

## 9 Self-Interest in Americans' Political Opinions

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The notion that human behavior is governed at least in part by selfish urges plays a role in virtually every psychology and moral philosophy in Western thought. The great thinkers of the Christian era, such as Saint Augustine, denounced the various lusts, of which lust for money and possessions (also known as greed or avarice) was only one, and by no means necessarily the worst; others identified ferocity, pride, or envy. Thomas Hobbes regarded the human being as motivated first and foremost by self-interest. Adam Smith also concluded that hedonistic selfishness was in some contexts the ruling motive of the human species: "every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people." But he saw self-interest as focused particularly on one motive, "augmentation of fortune." His near contemporary, Jeremy Bentham, argued that people act simply to secure pleasure and avoid pain (including the pleasures and pains of malevolence and benevolence).

From this mixture of antecedents, classical economics has deduced three basic psychological assumptions: the idea of materialistic hedonism, or a simple pleasure-pain principle of human motivation; the idea of egoism, that outcomes to the self are weighed more heavily than outcomes to others; and rationality, that decisions are made on the basis of reasonable calculations limited primarily by the amount of information available.

Theories of self-interest have also been influential in modern psychology. Its formative years were much influenced by Darwin, so accounts of human motivation were dominated by the view that humanity is basically selfish and driven by basic biological needs that ensure species survival. Freud viewed all behavior as motivated principally by such instinctual survival-oriented drives as hunger and procreation, operating according to the pleasure principle. Mainstream academic psychology developed a not

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dissimilar view, ranging from McDougall's theorizing about human instincts to Hull's and Skinner's ideas of primary drives. Deprivation motivates overt activity, and the organism learns adaptive habits when reinforced with drive reduction. It is perhaps not unfair to say, with Campbell (1975) and the Wallachs (1983), that the dominant modern psychological theories of motivation are fundamentally egoistic and hedonistic.

### Self-Interest in Mass Publics

Early studies of mass political behavior suggested that self-interest is a powerful motive in the ordinary citizen's political thinking. Studies of individual voting behavior (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) emphasized the importance of "position issues," whose motivational appeal was presumed to be "self-interest of a relatively direct kind" (p. 184). *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) concluded that Americans commonly responded to domestic issues in terms of "primitive self-interest" (p. 205) and "fairly concrete and short-term group interest" (p. 223), rather than ideologically. Neither work, however, actually assessed the effects of self-interest directly.

Others have demonstrated that fluctuations in the strength of the economy explain over-time changes in electoral outcomes fairly well (Kramer 1971; Tufte 1978; Monroe 1979). Their quite plausible interpretation was that individuals were "voting their pocketbooks." Yet this inference of individually self-interested behavior from a pattern of collectively rational aggregate behavior is purely speculative in the absence of individual-level evidence.

Our own research has tested the hypothesis that the individual's self-interest determines his or her policy and candidate preferences. In defining self-interest, we wished to use terms that corresponded to the common-sense, man-in-the-street understanding, and to its usage in intellectual history. We also wanted the definition to be sufficiently restrictive that the self-interest hypothesis would be both verifiable and falsifiable. As a result, we have defined self-interest as the (1) short-to-medium term impact of an issue (or candidacy) on the (2) material well-being of the (3) individual's own personal life (or that of his or her immediate family).

This definition excludes several other possibilities that we feel fall outside the normal connotations of the term and would make its effects much more difficult to assess, such as (1) long-term self-interest, (2) nonmaterial aspects of well-being (e.g., spiritual contentment, self-esteem, social adjustment, social status, or feelings of moral righteousness), and (3) interests that affect the well-being of the individual's group but not that of the specific individual (for a similar definitional analysis, see Barry 1965, chap. 10).

Virtually all of our research has used large-scale public opinion surveys, with national or statewide samples, or in some cases local surveys conducted in Los Angeles County or the city of Los Angeles. Our specific measures of self-interest have varied along two dimensions: retrospective (e.g., having recently lost one's job) versus prospective (e.g., expectations of a tax cut), and objective (the researcher's assessment of the individual's self-interest, e.g., having children in public schools gives one an interest in school funding) versus subjective (e.g., perceiving that one's own finances have been deteriorating gives one an interest in dismissing political incumbents). Contrary to the practice of many researchers, we ordinarily do not regard standard demographic measures as adequate indicators of self-interest, choosing rather to use more proximal measures of the personal impact of an issue on the individual.

Any cross-sectional study poses problems of causal inference. First, we have assumed that any significant correlation of self-interest and policy and/or candidate preference would reflect the causal role of self-interest. This assumption has not been very controversial. Second, most of our research has contrasted the effects of self-interest with those of a small set of "symbolic predispositions," typically, party identification, self-description as a "liberal" or "conservative," and racial tolerance. The importance of this contrast lies in our theory of "symbolic politics," in which political symbols evoke longstanding affective responses rather than rational self-interested calculations (Sears 1975, 1983). These affective responses are presumed to be the residues of earlier-life socialization (not necessarily preadult), which are evoked by relevant political symbols. For example, party identification is likely to be elicited by a partisan election, and racial tolerance by a busing controversy. We selected these particular predispositions because they can be shown to have been relatively stable through most individuals' adult life spans, and so are unlikely to be substantially influenced by the individual's short-term material self-interest in adulthood.

We have used several statistical criteria for assessing the effects of self-interest. A convenient starting point is to ask whether the self-interest index correlates to a statistically significant degree ( $p < .05$ , two-tailed test) with the political attitude in question. However, because a relatively weak correlation can meet that minimal criterion in large survey samples, we also consider the absolute size of the correlation. From regression equations including self-interest and symbolic predispositions as predictors, we consider the statistical significance and the absolute size of the regression coefficients, as well as the variance explained by the self-interest indicators (taken as a set, or compared to that explained by the relevant symbolic predispositions).



### The Minimal Effects of Self-Interest

The results of all our studies are tabulated in table 9.1. The table shows, for each study, the type of self-interest (e.g., "vulnerability to busing"), the number of self-interest measures used, the political attitude that serves as the dependent variable (e.g., "opposition to busing"), the sample area, and the date of survey. It then presents, in order, three statistical indicators: the mean bivariate correlation between self-interest and dependent variables; the proportion of self-interest measures that yielded statistically significant regression coefficients; and the mean standardized regression coefficient for the self-interest terms.<sup>1</sup> The other indicators are referred to in the text. These analyses were taken from previous research reports, rather than being conducted anew for this paper, so the procedures vary somewhat from study to study.

### Racial Issues

Our research on the self-interest hypothesis began as an incidental by-product of our work on whites' political resistance to racial change. As the civil rights struggle shifted from the Deep South to the North and West in the late 1960s, one popular hypothesis was that racial threats had finally come to northern whites' doorsteps, thus evoking a self-interested "white backlash." We first tested this thesis in 1969 and 1973 surveys in nearly all-white suburbs of Los Angeles, when the white mayor, Sam Yorty, was challenged by a black city councilman, Tom Bradley. We measured personal racial threat to the respondents' private lives (i.e., self-interest) by asking people how they perceived (1) the dangers from desegregation of their neighborhood; (2) the economic threat they personally felt from blacks; (3) the threat of racial busing to their family; and (4) the fear of personal victimization by black crime. We also asked a series of questions about racial intolerance, which we summed into an index of "symbolic racism" (Sears and Kinder 1971; Kinder and Sears 1981).

Preference for the white candidate was strongly predicted by symbolic racism, and scarcely at all by racial threat. As entry 1 in table 9.1 shows, only 2 of the 18 regression coefficients for racial threat (11 percent) were significant, and their average was a nonsignificant  $+ .04$ . In contrast, symbolic racism had highly significant effects, accounting for 22.3 percent and 15.3 percent of the variance in candidate preference in the two years.

We then conducted a series of studies focused specifically on whites' opposition to busing. Whites were regarded as self-interested in busing if they had children in the public schools, lived in districts with busing happening or threatened, or lived in all-white neighborhoods. In two national studies, only one of ten self-interested regression coefficients was significant—they averaged just  $.00$  (see entries 2 and 3)—and the self-interest

Table 9.1 Effects of Self-Interest on Public Opinion

Type	Self-Interest		Dependent Variable		Survey		Correlation		Regression		
	No. Items	Type	No. Items	Sample	Year	Mean	Type*	Net Percent Significant	Betas: Mean	Tests	Source
<i>Racial issues</i>											
1. Racial threat	20	Oppose black mayoral candidate	1	Los Angeles suburbs <sup>a</sup>	1969, 1973	$+ .21^b$	1	11.1	$+ .04$	(18)	Kinder & Sears 1981
Neighborhood integration	5					$+ .41^b$	1	0.0	$+ .06$	(5)	
Economic competition	6					$+ .21^b$	1	25.0	$+ .02$	(4)	
Racial busing	5					$+ .05^b$	1	0.0	$- .01$	(5)	
Black violence	4					$+ .26^b$	1	25.0	$+ .09$	(4)	
2. Vulnerability to busing	5	Opposition to busing	2	national <sup>a</sup>	1972	$+ .01$	4	16.7	$+ .02$	(6)	Sears, Hensler, & Speer 1979
3. Vulnerability to busing	5	Opposition to busing	1	national <sup>a</sup>	1976	NA	4	0.0	$- .02$	(4)	Sears et al. 1980
4. Vulnerability to busing	24	Opposition to busing	14	national, Calif., Los Angeles <sup>a</sup>	1964–1979	NA	4	21.1	$+ .03$	(52)	Sears & Allen 1984
5. Vulnerability to bilingual education; bilingualism	9	Opposition to bilingual education	7	national <sup>a</sup>	1983	$+ .02$	1	0.0	$+ .01$	(8)	Huddy & Sears 1989
<i>General economic issues</i>											
6. Declining personal finances	2	Presidential performance	3	national	1983	$+ .04$	NA	NA	NA	(6)	Sears & Lau 1983
7. Declining personal finances and vulnerability to inflation	2	Opposition to taxes and spending	18	California	1979	NA	1	0.0	$.00$	(10)	Sears & Citrin 1985



8. Vulnerability to inflation	2	Presidential performance	4	national	1983	-.03	4	NA	NA	(4)	Sears & Lau 1983
<i>Employment</i>											
9. Employment problems	6	Government guaranteed employment	2	national	1976	NA	1	33.3	+.02	(3)	Sears et al. 1980
10. Employment problems	4	Guaranteed jobs, presidential performance	5	national	1983	+.04	NA	NA	NA	(8)	Sears & Lau 1983
11. Women's role in the workplace	3	Gender equality and feminism	5	national	1984	NA	3	16.7	NA	(6)	Sears & Huddy 1990
<i>Energy</i>											
12. Personal impact of energy crisis	4	Proadministration policy support	8	Los Angeles County	1974	NA	3	0.0	.00	(2)	Sears et al. 1978
<i>Service recipients</i>											
13. Poor health insurance	3	Support for national health insurance	1	national	1976	NA	1	66.7	+.08	(3)	Sears et al. 1980
14. Service recipients	13	Support for taxes and spending	18	California	1979	NA	1	25.0	+.03	(20)	Sears & Citrin 1985
15. Service recipients	4	Opposition to Prop. 2½	2	Massachusetts	1980, 1981	NA	4	25.0	+.03	(4)	Lau, Coulam, & Sears 1983
16. Women's economic disadvantage	5	Support for women's issues	3	national	1984	NA	3	20.0	NA	(10)	Sears & Huddy 1990
<i>Taxes</i>											
17. Federal tax burden	5	Support for tax cuts	4	national	1983	+.10	NA	NA	NA	(16)	Sears & Lau 1983
18. State and local tax burden	2	Opposition to taxes and spending	18	California	1979	NA	1	90.0	+.15	(10)	Sears & Citrin 1985
19. State and local tax burden	4	Support for Prop. 2½	2	Massachusetts	1980, 1981	NA	4	50.0	+.12	(4)	Lau, Coulam, & Sears 1983

<i>Public employment</i>											
20. Public employees	1	Support for taxes and spending	18	California	1979	NA	1	60.0	+.09	(5)	Sears & Citrin 1985
21. Public employees	2	Opposition to Prop. 2½			1980, 1981	NA	4	100.0	+.14	(2)	Lau, Coulam, & Sears 1983
<i>Crime</i>											
22. Vulnerability to crime	6	Support for law and order policies	5	national	1976	NA	4	33.3	+.03	(3)	Sears et al. 1980
<i>War</i>											
23. Relatives and friends in Vietnam service	6	Opposition to Vietnam War	3	national	1968	+.04 <sup>d</sup>	3	16.7	+.04	(6)	Lau, Brown, & Sears 1978
24. Vulnerability to military draft	7	Opposition to draft; support detente	11	UCLA students	1980	-.08	2	-20.0	-.05	(10)	Sears et al. 1983
25. Concern about likely war	3	Opposition to draft; support detente	11	UCLA students	1980	+.20	2	50.0	+.19	(2)	Sears et al. 1983
Total	147		168			+.07		22.8	+.04	(188)	

\*Note: The number of items shown is prior to the development of composite scales. Correlation is Pearson  $r$  unless otherwise specified. Regression type included only self-interest terms, where possible (type 1); otherwise they included self-interest and some demographics (type 2); self-interest and symbolic predispositions, typically ideology, party identification, and racial attitudes (type 3); or all three (type 4). The standardized regression coefficient (beta) is shown. Net percentage significant is the percentage significant (at least  $p < .05$  two-tailed) in the predicted direction minus the percentage significant in the opposite direction.

a. Whites only.

b. Gamma.

c. Non-Hispanics only.

d. Tau - c.



variables did not show any additive or interactive effects (Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears et al. 1980). In a later study, eight surveys on busing yielded 24 self-interest coefficients, which averaged  $+ .03$  (Sears and Allen 1984; entry 4). Racial intolerance dominated self-interest in all three studies, yielding highly significant regression coefficients of  $.39$  and  $.31$  in the first two, and an average correlation of  $.26$  in the third.

Others who have tested the self-interest hypothesis concerning busing have obtained much the same result (e.g., Bobo 1983, using national data; McConahay 1982, in Louisville; McClendon and Pestello 1983, in Akron; and Gatlin, Giles, and Cataldo 1978, in Florida). Similarly, Kluegel and Smith (1983) and Jessor (1988) have found that whites' self-interest in affirmative action (e.g., perceived personal competition for jobs with blacks) has little effect on attitudes toward racial policies, which instead are best explained by more general attitudes of racial intolerance. Similarly, Anglos' opposition to bilingual education seems to be governed more by racial attitudes than by personal experience with it (indeed those with children in such programs are the most supportive of it; Huddy and Sears 1989; entry 5). These studies of racial issues, then, have almost uniformly yielded little support for the self-interest hypothesis that racial threats to whites' private lives affect their stances on racial policies, and equally uniformly have yielded strong effects of racial intolerance.

### *Economic Issues*

It might be argued that racial conflicts have a complex, profoundly emotional quality that mask or at least complicate the effects of self-interest. Economic issues might therefore be regarded as more appropriate venues for the occurrence of self-interest. Our research in this line began with attitudes toward government-guaranteed full employment and national health insurance (Sears et al. 1980). As entries 9 and 13 in table 9.1 indicate, the self-interest indicators yielded rather small regression coefficients, averaging  $+ .05$ , although half of them were statistically significant. Green (1988) reports similarly weak self-interest effects on these two issues. Another study focusing on unemployment, inflation, and presidential economic performance yielded eighteen correlations with self-interest, averaging  $+ .02$  (Sears and Lau 1983; entries 6, 8, 10, 17). We also found that the personal impact of the 1973–74 energy crisis had no effect whatever on individuals' political attitudes (Sears et al. 1978; entry 12).

A considerably more ambitious study (Sears and Citrin 1985; entries 7, 14, 18, 20) took advantage of three California ballot propositions in 1978–80 that offered, respectively, a massive property tax reduction (Proposition 13 in 1978), a cap on state spending (Proposition 4 in 1979), and a 50 percent reduction in state income taxes (Proposition 9 in 1980). These presented a unique opportunity to study political self-

interest, since they offered individual taxpayers large and concrete economic benefits as well as dire threats to public services and public employment, with the intense and focused attention of hotly contested campaigns.

We identified four groups of self-interested respondents: "taxpayers" (those who were homeowners, felt burdened by heavy property and/or income taxes, expected large tax reductions from the propositions, or had high income), the economically discontented (those who had declining family finances or felt hurt by inflation), public employees, and the recipients of various government services. The dependent variables were attitudes toward the three ballot measures and toward size of government and spending on public services, estimates of waste in government, and perceptions of excessive wages for public employees.

The "taxpayers" held quite consistently self-interested political preferences, as shown in table 9.1, entry 18; we will return to this below. The economically discontented, who might have been expected to support tax and spending cuts, did not. Further analyses, not shown in the table, found no evidence for interactions between these types of economic discontent that might reflect "stagflation" (Sears and Citrin 1985:137–39). The public employees and recipients of government services were expected to defend the public sector out of self-interest, but showed only scattered support for it. The regression coefficients averaged  $+ .03$  for service recipients (entry 15) and  $+ .09$  for public employees (entry 20), though the latter yielded some significant effects to which we will return. Surveys done in Massachusetts before and after the vote on Proposition 2½, another major property-tax-cutting measure, yielded quite similar results in virtually all these respects (Lau, Coulam, and Sears 1983; entries 15, 19, 21).

The rise of the women's movement might have generated self-interested support from women for policy positions benefiting them. However, women have not generally supported women's issues more than have men (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Mansbridge 1985). Among women, support for women's issues, gender equality, and feminism and for candidates favorable to women (such as Mondale and Ferraro in 1984) might well have been rooted in special economic interests concerning children, marriage, and work. Our study did show that single mothers were especially supportive of government aid to women, and working women were especially supportive of gender equality (Sears and Huddy 1990; entries 11, 16). But for the most part women responded to these issues as symbolic ones. Feminism and abortion policy proved to be almost pure symbolic issues.

Finally, two studies have examined self-interest among the elderly in programs that do (Social Security and Medicare) or do not (education)



especially benefit them. However, Huddy's (1989) literature review finds no greater support for Social Security or Medicare spending among the elderly, and Ponza et al. (1988) actually find less support among them (along with less support for spending on education). The latter also find no great age differences in support for transfer payments either to low-income older people or to (presumably younger) low-income families with children. In both studies, policy preferences are somewhat more closely linked to economic position among older people, but the effects are neither very strong nor very consistent.

In short, these several economic issues yielded somewhat more evidence for self-interested political attitudes than was the case for racial issues, but even here it is unusual.

### *Crime and War*

We have also considered the effects of violence. Analysis of a 1976 national survey tested the hypothesis that support for "law and order" policies would be produced by such self-interest variables as recent victimization by crime and fear of walking in one's neighborhood at night (Sears et al. 1980; entry 22). All told, self-interest explained only 0.4 percent of the variance (compared to 17.1 percent for the usual three symbolic predispositions). Crime would seem to be more a symbolic than a personal issue in politics.

A major source of self-interest in war is vulnerability to combat. However, we found little evidence that those with friends and relatives serving in Vietnam were most opposed to the war there (Lau, Brown, and Sears 1979, entry 23; Mueller 1973 reports similar findings). Moreover, among a representative sample of UCLA undergraduates, in a study conducted during the 1980 confrontations with the USSR over Afghanistan, vulnerability to the draft did not produce increased opposition to registration, draft, or military action toward the Soviet Union (Sears et al. 1983; entry 24). While one possible measure of self-interest, the perceived likelihood of war, was associated with antiwar and antidraft preferences, this proved one of the rare cases in which controls for symbolic predispositions completely eliminated any trace of a self-interest effect.

### *Pocketbook Voting*

Other researchers have focused on the "pocketbook voting" hypothesis that presidential and congressional voting is responsive to the voter's own financial situation. As indicated earlier, Kramer (1971) demonstrated that as aggregate economic indicators go up, so does the incumbent's vote share. His interpretation of this finding as reflecting self-interest was, however, challenged by Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 1981), who found that people's judgments about how well the nation was doing economically ex-

plained their congressional voting better than did their personal finances or employment status.

These findings have led to considerable subsequent research. Correlations between perceived personal finances and presidential vote in all seven National Election Studies (NES) surveys from 1956 to 1980 provide the strongest support for pocketbook voting (Kiewiet 1983).<sup>2</sup> However, personal finances have not related significantly to voting in other contexts. Kiewiet (1983) found that only 7 percent (2 of 26) of the coefficients regressing congressional vote on personal finances were significant. Scattered studies of senatorial and gubernatorial voting in the United States, and of parliamentary voting in Great Britain, West Germany, France, and Italy, yield the same conclusion (Kiewiet and Rivers 1984; Lewis-Beck 1986).

The best study of the effects of unemployment on voting is again Kiewiet's (1983), using the NES series: unemployment was associated with more Democratic voting in 30 of the 36 cases, though the effect was statistically significant in only 20 percent of these instances. Schlozman and Verba's (1979:318) careful examination of the effects of unemployment in the mid-1970s also found a slight (4 percent) shading to the Democrats among the unemployed. On the other hand, other studies have failed to find significant effects on political attitudes of either unemployment or the personal impact of recessions (Feldman 1984; Kinder and Mebane 1983). In sum, unemployment seems consistently to produce a slight tilt toward the Democratic side, particularly in presidential elections.

The personal impact of inflation seems to have had an even weaker political effect. Kiewiet (1983) found that people who said inflation was their most serious personal problem voted significantly more Republican (as predicted), but in only one of five surveys. A number of studies have found no significant political effects of feeling hurt by inflation on presidential job approval or inflation policy (Lau and Sears 1981), support for tax and spending cuts (Sears and Citrin 1985), and judgments of the national severity of inflation (Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986, 1987).

In most cases, then, these measures of pocketbook motivation do not relate significantly to people's voting behavior. The only real dispute is over the strength of the link to presidential vote. We would agree with Feldman (1984:248), who concludes that "the accumulated evidence very strongly suggests that vote choice and presidential evaluations are at best modestly influenced by *personal* economic considerations."<sup>3</sup>

### *Information*

Economic theories assume that perfect rationality occurs only under conditions of perfect information. That might lead us to expect that self-interest would have stronger effects among the better informed. But avail-



able research does not support that view. Sears et al. (1980) found that the better informed were actually the least self-interested in three of four issue areas, but the differences were trivial. Similarly, among better-informed college students, vulnerability to the military draft was associated with greater support for it (Sears et al. 1983). Weatherford (1983) and Conover, Feldman, and Knight (1986, 1987) tested the opposite hypothesis, that the poorly informed would be more self-interested because they could not look beyond the narrow confines of their own personal experiences. But they did not find evaluations of government performance to be any more self-interested among the less informed.

None of these political issues seems, on the surface at least, to be any more or less complex than is usual for mass politics in this country. Given extreme and unusual complexity, information may be more important. Green (1988) investigated attitudes toward a ballot proposition in California limiting rent control which was so confusing (and perhaps even deceptive) that many mistakenly voted against their own real preferences. In this case, renters (the interested parties) voted their own interests considerably more if correctly informed. Aside from this unusual case, greater political information seems not to boost the strength of self-interest very much.

### Summary

Clearly averaging over these quite heterogeneous studies cannot be meaningful in any rigorous sense, but a summary statement can perhaps convey a crude approximation of the overall pattern. As shown in table 9.1, we find in our own work that only about 20 to 25 percent of the self-interest terms meet the minimal standard of statistical significance. The average bivariate correlation of  $+ .07$  and regression coefficient of  $+ .04$  reflect only minor explanatory contributions.

Since ours is a large sample of tests, it is not surprising that the other studies discussed in this section using the same general paradigm have obtained similar findings. Even Kiewiet's (1983) analyses of personal finances and unemployment as determinants of presidential vote yielded minimally significant self-interest terms at about this same rate. Green's (1988) extensive and important new set of studies fits this pattern as well. We would conclude, therefore, that self-interest generally has not been of major importance in explaining the U.S. public's political preferences.

It is possible that even these minimal effects may be exaggerated somewhat. Specifically, some significant findings in the literature may have resulted from item-order artifacts rather than genuine self-interest. An experiment varying the proximity of self-interest to political attitude items induced artificial self-interest effects at high levels of proximity (Sears and Lau 1983). In the National Election Studies series, "pocketbook voting"

findings, based on perceived personal finances, have tended to be strongest when the interview schedules presented just such proximal item orderings (though the strength of such artifacts in existing data probably cannot be definitively established; see Sears and Lau 1983; Lewis-Beck 1985; Lau, Sears, and Jessor 1989).

### When Does Self-Interest Work?

There are always exceptions to any general principle in the behavioral sciences, and the exceptions usually clarify the principle itself. In our research there have been four cases in which virtually every indicator of self-interest had a statistically significant effect on virtually every relevant dependent variable. What general principles can we extract from these successes, and the more numerous failures, about the necessary conditions for self-interest effects?

### *Clear, Substantial Costs and Benefits*

The strongest and most consistent self-interest effects have been associated with paying taxes. Feeling especially burdened by state and local taxes, and homeownership, and expecting large dollar savings were all substantially related to support for the tax-cutting ballot propositions (Sears and Citrin 1985; Lau, Coulam, and Sears 1983). These self-interest effects were consistent, statistically significant, and of unaccustomed magnitude, as table 9.1 shows. Similar findings have been reported by Hawthorne and Jackson (1987) on support for the tax cuts in the 1978 Tax Revenue Act, on support for the federal tax cuts proposed just prior to the Reagan administration (Lau and Sears 1981), and on acceptance of tax cheating in Norway (Listhaug and Miller 1985). These represent fairly robust and consistent effects of self-interest on political preferences.

Why does self-interest work in these cases? Apparently partly because of the unusual clarity of the personal stakes. This has been shown in several experiments varying the personal tax increases presented as the cost of a particular policy proposal (Green 1988). Greater proposed personal tax increases (\$5 versus \$50 annually) significantly diminished support for providing shelter for the homeless (from 86 percent to 75 percent) and for building a subway in Los Angeles (from 51 percent to 29 percent). Similar findings emerged from experiments on a ballot proposition designed to clean up California's waterways and on a proposed increase in cigarette taxes (and opposition to the latter was greatest among low-income smokers). Such advertised tax costs did not invariably have a strong effect; they did not affect support for bilingual education, nor did the overall size of an environmental bond issue (as opposed to its personal



tax cost) affect support for it (p. 176). Still, self-interest can sometimes be elicited when personal tax increases or reductions are highly salient.

The magnitude of the stakes would seem also to be an important factor. In the tax revolt cases, support for a tax cut was quite specifically linked both to the burden of that particular tax on the individual and to the size of the proposed reduction in his or her own taxes (Sears and Citrin 1985). The dollar benefits to the individual in that case were substantial in absolute terms. We would also speculate that a further helpful condition was that the political remedy was certain—a constitutional amendment that would lock in a reduction in tax assessments and a cap on tax rates.

### *Ambiguous Severe Threats*

In two other cases, threats that were both severe and ambiguous seem to have motivated self-interested political preferences. In both California and Massachusetts, public employees were substantially more opposed to the tax and spending reduction referenda than were other voters. Averaging across eleven different comparisons, public employees were more opposed than other respondents to the three referenda in California by an impressive 24 percent (Sears and Citrin 1985). Similarly, Lau, Coulam, and Sears (1983) found that public employees were more opposed to Proposition 2½ in Massachusetts, both before and after its passage. In both cases the effects held up with all other variables controlled. Public employees' opposition seems to have been based on their desire to prevent job and pay cuts. Their opposition to the spending-cap referendum was correlated with their perceptions that it would cut the number of public employees or their wages ( $r = .24$ ), which was not the case for other citizens ( $r = .02$ ). Green (1988:237) reports similar findings for their opposition to the later income-tax-cutting proposition.

Another set of ambiguous but severe threats seems to have stimulated the operation of self-interest in one particular phase of busing controversies. Surveys of whites in Los Angeles done after a court order mandating school desegregation, but before implementation, found a substantial self-interest basis for whites' opposition to busing (all ten regression coefficients were significant, averaging  $+ .13$ ). However, surveys done prior to any publicity about busing in the community, or after implementation of the court order, yielded the usual crop of generally nonsignificant self-interest effects (only 17 percent of the regression coefficients were significant, averaging  $+ .03$ ; see Sears and Allen 1984; other smaller-sample studies done prior to the court order also obtained nonsignificant results: see Caditz 1976, and Kinder and Sears 1981).

We would speculate that self-interest emerged in these cases because of the combination of uncertainty and severe negative possibilities. The uncertainty, we suspect, allowed for the most threatening sorts of fantasies

about one's own possible fate; the imagined threats could reach extraordinary peaks, helped along by the far-ranging rumors that gain circulation in a time of uncertainty and ignorance. All this was no doubt exacerbated in the busing case by the low levels of real contact and reality testing most white Americans have with blacks, and by the fantasies regarding blacks that lurk just below the surface of many white Americans' psyches.

Another example that is perhaps only superficially different has been provided by Green (1988). He has shown that smokers (especially heavy smokers) are considerably more opposed than nonsmokers to bans on smoking in public places and to increases in the cigarette tax. The uncertainties and terrors of cigarette deprivation may seem less cosmic than in the previous examples to readers who have never smoked, but perhaps not to those who are now or have in the past been heavy smokers.

### *Politicizing Self-Interest*

A third category of exceptions consists of events that politicize self-interest. In our research we have but one example, and that arguable: the apparent politicization of economic self-interest by Ronald Reagan over the course of his presidency.

Over the 1956–80 period, there were only modest, marginally significant effects of personal finances on presidential voting in the National Election Studies, as indicated above. By our count (Lau, Sears, and Jessor 1989), the mean correlation of personal finances with vote intention was  $+ .12$ , and with actual vote,  $+ .11$ ; the regression coefficients were  $+ .08$  in each case. In 1980 President Reagan quite explicitly asked Americans to vote on the basis of self-interest: "ask yourself . . . , are you better off today than you were four years ago?" But this explicit appeal to self-interest apparently became salient too late in the 1980 campaign to evoke widespread self-interested voting. Overall, perceived personal finances and presidential vote were only weakly associated ( $r = + .08$ ), and Reagan did not seem to attract more new support toward the end of the campaign from those whose personal finances had been declining (Sears and Lau 1983).

By 1984, the same plea for a self-interested vote was the centerpiece of his presidency and campaign for reelection. The association of personal finances with presidential preference showed a startling increase: the raw correlations jumped to  $.36$  and  $.33$ , respectively, and the regression coefficients to  $.19$  and  $.18$ . This reflects an increase in the strength of self-interest over his first four-year term of some considerable magnitude. Nevertheless, the fact that self-interest so rarely has a strong and systematic effect suggests that political events and campaigns rarely are successful in mobilizing it, even when they try.



### The Narrowness of Self-Interest Effects

The evidence up to this point is that self-interest generally has quite weak effects on political preferences, and that symbolic predispositions have much stronger and indeed overriding effects. Many materialist theorists have suggested that ideology, party preferences, and racial prejudice are themselves mere creatures of real economic interests, as in the class basis of parties in the United Kingdom, Chile, or Italy, or in group conflict analyses of racial prejudice (Bobo 1988; Campbell 1965; Lipset 1981). Self-interest could therefore indirectly influence policy and candidate preferences by shaping more general ideological or partisan preferences.

This indirect influence does not seem likely to be very strong, for several reasons. The many unsuccessful attempts to find cognitively broad ideologies in most Americans (Converse 1964; Kinder and Sears 1985) should make us doubtful that self-interest motivates broad ideological points of view. Moreover, there is fairly good evidence that the affective preferences we have described as symbolic predispositions tend to crystallize and stabilize by the end of early adulthood (though they are scarcely invariant), and so should not be especially susceptible to the vagaries of adult material interests. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the possibility, given the popularity of the theory. As will be seen, even when self-interest has significant effects on policy preferences, they usually prove to be cognitively quite narrow.

### *Self-Interest and Symbolic Predispositions*

To start with, symbolic predispositions are in most instances almost wholly uncorrelated with self-interest. Two examples make the point. Our study of the origins of four policy attitudes (Sears et al. 1980) generated twenty-nine correlations between self-interest indexes and the usual three symbolic predispositions. The largest was .11, and the median a nonsignificant .05. Even our study of the California tax revolt, which yielded several significant self-interest effects, produced similarly null results. We regressed the same set of three symbolic predispositions on our seven basic self-interest indicators, but only 19 percent of the resulting self-interest terms were statistically significant (Sears and Citrin 1985). Both results are typical of our other studies.

### *Four Specific Cases*

But it turns out that self-interest has even narrower cognitive implications, as a review of our several significant effects reveals. First, the public employees' self-interested opposition to the tax revolt extended no further than a narrow defense of their own jobs and salaries. We analyzed their support for the public sector and for the moderate political Left across

eleven questions that did not mention the ballot propositions themselves, ranging from the quite general (political ideology and party identification) to the more concrete (desired size of government, levels of spending on public services, or imposition of tuition at public universities). Public employees supported the public sector significantly more than other respondents on just one question: whether or not they thought government workers were overpaid (Sears and Citrin 1985: 156). Similarly, Listhaug and Miller (1985) found that public employees in Norway did not oppose tax evasion any more than did other citizens. In short, public employees were willing to defend their own salaries and jobs, but demonstrated no more general support for the public sector.

During the tax revolt, service recipients did display some self-interested defense of the specific programs from which they personally benefited; for example, people with children in the public schools showed some special support for spending on the schools (Sears and Citrin 1985). But this self-interested thinking was both weak and narrow. These regression coefficients ranged only from +.06 to +.09, and were far outstripped by the effects of symbolic predispositions. The service recipients did not support spending on other domestic programs, nor oppose general tax and spending cuts or otherwise support the public sector more than other respondents. These modest and narrow effects parallel those obtained by Cataldo and Holm (1983) among public school parents on school bond voting.

Third, further analysis of college students' attitudes toward military registration and the draft turned up two limited significant self-interest effects. About twice as many students twenty-one and older were in favor of restricting the draft to eighteen- to twenty-year-olds as were students under twenty-one. Similarly, student deferments were supported by half again as many freshman males, who presumably could benefit from them, as by senior males, who could not. But the younger and older students differed only on these explicitly age-related questions; they did not differ in general support for registration, draft, or military intervention.

Taxpayers again provide one partial exception. The heavily tax-burdened (objectively or subjectively) were markedly more anti-public sector (in opposing service spending, perceiving large amounts of waste in government, and so on) than were others (Sears and Citrin 1985). Being burdened by one kind of tax also transferred to support for cuts in other kinds of taxes; for example, home owners, especially those whose property taxes had been significantly cut by Proposition 13, continued to give unusually high levels of support to the income-tax cuts proposed by Proposition 9 (holding income level constant).

The taxpayers stand out as the sole exception, however. The self-interest effects uncovered in other areas turn out not only to be rather small in absolute terms, or unreliable, but also when present, to be quite specific



the policies most narrowly linked to the self-interest dimension in question. The effects of self-interest usually extend neither to other related policy issues nor to more general policy or ideological questions.

#### *Can Broad Self-Interest Effects Be Induced?*

Self-interest effects can be generated by politicizing personal experience (as in the Reagan presidency) or by personalizing political issues (as in our item-order experiment), can they also be made cognitively broader than narrow and specific as those just described (Sears and Lau 1983). In the case questions about personal financial situations were closely followed by questions on presidential performance. Some self-interest effects were induced, but they were quite specific, occurring only when the time perspective (past versus future) and dimension of performance (economic versus overall) exactly matched. Similarly, item proximity increased the correlation of perceived federal tax burden to closely matching attitudes toward federal tax policy, but not to the more distant association of perceived state/local tax burden with those same federal tax policy items (even those proposing major tax cuts). In short, it would appear that not only are self-interest effects rare, and when they do appear, quite narrow and specific, but attempts to induce them may be successful only in a quite narrow and specific arena.

#### *Why Doesn't Self-Interest Usually Work?*

What are the main reasons that self-interest doesn't usually have a major significant effect on U.S. public opinion? Let us offer two general possibilities.

#### *The Stakes Are Usually Neither Large Nor Clear*

One reason, perhaps, is that the stakes are usually small and obscure. Ordinary people simply do not often perceive government as offering them very clear or substantial personal costs or benefits. The California tax revolt would seem to be a splendid exception: local newspapers, for example, ran preelection tables displaying exactly what property or income-tax reductions voters would get if the relevant ballot propositions passed. And the absolute magnitudes of those benefits were impressive.

In contrast, large changes in national economic conditions, such as in the inflation or unemployment rates, may have unpredictable and even mixed effects on individuals, as Kiewiet (1983) has pointed out. The personal costs of unemployment may be intense, but they are concentrated in relatively small groups of disproportionately lower-income and occupa-

tional groups, which are both a small subset of the electorate and for other reasons among its least politically active. The immediate short-term costs of inflation to any given individual are difficult to establish. Prices go up, but for some, wages and/or the value of their real property go up much more, so short-term losses may be overshadowed by longer-term gains. And, as Barry (1970/1978) has suggested, when the costs of political actions (or attitudes) are minimal, other motives may take over.

#### *Attributions of Government Responsibility*

Personal well-being does fluctuate a good bit, and varies from one person to the next. How much the government is responsible for this variance is not a matter that economists, politicians, or political scientists usually agree on, much less ordinary citizens. An "almost ubiquitous" assumption in the literature on self-interest (Kiewiet and Rivers 1984: 381) is that self-interest will affect political preference only when individuals attribute responsibility for their well-being to the government.

People rarely see government as responsible for their own personal well-being, either for its present state or future prospects. People usually explain why their family's finances have improved or declined in personal (or "privatistic") rather than societal (or "collectivist") terms (Feldman 1982; Kinder and Mebane 1983). Lane observed a number of years ago that Americans "morselize" their personal experiences: "a union demand is a single incident, not part of a more general labor-management conflict; a purchase on the installment plan is a specific debt, not part of a budgetary pattern—either one's own or society's. The items and fragments of life remain itemized and fragmented" (1962: 353). Similarly, Schlozman and Verba (1979) found that the unemployed tend to perceive their unemployment as caused by individual, proximal circumstances, rather than seeing the society at large, or government, as responsible. And Brody and Sniderman (1977) found that people rarely feel government should help them with their personal problems, even the economic ones.

Does self-interest then affect political preferences only in that small subset of individuals who perceive government or society at large as responsible for their personal problems? Feldman (1982) found that perceived family finances affected political attitudes only among those who attributed trends in their own finances to societal, as opposed to personal, causes. Other studies have obtained either similar but not statistically significant differences (Lau and Sears 1981; Kinder and Mebane 1983), or no differences at all (Sears et al. 1980). The evidence seems mixed but mildly supportive of this hypothesis.

Another approach to the same hypothesis has been to look at events that can be unequivocally attributed to government. Some of these have yielded strong self-interest effects: successful tax-cutting propositions en-

Does this result  
hold up?



sure that the government cuts taxes (Sears and Citrin 1985; Lau, Coulam, and Sears 1983), and governments are clearly the cause of busing children to racially mixed schools (Sears and Allen 1984). However, other events with unequivocal government responsibility have not produced positive self-interest effects, such as inflation (which is widely perceived as strongly governmentally influenced; see Kiewiet 1983), the Reagan budget and tax cuts, or the 1982 recession (Feldman 1984; Sears and Citrin 1985; Sears and Lau 1983; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986, 1987; Kiewiet 1983). In short, the attribution of government responsibility sometimes fosters self-interest effects, and sometimes does not. This attribution may be a necessary but insufficient condition for political self-interest effects.<sup>4</sup>

Americans appear to have a bias toward making internal attributions, that is, toward explaining behavior and events through causes internal to individuals such as motives, ability, personality, or attitudes, rather than through such external causes as social pressure, luck, the difficulties presented by external realities, society—or government. This bias has been described by Langer (1975) as “the illusion of control” and by Sniderman and Brody (1977) as “the ethic of self-reliance.” A bias toward internality is often accompanied by the general view that it is a “just world” in which people get the outcomes they deserve (Lerner 1980). If people are responsible for their own outcomes, the rich deserve their wealth, the poor deserve poverty, and accident victims deserve their fates as well. There is clear evidence that Americans value this sense of internal control; for example, Jellison and Green (1981) showed that people most like others who believe in internal control.

This bias toward internality would seem to represent a considerable obstacle to the influence of self-interest on political opinions. If people are predisposed to view their own well-being as caused by their own actions, it will be difficult for them to comprehend the full impact of government actions on their lives and thus adopt rational self-interested preferences.

### Critiques

It would perhaps be useful at this point to cite briefly, and respond to, the main criticisms of this research.

#### *Measures and Definitions*

One criticism is that it has relied too heavily on objective measures of self-interest, which may be insensitive to self-interest as the individual voter perceives it (e.g., Bobo 1983; Kiewiet 1983). It is true that most (about two-thirds) of our measures have been objective, partly because they yield less ambiguous causal inferences (it is quite unlikely that being a Democrat or Republican will affect one's being a man or having a child in

school, but quite possible that it affects one's estimates of the likelihood of war or of personal finances).

However, in actuality, objective and subjective measures of self-interest have had very similar effects in this research whenever parallel measures have been available. Objective home ownership was as closely related to support for the California tax revolt as were subjective feelings of tax burden (Sears and Citrin 1985); neither subjective nor objective measures of vulnerability to busing have much influenced whites' opposition to it (Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears et al. 1980); and the objective proportion of Hispanics in one's county increased opposition to bilingual education as much as did subjective estimates of the proportion of Hispanics in the neighborhood (Huddy and Sears 1989). Kiewiet (1983) actually found stronger effects of objective than of subjective measures of unemployment, contrary to his expectation. It is therefore difficult for us to see this as an adequate explanation for the lack of self-interest effects.

Second, our operational definitions of self-interest could be too broad, diluting self-interest by combining people with little real interest with the few genuinely interested parties. We have protected ourselves in most of these studies by examining refined combinations of self-interest variables and interaction effects, and occasionally have mentioned them above (though not exhaustively, for space reasons). In general they have not improved the case for self-interest.

On the other hand, our definition of self-interest may be too narrow. For one thing, political preferences may be influenced by long-term self-interest. For example, young workers' attitudes toward Social Security taxes may be influenced more by their desire for far-distant retirement benefits than by their current tax burdens. We have two responses. Even if that were the case, one would expect short-term self-interest to have a stronger political impact, because it is less remote, more emotionally evocative, and easier to calculate. Yet, as we have seen, short-run self-interest has had little effect. From a more pragmatic point of view, it is difficult to assess long-term self-interest. People's own perceptions of it would seem likely to be influenced by many variables other than self-interest, among them current partisan predispositions. So from a purely tactical point of view, it is not obvious how one could obtain unequivocal empirical tests of long-term self-interest.

#### *Group Interest*

Another possibility is that group interest, rather than self-interest, may have the real political clout. A number of sociopsychological theories bear on group interest, focusing variously on such phenomena as social identity, reference groups, group consciousness, or group conflict (see Con-



over 1987). The link to self-interest lies in the hypothesis that people are more likely to act politically in their own interests when acting collectively rather than individually. That is, self-interest alone may not be very potent, but it can be if linked to a sense of one's group's interests.

So far, most of the relevant empirical work has tested a realistic group-conflict hypothesis, that people's own interests are mobilized when their group is in competition with another group for scarce resources. This suggests that policy and candidate preferences promoting the group's interests have three determinants: perceptions that the two groups have real conflicts of interest; feelings of material interdependence with one's own group; and feelings of in-group solidarity (e.g., Bobo 1983, 1988). A competing view, described as a "symbolic politics" theory, focuses instead on learned antagonisms and prejudices against the rival group (Sears and Kinder 1985).

One pattern of data has emerged from studies of racial conflict in the United States. This pattern appears both in studies of whites' attitudes toward blacks and racial policies (Jessor 1988) and in studies of Anglos' attitudes toward Hispanics and bilingual education (Huddy and Sears 1989). In both cases there was strong evidence for the role of antiminority attitudes, consistent with the symbolic politics view. Promajority solidarity played no role. However, in both cases there was evidence for a limited effect of perceived group conflict. In the case of race, perceived material interdependence with the in-group proved irrelevant, but in the other, Anglos' perception that the education of "people like them" would suffer if special attention were given to Hispanic children contributed to opposition to bilingual education (Huddy and Sears 1989). This reflects limited support for the group-conflict model.

Two other studies focused on the elderly's interests in old-age policies and on women's interests in women's issues (Huddy 1989; Sears and Huddy 1990). Here there was little evidence of any role of antagonistic attitudes toward the rival groups (younger people and men, respectively), nor of any role for in-group solidarity or perceptions of intergroup conflict. But in both cases there was some polarization within the in-group according to economic interests, with less affluent older people and women being particularly supportive of special government aid to the elderly and women, respectively. In short, there is a little evidence that group interest has stronger effects than self-interest, but direct tests of its effects are still in their infancy.

### Symbolic Politics

A final alternative is to adopt a wholly different, "symbolic politics," approach to these phenomena (e.g., Sears et al. 1980). At a number of points

we have indicated that symbolic predispositions have considerably greater strength than does self-interest in determining policy and candidate preferences; for example, self-interest explained, on the average, 1.7 percent of the variance in policy preferences regarding jobs, health insurance, bus-ing, and crime, whereas three symbolic predispositions explained an average of 14.0 percent, or about eight times as much (Sears et al. 1980). Similarly, Kiewiet (1983) found that party identification exceeded statistical significance in every single case, unlike self-interest, which did so less than a quarter of the time. Why do symbolic predispositions have a stronger effect?<sup>5</sup> We offer two general possibilities (though other plausible ones clearly exist).

### Public Regardingness

The first possibility is that people may be socialized to respond to public issues in a principled and public-regarding manner. Perhaps political socialization teaches people to weigh most heavily the collective good when they don their "political hats," and to weigh their private good most heavily only when dealing with their personal affairs (Sears et al. 1980:681). If so, symbolic attitudes might express the adult's sense of the public good, and would be quite deliberately and self-consciously given more weight than private considerations in judgments about public policy. A conservative political ideology may simply reflect the belief that an ordered, predictable, and stable society is best for all, quite aside from one's own interests. This does not necessarily imply that the public-regarding view in question is a particularly noble one. One may wish to prevent the "mongrelization of the race" by voting for genocide, or to eliminate welfare because it simply rewards sloth. Nor would it necessarily rule out all forms of self-interest; for example, de Tocqueville felt that personal and national interests converged in enlightened self-interest.

If this were true, adults should vary in their degree of public regardingness, and self-interest should have a stronger effect among the more privatistic citizens (Wilson and Banfield 1971). One test of this hypothesis (Sears et al. 1980) yielded no such differences, but we would not regard this as a definitive test.

### Reflexive Affective Responses to Political Symbols

A second possibility is that cognitive processes favor symbolic predispositions. Political attitudes may reflect mainly the emotions, or affects, previously conditioned to specific symbols. For example, attitudes toward "forced busing" to integrate whites and blacks would depend on affects toward such symbols as "force," "busing," "integration," and "blacks." Presumably this is partly due to the cognitive efficiencies produced by such simplifications. But it can serve political purposes as well. Politicians and



journalists constantly condense complexity into simplified symbolic terms to induce constituent and audience concurrence. Moreover, they code political issues and events in familiar symbolic terms that will evoke widespread symbolic predispositions in the citizenry. To do this they use abstract symbols such as "welfare," "crime in the streets," "patriotic," "busing," "Watergate," or "Vietnam." In contrast, it is most difficult to code the rich complexity of private experience into simple symbolic terms. Individual experiences are perhaps too close, too emotionally evocative, to lend themselves to easy generalization. As a result, personal experience may, as Lane says, be "morselized," and so not coded semantically in terms that are readily triggered by political symbols.

If personal experience is morselized and political dialogue is coded into abstract terms, the two should tend to be cognitively compartmentalized. The personal and political worlds would simply be in different cognitive realms. Indeed, as we have seen, even the strongest self-interest motives usually have quite narrow effects on political attitudes. Insofar as people do connect private interests to public life, they make that connection in a highly specific way; no general belief systems connect the two realms, and personal experience rarely gets related to more general symbols.

In short, the dominance of symbolic predispositions may come about because of a general tendency toward reflexive affective responses to political symbols. Political symbols may come semantically coded in ways that make them easy to link to symbolic predispositions, but difficult to connect to the blooming and buzzing confusion that is our daily personal experience.

### Conclusion

To summarize, self-interest ordinarily does not have much effect on the mass public's political attitudes. There are occasional exceptions, as when there are quite substantial and clear stakes (especially regarding personal tax burdens) or ambiguous and dangerous threats. But even these conditions only infrequently produce systematic and strong self-interest effects, and then, ones that are quite narrowly specific to the interest in question. The general public thinks about most political issues, most of the time, in a disinterested frame of mind.