

A politician argues that abortion should be illegal because God condemns it as murder. Do liberal democratic citizens find this politician's appeal to God in support of his policy position acceptable, or do they reject it as impolitic, impolite, or unethical? Liberal theory is divided as to how citizens should answer. The question of what sort of norm should guide public reason is hotly contested; purported norms vary from those that demand public reason should almost always be free from religious and philosophical doctrines (Rawls 1993) to those that argue almost anything is acceptable (Habermas 1998) to others somewhere in between (Stout 2005). As yet, liberals have conducted this debate without any attention to the norms that govern public reasoning in practice. Because liberal theory interprets citizen's shared understandings of moral principles (Walzer 1984), and because liberal theories must win at least the hypothetical consent of their citizens (Rawls 1993; Tomasi 2001; Klosko 2000), this lack of empirical information is a significant lacuna in the theory.

I propose to investigate the question of what norms govern citizens' public reasoning using a *two-phase, mixed qualitative and quantitative research design* at the *individual level of analysis*. In so doing, I will contribute to a growing field that empirically investigates the claims of liberal theory (Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1990; Conover et al. 1991; Gunderson 1995). Based on the most influential normative account of public reason (Rawls 1993), I hypothesize (H_1) that the norms individuals follow in their public reasoning will vary according to the composition of the group to which their reasons are addressed. Specifically, my *dependent variable (DV)* is the public reasoning norm individuals adopt, and my *independent variable (IV)* is the level of religious/philosophical diversity in the group addressed. I will operationalize *DV* by creating an ordinal scale of possible norms of public reason, ranging from most restrictive (reasons that are not universally applicable to all members of the audience are unacceptable [Rawls]) to least restrictive (almost all reasons are acceptable [Habermas]). To create this scale, I will conduct a careful study of the literature on public reason. The operationalization of *IV* will be spelled out in the discussion of the second phase below.

Because there is little empirical data on the practice of public reason, the first phase of my project will be to conduct a *large-n, quantitative survey* of public preferences. Here, I will hold *IV* constant so as to learn what norms individuals typically follow (*DV*) in normal political practice and how their adoption of such norms corresponds to relevant demographic variables. Specifically, I will test the following hypotheses (H_2): the norms individuals follow will correspond to their SES, religious preference, religiosity, education levels, or ideological affiliation. My survey will present individuals with a public policy position and a set of possible reasons a politician might use to justify that position, derived from my ordinal scale. Individuals will be asked to select those reasons that seem acceptable to them and those that are unacceptable or offensive, *irrespective of their agreement or disagreement with the policy position they justify*. To hold *IV* constant, I will ask individuals to imagine the politician is addressing voters nationally.

In the second phase, I will conduct a series of *carefully controlled focus groups* that will allow me to observe the affect of variance in *IV* on the norms individuals follow in observed public reasoning. I will ask these focus groups to discuss a variety of policy positions that are likely to engage their religious or philosophical beliefs (abortion, gay marriage, moral education, etc.) and code the reasons individuals use to justify their positions according to my ordinal scale. My hypothesis in this step is that as individuals (who will each participate in at least three focus groups) participate in groups characterized by varying degrees of diversity, there will be an observed change in the norm that I would otherwise expect them to adopt based on phase one.

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So *IV* will be operationalized as the amount of diversity in the composition of a given focus group, *DV* as the *change* in predicted norm adherence. I expect (H_1) that as *IV* decreases, I will observe individuals following less restrictive norms than the collection of demographic, political, and religious variables would otherwise predict.

This use of focus groups has several methodological advantages. First, because I am interested not in individuals' expressed opinions but the reasons they use to justify those opinions, there is less possibility of moderator-introduced bias. (To preserve continued debate, I will emphasize that a consensus opinion is *not* the point of the group). Second, to correct for the possibility of non-independent observations, I will have some individuals participate in groups varying from less diverse to more, some from more to less, and some without any such order at all, in each case considering the likely effect such a structure will have on my observations. Finally, the focus groups will allow me to distinguish *DV* variance according to the composition of the group and variance according to the individual addressed, thus ruling out those cases where individuals follow different norms for prudential reasons.

If H_1 holds, this result will serve as an important confirmation of the more restrictive and most influential account of public reason, that of Rawls and his admirers. However, if H_1 does not hold, this will indicate that the Rawlsian account needs reformulation. This *empirical* result can test aspects of liberalism, a *normative* theory, because contemporary liberal theory *does not strictly adhere to the fact-value distinction*. Contemporary liberals claim their theorizing is a deep hermeneutic (interpretation) of citizens' shared moral understandings (Walzer 1984; Rawls 1993). Therefore, ethical demands that differ significantly from expressed preference *and* observed behavior suggest errors in interpretation. Furthermore, liberal theories must satisfy the *liberal principle of legitimacy*, which claims that citizens must consent, at least hypothetically, to liberal theories (Tomasi 2001). Hence, empirical results that do not comport with a given liberal theory suggest that the theory is unlikely to satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy and needs reformulation. This possibility has led at least one liberal (Klosko 2000) to develop a theory completely within the boundaries of empirically observed public preferences.

I will publish my results as a series of journal articles in a national political science journal, effectively communicating the *important theoretical, methodological, and broad political implications* of my results.

At Duke University, I am well positioned to conduct this study. The political theory community here includes liberals (Thomas Spragens, Evan Charney, Ruth Grant) and critics of liberalism from Christian (Stanley Hauerwas) and radical democratic (Romand Coles, Peter Euben) perspectives. I will also be able to take advantage of Americanists here (Michael Munger, Jon Transue) and at nearby UNC. This is especially relevant as Pamela Conover and Donald Searing (see cite above) are members of UNC's department. Finally, Duke has recently begun the Social Science Research Institute, a resource that demonstrates the university's commitment to hard-hitting, empirical social science and will assist me methodologically.

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Possible Example Survey Question:

Would the following example be necessary here? “For example, the survey could ask individuals to assess the following reasons for forbidding gay marriage: 1) because God forbids it, 2) because heterosexual families are more socially beneficial than homosexual families, or 3) because the state need not endorse lifestyle choices that are outside of the mainstream.”