

A utilitarian perspective on how citizens think about their political decisions

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Advantages of a central state

- ▶ It can solve social dilemmas by raising the cost of defection.
 - ▶ Specifically, it has the power to influence people with the threat of punishment rather than the offer of reward.
 - ▶ Punishment is relatively cheap, when it is needed. (Salary vs. threat of whipping to make people work.)
 - ▶ But, if the threat alone is effect, punishment is even cheaper because it isn't used.
- ▶ Similarly, the state can enforce coordination, e.g., language.
- ▶ And it can increase total utility through (re)distribution.

Features of political participation (in a democratic state)

- ▶ Usually much less costly than spontaneous cooperation in a social dilemma.
- ▶ Not cost-effective in advancing self-interest (Downs).
- ▶ Often more cost-effective than charity in doing good for others, especially with large numbers of affected others, where the large number outweighs the small influence of one citizen.
- ▶ Cost-effectiveness increases with number affected, hence parochial voting (parochial altruism) is more effective than self-interest voting but less effective than cosmopolitan voting.

Expected utility of voting (or, more generally, political participation)

$$\sim \text{Effect} \cdot \frac{\text{Number considered}}{\text{Number of voters}}$$

Number considered can be:

Self: a few (usually includes family).

Group: on the order of the number of voters, or much less (unions, etc.).

Humanity: many times the number of voters, includes world and people in the future.

Voting is highly inefficient as a way of pursuing self-interest, and pretty inefficient for pursuing parochial group interest. But it is worthwhile if the voter considers humanity (Edlin et al., 2007, 2008).

Democracy is a design to amplify altruistic concerns for large number of others. A utilitarian voter would vote for what is best for all in the long run.

Biases

Those concerned with mis-using the basic structure, e.g.:

- ▶ Parochial voting
- ▶ Self-interest voting

Those concerned with supporting non-optimal policies, e.g.:

- ▶ Omission bias
- ▶ Do no harm
- ▶ Supporting deontological rules
- ▶ Failures to engage in Actively Open-minded Thinking (AOT)

Biases stem from naive theories

The way that people vote in an election, or, more generally, participate in a situation where many people have a say, may be determined by how they think about what they are doing, their theory of participation.

People have “naive theories” of science. For example, many people think that the temperature is warm in the summer because the earth is closer to the sun.

Similarly, they may have naive theories of political participation.

Parochialism

One deviation from the theory is that people are parochial. They think it is their moral duty to vote for the benefit of their group, such as their nation, even when the harm to outsiders would exceed that benefit.

In part, this attitude arises from a feeling of reciprocity: if my nation gives me the right to vote, then I must use that right on behalf of the nation. Some people see it as betrayal to vote for what is best for humanity, when that hurts their nation.

Orwell on nationalism

“By nationalism I mean first of all the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled ‘good’ or ‘bad’. But secondly — and this is much more important — I mean the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests.” George Orwell (1945)

Parochialism: Moral judgments about non-parochial actions

“Private universities in the U.S. accept foreign students while rejecting some U.S. students who are almost as well qualified.”

What do you think of this action?

- ▶ It is not a moral issue. [25]
- ▶ It is morally acceptable. [10]
- ▶ It is a moral issue, but I cannot say in general whether it is wrong or not. [12]
- ▶ It is morally wrong, but it should be allowed. [9]
- ▶ It is morally wrong, and it should be banned in most cases. [20]
- ▶ It is morally wrong, and it should be banned in all cases, regardless of the benefits to the outsiders. [13]
- ▶ ... regardless of the benefits to the outsiders and citizens. [11]

THE DUTY TO SUPPORT NATIONALISTIC POLICIES

Jonathan Baron, Ilana Ritov, Joshua Greene

Citizens perceive a duty to support policies that benefit their nation, even when they themselves judge that the consequences of the policies will be worse on the whole, taking outsiders into account.

When asked for reasons, many subjects felt an obligation to help their fellow citizens before others, and they also thought that they owed something to their nation, in return for what it did for them.

In an experiment with Israeli and Palestinian students, group membership affected both perceived overall consequences and duty.

Subjects still showed a greater group duty than predicted by perceived consequences.

Experiment 1

Web questionnaire. 70 subjects who said their primary loyalty was to the U.S. (out of 81 who completed the study).

The introduction to the study, called “Government policies,” read:

Each case concerns your attitude toward U.S. government policies. We ask about your active support for various policies. This means that you would be willing to do something. If you support a policy actively, you are more likely to vote for a political candidate who favored that policy. You might also write letters, try to convince others, sign petitions, participate in demonstrations or boycotts, and so on.

We ask about the policies themselves and the duty of U.S. citizens to support or oppose these policies actively. If you are not a U.S. citizen, you can still answer both questions. Give your true attitude of the policy, not the attitude you think you would have if you were a U.S. citizen.

Cases

Repeal the free-trade agreement with Mexico (part of NAFTA).

Repeal the free-trade agreement with Canada (part of NAFTA).

Reduce by 50% the amount of U.S. oil exported to other countries.

Increase by 50% the number of guards on the U.S./Mexican border.

Require employers to ask for proof of citizenship or legal immigrant status.

Reduce the number of Chinese students allowed to enter Ph.D. programs in the U.S.

Reduce the U.S. contribution to United Nations peacekeeping by 50%.

Ratify the proposed free-trade agreement with Colombia.

Eliminate tariffs on all goods produced in Sub-Saharan African countries.

Eliminate quotas on sugar imports, allowing more foreign sugar to enter the U.S.

Eliminate tariffs on ethanol from Brazil (which is cheaper than that produced by U.S. farmers).

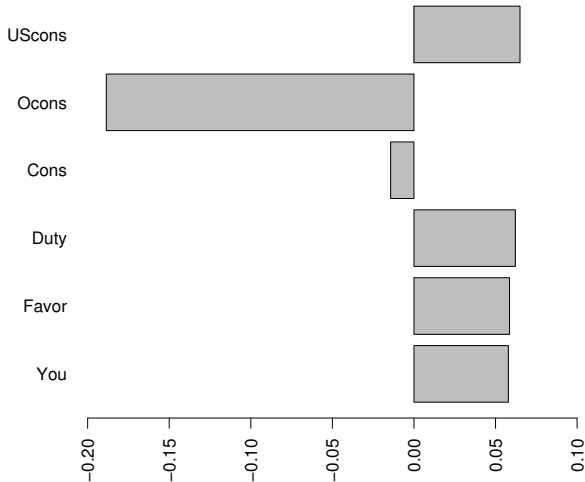
- Allow illegal immigrants to apply for legal immigrant status after paying a \$1,000 fine.
- Remove the subsidy for ethanol production from corn, in order to increase the amount of corn available for food and food production.
- Increase funds to fight malaria in Africa.
- Increase funds to fight AIDS around the world.
- Increase funding for research on agriculture in Asia and Africa, with the idea of increasing production.
- Increase funding for research on tropical diseases.
- Increase by 50% visas for technical workers who are sought by U.S. companies.
- Reduce emissions of greenhouse gases in the most efficient way by 25% of their current level. (This would involve higher taxes to discourage fossil fuels, investment in research and development, and regulation, which would raise other costs.)
- Send troops to keep the peace in African countries where people are dying from local wars, such as Sudan and Congo.”

Questions

- UScons:** How would this proposal affect the U.S. on the whole, taking into account both its good effects and bad effects? [5 point scale]
- Ocons:** How would this proposal affect other countries on the whole, taking into account both its good effects and bad effects? [5 point scale]
- Cons:** Taking into account the effects on both the U.S. and other countries, what would be the overall effect of this policy? [5 point scale]
- Duty:** What is the duty of U.S. citizens concerning active support of this proposal, or active opposition to it? [3 point scale]
- Favor:** What is your own inclination concerning active support or opposition? [3 point scale]
- You:** How would this proposal affect you personally and those you most care about? [3 point scale]

Means for subjects who identified with the U.S.

Units are steps on each response scale (-2 to 2 for consequences, -1 to 1 for the rest). Positive is option favoring U.S. Favor and You are as high as Duty. People think they would do their duty.



Experiment 2 asked about reasons for duty

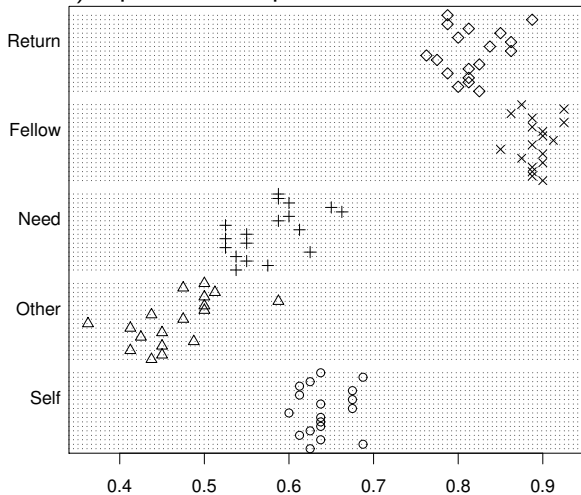
Which of the following is true about duty in this case?

- ▶ **Citizens have a duty to help their nation in return for what their nation does for them.**
- ▶ **Citizens have a duty to help their fellow citizens before helping others.**
- ▶ People have a duty to help those in need, wherever they are.
- ▶ People have a duty to help citizens of other nations when their own governments cannot or will not provide the needed help.
- ▶ A citizen has a duty to support policies that are best for him or her personally.

Main reasons are first two, in bold.

Reasons for duty, Experiment 2

Each point represents the mean response to the questions about reasons for a proposal, for a given questions. The groups (and different symbols) represent the questions:



Experiment 3: Israelis and Palestinians

Subjects classified by preferred language: 57 Hebrew (29 female, 28 male), 54 Arabic (28 female, 22 male), and 11 “other”. Proposals:

- ▶ All parts of Jerusalem will remain under Israeli control, and the Arab neighborhoods will have some municipal autonomy.
- ▶ Jerusalem will be the capital of two states: The Jewish neighborhoods will be part of Israel, the Arab neighborhoods will be part of Palestine. The old city will be governed by an international organization, and will remain open to all.
- ▶ Israel will dismantle all settlements except for the big clusters (Maale Edomim, Ariel, Gush Etzion, and Beitar-Ilit), establishing a new borderline. A free and safe passage for Palestinians will be established between the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian state will recognize the new border.
- ▶ Israel will withdraw to the 67 boarder except for a few changes resulting from agreed swaps. Palestinians will give up the right of return to the area inside Israel.
- ▶ ...

Questions

- Icons** How will this agreement affect Israel, when you take into account both the positive and the negative consequences?
- Pcons** How will this agreement affect the Palestinians, when you take into account both the positive and the negative consequences?
- Cons** What will the overall effect of this agreement be, when you take into account its effect on both Israel and the Palestinians?
- Iduty** What in your opinion is the duty of an Israeli, concerning active support for or active opposition to this agreement?
- Pduty** What in your opinion is the duty of a a Palestinian, concerning active support for or active opposition to this agreement?
- Favor** Will you personally support or oppose the agreement?
- You** Will you personally or the people closest to you be affected by the agreement?

Results

Discrepancy measure: We computed Duty $(-1,0,1)$ on the subject's side minus sign of Cons $(-1,0,1)$. Positive numbers imply duty to support one's side when the consequences are equal or reversed.

Favor measure: Sign of the mean of Favor and You: -1 for opposing and 1 for favoring.

The product of the discrepancy measure and the favor measure was positive across Ss (mean of 0.076 out of a maximum of 2 , $t_{110} = 2.58$, $p = 0.0111$)

This also worked for the product of the discrepancy measure and the differences between consequences favoring the subject's side and consequences favoring the other side (mean of 0.18 out of a maximum of 8 , $t_{110} = 2.61$, $p = 0.0104$). And also for the difference between lbest and Pbest (mean 1.6 out of a maximum of 6 ; $t_{121} = 10.57$, $p = 0.0000$).

In sum, subjects see a duty to support proposals on their side (and oppose proposals on the other side) even when their duty is discrepant with their own judgment of overall consequences.

Conclusions

Results illustrate non-consequentialist judgments in the form of parochialism. Seem to arise from reciprocity and other deontological considerations.

National loyalty need not imply neglect of outsiders.

However, in additional analyses, although each side weights their own side more in judging overall consequences, each gives some weight to the other side. Optimistically, this opens the door to negotiation (at least among students at an Israeli university).

People also think they have a duty to vote for their self-interest

Surprisingly, some people think that they have a moral duty to vote for what is in their own interest, even when that conflicts with the interests of the world and their nation.

In part, these people understand voting as being like participation in a market. The most popular product wins.

Neglected here are the limitations on simple majority rule: the existence of a minority with strong feelings or even important rights; or the existence of a majority who do not vote at all (children, foreigners, the unborn).

The “culture of honor” in citizens’ concepts of their duty

Some people see a moral duty to support their group (their nation) regardless of harmful effects on outsiders.

One study supports the hypothesis that this duty avoids betrayal of the nation, which they see as granting the right to vote for the purpose of advancing national interest.

Some also see a duty to defend their self-interest through voting; many think this is a rational way to pursue their interests.

Another justification is, “If [the voter] does not look out for her own interests, nobody else will.”

I hypothesize a norm of responsibility for self-defense, part of the “culture of honor” (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994) in all of us. Yet politics is by design an inefficient way to pursue self-interest, although it is efficient for advancing the good of all.

Voting on fossil-fuel tax in close election

A good-idea condition: “June thinks that the main issue in the election is a tax on carbon fuels in the U.S. June thinks that the tax is a **good idea** on the whole because of its long-term benefits in reducing global warming. But the tax would be **bad for her** because she is a heavy user of oil. . . .”

A bad-idea condition: “. . . [Betty] thinks that the tax is a **bad idea** on the whole. She thinks that its bad effects on the world and U.S. economy would slightly outweigh its long-term benefits in reducing global warming. But the tax would be **good for her** because she holds a patent on a technology that would be used for generating electricity from sunlight.”

The questions about each of the four cases, with criteria for scoring in brackets, were:

Some of the questions

If Betty does not look out for her own interests, nobody else will.

- ▶ This is a good reason to vote for the candidate who favors the tax.
- ▶ This is not a good reason to vote for or against either candidate.
- ▶ This is a good reason to vote against the candidate who favors the tax.

She will benefit from a reduction in global warming.

If voters vote according to their self-interest, then policies that are best for the majority are likely to be chosen.

If the pro-tax candidate wins by one vote, and she votes for that candidate, she will regret it.

If voters vote according to their view of what is best on the whole, then the best policies for all are likely to be chosen.

Citizens are given the right to vote in order to defend their own self-interest.

Citizens are given the right to vote in order to help decide what is best on the whole.

% of answers about reasons for self-interest voting

“Yes” favors the side that agrees with self-interest.

Reason	Yes	No
If X does not look out for her own interests, nobody else will.	52	11
She will benefit from a reduction in global warming.	63	12
If voters vote according to their self-interest, then policies that are best for the majority are likely to be chosen.	32	20
If the pro-tax candidate wins by one vote, and she votes for that candidate, she will regret it.	38	10
If voters vote according to their view of what is best on the whole, then the best policies for all are likely to be chosen.	40	25
Citizens are given the right to vote in order to defend their own self-interest.	47	19
Citizens are given the right to vote in order to help decide what is best on the whole.	49	28

Self-interest, spending, and taxes

The introduction began: “The U.S. government has a problem about its long-term budget. This study is about various proposals that will affect the budget, and other things. Proposals to cut taxes or increase spending will increase the budget deficit. Proposals to increase taxes (including those that eliminate deductions) or reduce spending will reduce the deficit. Of course, the deficit is not the only issue.” E.g.:

Proposal: Increase U.S. government funding for research on removal of greenhouse gases (CO₂ and methane) from the atmosphere, by \$50 per citizen per year. Removal of these gases would reduce the risk from global warming.

Test question: How would this proposal affect the U.S. budget deficit, in the short term, if it were passed?

It would reduce the deficit. It would increase the deficit.

Questions

How would this proposal affect the U.S. on the whole if it were passed? [It would help. It would hurt. Not sure.]

How would this proposal affect you and those close to you, if it were passed? [Same options.]

How would you vote on this in a referendum? [“for” “against” “abstain or unsure”]

Concerning this proposal, what is the duty of a citizen? That is, what is the morally best way to think about how to vote?

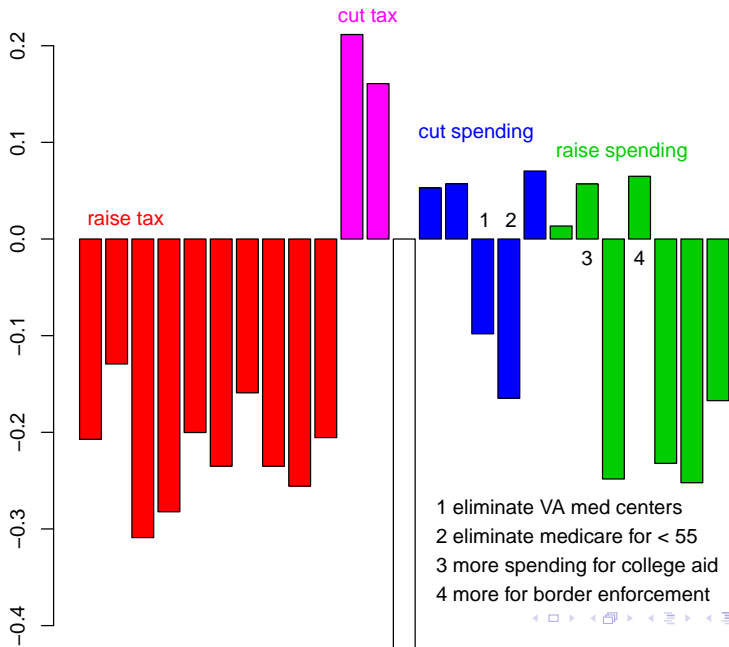
- ▶ A voter should vote for proposals that would benefit the voter and those close to him or her, regardless of their effect on the nation.
- ▶ A voter should vote for proposals that benefit the nation as a whole, regardless of their effect on the voter.
- ▶ A voter should take both self and nation into account but make sure to defend self-interest primarily.
- ▶ A voter should take both self and nation into account but give national interest priority over self-interest.

Self-interest voting is related to anti-tax attitudes

Americans who think that they have a moral 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.

The figure will show the 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).

Correlations between pro-voting and self-interest duty



Self-interest voting may be malleable

Nobody tells people what voting is about. It could be that they are easily influenced, because there is no announced theory that they are taught to believe.

The change in self-interest voting suggests that politicians themselves can influence how people think.

Some evidence suggests that, throughout the world, the number of "cosmopolitan" citizens is increasing, possibly as a result of greater mobility. More people seem to have weak loyalty to their nations.

Dale Miller (1999) on changing norms

“... consider then-candidate Ronald Reagan’s famous refrain in the 1980 U.S. presidential campaign: ‘Ask yourself, are you better off today than you were four years ago?’ This refrain reflected a message as well as a question. . . . In effect, by telling voters that a vote for him would be good for their pocketbook, Reagan was telling them that it was normative to vote on the basis of their pocketbook. It is interesting to note that the correlation between self-interest (defined by personal financial situation) and candidate preference in the 1980 U.S. presidential election was only .08 (Sears & Funk, 1991). However, it rose to a more substantial .36 by 1984 (Lau, Sears & Jessor, 1990), tempting one to speculate that the tenor of the self-interest-celebrating rhetoric of Reagan’s first term contributed to the social construction of voting behavior . . . as being something that self-interest does and should dominate.”

Reducing parochialism

1. Approval voting: If both in-group and out-group members vote to approve or disapprove each of several candidates or proposals, proposals that are best on the whole are more likely to win because they often approved by everyone. (Northern Ireland; Sri Lanka).

2. Make things more personal, to get people to think individual human beings rather than abstractions like nations: Manuel and Manuela rather than "Mexicans". Experimental manipulations have demonstrated this effect. The success of these manipulations also suggests that parochial voting is not somehow part of human nature but is the result of a cognitive abstraction.

3. Re-frame choices as acts rather than omissions, since parochialism is reduced for acts. (Hard to do.)

Do no harm (Baron & Journey, 1993)

People agree that omission bias makes things worse.

- ▶ 39% of the subjects said they would vote for a 100% tax on gasoline (to reduce global warming).
- ▶ Of those who would vote against the tax, 48% thought that it would do more good than harm on the whole.
- ▶ Of those subjects who would vote against the tax, despite judging that it would do more good than harm, 85% cited the unfairness of the tax as a reason for voting against it (for instance, the burden would fall more heavily on people who drive a lot).
- ▶ 75% cited the fact that the tax would harm some people on the whole (for instance, drivers).

Actively open-minded thinking

“In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself . . . the fallacy of what was fallacious.” J. S. Mill

AOT scale: “Questions about thinking” ($\alpha = .67$)

Response scale: Strongly agree ... Strongly disagree (5 points)

- ▶ Allowing oneself to be convinced by an opposing argument is a sign of good character.
- ▶ People should take into consideration evidence that goes against their beliefs.
- ▶ People should revise their beliefs in response to new information or evidence.
- ▶ Changing your mind is a sign of weakness. (-)
- ▶ Intuition is the best guide in making decisions. (-)
- ▶ It is important to persevere in your beliefs even when evidence is brought to bear against them. (-)
- ▶ One should disregard evidence that conflicts with one's established beliefs. (-)
- ▶ People should search actively for reasons why their beliefs might be wrong.

Correlations, disattenuated correlations on top

	Relig	AOT	Uscale	ActRule	ActOmit
Relig	0.83	-0.817	-0.808	-0.264	-0.346
AOT	-0.609	0.67	0.683	0.417	0.285
Uscale	-0.570	0.433	0.60	0.318	0.611
ActRule	-0.200	0.284	0.205	0.69	0.436
ActNum	-0.270	0.200	0.404	0.310	0.73

Reliabilities in bold. Raw $r = .200$ is $p = .05$ 2-tailed.

The expanding circle

Beginning to reason is like stepping onto an escalator that leads upward and out of sight. Once we take the first step, the distance to be traveled is independent of our will and we cannot know in advance where we shall end. (Peter Singer)

If Peter Singer is correct, then AOT should lead to cosmopolitanism.