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The O'Reilly factor: An ideological bias in judgments about sexual harassment

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ABSTRACT

Liberals and conservatives are known to differ in the extent to which they prioritize moral concerns about harm, justice, and particularly, in-group loyalty. Accordingly, here we evaluate ideological differences in the context of an important societal issue: sexual harassment. In a national US sample ($N = 1000$) participants were asked how big of a problem sexual harassment is in the United States and, following random assignment to one of two conditions, whether they think a prominent liberal (Harvey Weinstein, $n = 500$) or conservative (Bill O'Reilly, $n = 500$) should go to jail following sexual harassment accusations. Main results reveal two clear findings; 1) conservatives are generally less concerned about sexual harassment in society and 2) while the probability of condemning Weinstein or O'Reilly was about equal among liberals, conservatives were significantly and substantially more likely to condemn the out-group (Weinstein) than they were to condemn their own in-group (O'Reilly). These findings uncover an important ideological asymmetry in judgments about sexual harassment.

1. Introduction

On October 5, 2017, the *New York Times* released a major news story that implicated U.S. film producer Harvey Weinstein in a large number of sexual harassment cases (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). In the same article, other high-profile individuals who have been involved in multi-million dollar payouts as a result of sexual harassment accusations were also discussed, including conservative media icon Bill O'Reilly. Almost instantly, these developments kindled widespread controversy as well as national debates about sexual misconduct in the workplace, and, within a week, public opinion polls showed that over 85% of Americans had heard about the Weinstein and O'Reilly cases (HuffPost/YouGov, 2017a, 2017b). Many more victims of sexual abuse began to speak out publicly (known as the "Weinstein effect"), triggering the start of the viral #MeToo campaign, which quickly turned into a global phenomenon (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018).

Interestingly, little to no psychological research has been conducted on how the public has responded to these events. Given the strong social, moral, and political implications that surround sexual harassment, motivational biases are likely to drive moral judgments of a) how severe the problem is and b) the extent to which (legal) punishment and reform is needed. In fact, although people generally favor members of their own in-group (Tajfel, 1981), important ideological asymmetries are likely to exist, especially in the context of divisive moral dilemmas,

such as sexual harassment. For example, a large literature describes persistent and important psychological differences between liberals and conservatives (e.g. Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2013; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, 2017; Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, & Hardin, 2018). In particular, moral foundations theory has been used to explain "culture wars" on a variety of hot button issues, including immigration and abortion (Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Of particular interest is the finding that conservatives and liberals rely on different moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Moral foundations theory explains these differences through the way in which conservatives and liberals prioritize *individualizing* values (harm/fairness)—which focus on equality, justice, and protecting individual rights—vs. *binding* foundations (in-group loyalty, authority, and purity). Specifically, whereas liberals care primarily about fairness and avoiding harm (social justice concerns)—values that are particularly salient in the context of sexual harassment and reform—conservatives are more likely to display unconditional loyalty to one's in-group, engage in system justification, and show much greater opposition to social justice and change (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014; Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2018). Importantly, while strong "binding" foundations can also elicit protection, this is mostly restricted to the in-group, often at the expense of derogating the out-group (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Smith, Aquino, Koleva, &

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Graham, 2014).

Accordingly, because harm, fairness, and justice concerns take priority for liberals, we expect that liberals will be more concerned about sexual harassment than conservatives. In addition, because conservatives attach greater value to in-group loyalty, we expect that conservatives will show an in-group favoritism bias where, although less concerned, they would punish a liberal (out-group) offender more than a comparable conservative (in-group) offender. To test these hypotheses, we randomly assigned participants in a national U.S. sample to read a statement and make several moral judgments about either a well-known conservative (Bill O'Reilly) or liberal (Harvey Weinstein) celebrity who has been accused of sexual harassment.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

We designed a national, online survey experiment shortly after (October 25, 2017) the release of the Weinstein article in the *New York Times*. To implement our study, we obtained a national quota sample of the U.S. population (N = 1000) from YouGov, a large and established market research firm that maintains an online panel of about 2 million adults in the United States (YouGov, 2018). Standard sampling quotas were used to match our sample to the U.S. population, including gender (51% female), age (M = 48, SD = 17, min = 18, max = 89), race (67% white, 13% Black, 14% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 4% other/mixed) and education level (5% no high school, 35% high school graduate, 60% some college or higher). Party ID was distributed as follows: Democrat (37%), Independent (36%), and Republican (26%). Political ideology was measured on a standard 5-point scale (1 = very liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = moderate, 4 = conservative, 5 = very conservative, M = 3.04, SD = 1.18).

In the experiment, all participants were first exposed to the following statement; "Sexual harassment in the workplace, or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or conduct of a sexual nature that makes someone feel offended, humiliated or intimidated, is a form of sex discrimination and is illegal in the United States".[1] This was followed by random assignment (n = 500) of the perpetrator and their respective ideology: "As you may know [Bill O'Reilly, a prominent conservative/Harvey Weinstein, a prominent liberal] recently lost his job at [Fox News/the Weinstein Company] as a result of allegations of sexual harassment." We explicitly mentioned the ideological orientation of both Weinstein and O'Reilly so that regardless of an individual's level of familiarity, they could still deduce in-group vs. out-group affiliations. We subsequently elicited moral judgments about whether either candidate should go to jail. To evaluate whether both groups were balanced on important sociodemographic characteristics, we conducted an experimental balance test. A logistic regression revealed that experimental assignment was random: none of the covariates (e.g. gender, age, party ID) predicted experimental assignment, LR (8) = 2.76, p = 0.95.

2.2. Measures

For our outcome measures, participants were asked to make two moral judgments about a) the severity of sexual harassment as a societal problem in the U.S. and b) potential punishment. To assess the former, we asked participants: "How big of an issue do you believe sexual harassment is currently in the United States?" Response options ranged from 1 = not very serious to 10 = very serious (M = 7.23, SD = 2.63). To assess the latter, we asked: "If the allegations of sexual harassment are proven to be true, do you believe [Bill O'Reilly/Harvey Weinstein]

should go to jail?" Response options included: yes (64%), no (14%), don't know (22%). Lastly, we asked participants about their personal experiences (yes/no), including whether they themselves had been sexually harassed in the workplace (yes = 19%) or had witnessed (16%) or known a friend, family member, or colleague (14%) who had been sexually harassed.[2]

3. Results

Overall, a large majority of the sample (75%) believe that sexual harassment is a somewhat to very serious issue, but, consistent with our hypothesis, this figure masks substantial ideological heterogeneity. On average, liberals believe that sexual harassment is a significantly bigger problem in the U.S. compared to conservatives (M_{lib} = 8.28, SD = 2.03 vs. M_{cons} = 6.13, SD = 2.87, $t(562)$ = 10.15, p < 0.001, d = 0.86, 95%CI; 0.68, 1.03), but we observe no differences in severity rating across treatment conditions (M_{diff} = 0.03, p = 0.86). Next we analyze subjects' views about punishing the perpetrators. Among respondents who did not think either of the accused figures should go to jail (n = 125), conservatives make up the majority (49%) followed by moderates (37%) and liberals (14%), $\chi_{(1)}$ = 26.84, p < 0.001.[3] To evaluate the likelihood that a respondent would say that either Weinstein or O'Reilly should go to jail if the allegations were true, we ran a logistic regression with prescriptive "jail" judgments (yes/no) as the dependent variable and experimental condition (O'Reilly/Weinstein) and ideology as independent variables (Table 1). There was a significant main effect (model 1, Table 1) of condition so that the odds of stating that the alleged perpetrators should go to jail increases by 311% (OR = 4.11) if subjects were assigned to the Weinstein (vs. O'Reilly) condition. If the respondent was conservative, this reduced the odds of prescribing jail time in general by 80% (OR = 0.20). Importantly, this main effect masked strong ideological heterogeneity, as indicated by a significant and substantial interaction effect (Model 2, Table 1) so that if the respondent was conservative *and* assigned to the Weinstein condition, this increased the likelihood of jail judgments by 434% (OR = 5.34).

As illustrated further in Fig. 1, for liberals, the marginal probability of answering "yes" to the jail punishment question was very similar at 90% [95% CI; 0.84, 0.96] for O'Reilly versus 94% [95% CI; 0.89, 0.98] for Weinstein (Fig. 1). On the other hand, conservatives were ambivalent about their in-group with a probability of deserving jail time of only 50% [95% CI; 0.40, 0.60] for O'Reilly versus 90% for Weinstein [95% CI; 0.85, 0.95]. Model 3 (Table 1) illustrates the robustness of this interaction effect when adjusting for covariates, including gender (OR = 1.97), age (OR = 1.01), race (OR = 1.76), education (OR = 1.16), political interest (OR = 1.29) and whether the participant reported having been personally harassed (OR = 1.08).

4. Discussion

We hypothesized that, in the wake of mounting claims over sexual harassment, liberals and conservatives are likely to display different moral judgments on the issue. Results support our hypotheses. In particular, although it is well-established that people generally favor members of their own in-group (Rand et al., 2009; Tajfel, 1981), the unique moral context of the current research illustrates an important ideological asymmetry in this basic tendency. One on hand, results indicate that conservatives are substantially less concerned about sexual harassment as a broad societal issue. While we did not probe the motivations behind this finding, this could be explained by an

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[1] This statement is based on the U.S. government's official definition of sexual harassment: https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/fs-sex.cfm

[2] Reporting on one's own experiences may differ from reporting on others', which may affect the results of the study.

[3] We recoded political ideology into three categories (liberal, moderate, conservative).

Table 1
Logistic regression model of prescriptive moral judgments.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
"Should go to Jail"	Odds	95% C.I.	Odds	95% C.I.	Odds	95% C.I.
Condition (Weinstein)	4.11***	2.66, 6.35	1.68	0.63, 4.52	1.72	0.63, 4.68
Ideology (conservative)	0.20***	0.11, 0.36	0.11***	0.11, 0.15	0.10***	0.05, 0.23
Condition * Ideology	–	–	5.34**	1.59, 17.90	6.12**	1.78, 21.0
Gender (female)	–	–	–	–	1.97**	1.24, 3.10
Age	–	–	–	–	1.01	0.99, 1.02
Race (non-white)	–	–	–	–	1.76*	1.07, 2.87
Education	–	–	–	–	1.16	0.99, 1.35
Harassed (yes)	–	–	–	–	1.08	0.60, 1.91
Political interest	–	–	–	–	1.29*	1.01, 1.64

Note: Coefficients are odds ratios.
*** $p < 0.001$.
** $p < 0.01$.
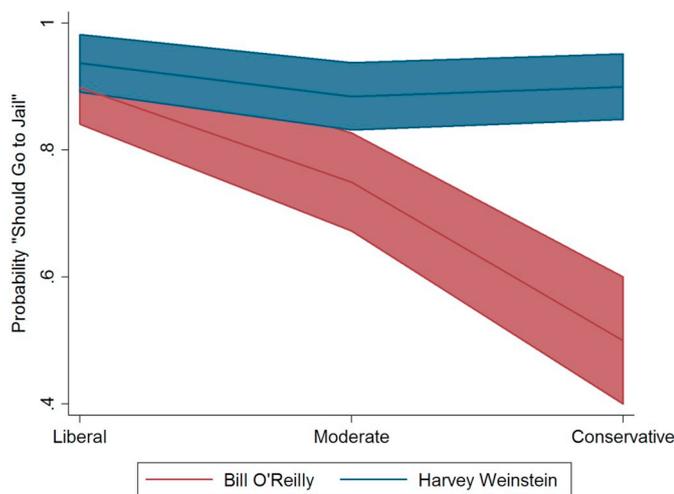* $p < 0.05$. $N = 704$ (excludes "don't know").

Fig. 1. Marginal probabilities of the interaction between experimental condition and political ideology. Bands represent 95% confidence intervals.

underlying desire to maintain and defend the status quo, as conservatives are known to load higher on system justification (Jost et al., 2003). In particular, however, we argued that because liberals and conservatives rely on different moral foundations, liberals would prioritize fairness and harm (social justice) over in-group loyalty whereas the reverse would be true for conservatives. This is especially salient in the current context, given that sexual harassment judgments are known to diverge more if they involve a classic power differential where a higher-ranking perpetrator harasses a lower ranking employee (Blumenthal, 1998). Importantly, these findings are consistent with other research, which suggests that the predominant concern with in-group loyalty among conservatives is associated with a higher preference for authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and lower societal concern for harassment and discrimination (Altemeyer, 1998; Kugler, Jost, & Noorbaloochi, 2014). In terms of limitations, an alternative explanation for these findings could be that the media attention around the Weinstein case was perceived as more severe. However, this does not explain why the probability of morally condemning Weinstein or O'Reilly was equal among liberals, whereas conservatives were much more favorable toward O'Reilly but strongly condemned Weinstein. Instead of administering the MFQ (Graham et al., 2009), we chose to conduct a randomized experiment in which participants made judgments about a real and topical, high-stakes moral issue. As such, our research improves upon prior work by using experimental and national rather than student or convenience samples and by examining in-group

loyalty in the context of *immoral* rather than morally desirable behavior (Kugler et al., 2014).

Anecdotal examples of the asymmetry in moral judgments we have uncovered here are not difficult to find. For example, public polls show that a majority of Republicans continued to support O'Reilly—but not Weinstein—despite the accusations (Peck & Edwards-Levy, 2017). A similar pattern emerged during the controversy over the sexual harassment allegations levied against Brett Kavanaugh during the congressional hearings in the U.S. Senate to confirm his appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court in the fall of 2018. Opinion surveys revealed support diverged sharply among Democrats and Republicans, with 80% of Democrats opposing the confirmation while 77% of Republicans remained supportive (Frankovic, 2018).

Unfortunately, sexual harassment has traditionally suffered from a lack of social consensus about what constitutes "harassment" (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). As such, these notable partisan differences in judgments of how severe the problem is and who should be punished hampers public consensus building to address the important problem of sexual harassment in society. We encourage future research to address these important challenges.

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