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CHAPTER 2

Investigating Interests

MITT ROMNEY BLAMED HIS 2012 ELECTION LOSS on self-interested voting. Many leading figures in the academy, however, are, to say the least, skeptical of this kind of explanation:

[S]elf-interest ordinarily does not have much effect on the mass public's political attitudes. —*David Sears and Carolyn Funk, professors (1990)*¹

Unless the material outcomes from a public policy or issue are very clear, very large, and very imminent, self-interest does not determine opinion or action. —*Charles Taber, professor (2003)*²

The current scholarly consensus holds that self-interest is not a major determinant of issue attitudes or voting choices.

—*Michael Lewis-Beck, William Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert Weisberg, professors (2008)*³

Self-interest has no more than sporadic marginal effects on political views.

—*Bryan Caplan, professor (2012)*⁴

[S]elf-interest is a weak predictor of policy preferences.

—*Jonathan Haidt, professor (2012)*⁵

These folks are very well-respected researchers at top universities who have written numerous influential articles and books on political opinions. They understand that they're saying something that would surprise most people, but it's their sincere view—Romney's analysis must be wrong because people don't typically prefer policies or candidates based on self-interest.

The self-interest-denying message hasn't generally impressed the chattering class. Commentators regularly claim that self-interest is kind of a big deal in politics:

[A]s is so often the case with people who spend heavily on elections, [their] worldview does happen to coincide pretty neatly with the economic interests of the people who hold it. —Ross Douthat, *political pundit* (2013)⁶

The sense of fairness is so often a moralised stalking horse for personal interest. —Will Wilkinson, *political pundit* (2013)⁷

The traditional conservative anti-government economic agenda is getting less and less popular in large part because it appeals to the economic interests of a small minority of capital owners and high-income earners.

—Jonathan Chait, *political pundit* (2013)⁸

[H]uman beings are very good at convincing themselves of whatever their self-interest would have them believe.

—Ezra Klein, *political pundit* (2012)⁹

So which is it? On the one hand, many influential columnists think that self-interest matters. A lot. On the other hand, a number of respected researchers confidently assert that self-interest isn't all that important, often without bothering to hedge their declaratives with the usual academic "mights," "coulds," and "suggests."

These views are so diametrically opposite that someone—really, many someones—must be wrong. We think we know who.

Self-Interest Is Dead, Long Live Self-Interest!

Consider an influential set of claims from the 1998 edition of *The Handbook of Social Psychology* from a chapter by political scientist Donald Kinder (another deservedly well-respected figure) reviewing findings on political opinions:

For the self-interested citizen, then, the question is always and relentlessly, What's in it for me and my family—what's in it for me and mine now? Defined in this way, self-interest is surprisingly unimportant when it comes to predicting American public opinion. . . . Consider these examples. When faced with affirmative action, white and black Americans come to their views without calculating personal harms or benefits. The unemployed do not line up behind policies designed to alleviate economic distress. The medically indigent are no more likely to favor government health insurance

than are the fully insured. Parents of children enrolled in public schools are generally no more supportive of government aid to education than are other citizens. . . . Women employed outside the home do not differ from homemakers in their support for policies intended to benefit women at work. On such diverse matters as racial busing for the purpose of school desegregation, antidrinking ordinances, mandatory college examinations, housing policy, bilingual education, compliance with laws, satisfaction with the resolution of legal disputes, gun control, and more, self-interest turns out to be quite unimportant. . . . American society is marked by huge differences in income, education, and wealth, but such differences generally do not give rise to corresponding differences in opinion.¹⁰

This take on the state of the art in political science has been highly influential in academic circles. The quote from Charles Taber above is from a discussion quoting Kinder at length. In his recent book, *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt cites the Kinder article in summarizing the role of self-interest in political opinions. We quoted a bit of it earlier, but here's more context from Haidt: "Many political scientists used to assume that people vote selfishly, choosing the candidate or policy that will benefit them the most. But decades of research on public opinion have led to the conclusion that self-interest is a weak predictor of policy preferences."¹¹

Five of Kinder's claims can be evaluated reasonably straightforwardly with the main source of data used in this book, the U.S. General Social Survey, which has measured public opinion on a wide range of topics going back to the early 1970s.

Affirmative Action. In 1994 the GSS asked whites whether they thought it was likely that they or anyone in their families would not get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified African American received one instead. African Americans were asked the inverse question, whether they thought it was likely that they or anyone in their families would not get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified white received one instead. The survey asked these respondents about their support for or opposition to preferences in hiring and promotion for African Americans.

Recall that Kinder's claim was that people take positions on affirmative action "without calculating personal harms or benefits." If that claim is right—if people's views don't track their perceptions of their interests—then whether one stands to gain or lose under affirmative action should have no effect on whether one is for it or against it.

However, in sharp contrast (we present fuller analyses of this issue and the others that follow in the Data Appendix for Chapter 2), we find that the biggest supporters of race-based affirmative action were African Americans who indicated that it is likely that they or a family member would lose a job or promotion to a white—62% supported it and only 22% strongly opposed it. The biggest opponents of race-based affirmative action were whites who indicated that it is likely that they or a family member would lose a job or promotion to an African American—only 8% supported it and 77% strongly opposed it.

Crucially, there were significant differences among African Americans and among whites based on whether they said that they or a family member was at risk. Among African Americans who did not perceive a risk of losing jobs to whites, support for race-based affirmative action dropped to 47% (compared to 62% of African Americans who did perceive the risk). Among whites who did not perceive a risk of losing jobs to African Americans, strong opposition to race-based affirmative action dropped to 65% (compared to 77% of whites who did perceive the risk).

Self-interest deniers might point to the fact that African Americans at lower risk are more likely to favor affirmative action than whites at lower risk as some kind of confirmation that there's *more* than self-interest at work in these opinions. We agree with this, in a way, as we'll describe as we get deeper into this chapter. But the claim at issue here is simply whether self-interest enters the picture at all.

One could quibble at the margins. Is it really "self"-interest to ask about risk to one's "family members" in addition to one's self, for example? (Still, Kinder started it; his formulation explicitly included "me and my family.") Also, it's true that these percentages don't allow us to infer without question that people are "calculating personal harms or benefits." But to the extent these numbers tell us anything, it's that people's own interests are, on average, clearly related to their stated positions.

Unemployment. The claim: “The unemployed do not line up behind policies designed to alleviate economic distress.” On a GSS survey item asking whether it should be the government’s responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed, 74% of the unemployed think it should be, but only 46% of those working full-time agree. On a GSS survey item asking whether government spending on unemployment benefits should be increased, left the same, or decreased, 57% of the unemployed think it should be increased, but only 27% of those working full-time agree. The unemployed actually *do* “line up behind policies” that help the unemployed.

Government Health Insurance. The claim: “The medically indigent are no more likely to favor government health insurance than are the fully insured.” A closely related GSS survey item asks whether the government should have a responsibility to help pay for doctors and hospital bills or whether people should take care of themselves. Among individuals in the bottom half of the income distribution who lack health insurance coverage, 65% lean to the government-responsibility side and 13% lean to the take-care-of-yourself side. Among individuals in the top half of the income distribution who have health insurance, 46% lean to the government-responsibility side and 19% lean to the take-care-of-yourself side. One might be surprised that the differences aren’t greater than they are, but it’s not the case that the uninsured poor are “no more likely” than others to favor a government role in health insurance.

School Funding. The claim: “Parents of children enrolled in public schools are generally no more supportive of government aid to education than are other citizens.” The GSS doesn’t ask questions that address precisely this claim, but we can come reasonably close. We can look at people whose children do or did attend public schools, on the one hand, and the childless and those with children who do or did attend private school, on the other hand, splitting both groups into younger and older adults, approximating those with children still in school versus those with grown children. Among these groups, the highest level of support for increased school spending comes from adults under fifty whose children exclusively attend/attended public schools—to the tune of about eight in ten supporting higher spending on public education. The lowest levels of support for increased school funding come from

older individuals, whether or not their (by now probably grown) children attended public school. Among these older folks, two-thirds support higher spending on education. Unlike the three cases above, these differences, while statistically significant, are not very big in practical terms, and especially unimpressive when we add the fact that almost three-quarters of younger people without children in public schools also support higher spending. These results, then, don't really provide an unequivocal answer one way or the other on the claim, especially given the use of the term "generally." Score this one as unclear.

Working Women. The claim: "Women employed outside the home do not differ from homemakers in their support for policies intended to benefit women at work." For this topic, we compared, on the one hand, women working full-time (whether married or not) with, on the other hand, women who report they are "keeping house" (to use the GSS's term) and are also married to full-time workers. For these two groups of women, we looked at two items: (1) views regarding employers hiring and promoting women, and (2) whether women should receive paid maternity leave when they have a baby. There were no significant differences between these groups on these items. Thus, we think the claim with respect to working women is supported by these data.

So, in the five cases in which we can relatively cleanly assess the claims with the GSS, only one—the one regarding working women—is true. The statement about education was unclear, but leaned toward being untrue. In the other three cases—affirmative action, unemployment, and health insurance—self-interest relates to people's positions in exactly the way Kinder's statements denied.

Bilingual Education and Gun Control. In additional areas—including bilingual education and gun control—Kinder suggested that self-interest is "quite unimportant," a suggestion whose accuracy depends on one's view of how big an effect would have to be before it graduated to being important.

On bilingual education, in fact, in the GSS data, the strongest support for eliminating the programs is among those who speak only English (24% want to eliminate; 24% are strongly opposed to eliminating), while the strongest opposition to eliminating bilingual education is among those who speak Spanish and English but no other language (13% want

to eliminate; 45% are strongly opposed to eliminating). We think these differences are large enough to be important, and certainly not small enough to be “quite unimportant.”

On gun control, the GSS has included gun ownership and a range of gun-related policy views over the years. Typically, on policy items involving permits, background checks, and limiting semiautomatic or high-powered weapons to police or military, restrictions are supported by around 85% to 90% of people who do not own guns, but support for restrictions drops to the 50% to 70% range for gun owners. That is, there is typically around a 25-point gap between gun owners and non-owners, a gap that strikes us as plainly important.

Socioeconomic Status. Finally, Kinder made the following broad claim about political views: “American society is marked by huge differences in income, education, and wealth, but such differences generally do not give rise to corresponding differences in opinion.” We’ll investigate the relationships among education, income, and political opinions at length in the pages to come, but for now let’s take a look at two examples of issues that are central matters of difference between Democrats and Republicans on which one might expect people with different income levels to have different opinions. We’ll compare those in the bottom 20% of family income, the middle 20%, and the top 10% (as with all these issues, we present the full data in the appendixes).

On the question of whether the government should be taking steps to reduce income disparities, 57% of the poorest group lean left of center in their responses, dropping to 49% of those in the middle, and dropping substantially to only 30% of the wealthiest group. A recent study looking at this GSS item went further, using data from the same individuals over time. The finding was that when people experience unemployment or a loss in income, their views on reducing income disparities become significantly more liberal than they were before the unemployment or income loss, providing powerful evidence that there really is a causal connection leading from one’s economic circumstances to one’s political views on redistribution.¹²

On the related question of whether the government should be taking action to help the poor or whether the poor should help themselves, lots of people (reasonably, we think, given how the question is worded) land

in the middle, agreeing with both positions. But, still, more than twice as many of the richest Americans (39%) than the poorest Americans (17%) head to the right on this question; and more than twice as many of the poorest Americans (40%) than the richest Americans (17%) head to the left on this question. Americans in the middle of the income distribution are practically evenly split on this item.

So, for questions like these—questions that relate directly to income redistribution—does income “give rise to corresponding differences in opinion”? It sure looks that way to us.

The evidence that people’s policy views really do track their interests raises the question of how the self-interest-denying meme got started in the first place. Kinder’s summary, after all, isn’t based on nothing, but in fact relies on a large number of studies by several researchers over many years. Nonetheless, we have major concerns about these studies. We’ve provided what we believe to be a key piece of the puzzle at the end of the Data Appendix for Chapter 2, but our argument is rather technical and, to many, we predict, not particularly interesting (it’s a thrilling tale of how the use of DERPish and other noncausal variables as predictors in multiple regressions leads to plainly misleading coefficients for both noncausal and causal variables). For those uninterested in such academic Urkel-jerking, our summary is this: The self-interest-denying claims from academics are based on complex effects from complex studies with questionable assumptions, but the summaries of these studies make it sound like these are simple conclusions from simple studies. When one strips out the complexity and just looks at the simple statements, as we did above, the simple statements are often untrue.

In sum, our fact-checking indicates that self-interest often plays an important and substantial role in key areas of policy opinions, and yet strongly worded self-interest denials regularly pop up. One example is the well-known book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, by journalist Thomas Frank. The central claim in Frank’s book is that whites with lower incomes in red states are ignoring their economic interests by voting Republican. Several political scientists have since debunked Frank’s claim,¹³ including a thorough treatment in *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State*, by Andrew Gelman and colleagues. Gelman finds that while wealthier states often have more Democratic voters, richer people

within any given state are more likely to vote Republican. It's simply not the case that people (even Kansans) generally ignore income in choosing political parties, though income is not the only thing that matters. Frank's is a comforting tale for big-city liberals who want to think that middle-American conservatives are suckers; but, sadly perhaps, it just ain't so (or, at least, it ain't so in the way that Frank claims it is).

Reports of the death of self-interest have been greatly exaggerated. We don't want to replace one extreme with another by saying that some narrowly defined version of self-interest is all that matters—to be clear, we're not saying that. Indeed, the rest of this chapter examines some of the complexities and widens the typical view.

The Nature of Interests

What do people mean when they say that something is in a person's interests? Mainly, it's that something advances a person toward getting what they want. It's more complex than this, of course, in no small part because people want many things, some of which are mutually exclusive. A heroin addict might want to get more heroin, and people wouldn't normally say that doing so would be in their interests. Why not? Because people think that getting more heroin will interfere with the person achieving their (presumed) long-term goals—looking after their own health and safety, success at a job, developing and maintaining relationships with friends and partners, taking care of their children, and so on. People can have goals, after all, that conflict.

In a related way, one often hears that something would be in someone's interests even though they might not know it themselves—it's in people's interests to eat less trans fats, it's in teenagers' interests to wait to have children, and so on. People are comfortable saying what's in someone else's best interests because they assume that people share some very basic goals. People should eat less trans fats because most people want to be healthier. Teenagers should wait to have children because having children too early often leads to being poorer over one's lifetime, something few people presumably want.

What people usually mean by something being in a person's interests, then, is that it advances them toward getting what they want overall, but such claims always rest on a set of background assumptions regarding what people usually want and how to prioritize those various goals when they conflict. It's not an airtight way to think about it, but for many purposes it's close enough.

So what, then, do people want? To figure this out, we start with our friend and colleague Doug Kenrick. Kenrick has been an influential researcher for decades, and in recent years he has been usefully integrating social psychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, dynamical systems theory, and behavioral economics. These days he's been combining his academic efforts with popular books bringing social science to the masses, including *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life* and *The Rational Animal* (coauthored with Vlad Griskevicius).

Kenrick and his colleagues maintain that people are trying to put together lives that advance fundamental, everyday motives, including satisfying immediate physiological needs (breathing, eating, drinking, finding shelter, etc.), defending themselves and those they value, establishing social ties, gaining and maintaining social status and esteem, attracting and retaining mates, and parenting. People are not abstract beings, after all, but social animals.

Economic goals don't appear explicitly on Kenrick's list, but are interwoven in various ways. Money isn't viewed as a fundamental motive in itself, but as something useful to satisfying various fundamental motives—securing food, shelter, health care, and protection; gaining and maintaining social status, alliances, and mating relationships; providing advantages for one's children and other family members. Economists are sometimes accused of believing that humans mostly care about economic outcomes, but most modern economists don't believe this. The standard views in economics see people as maximizing their *preferences*, whatever these happen to be. These preferences can include having more money, but can also include gaining prestige, or having sex, or having one's children fulfill their own preferences, or a range of other goals.¹⁴

There are further goals that derive from the high-level goals. Some key subgoals relate to managing how one is thought of by others. In

establishing social ties, for example, people seek to come across as reliable, predictable, competent, consistent, admired, nice, powerful, reasonable, likable, generous souls—just the sort of people, that is, that other people might rationally view as someone who would be a good friend to have.

The list of fundamental motives is relatively straightforward, but matters become more complex because motives and the priorities among them differ across individuals, across sexes, across stages of life, across cultures, and across situations. To take a simple example, young men often do dangerous things (football, skateboarding, motocross, fighting) in substantial part—whether they know it or not—to gain attention from young women. It's not that they stop caring about their safety, but that, for some individuals in some situations, safety motives are trumped by mating motives.¹⁵

Furthermore, motivation is dynamic, frequently sensitive to context. For instance, Kenrick and his colleagues have run clever experiments regarding the widely discussed tendency toward loss aversion—where people fear losses more than they desire equal-sized gains. The studies show that, in fact, loss aversion depends on what motives are salient at the time. Get people thinking about their safety, and they show typical loss aversion patterns. Get young men thinking about hooking up with young women, however, and their loss aversion disappears as they seek to gain the kinds of things (money, status) that might be attractive to women.¹⁶

Our view of political interests draws heavily from the work of researchers analyzing how people's lives and minds reflect humans-as-social-creatures kinds of goals. These goals can be complex, contradictory, and overlapping, they can involve short-term or long-term agendas, they can differ between individuals, and they can differ within the same individual over time.

Contrast this somewhat catholic view with typical definitions of “self-interest” from political science, which tend to be very narrow. Self-interest, by the usual standards, is invoked only when a person gets some material gain now or soon. A typical definition involves “relatively short-term tangible benefits.”¹⁷ Getting some money today is in a person's self-interest, but—somewhat oddly—entering into an agreement

to get some money a few years from now is not. Gaining social status isn't in a person's self-interest—again, on many traditional definitions—because it's not “material” or “tangible,” despite the fact that status usually translates in the real world into more control over the levers of power that distribute resources over time.

By the restrictive definitions, getting a college education is not in a person's self-interest because it leads to immediate loss of income (while in college) in exchange for long-term gain. To take another example—again confounding most people's intuitions—by the restrictive definitions, two single adults who want to marry but are legally prevented from doing so (e.g., because of laws against interracial marriage or against same-sex marriage) would not have their self-interests advanced by removing the legal barrier (self-interest is about money, not relationships).

The perversities that the standard definition introduces penetrate into any number of policy domains. On the restrictive definitions, being denied access to birth control is not against the self-interest of someone who wishes to be sexually active while avoiding pregnancy (it's not material in the short term). On the usual definition, wanting publicly funded unemployment insurance to be available is only in the self-interest of people currently unemployed, despite the fact that lots of other people might need it in the future. On the restrictive definitions, it's not against the self-interest of sexually active young women when others engage in moralistic “slut shaming.” On the usual definition, it does not advance the self-interest of young minority men to eliminate racial profiling by the police.

We simply reject the restrictive definitions of “self-interest.” In real life, people have agendas that involve more than the short term and more than just money. Viewing “self-interest” in such a limited, counter-intuitive way strikes us as arbitrary. Instead, generally—and we concede somewhat less cleanly—we view self-interest as advancing any of a range of people's typical goals, whether directly involving material gain or not, whether involving immediate gain or something more subtle that advances someone's progress over the longer term.

Somewhat oddly, typical definitions of self-interest *do* include immediate material benefits to one's family members. (Recall Kinder's

formulation, which included “me and my family.”) Even by the restrictive definitions, then, “self-interest” isn’t really just about one’s self. We agree with this expansion, primarily because it captures something fundamental about human life—people typically care deeply about outcomes for close family members, particularly their children. Indeed, evolutionary biology, on Richard Dawkins’s famous “selfish gene” frame, views an organism as a machine that advances the interests of its own genes, genes that are shared, to one degree or another, by parents and children, siblings, nephews and uncles, grandparents and grandchildren.¹⁸

For all these reasons, we think it’s probably best to jettison the term “self-interest” altogether. To replace it, we’ll borrow from evolutionary biologists, who use the term “fitness” to describe reproductive success, which is evolution’s bottom line. When evolutionary biologists want to talk about the combined gene-level reproductive success of a person and that person’s relatives, they refer to “inclusive fitness.” So, we’ll refer to “inclusive interests.” Something is in a person’s “inclusive interests” when it advances their or their family members’ everyday, typical goals.

But even this leaves out something important.

Life Is a Team Sport

There is no deeper truism in economics than the idea that people compete over scarce resources. Indeed, this is true not only for people, but for animals generally. Animals are built for competing. In the nonhuman world, they compete with one another for territory, food, and anything else that contributes to survival and reproductive success. Often they have built-in equipment for competition, like the large antlers of bucks used to compete with other bucks for access to does.

Humans don’t have much by way of natural armaments, but two human traits stand out: big brains and big social groups. Relative to their relatives, humans have large, dense social networks and huge numbers of both negative and positive social interactions. People spend incredible portions of their time in close proximity—sometimes, these days, virtual proximity—to other people. Indeed, humans cooperate with one

another arguably more than almost any other species, except maybe some kinds of insects.¹⁹ People cooperate with one another on many scales across many domains, from division of labor within families to modern large-scale military enterprises.

The fact that people are so social means that they can advance their interests not only by making use of physical tools, but also by making use of social tools (i.e., their relationships with other people). There is one crucial difference. When someone uses a rock to beat on a rival, the rock is no better (or worse) off. Not so with social tools.

The fact that people use one another does not mean that the individuals who are being so used might not also stand to benefit. People use one another to reach goals they couldn't if they acted separately, goals whose benefits are typically shared to one degree or another. They rely on their social networks to help carry them through hard times. And when someone gains, it's often a gain for others in their social network as well.

Indeed, anthropologists have emphasized that a pervasive, even universal, feature of human societies is that people cooperate with one another to produce goods and services that benefit the group, or at least some subsection of it. Such activities range from hunting in small-scale societies—in which meat is frequently shared broadly among members of the larger community—to Wikipedia, a planetary outpouring of cooperative effort to benefit anyone with an Internet connection.

A related, if perhaps less encouraging, point is that psychologists have documented that humans reliably play favorites, disposed—to put it very roughly—toward helping those that are more like them rather than those who are less like them. The data from psychological experiments dating back several decades have suggested to some that nearly any feature, no matter how arbitrary or inconsequential, can motivate in-group favoritism. In classic early studies, subjects estimated the number of dots on a screen and were (randomly) informed that they were “over-estimators” or “under-estimators” of the number of dots. Assigning these (trivial, artificial) labels influenced subjects' subsequent choices of allocating rewards to other subjects, with people favoring those who were “like them” in terms of their style of estimation.²⁰

In the real world, cooperative groups are formed and dissolve on an ad hoc basis all the time. People participate in pickup games of soccer or basketball for a short period, dissolving at the end of an afternoon. The film industry illustrates a similar phenomenon, with groups of specialists—actors, directors, technicians—working cooperatively on a particular project, and more or less disbanding when the task is complete.²¹ And people are choosy about the groups they join and stay members of. In laboratory experiments in behavioral economics, people often exit groups that are not meeting their standards of being sufficiently cooperative.²²

The point is that one's interests are often enhanced by advances generally among one's social network. Life is competitive, not just for individuals and families but for various, wider, overlapping social circles as well. Life is a team sport, and we're all on several teams. The benefits spill over; the harms trickle through.

And so our earlier notion of “inclusive interests” needs to be expanded further. People's everyday, real-life endeavors are enhanced by various kinds of material and nonmaterial gains, over shorter-term and longer-term horizons, received by themselves, their family members, and their friends, allies, and social networks.²³

An Interest by Any Other Name

Self-interest deniers are often quick to point out that while *self*-interest doesn't really matter, *group* interests matter quite a bit when it comes to political issues. Kinder puts it this way: “In matters of public opinion, citizens seem to be asking themselves not ‘What's in it for me?’ but rather ‘What's in it for my group?’”²⁴

Our notion of inclusive interests skates over it, but the self/group distinction has always been pretty messy. To begin with, we've noted that typical definitions of self-interest nonetheless explicitly include a group—family members.

But the bigger problem is that group interests, as typically conceived, overlap with the interests of individual members of the group. Groups,

after all, are made up of individuals. Take Kinder's discussion of groups, for example. He points to large average differences between whites and African Americans on issues relating to racial discrimination and safety-net programs and in party affiliations. There is no doubt that these differences exist. The issue is what to make of them.

When a particular African American supports policies that attenuate the negative effects of racial discrimination, sure, those policies are good for other African Americans. Should the individual's support for the policies be understood as advancing the interests of the person (and their family), and helping other African Americans as a side effect? Or should support for the policies be understood as advancing the interests of other African Americans, helping the self (and kin) as a side effect? Or some combination of both?

It's certainly not obvious, to us anyway, that supporting policies in this way is properly described as looking out for one's group as opposed to looking out for one's self and one's family. When one widens the circle to social allies, taking account of the common sharing of benefits among them, the problem is compounded. If I'm an African American with a social network consisting mostly of other African Americans, and if having more African Americans hired and promoted within companies would place more people in my social network in positions to control hiring and promoting decisions themselves, and if that might help me and my family members get hired and promoted down the road, then it becomes something of a mess to try to unravel what the "self" and "group" interests are.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Righteous Mind*, takes things further than most social scientists and views advancing group interests as a kind of self-sacrifice. When it comes to politics, he views people as choosing a team and transcending their own interests in favor of group interests.²⁵ We resist this move as applied to most real-world political issues. If most African Americans support policies that attenuate the negative effects of racial discrimination, and most African Americans benefit from these policies, and few African Americans are harmed by these policies, then we don't see why supporting one's group would be self-sacrificial. We view most examples of things that advance

“groups” as basically equivalent to things that advance the individual interests of lots of members of those groups.²⁶

In some cases self-interest and group interests might genuinely diverge. An obvious example would be wealthy African Americans and income redistribution. African Americans have, on average, lower incomes and lower income social networks and might therefore benefit from more robust income redistribution. But the immediate individual interests of wealthy African Americans pull the other way. What do the data show? As we’ll discuss in chapter 6, average views on income redistribution are predicted by a mixture of race, income, and a few other factors. Among those most opposed to government income redistribution are, unsurprisingly, wealthy whites. Among those who most support income redistribution are poorer and middle-income African Americans. Wealthy African Americans are in the middle—neither as routinely opposed as wealthy whites nor as routinely supportive as poorer African Americans.

Such patterns would seem to us to undermine Haidt’s view that people typically sacrifice their own interests to those of their salient groups. We hasten to add that such patterns similarly don’t support the view that people solely care about immediate individual interests. Instead, these patterns suggest a messier formula, one that combines self-interest and group interests into something more like: What’s in it for me, my family, my friends, my allies, and my wider social network? This combination is what we’re calling “inclusive interests.”

From our perspective, it’s not surprising that politicians routinely talk about “you and your family,” or that circumstances that threaten people’s physical safety (like the attacks of 9/11 or large hurricanes) serve as such potent motivators of political will, or that issues relating to sex and reproduction (like abortion and birth control) can for some people in some circumstances become as or more important than issues relating to income redistribution, or that politics can often appear to be as much about people’s own groups as their own selves.

In later chapters, we’ll take a close look at how particular demographic features relate to differences in people’s inclusive interests with respect to particular policy disputes. First, however, we’ll address a lingering and important concern. If people are driven by their interests, why is it that,

when asked why they have the policy preferences they have, people hardly ever say that it's because it's in their interests? Instead, people often claim that they, themselves, are largely magnanimous, interest-free creatures, while viewing their opponents as, at best, creatures of self-interest (and, at worst, evil people actively trying to sabotage society). If interests so obviously matter, why won't people just admit it?