

Political Orientation, Religiosity, and the Justifiability of Law Violations

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Abstract

A large sample of undergraduate students were asked questions that pertained to how justified they would feel in breaking the law under different circumstances. In addition, the participants' degree of religiosity and political affiliations were measured. We found that participants who identified themselves as more politically liberal felt more justified in breaking laws across all of our hypothetical situations. Conservatives on average felt less justified in violating laws in our situations. This finding corresponded to that of our religiosity measure, in which participants that reported being more religious felt, on average, less justified violating laws with the exception of when the law conflicted with their religious beliefs.

Introduction

- When asked directly, individuals typically report that it is “always” important to obey laws.
- In addition, procedural justice researchers have long demonstrated individuals' desire for adherence to rules and laws.
- Furthermore, legal scholars tout the necessity of strict adherence to laws and regulations in order to ensure that society has a rule of law.

• This new research builds on these earlier studies to address the following questions:

- In what situations will individuals feel justified in breaking laws?
- And how do individuals' religiosity and political affiliation affect their willingness to break a law?

Methodology

Participants:

Sample of 1,847 undergraduates from Arizona State University; 48.8 % of participants were male, 51.2% were female; mean age = 19.55 years.

Materials:

Our participants were presented with a written survey in which they were asked how justified they felt in disobeying a law in various circumstances:

1. *When the law conflicts with their religious beliefs*
2. *When the law conflicts with their personal ethical beliefs*
3. *When obeying the law would prevent them from doing what they would prefer to do*
4. *When obeying the law would cause harm to someone*
5. *When the "right thing to do" is something contrary to what the law requires*
6. *When the law conflicts with another law*
7. *When the law is rarely enforced*
8. *When the law was created for the benefit of large corporations, and not individuals*

Participants then answered six items that were designed to measure their religiosity; those items were collapsed into a single measure.

Finally, we measured our participants' political party affiliation (republican, democrat, etc.), political orientation (liberal vs. conservative), and gender.

Procedure:

Participants received these items as part of a survey battery administered during the first week of classes of the Fall 2006 semester.

Although all participants were asked to rate the eight law-violation scenarios, not all participants received the religious and political items.

Results

Measured Variables

We first created an overall measure of **desire for adherence**

- This variable is the average response to each of the eight scenarios
- Higher numbers represent a more tolerant view of law violations

We then created an overall measure of **judgment variability**

- This variable is the variance of an individuals judgments of the eight law violation scenarios
- Higher numbers represent individuals who are more variable in their judgments of law violations (i.e., whose judgments are more greatly affected by situational differences)

We then ran a series of ten regression analyses in which we predicted participants' judgments of the scenarios (and their overall adherence and variability) from the religiosity, political orientation, gender measures. We also included all possible two and three-way interactions; however, none were significant.

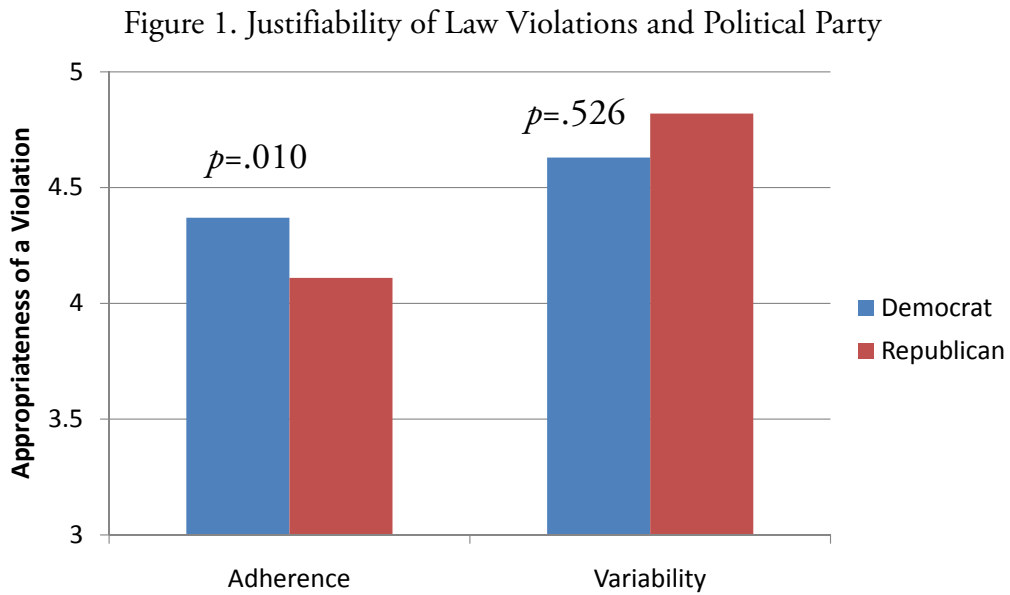
In Table 1 below, we list the standardized regression coefficients for each of the models.

Higher numbers = "More Justified in Violating the Law"		1 = Very Conservative 7 = Very Liberal	1 = Non-Religious 7 = Extremely Rel.	0 = Female 1 = Male	All possible 2 and 3-way
Justifiable to violate law when...	Model R ²	Politics	Religion	Gender	Interaction
Conflicts with Religion	.307	.074	.313**	.103	--
Conflicts with Personal Ethics	.048	.196**	.273**	.051	--
Prevents From Doing What They Want	.021	-.010	-.080	.067	--
Causes Harm to Someone	.010	.037	.061	.083	--
Contrary To The "Right" Thing To Do	.045	.224**	.222*	.322*	--
Conflicts With Another Law	.020	.201**	.161	.315	--
Law Is Rarely Enforced	.038	.000	-.188	.075	--
Law Benefits Big Business	.077	.223**	.040	-.015	--
Overall Desire for Adherence	.056	.212**	.192	.239	--
Overall Judgment Variability	.031	.235***	.301**	.213	--

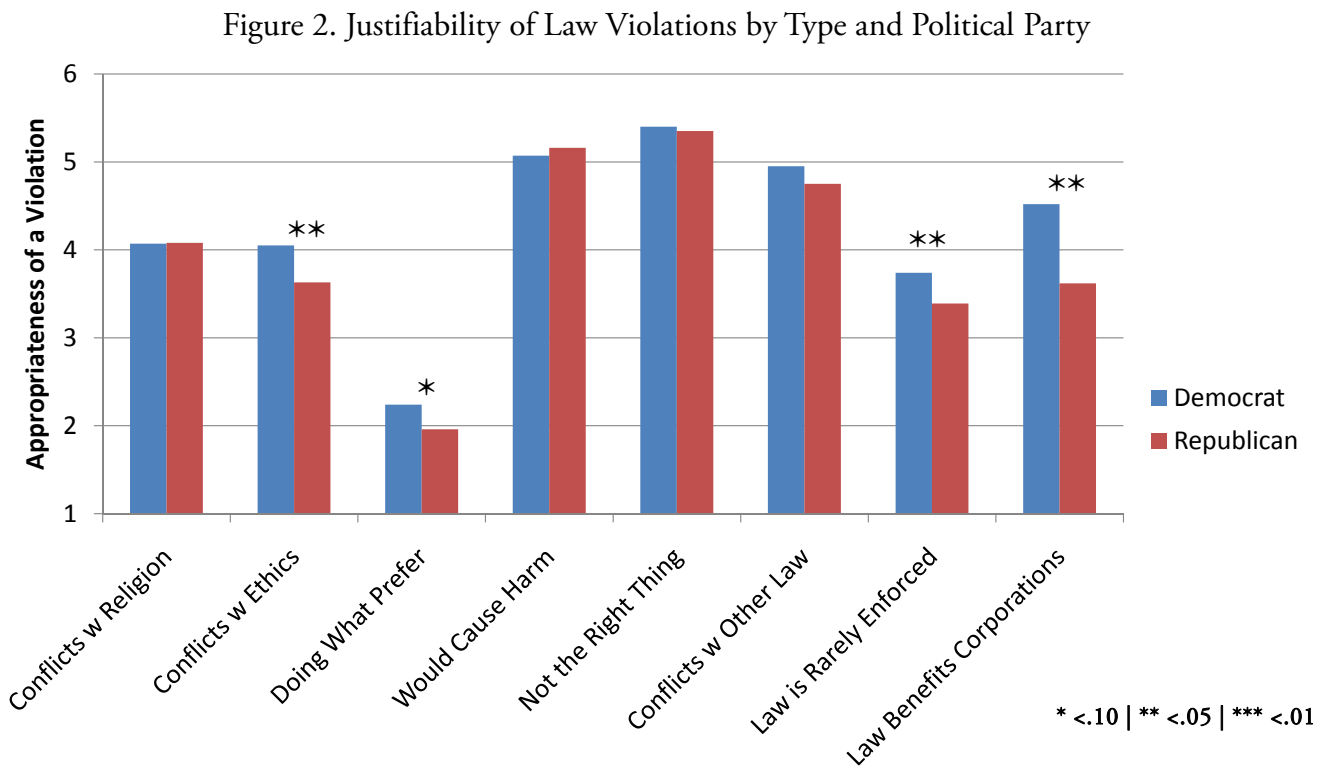
* <.10 | ** <.05 | *** <.01

We then examined political party preferences and judgments of rule violations:

First, we conducted a pair of one-way ANOVAs on the overall measures of desired adherence and variability:



Next, we looked at judgments of individual scenarios:



* <.10 | ** <.05 | *** <.01

Discussion

Political Orientation & Religion

- Participants with liberal political attitudes judged potential law violations as more justifiable across all of our scenarios. Liberal political attitudes were also associated with increased variability in the ratings—liberals tended to differentiate between the scenarios, while conservatives remained more consistent.
- Political orientation predicted judgments of several scenarios, with more liberal attitudes associated with a higher level of perceived justifiability for violating a law that 1) conflicts with another law, 2) conflicts with one's personal ethics, 3) conflicts with the "right thing to do" and 4) benefits big corporations over individuals.
- Religiosity was not related to the overall responses to the scenarios; however, it was associated with increased variability in the ratings—religious participants tended to differentiate between the scenarios, while those who were less religious remained more consistent.
- Religiosity predicted judgments of several scenarios, with high religiosity associated with a higher level of perceived justifiability for violating a law that 1) conflicts with one's religious beliefs, 2) conflicts with one's personal ethics, and 3) conflicts with the "right thing to do."

Political Party

- Across all of our scenarios, Democrats were significantly stronger than Republicans in their feelings that a person would be justified in violating laws.
- However, when looking at the individual scenarios, this was limited to situations in which the law 1) conflicted with one's ethics, 2) prevented someone from doing what he/she wanted, 3) was rarely enforced, and 4) was made for the benefit of corporations over individuals.

Conclusion

Although, when asked directly, most people claim it is almost “never” justifiable to violate a law, situational factors may lead to instances in which a person feels justified in violating the law. In addition, individual ideological differences further define situations in which violations may be seen as justifiable. These findings tie closely to research on moral decision making and procedural justice, and have implications for the understanding of how individuals understand the law, and for the study of the rule of law.

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