

**Party preservation or self-promotion?  
Leadership PAC contributions  
in the U.S. House of Representatives**

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The recent passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 means parties will have to rethink one of their favored tools for enforcing party discipline: soft money. The legislation, which overhauls campaign finance laws, may have strong implications for the way parties can use campaign contributions in general to impose party discipline. Prior to passage, parties had played a well-documented role in managing campaign finance. They provide technical and financial assistance (Herrnson 1986), assistance that may increase the challenger's fundraising success (Herrnson 1992). Parties can also create a more efficient distribution of campaign funds (Jacobson 1985) and can strategically funnel money to those races where it may do the party the most good (McAdams and Johannes 1987). If the new legislation decreases these roles the party now plays, what entities may take its place? One contender for the position is leadership political action committees (PACs), PACs created by members of Congress themselves in an effort to funnel funds to other candidates. The recent legislation makes no mention of leadership PACs. This paper examines the implications of an increased role for leadership PACs in campaign finance.

This study explores how legislator-donors choose among their colleagues in the House of Representatives to make campaign contributions. If the reforms indeed signal an increased role for leadership PACs, this question is now of increased importance: Are legislator-donors contributing to support the ideological position of the party, their own ideological position, or their future efforts to gain positions of power? The answer to these questions is an unequivocal "yes." I present a model of leadership PAC giving that depicts legislator-donors as balancing all three goals at once. Examining leadership PAC donation patterns in relation to the more developed literature on traditional PACs reveals

that legislator-donors make contributions in competitive races in an effort to boost both their own ideological position as well as that of their parties. They make contributions in safe races to buy access to those legislators who are already ideologically similar to them. In other words, legislators who control leadership PACs make some contributions that support their party, but a greater number of contributions go to meeting legislator-donors' personal goals. Further, differences between how Democrats and Republicans use leadership PAC funds may have implications for party competition in elections. This pattern suggests that an increased role of leadership PACs would imply a system under which legislative power is fragmented among several legislators who may or may not be ideologically proximate to the party. I go on to argue that, ironically, such a system looks very similar to the system in place prior to the 1970s reforms in the House, when entrenched committee chairs maintained disproportionate power over policy outcomes. If this is true, ability to raise funds may replace seniority as the litmus test for power in the House.

I make these claims based on an empirical study of dyads from the 2000 election, pairing every leadership PAC with every incumbent copartisan of the leadership PAC's sponsor. I estimate the model using tobit, with the dependent variable being the amount of money the leadership PAC donated to the legislator's campaign. I find that legislators who control leadership PACs make donations to legislators who are ideologically proximate to themselves in safe races, presumably to shore up support for future bids for positions of institutional power. Further, Republican legislator-donors make contributions to candidates proximate to their parties on the ideological dimension of party cleavage in competitive races. Republicans also make donations to candidates who

are ideologically similar to themselves, both on the dimension of party cleavage and the wedge dimension, while Democrats give exclusively to candidates who are ideologically proximate to their own ideal points on both dimensions. These results imply that individual fundraisers from both sides of the aisle may be able to cajole their fellow legislators into voting with them, for fear of losing valuable campaign contributions. At the same time, though, incentives for Democrats to vote with their monied colleagues may be greater than for their Republican colleagues, since Democrat legislator-donors offer no incentive to toe the party line.

### **What is a leadership PAC?**

In the 2000 election, Members of Congress gave almost \$16 million to the campaigns of their colleagues. The contributions came from either their campaign coffers or their own political action committees, called leadership PACs, created expressly to shuffle resources among members. Creating leadership PACs provides legislators' donors with another outlet for their contributions. Federal law limits individual contributions to individual campaigns to \$1000 per election cycle (the recent legislation increases this limit to \$2000), but donors may contribute another \$5000 per year to a leadership PAC. Further, leadership PACs can make larger contributions to the campaigns of others, since individual campaigns face the same limit of \$1000 per election, but leadership PACs can contribute up to \$5000 per election. (Note that the primary, the general, and any runoff election are each considered separate elections under FEC (Federal Elections Commission) rules.) In other words, one donor can give \$1000 to a legislator's personal campaign and another \$5000 to that legislator's PAC. Further, a

legislator without a leadership PAC can contribute only \$1000 per election to a colleague, but having a leadership PAC allows that same legislator to contribute \$5000.

The creation of leadership PACs seems to be a rational response to a reality that is clear in the literature on campaign finance: Those whose elections need money the most face the most difficulty in raising funds. Incumbents have a cash advantage over challengers at the beginning of elections, and that advantage only increases as the campaign continues (Krasno, Green, and Cowden 1994). The number of competitive House seats has declined because fewer and fewer challengers can afford to run even a bargain-basement campaign (Abramowitz 1991). And challengers are ill-equipped to react to an increase in incumbent fundraising (Ragsdale and Cook 1987). Indeed, issues such as these have made campaign finance reform a lightning rod issue within the electorate and Congress itself.

The study of leadership PACs is also important theoretically because it allows researchers to construct a more nuanced view of legislators' goals. Fenno (1973) claimed that legislators have three competing goals: reelection, institutional power, and good public policy. Following Mayhew (1974), students of Congress reasoned that because meeting the reelection goal was a necessary condition to meeting either one of the other two goals, researchers could simply model legislators as purely reelection seeking. Indeed, this simplification made possible a large percentage of the research that informs our current understanding of congressional behavior (see, for example, Fiorina 1977, Loomis 1988, and Arnold 1990). Yet studying how legislator-sponsors make leadership PAC contributions allows researchers to observe behavior that is necessarily not related to the reelection goal. Further, the more developed research on traditional PACs allows

us to differentiate even between behavior aimed toward gaining institutional power and good public policy.

### **“Traditional” PAC behavior**

Scholars have paid considerable attention to the role and persistence of traditional PACs in financing congressional elections (for example, Gopoian 1984; Wilcox 1989; McAdams and Johannes 1987; Grier, Munger, and Roberts 1994; Hojnacki and Kimball 2001; Mitchell, Hensen and Jepsen 1997; Gray and Lowery 1997; McCarty and Rothenberg 1996; Cox and Magar 1999; Coleman and Manna 2000). We know, for example, that PACs make contributions strategically, in an effort to affect policy outcomes (Wright 1985; Eismeier and Pollack 1986; Snyder 1990), and that these strategies differ among different types of PACs (Burns, Francis, and Herrnson 2000; Rudolph 1999; Poole, Romer, and Rosenthal 1987). These contributions can be influential in affecting legislators’ vote choices at the state level (Gordon 2001), but the effect is less clear among federal legislators (Grenzke 1989). Although some legislators typically receive more PAC donations than others (Romer and Snyder 1994; Box-Steffensmeier and Grant 1999), national parties can provide a more efficient distribution of campaign resources (Jacobson 1985). Unfortunately, a systematic study of member-to-member giving or the behavior of leadership PACs, both alternate means of distribution of wealth among candidates, has yet to be undertaken.

The act of contributing funds to another candidate reveals a legislator pursuing one of Fenno’s two non-electoral goals. Fortunately, the more developed literature on PACs in general provides a roadmap for discerning between those contributions meant to

increase chances of gaining institutional power and those contributions meant to increase chances of passing “good public policy” into law. This is because if traditional PAC contributions can be divided into two types, it follows that leadership PAC contributions should be similarly divisible. Early in the study of PAC contributions, researchers divided campaign donations into two categories: those meant to affect electoral outcomes, called Type I contributions, and those meant to affect legislators’ behavior within Congress, called Type II contributions (Wright 1985, Welch 1980). According to this literature, PACs that contribute to candidates in tight electoral races (Type I) are attempting to change the ideological timbre of Congress by affecting which candidates win seats. On the other hand, PACs who contribute to candidates in safe seats (Type II) are attempting to persuade those who already have seats in Congress to cast votes in agreement with their views on issues. These studies find that PACs behave differently based on type: ideological PACs make contributions in tight races (Welch 1980) and corporate PACs make contributions in safe races (Wright 1985).

Drawing from this literature, I claim that contributions from leadership PACs can be similarly divided. First, leadership PACs that contribute funds to candidates in competitive races are most similar to Type I PACs. Like the ideological PACs, the legislator who controls the PAC is interested in “good public policy.” Like the Type I PACs, these kinds of leadership PACs exist to control the types of legislators who serve in Congress. Legislators likely conceive of “good public policy” in two ways. First, they will select legislators who are ideologically proximate to themselves, in an effort to sway policy closer to their own ideal points. But second, such donations would likely go to legislators who are ideologically proximate to the legislator’s party. In this way, the

legislator is protecting the party's majority, valuable because the majority sets the rules (Cox and McCubbins 1993) and because majority status translates increased campaign contributions (Cox and Magar 1999).

Second, leadership PACs that contribute funds to candidates in safe races are most similar to Type II PACs. Like traditional PACs who make such donations, legislator-donors are attempting to persuade entrenched fellow legislators to support their future leadership bids.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, such efforts to “buy” votes will be cheaper for legislators who are already ideologically proximate to the donor. Therefore, we would expect such donors to make contributions to legislators who are already ideologically proximate to themselves.

## **Hypotheses**

This conception of leadership PAC behavior implies several empirically testable hypotheses regarding the role of ideology in the selection of recipients for leadership PAC donations. One can easily test how legislator-donors select recipients based on ideology because Poole-Rosenthal D-Nominate scores provide ideological values both on the dimension of party cleavage and a second dimension, one that likely cuts across party labels.<sup>2</sup> The variable of interest is ideological distance from the recipient to both the party median position and the legislator-donor's own position. Constructing such a variable requires simply computing the absolute value of the difference between the two Poole-Rosenthal scores. Those distance variables allow the investigation of the three following hypotheses.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that such support could come in the form of a new leadership bid or a renewal of a position already held.



One would expect legislator-donors who make contributions in competitive races to behave like Type I PACs. This implies two hypotheses. First, legislator-donors will support candidates most likely to reinforce an ideological position similar to their own. Further, there is no reason to expect that behavior to be limited to only one of the two ideological dimensions. This, therefore, implies the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: In competitive races, legislator-donors are more likely to make contributions to candidates who have smaller ideological distances from the legislator-donor on both dimensions.*

Second, legislator-donors seeking “good public policy” will wish to reinforce their own party’s majority. Presumably, they do so both because they believe their party supports better policies than that of the other party. Further, they do so in an effort to maintain the majority. Yet it is not likely that such donations would occur equally on both dimensions. Supporting positions proximate to the party’s ideal point on the dimension that cuts across party helps little in maintaining the majority. Therefore, this logic implies the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>2</sub>: In competitive races, legislator-donors are more likely to make donations to candidates who have smaller ideological distances from the party on the dimension of party cleavage alone.*

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<sup>2</sup> See Poole and Rosenthal (1991) for more information on this feature of ideology scores.

But the literature on traditional PACs tells us that PACs often make contributions to legislators who are not likely to need the money: those running in safe districts. It follows that legislator-donors are likely to use campaign contributions much in the same way as Type II PACs, in an attempt to secure access to legislators. Presumably, they will use such access to assist them in any future elections for power positions within the House. Given this, such donations will likely go only to those candidates who are most ideologically proximate to the legislator and will likely go only to those candidates who have safe seats. This is because such donations for the sake of access can only hope to pay off if the candidate is elected, so making such donations much more valuable to the legislator-donor if they are give to candidates who are assured victory. This implies the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>: In safe races, legislator-donors are more likely to make donations to candidates who have smaller ideological distances from the legislator-donor on both dimensions.*

### **The data**

The data consists of information on all incumbents in the 2000 election. Each observation is a dyad comprised of each of the 38 Republican House leadership PACs that made donations to ten or more incumbents in the 2000 election,<sup>3</sup> paired with each of the 224 Republican members of the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress<sup>4</sup> and the 21 Democrat House

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<sup>3</sup> See Table One for a list of leadership PACs.

<sup>4</sup> Note that this implies that legislator-donors may contribute to their own campaigns. Although rare, the behavior does occur.

leadership PACs paired with each of the 211 Democrats.<sup>5</sup> The dependent variable is either zero if no donation was made or the amount of the donation if a donation was made. Because the data is censored at 0, it is assumed to be distributed censored normal. Therefore, the proper estimation procedure is tobit.

The variables of theoretical interest are the distances between recipients and either donors or parties. As explained above, these are measured using Poole-Rosenthal DW-Nominate scores. Further, the hypotheses indicate that results will be different in safe districts than in competitive districts. For this reason, the distance variables are each interacted with two dichotomous variables: one coded 1 for safe districts, 0 otherwise; the other coded 1 for competitive districts, 0 otherwise. A district is considered “Safe” if it received a “safe” designation by “Cook’s Call,” an index<sup>6</sup> constructed for each congressional district by policy analyst Charles Cook<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, there are eight separate distance variables, four interacted with the safe dichotomous variable and four interacted with the competitive variable. Within each set of four variables are two distance variables measuring proximity to the party and two measuring proximity to the donor. Within the two distance variables is one variable measuring distance on the dimension of party cleavage and one measuring distance on the second dimension. These interactions allow for variation in the effect of ideological proximity in safe or competitive races, thus allowing testing of the hypotheses of interest. For example, the hypotheses imply a negative value for safe districts with respect to proximity to the legislator-donor, but not proximity to the party. Further, the hypotheses imply a negative

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the number of Republican and Democrat members of Congress does not sum to 435 because when legislators died and were replaced, both legislators are included in the data.

<sup>6</sup> As reported in Barone and Ujifusa 1999.

value for competitive districts for proximity to the legislator-donor on both dimensions and party, only on the dimension of party cleavage.

A proper test of the hypotheses requires controlling for several variables unrelated to ideology that also may affect the value of a donation. Several of these are dichotomous variables describing characteristics of the recipient. First, a variable on retirement is coded 1 if the recipient announced plans to retire, 0 otherwise. Second, a variable describing the state of origin is coded 1 if the recipient is from the same state as the donor, 0 otherwise. Third, a variable describing the region of origin is coded 1 if the recipient is from the same region of the country as the donor, 0 otherwise. Fourth, a variable related to holding a committee chair is coded 1 if the recipient is a chair of a committee, 0 otherwise. Fifth, a variable related to holding a subcommittee chair is coded 1 if the recipient is a chair of a subcommittee, 0 otherwise. Sixth, a variable related to having a position on a power committee is coded 1 if the recipient is has a position on Rules, Ways and Means, or Appropriations, 0 otherwise. Seventh, a variable called Manager is 1 if the recipient was a floor manager when the House brought its impeachment of President Bill Clinton to the floor of the Senate,<sup>8</sup> 0 otherwise. Two other control variables account for the number of terms a legislator has served and the total amount the leadership PAC contributed during the 2000 election.

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<sup>7</sup> Approximately 67 percent of Republican incumbent's districts received a "safe" designation in the 2000 election.

<sup>8</sup> Media reports at the time indicated that many Republicans feared that the managers would be special targets of Democrats angry about impeachment.

## Results

The most noteworthy result of the regressions is the differences between the two major parties. Those results are described below.

### *Republicans*

Results of the tobit regression for Republicans appear in Table One.<sup>9</sup> All three hypotheses are confirmed. First,  $H_1$  is supported because the distance between the legislator-donor and the recipient is statistically significant, in the direction hypothesized. As distances between the legislator-donor and the recipient become smaller, contributions become larger. Further, this result is true for both the dimension of party cleavage and the second dimension. This indicates that legislator-donors use campaign contributions in a fashion similar to Type I PACs: They are attempting to affect public policy by supporting candidates in tight races who are ideologically close to themselves.

Also,  $H_2$  is confirmed, because the distance between the party and the recipient is statistically significant, in the direction hypothesized. As distances between the party median voter's ideal point and the recipient become smaller, contributions become larger. It is especially interesting because, as predicted, this result exists only on the dimension of party cleavage. Therefore, the legislator-donors are supporting candidates who are likely to support the party's ideal point in tight races. Further, the result holds, as predicted, for only the dimension of party cleavage. Legislator-donors appear to make such donations only on the dimension that would matter most to the party, perhaps

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<sup>9</sup> Although it would be interesting to analyze each of the leadership PACs individually, this is often not possible, as the individual tobit estimation fail to converge in more than half the cases. Those that do converge yield results similar to the aggregate results reported here.

indicating that one reason for the contributions is to curry favor with the party, perhaps in an effort to shore up support for future leadership bids.

Last,  $H_3$  is also confirmed. In safe districts, legislator-donors make larger contributions to those recipients who are most ideologically proximate to themselves on both the dimension of party cleavage and the second dimension. This indicates that the legislators are attempting to curry favor with those legislators who are from safe districts, and therefore are likely to be returned to Congress. Like Type II traditional PACs, these contributions are likely made in an effort to gain the favor of legislators who may already be ideologically proximate to themselves in an effort to gain access. This access, then, may be used to request assistance in future leadership bids.

The results indicate, then, that those candidates in competitive districts who are both proximate to the party and proximate to the donors will receive larger donations. In safe districts, only those candidates who are more proximate to donors receive larger donation. But it is important to note that for a given candidate, each legislator-donor observes the same distance to the party, since the party's ideal point is constant throughout the data. On the other hand, every legislator-donor sees a different distance to their own ideal point, since that variable depends on both the position of the legislator-donor and that of the candidate. Therefore, if we are to assess the effects of a potential increase in importance of leadership PACs, we must keep in mind the ideological location of those legislator-donors who are the most generous.

### *Democrats*

The results of the Democrats' equation are presented in Table Two.<sup>10</sup> They are clearly different from those reported for the Republicans. Most notably, the results indicate that ideological proximity of the recipient to the party is not related to the amount of contributions. Therefore, only two of the three hypotheses are confirmed.

First,  $H_1$  is clearly supported. Democrat legislator-donors give to candidates in unsafe races when those candidates are ideologically more proximate to them. The result is true on both dimensions, although the coefficient is much larger on the dimension of party cleavage. In other words, Democrats are trying to change the ideological timbre of Congress by helping those candidates closest to them, who need the help most.

At the same time, however, there is no evidence that the Democrats' attempts to change the ideological timbre of Congress translate to attempts to shore up the median of the Democratic party. For this reason,  $H_2$  is not supported for Democrats. Indeed, the coefficient on proximity to the party on dimension two in unsafe districts is statistically significant, although in a direction opposite to that hypothesized. In other words, distance from the party on the wedge dimension translates to greater contributions for Democrats. The reason for this choice is left for future research.

Last,  $H_3$  receives nominal support. Theoretically, Democrat legislator-donors should donate more funds to those legislators who are ideologically closest to them. Although signs on both coefficients are in the direction hypothesized, only the coefficient on dimension two is statistically significant. Therefore, ironically, we can be more

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<sup>10</sup> The committee chair, subcommittee chair, and manager variables are necessarily excluded from the Democrat regression, as Democrats are precluded from holding these positions.

certain that legislator-donors consider the wedge dimension than that they consider the dimension of party cleavage when they make their contributions.

The results for the Democrats, then, indicate that Democrats make contributions to shore up their own ideological positions, both in safe and competitive races. In contrast to their Republican counterparts, there is no evidence that Democrat legislator-donors make contributions in any effort to help their party. This is especially significant, in the face of the efforts by their colleagues on the other side of the aisle, who do help their party. Republicans who are close to their party can expect financial assistance, but Democrats close to their party cannot.

### **The effects?**

If legislator-donors are close to the party median, the effect of such donation practices may, in a sense, wash out. If every recipient feels equal financial pressure to move toward a position close to the party median, then the effect of having different legislator-donors instead of one party is nil. On the other hand, if legislator-donors are *not* equally distributed around the party median, the effect of having different legislator-donors could be quite large.

Figure One depicts a graph of Republican legislator-donors' ideology and total amount given. Figure Two is the same graph for the Democrats. First, it is easy to see that there is no relation between amount given and Poole-Rosenthal dimension one DW-nominate scores for either party. Second, legislator-donors are not grouped near the party median. In fact, most of the legislator-donors are to the right of the party median in the Republican graph and to the left in the Democrat graph. Therefore, donors are more



extreme than rank and file party members. Interestingly, this fact is more pronounced in Republican legislator-donors than in their Democrat counterparts. This indicates that if donations have an effect on the ideology of those seeking contributions, it will be to make the recipients more extreme on both ends of the ideological spectrum. Beyond this, the existence of numerous legislator-donors could serve to fragment the pressure candidates feel. Should they please the party's median or one or more of the ideologically disparate legislator-donors?

For Republicans, then, legislator-donors' contributions may have the effect of moving legislators closer to the ideal point of the party. At the same time, however, the donations may also create pressure for candidates seeking donations to select positions more proximate to the legislator-donors' generally more extreme ideal points. For Democrats, the only viable strategy for seeking contributions is to select positions more proximate to legislator-donors, since locating near the party yields Democrats nothing. Under these circumstances, we can expect to see a world similar to that of the entrenched committee chairs prior to the 1970s. Disparate legislator-donors will control small fiefdoms of power, with very little oversight from other forces.

## **Conclusion**

Legislator-donors use leadership PACs to assist them in achieving multiple goals. First, Republican legislator-donors select those candidates in competitive districts who are closest ideologically to the party, thereby supporting the party's efforts in the districts where the funds matter the most, although Democrats do not act similarly. But more interesting, legislator-donors of both parties select those candidates most ideologically

proximate to themselves in both safe and competitive districts. Therefore, legislator-donors spend more cash supporting their own positions than they do supporting that of the party.

What are the implications of these findings? Certainly, there are other sources of campaign contributions, such as traditional PACs, and the contributions from leadership PACs are generally not a large part of a candidate's coffers. But if these contributions indeed have an effect on the types of candidates who are reelected, even if the effect is small, the findings could have clear implications for how business is done in the House of Representatives. Recent passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 may prompt parties to rely more heavily on leadership PACs to step in and provide money to cover the shortfall created by the legislation's soft money ban. The results reported above imply that many of these legislator-donors will be using their PACs to support their own ideological positions, rather than solely for the benefit of the party. If these trends continue, it could mean a return to the days of a House controlled by a few legislators with a great deal of power and the ability to cajole their colleagues. This time, however, it will be fundraisers, not chairmen, who will be calling the shots.

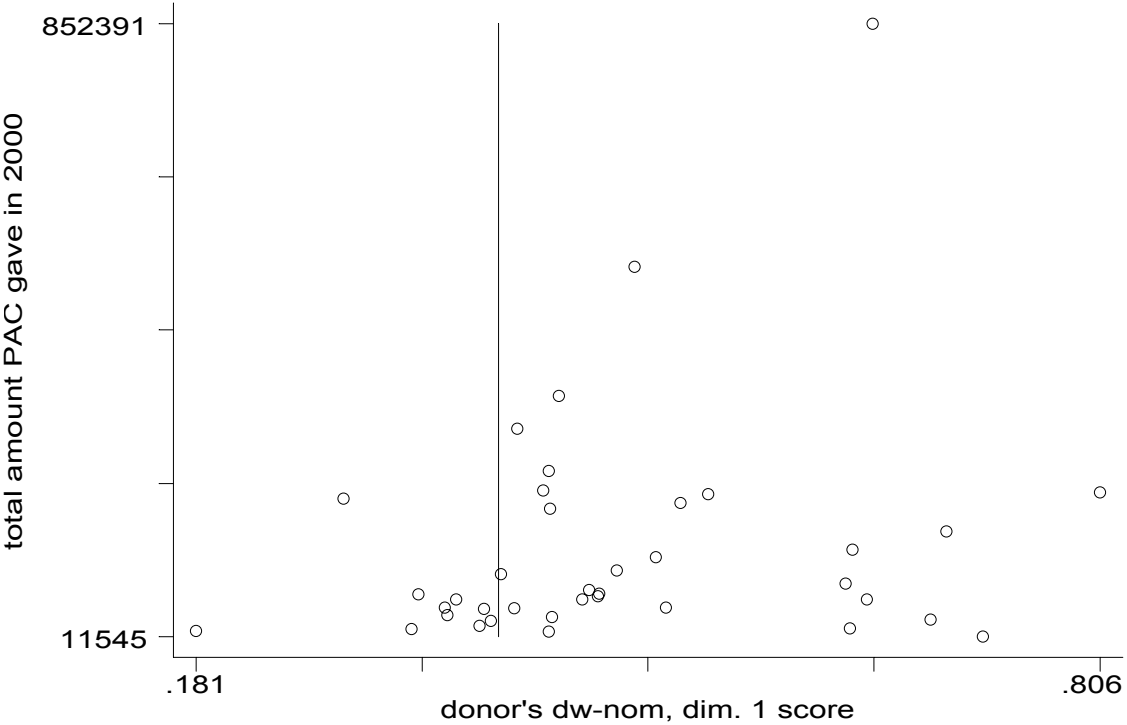
**Table One: Tobit with amount of donation as the dependent variable (Republican)**

Variable		Coefficient	Standard Deviation
Seat is safe	Dimension One distance from donor	-5075*	2202
	Dimension Two distance from donor	-1733*	459.4
	Dimension One distance from party	-344.7	1725
	Dimension Two distance from party	-649.8	674.0
Seat is competitive	Dimension One distance from donor	-5159*	1334
	Dimension Two distance from donor	-1233*	276.2
	Dimension One distance from party	-6510*	1376
	Dimension Two distance from party	668.5	579.1
Dichotomous controls	Retire (1 if announced retiring)	-2651*	437.0
	Same state (1 if from same state)	1647*	484.7
	Same region (1 if from same region)	-777.6*	248.9
	Recipient is committee chair	-2196*	710.1
	Recipient is subcommittee chair	-538.2	315.0
	Recipient is on power committee	-403.1	260.7
	Recipient was floor manager	1151*	426.8
	Recipient's seat is safe	-5116*	476.8
Other controls	Recipient's terms in office	-187.1*	57.79
	Total amount PAC gave	0.01069*	0.0006
	Constant	-2896*	361.6
Log likelihood		-11150	
N		8512	

**Table Two: Tobit with amount of donation as the dependent variable (Democrat)**

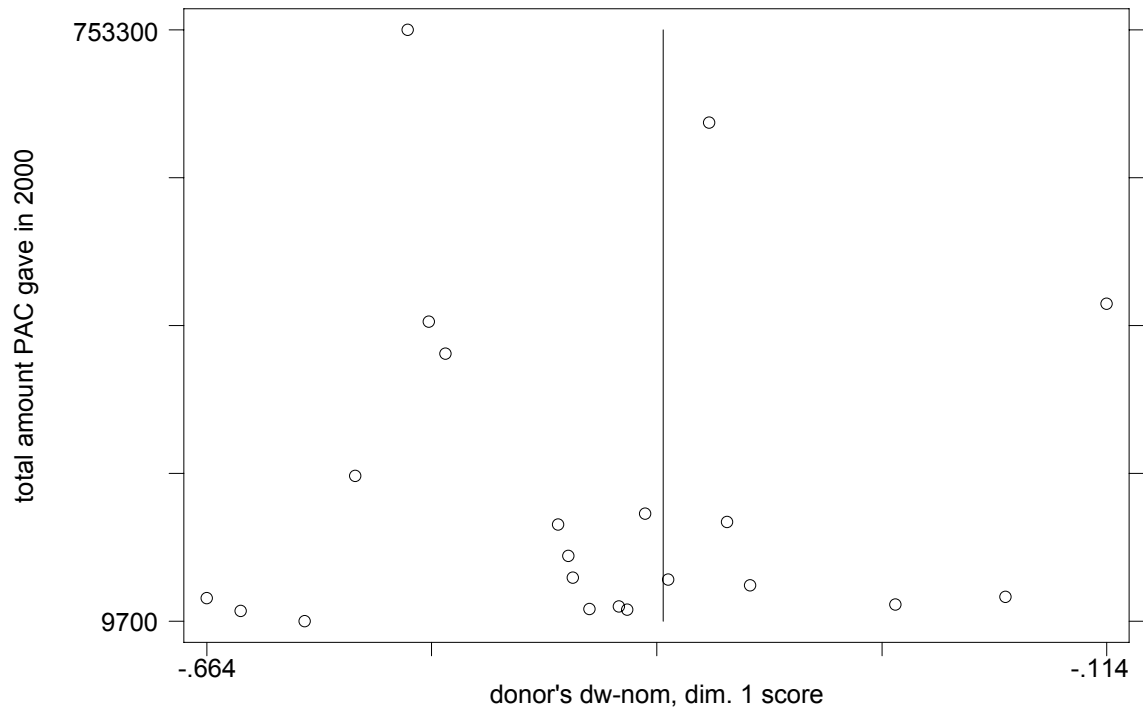
Variable		Coefficient	Standard Deviation
Seat is safe	Dimension One distance from donor		
	Dimension Two distance from donor		
	Dimension One distance from party		
	Dimension Two distance from party		
Seat is competitive	Dimension One distance from donor		
	Dimension Two distance from donor		
	Dimension One distance from party		
	Dimension Two distance from party		
Dichotomous controls	Retire (1 if announced retiring)		
	Same state (1 if from same state)		
	Same region (1 if from same region)		
	Recipient is on power committee		
	Recipient's seat is safe		
Other controls	Recipient's terms in office		
	Total amount PAC gave		
	Constant		
Log likelihood			
N			

**Figure One: The ideology of donors by total amount contributed (Republican)**



Note: Vertical line at the party's median.

**Figure One: The ideology of donors by total amount contributed (Democrat)**



Note: Vertical line at the party's median.

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