

The Political Polarization of America's Physicians

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Abstract of Work in Progress

Physicians (aka medical doctors) making campaign contributions to presidential and congressional candidates in the United States are increasingly polarized with respect to gender, type of employment, and professional specialty. The gender gap, where males contribute relatively more to Republicans is much larger than the gender gap in the general population. Self-employed and those working for profit institutions contribute more to Republicans than do those working for non-profits. Surgeons contribute more to Republicans than do psychiatrists and pediatric specialists. The “gaps” have shown sharp increases over the past two decades. These findings appear to follow economic self-interests.

Republican contributions are strongly correlated with the average specialty earnings. For-profits do not want government interference with their practices and changes in Medicare reimbursement policies that would favor non-profits. Female doctors, in part because they work fewer hours, are likely to earn less than their male counterparts. All findings hold in a multivariate analysis that includes year and geographic fixed effects. We do not address whether the political preferences of doctors are formed by the remuneration of their specialty and by their type of employment or if the left-right political preferences of medical students influence their career choices of specialty and place of employment.

Our findings were developed after the Federal Election Commission campaign contribution records for individual candidates over 1991-2012 were matched to create a contribution profile for each contributor and contributors were then matched with government data bases for the more than 800,000 physicians in the United States. Physicians are professionals with graduate degrees, and accordingly, they are viewed by political analysts as solidly in the Democratic camp. We find, to the contrary, that physicians who participate actively in politics are far from uniformly wedded to the Democrats. Indeed, of the 19 physicians serving in Congress, all but one are Republicans. In the much larger group of physicians who have contributed at least \$200 in one or more national races, 247,408 from 1991 through 2012 election, we do find that Republican contributors outnumber Democrats, but there is a recent trend to the Democrats. Physician contributions are likely to reflect economic and social effects embodied in the profound changes in the profession in recent decades. This paper documents that the economic, social, technological, and public policy changes that have altered the profession have been accompanied by important changes in the political preferences of physicians. The increasing fraction of doctors who are females and the increasing fraction of doctors who are not self-employed explain an important fraction of the profession's political donors transition away from supporting Republicans.