What's in it for me?: Voter self-interest is highly underrated

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Consider this column a treatise on the importance of voter self-interest.

Ask: What's in it for *me*? How is this going to make *my* life better? How do *I* benefit?

There is nothing wrong in demanding answers to these questions. In fact, not asking them caused our politics both locally and nationally to go seriously off-track.

Too often, hurting the other guy — making your perceived enemies pay, no matter if it ends up making your own life actually worse — is the most important thing.

This is a sure way to bad outcomes. Just look at the last legislative session.

Some context. State lawmakers convened in Olympia in January facing a $12 billion shortfall — the result of too much spending and unrealistic projections of how much tax money would be rolling in.

An internal email among Senate Democrats inadvertently released just before the legislative session outlined options for new revenues including a payroll tax on businesses, an increase in the Business and Occupation tax, a new "Wealth Tax" and increased capital gains taxes.

To smooth the way for all these tax increases, Senate Democrats recommended specific talking points in their confidential memo: "Be specific about the 'villain' — talk about 'the wealthy few' and those who wrote our flaw (sic) tax code 100 years ago."

About the same time, business groups began thinking about political messaging and conducting their own research. That's no surprise.

Here's where it gets interesting.

In a series of closely held surveys, voters overwhelmingly told business-backed pollsters that the Legislature had enough money to address important priorities, it just needed to spend more effectively. And most did not trust the Legislature to make meaningful progress on homelessness and affordable housing.

Polls conducted in January found that 59% of respondents said the budget deficit was due to state lawmakers failing to control spending rather than inflation, population growth or demand for services.

At the same time, only 42% of people polled believed that raising taxes on large businesses and wealthy individuals by billions of dollars was a good idea.

One month later, the same percentage of people agreed that out-of-control state spending caused the budget woes.

But by February, 54% supported taxing wealthy people and corporations to fix the problem.

What caused that massive swing?

In a word: Trump.

The inauguration of President Donald Trump on Jan. 20 and the sight of the nation's wealthiest business leaders such as Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk enthusiastically welcoming the new administration was too much for many Washingtonians.

Here comes the part about the importance of looking out for your own self-interest. Because if polls are to be believed, people wanted to tax the rich — punishing big companies and corporate fat cats — even if it meant harming themselves.

Remarkably, 85% of those polled believed businesses would just pass on new state taxes to customers, raising the cost of living for all Washingtonians.

Among self-identified Democrats, 33% believed if the Legislature went through with its plans to increase taxes, their own lives would be about the same, while 1 in 5 predicted their lives would actually get worse.

In other words, inflicting pain on perceived enemies — even if they escape with little damage and the policies ended up causing harm in your own life — was enough for a lot of people.

This is tribalism run amok.

In the end, Gov. Bob Ferguson signed a budget that contained roughly $9 billion in new taxes over four years.

Here's another example.

In February, Seattle voters decided on a $50 million payroll expense tax to pay for what boosters called social housing. The proposal was strongly opposed by the editorial board, which believed it was not well-conceived or planned. The new tax passed by 63%.

Before the election, polls including one by the Northwest Progressive Institute showed a toss-up.

So what happened to drive a massive victory for social housing and more business taxes?

Trump happened. His inauguration took place two days before ballots went out in the mail.

An after-election poll by the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce showed that 62% believed companies will pass the cost of the new payroll tax to customers, resulting in an even higher cost of living for Seattle residents.

Voters were split on whether the money would make a difference in the city's affordable housing crisis. Like the state polls, a majority of respondents supported taxing "billionaire tech CEOs" to send a message.

To be clear, this phenomenon has been thoroughly documented for voters on the right of the political divide for decades.

Consider Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which passed the House on May 22. It included big cuts to food stamps and nearly $800 billion in reduced Medicaid spending over 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Both Medicaid and food stamps disproportionately help Trump-supporting rural areas.

Around here, Central and Eastern Washington have the highest proportions of folks on Medicaid. In the 4th Congressional District, which stretches down the middle of the state from the Canadian to the Oregon border, 70% of children are on Medicaid.

Nonetheless, Republican U.S. Reps. Michael Baumgartner of Spokane and Dan Newhouse of Sunnyside voted for the package.

Let's return to the premise: Voters would be better served by following their own interests — at all levels of government.

What if people dependent on subsidized health care asked: What policies will improve my medical access and provide better employment opportunities so I can afford good private insurance?

Locally, what if Seattleites demanded to see progress on homelessness and housing, instead of simply being told that City Hall has spent over $1 billion on affordable housing over the last four years — a stunning amount for a city of about 750,000 residents covering 83 square miles.

What if achieving outcomes on housing, transportation and caring for the most vulnerable were more important than simply taxing corporations and inflicting pain on the wealthy?

Bottom line: Asking "What's in it for me?" is a fine way to judge public policy, and voters ought to do more of it.

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