Trade-offs in Economic Preferences: Partisans Perceive Ideological Divergence Where There is Strong Convergence

Abstract

Four studies (N = 6,118; 183,090 observations) isolate partisan preferences for the often-competing economic motives of poverty alleviation, equality, and efficiency. Specifically, we test how Democrats and Republicans differ in their priorities, how they make trade-offs when priorities conflict (Study 1a), and how they think partisan outgroup members manage these same priorities (Study 1b). In addition, we test whether preferences (Study 2a) and predictions about the outgroup (Study 2b) shift with monetary stakes. We show areas of partisan preference overlap and divergence and reveal errors in cross-partisan meta-perceptions. Republicans and Democrats alike prioritize helping the poor over all other motives, yet they differ in how they balance trade-offs involving other priorities. Despite substantial overlap in actual socioeconomic preferences, partisans – particularly Democrats – incorrectly assume yawning differences. For example, Democrats incorrectly predict that Republicans favor policies that help the rich and increase inequality over policies that help the poor and decrease inequality. By creating separate dimensions capturing help and harm to the rich and poor, our typology isolates economic motives, examines tradeoffs, reveals cross-partisan misperceptions, and highlights areas of bipartisan agreement on fundamental economic priorities.

Keywords: Inequality, Political Polarization, Poverty, Socioeconomic Preferences

Economic inequality—the gap between the rich and the poor—has grown over the last half century and is linked to a plethora of social ills including worse public health, more violent crime, and increased psychological distress[1–6]. Although most Americans oppose inequality and believe the government should address it, their support for specific redistributive policies remains inconsistent[7].

Debates about economic policy often reduce complex preferences to binary choices—such as concern for the rich versus concern for the poor or redistribution versus efficiency. For example, the Occupy Wall Street protests used slogans like "we are the 99%" to highlight rising inequality between the top 1% and everyone else[8]. Others, however, argue that reducing inequality by taking from the rich (the focus of Occupy Wall Street) is short-sighted and inefficient because "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Socioeconomic outcomes like reduced inequality or increased efficiency are rarely driven by a singular motive. A preference for efficient resource allocation (the rising tide that lifts all boats) might stem from a desire to help the poor, the rich, or both. A desire to reduce inequality might reflect a desire to help the poor, take from the rich, or both[9]. Simply asking people whether they support reducing inequality or increasing efficiency cannot disentangle the underlying (and potentially overlapping) motives driving support. Moreover, these dimensions may interact; someone might support helping the poor but be willing to forego gains to the poor to stifle rising inequality. Indeed, pointing to the mixed motives underlying economic preferences, rather than simply supporting or opposing redistribution, individuals feel differently when the same policy is framed as taking from the rich versus helping the poor[10].

Complexity in the motives underlying economic preferences can make the drivers behind political outgroup members' policy attitudes opaque— a lack of clarity upon which partisans layer the least charitable assumptions[11]. Democrats might (mis)attribute Republican opposition to a wealth tax as wanting to protect the rich rather than concerns about an inefficient "leaky bucket" of resource waste accompanying redistribution. Republicans might (mis)attribute Democrat support for the same tax as a desire to punish the wealthy rather than to help the poor or reduce inequality.

Previous research has acknowledged these competing economic priorities by asking people to choose among policies that prioritize poverty alleviation, inequality reduction, or efficiency. In a representative lab-based design[12–15], participants evaluate a set of three payment distributions: one that is efficient, one that minimizes inequality, and one that maximizes the payout of the "poorest" player. Work investigating what is prioritized reveals some support for each of the three possibilities—concern for increasing efficiency[14], minimizing inequality[12–14], and helping the poor[15]—being the highest priority. However, these designs force either/or decisions that may oversimplify underlying motives. For example, selecting the inequality-minimizing option is typically interpreted as a preference for equality over efficiency or poverty alleviation, when in fact, an individual might care about all three. Furthermore, such studies often present a narrow set of policy options, limiting the ability for researchers to investigate how individuals make tradeoffs differently at varying ranges in the possibility space (e.g., identifying the point at which inefficiency becomes sufficiently high as to constrain support for helping the poor).

Here we introduce a new methodological approach designed to better capture the motives underlying partisans' economic preferences. We ask: How strongly do Democrats and Republicans prioritize helping the poor, reducing inequality, helping the rich, and increasing efficiency— especially when these goals conflict? Do partisans' actual preferences differ? And how much divergence do people believe there to be?

A Typology of Economic Preferences

To explore these questions, we present a typology that classifies policies along two axes: help versus harm, and the rich versus the poor (Fig. 1). This typology allows us to empirically observe how changes to the wealth of the rich and poor, as well as effects on inequality and efficiency shape policy support—and to isolate how strongly a person is motivated by each factor.

The typology consists of 440 policies spread across four quadrants, generated from two orthogonal axes representing policies encompassing a large degree of positive and negative impact on the wealth of the rich and the poor. Policies range from -50% to +50% (in 5% increments) in wealth for each group. This setup allows us to evaluate support for policies based on whether they help or harm the poor

or the rich, reduce or increase inequality (the gap in wealth between the poor and rich), and improve or worsen efficiency (the size of the overall economic pie, independent of how it is allocated).

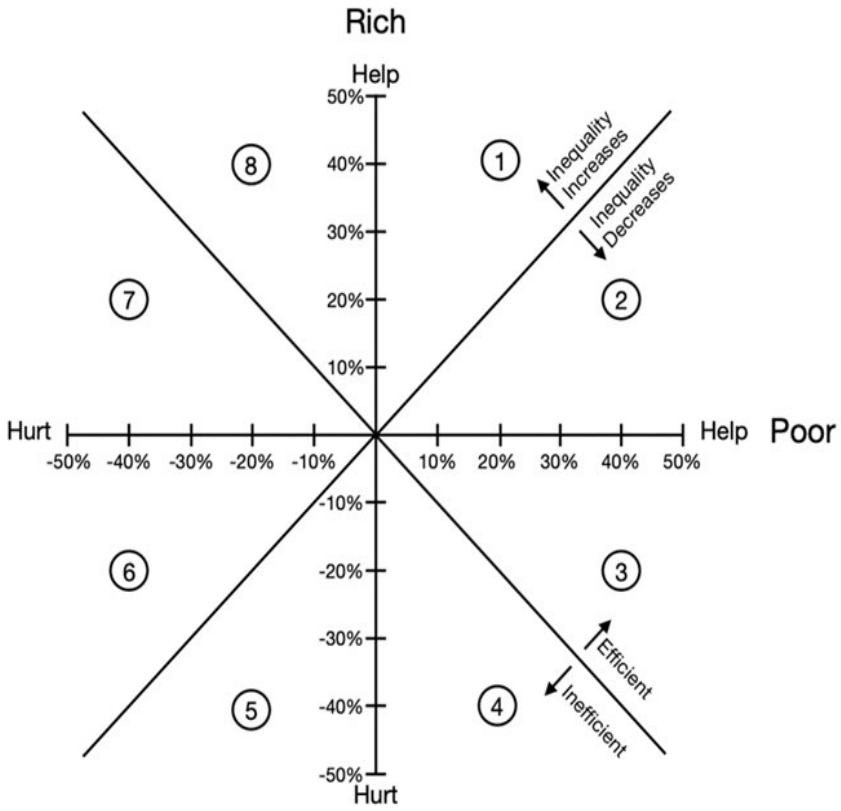

Fig. 1. Theoretical typology depicting policies that affect (a) the poor, (b) the rich, (c) inequality, and (d) efficiency.

Policies to the left of the y-axis decrease the wealth of (i.e., harm) the poor; policies to the right of the y-axis increase the wealth of (i.e., help) the poor. Policies above the x-axis help the rich whereas policies below the x-axis harm the rich. Policies above the positive sloping diagonal increase inequality (i.e., increase the percentage gap in wealth between the rich and poor) and policies below the positive sloping diagonal decrease inequality (i.e., decrease the percentage gap in wealth between the rich and the poor). Finally, policies above the negative sloping diagonal increase efficiency (i.e., result in a net gain to the pool of resources regardless of allocation) whereas policies below the negative sloping diagonal decrease efficiency (i.e., result in a net loss).

This typology allows us to examine individuals' willingness to countenance specific trade-offs that pit motives against one another. For example, how much growth in inequality will people tolerate to ensure gains to the poor? How much harm to the rich will people accept to reduce inequality? A key strength of our approach is that these policies are decontextualized: they contain no partisan language or cues, enabling us to observe underlying socioeconomic preferences stripped of excess political baggage.

We use percentages because, while imperfect, they are easy for participants to understand. Here, we treat a policy that helps the poor by 10% and the rich by 5% as reducing inequality (i.e., the gap in wealth is closing in the percentage of the overall resources held by the rich vs. the poor). While absolute inequality may still rise (due to baseline disparities), we focus on relative percentage gaps. The focus on percentage gaps avoids the assumption that participants are conducting complex calculations to convert percentages into absolute dollars as they determine whether a given policy increases or decreases inequality. In the Supplemental Information [SI], we replicate our results using raw dollar amounts (-$500 million to +$500 million) (SI Section 7).

Understanding partisan priorities provides insight into whether ideological differences in economic preferences are as stark as they appear. People often assume outgroups dislike and dehumanize them more than they actually do[16], a bias shown to predict hostility between Democrats and Republicans[17,18]. Further, Americans assume greater ideological polarization than reality warrants[19]. For instance, partisans overestimate their differences in policy attitudes on issues like immigration and correcting these false perceptions can improve intergroup attitudes[20]. Given the complexity of socioeconomic preferences—and the ambiguity about why someone might support a given policy— they are prime candidates for partisan misperceptions and corrections.

Predictions and Study Overview

In four studies, we use our typology to examine partisans' socioeconomic motives, their perceptions of out-party preferences, and the degree of overlap between the two. First, we use nationally representative panels to identify Democrats' and Republicans' actual socioeconomic preferences (Study 1a), and their predictions about opposing partisans (Study 1b). Next, in Study 2a and 2b, we use a

paradigm where participants' policy support affects actual monetary outcomes for all participants including themselves. Thus, while participants in Study 1a vote on hypothetical policies, participants in Study 2a have "skin in the game." In all studies, participants are asked to vote on a random subset of 30 (out of the 440 total) policies. All studies were preregistered (https://osf.io/rt7uq/?view_only=bcba262232bd47199eada298828324b4).

We hypothesized that partisans' actual socioeconomic motives would differ. The political left (vs. right) tends to rely more strongly on considerations of harm reduction and fairness in their moral reasoning[21] and express less tolerance of hierarchy[22]. The political left's prioritization of harm reduction and fairness may manifest as support for those at the bottom of the hierarchy; relative to the right, individuals on the political left tend to show more empathy for[23], attention to[24], and efforts to overturn hardships[25] experienced by socially disadvantaged (vs. advantaged) groups—effects thought to be driven by a desire to attenuate inequality (which can be accomplished by either or both of lifting those at the bottom or bringing down those at the top). Thus, we reasoned that relative to Republicans, Democrats would more strongly desire reducing harm (and providing help) to the poor, be more averse to helping (and more tolerant of harming) the rich, and be more opposed to increasing (and committed to decreasing) inequality. In addition, based on prior work[26], we reasoned that Republicans (versus Democrats) would place more emphasis on economic efficiency.

Still, partisans' actual preferences might align more than either side assumes. Whereas people believe their political opponents hold extreme beliefs[27], the ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans may be exaggerated[28,29]. Using our typology, we examine areas of convergence and divergence by comparing cross-party perceptions (Study 1b-2b) and actual preferences (Study 1a-2a).

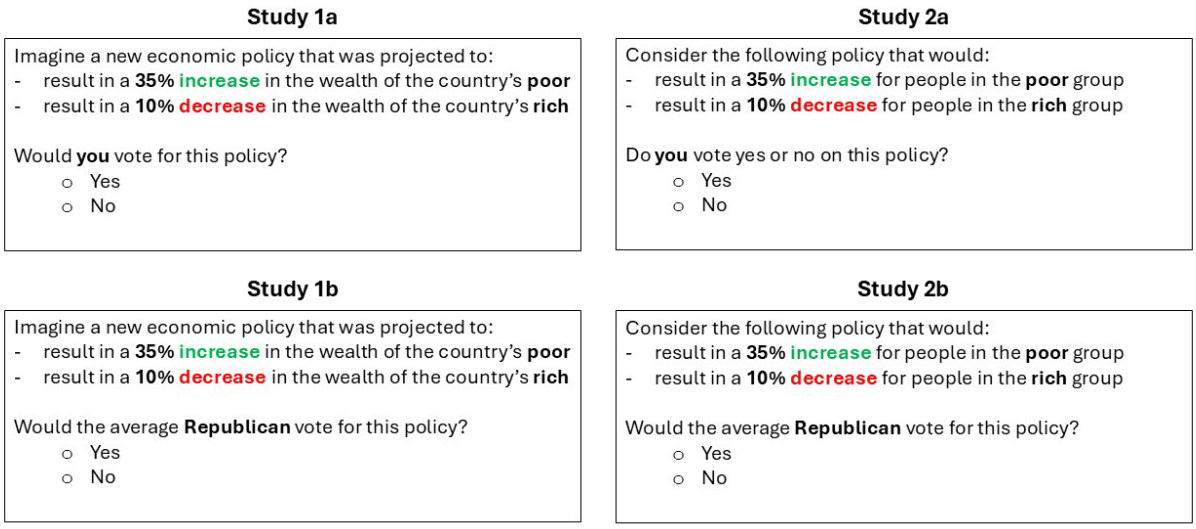

Fig. 2. Sample question from each study. Republican participants in Study 1b and 2b responded to the question, "Would the average Democrat vote for this policy?"

Study 1a – Partisan Socioeconomic Priorities

We recruited a nationally representative sample of Americans through Leger Panels (n_{1a} = 1,798). Each participant voted (Yes/No) on 30 randomly drawn hypothetical policies from the typology (Fig. 2). Each policy was described as having some effect on the poor (e.g., 5% increase in wealth for the bottom 20%) and the rich (e.g., 5% decrease in wealth for the top 20%). The resulting dataset contained 53,940 votes across the 440 policies (M_{votes}= 122.59, range= 102-138).

We use standardized binomial crossed-factors multilevel regressions to predict policy support (1= Yes, 0= No) across the full typology (see SI Section 3 for model justification details), coding each policy according to whether it decreases (-1), does not change (0), or increases (+1) each of the wealth of the poor, the wealth of the rich, inequality, and economic efficiency. Our analyses nest individual votes (n = 53,940; Level 1) under both participants (n = 1,798; Level 2) and policies (n = 440; Level 2).

Results

Helping the poor is the strongest predictor of policy support (Table 1). Holding all else constant, model-predicted policy support jumps from 8% (for policies that harmed the poor) to 57% (for policies that helped the poor, see SI Table S2). Reducing (vs. increasing) inequality is the second strongest predictor of support, increasing model-predicted support from 15% to 39% holding all else constant.

Increasing efficiency and helping the rich also increase model-predicted policy support, albeit to a lesser degree (from 21% to 30% and 24% to 27%, respectively).

Breaking results down by ideology (Fig. 3a-b, *Left*) reveals both convergence and divergence. Across partisan lines, helping (vs. harming) the poor is the strongest driver of policy support (model-predicted Democratic support: +57 percentage points (pp); Republican: +41pp). In addition, Democrats (+31pp) place greater importance than Republicans (+17pp) on reducing (vs. increasing) inequality, while Republicans (+12pp) place greater emphasis than Democrats (-9pp) on helping (vs. harming) the rich. Partisans hold similar preferences for efficiency (vs. inefficiency; Democrats: +10pp; Republicans: +8pp).

In supplemental analyses, we incorporate the *degree* to which policies help and hurt the rich and poor and examine how partisans manage trade-offs when priorities conflict. We find that Republicans are more averse to increasing degrees of harm to the rich, while Democrats are more averse to increasing degrees of help to the rich (SI Table S3). In addition, when considering policies that help the poor but increase inequality (by helping the rich even more), Democrats are faster than Republicans to forgo gains to the poor to prevent rising inequality (SI Tables S4, S5, and Fig. S1). When examining the trade-off between reducing inequality and harming the rich, we find that Democrats support policies that harm the rich by up to 50% as long as the poor are helped to any degree, and inequality is thereby reduced (SI Tables S6, S7 and Fig. S2). Republicans, in contrast, are unwilling to support policies imposing large degrees of harm to the rich irrespective of how much these policies help the poor.

Discussion. Across partisan lines, helping the poor best predicts policy support, and Democrats and Republicans alike generally favor reducing inequality and increasing efficiency. In fact, partisans agree on more than they disagree, showing a similar rank ordering of priorities and differing only in their support for helping the rich. Nevertheless, partisans diverge in the extent to which they prioritize reducing inequality and avoiding harm to the rich: Republicans are more averse to harming (and more supportive of helping) the rich, and Democrats prioritize reducing inequality to a greater extent.

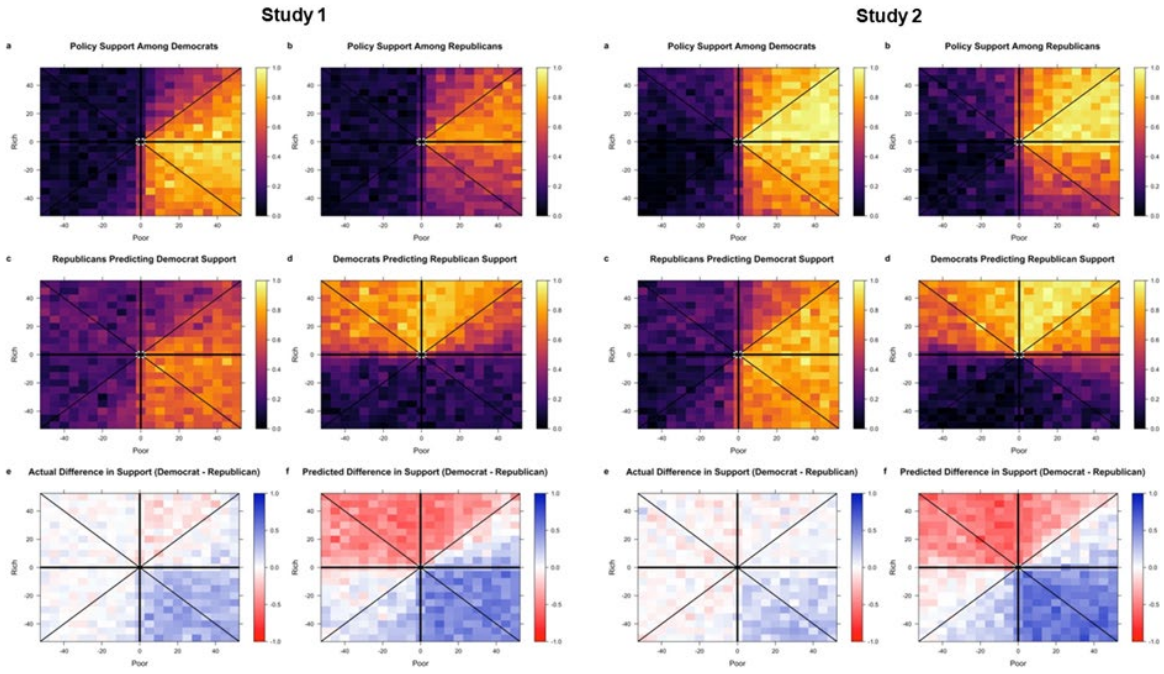

Fig. 3. Left Panel: Heatmaps depicting actual and predicted policy support in Studies 1a and 1b. (A) Policy support among Democrats, (B) Policy support among Republicans, (C) Republicans' Predictions of Democrat Support, (D) Democrats' Predictions of Republican Support, (E) Difference in actual policy support (darker blue/red indicates stronger relative Democrat/Republican support, respectively), and (F) Predicted difference in policy support (darker blue/red indicates cross-party perceptions of stronger relative Democrat/ Republican support, respectively). Right Panel: Heatmaps depicting actual and predicted policy support in Studies 2a and 2b. (A) Policy support among Democrats, (B) Policy support among Republicans, (C) Republicans' Predictions of Democrat Support, (D) Democrats' Predictions of Republican Support, (E) Difference in actual policy support (darker blue/red indicates stronger relative Democrat/Republican support, respectively), and (F) Predicted difference in policy support (darker blue/red indicates cross-party perceptions of stronger relative Democrat/Republican support, respectively).

Study 1b – Cross-Partisan Predictions

In Study 1b (n_{1b}= 1,501; Leger Panels), participants predicted how the average opposing partisan would vote on 30 randomly drawn policies (Fig. 2). This yielded 45,030 votes spread across all 440 policies (M_{votes} = 102.37, range= 86-119) and allowed us to compare cross-partisan predictions with actual policy support from Study 1a (Fig 3., *Left*; Fig. 4, *Top*).

Results

Republicans were relatively accurate in predicting Democrats' preferences, correctly identifying that Democrats prioritize helping the poor and reducing inequality, though they underestimated the strength of both motives. For example, Republicans anticipate a 28pp spread in Democratic support for policies that harm (26%) versus help (54%) the poor (see SI Table S8), while the actual spread is 54pp (harm: 8%; help: 64%). Further, Republicans predict an 18pp spread in the extent to which Democrats support policies that increase (31%) versus decrease (49%) inequality, while the actual spread in Democrats' preferences is 30pp (increase: 16%; decrease: 46%). In addition, Republicans predict that Democrats are indifferent to whether policies are economically efficient (decrease: 38%; increase: 40%), however Democrats prefer policies that increase (35%) versus decrease (25%) efficiency. Finally, Republicans predict that Democrats' votes are not driven by whether policies help (vs. harm) the rich (help: 39%; harm: 39%), while Democrats in Study 1a prefer policies that harm (34%) versus help (25%) the rich.

By contrast, Democrats considerably misjudged Republican preferences. They incorrectly predict that Republicans primarily seek to help (vs. harm) the rich (Table 1), estimating a 47pp spread in Republicans' support for policies that help (65%) versus harm (18%) the rich when the actual spread among Republicans is 13pp (help: 28%; harm: 15%). Further, Democrats predict that Republicans seek to increase inequality, estimating a 27pp difference in Republicans' support for policies that increase (53%) versus decrease (26%) inequality. The actual spread in Republican support is 17pp, with policies that reduce inequality (31%) garnering more support than those that increase it (14%). Notably, Democrats predicted that helping the poor was the least important driver of Republican support, estimating only a 9pp spread in support for policies that harm (34%) versus help (43%) the poor. In fact, helping the poor was the strongest predictor among Republicans and the actual spread in Republicans' support for policies that help versus harm the poor is 42pp (help: 49%; harm: 7%). Lastly, Democrats are relatively correct in their prediction that increasing (vs. decreasing) efficiency results in a 10pp spread in Republicans' policy support (decrease: 34%; increase: 44%), as the actual difference among Republicans' was 8pp (decrease: 17%; increase: 25%).

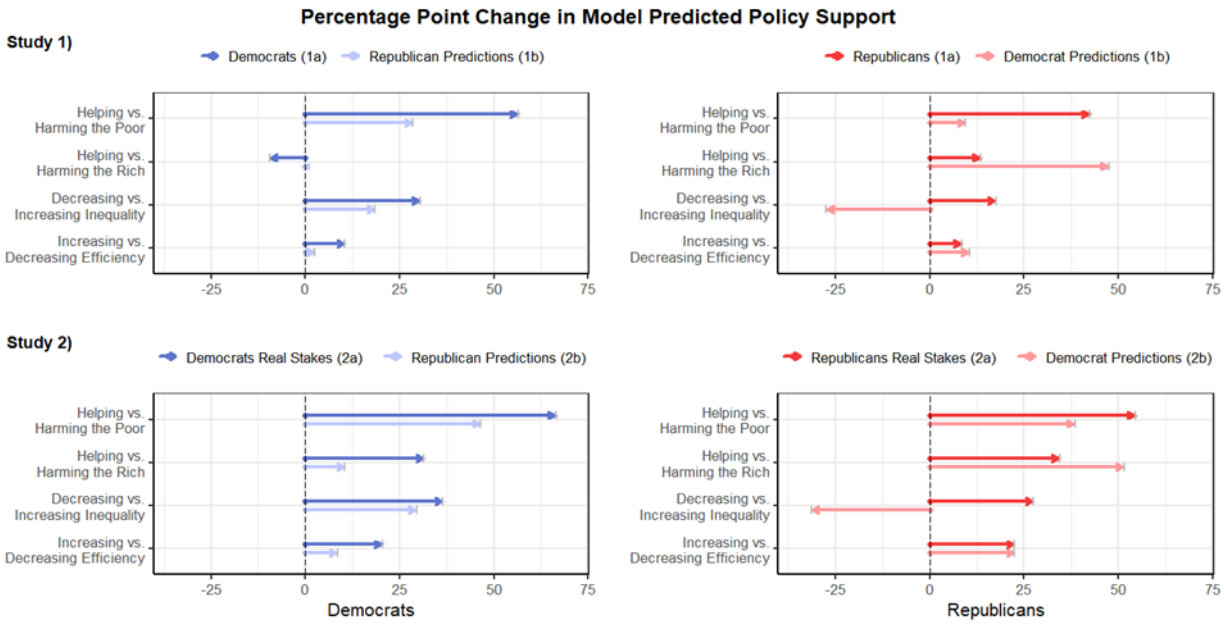

Fig. 4. Top Panel: Change in Model-Predicted Policy Support as a Function of Policy Outcome for Studies 1a and 1b. Dark colored arrows correspond to model predicted voting patterns in Study 1a and light colored arrows correspond to model cross-partisan predictions in Study 1b. Bottom Panel: Change in Model-Predicted Policy Support as a Function of Policy Outcome for Studies 2a and 2b. Dark colored arrows correspond to model predicted voting patterns in Study 2a and light colored arrows correspond to model cross-partisan predictions in Study 2b.

To directly test prediction accuracy, we use the Structural Similarity Index (SSIM) and the policy-level mean squared error (MSE) of Republicans and Democrats to compare cross-partisan predictions with actual voting. The SSIM captures how similar cross-partisan predictions are to actual voting by comparing the luminance, contrast, and structure of the two heatmap images. SSIM values range from -1 (indicating the images are completely different) to 1 (identical images).

Republicans' predictions were more structurally similar to Democrats' actual voting (SSIM= 0.661) than Democrats' predictions were to Republicans' actual voting (SSIM= 0.445). Of note, Democrats and Republicans actual voting patterns are highly similar (SSIM= 0.733) and partisans resemble each other more closely than each party resembles the out-party's image of them. In addition, in computing the policy-level MSE of Republicans and Democrats (i.e., the average gap between actual and

predicted support across all policies), we find that Republicans (MSE= 0.025) demonstrate less prediction error than Democrats (MSE= 0.152), $t(878)= -4.579$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.127, -.051], Cohen's $d= 0.309$.

Discussion. In sum, Democrats substantially underestimated Republican concern for the poor and overestimated Republican desire to help the rich and increase inequality when, in fact, Republicans' actual voting patterns in Study 1a— like Democrats'— prioritize helping the poor and reducing inequality. Conversely, Republicans more accurately predict Democrats' priorities, recognizing that Democrats primarily seek to help the poor and reduce inequality, and care less about efficiency and helping (or harming) the rich.

Because participants in Study 1 vote on policies with no consequences, participants' responses may reflect hypothetical bias[30], whereby they endorse certain policies they would not support if outcomes affected the material well-being of themselves and others. Facing no consequences, participants may treat policy endorsements as an abstract exercise or hew toward socially desirable responses. To address this, Study 2 introduces real monetary stakes, which creates an incentive-compatible mechanism[31] and helps to ensure we are capturing true preferences.

Study 2a – The Influence of Economic Stakes on Partisan Socioeconomic Priorities

In Study 2a ($n_{2a}= 1{,}406$), American participants recruited via Cloud Research's Connect platform voted on 30 randomly drawn policies. Before voting, they were told they would be randomly assigned to either a "rich", "poor", or "middle" group, where bonuses for the "rich" and "poor" groups would be determined by whichever policy received the most Yes votes (the "middle" group would receive the same bonus regardless; see Methods Section and SI Section 6 for additional detail). Participants were held behind a veil of ignorance; they would learn their randomly assigned group only after they finished voting on the policies. This helped ensure that participants felt their decisions mattered for everyone, including themselves, without risking they would view the paradigm as merely a game in which they ought to make whichever decisions increased their own group's payout. Our Study 2a dataset included 42,180 votes spread across policies ($M_{votes}= 95.86$, range= 88 - 102). Analyses nest individual votes ($n = 42{,}180$; Level 1) under both participants ($n = 1{,}406$; Level 2) and policies ($n = 440$; Level 2).

Results

Study 2a results closely mirror those of Study 1a in many ways. Helping the "poor" group again emerges as the strongest predictor of policy support (Table 1), boosting predicted support from 14% to 74% (60pp spread vs. Study 1a's 49pp spread). In addition, reducing (vs. increasing) inequality boosts support from 26% to 57% (31pp spread vs. Study 1a's 24pp spread) and participants were more likely to favor efficient policies; increasing (vs. decreasing) efficiency bolstered support from 31% to 51% (a 20pp spread compared to the 9pp spread in Study 1a). Unlike in Study 1a where helping (vs. harming) the rich increased policy support by only 3pp, in Study 2a, helping (vs. harming) the "rich" group had a larger effect, boosting policy support from 25% to 58% (33pp spread).

As in Study 1a, helping (vs. harming) the "poor" group remains the primary concern across partisan lines (Democrats: +66pp; Republicans: +54pp). Both groups also favored reducing (vs. increasing) inequality (Democrats: +36pp, Republicans: +27pp) and increasing (vs. decreasing) efficiency (Democrats: +20pp; Republicans: +22pp). Finally, while Republicans in Study 1a favored helping the rich more than Democrats, that gap vanished in Study 2a. That is, with real stakes on the line, Republicans (+34pp) and Democrats (+31pp) place similar importance on helping (vs. harming) the "rich" group.

Where Democrats and Republicans alike were relatively averse to increasing degrees of help to the rich when policies were hypothetical (Study 1a), with real stakes, both Democrats and Republicans (and especially Republicans) are less averse to increasing degrees of help to the rich (SI Table S3). In addition, while Democrats in Study 1a were more willing than Republicans to forgo gains to the poor to prevent rising inequality, when participants have "skin in the game" there is almost universal support for policies that help the "poor" group, even when those policies increase inequality (SI Table S4-5, Fig. S2).

When examining trade-offs between harming the rich and reducing inequality, Democrats in Study 2a were more supportive than Republicans of policies that harmed the rich as long as inequality was also reduced. However, relative to Study 1a, Democrats in Study 2a are much less supportive of these policies; where over 67% of Democrats in Study 1a supported a policy that levied a 50% wealth reduction

on the rich if it also decreased inequality by 35%, only 43% of Democrats did so in Study 2a (SI Table S6-7, Fig. S4).

Discussion. With real monetary stakes and the potential to be randomly assigned to the "rich" group, Democrats vote more in favor of helping the rich, showing similar patterns to Republicans. In addition, while we replicate the lack of partisan differences on desires for efficiency, both parties care about it more in Study 2a. These preference shifts may reflect both the chance of personal gain and the broader relatability of the "rich" group in this context. First, participants could end up in the rich group in Study 2a, thus, they had more to gain by supporting policies benefitting the "rich". In addition, even if a given participant in Study 2a was not to end up there herself, those who made up the "rich" group had more in common with the participant than do the real life rich, who may attract little affinity and some antipathy from everyday people. In addition, the "rich" group in Study 2a were a proportionally more expansive group than in Study 1a—comprising a random third of the sample rather than the stated 20% in Study 1a.

Study 2b – Cross-Partisan Predictions of Partisan Socioeconomic Preferences with Stakes

In Study 2b (n_{2b}= 1,413; Cloud Research), participants were informed of the design of Study 2a, then were asked to predict how the average member of the opposing party would vote on 30 randomly selected policies. This resulted in 42,390 votes spread across all policies (M_{votes}= 96.34, range= 88-102).

As in Study 1b, Republicans predicted Democrats' preferences more accurately than Democrats predicted Republicans'. Heatmaps revealed strong alignment between Republicans' predictions and Democrats' actual voting, while Democrats again substantially misjudged Republican voting patterns (Fig. 3, *Right*; Fig. 4, *Bottom*).

Results

Republicans correctly predicted that helping (vs. harming) the "poor" group was the top driver of Democrats' policy support but underestimated its strength (predicting a 46pp gap compared to the actual spread of 66pp; see SI Table S8 for all estimates). Republicans also underestimated Democrats' preferences for reducing inequality (+29pp predicted vs. +36pp actual) and increasing efficiency (+8pp

predicted vs. +20pp actual). Finally, Republicans underestimated how much Democrats in Study 2a prioritize helping (vs. harming) the "rich" group, predicting a 10pp spread for policies that help (vs. harm) the "rich" group. In fact, Democrats in Study 2a favor these policies by 31pp, in stark contrast to their 9pp preference for harming (vs. helping) the rich in Study 1a.

Democrats, by contrast, misidentified helping the rich as the primary driver of Republican support (Table 1). Democrats estimated a 51pp spread in Republicans' support for policies that help (70%) versus harm (19%) the "rich" group when the actual spread among Republicans is 34pp (help: 57%; harm: 23%). Democrats again substantially underestimated Republican' preference for helping (vs. harming) the "poor" group and decreasing (vs. increasing) inequality. Whereas Democrats predict a 28pp spread in policies that help (57%) versus harm (29%) the "poor" group, Republicans actual spread is almost twice that (54pp). In addition, Democrats believed Republicans would favor policies that increase (59%) versus decrease (28%) inequality (31pp spread), while Republicans actually preferred policies that reduced (53%) rather than increased (26%) inequality. Democrats did, however, correctly estimate the spread in Republican preferences for increasing (vs. reducing) efficiency (estimated and actual spread are both 22pp).

Republicans' predictions are more structurally similar to Democrats' actual voting (SSIM= 0.699) than Democrats' predictions are to Republicans' actual voting (SSIM= 0.492). Again, Democrats and Republicans actual voting patterns are highly similar (SSIM= 0.752). In addition, while the pattern of accuracy is directionally consistent with Study 1b, we find that Republicans (MSE= 0.017) in Study 2b do not show less prediction error than Democrats (MSE= 0.115) when predicting how the opposing party would vote ($t(878) = -1.860$, $p = 0.063$, 95% CI [-.066, .005], Cohen's $d = 0.125$).

Thus, even when policies had real stakes, Republicans' predictions about Democrats remained reasonably accurate, while Democrats dramatically misread Republican motives. These asymmetries suggest that while shared priorities exist, they are often obscured by inaccurate partisan perceptions.

General Discussion

Although American politics is widely seen as polarized[32], our findings reveal substantial bipartisan agreement on core economic priorities– most notably, the shared importance of helping the poor and reducing inequality. Despite this preference convergence, however, partisans perceive stark divides. Across four studies (and two supplemental studies), we mapped partisans' actual economic preferences, examined their beliefs about counter-partisan preferences, and assessed whether monetary stakes shifted preferences and perceptions.

Counter to popular caricatures, Democrats were not primarily or even strongly motivated by harming the rich. Whereas Democrats showed strong preferences for helping the poor and reducing inequality— whether there were financial stakes or not— they showed a mild preference for harming the rich in Study 1a that reversed to a preference for helping the rich in Study 2a (when their decisions had real financial stakes and when they had a chance of being in the "rich" group).

Moreover, and again counter to popular caricatures, Republicans do not heavily prioritize providing large gains to the rich when there are no personal consequences to their voting decisions. Instead, Republicans—like Democrats—prioritize helping the poor and reducing inequality (preferences that held true whether or not decisions involved personal financial stakes). Critically, we find bipartisan agreement on basic economic priorities (e.g., helping the poor, reducing inequality, and increasing efficiency) with differences only emerging regarding the rich. Additional analyses revealed further nuance; Republicans have little motivation to help the rich but are motivated to avoid harming them.

Still, partisans failed to recognize this overlap. Democrats, in particular, misjudged Republicans' motives, assuming they prioritized helping the rich and increasing inequality over helping the poor, even though Republicans' actual policy preferences closely resembled Democrats' own. That Democrats are more inaccurate in predicting the views of Republicans than the reverse is notable and future research is required to understand this striking asymmetry. Perhaps this difference emerges because Democrats are more likely to caricature— or be exposed to media that caricatures— the economic preferences of

Republicans than vice-versa. That said, research suggests similar levels of cross-party hostility and misperceptions, suggesting there is unlikely to be a shortage of general caricaturing on either side[17,20].

This asymmetry may also stem from differences in the gap between elites and "followers" (i.e., the general public). Whereas the average (non-elite) Democrat is ideologically similar to Democratic elites, the average Republican is ideologically distinct from Republican leaders[33–35]. Our work suggests that the average Democrat and Republican are more ideologically similar than dissimilar. It is possible that both Republicans and Democrats look to partisan outgroup elites when making inferences about the preferences of the average outgroup member. If so, and to the extent that the gap between average and elite Republicans is larger than between average and elite Democrats, this could result in Democrats being more mis-calibrated than Republicans in their views of the other side's priorities. Future research will be necessary to better identify the sources of partisans' inaccurate meta-perceptions.

In addition, we observe differences in trade-offs when real stakes are introduced. In hypothetical settings, Democrats were more willing to forgo gains to the poor to prevent rising inequality. In contrast, when facing monetary stakes, both Democrats and Republicans favored helping the poor even if inequality rose. Moreover, while Democrats in Study 1a were supportive of policies that decrease the wealth of the rich if the poor are helped to any degree, Democrats in Study 2a were much less likely to endorse policies that harm the rich. It's possible that participants in Study 2a were more focused on the potential upside of being randomly assigned to the "rich" group and prioritized more resources in the overall system such that they became almost insensitive to inequality if the "poor" group benefited at all. This is consistent with work examining the prospect of upward mobility which suggests that people who expect to become richer support policies that favor those positions to which they aspire[36].

Practically, our work provides insights into how best to frame policies surrounding inequality, poverty, and wealth to elicit common ground. For example, focusing on helping the poor is likely to be the most broadly popular policy among Democrats and Republicans alike. Moreover, framing a policy around its benefits to society as a whole might be more effective than emphasizing how that policy levies additional taxes upon the rich. Indeed, policies emphasizing joint gains to the poor and rich may elicit

broader bipartisan support, so long as the poor are benefiting more than the rich. Our research highlights bipartisan overlap in economic preferences and suggests that framing policies within these areas of convergence (e.g., de-emphasizing harm to the rich, emphasizing help to the poor) may foster bipartisan agreement.

This research is not without its limitations. First, in most analyses we use model predictions, which infer beyond the point at which data exist (e.g., predicting people's responses to a policy where the rich or poor are being helped greater than 50%). Future work expanding the typology to 100% in either direction would provide a more complete picture of policy support at the extremes. Second, voting behavior, priorities, and how people manage trade-offs may differ depending on the social or economic categories on the axes. While we chose the top and bottom 20% in Study 1, we could redefine the axes in numerous ways to examine whether our conclusions change when the rich and poor are redefined. For example, perhaps individuals exhibit different patterns if the rich are re-defined as the top 1% (vs. the top 20%). Beyond this, our flexible typology allows us to generalize to different contexts (i.e., beyond class divides). For example, while here we consider class in isolation, class and race are deeply intertwined and future work would benefit from using race-based axes to examine how individuals manage trade-offs relevant to those contexts— how much inequality between racial groups are people willing to tolerate to improve the material position of the disenfranchised group?

Finally, while participants in Study 2a were held behind a veil of ignorance, we could have explicitly assigned people to a group prior to voting. Alternatively, we could have retained a sense of real stakes while mitigating the risks of "gaming" by having participants make decisions affecting other online workers but not themselves. It's possible that with no chance of benefiting from their voting behavior, participants would be less keen on helping the rich and more sensitive to increasing inequality. Our flexible typology structure can be adapted to further generate insights about how people might make socioeconomic decisions whenever multiple motivations are simultaneously at play and in conflict.

Conclusion

Inequality reduction and poverty alleviation are central to sociopolitical debates. We develop and test a typology that delineates the structure of social policy into its underlying dimensions. We find that policy support derives from a mixture of a desire to reduce inequality, help the rich, grow the overall pool of economic resources, and, most strongly, help the poor. While Democrats and Republicans share substantial common ground, they fail to recognize this convergence, reinforcing a false perception of ideological divides. These inaccurate perceptions—particularly Democrats' misperceptions of Republican policy support—may exacerbate partisan hostility. These findings shed light on the psychology of socioeconomic preferences, with implications for framing policies aimed at garnering bipartisan support.

Methods

Studies were approved under [BLINDED] Institutional Review Board (STU00211051). All participants provided informed consent. Data, materials, and code for all studies can be found online on OSF (https://osf.io/rt7uq/?view_only=bcba262232bd47199eada298828324b4). All studies were preregistered (see SI Section 1).

Studies 1a and 1b

Participants. For Study 1, we recruited two sequential quota-matched nationally representative samples of Americans (n_{1a}= 1,798; n_{1b}= 1,501) from Leger Panel Services (see Table S1 for all sample demographics). As preregistered, participants were automatically excluded in the data collection phase if they failed at least one of two attention checks ("Please choose Somewhat Disagree" and "Please write the number of letters that appear in the word Monday"). Both samples were approximately evenly split between Democrats (n_{1a}= 990; n_{1b}= 778) and Republicans (n_{1a}= 808; n_{1b}= 723). A priori power simulations[37,38] determined that a sample of 1,460 participants offered sufficient power (Power= .99, α= .05) to detect standardized effects in a binomial crossed-factors multilevel model as small as β= .05.

Procedure. In both studies, each participant viewed a selection of 30 policies randomly drawn from a larger set of 440 policies. In Study 1a participants reported whether they themselves would vote

for each policy ("Would you vote for this policy?" Yes/No). In Study 1b participants indicated whether they thought the average member of the opposing political party would vote for each policy ("Do you think the average [Democrat/Republican] would vote for this policy?" Yes/No).

Each policy was described as having some effect on the wealth of the country's rich and poor, defined as the top and bottom 20% of Americans. We defined wealth as the total value of all of a person's financial assets (e.g., investments, savings, homes, etc.). In one such sample policy, participants were asked to "imagine a new economic policy was proposed that was projected to (a) result in a 25% increase in the wealth of the country's poor and (b) result in a 5% increase in the wealth of the country's rich." While the question framing remained constant, each policy differed in the percentage change for the rich and poor, which varied randomly between "no change" and 50% increase or decrease in 5% increments.

Because participants evaluated 30 (of 440) randomly selected policies, the resulting data was, by design, Massively Missing Completely at Random or MMCAR[39]. Specifically, data were 93.2% missing, and the missingness was, by definition, at random. The advantage of the MMCAR planned missingness design is that it gave us a sufficient number of votes on each hypothetical policy ($M_{votes1a}$= 122.59, range= 102-138; $M_{votes1b}$= 102.37, range=86-119;) while simultaneously not overwhelming participants with 440 repetitions of the same question. Designing our procedure such that the data is missing completely at random ensures that any missing data techniques lead to unbiased estimates[40].

After answering the 30 policy questions, participants filled out measures of their support for economic inequality[41] (M_{1a}= 2.91, sd= 1.60; M_{1b}= 2.95, sd= 1.50) and social dominance orientation[42] (M_{1a}= 2.87, sd= 1.19; M_{1b}= 2.89, sd= 1.17) [41] on scales ranging from 1 (Strongly [Disagree/Oppose]) to 7 (Strongly [Agree/Favor]).

Participants also indicated their political ideology across four questions. First, they reported how Liberal (1= Very) or Conservative (7= Very) they are (a) when it comes to politics (M_{1a}= 3.94, sd= 1.84; M_{1b}= 4.12, sd= 1.91), (b) on social issues (M_{1a}= 3.92, sd= 1.90; M_{1b}= 3.98, sd= 1.95), and (c) on economic issues (M_{1a}= 4.12, sd= 1.83; M_{1b}= 4.25, sd= 1.88). Lastly, participants chose whether they most closely identify as a Democrat (n_{1a}= 754; n_{1b}= 712), an Independent (n_{1a}= 432; n_{1b}= 96), a Republican (n_{1a}= 549;

n_{1b}= 672), or as some other political party (n_{1a}= 63; n_{1b}= 21). If a participant chose Independent or Other, we followed-up with a question asking, "if you had to choose one, today, which do you more closely identify with?" Participants were asked to select either Democrat (n_{1a}= 236; n_{1b}= 66) or Republican (n_{1a}= 259; n_{1b}= 51). Participants who initially selected Independent or Other were included in the category they chose in the second question given that those who lean Democrat or Republican are similar to those who categorize themselves outright as Democrat or Republican[43].

To explore how policy outcomes predicted (a) actual policy support and (b) cross-partisan predicted policy support, we ran a series of standardized binomial crossed-factors multilevel regressions. First, we explored how categorical change (-1= Decrease, 0= No Change, and +1= Increase) in each of the wealth of the poor and rich, inequality, and economic efficiency interacted with political ideology to predict policy support (Study 1a) and cross-partisan predicted policy support (Study 1b). In overall models, we contrast coded political ideology (-1=Democrat, 1= Republican) and added four interaction terms, one for each of the four main predictors with political ideology. In Democrat (Republican) models we recoded political ideology such that 1= Republican and 0= Democrat (1= Democrat, 0= Republican) to estimate simple slopes for each main effect among Democrats (Republicans).

Studies 2a and 2b

Participants. For Study 2, we recruited two samples of American adults (n_{2a}= 1,616; n_{2b}= 1,629) using Cloud Research's Connect platform (see Table S1 for all sample demographics). As in Study 1, participants were automatically excluded in the data collection phase if they failed at least one of two attention checks ("Please choose Somewhat Disagree" and "Please write the number of letters that appear in the word Monday"; final n_{2a}= 1,406; n_{2b}= 1,413). Both Study 2a and Study 2b were approximately evenly split between Democrats (n_{2a}= 717; n_{2b}= 718) and Republicans (n_{2a}= 689; n_{2b}= 695).

Procedure. As in Study 1a, participants voted on 30 random policies drawn from the larger set of 440 policies under a MMCAR design. The policy voting procedure was identical to Study 1a, however, in Study 2a, prior to voting, participants were informed that they would be randomly assigned to one of three groups following the conclusion of the study: a "rich" group, a "poor" group, or a "middle" group.

Participants learned that their group assignment would affect the size of their bonus payment, and that the "rich" group would start with 1,000 tokens, the "middle" group with 250 tokens, and the "poor" group with 100 tokens. Participants were informed that every 10 tokens corresponded to $0.01 for their eventual bonus payment. Finally, participants were told that the policy receiving the most Yes votes would dictate the size of bonus payments for the "rich" and "poor" groups (the "middle" group would receive 250 tokens regardless– a $0.25 bonus payment). For example, if the top voted policy was that the "poor" group would receive a 50% increase in tokens and the "rich" group would receive a 10% increase in tokens, those assigned to the "rich" group would receive 1,100 tokens (a $1.10 bonus payment), while those assigned to the "poor" group would receive 150 tokens (a $0.15 bonus payment). Participants were held under a veil of ignorance and did not learn their group assignment until after they finished voting (see SI Section 6 for the full text participants saw).

In Study 2b, participants read about the design of Study 2a and were asked to indicate how the average member of the opposing political party voted ("Do you think the average [Democratic/Republican] participant in our dataset voted for this policy?").

After voting on 30 policies, participants were asked the same four questions as in Study 1 intended to gauge their political ideology. First, they reported how Liberal (1= Very) or Conservative (7= Very) they are (a) when it comes to politics (M_{2a}= 3.89, sd= 2.01; M_{2b}= 3.75, sd= 1.97), (b) on social issues (M_{2a}= 3.70, sd= 2.08, M_{2b}= 3.58, sd= 2.04), and (c) on economic issues (M_{2a}= 4.05, sd= 2.02; M_{2b}= 3.98, sd= 2.00). Lastly, participants indicated whether they most closely identify as a Democrat (n_{2a}= 694, n_{2b}= 683), an Independent (n_{2a}= 58, n_{2b}= 67), a Republican (n_{2a}= 657, n_{2b}= 659), or as some other party (n_{2a}= 6, n_{2b}= 4). As in Study 1, if a participant chose Independent or Other, we asked, "if you had to choose one, today, which do you more closely identify with" and gave participants the options Democrat (n_{2a}= 26, n_{2b}= 35) or Republican (n_{2a}= 38, n_{2b}= 36).

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Table 1. Beta weights (95% CI) for Policy Support (Study 1a and 2a) and Cross-Partisan Predictions (Study 1b and 2b)

	Study 1a			Study 1b	
	Overall	Democrats	Republicans	Reps Predicting Dems	Dems Predicting Reps
Change to the Poor	1.338*** (1.368, 1.407)	1.462*** (1.383, 1.542)	1.249*** (1.167, 1.332)	.589*** (.536, .642)	.187*** (.126, .249)
Change to the Rich	.078* (.007, .148)	-.212*** (-.294, -.130)	.383*** (.299, .466)	.005 (-.049, .060)	1.041*** (.986, 1.096)
Change to Inequality	-.640*** (-.709, -.571)	-.734*** (-.812, -.656)	-.504*** (-.587, -.420)	-.375*** (-.428, -.322)	.554*** (.495, .613)
Change to Efficiency	.229*** (.160, .298)	.242*** (.160, .325)	.237*** (.157, .317)	.039 (-.015, .093)	.218*** (.160, .275)

	Study 2a			Study 2b	
	Overall	Democrats	Republicans	Reps Predicting Dems	Dems Predicting Reps
Change to the Poor	1.410*** (1.346, 1.476)	1.580*** (1.503, 1.656)	1.244*** (1.169, 1.319)	.989*** (.929, 1.409)	.567*** (.491, .644)
Change to the Rich	.695*** (.622, .768)	.641*** (.546, .736)	.743*** (.656, .830)	.207*** (.141, .274)	1.119*** (1.058, 1.179)
Change to Inequality	-.662*** (-.735, -.588)	-.749*** (-.843, -.655)	-.581*** (-.669, -.492)	-.589*** (-.653, -.526)	.623*** (.548, .698)
Change to Efficiency	.430*** (.367, .492)	.414*** (.338, .490)	.457*** (.385, .529)	.148*** (.086, .210)	.452*** (.391, .513)

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Outcome variable is policy support (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Predictors are coded as -1 (decrease), 0 (no change), and 1 (increase).