Does rhetoric about political inequality reduce citizen engagement?

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Abstract

Political rhetoric commonly calls attention to unequal influence – the idea that some citizens' voices have a greater impact than others. This inequality violates what most Americans would view as part of a healthy, functioning democracy and thus, arguably, heightens perceptions that our democracy is not very democratic. In this project we investigate the effect of such rhetoric on engagement. While citizens may view this information as concerning, it may also reduce their engagement in the democratic process, which could exacerbate political inequality further. We examine this possibility using several field experiments on the Google AdWords platform as well as a survey experiment that was concurrently in the field.

Introduction

Thus far, one defining feature of the 2016 presidential race is the recurring focus on two related topics: the expanding role of money in politics and the closely-related issue of political inequality (i.e. the ways in which elites running the government are not responsive to the wishes of the broader electorate). Candidates across the ideological spectrum – Hillary Clinton, Martin O'Malley, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, and Lindsay Graham, among others – as well as many in the non-partisan sphere have all decried the outsized role of wealthy donors, the rise of super PACs, the influence donors wield over the political process, and the resulting deafness to ordinary citizens' interests and preferences (Brown 2016).

Stepping back from the current campaign, rhetoric about political inequality is a long-standing feature of American campaigns. Increasing elite polarization (McCarty et al. 2008), close contests for control of Congress (Lee 2009), the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision and the increasing prominence of billionaire donors (Hasen 2016), growing emphasis on lobbying by the wealthy (Drutman 2016), and increasingly-heated rhetoric directed toward political opponents (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015) all provide opportunities for elites to characterize the American political system as beholden to wealthy elites and non-responsive to the wishes of ordinary Americans.

The fact that such rhetoric is commonplace would seem to suggest that it must be engaging – after all, why would so many employ it? – but to our knowledge its potential effects have not been tested empirically. While many researchers study the empirical linkages between money and politics (for a recent summary of this literature, see Brown 2016) to our knowledge the question of what happens when ordinary citizens are exposed to rhetoric about this inequality is thus far unanswered.

These observations help motivate our key question: How does talking about political inequality affect citizen engagement?[1] Does this kind of rhetoric diminish the desire of

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[1] Here, and in what follows, we use the term "political inequality" as a catch-all term that would encompass rhetoric related to campaign finance, the role of money in politics, and/or influence of the wealthy (and lack of influence of the non-wealthy) in American democracy.

ordinary Americans to participate in the political process, which itself has the potential to further exacerbate political inequality?

In this paper we argue that it depends – and, in particular, it depends upon the type of engagement. Calling attention to political inequality can be highly persuasive in the sense that it increases concern about the problem. In other words, the rhetoric can successfully help set the agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This agenda-setting process is important because, although there is large bi-partisan support for various kinds of campaign finance reforms that are poised to limit the influence of big money in politics (and, by extension, reduce – or at least give the appearance of reducing – political inequality), the issue ranks low on Americans' priorities.[2]

What about political behavior? In this paper we focus on a particular form of political behavior: information seeking. We argue that rhetoric about political inequality reduces people's desire to seek out information and engage in the American political process because, fundamentally, it calls attention to the fact that our democracy is in fact not very democratic – that the will of the people is not heeded by elected officials and the institutions of government. So while this rhetoric may affect public opinion by persuading people that there's a problem that should be addressed, we argue that it will also reduce their desire to take part. It is thus an example of self-undermining rhetoric that persuades, but also paralyzes (Levine 2015).[3]

In this paper we investigate the link between political inequality rhetoric and voter engagement in two ways. First, we conduct a series of field experiments in which we study the impact of this rhetoric in a natural setting in which citizens are given the opportunity to gain information regarding voter registration. Second, we conduct a survey experiment that investigates the impact of political inequality rhetoric on various measures of attitudinal

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[2]For evidence on the first point, see here: http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/6-perceptions-of-elected-officials-and-the-role-of-money-in-politics/. For evidence on the second point, see here: http://www.gallup.com/poll/188918/democrats-republicans-agree-four-top-issues-campaign.aspx

[3]While the unexpected success of Trump and Sanders might suggest evidence in support of this latter possibility, the interpretation of their rise is unclear. Turnout in the Democratic primaries and caucuses is sharply down this year compared with 2008, the last year that featured a contested Democratic primary. And although Republican turnout is much higher than in either 2008 and 2012, it's unclear how much of that is due to Trump's mere presence in the race as compared with the race's overall heightened level of competitiveness. In short, there remains the very real possibility that this rhetoric is demobilizing.

engagement, especially concern about the issue.

Field Experiments

We first conducted a series of field experiments to investigate political action in a natural setting. We partnered with Long Distance Voter (LDV), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that operates a website (www.vote.org) to centralize information related to voter registration, Election Day voting, and early voting for residents of all fifty states. The overriding goal, as noted on their website, is to "leverage technology to remove barriers to voting." During the 2016 campaign LDV is the recipient of a Google AdWords Grant, which allows LDV to bid for advertisement space at the top and to the right of Google search results when users search using specific keywords. We were able to use part of the grant money to conduct a series of experiments that investigated how various messages related to political inequality influence people's desire to search for more information by clicking on the ad.

Given that Google AdWords is not a common research platform for studies of politics and communication, we first briefly describe how it works.[4] Each ad contains four lines: a subject line, two lines of text, and a url. We specified a long list of search terms related to voter registration (3,168 in total) that would prompt the appearance of our ads.[5] When a Google user searches for one of our terms, Google conducts an instant auction in which AdWords customers bid to have their ads shown. The highest bids win. As Google grant recipients, our maximum bid was limited to $2. Given that our search terms were very popular, we often faced significant competition for ad space (and prices would reach as high as $7-9). When we won the auction, then our experiment was run, and one of our ads was randomly assigned to be shown.

The population for our field experiments is thus the set of people that are searching on the Internet for voter registration information. It is a convenience sample, but one that is

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[4]There have been a few published papers in these fields that have investigated citizen engagement through Facebook ads, but not AdWords to our knowledge (see, for example, Ryan 2012).

[5]Here are some examples of the keywords: Register to vote, voter registration, registration deadline, how to register, voting website, election ballot, voter registration deadline, vote registration, verify registration, verify your registration.

arguably of interest for two main reasons. First, from the perspective of testing hypotheses about political rhetoric that might reduce engagement, ours is a particularly tough test. After all, the people in our study are already motivated enough to conduct an information search on their own. Second, from the perspective of thinking about whether this kind of rhetoric exacerbates political inequality, this is a especially meaningful group. This group would consist of people that are not currently registered where they live, either because they have never been registered to vote or because they are simply not registered at their current address. We view this group as of interest in and of itself.

An ideal experimental design might randomize Google users to receive either a control group message or one of several possible treatment group messages that are theoretically of interest. In our case, however, LDV requested that we set up each experiment as a two-group design in which the control group was always their strongest message to date. Thus, in order to test the effect of various political inequality messages, we conducted a rapid-fire series of two-group field experiments over a short period of time. Each experiment was posted for 9-12 hours, and they each followed in quick succession over the course of a few days at the beginning of June 2016.[6]

With these limitations in mind, the control group in all of our experiments was LDV's "best-performing" language that emphasized how it was "quick, easy, and free" to register to vote. We then conducted four experiments in which the treatment language referred to some aspect of political influence (i.e. citizens' voices mattering or not). The treatments varied along two dimensions: first, whether they explicitly referred to existing inequalities in political influence and, second, whose influence was mentioned.

A summary of our four treatments appears in Figure 1. The two treatments in the top

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[6]We were also very careful to limit the length of each experiment for two other reasons. First, we wanted to limit the possibility that there were broader political events that might arise that would introduce significant heterogeneity in terms of how users responded to the content of our ads. We will present data later on to suggest that this was not a concern during our fielding period. Second, we were mindful of the fact that the Google AdWords algorithm seeks to optimize which ads are shown at all times, and thus will stop showing ads if it becomes clear that one ad is significantly out-performing another (even if it is part of an experiment in which the ads are supposed to be randomized). For this reason, we were mindful of severe imbalances in the number of times our control and treatment groups were being shown for each experiment. As seen in the results, no major imbalances arose. Lastly, it is worth noting that another possible research design, that also would include all comparisons at once, would include a cluster-randomized design (Ryan and Broockman 2012), in which we cluster all possible users based on their age, gender, and any other known characteristics (the kinds of attributes that would be known if users are logged into a Gmail account when they search). Unfortunately LDV's grant is limited in the functionality available, and thus we do not have access to this kind of information about the users.

left ("Wealthy buying elections" and "The system is rigged") mirror what is arguably the most common kind of political inequality rhetoric by referring to the existing status quo and focusing on the outsized influence of people other than those who are the main audience for these messages. One message does so by referring to the role of money in politics, whereas the other one does so by making a more wide-ranging critique of the decision-making process.[7] The treatment in the bottom left ("Your voice is not yet being heard") also refers to the existing status quo, especially given that our ads will appear to people seeking registration information, but at the same time focuses only on the influence (or lack thereof) of the individual him/herself. The fourth message we test is in the bottom-right quadrant – it also only refers to ordinary citizens not having influence, but does so in a way that avoids referring to existing inequality in political voice and influence.[8]

		Does rhetoric mention existing inequality in political influence?	
		Yes	No
Whose influence is mentioned?	Others having influence	"Wealthy Buying Elections" "The System is Rigged"	(not tested)
	Ordinary citizens not having influence	"Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	"Be Heard this Election"

Figure 1: Comparison of treatments in our AdWords experiments. Control group was the same in each one, and employed LDV's best-performing language at the time of our experiments.

Overall, our research design allows us to test a variety of messages that all mention political influence, but do so in ways that capture meaningful (and politically-relevant) differences in how elites may wish to draw attention to the issue. The full wording of our ads appears in Table 1. Our outcome measure is the most direct way in which people would engage with the content of our messages: whether people click on them or not. Following Ryan (2012), who

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[7]In all cases we were varying the second line in the ad. The ads are limited to 25 characters on the first line (including spaces), and the next three lines may contain 35 characters.

[8]As noted in the figure we do not test messages in the top-right quadrant because we believed it would be difficult to craft a convincing message that adequately satisfied both criteria (this aspect probably explains why they are far less prevalent as well).

Table 1: Treatments: AdWords Experiments

Experiment 1: "Wealthy Buying Elections"	
Control group	*Treatment group*
Free Voter Registration	Free Voter Registration
Registering is quick, easy, & free	Wealthy Buying Elections
Register to vote now!	Register to vote now!
www.vote.org	www.vote.org
Experiment 2: "The System is Rigged"	
Control group	*Treatment group*
Free Voter Registration	Free Voter Registration
Registering is quick, easy, & free	The System is Rigged
Register to vote now!	Register to vote now!
www.vote.org	www.vote.org
Experiment 3: "Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	
Control group	*Treatment group*
Free Voter Registration	Free Voter Registration
Registering is quick, easy, & free	Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard
Register to vote now!	Register to vote now!
www.vote.org	www.vote.org
Experiment 4: "Be Heard this Election"	
Control group	*Treatment group*
Free Voter Registration	Free Voter Registration
Registering is quick, easy, & free	Be Heard this Election
Register to vote now!	Register to vote now!
www.vote.org	www.vote.org

conducted digital-age field experiments via Facebook ads, we interpret clicking as a measure of information-seeking behavior.

Before presenting the results, a few caveats are in order. First, as noted above, these experiments were all fielded over short periods (9-12 hours) in rapid succession at the beginning of June 2016. Although political influence has been a common rhetorical feature of the 2016 campaign, we were mindful that if the specific topics of our ads were at the top of news headlines during our brief fielding periods then that could threaten our ability to draw internally-valid inferences. Thus, we conducted searches of news headlines for all words in our control and treatment groups during the fielding period. We found no evidence that these topics dominated headlines during these brief periods.[9] Second, our design does not prevent the same person from being exposed to our ads multiple times, if he were to search using our

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[9]While our studies were in the field, using the Access World News database we conducted a search of five highly-circulated newspapers (USA Today, LA Times, NY Post, Daily News, and AM News) for the hours that our ads were in the field, searching for mentions of the ad terms (and related terms) either in a headline OR mentioned in the lead/first paragraph. For each of our four experiments, we found zero instances in which our terms appeared.

keywords multiple times during our brief fielding period. Nevertheless, we minimized this possibility by fielding each experiment for only a very brief period of time. Moreover, our experiments involved very competitive search keywords and, as noted earlier, our maximum bid was set relatively low. Thus, it was highly likely that there were many instances in which we were outbid. This means that even if someone did conduct multiple searches during our brief fielding window, it's unlikely that we would win the auction multiple times.

Lastly, from an ethical point-of-view, it is worth underscoring that our treatments are highly similar to the kind of information that voters would be exposed to in their everyday lives. Thus, while we certainly recognize and are sensitive to the ethical implications of potentially reducing political engagement (especially anything related to the fundamental democratic act of turning out to vote), the ubiquitousness of this rhetoric suggests to us that this study is worthwhile.

Field Experiment Results

The results for our experiments appear in Table 2. For each experiment we list the total number of impressions (i.e. the total number of times that our ads were shown to people that searched using one of our keywords), the total number of clicks, the click rate (i.e. proportion of impressions that elicited a click), and then finally a statistical comparison between the click rates. The pattern is striking. We see substantial (and substantively significant) evidence that rhetoric explicitly calling attention to inequality in political influence reduced engagement. Rhetoric calling attention to the "wealthy buying elections" reduced clicks by 46.7% relative to the control group, "the system is rigged" reduced clicks by 43.6%, and "your voice is not yet being heard" reduced clicks by 20.7%.

In contrast, we see no evidence of such a decrease in response to the message that did not refer to current political inequality: "Be heard this election". Indeed, in this case, the click rates between the control and treatment groups were practically identical. It is worth underscoring the importance of this lack-of-difference. Recall that the control group is LDV's current "best performer", and so it's unlikely that we would craft a treatment that would

Table 2: Results: AdWords Experiments

	Exp 1: "Wealthy Buying Elections"	
	Control group	*Treatment group*
Impressions	4369	3896
Clicks	320	152
Proportion Clicking	.07	.04
Statistical Comparison	$|z| = 6.69, p = .00$, two-tailed test	
	Exp 2: "The System is Rigged"	
	Control group	*Treatment group*
Impressions	3586	3720
Clicks	289	169
Proportion Clicking	.08	.05
Statistical Comparison	$|z| = 6.20, p = .00$, two-tailed test	
	Exp 3: "Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	
	Control group	*Treatment group*
Impressions	2678	2774
Clicks	365	300
Proportion Clicking	.14	.11
Statistical Comparison	$|z| = 3.18, p = .00$, two-tailed test	
	Exp 4: "Be Heard this Election"	
	Control group	*Treatment group*
Impressions	3897	3710
Clicks	319	286
Proportion Clicking	.08	.08
Statistical Comparison	$|z| = 0.77, p = .44$, two-tailed test	

yield a higher click rate. However, a message that does just as well is extremely noteworthy, as it suggests that this message can be a powerful way to use influence-related language to engage people.[10]

While the pattern of results from this series of field experiments is clear, it also raises one unanswered question. While we know whether people engaged with our ads or not by clicking on them, whether they engaged with other information contained within the search results is Google's proprietary information unavailable to us. Thus, it is possible that perhaps our political inequality messages reduced engagement with the ads themselves, but nevertheless increased engagement more generally. In other words, to better interpret the

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[10]We also conducted two separate experiments that also used "wealthy buying elections" and "the system is rigged", but then substituted "Join millions who agree" in the third line. The motivation behind these experiments was to see if this kind of impersonal cue that signaled a descriptive norm of behavior (cf. Mutz 1998) might overcome the negative effect of the top-down political inequality language. It turns out that they did not. Compared with the control group, the treatment with "Wealthy buying elections//Join Millions who Agree" yielded a significantly lower click-rate (0.040 versus 0.064, $z = 4.93, p = .00$ two-tailed test) as did "The system is rigged//Join millions who Agree" (0.040 versus 0.054, $z = 4.87, p = .00$, two-tailed test). To be sure, there is some indication that the impersonal cue "worked", as the decrease in clicks was proportionately smaller when including that cue as opposed to not including it, but the broader point is that we have no evidence that the impersonal cues were sufficient for overcoming the negative effect generated by these two forms of political inequality rhetoric.

field experiment results, it is necessary to know more about how these kinds of messages may affect people's attitudes toward electoral engagement more generally. Measuring that in the AdWords context was not possible, but it is in a survey context, and to that we now turn.

Survey Experiment

While our field experiments were in progress we designed a survey experiment to gauge the effect of our treatments on other important measures of political engagement. In our survey experiment subjects were presented with the following scenario: "Please imagine that you just moved to a new state and wanted to register to vote. You do a Google search for "voter registration" and a number of results show up. In addition, as is common with Google searches, an ad appears near the search results. It reads as follows:". Subjects were then randomly assigned to receive the text of our control group or one of our four treatment groups.

Afterwards subjects received a very brief questionnaire that included measures of engagement along with demographic questions. Two questions asked about their likelihood of taking action: how likely they would be to click the ad and how likely they were to vote in November's election for President. The former question was designed as a robustness check for our field experiment results. The voting question addressed the concern from the field experiments that perhaps the content reduced engagement with the ads themselves but not in any broader, politically-important sense. This question directly measured whether our messages affected people's desire to participate in the electoral process altogether. Our final engagement measure was an agenda-setting question that asked respondents how much they believed the federal government should prioritize passing laws that would impose new limits on campaign spending. The precise question wording appears in the appendix.

We recruited a diverse national sample (N=515) through the online platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). While AMT samples are not nationally representative – in partic-

ular, they tend to be younger and more liberal – they are nevertheless reasonably diverse and also useful for drawing inferences from experiments in situations like ours when we do not expect the age or ideology of our respondents to condition how they respond to the treatments (Berinsky et al. 2012, Krupnikov and Levine 2014).

Survey Experiment Results

Table 3 shows the results for each of our three engagement measures, including the average values and then the differences between the control group and each of the treatment groups. Three patterns stand out. First, mirroring our field experiment results, we find that each of the three treatments mentioning existing forms of inequality in political influence reduced people's stated likelihood of clicking. "Wealthy buying elections" and "The system is rigged" led to especially large decreases (53% and 51%, respectively). These results serve as a robustness check to the field results using a different population and different method of eliciting responses. Second, the results for voting intentions suggest that our messages impacted respondents even outside of the context of the ad. Each of the three inequality messages reduced the likelihood that people said they would vote this coming November. This suggests how this kind of language can undermine electoral engagement in a much broader sense than simply voter registration-focused ads. Lastly, we find some evidence for a positive agenda-setting effect as well, at least in response to the "wealthy buying elections" message. Given that this is the only message that explicitly referenced campaigns, it is perhaps not surprising that it was the only one to have a positive agenda-setting role as well. Stepping back, however, we see how even if it has that agenda-setting influence, it can undermine itself in other important ways by reducing people's desire to engage with the electoral process.

Table 3: Political Influence Frames and Electoral Engagement

Likelihood of clicking on the link?				
Experimental Group	Average	Diff.	t-statistic	p-value
Control group ("Quick, easy, and free")	0.43			
"Wealthy buying elections"	0.20	-0.23	$t =$-5.00	$p =$.00
"The System is Rigged"	0.22	-0.22	$t =$-4.78	$p =$.00
"Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	0.34	-0.09	$t =$-1.97	$p =$.05
"Be Heard this Election"	0.45	0.01	$t =$0.33	$p =$.74
Likelihood of voting this coming November?				
Experimental Group	Average	Diff.	t-statistic	p-value
Control group ("Quick, easy, and free")	0.85			
"Wealthy buying elections"	0.76	-0.09	$t =$-2.01	$p =$.05
"The System is Rigged"	0.77	-0.07	$t =$-1.72	$p =$.09
"Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	0.74	-0.10	$t =$-2.35	$p =$.02
"Be Heard this Election"	0.84	-.01	$t =$-0.13	$p =$.90
How much to prioritize campaign finance reform?				
Experimental Group	Average	Diff.	t-statistic	p-value
Control group ("Quick, easy, and free")	0.63			
"Wealthy buying elections"	0.71	0.08	$t =$2.17	$p =$.03
"The System is Rigged"	0.66	0.03	$t =$0.79	$p =$.43
"Your Voice is Not Yet Being Heard"	0.59	-0.03	$t =$-0.92	$p =$.36
"Be Heard this Election"	0.58	-0.05	$t =$-1.31	$p =$.19

Survey experiment results (N=515). All outcome measures re-coded to be 0-1. See appendix for details on question wording. All p-values are two-tailed.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Overall, we find strong and consistent evidence that commonplace rhetoric calling attention to inequalities in political influence reduces citizens' engagement in the electoral process, even if in some cases it can serve an important agenda-setting function. This means that rhetoric about political inequality can itself exacerbate political inequality, to the extent that it leads ordinary citizen to opt-out of the electoral process.

Our findings have several implications. One is that they add to a growing list of other work showing that the effect of political rhetoric on political engagement greatly depends upon the form of engagement (e.g. Levine 2015). As in our studies, the same exact rhetoric has divergent effects on people's attitudes as compared with their behavior. Thus, while at first blush it may seem advantageous for elites to craft messages highlighting problems that their audience is concerned about, such a strategy may end up backfiring in striking ways. While it is understandable that oftentimes it may not make sense for elites to reference the

content of our control group (i.e. how registering to vote is quick, easy, and free), our results suggest that an optimal way to draw attention to "people power" is to use rhetoric like "Be heard in this election" and to avoid rhetoric that explicitly calls attention to existing inequalities. We draw this conclusion under the presumption that, in most cases, speakers would wish for their rhetoric to motivate both attitudinal and behavioral engagement in the same direction.

Our results also provide a springboard for future work. Two opportunities seem especially ripe. One is to study the effect of this kind of rhetoric on other forms of engagement, such as during get-out-the-vote campaigns. Another is to vary the source of the information. We only investigated messages that were not explicitly tied to partisan sources, but it is worth studying if responses differ if the messages come from a candidate. That certainly seems possible, but then again the people who pay the most attention to candidates' statements are likely to already be highly engaged.

Lastly, our results speak to broader debates about how to spur broader political participation in American democracy. Several recent books detail the contours and nuances of unequal voice in contemporary American democracy (for example, Hacker and Pierson 2010, Gilens 2012, Mann and Ornstein 2012). After describing the problem in great detail, it is common for books like these to end (in part) with an appeal for citizens to become more informed, with the implicit expectation that more information about these problems would help create the political will for change. Our results are, to our knowledge, the first empirical test of what happens when you do that, at least with respect to political inequality. If the goal is to increase citizen engagement, our results suggest proceeding with caution and focusing messages on ordinary citizens being heard, not other citizens having too much voice.

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Appendix: Survey Experiment Text

Here are details about the treatments and questions included as part of our survey experiment.

All subjects received the following:

Please imagine that you just moved to a new state and wanted to register to vote. You do a Google search for "voter registration" and a number of results show up. In addition, as is common with Google searches, an ad appears near the search results. It reads as follows: *[Respondents were then randomly assigned to be shown one of the five ads from our field experiments].*

Here are our three measures of engagement:

–How likely or unlikely would you be to click on the ad? *Extremely likely...Extremely unlikely*

–[Based on Gallup likely voter question:] Next, we'd like you to rate your chances of voting in November's election for President on a scale of 1-10. If 1 represents someone who definitely will not vote and 10 represents someone who definitely will vote, where on this scale of 1 to 10 would you place yourself? *1 – Definitely WILL NOT vote ... 10 – Definitely WILL vote*

–At any given time government officials have many problems to deal with. To what extent do you think federal government officials should prioritize crafting policies that would impose new limits on campaign spending? *Top priority...Not a priority at all*