The effect of political affiliation on people's perceived immorality of and reactions to acts that violate one of the five moral foundations

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Background:
Moral Foundations Theory holds that liberals are primarily concerned with harm and fairness and conservatives are equally concerned with all five moral foundations (i.e., care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity).\(^1\) Recent work argues that liberals are equally as concerned about authority as conservatives.\(^2\) Furthermore, even if conservatives judge certain behaviors as more immoral than liberals, this does not mean that conservatives are more likely to “speak up” and confront the perpetrator of an immoral behavior.\(^3\) As in many domains, it could be that the attitude-behavior relationship is weak.\(^4\)

Hypothesis:
We predict that, for loyalty and authority, the positive relationship between conservatism and outcome measure (e.g., endorsement) disappears when asking about behavioral reactions. That is, we predict an interaction between political affiliation and type of outcome.

Study 1: Item Selection (\(N = 563, \) undergraduates)
Participants were randomly assigned to one of five moral foundations. They rated 60 foundation-violating behaviors on how much they violated that foundation. From the results, we identified the five items per moral foundation that most violated the foundation that they were written to portray for a total of 25 items.

Study 2: The effect of political affiliation on outcomes (\(N = 301, \) mTurk)
Participants were randomly assigned (within-subject) to start with either the “immoral condition” (i.e., attitude) or the “reaction condition” (i.e., behavior), which determined the scale they received to evaluate the 25 items on.

Immoral Condition: For each of the following situations, indicate the extent you consider the person’s behavior to be immoral on a scale from 1=Not at all immoral to 7=Highly immoral.

Reaction Condition: How likely is it that you would tell the person that his/her behavior is wrong (i.e., to what extent are you likely to express, in one way or another, your disapproval to the “perpetrator” of the behavior)? 1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Very likely

Results:
Across political affiliation, participants expressed patterns consistent with Moral Foundations Theory for ratings of perceptions of immorality (i.e., positive slope for loyalty, authority, and sanctity). The trend did not hold for self-reported likelihood of behavioral reactions.

The predicted interaction was significant for loyalty (\(p = 0.025\)) and authority (\(p = 0.027\)): there was a significant difference between the slopes for loyalty and authority across condition such that political affiliation did not effect the relationship between likelihood of behavioral reaction and foundation as it did for perceptions of immorality.

Conclusions:
Our empirical work shows that, for loyalty and authority, while liberals and conservatives differ in their perceptions of immorality of certain behaviors that violate societal standards, they do not differ in their tendency to express a reaction as a bystander to the behavior. Overall, the ratings of the likelihood of expressing disapproval were not fully consistent with Moral Foundations Theory—political affiliation only affected purity, not loyalty and authority—suggesting a disconnect in the mapping of moral attitudes and behaviors.

References