
We know, with precision, for whom American voters cast their ballots. But it is much less clear why they pull the lever for a particular candidate or political party. Some maintain that people vote selfishly, supporting the candidate who will advance their interests the most. Others insist that ideology, emotion, party loyalty and affiliation with a demographic group are the main motivators.

In *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind*, Jason Weeden (a lawyer and a senior researcher at the Pennsylvania Laboratory for Experimental Laboratory Psychology) and Robert Kurzban (a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the founder of PLEEP), use data from the U.S. General Social Survey to argue that most political views are, in fact, governed by self-interest - and that race, sexual orientation, religion, church attendance, education, income, age, and gender "do a good job" predicting opinions on controversial issues, including same-sex marriage, affirmative action, immigration, taxes, and social welfare spending. At same time, since voters find allegations of self-interest "insulting, regardless of how well the accounts explain the facts," they "engage in blatant spin to hide their real motives, usually without even being aware that this is what they're doing."

*The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind* is provocative and often persuasive. As the authors readily acknowledge, however, it does not explain "the totality of the expanse of American political opinion."

Weeden and Kurzban remind us that self-interest is a complicated concept. Goals, they write, "can be complex, contradictory, and overlapping, they can involve short-term and long-term agendas," material and non-material gains, and they can differ between individuals and shift for a single individual over time. Their preferred term, "inclusive interests," which captures the goals of individuals, family members, friends, allies and social networks, however, is not all that much
That said, the authors analyze GSS data to claim that people typically adopt positions that are consistent with their strategic inclusive interests. "Freewheelers," who have spent a sizeable amount of their adult lives having sex (with multiple partners) and not having children, for example, often support a right to be abortion, while "Ring Bearers" (high-commitment, high fertility families) who have an interest in making casual sex more costly and difficult, seek to limit family planning options. On economic issues, the wealthy are less supportive of income redistribution than the poor; religious groups, whose churches assist the poor within their denomination, and the self-employed, who face higher tax burdens than those employed by others, tend to oppose public assistance.

For many issues, however, self-interest is difficult to calculate - or seems to be less relevant. Weeden and Kurzban admit that older Americans' skepticism about government programs for the poor is shaped by a pervasive but mistaken conviction that Social Security and Medicare are "earned benefits rather than redistributed programs," paying out far more to seniors than they ever paid in payroll taxes. Self-interest also offers "little traction" in explaining the views of most voters on environmental issues, defense spending, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And it is worth noting, the authors do not discuss some legislation, including inheritance taxes, on which there appears to be a disconnect between overwhelming approval across all income groups and self-interest.

Weeden and Kurzban have provided a solid foundation for understanding the bases of political opinions. But there is, indeed, "more to the story." It might well include measurement of the intensity of conviction on issues and the electoral potency of negative advertisements and "negative reference groups"; an explanation of what actually gets a voter to the polls on election day and what keeps so many others at home; and an investigation of the role of self-interest (or inclusive interests) in rapidly shifting views, like those on gay rights and gay marriage.

Further study might also help account for the enduring and intensifying allegiance to political parties and the conclusion of a recent poll conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press that 92% of Republicans are to the right of the average Democrat and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the average Republican; and 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans believe that the policies of the party they oppose are a threat to the well-being of the nation. These findings appear to be at odds with the authors' claim that party identifications are "essentially the average of one's political positions." With their observation that the conventional wisdom that divides people broadly into liberals and conservatives is "plainly insufficient, even lazy." And with their suggestion that we should "forget red, blue, and purple - it's more like a 24-box of Crayons."

Addressing these questions might - or might not - change the anything but pretty picture painted by Weeden and Kurzban: that behind the political opinions embraced by most Americans is "self-interest disguised through self-deception."