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# Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology

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## Abstract

Understanding why donors give money to legislative candidates is vital for assessing how money influences politics. In this paper, I test theories of why political action committees (PACs) and individuals, the two largest sources of campaign money, contribute to legislative candidates. Using a variety of data at the state and federal level, I show dramatic differences between individual and PAC contribution patterns. An original survey of donors in the 2012 election cycle shows that individuals consistently rank ideological concerns as highly important when deciding where to give. Finally, using two different within-legislator designs, I show a causal relationship between incumbency, ideology, and contributions. These results provide the most direct and comprehensive test of contributor motivations to date.<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

campaign contributions, campaigns and elections, legislative politics

## Introduction

Why do individuals and organizations contribute money to political campaigns? Recently, scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the degree to which money influences electoral results (A. Brown 2013; Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1978), legislative outcomes (Groselclose and Snyder 1996; Hall and Wayman 1990; Powell 2012), and representation (Bartels 2010; Gilens 2012). Moreover, scholars have investigated the various ways in which candidates appeal to donors (Hassell and Monson 2014) and where they target such appeals (Bramlett, Gimpel, and Lee 2011; Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski 2006; Tam Cho and Gimpel 2007). Yet, to document the effects of money on politics outcomes, we must better understand what exactly donors expect from their contributions. If, for instance, contributors give money in support of candidates with a particular ideology, or with the expectation of political favors in return, then we have great reason to be interested in how a representative democracy functions in a world with political contributions. This is particularly true if those who contribute are unrepresentative of the population as a whole (Clifford Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Francia et al. 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). It is with these factors in mind that this paper seeks to further understand the motivations underlying why individuals and organizations contribute money to political candidates.

The primary contribution of this paper is to provide more direct and comprehensive empirical tests of different

theories of why contributors choose to give money to political candidates. Previous theories suggest that different motivations exist among different groups of the donor population. Yet, many previous empirical tests of these theories use narrow subsets of campaign contributors. I empirically identify these different motives among donors using original survey data as well as comprehensive contribution and electoral data that span both state and federal elections over several decades. The results provide the most direct and comprehensive test of contributor motivations to date.

Furthermore, tectonic changes in the campaign finance and ideological landscapes warrant a reevaluation of the motivations of donors. In recent years, candidates for state and federal offices have raised substantially more money than in the past (Davidson et al. 2013). At the same time, members of both political parties have become more polarized (Abramowitz 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Shor and McCarty 2011; Theriault 2008). In addition, the Internet has provided candidates with new ways to appeal to potential donors, and, as a result, a flood of new donors has entered the fray (Karpf 2013). Finally, recent rulings by the Supreme Court have the potential to further change who contributes and how

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much money they can give to their preferred candidates (Gold 2014, *McCutcheon v. FEC* <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2013/12-536>). Given these changes, the empirical results provide a new look at the motivations of contributors. To do so, I use a variety of data and identification strategies, including an original survey as well as comprehensive donation data at both the state and federal levels.

The results presented herein show that different groups of donors give for widely different reasons. I show that the two largest sources of campaign money, individual donors and political action committees (PACs), exhibit dramatically different behavior in the political marketplace. Political groups' contribution patterns are consistent with motives centered around access and influence. In contrast, the contribution behavior of individual donors is consistent with purely ideological motivations. Finally, a particular group of PACs—those with ideological considerations—appear to care about both of these objectives.

## Existing Tests of Contribution Motivations

### PAC Motivations

Previous research has suggested that PACs are interested in influencing legislators in an effort to ensure that legislation affecting their particular issue better reflects their interests. Hall and Wayman (1990) pioneered the theory of access in response to previous research that found few connections between PAC contributions and specific votes by members of Congress (Grenzke 1989; Wayman 1985; Wright 1985). Rather than buying legislators' votes, Hall and Wayman suggested that PACs are primarily interested in buying access and time, thereby ensuring that their influence is felt in the *creation* of favorable legislation rather than the final vote on any particular bill. Moreover, according to these authors, contributions affect the intensity with which legislators pursue (or do not pursue) various policies.

Various scholars have empirically tested a number of implications of this theory by showing that access-oriented giving is affected by factors such as incumbency (Jacobson 2013), relevant committee membership (Grier and Munger 1993; Milyo 1997), electoral security (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Milyo, Primo, and Groseclose 2000; Welch 1980), and majority party status (Cox and Magar 1999; Rudolph 1999). In each case, the authors make the case that access-oriented interest groups prefer these features because they increase the value of the legislator's influence in the policy-making process.

Recent work has attempted to estimate causal effects and improve upon the estimates found in these earlier studies. For example, Grimmer and Powell (2013) find

that when legislators are involuntarily removed from committees, contributions from PACs related to that committee's issue area decrease. This suggests that the value of buying access to legislators immediately decreases when they no longer sit on a committee connected to a group's particular interests. Similarly, Fourniaies and Hall (2014) use a regression discontinuity design to show that barely winning candidates raise more money from PACs in future elections than candidates from the same party in districts where that party barely lost. This result suggests that PACs value incumbency, causing a substantial financial incumbency advantage.

Although each of these studies provides evidence of access-oriented PACs, others suggest that there remains a large ideological component to interest group giving (Bonica 2013b; Brunell 2005; LaRaja and Schaffner 2014). I advance our understanding of this theory and shed light on this disagreement in the literature by providing more comprehensive empirical evidence of interest groups' motivations. I show results consistent with access-oriented giving in both cross-sectional and panel models across several decades of election cycles in both state and federal elections. Furthermore, I use a causal identification strategy that applies broadly, as opposed to locally identified results that come with relatively rare events such as committee exile or with methods such as regression discontinuity designs (Imbens and Lemieux 2008).

### Individual Motivations

Theories of individual donors' reasons for giving money differ from theories of PAC motivations. Early scholarship suggested that individual donors give for a variety of reasons. Francia et al. (2003) and Clifford Brown, Powell, and Wilcox (1995) argue that individuals give for ideological, material, and social reasons. However, Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder (2003) and Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz (2008) disagree and suggest that individual's participation in the campaign finance marketplace is primarily an ideologically motivated *consumption good*, meaning that individuals contribute because they enjoy participating in politics and find satisfaction in supporting their candidate or party of choice. These authors argue that individuals primarily care about the ideologies of the candidates who are elected to office. Unlike PACs, individual donors do not intend to develop a long-term relationship with candidates through their donations, nor do they intend to secure the opportunity for future access to legislators.

There are fewer tests of individuals' motivations for giving, which is surprising given the importance of individual contributors in the campaign finance marketplace. The Francia et al. (2003) survey of individual donors is a

notable early look into individuals' motivations. However, the data from their survey of donors are now more than twenty years old. Given the changes in the campaign finance landscape, including a dramatic increase in contributions from individual donors (Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008), an updated test of individuals' motives is certainly warranted. Individual contributors are now the largest source of campaign money, and in the 2012 election cycle, individual contributions constituted nearly 90 percent of the money given (Fremeth et al 2013).

A few recent papers have tested theories of the motivations of individuals. Several of these studies do so by looking at the giving patterns of corporate executives (Burris 2005; Fremeth, Kelleher-Richter, and Schaufele 2013; Gordon, Hafer, and Landa 2007; Richter and Werner 2014). However, CEOs are certainly not representative of the typical donor, and their contributions amount to a small proportion of total individual contributions (Bonica 2013a). Among studies that investigate the giving of all individual donors, several studies find that more extreme candidates tend to raise more money from individual contributors (Ensley 2009; Johnson 2010, 2013; Stone and Simas 2010). McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) find that individuals target their donations rather than spreading them across the ideological spectrum. These results are consistent with a theory that individuals reward candidates financially for moving closer to their preferred ideology.<sup>2</sup>

I advance our understanding of why individuals contribute in several ways. First, I use an original survey of individual donors in the 2012 election that directly addresses their motivations for giving. These data provide a representative view of donors' own thoughts on the importance of various factors that determine who they support financially. Although previous work has focused on the alignment of donors' ideologies with the candidates they give to, I also find that donors care about the ideology of the recipient's challenger. Furthermore, using survey data, I show that ideology is not equally important among all individuals. Specifically, I show new results indicating that the most ideologically extreme donors are those who care most about ideological alignment. This is a previously unidentified relationship between donor ideology and giving. Finally, using election and contribution data, I present more comprehensive and direct empirical tests than previous work has done. Using data from several decades for all recorded individual contributions, I build a unique panel dataset that allows me to identify ideologically motivated giving by all individual donors rather than a small sample of the donor population, such as those who gave in one particular election cycle or the set of corporate executives.

### *Ideological Group Motivations*

Ideological groups occupy an intermediate position between purely access-oriented PACs and individuals

with regard to their motivations for giving. Their unique interests lead them to value access while also caring about ideology (Snyder 1992). The reason for this hybrid approach to contributions stems from the combination of these groups' interest in advancing specific policies (as PACs also do) with the fact that their particular policy interests cleave along ideological and partisan lines (Baron 1994). This is not the case with a non-ideological PAC where the two major parties do not have clearly delineated positions on the topics advocated by the group. These ideological groups' interest in advancing policy implies that they should value incumbency and long-term relationships with legislators in office (Herrnson 2012). This feature makes them similar to other non-ideological PACs. However, their interest in policies supported by only one particular party implies that ideological groups will contribute overwhelmingly to candidates who share their partisan and ideological leanings, making them similar to individuals (Brunell 2005). Together, these conditions imply that we should often see these groups occupying a middle ground between the behavior of access-seeking PACs and ideologically motivated individuals.

### **Data and Results**

To test these theories of giving among PACs, ideological groups, and individuals, I use a variety of data and empirics. The first source of data is a comprehensive list of contributions to state and federal legislative candidates (Bonica 2013b). At the state level, the data extend from 1990 through the 2012 election cycle. At the federal level, the data cover 1980 to the 2012 election cycle. These data allow me to calculate the amount of money raised by each candidate from PACs, ideological groups, and individuals.

I distinguish between PACs and ideological groups by using the classification scheme developed by the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), a nonpartisan organization that tracks and collects campaign contribution data. CRP has developed a coding scheme that classifies the type of contributing organization by industry for both federal and state level donations. For each interest group, they classify each group by the main focus or area of policy interest. These categories include various business sectors, as well as a category for "labor/union" and "ideological/single-issue" groups. Based on this classification scheme, I code ideological groups as those coded as "ideological/single-issue" or "labor/union." I include unions in the ideological group given their history of overwhelmingly supporting Democratic candidates (Herrnson 2012; Jacobson 2013; Rudolph 1999).<sup>3</sup> I also use data from an original survey of individual donors who gave to candidates in the 2012 election cycle. Using the survey, I illustrate the primary motivations for giving that respondents identified. I discuss in greater detail the survey methodology and characteristics



of the respondents later in the paper. Using these data, we observe distinct differences in the patterns of giving between individuals and PACs.

### Access-Seeking Behavior

Cross-sectional comparisons of donations by individuals and PACs show that interest groups are much more likely to support incumbent legislators. Figures A5 and A6 in the online appendix (<http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>) show that this is the case for every election cycle from 1980 through 2012 in both federal and state legislative races. However, simple cross-sectional data may not account for the myriad factors that could differ between incumbents and challengers. These differences may also affect whether or not PACs, ideological groups, or individuals contribute money. For example, candidates with stronger ties to the business community may be more electable and independently better at raising money from PACs and ideological groups. To account for these differences, I conduct a within-legislator analysis that isolates the effect of incumbency on PAC, ideological group, and individual contributions. The analysis is based on the following thought experiment. Consider a legislator who runs for office as a challenger in time  $t$  and wins the election. This legislator is seated in the legislature, and runs again in the next election cycle, time  $t + 1$ , this time as an incumbent. If we compare the fundraising portfolio of this candidate in her first election to her portfolio in her second election, we can see the effect incumbency has on donations from these different groups.

By comparing the fundraising patterns of the same legislator across time, we account for time invariant factors that are specific to the state, district, and legislator, thus isolating the effect of incumbency on donations. By further parsing the data to only compare candidates who ran against an incumbent at time  $t$  and as the incumbent in a contested race in time  $t + 1$ , we can further remove any differences between open versus contested seats from the analysis. Moreover, I do not consider candidates in the terms immediately before or after redistricting (candidates first elected in 1990, 2000, and 2010) to account for the effect that changes in the district composition may have on legislators' fundraising in the following cycle.<sup>4</sup> Finally, by looking at candidates that run in a variety of years, we can account for any temporal trends in donation behavior by PACs and individuals. In a regression framework, this comparison is conducted through three separate models. In the first model, the (logged) amount of money raised from PACs by legislator  $j$  is regressed on an indicator for incumbency and a legislator-specific fixed-effect  $\alpha_j$ . In the second model, the (logged) amount of money raised from ideological groups is regressed on the same variables. Finally, the same model is fit with

individual money as the dependent variable. Comparing the values of  $\hat{\beta}$ ,  $\hat{\gamma}$ , and  $\hat{\zeta}$  will show us the difference in importance placed on incumbency by PACs, ideological groups, and individuals.

$$\log(PAC_{ijt}) = \alpha_j + \beta \text{incumbent}_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

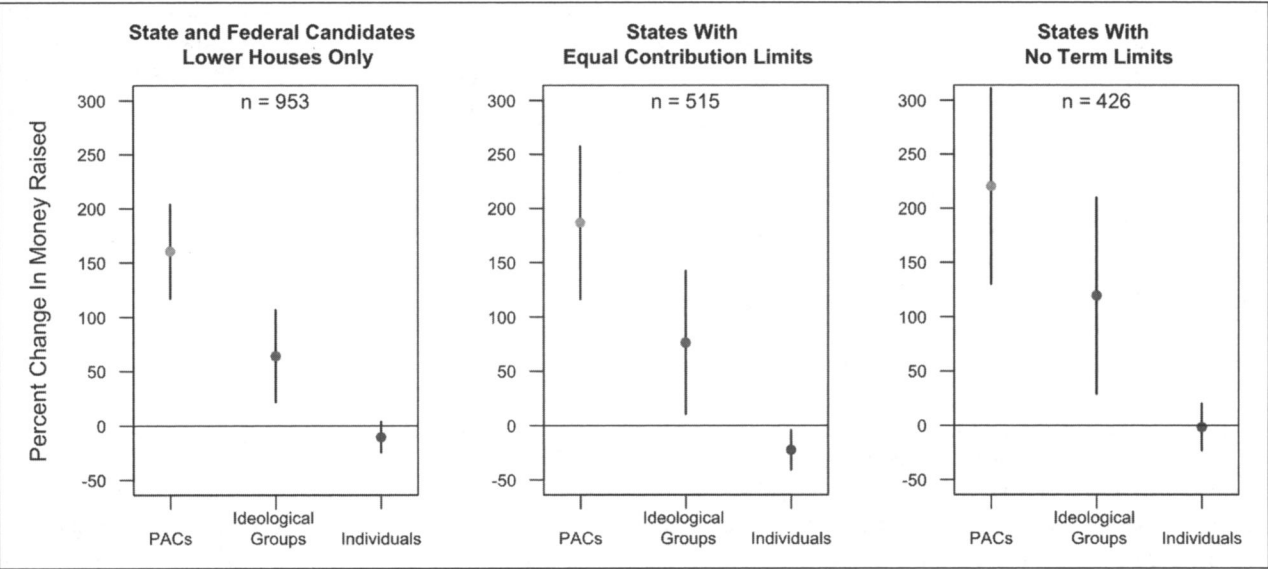
$$\log(Ideological_{ijt}) = \alpha_j + \beta \text{incumbent}_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

$$\log(Individual_{ijt}) = \alpha_j + \beta \text{incumbent}_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

The value of  $\hat{\beta}$  will tell us the estimated percent increase in contributions from PACs that is due to becoming an incumbent, while the value of  $\hat{\gamma}$  and  $\hat{\zeta}$  will show us the same quantity among ideological groups and individual contributions. We expect the value of  $\hat{\beta}$  to be larger than  $\hat{\zeta}$  if PACs value incumbency more than individual contributors. If ideological groups value incumbency,  $\hat{\gamma}$  should also be positive and larger than  $\hat{\zeta}$ . This expectation arises from the theoretical argument that when a candidate becomes an incumbent, she now has much greater value to an access-seeking interest group. As an incumbent, her ability to grant access to the legislating process has increased dramatically, giving groups an incentive to support her financially. If individuals are primarily concerned with the ideology of the candidate, we would not expect becoming an incumbent to have the same allure as it does for interest groups.

Figure 1 shows the estimated effect of  $\hat{\beta}$  and  $\hat{\gamma}$ , and  $\hat{\zeta}$  when estimated on legislators at both the state and federal levels. Incumbency increases PAC contributions by roughly 150 percent from the previous election. The effect is also positive for ideological groups. Incumbency increases contributions from these groups by nearly 50 percent. In contrast, incumbency does not appear to have any effect on individual contributions. The estimated coefficient is nearly 0 and is statistically insignificant at the .05 level. These results align with the cross-sectional data in Figure A8 in the online appendix and show that PACs' and ideological groups' affinity for supporting incumbent legislators is not caused by some other confounding variable but is rather directly related to the incumbency status of a legislator.

The within-legislator design shows us that incumbency causes greater financial support among PACs and ideological groups. This result further supports the previous results and suggests a direct relationship between the access-granting privileges of incumbency and PAC and ideological group contributions. We should note that contributing



**Figure 1. Effect of incumbency on contributions.**  
The left panel shows that becoming an incumbent leads to a roughly 150 percent increase in contributions from PACs. Among ideological groups, the effect is positive; becoming an incumbent leads to a 50 percent increase in contributions from these groups. However, becoming an incumbent does not have a positive effect on contributions from individuals. The middle panel shows the effects of becoming an incumbent on contributions in states with equal contribution limits for each group. The right panel shows the result for states without term limits. PACs = political action committees.

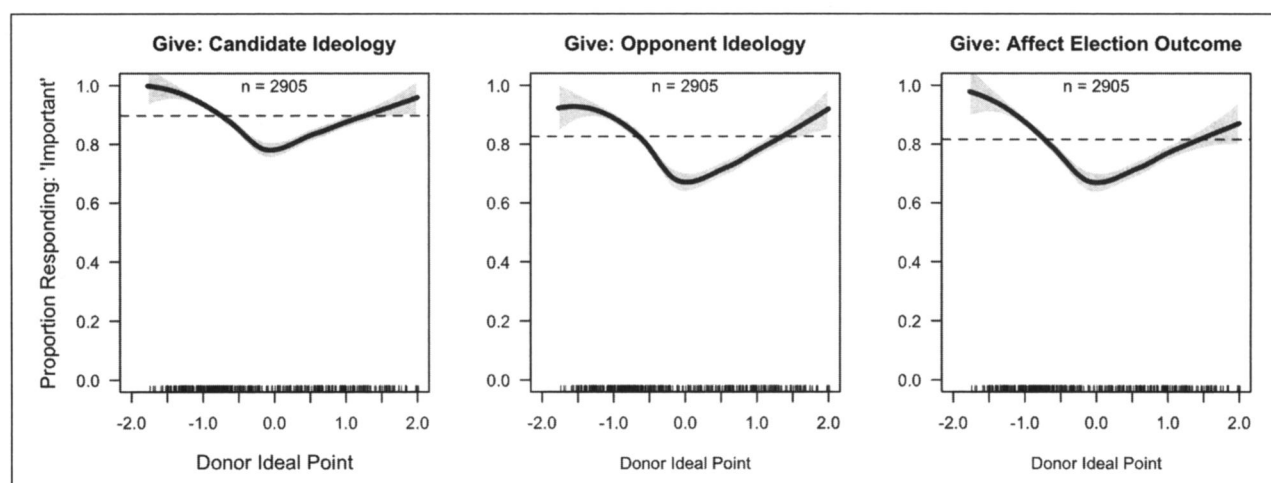
to an incumbent legislator does not necessarily guarantee an interest group future access to the legislator or the law-making process. However, incumbency is certainly a necessary condition for access, and these results show that PACs and ideological groups recognize the importance of incumbency in gaining access to the legislative process.

We should note that the identification strategy does not account for other factors that may change for a given legislator over time. Yet, for the estimated effect to be due to some factor other than changes when a legislator moves from being a challenger to an incumbent (aside from access to the legislative process), it must be the case that this omitted variable affects interest groups while *not* affecting individuals. Possible time-varying factors such as increases in candidates' abilities, changes in the competitiveness of the district, franking privileges, and increased coverage by the media should not affect PACs' willingness to contribute any differently than individual donors'. However, a potential time-varying factor, approaching term limits, could deter access-seeking PACs from contributing. This, however, should push the effect of incumbency among PACs toward 0. The center and right panels of Figure 1 present the same results, but restricted to states that have equal limits on contributions from individuals or PACs and for states without term limits. This ensures that any effect is not due to individuals having lower limits than interest groups or legislators being forced from office sooner than others. In each of these cases, interest groups appear to value incumbency while individual donors do not.

**Ideological Motivations**  
*Survey of Individual Donors*

The most direct way to identify individuals' motivations for giving would be to simply ask them. To do so, I conducted a survey of individual contributors in the 2012 election cycle. When donors give more than \$200 to a federal candidate in an election cycle, the Federal Election Commission requires the donor and receiving candidate to publicly disclose the contributor's name, address, occupation, and the date and amount of the contribution (Federal Election Commission 2002).<sup>4</sup> Using this publicly available list of contributors, I mailed 20,500 letters to donors who gave to the twenty-two senators who actively sought reelection in 2012. Approximately three thousand donors responded and completed the survey online. In the online appendix, I discuss the survey methodology in greater detail and address the representativeness of the sample. After weighting, the sample closely resembles the population of donors who gave to these twenty-two reelection seeking senators. Figure A1 in the online appendix shows the distribution of the population and the weighted sample. We see that the two distributions are quite similar. Moreover, the population of donors who gave to these twenty-two senators is quite similar to the entire population of individual contributors in 2012. For this reason, I am confident that the survey can speak to the motivations of individual donors in general.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the survey, respondents were presented with several potential reasons for contributing to a political



**Figure 2.** Importance of potential motivations for giving among individuals.

Each panel shows the overall proportion of respondents to the donor survey who said the reason for giving was either *very important* or *somewhat important* with a dotted line. Each panel presents a different reason that is tied to ideological motivations. In all three cases, the proportion saying these reasons are important is very high, indicating ideology is extremely important to individual donors. Furthermore, the “U” shaped loess curve shows that the most ideologically extreme donors are even *more* likely to be motivated by ideology when giving.

campaign. These considerations included the degree to which the recipient agreed with the donor on political issues, the degree to which the recipient’s opponent did not agree with the donor on political issues, and whether or not the recipient was engaged in a close race where the donor’s contribution might help their preferred candidate win. Respondents were then asked to indicate how important each of these considerations is for them when deciding who to support financially. Responses ranged from *extremely important* to *not at all important*.<sup>6</sup> In addition to reasons for giving, respondents answered various questions regarding their policy preferences on several current political issues.

Using the responses to policy preferences, I estimate the ideological positions of donors using a standard one dimensional ideal point model (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004). This score is a measure of the degree to which a person is liberal or conservative on a unidimensional policy scale. While ideal points are latent values, they are estimated by using observed data. In their most common application, these observed data have been roll call votes cast in Congress where legislators either vote “yea” or “nay” for each proposal (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). However, the statistical estimation of ideal points using roll call voting is a burgeoning field in the study of American politics. Recent work has expanded the use of ideal point models to incorporate a variety of actors such as voters (Gerber and Lewis 2004), the president (Bailey 2007), Supreme Court justices (Martin and Quinn 2002), and state legislators (Shor and McCarty 2011). The key to each of these methods is creating a dataset in which the actors cast votes over a variety of binary questions. In the case of voters, scholars often use expressions of support

for policies on a survey as a “yea” vote. It is this method that I use to estimate the ideal points of donors.<sup>7</sup> Smaller values indicate more liberal ideological positions.

If individual donors are motivated by ideology when deciding where to contribute money, we should see a large percentage of respondents indicating that ideological reasons are either *extremely important* or *somewhat important*. Figure 2 displays the proportion of donors who provided either of these two responses to three different questions that are tied to ideological giving. Figure 2 shows these proportions on the y-axis with the estimated ideal point of the respondent on the x-axis. If ideology is a primary motivator for individual donors, we should see large majorities answering that these potential reasons are important. This is exactly the case. The horizontal dotted line in each panel of Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents ranking each consideration as important when deciding to whom to contribute. The ideology of the recipient is the most important consideration, with close to 90 percent of respondents indicating that this was important to them. Furthermore, the ideology of the opposing candidate and the perceived ability to affect the election outcome are also an important consideration for many donors. More than 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that objections to the opponent’s ideology were important to them when deciding who to give to. Likewise, nearly 80 percent indicated that affecting the outcome of the race in favor of their preferred candidate was an important reason to give.

While these results are consistent with previous research (Clifford Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Francia et al. 2003), Figure 2 also reveals a previously undocumented pattern in donor motivations. In each

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Motivations Questions in Survey.

Importance	Extremely	Somewhat	Neither	Not much	Not at all
Ideological Agreement	0.71	0.27	0.02	0.00	0.00
To Affect Election Outcome	0.56	0.34	0.07	0.02	0.01
Unacceptable Opponent	0.52	0.38	0.06	0.02	0.01
Candidate will Help Business	0.33	0.44	0.14	0.05	0.03
Close Race	0.27	0.46	0.17	0.04	0.05
Candidate Listen to My Concerns	0.25	0.44	0.20	0.07	0.04
Personally Know Candidate	0.21	0.30	0.27	0.08	0.13
Home District	0.20	0.37	0.25	0.09	0.08
Affect my Work	0.19	0.38	0.28	0.08	0.07
Asked by Colleague	0.04	0.26	0.34	0.16	0.19
Asked by Political Group	0.04	0.24	0.34	0.18	0.20

panel of Figure 2, the proportion of respondents answering *very important* or *somewhat important* to these questions increases as respondents become more ideologically extreme. The x-axis of each panel shows the ideological score for each respondent. In all three questions, ideologically extreme donors are more likely to rate these ideological reasons as important to them when deciding to whom to give. In contrast, those donors with moderate estimated ideal points are less likely to rate these as important reasons for donating money to potential candidates. As a check against the case that ideological donors tend to rank *all* considerations as more important to them when deciding who to support, Figure A10 in the online appendix plots the same relationship but for several non-ideological motives, such as candidates and donors sharing the same district, donors thinking the candidate will help their district, or donors being asked to give money. For each of these three questions, we do not see the same “U” shaped pattern of ideologically extreme donors placing these reasons as more important than those donors with moderate ideal points.

Furthermore, Table 1 shows the results of all of the potential motivations questions asked of donors in the survey. Each row is a potential motivation. The columns display the proportion of respondents who indicated that the motivation was *extremely important*, *somewhat important*, *neither important nor unimportant*, *not that important*, and *not at all important*. The rows are ordered by the percentage of donors who indicated that the potential reason for giving was *extremely important*.<sup>8</sup> Looking at the table, we see that the data naturally break into three categories. The first category can be identified as ideologically themed concerns. The second, less important grouping largely relates to personal and professional connections to the candidate. The final two, least important considerations are related to solicitations made of the donor requesting that he or she contribute.<sup>9</sup> These results are consistent with the theory that individual donors place

a premium on ideological factors when deciding who to support financially.

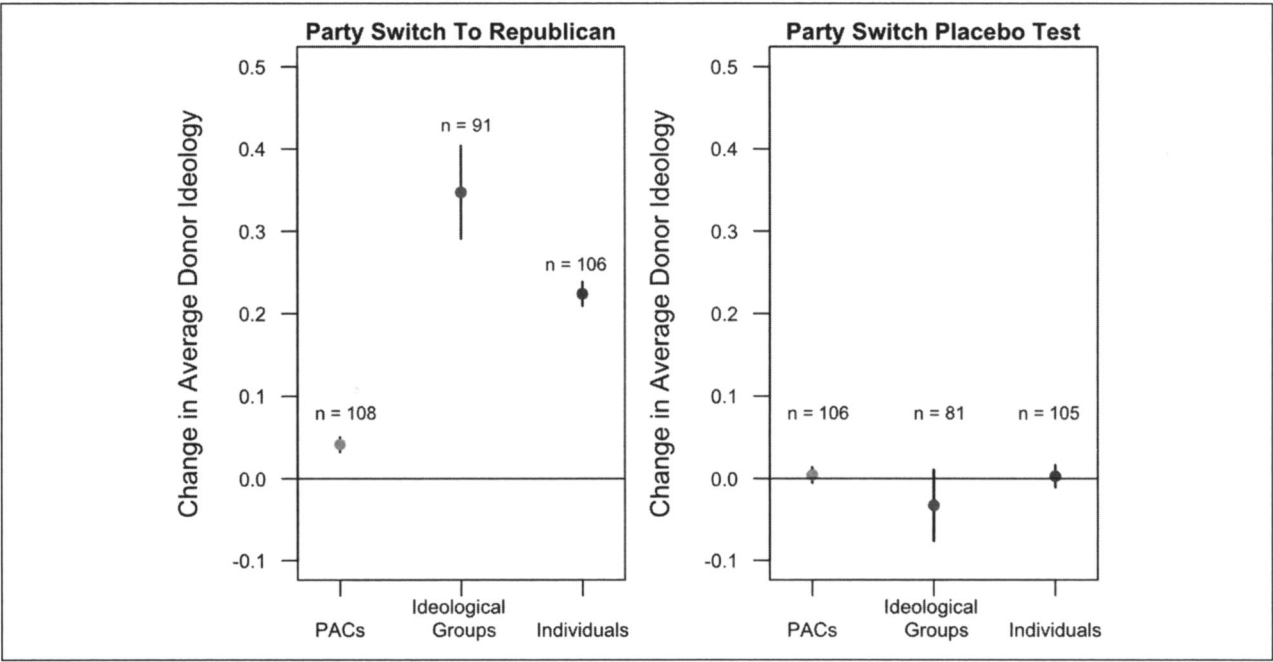
Party Switching

Unfortunately, similar survey results are not available from PACs or ideological groups. However, we can further demonstrate the ideological motivations of individuals and ideological groups while also demonstrating that PACs have little concern for the ideology of legislators by looking at additional data.

Using the database of contributions from PACs, ideological groups, and individuals, I show that in the rare cases when legislators change party affiliations, the composition of their ideologically motivated donors changes as well. In contrast, the composition of PAC contributions is mostly unaffected. Bonica (2013b) has used these contribution data to estimate the ideological positions of contributors in both federal and state legislative elections. Using these ideological scores, I estimate the changes in the average ideology of donors to legislators before and after a legislator changes parties. Although scholars have demonstrated that most legislators are ideologically consistent over the course of their careers (Poole 2007), legislators who change parties show a dramatic ideological shift at the time of the change (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Nokken and Poole 2004; Poole 2005). While few legislators in the House and Senate change parties, many more switches occur in the state legislatures simply because there are vastly more state legislators than representatives in Washington, D.C. In this analysis, I look at the effects of changes by the roughly 100 incumbent legislators at both the state and federal levels between 1980 and 2012.<sup>10</sup>

If individuals and ideological groups are motivated by ideology when contributing, these donors should react quickly to the sudden shift in a legislator’s party and voting behavior. Specifically, changes by legislators from





**Figure 3.** Effect of changing parties on average contributor ideology. The left panel shows that becoming a Republican leads to a significant conservative shift in the ideology of the average ideological group and individual contributor. Positive numbers indicate more conservative ideologies. In contrast, becoming a Republican leads to a small and substantively insignificant shift in the average ideology of PAC contributors to the legislator after the change. This right panel shows the effect of estimating the party switching models in the two terms prior to changing parties. This model allows us to eliminate as a possible alternative the story that contributors are driving a legislator’s decision to change parties, or that PACs are anticipating the change better than individuals and ideological groups. PACs = political action committees.

the Democratic to the Republican Party should be accompanied by shifts in who these legislators raise money from. Liberal individual donors and ideological groups should abandon these erstwhile Democrats while conservative donors may embrace their new partisan allies. Similar changes, but in the opposite direction, should accompany switches from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. Formally, I estimate the following models for PACs, ideological groups, and individuals:

$$PAC\ Ideology_{ijt} = \alpha_j + \beta Republican_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

$$Ideological\ Group\ Ideology_{ijt} = \alpha_j + \beta Republican_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

$$Individual\ Ideology_{ijt} = \alpha_j + \beta Republican_{jt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, t \in \{0, 1\}.$$

In these models, the dependent variable is the estimated ideology of contributor  $i$  to legislator  $j$  in the election cycle immediately preceding the partisanship change ( $t = 0$ ) or immediately after the party change ( $t = 1$ ).  $\alpha_j$  is

a legislator-specific indicator variable, which provides us with a within-legislator estimate of the effect of a partisan change. The value of  $\hat{\beta}$ , therefore, shows the within-legislator average change in the ideology of PAC contributors after switching to the Republican Party.  $\hat{\gamma}$  and  $\hat{\zeta}$  show the same estimate for ideological groups and individual contributors, respectively. If individuals and ideological groups react to shifts in legislators’ ideologies after changing parties, then the values of  $\hat{\gamma}$  and  $\hat{\zeta}$  should be positive. In contrast, if PACs care little about ideology, we would not expect PACs to react to partisan changes in the same way, and thus, the value of  $\hat{\beta}$  should be close to 0.

The left panel of Figure 3 shows the results of these models. The results support the idea that ideological groups and individuals care a great deal about the ideology of the candidates they support. Among ideological groups and individual contributors, when legislators switch to the Republican Party, there is a dramatic shift in the average ideology of contributors who support these candidates.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the legislator receives support from significantly more conservative donors. The effect sizes are .35 among ideological groups and .22 among individuals. These shifts represent 30 and 20 percent of the standard deviation in donors’ ideologies in 2012. In

contrast, we do not see a similarly large shift in the ideology of PAC contributors after a legislator switches parties. While the effect is precisely estimated, it is substantively small (.04; 4% of the standard deviation of donor ideologies in 2012) and several times smaller than the effect for ideological groups and individuals. The “*n*” above each estimate indicates the number of legislators included in each model.<sup>12</sup>

Changing parties is certainly not a randomly occurring event, and it is possible that the change in partisanship is perhaps partially caused by a shift in a legislator’s donors prior to the party switch rather than the move causing changes in donors’ behavior. In addition, the lack of an effect among PACs could be the results of PACs having already anticipated the change in partisanship while individuals and ideological groups are slower to “read the partisan tea leaves” that may suggest a party change is soon to come. To test for these possibilities, I estimate the same models as in the left panel of Figure 3, but rather than looking at contributors before ( $t = 0$ ) and after the partisan change ( $t = 1$ ), I look instead at the ideology of contributors in the period prior to the switch ( $t = 0$ ) and the election cycle before that ( $t = -1$ ). If it is the case that contributors are driving the decision to change parties, we should see positive coefficients indicating more conservative donors gravitating toward the legislator preceding the change, pushing the legislator toward changing parties. In addition, if PACs are anticipating party switches, then we should see a larger positive effect among PAC contributors. However, this is not the case. In the placebo test, there are no significant changes in the ideologies of the donors. Finally, Figure A11 in the online appendix plots a similar across-unit placebo test by simulating “fake” party switches among legislators who in reality did not change parties and plotting the changes in their contributors’ ideologies. The results show that there is no general trend in the change of ideologies of legislators’ donors. Each estimate is very close to 0.

Figure 3 shows that these alternative explanations are unlikely to be the cause of the party switching effect. Among PACs, ideological groups, and individuals, the effects are small and statistically indistinguishably from 0. This suggests that ideological groups and individuals are in actuality reacting to changes in legislators partisanship, not causing it. Changing parties leads to a radical change in the types of individuals and ideological groups that give to the candidate post-change. In contrast, changing parties does not appear to lead to dramatic changes in the types of PACs that incumbent legislators raise money from.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined theories of how PACs, ideological groups, and individuals differ in their motivations

for contributing to candidates for political office. Using a variety of data, I present several novel empirical tests of these theories that improve upon previous empirical examinations of donors’ motivations for giving. These results provide the most direct and comprehensive test of contributor motivations to date and improve upon previous empirical tests of these theories.

The results show that PACs often give to legislators from both parties, greatly value incumbency, and are mostly unaffected by changes in a legislator’s ideology. These results support the theory that interest groups value access to legislators in office but care little about the ideological position of these legislators. In contrast, individuals focus their contributions toward candidates of the same ideological position, care little about incumbency, and significantly respond to changes in legislators’ ideologies. Furthermore, in survey results, the overwhelming majority of individuals indicate that ideology is important to them when deciding which candidates to support. Finally, ideological groups appear to split the difference between the two different motivations of PACs and individuals. While ideological groups behave similarly to PACs in their desire to have access to legislators, they also behave like individuals and appear to value ideology as well.

While this paper addresses the motivations for contributing, there is much work yet to be done regarding the way in which these motivations affect politician’s behavior. Scholarship that discusses the impact of money on political outcomes must begin with an accurate understanding that different groups give for different reasons. If PACs are continually seeking access through campaign contributions, a logical next step is to know what type of access (if any) they are granted by legislators and how legislation would change in the absence of such influence (Broockman and Kalla 2014). And while individuals may not seek access to legislators, the value they place on ideological purity may lead to polarized and ideologically extreme candidates who seek individual contributions (Bonica 2013b). Further study of these relationships is certainly warranted.

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## Notes

1. All replication data are available at <http://MichaelJayBarber.com>.
2. While this paper focuses on which candidate’s donors support conditional on giving money, several studies also find

- that more ideologically extreme and wealthier individuals are more likely to become donors (Clyde Brown, Hedges, and Powell 1980; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).
3. However, excluding unions from the ideological group category does not change any of the results. I also exclude any party run organizations, including leadership political action committees (PACs), from this group. I do not include candidate or party groups in either classification.
  4. I further restrict the sample by only considering states with two-year election cycles in even-numbered years. This is because campaign finance data are collected according to two-year, even-numbered cycles. Thus, determining the fundraising of legislators elected on off-year cycles is problematic. This means I exclude Alabama (AL), Louisiana (LA), Maryland (MD), Mississippi (MS), North Dakota (ND), New Jersey (NJ), and Virginia (VA).
  5. Because the sample is drawn from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) file, donors who gave less than \$200 are not included in the survey. If their motivations differ from itemized donors, this could provide an incomplete picture of individual donors' motivations. However, Magleby, Goodliffe, and Olson (2015) find that motivations between small and large donors at the presidential level are quite similar.
  6. The exact wording of this question was, "How important are the following factors in your decision to make a contribution to a U.S. House or U.S. Senate candidate?" 4 = *extremely important*, 3 = *somewhat important*, 2 = *neither important nor unimportant*, 1 = *not that important*, 0 = *not at all important*.
  7. Specifically, I estimate the ideal points using the "R" package *ideal* developed by Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004).
  8. Table 1 shows the raw percentages among individual donors. In the online appendix (<http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>), I show the relationship between these motivations and a donor's income. Overall, the effects are quite small, indicating that motivations among donors are quite uniform across income.
  9. Although it is possible that survey responses can be subject to social desirability bias, it is less likely that respondents feel a social pressure to respond a certain way when discussing donation motivations than they would when asked if they had voted, where there is excellent documentation of social desirability bias.
  10. The number of legislators in each model varies slightly because some legislators do not raise any money from PACs, individuals, or ideological groups in a particular election cycle and thus cannot be included in the model.
  11. Given that Bonica identifies contributor's ideologies through the legislators they give to, there is the possibility of endogeneity when using legislators' ideologies in a model of party switching. However, if this is the case, the fact that these donors gave to legislators who later switched parties should move the ideologies of the donors toward centrist values on average, which would bias against finding any effect here.
  12. As mentioned earlier, some legislators do not raise any money from PACs, individuals, or ideological groups in a particular election cycle and thus cannot be included in the model.
  13. I replicate the results of Figure 3 in Table A4 of the online appendix using a difference-in-differences approach. The results are consistent with those displayed in Figure 3.

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