

Study presents new perspective on morality based on nuances in values among different political ideologies

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While social psychology has long been interested in learning more about how one's moral values relate to one's political views, most of the research to date has used quite the same perspective.

So far, these studies would rather rely on one's self-identification on the liberal-conservative or left-right political spectrum. Over the past 15 years, most have used questionnaires based on the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which claims that there are several innate, evolutionary ancient values (i.e. care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity and liberty), which are universal across cultures, and sit at the core of humanity's "intuitive ethics." Furthermore, this [theory](#) assumes that morals are the cause of politics.

Now, to question and build upon what earlier [research](#) work has concluded, a team of researchers from Tilburg University, University College London, the University of Oxford and Aarhus University, has decided to take quite a different approach in a new study.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

First, instead of relying on data about people's self-reported political identity, they sought to place them on the liberal-conservative spectrum by using their attitudes towards particular policies (e.g., traditional marriage, welfare benefits).

Then, instead of the moral foundations theory, the research team turned to the theory of morality as cooperation. According to the latter, humanity has long learned to value and pursue cooperation as a building block of a prospering society. As a result, to retain this mutually-beneficial social interaction, humans developed a collection of cooperative rules, which philosophers then called morality.

Having analyzed existing [survey data](#) from the U.S., Denmark and the Netherlands, and then having added to it an analysis of more than 1,300 users of the social network platform Reddit, the researchers concluded that the theory of morality as cooperation can be successfully used to reveal new insights into the relation between politics and morality.

The alternative view on morality and politics allowed for the research team to explore the nuances setting apart family values (i.e. loyalty and commitment to one's family) and group values (i.e. loyalty and commitment to other groups one feels that belongs to) that traditionally have been assumed to overlap with each other, and—as such—were both linked to conservatism.

Likewise, conclusions based on the moral foundations theory made no difference between fairness values (e.g. valuing redistribution, sharing, equality) and reciprocity values (e.g. valuing social exchange, obligations to return favors). However, in the present study, the research team confirmed that there is indeed a difference between these sets of values and how they relate to different political ideologies.

Nevertheless, the authors point out that there is need for further studies and additional measures that will make it possible to map the relation between morality and politics. Future research will also need to evaluate how cultural differences affect these variables.

More information: Florian van Leeuwen et al, Morality as cooperation, politics as conflict, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2024).
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