What is a “Social Issue”?

There can be a fair amount of disagreement among scholars about just what should be considered a social issue, but at the core of most typologies are those controversies that fall under the aegis of “religious and cultural conflict” (Layman 2001): issues such as abortion, gay rights, the role of religion in public schools, and euthanasia. Other scholars also include additional battles over freedom of speech and the public regulation of private behavior—such as use of recreational drugs and the availability of pornography—on a longer register of what they call “moral issues” (for example, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). An even further expansion of the list is promoted by those who locate the origins of opinion in the extent of one's predisposition toward authoritarianism, which they view as a cause of what one scholar calls the “familiar triad of racial, political and moral intolerance” (Stenner 2005: 1). Within this framework, added to the list of issues are those involving race and ethnicity, such as educational and residential desegregation, affirmative action, and immigration. Other scholars take a different approach by setting forth criteria that can be used to separate social issues from others.

Leege and his collaborators define what they call “cultural politics” as “less a set of issues than a style of argumentation that invokes fundamental social values and emphasizes group differences” (Leege, Wald, Krueger, and Mueller 2002: 27–8). Thus elaborated, this approach justifies including—in certain contexts—issues such as crime (including the death penalty, punishment of criminals, and gun control) and national security as subjects of research.

The Distinctiveness of Social Issues: Shared Characteristics

Some important similarities are shared by many of the policy domains scholars have identified as social issues. For one, debates about social issues are usually about ends, rather than means: should gay people be allowed to serve openly in the military? Should abortion be legal? Should patients with incurable diseases be allowed to seek a doctor's assistance to end their lives? In Donald Stokes's terminology, they are thus generally position rather than valence issues (1963, 373). Typically there is much more disagreement over the desired end state in social issue domains than on valence issues like schools, the environment, or foreign policy—where most Americans agree that, all things being equal, they'd like a well-educated citizenry, clean air and water, and a nation safe from its enemies. A second distinction is that the social issues identified here are generally associated with policies whose implementations require little in the way of resources. In fact, we might consider social issues to be distinguished from others by the fact that they are attempts to redistribute values rather than resources (Gusfield 1963). While most welfare state issues involve taxing and spending and thus inevitably require the consideration of tradeoffs among them, for the most part social issues are not subject to a similar budget constraint. Third, scholars have noted how social issues are generally “easy” rather than “hard” issues according to the distinction made first by Carmines and Stimson (1980). Easy issues are symbolic rather than technical, deal with policy ends rather than means, and have been on the political agenda for a relatively long time—all criteria often associated with social issues. The characteristic feature of easy issues is that voters at all levels of sophistication are equally able to translate their issue attitudes into votes—and thus empirically we see little difference among the least and best-informed in the relationship between preferences on easy issues and voting. A related feature is that voters at all levels of sophistication are equally able to translate their issue attitudes into votes—and thus empirically we see little difference among the least and best-informed in the relationship between preferences on easy issues and voting.
social issues tend to be more stable over time than on other issues (Converse and Markus 1979; Erikson and Tedin 2007). Social issues are arguably easier for lawmakers as well: information barriers are low, and thus little expertise is required to change policy in a definitive way on social issues (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996).

These three attributes that many social issues have in common—they are about ends, not means; they are less affected by resource constraints; and they are easy for both citizens and policymakers—bring us to a final characteristic that distinguishes social issues from others in the American context: the strong role courts have played in their recent political trajectory. It is not inconceivable that one of the reasons courts have been so active in this realm is that a change in policy on these issues can be accomplished with relatively little cost and expertise, making court rulings credible and enforceable. On many of the most salient social issues, the United States Supreme Court has issued highly consequential rulings striking down democratically enacted laws and policies between the mid-1950s and the present day. These include decisions on abortion, gay rights, school prayer, interracial marriage, racial segregation, and pornography. In each of these cases, the court changed policy in an unmistakably liberal direction. Public opinion on these issues has not necessarily followed suit (Persily, Citrin, and Egan 2008), and some rulings have polarized—rather than led—public opinion (Brickman and Peterson 2006; Franklin and Kosak 1989; Johnson and Martin 1998). All told, in the post-New Deal era, federal courts have played a much larger role in adjudicating disputes on social issues than on economic issues.

Social Issues as a Second Dimension of Conflict in American Politics

A complementary approach adopted by scholars seeking to circumscribe the set of issues properly considered “social” has been to conduct some sort of data reduction process designed to identify underlying factors, dimensions, or latent variables. Many of these analyses have uncovered a dimension consisting of social issues that is distinct from the primary left–right conflict over the role of government in economic matters in the United States. Depending on the survey questions being analyzed, the dimension typically includes a tightly interrelated set of controversies over morality, the role of the state in regulating private behavior, and the rights of disadvantaged groups, including women, racial minorities, and gays (for example, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Fleishman 1988; Layman and Carsey 2002a; Stimson 1975; Treier and Hillygus 2009). Analyses like these find much less frequently that debates about crime, welfare, or guns belong distinctly to the family of social issues. To be clear, attitudes on the social issues dimension are not entirely unrelated to those regarding the welfare state: preferences on the two dimensions tend to covary to a substantial degree with one another and with survey respondents’ placements of themselves on the generic liberal-to-conservative scale.

The distinctiveness of social issues as a separate dimension of conflict in American politics has been found to vary depending on contexts in other arenas, including congressional roll-call votes (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), congressional constituency opinion (Fleck and Kilby 2002), and interest groups (Poole and Rosenthal 1998). Overarching ideologies stitch voters located in different areas of this policy space into political coalitions (Hinich and Munger 1994). Although the chief lines of battle in contemporary American politics are drawn between liberals (those who favor expansion of the welfare state, but less state promotion of traditional morality) and conservatives (those who favor more state promotion of traditional morality, but a smaller welfare state), there is nothing particularly natural about these coalitions. The primary conflict in American politics at the turn of the twentieth century pitted liberal social and economic conservatives on one side against social conservatives and economic liberals on the other (Brady 2001; G. Miller and Schofield 2003). Currently, however, in advanced industrial democracies it is generally the case that parties that support expansion of the welfare state also advocate less traditional positions on social issues (Benoit and Laver 2006).

Trends in Opinion on Social Issues

In the very long term, trends in American opinion on most leading social issues have moved in an unmistakably liberal direction—that is, away from support for government regulation of private behavior and toward less traditional views of morality and intergroup relations. For example, where survey data are available, scholars have found that current attitudes are substantially more liberal than in the 1960s on social issues as diverse as abortion, school prayer, the right to die, gay rights, desegregation, and women’s roles (see, generally, Persily, Citrin, and Egan 2008). Trends like these—and similar opinion change around the world that has coincided with industrialization and prosperity—are cited by Ronald Inglehart in support of his “post-materialism” thesis (Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Inglehart’s explanation for liberalizing opinion trends is simple: economic security makes humans cognitively and socially more autonomous. It thus leads us to turn away from traditional, religious values toward the rational and secular—and to prize self-expression over conformity. Global opinion data provide substantial cross-national evidence for the theory.

However, Inglehart’s human development sequence is less helpful in explaining opinion on social issues over the past four decades in the
United States, where many liberalizing trends have flattened out in ways that the theory would not predict. Figure 38.1 plots American public opinion on leading social issues, separating these issues into three groups: those that many Americans currently associate with some notion of equal rights (controversies dealing with race, gender, and sexual orientation), those that have remained distinctly in the realm of private behavior, and those having to do with crime and guns. The differences among these trends are striking. Attitudes on social issues that can be viewed through an egalitarian lens have generally moved in a liberal direction since the 1970s, but attitudes on social issues regarding private behavior have remained relatively stable over the past forty years. The data suggest that Americans are increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of unequal treatment of their fellow citizens, even as they continue to frown upon behavior they view as immoral or licentious. Nowhere is this distinction more important than in the battle over gay rights, where advocates have pinned their hopes on—and become increasingly successful at—framing homosexuality as an issue of ascriptive identity rather than discretionary sexual behavior (for example, D'Emilio 1998; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008). Finally, attitudes on crime and guns have changed over time—but not in any reliable fashion. Support for requiring handgun permits has moved in a slightly liberal direction, while support for a handgun ban has moved in a decidedly conservative one—even as the proportion of Americans reporting that they keep a gun in their home has fallen sharply over the past four decades. Americans' support for capital punishment for convicted murderers remains consistently high, but it has tended to fluctuate with the murder rate (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun 2008; Hanley 2008). The lack of consistency in these trends provides further confirmation that attitudes on crime and guns do not fit quite as squarely as do the other controversies discussed in this chapter in the category of issues considered "social."
Two other notable trends in opinion shared by most social issues in the United States over the past fifty years are increased salience and increased partisan conflict. The space occupied by most of the leading social issues on the current landscape of American politics was minimal until the second half of the twentieth century, and the partisan divisions we take for granted on these issues have arisen relatively recently compared to those that have long accompanied Americans' views on the welfare state. Democratic and Republican elites actually switched sides on race relations in the 1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989) and on abortion in the 1970s (Adams 1997). Significant differences between rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans in attitudes on women's rights, abortion, and gay rights did not emerge in full force until the 1990s (Layman and Carsey 2002b). Over the past few decades, the association between partisanship and attitudes on social issues has grown across all birth cohorts (Stoker and Jennings 2008), but faster among those with college degrees (Bartels 2006), women (Kaufmann 2002), and whites in the South (Kruckey 2006).

Analysts have found that attitudes on social issues—notably, abortion—are significantly associated with vote choice (Abramowitz 1995; Alvarez and Nagler 1995, 1998; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Domke, Shah, and Wackman 2000; Highton 2004). This has inspired a lively debate in both popular and academic literatures about the extent to which the issues have split the parties' coalitions. Pundits and pollsters have reacted to the Democratic Party's recent decline among white voters by asserting that those of lower socioeconomic status have been persuaded to vote against their economic interests by a Republican Party that takes a conservative position on issues like abortion and gay rights (Frank 2004; Greenberg 2004). But political scientists have countered with analyses showing these claims to be incorrect, or—at best—lacking proper nuance. Support for the Democrats among low-income white voters has actually remained steady over time (Bartels 2006; Stonecash 2000), and income and class remain strong predictors of party identification and vote choice (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Manza and Brooks 1999). While it is true that lower-income whites are less supportive of abortion rights and gay rights than those with high incomes (M. D. Brewer and Stonecash 2007), it is generally the case that attitudes on economic issues continue to more strongly affect vote choice and partisanship than social issues (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006). If anything, social issues drive the votes of rich whites more than of poor whites (Gelman 2008) and those of whites with college degrees more than of whites without college degrees (Bartels 2006).

What explains the recent emergence of social issues as highly salient controversies on which Democrats and Republicans increasingly take opposing sides? And why hasn't American opinion on social issues moved in the unambiguously liberal direction predicted by post-materialism theory? The most persuasive answers to these questions lie in America's distinct political culture, which has remained tied to religious tradition even as the country has attained nearly unparalleled prosperity. The United States is truly an outlier, standing virtually alone as a highly religious society among the world's advanced industrial democracies (Pew Research Center 2002, 2003). Americans' persistent embrace of religion in the face of rising living standards presents fertile ground for the highly salient debates on school prayer, abortion, gay rights, and euthanasia seen across the nation over the past few decades. Religious communities—and in particular, evangelical Christian churches—have found themselves in conflict with emerging post-materialist values in America, producing "both a demand for political action and thousands of activists dedicated to supplying it" (J. C. Green 1995, 5).

Media Coverage of Social Issues

Trends in media coverage of individual social issues have largely tracked the degree of their importance in American politics. For example, the media paid little attention to segregation until the mid-1950s (Murakami 2008); abortion until the late 1960s (Luks and Salamone 2008); the right to die controversy until the late 1980s (J. A. Green and Jarvis 2008); and same-sex marriage until the mid-1990s (Egan, Persily, and Wallsten 2008). As an illustration of these patterns, Figure 38.2 plots trends in network television news coverage over the past four decades. The top panel graphs the average number of stories per year on leading social issues appearing on each of the three major networks' evening news programs. The graph shows that racial issues, once the clear leader in terms of news coverage, were eclipsed by abortion in the 1990s—and then homosexuality in the 2000s—as the leading social issues of the day. The share of Americans naming these sorts of cultural issues as the nation's most important problem has risen significantly over the past few decades (M. D. Brewer and Stonecash 2007). But all of this is put in perspective in the bottom panel of Figure 38.2, where the average number of stories per year per network about any social issue is plotted alongside the number of stories on education, the economy, and taxes. In this graph it is clear that news coverage of social issues is relatively light compared to the number of stories devoted to issues aligned firmly on the first dimension of conflict in American politics. Furthermore, coverage of social issues displays no upward trend over time, either in absolute numbers of stories or relative to trends in coverage of other issues.

Little is known about what distinctiveness, if any, characterizes the way media cover social issues and the extent of media effects on public opinion regarding these issues.
Figure 38.2 Trends in television news coverage of leading social issues, 1970–2009

Search terms for trends (*indicates Boolean “wild-card” operator):
Abortion: "abortion"
Death Penalty: “death penalty" or "capital punishment"
Drugs: "drug control" or "drug abuse" or "drug problem"
Economy: "unemployment" or "inflation" or "economy"
Education: “education” or “schools”
Homosexuality: "gay" or "homosexual*"
Race: "civil rights" or "affirmative action" or "race relations"
Taxes: "tax*"
Women's rights: "equal rights amendment" or "feminism" or "women’s rights" or "sex discrimination"
Source: Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

On gay rights, analysts have found that news coverage has shifted over time from a tone that is unambiguously negative (for example,
Explaining Opinion on Social Issues

What sorts of forces cause opinion on social issues to covary in such a consistent fashion—and in a way that is distinct from attitudes on economic issues? Three prominent answers to these questions have emerged in public opinion research. A tradition of scholarship with a particularly long lineage locates the source of opinion on social issues in the extent to which individuals' personalities fall on the spectrum between tolerance and authoritarianism. More recent work examines how attitudes on social issues are the consequence of deeply held core values—values that may be in conflict with one another and thus produce ambivalence. Finally, many scholars have shown that social issues are no different from others in the way that elite leadership of opinion can affect individual attitudes. Of course, these three explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the following discussion, I outline each of the arguments in turn.

Authoritarianism

A crude—but nevertheless accurate—way to sum up people's stances on most social issues is the extent to which they dislike certain groups and disapprove of certain behaviors. The strong relationship between these two bundles of attitudes suggests the concept of authoritarianism as a natural point of departure for explaining opinion on social issues. The study of authoritarianism has improved tremendously since the concept was introduced in Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford 1950), but the basic claim has remained the same: some people have a fundamental orientation toward in-group favoritism, conformity, and thus the maintenance of established social order, leading them both to reject efforts to flatten social hierarchies and to favor the policing of private behavior (Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 1989; Sterner 2005). Authoritarian predispositions appear to be activated by actual or perceived threats to the established order. High authoritarians react to such threats by becoming less tolerant of out-groups and more punitive of morally aberrant behavior. This may provide micro-foundations for the finding that controlling for a society's level of economic development, its level of economic inequality—and, presumably, an accompanying perceived breakdown of the social order—is associated with intolerance toward homosexuality (Andersen and Fetner 2008). Hetherington and Weiler (2009) present evidence that among white Americans, low and high authoritarians are increasingly sorted (respectively) into the Democratic and Republican parties. A group that is a notable exception is African Americans, who tend to be high authoritarians. Their attitudes on some social issues, such as same-sex marriage, can be unusually conservative for being such strong Democrats (Lewis 2003).

The value of scholarship on authoritarianism for those interested in opinion on social issues is quite substantial: this theory alone tells us why social issues might inhabit a separate dimension of public opinion. By differentiating authoritarianism from conservative attitudes about the welfare state, it provides a compelling explanation for why coalitions between liberals and conservatives on economic and social issues are never set in stone.

Values in Conflict

Social issues are distinctive from other issue domains in that the underlying core value of *moral traditionalism* (Conover and Feldman 1986) plays a strong role in shaping attitudes on these issues (for example, P. R. Brewer 2003; Carmines and Layman 1997; Layman and Green 2006). Of course, moral traditionalism is not the only core value Americans invoke when constructing their opinions on social issues. In particular, we might expect values regarding egalitarianism and limited government (Feldman 1983) to respectively affect attitudes on issues involving women and minorities on the one hand and the regulation of private behavior on the other. Scholars have documented the ambivalence in opinion that results when core values are in conflict on social issues such as abortion (Alvarez and Brehm 1998).
One reaction to these findings is to wonder how exactly we can distinguish a case of true ambivalence from one in which an opinion just happens to be not so strongly held (J. Miller and Peterson 2004). Furthermore, without studies that look for evidence of ambivalence in a consistent way across different issue domains, we cannot say for sure the extent to which the level and nature of ambivalence in the realm of social issues is distinctive—or whether it is similar to the ambivalence Americans appear to exhibit in other issue domains due to conflicts in core values (for example, Feldman and Zaller 1992; Keele and Wolak 2006).

**Elite Opinion Leadership**

John Zaller's celebrated theory of opinion change holds that opposing messages transmitted by political elites interact with individual ideological predispositions and interest in politics to produce a polarized public (1992). Given the fact that social issues are “easy” and that attitudes on these issues are relatively consistent over time, we might expect it to be difficult and unusual for opinion to be shaped by the messages of partisan and ideological elites in this way. Nevertheless, scholars have identified numerous instances of mass attitude change following elite shifts in opinion and others where political information plays an important role. Much of this change has its roots in the Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights in the 1960s and the party’s capture by “New Left” activists in the 1970s, which yielded opportunities for Republicans to woo evangelical Christians and others who held conservative views on social issues (Brady 2001; Layman 2001). Partisan trends in mass opinion followed elite divides. Some of this change is undoubtedly due to shifts in party affiliation and cohort replacement, but panel survey data demonstrate that aggregate change is also due to partisans changing their attitudes to conform with their party’s position on the issue (Layman and Carsey 2002b). Other studies report evidence of this sort of conversion of attitudes among party activists, as well (Layman and Carsey 1998; Carsey and Layman 1999; see also Carmines and Woods 2002; Wolbrecht 2002).

But the direction of causality in the relationship between partisan attitudes on social issues need not necessarily run from the former to the latter—and the process is often reciprocal. For example, Bill Clinton successfully shifted opinion on gays in the military among his followers but he also lost popularity among those originally opposed to his policy change (Bailey, Sigelman, and Wilcox 2003). More generally, Carsey and Layman (2006) find that those who feel strongly about an issue tend to change their partisanship if they correctly perceive that they disagree with their party’s position on the issue, while those who do not attach importance to an issue are likely to change their issue attitudes to align with their partisan identification—a pattern that is consistent across economic, social, and racial issues. The argument corresponds to research showing that masses can follow elites on any issue that divides the elites of the two parties—but only after the issue becomes part of the underlying basis for party identification (Hill and Hurley 1999; Hurley and Hill 2003; Levendusky 2009; Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002).
have shown that the power of authoritarianism in shaping attitudes persists even after controlling for a core value like moral traditionalism (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005). But scholarship is lacking that explores questions such as: can opinion leaders raise the specter of a threat to activate authoritarianism and turn citizens sour on “deviants” and other minorities? How stable is authoritarianism across the life span, and how does its stability compare to that of party identification and core values? Do the ways we think about values change depending on which issues happen to be salient? And what happens when—as in campaigns on referenda over abortion, gay rights, and drugs—political leaders bombard voters with opposing messages that invoke conflicting core values? Should we expect ambivalence (as the core values literature predicts) or polarization (as indicated by research on opinion leadership)?

In answering these questions, scholars will need to continue to take care in how they define the domain of social issues with criteria that are theoretically grounded and empirically documented, rather than designated a priori based upon convention or popular conception. In determining the causes of attitudes on social issues and their salience in the public sphere, consideration should be given to the varying incentives faced by candidates, activists, and parties either to fold these debates into the primary left–right axis that defines American political conflict or, by contrast, to forge new coalitions. From these starting points, we can better determine whether the processes that shape public opinion on social issues are similar to those associated with other attitudes regarding public affairs—or, rather, if there is something special about this set of controversies, which mobilizes, excites, and inspires so many Americans in contemporary politics.

References


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