Is There a Culture War? Heterogeneous Value Choices and American Public Opinion

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Culture and Values

**Culture:**

Predominant values within a society (e.g., Inglehart 1990)

Culture provides the context within which public opinion exists and determines “boundaries” for legitimate attitudes (e.g., Wildavsky 1987).

**Values:**

An individual’s abstract general ideas about desirable and undesirable end states of human life (e.g., Rokeach 1973).

People have personal value structures that effectively rank-order values from most- to least-important (e.g., Schwartz 1992).
Consensus or Division?

**Cultural Consensus:**

Societal stability requires general agreement on fundamental values (e.g., Dahl 1989).

Political and social conflict only occur within boundaries established by consensus on basic values (e.g., McClosky and Zaller 1984).

**Cultural Division:**

Some scholars argue that American culture has always been characterized by “inconsistent combinations of traditions . . . (Smith 1993)”

Other commentators have suggested that the fundamental American consensus has broken down in recent decades, producing a “culture war”
Culture War in America

Disagreement about basic value orientations, with immediate political consequences

Early statement by Patrick Buchanon (1992 Republican National Convention):

“There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America.”

Recent manifestations:

Prominent theme in candidate rhetoric and media coverage of 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns

Rise of the Tea Party
Empirical Results Vary Widely

Polarization of American politics may be symptomatic of culture war

Fundamental differences in moral and religious orientations within the American population (e.g., Lakoff 2002; Barker and Tinnick 2006)

Sharp increases in issue conflict within American public opinion (e.g., Layman, Carsey, Horowitz 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008)

Differences in basic conceptions of representative government (Barker and Carman 2012)
Empirical Results Vary Widely

Questions about basic validity of culture war hypothesis

Traditional theories about differences among status groups account for existing divisions in society (Evans 1996; Williams 1997; Wolfe 1998)

Extent of polarization has been overstated, with sharp differences limited to religious issues (DiMaggio, Evans, Bryson 1996; Davis and Robinson 1996)

Americans are largely united in support of fundamental principles (Baker 2005)

American electorate remains moderate in its political orientations (Fiorina, Abrams, Pope 2006; Gelman 2008).
Is There a Culture War in the United States?

Some say yes:
“The divisions of political consequence today are . . . the result of differing worldviews. . . . (The conflict revolves) around our most fundamental and cherished assumptions about how to order our lives—our own lives and our lives together in this society. (Hunter 1991, p. 42).”

Others say no:
“(Allegations of a culture war in America) . . . range from simple exaggeration to sheer nonsense. . . . The myth of a culture war rests on misinterpretation of election returns, a lack of comprehensive examination of public opinion data, systematic and self-serving misrepresentation by issue activists . . . (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, p.8)”
Potential Limitations of Previous Work

Polarized political attitudes could occur for other reasons (e.g., Levendusky 2009).

Culture war may not be manifested clearly in political issues (e.g., Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Polarization research focuses on unidimensional conflict but culture may be multidimensional (e.g., Wildavsky 1987; Inglehart 1997)

Some research on values has looked at feelings about specific values taken singly, rather than choices between values (e.g., Baker 2005; Goren, Federico, Kittilson 2009).
Objective of This Analysis

Construct an empirical model of American political culture (or at least that portion of culture that is focused around values)

The challenge is to incorporate individual-level value choices into a parsimonious model of society-level value structure

Enable systematic analysis of variability across the full range of individual value choices
A Geometric Approach— the MDPREF Model

Show values as points and people as vectors within a common space.

Locate points and vectors so that individual value choices are reflected in the projections of the value points onto the individual vectors.

Nonmetric scaling approach does not make onerous assumptions about measurement characteristics of data.

Results provide graphical depiction, facilitating easy and intuitive interpretation.
A Simple Example

Assume three values (A, B, and C) and two individuals (1 and 2).

Data consist of individuals’ rankings of the values (larger numbers mean higher ranks).

Data Matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Values:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 1:</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 2:</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Geometric Representation of Simple Example Data:
Data from 2006 CCES:

Internet survey using nationally representative sample; component used here contains 1,000 respondents (of whom 775 provided usable data).

A battery of items in the post-election survey had respondents rank-order the importance of seven values:

- Freedom
- Equality
- Economic security
- Social Order
- Morality
- Patriotism
- Individualism
Model Estimation and Interpretation

Nonmetric scaling method:

Point locations and vector orientations are estimated using an ALSOS approach.

Spatial positions of vectors and points reflect individual rank-orders of values.

Interpretation of Model:

Distances between value points correspond to similarities in ranks that respondents assign to respective values.

Angles between vectors correspond to similarity between individuals’ rank-orders of values.

Cosine of angle between vectors is the correlation of the ranked values.
Full Model:

Value Points and Jittered Vector Terminal Points
Interpretation of Model Elements

Value points and individual vectors:

Three weak groups of value points (one “group” is a single point)

Extreme heterogeneity in value choices, with three weak modal directions for individual vectors

Mean Direction Vector is a Useful Summary:

Vector obtained using mean coordinates across individual vectors

Length of mean direction vector is inversely related to variability in individual vector directions.
Full Model, Including Mean Direction Vector:
Disagreement Rather Than Consensus on Values

No support for consensus theory of agreement on fundamental principles

Do these heterogeneous value choices indicate the presence of a *culture war*?

Culture war suggests systematic variability in values:

- Demographic, class, or religious divisions?
- Political disagreements?
- Examine mean directions of subgroups defined by these characteristics
Demographics– Race and Gender:

[Diagrams showing relationships between different demographic groups and values like Freedom, Equality, Economic security, Morality, Individualism, Social order, and Patriotism.]

- Black
- Hispanic
- Other
- White

Female
Male
Social Class—Education and Income:

- No HS
- Some college
- HS grad
- 2−Yr degree
- 4−Yr degree
- Post−grad

- Freedom
- Equality
- Morality
- Individualism
- Patriotism

- Social order

- $LT$ $60K$
- $60K$−$100K$
- $More than $100K$
Religion– Denomination and Commitment:

- Freedom
- Equality
- Morality
- Individualism
- Social order
- Patriotism
- Christian
- Jew
- None
- Other
- Cath
- Prot

Freedom
Equality
Morality
Individualism
Patriotism
Mod low
Very low
Mod high
Very high
Politics– Party ID and Ideology:
Evaluating Multivariate Effects

Use “circular regression” to examine multivariate influences on individual value choices

Generalized linear model with following specification:

\[ \mu_i = \mu + g^{-1}(x_i\beta) \]

Where:

* \( \mu_i \) is position of observation \( i \)'s vector around the unit circle (in radians, moving counter-clockwise from 3:00 position).
* \( x_i \) is vector of independent variable values for observation \( i \)
* \( \mu \) is the intercept, \( \beta \) is the coefficient vector, and \( g^{-1} \) is a link function mapping from the linear predictor to the interval from zero to \( 2\pi \)

Parameters are estimated by maximizing a likelihood function based on the Von Mises distribution.
### Circular Regression—Empirical Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Maximum Likelihood Estimate</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>0.148</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad</td>
<td>0.429</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious commitment</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>-0.109</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-0.140</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.951</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Maximum Possible Difference Due to Each Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Maximum Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious commitment</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summarizing Polarization

How Different are Value Orientations in Subgroups Defined by Individual Characteristics?

Find most extreme predicted vector orientations in the clockwise and counterclockwise direction around unit circle of individual vector orientations.

Obtain bisector between the most extreme predicted vectors

Take mean orientation of vectors on each side of the bisector

Angular Separation of Mean Predicted Vectors Summarizes Value Polarization.
How Polarized are the Opposing Sides?

- Freedom
- Equality
- Economic security
- Morality
- Individualism
- Social order
- Patriotism
Summarizing Polarization

Mean Vectors Point in Nearly Opposing Directions

This indicates that value preferences of two sides are almost mirror images of each other.

Correlation between two mean predicted vectors is -0.646.

Mean vectors are relatively long, showing that value preferences are relatively homogeneous, within the two sides.

Probably not too much to say that these strongly contrasting value preferences reflect the existence of a culture war.
Conclusions

Stark heterogeneity in value choices

Polarization is probably sufficient to justify claim that a culture war exists.

Foundations of the culture war are a bit surprising.

Not rooted in race, gender, religious affiliation, or region
Religious commitment, age, and education do show effects
Most pronounced differences along partisan and ideological lines

The culture war is a political phenomenon.