

Love thy Neighbor: Moral Suasion and the Formation of Immigration Policy Preferences

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Abstract: Recent experimental work on moral suasion has administered moral messages abstractly, that is, without any sense of who the message is given by or in what context. This abstractness limits the external validity of the studies. In addition, recent studies have focused on the effect of suasion on behavior, overlooking its effect on the formation of policy preferences. We address these two gaps by designing a survey experiment that administers moral suasion—the Golden Rule—as delivered by particular sources such as a religious or political figure. We then examine the effect of this concrete moral suasion on cooperative behavior, and on the formation of policy preferences on immigration. We find that the impact of a moral message on individual behavior and policy preferences is mediated by the source of the message

Introduction

Recent studies have suggested that moral suasion can have a powerful effect in fostering cooperative behavior among individuals in an experimental setting (Dal Bó and Dal Bó 2014; Ito, Ida, and Tanaka 2018). These studies are important because they explore the under-examined influence of values on political behavior. Moral suasion is significant because, if effective, it promises to be a much less contentious and more cost-effective way to foster cooperation than most options based on the provision of material incentives.

Yet recent work on moral suasion in this literature is incomplete given the excessively abstract way in which it treats moral suasion: Researchers focus on how exposure to messages based on moral appeals affects the material incentives shaping individual behavior, but they overlook the source of those normative appeals. Typically, researchers employ time-honored moral norms such as the Golden Rule, but do not specify who is stating this rule and in what

context. They ask participants to consider moral messages prior to conducting a task or responding to a questionnaire, abstracted from the contexts participants would hear such messages in the real world beyond the research protocol.

There are two main problems with this level of abstraction. First, ignoring the source of the moral message limits our understanding of how moral suasion works upon individuals, namely the mechanism behind the scenes that explains why subjects do not simply disregard such messages when they come at the expense of material and other interests. Second, the abstractness of the moral message vitiates the external validity of the experiment. Since participants rarely encounter moral messages in the abstract—messages come from different authorities—then the significance of such abstract moral suasion is undermined. Insofar as subjects do come upon an authority-free moral message in the world—on bumper stickers, fortune cookies, or billboards—the impact of these messages is likely to be much less compelling than when the moral appeal comes from a trusted friend, parent, wise person, or political or religious leader. In addition, the empirical work on moral suasion has focused on incentives to cooperate, investigating the effect of moral suasion on subjects’ actions in public goods games (Dal Bó and Dal Bó 2014). Yet we should also expect moral suasion to have a role in shaping political behavior and attitudes on policy issues, a theme that has taken the central stage in political science research.

In this paper, then, we aim to contribute to this literature on moral suasion by filling in these two gaps. First, we investigate the role of concrete moral messages in shaping policy preferences. In our experiment, we have several treatment groups given the same moral message—the Golden Rule—from different sources. One treatment group receives the message in the abstract, while other groups get the message from a religious authority or from a political authority. We ask participants their views on immigration policy to determine whether any particular source

of moral messaging has an effect on policy preferences. We explore variation across treated and control groups on preferences towards three distinctive dimensions in current debates on immigration policy in the United States. Those dimensions include border control, treatment of undocumented migrants, and qualifications for receiving immigrant status. The three policy dimensions are organized along distinctive principles: security, empathy, and diversity; we expect exposure to the moral suasion message and the source of the message to have differential effects on subjects' responses. Finally, we investigate the effect of moral suasion messages on participants' altruistic behavior as reflected in their willingness to contribute to charity.

Related Literature

In a recent paper, Dal Bó and Dal Bó 2014 explore the effects of moral suasion on cooperation in an experimental setting. They ran four experiments in their study. Each round of the experiments began with each participant receiving a message on his or her computer. This message either contained no moral content (control), moral content (the Golden Rule or a Utilitarian moral statement), or a suggestion to act selfishly (the “self-regarding” message). In all cases, the message was not connected to any particular person or authority; it was an abstract, disembodied message flashed on a computer screen for participants to read. Surprisingly, however, in all their experiments, the moral suasion had a significant effect in fostering cooperative behavior. This is an important finding.

However, it remains unclear why moral suasion works. Dal Bó and Dal Bó offer a few explanations. First, moral suasion fosters cooperation because participants receiving the message expect others to receive the message as well and engage in cooperative behavior. This expectation leads each participant to cooperate; however, if each participant does not know whether others are

receiving this message (and so cannot maintain this expectation), then each will be less likely to cooperate at the same level. Moreover, it is not clear in what sense these expectations explain the mechanism behind moral suasion. Instead, what we find in their experiments is that moral suasion is effective, but its effects are offset by the expectations of the behavior of others. Rather than explaining moral suasion in the first place, we are faced with the additional puzzle of explaining the role of expectations in group dynamics. It could be the case that moral suasion operates according to one mechanism, while expectations of others operates according to another, such as sense of justice or reciprocity in carrying out moral rules.

The second explanation they offer is that moral suasion affects preferences, raising “the level of contribution subjects deem morally right regardless of what others do, or by raising the utility weight on meeting that level” (Dal Bó and Dal Bó 2014, p. 5). However, charting the effect of moral suasion does not really explain why moral suasion has this effect. We need to know more about why moral suasion affects preferences. Indeed, Dal Bó and Dal Bó ultimately admit that these questions are beyond the scope of their study –“an interesting question is whether the impact of moral messages is due to the fact that the messages are labeled as moral, or to the intrinsic appeal of the principles contained in those statements; we leave this issue to future research” (p. 16).

We attempt to get at the underlying mechanism behind moral suasion by investigating the moral authorities who issue the moral suasion we hear. If we see disparate effects coming from different moral authorities relaying the same moral suasion message, we can get a bit closer to understanding how moral suasion works: in this case it would work not only because of the intrinsic rightness of the moral rule, but because of the nature of the authority behind it.

Political science scholars have long recognized the importance of group affiliation in shaping attitudes and beliefs. In particular, three groups are of great importance in affecting such attitudes and beliefs—families (Lyons Jeffrey 2017; Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016), religion (McCarthy et al. 2016; Margolis 2017), and political affiliation (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). These different groups contain leaders whose authority carries particular weight in the formation of identities and in shaping political behavior. In addition, other, rival groups could exert a negative moral influence—their moral messaging may lead individuals in opposed groups to ignore or even violate these norms. In short, then, the source of the moral message matters as much as, if not more than, the intrinsic authority of the message itself.

As a result, in our study, we tease out the effect of these authorities by framing the moral message as coming from one of the two groups mentioned above—religion and political. We expect that these treatments will have a different effect on cooperative behavior than the abstract moral message alone, and we expect the abstract moral message to have a stronger effect than the control.

Finally, in the exploratory part of our study, we are interested in pushing the moral suasion literature beyond the effect on behavior to the formation of policy preferences, something previous research has not attempted. We picked three distinctive policy dimensions associated with the regulation of immigration where we expect that exposure to the Golden Rule – “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*” – could make respondents be more sympathetic to the plight of immigrants.¹

¹ Subjects were randomly assigned to three treatment conditions and a control. The first treatment condition, which we dubbed “Abstract”, asked respondents to consider the quote “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and illustrate it with an example. The other two treatment conditions present the quote as if expressed by George Washington (“Politics” source), or Mother Theresa (“Religious” source). The control group was asked to consider the quote “It is important to

We should, thus, expect treated subjects to be more likely to adopt more permissive immigration policies. However, we also expect that moral suasion will have a differential impact on policy preferences depending on the underlying principle around which the policy option is designed. It might also be the case that moral suasion is outweighed by other concerns—such as personal security in the context of immigration. Under these concerns, moral suasion might be not strong enough to effect changes in respondents’ preferences towards policy outcomes.

Empirical strategy

We designed a survey experiment to determine the effect of moral suasion on behavior as well as on policy attitudes.

Participants: We recruited 1331 paid participants with Amazon Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) in the Spring of 2018 for the online survey experiment, randomly assigning them into 4 groups. Had this been conducted in a physical lab, we likely would have settled on a smaller group of participants -- perhaps half as many, factoring in the modest effect sizes we anticipated. The online environment inherently introduces more noise into the measurement process, hampering tests of statistical significance. M-Turk has other drawbacks as well. Despite its extensive use in psychology studies and some scholars finding it generally reliable for research purposes (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Hauser and Schwarz 2016), others have raised questions about the external validity of M-Turk experiments, since the subject pool on M-Turk may not be representative of the average person, or may “game the system” by reflecting too much on the nature of the experiment (Krupnikov and Levine 2014). These are valid concerns limiting the generalizability of experimental results obtained from such a subject pool.

start your day with a balanced meal” and describe what they had for breakfast. Treatment and control groups are balanced across all recorded covariates, except education.

The demographic breakdown of the recruited M-Turk group does not realistically mirror what a true population-based sampling of the American public would have yielded. While experimental designs with random assignment to treatment conditions address the challenges of bias resulting from omitted variable or unobserved confounders, this stubborn obstacle is hardly overcome. On the other hand, the strength of experiments is that all of the variables we do have variation on in our subject pool, both observed and *unobserved*, are inherently controlled for, boosting confidence in any causal claims.

Table 1 reports the basic demographic and ideological background for the participants. Though a perfectly representative sample of any specific population was not sought, we were satisfied by the significant level of dispersion present across many of the standard demographic control variables used in survey research. Roughly 52.6% of the participants were between the ages of 30 and 49 years old, with 30.8% being younger than 30 and the other 16.6% being older than 49. Males slightly outnumbered females (51.9% to 48.1%, respectively). Only 22.5% of participants were non-white. The group was quite educated, with 54.6% holding a bachelor's degree at a minimum, though only 28.5% of the participants earned more than \$75k/year. The mean ideology of the group was left-of-center, or “slightly liberal”. One could hardly argue that this group is perfectly representative of any conventionally studied target population, but neither does it need to be. Our goal is to control for as many variables as possible in order to isolate the observed relationship between our treatment and our subsequent questions concerning policy preferences.

[Table 1 about here]

Procedure: We relied on online survey software (*Qualtrics*) to randomly assign the experiment's participants into four groups—an “abstract suasion” group ($N = 315$), a “religion

suasion” group ($N = 331$), a “politics suasion” group ($N = 336$), and a control group ($N = 349$). The “abstract suasion” group was given the Golden Rule without any context for it. We told the participants to “*Consider the following quote: ‘do unto others...’*” and then asked them to illustrate the quote with an example to impress the principle on them. This abstract moral suasion is intended to replicate the previous work of scholars who offered such principles without any concrete context.

The “religion suasion” group was given the Golden Rule as mediated by Mother Theresa. The survey states:

Consider the following quote: Mother Theresa often said, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

We chose Mother Theresa because (a) everyone knows who she is, (b) we associate her strongly with religion, and (c) she is not polarizing but widely admired. As before and with subsequent treatments, we asked respondents to illustrate the quote with an example.

The “political suasion” group was given the Golden Rule through the mouth of George Washington. The survey reads:

Consider the following quote: George Washington often said, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

We chose George Washington because (a) everyone knows who he is, (b) we associate him strongly with American politics, and (c) he is not polarizing but widely admired. Finally, we prompted the control group with a statement about the importance of a balanced meal and asked the group what they had for breakfast that morning.

After the manipulation, we asked participants questions about their policy preferences towards immigration, taxation, and welfare policies. In each case, we gave participants a

conservative option, a status quo option, and a progressive option. Specifically, we probed respondents' view on three relevant components of the immigration regime: security (open/closed borders), treatment of current undocumented immigrants (deport/amnesty), and the eligibility principle for admission into the U.S. (merit/diversity).

Finally, after the policy questions, we administered a manipulation check that doubles as a test of the strength of the moral suasion on respondents' behavior. The survey prompt reads:

For taking this survey, you will be entered in a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card. If you win the gift card, how much of the \$50 would you be willing to contribute to the Red Cross? Here is some information about the organization: The American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors. Every 8 minutes the Red Cross responds to an emergency.

Giving to charity represents the participants' opportunity to engage in cooperative behavior at their own personal expense. We chose the American Red Cross because (a) everyone knows what it is, (b) it is widely regarded as reliable, and (c) it is not polarizing.

Results:

For the initial set of results, we assess participants' immigration policy preferences across three dimensions: border security, treatment of undocumented migrants, and migrant qualifications. We asked respondents to indicate their support of these policies and compared responses across treatment conditions. In the ensuing paragraphs, we discuss the results for each policy dimension. For ease of interpretation, we present both predicted probabilities for each policy dimension and treatment condition pairing, as well as changes in predicted probabilities when moving from the

control group to the treatment group for each dimension. Tables with estimates of the results can be found in the Appendix.

i) Border security:

The first immigration policy question asks whether the state should adopt a more stringent or permissive border control policy.² Figure 1 shows that, in comparison to the control group, the Abstract and Religion treatment conditions are associated with slightly higher probability of support for the current border security regime, as well as an open border policy. The Politics treatment, on the other hand, shows a slightly greater probability of support for stricter border security (i.e. closed borders).

Figure 2 assess the magnitude of these changes in probabilities associated with moving from the Control group to each of the treatment conditions. As we can see, the change in probability of support (for the current system of border security and for an open borders policy) and probability of opposition (for closed borders) for respondents in the Abstract and Religion groups (versus the Control group) is statistically different from zero at $p < 0.10$. On the other hand, the changes associated with respondents in the Politics condition are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

² The survey question reads: *What is closest to your view of the ideal immigration policy?*

1. *Open borders. Government should not regulate migration at all.*
2. *The current immigration system.*
3. *Closed borders. Government should strictly regulate migration.*

ii) Treatment of undocumented immigrants:

The second immigration dimension looks at whether the government should grant amnesty or deport undocumented migrants currently in the U.S..³ Figure 3 suggests that when the moral suasion message is delivered by a religious source, we observe a decrease in the probability of support for deportation and higher support for granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants, as compared to Control group probabilities. The Religion group is also the only one that displays overlapping predicted probabilities for the “Deport all” and “Amnesty all” policies. Turning to Figure 4, we see that the change in probabilities for all three policies is significantly different when moving from the Control condition to the Religion condition, with respondents in the Religion condition displaying greater support for both amnesty options and greater opposition towards the deportation policy. Although respondents in the other treatment groups exhibit similar patterns, the differences therein are indistinguishable from zero.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

iii) Merit or diversity:

The final immigration dimension looks at support for eligibility criteria for admitting immigrants.⁴ Figure 5 shows the predicted probabilities of supporting each criterion by treatment condition. As in the previous immigration dimension, respondents in the Religion group are the standouts. Those who received the religious source of the moral suasion message were more likely

³ We asked respondents: *What ideally should the U.S. do about undocumented immigrants?*

1. *Deport them.*
2. *Amnesty for relatives of current citizens and DACA participants.*
3. *Amnesty for all undocumented immigrants.*

⁴ *What is closest to your view of the ideal immigration policy?*

1. *Stronger merit-based immigration policy than current policy.*
2. *Stronger diversity-based immigration policy than current policy.*
3. *Current policy (which combines merit and diversity).*

to support the current (mixed) system than either of the other options. Conversely, respondents in the Politics group showed a slight preference for a system based on greater merit. Finally, respondents across all conditions were least likely to support a system geared towards greater diversity. However, as shown in Figure 6, the change in predicted probabilities when comparing each treatment group to the Control group is indistinguishable from zero. Here, the greatest differences observed are in the levels of support for diversity-based policies and levels of opposition for merit-based policies among those in the Religion condition.

[Figures 5 and 6 about here]

vi) Donations to the Red Cross:

In addition to assessing how the different treatment conditions affect policy preferences, we explored the impact of the Golden Rule—as introduced by different sources—on respondents’ willingness to contribute to the Red Cross. We find that moral suasion matters: as shown in Figure 7, the average donation across all treatment conditions is \$2.08 higher than the average contribution for respondents in the Control group (significant beyond the 90% level).

Table 2 separates the donation amounts by treatment group and compares them to the Control group. As we can see, respondents in the Religion group donated the greatest amount – \$3.18 more than the Control group. Respondents in the Abstract group donate over \$2 more than those in the Control group, although this difference falls just short of the conventional ($p < 0.05$) statistical level.

Finally, we dive a little deeper into the Religion treatment group by separating the donation amounts based on respondents’ stated religiosity. As shown in Table 3, religious respondents in both the Religion and Control groups donated more, on average, than non-religious respondents in

either group. Even still, for religious respondents, the difference in the amount donated between the Religion group and the Control group is a significant \$5.19. Conversely, the average difference between the two groups for non-religious respondents is negative, though statistically indistinguishable from zero. Altogether, these findings suggest that it is not just the moral suasion message that imparts an effect; rather, the source of the message also matters. Moreover, the characteristics of the person receiving the message may interact with the source of the message to increase or decrease (or even completely reverse) the overall effect that the message has, as it did with the religious source and respondents' religiosity.

[Figure 7 and Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Discussion and Conclusion

We expected moral suasion to have a differential impact on policy preferences depending on the moral principle guiding the policy position. To tease out these effects we chose three distinctive policy dimensions associated with the regulation of immigration where we expected exposure to moral suasion would make respondents be more sympathetic immigrants.

The results from the analyses of responses to the survey provide evidence that moral suasion affects individuals' preferences over immigration regulation in systematic ways: in most cases, subjects receiving the moral suasion message are more likely to support less restrictive border security, are less willing to support deportation, and are more inclined to granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants. Yet the magnitude of the impact of receiving a moral suasion

message on those policy dimensions varies when the message is delivered in the abstract, or when the subjects receive it in association with religious or political authorities. Indeed, in some cases, our results suggest that policy preferences (and behavior) are pushed in opposite directions under the Political and Religion treatment conditions. For the Political group, we speculate that concerns about personal security (as it relates to immigration) may dominate; the emphasis on values in the survey instrument might not be strong enough to move individuals to be more sympathetic to immigrants or the poor.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Experiment Participants

Household Income		Religion	
Less than \$25,000	17.7%	Jewish	1.6%
\$25,000-\$34,999	15.1%	Muslim	0.6%
\$35,000-\$49,999	17.7% ^a	Protestant	24.0%
\$50,000-\$74,999	21.0%	Roman Catholic	16.0%
\$75,000-\$99,999	14.5%	Agnostic	21.4%
\$100,000-\$149,999	10.1%	Atheist	17.9%
\$150,000 or more	3.9%	Other	18.5% ^b
Education		Age	
Some high school	0.2%	18-29	30.8%
High school	10.2%	30-49	52.6% ^a
Some college	24.6%	50-64	13.7%
Associate	10.4%	65 or over	2.9%
Bachelor	41.9% ^a	Gender	
Master	10.0%	Male	51.9%
Professional	1.6%	Female	48.1%
Doctorate	1.1%	Ideology	
Ethnicity		Extremely conservative	4.6%
Asian	6.5%	Conservative	11.1%
Black	8.7%	Slightly conservative	11.6%
Hispanic	5.1%	Moderate	21.8%
White	77.5%	Slightly liberal	13.8% ^a
Other	1.7%	Liberal	25.1%
		Extremely liberal	12.1%
Party		Follow politics	
Independent/Other	46.9%	Fairly closely	54.3%
Republican	17.3%	Not much at all	11.8%
Democrat	35.8%	Very closely	33.9%

^a Category includes median

^b Other: Mormon, Christian Scientist, Orthodox and Seventh-day Adventist

Figure 1: P(support) for Border Security (90% CI shown)

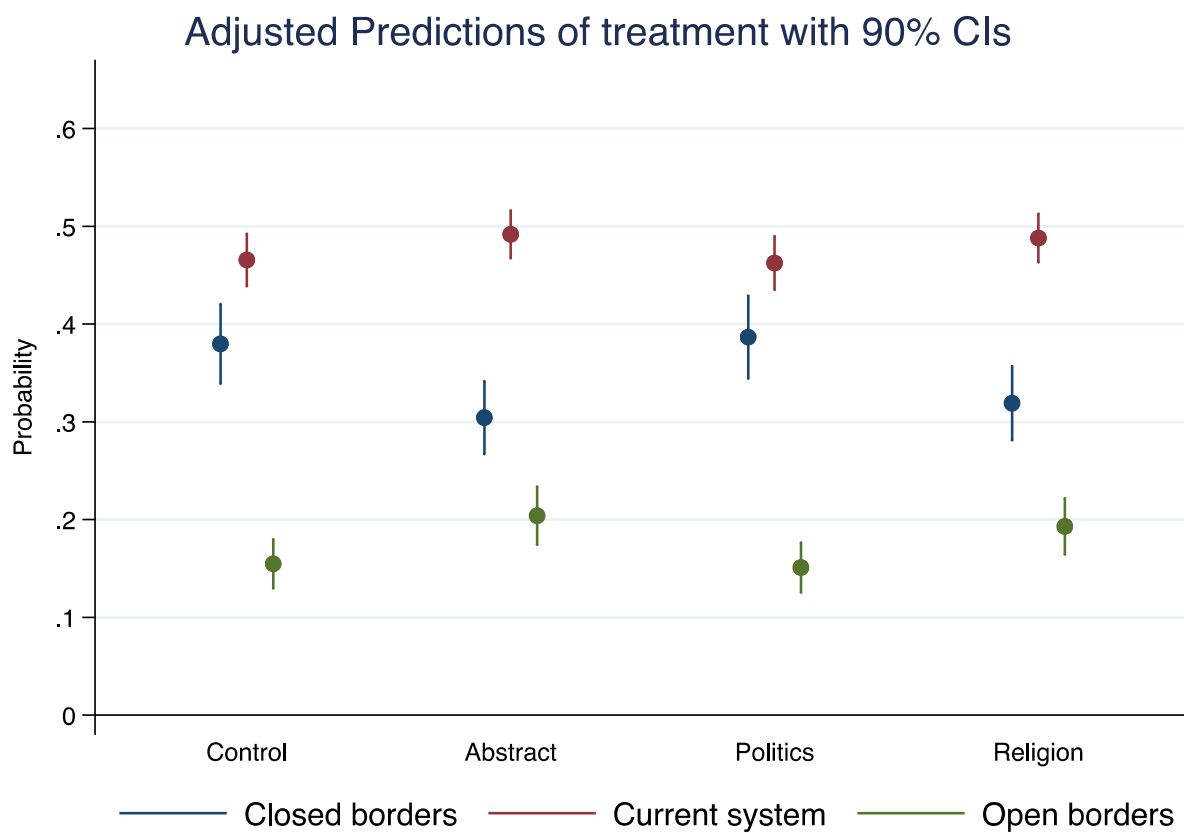


Figure 2: $\Delta P(\text{support})$ for Border Security (90% CI shown)

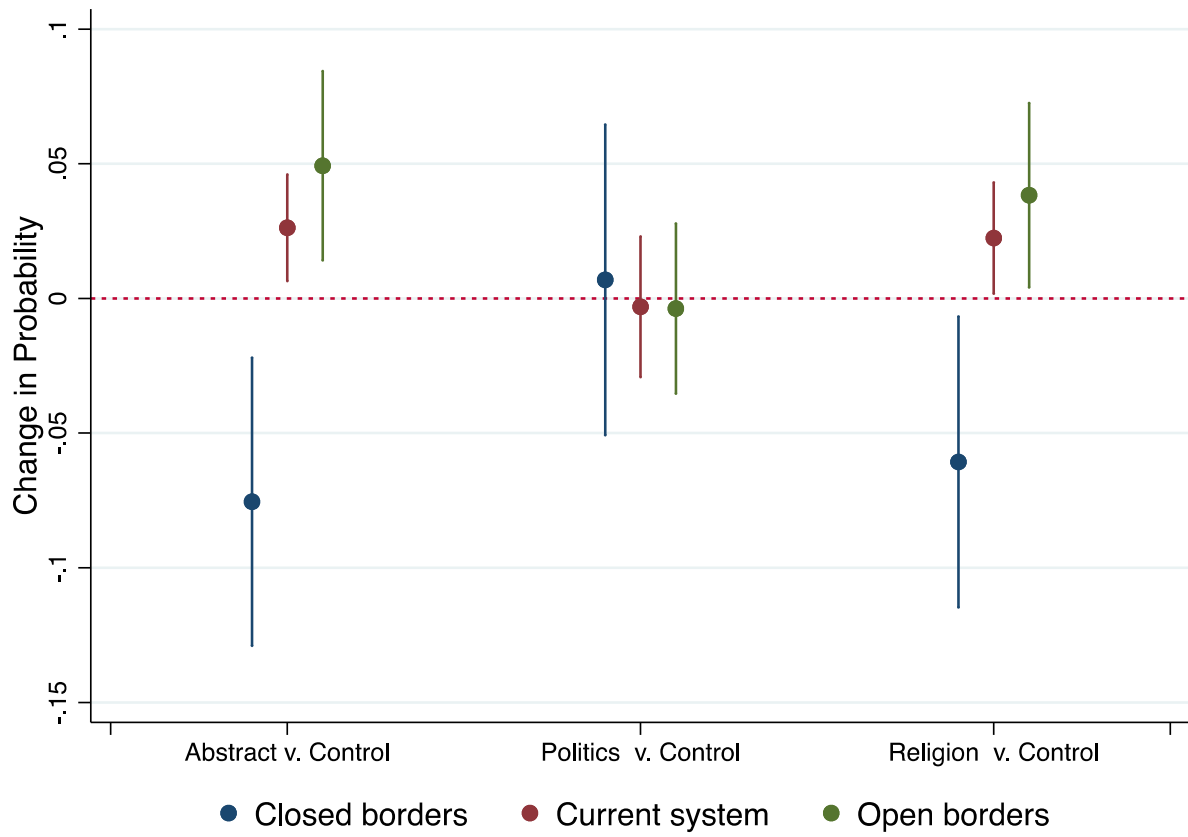


Figure 3: P(support) for Deportation (90% CI shown)

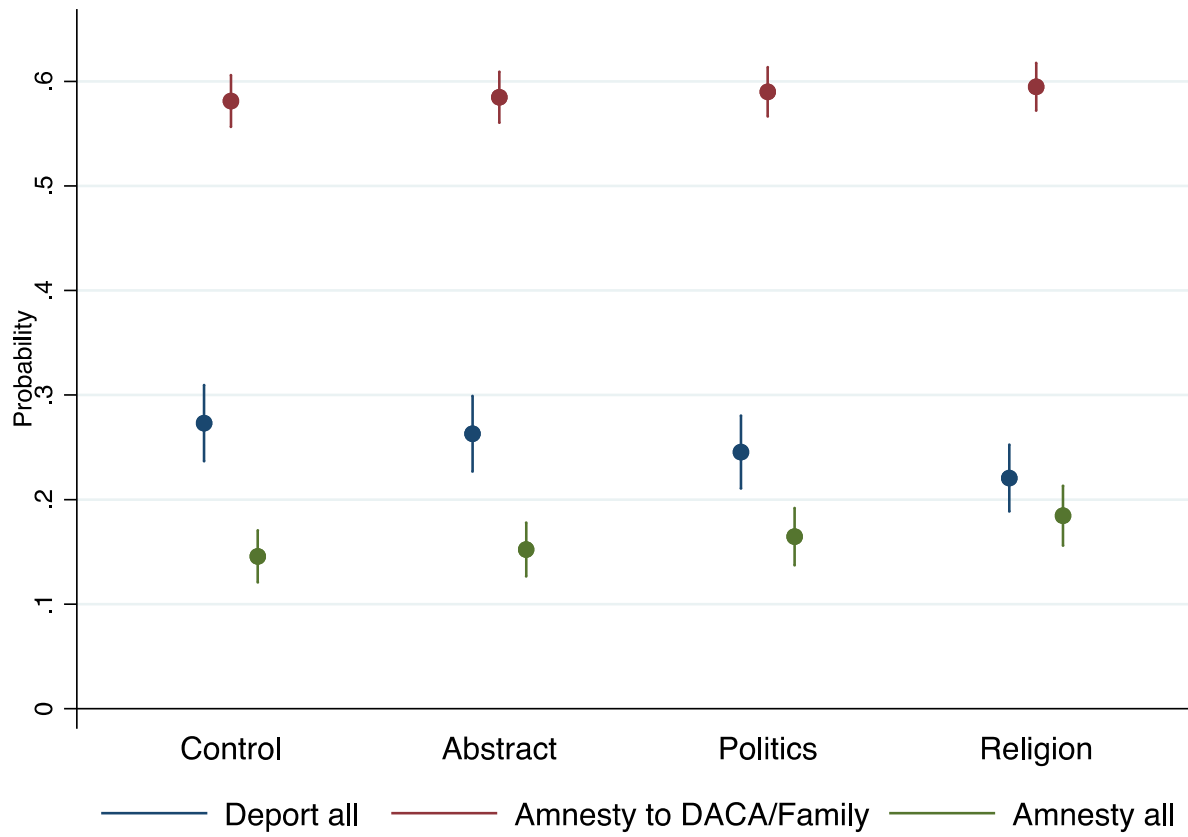


Figure 4: $\Delta P(\text{support})$ for Deportation (90% CI shown)

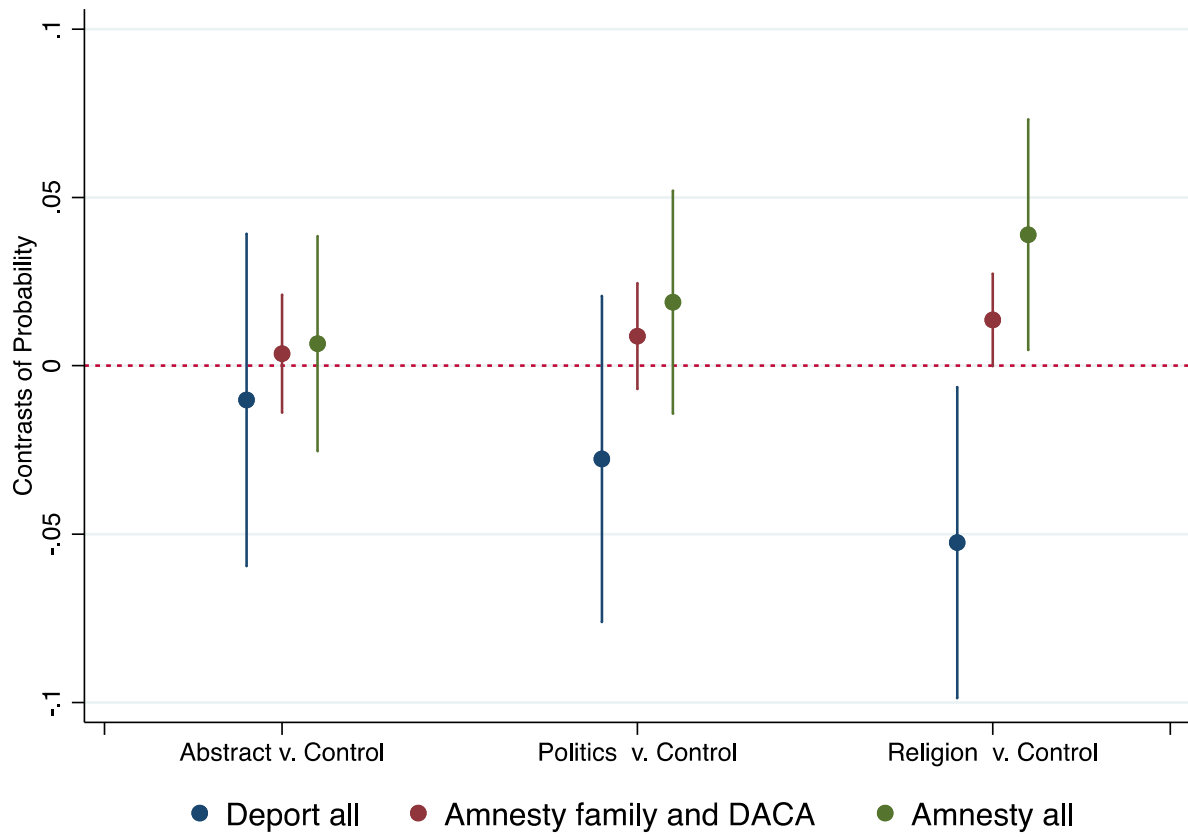


Figure 5: P(support) for Diversity or Merit Eligibility (90% CI shown)

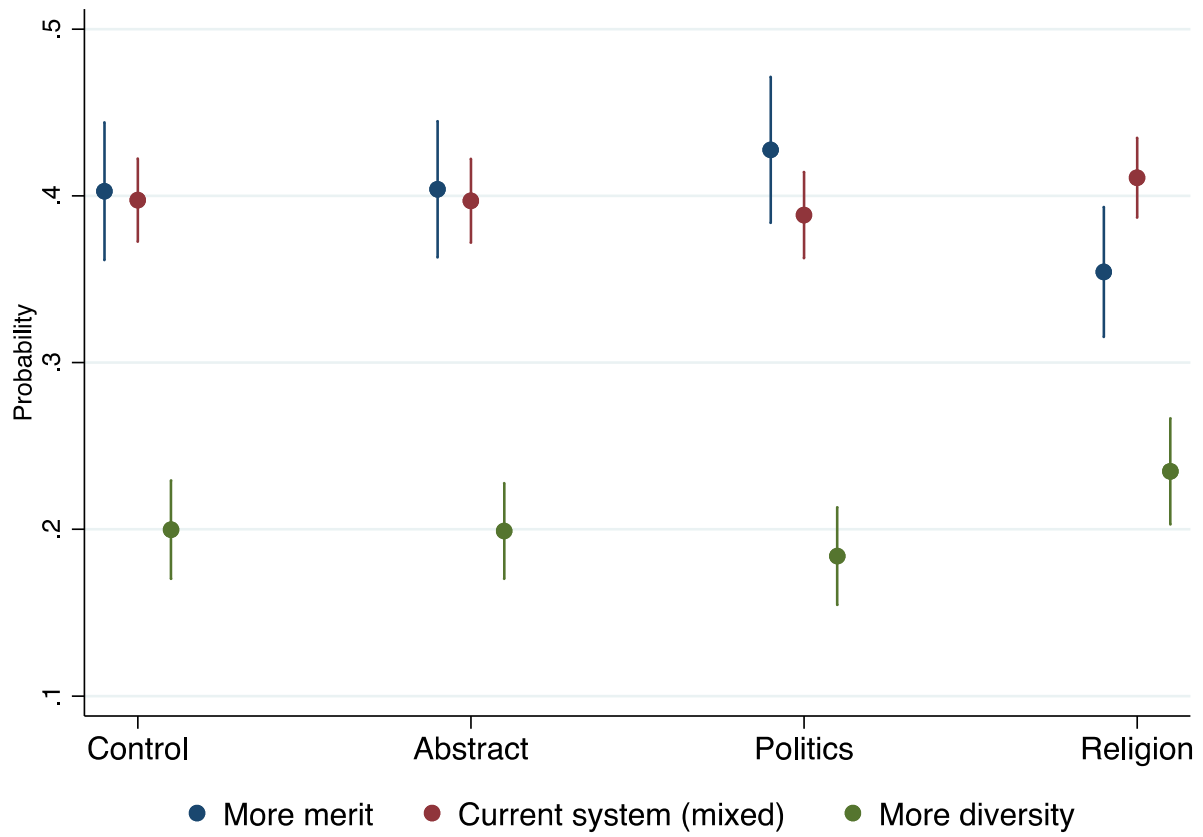


Figure 6: $\Delta P(\text{support})$ for Diversity or Merit Eligibility (90% CI shown)

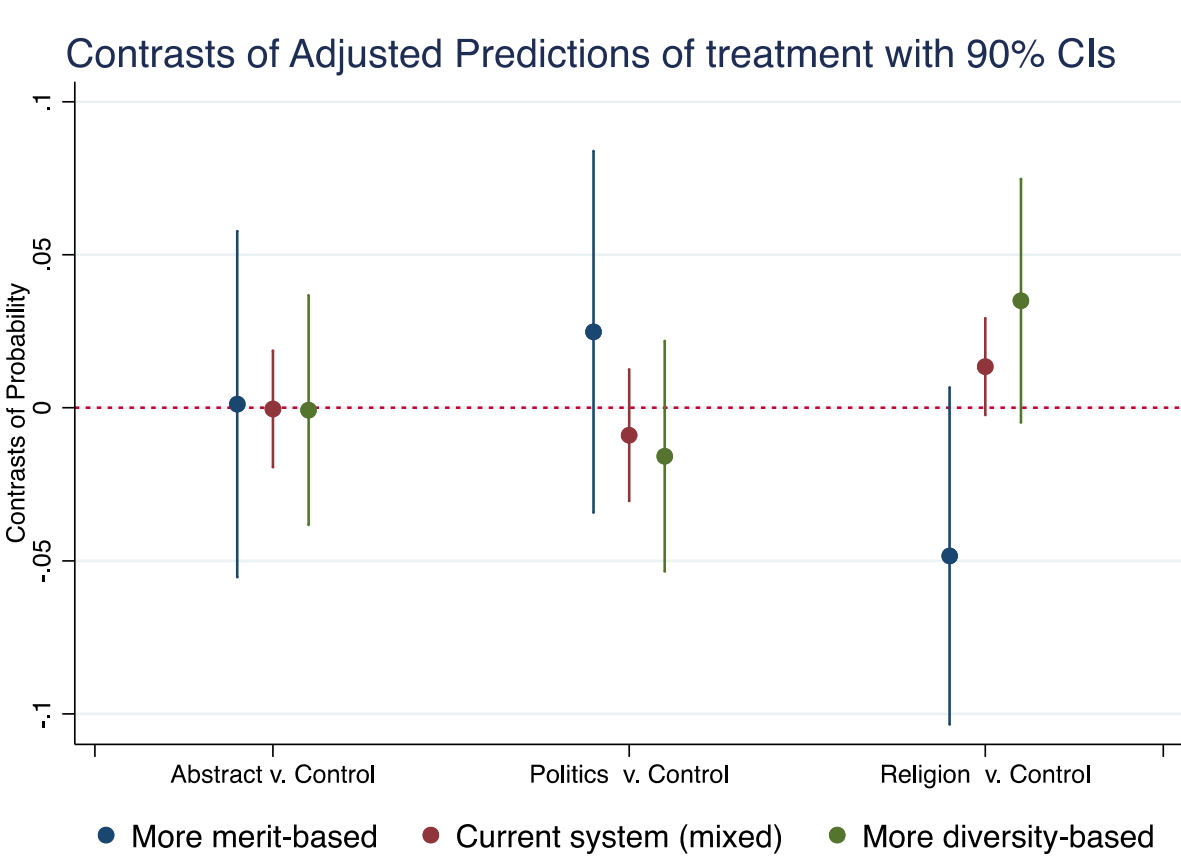


Figure 7: Donations to Red Cross by Treatment (95% CI shown)

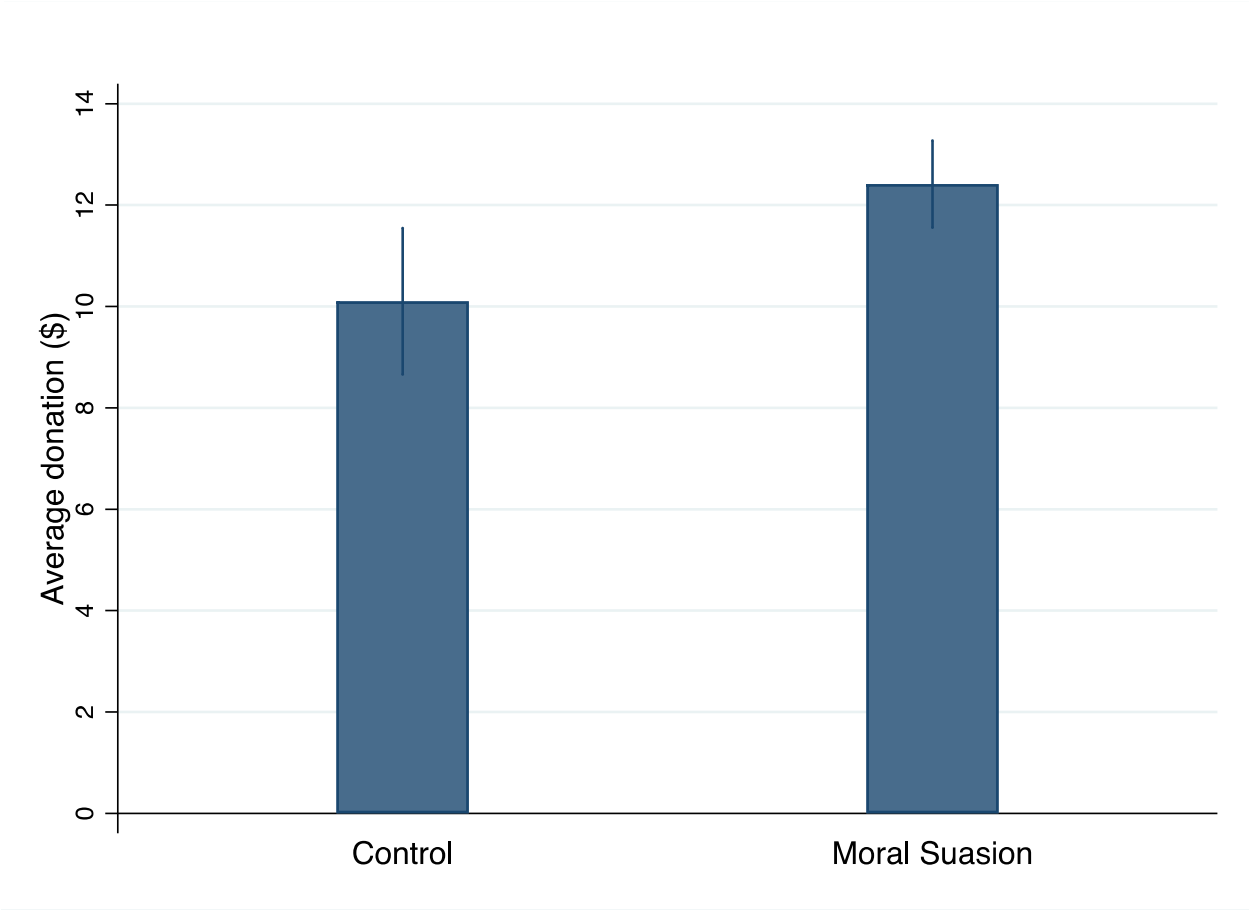


Table 2: Differences in Contributions to the Red Cross

	Difference	95% Confidence Interval	
Abstract vs Control:	\$2.06	-\$0.85	\$4.90
Politics vs Control:	\$1.44	-\$1.25	\$4.13
Religion vs Control:	\$3.18	\$0.24	\$6.11

Table 3: Average Contributions to the Red Cross by religiosity and treatment condition

Religious respondent	Donation	95% Confidence Interval	
Religious treatment (A)	\$19.14	\$16.38	\$21.90
Control group (B)	\$13.95	\$11.62	\$16.29
Difference (A-B)	\$5.19	\$1.57	\$8.80
Non-Religious respondent	Donation	(95% Conf. Int.)	
Religious treatment (A)	\$10.80	\$7.18	\$14.42
Control group (B)	\$12.18	\$9.11	\$15.25
Difference (A-B)	-\$1.38	-\$6.12	\$3.37

Appendix

Table A1: Multinomial Logit Estimates for Border Security Immigration Policy

Treatment	Closed borders	Open borders
Abstract	-0.395** (0.176)	0.050 (0.218)
Politics	0.064 (0.164)	0.054 (0.221)
Religion	-0.290* (0.171)	0.065 (-0.215)
N	1330	1330

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Note: omitted policy is Current system

Table A2: Multinomial Logit Estimates for Deportation Immigration Policy

Treatment	Amnesty to Family/DACA	Amnesty to All
Abstract	0.123 (0.182)	0.039 (0.252)
Politics	0.129 (0.180)	0.217 (0.242)
Religion	0.327* (0.186)	0.419* (0.245)
N	1330	1330

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Note: omitted policy is Deport All

Table A3: Multinomial Logit Estimates for Admittance Immigration Policy

Treatment	More Merit	More Diversity
Abstract	-0.151 (0.173)	-0.241 (0.215)
Politics	0.152 (0.172)	0.053 (0.211)
Religion	-0.262 (0.174)	-0.010 (0.204)
N	1330	1330

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Note: omitted policy is Current system