Selfish Corporations

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Motivated by the public debate regarding corporate responsibility, we construct a memory-based model of decision-making to illustrate how corporate and political communication can impact policy preferences. We test the predictions of our model in a new large-scale survey of U.S. citizens on their support for economic policies such as corporate bailouts. We first establish that the public demands corporations to behave better within society, a sentiment we label “big business discontent.” Then, using random variation in the order of survey sections and in the exposure to animated videos, we confirm the key predictions of our model. First, messages that prime respondents to think about policy through the lens of corporate responsibility make people more averse to bailouts, while reframing the issue in terms of economic trade-offs has opposite effects. Second, attempts to paint a positive public image of big business can actually backfire, as they focus attention on an aspect on which the public has well-established negative views.

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