A Conditional Theory of Self-Interest and Symbolic Politics

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Abstract: Using the 2012 ANES, I find support for the conditional theory of self-interest. For policy preferences toward guaranteed jobs and national health insurance, I find evidence that self-interest indicators matter more for Republicans, as expected from theories of motivated reasoning, compared to Democrats. I then look more closely at preferences towards the Affordable Care Act (ACA). I find that self-interest has both a *positive* impact among strong Republicans and a *negative* impact among strong Democrats, causing partisans to converge in their policy preferences. Self-interest indicators may serve to integrate partisans on policy issues, as is the case with the ACA, and promote better decision-making. These are important caveats to political science research on motivated reasoning since such research primarily finds that affective biases polarize voters and lead to lower quality decisions.

One of the most persistent puzzles in political science is the relatively little effect of self-interest on political preferences and behavior. In nearly all of the studies on self-interest, people's general orientations, like party identification, political ideology, and racial tolerance play a much larger role in determining candidate and policy preferences compared to self-interests (e.g., Sears and Funk 1991). Furthermore, there is little to no evidence that self-interest is moderated by individual characteristics, such as political knowledge, political sophistication, issue importance, emotions (Sears et al. 1980; Lau and Heldman 2009), or attributions of responsibility (Kinder and Mebane 1983; Sears et al. 1980).

Recent research, however, hints that the effect of self-interest may differ across partisans. For instance, Henderson and Hillygus (2011) find that strong Republicans with health related self-interests are about as likely to oppose universal health care as Democrats. Margalit (2013) finds that individuals who lost their job during the great recession were more likely to support increased welfare spending, but this effect was "appreciably larger among Republicans" (80). In particular, Republicans who lost their job had probabilities of supporting additional welfare spending that were 40 percentage points higher than those who remained employed, while job loss had virtually no effect among Democrats.[1]

While previous research suggests that partisanship may condition the impact of self-interest on policy preferences, there is no theoretical understanding about these differences. Drawing on theories of motivated reasoning, I argue for a conditional theory of self-interest and

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[1] In addition, Berkman and Plutzer (2008) show that self-interest effects for school spending are clearly present only among elderly migrants—those who lack affective ties to the local school system. This suggests that in the absence of symbolic politics, instrumental self-interest comes to the fore.

symbolic politics. According to motivated reasoning theory, citizens interpret new information through partisan filters (Kam 2005; Mondak 1993) and are driven to reach policy conclusions that are consistent with their predispositions (Taber and Lodge 2006). This suggests that citizens with self-interests that are consistent with their partisan beliefs are minimally influenced by selfish motives in forming political preferences.

On the other hand, when citizens are confronted with personal circumstances that conflict with their partisan beliefs, self-interest indicators serve as informational shortcuts that push opinion in the opposite direction of partisan cues. This is partly due to a "ceiling effect"; conflicted partisans have more "opportunities" for self-interest indicators to influence opinions. Yet, self-interest also motivates conflicted partisans to engage in more effortful reasoning in which they consider personal circumstances in forming opinions.

I find support for the conditional theory of self-interest through analyses using the 2012 ANES on two issues that have been studied extensively in the past including guaranteed jobs and national health insurance (e.g., Sears et al. 1980; Lau and Heldman 2009). For both policy areas, I find evidence that self-interest indicators matter more for Republicans, as expected from theories of motivated reasoning, compared to Democrats. I then take a closer look at the conditional effects of health-related self-interests on preferences toward the Affordable Care Act (ACA). I find that self-interest has both a *positive* impact among strong Republicans and a *negative* impact among strong Democrats, causing partisans to converge in their policy preferences.

The results suggest that the non-significant findings in the past may be partially explained by the fact that self-interest impacts preferences differently among partisans. While other studies have explored how self-interest affects preferences in subsets of individuals (e.g., Sears and Funk

1991), this study is the first to focus on the heterogeneous effects of self-interest among partisans.[2] Moreover, because self-interest has an asymmetric effect across partisanship, self-interest indicators may serve to integrate partisans on policy issues. In the case of the ACA, self-interests act to unite partisans and promote better decision-making among conflicted partisans. These are important caveats to political science research on motivated reasoning since such research primarily finds that affective biases polarize voters (e.g., Nyhan et al. 2012) and lead to lower quality decisions (e.g., Redlawsk 2002).

Towards a Conditional Theory of Self-Interest and Symbolic Politics

While theories from psychology, philosophy, and economics suggest that human behavior is guided by selfish motives, the empirical evidence in political science research is surprisingly stark. For example, in their studies on racial threat and candidate choice, Kinder and Sears find that measures of racial threat had virtually no influence on citizens' support for the conservative white former police chief (Sam Yorty) over the liberal Black city councilman (Tom Bradley) in the Los Angeles mayoral elections of 1969 and 1973 (Sears and Kinder 1971; Kinder and Sears 1981). Instead, people's general orientations, like party identification, political ideology, and racial tolerance play a much larger role in determining candidate preferences compared to self-interests (Sears and Funk 1991). Theoretically, the implication is that public opinion and political behavior are guided less by contemporaneous personal circumstances or *self-interests* (Chong 1996) and more by predispositions, also called *symbolic beliefs*, that are formed early in life and persist across the lifespan (Sears and Funk 1991).

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[2] While Henderson and Hillygus (2001) and Margalit (2013) find similar results, the focus of their studies was not in understanding the differential impact of self-interest across partisans.

These empirical results have psychological implications for our understanding about how citizens engage in political information processing. The *self-interest theory* suggests that citizens make policy decisions after assessing how much benefits based on their own personal circumstances they will receive from certain policies. This theory is in contrast to the *symbolic politics* approach, which suggests that early, learned affective responses to familiar political symbols, such as the political parties, influence political attitudes and behavior (Sears et al. 1980). The former implies effortful, systematic information processing, while the latter implies less effortful, more efficient, heuristic processing (Kam 2006). For the most part, these two theoretical accounts are presented as mutually exclusive; that is, citizens can use *either* cost-benefit calculations based on personal self-interests *or* symbolic beliefs formed early in life when deciding whether to support a particular candidate or policy (though, see Chong et al. 2001).

Motivated reasoning theory suggests that these two information processes need not be mutually exclusive. According to motivated reasoning theory, people strive to maintain opinions that are consistent with their values, identities, and attitudes; in other words, consistency in symbolic politics. As a result, citizens often engage in selective information processing (Taber and Lodge 2006). Feelings toward political parties are particularly important for applying motivated reasoning theory to political behavior. Partisanship is a fundamental predisposition (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) that endures across the lifespan (Goren 2005) and plays a central role in voting behavior and public opinion (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). In addition, the majority of people hold meaningful party attachments, regardless of political sophistication (Erikson and Tedin 2007). Motivated reasoning theory explains why partisans may discount, counter-argue, or ignore new information that challenges existing beliefs (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000). Motivated

reasoning theory also suggests that when citizens are presented with information that is congruent with predispositions, the information will be easily accepted "since it requires no effort to accept what one already knows is true" (Redlawsk 2002 1023; see also Taber and Lodge 2006). This leads to the first hypothesis concerning the conditional effect of self-interest on policy preferences among partisans.

H1: Self-interests that are congruent with partisan cues will minimally influence policy preferences.

H1 implies that partisans engage in limited information processing when confronted with self-interests that are consistent with their partisanship. Information that opposes existing preferences, however, requires more effortful processing than does congruent information (Ditto et al. 1998; Fiske and Taylor 1991; Redlawsk 2002). At the very least, this suggests that partisans with personal circumstances that conflict with partisan cues (e.g., *conflicted partisans*) will engage in more effortful, rational, cognitive processing that is required for self-interest indicators to matter (Sears and Funk 1991).[3] In addition, research shows that effortful reasoning can lead to different decision-making processes. In the context of ideology, for example, conservatives tend to make dispositional attributions for the causes of policies, like poverty, while liberals tend to emphasize social and environmental factors (Cozzarelli et al. 2001; Sniderman and Teltock 1986). People engaged in more effortful reasoning in which they considered situational constraints, however, when salient values conflicted with dispositional attributions. For instance, Morgan et al. (2010) find that conservatives made stronger situational

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[3] Redlawsk (2002) actually measures this difficulty using processing time for respondents to complete tasks. Although the expectation that conflicted partisans will have longer processing time is empirically testable, I am not able to do so with the existing dataset.

attributions than liberals for the behavior of Marines accused of killing Iraqi civilians; they explain that conservative values (e.g., patriotism, national security, etc.) were more consistent with excusing the Marines' behaviors.

There is no guarantee, however, that incongruent information leads to better or higher quality decisions. In fact, much of the political science research finds that incongruent information causes partisans to cling stronger to their underlying beliefs. For instance, Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel find that politically knowledgeable Palin supporters were more likely to believe that the ACA would create death panels after being presented with corrective information (see also Redlawsk 2002; Nyhan and Reifer 2010; Dancey and Sheagley 2013). There are reasons to believe, however, that the effect of *self-interest* as incongruent information among conflicted partisans will lead to *better* (e.g., more rational) decisions. First, self-interest theory rests on the egoism assumption, which suggests that personal interests outweigh all others (Sears and Funk 1991). The egoism assumption is widely shared among social psychologists such that attitudes associated with the personal consequences produce more rational information processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Sears and Funk 1991). Second, egocentric biases are pervasive and powerful (Bargh 1982; Nuttin 1985; Jervis 1976). For instance, individuals tend to credit the self for successes but blame others or situations for failures (the self-serving bias), consider the self superior to the average peer (the better-than-average bias), and disproportionately recall negative self-relevant information less than positive self-relevant information (selective self-memory effect) (Sedikides and Alicke 2012). This leads to the second hypothesis regarding the *direction* of the effect of self-interest among conflicted partisans.

H2: Self-interests that are incongruent with partisan cues will push policy preferences in

the opposite direction from partisan cues.

To summarize, motivated reasoning theory leads to expectations regarding the asymmetric effect of self-interests on partisan preferences. Because partisans are less affected by information that coincides with predispositions, the expectation is that self-interests that are congruent with partisan cues will not influence policy preferences (H1). Self-interests that are incongruent with partisan cues will be more likely to influence policy preferences. Furthermore, because of the egoism assumption and superiority of the self in evaluating policies, the expectation is that self-interests among conflicted partisans will push policy preferences away from partisan cues (H2). I test these expectations using the 2012 American National Election Survey (ANES) and preferences towards guaranteed jobs and national health insurance, which extends analyses originally conducted by Sears and colleagues (1980).

Conditional Self-Interest and Symbolic Politics in the 2012 ANES Survey

I start by mimicking classic work by Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen (1980) on policy preferences towards guaranteed jobs and national health insurance.[4] Sears et al. (1980) use the 1976 ANES and find that self-interest explained just 1% of the total variance in policy preferences towards these two issues while symbolic preferences accounted for the majority of the variance in expressed opinions. These results largely collaborate with more recent analyses from the 2000 and 2004 ANES (Lau and Heldman 2009). Similar to previous research, policy preferences toward guaranteed jobs is measured using a question that asked respondents to place

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[4] Sears et al. (1980) also explore preferences towards school busing and the rights of people accused of crimes. In all four policy domains, they find that symbolic attitudes trump self-interest effects in determining policy preferences.

themselves on a scale where a 0 indicates that the "government see to job and good standard of living" and 6 indicates the "government let each person get ahead on his own." Respondents are also asked to place themselves on a scale where a 0 indicates "government insurance plan" and a 6 indicates support for a "private insurance plan", which is used to measure policy preferences towards national health insurance.

I include three measures of symbolic attitudes that previous studies find are overwhelmingly related to policy preferences: ideology (measured by the standard ANES 7-point item), political party (measured by the standard ANES 7-point item) and racial resentment. Racial resentment is additionally important to include since racial attitudes are strongly linked to health care opinions (Tessler 2012) and feelings towards President Obama (Tesler and Sears 2010). Respondents are asked four questions that tap into racial resentment (see Appendix for details). These variables are combined to create a standardized scale with a high degree of reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha (r=.89), and with higher values representing higher levels of racial resentment.

All models also include six control variables including age, education, family income, gender, race (nonwhite), and political knowledge (see descriptive information in Table A1 and the Appendix for more details). The demographic variables are measured using standard ANES items and largely reflect previous research. The political knowledge measure combines nine questions that ask about the respondent's recognition of officeholders as well as their knowledge about American politics more generally. I combine these variables to create a standardized scale with a high degree of reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha (r=77), with higher values indicating greater political knowledge. Finally, previous research finds that sociotropic beliefs about the nation's economy may trump self-interest in determining policy preferences (Kinder

and Kiewiet 1979). Consequently, I also include a measure that asks respondents to rate the state

of the economy in the United States from very good (0) to very bad (4).

Measuring Self-Interest

There is little consensus on how to properly operationalize self-interest, most likely due

to the fact that self-interest indicators, by definition, may be unique to the specific policy area.

The majority of studies use both objective and subjective measures that tap into economic self-

interests. Objective measures include unemployment and disability status of the respondent or

their spouse, health insurance coverage, or problems paying medical or other bills (e.g., Sears et

al. 1980; Lau and Heldman 2009; Price et al. 2006). Subjective measures used in previous

research include questions about whether respondents are better or worse off financially

compared to a year ago (Sears et al. 1980), whether respondents have anxiety over paying

medical or other costs (Henderson and Hillygus 2012), or whether respondents worry about

losing their job or being able to afford health insurance coverage (Sears et al. 1980).

The 2012 ANES includes several objective and subjective measures that encompass

economic self-interests that are relevant to policy preferences toward guaranteed jobs and

national health insurance. In addition to having objective measures about unemployment,

disability status, health insurance coverage, and self-rated health status, respondents are asked a

series of subjective questions regarding whether they are worse or better off financially

compared to a year ago, their level of anxiety about losing their job, how worried they are about

their current financial situation, and how likely it is that they will not be able to pay for their

healthcare costs or make housing payments on time. Finally, respondents are asked if they know

anyone who has lost a job in the past 12 months. Many of these measures tap into a person's risk

or threat of being in a dire economic situation, which may capture economic self-interest beyond

traditional objective measures. All of these measures are highly related to one another (see Appendix for details) and, as importantly, scholars often think about these multiple measures of self-interest as overlapping conceptually. For instance, when using health insurance coverage as a measure of self-interest, the assumption is that uninsured individuals lack coverage because they are unable to afford it, and therefore, are more likely to support government health insurance. Consequently, I combine these various measures to create a standardized scale of self-interest with a high degree of reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha (r=.60); there is evidence that these variables capture a single dimension, accounting for 86% of the variance in the total score.

There are several methodological benefits to using a composite measure of self-interest as opposed to individual components. First, as shown in the Appendix, these measures are highly related to one another; high correlation among the indicators creates problems of multicollinearity in standard regression models. Combining indicators into one scale of "vulnerability" is a technique that Lau and Heldman (2009) use to assess the relative explanatory power of symbolic politics compared to self-interest indicators. While Lau and Heldman (2009) find some of the strongest effects of self-interest when using a composite scale as opposed to the individual components, they also find that the average effect of symbolic beliefs is always larger than the strongest effect of self-interest, regardless of the outcome or year of survey.

The second reason I use a composite scale as opposed to the individual components of self-interest is due to ease of interpretation. I use interaction variables to test whether the effect of self-interest on policy preferences is conditional on partisanship. One interaction variable between party identification and the composite score is easier to interpret compared to multiple interactive variables between party identification and the individual indicators. Finally, previous

work often uses different indicators of self-interest when predicting preferences across issues,

even though many of the indicators are correlated, which makes comparisons across models

difficult. Instead of tailoring the self-interest indicators to the specific policy area, I use the same

composite scale in all the preceding models. Thus, I am able to identify whether self-interest

matters more for some outcomes compared to others.

Results

In the models reported below, I estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models

since the dependent variables are continuous and employ survey weights to account for the

complex survey design and non-response.[5] I regress the composite measure of self-interest on

preferences towards guaranteed jobs and national health insurance and then include an

interaction between self-interest and partisanship in the second set of models. Recall that the

conditional theory of self-interest suggests that self-interest will have a minimal influence on

policy preferences when congruent with partisan cues (H1). Alternatively, self-interest

indicators that are incongruent with partisan cues will act to push policy preferences away from

partisan beliefs (H2). For both policy areas, the hypotheses suggest that Democrats are more

likely to support government intervention, largely irrespective of their level of self-interest. On

the other hand, the theory suggests that Republicans who are the most self-interested (e.g., those

that have a high score on the composite index of economic self-interest) will be more likely to

support government intervention with guaranteed jobs and national health insurance compared to

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[5] Estimates are nearly identical when using an ordered logistic model instead of OLS regression.

I weight models using the "weight_full" variable since the pre- and post-election samples and the

telephone and cell-phone samples are combined.

other Republicans. In other words, the effect that self-interest has on policy preferences will be larger among Republicans than Democrats.

Results are shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, self-interest impacts policy preferences toward both guaranteed jobs and national health insurance. In particular, the maximum effect of self-interest on preferences toward guaranteed jobs and national health insurance is 2.09 and 2.10, respectively. It is important to note that the maximum effect of self-interest is larger than the maximum effects of partisanship and ideology for guaranteed jobs (1.12 and 1.75, respectively) and the maximum effect of partisanship for national health insurance (1.47). However, in analyses that assess the unique variance attributable to self-interest compared to symbolic beliefs, partisanship, ideology, and racial resentment explain a much larger proportion of the variance in policy preferences compared to the self-interest index, which is consistent with previous research.

More importantly, Table 1 shows that the coefficient on the interaction variable between self-interest and partisanship is statistically significant and in the expected direction for both policy issues. The analyses suggest that the effect of self-interest decreases as partisanship towards the Democratic Party increases. To get a clearer idea about these conditional effects, Figures 1 and 2 plot the estimated marginal effects of self-interest on policy preferences by partisanship.   For both policy issues, the largest effect of self-interest occurs for strong Republicans. More specifically, the model predicts that the average level of support for guaranteed jobs among strong Republicans with low self-interest is 1.82 compared to 3.57 among strong Democrats with low self-interest, all else equal. Interestingly, however, there is little distinction in policy preferences across partisanship when self-interest is high; in fact, the estimated level of support for guaranteed jobs among strong Republicans with high self-interest

is 4.85 compared to 4.83 among strong Democrats with high levels of self-interest. Similar

patterns occur for policy preferences towards national health insurance. While for both policy

areas, self-interest acts to increase support for government intervention, the effect of self-interest

is appreciably larger among the most dedicated Republicans, providing empirical support for the

conditional theory of self-interest. Additionally, the results suggest that personal circumstances

can trump the partisan biases in policy preferences that previous research finds are so pervasive

(e.g., Redlawsk). In the next section, I explore whether self-interests trump partisan biases by

looking at preferences toward the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which is highly partisan and

polarizing.

A Closer Look at Self Interests and Preferences toward the ACA

On March 23, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA)

delivering on his 2008 campaign pledge to overhaul the nation's health care system. Two years

after, the Supreme Court upheld two of the law's major provisions, including the individual

mandate and the Medicaid expansion, essentially legitimizing healthcare reform.[6] Shortly after

the ruling, President Obama held a press conference that explained the tangible benefits to

citizens including the ability to stay on parents' plans until age 26, the removal of lifetime limits

and preexisting conditions clauses, and the availability of free preventive care. The new law also

offered citizens without health insurance an array of plans to choose from through the creation of

state health insurance exchanges. In short, several groups, including young adults, citizens

without health insurance, the elderly, and people in poor health, stood to receive personal

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[6] There are various ways that the law may be undermined through judicial and administrative

action implementation (Skocpol 2013), but there is little reason to suspect that this law will be

repealed.

benefits from the law. And, while not fully implemented until 2014, the ACA has already led to significant gains in health insurance for young adults, particularly for those in worse health (Sommers et al. 2013).

The message that the ACA would personally impact segments of the population was not lost on the American people. When asked their views of the expected impact of health care reform before enactment, a majority of citizens opined that uninsured persons and low income families would be better off under the ACA (Blendon and Benson 2010). About a third of Americans said that their own personal well-being as well as the quality of care would be improved under the new law (Blendon and Benson 2010).

In addition to having clear links to personal circumstances, the ACA is also a source of strong partisan debate, suggesting that partisan cues should be particularly influential for policy preferences. The partisan divide over healthcare policy originated in Obama's first term prior to passing the ACA. While a major legislative achievement for Obama and the Democratic Party, the ACA came without a single Republican vote in Congress and resulted in gains for the Republican Party in the 2010 Congressional, gubernatorial, and other state level elections (Konisky and Richardson, Jr. 2011). After taking control of the House of Representatives, Republicans, in a largely symbolic gesture, voted unanimously to repeal the ACA (and have subsequently voted to appeal the ACA another forty times). Similar political challenges await as opponents at the state level, who are largely Republican, seek to undermine the law through judicial and administrative action (Skocpol 2013).

Healthcare reform was still very much on the minds of voters in the 2012 election. Likely voters ranked health care as the second most important issue in deciding their votes, which mirrored the ranking of health care as an important issue in the 1992 presidential election

(Blendon et al. 2012). The majority of Obama voters favored the implementation or expansion of the ACA (78%), supported a more activist federal government in US health care (92%), and opposed changing the structures of the current Medicare (83%) or Medicaid (78%) programs (Blendon et al. 2012). These partisan differences echoed the contrasting views of the candidates, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, and their respective political parties.

Previous Studies on Health-Related Self Interests

Previous research tends to conform to other studies finding that health related self-interests play little or no role on political preferences or behavior (e.g., Sears et al. 1980). For instance, Price et al. (2006) find little evidence that self-interest, such as having a serious health condition or problems paying healthcare bills, influenced health care knowledge or political participation. Similarly, Konisky and Richardson (2011) find that people's collective evaluations of healthcare reform played a stronger role in voting for the Democratic candidate in the 2010 Congressional and state level elections compared to personal concerns about the quality and expense of their own future health care. Henderson and Hillygus (2012) find that self-interest, measured as anxiety over medical costs, conditions the probability that a Republican moved to opposition of universal health care from 2008-2010. Finally, Tesler (2012) finds that racial resentment had a stronger effect on whites' support for a single payer government health care system and the public option compared to self-interest, measured as anxiety over medical costs.

The inconsistent and minimal effects of self-interest on preferences towards healthcare reform are likely a result of scholars not analyzing differences across partisanship (though see Henderson and Hillygus (2012)). According to motivated reasoning theory presented above, the expectation is that preferences towards the ACA are minimally influenced by self-interests

among Democrats, but are among Republicans. Furthermore, self-interests will act to increase support for the ACA among Republicans, going in the opposite direction of partisan cues.

To test the conditional effects of self-interests on preferences towards the ACA, I use a question from the 2012 ANES that asks respondents if they "favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the health care reform law passed 2010." The question adds that "this law requires all Americans to buy health insurance and requires health insurance companies to accept everyone", which gives respondents some information about the content of the law. Overall, 38% of the respondents favor the law, 39% oppose the law, and 24% neither oppose nor favor the law.

Given the ordered nature of the outcome variable, I use a generalized ordered logistic (GOL) model to examine the relationship between self-interest and views toward the ACA. The generalized ordinal logistic model relaxes the parallel-lines assumption (used in the ordinary ordered logistic model)[7] and allows the effect of each covariate to differ depending on the value of the outcome variable. More specifically, the GOL can be written as:

$$P(Y_i > j) = h(X\beta_j) = \frac{e^{(\alpha_j + X_i\beta_j)}}{1 + e^{(\alpha_j + X_i\beta_j)}}; \quad j \in \{1: favor, 2: neither\ favor\ nor\ oppose, 3: oppose\}$$

Subscript j for βs denotes that the estimated impact of the explanatory variables is allowed to be different for each category. Basically, this model estimates a series of binary logistic regressions: first, favoring the ACA versus the other two categories; and then, not opposing the ACA (i.e., favor and neither favor nor oppose) versus opposition.[8] **X** includes all of the variables measured identically to the previous analyses with the main variable of interest being the

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[7] A Brant test shows that the assumption of the parallel-lines model are violated, which suggests the appropriateness of the GOL over ordinary ordered logistic regression.

[8] The results are nearly identical when conducted using a multinomial logistic regression.

composite score of self-interest (higher values indicate greater self-interest). As before, weights

are used to account for the complex survey design. In order to mimic previous analyses, I first

estimate models for the entire sample. Next, I explore the conditional effects of self-interests

among partisans by including an interaction term between the self-interest score and

partisanship.

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the GOL predicting levels of support for the ACA.

Interestingly, in the models without the interaction terms, the coefficient on the self-interest

variable is negative, suggesting that higher levels of self-interest make it *less* likely that the

respondent will be supportive of the ACA. In addition, the greatest effect of self-interest is to

push people into full opposition (e.g., into the oppose category instead of the neither support nor

oppose category or support category). More important, the interaction term is statistically

significant such that the effect of self-interest on support for the ACA is conditional on

partisanship. To interpret the conditional effect of self-interest on preferences towards the ACA,

Figure 3 plots the predicted probabilities of supporting the ACA across different levels of self-

interest and partisanship, keeping all other variables constant. The error bars identify the 95%

confidence intervals around the estimated probabilities.

As shown in Figure 3, self-interest has differential impacts on respondents depending on

their partisanship. For strong Republicans, high self-interest acts to increase the probability of

supporting for the ACA while high self-interest decreases support among strong Democrats. As

a result of the asymmetric effects of self-interest, the largest differences in support for the ACA

occur between partisans with low self-interest, while partisans with high self-interest are

statistically indistinguishable. The predicted probability of a strong Republican with low self-

interest supporting the ACA is 6% compared to a strong Democrat with low self-interest with a predicted probability of 85%. On the other hand, the predicted probability of a strong Republican with high self-interest supporting the ACA is 29% compared to 26% for strong Democrats with similar levels of high self-interest.

These results generally support the conditional theory of self-interest and symbolic politics, but with an important caveat. In the previous analyses, self-interest had virtually no effect among Democrats. In predicting support for the ACA, however, self-interest has both a *positive* impact among strong Republicans and a *negative* impact among strong Democrats, causing partisans to converge in their policy preferences. Additional analyses suggest that self-interest also has an asymmetric effect on approval of the way Obama is handling health care; increased self-interest increases approval among strong Republicans and decreases approval among strong Democrats. One reason that self-interest decreases support for the ACA and Obama among Democrats may be that these individuals do not believe healthcare reform is liberal enough. While untestable with the 2012 ANES, CNN polls show that about 12% of American on average oppose the ACA because it's "not liberal enough", suggesting that opponents of the ACA are a heterogeneous group.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to dig deeper into our understanding of the way selfish motives impact policy preferences among the electorate. The major conclusion from research over the last quarter century is that self-interest does not matter for individuals when forming policy preferences and are not moderated by individual factors, such as political knowledge or values (e.g., Lau and Heldman 2009). Moreover, symbolic attitudes, including ideology, racial tolerance, and party identification, matter much more in determining policy preferences

compared to self-interests. The empirical results presented in this paper, however, suggest that scholars have largely overlooked an important conditional factor: partisanship. I find that self-interest impacts partisan differently. Guided by motivated reasoning theory, when self-interest is aligned with partisan cues, self-interest matter little, at least in predicting attitudes towards general policy issues. On the other hand, when self-interests are not aligned with partisan cues, they impact policy preferences and act to push policy preferences away from partisan cues. The results suggest that the non-findings in the past may be partially explained by the fact that self-interest impacts partisans differently.

In the context of the ACA, self-interests have asymmetric effects across partisans. Among strong Republicans, self-interests are associated with increased support for the ACA, while self-interests are associated with opposition to the ACA among strong Democrats. The results suggest that self-interests create convergence and less polarization towards the ACA. This is an important caveat to research on motivated reasoning, which suggests that affective biases polarize voters (e.g., Nyhan et al. 2012) and lead to lower quality decisions (Redlawsk 2002). While information from the policy environment can help perpetuate partisan differences among the electorate, information that involves personal circumstances can cause convergence.

Empirical analyses of other policies would help further determine how self-interests impact policy preferences among partisans. There is evidence that self-interest effects differ across partisans for preferences towards welfare (Margalit 2013) and healthcare reform (e.g., Henderson and Hillygus 2009). While there is no reason to suspect that these two issues are unique to the theory presented above, future research should consider other policy issues. Longitudinal analyses would be particularly beneficial to determine the enduring effect that self-interests have on the policy preferences among partisans. For instance, Margalit (2013) finds

that the effect of unemployment on support for welfare policies is temporary among

Republicans. This suggests that sustained personal circumstances, such as chronic disease, may

impact partisans and induce opinion change eventually. Nonetheless, the evidence presented

here suggests that the effects of self-interest are more nuanced than previously thought.

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Table 1 OLS Regression Analyses Predicting Support for Guaranteed Jobs and National Health Insurance using the 2012 ANES

|	Guaranteed Jobs (N=4,361)			Health Insurance (N=4,346)		
	M1		**M2**		**M1**	**M2**
Self-Interest Score	2.09 ***		3.03 **		2.10 ***	3.10 *
	(.35)		(.63)		(.34)	(.58)
Partisanship (Democrat High)	.16 ***		.29 ***		.21 ***	.35 ***
	(.02)		(.07)		(.02)	(.07)
Self-Interest*Partisanship			-.29 *			-.31 *
			(.16)			(.15)
Ideology (Liberal High)	.25 ***		.24 ***		.37 ***	.36 ***
	(.03)		(.03)		(.03)	(.03)
Female	-.45 ***		-.45 ***		-.15 *	-.15 *
	(.08)		(.08)		(.09)	(.09)
Nonwhite	.11		.11		-.30 ***	-.30 **
	(.09)		(.09)		(.10)	(.10)
Age Group (centered at mean)	-.02 *		-.02 *		.001	-.001
	(.01)		(.01)		(.01)	(.01)
Income (centered at mean)	-.02 ***		-.02 ***		-.02 ***	-.02 ***
	(.005)		(.005)		(.005)	(.005)
Education (centered at mean)	-.04		-.04		.02	.02
	(.03)		(.02)		(.03)	(.03)
Political Knowledge Score	-.97 ***		-.98 ***		-.02	-.03
	(.20)		(.20)		(.21)	(.21)
Racial Resentment	-1.15 ***		-1.15 ***		-1.24 ***	-1.24 ***
	(.16)		(.16)		(.18)	(.18)
National Economy Worse	-.11 **		-.11 **		-.26 ***	-.26 ***
	(.04)		(.04)		(.05)	(.05)
Constant	2.23 ***		1.82 **		1.81 ***	1.38 ***
	(.24)		(.36)		(.29)	(.36)

Note: Table reports the regression coefficients and standard errors. All predictors have been standardized to range from 0 to 1, except as noted. Estimates are weighted to account for the complex survey design. Data are from the 2012 American National Election Studies. Higher values on the dependent variables indicate a more liberal position (e.g., more government intervention). *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 with a one-tailed test.

Table 2 Generalized Ordered Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Support for the ACA using the 2012 ANES (N=4,579)

|	Oppose ACA versus other 2 categories		Oppose ACA or Neither Favor Nor Oppose versus Support	
	M1	**M2**	**M1**	**M2**
Self-Interest Score	-2.27 ***	.14	-1.01 *	1.90
	(.58)	(.97)	(.55)	(1.22)
Partisanship (Democrat High)	.39 ***	.77 ***	.40 ***	.76 ***
	(.03)	(.13)	(.03)	(.13)
Self-Interest*Partisanship		-.82 **		-.78 ***
		(.27)		(.27)
Ideology (Liberal High)	.45 ***	.43 ***	.35 ***	.34 ***
	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)
Female	-.05	-.03	.68 ***	.68 ***
	(.16)	(.16)	(.16)	(.16)
Nonwhite	.33 *	.34 *	.07	.07
	(.18)	(.18)	(.14)	(.14)
Age Group (centered at mean)	-.01	-.01	-.002	-.005
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Income (centered at mean)	-.01	-.01	.00	.00
	(.008)	(.008)	(.007)	(.007)
Education (centered at mean)	-.03	-.03	.12 **	.13 **
	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)
Political Knowledge Score	-.64 *	-.63 *	.84 ***	.83 *
	(.36)	(.36)	(.36)	(.36)
Racial Resentment	-2.07 ***	-2.06 ***	-1.49 ***	-1.50 ***
	(.29)	(.30)	(.26)	(.26)
National Economy Worse	-.56 ***	-.56 ***	-.45 ***	-.45 ***
	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Constant	2.65 ***	1.57 **	-.99 ***	-2.25 ***
	(.45)	(.58)	(.46)	(.67)

Note: Table reports the generalized ordered regression coefficients and standard errors. All predictors have been standardized to range from 0 to 1 , except as noted. Estimates are weighted to account for the complex survey design. Data are from the 2012 American National Election Studies. Higher values on the dependent variables indicate a more liberal position (e.g., more government intervention). *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 with a one-tailed test.

Figure 1 Marginal Effects of Self-Interest on Support for Guaranteed Jobs by Partisanship, 2012 ANES
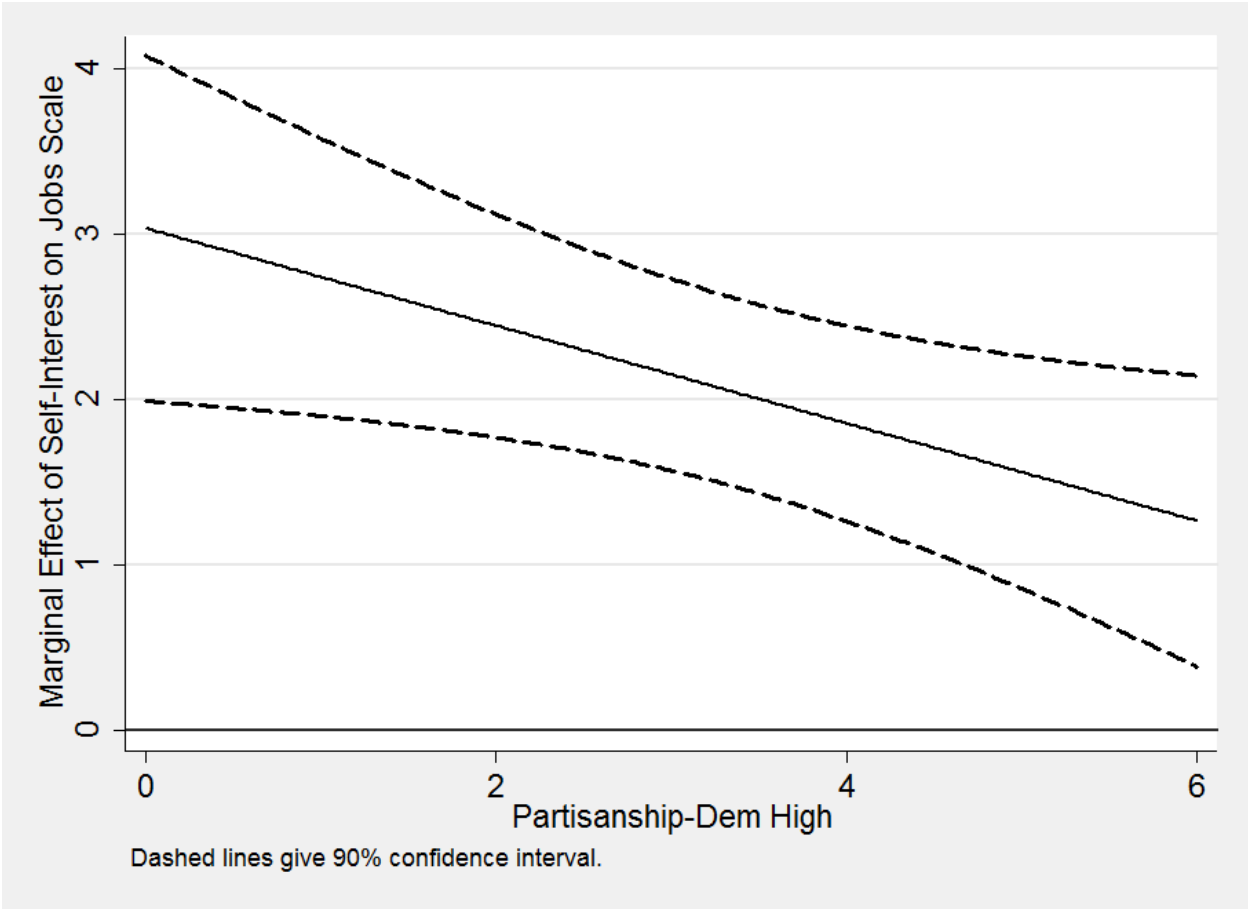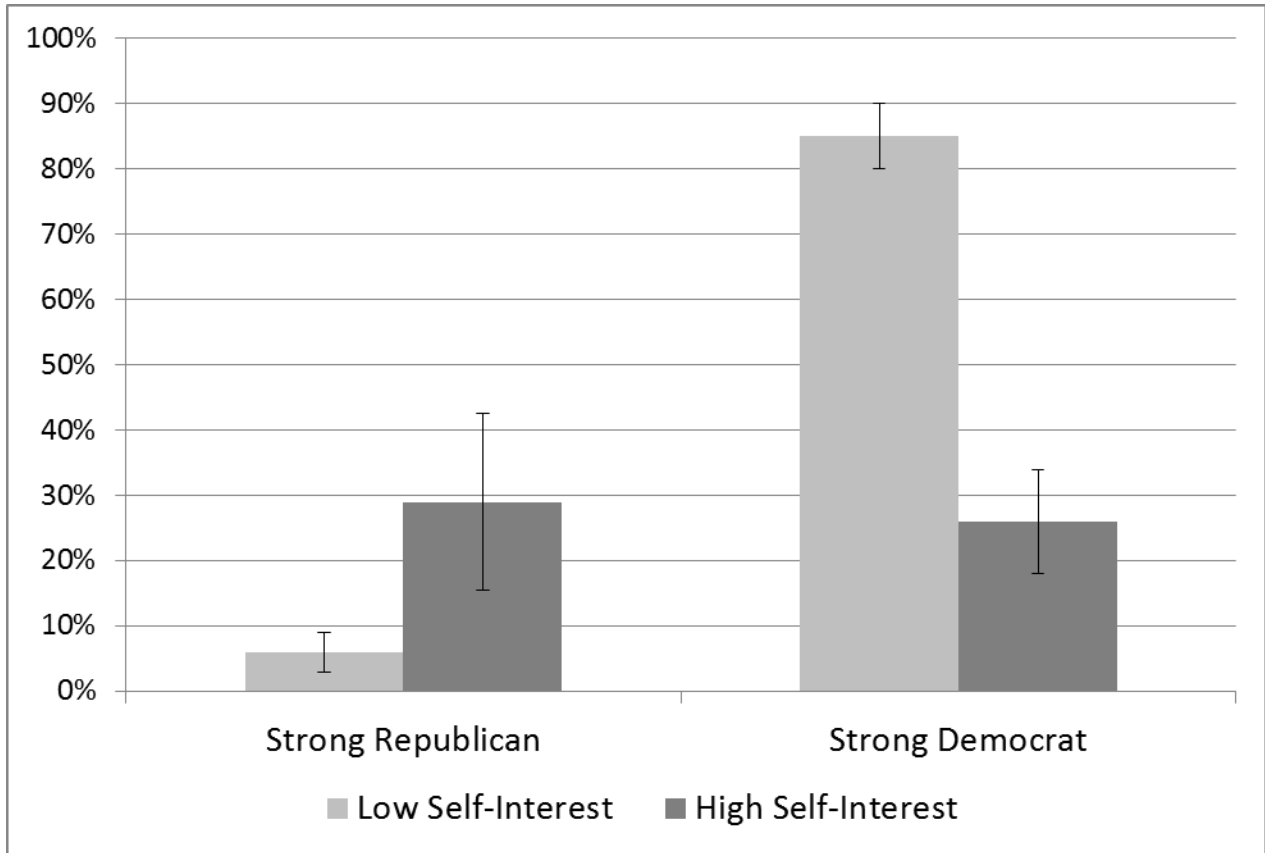

Note: Marginal effects are from Model 2 for preferences towards guaranteed jobs, reported in Table 1. All other variables are held constant at their mean. Dashed lines give the 90% confidence interval using the delta method.

Figure 2 Marginal Effects of Self-Interest on Support for National Health Insurance by Partisanship, 2012 ANES
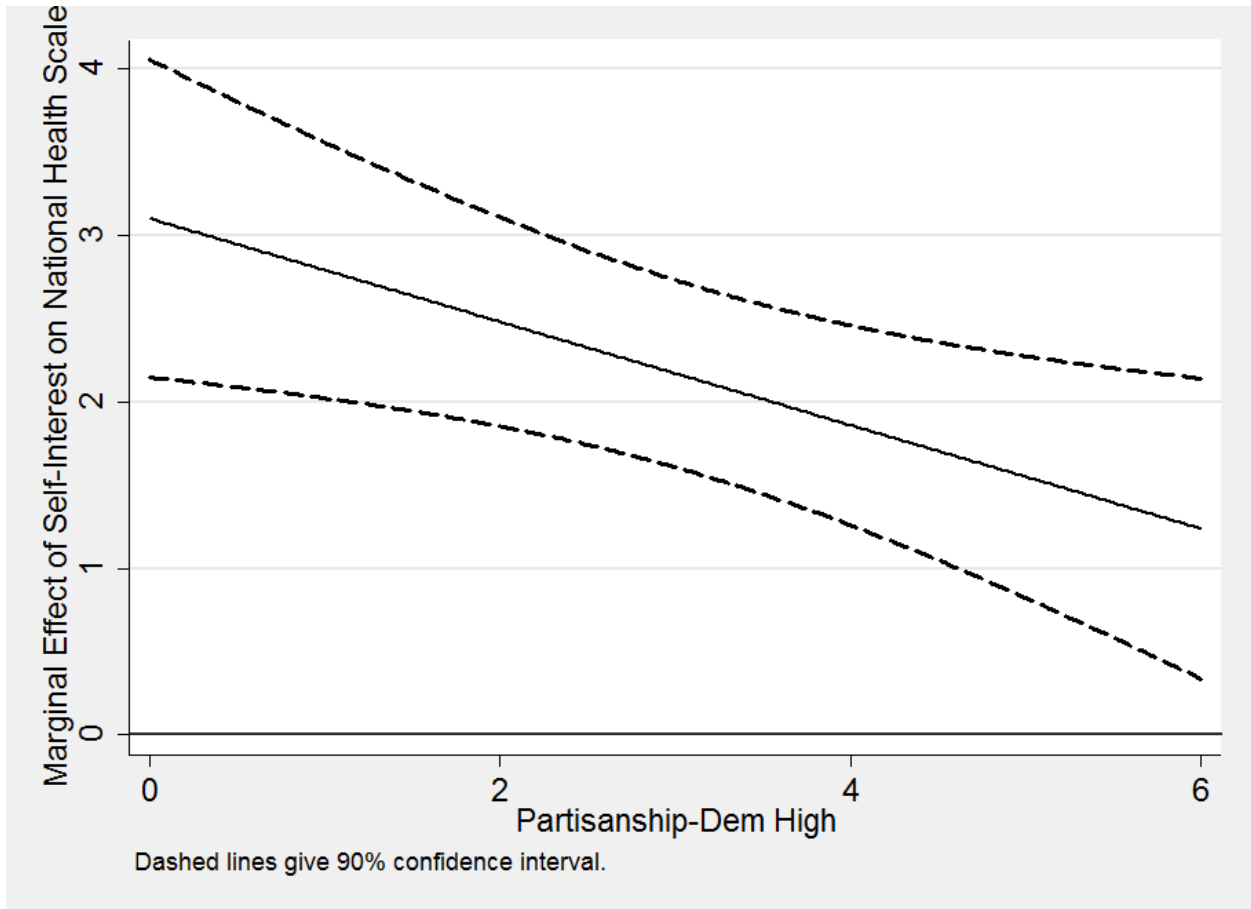
Note: Marginal effects are from Model 2 for preferences towards national health insurance, reported in Table 1. All other variables are held constant at their mean. Dashed lines give the 90% confidence interval using the delta method.

Figure 3 Predicted Probability of Supporting the ACA, across Partisanship and Self-Interest, using the 2012 ANES

Note: Predicted probabilities are from Model 2 for preferences towards the ACA, reported in Table 2. All other variables are held constant at their mean. Error bars give the 95% confidence interval using the delta method.

Appendix

Racial Resentment

Four questions are used to create the racial resentment scale. These include the following questions to which respondents could answer agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly:

- "Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors."

- "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class."

- "Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve."

- "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites."

Political Knowledge

Nine questions are used to create the political knowledge scale. These include the following questions:

- "Do you happen to know how many times an individual can be elected President of the United States under current laws?"

- "Is the US federal budget deficit now bigger, about the same, or smaller than it was during most of the 1990s?"

- "For how many years is a United States Senator elected?"

- "What is Medicare?"

- "On which of the following does the US federal government currently spend the least?"

- "John Boehner. What job or political office does he NOW hold?"

- "Joe Biden. What job or political office does he NOW hold?"

- "David Cameron: What job or political office does he NOW hold?"

- "John Roberts. What job or political office does he NOW hold?"

Self Interest

The self-interest scale is comprised of several objective and subjective measures including:

- "Do you presently have any kind of health insurance?"

- "Would you say that in general your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?"

- R or spouse is unemployed

- R or spouse is permanently disabled

- "How worried are you about losing your job in the near future?"

- "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you and your family are better off or worse off than you were a year ago?"

- "During the next 12 months, how likely is it that you will be able to pay for all of your health costs?"

- "So far as you and your family are concerned, how worried are you about your current financial situation?"

- "During the next 12 months, how likely is it that you will be able to make all of your [rent/mortgage/housing] payments on time?"

- "During the past 12 months, has anyone in your family or a close personal friend lost a job, or has no one in your family and no close personal friend lost a job in the past 12 months?"

Table A1. Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Variables				
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Guaranteed Jobs Scale	2.68	1.79	0	6
National Health Insurance Scale	2.82	1.96	0	6
Support for the ACA	1.00	.87	0	2
Female	.18	.38	0	1
Nonwhite	.20	.40	0	1
Education (centered at mean)	-.08	1.14	-1.97	2.03
Age Group (centered at mean)	-.43	3.45	-6.43	5.57
Income (centered at mean)	.79	7.94	-12.64	14.36
Political Knowledge Score	.59	.21	0	1
Ideology (strong liberal high)	2.77	1.45	0	6
Partisanship (strong democrat high)	3.20	2.10	0	6
Self Interest Scale	.46	.11	0	1
National Economy Worse	2.81	.87	0	4
Racial Resentment	.65	.24	0	0.9999999

Table A2. Item statistics to create self-interest scale						
Variable	N	Sign	Item-Test Correlation	Item-Rest Correlation	Average Interitem Correlation	Alpha
Worried about current financial situation	3246	+	.56	.34	.13	.57
Worried about losing job	5483	-	.43	.21	.14	.60
Able to pay housing payments	1559	+	.53	.37	.13	.57
Know someone lost job	5493	-	.64	.46	.11	.53
Able to pay health costs	5466	+	.64	.46	.11	.53
Unemployed	5914	+	.40	.18	.15	.61
Disabled	5914	+	.35	.11	.16	.62
Self-Rated Health Status	5902	+	.48	.26	.13	.58
Worse off than a year ago	5914	+	.44	.19	.14	.60
No Health Insurance	5914	+	.47	.24	.14	.59
Scale					.13	.61

Table A3. Correlation Matrix of Variables in Self-Interest Scale									
	Worried financial situation	Worried about losing job	Able to pay housing payments	Know someone lost job	Able to pay health costs	Unemployed	Disabled	Self-Rated Health Status	Worse off than a year ago
Worried about losing job	-.09								
Able to pay housing payments	.21	-.11							
Know someone lost job	-.29	.13	-.40						
Able to pay health costs	.16	-.09	.42	-.33					
Unemployed	.15	-.07	.13	-.10	.11				
Disabled	.06	.01	-.01	-.07	.05	.04			
Self-Rated Health Status	.17	-.07	.19	-.15	.15	.09	.11		
Worse off than a year ago	.14	-.06	.10	-.21	.02	.08	.06	.07	
No Health Insurance	.12	-.05	.19	-.12	.35	.14	.01	.06	-.06