

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WOKE

EVANGELICALS, SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIORS, AND THE MORALIZATION OF U.S. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

KIRSTEN ADAMS

HUSSMAN SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM & MEDIA

OVERVIEW & RESEARCH GOALS

- » Makes a theoretical argument for a communication approach to the study of morality in political discourse
- » Develops an analytical framework for the (social scientific) study of moral language in political communication research
- » Examines moral claims at work by two central elite groups in American politics – partisan media and politicians – in three empirical cases, each in the context of the 2020 U.S. election
- » Analyze how the U.S. political left and right advance rival moral claims and potentially "sort" partisans along moral lines

DATA & METHODS

(currently in data collection)

- » Digital partisan media, 2019-2020
 - Left sources: Vox, Huffington Post, Mother Jones, Daily Kos, CNN, MSNBC, Occupy Democrats
 - Right sources: Breitbart, Daily Caller, Washington Examiner, New York Post, Fox News
 - Legacy op-eds: NYT, WSJ, WaPo, USA Today, Guardian
- » Cable TV transcripts (Fox, CNN, MSNBC), 2019-2020
- » Campaigners' digital & social media (Twitter, Facebook, campaign emails), 2019-2020
- » Campaigners' public communication (rallies, town halls, debates), 2019-2020

Inductive qualitative analysis of 2020 U.S. election data for three empirical cases



Develop and validate "manually validated organic dictionaries" for content analyses



Full-scale computational content analyses of moral claims



Inductive qualitative analysis of patterns identified in quantitative analyses

By studying how moral claims arise in a variety of contexts throughout an electoral campaign, advanced by campaigners themselves and amplified in partisan media and political commentary, I shed light on what it means to have moral discourse embedded in political life.

How political actors apply moral claims—particularly along partisan lines—has important consequences for how these groups "morally sort" themselves and draw rhetorical moral boundaries around unacceptable ideas, policies, actions, and individuals.

Central to this research is a question imperative to understanding our current political moment: **If all political claims become moral claims, how can citizens deliberate over fundamentally different understandings of what is moral?**

CASE 1: MORAL CLAIMS & THE "SPACE OF OPINION"

Examines moral claims within the contemporary space of partisan media and political commentary

Research Questions & Goals

- » To what extent are these forms of language present within explicitly partisan media as well as in mainstream op-eds, and how does this content differ (or remain the same) along partisan lines?
- » To what extent does moralized language of partisan media content bleed into "hard news" content from the same sources?

CASE 2: MORAL CLAIMS & POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Turns to political campaigners themselves, examining moral campaign appeals by U.S. presidential and congressional candidates

Research Questions & Goals

- » What moral discourse enters the public sphere when it comes to political candidates contesting office?
- » To what extent do campaigners deliberately apply moral claims, and how does this differ along partisan lines?
- » Examine the identity basis of these moral campaign appeals (e.g., claims centered around in-group moral appeals or out-group moral criticism)

CASE 3: MORAL CLAIMS & POLITICAL ISSUES

Examines the presence of moral claims across public debates around a series of polarizing political issues

Research Questions & Goals

- » How and to what extent are political issues not traditionally understood by political scientists to be "moral" issues embraced as such by political actors?
- » Examine the overall presence of moral claims across discourse on each issue, the forms of moral appeals that are used, and how these differ along partisan lines