

Love thy Neighbor: Moral Suasion and the Formation of Immigration Policy Preferences

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Abstract

Recent experimental work on moral suasion has administered moral messages abstractly, that is, without any sense of who the message is given by or in what context. This abstractness limits the external validity of the studies. In addition, recent studies have focused on the effect of suasion on behavior, overlooking its effect on the formation of policy preferences. We address these two gaps by designing a survey experiment that administers moral suasion—the Golden Rule— as delivered by particular sources such as a family, religious or political authority. We then examine the effect of this concrete moral suasion on cooperative behavior, and on the formation of policy preferences over three different policy dimensions in the current immigration policy debate: border security, treatment of undocumented immigrants, and desired criteria for obtaining immigration status. We also compare the impact of moral suasion on other policy preferences such as taxation and welfare, which are based on different moral principles than the regulation of immigration. We find that the impact of a moral message on individual behavior and policy preferences is mediated by the source of the message, and varies across policy issues and dimensions. The administration of moral suasion makes respondents less likely to support restrictive border security, more likely to support legalization of undocumented immigrants, and prefer promoting diversity over merit when granting visa. Yet we also find that responses vary with subjects' religiosity, partisan alignments and the source of the message in systematic ways.

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