Changing Political Attitudes:

Moral Purity, Disgust, and Political Conservatism

Jake Lundy

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Changing Political Attitudes:
Moral Purity, Disgust, and Political Conservatism

One of the five moral foundations identified by Haidt (2013), Purity, or sanctity, is the repulsion for actions, things, foods, and attitudes that degrade a pure, sacred object or practice. Behaviors that violate the Purity foundation are sometimes considered immoral.

Haidt (2013) describes Purity violations through the example of voluntary cannibalism, in which both parties are willing participators. Though this action causes no harm to anyone in a direct, material, or utilitarian way, it nonetheless represents a social stain or pollution that desecrates several of the bedrock moral principles of Western society, such as our shared beliefs that human life is supremely valuable, and that the human body is more than just a slab of meat.

Although Haidt’s example is extreme and uncommon, there are many situations that involve Purity violations, especially in the political sphere. Much more than American liberals, American conservatives, for example, talk about the “sanctity of life,” the “sanctity of marriage,” and the “sanctity of the body.” There appears to be a positive relationship between Purity, as well as the disgust associated with its violation, and conservatism in American politics.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the literature regarding the Purity foundation, disgust, and conservatism in America. Why and to what extent do conservative express more disgust at Purity violations than liberals? Are there any methods that can alter the relationship between Purity and conservatism? Are there any behaviors that liberals would perceive as more immoral than conservatives? If so, then could they be used to break the link between conservatism and the perceived immorality of behaviors that violate the Purity foundation?

Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) explored how moral judgments vary across the political spectrum. Across four studies, the researchers used several methods to assess which
moral foundations both liberals and conservatives endorsed and practiced the most. Of the five moral foundations, Harm, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, liberals consistently showed greater endorsement and use of the Harm and Fairness foundations relative to the other three foundations, whereas conservatives endorsed and used the five foundations more equally. These findings help to illuminate the nature of moral disagreements in the American "culture war."

Frimer, Gaucher, and Schaefer (2014) examined how the Authority moral foundation differentially affects liberals’ and conservatives’ perceptions of obedience. Among them, conservatives view obedience to authority more positively. However, conservatives only have more positive moral views of obedience when the authorities are conservative (e.g., commanding officers), and liberals do only when the authorities are liberal (e.g., environmentalists). The two camps agree about obeying ideologically neutral authorities (e.g., office managers). Although obedience itself is not ideologically divisive, authority to it is.

In Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, and Cohen (2009), they explored how disgust, but not other negative emotions, moralizes and amplifies the Purity moral domain but not the moral domains of Fairness or Harm. They found that feelings of disgust, but not anger (Study 1), sadness (Study 2), or fear (Study 3) increased condemnation of behaviors violating Purity and increased approval of behaviors upholding Purity. In addition to providing evidence for the disgust-Purity association, they also demonstrated that disgust was unrelated to moral judgments about Fairness (Studies 1 and 2) or Harm (Study 3).

Although Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) found that conservatives seemed to use the five moral foundations more equally than liberals, Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom (2009) report two studies suggesting that a predisposition to feel disgust is associated with more conservative political attitudes, especially for issues related to the moral dimension of Purity. In the first
study, they found a positive correlation between disgust sensitivity and self-reported conservatism in a broad sample of U.S. adults. In Study 2, they found that while disgust sensitivity is associated with more conservative attitudes on a range of political issues, this relationship is strongest for Purity-related issues, specifically abortion and gay marriage.

Extending the findings of Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom (2009), a study conducted by Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, and Haidt (2012) found a positive relationship between disgust sensitivity and political conservatism, even when controlling for demographic variables and the “Big Five” personality traits. Disgust sensitivity was also associated with more conservative voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. In Study 2, they replicated the disgust sensitivity–conservatism relationship in an international sample of respondents from 121 different countries. Across both samples, contamination disgust, which reflects a heightened concern with interpersonally transmitted disease and pathogens, was most strongly associated with conservatism.

Just as disgust sensitivity seems to be positively related to conservatism, Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, and Bloom (2009) also demonstrates that disgust sensitivity is associated with intuitive disapproval of homosexuals. Since people tend to describe behaviors as intentional when perceived to be morally wrong, Study 1 observed how participants would describe the encouragement of public kissing. The greater the participants’ disgust sensitivity, the more likely they were to perceive the encouragement of gay men kissing in public as intentional. Moreover, in Study 2, they found that the greater the participants’ disgust sensitivity, the more they showed unfavorable automatic associations with gay people, via the IAT, as opposed to heterosexuals.

In emotionally evocative, disgust-eliciting moral dilemmas, people make rapid moral intuitions. Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko, and John (2012) explored the influence of emotional reappraisal, an emotion-regulation strategy that involves changing the trajectory of an emotional
response by reinterpreting the meaning of the emotional stimulus, on these initial moral
intuitions and if it can lead to more deliberative moral judgments. They found that emotional
reappraisal was associated with fewer intuition-based judgments (Studies 1, 2, & 3), with more
time spent in deliberation (Study 2), and less intense emotional reactions to moral dilemmas
(Study 3). Thus, political conservatives could be steered away from their initial disgust responses
to Purity violations through reappraisal.

If emotional reappraisal can lead to more deliberative moral judgments, then can it also
be used to lessen an initial disgust response? Feinberg, Antonenko, Willer, Horberg, and John
(2014) proposed that disgust has less influence on the political and moral judgments of liberals
because they tend to regulate disgust reactions through reappraisal more than conservatives. In
Study 1, they found a negative correlation between conservatism and the tendency to reappraise
disgust. When exposed to a video of men kissing, in Study 3, conservatives who were instructed
to reappraise their initial emotional reactions expressed more support for same-sex marriage than
conservatives in the control condition, demonstrating attitudes statistically equivalent to liberal
participants.

Going in the opposite direction, Helzer and Pizarro (2011) demonstrated that reminders
of physical Purity influence specific moral judgments regarding behaviors in the sexual domain
as well as broad political attitudes. Participants reported being more politically conservative after
receiving a reminder of physical cleansing when in a public setting (Study 1) and when in a
laboratory setting (Study 2); those in the laboratory also demonstrated harsher moral judgments
toward sexual Purity violations. This article provides further support for the link between
physical Purity and morality, and it demonstrates how manipulations of physical Purity can
influence political attitudes.
Feinberg and Willer (2013) investigated the effect of Harm- and Purity-based frames on conservatives’ and liberals’ pro-environmental attitudes. By varying the content of ostensible newspaper articles, conservatives’ pro-environmental attitudes increased after exposure to a Purity frame (i.e., a conservative-relevant moral foundation), but not following a Harm frame (i.e., a liberal-relevant moral foundation). On the other hand, liberals’ attitudes did not change following the Harm or Purity manipulations. This research documents differential effects of some moral frames for liberals and conservatives, for a liberal pro-attitudinal stance on an issue.

Extending this research, Day, Fiske, Downing, and Trail (2014) explored how each of the five moral foundations, Harm, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, can influence stances on pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal issues for liberals and conservatives. Examining liberals’ and conservatives’ attitudes after exposure to conservative pro-attitudinal stances on issues (Study 1) and to liberal pro-attitudinal stances on the same issues (Study 2), they found that relevant moral foundation-based frames strengthened existing political attitudes when framing pro-attitudinal issues. However, in Study 2, they found partial evidence to support that conservative-relevant moral frames of liberal issues can increase conservatives’ liberal attitudes.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests two testable methods for changing conservative’s political attitudes: emotional reappraisal and framing. If one can frame liberal pro-attitudinal issues with conservative-relevant moral frames, then one can increase conservatives’ liberal attitudes (Day et al., 2014; Feinberg & Willer, 2013). If issues cannot be framed, however, then instructing conservatives to use emotional reappraisal to regulate their initial disgust reactions could increase their acceptance of liberal pro-attitudinal stances. (Feinberg et al., 2014).
References


and political attitudes. Psychological Science, 22(4), 517-522.


Inbar, Y., Pizarro, D.A., & Bloom, P. (2009). Conservatives are more easily disgusted than


Rottman, J., Kelemen, D., & Young, L. (2014). Tainting the soul: Purity concerns predict moral