

A Framework for Understanding the Role of Self-Interest in Attitude Formation

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Abstract

Jennifer Kirstin Benz: A Framework for Understanding the Role of Self-Interest in
Attitude Formation
(Under the direction of Thomas Carsey)

In this paper I present a framework based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion to explain the interplay of self-interest with symbolic beliefs and sociotropic perceptions in determining policy preferences. In developing the self-interest framework, I generate three testable hypotheses. I address two of these hypotheses in this paper using individual level survey data on preferences for a system of universal health insurance. The results of these tests provide preliminary support for the self-interest framework and suggest that a new conception of the effect of self-interest on policy preferences is in order.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1
Background	3
A Framework for Understanding the Role of Self-Interest	8
Data and Methods	13
Results	17
Discussion	24
Conclusion	27
Appendix A: Question Wordings	28
Works Cited	29

List of Tables

Table

1. Symbolic Politics and Self-Interest Framework
Models of Preferences for Universal Coverage 19

List of Figures

Figure

1. Expected Interaction of Self-Interest and Symbolic Beliefs12
2. Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status20
3. Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status & Party22
4. Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status & Sociotropic Perceptions23

Introduction

The function of self-interest in political behavior is regularly debated in both the normative and empirical literatures. One important puzzle is the discrepancy between the significant role of self-interest in the economic, public policy and normative political literatures and its insubstantial role in the political public opinion literature. The public opinion literature has generated two widely cited theories in which symbolic beliefs or perceptions of the larger national situation are more predictive than self-interest in determining policy and electoral preferences. Individual empirical tests generate support for both of these theories, but the accumulated body of evidence demonstrates that the theories are conditional upon individual and contextual factors. The result is an unclear understanding of the basic structure of public policy attitudes. In this paper, I present a framework for understanding the determinants of public policy preferences that highlights the interplay of self-interest with symbolic beliefs and perceptions of the national situation for important public policy issues. Tests of the theory show when and how self-interest becomes a significant predictor of public policy attitudes.

Despite the theoretical disagreement about the determinants of public policy preferences, aggregate public opinion is a proven influence on the policy process in the United States. A considerable body of evidence finds that the public's preferences have important effects on electoral and public policy outcomes (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson 1999; Kelly 2005; Wlezien 1995).

Furthermore, public policy scholars and practitioners observe in real time the determinants of public opinion and their consequences on important public policy issues. The debate over health care reform provides a clear example. Experts on health care reform policy observe that individual self-interest has a large effect on the public's preferences for large-scale change (Oberlander 2003; Blendon 2006). Oberlander writes, "The insured are generally satisfied with their own medical care, even if they think poorly of the system as a whole. Consequently, the well-insured are not a reliable constituency for change. Indeed, any reform that threatens to alter their medical care arrangements is likely to provoke public opposition" (2003).

Observations like this challenge conventional thinking in political science about the determinants of policy attitudes, and most especially, the role of self-interest. The framework I present in this paper provides a way to reconcile the discrepancy between the observed effects of self-interest in the policy environment and the inability to find an effect of self-interest in the political science literature. I begin with a brief review of the literatures on symbolic beliefs and voting based on perceptions of the national economic situation, highlighting the role that self-interest plays in those theories. I then present the self-interest framework and discuss the expectations of the framework for understanding attitudes toward public policy issues. In the next section, I utilize individual level opinion data on preferences for a system of national health insurance to test aspects of the framework. I conclude with a discussion of the results and their implications for the role of self-interest in politics.

Background

Early theories of public opinion emphasized the role of self-interest as a major determinant of individual preferences. Campbell et al. (1960) articulate a notion of public policy preferences as mere expressions of “primitive self-interest” (Campbell et al 1960). Popkin et al. (1976) assert that the influence of economic conditions on electoral outcomes results from individuals basing their electoral decisions upon the tangible economic situations they face in their daily lives. The self-interested motivations of these “pocketbook voters” served as a central theme in the work on the political economy of individuals for several years.

Kinder and Kiewiet conducted the first critical investigation of the pocketbook voter assumption (1981). In doing so, they defined the sociotropic voter as an individual “influenced most of all by the nation’s economic condition” and not the condition of their own pocketbook (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). They argued that individuals develop rough evaluations of the nation’s economic condition and place credit or blame on the incumbent government accordingly. Furthermore, they showed that sociotropic perceptions are not simply expressions of ideological or partisan loyalties. They and others showed that sociotropic perceptions are more predictive of vote choice than pocketbook considerations (Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988).

Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) expressed an agnostic belief about the motivation driving sociotropic effects. They were clear that sociotropic politics did not necessarily imply a politics of altruism. Sociotropic politics, they believed, could very well be a politics of indirect self-interest, but they were unable to adequately test for this possibility. Several scholars have since taken up this issue and the evidence that has accumulated suggests that sociotropic politics are not indirect expressions of self-interest. Evaluations of group fairness, social value commitments, and beliefs in economic individualism seem to moderate the role of self-interest and bolster the effect of sociotropic perceptions (Mutz and Mondak 1997; Funk 2000; Funk and Garcia-Monet 1997; Feldman 1982).

At about the same time that the sociotropic politics literature was questioning the role of self-interest, work by Sears and his colleagues explored the relative contribution of self-interested motivations compared to symbolic beliefs about race¹, political parties, and ideology in predicting policy preferences and political behaviors (Kinder and Sears 1981; Lau et al. 1978; Sears et al. 1980). Their studies found little or no effect of self-interest on policy preferences across a number of domains. Even when self-interest effects were present, their explanatory power compared to symbolic beliefs was quite small. A recent replication and update of the original work confirms the dominant role of symbolic beliefs (Lau 2007).

¹ Early work by Sears and colleagues on symbolic racism has been criticized for methodological problems such as construct validity and confounding the independent and dependent variables (see Sniderman and Tetlock 1986). Work focusing on the symbolic politics of ideology and partisanship (Sears and Lau 1983; Lau 2007) improves upon these methodological problems. However, the dependent variables often used in these analyses ask about preferences for vague policies and are unlikely to tap the concept of tangible self-interest investigated in this paper.

Overall then, the bulk of the evidence from the sociotropic perceptions and symbolic beliefs literatures reduces self-interest to a negligible determinant of policy preferences. However, several studies do find a role for self-interest when examining preferences for policies that offer clear benefits or costs (Sears and Citrin 1985; Dixon et al. 1991; Wolpert and Gimpel 1998). Furthermore, survey and laboratory based experiments demonstrate that priming self-interest can induce significant self-interest effects in policy preferences (Sears and Lau 1983; Chong et al. 2001). Taken together, these results suggest that theories of political attitude determinants should not be so quick to dismiss the role of self-interest. The empirical data imply that the role of self-interest is conditional and the evidence to date implies that self-interest is most likely to have an impact on attitudes when an individual is aware of his or her self-interest and when the implications of the policy options for the individual are clear. However the literature lacks any theoretical justification for these findings.

The conditional nature of self-interest can potentially be explained using models of attitude formation available in the social psychology literature. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion is of particular relevance to understanding the roles of self-interest, sociotropic perceptions, and symbolic beliefs. The ELM begins with the premise that individuals want to hold correct attitudes² (Festinger 1950). Attitudes are defined in the ELM as “general evaluations people hold in regard to themselves, other people, objects, and issues” (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). The attitudes can be based on behavioral, affective, and/or cognitive experiences, and have the

² Individuals are motivated to hold attitudes that are adaptive and lead to positive behavioral, affective, and cognitive consequences. Festinger’s Social Comparison process (1954) explains how individuals determine the correctness of their attitudes by comparing them to the attitudes of others.

potential to influence behavioral, affective and cognitive processes in the future (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model puts forth two routes that individuals might take when forming an attitude (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Individuals who are both motivated and able to cognitively process information relevant to the attitude are likely to take the central route to forming attitudes, which involves more cognitive processing and leads to relatively accessible and stable attitudes (Petty et al. 1995). These individuals are said to have high elaboration likelihood. High elaboration indicates a process in which individuals carefully attend to issue messages, access relevant information from memory, elaborate upon the message using the information from memory, and form an attitude based on this analysis (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Individuals lacking the motivation or ability to process information are likely to take the peripheral route to forming an attitude, such that they rely on simple cues and heuristics rather than cognitive processing. These individuals are said to have low elaboration likelihood as they do not attend carefully to the message or undergo a process of accessing relevant information from memory³.

One feature of the Elaboration Likelihood Model that will help inform the self-interest framework I present in the next section is that pieces of information and cues can serve multiple roles for individuals⁴. A common example used in the literature is an ad

³ Though not pertinent to the present study, it should be noted that individuals who rely exclusively on cues or who engage fully in cognitive processing occupy the endpoints of the elaboration likelihood continuum. Most individuals fall somewhere along the continuum such that they utilize both arguments and cues to form their opinions. However, it is possible to discriminate between attitude formation that results primarily from the peripheral route and attitudes formed using the central route. Although important to understand the underlying continuum, most research considers the processes operating at the endpoints (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

that shows a picturesque view of a sandy beach. In an advertisement for a hotel in Hawaii, this picture serves as relevant information for cognitive processing in the central route because it supplies information on the benefits of the hotel. The same scene appearing in an advertisement for a car serves only as a peripheral cue because it does not provide any relevant information about the qualities of the car (Staats and Staats 1957). In other words, a piece of information can serve as a cognitive argument or as a peripheral cue depending on the context. As the self-interest framework is presented, it will be important to remember that cues in the political environment can influence both central route and peripheral route processors.

⁴ In addition to serving as arguments or cues, a piece of information can also affect attitude formation by determining whether message processing occurs objectively or with a bias. In biased processing, a piece of information can influence individuals to generate a specific type of thought, or to inhibit a specific type of thought (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Biased processing under the ELM shares many features with models of Motivated Reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2000) and Bayesian updating (Bartels 2002).

A Framework for Understanding the Role of Self-Interest

In this section, I build on the existing literature to present a framework for understanding when and how self-interest becomes an important determinant of policy preferences in the political environment. The political environment provides individuals with a large amount of information they can use to form policy preferences. Each of these pieces of information can be considered as either an argument or a peripheral cue depending on the degree to which individuals rely on cognitive processing to form their preferences. Included among the different types of information available are:

- Descriptions of the current national condition that serve to frame the policy problem (sociotropic considerations).
- Arguments about the merits and consequences of policy options for different groups of individuals (self-interested considerations).
- Endorsements of policy options by politicians and political parties (symbolic considerations).
- Policy frames that connect the policy to broader ideological values (symbolic considerations).

Recall that individuals are likely to engage in central route processing when they are able and motivated to think about the issue (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Research on the ELM finds that personal relevance, which occurs when an issue has significant consequences for the individual, motivates individuals to engage in central route processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1979). In the realm of political decision making, I propose that self-interest serves as a source of motivation⁵. Self-interest suggests that the

⁵ Individuals can be motivated to use central route processing for several reasons. In addition to the motivation of self-interest (i.e. personal relevance) discussed in this paper, another well researched motivation is an individual's need for cognition. Individuals high in need for cognition (NFC) enjoy

issue carries significant consequences for the individual. As self-interest increases, people will become more motivated to cognitively process the issue information available in the political environment. The intrinsic consequences of the issue motivate self-interested individuals to form a correct attitude because the costs of holding an incorrect attitude are large. Individuals with a clear stake in a policy outcome are therefore more likely to engage in central route processing as they form their attitudes. This is the first role of self-interest as a determinant of public policy preferences.

Once they are cognitively engaged, individuals with a self-interested stake in the policy outcome will be more likely to consider the sociotropic and symbolic considerations available in the political environment as informational arguments⁶.

Compare this to individuals lacking a self-interested motive in the policy outcome who are likely to rely on the sociotropic and symbolic considerations as simple cues to form their preferences. The second role of self-interest, therefore, is to moderate the influence of sociotropic and symbolic considerations. Under this framework the influence of self-interest on sociotropic perceptions and symbolic beliefs to determine policy preferences will differ depending on the importance of the policy issue for the individual.

engaging in effortful and analytic thinking (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). Need for cognition is an individual difference variable that is rarely measured in political surveys. Although not a direct proxy for NFC (Cacioppo et al. 1996), an individual's education is controlled for in all analyses presented here.

⁶ Petty and Cacioppo find that central route processors are better able to distinguish between strong and weak arguments compared to peripheral route processors (1986). Party identifiers are likely to consider arguments from their own party as strong and to disregard information from the other party (Druckman 2004). Party identifiers engaged in central route processing should therefore view party messages as strong arguments. Party identifiers engaged in peripheral processing should not make a distinction about argument quality, but simply accept the party message as a cue. Determining the quality of sociotropic arguments is less straightforward. Objectively, the political environment is likely to supply some strong and some weak sociotropic arguments. Individuals processing centrally should be able to distinguish the argument quality, and are likely to form their overall sociotropic perception based only on the strong arguments in the environment. Peripheral route processors are likely to use the number of sociotropic arguments available in the environment as a cue about the severity of the policy problem.

The framework generates three hypotheses about the role of self-interest as a determinant of policy preferences. First, I expect individuals with a narrow self-interest in a policy outcome to engage in behaviors consistent with attitude formation under the central processing route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Self-interested individuals should be more likely to engage in the types of information processing behaviors consistent with central route processing. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, the ability to distinguish between strong and weak arguments in the face of peripheral cues such as source expertise and varying the number of arguments. The attitudes formed by self-interested individuals, like all central route processors, should demonstrate the characteristics of strong attitudes indicative of preferences formed using the central route such as greater persistence and increased ability for the attitude to predict behavior (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). This hypothesis is not tested in this paper.

Second, I expect the effects of self-interest to be significant whenever the policy outcomes and consequences are clear because self-interested individuals will be motivated to form the correct attitude given the appreciable costs of forming an incorrect attitude. Phrased in the negative, self-interest is unlikely to have a significant effect for policies that lack tangible benefits or costs. A significant effect of self-interest should remain even when controlling for symbolic beliefs and sociotropic perceptions.

Third, self-interest should moderate the effects of sociotropic perceptions and symbolic beliefs. Individuals with an interest in a policy will be more likely to elaborate on the information about the policy available in the political environment. Self-interested individuals will therefore relate the information about the policy from the political parties and political commentary to their knowledge about their own interests. Because the costs

of forming an attitude against one's own interests are greater than forming an attitude against one's symbolic beliefs or sociotropic perceptions, the self-interest framework expects no significant differences among individuals with a tangible interest in a policy regardless of their symbolic beliefs or sociotropic perceptions⁷. Individuals without a tangible interest in a policy will not be motivated to elaborate on the information available in the political environment and will therefore rely on symbolic beliefs and sociotropic perceptions as cues to form their attitudes. As a result, the self-interest framework expects significant differences based upon symbolic beliefs and sociotropic perceptions to exist among individuals without a tangible interest in the policy.

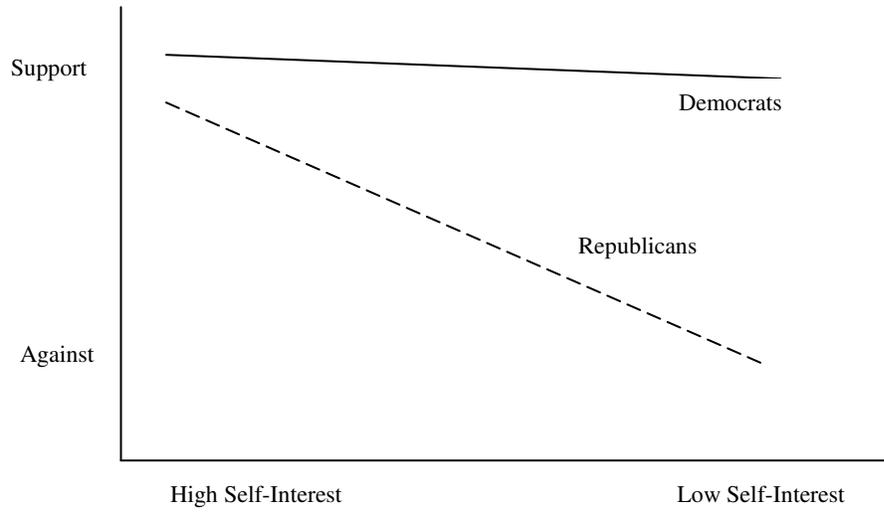
Figure 1 depicts the relationship between self-interest and a symbolic belief, party identification, for a hypothetical policy⁸. The second hypothesis of the self-interest framework predicts that, overall, self-interested individuals will support the policy more than individuals without an interest. Furthermore, the situation pictured is one in which self-interested individuals and Democrats tend to support the policy. In this situation, the third hypothesis of the self-interest framework predicts no significant difference among self-interested Democrats and Republicans and a significant difference between Democrats and Republicans without an interest in the policy. Additionally, the nearly flat slope of the Democrats' line predicted by the third hypothesis of the framework

⁷ Cacioppo and Petty find the potential for an individual's self-interest to reach such a high level that it biases the processing of information (1979). It is therefore conceivable that an individual's interest in a policy can increase to a point at which the individual is so motivated to advance his interest, he will no longer behave as a central route processor attending to all information in the environment, and will instead reject any information that does not support his interest.

⁸ Party identification is treated as a symbolic belief in the symbolic politics literature (for example Sears et al. 1980). This assumes a conception of party affiliation as a psychological identity (Campbell et al. 1960). A concept of party affiliation as an instrumental tally (Fiorina 1981), is not likely to yield the same effect. Although the nature of partisanship is still open to debate, many scholars believe that each of these explanations is true for some individuals and not for others (Erikson et al. 2002).

means that no significant differences exist among Democrats regardless of self-interest, but self-interested Republicans should differ from Republicans without an interest in the policy.

Figure 1: Expected Interaction of Self-Interest and Symbolic Beliefs
Self-interested individuals and Democrats are for the policy.



Data and Methods

In this paper, I test the expectations that self-interest will have an effect for policies with tangible individual outcomes, and that self-interest will moderate the effects of sociotropic perceptions and symbolic beliefs using multivariate regression techniques with national survey data. I use the health care reform case, specifically preferences for a system of universal health insurance, as an example of a policy with tangible policy consequences.

The use of survey data requires the researcher to make a decision about the self-interest of an individual respondent or category of people. My selection of the universal health insurance policy is intended to minimize the error associated with that judgment. Being uninsured in this country creates a number of tangible effects including fragmented health care, delayed treatments, failed detection of preventable diseases, and increased financial instability⁹. Policies that guarantee health care coverage provide tangible benefits for the medically uninsured.

At the same time, the provision of universal health care coverage invokes sociotropic and symbolic considerations as well. When questioned about the status of the U.S. health care system, individuals' opinions are generally fairly negative to begin

⁹ Reports from the Institute of Medicine develop and discuss these implications more fully. Institute of Medicine (IOM). 2003. *A Shared Destiny: Community Effects of Uninsurance*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press See also, <http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/factsheets/display.php?FactSheetID=116>, accessed November 2, 2007.

with¹⁰, and much of the debate over a system of universal coverage revolves around the chance that the reform could further lessen the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the system. Symbolic beliefs about a system of universal coverage are embodied in the rhetoric of socialism and big government that is consistently present in the elite debate over the policy. As such, preferences for a system of universal health insurance provide a reasonable test of the self-interest framework.

To operationalize these concepts for testing the self-interest framework theory, I utilize data from a September 2006 ABC News/Kaiser/USA Today national survey of adults about health care issues archived at the Roper Center¹¹. The dependent variable in this analysis is a dichotomous choice between a preference for the current health insurance system or a universal insurance program (exact question wordings are included in Appendix A). Fifty eight percent of the sample stated a preference for a system of universal health insurance. Self-interest, the key independent variable, is operationalized as having some form of health insurance or health care coverage. Only nine percent of the sample reports lacking any form of health coverage. According to the Current Population Survey in 2005, nearly sixteen percent of the U.S. population lacks any form of health care coverage. Underreporting in the survey is likely due to the correlation

¹⁰ In a 2006 ABC News/Kaiser/USA Today poll, 82 percent of respondents were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the total cost of health care in the U.S., 54 percent were dissatisfied with the quality of health care in the U.S., and 90 percent perceived the number of Americans with no health insurance to be a serious or critical problem for the country.

¹¹ Kaiser Family Foundation and USA Today. ABC News/Kaiser/USA Today Poll # 2006-1021: Health Care Costs and Issues [computer file]. 1st Roper Center for Public Opinion Research version. Storrs, CT: The Roper Center, University of Connecticut [distributor], 2006.

between the uninsured population and populations difficult to contact in telephone surveys¹².

Symbolic beliefs include self-identification as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent and identification as a liberal, conservative, or moderate. Thirty nine percent of the population reports affiliation with the Democrats, thirty one percent with the Republicans, and thirty percent with Independents. Sociotropic perceptions are operationalized using a question that asks respondents to classify the number of Americans without any form of health insurance as a critical problem (55%), a serious problem (35%), a problem that is not serious (7%), or not a problem (4%).

To test the hypothesis that self-interest moderates symbolic beliefs, I form interaction terms between health insurance status and the pair of party affiliation variables representing Democrats and Republicans. The omitted baseline category is for independents. Party identification is selected as the symbolic belief because the parties have public stances on the issue of universal health care insurance. Because the universal coverage issue has not been debated in terms of ideology or race as frequently as the partisan debate, interactions with these symbolic beliefs are not considered here. The self-interest framework predicts that self-interest moderates sociotropic perceptions as well. However, due to small sample sizes among the uninsured who perceive the number of Americans without health insurance to be a non-problem or a minor problem, I was unable to include the interaction term. The main effect for sociotropic perceptions remains in the model. To reduce the risk of omitted variable bias, I include controls for

¹² The uninsured are more likely to be low-income, young, and disproportionately non-citizens. For additional information on the demographics of the uninsured population, see ASPE Issue Brief. 2005. Overview of the Uninsured in the United States: An analysis of the 2005 Current Population Survey. Available at <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/health/reports/05/uninsured-cps/index.htm#Insurance>>.

education, gender, race, and income. These variables are not discussed in the analysis, but it should be noted that the only demographic variable that is consistently significant is income which demonstrates an expected negative relationship with support for universal coverage.

Results

To test the self-interest framework hypotheses, I estimate a logit model with a preference for a system of universal health insurance as the dependent variable. I present the results of the self-interest framework model in the right hand column of Table 1. Also included in the left column of Table 1, for comparison purposes, are the estimates predicted using a traditional symbolic politics model. The symbolic politics model behaves as expected with significant and positive coefficients on the Democrat and liberal terms and negative and significant coefficients on the Republican and conservative terms. Joint Wald hypothesis tests confirm that Democrats and Republicans are significantly different from one another, as are liberals and conservatives¹³. Of note is the highly significant and negative sign on the insured term meaning that insured individuals are significantly less likely to prefer a system of universal health insurance even after controlling for symbolic beliefs and sociotropic perceptions. Most models in the symbolic politics literature find that self-interest variables contribute very little compared to models including only symbolic belief variables (Lau 2007).

The significant effect of self-interest in the symbolic politics model is likely due to the characteristics of the dependent variable. First, it provides a tangible policy outcome for the uninsured. Second, it provides a clear contrast to the current system which is not meeting the needs of the uninsured and is therefore likely to activate self-

¹³ The relevant Wald test statistics are: Democrats=Republicans ($\chi^2_{1df} = 37.35, p<.01$) and liberals=conservatives ($\chi^2_{1df} = 18.18, p<.01$).

interest. The self-interest framework specifies that these types of characteristics, which exemplify the idea of tangible policy consequences, are necessary to activate self-interest. These features are often lacking in the dependent variable of traditional models of symbolic politics.

The self-interest framework model provides a further improvement in explaining preferences for a system of universal health insurance¹⁴ and provides support for the expectations derived from the self-interest framework. The first expectation of the framework is that self-interest will have an effect on policy preferences when the policy has tangible consequences. To assess the overall effects of self-interest among individuals with a party affiliation, it is necessary to assess the coefficient on the insured variable together with the coefficients on the relevant interaction terms. I use a joint Wald test to evaluate the null hypothesis that self-interest has no effect ($\beta_{\text{insured}} + \beta_{\text{insured} \times \text{Democrat}} + \beta_{\text{insured} \times \text{Republican}} = 0$). The test allows me to reject this hypothesis at $P < .05$.

¹⁴ The log-likelihood for the symbolic politics model is -512.91 and reduces to -510.42 for the self-interest framework model ($\chi^2_{1df} = 4.98, p < .05$).

Table 1: Symbolic Politics and Self-Interest Framework Models of Preference for Universal Coverage

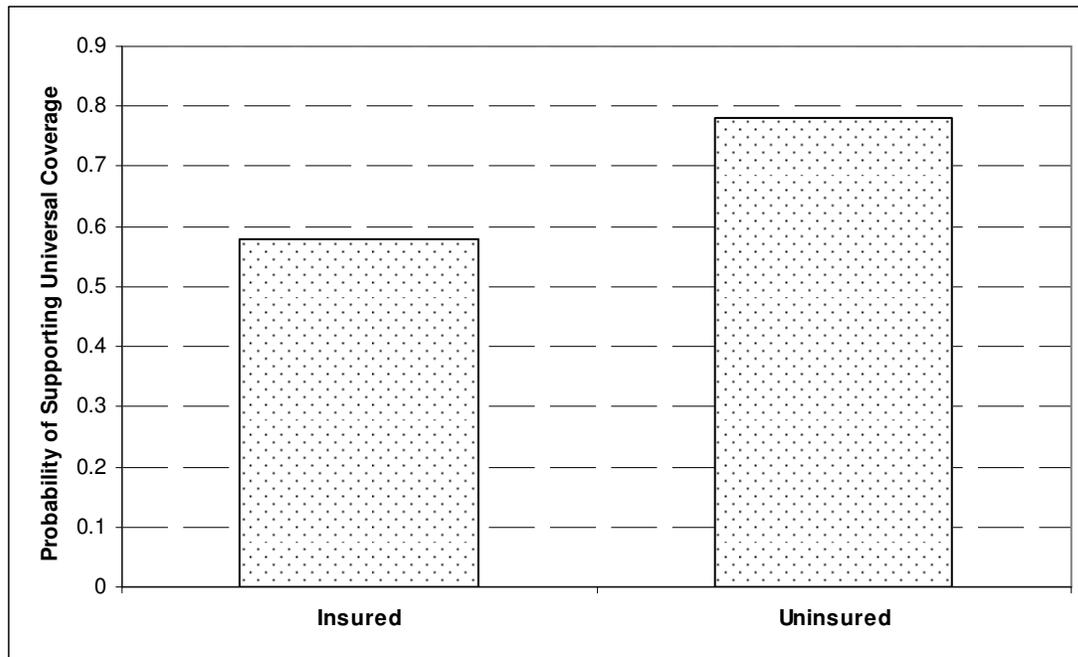
	Symbolic Politics Model Preference for Universal Coverage	Self-Interest Framework Model Preference for Universal Coverage
Insured	-1.327** (0.352)	-.959* (0.530)
Uninsured Problem for Country	0.590** (0.112)	0.590** (0.113)
Democrat	0.434* (0.190)	0.284 (0.699)
Republican	-0.821** (0.200)	0.789 (0.935)
Liberal	0.600** (0.212)	0.589** (0.212)
Conservative	-0.410* (0.181)	-0.421* (0.182)
Insured x Democrat	--	0.159 (0.724)
Insured x Republican	--	-1.686* (0.952)
Education	0.048 (0.075)	0.048 (0.075)
Age	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)
White	-0.092 (0.204)	-0.112 (0.204)
Income	-0.093* (0.056)	-0.094* (0.057)
Female	-0.106 (0.159)	-0.113 (0.160)
Constant	0.244 (0.641)	-0.074 (0.732)
χ^2	223.02	228.00
Log-likelihood	-512.91	-510.42
N	917	917

Note: Table entries are logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, one-tailed tests.

The coefficients show a significant, negative relationship of being insured to preferring a system of universal health insurance over the current system. Figure 2 demonstrates the effects of insurance status on preferences for universal coverage in the Self-interest Framework. The predicted probability of supporting universal coverage for insured individuals is .58 (95% CI: .49-.66) and .79 (95% CI: 0.60-0.95) for uninsured individuals¹⁵. This represents a 21 percentage point decrease in support as individuals move from being uninsured to having insurance. These results provide support for the self-interest framework's expectation that self-interest will have an effect on policy attitudes when the policy has tangible consequences.

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status



Of central interest in evaluating the self-interest framework is whether or not the effects of symbolic beliefs are moderated by self-interest. The expectation of the self-

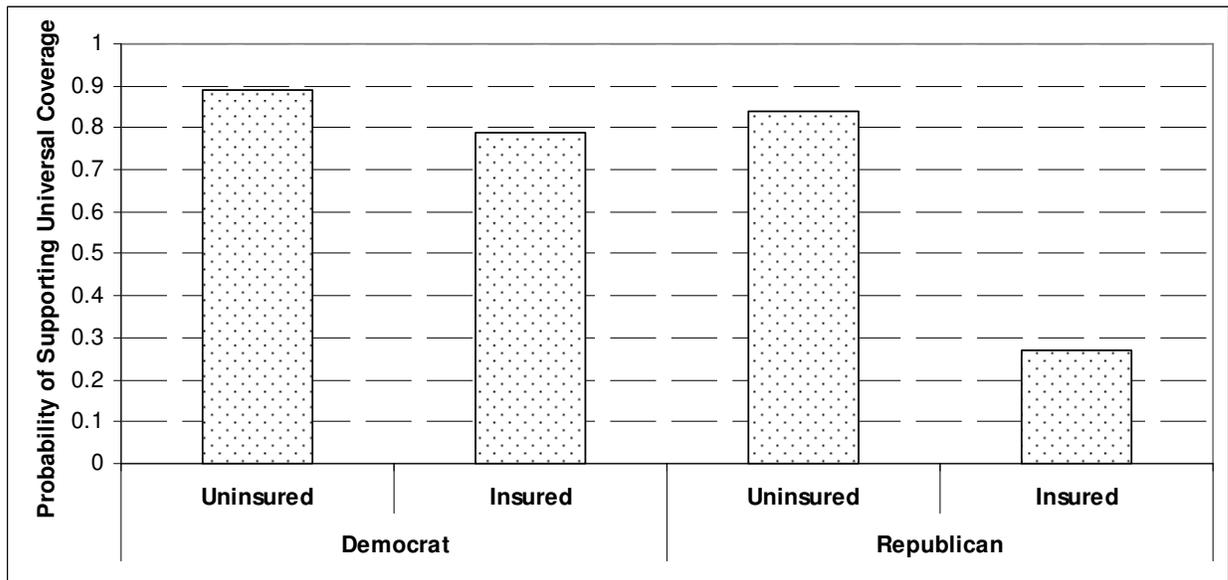
¹⁵ With the party, the party interaction terms, and ideology set to the modal value of zero, this represents the effect for moderate Independents. Perceptions of the uninsured problem for the country and demographic variables are set to their mean or modal value.

interest framework, as depicted in Figure 1, is that Democrats will have similar preferences for universal coverage regardless of insurance status, while insured Republicans should express less support for universal coverage compared to uninsured Republicans and all Democrats. These expectations are borne out in the non-significant coefficient on the interaction term for insurance status and Democrats as well as the negative and significant coefficient on the insurance status and Republican term.

Again, to help with interpretation, the predicted probabilities for the interaction are presented in Figure 3. There are two important features to notice. First, there are no significant differences in preferences by party for self-interested individuals with a tangible stake in the policy outcome. The probability of preferring universal coverage to the current system for uninsured Democrats is .89 (95% CI: .797-.992) and .84 (95% CI: .625-1.00) for uninsured Republicans¹⁶. Second, insured Republicans, whose probability of supporting universal coverage is .27 (95% CI: .197-.337), are significantly different from uninsured Republicans and all Democrats. These results provide initial support for the idea that self-interest serves to motivate individuals to carefully process information in the political environment such as party messages and potentially discount these messages when they conflict with self-interest.

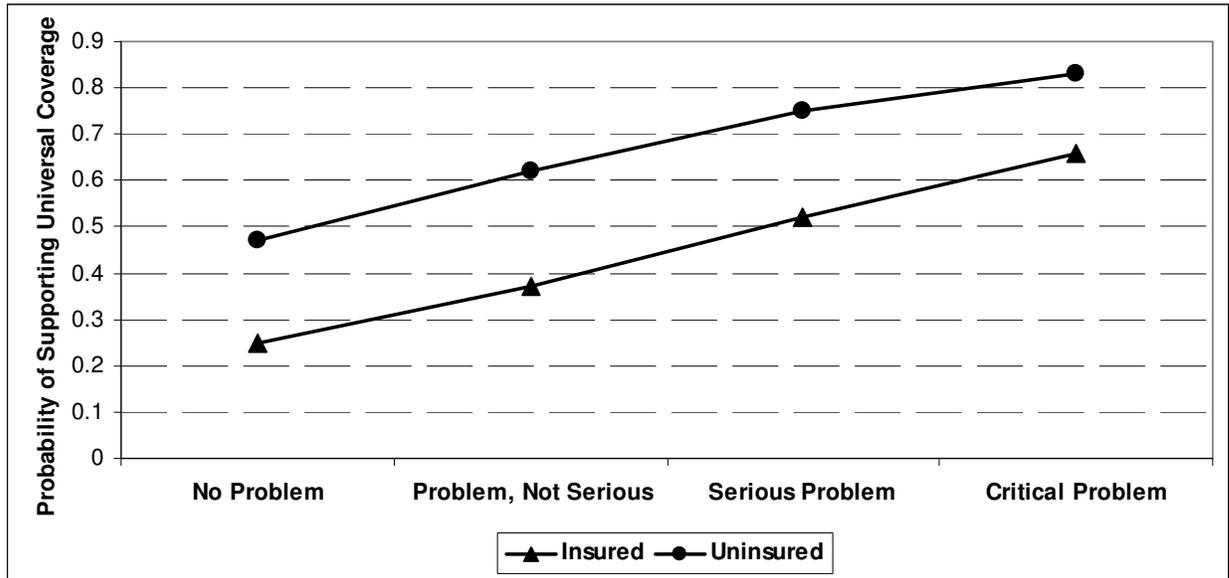
¹⁶ Predicted probabilities for party affiliations are calculated by setting the main party affiliation term and party interaction term to one. The liberal term is set to one for Democrats and the conservative term is set to one for Republicans. The remaining variables are set to their modal or mean value.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status & Party Affiliation



Although the data could not support the inclusion of an interaction between insurance status and sociotropic perceptions, it is still important to consider the consequences of including a main effect of sociotropic perceptions in models of self-interest and symbolic beliefs. As seen in Table 1, there is a significant and positive relationship between perceptions of the number of uninsured as a problem and preferences for universal health insurance. Holding all other variables at their mean or modal value, moving from a perception that the number of uninsured is not a problem at all to the perception that it is a critical problem increases the probability of supporting universal coverage from .46-.83 for the uninsured and from .25-.66 for the insured. Because the interaction term could not be included in the model, Figure 4 shows the additive effect of being uninsured. The uninsured tend to be about 20 percentage points more supportive of universal health care.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Support for Universal Coverage Given Insurance Status & Sociotropic Perceptions



Discussion

The results presented in the case of universal health insurance provide support for the self-interest framework. The framework generates three predictions. First, the effects of self-interest will be significant whenever the policy outcomes and consequences are clear. The results support the hypothesis. The provision of universal health insurance provides a tangible benefit to those individuals without health insurance. Individuals currently lacking health insurance, those with a tangible interest in the policy, were significantly more likely to support the policy. This effect persisted even when symbolic beliefs, such as party affiliation and ideology, and sociotropic perceptions of the uninsured problem were controlled for in the model. The significant effect of self-interest found in this analysis differs from the results found in much of the symbolic politics literature. According to the self-interest framework, this discrepancy is explained by differences in the dependent variable. In the present study, the dependent variable provides a policy choice between the status quo and a new system of health care in which all individuals have some form of health insurance. This policy choice poses tangible benefits for the uninsured. The dependent variable in the symbolic politics literature rarely has the same characteristics. Under those conditions, when tangible policy effects are not clear to respondents, the self-interest framework would not predict significant effects for self-interest.

Second, the self-interest framework predicts that self-interest will moderate the effects of sociotropic perceptions and symbolic beliefs. The results presented in the case of universal health insurance preferences demonstrate significant differences between individuals without an interest in the policy based on party affiliation, and no such differences between those individuals with an interest in the policy. As expected, the uninsured were equally as likely to support universal coverage regardless of party affiliation. The self-interest framework posits that the uninsured are motivated to centrally process information in the political environment. The data presented above provide evidence for the idea that Republicans without insurance were motivated to overcome the party message to support a system of universal health insurance over the current system. Furthermore, the insured, those without a tangible interest in the policy, showed significant differences in support for universal coverage by party affiliation. This suggests that party messages were processed peripherally as cues rather than elaborated upon centrally as arguments. Although correlational in nature, these results provide support for the self-interest framework's prediction that self-interest motivates individuals to centrally process symbolic political information, while those without an interest are likely to accept the symbolic political information as a peripheral cue.

Finally, public policy attitudes formed by self-interested individuals should demonstrate the attributes of all attitudes formed using central route processing such as persistence and certainty. The data utilized for testing the first two hypotheses are not capable of evaluating this expectation of the framework. Future experimental work will be needed to evaluate the characteristics of attitudes resulting from both individuals lacking self-interest and those with self-interest in a public policy. Additionally, the

survey data employed in this study were unable to accommodate testing the expectation that self-interest should moderate the effects of sociotropic perceptions. Testing this expectation using survey data can potentially occur for policy areas where there is more variation among the self-interested on sociotropic conditions or through experimental manipulations.

Conclusion

The self-interest framework provides a new way of conceiving the role of self-interest in politics. Self-interest serves to motivate individuals to carefully process the information they receive from the political environment to form policy attitudes rather than simply relying on symbolic cues or perceptions of the national situation. The framework provides insights into understanding the determinants of public policy attitudes. In the aggregate, these attitudes function as inputs in the public policy process and serve as predictors of policy outcomes (Erikson et al. 2002).

Additionally, the self-interest framework may have implications for political behavior. The attitudes formed by self-interested individuals are predicted to be strong and therefore more predictive of behavior. Scholars have begun to explore the idea that self-interest may have more of a political impact in terms of behavior than attitudes (William and Ratner 1998; and Green and Cowden 1992). The self-interest framework would provide a theoretical rationale for these predictions. Testing the behavioral impact of the framework would provide an even greater understanding of the subtle, but significant, role that self-interest plays in politics.

Appendix A: Question Wordings

* Kaiser Family Foundation and USA Today. ABC News/Kaiser/USA Today Poll # 2006-1021: Health Care Costs and Issues [computer file]. 1st Roper Center for Public Opinion Research version. Storrs, CT: The Roper Center, University of Connecticut [distributor], 2006.

Dependent Variable

Which would you prefer – (the current health insurance system in the United States, in which most people get their health insurance from private employers, but some people have no insurance) or (a universal health insurance program, in which everyone is covered under a program like Medicare that’s run by the government and financed by taxpayers)?

Self-Interest

Do you have some form of health insurance or health care coverage, or not?

Symbolic Beliefs

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as: (A Democrat, A Republican, An Independent, Or What)?

Would you say your views on most political matters are liberal, moderate, or conservative?

Sociotropic Perceptions

Thinking now about the number of Americans who have no health insurance – do you think that’s (a critical problem for the country, a serious problem but not a critical one, a problem but not serious, or not much of a problem at all)?

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