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Morality and politics: Comparing alternate theories

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ABSTRACT

Debates about the American "culture wars" have led scholars to develop several theories relating morality to political attitudes and behaviors. However, researchers have not adequately compared these theories, nor have they examined the overall contribution of morality to explaining political variation. This study uses nationally representative data to compare the utility of 19 moral constructs from four research traditions – associated with the work of Hunter, Lakoff, Haidt, and Schwartz – for predicting political orientation (liberalism/conservatism). Results indicate that morality explains a third of the variation in political orientation – more than basic demographic and religious predictors – but that no one theory provides a fully adequate explanation of this phenomenon. Instead, political orientation is best predicted by selected moral constructs that are unique to each of the four traditions, and by two moral constructs that crosscut them. Future work should investigate how these moral constructs can be synthesized to create a more comprehensive theory of morality and politics.

1. Introduction

Not long ago James Davison Hunter, originator of the famous "culture war" hypothesis, posed a series of crucial questions for scholars interested in political behavior. Primary among these was the basic query: does a culture war even exist? Scholars have responded in the affirmative and the negative, but their answers depend more on the definition of a culture war than on debates about political trends in the United States. Indeed, both Hunter and his opponent Alan Wolfe have agreed that the strong divisions of political opinion are largely the province of elites, and that most Americans are far more moderate in their views (c.f. DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina et al., 2006; Hunter, 2006; Wolfe, 2006).

Debates about "culture wars," however, are fundamentally arguments about the sources of variation in political positions – albeit clothed in more vivid language – and these have existed for years. Even without a "war" at the popular level, differences in political opinions and actions abound. People vote for one candidate or another, support some causes but not others, and consider themselves more or less liberal or conservative. Failures to find a society-wide cultural divide highlight the complexity of the problem, and warn us away from a simple bipolar solution. Yet social scientists continue to care deeply about political heterogeneity, not least because it intersects with important social issues such as stratification, race, and immigration. Scholars therefore continue to search for the unifying logic behind political cleavages. To quote Hunter, we are still groping to understand "the nature and meaning of the differences involved" (Hunter, 2006, 11).

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Researchers have attributed variation in political outcomes to class, demographic characteristics, interpersonal processes, cultural change, community context, and experiences during adolescence, to name a few (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; Davis and Robinson, 1996; Hunter, 2006; Mathias, 2013; McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Weeden and Grusky, 2012; Wright and Boudet, 2012). Though these efforts have been informative, they have not addressed Hunter's fundamental claim, which was that *moral* differences translate into political diversity. Scholars have explored the question of *whether* the United States is embroiled in a culture war – thus interrogating Hunter's conclusion – but have not fully investigated the theoretical assertion that undergirds it. Does the absence of a culture war at the popular level mean that moral differences play little role in explaining political variation? Or does morality still matter for politics, though perhaps not in the way originally proposed by the culture wars thesis?

Several theories suggest that morality does matter, but scholars do not agree on *which* moral differences matter most. Four prominent theories deriving from sociology, linguistics, and psychology give different answers. Hunter points to relativism and religion, Lakoff to primordial family metaphors, moral foundations theorists to notions of authority and purity, and value theorists to differing value commitments (Baker and Boudens, 2009; Graham et al., 2009; Hunter, 1991; Koleva et al., 2012; Lakoff, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2010). Each approach has prompted research, and each has empirical evidence to support its assertions. However, scholars often investigate their own claims without comparing them to other, equally plausible hypotheses. There are exceptions, but such studies typically consider only two theories at a time, fail to empirically investigate the possibility that the theories are actually tapping the same underlying moral constructs, and are limited by the use of convenience samples (e.g., Van Leeuwen and Park, 2009; McAdams et al., 2008). Even so, these studies suggest that using moral constructs from several theories might better capture political variation.

This paper advances the study of morality and politics by directly addressing these challenges. Using measures representing four influential theories from new, nationally-representative data, it investigates the links between morality and political outcomes to determine (a) if morality significantly and substantively predicts political variation, net of demographic controls, and if so (b) which moral constructs play the most important roles.

2. Does morality matter for politics?

Scholars and political elites have latched onto moral concerns as if they are key to political decisions, but does the evidence support this characterization? Research to date provides a mixed picture. On the one hand most scholars agree that only 10–15% of the American population occupy "opposing moral and ideological universes" (Hunter, 2006, 25), suggesting that moral concerns might play little role in political decision making for the general citizenship. On the other hand, emerging evidence indicates that morality is deeply implicated in political behavior for non-elites as well – one recent study found that moral orientations typically explained more variance in political attitudes than age, gender, religious attendance, or interest in politics (Koleva et al., 2012). Clearly we need further consideration of this question.

Several scholars have offered theoretical tools that can help us link morality to politics. Writing a decade ago, Hechter (2004) argued that class politics in the United States are increasingly being replaced by politics based on cultural divisions. Rather than uniting with others of similar economic standing, Americans are forming ties based on "ethnicity, religion, nationalism, gender, and sexual orientation" (404). These groups form boundaries along non-monetary lines, allowing group-specific experiences and cultures to play more of a role. Often, group cultures contain strong normative elements that take on a moral tone – ethnicity can be bound up with the cultural expectations and sanctions of a home country, for instance, while belonging to a religious community often requires allegiance to a particular moral code. Thus culture-based politics leads naturally to the introduction of moral concerns into the political landscape.

Furthermore, a number of scholars have proposed that humans are fundamentally moral beings. Smith (2003) argued that humans are motivated both by internalized moral commitments and to maintain the moral orders that define their external social environments. Hitlin (2003, 2008) offered a similar argument, and provided evidence that values – defined as conceptions of the desirable – are important components of personal identities. Finally, Haidt and Joseph (2004) argued that evolutionary processes have endowed humans with innate impulses towards goals that most consider to be moral, such as fairness and caring for others (c.f., Greene, 2013, chapter 2). If people are fundamentally morally-attuned, as these scholars suggest, then it seems that morality does – even must – play an important part in shaping their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors both politically and in general. Indeed, substantial work suggests that morality is deeply implicated in many aspects of people's lives, including their cultural orientations (Bellah et al., 1996 [1985]), evaluations and judgments of others (Inbar et al., 2012a; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Lamont, 1992, 2012), emotions (Greene, 2013, chapter 4; Malti and Latzko, 2012), experiences of solidarity (Vaisey, 2007), and behaviors (Stets and Carter, 2012; Vaisey, 2009; Wikström, 2010). The extent of moral influence on political outcomes, however, remains unclear.

3. Using morality to explain political differences

Given the theoretical plausibility of moral/political linkages and the limited evidence that supports them, we turn now to an exploration of which facets of morality are likely to matter. Below we examine four theories that have explicitly forged moral/political links. These approaches derive from foundational work by Hunter, Lakoff, Haidt, and Schwartz.