Moralization, character judgments and polarization

Proposal summary

Morality is one of the main factors behind polarization. Attitudes towards political issues perceived as moral are more likely to be extreme (Ryan, 2014), make people more willing to have greater social and physical distance, more intolerant and less cooperative towards others with dissimilar attitudes, and are associated with difficulties and reluctance to generate solutions to resolve disagreements (Ryan, 2016; Skitka, 2005).

However, several studies on moral convictions have documented that the degree to which attitudes toward political issues are perceived as moral is not uniform, but varies from person to person. And when they are indeed perceived as such, i.e., when people exhibit strong moral convictions, certain important implications follow, such as perceiving attitudes as objective and universal truths (Morgan & Skitka, 2020), positions that are stable over time (Luttrell & Togans, 2021) resistant to different forms of social influence (Aramovich et al., 2012; Luttrell et al., 2016). Furthermore, moral convictions may be related to engagement, activism, and political participation (Zaal et al., 2011; van Zomeren, et al., 2012).

We believe that one implication of moral convictions that to our knowledge has not been explored is related to character judgments. Specifically, we hypothesize that when people have strong moral convictions about a specific issue, they tend to have more negative character judgments of those who think differently.

And character judgments, in turn, have important implications for the way we relate to each other. Information about a person's moral character has been found to be a better predictor of desirability, identity, controllability, and overall impression formation than warmth and competence information (Goodwin et al., 2014; Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla et al., 2012; Brambilla et al., 2019). In addition, moral character information further influences emotions such as affection, hostility, hatred, and suspicion; and behavioral intentions to help or interact (Pagliaro et al., 2013).

Considering the wide primacy of moral character information, a second hypothesis is that negative character judgments predict social distance, an affective manifestation of polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). That is, when people judge someone else to be a bad person, they will want to stay away from that person and avoid any kind of social interaction as much as possible.

Finally, a third hypothesis is that it is not moralization as such that directly produces social distance and hence polarization, but character judgments against someone who thinks differently about a given issue, which has been moralized.

We would like to test these three hypotheses in three of the most polarized countries in the world, according to the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer: Argentina, the United States, and Colombia were the most severely polarized countries (Edelman, 2023). This proposal relates to data to be collected in the US.

Specifically, we want to test whether moralization alone predicts social distance and polarization or whether it does so through the negative character judgments it enables. We
hope that understanding the effect of moralization and character judgments on polarization can help identify the drivers of this phenomenon and potentially how to reduce social distance.

References


