Self-Interest, Symbolic Attitudes, and Support for Public Policy: A Multilevel Analysis

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This paper examines the role of self-interest and symbolic attitudes as predictors of support for two domestic policy issues—guaranteed jobs and incomes and national health insurance—in the American National Election Survey (ANES) between 1972 and 2004. As was the case in 1976 when Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen (1980) first explored this topic, symbolic attitudes continue to be much more important predictors of policy attitudes than various indicators of self-interest over the 30 years we analyze. We explore this finding further to determine whether any individual/internal and external/contextual variables affect the magnitude of self-interest effects on policy support. Five possible internal moderators of self-interest effects are examined: (1) political knowledge, (2) issue publics, (3) political values, (4) social identifications, and (5) emotions, but none are found to boost the magnitude of the self-interest effect. However, we do find some evidence that contextual variables representing the social/information environment moderate the impact of self-interest on public opinion.

KEY WORDS: Symbolic politics, Self-interest, Government health insurance, Guaranteed jobs, Contextual effects, Hierarchical linear models

One of the enduring questions in public opinion research is the extent to which citizens’ political beliefs and behavior are guided by their own narrowly defined tangible self-interest. Virtually every Western moral philosophical and psychological theory gives a prominent role to such self-interest (Sears & Funk, 1991), yet when David Sears started putting this question to empirical test he found surprisingly little support for it. For example, white Los Angeles residents who felt personally threatened by possible neighborhood desegregation, or by economic competition from blacks, or who feared black violence in their neighborhood,
were no more likely to support the conservative white former police chief, Sam Yorty, over liberal Black city councilman Tom Bradley in the Los Angeles mayoralty elections of 1969 and 1973 (Kinder & Sears, 1981). Likewise, Los Angeles residents personally affected by the energy crisis of 1974 were no more or less likely to support President Nixon, or “the political system” more generally, than were Angelinos who were not directly affected by the crisis (Sears, Tyler, Citrin, & Kinder, 1978). Similarly, white adults across the United States living in areas where busing for school integration was occurring or threatened, or who had children in public school, were no more opposed to busing than adults without those markers of self-interest (Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979). Lastly, adults with close friends or family members serving in the military in Vietnam were no more opposed to the Vietnam War in 1968 than citizens without any such personal involvement with the war (Lau, Brown, & Sears, 1978). In every one of these instances, however, what Sears called symbolic beliefs—early learned affective responses to familiar political symbols such as Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, blacks and whites—had clear and strong influence over the political attitude or behavior in question.

Perhaps the broadest exploration of the self-interest versus symbolic attitudes debate was provided by Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen (1980), who took advantage of an unusually large number of viable self-interest items in the 1976 American National Election Study (ANES) to explore the question across four distinct public policy issues: guaranteed jobs and incomes, busing of school children for integration, the rights of people accused of crimes, and government health insurance. The authors found that the personal effects of a recent economic recession were weakly (though statistically significantly) associated with support for guaranteed jobs and incomes, but neither being unemployed or currently laid off from work, nor feeling “worse off” financially than a year ago, had any effect whatsoever on support for this issue in 1976. Likewise, adults with a child in a neighborhood public school, or living in an area where busing was occurring or rumored to occur shortly, were no more opposed to busing for school integration than other respondents. When it came to the rights of those accused of crimes, respondents who had personally seen or been a victim of a crime in the past year were weakly (though again significantly) associated with more conservative views toward law and order, but two other indicators of self-interest—not feeling safe walking alone in your neighborhood at night and staying away from certain parts of town because of fear of crime—had no relationship to law and order beliefs. Sears et al. found the largest effect of self-interest with the issue of national health insurance, where both those without any form of health insurance, and those whose insurance was inadequate to protect against a major illness were more supportive of government health insurance.

In all four policy domains studied, some combination of symbolic attitudes—liberal-conservative ideology, party identification, and racial prejudice—proved to be much stronger predictors of attitudes toward the policy question at hand.
On average across the four issue domains, the various self-interest indicators explained only 1% of the variance over that already explained by symbolic beliefs, while the symbolic beliefs collectively explained 10 times more of the explainable variance in policy attitudes above that already accounted for by self-interest.

Sears et al. went on the explore five special circumstances that might be expected to maximize the potential effect of self-interest: private-regarding values, believing the government is generally responsive to the public, feeling politically efficacious, believing the issue is a very important national concern, and political sophistication. None of these five potential moderators had any effect on the relative importance of self-interest and symbolic attitudes in 1976, however. Nor did self-interest in any of these four domains have anything to do with the vote for president in 1976. The conclusion seemed inescapable: narrowly defined tangible self-interest rarely has much to do with citizens’ political beliefs and behavior. Subsequent reviews of the literature (Citrin & Green, 1990; Lau, 1990; Sears & Funk, 1991) have revealed a few exceptions to the general rule—e.g., when the stakes are unusually large (Sears & Citrin, 1985)—but not enough to alter the general conclusion offered above.

We want to accomplish three goals with this paper. First, we want to replicate the original Sears et al. (1980) analyses with data from subsequent ANES surveys. Science begins with replication, and while we have no a priori reason to believe that public opinion in 1976 was driven by factors that were unique to that year, every major national election has its own special characteristics, and it will not hurt to see whether the general patterns observed by Sears et al. during the 1976 presidential campaign also appear in subsequent years. Two of the issues originally considered by Sears—school busing and rights of the accused—have disappeared from the political scene, and, perhaps more importantly, from the ANES surveys. But attitudes toward government health insurance, and, even more consistently, guaranteed jobs and incomes, have been asked in many subsequent surveys, and they will form the basis of our systematic replication of these earlier findings.1

Our second aim in this paper is to put the self-interest versus symbolic attitudes question to further tests by exploring several promising factors that could

1 The government health insurance item reads “There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company paid plans. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” The guaranteed jobs item reads “Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” One of our reviewers notes that this latter question is not the best item the NES staff has ever written: does it refer to jobs or incomes or, as we have always presumed, both? Given that a primary purpose of this paper is to replicate earlier research by Sears, and he used this same item, there is not much we can do about this problem other than note the ambiguity in this particular dependent variable.
moderate the effect of self-interest on political attitudes: political sophistication, perceived importance of the issue, emotions, social identifications, and political values. We will say more about each of these factors below. Perhaps researchers have not been as vigilant or opportunistic as possible in looking for situations where (or voters for whom) self-interest might actually have a strong influence on public opinion. Perhaps we were just unlucky when we initially explored these issues because 1976 was somehow such an unusual year (post-Watergate?) that nothing could induce self-interested political behavior, but the same moderators that fell flat in 1976 might prove to be more powerful in later election years.

All of the variables discussed above that have been hypothesized to increase the influence of self-interest are *intra-individual*—that is, they are individual differences that citizens carry around with them throughout life, no matter where they are. Context—or the social environment—also matters with respect to many aspects of social behavior, however, and the systematic replication of the analysis across different elections provides crucial leverage to examine the effect of the changing salience of these issues over space and time. Thus thirdly, we consider *extra-individual* contextual factors as possible moderators of self-interest effects. Perhaps the experiences of others in one’s surrounding social environment are sufficient to make one’s self-interest more salient during the decision-making process.


**Method**

Sears et al. (1980) divided the determinants of policy attitudes into three conceptually distinct groups: relatively short-term tangible self-interest, early learned symbolic attitudes, and background/demographic controls. We will consider two symbolic attitudes in all of our analyses: political party and liberal-conservative identification (both measured by the standard ANES 7-point items).² Six control variables are also included in every analysis: age, education, family income, gender, race (nonwhite), and political knowledge. The first five are always measured by the standard ANES items and are identical across election years. Political knowledge is measured by the proportion of correct answers to every factual question we could find in each survey, but the particular questions available vary considerably across election year. Because the literature on economic perceptions now regularly contrasts self-interest to sociotropic beliefs about the health of the nation’s economy (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979), we have added socio-

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² Sears et al. (1980) also considered a third symbolic attitude, racial prejudice, but its effects were primarily aimed at explaining two policy attitudes that we are not replicating in this paper, school busing and the rights of the accused, both of which had strong racial components in 1976.
tropic beliefs as one final control variable to our model of guaranteed jobs and incomes.

Indicators of tangible self-interest must, by definition, be unique to each policy area. In the case of attitudes toward guaranteed jobs and incomes, the standard employment question asks whether respondents are working now, temporarily laid off, unemployed, permanently disabled, retired, are homemakers or students. The same question is asked about the respondent’s spouse, if the respondent is married. Only in the 1984 survey did more than a handful of respondents ever say they were temporarily laid off, so our first measure of short-term tangible self-interest notes whether respondents or their spouses are currently unemployed or laid off. Surely these people would be better off if the government had a policy guaranteeing jobs and incomes. We separately note whether respondents or their spouses are permanently disabled—a very different situation, but again one where there can be little doubt where the immediate tangible interests of a person lie. Subsequent questions in the employment series asks respondents whether they (and again, their spouses) are working more or fewer hours than they would like, whether they are worried about losing their job, whether they have been unemployed anytime in the past year, and whether they have had their hours reduced in the past years. We combined answers to these questions into a single scale measuring the tangible effects of a slow economy on respondents and their families.3 All of these items require mostly simple objective responses, and as such should be very reliably answered. Our final self-interest item in the guaranteed jobs domain asks respondents whether they are better or worse off financially than they were a year ago. This is a much more subjective judgment, and responses to this question can surely be biased by factors beyond one’s immediate personal financial well-being, most obviously, partisan concerns. Our analyses will control for partisanship, however, and this single question is the most comprehensive indicator of economic self-interest available in the ANES surveys.

Possible indicators of tangible self-interest in the area of government health insurance differ more widely across election years and are not always available. Indeed, the policy question itself has not been asked as regularly as the guaranteed jobs item. However, in 1976, 1992, 1994, and 2004, we have four reasonably comparable items that measure this concept.4 First and most straightforwardly is whether respondents have any kind of health insurance; clearly, people without

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3 Before 1980, these questions were a bit different. An online appendix for this article lists in detail which items were used to operationalize all of our variables in every election study. This appendix is available from the first author’s web page: http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/lau/.

4 The 1994 congressional elections occurred shortly after President Clinton’s National Health Security Act, the major initiative of his first term in office, had gone down in flames. The ANES repeated the same self-interest questions they had asked in 1992, and because there are only three other surveys with a broad set of self-interest items relevant to the issue of government health insurance, we include data from this one off-year election in our analysis. Data are available for the guaranteed jobs issue from many off-year election years as well, but because there is no shortage of relevant data on this issue, for simplicity we limit analysis to presidential election years.
health insurance would be better off if the government provided that coverage. Equally straightforward is a question about whether respondents can afford to pay for the health insurance they need. In 1976, respondents were asked whether their coverage is adequate in the case of a major illness. Starting in 1992, respondents were asked whether, in the past year, anyone in the family has had to put off medical or dental treatment because they did not have the money. The questions about having any form of health insurance, and having to put off medical or dental treatment, are fairly simple and objective questions to answer; the question about “being able to afford” needed health insurance is more subjective in nature. An even more subjective question was asked in 1992 and 1994, whether respondents were satisfied with the quality of care available to them. Finally, we also included an indicator of whether the respondent or their spouse is permanently disabled (from the employment status question described above) as an indirect measure of current health status.

Results

How Strongly Does Self-Interest Explain Policy Attitudes?

We analyzed public opinion toward guaranteed jobs and incomes in every presidential election study between 1972 and 2004. Table 1 shows the results of three of those analyses: 1976 (to replicate Sears et al., 1980), 2004, the most recent ANES study, and one intermediate year, 1992. All predictors have a 1-point range, so the unstandardized regression coefficients reported in the table can be easily compared to each other. There are no surprises here. For every year examined (including those not shown in Table 1), most of the control variables prove to be statistically significant, and when significant, always have their expected sign. Over one-third of the self-interest indicators are also significant and of reasonable magnitude. But, typically, the two symbolic attitudes are both among the two or three most important predictors in the model.

Comparable data from the same three surveys are shown in Table 2 for attitudes toward government health insurance, except that now these three surveys are the only presidential election years for which we have appropriate data. The six control variables are generally much less important on this issue than they are on guaranteed jobs and incomes, reflecting the universal character of this policy problem. On the other hand, self-interest appears to be noticeably more important on this issue, as in every case at least three of the indicators have statistically significant effects in the equation. But the most important predictor in every election year is liberalism-conservatism, and a second symbolic attitude, party identification, is always among the most important remaining predictors in the equation.

The significance of the individual predictors is not the most telling statistic in comparing the relative importance of these two categories of predictors, however, particularly with the large sample sizes available in the ANES surveys. On the one
hand, there are twice as many indicators of self-interest as there are measures of symbolic attitudes, which would seem to stack the deck in favor of self-interest. On the other hand, if the various measures of self-interest were strongly correlated with each other, their standard errors would be inflated by multicollinearity, which would work against individual terms achieving conventional levels of significance. Even more insidious, if the errors of measurement associated with the different indicators of self-interest (or equally, symbolic beliefs) were positively correlated with each other, sign reversals could occur (Achen, 1985). This does not appear to be a problem for any of the coefficients in the three regressions reported in Table 1 (although there are a few sign reversals among the self-interest coefficients in some of the election years not shown in Table 1), but it definitely would appear to be influencing the negative and almost statistically significant coefficient associated with not having any health insurance in 1976 (and two others in 1994, the one available health care analysis not reported in Table 2). All told across the 13 regressions and two policy domains, one-sixth of the self-interest coefficients (nine of 54) have negative signs. None of these are statistically significant, but sign reversals seem prevalent enough to take Achen’s warning seriously.
There is no perfect solution to these potential problems, and we have tried to address them via two somewhat different routes. One approach is to focus not on the significance of individual terms in the regression, but to ask whether a set of predictors— all of the self-interest variables, or all of the symbolic beliefs— adds significantly to the predictive power of our equations once all of the other variables in the equations have been controlled. This was the approach taken by Sears et al. (1980) in their original article. It can be accomplished by a straightforward partitioning of the sum of squares, and it is a very strict test in that any shared variance between the targeted set of predictors (that is, the self-interest items or the symbolic beliefs) and other variables in the equation is attributed to those other variables. Thus what remains is only that variance that can be uniquely attributed to the final targeted set of predictors.  

In practice, this test is accomplished by dividing the predictors into three sets: the demographic/control variables, in set 1, the two symbolic beliefs, in set 2, and the four or five self-interest indicators, in set 3. Then three regressions are run, the first with all three sets of predictors, that yields a total R-Square; the second with only the demographic and symbolic predictors, that yields a partial

<p>| Table 2. Public Support for Government Health Insurance, 1976, 1992, and 2004 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>2004</th>
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<td>.03</td>
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<td>.09</td>
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<td>.16</td>
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<td>.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>.24</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.32</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<td><strong>Self-Interest Indicators</strong></td>
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<td>No Health Insurance</td>
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<td>.24</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cannot Afford Health Insurance</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.57***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Had to Defer Health Care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have to Borrow $ if Major Illness</td>
<td>.98***</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.33***</td>
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<td>Available Health Care Poor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanently Disabled</td>
<td>.87***</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.37*</td>
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<td><strong>Symbolic Predispositions</strong></td>
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<td>Liberal/Conservative (Lib. Hi)</td>
<td>2.79***</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>1.27***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party Identification (Dem. Hi)</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>1.14***</td>
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<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>3.67***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>4.10***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>2,205</td>
<td>1,971</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R^2</strong></td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.169</td>
<td>.233</td>
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* Note. Table reports the unstandardized regression weights and their standard errors. All predictors have been scaled to have a one-point range. Data are from the American National Election Studies, employing weighted samples.
The crucial data from all nine surveys are shown in Table 3, the top panel for guaranteed jobs, the bottom panel for government health insurance. The first row in each panel shows how much unique variance can be attributed to the four or five self-interest indicators after all of the control variables and the symbolic attitudes have already been included in the analysis. The mean for guaranteed jobs and incomes across the nine surveys is .007, less than 1% of the explainable variance. The additional variance that can be explained by adding the four self-interest variables to the equation after the demographic/controls and symbolic beliefs have been entered into the equation is never statistically significant in this policy domain. The second row of each panel shows how much of the explainable variance can be uniquely attributed to symbolic beliefs, above and beyond the control variables and self-interest indicators. The mean for guaranteed jobs and incomes across the nine surveys is .059, eight times as much as the mean attributable to self-interest. The additional variance that is explained by adding the two symbolic beliefs to the equation is always statistically significant.

Turning to government health insurance, the mean unique variance attributable to self-interest across the four surveys is .035%, noticeably more than was the case with the guaranteed jobs issue, and usually a statistically significant addition.
to the equations. But once again, the two symbolic attitudes are also very important predictors. In every case except 1976, the two most important variables in the equations are symbolic attitudes. On average, they uniquely explain .077% of the variance in public opinion on the government health insurance question, more than twice as much variance as can be attributed to self-interest. In sum, a partitioning of the sum of squares clearly demonstrates that early learned symbolic beliefs are much more important predictors of two important policy beliefs than tangible short-term self-interest.

We can compare the relative importance of self-interest and symbolic beliefs in these analyses with another even simpler procedure. One set of potential problems arises because we have multiple indicators of the two crucial concepts we are considering, self-interest and symbolic beliefs. Our second solution is to combine the multiple indicators of self-interest in a particular policy domain into a single “vulnerability” scale and to likewise combine the two symbolic beliefs variables into a single summary scale. Now we have only one manifest indicator of each of our crucial concepts, and if we scale them both to have a 1-point range, we can directly compare the magnitude of the regression coefficients—a more intuitive measure of the explanatory “power” of each concept—without worrying about sign reversals in some of the coefficients due to correlated measurement error.6

The magnitude of the two regression coefficients across election years is plotted in Figure 1, for guaranteed jobs in the top panel and for government health insurance in the bottom panel. This figure is probably the best way to visualize the relative explanatory power of the two conceptual variables. In some years (e.g., 1980) the effect of self-interest is vanishingly small; in other years (2004, on the guaranteed jobs issue) the effect of self-interest is fairly strong, alone moving respondents almost a third of the entire range of the dependent variable. But in every year and on both issues, without exception, the effect of symbolic beliefs is always stronger (and often, a lot stronger) than the effect of self-interest. Indeed, the average effect of symbolic beliefs across the 13 regressions is larger than the strongest effect of self-interest.

There is little new in what has been presented so far, other than replicating an analysis originally presented by Sears et al. (1980) in many additional election years. The consistency with which these findings have replicated over time is impressive, however, and we wonder how many other classic findings in political behavior could stand the test of time equally well. In any case, we now turn to exploring several additional factors which theoretically could increase the impact of tangible self-interest on public opinion toward these two issues.

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6 Creating these summary measures of self-interest and symbolic beliefs is not without costs, however—throwing away potentially valuable explanatory power. The total explained variance in the analyses with these two new summary variables is always somewhat less than the original regressions conducted with all of the individual predictors.
Figure 1. Relative Importance of Self-Interest and Symbolic Beliefs Summary Variables

Note: Data represent the magnitude of the regression coefficients for the summary symbolic beliefs and self-interest predictors. Each dependent variable ranges from the most conservative response, coded 1, to its most liberal value, coded 7. The two summary conceptual variables have each been scaled to have a one-point range. Hence each regression coefficient can be interpreted as the amount of change in the dependent variable that would result from a “full dose” of either of the two crucial summary conceptual variables, holding all other variables in the equation constant. The equations also include all of the demographic and control variables listed in Tables 1 and 2.
Possible Moderators of the Effects of Self-Interest: Internal Factors

Political Sophistication. When political psychologists first began studying symbolic politics in the 1970s, public opinion researchers were well aware that ideology constrained the views of relatively few citizens (Converse, 1964)—perhaps only the 2.5% of the general public that the authors of the American Voter classified as ideologues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). On the other hand, simple “gut” reactions, the type of immediate unthinking emotional reactions that Madison feared would too often motivate majority opinion, were thought to hold greater promise for explaining the policy attitudes of the mass public. And what could be more elemental, more attention-grabbing, more motivating, than tangible short-term self-interest? The rational choice theories of social behavior that were beginning to take hold in political science offered pocketbook concerns as a primary and universal motivation of human behavior (e.g., Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1973). From this perspective, we might expect the influence of ideology to be limited to the most sophisticated members of the general public, while self-interest could help guide the public opinions of almost everyone. The basic results presented in Tables 1–3 make it very clear that this simple interpretation cannot possibly be correct.

In retrospect, what is wrong with this explanation is the implicit assumption that pocketbook concerns are obvious and immediately understood by virtually everyone. In modern democracies, politics rarely puts a gun to citizens’ heads or offers them large sums of money for a particular behavior. Figuring out what one’s self-interest is on many political issues can be daunting even for the most politically sophisticated citizens. From this perspective, self-interest effects might be limited to the most attentive or sophisticated members of the general public. This is exactly the argument made by Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2003) in their theory of “heterogeneous attribution,” which holds that only the most sophisticated voters can make the link between their personal circumstances and the actions of politicians. This turns the original understanding of immediate tangible self-interest on its head, but it is at least conceivable that this hypothesis could be true given the results presented so far. Thus, we hypothesize a positive interaction between political knowledge and our various indicators of self-interest.7

7 There are also theoretical reasons to expect an interaction between political sophistication and symbolic attitudes, although to get there we must reinterpret those attitudes as important political heuristics (Lau, 2003; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Symbolic politics theory focuses on the origins of symbolic attitudes in preadult conditioning, and there is a great deal of evidence from political socialization research that is consistent with this perspective (Jennings & Niemi, 1974; Sears, 1975). But the political cognition literature has also identified party and liberal-conservative identifications as important political heuristics that help people—or “cognitively limited information processors”—simplify and make sense of their political worlds (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; Lodge & Hamill, 1986). Everyone faces severe cognitive limits on information processing and must rely on a variety of cognitive shortcuts to negotiate all aspects of the social world. The great promise of political heuristics is that they might help “level the playing field” and make it possible for those less interested in and knowledgeable about politics to still make fairly reasonable or accurate
To test this hypothesis, we took our scale of political knowledge as a reasonable measure of political sophistication and computed multiplicative interactions between it and our various indicators of self-interest, respecifying all of our basic regression models to include these additional interaction terms. The results were quite disappointing. Only five of 36 interactions in the nine guaranteed jobs equations approach statistical significance, and three of those had the wrong sign (that is, self-interest is less important among the politically knowledgeable). Only one of 18 interactions in the four government health insurance equations is significant, and that one has the wrong sign. If we use our summary measure of self-interest rather than the individual indicators, the story does not change. Only two of the 13 coefficients across the 13 regressions approach significance, and one of these two has the wrong sign. All told, there is absolutely nothing here to suggest these scattered significant effects are anything more than chance variations around what is basically a noneffect.

**Issue Publics.** Maybe it is too much to ask of the general public that people would connect their personal situation to their opinion on public policy issues. Most political issues are too abstract, too distant, too strange and unfamiliar for the average citizen, and even those who express an opinion toward a policy issue are, more often than not, actually expressing a “nonattitude” (Converse, 1964, 1970). But there is one group of people who we might expect to hold “real” attitudes towards an issue—those people who comprise the relatively small “issue public” who care about and pay attention to any given issue. A reasonable approach for isolating issue publics would be to look to those respondents who believe that either of our policy areas were important national problems. Starting in 1976 the ANES surveys began asking respondents what they thought were the most important problems facing the country, and we isolated those people who mentioned jobs, unemployment, inflations, or “the economy” as an issue public for the guaranteed jobs issue; and those people who mentioned health care or health insurance as an issue public for the government health care issue. We then ran our basic regressions again, but only for those respondents who were part of the narrower issue public for that policy issue.

In some years this group was too small to make a separate regression possible (1988, 1996, and 2000 for the economy; 1976 for health care), but in all other years the issue publics were comprised of at least 300 respondents for each issue. But this made no difference in the relative power of tangible self-interest to explain political judgments (Bartels, 1996). Ironically, just as tangible short-term self-interest does not seem to be a very effective basis for the masses to make political decisions, nor do political heuristics seem to improve the quality of decision making of all citizens. In fact, a fair amount of political sophistication is required to employ many political heuristics effectively (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). Thus we would also hypothesize that political sophistication will interact with our two symbolic attitudes in determining policy attitudes toward guaranteed jobs and government health insurance. Such a hypothesis would take us beyond the focus of this paper, however, and we will say no more about it here than to note that the data at hand provide very strong support for this hypothesis.
attitudes toward these two policy issues. If anything, self-interest generally had a weaker effect in the issue public than it did among the general population, particularly in the health care domain. We simply find no evidence that perceiving an issue to be an important national problem has any effect on the extent to which tangible self-interest plays much of a role in helping to form attitudes toward that issue.

**Emotions.** One intra-individual factor that has been largely absent from the symbolic politics literature is emotions. Based on a great deal of research in the cognitive neurosciences, the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) makes the provocative claim that, counter to centuries of traditional Western political thought, passion and reason are complementary rather than opposing forces; in fact, passion—emotion—often guides conscious thought. In a nutshell, the theory is based on the idea that emotional reactions in the limbic system to new stimuli occur independently of, and far sooner than, conscious awareness. These initial emotional reactions help determine whether subsequent conscious processing of the stimuli is even necessary. Positive emotions—enthusiasm—engage the disposition system which guides the acquisition and enactment of unconscious automatic behaviors. When people feel enthusiastic, they rely on well-learned cognitive shortcuts and heuristics such as party and liberal-conservative identifications to guide their behavior. On the other hand, negative emotions—particularly threat and anxiety—engage the surveillance system, which acts to interrupt ongoing automatic processing and motivates conscious deliberation. According to the theory of affective intelligence, then, conscious, deliberative political calculations occur primarily when people are motivated by anxiety or fear.

The theory of affective intelligence allows us to pose another hypothesis about factors that could moderate the effects of self-interest on policy attitudes. To the extent that anxiety can motivate conscious thought, and such conscious thought is necessary for people to figure out where their self-interest in some political issue is, we hypothesize that anxiety should increase the effects of self-interest on policy attitudes.8

To test this next hypothesis we rely on a series of items the ANES began asking in their 1980 survey about whether the major presidential candidates had ever made the respondent feel angry, afraid, hopeful, or proud. These questions are asked of each major candidate in turn. Following Marcus et al. (2000), we use responses to the question about feeling “afraid” to indicate anxiety. We then computed simple multiplicative interaction terms between it and our various indicators of self-interest. Across the two policy attitudes, six of the 46 interaction terms produced the hypothesized effects (while two additional interactions were

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8 To the extent that our two symbolic attitudes are both common political heuristics, it is easy to further hypothesize that enthusiasm should interact positively with both Liberalism-Conservatism and party identification to predict policy attitudes, while if anything the two symbolic attitudes should interact negatively with anxiety. We find no support for either of these subsidiary hypotheses, however.
significant but negative). Most of the significant interactions are scattered across different election years and indicators of self-interest, but to the extent there is any pattern to these results at all, it involves interactions between anxiety and being unemployed or laid off in the guaranteed jobs equations, which were positive and significant in three of six instances. So, with the possible exception of this one indicator, we find no support for the hypothesis that anxiety should increase the effect of self-interest on policy attitudes.

Social Identification and Political Values. We explored two additional intra-individual factors as possible moderators of self-interest: social identifications and political values. Perhaps people who feel particularly close to an affected group—or who accept a calculating, cost-benefit mode of thinking—might be more likely to use their own self-interest in forming their political beliefs. Over the years, ANES has asked what groups respondents feel “close to,” and the only one that made any sense as a possible moderator of self-interest is “businessmen and women.” Businessmen and -women expect customers to be motivated by short-term material interests, and it is plausible that they might deal with the political world in a similar manner, particularly if they had any personal self-interest in the guaranteed jobs and incomes issue. Plausible, perhaps, but wrong. Of the 32 interaction terms involving self-interest and identification with businessmen and -women in the surveys between 1972 and 2000,9 seven approached conventional levels of statistical significance, but four of those were negative, and only three have the predicted positive sign. This does not appear to be an avenue that is worth exploring further.

We also looked at whether respondents who held “acquisitive” rather than “postmaterial” values (Inglehart, 1971; Inglehart & Abramson, 1994) were more likely to allow their self-interest to shape their political attitudes. Relevant items were asked in the ANES surveys between 1976 and 1992, and, again, it seems plausible that citizens who approach politics from a more acquisitive viewpoint might be more likely to consider their own self-interest in forming attitudes toward different policy questions. This hypothesis proved to be a complete washout. Considering both the guaranteed jobs and government health insurance issues, only two of 35 possible interaction terms between values and self-interest approached statistical significance, and one of those two had a negative sign.

Possible External Moderators of the Effects of Self-Interest

So far, we have been unsuccessful in our attempt to find any additional circumstances where tangible short-term self-interest might play a larger role in shaping public opinion toward either guaranteed jobs or government health insurance. Neither greater political sophistication or emotions, nor social identifications or political values, nor perceiving an issue to be an important national problem, have

9 The “close to” items were not asked in the 2004 survey.
been sufficient to make self-interest salient to our respondents as they determine their attitudes toward these two different policies. Perhaps we have been mistaken in looking inside the individual for conditions that might boost the self-interest effect, however. We now turn to the social environment to explore some additional factors that could impact the role that self-interest plays in shaping public opinion.

We do not do so blindly; two lines of research guide our thought. First, Zaller and Feldman’s “simple theory of the survey response” (1992; see also Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988) argues that most people do not have a simple straightforward opinion toward most policy issues. Instead, they hold a number of sometimes conflicting “considerations” about any public policy. When asked, people come up with a response by averaging across the considerations that happen to come to mind at the moment of decision. Thus, any factors that might make one set of considerations particularly salient at the moment of decision could influence reported opinions.

There are several related factors that might make respondents’ self-interest unusually salient at the time they are reporting their opinions. If economic problems (or problems obtaining/affording health care) are particularly severe in a respondent’s social environment, their own vulnerability or exposure to unemployment or possibly losing health insurance are probably unusually salient, either because one is likely to directly know (or know of) someone experiencing those problems, and/or because those problems are more frequently discussed in the local media. Either way, respondents’ tangible interests in these issues are more likely to be salient when they are expressing their opinions toward the policy issues at hand. Thus we are predicting that self-interest will become an important determinant of policy attitudes in social contexts in which those policy problems are particularly salient.

A second line of research guiding our thinking arises from various attempts to explain one of the interesting anomalies in the literature linking economic indicators to political outcomes—the tendency for macrolevel indicators (for example, changes in the national economy) to be linked to macrolevel outcomes (presidential vote totals, or support for the President’s party in the legislature) much more strongly than individual-level indicators of material self-interest are linked to individual-level measures of political behavior (Feldman, 1984; Monroe, 1979; Sears & Funk, 1991). Kinder and Kiewiet (1979) explain this discrepancy by showing that while changes in personal financial well-being are typically unrelated (or only weakly related) to political outcomes, changes in perceptions of the nation’s economy, which Kinder and Kiewiet call sociotropic beliefs, are much more strongly related to political outcomes. Not everyone has been convinced by Kinder and Kiewiet’s reconciliation, however (e.g., Kramer, 1983; Markus, 1988). The most trenchant point raised by these critics is that cross-sectional variation in personal well-being—the only type of variation that can be measured by typical (cross-sectional) surveys—may pale in significance relative to over-time variation in the economy or the availability of affordable health care. As Feldman (1984) suggests vis-à-vis the effects of personal economic well-being, “self-interested
economic voting may be substantial only during recessionary periods when the effects of economic conditions on people’s well-being are most apparent and pronounced” (p. 236). Again, Feldman seems to be suggesting that self-interest could be particularly important in times or places where the policy problem is particularly severe.

Thus the question we want to ask here is whether variation in the impact of self-interest across election years can be explained by changes in objective conditions in the local environment. We can explore these questions with a hierarchical linear model (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002) using data from the nine presidential elections between 1972 and 2004 for the issue of support for guaranteed jobs and incomes, and data from the four available surveys (including 1994) for the government health insurance issue. Hierarchical linear modeling is ideally suited for situations where individuals are clustered within different geographic or temporal units. In our case, every respondent in the ANES surveys resides in one of the 50 states and answered questions shortly before one of the presidential elections between 1972 and 2004. This data clustering leads us to strongly suspect that error terms will be correlated within clusters, which violates the homoskedasticity assumption of ordinary least squares regression. The primary goal of a hierarchical linear model is to explain individual-level variation in a dependent variable while statistically controlling for (and potentially trying to explain) variation in the mean response across different levels of analysis.

Our level-1 (individual-level) models include all of the control variables in Tables 1 and 2, plus the summary indicators of self-interest and symbolic beliefs. We decided to use the summary variables rather than the individual indicators of these two crucial concepts to avoid the problem of sign reversals that could result from correlated measurement errors, a problem that would be exacerbated by the hypothesized interactions of self-interest with measures of the severity of the problem in the social environment. At level 2 (state) for the guaranteed jobs model, we add a measure of the local economy, Change from the preceding year in Per Capita Personal Disposable Income (CPCPDI), controlling for inflation. We also have one level-2 predictor for the government health insurance model, the percent of adults in the state without any form of health insurance. A third level of analysis is election year, but as we have no predictors at that level, our models are unconditional at the highest level.10

We allow the level-2 predictors to influence variation in the level-1 intercept, which represents the mean response to the guaranteed jobs or government health

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10 Per capita personal disposable income data come from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Annual state-level data on the percent of adults 16 and older without any form of health insurance are estimated from the Census Bureau’s annual surveys of the American public. We did explore one level-3 predictor for each model, the salience of the policy problem in the national media during the year. Media salience was operationalized as the number of stories about those issues appearing in the New York Times during the previous 12 months. These level-3 predictors never added significantly to support for either social policy, however, and for simplicity we dropped them from our models.
insurance items (that is, the dependent variables in the analyses), controlling for all of the individual-level predictors in the model. But our focus will be on another advantage of hierarchical linear modeling, the ability to try to explain variation in regression slopes across units of analysis. In particular, we will look at variation in the effects of the different self-interest indicators across the different local contexts (that is, states) and election years. We have retained the level-2 predictors in their original metric. High values of a Change in Per Capita Personal Disposable Income indicate a very positive local economy, which we would expect to reduce self-interest effects, while low levels of CPCPDI should increase self-interest effects. Hence we predict a negative interaction between CPCPDI and the summary measure of self-interest on support for guaranteed jobs and incomes. On the other hand, high levels of people without any type of health insurance indicate a potentially serious health care crisis in a state, which we would expect to maximize self-interest effects. Hence we predict a positive interaction between state-level uninsured and the summary measure of tangible self-interest.

We begin by computing the variance components—the amount of variance in the dependent variable that exists at the different levels of analysis. If significant variance does not exist at higher levels of analysis, there is no reason to proceed. For guaranteed jobs and incomes, only .4% of the total variance occurs at level 3, election year, but a healthier 2.2% of the total variance exists across states. For attitudes toward government health insurance, 1.3% of the total variance occurs at level 3, and 2.9% occurs at level 2. All of these effects are highly significant ($p < .001$), indicating that there is important upper-level variance to be explained.

Our basic strategy for model building was to include all level-1 predictors as “fixed effects” (that is, constant across contexts), but then to allow each coefficient in turn to vary randomly across higher-level contexts, retaining those coefficients as random that proved to have significant variation across contexts. In the guaranteed jobs equation, the coefficient for age, nonwhite, perceptions of the nation’s economy, and the summary self-interest variable all included significant variation. In the government health insurance equation, the coefficients for nonwhite, political knowledge, and the summary symbolic beliefs variable all varied significantly across contexts.

Formally, the full mixed models for our two multilevel analyses can be written as

\[
\text{Guaranteed Jobs} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{010} \cdot \text{CPCPDI} + \gamma_{020} \cdot \text{Age} + \gamma_{030} \cdot \text{Education} + \gamma_{040} \cdot \text{Income} + \gamma_{050} \cdot \text{Female} + \gamma_{060} \cdot \text{Nonwhite} + \gamma_{070} \cdot \text{National Economy} + \gamma_{080} \cdot \text{Political Knowledge} + \gamma_{090} \cdot \text{Symbolic Beliefs} + \gamma_{010} \cdot \text{Self-Interest} + \gamma_{011} \cdot \text{CPCPDI} \cdot \text{Self-Interest} + r_1 \cdot \text{Age} + r_5 \cdot \text{Nonwhite} + r_6 \cdot \text{National Economy} + r_9 \cdot \text{Self-Interest} + r_0 + u_{00} + e
\]

and

\[
\text{Government Health Insurance} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{010} \cdot \text{Uninsured} + \gamma_{020} \cdot \text{Age} + \gamma_{030} \cdot \text{Education} + \gamma_{040} \cdot \text{Income} + \gamma_{050} \cdot \text{Female} + \gamma_{060} \cdot \text{Nonwhite} + \gamma_{070} \cdot \text{Political Knowledge} + \gamma_{080} \cdot \text{Symbolic Beliefs} + \gamma_{090} \cdot \text{Self-Interest} + \gamma_{010} \cdot \text{Uninsured} \cdot \text{Self-Interest} + r_1 \cdot \text{Nonwhite} + r_5 \cdot \text{Political Knowledge} + r_9 \cdot \text{Symbolic Beliefs} + r_0 + u_{00} + e
\]

The $\gamma_{ij0}$ are familiar regression coefficients, while $e$, $r_i$, and $u_{00}$ represent unexplained or error variance at the different levels of analysis.
The basic results of the resulting hierarchical linear models are shown in Table 4. These coefficients can be interpreted in the same way as OLS coefficients, and the results of the level-1 predictors are the best summary of the effects of the standard individual-level predictors of support for these two policy attitudes over the 1972–2004 period. With very large Ns, most of these level-1 coefficients are statistically significant. All of the level-1 predictors have a 1-point range, remem-
ber, so it is easy to compare the effects of each of these variables. Females and Nonwhites are significantly more liberal on both policy issues, all else equal, but with the exception of the effect of Nonwhite on Guaranteed Jobs and Incomes, their effects are quite modest. Greater Income, on the other hand, pushes respondents in a conservative direction on both policy issues.

But of the level-1 predictors we are most interested in the effects of Self-Interest and Symbolic Beliefs. Both of these summary variables are highly significant in each equation. Self-interest pushes respondents almost an entire point—one-sixth of the total 6-point range of the dependent variable—on the Guaranteed Jobs and Incomes equation, and over 1.5 points—or a quarter of the entire range of the dependent variables—on the Government Health Insurance policy. But as we have already seen, Symbolic Beliefs are more than twice as important as Self-Interest for the Guaranteed Jobs item, and about 70% more important on the Government Health Insurance policy.

One of our upper-level (contextual) predictors—Change in Per Capita Personal Disposable Income—also has a significant effect on attitudes toward guaranteed jobs and incomes. The better off the local economy, the more liberal citizens are toward guaranteeing jobs and incomes to their fellow citizens. This sounds like the altruism of the rich—or at least the well-off. Although this coefficient appears modest compared to many of the others in the equation, we have retained the original scale of this variable, which in our data ranges between −3.05 to 16.03. Thus the effect of the full observed range of the social context (19.08 × .04 = .76) is about the same in absolute magnitude as the effect of Nonwhite or Income in this equation. The percent of the adult population of a state without any health insurance has no direct effect on support for Government Health Insurance, however.

The focus of this analysis is the cross-level interactions between the summary indicators of self-interest and the two higher-level predictors. These interaction terms test the crucial hypothesis of whether there is systematic variation in the effect of self-interest—that is, its slope—as a function of the higher-level predictors. As shown in Table 4, the answer is mixed. There is absolutely no evidence that State-Level Uninsured has anything to do with the importance of self-interest for the government health insurance issue. But the cross-level interaction between Change in Per Capita Personal Disposable Income and the Self-Interest summary variable for guaranteed jobs and incomes indicates, as predicted, that as the economic climate in the social environment improves, the effect of tangible self-interest declines.

To examine this cross-level interaction in more detail, we selected respondents living in the top and bottom quarters of the distribution of economic environments and specified our basic models again, this time employing the individual indicators of self-interest (and symbolic beliefs) rather than the summary scales. The results, shown in Table 5, are not exactly as expected. Given the nature of the cross-level interaction observed in Table 4, we expected all or at least most of the
self-interest coefficients to be noticeably stronger in unfavorable economic contexts than in areas where the economy is generally booming. The coefficients for two of the self-interest variables, being Unemployed/Laid Off and the effects of the Recession, were slightly (but certainly not “noticeably”) larger for respondents living in poor economic environments. The coefficient for one of the self-interest indicators, Personal Financial Well-Being, was much, much larger in bad environ-

### Table 5. Multilevel Analysis of Public Support for Guaranteed Jobs and Incomes, 1972–2004, Controlling for Local Economic Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed Effects</th>
<th>Favorable Economic Context</th>
<th>Unfavorable Economic Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level-1 Predictors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>.81***</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.34*</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−.43</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>−.99***</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>−.19</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Economy Worse</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal/Conservative (Lib. Hi)</td>
<td>1.37***</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification (Dem. Hi)</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Interest Indicators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed or Laid Off</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanently Disabled</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recession Effect on Family</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Personal Financial Well-Being</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.47***</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
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Random Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 (State) Intercept</td>
<td>.06***</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>117.3</td>
<td>.05***</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age slope</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonwhite slope</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed/Laid off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>.64*</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 (Year) Intercept</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>.03***</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>14,401.20</td>
<td></td>
<td>9,797.92</td>
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<td>Estimated Parameters</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001

Note. Data from the favorable economic contexts include 3731 level-1 cases from 81 states and 7 election years. Data from the unfavorable economic contexts include 2593 level-1 cases from 64 states and 6 election years.
ments than in good; but the coefficient for the final measure of self-interest, being Disabled, was noticeably larger in good economic environments than in bad. We have no good explanation for this surprising result.

Discussion

One of the goals of the paper was to replicate the symbolic politics analysis originally presented by Sears et al. (1980). We can firmly conclude that the basic story they told has not changed in the quarter century since they first explored the topic. Second, we can conclude that none of the “internal” moderators of self-interest considered in this paper moderate the weak effect of self-interest on policy attitudes typically reported in the literature. For example, we hypothesized that weak self-interest effects may be a function of most people lacking the political knowledge required to link their own tangible self-interest to political outcomes. We found no evidence that political knowledge interacts with self-interest in explaining policy attitudes, however. Nor did we find any evidence that acquisitiveness values, or identifying with businessmen and women, or believing an issue to be an important national problem, in any way moderate the effect of self-interest on policy attitudes.

We also found no evidence that emotions interact with self-interest to moderate the effects of those two sets of predictors on opinion formation. We predicted that anxiety would lead people to more careful consideration of the problem at hand and thus might maximize the estimated effects of self-interest. But we found little support for this hypothesis. In fairness to affective intelligence, we are not sure this was the best test of the ability of emotions to moderate the influence of either self-interest of symbolic attitudes on policy attitudes. Survey respondents were asked about their emotional experience vis-à-vis the major presidential candidates, but we were considering opinion on policy attitudes rather than the vote choice. As far as we know, there is nothing in the theory of affective intelligence that says the predicted effects will only occur if the emotional experience is closely tied to the problem at hand, but most of us would probably expect the effects to be much stronger if there was such a close association. Given the difficulties of measuring emotions with surveys to begin with, it is not all that surprising that we did not find any support for these hypotheses. It would be a better test of the affect intelligence hypotheses if the emotions were gathered specific to the policy question at hand. For example, “When you think about people who are unemployed or have been laid off from work, does it ever make you feel angry? Afraid? Anxious?”

We did, however, find some mixed but intriguing evidence that self-interest effects may be moderated by the social environment, at least for the guaranteed jobs and incomes policy. We introduced measures of the local (state-level) economic situation and found that bad economic times can substantially maximize some self-interest effects on policy attitudes (Personal Financial Well-Being), but
it can also minimize others (being Disabled). Personal Financial Well-Being is
the most comprehensive, but also the most subjective, indicator of self-interest
we have in the jobs domain. Does its subjectivity make it more responsive to the
surrounding economic climate? This possibility is surely worth additional
research. We also wonder if the estimated effects of the social environment would
have been stronger if we had used some measure of local context smaller than the
state. Economic data are often available from smaller aggregate units, but we
despair of finding any evidence on the number of people without health insurance
at any unit smaller than the state.

In conclusion, if one never found self-interest effects on attitudes toward
policy issues, one might worry about the whole enterprise of trying to understand
public opinion. But the very fact that we can find them, sporadically, here and there
and under particular circumstances, should give us more confidence in the basic
findings of symbolic politics theory, that in the everyday world of democratic
politics, under a very wide variety of circumstances, very few citizens walk around
trying to figure out what their tangible short-term material interests are. Self-
interest is a popular explanation for other people’s behavior (Miller, 1999)—it just
does not do much to explain our own behavior. When people express opinions on
public policy issues, their own material self-interest rarely has much to do with the
opinion expressed. What is largely misguided, we believe, is the underlying theory
of human behavior that would lead us to expect self-interest effects to begin with.
We have many better, more psychologically realistic theories of human behavior
available to us. It is time for political psychologists to more vigorously export their
theories to the other social sciences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of
the International Society of Political Psychology in Portland and the 2007 Annual
Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago. Correspondence
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