

SELF-INTEREST, GROUP INTEREST, AND VALUES:
THE DETERMINANTS OF MASS ATTITUDES TOWARDS
FOREIGN AID IN DONOR COUNTRIES

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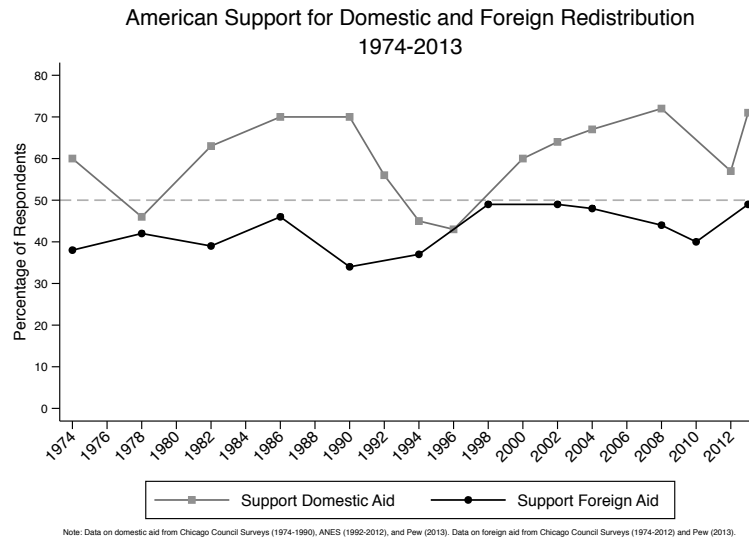
Chapter 1

Introduction

Self-Interest, Group Interest, and Values: The Determinants of Mass Attitudes towards Foreign Aid in Donor Countries investigates the puzzle of public support for foreign aid in donor countries. Despite little evidence that individuals in donor countries benefit directly from foreign aid, a large percentage of donor publics have supported foreign aid policies at one moment in time or another. Across countries, American support for foreign aid is among the lowest and the U.S. is one of the most stingy donors in terms of foreign aid as a percentage of Gross National Income. Yet, even in the United States, support for foreign aid has hovered at just under 50% since the 1970s. The percentage of Americans supporting foreign aid has ranged between 40% and 50% in every survey since the American National Election Study and Chicago Council on Foreign Relations began asking about foreign aid. Examining the distribution of support for foreign aid over time as compared to something like support for welfare programs (see Figure 1.1) reveals that this percentage is relatively constant over time and much of the variation in attitudes towards foreign aid is between individuals in a single survey rather than between survey years.

What then explains variation in public support for foreign aid in donor countries

Figure 1.1: **Public Opinion Towards Domestic and Foreign Aid in the United States**



like the United States? This question is a familiar one to scholars of political behavior and international political economy, but has received limited attention in the context of foreign aid. This study aims to change that. The framework I use to answer this question is drawn from the literature on domestic redistribution. The use of this framework builds on work by scholars such as Berinsky (2009) who argues in his study of mass attitudes towards international conflict that “public opinion about war is shaped by the same attitudes and orientations that shape domestic politics” (2). It also takes seriously the recent proposal by Cunningham and Lemke (2013) that the international and domestic contexts should be studied together. Again their arguments are about the study of warfare, but they make sense for the study of redistribution as well. Indeed, they note that “theories of conflict focus on phenomena—such as information asymmetries, commitment problems, and issue divisibility—that should explain both conflicts within and between states” (609). Applying this same logic

to the study of redistribution, we can examine the ways in which the “phenomena” that explain variation in support for domestic redistribution help us to understand variation in support for redistribution in the international context.

There are three such phenomena pointed to by the literature on support for redistribution in the domestic context. In her recent book on public opinion about redistribution, Wong (2010) characterizes them in the following way:

Social scientists tend to rely on concepts such as self-interest, group interest, and ideology in their models for explaining how people decide on whose behalf they should act and who has a right to public services and shared resources. In essence, current understanding about what motivates redistributive behavior boils down to three statements: (1) we want to help ourselves, (2) we want to help those in our groups, and (3) we want to apply our values — such as egalitarianism or individualism — and ideas about the role of government widely, not just to a small subset of the population (2).

Although past research on foreign aid has devoted considerable attention to the relationship between welfare and foreign aid (see e.g. Lumsdaine (1993); Noël and Thérien (1995, 2000, 2002)), my dissertation will be the first to examine whether and how the factors that shape mass attitudes towards welfare also help us understand public support towards foreign aid. To this end, the following chapters take up each of the phenomena highlighted by Wong respectively — self-interest, group interest, and ideology — and explore their relationship to support for foreign aid.

Chapter 2, *Material Interests: The Self and the Nation*, investigates the self-interest hypothesis. Although a considerable amount of past research focuses on the extent to which self-interest shapes attitudes towards foreign economic policies, few have investigated whether self-interest shapes opinion towards foreign aid. Moreover,

the few studies on self-interest and foreign aid have provided mixed evidence in support of the relationship. These mixed findings, however, are largely the result of including objective proxies for self-interest in existing models of public opinion about foreign aid rather than building theory about the role of self-interest in foreign aid attitude formation. This study fills that gap in the literature and argues that the costs and benefits of foreign aid are neither clear nor salient to individuals in donor countries leading few individuals to believe that foreign aid affects their economic standing. By contrast, I argue that the costs and benefits of foreign aid to the nation are made clearer by elites, leading national interests to be a stronger predictor of attitudes towards foreign aid. I test these arguments using original surveys fielded in the United States and United Kingdom. I provide both observational and experimental evidence in support of the theory.

In Chapter 3, *Transnational Ties and Group Interests*, I examine the role of group interest through a study of the effects of transnational ties on individual support for foreign aid. Although globalization and international migration have led more people than ever to have personal connections that cross national borders, we know little about how these personal connections affect attitudes towards foreign aid. In this study, I argue that transnational ties increase support for foreign aid via two possible mechanisms: group interests and cosmopolitanism. I test this theory using an original survey experiment embedded in a national survey of 1,000 Latino Americans. I find that Latinos vary significantly in the strength of their foreign ties and the strength of these ties is strongly correlated with support for U.S. foreign aid. The findings from the experiment, which varies the location of a U.S. foreign aid program, provides evidence in support of the cosmopolitan mechanism: Latinos with transnational ties

equally support aid to Africa and aid to Latin America. A test of the generalizability of the findings to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States and United Kingdom reveal however that group interests may be a more powerful mechanism outside of the Latino American community. This study introduces an important new explanatory variable into the study of international redistribution and provides insight into the emerging link between international migration and foreign aid.

Finally, Chapter 4, *Values at the Water's Edge* looks at how values shape attitudes towards foreign aid. Prior research on public opinion about foreign aid points to the importance of values related to the welfare state such as economic ideology. Scholars argue that liberals, who support redistribution at home, also support redistribution abroad in the form of foreign aid. Yet, the conditions under which individuals apply values learned in the domestic political context to issues of foreign policy remain undertheorized. In this article, I argue that ideology interacts with foreign policy orientation – individuals' placement along the internationalist/isolationist spectrum – to shape mass attitudes towards foreign aid. Using data from public opinion surveys fielded in three different donor countries – the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway – I show that ideology is strongly associated with support for foreign aid among internationalists, but has little effect on isolationists' foreign aid preferences. The interaction also reveals a split among liberals: Liberal internationalists strongly favor foreign aid, but liberal isolationists oppose it. These findings help explain why American and British support for foreign aid is lower than support in countries like Norway, why domestic welfare programs in some countries are more popular than foreign aid, and why some countries have generous welfare states but are foreign aid laggards.

In summary, this dissertation offers new theory and data to advance our understanding of why individuals in donor countries support foreign aid. The final chapter distills these theoretical contributions and findings, and offers reflections on steps for future research.