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Title: A Reconsideration of Self-Interest in American Public Opinion

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Abstract

Previous research has failed to produce evidence that self-interest exerts a powerful force in public opinion formation. Stoker's argues the opposite. Using data from the 1993 Pilot Study, she finds that in three issue areas -- national health care, public funding of private and parochial schools, and affirmative action -- people's sense of whether they would stand to benefit from a policy initiative, or had benefited from an extent policy, were important in two ways. First, people tended to adopt opinions that were consistent with a sense of whether the policy would be costly or beneficial to them. Second, people's sense of a policy's cost or benefit to themselves seemed to determine, in part, the opinions they held on those policy issues. In particular, the effect of their personal cost/benefit analysis remained strong in regression models that took into account a wide array of demographic and policy predisposition variables. Stoker argues that these "not so minimal effects" findings occur because her model takes into account an intervening step in opinion formation that earlier researchers had ignored. Whereas previous studies examined only objective measures of the personal impact of policies -- the tangible, material consequences of a policy for an individual and their family -- Stoker's analysis also models subjective sense of personal cost or benefit. By accounting for interaction between both these measures, Stoker argues, a more theoretically realistic model of opinion formation emerges, one in which self-interest plays a key role.