

Liberals and conservatives have different views on equity, but share 'protestant work ethic'

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There are longstanding debates in the United States about how society should distribute resources and support, from education to public health. Examining fairness through the lens of Moral Foundation Theory, researchers show that people on the political left (Democrats and liberals) tend to focus on equity, or need based on where people start, more than people on the political right (Republicans and conservatives). When it comes to proportionality, or the idea that people's outcomes should be proportional to their effort (sometimes viewed as the "Protestant work ethic"), the link between a person's political leaning and their concern for proportionality isn't as strong.

"Even though people on the political left are somewhat less likely to buy into the belief that 'you get what you give' than those on the political right," says Christofer Skurka (Cornell University), "it seems that concerns about meritocracy, and what some have called the Protestant Work Ethic, are interwoven into the fabric of American principles."

The research appears in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

They studied a national sample of U.S. adults recruited through Nielsen's Harris Panel, randomly split into calibration (N=1,499) and replication samples (N=1,499).

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) is a well-known psychological framework that unpacks why people judge moral situations in different ways. In terms of politics, differing [moral views](#) are linked to support and opposition for various policies.

"For a while, there has been discussion about expanding MFT to include other foundations aside from the original five foundations described by the theory and to refine our understanding of the original foundations," says Skurka.

The participants completed a moral foundations questionnaire, measuring their views on various moral principles including Harm/Care (involving empathy and the desire to limit the suffering of others), Fairness/Reciprocity (the desire to minimize unjust treatment), Ingroup/Loyalty (obligation to the groups of which one is a member), Authority/Respect (reflecting the need to maintain social order by respecting hierarchical relationships), and Purity/Sanctity. Participants also reported their political leanings and party affiliations, if they had any.

They looked at two new possible "foundations" on which people in the U.S. base their judgments about what is right and wrong: Equity, that people should receive support based on their starting point in order to ensure that all people have equal success, and Proportionality, that people should receive support in proportion to how much effort they give.

Both Equity and Proportionality emerged as significant predictors of party affiliation in their first and second study. Specifically, for a one-unit increase on the Equity scale, the odds of being a Democrat increased by 54-82%. For a one-unit increase on the Proportionality scale, the odds of being a Democrat decreased by 31-34%. However, when they looked at Equity and Proportionality as predictors of political

ideology (on a scale from extremely conservative to extremely liberal), Equity consistently predicted a person's ideology, but Proportionality only predicted a person's ideology in the first study.

Skurka notes that they only interviewed adults in the United States for this study, so these results may not hold for other groups of people or cultures.

They are also still parsing out if their findings reflect two possible new foundations, Equity and Proportionality, for MFT or if these are "simply values that shape how we view the world around us."

"If we get a better sense of how these foundations play out in cultural contexts outside the U.S., we will have a much better idea of whether Equity and Proportionality are inherent to all of our moral evaluations," summarizes Skurka.

More information: Skurka, Christofer; Winett, Liana; Jarman-Miller, Hannah; Niederdeppe (2019). All Things Being Equal: Distinguishing Proportionality and Equity in Moral Reasoning. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Online before print August 7, 2019.

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