

## **Policing the Perimeter: Disgust and Purity in Democratic Debate**

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Abstract: We seek to explicate the precise role that one specific emotion, disgust, plays in generating political acrimony. We do so by identifying the link between the different dimensions along which moral judgments are made by those espousing different political ideologies and the different emotions which undergird these evaluations. These assessments reliably track along liberal and conservative dimensions, are linked to the way in which values associated with purity and sanctity elicit greater degrees of disgust among conservatives. . Here we review a growing literature showing how disgust affects the psychology of politics through its influence on the cognitive and emotional processes which govern judgments of morality, as well as its direct impact on specific policy preferences. We then apply these findings to the nature and tenor of political discourse, and suggest some of the ways that disgust might affect the character and function of democratic debate and tolerance. Finally, we discuss what these findings might mean for public policy.

Keywords: Disgust; ideology; disgust; emotion; liberal; conservative; public policy

Some years ago in a former career, one of the authors was a third party arbiter and consultant, brought in to ensure that two companies would successfully merge. The most detailed and painful parts of this particular merger involved negotiations between the chief operating officers, tasked with the grueling and painstaking process of decommissioning one of the manufacturing divisions, and rolling critical staff from one division into another. The end results extinguished a good part of the hard work, visions and dreams of the executives on both sides, forcing these two individuals to renege on promises each had made to those they cared about. In addition, their actions would put a lot of people out of work, likely wrecking havoc on already stressed families. The entire negotiation was one of relative losses, for every point conceded by one extracted both a personal and professional cost to the other. Yet, the three participants went through this process every day, oftentimes for 16 hours or more at a time, with humility, passion, frustration, anger, and at times, shame, but always with mutual respect. Over the weeks, the two executives became friends and held each other in high regard, while compromising and giving ground on just about everything else each held dear. When the negotiation was settled and the terms agreed, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. As the conversation finally moved away from the painful topic at hand, and toward more mundane matters, the three protagonists sat in the executive suite where several large screen TV's had a news story running on a controversial referendum on immigration. As both executives watched, "small" talk turned to politics. Within minutes, all they had worked for over the weeks was thrown out the door. These two intelligent, well educated and reasonable people who had sacrificed all they held most dear to achieve their mutually agreed upon goal, and discussed the most difficult of topics with opposing agendas and views with grace, proving able to sustain an informative, constructive and positive conversation over many weeks, even when considering

tremendous personal losses, instantaneously lost all respect for one another over a television report on immigration. At the time, it would be impossible to aptly describe the way they looked at one another, except to say they viewed one another with disbelief, confusion, ire and disgust.

How is it that two equally intelligent, educated, and reasonable people can discuss almost any topic with divergent views in a positive, constructive manner, but once the talk turns to politics (or religion), a simple conversation degenerates into one of frustration and mutual resentment? In this situation, two people who had just engaged in a highest of stakes intellectual fencing match now, due to opposing political opinions, looked at one another as if the other were simply crazy or stupid for believing what they did about immigration.

We are all familiar with slightly similar occurrences in our own lives, watching two people talk around and past each other when it comes to politics. Indeed, such antagonism is also commonly found on the floor of Congress. In announcing his decision not to seek re-election, Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana cited as his reason that congress was driven by “too much narrow ideology and not enough practical problem solving.”<sup>1</sup> Those who have equated Obama with Hitler, or universal health care to Stalinist Communism and Nazi Germany<sup>2</sup> (see Milbank 2009), or called progressivism a “cancer”<sup>3</sup> obviously seek to incite by invoking such a dramatic and emotional comparison. Policy debates on such complex and important topics as health care take on the characteristics of hostile theatre, with many accusations involving analogies to physical assault and violations of the body envelope; common renderings describe health care reform as

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Klein, Jonathan Karl and Human Khan, Feb 15, 2010, “Democratic Senator Evan Bayh Retiring: ‘I Do Not Love Congress.’ ABC World News Tonight. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/indiana-democratic-senator-evan-bayh-announces-retirement/story?id=9841970>

<sup>2</sup> At Bachman’s press conference on health care at the Capitol, Nov. 5, 2009, 5-by-8-foot banners read “National Socialist Health Care: Dachau, Germany – 1945”.

<sup>3</sup> Glenn Beck referring to progressivism as a “cancer eating away are the Constitution”: <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/37061/>

being “rammed down the throat of the American public” for instance.<sup>4</sup> Political elites, those who are ostensibly the most “sophisticated” lead the way. Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) went so far as to intimate that the Democrats somehow caused the swine flu.<sup>5</sup> In a rally inspired by her, demonstrators covered themselves in fake blood and carried “dolls representing aborted fetuses, as the Grim Reaper led them in chains to hell” (Milbank 2009).

Academics, policy makers, pundits, and members of the interested body politic have long struggled with the question of how people exposed to the same political information react so differently in response to it. How is it that people gazing at each other across a political divide often cannot even have a conversation about their disagreements in a productive manner? Why is there so much acrimony? Authors as long ago as Hobbes (1660/2009) recognized that disagreement can lead to shouting, and how such behavior can make it difficult for parties to engage in reasoned debate, or to keep negotiation civil, and how war might erupt when such diplomatic arguments fail. Yet since that time, we seem to have made little progress in learning how to overcome such division. Why does this occur? What does visceral hostility across the political divide mean for the nature of democratic debate and the ability to reach effective compromise on emotionally evocative issues? Do emotionally hostile interpersonal exchanges in the Senate, for example, affect the kinds of agreements that can be reached, or indeed the likelihood for resolution of certain hot button issues at all? Why is it that policy exchanges become especially emotionally charged on social issues, particularly those that have to do with the physical body, but rarely is such hostility seen for economic issues? Political hostility is not new; indeed, both sides of the aisle accuse each other of “ramming bills down my throat.” But

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<sup>4</sup> At least 11 recent citations in the press and talk shows to this phrase can be found in links from: [http://www.modelmayhem.com/po.php?thread\\_id=548707&page=1](http://www.modelmayhem.com/po.php?thread_id=548707&page=1).

<sup>5</sup> “I find it interesting that it was back in the 1970s that the swine flu broke out then under another Democrat president Jimmy Carter.”

the questions why these conflicts arise particularly in certain areas by not in others. Why do particular social questions evoke instantly visceral responses whereas economic issues rarely catapult such reactions? And what might these gut feelings mean for the nature of democratic debate and compromise?

We believe these issues have been largely overlooked, because the focus has remained on either the influence of emotion on the opinions of the mass public (Brader 2006; Marcus et al. 2000; Marcus 2002; Neumann et al. 2007; Lupia and Menning 2009) or on the substantive nature of differences in policy position independent of emotional charge. But while it is well understood that emotion is important to the nature of such debates, it has proved challenging for scholars to capture the essence of its influence on public policy debates. Most of the extant literature has argued that anxiety, enthusiasm and aversion represent the emotions which drive partisans' reactions to political topics (Marcus et al., 2000). The influence of other emotions to affect prospects for reasoned discourse over hot button political topics has been less widely explored (for a notable exception, see Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Indeed, one emotion, which has gone largely unnoticed in political science, offers reason to renew the goal of exploring the impact of emotion on the nature of political discourse: the emotion of disgust.

If reasoned deliberation is supposed to serve as the foundation for a liberal democracy, what prospects for compromise exist if there are areas where debate in and of itself actually makes it more difficult for individuals to listen to one another? An ability to bargain and negotiate across interests provides a basis for healthy democracy, and obstacles to rational discourse challenge this promise.

Below we provide a brief discussion of how emotion in general can influence political perceptions, followed by a more specific overview of the way in which disgust might trigger the

value judgments which undergird policy preferences; we follow with a more thorough elucidation of the specific emotion of disgust. The following section describes how disgust affects the psychology of politics, through its influence on the cognitive and emotional processes which govern judgments of morality, as well as its direct impact on specific policy preferences. Finally, we suggest some of the ways that disgust might affect the nature and function of democratic debate and tolerance, and what these findings might mean for public policy. In seeking to explain how recent developments in psychology and neuroscience regarding the nature of disgust can inform political science, we hope to illuminate the way in which issues of sanctity and purity fuel particular acrimony along the liberal-conservative divide.

### **Emotion and the Structure of Political Meaning**

Emotion has long been known to influence behavior and decision making through its powerful effect on thoughts, behavior, motivation and attachment. However, the nature of political debate has increasingly centered on one emotion, disgust, which has been largely absent in the scholarly literature on the nature of the political debate.

Instead, most of the emotion and political behavior scholarship has largely focused on the prediction of ideology or attitudes of the mass publics (Marcus et al., 2000; Neumann et al., 2007). However, early as well as recent debates in the political science literature have focused on whether general valence theories of affect adequately characterized political activation and discourse, or whether more discrete models of emotion would prove more accurate (e.g., Neumann et al. 2007; Petersen et al., 2010). We suggest that this debate is not trivial; rather, the specific nature of the emotion explored holds tremendous import for the political and institutional consequences we explore.

Various emotions exert important but potentially different public policy consequences because different emotions influence the interpersonal nature of how people work together in a democracy in different ways. Since more than one emotion exists, different emotions can pull in different directions, or may exert their influence in one area of public policy and not in others, or become differentially activated in the face of particular triggers. Anger exerts a different effect than fear, for example (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), encouraging more optimistic assessments of future outcomes and more top-down decision making strategies. As a result, the effect of anger on public policy may be quite different when contemplating war than when assessing prospects for health care reform.

Indeed, certain emotions such as fear or anger seem to have a lot more to do with the specifics of political attitudes and preferences, while other emotions such as disgust may affect other domains of evaluation disproportionately. Disgust appears to primarily affect how we perceive and understand the nature of morality. In this way, particular issues may prime specific emotions; for example, talk of war may heighten the sense of fear or anger among certain individuals, while discussions of gay marriage may trigger disgust among others. However, this same topic may simultaneously trigger other specific emotions, such as happiness, among other members of society. In this way, the same topic can generate vastly different emotional responses, and thus entrain entirely divergent decision making strategies, depending on a myriad of personal, biological and environmental factors in an individual's personal history.

In the past, emotion has typically been explored within the realms best suited to analyze the topics of greatest substantive interest to scholars, such as vote choice, and this work has provided important insights in these areas (Brader, 2006; Marcus et al., 2000; Neumann et al., 2007). This research has proved critically important for understanding policy positions, but has

not enlightened the underlying nature of the public policy making process itself, or illuminated how certain topics trigger variant emotions among different members of the populace, which in turn shape perception, stimulate reactions and structure responses accordingly. Yet such factors strongly influence the interpersonal aspects of political negotiation and disagreement, including processes of communication, group affiliation, and the ways in which personal feelings and relationships influence the interpretation of political meaning.

Until recently, the mechanism for explaining underlying emotional differences in the psychology of morality did not exist in the academic literature, but now we have indicators that such a motivator lies in the emotion of disgust in particular. Disgust has emerged as a critical force distinguishing conservatives and liberals in its elicitation, interpretation and influence (Haidt and Graham 2007). Experiences of disgust dramatically affect the dimensions along which individuals assess moral values. In fact, it encompasses the cognitive, emotional and physical properties that are predictably divergent across ideological positions and infuses evaluations of morality along dimensions of purity and sanctity in conservatives but not in liberals. In its most recent instantiation in the hard sciences, a great deal of attention has been placed on this emotion (Haidt and Graham 2007, Haidt et al. 1997); indeed, disgust has received widespread attention for its importance in structuring ideology, morality, and political preferences (Inbar, Pizzaro and Bloom 2008; Inbar et al 2009; Inbar and Pizzaro 2009).

In the past, scholarly attention to the origins of political division primarily concentrated on individual differences in policy preferences. Some may argue that political divides reflect power differentials, and we do not suggest otherwise. However, it is not just that political opponents may not start off on level playing fields. Rather, we suggest they may be playing entirely different games on the same field; one team may be playing soccer while the other is

playing baseball, and yet both are on the same field believing they are playing the same game but the “other side” is the one failing to play by the “rules” of the game. The sense that the other side is cheating, or playing dirty, incites aversion on both sides. Unfortunately, neither side realizes that although they are playing side by side on the same field, each side is actually playing a very different game with very different rules, goals and values. Each side remains unaware of the other side’s equal lack of awareness, like a hall of mirrors in which each side, seeing only their own reflection, experiences the images as though they were realistic representations of the other.

Such differences often fuel the already hostile nature of contentious political issues. Personal and antagonistic rhetoric clearly signals frustration on all sides of the debate. However, the consistent use of visceral, often physical, terms for signaling displeasure has largely gone unnoticed in explaining the division among ideologues. Yet this language and imagery does not emerge by accident. Rather, it occurs precisely because people use the emotion of disgust to signal rejection in the face of objects, events and people they consider objectionable or contaminated. Invoking associations and triggers associated with disgusting things in a political context provides a kind of shorthand communication strategy to inform allies that allowing particular thoughts or people or policies into one’s life can lead to unknown negative consequences, much like infection can lead to disease, which, once it takes hold, can threaten the life of its victim. How is it that some people see illness in the same place others discover cure? Indeed, just as some people fear botulism from improperly canned food, while others seek out injecting it to hold the signs of aging artificially at bay, some see abortion as abomination while others view it as a sometimes necessary requirement.

The fact that individuals may be less influenced by the rational calculations of cost and benefit which economists often rely on to predict decision making than other normative or emotional factors hardly constitutes a novel recognition (Marcus et al., 1995, Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). However, the specific nature of the mechanisms which drive these alternative forces have not always been fully explicated. We suggest these issues can receive new illumination in light of recent work in neuroscience and psychology which highlights the links between moral judgment and emotion in general and concerns about purity and disgust in particular. Previous work on emotion in politics has tended to focus on either the influence of emotion on the opinions of the mass public (Brader 2006; Marcus et al. 2000; Marcus 2002; Neumann et al. 2007; Lupia and Menning 2009) or on the substantive nature of differences in policy position independent of emotional charge.

Here we seek to offer the beginning of a resolution to the challenge of explaining how and why people come to play different political games by introducing evidence that people literally interpret the same information differently, and evaluate policies, people and actions using different dimensions of values, assigning different psychological weights to the value of purity which, in turn elicit different degrees of disgust. Personal disgust then launches a series of physiological and cognitive mechanisms which operate to distance the disgusting object from the recipient. These psychological propensities operate to keep potentially harmful objects and individuals from potentially contaminating the disgusted person. These strategies, designed to keep the observer safe from injury, work to increase resistance, acrimony and intolerance toward the offensive object or person. Although there has been quite a bit of important work exploring the links between democracy and disgust, especially in the domain of political theory (Sabl, 2002; Brown, 1993; Thiele, 2006; Noval, 2008; Krause, 2008; Hancock, 2004) there has been

very little discussion of the relationship between moral judgments, emotion and substantive political decision making.

### **Disgust in the the Study of Politics**

While such findings have been widely circulated in high profile science publications, research on disgust has found less purchase in our own discipline. Smith et al. (2009) provide a critical exception, having introduced recent research on this concept to the political science audience in a substantive way. Marcus (2002) addresses how disgust may help shape democratic politics and McKuen et al. (2010) provide an empirical discussion of how the larger phenomenon of aversion plays a role in their larger theory of affective intelligence. However, in each of these constructs, disgust constitutes one aspect of a larger posited affective state they label aversion. Along with anxiety and enthusiasm, aversion represents one of the affective states which can drive and influence political choice and action. However, to return to the issue of discrete versus more general aspects of emotion, aversion can also encompass emotional states such as anger, which we understand to embody a quite distinct affective state from disgust. In order to explore the manifestation, operation and functioning of disgust more specifically in terms of its impact on the nature of public discourse, we concentrate here on disgust, not aversion, and thus the important literature on affective intelligence does not speak to our broader point directly.

In addition, importantly, any model which locates the source of political preference and action in a single affective state, however powerful, risks underestimating the complexity of the interactive process which drives outcomes of interest. Personality traits may have enduring influence over time, but transient emotional states, such as anger or disgust, while often anchored in a particular ideology or personality trait, nonetheless constantly interact with other, and often divergent, emotional states so that various processes remain concurrently operative. While the

ultimate goal would be to explore the political conditions under which disgust is dominant, and the environmental forces which weaken or strengthen its influence, our initial purpose is to introduce its importance in helping to lay a critically important physiological and psychological foundation for ideological divergence. We celebrate those authors who have begun to interrogate specific moral emotions in political context (Petersen, 2010), and here we contribute to that discussion by concentrating specifically on the influence of disgust on political ideology and democratic discourse.

Existing scholarship on disgust, the vast majority of which has taken place outside of the political science literature, has focused on its ability to predict political differences across left – right dimensions. But this focus on whether or not disgust affects such variance presents a very narrow focus. We suggest that such difference delves much deeper than mere differences along a simple political continuum. Indeed, in this regard, it can prove helpful to conceptualize ideology along a more two-dimensional space, characterizing economic and cultural issues along separate dimensions (Kriesi, 2009). Disgust prompts people to literally think, and evaluate, along different dimensions within any given issue; it triggers different cognitive mechanisms of evaluation so that people view and interpret the very same information differently (Gray et al., 1997; Moll et al 2005); they focus on different preferences in its presence than in its absence. Moll et al. (2005) found that areas of the prefrontal and orbital frontal brain regions appear critical in rendering moral judgments and making automatic assessment of morality with regard to social events. Research employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) located the origin of disgust in the anterior insular cortex (Phillips, 1997). There is some indication that the basal ganglia may be implicated in disgust as well (Gray et al., 1997). In fact, disgust provides an exceptionally powerful foundation upon which acrimony in debate escalates. Given the same

information, people who experience disgust see things differently than those who do not (Phillips et al 2007). This phenomena does not result from different preferences, or derive from diverse childhood socialization, but rather represents a truly inherent difference in psycho-physiological experience that simply. These physiological differences are similar to those reported by Oxley et al (2008) in their study showing that conservatives demonstrated a greater physiological response to threat than liberals, while leaving open the question of whether ideology or physiology leads the charge. In other words, different emotional elicitations, whether anxiety or disgust, entrain more than a simple difference on a political left-right ideological dimension. In this sense, we are seeking to reach past whether disgust predicts such differences, but rather point to a much larger and deeper underlying latent cognitive-emotive information and categorization process, whereby different individuals literally see the world differently, and evaluate input along different dimensions; in turn, such mechanisms have critical implications for political discourse, and for the evaluation of political “others” (Kristeva, 1982).

We do not claim that disgust represents the only emotion worth investigating for its impact on political outcomes of interest. However, disgust as an emotion remains critical for explicating the relevant *processes* involved in *political debate*. More fully examining the nature of disgust can also illuminate the dynamics and consequences of public discourse, deliberation and representation to break down the behavioral implications of these findings within an interpersonal context. As individuals model and replicate particular predispositions, so too do leaders; these attitudes can be reflected in the actions of states as well. In this way, we can begin to understand more broadly how emotion fits into our political decision making strategies and responses to those with opposite views.

We summarize the findings on disgust below, and argue that disgust emerges as a critical emotion for understanding the nature and character of democratic debate because it is the discrete affective state which most directly ties into the moral dimensions upon which people evaluate others' attitudes, preferences and behaviors. After providing an overview of the nature of disgust, we then discuss the ways in which this emotion interacts in important ways with political ideology. In so doing, we argue that it is not the case that conservatives are heartless or that liberals are sexually indiscriminate, but rather suggest that the nature of the relationship between political ideology and morality remains more subtle and nuanced. If political opponents strive to overcome pernicious divides characterized by internecine fractures, greater transparency in understanding the foundations of each other's judgments can only further aid the cause of reconciliation across such chasms.

### **The Emotion of Disgust**

Traditionally overlooked as an important emotion for understanding the nature of social behavior, disgust originally constituted one of Darwin's six basic emotions. It possesses cross-cultural recognition in signature facial expression (Curtis et al., 2001; Ekman and Freisen 1977) patterned by a wrinkling of the nose and a downturning of the mouth, as well as physiological correlates, including lowered blood pressure and sympathetic nervous system activation (for a review see Smith et al 2009). The definitive behavioral response involves stopping or ceasing any approach toward the object eliciting disgust (Haidt et al. 1997).

Most of the factors that elicit disgust seem to coalesce around a few broad categories. Curtis et al. (2001) identifies five basic categories which include: bodily excretions; decaying and spoiled food; particular things such as toilets which are assumed to be contaminated; certain categories of "other" people; and violations of morality (e.g., homosexuality) or social processes.

Interestingly, the category of moral disgust, similar to what Moll et al. (2005) categorize as “indignation,” finds the universal inclusion of politicians, along with injustice, prejudice, vulgarity, and abuse of power. These categorizations build on earlier typologies which suggested that physical contact with unpleasant or unknown people evokes disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987), as does uncertainty and violations of social rules (Miller 1997; Rozin et al. 1999). Harris & Fiske (2006) found that individuals who are judged as both low warmth and low competence, such as drug addicts and homeless people, differentially elicited disgust. This work demonstrated greater activation in the insula and amygdala of subjects judging such individuals and less activation in the medial pre-frontal cortex (mPFC). This suggests that such individuals may be perceived as less human since judgment of disgusting objects similarly fails to activate the mPFC. Other work by this team (2007) shows that forcing subjects to make individuating judgments about extreme outgroup members who elicit disgust (age, food preference) raises activation of the mPFC, indicating at least one mechanism by which individuation can reduce disgust.

Haidt et al. (1997) delineate seven categories which largely overlap with Curtis’ characterization, incorporating food, animals, body products, sexual deviance, body envelope violations, poor hygiene and death.<sup>6</sup> Biological and cross cultural validation suggests that disgust rests on far more than constructed cultural norms.<sup>7</sup> Recognized for his seminal

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most commonly employed standard relies on the Haidt (1994) Disgust Scale, which includes a 32 item measure encompassing 4 questions along each of the 7 dimensions described above. Each dimension combines 2 true/false measures with 2 disgust response questions. This scale has been shown to demonstrate a moderate correlation with sensation seeking and fear of death, a weak association with neuroticism and psychoticism and no correlation with Eysenck’s Personality Questionnaire Extraversion and Lie Scale.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, one of the apparent problems with this argument lies in the relatively late development of disgust. However, this slow development, obviously not unheard of in other areas, such as the emergence of sexuality in puberty, should not be surprising in light of the recognition that many children would be protected from most potential sources of contamination by close contact with their mothers throughout their early years. This would allow time for infants and children to develop flexible adaptation to local norms of cuisine, for example. Since ecologies differ greatly across the globe, the ability to accept various diets would maximize the potential for

contribution to the area, Paul Rozin indicated that the most universal aspects of disgust related to aversion to waste, and, in particular, oral incorporation of anything associated with waste (Rozin and Fallon 1987).<sup>8</sup> It is easier to extinguish conditioned disgust reactions to some objects, like flowers, than to others, which commonly elicit disgust, such as spiders and snakes. Not surprisingly, it also appears easier to condition disgust to some objects, such as feces, than to say, a food like chocolate (Mineka and Cook 1993). Before dismissing this last finding as a penetrating insight into the obvious, remember that such a finding runs counter to all the standard behaviorist literature which both assumes and argues that any object can be paired equally well and easily with any unconditioned stimulus to produce equivalent conditioned responses, much as Pavlov's dogs learned to salivate in response to the bell presented just prior to food during learning trials. Yet introspection in this case clearly supports the finding that some things can more easily elicit disgust than others.

Several theories have been put forward to account for the development and evolution of disgust. In his cultural examination of the history of disgust, Miller (1997) argued that disgust developed as a mechanism to defend both the body and soul against various forms of pollution, including moral violations. Rozin et al. (1999) argued that disgust operated according to two laws. The first aspect relates to the contiguity of contagion, whereby people believe that once an object has come into contact with something that has been contaminated, that second object must also be considered contaminated. So, for example, once dog feces have touched a plate, that plate is thereafter treated as similarly polluted. The second involves similarity in such a way that

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survival. Delay in disgust elicitation would allow for just such flexibility in the face of differing food aversions in particular.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Nichols (2002) found that norms established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century around inculcating an aversion to disgusting things proved more likely to survive than norms developed around other aspects of etiquette. Elias (1939) similarly explored how etiquette surrounding sexual and food practices developed into a "civilizing process".

appearance becomes reality; for example, things that resemble contaminated objects also elicit disgust, as when plastic objects shaped like feces arouse aversion.

In related work, Rozin et al. (1999b) described how primates, including bonobos, chimpanzees and humans remain supremely sensitive to violations of social order, in particular defections in dyadic relationships. They argued that this characteristic forms the foundation of human morality and informs our notions of loyalty. Obviously, this characteristic aversion to dyadic defection holds tremendous social and political consequences. For example, such a reaction can explain, in part, the disgust that can arise when spouses cheat. But it also illuminates the social sanctioning that occurred against Linda Tripp, who in turning in Monica Lewinsky received little praise for arguing that she was doing the “right” thing by uncovering adultery in the President precisely because people were disgusted by her disloyalty to a friend whose trust she exploited.

Rozin et al. (1999b) argued that disgust serves the function of protecting people from harm by extending aversion from the physical to the social world, treating social parasites as though they embodied the contamination inherent in physically aversive objects. By treating social objects of disgust in a manner similar to physical objects which elicit disgust, such perpetrators are avoided, punishing them while protecting those who quarantine the undesirables. In this way, Rozin et al (1999b) suggested that disgust helps police the portals of the body and soul that remain vulnerable to either physical or social forms of contamination. As Curtis et al. (2001: 23) argue: “If the selective force of the pathogens was sufficient to modify our physiology, it is reasonable to suggest that the same forces were at work on our behavioral traits.”

Drawing on earlier work by Schwerder et al. (1997), Rozin et al. (1999) proposed that three basic emotions of anger, contempt and disgust were differentially activated by violations of three particular moral codes. Anger emerged in reaction to violations of autonomy and individual rights, contempt became aroused in response to violations of community, including authority and hierarchy such as status violations, and, importantly, disgust manifests when violations of so called divinity, referring to purity and sanctity, occurred. In this way, moral dimensions related to social and religious contamination selectively elicit disgust.

The most convincing explanations for the emergence and maintenance of disgust rest on evolutionary logic. Early work in this vein by Nesse and Williams (1995) suggested that natural selection designed disgust to ensure that people avoided potential sources of infection and contagion. Curtis et al. (2001) demonstrated that in all cases except one, the mechanisms of transmission for major infectious diseases (i.e. food borne illness) all correlated with one of more categories of factors which elicited disgust (i.e, rotten food). Pinker (1998) similarly argued that natural selection crafted disgust as the operative psychological mechanism by which individuals came to experience an “intuitive microbiology,” prompting a differential aversion to those objects or people who were most likely to cause infection, contamination or disease.

### **From Disgust to the Psychology of Political Orientation**

But how does disgust influence important political factors? Recent research in psychology has begun to implicate the emotion of disgust as the instigating mechanism which, through the direct and indirect mediating mechanism of a left-right political orientation, exerts a predictable influence on responses to particular political policies.<sup>9</sup> One of the ways it may

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<sup>9</sup> It may prove useful to speculate on the physical mechanism by which disgust and decision making might be linked. The most obvious candidate for this connection lies in the neurotransmitter serotonin. It may surprise some who are familiar with the now epidemic use of serotonin specific reuptake inhibitors such as Prozac for the treatment of depression to discover that over 80% of the serotonin receptors in the human body exist in the epithelial

accomplish this goal is by helping to regulate responses to in-group attraction and out-group hostility (Hodson and Costello 2007; Jost 2007; Skitka et al. 2005). As noted above, this work fits well within the burgeoning investigation of the influence of emotion on decision making, which focuses on discrete emotions such as anger, and examines how these emotions can bias certain judgments, such as those involving risk (Lerner and Keltner 2000).

Note that this relationship provides a clear link between the *specific* nature of emotional elicitation and outgroup discrimination. In other words, the problem is not just that liberals and conservatives see the world in different ways, but also that this worldview is seen as a direct contradiction of one's own way of life. So, taking the issue of gay marriage as an example, it is not that conservative hostility simply confuses liberals. Rather, the conservative position is interpreted as an assault on ingroup members while conservatives understand those individuals who want to engage in gay marriage as outgroup members. Thus, acrimony arises not only because of principled differences in public policy, and that anger that elicits, but also emerges from each group espousing mutually inconsistent approaches to the appropriate resolution to the enduring problems of group social and political life.

In providing an overview and integration of the work on disgust and its relationship with political orientation, we emphasize in particular the way in which moral judgments differ depending on ideology, but ideology in turn informs our understanding of who constitutes a member of the ingroup and how remains outside the fold. In what we believe to be the most critical work on disgust with regard to democratic debate, Haidt and Graham (1997) show a clear

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cells of the gut, which secrete serotonin. This explains why nausea tends to present one of the more challenging side effects associated with the intake of SSRI medication. Moreover, the gut communicates directly with the brain through the vagus nerve. In this way, the literal experience of nausea in the face of disgusting phenomena has not only a clear evolutionary advantage by preventing the ingestion of potentially contaminating substances, but also describes the direct physical experience of disgust in the face of moral aversion as well. Moreover, the neurochemical link between disgust and mood becomes obviously enlightened.

delineation in the type and number of moral dimensions by which people evaluate other individuals, actions and events. Such differences are part of the reason why liberals and conservatives appear to have such difficulty achieving agreement on issues involving moral and cultural judgments in particular; they literally bring *different* definitions and moral compasses to their evaluation and assessment of the meaning and value of objects, events and people.

(Insert Figure 1)

Figure 1, originally presented in Haidt and Graham (2007) shows that while liberals tend to focus on two main aspects of morality, those related to harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, conservatives bring to bear three additional factors in making such judgments, adding in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity to those which liberals espouse (also see Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009). This work demonstrates clearly, for example, that liberals and conservatives necessarily give different weight to different dimensions, with conservatives evaluating morality along five dimensions, and liberals typically only evaluating morality along two dimensions. Specifically, conservatives focus on issues of sanctity and purity, while liberals tend to stress the importance of values such as fairness.

Graham, Haidt and Nosek (2009) employed various methods in four distinct tasks to assess the extent to which liberals and conservatives relied on particular values in making moral assessments. The first task examined tradeoffs between the abstract values of violence and loyalty; the second had people evaluate various scenarios; the third explored how people handled the idea of ‘sacredness’; and the last examined reactions to moral and religious texts. Their findings showed that on any given issue, liberals make half of their judgments of moral rectitude based on assessments of fairness, for example, while for conservatives such a value only constitutes twenty percent of their evaluation. Note, in particular, that purity and sanctity, while

representing a very important dimension on which conservatives evaluate moral judgments, remains essentially blind in such judgments made by liberals. The purity dimension is specifically related to disgust and includes:

- Whether or not someone did something disgusting
- Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
- Whether or not someone did something unnatural or degrading
- Whether or not someone acted in a virtuous or uplifting way
- Whether or not someone was able to control his or her desires

This is not to say that purity does not matter to liberals, but rather that such a value is not brought to bear in nearly the same way as conservatives when engaging in evaluations of moral rectitude. This particular factor also highlights why a fuller understanding of disgust sensitivity remains crucial to a comprehensive analysis of the origins of political ideology.

In a series of critical contributions, Inbar et al. (2008, 2009) documented that individuals differ in their sensitivity to disgusting stimuli and that such sensitivity related to self-reported political conservatism. Disgust sensitivity became particularly activated around precisely those issues that evoked purity and sanctity concerns, such as abortion, homosexuality and gay marriage. Drawing on Knobe (2006) which showed that individuals are more likely to ascribe intentionality to someone whose behavior they find morally wrong or offensive, Inbar et al. (2009) found that individuals with greater disgust sensitivity were more likely to attribute intentionality to someone whose behavior caused gay men to kiss in public, even if they did not report an aversion to the behavior itself; importantly, this attributional bias did not extend to cases involving heterosexuals kissing.<sup>10</sup> In the first introduction of disgust into the political

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<sup>10</sup> Additional neuroscientific work supports the insights provided by Inbar et al. (2009). Research employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) located the origin of disgust in the anterior insular cortex (Phillips, 1997), although more recent work has demonstrated differences in the location of “pure disgust” as opposed to “indignation,” the form of disgust which involves a moral judgment concerning the object. So, for example, a dog eating its own feces might elicit pure disgust, but few people would render a moral judgment against the animal even if they did not like the behavior; however, finding a worm in food at a restaurant might engender indignation since an element of responsibility for the outrage becomes encompassed within the reaction. Brain activations in pure disgust and indignation show both overlapping and distinct locales. Overlapping activity occurs in the regions

science discourse, Smith et al. (2009), in similar fashion to Inbar et al. (2008, 2009) ran a physiological demonstration of the influence of disgust on politics.

The combined work by Haidt, Rozin, Inbar and followers shows that conservatives are truly more sensitive to disgust related stimuli than liberals. As a result, they remain more prone to bring such dimensions to bear when making moral judgments precisely because such purity related concerns activate these sentiments differentially. In this way, people actually rely on different dimensions in making their moral and political judgments of actions, actors and activities. In this way, disgust becomes intrinsically linked to the expressed and manifest differences we witness along the right-left political spectrum.

In summary, it is not simply that conservatives are more easily disgusted, but rather that people with greater disgust sensitivity, showing greater neurological and physiological activation when confronting disgusting stimuli, tend to be more conservative politically. In addition, such individuals also seem prone to invoke a greater number of dimensions when evaluating the morality of various people and events. Again, such individuals tend to fall on the conservative side of the equation, while those espousing a more narrow number of dimensions upon which they assess morality, typically focused around concerns of fairness and equality, appear more likely to advocate more liberal proclivities. We believe this point remains critical for democratic debate. To be clear, disgust sensitivity varies across individuals, with some people experiencing a lower threshold at which they find objects disgusting. However, conservatives are more easily disgusted and, in general, appear more prone to integrate disgust into their moral evaluations

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of the medial and lateral orbital frontal cortex (OFC) while distinct responses to indignation in particular occur in the region of the anterior OFC and left insula. Activation of this area of the insula appears to be absent in instances of pure disgust, implicating this region as critical in the ascertainment of moral judgments in particular. Moll et al. (2005) suggest that these areas of the prefrontal and orbital frontal regions appear critical in rendering moral judgments and making automatic assessment of morality with regard to social events. Because facial recognition of disgust is selectively impaired in even premorbid Huntington's disease gene carriers, there is some indication that the basal ganglia may be implicated in disgust as well (Gray et al., 1997).

and, in turn, the political preferences these judgments trigger. In this way, people on opposite sides of the political divide apply different dimensions to morality. These values then inform the positions they take on important issues such as the balance between liberty and defense. This realization provides deep insight into the intractable nature of many political disagreements, because people do not understand that the other side literally experiences, sees and evaluates the same information in dramatically different ways along often incommensurate and non-overlapping dimensions.

### *Relating Disgust to Moral Judgments*

Disgust exerts a powerful emotional influence in areas related to avoiding disease and contamination; however the evidence to support any contention that it can exert a political effect beyond the manipulation of its arousal by political elites is not as well understood. Why would we expect such a relationship to emerge? What do these experiences have to tell us about the origin and manifestation of political ideology and moral outrage? Several lines of evidence exist which speak to the way in which differences on the liberal-conservative spectrum mediate the relationship between disgust and politically relevant responses and behaviors. As noted above, disgust sensitivity has been associated with conservative political attitudes, especially on those items related to dimensions of purity (Inbar et al. 2008). The importance of this finding is highlighted by the fact that conservatives are more likely to make moral evaluations of everyday objects, such as refrigerators, categorizing such things as good or bad, than liberals; this tendency is also independently exacerbated by age independent of ideology (Jarudi et al., 2005).

This insight provides one compelling reason to explain why we see moral outrage surrounding political topics where they might not arise while discussing other important issues. Political topics, like religious ones, easily become more heated than other types of debate. At a

basic level, at least partly due to different sensitivities to disgust, conservatives and liberals literally interpret things differently and take different moral stances on the same issue because they are using different moral thermometers. This recognition may help explain why small initial differences in policy positions in Congress or in the public can quickly blow up into major internecine fights; individuals rely in different emotions (anxiety or disgust) to make their evaluations of different politicians, policy options and public events. Congressional debates offer a powerful example of how a single message can be constructed and interpreted in vastly different manners based on small degrees of substantive policy nuance. Depending on which dimensions get triggered by a particular debate, once a disgust response ensues, moral outrage follows for those who evaluate morality along such dimensions. It then becomes seemingly insurmountable for opposing camps to come back to the negotiating table to achieve agreement, instigating paralysis as well as antagonism.

In popular culture books such as “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” political pundits, journalists and other observers attempt to characterize the reason for the heated intransigence and internecine nature of the political divides which seem to characterize modern political culture. Obviously political scientists have empirically engaged the question of whether Americans are angry and disaffected, or whether they are culturally hostile or one another, and what this may mean for the prospects for democratic accommodation (Fiorina et al., 2010; Bartels, 2006). While Bartels (2006) finds that social issues do not appear to trump economic ones as Frank claims, he does note that the political significance of social issues has increased in the last twenty years among better educated white voters. This groups represents, of course, precisely the demographic many politicians would hope to capture in seeking money for electoral campaigns.

As a result, an astute political actor might be well served by establishing an entrepreneurial identity which adheres to the social values espoused by his wealthier constituents.

Many people note that the rancorous tenor of these crevasses appear particularly acute precisely when it comes to social policy issues such as abortion and gay marriage. Often these explanations center around the way in which political ideologies, such as liberalism or conservatism, inform responses to specific issues. In many cases, such debate generates more heat than light, managing to recreate the very animosities they seek to ameliorate, by blaming, however implicitly, one side or the other for the problems that emerge.

Indeed, acrimonious debate results when people cannot understand one another precisely because they interpret information on the basis of very different values. Individuals differ in how they interpret and feel a wide range of emotions. Principled differences on policy can surely generate anger as well as disgust; as noted above, we do not claim that disgust represents the only operative emotion in politics, or that it acts in isolation. Rather, we suggest that precisely in those domains which affects judgments of morality, differences in disgust sensitivity will elicit predictably different reactions across the right-left ideological spectrum. These differences may be expressed on a left-right political dimension, but often such physiological differences originate from deeper sources, and manifest across wider domains. Individuals can benefit from realizing that people interpret information differently based not only on their political preferences, but also upon specifically which emotions become activated in reaction to particular choices, and which value dimensions are used to evaluate the morality and “rightness” of given options. Such communication needs to be exported to make bridging such divides tenable and feasible. Making such knowledge transparent can only encourage a healthier democracy and more constructive democratic debate. Rather than arguing past one another, individuals across a

policy divide might begin to discuss the implications of those policies for deeper values and concerns involving otherwise implicit trade-offs between equality and purity, for example .

One primary mechanism which may integrate these seemingly disparate phenomena combines regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) with ideo-affective polarity theory (Tompkins 1965) as Choma et al. (2009) convincingly argue. Drawing on a definition of happiness put forward by Diener (1994), which combines life satisfaction with the occurrence of positive feelings and the avoidance of negative ones, Choma et al. (2009) find that strong partisans of all sorts show higher life satisfaction. This suggests that such ideological systems provide orienting world views which supply adherents with a particular kind of meaning, purpose or certainty that adds to their sense of subjective well being relative to those who remain more agnostic about politics. But rather than utilizing the simple bipolar measure of liberalism and conservatism commonly utilized by scholars, they employ separate measures of each proclivity to assess positive and negative emotions. This innovation is similar to the one devised by Sandra Bem (1972) in designing her sex role inventory to propose distinct scales for masculinity and femininity, as distinguished from earlier work where such concepts were conceptualized exclusively as opposite ends of a single continuous bipolar spectrum.

By providing separate assessments of liberalism and conservatism, Choma et al. (2009) ascertained not that conservatives were happier overall, but rather that estimates of happiness depended on the definition employed. In particular, liberals showed greater positive affect and conservatives reported fewer negative emotions. This would make sense if part of the function of a conservative ideology is to diminish uncertainty (Jost et al., 2003) since recent brain imaging

demonstrates that the brain activates internal reward circuitry in response to certainty, absolutism and dogmatism.<sup>11</sup>

Choma et al (2009) explain their findings in light of a regulatory model which suggests that liberals focus on promotion, preferring to move toward gains and seek positive emotions. In the political realm, this might encourage support for humanitarian public policies for example. In addition, left wing proponents appear to demonstrate greater degrees of emotional approach. On the other hand, conservatives prefer a more prevention oriented regulation of emotion, seeking a more normative, rule based protective approach to government action. This argument finds additional evidence in work reported by Leone and Chirumbolo (2008) which showed a relationship between emotional avoidance and right wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and conservatism.

In short, conservatives and liberals direct their attention and emotive evaluation toward different facets of the human experience, with liberals more sensitive to a promotion system geared to gains and positive emotions, and conservatives more governed by a prevention system which remains more responsive to losses and negative emotions (Choma et al. 2009; Higgins 2000). Choma et al. (2009) tie these differences in so-called regulatory style to important differences in how each ideological type experiences emotion. They suggest that a promotion style potentiates a humanistic world view, which assumes that people are basically good, and governments and societies should help support them, while a more prevention oriented style encourages a more normative view, suggesting that people are basically bad and the job of society should be to regulate and constrain the behavior of those who can hurt others. Such a theoretical approach supports observed differences in the relative acceptance of political

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<sup>11</sup> In an equally striking demonstration of the same phenomena, people find uncertainty in waiting for test results more upsetting than finding out for certain that such results were bad, suggesting that uncertainty itself can be worse than the occurrence of the negative outcome which ostensibly instigated the reason for the fear.

integration of out-groups as well, particularly in such areas as defense and immigration, again pointing to the experience of disgust as a critical factor directing the influence of ideology on political outcome in domains of moral judgment.

Just as differences in regulatory style manifest across a left-right divide, the psychological architecture of disgust also reflects such divergences as well, potentiating different evaluations of morality in particular. If true, the public policy consequences of these basic dispositional differences are profound and enduring. Sometimes, the effect can prove beneficial, as when increased disgust sensitivity appears to decrease risk taking in women (Fessler 2004). This predilection can then have direct positive health consequences, as when pregnant women in the first trimester, the period when they are most vulnerable to infection, show heightened in-group favoritism and ethnocentrism, both of which decline in the second and third trimesters when immunosuppression, and thus risk of infection, decline (Navarrete and Fessler 2007). This automatic mechanism can thus make it less likely for pregnant women to either miscarry, or contract an illness which might compromise the health of her offspring.

In fact, the mechanism by which disgust can elicit predictably biased attitudes toward public policy appears particularly pronounced exactly in this realm of out-group prejudice and ethnocentrism, as might be expected from the evolutionary perspective put forward earlier. Specifically, differences in interpersonal disgust sensitivity predict revulsion and rejection toward out-groups. In one study, Navarrete and Fessler (2006) found that ethnocentric attitudes increased as a function of perceived vulnerability to infection, just as in-group attraction increased as a function of disgust sensitivity. This would make sense if individuals share more common flora with in-group members and thus are more likely to contract disease from out-group members. Moreover, when individuals possess heightened disgust sensitivity, they would

likely want to be able to rely on in-group members for help in the case of infection and contamination.

However, greater disgust sensitivity produces negative attitudes toward immigrants, foreigners and other presumed (perceived) socially deviant groups such as homosexuals, even controlling for prospects of disease contamination. Importantly, the effect is not direct, but rather mediated by ideology. In other words, interpersonal disgust sensitivity affects political ideology, such that those with higher levels of disgust sensitivity demonstrate higher levels of social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism and dehumanizing attitudes toward the out-group (Hodson and Costello 2007). Obviously, this finding holds enormous implications for intractable cases of internecine conflicts, especially those that might become easily exacerbated by ethnic or religious differences. Here, again, the intriguing findings provided by Fiske (2007) prove instructive; to the degree that it becomes possible to force more individuating experiences and assessments of outgroup members, disgust may decline, opening the possibility for more reasoned debate.

Clearly, strong ideological positions generate fierce moral evaluations which produce enormous interpersonal consequences. In one study, Skitka et al. (2002) found that individuals display a strong preference for keeping greater social as well as physical distance between themselves and those they judge attitudinally dissimilar. This fact alone might explain some of the rise in gated communities or self-segregation in housing, education or marriage, for example. Moreover, this intolerance is not restricted to strangers; people show a similar preference for distance in relationships with both intimates and strangers who espouse different attitudes. Regardless of ideology, people demonstrate much lower good will and cooperation in groups which contain members who endorse heterogeneous attitudes. This phenomenon may undergird

some of the striving for consensus seen in groupthink (Janis, 1972) models of decision making. Most importantly for purposes of public policy, people in such groups also display a heightened inability to create procedural resolutions to solve disputes. In other words, they cannot even agree on how best to regulate themselves out of their divergent positions to achieve outcomes of mutual benefit. Such work has direct implications for making public policy. This work clearly illustrates the experience and intuition that many observers have when watching political adversaries attempt to resolve conflicts; the very fact that one's opponent takes a particular stance seems to make the other side become more extreme and entrenched in their own position in and of itself. Anyone who has sat through a contentious faculty meeting or watched a congressional or parliamentary debate can attest to the reality of this pattern of behavior. Conflict not only emerges more frequently as cooperation and goodwill decline, but prospects for constructive resolution also diminish as each side literally fails to see potential common ground.

### **Disgust and Democratic Debate**

Emotion does influence behavior. Some efforts have sought to explain what specific emotions mean for democracy in more than a polemical sense. Barrington Moore (2000) examined how disgust and fixations on purity affected public discourse, and Julia Kristiva (1982) also explored how impurity, abjection and other forms of "othering" can inform our understanding of such public policy issues as immigration.

George Lakoff, in his work on *Moral Politics*, argued that the left-right spectrum could be mapped onto a parental model of nurturance, whereby the mother represented the liberal nurturing approach, and the father offered an exemplar of authority. If Haidt and Graham's (2007) argument concerning the foundation of morality proves correct, and a growing body of evidence from subsequent studies have validated their contentions (e.g., Inbar et al 2009; Smith

et al 2009) , then it is not the simply case that conservatives are more authoritative than liberals (Altemeyer 1981), but rather that conservatives approach issues of morality and public policy with a wider set of dimensions upon which to evaluate their worth, which incorporate concerns about harm and care and fairness and reciprocity just like liberals, but also brings to bear three other dimensions on which they also base judgments of morality, namely in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Note that these last three are just the dimensions that research has discovered more closely relate to conservative political preferences. This difference in perception appears tied to fundamental evolved physiological sensory mechanisms related to disgust, whether such measured are taken by surveys, observation of facial expression, neurological function, or physiological reactivity.

Politically, the most important connection lies in the recognition that greater disgust sensitivity can provoke greater concerns with purity and in-group loyalty in particular, in and of itself. These associations are not always as obvious as they might appear. For example, people with strong moral conviction actually demonstrate less trust in political authorities, while those espousing greater religiosity demonstrate more trust in those authorities (Wisneski et al. 2009). The diminished trust in political authority may go back to the conservative emphasis on the more negative role of government in preventing harm, rather than promoting welfare. Importantly, those displaying greater religiosity and distrust made quicker, less considered decisions. These evaluations appear to stem from different levels of disgust sensitivity, and hold huge implications for both the hair trigger factors which instigate political conflict, but also portends poorly for prospects to resolve contentious issues in a way that serves the most people as best as possible. But as long as problems remain in the ability of liberals and conservatives to even understand

that they are bringing different currency to the exchange, it may prove terribly difficult to overcome such intrinsic differences in approach and perspective.

Readers should not infer any moral judgment in this analysis. Viewed from this perspective, conservatives and liberals should be understood as equally moral and empathetic. Conservatives simply spread out in their assessment concerning what constitutes moral action across a wider array of domains than liberals. It is simply that the continuum of morality across political ideology differs in a fundamental way. Liberals appear more confined to two domains of morality while conservatives espouse five. This may help explain, in part, why some liberals painted as “bleeding hearts” appear to manifest greater intensity; they engage fewer domains so they appear to concentrate more energy into those areas. Conservative evaluations, on the other hand, are spread more evenly across all domains, while liberals remain confined primarily to two dimensions on which they evaluate the morality of particular events, people and positions. Thus, conservatives appear “less caring” precisely because they divide attention across more domains. Again, it is not necessarily that liberals do not experience these emotions, but rather that they do not rely on them in the same way conservatives do in determining the morality of given individuals or actions.

Liberals and conservatives do converge on dimensions about harm/care and justice/fairness, although they would likely start from a different baseline since liberals would invest a higher percentage of their evaluation in those domains than conservatives. In these areas, consensus should prove easier to achieve, since opposing camps can share overlapping concerns and values. However, on those domains upon which conservatives evaluate morality but liberals do not, such as in-group loyalty, authority and purity, conservatives and liberals would find it much more difficult to locate common ground. In those areas, conservatives attach tremendous

weight to dimensions in which liberals do not even own a scale, such as issues related to sexual morality. In short, some things such as fairness simply matter more to liberals because they do not evaluate other issues, such as those related to purity, on the same template of moral reasoning as conservatives do. Similarly, some things that matter acutely to conservatives, such as purity, do not affect the moral judgments of liberals much at all. As a result, in allocating a restricted amount of time, energy and money to given issues, liberals allocate more units to fewer pots, while conservatives put fewer units across more pots.

### Conclusions

Liberals and conservatives differ in their basic physiological propensity toward disgust. Not only are conservatives more prone to feel disgust, but they are also much more likely to interpret this feeling as possessing moral relevance, such that things that make them feel disgusted are judged immoral. Because of these physiological and psychological differences, liberals and conservatives literally experience the same world differently, and thus confront a huge challenge in trying to reconcile those views. These insights, particularly those related to the basic physiological underpinning of a specific emotional state, challenge several political science orthodoxies, including those related to assumptions of rationality, or the power of deliberation in overcoming basic policy differences (Morrell, 2010, Fishkin, 1993).

Liberals and conservative do not think the same way nor do they interpret or evaluate information, or its meaning, in the same way or along the same dimensions. In short, popular intuition is accurate: political partisans actually do talk around one another, almost as though they were speaking a foreign language the other did not recognize. Both believe they experience simultaneous translation and the other side simply remains obstinate despite mutual recognition of the same reality. But in fact they do not hear the same language or see the same reality. This

may very well represent one of the reasons for the widespread emergence of so much acrimony across the political divide. While it sounds like each side is listening, in reality each side is hearing a different message and evaluating the morality of content on the basis of different criteria, which remains truly unbeknownst and incomprehensible to the other side. It is not a matter of “if they only knew better”, or more, or understood, but rather it is simply the case that individuals literally think and evaluate the same information differently. In fact, each side does know the same thing; they just attribute different meaning and value to that information when it comes to particular domains of moral judgment. The psychological mechanisms of morality and right and wrong that liberals and conservatives employ have different dimensions, which are weighted differently by each side.

Given our focus on the American political science literature, we have stuck closely to the left-right continuum in making our argument regarding the influence of disgust on political outcomes. However, the insights provided by the literature on disgust provide motivation to further investigate the validity of the European literature on ideology, which suggests a more sophisticated two –dimensional space (Kriesi, 2007; Kriesi et al., 2009). In this conceptualization, one dimension relates to economic issues such as redistributive policies, while the second relates to the kind of social and cultural issues such as abortion that we have highlighted here as eliciting disgust. Therefore, the research on disgust may help explain *why* ideology exists in a multi-dimensional space. Precisely because distinct physiological parameters regulate each dimension, the emotion of disgust differentially mediates the cultural space

These arguments have important implications for public policy and for scholars. For purposes of public policy, it remains crucial, if the political compromises necessary for perpetuating a functional democracy are to be achieved, to recognize that morality means

different things for adherents of opposing political orientations. Attempting to debate on the morals is akin to debating which religion is correct. Conservatives evaluate the basis of morality along more dimensions than liberals. On a practical level, this means that many discussions within policy groups take place along domains that literally do not exist for liberals, engendering frustration and misunderstanding on both sides of the aisle. For, in reality, what matters a great deal to conservatives does not even register for liberals, rendering each side angry and frustrated with the intransigence, obstinacy and purported immorality manifested by the opposing side. In many ways, the processes by which many groups literally talk past each other increases the degree of political strife in public life. Conversations and disputes surrounding topics of fairness and harm, such as many involved in the financial or economic realm, can achieve resolution through considered debate and deliberation. But in many other areas, such as those involving purity, discussion becomes truncated and paralysis sets in. The importance of bringing this recognition to public light lies in the potential to render the bases of acrimony in certain areas of discourse more transparent to each side. Rather than simply scream at each other, and claim that the other side is immoral or unjust, each side can begin to access the other on a dimension that the other side can grasp in hopes of achieving compromise. Liberals can try to recognize the importance of purity for conservatives; conservatives can begin to see the implications of their positions for the values of equity which liberals prize. This mutual recognition might hopefully facilitate better communication and improve prospects for negotiation. Neither side will necessarily espouse the values and weighting the other side prefers, but they can at least realize that they are playing different games and begin to read each other's rule book.

In topics revolving around in-group loyalty, authority or purity, liberals and conservatives continually attempt to compare apples and oranges because no middle ground exists.

Conservatives want discussion on topics that do not undergird the moral reasoning of liberals. Liberals want discussion on issues that are not as important to conservatives as they are to liberals. The result is that on topics that activate heightened disgust sensitivity for conservatives, especially those that involve issues of purity, the very basis and purpose for their ideological orientation becomes activated in a way that is not true for liberals. Conservatives cannot understand why liberals are so licentious; liberals cannot understand why conservatives are so rigid. And it is in the area of just such topics as these, including abortion, gay marriage, or immigration, that no reasoned debate seems to take place. No compromise on beliefs is possible, because what matters to one side simply does not enter into the calculation or moral reasoning of the other.

This argument is not simply about disgust but speaks to much larger and more important themes in governance. Once we combine this different moral range across individuals who espouse alternative ideological frames with genetic and neurological differences as well, the implications of this realization remain profound for policy making, negotiation and representation.

An open discussion of these issues in policy circles, research centers and within the interested public is warranted. It is not that liberals are immoral, or that conservatives are mean-spirited. But people inherently evaluate information through a different lens. Democratic debate and discourse can only improve by mutual recognition of the fact that while we are all the same, and every human being should be accorded the same value and rights, each person does feel and think and evaluate morality along different domains. Communication and compromise can only be improved by accepting and understanding these evaluative differences, rather than resorting to name calling, and further acrimony. Without such transparency, those who choose to exploit and

manipulate the public will continue to take free reign in attempting to spark outrage in service of their own purposes, whether for profit or power. And little progress will be made toward establishing the reasoned compromise upon which democratic systems depend.

Figure 1: Haidt and Graham 2007

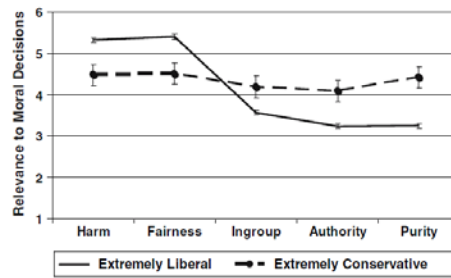


Fig. 1. Moral relevance by foundation for extreme liberals and conservatives. 1 = not relevant at all, 6 = always relevant.

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