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# *Economic Self-Interest and Political Behavior\**

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The nature of the relationship between personal economic well-being and political behavior has been an object of much theory and research in the social sciences. A growing number of studies of survey data have concluded, however, that there is little or no relationship in the U.S. between financial well-being and political attitudes and behavior. This paper offers an explanation for these findings based on the way people perceive the nature of their financial well-being. The analysis shows that belief in economic individualism leads people to accept personal responsibility for their economic conditions, which in turn eliminates any connection between personal well-being and political evaluation. I discuss the role of political culture and belief in the assessment of "self-interest" and "rationality" in political behavior in light of these findings.

It is commonly assumed that personal economic conditions are an important determinant of political attitudes and behavior. The concept of economic self-interest has occupied a central place in sociological theories of political conflict and behavior (Lipset, 1960), and a major theoretical approach in political science explains political behavior on the basis of the personal costs and benefits of government policies, economic policies in particular (Downs, 1957; Kramer, 1971). Analysts and politicians alike frequently claim that people "vote their pocketbooks" (Tufte, 1978). Consistent support for such propositions, especially at the individual level, is harder to come by. An accumulating body of research on the determinants of congressional voting seemed to offer concrete evidence of the role of personal economic self-interest<sup>1</sup> in political behavior (for a review of this literature, see Monroe, 1979). While it would be unfair to say that there is a consensus among researchers in this area (see, for example, Stigler, 1973; Arcelus and Meltzer, 1975; Owens and Olson, 1980), most of these studies have found statistically significant effects of aggre-

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<sup>1</sup>Self-interest is a slippery concept to deal with. Defined most broadly, almost any action can be interpreted as being in an individual's self-interest. It is not unreasonable, for example, for people to believe that their economic well-being depends on the condition of the national economy and support policies that might be detrimental to them in the short run. Economic self-interest will be used here in the more narrow sense of actions consistent with short-run personal well-being (see Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen, 1980). I will return to this issue in the concluding section of the paper.

gate economic conditions—inflation, unemployment, real income—on the outcomes of congressional elections. Other studies point as well to the impact of economic conditions on presidential voting (Meltzer and Vellrath, 1975; Tufte, 1978) and popularity ratings (Kernell, 1978).

One problem with these findings is that they often depended on the analysis of aggregate level data, and there are always a number of individual level processes that may produce an aggregate level relationship. Several recent studies have shown just how tenuous such cross-level inferences can be. Examining survey data collected over a period of twenty years, these studies (Fiorina, 1978; Klorman, 1978; Wides, 1976, 1979; Sigelman and Tsai, 1981) have found little evidence that the aggregate level findings can be explained by people voting in accord with changes in their personal economic well-being. These negative results at the individual level have both failed to provide evidence for the impact of personal economic self-interest on political behavior and severely complicated the search for an explanation of the aggregate level relationships between economic indicators and election results.

A resolution of this problem has recently been offered in a series of careful analyses of survey data by Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 1981; Kinder, 1980). Again finding little evidence of any impact of personal economic conditions on congressional and presidential voting, they test another explanation for the economy-voting relationship based on what they term collective economic grievances. In this model, voters respond not to their own economic circumstances but rather to the state of the national economy and the incumbent party's performance in that area. Kinder and Kiewiet's analyses found strong support for the collective grievance explanation, as measures of people's perceptions of the economy and party competence in handling the economy influenced vote choice over and above the effects of party identification. Moreover, not only did personal economic grievances fail to have any direct impact on vote choice, there was little evidence that people related their perceptions of the national economy to their own economic well-being. Schlozman and Verba (1979) came to a very similar conclusion in their detailed study of the impact of unemployment experience on political behavior.

It thus appears as though the aggregate level relationships between the economy and voting can be accounted for by voters' responses to the state of the economy and the parties' "success" in managing it and *not* from any direct impact the economy may have on their personal lives. This effect is clearly not a result of people considering economic conditions unimportant. Kinder and Kiewiet's results show that perceived economic conditions are sufficiently salient to affect voting behavior when those conditions are measured at the national level. The issue, then, is not that economic well-being is unimportant, but that *personal* economic

well-being is *politically* unimportant. As Kinder and Kiewiet conclude (1979, p. 522): "Under ordinary circumstances, voters evidently do not make connections between their own personal economic experiences—however vivid, immediate and otherwise significant—and their political attitudes and preferences."

Although this explanation may have solved the problem of resolving the aggregate and survey level studies of the role of the economy in electoral choice, it has raised a perhaps more significant problem: Why do personal economic conditions fail to influence political behavior? Given the importance of economic self-interest as a theoretical concept and the growing concern with the political effects of the economy, the accumulating evidence for this nonrelationship requires further analysis.

Any analysis of the reasons why people fail to relate their personal well-being to their political attitudes must consider people's perceptions of the causes of their personal problems and their beliefs about the role of the government in alleviating those problems. Two recent studies provide the basis for developing an explanation of the politicization of economic discontent. Research by Sniderman and Brody (1977) has shown that people in this country overwhelmingly feel that they are responsible for solving their personal problems. If people do in fact see their economic well-being as their own responsibility, they will not be likely to tie it to their more global assessments of the economy or their evaluations of political leaders (Sniderman and Brody, 1977; Brody and Sniderman, 1977). Schlozman and Verba (1979) have examined the question of personal responsibility from a more general perspective in their study of the political effects of unemployment. Looking at an aspect of American social ideology they refer to as the "American dream," Schlozman and Verba show that beliefs in economic individualism—hard work and equal opportunity—are widespread and deeply rooted. They concluded that these beliefs play a major role in preventing the translation of personal experience with unemployment into political attitudes and behavior.<sup>2</sup>

In more general terms, the political impact of personal economic grievances is a consequence of the understanding people develop to explain their personal conditions (see Lane, 1962). A critical step in the politicization of personal well-being is the attribution of causality—the question of who is responsible for personal economic conditions (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). In order for personal economic welfare to affect political behavior, people must perceive that political events and decisions have some impact on their financial well-being (directly or through mac-

<sup>2</sup>Schlozman and Verba never attempt to show *directly* that belief in the American dream interferes with the relationship between unemployment and political attitudes and behavior. Their conclusions rest on the relative independence of objective unemployment experience (and social class) from social ideology and political behavior.

roeconomic conditions). Left open, however, is the theoretically more interesting question of the determinants of such attributions. In a complex and ambiguous world, perceptions of responsibility are unlikely to be a simple consequence of objective conditions. Under such conditions, social and political beliefs play a major role in the understandings people develop about their own situation and the impact of politics. A full explanation of the process of politicization thus requires an analysis of both the attributions people develop *and* the underlying beliefs that influence the perception of responsibility.

The following analysis will elaborate and test an explanation for the lack of relationship between personal economic grievances and political behavior based on these general processes of political perception and attribution. It will involve isolating the beliefs that lead people to accept personal responsibility for their economic conditions. More specifically, four hypotheses will be tested:

1. Most people in the United States see changes in their economic well-being to be a consequence of personal factors or forces in their proximate environment.
2. People will relate their personal economic well-being to their evaluations of government economic performance when the major influence on their well-being is seen to be the economy or government; conversely, when personal factors are held responsible for economic well-being, political evaluations will be independent of personal grievances.
3. Personal economic conditions will influence voting behavior only when there is a perception of social (economic, governmental) responsibility for financial well-being.
4. People will perceive *personal* responsibility for their economic well-being to the extent they hold beliefs consistent with economic individualism; specifically, beliefs in the individual work ethic and equality of opportunity.

### **Perceptions of Responsibility for Economic Well-Being**

One-half of the respondents ( $N = 1,119$ ) in the 1972 Center for Political Studies (CPS) national election study<sup>3</sup> were asked the now standard financial well-being question: "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your fam-

<sup>3</sup>The 1972 CPS election study was actually two independent national samples, designated forms I and II. While a majority of the questions were asked of all respondents, some items were only placed on one of the two forms and thus asked of only half of the total number of respondents in the study (but still a random sample). The economic well-being items were only asked of form I respondents.

ily) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?" In this particular survey a follow-up question was also included: "Why do you say so (that you are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago)?" One or two responses to the latter question were recorded for each respondent. Of the 87 percent of the sample who answered the first question, 78 percent offered at least one reason for the changes in their financial well-being ( $N = 726$ ) and 25 percent gave a second reason as well. From the CPS coding of this item, it is possible to construct a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the reason given is "personally located" or "societally located." This distinction is based on the perceived causation of changing well-being. Some reasons offered reflect purely personal, individualistic causes, whereas others suggest society-wide political or macroeconomic conditions.<sup>4</sup> Explanations coded in the personal responsibility category include wage increases and promotions, more members of the family working, increased expenses, unemployment, and lay-offs. Responses in the societal responsibility category focus on higher prices, inflation, cost of living, and taxes.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the societal category includes few explicitly political responses (e.g., wage and price controls or taxes), but rather focuses more generally on the state of the national economy.<sup>6</sup>

What do the responses indicate? On the one hand, they may just reflect actual influences on people's well-being. Thus, the respondents may be accurately reporting that a promotion, increased expenses, or the cost

<sup>4</sup>This dichotomous coding is crude; two possible extensions may be considered. First, attributions may be more complex than just personal or societal. The former may involve factors dealing with personal initiative as well as proximate causes beyond immediate control. The societal category could also be disaggregated into macroeconomic conditions and direct government influence. Second, the dichotomous coding contains no indicator of the intensity of belief. Despite this, the measure constructed here is more than adequate to test the central hypothesis that politicization of economic well-being requires some sort of collective attribution of responsibility rather than purely personal blame.

<sup>5</sup>Some may disagree with the placement of unemployment in the personal rather than societal category, especially since inflation is placed in the latter. Schlozman and Verba (1979) have shown, however, that while the unemployed may look for government assistance to ease the financial burden, they do not see the government as a direct cause of their problem and believe the solution depends on individual initiative. This categorization was also mandated by the CPS coding of unemployment with other "personally located" causes of well-being. In any case, the effects of this placement on the analyses are minimal since few unemployed are included in a sample of this size.

<sup>6</sup>Most of the nonresponders to the follow-up financial well-being question were those who reported no change in their well-being. Analysis of this group shows that they resembled closely those in the personally located group. Thus, the coding used here probably *overestimates* the proportion of people who saw the cause of their well-being in societal or governmental factors.

of living was the single most important determinant of their financial well-being. The real world, however, is not quite so neat or simple. For most people a number of personal, political, and macroeconomic factors are likely to affect well-being (Katona, 1976). People's responses to these questions, therefore, should represent their *perception* of one or two dominant influences selected out of many and thus, we argue, reflect various social and personal beliefs as well as objective economic conditions.

The first hypothesis—that most people see personal or proximate factors as responsible for their well-being is strongly supported by the data. By the coding just described, only 19.8 percent of the respondents gave societally located reasons on the first response recorded. Assuming that the first reason offered is the most important to the respondent, only one in five thought the economy or politics was the most important factor in their financial well-being. Among those who gave a second response (one-third of the above), societally located reasons were more widespread (50.8 percent of second responses). Yet even considering both responses, just 34.8 percent indicated societal responsibility on *either* response, while only 15.4 percent gave solely societal reasons for well-being (both responses or the first if only one given). Even by liberal standards, then, only one of three people in 1972 saw any direct connection between government action and their financial well-being.<sup>7</sup>

The data show, interestingly, that the nature of the explanations that people offer for their economic well-being depends strongly on whether their financial conditions have recently improved or worsened. This relationship was clearest for the first responses, in which societal responsibility was cited by 45.6 percent of those whose well-being worsened, by 25.3 percent of those reporting no change, and by only 0.6 percent of those whose well-being improved ( $\tau\text{-}c = 0.42$ ). Two explanations may be suggested to account for this. It may simply be that under contemporary economic conditions major improvements in well-being are only likely to result from improvements in job status and the like, while general economic factors (inflation, taxes, etc.) will be detrimental. On the other hand, research in the social psychology of achievement motivation has shown that there is a tendency for people to attribute their successes to

<sup>7</sup>These estimates are very similar to those obtained by Brody and Sniderman (1977), who used a different set of questions. Their estimates, however, are based only on those who said that personal economic concerns were their most important problem (about 23 percent of the sample). Some caution should be used in generalizing from this and other findings reported here, since specific economic and political conditions may influence the way in which people perceive the causes of their economic well-being. Without comparable analyses from other times, we have no way of judging whether 1972 is "typical" in these respects.

internal factors and attribute their failures to environmental sources (Weiner, 1974). While these data do not permit a test of the relative merits of these explanations, research by Katona (1975, 1976) suggests that the tendency for Americans to take personal credit for improvements in their economic well-being may be quite robust. Although the data necessary to examine this finding under very different economic conditions are not available, Katona's results for 1968, 1970, and 1972 are consistent with the pattern found here. This empirical result could prove to be significant since it indicates that an incumbent administration could be blamed for people's declining economic well-being but will receive no credit when well-being improves. Such an asymmetric relationship has been detected in some aggregate level studies (Bloom and Price, 1975; Mueller, 1973).

### Locus of Responsibility and Political Evaluation

According to the second hypothesis, those who locate the source of their personal economic conditions in general economic or governmental activity should perceive a connection between their own situation and government performance. This should be reflected in a relationship between changes in financial well-being and evaluations of the government's handling of the economy. No such relationship should exist for those whose economic well-being is seen to be personally determined. To test this, the societally responsible group was considered to be those who gave a societally coded reason to *either* the first or second response ( $N = 253$ ), while the personally responsible group was made up of those giving only personal reasons for financial well-being ( $N = 473$ ). This division was necessary to ensure adequate numbers in both groups.<sup>8</sup>

The results were quite consistent with our expectations. The correlations ( $\tau b$ ) between financial well-being and the evaluation of government economic performance<sup>9</sup> were 0.08 for the personally responsible group and 0.35 for the societally responsible group. The difference in correlations actually understates the contrast between these two groups

<sup>8</sup>The personally responsible group is composed solely of those giving purely personal responses, while the societal group contains people who gave purely societal responses (44 percent), a societal response followed by a personal response (13 percent), and a personal response followed by a societal response (43 percent). This coding is consistent with the theoretical argument, since those who gave mixed responses attributed at least some responsibility for their well-being to societal factors. What limited analysis can be done given the small  $N$ 's indicates that those who gave mixed responses in fact behaved similarly to the pure societal group. This coding also assures that for the forthcoming analysis there will be an adequate number in the societal category with improved well-being.

<sup>9</sup>The exact wording of the government performance question is: "As to the economic policy of the government—I mean steps taken to fight inflation or unemployment—would you say the government is doing a good job, only fair, or a poor job?"

owing to the skewed marginal responses in the societally responsible group (see Bruner, 1976). To look at this relationship another way, consider the government evaluations of those whose well-being worsened. Among the personally responsible group, 27 percent whose well-being declined rated government performance as poor compared to 25 percent who rated it good. The corresponding values for the societally responsible group were 46 percent and 10 percent. In the first case, declining well-being had virtually no impact on evaluation of government performance, whereas in the second group the relationship was quite strong. Thus, the connection between personal well-being and government economic activity does depend on the individual's locating the causes of changing well-being in general economic or political forces. The perception of personal responsibility, on the other hand, prevents any connection between these domains.

The next step is to show that the existence of self-interested voting behavior depends on the ability to link personal economic conditions with political evaluations (hypothesis 3). There should thus be a significant effect of personal well-being on vote choice for the societally responsible group and no effect for the personally responsible group. To test this hypothesis, I estimated the following model predicting congressional and presidential vote choice:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1\text{PID} + b_2\text{Same} + b_3\text{Worse} + b_4\text{Societal} \\ + b_5(\text{Same} \times \text{Societal}) + b_6(\text{Worse} \times \text{Societal})$$

where  $Y = 1$  if vote Democratic, 0 if Republican; Same = 1 if well-being reported "same," 0 otherwise; Worse = 1 if well-being "worse," 0 otherwise; Societal = 1 if societally responsible group, 0 if personally responsible; and PID = 1 if Democratic party identification, 0 if independent, and -1 if Republican identification.

Since party identification is a pervasive influence on vote choice, it is included in the regression model coded this way to minimize any indirect effect of personal well-being on vote through party identification (see Brody, 1977). As there is no reason to assume the impact of the trichotomously coded financial well-being variable on vote choice is linear, it has been represented as a pair of dummy variables (Fiorina, 1978). To test the hypothesis that well-being will affect vote choice only for those who perceive societal responsibility, a pair of interaction terms have been included (Wright, 1976). This coding effectively produces separate estimates of the impact of well-being on vote for the personal and societally responsible groups. For the former,  $b_0$ ,  $b_2$ , and  $b_3$  yield the relative effects of each category of well-being (better, same, worse) on vote, holding party identification constant. The respective estimates for the societally responsible group are  $b_0 = b_4$ ,  $b_2 + b_5$ , and  $b_3 + b_6$ . Thus  $b_4$ ,  $b_5$ , and  $b_6$

indicate the extent the impact of well-being is *different* for these two groups. In addition, the model was estimated with  $b_4 = b_5 = b_6 = 0$  in order to assess the effects of economic well-being on vote choice without consideration of perceived responsibility. The regression estimates for the presidential and congressional races are given in Table 1.<sup>10</sup>

The results for the restricted models replicate prior research. Economic well-being had no significant effect on congressional voting in 1972 and only a minor impact on presidential voting. The estimates of the full models show a striking contrast between the personal and societal responsibility groups. For congressional voting, economic well-being was strongly related to vote choice for the societally responsible group and not at all related for the personally responsible group. The regression es-

<sup>10</sup>Technically, regression analysis should not be used with a dichotomous dependent variable since the assumption of homoscedasticity is violated. This violation will bias estimates of standard errors and affect the interpretation of tests of statistical significance. To guard against misleading conclusions, all of the regression equations were also estimated using probit analysis. The results reinforce all of the conclusions presented here. In addition, the equations were reestimated with education, income, race and region included as exogenous variables. The new estimates for the economic well-being terms were not significantly different from those obtained in the simpler models.

TABLE 1  
Effect of Economic Well-Being on Voting Behavior  
by Locus of Responsibility, 1972

Variable	Presidential Vote		Congressional Vote	
	Restricted	Full	Restricted	Full
Constant	.31(.083)	.31(.121)	.53(.095)	.54(.139)
Party identification	.24(.016)	.25(.019)	.29(.018)	.28(.021)
Well-being				
Same	-.04(.035)	-.14(.082)	.00(.039)	.13(.088)
Worse	.11(.051)	.12(.058)	.01(.047)	.02(.064)
Same × societal	—	.45(.081)	—	.23(.089)
Worse × societal	—	.26(.070)	—	.37(.091)
Societal	—	.13(.061)	—	.22(.085)
R	.51	.56	.57	.62
N	679	515	568	428

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Estimates for the full models are limited to those who gave an explanation for changes in their financial well-being.

timates were very similar for the presidential vote except that the dummy variable for declining financial well-being was just barely statistically significant in the personally responsible group. It is interesting to note that for the societally responsible group there was little difference in impact on voting behavior between declining and stable well-being. Once the government was seen as responsible for personal well-being, anything short of improvement hurt the incumbent administration.

The results show clearly that locating the source of financial well-being in societal conditions is a necessary condition for any behavioral impact of personal economic grievances. Once this connection is made, changes in financial well-being become a powerful determinant of vote choice. This effect is not observed for the public as a whole because of the large number of people who accept personal responsibility for their financial well-being.

### Individualistic Beliefs and Economic Self-Interest

Although the analysis to this point has supported my basic argument, it has merely replaced one question with another. Instead of asking why personal economic grievances appear to have no political consequences, the question now is *why* so few people hold the government responsible for their economic well-being. In their study of personal problems and the way people cope with them, Sniderman and Brody (1977) argue that the tendency of people to reject outside help with their personal problems reflects an "ethic of self-reliance." Yet this analysis is little help in understanding the origins of self-blame, since it merely labels the phenomenon. To explain more fully the politicization of personal economic conditions, we must examine the factors that *lead* to personal and societal attributions for personal problems. This examination requires an analysis of the beliefs people hold about economic advancement and inequality in society (Lipset, 1973; Coleman and Rainwater, 1978). At this level, we will begin to understand the basis of the American pattern of self-reliance.

In the United States, it is argued, these cultural beliefs take the form of the "American dream": there is opportunity for all those who work hard to advance themselves (see for example Wyllie, 1954; Huber and Form, 1973; Schlozman and Verba, 1979). Closer examination shows that economic individualism is composed of two distinct dimensions of belief, the work ethic and equality of opportunity (Lipset, 1973; Lamb, 1974, 1980). These two dimensions form the personal and structural components of individualism: one must work hard *and* advancement must be accessible to all. While a normative commitment to economic individualism would require both aspects to be valued, beliefs in the *existence* of each need not be so constrained. For example, an individual may simul-

taneously believe that hard work leads to advancement and opportunities for advancement are not equally distributed. Thus, to adequately assess the impact of beliefs in economic individualism on the attribution of responsibility for economic well-being, we must operationalize the full dimensionality of these beliefs rather than assume (as some have) that either adequately represents the full scope of individualism.

A series of items in the 1972 election study can be used for this purpose. They presented to the respondents ten different statements offering explanations for the existence of poverty.<sup>11</sup> The questions and answer frequencies are shown in Table 2. The data show that a majority of Americans admit the absence of full equality of opportunity—poor people face inferior educational opportunities, insufficient jobs, and lack of job seniority. At the same time, the problem is not the fault of the wealthy and powerful, nor inherent in the “American way of life.” Furthermore, majorities also assert that the poor do not work hard enough and jobs are available to those who do work. At the aggregate level, then, both self- and system-blame for poverty are evident.

More important, however, is the structure of these items at the individual level. If there are in fact two distinct dimensions of economic individualism, then, from the content, questions 1 through 6 should form the structural dimension (equal opportunity) and items 8, 9, and 10 should tap the personal dimension (work ethic). Item 7 is somewhat ambiguous in this respect because it involves both the availability of jobs (opportunity) and the need to work for them.

The factor analysis reported in Table 3 strongly confirms these expectations. First, several tests of dimensionality all indicate that two factors should be extracted.<sup>12</sup> Second, the factor structure shown in the table (principal factors with oblique rotation) conforms nicely with the expected pattern of factor loadings. The two factors clearly distinguish the structural from the personal items, while the question thought to be ambiguous loads on both factors. The structural factor is better defined than the personal factor because of the unequal balance of items. It is interesting to note that the personal/work ethic factor is much better de-

<sup>11</sup> There are several advantages in using questions in this form. Not directly asking about the existence of the work ethic and equality of opportunity reduces the possibility that people will give ritualistic responses based on cultural values. This should better indicate the extent to which people believe that the system actually works as they say. Posing the questions in the third person rather than first person sharply reduces the possibility of rationalization.

<sup>12</sup> Only the first two eigenvalues were greater than 1, and the eigenvalues decreased smoothly and gradually from that point. The chi-square statistic from maximum likelihood estimation indicates that a second factor substantially improves the fit but a third factor improves it considerably less. Finally, no obvious substantive significance can be attached to a third extracted factor.

fined by hard work, drive, and ambition than by lack of ability. Finally, even though an oblique rotation was used to interpret the initial two factors, there is no correlation between the factors in the resulting solution ( $r = .007$ ). Thus, not only are beliefs in the work ethic and equality of opportunity distinct dimensions, they are also almost perfectly orthogonal.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>For additional analysis of the reliability and validity of these two scales, see Feldman (1981).

TABLE 2  
Frequency Distributions for Economic Individualism Questions

Belief	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	N
1. The poor are poor because the American way of life doesn't give all people an equal chance.	9.1	30.1	37.4	23.3	1,039
2. The seniority system in most companies works against poor people; they're the last to be hired and first to be fired.	13.2	28.2	35.7	22.9	988
3. Good skilled jobs are controlled by unions and most poor people can't get into skilled unions.	13.7	37.5	34.6	14.3	974
4. Poor people didn't have a chance to get a good education; schools in poor neighborhoods are much worse than other schools.	21.0	42.5	24.6	11.8	1,023
5. People are poor because there just aren't enough good jobs for everybody.	12.3	44.2	31.5	12.0	1,048
6. The poor are poor because the wealthy and powerful keep them poor.	10.4	29.1	35.9	24.5	1,044
7. With all the training programs and efforts to help the poor, anyone who wants to work can get a job.	23.5	38.3	26.8	11.5	1,053
8. Most poor people don't have the ability to get ahead.	11.3	46.6	29.7	12.4	1,042
9. Many poor people simply don't want to work hard.	16.7	41.6	27.8	13.9	1,041
10. Maybe it's not their fault, but most poor people were brought up without drive or ambition.	11.1	46.5	28.6	13.9	1,031

These results mean that the hypothesis linking economic individualism with personal responsibility for economic well-being must be elaborated. Since belief in *either* the work ethic or equal opportunity should result in some measure of self-blame for declining well-being—in one case the opportunities are available, in the other case hard work is required—economic well-being should be politically significant only when *both* dimensions of economic individualism are rejected.

Unfortunately, the financial well-being questions used in the previous section were administered only to form I respondents, and the economic beliefs items were asked only in form II. Since the two sets of questions were asked of different people, the relationship between them cannot be directly assessed. Hypothesis 4 can be tested, however, by

TABLE 3  
Factor Structure of Economic Individualism Items

Belief	F1: Equal Opportunity	F2: Work Ethic	<i>h</i> <sup>2</sup>
1. American way of life doesn't give all an equal chance.	<i>.62<sup>a</sup></i>	.06	.39
2. Seniority system works against poor people.	.62	-.12	.40
3. Most poor people can't get into skilled unions.	<i>.54</i>	-.15	.32
4. Poor people didn't have a chance to get a good education.	<i>.53</i>	-.09	.29
5. There aren't enough good jobs for everybody.	<i>.54</i>	.08	.29
6. The wealthy and powerful keep poor people poor.	<i>.50</i>	.05	.26
7. Anyone who wants to work can get a job.	<i>.50</i>	.38	.40
8. Poor people don't have the ability to get ahead.	-.27	.39	.19
9. Poor people don't want to work hard.	.21	<i>.56</i>	.30
10. Poor people were brought up without drive or ambition.	.08	<i>.63</i>	.39
Percentage of variance	71	29	

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in italics indicate significant loadings on the factor.

making use of the 1972–76 election panel. Since most of the 1972 form II respondents were reinterviewed in 1976, it is possible to examine the impact of economic individualism—as measured in 1972—on the political effects of economic well-being in the 1976 election. Because the question used to measure the locus of responsibility was not asked in 1976, we cannot directly relate economic individualism to perceived responsibility for personal economic welfare. Instead, it will be necessary to show that the relationships between financial well-being and political evaluation and behavior that were previously shown to hold only for those who see economic or governmental responsibility also hold only for those who reject both dimensions of economic individualism. There is, however, a positive side to using the panel design to examine these relationships. Since beliefs in individualism were measured four years before the observed impact of economic conditions, the alternative hypothesis of rationalization is effectively eliminated.

For this analysis, factor scores were computed for each respondent on each of the two factors. Each of the scales was then dichotomized into those who predominantly accepted that belief and those who tended to reject it. Everyone was placed into one of four groups reflecting their acceptance/rejection of the work ethic and equality of opportunity.<sup>14</sup> By this coding, 34 percent of the sample accepted both dimensions, 25 percent accepted the work ethic but rejected equality of opportunity, 22 percent held the opposite belief pattern, and 18 percent rejected both aspects of economic individualism.

The 1976 election study contains a number of items tapping evaluations of the government's performance in economic affairs and the relative ability of the parties to handle economic problems. Table 4 presents the correlations ( $\tau$ -b) of financial well-being with four measures of performance in both general economic matters and inflation. The sample is divided into the four groups defined by the two economic individualism measures. The results show clearly how distinctive the nonindividualistic group is: correlations between financial well-being and political evaluation were weak or nonexistent throughout each of the other three groups. Among those rejecting economic individualism, however, declining well-being was consistently related to negative evaluations of the government's economic performance and the belief that the Democrats are better able to handle economic problems than the (incumbent) Republicans. For those who believed completely or in part in the existence of economic

<sup>14</sup>The dividing points were obtained by calculation of the scale values that would result if a respondent gave neutral responses (3 on a scale of 1 to 5) to all ten questions. This division is somewhat arbitrary in that it depends on the specific items in the scale. The end result seems to overestimate the percentage of people who reject the work ethic and equality of opportunity.

individualism, political evaluation was completely divorced from personal well-being, and the party in power received no blame for declining well-being.

Given the relationships just reported, economic well-being should affect vote choice only among those who reject economic individualism. To test this prediction, I estimated the following model for each of the four individualism groups:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1PID + b_2\text{Same} + b_3\text{Worse}$$

where  $Y = 1$  if vote Republican, 0 if Democratic; Same = 1 if well-being reported "same," 0 otherwise; Worse = 1 if well-being "worse," 0 otherwise; and PID = 1 if Republican party identification, 0 if independent, and -1 if Democratic identification. Table 5 shows quite clearly that the results were those expected. In the case of presidential voting, there was absolutely no evidence of self-interested behavior for the groups accepting the existence of economic individualism. The single influence of economic well-being occurred in the group rejecting individualistic beliefs. As before, simple lack of improvement was just as bad for the incumbent administration as perceived declines. The smaller magnitude of these coefficients compared with the 1972 results may be due to President Ford's relatively short time as incumbent.

The results for congressional voting in 1976 were very similar. The nonindividualists were very responsive to changes in their financial well-being, which powerfully influenced their voting behavior. In these results, self-interested behavior was observed for one other group: those who ac-

TABLE 4  
Correlations between Financial Well-Being and Government/Party  
Competence for each Belief Group, 1976

Correlation of Financial Well-being and	Economic Individualism Group				
	Work Ethic: Work Opportunity:	Reject	Accept	Reject	Accept
Government inflation policy		.31	.04	.09	.05
Party competence/inflation		.27	.08	.04	.07
Government economic policy		.37	.09	.00	.09
Party competence/economy		.30	.01	.04	.07
Mean		.31	.06	.04	.07
N		188	259	229	354

Entries are tau-b correlations. N's given are the total number in each group. Each correlation is based on somewhat fewer cases due to missing data.

cepted equality of opportunity but rejected the work ethic. The impact was considerably weaker than for those who rejected equality of opportunity as well, and the analysis does not suggest any obvious explanation for this one deviation from expectation. The only other statistically significant coefficient—for the group most accepting of economic individualism—is in the wrong substantive direction.<sup>15</sup>

**Economic Individualism and Explanations of Well-Being**

The one gap in this analysis has been the inability to relate beliefs in economic individualism directly to the locus of responsibility for personal

<sup>15</sup> Each set of four separate regressions was also estimated in a single equation by the dummy variable technique employed in the earlier model estimates. The separate results are reported here for ease of interpretation (the full models have thirteen terms). The single-equation estimates reaffirm all of the conclusions drawn from Table 5. With those who accepted both dimensions of individualism as the excluded category, only the well-being terms corresponding to those statistically significant in Table 5 were significant in the single-equation estimates.

**TABLE 5**  
**Effect of Economic Well-Being on 1976 Voting Behavior by Beliefs in Economic Individualism**

Variable	Economic Individualism Group					All
	Work Ethic: Equal Opportunity:	Reject Reject	Accept Reject	Reject Accept	Accept Accept	
<b>Presidential voting</b>						
Well-being						
Same		.22*	.01	.04	-.03	.02
Worse		.15*	.05	-.05	.04	.06
Party identification		.31*	.32*	.35*	.29*	.32*
Constant		.39*	.49*	.37*	.37*	.41*
<i>R</i>		.59	.63	.68	.58	.61
<i>N</i>		79	105	100	163	460
<b>Congressional voting</b>						
Well-being						
Same		.36*	-.10	.14	-.19*	.03
Worse		.43*	-.07	.21*	-.07	.11*
Party identification		.23*	.34*	.28*	.27*	.28*
Constant		.30*	.60*	.29*	.59*	.47*
<i>R</i>		.56	.66	.58	.54	.54
<i>N</i>		67	86	86	136	386

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.

\* Significant at .05.

economic conditions. This relationship is crucial to my earlier argument that the reasons people offered for their financial well-being reflected more than objective circumstances. While the evidence presented here has strongly supported this hypothesis, limitations of the data have prevented a direct test of it.

However, a partial solution to the problem can be secured through the use of three items on the half of the 1972 election study that contains the economic well-being questions (form I).<sup>16</sup> These items deal with the same causes-of-poverty theme as the ten questions examined above. However, the various explanations for poverty are presented in forced-choice format, requiring the respondent to choose one of two alternatives. The problem is that personal and structural causes of poverty are now required to be opposing rather than independent dimensions of belief. In addition to the unreliability inherent in very short scales, the lack of independence makes a scale based on these three items a flawed measure of economic individualism. Nevertheless, it should be a sufficient test of the hypothesis that a relationship exists between belief in economic individualism and the locus of responsibility for economic well-being.

Since societal responsibility is widespread only among those who saw their well-being as having declined, the relationship between the three item economic individualism scale and the dichotomous locus of responsibility measure was examined for this group. The hypothesized relationship was confirmed by these data, producing an overall correlation ( $\tau$ - $c$ ) of 0.28. A better indication of the magnitude of this relationship can be gained from looking at those in the extreme categories of the economic individualism measure. Among those who gave individualistic responses to all three items ( $N = 61$ ), 64 percent saw the major source of their declining well-being in personal factors. At the other extreme, 75 percent of those *least* committed to economic individualism ( $N = 28$ ) located their problems in economic or political conditions. It is reasonable to expect that this relationship would be even stronger if the more comprehensive and reliable measures of economic beliefs were used. Regardless, these results show that the way people explain changes in their economic well-being depends greatly on the general beliefs they hold about economic success in society. As demonstrated above, such explanations are critical in determining the relationship between personal economic well-being and political behavior.

<sup>16</sup>The three items are variable numbers 843, 848, and 856 from the 1972 CPS election study code book.

### Conclusions

The concept of self-interest, and economic self-interest more specifically, has been the basis of much theorizing by political scientists. The view that people are rational utility maximizers has in recent years been reinforced by the use of economic models in the study of political behavior. Political action thus becomes a consequence of the personal costs and benefits of the choices available to the actor (Downs, 1957; Frohlich and Oppenheimer, 1978). In a series of papers, Sears and others (see Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen, 1980; Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979) have disputed this, arguing strongly that self-interest plays little or no role in political behavior or the development of political preferences and attitudes. From this perspective, people respond instead to the simpler, more basic appeals of symbolic concerns and socialized values.

Both of these views fail to appreciate, however, that the relationship of private concerns to political activity is neither totally obvious nor impenetrably obscure. Rather, it depends on how the individual interprets the nature of the problem and where he assigns responsibility. Making a personal concern the basis of political evaluation is "irrational" if the cause of the problem is perceived to be independent of political action. Personal concerns and objective conditions will play a direct role in political behavior only when they are interpreted in explicitly political terms (Hamilton, 1967; Brody and Sniderman, 1977).

In the case of personal economic grievances, the preceding analysis has shown that locating changing well-being in the context of societal economic conditions or political actions is a necessary condition for personally self-interested political behavior. Moreover, under these conditions, financial well-being becomes an important determinant of political evaluation and vote choice. This effect is obscured for the public as a whole by the large proportion of people for whom financial well-being has little perceived connection to politics.

The political world is complex and often quite ambiguous. Causal relationships between politics and personal well-being are typically unclear even to the most attentive. In some few instances—large property tax increases for example—the connection between politics and well-being may be relatively clear. In most cases, a number of explanations may fit the situation quite well. It is at this point that a person's beliefs about the nature of politics and private life become critical. General beliefs about politics can impose a sense of order on an otherwise confusing political reality. Perhaps most important for the majority of people, political and social beliefs can serve to define a problem, assign blame, and point to solutions (Lane, 1962). When the situation under consideration involves

personal conditions or grievances, these beliefs will affect whether the individual or the political system is perceived to be responsible.

When the political beliefs that influence the definition of political reality are widely shared in a society, they make up part of that nation's political culture (Rosenbaum, 1975). The liberal political culture of the United States (Hartz, 1955; Lipset, 1973; Devine, 1972) establishes basic parameters within which politics and private affairs are perceived and interpreted. As the analysis presented here demonstrates, dimensions of economic individualism are clearly evident in mass belief systems, and the vast majority of Americans believe that economic mobility is in fact a function of personal initiative. As a result, the individual assumes responsibility for personal well-being or locates the cause in proximate circumstances (Brody and Sniderman, 1977). Consequently, personal economic grievances are not connected to political activity and have little effect on voting decisions. This disconnection is not, however, an intrinsic feature of economic reality.<sup>17</sup> Those rejecting economic individualism perceive the causes of their financial well-being differently and behave accordingly. The beliefs making up the political culture in large part thus define the context in which behavior is "self-interested" or "rational." The small group in this analysis who reject the dominant cultural beliefs show how very different political behavior in the United States would be if they were the norm.

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<sup>17</sup>Katona, Stumpel, and Zahn (1971) report that Western Europeans are much less likely than Americans to see themselves as personally responsible for changes in their economic conditions and more likely to refer to factors such as inflation, government activity, and trade unions.

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