

The Foundations of U.S. Public Opinion About Campaign Finance in the Post-*Citizens United* Era

Paul R. Brewer, Jennifer L. Lambe, and Philip Edward Jones

ABSTRACT

Those seeking to influence campaign finance policy often invoke public opinion to support their legal and policy arguments. Thus, an understanding of the factors that explain citizens' views about the topic can help illuminate the political landscape surrounding it. This study examines the foundations of public opinion about campaign finance issues that emerged in the wake of the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United*. An analysis of original data from a national survey found that political predispositions—including party identification, political ideology, external political efficacy, trust in corporations, and political interest/attention—predicted individuals' opinions, as did use of the Fox News cable channel and satirical television news programs. The results speak to how a range of actors may shape and capitalize on the nature of public opinion here.

Keywords: *Citizens United*, campaign finance, public opinion, super PACs, disclosure, spending limits

THE U.S. SUPREME COURT'S 2010 RULING in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*¹ dramatically altered the financing of political campaigns in the United States. The decision allowed for the formation of "super PACs" (political action committees) that can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money so long as they do not coordinate with candidates' campaign committees. It built on two premises: that campaign spending is a form of free speech and that associations, including corporations, possess the same constitutional rights to speech as individuals. In the wake of the decision, super PACs spent more than \$62 million during the 2010 election cycle and almost ten times that during the 2012 cycle (OpenSecrets.org 2014). Furthermore, campaign spending shifted increasingly from

the control of political parties or candidates to nonprofit organizations that are not required to identify their donors. Additional rulings in *SpeechNOW v. Federal Election Commission*² and *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*³ removed caps on the amounts that individual donors can contribute in an election cycle.

These developments prompted considerable political debate (Blass, Roberts, and Shaw 2012; Kingser and Schmidt 2012), with reactions among political leaders polarized along party and ideology. Democratic leaders, including President Barack Obama, criticized the rulings, as did many liberal organizations; some specifically attacked the ideas that campaign spending is speech and that corporations have the same rights to speech as people. Democratic leaders also repeatedly but unsuccessfully introduced legislation, such as the DISCLOSE Act, to increase transparency in political contributions.

Paul R. Brewer is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware. Jennifer L. Lambe is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Delaware. Philip Edward Jones is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Delaware.

¹130 S. Ct. 876 (2010).

²599 F.3d 686 (D.C. Cir. 2010).

³134 S. Ct. 1434 (2014).

In contrast, many Republican and conservative leaders—including 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney—praised the decisions as victories for freedom of speech. Republican lawmakers also generally opposed reforms such as the DISCLOSE Act. The changes in campaign finance following *Citizens United* received extensive coverage in the news media, particularly in regard to expenditures by corporations and wealthy individuals.⁴ Another form of media response came from Stephen Colbert, host of the television program *The Colbert Report*, who formed his own super PAC, raised more than a million dollars for it, and used it to satirize the *Citizens United* ruling and its consequences.

Polling conducted in the wake of the ruling suggested that U.S. citizens who were aware of the topic tended to hold negative views toward the decision and the super PACs to which it gave rise. A February 2010 *Washington Post*/ABC poll found that 80 percent of respondents opposed the ruling (Eggen 2010). Among respondents in a January 2012 Pew Research Center (2010b) poll who had heard of the ruling, 65 percent viewed it as having a negative effect on the presidential campaign whereas only 16 percent viewed it as having a positive effect. Another *Washington Post*/ABC poll, conducted in March 2012, found that 69 percent of respondents thought it should be illegal to operate super PACs that “can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money on behalf of candidates they support” (Cillizza and Blake 2012).

To date, however, relatively little research has examined what explains citizens’ opinions about the issues raised by the *Citizens United* ruling and subsequent developments. Understanding such opinions is crucial for anyone seeking to influence policy in this domain, given the role that public opinion can play in shaping public debate—and, ultimately, public policy (see, e.g., Burstein 2003) as well as court decisions (e.g., Mishler and Sheehan 1993). Because the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed the premises at the core of *Citizens United*, any dramatic overhaul of the campaign finance system would require a constitutional amendment and therefore a great deal of public will. Even legislative measures to increase transparency may need strong public support to overcome the hesitancy of officials who have been elected under the current system.

Indeed, a wide range of actors have cited public opinion as a basis for policy or legal arguments in

the context of campaign finance. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Buckley v. Valeo*⁵ rested in part on the premise that avoiding the perception of quid pro quo corruption in the political process is critical to preserving public confidence in government (a premise that public opinion research does not necessarily support; see Blass, Roberts, and Shaw 2012; Primo and Milyo 2006; Persily and Lammie 2004). Since then, proponents of campaign finance reform have frequently invoked public opinion to bolster their positions—as U.S. Senators Sheldon Whitehouse and John McCain did in their amicus brief in *American Tradition Partnership, Inc. v. Bullock*,⁶ citing the aforementioned Pew survey. Furthermore, the prominent role of campaign finance issues in recent election campaigns suggests that politicians see such issues—and public opinion about them—as politically important. As a case in point, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton pledged in her July 28, 2016 nomination acceptance speech, “to appoint Supreme Court justices who will get money out of politics and expand voting rights, not restrict them, and ... pass a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*.” More broadly, public opinion may help define the political landscape for future actions on campaign law. Observing the public backlash against the *Citizens United* decision, Hasen (2011, 619) argues that “the Court’s campaign finance jurisprudence has been conducted on a background of ideological struggle, bounded at its extremes by public opinion.”

With this in mind, we use original survey data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents to examine the nature and foundations of public opinion about (1) *Citizens United* and super PACs; (2) arguments that campaign spending is free speech and that corporations have the same rights as individuals; (3) limits on spending by individuals and corporations on behalf of candidates; and (4) requirements that individuals and corporations report such

⁴For example, a Lexis-Nexis search for “Citizens United” and “corporations” across ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC in the six months preceding the study yielded 151 stories (in contrast, a search for “Citizens United” and “labor unions” yielded only 25).

⁵424 U.S. 1 (1976).

⁶Brief of United States Senators Sheldon Whitehouse and John McCain as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Respondents, *American Tradition Partnership v. Bullock*, 132 S. Ct. 2490 (2012) (no. 11-1179).

spending. The results point to how political predispositions (including party identification, political ideology, external political efficacy, trust in corporations, and political interest/attention) and media use (particularly of ideologically driven cable television news and political satire programming) may shape citizens' campaign finance opinions. As such, they shed new light on the foundations of public opinion in the post-*Citizens United* era and, thus, carry wider potential implications for the political context surrounding law and policymaking on campaign finance issues.

PREDISPOSITIONS, MEDIA USE, AND PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT CAMPAIGN FINANCE POLICY

This study's theoretical argument begins with the premise that citizens tend to form opinions about specific issues—such as campaign finance policy—on the basis of their more fundamental political predispositions. These political predispositions may include a range of core values, such as beliefs about freedom, limited government, individualism, capitalism, and equality of opportunity (Feldman 1988; McClosky and Zaller 1984); party identification and political ideology in terms of liberalism versus conservatism (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992); and broad orientations toward the political system such as trust in government and political efficacy (Easton and Dennis 1967; Miller 1974; Hetherington and Globetti 2002). Here we focus on a subset of such predispositions (though others are worthy of future study, as well).

First, we examine the extent to which public opinion about campaign finance issues is polarized along partisanship and ideology. The policymaking context for such issues is strongly divided along political lines, which creates substantial obstacles to any new legislation on the topic (let alone a constitutional amendment such as would be required to overturn the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions). The public debate among elites regarding campaign finance is similarly polarized, with Democratic and liberal leaders, on the one hand, and Republican and conservative leaders, on the other, taking contrasting stances on the subject. Given that members of the public tend to follow signals from partisan and ideological elites who share their views (Levendusky 2010; Zaller 1992), the polarization in these signals

about campaign finance policy may be reflected in citizens' opinions (see Bowler and Donovan 2016). For example, one would expect Republicans and conservatives to hold more favorable opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs than Democrats and liberals, respectively. Similarly, Republicans and conservatives may be more likely to agree that campaign spending is free speech and that corporations have the same rights as individuals, as well as to express greater opposition to limits on and disclosure requirements for spending by individuals and corporations. Such polarization could compound the political barriers to future policymaking on campaign finance.

We also explore the degree to which public opinion about campaign finance issues in the wake of *Citizens United* reflects broader attitudes about the political system. Debates about such issues have often emphasized concerns about the potential corrupting influence of campaign contributions—including from corporations—on the integrity of government and the responsiveness of elected officials to the public (see, e.g., Primo and Milyo 2006). Research has yielded little evidence for the assumption that campaign finance policy itself shapes trust in government and external political efficacy (i.e., belief that government is responsive to citizens) among the public (Persily and Lammie 2004; Primo and Milyo 2006). However, citizens may still follow the connections provided by public debate in using these predispositions as information shortcuts for evaluating campaign finance issues.

Specifically, Grant and Rudolph (2004; see also Rudolph 2005) argue that external political efficacy and trust in government may foster support for deregulatory campaign finance reform and opposition to regulatory campaign finance reform. Regarding external political efficacy, they observe that “reform advocates contend that the present campaign finance system obstructs government responsiveness by placing the interests of lobbyists, PACs, and large contributors over those of the average citizen” (Grant and Rudolph 2004, 82). Regarding political trust, they argue that “people who trust government to do what is right may be less fearful that candidates will engage in disreputable fundraising practices” (Grant and Rudolph 2004, 82). In the case at hand, *Citizens United* is a deregulatory court decision—one that opponents have framed as a threat to government accountability and responsiveness (e.g., Udall 2010). Thus, external political efficacy and

trust in government may be associated with more favorable opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs, as well as agreement with the associated arguments that campaign spending is speech and that corporations have the same rights as individuals. Meanwhile, new spending limits and disclosure requirements would constitute regulatory reform, which supporters have framed as promoting the integrity and responsiveness of elected officials (sometimes pointing to the majority opinion's argument in *Citizens United* that "prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters"; see Briffault 2011). Accordingly, external political efficacy and trust in government may predict opposition to limits on and disclosure requirements for spending by individuals and corporations.

Attitudes toward groups potentially affected by campaign finance policies may serve as additional shortcuts for evaluating such policies, particularly when elite discourse frames the policies in terms of group interests (see Grant and Rudolph 2004). Given that the public debate following the *Citizens United* decision often framed it in connection to corporations as a group (see Kingser and Schmidt 2012), one might expect trust in corporations to be associated with more favorable opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs. Likewise, such trust could help explain agreement that campaign spending is speech and that corporations have the same rights as individuals, along with opposition to limits on and disclosure requirements for spending by individuals and (particularly) corporations.

Citizens' opinions about campaign finance issues could reflect their levels of political interest and attention, as well. Grant and Rudolph (2004) found that political sophistication was negatively related to satisfaction with the existing campaign finance system but did not predict support for reforms. Relatedly, Blass et al. (2012) found that campaign finance knowledge was not related to support for campaign finance reform shortly before the *Citizens United* decision. However, the increased flow of information to the public about campaign finance following the *Citizens United* ruling raises the prospect that political interest and attention could be related to opinions about campaign finance during this period, given that politically interested and attentive citizens should be particularly likely to receive information about such issues from public debate.

Looking beyond political predispositions, previous research shows that news consumption was linked to greater support for campaign finance reform before the *Citizens United* decision (Blass et al. 2012). Furthermore, the substantial level of news media coverage devoted to campaign finance issues following *Citizens United*, in conjunction with the increasingly polarized and fragmented nature of the U.S. media landscape, suggests that specific news outlets may have framed these issues in ways that influenced opinions among citizens who used them. In regard to the volume of news coverage, a search of transcripts in the Lexis-Nexis database for "Citizens United" or "super PACs" from December 1, 2011, to May 31, 2012 (the half-year period before the collection of the present study's data), yielded 272 stories on the three major broadcast networks (125 on NBC, 99 on CBS, and 48 on ABC) along with 1,619 stories on the three major cable news networks (899 on CNN, 376 on MSNBC, and 344 on Fox News).

In regard to news framing, research suggests that the Fox News cable network typically frames politics from a conservative perspective whereas MSNBC tends to do so from a liberal perspective (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Feldman et al. 2012; Weaver and Scacco 2013). The public opinion literature indicates that consumption of such ideologically driven cable television news can shape opinions about political topics (Cappella and Jamieson 2008; Feldman et al. 2012; Morris 2005; Stroud 2011). Moreover, one study found that Fox News use predicted knowledge about super PACs and perceptions about the role of money in politics (Hardy et al. 2014), suggesting the potential for this form of media use to shape campaign finance opinions. Accordingly, one might expect links between Fox News viewing and opinions about campaign issues following the *Citizens United* decision. The same study failed to uncover a significant relationship between MSNBC use and knowledge about super PACs or perceptions about the role of money in politics (Hardy et al. 2014). Nor did it find consistent evidence that other forms of media use explained either of these variables. Thus, it is less clear that other forms of news media use should explain campaign finance opinions.

A growing body of literature indicates that satirical television news frequently addresses policy issues (Brewer and Marquardt 2007) and can also influence audience members (Baumgartner and Morris 2006,

2008; Cao 2010; Cao and Brewer 2008; Morris 2009; Tsftati et al. 2009; Xenos and Becker 2009; Young and Hoffman 2012). Undoubtedly the most prominent satirical treatment of campaign finance issues in the wake of *Citizens United* was *The Colbert Report* host Stephen Colbert's own super PAC (named Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow). As he explained in numerous segments on his program, this was a real 501(c)(4) organization, created with the assistance of his attorney, former Federal Election Commission (FEC) chairman Trevor Potter. Indeed, Potter—a vocal critic of the post-*Citizens United* campaign finance system—visited Colbert's program on multiple occasions to discuss the implications of campaign finance law.

Looking at this case, LaMarre (2013; see also Brewer et al. 2013) found that exposure to Stephen Colbert's parody of super PACs on his program increased knowledge about super PACs and *Citizens United* as well as support for campaign finance reform. Moreover, Hardy et al. (2014) found that *The Colbert Report* use predicted knowledge about super PACs and perceptions about the role of money in politics. The present study extends this research by testing whether use of *The Colbert Report* and its companion program, *The Daily Show* (which sometimes included "crossover" coverage of Colbert's super PAC), is related to opinions about campaign finance issues following *Citizens United*.

In short, our theoretical framework proposes that a range of political predispositions and forms of media use may drive Americans' opinions about campaign finance. We assume that citizens' political belief systems tend to be hierarchical, with broad predispositions influencing more specific opinions (see, e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). Similarly, we assume that media use tends to shape specific policy opinions rather than the other way around. However, our analysis should be interpreted with caution given that alternative causal relationships, including reciprocal causality from policy opinions to predispositions or media use, are possible here.

METHOD

To assess Americans' opinions about campaign finance issues in the wake of the *Citizens United* decision and examine what factors may explain these opinions, we conducted a nationally representative

telephone survey of 906 adults living in the continental United States. The survey was administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates in May–June, 2012, using a dual sampling frame consisting of both landline ($n=551$) and cell phone ($n=355$) respondents. The response rate was 12.5 percent (calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's RR4). This is low in historical perspective but comparable to the typical response rate (9%) for 2012 surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center. The demographic composition of the sample was broadly similar to that of the U.S. population.⁷ Furthermore, the results for some of our key measures of public opinion about campaign finance issues dovetail with findings from other polls (see below).

The survey included a series of questions measuring opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs; opinions about arguments that campaign spending is free speech and that corporations have the same rights as individuals; support for limits on spending by individuals and corporations on behalf of candidates; and support for requirements that individuals and corporations report such spending. In the following section, we describe responses to these questions. We then use them as dependent variables in analyzing what explains opinion here. The measures for our independent variables were as follows, with all key variables transformed to range from 0 (the minimum) to 1 (the maximum):

Predispositions: Party identification was measured using standard branching-format items yielding a seven-category scale (where 0=strong Democrat and 1=strong Republican; $M=.48$; $SD=.35$). Political ideology was measured on a five-category scale (coded so that 0=extremely liberal and 1=extremely conservative; $M=.55$;

⁷The proportion of sample respondents who were women (53%) was the same as the population proportion. The proportions of respondents who identified as African American and Hispanic were 10% (vs. 12% of the population) and 9% (12%), respectively. Sample composition for education was as follows (population values in parentheses): less than high school, 5% (10%); high school graduate, 26% (31%); some college, 27% (29%); college degree or higher, 42% (30%). The age distribution was as follows: 18–24 years old, 11% (13%); 25–35, 13% (17%); 35–44, 14% (17%); 45–54, 16% (19%); 55–64, 20% (16%); 65+, 28% (18%). Means for the dependent variables differed little depending on whether the data were weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S. population. The analysis presented here used unweighted data but controlled for standard demographic factors.

$SD = .28$). External political efficacy was measured through a standard four-category item (reverse-coded so that 0 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree) capturing agreement with the statement, “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think” ($M = .33$; $SD = .34$). Trust in government ($M = .38$; $SD = .19$) and trust in corporations ($M = .37$; $SD = .17$) were each measured using four-category items asking “How much of the time can you trust [the government in Washington/corporations] to do what is right?” (0 = never; 1 = just about always). Political interest/attention was captured through an index ($M = .78$; $SD = .25$) created by averaging across measures of how interested in politics and public affairs respondents were and how much attention they paid to politics and public affairs ($r = .74$, $p \leq .01$); for each item, options ranged from not at all (coded as 0) to very (coded as 1).

Media Use: A series of items measured self-reported frequency of use for a variety of media, with options ranging on four-category scales from never (coded as 0) to regularly (coded as 1). The sources included a daily newspaper ($M = .67$; $SD = .36$); national network evening news programs ($M = .66$; $SD = .35$); Fox News Channel ($M = .51$; $SD = .38$); CNN ($M = .51$; $SD = .35$); MSNBC ($M = .44$; $SD = .36$); *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* ($M = .27$; $SD = .34$); *The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert* ($M = .26$; $SD = .32$); and news online ($M = .63$; $SD = .39$). The measures for *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* were averaged to create an index ($M = .26$; $SD = .30$; $r = .69$, $p \leq .01$) capturing use of political satire programs.

Demographics: The analysis included gender (1 = female, 53%), self-identification as African American (1 = yes, 10%), self-identification as Hispanic (1 = yes, 8%), age (median = 53 years), education (as captured by an eight-category measure; $M = .56$; $SD = .27$), and income (as captured by a nine-category measure; $M = .52$; $SD = .30$) as controls.

To test our theoretical arguments about what explains public opinion about campaign finance issues, we estimated a series of structural equation models. This approach allowed us to analyze the relationships, or paths, among all of the variables of interest based on the covariances among them (Bollen 1989). Specifically, we used diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS) to estimate our models, a technique that is appropriate for models—such as

ours—in which key variables are ordinal (e.g., strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree) rather than continuous (e.g., 1 to 10; see Jöreskog 1990). Other statistical approaches, such as estimating ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models or ordinal logistic regression models for each dependent variable, yielded substantively similar results.

One challenge in using structural equation modeling involves making identification decisions by specifying paths among the variables in the model. Such decisions may obscure plausible alternative causal paths. With this in mind, we estimated a series of alternative models that added or subtracted paths. These reveal largely similar results across models (see the Appendix). Still, it is important to note that our models do not account for potential reciprocal relationships among the key variables (to do so would require panel survey data, rather than the cross-sectional survey data we have here). Thus, we emphasize that our results reflect specific assumptions about the underlying causal relationships. The results presented below are based on a model that included paths from political predispositions, demographics, and media use to each of the opinion variables ($N = 651$). Results were substantively similar (with N s ranging from 699 to 729) when models were estimated separately for each opinion variable.⁸

WHAT OPINIONS DID AMERICANS HOLD FOLLOWING *CITIZENS UNITED*?

Respondents were asked three questions about the *Citizens United* decision and super PACs. The first asked how strongly they favored or opposed “a 2010 Supreme Court decision allowing corporations and individuals to spend as much as they want on political ads, as long as they don’t coordinate with the campaigns or candidates.” Response options ranged on a five-category scale from strongly oppose (coded as 0) to strongly favor (coded as 1). More respondents opposed the decision than supported it ($M = .39$; $SD = .25$). The second asked whether they thought the decision’s “effect on the

⁸The differing N s reflect missing values on the dependent variables. Of the independent variables, the one with the greatest number of missing values was income (valid $N = 823$); for all other independent variables, valid $N \geq 877$.

campaign is positive or negative,” with options ranging on a three-category scale (where 0=negative effect, .5=no effect/mixed effect, and 1=positive effect). More respondents saw a negative effect than a positive one ($M=.36$; $SD=.29$). The third, which was prefaced by the statement that “organizations known as super PACs can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money on behalf of candidates,” asked respondents on a five-category scale how strongly they favored or opposed “allowing these super PACs to operate this way.” Here, opposition substantially outweighed support ($M=.31$; $SD=.28$). Given that the three measures were strongly correlated with one another, the analysis focused on an index created by averaging across them ($\alpha=.77$). For each item, opinions tended to be more negative than positive; thus, scores on the index tended to fall below the midpoint as well (see Figure 1a; $M=.35$; $SD=.22$). The findings here parallel other survey results showing largely negative public opinion toward *Citizens United* and super PACs (Pew Research Center 2012b).

A single item asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

“Campaign spending is a form of free speech.” Responses ranged on a four-category scale from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (1) with a majority of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing (see Figure 1b; $M=.55$; $SD=.35$). A similar item asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Because corporations are made up of individuals, they have the same constitutional rights as people.” For this item, slightly more respondents disagreed than agreed (see Figure 1c; $M=.45$; $SD=.37$). The results for the “free speech” question parallel findings from Gallup polling conducted shortly before the *Citizens United* decision (Saad 2010).

A series of four items (with four-category scales reverse coded so that 0=strongly favor; 1=strongly oppose) asked respondents how much they favored or opposed, “Limiting how much money wealthy individuals can spend on behalf of candidates they support” ($M=.55$; $SD=.34$), “limiting how much money corporations can spend on behalf of candidates they support” ($M=.63$; $SD=.34$), “requiring wealthy individuals to publicly report how much money they spend on behalf of candidates they

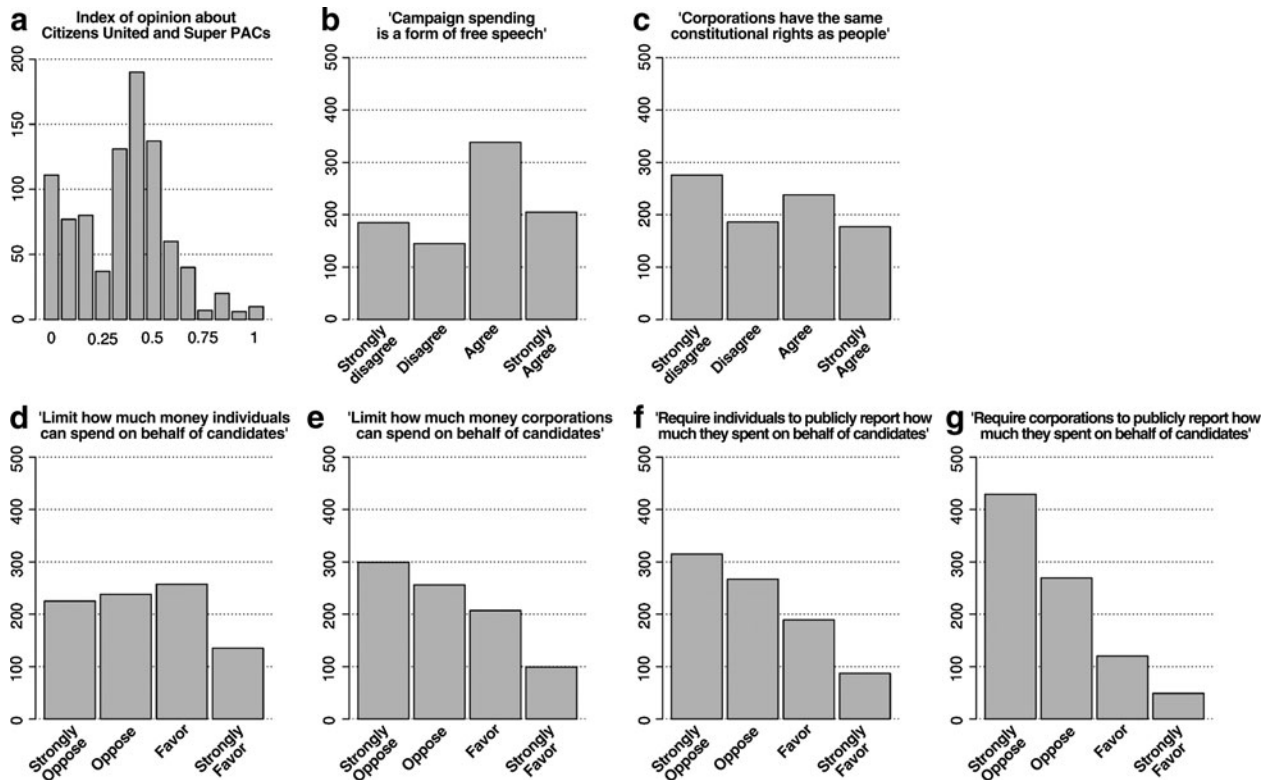


FIG. 1. Frequency distributions for opinion variables (a–g).

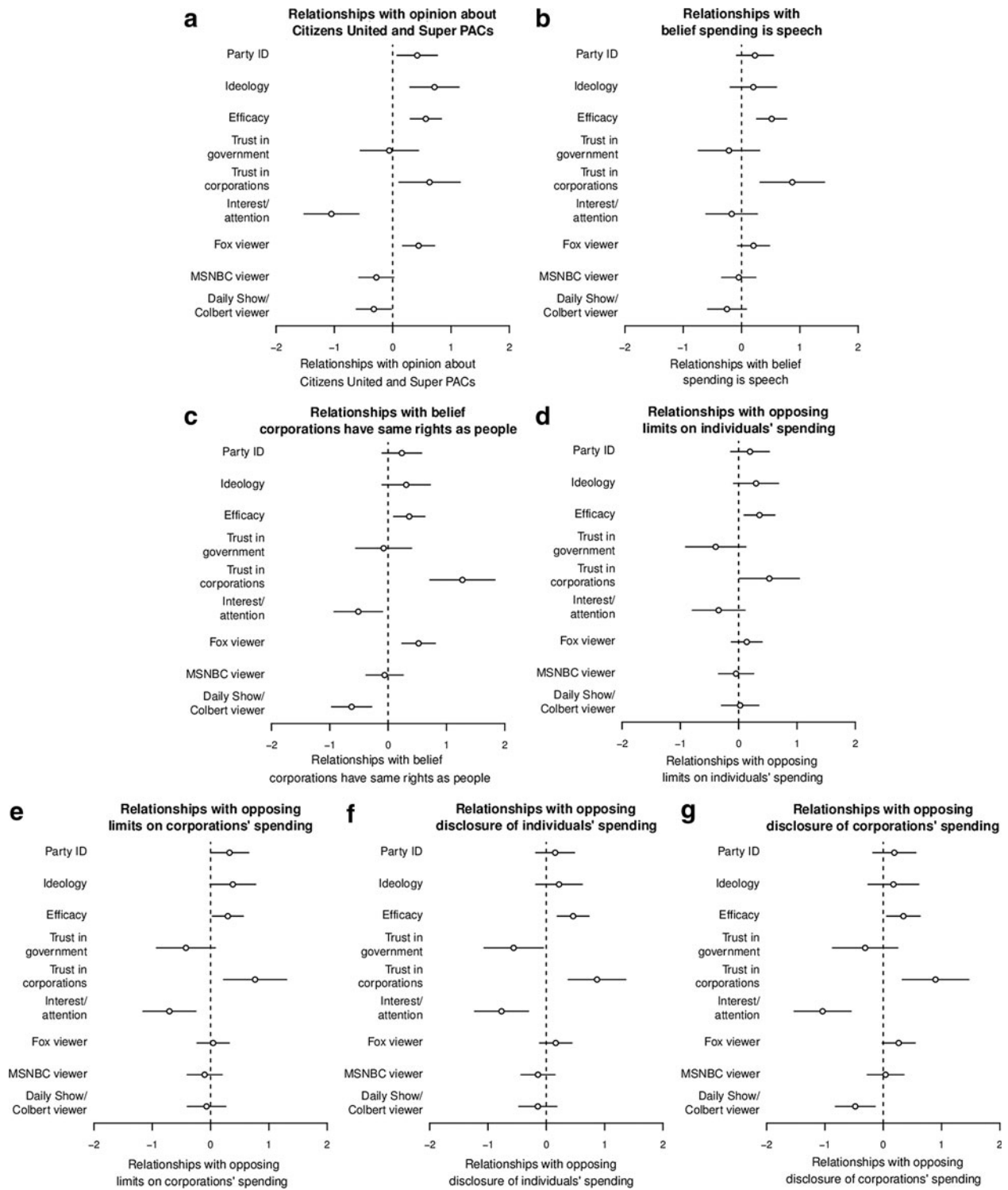


FIG. 2. Relationships between key independent variables and campaign finance opinions (bullets are coefficient estimates; lines are 95% confidence intervals) (a–g).

support” ($M = .65$; $SD = .33$), and “requiring corporations to publicly report how much money they spend on behalf of candidates they support” ($M = .75$; $SD = .30$). For each item, a majority of respondents expressed support, with sizable majori-

ties for the second and third items and an even larger majority for the fourth (see Figures 1d–1g). The results for the public reporting items suggest that proposed legislation along the lines of the DISCLOSE Act enjoys broad popular support.

WHAT EXPLAINED AMERICANS' OPINIONS FOLLOWING *CITIZENS UNITED*?

Our structural equation model captured the relationships between the key independent variables and opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs (Figure 2a), campaign spending as free speech and the rights of corporations (Figures 2b and 2c), limits on individual and corporation spending (Figures 2d and 2e), and disclosure requirements for individuals and corporations (Figures 2f and 2g). First, consider the results for the political predispositions. Compared to Democrats and liberals, Republicans and conservatives held more favorable opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .05$ for party identification; $p \leq .01$ for ideology). In addition, Republicans expressed greater opposition to limits on spending by corporations ($p \leq .05$). These results suggest that beneath the overall negative tilt of opinion toward *Citizens United* and super PACs, public opinion on these topics is polarized in ways that reflect the divided political debate over them (Levendusky 2010; Zaller 1992).

External political efficacy was significantly related to all seven opinion variables in the expected directions. It was positively related to favorability toward *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .01$), belief that campaign spending is speech ($p \leq .01$), belief that corporations have the same rights as people ($p \leq .01$), opposition to spending limits for both individuals ($p \leq .01$) and corporations ($p \leq .05$), and opposition to reporting requirements for both individuals ($p \leq .01$) and corporations ($p \leq .05$). These results support the idea that external political efficacy is linked to support for deregulatory campaign finance reform and opposition to regulatory campaign finance reform (Grant and Rudolph 2004; Rudolph 2005), a pattern that furthermore resonates with how the debate following the *Citizens United* decision framed its implications for the responsiveness of elected officials. In contrast to efficacy, trust in government was significantly related to only one of the opinion variables, opposition to an individual reporting requirement ($p \leq .01$), and the negative relationship here contradicted expectations. Put simply, such trust does not appear to matter for public opinion about campaign finance reform.

Trust in corporations was related to all seven opinion variables. It was positively related to favorability toward *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .05$), belief that campaign spending is speech ($p \leq .01$), and

belief that corporations have the same rights as people ($p \leq .01$). Such trust was also positively associated with opposition to limiting spending for both individuals ($p \leq .05$) and corporations ($p \leq .01$), as well as with opposition to reporting requirements for both individuals ($p \leq .01$) and corporations ($p \leq .01$). These relationships dovetail with the ways in which public debate framed corporations as central to campaign finance policy following the *Citizens United* decision.

Those who followed politics the closest liked the *Citizens United* decision the least and favored several new regulatory reforms the most. Political interest/attention was negatively related to favorability toward *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .01$), belief that corporations have the same rights as people ($p \leq .05$), opposition to limiting spending by corporations ($p \leq .01$), and opposition to requiring individuals and corporations to report spending ($p \leq .01$ for each). The contrast here to pre-*Citizens United* findings for political sophistication (Grant and Rudolph 2005) and knowledge (Blass et al. 2012) could reflect differences in measures but could also reflect the effects of the public debate following the decision.

Among the media variables, two stood out for their relationships with public opinion: Fox News use and political satire use. As expected given Fox News' conservative slant on issues, viewing this network was positively related to favorability toward *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .01$) and belief that corporations have the same rights as people ($p \leq .01$)—even after controlling for key factors (such as partisanship, ideology, and demographics) that shape its viewership. On the other hand, MSNBC use was not significantly related to any of the opinion variables. Given that these two ideologically driven cable news networks devoted roughly similar amounts of coverage to the *Citizens United* ruling, the contrast may reflect patterns in how they framed the subject and/or differences in how audience members processed information from them. No other form of traditional media use was related to any of the opinion variables, with one exception: network evening news use was negatively associated with opposition to requiring individuals to report spending ($p \leq .01$). Finally, use of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* was negatively related to favorability toward *Citizens United* and super PACs ($p \leq .01$), belief that corporations have the same rights as people ($p \leq .01$), and opposition to requiring corporations to report spending

($p \leq .01$). These findings suggest that exposure to satire such as Colbert's can help explain opinions about *Citizens United* and super PACs.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that a number of political predispositions and media use forms were associated with opinions about the campaign finance issues that emerged in the wake of the *Citizens United* ruling. As such, they help establish the contours of the political landscape surrounding future policy-making and legal decisions surrounding the topic. Furthermore, they suggest ways in which key actors, from party leaders to satirical television show hosts, could both shape and make use of public opinion in the context of campaign finance policy.

To begin with, the finding that partisanship and political ideology were related to views about several of the topics under study suggests that citizens followed cues from elites on opposing sides of the political spectrum, so that public opinion reflected the polarized signals from these elites. Given this split, calls for measures such as a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United* are likely to resonate with many Democrats and liberals among the public but fewer Republicans and conservatives. Furthermore, such polarization could extend to any other aspect of campaign finance policy that becomes the focal point for future partisan and ideological clashes among political leaders.

The results also yield new evidence that citizens use their generalized orientations toward the political system—particularly external political efficacy—to evaluate campaign finance policy. Thus, concerns about the responsiveness of elected officials may carry consequences for campaign finance issues through their impact on public opinion, despite the absence of any effect of campaign finance policy itself on external political efficacy (Persily and Lammie 2004; Primo and Milyo 2006).

Furthermore, the results are consistent with the argument that differences in framing across outlets within a fragmented media landscape can carry implications for public opinion about campaign finance. On the one hand, Fox News viewership was linked to support for *Citizens United* and super PACs; on the other, satirical news program use was linked to opposition. These findings suggest that partisan and satirical media outlets are potential tools for shaping public opinion on campaign

finance—just as *The Colbert Report* host Colbert and his ally, former FEC chairman Trevor Potter, intended. Nor has this potential ended with Colbert's own super PAC. For example, an April 3, 2016, segment of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* that discussed concerns about congressional campaign fundraising and proposed legislation to address these concerns had received almost five million views on YouTube at time of writing.

In considering these conclusions, it is important to note the limitations of the study. Most obviously, the use of cross-sectional data limits causal inferences regarding the effects of predispositions and media use on opinions. For example, the relationships between media use and opinion do not necessarily demonstrate that the former influenced the latter. As Hardy et al. (2014) argue, however, it seems more plausible that media consumption would shape individuals' opinions about campaign finance issues than vice versa; in addition, experimental evidence corroborates the potential for media messages about campaign finance to shape public opinion (Brewer et al. 2013). As is the case with many studies of public opinion, the analyses also relied on single-item indicators for a number of key variables, including political predispositions and self-reported media use. However, the study relied on widely used measures for these variables: the trust and efficacy measures were drawn from previous research (e.g., Grant and Rudolph 2004), as were those for media use (e.g., Morris 2005; Cao 2010).

Keeping in mind these limitations, the present study's findings help identify the foundations of public opinion about a set of issues with major implications for the role of money in the conduct of U.S. election campaigns. As such, they provide starting points for exploring the potential consequences of public opinion for campaign finance policy debates as well as for developing approaches to informing or influencing citizens' opinions on the subject. Given that this topic appears likely to remain on the public agenda for the foreseeable future, a host of actors on both sides of the debate will undoubtedly seek to sway, invoke, and capitalize on such opinions.

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Address correspondence to:

Paul R. Brewer

Department of Communication

University of Delaware

Pearson Hall 241

Newark, DE 19176

E-mail: prbrewer@udel.edu

APPENDIX: ALTERNATIVE MODELS

We used DWLS to estimate a series of structural equation models testing alternative specification assumptions about the causal relationships among the variables. The model presented in the text included paths from the political predispositions, media use forms, and demographics to each opinion variable (paths A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I in Figure A1). A second model subtracted the paths from the media use forms to the opinion variables (paths G, H, and I). This model produced results similar to those from the model in the text, with a few new significant paths (all in the expected directions): from party identification to beliefs that campaign spending is free speech and that corporations have the same rights as people; and from ideology to belief that corporations have the same rights as people, support for limits on spending by corporations, and support for disclosure requirements for corporations. In addition, two paths fell from significance: the ones from external efficacy to beliefs that corporations have the same rights as people and to support for disclosure requirements for corporations.

A third model subtracted the paths from the demographics to the opinion variables (paths D, E, and F). This model also produced results similar to those from the model in the text, with some new significant paths (all in the expected directions): from party identification to beliefs that campaign spending is

free speech and that corporations have the same rights as people; from ideology to belief that corporations have the same rights as people, support for limits on spending by individuals and corporations, and support for disclosure requirements for corporations; and from political interest/attention to belief that campaign spending is free speech and support for limits on spending by individuals. In addition, several paths fell from significance: from external efficacy to beliefs that corporations have the same rights as people and to support for disclosure requirements for corporations; from party identification to support for limits on spending by corporations; and from trust in government to support for disclosure requirements for individuals.

A fourth model was identical to the model in the text except that it added paths from the predispositions and demographics to the media use forms (paths J and K) along with indirect effects from the predispositions and demographics to the opinion variables through the media use forms (thereby allowing for potential indirect effects through selective media exposure; see Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2008). Looking at the total (direct plus indirect) effects from this model, the results were similar to those from the model in the text with a few new significant paths (all in the expected directions): from party identification to beliefs that campaign spending is free speech and that corporations have the same rights as people; and from ideology to belief that corporations have

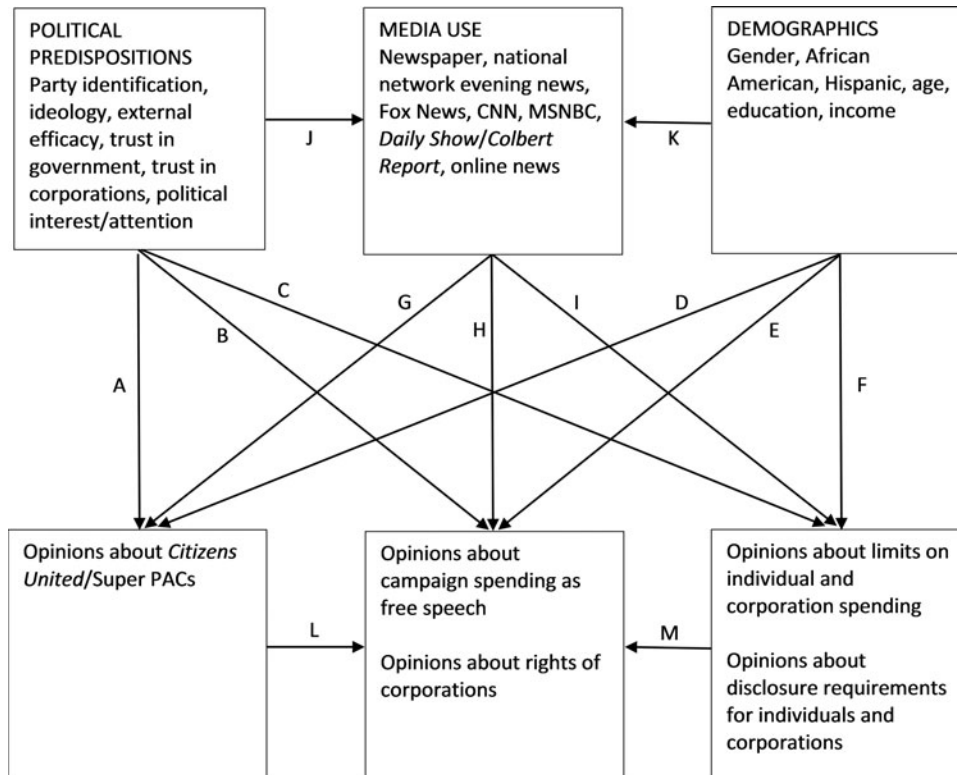


FIG. A1. Potential relationships among demographics, political predispositions, media use, and opinions about campaign finance.

the same rights as people and support for limits on spending by corporations. Most of the significant relationships between the predispositions and the opinion variables followed direct paths. However, a number of indirect relationships emerged, always in directions consistent with expectations. Thus, the results from this model suggest that selective media exposure may have shaped opinion about campaign finance issues in some ways.

Taken together, the results from these alternative models largely corroborate the results from the model presented in the text. However, they do suggest that the latter may underestimate the relationships between party identification and ideology, on the one hand, and some of the opinion variables, on the other. In the second and third models, two relationships for external efficacy fell from significance; however, in every case except one (external efficacy to beliefs that corporations have the same rights as people in the third model), these relationships were just short of standard levels of significance ($p = .06$ or $.07$).

A fifth model added relationships from opinions about campaign spending as free speech and the rights of corporations to the other opinions variables (paths L and M). All of these relationships were positive and significant. Given that public debate presented arguments about whether campaign spending is free speech and whether corporations have the same rights as people as

key rationales for supporting or opposing particular campaign finance policies, one potential interpretation of results here is that citizens' views on the former shaped their opinions about the latter. However, the former also could have served as rationalizations for the latter.

The model presented in the text is saturated, or just-identified, as are the second and third models. That is, the number of parameters estimated for each of these models is equal to the number of observed variances and covariances. As such, each model successfully converges on a unique solution to the set of equations and yields uninformative fit statistics. For the fourth model, $\chi^2 = 289.04$ ($p \leq .01$), Goodness of Fit Index = .94, Comparative Fit Index = .91, and Normed Fit Index = .91. For the fifth model, $\chi^2 = 329.92$ ($p \leq .01$), Goodness of Fit Index = .93, Comparative Fit Index = .89, and Normed Fit Index = .89.

We estimated modification indices for the fourth and fifth models (see Sörbom 1989). These indices estimate the change in the χ^2 statistic that would occur if the fixed parameters were freed (given that the saturated models' fit cannot be improved by definition, modification indices cannot be calculated for them). None of the expected changes to the χ^2 statistic are greater than .75 for either model. Given the χ^2 values of 289.04 and 329.92, the modification indices suggest that freeing those parameters would not significantly improve model fit.