SOCIAL, POLITICAL, EARTH & ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH GROUP

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

The Moral Foundations of Group Perceptions
2023 SPEER Survey Findings

Heather Bedle, Ph.D.

The University of Oklahoma

August 2024

CONTACT: speer@ou.edu

RECOMMENDED CITATION: Bedle, H., (2024). The Moral Foundations of Group Perceptions. 2023 SPEER Survey Findings.

SPEER

Downloaded from SHAREOK, Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/340573

Except where otherwise noted, this report is licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License

The Moral Foundations of Group Perceptions

Heather Bedle, Ph.D.

2023 SPEER Survey Findings

August 2024

Abstract

We investigate the role of moral foundations in shaping attitudes towards various social and political groups in the United States. Using data from the 2023 SPEER survey (N=2,188), we examine how the five moral foundations—Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity—relate to feelings towards left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic groups, while controlling for demographic factors. Our findings reveal that individualizing foundations (Care and Fairness) consistently predict warmer attitudes towards left-sympathetic groups and cooler attitudes towards right-sympathetic groups. Conversely, binding foundations (Loyalty and Authority) show strong associations with warmer attitudes towards right-sympathetic groups and cooler attitudes towards left-sympathetic groups. The Purity foundation demonstrates more complex relationships, defying simple left-right categorization. These results underscore the importance of considering psychological factors alongside demographics when studying group perceptions and affective polarization.

1. Introduction

Understanding how Americans perceive various social and political groups is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics of contemporary U.S. society. These perceptions shape public discourse, influence policy decisions, and impact social cohesion (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In an era of increasing polarization, examining attitudes towards different groups can provide valuable insights into the underlying factors that contribute to social tensions and political divisions (Finkel et al., 2020).

Recent research has highlighted the growing importance of affective polarization, where individuals hold strong positive feelings towards groups they identify with and negative feelings towards outgroups (Mason, 2018). This phenomenon extends beyond traditional partisan lines, encompassing a wide range of social, religious, and ideological groups (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Iyengar and Westwood's (2015) work on affective polarization used feeling thermometers to measure attitudes toward political outgroups, finding that party affiliation was a stronger predictor of discrimination than race.

Previous analysis (Bedle & Garneau, 2024) revealed several insights regarding attitudes towards left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic groups. For left-sympathetic groups (e.g., Liberals, Atheists, Muslims, Transgender People, Feminists, Illegal Immigrants, Journalists, and Climate Scientists), conservative and Republican identifications were consistently associated with lower thermometer ratings. Younger respondents and those with higher education levels generally expressed warmer feelings towards these groups. Women tended to express warmer feelings towards several left-sympathetic groups, notably

Transgender People and Feminists. Religious variables such as biblical literalism and evangelical identification were often predictive of cooler attitudes towards these groups.

For right-sympathetic groups (e.g., Conservatives, Christian Nationalists, Militia Members, NRA Members, Oil & Gas Industry, Police, and White Supremacists), different patterns emerged. Conservative and Republican identifications strongly predicted warmer feelings towards these groups, while moderate and independent identifications often had the opposite effect. The relationship with age was more varied for these groups. Rural residency was associated with warmer feelings towards some right-sympathetic groups, particularly Militia Members and NRA Members. Having children was a significant predictor of warmer attitudes towards several right-sympathetic groups. Religious attendance, biblical literalism, and evangelical identification were positively associated with attitudes towards groups like Christian Nationalists.

Building on these findings, the current analysis delves deeper by incorporating psychological aspects to understand Americans' feelings about groups, using Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). MFT allows an understanding of principles that shape individuals' attitudes and beliefs (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Graham, 2007). According to MFT, people rely on a set of moral foundations, including care/harm (Care), fairness/cheating (Fairness), loyalty/betrayal (Loyalty), authority/subversion (Authority), and sanctity/degradation (Purity) (Graham et al., 2013). Graham et al. (2009) suggest that liberals and conservatives differ in their use of these moral foundations, with liberals prioritizing the individualizing moral foundations of Care and Fairness, while conservatives place greater emphasis on the binding foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Purity.

The SPEER 2023 pilot survey examines attitudes towards a diverse array of groups, categorized broadly as left-sympathetic and right-sympathetic, to provide a comprehensive picture of contemporary American social and political divides. We investigate how these moral foundations intersect to shape these attitudes, while controlling for standard demographic factors. By exploring the complex interplay of these variables, we aim to uncover patterns that illuminate the multifaceted nature of group perceptions in the United States.

2. Methods

2.1 Data

Data collection was conducted for the SPEER 2023 survey via online survey panels administered by Qualtrics, adhering to the guidelines and regulations of the University of Oklahoma Institutional Research Board (IRB approval #15823). All subjects provided informed consent. The sample consists of 2,188 U.S. adults (18+ years), recruited through quota-based sampling to match census benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, and U.S. region, ensuring a large and diverse representative sample. For additional details, refer to the SPEER 2023 Survey report (Bedle et al., 2024).

2.2 Measures

Dependent Variables

Respondents were asked the following question:

> *We'd like to get your feelings toward some groups of people. We'd like you to rate each group named below using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and*

100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the group and that you don't care too much for that group of people. You would rate the group at the 50- degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the group. For each group, touch or click the circle and drag it to the degree mark that best represents your feelings about that group. If you come to a group whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that group. Just move on to the next one.

The following groups were analyzed:

Left Sympathetic Groups

- Liberals
- Atheists
- Muslims
- Transgender People
- Feminists
- Illegal Immigrants
- Journalists
- Climate Scientists

Right Sympathetic Groups

- Conservatives
- Christian Nationalists
- Militia Members
- NRA Members
- Oil & Gas Industry
- Police
- White supremacists

Independent Variables: Moral Foundations

This study employs the five moral foundations as defined by Graham et al. (2011) and Haidt & Graham (2007) as its primary independent variables: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. These foundations were assessed using the 20-item Moral Foundations Questionnaire developed and validated by Graham et al. (2011).

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire consists of two parts:

Moral Relevance (10 items): Respondents rate the relevance of various moral concepts to their thinking on a 6-point scale. For example:

- Care/harm foundation: "Whether or not someone suffered emotionally"
- Fairness/cheating foundation: "Whether or not some people were treated differently than others"

Moral Judgments (10 items): Respondents indicate their level of agreement with statements related to each moral foundation, also on a 6-point scale. For example:

- Care/harm foundation: "Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue."
- Fairness/cheating foundation: "When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly."

To create scales for each of the five moral foundations, we summed the responses to the relevant items from both parts of the questionnaire. These composite scales serve as our independent variables, enabling us to examine the relationship between individuals' moral foundations and their feelings towards various groups.

By utilizing this validated instrument, we aim to capture a comprehensive picture of participants' moral intuitions and values. This approach allows us to investigate how these fundamental moral foundations may influence or correlate with attitudes towards different social and political groups in contemporary American society.

Control Variables

We also incorporated control variables based on standard demographics and other covariates commonly associated with environmental attitudes, as identified in previous research and the literature review. These variables include:

- Political party affiliation
- Mean-centered age (with a squared term when significant)
- Gender
- Race
- Education level
- Income
- Marital and parental status
- Religious service attendance
- Evangelical identity
- Biblical views
- Urbanicity
- U.S. region

Linear OLS regressions were employed to test relationships between these variables and thermometers of groups, including the aforementioned control variables.

3. Insights

After performing the OLS regressions, we noted that a wide range of variables were significant predictors, with overlap between group thermometers. These regressions were run with the sociodemographic controls noted above. The results are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: OLS Regression analysis for Left sympathetic groups

	Liberals		Atheists		Muslims		Transgender People		Feminists		Illegal Immigrants		Journalists		Climate Scientists	
	b		b		b		b		b		b		b		b	
Moral Foundations																
Care	0.594	**	0.221		0.834	***	1.311	***	0.935	***	0.967	***	0.518	*	1.353	***
Fairness	0.484	*	0.786	***	1.041	***	1.265	***	1.163	***	0.683	**	0.888	***	1.065	***
Ingroup	-0.038		-0.288		-0.468	*	0.012		0.102		-0.652	***	0.083		-0.387	*
Authority	-0.525	**	-1.193	***	-0.465	*	-0.148	***	-0.151	***	-0.936	***	-0.252		-0.632	***
Purity	-0.431	**	-0.634	***	-0.328		0.986	***	-0.439	**	-0.415	*	-0.323		-0.306	
Adj. R2	0.46		0.278		0.194		0.391		0.345		0.372		0.205		0.349	

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

**Note: Model includes controls for party affiliation, political orientation, age, sex, race, socio-economic status, family status, region, urbanicity, and religious variables*

Table 2: OLS Regression analysis for Right sympathetic groups.

	Conservatives		Christian Nationalists		Militia Members		NRA Members		Oil & Gas Industry		Police		White Supremacists	
	b		b		b		b		b		b		b	
Moral Foundations														
Care	-0.5	*	-0.69	***	-0.599	**	-1.169	***	-1.165	***	-0.432	*	-0.414	**
Fairness	-0.257		-0.479	*	-0.604	**	-0.324		0.158		-0.105		-1.078	***
Ingroup	1.046	***	1.44	***	1.024	***	1.236	***	1.336	***	0.637	***	0.843	***
Authority	0.803	***	0.583	**	0.211		0.557	*	0.901	***	1.596	***	0.331	*
Purity	0.233		0.501	**	-0.052		0.172		0.042		0.359	*	-0.274	*
Adj. R2	0.445		0.344		0.111		0.331		0.22		0.336		0.153	

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

**Note: Model includes controls for party affiliation, political orientation, age, sex, race, socio-economic status, family status, region, urbanicity, and religious variables*

Care and Fairness: These individualizing foundations are consistently positively associated with warmer feelings toward left-sympathetic groups and negatively associated with right-sympathetic groups. This aligns with previous research suggesting that liberals tend to prioritize these foundations (Graham et al., 2009).

- For left-sympathetic groups, the Care foundation shows the strongest positive associations with all groups, excluding Atheists.
- The Fairness foundation is positively and significantly associated with all left sympathetic groups.
- For right-sympathetic groups, both Care and Fairness show strong negative associations with attitudes towards most groups.

Ingroup Loyalty: This binding foundation shows a clear divide between left and right-sympathetic groups, strongly aligning with conservative values (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

- Strongly positively associated with all right-sympathetic groups.
- Negatively associated with several left-sympathetic groups, particularly Muslims, Illegal Immigrants, and Climate Scientists.

Authority: This foundation also shows a clear left-right divide, consistent with its categorization as a binding moral foundation.

- Negatively associated with all left-sympathetic groups except Journalists, with the strongest negative associations for Atheists and Illegal Immigrants.
- Positively associated with right-sympathetic groups, except Militia. The strongest positive association is with Police.

Purity: This foundation presents the most complex and nuanced results, breaking from the typical left-right alignment.

- Mixed results for left-sympathetic groups:
    - Negative associations with Liberals, Atheists, Feminists, and Illegal Immigrants.
    - Surprisingly positive association with Transgender People, which warrants further investigation.
- Varied associations with right-sympathetic groups:
    - Positive associations with Christian Nationalists and Police.
    - Negative association with White Supremacists. This also warrants additional research.

These findings suggest that while the Care, Fairness, Loyalty, and Authority foundations largely align with expected left-right divides, the Purity foundation plays a more complex role in shaping attitudes towards various groups. This complexity may reflect the multifaceted nature of purity concerns, which can encompass religious, cultural, and moral aspects.

4. Concluding Thoughts

This analysis of the SPEER 2023 pilot survey highlights the critical importance of looking beyond traditional demographic factors when seeking to understand people's attitudes towards various social and political groups. While demographic variables certainly play a role, our findings demonstrate that moral foundations provide additional, insights into the complexities of group perceptions in the United States.

The relationships we've uncovered between moral foundations and group attitudes suggest that psychological factors play a significant role in shaping social and political divisions. The consistent patterns observed with the Care, Fairness, Loyalty, and Authority foundations, as well as the more complex role of the Purity foundation, underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to studying affective polarization and group perceptions.

Our research serves as a call for more comprehensive investigations into the psychological underpinnings of social and political attitudes. Future studies should continue to explore the interplay between moral intuitions and social factors in shaping how individuals perceive different groups. Longitudinal research, such as those planned by SPEER, could provide valuable insights into how these relationships evolve over time. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches combining insights from psychology, political science, and sociology could further enhance our understanding of group perceptions and social divisions. Such research could inform more effective strategies for reducing polarization and fostering social cohesion.

In conclusion, while demographic factors remain important, we emphasize the need for a more holistic approach to understanding group attitudes. By considering moral foundations and other psychological factors alongside demographics, researchers can develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping American society. This expanded perspective is crucial for addressing the challenges of social and political polarization in an increasingly diverse and complex social landscape.

Data and Code Availability

As much as is allowed by the IRB and survey collection agreements, data and code can be made available by contacting speer@ou.edu.

Acknowledgements

We thank the University of Oklahoma, and its College of Earth and Energy for providing start-up funding to the lead author for survey collection. Additionally, we thank Dr. Ann Beutel with the University of Oklahoma's Department of Sociology for immense help in the survey design and collection, and Dr. Christopher R.H. Garneau for insightful feedback.

References

Bedle, H., Beutel, A.M., Garneau, C.R.H. (2024). SPEER23 Survey Report: Investigating Climate, Weather, and Energy Attitudes in the United States through the Lens of Social and Psychological Factors.

Bedle, H. (2024). Group Perceptions in America: Demographic and Ideological Divides. 2023 SPEER Survey Findings.

Druckman, J. N., & Levendusky, M. S. (2019). What do we measure when we measure affective polarization? Public Opinion Quarterly, 83(1), 114-122.

Finkel, E. J., Bail, C. A., Cikara, M., Ditto, P. H., Iyengar, S., Klar, S., ... & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. Science, 370(6516), 533-536.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 96(5), 1029–1046. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141

Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. Journal of personality and social psychology, 101(2), 366–385.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. Advances in experimental social psychology, 47, 55-130. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407236-7.00002-4

Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. Social Justice Research, 20(1), 98-116.

Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. American Journal of Political Science, 59(3), 690-707.

Mason, L. (2018). Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity. University of Chicago Press.