Rationally Speaking #187: Jason Weeden on, “Do people vote based on self-interest?”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest, Jason Weeden. Jason is a psychologist and a lawyer. He is the co-author, with Robert Kurzban, of the book The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind. He's also a blogger at Pleeps.org. P-L-E-E-P-S.org.

We're going to be talking today mostly about the thesis of his book, The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind, which is that when voters make choices about which politicians to vote for, or which policies they support, they are significantly motivated by their own self-interest. Maybe not 100%, but a lot more than we like to think -- and also a lot more than political scientists, or a lot of political scientists, think voters are. Jason, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Jason: Great to be here.

Julia: How'd I do with my summary of your thesis? Do you want to add or change anything?

Jason: No, that's exactly right. I mean, we mainly think about self-interest first of all as mattering more than a lot of political scientists think, but we also think about it mattering more broadly. Hitting more different kinds of issues.

Julia: So you're arguing that we should be defining self-interest differently than we, political scientists, tend to define it? And also that, if you define it that way, it matters more than we think it does in motivating our voting preferences and choices.

Jason: Right. Exactly. So self-interest on a normal political science frame, self-interest is just going to mean money. It's going to mean, "I'm interested in my short-term economic well-being," and so you think about things like if I'm on welfare, I like welfare payments. If I'm on Social Security/disability, I like Social Security/disability payments.

Julia: Right.

Jason: So part of the equation is political scientists, you know, this sort of started in the late 70's and through the 80's and 90's, a lot of them came to believe even in that very narrow sense, self-interest isn't very important. So part of our thesis is, "No. Just go look at the data. That actually is an important set of considerations."

Then we also take it further and say, "You know, you can think about discrimination issues. Discrimination on the basis of race, or religion, or gender, or sexual orientation. You can also find a kind of self-interest there where minorities are especially interested in racial equality. Religious non-Christians are especially interested in religious non-discrimination. Gays and lesbians are especially interested in LGBT discrimination."

So that's another sense of self-interest. Then we really take it further -- you know, in the history of the ideas that led up to this, the place we started is thinking about things like abortion rights, birth control, pornography. These kinds of sexual and reproductive lifestyle issues. We think there's self-interest going on there too.

For example, you know, people who spend a lot of time sexually active but not wanting to have a lot of kids. It turns out those people are especially pro-choice. We think that's a kind of self-interest even though it doesn't relate to getting any money in the short term. It relates more to seeking advantages for your own lifestyle.

Julia: Right. Right. It's interesting to think about what your book is arguing against, because in some sense it might seem kind of common-sensical that, yes, people will prefer policies that favor themselves. But then on the other hand, we don't tend to think of ourselves that way. Then on the *other* other hand, we often think of other voters that way.

Jason: Exactly right.

Julia: Like, "Well, of course rich people vote Republican because they want lower taxes, because they want to protect their money, and so on." Then on the other other hand, political scientists seem ...

Jason: How many hands do we have now?

Julia: Yeah. Political scientists often ... I don't know if this is common knowledge at all. This might surprise many listeners, but a lot of political scientists have been arguing that self-interest is not actually very predictive of votes. So what is your sense of the state of the consensus, if there is one, on how much self-interest matters to voters, or motivates voters?

Jason: Yeah, I think there is no consensus. You know, look. It's like blog comment land. We get two kinds of comments. One is, "That's totally obvious. I don't know why you guys bothered telling us that," and the other one is, "That's so obviously untrue."

Julia: I know!

Jason: It's like, "Okay. Make up your damn mind." Right?

Julia: Yes. I get the same thing with many of my posts, and tweets, and speeches. Yeah.

Jason: Yeah.

Julia: You'd think they could just read each other's comments. That's what I don't get. Why can't they just look and see that other people are, you know, proving them wrong by virtue of their existence? Anyway ...

Jason: Look. I think among the sort of people who do research and think about these areas, I think everybody would probably agree there's some degree of interest going on. There's some degree of self-interest. People are going to disagree about how to

define self-interest. They're going to disagree about the extent of the evidence. There's going to be a lot of technical disagreements about what should you be controlling for. What's actually a cause and what's an effect? Go ahead.

Julia: Maybe it would be helpful. Sorry to interrupt you. You can finish your sentence after I throw this in, but I think it would be helpful to just talk about what are the alternatives to this theory? What are the other things that people argue are motivating voters if not self-interest?

Jason: Sure. You know, political science and really political psychology, right? So sort of a subset of political science, takes a very abstract view about political issue. Attitudes about party identification, about voting. It's a whole lot of stuff about personality features. So extroversion or conscientiousness, or these political personality features. Things like right-wing authoritarianism, or racial resentment, or moral foundations.

The kind of Jon Haidt stuff, about the foundations. Purity and authority or whatever they are. I forget what the list is. These are all very ... Oh, and then also, you know, in political science you get a whole lot of "you're raised with a certain party identification." You're raised in a Republican household or you're raised in a Democratic household. That just makes you a kind of team-ish partisan that doesn't really care about the content of issues. You're just following your party.

Julia: Right.

Jason: So, you know, one way to think about what we're doing is Rob Kurzban and I are coming in and saying, "Yeah, but you know that politics is about real stuff and real people's lives, right?" You know, when you restrict abortion access, that's a real thing. It affects different people differently. It effects people's real lives. Especially when you're talking about things like discrimination versus meritocracy. This is something real. It affects people's real lives.

So, to answer your question, the alternative version, it views politics as this highly abstract thing. It's about personalities. You know, there's a paper that came out a couple years ago that says, "Oh, being liberal and conservative, it's mostly about this thing called negativity bias. It's just sort of how much negativity you see in the world." It's all these kind of contentless, very abstract things driving politics.

And you know, what we're arguing against is saying, "No, no, no. To some extent some of those things are true, but you also just can't neglect the fact that politics ends up being about competing policy agendas that affect people's real lives."

Then when you start trying to connect, "Well, let's look at these kinds of policies and see who those would affect? Okay, now let's go look at the data and see whether it looks like, you know, people who are affected one way adopt that view and people who are affected the other way adopt the other view."

We went issue by issue through a lot of different kinds of political issues using social survey data and found that, yeah, typically when you take that approach, you find

these connections between people's real lives and how policies are affecting them, and that affects their issue attitudes.

Julia: For example?

Jason: Well, you know, there are really three big domains and we split them up into different chapters.

One are these sexual and reproductive issues. Some people, we call them “ring bearers,” and they're these people who are not very sexually active before they get married. Or at least before they're in highly committed relationships. And then they tend to get married, and stay married. They tend to have more kids.

Versus, what we call free-wheelers. So these are people who have more non-marital sex, more sex partners, fewer kids, later kids. If you look at those kinds of lifestyle indicators, when you get into a data set that has them -- and the General Social Survey, lucky for us, has a lot of that data. They have sex partners, number of kids, whether you've ever been married, whether you've ever been divorced.

You take these kinds of factors, and sure enough, those things will predict -- you know, not totally, but to a substantial degree -- those things will help you figure out who thinks abortion should be legal. Who thinks that's important. Who thinks abortion should be illegal. Who thinks that pornography should be illegal. Who thinks that pornography should be legal. Who think birth control should be more widely available versus less widely available.

So that's one domain we look at. Another domain are these issues about discrimination and meritocracy, you know? To what extent do you think white, Christian, native born, heterosexual men should be favored just because they're white, native born, heterosexual men? To what extent do you think should there be a prayer in schools? Should there be Christian prayer in schools? Which is a form of discrimination against non-Christian kids. Do you think there should be Affirmative Action on the basis of race or gender?

So these kinds of issues, again, there we looked at, "Well, what's the alternative to these kinds of discrimination?" Well, it's a sort of test-based, education-based, meritocracy where instead of saying, "Let's look at race, and gender, and religion, and those things," you say, "Let's just look at where people went to school and how well they did and how good they are at tests."

When we unpacked those sets of issues we found, sure enough, that the people who test well and have a lot of education really think meritocracy is awesome. The people who are white, Christian, native born men who are not good at tests and who don't have a lot of education, those people say, "Yeah. We're not sure this meritocracy thing is so great. We just think white Christians are awesome.”

Then the third one is the most obvious one, which are these economic issues about, you know, should we be redistributing money from wealthier people to poorer people? And, yeah, there we find sure enough, poor people and especially poor

people with poor social networks, which includes a lot of racial minorities, those groups tend to think redistribution is great. Whereas, you know, especially white high-income Christians think, "No. Redistribution's not great. We would prefer to have this be a private charitable thing where our churches support people we want them to support, and don't support the people we don't want them to support.

Julia: Right. Great. So, I know you're well aware because you've written all about this and you're a very careful researcher… It's important to, when you're thinking about explaining some outcome, like people's stated policy preferences or their votes, and you're looking at independent variables that might help explain that outcome, you have to be really careful about clearly isolating the direction of causality. Or at least to the extent that, you know, as much as you can.

Jason: Yeah.

Julia: So it seems like with some of these, there's a lot of different ways that someone's self-interest could be defined. Because, you know, every person fits lots of different categories at once. You know, I'm female. I'm, you know, in my early 30's. I live in California. I have such-and-such level of education, and so on and so forth. It seems like some of those independent variables could plausibly also be dependent variables.

And maybe if I ... Well, just to take your example of the meritocracy question, the direction of causality could be going one way, in which, "You know, I didn't get a very good education and therefore that causes me to not favor policies that reward you based on your level of education." But maybe it could be going the other way additionally, where I just, you know, don't think that education should be important and that causes me both to not support policies that reward education, and also not to get an education myself.

Jason: Yeah.

Julia: So I guess I'm asking, when you do these analyzes, to what extent are you primarily trying to focus on independent variables that don't have that, you know, this messy causal nature?

Jason: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's a great question and it's something we thought a lot about. You've got to sort of take a step back, right? So the gold standard for causal analyses are obviously experiments, but, you know, it's very hard to do experiments on things like, "How do you form your attitudes about--...?"

Julia: Right.

Jason: I mean, you can do short-term manipulations in a lab and kind of push people over here and push people over there, but it's really hard to go back and say, "Yes. These short-term manipulations we're doing in a lab, also explain to you the long-term maturational process of developing this attitude in the first place."

Julia: Right.

Jason: So experiments are hard in this area. So what you're left with is, you know, doing cross-sectional data, looking at big databases, trying to find correlations and then having to make assumptions about causality. And we prefer demographics to the alternative.

Julia: Demographics are like race, gender?

Jason: Demographics are things like race, gender, age, education, religion, church attendance, sexual and reproductive lifestyles. There's a lot in there.

Julia: As opposed to things like personality traits?

Jason: As opposed to things like party identification. Look. I mean, you go to any political science study that's looking at what causes people to differ on issue x -- Issue x might be immigration. Issue x might be abortion. Issue x might be the Affordable Care Act. Whatever. You know, what causes people to differ on that?

Every political science model -- and in fact, we got some criticism for leaving this stuff out. Every political science model you'll see of these things will use your own self-labeled liberal or conservative ideology.

So it's just going to be a question that says, "Do you normally think of yourself as super liberal, kind of liberal, moderate, kind of conservative, super conservative?" They'll use that as a causal predictor. They'll use your party identification. So do you normally favor Democrats or Republicans? And that'll be a causal thing.

Then often they'll throw in other kinds of attitudinal scales. So things like social dominance orientation, which is this scale item where you basically ask people about, you know, "Do you think dominant groups ought to be dominant and submissive groups ought to be submissive and not complain?"

And you know, because of our causal concerns, we let that stuff out of our models. We said, "We're just not going to control for party identification because we are not even a little bit sure that that is primarily causal." We understand that it's in part causal, but we also think a lot of people are choosing to be Republicans or Democrats because of how they feel about various kinds of issues.

Julia: Right. That should be a strong, at least part of your strong default hypothesis. That there's causality going that other way, right? I would be surprised if there wasn't.

Jason: Right, but you know, every cross-sectional study in the literature's going to put that in as a independent variable.

We left it out. So the things we were choosing to focus on were these demographics. Things like, you know, Rob and I had a paper in Political Psychology that came out, maybe it was five months ago, six months ago, where that was for an academic audience, and we really talked about this stuff in-depth.

What we discussed there was, "Yeah, look. With demographics, some of them you're pretty sure what you're looking at, right?" Race, gender, age. I mean, there may be a little causality going the other way. So here I'll give you an example with race. I mean, maybe you get somebody who plausibly could call themselves Hispanic, but they have a very conservative ideology on racial issues and so they just have decided to call themselves white.

Julia: Right.

Jason: Which happens all the time because definitions of what white means change all the time. So there could be a little bit of reverse causality there, but you know, I'm pretty comfortable saying the lion's share, the big share of the causality when you see a correlation between race and political items, most that correlation is causality going from race to politics.

Julia: Right.

Jason: Same thing with gender. Same thing with age.

Julia: Right. I totally agree with all of that. But education?

Jason: You know, education and test performance... It just seems very unlikely to me that a whole bunch of the causality between education and politics is about, you know, sort of Libertarian people self-selecting a bunch of education.

Julia: Well, for test performance I agree with that, but couldn't there be like ... I don't know, people with more traditional values, ring bearers, say, maybe especially women, are less likely to get higher education because they're more focused on, you know, building a family or something.

Jason: Yeah, maybe.

Julia: Okay.

Jason: Maybe. For sure, yeah, it gets messy.

Then, you know, I think one of the messiest things is actually religion. If you go look longitudinally at people's own religious descriptions of themselves, it turns out people jump around all the time between, "I'm a Christian," versus, "I'm nothing in particular."

Julia: Really?

Jason: Yeah.

Julia: A single person?

Jason: Yeah.

Julia: It's common for a single person to go back and forth? Interesting.

Is that about self-description or about how active they are in the religion? Like how often they attend church.

Jason: I think both.

Julia: Interesting.

Jason: So we've really got to think about, is there an example of the causality going both ways? Again, I think, you know, if you think about things like, "Are you Jewish, or Christian, or Agnostic, or Atheist?" I think most of the causality's going to be causality from religion to politics -- but yeah, there's always this possibility that there's some other kind coming back the other way.

Julia: Okay.

Jason: It differs variable by variable. You know, there are some variables where you really are pretty safe assuming that's a causal variable. Other variables where it's harder.

Here, I'll give you one that's one of the hardest. In fact, we had to address this in the book: things like when we use “how many people you've slept with” as a predictor. This is something the social survey allows you to ... information they have.

So, how many people you've slept with as a predictor variable. Well, there you could totally and obviously see people's religious and ideological commitments.

Julia: Oh, causing them to downplay or just lie? Yeah.

Jason: Causing them to adopt different sexual lifestyles, or to lie. Sure.

Julia: Oh, I see. Sorry, well, you can't really ... Oh, I see. So at some point, if you become Christian, then you stop sleeping with people, and that could reduce your total number overall?

Jason: Well, here. Let's think about it. Let's get concrete. Think about abortion rights, you know? Is somebody not sleeping around and having lots of kids because they're pro life -- or are they pro life because they're not sleeping around and having lots of kids?

Julia: Right.

Jason: That's a very hard one to untangle. So actually, in the book, what we do is we kind of bring these things in and out of our models, and kind of show you, "Well, you know, you can think of religion as the cause or you can think of these lifestyles as causal."

Jason: Either way, what we found is there's a big relationship between these lifestyles and religion. And these kinds of lifestyle political issues like abortion, and pornography, and their own premarital sex, and the rest of it.

Julia: Got it. So how would you distinguish whether religious or ring bearer voters are supporting pro life policies because they think that's what's good for the country and that's what's morally correct, versus that's good for them?

I guess we could even make the case for why that's good for them, but I suppose it's ... Yeah.

Jason: Well, the answer, I'll give you the “why it's good for them.” Well, I mean, let's start with the easy one. You know, young people in a big city late in their education, or early in their career, who are sexually active, really think they're going to get married down the road and settle down and have kids later -- but right now they really don't want to have kids.

Julia: Right.

Jason: Pretty much everyone would agree, "Okay. Right. The availability of birth control and abortion are in your interests under those circumstances, right?" So that's one side of that coin.

Julia: Those are the free-wheelers?

Jason: Those are the free-wheelers.

Julia: Right. Now the ring bearers…

Jason: Yeah, the ring bearers are harder. There both Rob Kurzban and I both have an evolutionary background, so we're both used to thinking about lifestyle conflict and the strategic conflicts that can arise from competing lifestyles. The kind of more folksy way to say it in this particular case is… you can think of ring bearers, right? The people who are not sleeping around, getting and staying married, having these large families.

Having a large family is a precarious thing. You know, little things can go wrong for you financially and, you know, a divorce is very hard on large families. On mothers, children. You can think of ring bearers as kind of like people who are trying to diet in a place where there's a bunch of candy around.

Julia: Right.

Jason: So what ring bearers really want to do to advance the stability of their own relationships is to try to get people around them to offer fewer temptations. They do this in part -- this is in part what religious involvement is for people. Religious involvement is surrounding yourself with people who tend to agree with that. And tend to agree with it so strongly that they'll express attitudes that say, "Yeah, people

who don't abide by monogamous sexual codes ought to be punished and ostracized. They ought to bear costs for those moral violations."

That's how we think of ring bearers. Ring bearers are people who, in their own lives, they're trying to navigate these monogamous, high-fertility relationships. And part of their strategy is they're going to try to surround themselves with other people who agree with that to smooth out the road, but also they're going to try to use what influence they have to try to keep other people from engaging in promiscuous lifestyles.

So it does have these funny implications. Like normally you'd think about the ... Well, my dissertation was about abortion rights. And normally you'd think about abortion rights as, "Well, it's this philosophical conflict about when life begins."

We would say, "No. Deep down, it's really about regulating promiscuity." That's why, for example, with abortion rights, you see things like, in surveys you ask people, "Should a woman be able to get an abortion if she's raped, or if the child has a developmental problem?" A lot of people say yes, including a lot of people who think of themselves as pro life.

Then you ask things like, Well, what if she's just single and doesn't want to marry the man? “No. No, no, no. She shouldn't be able to get an abortion then.”

This is the kind of thing that we think gives evidence that abortion, the deep conflict of abortion is not about when life begins. The deep conflict about abortion is about regulating lifestyles.

Julia: Okay. So I'm just accepting that premise for now, because there's too much stuff in total to talk about.

The strategic picture that you're painting, I mean… it rings true to me and I wouldn't be at all surprised if it were true. But it still seems to speak to this trickiness in describing what we should expect to be in someone's self-interest.

It's hard to know in hindsight, but I'm not sure a priori that it would have been obvious to me to expect that ring bearers -- people with this pattern, of having fewer sexual partners and having children earlier -- to expect them to be the ones voting in favor of abortion restrictions. As opposed to, say, men being more likely to vote in favor of abortion restrictions and women to be more likely to oppose abortion restrictions. To be in favor of, you know, pro choice policies.

I think that we don't ... Correct me if I'm wrong about the statistics here, but I think that we see men and women roughly equally supporting abortion. Which might seem naively like a falsification, or like a piece of data that undermines the “people vote in their self-interest” theory. If you think that it's in women's self-interest to have abortion allowed, well, we don't actually see that playing out in the data.

I mean, you can say, "Well, no. It's not about men versus women. It's about ring bearers versus free-wheelers.” And that totally has this plausible story behind it, but

I feel like there are lots of different plausible stories that we could tell in a lot of these cases.

Jason: Yeah. Right, and that's going to be an issue here. There's no way I can talk you out of or talk you into the full range of these things, but… yeah that's one point we for sure make about abortion, is strategically, it's really not men versus women. It's ring bearer men and ring bearer women versus free-wheeler men and free-wheeler women. And when you go to the data, that's how it shakes out.

I agree with you that someone who is clever can come up with lots of different kinds of arguments for what might be in someone's interests.

Julia: I actually played a little game with myself where I tried to come up with a self-interest story, and reverse it and then come up with a story for that too. Which I like to do in general, just to sort of test my reasoning.

So I was able to think of like, "Well, you know, what if there was a political candidate advocating for more US military intervention in other countries?" Maybe men of draftable age, we might expect them to oppose him. Because, you know, it's in their self-interest not to get drafted, and have to go fight in other countries.

But then on the other hand, maybe you know, this candidate is raising the status of the military. And people who have family members who have fought in the military, people who maybe were in the military themselves, now their social status is raised. That would be appealing to them and their own self-interest.

Jason: Yeah, yeah. I totally agree with all of that, and in fact, we had a set of issues that we just didn't touch. We talk about them in the last chapter of the book, and we say, "We aren't addressing this set of issues because it wasn't clear to us at all what to expect from a self-interest perspective." One of those was military stuff.

Julia: Right.

Jason: Another one was environmental stuff. Environmental regulation. You know, Rob and I sat around and talked about, you know, "Do we think there's any expectation on environmental stuff about who would tend to ...?" You know, you can come up with some things. People who work in certain kinds of industries maybe. People who have certain kinds of jobs.

Julia: You can certainly come up with pretty plausible stories for why some people would oppose environmental regulations. It's a little harder it seems to come up with stories for why some groups would be in favor of environmental regulations, that rely on self-interest.

Jason: Yeah. In general, I just think it's a difficult area. Another area we didn't come out with opinions on was right to die. You know, assisted suicide issues.

Julia: Right.

Jason: We couldn't see strong arguments on one side or the other. So we really tried to focus on three areas and I mentioned them. The sexual and reproductive lifestyles, social status through discrimination and meritocracy, and then the redistribution of wealth.

Partly why we stuck to those areas is I've mentioned with both have an evolutionary background. These are all areas that evolutionary psychologists are very comfortable thinking about. These are conflicts that have been around for a long time where the sides are pretty clearly divided. It's pretty obvious what people are looking for, and thus what they would consider deep down to be in their interests. So I think on the three broad things we looked at, we're pretty comfortable. And we found stuff that plausibly fit what we were expecting to see.

Sure. There are lots of different kinds of issues. You can get down into the weeds of policymaking and there's zero expectation. You know, should we have single payer versus the public option? Well, you know, I have absolutely no prediction about how it would shake out about that.

Julia: Right. One thing that we haven't talked about yet is whether you're looking at what is in fact in people's self-interest or what they *think* is in their self-interest. For example, all these people who oppose Obamacare, but they like ACA -- and they don't realize they're the same thing. It's not clear what we should expect people to think about minimum wage policies or something like that.

Jason: Yeah, exactly. Well, look. I mean, Rob Kurzban and I, we're both psychologists and the book presents a psychological model, and that psychological model is -- think about it like a corporation or a presidential administration. So you have a set of decision makers that are hidden from public view in back offices making their decisions based on interests.

So if we're talking about -- I'll just stick with the corporation model. We're talking about a business corporation, there's a board of directors. They do not meet in public. They meet in private. They talk about the company's interests and they make large strategic decisions based on what's in the shareholder's financial interests. They then pass along their sort of high-level decisions to different departments within the company.

Those different departments do different things. Some of them are about ordering products. Some of them are about shipping. Some of them are about HR or whatever. There are also communications departments that are tasked with the job of, "Okay. Figure out how to say this. How to talk about what we're doing.

Julia: How to defend this.

Jason: How to defend it. So, you know, I think the example we give in the book is, you know, a bank wants to sponsor a local arts fair. Why do they want to do that? Well, because they're bored, and they're financial people that made calculations that say, "We're going to get advertising out of this that will get us x more customers and that will more than offset the costs of funding this arts fair."

It's given over to a communications office. The communications office isn't going to say that, right? The communications office is going to say, "We really think it's important to be good members of the community and it's especially about the children who benefit from these festivals. We just really care about children and the community." That's what they're going to say.

Then you have spokespersons, and the spokespersons often ... I mean, sometimes they're part of these communications teams, but sometimes the spokespersons are literally just spokespersons. They're handed the message and they just go out in public and say, "Hey. You know the reason big bank is sponsoring this arts fair is because they love communities and children," and they literally don't know any differently.

Our view is that that kind of an analogy actually describes pretty well some things we know about how human minds work. There are lots of different departments doing lots of different things. You've got kind of deep emotional systems that set broad priorities, that kind of react in broad ways to these sorts of things I like, and these sorts of things I don't like. Those broad responses have a whole lot to do with evolutionary interests. Interests in mating outcomes. Interest in social status. Interest in defending people who are related to you. Et cetera.

Julia: Right. So to the extent that your spokesperson genuinely believes that you're acting altruistically, that can convince other people in your tribe that you're altruistic, and then they'll like you more, and want to collaborate with you and trust you.

Jason: Exactly. So we've got these emotional systems that are producing our gut-level reactions, which, think of them like a board of directors. It's just this high-level agenda-setting.

Julia: Yeah. It's a great analogy.

Jason: It's like, you know, you winning a competition in front of lots of people where everyone's patting you on the back. "That's a great outcome. Try to do that."

Julia: Right.

Jason: That's what your emotions try to tell you, but then you've got all these other systems that are figuring out, "Okay, well how do we make that happen? What do we need to do to actually make that plan come true?" Then you also have these communications systems that are not going to say, "Oh, yeah. I'm just trying to get attention because I want people to think I'm awesome and maybe it'll help me get laid, or make a bunch of money, or something." No. Your communications systems will say something else. They'll say something about how you're a good, honest, reliable, reasonable person that other people ought to like.

So anyways, now to bring it back finally around to your question.

Julia: Which I've forgotten, by the way. I hope you remember.

Jason: It's, "How does self-interest actually manifest versus what you think is in your self-interest versus, you know, what would not be in your self interest?"

Julia: Excellent. Thank you.

Jason: This is how we think about it. We think about it as the high level emotional responses that really drive whether different policies are appealing to different people. Those high-level judgements are based on neural systems that are doing the best they can with the information that they can to actually advance these concrete interests about social life. About your resources, and your mating status, and your kin, and whether you're high or low status within your social group. It's thinking about those things and doing the best it can. By the time you get all the way down to consciousness, which is just this spokesperson who's clueless.

Julia: Right.

Jason: You know, we think of consciousness as like the captain of the ship. No. The consciousness is this little spokesmodel that doesn't do a damn thing other than the talking points that they're handed.

Julia: I like spokesmodel even better than spokesperson, it really emphasizes the ornamental nature.

Jason: Yeah, exactly. Right. It's just some dumb actor who's given a script, so of course your consciousness is going to say, "No. I don't favor my politics because it helps me. No, no, no, no. I favor the politics I favor because it's best for everyone. In fact, mostly I just want to help other people and not me."

I mean, that's the message, but it's very similar to the message that a corporation would produce. It's very similar to the message that a presidential administration would produce to justify what it's doing.

Julia: Right.

Jason: On the consciousness level, everyone thinks they're not self-interested. So if you ask people, "What's motivating you to hold this political position?" Hardly anyone will say, "Well, because it's in my self-interest."

So what you have to do, you have to be a detective or a good reporter. You have to think about, "What do I think would be in their interests ?"and then see whether that's lining up with what they're actually doing, and that's what we're doing in the book.

We're connecting these demographic features to these political items and showing you a plausible argument about what self-interest means. You can find these connections where, for these kinds of issues, it's these kinds of demographics that matter. So if it's immigration, you know, it's native born white people who aren't very highly educated do not like immigration.

Julia: Because it's their jobs that are ...

Jason: Yeah, exactly.

Julia: Well, this is actually a great example because there are a bunch of very reputable economists, although it's not a universal consensus yet, who argue that, "No. Immigration, it doesn't threaten the jobs of low income American workers." So if your model was strictly about what is good for people and it wasn't paying attention to, "What do people think is good for them?" then it might not expect people to mind immigration.

Jason: My opinion, and I'm not an economist, and I'm not an expert in this literature, but my opinion is what you've just said is not really an accurate depiction of the sum total.

Julia: Okay.

Jason: I think the economics literature will tell you that overall immigration is good for an economy. Then it's going to be especially good for people at the top. Highly educated people.

Julia: Okay. So I don't actually want to argue the economics, because it's very interesting, but it's not all that relevant to the question I'm trying to ask.

It just seems to me like there are a lot of cases where actually it really is about the board of directors and the information that they have, and not about what the spokesmodel thinks is the reason. So, you know, people might have a false perception of their chances of making it into the top, you know, 10% of the income distribution and given that, they might support policies that are good for the top 10% because they think they're going to be there soon.

Their spokesmodel might say, "No, I'm just doing what I think is, you know, the right choice for the country," but their board of directors is actually self-interested. It's acting based on their perception of their self-interest, but not their *actual* self-interest -- because they're not going to make it into the 10%. Plausibly.

Jason: There's no Plato idealism in this model, right? It's not that people are born with some kind of magic knowledge of what's in their interest. They have to try and figure it out. They have limited knowledge and they sometimes get it wrong. It's especially true ... This is why I was going back to policy details about I use the example of single payer healthcare versus a public option on Obamacare.

You just cannot expect more than .02% of the population to even understand what the implication of that difference are. So therefore, you can't expect people to sort that out. The kinds of things we're looking at in the book are much kind of grosser and broader than that.

So, for example, one of the things we look at in the economics chapter, it's this item. It's actually a couple of different related items in the general social survey that ask

the following question: Do you think we ought to be doing more to get taxes and other resources from high-income people and use that to redistribute money to poor people?

It's just super basic stuff like that. Sure enough, you look at that item and one of the really great demographic predictors of that item is, "What's your income?"

Right, so I totally agree. If you try to get too small-scale, if you try and get into the weeds too much, you're just going to lose the capacity of ordinary people to even figure out what's in their self-interest.

Again, I think one these large-scale policy conflicts, a large-scale policy conflict is, "Should we have more or less redistribution from rich to poor?" I think people figured out a large-scale conflict is, "Do you think the game should be rigged in favor of white, male, heterosexuals, or do you think it ought to be meritocracy?"

Julia: Right.

Jason: That's a large-scale conflict. Another large-scale conflict is, do you think we ought to be trying to regulate people's sexual and reproductive lifestyles, or do you think it should just be, "To each his own." So I think when you start getting into these large-scale conflicts, you see people's boards of directors having enough information to figure that out. Then it shows up in the numbers. It shows up in the data.

Julia: So there's this spectrum of what could reasonably be called in someone's self-interest -- where, on the one hand, you have this very strict definition. It's like purely financial and just about me right now. As opposed to, you know, my family or the future.

Then at the other end of the spectrum, it's almost tautological. It's just saying, "Well, if I feel good when I'm voting and I'm happy with my vote, that's my self-interest because I made myself happy," or something. That's kind of a dumb way to define self-interest.

So you're sort of defining it somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

Jason: Yeah, exactly. We're somewhere in the middle of that. So what we think is ... Well, actually first of all, let me say political scientists will often say in this very limited sense of self-interest where it's just socioeconomic stuff self-interest doesn't have a big effect. We talk about it some in the book and especially in this paper on political psychology from a few months ago. We really break it down -- and even on that limited definition, to say that self-interest doesn't matter is just not true.

There's study, after study, after study that will find, for example, that people who had less money, and had more precarious economic situations, and had more economic hardships, those people are significantly and substantially more likely to favor social welfare safety nets than are people who are very wealthy and have very stable wealthy situations, which are much less likely to favor these things. Even on the limited definition, it doesn't make any sense.

But then, yes. We try to walk it forward without going crazy. Without saying, "Self-interest is whatever makes you feel good." That was a great example. Without taking it that far, we tried to say, "Look. We're just going to try to expand it into these areas of evolutionary conflict where we're pretty sure everybody's equipped to think about the conflict.

Julia: Right. Where we should expect people to, unconsciously or consciously, be trying to get optimize for these things. Even if it's not directly money.

Jason: These large-scale conflicts we ought to expect people to be able to have the equipment in their heads to want to sort that out, how it affects them. And then to respond to how it affects them. Then that's when we go to the data, and say, "Yup. Looks like that's happening."

Julia: Okay. So I have two questions now. The first question is: Why do you think -- the way you describe it, it's like you can just look at the data and you can see the connection between people's short-term material self-interest and their policy preferences or their votes.

So: Why are there so many smart political scientists *not* coming to that conclusion if they have access to the same data that you have?

Jason: Yeah. This actually links back to an earlier thing we talked about, because they put a bunch of ... Can I cuss here?

Julia: Yeah. Go ahead.

Jason: They put a bunch of shit in their models. That's why.

Julia: I'll just add a content warning on this episode, that's fine!

Jason: I'll give you an alternative take to use. They put a bunch of junk in their models.

Anyway, so because they'll put in party identification, and liberal/conservative self-labeling, and they'll put in these attitudinal scales that look a whole lot like the things they're measuring. So for example, you know, you're trying to predict some political attitude about discrimination, and you go measure some quote-unquote "value" about discrimination, which just ends up looking like discrimination items.

Sure enough, there are correlations between values and policy attitudes, if you measure the right values and the right policy attitudes where they just overlap a bunch. "Those correlations are huge" -- well, of course they're huge. You're taking the same question, asking people twice, and then correlate like it's a cause because, well, I called this one a value and I called that one an attitude, so it must be causal, right? No.

Then also, you know, party affiliation, liberal/conservative self identification, these are also big correlations, but are especially causally questionable. If you make it a horse race, if you say, "I'm going to have self-interest on one hand, and on the other

hand, I'm going to have one of these symbolic attitudes. I'm going to have party identification, and ideology, and values, and the racial resentment, and right-wing authoritarianism, or whatever else you put in there."

If you just make it a horse race about who can explain the most variants, yeah, the symbolic things are going to win. That's especially true if you have a very poorly developed idea about what interests mean, and you restrict your interest predictors down to a very very small subset.

So here, I'll give you a real world example. A lot of the papers that ... and I swear to you that I'm not making this up. A lot of the foundational papers and the literature on self-interest not mattering in politics, they would go measure, let's say they're trying to predict welfare attitudes. Attitudes toward welfare spending. They would ask things like, "Are you on welfare right now?" That would be a predictor and that would be, you know, one of the self-interest predictors.

Then they would take your income level and say, "Oh, that's not a self-interest predictor because income is too broad. You control for income in the model. So income would have this big coefficient, but they would say, "Oh, that coefficient's irrelevant to our judgment about whether self-interest matters," because what really matters is the thing about, "Are you on welfare right now?"

Look, there are always statistical tricks you can use. You control for highly related things. You can flood the model with a lot of different variables so that no one predictor looks very big. You can put in a lot of things that are likely not causal predictors. We actually have a demonstration the in the book about how if you put a non-causal predictor in the model, it will totally suck up variation from causal predictors.

So there are all kinds of ways to kind of work your data analysis, where you hide these effects. So what we tried to do in the book was we said, "Okay. We're just going to simplify it. We're just going to look at these demographics issue by issue, we're not going to flood the model with a bunch of junk."

In fact, I don't know how technical I can get. We ran step-wise regressions to not let the model get flooded with too many variables. When you clear out the junk, you see the relationships actually quite clearly.

Julia: Before I lose track of my second question, I just wanted to ask about something that, to me at least, seems very much in the gray area on that spectrum between the very tight definition of self-interest and a very tautological definition of self-interest. Which is: something that is good for a group that you belong to, without necessarily, you know, directly being good for you.

There are two ways that you could define something that is good for your group. One is it's good for the group, and it might therefore end up being good for you personally. Like a policy that helps, you know, your race. Maybe say if there's an Affirmative Action Policy and you don't necessarily know if you're going to end up

needed Affirmative Action, but maybe you will. We could say that, you know, the policy that helps the group might help you directly personally.

But there are other ways of helping a group that you belong to that are definitely not going to help you personally. Not directly anyway. Let's say your group is Christians and it's a policy that helps Christian women and you're a Christian man. It seems harder to say that that's self-interest.

I guess I'm wondering where you draw the line, including group interests, in your definition of self-interest. Do you draw it before both of those? Do you draw it after both of those? Do you draw it between those two, you know?

Jason: We talk about this in the book and we really talk about it in our academic article. A lot of political scientists will say to you. Well, self-interest doesn't matter, but group interests do. Our problem is, trying to split the two apart is just, in practice, so much harder than it looks.

Julia: Yeah. Yeah. It looks hard to me, so that's daunting.

Jason: Right, because even that thing you said about Christian women -- well, but if it raises the status of Christians… You know, even if you're a Christian man. The policy may be about Christian women, but you know, it might be more complexly about helping Christian families ...

Julia: I guess, right. So you could marry a Christian woman and then she is helped financially by these policies, so it helps her household maybe?

Jason: Well, or here, to take an example. You know, the example you raised of Affirmative Action, we actually looked at that. We looked at these general social survey items that had people respond to Affirmative Action, but also they would ask them about their own race. It also asks them this question about, you know, “Are you personally being held back in a job because white people are being favored?” if they were African American. Or if they were white, you know, “Are you personally being held back because African Americans are being favored?” It turns out both of these things matter. So you can find the direct self-interest of that. You can also just find an effect of race.

Now we’re trying to sort of take a step back and say, "How do you even distinguish on Affirmative Action?" So even if it doesn't help you today, you know -- if you're a minority, having a political environment that's more accepting of Affirmative Action generally, part of it is – here, take another step back.

Everybody in this game, everybody in the self-interest and politics game, agrees that effects on family members should be thought of as effects on yourself. So every definition of self interest talks about what's in the interest of you or your family. It actually creates this funny effect where it's like the definition of self-interest for everybody literally includes a group of people.

Julia: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense. It would be very weird if in a self-interest model you didn't care about what happened to your kids.

Jason: Yeah, right. Exactly. From an evolutionary view, there's just zero mystery about why people care about kids and other family members. So, right off the bat, the group vs. self distinction is thrown this curve ball. Everybody's definition of self-interest includes a group. Then you start thinking about, "Is that group statistically more likely to share your race and religion and educational status?" Of course it is.

Then, you know, Rob and I were also thinking about social networks. Not social networks in some highly abstract far-flung sense, but social networks in a very concrete sense... Not everybody, but most people have a circle of friends who are close to them who they share rewards and harms with. So, you get in trouble, you have a group of friends that you can go to who can help you out. When you do well, there's a certain group of people you know who get some reflective glory off of that.

Once you start thinking about family members, your close personal social networks, it just gets really hard to talk about, "I know how to draw the line between group and self."

Look, we just made a practical point. You know, at the end of our discussion about these group interest things, we just make a practical point, which is, whenever people talk about a group interest versus a self-interest effect, they're almost never talking about something that harms the individual. They're either talking about something that is likely to help that individual ... Well, you know, the right way to say this: They're either talking about something that's almost sure to help that individual, or something that probably will help that individual. Something that's definitely not going to hurt them.

Julia: Right. So a tricky case that doesn't seem to come up a lot, you're saying, is a case where someone would support a policy that's bad for them personally, but good for the group that they belong to. That would make it tough.

Jason: I couldn't even think of examples. You know, Jonathan Haidt, in his recent book on politics from a few years ago, Haight actually defines group interests that way. It's interests that harm yourself, but help the group.

Julia: Yeah. Well, that's a clean way to separate it from self-interest.

Jason: But Jon, can you give me some examples here, buddy, because I don't see them?

Julia: There's some community examples in other contexts that are not the one you're focused on. Like, when I take out the trash, and that's like a small cost on me, but it helps my house.

Jason: Yeah, but there's also a whole lot of psychological stuff that goes along with that. You keep track of what your roommates do, and if they don't take out the trash, if they don't do their chores to the level that you do, you get upset. Then you start imposing costs on them by haranguing them or whatever.

So, you know, even that example of taking out the trash for other people, it's the case that humans have all these psychological mechanisms to make sure that those arrangements are fair, and they get very upset when they're not fair.

Julia: Yeah. If you're defining self-interest that way.

Jason: I don't want to take an extreme position here. Let me freely admit there are lots of people in lots of different circumstances who do things that are not at all self-interested, but that's just not what we're talking about. What we're talking about is on average, in general, is it statistically more likely that people come down on the side of what looks like their self-interest.

Looking at the data on a bunch of different issues, our argument is, "Yeah, it looks like in general they're more likely to come down on the side of self-interest than not to." It's not that they're extremely more likely to do so. They're substantially more likely to do so. But of course there are exceptions.

I mean, you know, in all these kinds of social science models, you could predict at random 50 out of 100 people correctly and in a really kick ass social science model, you're getting maybe 70 out of 100 people correct.

Julia: Right.

Jason: You know what I'm saying? That's like a .4 multiple correlation, right, would be getting 70 out of 100 people right? Which is about as good as you're going to do with demographic predictors and piling them on top of each other.

So, you know, look. Are there exceptions to that? Well, yeah, there are a ton of exceptions to that. There's 30 out of 100 exceptions to that. Then you'd be getting 50/50 at random again.

Julia: Right. You're still making a substantive claim in the sense that other theorists think it's, you know, much lower than you think it is.

Jason: That it's trivial, that it's non-existent. So, saying, "We can get 70 out of 100," that's pretty good.

Julia: Right.

Jason: Again, I'm making up those numbers off the top of my head.

Julia: They're good for illustration. Yeah. I guess I'll just ask one more question and then we can close.

In just thinking about this topic a priori without looking at any of the data… I would not be surprised if people weren't really motivated to vote in their self-interest, just in the sense that your vote actually doesn't have that much causal impact on the policies that get passed. I mean, a little bit maybe, but especially in competitive states or competitive districts it's almost zero.

So, this is kind of a point in favor of the, like, "People vote as a way to cheer for their team, for their tribe," theory. You do get short-term benefits from voting. Emotional benefits. It makes you feel good about yourself. You feel like you're, you know, voting for some symbolic value. That it's like a narrative about who you are, and who your people are, and what kind of country you stand for. Et cetera.

And I wouldn't really expect that to win out over self-interest if you had a way to actually benefit yourself materially, or your family, or your group. But if you can't, then maybe it just makes sense to... I mean, this is all a priori. I'm not talking about the data. But maybe you should expect people to just vote in a way that, you know, feels validating to them. Since that's the only real large benefit that they're going to get from voting.

Jason: Yeah. Look, it's a really great point. So let me make a distinction that I haven't made before, which is: our book is not actually about, you know, why people vote or whether they vote. Our book is really about, if you ask somebody a question in a public opinion survey, like what do you think about immigration?

What we can tell you is their answers to those questions relate substantially, non-trivially, much more than the conventional wisdom tells you, those things relate to self-interest.

We also looked at party identification. Who favors Democrats. Who favors Republicans. What we can tell you there too is, yes, the kind of self-interest to demographics blowing through these different issue opinions will tell you a lot about who favors Democrats and who favors Republicans.

So you just used an example of, you know, voting to cheer on your team. Well, we're telling you what our data speaks to is telling you why somebody chose that team.

Julia: Right. That's a good distinction.

Jason: One of the things that we did in the book, and it's in the last couple of chapters… we actually go through different Republican demographic groups and different Democratic demographic groups and show you about all these intra-party, all these differences within the parties and these different groups and how they think about issues.

So like an example from the Republican side: you have kind of, you know, less educated, poor, but highly religious white Evangelicals is one group in the Republican coaliltion. Another group are, you know, the sort of Libertarian, “captain of industry” kind of guys. You know, white, often they're Christian. They're white Christians -- but they don't go to church and they're not ring bearers. They're more free-wheelers.

Sure enough, you know, the downscale religious people will say, "Yeah, we're kind of in favor of social safety nets, but what we really care about is outlawing abortion and outlawing pornography and those kinds of things." Whereas the kind of captain

of industry group, they'd say, "Yeah, what we really care about is low taxes and less regulation -- but about abortion rights or on immigration, we're actually center left."

Then, you know, you can go to the democratic side and there are lots of, you know, white highly educated non-Christians. So people who are Jews, or Agnostics, or Buddhists with a lot of education. Very very socially liberal, but actually on economic stuff, kind of centerist. Versus, think about churchgoing African Americans -- very liberal on racial issues, but actually pretty conservative on things like abortion, and divorce, and pornography, and marijuana legalization, and things like that.

So that's really what we're trying to get at. We're trying to show you about, "Why is it that these kinds of people care about these kinds of issues, and these other kinds care about these other kinds of issues?"

It turns out the world is really not just divided into Democrats and Republicans, into liberals and conservatives. It's not just about you choose a team and that determines everything about your views. There are all these different demographic sub-clusters within Democrats and Republicans, within liberals and conservatives, that have these issues specific profiles that relate to the demographics, which we then argue then those demographics relate to their interests.

Julia: Right, and because demographics aren't really changeable easily in most cases, we can pretty fairly conclude that the self-interest based in those demographics is causing the choice of those positions.

Jason: Yeah, right. Some demographics you're more sure than others, but on the whole, you can be much more sure about demographics being causal than you can about things like party identification and personality on, you know, political issues, or values, or things like that.

Julia: Right. Excellent. That's really helpful. Cool. That's probably a good place to close.

Before I let you go, Jason, I want to invite you to give the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode, which is a book, or an article, or a blog, or something that has influenced your thinking at some point in your life or your career. So what would your pick be for this episode?

Jason: Well, I think for me and a lot of people my age, I was in high school in the 80's. It was really meeting Carl Sagan.

Julia: Oh, yeah.

Jason: You know, Dragons of Eden, and The Cosmos, I think that really got me excited not just about doing science, but it got me excited about communicating about science in a way that, you know, other people can understand. You'll see that in my blogging and in the book it's trying to adopt a more conversational tone. Trying to be an effective communicator of complicated ideas. That really ultimately comes back down to Sagan for me and I think a lot of people.

Julia: Is there a book of Sagan's that you think is underappreciated relative to the others? Or: what's your favorite? Either one.

Jason: Oh, my favorite is Dragons of Eden because that's the one that really got me started. It's a book that's largely about emotion.

Julia: Oh, excellent. Well, we'll link into Dragons of Eden on the podcast website as well as to your book, The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind, and your blog, Pleeps.org. Jason, thank you so much for joining us.

Jason: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Thanks very much.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.