



# The Relationship Between Attitudes on Social Security Spending, Income, and Party Affiliation in the United States, 1984–2024

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## Introduction

- Social Security is the largest federal program, accounting for \$1.5 trillion or 21% of the budget in FY2024 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2025)
- Lower-income individuals are more likely to favor increased welfare spending, consistent with rational choice theory (Yang & Barrett, 2006; Lazarevic & Ziegler, 2014)
- Party affiliation also predicts welfare attitudes, with Democrats favoring expansion and Republicans favoring retrenchment or market-based alternatives (Faricy, 2017; Lazarevic & Ziegler, 2014)
- Partisanship increasingly conditions how individuals process information about redistribution, with party affiliation's predictive power increasing between 2004 and 2016, particularly among high-income voters (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Brooks & Harter, 2021)
- Evidence on whether partisan effects persist long-term is mixed; some find party differences in shaping welfare policy have declined since the 1970s (Jensen & Wenzelburger, 2019; Bandau & Ahrens, 2019), while others find partisanship still shapes class-related entitlements (Allan & Scruggs, 2004)
- However, existing research has yet to examine how income and party affiliation interact to shape attitudes toward Social Security spending as a specific welfare program across multiple decades.

## Research Questions

1. Does income predict support for increased Social Security spending?
2. Does the effect of income on support for increased Social Security spending differ by party affiliation?
3. Does the effect of income and party affiliation on support for increased Social Security spending differ across election years?

## Methods

### Sample:

- **Data Source:** ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File (1948–2024), consisting of pooled cross-sectional surveys of U.S. citizens aged 18+ across presidential election years
- **N-range:** 662 (1948)–8,280 (2020); some waves include oversamples and panel components
- Survey administration varies by year, including face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys, web surveys, and video interviews
- Survey weights are applied throughout to adjust for differences in sampling design and ensure comparability across years

### Measures:

- **Attitudes on Social Security Spending:** "Should federal spending on Social Security be increased, kept the same, or decreased?"; recoded as binary, where 1= increased, 0=kept the same/decreased
- **Income Group:** Household income grouped into five ordered quintile-percentile bands: 0-16, 17-33, 34-67, 68-95, 96-100
- **Party Affiliation:** 3-point scale: Democrat (1), Independent (2), Republican (3)
- **Controls:** Age, Gender, Race & Ethnicity, Education, Work Status, Census Region

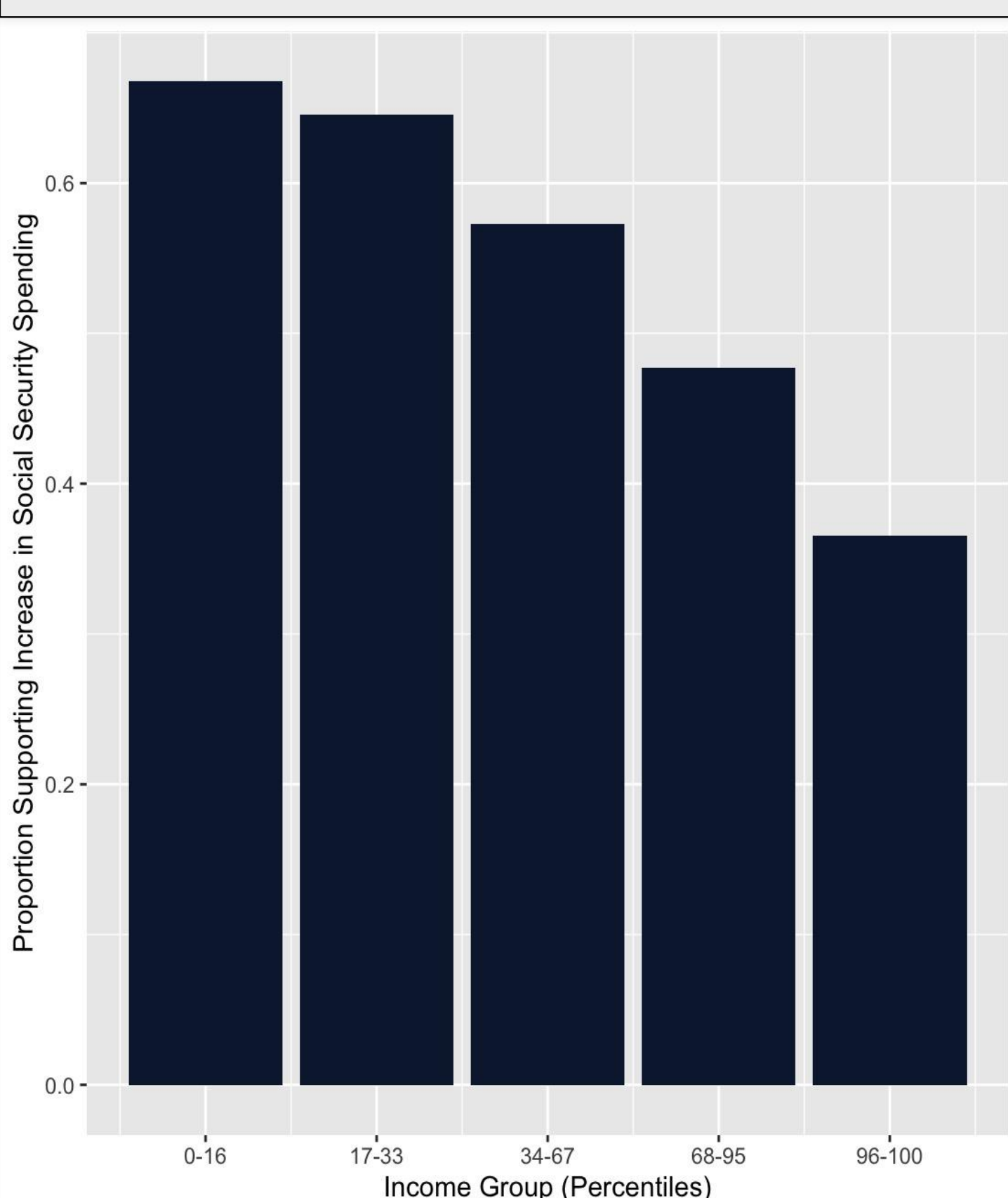


Figure 1: Proportion Supporting Increase in Social Security Spending by Income Quintile, 1984-2024

## Results

### Multivariate Analysis

- A logistic regression controlling for all variables listed in §Measures confirms that income negatively predicts support for an increase in Social Security spending (OR = 0.926,  $p < 0.001$ )
- To test whether this effect differs by party affiliation, an interaction term between income and party affiliation was included in the regression, with Democrats as the reference category
- The interaction term *Income x Republican* (OR = 0.851,  $p < 0.001$ ) is significant, indicating that the negative effect of income on support is significantly steeper among Republicans than among Democrats
- In other words, as income increases, Republicans become disproportionately less supportive of an increase in Social Security spending relative to Democrats, with Independents falling between the two parties
- Predicted probabilities are estimated holding all control variables at their most frequently observed values: white female, some college education, employed, residing in the South, at mean age

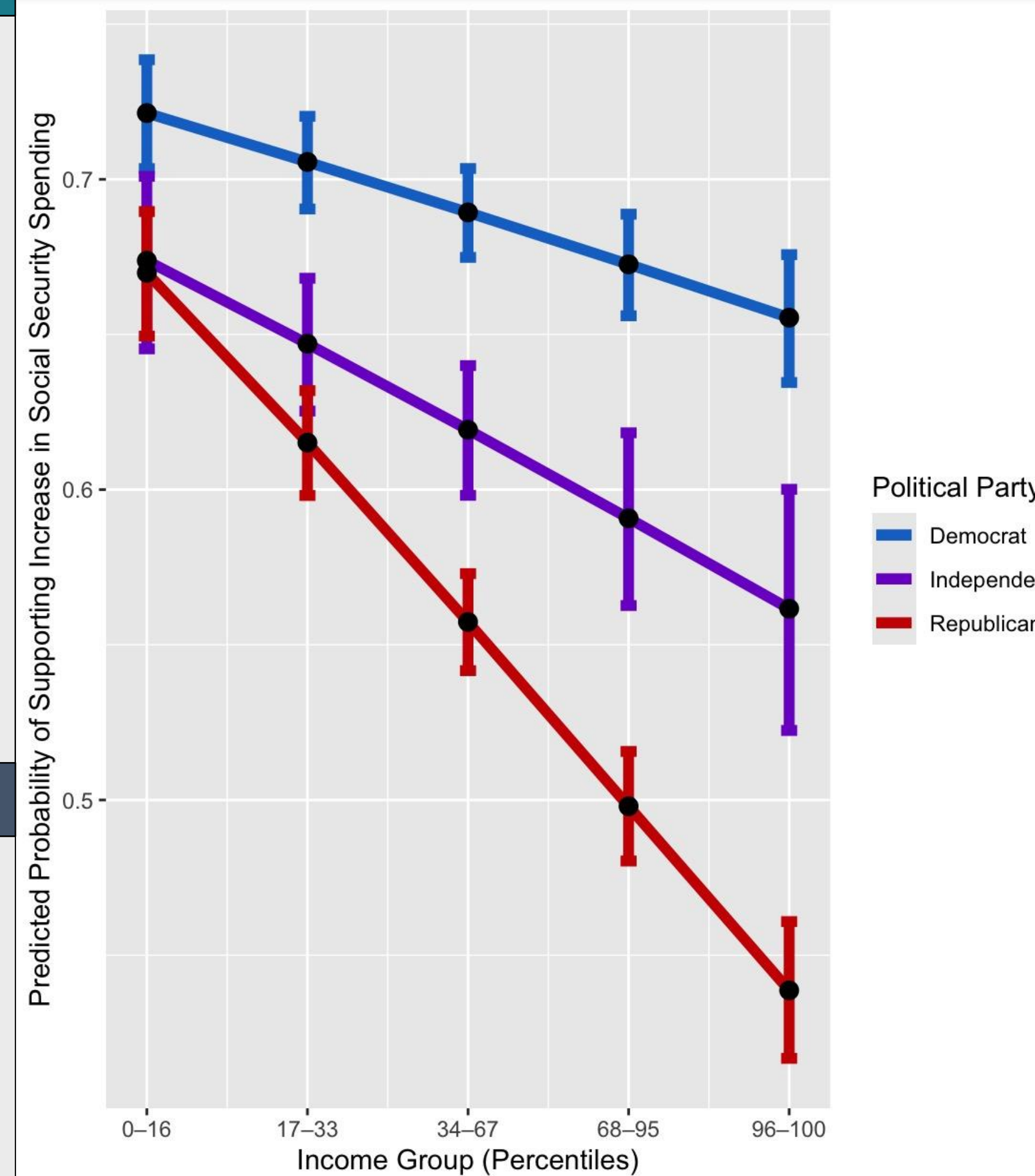
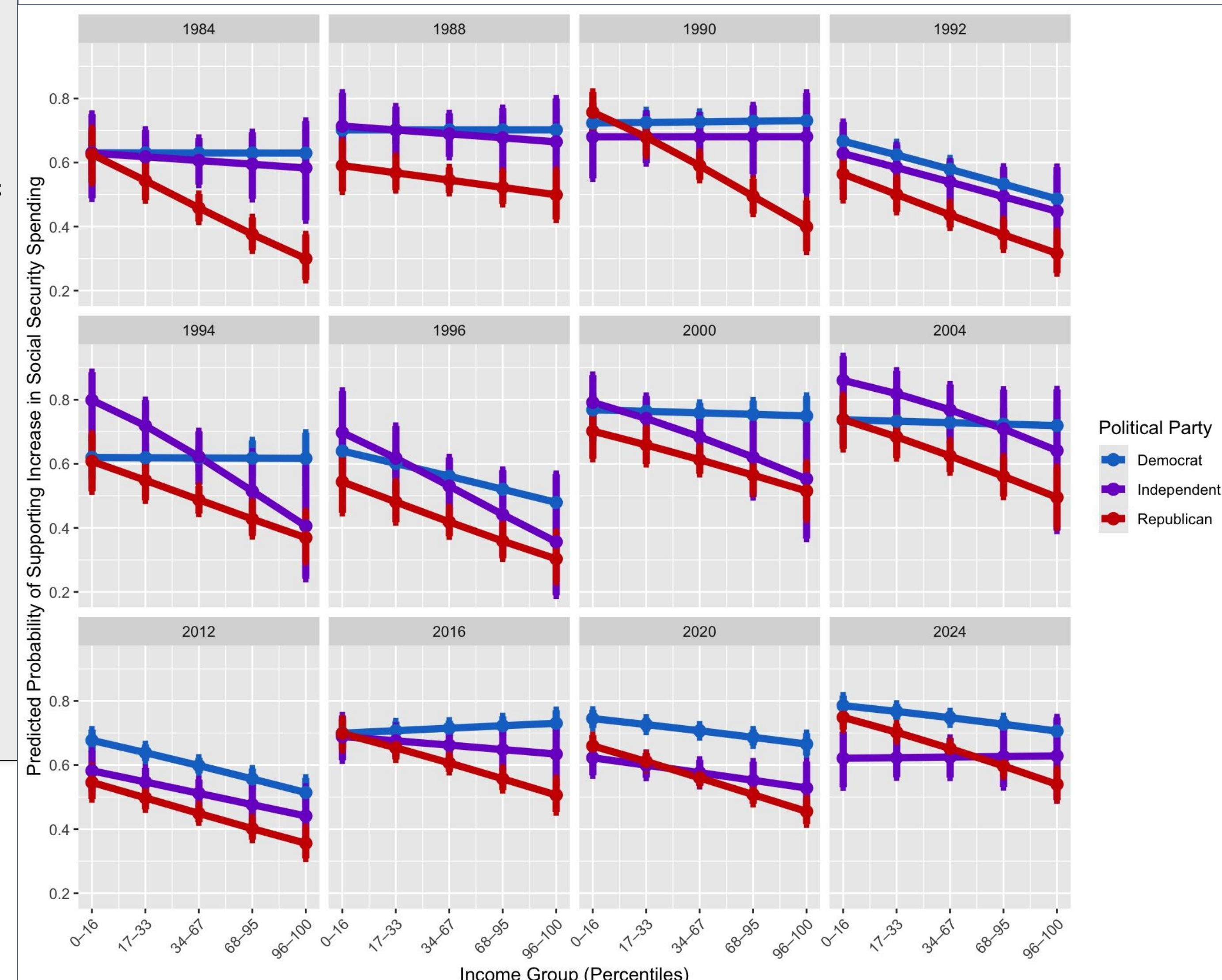


Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Supporting Increase in Social Security Spending by Income Group and Party Affiliation

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Supporting Increase in Social Security Spending by Income Group, Party Affiliation, and Election Year



### Temporal Analysis

- A logistic regression adding a three-way interaction term *Income x Party Affiliation x Year* tests whether the interaction between income and party affiliation on Social Security spending preferences has changed over 40 years, with 1984 as the reference year
- A nested model test confirms the three-way interaction is statistically significant overall ( $\Delta$ deviance = 128.2,  $df = 60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )
- Most three-way interaction terms are not statistically significant, meaning the interaction between income and party affiliation in most years does not differ significantly from 1984
- The exceptions are *Income x Republican x 2012* (OR = 1.37,  $p = 0.008$ ) and *Income x Republican x 2020* (OR = 1.25,  $p = 0.048$ ), indicating that higher-income Republicans became relatively more supportive of Social Security spending increases in these years compared to the 1984 baseline, compressing the within-party income gradient; notably, the three party lines converge most closely in 2016
- Overall, the predicted probability gap between parties narrows over time; among Democrats, the negative relationship between income and support attenuates; among Independents, no consistent directional trend emerges; and among Republicans, while support remains negatively associated with income throughout, the within-party income slope appears to flatten and even shifts upward over time

## Results

### Bivariate Analysis:

- Support for increasing Social Security spending declines monotonically across all five income groups, from ~70% in the lowest bracket (0-16th percentile) to only ~36% in the highest bracket (96-100th percentile)
- This pattern holds across the full 40-year sample, suggesting a stable negative relationship between income and spending preferences over time

## Discussion

- The significant *Income x Republican* interaction term captured in Figure 2 suggests that party affiliation fundamentally alters how income shapes preferences, with Republican affiliation appearing to activate income as a cue for self-interest in a way that Democratic affiliation does not; this is consistent with Brooks & Harter's (2021) findings
- The narrowing of predicted probability gaps across party lines in Figure 3 suggests that income-based attitudinal divergence on Social Security spending may be more limited than the current atmosphere of polarization would predict; this warrants future investigation into whether the program's contributory structure renders it less susceptible to partisan sorting than means-tested welfare programs
- The re-emergence of divergence in 2020 and 2024 suggests the 2016 disruption may have been context- or candidate-specific rather than a durable realignment of preferences; a possible explanation is Trump's divergent populist messaging explicitly promising not to cut Social Security spending, a marked departure from traditional Republican austerity positions, though whether this reflects responsiveness to elite signals remains an open empirical question; the particular significance of 2012 and 2020 similarly points to context-dependent activation of the income-party divide, as the fiscal urgency of the Great Recession and COVID-19 stimulus debates may have temporarily unified Republicans across income groups in their support for federal spending including on Social Security
- Taken together, such context-dependency is consistent with neither the steady weakening of partisan effects over time (Jensen & Wenzelburger, 2019; Bandau & Ahrens, 2019) nor their linear strengthening (Allan & Scruggs, 2004); instead, it suggests that Social Security occupies a distinct position in American welfare politics, broadly popular enough to resist full partisan sorting, yet not immune to income-based divisions that activate under specific political conditions

## References

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