

**Self-Interest, Asymmetric Policy Effects, and Democratic Backsliding:  
Expanding the Analytical Toolbox**

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This version: September 6, 2021

Word Count: 11,922

**Abstract**

*Theoretical models of political agency primarily incorporate elected executives' self-interest as motivating reelection-seeking behavior, which, in turn, keeps these politicians in check. A concerning trend of democratic backsliding highlights that these models fail to capture variations in the intensity of self-interest motivations and their effects, especially the discriminatory nature of some seemingly universal policies. To bridge this gap conceptually, I focus on elected executives' efficiency in matching the intensity of the policy tool to the severity of policy problems, thus developing the Ladder of Discriminatory Policy. I tie climbing and descending this modular ladder to system-level policy punctuations; the asymmetric effects of policies on politically relevant target groups; and to elected executives' progression between three self-interest constructs with varying levels of self-interest intensity. I explore socio-psychological and political mechanisms that may facilitate this progression and develop the Discriminatory Policy Conjecture, which can generate hypotheses regarding democratic backsliding and its remedies.*

**Keywords:** self-interest, elected executives, asymmetric policy effects, discriminatory policy, democratic backsliding

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## INTRODUCTION

Theoretical models of political agency primarily incorporate elected executives' self-interest as motivating reelection-seeking behavior (Mayhew 1974). Thus, according to the general consensus, governments are made up of elected executives who work to advance the public interest in its broader sense (Bentley 1908) to increase their reelection chances, while abiding by democratic rules and norms that sustain open political contestation. Reelection concerns therefore keep politicians in check (e.g., Alt, de Mesquita, and Rose 2011; Besley 2006; Besley and Case 1995, 2003; Ferraz and Finan 2011; List and Sturm 2006). It is also generally believed that even opportunistic elected executives respect established democratic norms, the rule of law, and the integrity and autonomy of central democratic institutions, while indulging their selfishness by bolstering the benefits that they and their political base reap (e.g., Aidt, Veiga, and Veiga 2011; Bohn and Veiga 2019). Attempts to rein in self-interest — which is defined here as using the powers of public office to undertake any action primarily to benefit oneself — have furthermore introduced an ethical component of behavior into individual and collective action situations (e.g., Frohlich and Oppenheimer 2000). Still, the ethical orientation uncovered leaves the elected executive able to pursue fairness-oriented behavior while maintaining intact the constitutionally “safe space” of the political system, the political actors' playground.

However, a concerning trend of democratic backsliding has recently been recorded (e.g., Boese et al. 2021; Gerschewski 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Hyde 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lieberman et al. 2019; Mukherji 2020; Pierson and Schickler 2020; Roberts 2019), with the COVID-19 pandemics increasing the risk of democratic decline in numerous states mainly due to the marginalization of the legislative branch of government (V-Dem Institute 2020). In addition, democracy in the U.S. has been under siege due on various occasions to the actions of

elected executives — the 1790s, the Civil War, the Gilded Age, the Depression, and Watergate (Lieberman and Mettler 2020) — and at times democracy has declined in numerous U.S. states (e.g., Grumbach 2021). According to this reality check, theoretical models of political agency currently lack an analytical tool that will enable scholars to gauge the full spectrum of elected executives' behavior in pursuit of their interest “at any cost” or “by any means possible,” including crossing the Rubicon of undermining the pillars of democratic regimes.

This issue is clearly important because its asymmetric effects on target populations seem qualitatively different from budget punctuations (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones et al. 2009). An example is voter suppression rules in the U.S. whose impact fall disproportionately on Black and Latino voters. Further, it undermines the reliance on disproportionate information processing in policymaking systems as the main explanation of the episodic nature of policy change over time (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), while raising the specter of a multifaceted concept of political self-interest, at the center of which is other-disregarding behavior within a boundedly-rational framework. Among the concrete examples of this are President Trump's incitement after losing the 2020 elections, which led to an assault on the U.S. Congress in the final stretch of his presidency; and the decision of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political allies in government on April 27, 2021, to appoint one of his cronies to the position of justice minister, despite the Attorney General ruling that the vote was illegal. These examples clarify that the concept of self-interest brings together both law-abiding political leaders and “outlaws,” some of whom already control the executive and are trying to gain control of the legislative and judicial branches in pursuit of their political and/or personal interests.

Likewise, there are critical gaps in our understanding of some public policies that are seemingly universal and are ostensibly pursued in the public interest, but in reality are targeted

and discriminatory in nature. An example is the abuse of defamation laws by Narendra Modi's government to hound critics. Even when "public interest" is conceived in a substantive way (Popper 1945), rather than as a rhetorical weapon used by politicians to shore up their positions (Dahl and Lindblom 1953, Schubert 1957), the fact that the general public benefits from government decisions does not, in itself, provide sufficient grounds to regard elected executives as actors who consistently work to advance the public interest. Indeed, a policy that is seemingly in the public interest could be explained by coincidence, error, policy drift (e.g., Hacker 2004), or as a simple byproduct of a public policy designed primarily to benefit the supporters of the regime, the governing coalition or parts thereof, the governing party, or the political leader. Furthermore, because public interest can be examined in subjective and objective terms (Bartels 1996), what some regard as a policy pursued in the public interest could be a deliberate misfit between the severity of the policy problem and the intensity of policy tools (e.g., size of policy investment) that is initiated by elected executives in the pursuit of political and/or personal interests.<sup>1</sup> This mismatch, which manifests for example in policy over- or under-investment (Jones, Thomas, and Wolfe 2014), indicates that the policymaking system is inefficient relative to the severity of the policy problems it faces.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For competing conceptualizations of policy tool intensity, see, for example, Knill, Schulze, and Tosun (2012), and Schaffrin, Sewerin, and Seubert (2014, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, the efficiency of policymakers in matching the intensity of the policy tool to the severity of problems over the long run is uncharted territory in policy sciences, and it has only been conceptually addressed in the context of "policy bubbles" (Jones, Thomas, and Wolfe 2014, 149; Maor 2014).

To address these critical shortcomings in the conceptual realms of political self-interest and public-interest, I undertake four tasks. First, I explore the multifaceted nature and characteristics of alternative conceptions of self-interest in political life. Here, I advance three ideal-typical conceptual constructs — “self with no regard for others,” “self before others,” and “self equal to others” — which help to focus our attention on the premises underlying the relationships between elected executives and their environment. These constructs capture varying intensities of elected executives’ self-interest, which, in turn, impinge on the weight leaders accord to “others” as a constraint. Second, I uncover the potential range of individual and institutional policy beneficiaries that elected executives with varying levels of self-interest intensity may seek to benefit, and the ways these beneficiaries can be reached, in terms of the scope of target populations and the level of policy tool calibration. Third, I develop the *Ladder of Discriminatory Policy*, and I tie climbing and descending this modular ladder to system-level punctuations (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and disproportionate policies (Maor 2021) that have asymmetric effects on politically relevant target groups, as well as to elected executives’ progression between the aforementioned ideal-typical constructs. Fourth, I rely on robust findings in psychology, sociology, and political science to explore socio-psychological and political mechanisms that may facilitate this progression. Finally, I develop the *Discriminatory Policy Conjecture* that can serve as an ideal type or a benchmark in assessing the discriminatory behavior of leaders in the real world, and as a generator of insights and hypotheses, probing its utility. In doing so, I rely on a few streams of research, namely, ideological and emotional polarization, self-interest, democratic backsliding, and policy responses, while connecting current research in American politics with the study of comparative politics. Utilizing this conjecture will hopefully improve our ability to capture the overlap between public- and leader-serving policy decisions; the shift that may occur

away from the former and towards the latter; and the move from a pendulum-like political dynamic towards a nonlinear dynamic that leads to democratic backsliding and regime change.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The first section elaborates on the standard perspectives concerning self-interest. The second section introduces *the Ladder of Discriminatory Policy*. The third section develops a multifaceted perspective on political self-interest that contains different levels of self-interest intensity. The fourth section addresses the socio-psychological and political mechanisms that may facilitate the progression from one level of self-interest intensity to a higher level. The fifth section develops the *Discriminatory Policy Conjecture*. The paper concludes by demonstrating how the conjecture can be used, once it is viewed as a benchmark.

## THE STANDARD PERSPECTIVE ON SELF-INTEREST AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

*Self-interest* is a decisive factor motivating decisions.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, theoretical models of political agency primarily incorporate elected executives' self-interest as motivating reelection-

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<sup>3</sup> For the evolution in the characterizations of self-interest, see Smith (1776), Edgeworth (1881), and Hirschman (1977). Broad characterizations of self-interest can currently be divided into two types: (i) the narrow view, applied by some scholars of economics, for example, the self-interested actor in agency theory (e.g., Alchian and Demsetz 1972; Jensen and Meckling 1976) and political science (e.g., Aldrich 1993; Downs 1957 ); and (ii) the notion of bounded self-interest, which is often ascribed to actors who seek to maximize their own self-interest, providing this does not violate perceived norms of fairness (e.g., Frohlich and Oppenheimer 2000; Ostrom, Walker, and Gardner 1992; Rawls 1971).

seeking behavior and thus serving to keep politicians in check. Economists and political scientists also employ a related concept regarding human behavior: *opportunism*. For example, Williamson's (1985) transaction cost economics assumes that while most actors are self-interested, others exhibit opportunism by pursuing their self-interest with guile (Williamson 1984, 198), deceiving and cheating their exchange partners to maximize their own benefit. As in the case of self-interest, theoretical models of political agency that incorporate elected executives' opportunism as motivating moves and counter-moves in the context of political cycles (e.g., Aidt, Veiga, and Veiga 2011) and crisis exploitation (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009) still accept that politicians will be kept in check, generating framing contests while avoiding compromising democratic norms, the rule of law, and the integrity and autonomy of central democratic institutions.

The merit of these studies notwithstanding, the implicit assumption that reelection concerns will keep self-interested, boundedly self-interested, and opportunistic elected executives in check under all circumstances is puzzling. This is because some reelection challenges that incentivize political executives to engage in credit claiming (Grimmer, Solomon, and Sean 2012; Mayhew 1974) widen the window for a deliberate misfit between policy problem severity and policy tool intensity for political gains, including undermining and even dismantling the constitutionally "safe spaces" of democratic political systems. Examples include the constitutional replacements in Venezuela (1999), Ecuador (2008), and Sri-Lanka (1972), which occurred "when existing institutions no longer serve[d] the interests of those with the power to change them, or when the losers under a particular set of rules organize[d] a successful reform coalition" (Negretto 2020, 5), rather than due to the need "to overcome a political crisis, improve governability, increase popular control and influence over collective decisions, or modernize their basic institutions" (Negretto 2020, 1). Another example of a problem/tool misfit has been recorded in the area of

counterterrorism. Scholars have consistently demonstrated that democratic governments implement suboptimal policies involving observable displays of force and coercive action rather than opting for secretive, more optimal activity. This is a result of electoral incentives, which motivate executives to respond to public demands for more security in the aftermath of major terror attacks (e.g., Crenshaw 2010; Cronin 2009; Donohue 2008; Dragu 2017; Bueno de Mesquita 2007).

These two examples reflect system-level punctuations, in terms of the rapidity of the change between periods of partial equilibrium (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993), or disproportionate policy responses, in terms of the lack of balance between policy costs and benefits (Maor 2021). The concerning trend of democratic backsliding referred to earlier further brings to the fore the possibility that these policy changes are intentional in nature: the result of deliberate disproportionate policy responses (Maor 2021) rather than the result of the accumulation of policy errors (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993) leading the policy system to oscillate between periods of underreaction to the flow of information coming from the environment into the system and overreaction due to disproportionate information processing (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Such reelection challenges, which can bring about pronounced and deliberate patterns of overreaction and underreaction in policymaking, may be missed or misconstrued if alternatives to self-interest (Etzioni 1988; Mansbridge 1990; Sen 1987, 1990) are suppressed, or if the variation in self-interest underlying the political executives' behavior is ignored. The former alternative is reinforced by scholars who claim that reining in self-interest, for example, by incorporating concerns for fairness, is the only valid behavioral assumption on which one can base scientific explanations built on realistic foundations (Elster 1990; Frank 1987; Frohlich and Oppenheimer 2000; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986; Rabin 1993). My central task, however, is addressing



the second alternative, and, more specifically, integrating leader motivation with policy punctuations and deliberate disproportionate policy responses that have asymmetric effects on politically relevant target groups.

Indeed, I hold that all political motivations can be reduced to self-interest if the inner architecture of this concept, especially the variations between different levels of self-interest intensity, are uncovered and made explicit. Consequently, this paper is dedicated to introducing bounded rationality into policymakers' behavior, which sometimes matches the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem in an efficient manner while, on other occasions, especially when the fate of elected executives hangs in the balance, is inefficient in this regard. I also allow for the possibility that some elected executives will be disinclined to correct these inefficiencies when such corrections have ramifications for their ultimate political survival and/or personal freedom (e.g., a failure to cancel the criminal indictment and terminate an elected executive's trial or other criminal proceedings). As such, I avoid a bipolar, rational vs. non-rational type of thinking, instead allowing for a range of different self-interest intensities to explain the various electoral ramifications and personal implications for democratically elected executives, in general, and for chief elected executives in particular. Attention now turns to a novel analytical tool that explains the generic designs of discriminatory policies, including those involved in anti-democratic radicalization, that elected executives can implement to increase their reelection prospects.

## **THE LADDER OF DISCRIMINATORY POLICY**

The notion of a *discriminatory policy ladder* reveals variations in the efficiency of policymakers when matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem over the short or

long term. It is conceptualized along two dimensions — the scope of the target populations and the level of policy tool calibration — which are the targets of political manipulation when elected executives wish to effectively achieve a misfit between the severity of the policy problem and the intensity of policy tools in order to advance asymmetrical policy outcomes that will benefit them politically. One example is the Israeli government's enforcement decisions during the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, although ultra-Orthodox localities were hotspots for the spread of the virus, the government nevertheless imposed stringent restrictions on a national level, consistently enforcing them mainly in secular, nearly virus-free areas. This benefitted the ultra-Orthodox partners of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's caretaker coalition government. Another example recorded in the U.S., which is characterized by a relatively high level of economic inequality, is President Trump's signature policy of tax cuts with a distribution of benefits skewed in favor of corporations and the wealthy (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2020; for the long-term trend, see Picketty 2014). The use of the aforementioned two dimensions is indeed restricted to revealing asymmetric effects in terms of distributive effects (whether in terms of resources or political power).

The first dimension relates to the scope of the target populations that stand to benefit from the policy, the politicization of which is often accompanied by the social construction of target populations (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 1993). Here, the ultimate recipients of policy benefits include society at large; supporters of the state, the regime, and the core political institutions; supporters of the coalition government or part thereof; supporters of the governing party; or supporters of the chief elected executive. These beneficiaries correspond to the most salient ways in which reelection concerns are articulated and, consequently, a policy is designed (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001; Maskin and Tirole 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2020; Smith and

King 2021). They can be identified geographically, economically, socially, or behaviorally (e.g., through their patterns of interaction).

The second dimension concerns the level of policy tool calibration, the politicization of which implies that higher levels of calibration increase the level of asymmetry in the allocation of policy benefits among politically relevant target groups (Howlett 2009). Politicized tool calibration is therefore required to ensure that policy benefits will be directed at the politically relevant target populations with sufficient accuracy. Policy and administrative components that are targets of calibration include, for example, the level of law enforcement, the level of discretion employed by street-level bureaucrats, and the level of (financial) benefits that are transferred through “back doors.” This dimension is divided into five levels, ranging from no calibration, as in the case of a universal policy, to an extremely high level of calibration, as in the case of a policy tool that is calibrated to target the supporters of one individual, namely the chief elected executive (e.g., legislation that in effect halts or delays a chief elected executive’s criminal trial).

Table 1 presents the varying target populations and the levels of policy tool calibration. There are two apparent ways in which an elected executive can climb the ladder of discriminatory policy. One is by broadening the scope of the target population that stands to benefit from the policy at hand. The other is to limit the selective way in which a policy instrument is calibrated to benefit specific populations disproportionately. These strategies are *modular*, meaning that elected executives can, as noted earlier, target the whole population yet calibrate the policy tool (e.g., the levels of law enforcement) in a way that will disproportionately benefit certain politically relevant target groups. Furthermore, for every level of audience scope, the level of policy tool calibration could vary in any way possible. Public policies that are seemingly of a particular nature and are ostensibly pursued in a specific interest (e.g., as part of reputation management in heterogeneous

**TABLE 1. The Ladder of Discriminatory Policy**

<i>Policy Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Description</i>		<i>Level of mismatch between problem severity and the intensity of policy tools</i>
	<i>Scope of audience</i>	<i>Levels of policy tool calibration</i>	
Civil society	Universal	None	None
State/regime/ Political institutions	Segments of society supporting the regime	Moderately High	Moderately high
Coalition-government	Segments of society supporting the governing coalition	High	High
Governing party	Segments of society supporting the governing party	Very high	Very High
Chief elected executive	Segments of society supporting the chief elected executive	Extremely high	Extremely high
Note: Source: Own table.			

audience contexts), may in reality produce less asymmetric policy effects than those initially expected.

Accordingly, a highly politicized public policy may result from “descending the ladder,” eclipsing when policy is designed to benefit societal segments that support the chief political executive, and when a policy tool is calibrated largely to bolster the benefits that accrue to these segments (or when policy tools are designed to bolster the disadvantages accruing to the opposing societal segments, and policy tools are calibrated to augment this effect). Declining politicization of public policy is achieved by “climbing the ladder,” eclipsing when a policy targets society at large with no policy tool calibration (i.e., when it is uniformly applied to all). Overall, the higher

one climbs, the more inclusive and neutral — and therefore less discriminatory — the policy outcomes are.

The ladder is therefore designed to encompass primarily the discriminatory nature of some seemingly universal policies over the said dimensions. Such policies may arise in situations of increasing political uncertainty for chief elected executives in democratic regimes, especially those who do not face binding term limits. These situations include, for example, instances in which chief elected executives contest election results, as in the case of former President Donald Trump following the U.S. 2020 elections, or when there is no clear winner in one (or more) consequent elections, as in the case of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government has failed to win a majority in four consequent elections. The ladder also covers situations of extreme personal uncertainty involving the said political leaders, for example, when they are facing criminal charges and awaiting judicial proceedings or impeachment trials. Needless to say, both types of uncertainties may overlap, as in the aforementioned Israeli case. These situations create unique incentives that bring to the fore the full spectrum of policy choices, the implementation of which demonstrates how far political executives may be willing to go to ensure their political survival and personal freedom.

Clearly, the borders between these categories can be drawn only very loosely; and the number of rungs into which the ladder is divided largely depends on the fine-tuning of the analysis. However, for the purposes of my analysis, the most important aspect is the fundamental problem that political executives face: namely, how to descend a step without suffering unnecessary electoral and other negative consequences. In the extreme scenario, the political “pricing” system may work “without cost,” meaning that there will be no political costs involved in undermining established democratic norms, the rule of law, and the autonomy and integrity of core democratic

institutions. This is because weaker democratic mechanisms are less able to fully bring to the fore the political support of (newly) opposing individuals and groups, and because elected executives can spread an endless stream of lies, making it difficult for a large swath of society to distinguish between truth and falsehoods.

An important caveat of the analysis so far is the lack of attention devoted here to institutions, structures, networks, and resources. Notwithstanding the importance of these factors, the increasingly centralized and personalized nature of modern political leadership highlights political leaders' personalities, leadership styles, political skills, legitimacy, and symbolic capital (e.g., McAllister 2007). Political leaders may employ these components to manipulate institutional, cultural, and other contextual factors in pursuit of their own interests. A skillful politician can therefore master rhetorical and other tools to conceal political and personal interests, and when a leader's cult of personality emerges (Crabtree, Kern, and Siegel 2020), even a rough use of these tools may suffice.

The "politician's skills" argument may indeed mask some underlying and more fundamental phenomena. Context-specific drivers, such as economic shocks and changes in cultural values (Noris and Inglehart 2019), spring to mind. Still, leaders' actions and therefore the motives behind these actions may determine how context-specific and global phenomena are interpreted by the general public and acted upon during democratic backsliding processes. This would be especially acute, for example, in contexts of relatively high levels of ideological and emotional polarization (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020), negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2018) and asymmetric polarization (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2015), when political parties harness divisions between parties and mobilize the electorate in response to perceived threats posed by their domestic political "enemies;" when the politics of inclusion is weaponized, that is,

when a majority casts doubt upon minorities as a way to create and radicalize a political base; and when policy issues become identity issues. This is not to suggest that political institutions, structures, networks, and resources do not shape the behavior of political leaders. Of course, they do (e.g., Orren and Skowronek 2004; March and Olsen 1984, 1998; Weaver and Rockman 1993). However, at times, under constant, uncivilized rhetorical (and other) attacks launched by democratically elected incumbents, institutional gatekeepers may fear using their legal authority and symbolic capital to defend democratic institutions.

I now turn to explore the multifaceted nature and characteristics of alternative conceptions of self-interest in political life, thereby highlighting the process of descending the ladder, which generally involves the progression towards higher levels of self-interest intensity and the simultaneous strengthening of “disregard to others.” Classic examples of this progression include former President Trump’s lack of restraint, in terms of rhetoric and actions, vis-a-vis the rule of law and the integrity and autonomy of core democratic institutions after losing the 2020 Presidential elections, and similar expressions by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after he won a historic fourth term in office in March 2015, and especially after he was officially indicted on November 2019 for breach of trust, accepting bribes, and fraud.

## **A MULTIFACETED PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICAL SELF-INTEREST**

When elected executives decide whether and how to act, whom do they seek to benefit? An answer to this question may conveniently begin by injecting other-disregarding orientations into the concept of self-interest. Three ideal, typified motives that capture varying levels of self-interest intensity are configured on the basis of these other-disregarding orientations. These motives impinge on the weight elected executives attribute to “others” as a constraint, that is a limitation

or restriction on activity, be it institutional (e.g., separation of powers, federalism, independent media, veto points, transparency requirements) or cultural (e.g., public opinion and societal values).<sup>4</sup> The term “others” is therefore used here in a general sense, referring to society at large (including its cultural and institutional bonds). This view differs from concern for certain groups based on social identification or political considerations (e.g., the elected executive’s domestic political base). Such concern for certain groups is already embedded in the concept of self-interest; indeed, it is characteristic of elected executives, who partition the world into in-groups and out-groups in a wide range of contexts, creating “a desire to improve the welfare of certain groups in society, possibly at the expense of other groups” (Fowler and Kam 2007, 813). Cases in point include particularistic presidents who routinely allocate federal resources to benefit their partisan and electoral constituencies (Kriner and Reeves 2015).

The first category is termed *Self with no regard for others*. This category refers to democratically elected incumbents who seek to maximize their own self-interest to the complete exclusion of others and with no regard for the formal and informal “rules of the game,” that is, no matter what the costs and by any means necessary. Cases of executive aggrandizement in presidential systems exemplify this subset of elected executives (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Graber, Levinson, and Tushnet 2018; Linz 1990). These democratically elected incumbents do not perceive others as an unsurmountable obstacle. Thus, they are likely to set extreme policy objectives and priorities, disregarding any “constraints.” They are also likely to be extremely reactive to new information, especially when responding to claims made by actors who oversee,

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<sup>4</sup> For an assessment of the personality characteristics of political leaders, including their respect for political constraints, and in turn, their leadership style, see, for example, Hermann (2003).



sanction, and coordinate against the executive. In addition, they are likely to employ high-intensity policy tools with little regard for the severity of the policy problem at hand; implement extreme and highly-visible policies and political actions, such as fanning the flames of violence in the domestic and/or international arenas; strategically incite against outgroups; endorse policy solutions that escalate political divisions; increase state coercion during (manufactured) crises; and seek the support of and cooperation with ideologically-extreme forces.

The outcome of policy choices driven by this conception of self-interest may seem to resemble a nearly unrestrained pursuit of policy objectives. Classic examples are Trump's policy of separating children from their parents at the U.S. border, and his response to the so-called 'invasion' by a caravan of asylum seekers in the run-up to the U.S. 2018 primaries, sending several thousand soldiers to help secure the southern border to reinforce the idea that an 'invasion' was underway. In these cases, the political "pricing" system worked for Trump without much cost. This may have been partly achieved by filling gatekeeper positions as well as legislative committees that control the management of the legislature with loyalists (e.g., Kanthak 2009), combined with the use of threats and other strategic communications, and the forms of strategic behavior they facilitate. His calculus of decisions did not ignore economic and social costs because they were already embedded in his disregard to others' orientation.

The second category is termed *Self above others*. This subset of elected executives operates within the formal rules of the game but does not hesitate to make inroads in pursuit of political and/or personal interest by "gaming" the informal "rules of the game," that is, the commonly accepted political conventions and norms. In other words, their political choices are determined by formal rules, which they believe to be right. Specifically, Meiser (2015) suggested that democracies contain two restraining features—the "fundamental institutions" of democracies (e.g.,

separation of powers, elections and public opinion, and the principle of federalism in the U.S.), and their “norms.” Scholars have also identified similar sources with regard to democratic peace (Maoz and Russett 1993). This subset of elected executives considers democratic norms and conventions, especially in relation to the conduct of elections, an arena for strategic manipulation (e.g., manipulating electoral rolls and using government resources for electoral campaigns) in order to advance their interests. One example is Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s 2019 attempt to prorogue Parliament just weeks before the U.K.’s scheduled departure from the European Union to minimize Parliament’s opportunity to block a no-deal Brexit. Another example is Israel’s 2019 elections, during which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party placed some 1,200 cameras in predominantly Arab polling stations to lower Arab voter turnout.

Elected executives who are willing to undermine democratic norms often assume that the presence of competing interests, uncertainty about the nature and scope of norm violations (Donno 2010), and the courts’ general disinclination to intervene will inhibit norm enforcement. Even if norm enforcement prevails — as occurred in the former case, when the U.K. Supreme Court ruled the government’s attempt to prorogue Parliament unlawful — often little political damage is incurred. Such political leaders may consider the reputational costs of shaming worthwhile in their effort to advance their interests and become icons for their supporters, who relish this combativeness. Consequently, political leaders who are motivated by “self before others” motives are likely to be highly reactive to new information; employ high-intensity policy tools with little regard for the severity of the policy problem at hand; and perform high-visibility acts to further their political goals — all within the formal “rules of the game.” Their attempt to maintain their legitimacy for the next round of the policy cycle acts as a restraint on their policy strategies,

moderating both policy responses and punctuated policy processes while shaping perceptions regarding proportionate policy response.

The third category is termed *Self equal to others*. This subset of elected executives seeks to maximize their own interest and the interests of others equally while operating within the formal and informal “rules of the game.” Although “others” is used here as a general term (as noted earlier), this does not imply altruism — “a willingness to pay a personal cost to provide benefits to others in general, regardless of the identity of the beneficiaries” (Fowler and Kam 2007, 813) — because these actors will consider the welfare of others only if it does not harm them politically. In such cases, elected executives consider the welfare of others a value in itself when making policy decisions. They acknowledge the “rules of the game” and advance non-partisan and non-ideological systems of dialogue with rival political and policy actors. Perhaps most importantly, they increase coordination among political groups, thus contributing to the accountability of democratically elected incumbents through deterrence (Weingast 1997), weakening the very opposition forces that seek to undermine the mechanisms of accountability and transgress the rule of law.

It bears noting that equal concern for the welfare of others may have behavioral implications. These actors are likely to score moderately in reactivity to policy problems and new information and in the intensity of policy tools employed. For example, in the area of climate change, they will prioritize balanced environment regulation over a Green New Deal-type policy; and in the area of racial inequality affirmative action over reparations. Hence, this subcategory of elected executives can be found in-between those advocating transformational changes to address a major problem and those denying the problem’s very existence. Indeed, they are likely to acknowledge a problem’s existence but avoid supporting drastic approaches to solve it. They are

also likely to avoid grievance-based politics and reduce both polarization and “the heat” of partisan competition. Yet they will not be shy about emphasizing certain policy problems, selling certain policy solutions, and orienting themselves towards populations that believe in the policy problem more than they believe in the solution, or vice versa.

The boundary of my classification stops here. Indeed, in the case of *self after others*, self-interest is diluted to such an extent that actors seek to maximize their own interest only after maximizing that of others. In other words, actors consider the welfare of others even though this causes them political harm. The conceptual decision to draw the aforementioned boundary here attests to my recognition that, at the extreme, the intensification of self-interest in political life highlights only one motivation (i.e., self with no regard for others), and it is not advanced here to the exclusion of other possible motivations. This leaves us with three categories of other-disregarding behaviors, the fruitfulness and flexibility of which should be elaborated on and illustrated in future research.

This conceptualization recognizes that policymakers’ deliberate inefficiency in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem can be oriented to the past (revenge), present, and/or to future; that such responses can be politically directed, singly or simultaneously, at individual/s, organization/s, jurisdiction/s, and/or at the context (e.g., informal and formal institutions) within which the said elected executive operates; and that they can resort to maximalist strategies at the rhetorical level or “on the ground.” For example, Trump’s response to the so-called ‘invasion’ mentioned above included three distinctive crisis overreaction policy styles: communicating in absolutes, performing in absolutes, and challenging the rule of law (Maor 2020). Political actions can furthermore be oriented in a value-aligning manner, an affected manner (e.g., related to emotion-generating symbols and use of language), a highly innovative manner,

and other manners. These actions can simultaneously be directed at several targets and performed in various modes, and this, in turn, adds flexibility and nuance to the conceptualization advanced here.

The aforementioned classification brings to the fore the idea that *changes in the intensity level of elected executives' self-interest lead to changes in their political behavior and, consequently, in the 'fit' or balance between the intensity of policy tools and the severity of the policy problem as well as in the degree of policy discrimination in system-level punctuations — often in predictable ways*. Changes in elected executives' behavior can be described in terms of “climbing” and “descending” the ladder of disproportionate policy. The concept of “self-interest” also accords well with the role of contingency in policymaking, mainly when elected officials orient themselves to expectations regarding what others will do based on earlier experiences, yet these expectations fail to coincide with how the actors behave later. Once contingency enters the fray, it is possible to view policymakers' inefficiency in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem as an ongoing process and not solely as an anecdotal act.

In addition, the existence of a self-interest continuum does not presuppose the cultural capacity of considering the role or attitude of others. This allows us sufficient leverage to consider the idea that elected executives who are oriented to “self with no regard to others” do not inhabit the same cultural universe as a large swath of the society they govern. This may become evident when elected executives opt to implement their preferred policies “at all costs,” ignoring, for example, the integrity of elections. It contradicts the implicit assumption underlying theoretical models of political agency according to which elected executives will, on the one hand, enter the political fray to advance the implementation of their preferred policy but, on the other, seek to maintain legitimacy for the next round of the policy cycle. The need to engage in political battles

while maintaining legitimacy for the next policy cycle “imposes restraints on policymakers’ strategies, moderates their behavior, and shapes perceptions regarding proportionate behavior and policy response” (Maor 2019, 51). This implicit assumption seems unrealistic in light of current democratic backsliding trends. Indeed, it seems more likely that elected executives may lack the cultural capacity to consider the role or attitude of “the other” than that their attempts to view things from another’s perspective are an effort to protect their reputations. Therefore, one cannot use the role or the attitude of others to explain the full spectrum of self-interest types. This argument is highly relevant in contexts of moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) and culture wars (Hunter 1991).

## **DRIVERS OF CHANGES IN SELF-INTEREST MOTIVATION**

What mechanisms may facilitate the progression of self-interest to a higher level, causing elected executives to descend the disproportionate policy ladder? We still lack a good theoretical explanation of such a progression. Indeed, studying this process would be highly difficult without extensive contextual information. However, research findings in the fields of psychology, sociology, and political science — some of them rather robust — provide a basis on which we can base reasonable potential explanations of such progression.

A political norm prescribing that a particular level of self-interest intensity is politically appropriate may structure the behavior of elected executives by providing a “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olson 1998). It may also ease the progression from one level to a higher one; increase the proliferation of these motives; and solidify this type of motivation while simultaneously weakening collective action against it. By the same token, the intensification of self-interest may also be facilitated by the increasing desirability of political actions guided by the high-intensity motive, that is, by the emergence and diffusion of a “logic of consequences.”

Political leaders in adjacent jurisdictions or ideologically compatible regimes, whose actions are viewed as politically desirable, can act as drivers or amplifiers of similar yet latent tendencies exhibited by a political leader operating in another jurisdiction or regime. By the same token, if elected executives perceive themselves as group members (e.g., belonging to a group of celebrity politicians), this may cause them to behave in accordance with what they believe other group members expect, thus facilitating the progression towards higher levels of self-interest intensity.

The progression towards a higher intensity of self-interest — thus descending the disproportionate policy ladder — may also be facilitated by relatively high levels of leaders' self-serving biases (e.g., Stouten and Tripp 2009; Van Dijk and De Cremer 2006) as well as psychological entitlement (e.g., Stouten and Tripp 2009; Hart, Tortoriello, and Richardson 2020). The latter may be defined as a “stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others” (Cambell, Bonacci, Exline, and Bushman 2004, 31). Two characteristics of elected executives that are at their core based on self-interest and often mentioned in this respect are narcissism (e.g., Rosenthal and Pittinsky 2006) and Machiavellianism (e.g., Deluga 2001). People who score high on narcissism tests are characterized as arrogant and exploitative of others (e.g., Campbell et al. 2004; Emmons 1987), taking credit for others' accomplishments (Brunell et al. 2008; Rauthmann 2012) and expecting superior treatment (Campbell et al. 2004, Miller et al. 2011). Machiavellians employ deceptive interpersonal tactics (Shapiro, Lewicki, and Devine 1995) and can lie convincingly to further their interest (DePaulo and Rosenthal 1979; Geis and Moon 1981). As long as the elected executives who act upon such motives can maintain anonymity, whether by legal or other means, intensification to a higher level of self-interest can endure.

Due to system justification mechanisms, populations frequently excluded from policy benefits by political actors who are oriented to “self before others” and “self with no regard to others” may increasingly be viewed as inferior to the political executive’s ingroup (e.g., Jost 2019). This may occur in an indirect way through the internalization of the existing socio-political order. For those who belong to the elected executive’s ingroup, it means rationalizing one’s own position of advantage, leading to expressions of ingroup favoritism (Samson 2018, 4). This system justification mechanism might modify the dominant emotional response to such outgroups, eliciting contempt toward groups that are perceived to be inferior in terms of status (Fischer and Giner-Sorolla 2016). Contempt is a social emotion triggered in reaction to “others,” justifying their oppression as well as superiority, domination, discrimination, and exclusion (Gervais and Fessler 2017). It constrains empathic responses and leads to distancing from outgroup members as well as a proliferation of derogatory language (Cuddy, Fiske and Glick 2007). Contempt may thus drive aggressive forms of action towards certain groups, facilitating the progression towards political actions that reflect a higher-intensity of self-interest.

Another mechanism that may ease this progression is the desire for revenge, which induces a focus on the self (Elshout et al. 2015). According to Elison and Harter (2007), offences that prompt a threat to the self tend to elicit negative self-conscious emotions, such as shame and humiliation. Scholars therefore argue that feelings of revenge involve an intrapersonal focus (Frijda 1994) and may facilitate the aforementioned progression in order to restore the self. In addition, the self-focus that characterizes feelings of revenge is important in explaining the enduring nature of such feelings and therefore the enduring nature of such progression: “[F]eelings of revenge are generally a reaction to a specific event and last longer because they may involve more planning and there is not always an opportunity to act upon them” (van Doorn 2018, 322).



Research indeed seems to indicate that actors undertake restoration of the self, as brought to the fore by feelings of revenge (Frijda 1994), when an opportunity arises. The opportunity to act upon these feelings is therefore a key factor deciding whether such feelings translate into actual behavior (Elshout et al. 2017).

In contrast to the delayed response in the case of revenge, in the case of retaliation, the pain is immediately reflected back onto the perpetrator (Barash and Lipton 2011). This difference highlights another mechanism central to elected executives' ability to render the public or part thereof addicted to their presence. Once the public or part thereof becomes addicted, it may be easier to progress to a higher level of self-interest intensity. A classic example is ex-president Donald Trump, who constantly aired his grievances and acted upon them by filing numerous lawsuits relating, for instance, to election fraud. Recent studies show that cues such as experiencing wrong or injustice or being reminded of a perceived wrong or injustice — a grievance — activate these same reward and habit regions of the human brain, triggering cravings in anticipation of experiencing pleasure and relief through *retaliation* (Chester and DeWall 2016). Once people become addicted to seeking retribution, elected executives can tailor their behavior to increase ingroup identification, political participation, and preferences for strong leadership.).

Institutions may play a role in the progression to a higher level of self-interest intensity because they define what is “legitimately expected behavior” (Knight 1992, 15), meaning that they shape actions and “exert patterned higher-order effects” (Clemens and Cook 1999, 444). Yet, the interpretational gaps they leave (Gerschewski 2021, 220) enable elected executives to gradually weaken formal institutional checks, easing the progression towards a more intense level of self-interest and making public opinion the most critical constraint on leaders' actions. Context — the issues and problems on the political agenda — also plays a role in progressing towards a more

self-intensified motivation. Candidates' personalities may interact with contextual factors, facilitating the emergence of dominant leaders. For example, politically turbulent times offer increasing latitude for aggressive actions that may increase leaders' perceived competence and hide leader-serving policies (e.g., Laustsen and Petersen 2020).

I therefore propose that multiple factors may facilitate the movement of democratically elected incumbents to a higher level of self-interest intensity. For some elected executives, this process may be a conditional one, in which each step depends on the outcome of the previous one. For others, the process may be similar to leapfrogging, skipping one or more steps. For yet others, it may take the form of a sudden change, once political desperation takes root and canalizes policy choices towards gross inefficiency in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem. Still, a leader may not be likely to engage in such a response if one or more of the aforementioned facilitating factors are not in place. These mechanisms, probably among many others, are by no means constant and may change over time, depending specifically on an elected executive's predispositions, experiences, social network, and exposure to other elected executives driven by self-intensified motives.

## **A CONJECTURE**

Based on the theorizing presented so far, which has produced a predictive model, I develop a conjecture that, by definition, is not predictive in nature. The conjecture is formulated as follows:

*CONJECTURE If elected executives are boundedly rational and the political costs of maintaining their legitimacy for the next round of the policy cycle are well above zero, a higher intensity level of political leaders' self-interest will lead to a higher level of inefficiency in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy*

*problem, and to system-level punctuations with discriminatory effects on politically relevant target groups, independent of how others are affected, and regardless of democratic norms, the rule of law, and the autonomy and integrity of core democratic institutions. Moreover, if political leaders' preferences for policy ideas and public goods or services are detached from real evidence or instrumental value, and the subjective values of these ideas, goods, and services are emotionally charged, this inefficient allocation of policy investment will be independent of the initial background conditions of the policy problem.*

To understand why this conjecture matters, it is important to be clear regarding what it is and what it is not. This conjecture is not an empirical proposition, although it is possible to formulate empirical propositions in light of it. It is not a testable hypothesis nor a policy tool — one suggesting that under certain circumstances, we can rely on elected executives to produce inefficient matches between the intensity of policy tools and the severity of the policy problem; and that the informal and formal “rules of the game” do not always affect the (unrestrained) behavior of these executives. It is not a predictor, a descriptor, or a policy prescription. This conjecture should be understood solely as an ideal type or benchmark, providing us with the insight that certain idealized political conditions will facilitate a particular set of policy results. In turn, it enables an understanding of situations that deviate from this benchmark, thus providing direct contact with the real world, especially regarding democratic backsliding processes and the remedies for them, insofar as discriminatory policies are concerned. In the U.S. context, examples of the latter include reducing economic inequality by reversing discriminatory tax cuts (Hacker and Pierson 2005; 2010); reversing discriminatory policies and laws that increase persistent racial

and gender inequality (e.g., employment; voter suppression); reversing industry-friendly rules adopted by former President Trump that alter how the U.S. Environment Protection Agency calculated the “social cost of carbon;” and educating the public regarding the risks involved in changing the interpretation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act from barring discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin for recipients of federal funding (known as “a disparate impact”) to prohibiting only intentional discrimination — a change of interpretation attempted by the Justice Department during Trump’s final weeks in office (Meckler and Barrett 2021). The difficulties involved in disentangling the extent to which political executives’ actions reflect a desire to benefit themselves rather than “others” in contexts of conflict and coordination (Schelling 1960, 1978) do not relieve scholars of the responsibility to scrutinize these elements carefully and use this conjecture effectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

Improving our understanding of elected executives’ self-interest means improving our grasp of how far they will go in pursuit of their political and personal interests. To achieve this improved understanding, I have rectified the narrowly defined perspective of political self-interest by injecting elements of “others” into the theoretical core of the analytical scheme advanced here. Thus, I distinguish between varying levels of intensity in the inner architecture of the concept of self-interest and link the progression to different intensity levels of elected executives’ self-interest to the efficiency of these executives in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem, that is, to descending or climbing the ladder of discriminatory policy. As such, this paper constitutes a preliminary attempt to unpack the concept of political self-interest, flying far from conceptual schemes that view self-interest in uni- or bi-dimensional perspectives, in the

hope that this conceptual exercise will help cast elected executives' policy decisions under conditions of deep political and/or personal uncertainties in sharper relief.

I have also constructed a conjecture that is applicable to boundedly-rational elected executives operating in democratic regimes for whom the political costs of maintaining their legitimacy for the next round of the policy cycle are well above zero. Once this conjecture is viewed as a benchmark, scholars may use it as a device to generate insights and hypotheses, applying it to analyze how the real world departs from this benchmark regarding policymakers' (in)efficiency in matching the intensity of policy tools to the severity of the policy problem, and the consequences for society at large and the stability of democratic regimes. It is reasonable to suggest that when the expected political costs of maintaining decision-makers' legitimacy for the next round of the policy cycle are zero or near-zero, policy investments will presumably be efficient or near-efficient, and thereby policy decisions are likely to prioritize the welfare of society as a whole. Here, current theoretical models of political agency work at their best. The conjecture should be helpful when deep political and/or personal uncertainties prevail.

The conjecture furthermore sheds light on policy processes and individual behaviors that have previously gone unnoticed, such as bargaining over the match between the intensity of policy tools and the severity of the policy problem. It also directs attention to the manufacturing of opportunities for *softening up* (Kingdon 1984), which refers to policy entrepreneurs' attempts to prepare and educate both the public and specialists for a gross misfit between the intensity of policy tools and the severity of the problem by, for example, diminishing their cognitive and emotional responsiveness to such policy responses. The conjecture likewise improves our understanding of policy processes in various novel ways, especially concerning innovations in the policy tools employed when the match between the intensity of these tools and the severity of the policy

problem is deliberately inefficient. Hopefully, scholars will achieve a full understanding of the conditions necessary for this conjecture to be true. Doubtless, there will be some difficulties in applying it. However, because it reflects and captures essential aspects of real-world politics, it provides a fully acceptable benchmark for further analysis, and it can be utilized in discussions of discriminatory public policies and democratic backsliding.

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