

INFORMED DECISIONS ON SOCIETAL DILEMMAS

Political participation

Citizens' concepts of their duty as voters

Rationales for voting include:

- **Self-interest**
 - Some people believe it is their duty to vote for policies that are in their own self-interest, regardless of harmful effects on their nation and the rest of the world.
- **Duty to nation or group**
 - Some people believe it is their duty to vote for policies that are in the interest of their group (nation) regardless of harmful effects on the rest of the world or on themselves.
- **Duty to humanity (worldwide and future generations)**
 - Some people think in terms of the overall effect of their vote on humanity and on the rest of the world, and they consider all people, including future people.

Politicians can influence how people think about voting.

- Polling and survey evidence suggest that self-interest voting in the U.S. has increased substantially over the last few decades. This is perhaps because politicians, starting primarily with Ronald Reagan, have appealed to voters on this basis.

People need to be taught what voting is about.

- People may believe that voting in self-interest is a rational way to pursue their interests, however, this is not rational, because the probability of a single vote having an effect is extremely low.

Politics is an inefficient way to pursue self-interest, although it is efficient for advancing the good of all.

- A single vote has very little chance of affecting the outcome of an election, so voting for self-interest is like buying a lottery ticket, a bad deal. But when we consider possible effects on others around the world now and in the future, the large number of people affected compensates for the low probability and voting becomes worthwhile.

Voting can be seen as a way of solving problems that require large-scale cooperation, such as environmental problems.

- Voters who believe that it is beneficial to reduce our carbon footprint, but who are unwilling to do this on their own because of the cost, may support policies that will make everyone reduce their carbon consumption. The cost of the reduction may be large, but the cost of voting is small by comparison.

National interest voting is connected to beliefs that it is a duty to cast votes that benefit the nation, because the nation gives citizens the right to vote.

- Some people believe it betrays one's nation to vote for what is best for humanity – even when the harm to the rest of the world would exceed the benefit to their group – if doing so would hurt their nation.
- For example, when asked about the duty of a voter who thinks that a carbon tax would help the world on the whole but hurt the U.S., some say it is the voter's duty to vote against the tax.

Self-interest voting is connected to anti-tax attitudes.

- Americans who believe it is their duty to vote on the basis of self-interest tend to oppose taxes of all sorts. They have mixed views about government spending. They tend to favor spending that they see as benefiting them personally. (See Figure 1.)

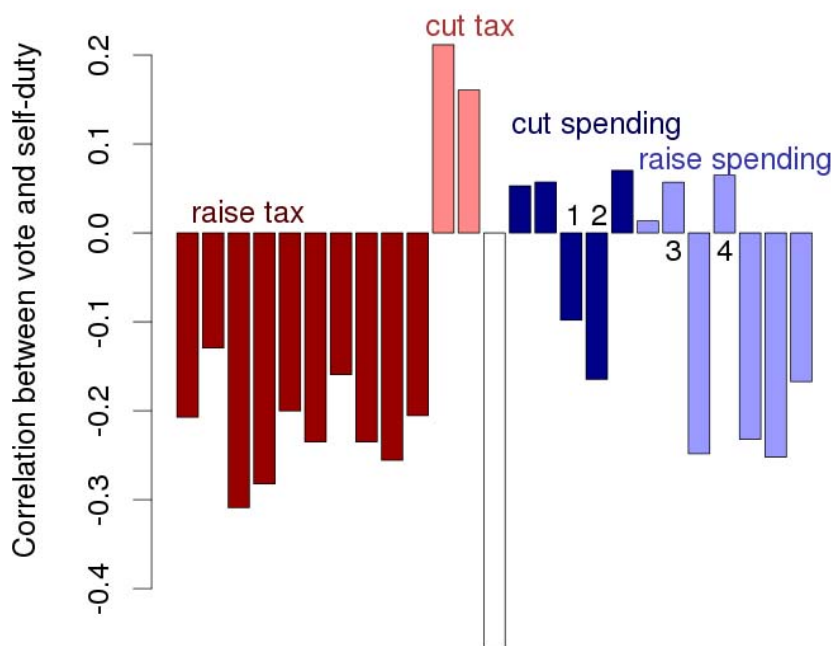
Although people want lower taxes and spending in the abstract, they do not want to cut much specific spending.

- In one study, respondents generally favored lower taxation and lower government spending. However, when given an exhaustive list of the major categories of government spending and asked to adjust the spending in each category upward or downward to match what the spending level should be, they adjusted some of the categories upward, with the result that total spending was essentially unchanged, even though the subjects still favored lower taxes.

We conducted a study with individuals who thought of voting as defending their self-interest. We asked their opinions on 26 specific proposals that might affect the U.S. government’s budget. These proposals included various tax increases (for example, an increase in the tax on gasoline, or removal of a tax deduction for mortgages), tax cuts (corporate profits, inheritance), spending cuts (military, prisons), and spending increases (inspection of incoming goods, aid for college tuition). For each proposal, the individuals answered questions about its effect on the U.S. as a whole, the effect on the budget, the effect on the subject, and how the individual would vote on it in a referendum. In addition, for each proposal, participants were asked whether the duty of citizens was to vote on the basis of self-interest or national interest (or both). Self-interest voters were generally opposed to spending as well as taxation. They were thus generally in favor of smaller government, although the pattern was not as consistent with spending as with taxes.

Figure 1. Correlation between participants’ national budget choices and sense of duty to nation

Correlation across subjects between voting for each item (1, 0, -1) and answer to the question about citizens’ duty (scored 1.5, 0.5 -0.5, -1.5, where positive numbers favor self-interest).



The numbers 1-4 are exceptions to the general pattern of self-interest favoring reduced spending. They are:

1. Eliminate the Veterans Administration Medical Centers (which include the hospitals).
2. Eliminate Medicare for those now 55 years old or younger (who would qualify for it in 10 years).
3. Increase U.S. assistance for college tuition (Pell grants) by an average of \$50 per citizen per year.
4. Increase U.S. government funding for border enforcement of illegal immigration by \$100 per citizen per year.

For more information, please access the full study or contact the author: baron@psych.upenn.edu

Baron, J. (2012). **The “culture of honor” in citizens’ concept of their duty as voters.**

Rationality and Society, 24(1) 37–72.

Baron, J., & McCaffery, E. J. (2008). **Starving the beast: The political psychology of budget deficits.**

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Jonathan Baron (baron@sas.upenn.edu) is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and a Senior Research Fellow of the Wharton Risk Management Center. His research interests include the study of intuitions and judgment biases that impede maximization of utility (good) by democratic government. These include parochialism, the act-omission distinction, moralistic values, and the isolation effect. He is the author of *Morality and Rational Choice* (1993, Kluwer/Springer) and *Judgment Misguided: Intuition and Error in Public Decision Making* (1998, Oxford University Press).