

Political Participation and Civic Courage:

The Negative Effect of Transparency on Making Small Campaign Contributions

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Abstract

This study assesses whether public disclosure of campaign contributions affects citizens' willingness to give money to candidates. In the American states, campaign finance laws require disclosure of private information for contributors at relatively low thresholds ranging from \$1 to \$300. Drawing on social influence theory, the analysis suggests that citizens are sensitive to divulging private information, especially those who are surrounded by people with different political views. Using experimental data from the 2011 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, it demonstrates how individuals refrain from making contributions or reduce their donations to avoid disclosing their identities. The conclusion discusses the implications of transparency laws for political participation, especially for small donors.

Keywords: Political participation, Campaign contributions, Political transparency, Social influence theory, Political finance law, Internet and politics

Transparency in politics is typically touted as salutary for democracy. Few would disagree that transparency is particularly important with respect to campaign donations, a form of political activity in which public concerns about corruption and influence peddling loom large. For more than a century in the U.S., political donors to candidates and parties have been required to disclose private information (e.g., name, address and occupation) to federal and state agencies (Sikes 1928). Today, all states require donor disclosure at thresholds that vary from \$1 to \$300.¹ In theory, knowing who gives and receives campaign money provides a deterrent against corruption and offers information to voters about where politicians receive their support. This dynamic is nicely captured by Justice Brandeis' famous dictum that "sunlight is best disinfectant" in explaining how transparency promotes accountability of institutions (Brandeis 1913).

While the benefits of disclosure for democracy seem self-evident, the costs have not been explored very much (Briffault 2010; Cain 2010). Recent incidents involving retaliation and intimidation by opponents of a same-sex ballot measure against petition signers and donors who supported the measure suggest that these costs are real. One controversial website, *eightmaps.com*, retrieved individual donor data made available through the Secretary of State of California to create Google maps that identified the names, approximate location and amount donated. Donors reported receiving death threats, vandalism of property, business boycotts and harassing emails (Stone 2009). The situation prompted concerns that the much-lauded pursuit of political transparency was negatively affecting individual privacy, freedom of speech and political engagement.

The Supreme Court acknowledges the possibility that divulging private information about political activity incurs costs on citizens but is understandably reluctant to upend disclosure laws. In *Doe v. Reed* (2010), for example, it upheld the constitutionality of disclosure laws for signing petitions on a referendum because such activity involves legislating, which is not protected by secrecy. Justice Scalia went further in his deliberations, declaring that, "running a democracy takes a certain amount of civic courage" and that one reason for disclosure is "so you can be out there and be responsible for the positions you have taken".² Like John Stuart Mill, Scalia believes that openly declaring preferences is fundamental for sustaining accountable democratic deliberation (Briffault 2010). Others contend, however, that Justice Scalia's position is too heroic for ordinary citizens. In this view, disclosure rules put an undue burden on political rights and may hurt the goal of promoting broad and equal political engagement (Briffault 2010; Cain 2010; McGeeveran 2003-2004). Surprisingly, we currently lack a theoretical framework and empirical research to place such concerns in context.

The question about whether disclosure affects political participation (in this case, political contributions) can be fruitfully explored by turning to theories of social influence. The analysis draws on social-psychology theory, which suggests that the prospect of revealing political preferences might cause some to withdraw from politics (Hayes, Scheufele, and Huges 2006; Mutz 2002; Ulbig and Funk 1999). The central hypothesis is that publicity about one's political acts and preferences will dampen participation because of the social costs it imposes. These costs are relatively high among individuals who are sensitive to being exposed because of their unique opinions within their social milieu.

Exploiting experimental data, this study observes changes in behavior when potential donors are faced with the prospect of revealing their names on the Internet as they contemplate giving a contribution. Using Internet survey data from the 2011 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES)(Ansolabehere 2011), it assesses reactions of potential donors when asked to provide private information at various thresholds (\$1, \$50 or

\$100). The study is designed to see if citizens choose *not* to give money, or give *below* the disclosure threshold to avoid publicity requirements. The theoretical expectation is that disclosure at relatively low levels triggers a psychological reaction that reduces willingness to make small contributions.

The experimental design provides a particularly compelling demonstration of the causal effect of publicity on individual behavior, a dynamic which has not always been easy to show in political research on social influence (Mutz 2006) or new media (Bimber 2012). In support of the theory, the findings demonstrate that publicity generally dampens the willingness of small donors to contribute money, and that those who are surrounded by people who do not share their views are more likely to refrain from or limit making political contributions when they think their donations are public. As Mutz (2006) observes, this behavior likely stems directly from concerns that preference revelation will roil social relations among neighbors, co-workers, and other associates.

The implications of this research seem important for theories about political engagement and policies on transparency. To the degree that disclosure has a chilling effect on participation of small donors it might give pause to overly broad claims that sunlight is a disinfectant without negative side effects. Its findings may encourage policymakers instead to focus transparency efforts on major donors (Cain 2010). This effort is particularly important in light of two court decisions *SpeechNow.Org v. Federal Election Commission (2010)* and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010)*,³ which allow respectively unlimited contributions and unlimited spending for political organizations that operate independently of candidates and parties. These court decisions potentially increase the salience of major donors in American elections. Therefore, proposals to increase the participation of small donors in the campaign finance system as a way of offsetting major donor influence (see, for example, Skaggs and Wertheimer 2012) should also consider factors that tend to discourage small donor participation.

Secondarily, this study raises issues about how the Internet is changing the social context in which citizens engage in politics. While some research has demonstrated the positive effect of the Internet on various forms of participation,⁴ under some circumstances it may depress participation among individuals who feel the medium indiscriminately mixes their political and social lives. For citizens who value a degree of privacy in making political choices, the Internet may compel them to draw upon reserves of civic courage to a greater extent than previously if they choose to engage in politics.

The Context for Making Political Contributions

For much of the twentieth century, contributing money was not considered an especially public act. Citizens typically wrote checks at fundraising events where attendees included a self-selected group of like-minded citizens. Among this crowd, fear of reprisal or offending others was minimal. Indeed, the homogeneity of the group likely enhanced levels of participation (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; McClurg 2006a; Mutz 2002). While the donor might have been required to provide private information to an election agency (via the campaign committee), she could safely assume that her contribution would not be transparent to others, especially for relatively small amounts. Contribution records were stored at the state or federal election agency, where few would take the trouble of searching through stacks of files. For this reason, a donor could plausibly assume that the donation was virtually anonymous.

The reality today is that the Internet makes it possible to publicize information about political activity quite easily. Citizens can no longer assume that their actions are *de facto* private. What makes this situation especially intriguing is that the legal system in the US and prevailing social norms have prompted two different approaches to political privacy depending on the nature of the activity. Since 1892, voting throughout the US has been by secret ballot, in an attempt to curtail widespread efforts by the political parties in the 19th century to influence voters through intimidation or bribery. The secret ballot has made voting a private act, along with a strong social norm against asking strangers how they voted.⁵ On the other hand, making contributions and signing ballot petitions has become more public, both because of changes to law and technology. Many states require information about donors – names, addresses, occupations, even for donations as little as \$1 – and post them on the Internet (McGeeveran 2003-2004). To validate the status of petition signers for a ballot issue, election officials require organizers to provide the names and addresses of signers. In Wisconsin, these lists have been made public on the Internet, in compliance with the state’s public record law, and used by opposing organizations to perform analysis of eligible petition signers (Muskal 2012).

Courts have upheld these disclosure practices with respect to campaign finance for three basic reasons: 1) to deter corruption, 2) to provide voters with information about candidate financial support, and 3) to help with enforcement of campaign finance laws (Briffault 2010). Even while the Court strikes down various limits on contributions or spending, it has consistently supported the use of disclosure rules on these grounds.⁶

Social Influence and Political Participation

A considerable body of work in political science has drawn on insights from social psychology to explain political behavior in a variety of contexts. Particularly illuminating in this regard is the study of social influence through interpersonal networks, which affect political attitudes and engagement. This research has yielded insights about how personal interactions through networks potentially creates social capital that encourages people to participate in politics, above and beyond individual level characteristics (Fowler 2005; Klofstad 2011; Knoke 1990; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; Leighley 1990; McClurg 2003; Nickerson 2008). The impact and direction of social influence, however, is mediated by structural characteristics of the network. For example, a person’s inclination to participate might be affected by the degree of conflict or cross-pressures in a network (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Mutz 2002), the availability of expertise (Huckfeldt 2001; McClurg 2006b), and distribution of motivations and weak ties (Siegel 2009).

This study examines the potentially depressive effects on participation for those who are cross-pressured in their social situations. By cross-pressured I mean the presence of contradictory and opposing viewpoints within an individual’s social environment. Controlling for other factors, it appears that individuals with likeminded friends and family tend to participate more in politics than those who interact with people who disagree with them (Mutz 2006).⁷ Studies of local communities reveal how political disagreement creates feelings of *ambivalence*, which can make individuals less likely to engage in politics (Campbell 1997; Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Mutz 2006). A second mechanism at work is *social accountability*. Citizens may avoid participating in public discussions when they fear their political opinions or actions challenge community norms (Berinsky 1999; Mansbridge 1980; Noelle-Neumann 1984) or bring them into conflict with others (Eliasoph 1998; Mutz 2002; Rosenberg 1954-55).

The power of social networks to influence participation is likely mediated by the degree to which individuals believe their actions can be observed by others (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Under some circumstances, exposure of political activity can positively impact participation. In studies of voting behavior, for example, citizens who learn that neighbors know whether they voted or not are more likely to go to the polls (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008), presumably because such participation reflects a positive norm in the social community and individuals might feel ashamed for not participating. Other work shows similar effects for rather demanding forms of participation, such as attending a caucus (Grose and Russell 2008), or political protests (Chong 1991). The likely motive for participation in these contexts is the desire to preserve social status in the community by appearing to do what others expect (Hayes, Scheufele, and Huges 2006).

Under some circumstances, however, social influence may *discourage* people from participating. The same studies that observe increased attendance at polls and caucuses note that participation declines when respondents learn that their votes would be made public (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Grose and Russell 2008). The revelation of a political choice appears to give pause for some, because expressing opinions or dissent may threaten social ties (Mutz 2006). The social costs of disclosing political preferences can be especially high for those with minority viewpoints (Kuran 1995; McClurg 2006a), because they experience interpersonal cross-pressures.⁸ In contrast, for those who surround themselves with like-minded folks—often referred to as homophily -- the social costs of politics may be quite low (Farrell 2012), since their views are positively reinforced by friends and neighbors (Mutz 2002). Studies show, for example, that partisans living in communities with a heavy skew of like-minded partisans are more likely to vote than partisans in heterogeneous social contexts (Gimpel, Dyck, and Shaw 2004).

How the Internet Affects the Social Context of Political Participation

Research about the effects of the Internet on politics has often focused on its potential to generate positive outcomes, such as enhancing participation and trust in government (Bimber 2001; McNeal, Hale, and Dotterweich 2008; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Tolbert and McNeal 2003).⁹ The basic theoretical argument is that the Internet lowers transaction costs of exchanging information, which makes it easier for individuals to get involved in politics (Shirky 2009). One additional mechanism is that the Internet appears to increase the prospect that like-minded people will find each other (e.g., homophily), which spurs participation as individuals with mutual interests support and encourage one another (Benkler 2006; Sunstein 2009).

This analysis does not challenge the general claim that the Internet potentially broadens participation, but raises the possibility that the lower transaction costs achieved by the Internet could, under some conditions, induce people to avoid politics (McNeal and Hale 2010). Lower transaction costs increase the flow and transparency of political information making it easier for citizens to learn about politics and express opinions. In doing so, however, the Internet potentially increases the likelihood that citizens will confront the *social costs* of preference revelation. These social costs are not distributed evenly across the population. Drawing on social influence theory, the social cost of preference revelation is likely to be lower for those who associate with likeminded individuals, and greater for those who feel surrounded by those who may disapprove (Farrell 2012). To be sure, the Internet provides opportunities for those with minority viewpoints in a local community to connect with sympathizers in far-flung geographic spaces. However, the expression of

preferences via the Internet may also expose such individuals to those who do not share their preferences in their local community.

For this reason, the Internet potentially dampens participation among those for whom social costs of preference revelation are high, precisely because it alters the social context in which individuals choose to participate in politics. Specifically, it makes some political acts, which are assumed to be private, now acts that amount to a public endorsement (Briffault 2010; McGeeveran 2003-2004). The unwieldy social context of the Internet widens exposure to a politically heterogeneous network in which we might run into our bosses, poker partners or ex-lovers. The open environment makes it difficult to cordon political activity from other forms of social engagement such as work and play. Even if an individual believes she has a fair-minded boss, she may not want her knowing that she contributed to a conservative “Tea Party” candidate, particularly if the boss is known for her political liberalism. In this way, the Internet makes a hash of personal efforts to tailor the presentation-of-self to targeted groups because the individual can no longer control the context in which he or she manages the props, costume and audience appropriate to the situation (Goffman 1959). Lacking this control and the fear of being miscast, the individual withdraws from the stage.

Few empirical studies of participation have raised questions about the potential dark side of the Internet and how, by altering the social context, it might deter some individuals from engaging because of privacy concerns (e.g., McNeal and Hale 2010). These privacy issues emerge frequently in policy debates about how business firms routinely extract personal information of Internet, but have rarely been echoed in analyses of political participation, except with respect to voting (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling 2009).

The Impact Disclosure on Political Contributions

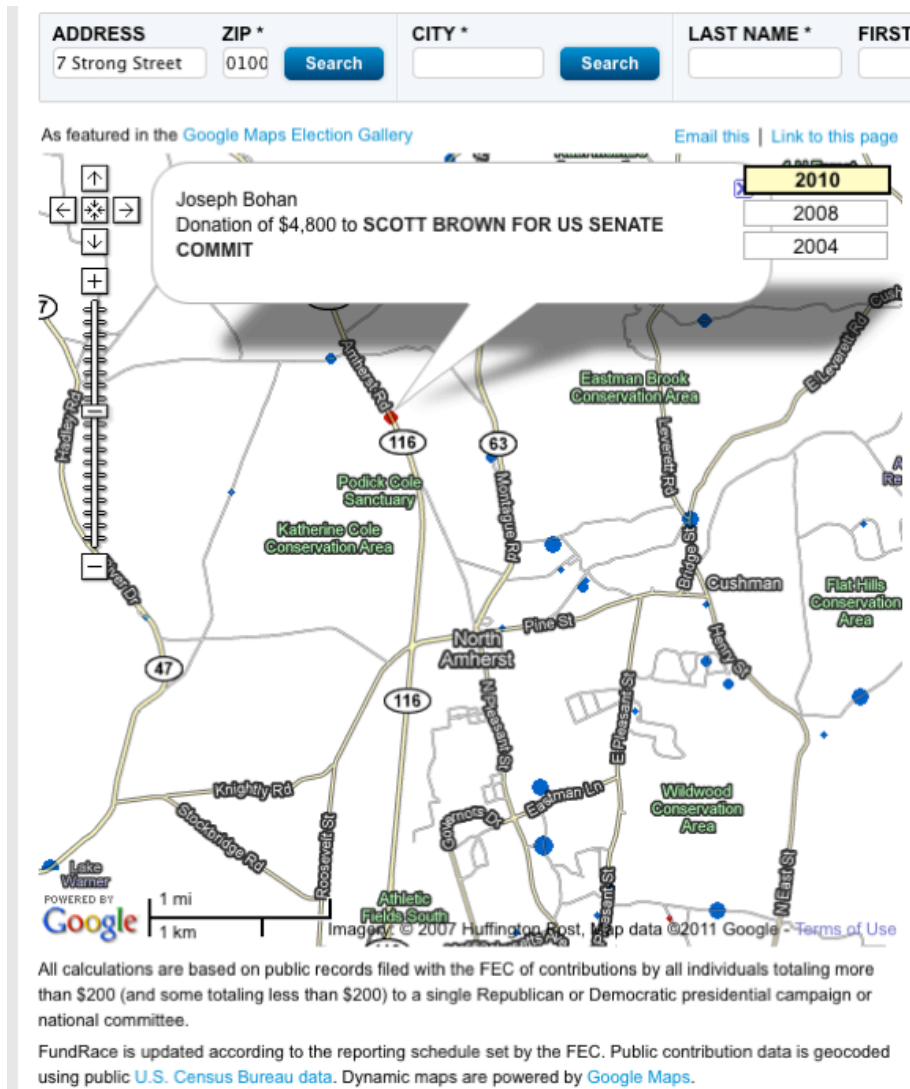
While there is evidence from experimental studies that voting behavior is marked by social pressure, there have been no similar studies to observe the effect of disclosure on other common political activities. It remains an open question whether it has an impact donating money, which is a more rarified form of participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Studies show that donors tend to be wealthier, more educated, white and more interested in politics than others (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and these traits are associated with being less vulnerable to social influence (McClurg 2006b; Ulbig and Funk 1999). Thus, we might expect public disclosure to have minimal effects on political donors. To the degree that transparency of preferences negatively affects giving money, this study provides a fairly strong test of the effect of disclosure on political activity since it focuses on individuals with relatively high social and economic status.

Compared to voting the social context for giving donations has changed considerably during the past few decades, making it more likely that giving money becomes a public display of political preference. Federal and state election agencies have made great strides improving the disclosure of political contributions over the Internet, allowing site users to search easily for names of donors. At the federal level, the law requires contributors giving \$200 or more to provide their name, address, occupation, employer, and amount. Seven states require similar information for *any* amount, starting at \$1, with another 19 states setting their limits somewhere between \$20 and \$51; 19 states require disclosure at \$100 or \$101, while 5 states range from \$150 to \$300 (see Appendix A).

Importantly, entrepreneurial watchdog groups have created websites that use government-gathered data to organize the information easily for online users, sometimes in

provocative ways. Figure 1 provides an example of one site, operated by the Huffington Post, which merges publicly available data on contributions from the Federal Elections Commission with geo-coded data provided by the Census Bureau to generate Google Maps. These maps locate the address of individuals who give money, along with colored dots showing the party to which they donated (blue dots for Democrats, red for Republicans). One click on the dot reveals the donor's name, amount of contribution and political committee that received it. These data can be retrieved readily by anyone – an employer, landlord, or prospective date – who chooses to Google a name.

Figure 1. Google Map of Political Donors



The example in Figure 1 shows a college town, which displays an overwhelming number of blue dots relative to red dots. With a few clicks, anyone can see how their neighbors, friends and colleagues choose to spend their money on politics. While donors tend to possess attributes that make them less vulnerable to social influence, theory suggests that the desire to conform or avoid roiling private relationships will make respondents wary

of participating in situations where friends, neighbors and colleagues at work might find out. Citizens may fear that others will judge them differently or misconstrue the reasons why they gave money. The unbounded diffusion of information through the Internet may even affect the behavior of those who are not typically cross-pressured in their immediate social environments. No one can ever be sure who might view their political activity, including future potential business clients and employers. Overall, the social costs associated with disclosure leads to the following testable hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Disclosure reduces political participation. Disclosure should diminish the likelihood that respondents donate money, or else cause them to give smaller amounts that fall below the threshold at which donations are made public.

The impact of social influence should be particularly strong among citizens who do not share political beliefs with their associates from daily life. Research suggests that *homophily* in social networks strongly encourages political participation since like-minded supporters encourage and reinforce each other's activities (Mutz 2002; Mutz 2008). The converse, of course, is that being in an environment where people may disagree with you tends to discourage participation. Those who feel they have different political opinions from associates will experience social costs that outweigh the political benefits of participation. Being in the minority -- a strong form of *interpersonal cross-pressure* -- appears to make one sensitive to challenging group norms (McClurg 2006a) and raises additional concerns about retaliation or jeopardizing social relations (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling 2009; McClurg 2006a; Ulbig and Funk 1999). Thus, the desire to preserve social harmony will make individuals with minority viewpoints especially reluctant to have the veil of secrecy pierced by the Internet. They will tend to refrain from activities that expose their political preferences.

Hypothesis 2: Disclosure has a stronger impact on those exposed to interpersonal cross-pressures. Faced with the prospect of disclosing a contribution, citizens whose views differ from those in their social community will be less likely to donate money or prone to giving amounts that fall below the threshold at which donations are made public.

Experimental Design: Analyzing the Effect of Disclosure on Participation

The data are a representative survey of 1000 American adults conducted as part of the 2011 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is conducted by YouGov-America, which conducts online opt-in surveys using a matched random sample design where a subset of respondents recruited for online surveys are selected by matching them on demographic characteristics to a randomly selected set of American adults. Its validity as an unbiased survey tool has been demonstrated through comparisons of its projected election outcomes with actual election results in 2006 through 2012, as well as extremely similar results in comparing summary statistics, correlations and regression coefficients in modeling vote choice with the American National Election Studies during the same period (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). Moreover, studies have shown that the mode of sample contact (Internet, phone, and mail) has no effect on regression estimates of models of turnout and other outcomes (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013). The opt-in panel is

disproportionally white, old and educated, and so the data on sub-populations such as Hispanics does not always perform as well (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). It also appears to be somewhat more politically knowledgeable than samples drawn using other modes (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013). However, these limitations should not impact this study since the analysis does not focus on differences across demographic subpopulations but on cross-pressured individuals. Moreover, the differences in the opt-in panel reflect subgroups (white, old, educated, knowledgeable) that should be less vulnerable to social influence and therefore the results, if anything, are biased against the hypotheses put forward. While the CCES/YouGov methodology is relatively new, it has had a major impact on political science research. In six years (as of March 2013) the project has produced 122 publications, including many in the top political science journals, as well as provided essential data for major books on political representation and Congress.¹⁰ Appendix B includes additional information about the survey.

The experimental design used in the analysis provides a strong basis for making causal inferences about donor behavior by varying the treatments among subsets of the sample and holding other elements constant. The wording for the question on making contributions was slightly altered to different sets of randomly selected respondents. For the control condition, the question asked respondents about their willingness to contribute money. Specifically, the question read, “If a candidate is running in your district who closely represents your political views, how much, if anything, would you consider donating to his campaign?” Respondents were asked to enter an amount between 0 and \$2500. The other treatment versions of this question varied slightly. In one version, a sentence was added to indicate simply that their donation would be public (i.e., starting at \$1). It read at the end, “Please note: names of donors are made public on the Internet.” Another version created a threshold at which donations would be made public at \$50. It read: “Please note: names of donors contributing over \$50 are made public on the Internet.” The final version changed the threshold for disclosure to \$100. Thus, the last two versions provide a cue that anonymity is potentially lost once the donor chooses to give above a certain amount.

Given that few Americans actually have the experience of contributing campaign money, the analysis also presents separate findings for respondents who said they made a contribution in the previous five elections, as well as those who appear to be active citizens by virtue of voting in the recent election and claiming that they pay attention to public affairs regularly.¹¹ These constraints provide the findings with greater external validity since it involves respondents who have already engaged in this form of political activity, or who are potential donors because political interest is strongly associated with the likelihood of making contributions (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

A key independent variable in this experiment is the social context of respondents. The study compares responses of citizens in homophilic networks (they share views with those around them) and those who are internally cross-pressured by having opposing views in their midst. Again, the expectation is that respondents surrounded by unlike views are more likely to be affected negatively by the prospect of public disclosure. To identify the degree of interpersonal cross-pressure facing respondents, a question asked: “Would you say that your political views are similar to, or different from those of people in your family, co-workers, and neighborhood?” The responses provided “Views are much the same”, “Views are somewhat different”, “Views are very different” and “Not sure”. The question is framed to get respondents to consider both strong personal ties and social acquaintances in their communities. Regardless of whether such perceptions are accurate, it is the perception of similarity or difference by the respondent that is likely to matter for her behavior.

The measure of internal cross-pressure provides some leverage to isolate the effect of *social accountability* (as opposed to *ambivalence*) as the underlying social-psychological mechanism driving this behavior. Mutz (2006) posits that behavior can change through two possible psychological mechanisms. The first predicts withdrawal because greater exposure generates feelings of ambivalence as the individual begins to face the prospect of reconciling so many conflicting opinions. The second mechanism suggests a form of social accountability in which exposure makes individuals fear reprisals or costly conflict for challenging prevailing norms. To be sure, the process is likely intertwined. But since this study focuses on *unveiling* preferences, it is more likely to evoke a response from those facing interpersonal conflict (social accountability) than with those facing intrapersonal conflict (ambivalence). Those who refrain from participation because they are ambivalent should not care as much about being exposed compared to those who want to maintain social harmony.

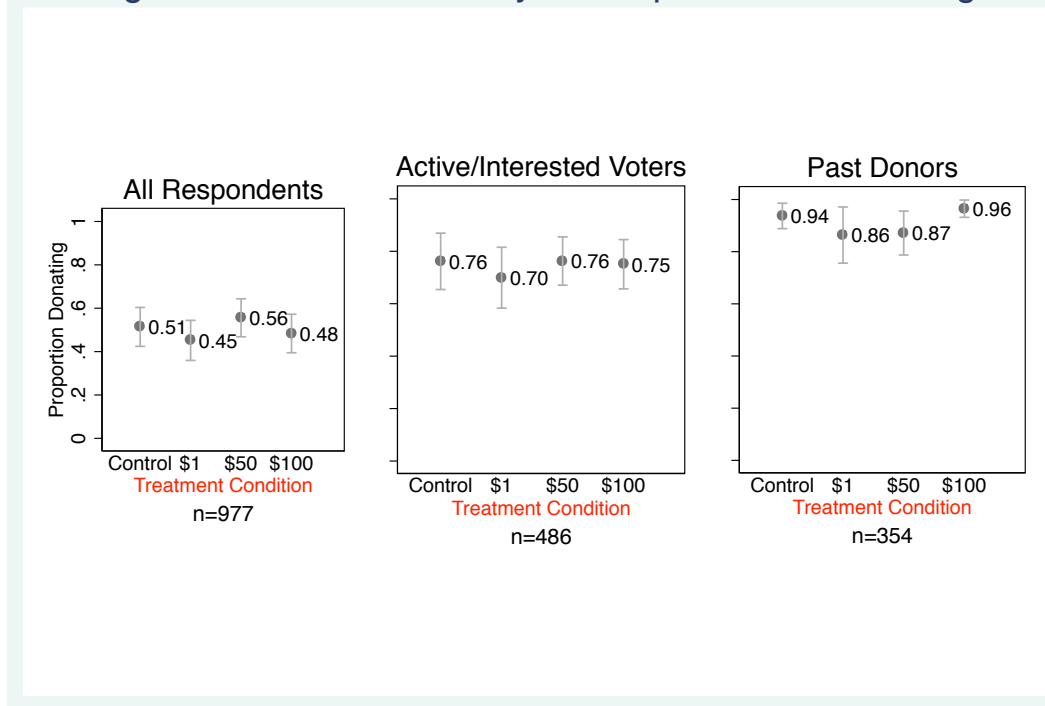
The Effect of Disclosure on Campaign Contributions

The first part of the analysis looks at whether disclosure has the effect of discouraging respondents from giving *any* money. Figure 2 plots three graphs. The first is the effect of publicity on willingness to contribute for *All Respondents*. The next two graphs are subsets of the sample to approximate citizens who might conceivably make a small donation in a real election. One shows *Active and Interested Voters* who say they voted in the previous election and keep abreast of the news most of the time. The other shows *Past Donors*, defined as someone who gave a political contribution in the past 5 years.

The point estimates reflect the proportion of respondents in either group who make *any* kind of political contribution and the extended lines are the confidence intervals. Note that active/interested voters are more likely to make a donation in this experiment than all respondents, and that past donors have the greatest likelihood of making a contribution. This pattern confirms the research about politically interested citizens and donors, namely that they are more active in politics (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). For these respondents, making a political contribution is a plausible activity and, as stated previously, provides some external validity for the experiment. Among past donors in the control condition, 94% of respondents who made a donation in the past, agreed to make a donation in the experiment compared to only 59% of all respondents. Importantly, however, it appears that publicity has no apparent effect on willingness to make a contribution for any set of respondents, whether disclosure starts just above \$1, \$50 or \$100. While there is a decrease in the expected direction among past donors when donations are publicized (at \$1 and \$50 conditions), the differences are not statistically significant. In this instance of choosing to give money or not, the null hypothesis (Hypothesis 1 regarding reduced participation in the entire population) cannot be rejected.

While this finding may suggest that social influence has little or no impact on the willingness to make a donation, it does not fully account for the impact of disclosure on cross-pressured citizens (Hypothesis 2). First, it should be pointed out that, even without disclosure, cross-pressured respondents are among the least likely in the experiment to give money at all, a finding which is consistent with previous research on citizen participation (Mutz 2006). In this experiment, only 39% of respondents in the strongly cross-pressured group (i.e., surrounded by those with very different views) were willing to give money, compared with 46% for those whose views are only somewhat different, and 61% for respondents whose views are the same. There is a clear linear relationship between the extent of being cross-pressured and willingness to make a contribution.

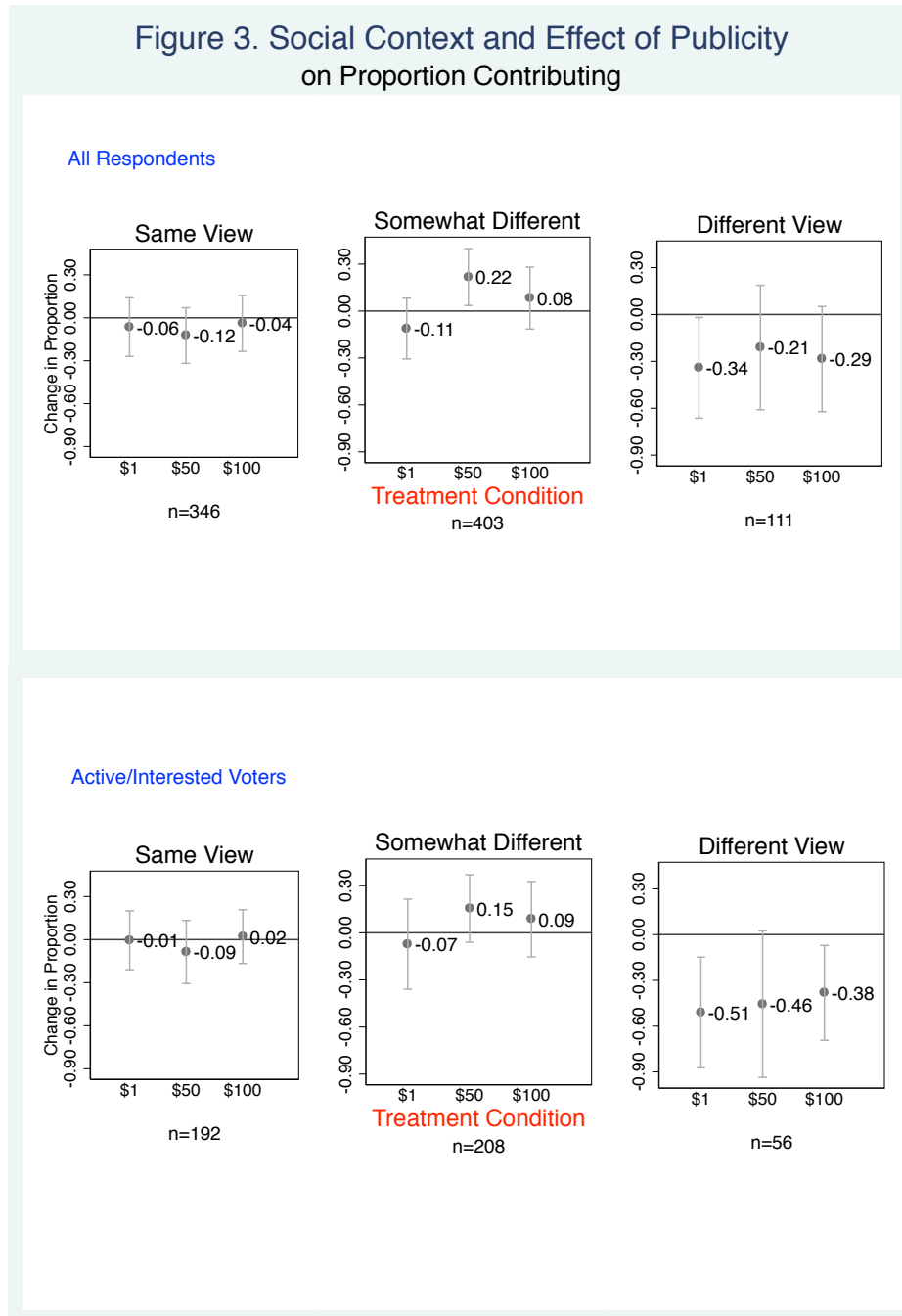
Figure 2. Effect of Publicity on Proportion Contributing



This experiment demonstrates that the strongly-cross-pressured are *even less likely* to give money when faced with potential disclosure of political contributions. This finding confirms Hypothesis 2. Figure 3 divides all respondents into three categories depending on whether they have the “same”, “somewhat different”, or “very different” views from those around them. The horizontal line across the graphs signifies a baseline of zero for the control condition, and the point estimates reflect deviations from this baseline. The top set of graphs, which includes all respondents, indicates that the willingness to contribute among those with “very different” views (i.e., the most cross-pressured) drops sharply when they face public disclosure, compared to respondents who share the “same” or “somewhat different” views with those around them. The top right graph shows that the negative effect is triggered when respondents are simply informed that the names of all donors must be made public on the Internet (see bar for \$1 threshold). Specifically, the proportion of highly cross-pressured respondents willing to contribute drops by .34 compared to similarly cross-pressured respondents in the control condition (recall that the control condition does not mention publicity). The bars extending from the point estimate reflect the .95 confidence intervals and do not overlap with the horizontal baseline, indicating that the finding is statistically significant at p-value of .05. At the \$50 and \$100 disclosure level, there are substantial declines as well, although these fall just short of conventional levels of statistical significance. This finding makes intuitive sense because respondents in these conditions can presumably still donate and avoid disclosure by giving less than the disclosure threshold. In fact, many reacted precisely in this way.

Among respondents who are not cross-pressured or moderately cross-pressured (i.e., those who have the “same view” or “somewhat different views”), the thresholds do not appear to affect willingness to donate, even though the declines are mostly in the expected

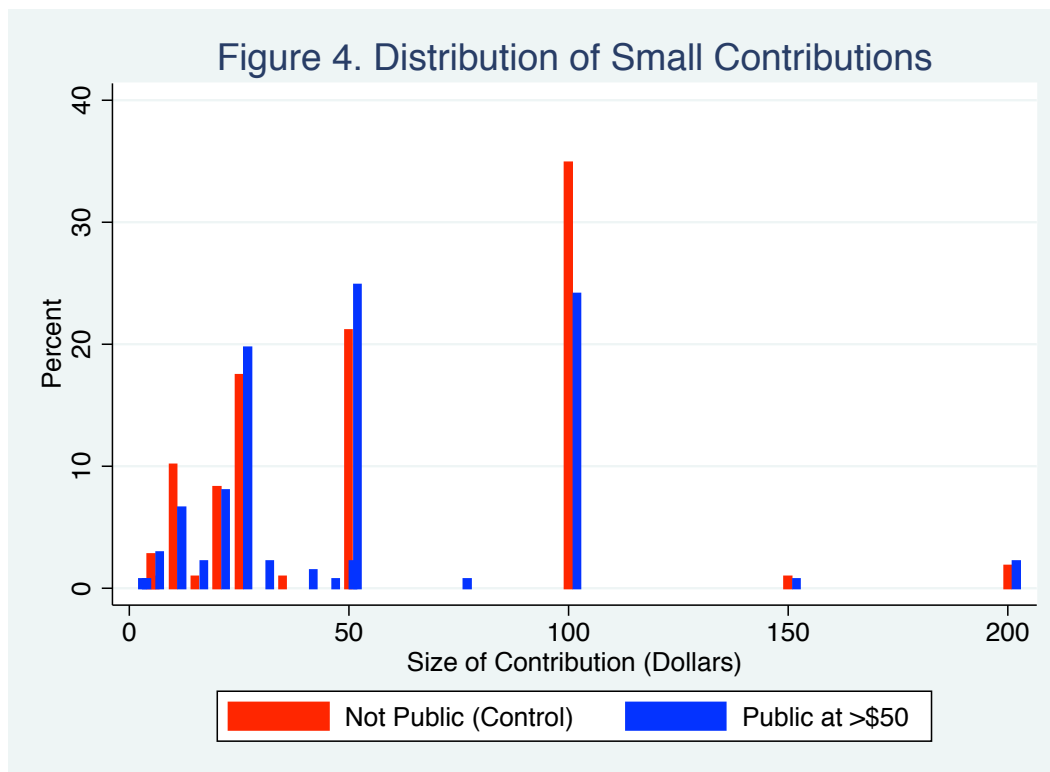
direction. Curiously, at the \$50 level, the respondents whose views are “somewhat different” experience an increase of .22 in the proportion choosing to give money. This outcome is contrary to expectations. However, the effect disappears once the sample is restricted to respondents who are more likely to give money in the real world, such as “Active and Interested Voters” in the bottom set of graphs.¹²



Importantly, the substantive impact on cross-pressured citizens is significant and large among active and interested voters (bottom set of graphs), which includes a subset of

citizens who are more likely to give money than the general population. As Figure 3 shows, the respondents in this group who react most negatively to disclosure are those who feel surrounded by people with different views. The effects are present for every treatment condition in the experiment (\$1, \$50, \$100), and in a linear pattern that is consistent with experimental expectations.¹³ Higher thresholds attenuate the negative impact of disclosure because they allow respondents to give smaller amounts, which preserve their anonymity. Those who face disclosure starting at \$1 experience a .51 decline in proportion donating compared to the control; at \$50 disclosure the decline is .46; and at \$100 the decline is .38. Overall, Figure 3 provides robust support for Hypothesis 2 that disclosure matters in the decision to contribute for those who face strong interpersonal cross-pressures. The treatment appears to affect a subset of active citizens who are plausible political contributors in the real world.

The next part of the analysis looks at whether thresholds affect the *amounts* that citizens are willing to donate. The underlying rationale is that some citizens will adjust their political contributions to avoid having to disclose their identities. To get a sense for how much respondents are willing to contribute, Figure 4 shows the distribution of donations at \$200 or less, which comprises almost 95% of all contributions, for those in the control

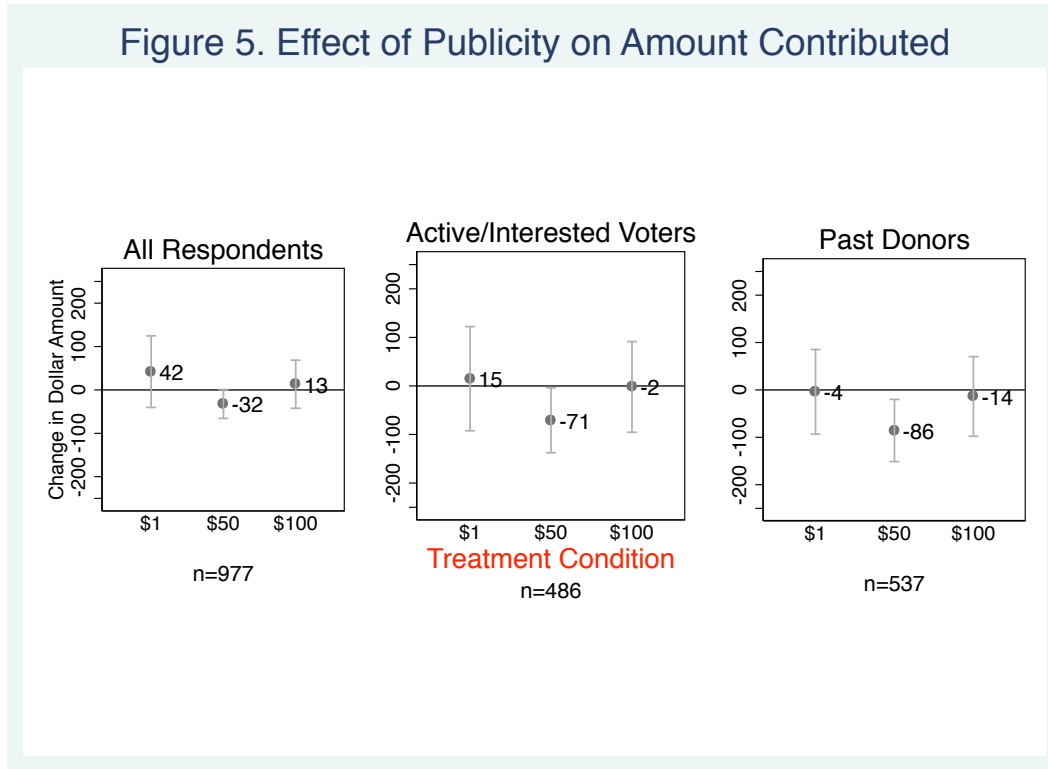


group (red/lighter shade) and those who face a disclosure threshold of \$50 (blue/darker shade). It reveals donors typically give sums in round amounts like \$25, \$50, and \$100. However, donors faced with a \$50 threshold (those in blue) are less likely to make a \$100 donation compared to the control group. Instead, a greater percentage of respondents in the \$50 treatment condition (which typically means disclosure starts at \$51) choose to bunch

their contributions at \$50 or \$25 to avoid disclosure. This histogram suggests that respondents are sensitive to cues about disclosure of contributions.

To see if these different distributions reflect genuinely different behaviors, the next set of analyses provides difference of means tests across three conditions (\$1, \$50, \$100). Once again, the horizontal baseline in Figure 5 provides the control condition against which to measure change. The analysis applies to three sets of groups: all respondents, active/interested voters, and past donors.¹⁴ A clear finding is that the \$50 threshold causes donors to cut back on contributions. Among “all respondents”, the average size of contributions declines \$32 from a baseline of \$80 (baseline amounts not shown in graphs). This change reflects a 40% decrease in the average size of contributions. Similarly, among “active/interested voters” the presence of a \$50 threshold causes the average size of a donation to fall by \$71 from a baseline of \$150, which reflects a decline of 47%. Finally, among “past donors”, who unsurprisingly start at the highest average, the typical size of a donation falls by \$86 from a baseline of \$171, reflecting a decrease of 50% from the control group.

Figure 5. Effect of Publicity on Amount Contributed



These declines provides support for Hypothesis 1 that disclosure thresholds cause potential small donors to pull back by giving less money so as to avoid disclosing their identities. The \$100 threshold did not appear to matter, which is related to the fact that 91% of donors in the experiment gave \$100 or less (as Figure 4 suggests). In other words, not many respondents faced the quandary of exposure at \$100 simply because they were already inclined to give less than that. Larger experimental samples may, in fact, demonstrate that the \$100 threshold affects donors. The \$1 threshold did not appear to matter either, which is curious since one would think that it would cause some potential donors to give nothing. One possibility is that the finding is an artifact of the question wording. For the respondents

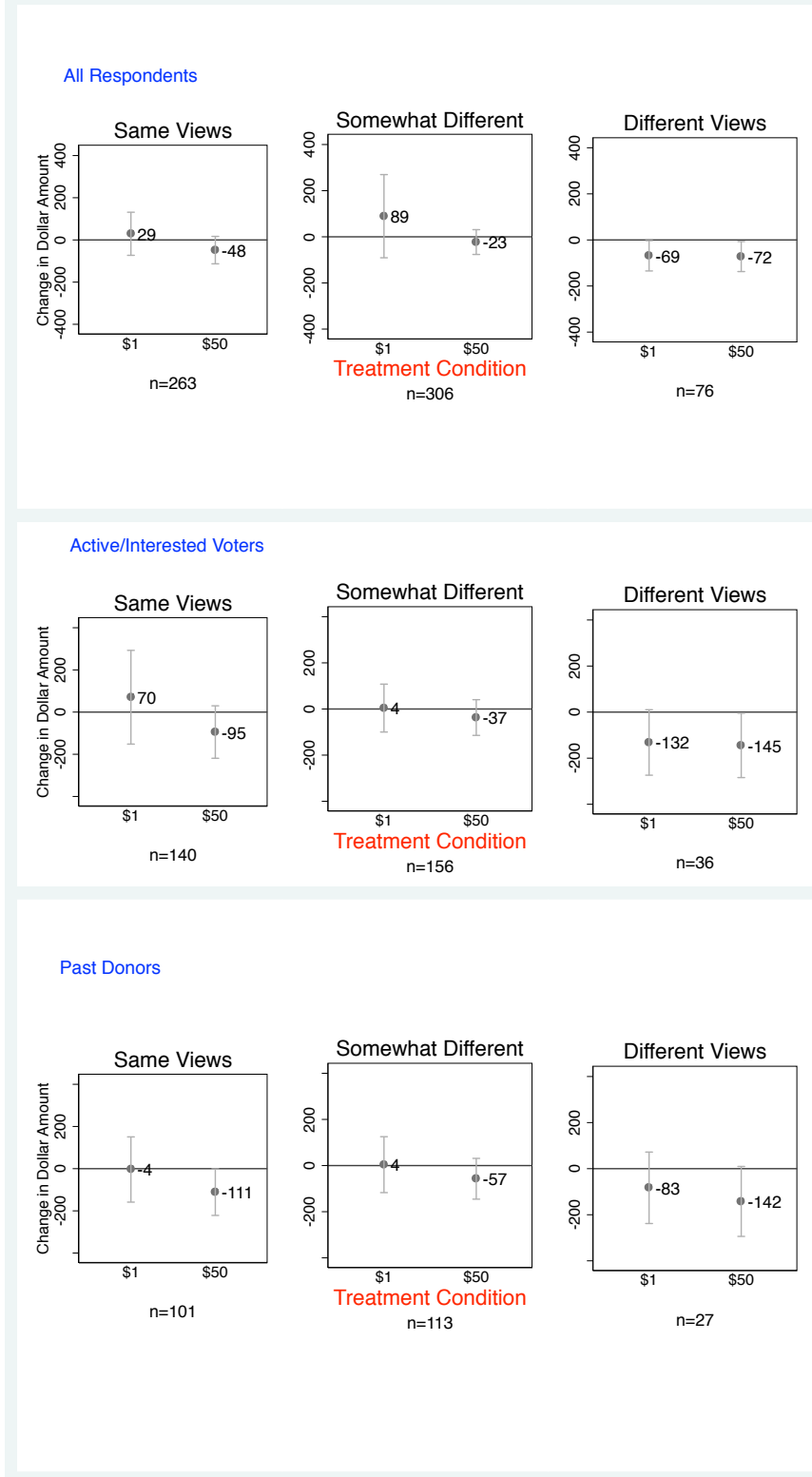
facing the \$1 condition, they were merely told that all donations are public, while at higher threshold they were told it becomes public at \$50 or \$100. It is possible that citing a specific threshold amount provides a stronger cognitive cue that contributions will be disclosed. Another possibility, and one that is explored in the next graph, is that a \$1 threshold does, in fact, have an impact but it is confined to a smaller subset of respondents who are strongly cross-pressured.

To probe the possibility that disclosure causes cross-pressured individuals to reduce their donations even more precipitously than others, the next set of analyses shows behavior across different social contexts. The findings reveal again how cross-pressured respondents are more sensitive to publicity (Hypothesis 2). Figure 6 replicates the previous analysis but this time breaks down the behavior of respondents according to their social situation. It compares three groups: those who are surrounded by people with the “same views”, “somewhat different”, or “very different”. The top set of charts includes findings for All Respondents, followed by Active and Interested Voters, and then Past Donors. First note that across all subsets of the sample, respondents who are surrounded by people with “different views” tend to react negatively when choosing to make a small donation (the \$100 category is dropped because there are no effects for reasons cited above). The treatment effect at the \$50 threshold is significant in each set. Notably, the effects are largest for citizens in the population who are most likely to give money, i.e., the active/interested voters and people who have given money in the past. Focusing on past donors (the bottom set of graphs), the average contribution plummets by \$142 (from a baseline of \$175) among respondents facing strong interpersonal cross-pressures. This brings the average contribution to just \$33, which is a decline of 81%. For the \$1 condition, there is a decline of \$83, although the change is not statistically significant.

In support of Hypothesis 1, declines are also observed for respondents surrounded by those with the “same views” or “somewhat different” views but these were not nearly as large. Among those whose views are the same, the decline in average contributions between the control and treatment group fell by \$111 from a baseline of \$197, reflecting a drop of 56%. Those with somewhat different views experienced a decline of \$57 from a baseline of \$153, reflecting a drop of 37% (the difference for this latter group was not statistically significant).

While these findings are not perfectly linear across social contexts the preponderance of evidence indicates that disclosure negatively affects likely donors (Hypothesis 1), and that being surrounded by those with different views makes one even more cautious about giving money (Hypothesis 2).

Figure 6. Social Context and Effect of Publicity on Amount Contributed



Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This study indicates that publicizing the identity of political contributors has a negative impact on small donors. When some citizens believe that their contributions will be posted publicly on the Internet at relatively low levels they tend to cut back on giving to avoid publicity. Individuals who face strong interpersonal cross-pressures from people around them are most likely to stop giving or donate at considerably smaller amounts to avoid the threshold amount when their names become public. In the broader population, disclosure does not necessarily cause citizens to stop making contributions but encourages them to make smaller donations at levels below the disclosure threshold. These findings confirm hypotheses about political participation that are rooted in social influence theory. Specifically, citizens who experience interpersonal cross-pressures – defined here as those who perceive themselves as surrounded in their local social circles by opposing viewpoints -- are more likely to dampen participation when facing the prospect of revealing their preferences by giving a small contribution. The dampening effect is present but weaker among those who claim to be surrounded by people with likeminded views.¹⁵ These findings are linked to behavioral changes resulting from social accountability mechanisms (i.e., interpersonal conflict) rather than feelings of ambivalence (intrapersonal conflict) since it is the potential unveiling of preferences to others that appears to cause individuals to withdraw.

The analysis adds to our understanding about how secrecy or its absence affects citizens' willingness to engage in politics. While previous studies have demonstrated the power of social influence theory in voting behavior (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) and deliberation (Mutz 2006), this study applies it to the more exclusive form of engagement of making political contributions. Typically, contributors comprise a class of citizens with higher social status and resources who should be least likely to be affected by social influence. But even among them, the findings suggest that that publicity has a powerful impact.

Importantly, this study suggests that the Internet may change the social context for some forms of political engagement in potentially negative ways. While the Internet has the potential to boost participation for partisans and activists (Bimber 2001), under certain conditions it may chill participation among those who do not have homophilic networks or who are less politically committed. Politics for many people is not an all-encompassing aspect of their lives. Most engage in it occasionally, and typically in a voting booth where their vote is secret. In voting, they obtain the psychological benefit of performing a widely praised civic act without having to reveal preferences. To a large degree, the voter controls the context in which they express preferences. They can tell friends, or they can choose to withhold such information if they choose to cordon off political commitments from other social roles in their community.

The ease with which the Internet assembles and spreads information about political activity can make non-voting forms of engagement a dicey proposition. By divulging political acts, which were previously secret, the Internet conceivably makes it harder for individuals to separate their various social roles. The small act of making a \$100 contribution to a favored candidate or cause has the potential to threaten social ties in a local community, or even affect the ability to get work, if information about these contributions is easily accessible. For some, the social cost of participation may appear too high compared to the benefit of political participation.¹⁶ To be sure, Justice Scalia may have a good point about the

importance of civic courage in a democracy, but the inclination to withdraw from politics may be less about courage than a decision to focus on other priorities. If participating in politics is not an especially satisfying activity, why bother if it is going to roil social relations that are considered more important?

One implication is that the lack of privacy may tilt political participation even more toward engaged partisans and ideologues. Previous studies demonstrate that firm partisans tend to surround themselves with like-minded people, and feel more comfortable advertising their politics than other citizens (Mutz 2006). They enjoy pasting political bumper stickers on their cars and putting campaign signs in front of their homes (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For such people, the benefits of political engagement, such as solidarity with a broader community of partisans, may outweigh the social cost of displeasing neighbors and acquaintances who may disagree with them. In contrast, individuals who are cross-pressured in their communities may choose more frequently to conceal true preferences – often referred to as “preference falsification” (Farrell 2012; Kuran 1995). For purposes of brevity this study did not discuss differences in participation between moderates and ideologues. But in an analysis with these data, it appears that moderates are much more likely to reduce political giving than strong ideologues when faced with disclosure thresholds. With a \$50 disclosure threshold, the average donations from moderates plummeted by 65% compared to only 24% for those who said they were strongly liberal or conservative (and the decrease for ideologues was not statistically significant). Since the cost of displaying one’s politics may be especially high in an era of highly polarized politics, political activity may become even more dominated by those for whom politics is a highly salient feature of their personal lives. This finding points up the difficult dilemma for democratic theory, namely that it is desirable to have both exposure to different opinions and robust participation in politics, and yet there appears to be a trade-off between the two (Thompson 2008).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest some potential unintended consequences of disclosure policies that include small donors. Experts have discussed the benefits of maximizing the role of small donors in financing campaigns, such as expanding engagement in the political process and minimizing the role of major donors (Corrado, Malbin, Mann, and Ornstein 2010). This goal seems particularly salient in the wake of court cases such as *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission*, which potentially increase the role of large donors. The findings in this study suggest that disclosure rules negatively affect small donors. In this experiment, the \$50 threshold causes past donors to decrease their giving by roughly 50%. That is a substantial source of financing that is foregone in American elections by imposing on the privacy of donors at amounts that can hardly be considered corrupting. Given that so many individuals choose to give as little as \$100 in the control condition it appears that thresholds in the American states should be set above this amount so that potential small donors will not be discouraged from giving.¹⁷ The low thresholds are likely to have larger negative impact in local elections, which rely heavily on small donations. Based on these concerns, reformers might also consider ways to promote partial-disclosure (Cain 2010), which would allow collection of donor information so that the public has some knowledge about which interests are giving money, without necessarily infringing on the privacy of donors by revealing individual identities. To be sure, “sunlight” on money in politics is widely acknowledged as essential for holding political elites accountable. However, it does not necessarily have to cast its glare on citizens whose political donations fall well short of what any reasonable person might consider corrupting.

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Appendix A. Reporting Requirements: Disclosure Thresholds

State	Disclosure starts at:	State	Disclosure starts at:
Alaska	1	New York	100
Florida	1	Alabama	100
Louisiana	1	California	100
Michigan	1	Delaware	100
West Virginia	1	Hawaii	100
New Mexico	1	Indiana	100
Ohio	1	Kentucky	100
Colorado	20	Montana	100
Wisconsin	20	North Carolina	100
Arizona	25	Nevada	100
Iowa	25	Oregon	100
New Hampshire	25	Rhode Island	100
Washington	25	South Carolina	100
Wyoming	25	South Dakota	100
Missouri	35	Tennessee	100
Arkansas	50	Virginia	100
Connecticut	50	Vermont	100
Idaho	50	Georgia	101
Kansas	50	Minnesota	101
Massachusetts	50	Illinois	150
Maine	50	Mississippi	200
Oklahoma	50	North Dakota	200
Pennsylvania	50	Nebraska	250
Texas	50	New Jersey	300
Utah	50		
Maryland	51		

Source:

Campaign Disclosure Law Database, "The Campaign Disclosure Project: Bringing Sunlight to Political Money in Fifty States." A project of the UCLA School of Law, Center for Governmental Studies and California Voter Foundation.

Accessed Sept. 15, 2012. <http://disclosure.law.ucla.edu/> ;

Campaign Finance Institute, Interactive Tool for Citizen Policy Analysis, Available at <http://www.cfinst.org/state/CitizenPolicyTool.aspx>

Appendix B. Information about the Cooperative Congressional Election Study

The CCES is conducted over the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix using a matched random sample design where a subset of respondents recruited for online surveys were selected by matching them on demographic characteristics to a randomly selected set of American adults. The pre-election survey (used in this analysis) was administered late September to late October. Individuals are recruited onto the YouGov/Polimetrix Internet panel using targeted online advertisements designed to assure a large and representative group of panelists. The online advertisement leads individuals to a gateway survey; at the end of this initial survey, respondents are asked if they would like to join the panel. Propensity score weights were developed to ensure that the sample represented the characteristics of the adult population according to the most recent Current Population Survey. The CCES samples were drawn from the YouGov/Polimetrix panel using a sample matching technique to ensure a nationally representative sample.

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Notes

¹ See the Campaign Disclosure Law Database, "The Campaign Disclosure Project: Bringing Sunlight to Political Money in Fifty States." A project of the UCLA School of Law, Center for Governmental Studies and California Voter Foundation. Accessed September 15, 2012.

² *Doe v. Reed* transcript at 12-28. *Doe v. Reed*, 561 U.S. ____2010, Justice Scalia, concurring in the judgment. Available at <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/09-559.ZC4.html>

³ *SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission*, 599 F.3d 686 (D.C. Cir 2010); *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

⁴ For review of literature, see Neumann, W. R., B. Bimber, and M. Hindman. 2011. "The Internet and Four Dimensions of Citizenship." in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by R. Y. Shapiro and L. R. Jacobs. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ To be sure, some people lack trust in the secrecy of the ballot box, and many appear to divulge to others who how they voted. Gerber, A. S., G. A. Huber, D. Doherty, and C. M. Dowling. 2012. "Is There a Secret Ballot? Ballot Secrecy Perceptions and Their Implications for Voting Behaviour." *British Journal of Political Science* FirstView:1-26.

⁶ See *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976), *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010) and *Doe v. Reed*, 561 U.S. ____2010.

⁷ McClurg (2006) argues that the presence of political expertise in heterogeneous networks may offset the ambivalence and withdrawal from politics networks through the passing of information that helps people reject dissonant views.

⁸ Interpersonal cross-pressures may be contrasted with intrapersonal cross-pressures. The latter situation occurs when individuals have multiple and overlapping social identities, which are not always compatible, such as a labor union member who is Republican.

⁹ This work has been careful not to overstate these positive effects and indeed has refuted some of them. See, for example, McNeal, Hale and Dotterweich (2008) on trust.

¹⁰ See David C. Barker and Christopher J. Carman, *Political Representation in Red and Blue America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Gary C. Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections* (New York: Pearson, 2012).

¹¹ Because it was an off-election year, the CCES 2011 data did not include questions about other kinds of political participation such as putting up lawn signs, signing petitions, etc.

¹² When the sample is restricted to only ‘past donors’ the substantive change for the moderately cross-pressured (somewhat different views) or non-cross-pressured (same views) respondents is not much different from zero. The graphs for past donors are not shown here because, in this instance, there were insufficient data to run the models for past donors who are cross-pressured.

¹³ The differences across thresholds are not statistically significant, which is not surprising given the relatively small sample size.

¹⁴ These groups are not mutually exclusive. All respondents includes active/interest voters as a subset; active/interest voters includes past donors as a subset.

¹⁵ The questionnaire asked respondents about the views of people in their *local* communities, which is the social context this study sought to assess. Presumably, however, such respondents could also feel some cross-pressure from being exposed over Internet to those in their virtual communities or have concerns about how such disclosure might affect future relationships (e.g., future employers).

¹⁶ This dynamic does not appear to be driven necessarily by fear that giving up information will result in unwanted solicitations. Otherwise we would observe respondents opting out regardless of social context. However, the results indicate that the changes occur primarily among those who are surrounded by people with different views.

¹⁷ An analysis that included more donors might conclude that a threshold higher than \$100 would be better, particularly for federal elections.