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Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting

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This article contrasts short-term self-interest and longstanding symbolic attitudes as determinants of (1) voters' attitudes toward government policy on four controversial issues (unemployment, national health insurance, busing, and law and order), and (2) issue voting concerning those policy areas. In general, we found the various self-interest measures to have very little effect in determining either policy preferences or voting behavior. In contrast, symbolic attitudes (liberal or conservative ideology, party identification, and racial prejudice) had major effects. Nor did self-interest play much of a role in creating "issue publics" that were particularly attentive to, informed about, or constrained in their attitudes about these specific policy issues. Conditions that might facilitate more self-interested political attitudes, specifically having privatistic (rather than public-regarding) personal values, perceiving the policy area as a major national problem, being high in political sophistication, perceiving the government as responsive, or having a sense of political efficacy, were also explored, but had no effect. The possibility that some long-term self-interest might be reflected in either group membership or in symbolic attitudes themselves is examined. While such possibilities cannot be definitively rejected, problems with interpreting standard demographic findings as self-interest effects are discussed.

In recent years, "rational" decision-making models have made a comeback in analyses of electoral behavior. Spurred on partly by V. O. Key's (1966) faith that "voters are not fools," political scientists have increasingly emphasized the cognitive, calculating, sensible, up-to-date, and utility-maximizing aspects of the voter's behavior. In the tradition of Downs' spatial theories, some analysts have emphasized "rational choice" models which presuppose a series of complex perceptions and calculations on the part of the voters, eventuating in support for the candidate or party closest to the voter on issues important in the campaign (e.g., Page, 1977; Riker and Ordeshook, 1973). That is, "issue proximity" determines the vote. Others have presupposed less elaborate cognitive activity, arguing that voters make sensible but more global retrospective evaluations of the incumbent's performance, and then reward or punish accordingly with their votes (Fiorina, 1978; Kramer, 1971; Tuft, 1978). Either way, an important corollary has been that such judgments affect electoral behavior disproportionately among those with a special interest in the policy area in question (that is, its unique "issue public"), rather than uniformly across issues and voters.

Much empirical evidence demonstrates the correlations of issue proximity and performance judgments with voting behavior, espe-
cially within specifiable issue publics. But what, in turn, are the origins of these voter judgments? And what generates an “issue public”? In general, theories on this subject come mainly from economic theories of human behavior. These simply hold that voters try to maximize their perceived utilities, i.e., the worth or value of any given outcome to the individual. Such theories do not usually specify the nature of those utilities very precisely, but they almost always assume, at least implicitly, that the most powerful are those with tangible impact on the voter’s personal life. In common-sense language, “self-interest” is the main driving force behind voters’ decisions. Yet this assumption has rarely been made very explicit, nor tested empirically in any very precise or tenacious way. The empirical pursuit of evidence of such self-interest is, therefore, a main focus of this study.

Before we proceed, though, it would be wise to specify clearly the boundaries of the self-interest hypothesis. A self-interested attitude is usually defined as one that is instrumental to the individual’s attainment of valued goals. However, to make the hypothesis falsifiable and non-trivial, we prefer to restrict the range of goals to those which bear directly on the material well-being of individuals’ private lives, concerning their financial status, health, domicile, family’s well-being, etc. Excluded, therefore, are such nonmaterial goals as spiritual well-being, moral rectitude, prestige or status, relief from neurotic anxiety, or altruism. Excluded also are very long-term calculations about self-interest that do not bear directly on the voter’s well-being in the short run. Such restrictions align our notion of “self-interest” with such common terms as “selfish” or “greedy,” emphasizing the egocentric, material, and short-to-medium term determinants of human behavior. While the excluded considerations all may exert important influences upon the formation of voters’ attitudes, they involve less straightforward versions of the self-interest idea, and go well beyond the way ordinary people use the term. We will give them separate treatment once this more restricted version of self-interest has been dealt with.

The alternative point of view we wish to contrast with self-interest may be termed “symbolic politics” (Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979). By this line of thinking, people acquire stable affective preferences through conditioning in their preadult years, with little calculation of the future costs and benefits of these attitudes. The most important of these are presumably some rather general predispositions, such as party identification, liberal or conservative ideology, nationalism, or racial prejudice.

When confronted with new policy issues later in life, people respond to these new attitude objects on the basis of cognitive consistency. The crucial variable would be the similarity of symbols posed by the policy issue to those of long-standing predispositions. Political attitudes, therefore, are formed mainly in congruence with long-standing values about society and the polity, rather than short-term instrumentalities for satisfaction of one’s current private needs. In the world of “symbolic politics,” one’s political and personal lives exist largely isolated from one another.

The main purpose of this study is to test these two competing explanations for the formation of policy attitudes and for issue-based voting. Do people support those policies that further their private gains, or do policy preferences originate instead in political predispositions which are largely the residue of an earlier political socialization that was ignorant of present self-interest? And, do policy preferences affect voting behavior more when they are based in self-interest?

Surprisingly, the precise role of self-interest in determining voters’ attitudes has received little empirical attention in the past, perhaps because it has seemed so straightforward. Ideally, it would require relating the direct personal impact of a policy issue to a voter’s policy preferences. More often, indirect measures have been used—mainly macro-level data and demographic variables—and voters’ self-interest inferred from them. However, in both these cases, the independent variables are so removed from the direct impact of a policy issue on the individual that they provide at best imprecise, ambiguous indicators of it. For example, macro-level fluctuations in the economy hurt the electoral outcomes of an incumbent president’s party (Kramer, 1971), but there is apparently little connection between personal economic impact and electoral defection at the individual level (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979). That is, self-interest had only weak effects.

Similarly, the personal impact of a policy issue clearly depends partly on the individual’s social location; e.g., the urban poor are more likely to benefit from job training programs than are suburban professionals. Demographic variables are widely used to index personal impact (see Campbell et al., 1960, Ch. 9, among many others). But they prove to be excessively imprecise indices of this kind of self-interest. Most demographic variables do describe people’s current social locations, and so, to some degree, the probable impact of any given government policy on them. But most also describe their preadult social backgrounds to
some degree, and hence their socialization. For example, the strongest opposition to the Vietnam War, at least in its later stages, came from the young. This age effect might seem at first glance to have been based on the war's personal impact on them, since the young were most likely to be sent into combat. But other evidence suggests the age effect really reflected differential political socialization. Opposition to the war was greatest among young women, and young men in elite colleges, few of whom were very vulnerable to the draft. But their socialization had made them unsympathetic to violence, militarism, and virulent antimunism. Age indexed not only the personal impact of the war, but differential political socialization as well. As a general matter, then, demographic variables are inadequate indicators of self-interest, because they inextricably confused it with socialization and therefore the origins of symbolic predispositions.

Such considerations argue for indexing self-interest more directly in terms of a policy's concrete impact on the individual's personal life. Some such efforts have found self-interest not to have major effects on policy attitudes and voting behavior (e.g., Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Sears et al., 1979). Instead, symbolic predispositions such as racial prejudice, liberal or conservative ideology, and party identification had the major effects. To be fully convincing, however, such analyses need to be supplemented with national studies on a wider range of policy issues, which the present study affords.

Our second main goal is to explore special conditions that might maximize the effects of self-interest on policy preferences, given the weakness of self-interest effects in prior studies. The condition most stressed in both rational-choice theories and empirical studies of public opinion is information; voters need to be able to figure out what policy position maximizes their self-interest (e.g., Converse, 1975). An abstract ideology might also be necessary to help guide the voter through the complexities of determining selfish policy preferences in an abstruse political system (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 209). Voters might respond more to self-interest, also, if they believed that solving a given problem is the government's responsibility, that the government is ready to act on it, and in response to public opinion, and to that citizen's opinion in particular. The voters may also need to believe that it is legitimate to act politically in a self-interested, private-regarding way, rather than in a more public-regarding manner (Wilson and Banfield, 1971). As well as these standing predispositions, certain causal attributions linking self-interest to the particular policy in question might be required. The most relevant would concern both the origins of the policy problem and who is responsible for its solution (Brody and Snidman, 1977). The hypothesis would be that self-interest affects policy preferences only when voters perceive government action to solve the problem to be relevant and legitimate. Interactions of such variables with self-interest will be explored, to determine whether or not they are preconditions to self-interest effects.

Finally, self-interest may generate "issue publics." That segment of the public most concerned about a particular issue is likely to be marked by paying more attention to it, collecting more accurate information on candidates' positions about it, and having more consistent policy attitudes about it. All of these indicators of being in an "issue public" may be stimulated when the issue affects the voter personally. For example, Converse (1975) has argued that "doorstep issues" are especially likely to produce both attentiveness to an issue and attitudinal constraint. And Nie et al. (1976) argued that the well-known rise in issue consistency and issue voting in the late 1960s was partially due to increased personal impact of national issues. Lau et al. (1978) found only weak support for both expectations, but there is clearly need for a more extended analysis of the self-interest contribution to the generation of "issue publics."

The data for the study came from the 1976 CPS presidential election survey. That election is a particularly apt case because of the manifest relevance of self-interest issues (principally economic ones) to the presidential choice. Also, the 1976 CPS study contained an unusually fertile series of both self-interest and symbolic measures in four policy areas: unemployment, medical insurance, housing, and crime. It involved a nationally representative panel survey with two waves of interviews, one before and one after the election. Since some crucial variables were only asked in the post-election wave, only respondents interviewed in both waves are considered here. The weighted N is 2403.

Determinants of Policy Attitudes

The analysis begins by considering the determinants of preferences in the four policy areas mentioned, using regression analysis. The independent variables are (1) self-interest (i.e., the personal impact on respondents of) the policy issue, and (2) symbolic attitudes. (3) Relevant demographic variables are also used,
for better specification of the models, but since their theoretical status is ambiguous, they will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Three symbolic attitudes were used as appropriate: party identification, liberal or conservative ideology, and racial prejudice. The same five demographic variables were used in most analyses: age, education, family income, sex, and race. For the busing analysis, race was not used since only white respondents were considered. It was replaced by a dummy variable indexing whether the person was living in the South or not at age 14.

In each policy area, there were three or four indices of self-interest. For the unemployment policy issue, self-interest concerned whether or not (1) the respondent or other head of household was currently unemployed or temporarily laid off, (2) the family was worse off financially than a year earlier, and/or (3) the recession had hurt the respondent's or family's employment situation. For the national health insurance issue, self-interest was indexed by having (1) no current insurance coverage, (2) current insurance coverage too low to cover major medical costs, and/or (3) excessively costly insurance premiums. For busing, self-interested whites (1) had a child in public school, (2) did not have a child already riding a bus to school, (3) lived in a district with busing happening or rumored, and/or (4) lived in an all-white neighborhood. For crime, self-interested respondents (1) had recently been victimized by crime, (2) felt their own neighborhood was not safe to walk alone in at night, and/or (3) stayed away from certain parts of town because of fear of crime. In each case, a single policy attitude dependent variable was used. The details of all these variables and scale construction are presented in the appendix.

Generally speaking, we found self-interest to have little effect on voters' policy preferences, while symbolic attitudes had major effects. The simple regressions, in Table 1, show that no self-interest index significantly affected whites' opposition to busing; respondents personally affected by the recession were somewhat more favorable to government-guaranteed jobs; recent victims of crime showed somewhat greater support for law-and-order policies; and both those without medical insurance, and those perceiving their current coverage as inadequate, were more apt to support national health insurance. But only four of the thirteen self-interest indicators had even a statistically significant effect. The simple total contribution to $R^2$ of self-interest ranged between 3.1 and 0.4 percent across the four policy areas, as shown at the top of Table 2.

In contrast, all symbolic attitude variables had significant effects, and some were quite strong. In all cases, liberalism-conservatism far outstripped any of the self-interest variables, and racial prejudice did so in the two areas (busing and law and order) where it was relevant. The simple contribution of symbolic attitudes to $R^2$ ranged between 17.1 and 10.1 percent, as shown in Table 2.

More telling still is the contribution of each category once the other has been taken into account; i.e., the unique contribution to $R^2$ of each category of predictors. If we conduct a stagewise regression using the three categories of variables (symbolic attitudes, self-interest, and demographics) as the three steps, and vary the order of entry, we can assess the unique contribution of each category. Again, symbolic attitudes are consistently much more important than self-interest in determining policy preferences. Comparison of rows 4 and 5 in Table 2 shows that self-interest contributes, uniquely, from 0.4 to 2.4 percent, depending on the policy area, while symbolic attitudes contribute between 9.0 and 17.3 percent. Symbolic attitudes are always at least four times as powerful.

We treated the self-interest variables in several other ways, but none of the variations altered the basic outcome. Treating being unemployed and being laid off as separate variables, or narrowing the recession's effect to the respondent alone, did not change their effects on unemployment policy preferences. For attitudes toward national health insurance, we formed a composite index from the three self-interest items, which raised $R^2$ slightly from .147 to .162, but scarcely changed any individual terms (the composite drew a beta of .11). We ran the busing regression separately for people living in districts with busing and those where busing was rumored (in both of which children might genuinely be susceptible to being bused), but in neither case did the remaining self-interest items reach significance (though having a child in public school came close with rumored busing: p < .10). Also some of the measures of self-interest and policy attitudes were badly skewed on the busing issue, raising the possibility of underestimating true self-interest effects. Hence we redid that analysis, first using only a less skewed, general school integration item (v3211), and then just among self-proclaimed liberals and the least-prejudiced third of the sample (whose busing attitudes were not so skewed), but the findings remained almost exactly the same. Distributions of all variables on the other issues were reasonably balanced. In brief, the basic finding is that symbolic attitudes are the main predic-
tors of respondents’ policy attitudes; self-interest contributes only trivially.

Special Conditions for Self-Interest Effects. Self-interest may only operate under certain circumstances, however, and so may be strongest in interaction with other variables. We therefore tested its interactions with five predispositions: political sophistication, private-regarding values, perceived government responsiveness, sense of political efficacy, and perceiving the issue as a very important problem. Measurement of these variables is described in the appendix. The analysis involved splitting the respondents at the median on each of these variables in turn, and then re-running the basic regressions shown in Table 1 on these subsamples separately. Without going into unnecessary detail, we can say that none of these additional variables made any appreciable difference in the effects of self-interest on policy preferences. Indeed, in general, the overall $R^2$ for the equations, and the magnitude of the self-interest, symbolic, and demographic effects, were virtually identical for respondents high or low in these potentially moderating variables. In a separate analysis, examining only the most efficacious 20 percent (rather than the top 50 percent) of the sample did not materially improve matters.

Sophistication is perhaps the most theoretically interesting of these, because “rational choice” presumably depends upon adequate information. Sophistication did generally elevate the predictability of these equations ($R^2$ increased by an average of 7.5 percent). But it did not affect self-interest at all: seven of the thirteen self-interest terms (considering all issue areas) yielded higher unstandardized regression coefficients in the more sophisticated half than in the less sophisticated half of the population. Four were statistically significant in each group. Sophistication did seem to strengthen symbolic attitudes somewhat: seven of the nine terms were larger with high sophistication. This contrast can be seen more systematically in the analysis shown in Table 3. Sophistication strengthens the unique contribution of sym-

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**Table 1. Predictors of Support for Specific Policies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guaranteed Jobs</th>
<th>National Health Insurance</th>
<th>Busing (Whites only)</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-interest Index</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolic attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal-conservative ideology (liberal)</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification (Democratic)</td>
<td>.08****</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial prejudice (tolerant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>-.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (male)</td>
<td>-.07***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
<td>-.08***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income ($)</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.06*</td>
<td>.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (white)</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1727</td>
<td>1562</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Computed from data collected in the 1976 election study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.*

*Note: Entries are betas.*

*See appendix for a description.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$
# Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics

## Table 2. Variance in Policy Attitudes Accounted for by Each Category of Predictor Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution of:</th>
<th>Guaranteed Jobs</th>
<th>National Health Insurance</th>
<th>Busing (Whites only)</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attitudes</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.171</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attitudes beyond self-interest</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest beyond symbolic attitudes</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics beyond symbolic attitudes</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics beyond self-interest</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total R²</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Computed from data collected in the 1976 election study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

**Note:** The amount of variance explained is an indication of how "useful" each set of predictor variables is in predicting variance in the policy attitudes. When these predictors are correlated, the amount of variance any category predicts when considered alone overestimates that category's unique contribution to the regression. But the increase in R² produced by adding that category to a stagewise regression after another category has already been included provides an index of its unique contribution to variance explained. To give an example of how these usefulness figures are computed, self-interest and symbolic attitudes together explain .121 of the variance in attitudes toward guaranteed jobs. When the contribution of self-interest alone (.031) is subtracted from this, the remainder (.090) is the amount of additional variance explained by symbolic attitudes above and beyond that explained by self-interest. The data for this table comes from the regressions shown in Table 1.

bolic attitudes (rows 1 and 2) but not of the self-interest indices (rows 3 and 4).

Nor did having a clear political ideology make people more selfish. To test this, we compared the effects of self-interest in the unemployment issue among people who indicated strong ideological convictions by responding to all four liberal-conservative items (see the appendix) to those with little ideology (those who responded to only one). The stronger ideologues actually generated lower b-weights for self-interest on two of the three items (though not by much). So presence of ideology appears not to facilitate self-interest, either.

Finally, the voters' self-interest may affect

## Table 3. Variance in Policy Attitudes Accounted for by Each Category of Predictor Variables, Controlling on Sophistication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution of:</th>
<th>Guaranteed Jobs</th>
<th>National Health Insurance</th>
<th>Busing (Whites Only)</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attitudes beyond self-interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High sophistication</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.172</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low sophistication</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest beyond symbolic attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High sophistication</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low sophistication</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics beyond self-interest and symbolic attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High sophistication</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low sophistication</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Computed from data collected in the 1976 election study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

**Note:** The data for this table are based on regressions identical to those presented in Table 1, but done separately for respondents high and low in sophistication. Entry is R², computed as in Table 2.
their policy preferences only when they make the right attributions about the origins of the policy problem and locus of responsibility for its solution. Self-interest should influence preferences about government policy only when voters attribute their problems to causes external to themselves, and/or feel the government is responsible for their solution. If one perceives one’s own plight to be caused by one’s situation, rather than by one’s own actions, then one should regard government action to change the situation as most appropriate. For the economic policy areas, we generated scales to measure perceived locus of causality for poverty (whether the poor, or their situation, is to blame), and perceived government economic responsibility (whether or not it is up to government to solve various economic problems). (See the appendix for details.) However, when we ran the basic regression on the unemployment issue (Table 1) only among those above the median in external attributions, all self-interest terms washed out. In the case of attitudes about medical insurance, we found two of the self-interest terms to be stronger among respondents with external locus of causality, and one weaker. No relevant attributions were available for the other two areas. There is little evidence, then, that appropriate causal attributions increased the power of self-interest.1

Alternative Models

In testing for respondents’ self-interest, we have initially used only direct measures of the impact of policy issues on their personal lives. However, some of our other predictors may also be picking up the effects of personal impact, perhaps yielding some genuine self-interest effects we are overlooking.

Symbolic Attitudes. One possibility is that the symbolic attitudes themselves reflect self-interest, rather than some archaic relics of a childhood socialization process blind to the child’s ultimate adult interests. Such predispositions may be constantly reformulated to capture and synthesize a variety of the voter’s interests and provide cognitively simple and economical cues to self-interest amid the complexities of changing issues and candidates. One version of this notion is that symbolic attitudes are reasonably responsive to the personal impact of government policy over the short-to-medium term. This can be addressed with the data here. Another is that they are adjusted in an interest-maximizing manner over many years and in relation to many issues; we will return to this later on.

At the least, the voters’ symbolic attitudes seem clearly not to express the short-term personal impact of policy issues. The correlations between the self-interest variables and symbolic attitudes are minuscule. On the unemployment issue, the median correlation between the three self-interest measures and the two symbolic dimensions was +.08; regarding national health insurance, none of the six correlations exceeded +.05; for busing, none of the eight correlations exceeded +.11, with a median of +.04; for crime, the nine correlations ranged between +.03 and −.13, with a median of −.03. These negligible correlations replicate earlier findings that whites’ symbolic attitudes were unaffected by the personal impact of the race issue (Kinder and Sears, 1980; Sears et al., 1979).

A more rigorous test of this alternative exploits the CPS 1972–1976 panel study. If symbolic attitudes are constantly readjusted to express current self-interest, measures of symbolic attitudes taken in earlier years ought to be of diminished value in predicting to current policy attitudes (since they could not so accurately reflect current self-interest). Current self-interest and its surrogate, current symbolic attitudes, ought by contrast to have much better predictive value. However, including 1974 symbolic measures in regressions which otherwise use 1976 data weakens the influence of self-interest still further, and actually strengthens symbolic attitudes. On the unemployment issue, the simple contribution to $R^2$ of self-interest drops to 1.9 percent, and its unique contribution to 1.2 percent. In contrast, the contribution of symbolic attitudes increases to 12.3 and 11.6 percent, respectively. So it is very unlikely that current personal impact of an issue has any important indirect effect on voters’ policy preferences through symbolic attitudes.

1 This phenomenological approach assumes such attributions are not caused by self-interest, symbolic attitudes, or the policy attitudes themselves. This is to us a dubious assumption, since causal attributions are well-known vehicles for rationalizing affective states (Bradley, 1978). A “symbolic politics” perspective would therefore treat them affectively, as symbolic attitudes (e.g., blaming the poor for their own poverty is simply another manifestation of conservatism). And indeed they have strong main effects when added to the regressions shown in Table 1, reducing the effects of liberal or conservative ideology somewhat, but increasing the overall $R^2$ by about 40 percent in each case.
Demographic Variables. A second possibility is that demographic variables also index self-interest, since they too partially describe the individual's social location. Again there are two versions of this alternative, one short-term and one longer-term. The former simply suggests that the individual's social location, as indexed by demographic variables, partially determines the immediate personal impact of government policy, and therefore ought to be interpreted in self-interest terms. We can address this version here with our data. Demographic variables could also index self-interest in the longer-term, "ideology-by-proxy" sense suggested by Campbell et al. (1960, Ch. 10): poorly informed voters may cut their information costs by conforming to the political norms of groups with whom they perceive common fate. Conformity spares them the information search and calculations they would otherwise engage in by themselves. We will return to this version later.

If demographic variables had some significant effect upon voters' policy attitudes, above and beyond that contributed by our direct measures of personal impact, they might be tapping some unmeasured policy impacts. However, as we noted earlier, demographic measures also describe social background, and hence the socialization origins of symbolic attitudes. They cannot therefore be interpreted unequivocally as reflecting the personal impact of the policy issue; they rather represent some combination of it and symbolic attitudes. The mixture might seem hopelessly impenetrable, but it can be unscrambled to some degree by determining whether or not demographic variables contribute unique variance to policy attitudes, above and beyond that contributed by our direct measures of self-interest and symbolic attitudes. If they do not, it is unlikely that they constitute some untapped reservoir of self-interest variance.

In fact, demographic variables had rather weak effects in our data. Moreover, what variance they did contribute tended to overlap with that contributed by symbolic attitudes. So they probably mostly reflect the residual effects of earlier socialization rather than current self-interest. This point is clearest in the cases of medical insurance, busing, and crime, so let us consider them first. Here the demographics added relatively little variance to that contributed by symbolic attitudes (between 0.6 and 4.6 percent; see Table 2, row 6). They explained more variance above and beyond self-interest (between 2.9 and 10.1 percent; Table 2, row 7). Demographic factors have the strongest effects on the crime issue, so it merits a little fuller explication. White, male, and high-income respondents were the harshest law-and-order advocates, as shown in Table 1. But these cannot be disguised self-interest effects, because these same groups were the least frequently victimized by or vulnerable to crime. For example, women indicated more vulnerability than men by being more afraid to go out in their neighborhoods alone at night (r=.29). The alternative case, for socialization origins of law-and-order sentiments in these groups, is fairly clear; certainly males, and whites, are generally socialized to more punitive, authoritarian stances than are women and blacks.

The unemployment issue seems at first glance to yield the most plausible case that demographic variables are picking up self-interest effects. Table 1 shows that support for guaranteed jobs comes disproportionately from the groups most likely to profit from them: blacks, women, and those with low income. But the demographic variance is not shared with the direct measures of self-interest. When the demographic variables are omitted from the basic regression (Table 1, column 1), the $R^2$ drops (from .215 to .121) and the self-interest terms do not become much stronger (the beta for recession impact rises from .06 to .10, but the other two remain trivial). Similarly, the demographic variables lose little of their power when self-interest is added to the equation (the contribution of $R^2$ dropping only from 15.6 to 13.0 percent; compare rows 3 and 7 in Table 2).

So demographic variables contributed to support for guaranteed jobs independent of the variance supplied by the direct personal impact of employment problems. It is conceivable that in this case demographic factors are picking up effects of the current personal impact of the employment issue that are inadequately indexed by our more direct measures of self-interest. But it seems unlikely since the latter have considerable face validity, and seem to cover adequately the main employment problems people have. If this finding reflects some effect of self-interest, then, it seems more likely to require an expanded definition of self-interest; we will return to this point later.

1976 Presidential Voting

The next question was whether or not self-interest would affect issue voting. Specifically, simple self-interest theories would predict that policy attitudes would affect presidential voting more among those with some private interest in the issue than among those with none. That is, in predicting the vote, we would expect policy attitudes and self-interest to
interact. The symbolic politics hypothesis, on the other hand, suggested that issue voting would occur without reference to self-interest; that is, that symbolic and policy attitudes would have main effects upon the vote, and not interact with self-interest.

A fully specified voting model would, of course, be based on a “funnel of causality” which passes from demographic variables through party identification to partisan attitudes concerning party, candidates, and issues (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Miller et al., 1976). Simply to assess the role of self-interest does not require a full account of presidential voting in 1976, however. We need to include the major variables, and then determine the marginal additional effects of self-interest. Hence, we specified regression equations in each policy area using a common set of symbolic attitudes and demographic variables, but each having a different “relevant policy attitude” (which was the dependent variable for the previous analyses), and different self-interest indices (as spelled out in previous sections). In addition, we included more general issue proximity indicators in three areas: economic issues, social issues, and busing.  

This model departs from the standard Michigan treatment in three ways. All variables are included in the equation simultaneously, rather than in the order implied by the “funnel,” because we are not concerned with making precise distinctions among the contributions of other variables in the model. Liberal or conservative ideology is treated as a symbolic attitude analogous to party identification, rather than as simply one among a number of policy issues, since we consider it a generalized stable predisposition. Finally, we have ignored candidate evaluation, because it seems almost impossible to imagine it as unequivocally prior, causally, to candidate preference as expressed in the vote, when both are measured simultaneously. To repeat, we think these departures are not consequential for our main purpose, which is to estimate the proximal effects of self-interest above and beyond the effects of other variables.

This analysis generated terms for thirteen two-way interactions of self-interest and policy attitudes, considering the four issues. Of these, only two were significant. Persons not covered by medical insurance did vote more for the candidate whose positions were closest to theirs on medical insurance, but people least economically harmed by the recession voted more for the candidate whose views they agreed with most on guaranteed jobs. Only one of the thirteen self-interest indices had a significant main effect on the vote: declines in family financial situation were related to voting for Carter. The busing analysis was repeated within each of the critical “busing in area” subgroups (those for whom busing was happening or rumored in the area) but this change still did not yield significant interactions with self-interest.

It is hardly surprising that far and away the most important contributors to the vote are symbolic attitudes, especially party identification. Considering each category of variables by itself (as the first step in the stagewise regression, exactly as done earlier with policy attitudes in Table 2), symbolic attitudes and policy attitudes are most important (Table 4, rows 1–4). Symbolic attitudes retain that premier status even when self-interest and policy attitudes are considered (rows 5 and 6). Symbolic attitudes always add at least 20 percent to the R², even when other variables are considered first. But self-interest, policy attitudes, and demographic variables all lose their force when symbolic attitudes are considered first (rows 7–10). They never add more than 4 percent to the R² once symbolic attitudes have been taken into consideration. So in voting behavior, as in the generation of policy attitudes, symbolic attitudes have the greatest impact, and short-term self-interest apparently has almost no effect.

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This analysis may somewhat overestimate symbolic effects, by omitting candidate evaluations from the equation, or underestimate them, by not assessing their indirect effects through issues and candidate evaluations. To make precise allocations of the causal roles of these several factors demands a different research design from that of the 1976 CPS survey, we believe, especially obtaining measures at much earlier stages of the campaign. Our assumption, that party identification is causally prior to 1976 policy attitudes, can be checked, in part, by using 1974 or 1972 party identification on panel respondents. When we did this on the one issue (guaranteed jobs) yielding a significant self-interest effect, we found no changes in the role of self-interest, either as main effects or in interaction with policy attitudes on guaranteed jobs.

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2 It might also be noted that we recognize regression is often replaced by logit or probit analysis with dichotomous dependent variables. The disadvantages of regression analysis in such instances are serious chiefly with skewed data, and our dependent variable (the Carter-Ford division of the vote) is quite evenly distributed.
Issue Publics

Does self-interest create "issue publics?" That is, do voters with a greater personal stake in an issue perceive it as more salient, perceive candidates' positions on it more accurately, and have more consistent policy preferences about it? These data yield little evidence for such an effect. Mentions of an issue area as a major national problem indexed issue salience. Unemployed respondents did tend to mention employment as a major national problem more than did other respondents: 71 percent of those either unemployed or laid off spoke of unemployment as an important national problem, while only 56 percent of the employed did. Being affected by the recession had a weaker but still significant effect on issue salience, while personal financial reverses did not. The other three policy areas were not mentioned often enough as major national problems to warrant extending this analysis to them. None of the self-interest indices on any issue significantly improved the accuracy of perceptions of candidates' positions on the issue; indeed, the differences were never more than 5 percent, and most were in the wrong direction (i.e., the self-interested were less accurate). Finally, issue constraint (that is, the consistency of policy preferences) could be tested for on two issues. The unemployment policy item was asked both in the pre-election and in the post-election wave. Being unemployed or laid off increased the test-retest correlation for this policy preference (from \( r = -0.50 \) to \( r = -0.61 \)), but being affected by the recession, or having suffered financial reverses, actually reduced it. On the busing issue, we assessed constraint using the correlations among the three items in the busing scale. These correlations were higher among the self-interested than the disinterested in eight of fifteen cases, and lower in the remaining seven. Indeed, the correlations are amazingly parallel. So there is little evidence here that voters' self-interest plays much of a role in creating "issue publics" for national issues.

Discussion

The main goal of this article has been to assess the relative roles of self-interest and symbolic attitudes in producing policy attitudes and issue voting on four controversial policy areas (unemployment, national health insurance, busing of school children for racial integration, and crime). In general, symbolic attitudes (liberalism-conservatism, party identification, and racial prejudice) had strong effects, while self-interest had almost none. A secondary goal was to explore some conditions that might facilitate more self-interested political behavior, but none was discovered that substantially affected the generally minimal level of self-interest effects (though sophistication did considerably increase the power of symbolic attitudes). Demographic variables generally had little effect beyond what was contributed by the more proximal symbolic attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution of:</th>
<th>Guaranteed Jobs</th>
<th>National Health Insurance (Whites Only)</th>
<th>Busing</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
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<td>.106</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.103</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-interest</td>
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<td>.053</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.038</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy attitudes</td>
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<td>.208</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attitudes</td>
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<td>.393</td>
<td>.370</td>
<td>.409</td>
</tr>
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<td>.350</td>
<td>.327</td>
<td>.375</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.219</td>
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<td>.015</td>
<td>.004</td>
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<td>.004</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics beyond symbolic and policy attitudes</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed from data collected in the election study, 1976 Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

Note: Entry is \( R^2 \), computed as in Table 2.
or self-interest measures (except in the case of unemployment), and so were unlikely to carry otherwise hidden self-interest effects.

A number of methodological complaints might be made about these analyses, but it can be said with some confidence that none we can think of accounts for the results. When composite self-interest measures, which are less skewed, are used, they usually generate somewhat stronger results, but of the same small order of magnitude. When the symbolic measures are dichotomized or trichotomized, to reduce variance, they have about the same effects. The same results occur when the policy attitudes are normally distributed (e.g., on crime) as when they are more skewed (e.g., on busing). Moreover, the few significant self-interest effects that did emerge fit no obvious pattern in terms, for example, of being subjective, objective, retrospective, or prospective.

A number of earlier studies have found self-interest to have little effect on policy attitudes (and voting behavior) on such issues as the economy, civil rights, the Vietnam War, busing, and the energy crisis (Bauer et al., 1963; Fiorina, 1978; Gatlin et al., 1979; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Sears et al., 1978; Sears et al., 1979). There are some exceptions, however. Home ownership and being employed in the public sector had strong effects upon Californians’ voting on property tax reform (Proposition 13) in 1978 (Sears, 1978), and the prospect of a local busing plan in Los Angeles was most opposed by parents likely to be affected by it (Allen and Sears, 1978). In the latter two cases the personal impact seems likely to have been considerably more definite, concrete, and immediate than is the case for most political issues, and this may be the reason that voters overcame the seemingly more common tendency to segregate political attitudes from their personal lives. In any event, symbolic attitudes also had powerful effects in both these cases. Hence, in our judgment, the present findings are quite robust; the concrete personal impact of political issues seems rarely to influence policy preferences and voting behavior very strongly. The exceptions seem to involve unusual extremes of impact.

This extensive set of findings ought to shed some doubt on a central assumption of at least the more naive versions of economic or rational-choice theories. Indeed, it raises the question of why the self-interest assumption has been held so tenaciously yet apparently so uncritically. Part of the reason may be that it follows from one of the most common lay theories of human nature—a simple hedonic pleasure-pain theory—and so it seems "obvious." Partly, as we indicated earlier, the only self-interest indices in common use have been both quite indirect and subject to numerous alternative explanations: macro-level data, demographic variables, or group references in open-ended items (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 203–40). In the absence of direct measures, self-interest had to be inferred from data that prove to have been misleading.

But we also need to consider the possibility that this apparent disconfirmation arises simply because our definition of self-interest was too restrictive. It will be recalled that it was defined in terms of the rather short-term, concrete impact of policy issues upon the individual’s material well-being. A looser definition might open up some more impressive effects.

One such possibility is that “symbolic attitudes” themselves express some sense of self-interest which develops over a longer period, and therefore takes into account a broader collection of the person’s interests. To be sure, other research that attributes symbolic attitudes to childhood socialization would seem to shed some doubt on this possibility (e.g., Sears, 1975). The child’s political sophistication is so low that self-interest cannot be a major force at the time symbolic attitudes are initially acquired. And symbolic attitudes seem to be rather stable in later years; party identification and racial prejudice, for example, show virtually no change over four-year time spans (Converse, 1975; Sears, 1980). They are certainly insensitive to the short-term, concrete impact of policy issues upon the individual’s personal life, as we have shown above.

Still, the evidence is by no means definitive. There is little direct longitudinal evidence on the long-term stability of symbolic attitudes, and even less on their responsiveness to changes in the individual’s personal circumstances. Fiorina’s (1978) painstaking analysis of the 1972–74–76 panel study data was able to uncover some evidence of small, only marginally significant modifications of party identification due to personal financial situation. But it is still possible that such predispositions do reflect long-term self-interest in some important way, perhaps cumulating and averaging over many

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4Another apparent exception is Tufte’s (1978) use of 1976 NBC voter-exit surveys, which obtained strong correlations of personal financial situation with vote preference. Our suspicion is that this reflects the strong pressures to rationalize one’s vote decision inherent in the voter-exit site, where the interviewer is essentially asking the voter for a socially acceptable explanation for his or her just-completed vote.
issues and time periods. What we can say with some certainty is that both symbolic attitudes and policy preferences are remarkably indifferent to the individual’s current personal situation, even when it involves such very striking phenomena as personal unemployment, the threat of catastrophic medical expenses, or having one’s own child bused to distant ghetto schools. It may be that such personal events must be very severe, or cumulate over a longer period, to affect symbolic attitudes and policy preferences; our data do not scan such extreme cases adequately enough to be very informative on that point.

A second possibility is that self-interest operates indirectly through perceived shared group interests. By this argument, unsophisticated voters, having difficulty calculating what political posture is interest-maximizing, support the political positions taken by some group whose outcomes in private life seem over the long term to be correlated with their own. If this long-term self-interest process were operating, direct measures of immediate impact might not predict to policy preferences (voters finding it too complicated to figure out the maximizing policy stance) but group membership would (so they let the leadership figure it out). Campbell et al. (1960) term this process “ideology-by-proxy,” but it is perhaps more accurately described as “self-interest-by-proxy.”

Two bits of evidence in this study do suggest some self-interest might be operating in this “self-interest by proxy” manner. As indicated earlier, the substantial demographic effects on opinions concerning unemployment policy held irrespective of people’s self-interest. Hence, voters may have used group membership as a guide to policy preference, while disregarding their own personal short-term self-interest. And there was some tendency for demographic variables to have increasing influence over the policy preferences of voters with lower levels of political sophistication (see Table 3, rows 5 and 6).

However, the case is not closed. These effects are not strong ones: they really held clearly only on the unemployment issue, of the four tested. And the unemployment issue would seem to be one on which a person’s self-interest is least complicated to convert into political preferences (indeed, Campbell et al., 1960, p. 205, use it as the premier example of an issue so simple that the self-interest-by-proxy process is unnecessary). Moreover, in the absence of additional information, such demographic effects are just as plausibly interpreted as reflecting fraternal solidarity. Identification with fellow group members and empathic concern for their welfare, rather than indirect self-interest may be responsible for them. And fraternal solidarity comes closer conceptually to our notion of symbolic politics than it does to self-interest.

Both of these latter possibilities require defining self-interest in terms of a somewhat longer time frame than we have been using. Obviously, our data cannot test for either very decisively. Whether or not more appropriate data would yield major self-interest effects cannot be anticipated for certain. All this discussion can hope to accomplish is to point up some of the problems in interpreting standard findings (mainly involving demographic factors) as documenting self-interest effects, even of the longer-term variety discussed here. It is to be hoped that more pointed tests are in the offing.

These findings do not settle why people derive their policy preferences from such general “symbolic attitudes,” while ignoring the direct personal impact of government policy. From our perspective, the most plausible interpretation rests in “symbolic politics”; i.e., in rather unthinking, reflexive, affective responses to remote attitude objects. Affective responses are conditioned to symbols which, when salient, evoke consistent evaluations. We have no data directly assessing this process, however, and simply appeal to the vast literatures on the preadult acquisition of partisanship, social values, and racial prejudice, on the one hand, and on cognitive consistency pressures on the other, for evidence of it.

Alternatively, symbolic attitudes may express the adult’s sense of the public good, and are quite deliberately and self-consciously given more weight than private considerations when voters make judgments about public policy. 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. To us, this too is plausible, and poorly tested with the few public- versus private-regarding value items used here.

Either way, the present findings suggest some modifications in the conventional view of political belief systems in the mass public. Most

5Indeed, if the literature on relative deprivation offers a parallel, it may be even more plausible. There is some evidence that fraternal deprivation is more potent politically than is egoistic deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Vunneman and Pettigrew, 1972).
theorists have assumed that private concerns are central to political belief systems, and that they therefore constrain political attitudes. This assumption has held across quite a variety of private concerns, including the individual’s emotional life (McClosky, 1959), social relationships (Lane, 1962), economic and practical life (Downs, 1957), “doorstep issues” (Converse, 1975), or matters of class and status (Lipset, 1960). The “symbolic politics” viewpoint sees this quite differently, however. The central elements in political belief systems may be strong affective commitments to certain symbols, which remain constant for many years due to long histories of reinforcement. And they may constrain the individual’s political responses to numerous other stimuli, such as policy issues, political events, media presentations, or electoral candidacies. But this provides no guarantee that they are central in other aspects of the individual’s functioning. And the individual’s private life may be quite peripheral to his or her political belief system, and both may be mutually quite unconstraining. For example, inconsistencies between expressing high levels of prejudice at a symbolic level, and displaying tolerant behavior toward minority individuals in private life, are common and well documented (Schuman and Johnson, 1976). Too little is known about the conditions under which private concerns influence people’s attitudes about public affairs. But at the moment it appears these conditions are more limited than once thought.

A common view today is that the practicing politician needs to pander to the citizenry’s short-term, material, personal self-interest, because issue publics are composed of the relatively narrow subgroups who are directly affected by the issue in question. Indeed, “single-issue” issue publics are supposed to be focused quite intensely on some selfish concerns. The present data suggest instead that an “issue public” is comprised principally of those with shared symbolic loyalties, and that, similarly, a disaffected member of the “coalition of minorities” is one whose symbolic attitudes have been violated. The dangers to the politician practicing in the remote, largely media-conveyed world of public symbols perhaps lie, therefore, not so much in inconveniencing people in their private lives, as in violating their symbolic attitudes.

Appendix

The following lists the major variables used in these analyses and their designated variable numbers in the 1976 CPS codebook. In all cases where scales were used, the individual items were standardized and then averaged; half or fewer missing values were allowed.

Symbolic Attitudes: Party Identification: Standard 7-point scale (v3174). Liberalism-Conservatism: Scale based on 7-point liberal-conservative item (v3286), 10-point left-right item (v3360), and the difference between “feeling thermometer” ratings of conservatives and liberals (v3838-3823). Racial prejudice: Scale based on whether or not civil rights people are pushing too fast (v3213), whether or not whites have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods (v3214), whether segregation or desegregation was favored in general (v3217), and feeling thermometer measures on blacks (v3832) and black militants (v3841) (these items were selected from a factor analysis of 13 race-related items, on which these five loaded between .27 and .63 on the first factor, while all others loaded .22 or below).

Demographic variables: Age (v3369), Education (v3384), Family income (v3509), Sex (v3512), Race (v3513), and Region of origin (a dummy variable, South or non-South at age 14: v3501).

Self-Interest: Employment: (1) self or head of household unemployed or laid-off (v3431); (2) self and family worse off financially (v3137); (3) scale based on effects of recession on respondent or respondent’s family in terms of unemployment (v3146), reduced hours (v3148), pay cut (v3150), or additional reliance on governmental assistance (v3152). Health Insurance: (1) absence of personal health insurance coverage (v3281); (2) inadequate coverage for major illness (v3285); (3) excessively costly coverage (v3283). Busing: (1) having a child in public school (v3381); (2) not having child who already rides a bus to school (v3382); (3) living in an area with busing happening (v3209) or rumored (v3208); (4) living in an all-white neighborhood (v3221). Crime: scale based on (1) four recent victimization experiences: having witnessed a crime (v3919); having car (v3921), home or apartment (v3920) broken into; having been forcefully attacked (v3922); (2) not feeling safe walking alone in the neighborhood at night (v3910); (3) staying

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6 Converse’s (1975) speculations that ideology is most central for elites, and “doorstep issues” for the less sophisticated, are only half supported. Table 3 bears out the first, but provides no support at all for the second. Nor does it support the notion that sophistication increases the influence of self-interest on policy preferences (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 209).
away from certain parts of town because of fear of crime (v3918).

Mediators: Sophistication: scale based on (1) education, (2) two political knowledge items, on which party controlled Congress (v3683 and v3684), (3) interest in the campaign (v3031), and (4) the number of media in which the campaign was followed (v3600, 3602, 3604, 3645). Privatist values: scale based on rankings of five Roekeach instrumental and terminal values, keying positively "ambitious, hard working aspiring" (v3936), "prosperous life—good income and being able to afford the good things of life" (v3945), and "independent—self reliant, self-sufficient" (v3938); keying negatively were "helpful, working for the benefit of others" (v3939) and being "responsible, dependable, reliable" (v3940). Government responsiveness and political efficacy: scales based on standard items (v3741–3744 and v3815–3818, respectively). Major national problem: (v3685–7) respondents could mention up to three issues; any of these three responses was counted for our purposes. Too few respondents mentioned anything about national health insurance (n=71), busing (n=25), or crime (n=63) to make separate analysis meaningful in these cases, but 1073 mentioned something about unemployment or jobs.

Attributions: Causes of poverty: Scale based on the six of seven available items which loaded together in a factor analysis: attributing poverty to the wealthy and powerful (v3751), too few jobs (v3752), too little chance for a good education (v3753), the seniority system in companies (v3754), inability to get into skilled unions (v3755), and our way of life, which doesn't give the poor an equal chance (v3757). Up to two missing values were allowed. Government responsibility to solve economic problems: scale based on perceived government responsibility to solve high taxes (v3717), inflation (v3718), unemployment (v3720), and consumer protection (v3724).

Policy attitudes: Employment: scale based on an item repeated in the pre- and post-election waves, on whether or not the federal government should guarantee everyone a job and a good standard of living (v3241 and v3758). Health insurance: preference for a government insurance plan or private insurance (v3273). Busing: scale based on the 7-point busing item (v3257), government intervention in school desegregation (v3211), and the number of pro- or anti-busing statements across three responses to the open-ended busing item (v3205–3207); these three items had loaded between .38 and .76 on the second factor of the race factor analysis while all others loaded below .24. Crime: scale based on attitudes about the permissiveness of courts (v3913), rights of the accused (v3248), gun control (v3911), the Supreme Court (v3553) and urban unrest (v3767); these had loaded over .30 on a single factor in a factor analysis of eight items on crime policy.

Residential vote: Post-election report of a Carter (0) or Ford (+1) vote. For the policy attitude x self-interest interactions, the policy attitudes were rescored as three-point variables (+1 was closer to Ford, –1 closer to Carter, and 0 equi-distant from them); the interaction terms multiplied this policy-distance measure by self-interest. Other policy attitudes were based on a factor analysis of responses to the nine 7-point attitude scales, yielding 3 issue clusters: economic (government medical insurance, government guaranteed job, government aid to minorities, and change in the tax rate); social (rights of the accused, legalization of marijuana, and equal rights for women); and busing (single item). Each issue cluster was recoded into a 3-point dummy variable indicating whether respondents were closer to Ford’s or Carter’s position in that issue area: +1 if closer to Ford, –1 if closer to Carter, and 0 if equidistant from the two. For analyses involving one of our four policy areas, the relevant issue was not included within its cluster.

References


