

Moral Values and Voting (Enke, 2020)

Morality can be defined as people's beliefs about what is right and wrong. In other words, people have a certain set of values associated with right and wrong actions. The Moral Foundations Theory defines universalist and communal values that form those beliefs. Justice, fairness, and individual rights are related to universalist values, while loyalty, respect, and tradition are communal ones. Sociologists have argued that moral values are crucial to understand voting patterns. Now, economists can provide empirical evidence to that claim.

One Sentence Summary

This paper shows the link between morality and voting behavior. Specifically, it identifies the moral values of politicians (moral supply) and voter (moral demand) using text analysis techniques. This framework was used to study the last three U.S. presidential campaigns, with a particular interest in the 2016 election.

Main Findings

Consider the next thought exercise. On one hand, a voter has a set of moral values, and they would prefer a politician that has them. On the other, politicians can portray their moral values through public speech. A politician wins a vote when their portrayed values are closer than other politicians to the preferences of a voter. For example, imagine two candidates. One expressed communal values and the other universalist values. Each candidate will get the votes from the voter that is closer to their moral values. The communal candidate will get the votes from the communal voters. This exercise is the theoretic framework the author used as a base for his empirical evidence.

The author identified the moral supply and demand values by estimating a relative moral index of universalist versus communal values. A low index means that the individual has more communal values than universalist ones, and vice versa. For the moral supply side, he estimated the frequency of words related to communal and universalist values a U.S. politician spoke during congress or a presidential campaign. For the demand, he used a moral survey, specially designed to identify their position in the moral spectrum, of U.S. voters.

With the moral index data, he found that an average Democrat congressman is more universalists than a Republican. He also showed that Republicans and Democrats politicians are becoming more universalists since the 1960's. Focusing on the 2016 election, Donald Trump had the biggest moral gap between the two main candidates in the last three presidential campaigns¹. Additionally, Trump had the lowest moral index, or the most communal, out of all the main candidates. Donald Trump may have gathered more votes because he expressed more communal

¹ In this case the moral difference between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was higher than Obama and McCain and Obama and Romney.

values. Nonetheless, this is not a sufficient explanation of Trump's success. The joint behavior of moral supply and demand defined the results.

Voters' moral preferences has slowly shifted to communal values since 2008. In metropolitan areas, voters maintained a preference for universalist values, even if they are more communal than before. The shift is more pronounced in the rural and urban population, shifting from a universalist preference to a communal one. This finding suggests that Trump's political strategy was precise and effective.

Concluding Remarks

The author found evidence of a link between moral values and voting behavior on other U.S. presidential campaigns. His framework may be general enough to explain a moral side to elections, at least in the U.S. Moral research has the potential to explain modern political phenomenon like the rise of populism in the last decade. It just needs more studies to support the proposed theoretical framework.

References

- Enke, B., 2019. Moral Values and Voting. *Forthcoming, Journal of Political Economy*. https://benjamin-enke.com/pdf/Values_voting.pdf.