

The Mobilizing and Polarizing Effects of Political Moral Appeals

Linda Bos

All politicians know argumentation is key when explaining party positions to voters. One persuasive way of arguing is to justify policy statements by connecting to beliefs about right and wrong. In their political moral appeals politicians and parties refer to these moral beliefs, making clear why policies are inherently 'good' or 'bad'. For instance, because the current situation is unfair, harmful, leads to chaos or is plain disgusting. Or because we should care for those in need, create equal opportunities, be loyal, obedient or pure. U.S. research has shown that liberals and conservatives endorse divergent moral belief systems, using different moral appeals and arguments, and that conservatives tend to moralize more than their liberal opponents (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009). Knowledge on the use of moral appeals by European political elites is limited, but preliminary analyses from the Netherlands, Germany and Austria show that they too tend to moralize their statements in both formal and informal political communication (Author, 2019).

The moral justification of a party position is expected to appeal to (Lipsitz, 2018) and convince voters and thus have mobilizing effects (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Jung, in press). This is most notably the case for partisans, i.e., voters agreeing with the party's messages. Yet, these appeals are also argued to induce "'other-condemning' emotions and action tendencies that can drive citizens apart" (Ryan, 2014: 383), thus fostering interpersonal intolerance and (issue) polarization (Clifford, 2019). However, with the exceptions of Jung

## THE MOBILIZING AND POLARIZING EFFECTS OF POLITICAL MORAL APPEALS

(in press) and Tzelgov and Dumitrescu (2018) studying mobilizing effects in respectively a number of Anglo-Saxon countries and the Brexit case, thus far the consequences of moral appeals have mainly been studied in the U.S. This raises the question to what extent previous findings can be extended to other – most notably, multiparty – contexts. In addition, while previous research has laid out the theoretical potential of moral political elite communication on voter and issue polarization, a direct test is still lacking.

This project builds upon three studies to investigate the consequences of moral appeals in political elite communication on voters. I focus on three European countries: the Netherlands, Germany and Austria, and study the mobilizing and polarizing effects of moral appeals.

The first study uses the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009) in automated content analyses (ACA) to assess the presence of moral words in politicians' tweets ( $n = 1,130,073$ ) and gauges the extent to which these words – above and beyond the presence of positive and negative words – directly appeal to twitter users by engaging likes and retweets. The results indicate that when politicians use words referring to (im)moral behavior in their tweets, these tweets are more likely to resonate among the twitterverse and are more likely to go viral. In other words: moral appeals have mobilizing effects.

In a second study I investigate these effects in electoral behavior, and test whether partisan moral appeals increase the favorability of a party, most notably among voters feeling ideologically close. In addition, I study the potential polarizing effects and expect ideologically close voters to be less positive about other parties as a result of moral party communication. To study these hypotheses I use the MFD to code the morality of manifesto statements ( $n = 170,786$ ) and link those to 12 CSES election surveys (1998-2017;  $n$  ranges

## THE MOBILIZING AND POLARIZING EFFECTS OF POLITICAL MORAL APPEALS

from 1,000 to 3,023), based on the party-voter dyad (total  $n = 97,395$ ). I run regression analyses with robust standard errors clustered around voters<sup>1</sup>. I control for alternative explanations at the individual level (socio-demographics, ideology, ideological and party extremity, partisan affinity) as well as party (niche party or not) and election level explanations (effective number of electoral parties, system polarization) and add country fixed effects. The results show that the morality of a party manifesto indeed increases the turnout for a party, adds to the favorability of a party and decreases the favorability of other parties, thereby increasing polarization. These results are dependent upon ideological distance: only voters placing themselves close to the specific party on the left-right scale are affected in the expected direction.

In a third study I experimentally test the mobilizing and polarizing effects of specific moral messages and investigate whether effects are dependent upon issue congruence and voter characteristics such as opinion extremity, moral conviction and moral absolutism. I do this with an experiment fielded in the Netherlands (October 2019,  $n = 483$ ) testing the impact of exposure to congruent and incongruent moral versus consequentialist appeals on five different issues (immigration, euthanasia, health care, European integration and climate change) on the willingness to mobilize and the tolerance for opponents' mobilization. The results show no across-the-board effects of moral appeals, nor are these effects moderated by issue congruence or other individual correlates. The results do show that a moral climate appeal (whether attitude-congruent or not) mobilizes respondents, and that a morally congruent euthanasia appeal decreases the tolerance towards opponents.

<sup>1</sup> As a robustness check I also ran multilevel regression analyses with random intercepts nesting voters in elections. These lead to the same conclusions. However, multilevel logit models do not converge.

## THE MOBILIZING AND POLARIZING EFFECTS OF POLITICAL MORAL APPEALS

In line with Jung (in press) the findings show that also in European multiparty contexts political moral appeals have mobilizing potential, while they extend previous research by showing moral party communication can fuel out-party hostility, in turn enhancing polarization. Yet, while these results are consistent in large scale studies and at the aggregate level, the replication of the causal mechanism at the individual level only held up to a limited extent, nor did the experimental study generate any knowledge on the extent to which effects of moral appeals are dependent upon individual-level correlates<sup>2</sup>. Yet, this project still adds to the knowledge on individual-level consequences of political moral appeals, while it also sheds a light on the type of messages that polarize citizens (e.g., Kalmoe, Gubler & Wood, 2018).

### References

- Clifford, S. (2019). How emotional frames moralize and polarize political attitudes. *Political Psychology*, 40(1), 75-91, doi: 10.1111/pops.12507.
- Clifford, S., & Jerit, J. (2013). How words do the work of politics: Moral foundations theory and the debate over stem cell research. *Journal of Politics*, 75(3), 659-671.  
doi:10.1017/S0022381613000492
- 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.

<sup>2</sup> The results of Study 3 did show that voters with a more extreme opinion, indicating this opinion to be an expression of their norms and values (i.e., having stronger moral convictions), are more likely to be mobilized on said issue. In addition, while respondents with stronger moral convictions are more tolerant of others, those holding absolutist moral attitudes are more intolerant. The *positive* correlation between moral conviction and tolerance is interesting as it departs from previous U.S. research indicating a quite consistent negative relation between the two (e.g., Ryan, 2014).

## THE MOBILIZING AND POLARIZING EFFECTS OF POLITICAL MORAL APPEALS

Jung, J-H. (in press). The mobilizing effect of parties' moral rhetoric. *American Journal of Political Science*.

Kalmoe, N. P., Gubler, J. R., & Wood, D. A. (2018). Toward conflict or compromise? how violent metaphors polarize partisan issue attitudes. *Political Communication*, 35(3), 333-352.

Lipsitz, K. (2018). Playing with emotions: the effect of moral appeals in elite rhetoric. *Political Behavior*, 40(1), 57-78, doi: 10.1007/s11109-017-9394-8.

Ryan, T. J. (2014). Reconsidering moral issues in politics. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(02), 380-397.

Tzelgov, E., & Dumitrescu, D. (2018). 'Taking back control', again: the effect of moral foundation arguments and partisan cues on attitudes towards a People's Vote. Available at SSRN 3254506.