



A Not So Divided America

Is the public as polarized as Congress, or are red and blue districts pretty much the same?

Conducted by



A Joint Program of the Center on Policy Attitudes and
the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland

Voice Of the People (VOP) is a non-partisan organization that seeks to re-anchor our democracy in its founding principles by giving 'We the People' a greater role in government. VOP furthers the use of innovative methods and technology to give the American people a more effective voice in the policymaking process.

The **Program for Public Consultation (PPC)** seeks to improve democratic governance by helping governments consult their citizenry on the key public policy issues the government faces. Unlike standard polls, in public consultations respondents are presented information that helps simulate the issues and tradeoffs faced by policymakers. PPC has been established to develop the methods and theory of public consultation and to conduct public consultations. PPC is a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes and the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

Executive Summary

Introduction

A cornerstone of democracy is the idea that elected representatives to some extent represent the views of their constituents. Thus, the policy conflicts between Democratic and Republican Members of Congress are often assumed to mirror differences in public attitudes in the districts or states that they represent. If so, the views of people in “red” districts or states would presumably be distinctly different from views of people in “blue” districts or states on policy issues. But is this true?

Much has been written recently about the growing partisan polarization that can be seen in response to ideological questions. One might expect this to lead to substantial differences between red and blue districts and states on policy prescriptive questions—i.e. concrete questions about what the government should actually do on specific policy issues. However, if this were not the case—and differences between red and blue districts and states on policy questions are minor—it would suggest that it is unlikely that polarization in the public is driving the polarization on policy issues in Congress; and that the drivers may lie in other sources of influence on Congress.

In light of these questions, we conducted a study that compared the responses to policy prescriptive poll questions of people who live in “red” districts or states to those who live in “blue” districts or states.

Procedure

Selection of Source Surveys: We first sought out surveys that provided data showing the Congressional district in which each respondent resided. We found 14 different surveys with datasets that included information about the respondents’ congressional districts. We also included 10 surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and several major media outlets that only provided state-level breakouts. The surveys were conducted from 2008 through 2013.

Selection of Poll Questions: From these surveys we selected 388 questions on a wide range of policy issues. Questions were limited to those that were policy-prescriptive: i.e., they asked respondents to weigh in on a policy choice the government could make or had made. The overwhelming majority of 339 questions were divided by districts, while 49 were divided by states.

Key Findings

1. Comparing the views of people who live in red Congressional districts or states to those of people who live in blue Congressional districts or states, across 388 questions, majorities or pluralities took opposing positions in about one out of thirty cases (just 3.6 percent of the time). In two out of three cases there were no statistical differences.
2. The few questions for which views were polarized between red and blue districts or states dealt with policy topics that are familiar, high-profile, ‘hot-button’ partisan issues. However, for all of these topics there were also other questions that did not elicit polarized responses between red and blue districts or states.
3. There were numerous areas associated with high-profile partisan conflict in which no questions appeared where people in red districts/states and blue districts/states took polarized positions.
4. Hearing strongly-stated arguments for and against a policy position, ones that respondents might have recognized as characteristic of partisan ideology, did not subsequently increase the incidence of polarization between red and blue districts on policy-prescriptive questions.
5. In the current environment, the parties have taken strong positions on the budget—with Republican members of Congress strongly opposing revenue increases and Democrats strongly opposing cuts to entitlements. However, when respondents were asked to make up their own federal budget, there were only slight differences between respondents in red and blue districts. In both cases majorities both raised revenues and trimmed entitlements.

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Introduction

A cornerstone of democracy is the idea that elected representatives to some extent represent the views of their constituents. Thus, the policy conflicts between Democratic and Republican Members of Congress are often assumed to mirror differences in public attitudes in the districts or states that they represent. If so, the views of people in “red” districts or states (i.e. represented by a Republican House Member or by two Republican Senators) would presumably be distinctly different from views of people in “blue” districts or states (represented by a Democratic House Member or two Democratic Senators), and especially so on policy issues that have generated high-level partisan conflict and intense debate in the halls of Congress. But is this true?

Much has been written recently about the growing partisan polarization that can be seen in response to ideological questions. Prominent is the study by the Pew Research Center, released in May 2014, which asked Americans to choose between a series of pairs of broadly stated ideological themes over such issues as the proper size of government. The growing differences between Republicans and Democrats in response to these questions appear to be part of the process described as “The Big Sort,” whereby people associated with the Republican and Democratic parties have become more ideologically homogeneous.

One might expect this to lead to substantial differences between red and blue districts and states on policy-prescriptive questions — i.e., concrete questions about what the government should actually do on specific policy issues. If this were the case, it would help explain the growing polarization in Congress and would suggest that it is derived in significant measure from polarization among the electorate, and thus that Congress is indeed representing the people.

However, if this were not the case—and differences between red and blue districts and states on policy questions are minor—then it would suggest that responses to ideological themes are not as fundamental as they may seem. More importantly, it would suggest that it is unlikely that polarization in the public is driving the polarization on policy issues in Congress, and that the drivers may lie in other sources of influence on Congress.

To find out, we conducted a study that compared the responses to policy-prescriptive questions of people who live in red Congressional districts or states with those represented in blue Congressional districts or states. We wanted to find out how much of the time the views of those who live in blue districts or states differ from those who live in red districts or states on the types of policy questions that Congress faces.

Procedure

Because most surveys are done with samples of just 800-1,000 respondents, the samples were too small to analyze each district or state separately. (Some surveys collect the data on each respondent’s Congressional district; others only collect data on the respondent’s home state.)

However, in most cases (and in all the cases examined for this study), it was possible to divide all respondents in a typical survey according to whether they lived in a blue district or state or in a red district or state, and then compare them as two groups. If the polarization in Congress is in fact derived from polarization between the populations living in the districts/states they represent, we would expect the majorities of these two groups to take opposing positions on key policy issues.

Selection of Source Surveys

Because Congressional districts are smaller, potentially more homogenous, and more definitively red or blue (as there is only one representative), our primary analysis was in terms of districts. Thus, we first sought out surveys that provided data showing the Congressional district in which each respondent resided. We found 14 different surveys with datasets that included information about the respondents' Congressional districts.

These surveys include:

- Four conducted by the Program for Public Consultation (December 2010, December 2011, April 2012, July 2013), that explored in depth the federal budget, the 2001/2003 tax cuts, the defense budget, and Social Security
- Two by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (June 2010 and June 2012) on U.S. foreign policy issues
- Four by the National Election Study (waves 10, 11, 13 and 17; October 2008 to May 2009) on a wide range of topics including abortion, the Iraq war, climate change and others
- Three conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org (September 2009, December 2009, winter 2008): the first on U.S. health care reform, the second on climate change, and the third on a wide range of human rights topics, including racial and sex discrimination
- A poll conducted by the Program for Public Consultation specifically for this study (April 2011) in order to collect data on some highly controversial topics—notably abortion and reproductive rights, collective bargaining by government employees, activities of the National Labor Relations Board, and raising the minimum wage

In addition to these 14 surveys, in order to widen our base of questions on a few specific topics that are highly controversial (same-sex marriage and other gay and lesbian issues, abortion, and gun control), we included 10 surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and several major media outlets that only provided state-level breakouts.

States with two Republican senators were designated “red” and those with two Democratic senators were designated “blue.” States with one senator from each party were viewed as “red” or “blue” depending on the state’s vote in the preceding presidential election (2008 or 2012). If a state’s presidential vote showed a margin of 2 percent or more, then it was designated red or blue accordingly. If the margin was below 2 percent, the state was left out of the analysis.

These 10 polls were from:

- Pew Research Center (March and September 2011; June 2012; March and May 2013)

- ABC News (February 2010, July 2011)
- CBS News (December 2010)
- Time (June, 2011)
- Newsweek (December 2008)

Selection of Poll Questions

From these surveys we selected 388 questions on a wide range of policy issues. The overwhelming majority of 339 questions were divided by districts, while 51 were divided by states.

Questions were limited to those that were policy-prescriptive: i.e., it asked respondents to weigh in on a policy choice the government could make or had made. For clarification, here are examples of question types that were *not* included because they did *not* ask respondents to specify a policy direction but rather presented an argument: questions that asked respondents whether they “agree or disagree,” or found the argument “convincing or not convincing”; asked respondents’ *perceptions* of what is the case about a policy situation; asked about perceptions of threat; asked about their level of concern about an issue, with no indication of a policy prescription one way or another; or asked for reactions to *another* country’s foreign policy direction, not that of the United States.

Analysis of Various Types of Poll Questions

To compare responses in red districts/states and blue districts/states, each poll question had to be treated in a binary fashion. This was self-evident in the many cases in which the poll question offered the respondent two possible structured responses. However, other variants had to be adapted to a binary analysis.

In cases where two basic responses were offered respondents (e.g. favor vs. oppose) but they were also offered intensity options (e.g. very or somewhat), the intensity variations were collapsed for each basic response.

When a poll question offered three responses on a continuum, two were collapsed as follows. If one or the other end of the continuum of responses was a majority position in either red or blue districts/states, the other two positions would be collapsed. If no end of the continuum option was chosen by a majority, the division was made according to which option was the one that was more sharply different from the other two, or how the options most closely mirrored the divisions in the political debate.

These principles applied to a study in which respondents were presented currently proposed spending numbers and were asked to enter the exact spending level they preferred for each item. Responses were first divided according to whether respondents increased, maintained, or decreased spending relative the numbers presented, and then collapsed as noted above.

Another study’s series of spending questions had an asymmetric continuum, offering the options of increasing, keeping the same, decreasing or eliminating. Responses were collapsed as

follows. If one or the other end of the continuum of responses was a majority position in either red or blue districts/states, the other three positions would be collapsed. If there was no majority at either end of the continuum, “increased” and “kept the same” were added together, and “decreased” and “eliminated” were added together.

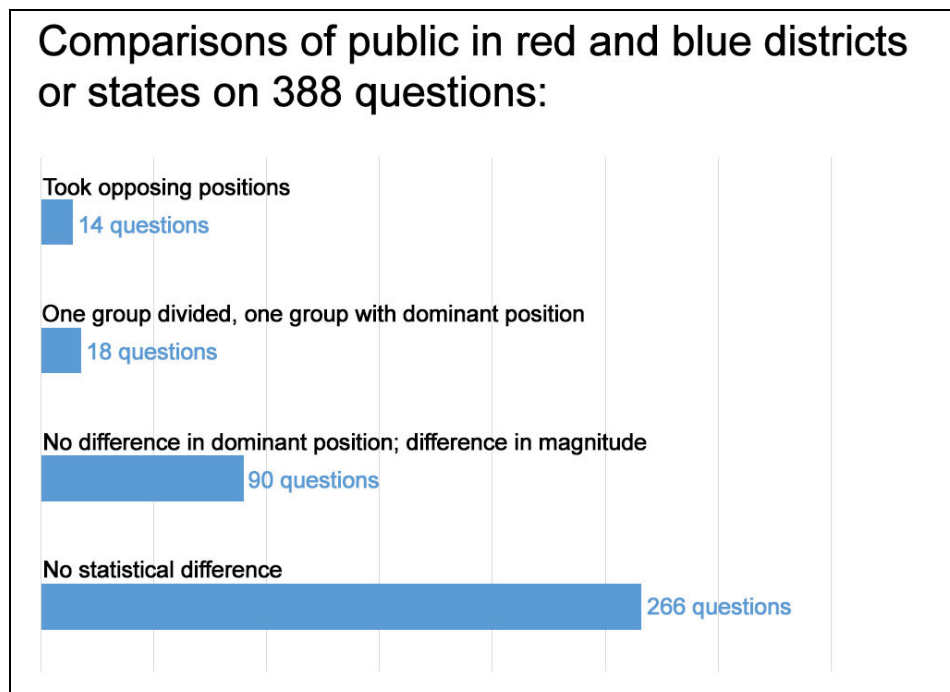
Significance Test

Analytic comparisons were made between the red and blue districts/states with a significance test, called the z-test, on the *differences* between the two population means (red districts/states and blue districts/states). In this test, if the standard error of the different proportions exceeds the differences between the two populations with 95% confidence, the results are considered significant. Thus, those questions in which the results approached chance (i.e., a 50-50 split) tended to be non-significant, and questions whose results diverged strongly from chance tended to be significant.

FINDINGS

- 1. Comparing the views of people who live in red Congressional districts or states to those of people who live in blue Congressional districts or states, across 388 survey questions, majorities or pluralities took opposing positions in about one out of thirty cases. In two out of three cases there were no statistical differences.**

Respondents were divided according to whether they lived in a red or blue district or state. The responses of each group to 388 policy-prescriptive survey questions (i.e., the question asked respondents to specify what the government should do) were then aggregated and compared. The comparison found:



- For only 3.6 percent of the questions — 14 out of 388 — did a majority or plurality of those living in red congressional districts/states take a position opposed to that of a majority or plurality of those living in blue districts/states.
 - For 4.6 percent of the questions (18 out of 388), there was a majority or plurality in one group of districts/states, while the other group was divided.
 - For 23.2 percent, or 90 questions, there were significant differences in the size of the group taking the dominant position, but the dominant position was the same.
 - For the remaining 68.6 percent, or 266 of the questions, there were no statistical differences between the distribution of views in the red districts/states and the blue districts/states.
- 2. The few questions for which views were polarized between red and blue districts or states dealt with policy topics that are familiar, high-profile, ‘hot-button’ partisan issues. However, for all of these topics there were also other questions that did not elicit polarized responses between red and blue districts or states.**

The questions for which there was any red-blue district or state polarization—i.e., for which majorities or pluralities took opposing positions in one or more questions—covered six topics in all. Three of these topics were “hot-button” topics that are famously controversial—gay and lesbian issues, abortion, and Second Amendment issues relating to gun ownership—and these accounted for 11 out of the 14 polarized questions. The other three topics were not “hot-button” topics and had a single polarized question each: Justice Department spending, the use of U.S. troops, and foreign aid.

Topics and Numbers of Questions for Which Cases of Polarization Were Found		
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Total Questions</i>	<i>Polarized Questions</i>
Gay and Lesbian Issues	29	8
Abortion	14	2
Gun Control	10	1
Justice Department Spending	2	1
Use of US Troops	12	1
Foreign Aid	19	1

Gay and Lesbian issues: In 8 questions out of 29 there were indeed opposing majorities. In 2013, 53% of people in red states thought gay marriage should be illegal, and 58% of people in

blue states thought it should be legal. Asked how they would vote if given the chance to vote for or against an amendment to their state constitution that would ban gay marriage, 54% of in red states said they would vote in favor of it, while a 50% plurality in blue states said they would vote against it. On adoption rights for gays and lesbians, as would be predicted, a majority in blue states was supportive (57%); however, a plurality in red states were opposed (49% opposed, 43% supported).

However, for numerous other questions on gay and lesbian issues, views were not polarized. On the general issue of whether homosexuality should be accepted or discouraged by society, a majority in blue states (63%) and a plurality in red states (49% to 42%) said it should be accepted. Majorities favored civil unions for gay or lesbian couples in both red states (53%) and blue states (71%), though the statistically significant difference was in the expected direction. Majorities in both red and blue states (75% and 82% respectively) said that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly in the military.

It should be recalled that the questions collected for this study were collected from the years 2008-2013, with the latest from spring 2013. Consequently, the widely noted shift in public attitudes on gay marriage was still an ongoing process when these questions were fielded.

Abortion: There were two questions stated in general terms in which majorities or pluralities had opposing views. Fifty-five percent of those in red states thought abortion should be illegal, while 60% in blue states said it should be legal. The other question, which asked whether abortion should be legal in all or most cases, found 51% in red states saying it should be generally illegal and 59% in blue states that it should be generally legal.

On more specific questions, opposing majorities did not appear. For example, equivalent majorities agreed that abortion should at least be available in some cases (74% in red states, 78% in blue states), that abortion should be legal if the woman was raped (70% in red districts, 71% in blue districts), and that government funding of Planned Parenthood should not be ended (63% in red districts, 64% in blue districts).

Gun Control: There was a single question in which red states and blue states were opposed. Asked “What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, OR to control gun ownership?” 56% in red states said it was more important to protect the right to own guns, while in blue states 51% said it was more important to control gun ownership. This was also the most broadly phrased value choice.

On more specific questions, opposing majorities did not appear. Thus, allowing permits to carry concealed handguns under certain conditions—for persons with no criminal record who have passed a gun safety test—was favored by pluralities in both red districts (50% to 34%) and blue districts (43% to 39%). Forbidding state and local governments to ban handguns and concealed weapons in high-crime areas was supported by clear majorities in red and blue states (65% and 58% respectively).

In both of these above instances the differences were significant in the expected direction. However, on a federal ban of semi-automatic assault weapons to civilians, both red and blue

states had majorities in favor, with no statistical difference, in a question that specified their use would be reserved to the military and police. In another question that simply referred to “a ban on assault-style weapons,” a majority in blue states was in favor while red states were divided.

Justice Department Spending: In the context of a budget exercise, a majority in blue districts maintained or increased funding for enforcement activities and the court system (54%), while this was cut by a majority in red districts (53%). However, on funding for the federal prison system, shown in the same exercise, equivalent majorities maintained or increased spending.

Use of US Troops: In a series of questions about the possible use of US troops for specific purposes, when asked whether they would favor or oppose the use of US troops if Israel were attacked by its neighbors, a majority in red districts favored this (52% favor, 47% oppose) while a majority in blue districts did not (45% favor, 54% oppose). However, in the other eleven cases none even showed a statistically significant difference.

Foreign Aid: Among 19 questions regarding foreign aid, one showed opposing majorities—regarding aid directed to global health programs. In a budget exercise framework in which respondents set their own spending levels, a majority in red districts cut global health spending (58%), while a majority of blue-district respondents maintained or increased it (54%). Among the remaining 18 questions on foreign aid, for three, one group of districts was divided and the other not; for eight, red and blue districts agreed but with statistically significant differences in magnitude; and for seven others there were no significant differences.

3. For numerous areas associated with high-profile partisan conflict, in no questions did people in red districts/states and blue districts/states take polarized positions.

In a number of other areas associated with high-profile partisan conflict, no questions were found that showed opposing majorities or pluralities in red and blue districts/states.

Topics and Numbers of Questions for Which No Cases of Polarization Were Found			
<i>Domestic Topics</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>International Affairs Topics</i>	<i>Questions</i>
Health care reform	22	The US role in the world in general	14
Immigration	10	Defense spending (overall, and detailed budget)	24
Social Security	10	US military bases abroad (overall, and specific locations)	9
Raising or lowering federal taxes	24	Iraq and Afghanistan	10
Climate change and the environment	27	General Middle East issues	5
Preventing race and gender discrimination	6	Hezbollah and Hamas	2
Human rights	11	US policies toward Libya, Syria and Iran	18
Labor issues	4	US policy toward China and East Asia	12
Energy policy and government spending on energy	7	US policy toward North Korea	12
Spending on infrastructure	6	US policy toward Cuba	3
Science policy, including stem cell research	4	Terrorism and anti-terrorism policy	9
Marijuana laws	2	Nuclear and biological weapons issues	6
Spending on education	5	Globalization and trade	15
Spending on agriculture	2	The UN and international organizations	22

In all the subject areas with no polarized positions—which included a total of 302 questions—there were 13 questions (4% of this group) on which the red or blue district/state had a divided response while the other had a dominant position. In another 60 questions (20% of this group) there were statistically significant differences, though majorities or pluralities made the same choices in both cases.

4. Hearing strongly-stated arguments for and against a policy position, ones that respondents might have recognized as characteristic of partisan ideology, did not

subsequently increase the incidence of polarization between red and blue districts on policy-prescriptive questions.

One possible explanation for the lack of differences between red and blue districts/states is that in response to generic questions about policy issues, respondents failed to discern the underlying ideological themes that would presumably have elicited a response that is more consistent with the partisan color of their district.

We wanted to know if hearing strongly-stated arguments for and against policy positions--arguments that are characteristic of party positions--might result in more pronounced blue-red district differences. Hearing such arguments might also trigger a memory of their own Member's position.

Among the 388 questions examined, there were 28 for which respondents were first presented and asked to evaluate a set of strongly-stated arguments typical of the dominant political discourse on the issue, before finally taking a position on the policy issue. For all these questions district-level data were available. These included questions on:

- several widely-argued aspects of health care reform (the public option, the individual mandate, the employer mandate, tort reform, and the purchase of insurance across state lines)
- funding levels for the Afghanistan war
- funding levels for the general defense budget and its components
- possible ways to cover the Social Security shortfall, and other changes to the program
- economic policy

Overall, the responses to the 28 questions that followed a battery of arguments were not characteristically different than for the whole set of 388 questions.

For the 28 questions, none had opposing majorities or pluralities in red and blue districts. In one case (on the individual mandate in health care reform) blue districts were in favor while red districts were divided. In the blue-district group, 55 percent favored "requiring all people to have health insurance for themselves or their children," while 41 percent opposed this requirement; in the red-district group, 48 percent favored this and 47 percent opposed it (a statistically divided result). (For the health care questions regarding the employer mandate, tort reform, and the purchase of insurance across state lines, though each was preceded by a battery of arguments, there was no statistical difference between the two groups.)

There were six other cases where there were significant statistical differences between red and blue districts, though their majority responses were in the same direction. In one case, a larger majority in red districts favored reducing benefits to the top 25% of earners in order to help cover the Social Security shortfall. The other five cases were in a detailed exercise on the defense budget and concerned spending areas—current air force capabilities, current ground force capabilities, new naval capabilities, and missile defense—for which arguments were given for maintaining or reducing spending in that area.

In all these five cases, majorities in both the red-district group and the blue-district group made reductions, but there were significant differences in the expected direction—that is, the blue-district majorities making reductions were larger than the red-district majorities making reductions.

In the remaining 21 cases, though respondents had first dealt with strongly-stated arguments, there was no statistical difference between red-district and blue-district responses.

5. In the current environment, the parties have taken strong positions on the budget—with Republican members of Congress strongly opposing revenue increases and Democrats strongly opposing cuts to entitlements. However, when respondents were asked to make up their own federal budget, there were only slight differences between respondents in red and blue districts. In both cases majorities both raised revenues and trimmed entitlements.

Another possibility is that, while responses to more generic questions may have been homogenous, when forced to make actual trade-offs in a budgetary context, respondents would show the differences consistent with the policy priorities of the party of their representative.

Among the 388 questions were 47 from an interactive, online exercise on the budget deficit, in which a representative sample was given extensive information, real-time feedback, and the ability to freely change budget numbers up or down. For all of these questions district level data was available.

Spending items. Among a total of 31 areas of the discretionary budget, there were 22 areas in which there were no statistical differences between the choices of those in red and those in blue districts—both either cutting, or maintaining or increasing, the funds for that area. In another 4 areas, majorities that differed only by size made choices in the same directions.

There were 3 areas in which one group of districts was divided while the other group had a majority preference. These areas were: spending on mass transit (red districts were divided, while a majority in blue districts maintained or increased it); development assistance (a majority in red districts cut it, while blue districts were divided); and the Department of Homeland Security (a majority in red districts maintained or increased it, while blue districts were divided).

In 2 areas, red districts and blue districts made choices in opposing directions. In both areas, a majority in red districts cut spending and a majority in blue districts maintained or increased it. These two areas were spending on global health and on the Department of Justice for law enforcement and the court system. (The federal prison system was a separate line item; both groups of districts maintained or increased its budget, with no statistical difference.)

Revenue items. There were 16 items for revenue, and for 10 of these there were no statistical differences between the choices of those in red and those in blue districts. Overall, in this exercise both red districts and blue districts increased revenues, and were very similar in the ways they did so. Red districts raised about the same amount of revenue from income taxes as

blue districts did, but they were somewhat more inclined to seek revenue from corporate taxes and excise taxes than were blue districts.

For 4 items, majorities of statistically different magnitudes made choices in the same direction. In a fifth item a plurality in blue districts agreed with a majority in red districts.

On one item—raising income taxes on incomes in the \$50-75,000 range—blue districts were divided (41% favor, 38% oppose) while red districts had a plurality opposed (40% favor, 45% oppose). This difference, while not large, was statistically significant.

On 6 other items there were statistically significant differences, though the red-district group and the blue-district group agreed on direction. These included:

- Oppose raising income taxes on individual incomes of \$30-40,000
- Oppose raising income taxes on individual incomes of \$40-50,000
- Favor raising income taxes on individual incomes of over \$1 million
- Favor raising the average tax rate on corporate profits
- Favor taxing “carried interest” as ordinary income

And separately, a survey on the issue of temporarily reducing the payroll tax to assist economic recovery found majorities in both red and blue districts supporting a tax increase on incomes over \$1 million a year in order to pay for the reduction.

Of the 6 items just discussed, the significant differences went in the expected direction (blue districts more willing to tax) in 3 cases, and went in the contrary direction (red districts more willing to tax) in the other 3 cases.

For 4.3 percent of the budget exercise questions, the views in red districts and in blue districts were opposed to each other. For all the other questions in this study—those not part of the budget exercise—this was true 3.5 percent of the time.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the data analyzed in this study, it is unlikely that polarization in the public is driving the polarization we see in Congress today. The striking similarity between red districts/states and blue districts/states on the vast majority of policy issues we reviewed suggests that red and blue districts are far more alike than different. On most issues, it appears America is not so divided after all.