The expression of moral foundations by U.S. senators: There’s more to morality than just party affiliation

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The literature suggests that liberals are primarily concerned with harm and fairness and conservatives are equally concerned with all five moral foundations. (cf. Haidt, 2007)

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<tr>
<th>Predicted Effect of Political Affiliation and Moral Foundation on Attributed Importance</th>
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<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>Republican</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seat Competitiveness</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
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Is Senator Affiliation the sole predictor of references to the moral foundations?

Hypothesis: Situational factors unique to elections, particularly those related to threat, influence appeals to the moral foundations beyond the effect of senator affiliation.

There were no significant main effects or interactions of senator affiliation. Senator affiliation only had a marginally significant main effect on the use of fairness (p = .079); senators in the Democratic Party made more appeals to fairness.

Senator Affiliation did not predict frequency of references to the moral foundations. Incumbency and Seat Competitiveness did.

Incumbents and candidates in competitive elections employed harm, fairness, loyalty, and authority differently than other candidates, regardless of their party affiliation. It appears, then, that senators use appeals that boost their chance of winning the election. Increased use of harm in competitive elections and by incumbents can be seen as a fear-mongering strategy. Seat competitiveness also predicted fewer appeals to loyalty, likely in effort to attract swing voters. Incumbents appealed more to authority, which favors the experienced incumbent.

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<th>Frequency of Words for Moral Dimensions by Senator Affiliation</th>
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Predictors:
- Senator Affiliation: political party that the senator belongs to.
- Incumbency: whether candidate was running for re-election; acts as safety buffer.
- Seat Competitiveness: whether the state’s election was a close race (threatening) or not.

Advertisements from candidates (N=77) in the 2014 U.S. Senate election were transcribed.

Two ads were used per candidate (15 female, 62 male; 38 Republican, 33 Democratic, 6 other). The ads were run through Yoshikoder, a content analysis software.

Outcome measure: frequency with which moral foundation-related words were mentioned in the ads.

Conclusions:
- Overall, we show that situational factors--such as incumbency and seat competitiveness--sometimes override the effects of long-lasting beliefs--such as party affiliation--on the use of moral appeals. Our empirical work affords researchers a new perspective on how politics is moralized and how the moral foundations come to form the basis of political identity.

References

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