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Toby Bolsen & Thomas J. Leeper

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Self-Interest and Attention to News Among Issue Publics

TOBY BOLSEN and THOMAS J. LEEPER

To what extent are groups selectively exposed to news that affects their self-interest? We theorize that having an interest at stake in an issue increases the importance of related information, promoting selective exposure to politics. The framework we develop generates hypotheses we test with data from 29 U.S. public opinion surveys conducted between 1997 and 2007 with a combined sample size of over 40,000 respondents. We find that though the propensity to follow news is a general predisposition, people's exposure to specific issues varies based on whether or not information is relevant to their interests, as defined by social group (or issue public) membership. While general awareness of political matters is normatively desirable, exposure to issues relevant to one's self-interest is an equally important and necessary precondition for political engagement and issue public formation. Evidence from this study suggests that citizens with low levels of general news exposure may, nonetheless, attend to personally relevant information, enabling democratic accountability across dynamic information environments.

[Supplementary material is available for this article. Go to the publisher's online edition of Political Communication for the following free supplemental resource(s): iPoll survey identifiers for the data used in this article and full regression results for all statistical models reported in the article.]

Keywords news attention, self-interest, groups, issue public

Not all politics matters equally for everyone. With so many issues, politicians, and problems, the political world may often seem, in the words of William James, a “blooming, buzzing confusion.” From that commotion, can individuals obtain political information that matters to their lives? The existing literature is inconclusive regarding whether the propensity to attend to politics is concentrated among a few highly attentive citizens (*information generalists*) or numerous smaller groups of people with an intense interest in specific issues (*issue publics*). If protecting one's self-interest is normatively desirable (e.g., as a way for average citizens to hold government accountable), the public needs to be able to expose themselves to information about matters that affect them personally. Although research on the determinants of selective news exposure has interested scholars for decades, few studies explore the role that self-interest plays in this process.¹ While some find evidence of a link between personal interests and exposure to specific news stories (Hutchings, 2003; Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990),

Toby Bolsen is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Georgia State University. Thomas J. Leeper is Post-doctoral Researcher, Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University.

Address correspondence to Thomas J. Leeper, Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University, Building 1340, 8240 Aarhus C, Denmark. E-mail: thosjleeper@gmail.com

others maintain that attentiveness is a general trait (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Price & Zaller, 1993). Recent work suggests that this long-standing debate remains unsettled (Jerit, 2007; Price, David, Goldthorpe, Roth, & Capella, 2006).

Understanding whether self-interest influences what news issue publics receive is important for several reasons.² First, if self-interest leads citizens to overcome a low general attentiveness to political matters, then aggregate levels of awareness may be elevated by emphasizing the connection between public policies and one's personal well-being.³ Second, if self-interest drives exposure to political information, then we may be less concerned about the implications of low levels of general news exposure by the public. Exposure specifically to those matters with consequences for one's self-interest may even be more important than general mindfulness of all politics. If citizens attend to personally relevant issues, representatives can be held accountable by groups of citizens passionate about specific issues.

This article theorizes that self-interest motivates selective exposure to issues that are self-relevant. We test predictions from this model with data from 29 public opinion surveys conducted between 1997 and 2007 in the United States—with a combined sample size of over 40,000 respondents. We find that while the propensity to gather information is a general predisposition based on education and other individual characteristics, people vary in their exposure to certain subjects. We also find that while general political interest explains some variation in news exposure, another important source of variation derives from whether or not one's interests are at stake. This selective exposure can help various publics defend their interests, with obvious implications for debates regarding the potential for democratic accountability in an increasingly "noisy" political environment.

The Study of Interests and Information: Are Citizens Generalists or Specialists?

Some maintain that exposure to (political) news media reflects a general disposition (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Zaller, 1992). From this perspective, knowing that someone is attentive to U.S. military action in Iraq is a strong indicator that this same individual is paying attention to other political issues, such as the debate over using federal funds for stem cell research. Such individuals are often motivated to learn about politics not out of "narrow self-interests, but due to a general political interest or sense of civic duty" (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p.139). In addition, individuals with more cognitive resources are better equipped to organize and make sense of complex policy issues. A common indicator of cognitive ability is years of formal education. Formal education transmits knowledge that may make learning about politics easier later in life, and individuals with advanced educational training are more likely to have internalized civic-duty norms regarding political participation (Nie, Junn, & Stehlick-Barry, 1996).

In contrast to the *generalist* model, some scholars—as far back as Converse (1964)—maintain that attention to politics is domain-specific (Bennett, 1990; Hutchings, 2001, 2003; Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar et al., 2008; Kim, 2009; Miller, Suchner, & Voelker, 1980). From this view, individuals pay close attention only to a small number of political issues they care about a great deal; for example, people only engage in policy debates that directly touch on their own lives (Anand & Krosnick, 2003). Jerit (2007, p. 4) explains that "if cognitive ability is the key determinant of interest in [the generalist account], motivation is the driving force behind differential attention in the issue public story." The term *issue publics* (or attentive publics) refers to groups who care a great deal about specific issues, pay attention to these issues in the news, and form stronger attitudes toward related objects (Almond,

1950; Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Krosnick, Berent, & Boninger, 1994). The issue public thesis maintains that people are unable to attend to an unlimited range of political issues and therefore focus on matters that are personally important (Iyengar et al., 2008; Kim, 2007). This model suggests a pattern of knowledge and attention “reflecting group differences in experiences, interest, and access to information” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 139).

The initial empirical work that tested the interest-attention (or interest-exposure) link produced mixed results. Price and Zaller (1993) find, among other things, that women of childbearing age were no more likely than men to pay attention to the 1989 Supreme Court case—*Webster v. Reproductive Services*—that attempted to restrict women’s right to an abortion. They maintain that if self-interest were a driving force underlying attention to political issues, then women should have paid greater attention than men to this issue. Their findings for other news stories are mixed, with self-interest driving attention in some but not all cases. Conversely, Iyengar (1990) argues that selective attention to political information narrows the political world to issues that are most relevant to the individual citizen. Utilizing both experiments and survey data, he finds a strong link between self-interest and attention to politics.

Although the early literature debated the existence of issue publics, there is now some clear evidence in support of the notion that citizens selectively attend to issues (Althaus, Cizmar, & Gimple, 2009; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Eveland, 2001; Eveland, Hutchens, & Shen, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2008; Kim, 2007, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Recent studies have examined the psychological processes underlying selective exposure to particular issues. For example, Smith, Fabrigar, Powell, and Estrada (2007) find that processing motivations and time constraints moderate selective exposure. Brannon, Tagler, and Eagly (2007) demonstrate that attitude strength increases issue-specific exposure. And Kim (2007) uses a unique sampling strategy to show differences in the online information-seeking behavior of pro-life and pro-choice issue publics under different motivational conditions. These studies examine possible mechanisms that could connect self-interest to selective exposure or operate parallel to the effects of self-interest and issue public membership. An important unanswered question relates to whether or not self-interest motivates citizens to follow news stories once general political interest has been taken into account.⁴ This question is important given that individual variability in exposure to information is fundamental to political communication research (Iyengar et al., 2008).

Self-Interest and Selective Exposure

We theorize that self-interest motivates selective exposure to political issues in the news beyond general news-following behavior.⁵ Existing research in psychology shows that self-interest is one of three principal sources of variance in the importance of a person’s attitudes (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). “Self-interest-based importance presumably develops when people ‘expect [an object or issue] to have significant consequences for their own lives (Apsler and Sears 1968, p. 162),’ or when an individual perceives that an attitude object is likely to have a clear and direct impact upon his or her rights, privileges, or lifestyle” (Krosnick, 1990, p. 72). Once an issue becomes personally important, individuals are more likely to think about this issue (Krosnick, 1989), take action because of the issue (Miller & Krosnick, 2004), and develop attitudes toward the issue that are resistant to persuasion (Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006).⁶ Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, and Boninger (2005) demonstrate that people who attach personal importance to an attitude

acquire knowledge about the attitude object.⁷ Those who are (a) generally informed or (b) members of issue publics are more likely to know how alternative policy courses would affect them (see also Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). To review, the psychological literature suggests that (a) self-interest is an antecedent of attitude importance and (b) people selectively expose themselves to information relevant to attitudes deemed important. The psychological literature thus leads us to two hypotheses about the effects of self-interest on news attention.

H1: Individuals with a vested interest in an issue are more likely to be exposed to news about that issue than those who lack such an interest.

H2: Individuals with a vested interest in an issue are more likely to be exposed to news about that issue than they are to attend to other issues generally.

While the psychological theories just discussed suggest these hypotheses should be true, this link has not been substantiated with a diverse selection of real political news stories on representative samples of the American public. We note, however, the contribution of Price and Zaller (1993) toward understanding attention to particular news events. We extend their analysis over time with a large array of news stories and examine both within- and between-group differences in selective exposure.

Data/Methods

In this study, we utilize data from 29 national surveys administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates between 1997 and 2007. Using the archives at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, we identified the universe of surveys that asked respondents: “Now I’m going to read you a list of some stories covered by news organization in the last month or so. As I read each one, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not closely at all” (a standard question wording, used across all of these surveys, that constitutes our outcome variable). The topics in these surveys ranged from attention to specific events (e.g., President Bush’s 2003 State of the Union Address, results of the presidential election in Mexico) to more general, long-term issues (e.g., the U.S. war on terrorism, UN weapons inspections in Iraq). On each survey, the interviewer would list between 6 and 10 specific stories recently covered by news organizations, and responses were recorded for attention to each story individually.⁸

From this universe of surveys, we isolated specific news stories that could be tied to one of three political groups that could be clearly defined using the demographic data available in each survey: females, Blacks, and older Americans.⁹ Across the 29 surveys, 45 specific issues were paired to one of these groups (i.e., some surveys included news stories relevant to more than one of these groups). A list of these stories, by group, is included in Table 1. We define two measures of news attention: *global follows* and *specific follows*. Both are based on responses to the battery of questions. Respondents’ exposure to each story is coded as follows: 4 = very closely, 3 = fairly closely, 2 = not too closely, and 1 = not at all. *Specific follows* is defined as each respondent’s attention to the identified group-relevant news story in a given survey. For each respondent, *global follows* is an average of responses to all stories that are not group-relevant (rounded to take only discrete values from 1 to 4). Responses to the identified specific question are excluded from the calculation of the global measure in each analysis.¹⁰ To clarify, an individual who reported following all of the issues on a survey, except the group-relevant story, “very closely” would have a global score of 4, and an individual who reported following all of the issues “not closely at all” would have a

Table 1
News attention items for issue publics

	Field dates	Global coefficient (SE)	Specific coefficient (SE)	N
<i>Women's issues</i>				
The FDA's decision to make the abortion pill, RU-486, available for sale in the United States	October 4–8, 2000	.00 (.08)	.19 (.08)	1,331
The new drug that may prevent breast cancer in women	April 17–27, 1998	.04 (.07)	.41 (.07)	1,201
The announcement by a panel of scientists that there is no evidence to suggest breast implants cause disease in women	December 8–13, 1998	–.13 (.07)	.16 (.07)	1,201
A new scientific study that found no link between a high-fat diet and breast cancer	April 10–22, 1999	–.10 (.08)	.58 (.08)	1,200
The Mother's Day million mom march in support of gun control laws	May 26–June 4, 2000	–.02 (.07)	.14 (.06)	1,200
News about when the abortion pill mifepristone, also sometimes called RU-486, might be available in doctors' offices	November 29–December 3, 2000	.19 (.07)	.14 (.07)	999
The findings of a new study on the effects of estrogen replacement therapy on ovarian cancer	March 28–April 1, 2001	.07 (.07)	.68 (.08)	1,082
A new study suggesting that hormone therapy may not provide heart benefits to women	August 2–5, 2001	–.06 (.08)	.64 (.08)	1,005
Ongoing discussions about mammograms for women	March 28–31, 2002	.05 (.08)	.98 (.08)	1,003
A report from the National Institutes of Health on hormone replacement therapies for women	July 18–21, 2002	–.20 (.07)	.61 (.07)	1,208

(Continued)

Table 1
(Continued)

	Field dates	Global coefficient (SE)	Specific coefficient (SE)	N
Results from a recent National Institutes of Health study on birth control pills and breast cancer	July 18–21, 2002	-.20 (.07)	.42 (.07)	1,208
A new experimental vaccine that may protect women against cervical cancer	December 6–10, 2002	-.07 (.07)	.25 (.07)	1,206
A government decision to end a clinical trial of estrogen because of a slightly increased risk of stroke in women	April 1–5, 2004	.05 (.07)	.66 (.07)	1,201
Elizabeth Edwards's diagnosis of breast cancer	December 2–5, 2004	.14 (.07)	.37 (.07)	1,203
Reports of a vaccine that may protect women from cervical cancer	December 2–5, 2004	.14 (.07)	.18 (.07)	1,203
A government report investigating the FDA's decision to not allow over-the-counter sales of the morning after pill	December 6–11, 2005	.08 (.07)	.04 (.07)	1,202
Reports of a vaccine that may protect women from cervical cancer	June 8–19, 2006	.03 (.06)	.50 (.07)	1,217
<i>Racial issues</i>				
The controversy over treating Black English, or Ebonics, as a second language in schools	January 9–12, 1997	-.08 (.13)	.21 (.11)	1,503
The Texas murder trial of a man accused of dragging a black man behind a pickup truck	February 18–21, 1999	-.05 (.12)	.55 (.12)	1,203
The debate about flying the confederate flag over the state capital in South Carolina	February 9–14, 2000	.14 (.12)	.47 (.11)	1,330
Rioting in Cincinnati after an unarmed black man was shot by police	April 18–22, 2001	.02 (.13)	.60 (.12)	1,202

Debate over eliminating affirmative action programs	April 30–May 4, 2003	.13 (.15)	.56 (.14)	1, 201
The death of Rosa Parks	November 3–6, 2005	-.11 (.14)	.51 (.14)	1, 201
Rebuilding efforts in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina	March 8–12, 2006	-.20 (.11)	.36 (.11)	1, 405
President Clinton's apology for medical research experiments at Tuskegee Institute involving African-Americans	June 18–22, 1997	.12 (.12)	.61 (.12)	1, 202
A report by the National Academies' Institute of Medicine about how racial minorities are treated in the health care system	March 28–31, 2002	.23 (.14)	.90 (.14)	1, 003
A new drug targeting African Americans that may decrease deaths from heart failure	December 2–5, 2004	.04 (.12)	.31 (.12)	1, 203
<i>Older Americans' issues</i>				
The Medicare reform legislation recently signed into law	December 15–17, 2003	-.24 (.09)	-.02 (.08)	815
The debate in Washington about how to reform the Medicare system	November 18–December 4, 2003	-.07 (.04)	.05 (.06)	6, 873
Changes to the prescription drug coverage provided by Medicare	December 7–11, 2005	-.11 (.07)	.20 (.06)	1, 502
The debate about how to reform the Social Security system	April 17–27, 1998	.16 (.07)	-.13 (.07)	1, 201
Debate in Congress about prescription drug benefits and the Medicare program	May 26–June 4, 2000	.09 (.07)	.11 (.06)	1, 200
Presidential candidate George W. Bush's proposals about Social Security	May 26–June 4, 2000	.09 (.07)	-.18 (.07)	1, 200
Debate in Congress about providing prescription drug benefits to seniors	August 2–6, 2000	-.04 (.08)	.17 (.08)	1, 001
A new government report about the financial future of Social Security and Medicare	March 28–April 1, 2001	.19 (.08)	.20 (.07)	1, 082

(Continued)

Table 1
(Continued)

	Field dates	Global coefficient (SE)	Specific coefficient (SE)	N
President Bush's proposal to immediately help seniors with their prescription drug costs	August 2–5, 2001	.09 (.08)	.14 (.08)	1,005
Discussions in Congress about a Medicare prescription drug benefit	July 18–21, 2002	.17 (.07)	.04 (.07)	1,208
President Bush's Medicare reform proposal	February 6–10, 2003	–.26 (.07)	.00 (.07)	1,201
A vote in Congress on a bill to add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare	December 3–7, 2003	.04 (.07)	.00 (.07)	1,206
Discussions about the cost of the recently passed Medicare prescription drug law	April 1–5, 2004	.12 (.07)	–.05 (.07)	1,201
The nomination of FDA Commissioner Mark McClellan as administrator of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services	April 1–5, 2004	.12 (.07)	.11 (.08)	1,201
A report by the Medicare trustees on the financial condition of the Medicare program	April 1–5, 2004	.12 (.07)	–.03 (.07)	1,201
The start of enrollment in the new Medicare prescription drug benefit	December 6–11, 2005	.09 (.07)	.11 (.07)	1,202
The start of the new Medicare prescription drug benefit	April 6–11, 2006	.04 (.07)	.21 (.06)	1,446
Stories about the deadline for enrolling in the Medicare prescription drug benefit	June 8–19, 2006	.09 (.06)	.12 (.07)	1,217

Note. Columns 3 and 4 report ordered probit coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses, for the general follows and specific follows models. OLS provides substantively and statistically comparable results. Full regression results for all specifications are available in the online appendix.

score of 1.¹¹ Global and specific measures reflect latent variables that manifest in responses to the four-category survey questions and therefore reflect analogous constructs (exposure) and share a common scale.

In order to assess the differential effects of group membership on either general or specific exposure, two similar models were estimated: one with global follows as the outcome measure and an otherwise identical model with specific follows as the outcome measure. Each model included indicator variables for female, Black, and age group,¹² along with a basic set of demographic covariates.¹³ Due to the ordinal nature of the specific measure (and the transformation of the global measure to this same scale for purposes of comparability), both models are estimated using ordered probit regression.¹⁴ The key comparison is between the coefficients on the group indicator variable in the global and specific models. While it is advantageous for our analysis that all of the questions composing global follows are drawn from a single question battery, it is possible that the common response scales produced satisficing (e.g., reporting the same level of exposure to all stories in the battery). However, if respondents provided the same response to every news story (e.g., following each story “very closely”), this would bias the estimate of the difference (specific-global) toward zero, leading us to find no self-interest effect.¹⁵

To test both of our hypotheses, the coefficients in the global and specific models for female (β_1), Black (β_2), and age (β_3) are characterized as group differences in attention to news generally and to the specific issue for females, Blacks, and older Americans, respectively. In testing H1, a positive coefficient for a group in the specific model reflects higher attention by that group to the specific issue than by respondents not in that group and supports our hypothesis. In testing H2, a zero coefficient for a group in the global model indicates no difference in attentiveness to general news between that group and those not in the group. The raw value of general attention, however, does not test H2. Instead, the difference (β specific – β global) indicates how much more attentive a group is to a specific story than they are to news in general. Positive differences support H2. When β global is negative for a given group, a positive β specific value reflects not only an increased attentiveness to the target story but a reversal of general inattentiveness. To facilitate interpretation, we report these comparisons in terms of predicted probabilities of news-following for each group. These probabilities are calculated using Clarify (Tomz, Wittenberg, & King, 2001). For each story, the probabilities of respondents reporting that they followed it “very closely” or “fairly closely” were then summed together. All figures and discussion in the next section report this summed probability of following a given story compared to following news in general.

Results

Before addressing our two key hypotheses, we first report the patterns of regression results for the “usual suspects” that tend to predict news exposure. Most importantly, education is the workhorse of general news exposure. Those who are more educated are more attentive in 41 general models. Averaging across all surveys, at the minimum of education (i.e., eighth-grade education or less) there is about a 34% probability of following the news (meaning a score of 3 or higher on the global measure). At the mean of education, there is a 40% probability of following the news. At the maximum of education (i.e., a postgraduate degree), there is a 44% chance of following the news. Income—another common predictor of political engagement—is additionally predictive of general follows in 24 models. As one would expect, a similar pattern emerges in specific models, but as we discuss next, these “usual suspects” do not fully explain exposure to news stories where self-interest is at stake.¹⁶

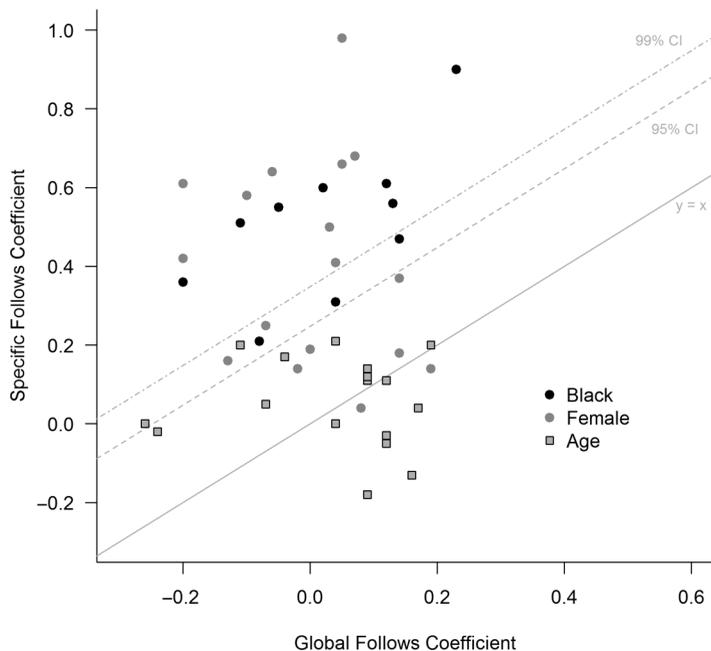


Figure 1. Relative size of global and specific follows coefficients. The solid diagonal represents $y = x$, so all points above this line indicate surveys where news attention among the group to the specific question is higher than for news generally. The dashed lines represent 95% and 99% confidence intervals for a one-tailed independent t test of the difference between global and specific coefficients. Note that for visual clarity, the confidence intervals are drawn using the largest (most conservative) standard error of any coefficient across all models.

Turning to tests of our hypotheses, the results strongly confirm both of our predictions. Given that the global and specific measures have common measurement and scale, it is possible to directly compare coefficients from both sets of models. Averaged across the entire sample, β specific is 0.50 and β global is 0.12, an average increase of 0.38 in attentiveness (in coefficient units) to the target issue relative to news generally.¹⁷ Table 1 reports all of the key coefficients. For 34 of our news stories (across 24 of the 29 surveys), this difference is statistically significant ($p < .01$), and for two additional stories it is marginally significant ($p < .10$).¹⁸ Attention to the target group-relevant issue is consistently large and larger than the attention to stories overall, confirming both of our hypotheses.¹⁹ Figure 1 demonstrates this general pattern of results.

While these results statistically confirm both hypotheses and we can use differences between β specific and β global to describe general trends, coefficients from these models are difficult to interpret. Looking at predicted probabilities of following the stories provides a more intuitive summary of the analysis. On average, individuals across these three groups were 8% more likely to follow specific stories than the rest of the population. For Blacks, women, and older Americans, these differences averaged 16%, 9%, and 2%, respectively. Blacks were between 6% and 23% more likely than others to follow group-relevant stories. Women were between 2% and 17% more likely to follow group-relevant stories (though they were less likely than men to follow one seemingly group-relevant story related to RU486). Older Americans, the hardest test for our hypotheses, were between 4% less and 8% more likely to follow group-relevant stories.

Further breaking out results by group reveals additional interesting patterns. While Blacks do not differ much in their general attention to news from other groups, they are much more likely to follow news that is group-relevant than they are to follow news generally (average β specific – β global = 0.46, the largest difference between general and specific coefficients across the three groups we examine here). In the four cases when β global is negative, attention to the target story reverses lower general attentiveness among Blacks compared to non-Blacks.²⁰ Figure 2 presents predicted probabilities for following these issues among Black and non-Black respondents. Across all 10 issues, members of this group are significantly more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to pay attention to group-related stories. The predicted probability of following these issues “closely” for Blacks is 39%, whereas the predicted probability of following these 10 issues for non-Blacks is only 23%.

Turning to the next set of surveys, women were no more or less likely than men to follow news generally (average β global = 0.00), though β global is negative for 10 of 18 surveys. Stories that are group-relevant, however, provoke considerably higher attention among females: The average β specific is 0.41 across these 18 issues (average β specific – β global = 0.40; $p < .01$ in all but four cases). On 10 surveys, β specific reverses a lower general attentiveness among females such that attention to a female-relevant news story is greater among females than males, while general news attention in the survey sample is lower among females than males. Figure 3 also illustrates that there is some variation across issues in terms how closely women and men seem to be paying attention to the various topics. This may be, in part, a function of variation across information environments in terms of media coverage of various women’s issues (Jerit, 2007; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006; Nicholson, 2003).

The last group we examined, older Americans, makes a hard test for our hypotheses. Whereas extant literature has shown that males and females do not dramatically differ in general news attention and minority racial groups tend to be less generally attentive to news, older Americans are typically more attentive to news than other age groups (Neuman, 1986; Price & Zaller, 1993, Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). While H1 predicts

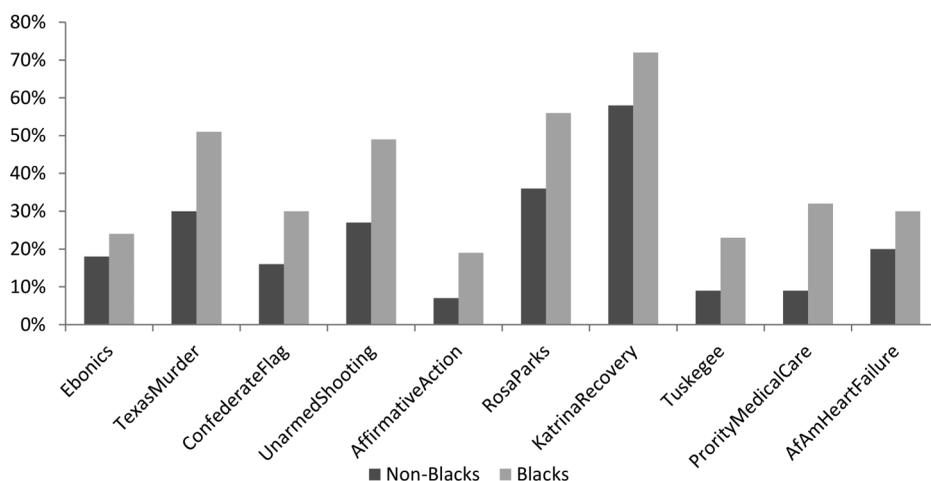


Figure 2. Probability of following racial issues. We collapse the 4-point dependent measure to a 2-point measure and combine “very” and “fairly” closely response options into a dichotomous “probability of following” measure. See Table 1 for the wording of each question.

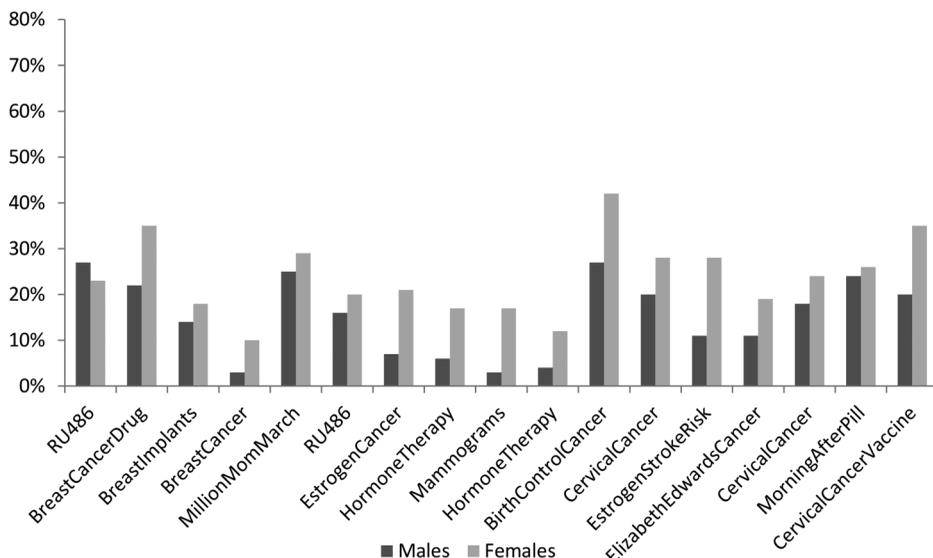


Figure 3. Probability of following female issues. We collapse the 4-point dependent measure to a 2-point measure and combine “very” and “fairly” closely response options into a dichotomous “probability of following” measure. See Table 1 for the wording of each question.

high attention to group-relevant stories, H2—which predicts differences between specific and general attention—is harder to confirm when baseline general attention is already high. Our results for older Americans, however, strongly confirm both hypotheses. Consistent with prior evidence of high attention among this group, the average β global is 0.27. Despite this high baseline attention, attention to target issues is even higher: average β specific = 0.58 and average β specific – β global = 0.31.²¹ In more intuitive terms, the predicted probability of following all issues “closely” for individuals 59 and under is 34%, while for individuals 60 and over the probability increases to 36% (see Figure 4). Taken together, the results presented in Figures 2–4 provide clear evidence that issue publics pay closer attention to news that is group-relevant.

Finally, we examine differences between global and specific attention within groups (as opposed to differences in specific attention between men and women, Blacks and others, or older and younger Americans). Figure 5 illustrates that when Blacks have an interest at stake in an issue, they are much more likely to report following group-relevant issues relative to other issues in each survey. The predicted probability of following global issues closely for Blacks is 14%, whereas the predicted probability of following group-relevant issues closely increases to 39%. While Blacks are less attentive to two of the stories we identified, these data provide clear evidence in support of H2. In looking at the predicted probability of following global issues versus specific issues based on age (i.e., under or over age 60), the effects are much less remarkable. Thirty-five percent of individuals over the age of 60 are predicted to follow global issues closely, whereas 36% are predicted to follow group-relevant issues. Finally, for females, the evidence does not support H2. The average predicted probability of following issues closely in the global models (44%) is actually *higher* than it is for women’s issues (24%); nonetheless, that females still attend to these issues to a greater degree than males supports our theory of the self-interest–attention linkage.

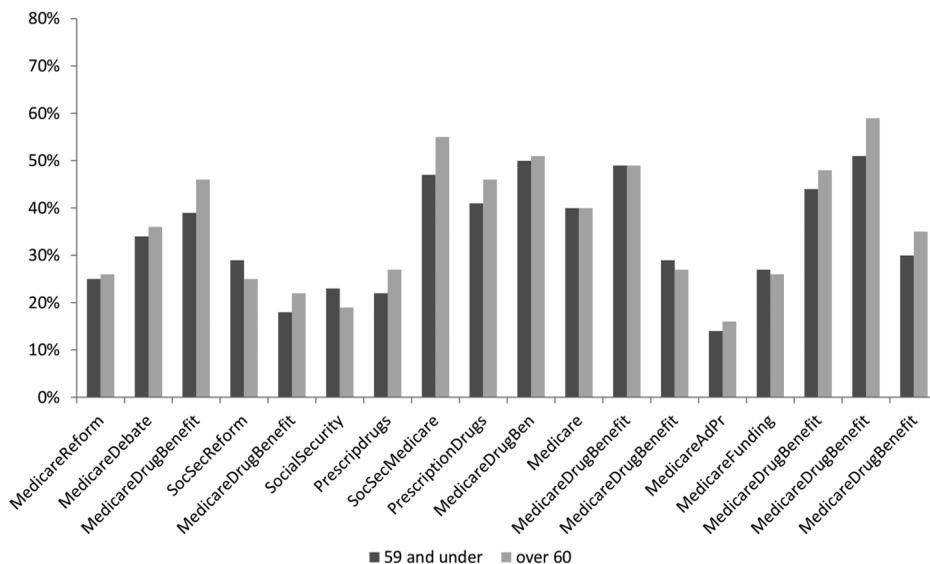


Figure 4. Probability of following issues by age group. We collapse the 4-point dependent measure to a 2-point measure and combine “very” and “fairly” closely response options into a dichotomous “probability of following” measure. See Table 1 for the wording of each question.

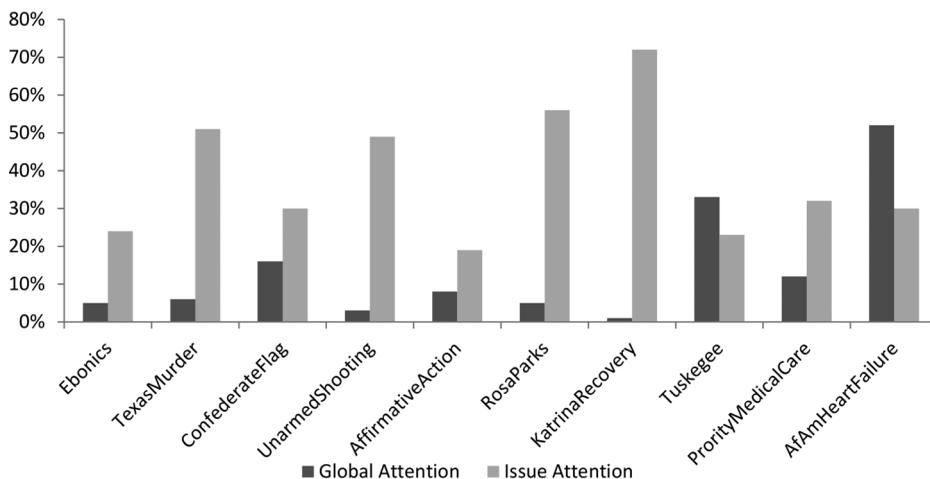


Figure 5. Predicted global and issue-specific attention for Blacks. This charts the predicted probability of following all recent news events in a survey against the probability of following an interest-relevant issue in that survey. For presentational purposes, we collapse the 4-point dependent measure to a 2-point measure and combine “very” and “fairly” closely response options into a dichotomous “probability of following” measure.

While the bulk of our analysis looked at the three groups for which the most data were readily available, other groups shows similar and possibly stronger relationships between self-interest and attention. For a 2002 story about the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, 52% of Catholics were predicted to follow the story compared to 39% of non-Catholics, while they were no more likely than members of other religious groups to

follow news generally. For a 2006 story about immigration reform efforts in Congress, our model predicted that 61% of Hispanics would follow the story, compared to 47% of non-Hispanics. These two brief examples suggest that the relationship between self-interest and attention is not restricted to the three groups for which the most data are available.²²

Conclusion

The expectation that self-interest drives human behavior is a central tenet of rationalistic models of human political and social behavior (Miller, 1999). Surprisingly, decades of research testing the impact of self-interest on political engagement offer equivocal evidence, and causes of selective exposure to political information are just beginning to be well understood. Using data from 29 national surveys with over 40,000 respondents across a 10-year period, we show that individuals are more likely to follow news that affects their self-interest. While the effects are sometimes small, and for a few stories self-interest does not appear to show increased news-following, the robustness of the findings leaves little doubt that the first step in the creation of issue publics—following group-specific news—is solidly in place on a wide scale. We find convincing evidence for our first hypothesis—that members of that group are more attentive to group-relevant news than other people—across all three groups considered here. Evidence in favor of our second hypothesis is weaker, at least for females and older Americans, but we find that self-interest has a dramatic impact on the news behavior of African Americans.

A possible caveat, however, relates to the validity of survey measures of exposure. It is possible that our measure of news-following does a poor job of assessing past exposure, but this is common to most measures of media use. Even so, if our measures have weak validity, it would be constant across both the global and specific measures and therefore should not have affected our key comparisons between these measures. Ultimately, there are few alternative measures that have obtained consensus in the literature (see Eveland et al., 2009; Prior, 2009a, 2009b). Further research is of course needed to improve the validity of survey measures, which would aid not only studies of selective exposure but research on all aspects of political communication.

Our findings are important regardless of whether there is always a measurable information gain that results from greater attention to self-relevant information. For example, Price et al. (2006) find that attention to an issue can lead to other downstream effects such as stronger attitudes and more issue-relevant participation in the domain of health. And, while our results may seem unsurprising (that certain groups are more likely to be exposed to stories that affect them directly), the speculation that these groups would be more attentive to particular issues has not been adequately demonstrated. We extend the extant literature on selective exposure (see, for example, Hutchings, 2001; Kim, 2007; Price et al., 2006) by showing that it is tied to self-interest across a broad range of issues, different types of groups, and over time.

The results offer some hope for engaging more citizens in politics. If self-interest is a cause of political information exposure, then perhaps citizens can at least have access to information about the large number of public policy issues affecting their lives. If issue-specific exposure is a prerequisite to issue public formation, then our evidence suggests the prerequisites for the formation of issue publics are alive. This is normatively pleasing insofar as it suggests that traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women and racial minorities, may be politically engaged on issues they consider personally relevant. An interesting extension would be to see if this finding is replicated across an even wider range of issues and different types of self-interest. For example, are Hispanics more attentive to news

stories on U.S. immigration reform? Do environmentalists follow news about environmental policy, pollution, or climate change to a greater extent than other groups? But exposure is only the first part of the political engagement process. New research should examine whether and how issue-specific exposure informs and aids the opinion formation of relevant groups. Available data limit our ability to demonstrate these downstream connections.

Finally, this research speaks to the long-standing debate over whether citizens are information *specialists* or *generalists*. That individuals are selectively attentive is a fundamental requirement of life in a large, complex information environment (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). We have found that individuals are not just selectively attentive to arbitrary categories of news, but instead seem to focus their attention on the parts of news that affect them personally. Across all of the news stories examined here, self-interest seems to, on average, increase attention by about 8%. By comparison, the average difference in attention between those with the least and most education is about 10%; both general and specialist motives drive attention to a similar extent. The answer to whether citizens are generalists or specialists is clearly “yes.” Both sides seem to be right to some extent. A number of citizens are chronically attentive to political phenomena. In line with previous research findings, these citizens are well educated with relatively more life experience. At the same time, self-interest seems to serve as an additional source of motivation for attending to political issues. Our findings support the view that citizens need not be generally attentive to be exposed to information that affects them personally.

Notes

1. We use the term “selective exposure” broadly to refer to a preference for any particular sort of information (see, e.g., Holbrook et al., 2005; Iyengar et al., 2008).

2. As we discuss at length below, we equate group identity with an individual’s self-interest. This draws not only from a large literature in social psychology on the antecedents of attitude importance (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995), but also from literature on “linked fate” in political science (Dawson, 1994; Gay & Tate, 1998; Herring, Jankowski, & Brown, 1999; Simien, 2005; Tate, 1994). Simien (2005, p. 529) defines linked fate as “an acute sense of awareness (or recognition) that what happens to the group will also affect the individual member.” For instance, among African Americans, perceptions of linked fate arise from shared experiences of oppression, and this “stage of identification, where individuals come to see themselves as sharing a linked fate with other African Americans, leads to collective action as a necessary form of resistance” (Simien, 2005, p. 530; Dawson, 1994; Tate, 1994).

3. Individual differences in awareness affect the connection between self-interest and policy choices because exposure to cueing communications alters the priority given to self-interest in decision making (Chong, Citrin, & Conley, 2001; Miller, 1999).

4. An additional, growing literature examines partisan selective exposure, which attempts to link party identifiers or ideologues to particular news media or to particular news stories (see, for example, Dilliplane, 2011; Feldman, 2011; Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2007, 2008, 2010). This literature is obviously relevant, but we focus here on studies about non-partisan, non-ideological forms of self-interest. We also focus on exposure or attention to group-relevant stories, not specifically on stories that are congenial or uncongenial to one’s particular group, party affiliation, or predispositions.

5. Note that “researchers typically make inferences about respondents’ self-interest by making their own analysis of the consequences of [a] policy [or issue] for different [demographic] groups in society” (Chong et al., 2001, p. 542). Objective measures of self-interest have been shown to differ significantly from subjective assessments and to be more closely connected to an individual’s opinions (Chong et al., 2001, p. 545). Differentiating issue public members from nonmembers can be “a controversial decision because it can be done in a number of different ways” (Krosnick & Telhami,

1995, p. 538). One limitation of our approach is that it may misidentify or fail to fully identify all issue public members. Another method of identifying issue publics is to ask survey respondents directly how important an issue is to them personally (Anand & Krosnick, 2003, p. 37). Nonetheless, our approach is widely used throughout this literature.

6. Self-relevant information also leads to higher levels of encoding and recall (Dutta & Kanungo, 1975; Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977).

7. Knowledge accumulation is the result of selective exposure to self-relevant information and selective elaboration of related information. The implication of this is that “most citizens are likely to be knowledgeable about the few issues that they care deeply about and are therefore equipped to be ‘responsible voters’ if and only if they are first attentive to those issues” (Holbrook et al., 2005, p. 767).

8. This battery of questions was typically at the beginning of each survey, with some surveys including the battery as the first question and others as late as the 27th question. The median starting point for the battery within each survey instrument was as the third question.

9. We also found stories related to other groups (Catholics, Latinos, union members, etc.) but excluded them prior to the analysis due to the limited number of stories our theory would expect these groups to attend to. Our mapping of the three main groups in our analysis is consistent with the “group interest” literature, which maintains that “category membership and identification with a group and a sense of shared fate lead to group-based assessments of self-interest” (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993, p. 445; see also Bobo, 1983, 1988; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Jackman & Muha, 1984; Mutz & Mondak, 1997).

10. When two or more group-relevant stories were found in a single survey for the same group (e.g., women), each was excluded from the global follows calculation. When group-relevant stories were found for multiple groups (e.g., women and older Americans) in the same survey, separate calculations of global follows were made for each group (excluding only the story relevant to their group).

11. The number of observed levels (and cutpoints on the latent exposure variable) for the global and specific measures is identical. Averaging responses to all questions maintains the observed range of this outcome and its comparability to the specific measure, though our results are generally robust to alternative coding of the outcome measures.

12. The choice of a dummy variable in these models aids substantive comparison across the three identified groups (females, Blacks, and older Americans). While responses to the age question are continuous, we use age as an indicator, with those 60 and older set to 1 and those 59 and under set to 0. Models that include alternative specifications of age (including a binary split at 65 or a continuous predictor) provide substantively similar results, and models containing a binary split at 60 or 65 produce statistically similar results. The choice of 60 attempts to include those at (early) retirement age in addition to nearly retirement age.

13. Education and income are both ordinal variables ranging from 1 to 8. Republican and Democrat are dummy variables. This specification reflects the nonlinear relationship between partisanship and news attention (i.e., Democrats and Republicans are generally more attentive than nonpartisans, but neither group is more attentive than the other). On a subset of surveys where a follow-up “leans”-type party identification question was asked, those who leaned toward one party or the other were coded .5 in the respective variables.

14. Modeling with OLS or using the full interval scale of the global measure yields substantively and statistically comparable results. In the analysis presented here, we use the four-category global measure to preserve comparability with the specific measure and to ease presentation of results.

15. It is also possible that respondents reacted to race, age, or sex-related cues in the questions, leading them to provide socially desirable responses (i.e., reporting more attention to stories that they “should” be attentive to). We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

16. Due to space constraints and for clarity of presentation, we do not report the full results for all global and specific models. Also, note that we include partisanship variables in all models. Democrats are typically slightly more attentive than Republicans and Independents, though the latter groups do not generally differ from one another and Republicans are sometimes more attentive than

Independents (one or both partisanship variables were significant for 34 general attention models). Democrats are, similarly, more attentive to 27 specific stories than Independents, as are Republicans in 10 instances.

17. The results of the analysis of older Americans' attention to news in the 2006 HNI060 survey are potential outliers due to the large oversampling of adults age 65 and older. The core sample size is 1,217, with an oversample of 1,300. Excluding results from this survey, the average values of coefficients and their difference are similar: $\beta_{\text{global}} = 0.15$, $\beta_{\text{specific}} = 0.49$, and $\beta_{\text{specific}} - \beta_{\text{global}} = 0.34$.

18. Given our directional hypotheses, our statistical significance tests are one-tailed t tests for differences between the coefficients for each group's indicator in the specific and general models, under the assumption that general follows and specific follows are uncorrelated. These two measures are sometimes positively correlated, however, although these correlations never exceed .50 when present.

19. In fact, for only four stories in the entire sample is specific attention lower than global attention on stories regarding RU486 (female, 2000), Social Security (age, 2000), and Medicare (age, 2003 and 2004). In each of these cases, however, the specific coefficient is not significantly different from the global coefficient.

20. These stories are the debate over Ebonics (1997), news that African Americans are disproportionately more likely to suffer heart failure (2004), Rosa Parks's death (2005), and news of Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts (2006).

21. While this is the smallest difference between general and specific attention, it reflects statistically significant differences in most cases. For 11 of 18 surveys, this difference is statistically significant at $p < .01$, and in one additional survey the difference is marginally significant at $p < .10$. In three of the remaining surveys, attention to stories we identified as group-relevant was lower than general attention: one about Social Security (2000) and two about Medicare (2003 and 2004).

22. These results come from an analysis of iPOLLS data sets USPEW2002-06NII for Catholics (question 5g) and USPSRA2006-HNI059 for Hispanics (question 2d). The regression models are identical to the other analyses but include additional indicator variables for these two groups.

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