Putting the Pieces Together: Ideology Beyond Policy

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Putting the Pieces Together: Ideology Beyond Policy

Abstract
Ideological differences exist far beyond policy preferences. Our ideologies are built from much more intrinsic building blocks, and as such the effects of this are seen far outside of what is generally considered the political realm of existence. When explaining these ideologies we must look past the policy preferences and more into the base parts of what makes people who they are. Liberals and conservatives differ on important measures, and these differences between us have a deeper root than most see. Morality, motivations, and personality all combine to form the expression of ideology. This paper explores these three aspects of people, and how they interact as driving forces behind one's ideology.

Keywords
Political Science, Ideology, Morality, Motivations, Personality
Ideology is a complicated subject that has been spoken about and studied as long as separate schools of thought have existed. For a long time, it was thought to be a purely intellectual choice, but more recently that assertion has been challenged. A person’s ideology is built up from many different sources, but not all agree on what these are, and if they do indeed explain ideology. Pointing to different indicators from morality or motivation to personality, scholars attempt to show that the differences between the ideological camps go far beyond policy preferences. We can look at a wide variety of personal attributes to explain ideology. These correlations may also explain how differences in the fundamental building blocks of people can explain their ideologies, even when these are not items we typically attribute to being ideological. These indicators have been shown to strongly correlate to a person’s ideology, and can also become good predictors of a person’s ideology if given this information. Ideology is built from fundamental blocks of who a person is, and contributes to their entire worldview, not simply their policy preference. While traits such as morality, motivations, and personality do not make up all of ideology, they are a solid indicator of it. These puzzle pieces show how policy preferences aren’t the sole definition of ideology, as well as how people come to those conclusions.

Making up a good portion of our nature, morality is a multifaceted subject that can mean many different things to people, but there are basic principles that we can point to that outline this subject. It is already clear that liberals hold different views than other ideological groups when it comes to what we call moral issues, but rather than ideology being a predictor of moral attitudes, some would argue that moral attitudes shape ideology. Moral foundations theory breaks morality into five main categories, “Harm/Care,” “Fairness/Reciprocity,” “Ingroup/Loyalty,” “Authority/Respect,” and “Purity/Sanctity” (Cornwell et al 2013). The importance placed on these values creates your moral foundation. Conservatives and liberals consistently rank moral foundations differently, adding to the idea that one’s moral foundation may be a key piece that causes them to become either liberal or conservative. While conservatives value most foundations of morality equally, liberals tend to rank avoidance of harm and a commitment to equality significantly higher than the other markets of moral value. This aligns well with the liberal principles of equality of opportunity, and the push to ensure that all people have equal chances of success.

Valuing equality more leads directly into not accepting the strict role of hierarchy in society. Conservatives, on the other hand, are more apt to accept the role of authority and hierarchy in society, believing that these are natural and are an essential part of the creation of an ideal society. We can see this in terms of outgroup acceptance and even levels of religiosity (Schlenker et al 2012). Liberals are also more likely to strive for significant changes in the status quo, prompting them to accept groups that do not fall under the umbrella of traditional society, and give them a place at the table, even when allowing them to move forward may upset the existing values and definitions of morality. Valuing modesty more may lead to conservatives holding more “regressive” positions on social issues than liberals do (Janoff-Bulman 2014). Cornwell and colleagues found that these moral differences do not only correlate to ideology, but they also may explain the motivations that fuel ideology (Cornwell et al 2013). Both liberals and conservatives increasingly see each other as immoral in the current political climate (Pew 2016). The moral explanations for ideology may also explain this, if liberals and conservatives have separate...
foundations for morality, understanding how the other side establishes their stance on moral issues becomes complicated. The fundamental differences between liberals and conservatives show in the way they discuss moral issues, for example, the welfare system. For conservatives, use of the welfare system can be considered a moral failure, rewarding lack of effort. It is seen to incentivize laziness, while for liberals the welfare system is seen to be a leg up in order to give independence and foster a path for people to become productive citizens. The distinct moral values leave different ideologies without a common point to stand on. Approaching different issues from their own perspectives gives each side the chance to pass harsh moral judgment, due to the issues being filtered through vastly different moral lenses. Conservative stances do not fit the moral scheme of liberals and vice versa.

Theories of how moral attitudes inform ideological leanings have addressed the issue in many different ways, but one that has garnered a lot of thought is Lakoff’s Moral Politics Theory pertaining to parenting. Moral Politics Theory shows that there are ideological differences in the way one should approach care to others. Under a liberal’s vision of morality the government is a nurturant parent, providing care, understanding, and opportunity to the child, all while conveying the idea that empathy is the most pressing trait to be concerned with in order to be a moral member of society. Following this theory, the state is to be respected because they provide a place for the public to flourish and it is their role to care for people. It is easy to see how, following this line of thought, liberals would have a far different reaction to a phenomenon such as the opioid epidemic than conservatives would. Addiction in the eyes of a liberal is not a moral failing due to lack of willpower, but a disease that requires care for the person, not punishment. This is simply one example of an issue in which we can starkly see the divergence in moral codes, and how that leads to the differences in proposed solutions. Following this, it shows that liberals are more concerned with the prevention of harm than other groups, considering certain things that may harm others immoral, even if these actions would make life easier for themselves (Cornwell et al 2013). To show that this is truly an ideological difference, Feinberg and colleagues took Lakoff’s ideas and tested them in multiple studies. They not only upheld Lakoff’s theories, finding the expected differences but also found more differences along the lines of the ideal for moral government as opposed to how people themselves should act. When considering different stems for morality, we can then understand where the logic of liberal ideology comes from. Moral governance means very different things when considered through separate ideological lenses, to the point that morality isn’t recognized as existing in the stance of the other (Feinberg et al 2019).

Just as our morals inform our ideology, so do our motivations. The motivations of liberals differ from those of people with other ideologies. Motivation is something more intrinsic in nature, and it can lead us down many different paths. A motivation for equality may lead liberals to push to fund public goods, even when a conservative with their motivation to protect their own may argue that this is a frivolous use of funds. These motivations are psychological differences in the rationale behind the push for different goals. Motivations have an effect on how our lives unfold, and the base motivations of liberals can be looked at as a distinct feature that leads to their ideology. Schlenker and colleagues found that depending on the motivations, a person’s moral foundation also changed (Schlenker et al 2012). Conservatives value prevention more, and prevention of harm can be seen as one of their motivations, while the liberal motivation to match is the promotion of equality. The promotion of equality can be seen as the stem of historically liberal policies such as welfare programs. While conservatives find fear highly motivating, liberals are less motivated by fear, particularly of what may come as a result of seeking change. For these reasons, liberals are far more motivated by messages of hope than fear. We can see this in the way voters are advertised to. Campaign slogans from each side play at their voter’s natural inclinations. George W. Bush’s reelection slogan, “A Safer World and a More Hopeful America” was often...
shortened to simply “A Safer World,” playing off of fears that riddled the nation in the wake of 9/11 in order to win conservative votes. On the flipside, Barack Obama’s messages of “Change We Can Believe In,” and the 2012 one word, “Forward,” created an air of progress and movement that attracted the more liberal base of Democratic voters. These motivations influence our policy preferences, and even further, the way we see an ideal world. National security is often seen as a conservative issue, something that Bush clearly capitalized on, unlike Obama. Both liberals and conservatives capitalize on branding using issues their ideological group is seen to own, creating an effective narrative for them.

Motivations are also affected by personality, which is clearly linked with ideology (Janoff-Bulman 2014). One important motivation identified by Jost is a need to identify and address psychological needs, that are often dictated by personality. Personality is the most stable of the indicators that may show a person’s ideology. Personality is largely heritable, and it influences both motivations and morality (Hirsh et al 2010). Personality is a basis for motivations, informing one on what they may require to fulfill their needs, and it also informs one’s moral code, aiding in prioritization and understanding of the world. In making up motivations, people include a balance of needs for safety, different types of fulfillment, and membership in social groups among others. Liberals are motivated by a higher need for stimulation, or cognitive fulfillment which may be connected to them generally having more open personalities (Jost 2006). This need for stimulation motivates liberals to seek novel experiences and can lead to a higher level of exposure to different groups of people (Janoff-Bulman 2014).

Motivations and morality go hand in hand, influencing each other and deriving influences in the same ways. Liberals and conservatives also tend to lead fundamentally different lives, down to intrinsically being different people, and interacting with the world in a different way. Personality traits are often measured using a scale, psychologists know as the “Big 5”. When tested, liberals and conservatives score significantly differently on two of the five dimensions. The two most pointed to dimensions here are openness and conscientiousness, although there are differences among the others, here is where we see the evenest split. Openness to experience dictates a person’s willingness to step outside of what they already know, or what could be considered their sense of adventure, while conscientiousness speaks to a person’s attention to detail and diligence. Conservatives tend to score high on conscientiousness, while liberals score high on openness (Hirsh et al 2010). The openness in liberals leads to a different outlook on the world, and as Heywood described it, ideology at its base is based on the way one sees the world now, and the way they think it should look in the future. Ideology then, is what follows this and considering the consistent openness we see in liberal’s personalities, their outlook on the world invites change more readily (Heywood 2017). The policy proposals and preferences of liberals follow openness to experience. One example of this is with their recent and stark change in stance on same-sex marriage. In 1996 33% of Democrats believed that same-sex marriage should be recognized as valid, as of 2018 that number has more than doubled at 83%. The Democratic party is more liberal than the Republican party in the United States, and although the Republicans also made a jump, going from 16% to 44% approval, it was by far not as steep (McCarthy 2018). This fits with the theme of liberal and conservative values that have been established, with personality, morality, and motivation all intermingling to create this stance. Liberal emphasis on the moral priority of empathy, equality of opportunity as a motivator, and openness as a core part of personality all mold the path for the vast majority of liberals to hold this stance.

Although most studies of personality and ideology address openness and conscientiousness as the place where we see divergences in ideology, Hirsh and colleagues looked into splitting another factor, agreeableness. They found that if they split measures of agreeableness into two main groups, there was a consistent difference between liberals and conservatives. Liberals are
agreeable in the sense that agreeableness breeds compassion, but not in association with orderliness or politeness. Thinking about issue arguments, this split in agreeableness follows a reasonable path, fitting of common knowledge about liberals. Liberals are not as concerned with order and social convention, but being agreeable in the way that fosters compassion seems to be a fitting scheme for a group that strives to promote equality among different groups (Hirsh et al 2010).

It is difficult to separate any of these aspects used to explain ideology from one another, in some sense they all bleed into one another. For example, we can look to life satisfaction, liberals have been shown to be less satisfied with life than their conservative counterparts, although this is not a large gap, it is a consistent one. The difference can be explained in a few ways: liberals do not need or even want as much structure as conservatives do. Hierarchical structures have been shown to give people a sense of belonging or purpose, and that in turn has been linked to happiness. The structure provides a clearer set of rules and requires less effort in that area, it would then follow that liberals rejecting that structure can take on an undue burden in not having that clarity. These structures, such as many religious institutions give a community that may be beneficial for life satisfaction, but require subscribing to a certain value set. Liberals also show fewer behaviors that have been linked to higher levels of satisfaction in life. Religiosity and higher self-esteem were both linked with both higher levels of conservatism and happiness. This also drives home the difference in morality, with liberals not seeing a strong link between morality and religiosity, where conservatives find that to be an important aspect of making moral decisions. Liberals also see society as far more unjust than conservatives, and their unrealized push for equality requires a level of dissatisfaction with the current state of the world around them that certainly does not lend itself to high levels of life satisfaction. (Schlenker et al 2012). Liberals are more open to experience, but at times that may translate into taking risks that others may not. They also are motivated by ideas or goals that many times go unrealized throughout life.

Promoting equality and preventing harm are both goals that do not have a set finish line, both require constant efforts, but it seems that the results of promoting equality can be more difficult to see, leaving preventing harm as a more tangible goal with more satisfying results (Janoff-Bulman 2014). As we can see with this breakdown of factors that contribute to liberal’s lower happiness in relation to conservatives, all three of the indicators spoken of coming together to create the conditions for this end result, as is the case when it comes to ideology as a whole.

Ideologies are complex, built from base aspects of a person, not simply taken from policy proposals and clear-minded thought. Everything we are, how we view the world, and who we strive to be is tied up in our ideology, and ultimately that is what influences our true policy positions as well.
References


