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Moral Leadership in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Voters commonly revise their political beliefs to align with the political leaders with whom they strongly identify, suggesting voters lack a coherent ideological structure causally prior to their political loyalties. Alternatively, voters may organize their preferences around nonideological concepts or values, such as moral belief. Using a four-wave panel study during the 2016 election, we examine the relationship between voters' own moral foundations and their perceptions of the candidates' moral beliefs. We observed a bidirectional relationship among Republicans, who revised both their own moral beliefs and their perceptions of Donald Trump to reduce incongruities. In contrast, Democrats revised their perceptions of Hillary Clinton to align with their own moral beliefs. Importantly, consistency between voters' and political candidates' moral beliefs was more common among partisans and led to polarized evaluations of the two candidates on Election Day.

KEY WORDS: partisanship, moral foundations, moral conviction, motivated reasoning, cognitive dissonance

Political scientists have long been interested in examining the factors that underpin citizens' vote choice. Central to this debate is whether citizens have well-formed, stable attitudes that constrain and guide their political choices during an electoral campaign, or if, instead, voters' contemporaneous electoral preferences are shaped primarily by preexisting partisan loyalties or are otherwise constructed spontaneously and haphazardly (Campbell et al., 1980; Lenz, 2013). That is, are political preferences guided by perceptions of which candidates or parties best match one's own issue positions, leadership style, and personal values? Or might one's own preferences on policy and leadership instead change in the direction of whichever candidate or party one already favors (Lenz, 2013; Levendusky, 2009)?

Moral beliefs are one example of a nonideological predisposition commonly presumed to structure political attitudes and guide political behavior (Smith et al., 2017). Moral beliefs have indeed been found to influence political preferences and motivate political participation (Franks & Scherr, 2015; Graham et al., 2009; Koleva et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2014; Weber & Federico, 2013; Weinschenk & Dawes, 2019; Weisberg, 2005). For this reason, rhetoric by political elites commonly engages the distinct moral considerations of their targeted constituencies in order to shape political behavior (Clifford & Jerit, 2013).

But is the assumption that moral beliefs are stable orientations that, a priori, constrain political psychology valid? Moral foundations theory argues that moral judgments arise from intuitive concerns shaped by innate psychological modules that once solved adaptive challenges for ancestral humans throughout evolutionary history (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Some scholars have argued that differences between liberals and conservatives in these "moral foundations" can meaningfully account for political conflict and incivility (Graham et al., 2012; Koleva et al., 2012). Even the assumption that moral foundations *cause* political preferences and orientations is relatively common in the published literature. Recent work has called this assumption into question. Smith and colleagues (2017) observed substantial variability in individuals' moral foundations over time that did not meaningfully correspond with changes in political attitudes. Hatemi et al. (2019) use panel data to show that ideology is a better predictor of moral foundations than the reverse. Moral beliefs also seem to involve more conscious thought than previously argued, indicating that self-reported moral beliefs may be more responsive to the environment than scholars have typically assumed (Haidt, 2001; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). Consistent with this, Ciuk (2018) finds that exposure to partisan or ideological cues (especially outgroup vs. ingroup cues) can cause change in endorsement of specific moral foundations.

Together, these findings point to the role of contextual factors, such as political campaigns and ideological motives, in shaping moral beliefs in the general voting population (Brandt et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017). Such a dynamic could indicate a bidirectional relationship between political preferences and moral beliefs. In particular, we propose that preferences for political leaders are just as likely to shape moral beliefs as the converse—suggesting that while moral beliefs could be important determinants of political preferences, partisan attachments and commitments might also shape and inform the moral beliefs endorsed by members of the public. We also provide the first demonstration of a psychological mechanism for this bidirectional relationship between moral beliefs and political preference—that partisans will be particularly motivated to resolve inconsistency between their own moral views and that of their preferred candidate. Using data from a four-wave panel study collected over the course of the 2016 election, we tested these hypotheses by examining how respondents formed and resolved differences between their own moral beliefs (as measured by the moral foundations questionnaire—MFQ; Graham et al., 2011) and their perceptions of the presidential candidates' moral beliefs.

Our results indicate a bidirectional relationship between voters' moral beliefs and their perceptions of the candidates' beliefs, such that voters' MFQ predicted changes in perceptions of candidates' MFQ, and vice-versa. Respondents of both parties projected their own moral foundations onto the candidate they identified with the most (i.e., the candidate of their own party). Meanwhile, respondents' views of the opposing party candidate's morals were mostly unrelated to their own moral foundations. These effects were greater for respondents who identified more strongly with a particular candidate. Importantly, increased congruency in perceptions of the moral beliefs of the self and one's favored candidate led to greater polarization in evaluations of both candidates and increased likelihood of voting for one's supported candidate.

Partisanship Drives Political and Moral Beliefs

Much theory and research in political psychology indicates that a range of motivational biases are commonly engaged when partisan cues are salient, which can impede and even distort the evaluation of information relevant to citizens' political judgments and behavior (Groenendyk, 2013). Partisan affiliation often serves as a social identity and may therefore fulfill expressive needs (e.g., bolstering self-esteem or ingroup belonging) more than instrumental ones (e.g., helping to advance policy goals; Huddy et al., 2015). One implication of the identity-expressive function of partisanship is that, because voters want to see their "team" win partisan conflict, they often give less consideration to policy outcomes and may instead focus their attention on justifying and maintaining their

partisan loyalties (Groenendyk, 2013; Mason, 2018). This can lead partisans to be "followers" in regard to issues by adopting the policy preferences of political leaders with whom they most strongly identify (Lenz, 2013).

Goren (2013), however, argues that voters do have stable preferences on the main cleavage issues between the two parties (i.e., limited government, traditional morality, and military strength), which operate as key heuristics in guiding vote choice, even among less informed citizens who lack coherent or constraint ideological preference on the liberal-conservative continuum. Feldman and Johnston (2014) find similar patterns and further argue that the unidimensional liberal-conservative divide typically used to frame political debate obscures the degree of stability at the individual level, such that people hold coherent, stable multidimensional beliefs that organize their political preferences and only appear idiosyncratic at the aggregate level. Similarly, Goren et al. (2020) find evidence of coherence and stability in the structure and use of prepolitical human values (i.e., universalism or conservationism) across all levels of political sophistication, which, in turn, organizes ideological judgments. Thus, even if issue positions and the content of ideological belief can seem unstable, it remains possible that more abstract, albeit stable, predispositions, such as "foundational" moral beliefs, may nonetheless guide those positions a priori.

Moral Foundations as Political Predispositions

Moral foundations theory has been used to support the claim that political attitudes stem from stable moral beliefs that represent a higher-order predisposition (Smith et al., 2017). This theory argues that human morality can be classified into five broad foundations that are consistent across cultures (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012). These foundations are Harm (focusing on the suffering of others), Fairness (focusing on inequality, reciprocal altruism, and proportionality), Loyalty (focusing on duties relating to ingroup membership), Authority (focusing on respect for authority figures and traditions), and Purity (focusing on physical and spiritual contamination and feelings of disgust). The Harm and Fairness foundations are grouped together as the "*individualizing*" foundations, as they emphasize the rights and protection of individuals, whereas the Loyalty, Authority, and Purity foundations together are the "*binding*" foundations that are important in the formation and cohesion of groups. Liberals and conservatives have been found to endorse different moral foundations, with liberals placing greater weight on the individualizing foundations and conservatives instead being relatively more concerned with the binding foundations (Graham et al., 2012).

A variety of scholarly work has examined moral foundations as a predictor of political policy preferences. In the realm of foreign policy, the individualizing foundations have been found to predict support for cooperative relations with other nations, whereas the binding foundations predict support for greater military force (Kertzer et al., 2014). Similar divides in cultural issues also appear to be born out of different moral considerations. For example, the relative weight liberals and conservatives place on the Purity foundation covaries with disagreement over issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, whereas differences in opinion on issues such as gun control and the death penalty are predicted by the Harm foundation (Graham et al., 2009; Koleva et al., 2012). Moral foundations even predict presidential vote choice in both 2012 (Franks & Scherr, 2015) and 2016 (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2019). That political disagreements stem from different, but subjectively valid, moral worldviews may contribute to the rancor that surrounds much of political debate and why bipartisan compromise seems so elusive (Kertzer et al., 2014; Skitka, 2010; Skitka & Morgan, 2014).

Moral Belief as Rationalization for Partisan Preferences

Moral foundations are theorized to be cognitive systems producing gut-level reactions (Graham et al., 2012). This implies that attitudes produced by the activation of moral beliefs should be

relatively consistent, durable, and guide downstream behavior (Goren & Chapp, 2017). This viewpoint, though, is predicated on the assumption that moral foundations really *are* stable and causally prior drivers of political attitudes. Critiques of moral foundations theory point to evidence of a fair deal of movement over time in people's endorsement of the moral foundations, a finding that weakens the claim that they represent stable predispositions (Smith et al., 2017; Weber & Federico, 2013). Thus, it remains possible that moral foundations can serve, in part, to justify or rationalize preexisting political judgments and behavior, instead of acting causally prior to these preferences and actions (Jost & Amodio, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2005, 2013).

If this is the case, a sizable body of research suggests that partisanship would be an important mover of moral foundation endorsement. Party identification is a powerful heuristic for political decisions and can motivate biased interpretation of information in ways that are favorable to one's party (Campbell et al., 1980). The salience of partisan cues (e.g., whether a Democrat or a Republican is advocating for a particular policy) increases partisan support, regardless of the merits of a given policy, especially in polarized contexts (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Druckman et al., 2013). In some electoral contexts, partisanship has even predicted change in constructs commonly theorized to represent strongly held predispositions, such as racial and religious attitudes. For example, during periods of high interparty disagreement, where partisanship is the defining feature of political conflict, Whites have been observed to adjust their racial attitudes to align with their partisanship (Engelhardt, 2018). Despite much debate over why evangelicals supported Trump, whose personal conduct may be inconsistent with commonly stated religious values, Margolis (2020) found evidence that negative partisanship (dislike towards the Democratic Party and candidate) motivated devout evangelicals to support Trump over any religious concerns.

We predict that partisanship will similarly move moral foundations over the course of the election, just as it has for religious and racial attitudes. Thus, citizens may realign their moral foundations to match their perceptions of the moral preferences of political leaders that they support. Although this strikes us as plausible, there is reason for caution. Most people do not wish to perceive themselves as blind partisans and feel pressure to be good citizens who make informed decisions (Groenendyk, 2013). One way for people to resolve the distress caused by a clash between their personal and partisan viewpoints, while still remaining faithful to their beliefs, could be to realign their *perception* of the party to align with how they perceive themselves. For example, during the 2016 election and continuing into his presidency, Donald Trump often seemed to give contradictory opinions on various topics (Timm, 2016). A supporter who is distressed by one of those statements may choose to simply focus on the comments that match their existing, stable preferences or seek to justify why the offending statement was not a "true" expression of Trump's beliefs. Clinton supporters worried about her ties to corporations, and the financial sector could focus on her more socially liberal positions (Cheney, 2016).

In the present research, we examine both possibilities—that is, we provide the first test of the extent to which voters' self-reported moral beliefs drive or are driven by their perception of the moral positions of the presidential candidate in the political party with which they most strongly identify.

The Present Study

This study will examine moral leadership among political candidates in the 2016 presidential election.

H1: At the early stages of the political campaign, we expect respondents to project their own moral foundations onto the candidates with whom they most strongly identify.

H1a: Respondents will perceive the moral foundations of the candidate they support as similar to their own self-reported moral foundations.

We investigate, but do not expect to observe, this relationship for opposition candidates.

We also examine whether moral foundations lead to more intraindividual *change* in perceptions of candidates' moral foundations over the course of the campaign, or if, instead, the latter drove intra-individual change in the former. Voters are likely to find discrepancies between perceptions of their own moral foundations and their preferred candidate's distressing, consistent with other perspectives and findings in psychology concerning strategies that reduce dissonance that arises from discrepant cognitions or behaviors (e.g., Festinger, 1957; McGrath, 2017). This incongruency should induce an aversive state of uncertainty that leads either to disengagement from the political domain (e.g., Vitriol et al., 2019) or change in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that reduce perceived self/candidate discrepancies.

H2: We expect voters to more commonly adjust their moral beliefs to align more closely with their perceptions of the moral beliefs of their favored candidates.

This would be similar to how voters resolve the dissonance caused by voting for candidates (Mullainathan & Washington, 2009) or parties (Bolstad et al., 2013) they may dislike by increasing their approval of them. Another possible way to resolve any dissonance is for voters to align their perceptions of their favored candidate's moral beliefs to match their own. Although we anticipate some degree of bidirectionality, we expect the direction of this relationship to more strongly indicate change in voters' own morals to align with their perceptions of the candidates' morals than vice versa.

H3: Hypothesis 3 concerns individual differences that may increase the need for congruency in perceptions of moral beliefs for the self and one's supported candidate.

H3a: We expect respondents who strongly (vs. weakly) identify with a given political candidate to be particularly motivated to attain self/candidate congruency in perceptions of moral beliefs.

H3b: Those who perceive their partisan identification as a reflection of their core moral beliefs (i.e., moral convictions; Skitka, 2010; Skitka & Morgan, 2014) should similarly be more motivated to resolve any incongruency.

We also examine the downstream consequences of congruency (vs. incongruency) for political attitudes and behavior on Election Day. In particular,

H4a: We expect voters who have high levels of congruency (vs. incongruency) in self/candidate perceptions for candidates they support to evidence higher levels of polarized evaluations of the candidates at the end of the campaign.

H4b: We also expect an increased likelihood of actually voting on Election Day for the candidate voters favored at the earliest measurement period.

Methods

Data

We utilized data collected as part of a large, multi-investigator study of the 2016 presidential election by the Center for the Study of Political Psychology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, utilizing a four-wave panel design. Specifically, 3,557 U.S. citizens were recruited using Survey Sampling International (SSI) for an online survey investigating beliefs about current events

and political affairs and were offered monetary compensation upon completing each wave of the study. Sample size at Wave 1 was determined to increase the likelihood that approximately 1,500 respondents would be retained across all four waves, based on estimated attrition provided by SSI. Attrition for the full sample across the four waves was 49%, with 1,730 respondents responding to the Wave 4 survey.

For the analyses reported below, we relied on respondents who indicate at Wave 1 that they supported *either* Clinton or Trump and used measures administered at Wave 1 (W1; July 1–18, 2016), Wave 2 (W2; September 10–16, 2016), Wave 3 (W3; October 20–29), and Wave 4 (W4; November 7–10, 2016). Out of all of the respondents recruited at W1, 390 respondents (63% women; mean age = 57.21, *SD* = 13.27) were randomly assigned at W2 to participate in our study and then completed all of our measures at each subsequent time point. Of the respondents assigned at W2, we retained 41% across the waves. Analysis of respondents who were or were not retained across all four waves do not indicate meaningful differences in critical variables or demographics, with the differences being either nonsignificant or very small, giving us more confidence that attrition did not introduce systematic error in our observations (Table S1.2 in the online supporting information).

W1 sample weights were applied to improve the extent to which these data are nationally representative of the U.S. population. Weights were based on population benchmarks for race, ethnicity, gender, education, and income at W1 and then adjusted for unit nonresponse in each of the latter waves. We use W1 in our analyses as many of our measures, including all of our control variables, are from W1. Unweighted estimates are available upon request and do not yield substantively or significantly different conclusions. By utilizing four waves, we are able to observe intraindividual change in moral foundations as a function of perceptions of candidate's moral foundation, and vice versa, over the course of the last few months of the campaign.

Procedures and Measures

Tables 1 and 2 shows the weighted means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations among all measures used in our analyses. The online supporting information includes the exact language

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Alpha-Levels of all Measures, Weighted by Survey Weights

Variables	*M*	*SD*	α
1. Self-binding W1	.663	.186	.791
2. Self-binding W3	.702	.190	.798
3. Self-indiv W1	.675	.206	.809
4. Self-indiv W3	.698	.207	.827
5. Clinton-bind W2	.465	.266	.901
6. Clinton-bind W3	.453	.253	.903
7. Clinton-indiv W2	.466	.298	.930
8. Clinton-indiv W3	.479	.301	.952
9. Trump-bind W2	.547	.259	.894
10. Trump-bind W3	.636	.267	.909
11. Trump-indiv W2	.439	.312	.947
12. Trump-indiv W3	.539	.297	.945
13. Binding-incongruent W2	.143	.116	–
14. Indiv-incongruent W2	.186	.179	–
15. Binding-incongruent W3	.113	.105	–
16. Indiv-incongruent W3	.138	.138	–
17. Party moral conviction	.752	.210	–
18. Likelihood of support	.832	.237	–
19. Candidate evaluation	.658	.333	–
20. Vote correspondence W4	.897	.304	–

Table 2. Correlation Matrix, Weighted by Survey Weights

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1. Self-binding W1	1.00																			
2. Self-binding W3	.56**	1.00																		
3. Self-indiv W1	.63**	.26**	1.00																	
4. Self-indiv W3	.27**	.62**	.46**	1.00																
5. Clinton-bind W2	.07	−.04	.13**	.20**	1.00															
6. Clinton-bind W3	−.05	−.09	.07	.24**	.63**	1.00														
7. Clinton-indiv W2	−.05	−.13*	.09*	.13*	.81**	.46**	1.00													
8. Clinton-indiv W3	−.14*	−.18*	.05	.24**	.50**	.84**	.57**	1.00												
9. Trump-bind W2	.23**	.44**	.15**	.44**	–	–	–	–	1.00											
10. Trump-bind W3	.43**	.52**	.09	.46**	–	–	–	–	.72**	1.00										
11. Trump-indiv W2	.28**	.36**	.22**	.39**	–	–	–	–	.82**	.56**	1.00									
12. Trump-indiv W3	.36**	.43**	.16*	.38**	–	–	–	–	.66**	.84**	.71**	1.00								
13. Binding-incon W2	−.18**	−.04	−.18**	−.21**	−.10	−.26*	−.07	−.26*	−.11	−.12	−.22**	−.11	1.00							
14. Indiv-incongruent W2	−.07	−.19*	−.02	−.04	−.21**	−.03	−.48**	−.26*	−.14*	−.14	−.37**	−.16	.46**	1.00						
15. Binding-incon W3	−.22**	−.21**	−.11	.02	−.09	−.06	−.06	−.02	−.30**	−.62**	−.33**	−.49**	.11	.19*	1.00					
16. Indiv-incon W3	−.19*	−.01	−.13*	.22**	−.10	−.08	−.37**	−.18*	−.09	−.27*	−.22*	−.50**	.02	.25**	.48**	1.00				
17. Party MC	.21**	.30**	.20**	.14**	.14*	.19*	.11*	.12	.13*	.03	.13*	.07	.06	.09	.01	−.14*	1.00			
18. Likelihood of support	.06*	.05	.10**	.01	−.07	−.14*	−.07	−.14*	.11*	−.23**	.10*	−.14*	.03	.00	−.40**	−.32**	.30**	1.00		
19. Candidate evaluation	.07*	.13**	−.03	.00	−.22**	−.24**	−.17*	−.26**	.01	−.04	−.03	−.10	−.04	−.02	−.14*	−.27**	.26**	.48**	1.00	
20. Vote corresp. W4	−.10**	.10**	.02	−.07*	−.12	−.01	−.07	−.03	−.23**	−.47**	−.21**	−.45**	−.18**	−.12*	−.18*	−.11	.02	.40**	.27**	1.00

$^{+}p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.

used to measure all variables used in this analysis and the distribution of vote preference at each wave (Table S1.1 in the online supporting information). At W1, all respondents from the full sample completed measures of demographics, including gender (0 = women, 1 = men), income, age, education, and race (0 = non-White, 1 = White); vote preference, Donald Trump (38%), Hillary Clinton (49%), or Gary Johnson (13%), although only Trump and Clinton voters were included in our analysis, and partisan identification, likelihood of voting for Clinton or Trump, and moral conviction for partisan identification.

At W1, all respondents completed a reduced version of the 20-item moral foundations questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011), in which we retained two items that had high factors loadings per each of the five foundations, based on pilot data (See Tables S2.1–S2.5 in the online supporting information). Based on these responses, we computed a measure of self-reported support for binding and individualizing moral foundations. At W2, respondents completed the same version of the 10-item MFQ, but this time adapted to measure perceptions of the moral foundations for *either* of the two major party candidates. Respondents were randomly assigned to complete these measures for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, but not both. Based on the responses, we computed a measure of perceived support for binding and individualizing moral foundations. At W3, respondents repeated the same candidate-specific MFQ as at W2 as well as completing the standard MFQ (order of each question set randomly assigned). Based on the responses, we again computed a measure of perceived support for binding and individualizing. Thus, at W1, respondents reported a measure of their own moral foundations; at W2 respondents reported their perceptions of the moral foundations of one of the two major presidential candidates; and at W3, both measures of moral foundations were repeated. Respondents reported their actual vote choice at W4.

Data Transformation and Hypothesis Testing

Analyses were conducted on a two-factor structure of the self-reported and candidate-specific MFQ (e.g., Smith et al., 2017), in which we collapse across Harm/Fairness dimensions to compute individualizing foundations, or Authority/Loyalty/Purity dimensions to compute binding foundations. All continuous and ordinal variables were rescaled to run from 0 to 1 for easier comparison and estimation of effect sizes, as Little (2013) recommends when variables are measured on different scales. Higher values for all variables either indicate greater presence of the trait or greater support for Trump (vs. Clinton), conservatives (vs. liberals), and Republicans (vs. Democrats), as is appropriate. Based on respondents' stated choice of candidate at W1, we computed indicators for how likely respondents said they were to vote for their favored candidate as well as whether or not respondents actually voted at W4 for the candidate they had stated to prefer at W1.

Similarly, indicators of congruency between self/candidate binding or individualizing evaluations were computed separately for respondents' favored and opposed candidate, although we only utilized the variable computed for one's favored candidate. A difference score was computed between W1 self-ratings and W2 candidate-ratings and between W3 self-rating and W3 candidate-ratings. We use the absolute value of the difference score between W3 self and candidate ratings as a dependent variable in the models estimating the predictors of self/candidate congruence and as an independent variable in the models predicting the downstream effects of congruency on candidate evaluations and vote choice. As a result, higher values, indicating larger difference scores, correspond with less congruence. Finally, an indicator of polarized candidate evaluation at W3 was computed by taking the absolute value of the difference in feeling-thermometer ratings of both candidates. All analyses include race, gender, age, education, income, political knowledge, partisan identification, and ideological self-placement as covariates. Because partisan identification and ideological self-placement covary with moral foundations, this model provides a conservative test of our hypothesis. However,

the results are unchanged without covariates in the model. These results are also available upon request.

Results

Self-MFQ and Candidate-MFQ: Do voters project their own moral foundations on candidates they support (H1)?

We begin with a test of our first hypothesis by investigating the relationship between W1 self-MFQ and each W2 candidate-MFQ, separately for Trump and Clinton supporters. We expected respondents to project their own moral foundations onto the candidates with whom they most strongly identify (H1). Results confirm this prediction (See Figure 1 and Table 3; estimates in tables represent unstandardized regression coefficients with the confidence intervals in parentheses).

Specifically, among Clinton supporters, W1 self-reported binding ($b = .552$, 95% CI [.391, .712], $p < .001$), but not individualizing ($b = .040$, 95% CI [−.0139, .218], $p = .663$), foundations predicted perceptions of Clinton's foundations. Given that our variables have been rescaled to run from 0 to 1, this estimate indicates that moving from the lowest to highest levels of self-binding at W1 corresponded with an increase of 55% in perceptions of Clinton binding at W2. A similar pattern emerged for judgments of Trump's moral foundations among Trump supporters, providing even stronger support for Hypothesis 1. For Trump supporters, W1 self-reported binding ($b = .328$, 95% CI [.178, .478], $p < .001$) *and* individualizing foundations ($b = .351$, 95% CI [.170, .532], $p < .001$) predicted perceptions of Trump's foundations, respectively. In contrast, among Clinton supporters, self-reported moral foundations were unrelated to perceptions of Trump moral foundations ($ps > .05$).

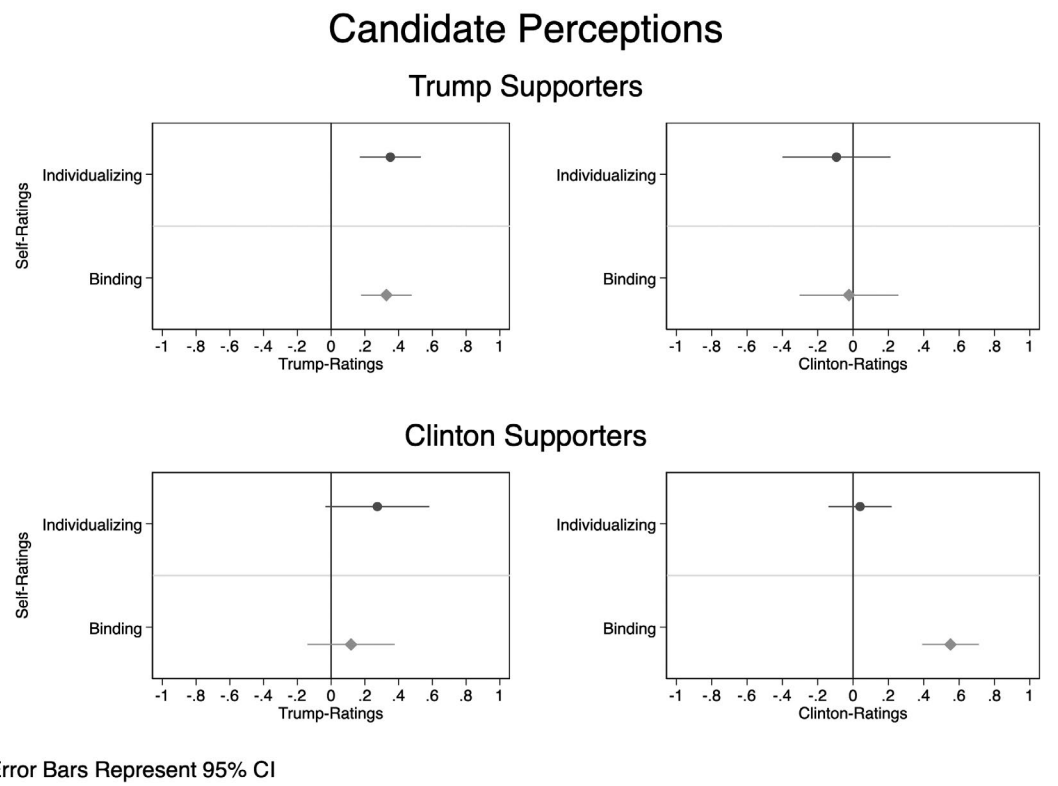

Figure 1. Candidate perceptions.

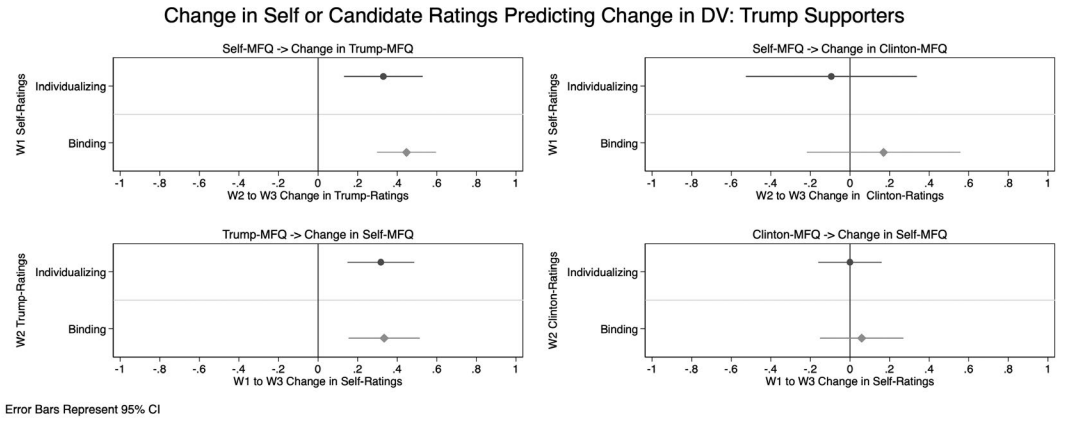

Figure 2. Change in self or candidate ratings predicting change in DV: Trump supporters.

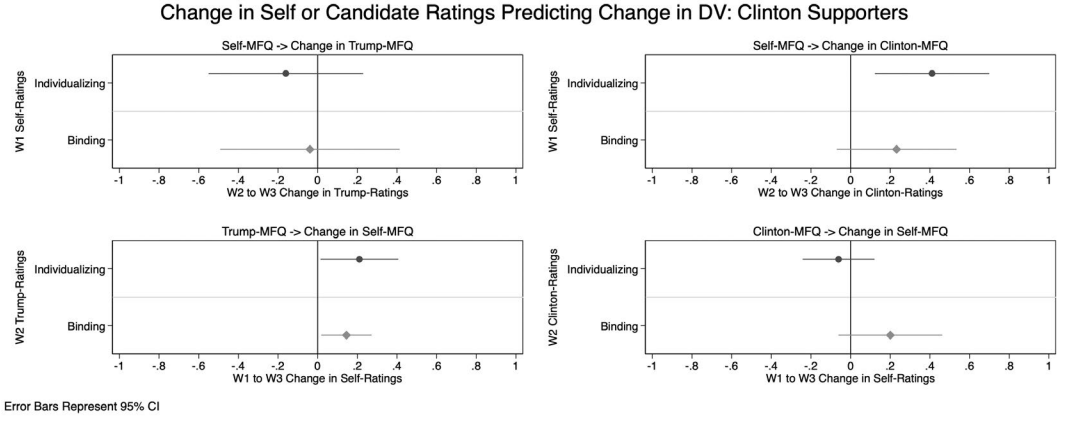

Figure 3. Change in self or candidate ratings predicting change in DV: Clinton supporters.

Similarly, among Trump supporters, self-reported moral foundations were unrelated to perceptions of Clinton moral foundations (*p*s > .5).

These findings suggest that moral foundations predict the perceived moral foundations of the candidate that respondents support, but not perceptions of opposition candidates. For this reason, and to simplify the presentation of our results, analyses below only utilize perceptions of the moral beliefs for candidates that one supports.

Longitudinal Effects: Do voters' perceptions of the candidates drive intraindividual change in moral foundations or vice versa (H2)?

Here we examine longitudinal relationships between self-MFQ and candidate-MFQ, separately for Clinton and Trump supporters. In particular, we use the earliest measure of self-MFQ (W1) as a predictor of intraindividual change in candidate-MFQ (from W2 to W3), and W2 candidate-MFQ as a predictor of intraindividual change in self-MFQ (from W1 to W3). See Figures 2 and 3 and Tables 4 and 5. To estimate the change in a dependent variable over time, we included its lagged value (i.e., the value from a previous wave) as a predictor in the model. For example, in examining whether

Table 3. Relationship Between Wave 1 Self-MFQ and Each Wave 2 Candidate-MFQ

	Trump Supporters				Clinton Supporters			
	Individual—Trump (W2)	Binding—Trump (W2)	Individual—Clinton (W2)	Binding—Clinton (W2)	Individual—Trump (W2)	Binding—Trump (W2)	Individual—Clinton (W2)	Binding—Clinton (W2)
	b (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)
Individual Foundations (Wave 1)	.351** (.170, .532)	–	−.094 (−.40, .212)	–	.274^{+} (−.034, .582)	–	.040 (−.139, .218)	–
Binding Foundations (Wave 1)	–	.328** (.178, .478)	–	−.023 (−.303, .257)	–	.118 (−.140, .377)	–	.552** (.391, .712)
White	.032 (−.242, .306)	−.210* (−.368, −.052)	−.281^{+} (−.587, .36)	−.221** (−.379, −.064)	−.119 (−.264, .027)	−.032 (−.157, .092)	−.019 (−.107, .068)	−.003 (−.069, .064)
Income	.103 (−.068, .274)	.121^{+} (−.011, .253)	−.145 (−. 402, .112)	−.092 (−.309, .125)	−.043 (−.353, 267)	−.107 (−.381, .167)	.097 (−.124, .318)	.081 (−.058, .220)
Party ID	.118 (−.033, .269)	.113* (.003, .223)	−.299** (−.523, −.075)	−.259** (−.452, −.067)	−.014 (−.243, .215)	−.013 (−.219, .193)	−.253** (−.374, −.132)	−.285** (−.426, −.144)
Ideology	.093 (−.119, .306)	.254** (0129, .379)	−.041 (−.322, .241)	−.158 (−.399, .083)	.063 (−.213, .339)	−.097 (−.330, .136)	.093 (−.040, .227)	.061 (−.083, .204)
Age	−.123 (−.293, .048)	−.110 (−.252, .033)	−.380** (−.611, −.149)	−.274* (−.517, −.032)	−.261* (−.498, −.023)	−.173^{+} (−.356, .011)	.066 (−.091, .224)	−.10 (−.239, .036)
Education	−.158* (−.298, −.019)	−.182** (−.298, −.066)	.195* (.008, .383)	.187* (.005, .369)	.091 (−.170, .352)	.198^{+} (−.032, .429)	−.073 (−.233, .088)	−.093 (−.225, .039)
Women	−.005 (−.077, .067)	.0004 (−.056, .057)	−.001 (−.104, .102)	−.028 (−.119, .063)	−.147* (−.270, .024)	−.086 (−.188, .017)	−.071* (−.126, −.015)	−.038 (−.092, .016)
Constant	.239 (−.061, .538)	.469** (.292, .646)	1.115** (.627, 1.604)	1.009** (.750, 1.267)	.338* (.033, .643)	.506** (.280, .732)	.652 (.481, .822)	.364** (.213, .515)
N	159	157	183	180	220	218	218	220
R^2	.194	.348	.193	.214	.141	.094	.157	.421

Note. All variables recoded to run from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. White is compared to non-White. Party ID and ideology are from Wave 1, and coded so higher scores are Republican (conservative) and lower scores are Democratic (liberal).

$^{+}p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.

Table 4. Self-MFQ (W1) Predicting Intraindividual Change in Candidate-MFQ (W2 to W3)

	Trump Supporters				Clinton Supporters			
	Individual Foundations—Trump (W3)	Binding Foundations—Trump (W3)	Individual Foundations—Clinton (W3)	Binding Foundations—Clinton (W3)	Individual Foundations—Trump (W3)	Binding Foundations—Trump (W3)	Individual Foundations—Clinton (W3)	Binding Foundations—Clinton (W3)
	b (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)
Individual—Trump W2	.458** (.255, .661)	–	–	–	.425* (.099, .751)	–	–	–
Binding—Trump W2	–	.462** (.270, .654)	–	–	–	.581** (.299, .862)	–	–
Individual—Clinton W2	–	–	.405** (.179, .630)	–	–	–	.167 (−.082, .417)	–
Binding—Clinton W2	–	–	–	.310** (.136, .484)	–	–	–	.498** (.220, .775)
White	−.043 (−.409, .323)	.042 (−.064, .149)	.585** (.234, .935)	.435** (.188, .683)	−.039 (−.245, .166)	.080 (−.111, .271)	.040 (−.057, .137)	.067 (−.028, .163)
Income	−.061 (−.237, .114)	−.016 (−.145, .112)	−.092 (−.383, .199)	−.091 (−.338, .156)	−.465** (−.80, −.130)	−.152 (−.415, .111)	.093 (−.032, .219)	.016 (−.133, .164)
Party ID	−.041 (−.172, .090)	.025 (−.090, .141)	−.048 (−.312, .215)	−.026 (−.241, .190)	.055 (−.179, .290)	.060 (−.175, .295)	.018 (−.142, .177)	−.084 (−.245, .076)
Ideology	.305** (.086, .524)	.197* (.014, .381)	−.024 (−.397, .349)	−.128 (−.442, .186)	.010 (−.349, .369)	−.022 (−.350, .306)	.194 (−.039, .426)	.107 (−.078, .293)
Age	.000 (−.221, .221)	−.063 (−.287, .161)	−.672** (−1.017, −.327)	−.470** (−.743, −.196)	−.232 (−.514, .050)	−.261+ (−.539, .017)	.111 (−.070, .293)	.083 (−.101, .267)
Education	.067 (−.075, .209)	−.004 (−.129, .121)	.067 (−.158, .292)	.057 (−.137, .251)	.197 (−.115, .508)	−.005 (−.358, .348)	.035 (−.127, .197)	−.015 (−.181, .150)
Women	−.043 (−.108, .021)	.001 (−.056, .057)	.087 (−.050, .224)	.083 (−.020, .187)	.073 (−.062, .209)	.053 (−.085, .190)	.008 (−.062, .078)	.009 (−.060, .078)
Individual—Self W1	.330** (.131, .529)	–	−.094 (−.526, .338)	–	−.160 (−.550, .229)	–	.411** (.123, .699)	–
Binding—Self W1	–	.447** (.298, .596)	–	.170 (−.218, .558)	–	−.039 (−.491, .414)	–	.232 (−.070, .534)
Constant	.003 (−.365, .371)	−.097 (−.239, .045)	.101 (−.526, .338)	.064 (−.305, .434)	.515** (.146, .883)	.326 (−.097, .748)	.085 (−.217, .388)	.070 (−.164, −.304)
N	87	85	85	84	70	71	88	88
R^2	.510	.645	.402	.393	.444	.366	.326	.452

Note. All variables recoded to run from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation.
$^{+}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

Table 5. W2 Candidate-MFQ Predicting Intraindividual Change in Self-MFQ

	Trump Supporters				Clinton Supporters			
	Individual—Self (W3)	Binding—Self (W3)	Individual—Self (W3)	Binding—Self (W3)	Individual—Self (W3)	Binding—Self (W3)	Individual—Self (W3)	Binding—Self (W3)
	b (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)	*b* (*CI*)
Individual—Self W1	.282** (.084, .480)	–	.602** (.330, .873)	–	.093 (−.174, .361)	–	.560** (.280, .840)	–
Binding—Self W1	–	.332** (.136, .528)	–	.466** (.185, .746)	–	.124 (−.122, .370)	–	.603** (.315, .892)
White	−.192** (−.317, −.067)	.123* (.020, .226)	.023 (−.122, .169)	−.159* (−.313, −.006)	−.092 (−.206, .022)	−.123** (−.210, −.035)	−.044 (−.149, .061)	.080 (−.040, .200)
Income	.084 (−.044, .211)	.039 (−.058, .136)	−.106 (−.296, .084)	−.089 (−.243, .064)	−.066 (−.244, .112)	.061 (−.122, .243)	.030 (−.105, .164)	.073 (−.149, .294)
Party ID	.033 (−.091, .156)	−.075^{+} (−.154, .003)	−.011 (−.183, .162)	−.056 (−.181, .069)	.191** (.063, .319)	.056 (−.046, .159)	−.134^{+} (−.292, .024)	−.138 (−.326, .050)
Ideology	.082 (−.109, .273)	.221* (.028, .414)	.086 (−.130, .302)	.193* (.004, .382)	−.305* (−.550, −.060)	.246** (.112, .380)	−.012 (−.214, .190)	.174^{+} (−.005, .353)
Age	−.050 (−.262, .162)	−.096 (−.310, .118)	−.058 (−.280, .164)	.089 (−.203, .380)	.381** (.156, .606)	.046 (−.120, .211)	.109 (−.055, .272)	.159 (−.056, .374)
Education	−.030 (−.181, .122)	−.012 (−.131, .107)	.045 (−.104, .195)	.030 (−.112, .172)	−.009 (−.178, .160)	−.155 (−.341, .031)	.074 (−.078, .225)	.122 (−.038, .282)
Women	.045 (−.023, .113)	.054^{+} (−.004, .113)	.065^{+} (−.012, .141)	.006 (−.065, .077)	.105* (.005, .205)	−.053 (−.128, .023)	.031 (−.041, .102)	−.017 (−.099, .065)
Individual—Trump W2	.317** (.148, .486)	–	–	–	.210* (.014, .407)	–	–	–
Binding—Trump W2	–	.334** (.1154, .514)	–	–	–	.145* (.018, .272)	–	–
Individual—Clinton W2	–	–	−.0002 (−.161, .160)	–	–	–	−.061 (−.241, .120)	–
Binding—Clinton W2	–	–	–	.059 (−.152, .270)	–	–	–	.200 (−.061, .462)
Constant	.410** (.273. .547)	.058 (−.058, .175)	.202 (−.178, .582)	.396* (.045, .747)	.531** (.301, .761)	.522** (.297, .747)	.311* (.016, .606)	−.132 (−. 380, .117)
N	87	85	86	84	73	71	92	93
R^2	.424	.609	.467	.376	.467	.485	.481	.484

Note. All variables recoded to run from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation.
$^{+}p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.

W1 self-individualizing predicts change in the perception of Trump individualizing, we regress W3 Trump individualizing on W2 Trump individualizing and W1 self-individualizing, and interpret the coefficients of the latter as estimates of *change* in Trump-individualizing perceptions from W2 to W3 (see Finkel, 1995). As a reminder, we hypothesize that the perception of candidates is driving perceptions of the self to a greater extent than the reverse.

Among Trump supporters, we find self-individualizing foundations significantly predicted changes in Trump-individualizing foundations (b = .330, 95% CI [.131, .529], p = .001) and Trump-individualizing foundations significantly predicted changes in self-individualizing foundations (b = .317, 95% CI [.148, .486], p < .001). The same bidirectional pattern was observed with self-binding foundations predicting changes in Trump-binding foundations (b = .447, 95% CI [.298, .596], p < .001), and Trump-binding foundations predicting changes in self-binding foundations (b = .334, 95% CI [.154, .514], p < .001). For perceptions of Clinton, however, we observed no significant relationships in either self or candidate moral foundations among Trump supporters. Thus, we observed bidirectional relationships between self-MFQ and Trump-MFQ (but not Clinton-MFQ) for Trump supporters, such that early ratings of both individualizing and binding dimensions predict change across the measurement period. However, contrary to our expectations, it seems that self-binding and, to a lesser extent self-individualizing, foundations drove more intraindividual change in perceptions of Trump moral foundations than vice versa.

Next, we conducted the same analyses for Clinton supporters. Among Clinton supporters, we only find significant effects for self-individualizing foundations predicting changes in Clinton-individualizing foundations (b = .441, 95% CI [.123, .699], p = .006). Self-binding foundations did not significantly predict changes in Clinton-binding foundations (b = .232, 95% CI [−.070, .534], p = .131). Clinton moral foundations did not significantly predict changes in either self-individualizing (b = −.061, 95% CI [−.241, .120], p = .431) or self-binding (b = .200, 95% CI [−.061, .462], p = .132) foundations. We observed no significant effects of self-binding or self-individualizing foundations on perceptions of Trump moral foundations among supporters of Clinton. However, there were significant effects of Trump-individualizing (b = .210, 95% CI [.014, .407], p = .036) and Trump-binding foundations (b = .145, 95% CI [.018, .272], p = .026) on self-moral foundations among supporters of Clinton.

Clinton supporters' self-individualizing foundations predicted changes in perceptions of Clinton's individualizing moral foundations. Interestingly, perceptions of Trump's individualizing and binding dimensions led to change in self-MFQ among Clinton supporters, although the effects of perception of Trump on change in own morals among Clinton supporters was not as large as this dynamic among Trump supporters.

Congruency vs. Incongruency: Do strong (vs. weak) supporters and voters who invest a moral conviction in their partisan identification attain higher levels of congruency between moral perceptions of the self and their preferred candidates (H3)?

Here we examine the hypothesis that respondents who strongly (vs. weakly) support a given candidate (H3a) or who hold moral convictions about their partisan identification (H3b) will demonstrate *increased* levels of congruency in both self and candidate perceptions of moral beliefs across the measurement period due to feeling a greater motive to resolve any incongruity. For this analysis, we first evaluated the main effect of (1) W1 likelihood of voting for one's favored candidate (Clinton or Trump) or (2) W1 moral conviction for partisan identification, separately, on (3) W3 self/candidate congruency for both binding or individualizing dimensions. Because this model included W2 self/candidate congruency as a lagged indicator in the model, the estimated effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable represents the effects of the W1 predictor (1 or 2) on intraindividual change in moral foundations—that is, increased congruency as a function of the W1 predictor (see Tables S1.6 and S1.7 in the online supporting information). As a reminder, congruence indicators were computed as the absolute value of the difference score for perceptions of one's own moral

foundations and that of the candidates. As such, higher values on this indicator correspond with a larger difference score and hence lower levels of congruence.

Results provided strong support for Hypothesis 3a but no support for Hypothesis 3b. Specifically, likelihood of voting for one's favored candidate at W1 was associated with increased self/candidate congruency on binding ($b = -.184$, 95% CI [−.285, −.083], $p < .001$) and individualizing dimensions ($b = -.173$, 95% CI [−.281, −.065], $p = .002$). However, the extent to which respondents report that their partisan identification is held as a moral conviction at W1 did not predict a significant increase in self/candidate congruency for binding ($b = .006$, 95% CI [−.083, .095], $p = .896$) or individualizing foundations ($b = -.099$, 95% CI [−.238, .041], $p = .164$). Thus, respondents who expressed strong support for their candidate demonstrated *increased* levels of congruency in the relationship between their moral beliefs and that of their favored candidate from W2 to W3. Despite our predictions, we did not find a similar pattern for respondents who hold their partisan identification as a moral conviction.

Downstream Effects of Self/Candidate Congruency (vs. Incongruency): Does it lead to polarized evaluations and voting behaviors on Election Day? (H4)

Finally, we examine the hypothesis that self/candidate congruency for the candidate one supports at W3 would predict W3 polarization in candidate evaluations (H4a) and the likelihood that respondents actually voted for their preferred candidate on Election Day (measured at Wave 4; H4b). Results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4a, but no for support Hypothesis 4b (see Tables S1.8 and S1.9a in the online supporting information). Specifically, self/candidate congruency for individualizing foundations predicted more polarized candidate evaluations ($b = -.552$, 95% CI [−.931, −.173], $p = .005$), while self/candidate congruency for binding foundations did not ($b = -.221$, 95% CI [−.776, .334], $p = .434$). Neither self/candidate congruency for individualizing (Exp(b) = .018, 95% CI [.00, 6.257], $p = .176$) nor binding foundations (Exp(b) = .002, 95% CI [.00, 22.762], $p = .193$) predicted increased likelihood of voting for one's favored candidate on Election Day.[1]

Discussion

A burgeoning line of research indicates that voters commonly revise their political beliefs to align with their political leaders (Lenz, 2013), leading to the view that voters lack a logically coherent set of opinions that are independent of their political loyalties (Converse, 1964). This paints a dim view of voters' ability to be effective citizens in a democracy, with political elites seeming to have broad leeway to act against voters' interests without severe costs (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Alternatively, some scholars have advanced a more positive interpretation that voters' political preferences may be coherently organized on the basis of abstract concepts or values other than ideology, which can obfuscate the extent to which political judgments are actually based on a stable set of preexisting preferences (Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Goren, 2013; Goren et al., 2020). We examined the formation and effects of one potential abstract system of belief that has been characterized as both stable and causally prior to political judgment and behavior/moral foundations.

Early theory argued that moral foundations predicted political preferences and was an important source of political disagreement and conflict between the parties (Graham et al., 2009; Koleva et al., 2012; Skitka & Morgan, 2014). However, more recent research indicated the causal relationship may

[1]The lack of significance is likely due to low statistical power, as there were only 124 observations at W3. The odds ratios are inflated (.018 and .002 represent 5.455% and 43.378% change in odds per unit change in individualizing and binding congruency, respectively), likely due to high prevalence in the outcome variable (7 inconsistent vs. 117 consistent; McNutt et al., 2003) and sparse covariate-by-outcome data (Greenland et al., 2016). When we use W2 self/candidate congruence instead, the effects on vote choice are significant, but the odds ratios remain inflated (.004 and .0003 represent 24,900% and 333,233% change in odds per unit change in individualizing and binding congruency, respectively; see Table S1.9b in the online supporting information).

be bidirectional, such that political preferences, including partisanship and ideology, can also cause movement in moral foundations (Ciuk, 2018; Eriksson et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). The current research was designed to investigate the direction of the relationship between moral belief and political preferences, whether and which kind of voters are motivated to minimize incongruency between their moral beliefs and their perception of their favored candidates' moral beliefs, and what consequences congruency may have for electoral behavior and participation.

We provide a direct test of a hypothesized bidirectional relationship between voters' moral foundations and their perceptions of the morals of their favored candidate over the course of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. We predicted that there would be movement across the measurement period to reduce any incongruity as voters seek to align their own beliefs and those of the candidate they support. We also expected that strongly identified partisans would be motivated to attain congruency, and that such congruency would promote polarized candidate evaluations. The results broadly support these hypotheses.[2]

Asymmetry in the Size and Direction of Self/Candidate Moral Beliefs Across Candidates

The pattern of results showed interesting asymmetries between perceptions of the two candidates that deserve more attention, although we caution that this asymmetry may relate to idiosyncratic features of this particular electoral context or these particular candidates and their supporters (i.e., Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton). Both Trump and Clinton supporters projected their own moral foundations onto their view of their favored candidates' moral beliefs. And, as expected, this pattern was not observed for views of the opposition candidate's morals (as any incongruency between perceptions of opposed candidates' and one's own morals should not be aversive and thus not prompt voters to seek congruency). Among Trump supporters we also found bidirectional effects leading to convergence, with respondents' own moral foundations predicting changes in their perceptions of Trump's moral foundations and the reverse. For Clinton supporters, this pattern was observed but in a more limited way—we only found movement in voters' perceptions of Clinton's moral foundations towards their own moral foundations (and only for the individualizing foundations). Perceptions of Trump, but not Clinton, changed how his supporters perceived their own moral beliefs. Why?

It is unclear why the bidirectional pattern of moral foundation congruency was cleaner for Trump (vs. Clinton) supporters. Clinton supporters' concern about individualizing dimensions, traditionally more liberal concerns, did not relate to perceptions of Clinton, whereas Trump supporters' concerns about both individualizing and binding dimensions increased perceptions of Trump as similarly concerned about these issues. This asymmetry is particularly interesting in light of other work that has found similar movement towards alignment based on partisanship for supporters of *both* major party coalitions (Grossman, 2018). Another unexpected asymmetry was a weak but significant bidirectional relationship between perceptions of Trump's moral foundations and *Clinton* supporters' moral foundations. Although other work has found significant movement among liberals in reaction to Trump, typically that movement was observed to be in the opposing direction (e.g., Luttig et al., 2017).

One possible explanation for the asymmetry we observed concerns differences in the quality and quantity of the media coverage each candidate received. News coverage of Trump focused extensively on his character and personal life more than was true of Clinton's coverage (Faris et al., 2017;

[2]Of all of our predictions, two did not gain empirical support. Specifically, our hypothesis that voters who report that their partisan identification reflects a moral conviction would show higher levels of congruence was not supported. Similarly, our hypothesis that higher levels of congruence at the end of the campaign would correspond with increased likelihood of voting for one's favored candidate on Election Day was also not supported. These models were limited by low statistical power, high prevalence in the outcome variable, and sparse covariate-by-outcome data.

Patterson, 2016a, 2016b). Even if mainstream coverage of Trump was mostly negative, it may have still given his supporters an increased opportunity to learn his moral beliefs (a necessary condition for them to move their own towards convergence with his). Given the Trump campaign's common framing of media criticism as proof of bias, negative coverage could also have even facilitated congruence to the extent that it motivated Trump supporters to justify and rationalize their partisanship (Faris et al., 2017; Flynn et al., 2017; Lawrence & Boydstun, 2017).

News coverage of Clinton was also negative overall. However, coverage of Clinton uniquely focused heavily on the scandal involving her use of a private email server (Patterson, 2016b; Saad & Newport, 2015; Sides et al., 2018b). When combined with coverage of other alleged scandals of the past, over a tenth of Clinton's coverage centered on accusations of wrongdoing—this amounted to more than twice the coverage of her policy positions (Patterson, 2016b). Such extensive focus on allegations concerning Clinton's past and contemporaneous scandals throughout the campaign, which contributed to a recurring narrative of Clinton as dishonest and "crooked," could have led perceptions of her to more easily "stick" and be less open to movement even among her supporters (Patterson, 2016a; Sides et al., 2018b).

Another possibility is that each candidate's supporters consumed different media sources, influencing how they perceived each candidate. Content analyses show an asymmetric polarization of media, with sources on the left and center focused heavily on negative articles about *both* candidates' scandals or failings. In contrast, right and far-right sources, in addition to attacking Clinton, also focused on deflecting from Trump's negatives and touting his positives (Faris et al., 2017). These repeated defenses of Trump could have made it less likely for his supporters to reevaluate their support of Trump, increasing the level of uncertainty caused by incongruity between their own morals and perceptions of Trump's moral beliefs. This uncertainty could have heightened the motivation to attain convergence and reduce incongruency, consistent with our observation that stronger identification with a candidate predicted greater congruency (and especially for Trump).

Differences in how each candidate experienced the primaries may also help to explain the divergences between Trump and Clinton supporters in the general election. Voters who chose Trump during the primary were much more likely to say the primaries were a good way to determine the best nominee than voters who supported Clinton (Pew Research Center, 2016), perhaps leading to an increased motivation to resolve any dissonance in their reasons to support him (Pew Research Center, 2016). Some of Trump's strongest support also came from voters with political views that are less likely to be ideologically constrained, which could allow for more movement towards congruency (Converse, 1964; Sides et al., 2018a). However, Clinton had more positive ratings than Trump among supporters of their respective primary opponents, and a greater percentage of Democrats compared to Republicans expected their party to unite behind the victor (Pew Research Center, 2016). Clinton also received early and enthusiastic support from the Democratic base and party. We think the primary dynamics for both candidates create a plausible scenario in which supporters had sufficient motivation to reduce incongruency.

Future research should examine if or how primary dynamics, media consumption and information-seeking, particular candidates' rhetorical style and unique histories, and psychological differences across the ideological spectrum and partisan divide may condition the pattern of observations reported in this analysis.

Implications for Voter Competence

Despite relatively more rigidity in moral perceptions of Clinton (vs. Trump) among her (vs. his) supporters, overall, we found a high level of malleability across the measurement period in respondents' moral foundations. This undercuts the strong assumption of stability and a priori causality of moral foundations on political attitudes and behaviors, as has been common in past research

predicting vote choice (Franks & Scherr, 2015; Weinschenk & Dawes, 2019) and issue positions (Koleva et al., 2012). Instead, people may adopt certain moral foundations to justify conclusions (such as candidate choice) that they inferred from other concerns (such as partisanship or ideology; Ciuk, 2018; Hatemi et al., 2019). The MFQ may be tapping a more contextualized state, rather than innate or trait dimension of personality (Smith et al., 2017), and thus may be better used as a measure of the effects of other sets of group-based concerns, rather than exclusively as an individual difference measure of their antecedents.

Importantly, convergence between voters' own moral foundations and their perceptions of the candidates had downstream effects on their political judgment in ways that may have implications for voter competence, such as polarized evaluations of candidates. Do citizens choose a candidate out of personal liking or partisanship (Lenz, 2009, 2013), and then, when they later learn that that candidate's beliefs are misaligned with their own, reduce any resulting dissonance by resolving the incongruities rather than by reevaluating their support (Mullainathan & Washington, 2009)? This account implies that voters are less able to hold candidates accountable for deviations from their own moral beliefs, as those deviations might not be consequential if it leads to change in either the voters' own morals or in their perceptions of the candidate.

An alternative interpretation is that the convergence in self/candidate moral foundations indicate learning effects (Hirano et al., 2015; Lenz, 2009). For example, over the course of the campaign, people may learn about the moral beliefs of the candidates and gain clarity regarding their own moral beliefs and in their perceptions of the candidates. Consistent with this interpretation, it may simply be the case that the greater movement in perceptions of Trump's moral beliefs are an artifact of his relative novelty as a candidate in 2016 or increased media coverage of his moral character, which may provide a better opportunity for his supporters to learn about him and revise their views. However, we observe mixed evidence for a such an interpretation. While there were small shifts in the mean perceptions of the candidates' moral foundations across the waves (see Table 1), there did not appear to be a decrease in the variance of those perceptions. Reduced variability in perceptions of the candidate's moral beliefs over time would be expected if voters' perceptions of the candidates were becoming clearer as they learned more during the campaign. Furthermore, when separated by vote choice, most of the movement in perceived candidate moral foundations seemed to be driven by supporters of the opposing candidate (i.e., Trump supporters' views of Clinton's morals and Clinton supporters' views of Trump's morals; Table S1.5 in the online supporting information). It is unclear why we would expect learning to occur for perceptions of the opposing candidates to a greater extent than the candidate that one supports. While we do not view the findings to support a "learning" effect, future research would benefit from more direct investigations of this hypothesis (see Lenz, 2009).

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few aspects of our design that require some caution in our interpretations. Due to space constraints on the panel survey, we had to use a reduced version of the MFQ. Though we used pilot data to determine the most important items, future research could see if our results replicate with the full questionnaire. Furthermore, unlike Ciuk (2018), our design was not experimental, so we cannot make strict claims about the causality of the change in moral foundation endorsement that we observed.

There are also limitations with our data, given the low level of variation in vote consistency. Of the 1,248 respondents in the entire sample, only 166 respondents reported inconsistency between W1 candidate preference and their self-reported vote on Election Day. This means there was a very high prevalence in the outcome variable, which inflates the odds ratios (McNutt et al., 2003), a problem that is exacerbated by sparse data bias (where the number of observations for certain combinations of independent and dependent variables is too small; Greenland et al., 2016). In combination with

the low statistical power, these issues led our analyses on vote consistency to overextrapolate from what the data could support.

We also had to take the candidates as they were given (e.g., Donald Trump may not represent prototypical Republican moral values), rather than being able to randomly assign their moral messaging. For example, there is some evidence that Trump's campaign more commonly used moral language (Enke, 2018), which could increase the connection of his brand to moral issues. Both major party candidates in the 2016 election have been in the public eye for decades. That these candidates were relatively known to the general public might have shaped the degree to which their supporters were willing or able to change their views of the candidates. Future research should seek to replicate our findings with different presidential candidates, as well as candidates in other election contexts, and more directly test causal direction. Despite these constraints, our findings show that the relationship between citizens' moral foundation endorsement and their political behavior is more complicated than often argued, with potentially bidirectional causal pathways. In our view, this more nuanced and dynamic account raises novel questions with important implications for political psychology and behavior that await additional investigation.

Although some voters may support candidates who match their preexisting moral beliefs, we nonetheless conclude that political leadership is also moral leadership. In the same way that voters' political attitudes often follow the direction espoused by political leaders, citizens readily revise even closely held and cherished moral beliefs to align with the candidates in whom they invest their trust and confidence.

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Supporting Information

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