Beyond Identity Politics: Moral Psychology and the 2008 Democratic Primary

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The two leading candidates for the 2008 Democratic Party presidential nomination, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, had very similar policy positions and yet demonstrated appeal to disparate populations. Much has been written in the press about demographic differences between supporters of these candidates, but little is known about these groups' psychological profiles. We used standard personality and moral psychology scales to predict differential favorability ratings toward these candidates, while controlling for age, gender, education, and political orientation. Higher scores on group-based morality, primary psychopathy, and moral relativism predicted relative favorability toward Clinton. Higher scores on individual-based morality, empathy, and global concern for others predicted relative favorability toward Obama. The authors discuss how voters' personalities and moral concerns may interact with media portrayals of the candidates—consistent with recent congruency models of political preference—especially in cases where policy differences are small.

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Introduction

The 2008 Democratic presidential primary featured two candidates with very similar policy proposals—Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton—who nevertheless garnered enthusiastic support from different groups of people. Many of these supporters also exhibited strong enmity toward the other candidate, sometimes going so far as to say that if their candidate lost, they would rather vote for Republican candidate John McCain than vote for the other Democrat in the general election. For psychologists, this represented an opportunity to study political support without the variance normally associated with disparate partisan identities and policy issues. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were both Democrats whose policy disagreements were relatively minor, and in any case those differences were not widely known among the electorate (Curry, 2006). The electorate was relatively homogenous, primarily composed of liberal, self-identified Democrats. What then drew people toward one candidate or the other?

The popular media reported numerous statistics about the supporters of each candidate, based on gender, race, age, and education. It is hardly surprising that people are more likely to vote for candidates who are members of their own demographic group, i.e., of the same or similar age, gender, or race. Older voters voted for the older candidate. African-American voters voted for the African-American candidate. Female voters voted for the female candidate (Gallup, 2008).

However, it is an oversimplification of the views of women and African Americans to assume that their support is solely a result of shared identity. Within these groups, there were still individuals who supported each candidate. Individual differences beyond shared identity have been extensively studied with regard to political behavior. Liberal or conservative identification has been found to be predicted by Big Five personality factors (Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008) and a need for closure (Chirumbolo & Leone, 2008). Moral motives have also been found to predict political identification (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2007), and values have been found to be a better predictor of political choice than personality factors (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006). However, previous research has focused on choices between candidates with clear ideological differences. Very little research has been done on associations between individual differences and political preference within the same party, where ideological and policy differences are much smaller. How do individual differences in voter personalities predict candidate preference in a case such as the 2008 Democratic primary?

Recent work in social psychology suggests that gut-level, intuitive processes may underlie much of political decision making (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Westen, 2007). Emotional reactions play a powerful role in drawing people to candidates (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Westen, 2007). This implies

that candidate preference may be driven by personality, character, or style as much as policy. The congruency model of political preference hypothesizes that voters select politicians whose traits match their own traits (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Similarity between voters and politicians acts as a "humanizing glue," which has an implicit impact on various affective and cognitive appraisals of candidates. An initial study of Italian voters found that voters rated themselves as more similar on personality measures to candidates and leaders of their own party, compared to candidates and leaders of opposing parties (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 2002). This finding was replicated in the United States, as supporters of George W. Bush and John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election perceived their preferred candidate to be similar to themselves on personality measures (Caprara, Vecchione, Barbaranelli, & Fraley, 2007; Roets & Van Hiel, 2009).

However, one limitation of previous research on voter–politician congruency is that previous studies have examined candidates from opposing parties (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1999; Caprara et al., 2002; Caprara et al., 2007) or voters who identify with opposing parties (Roets & Van Hiel, 2009), leaving open the possibility that results are driven by voter–party congruency rather than voter–politician congruency. Given the lack of ideological differences between the Democratic primary candidates (Curry, 2006), congruency between voter personality factors and intuitive reactions to media portrayals may have played an even bigger role in this election than in previous elections, as voter–party congruency effects should be mitigated. By examining the relative scores of supporters of each candidate using measures of personality, values, and morality, we hoped to learn which individual differences might be associated with preference for one candidate over the other, and whether voter–politician congruency remains important in the relative absence of confounding voter–party congruency effects.

Specifically, we focused on measures that might predictably interact with characterizations of Clinton as the establishment figure versus Obama as the agent of change. Clinton had been a leading figure in the Democratic party for years, dating back to her husband's presidency throughout the 1990s. In contrast, Obama's campaign was based on the idea of "change" and challenging the Washington status quo, and he was not a national figure before his 2004 keynote speech at the Democratic national convention. We predicted that psychological measures that relate to attitudes toward group loyalty and change would be associated with individuals' candidate preferences in this primary election.

We also analyzed data from personality measures that could predictably relate to the candidates' differing emotional styles. Throughout the campaign, Clinton was portrayed as the cold, calculating, competent veteran (Media Matters, 2007). In contrast, Obama was portrayed as the inspiring rookie whose natural rhetorical skills played on the emotions of his audience. Thus, we predicted that those individuals who scored higher on measures indicating a more emotionally affected nature would exhibit relative preference for Obama. Lastly, Clinton pursued the

image of a fighter (CNN, 2008) who could do what needed to be done in the rough world of politics, while Obama sought to portray politics-as-usual as corrupt (*Chicago Sun Times*, 2007), promising to take a more principled and less Machiavellian approach. Accordingly, we predicted that relative preference for Obama would be predicted by measures indicating less individual willingness to make moral compromises in the service of superseding goals.

Method

Participants

From October 2007 to February 2008, during the Democratic primary season, 8,026 people came to our website, www.YourMorals.org, and completed a survey asking for their opinions of the leading contenders in both party primaries. YourMorals.org is a data collection website where, after providing basic demographic information, participants are given a list of psychological scales and in return for completing them are given feedback about aspects of their morality, personality, and ideology. Participants elected to take a survey titled "Presidential Candidates." A large number of these people also took other psychological scales, which have been well validated by previous research. In this study, we explored the data collected during this period and attempted to form a picture of the individual difference variables which best predicted relative favorability ratings toward Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. We analyze only the responses of those who self-identified as Democrats, rather than as Republicans. Thus, our final sample for analysis consists of 4,574 participants. Our final sample was largely male (61%), white (89% of those who reported their ethnicity), very well educated (the average participant had completed some amount of graduate/professional school), and mostly middle or upper-middle class (17% working class, 47% middle class, 34% upper-middle class, and 2% upper class).

Measures

Presidential candidates' favorability ratings. In the context of a survey on political attitudes, participants answered the question "What is your opinion of the politicians listed below?" on a 7-point scale, from very unfavorable to very favorable, with the midpoint of the scale indicating neither favorable nor unfavorable. The names of these politicians were listed in the following order: Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, Al Gore, Dennis Kucinich, John McCain, Barack Obama, Ron Paul, Bill Richardson, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo, and Fred Thompson. Participants had the option of skipping a question, but were given no explicit "no answer" option.

Individual Difference Measures

Our hypotheses about relevant individual difference measures involved three main dimensions: group loyalty, emotional style, and willingness to make moral compromises. In order to examine individual differences related to group loyalty, we analyzed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2009) and Identification with All Humanity Scale (McFarland & Brown, 2007). Emotional style was examined using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), Big Five Personality Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999), and Levenson Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Willingness to make moral compromises was examined using the Levenson Psychopathy Scale along with the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth, 1980). Each questionnaire will be described more fully along with the relevant results below.

Results

In general, our sample was more favorable toward Obama (5.07 on a 7-point scale) than Clinton (4.06). The dependent measure in all the following analyses is the difference between favorability ratings of Obama and favorability ratings of Clinton, with higher scores indicating a more favorable opinion of Obama than Clinton. These favorability ratings correlated with demographic factors as follows: for age, $r = -.123$, $p < 0.01$ (Obama supporters were younger); for gender (male $= 1$), $r = 0.145$, $p < 0.01$ (Obama supporters were more likely to be male). Education (measured on a 9-point scale of highest level achieved) and politics (measured on a 1–7 scale of conservative to liberal) showed no correlation with favorability to Obama (both $|r| < 0.03$); that is, neither candidate's supporters were more educated or more liberal.

All statistics presented below are based on linear regression analyses that controlled for gender,[1] age, education, and political orientation. We did not control for race statistically, because our sample was relatively racially homogenous (89% white, 1–2% black and Latino, 5% no response); therefore, we were not able to analyze results by race. However, having such a homogenous sample means that race is effectively held constant, and our study is an examination of the personality factors that influenced educated white voters. Results of the multiple regressions are summarized in Table 1.

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[1] Subsequent analysis using gender as a possible moderator found that effects were generally similar within both genders. The lone exception was the Ingroup moral foundation, for which the effect was mainly driven by men. We did not, however, have any gender-specific hypotheses, so we did not include this finding in our main discussion.

Table 1. Regressing Individual Difference Variables on Relative Favorability for Obama over Clinton

	Self-identified Democrats
Moral Foundation Questionnaire	
Harm	0.019
Fairness	0.058**
Ingroup loyalty	−0.036*
Authority	−0.045**
Purity	−0.020
Big Five Personality Scale	
Openness to experience	0.020
Conscientiousness	−0.054
Extraversion	−0.010
Agreeableness	0.009
Neuroticism	0.013
Interpersonal Reactivity Index	
Personal distress	0.101*
Perspective taking	0.066
Empathic concern	0.048
Fantasy	0.070
Levenson Psychopathy Scale	
Primary psychopathy	−0.210***
Secondary psychopathy	0.007
Identification with All Humanity Scale	0.076*
Ethics Position Questionnaire	
Moral idealism	0.019
Moral relativism	−0.083*

Note: Values shown are standardized beta regression coefficients.
*$p < 0.05$ (two tailed).
**$p < 0.01$ (two tailed).
***$p < 0.001$ (two tailed).

Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Three thousand seven hundred and two self-identified Democrats took a 40-item version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2009; see also Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). The scale measures endorsement of five foundational moral concerns that appear across cultures. The scale has two parts, measuring abstract assessments of moral relevance (e.g., "When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent do you consider whether or not someone suffered emotionally?" for Harm) and agreement with moral judgments (e.g., "I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural," for Purity). Each of the two parts of the scale contained four questions related to each foundation: (1) Harm/care, (2) Fairness/reciprocity (including issues of rights), (3) Ingroup/loyalty, (4) Authority/respect, and (5) Purity/sanctity. The first two foundations (Harm and Fairness) can be thought of as "individualizing foundations" because they are concerned with individuals treating other individuals well. The

latter three (Ingroup, Authority, and Purity) can be thought of as three "binding foundations" because they involve more group-level concerns about how to be a good group member, support social order, and respect tradition. Endorsement of the binding foundations is consistently related to political conservatism (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

As shown in Table 1, relative favorability toward Obama was significantly related to endorsing the Fairness foundation, while relative favorability toward Clinton was significantly related to endorsing the moral values of Ingroup and Authority. While the effect sizes are small, they show that the moral foundations retain predictive validity for this candidate choice even when controlling for age, gender, education, and political orientation. Clinton supporters appear to be more morally conservative, showing greater endorsement of group-oriented moral concerns, though they identify themselves as being just as strongly liberal. Relative preference for Clinton appears to be related to being a good group member, favoring tradition, and supporting the social order, while relative preference for Obama appears to be related to endorsing moral foundations related to treating individuals well.

Identification with All of Humanity

One thousand three hundred and seventeen self-identified Democrats completed the Identification with All of Humanity Scale (McFarland & Brown, 2007). The 27-item scale is a measure of identification with people in one's community, people in one's country, and people globally by asking nine questions concerning each of these three groups (e.g., "How much would you say you have in common with the following groups?"). McFarland's method for analyzing this scale is to analyze identification with people globally, controlling for identification with people locally and nationally (McFarland & Brown, 2007). Relative favorability toward Obama was uniquely predicted by identifying with humanity globally (see Table 1). This suggests that relative preference for Obama is related to identification with humanity as a whole, while relative preference for Clinton may be more ingroup-based.

Big Five Personality Inventory

One thousand one hundred and forty-one people took the "Big Five" Personality Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). The scale is a 40-item measure of five basic personality traits in which participants agree or disagree with statements about themselves (e.g., "I see myself as someone who is talkative."). The traits measured by the scale are Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. There was a marginally significant relationship between higher conscientiousness scores and preference for Clinton

over Obama ($p = 0.073$), with no other relationships approaching significance (see Table 1). High scorers in conscientiousness are often described as well-organized, goal-directed people who are able to control their impulses in favor of rational thought (John & Srivastava, 1999). This suggests the existence of a more rational nature for those who showed relative preference for Clinton and a more impulsive or emotionally driven nature for those who showed relative preference for Obama.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index

Five hundred and fifty-two people took the "Interpersonal Reactivity Index," (Davis, 1983). The scale is a 28-item measure of empathy, with seven items covering each of four distinct aspects of empathic responding to others: (1) Perspective-taking, (2) Fantasy, (3) Empathic Concern for Others, and (4) Personal distress. Participants were asked whether certain statements did or did not characterize them very well (e.g., "I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me," for Fantasy). Higher scores on personal distress uniquely predicted relative favorability toward Obama. Other subscale relationships were positive but nonsignificant (see Table 1). According to Davis (1983), a high score on personal distress indicates "'self-oriented' feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings." This suggests that favorability toward Obama is related to increased emotional response in certain interpersonal situations.

Levenson Psychopathy Scale

Four hundred and twenty-four self-identified Democrats took the Levenson Primary and Secondary Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). The scale is a 26-item measure of psychopathic personality traits in noninstitutionalized populations. Psychopathy is characterized by a lack of guilt, empathy, and conscience. The scale distinguishes two factors of psychopathy. The first factor, primary psychopathy, involves a lack of emotional concern for others, while secondary psychopathy is characterized by self-reports of impulsive antisocial behavior. Relative preference for Clinton over Obama was highly related to higher primary psychopathy scores, even controlling for age, gender, education, and political orientation (see Table 1). This indicates that relative support for Obama may be related to higher degrees of social emotions such as empathy and guilt that prevent individuals from advancing their cause at the expense of others. There was no relation between candidate preference and secondary psychopathy; neither group of supporters was more likely to have reported engaging in impulsive antisocial behaviors.

Ethics Position Questionnaire

Six hundred and thirty-six self-identified Democrats completed the "Ethics Positions Questionnaire" (Forsyth, 1980). The 20-item scale is a measure of moral idealism (e.g., "It is never necessary to sacrifice the welfare of others.") and moral relativism (e.g., "Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual."). Relative preference for Clinton over Obama was uniquely predicted by higher scores on moral relativism (see Table 1). This suggests that relative preference for Obama may be related to the idea that morals are absolute, while relative preference for Clinton may be related to the idea that right and wrong may vary depending on the situation.

Discussion

Our hypotheses focused on three main observed differences in portrayals of the personal differences between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama when they competed as candidates in the 2008 Democratic primary elections. Clinton was portrayed as the more experienced and established candidate, having been a flag bearer for the Democratic party for many years. As such, it is unsurprising that Clinton supporters scored higher in endorsing moral foundations that are based on the value of being a good group member—in this case, being a good group member of the Democratic Party, showing loyalty to the Clinton family that led the Democratic Party throughout the 1990s. It also makes sense that her supporters would value authority, respect, and tradition, and might feel that her years of experience entitled her to higher standing within the party. However, it is somewhat surprising that people who favored her claimed to be just as liberal as those who favored Obama, given that previous research has found a robust relationship between identification as a liberal and endorsement of individual rather than group conceptions of morality (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Perhaps those individuals identified as liberal out of a sense of loyalty to the Democratic party.

Obama supporters valued individual-based morality (higher Moral Foundations Questionnaire results for Fairness) and therefore perhaps did not see any issue in being "disloyal" to Clinton and refusing to recognize the standing that her years in the public eye might entitle her to. As some have noted, "Obama has attracted tens of thousands of young supporters who are loyal to him, not to the Democratic Party. Clinton, on the other hand, has strong support among party regulars" (Allen, 2008). Evidence that Obama supporters might have been more concerned with people in general rather than with their group can also be seen in the fact that Obama supporters scored higher on concern for humanity in general as measured by the Identification with All of Humanity scale. Effect sizes found for these measures were small, however.

The second perceived personality difference between the candidates we examined was the contrast between Clinton's more rational style and Obama's more emotional style. Supporters of Obama did appear to be a bit more emotional, at least on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and the primary psychopathy scale. This would fit Obama's much-discussed campaign style, which attempted to engage the emotions of his audience through inspiring rhetoric. More empathic voters might be more easily swayed by such a campaign. In contrast, Clinton supporters appeared to be more coldly rational, scoring lower on empathy measures, though observed effect sizes were small. Relatively higher moral relativism and primary psychopathy scores indicate an emotionally cool willingness to make tough decisions that might have some negative consequences, in the service of some superseding goal. This could be framed as a positive quality ("the ability to make tough decisions") or as a negative quality ("the willingness to do anything to get ahead"); both characterizations have been made of Clinton in the election (Media Matters, 2007). Social emotions can be seen as a double-edged sword, and it makes sense that people favor the candidate who is portrayed as being most similar to them in terms of these emotions (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004).

Lastly, we examined the contrast between portrayals of Clinton as an experienced political fighter who could work well within an imperfect system and Obama as an agent of change that sought to reform the system itself into something more pure. Given Obama's emphasis on "change" as a campaign slogan, it would seem likely that we would have found observable differences in openness to experience between those who favored Obama and those who favored Clinton. However, the only observed difference among the "Big Five" personality traits was that Clinton supporters scored marginally higher on conscientiousness, an effect that was small. Higher conscientiousness scores can be an indication of being a high achiever or an indication of being uptight. Again, both characterizations were made of Clinton during the election, indicating that conscientious voters appeared to prefer the candidate most like themselves.

One of the stronger negative associations we found was between primary psychopathy and relative favorability toward Obama. A convergent small negative association was found between relative favorability toward Obama and moral relativism. Both of these constructs indicate a willingness to get ahead at the expense of some moral principle. Relative favorability toward Obama was highly associated with decreased primary psychopathy and lower scores of moral relativism, indicating that Obama's characterization of himself as an agent of a purer form of politics was effective in earning him support among those who endorse a purer form of morality, one where principles cannot be sacrificed for expediency.

It is important to note that we generally found small effects for most of our dependent variables and a comparably larger effect size for primary psychopathy. In nonclinical populations, primary psychopathy can be thought of as a complex personal characteristic that is indicative of traits such as low emotional reactivity to

the distress of others (Blair, Jones, Clark, & Smith, 1997) and a willingness to make moral compromises (Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva & Haidt, 2009), rather than as a personality disorder. Some aspects of primary psychopathy can actually be seen as beneficial in the business world (Babiak & Hare, 2006). The complexity of the trait means that it can be characterized as a higher-level trait in hierarchical models of personality, influenced by lower-level dispositional characteristics (Mcadams, 1996). It is plausible that the small dispositional effects on low emotional reactivity and abstract moral relativism may contribute to a larger observed effect using the higher-level trait of primary psychopathy, which is related to several of these dispositions.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of our study is the correlational nature of the design, because it does not isolate causation or rule out potential confounding variables. In the regression analyses, we were able to partial out the variance due to known demographic factors, but the causal nature of these relationships cannot be inferred. The effect sizes were small, perhaps due to the large amount of shared variance among the demographic factors, political orientation, and the personality variables used. This may have also resulted from the restricted range of our sample, which included only self-identified Democrats. Another limitation is that while Internet samples are generally more representative than traditional student samples (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004), our sample was not representative of Democratic primary voters or Democrats in general; for instance, the participants were disproportionately white and well-educated. Most of our participants were readers of political or science news articles that linked to our website, so conclusions may be specific to this politically engaged population (72% reported being "very much interested" in politics). This political engagement makes it likely that our sample was generally aware of common media portrayals of the candidates and that they were aware of the similarities between the two candidates' political opinions. However, it is possible that this engaged population was able to focus on the few actual policy differences that existed between the candidates, such as Clinton's support for a gas tax holiday during the campaign, and that measured personality differences interact with these policy preferences.[2] This election provided a unique opportunity to "control" for policy differences using real-world candidates with very similar policy proposals, but future experimental research using fictitious candidates that vary solely on nonpolicy issues would help rule out this confound.

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[2] Comparisons of participants who were "somewhat interested" and "very much interested" in politics yielded directionally similar results, indicating that it is less likely that the ability to focus on policy differences is driving results. The exception was MFQ-Ingroup, for which the effect was driven by "very much interested" participants.

Conclusion

Across a number of scales, a pattern emerged in which favorability toward Obama was associated with a more emotional, idealistic, and individualistic personality, while favorability toward Clinton indicated a more rational, pragmatic, and group-oriented personality. Taken as a whole, the pattern of results from these scales offers a set of personality characteristics that match well with what has been reported in the press about these candidates during this election cycle. This finding fits well with a long-standing finding that similarity breeds liking (Byrne, 1997) and recent work on voter–politician congruency (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). This finding extends the literature on congruency to predicting candidate preference within a party and between candidates with minimal policy differences. It is unclear whether this is an explicit or implicit process, but just as with race and gender, voters were seemingly drawn to the candidate who matched them on personality and values. In the absence of clear policy differences, voters who were more emotionally cool preferred the more emotionally cool candidate, while those who were more empathic preferred the more emotionally connected candidate. Voters who were more group oriented preferred the candidate who was portrayed as a better group member, while those who were less group oriented preferred the candidate who was more of an outsider. Pragmatic voters preferred the pragmatic candidate. Notably, the moral and personality scales predicted candidate preference even when controlling for age, gender, education, and political ideology. Voters will continue to vote for candidates they identify with based on demographics, and any poll of a representative sample of the population will continue to have to model the population of likely voters based on these demographics. However, demographics do not tell the entire story, and as political polls become more common and sophisticated, the best political polls may eventually seek to collect information on the personalities and moral intuitions of voters as well.

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