

COVID vs. SIVH

The Self-Interest Voter Hypothesis, or SIVH, claims that individuals' political views are closely based on their objective self-interest. Despite its popularity, the evidence is strongly against it. If the SIVH were true, for example, income would be an excellent predictor of party identification. In reality, the correlation between the two is near-zero. People don't vote for the party that gives them a better balance sheet; they vote for the party that speaks to their ideals.

Still, you may ask, what happens if the stakes are life and death? The whole COVID debacle provides an elegant illustration. If people's views on COVID were largely based on objective self-interest, we would see the following patterns.

1. Support for strict COVID policies would be near-zero for the young, then rise *very* rapidly with age, because the risk of death roughly triples as your age rises by a decade. The inconvenience of policy, in contrast, varies little by age.
2. People with underlying conditions would be vastly more supportive of strict policies, because risk is again sharply higher for such people. Indeed, support by people with *no* such conditions would be very low, because such people make up less than 10% of the victims even though they are a majority of the population.
3. Males, blacks, and Hispanics would be modestly more supportive of strict COVID policies, because their risks are modestly higher.
4. Yes, you can tweak the SIVH so people care about the well-being of their families. But again, this implies that people who happen to have many high-risk family members would be *much* more supportive of strict measures than loners.
5. Support Human Challenge Trials would be virtually unanimous. Why? Because human experimentation would dramatically improve the quality of prevention policy and speed the arrival of safe, effective vaccines. *No one* would worry about the risk to the participants, except the participants themselves: "If you're worried, don't volunteer. End of story."

On reflection, support for these SIVH predictions is weak at best. While demographic breakdowns of public opinion on COVID policy are strangely scarce, Democrats clearly favor stricter policies than Republicans. But it is Republicans who receive markedly more support from the elderly. Since COVID risk increases *very* rapidly with age, this is a shocking result. Other demographic patterns are mixed: Males, blacks and Hispanics are all higher-risk, but males are more Republican while blacks and Hispanics are more Democratic. It's hard to tell if people with underlying conditions or high-risk relatives has any effect on desired COVID policies, but remember: If the SIVH were right, these effects

would be too big to miss.

Most strikingly, other than a few economists, statisticians, Effective Altruists, and other exemplars of numeracy, virtually *no one* supports Human Challenge Trials! Why not? Because almost everyone is morally horrified by the very idea. Rationally speaking, the underlying moral principle is hard to fathom: Why *shouldn't* you let a thousand heroes voluntarily take a minor risk to their own lives to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of strangers? Is low-risk heroism somehow villainous? But the public's moral confusion is small comfort to the politician who goes against the public's atavism.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: I would much rather live in a world of rational, selfish voters. Yes, such people can be callous. They would be deaf to the grand arguments of *The Problem of Political Authority*. Yet they would favor much better policies than the irrational, unselfish voters whose dominate actual polities. Unselfishness may lead you to "Do your part." What good is "doing your part," though, if you refuse to think straight about what to do?