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The Impact of Political Beliefs on Ethical Framework in Adults

Kiana Oliver

Abstract: This study aimed to examine the differences between major political philosophies in the United States and whether these beliefs influence a person's ethical views. This research was a non-experimental correlation design, using a survey methodology with adult participants. The participants were asked to complete the 39-item *The Impact of Political Beliefs on Ethical Frameworks in Adults Survey*. A Pearson's r was conducted to determine the relationship between political beliefs and ethical frameworks. The results showed a slightly positive correlation that was statistically significant [$r(166) = .28, p = .000$]. Therefore, there was sufficient evidence to support the research hypothesis: there is a correlation between political beliefs and ethical frameworks. In other words, the study's results show there is a relationship between a person's political and ethical beliefs, and the former may influence the latter. Concerning ethical frameworks, the results showed that Republican Party members are Absolutists as they scored low on the Relativism scale and high on the Idealism scale. In contrast, Democratic Party members are Situationists who scored high on both Relativism and Idealism. A one-way ANOVA also showed a statistically significant difference among generational groups and their political belief ($F(3,153) = 10.359, p < .001$).

Keywords: political parties, ethics, religion, liberal, liberalism, conservative, conservatism, libertarian, libertarianism, moderate, and political scale.

Introduction

As indicated by a study published by the Pew Research Center (2017), political differences in the United States are causing a division amongst Americans. In 1994, using a scale of 10 political values, 23% of Republicans were more liberal than the median Democrat. Similarly, 17% of Democrats were more conservative than the median Republican (Pew Research Center, 2017). The current Pew Research Center (2017) report states that Republicans are now 95% more conservative than the median Democrat. In contrast, Democrats are 97% more liberal than the median Republican. With major political events of the 2010s, there is a demand to understand how politics influence individuals and their worldviews (Brandt et al., 2014; Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 2016).

The purpose of this research study was to examine the differences between major political philosophies in the United States and how these beliefs influence ethical frameworks. The following paper is organized in thematic principles as it discusses the topics of American political parties, political ideologies, and ethics. The sources

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are peer-reviewed and gathered through the EBSCO-Host database, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The key terms used in searching for these sources were *political parties*, *political parties in the United States*, *ethics*, *morals*, *morality*, *liberal*, *liberalism*, *conservative*, *conservatism*, *libertarian*, *libertarianism*, *moderate*, and *political scale*.

Definitions of Conservatism and Liberalism

To measure the characteristics of Conservatism, Everett (2013) conducted an exploratory investigation in which participants were required to list ten issues that are important to Conservatives, which resulted in the following terms: abortion, welfare benefits, tax, immigration, limited government, military and national security, religion, gun ownership, traditional marriage, traditional values, fiscal responsibility, business, the family unit, and patriotism. Everett (2013) noted a significant consensus amongst participants concerning these terms, which suggests there are issues distinctive to conservatism. Conservatives also score higher on neophobia, or the fear of anything new (Haidt, 2012). As a result, Conservatives are more protective of maintaining traditions, including borders and boundaries (Haidt, 2012).

Jost et al. (2003) indicates that Liberals express a higher tolerance towards complexity, flexibility, and new experiences. Haidt (2012) further supports these findings by observing that Liberals score higher in neophilia, or the openness to novelty, along with measurements of caringness. These qualities possibly explain why Liberals are more likely than Conservatives to advocate for civil rights (Horowitz et al., 2019). At the time of this study, there was no research that examined issues that are associated with Liberalism.

Consideration of Alternative Parties. As shown by Gilberstadt and Daniller's (2020) research, the number of Moderate supporters has declined, as they constitute 38% of Democratic voters compared to 40% during the 2012 re-election of President Barack Obama. Researchers, including Lakoff (2016), denounce the idea of a political middle as a metaphor. Whether this group exists as a genuine political party that has declined or, as Lakoff (2016) proposes, a nonexistent ideology, researchers use Moderates to compare the differences between Conservatives and Liberals (Graham et al., 2012).

Libertarians deeply value liberty and uphold it as an individual's inalienable right that must be protected by the government (Iyer et al., 2012). Using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), Haidt (2012) compared the responses of 12,000 Libertarians and discovered that Libertarians' personalities are similar to Liberals, with low scores within the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations. Libertarians scored very low in the Care foundations while scoring higher than Conservatives on questions regarding economic liberty (Haidt, 2012).

Libertarians also show greater support for individual liberty while having weaker support for other moral principles (Iyer et al., 2012). Iyer et al. (2012) observed that compared to Conservatives and Liberals, Libertarians were the only political group to have higher scores on systemizing than on empathizing. From these conclusions, Libertarians are discernable from Conservatives and Liberals (Everett, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Iyer et al., 2012).

Political Intolerance and Stereotyping

Brandt et al. (2014) proposed that both political groups express similar degrees of intolerance towards opposing ideologies. Compared to their political counterparts, each party (Conservative and Liberal) showed more intolerance against the opposing group (Brandt et al., 2014). The researchers also stated it is inaccurate to classify Liberals as tolerant and Conservatives as intolerant, as both groups oppose ideologies that threaten their political worldviews.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the relationship between political party members, political ideologies, and ethical frameworks in an adult population. A limitation found in the studies included the generalizability of the participants. The current research (Brandt et al., 2014; Everett, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Iyer et al., 2012) selected adult participants but did not consider cohort effects or variations among younger generations. This research study could benefit people (i.e., politicians) interested in American politics and how ethical frameworks influence decision making.

Operational Definitions of Study

The following terms were operationally defined for this study:

1. Participants' levels of political attitudes were self-reported using a modified questionnaire consisting of items from the *Political Belief Scale* (PBS) (Webber et al., 2018). Items on this questionnaire were measured on a 7-point Likert scale indicating the degree of their political beliefs or to what extent they agreed with a statement. For example, one statement included, "There should be a ban on the sale of all firearms" (Webber et al., 2018). Also, the questionnaire included an item asking which political party the participants identify with. For example, 1 = *Republican Party*, 2 = *Democrat Party*, 3 = *Libertarian Party*, and 4 = *Other*. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the *Political Belief Scale* (PBS) (Webber et al., 2018) ranged from 0.66 (moderate) to 0.83 (conservative).

2. Participants' levels of ethical frameworks were self-reported using the *Ethics Position Questionnaire* (EPQ) (Forsyth, 1980). Items on this questionnaire were measured on a 9-point Likert scale indicating the participants' opinions regarding the statements. For example, one statement included, "A person should make certain that their actions never intentionally harm another even to a small degree" (Forsyth, 1980). Two-week-test-retest reliabilities for the *Ethics Position Questionnaire* (EPQ) (Forsyth, 1980) resulted in 0.67 for Idealism and 0.66 for Relativism. The coefficient alphas were 0.80 for Idealism and 0.73 for Relativism (Forsyth, 1980). The Relativism score of the EPQ had a low correlation (-0.31) with the Survey of Ethical Attitudes (Hogan, 1970).

3. Participants' age was measured by generation using a demographic questionnaire that the researcher created. Reference to generational periods used Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019). For example, 1 = *Silent (Born 1928-45)*, 2 = *Boomers (Born 1946-64)*, 3 = *Generation X (Born 1965-80)*, 4 = *Millennials (Born 1981-96)*, and 5 = *Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)*.

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Hypothesis

One hypothesis guided this study:

1. There will be a relationship between levels of political beliefs and ethical frameworks within participants.

This hypothesis was tested in its null form.

Research Questions

Three research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are participants' average degree of political attitudes?
2. What are participants' average degree of ethical frameworks?
3. Are there political beliefs and ethical differences as a function of age?

Methods

Participants

This study consisted of 168 participants recruited through Southern Adventist University. All participants were over the age of 18 and were recruited through convenience sampling for various generations. Those who agreed to be a part of this study were given a QR code or link to Google Forms. After reading the informed consent form, the individuals agreed to be a participant in the study by clicking 'Next'. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (2017).

Materials

The Impact of Political Beliefs on Ethical Frameworks in Adults Survey was composed of three different questionnaires containing a total of 39 items combined from the *Political Belief Scale* (PBS) (Webber et al., 2018) and the *Ethics Position Questionnaire* (EPQ) (Forsyth, 1980). This questionnaire was made up of a demographic questionnaire, a political beliefs scale, and an ethical positions questionnaire. Section #1 was a demographic questionnaire created by the researcher regarding the participants' political party membership and their generation as determined by birth year (Dimock, 2019). Section #2 measured political beliefs using Webber et al.'s (2018) PBS with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.66 (Moderate) to 0.83 (Conservative). Section #3 measured ethical positions using Forsyth's (1980) EPQ, with the coefficient alphas being 0.80 for Idealism and 0.73 for Relativism.

Design and Procedure

This study was a non-experimental correlational research design that used survey methodology. A convenience sample of 168 adults at Southern Adventist University (SAU) was recruited to complete the questionnaire. The participants included SAU students and faculty members. A QR code and link to the Google Forms survey were distributed to the following SAU departments: Education and Psychology, Religion, Biology, History, Physical Education, English, Counseling, and Nursing. To recruit more participants, the researcher visited the front desks at McKee Library and SAU's student center to distribute posters containing a QR code to the Google Forms survey. The Google Forms survey was distributed on March 29, 2021, and was closed from

receiving further submissions on April 14, 2021.

Data Analysis

The data was scored, coded, and entered into SPSS. Data excluded from the results included duplicates and participants who identified as non-American citizens. The following statistical analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis and answer the three research questions. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all the major variables in the study. Pearson's r , one-way ANOVAs, and an independent samples t -test were calculated to analyze the hypothesis and research questions.

Results

Of the 168 participants in this study, 77 identified as Republicans, 50 as Democrats, 5 as Libertarians, 14 as Independent, and 22 as None (that is, having no political party membership). The average political attitude among participants was $M = 65.04$ ($SD = 6.54$) with a majority identifying with the Republican Party.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Political Beliefs and Ethical Positions

<u>Variables</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Political Beliefs	64.8631	6.52762
Ethical Positions	110.2321	17.42219

Note. $n = 168$

Table 2
Frequency Distribution of Participants' Political Party Membership

<u>Political Party Membership</u>	<u>n</u>
Republican Party	77
Democratic Party	50
Independent Party 1	4
Libertarian Party	5
None	22

The Relationship Between Political Beliefs and Ethical Positions

The hypothesis predicted there would be a relationship between levels of political beliefs and ethical positions within participants. To determine the relationship between political beliefs and ethical positions, a Pearson's r was conducted. The analysis showed a slightly positive correlation and was statistically significant [$r(166) = .277, p = .000$]. This relationship supports the research hypothesis: there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that there is a correlation between political beliefs and ethical frameworks.

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In other words, the study's results suggest there is a relationship between a person's political and ethical beliefs, and the former may influence the latter.

Table 3

Mean Composite Score of the Political Belief Scale (Webber et al., 2018)

Political Party Membership	Liberal	Conservative	Moderate
Republican Party	10.67	22.41	30.14
Democratic Party	19.70	13.86	34.06
Libertarian Party	13.00	17.60	32.40
Independent Party	16.22	16.41	30.43
None	15.41	18.50	32.00

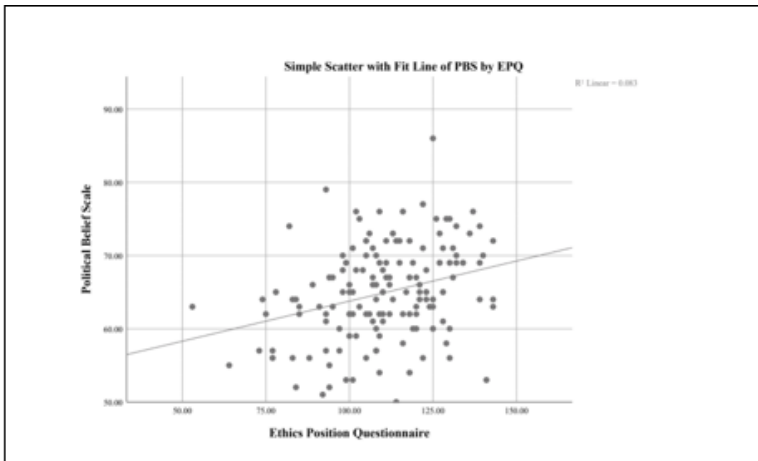


Figure 1. Scatter Plot of Political Belief Means as a Function of Ethics Position

Political Party Membership and Political Belief

Using the mean composite score of the *Political Belief Scale* (Webber et al., 2018), members of the Republican Party scored the lowest on Liberalism at 10.67, while members of the Democratic party scored the highest at 19.70. Members of the Independent Party scored the second-highest on Liberalism at 16.22. Members of the Republican Party scored the highest on Conservatism at a mean composite score of 22.41, while members of the Democratic Party scored the lowest at 13.86. Members of the Libertarian Party scored the second-highest on Conservatism at 17.60. Lastly, members of the Democratic Party scored highest on measurements of Moderatism at 34.06, and members of the Republican Party scored the lowest at 30.14. Members of the Libertarian Party scored the second highest on Moderatism at 32.40.

Table 4

Mean Composite Score of the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth, 1980)

<u>Political Party Membership</u>	<u>Idealism</u>	<u>Relativism</u>
Republican Party	62.23	44.87
Democratic Party	62.78	53.10
Libertarian Party	58.60	45.00
Independent Party	59.58	47.85
None	63.86	47.85

Political Party Membership and Ethical Framework

The mean composite score of the *Ethics Position Questionnaire* (Forsyth, 1980) shows members of the Republican Party scored 62.23 for Idealism, while members of the Democratic Party scored 62.78. Republican Party members scored 44.87 on Relativism, and Democratic Party members scored 53.10. Because Republican Party members scored low on the Relativism scale and high on the Idealism scale, Forsyth (1980) would suggest these participants are Absolutists who “use inviolate, universal moral principles to formulate moral judgments.” Democratic Party members scored high on both Relativism and Idealism, which suggests they are Situationists who “advocate a contextual analysis of morally questionable actions” (Forsyth, 1980).

Table 5

ANOVA of Political Beliefs and Ethical Positions

	<u>Sum of Squares</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>Mean Square</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Between Groups	2697.418	61	44.220	1.061	.390
Within Groups	4418.433	106	41.683		
Total	7115.851	167			

Age and Political Belief

The research question asked if there are political differences as a function of age. A one-way ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference among age groups and political belief ($F(3,153) = 10.359, p < .001$). The post-hoc analysis showed that the statistical significance was present between Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) ($M = 66.60, SD = 6.20$) and Boomers (born between 1946-1964) ($M = 59.60, SD = 3.94$). There was also a statistically significant difference between Generation Z and Generation X (born between 1965-1980) ($M = 60.36, SD = 5.88$). These results show younger generations have more liberal beliefs than older generations.

Table 6
Frequency Distribution of Participants' Generation

<u>Generation</u>	<u>n</u>
Silent (Born 1928-1945)	2
Boomers (Born 1946-1964)	17
Generation X (Born 1965-1980)	16
Millennials (Born 1981-1996)	13
Generation Z (Born 1997-2012)	126

Age and Ethical Position

The results also support the research question, as there were political differences amongst the various generations. The research question asked if there are ethical differences as a function of age. A one-way ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference in ethical positions as a function of age group. The data showed an $F(3,153) = 4.848$ ($p < .01$) showing a statistically significant difference. A post-hoc analysis showed that the major difference was between Generation Z ($M = 112.82$, $SD = 16.85$), Boomers ($M = 100.53$, $SD = 19.37$), and Generation X ($M = 98.43$, $SD = 19.37$). Therefore, this study suggests there are significant differences between the members of these generations.

Other Interesting Findings

Using the mean composite score of the *Political Belief Scale* (Webber et al., 2018), members of the Independent Party scored 16.22 on Liberalism while participants who identified as None (no political party membership) scored 15.41. Concerning Conservatism, Independent Party members scored 16.41, and None scored 18.50. Lastly, Independent Party members scored 30.43 on Moderatism, and None scored 32.00. These findings suggest that Independent Party members differ from Republicans, Democrats, and Libertarians. Furthermore, although there were participants who did not identify with any political party, they still expressed political beliefs.

On the Idealism scale for the *Ethics Position Questionnaire* (Forsyth, 1980), the mean composite score of Libertarians was 58.60. Independent Party members scored 59.58 on Idealism, and None scored 63.86. Libertarians also scored 45.00 on Relativism with 47.85 for Independent Party members and 47.85 for None.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences between major political philosophies in the United States and how these beliefs influence ethical frameworks. The hypothesis theorized there would be a relationship between levels of political beliefs and ethical frameworks. The first research question asked about the average degree of political attitudes amongst participants. The second research question asked about the average degree of ethical positions amongst participants. The third research question asked if there are political beliefs and ethical differences as a function of age.

The hypothesis was statistically significant, and there was also a slightly positive relationship between political beliefs and ethical positions. There is sufficient evidence to support the claim that there is a correlation between political beliefs and ethical positions. As ethical positions increased, political beliefs also increased as well. There was also a statistically significant difference between age groups and political belief, which means that political beliefs are influenced by an individual's generation. Likewise, there was a statistically significant difference in ethical positions as a function of age group, meaning generational differences influence ethical positions. If the sample size for the Silent Generation (born between 1928-1945) was larger than two participants, the results of this research could possibly change to show how these participants compare to younger generations. The results of this research study support previous research, specifically the hypothesis that there is a relationship between levels of political beliefs and ethical frameworks within participants. The literature explained that there are characteristics and issues that are unique to the major political philosophies (i.e., conservatism, liberalism, moderate) in the United States. Concerning the relationship between political beliefs and ethical differences as a function of age, a possible explanation could be that the various generations were influenced by world events and changes within American society and educational systems.

Limitations and Weaknesses

The primary weakness of this study was the limited sample size of older generations (see Table 3). 72.4% of participants were Generation Z, 7.5% were Millennials, 9.2% were Generation X, 9.8% were Boomers, and 1.1% were Silent. The inadequate sample size of the Silent Generation could have influenced the results. There were not enough Silent participants to compare this generation with younger generations. The researcher initially proposed distributing the questionnaire amongst assisted living home residents for a larger sample size. However, this proposition was unable to be executed due to COVID-19 restrictions within the facilities. Another weakness was that the research study and questionnaire were conducted in a religious institution of Southern Adventist University. Having religious influences may have affected the participants' political beliefs and ethical frameworks. A third weakness would be the measurement of political beliefs, as several participants did not identify with a political party. Therefore, it is possible these participants selected an answer that sounded the most socially acceptable.

Importance of the Study

The topics of political beliefs and ethics are important because of the current division within the United States caused by political differences. The results of this study offer additional information concerning how politics and ethics may influence a person's beliefs. The study also shows variations within political parties and ideologies due to the members' age and ethical frameworks. The research introduces new questions about other factors aside from age and ethical frameworks that may affect Americans' political beliefs. This study could benefit politicians as they may want to consider age and ethical differences when attempting to persuade potential older and younger voters.

Agenda for Future Research

Future research should use a larger sample size, resulting in greater diversity in age, political beliefs, and ethical frameworks. There should be an equal number of generations measured to accurately measure the differences in these populations. A more comprehensive ethical frameworks questionnaire should be used, which would include more ideologies than just idealism and relativism. Furthermore, a more comprehensive political beliefs scale could be used to reflect more political ideologies than conservative, liberal, and moderate ideas. Lastly, future research should examine the differences between Generation Z, Boomers, and Generation X. The research should determine the reason(s) for these differences and examine whether they influence voters.

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