

## **Moral Foundations Theory and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election<sup>1</sup>**

Leda Nath & Nick Pedriana  
University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, U.S.

Chris Gifford and Jim McAuley  
University of Huddersfield, U.K.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank students Jason Fong and Dominic Mahn and previous student Dr. Nicole Sherretts for their research assistance on this project.

## **Moral Foundations Theory and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election**

### **ABSTRACT**

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) argues in part that people's moral intuitions impact their political values and behaviors above and beyond conventional demographic predictors. We test the theory by analyzing the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Our analysis is in part an attempt to replicate past findings linking voters' moral intuitions to candidate choice. We surveyed university students at a mid-sized college on their moral intuitions and their choice for president. Results provide qualified support for MFT predictions on the effect of moral intuitions on individual political preferences. We present our analyses followed by a discussion of future research on voting behavior here and abroad.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Like prior election results, Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election suffers no shortage of explanation and analysis. As per usual, voting patterns have been broken down along key demographic factors including income, education, gender, race, age, etc. Beyond standard statistical correlations, the "marginalized white working-class" argument (see, e.g., Hochschild, 2016) seems to have settled into conventional wisdom among citizens and the press. Recent research, however, casts doubt on a straightforward class explanation and suggests that the range of Trump's support may reflect broader disenchantment with rapid global changes and the perceived loss of national identity that cuts across economic status (see Walley, 2017). Building on this emerging research agenda, we think that Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) is one promising alternative for deeper understanding of politics and political conflict. Moral

Foundations Theory (MFT) explores in part the extent to which people's *moral intuitions* can help predict a wide range of political and cultural attitudes and behaviors. This paper makes a modest contribution to this scholarly project; we analyze voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election to test several of MFT's key ideas and claims. We explore whether and to what extent voters' moral intuitions--above and beyond standard demographic, class, and other control variables--can explain voters' preference for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton.

## MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY AND POLITICS

MFT developed in part as an attempt to gain new and deeper understanding of the seemingly intractable (and growing) political, cultural, and/or religious divisions in the U.S. and elsewhere. Accumulating insights from anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology, the theory identifies five fundamental moral "foundations" (and their opposites) shared—to greater or lesser extents—by all human beings and societies across time and cultural context: care/harm; fairness/cheating; loyalty/betrayal; authority/subversion; and purity/degradation) (Haidt and Joseph 2006; Haidt 2012). These moral sentiments are *intuitive*, akin to "gut-level" feelings that strongly influence subsequent moral reasoning processes that translate into conscious behavior (e.g. voting preferences) (Haidt, 2012; Haidt and Graham, 2007). Among MFT's most central and replicated findings is that one's moral intuitions are excellent predictors of one's political ideology. Specifically in the U.S. context, MFT research consistently finds that liberals and conservatives differ systematically in the extent to which they emphasize and/or rely on different sets of moral intuitions (Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009; Haidt 2012; Haidt and Craig 2004). For example, liberals in the U.S. identify strongly with the care and fairness foundations (referred to together as the "individualizing" foundations), but significantly less so with the loyalty,

authority, and purity foundations (referred to together as the “binding” foundations).

Conservatives in the U.S. by contrast, rank the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations as significantly higher in importance. Conservatives also identify consistently with the care and fairness foundations, albeit at a lower average magnitude than liberals/progressives (Kim, Kang and Yun, 2012; Milesi, 2016; Day et al. 2014; Franks and Scherr, 2015; Graham, Nosek, and Haidt, 2012).

We apply the insights and findings of MFT to the empirical case of the 2016 U.S. presidential election by testing whether Trump voters reported higher levels of support for the binding moral foundations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity and, conversely, whether Clinton voters reported higher levels of the care and fairness foundations, controlling on key demographic variables.<sup>2</sup> Our analysis follows Franks and Sherr’s (2015) use of MFT to predict voting behavior in the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney and thus offers an opportunity to replicate prior findings linking moral intuitions to voters’ candidate preference. The authors found that when controlling for voters’ religiosity,<sup>3</sup> moral foundations “incrementally predict prospective candidate choice above and beyond politically relevant demographic variables” (p. 219). Notably, higher endorsement of the care foundation significantly predicted intent to vote for Obama, whereas as higher endorsement of the purity foundation significantly predicted intent to vote for Romney. Moreover, when the individualizing and binding foundations were combined into two respective variables, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Biological sex, race/ethnicity, and family income. We do not include education or age because all participants were college undergraduates. In addition, we ran all models with and without education and age and results did not change.

<sup>3</sup> The authors make a strong case, backed by theoretical and empirical research, that one’s level of religiosity is associated with a range of moral intuitions and political sensibilities and thus its impact on voting intentions should be statistically accounted for (see, e.g., Piazza, 2012; Piazza and Sousa, 2014; Malka et al. 2012; DeKoster and van der Waal, 2007). We agree and include our own measure of religiosity in our analysis.

authors found that “the collapsed [foundations] were powerful predictors of voting behavior” (p. 219).

While not addressed by Franks and Sherr (2015), social media has recently been identified as a key variable when examining politics and elections (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Howard, 2005b; Kellner, 2005). According to Hager (2014), candidates mostly use their campaign website to share information, but also will focus on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Although Hager (2014) noted the use of such social media by candidates, chi-square analyses revealed its presence had no significant relationship to candidate success. Similarly, correlations revealed that the number of “likes” and posts in Facebook, tweets and Twitter followers also did not relate to success. Only when the status of the candidate (*incumbent* or *challenger*) was considered did a significant effect occur. In that case, Hager (2014) found the success of *challenger* candidates was positively related to the number of Facebook “likes” and posts whereas the success of the incumbents was negatively correlated with social media. This information, coupled with Howard’s (2005a) finding of an increase in Americans’ claiming the internet is “very important” in deciding how to vote, persuaded us to include social media as a control variable (see, e.g., Howard, 2005b; Best & Kellner, 2001; Kahn & Kellner, 2003; Kellner 1999).

Thus on the one hand, our study provides an opportunity to replicate past empirical research on the relationship between moral intuitions and voting preferences. Conversely, findings inconsistent with past research may be an impetus to refine and further develop MFT and/or to consider alternative methodological strategies for testing MFT in the empirical context of voting behavior generally, and U.S. voter preferences, specifically.

## METHODOLOGY

Using a cross-sectional face-to-face survey design, in spring 2017 we surveyed N=93 university students from a mid-sized Midwestern state university in the United States. See Table A for the characteristics of the sample. Further below, we explain our variables followed by a description of the modeling.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the sample.**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>United States N=93</b>
Sex (1=female)	.34 (.48)
Race (1=non-white)	.12 (.33)
Class	Lower (5.7%) Lower Middle (18.2%) Middle (42.0%) Middle Upper (33.0%) Upper (1.1%)
Media Usage (0=none to 5=high usage)	3.01 (1.30)
Religiosity (0=none to 5=high religiosity)	1.81 (1.43)

## *Measures*

### Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is voting behavior in the U.S. 2016 Presidential election. In the survey, we asked respondents how they voted in the recent 2016 presidential election and provided four answer choices (i.e., Donald Trump; Hillary Clinton; Another Candidate; I did not vote in the recent election). For analyses, we recoded the variables into dichotomous form (i.e., 1=Voted for Trump and 0=Voted for Hillary Clinton or another candidate). We left “I did not vote in the recent election” out of the analyses, setting the sample at N=93.

### Independent Variables

Our main independent variables are voters’ moral intuitions as defined by MFT (Haidt, 2001, 2013). We adopted the moral foundations theory questionnaire (Graham et al. 2009) to measure the moral intuitions of *care*, *fairness*, *loyalty*, *authority*, and *purity*. We then we adopted the moral foundation index by subtracting mean values of moral intuitions associated more often with conservatism (i.e., loyalty, authority and purity) from mean values of those associated more often with liberalism (i.e., caring and fairness). Higher scores on this index suggest greater progressivism (moralfoundations.org/questionnaires 2013). Also, to be consistent with prior research on MFT and voting outcomes (see Franks & Sherr, 2015), we created two additional index variables to capture, respectively, the *binding* moral intuitions (i.e., averaging loyalty, authority and purity measures) and *individualizing* moral intuitions (i.e., averaging care and fairness measures).

### Control Variables

*Sex* (1=female), *race* (1=minority), and *social class* were measured as demographic controls. We also assessed current *education level*, and current *age* (in years). Since all respondents were undergraduate students, we ran the models with and without education and age. The results did not change. We report models without those two variables for simplicity.

As discussed above, religion correlates highly with political orientation (McDaniel, 2016). To account for this, we adopted Lukwago et al.'s (2001) measure of religiosity. Respondents used a 6-point Likert scale from 0=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree to state their level of agreement with these ten statements: (1) I talk openly about my faith with others; (2) I often read religious books, magazines, or pamphlets; (3) I often watch or listen to religious programs on television or radio; (4) My spiritual beliefs are the foundation of my whole approach to life; (5) I am often aware of the presence of God in my life; (6) I have a personal relationship with God; (7) When I am ill, I pray for healing; (8) I pray often; (9) I rely on God to keep me in good health; and (10) I am not religious (reverse coded). Factor analyses suggested the first item be left out in averaging the remaining items into a single variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ).

Finally, we included Hughes, Rowe, Batey and Lee's (2012) measure of social media usage. Respondents used a 6-point Likert scale from 0=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree to state their level of agreement with these seven statements: (1) I use social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) to find and spread information; (2) Social media is primarily for information; (3) I use social media to keep abreast of current events; (4) I use social media to keep in touch with friends; (5) I use social media because my friends do; (6) Social media is primarily for socializing; and (7) I use social media a lot every day. Factor analyses revealed two factors where one reflected media for socializing, and the second reflected media for



information. We created a new variable focusing on using media for information by averaging responses on questions 1, 2, 3 and 7 (Chronbach's alpha = .85).

### Modeling

We ran logistic regression analyses to examine moral foundations on the 2016 U.S. presidential election vote and while controlling for various factors. See Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1**

$$\text{logit}(p_{\text{voting}}) = B_0 + B_{\text{mft}}X_{\text{mft}} + B_1X_{C1} + B_2X_{C2} + B_3X_{C3} + B_4X_{C4} + B_5X_{C5}$$

Where:  
 $p_{\text{voting}}$  is the probability voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election.  
 $B_0$  is the intercept.  
 $B_{\text{mft}}$  is the coefficient linked to the moral foundation-related variable.  
 $B_1 \dots B_5$  are the coefficients of controls.  
 $X_{C1} \dots X_{C5}$  are the control variables.

We examined first the overall *moral foundation index* followed, respectively, by the *individualizing* and the *binding* variables. Each analyses includes three models: a simple logistic regression (i.e., Model 1), one with demographic controls (i.e., Model 2), and finally a third adding media usage and religiosity control variables (i.e., Model 3).

### RESULTS

Our results first reveal that higher scores on the overall *moral foundations index* significantly decreased the likelihood of a vote for Trump. Even by the third model which includes demographics, media usage, and religiosity controls, the *moral foundations index* is the only variable significantly negatively related to *voting behavior* ( $B = -1.79, p \leq .001$ ).

Our results further revealed that the separate index variables linked, respectively, to the *binding* moral foundations (favored more by conservatives) and *individualizing* moral foundations (favored more by liberals) both have significant effects on voting preferences until Model 3, where only the *individualizing* moral foundations remained significant ( $B = -2.20, p < .01$ ). The *binding* variable, however, approached significance ( $B = 1.20, p < .06$ ). That is, the higher one scored on the *individualizing* foundations variable, the more likely one voted for Hillary Clinton. And while we did not find significance for the *binding* foundations variable, the effect approached significance and was in the predicted direction.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Analyses of *Combined Moral Intuitions* on 2016 U.S. Election**

Model:	U.S. Presidential Election (1=Trump)					
	1	2	3	1	2	3
<b>Constant</b>	.57 (.34)	-.34 (1.32)	-1.59 (1.60)	1.82 (1.96)	.55 (2.60)	1.17 (2.67)
<b><i>Moral Foundation Index</i></b>	-1.79*** (.49)	-1.83*** (.52)	-1.65** (.54)			
<b><i>Binding</i></b>				1.61** (.55)	1.73** (.56)	1.20t (.63)
<b><i>Individualizing</i></b>				-2.01*** (.59)	-1.98** (.64)	-2.20** (.72)
<b>Sex (1=female)</b>		.43 (.65)	.34 (.66)		.42 (.65)	.28 (.67)

<b>Race (1=nonwhite)</b>	.83 (1.08)	.67 (1.10)		.78 (1.08)	.41 (1.08)
<b>Class</b>	.23 (.38)	.28 (.39)		.20 (.38)	.14 (.41)
<b>Media Usage</b>		.13 (.25)			.35 (.31)
<b>Religiosity</b>		.30 (.22)			.39 (.23)
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	.38	.40	.43	.38	.40

---

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ;  $t \leq .06$

## DISCUSSION

As a test of Moral Foundations Theory, we examined whether one's moral intuitions could help explain voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election. We used a sample of university undergraduate students in a Midwestern state university. Using logistic regression, we ran three models: one examining only the moral intuition measures effects on voting, a second which added demographic controls, and a third adding a media usage and religiosity measure. Both the overall moral foundations index variable and the separate individualizing index variable significantly predicted voting preferences in the 2016 election. And while the binding foundations index variable failed to meet the .05 significance threshold, it came close and in the predicted direction ( $p < .06$ ).

To explore further but not reported above, we ran models examining the effect of each separate moral foundation. Liberal moral intuitions tend disproportionately towards care and

fairness, and were significantly related to voting for Hillary Clinton. For each of the three moral intuitions more associated with conservatism (loyalty, authority, and purity), results were less straightforward. To be sure, they significantly predicted a vote for Donald Trump for Models 1 and Model 2. For Model 3 however, *religiosity* trumped (no pun intended) the effects of loyalty, authority, and purity. This suggests that perhaps religiosity is too closely correlated with the moral intuitions in question. To explore this, we reran Model 3 for loyalty, authority and purity while leaving *religiosity* out. In these cases, loyalty ( $B = .86, p \leq .05$ ), authority ( $B = 1.36, p \leq .01$ ) and purity ( $B = .78, p \leq .05$ ) remained significant.

These results are generally consistent with the predictions of MFT and may be an initial step towards deeper understanding of similar political developments beyond the U.S. For example, the 2016 Brexit vote in the U.K., like the election of Donald Trump, involved unexpected populist victories driven in part by renewed nationalist and anti-immigration sentiment. Both sentiments are related to each of the five moral foundations generally, and to fairness and in-group loyalty in particular. Moreover, emerging research suggests that popular explanations tying both outcomes to white *working-class* resentments may overstate the effect of white economic insecurity while underestimating pushback against an increasingly perceived loss of national identity felt at least as strongly by the UK's middle classes (for a comprehensive treatment of these issues, see, esp., Bhambra, 2017). Either way, our moral gut feelings may have at least as much to say about our political choices as do the usual suspects of demographic and class characteristics, and emerging research in the U.S and U.K. warrants further examination into the moral foundations of political values, attitude, and behaviors.

## REFERENCES

- Best S. & Kellner, D. (2001). *The postmodern adventure; Science, technology, and cultural studies at the third millenium*. New Ork and London: Guilford and Routledge.
- Bhambra, Gurminder. 2017. "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': on the Misrecognition of Race and Class." *British Journal of Sociology* 68: S214-32.
- Day, M. V., S. T. Fiske, E. L. Downing and T. E. Trail (2014). Shifting liberal and conservative attitudes using moral foundations theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(12):1559-1573.
- DeKoster, Willem and Jeroen van der Waal. 2007. "Cultural Value Orientations and Christian Religiosity: On Moral Traditionalism, Authoritarianism, and their Implications for Voting Behavior." *International Political Science Review* 28: 451-67.
- Franks, A. S. and K. C. Scherr (2015). Using moral foundations to predict voting behavior: Regression models from the 2012 U.S. presidential election. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 15(1):213-232.
- Graham, J., B. A. Nosek, B. A. and J. Haidt (2012). The Moral Stereotypes of Liberals and Conservatives: Exaggeration of Differences across the Political Spectrum. *PLoS ONE*, 7(12):e50092.
- Graham, J., J. Haidt and B. A. Nosek (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96:1029-1046
- Hagar, D. (2014). Campaigning online: Social media in the 2010 niagara municipal elections. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 23(1), 74-98. Retrieved from <https://libproxy.uww.edu:9443/login?url=https://libproxy.uww.edu:3202/docview/1667952199?accountid=14791>
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgement. *Psychological Review*, 108(4):817. [doi:10.1037/0033-295x.108.4.814](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.108.4.814).
- Haidt, J. (2012). The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion, Allan Lane Publishers.
- Haidt, J. and C. Joseph. (2006) The moral mind: How five sets of innate intuitions guide the development of many culture-specific virtues, and perhaps even modules, in P. Carruthers, S. Laurence, and S. Stich (Eds.) The Innate Mind, Volume 3.
- Haidt, J. and J. Graham (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research*, 20(1):98-116.
- Haidt, J., and J. Craig (2004). Intuitive ethics, how innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus*, 133(4):55-66. [doi:10.1162/0011526042365555](https://doi.org/10.1162/0011526042365555)
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.
- Howard, P. N. (2005) *Politics in code: Franchise and representation in the age of new media*. Cambridge University Press.

- Howard, P. N. (2005b). Deep democracy, thin citizenship: The impact of digital media in political campaign strategy. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 597, 153-170. Retrieved from <https://libproxy.uww.edu:9443/login?url=https://libproxy.uww.edu:3202/docview/219503837?accountid=14791>
- Hughes, D. J., Rowe, M., Batey, M., & Lee, A. (2012). A tale of two sites: Twitter vs. facebook and the personality predictors of social media usage. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 561-569. doi:<http://libproxy.uww.edu:2071/10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.001>
- Kahn, R. & Kellner, D. (2003). Internet subcultures and oppositional politics, *In D. L. Muggleton (Ed.)*, The post-subcultures reader. London: Berg
- Kellner, D. (1999). Globalization from below? Toward a radical democratic technopolitics. *Angelaki*, 4(2):101-113.
- Kellner, D. (2005). The media and election 2004. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(2), 178-186. Retrieved from <https://libproxy.uww.edu:9443/login?url=https://libproxy.uww.edu:3202/docview/220453622?accountid=14791>
- Kim, K. R., J. Kang and S. Yun. (2012). Moral intuitions and political orientation: Similarities and differences between South Korea and the United States. *Psychological Reports: Sociocultural Issues in Psychology*, 111(1):173-185.
- Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? college students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(5), 608-630.  
doi:<http://libproxy.uww.edu:2071/10.1080/15205436.2010.516863>
- Lukwago, Susan N., M. W. Kreuter, Dawn C. Buckholtz, Cheryl L. Holt, and Eddie M. Clark (2001). Development and validation of brief scales to measure collectivism, religiosity, racial pride, and time orientation in urban african american women. *Urban African American Women*, 20(16):63-71.
- Malka, Ariel, Yphtach Lelkes, Sanjay Srivastava, Adam Cohen, and Dale Miller. 2012. "The Association of Religiosity and Political Conservatism: The Role of Political Engagement." *Political Psychology* 33: 275-99.
- McDaniel, E. L. (2016). What Kind of Christian Are You? Religious Ideologies and Political Attitudes. *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion*, 55(2), 288-307.  
doi:10.1111/jssr.12264
- Milesi, P. (2016). Moral foundations and political attitudes: The moderating role of political sophistication. *International Journal of Psychology*, 51(4):252–260.
- Moralfoundations.org/questionnaires. 2013. Accessed April 27, 2018.
- Piazza, Jared. 2012. "If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments: Religiosity Increases Preference for Rule-Based Moral Arguments." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 22: 285-302.

Piazza, Jared and Paulo Sousa. 2014. Religiosity, Political Orientation, and Consequentialist Moral Thinking. *Social Psychology and Personality Science* 5: 334-42.

Walley, Christine J. 2017. Trump's election and the "white working class": What we missed. *American Ethnologist*, 44(2):231-236.