Definitely Not Moralistic: State Political Culture and Support for Donald Trump in the Race for the 2016 Republican Presidential Nomination

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ABSTRACT
This study analyzes the important role state political culture played in the race for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. Donald Trump appealed to demographically distinct types of voters in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries and caucuses that varied considerably from previous Republican presidential nominees. Relative to the demographics of the primary electorates, however, this study finds that state political culture played an outsized role in determining Donald Trump’s relative level of support in a particular state. When state demographics are utilized in ordinary least squares regression models as independent variables with state partisanship and Daniel Elazar’s state political culture typology, political culture proves to be a significant determinant of the level of support given to Trump in a state. States that are characterized by a more moralistic political culture are considerably more likely to have given Trump a lower share of the vote while voters in states that are characterized by a more traditionalistic or individualistic culture were more likely to support Trump.

The contest for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination was unprecedented. Donald Trump, who few saw as a serious candidate when he announced he was running for president, became the nominee at the Republican Convention in Cleveland in July. This is the case despite the fact that he has never held political office before and has very low favorability ratings among the general population.

Trump emerged as the likely nominee by presenting himself stylistically as a completely different candidate from previous Republican presidential candidates. Trump's bluntness and lack of "political correctness" clearly appealed to many more Republican voters than was imagined by the media and Republican establishment at the beginning of the nomination process. Trump, simply put, appealed to a segment of the Republican electorate that long been ignored at the presidential nomination stage. Demographically, Trump’s support varied from that of other Republican candidates, but not by as much as was widely portrayed. Although a number of demographic divides existed in the Republican primaries, this study finds that these demographic divisions are secondary to state political culture as an explanatory factor differentiating Trump’s level of support in different states. In the end, state political culture played an outsized role in determining Trump’s vote share throughout the nomination process.

THE DYNAMICS OF DONALD TRUMP’S SUPPORT
Much of the discussion of Trump's surprising appeal to the Republican electorate has focused on the demographic groups that have given disproportionate support. Trump tended to do best in counties where white identity mixes with long-simmering economic dysfunctions. A significant share of his supporters were from areas of the country that largely missed the transition of the United States away from manufacturing and into a diverse, information-driven globalized economy. In particular, Trump did better in areas of the country with high concentrations of whites without a high school diploma, in areas of those that self-describe themselves as ancestrally “American,” and areas with high percentages living in a mobile home (Irwin and Katz 2016).

Trump's campaign slogan “Make American Great Again” suggests that his campaign is stoking fears about generational societal change. Many Trump supporters are deeply concerned
that the country they live in is not the country of their youth and
that they themselves are no longer represented by the US gov-
ernment. Support for Trump is motivated by something beyond
the more conventional view of conservatism in which economic
freedom and small government as well as social and fiscal respon-
sibility are prized. In a similar vein, Trump may also represent
an identity politics of the Right that is the legacy of cultural pop-
ulism that originated with segregationist George Wallace, former
governor of Alabama who ran for president in 1968 and 1972.
Wallace’s technique of “positive polarization”—pitting his sup-
porters against the dominant cultural establishment—branded
him as the “authentic” candidate (Fraser and Freeman 2010).
Supporting this theory is the fact that Trump has done consider-
ably better in areas that supported George Wallace in the presi-
dential election of 1968 (Irwin and Katz 2016). This idea of Trump
being the authentic, anti-elitist truth teller was a critical compo-
nent to his success. In all states with primary exit polls, Donald
Trump overwhelmingly won the support of voters who said the
top candidate quality was to “tell it like it is.”

Focusing solely on demographic groups, however, misses
important geographic nuances of the 2016 Republican nomi-
ation. Where people live is politically more important than
ever (Brown et al. 2005). States—and regions—have real and
significant cultural and political differences (Gelman 2008).
Even after accounting for group traits, regional effects can often
be detected because people that are proximate to one another
influence each other’s attitudes and behavior (Mutz 2002).
This can be considered a “neighborhood effect”—the tendency
for people to be socialized by those they live around (Gimpel
and Schuknecht 2003).

It would thus be a vast oversimplification to say that Trump’s
support in winning the nomination was due mostly to his suc-
cess with blue-collar workers. Even though Trump’s support
has been portrayed as appealing to poorer working-class whites
who are assumed to have lost the most from globalization, his
appeal is in reality much wider than that. Despite some consistent
demographic relationships in Trump’s support from state to state
through the nomination process (in particular, his support among
voters without a college education), it is clear that demographics
alone does not explain all the variance in Trump’s support. Even
though there were obviously demographic differences between
the coalitions that supported and opposed Trump, the explana-
tory power of these demographic gaps is limited. State political
culture, as it turns out, tends to be a much stronger predictor of
how well Trump did in a particular state than state demographics.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND SUBCULTURES
Given the importance of the relationship between what govern-
ment does (or does not do) and political culture, the political
cultures of American states rightfully should be a major focus of
study. Political cultural factors are influential in shaping govern-
ment in three ways: 1) by molding the political community’s percep-
tions of the nature and purposes of politics and expectations
from government and the political process, 2) by influencing the
recruitment of specific kinds of people to become active in gov-
ernment and politics, and 3) by directing the actual way in which
government is practiced by citizens and politicians (Elazar 1999).

A commonly used typology for political subcultures within the
United States is that proposed by Daniel Elazar (1984). Elazar’s
theory is based on the immigration and migration patterns of
ethnic groups and religions. Elazar’s scheme has widely been seen
as the most promising effort to map American political cultures
and the best way to characterize state political culture (Mead
2004). According to Elazar, the national political culture is the
synthesis of three major political subcultures that are dominant
in varying parts of the country: moralistic, individualistic, and
traditionalistic. All three are of nationwide proportions, having
spread over time throughout the country. At the same time, each
subculture is strongly tied to specific areas of the country, reflect-
ing the streams and currents of migration that have carried people
of different origins and backgrounds across the country.

The moralistic political culture stresses the conception of the
commonwealth as the basis for democratic government. Politics
is viewed as being a positive activity in which citizens have an
obligation to participate. Good government is measured by the
degree to which it promotes the public good. The individualis-
tic political culture, on the other hand, is based on the utilitarian
conception that politics should work like a marketplace. Govern-
ment should handle only those functions demanded by the people
it is created to serve. This businesslike conception of politics
places a premium on limiting community intervention on private
activities and restricts government action to only those areas that
encourage private initiative. Finally, the traditionalistic political

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leanings of these states, however, are on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum: Utah is generally considered to be one of the most conservative and Republican states, while Minnesota has a reputation for being progressive and currently has the longest streak of supporting the Democratic nominee for president (every year since 1972). As it turns out, both Minnesota and Utah—polar opposites ideologically—were two of Trump’s worst states in the 2016 nomination process. Minnesota has long been seen as the archetypical example of a state informed and permeated by the moralistic political subculture. The tone set by the state’s political culture, Elazar argues, permeates Minnesota’s entire civil society, its politics and government, giving Minnesota a clean government image (Elazar 1999). Minnesota’s political culture represents everything that Trump is not politically. The reformist, inclusive, good government nature of moralistic subcultures is simply put the antithesis of Trump’s message of populist, domino authoritarianism that appeals to those who believe he “tells it like it is” despite obvious, and continuous, fabrications.

Beyond just Minnesota and Utah, Elazar’s typology of political subcultures proves to be a good predictor of Trump’s support in the 2016 Republican presidential nomination process through the Indiana primary on May 3 (at which point Trump’s remaining opponents—Ted Cruz and John Kasich—dropped out of the race). Specifically, whether or not the moralistic subculture was dominant in the state was an excellent predictor of Trump’s vote share (see table 1). Trump does very poorly in moralistic states, regardless of whether or not the state is relatively liberal or conservative. Trump’s Republican vote share in the 2016 primaries and caucuses was 28.3% in moralistic states, much lower than the 38.3% he received in traditionalistic states and 49.6% in individualistic states. The difference between Trump’s share of the vote in moralistic and individualistic states is especially noteworthy. As much as Republicans in moralistic states were repelled by Trump, Republicans in individualistic states gravitated toward the billionaire businessman from New York City. This is consistent with the individualistic subculture’s business-like view of government: government in individualistic subcultures simply represents a means of defending one’s own interests.

Table 1 also displays Trump’s vote share by subculture of all voters, including those who participated in both the Democratic and Republican primaries and caucuses. Calculating Trump’s support as a proportion of the total Republican and Democratic vote leads to a different impression of Trump’s popularity in a state relative to looking at just the Republican vote total. As a measure of all voters, Trump’s poor standing in moralistic states is especially reinforced: he received less than 14% of the total vote in moralistic states. Trump’s support in individualistic states, however, looks considerably less impressive by this measure as Trump’s turnout in individualistic states tended to be noticeably stronger. Trump did extremely well among Republican voters in many individualistic states of the Northeast, but the number of Republican voters was considerably lower than those voting in the Democratic primary. New York, for example, was one of Trump’s best states among Republican voters, but there were more than twice as many voters in the Democratic primary than the Republican primary. Consequently, as a share of all voters Trump’s strongest subculture was the traditionalistic, where 23.3% of all voters supported him.

To further test the predictive value of Elazar’s subcultures in the contest for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, ordinary least squares regression models were employed utilizing state political culture, state partisanship, and state demographics as independent variables. Two measurements of Elazar’s typology are used to test the influence of political culture. For the first model, whether or not the dominant subculture in a state is moralistic is used as a dummy variable (with moralistic subculture coded as 1 and traditionalistic and individualistic subcultures coded as 0). The second model used Ira Sharkansky’s (1969) operationalization of Elazar’s typology, which rates states on a scale from 1 to 9, with low scores given to moralistic states and high scores given to traditionalistic states, with individualistic states in between. This measurement was used in a prior study to test the “institutional lag model” that predicts that a state’s political institutions are structured according to a political culture dominant in the state (Norrander 2000).

Table 2 contains the results of the model predicting Trump’s vote share in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries and caucuses before his remaining opponents dropped out on May 3. Upon controlling for state partisanship and the demographics of the state, table 2 indicates that having or not having a moralistic subculture is a strong and significant predictor of Trump’s share of the Republican as well as the overall vote. The same can also be said of the model that includes Sharkansky’s typology of political culture, which is also a statistically significant predictor of Trump’s performance in a state. Taken together, these models indicate that, net of statistical controls, political culture is an important determinant of Trump’s vote share in the race for the Republican nomination. State partisanship and state Partisan Statements

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Moralistic</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Traditionalistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican Primaries</td>
<td>28.3***</td>
<td>49.6***</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucuses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOP + Democratic</td>
<td>13.6***</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>23.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primaries/Caucuses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Trump’s share of Vote in 2016 presidential nomination contests through May 3. N = 37 for GOP share of vote; N = 35 for total GOP and Democratic vote. Significance levels: ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05 for independent samples t-test within each subculture.
demographics, on the other hand, proved to be relatively poor predictors of Trump’s vote share relative to political culture. It must be noted, however, that because the analysis is done at the state-level it is uncertain if the culture/vote correlations reflect the true effects of culture or if they simply are proxies for individual differences that vary across the states.

Why did Trump do so much worse in moralistic states? In short, Trump’s ideology and persona were a terrible fit for moralistic states. Moralistic states are more likely to be ideologically extreme, in both directions (Erikson et al. 1993). As a result, Trump’s ideological “flexibility,” as he has termed it, appealed less to the citizens of moralistic states.

Furthermore, given Trump’s outsider campaign message of “make America great again,” it is perhaps not surprising that in communitarian moralistic states, which unlike individualistic states, resist a businesslike approach to politics and government.

Trump’s outlandish comments regarding race and immigration (e.g., building a wall at the Mexican border, preventing Muslims from entering the country, and his “birther” statements) were also less attractive to those in moralistic states who pride themselves on good citizenship. Attitudes toward race and immigration, therefore, appear to have been a much more important factor in explaining Trump’s relative weakness in moralistic states. Since moralistic states have traditionally been the most supportive of civil rights and the most racially tolerant, Trump’s race-baiting may have been more of a deterrent to vote for him among white voters in moralistic states than it was in individualistic and traditionalist states.

Now that Donald Trump is the Republican nominee for president, the question is whether or not this relationship of his relative support in different subcultures will also exist in the general election.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Donald Trump's Share of Vote</th>
<th>Donald Trump's Share of Total GOP + Democratic Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STATE POLITICAL CULTURE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moralistic Subculture</td>
<td>-17.430 (3.728)**</td>
<td>-10.609 (2.391)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkansky’s Typology</td>
<td>2.379 (0.842)**</td>
<td>1.847 (0.457)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATE PARTISANSHIP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Obama Vote</td>
<td>0.589 (0.218)</td>
<td>0.011 (0.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Total GOP + Democratic Vote</td>
<td>0.201 (0.151)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATE DEMOGRAPHICS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>0.217 (0.137)</td>
<td>0.267 (0.192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>0.195 (0.314)</td>
<td>0.350 (0.379)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Urban</td>
<td>0.103 (0.104)</td>
<td>0.275 (0.116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Aged 65+</td>
<td>1.071 (1.065)</td>
<td>0.743 (1.269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% College Graduate</td>
<td>-0.500 (0.521)</td>
<td>-0.906 (0.618)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-18.967 (18.037)</td>
<td>-58.549 (28.396)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.686</td>
<td>.569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>9.050***</td>
<td>5.460***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinary least squares regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent Variable: Trump’s share of Vote in 2016 presidential nomination contests through May 3. N = 37 for GOP share of vote; N = 35 for total GOP and Democratic vote. Moralistic Subculture: 1 = moralistic, 0 = traditionalistic and individualistic. Significance levels: ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.
worse in moralistic states than previous Republican presidential nominees. Early indications are that this could indeed be the case. An April 2016 poll conducted for Deseret News by KSL, for example, found Hillary Clinton tied with Donald Trump in general election match in the state of Utah, a state that Obama lost by 48 percentage points in the 2012 general election. Although one poll with Trump and Clinton tied by no means suggests that Clinton will win Utah, simply the fact that she was deemed to even be potentially competitive in the state is a startling turn-around for a state that has not voted Democratic for a president since 1964. Any discussion of Trump winning the 270 Electoral College votes necessary to win the presidency thus becomes more problematic because some states that are key to his electoral strategy—states like Michigan and Wisconsin—have moralistic subcultures. Given his lack of support in moralistic states, in fact, Trump may have a hard time holding onto traditionally Republican moralistic states. By nominating Trump, the Republicans are potentially risking turning some red moralistic states blue.

NOTES
1. Partisanship was determined by Obama’s share of the 2012 general election vote.
2. Demographics included the share of the population that is white, lives in urban areas, is aged 65 or older, and is a college graduate, as well as the state’s per capita income.

REFERENCES