

Running head: MORAL AND RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS

Moral and Religious Convictions and Intentions to Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract

The current research investigated whether people's issue-specific moral and religious convictions had distinct or redundant effects on their intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election. Participants reported their levels of moral and religious conviction about the issue that they perceived as most important to the 2008 presidential election and their intentions to vote. Results indicated that stronger issue-specific moral convictions and weaker issue-specific religious convictions were associated with increased intentions to vote. In short, people's moral and religious convictions had distinct and dissimilar effects on their intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election.

Key words: Moral Conviction, Religious Conviction, Intentions to Vote, Political Engagement

Moral and Religious Convictions and Intentions to Vote in the 2008 Presidential Election

President George Washington declared in his farewell address, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these...firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.” In this bold proclamation, the first President of the United States asserted that morality and religion were and should remain at the center of political life. Consistent with President Washington’s assertion, people’s moral and religious beliefs do indeed influence their political beliefs and behaviors. For example, people who reported that their candidate preferences or positions on hot-button political issues reflected strong moral convictions (i.e., beliefs about fundamental right and wrong) were more likely to vote in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections than were people whose positions were weak in moral conviction (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). There are also indications that people’s religious beliefs might influence their political views and behaviors. For example, increased levels of overall religiosity are associated with more conservative than liberal partisan leanings (Olson & Green, 2006; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003) as well as increased civic engagement (Verba, Lehman, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Taken together, there are reasons to believe that people’s moral and religious beliefs shape their political positions and behaviors. However, it is less clear whether issue-specific moral and religious convictions are unique or overlapping psychological constructs. The current research tested whether people’s issue-specific moral and religious convictions (a) represent the same underlying construct and similarly predict people’s engagement in electoral politics, or (b) each uniquely predict people’s political engagement. Before turning to the details of the current

study, we briefly review theory and research about the links between moral convictions, religious convictions, and political engagement.

Moral Conviction

Moral convictions reflect one's fundamental beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Unlike past theories that have specifically defined the content of morality (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983), our approach asserts that there is substantial variability in the issues that a person perceives as having moral relevance. For example, a person may vest their position on healthcare reform with moral conviction—perceiving the issue as related to fundamental questions of right and wrong. However, the same person may see other issues as irrelevant to morality. For example, this person's stance on the death penalty may be based on pragmatic concerns such as the deterrence of crime rather than a moral sense of right and wrong. In short, we argue that people may imbue some attitudes but not others with a sense of moral conviction. In support of this idea, there is considerable variation in the degree to which people's attitudes about any given political issue are vested with moral conviction (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005). Moreover, the degree to which people's attitudes are vested with moral conviction predicts a wide array of phenomena. For example, increased moral conviction about a given issue predicts increased prejudice toward those who hold an opposing attitude (Skitka et al., 2005), as well as distrust of political authorities to “get it right” with respect to the issue-at-hand (Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009). Most importantly to the current research, people with stronger moral convictions about their preferred candidates and hot-button political issues are more likely to vote in presidential elections than those with weaker moral convictions about candidates and issues (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). An open question, however, is whether moral convictions

represent something similar to or distinct from people's religious convictions in predicting whether people vote on election days.

Religious Conviction

People may base their issue and policy positions on their religious beliefs. In general, researchers have treated religiosity as a variable that differs in a stable manner from one individual to another (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Accordingly, researchers frequently (a) measure individual differences in overall religiosity, religious commitment, religious service attendance, and internal versus external religious motivation, and (b) test whether between-person differences in these individual difference variables predict behavior (see Hill, 2005 for a review). We take a different approach. Similar to our conceptualization of moral conviction, we measure religious conviction as a characteristic of attitudes rather than persons.

Definitionally, issue-specific religious convictions reflect the degree to which one's position on a specific issue or policy is based on one's religious beliefs. For example, a person may ground her position on a given issue (e.g., healthcare reform) on religious beliefs but may see other issues (e.g., the Iraq War) as unrelated to religious beliefs. Furthermore, researchers cannot assume that a person's overall level of religiosity predicts the degree to which he attaches religious significance to a specific issue. For example, Person A may report higher levels of overall religiosity than Person B, but Person B may perceive a given issue (e.g., healthcare reform) as more related to his religious beliefs than Person A. What is of interest to the current study is the degree to which people's positions on the issues that they perceived as important in the 2008 election were vested with moral and religious conviction. Furthermore, the current study explored the implications of moral and religious convictions for political engagement.

Using this approach allowed us to explore whether increased issue-specific moral and religious convictions predicted people's intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election. Most attitude theorists and researchers have focused on structural aspects of attitudes to increase attitude-behavior correspondence (e.g., attitude extremity; see Krosnick & Petty, 1995). However, there are reasons to believe that attitude content (i.e., the degree to which an attitude reflects moral or religious beliefs) may be important as well (see Skitka, Bauman, Lytle, in press). By measuring issue-specific moral and religious conviction, we can investigate whether attitudes vested with stronger moral and religious convictions correspond more strongly with behavior than attitudes weaker in moral and religious conviction.

Although a growing number of studies have examined issue-specific moral conviction (see Skitka & Morgan, 2009 for one review), few studies have investigated the effects of issue-specific religious conviction. In one study, increased religious conviction about physician-assisted suicide (PAS) predicted increased trust in the United States Supreme Court to make the "right" decision about the legality of PAS (Wisneski et al., 2009). In another study, increased religious conviction about PAS predicted decreased levels of perceived outcome fairness and decision acceptance of a Supreme Court ruling affirming state's rights to legalize PAS (note: nearly all those with strong religious convictions about PAS opposed its legality; Skitka et al., in press). Although these studies indicate that issue-specific religious convictions predict trust and perceived fairness of public policy decisions, no research has investigated whether vesting specific policy positions with religious conviction affects people's subsequent motivation to take action (political or otherwise). Consequently, how issue-specific religious conviction relates to behavior in general and political engagement in particular is a novel area of inquiry.

That said, some related research provides clues about possible connections of religious convictions and intentions to vote. There is significant correspondence between church attendance, overall levels of religiosity, and the tendency to have stronger religious convictions about specific issues (Skitka, in press). Therefore, research about the connections between these individual difference variables and political engagement may provide some hints about the ways that issue-specific religious convictions relate to voting behavior. For example, some research indicates that people who frequently attend church are higher in civic and political engagement than those who infrequently or never attend church (Verba et al., 1995). To the extent that church attendance predicts a tendency to base one's policy positions on religious conviction, increased religious convictions should also be associated with increased political engagement and intentions to vote. Other research, however, points to the possibility that increased religious conviction might decrease people's intentions to vote. For example, people who believe that God is directly involved in worldly affairs are less likely to vote compared to those who do not believe in God's direct intervention (Driskell, Embry, & Lyons, 2008). To the extent that a belief in God's intervention is associated with the tendency to vest policy positions with religious conviction, increased religious convictions should be associated with decreased intentions to vote. Other findings suggest that the 2008 presidential election presented people who are high in overall religiosity with few palatable alternatives. The 2008 election was marked by relatively tepid support for the major party candidates among those who belonged to key religious voting blocs (PEW Forum, 2008a, 2008b). To the extent that membership in religious voting blocs is related to increased issue-specific religious convictions, increased religious conviction may have been related to decreased intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election. In sum, existing research has focused on the relations of overall religiosity and political engagement and therefore

provides only mixed suggestions about the links between issue-specific religious conviction and intentions to vote; some evidence suggests that there should be a positive correlation whereas other evidence suggests that there should be a negative correlation between issue-specific religious convictions and intentions to vote.

Are Moral and Religious Convictions Distinct?

A central goal of the current research was to test whether issue-specific moral and religious convictions were similar or distinct psychological constructs, and whether these two types of conviction had similar or distinct effects on intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election. Although little research has looked at the links between moral and religious convictions, past theory and research often implicitly assumes that moral and religious beliefs are interchangeable constructs (e.g., Mooney, 2001; Mooney, Transue, & Schuldt, 2009). Indeed, major religious theologies such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism assert that faith and morality are inseparable (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985). In short, moral and religious convictions might be intrinsically connected and even inseparable constructs. Consequently, moral and religious conviction may play similar and largely redundant roles in shaping people's intentions to vote.

Another possibility is that moral and religious convictions are distinct psychological constructs that uniquely affect people's beliefs and behaviors. Some have declared that people do not need religion to develop a strong sense of morality (e.g., Dawkins, 2006). Likewise, theorists have argued that morality and religiosity are two distinct areas of human concern. Specifically, theorists argue that people ground their conceptions of morality in rational arguments about justice, fairness, and harm that transcend cultural contexts and the dictates of authorities, whereas people typically ground their religious beliefs on religious canon and the dictates of religious

authority (Turiel, 2002). In support of the possibility that moral and religious convictions are distinct, increased moral conviction about PAS predicted decreased pre-decision trust in the Supreme Court to make the “right” decision about the legality of PAS, whereas increased religious conviction predicted increased pre-decision trust in the Supreme Court (Wisneski, et al., 2009). Likewise, moral and religious convictions had distinct effects on the perceived post-decision fairness and acceptance of the Supreme Court’s ruling about the right of state’s to legalize PAS (Skitka et al., in press). In sum, moral and religious convictions may be distinct and separable constructs that had distinct effects on people’s intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election.

The Current Research

The goal of the current research was to test the effects of people’s moral and religious convictions about the issues that they perceived as most important in the 2008 election on intentions to vote. We tested two competing hypotheses: (1) moral and religious convictions represent the same psychological construct, and moral conviction should therefore be unrelated to intentions to vote after controlling for the effects of religious conviction (and vice versa), and (2) moral and religious convictions are distinct constructs and therefore should have distinct (and perhaps dissimilar) effects on intentions to vote.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Four hundred and thirty six participants (208 Democrats, 67 Moderates/other, and 161 Republicans) completed online surveys shortly before the 2008 Presidential election. Participants were recruited from the online panel maintained by StudyResponse, a non-profit organization based at Syracuse University. The panel consists of individuals who have self-selected to participate in internet surveys in exchange for the chance to win gift cards. Potential participants

were sent an email inviting them to participate with a “clickable” link that connected participants to the survey. Our sample was restricted to U.S. residents and used quota sampling to ensure equal initial recruitment of males and females. Additionally, because our dependent variable was intentions to vote in the 2008 Presidential election, our sample was restricted to those who were (at the time of the survey) eligible to vote in the 2008 election: non-felons, U.S. citizens, and those registered to vote.¹

Measures

Political identification and strength of identification. Because it was possible that any observed effects would be moderated by participants’ political identification or strength of identification, participants completed measures to assess these variables. Specifically, participants reported their political identification by first responding to one item that assessed whether they identified as Democrat, Republican, or moderate/other. Participants who indicated that they were Democrat or Republican subsequently branched to an item that assessed how strongly they identified as a Democrat or Republican. Participants responded on a 3-point scale with the verbal anchors *slightly*, *somewhat*, or *very*. Participants who indicated that they were moderate/other subsequently branched instead to an item that assessed whether they leaned closer to being a Democrat or a Republican with three response options *I am closer to being a Democrat*, *I am close to neither*, or *I am closer to being a Republican*. Scores from these items were combined to create two different scales, a bipolar 7-point scale that ranged from strong Democrat (-3) to strong Republican (+3), with a midpoint of moderate/other (0),² and a second

¹Participants’ felony status, U.S. citizenship, and registration information were collected in a prior wave of a larger study. The pattern of results did not differ when non-registered participants were included in the analyses.

²Participants who identified as Moderate/Other and: a) as closer to the Democratic Party were labeled as “slight Democrats” (-1), b) as closer to the Republican Party were labeled as “slight Republicans” (+1), and c) as close to neither were labeled as “moderate/other” (0).

measure that assessed non-partisan strength of party identification that ranged from not at all identified (0) to strongly identified (3).

Most important issues. Participants were given a list of thirteen issues-of-the-day, including: abortion, the energy crisis, environmental protection, gasoline prices, healthcare, homeland security, the housing crisis, illegal immigration, Iran, the Iraq War, same-sex marriage, tax cuts, and unemployment.³ From this list, participants were asked to “Select the two issues that are most important to your thinking about the 2008 Presidential election at this point in time.” The percentage of participants who selected each issue as most-important is presented in Figure 1. For each participant, we randomly selected one of the two most important issues for further analysis.⁴

Issue-specific moral conviction. Participants reported the degree to which their positions on their most important issue reflected a moral conviction by responding to two items: (1) “To what extent is your position on [your most important issue] deeply connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong?” and (2) “To what extent is your position on [your most important issue] a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?” Participants responded on 5-point radio-button scales with the verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*. Participants’ scores for these items were significantly correlated, $r(434) = .82$, and were averaged to yield one scale measuring the degree to which participants were morally convicted about their most important issue. Higher scores reflected greater moral conviction.

³ The economic stimulus package, or bailout, was not included on the list because the initial survey was fielded before the stimulus emerged as an issue

⁴ We also tested hypotheses collapsing across participants’ responses concerning their two most important issues and found a similar pattern of results as those reported with a single issue. Because the correlation of moral and religious conviction across issues was too low to justify averaging across issues, the random selection of an issue was a more reliable operationalization of these constructs.

Issue-specific religious conviction. Participants reported the degree to which their positions on their most important issue reflected religious conviction with the following item: “To what extent is your position on [your most important issue] a reflection of your religious beliefs?” Participants responded on a 5-point radio-button scale with the verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*, with higher scores reflecting stronger religious conviction.

Intentions to vote. Participants reported their intentions to vote in the 2008 Presidential election in response to the following item: “How likely are you to vote in the upcoming Presidential election?” Participants responded on a 5-point radio-button scale with the verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*. Higher scores reflected a greater intention to vote.

Results

To explore the relative importance of moral and religious convictions in the 2008 election, we conducted a dependent t-test. Results indicated that participants expressed stronger moral ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.20$) than religious conviction ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.57$) about their most important issues, $t(433) = 18.97$, $p < .001$. This result is an interesting one in itself: people felt more moral than religious conviction about their most important issues in the 2008 presidential election. However, this analysis does not speak to our primary research question—did people’s moral and religious convictions have distinct effects on their intentions to vote in the 2008 election?

To investigate this question, we first calculated the correlation coefficient for participants’ levels of moral and religious convictions about their most important issues in the 2008 election. As can be seen in Table 1, participants’ degree of issue-specific moral and religious conviction about the most important issues to them in the 2008 election were correlated at $r(434) = .44$, $p < .001$; stronger moral convictions were associated with stronger religious

convictions. Although significant, this correlation was not sufficiently strong to suggest that moral and religious convictions are the same construct. That said, the correlation was not sufficiently weak that one could rule out the possibility that the previously observed effect of moral conviction on intentions to vote was a consequence of shared variance with religious conviction.

To put hypotheses to a stronger test, we conducted analyses using standard regression. More specifically, we entered control variables (gender, age, and education level), party identification, strength of party identification, issue-related moral and religious convictions, and all two-way and three-way interactions of religious and moral conviction with non-control variables into a regression equation to predict intentions to vote. All continuous variables were centered at their means. Analyses indicated that people more strongly identified with a political party reported stronger intentions to vote, $B = 0.12$, $t(416) = 2.77$, $p < .001$. More important to the goals of this study, stronger moral convictions about most-important issues predicted increased intentions to vote, $B = 0.15$, $t(416) = 3.66$, $p < .001$, whereas stronger religious convictions about most important issues predicted decreased intentions to vote, $B = -0.13$, $t(416) = -4.00$, $p < .001$. In short, issue-related moral and religious convictions had distinct and opposite effects on people's intentions to vote.

Other results indicated that the main effects of moral and religious conviction were qualified by a significant religious by moral conviction interaction, $B = 0.08$, $t(416) = 3.12$, $p < .01$. Analyses of simple slopes indicated that stronger religious convictions predicted weaker intentions to vote at low levels of moral conviction, $B = -0.23$, $t(416) = -3.97$, $p < .001$, but not at high levels of moral conviction, $B = -0.03$, $t(416) = -1.09$, *ns*, see Figure 1.

No other interactions significantly predicted intentions to vote. Of particular note, the interactions of moral conviction with party identification, $B = 0.01$, $t(416) = 0.48$, *ns*, and strength of party identification, $B = -0.01$, $t(416) = -0.07$, *ns*, were non-significant. Likewise, the interactions of religious convictions with party identification, $B = -0.02$, $t(416) = -1.25$, *ns*, and strength of party identification, $B = 0.02$, $t(416) = 0.59$, *ns*, were non-significant. In other words, the effects of moral and religious conviction on intentions to vote were similar for Democrats and Republicans, and for weak and strong partisans.

General Discussion

The goal of the current study was to test the effects of people's moral and religious convictions about the issues they perceived as most important in the 2008 presidential election on their levels of political engagement. In particular, the current study tested whether people's moral and religious convictions about their most-important issues had unique or redundant effects on their intentions to vote. Results indicated that people's levels of issue-specific moral and religious conviction did indeed have distinct effects on intentions to vote. Issue-specific religious convictions did not affect intentions to vote when attitudes were high in moral conviction. Regardless of the relative strength of religious conviction, people who expressed stronger moral conviction about their most important issue in the 2008 election also were higher in intentions to vote. In contrast, when people's most important issue was one that they held with weak moral conviction, increased religious conviction had a de-motivating effect. As religious conviction increased, intentions to vote also decreased. In short, issue-specific moral and religious convictions had unique and quite different effects on people's intentions to vote.

Implications

The findings of the current study have important implications for our understanding of the links between people's levels of moral conviction, religious conviction, and political participation. Most clearly, the current study illustrates the limitations of approaches that treat morality and religion as interchangeable (e.g., Mooney, 2001; Mooney et al., 2009) and reinforces the notion that moral and religious convictions are distinct (e.g., Skitka et al., in press; Wisneski et al., 2009). Moreover, these results also suggest that moral and religious convictions exhibit different levels of motivational force. Previous research has demonstrated that increased moral convictions about an issue predicted an increased tendency to take action (Skitka et al., 2005, Skitka & Bauman, 2008). The current study suggests that issue-specific moral convictions provide people with greater motivation to take action than do issue-specific religious convictions. In other words, increased moral conviction predicts greater attitude-behavior correspondence whereas increased religious conviction does not.

The current study also reinforces the notion that it is necessary to distinguish between overall religiosity and issue-specific religious conviction. Although overall religiosity (typically assessed through frequency of church attendance) predicts increased political engagement (e.g., Verba et al., 1995), our results indicate that issue-specific religious conviction was associated with decreased political engagement. It is plausible that increased church attendance predicts increased civic and political engagement because both variables share common variance associated with a desire to take part in collective behavior. In contrast, vesting one's specific policy preferences with religious conviction may decrease political engagement because increased religious conviction might predict people's tendency to rely on God and not secular authorities to manage the issue and "get it right" (e.g., Driskell et al., 2008). One goal for future research should be to further explore similarities and differences between overall

religiosity and issue-specific religious conviction. Furthermore, future research that explores the association between religion and political behavior should not exclusively rely on individual difference measures of religiosity (e.g., church attendance), but should also measure the effects of people's issue-specific religious beliefs on their policy positions, candidate preferences, and intentions to show up at the polls on election day.

In addition to the theoretical and empirical implications of the current research, our findings have applied implications as well. For example, to the extent that politicians, political strategists, and policy makers wish to increase political engagement, it may be most effective to engage people on a moral rather than a religious level. That is, it may be most effective to describe issues or candidates in terms of fundamental right and wrong without referencing religion.

Possibilities for Future Research

In addition to the possibilities for future research that we described above, it will also be necessary to replicate the current study in additional contexts. The current study was limited to an investigation of the effects of moral and religious convictions on people's intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election—a context shaped by people's views of specific events and candidates. Accordingly, one must be careful not to over-generalize the findings of the current research. It will be useful to study the associations between religious conviction and political engagement across more than one election cycle.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to document the distinct associations of moral and religious convictions with people's intentions to take action in general and to vote in particular. Moreover, this study clearly demonstrated that people's levels of moral and religious

conviction have distinct and non-overlapping effects. Despite the specificity of the current research to the 2008 election, our results suggest that moral and religious convictions are distinct psychological constructs—moral and religious beliefs are not intrinsically bound. Nonetheless, the current research also suggests that President Washington was correct in his assertion that moral and religious beliefs shape political life; high levels of moral conviction and low levels of religious conviction predicted increased intentions to vote in the 2008 presidential election.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-correlations of Demographic Variables, Predictors, and Voter Intentions

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Gender	.53	.50	1.00						
2. Age	41.83	13.11	-.20***	1.00					
3. Education level	3.99	1.70	-.16***	-.01	1.00				
4. Party identification	-.17	1.80	-.01	.02	.00	1.00			
5. Strength of party identification	1.51	.99	.00	.05	-.01	-.05	1.00		
6. Issue-related religiosity	2.38	1.57	-.01	-.18***	-.06	.06	.11**	1.00	
7. Issue-related moral conviction	3.74	1.20	-.05	.02	-.06	-.09 [†]	.17***	.44***	1.00
8. Intentions to vote	4.73	.75	-.04	.14**	.00	-.03	.17***	-.08 [†]	.09*

Note. $N = 436$. Gender was coded 0 (male) and 1 (female). Age ranged from 18 to 77 years old. Education was coded as 1 (less than a high school education), 2 (high school education), 3 (some college, no degree), 4 (Associates degree), 5 (4 year college degree), 6 (some grad school, no degree), 7 (Master's degree), and 8 (Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced degree). Party identification ranged from -3 (strong Democrat) to +3 (strong Republican). Strength of party identification ranged from 0 (not at all identified) to 3 (strongly identified). Issue-related religiosity, issue-related moral conviction, and voter intentions each ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

[†] $p < .09$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Percentage of participants who selected each issue as one of their two most important in the 2008 presidential election ($N = 436$).

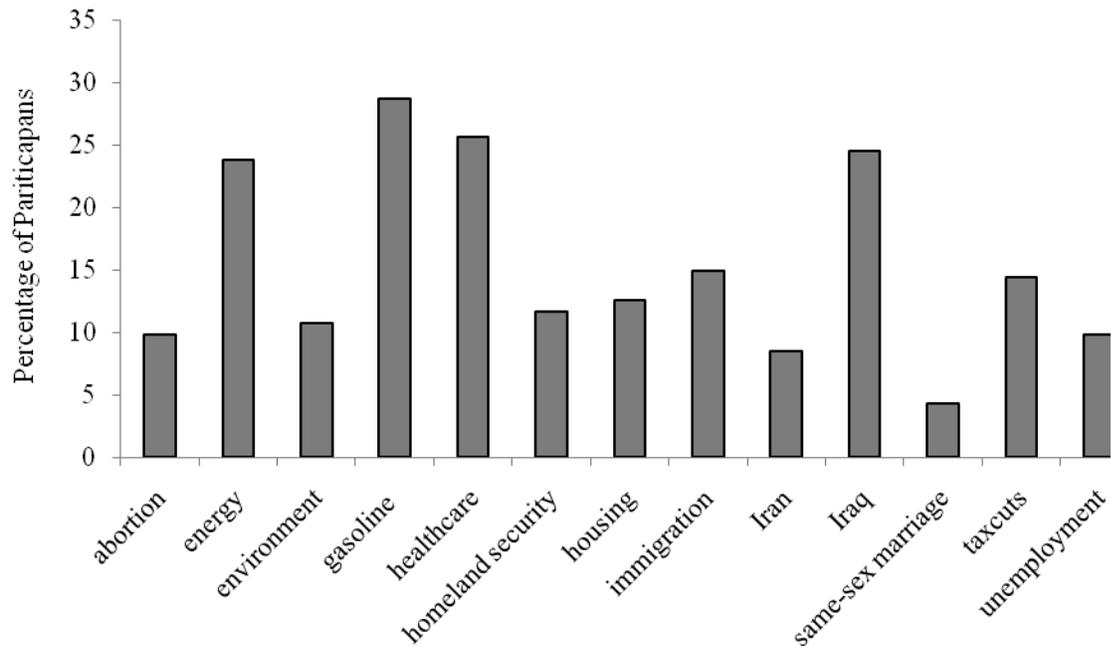
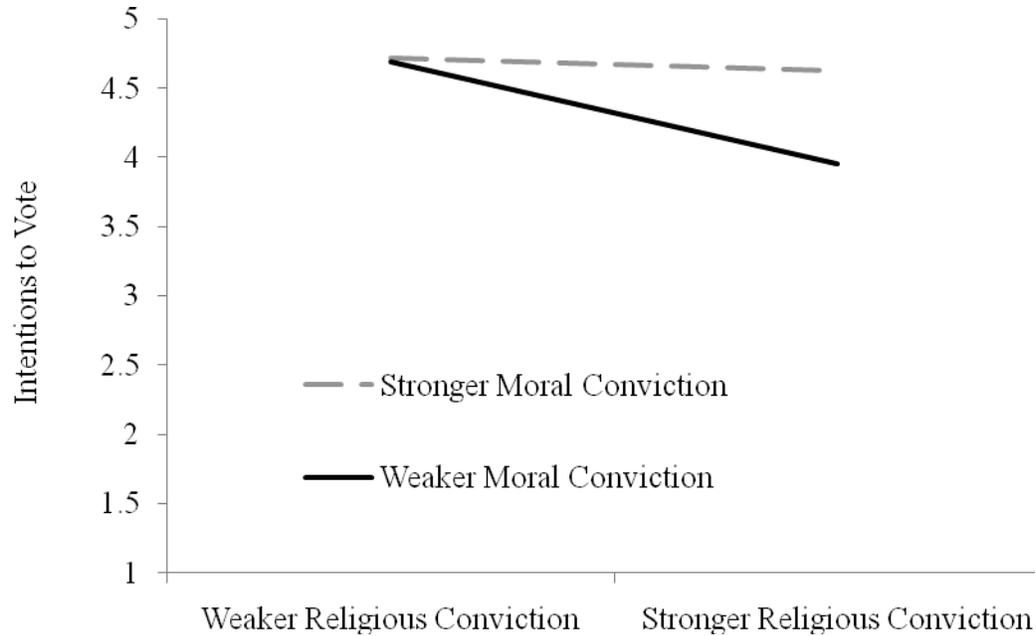


Figure 2. The effects of religious conviction on intentions to vote at weaker and stronger levels of moral conviction.



Note. Approximately 33% of participants ($N = 145$) reported scores below the means on both the religious and moral conviction scales; 25% ($N = 110$) reported scores above the mean on the religious conviction scale and below the mean on the moral conviction scale; 11% ($N = 50$) reported scores below the mean on the religious conviction scale and above the mean on the moral conviction scale; and 30% of participants ($N = 129$) reported scores above the means on both the religious and moral conviction scales.