

Striking While the Iron Is Hot: Exploring the Impact of Issue Ownership and Issue Salience on Donations to Political Organizations in the 2020 US Presidential Election

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Abstract

This study integrates the perspectives of issue niche theory and issue ownership theory to examine how variations in issue salience affect the resources available to political organizations affiliated with different parties. Analyzing a database with millions of donors' political donation records, our time series analysis reveals a nuanced interplay: When some issues associated with Democrats assume the spotlight, there is a discernible increase in left-leaning donations. Simultaneously, when other Democrats issue raises to prominence, there is a notable suppression of right-leaning contributions. These findings underline the persuasive force of issue ownership for each party, which either bolsters fundraising for affiliated political organizations or obstructs donations to opposing groups. Furthermore, we observe that competence-related issues, such as COVID-19 and the economy and inflation, exert a substantial influence on political contributions among both left- and right-leaning donors. Notably, competence issues demonstrate a more pronounced influence on donor behavior compared to associative issues. Overall, our study suggests a refined issue niche theory tailored to the political context, where issue niches are shaped not only by issue salience but also by the precise issue ownership type.

Keywords

political donation, issue salience, issue ownership

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In 2020, nearly \$14 billion was spent on federal election campaigns in the United States, making it the most expensive campaign in U.S. history, more than doubling the amount spent in the 2016 election (Open Secrets 2020). This trend shows no signs of reversing, suggesting that substantial financial resources in politics will persist in the near future (Guardian 2022). With such a significant influx of money into the political arena, it is crucial to explore the factors driving donations and their associated consequences.

One such factor is issue salience and public attention. According to issue niche theory, when public attention is directed toward different issues, resources may flow into these issue spaces, enriching niche holders such as political parties and political organizations (Yang 2020). This study draws on issue niche theory (Li et al. 2021; Liu and Van de Walle 2023; Sommerfeldt et al. 2022; Tsai et al. 2023; Yang 2020) and issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003) to examine how changes in issue salience affect the resources that become available to political organizations.

Political organizations here refer to interest groups, social movement organizations (SMOs), political campaign organizations, and nonprofit advocacy organizations (Andrews and Edwards 2004; Fraussen and Halpin 2018). These organizations are critical actors in political processes such as elections, political campaigns, lobbying, social media outreach, social movements, and social mobilizations (Pacheco et al. 2014). Moreover, fundraising holds substantial influence in shaping these organizational fields, either enabling or constraining the growth of organizations (Bartley 2007). In the current heavily financed political landscape, political donations play a significant role in determining the outcome of campaigns and the future of democracy (Gilens 2012).

Traditionally, issue ownership theory has been applied to explore how issues associated with various political parties affect voters' behaviors, their perception of campaigns, their judgments of candidates, and the news coverage of political campaigns (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Gilmore and Rowling 2019; Thesen et al. 2017; Walgrave et al. 2012). Nevertheless, it is widely understood that political donations represent a direct form of political speech exercised by millions of donors (Dawood 2015). It is surprising to note that relatively little research has explored the connection between issue ownership and political donations.

To address this gap, our study integrated issue niche theory with issue ownership theory to explore several key questions. First, we investigate whether fluctuations in issue salience in media coverage led to corresponding changes in political donations to various organizations. Second, we explore the effect of issue ownership types. Specifically, associative issue ownership reflects a political party's historical commitment and reputation for addressing specific concerns, while competence issue ownership pertains to the party's perceived competency in handling and resolving issues that voters are currently concerned about (Tresch and Feddersen 2019; Walgrave et al. 2012). We aim to discern which type of ownership better predicts shifts in donations and the direction of their influence.

Our analysis revealed that when Democrat-associated issues, such as abortion rights, take center stage, there is a positive impact on left-leaning donations. Conversely,

when Democrat-owned issues, such as climate change, become prominent, right-leaning donations significantly decrease. This highlights the influence of associative issue ownership, demonstrating its ability to not only bolster fundraising for affiliated political organizations but also to hinder donations to opposing groups. Additionally, we found that competence-based issues, like COVID-19 and the economy and inflation, exert a significant influence on political donations for both left and right-leaning donors. This suggests a lack of consensus among donors regarding the incumbent party (the Republican Party)'s performance. Notably, competence issues tend to have a larger effect on donor behavior than associative issues.

This study makes two significant contributions. First, through a rigorous time series analysis, it establishes a significant association between issue salience and fluctuations in donations to political organizations. This marks the first empirical evidence of the effect of issue ownership on the resources that flow to political organizations, extending the theory's applicability. Second, while previous research often relied on experimental settings or survey data from relatively small samples, our study uniquely tracks individual and aggregated daily donations to political organizations, drawing conclusions based on a vast behavioral dataset from millions of U.S. donors. The study also discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Issue Niches and Donations to Political Organizations

Organizational Communities and Political Organizations as Communities

Organizational communities are defined as groups of organizations that are interconnected through communication networks and shared resource niches, whether spatially or functionally bounded (Aldrich and Ruef 2006). One specific category within organizational communities is political organizations, which encompass a variety of entities such as interest groups, SMOs, political campaign groups, and nonprofit advocacy organizations (Andrews and Edwards 2004). These organizations share common traits: they operate outside both the private and public sectors, have a mission to advocate for a cause or constituency, and must address three core organizational tasks: mobilizing support and members, seeking political influence or re-election, and ensuring their organizational survival (Fraussen and Halpin 2018).

Similar to other nonprofit organizations, political organizations rely on fundraising to sustain their mission and operations. Funding sources typically include government grants, foundation grants, corporate donations, and individual contributions (Bartley 2007). The sources of funding wield significant influence over the operations of political organizations. For instance, Bartley (2007) demonstrated how certain foundations utilized grants associated with forest certification to transform confrontational environmental SMOs into more moderate nonprofits while advancing their own forest-building agendas through the leverage of SMO protests.

Among funding sources, individual donations play a crucial role in supporting political organizations. Political campaigns, in particular, raise millions of dollars during

each election cycle (Hill 2022). In contrast to grant-making institutions, individual donors are often motivated by personal characteristics and their perceptions of reality rather than systematic visions or strategic agendas (Hassell and Monson 2014; Hill 2022). Previous research suggests that public attention is a significant driver of donation decisions (Li et al. 2021; Liu and Van de Walle 2023; Sommerfeldt et al. 2022; Tsai et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2021). As we explore in further detail below, this study draws upon issue niche theory (Yang 2020) to elucidate the pivotal role of public attention in shaping resource availability for political organizations.

Issue Niche Theory

Issue niche theory posits that nonprofit communities rely on the public's perception and responses to various social issues to mobilize resources and coordinate their activities (Yang 2020). Nonprofits essentially operate within issue niches, which emerge when "a diverse set of stakeholders, with varying identities and ideologies, attach significance to a situation or perceived problem, interpret the nature of the issue, and subsequently mobilize resources to address the issue" (Yang 2020: 43). The availability of resources within an issue niche depends significantly on the level of public attention it receives. Nonprofits rely heavily on donations and grants, which increase when an issue is perceived as salient, urgent, and important. Conversely, when an issue is obscure and few people are aware of it, nonprofits struggle to fundraise effectively (Yang 2020). As such, prominent social issues typically channel more resources into the nonprofit communities associated with them, whereas dormant issues can limit the availability of resources for these organizations. The size of issue niches also influences various aspects of nonprofit community operations, including alliance formation, resource mobilization, volunteer recruitment, societal recognition, and support. The ongoing process of communication continually sculpts and reshapes the dimensions of an issue niche, primarily through the evolution of issues and fluctuations in public attention (Yang 2020).

Issue niche theory established a strong correlation between issue salience and the amount of resources in different issue niches (Yang 2020). Numerous studies have tested this theory, consistently confirming the relationship (Li et al. 2021; Liu and Van de Walle 2023; Sommerfeldt et al. 2022; Tsai et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2021). For example, Li et al. (2021) investigated how the networks of top U.S. nonprofits evolved before and after the general public began to pay significant attention to the issue of COVID-19. They found that tie formation patterns were much more active within issue niches associated with salient issues. Similarly, Sommerfeldt et al. (2022) explored network formations among Malaysian nonprofits and found that, rather than collaborating with similar organizations (homophily theory-based hypothesis), nonprofits were more willing to cooperate with those connected to salient issues. This study showed that hypotheses based on issue niche theory better predict tie formation among nonprofits than homophily theory. Tsai et al. (2023) demonstrated that issue salience profoundly affects the public's perception of corporate sociopolitical activism, with public being more likely to expect corporations to fund causes associated with salient social issues, thus benefitting nonprofits working on these issues.

While previous issue niche research has established the connection between issue salience and resource fluctuation for nonprofits in the context of alliance building and corporate donations, there has been limited understanding of whether issue salience also impacts individual donor behavior and affects nonprofit resource availability at scale. To delve deeper into this dynamic, we now shift our focus to issue ownership theory.

Issue Ownership Theory

Issue Ownership

The concept of issue ownership, introduced in the 1980s (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1989), refers to voters' tendency to associate certain issues with specific political parties. As Egan (2013) observed, "to anyone who follows American politics, the association of specific issues with either the Democratic or Republican Party makes a certain intuitive sense" (p. 49). For political parties, "owning" key issues serves as a crucial electoral asset, as voters often support the party they believe will best address the issues most important to them.

Over the years, issue ownership has been further developed into a theoretical framework (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003), and studies have consistently found support for the notion that issue ownership powerfully affects electoral behaviors and party competition (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Walgrave et al. 2012). Within the field of communication, scholars have applied issue ownership theory to study the interaction effect between news coverage and political advertising (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994), issue ownership and issue framing in political campaigns (Arbour 2014; Gilmore and Rowling 2019), perceived authenticity in corporate social advocacy (Lim and Young 2021), and the interaction effect of issue ownership, priming, and agenda setting on voter choices (Kioussis et al. 2015). Research also shows that journalists are aware of issue ownership and tend to reinforce such reputations in their coverage (Hayes 2008).

Despite the extensive literature, no study to date has specifically explored the connection between issue ownership and political fundraising. This appears to be a considerable gap in the literature because fundraising in modern politics plays such an essential role in affecting campaign outcomes, and political organizations that can raise large funding are considered "pivotal power brokers" (Andrews and Edwards 2004). Fundraising is also fundamental to fuel efforts such as social media campaigns, political events, and voter mobilization, which could swing public opinion and affect election outcomes (Ellis et al. 2017). Without properly understanding the connection between issue ownership and fundraising, scholars and practitioners may be blind to an important variable that shapes fundraising effectiveness.

Competence Versus Associative Issue Ownership

In the recent decade, research has revealed that issue ownership has two distinct dimensions or types: *associative* issue ownership, which reflects a party's history

and reputation for caring and being committed to specific issues, and *competence* issue ownership, which refers to a party's perceived competence in handling an issue and resolving problems concerning voters (Tresch and Feddersen 2019; Walgrave et al. 2012).

The two dimensions are assumed to have different origins in socio-political contexts. As a form of spontaneous association between issues and parties, associative issue ownership results from a history of shared attention between parties and their respective supporters (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave et al. 2012). This type of issue ownership is considered relatively stable because it arises from historical cleavage between the social groups from which parties originated and the social issues those groups care about. Similarly, Petrocik (1996) notes that issue ownership depends on the social basis of a party. Parties that are historically supported by a certain social class on the issue of interest to that class. For example, when thinking about the immigration issue, many will spontaneously relate immigration to right-wing populist anti-immigration parties, both in the U.S. and in Europe (Walgrave et al. 2012). Right-wing parties are also often associated with business-friendly policies and relaxed taxation (Thesen et al. 2017). On the contrary, climate change and civil rights issues are closely associated with left-wing parties, such as the Democratic Party in the U.S. Other studies have found that left-wing parties tend to be evaluated favorably regarding social welfare and unemployment issues (Thesen et al. 2017; Walgrave et al. 2012).

Competence issue ownership, on the other hand, is more subject to change. This type of issue ownership reflects a matter of track record, which is subject to external influences and can be very dynamic. The record of the incumbent party (the Republican Party) is especially key to determining competence issue ownership. Petrocik (1996) notes that if a party fails to deal with an issue adequately, it may lose its competence issue ownership or may strengthen its ownership when dealing with it well. The effect of performance may be especially salient for emerging new issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015).

These two dimensions are important because they have different stability dynamics, thereby affecting voter behaviors differently when such issues become prominent. Based on a survey from Belgium, Walgrave et al. (2012) found that associative issue ownership sufficiently differs from competence issue ownership and is an independent determinant of voting behavior. Nevertheless, the multidimensionality of issue ownership suggests that which party owns an issue is often not an "either-or" situation.

When building an individual-level model of the effects of issue ownership, Lachat (2014) found that voters may differentiate between which party cares about an issue and which party offers a good solution to the issue. In other words, which issue is owned by which party may be perceived differently by individual voters? Similarly, in their extensive literature review, Walgrave et al. (2015) noted the ambiguity of mixing the associative and competence dimensions. They argue that, given the multidimensionality of issue ownership, it is possible for parties to "steal" issues from other parties. In this study, although we distinguish between associative and competence issues for practical methodological reasons, we view this distinction not as a dichotomy but as a dynamic characteristic that can vary across election cycles. Some issues may be more clearly defined, while others are owned by both parties from different perspectives.

Moreover, as further discussed below, research has shown that issue salience likely affects party donations differently based on the type of issue ownership (Thesen et al. 2017; Walgrave et al. 2012).

Issue Salience and the Consequences of Issue Ownership

Research indicates that the impact of issue ownership is influenced by media priming and issue salience. Previous studies distinguish between two aspects of issue salience: media-driven salience, which is reflected in media coverage, and personal issue salience, which pertains to individuals' perceptions of the importance of social issues in relation to themselves (Hansen and Dolan 2020). In this study, we employ news media issue salience as a proxy for gauging public issue salience. This choice is partly motivated by the impractical cost associated with conducting daily surveys of the general U.S. public to assess their perceived issue salience. Furthermore, existing research has demonstrated a strong correlation between media issue salience and public issue salience (Kioussis et al. 2015). According to Iyengar and Kinder (1987), priming refers to the process in which "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, politics, and candidates for public office are judged" (p. 63). As noted by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), "priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments" (p. 11). At any given time, many social issues coexist. Priming helps explain why some issues significantly affect voter decisions and others do not. When issues become salient in voters' minds, they are primed to use these issues as standards for evaluation and decision-making (Kioussis et al. 2015).

In addition, research suggests that when issues become salient, associative versus competence issue ownership affects voter decisions in different ways. Walgrave et al. (2012) argue that for associative issues, the benefits of a salient issue may be exclusively enjoyed by one party at the cost of an opposing party. This is because the party-issue association draws voter attention to some parties and not to others. Similarly, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007, p. 118) liken associative issue ownership to a form of "issue hegemony," which suggests that when associative issues become salient, some parties benefit while competing parties may suffer losses. In addition, recent research shows that media coverage can directly affect issue salience and issue ownership evaluations (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). As such, we propose:

H1: When associative issues become salient in the news, the parties that own those issues will see a significant increase in their political donations, whereas opposing parties will see a significant decrease in their political donations.

As for competence issues, the effect of issue salience depends on a range of factors such as party positions, party's issue performance, and voter perceptions (Vliegenthart and Lefevere 2018; Walgrave et al. 2012). Among these factors, the incumbent effect is especially significant in voter evaluations. As noted earlier, research suggests that

when the incumbent party handles an issue adequately, the party could benefit from the salience of such issues, whereas when the incumbent mishandles the issue, the challenger party will benefit regardless of their track record (Vliegenthart and Lefevere 2018). As such, we propose:

H2: When competence issues become salient in the news, (a) if the issue is handled adequately, the incumbent party (the Republican Party) will see a significant increase in their political donations, whereas opposing parties will see a significant decrease in their political donations. (b) If the issue is handled inadequately, we would observe the opposite effect.

Finally, most previous studies tend to examine the associative and competence dimensions of issue ownership separately, with few studies comparing their effects side-by-side (Vliegenthart and Lefevere 2018; Walgrave et al. 2012). In addition, no study to date has explored the effect of issue ownership on political donations. Therefore, it is unclear which types of issues are more influential in the context of political donations. As such, we ask:

RQ: Between associative and competence issues, which type of issues could more significantly affect donor behaviors for political donations?

In sum, although scholars have explored how issue ownership affects voters' decisions and behaviors, little research has explored how issue ownership affects other aspects of election campaigns, such as political fundraising. Specifically, in consequential and expansive elections, such as the U.S. presidential elections, issue ownership may not only affect voter decisions but also influence the fundraising potential for hundreds of political organizations affiliated with the competing parties. These organizations are important parts of massive political machines, and understanding the connection between issue ownership and their fundraising is an important, yet missing piece in issue ownership research. Our analysis below aims to close this gap.

Methods

In this section, we first present the sourcing of donation records from the 2020 election cycle. Next, we discuss our measures for issue salience based on media coverage as derived from Google's Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) data. Finally, we discuss our modeling approach for time series analysis that connects donation patterns with specific issue coverage.

Donation Records

Records of individual donors' donations to political organizations were obtained from a database maintained by a nonprofit marketing company.¹ Specifically, there were donations to eighty-eight nonprofits in the database. The database contains up

to 1 billion records of donation incidents that date back to 3 decades. Such donation incidents include individual donors' donation behaviors to various nonprofits over the years and donors' demographic information. Based on self-identified labels, civil rights SMOs and liberal political organizations were classified as left-leaning political organizations. Republican political candidate campaigns, conservative political organizations, and conservative judicial and patriotic political organizations were classified as right-leaning political organizations.

Within the database, in 2020, there were 394,584 unique donations made to left-leaning political organizations (mean = 58.073 USD, $SD = 2439.366$ USD), with a total amount of 22,914,807.75 USD. In the same year, there were 25,437,723 donations made to right-leaning political organizations (mean = 52.833 USD, $SD = 1183.101$ USD), with a total amount of 119,166,034.98 USD. Overall, these data allowed us to analyze the temporal dynamics of 142,080,842.73 USD in political donations. It is necessary to note that the difference in donation amounts between the left and right in the data is due to the fact that the company served more conservative organizations than progressive ones. The data are not a representative sample of all donations in the U.S. but instead are useful in a comparative analysis to illustrate how left-leaning and right-leaning donors react to issue salience on a per capita basis. In subsequent analyses, left-leaning and right-leaning donations were analyzed separately using proper methods to ensure that the results were comparable. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of daily donations to the political left and right. The figure shows that the peak for left-leaning political donations occurred at the end of March 2020, whereas right-leaning political donations achieved their peak around July 2020.

Media Coverage

Media coverage was obtained by accessing GDELT. This database is based on Google's powerful search engine that surveys all news outlets (e.g., mainstream media, blogs, and digital media outlets) worldwide to capture massive information about events happening around the world. GDELT collects news articles every 15 minutes, machine-translates over 200 languages into English, and codes each news article by theme, sentiment and tone, location, and entities, among other factors. This database is supported by Google Cloud and Google's data processing capability and significantly surpasses any similar endeavors (e.g., LexisNexis) in terms of comprehensiveness. We accessed GDELT through its Python API and searched for news articles covering the top ten issues in 2020 based on the 2020 voter report released by the Pew Research Center (2020). In 2020, 137,760,786 articles were retained by GDELT from the U.S. for further analysis. We further calculated issue salience based on the retrieved data (see below). Our search was limited to 2020 with locations set in the United States.

Issue Type Classification

In this study, we categorize issues into three groups: GOP-owned associative issues, Democrat-owned associative issues, and competence issues. To establish these

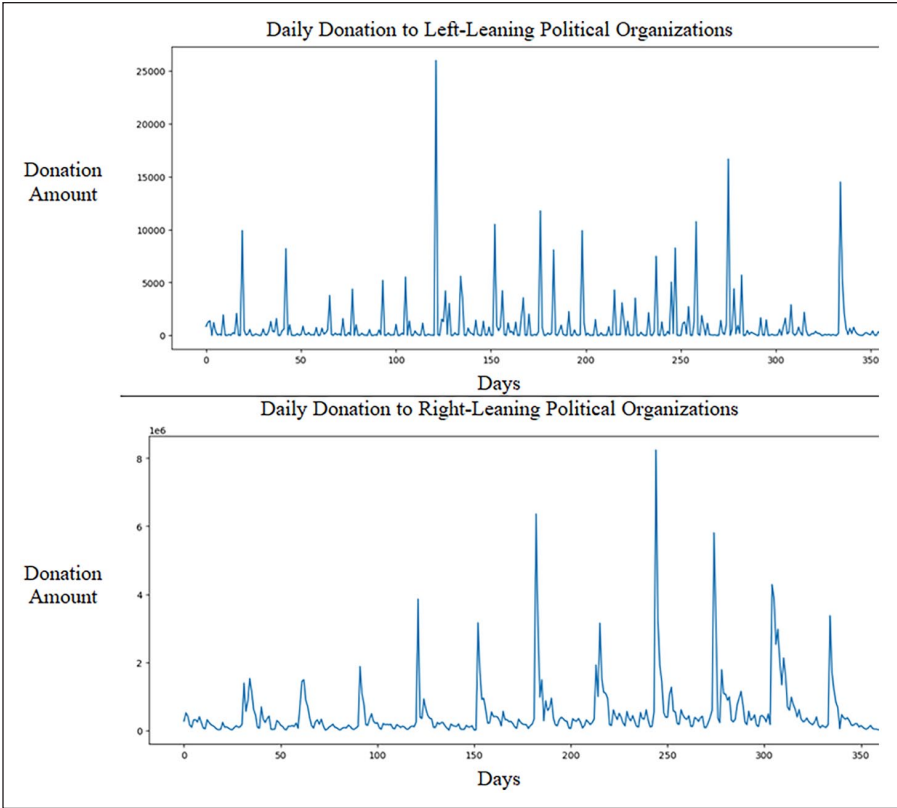


Figure 1. Daily Dynamics of Donations to Left and Right-Leaning Political Organizations. Note. Y-axis are total daily donation amount in USD. The notation “1e6” means 1×10^6 times, which equals 1,000,000 (1 million dollars).

categories, we first distinguish between associative and competence issues. According to the established literature (Petrocik 1989), associative issues are relatively stable and exert a lasting influence within a party’s policy framework, whereas competence issues are more dynamic, changing across election cycles or representing emerging concerns that multiple parties may claim ownership of.

Prior research identifies race and inequality, climate change, and abortion rights as Democrat-owned issues, and violent crime, gun policy, immigration, and the border wall as Republican-owned issues (Cole and Hawthorne 2013; Vliegthart and Lefevere 2018; Walgrave et al. 2012; Wright et al. 2022), aligning with the framework adopted in this study. Among these, the border wall, despite its relatively recent emergence in mainstream politics, gained prominence during the 2016 Trump campaign (Zhen et al. 2023) and is therefore categorized as a Republican-associated issue.

Additionally, governance-related matters such as the economy and inflation, health-care systems and policies, and Supreme Court appointments are commonly classified

as competence issues (Marquis and Tresch 2022; Walgrave et al. 2015). Emerging concerns, such as those stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, are also designated as competence issues. For further details, refer to Table 1.

Additionally, to empirically gauge public sentiment on the incumbent party's performance regarding competence-related issues, we referenced public polling data from the Pew Research Center (2020). This data provided an objective measure of public perceptions concerning the incumbent party's competency across various issues. For instance, the Pew data indicate that Republicans held a lead over Democrats on economic issues, with 49 percent of voters believing Republicans could outperform Democrats. In contrast, Democrats led substantially in areas such as COVID-19 management and healthcare policies. This use of external public perception data offers a grounded basis for objectively assessing the adequacy of the parties' handling of these issues.

Measures

Daily Donations. The study measured the flow of resources into various political niches based on the daily donations received by communities of political organizations. Specifically, we aggregate daily donations in terms of dollar amounts to left- and right-leaning organizations to calculate daily donation totals.

Issue Salience. We measured issue salience by calculating the ratio of the total number of stories associated with a topic to the total number of stories that appeared on all online and mainstream news media on that day. For example, if there were 23,046 stories appearing on all online and mainstream news media on January 1, 2020, and among them thirty-four cover stories related to climate change, the ratio between the two values would suggest how prominent the issue of climate change was on January 1, 2020. We obtain the daily issue salience measure for ten issues from GDELT.

Models

This section discusses the models we used for estimating the relationship between public attention to issues and daily donation flows. It covers the rationale for the model, tests for stationarity, a test for Granger causality, model specification, generalized impulse response functions (GIRFs), generalized forecast error variance decomposition (GFEVD), and model robustness checks.

Vector Autoregression (VAR): This study used VAR for the analysis for several reasons. Public attention may impact donations at different rates over time. There may be an immediate effect and there may also be lagged effects. VAR allows the examination of both for different issues on donation flow (Lim and Kim 2022). In addition, VAR enables us to account for direct and indirect feedback effects of public attention on different issues. This is relevant since public attention is finite, and increased attention to one issue may reduce attention to others (Yang 2020). VAR allows us to simultaneously assess the interactions among ten issues and political donations. Finally,

Table 1. Top 10 Voter Issues in the U.S. in 2020 and Categories.

Issue types of issues and keywords	GOP-owned associative issues	Democrat-owned associative issues	Competence issues
Issues	Violent crime	Race and ethnic inequality	Economy and inflation
Keywords	Homicide, violent crime, criminal justice system, robbery, gang crime	Racial inequality, systemic racism, racial discrimination, racial disparities, civil rights	Inflation, economic recovery, federal reserve, interest rates, cost of living
Issues	Gun policy	Climate change	Health care
Keywords	Second amendment, assault weapons, gun control, concealed carry, mass shootings	Climate change, global warming, green gas emissions, environmental sustainability, carbon emissions	Healthcare reform, health insurance, affordable care act (ACA), healthcare costs, public health crisis
Issues	Immigration and border wall	Abortion rights	COVID-19
Keywords	Immigration reform, border wall, border security, deportation statistics, asylum seekers	Abortion rights, reproductive rights, Roe v. Wade, Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health, pro-choice	Coronavirus, pandemic, COVID-19 vaccine, mask mandates, social distancing
Issues			Supreme court appointment
Keywords			Supreme court nominee, confirmation hearings, senate judiciary committee, supreme court appointment, supreme court vacancy

VAR captures the dynamics of carryover effects over time through GIRFs (Hatemi-j 2014). This feature allows for a robust causal ordering of variables. VAR also controls for trends, seasonality, nonstationarity, serial correlation, and reverse causality, all of which may appear in news coverage time series (Farzanegan and Zamani 2022; Vliegenthart and Damstra 2019). Overall, the application of VAR allows us to robustly establish significant relationships between public attention to specific issues and donation flow. Please see Appendix A for analytic steps.

Results

First, we conducted the Augmented Dickey–Fuller (ADF) test to determine the stationarity of the variables, and we performed a cointegration test to establish the presence of a statistically significant connection between two or more time series. Appendix B presents the results of the ADF test and cointegration tests. Based on these test results, the data were transformed to create a stationary time series.

Granger Causality Tests

We examine whether public attention can help to predict each key issue and separately donations to left- and right-leaning political causes. Appendix C displays the p -values of the Wald test (Chi-square) statistic for Granger causality (Hatemi-j 2014). The results suggest that different issues significantly Granger-caused changes in daily political donations for political nonprofits on the left and right. Specifically, COVID-19, violent crime, the economy and inflation, healthcare, and race and ethnic inequality are five issues that significantly Granger-caused changes for both the left and right organizations. In addition, abortion was a significant issue for political donations on the left but insignificant for political rights. Conversely, Supreme Court appointments were a significant issue for the political rights but insignificant for the political left. The Granger causality test revealed the significant relationships but did not suggest the direction of such relationships or the relative importance of predictors, so additional analyses were further performed.

VAR Models

Next, we fitted VAR models to establish the direction of causal relationship between issue salience on various issues and donation amounts to left-leaning and right-leaning nonprofits. Although VAR estimates all pairs of causal relationships between all variables, in this study, we focused on reporting the impact of issue salience on daily donations. For left-leaning donations, we selected an optional lag length of one for the VAR model based on the smallest AIC (Akaike information criterion) value (-22.966), indicating that most effects occur at short time intervals (a lag of 1 day).

According to the Granger causality test, the abortion rights issue (coef=3988.035, $SE=2672.439$), the economy and inflation (coef=1301.462, $SE=628.418$), and the COVID-19 issue (coef=211.574, $SE=210.430$) significantly and positively contributed to the increase in left-leaning daily donations. Conversely, violent crime (coef= -206.651 , $SE=828.777$), healthcare reform (coef= -956.801 , $SE=1040.084$), and race and ethnic inequality (coef= -859.085 , $SE=1036.911$) significantly and negatively affected daily donations for left-leaning causes.

For right-leaning donations, an optional lag length of seven yielded the best model according to AIC (-23.703), suggesting that politically right-leaning donations take longer to react to public attention compared to left-leaning donations. For right-leaning causes, the economy and inflation (coef=65.864, $SE=742.391$), healthcare (coef=265.064, $SE=1147.222$), and the COVID-19 issue (coef=46.002, $SE=211.264$) significantly and positively affected daily donations. Conversely, for right-leaning donors, public attention to issues such as climate change (coef= -1213.118 , $SE=1681.561$), violent crime (coef= -517.413 , $SE=824.820$), race and ethnic inequality (coef= -760.902 , $SE=1072.261$), and Supreme Court justice (coef= -522.541 , $SE=2219.071$) significantly reduced daily donations.

Immediate and Accumulated Impacts of Public Attention on Political Daily Donation

Figure 2a and b visually depicts the dynamic immediate versus cumulative impulse response functions for daily donations from left-leaning and right-leaning donors to public attention on various issues. In Figure 2a, corresponding to the left-leaning donations, the results align with the VAR models, where abortion rights, the economy and inflation, and COVID-19 immediately, positively, and significantly affect donations. Additionally, the cumulative effects of these factors appear to have a relatively long-lasting impact. Conversely, we observed negative impacts from issues such as violent crime, healthcare reform, and race and ethnic inequality, but their cumulative effects do not seem to endure for an extended period. Among these, the negative impact of violent crime is particularly moderate.

For Figure 2b, representing right-leaning donations, the economy and inflation, as well as COVID-19, have a positive and lasting impact on daily donations. Furthermore, issues like race and ethnic inequality, Supreme Court justice appointments, and climate change also exhibit significant effects, albeit with a relatively limited cumulative impact.

Relative Importance Analysis of Issues Affecting Donation

Next, we aimed to understand the relative importance of issues concerning their ability to impact political donations. Appendix D presents the results of the relative importance of ten issues in explaining the variance in political donations for both left-leaning and right-leaning causes based on GFEVD.

For left-leaning donations, the results indicate that 85.6 percent of the variance is explained by the internal dynamics (which essentially are all other variables that could affect daily donations that are not captured here) of left-leaning donations. Among the most important issues are the economy and inflation, which explain 1.7 percent of the variance, followed by race and ethnic inequality at 1.4 percent, and COVID-19 at 1.0 percent. Regarding right-leaning donations, the results show that 85.3 percent of the variance is explained by the internal dynamics of right-leaning donations. Similar to the findings for left-leaning donations, the most influential issues are race and ethnic inequality (2.9%), economy and inflation (1.8%), and COVID-19 (1.1%).

Hypotheses Testing and Research Question Answering

Based on the results, we can now address our hypotheses and research questions (details on whether results from each issue support the hypotheses are presented in Appendix E). H1 stated that when associative issues become salient in the news, parties that own such issues will see a significant increase in their political donations, whereas opposing parties will see a significant decrease in their political donations. In this study, we found that when Democrat-owned issues such as abortion rights are salient, such issues positively drive up left-leaning donations but have no significant

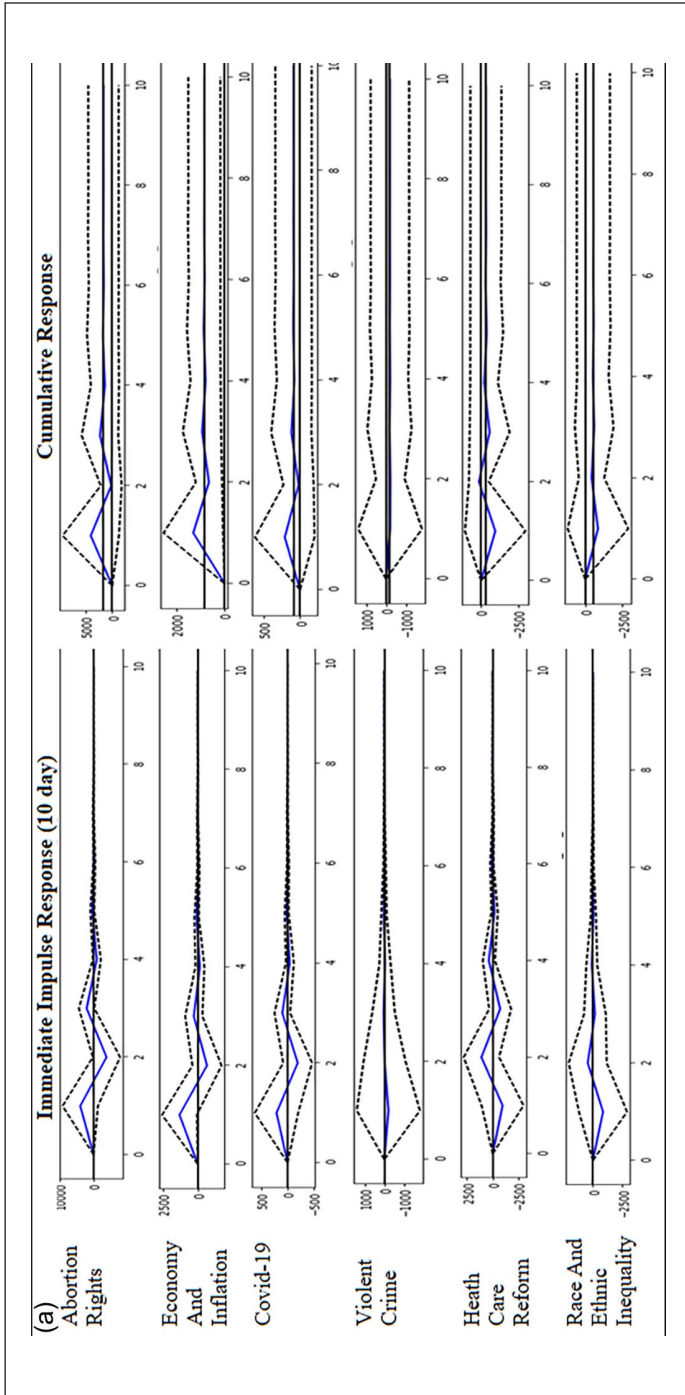


Figure 2. (continued)

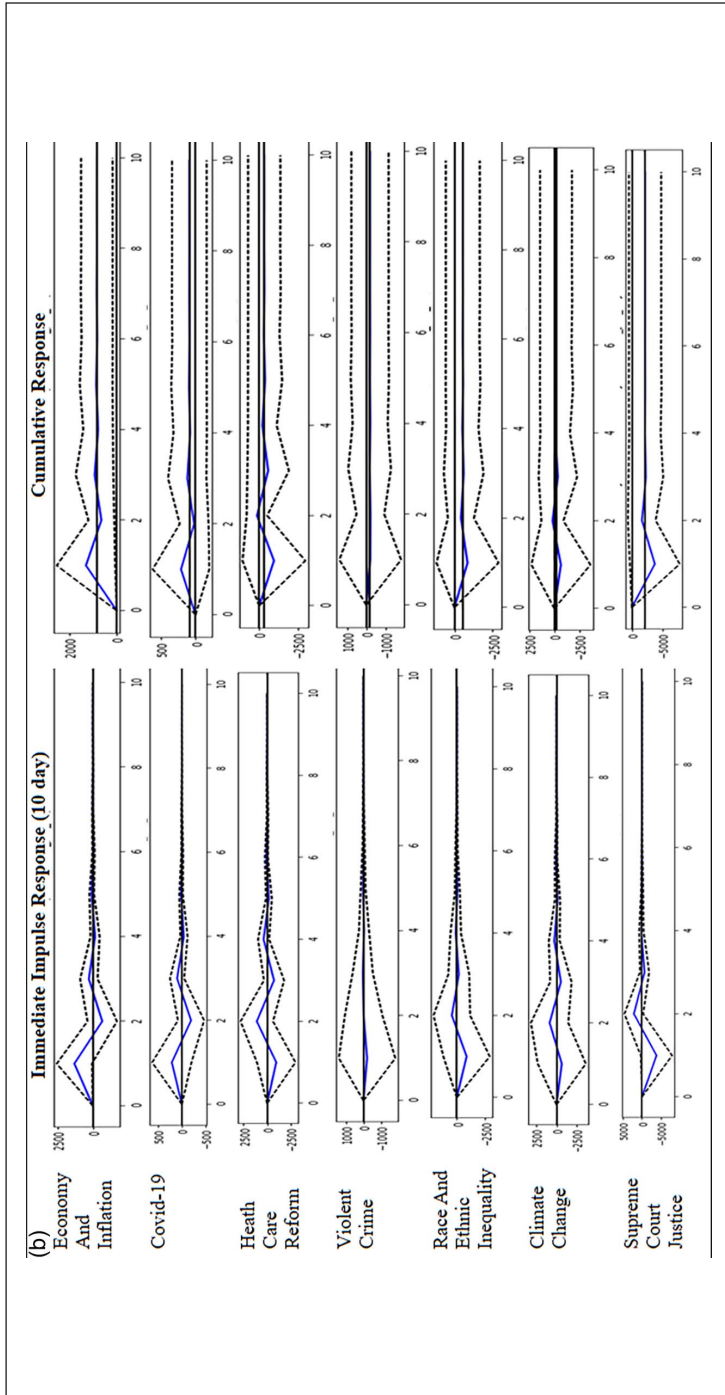


Figure 2. (a) Immediate versus cumulative effect of public attention to different issues on daily donation to left-leaning organizations. (b) Immediate versus cumulative effect of public attention to different issues on daily donation to right-leaning organizations.

Notes. The units on the Y-axis represent the magnitude of change in daily donations in response to changes in public attention to specific issues. Only issues significant through Granger-cause daily donation changes are shown here. The blue lines indicate how left-leaning donations react to changes in these issues and the dotted line shows the lower and upper bound of the 95% confidence interval. The reason plotted changes appear of the same magnitude for left- and right-leaning organizations is because when calculating impulse response functions, we standardized the effect of a one-unit change in the predictor variable (public attention to various issues) on the outcome variable (daily donations).

effect on right-leaning donations. At the same time, when Democrats-owned issues such as climate change are prominent, the public attention significantly and negatively drives down right-leaning donations, suggesting the power of issue ownership not only affects the fundraising of associated political organizations but also that of the opposite political organizations. Based on the results, H1 was partially supported.

H2 posited that the prominence of competence-related issues in the news influences political donations. When these issues are effectively addressed, the incumbent party experiences a noteworthy surge in financial contributions, while opposing parties witness a significant decline in their political funding. Conversely, mishandling such issues results in the opposite effects. To gauge public sentiment on the incumbent (the Republican Party)'s performance in these domains, we turned to Pew Research Center's (2020) public polling data. According to the Pew data, Republicans hold a lead on economic issues, with 49 percent of voters believing they can outperform Democrats (40%). Regarding COVID-19, Democrats lead by a substantial margin (47%) compared to Republicans (35%). In the realm of health care policies, Democrats also command a significant advantage (51%) over Republicans (37%). Pew did not include public opinion on Supreme Court Justice nominations in the same study.

Upon comparing our findings with Pew data, an incumbent advantage for right-leaning organizations emerged in the economic domain. However, the same issue also remarkably bolstered political donations for left-leaning organizations. Similarly, concerning COVID-19, despite the incumbent (the Republican Party)'s disadvantage, the issue had a mobilizing effect, contributing to increased donations for both left and right. Surprisingly, in the context of health system issues, our results revealed a contradiction to the hypothesized directions of the salience effect. Consequently, H2 receives partial support based on our empirical observations.

Finally, RQ explored the comparison between the effect of associative and competence issues to see which might more significantly affect donor behaviors for political donations. The analysis revealed that in terms of impact level, competence issues matter more than ownership ones for driving up political donations to both left and right.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The present study integrates issue niche theory with issue ownership theory to investigate how the salience of various types of social issues impacts donations to political organizations during an election year in the U.S. This research makes substantial contributions to both theories, providing robust empirical evidence that substantiates their theoretical propositions. Furthermore, this study extends the scope of both theories by introducing novel concepts and findings that suggest promising avenues for future research.

In particular, issue niche theory postulates that issue salience influences resource availability within distinct issue niches, consequently shaping the donation patterns

for political organizations (Yang 2020). Our research findings align with this theoretical premise. Additionally, our study uncovers a more nuanced impact of issue salience that goes beyond the simple augmentation of donations.

Our study uncovers that the salience levels of associative and competence issues have distinctive impacts on political organizations' fundraising. Notably, the benefits of heightened salience in associative issues tend to be more pronounced for political organizations aligned with political parties that "own" such issues. For instance, when issues such as abortion rights dominate news headlines, the surge in public attention proves advantageous for left-leaning political organizations. Moreover, the prominence of issues such as climate change creates unfavorable fundraising conditions for right-leaning political organizations, effectively dampening their donation inflows.

This finding aligns with the theoretical predictions of issue ownership theory (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave et al. 2012). Previous research consistently underscores the enduring and resistant nature of associative issues due to their historical and reputational components (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). The link between associative issues and specific parties is ingrained in the public consciousness, making it challenging for opposing parties to reap benefits from these issues.

It is important to highlight that our analysis has revealed additional nuances regarding the actual impact of associative issues. While our findings indicate that climate change reduced financial support for political rights, the salience of abortion did not significantly reduce donations to the right. However, abortion did drive up donations to the left. As discussed earlier, the distinction between associative and competence issues may be a continuum, and the abortion issue may be one that both parties can lay claim to from different angles. Future studies may consider classifying the abortion issue as an associative issue for both parties. At the same time, our analysis suggests that climate change may be related to Democrats.

Additionally, we discovered that the advantages of competence issues could be harnessed by both sides of the political spectrum. Despite the challenging social, economic, and public health crises of 2020 (Pew Research Center 2020), it appears that both the incumbent (the Republicans) and challenger parties (the Democrats) were able to claim ownership of these issues, motivating donors to contribute. Our analysis revealed that COVID-19 and the economy and inflation significantly boosted donations for both the political left and right. This finding is also in line with prior research that emphasizes the dynamism and susceptibility to influence of competence issues (Vliegenthart and Lefevere 2018; Walgrave et al. 2012). Because competence issues are not necessarily "owned" by any party, their salience could potentially be beneficial for both sides. This finding underscores the importance for both sides to identify the most salient competence issues and compete to incorporate them into their promotional messages.

Surprisingly, our findings indicate that the issue of Supreme Court justice appointments had an unexpected consequence: a decline in donations for right-leaning political organizations. One plausible explanation is that tangible successes may not

generate the same level of enthusiasm among donors as the pursuit of those victories. With the considerable achievements of Republicans in appointing right-leaning justices to the Supreme Court, donors may perceive the issue as already “resolved” and therefore believe it no longer necessitates additional funding or support. Future studies could delve into exploring the potential dampening effect of a party’s policy successes on fundraising efforts.

In summary, our study hints at a refined issue niche theory tailored to the political context, where issue niches are shaped not only by issue salience but also by the precise *issue ownership type*. As a result, the effectiveness of political organizations’ fundraising endeavors hinges on their ability to strategically navigate the fluctuations in associative and competence issue prominence. This entails organizational strategies for seizing favorable moments while also preparing to weather unfavorable ones proactively.

Furthermore, our study extends the application of issue ownership theory by illustrating that its influence reaches far beyond voter behaviors. In fact, issue ownership can serve as a strategic instrument for political fundraising. In the intensely competitive political landscape leading up to the 2024 elections, a comprehensive understanding of this tool has the potential to significantly enhance the fundraising capabilities of political organizations.

Practical Implications

Our findings have implications for political fundraisers, particularly regarding the critical role of timing. While past campaigns have often focused on individual donor characteristics with limited attention to socio-cultural trends, our research highlights a strategic roadmap fundraiser can use to optimize contributions by aligning efforts with the timing of prominent issues.

As public attention shifts with news coverage, specific issues create unique opportunities for fundraising. To capitalize on these moments, fundraisers must establish systems to monitor media coverage of pivotal issues. When issues strongly associated with a political party gain prominence, it becomes an ideal time for fundraisers from that party to engage donors. The old adage “strike while the iron is hot” aptly applies here: capitalizing on these resonant moments can significantly amplify campaign outcomes.

For instance, our analysis shows that timing alone accounts for about 2 percent of the variation in political donations within our sample. This translates to substantial financial gains—up to half a million dollars for left-leaning causes and over 2 million dollars for right-leaning causes in 2020. Given the nearly \$14 billion raised in political donations that year, the cumulative impact of applying these insights could reach tens of millions in future cycles, such as 2026. Conversely, when issues linked to opposing parties dominate the news, fundraisers should pause their efforts. Raising funds during unfavorable periods not only risks low returns but could even alienate potential donors. Simply put, “don’t strike when the iron is cold.” This strategic restraint can save substantial resources that might otherwise be wasted on poorly timed campaigns.

Our findings also emphasize the importance of issue competence—highlighting a party’s strengths on salient issues in fundraising messaging is essential for maximizing contributions. Additionally, we uncovered key differences in donor response times: left-leaning donors tend to respond best immediately after a news event, while right-leaning donors are more likely to contribute a few days later. Understanding these patterns can help fundraisers fine-tune their strategies for different donor bases. While our analysis primarily focused on fundraising, these insights into issue ownership and timing could also inform resource mobilization strategies. Aligning fundraising efforts with the ebb and flow of issue salience—and tailoring messaging to emphasize competence—can unlock new opportunities for political fundraisers.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study, while contributing valuable insights, has certain limitations that warrant further research. First, our focus on donor behaviors during the 2020 Presidential election year warrants an examination of whether similar trends persist over time. Future studies could compare donor behaviors in 2020 with those in 2024, given that both elections featured the same leading candidates. Such a comparison could offer meaningful insights into the evolution of donor behavior across election cycles.

Second, liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning media outlets likely cover the same issues differently and have varying impacts on donors. Future studies should carefully compare the coverage patterns between liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning media outlets. Additionally, our data primarily reflects national-level trends, potentially overlooking variations in issue significance at the state and local levels. Previous research indicates that different demographics attribute varying levels of importance to different issues (Hansen and Dolan 2020). Therefore, subsequent studies could explore the influence of issue ownership on fundraising within local political organizations and among diverse demographic groups to identify any distinctive patterns. Furthermore, psychological mechanisms, such as individuals’ moral values, may moderate the influence of issue salience (Clifford 2014). Future studies incorporating experimental designs could offer valuable insights into how moral beliefs shape individuals’ positions on various issues. Finally, while our dataset provides excellent access to donor information, it may not fully represent all political donations made in the United States in 2020. Moreover, right-leaning organizations are overrepresented in our sample compared to left-leaning ones. Although we conduct separate analyses for left- and right-leaning organizations, the unequal sample sizes may still introduce potential bias. This limitation affects the interpretation and generalizability of our findings. Future research should strive to collect more comprehensive data on a broader scale to validate our results.

In summary, as the first study delving into the interplay of issue salience, issue ownership, and resource availability for political organizations, our findings underscore the strategic and practical importance of this research trajectory. Ongoing research in this area holds the promise of refining fundraising campaigns and advancing the theoretical frameworks of both issue niche theory and issue ownership theory.

Appendix A. Analytic Steps

We carried out the analysis in the following five steps. First, we estimated the stationarity properties of the variables using the ADF Test and transformed the data for non-stationary variables. We also tested the datasets for cointegration (Hatemi-j 2014). Second, we tested for relationships among variables using the Granger causality test. Third, to model the dynamic and relative contributions of variables, we estimated VAR models. Fourth, we ran GIRFs to examine the net impact of an external shock on donation behaviors. Afterward, we conducted GFEVD to understand the relative importance of issues to donations. Previous research (Luo et al. 2022) found that GFEVD can identify the relative importance of all independent variables and establish it across 20 days to reduce a model’s sensitivity to short-term fluctuations. Finally, we conducted model evaluation tests to check the robustness of the models. All analyses were conducted separately for left-leaning and right-leaning political donations.

Appendix B. Augmented Dickey Fuller Test and Cointegration Tests.

Issues/daily donation	Augmented dickey fuller test		Johanson’s cointegration test	
	Test statistic	p-Value	Test stat > C (95%)	Significance
Abortion rights	-4.016	.001**	397.54 > 263.2603	True
Climate change	-2.859	.050	297.65 > 219.4051	True
COVID-19	-2.880	.047*	219.18 > 179.5199	True
Violent crime	-2.631	.086	153.0 > 143.6691	True
Economy and inflation	-1.830	.365	106.58 > 111.7797	False
Gun policy	-3.375	.011*	66.69 > 83.9383	False
Healthcare	-2.557	.102	38.31 > 60.0627	False
Immigration and border wall	-2.462	.124	21.06 > 40.1749	False
Supreme court appointment	-2.617	.089	13.0 > 24.2761	False
Race and ethnic inequality	-2.898	.045*	5.41 > 12.3212	False
Daily donation to left	-19.335	.000***	0.1 > 4.1296	False
Daily donation to right	-11.365	.000***	0.11 > 4.1296	False

Note. Insignificant p-value for ADF indicates non-stationary time series and thus these time series are further transformed using first difference to achieve stationary status. Johanson’s Cointegration test, when the results are true, shows a cointegration pattern among time series.

Appendix C. Summary of the Results of Granger Causality Tests. The Dependent Time Series are Daily Political Donation to Left and Right-Leaning Political Organizations.

Public attention to key issues	Daily political donation to left-lean organizations	Daily political donation to right-lean organizations
Abortion rights	.004**	.920
Climate change	.099	.004**
COVID-19	.000***	.018*
Violent crime	.026*	.027*
Economy and inflation	.000***	.004**
Gun policy	.773	.339
Healthcare	.004**	.005**
Immigration and border wall	.277	.280
Supreme court appointment	.117	.034*
Race and ethnic inequality	.008**	.020*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Appendix D. Variance Decomposition of Left and Right Political Donation as Explained by Public Attention to Various Issues.

Public attention to key issues	Daily political donation to left-lean organizations	Daily political donation to right-lean organizations
Abortion rights	.005	.001
Climate change	.006	.006
COVID-19	.010	.011
Violent crime	.001	.001
Economy and inflation	.017	.018
Gun policy	.001	.001
Healthcare	.003	.003
Immigration and border wall	.005	.001
Supreme court appointment	.005	.006
Race and ethnic inequality	.014	.029
Daily political donation to left-leaning nonprofits	.856	—
Daily political donation to right-leaning nonprofits	—	.853

Appendix E. Summary of Results Per Hypothesis on Each Issue.

Social issue	Left-lean donations and related hypotheses	Right-lean donations and related hypotheses	Overall
Abortion rights	Public attention to abortion rights Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .004^{**}$, significant at the 1% level). H1 supported	No significant Granger causality from public attention to abortion rights to donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .920$). H1 rejected	H1 partially supported
Climate change	Public attention to climate change does not significantly Granger-cause donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .099$). H1 rejected	Public attention to climate change Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .004^{**}$; significant at the 1% level). H1 supported	H1 partially supported
COVID-19	Public attention to COVID-19 Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .000^{***}$, significant at the 0.1% level). H2 supported	Public attention to COVID-19 Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .018^*$, significant at the 5% level). H2 rejected	H2 partially supported
Violent crime	Public attention to violent crime Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .026^*$, significant at the 5% level). H1 supported	Public attention to violent crime Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .027^*$, significant at the 5% level). H1 rejected	H1 partially supported
Economy and inflation	Public attention to the economy and inflation Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .000^{***}$, significant at the 0.1% level). H2 supported	Public attention to the economy and inflation Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .004^{**}$, significant at the 1% level). H2 rejected	H2 partially supported
Gun policy	Public attention to gun policy does not significantly Granger-cause donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .773$). H1 rejected	Public attention to gun policy does not significantly Granger-cause donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .339$). H1 rejected	H1 rejected
Healthcare	Public attention to healthcare Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .004^{**}$, significant at the 1% level). H2 rejected	Public attention to healthcare Granger-causes an increase in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .005^{**}$, significant at the 1% level). H2 rejected	H2 rejected
Immigration and border wall	Public attention to immigration and border wall does not significantly Granger-cause donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .277$). H1 rejected	Public attention to immigration and border wall does not significantly Granger-cause donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .280$). H1 rejected	H1 rejected
Supreme court appointment	Public attention to Supreme Court appointments does not significantly Granger-cause donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .117$). H2 rejected	Public attention to Supreme Court appointments Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .034^*$, significant at the 5% level). H2 rejected	H2 rejected
Race and ethnic inequality	Public attention to race and ethnic inequality Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to left-leaning organizations ($p = .008^{**}$, significant at the 1% level). H1 rejected	Public attention to race and ethnic inequality Granger-causes a decrease in daily donations to right-leaning organizations ($p = .020^*$, significant at the 5% level). H1 supported	H1 partially supported

Notes. Overall, H1 is partially supported by 4 out of 6 associative issues, and H2 is partially supported by 2 out of 4 competence issues.


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Note

1. To protect the identity of the marketing company, we have agreed not to disclose its name. Additional details about the sample data and access to the database are available upon request by contacting the corresponding author.

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