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ARE CONSERVATIVES MORE PUNITIVE TO CRIMINAL OFFENDERS THAN
LIBERALS? A MORAL FOUNDATIONS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Prior research shows that conservatives are more punitive than liberals. Little, however, is known about why. Drawing on data from a 2021 national survey of US adults ($n = 1,125$), the current study builds on prior research by Silver and Silver (2017) by testing the hypothesis that the reason conservatives are more punitive than liberals is that they possess different moral concerns. Specifically, the current study hypothesizes that the association between political ideology and punitiveness is spuriously related to the underlying moral foundations that people endorse. Bivariate and multivariate results affirm this assertion by showing that the association between political ideology and punitiveness is spuriously related to people's group-oriented moral foundations (loyalty, authority, and sanctity) and, to a lesser extent, their individual-oriented moral foundations (harm and fairness). Together, these results affirm previous findings reported by Silver and Silver (2017) and suggest that studies that fail to consider people's underlying moral concerns risk overstating the relationship between conservatism and punitiveness.

Keywords: punishment, political ideology, moral foundations theory, public opinion

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Decades of public opinion research reveal differences in attitudes toward punishment between liberals and conservatives. Both religious and political conservatives exhibit a more punitive stance than their liberal counterparts. This pattern is evident in their propensity to endorse a retributive, punitive approach, hold punitive views towards offenders in general, and support highly punitive policies with limited support for rehabilitation, “ban-the-box,” expungement, and voting rights (Silver and Silver 2017; Burton et al. 2020). Liberal-conservative differences in attitudes toward punishment have far-reaching consequences within the justice system, influencing juror perceptions, reactions to defenses and evidence, and even shaping judicial decision-making (Silver and Silver 2017).

The question that continues to occupy the minds of sociologists and researchers is, why are conservatives more punitive than liberals? Recently, scholars have suggested that political ideology and punitive attitudes may both be rooted in a third variable – an individual’s moral orientation (Silver and Silver 2017). To explore this hypothesis, my study will utilize Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to shed light on the differences in punitive attitudes between conservatives and liberals by examining the extent to which such differences are due to differences in their underlying moral intuitions.

Prior criminological research drawing upon MFT suggests that differences in punitive attitudes between liberals and conservatives stem from their differing moral sensibilities. However, this explanation has been examined by only a single study using convenience samples of college students and Mturk workers (e.g., Silver and Silver 2017). Therefore, this thesis will aim to replicate and extend Silver and Silver’s (2017) study to see if their results hold true for

members of the public. By doing so, I will be able to address the limitations of previous research on the topic and provide a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of the factors that contribute to differences in punitive attitudes between liberals and conservatives.

Moral Foundations Theory and Political Ideology: Exploring the Roots of Morality

To shed light on the underlying moral intuitions that guide basic human behavior, Jonathan Haidt and colleagues developed a novel theoretical framework to better understand the cross-cultural differences in these fundamental moral judgments and beliefs (Haidt, 2012). This framework is known as moral foundations theory (MFT). According to Haidt (2012), MFT describes the intuitions that operate – often at a subconscious level – to influence moral judgment. MFT theorizes that the moral intuitions depicted within the framework stem from inherent psychological processes that have evolved alongside sociocultural norms and practices (Richerson and Boyd 2005).

These moral intuitions give parents and various other socializing agents something to build on as they teach children about virtues, vices, and moral practices (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). In explaining this concept, Haidt (2012) likens the human brain at birth to an unfinished book, with nature providing a rough draft that experience and socialization then revise. Moral foundations theory seeks to describe both the content of the initial draft and how this initial draft is revised throughout childhood, resulting in the diverse moralities observed across cultures and the political spectrum. It views moral reasoning as a skill that we, as humans, have developed not to arrive at our moral judgments but to justify our own actions and defend the interests of the groups to which we belong. With all of this in mind, Haidt and associates organized these unconscious judgments of virtue and morality into five essential domains, named “moral

foundations.” These include harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt, 2012; Koleva et al. 2012).

Harm/Care highlights the importance of showing care, being kind, and protecting the vulnerable; causing harm to others or neglecting to offer necessary or deserved care are seen as moral wrongs. Fairness/Reciprocity underscores the value of treating everyone fairly and upholding justice and trustworthiness; taking advantage of people or treating them unequally or unfairly are considered moral violations of this foundation. Authority/Respect emphasizes the importance of following and showing deference to those in positions of authority, established social hierarchies, and traditional values; moral violations include acts of disrespect or defiance toward legitimate authority figures. Ingroup/Loyalty highlights the significance of remaining loyal to the various groups one is a part of, such as families, communities, and nations; moral violations include acts of betrayal against these groups or pursuing one's own interests to the detriment of the group's welfare. Lastly, Purity/Sanctity stresses upholding cultural standards pertaining to purity and moral decency; moral violations include engaging in impure practices or degradations as defined by the prevailing cultural and social norms (Silver and Silver 2017).

The Harm and Fairness foundations are categorized as “individualizing” since they prioritize protecting individuals' well-being and rights. The Authority, Loyalty, and Purity foundations are categorized as “binding” because they emphasize tradition, duty, interdependence, and adherence to cultural and religious practices. According to Graham et al. (2009), a person may have strong individualizing foundations, binding foundations, both, or neither. For instance, a person may score high on one or both of the individualizing foundations (harm and fairness) without necessarily scoring low on the binding principles (loyalty, authority, and purity), a pattern typically observed among political conservatives; and a person may score

high on one or both of the individualizing foundations (harm and fairness) while scoring low on the binding principles (loyalty, authority, and purity), a pattern typically observed among political liberals. Other patterns are also possible.

In the realm of political ideology, the liberal-conservative continuum is a practical tool used to predict voting behaviors and attitudes across a wide range of issues (Jost 2006), and MFT was developed in part to explain such ideological differences across people. Liberalism, characterized globally by its core value of individual liberty, places the rights and welfare of individuals above all else (Haidt 2012). Liberalism is, therefore, firmly rooted in the individualizing foundations of Fairness/Reciprocity and Harm/Care, which correspond to Kohlberg's (1969) "ethic of justice" and Gilligan's (1982) "ethic of care." Conversely, conservatism can be understood as a "positional ideology" or a response to challenges posed by liberals to authority and established institutions (Graham et al. 2009). Conservatives, as well as individuals from non-Western cultures, often prioritize collective well-being, community, and traditional values over individualism. This perspective, which emphasizes group loyalty, respect for authority, and self-discipline, is embedded in conservative ideology and reflected in the binding foundations of Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (Graham et al. 2009).

In numerous studies, Haidt and colleagues have found a strong and pervasive connection between the endorsement of binding moral foundations and adherence to conservatism while also discovering a positive but slightly less robust relationship between support for individualizing foundations and adherence to liberalism (for a review, see Haidt, 2012). MFT attempts to explain these findings by delving into the motives behind a person's adherence to individualizing and/or binding foundations. The theory posits that people are predisposed to a particular sociopolitical

belief (i.e., religious or political ideologies) because they are led, via moral intuition, to perceive a particular set of ideological beliefs as good or right (Silver and Silver 2017). Therefore, people differ morally and ideologically due to moral convictions gained.

during their upbringing and other experiences that are later reflected in their ideological stances and perspectives.

Political Ideology and Punitive Attitudes

Political and religious ideologies span a liberal-conservative spectrum (Graham et al. 2009). In the United States, political conservatives often advocate for small government, particularly regarding economic redistribution and social welfare. They also tend to encourage policies that uphold traditional religious values, such as limiting gay rights, abortion, and decreasing the use of contraceptives (Hunter 1992). American religious conservatives generally support a literal interpretation of religious texts and strong adherence to religious practices and traditions, while religious fundamentalists typically support Biblical literalism, evangelism, personal salvation, and the strict enforcement of punishment for sinful conduct (Silver and Silver 2017). Both approaches are consistent with a “binding” morality within MFT.

Many explanations have been offered to understand why conservatives generally have a more punitive outlook than liberals. However, before delving into these explanations, it is important to put forth our foundational metric and understanding of punitiveness. In this thesis, punitiveness is defined and regarded as a person’s retributive outlook, including support for the death penalty, support for harsher treatment of juvenile offenders, and the belief that prisons should primarily serve as a mechanism of punitive deterrence rather than rehabilitation (Silver 2017; Burton et al. 2020). Compared to liberals, conservatives are generally more inclined to endorse a retributive approach to punishment (Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, and Bursik 1992).

Conservative ideology is consistently associated with higher levels of support for the death penalty and a preference for imprisonment, where the primary aim is to punish offenders in the name of protecting society (Burton et al. 2020).

Whereas liberals prioritize a rehabilitative approach, emphasizing individual-oriented concerns, conservatives prioritize an “expressive” punitive stance placing great emphasis on group-oriented concerns. This dissimilarity extends to their divergent views on the causes of offending behavior: liberals tend to attribute offending to forces beyond the offender’s control (e.g., systemic or environmental forces), while conservatives tend to attribute offending to the offender’s own choices (Silver and Silver 2017). Liberals maintain faith in offender redeemability through rehabilitation and support programs, whereas conservatives tend to view offenders as irredeemable and their offenses as reprehensible acts that betray in-group values (Burton et al. 2020; Vaughan, Holleran, and Silver 2019).

These orientations, however, might exaggerate the causal link between a person’s ideological preference and their punitive attitude. As indicated by moral foundations research, conservatism and punitiveness are both grounded in a moral framework that prioritizes conformity to group values and traditions. In contrast, liberalism and leniency are both grounded in a moral framework favoring a concern for individual wellbeing and fairness (Graham et al. 2009). These moral underpinnings suggest that the connection between political ideology and punitiveness may be, to some extent, spuriously related to morality.

Punitiveness and Moral Foundations Theory

The same moral foundations that underlie an individual’s ideological beliefs may also underlie their punitive outlook. This association between ideology, morality, and punitiveness becomes quite apparent when examining the core values and perspectives of both the

individualizing and binding foundations (Silver and Silver 2017). For instance, those who prioritize individualizing foundations (Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating) over binding ones (Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation) are primarily concerned with the rights of offenders, thereby promoting a preference for greater due process protections and less severe punishments (Vaughan et al. 2019; Silver and Silver 2017). The Harm/Care intuition emphasizes preventing harm and showing care for others, while the Fairness/Reciprocity intuition emphasizes reciprocity, fairness, and equality (Vaughan et al. 2019). Together, these individualizing foundations contribute to a mindset that seeks to promote rehabilitative measures, thereby discouraging harsh punishment.

The reduced punitive attitudes expressed by proponents of individualizing foundations stem from their belief that the focus of crime and justice should be centered on reforming the offender without causing too much harm or discomfort. For instance, a harsh punishment that inflicts excessive pain or suffering on an offender clearly violates the Harm/Care foundation. Such a punishment may also be seen as unfair, directly contradicting the Fairness foundation. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect an inverse relationship between punitiveness and the individualizing foundations of Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity (Silver and Silver 2017).

Unlike the individualizing foundation, which focuses on the well-being of individuals, the binding foundation elicits greater concern for the needs and well-being of the group (Vaughan et al. 2019). The binding moral foundation elicits moral intuitions that the group has been wronged when a crime occurs, as such behavior violates group integrity, traditions, hierarchies, or customs (Silver and Silver 2017). According to Vaughan et al. (2019), the Ingroup/Loyalty foundation deems selfishness and disloyalty as moral wrongs, emphasizing the significance of loyalty and sacrifice for one's in-group. Similarly, the Authority/Respect foundation highlights

the value of respect and obedience towards authority figures, social traditions, and hierarchies, wherein selfishness is regarded as a moral transgression. Lastly, the Purity/Sanctity foundation stresses the importance of purity, as per the individual's cultural standards, viewing it as a moral virtue while considering impurity, degradation, and deviations from norms of decency as moral transgressions. As a result, proponents of the binding foundation may have more punitive attitudes due to their high regard for group welfare and the preservation of traditions and social norms.

Extensive sociological research indicates that people tend to adopt more punitive attitudes when they perceive crime as a signal or cause of an impending societal breakdown or a disruption of the moral order (Pickett, Mancini, and Mears 2013; Tyler and Boeckmann 1997; Unnever and Cullen 2010). Individuals who associate crime with the potential downfall of society also tend to prioritize group preservation over the well-being of the individual, triggering a more retributive psychological response (Vidmar and Miller 1980). This strong retributive outlook becomes evident when assessing individuals' punitive attitudes.

Compared to individuals with a strong individualizing foundation, those with a strong binding foundation are more likely to endorse capital punishment and disregard mitigating evidence. In addition to maintaining societal standards, people with a strong binding moral foundation may be less inclined to take the circumstances that led an offender to crime into consideration when determining punishments. As a result, jurors with strong binding foundations may be less likely to accept mitigating evidence (Vaughan et al. 2019). Crime, from this perspective, disrupts and defies social norms and established laws (an authority violation), often involving the victimization of fellow citizens (a loyalty violation) (Canton 2015), all of which increase the urge to punish.

While there is limited research that has empirically examined the relationship between binding and individualizing foundations and punitive attitudes, a few studies have been suggestive. In Brubacher's (2014) study, it was discovered that a person's adherence to the binding moral foundation was linked to a greater inclination towards punitive measures, including retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation. Conversely, those who endorsed individualizing moral foundation were more likely to support rehabilitation and restorative justice. Similarly, Graham and Haidt (2012) observed that individuals who believed that "war is necessary to maintain justice," indicating a willingness to support violent or repressive methods for the sake of justice, tended to exhibit stronger binding foundations. Conversely, this belief exhibited a negative association with individualizing foundations. In contrast to these ideas, Koleva et al (2012) found that while binding foundations did not significantly increase support for the death penalty, the individualizing foundation of Harm was linked to decreased support for it, suggesting that moral concerns related to the needs and rights of offenders play a role in reducing punitiveness.

Does Morality Explain the Association between Political Ideology and Punitiveness?

At first glance, the core characteristics of conservatism and liberalism seem to offer a straightforward, causal explanation for the divergent attitudinal differences among Americans and their resulting degrees of punitiveness. However, before accepting this apparent causal explanation, it is important to assess the generalized approaches and tendencies of each perspective compared to the average punitive outlook adherents of either perspective typically hold. For example, modern conservatives endorse the preservation of the collective, generally taking on a more pessimistic view of human nature. They do so by emphasizing the necessity of authoritative guidance, established institutions, and traditional values to enforce civil societal

coexistence (Graham et al. 2009; Gutmann 2001). On the other hand, modern liberals' promotion of individual liberty exemplifies the optimistic societal perspective, as they maintain the idea that people change over time and should have the ability to choose their own paths of personal growth (Graham et al. 2009).

As suggested by moral foundations theory, the connection between conservatism and punitiveness, as well as liberalism and leniency, may be grounded in the distinct moral frameworks that underlie each ideological perspective (Graham et al., 2009). Given conservatives' retributive outlook and proclivity for expressive punishment and liberals' prioritization of criminal offender reform and rehabilitation efforts, each group's moral foundations may drive their different levels of punitiveness. If morality is the root cause of both political ideology and punitiveness, then the association between political ideology and punitiveness, as suggested by past research, may be spurious (Silver and Silver 2017). In other words, moral foundations may determine both political ideology and punitiveness such that people with certain moral intuitions may be more likely to both align with a certain political ideology and prefer a certain level of punitiveness. If this were the case, then the causal relationship between ideology and punitiveness suggested by prior research may be overstated due to it being spuriously connected to people's underlying moral foundations (Silver and Silver 2017).

Summary of Hypotheses

Silver and Silver (2017) found that the relationship between political ideology and punitiveness was spurious due to the individualizing and binding moral foundations that people endorsed. However, that study was based on convenience samples of college students and MTurk workers. In this study, I will replicate Silver and Silver's (2017) study using data from a

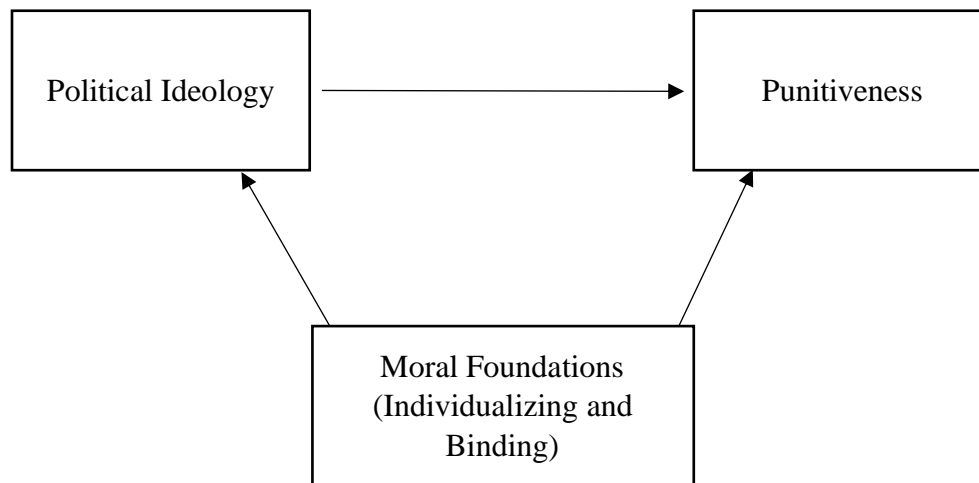
national sample of US adults gathered in 2021. The specific hypotheses I will examine are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The binding moral foundations (Authority, Loyalty, and Purity) will be associated with greater political conservatism, whereas the individualizing foundations (Harm and Fairness) will be associated with less conservatism.

Hypothesis 2: The binding moral foundations will be associated with greater punitiveness, whereas the individualizing foundations will be associated with less punitiveness.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between conservatism and punitiveness is, in part, spurious because the moral foundations underlie both ideological beliefs and punitive preferences.

These hypotheses are summarized in the figure below.



Chapter 2

DATA & METHODS

The data for this study comes from a national survey of 1,125 U.S. adults (including an oversample of 125 Black respondents) conducted in June 2021 by the leading academic survey

research firm, YouGov. YouGov uses a model-based sampling approach to produce matched, weighted samples that are highly generalizable to the U.S. adult population (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014; Sanders et al. 2007; Simmons and Bobo, 2015; Vavreck and Rivers 2008), particularly with respect to criminal justice attitudes (Graham et al. 2020).

For the present study's sample creation, YouGov interviewed 1,700 U.S. respondents from its online panel of 2 million U.S. residents. Of this group, 1,125 were matched to a stratified sample drawn from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS sample served as a synthetic sampling frame, effectively representing the target population of U.S. adults. Matched cases from the online panel were subsequently weighted to align with their respective sampling frames within the ACS. They achieved this alignment by using a propensity score function that included age, gender, race (for the general population sample), education, and region. This process generated distinct weights for both the general population sample and the oversampled Black American group. These two weighted samples were further refined through post-stratification based on race to create an overall sample weight variable (Silver, Goff, and Iceland 2022).

Not surprisingly, given YouGov's methodology, the sample for this study closely mirrors the demographic characteristics of the 2019 U.S. adult population. To further illustrate, comparisons with the ACS data are as follows (with ACS estimates shown in parentheses):

- Non-Latino White, 63.5 percent (60.0 percent)
- Female, 51.6 percent (50.8 percent)
- Bachelor's degree or more, 30.2 percent (33.1 percent)
- Currently married, 44.1 percent (47.6 percent) (Silver et al. 2022).

Chapter 3

Measures

Dependent Variable: Punitiveness

I measure punitiveness using three items. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of support or opposition to three punitive criminal justice policies: increasing the utilization of the death penalty for individuals convicted of murder, increasing the incarceration of juvenile offenders, and extending sentence lengths for repeat offenders. The respondents rated these items on a scale ranging from: 1 = “strongly oppose,” 2 = “somewhat oppose,” 3 = “neither support nor oppose,” 4 = “somewhat support,” 5 = “strongly support.” A scale measuring punitiveness was created by averaging responses to the three items, such that higher values indicate greater punitiveness.

Independent Variables

Political Ideology

I measure political orientation using a single item. Respondents were asked how they would describe their own political viewpoint: 1 = “very liberal,” 2 = “liberal,” 3 = “moderate,” 4 = “conservative,” 5 = “very conservative,” and 6 = “not sure.” Responses of “not sure” are treated as missing values.

Individualizing and Binding Foundations

I measure the moral foundations using the 30-item Moral Foundations (MFQ-30) questionnaire. The individualizing moral foundations scale was calculated by taking the average of the 12 items within MFT’s Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity foundations. The binding moral foundations scale was calculated by averaging the 18 items in MFT’s In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity foundations. The correlation between the individualizing

and binding moral foundations scales is positive ($r = 0.24$), which means people who score higher on one foundation tend, on average, to score higher on the other. This positive association is consistent with previous research (Niemi and Young 2016; Silver and Silver 2017; Silver and Silver 2021). The data also show that the Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity scales are highly correlated with one another, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$, which is consistent with previous research (for a review, see Brocic and Miles 2021; Graham et al. 2011; Niemi and Young 2016; Silver and Silver 2017; Silver and Silver, 2021, Silver et al. 2022). Similarly, the In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity scales also strongly correlated with one another, with coefficients of $r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$ between Ingroup/Loyalty and Authority/Respect, $r = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$ between Ingroup/Loyalty and Purity/Sanctity, and $r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$ between Authority/Respect and Purity/Sanctity. These statistically significant correlations support my (and others) decision to categorize MFT's five underlying foundations into the broader domains of individualizing and binding moral (Silver et al. 2022).

Demographic and Control Variables

To help isolate the effects of the moral foundation measures, I controlled for sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, and income. Education was measured as respondents' highest level of education, coded from 1 for no high school education to 5 for postgraduate degrees. Income was measured as the respondent's annual household income coded from 1 for less than \$10,000 to 13 for \$200,000 or more. Race/ethnicity was measured using three dummy variables with White as the reference category. Black was coded 1 for respondents who identified as Black or African American. Latino was coded 1 for respondents who identified as Latino or Hispanic. Other race was coded 1 for respondents who identified as Asian (3.6 percent), Native American (.4 percent), Middle Eastern (.3 percent), "other" (1.9 percent), and those belonging to two or more races (1.1

percent). The sex of the respondents was measured using a dummy variable where 1 represents females, and 0 represents males. Finally, age was measured by year and ranges from 19 to 94 years old.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 1,125)

Variable	Percent/Mean (SD)	Range
<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
Punitiveness	3.4 (1.2)	1 – 5
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
Political ideology ¹	3.1 (1.2)	1 – 5
Individualizing	4.1 (0.6)	1 – 5
Binding	3.4 (0.8)	1 – 5
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Female	51.6%	0 – 1
Age	49.1 (17.9)	19 – 94
White	63.5%	0 – 1
Black	11.7%	0 – 1
Latino	17.6%	0 – 1
Other race	7.2%	0 – 1
Education	3.4 (1.5)	1 – 6
Income	6.0 (3.4)	1 – 13

SD = Standard deviation

¹ Coded from 1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all of the variables in this study. The average level of punitiveness was 3.4 on a scale of 1 to 5. This suggests that, on average, the respondents exhibited a moderate punitiveness. The mean for political ideology was 3.1 out of 5, indicating

that respondents' political ideologies were more or less evenly distributed around the scale midpoint (I.e., moderate). The individualizing foundation score averaged 4.1 out of 5, and the binding foundations score averaged 3.4 out of 5. This shows that respondents are, on average, more inclined to endorse the individualizing foundations (Harm and Fairness) than they are to endorse the binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority, and Purity). Table 1 also shows descriptive statistics for the control variables: 51.6% of the respondents were female, the average age of the respondents was 49.1 years old, 63.5% of the sample were White, 11.7% Black, and 17.6% Latino, with 7.2% of the participants falling into the "other race" category. Finally, the mean education level was very close to the scale's midpoint at 3.4 out of 6, and income was slightly below the scale's midpoint at 6 out of 13.

*Table 2 examines the relationship between respondents' punitiveness and their political ideology. The punitiveness scores are divided at the median value such that those who scored above the median are categorized as "punitive," and those who scored below the median are not. As shown, 67.7% of conservative respondents scored above the median on punitiveness, followed by moderates at 42.1%, and liberals at the lowest percentage, with 14.3%. The highly statistically significant difference in these measures ($p < 0.001$) underscores the strong association between political ideology and punitiveness in this dataset. This finding is consistent with prior research (Silver and Silver, 2017). These results provide empirical support for my first hypothesis that political conservatism is associated with a greater likelihood of exhibiting punitive attitudes. Conversely, those who hold more liberal beliefs display less punitiveness.

TABLE 2. Punitiveness by Political Ideology¹

	Liberal (N=307)	Moderate (N=366)	Conservative (N=365)
% Punitive ***	14.3	42.1	67.7

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (chi-square test)

¹“Punitive” = above the median on the punitiveness scale

Table 3 displays the relationship between respondents’ individualizing and binding moral foundations and their corresponding levels of punitiveness. The moral foundation scores are divided at the median value such that those who scored below the median are categorized as “low,” and those who scored above the median are categorized as “high.” The data reveal that among the 561 respondents who scored as low on the individualizing foundation, 45.3% exhibited punitiveness scores above the median, whereas among those who scored high on the individualizing foundation (N=563), 39.3% scored above the median on punitiveness. This indicates that higher individualizing scores are associated with lower punitiveness. This relationship is significant at the $p < .05$ level, meaning there is less than a 1 in 20 chance it was obtained by chance.

The table also shows that among those who scored low on the binding foundation (N=527), only 20.3% scored above the median on punitiveness, whereas among those who scored high on the binding foundation (N=598), 61.7% scored above the median on punitiveness. This indicates that higher binding scores are associated with higher punitiveness. This relationship is significant at the $p < .001$ level, meaning there is less than 1 in 10,000 chance it was obtained by chance.

TABLE 3. Punitiveness by Moral Intuitions¹

Moral Foundations	Low Individualizing (N=561)	High Individualizing (N=563)	Low Binding (N=527)	High Binding (N=598)
% Punitive	45.3 *	39.3	20.3 ***	61.7

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (chi-square test)

¹“Punitive” = above the median on the punitiveness scale, “Low” individualizing and binding intuitions = below the median, “High” individualizing and binding intuitions = above the median

These findings suggest that the binding foundations (Authority, Loyalty, and Purity) have the stronger influence on an individual's punitiveness. Individuals with high binding foundations were notably more inclined toward punitiveness than those with low binding foundations. In contrast, the influence of individualizing foundations (Harm and Fairness) on punitiveness was significant but weaker. Overall, these results support my second hypothesis, which states that binding moral foundations will be associated with greater punitiveness, whereas individualizing foundations will be associated with less punitiveness.

To examine my hypotheses within a multivariate framework, I used multiple regression. This enabled me to examine how much the association between political ideology and punitiveness was spuriously related to the moral foundations, when controlling for other relevant factors. These analyses are shown in Table 4. The first relationship examined in Table 4 is the association between political ideology and punitiveness (Model 1). Here we see a highly statistically significant coefficient of 0.49 at the 0.001 level. This high degree of significance suggests a strong positive relationship between a person's conservatism and their punitiveness that is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. This result was found net of several potential confounding variables including gender (-.01, ns), which was not associated with punitiveness, age (.12, $p < .01$) which was positively associated with punitiveness, being Black, which was not associated with punitiveness (0.01), being Latino (0.10, $p < .05$) and being from an "other race" (.06, $p < .05$) were both positively associated with punitiveness. Conversely, more education (-0.18, $p < .001$) was associated with lower punitiveness. This suggests that, on average, more highly educated individuals tend to be less punitive, and this relationship is highly statistically significant. Finally, income was not associated with punitiveness. The model's adjusted R-squared was 0.34 indicating that political ideology plus the control variables explained 34% of

the variation in punitiveness. In other words, approximately 34% of the variation in punitiveness scores can be explained by political ideology and the control variables, including age, gender, race, education, and income.

TABLE 4. OLS Regression Predicting Punitiveness (N=1,125)¹

	Model 1 Beta (SE)	Model 2 Beta (SE)	Model 3 Beta (SE)
Political Ideology	.49 ***	.--	.19 ***
Moral Foundations			
Individualizing	.--	-.27 ***	-.20 ***
Binding	.--	.62 ***	.50 ***
Control Variables			
Female	-.01	.001	.01
Age	.12 **	.05	.05
Black ²	.01	-.07 **	-.05
Latino ²	.10 *	.01	.05
Other race ²	.06 *	.05 *	.03
Education	-.18 ***	-.13 ***	-.12 ***
Income	-.01	.05	.03
Adjusted R ²	.34	.46	.48

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

¹ Beta = standardized coefficients indicating how much the dependent variable changes with a one unit increase in the independent variable. Data weighted to be in alignment with the U.S. adult population. Missing data addressed using multiple imputation.

² Reference category = White

In Model 2 of Table 4, we examine the impact of the moral foundations, specifically the binding and individualizing foundations, on an individual's level of punitiveness. As predicted in our second hypothesis, an increase in individualizing moral foundations is linked to a significant decrease in punitiveness ($-0.27, p < .001$), while an increase in binding moral foundations is linked to a significant increase in punitiveness ($0.62, p < .001$). Thus, the pattern of results shown in Table 3 held when the control variables were added to the equation. Interestingly, regarding the controls, gender was not related to punitiveness ($0.001, ns$), neither was age ($.05, ns$) nor income ($.05, ns$). This suggests that as individuals age, their level of punitiveness tends to remain constant. In terms of race, being Black was associated with lower levels of punitiveness ($-.07$) compared to the reference category (White) and was statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Unlike Blacks, Latinos do not differ significantly from Whites in terms of punitiveness. The coefficient for "other race" is 0.05 and is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Consequently, individuals from other racial backgrounds, on average, exhibit slightly higher levels of punitiveness when compared to White individuals. Furthermore, education appears to have a substantial impact on punitiveness: the coefficient of -0.13 indicates that as the level of education increases, there is a decrease in an individual's level of punitiveness. Therefore, individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit lower levels of punitiveness. Ultimately, the model's adjusted R-squared value of 0.46 indicates that 46% of the variability in punitiveness is explained by the binding and individualizing moral foundations and the control variables.

Model 3 of Table 4 examines the final hypothesis, which states that the relationship between conservatism and punitiveness is, in part, spurious because the moral foundations underlie both political ideology and punitiveness. Model 3 shows that when compared to Model 1, there was a 61 percent reduction in the coefficient for political ideology (from $.49$ to $.19$) when

the moral foundations were included in the equation. Therefore, 61 percent of the relationship between political ideology and punitiveness is due to people's moral foundations. However, political ideology remained a significant factor even after accounting for the moral foundations, which means that there is still a relationship between the two. These results support our third hypothesis, that the association between political ideology and punitiveness is in part spuriously related to the moral foundations. The adjusted R-squared for Model 3 is 0.48, which indicates that 48% of the variability in punitiveness is explained by political ideology, the moral foundations, and the control variables.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The question of why political conservatives are more punitive than political liberals is of longstanding interest among researchers. Most prior research has assumed that there is something inherent in the liberal and conservative orientations that causes someone to endorse more lenient or more severe punishments for criminal offenders. Although a considerable body of research finds that the political orientations people adopt are rooted in their moral foundations (for a review, see Haidt 2012), only one prior study has sought to determine the degree to which people's moral orientations account for the association between political ideology and punitiveness (Silver and Silver 2017). That study found evidence that the association between political ideology and punitiveness was spuriously related to people's moral foundations. However, the results were based on convenience samples of college students and MTurk workers, thus raising questions about the generalizability of the results.

To address this shortcoming, this thesis replicated Silver and Silver's (2017) study by examining the relationships among the moral foundations (both binding and individualizing),

political ideology (conservatism-liberalism), and punitiveness. Consistent with Silver and Silver's (2017) findings, political conservatism and binding moral foundations were associated with greater punitiveness, while individualizing moral foundations were associated with lower punitiveness. In addition, the findings showed that the association between political ideology and punitiveness was substantially reduced when the moral foundations were included in the analysis, consistent with the spuriousness argument advanced by Silver and Silver (2017).

The comparatively weaker influence that the individualizing moral foundations had on predicting punitiveness, in comparison to the binding moral foundations, supports an interesting theory posed within Silver and Silver's (2017) study. The sociologists theorized that this smaller effect size could be attributed to the idea that individualizing foundations might decrease a person's punitiveness because of their heightened concern for the well-being of offenders. At the same time, endorsing individualizing foundations could also generate greater empathy for the individual victim, thereby creating a conflicting inclination to punish, resulting in a weaker relationship to punitiveness. Despite this interesting difference, overall, my findings support the conclusion that the relationship between political ideology and punitiveness is in part spuriously related to the moral foundations. That is, the association between political ideology and punitiveness was substantially reduced when the moral foundations were included in the model. The findings of this study confirm the greater tendency for political conservatives to exhibit increased punitive attitudes compared to their liberal counterparts. Additionally, the results reveal that an individual's perception of morality may play a substantial role in shaping his or her punitive judgments. Contrary to existing literature, the strong association between conservatism and punitiveness may not necessarily imply a significant *causal* relationship; instead, it could reflect an individual's moral intuitions. While prior studies focused on morality and punitiveness

using specific criminal scenarios detailing particular crimes and offenders (e.g., Alter, Kernochan, and Darley 2007; Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson 2002; Darley, Carlsmith, and Robinson 2000), no research beyond the Silver and Silver (2017) study explores how more generalized moral intuitions may impact the link between political ideology and punitive attitudes.

Consistent with Silver and Silver's (2017) findings, the results suggest that people's punitive attitudes are, at least in part, influenced by their intuitive moral concerns, as evaluated through the moral foundations approach. The failure of related studies to consider morality through this moral approach could therefore lead to an overestimation of magnitude of the association between conservatism and punitiveness.

Including moral foundations in future studies of punitiveness will allow researchers to achieve a fuller understanding of the variable's scope. For instance, both jury members and legal officials are likely to belong to social groups or subcultures endorsing different sets of moral foundations. Individuals from rural areas may endorse different moral foundations compared to those from urban or suburban areas. These moral differences can be attributed to individuals belonging to various social groups, subcultures, demographics, etc. Differing backgrounds lead people to prioritize and uphold each moral foundation differently (see Haidt and Graham 2007), resulting in diverse intuitive preferences regarding punishment (Silver and Silver 2017).

The results of this study suggest some important directions for future research. For example, future researchers might examine whether the moral foundations can explain why individuals and groups differ in their perception of the legitimacy of the law and the criminal justice system. Murphy, Tyler, and Curtis' (2009) study suggests that views about the appropriateness of various punitive measures, along with judgments about the fairness and

validity of laws or regulations describing "law legitimacy," are partly grounded in one's intuitive moral judgments that vary across social groups and among individuals. A person's disapproval of a specific law and its subsequent punishment may be due to that law or punishment directly contradicting the person's moral intuitions. Therefore, MFT could prove valuable not only in understanding individuals' behavior within legal settings but also, more generally, in providing greater insight into people's perceptions of the law and the legislative system that upholds it. This increased understanding is why it is essential for research and theory to at least attempt to take these different moral intuitions into account.

As discussed by various moral foundations scholars (e.g., Canton 2015; Haidt 2012; Haidt and Graham 2007), it is often challenging for individuals to understand moral perspectives they do not share. Therefore, concerning the observed relationship between moral foundations, conservatism, and punitiveness, this gap in understanding may help explain the longstanding conflict between conservatives and liberals regarding punitive measures and criminal justice policy. While moral foundations help explain the complexity and intractability of punitive attitudes (Canton 2015), it is important to encourage individuals to challenge their "moral comfort zone" and try to see things from their moral opposite's perspective (Haidt and Graham 2007). Individuals who go out of their way to do so, regarding criminal justice attitudes, may come to realize that those who oppose their views are not necessarily "evil" but are instead motivated by moral intuitions that one happens not to share, possibly leading to more communities finding new ways to reach some kind of settlement when it comes to law and crime-based issues (Silver and Silver 2017).

These findings may also allow for a more enhanced or comprehensive understanding of the general public's attitudes toward criminal justice policy. Existing studies indicate that

individuals are particularly responsive to messages structured to support the moral foundations they adhere to (Day, Fiske, Downing, and Trail 2014; Feinberg and Willer 2013; Kidwell, Farmer, and Hardesty 2013). For example, if a crime is discussed in terms of the chaos it inflicts upon society, its disregard for honored traditions, or its violation of purity standards, people who endorse the binding moral foundations may be more accepting of the proposition of severe punishments. Proponents of binding foundations may struggle to accept harsh punishments when discussions of these punishments (i.e., incarceration) involve their negative impact on families, the economic burdens they place on the country, or the perceived "contamination" of low-level offenders through exposure to more habitual or serious offenders. Considering the extent to which the formation of criminal justice policies is frequently in alignment with public sentiments on crime and justice (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Enns 2014; Nicholson-Crotty, Peterson, and Ramirez 2009; Ramirez 2013), the moral framing of criminal justice matters could potentially influence the types of policies individuals are inclined to support (Silver and Silver 2017).

Despite the possible shift in criminal justice attitudes as a framing response, Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) may also offer explanations as to why such attitudes often exhibit a markedly resistant propensity to change upon receiving new factual information (e.g., showing the exorbitant cost or ineffectiveness of various punitive policies, such as the death penalty; Bohm, Clark, and Aveni 1990). It is possible that intuitive processes, particularly those underlying moral judgments, make individuals hesitant, whether consciously or not, to accept information that contradicts their intuitions (Haidt 2012). This hesitation may also lead them to actively seek out information consistent with their underlying moral intuitions (i.e., confirmation

bias). Thus, if individuals' punitive attitudes are deeply rooted in their moral intuitions, they are likely to exhibit increased resistance to change (Silver and Silver 2017).

This study has several limitations that provide valuable opportunities for future research. First, because the data used here were cross-sectional, we are unable to definitively establish the causal order of the variables in the study. The cross-sectional design does not allow us to determine whether the moral foundations lead to conservatism (as theorized) or whether conservatism leads to specific moral foundations (Silver and Silver 2017). It is less likely that a person's punitive attitudes would determine either their political ideology or their moral foundations, though this too is possible.

Secondly, although the sample closely resembles the general makeup of the U.S. population, it was drawn from a single survey conducted by YouGov in June 2021. This timing coincided with the peak of public discourse on police brutality, particularly concerning racially marginalized groups, followed by widespread societal opposition to the harsh punitive measures often employed by law enforcement officials. The survey may therefore reflect short-term changes in respondents' punitive attitudes resulting from the events following George Floyd's murder. Respondents might have been similarly influenced by social desirability bias, leading them to align their responses with perceived societal norms at the time rather than expressing their true perspectives. Consequently, the generalizability of the results to other time periods remains unclear (Silver et al. 2022). Future researchers should therefore attempt to replicate the results of this study.

A third limitation of this study stems from the use of a moral framework that is still in development. Haidt (2012) suggests that the Fairness/reciprocity foundation should be divided into two distinct components: Fairness/Cheating, which emphasizes justice and proportionality,

and Liberty/Oppression, which emphasizes equality and freedom from oppression. This adjustment has yet to be made, as Liberty/Oppression presently remains a tentative moral foundation with no publicly available measure (see Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, and Haidt 2012 for a more in-depth explanation). Regardless, Haidt and colleagues continue to recommend the Moral Foundations Questionnaire that measures the five foundations used in this study (Dobolyi 2013).

The fourth limitation of this study is that it lacks measurements for several theoretically relevant concepts. Specifically, while speculating that the impact of individualizing foundations on punitiveness might be weaker compared to that of binding foundations due to the presence of conflicting concerns for both individual offenders and victims (for reference, see Canton 2015), there is no measure within the data regarding concern for the welfare of victims. Consequently, we were unable to include this concept in our models and cannot be sure that it helps to explain the difference in effect sizes (Silver and Silver 2017). Future research should delve further into examining this possible explanation.

Lastly, a general measure of punitiveness was the sole outcome variable used in this study. Due to this, future researchers should consider using other measured outcomes. For instance, a few studies have associated attitudes toward policing with concerns about community or societal well-being and cohesion (i.e., Jackson and Bradford 2009; Silver and Miller 2004). It is plausible to expect that different moral foundations underlie these attitudes. Future researchers should also investigate the extent to which the endorsement of binding and individualizing moral foundations contributes to various attitudinal phenomena within criminal justice. Exploring potential variations in punitiveness toward different types of crimes could be particularly insightful. For instance, individuals endorsing the purity foundation might exhibit higher

punitiveness toward crimes involving purity violations, such as drug and sex offenses (Silver and Silver 2017).

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the relationships among moral foundations, conservatism, and punitiveness. Its findings suggest that the relationship between conservatism and punitiveness is at least partially spurious due to the influence of moral foundations. I would urge future researchers to continue their exploration of moral foundations theory as it is a highly valuable framework for understanding people's attitudes toward punishment and other aspects of criminal justice practice and policy.

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