Moral Epistemology and Ideological Conflict in American Political Behavior*

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Objective. The nature and extent of polarization in the American electorate remains fiercely disputed. This study investigates the depth of ideological and value cleavages in political behavior by examining the influence of adherence to three categories of moral epistemology: premodern (morality is absolute, and stems from the guidance of a supernatural source), modern (morality is absolute, and can be determined through scientific and rational means), and postmodern (morality is nonabsolute, and stems from the subjective values of individuals or groups). *Methods.* Multiple correspondence analysis and multiple regression are used to analyze data from Pew's 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. *Results.* Premodern adherence exerts a general rightward effect and postmodern adherence exerts a general leftward effect on political attitudes. Among politically attentive respondents, moral epistemology promotes ideological constraint across the economic, social, and foreign policy issue domains. *Conclusion.* These findings indicate that ideological divisions in the American electorate are at least partly reflective of fundamental differences in beliefs about the nature and sources of moral knowledge.

> A political conception of justice must sometimes presuppose an answer to the moral and religious questions it purports to bracket. At least where grave moral questions are at stake, it is not possible to detach politics and law from substantive moral judgment. (Michael J. Sandel, 1996:23)

Sandel's point is an important but overlooked one: we use moral reasoning not only to reach private ethical decisions, but also to guide our normative evaluations of public policy. Moreover, our moral beliefs and values do not arise spontaneously, but are shaped by our conceptions about the nature of morality itself and drawn from our preferred sources of moral knowledge. On issues of both private and public ethics, decisions about "right" or "wrong" are preceded by determinations of how and from what sources such "right" and "wrong" questions are decided—if such objective distinctions even exist in the first place. Arthur Leff (1979) forcefully makes this point in an essay in which he argues that the "says who?" question necessarily underlies moral convictions. Consider, for example, competing positions on stem cell research. On this issue, both camps claim to represent the "moral" position, but draw their rationale from divergent sources—one from a belief that scientific progress is the best avenue for the betterment of the human condition, and the other from the position that science should be made subsidiary to revealed moral truths from transcendent religious authority (e.g., the principle of *imago Dei*, which asserts the sanctity of human life at all stages).

Certainly, the political effects of moral beliefs are especially pronounced on salient social and cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage, but debates in other policy realms do not occur in a moral vacuum. Consider, for example, liberal economist Paul Krugman's (2011) assertion that Democrats and Republicans "live in different intellectual and moral universes" on economic and social welfare spending issues. Torture and waterboarding, global warming, tax cuts, and free trade and globalization are among a diverse set of nonsocial issues that have inspired moral rhetoric in contemporary American politics. Indeed, Ryan (2014) finds that a wide range of policy issues—even technical issues such as collective bargaining—elicit a moral response from sizeable proportions of the public (see also Skitka, Morgan, and Wisneski, 2015). Moreover, the polarized political environment (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006) serves to escalate the role of moral rhetoric in matters of public policy as the parties move apart and find less consensus.

Accordingly, a relatively recent body of literature in political science has brought in outside work on the primacy of values (Rokeach, 1973; Smith, 2003) to demonstrate that values and value systems are indeed highly influential determinants of political behavior and policy preferences (Feldman, 2003). Indeed, values appear to underlie the phenomena of partisan polarization (Jacoby, 2014) and heightened ideological constraint (Barker and Tinnick, 2006) that have come to characterize contemporary American politics. But what role do ultimate moral authorities play in the formation of political attitudes across policy domains, and do the effects of moral epistemology persist while controlling for the influence of religious and sociodemographic factors?

In order to unpack the relationship between moral epistemology and political behavior in the American electorate, we first provide a theoretical argument that our understanding of the political influence of values is incomplete without accounting for the epistemic foundations through which those values are initially formulated and processed. We then develop a tripartite categorization of moral epistemologies—views about the nature and sources of moral knowledge—and test their influence on citizens' policy preferences using a large (35,000+ respondents) survey sample from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Lugo et al., 2008).

Our findings provide strong evidence that moral epistemologies serve as a source of ideological constraint in American political behavior, shaping attitudes across economic, social, and foreign policy issues as well as ideological self-identification. Specifically, in accord with past theories that connect constrained, orthodox, absolutist, and authoritarian worldviews with political conservatism and unconstrained, progressive, relativist, and nonauthoritarian belief systems with political liberalism, we find that premodernism—which holds that morality is absolute and revealed by a supernatural source—has a rightward effect on policy preferences, while postmodernism—which instead views morality as relative—exerts a leftward influence on policy preferences. These effects are strongest among politically attentive respondents. Accordingly, we propose that ideological divisions exposed in the modern public square are more deeply rooted in contrasting belief systems about how we determine what constitutes the "good" in human behavior and social activity (see also Jacoby, 2014).

In addition, our analyses provide an assessment of the relative effects of the three-legged stool of religious influence on political attitudes: belonging, behaving, and believing. By controlling for the sociological or ethnoreligious dimensions of religious influence— denominational affiliation and depth of religious involvement—we test the political effects of a component of belief central to any religious worldview: the source and nature of moral authorities. Our results indicate that all three religious components have sizable effects on Americans' policy preferences.

The Influence of Values and Moral Beliefs on Mass Policy Preferences

Recent years have seen a stream of literature that offers different approaches to the study of how individuals' core values and moral beliefs shape their political behavior. One approach has focused explicitly on religion by assessing the effects of three dimensions of religious influence on mass political behavior: religious beliefs (such as biblical literacy), behavior (such as frequency of church attendance), and belonging (such as denominational affiliation). Hunter's (1991) influential culture war thesis contends that the competing moral visions offered by the religiously orthodox and the religiously progressive have an important spillover effect into politics, identifying an "isomorphism between religious conservatism and political preservationism on the one hand, and between religious and secularism and political reformism (if not radicalism) on the other" (Hunter, 1991:128). The culture war thesis has received considerable empirical support in studies of American mass and elite political behavior (e.g., Layman and Carmines, 1997). Religion now comprises one of the primary partisan and ideological fault lines in American politics, though there remain questions about the relative influences of the belonging, behaving, and believing dimensions in shaping political attitudes.

A separate—but closely related—collection of work has more broadly examined the role of core values and beliefs in citizens' political belief systems. Values are promising as a source of structure in individuals' political attitudes since they are universally possessed, personally salient, and accessible (Rokeach, 1973). Indeed, Goren (2001, 2013) demonstrates that both politically sophisticated and unsophisticated voters derive specific policy preferences from broad value dispositions, even if the connection between values and political attitudes is stronger among the politically sophisticated.

One of the more pressing questions in this literature has been precisely *which* values matter in political behavior (e.g., Kuklinski, 2001). As for the studies with an explicitly religious focus, however, the values literature has generally connected values that emphasize absolutism, hierarchy, and order with right-wing political behavior and attitudes and values that emphasize relativism, equality, and change with left-wing political behavior (Jost, Federico, and Napier, 2009). For instance, in the typology of moral foundations developed by Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009), conservatives place greater emphasis than liberals on the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations, while liberals rely primarily on the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations. Other studies have found that parenting values exert a strong influence on policy preferences, with those holding a "disciplinarian" vision expressing more right-wing preferences than those with a "nurturant" vision on a range of issues including foreign aid, immigration, gay rights, welfare, defense spending, crime/gun control, and taxes (Barker and Tinnick, 2006). This finding is echoed in work on how authoritarianism (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009) and dogmatism (Jost et al., 2003) engender right-wing political attitudes. Finally, Jacoby (2006, 2014) has demonstrated the significance of citizens' value *rankings* (how they order different values from most to least important) to ideological and partisan divides between citizens, with conservatives and Republicans attaching greater importance to the values of morality, patriotism, and social order; and liberals and Democrats attaching greater importance to the values of economic security, equality, and freedom.

Both of these approaches—religious and value-centered—are driving at the role of cultural and moral divides in the political behavior of the contemporary American electorate, but we argue that the primacy of moral conceptions lie in their epistemological roots: what is the (1) nature of morality (what is it; is it fixed or flexible?) and (2) the source from which morality is derived (what process do we utilize to determine questions of "right" and

"wrong"?). In this article, we provide a direct test of the theoretical framework provided by Christian Smith (2003) in his provocative work *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. Smith challenges conventional theoretical systems of human nature such as rational choice theory, exchange theory, sociobiology, or *homo economicus*. Instead, he argues that the essence of human nature is encapsulated by *homo credens*, that is, humans have an innate need to be governed in and think in terms of moral beliefs and structures. Moral beliefs, rather than being a product of human society and culture, are instead the driving force of our behavior and institutions:

> [I] have sought to address the question of the particular kind of animals human beings are, in hopes of improving and enlarging our understanding of human social action and institutions. This book has advanced one approach to answering this question, arguing that the most adequate approach to theorizing human culture and social life must be a normative one that conceives of humans as moral, believing, narrating animals and human social life as constituted by moral orders that define and direct social action . . . until we recognize this and build into our theories the recognition that to enact and sustain moral order is one of the central, fundamental motivations for human action, our understanding of human action and culture will be impoverished. (Smith, 2003:147–48)

If, as Smith asserts, "[w]e build up our lives from presuppositional starting points in which we (mostly unconsciously) place our trust and that are not derived from other justifying grounds" (Smith, 2003:150), then citizens' fundamental beliefs about the nature and sources of morality should have wide-ranging behavioral effects, including political ideology and attitudes. The concept of moral epistemology is quite promising as a theoretical framework and empirical measure to more directly address the role of values in political behavior and avoid reliance on proxy measures of these values and attitudes; for example, church attendance or biblical literacy. We next discuss this concept and develop three families of epistemic authorities from a wider constellation of plausible epistemological categories.

The Mainsprings of Moral Knowledge: Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Epistemologies

Regardless of religion, worldview, or ideology, people tend to identify a final or ultimate epistemic authority to guide their own decision making and assess that of others. That is, these epistemic authorities are the final standard by which all other truth claims are judged. William Halverson refers to this as the "touchstone proposition" behind every person's worldview. He writes (Halverson, 1976:384):

> At the center of every worldview is what might be called the "touchstone proposition" of that worldview, a proposition that is held to be the fundamental truth about reality and serves as a criterion to determine which other propositions may or may not count as candidates for belief.

Examples of epistemic authorities include the scientific method of scientific positivism, the Bible of Protestant Christianity, the general will in Rousseau's democracy, personal preferences in the philosophy of egoism, and so on. Moreover, there can be no authority that stands outside and judges the pronouncements of these ultimate standards of truth; otherwise they would not be ultimate. To put it in more philosophical terms, all people hold beliefs that are derived from and justified by prior and basic beliefs. A basic belief is a belief that is foundational to one's system of thought, worldview, or moral epistemology. People

do not (nor can they) justify the basic beliefs that they hold; otherwise those beliefs would not be basic. Rather, basic beliefs are the standard by which other derivative, contingent, inferential, or dependent beliefs are justified. That is, basic beliefs or foundational beliefs are presupposed and stand behind all other beliefs. As such, they are the least likely to be relinquished when challenged (see Plantinga, 1967).

To test the political effects of moral epistemologies, we employ a tripartite framework of moral epistemologies—*premodern* (morality is absolute and is derived from a nonhuman source), *modern* (morality is absolute and can be determined by naturalistic means), and *postmodern* (morality is subjective)—which has long been present in the philosophical (Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1991; Jameson, 1998) and psychological (Kvale, 1992; Martin and Sugarman, 2000) fields. This typology of moral epistemologies has also been introduced into the political science literature by Golec and Van Bergh (2007), who find that premodernism is positively associated with a broad composite measure of political conservatism in a collected sample of 188 Polish citizens. Conversely, modernist and postmodern adherences are negatively associated with political conservatism, although no additional explanatory variables other than *need for cognitive closure* are included in their model. We draw from these and other philosophical literatures in more specifically defining each category of moral epistemology.

Premodernism

Some root their epistemic authority outside the natural realm and place it in the supernatural or behind the natural. Plato's forms, natural law, and divine revelation are final sources of truth that may be accessible but not determined by humans. Typically, this group agrees that universal invariant transcendent truth exists and genuine knowledge is possible, but they disagree on how to access it. For premoderns, all truth is God's truth and man's knowledge of truth is dependent upon supernatural or divine revelation. Indeed, man's knowledge is a limited subset of God's exhaustive knowledge. He can know God, himself, what is true, the world, and so forth only in so far as God has revealed this knowledge to him. Man's potential to understand reality, what is true and right, depends upon the light of God's revelation. As C. S. Lewis put it, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else" (Lewis, 1945:21). In this system, divine revelation is prior to understanding. This is what Saint Augustine meant when he wrote, "I believe so that I may understand." Some historians of Western thought mark the epoch separating premodern times from postmodern times in the middle of the 17th century, but of course for many religious adherents, premodernism best characterizes their belief system.

Modernism

The modern period in epistemology is usually traced to the secular enlightenment beginning in the middle of the 17th century. For moderns, universal transcendent truth exists and man's *unaided reason alone* can access it. Given the right tools and methods (rational thought and/or empirical observation) man can know things about the world concerning ethics, meaning, origins, history, and so on truly and completely without divine aid of any kind. Whereas truth and knowledge begin with God for premoderns, they begin with man's reason alone for moderns, and yet the two systems are in agreement that "T"ruth is detectable in the world. What is right and true and what constitutes genuine knowledge is

that which conforms to rational thought, the scientific method, and that which is pragmatic or useful (not that which conforms to the will, character, or revelation of God). The timeless universal laws of nature, reason, and morality exist and can be discovered through man's reason alone. However religious they may be, moderns check their beliefs at the door of natural science or reason. God is unnecessary for human understanding of the world, or as Nietzsche put it, "he is dead" because modern man has killed him. Immanuel Kant perhaps put it best when defining the enlightenment as the moment that man relinquishes authorities outside himself and uses his own reasoning to discover what is universally true. He wrote: "'Have the courage to use *your own* understanding!' is therefore the motto of enlightenment" (Kant, 1784:41). More recently, Sam Harris defended this perspective in writing, "questions about values—about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose—are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood" (Harris, 2010:1).

Postmodernism

Others drift more toward epistemological skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism. Unlike premoderns and moderns, who disagree over the source of truth but concur on its existence, postmoderns question the very prospect that objective truth, in any form, exists. If man is the starting point for knowledge, then nothing like objective universal truth can be known ultimately because man is hopelessly finite and limited both in what he can know and his ability to rise above his own background when he interprets his experiences and tries to communicate them to others. Postmodernists break with both premodernists and modernists in viewing morality as relative and moral guidelines as not factually "true" or "false" as is the case with, for example, mathematical propositions. For postmodern adherents, the foundations of moral knowledge—either supernatural or based on human reason—are frail and inadequate to determine objective moral truths. As John Mackie explains:

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities of qualities of relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from out ordinary ways of knowing anything else . . . This queerness does not consist simply in the fact that ethical statements are "unverifiable." (Mackie, 1977:38–39)

Postmodernists do not necessarily eschew all claims to moral "rights" and "wrongs," but they do reject the claim that they originate from any objective source (see Dreier, 2006 for a discussion of the distinction between moral relativism and moral nihilism). The overarching postmodern perspective is that humans create their own, nonuniversal truth—including moral meaning—in their lives. Morality is not obedience to rules, but the nature of relationships with others (Bauman, 1993). The key for postmodernism is that one's values may be held with great intensity or with great ambivalence, but they are ultimately reduced to personal preference born of external conditioning.

Collapsing the vast array of epistemological thought into three categories certainly fails to provide a full scholarly treatment of the subject. Nevertheless, we think these labels adequately pack common nontechnical epistemological thought into sensible and mutually exclusive genres for our purposes here. Moreover, we are aware that the history of Western thought cannot be neatly broken up into historical paradigm shifts of epistemic

presuppositions. But our intention is not to focus on the *chronology* of epistemological shifts, but rather on the *typology* of epistemological systems.

We also believe that this typology of moral epistemologies overlaps with ideological divisions in contemporary American politics. The belief in the existence of absolute moral laws, particularly of a religious source, should promote government action to promote and enforce traditional moral rules in social and cultural matters such as abortion and homosexuality. In the absence of overarching truths, as among postmodern adherents, nonjudgmental values such as pacifism and empathy seem to be most likely to shape citizens' policy preferences. This should engender an aversion to right-wing positions on social and foreign policy issues among postmodern adherents, since both involve the government enforcing judgments between right and wrong. However, we also believe that postmodern adherents will be more supportive of government action on social welfare policies because it is in this arena that the government can act as a secular, nonjudgmental agent of economic redistribution. In this view, economic rules are not built into the universe, and humans are free to manipulate economic systems without being in danger of violating absolute principles of economic law. In contrast, past work has found that adherence to absolutist doctrine—as among fundamentalist Protestants—promotes a belief in economic individualism and support for free market policies (Barker and Carman, 2000; but see Layman and Green, 2006).

Hypotheses, Data, and Methods

We formulate three hypotheses about the political effects of adherence to each of these epistemological frameworks:

> H_1: *Moral epistemologies serve as sources of ideological constraint. Premodern adherence will have a rightward effect and postmodern adherence will have leftward effect on respondents' general ideological preferences and their attitudes on economic, social, and foreign policy issues.*

> H_{1A}: *Relative to modernist adherents, the rightward effect of premodern adherence will be most pronounced on social policy preferences where traditional moral norms are most directly threatened. Likewise, the leftward effect of postmodern adherence will be most pronounced on economic and foreign policy preferences, for which the rejection of absolute morality promotes the values of empathy and pacifism.*

> H_2: *The influence of moral epistemology on policy preferences will persist after controlling for measures of religious belonging and behaving.*

> H_3: *The effects of moral epistemology on policy preferences will be present for respondents at all levels of political sophistication, but will be most pronounced among politically sophisticated respondents, especially on nonsocial policy preferences.*

To test these hypotheses, we use data from the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. This survey interviewed 35,556 respondents between May and August 2007 and includes large samples from a diverse set of faith traditions, as well as those unaffiliated with any faith tradition (Lugo et al., 2008).[1]

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[1]We use the Pew Research Center's religious tradition (RELTRAD) variable to categorize respondents' affiliation with major faith traditions. This variable is constructed from responses to specific denominational questions and includes the categories: Evangelical Protestant Churches, Mainline Protestant Churches, Historically Black Protestant Churches, Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Other Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Other World Religions, Other Faiths, Unaffiliated, and Don't Know/Refused.

TABLE 1

Distribution of Respondents by Moral Epistemology Categories in the Pew Research Center's 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

Epistemic Category	Short Description	Number of Respondents (Percent of Total)
Premodern	Morality is absolute, and source is supernatural (religious).	9,245 (27.3 percent)
Modern	Morality is absolute, and source is natural (scientific or rational).	17,232 (50.8 percent)
Postmodern	Morality is relative.	7,446 (21.9 percent)

Critically, this survey includes two questions that allow for the operationalization of the tripartite typology of moral epistemology.

The first question concerns attitudes toward moral absolutism, and reads: "Please tell me if you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree or completely disagree that there are clear and absolute standards for what is right and wrong." The second question concerns the sources of moral beliefs: "When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance? Religious teachings and beliefs, philosophy and reason, practical experience and common sense, or scientific information?" From these questions, we operationalize three dichotomous measures of moral epistemology—*Premodern*, *Modern*, and *Postmodern*. Respondents are coded as belonging to the premodern category if they completely or mostly agreed with the first statement and answered that their source of moral guidance was religious. Respondents are coded as belonging to the modern category if they completely or mostly agreed with the first statement and answered that their source of moral guidance was reason, experience, or science. Finally, respondents are coded as belonging to the postmodern category if they completely or mostly disagree with moral absolutism; their source of moral epistemology could be any of the four options—the key point here is that they do not believe that absolute moral truths exist, and thus no single epistemic source is authoritative. Respondents who do not provide answers to both of the two questions are excluded from the analysis. The distribution of respondents across these categories is provided in Table 1.

The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey also includes two general measures of political behavior: partisanship (1 = Democrat to 5 = Republican, with party leaners broken out) and ideological self-placement (1 = Very liberal to 5 = Very conservative). In addition to ideological self-placement and a general measure of ideology based on policy preferences, we create separate measures of respondents' policy preferences on economic, social, and foreign policy issues. We aggregate responses to multiple survey items to create the measures of economic, social, and general ideology.[2] Aggregated scales attenuate measurement error associated with individual survey items and provide more valid measures of latent ideological preferences (see, e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder, 2008). Specifically, we use the

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[2]Two foreign policy items are included in the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: one asking whether diplomacy or military strength is the best way to ensure peace and the other asking whether the United States should be less involved in world affairs. As an anonymous reviewer points out, these items tap into two orthogonal dimensions of foreign policy attitudes—one dealing with military strength versus diplomacy preferences and the other with isolationist versus interventionist preferences. Accordingly, they should not be combined into a single measure of foreign policy ideology. In our analyses, we use the military strength versus diplomacy item as our measure of foreign policy ideology.

item response theory (IRT) model to estimate economic, social, and general ideological scores for the respondents. IRT models allow individual items to vary in how strongly they load onto the underlying concept being measured, and have gained popularity in political science over recent years for the purpose of estimating latent ideology from political choice data (e.g., Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers, 2004; Treier and Hillygus, 2009; Jessee, 2009). We provide additional details about the IRT estimation procedure and results in an online appendix provided on the author's website.

Four items are used to construct the economic ideology measure: ideological self-placement, whether hard work and determination are enough to guarantee individual success, whether the government should do more to help the needy, whether stricter environmental laws and regulations are too costly from an economic standpoint, and whether the respondent prefers a smaller government with less services or a larger government with more services. Three items are used to construct the social ideology measure: ideological self-placement, whether the government should do more to protect morality in society, whether homosexuality should be accepted in society, and position on the legality of abortion. The measure of general ideology is constructed using all of the above items as well as ideological self-identification and the foreign policy ideology item (whether diplomacy or military strength is the best way to ensure peace). These variables are scaled such that higher values indicate more conservative attitudes. In subsequent analyses, we use both the continuous ideological scores and quartiles constructed from those scores.

Given the categorical nature of the variables, we first use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to examine how moral epistemology maps onto political preferences. MCA is a multidimensional scaling procedure that provides a geometric representation of the relationship between two or more categorical variables (Borg and Groenen, 2010:526–36; Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010). Based on the relative response frequencies, each of the variable categories is represented as a point in Euclidian space and the length of the interpoint distances is proportional to the degree of relative dissimilarity between categories. That is, more closely associated categories (e.g., "Conservative" and "Republican") will be placed in closer proximity than categories with lower response frequencies (e.g., "Liberal" and "Republican"). MCA offers a close approximation to ideal point estimation methods that are more familiar and theoretically grounded in political science (see Lowe, 2008; Bonica, 2014).

We then proceed to test whether the effects of moral epistemology on policy preferences persist after controlling for the effects of religious and sociodemographic variables using multiple regression. These variables include age cohort ($1 = 18$–29 years to $5 = 75+$ years), education ($1 =$ high school incomplete or less to $4 =$ college graduate or postgraduate work/degree), annual household income ($1 =$ less than \$10k to $9 = \$150k+$), and indicator variables for female, married, Hispanic, and black. Age, education, and income are rescaled to range between 0 and 1 so that a one-unit change in the variable can be easily interpreted as the effect of moving from the minimum to maximum category.

The religious measures include indicator variables for whether the respondent identified with a church in the evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, or Jewish traditions. We also include a secular indicator variable that is coded 1 if the respondent answered that he or she is an atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular, and 0 otherwise. To further capture the dimensions of religious belonging and behaving, we include variables for frequency of attendance at religious services ($1 =$ never to $6 =$ more than once a week) and personal religious salience ($1 =$ religion is not at all important in my life to $4 =$ religion is very important in my life). Both variables are rescaled to range between 0 and 1 to facilitate interpretation. We also measure political attentiveness with an item that asks: "Some people

seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?" Respondents who answer "most of the time" are coded 1 on the *Follow Politics Most* variable, while all other responses are coded 0.[3] Finally, we include the five-point partisanship measure as an explanatory variable (rescaled to range between 0 and 1) to capture the effects of partisan cue-taking on policy preferences (Zaller, 1992; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013).

Results

We begin by using MCA to analyze the relationship between moral epistemology and our measures of political behavior. Specifically, we include three political variables in the MCA analyses: partisanship, self-identified ideology, and score quartiles for economic, social, foreign, and general ideological preferences. The quartiles are scaled such that the first quartile includes respondents with the most liberal policy preferences and the fourth quartile includes respondents with the most conservative policy preferences. MCA is run separately for the economic, social, foreign, and general ideological quartiles. We estimate each model in two dimensions, but only show the estimated first-dimension positions of the variable categories in Figure 1.

The MCA results produce two important findings that support our first hypothesis. First, though MCA is estimated in two dimensions, the first dimension explains an overwhelming proportion of the variance (or principal inertia) in the response patterns between the four variables (moral epistemology and the three political variables). This figure ranges between nearly 81 percent when the general ideological quartiles are used to 92 percent for the configuration with the social ideological quartiles. In each of these results, the first dimension clearly represents the partisan-ideological cleavage in American politics, with Democrats, self-identified liberals, and respondents with liberal policy preferences on the left; and Republicans, self-identified conservatives, and respondents with conservative policy preferences on the right in all four of the estimated configurations shown in Figure 1.[4]

Second, in each of the results, our moral epistemology categories align with the first political dimension rather than comprising a separate dimension. Moreover, moral epistemology maps onto the first dimension in the hypothesized manner: postmodern respondents are the furthest left, modern respondents are in the center, and premodern respondents are the furthest right in each of the configurations. The consistency of this pattern across the separate policy domains suggests that moral epistemology promotes ideological constraint in respondents' political attitudes and behavior. Moreover, the distance between the epistemological categories also suggests that moral epistemology serves to divide respondents along the partisan-ideological continuum to nearly the same degree as partisan and ideological labels.

To control for the effects of confounding variables (especially of religious affiliation and behavior), we next turn to multiple regression analysis. We run five separate models in which

[3]A total of 20,620 respondents answered "most of the time" to the interest item and are coded 1, while the 14,671 respondents who provided another response are coded 0. This item is subject to overreporting, but this downwardly biases the results for attentiveness effects (i.e., in favor of the null hypothesis that there will be no additional effects among the politically attentive).

[4]The second dimension appears to mostly capture differences between extreme and moderate categories, and never explains more than 10 percent of the total variance.

FIGURE 1

Multiple Correspondence Analysis Results for Moral Epistemology, Political Behavior, and Policy Preferences
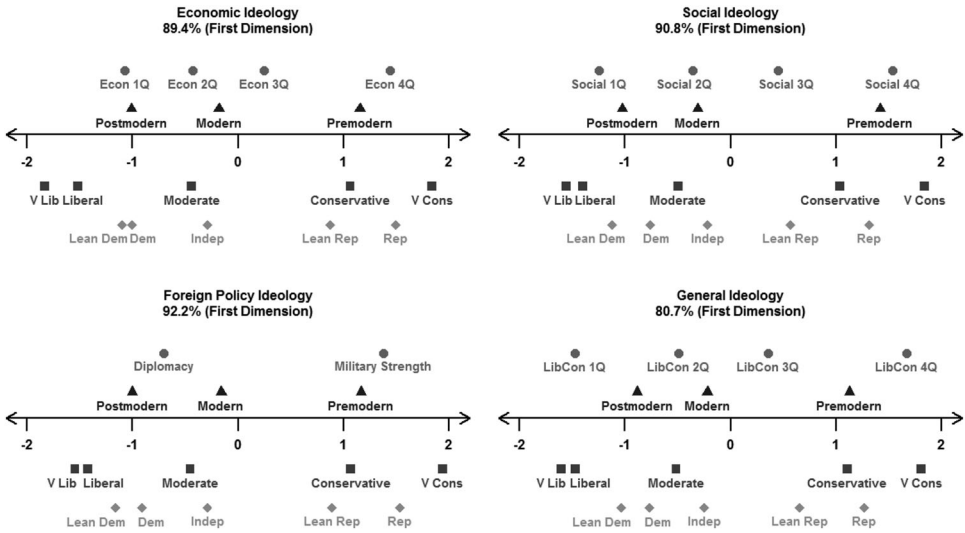
NOTES: Points shown are category first-dimension coordinates. Variance explained (proportion of total principal inertia) by the first dimension shown in headers.

the general ideology scores, ideological self-identifications, and measures of economic, social, and foreign policy attitudes are the dependent variables. In the general, economic, and social ideology models, the ideological scores are standardized so that a one-unit change is interpretable as a standard deviation change in the scores. Scores are also scaled such that higher values indicate more conservative attitudes. In the ideological self-identification and foreign policy models (in which the dependent variables are five-point and binary scales, respectively), we present marginal effects rather than the binary and ordered logit coefficients to ease interpretation.[5] These values represent changes in predicted probabilities of identifying as "conservative" or "very conservative" (in the ideological self-identification model) and of preferring military strength to diplomacy (in the foreign policy ideology model) produced by a one-unit change in the independent variables.

In each model, we include demographic and religious variables as well as indicators for premodern and postmodern adherence (omitting modern, which serves as the reference category). We also include interactions between the epistemological categories and our binary measure of political attentiveness (whether the respondent follows politics "very closely" or not). This term captures differences in the effects of moral epistemology between politically sophisticated respondents and their less-sophisticated counterparts. Finally, because both epistemological variables represent relative differences from the modern category, the effect of moving from the premodern to postmodern categories (i.e., the combined or full effect of moral epistemology) can be calculated by taking the absolute difference between the

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[5]The binary and ordered logit coefficients for these models are presented in the Appendix.

coefficients on the *Premodern* and *Postmodern* indicator variables.[6] The results are reported in Table 2.

Consistent with the MCA results, the regression models provide support for our first hypothesis that premodern adherence exerts a general rightward effect and postmodern adherence exerts a general leftward effect on political attitudes. In the models of general ideology (aggregated from specific issue preferences across domains) and ideological self-identifications, the coefficients for premodern and postmodern adherence and their interactions with political attentiveness are significant and in the expected direction. This is true even while controlling for the effects of religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services, and personal religious salience, supporting our second hypothesis that moral epistemology exerts separate effects from those of religious belonging and behavior.

The relationship between moral epistemology and economic, social, and foreign policy issue attitudes is more nuanced. Moral epistemology has an effect on the general ideology measure and ideological self-identifications for both politically attentive and inattentive respondents (though in both models, the combined effect of moral epistemology for the politically attentive is about twice as large as for the politically inattentive). The influence of moral epistemology on social ideology is only slightly greater for politically attentive respondents than politically inattentive respondents. It is also on social issues on which premodern adherents most clearly distinguish themselves from modernist and postmodernist adherents, consistent with our expectation that social ideology encompasses issues that most clearly pit traditional morality against progressive values and for which epistemological beliefs have more immediately recognizable relevance.

However, moral epistemology only meaningfully influences economic and foreign policy ideology among politically attentive respondents. The coefficients on the *Premodern* and *Postmodern* terms in the economic and foreign policy ideology models are never greater than 0.03 in absolute value. Among politically attentive respondents, there is only limited support for our hypothesis that the effect of postmodern adherence will be most pronounced on economic and foreign policy issues (i.e., that the difference between postmodern and modern adherents will be larger than the difference between premodern and modern adherents). We suspect the linkage between postmodern adherence—the rejection of absolute morality—and liberal (empathetic and pacifistic) positions on economic and foreign policy issues is more conceptually difficult than the linkage between premodern adherence—the belief in absolute moral rules stemming from a religious source—and socially conservative attitudes. This requires a greater level of political sophistication from postmodern adherents to distinguish themselves on economic and foreign policy issues than for premodern adherents to distinguish themselves on social issues.

These results partially support our first and third hypotheses: the effects of moral epistemology on issue attitudes are indeed larger for the politically attentive than the politically inattentive, and the differences in the effects of moral epistemology between the politically attentive and inattentive are also larger on economic and foreign policy issues than social issues. However, we expected that the effects of moral epistemology would nonetheless be present among the politically inattentive for all issues. This is not the case: among inattentive respondents, moral epistemology influences general ideological preferences, ideological self-identification, and social policy preferences, but not economic or foreign policy

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[6]In order to calculate the combined effects of moral epistemology among politically attentive respondents, we add the absolute difference between the *Premodern* and *Postmodern* coefficients to the absolute difference between the coefficients on the interaction terms *Premodern* ✗ *Follow Politics Most* and *Postmodern* ✗ *Follow Politics Most*. Estimation details are provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Influence of Moral Epistemology on Ideological Identification and Preferences

	General Ideology	Ideological Self-ID	Economic Ideology	Social Ideology	Foreign Policy Ideology
Premodern	0.25*	0.08*	−0.01	0.41*	−0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Follow politics most	0.01	0.01*	0.06*	−0.07*	0.06*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Premodern	0.08*	0.03*	0.10*	−0.01	0.05*
*Follow politics most	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Postmodern	−0.06*	−0.04*	−0.03	0.01	−0.02*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Postmodern	−0.23*	−0.08*	−0.20*	−0.14*	−0.08*
*Follow politics most	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Combined effect of moral	*0.31**	*0.12**	*0.02*	*0.41**	*0.02*
epistemology	*(0.02)*	*(0.01)*	*(0.03)*	*(0.02)*	*(0.01)*
Combined effect of moral	*0.62**	*0.23**	*0.32**	*0.55**	*0.15**
epistemology (follow	*(0.02)*	*(0.01)*	*(0.02)*	*(0.02)*	*(0.01)*
politics most)					
Female	−0.27*	−0.06*	−0.21*	−0.23*	−0.11*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age cohort (0–1)	0.24*	0.12*	0.37*	0.03	0.06*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Education (0–1)	−0.26*	−0.10*	0.14*	−0.31*	−0.10*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Household income (0–1)	−0.10*	−0.02*	0.30*	−0.37*	0.04*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Married	0.14*	0.05*	0.08*	0.13*	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Hispanic	−0.06*	−0.03*	−0.10*	0.02	−0.09*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Black	0.16*	0.08*	−0.18*	0.20*	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Church attendance (0–1)	0.41*	0.14*	0.10*	0.58*	−0.05*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Religious salience (0–1)	0.38*	0.16*	−0.03	0.46*	0.06*
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Evangelical	0.32*	0.11*	0.06*	0.35*	0.09*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Catholic	0.10*	0.06*	−0.01	0.11*	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Mormon	0.28*	0.11*	0.14*	0.28*	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Jewish	−0.20*	−0.05*	−0.23*	−0.20*	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Secular	0.04*	−0.01	−0.02	0.11*	−0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Party identification (0–1)	1.01*	0.45*	0.84*	0.51*	0.44*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Intercept	−1.02*		−0.80*	−0.72*	
	(0.02)		(0.03)	(0.03)	
N	28,251	27,089	28,225	28,142	24,798
R²	0.47		0.23	0.39	

TABLE 2

Continued

	General Ideology	Ideological Self-ID	Economic Ideology	Social Ideology	Foreign Policy Ideology
Adj. R^2	0.47		0.23	0.39	
RMSE	0.73		0.89	0.78	
Log likelihood		−32,277.67			−13,124.40
McFadden's pseudo-R^2		0.13			0.17

General, economic, and social ideology are standardized ideological scores; ideological self-identification is measured on a five-point scale and foreign policy ideology is measured on a two-point scale (diplomacy vs. military strength). DV values are coded such that higher values indicate more conservative preferences. Entries for the general, economic, and social ideology models are OLS coefficients; entries for the ideological self-identification and foreign policy models are marginal effects estimated from ordered and binary logit models (coefficients for the logit models provided in the Appendix). Marginal effects represent the changes in predicted probabilities of identifying as "conservative" or "very conservative" (in the ideological self-identification model) and of preferring military strength to diplomacy (in the foreign policy ideology model) from a discrete change in the variable from 0 to 1. Combined effects of moral epistemology (with standard errors) in the linear regression models (general ideology, economic ideology, and social ideology) estimated using the *lincom* command in Stata 13. Estimated coefficients of combined effects listed in italics. Marginal effects and combined marginal effects (with standard errors) of moral epistemology in the logit and ordered logit models (ideological self-identification and foreign policy ideology) estimated using the *margins* command in Stata 13, setting all other variables to their mean values. Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, one-tailed.

preferences. Conversely, among politically attentive respondents, moral epistemology has a relatively large effect in all five ideological models. Given the size of the attentive group (20,620 respondents, compared to 14,671 respondents coded as politically inattentive), we think this is still an important finding. However, in our models of economic and foreign policy attitudes, our results diverge from past work (e.g., Goren, 2001, 2013) that finds that citizens across levels of political sophistication use core values and beliefs to guide their policy preferences. Our results more closely align with Zaller (1992) and Jacoby (2006), which emphasize the role of political sophistication in conditioning voters' abilities to connect value predispositions and political attitudes.

Finally, though the results indicate that the influence of moral epistemology is most pronounced for social and foreign policy issue attitudes, it is nonetheless a meaningful determinant of economic ideology for the politically attentive. For instance, the combined effect of moral epistemology on economic attitudes among attentive respondents (0.32 among attentive respondents) is most comparable to that of moving from the lowest to highest income category (0.30), and also larger or roughly equal to other central sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, education, and race. Like Layman and Green (2006), we find that standard religious variables such as church attendance, personal religious salience, and affiliation generally fail to exert meaningful effects on economic policy preferences. However, we think that moral epistemology, in part, captures an element of religious belief (one that influences policy positions across issue domains) that is not explained by the standard measures of religious belonging and behavior.

Discussion

As James Davison Hunter (2010:63) notes, divides over political questions "often trace back to deeper metaphysical and epistemological differences that rarely if ever see the light of day. When disputes go 'all the way down' in this way, what is legitimate for

one faction is, by rights, illegitimate for another." We think that political science stands to gain a better understanding of the nature of political divisions by borrowing from work in philosophy and psychology on moral epistemology. Indeed, these results support the claim that ideological polarization in the contemporary American electorate is seeded in deep divisions over how citizens view the nature and sources of morality.

Our analysis demonstrates that divides over moral epistemology map onto a range of political divides over partisanship, ideological identification, and policy preferences. Specifically, premodernism (the belief that there exist absolute moral truths that originate from a religious source) has a rightward influence on general ideological preferences and attitudes on economic, social, and foreign policy issues, while postmodernism (the belief that there are no absolute moral truths) has a contrasting leftward influence on these measures. Moral epistemology appears to serve as an especially robust mechanism of ideological constraint among the politically attentive (cf. Jacoby, 2006). Among politically attentive respondents, moral epistemology has an ideologically consistent and meaningful effect on ideological identifications and preferences across issue domains. We think that these results can be useful in explaining why the growth in ideological constraint in the contemporary American electorate has been concentrated among citizens with higher levels of political sophistication (Claasen and Highton, 2009; Lupton, Myers, and Thornton, 2015).

We think these results are helpful not only in illuminating the nature of contemporary political polarization and divisions between warring partisan and ideological camps, but also in measuring the influence of a key element of religious belief—the nature and sources of moral knowledge—on political behavior. By controlling for the effects of religious belonging and behavior, our analysis demonstrates that religious beliefs are politically consequential. The results support the claim that the influence of moral and religious differences on political divides is not solely sociological, but rather runs to the fault lines of how individuals conceive of morality and ascertain moral knowledge.

Additional work is needed to map out the causal process by which moral epistemology influences political preferences. In particular, to what extent does moral epistemology shape broad value orientations such as egalitarianism and authoritarianism, which have been shown to have a strong effect on specific political attitudes? We believe that a structural equation modeling approach using data with measures of moral epistemology, core values, and policy preferences offers a promising route to uncovering the mechanisms involved in the relationship between moral epistemology and political preferences. Moreover, such analysis would further test the mettle of our claim that value orientations are themselves a product of more basic or foundational beliefs that are philosophical or epistemological in nature.

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