

Economists' policy views and voting

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Abstract. In Spring 2003, a survey of 1000 economists was conducted using a randomly generated membership list from the American Economics Association. The survey contained questions about 18 policy issues, voting behavior, and several background variables. The response was 264 (nonblank) surveys. The responses show that most economists are supporters of safety regulations, gun control, redistribution, public schooling, and anti-discrimination laws. They are evenly mixed on personal choice issues, military action, and the minimum wage. Most economists oppose tighter immigration controls, government ownership of enterprise and tariffs. In voting, the Democratic:Republican ratio is 2.5:1. These results are compared to those of previous surveys of economists. We itemize a series of important questions raised by these results.

Surveys of Economists

In the past 30 years, there have been more than ten surveys asking American economists to evaluate economic policy statements or identify their own political views. A few of the more prominent ones are Kearl et al., 1979; Alston et al., 1992; Blendon et al., 1997; Fuchs, Alan, and James, 1998; Fuller and Geide-Stevenson, 2003. In this paper, we present the basic results of a rich survey of American Economic Association members. In contrast to most previous survey of economists, our survey was designed to elicit an overall judgment of support or opposition for each form of government activism, and to make the format uniform so that an individual's set of responses could be combined into an index.

The results raise many questions about the current state of the economics profession. However, we basically let the reader react to the data his or her own way. In the concluding section we itemize questions for further research, and we are in pursuit of some of those questions ourselves. The purpose of this paper is to provide an early reading of the raw results and to encourage economists to better understand their own profession.

Description of Survey and Data

In March and April 2003, 1000 U.S. members of the American Economic Association were surveyed using a randomly generated list of members. The

overall aim of the survey project is to study how the individual's political views change over time; the survey asks the respondent to report the policy views she had when she was 25 years old, and then asks her present views. A byproduct of the investigation, then, is information about respondents' present views. This paper simply summarizes the present public policy views of AEA members; we do not consider the "when 25" views here.¹ The survey controller received 264 nonblank surveys in return, a response rate of 26.6% (adjusting for PO Returns, etc.).

Description of the Economist Sample

1) Check the highest degree you hold ($N = 264$)

Ph.D.	217	82.20%
Masters	34	12.88%
Bachelor's	3	1.14%
J.D.	9	3.41%
Other	1	0.38%

The sample of economists mostly contains individuals with a Ph.D. and 92.8% (245 respondents) reported economics as the field in which they got the degree.

2) Please check your primary employment ($N = 264$)

Academic	128 ^a	48.8%
Public sector	43	16.3%
Private sector	75	28.4%
Independent research	18	6.8%

^aWe changed three respondents to "academic" based on their having filled out the subsequent two questions, which are contingent on the respondent being an academic. Also, respondents who checked academic and other responses are counted as academic.

Of those reporting Academic, we ask two follow-up questions:

3) What is the highest degree your department issues? ($N = 128$)

Bachelors	30	23.4%
Masters	23	18.0%
Ph.D.	73	57.0%
No response	2	1.6%

4) Is your college/university public or private? ($N = 128$)

Public	77	60.2%
Private	46	35.9%
Both	3	2.3%
No response	2	1.6%

Economists' Views on the 18 Public Policy Questions

The respondents were asked 18 questions about public policy issues. The following query about tariffs shows the format:

Tariffs on imported goods to protect American industries and jobs:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support strongly	Support mildly	Have mixed feelings	Oppose mildly	Oppose strongly	Have no opinion
1	2	3	4	5	

The numbers 1–5 did not appear in the survey. They show how we weighted each response when creating an index (or mean response).

Here we present the results on the 18 policy questions in three groups: economic regulations (Table 1), regulation of personal choices (Table 2), and role of government (Table 3).

Of all 18 issues, tariffs are the form of government activism economists are most uniformly opposed to. A strong consensus against tariffs and quotas has been perhaps the most established finding in surveys of economists (Kearl et al., 1979, p. 30; Alston et al., 1992, p. 204; Moorhouse, Morris, & Whaples, 1999, p. 84; Fuller & Geide-Stevenson, 2003, p. 37; Heckelman & Whaples, 2004, p. 19). On minimum wage, economists are very mixed, with a slight edge *in support of* minimum wage laws. Our finding again agrees with two previous surveys of labor economists, both of which found that about half of those surveyed favored increasing the minimum wage (Whaples, 1996, p. 1730; Fuchs et al., 1998, p. 1391).² On FDA, OSHA, and EPA regulations, most economists are supportive. These findings again agree with previous findings of economists tending to support “consumer protection” laws and the regulatory power of the EPA (Kearl et al., 1979, p. 30; Alston et al., 1992, p. 205; Fuller & Geide-Stevenson, 2003, p. 380).

Looking at Table 2, we see that economists are mostly supporters of government restrictions on discrimination and of gun control, but are mixed on drugs, prostitution and gambling laws.

Table 1. Economists' views on economic regulations, $N = 264$, frequency (%)

Issue addressed	Support strongly (1)	Support mildly (2)	Have mixed feelings (3)	Oppose mildly (4)	Oppose strongly (5)	Have no opinion	No response	Mean value (S.D.)
Tariffs to protect American industries	6 (2.3)	8 (3.0)	20 (7.6)	53 (20.1)	176 (66.7)	0	1 (0.4)	4.5 (0.9)
Minimum wage laws	75 (28.4)	50 (18.9)	38 (14.4)	47 (17.8)	54 (20.5)	0	0	2.8 (1.5)
Occupational safety regs (OSHA)	124 (46.9)	65 ^a (24.6)	44 (16.7)	22 (8.3)	8 (3.0)	1 (0.4)	0	1.9 (1.1)
Pharmaceutical safety control (FDA)	129 (48.9)	56 (21.2)	41 (15.5)	22 (8.3)	15 (5.7)	1 (0.4)	0	2.0 (1.2)
Air and water regulation (EPA)	149 (56.4)	62 (23.5)	22 (8.3)	20 (7.6)	11 (4.2)	0	0	1.8 (1.1)
Economic regulation index, mean (and S.D.)								
2.6 (0.9)								

^aOne respondent checked both 1 and 2; counted as a 2.

Table 2. Economists' views on public policies concerning regulations of personal choices, $N = 264$, frequency (%)

Issue addressed	Support strongly (1)	Support mildly (2)	Have mixed feelings (3)	Oppose mildly (4)	Oppose strongly (5)	Have no opinion	No response	Mean value (S.D.)
Discrimination controls	174 (65.9)	34 (12.9)	18 (6.8)	21 (8.0)	17 (6.4)	0	0	1.8 (1.3)
Controls on "hard" drugs	93 (35.2)	49 (18.6)	49 (18.6)	37 (14.0)	36 (13.6)	0	0	2.5 (1.4)
Prostitution controls	39 (14.8)	55 (20.8)	48 (18.2)	71 (26.9)	46 (17.4)	5 (1.9)	0	3.1 (1.3)
Gambling restrictions	39 (14.8)	56 (21.2)	56 (21.2)	57 (21.6)	51 (19.3)	5 (1.9)	0	3.1 (1.3)
Gun control	143 (54.2)	37 (14.0)	20 (7.6)	26 (9.9)	36 (13.6)	2 (0.8)	0	2.1 (1.5)
	Regulation of personal choice index, mean (and S.D.)							
	2.5 (1.0)							

In Table 3, the form of government activism most opposed by economists is government ownership of enterprise, followed by tighter controls of immigration. Our result about immigration concords with the finding that 96% of labor economists agree that gains to American society from immigration exceeds the losses (Whaples, 1996, p. 731).

Economists are more centered on military aid and presence abroad and tuning the economy by fiscal policy. On fiscal policy, there seems to be a decline in support over time, where Kearn et al. (1979, p. 30) found a very high degree of agreement with the statement that fiscal policy has a significant stimulative impact on a less than fully employed economy; agreement with the same statement falls a bit by the time of Alston et al. (1992, p. 204), and would seem to be even lower in our study.

Economists generally support redistribution, the government production of schooling, foreign aid, and tuning the economy by monetary policy. On redistribution, Fuchs et al. (1998, p. 1400) finds that a little over half of labor economists and of public economists are inclined to increase redistribution.³

The bottom of Table 3 shows the mean Policy index over all 18 issues as 2.6. On the whole, economists are more supportive than opposed to government activism as listed here. Restricting the sample to the 128 responding economists who are in academics does not change the Policy index mean value.⁴

Economists Voting Behavior

Most economists vote Democratic (Table 4). The Democrat:Republican ratio is 2.5:1. The 2.5:1 ratio is based on answers for all economist respondents. Table 5 shows the ratios of democrat to republican voters for the various sectors of economists—beware the dwindling sub-sample sizes.

Voting Behavior from the Six Fields

When we surveyed the AEA members, we also surveyed members of five other scholarly associations. We also surveyed anthropologists, historians, political scientists, political and legal philosophers, and sociologists.⁵

Of the six fields surveyed, Table 6 shows that voting Democratic is most preponderant among the anthropologists and sociologists, who both have a Democrat:Republican ratio of nearly 16:1. The least preponderant is Economics, but even there the ratio is about 2.5:1.

A 2001 Brookings Institution survey of AEA members with 160 respondents found a ratio of 3.7:1. Hence, they found a higher ratio. The Brookings study also surveyed sociologists, historians, and political scientists. For sociologists, the ratio reported by Brookings was higher than ours, and for historians and political scientists their ratios were lower (Brookings Institution, 2001, p. 54). The differences might be partly accounted for by the fact that the

Table 3. Economists' views on public issues concerning the role of government, N=264, frequency (%)

Issue addressed	Support strongly (1)	Support mildly (2)	Have mixed feelings (3)	Oppose mildly (4)	Oppose strongly (5)	Have no opinion	No response	Mean value (S.D.)
Government ownership of enterprise	6 (2.3)	17 (6.4)	36 (13.6)	40 (15.2)	162 (61.4)	1 (0.4)	2 (0.8)	4.3 (1.1)
Redistribution	116 (43.9)	72 (27.3)	19 (7.2)	32 (12.1)	22 (8.3)	0	3 (1.1)	2.1 (1.3)
Government production of schooling (<i>k</i> thru 12)	132 (50.0)	45 (17.1)	38 (14.4)	23 (8.7)	23 (8.7)	1 (0.4)	2 (0.8)	2.1 (1.3)
Tuning the economy by monetary policy	115 (43.6)	83 (31.4)	32 (12.1)	22 (8.3)	10 (3.8)	2 (0.8)	0	2.0 (1.1)
Tuning the economy by fiscal policy	65 (24.6)	69 (26.1)	49 (18.6)	43 (16.3)	37 (14.0)	1 (0.4)	0	2.7 (1.4)
Tighter controls on immigration	22 (8.3)	44 (16.7)	43 (16.3)	71 (26.9)	82 (31.1)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	3.6 (1.3)
Military aid/presence abroad	40 (15.2)	57 (21.6)	79 (29.9)	49 (18.6)	38 (14.4)	0	1 (0.4)	2.9 (1.3)
Foreign aid (World Bk, IMF, USAID)	95 (36.0)	77 (29.2)	49 (18.6)	27 (10.2)	15 (5.7)	1 (0.4)	0	2.2 (1.2)
Role of government index (includes the 8 issues above), mean (and S.D.)								
Public policy index (includes all 18 issues), mean (and S.D.)								
								2.7 (0.7)
								2.6 (0.7)

Table 4. To which political party have the candidates you have voted for in the past ten years mostly belonged?

	Frequency	Percent
Democratic	153	58.0
Republican	61	23.1
Green	2	0.8
Libertarian	7	2.7
Respondents checking more than one option		
Democratic/republican	3	1.1
Other (w/o comment)	1	0.4
Diffuse (checked 3 or more)	5	1.9
Non-response	24	9.1
Do not vote	1	0.4
Cannot vote	7	2.7
Total	264	100

Table 5. Economists' D:R ratio by employment sector

Employment	<i>N</i>	D:R ratio
Academic	105	2.9:1
Public sector	36	4.1:1
Private sector	57	1.4:1
Independent research	16	4.3:1
	214	2.5:1

Brookings survey selected academics with certain specialties (Light, 2001, p. 3) (Table 6).

Sorting the Issues by Level of Support

Table 7 provides the complete wording of each question and sorts them by level of support by the average economist.

Questions for Further Research

The raw results presented in this paper raise a number of important questions:

1. Economists have something of a reputation for favoring free-market principles, yet we see that economists on average are supportive of most economic interventions, mixed on a few interventions, and opposed only on immigration (weakly opposed to tighter restrictions), government ownership of

Table 6. Voting behavior of the associations studied ($N = 1678$)

	Democratic (%)	Green (%)	Libertarian (%)	Republican (%)	Misc. (%)	No response (%)	Total (100%)
Anthropology	295 (84.3)	6 (1.7)	1 (0.3)	19 (5.4)	20 (5.7)	9 (2.6)	350
Economics	152 (57.8)	2 (0.8)	7 (2.7)	61 (23.1)	18 (6.4)	24 (9.1)	264
History	231 (77.8)	2 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	38 (12.8)	17 (5.7)	9 (3.0)	297
Philosophy (political and legal)	82 (76.6)	2 (1.9)	4 (3.7)	11 (10.3)	4 (3.7)	4 (3.7)	107
Political science	238 (77.0)	2 (0.6)	4 (1.3)	43 (13.9)	13 (4.2)	9 (2.9)	309
Sociology	288 (82.1)	8 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	18 (5.1)	19 (5.4)	18 (5.1)	351
Total	1286 (76.6)	22 (1.3)	16 (1.0)	190 (11.3)	91 (5.4)	73 (4.4)	1678

industry, and tariffs. It seems that most economists in fact stand in the middle of the road or even on the interventionist side. Why, then, do they have a reputation for being free-market supporters?

2. When you break the data down by individuals, what percent of all economists are free-market supporters? What percent of Democrats? What percent of Republicans? Do Republicans support free-market principles much more strongly than Democrats? On what issues do Democrats support free-market principles more than Republicans do?
3. Economists in academia are Democratic to Republican at a ratio of 2.9 to 1. If the Republican Party is more in line with the free market, and if economics teaches an appreciation of market forces, then why are most economists voting Democratic?
4. The survey responses came from a random sample of AEA members. Only about 55% of academic economists are AEA members (Siegfried 1998, p. 217). Hence, 45% decide against joining the AEA. Does this data warrant investigation into whether the AEA is skewed to the left? Maybe the economics profession is really more supportive of free-market principles than this survey suggests.
5. On some of the issues treated by the survey, such as FDA regulation of pharmaceuticals, economists who research the topic and express a judgment reach a clear conclusion in favor of liberalization (Klein & Tabarrok 2004). They probably would have answered 4 or 5 to the FDA question. Yet the average economist supports FDA control (with a score of 2.0). Indeed, 49% answered "strongly support." Assuming that the experts on the topic are correct, how can it be that most economists do not know the results of their own science on this urgent issue?
6. The results for all six fields surveyed show that Economics has the largest standard deviation in responses. If consensus is the hallmark of science, why is it that there is *less* consensus (on whether specific interventions

Table 7. The 18 issues ordered by level of economist support

	Policy index mean value	
Most economists support		
1	Laws making it illegal for private parties to discriminate (on the basis of race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or sexual-orientation) against other private parties, in employment or accommodations	1.8
2	Air-quality and water-quality regulation by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	1.8
3	Workplace safety regulation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)	1.9
4	Using monetary policy to tune the economy	2.0
5	Pharmaceutical market regulation by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)	2.0
6	Government production of schooling (<i>k</i> through 12)	2.1
7	Redistributive policies (transfer and aid programs and tax progressivity)	2.1
8	Laws restricting gun ownership	2.2
9	Foreign aid and assistance by such organizations as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and US AID	2.2
10	Laws restricting the use and exchange of “hard” drugs such as cocaine and heroin	2.5
	Economists are mixed on:	
11	Using fiscal policy to tune the economy	2.7
12	Minimum wage laws	2.8
13	American military aid or presence abroad to promote democracy and the rule of law	2.9
14	Laws restricting gambling	3.1
15	Laws restricting prostitution	3.1
Most economists oppose		
16	Tighter rather than looser controls on immigration	3.6
17	Government ownership of industrial enterprises	4.3
18	Tariffs on imported goods to protect American industry and jobs	4.5
	Overall policy index mean value	2.6

promote the public interest) in Economics than there is in Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Political Science and Sociology?

These are good questions for further research. The data provided by the survey will help us address some of them. But many of them, such as the possible ideological skew in AEA membership and the broader questions about the character of the profession, need to be addressed with new methods, new investigations, and searching reflection.

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Notes

1. At the Survey Homepage one may view a sample survey and documents explaining the methods, independent control, and certification of the survey results. The Survey Homepage URL is <http://lsb.scu.edu/~dklein/survey/survey.htm>.
2. Other surveys ask economists whether the minimum wage causes unemployment, but one's answer to that question does not determine an answer to our question about the minimum wage.
3. Kearn et al. (1979) and Alston et al. (1992) ask whether redistribution is a legitimate role of government. Fuller and Geide-Stevenson (2003) ask whether distribution of income should be more equal. Again, answers to these questions would not determine an answer to our questions.
4. Restricting the sample to academics does not significantly change any of the indexes: it change the economic regulation index mean to 2.65 (0.91), the personal choice index mean to 2.54 (1.01), and the role of government index mean to 2.72 (0.67).
5. In each case, we surveyed members of the American [discipline] Association, except that the philosophers were members of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy, which contained only 486 members.

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