

Round Giving: A Field Experiment on Suggested Charitable Donation Amounts in Public Television

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Abstract

Direct-mail fundraisers commonly provide a set of suggested donation amounts to potential donors, in addition to a write-in option. We conducted field experiments on direct-mail solicitations to over 10,000 members of a public television station, varying the string of suggested amounts. Increasing the vector of suggested amounts by 20-40 percent statistically significantly reduced the overall probability of giving by 15 percent, with no impact on gift amount. However, lowering the second-highest suggested amount from \$100 to \$95 produced an effect in the opposite direction, significantly reducing the number of gifts above \$90 by over 30%. Both manipulations (increasing the suggestion vector and using a non-round number) led to a larger proportion of write-in donations, even as they reduced the number of total gifts. In contrast to standard economic models of charitable giving, our results provide suggestive evidence that donors incur a cognitive cost from writing in an amount that differs from a suggested amount.

1. Introduction

Charitable giving continues to increase in economic importance, with \$358 billion – over 2% of U.S. GDP – contributed to charity in 2014 (Giving USA, 2014).¹ In an effort to attract dollars, charities spend a sizeable 15-35% of their total contributions on administration and fundraising, using mailings, phone-a-thons, and the like.² A growing literature has successfully used field experiments to explore the design features of a solicitation that affect giving behavior, which has provided insights into both fundraising practice and theories of public good provision.³

A common practice in direct-mail fundraising is to provide a vector of suggested donation amounts to potential donors, in addition to a write-in option. In fact, personal collection of hundreds of letters has led us to conclude that almost all mail solicitations provide suggested contributions, usually with multiple checkboxes of different amounts (e.g., \$25, \$35, \$50 and an ‘other’ box), known as an “ask string.” Many charities utilize ask strings in practice⁴, but research exploring how these suggested donation amounts affect donor behavior is limited.

To investigate the role of suggested amounts on donor behavior, we conducted field experiments using a year-end fundraising campaign for a public television station in Tucson, Arizona. In the first experiment, a mailing went out to 10,548 station members, soliciting a year-end gift. Members were randomized to one of four treatments in a 2x2 experimental design. First, we varied the size of the suggested amounts by shifting the entire vector of suggested amounts up by approximately 20% in two of the treatments. Second, we varied whether the vector of suggested amounts was fixed across individuals or personalized based on the individual’s previous donation. We conducted a second field experiment a year later with 9,964

¹ As reported by Giving USA in their report, available at <http://givingusa.org/>.

² As reported by the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy, Urban Institute, Center on Philanthropy, Indiana University. Nonprofit Overhead Cost Project: Facts and Perspectives.

³ See Jasper and Samek (2014) for a summary. Selected findings of that literature are that donations are increased through matches and seed grants (List and Lucking-Reiley, 2002; Karlan and List, 2011), donor gifts and lotteries (Landry et al., 2006), and recognition (Soetevent, 2005).

⁴ For instance, articles on the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) website provide rules of thumb for suggested gift amounts in direct mail (see <http://www.afpnet.org/ResourceCenter/ArticleDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=3580>). Blackbaud, the provider of one of the leading data solution systems for fundraisers, has made incorporating suggested amounts in direct mail straightforward for non-profits (see <https://kb.blackbaud.com/articles/Article/42915>). One of the authors (Reiley) also saved all direct-mail solicitations he received for a year, around the time of the experiment, and discovered that the vast majority of the dozens of charities who mailed him were employing ask strings.

station members in which we tested a larger shift of the vector (approximately 40%) and explored changing just one of the suggested amounts in the ask-string vector from \$100 to \$95 (the second-highest of five amounts in the ask string).

We observe that suggested donation amounts do have a strong influence on donor behavior; overall, 60% of donors choose to give one of the suggested amounts. We find in both experiments that the vector of 20-40% higher suggested donation amounts results in a likelihood of donating that is about 15% lower, with no significant effect on donation amounts (conditional on giving). We find that donors show preference for round numbers in their giving - even when the round numbers suggest a higher gift amount - as the treatment replacing a suggested amount of \$100 with an amount of \$95 produces an economically and statistically significant reduction in the probability of contributing a gift in the range of \$90 or more. In addition, we find that the vectors that lead to lower donation probabilities also lead to a higher probability of a write-in donation amount.

Our results cannot be explained by standard economic models of charitable fundraising as public-good provision, which model the gift amount as being optimized over a continuous set of choices. Suggested amounts are irrelevant in such models. By contrast, our results inspire us to propose that donors incur a cognitive cost from writing in an amount that differs from a suggested donation amount.

Our findings have broad implications for practice. Unlike more costly interventions often undertaken as part of fundraising campaigns (e.g., those that provide matching grants or gifts to donors), suggested amounts constitute a minor framing change or ‘nudge’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Suggested amounts are costless for the fundraiser to implement and do not affect potential donors’ action set, as they are still free to write in any amount. We demonstrate that fundraisers still need to think carefully about the choices of these amounts, as they have large, measurable effects on donor behavior.

2. Previous Work on Suggested Donations

Related work has found that suggested amounts increase the likelihood of giving at the suggested amount (Lee and Feinberg, 2013). Edwards and List (2014) found that suggesting a single amount in a telephone call resulted in a higher probability of receiving a gift relative to no suggestion at all, while Adena et al. (2014) found that a suggestion of 100 or 200 euros

decreased the probability of a gift but increased the average donation amount.⁵ Another strand of research has found that small suggested donation amounts increase the probability of a donation, with the legitimization of small gifts enhanced by language such as ‘even a penny helps’ (Cialdini and Schroeder, 1976; Reingen, 1978; Weyant, 1984; Weyant and Smith, 1987; Fraser et al., 1988).

Most relevant to our work is research that has explored shifting an entire string of suggested amounts. In general, this literature finds ‘downward-sloping demand’ in the sense that when the “price” (or suggested donation vector) increases, the “quantity” (or probability of donation) generally decreases (Weyant and Smith, 1987; Schibrowski, 1995; Warwick, 2003; de Bruyn and Prokopec, 2013). An exception is Doob and McLaughlin (1989), who found no effect on the probability of a donation.⁶ These projects explored relatively large shifts in the ask string (such as {\$5, \$10, \$25} versus {\$50, \$100, \$250} in Weyant and Smith (1987)). By contrast, we explore more modest changes, on the order of 20%. Also, with the exception of de Bruyn and Prokopec (2013), who utilized ask strings that were personalized based on the donor’s past donation, the rest of the literature explores fixed ask strings. In our experiment, we evaluate shifts in both fixed and personalized ask strings, documenting the existence of “downward-sloping demand” in our fundraising context. To this, we add a novel treatment in which we explore the effect of round (\$100) versus non-round (\$95) numbers.

Outside of the charitable giving context, researchers have found a role for round numbers in test taking (Pope et al., 2015) and bargaining outcomes (Pope et al., 2015; Backus et al., 2015; Cardella and Seiler, 2016), taking inspiration from Schelling’s (1960) theory of focal points. We believe our work is the first to document an effect of round numbers in charitable fundraising. We demonstrate the benefits of round numbers in suggested donation amounts for our public-television station, and we compare the size of this effect (on the probability of a donation) with that of the effect of a rightward shift in the entire ask string. We find it especially striking that the round-number effect (of \$100 versus \$95) produces a result opposite to our general finding of

⁵ Other work has investigated an *indirect* suggested amount by telling callers who were making a donation the contribution amounts of others. Shang and Croson (2009) found that giving potential donors information about past high donations (up to a point) increases donation amounts, while giving donors information about past low donations decreases donation amounts (Croson and Shang, 2008).

⁶ Karlan and List (2007) conducted a field experiment using a direct mail solicitation with three ask strings. They included an example using one of the ask strings at random to explain the impact of a matching grant - the example did not have a meaningful influence on behavior.

“downward-sloping demand,” in which rightward shifts of the ask string produce decreases in the probability of a donation.

3. Experimental Design

The experiments followed the Tucson television station’s normal year-end fundraising procedures. In the first experiment, on November 10, 2003, mailings went out to 10,548 current members (individuals who had made “membership” donations that year), randomized to one of four different solicitations.⁷ As was standard practice for the station in prior years, the mailing asked for an additional year-end gift from current members, not conferring any additional membership benefits. The experiment had the 2x2 design illustrated in Table 1.⁸ The first dimension experimented with fixed versus variable donation amounts, while the second experimented with shifting all suggested donation amounts up by approximately 20%. This design resulted from the station’s interest in the possibility of improving their revenue by personalizing the suggested donations by suggesting fractions of the donor’s previous membership gift to the station. We proposed the rightward shifts to help the station explore what amounts might be optimal, and to learn something more fundamental about the nature of donor behavior.

Table 1 shows the ask strings chosen for each treatment in the experiment. Treatment Fixed1 employed a similar ask string to that sent to donors in the previous year-end mailing, while Fixed2 increased these across the board by approximately 20%.⁹ In the Variable treatments, each suggested amount was defined as a fraction of each individual’s previous

⁷ Arizona Public Media also chose to apply the experimental treatments to two other groups of individuals: public-radio members, and lapsed members of both the radio and TV stations (people who had given in a previous year but not the current year). Because results for these groups were low-powered, we have chosen, for simplicity of exposition, not to present them in this paper. Power was low for radio station members because they are only one third as numerous as the television members studied here. Power was low for lapsed members because they donated at rates only one tenth as high as those for current members. The results for radio station members are directionally similar to those of the television station members. The results for lapsed members suggest the opposite direction of effect (donation probability increases with higher ask strings), but are small (0.3 percentage points) and statistically insignificant. These results are provided in the appendix.

⁸ Each person was assigned with equal probability to one of the four treatments, using random-number generation.

⁹ In the previous year’s (non-experimental) year-end campaign, suggested amounts were \$35, \$50, \$75, \$100, \$150 and write-in box. The previous year’s year-end campaign raised \$113,581.18.

membership gift amount X.¹⁰ Each ask string contained five specific suggestions of dollar amounts, followed by a write-in box for those who wished to give an amount other than those suggested. Potential donors were not told that the suggested donation amounts were based on a prior donation amount.

Table 1: Treatments in Experiment 1

Treatments	Solicitations	<i>Suggested Amounts</i>					
		Ask 1	Ask 2	Ask 3	Ask 4	Ask 5	Ask 6
Fixed1	2,619	\$30	\$50	\$75	\$100	\$200	\$__
Fixed2	2,692	\$35	\$60	\$95	\$120	\$240	\$__
Variable 1	2,604	0.5X	0.75X	1X	1.5X	2X	\$__
Variable 2	2,633	0.6X	0.9X	1.2X	1.8X	2.4X	\$__

Note: X represents the previous year’s membership gift amount. In Variable1 and Variable2, the amounts were rounded to the nearest \$5 increment, with an amount increased by \$5 if it turned out to duplicate the next lowest amount in the string.

In the absence of a clear theory about the correct proportions to use in the Variable treatments, we chose the Variable proportions so that the mean of each suggestion (across donors) would be roughly equal to the corresponding suggestion for current donors in the Fixed1 and Fixed2 treatments.¹¹ Since this sometimes produced unconventional dollar amounts (such as

¹⁰ Since few members give a year-end gift, we could not use the year-end gift from the previous year as our reference point. We use their previous membership gift instead, since we have such an amount for everyone solicited.

¹¹ In practice, the mean suggested amounts for the highest entries in the Variable ask strings ended up being a bit lower than the corresponding amounts for the Fixed ask strings. We can see this in Table 2 from the fact that the highest ask amount in Fixed is more than six times the lowest ask amount, while the highest ask amount in Variable is only four times the lowest ask amount. However, the means match relatively closely at the low end, which is where the bulk of donations occur. The mean suggested amounts for those who responded with donations in Variable1 were \$27.08, \$41.32, \$57.16, \$84.50 and \$114.41, while Variable2 resulted in mean suggested amounts of \$34.52, \$51.66, \$69.89, \$105.36 and \$140.70.

non-integer dollar amounts), we rounded all amounts to the nearest five-dollar increment for both Variable1 and Variable2.¹²

One year after the first experiment, we ran a second experiment as part of the station’s 2004 year-end gift campaign. This time, we did not explore variable ask strings, but instead decided to follow up on data from the first experiment suggesting donors favor round numbers over non-round numbers, like \$45 that had sometimes been produced in the variable treatments.¹³ In this experiment, we randomized donors into one of three treatments, as described in Table 2. Treatment 1, the baseline treatment, was similar to the Fixed1 treatment in the first experiment. Treatment 2 experimented with a large increase in ask strings relative to Treatment 1. Treatment 2 deletes the bottom amount, shifts down all suggestions, and adds a suggestion of \$500 at the top. At the low end of the suggestions, where most gifts are received, this increase is approximately 40%, compared with the 20% shift in Experiment 1. Finally, Treatment 95 asked about non-round numbers by modifying only the fourth number in the Treatment1 ask string, replacing \$100 with \$95.

Table 2: Treatments in Experiment 2

		<i>Suggested Amounts</i>					
Treatments	Solicitations	Ask 1	Ask 2	Ask 3	Ask 4	Ask 5	Ask 6
Treatment 1	3,336	\$35	\$50	\$75	\$100	\$250	\$__
Treatment 2	3,282	\$50	\$75	\$100	\$250	\$500	\$__
Treatment 95	3,346	\$35	\$50	\$75	\$95	\$250	\$__

Following its standard practice, in both experiments, the station sent an additional reminder mailing one month after the initial mailing. This mailing, with the same set of suggested amounts received by the donor in the original mailing, went to current members who had not yet given an additional year-end gift. We consider our treatment to include the effects of

¹² Since small previous gift X could yield redundant suggested amounts (e.g., \$5, \$5, \$10, \$10, \$15), we chose in those cases to increase suggested amounts by the minimum required so that each would differ from the last by at least five dollars (e.g., \$5, \$10, \$15, \$20, \$25).

¹³ See the discussion of Figure 1 in our results section below.

both the initial and the reminder mailing, since we were unable to obtain data on which members received a reminder.

Our data for both experiments consist of response rates and gift amounts for each person who gave in response to the year-end fundraising campaign. The outcome data include all gifts received on response cards from this experiment during the three-month period following the initial solicitation. We also obtained the previous (membership) gift amount and ask string applied to each individual who gave during the experiment. However, we were unable to obtain data on the past gifts of those who were solicited but chose not to give during the experiment, because the broadcasting station did not keep these records.¹⁴ The lack of data on non-donors means that we are unable to provide covariate balance checks for the experiment; however, we have reasonable confidence in the randomization of treatment assignment because the station outsourced the mailing to a marketing firm with years of experience in randomized direct-mail solicitations.

4. Results

We begin with Experiment 1. Table 3 provides a summary of our results on the probability of a gift, average gift amounts (conditional on giving) and proportion of gifts utilizing any suggested amount. Our main finding is that the set of suggested amounts significantly affects the probability of a gift. Despite the option to write in one's preferred amount, we observe "downward-sloping demand": larger suggested donation amounts lead to fewer gifts received.¹⁵ (Here, we interpret higher suggested donation amounts to be analogous to a higher "price" of giving.) We observe an 11.65% contribution rate in Fixed1 relative to an

¹⁴ This includes being unable to obtain details about specific numbers in the ask string for non-responders in Variable 1 and Variable 2 treatments. The reason this information is not available is because the randomization and mailings were conducted by a direct-mail marketing company hired by the broadcasting station. The company randomized a list of addresses to each of the treatment groups and sent the mailing. Upon receiving responses (donations) the broadcasting station recorded the experimental treatment group of each donor, using a code printed on the response card at the time of the randomized mailing. This unfortunately means that the station never recorded the treatment assignment for any member who did *not* donate. In future research projects, we would insist on recording treatment assignment for everyone solicited, not just everyone who donated. This would allow us to provide a randomization check, to look for heterogeneous treatment effects by past gift size, and to increase precision in our estimated treatment effects by conditioning donors' outcomes on covariates such as their past gift amount and whether they had previously given extra year-end gifts to the station.

¹⁵ Here, we interpret higher suggested donation amounts to be analogous to a higher "price" of giving, and the probability of giving to be equivalent to the quantity demanded. This "price" of course has nothing to do with donors receiving any good in return; we just note that asking for larger amounts causes donors to be less likely to give at all.

8.99% contribution rate in Fixed2 (Test of proportions $p < 0.01$) and a 10.60% contribution rate in Variable1 relative to a 9.15% contribution rate in Variable2 ($p < 0.10$). This brings us to our first result:

Result 1: Increasing the suggested amounts from Variable1 to Variable2 and from Fixed1 to Fixed2 leads to a significant decrease in response rates.

Treating the suggested amounts as a price level (which increased by approximately 20% in each comparison) and the gift probability as a quantity, the relevant demand elasticities in the two experimental comparisons are -1.1 ± 0.7 and -0.7 ± 0.7 , respectively. Noting the wide 95% confidence intervals on both estimates, we claim merely that the elasticities are in the neighborhood of -1 (the percentage decrease in gift probability approximately equals the percentage increase in ask amounts).

Table 3: Summary Statistics for Experiment 1

Treatment	Response Rate	Responses using a Suggestion	Gift Amount Conditional on Giving	Revenue per Solicitation
Fixed1	11.65% (0.63%)	6.57% (0.48%)	\$47.62 (2.48)	\$4.44 (\$0.41)
Fixed2	8.99%*** (0.55%)	5.05%** (0.42%)	\$47.27 (2.41)	\$4.25** (\$0.34)
Variable1	10.60% (0.60%)	8.49% (0.55%)	\$46.45 (4.46)	\$4.92 (\$0.55)
Variable2	9.15%* (0.56%)	4.33%*** (0.39%)	\$49.65 (5.12)	\$4.54 (\$0.54)
Overall	10.09% (0.29%)	6.09% (0.06%)	\$47.69 (\$1.87)	\$4.81 (\$0.05)

*Note: Reported gift amounts and proportion utilizing suggested amounts are conditional on making a gift. Standard errors in parentheses. Test statistics from a test of proportions are reported (response rates) and t-test (gift amounts) comparing Fixed1 and Fixed2 and Variable1 and Variable2. * p-value < 0.10, ** p-value < 0.05, *** p-value < 0.01.*

We next turn to the sizes of gift amounts. We see no significant differences in the mean gift size conditional on giving. More interesting than the mean gift amounts is the shape of the distribution of gifts, particularly the utilization of the suggested gift amounts. Conditional on giving, we find that a large proportion – 60% of those who contributed – use the suggested amounts. This constitutes 6% of all solicitations. This result is in line with Haggag and Paci’s (2014) work on taxi tipping, who found that default suggested amounts are often used as tips. Like us, they find that individuals are much more likely to give suggested amounts than to write in an amount, and that suggesting ‘too high’ tip amounts yields a greater number of individuals who do not tip at all. We also observe a statistically significant decline in suggested amount usage from Variable1 to Variable2, and a small but insignificant decline in suggested amount usage from Fixed1 to Fixed2. This brings us to our next result:

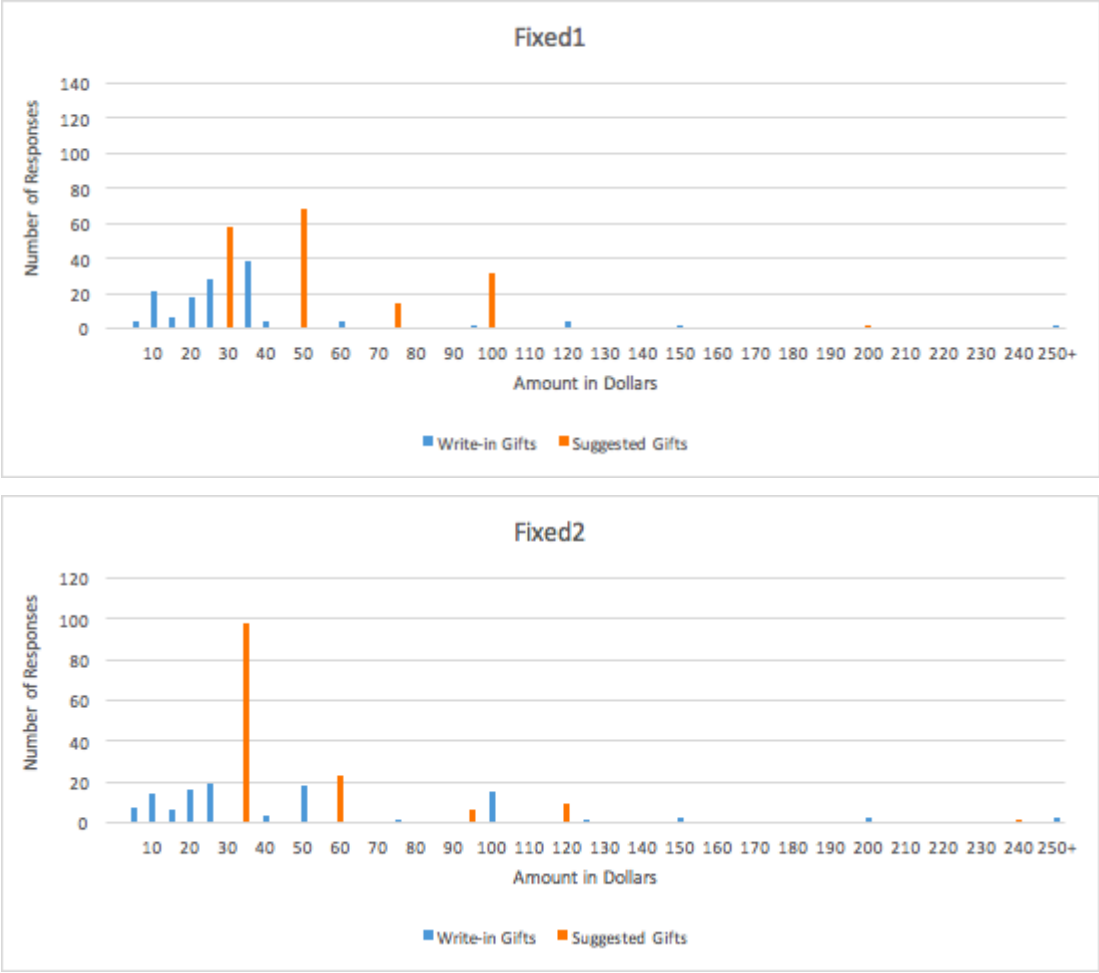
Result 2: 60% of contributors (6% of those solicited) utilize the suggested amount, and the utilization decreases as the set of suggested amounts increases.

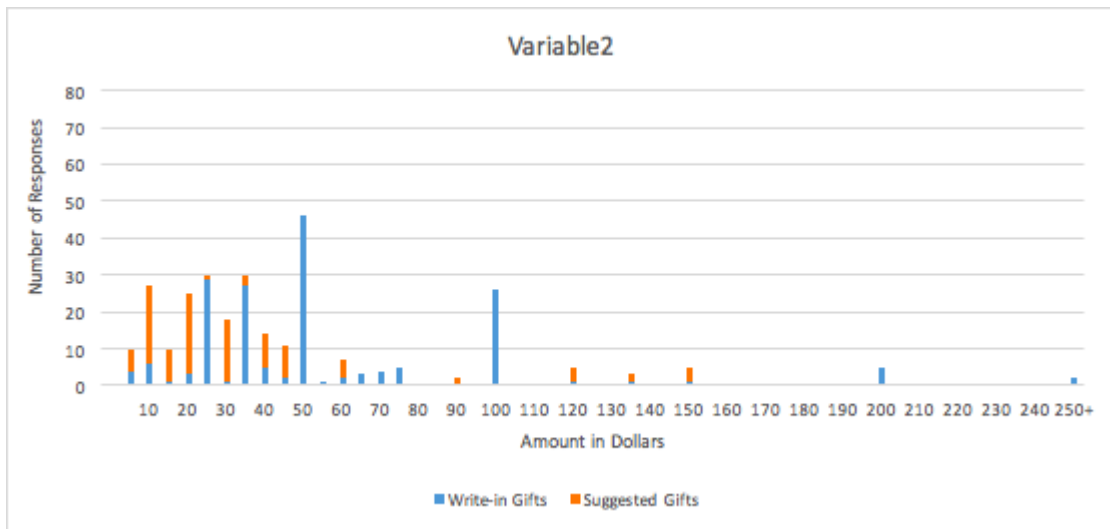
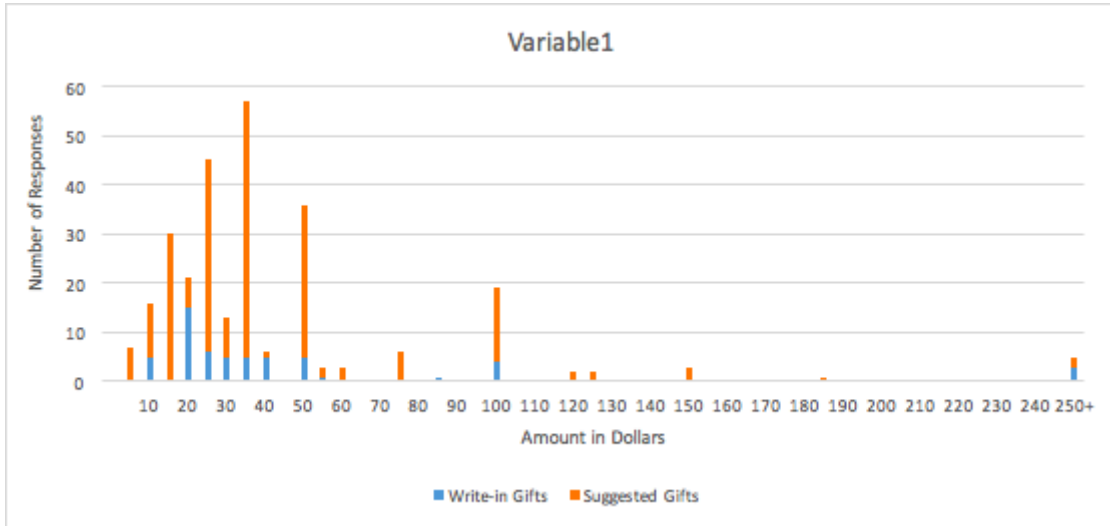
Figure 1 provides histograms of gift amounts in Experiment 1, where the bars are colored red for gifts accepting suggested gift amounts, and blue for write-in gifts. Most write-in gifts fall below the lowest suggested gift (58% of write-in gifts in Fixed1 and 56% of write-in gifts in Fixed2 are below the lowest suggested amount). The likelihood of giving any amount is statistically significantly higher when that amount is suggested. Utilization of suggested amounts is concentrated among the lowest two amounts in Fixed1 (\$30 and \$50) and lowest single amount in Fixed2 (\$35).

Interestingly, we see a preference for giving the “round” numbers \$25, \$50, and \$100 in all treatments, even when they are not suggested (see the panels for Fixed2 and Variable2). Variable1 and Variable2 also both display a high likelihood of giving \$100, whether that amount is suggested (Variable1) or not (Variable2). The \$25 amount is smaller than the smallest amount used in the Fixed treatments, so the evidence about this amount can be found mainly in the Variable treatments. In Variable1, we see over 50 gifts of \$25 when that amount is suggested, and 10 write-ins when it is not. In Variable2, we see almost no suggestions of \$25, but 30 write-ins at that amount. A similar result occurs for gifts of \$50: over 50 such gifts in Variable 1 (where they are mostly suggested) and almost 50 such gifts in Variable2 (where they are almost exclusively written in). Finally, we see just over 30 gifts of \$100 in Variable1, and just under 30 gifts of \$100 in Variable2. Note that total gifts at or near these round amounts tend to be less

frequent in Variable2 than in Variable1, suggesting that non-round suggested amounts may cause some donors not to give at all. (The motivation for Experiment 2 was to investigate this question in an experiment expressly designed for this purpose.)

Figure 1: Histograms of Giving Amounts in Experiment 1





*Note: Orange bars represent giving at a suggested amount, blue bars represent giving a write-in amount.

Finally, we examine hypothesis tests concerning differences in the distributions of gifts plotted in Figure 1. To conduct a chi-squared test, we bin the data into seven natural bins (corresponding to the numeric ranges chosen for the five individual numbers in the Fixed ask strings): no donation, under \$30, \$30-49, \$50-74, \$75-99, \$100-199, and \$200+. The Fixed1 and Fixed2 distributions are statistically significantly different from each other ($p < 0.01$), while the Variable1 and Variable2 distributions are not ($p = 0.47$).

Checking the individual bin ranges, we find it noteworthy that we see a significantly higher probability of giving in the \$50-\$74 bin in Fixed1 relative to Fixed2 when \$50 rather than \$60 is suggested (2.87% versus 1.77%, $p = 0.008$). We see more gifts in the \$100-199 bin in

Fixed1 versus Fixed2 when \$100 rather than \$120 is suggested, but this difference is not statistically significant (0.62% versus 0.38%, $p=0.17$).

We next present results from Experiment 2 in Table 4. We replicate Result 1 from Experiment 1, finding significant decreases in the probability of giving when shifting ‘up’ the suggested gift amounts from Treatment 1 to Treatment 2, a decrease of about 16% ($p<0.01$). This compares with the difference of about 23% found in Experiment 1 when comparing Fixed1 and Fixed2. Dividing that treatment effect by the increase of approximately 40% gives us an elasticity of -0.8 ± 0.6 , once again approximately -1.

Just as in Experiment 1, we find no statistically significant difference in the gift size conditional on giving when moving from Treatment 1 to Treatment 2: the 11% decline in mean conditional gift is insignificant ($p=0.27$). Because of the decline in the response rate, revenue per solicitation declines by 26% when we raise the suggested amounts from Treatment 1 to Treatment 2. ($p=0.04$).

Table 4: Summary Statistics for Experiment 2

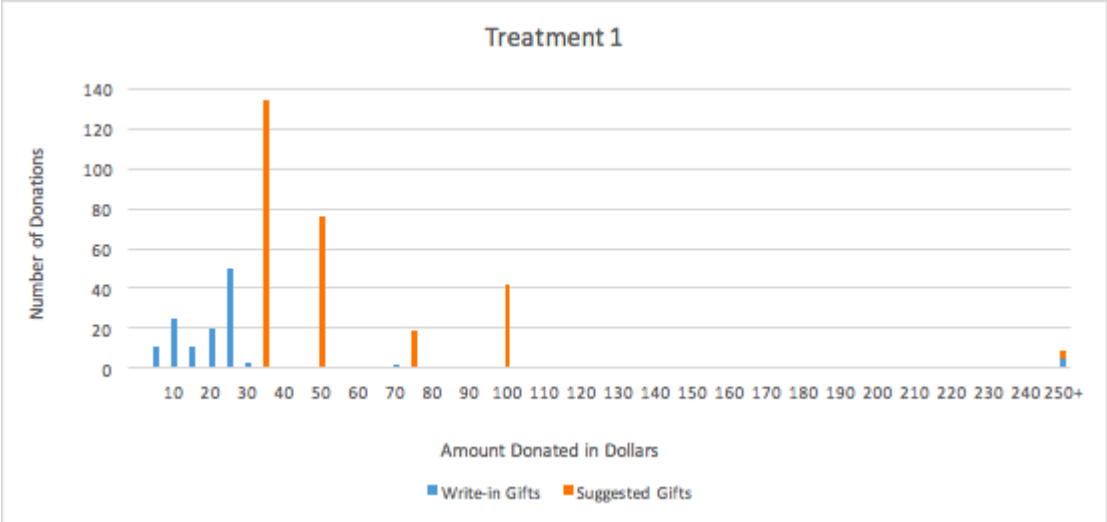
Treatment	Response Rate	Responses Using a Suggestion	Gift Amount Conditional on Giving	Revenue per Solicitation
Treatment 1 (\$100)	12.26% (0.56%)	8.24% (0.47%)	\$53.58 (\$5.11)	\$6.61 (\$0.74)
Treatment 2 (Shift up)	10.29%** (0.53%)	4.11%*** (0.35%)	\$47.50 (\$2.36)	\$4.89** (\$0.36)
Treatment 95 (\$95)	11.39% (0.55%)	6.75%** (0.43%)	\$44.78 (\$3.03)	\$5.11* (\$0.43)
Overall	11.32% (0.32%)	6.38% (0.22%)	\$48.90 (\$2.27)	\$5.54 (\$0.31)

Note: This table displays the response rate, gift size and proportion using suggested amounts, by treatment. Standard error terms in parentheses. Significance tests conducted comparing Treatment 2 to Treatment 1, and Treatment 95 to Treatment 1. * p -value <0.10 , ** p -value <0.05 , *** p -value <0.01 .

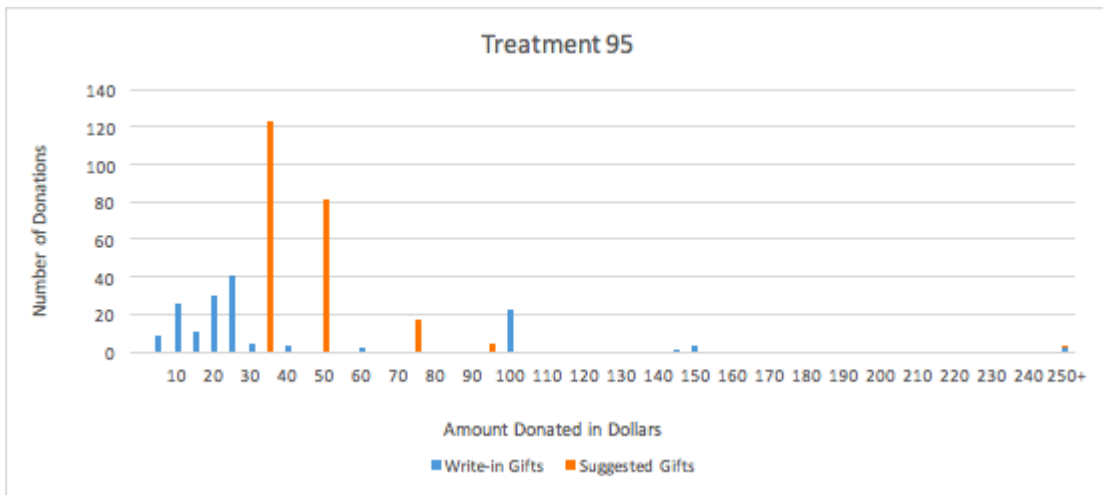
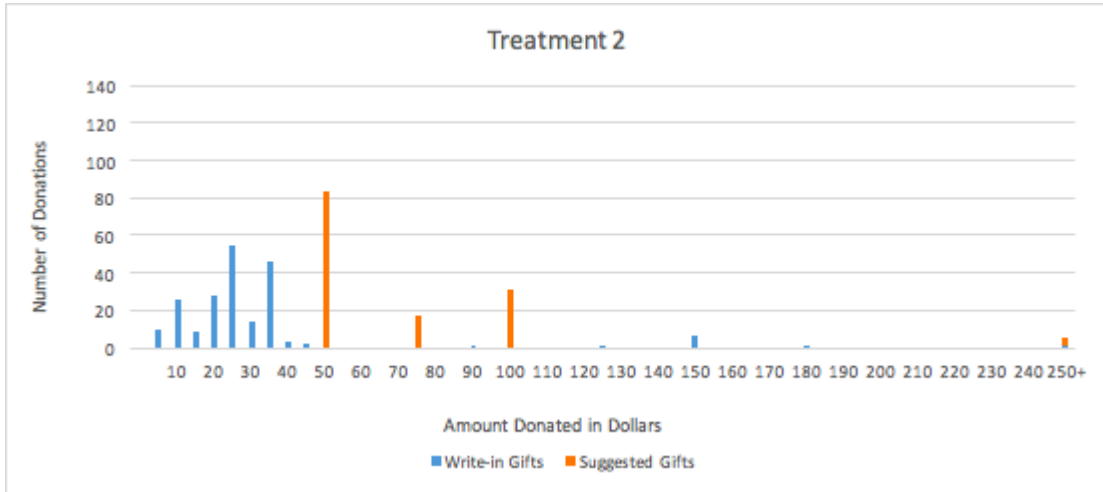
We observe that utilization of suggested amounts is highest in Treatment 1, and significantly lower in the other two treatments. Solicited donors accept suggested amounts 50% less often in Treatment 2 relative to Treatment 1 ($p < 0.01$), and 18% less often in Treatment 95 relative to Treatment 1 ($p = 0.02$). As can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the distribution of responses color-coded by type of response (red for suggested, blue for write-in), this difference in usage of suggested amounts is much greater in Experiment 2 (which increased all suggested amounts by ~40%) than in Experiment 1 (which increased all suggested amounts by ~20%).

Figure 2 shows us the distribution of average gift amounts in each treatment of Experiment 2.¹⁶ The comparison of Treatment 2 to Treatment 1 produces results similar to those in Experiment 1: the rightward shift causes people to make fewer donations overall, and to write in more amounts below the lowest suggested amount (which moves from \$35 to \$50).

Figure 2: Histogram of giving amounts in Experiment 2



¹⁶ Note that although Treatment 2 includes a top suggested ask amount of \$500, gifts of more than \$250 are extremely rare, so we keep the scale of this figure focused on amounts of \$250 or less, as in Figure 1. We receive 3 gifts of \$500 in Treatment 1, 1 gift of \$500 in Treatment 2 and 1 gift of \$500 in Treatment 95.



Especially interesting are the results comparing Treatment 95 to Treatment 1, where the only change is to lower the \$100 suggestion to \$95. The comparisons of means in Table 4 show overall giving rates are about 7% lower with the \$95 suggestion. This difference in response rates is not statistically significant ($p=0.27$), though the resulting 23% decline in mean revenue per solicitation is marginally statistically significant ($p=0.08$). Note that we expect low statistical power in these tests because the vast majority of gifts are at amounts much less than \$95, where suggested amounts are unchanged by the experimental treatment. Instead, we prefer to test the part of the distribution relevant to this suggested donation, where we see an interesting difference between the histograms.

We find that far fewer people give \$100 when the \$100 gift amount is not present (out of all who gave in each experiment, the proportion who give \$100 is 10% in Treatment 1, 9% in Treatment 2, and only 6% in Treatment 95). In addition, the likelihood of giving \$90 or more is

statistically significantly higher in Treatment 1 as compared to Treatment 95 (13.4% versus 8.9%, $p=0.03$). This brings us to our final result:

Result 3: Potential donors are more likely to give a gift in response to round suggested donation amounts (\$100 versus \$95).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Direct-mail (and now online) fundraisers commonly utilize “ask strings” of suggested donation amounts. It is not obvious, from the point of view of microeconomic theory, that the choices of these amounts should impact the behavior of donors, as a donor who doesn’t like one amount in the ask string has the opportunity to write in any amount. The possibility that these amounts could influence donations is ignored by standard economic models of charitable giving, in which donors choose a continuous variable as a gift amount to be removed from their private consumption and given instead to the charity.

We presented systematic evidence from large field experiments to explore the effects of varying the ask string. Across two field experiments, we sent nearly 20,000 solicitations to members of a public television station, varying the ask string across treatments. We find that changes in the ask string have large effects on consumer behavior. Shifting suggested donation amounts up by 20-40% produces a statistically significant reduction of about 15% in the number of donations received, with no significant effects on average gift amount.

We find that approximately 60% of contributors utilize the suggested donation amounts. The probability of sending a gift accepting one of the suggested amounts declines when we raise the ask string. When examining the magnitudes of the write-in amounts, we see a strong tendency to write in round numbers, such as \$50, \$100, and \$200, even when those amounts are not suggested. After noticing this feature of the data in our first experiment, we designed a second experiment to test the effect of suggesting a donation of \$95 versus a donation of \$100. We found that we received significantly more donations in the \$90 and above range when we used the round number \$100.¹⁷ Interestingly, this is different from conventional wisdom about

¹⁷ These results are in line with Pope and Simonsohn (2011), who showed that round numbers are used as reference points in performance scales, and with Pope et al. (2015a), who showed that round numbers are focal points in housing market negotiations.

consumer behavior in the market for private goods, where marketers often set prices with \$0.99 endings rather than round-number prices, in an effort to entice consumers to purchase.¹⁸

Related to our results on round numbers, Edwards and List (2014) report on treatments in which telephone solicitors ask alumni to pledge \$20 versus an ‘unusual’ amount of \$20.01-\$20.09. The authors find that the \$20 suggested amount generates a marginally significantly higher response rate relative to the ‘unusual’ ask. One confound in interpreting this result is that the ‘unusual’ ask is both not a round number and always higher than the \$20 ask. On the other hand, we consider an ask that is *lower* than the round number ask, still finding a decrease in giving rates. This specifically contrasts with the presence of “downward-sloping demand” in our other treatments: when raising the round amounts in Treatment 1 to the round amounts in Treatment 2, we see a reduction in the overall giving rate. We therefore find it especially striking that a reduction from \$100 to \$95 in the suggested amount produces a decrease in the number of gifts in the relevant range.

We propose the following theory that could explain our results. Suppose that there is some cognitive cost of deciding on an amount and writing it in, which one does not incur if one chooses a suggested donation amount. Suppose further that each individual has an ideal gift amount they would prefer to give if selecting a gift amount were cognitively costless; this amount would differ across individuals, depending on factors such as the donor’s wealth, income and altruistic warm-glow preferences. This bliss point could be thought of as the result of an idealized optimization problem, a problem that the individual finds cognitively costly to solve precisely. If her ideal gift amount is suggested, then the individual recognizes the amount as her ideal, so she chooses it. If her ideal amount is not included in the set of suggested amounts, but one of the suggested amounts is sufficiently close that she can recognize it as “almost ideal” and choose it without further introspection, she chooses that. However, if none of the suggested amounts look recognizably close to her ideal point, she then has to decide whether to introspect and decide on her ideal gift amount to write in, knowing that the time cost of doing so may not exceed the increase in utility she gets from sending a donation relative to keeping the money for some other purpose.

¹⁸ For example, Anderson and Simester (2003) experimented with mail-order catalogue prices, documenting higher quantity demanded for prices with a final digit of 9 than other final digits.

In addition, suppose that individuals have a preference for round gift amounts like \$50 and \$100 over less round numbers like \$60 and \$95. This preference manifests itself either directly through the donor utility function (with spikes in the distribution of ideal gift amounts across potential donors), or indirectly in the optimization process because round numbers are intrinsically easier to choose in the pre-calculation process of merely “recognizing” that a suggested amount is close enough to ideal to generate positive net utility benefits. We might think of such a model as a way to implement Herbert Simon’s idea of “satisficing” (Simon, 1955) in the charitable-donation context, in a manner that could provide practical benefits to fundraisers in designing their fundraising campaigns.

This idea is related to a literature on cognitive costs, in that providing suggested amounts may decrease the cost associated with writing in an amount. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) find that individuals are more likely to undertake activities with only a low number of choices, while Chuan and Samek (2014) find that individuals are less likely to give to a charity when provided the option of additionally writing a message in a holiday card.¹⁹ Eckel *et al.* (2015) find results that contrast somewhat with this idea: allowing donors to a university fundraising campaign to direct their gift to a specific unit results in larger donations, although the donors rarely make use of directing the gift. That is, offering donors an extra decision, which might increase cognitive costs, actually increased donations. Perhaps the opportunity made giving desirable for other reasons, such as signaling to the donor that the charity cares about their preferences, and this counteracted any effect of cognitive costs. The fact that donors rarely actually directed the gifts suggests that they were not, in fact, interested in taking on that cognitive cost.

Another interesting feature of our observed “downward-sloping demand” supports this cognitive-cost theory. While our first experiment increased suggested donation amounts by approximately 20%, our second experiment increased donations by approximately 50% (from Treatment1 to Treatment2). Both of these increases produced very similar reductions in the probability of a donation, approximately 20%, even though the “price changes” were very

¹⁹ One might also imagine the cost of deviating from a suggested donation amount to be social rather than cognitive in nature. Related work has proposed that suggested amounts provide additional information about social norms to the potential donor, and that individuals are influenced to move towards the suggested amount to conform to the social norm (Frey and Meier, 2004; Shang and Croson, 2009; Croson and Shang, 2008; Edwards and List, 2014). While this may be important in settings where each donor receives a single suggested amount, as in the experiments conducted via telephone or door-to-door solicitation, they seem less important in our setting with five different suggested amounts to choose from.

different from each other. This is consistent with the idea that when there is no suggested donation amount particularly close to her ideal donation amount, the donor has some discrete probability of choosing not to donate at all, due to the cost of thinking about the correct amount to donate. By contrast, in a market for a private good, we would expect a larger price change to produce a larger decrease in the quantity demanded.

We believe future work should develop and estimate structural econometric models that exploit experimental variation to help fundraisers choose better suggested donation amounts. Our data are not suitable for such an exercise, for two reasons. First, this year-end-additional-gift campaign is different from an annual membership campaign: only 10% of members donate, and they give relatively unpredictable amounts, smaller than their annual membership gifts. Second, we were unable to obtain giving data for people who were solicited but did not donate. Such data would improve statistical power, if a member's ideal gift amount this year is highly correlated with her observed gift amount the previous year. In the future, we imagine conducting experiments that generate ask-string variation for a given solicitation or set of solicitations, making sure to pair this with individual data on the history of individual gifts. This will allow researchers to estimate a distribution of latent desired gift amounts and the costs of choosing a write-in amount, which would then yield predictions about the optimal set of suggested donation amounts. A final step would test the structural model by testing the proposed optimal ask string against the status-quo ask string, to verify whether this exercise is capable of improving outcomes for the charity.

Suggested donations in charitable giving are a rich domain for future research. We would like to see whether a preference for round-number donations can be documented in a wide variety of contexts, with different charities, different groups of donors, and different fundraising channels. Given our observed "downward-sloping demand", we are also interested to see additional experiments and theory that can explain differences in consumer behavior between charitable giving and purchases of private goods.

6. References

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Appendix

Table A1: Experiment 1 Results: Current Radio Station Members (N=3,873)

Treatment	Response Rate	Responses using a Suggestion	Gift Amount Conditional on Giving	Revenue per Solicitation
Fixed1	10.47% (0.10%)	7.37% (0.85%)	\$54.74 (\$3.83)	\$5.73 (\$0.68)
Fixed2	10.84% (0.99%)	5.07%** (0.69%)	\$54.21 (\$4.00)	\$5.88 (\$0.69)
Variable1	12.41% (0.11%)	7.96% (0.88%)	\$58.31 (\$8.75)	\$7.23 (\$1.25)
Variable2	10.11% (0.95%)	5.02%*** (0.69%)	\$54.16 (\$4.11)	\$5.47 (\$0.66)
Overall	10.95% (0.50%)	6.32% (0.39%)	\$55.46 (\$7.82)	\$6.07 (\$0.42)

*Note: Reported gift amounts and proportion utilizing suggested amounts are conditional on making a gift. Standard errors in parentheses. Test statistics from a test of proportions are reported (response rates) and t-test (gift amounts) comparing Fixed1 and Fixed2 and Variable1 and Variable2. * p-value<0.10, ** p-value<0.05, *** p-value<0.01.*

Table A2: Experiment 1 Results: Lapsed TV Station Members (N=16,000)

Treatment	Response Rate	Responses using a Suggestion	Gift Amount Conditional on Giving	Revenue per Solicitation
Fixed1	0.83% (0.14%)	0.55% (0.12%)	\$42.88 (\$4.69)	\$0.35 (\$0.07)
Fixed2	1.11% (0.17%)	0.60% (0.12%)	\$84.33* (\$18.35)	\$0.95** (\$0.25)
Variable1	1.05% (0.16%)	0.73% (0.13%)	\$47.38 (\$7.98)	\$0.49 (\$0.11)

Variable2	1.30% (0.18%)	0.75% (0.14%)	\$34.23 (\$4.61)	\$0.45 (\$0.09)
Overall	1.08% (0.08%)	0.65% (0.06%)	\$52.21 (\$5.62)	\$0.56 (\$0.07)

*Note: Reported gift amounts and proportion utilizing suggested amounts are conditional on making a gift. Standard errors in parentheses. Test statistics from a test of proportions are reported (response rates) and t-test (gift amounts) comparing Fixed1 and Fixed2 and Variable1 and Variable2. * p-value<0.10, ** p-value<0.05, *** p-value<0.01.*

Table A3: Experiment 1 Results: Lapsed Radio Station Members (N=6,000)

Treatment	Response Rate	Responses using a Suggestion	Gift Amount Conditional on Giving	Revenue per Solicitation
Fixed1	1.07% (0.27%)	0.73% (0.22%)	\$72.19 (\$28.79)	\$0.77 (\$0.35)
Fixed2	1.40% (0.30%)	0.67% (0.21%)	\$81.19 (\$24.93)	\$1.14 (\$0.42)
Variable1	1.07% (0.27%)	0.47% (0.18%)	\$42.82 (\$7.43)	\$0.46 (\$0.14)
Variable2	1.47% (0.31%)	0.40% (0.15%)	\$51.14 (\$7.59)	\$0.75 (\$0.19)
Overall	1.25% (0.14%)	0.57% (0.09%)	\$62.27 (\$9.58)	\$0.78 (\$0.15)

*Note: Reported gift amounts and proportion utilizing suggested amounts are conditional on making a gift. Standard errors in parentheses. Test statistics from a test of proportions are reported (response rates) and t-test (gift amounts) comparing Fixed1 and Fixed2 and Variable1 and Variable2. * p-value<0.10, ** p-value<0.05, *** p-value<0.01.*