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MATERIAL HEURISTICS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD REDISTRIBUTION

ABSTRACT: According to the material-heuristics hypothesis, people's socioeconomic position affects their perceptions about the socioeconomic environment, including how society distributes opportunities and rewards and to what extent people are responsible for their own economic situation. These perceptions, in turn, affect attitudes toward wealth redistribution. In contrast to the material-heuristics hypothesis are the more familiar material self-interest hypothesis, which relates redistributive attitudes to one's personal interest in gaining or losing from redistribution; and the self-serving reasoning hypothesis, according to which perceptions of how society distributes opportunities and rewards are a consequence rather than a cause of attitudes toward redistribution, which are, in turn, driven by material self-interest. All three hypotheses connect socioeconomic position and attitudes toward redistribution, but only the material-heuristics and the self-serving reasoning arguments account for why perceptions of the causes of wealth and poverty vary across economic groups and why this variation matters for attitudes toward redistribution. Ignoring the role of such perceptions can lead to the simplistic attribution of attitudes toward redistribution to personal self-interest.

Keywords: *material heuristics; material self-interest; self-serving reasoning; heuristics; redistribution.*

The Michigan school of opinion research, beginning with its seminal volume on *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), sparked a prolific

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literature on information and the intellectual capacity of the public to reason about politics. This research was also furthered by Philip E. Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" ([1964] 2006), which pictured ordinary voters as minimally interested, ideologically unsophisticated, poorly informed, and intertemporally inconsistent in their opinions about political issues. Pushing these findings to their limit, one should expect people to hold a disarray of meaningless, random attitudes about policy issues, especially when they are not salient (Bishop 2004; Bourdieu 1972; Page 2007).

One of the most notable reactions to the "incompetent voter" literature was the revisionist claim that people use heuristics to form opinions about political objects. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" discussed ignorance of ideologies (i.e., liberalism and conservatism) that might otherwise have helped people make sense of political information. The revisionists argued that, to compensate for the absence of ideology as an organizing cognitive scheme, people use heuristic reasoning.

Heuristics are cognitive "judgment shortcuts" that compensate for information and knowledge gaps (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993). In sharp contrast to the practice among academic psychologists, for whom the use of heuristics indicates defects in reasoning, scholars advancing the heuristics paradigm in political science claimed that decisions based on heuristic reasoning can be as good as, or better than, decisions based on careful examination of the details of the subject (Lupia 1994; Tetlock 2017). And by marrying heuristics with rational-choice theory, revisionist political scientists were able to treat the former as elegant solutions to the problem of information acquisition given low incentives and high costs. Information acquisition demands investment, in this view (pioneered by the economist Anthony Downs in 1957), so rather than spending time and resources seeking detailed data and pondering the pros and cons of various aspects of policy alternatives and their consequences, voters use heuristics to form opinions about political issues.

In the revisionist literature, the *adequacy* of heuristics use as a substitute for full information was established more as a solution to an optimization problem under conditions of costly information acquisition than through an empirical comparison of heuristics use with adequate decisions, somehow normatively defined (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Arthur Lupia (1994), for example, showed that Californians who used as heuristics the automobile insurance industry's opposition to a ballot proposition

about car insurance voted the same way as did people who knew some of the provisions of the proposition. That did not mean, however, that “those who knew the provisions relatively well were indeed adequately informed” (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000, 158).

A different approach asks not about the adequacy of heuristics as a substitute for complete information, but as a mechanism governing decision making and opinion formation, regardless of whether this produces suboptimal results. Richard Lau and David Redlawsk (2001) list a variety of heuristics that political scientists have proposed in attempting to account for public opinion. One is the endorsement heuristic: the use of information about the supporters of a policy or candidate to infer the policy’s content or the candidate’s platform; or the reliance on endorsements from trusted, esteemed individuals or well-known public figures, such as artists or former political leaders (Mondak 1993). Another is something we can call the popularity heuristic: the use of perceived support for a policy or candidate, or perceived consensus about the desirability or popularity of a policy (McKelvey and Ordeshook 1985; Mutz 1992). Likability heuristics use feelings toward other groups to infer their policy position and form an opinion about it (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993). Candidates’ physical appearance, too, can provide clues that people use to form their opinions of issues (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Perceptions about the ideology of candidates associated with political proposals also provide information shortcuts for people trying to make sense of the consequences of proposed policies. Voters can infer that a policy involves tax reduction, for instance, if the proponents are associated with right-wing or conservative parties (Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985); this contradicts the Michigan view of voters as ignorant of the policy implications of ideologies.

More consistent with the Michigan view, however, is the use of party identification as a heuristic (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). According to this perspective, party identification begins at early stages of political socialization and remains an enduring feature of one’s political identity (Campbell et al. 1960). In contrast to the idea that people judge parties by the match of their issue positions to an ideology, party identification is said to precede and inform judgments about issues, policies, and candidates alike (Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Lodge and Hamill 1986; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Rahn 1993). Finally, scholars have shown that people use a “deservingness” heuristic to orient their attitudes

about welfare. This refers to the use of perceptions of whether the recipients of welfare deserve it to determine their support for such programs (Gilens 2009; Larsen 2008; Oorschot 2000; Oorschot 2006; Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011; Petersen et al. 2012).

This list suggests, contrary to the original revisionist idea, that heuristics use does not necessarily lead to accurate decisions in the sense that they are as good as those made by well-informed agents. Similarly, in what follows, I propose a hypothesis about a heuristic mechanism that I will call *material heuristics*. The mechanism highlighted by this hypothesis helps us understand how people's objective socioeconomic position (SEP) can affect their subjective perceptions of how the society distributes economic opportunities and rewards; and how, in turn, those perceptions affect opinions about redistributive policies. According to this hypothesis, people use judgments about the causes of their own material circumstances (their own SEP), such as whether these circumstances are their own doing or are exogenously caused, as heuristics for how wealth is distributed in society at large, which then determines whether they favor or oppose wealth redistribution.

Material Heuristics

There is a robust association across countries between SEP and people's opinions about redistributive policies (Guillaud 2013). SEP refers to objective socioeconomic traits of individuals such as their household income, occupation status, and level of education (Adler et al. 1994; Berzofsky et al. 2014; Bollen, Glanville, and Stecklov 2001).¹ Scholars have shown that the higher people's income and occupational status, the less they favor redistributive policies designed to mitigate market inequalities (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Alesina and Giuliano 2010; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Anderson and Pontusson 2007; Bean and Papadakis 1998; Cusack, Iversen and Rehm 2006; Finseraas 2008; Finseraas 2009; Morgan and Kelly 2010; Rueda 2018). How can we explain this connection?

The usual explanation emphasizes respondents' rational calculations of material self-interest (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Anderson and Pontusson 2007; Rehm 2009). SEP matters, according to this hypothesis, because "people care about how redistribution affects their net income" (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005). An alternative explanation suggests that SEP (or people's income, more narrowly) affects

redistributive preferences because it creates group identity, especially for the middle class (Lupu and Pontusson 2011). In this view, “middle-income voters empathize with the poor . . . to the extent that they live in the same neighborhoods, send their children to the same schools, and circulate within the same social networks” (Lupu and Pontusson 2011; see also McPherson et al. 2001). Although, in this perspective, the groups in the middle of the income distribution form attitudes about redistribution on the basis of class affinity, objective material self-interest is used to explain the subjective preferences of the low- and high-income groups. Often, it is taken for granted that voters are informed well enough to know that a policy leads to a net cost or benefit for them personally, and it is assumed that this knowledge is an important driver of their redistribution-policy attitudes.

However, SEP may matter for redistribution-policy attitudes not only because of class affinity or people’s material self-interest, but because it affects how people subjectively and differentially *perceive* (or *misperceive*) their broader political and socioeconomic environment. That is, people may heterogeneously perceive how the system operates to distribute economic resources, and how much that distribution depends on forces exogenous to individual efforts. Thus, people use their understanding of the reasons for their own material conditions to infer the mechanisms behind inequality and material success in the society at large. Perceptions about society-wide conditions and the distribution of economic resources are based on people’s interpretations of their own objective experiences with economic insecurity and their (perhaps lack of) struggle in providing material comfort for themselves and their families. People who always experience favorable material conditions may thus tend to believe that everyone else has enough opportunities to succeed, or that success is a matter of willpower and effort. Those less fortunate, on the other hand, may tend to emphasize exogenous constraints. In short, one’s interpretations of the reasons for own material circumstances are used as heuristics for material conditions at large. The two key points about material heuristics are first, that they are affected by people’s objective SEP; yet, second, that they can lead to perceptions about real-world conditions, in that people heuristically generalize to society at large their interpretations of the causes of their own material conditions.

Note that the material-heuristics mechanism shares some similarities, but is different from, the deservingness-heuristic hypothesis. For the

latter, people form their opinions about redistribution by considering their interpretations of those whom they perceive as receiving such assistance, and these perceptions can be motivated by factors such as racism (Gilens 2009; Larsen 2006; Van Oorschot 2000; Sniderman et al. 1991). Martin Gilens (2009), for instance, argues that white Americans oppose welfare because they perceive blacks as lazy. People using the deservingness heuristic can rely on various different cues, but people's own SEP does not figure among them (see Van Oorschot 2000). In contrast, the material-heuristics hypothesis states that people's SEP affects their perceptions of the causes of the distribution of economic resources in society. However, the two heuristic mechanisms are similar in that the material-heuristics mechanism can trigger deservingness considerations and even intensify perceptions of other groups' deservingness that originate in (for example) racism.

Socioeconomic Positions and Perceptions

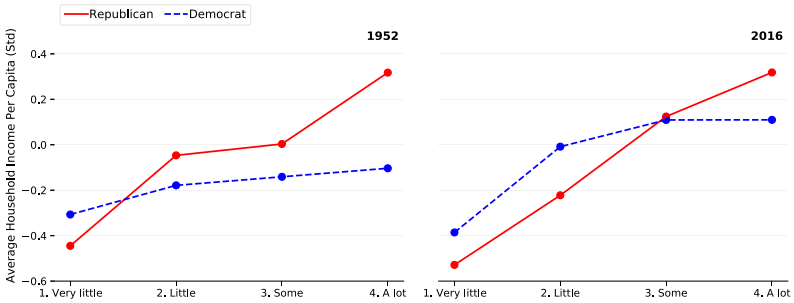
Some authors define “perception” as a fallible belief about factual conditions (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) or work with the idea of *misperception*, which contrasts factual beliefs against a “ground truth” supported by available evidence (ibid.). But we need not judge the accuracy of perceptions of facts to recognize that they are one of the core drivers of people's attitudes and actions. The evaluation of perceptions against a ground truth becomes secondary if we are to understand them empirically rather than passing judgment on them normatively—as the revisionists did in asserting the adequacy of heuristics, i.e., in asserting that they served as proxies for accurate information. What becomes more relevant is whether, how, and why those perceptions (or misperceptions) vary across individuals and social groups, and what the consequences of that variation are.

Perceptions are not randomly distributed. Political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have long argued that perceptions are affected by features such as partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960), motivated reasoning (Druckman 2012; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Taber and Lodge 2006), and social class (Atkinson 2013; Bourdieu 1984). The material-heuristics argument states that SEP may affect perceptions as well.

SEP can affect perceptions because it affects people's everyday experiences and the constraints they face in attaining their material goals. Those experiences not only create identity (Lupu and Pontusson 2011) but can

affect perceptions about how the socioeconomic environment operates. For instance, low-income groups are more likely to think they are not in control of their lives, in contrast to high-income groups (Johnson and Krueger 2005). Low-income population members tend to believe less in their own efficacy and capacity to achieve various goals, and feel more constrained by external forces, than those with higher incomes (Gurin and Gurin 1970; Gurin et al. 1978; Lefcourt 1981). These findings are consistent with research indicating that those in lower economic classes tend to attribute both good and bad life outcomes and income inequality to exogenous forces (Grossmann and Varnum 2011). In contrast, those in upper-income groups have a higher propensity to perceive themselves as having freedom of choice, and they tend to attribute inequality to agency, effort, merit, and biologically inherited abilities (Kraus et al. 2009; Kraus et al. 2012). Ramaswami Mahalingam (2003) shows that upper-class individuals are more likely to adopt folk-essentialist theories of social classes, as shown, for example, in agreement with the proposition that a transplanted brain from a rich person can make a poor person rich.

Figure 1. Average Income and Perception of Opportunity to Get Ahead in Life



Source: ANES 1952 and 2016, available at <https://electionstudies.org/>

Note: The question in 2016 was, “How much opportunity is there in America today for the average person to get ahead?” In 1952, the question was, “Some people say there’s not much opportunity in America today, that the average man doesn’t have much chance to really get ahead. Others say there’s plenty of opportunity, and anyone who works hard can go as far as he wants. How do you feel about this?”

American National Election Survey (ANES) panel data from 1952 and 2016 provide support for those arguments about class differences in socioeconomic perceptions. [Figure 1](#) shows the average household income per capita (standardized) by groups in response to the question, “How much opportunity is there in America today for the average person to get ahead?” Notice that the question targets perceptions of opportunity for the average person, not for respondents or the members of any specific social group. Regardless of partisanship, the average income of those who believe that there is no or little opportunity to get ahead is lower than those who think there are some or a lot of opportunities. Among Democrats, the average income in 2016 of those who believed that there are a lot of opportunities for the average person to get ahead was 1.6 times higher than it was for those who stated that there is no opportunity. Among Republicans, it was 2.23 times higher.

The years 1952 and 2016 were very different, but material heuristics may have been operating in both cases. People who believed there were few or very few opportunities had income below the average, while those who thought that there were some or a lot of opportunities had income above the average. The hypothesis is that they were interpreting their own experiences, which are affected by their SEP, in terms that they then projected onto society at large.

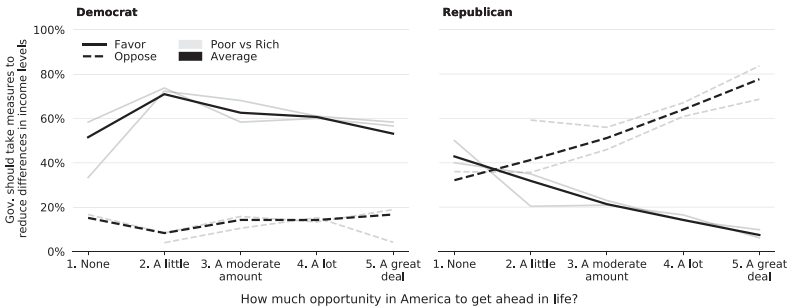
Socioeconomic Perceptions and Redistributive Preferences

Material heuristics matter because subjective perceptions can affect political opinions, attitudes, and behavior. Particularly, scholars have shown that perceptions about inequality, fairness, economic performance, and risk affect redistributive policy preferences. Studies have shown that not only do people tend to perceive levels of inequality differently, regardless of how the objective measures are constructed (Bavetta et al. 2017; Engelhardt and Wagener 2017; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018), but that perceived rather than actual levels of inequality affect redistributive attitudes (Choi 2019; Eriksson and Simpson 2012; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). Other work has demonstrated that perceptions about the *fairness* of inequality, rather than its level, matters. Inequality is often viewed as fair and acceptable when people think it reflects and rewards differences in effort, hard work, or merit, which diminishes support for redistribution (Alesina and Giuliano 2010; Gilens 2009; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Miller 1992; Piketty 1995). As Guangeun

Choi (2019) points out, it is reasonable to expect that “voters who think the level of inequality is serious and unacceptable, irrespective of the level of actual inequality, [will] demand more redistribution.” Similarly, Christian Albrekt Larsen (2008) shows that the number of job opportunities can affect perceptions of deservingness and redistributive policy attitudes. Alberto Alesina and Eliana La Ferrara (2005) show that Americans tend to believe more than Europeans that voluntary effort and hard work are rewarded with economic success, with those who believe that economic success is the result of merit and effort less supportive of redistribution. Conversely, those who attribute economic success to social context rather than individual agency are more inclined to support redistributive policies (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Alesina and Giuliano 2010; Fong 2001; Piketty 1995).

The 2016 ANES provides evidence that perceptions of societal conditions matter for attitudes toward redistribution. The survey asked respondents whether “the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” Figure 2 shows the percentages of Democrats and Republicans who opposed or favored the proposition, and how those percentages vary based on perceptions about opportunities for the average person to get ahead in life. The first noticeable difference in

Figure 2. Support for Policies to Reduce Differences in Income Levels, 2016



Source: ANES 2016, available at <https://electionstudies.org/>

Note: The question represented in the x-axis was, “How much opportunity is there in America today for the average person to get ahead?” On the y-axis, the percentages represent those who agreed or disagreed with the statement, “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” The “poor” in the figure are those with income below the average. The “rich” are those with income above the average.

Figure 2 is by partisanship. Only about 30 percent of Republicans who believed that there were no opportunities to get ahead opposed measures to reduce differences between income levels. However, 80 percent opposed such measures if they thought that there were many opportunities to get ahead. There were similar tendencies among Democrats, but they were less stark. Around 70 percent of Democrats who believed the system provided few opportunities for the average person favored redistribution, but only 55 percent of those who thought there were many opportunities.

The second thing to notice about Figure 2 is that the income groups behave similarly. The grey lines in the figure represent the poor and rich groups. I classified as “poor” those whose income was below average; otherwise, people were classified as rich. The proportion of both poor and rich who support redistribution diminished as they perceived more opportunity for the average person to get ahead. That is, the proportion of poor people who were against redistribution increased if they believed that there were ample opportunities, and the proportion of rich people who supported redistribution increased if they believed that there was little opportunity for the average person to get ahead. Arguably, both tendencies (poor against redistribution and rich favoring it) contradicted the respondents’ objective material self-interest.

Material Heuristics, Self-Interest, and Redistributive Preferences

Let us consider the information in Figure 1 and Figure 2 together but ignore the partisan differences for a moment. According to Figure 1, as income increases, people tend to perceive that their socioeconomic environment offers many opportunities for an average person to get ahead in life. According to Figure 2, the more people think that there are plenty of opportunities to get ahead in life, the less they support government measures to reduce economic inequalities. This suggests that socioeconomic perceptions are crucial factors that need to be taken into account when one investigates the relationship between SEP and redistributive attitudes. But how?

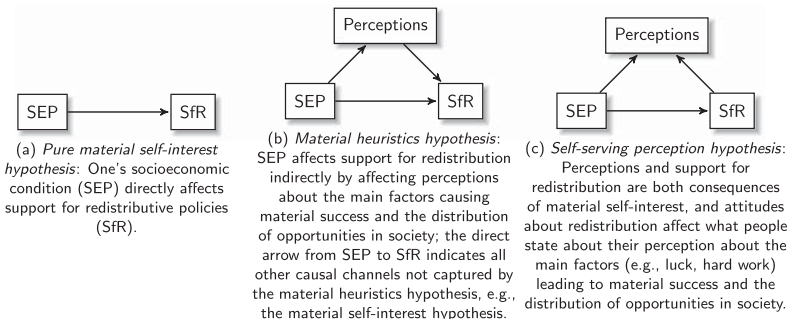
The material self-interest thesis attempts to connect SEP and redistributive preferences, but it is silent about the relationship between SEP and socioeconomic perceptions. The material heuristics argument fills this

gap: SEP affects perceptions about the socioeconomic environment, and those perceptions affect policy preferences. People in low (or high) SEP face more (or fewer) economic constraints, so they are more likely (or less) to *believe* that society does not provide many opportunities for people to succeed. As a consequence, they favor (or oppose) redistributive and compensatory state policies. If this hypothesis is correct, perceptions about the role of luck, hard work, merit, and self-determination work as a mediator of the relationship between SEP and policy preferences. (A mediator variable Z between X and Y is a variable caused by X which then causes Y, directly or indirectly.)

But it can be the case that the relationship between policy attitudes and socioeconomic perceptions runs in the other direction, such that the former affect the latter. Suppose that people with low income want more redistribution because of their material self-interest. The most “convenient” attitude for them to report on surveys would be that the socioeconomic environment provides few opportunities to get ahead in life, or that success is mostly due to luck or exogenous forces more than hard work. Similarly, people with high incomes who want less redistribution to avoid a higher tax burden can justify such a policy preference, which may reflect a materially self-interested motivation, by reporting a belief in self-determination, or a perception that hard work is the main cause of success in society. It is in the material self-interest of high-income people to exaggerate the role of self-determination and of opportunities to get ahead as a cause of material well-being. By the same token, it can be psychologically more comforting for those with low incomes to blame forces outside of their control as the cause of material hardship. In both cases, these beliefs produce a morally acceptable and cognitively more comfortable justification for their self-interest in redistribution, as well as for their own SEP. The mechanism can be either an unconscious or a conscious rationalization. We can talk about *perception* as long as this is an unconscious process, but *attitude falsification* may be a better term if it is a conscious mechanism. This argument is consistent with cognitive-dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), socially motivated reasoning arguments (von Hippel 2005), and self-serving cognitive mechanisms more generally (ibid.). In this case, the self-serving mechanism is self-preserving for the low SEP group and self-enhancing for the high SEP one (ibid.). I will refer to these arguments broadly as *self-serving* hypotheses about socioeconomic perceptions.

Although the distinction between conscious and unconscious processes is important in many contexts, it is less relevant for the purpose of comparing the implications of this mechanism against the material-heuristics hypothesis. What is relevant is that such a mechanism, conscious or unconscious, provides an alternative to the material-heuristics argument with testable implications and consequences for identification. Consider that the effect of SEP on socioeconomic perceptions, attitude falsification, or redistributive attitudes can be *direct* or *indirect*. For the *self-serving* explanation of the relationship between SEP and socioeconomic perceptions, the effect of the former on the latter is *direct* when people feel compelled to say, consciously or unconsciously, that there are not many opportunities in society to succeed despite hard work, and that the economy is therefore unjust, because this allows them to avoid blaming themselves for their economic condition. Similarly, high-SEP people can say the opposite to gratify themselves and legitimate their right to occupy their economic position. Alternatively, SEP can have an *indirect* effect on socioeconomic perceptions if material self-interest first affects one's attitudes about redistribution and then these affect perceptions of, or lead to rationalizations or attitude falsifications about, the role of hard work or exogenous forces in society, because they provide an additional narrative to morally justify being in favor or against redistribution in the first place. That is, in the case of the indirect effect of SEP on socioeconomic perceptions, the "true" motivation is material self-interest, which affects socioeconomic perceptions in part because it affects attitudes about redistribution. If this

Figure 3: Three Explanations for the Relation between Socioeconomic Position (SEP), Perceptions of the Socioeconomic Causes of Economic Success, and Support for Redistribution (SfR)



hypothesis is correct, perceptions about the role of luck, hard work, merit, and self-determination in society at large work as a *collider* of SEP and redistributive preferences, not as a mediator, as in the material-heuristics argument. (A collider Z, relative to two other variables X and Y, is a variable caused by both X and Y, directly or indirectly.)

Figure 3 summarizes the direction of the possible causal relations according to the material self-interest, material-heuristics, and self-serving reasoning hypotheses. The arrows represent the direction of causality between the different objects. In panel (a), the figure shows how the pure material self-interest hypothesis provides a reason why SEP may have a direct effect on support for redistributive policies (SfR), but it says nothing about the effect of either SEP or redistributive attitudes on socioeconomic perceptions. The direct arrows between SEP and SfR in the other panels represent the same explanation (material self-interest). Panel (b), representing the material-heuristics hypothesis, includes a path from SEP to SfR through perceptions about the causes of economic distribution. Panel (c) represents the hypothesis that socioeconomic perceptions are affected both directly and indirectly by SEP. The latter leads to redistributive policy attitudes, which affects perceptions of the causes of economic outcomes in society. This mechanism reflects a hypothetical self-serving psychological mechanism.

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Often, it is taken for granted that SEP matters because it determines material self-interest, but it can be misleading to assume that material self-interest is the only mechanism connecting SEP and attitudes toward redistribution. After all, the material self-interest hypothesis is an interpretation of empirical findings of the association between SEP and attitudes toward redistribution. Those findings seem to lend powerful, *a posteriori* support to the *a priori* self-interest or *Homo economicus* assumption. The latter assumption itself, however, cannot be demonstrated theoretically because one might just as easily assume, *a priori*, that people are, at the bottom, sociotropically and morally motivated. Yet—in the absence of an alternative, such as the material-heuristics hypothesis—the self-interest assumption seems to explain the empirical evidence that the poor favor redistribution more than the rich, vindicating *a posteriori* what is (on this issue) otherwise a merely theoretical claim.

The material-heuristics hypothesis, in contrast, is consistent with the possibility that people have sociotropic motivations and findings that they are poorly informed about how the socioeconomic environment operates. A crucial aspect of the material-heuristics hypothesis is that material conditions do not mechanically determine political attitudes because of material self-interest. Instead, the hypothesis states that political attitudes toward redistribution are grounded in socioeconomic perceptions that are themselves affected by material conditions. If people from affluent groups think that economic distribution tends to be due to luck, because that is how they view their own experience, they may favor redistribution, which would require higher taxes. Impoverished people who think distribution tends to be due to work effort may oppose redistribution that could bring benefits to themselves. On the other hand, if the rich think their material comfort is attributable to their own hard work, they may infer that work effort generally determines economic distribution, leading them to oppose redistribution for sociotropic reasons—but also creating the spurious appearance that this policy preference is based on self-interest. And if the poor perceive the persistence of their poverty as due to unfair barriers and extrapolate this perception to society at large, it can lead to preferences for redistribution that are actually sociotropic and only spuriously self-interested.

Thus, if we relax aprioristic commitments to *Homo economicus* and allow for the possibility that people's political opinions are also sociotropic and motivated by moral judgments, we open the door to a causal role for perceptions of socioeconomic conditions. The material-heuristics hypothesis offers a seemingly plausible mechanism by means of which people form these perceptions. If perceptual mechanisms are ignored *a priori* in favor of the MSI interpretation, such that SEP can only matter because it generates material self-interest (rather than generating perceptions of the way the socioeconomic environment works), we can misinterpret sociotropic evaluations and moral judgments grounded in SEP as self-interested.

Despite the focus on perceptions about causes of economic outcomes in this paper, it is important to notice that the material-heuristics argument is more general. It can operate to affect the formation of perceptions about other related aspects of the socioeconomic environment, such as the fairness of inequality, levels of crime, and economic development. These possibilities remain largely underinvestigated.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Those familiar with issues related to the identification of causal effects may have already foreseen the consequences for empirical analysis of the arguments presented in the paper, as summarized in [Figure 3](#). In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between the factors displayed in that Figure. Other variables surely matter (e.g., partisanship), but to simplify the exposition I will avoid complications that would emerge if those variables were considered. Despite this simplification, the issues I point out below can inform analysis of more complicated cases.

Panel (a) in [Figure 3](#) captures a pure material self-interest argument, panel (b) the material-heuristics hypothesis, and panel (c) the self-serving reasoning explanation. First, suppose that one wants to investigate the relationship between perceptions and support for redistribution. In that case, SEP is either a confounder (panels (b) and (c)), that is, a variable affecting both perceptions and support for redistribution, or it is simply irrelevant (panel (a)). If the hypothesis depicted in either panel (b) or (c) holds, then the empirical analysis must adjust for SEP unless one is able to manipulate perceptions of support for redistribution in an experimental setting, which can be difficult to achieve. If experimental manipulation of perceptions is achievable and hypothesis (b) holds, such an experiment would demonstrate that attitudes change as socioeconomic perceptions are altered. If hypothesis (c) holds instead, no effect would be observed. If that experiment cannot be conducted, then we need to adjust for SEP, which can be accomplished by comparing the relationship between socioeconomic perceptions and support for redistribution among different SEP groups separately or using techniques that achieve this by default, such as regression models with SEP as an additive covariate.

To see why this adjustment is needed in observational studies, suppose that when SEP increases, both socioeconomic perceptions (e.g., the degree to which people agree that there are very few opportunities to get ahead in life) and support for redistribution declines. If we ignored this effect of SEP and looked at socioeconomic perceptions and support for redistribution only, we might overestimate the effect of perceptions on support for redistribution when in fact, part of the reason why both decline together is that SEP increases. Thus, Christina Fong (2001, 228) argues that socioeconomic perceptions drive positions on redistribution, and she speculates that “people who believe in exogenous determination may be those who have low-mean, high-variance incomes . . . [while] those who believe in self-determination may simply be people who have higher-mean, lower-variance incomes” (see also Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). I agree that “the effect of these beliefs on redistributive preferences may be spurious if they are correlated with income, and self-interest is not properly controlled for.” Based on the above discussion and the relations represented in [Figure 3](#), this is true regardless of whether socioeconomic perceptions cause redistributive attitudes or vice versa. In either case, SEP (or income) causes both redistributive attitudes and socioeconomic perceptions. In other words, SEP is a confounder if we are interested in the relationship between socioeconomic perceptions and support for redistribution.

Now suppose that we are interested in investigating the *direct* effect of SEP on redistributive attitudes, that is, the effect that is not mediated by socioeconomic

perceptions. This effect can be interpreted as affirming the material self-interest hypothesis, but there might also be other mediating factors unrelated to material self-interest. While I will assume for now that the direct effect represents material self-interest, we must keep in mind the caveat that it is, in fact, just the *effect of SEP that is not mediated by the perceptions we are considering*.

In this scenario, if the material heuristics hypothesis (panel (b)) is correct, we should adjust for socioeconomic perceptions when evaluating the direct effect of SEP on support for redistribution. Otherwise, we might overestimate the explanatory power of the material self-interest hypothesis. To see why, suppose that as SEP increases, it diminishes people's perception that exogenous factors (as opposed to hard work) are the main cause of economic success, and suppose further that the less people attribute success to exogenous factors, the less they are sympathetic to redistributive policies. If we ignore the change in redistributive attitudes due to socioeconomic perceptions and look at SEP and attitudes toward redistribution alone, we will notice that support for redistribution decreases as SEP increases, and we will mistakenly attribute that change to SEP and, in turn, material self-interest when in fact it is at least in part due to changes in perceptions about the causes of the distribution of economic rewards in society. Hence, we must adjust for such perceptions when evaluating the direct effect of SEP on support for redistribution.

However, if the self-serving reasoning hypothesis (c) is correct, then one should *not* adjust for socioeconomic perceptions. In this case, the overestimation occurs by including rather than excluding perceptions as adjustment variables in the empirical analysis. To see why, suppose that the higher (lower) the SEP, the less (more) people *claim* they believe in self-determination. Additionally, according to the self-serving reasoning argument, what people claim about their belief in self-determination is also affected by redistributive attitudes: The less they support redistribution, the more they claim that self-determination rather than luck determines economic success, because this provides moral support for their redistributive preference. If we divide the population by degree of support for the view that people's SEP is caused by self-determination (i.e., if we adjust for that perception), then to each group with high SEP, support for redistribution will tend to be low. But that is so because both SEP and support for redistribution affect what people claim about self-determination. This would overestimate the effect of SEP on support for redistribution. It works like a simple equation: $x + y = c$. If we adjust for (or, equivalently, fix the value of) c (e.g., socioeconomic perceptions), then whenever x (e.g., SEP) rises, y (e.g., support for redistribution) must decline. Fixing c at a given level (or adjusting for socioeconomic perceptions) artificially strengthens/creates a dependence between x (SEP) and y (support for redistribution). If we do not adjust for c , x and y can vary freely. In sum, if the self-serving reasoning argument is correct, we must *not* adjust for socioeconomic perceptions to investigate the direct effect of SEP on attitudes, but we must do so if the material-heuristics argument is correct.

Ultimately, the verdict on which mechanism operates is a matter of empirical investigation, but one of the reasons this discussion matters is that it imposes constraints to that investigation. These constraints, however, are often overlooked. First, the empirical identification of causal connections between SEP, socioeconomic perceptions, and support for redistribution needs to take into account theoretical

debate about the causal story connecting them, especially if experiments cannot be conducted. Objective SEP is something that researchers cannot manipulate at will. Some perceptions are not easily manipulated either. This is particularly the case if they are grounded in life-long experiences or “crafted” to fit motivations. We cannot force someone to perceive that society provides many opportunities. It is unlikely that, in the time frame of an experiment, we can truly convince people who have *unsuccessfully* worked hard and struggled for years to make ends meet that society fairly rewards hard work. This does not mean that people can’t change their minds or believe in meritocracy despite not experiencing it in their lives. But some “factual” beliefs, misperceived or not, are not easily manipulated. Because experiments can be difficult to conduct, investigations using observational data need to rely on assumptions about the structural causal relations between the factors.

Second, this discussion shows that it is important to take socioeconomic perceptions into account even for researchers who are interested in investigating not perceptions themselves but the role of rational decision making and material self-interest. A large body of literature argues, from different angles, that cognitive tendencies and perceptions about reality, rather than reality itself, are the ultimate factors affecting attitudes and behavior (Kahneman 2011; Nisbett and Ross 1980; Tversky and Kahneman 2000; Choi 2019; Eriksson and Simpson 2012; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). The discussion above adds to that understanding that it is not sufficient to consider perceptions when one is testing rationalist hypotheses such as material self-interest. We also need to carefully consider the explanations that justify how to place perceptions in the causal structure. This is true, in particular, of perceptions affected by the objective conditions that lay at the foundation of material self-interest arguments.

The self-serving reasoning and material-heuristics hypotheses lead to different identification requirements, but this is often overlooked. For instance, Peter Ordeshook (1986) argues that rational-choice arguments such as the material self-interest thesis depend on subjective perceptions. He states that “the presumption of purposeful choice implies that, *after taking account of people’s perceptions*, values, and beliefs, we can model their decisions by asserting that they act as if they make such calculations” (idem, p 2, emphasis added). The discussion above allows us to supplement Ordeshook’s statement and add that the “taking into account” of perceptions may not be as straightforward as it may seem, especially in observational studies of redistributive attitudes. It depends on arguments about the causal relationship between SEP, socioeconomic perceptions, beliefs, and redistributive attitudes. If the self-serving reasoning hypothesis is correct, then one must *not* adjust for perceptions to estimate the direct effect of SEP on attitudes, contrary to Ordeshook’s recommendation. But if the material-heuristics hypothesis is correct, then perceptions must indeed be taken into account or “adjusted for.”

NOTE

1. Although SEP and income are different, I will use them interchangeably, because my argument should apply to both narrower (income) and broader (SEP) definitions of individual-level socioeconomic conditions.

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