



Economics Professors' Voting, Policy Views, Favorite Economists, and Frequent Lack of Consensus

Daniel B. Klein¹, William L. Davis², and David Hedengren³

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

In March 2010 we conducted a survey of U.S. economics professors and received 299 responses. Previous papers about the survey focused on novel questions and brought novel results.⁴ The present paper, however, reports on familiar questions, with unsurprising results, about economists' opinions on 17 policy issues, relating attitudes toward liberalization to political-party voting. We also report on some other matters. The results confirm and embellish things suggested by previous studies. The instrument, dataset, and analyses are online ([link](#)).

The paper offers small novelties, including the following:

- We mailed the survey to a list of two thousand U.S. economics professors, not a sample of AEA members.
- The survey included questions on policy topics not previously asked, including abortion and occupational licensing.
- Some of the analysis shows results not only by Democratic and Republican, but also by Green and Libertarian. We caution the reader about small numbers of Libertarian respondents and especially Green respondents.

1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

2. University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, TN 38238.

3. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

4. Davis et al. (2011) focuses on favorite economists, journals, and blogs (and describes our survey method). Klein et al. (2012a) focuses on the characteristics of members of twelve professional economic associations. Klein et al. (2012b) focuses on ideological openness (that is, whether the respondent likes it when a writer discloses his or her own ideological sensibilities).

Details about the survey are provided in William Davis et al. (2011). The response rate was only 15.2 percent, but the gender ratio and party voting ratio of the respondents give reason to believe that the set of 299 respondents is reasonably representative of economics professors in the United States.

The voting question was as follows:

To which political party have the candidates you've voted for in the past ten years mostly belonged?

Democratic
 Green
 Libertarian
 Republican
 other

Table 1 provides results for each voting group. When a respondent checked both Democratic and Republican, for example, we counted half for each; that is why the “Count” figures are not round numbers.

TABLE 1. Party voting, gender ratio, and average liberalism score of economics professors

Party	Count	Percentage of the 299	Gender ratio (men/women)	Avg. liberalism score (s.d.)
Democratic	167.67	56.08%	3.35	1.94 (0.56)
Green	5.17	1.73%	1.82	1.57 (0.45)
Libertarian	17.00	5.69%	10.33	3.52 (0.37)
Republican	61.83	20.68%	5.76	2.71 (0.54)
“Other” checked, but nothing written	11.33	3.79%	7.50	2.77 (0.63)
Cannot vote	11.00	3.68%	10.00	2.48 (0.89)
Choose not to vote	3.00	1.00%	2.00	3.25 (0.66)
No answer	22.00	7.36%	6.00	2.26 (0.89)
All	299	100%	4.19	2.27 (0.76)

Dividing the Democratic count (167.67) by the Republican count (61.83), we find a D:R ratio of 2.71, which is in line with previous findings for economists.⁵ The Libertarian count is 17, making for 5.69 percent of the sample, which is unusually high.⁶ We break out the Libertarian voters as a separate group, and, to follow through, do likewise for the Greens, even though their count at 5.17 means that the Green results are especially uncertain.

The 17 policy questions took the form as shown in the sample statement below:

5. After publishing our 2011 article, we discovered that the party coding of one survey (#5011) was entered as Democratic when in fact the respondent’s answer was Libertarian (the mismatch between the entered party coding and the policy views led us to double check). For this reason the percentages for those two parties differ very slightly from the reporting in our 2011 article—and other numbers in the 2011 paper are off slightly because of the error.

ECONOMICS PROFESSORS' VOTING

Each of the policy-issue questions offers a reform in relation to the status quo. Please mark your disposition toward each.

Higher minimum wages:

<input type="checkbox"/>					
support strongly	support, not strongly	neutral	oppose, not strongly	oppose strongly	have no opinion

We followed the format shown in asking 17 policy questions:

- Q10. Higher minimum wages
- Q11. Tighter restrictions (e.g., tariffs and quotas) on imported goods
- Q12. Tighter requirements for the permitting of new pharmaceuticals and medical devices
- Q13. Tighter restrictions on private parties engaging in discrimination (on the basis of race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or sexual-orientation) against other private parties, in employment or accommodations
- Q14. Tighter restrictions on the buying and selling of human organs
- Q15. Tighter workplace safety regulation (e.g., by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA))
- Q16. Tighter air-quality and water-quality regulation (e.g., by the Env. Protection Ag. (EPA))
- Q17. Tighter requirements on occupational licensing
- Q18. Tighter restrictions on prostitution
- Q19. Tighter restrictions on gambling
- Q20. Tighter controls on immigration
- Q21. Tighter restrictions on adult women having an abortion
- Q22. Tighter restrictions on “hard” drugs such as cocaine and heroin
- Q23. More redistribution (e.g., transfer and aid programs and tax progressivity)
- Q24. More funding of the public school system
- Q25. More benefits and coverage by Medicaid
- Q26. More American military aid or presence abroad to promote democracy and the rule of law

Using the word *liberal* in its classical Gladstonean sense of liberty or liberalization, we create a liberalism score of domain $[0, 4]$ by scoring the responses as follows: “support strongly” was scored as 0, “support, not strongly” as 1, “neutral” as 2, “oppose, not strongly” as 3, and “oppose strongly” as 4 (and “have no opinion” as missing data, not as “neutral”). Higher scores are deemed more

6. As the authors of this article are sympathetic to libertarian ideas, it might be thought that this showing reflects some kind of bias. As for the sampling method (explained at Davis et al. 2011, 127-128), we are certain that there was no such bias, for the economics departments and individual persons selected for sampling were determined either by rankings or by random selection by secretaries and assistants working under William Davis at the University of Tennessee, Martin, and they would not know or care to include one type rather than another. Moreover, the authors would have no cause to over-represent libertarians or any other group. What is less easy to dismiss is the notion that there was a libertarian response bias: The cover letter on University of Tennessee letterhead ([link](#)) came from William Davis and mentioned Robert Figgins as a collaborator (there is no mention of Klein or Hedengren), and it is possible that some recipients knew of them or their former publications and that such knowledge affected their inclination to respond.

liberal. For some issues, the liberty interpretation is less than clear-cut (air quality, abortion, military), but we exercise our judgment about things overall on the issue, and move on.

Each policy question is anchored in the status quo and uses a comparative term—“higher,” “tighter,” or “more”—to posit *a ratcheting up* of the restriction on individual liberty or the expansion of tax-funded government activities. The reform that it proposes is one-sided.

It is possible that one opposes making the minimum wage higher, without opposing the minimum wage or its status-quo level. By specifying a one-sided change to the status quo, our question narrows the issue and makes it more likely for the respondent to select “oppose.” And, as expected, one-sided questions yield results that are higher than those of questions that are two-sided (or general). The mean score for our one-sided questions is 2.27. A 2003 survey of AEA members, also using a five-point Likert scale that runs in the same direction, asked 18 policy questions that are two-sided, and the mean score is 1.64 (Klein and Stern 2007, 311; renormalized onto [0, 4]). The mean in our survey is higher, and the main reason is surely that the questions are one-sided: In our survey, low, “support” responses mean that the respondent not only supports the intervention but supports tightening or increasing it. And high, “oppose” responses do not necessarily imply support for liberalizing the status-quo policy.

In looking at the results by party voting, bear in mind that our 299 respondents are a sample *not* of the general population of the United States, nor of the population of college professors, but of economics professors. We know that professors in economics are more liberal than those in most other fields, especially in the social sciences and humanities (Klein and Stern 2005, 285). Republicans are not only more numerous in economics, but in economics they are more liberal than Republicans in other fields (the same is true of Democrats, but much less markedly).

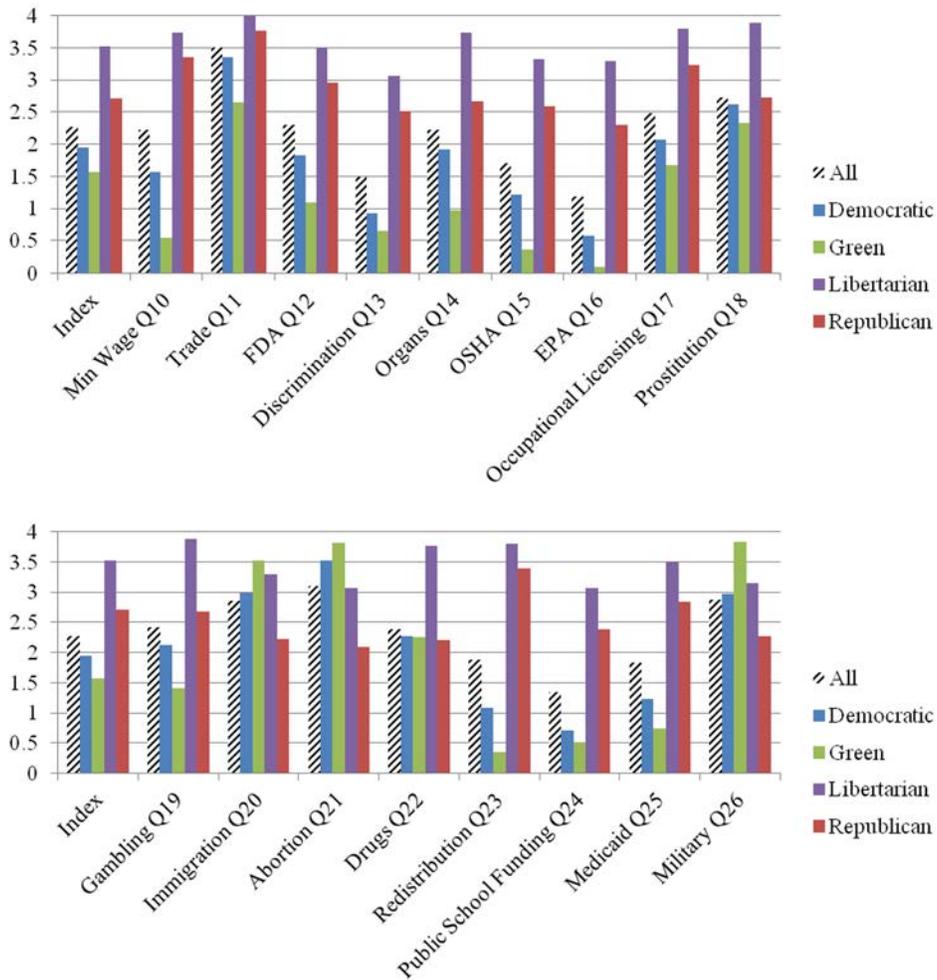
Figure 1 shows the mean response by party voting. Reading from left to right, the first group of bars is the liberalism score over all 17 policy questions. The Libertarians are most liberal, followed by the Republicans, the Democrats, and the Greens.

Then come the 17 policy questions. None of the results strikes us as surprising. It is noteworthy that on only three issues, immigration, abortion, and military, are the Republicans significantly less liberal than the Democrats. Democrats have a reputation of being more liberal on lifestyle issues, but we see that *among economics professors* it is not so for prostitution, gambling, and drugs.

It has been found that among social sciences and humanities professors, the Republicans have a bigger tent than the Democrats. Consider only the Republicans: Compute the standard deviation of their responses on the minimum-wage ques-

tion; and then on the next question, and so on; now sum all 17 Republican standard deviations. Now do the same for the Democrats. In the 2003 survey of members of six scholarly associations (each in a different discipline), the sum of the standard deviations of Republican policy-question responses is considerably higher than the sum of those of Democratic responses (Klein and Stern 2005, 271-273). In the present study we find that the Republican sum of the 17 standard deviations is 18.74, while the Democratic sum is 18.01.

Figure 1. Policy views by party voting



Source: The data graphed in Figure 1 is found on the worksheet labeled “Figure 1 Data” in [this Excel file](#).

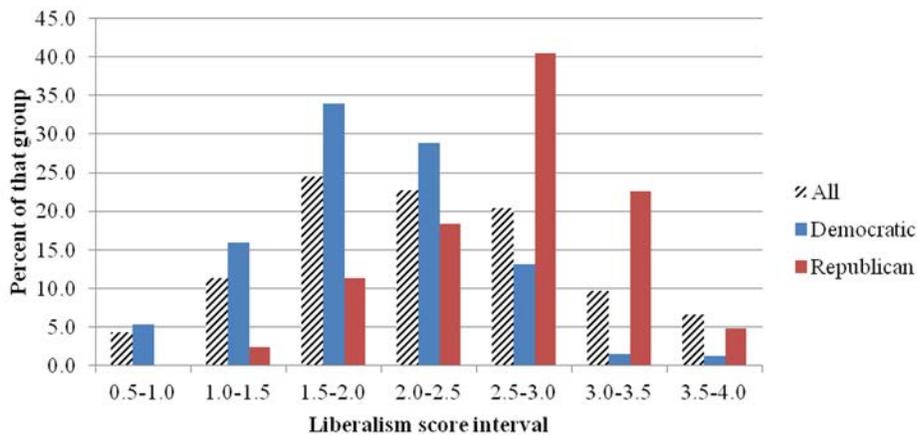
Our study speaks to the question of whether economists agree on public policy, but again finds results similar to the existing literature (for a discussion and citations, see Whaples 2009). For each policy question, response percentages and histograms can be viewed on the “Histograms” worksheet of [this](#) Excel file. One simple test is single-peakedness, as noted by Robert Whaples (2009, 346). We find that, for the responses to a policy question, 10 of the 17 distributions show some violation of strict single-peakedness (the 10 being the minimum wage, permitting new pharmaceuticals, discrimination, organs, the EPA, occupational licensing, prostitution, abortion, redistribution, and Medicaid). One might expect that a science about the welfare consequences of a policy would generate single-peakedness, even pronounced single-peakedness (as with the international trade question). After all, perfectly random responses would tend toward a uniform distribution.

The single-peakedness test is handy, but it is also crude, as it can generate false positives for consensus (consider our results on gambling, “hard” drugs, and public school funding) and false negatives (consider our results on prostitution and abortion). Another simple test is whether or not each of the five responses garners at least 10 percent.⁷ Here we find that economists are distributed evenly enough to fail this test of consensus for eight of the 17 questions (the eight being the minimum wage, discrimination, organs, OSHA, “hard” drugs, redistribution, public school funding, and Medicaid). These results and previous ones like them—as well as those of Figure 1, which show party cleavages on many issues—will serve scholars interested in whether economists agree on public policy (e.g., Gordon and Dahl 2013).

The economics profession exhibits greater ideological diversity than other fields (Klein and Stern 2005, 283-286). Is ideological diversity a good thing? The answer, for each of us, will depend on what sort of state of consensus the state of diversity is being compared to. Wherever one stands, one can imagine something worse than a lack of consensus.

For each respondent we can compute a liberalization score. We can then create a distribution of such scores over 0.5 intervals of the range [0, 4]. Figure 2 does this for all respondents, for Democratic respondents, and for Republican respondents.

7. The 10 percent figure is perhaps focal because if each of the five responses had 20 percent, then the distribution would be perfectly uniform, and 10 percent is half of that.

Figure 2. Distributions of the 17-issue liberalism score of economics professors

Source: The data graphed in Figure 2 is found on the worksheet labeled “Figure 2 Data” in [this Excel file](#).

Figure 2 helps us estimate the percentage of economics professors who are firm supporters of free enterprise. As each policy question proposes a ratcheting-up of the intervention, it is reasonable, in our view, to focus on 3.0 (“oppose, not strongly”) as a cut-point for firm support of the principles of free enterprise. By the 3.0 cutoff, we see that 16.4 percent of economics professors are firm supporters of the principles of free enterprise—or could be considered free-market economists. This figure of 16.4 percent is higher than the figure of 8.33 percent as highlighted by Daniel Klein and Charlotta Stern (2007, 324-329) in using the same numeric cut-point in reporting on the 2003 survey of AEA members. The difference appears to arise not chiefly from the differences between the populations sampled (economics professors in 2010 vs. AEA members in 2003),⁸ nor from differences between the set of policy issues in the two surveys. Rather, the difference surely arises chiefly from the fact that the 2010 policy questions are one-sided upward-ratchetings of intervention, yielding more “oppose” responses; someone content with the status-quo intervention might “oppose” or “strongly oppose” the reform proposals of the 2010 survey. So perhaps the difference is more apparent than real. Regardless, even

8. The 2010 survey included a question about membership in the AEA (as well as other associations), and we find that AEA members in the sample have a liberalism score about the same as that of the entire sample of 299 economics professors (Klein et al. 2012a, 153). For the individuals with a liberalism score above 3.0, their rate of membership in the AEA any time within the past ten years is 82 percent, which is only slightly below the rate of 85 percent for the entire sample of 299 respondents, and their rate of AEA membership “at present” is 61 percent, a bit below the rate of 66 percent for the entire sample (ibid., 150).

at 16.4 percent, the contingent of free-market economists is smaller than many people seem to think. Explanations for why people have faulty impressions about economists are offered by Klein and Stern (2007, 324-329).

TABLE 2. Gender, party voting, and liberalism score

	Democratic	Green	Libertarian	Republican	Other	All 299
Women	23.0%	35.5%	8.8%	14.8%	13.7%	19.3%
Liberalism score	1.81	1.33	2.94	2.57	2.52	2.02
Men	77.0%	64.5%	91.2%	85.2%	86.3%	80.7%
Liberalism score	1.98	1.71	3.57	2.72	2.50	2.33
Liberalism score, all	1.94	1.57	3.52	2.71	2.50	2.27

Regarding gender, it is well known that women in the United States are more Democratic and less classical liberal. Studies find similar results for economists (May et al. forthcoming; Hedengren et al. 2010, 310; Stastny 2010, 285). Table 2 shows the distribution among the parties by gender. We see that women are more likely, relative to men, to be Democratic/Green. The table also shows that within each of the two major parties, women are less liberal than their male counterparts.

TABLE 3. Favorite economists by party voting

	Democratic (n=167.67)	Green (n=5.17)	Libertarian (n=17)	Republican (n=61.83)	All (n=299)
Pre-20th Century	Smith, Adam (122)	Smith, Adam (7)	Smith, Adam (16)	Smith, Adam (52)	Smith, Adam (221)
	Ricardo, David (61)	Marx, Karl (4)	Ricardo, David (7)	Ricardo, David (25)	Ricardo, David (106)
	Marx, Karl (38)	Marshall, Alfred (3)	Marshall, Alfred (4)	Marshall, Alfred (16)	Marshall, Alfred (67)
20th Century, deceased	Keynes, J.M. (96)	Keynes, J.M. (6)	Friedman, Milton (14)	Friedman, Milton (48)	Keynes, J.M. (134)
	Samuelson, Paul (66)	Robinson, Joan (3)	Hayek, Friedrich (7)	Keynes, J.M. (21)	Friedman, Milton (124)
	Friedman, Milton (46)	Schumpeter, Joseph (2)	Mises, Ludwig von (3)	Hayek, Friedrich (17)	Samuelson, Paul (90)
Living, 60 or older	Arrow, Kenneth (32)	Arrow, Kenneth (3)	Buchanan, James (5)	Becker, Gary (25)	Becker, Gary (65)
	Solow, Robert (28)	Stiglitz, Joseph (2)	Coase, Ronald (5)	Buchanan, James (10)	Arrow, Kenneth (41)
	Becker, Gary (26)	Wade, Robert (1)	Becker, Gary (4)	Coase, Ronald (12)	Solow, Robert (35)
Living, under 60	Krugman, Paul (50)	Krugman, Paul (4)	Cowen, Tyler (2)	Levitt, Steve (9)	Krugman, Paul (60)
	Mankiw, Greg (12)	Acemoglu, Daron (2)	Easterly, William (2)	Mankiw, Greg (6)	Mankiw, Greg (22)
	Levitt, Steve (8)	Folbre, Nancy (2)	Mankiw, Greg (2)	Krugman, Paul (5)	Acemoglu, Daron (22)

Finally, we asked respondents to name their favorite economic thinkers, ranked first, second, and third, for each of four eras. Table 3 shows, for each era and by party voting, economists' top three favorites according to our tallying system, which gave six points to a first-place response, five points to a second, and four points to a third. We also list in parentheses the number of pure mentions of the named individuals. One thing that does cut across party lines is a large regard for Adam Smith.

Appendices

At the survey homepage ([link](#)), one can download:

- ([link](#)), the complete dataset of the survey
- ([link](#)), the survey instrument
- ([link](#)), the listing of 300 economics departments
- ([link](#)), the Excel files for tables, figures, and results provided in this paper.

References

- Davis, William L., Bob G. Figgins, David Hedengren, and Daniel B. Klein.** 2011. Economics Professors' Favorite Economic Thinkers, Journals, and Blogs (Along with Party and Policy Views). *Econ Journal Watch* 8(2): 126-146. [Link](#)
- Gordon, Roger, and Gordon B. Dahl.** 2013. Views Among Economists: Professional Consensus or Point-Counterpoint? *NBER Working Paper* No. 18728. National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, Mass.). [Link](#)
- Hedengren, David, Daniel B. Klein, and Carrie Milton.** 2010. Economist Petitions: Ideology Revealed. *Econ Journal Watch* 7(3): 288-319. [Link](#)
- Klein, Daniel B., William L. Davis, Bob G. Figgins, and David Hedengren.** 2012a. Characteristics of the Members of Twelve Economic Associations: Voting, Policy Views, and Favorite Economists. *Econ Journal Watch* 9(2): 149-162. [Link](#)
- Klein, Daniel B., William L. Davis, Bob G. Figgins, and David Hedengren.** 2012b. Most Economists Welcome Ideological Openness, A Survey Indicates. *Independent Review* 17(2): 227-231. [Link](#)
- Klein, Daniel B., and Charlotta Stern.** 2005. Professors and Their Politics: The Policy Views of Social Scientists. *Critical Review* 17(3-4): 257-303. [Link](#)
- Klein, Daniel B., and Charlotta Stern.** 2007. Is There a Free-Market Economist in the House? The Policy Views of American Economic Association Members. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 66(2): 309-334.

May, Ann Mari, Mary G. McGarvey, and Robert Whaples. Forthcoming. Are Disagreements Between Male and Female Economists Marginal at Best? A Survey of AEA Members and Their Views on Economics and Economic Policy. *Contemporary Economic Policy*. [Link](#)

Stastny, Daniel. 2010. Czech Economists on Economic Policy: A Survey. *Econ Journal Watch* 7(3): 275-287. [Link](#)

Whaples, Robert. 2009. The Policy Views of American Economic Association Members: The Results of a New Survey. *Econ Journal Watch* 6(3): 337-348. [Link](#)

About the Authors



Daniel Klein is professor of economics at George Mason University and chief editor of *Econ Journal Watch*. His email address is dklein@gmu.edu.



William L. Davis is Professor of Economics at the University of Tennessee at Martin where he has taught undergraduate and graduate courses for the last 22 years and currently serves as the managing editor for the *Journal of Business and Economic Perspectives*. His email address is wdavis@utm.edu.



David Hedengren is a Ph.D. student at George Mason University where he is a recipient of the Walter E. Williams fellowship. His interests include economic history and applied econometrics. His email is davehedengren@gmail.com.

[Go to Archive of Character Issues section](#)
[Go to January 2013 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5793>