

## **Moral Values, Moralism, and the 2004 Presidential Election**

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*The “moral values vote” in the 2004 American presidential election should be interpreted more broadly than as a reflection of concerns about same-sex marriage and abortion. Instead of specific hot-button social policy issues, a general personality trait of moralism—the tendency to perceive a moral dimension in everyday decisions—may have contributed to the election outcome. Specifically, we hypothesize that some Bush supporters shared Bush’s high level of moralism (as reflected in his rhetoric) and that this moralism motivated their votes. Consistent with our hypothesis, a preliminary empirical investigation suggests that Bush voters were, indeed, higher in moralism than were Kerry voters. Plans for further research and political strategy implications are discussed.*

By now, the story that George W. Bush won the 2004 presidential election due to the “moral values vote” has grown old, as has the newer story that discredited the original one. Almost as soon as the news networks declared that issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion drove Bush’s victory (e.g., Baker, 2004; Macko, 2004; Murphy, 2004), rejoinders by journalists and pundits began appearing (e.g., Langer, 2004; Meyer, 2004), and these narrative accounts have recently been buttressed by political scientists’ scholarly analyses showing that single issues like same-sex marriage contributed little, by themselves, to Bush’s win (e.g., Burden, 2004; Hillygus & Shields, 2005; Jacobs, 2004).

The controversy started with two brute facts. First, according to the widely reported National Election Pool exit polls, a plurality of Americans (22%)

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chose—from a closed list of seven options—“moral values” as the single most important issue influencing their vote. Second, of those individuals who ranked moral values as their top issue, 80% voted for Bush. The importance of these figures was underscored by a large post-election national survey indicating that “moral values” was the most important issue to 27% of voters and that fully 44% of Bush voters chose moral values as their top issue, compared to only 7% of Kerry voters (Pew Research Center, 2004).

Clearly “moral values” were important to many voting Americans—especially Bush supporters—but how are we to interpret this vague phrase? Most members of the press and the academy took “moral values” to refer to a few key hot-button issues—particularly same-sex marriage and abortion rights—that figured prominently in the presidential debates and in pre-election polling. Consequently, scholarly inquiries into the moral values explanation of the election have tended to test whether the specific policy issues of abortion and same-sex marriage had any independent impact on voting choice over and above the effects of other important variables, such as voters’ preferences on non-“moral values” issues (e.g., terrorism) and voters’ demographic characteristics (e.g., party affiliation; see Burden, 2004; Hillygus & Shields, 2005). The results of these inquiries have been unequivocal: views on same-sex marriage and abortion had no significant, independent impact on voting behavior, let alone a determinative effect on the outcome of the election (Hillygus & Shields, in press).

We believe that the emerging scientific consensus concerning the (non)impact of same-sex marriage and abortion on the 2004 election, rather than settling the “moral values” issue, actually *adds* interest to the exit poll and survey results. Why did nearly half of Bush voters cite moral values as their top issue, if abortion and same-sex marriage—the most plausible policy issues for which “moral values” may have been a stand-in—failed to have any independent effect on candidate choice? Certainly, one possibility is that voters had no access to the wellsprings of their preferences and simply chose an issue that sounded like a reasonable explanation for their voting choice (cf. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Adopting a more ingenuous stance toward voters’ espoused issue valuations, we propose that “moral values” may indeed have had a substantial impact on the presidential election, but not in the way that early commentators suggested and that recent analysts have denied. Instead, we suggest that a general tendency to see the world in moral terms, and to publicly, explicitly evaluate things as “right” and “wrong”—in short, a disposition to moralize—is shared by Bush and his adherents, and that this general moralism, rather than specific moral views, affected the election.

We begin our analysis by defining moralism and reviewing literature that suggests Bush is a paradigmatic moralist and that a personal quality such as moralism may have affected voting behavior. We then offer a preliminary empirical investigation supporting our hypothesis that Bush voters, compared to Kerry voters,

shared the president's moralism. Finally, we note implications for the "culture wars" and suggest avenues for future research.

### *What is Moralism?*

Some issues are generally considered to be moral issues. Virtually everyone, for example, perceives a moral dimension in a choice between killing an innocent person and sparing him or her; one option is seen as morally superior to the other—and obligatory for any decent human being. On the other hand, there are issues, such as the choice between chocolate and vanilla ice cream, which are seen nearly universally as matters of personal preference; it would be odd for someone to ask which flavor he or she categorically *ought* to select. For still other issues, such as whether to eat veal, level of moralization varies: meat-eating activates some people's moral sensitivities strongly, whereas others assign it no moral weight at all (Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997).

We define *moralism* as the tendency to perceive everyday life as imbued with a moral dimension—a dimension of ethical obligation. Those individuals who are on the high end of this personality trait—we will call them *moralizers*—generally view the world through a lens of "right" and "wrong." Cultures, as well as individuals, vary in their level of moralism: certain traditional societies, for example, endow virtually all behaviors with moral gravity (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). The level of moralism within a culture—and within an individual—is not, of course, static over time. Smoking, for instance, has grown increasingly moralized over the last several decades in America, while sexual orientation has grown increasingly "amoralized" (Rozin, 1999).

To help locate moralism within the context of prior psychological theory, consider the currently dominant paradigm in moral development research—social domain theory (e.g., Nucci, 2001). Social domain theorists differentiate between three domains of "social knowledge": the moral, the conventional, and the personal. The moral domain comprises actions that are absolutely right or wrong, independent of circumstances. The conventional domain also encompasses actions that qualify as "right" or "wrong," but not in an absolute sense—rather, in relation to temporally and socially local norms, such as driving on the right side of the road. Finally, the personal domain consists of actions that are purely matters of personal preference or taste. According to this taxonomy, individuals who are high on moralism (moralizers) have a tightly circumscribed personal domain and an expansive moral domain.

Beyond social domain theory, moralism may also remind readers of some constructs in the current personality literature. Individuals high in *integrative complexity* (Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Streufert, 1992), for example—people, that is, who tend to recognize and integrate multiple dimensions of a single issue—may find it difficult to pass casual right/wrong judgments and therefore may score low

on moralism. Individuals high in the psychological function of *judging* (see the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory; Myers, 1995), on the other hand, may be more likely to pass characterological judgments on others and therefore may score high on moralism. Two of the Big Five personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1999)—*openness* and *conscientiousness*—seem prima facie linked to moralism, but empirical analyses reveal that openness is closer to curiosity than to tolerance (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1997) and that conscientiousness is a considerably heterogeneous trait (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005), featuring some facets (e.g., virtue and responsibility) related to morality (if not moralism per se) and others (e.g., industriousness, order) with no apparent connection to moralism at all.

### *George W. Bush's Moralism*

“Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree.”

—George W. Bush (2002)

President Bush openly characterizes himself as a moralizer, a viewpoint with which his critics can, for once, agree. The ethicist Peter Singer (2004), for example, titled his own scathing indictment of Bush's moral outlook *The President of Good and Evil*. One reporter described Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address as “shot through with a quality that has come to mark his presidency: an unblinking brand of public moralism” (Purdum, 2003, p. A8). And the anthropologist Richard Shweder (2004), well known for his work in cultural and moral psychology, has referred to Bush's ethics as “the missionary position,” arguing that Bush's confident moralistic vision—his perception of abundant, everlasting moral principles governing all human societies—propels a proactive foreign policy designed, like missionary work, to bring other people into compliance with the one transcendent (moral) truth.

An especially enlightening analysis of Bush's brand of moralism has been developed by Shogan (2003, 2004). Investigating the rhetorical styles of 20th-century American presidents, Shogan (2003) identified a distinction between visionary rhetoric (advocating change and optimism about the future), more common among Democratic presidents, and categorical moral rhetoric (advocating rediscovery of and adherence to traditional moral values), more common among Republican presidents. Bush's categorical moral rhetoric, according to Shogan (2004), is strategically intertwined with his anti-intellectualism: by regarding extended reflection about complex issues as signifying weakness, Bush engenders a new kind of populist appeal independent of the economic class warfare that characterized past populisms. Bush's frequent invocations of right and wrong, his willingness to, for example, label a triad of sovereign nations an “axis of evil,”

resonates with those who feel that relativism has run amok, and that we must cast aside doubt in formulating—or, to adopt the relevant mindset, *rediscovering*—the appropriate moral vision for ourselves and for the world.

### *Moralism at the Ballot Box*

Among social scientists there is a venerable tradition of debunking the commonsense notion that voters' electoral preferences hinge on candidates' positions on policy issues. Instead, it is said, voters' decisions depend largely on simple group benefits and party habits (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964; Smith, 1989). Recent social-psychological research provides support for the latter factor: in an intriguing series of studies, Cohen (2003) demonstrated that people's evaluations of specific policy positions depended more on the parties that purportedly supported or opposed them than on the actual content of the policies. That is, even if opinions on policy issues do affect voter choice, the formation of these opinions, in turn, appears to be heavily influenced by party preferences.

Certainly, party identification has a strong influence on voter behavior, but other factors matter as well—both in producing party identification and in influencing those voters who do not strongly identify with any major political party. In this vein, the personal characteristics of candidates have grown increasingly important in the modern political era, especially as ideological differences between parties have withered (Giddens, 1998). According to one recent analysis, “voter-politician congruency” in personality and in values plays a vital role in today's election outcomes (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). In other words, people vote for politicians whose personality matches their own.

How does moralism fit into this framework for voter decision making? As discussed earlier, most authors have interpreted “moral values” on the 2004 exit polls and post-election surveys as a reference to the specific issues of abortion and same-sex marriage. Only 44% of voters who cited “moral values” as a top priority, however, pointed to these policy issues when asked what they thought “moral values” meant (Pew Research Center, 2004). This fact, coupled with the failure to find any independent effects of abortion and same-sex marriage on voter choice, suggests that the meaning of “moral values” has not been fully unpacked. Consistent with Langer (2004) and Fiorina (2004), we believe that “moral values,” for many voters, may actually have signaled personal characteristics more than policy issues. In particular, we propose that perceived congruency between Bush's moralism and voters' own moralism may have played an important role in motivating Bush's supporters in the 2004 election.

As a preliminary test of our hypothesis, we designed a correlational study comparing the levels of moralism among Bush voters and Kerry voters. We predicted

that Bush voters would be significantly higher in moralism than would Kerry voters. To help elucidate our moralism construct, we also administered a brief questionnaire measuring the Big Five personality traits. We had no a priori hypotheses about relationships between moralism and the Big Five traits.

## Method

### *Participants*

Syracuse University undergraduates (104 women, 60 men) participated for partial course credit. Of the 164 students, 129 voted in the 2004 presidential election, with 125 voting for either John Kerry or George W. Bush.

### *Materials*

*Demographic form.* A brief demographic form asked participants to report their sex, age, whether they voted in the 2004 Presidential election, and, if so, for whom they voted.

*Moralism questionnaire.* A novel questionnaire, designed to probe participants' levels of moralism, was introduced for this study.<sup>1</sup> This moralism questionnaire consisted of 30 one- to two-sentence vignettes, each describing a person deciding between two behavioral options. For each vignette there was a corresponding scale on which a participant rated the degree to which the decision was a matter of personal preference or a moral matter with a right and a wrong answer (1 = entirely personal preference; 5 = clearly a morally right/wrong matter). Pilot testing with a 10-item version of this questionnaire administered to a separate sample suggested that the directions were clear.

The moralism questionnaire's vignettes sampled a variety of everyday decisions, some widely considered moral in nature, others rarely moralized. Very few items' content had any discernible relationship to public policy issues. The following items are representative:

Melissa is alone in a study lounge and sees on the shelf a book that she'll need for a class she's taking the next semester. She considers whether to take the textbook without telling anyone.

Ian is going to bed and considers whether to set his alarm for 6:00 am or for 11:00 am.

Tim has already eaten two hamburgers and is feeling pretty full, but he really likes the French fries at this restaurant. He considers whether to order some.

Kelly does not feel like going to work today. She would rather go to the mall. Even though she feels fine, she considers calling in to work to say she is sick and is staying home.

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete version of the moralism questionnaire used in this study, along with psychometric characteristics and updates on development, please contact the corresponding author.

Amanda receives a \$50 check from a distant relative for her birthday but is feeling lazy. She considers whether to write a thank-you letter.

Chris needs one more course to fulfill his math requirements at college. He considers whether to take an easier algebra course or a harder calculus course.

*Big Five personality questionnaire.* The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), a 44-item Likert-type questionnaire, was administered to assess participants' extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience.

### *Procedure*

On November 29, 2004, less than one month after the presidential election, introductory psychology students participated in this study as part of a group testing session. After signing an informed consent form, participants completed a questionnaire packet that included the demographics sheet, moralism questionnaire, and BFI, along with several unrelated measures.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics and Scale Characteristics*

Of the 125 participants who voted for one of the two major party candidates, 28 (22.4%) voted for Bush and 97 (77.6%) voted for Kerry. The moralism questionnaire demonstrated acceptable reliability in the total sample ( $N = 164$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ) and no gender difference (male  $M = 72.65$ ,  $SD = 13.5$ ; female  $M = 72.71$ ,  $SD = 11.0$ ;  $t(162) = .032$ , n.s.).

To determine the factor structure of the moralism questionnaire, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principal components extraction and—since we did not have a theoretical reason to expect orthogonal factors—an oblique rotation (Promax). This analysis yielded 10 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1; Cattell's (1966) scree test revealed three major factors. These factors, however, were not readily interpretable and did not relate to voting behavior or the Big Five traits.

### *Moralism and Voting*

Consistent with our predictions, an independent-group  $t$  test revealed that Bush voters ( $M = 76.4$ ,  $SD = 12.4$ ) scored higher on the moralism scale than did Kerry voters ( $M = 71.7$ ,  $SD = 11.3$ ), one-tailed  $t(123) = 1.93$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.40$ . The nonvoting participants' scores ( $N = 35$ ,  $M = 72.9$ ,  $SD = 12.7$ ) fell between those of Bush and Kerry voters but did not differ significantly from either voting group's scores.

*Relationship between Moralism and the Big Five*

Moralism scores did not show significant relationships with any of the Big Five personality traits: extraversion ( $r = -.03$ , n.s.), agreeableness ( $r = .14$ , n.s.), conscientiousness ( $r = .08$ , n.s.), neuroticism ( $r = -.02$ , n.s.), and openness ( $r = -.03$ , n.s.). In addition, none of the three individual moralism factors correlated significantly with any of the Big Five traits.

**Discussion**

These results, although preliminary in nature, support our hypothesis that President Bush may have benefited from the moralizing tendencies of some American voters. In short, Bush voters in our sample had a significantly higher level of trait moralism than did Kerry voters.

The lack of a relationship between moralism scores and any of the Big Five traits was somewhat surprising, although this result may have been due partly to heterogeneity in the scale; item content varied widely across domains of social behavior. Still, the absence of significant correlations suggests that we may have identified a construct—moralism—that is relatively independent of the most-discussed traits in the personality literature.

*Limitations and Future Directions*

Four limitations of the present study should be noted. First, asking participants to name the candidate they voted for may have primed their moralistic (or non-moralistic) tendencies. Although the moralism questionnaire did not directly follow the voting question—they were both parts of a larger survey packet—priming effects may still explain our data.

Demand characteristics constitute a second possible limitation: upon reading the moralism questionnaire, participants may have recalled the voting question, guessed our hypothesis, and responded as they thought appropriate. Again, the embedding of both measures among other forms casts doubt on this alternative explanation, but, like the priming explanation, it cannot be excluded, since our lack of counterbalancing precludes the testing of order effects.

A third potential problem is that our sample was likely unrepresentative of American voters both in average level of moralism and in variability on the measure. We know from previous research that high socioeconomic-status (SES) college students are less likely than lower SES residents from the same community to moralize certain actions (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Our sample, therefore, drawn from a private university, may have been lower in moralism than American voters as a whole. It is important to note, though, that the restricted variability in our sample may have attenuated the relationship between the variables of interest.

Among the more diverse American voting population, then, the relationship we found may actually be even stronger.

A fourth limitation is that we did not control for other known demographic or attitudinal factors that may have affected participants' voting choices. We therefore cannot claim an independent effect of moralism on voter choice.

The aforementioned limitations of the present study lead naturally to a programmatic line of research investigating the effects of moralism on voting behavior. A first set of studies would add internal validity safeguards (e.g., counterbalancing) and, like previous scientific investigations into the 2004 election (e.g., Hillygus & Shields, 2005), would control for relevant demographic variables and opinions on issues to examine the *independent* effect of moralism on voter choice. This research would aim to demonstrate that the effects found in the present study were not due to qualities other than moralism that differentiated President Bush from Senator Kerry. A second set of studies would be experimental in nature, involving hypothetical candidates whose speeches, identical in policy content, were systematically varied in level of moralism. This research would aim to broaden the application of the present study beyond the immediate context of the 2004 American presidential election.

### Conclusions

We opened the present inquiry by discussing the post-election controversy concerning the "moral values vote." In response to the media message that a few hot-button social issues drove Bush's 2004 election victory, several prominent figures, including John Kerry and Hillary Clinton, have suggested that Democrats need to soften their rigid stances on issues such as abortion if they wish to win future elections (Healy, 2005; Rosenberg, 2004). We disagree. According to our analysis of moral values, moralism, and the 2004 election—awaiting corroboration from further research—the style, more than the substance, of current liberal rhetoric must change if progressives wish to court the moralistic voter. As Lakoff (2004) has suggested, Democrats may profit enormously from injecting morality into their language, even while they retain the same liberal positions. For example, as justification for progressive taxation, Democrats might emphasize the *moral duty* of the well-off to contribute differentially to society.

More speculatively, we suggest that the much-ballyhooed "culture wars" may be rooted in disagreements about the scope and nature of morality more than in the evaluation of specific, narrowly defined moral issues. Some popular accounts warn of the moral chaos entailed by an abandonment of objective moral standards (e.g., Beckwith & Koukl, 1998), echoing the idea that "without God, all is permitted" (Dostoevsky, 1879/1929). Might some apparent policy disputes stem from differences in *lay metaethics*—that is, laypeople's beliefs about the objectivity (or lack thereof) of morality—more than from actual policy differences? And might the

adoption of more moralistic language, in turn, assuage voters' fears of impending nihilism? Only further development of measures of trait moralism, combined with investigations into lay metaethics, can answer these and other pressing concerns.

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