“KNOWING” RIGHT FROM WRONG:
THE ROLE OF MORAL CONFIDENCE IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

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by

Christopher L. Weaver

Geoffrey C. Layman, Director

Graduate Program in Political Science
Notre Dame, Indiana
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ABSTRACT
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Americans have long been prone to conflict over moral values. As a result, moral issues frequently play a critical and divisive role in U.S. politics. However, the process by which individuals apply their moral judgments to politics is still poorly understood. Moral judgments and legal positions are distinct, as evidenced by an overlooked but consistent gap in opinion over time on the morality and legality of various moral issues. I contend that one’s perceived level of moral knowledge, which I call moral confidence, accounts for this variation in respondents’ willingness to translate their moral beliefs into legal positions. To test this theory, I leverage preexisting and original survey data to demonstrate the persistence of a morality-legality gap in opinion across the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. Furthermore, I demonstrate that moral confidence explains this gap; those with lower moral confidence are more likely to hold incongruous moral and legal opinions. Moreover, many respondents overestimate their moral knowledge, which leads them to be more willing to legally oppose acts on the basis of their moral beliefs. Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that some individuals become more legally supportive of moral issues when prompted to actually explain their moral beliefs. Thus, how much we know—or think we know—about right and wrong determines how forcefully we apply our moral beliefs to politics.
To my parents for encouraging me to pursue the education they never received
and the many teachers and professors from whom it was obtained.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The problem of moral conflict in American politics has received heightened attention in the past few decades in part due to the the work of James Hunter. In his so-called “culture wars” thesis, Hunter (1991) argues that the United States is engulfed in a conflict over the very core of its identity, culture, and values. Hunter depicts this disagreement as rooted in the fundamentally incompatible moral visions held by traditionalists and the religiously orthodox on one side, and secular progressives on the other. Each side, Hunter argues, relies on a distinct system of moral understanding. The moral system of the orthodox relies on religious scriptures that it deems inerrant and the belief that God is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, while progressives largely reject traditional sources of morality and claim that morality is a human construct that is constantly evolving. Subsequent empirical research has supported this notion that liberals and conservatives rely on distinct systems of thought or different cognitive processes in making moral judgments (Haidt 2012; Lakoff 2002). The deep-seated nature of this disagreement and the factions’ drastically divergent worldviews make the division seem irreconcilable. Indeed, both sides are perceived as absolutists who seek complete control of the moral order with little tolerance for reasoned communication or a middle-of-the-road compromise (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1992; Claire 1995; O’Connor 1996; Tribe 1990).

The question of whether the U.S. is actually engulfed in a culture war over conflicting moral visions has received extensive attention from both scholars and pundits, who have heavily debated the extent, ferocity, and basis of the conflict (Baker 2005; Barker and Carman 2012; Barker, Hurwitz and Nelson 2008; Davis and Robinson 1996; Evans
1996; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2006; Jacoby 2014; Layman and Green 2006). However, even those who argue the conflict is overblown do acknowledge that at least a subset of American political activists act as zealous, uncompromising combatants in certain policy areas, especially with respect to putatively moral issues. At the root of these moral and cultural conflicts is a tendency among both liberals and conservatives to moralize political issues and to condemn opponents as not only incorrect, but immoral. Indeed, political scientists suggest American politics has grown increasingly divided over moral issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage (Layman and Carmines 1997). Prior research suggests that moral judgments and moral issues influence how individuals vote (Abramowitz 1995; Franks and Scherr 2015), whether or not they turnout in elections (Grummel 2008; Biggergs 2011), how they respond to the mobilization efforts of interest groups (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Mooney and Lee 2000), how they perceive politicians (Clifford 2014), whether they hold elected officials accountable Page and Shapiro 1983, 182; Tavits 2007), and their party alignment (Adams 1997). What is more, in addition to their divisive role in state and national politics, moral issues also play a central role in conflict in urban and local politics (Sharp 2002; 2003; 2005; Wald, Button and Rienzo 1996).

However, this kind of moralistic, society-redefining conflict may be less novel in American politics than Hunter suggests. In *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*, James Morone (2003, 4) attributes much of the social and political conflict in American history to the “moral urge at the heart of American politics and society.” That is, Morone argues Americans possess a particular sensitivity to what they perceive as violations of their fundamental beliefs about right and wrong. As evidence for this tendency, Morone (2003) points events throughout American history, from bouts of widespread persecution in Puritan New England, through battles over race, gender, and temperance, to modern clashes over drugs, sex, and family values. While an expanding literature in psychology argues that morality evolved in all human beings to help overcome a variety of environmental threats (Haidt 2012) and obstacles to successful group cooperation (Greene
Morone argues that American society is especially inclined to moral fervor and has been since the Puritans first arrived on the shores of New England in the 1600s. This impulse has repeatedly motivated moralistic crusades to outlaw sins, expel or redeem sinners, and help the United States live up to some set of utopian ideals.

Viewed through Morone’s lens, American history is a series of moralistic tidal waves, with each moral wave cresting in response to a perceived threat of rampant sin and almost inevitably breaking after a period intense political conflict. This cycle begins when an individual or group first identifies a moral problem, which is usually focused upon some activity perceived as blasphemous, debasing, or corrupting (Morone 2003, 10-11). While Morone does not draw this distinction, prior work in moral psychology suggests certain activities are more likely to incite moral outrage than others by triggering one of a set of innate moral intuitions (Haidt 2001). After the initial moralistic reaction, an individual or group often begins a campaign to eradicate the purported sin. However, a group’s moral crusade often meets resistance from those either engaged in the purported sin or apathetic to it. As Morone points out, this almost inevitably leads the crusading group to turn to the government to impose its moral will on their opponents, which transforms a moral disagreement into a political issue.

Unaddressed in either Hunter or Morone’s accounts, however, is the question of whether this moral opposition must necessarily develop into legal opposition. It is largely assumed that those who oppose an act as immoral will at least eventually seek to legally impose their moral judgments on others. While the strategic factors that determine whether a group succeeds or fails in its efforts to impose its moral views have been examined across a range of issues, none of these accounts have asked how or why groups decided to impose their moral will in the first place. Despite its implications for how these divergent moral world-views will actually be enacted, the process by which moral judgments are translated into policy positions is still poorly understood.
Moreover, the route from moral opposition to legal opposition is not always clear. For example, on March 30, 2016, Donald Trump, a contender for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination, suggested in a town-hall-style forum that women should be legally punished for obtaining an abortion (Flegenheimer and Haverman 2016). Trump, who was once an abortion supporter, failed to predict the outrage this would elicit from even other abortion opponents, who did not feel legal opposition should entail a penalty for women. As a result of the ensuing backlash, Trump recanted his position within the day. While this may exemplify the costs associated with being overly willing to evolve one’s political positions, it also suggests that translating moral positions into legal positions may pose challenges for even political elites.

Despite these challenges, however, Americans have displayed a consistent willingness to impose their moral views by legally prohibiting even widely accepted acts. Consider the constitutional ban imposed on the sale, production, importation, and transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States from 1920 to 1933. Unlike other moralistic laws, such as the Comstock Law of 1873 that outlawed erotic and putatively obscene materials, Prohibition targeted a popular, public American pastime. The consumption of alcohol was not only common among both the working classes and the wealthy; it was also part of the Eucharist in several Christian denominations, and even the Puritans drank alcohol without shame, referring to it as the “goodly creature of God” (Morone 2003, 283-284). What is more, unlike contemporary moral debates over the legalization of recreational drugs such as marijuana, alcohol consumption was not only widespread, but legal. As such, alcohol seems to be a prime example of a “sin” that moral opponents might have been able to abide.

Nevertheless, with the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a massive grassroots movement advocating temperance succeeded in outlawing alcohol from coast to coast. The push for Prohibition began with the temperance movement in the early 19th century. While it started as a largely religious effort led by evangelical preachers to help sinful drinkers reform themselves, it quickly moved into the political sphere (Morone 2003,
284-285). In 1851, Maine became the first state to outlaw the sale of alcohol under the leadership of Neal Dow, the Mayor of Portland. The Know-Nothing party, primarily based around an anti-immigrant platform, quickly adopted the issue of temperance and succeeded in pushing prohibition into law in another 12 states by 1855.

These early prohibition laws were repealed in all but three states by the 1870s as a result of the collapse of the Know-Nothing party, the Civil War, and local political resistance (Morone 2003, 286). Nevertheless, the temperance movement reared itself again in new forms with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in 1874 and the Anti-Saloon League in 1893. Together with the Prohibitionist Party, these groups and other activists in the temperance movement persuaded politicians to push through prohibition at the state level across the country. By 1917, twenty-seven states were entirely dry, while a number of others were mostly dry at the county level (Morone 2003, 308). Despite their successes, the temperance movement could not fully limit the availability of alcohol in these areas without the authority to regulate interstate commerce. As a result, they began to pursue national reforms: first to forbid shipping liquor from wet to dry states and subsequently to prohibit the sale of alcohol in the entire country. By 1920, the temperance movement succeeded in getting the Eighteenth Amendment ratified by every state except Rhode Island and Connecticut.

A number of non-moral political factors certainly made Prohibition possible, but the underlying push for temperance was inherently moralistic. Indeed, the push for temperance parallels a recurring cycle of moral fervor Morone (2003) identifies throughout American history. What began as a self-help movement became evangelical and judgmental. Private judgment turned into public condemnation, and persuasion gave way to coercion. Dissatisfied with their private efforts to redeem sinners, reformers in the temperance movement turned to politics to give legal force to their moral beliefs.

While Prohibition was ultimately repealed by ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment, it serves as one of the most prominent examples of Americans’ willingness to crim-
nalize even widespread behavior they deem immoral. Critics of modern laws against gambling, tobacco, and recreational drugs would likely draw parallels between the issues. Indeed, the targets of moral ire may shift over time, but the desire to outlaw sin remains a recurring tendency in American politics. In fact, Prohibition’s ultimate failure is in keeping with many such moral pushes; Morone (Morone 2003, 11) points out that the targeted sins of these moralistic waves are rarely, if ever, eradicated.

While the immoral acts may never be fully stymied, however, the power granted to the state to combat them is usually retained even after the targeted sins become normalized. Prohibition was not simply a public endorsement of a private value; in order to enforce the moral will of the prohibitionists, it was necessary to construct a massive federal policing infrastructure to coordinate interstate efforts to prevent the production, transportation, and sale of alcohol, run down bootleggers, and change the very way people conducted their everyday lives (Morone 2003, 343-344). Despite the popular vision of American government as being relatively small and unobtrusive, it takes a substantial amount of power and public support to hunt witches and heretics, censor books, and monitor citizens’ sex lives. Rather than the exception, the regulation of private behavior has long been a major function of American government in the domain of morality policy. When private acts come to be perceived as threats to public decency, Americans are often only too happy to intervene. Of course, this occurs most easily when the targeted activity is a cultural feature of an outside group such as Native Americans or immigrants, but, as in the case of alcohol, common activities may also become targets of the crusaders’ ire.

Given the recurrence of these moralistic waves in American history, why does this moral urge seem so prevalent in the U.S.? It may stem from a variety of unique aspects of American society. To begin, Americans are particularly religious, especially when compared to their peers in other industrialized democracies. Beyond simply being more religious, however, Morone argues that Americans tend to view the U.S. through a lens of American exceptionalism. In a sermon at the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony,
John Winthrop, a Puritan minister, suggested the colony would be “as a city upon a hill,” an example to the rest of the world of communal unity and Christian purity (Morone 2003, 9). Morone argues that this vision of the United States as a community of model citizens has been picked up again and again throughout American history. While the precise message of the lesson changes over time, Americans consistently return to the idea that the rest of the world is or should be looking to the United States for lessons in faith, freedom, development, capitalism, etc. Morone argues that this notion of a divine American mission repeatedly leads us to try establish a model by cleansing our society of various vices and promoting various virtues.

This notion of America’s pseudo-sacred role in the world is also reflected in the concept of an American civil religion developed by Robert Bellah (1967), which posits that Americans of all faiths—and of no faith—hold in addition to their conventional religious beliefs a common set of quasi-religious beliefs about American history, founding documents, symbols, and shared values. By imbuing the U.S., its politics, and its policies with such sacred meaning and purpose, actors on all sides may be more motivated to see American government and society reflect what they see as foundational moral principles. This perspective is perhaps reflected in President Dwight Eisenhower famous statement in 1954 on the need for religion in the United States: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious faith—and I don’t care what it is” (Morone 2003, 347). Like Eisenhower, many Americans may have a deep-seated desire to see government represent a higher purpose, even if they cannot agree on the nature of that purpose.

As this theory suggests, moral fervor can also inspire the American public’s dreams and aspirations. In addition to witch hunts and efforts to police sexuality, Morone (2003) attributes an array of positive social reforms, including the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, to the moral urge at America’s heart. As has already been noted, some research in evolutionary psychology has suggested our moral intuitions are adaptations meant to spur cooperation rather conflict (Haidt 2012). While it seems these ef-
forts often ignite social and political conflicts between groups with disparate beliefs about what constitutes vice or virtue, there would seem to be some space for morality in public decision-making; Americans possess moralistic tendencies that can both ignite fierce, divisive conflicts and inspire the dreams and aspirations necessary for transformative policy-making.

In fact, while much of this dissertation focuses upon moral issues about which Americans disagree, large segments of the American population do agree on certain moral questions. For example, data from the 2015 Gallup Values and Beliefs poll suggest that approximately 72% of Americans believe the state of moral values in the country is “getting worse” (McCarthy 2015). Moreover, these findings are not time-bound results from a particular political situation; large majorities (between 67% and 82%) have said the state of moral values in the country is declining since Gallup asking the question in 2002. What is more, while social conservatives are the mostly likely to describe the moral state of the U.S. as declining, the majority of social liberals also give this response. In addition to thinking the state of moral values in the country is declining, a majority of Americans also believe the current state of moral values is “poor” (McCarthy 2015). These respondents likely disagree drastically about the specific causes for America’s poor and declining moral state, but they agree about the need for some sort of moral revival in the United States.

Indeed, just as the U.S. has a long history of moral crusades, it also has a rich tradition of jeremiads, which are a type of rhetorical narrative that laments a decline in virtue and calls for reform, repentance, or renewal (Murphy 2009). The term comes from the name of Jeremiah, a Biblical prophet who decried Israel’s sins and broken covenant with God and announced a coming disaster as divine punishment. Similarly, jeremiads in American history often predict some future calamity or attribute an ongoing disaster to the sins of the public. For example, the televangelist Jerry Falwell famously attributed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to sinners in the United States during a television appearance a few days after they occurred:
[W]hat we saw on [September 11], as terrible as it is, could be miniscule—if, in fact—God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve... The ACLU’s got to take a lot of blame for this... The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked... [along with] the pagans... and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way... (Murphy 2009, 4)

As Murphy (2009) notes, however, jeremiads are not the exclusive purview of religious conservatives. Americans of all stripes can point to the public’s moral failings or society’s decline from a previous, idealized age as a means to justify political change. For example, Murphy identifies Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech as one of many progressive jeremiads, which may be more secular but nevertheless call for a renewal of America’s past ideals. King’s speech, for instance, called for a return to the ideals of equality implicit in the Declaration of Independence.

Similarly, Morone (2003) identifies both the New Deal and Great Society programs as examples of liberal-minded efforts to use policy to achieve moral ends and to fulfill the American ideal. As evidence, Morone (2003, 347) quotes Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Second Inaugural Address, in which he justified his New Deal welfare programs in moral terms:

Old truths have been relearned; untruths have been unlearned. We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; we know now that it is bad economics. Out of the collapse of a prosperity whose builders boasted their practicality has come the conviction that in the long run economic morality pays. We are beginning to wipe out the line that divides the practical from the ideal; and in so doing we are fashioning an instrument of unimagined power for the establishment of a morally better world.

As alluded to in Franklin Roosevelt’s reference to “old truths,” these policies were viewed—or at least sold—not as novel economic policies, but as a return to America’s—and perhaps Christianity’s—original values. Despite its name, the New Deal was pitched not as a renegotiation of the American contract, but as a renewed commitment to its original contract.

The apparent centrality of morality in American politics makes it all the more important to understand what drives individuals to seek to legally enforce their moral beliefs.
at all. Why does the moral urge Morone and others describe become a desire for political change? This may seem self-explanatory; as stated above, Morone takes it almost for granted that moralistic groups will seek legal change when they prove unpersuasive in the private sphere. Indeed, we often assume a direct link between moral beliefs and legal preferences. However, I show in a subsequent chapter that this is not the case; in the limited number of surveys that ask about both legal and moral beliefs, I observe differences in moral and legal opinions across a range of moral issues. Americans find a range of activities to be morally acceptable, and as we might expect, they therefore believe individuals should be legally permitted to engage in these activities. For instance, a large number of Americans were “Wets” before and during Prohibition; they did not believe drinking was immoral and opposed criminalizing the consumption of alcohol. On the other hand, as discussed above, Americans consider a wide range of activities to be immoral and seek to criminalize them. This category includes the “Drys” who pushed for Prohibition. If all people fell into these two categories, the link between moral beliefs and legal preferences might be as straightforward as many assume. However, I show evidence that a substantial number of Americans believe activities are immoral but nevertheless do not support criminalizing them. For some reason, they resist the moral urge that Morone argues drives so much of American policy-making.

Why do these individuals’ moral beliefs and legal preferences differ? While I examine a range of potential explanations in this dissertation, I focus on moral confidence. Most individuals feel certain that their moral beliefs are correct. Moreover, they think they know a lot about right and wrong. I contend that this perceived level of moral knowledge, which I call moral confidence, plays an integral role in how these individuals apply and pursue their moral judgments in American politics. Because moral issues evoke deep emotional responses, individuals feel strongly about them on an intuitive level regardless of their actual knowledge of the issue. As a result, they tend to be highly confident in their own knowledge of the issue, which makes them more likely to take extreme positions and less
willing to compromise with political opponents. This results in more intensified and polarized political debates.

However, I contend that some individuals actually do doubt or question their moral judgments. Despite feeling deeply that something is morally wrong, they doubt their moral intuitions. As a result of this doubt, they are unwilling to legally impose their moral beliefs on others. In sum, these individuals’ moral and legal positions on issues differ due to a lack of confidence in their moral intuitions.

While what I have termed a lack of moral confidence may connote doubt or low self-esteem, it may also represent a potential solution to the ongoing moral strife in American politics. In the closing remarks of his 2008 TED talk on the role of moral psychology in differences between liberals and conservatives in the U.S., Jonathan Haidt identified what he saw as the central obstacle to resolving the kinds of moral conflicts Hunter and Morone describe:

\[\ldots\text{you can’t just go charging in, saying, “You’re wrong, and I’m right.” Because, as we just heard, everybody thinks they are right. A lot of the problems we have to solve are problems that require us to change other people. And if you want to change other people, a much better way to do it is to first understand who we are—understand our moral psychology, understand that we all think we’re right—and then step out, even if it’s just for a moment, step out... out of the moral matrix... And if you do that, that’s the essential move to cultivate moral humility, to get yourself out of this self-righteousness, which is the normal human condition. (Haidt 2008)}\]

By their very nature, moral beliefs are held with a deep certainty that the believer is in the right. Nevertheless, Haidt argues that moral conflicts can only be resolved when participants acknowledge they may be wrong. What I call a lack of moral confidence may alternatively represent what Haidt refers to as moral humility.

Furthermore, I argue that many Americans who display higher levels of moral confidence are, in fact, overconfident. That is, they tend to overestimate their understanding of moral issues, principles, and sources of moral authority. In turn, this overconfidence leads many Americans to take more extreme positions than they would if they had a more accurate
perception of their moral knowledge. Because moral issues arouse strong emotional reactions in those for whom the issues are moralized, they tend to inspire false confidence more than technical non-moral issues. Thus, members of the public tend to oversimplify moral issues and assume their own positions are easily perceived or understood. This only exacerbates their hostility toward opponents, who they see as failing to grasp self-evident truths. On issues where two opposing sides are both highly confident, neither is likely to see a need for discussion or debate due to their inflated sense of understanding and moral certainty. This further intensifies the conflict, making it far more difficult to establish a productive dialogue or achieve compromise.

Before further developing this theory, however, I first provide a brief overview of the wider literature on the nature of moral beliefs and judgments. In the proceeding sections, I begin by outlining the existing literature on how individuals render moral judgment and form moral beliefs. After this literature review, I elaborate on my theory of moral confidence and the illusion of explanatory depth in moral knowledge and argue that moral confidence plays an important role in the formation of public opinion by accounting for what I refer to as the morality-legality gap, the distinction between individuals’ judgments about what is right or wrong and their opinions about what should be legal. I next briefly outline the data and methods I will use throughout this dissertation to test these theories. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a detailed outline of the remainder of this dissertation.

1.1 Moral Beliefs and Judgments

Not only are moral issues contentious; the very concept of morality as an aspect of human culture and psychology has generated a substantial amount of disagreement. Its origins, in particular, are heavily disputed. While various religious traditions may view morality as divinely inspired or instilled, more recent work in psychology has posited a biological root for moral beliefs and judgments. Haidt (2012) argues both that moral judgments are empirically observable aspects of human neurology and that these impulses
evolved naturally over time to help human beings adapt to social and environmental challenges. For example, Haidt argues that the impulse to hold some things sacred and to view certain acts as degrading stems from the threat of harmful contaminants and diseases in nature. In a similar vein, Greene (2013) argues that moral beliefs evolved to solve cooperation problems. In the absence of moral impulses, Greene argues that consistent cooperation between human beings—particularly unrelated humans in large groups—would substantially more difficult. An moral aversion to cheating and selfishness, however, allows humans to behave more cooperatively. Thus, moral instincts helped early groups of humans survive in lieu of or in spite of rationally selfish strategies that might help individuals but hurt groups. As a result, these adaptive neurological impulses were passed on.

However, much of the initial research on moral reasoning and moral psychology was conducted by developmental psychologists, and it largely endorsed a rationalist model of moral judgment. These researchers largely viewed moral judgment as a reasoning process that improves as children age and improve in cognitive ability (Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1969). Kohlberg identified six stages of development in how individuals’ reasoning about moral dilemmas becomes increasingly sophisticated. He claimed that children transition from evaluating an action based on its direct impact on them to becoming more empathetic in their moral reasoning. This line of rationalist research conceived of morality as a kind of cognitive skill.

Turiel, Hildebrandt, and Wainryb (1991) further highlighted the role of informational assumptions and consequentialist evaluations in moral judgment. Examining young adults’ reasoning about abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and incest, the researchers found that people who judged the actions to be moral violations gave reasons based on what they believed to be the harmful consequences of the actions, while people who thought the actions were not wrong generally cited no harmful consequences. From these findings, they concluded both that people think consequentially and that the principle of harm is central to moral reasoning.
Researchers outside of developmental psychology, however, have criticized this approach from several different perspectives. Comparing Indian and American participants in experiments, Shweder, Mahaptra, and Miller (1987) discovered cross-cultural differences in moral reasoning. They rejected the claim that principles of harm and fairness inherently undergird moral judgment. Participants with different cultural and social backgrounds tend to systematically differ in the kinds of moral judgments they make, suggesting moral judgments are not the result of pure reasoning.

Subsequent work extended this critique even further. In the social intuitionist model, social psychologists argue that moral judgments are actually the result of quick, automatic evaluations (Haidt 2001). Reasons and justifications are produced post hoc for the purpose of either rationalization or persuasion. They argue that studies such as that of Turiel, Hildebrandt, and Wainryb mistake the direction of the relationship between moral judgments and reasoning. Instead, they argue that moral intuitions come first (Wilson 1993; Shweder and Haidt 1993; Haidt 2001). Numerous studies have since identified automatic emotional responses as the sources of moral judgment (Greene et al. 2001; Koenigs et al. 2007; Schnall, Benton and Harvey 2008; Valdesolo and DeSteno 2006; Wheatley and Haidt 2005).

Given the ease with which individuals form moral judgments, it is all the more important to understand more precisely the process by which Americans channel these moral judgments into political positions. In particular, we must better understand the role of moral knowledge, or perceived knowledge, in American political behavior. In an era with deep, uncompromising political divisions over moral issues, it is particularly important to understand the American tendency to overestimate moral knowledge and how this moral overconfidence leads individuals to pursue policies with greater tenacity and less tolerance or understanding for opponents’ points of view.
1.2 Moral Knowledge and Confidence

In his work on the intuitive nature of moral judgments, Haidt (2001) shows evidence that people produce strong moral judgments despite being unable to explain their reactions when challenged with both questions and counterarguments. Haidt identifies the common response after multiple rounds of such challenges as “I don’t know, I can’t explain it, I just know it’s wrong” (Haidt 2001, 814). This response illustrates the capacity for moral judgment in the absence of knowledge or the ability to explain one’s judgment.

While one may be able to make an intuitive judgment about right and wrong in the absence of knowledge, taking a stance on a policy and pursuing one’s political goals requires more information. One might be willing to declare an act morally wrong on the sole basis of an intuition, but one is likely far less willing to criminalize that act without more confidence in one’s knowledge. I contend that moral confidence, or how much one perceives oneself to know about moral issues, principles, and sources of moral authority, plays a decisive role in how one applies moral judgments in politics. It influences where they position themselves on the issue, how actively they pursue their policy agenda, and how willing they are to compromise with political opponents.

As an example of the kind of vitriolic rhetoric moral confidence can inspire in someone with questionable moral expertise, Phil Robertson, a businessman who produces duck hunting equipment and who became famous as one of the subjects of the reality television series *Duck Dynasty*, has repeatedly made national news for his vocal and insistent opposition to same-sex marriage. Neither a politician nor a religious leader, Robertson has nevertheless become a public representative of opposition to same-sex marriage. As a guest speaker at a rally for Ted Cruz’s presidential campaign in Iowa City, Iowa on January 31, 2016, Robertson expressed his support for Cruz and reiterated his moral opposition to homosexuality: “When a fellow like me looks at the landscape and sees the depravity, the perversion—redefining marriage and telling us that marriage is not between a man and a woman? Come on Iowa! It is nonsense. It is evil. It’s wicked. It’s sinful. They want us
to swallow it, you say. We have to run this bunch out of Washington, D.C. We have to rid the earth of them” (Reston 2016). For his part, upon taking the stage after Robertson, Ted Cruz called Robertson “a joyful, cheerful, unapologetic voice of truth” (Reston 2016).

What leads a person with little or no political or religious expertise to take to the national political arena to publicly condemn same-sex marriage? While it is hard to gauge Robertson’s actual level of moral knowledge, we can presume from his participation in the Cruz rally that he feels highly confident in his ability to explain his moral position on same-sex marriage to others. Indeed, the intuitive nature of moral belief may lead Robertson to presume that his position is obvious. Although he may have had a variety of motives for participating in the Cruz rally, Robertson took the stage in Iowa at least in part based on his confidence in his ability to explain his moral beliefs to others. Furthermore, this moral confidence led him to take a particularly hostile and uncompromising position, as Robertson goes so far as to suggest we “must rid the earth of” same-sex marriage supporters.

Moral opposition alone is unlikely to produce such vehement and hostile rhetoric. As Haidt and others have argued, moral judgments are generated intuitively, with little or no need for reasoning. They represent a gut-feeling that something is wrong, which is distinct from one’s ability to justify one’s judgments. Such intuitions are insufficient for political engagement in a social environment, where one must frequently justify and explain one’s position to others. This kind of action requires not just a strong moral feeling, but a high level of moral confidence. A person must feel confident in his or her understanding of the issue and ability to persuade others.

It is important to note that many of the participants in Haidt’s study who ultimately admitted, “I don’t know, I can’t explain it, I just know it’s wrong,” conceded their lack of knowledge and explanatory ability only after repeated challenges to their knowledge and reasoning. Thus, many people are at least initially morally overconfident. Indeed, their politics may be highly moralistic, but Americans are not necessarily better informed about morality as a result. It is inherently difficult to gauge the accuracy of beliefs about
morality in an objective sense, but a prior study of the relationship between knowledge and morality in the area of controversial socioscientific issues (SSI)\(^1\) found no statistically significant relationships between content knowledge, moral reasoning, and argumentation quality (Sadler and Donnelly 2006).

Americans also perform relatively poorly on measures of moral observance or knowledge of common moral sources. Most Americans identify religious sources as the source of their moral beliefs, but they attend religious services less, express less belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, and are less likely to identify as religious than previous generations (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Moreover, Americans also perform relatively poorly on tests of religious knowledge (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010).

All of this is consistent with the research of Haidt and other social intuitionists. Because moral judgments are generally the result of quick, automatic evaluations rather than a priori reasoning, Americans are able to render moral judgments without providing reasons for them. Even those who subsequently give reasons for their judgments are engaged in a process of post hoc justification rather than genuine deliberation. Moral judgments and the justification of those judgments, therefore, require little or no moral knowledge.

Indeed, political scientists have long argued that political disputes over moral issues, in particular, tend to draw in members of the public who are otherwise politically uninterested. Despite being generally unknowledgeable, uninterested, and uncertain about other types of political issues, people often take extreme positions on moral issues. These issues tend to be salient, divisive, and “easy,” relying less on sophistication or interest and more on emotions or gut-level feelings (Carmines and Stimson 1980).

However, individuals’ beliefs about their own knowledge are distinct from their actual level of knowledge. Indeed, people are often unaware of their own ignorance (Kruger and Dunning 1999). What is more, perceived knowledge can play an important role in how individuals make decisions. Research in social psychology has consistently observed

\(^1\)Topics include genetic engineering, climate change, animal testing for medical purposes, etc.
an illusion of depth in people’s beliefs about their own knowledge (Rozenblit and Keil 2002). Despite knowing relatively little, people believe they know a lot and tend to be overconfident in their knowledge of the world across a range of issues. They think they understand technical processes, natural phenomena, and political issues with far greater depth than is actually the case (Rozenblit and Keil 2002; Fernbach et al. 2013). Moreover, they believe they can explain these things to others.

Researchers have also demonstrated the possibility of reducing overconfidence in self-assessments of knowledge by confronting individuals with a requirement to explain their beliefs. Participants became significantly less confident in what they believed they knew when made aware of the gaps in their explanatory ability. Rozenblit and Keil (2002) asked participants to rate how much they understand an array of items like sewing machine or helicopters. They then asked the participants to provide detailed explanations of how some of the items work. When asked again how well they understand the item, participants rate their understanding significantly lower. This exposure to the depth of their own ignorance reveals the overconfidence present in their initial responses.

While Rozenblit and Keil’s initial experiments dealt primarily with knowledge about the technical workings of devices and natural phenomena, the illusion of explanatory depth persists across multiple knowledge domains, including those involving political issues. Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber (1984) show that, when confronted with their own political ignorance on political knowledge questions, respondents were less inclined to report themselves as interested in politics. Alter, Oppenheimer, and Zemla (2010) also show that respondents from both major parties reported understanding their favored 2008 presidential candidate’s policies better than they actually did. When asked to express those policies in writing, respondents moderated their support for their preferred candidates. Fernbach et al. (2013) show that, despite holding extreme political attitudes about complex
policies\textsuperscript{2}, people typically know less about such policies than they think they do. When forced to explain their positions, they adopt more moderate positions. They are also less likely to donate to relevant political advocacy groups.

In a similar vein, I hypothesize that many individuals tend to be morally overconfident despite their actual level of moral knowledge. In keeping with the social intuitionist model, I posit that many people make moral judgments based on intuitions rather a process of reasoning. As a result, they are able to make judgments with very little knowledge. However, I argue that many people are generally confident in their ability to explain their positions until forced to do so. Nevertheless, they can be made aware of their relative ignorance through a process of explanatory challenges similar to those used by social psychologists. What is more, I contend that making individuals aware of their ignorance will influence the positions they take on moral issues. This would further support my argument that moral confidence undergirds political decision-making on moral issues.

Admittedly, the observation that Americans know relatively little about politics is not particularly novel. Various works have shown that Americans know relatively little about politics. Downs (1957) argued that political inattentiveness was a rational response when comparing the relative costs and potential benefits of staying informed and thinking about politics. Converse (1964) argued that the majority of American adults show little or no consistency or ideological constraint in their political beliefs. Americans are no more informed and potentially less informed than they were 50 years ago about politics despite significant advances in education (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). They have difficulty recalling the names of their congressional representatives and other major national political figures. Additionally, they show little awareness across a wide range of politically salient issues. Bartels (1996) has argued that this dearth of informed voters has electoral consequences.

\textsuperscript{2}Fernbach et al. asked about sanctions on Iran, cap-and-trade policies, Social Security, health care, taxes, and merit-based pay for teachers.
Despite these critical assessments of Americans’ political knowledge, some scholars have questioned whether Americans need to possess the kinds of information elites believe is necessary. For instance, Lupia (2015) argues Americans are less concerned with the information that experts think is important. Moreover, scholars have suggested that individuals may not need to able to recall information correctly in order to form well-founded opinions. In on-line or impression-driven theories of voting behavior, voters keep and update a running tally of their impression of a candidate based on the information they encounter despite being unable to recall the information itself (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau 1995). Furthermore, voters are capable of using information shortcuts, cues, and cognitive heuristics in their evaluations to save themselves the costs of acquiring detailed political information (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). Similarly, Popkin (1994) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that voters are capable of making decisions with relatively little information in a theory of low information rationality. Voters rely on information shortcuts and limited personal information about candidates to make probabilistic estimates about where candidates stand. Thus, the fact that many American are uninformed about specific political facts may be irrelevant to their ability to make political decisions in the voting booth. Even politically uninformed and apathetic voters are capable of disciplining their members of Congress (Hutchings 2003). Thus, the fact that many American are uninformed about specific political facts may be irrelevant to their ability to make political decisions in the voting booth.

What these observers have largely failed to take into account is the role of the illusion of explanatory depth in decision-making. These authors have overlooked the degree to which many individuals’ decisions and opinions rest on explanatory knowledge they falsely believe themselves to possess. While political scientists may have a variety of theories to explain individuals’ ability to make decisions with little or no information, I suspect most people do not even recognize this feature of their decision-making. Rather, they make decisions with complete confidence that, if asked, they could explain the reasons for these
decisions. Only when challenged does the illusion of explanatory depth begin to erode. This may not change their preferences, but it likely affects both their confidence in those preferences and their willingness to impose those preferences on others. For example, while someone like Phil Robertson is unlikely to change his opinion on the morality of same-sex marriage, a more accurate assessment of his own expertise and knowledge might lead him to be less willing to speak publicly against the issue or to at least moderate the extremity of his opposition. At the aggregate level, while lower moral confidence would not affect the level of general moral opposition to the issues that divide American politics, I would expect it to produce less legal opposition and greater willingness to compromise.

While Fernbach et al. demonstrate the existence of an illusion of explanatory depth in knowledge about political issues, they do not examine the role of illusory knowledge in opinions on moral issues. Issues such as abortion and gay marriage evoke intense debate among both elites and members of the general public. Philosophers, theologians, and legal scholars may provide a wide range of complex and well-reasoned justifications for a moral position, but most people lack such well-developed moral knowledge. Despite this lack of depth in their knowledge, however, members of the general public are better able to take extreme positions on moral issues than the kinds of technical policy issues that Fernbach et al. examine. Below, I explain further how I empirically test these theories.

1.3 Research Design

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate: (a) that individuals differ in their moral and legal opinions about moral issues, with many exhibiting higher legal support for moral issues than moral support, which results in a morality-legality gap in opinion; (b) that individuals across a variety of groups and demographic characteristics exhibit high rates of moral confidence; (c) that diminished moral confidence helps explain the morality-legality gap by making individuals less likely to impose their moral judgments directly as legal positions; and (d) that many individuals overestimate their moral knowledge but can be
made aware of this fact, resulting in more moderate policy positions on the moral issue. To test these theories, I make use of a combination of existing observational survey data, original observational survey data, and original survey experiments. While the preexisting data allow me to examine the morality-legality gap in opinion over time, the original survey data allow me to more finely measure this gap and explore potential explanatory factors.

Using these data, I test a series of empirical hypotheses over the course of the dissertation. First, I establish the existence of a morality-legality gap in public opinion to test my first hypothesis:

\[ \text{H1: Moral support for all moral issues will be lower than legal support, resulting in a consistent morality-legality gap in opinion across issues.} \]

Here, I use preexisting data and independently collected data from an original survey to show that moral and legal opinion varies at both the aggregate and individual levels. Demonstrating this gap in public opinion requires survey data in which respondents are asked about both the morality and legality of various issues. While few surveys address both topics, I use the Gallup Values and Beliefs poll, the General Social Survey, and the Kinder Institute’s annual Houston Area Survey. Each asks about both the morality and legality of at least one of the moral issues in I am interested. In addition to making use of these existing data, I make use of an original survey that gauges opinion on both the morality and legality of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. Using these data, I show individual-level differences in moral and legal support for each issue and rule out alternative explanations for the morality-legality gap.

Next, I establish and measure the concept of moral confidence to test my second hypothesis:

\[ \text{H2: While moral confidence will vary across individuals and within individuals’ opinions across issues, most individuals will exhibit consistently high levels of moral confidence.} \]
This entails using independently collected observational survey data to measure individuals’ perceptions of their own moral knowledge. I examine moral confidence across all four of the issues discussed above to show that it is consistently higher than expected across types of moral issues. Using these data, I also identify the social, political, and demographic factors that account for variation in confidence.

I subsequently test my hypothesis regarding the role of moral confidence in the morality-legality gap in public opinion:

H3: Individuals with lower moral confidence will be more likely to possess incongruous moral and legal opinions by simultaneously morally opposing and legally supporting an issue.

Here again I make use of original data to show that moral confidence explains the morality-legality gap, even when accounting for a range of other social and political variables. That is, I show that those with lower moral confidence are more likely to legally support moral issues that they morally oppose.

I next examine the illusion of explanatory depth in moral knowledge to test three additional hypotheses:

H4a: For at least a subset of individuals, moral confidence is inflated by illusory moral knowledge.

H4b: When challenged to explain their moral knowledge, these individuals will express less moral confidence.

H4c: As a result of diminished moral confidence, these individuals will moderate their political positions.

Using two original survey experiments, I show that moral confidence is both inflated and malleable for many individuals on the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion. In the first experiment, members of the treatment group each receive an explanatory prompt intended to make them more cognizant of their actual moral knowledge by asking them to provide further information about the source of their moral beliefs and what that source specifically said about the morality of same-sex marriage. In accordance with prior research on the
illusion of explanatory depth in other areas of knowledge, I expect those who are prompted to confront their actual level of moral knowledge by explaining it subsequently display reduced confidence and become more supportive of same-sex marriage.

In the second experiment, I similarly prompt subjects in a treatment group to explain the source and content of their moral beliefs on the issue of abortion. Subsequently, members of both the control and treatment groups are asked to rate their level of moral support, legal support, and moral confidence for abortion. I expect that exposure to the explanatory prompt will reduce confidence, which will in turn lead respondents to be more legally supportive of abortion. However, in line with prior work on the intuitive origins of moral judgments, I do not expect the explanatory treatment to affect respondents’ moral positions on the issue. Rather, I contend that, despite being just as morally opposed, respondents who are made aware of their relative lack of moral knowledge will be less willing to legally impose their moral judgments on others.

With the data described above, I show evidence to suggest that individuals’ perceptions of their own moral knowledge matter for how they apply their moral judgments to politicized issues. Moreover, I make the case that greater attention should be given across the board to how individuals think and make decisions about moral issues. In particular, moral and legal opinions should be considered separately, and process by which the former are translated into the latter must be give greater attention. Moral issues are particularly likely to evoke moral judgments regardless of actual knowledge, but many individuals nevertheless believe themselves to possess such knowledge. To the extent they lack such moral confidence, however, they are likely to be less willing to impose their moral beliefs on other. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the structure of the dissertation.

1.4 Chapter Outline

In the chapters that follow, I test the theories outlined above. In Chapter 2, I outline the moral issues upon which this dissertation will focus. In doing so, I also engage with an
extensive literature on conceptualizing moral issues, as well as prior research and data on the four moral issues I have chosen to examine.

In Chapter 3, I use preexisting and original data to highlight the empirical puzzle upon which my dissertation is focused, showing how the morality-legality gap has persisted in individual-level opinion over time and across issues. I also examine the factors driving the morality-legality gap. I begin by drawing conceptual distinctions between morality and legality. While noting why the two terms bear comparison, I explain why they evoke separate considerations in the public mind and are driven by distinct—but related—cognitive processes.

Using preexisting data, I first provide empirical evidence for the existence of a gap in individual-level opinion regarding the morality and legality of four issues: abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. I also use these data to show how a gap has persisted in opinion on the issues over time and across sub-issues (e.g., abortion in the case of fetal defect). To conclude, I use other data sources along with an original survey with both legal and moral questions to examine the relationship between individuals’ characteristics and the morality-legality gap in individual-level opinion. These data will allow me to address and refute a range of competing explanations for this gap.

In Chapter 4, I further elaborate my theory of moral confidence and use an original dataset to show that individuals across groups and demographic characteristics consistently exhibit high levels of moral confidence. To do so, I explain how the concept of moral confidence can be operationalized and outline the process by which I have collected original data on moral confidence. I then use these data to demonstrate that most people exhibit high levels of moral confidence regardless of factors such as education or religiosity, which further suggests that moral confidence may be inflated. I also include a range of other demographic and political questions to identify the social, political, and demographic factors that account for variation in moral confidence. This helps me identify the key characteristics of the morally confident.
Advancing on the previous two chapters, Chapter 5 suggests that one major factor in the process by which moral judgments are translated into political opinions is moral confidence. I posit a theory that how much individuals think they know about issues matters for how they form opinions on those issues and act on those opinions. I also argue that this is particularly true for moral issues, which can evoke strong intuitive reactions regardless of an individual’s ability to explain or justify moral judgments. Specifically, I argue that moral confidence helps explain why some individuals apply their moral judgments directly to politics (exhibiting no morality-legality gap) and others do not.

To test this theory, I use original data to demonstrate that perceived moral knowledge helps explain the morality-legality gap by accounting for individual-level differences in opinion about the morality and legality of an act. I begin by providing an initial test of my hypothesis, measuring the impact of moral confidence on the morality-legality gap in individual-level opinion on abortion, physician-assisted suicide, the death penalty, and homosexuality. I show that moral confidence and the morality-legality gap are highly correlated across all issues. Moreover, I show that the impact of moral confidence is distinct from that of alternative explanatory variables, including a belief in moral relativism.

Building on my findings in Chapter 5 that moral confidence drives the morality-legality gap, I argue in Chapter 6 that the morality-legality gap should actually be much wider for many individuals. I show that moral confidence is inflated relative to individuals’ actual level of moral knowledge, that people can be made aware of their moral overconfidence, and that being made aware of their actual level of moral knowledge will drive people to become less opposed to the issue. Using data collected in two survey experiments, I show that individuals are morally overconfident on the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion until prompted to explain their knowledge. That is, respondents who are prompted to explain their moral beliefs on moral issues express lower moral confidence than those who are not prompted to explain. After using the data to establish that the illusion of explanatory depth exists in individuals’ moral knowledge, I subsequently show that the reduction in
moral confidence also corresponds to a widened gap in opinion between opinions about the morality and legality of a moral issue. That is, those in the treatment group are less willing to apply their moral judgments to political issues, due to reduced moral confidence.

In Chapter 7, I reiterate the role of my theory of moral confidence in moral judgments and political decision-making on moral issues, summarize my results, evaluate my various hypotheses, and further explore the wider political ramifications of moral confidence for the study of political behavior and political psychology. I argue that our perceptions of our own understanding play a key role in our political decision-making, and that our tendency to overestimate our understanding leads us to be more extreme and uncompromising when considering moral issues in politics.

While political scientists have begun to explore the role of morality and moral conviction in politics, they have largely overlooked both the gap between moral judgments and policy positions and the role of knowledge in decision-making on moral issues. This dissertation is intended to help us better understand the process by which individuals form and apply their moral judgments. Moreover, I demonstrate the importance of questions of moral epistemology for how individuals make decisions about moral issues. This also helps explain moral issues divide our politics so deeply: many believe they know much more about right and wrong than they actually do.

Ultimately, the central problem of moral conflict in the United States may not be that people have different moral views, but rather that they “know” their moral beliefs are correct. It is my hope that this research will encourage individuals to think more critically about what they believe they know, which may discourage individuals from imposing their moral beliefs on others and help to promote a more conciliatory tone in the debates surrounding moral issues. What we think we know matters, and thinking more carefully and honestly about what we know can influence whether and how we act on what we “know.”
In order to examine American attitudes on moral issues, I must first elaborate what precisely I mean by “moral” issues. In his concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously highlighted the challenges inherent in precisely determining what constitutes “hard-core” pornography in order to restrict it:

> I imply no criticism of the Court, which in those cases was faced with the task of trying to define what may be indefinable. I have reached the conclusion... that under the First and Fourteenth Amendments criminal laws in this area are constitutionally limited to hard-core pornography. I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.

In addition to exemplifying the intuitive nature of moral judgments in the absence of strict reasoning or knowledge, Stewart’s argument that he could recognize an example of pornography but could not define it parallels the difficulties in defining moral issues. While many Americans might struggle to explain exactly what distinguishes a moral issue, they know it when they see it.

The American public may be generally inclined to both moral fervor and disagreements over a wide range of policies and issues, but not all of these issues incite the public’s moral outrage. Only a subset of issues are widely viewed as moral by a sizable portion of the population. Putatively moral issues include birth control, divorce, premarital sex, stem cell research, gambling, capital punishment, animal cruelty, homosexuality, suicide, euthanasia, abortion, cloning, pornography, polygamy, and infidelity (Riffkin 2014). Indeed, most
individuals would likely name one of these issues as an example if asked about moral issues. Nevertheless, there are inherent difficulties in defining and categorizing moral issues.

We tend to distinguish between moral and non-moral issues in everyday parlance, but it is much more difficult to explain the exact basis for this distinction. The common thread between the issues listed is not immediately evident. Most scholarship on moral issues focuses on one of the aforementioned “obvious” examples that avoids the need for much justification, but this leaves us without a clear scheme for including or excluding certain issues. Despite their apparent importance in American politics, it is unclear what makes these issues “moral.”

Something certainly seems to set issues like abortion and homosexuality apart from issues such as taxes, education, and welfare. Empirical research confirms that moral issues are viewed and debated by the public in distinct ways (Mooney and Schuldt 2008), which confirms that they represent a real category in at least the minds of the public. Nevertheless, the boundaries of this category are not especially concrete, and it is far from obvious why certain issues invite moral controversy while others do not. Indeed, any argument for a given policy might be argued to be moral in the sense that it takes a normative stance based on a particular set of values or principles. So why do debates over subjects like death and sex seem to evoke such distinct reactions compared to debates over taxes and government spending?

In the next sections, I first address prior attempts to define moral issues. Based on an amalgamation of these preexisting typologies, I then work to establish a loose definition of moral issues that I use to distinguish moral issues in American politics from other topics of contention. I then use this definition to identify the set of moral issues upon which this dissertation will focus. Finally, in the remainder of the chapter, I address and summarize the previous research on public opinion regarding these issues.
2.1 Defining Moral Issues

Despite the inherent difficulties, prior scholarship has attempted to provide some basis for differentiating moral and non-moral issues. Broadly speaking, there are two general approaches used to distinguish moral issues from non-moral issues. The first, particularly popular among scholars of public policy seeking to fit moral issues into preexisting typologies, has sought to identify intrinsic features of moral issues themselves (Smith and Tatalovich 2003). In particular, these scholars often distinguish moral issues from economic issues, suggesting the former emphasize values rather than material resources (Studlar 2001). For example, Meier (2001, 21) argues that “[r]ather than redistributing income...morality politics seeks to redistribute values.” While the exact nature of the values being distributed varies, they are most frequently tied to fundamental principles regarding death, marriage, and reproduction. This perspective developed particularly in response to much of the early research that sought to explain morality policies such as gambling and liquor laws through the same economic lens as other components of state spending (Tatalovich and Daynes 2010, xxix). That is, these scholars argue that while other issues may be explained by largely economic factors such as wealth, urbanism, and industrialization, moral issues relate to more fundamental disagreements over core beliefs and values. These differences, in turn, were better explained by factors such as religion and culture than economic features (Hutcheson Jr. and Taylor 1973; Fairbanks 1977; Morgan and Meier 1980).

Either in lieu of or in addition to their inherent connections to fundamental principles or values, some scholars have also argued that issues commonly considered moral are distinguished by certain strategic features. For example, Studlar (2001, 39) suggests moral issues are non-technical and easily understood. That is, moral issues invoke the outrage of a wider swath of the public due to their simplicity. Unlike the complex set of considerations and laws that must be taken into account when taking a position on the American tax code or international trade, issues like abortion and same-sex marriage seem to be more black-and-white, which makes them more accessible to the average voter. For this reason, other
scholars argue that moral issues tend to be highly salient, elicit widespread participation, and encourage radicalization (Lowi 2010; Mooney 2001).

Despite their efforts, however, this approach has largely failed to offer a clear, unanimously accepted typology for distinguishing between moral and non-moral issues. Any set of traits or intrinsic characteristics to which various scholars have pointed is neither exclusive to moral issues nor applicable to all so-called moral issues. Abortion and homosexuality might both involve sexuality, but the intense regulation of gambling and alcohol would seem to have little to do with sex. On the other hand, some illegal drugs invite intense moral debate while far more potent pharmaceuticals invite little public scrutiny. Moreover, presumed lines between moral and non-moral issues often crumble when pressured. For instance, education policy is typically viewed as a non-moral issue, but the question of whether or not to teach evolution has arguably been moralized in American politics (Gibson 2004).

Furthermore, as Morone points out, moral issues rise and fall over time. What seems like an obvious moral issue to one generation may not be so obvious to the next, and vice versa. For example, Prohibition ultimately resulted from a widespread practice—alcohol consumption—becoming moralized and condemned, and the subsequent century has largely seen the issue again lose its status as a moral issue. Indeed, one of the primary problems with this entire approach is that it seems to consist largely of post hoc diagnoses with little predictive power. After an issue has become widely perceived as moral, a bevy of explanations can be provided, but these theories rarely seem to anticipate future issues.

Partially in response, a second approach has focused on how moral issues are debated (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Mooney and Schuldt 2008) or thought about (Biggers 2011; Glick and Hutchinson 2001) at both the aggregate and individual levels. For example, Mooney (2001) defines moral issues as those in which at least one side of the controversy portrays the issue in terms of sin and uses moral arguments. While similar to the work that suggests certain issues provide particular strategic opportunities for mor-
alization, this work places greater emphasis on the strategies and style of argumentation chosen by moralistic activists than on any features inherent to particular sets of issues. As an example of this kind of strategic moralization, Marietta (2009) argues that certain politicians—particularly Republicans—use sacred rhetoric more often than others, insisting that their positions on issues are based on non-negotiable convictions and adherence to a transcendent authority to inspire moral outrage. This kind of sacred rhetoric provides some advantage, helping candidates to project themselves as principled leaders, mobilize followers, and intensify political discourse (Marietta 2008). In a similar vein, Leege et al. (2002) argue that political campaigns strategically use emotion-laden, symbolic rhetoric so as to frame certain issues in a culturally divisive—or what might, in many cases, also be labeled morally divisive—way that mobilizes support by tapping into voters’ group attachments (e.g., race, gender, religion) and core values (e.g., patriotism, “family” values).

While also focusing on perceptions of issues, social psychologists have largely looked past group and elite-level discourse to examine individuals’ psychological responses to moral issues. In particular, this work has identified moral conviction as an important component of individual attitude strength (Skitka 2010; Skitka, Bauman and Sargis 2005; Skitka and Wisneski 2011). That is, individuals’ attitudes on certain issues are held with greater moral conviction than on others. Morally convicted attitudes are “a reflection of . . . core moral beliefs and convictions,” “deeply connected to . . . fundamental beliefs about right and wrong,” and “based on a moral principle” (Ryan 2014, 5). Thus, an issue is moral for an individual if it elicits a particular set of characteristic psychological responses in that individual. Moral issues arouse negative emotions, engender hostile opinions, and inspire punitive action. What is more, Ryan (2014) has shown evidence that individuals can hold morally convicted attitudes across a range of issues, including both putatively moral and non-moral issues. Indeed, evidence suggests that issues such as the environment can be made moral for individuals through manipulation of how they are framed (Feinberg and Willer 2012; Wolsko, Ariceaga and Seiden 2016).
While this approach allows us to move away from temporary categorization schemes by focusing entirely on whether or not groups or individuals exhibit observable, characteristic behaviors and attitudes, it does so by abandoning almost entirely the concept of an innately moral issue. These scholars suggest that any issue might be moralized either by the activities of a political group or in the mind of an individual. For instance, Clifford and Jerit (2013) argue that the media helps frame issues such as stem cell research in terms that activate the public’s moral intuitions. However, even the most savvy political or news organizations seem to be constrained in their ability to moralize certain issues, and certain issues certainly seem to elicit morally convicted attitudes among a much larger swath of the public than others. Dispensing altogether with the concept of moral issues as a category would seem to ignore both the analytic utility such a framework offers us in studying morality in politics and the empirical reality in which we reside, wherein certain issues seem to possess greater potential for moralization than others.

In this dissertation, I adopt a hybridized definition of moral issues. While I agree that the delineating feature of moral issues are the kinds of psychological responses and behaviors they elicit, I nevertheless contend that putatively moral issues deserve special attention. While a given individual or group may potentially view any issue as moral, the primary concern of political science must be those issues which elicit moralistic responses from a sizable portion of the population over a substantial period of time. Whether through some set of innate characteristics or the framing of political elites and activists, certain issues become moralized in the eyes of large enough swath of the American public to provide the basis for the kind of moral conflict Morone describes in U.S. history. Because they are prominent enough to induce moralized attitudes in a substantial portion of the public but not yet settled, it is within this set of issues that I would expect to find individuals who both morally oppose and legally support issues.

Furthermore, a substantial portion of the population must disagree as to whether or not the issue is morally wrong or right. There must be some level of visible contention.
This avoids what might be called one-sided moral issues, which are issues almost everyone in a society considers moral and about which almost everyone holds compatible opinions (Meier 1994, 246-247). For example, political leaders and members of the public generally agree that the act of murder is immoral. Although there is certainly disagreement over whether or not certain acts constitute murder, there is almost no disagreement over whether clear acts of murder are immoral. As a result, individuals have little or no cause to resist imposing their moral beliefs (and would, perhaps, face severe social or legal consequences for publicly questioning the consensus).

Similarly, looking at contentious issues avoids issues that almost everyone agrees are non-moral. For example, a lone individual could conceivably believe it is morally abhorrent to wear red, but a single objection that is so far outside of mainstream belief would be insufficient to give an issue moral status. In such instances, an individual would seem to have no ability to pursue the legal imposition of his or her judgments.¹

Therefore, in keeping with the psychological approach, I look primarily at attitudes on issues to identify them as moral rather than any inherent characteristics. However, unlike some researchers in this vein, I do not take an entirely individualized approach. To be a moral issue in a political sense, an issue must be viewed as moral by a sizable portion of the population. In the proceeding section, I discuss the specific selection process and data I use to identify the moral issues upon which I will focus for the bulk of this dissertation.

2.2 Case Selection

Identifying a set of moral issues with which to test my theories requires data on the contentiousness of a wide swath of issues for comparison. Fortunately, Gallup has tracked

¹As has already been noted, however, most contemporary moral issues were once considered non-moral issues or one-sided issues. This suggests that individuals can gain some ground against general moral consensus, but doing so has historically required extensive time (e.g., decades) and resources. Even still, it is unclear that every issue is equally prime for this kind of moral conversion. More research is necessary to better understand how these issues become generally moralized.
Americans’ views on the moral acceptability of various issues annually since 2001 as part of its Values and Beliefs poll. Though Gallup composed the list based on issues that are conventionally thought of as moral, it also allows respondents to state that they do not believe a particular issue is a moral issue. Of the 19 issues asked about in the 2014 Gallup Values and Beliefs poll, however, only three issues elicited such a response from more than 1% of respondents: gambling, cloning animals, and buying and wearing animal fur. This is not a substitute for Ryan’s measure of moral conviction and cannot tell us whether the issues evoked characteristic moralized responses in each person surveyed, but it at least suggests that respondents think of the issues as putatively moral. Table 2.1 shows the percentage of Americans who consider each of the 19 issues morally acceptable.

As Table 2.1 demonstrates, several putatively moral issues are widely viewed as either acceptable (e.g., birth control) or unacceptable (e.g., adultery) by members of both political parties. However, I am most interested in contentious issues, which are simultaneously viewed as both acceptable and unacceptable by substantial portions of the population. As the focus of my research, I have selected four putatively moral issues (emboldened) from the 19 covered by the Gallup Values and Beliefs poll: abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. While each is relatively contentious, these issues also allow me to examine how variation in public support mediates the impact of moral confidence. Therefore, I examine opinion on these four issues to show that moral confidence influences how individuals apply their moral beliefs across issues in varying levels of contention.  

This selection of issues varies sufficiently to explore moral and legal attitudes across a range of circumstances. First, each of four issues receives a different amount of moral support from the public. Fewer Americans view abortion as morally acceptable (42%) than view physician-assisted suicide (52%), homosexuality (58%), or capital punishment (61%)...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Moral Acceptability</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
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<tr>
<td>Birth Control</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>78</td>
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<td>Premarital Sex</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>Stem Cell Research</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>74</td>
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<td>Gambling</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td><strong>Capital Punishment</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
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<td>Fur Clothing</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Outside of Marriage</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Homosexuality</strong></td>
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<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>39</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Animal Testing</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>69</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Physician-Assisted Suicide</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animal Cloning</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
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<td>33</td>
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<td>Teenage Sex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polygamy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Cloning</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adultery</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
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SOURCE: 2014 Gallup Values and Beliefs Poll
NOTE: Entries are percentages.

as morally acceptable (Riffkin 2014). Moreover, the four issues also differ in legal status. Capital punishment has been legal—with various exceptions over time and across states—in the U.S. for most of its history, abortion and homosexuality were not fully decriminalized until 1973 (*Roe v. Wade*) and 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*), respectively, and physician-assisted suicide is still largely illegal in the United States. Of course, even where they are legal, various additional restrictions are imposed on each of these issues.

Second, Table B.1 shows that the four issues receive different levels of support from the coalitions of the two major American politics parties. While Democrats are generally more
supportive than Republicans of abortion (59% of Democrats say abortion is morally acceptable, while only 28% of Republicans say it is acceptable), homosexuality (71% v. 39%), and physician-assisted suicide (63% v. 40%), Republicans are more supportive of capital punishment (73%) than Democrats (52%) (Riffkin 2014). Moreover, while Democrats are more morally supportive of abortion than Republicans, they have been less willing to support it morally than they have legally, as evidenced by former President Clinton’s argument at the 1996 Democratic National Convention that abortion should be safe, legal, and rare (1996). In this way, abortion differs from homosexuality, which the Democratic Party has come to embrace more fully in recent years. Additionally, it should be noted that, though physician-assisted suicide receives greater support from Democrats than Republicans, it does not receive as much mainstream attention from elites in the party as abortion and homosexuality.

Finally, to the extent that moral issues inherently relate to fundamental principles or core values, these four issues do not seem to draw upon the same set of principles or values. While abortion and homosexuality may be conceived as relating to sexuality or reproduction, capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide are rarely, if ever, framed in these terms. Similarly, attitudes on abortion, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide may relate to considerations of death, opinions on homosexuality should not be driven by such concerns. Capital punishment, as a state-sponsored activity, also likely evokes separate considerations–related to government power and authority–than abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide, which might also be tied to concerns over an individual’s bodily autonomy.

For these reasons, as well as the availability of preexisting data on both moral and legal attitudes on the issues over time, I examine public opinion on these four issues in order to confirm the existence of a morality-legality gap in public opinion on moral issues. Before doing so, however, I first address the existing research on each of these issues. While little has been done to examine the specific link between moral judgments and policy
positions on abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, or physician-assisted suicide, all four issues have received a fair amount of attention from scholars for their role as divisive moral issues in American politics. I devote the remainder of this chapter to summarizing what these scholars have found regarding each of the four issues, beginning with abortion.

2.3 Abortion

Abortion has been highly touted as one of the most divisive issues in American politics. As an issue that raises ethical concerns over sexuality, human life, personal responsibility, and gender equality, it is one of the issues most discussed in relation to the so-called “culture wars” (Hunter 1991; 1994). In addition to dividing our culture, it is widely seen as a central cleavage in electoral competition (Abramowitz 1995). As a cleavage issue, abortion garners immense attention from the public, the media, government officials, activists, and interest groups (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Carsey and Layman 2006). The two national political parties have become associated with competing sides in the abortion debate, with Democrats taking the more pro-choice stance and Republicans taking a pro-life position (Adams 1997).

Political elites and activists certainly seem to be polarized on the issue of abortion. Through interviews with abortion activists, Luker (1984) found that pro-choice and pro-life activists shared little in the way of a common worldview or conceptions of sexuality and motherhood. Similarly, Layman et al. (2010), using surveys of party convention delegates, show that the political activists especially drawn to involve themselves in party politics hold extreme views on a variety of issues including abortion. These activists incentivize non-centrist positions for political candidates, who in turn sway less ideological members of the party to align themselves with the candidates’ new agendas. What is more, abortion disputes led to several thousand protests, a few hundred clinic blockades, thousands of arrests, 93 arsons, 40 bombings, 11 attempted murders, and the murder of five abortion providers between 1977 and 1994 (Mouw and Sobel 2001, 918). While comprising only a
small portion of the total crimes committed during that period, these instances nevertheless indicate the violent extent to which activist will proceed to accomplish their desired ends in the dispute over abortion in the United States. For many people, the stakes are high and sometimes even deadly.

Nevertheless, there are some who have disputed these findings for abortion activists. Ginsburg (1989) suggests that pro-life and pro-choice activists actually do share some common beliefs that get expressed through their political arguments. Through a case study of activists both supporting and opposing an abortion clinic in Fargo, North Dakota, Ginsburg identifies a common value of nurturance in the arguments of both sides. Similarly, Dillon (1996) argues that the public opinion literature has oversimplified Americans’ views about abortion. She argues that Americans have complex and nuanced views that cannot be understood through a simplistic orthodox/progressive framework. Studying the rhetoric of the abortion debate, she argues that the beliefs about abortion are just as complex and nuanced as beliefs about other, “harder” political issues. While not refuting Hunter’s thesis, these claims do suggest that the divide may not be as absolute or intractable as he suggests, even among entrenched activists. If this is the case, then the abortion dispute may be susceptible to reasoned democratic discourse.

The evidence is also ambiguous with regards to the wider public’s attitudes on abortion. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage of respondents to the General Social Survey (GSS) who favor or oppose allowing a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she wants it for any reason. The GSS first asked the question in 1977, and the public would seem to have been deeply divided over the issue for the entire intervening period. However, the prevalence and consistency of support or opposition do not necessarily tell us about the strength of the public’s attitudes on the issue, and some scholars have failed to find clear proof of a deep national divide on the abortion issue (Blake and del Pinal 1981; Mouw and Sobel 2001).

What is more, the public’s actual views on abortion are not always easy to discern. One difficulty is the degree to which question wording and order in public opinion surveys affect
respondents’ views on abortion. Jaffe, Lindheim, and Lee (1981, 99) note that “measuring public opinion is difficult, particularly when the subject is complex and has moral and religious overtones. Opinion polls typically are limited to a few oversimplified questions—crude instruments for making subtle distinctions or tapping attitudinal nuances.” A variety of factors—question wording, the way in which questions are ordered, and exogenous factors such as societal events occurring when polls are taken—can influence poll results. For instance, if an abortion question is framed so as to evoke considerations of choice, the responses are likely to be biased in the favor of pro-choice abortion advocates (Blendon, Benson and Donelan 1993, 2,872).

Adamek (1994) further notes that, over time, old survey items lose their validity as the particular events that sparked their creation, such as Roe v. Wade, lose relevance or evolve in the public mind. Bumpass (1997) uses a factorial experiment to examine the specific effects of changes in the wording and sequence of survey questions on the measurement
of attitudes toward abortion. He finds that 55% of respondents agree that a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion for any reason when it is specifically stated that the pregnancy is in the first trimester. On the other hand, 44% agreed when no pregnancy duration was stated. Similarly, only 48% of respondents favored making abortion legal for any reason when the question was posed after a series of specific reasons, but 60% favored it when it was listed first. Other factors that mattered included whether the pregnant woman was single, had financial constraints, or wanted no more children and whether gestational lengths were listed in descending or ascending order. The mode via which a survey is conducted also seems to affect responses. Ansolabehere and Schaffner (2014) find that respondents to a mail survey offered the most conservative answers to a battery of questions about topics including abortion, followed by those that answered by phone and then those that answered online.

As further evidence of the public’s nuanced position on the issue of abortion, Figure 2.2 displays the percentage of GSS respondents who believe a pregnant woman should be allowed to obtain a legal abortion in six different circumstances: if the woman’s health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy, if the woman became pregnant as a result of rape, if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby, if the family has a very low income and cannot afford more children, if the woman is not married and does not want to marry the man, and if the woman is married and wants no more children. As Figure 2.2 shows, the public has consistently been most supportive of abortion when the pregnancy threatens the mother’s health. The public has also been very supportive of abortion in instances of rape or when there is chance of a birth defect. In contrast, the public has been much less supportive of abortion when the woman cannot afford more children, is unmarried, or is married and simply wants no more children.

Despite the difficulties in measuring opinion on abortion, we have learned a substantial amount over time about how Americans feel and think about abortion. First of all, a sizable portion of the population has never thought that abortion should be strictly legal or illegal
in all circumstances (Mouw and Sobel 2001). In one of the few polls taken prior to the \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision, 77% of respondents to a 1962 Gallup poll believed abortion should be allowed in circumstances threatening the life of the mother, and 55% agree when the child might be deformed. According to Gallup, the percentage believing abortion should either be entirely legal or illegal was 54% in 1975, 48% in 1992, and again 58% in 1998. In May, 2012, Gallup found only 45% who believed abortion should be strictly legal or illegal. A large proportion of the population appears to hold “middle of the road” views about abortion. Additionally, the level of support for abortion has been fairly stable since the \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision. While the level of support increased substantially from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, there was little change throughout the rest of the 1970s and a slight decline in the early 1980s (de Boer 1977; Granberg and Granberg 1980; Gillespie, Vergert and Kingma 1987; Mouw and Sobel 2001).
Additionally, abortion opinion varies across groups. For instance, there are significant racial differences in views on abortion (Jelen and Wilcox 2003). African Americans generally express lower support for legalized abortion than whites (Wilcox 1990). This has generally been attributed to differences in religious doctrine devotion. This is unsurprising, given the degree to which religion is generally considered to be one of the strongest predictors of abortion attitudes. Religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices all appear to make independent contributions to the development of attitudes toward abortion (Jelen and Wilcox 2003). A number of religious groups have publicly positioned themselves against legal abortion. The Catholic Church, for instance, has a particularly well-known opposition to abortion (Welch, Leege and Cavendish 1995). However, only about 10% of Catholics oppose abortion in all cases (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007, 191). Rather, evangelical Protestants display the greatest opposition to abortion, with 23% always opposing abortion. Abortion is one of the core issues of the religious right and appears to be a potent source of mobilization for some committed Evangelical Protestants. Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants are the next most likely to oppose abortion in all cases, with 18% of both groups never permitting it when asked. Mainline Protestants, Jews, and seculars are generally much more supportive of abortion, with only 7%, 4%, and 6% opposing abortion in all cases, respectively (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007, 191).

Beyond identification, religious characteristics also matter to abortion attitudes. In particular, frequent church attendance is associated with greater opposition to abortion. This effect holds even when denomination and beliefs are held constant, suggesting that frequent religious attendance tends to promote pro-life views regardless of the position taken by particular denominations’ positions on the abortion issue (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1992). This has further implications for new age cohorts. Sullins (1999) finds that younger Protestants are less likely to be pro-choice than their elders. Conversely, younger Catholics are more likely to be pro-choice. Similarly, Evans (2002) shows an increase in intra-denominational polarization of abortion attitudes, with such trends being most apparent
among mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics. This supports Hunter’s culture war thesis, indicating the greater divide is between the orthodox and the progressive rather than between faiths. Of course, the official positions of denominations vary enormously on abortion. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that even frequent attenders in pro-choice congregations are more likely to oppose abortion (Jelen and Wilcox 2003).

While these studies of opinion on abortion have highlighted many of the nuances in views on abortion, taking into account situational factors like rape, measurement issues such as question wording, and the heterogeneity of abortion views across groups, they have nevertheless ignored the differences between allowing abortion and approving of abortion. Even scholars studying abortion opinion among parties and political elites have largely failed to distinguish between the two issues (Adams 1997; Carmines and Stimson 2002). Rather, they have focused on legal support at the expense of moral judgment.

Only one scholar, Scott (1989), has addressed empirically the distinction between opinion on the legality and morality of abortion. Scott found that the incongruities in moral and legal opinion on abortion were mostly among pro-choice advocates. Pro-life supporters tended to believe both that abortion is wrong and that it should be restricted or made illegal. Using data from a random digit dialed national cross-section telephone surveys conducted in the summer of 1986 at the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, she found that two-fifths of pro-choice supporters favored legal abortion despite their feeling that abortion is morally wrong. She also found that, though men and women did not differ in their views on the legality of abortion, women were more likely to consider abortion morally wrong. While Scott’s efforts were commendable, they are in dire need of replication. Her findings are outdated, and her analysis was relatively simplistic. What is more, she offered little in the way of a comprehensive theory as to why the morality-legality distinction existed in the first place.
2.4 Homosexuality

The issue of homosexuality has rapidly risen in prominence in American politics and tends to elicit an array of moral considerations. Americans have an extensive history of moralizing and criminalizing a variety of consensual sex acts (Morone 2003), but the issue of whether or not sex between adults of the same gender should be tolerated and accepted has been particularly divisive in American politics over the past few decades. Events such as the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City drew public attention to the prevalence of homosexuality in the U.S. (Ellis and Kasniunas 2011), and activists on both sides sought to bring the issue out of the private sphere and into a public debate. Subsequently, as Layman (2001) has argued, politicians and political parties have aligned themselves against one another on value-laden issues such as that of homosexuality and gay rights. As a result, opinion has been deeply divided. Those opposed to gay rights view homosexuality as immoral, perverse, corruptive, and destructive to traditional family values. Those in favor of gay rights view gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans as a marginalized group deprived of equal rights.

Despite the contentiousness of homosexuality, public acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality has grown substantially over the past few decades (Bowman and O’Keefe 2004). Indeed, more Americans believe homosexuality is “not wrong at all,” and fewer believe it is “always wrong” than at any point since the early 1970s (Ellis and Kasniunas 2011). Figure 2.3 displays the percentage of GSS respondents who say sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always or almost always wrong and those who say it is not wrong at all. As shown, opposition has steadily declined since the 1990s, while support steadily increased until support finally surpassed opposition in 2014.

Much of the observed change can be attributed to generational replacement (Wilcox and Norrander 2002), but there is also evidence that individuals’ views on the issue have changed over time (Brewer 2003). This is likely influenced by homosexuality’s greater
prevalence in the media and the fact that people are now more likely to know someone who is openly gay (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000).

Despite this liberalizing trend, resistance to homosexuality is still fierce, particularly among the religiously orthodox, socially conservative subculture of American politics. Prior to their invalidation in the United States Supreme Court’s 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, nine states still criminalized consensual sodomy without respect to the participants’ sexuality, and another four specifically prohibited same-sex couples from engaging in anal and oral sex.

While support for the actual criminalization of homosexual acts as particularly waned, the issue of whether or not members of the same sex may marry has remained heated and divisive. Before the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* to legalize same-sex marriage at the national level, 37 states had legalized same-sex marriage. However, the majority of these states were compelled by court order to legalize same-sex marriage.
marriage (Powell, Quadlin and Pizmony-Levy 2015). Eight of these states had appealed the courts’ decisions, while 13 other states still had legally enforced bans on same-sex marriage.

Although is no longer illegal, same-sex marriage still faces widespread public opposition. Figure 2.4 shows the percentage of GSS respondents who agree or disagree that homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another. The question has not been asked for as long a period as the question of whether it is wrong for members of the same sex to engage in sexual relations (this is likely further evidence that the issue of same-sex marriage has only recently gained acceptance), but it was asked once previously of GSS respondents in 1988. At that time, only 10% of respondents believed same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. Support has increased drastically in the interim and, indeed, has surpassed opposition, but a substantial number of Americans still opposed allowing homosexual couples to marry.
While a variety of factors played a role in the legal processes of those states that previously banned same-sex marriage, they were at least partially motivated by the public’s moral opposition to homosexuality. Evidence suggests this opposition is driven by a variety of factors, including ideology, religion, age, education, and gender (Ellis and Kasniunas 2011). Political conservatives, Evangelical Christians, older people, the less educated, and men are all more likely to oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Although these groups’ ability to impose their moral beliefs has been severely restricted by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, our prior history with opposition to abortion after *Roe v. Wade* and ongoing disputes over whether businesses and public officials may refuse to serve same-sex couples suggest that divisions over the issue will remain politically relevant.

2.5 Capital Punishment

It should be noted, however, that both abortion and homosexuality tend to be morally condemned by conservatives and defended by liberals. To ensure that the morality-legality gap and my theory of moral confidence are not simply functions of ideology, I turn to an issue that tends to draw the moral opposition of liberals more than that of conservatives: capital punishment. This refers to legal application of the death penalty or the execution of a convicted criminal by the state or federal government.

While the standards for the use of the death penalty have changed substantially over time, it has been used in the United States since colonization. The application of the death penalty actually increased substantially over time until its constitutionality came into question in the 1960s (Steel and Steger 2011). While the Supreme Court struck down several states’ capital punishment statutes in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), it also offered guidelines for revising these statutes and subsequently allowed the continued use of capital punishment in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976). More recently, the Supreme Court has legally upheld the use of lethal injection—the most prevalent form of capital punishment in the
U.S. today—in both general and specific forms in *Baze v. Rees* (2008) and *Glossip v. Gross* (2015). While the number of executions has declined drastically in the last several decades, opponents of the death penalty abhor any use of capital punishment. On the other side of the issue, supporters of capital punishment argue that the number should be greater, because the executions of those who receive the death penalty are unjustly impeded by an inefficient appeals system.

At issue in this debate over the use of capital punishment is the question of whether execution constitutes murder. While proponents of the death penalty view it as a just punishment for certain heinous crimes, opponents view the death penalty as simply another immoral act that only further compounds the injustice. In fact, capital punishment is deemed inhumane by many other industrialized democracies; the European Union requires its member states to abolish the death penalty as a precondition for entry. Most opponents of the death penalty view the punishment itself as an act of murder, but many also reject its utility. That is, they do not believe it deters potential criminals and argue that the possibility of false conviction makes the risk of wrongfully executing an innocent person too high. Furthermore, opponents point out that the death penalty appears to be unfairly applied, particularly against the poor and racial minorities.

Despite these arguments, most Americans favor the use of the death penalty for at least those convicted of murder. Figure 2.5 displays the percentage of GSS respondents who say they favor or oppose the death penalty for people convicted of murder. As shown, the public has been highly and consistently supportive of capital punishment since the question was first asked in 1974.

While the proportion of Americans reporting favorable views of the death penalty reportedly dipped below 50% during its constitutional review in the 1960s and early 1970s, support subsequently rose (Steel and Steger 2011, 51). Indeed, various polls document a dramatic increase in support for the use of capital punishment into the 1990s, with support reaching a peak in 1994 (Ellsworth and Gross 1994). While the number has declined
slightly since, the majority of Americans still favor the use of the death penalty in at least some circumstances. Indeed, while a majority of Americans believe capital punishment is unfairly applied against the poor and African Americans and only a minority believe the death penalty deters crime, a majority still supports its use (Steel and Steger 2011, 50).

As a result of its widespread acceptability, 31 states still officially allow the use of the death penalty. Moreover, evidence suggests that public support may encourage some judges—those elected to their positions—to apply and uphold death sentences with greater frequency (Brace and Boyea 2008). That is, the public’s support may actually encourage more executions.

As noted, the minority of Americans who morally oppose capital punishment differs substantially from the subset of Americans who oppose abortion and homosexuality. While they are less likely to morally oppose abortion and homosexuality, liberals are actually more likely to oppose capital punishment(Steel and Steger 2011). As such, the issue allows
us to examine whether the morality- legality gap persists when the ideological roles are reversed.

2.6 Physician-Assisted Suicide

The issues of abortion and capital punishment involve considerations of death and what is or is not perceived as murder, but they may also pose violations of another value that many Americans possess: the right to self-determination. Are Americans likely to also morally oppose acts involving the termination of a human life when the decision is left to the person whose life is being terminated? While the Supreme Court rejected the notion of a constitutional right to die in 1997 in Washington v. Glucksberg and Vacco v. Quill, the Court has subsequently ruled in Gonzales v. Oregon (2006) and Baxter v. Montana (2009) that physician-assisted suicide is also not strictly prohibited (Gorsuch 2006).

The conflict over physician-assisted suicide invokes a number of moral considerations. Suicide itself has long been viewed as morally wrong. Philosophers and theologians throughout history have condemned the practice on numerous fronts, while modern psychiatry often treats the suicidal urge as an illness. Purported reasons for this moral prohibition on suicide include human beings’ natural inclination towards self-preservation, the impropriety of depriving the human community of one’s individual contribution, and the belief that human life is a sacred gift from God.

However, proponents of physician-assisted suicide argue that patients suffering from painful or debilitating illnesses that will ultimately kill them present a special case. While they might defend any individual’s right to decide whether to live or die, they are particularly supportive when the individual is facing considerable pain as part of a terminal illness. They argue that in such instances suicide may be both a rational decision for the patient and a merciful act on the part of the physician.

Opponents, however, still see this as devaluing human life. They similarly point to the pain and suffering of loved ones left behind after the patient’s suicide. Moreover, oppo-
ponents aim criticism at the physicians who aid in the suicide. As part of the traditional set of ethical commitments in the Hippocratic Oath taken historically by medical practitioners, physicians swear to provide no deadly poison. While the modern oath no longer specifically prohibits this, opponents of physician-assisted suicide still see it as a violation of a medical ethics. Support for physician-assisted suicide has increased, but opposition to the act itself is still common.

Public support for physician-assisted suicide has increased since 1990, although it has been subject to swings resulting from prominent cases in the media such as that of Dr. Jack Kevorkian’s trial for assisting in patients’ suicides (Glick and Hutchinson 2001). While the GSS has not asked specifically about physician-assisted suicide, it has asked about respondents about the acceptability of suicide under certain circumstances since 1977. Figure 2.6 displays the percentage of respondents who favor or oppose allowing a person to end his or her own life if the person has an incurable disease. As shown, Americans have become
substantially more supportive of an individual’s right to end his or her life in the event of a terminal illness.

Importantly, the patient’s circumstances do appear to be determinitive in evoking public support. Figure 2.7 shows the percentage of GSS respondents who favor or oppose allowing a person to end his or her own life if the person is tired of living and ready to die. This might be considered a general measure of support for suicide. Despite the increased support for suicide in the event of a terminal illness, Figure 2.7 shows that Americans have become no more generally supportive of suicide over the same period of time. This suggests that physician-assisted suicide in the case of a terminal illness is considered morally distinct from suicide in general.

Despite the increase in support physician-assisted suicide received between 1977 and 1990, however, the issue remains divisive and supporters of physician-assisted suicide have seen few gains in the intervening period. Indeed, Americans are still more morally opposed
to physician-assisted suicide than capital punishment (Riffkin 2014). From a policy standpoint, only three states—Oregon, Washington, and Vermont—have legalized physician-assisted suicide.

Nevertheless, Gallup observed an increase in support for physician-assisted suicide in 2015 after the high-profile story of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old diagnosed with terminal brain cancer who moved from California to Oregon to be legally euthanized (Dugan 2015). While the issue still receives greater support from liberals than conservatives, both political parties saw similar increases in support during this time period. However, younger respondents became much more supportive of physician-assisted suicide than their older counterparts, which suggests the issue may be susceptible to the same effects of generational replacement we have observed on the issue of homosexuality.

2.7 Discussion

As I have endeavored to show, moral issues are defined more by how participants view them than by any inherent features or stakes in contention. The extent to which issues have become moralized and de-moralized over time, combined with the potential for currently non-moral issues to invoke core principles or values, suggests that there may be no defining internal feature of so-called moral issues. Rather, the public’s attitudes on issues identify them as moral. Unlike some researchers in this vein, however, I do not take an entirely individualized approach. While any issue may induce a moralistic response in a single person or group, only a subset of issues evoke such a reaction in a wide swath of the public.

The issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide, in particular, provide both quintessential and diverse examples of moral issues that divide the American public. As noted, a substantial portion of the public views each as moral. This is understandable, as each raises considerations of what might be considered fundamental principles and values: the value and dignity of human life, individual self-
determination, the natural order, etc. As a result of their moralization, these issues also divide the public. Each stimulates both strong support and opposition from a substantial portion of the population.

Nevertheless, the support varies across issues. Indeed, these issues were chosen at least partially on the basis of this variation. Moreover, they vary in the amount of support they have received over time. As I have shown, capital punishment has received widespread public support from the public for several decades. In contrast, homosexuality has gone from being widely vilified to being both legally and publicly supported. The issues of physician-assisted suicide and abortion are divisive, but the former has seen gains in support while the latter has not despite being legal for a much longer period of time and in a much larger segment of the country. Capital punishment also receives its support from a different political group than the other three issues. Importantly, this variation in support allows me to test my theories across a range of different issue contexts.

In the subsequent chapter, I show that public opinion on these issues also exhibits a morality-legality gap. While substantial portions of the public view these issues as moral and, what is more, believe them to be morally wrong, they do not necessarily impose their moral beliefs directly.
CHAPTER 3

THE MORALITY-LEGALITY GAP IN PUBLIC OPINION

In his speech at the 1996 Democratic National Convention, former President Bill Clinton (1996) remarked that “abortion should not only be safe and legal, it should be rare.” Nearly two decades after his speech, little seems to have changed in the public’s moral views of abortion. Indeed, in her own speech in 2005 marking the anniversary of Roe v. Wade, then-Senator Hillary Clinton echoed her husband’s sentiments to the New York State Family Planning Providers:

I believe we can all recognize that abortion in many ways represents a sad, even tragic choice to many, many women... There is no reason why government cannot do more to educate and inform and provide assistance so that the choice guaranteed under our constitution either does not ever have to be exercised or only in very rare circumstances. (Clinton 2005)

The Clintons’ statements capture an important element of public opinion in the United States. Most Americans, 56%, believe abortion should be legal in most or all cases, while only 40% believe abortion is morally acceptable (Public Religion Research Institute 2011, 22). Like Clinton, a sizable portion of Americans believe abortion is morally wrong but nevertheless support its legality. They evaluate the legality and morality of abortion separately and frequently take incongruous stances. This is an important distinction with implications for our understanding of both the psychology of morality and the process by which values are translated into policy positions.

Much of the existing literature on public opinion in the United States has ignored the morality-legality gap. On divisive moral issues like abortion, philosophers, ethicists, and
legal scholars have certainly drawn distinctions between the morality and legality of abortion, but there has been little empirical research into how these two distinct judgments relate to one another in public opinion. Instead, researchers have tended to conflate questions asking whether an issue is morally wrong and questions asking whether it should be legal. Studies often focus on one or both questions as measures of the same variable, using questions about morality and legality interchangeably, instead of treating opinion about morality and legality as two distinct issues.

When researchers do address nuances in opinion on moral issues, it has usually been to look at how support differs under certain conditions, such as comparing differences in support for abortion between a case of a potential birth defect and a case where the mother simply lacks the financial resources to support a baby. While understanding the context-specific nature of abortion opinion is important, it is an incomplete picture. Not only does context matter; it matters whether respondents are asked to make a moral or legal judgment. A subset of Americans are satisfied with the decriminalization of abortion despite finding it morally repugnant, indicating a need for greater precision and attention to detail in how we measure opinion on moral issues and how we interpret findings.

Despite being used interchangeably, I argue that questions on legality and morality actually measure separate dimensions of opinion. Different considerations are drawn upon when respondents are asked about morality than when they are asked about legality. Thus, I believe it is necessary to fully distinguish between both elements to gain a full understanding of Americans’ views on moral issues. It is important to understand how and why moral and legal opinions differ.

One might ask whether political science should be concerned with judgments about what is morally right if policy is more directly impacted by judgments about what should be legal. One reason to be concerned with American public opinion on the morality of an issue, however, is the degree to which political issues are commonly framed so as to evoke moral considerations. Politicians do not simply argue in legal terms; they use moral
and normative arguments about the nature of right and wrong. Few would admit to being unconcerned about the public morality. Indeed, most would likely concede an inextricable link between the law and moral convention. Though I argue that the two are less tightly linked than we may assume, I nevertheless believe both are relevant in seeking to understand public debates over moral issues.

How, then, are opinions about morality and legality interrelated? For one, the processes of moral reasoning and legal reasoning inform one another. Individuals’ ideas about what is good and evil inform their ideas about what is legal and illegal, and vice versa. The two terms are commonly used interchangeably to reference the same idea of acceptability. However, there is a need to distinguish between the two and parse out differences. Morality has an air of fixedness about it that legality lacks. Legislators, courts, and voters regularly change laws, which are ultimately man-made and therefore malleable. Morality, however, is often presumed to be determined by a higher force than human reason. It certainly changes and has changed drastically over the course of human history, but moral opinion rarely changes with a single legislative bill, court case, or ballot initiative. Rather, it is an ingrained part of many individual’ psychologies, and long-term cultural shifts are required for individuals to change their minds about their beliefs about right and wrong.

There may also be something like a temporary lag in the gap between morality and legality. That is, there may be stages in the evolution of moral issues wherein an issue first becomes legal and then becomes moral. Legal tolerance may naturally precede moral approval in a kind of moralization cycle. The issue of homosexuality, for instance might be a good indicator of such a cycle. As a culture, we have steadily progressed on the issue of homosexuality from a point in which it was a deep cultural taboo to one in which the current American President, Barack Obama, supports the legal recognition of gay marriages. It may be that moral approval of an act like homosexuality must be preceded by legal toleration. Before Americans could learn to accept gay couples as moral equals, they had to stop putting them in prison.
However, if there is such a cycle, why has abortion not progressed in terms of moral approval? The Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision made abortion legal in the United States in 1973. Despite this extensive period of legality, it has yet to be moralized. Moreover, we should ask why the morality-legality gap exists at all. After all, we might reasonably expect individuals to oppose legally those behaviors which they oppose morally. Yet, as I show in the next section, we see a consistent morality-legality gap across the four issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide.

3.1 The Morality-Legality Gap

To measure the morality-legality gap in public opinion on abortion, I make use of both preexisting data and an original survey. First, I endeavor to demonstrate a persistent gap between moral and legal opinions in existing data over time and across issues. As noted, few surveys even ask respondents about both the morality and legality of an issue, which further points to a failure in the field to take notice of this important distinction. However, a small subset of surveys have asked about both morality and legality to a limited degree. Gallup has tracked Americans’ views on the moral acceptability of various issues annually since 2001 as part of its Values and Beliefs poll. Conveniently, the poll has occasionally also asked respondents about their support for various policies related to these moral issues. This makes it one of the only options for gauging the morality-legality gap in opinion over time.

Using these data, Figure 3.1 illustrates the morality-legality gap in opinion on abortion from 2001 to 2013. The proportion of respondents stating that abortion was morally wrong has consistently been around 30 percentage points higher than the proportion of respondents stating that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.\(^1\) This demonstrates not only the existence of the morality-legality distinction in abortion opinion, but also shows

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\(^1\)While this excludes those who said it should be illegal under certain circumstances, the morality data also excludes those who responded that the morality of abortion depends on the situation.
that this gap has persisted over time despite an array of other changes in how Americans view abortion.

To ensure these results are not simply a byproduct of Gallup’s survey design or a time-bound effect, I also make use of an additional data set with both moral and legal data. Beginning in early 1982, the Kinder Institute’s annual Houston Area Survey has systematically monitored changes in the demographic patterns, attitudes, and beliefs of residents of Harris County, Texas. While it does not offer a nationally representative sample, the Houston Area Survey has simultaneously asked respondents about both the morality and legality of abortion nine times since 1990, allowing us to examine the morality-legality gap in abortion opinion over a longer period of time. Respondents were asked both “Do you personally believe that abortion is morally wrong or is it morally acceptable?” and “For/Against: What about changing the law to make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion?” Figure 3.2 displays the results of a longitudinal analysis of the difference in opinion between respondents’ views about the morality and legality of abortion between 1990 and 2013.
As Figure 3.2 shows, the proportion of respondents stating that abortion was morally wrong has consistently been around 20 percentage points higher than the proportion of respondents stating that they were in favor of changing the law to make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion. This further demonstrates not only the existence of the morality- legality distinction in abortion opinion; it shows that this gap has persisted over an even larger period of time despite an array of other changes in how Americans view abortion.

However, as noted in the previous chapter, opinion on abortion is significantly dependent upon the contexts of the abortion: status of the mother, health of the fetus, length of the pregnancy, circumstances of conception, etc. This may explain these findings: because both the Gallup and Kinder polls only ask about abortion broadly, they may be tapping into the problem of different contextual situations. To explore this possibility, Figure 3.3 shows results of three iterations of the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS only asked about both the morality and legality of abortion simultaneously in three waves of its survey, but
it asked those questions about abortion in two specific contexts. Respondents were asked to evaluate the morality and legality of abortion both when there was a strong chance of a defect in the fetus and when the family simply could not afford more children. As shown in the previous chapter, the public tends to be much more supportive of abortion in the case of a potential birth defect than when the family simply want no more children. As Figure 3.3 shows, support for abortion—both legally and morally—does differ in specific contexts. Respondents across all three years were more supportive of abortion in the case of a potential birth defect than when the family simply could not afford more children. Nonetheless, the gap in opinion on morality and legality persists across both contexts, which suggests the morality-legality gap is not simply the result of contextual considerations.

As these data show, there is a consistent morality-legality gap in opinion on abortion. Nevertheless, there may be good reason to believe that the morality-legality gap is unique to the issue of abortion, where political elites on the pro-choice side such as the Clintons have long displayed a reticence to morally endorse the actual act of abortion. On other

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2See Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2 for a full comparison of the public’s support for abortion under these and other circumstances.
issues, moral and legal opinion may be more tightly linked. To examine this possibility, I have also used Gallup data to examine the issues of homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide, which I discuss below.

Gallup has tracked Americans’ views on the moral acceptability of homosexuality annually since 2009 as part of its Values and Beliefs poll. While Americans increasingly view homosexuality as morally acceptable, 61% of Republicans and 40% of independents still view homosexuality as morally unacceptable (Riffkin 2014). Thus, it appears that homosexuality is still a highly salient and divisive moral issue in American politics. This indicates that same-sex marriage will likely remain a key battleground in the “culture wars” for some time to come (Hunter 1991). The Gallup data also include a measure of respondents’ support for the legality of homosexuality. Figure 3.4 shows the morality-legality gap in opinion on gay or lesbian relations from 2009 to 2013. While both have declined over time, the proportion of Americans who believe homosexuality is morally wrong has been consistently higher than the number who believe it should be illegal. Though the gap is smaller than that of abortion, ranging from 6 to 10 percentage points, its presence is
consistent across the five years questions about both morality and legality were asked in the survey. This further supports the existence of morality-legality gap in public opinion.

While Gallup has not asked respondents specifically about their position on the legal use of the death penalty, its Values and Beliefs poll has asked respondents whether they believe the death penalty is imposed too often, about the right amount, or not often enough. This is the closest approximation of a legal opinion available in the data. Figure 3.5 shows the morality-legality gap in opinion on the death penalty from 2001 to 2006.

As shown, the gap between those who believe the death penalty is wrong and those who believe it is imposed too often ranges from 4 to 9 percentage points. If anything, these data likely underestimate the gap in opinion on the death penalty, as there are undoubtedly respondents who would prefer to reduce the frequency with which the death penalty is applied without eliminating it altogether. Nevertheless, even by the conservative measure, these results suggest that the morality-legality gap persists in opinion on capital punishment despite lowered moral opposition overall and a shift in the ideological makeup of those morally opposed to the issue.
The Gallup Values and Beliefs poll also asked respondents about both the morality and legality of physician-assisted suicide. Using these data once more, Figure 3.6 shows the morality-legality gap in opinion on physician-assisted suicide from 2002 to 2013. Here, we again observe a substantial morality-legality gap in opinion, ranging from 12 to 22 percentage points.

As shown, a gap persists in moral and legal opinion across all four of the moral issues that the Gallup data allow me examine.\(^3\) Though the size of the gap varies across issues and over time, the morality-legality gap appears consistently. The variation is unsurprising, as we would not necessarily expect respondents to have the same level of uncertainty in their moral judgments across all issues. Some issues, such as abortion and physician-assisted suicide, may be more contentious or divisive than others (Riffkin 2014). Nevertheless, across all of these issues, a subset of respondents are unwilling to legally oppose actions they consider immoral. What accounts for this gap in opinion? These findings further support my theory. In the following sections, I delve more deeply into the individual-level

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\(^3\)Indeed, while the Gallup Values and Beliefs poll only permits me to examine the morality-legality gap on abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide, I have collected additional survey data via Amazon Mechanical Turk that shows a morality-legality gap in opinion on the issues of gambling, polygamy, and incest. See Table B.1 in Appendix B for the results.
gap in opinion on the morality and legality of these issues and begin to look at potential explanations for this gap in opinion.

3.2 Moral Opposition and Legal Support

To many public opinion scholars, this gap in opinion may appear unsurprising. The American public has long been criticized for being inconsistent, uninformed, and indecisive. Converse (1964) argued that the majority of American adults show little or no consistency or ideological constraint in their political beliefs. His “nonattitude” theory holds that people who regularly change their political positions in opinion surveys actually have no opinions. Rather, he argues that they are instead providing random responses. However, a wide range of alternative explanations have been offered to explain these features of public opinion.

The consistent response instability that Converse used as his primary source of evidence is often explained by more recent scholars as measurement error (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979; Feldman 1989). These scholars argue that the inconsistencies observed in public opinion surveys are the fault of the measurement instrument rather than the respondents. Seemingly small differences in survey design (e.g., interviewer and question-ordering effects) can elicit significantly different responses. Occasionally, these can even represent meaningful differences in opinion (such as when support for abortion varies by specific context, which suggests a principled difference of opinion).

Even subsequent scholars who have acknowledged the instability in the individual political opinions have questioned whether it represents a democratic problem. Zaller (1992) argued that, while members of the general public do not necessarily possess stable attitudes, they do possess certain proclivities toward one direction or another on particular issues. Zaller provided a theory in which members of the public possess a wide range of considerations that they draw upon to form an opinion in any given instance. Because they may draw upon one set of considerations in one iteration of a survey and a different set
of considerations in another iteration of the same survey, their responses are frequently unstable. However, not all respondents possess the same considerations. Depending on their interest in politics and exposure to elite sources of political information, they will differ in the amount of considerations they possess and the ideological direction of those considerations.

Is the morality- legality gap reducible, then, to a simple case of response instability? Possibly, but the consistency of this gap in a single direction across issues, over time, and in differing survey formats makes this possibility unlikely. Respondents are not simply providing divergent opinions on morality in one survey and legality in another survey a year later. A subset of respondents are providing incongruous answers to questions about the morality and legality of issues in the same survey, regardless of the year or specific wording of the questions. Moreover, response instability should not produce divergence in a consistent direction, whereas respondents in these surveys consistently exhibit higher levels of legal support. This suggests that there is a meaningful difference in opinion underlying the morality- legality gap.

Explaining this gap requires a more detailed knowledge of the relationship between opinions about morality and legality than existing data can provide. To collect the necessary data, I fielded a series of survey items via the YouGov Omnibus survey. YouGov, an internet-based market research firm, operates an online panel of over one million U.S. respondents, which it uses to provide a representative pool of respondents for online surveys. Though it is an online survey, YouGov is generally regarded as a high quality sample of the U.S. population, and the data are weighted to ensure representativeness. Prior research comparing YouGov’s internet sample to those obtained via telephone and mailings found few differences across modes (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014).

4However, see Table B.2 in Appendix B for the unweighted demographic composition of the Moral Confidence Survey respondents.
In this survey, I fielded questions asking respondents about both their moral and legal support for abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. On a scale from 0 to 100, respondents \( (n = 1,000) \) were asked to rate how strongly they believed each issue was immoral (0) or moral (100) and whether it should be illegal (0) or legal (100). Figure 3.7 shows the mean level of moral and legal support for each issue.

On a scale from 0 to 100, the mean level of moral and legal support, respectively, is approximately 43 and 56 for abortion, 51 and 68 for homosexuality, 63 and 68 for capital punishment, and 57 and 61 for physician-assisted suicide. Figure 3.7 also displays 95% confidence intervals around each mean. Legal support for each issue is significantly higher than moral support, and these differences are statistically significant \( (p < .05) \). Moreover, because I have a measure of each respondent’s level of both moral and legal support between 0 and 100, I can calculate the mean individual-level difference in moral and legal support for each issue. To do so, I subtract each respondents’ moral rating from his or her legal rating. For each issue, the mean difference is statistically significant \( (p < .05) \) and positive, which indicates that respondents are generally more legally supportive than morally supportive of each issue.

However, a statistically significant numerical difference in opinion on a 0-100 scale tells us little about the substantive significance of the difference in opinion. This includes even those who may be only slightly more legally supportive of an issue (e.g., a respondent who rates their moral support for abortion as 0 and their legal support as 5). While these

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5See Moral Confidence Survey in Appendix A for the precise wording of each survey item.

6In the following results, missing responses were recoded to the midpoint of 50. However, alternative models wherein they are dropped or recoded to the mean do not substantively differ.

7While the difference between two parameter estimates will always be statistically significant if their confidence intervals do not overlap, the converse is not true. The difference between two group means is a separate parameter, and its 95% confidence interval does not necessarily contain 0 when the intervals of the two means overlap.

8Expectedly, if we take the absolute value of each individual-level difference in moral and legal support (essentially a measure of absolute difference regardless of directionality), the mean difference is even larger than this measure indicates.
Figure 3.7. Differences in Moral and Legal Support
incremental differences in support may be individually meaningful, they may be dismissed as practically and politically inconsequential. To help ensure these measures are not overestimating the morality-legality gap, Figure 3.8 displays a scatter plot of each respondents’ self-rated moral and legal support for each of the four issues.

As Figure 3.8 shows, most respondents’ moral and legal support are relatively proximate. The horizontal axis ranges from 0 to 100 and reflects increasing moral support, while the vertical axis also ranges from 0 to 100 but represents increasing legal support. Thus, individuals who display identical levels of moral and legal support for each issue are located on a diagonal line running from the bottom left corner of each square to the top right corner. The more concentrated the points on the scatter plots are around this line, the more smaller the morality-legality gap. As we might expect, there is a clearly discernible
positive correlation between moral and legal support on each issue. While many respondents do not fall strictly on the line, they generally become more legally supportive as they become more morally supportive.

However, as I anticipated, a number of points in Figure 3.8 are also located quite far from the diagonal line. In particular, there are substantial clusters in the top left quadrants. This indicates that—particularly when moral support is below the midpoint of 50—a substantial number of respondents are significantly more legally supportive of each moral issue than they are morally supportive of it. In contrast, relatively few respondents place themselves in the bottom right quadrants, which would indicate greater moral support than legal support. It is the top left quadrant that serves as the primary focus of this dissertation; the points within represent those who believe acts they consider immoral should nevertheless be legally permitted. The density of respondents in this quadrant provides further support for my theory.

To help better visualize these data and assess meaningful differences in opinion, I divide the sample into categories based on these four quadrants. Each represents a distinct combination of moral and legal support. Those at or above the scales’ midpoints are categorized as supportive, and those below are categorized as opposed. Thus, respondents fall into one of four groups: those who believe an issue is moral and should be legal, those who believe an issue is immoral and should be illegal, those who believe an issue is immoral and should be legal, and those who believe an issue is moral and should be illegal. These density of these four categories are displayed for each issue in Figure 3.9.

As Figure 3.9 shows, the largest category of respondents for each issue is comprised of those who both morally and legally support each issue. Capital punishment (67%) receives the greatest amount of combined support, abortion (45%) receives the least, and physician-assisted suicide (62%) and homosexuality(52%) fall between the two. The second largest

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9This is confirmed statistically. The correlation between moral support and legal support is .82 for abortion, .76 for homosexuality, .85 for capital punishment, and .90 for physician-assisted suicide.
Figure 3.9. Combined Moral and Legal Support or Opposition

category of respondents for each issue is comprised of those who both morally and legally oppose each issue. Here again, capital punishment (18%) receives the least amount of combined opposition, while abortion (35%) receives the most, and physician-assisted suicide (27%) and homosexuality (24%) fall between the two. Interestingly, physician-assisted suicide receives the second highest level of combined moral and legal support and the second highest level of combined moral and legal opposition. As a result fewer respondents hold conflicting moral and legal views on physician-assisted suicide than any other issue.

As we might expect, the number of respondents who believe an issue is moral but believe it should be illegal is marginal (1-3%).\textsuperscript{10} However, a relatively sizable number of

\textsuperscript{10}Notably, however, this category is largest for the issue of capital punishment, as was also evidenced by Figure 3.8. Given the state-sponsored nature of capital punishment as an act, it is possible that there are more technical or policy-based reasoned for opposition (e.g., its ineffectiveness at dissuading crime) that hold sway even among those who do not morally oppose capital punishment.
respondents legally support an issue that they morally oppose. This proportion is greatest for homosexuality (23%) and lowest for physician-assisted suicide (8%), with abortion (18%) and capital punishment (11%) falling in the middle. These represent sizable subsets of the population. Moreover, they exhibit a meaningful difference in their moral and legal opinions, which further demonstrates the existence of a statistically and substantively significant morality-legality gap in public opinion.

3.3 Explaining Incongruous Moral and Legal Attitudes

Why, then, do these individuals exhibit incongruous moral and legal opinions? One seemingly straightforward explanation for the morality-legality gap may be tolerance or moral relativism, a willingness to permit behaviors with which one disagrees. Individuals may believe morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow a single standard. This is a particularly appealing explanation, given what may seem to be a constant trend toward progressive liberalization in American society. Americans have grown to tolerate a range of things: unfavorable actions such as divorce and infidelity, racial and ethnic cultural differences, loosened sexual norms, etc. Americans have decriminalized many behaviors of which they previously disapproved both morally and legally.

Indeed, prior research suggests that certain individuals are more authoritarian than others, possessing a “need for order and, conversely, intolerance for confusion or ambiguity, and a propensity to rely on established authorities to provide that order” (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 34). Those who are more authoritarian are less tolerant of moral ambiguity. They see the world in black and white terms, and they feel threatened when the actual world appears more ambiguous. Authoritarianism is also correlated with a belief in biblical inerrancy and a belief that there is a struggle between good and evil in the world today. In other words, authoritarians are both more convinced of the accuracy of a prominent source of moral values and that the world is engulfed in a struggle over those values.
However, while authoritarianism and tolerance may help explain the morality-legality gap in opinion on issues like abortion or same-sex marriage, they seem less relevant to opinion on the death penalty. It is not clear that tolerance would extend so far as to allow the state to wrongfully execute prisoners. Furthermore, while they may help explain the overall tendency to impose one’s moral beliefs on others, they do not seem to explain why someone would decisively judge an action morally wrong but refuse to legally enforce that judgment. Nonauthoritarians should be less likely to oppose an issue not just on legal terms, but also moral terms. Tolerance would seem likely to exhibit itself in both legal and moral decision-making. In the range of questions asking about the morality of various issues, Gallup allowed respondents to its Values and Beliefs poll to say that it depends or that it is not a moral issue. I would expect tolerant nonauthoritarians to be drawn to these categories or even to consider an issue morally acceptable rather than decisively declare it morally wrong.

Furthermore, prior work in psychology suggests that attitudes held with strong moral conviction should not be held relativistically. Skitka (2010, 269) shows that moral beliefs are treated “as if they were readily observable, objective properties of situations, or as facts about the world.” Additionally, Ryan (2014) shows that moral conviction arouses negative emotions with punitive overtones, which would seem to further preclude tolerance in cases where an individual’s attitude is actually morally convicted.

To test this possibility, I also asked respondents to the YouGov Omnibus survey to rate their agreement with a statement endorsing moral relativism, “Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard,” on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”).

To validate this measure, I compared it to four alternative measures of moral relativism using data collected in a 2016 survey of respondents (n = 300) recruited via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). While MTurk does not provide a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents, it is used regularly in other disciplines and occasionally in political
science to conduct survey experiments (Arceneaux 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling 2011). Previous analyses have also shown MTurk users to be more diverse than those in most college student panels and other online panels (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). The other four measures asked respondents to rate their agreement on a scale from 0 to 100 with four other statements: “Moral standards should be seen as individualistic: what one person considers moral may be judged as immoral by another person”; “Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave and should not be used when making judgments of others”; “The question of what is moral for everyone can never be resolved because what is moral or immoral is up to the individual to decide”; and “Everyone should be held to the same moral standard.” The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for these five items was .88, which suggests they are all largely comparable measures of the same underlying concept. Thus, I feel confident the item used in the YouGov Omnibus survey actually measures moral relativism.

In order to identify the other determinants of the morality- legality gap, I include a variety of social, political, and religious control variables in the model. These measures include respondents’ age (measured in years), gender (with male as the reference category), race (with white as the reference category), education (a 6-point ordinal scale based on highest degree received/attempted ranging from “No high school” to “Post-graduate degree”), marital status, parental status, partisanship (with independent on a 7-point scale as the reference category), attention to news and public affairs (a 4-point ordinal scale from “Hardly at all” to “Most of the time”), voter registration status, religious identification (with Evangelical Protestant as the reference category), and church attendance (a 6-point

11 See Morality Item Comparison Survey in Appendix B for the full question wordings for each item.

12 The correlation between each of the other four items and the primary moral relativism item ranged between .55 and .85.

13 The full text of the question was “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others are not that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?”
scale ranging from “Never” to “More than once a week”). To begin, I test the separate impact of these variables on both moral and legal support for each issue using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. The results are displayed in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2.

As shown in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2, many of these factors help explain moral and legal support across the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. As the variables are coded from 0 (strongest belief that the issue is “immoral” or should be “illegal”) to 100 (strongest belief that the issue is “moral” or should be “legal”), positive coefficients indicate greater support. While some factors relate only to one kind of support for a single issue, several variables exhibit broader patterns. Moral relativism, notably, is positively and significantly associated moral and legal support for abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide. However, moral relativism is associated only with greater legal support for the issue of capital punishment. That is, those with higher belief in moral relativism are more likely to say all four issues are should be legal, but they are also more likely to say all issues—with the exception of capital punishment—are moral.

Regarding general demographic variables, age is negatively associated with moral and legal support for homosexuality, but unrelated to support for the other three issues. African Americans are less morally and legally supportive than whites of homosexuality and physician-assisted suicide, but only less legally supportive of abortion and capital punishment. Education is positively related to both moral and legal support for the issues of abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted, and negatively related to moral and legal support for capital punishment.

Among political variables, Democratic and Republican partisanship are related in the expected ways to the four issues, with partisans being more likely to share their party’s traditional stance on each of the issues. While the difference between the two parties and independents is statistically insignificant for the issue of physician-assisted suicide, the difference between the two parties is significant. As noted in previous chapters, physician-
**TABLE 3.1**

PREDICTORS OF MORAL AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR ABORTION AND HOMOSEXUALITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th></th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral Support</td>
<td>Legal Support</td>
<td>Moral Support</td>
<td>Legal Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>-3.70</td>
<td>-8.25*</td>
<td>-15.35**</td>
<td>-17.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-1.94</td>
<td>-8.45*</td>
<td>-5.06</td>
<td>-6.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>-6.26</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.35*</td>
<td>3.17**</td>
<td>2.82**</td>
<td>5.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-4.65*</td>
<td>-5.55**</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>-5.43*</td>
<td>-8.53**</td>
<td>-7.98**</td>
<td>-2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>9.38**</td>
<td>12.18**</td>
<td>10.93**</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
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<td>-12.65**</td>
<td>-10.77**</td>
<td>-9.85**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
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<td>.18</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>-.99</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>9.19**</td>
<td>12.71**</td>
<td>18.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>15.56**</td>
<td>18.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>12.16**</td>
<td>12.00**</td>
<td>19.27**</td>
<td>18.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>6.73*</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>15.60**</td>
<td>14.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>16.74**</td>
<td>13.85**</td>
<td>18.10**</td>
<td>19.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>-4.85**</td>
<td>-5.42**</td>
<td>-5.45**</td>
<td>-4.56**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² .34 .37 .37 .32
N 1,000 1,000 1,000 1,000

NOTE: Entries are OLS regression coefficients.

*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
## TABLE 3.2

PREDICTORS OF MORAL AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral Support</td>
<td>Legal Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−3.73</td>
<td>−2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>−4.78</td>
<td>−9.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>−1.77</td>
<td>−2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>20.37**</td>
<td>17.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
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<td>−1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>−2.57**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>4.61*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>−11.39**</td>
<td>−13.87**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>10.44**</td>
<td>10.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>−1.08</td>
<td>−.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>−.96</td>
<td>−2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>−2.35</td>
<td>−4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>−3.06</td>
<td>−1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>−20.84**</td>
<td>−23.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>−1.77**</td>
<td>−1.77**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R²: .17 .18 .31 .35  
N: 1,000 1,000 1,000 1,000

NOTE: Entries are OLS regression coefficients.  
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
assisted suicide has received less attention from either party, which likely accounts for the smaller partisan difference. Partisans have fewer cues upon which to rely in the formation of their opinions.

Religiously, church attendance is associated with lower moral and legal support for each of the four issues. That is, people who attend religious services exhibit greater moral opposition to each of the issues, including the conservative-backed issue of capital punishment. Atheists, on the other hand, are significantly more morally and legally supportive of abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide, and less morally and legally supportive of capital punishment. All religious groups are more morally and legally supportive of homosexuality than Evangelical Protestants.

Although there are many consistent patterns across the four issues, several differences emerge between the factors driving moral support and legal support. In particular, we observe several cases where a variable is more strongly related to one type of support than another. For example, compared to independents, Democrats are much more morally supportive of homosexuality than legally supportive. This is likely because independents are much closer to Democrats legally on the issue than they are morally. Similarly, while Mainline Protestant are no more likely than Evangelical Protestants to morally support abortion, they are more likely to legally support abortion. This kind of nuance in opinion further emphasizes the need to treat moral and legal support as separate attitudes.

However, the above results can only tell us how each variable relates to general moral and legal support for each issue. I am most concerned with the effect on interactions between the two variables. In particular, I am interested in what drives individuals to legally support issues they morally oppose. Thus, I use logistic regression to examine the impact of each variable on the probability of combined moral opposition and legal support for the
issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. The results are displayed in Table 3.3.\textsuperscript{14}

Table 3.3 shows the results of logistic regression, with positive coefficients reflecting a higher probability of combined moral opposition and legal support for the issue identified at the head of each column. As shown, there is no consistent relationship between moral relativism and the possession of incongruous moral and legal attitudes. While relativism is positively and significantly associated with a higher probability of incongruous moral and legal views of abortion, it has a negative and statistically significant effect for capital punishment, and it has no effect on homosexuality and physician-assisted suicide. This is likely explained by the relationships we observed in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 above. Counter to expectations, relativists are likely to be more morally and legally supportive. That is, they are more tolerant in both dimensions and not simply less willing to impose their moral beliefs on others.

Similarly, no other variables show any consistent effect across all four issues. African Americans are more likely than whites to show a morality-legality gap in opinion on homosexuality and physician-assisted suicide, but not on the issues of abortion or capital punishment. Latinos and Asians are less likely than whites to display a morality-legality gap on abortion, but they are no different on any of the other issues. Democrats and Republicans are both less likely than independents to hold incongruous opinions on physician-assisted suicide, Democrats are less likely for homosexuality, and Republicans are less likely for capital punishment, but there are no observed differences for abortion. Catholics are more likely than Evangelicals to hold incongruous views on homosexuality and physician-assisted suicide, they show no differences on abortion or capital punishment. Not even variables we might associate general knowledge, political knowledge, or moral

\textsuperscript{14}A binomial logistic regression model collapses the three other potential categories (moral and legal support, moral and legal opposition, and moral support and legal opposition) into a single category. However, when multinomial logistic regression is used to calculate the likelihood of moral opposition and legal support relative to each of the alternative categories separately, moral relativism has a similarly inconsistent effects and fails to predict combined moral opposition and legal support across issues.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.01**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.86**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>−.65*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>−3.15**</td>
<td>−.88</td>
<td>−1.10</td>
<td>−.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>−.92**</td>
<td>−.38</td>
<td>−.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.27</td>
<td>−.85*</td>
<td>−.75**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>−.34**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>−.25**</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>−.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>−.34</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>−.20</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>−1.44*</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>−.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R² .07  .08  .06  .05
N 1,000 1,000 1,000 1,000

NOTE: Entries are logit coefficients.
* p <.10, ** p <.05, two-tailed
knowledge such as education, interest in the news and public affairs, and church attendance consistently predict differences across the four issues. Thus, while these variables matter for specific issues, there are no clear drivers of the morality-legality gap in opinion.

3.4 Discussion

As both the Gallup data and the results of my original survey confirm, Americans’ attitudes on moral issues are more complex than is often assumed. Across time, issues, and a variety of survey formats, respondents consistently exhibit greater legal support for moral issues than moral support. This means that a subset of individuals consider an act morally wrong but refrain from seeking to legally prohibit others from engaging in it. While this could be assumed from the morality-legality gap in the aggregate data, it is confirmed more clearly in the individual-level analyses conducted in this chapter. Indeed, we observe not only a statistically significant numerical gap in support, but also a substantively significant difference in opinion. Respondents are not merely more legally supportive by a difference of degrees; some display qualitatively higher levels of legal support than moral support.

If nothing else, these findings demonstrate the importance of measuring moral and legal support as separate dimensions of public opinion on moral issues. Social scientists often conflate the two measures, assuming that respondents’ belief that an act is morally wrong is the equivalent of legal opposition. That is not the case for all respondents, and conflating the two measures can mislead interpretation of these respondents’ positions on the issues. To the extent that arguments for a polarized public depend on moral attitudes about these issues, these dire claims may be overstated. Indeed, these findings may provide some cause for hope: some Americans display some resistance to the moral urge that Morone argues inspires so much conflict in the United States.

What is more, these differences in moral and legal support are not explained by existing variables. While certain factors help predict simultaneous moral opposition and legal support on individual issues, none consistently predict incongruous positions across all four
issues. Even belief in moral relativism, which we might look to as a logical explanation for this position, has inconsistent effects across the four issues. We must look elsewhere for an explanation for this gap in opinion.

In the next chapter, I introduce a measure of individuals’ perceived level of moral knowledge, which I call moral confidence. A subset of individuals lack confidence in their moral knowledge and understanding of moral issues. I hypothesize that it is this subset of respondents who are less confident in their own moral knowledge who are most likely to display a combination of moral opposition and legal support for an issue.
CHAPTER 4

MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE

As discussed in Chapter 1, moral judgments come instinctively to most people; they are generally the result of quick, automatic evaluations that require little knowledge or reasoning (Haidt 2001). For issues that trigger certain neurological responses, individuals are able to quickly provide moral judgments that are both strongly felt and relatively difficult to change. These moral intuitions guide most individuals’ moral beliefs, but their moralistic tendencies may make Americans especially subject to their moral impulses.

Moreover, moral issues tend to be more salient, divisive, and “easy,” relying less on sophistication or interest and more on emotions or gut-level feelings (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Because of this, political disputes over moral issues, in particular, tend to draw in members of the public who are otherwise politically uninterested. Despite being generally unknowledgeable, uninterested, and uncertain about other types of political issues, people often take more extreme, hostile positions on moralized issues (Ryan 2014).

Given these facts, it might come as little surprise that moralized politics seem so extreme. Human beings are well-equipped to render judgments on moral issues based almost strictly on their intuitive sense of right and wrong. While these instincts may have originally evolved to help us cooperate, Greene (2013) argues evolutionary adaptations that originally helped groups thrive now serve to divide us. In groups substantially larger than those in which the traits evolved, and with drastically different beliefs and cultures coming face-to-face in a context alien to our earliest ancestors, our deeply felt moral impulses lead us into conflict with others whose own impulses simultaneously lead them to condemn us.
Features that originally helped us survive without the need for consistent rationality now seem to preclude rational cooperation and compromise.

However, the irrationality of morality should not be taken to mean that knowledge plays no role in morality or individuals’ opinions on moral issues. What one believes oneself to know is distinct from one’s actual knowledge. Indeed, most people are unaware of their own ignorance (Kruger and Dunning 1999). Moreover, individuals’ perceptions of their own knowledge may be just as important to their behavior as real knowledge. For example, prior evidence suggests individuals are more likely to change their political attitudes when they have less confidence in their knowledge (Krosnick and Petty 1995). Similarly, Bishop, Oldendick and Tuchfarber (1984) suggest that individuals think they possess greater political knowledge than they actually do; when confronted with their own political ignorance on political knowledge questions, respondents were less inclined to report themselves as interested in politics. Thus, how much people think they know matters.

More importantly, while psychological evidence suggests that individuals do not rely on a process of reasoning to reach moral judgments, that does not mean these individuals believe they cannot provide reasons for their moral judgments. In fact, it is likely quite the reverse: the intuitive nature of moral judgments may very well lead individuals to believe they are even more rational, logical, or accurate than conclusions reached by a genuine process of deliberation. The purported evolutionary advantage of moral intuitions is the fact that they are felt with sufficient strength so as to make human beings behave cooperatively even when doing so runs counter to strict self-interest. Individuals would almost necessarily feel such a deep-seated impulse as truth. Indeed, the average individual likely fails to distinguish between this perceived sense of “knowing” what is right and actual knowledge. This is perhaps especially true for individuals who never have their knowledge challenged or its illusory nature revealed to them.

Despite the abundant literature in psychology that suggests moral beliefs are driven by intuition and emotion rather than reason or knowledge, I contend in this chapter that
individuals nevertheless believe themselves to know a great deal about morality. That is, they think they know a lot about moral issues, sources of moral authority, and the roots of their own moral beliefs. Across a wide range of socio-demographic categories, I show that respondents consistently express an incredibly high degree of confidence in their moral knowledge. Even among groups such as the less educated or less religious, who we might expect to be less confident as a result of lower levels of actual moral knowledge, I show that respondents consistently express incredibly high degrees of confidence in their moral knowledge.

Specifically, they are highly confident that they can explain their moral judgments to others. Although they did not actually engage in a reasoning process to reach their moral conclusions, these respondents are driven by an underlying beliefs that they could provide reasons if called upon. It is this social aspect of their confidence that leads them to pursue their moral judgments with such fervor. Because they are so sure of their ability to explain moral judgments, they fail to question them and seek to impose them upon others. Before empirically assessing the public’s perceived level of moral knowledge, however, I first outline more specifically what I mean by perceived moral knowledge, which I refer to as moral confidence, in relation to prior work in the field of social psychology.

4.1 Perceived Knowledge and Moral Confidence

A broad array of research suggests Americans know relatively little, particularly regarding politics. Indeed, Downs (1957) argued that it was irrational for the American public to devote the time and energy necessary to be fully attentive to politics. Perhaps as a result, Converse (1964) showed that the majority of American adults demonstrated little or no consistency or ideological constraint in their political beliefs. In their thorough examination of Americans’ attainment of civic and political knowledge using 50 years of survey data, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) found that Americans regularly failed to correctly identify the answers to political questions on an array of topics. Although Americans tend
to know slightly more about civic institutions and processes than about specific people or policies (likely because the former have remained fairly consistent over time), in most cases Americans were no more informed and often less informed than they were 50 years ago. Despite increases in the overall education level of the population and specific efforts to increase civic knowledge, Americans are still woefully less informed about politics than we might expect them to be (Galston 2001).

Not only do Americans not know much about politics; they are also generally uninterested in becoming more informed Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). To the extent Americans do seek out additional information, they often do so only to find information that confirms their preexisting beliefs (Nickerson 1998). With highly targeted media outlets such as Fox News serving as many individuals’ primary sources of news and information, it is incredibly easy for individuals to selectively expose themselves to news and information that conforms to their prior expectations and beliefs.

In the specific domain of moral knowledge, Americans also perform relatively poorly by many standards. They know relatively little about religion (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010), and they are generally less religious than previous generations (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Moreover, prior work has found no statistically significant relationships between individuals’ content knowledge, moral reasoning, and argumentation quality (Sadler and Donnelly 2006). Despite their lack of actual knowledge, however, research in social psychology has consistently observed an illusion of explanatory depth in individuals’ beliefs about their own knowledge (Rozenblit and Keil 2002). Despite knowing relatively little, people believe they know a lot. Indeed, people tend to be highly confident in their knowledge of the world across a range of issues, including technical processes, natural phenomena, and political issues (Rozenblit and Keil 2002; Fernbach et al. 2013). Moreover, they believe they can explain these things to others.

Rozenblit and Keil (2002) initially showed that individuals overestimated their knowledge about the technical workings of devices and natural phenomena, but subsequent re-
search has revealed an illusion of explanatory depth across multiple knowledge domains. This extends to political knowledge. Alter, Oppenheimer and Zemla (2010) showed that respondents from both major parties reported understanding their favored 2008 presidential candidate’s policies better than they actually did. Similarly, Fernbach et al. (2013) showed that individuals overestimate their knowledge on a range of political policies, including sanctions on Iran, cap-and-trade policies, Social Security, health care, taxes, and merit-based pay for teachers. In all of these knowledge domains, participants sincerely believed they understood and could explain the process or issue up until the moment they were actually called upon to do so. Furthermore, in the cases of political knowledge, participants were more supportive of their favored political candidates and held more extreme positions based upon their supposed knowledge; after being asked to actually explain their favored candidates’ positions or the policy issues, participants moderated their support and positions. This suggests that individuals possess an underlying, inflated sense of explanatory knowledge that affects their behavior and decision-making.

I contend that this illusory sense of knowledge extends to issues of right and wrong. Indeed, there is good reason to believe illusory knowledge should be even more prominent on deeply felt moral issues than on these other technical and political issues. As discussed above, prior research in the field of moral psychology suggests the main function of moral reasoning is argumentative (Haidt 2001). Moral judgments are generally the result of quick, automatic evaluations rather than a priori reasoning. Even those who subsequently give reasons for their judgments are engaged in a process of post hoc justification rather than genuine deliberation. Due to the ease with which individuals are able to form such strong moral judgments, individuals are more likely to believe they possess the knowledge necessary to explain these judgments. Indeed, they may very well feel that the explanations for their judgments are “obvious” or based on “common sense.”

Because moral issues evoke strong emotional reactions in those for whom the issues are moralized, I believe they should inspire even greater confidence than technical non-moral
issues. As a result, I argue that many Americans believe they know a lot about issues of right and wrong and the processes by which they render moral judgments. Whether or not they actually understand morality, they perceive themselves as being knowledgeable. They are highly confident not only in their understanding of moral issues, principles, and sources of moral authority, but also in their ability to explain these things to others. Based on their assumed ability to explain their positions to others, these respondents are more willing to impose their moral beliefs. Because this knowledge may be illusory, however, I refer to it as moral confidence instead of moral knowledge. Moreover, as I show in the next section, there is good cause to believe that many Americans are morally overconfident.

4.2 Measuring Moral Confidence

To measure moral confidence, I examine how well individuals feel they can explain their moral beliefs on a given issue. Specifically, respondents are asked to rate their confidence in their “ability to explain your moral judgments” on a slider scale from 0 (“Very Unconfident”) to 100 (“Very Confident”) for a given moral issue. This is in line with measures used in previous research on the illusion of explanatory depth in other knowledge domains, which have primarily focused on subjects’ beliefs about their ability to explain their knowledge instead of subjects’ general sense of understanding. Importantly, this is distinct from one’s belief that one is right, as moral beliefs in particular might be expected to correspond to a strong sense of—potentially unexplainable—righteousness. Furthermore, although asking respondents to simply assess their general level of knowledge may serve as a good indicator of one’s internal understanding, I am primarily interested in how well respondents feel they can explain their intuitive moral judgments to others, as I am interested in the translation of private beliefs into public policies. If an individual feels he or she knows right from wrong but cannot explain it to others, the individual may nevertheless be unwilling to impose his or her beliefs on others. Despite what may be a higher bar, I nevertheless anticipate that respondents will exhibit high levels of moral confidence.
As this is a novel measure of an unexplored concept, I also fielded an exploratory survey designed to validate this measure of moral confidence by comparing it with alternative measures of moral confidence and distinguishing it from the concept of moral relativism. Specifically, I recruited subjects \((n = 300)\) via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk).\(^1\) For comparability, I focused this subsequent survey on the issue of abortion. In addition to the item described above, respondents to the MTurk survey were asked about four alternative measures of moral confidence.\(^2\) The first alternative measure of moral confidence prompted respondents to rate their confidence in their ability to explain their moral judgments on the issue of abortion on a 7-point ordinal scale. The second alternative measure asked respondents to rate how much they know about the issue of abortion from 0 (“Very Little”) to 100 (“Very Much”). The third alternative measure asked respondents to rate their agreement with the following statement on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”): “I am able to explain my moral judgments on the issue of abortion to other people.” The fourth alternative measure asked respondent to estimate how often they doubt their moral judgments on the issue of abortion from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Very Often”). As an initial indicator of internal reliability, the Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) for these five items was .87.\(^3\)

To distinguish between moral confidence and moral relativism, I also included five measures of relativism. The first, used in the previous chapter, asked respondents to rate their agreement with the following statement: “Morality is a personal matter and society

\(^1\)As discussed in the previous chapter, MTurk does not provide a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents. However, it is used regularly in other disciplines and occasionally in political science to conduct survey experiments (Arceneaux 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling 2011). Previous analyses have also shown MTurk users to be more diverse than those in most college student panels and other online panels (Berinksy, Huber and Lenz 2012).

\(^2\)See Morality Item Comparison Survey in Appendix A to see the specific wording of each item. The measures of confidence and moral relativism were randomly ordered within the survey.

\(^3\)Doubt in one’s moral judgments had the weakest correlation with the primary moral confidence measure: -.42 (the negative correlation is due to the fact that higher values indicate greater doubt). The correlation between each of the other three items and the primary moral confidence item ranged between .63 and .85.
should not force everyone to follow one standard,” on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”). The other four measures asked respondents to rate their agreement on a scale from 0 to 100 with four other statements: “Moral standards should be seen as individualistic: what one person considers moral may be judged as immoral by another person”; “Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave and should not be used when making judgments of others”; “The question of what is moral for everyone can never be resolved because what is moral or immoral is up to the individual to decide”; and “Everyone should be held to the same moral standard.” The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for these five items was .88.4

In addition to these items, I also include a measure of moral conviction, or the extent to which one’s attitudes on a given issue are based on core moral beliefs. Prior research has identified moral conviction as an important component of individual attitude strength (Ryan 2014; Skitka 2010; Skitka, Bauman and Sargis 2005; Skitka and Wisneski 2011). Specifically, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their positions on abortion were a reflection of their core moral beliefs and convictions on a scale from 0 (“Not at All”) to 100 (“Very Much”).

To test whether these items actually measure separate attitudes, I use exploratory factor analysis.5 The results are reported in Table 4.1. The results make it clear that moral confidence, moral relativism, and moral conviction are distinct concepts. The moral confidence indicators have strong loadings on one factor, while the moral relativism items load strongly on another factor. Moral conviction, meanwhile, loads most strongly on a third factor.6 While the measures of moral doubt and belief that everyone should be held to the

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4The correlation between each of the other four items and the primary moral relativism item ranged between .55 and .85.

5The factor loadings in the table are loadings after oblique factor rotation. However, use of orthogonal factor rotation returns results that do not substantively differ.

6Furthermore, when included in the full model, moral conviction neither has an effect on the probability of incongruous moral and legal attitudes nor diminishes the effect of moral confidence.
### TABLE 4.1

**EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS OF MORAL CONFIDENCE AND RELATIVISM ITEMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral Confidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident in your ability to explain... (100-point)</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident in your ability to explain... (7-point)</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much do you know about the issue of abortion</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to explain my moral judgments...</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you doubt your moral judgments...</td>
<td>−.49</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral Relativism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality is a personal matter and society...</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>−.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral standards should be seen as individualistic...</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral standards are simply personal rules...</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...what is moral for everyone can never be resolved...</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone should be held to the same moral standard</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.48</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral Conviction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eigenvalue</strong></td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variance Explained</strong></td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** Entries are the factor loadings of each variable on obliquely rotated factors. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were retained.

Same moral standard load more weakly on their respective factors than other items, they are still most strongly associated with these factors (moreover, they both run reverse to the other items in their respective factors).

Based on these results, I feel relatively confident in using a measure of explanatory knowledge to gauge moral confidence. In the survey described in the previous chapter, I fielded a series of questions via the YouGov Omnibus survey in which respondents \((n = 1,000)\) were asked to rate their confidence in their “ability to explain your moral judgments” on a slider scale from 0 (“Very Unconfident”) to 100 (“Very Confident”) on the issues of
abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. Figure 4.1 displays the mean level of moral confidence for each issue.

As shown, moral confidence is quite high across all four issues, between 74 and 76. Indeed, the top quartile of respondents for each issue rated their moral confidence as 100. Conversely, only 25% of respondents rated their confidence as lower than 53 for abortion, 52 for homosexuality, 52 for capital punishment, and 51 for physician-assisted suicide. Given what I noted above regarding the American public’s lack of knowledge on general issues, politics, and religion, the respondents in this survey would seem to be exhibiting

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7See Moral Confidence Survey in Appendix A for the precise wording of each survey item.

8In these results, missing responses were recoded to the midpoint of 50. However, dropping missing responses or recoding them to the mean has little impact on the overall findings.
a higher than expected level of moral knowledge. Issues such as abortion and homosexuality certainly receive a great deal of media attention, but respondents exhibit almost just as much moral confidence on the issue of physician-assisted suicide, which has received substantially less public attention from figures in the media and political elites. While it is impossible to determine whether respondents are accurately assessing their explanatory moral knowledge, these results strongly suggest the public is morally overconfident across moral issues. This is consistent with the prior research discussed above on the illusion of explanatory depth that suggests people tend to overestimate their knowledge across a range of issues.

As Figure 4.1 shows, there are no significant differences between the mean ratings of moral confidence for the four issues. At the aggregate level, respondents exhibit approximately the same level of confidence across the four issue. However, the four items do not necessarily measure the same concept. While they are moderately correlated with one another, the correlations between each pair only range from .48 to .67. Though the four measures of moral confidence are certainly related to one another, this suggests that individuals do vary in their moral confidence across each of the four issues. That is, individuals may be more morally confident on one issue and less morally confident on another. Thus, I treat confidence on each issue as a separate measure rather than combine them to create a latent variable. Moreover, as I show in the proceeding sections, the factors that drive confidence across the fours issues vary.

4.3 Moral Confidence Across Groups

I next show how moral confidence on abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide remains consistently high across key variables. While I anticipate a certain amount of variation across groups, I expect moral confidence to be relatively high across groups and demographic characteristics. That is, consistent with my theory that moral confidence is largely detached from actual knowledge, I expect even
groups that we might otherwise presume to be less knowledgeable or informed to be highly confident in their moral knowledge.

In order to examine variation in moral confidence, I leverage a variety of social, political, and religious control variables collected in the YouGov Omnibus survey. These measures include respondents' age (measured in years), gender, race, education (a 6-point ordinal scale based on highest degree received/attempted ranging from “No high school” to “Post-graduate degree”), marital status, parental status, partisanship (with independent on a 7-point scale), attention to news and public affairs (a 4-point ordinal scale from “Hardly at all” to “Most of the time”), voter registration status, religious identification, and church attendance (a 6-point scale ranging from “Never” to “More than once a week”).

Many of these factors are associated with disparities in knowledge, resources, or interest in politics. Differences in age, gender, and race have all traditionally been associated with both knowledge and the resources necessary to gain or expand one’s knowledge. Education, as a function of one’s level of additional schooling, is particularly related to one’s level of knowledge. Political variables such as partisanship, interest in public affairs, and voter registration status all reflect one’s level of information about, interest in, and access to the political system, which in turn subsidizes the cost of acquiring more information about moral issues. Finally, religion should relate directly to one’s exposure to sources of moral authority and elite moral cues. Therefore, if moral confidence were measuring actual moral knowledge, I would expect it to vary significantly across these groups. As I show, however, this is not the case.

To begin, I examine the bivariate relationship between several of these variables and moral confidence on each of the four issues. I start by exploring variation in mean levels of moral confidence across different age groups. Respondents were divided into 5-year age

9The full text of the question was “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?”
brackets up the age of 64. Figure 4.2 displays this relationship for each of the four issues. Across age groups, confidence is quite high. Although the youngest age bracket (18-24 years old) exhibits lower moral confidence than many of the older age brackets, even this group is still quite morally confident. Nonetheless, the figures shows little in the way of a consistent linear relationship between age and confidence across the four issues.

Next, I examine differences in mean levels of moral confidence by gender. The results are displayed in Figure 4.3. Although men are significantly more confident across all four issues, both genders display relatively high rates of moral confidence. Moreover, it should be reiterated that the observed differences should not necessarily be read to indicate that men actually know more about morality. My measure of moral confidence is designed to gauge how much individuals perceive they know about morality. Prior research suggests that men are more likely than women to guess in political knowledge questions, which accounts for studies in which men seem to be more politically knowledgeable than
women (Mondak and Anderson 2004). That is, women are more likely to admit they do not know the answer to a question when asked. Here, too, it seems more likely to be the case that women are more willing to admit they know relatively little about morality than that men actually know more about moral issues or are better able to explain their moral judgments. What is more, the relatively high level of moral confidence displayed by both genders suggests neither gender is especially well-aware of their actual moral knowledge. Nevertheless, in the absence of any measure of “real” moral knowledge, it is impossible to determine the true cause of any gender differences in moral confidence.

I next turn my attention to racial differences in moral confidence. Figure 4.4 displays variation in mean levels of moral confidence for each of the four issues across racial and ethnic groups. As shown, whites are significantly more confident than both African Americans and Latinos across each of the four issues. The gap between whites and African Americans is far and away one of the largest differences in moral confidence across vari-
ables. This racial gap ranges from 21 points to 25 points. While the exact reasons for these racial gaps are unclear, it seems likely to again be driven by whites’ overconfidence rather than any actual knowledge gap between whites and African Americans or Latinos. Furthermore, African Americans and Latinos receive conflicting cues on moral issues due to their tendency to be both more religious than whites and more Democratic. These crosspressures on African Americans’ and Latinos’ attitudes on moral issues may also drive them to feel less confident in their positions, as a position that corresponds with their religious identity would likely conflict with their partisan loyalty, and vice versa. Additionally, although they are less confident than whites, African Americans and Latinos are still highly confident.

I next look at education, where we might particularly expect to observe a relationship with moral confidence. Those with higher levels of education might reasonably be expected to have higher levels of actual moral knowledge, which could in turn give rise
to greater moral confidence. Figure 4.5 displays mean levels of moral confidence across educational groups based on the highest degree the respondent received or—in the case of “Some college”—attempted ranging from “No high school” to “Post-graduate degree.” While there does appear to be some slight positive relationship between education and moral confidence, even those without a high school degree exhibit what might be considered relatively high moral confidence on each of the four issues.

Similarly, we might expect partisanship to affect moral confidence, with partisans displaying greater moral confidence as a result of the partisan messages they receive. Zaller (1992) argues that mass opinion is largely shaped by exposure (via the media) to elite discourse on issues. Democrats and Republicans may receive clearer, more distinct messages about the morality and legality of moral issues. Moreover, Carsey and Layman (2006) suggest that, once measurement error has been taken into account, party identification is somewhat more stable than attitudes toward abortion, which in turn suggests that partisan-
ship may drive issue attitudes, rather than vice versa. That is, Republicans and Democrats receive relatively more consistent messages from party elites and activists regarding both the morality and legality of moral issues, and they may therefore be more likely to hold congruent views of moral issues along both dimensions.

Figure 4.6 displays mean levels of moral confidence across partisan categories. Categories are derived from respondents’ identification on a 7-point scale. Those who identify as Republican, Democratic, or as leaning toward one of the two major parties are included in their party of choice. Those who deny loyalty to either party after two questions are categorized as independents. While both Democrats and Republicans display significantly greater moral confidence on the issue of homosexuality, only Republicans are significantly more confident on the three other issues. Furthermore, independents are also much more morally confident than might generally be expected.
Next, I examine variation in mean levels of moral confidence across attention to news and public affairs. The distribution is shown in Figure 4.7. Here we see the strongest relationship between any variable and moral confidence and the lowest observed level of confidence; there is a clear positive and linear relationship between interest in news and public affairs and moral confidence. While they are still relatively confident, those who follow the news and public affairs hardly at all report levels of moral confidence that are at least 20 points lower than those who follow the news and public affairs most, with the widest gap of 27 points on the issue of abortion. While these individuals may simply be less informed about moral issues and less able to explain their moral judgments due to decreased awareness of moral debates from the news media, it is also possible that they are

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10 The full text of the question was “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?”
more cognizant or less self-conscious of their moral ignorance. Just as they are either more realistic or pessimistic in their assessment of the extent to which they follow the news, they may be more realistic or pessimistic in their assessment of their moral knowledge.

Also in the political domain, I next compare moral confidence across each of the four issues by respondents’ voter registration status. We might reasonably expect those who have actively registered to vote in elections to believe they possess greater understanding of politically divisive moral issues. Figure 4.8 displays the results. As shown, those who are registered to vote exhibit significantly higher levels of moral confidence on the issues of abortion, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. The difference between registered voters and unregistered respondents is insignificant for the issue of homosexuality, but this seems to be due to greater confidence on the part of unregistered respondents for the issue of homosexuality rather than diminished confidence on the part of registered
voters. However, once again we see that even those who do not register to vote believe they are highly capable of explain their moral beliefs to others.

Finally, I also examine religious differences in levels of mean moral confidence across each of the issues. I first examine different religious traditions, including Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, other religions (including both non-Christian religions and smaller Christian sects), the non-religious, and atheists. Figure 4.9 displays the results.

While all religious groups display high levels of moral confidence, atheists display significantly higher levels of moral confidence than any other group for each of the four issues. They exhibit particularly high moral confidence on the issues of homosexuality (95) and abortion (91). The reasons for this may not be entirely obvious, as those who identify with a religion might be expected to either actually possess or believe themselves to possess greater understanding of morality and sources of moral authority. However,
the opposite seems to be the case. This may be due to the fact that self-identified atheists affirm a belief that no gods exist and have adopted a label that is still widely stigmatized in the United States. In some ways, this represents a more active and costly commitment that may translate to a generally higher belief in one’s own understanding of philosophical issues such as right and wrong.

To further explore religious differences, I next examine moral confidence across levels of religious commitment in the form of church attendance. Attendance ranges from “never” to “more than once a week.” The results are displayed in Figure 4.10. Similarly to the results in Figure 4.9, respondents at all levels of church attendance express high levels of moral confidence, but those who never attend church express significantly higher levels of moral confidence across each of the four issues. One possibility for these results is that the fervently non-religious may be more likely to independently reason through their judgments on moral issues and therefore possess greater confidence in their beliefs. That is, the religious may primarily possess inherited moral beliefs, which may make them less confident in the reasons behind those beliefs.

Although I do observe some variation in moral confidence, moral confidence is relatively high across all of these variables. Indeed, it is much higher than we might expect. The fact that it is so consistently high further indicates that moral confidence is inflated by the illusion of explanatory depth. Given the extremely high levels of moral confidence exhibited, in fact, it is difficult to discern the characteristics of those with low moral confidence. To help provide a clearer picture of individuals with low moral confidence, I therefore break the sample up into sub-groups based on quartiles of moral confidence for each issue. As noted above, the top quartile of respondents for each issue rated their moral confidence as 100. These respondents are categorized as possessing high moral confidence. Conversely, only 25% of respondents rated their confidence as lower than 53 for abortion, 52 for homosexuality, 52 for capital punishment, and 51 for physician-assisted suicide. These respondents are categorized as having low moral confidence. Those in the middle...
Figure 4.10. Moral Confidence by Church Attendance

two quartiles are categorized as having moderate moral confidence. Based on these categories, Table 4.2 displays the prevalence of moral, demographic, political, and religious characteristics for the bottom (low) and top (high) quartiles of moral confidence by each issue.

As shown in Table 4.2, even those in the lowest quartile of moral confidence for each issue exhibit high levels of confidence. The means level of confidence for each group ranges from 34 (homosexuality) to 41 (capital punishment). Importantly, however, these groups vary only minimally in terms of belief in moral relativism. For the lowest and highest quartile on each issue, moral relativism ranges somewhere in the 60s. Thus, moral confidence does not appear to be a function of any kind of relativistic philosophy or tendency in thought.

Those with low confidence across all four issues also tend to be consistently more female, less white, less educated, and single. They also tend be less likely to register to
## TABLE 4.2

CHARACTERISTICS OF LOW AND HIGH MORAL CONFIDENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Capital Assisted</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexual Punishment</th>
<th>Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Low High High</td>
<td>Low Low High High</td>
<td>Low Low High High</td>
<td>Low High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Confidence*</td>
<td>37 100</td>
<td>34 100</td>
<td>41 100</td>
<td>39 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism*</td>
<td>62 67</td>
<td>61 67</td>
<td>61 69</td>
<td>61 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*</td>
<td>44 45</td>
<td>46 44</td>
<td>43 47</td>
<td>42 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61 52</td>
<td>59 49</td>
<td>67 49</td>
<td>60 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>47 75</td>
<td>44 78</td>
<td>52 75</td>
<td>43 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>24 4</td>
<td>22 3</td>
<td>25 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>23 10</td>
<td>20 11</td>
<td>22 9</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 1</td>
<td>1 4</td>
<td>2 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Year Degree</td>
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<td>18 28</td>
<td>19 31</td>
<td>18 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>40 46</td>
<td>38 50</td>
<td>39 52</td>
</tr>
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<td>29 23</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Democrat</td>
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<td>37 47</td>
<td>45 35</td>
<td>42 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<td>33 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
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<td>29 29</td>
<td>19 39</td>
<td>25 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>59 76</td>
<td>66 71</td>
<td>62 72</td>
<td>63 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Hardly at All</td>
<td>34 6</td>
<td>28 11</td>
<td>26 10</td>
<td>28 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Most of the Time</td>
<td>25 55</td>
<td>30 52</td>
<td>29 52</td>
<td>33 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>23 21</td>
<td>26 18</td>
<td>26 18</td>
<td>25 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>12 10</td>
<td>13 12</td>
<td>11 14</td>
<td>11 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>23 18</td>
<td>24 15</td>
<td>24 17</td>
<td>25 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>28 26</td>
<td>24 30</td>
<td>26 27</td>
<td>25 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>1 8</td>
<td>1 9</td>
<td>4 7</td>
<td>4 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Attend</td>
<td>21 35</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>22 34</td>
<td>16 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend ≥ Weekly</td>
<td>30 26</td>
<td>33 22</td>
<td>30 23</td>
<td>30 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Columns are the bottom (low) and top (high) quartiles of confidence by issue. Unless otherwise indicated, entries are percentages.

* Mean Values
vote and to follow the news and public affairs regularly. They are also less likely to identify as atheists or to never attend religious services.

In terms of partisanship, however, a few curious inconsistencies emerge across the four issues. Democrats are less likely to fall into the bottom quartile of moral confidence on the issue of homosexuality, but they are more likely to be in this category for the issues of capital punishment. Though the differences are less substantial, they are also slightly prevalent in the low moral confidence category for abortion and slightly more prevalent for physician-assisted suicide. Republicans, in contrast, are less likely to be in this category for every issue except homosexuality. As has been discussed above, this may be due to the slightly more ambiguous moral cues sent and received by Democrats in the United States. Republicans, on the other hand, typically display more consistency in their moral messaging.

4.4 Determinants of Moral Confidence

Simply looking at bivariate relationships, however, can tell us relatively little about the root causes of moral confidence. How do these variables compare to one another in a multivariate analysis? In order to identify the determinants of moral confidence, Table 4.3 shows the results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model examining the relationship between moral confidence and the array of social, political, and religious variables described above. I include measures of moral relativism, age, gender, race, education, marital status, parental status, partisanship, attention to news and public affairs, voter registration status, religious identification, and church attendance.

11To measure moral relativism, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a statement endorsing moral relativism, “Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard,” on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”).

12For details on the measurement and operationalization of these variables, see page 75 in Chapter 3.
To begin, moral relativism is positively and significantly related to moral confidence for each of the four issues. That is, the more one endorses moral relativism, the higher one rates one’s moral confidence. This is somewhat counterintuitive. Moral relativism is traditionally viewed as a rejection of absolute morality, which suggests a relativist might express a lack of confidence in all moral judgments. These results suggest that endorsement of moral relativism is not a strictly philosophical statement. In all likelihood, moral relativism as measured here reflects a view of how policy should be made than about the absolute truth of one’s own moral judgments.

Other variables with a consistent and statistically significant relationship to moral confidence across issues include race, interest in news and public affairs, and church attendance. African Americans are consistently less confident on all four moral issues than whites, while Latinos are less confident on the issues of abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide. The greater one’s interest in the news and public affairs, the higher one’s moral confidence on all four issues. On the other hand, those who attend religious services more frequently are less morally confident on the issues of homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide.

Additionally, age, gender, and partisanship display a relationship with at least two of the four issues. Age is negatively associated with moral confidence on the issue of homosexuality, but it is positively correlated with moral confidence on the issue of capital punishment. Women are significantly less morally confident than men on the issues of capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide. Democrats are more confident than independents on the issue of homosexuality, while Republicans are more confident than independents on the issues of capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide.

Some variables also have an isolated effect on individual issues. These include education, voter registration, and religious tradition. The more highly educated are slightly more morally confident on the issue of abortion, registered voters are slightly less confident on the issue of homosexuality, and atheists are more morally confident on the issue of ho-
TABLE 4.3

DETERMINANTS OF MORAL CONFIDENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.07*</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>-.66</td>
<td>-5.72**</td>
<td>-3.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-5.00</td>
<td>-9.81</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>-7.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>-3.10</td>
<td>-9.70</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>-8.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.35*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>-1.47</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>6.70**</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>8.46**</td>
<td>4.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>6.53**</td>
<td>6.90**</td>
<td>4.78**</td>
<td>4.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>-.60</td>
<td>-5.80*</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td>-2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>-2.46</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-3.05</td>
<td>-2.03</td>
<td>-1.64</td>
<td>-3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>4.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>8.31**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td>-2.09**</td>
<td>-1.38**</td>
<td>-1.82**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R^2  .19  .20  .21  .20
N  1,000  1,000  1,000  1,000

NOTE: Entries are OLS regression coefficients.
* p < .10, ** p < .05, two-tailed
mosexuality. Importantly, these differences reemphasize the fact that attitudes on distinct moral issues—while susceptible to the influence of common moralistic factors—are also driven by the separate considerations that these issues evoke.

4.5 Discussion

As the findings presented here indicate, moral confidence varies by issue and across subsets of individuals, but it is consistently higher than we might expect across all groups for all four of the issues surveyed. That is, people from a range of backgrounds generally think they know a lot about right and wrong, the sources of their moral beliefs, and the process by which they reach moral judgments. All of this perceived knowledge exhibits itself in their assessments of how confident they are in their ability to explain their moral judgments.

The consistently high levels of observed moral confidence across groups lends further support to the notion that this confidence may be illusory. That is, many of these individuals are morally overconfident. Indeed, despite their relatively high assessment of their moral knowledge, there is good reason to doubt that Americans know as much as they claim they do about morality. To the extent that we are able to gauge actual moral knowledge, Americans seem to know relatively little.

If they are so morally uninformed, why do respondents rate their moral knowledge so high? In short, they do not realize how little they know. Most people are unaware of their own ignorance (Kruger and Dunning 1999). Furthermore, people do not like to admit how little they know. For example, Bishop et al. (1980) showed that respondents are willing to give opinions on topics about which they knew little or nothing, including a completely fictional policy referred only as the “1975 Public Affairs Act.” Nevertheless, as I show in the next chapter, these respondents’ overconfidence in their knowledge can have tangible political effects.
While the factors accounting for differences in moral confidence are not necessarily consistent across issues, these results do indicate a few common drivers. Although confidence is generally high across the groups, these results show that some individuals are significantly more confident than others. For example, African Americans and Latinos exhibit significantly lower confidence than whites, and partisans differ from one another and independents in the expected direction on several issues. Interest in news and public affairs, however, appears to have the strongest relationship to confidence, with those who say they follow news and public affairs more regularly exhibiting higher levels of moral confidence. In the next chapter, I show that this variation in moral confidence accounts for the morality-legality gap in public opinion.
CHAPTER 5

CONFIDENCE IN MORAL AND LEGAL DECISION-MAKING

As shown in Chapter 3, there is a consistent gap in moral and legal opinions on moral issues. Across time and a variety of survey formats, respondents consistently exhibit greater legal support than moral support for the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. We observe not only a statistically significant numerical gap in support, but also a substantively significant difference in opinion. In fact, a subset of individuals go so far as to legally support issues that they morally oppose. Despite firmly believing that an act like abortion is wrong, some respondents believe it should be legal. Given what we know about the strength and divisiveness of moral attitudes in both our modern “culture wars” and throughout American history (Hunter 1991; Morone 2003), this kind of incongruence in opinion might be unexpected. Indeed, much of the literature largely assumes individuals should seek to impose their moral beliefs directly as policy positions. As we have seen, however, this is not the case for many members of the American public.

Moreover, this morality-legality gap cannot be easily explained by basic demographic, political, or religious differences. While certain factors help predict simultaneous moral opposition and legal support on individual issues, none consistently predict incongruous positions across all four issues.\(^1\) Although these respondents might be expected to espouse a philosophical justification for their incongruous moral and legal positions, belief in moral relativism has inconsistent effects across the four issues. Relativists are more likely to

\(^1\)For a full comparison of alternative factors that might be potential determinants of moral opposition and legal support, see Table 3.3 in Chapter 3.
morally oppose and legally support abortion, but they are less likely to do so for capital punishment and neither more nor less likely to do so for the issues of homosexuality and physician-assisted suicide. Therefore, we must look elsewhere for an explanation for the morality-legality gap in public opinion.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, individuals vary in their belief in their own ability to explain their moral judgments, which I refer to as moral confidence. As we might expect given the intuitive nature of moral judgments and the extent to which moral issues rely on emotions and gut-level feelings instead of sophistication or interest (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Haidt 2001), moral confidence is generally quite high. People believe they know a lot about right and wrong, sources of moral authority, and the process by which they render moral judgments. Nevertheless, some individuals are less morally confident than others. However, moral confidence is distinct from factors such as religiosity and moral relativism, which indicates it is a separate dimension of individuals’ moral attitudes.

Notably, I argue that many individuals tend to be morally confident regardless of their actual level of moral knowledge. Nevertheless, the fact that their knowledge is not “real” may have little impact on how individuals behave on the basis of what they feel they know. For example, prior evidence suggests individuals are more likely to change their political attitudes when they have less confidence in their knowledge (Krosnick and Petty 1995), and Bishop, Oldendick and Tuchfarber (1984) show that, when confronted with their own political ignorance on political knowledge questions, respondents were less inclined to report themselves as interested in politics.

I hypothesize that moral confidence explains the gap in individuals’ moral and legal beliefs. In the sections that follow, I further outline this theory, explain the methods used to operationalize these concepts, and empirically test my theory regarding the relationship between moral confidence and the morality-legality gap in opinion. I conclude the chapter by reporting the results of these tests and discussing their implications.

2For a full account of the factors that predict moral confidence, see Table 4.3 in Chapter 4.
5.1 Moral Knowledge and Legal Decision-Making

In keeping with earlier work in social psychology, I posit that many people make moral judgments based on intuitions rather a process of reasoning. In the social intuitionist model, moral judgments are thought to be the result of quick, automatic evaluations (Haidt 2001). In contrast to earlier theories that assumed moral decision-making was the result of a process of reasoning or deliberation, these scholars argue that moral intuitions come first (Wilson 1993; Shweder and Haidt 1993; Haidt 2001). Reasons and justifications are produced post hoc for the purpose of either rationalization or persuasion. Numerous studies have since identified automatic emotional responses as the sources of moral judgment (Greene et al. 2001; Koenigs et al. 2007; Schnall, Benton and Harvey 2008; Valdesolo and DeSteno 2006; Wheatley and Haidt 2005).

Because moral judgments are intuitive, individuals are able to make judgments with very little knowledge. That is not to say that they do not believe they can provide arguments, however. People are often unaware of their own ignorance (Kruger and Dunning 1999), and moral issues are especially likely to attract the attention of members of the public who are otherwise politically uninterested or uninformed (Carmines and Stimson 1980). As a result, many people believe themselves to be more informed on moral issues than they actually are.

How much one thinks one knows may not reflect how much one actually knows, but it may nevertheless influence how one makes decisions and how fervently one insists upon those decisions. As noted in previous chapters, social psychologists have consistently found that people tend to believe they know more than they actually do about a range of technical processes, natural phenomena, and political issues (Rozenblit and Keil 2002; Fernbach et al. 2013). Moreover, on the basis of this illusory knowledge, individuals tend to take more extreme stances on political issues, express more ardent support for political candidates, and give more money to interest groups (Alter, Oppenheimer and Zemla 2010;
Fernbach et al. 2013). When made aware of how little they actually knew about political issues and candidates’ positions, however, these individuals moderated their positions.

Similarly, individuals’ perceived moral knowledge may determine their willingness to impose their moral beliefs. While one may be able to make an intuitive judgment about right and wrong in the absence of knowledge, taking a stance on a policy and pursuing one’s political goals requires more information. One might be willing to declare an act morally wrong on the sole basis of an intuition, but one is likely far less willing to criminalize that act without more confidence in one’s knowledge. I contend that moral confidence, or how much one perceives oneself to know about moral issues, principles, and sources of moral authority, plays a decisive role in how one applies moral judgments in politics. It influences where they position themselves on the issue by moderating the application of their moral judgments. Specifically, I expect that those with lower moral confidence will be more willing to legally support issues that they morally oppose. In other words, they feel an issue is morally wrong but do not feel sufficiently confident in their moral knowledge to impose this belief on others. In this way, I argue that moral confidence explains the morality-legality gap in public opinion. In the next sections, I test this hypothesis using original survey data.

5.2 Confidence and the Morality-Legality Gap

As described in the preceding chapters, I fielded a series of survey items via the YouGov Omnibus survey to measure both the morality-legality gap and levels of moral confidence.³ To measure the morality-legality gap in opinion, respondents ($n = 1,000$) were asked about both their moral and legal support for abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. On a slider scale from 0 to 100, respondents were asked to

³YouGov, an internet-based market research firm, operates an online panel of over one million U.S. respondents, which it uses to provide a representative pool of respondents for online surveys. Though it is an online survey, YouGov is generally regarded as a high quality sample of the U.S. population, and the data are weighted to ensure representativeness.
rate how strongly they believed each issue was immoral (0) or moral (100) and whether it should be illegal (0) or legal (100).\footnote{See Moral Confidence Survey in Appendix A for the precise wording of each survey item.} To gauge moral confidence, respondents were asked to rate their confidence on a slider scale from 0 ("Very Unconfident") to 100 ("Very Confident") in their ability to explain their moral judgments on abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide.

To begin, a simple bivariate comparison shows that moral confidence on each issue is negatively related with the absolute value of the difference between each individual’s stated level of moral and legal support. That is, as individuals become more morally confident, their moral and legal opinions are more tightly linked (the effect of moral confidence on the gap in moral and legal attitudes ranges between -.05 and -.09 by issue). This suggests that confidence does actually drive individuals to directly impose their moral judgments as legal positions.

This is merely a numerical difference, however, and may not correspond to a substantive difference in moral and legal attitudes. Therefore, to help facilitate interpretation and ensure I am measuring meaningful differences in opinion, I break the sample into categories based on combinations of moral and legal support.\footnote{See Figure 3.8 and Figure 3.9 in Chapter 3 for a visual display of these categories.} Those above the scale’s midpoint are categorized as supportive and those below are categorized as opposed, and respondents are divided between those who believe an issue is moral and should be legal, those who believe an issue is immoral and should be illegal, those who believe an issue is immoral and should be legal, and those who believe an issue is moral and should be illegal. As my primary dependent variable, I examine the probability of believing an issue is immoral and should be legal, which is the only substantial category of respondents with incongruous moral and legal beliefs.
In order to control for mitigating factors, I also include a variety of social, political, and religious control variables in the model. These measures include respondents’ age (measured in years), gender (with male as the reference category), race (with white as the reference category), education (a 6-point ordinal scale based on highest degree received/attempted ranging from “No high school” to “Post-graduate degree”), marital status, parental status, partisanship (with independent on a 7-point scale as the reference category), attention to news and public affairs (a 4-point ordinal scale from “Hardly at all” to “Most of the time”), voter registration status, religious identification (with Evangelical Protestant as the reference category), and church attendance (a 6-point scale ranging from “Never” to “More than once a week”). I also control for moral relativism by asking respondents to rate their agreement with a statement endorsing moral relativism, “Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard,” on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”). As has been noted above, legal support for issues that an individual morally opposes might be a logical expression of one’s belief in moral relativism. While this variable had no consistent effect in previous models, it may nevertheless mitigate the effect of moral confidence.

Table 5.1 displays the results of a logistic regression model to examine the impact of moral confidence on the probability of combined moral opposition and legal support for the abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. Controls are included for all of the variables discussed above. Here, moral confidence is measured as a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 100.

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6To see the effect of these variables on the probability of moral opposition and legal support for each of the four issues in a model sans moral confidence, see Table 3.3 in Chapter 3.

7This binomial logistic regression model collapses the three alternative categories into a single category. However, when multinomial logistic regression is used to predict the relative likelihood of being in each category separately, those with low moral confidence are consistently most likely to be in the category of moral opposition and legal support for each issue, which is not the case for those with high moral confidence.

8For the results of a logistic regression model without controls examining the bivariate relationship between moral confidence and the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal opinions, see Table B.3 in Appendix B.
### TABLE 5.1

PREDICTORS OF MORAL OPPOSITION AND LEGAL SUPPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Confidence</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>−.03**</td>
<td>−.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.01**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>−.87**</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>−3.33**</td>
<td>−.98</td>
<td>−1.01</td>
<td>−.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.43*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.87**</td>
<td>−.45</td>
<td>−.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−.23</td>
<td>−.66**</td>
<td>−.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>−.25**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>−.14</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>−.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>−.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>−1.39*</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>−.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R²            | .09      | .09           | .12                | .12              |
N                    | 1,000    | 1,000         | 1,000              | 1,000            |

NOTE: Entries are logit coefficients.
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
As shown, moral confidence is negatively and significantly correlated with the likelihood of morally opposing and legally supporting each issue. That is, the less morally confident an individual is, the more likely the individual is to hold incongruous moral and legal attitudes. Although the precise size of the coefficient—and the corresponding change in the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal beliefs—varies across the four issues, its effect is consistently negative for abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. These results confirm my initial hypothesis and suggest low moral confidence serves as the primary driver of the morality-legality gap in opinion.

Moreover, no other variable demonstrates a consistently significant relationship with all four dependent variables. While a belief in moral relativism does significantly increase the probability of incongruous moral and legal beliefs on the issue of abortion, it has no effect on homosexuality, capital punishment, or physician-assisted suicide. Thus, moral relativism neither drives the gap nor diminishes the impact of moral confidence.

Similarly, variables that previously were shown to influence the probability of combined moral opposition and legal support for issues lose statistical significance when the effect of moral confidence is accounted for in the model. For example, African Americans are no longer any more likely than whites to hold incongruous views on any of the moral issues. More importantly, no variables aside from moral confidence consistently predict the probability of incongruous moral and legal positions across all four issues.

While the results in Table 5.1 indicate a statistically significant relationship between moral confidence and simultaneous moral opposition and legal support, logit coefficients are not directly interpretable in terms of substantive impact. To help understand the actual impact of moral confidence on the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal opinions, Figure 5.1 displays the predicted probability of moral opposition and legal support.

Conversely, those who both morally oppose and legally support an issue exhibit lower moral confidence. Within each issue, the mean moral confidence score for each morally opposed and legally supportive group is significantly ($p < .05$) lower than the means for those who have consistent moral and legal positions.
port as moral confidence increases from 0 to 100 (holding all other variables constant at their means). As shown, the probability decreases substantially as confidence increases from the minimum to the maximum. This means that those with greater confidence are less likely to fall into the category of respondents who morally oppose and legally support each issue. Notably, the relationship appears slightly stronger for the issues of capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide than for abortion and homosexuality. This may be the result of the greater attention the latter two issues receive in the media and from political elites.

To further validate this measure of moral confidence and demonstrate the robustness of these findings, I also measured the impact of alternative measures of moral confidence.
on the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal beliefs. To do so, I fielded an additional survey in 2016 to compare the item used here with alternative measures of moral confidence. Respondents ($n = 300$) were recruited via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

In addition to the item used in the YouGov Omnibus survey (Confidence (100-point)), respondents to the MTurk survey were asked about four alternative measures of moral confidence with respect to the issue of abortion. The first alternative measure (Confidence (7-point)) asked respondents to rate their confidence in their ability to explain their moral judgments on the issue of abortion on a 7-point ordinal scale. The second alternative measure (Knowledge) asked respondents to rate how much they know about the issue of abortion from 0 (“Very Little”) to 100 (“Very Much”). The third alternative measure (Explanatory Ability) asked respondents to rate their agreement with the following statement on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”): “I am able to explain my moral judgments on the issue of abortion other people.” The fourth alternative measure (Doubt) asked respondents to estimate how often they doubt their moral judgments on the issue of abortion from 0 (“Never”) to 100 (“Very Often”).

As in previous models, I control for the effect of respondents’ age, gender, race, education, attention to news and public affairs, religious identification, church attendance, and belief in moral relativism. The results of a series of logistic regression models controlling

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10 See Table 4.1 for a full comparison of these items as measures of the same construct.

11 See Morality Item Comparison Survey in Appendix A to see the specific wording of each item. The measures of confidence and moral relativism were randomly ordered within the survey.

12 Moral relativism is measured as their agreement with the statement that “Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard” on a scale from 0 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 100 (“Strongly Agree”). As discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, this survey also included alternative measures of moral relativism. The results below hold when each of these alternative measures, or a calculated scale based on all five variables, are substituted.

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TABLE 5.2

ALTERNATIVE INDICATORS OF MORAL CONFIDENCE AND COMBINED
MORAL OPPOSITION AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR ABORTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Moral Opposition &amp; Legal Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence (100-point)</td>
<td>−.02**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence (7-point)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory Ability</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubt</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R^2</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Entries are logit coefficients. Standard controls are included but not shown.
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed

for these variables and estimating the impact of various indicators of moral confidence on
the probability of incongruous moral and legal positions are shown in Table 5.2.\(^{13}\)

As shown, regardless of the measure used, moral confidence is significantly related to
the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal positions on the issues of abortion.\(^{14}\)
The first four measures of moral confidence are coded such that higher values indicate
higher assessments of one’s moral knowledge. As expected, they are negatively related to
moral opposition and legal support. That is, the more confident one is, the less likely one
is to hold incongruous positions on the issue. Conversely, Doubt represents doubt in one’s
moral judgments and is coded such that higher values indicate lower levels of confidence
in one’s moral knowledge. Thus, higher values are correlated with a higher probability of

\(^{13}\)Table 5.2 reports only the coefficients for the five moral confidence items, but the relationship between
the control variables and incongruous moral and legal attitudes largely mirrors those reported in the models
above.

\(^{14}\)Furthermore, when a calculated scale based on all five items of moral confidence is substituted, it also
has a significant and negative impact on the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal positions on
abortion.
incongruous moral and legal positions. These results further validate the measure of moral confidence used in the YouGov survey and provide additional evidence for the relationship between moral confidence and the morality-legality gap in opinion.

5.3 Low Confidence, Moral Opposition, and Legal Support

As was noted in the previous chapter, however, moral confidence is generally quite high. Indeed, the top quartile of respondents for each issue rated their moral confidence as 100. That is, they believed themselves to be maximally confident in their ability to explain their moral judgments. Conversely, only 25% of respondents rated their confidence as lower than 53 for abortion, 52 for homosexuality, 52 for capital punishment, and 51 for physician-assisted suicide. While certainly lower than the maximum, these are still relatively high levels of moral confidence for the bottom quartile to express. What is more, the limited number of respondents makes estimation less precise at the lower end of the moral confidence spectrum. It also inhibits our ability to meaningfully discern differences between the most and least confident respondents.

To help parse out the differences between these categories, I re-ran the models with the categorical variable developed in the previous chapter that divides the sample by low, moderate, and high confidence for each issue based on quartiles of moral confidence. The top quartile of respondents for each of the four issues—who rated their moral confidence as 100—are categorized as possessing high moral confidence. The respondents who rated their moral confidence below 53 for abortion, 52 for homosexuality, 52 for capital punishment, and 51 for physician-assisted suicide were categorized as having low moral confidence. Those in the middle two quartiles are categorized as having moderate moral confidence.15

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15For a comparison of the characteristics of those with low and high moral confidence, see Table 4.2 in Chapter 4.
TABLE 5.3
PROBABILITY OF MORAL OPPOSITION AND LEGAL SUPPORT BY LEVELS OF MORAL CONFIDENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Confidence</td>
<td>1.45**</td>
<td>.93**</td>
<td>1.79**</td>
<td>1.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Confidence</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.46</td>
<td>-.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>.01**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-.95**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-3.35**</td>
<td>-.84</td>
<td>-.73</td>
<td>-.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.43*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.86**</td>
<td>-.41</td>
<td>-.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>-.59**</td>
<td>-.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>-1.47*</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R²            | .12      | .10           | .17                | .17              |
N                   | 1,000    | 1,000         | 1,000              | 1,000            |

NOTE: Entries are logit coefficients.
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
First, Table 5.3 shows the full results from a logistic regression model. Coefficients represent the change in the likelihood of morally opposing and legally supporting each of the four issues. For low confidence and high confidence, these coefficients represent the change in probability compared to the category of respondents with moderate moral confidence. As these results indicate, there is no significant difference between those with moderate moral confidence and those with high moral confidence in likelihood of morally opposing and legally supporting an issue. Rather, those with low confidence are significantly more likely than both categories to hold this position. This suggests that the effect observed in the previous model is primarily driven by those with low moral confidence.
As has already been noted, logit coefficients can be difficult to interpret in terms of substantive impact. Thus, Figure 5.2 displays the predicted probability of holding incongruous moral and legal views on each issue for the three levels of moral confidence (holding all other variables constant at their means). As shown, while those with moderate and high moral confidence are relatively similar, the probability of morally opposing and legally supporting each issue increases significantly for those in the lowest quartile of moral confidence. Once again, this suggests that, beyond a certain threshold, increased moral confidence has diminishing effects on one’s likelihood of incongruous moral and legal positions. Conversely, this means that a minimal amount of moral confidence is sufficient to drive individuals to translate their moral beliefs into policy positions. As Figure 5.2 shows, those with a moderate level of moral confidence are about as likely as those with high moral confidence to impose their moral views as legal positions.

In the preceding models, it should be noted that the reference category for all predicted probabilities is all those respondents who hold congruous moral and legal attitudes. This includes those who are both consistently supportive and consistently opposed to each issue. Thus, these models are measuring the probability of holding incongruous moral and legal opinions compared to holding consistent opinions. However, we may be more interested in the specific probability of legally supporting an issue that one morally opposes. That is, what effect does moral confidence have on one’s decision to impose one’s moral beliefs on others? To answer this question, I restrict the models to only those respondents who morally oppose each issue and predict the probability of legal support. The results of these alternative models are displayed in Figure 5.3, which shows the probability of legal support given moral opposition for the lowest and highest quartiles of moral confidence for abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide.

As shown in Figure 5.3, the effect of moral confidence remains significant when the models are restricted only to those who morally oppose each issue. Among moral opponents, those with low moral confidence on an issue are significantly more likely to legally
support the issue than those with high moral confidence. Notably, however, this difference is smallest for those who morally oppose homosexuality. This appears to be driven by the substantially higher level of legal support exhibited by those with high moral confidence on the issue. This is somewhat unexpected, as we might have expected these respondents to show greater willingness to criminalize an act they view as immoral. This may reflect the public’s rapid shift in acceptance of homosexuality. Furthermore, it should be recalled that homosexuality refers simply to the actual act of sex between two people of the same gender. Compared to the more controversial issue of same-sex marriage, public support for criminalizing actual homosexual acts has particularly declined.\footnote{See Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4 in Chapter 2 for a comparison of the public’s attitudes on homosexuality and same-sex marriage over time.} These results suggest
criminalizing homosexual acts may no longer have significant support even among those who believe these acts are immoral.

For the issues of abortion, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide, opinion corresponds much more closely to expectations. Even though they believe the issues are immoral, those with the lowest levels of moral confidence on these three issues are more likely to legally support the issues than to legally oppose them. In contrast, those with high moral confidence on these three issues are much more likely to legally oppose issues they moral oppose.

5.4 Discussion

These results lend strong support to my theory of moral confidence and decision-making on moral issues. Indeed, the findings outlined above suggest that low moral confidence plays a key role in the morality-legality gap in opinion on the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide.\footnote{Moreover, preliminary data from a survey fielded via Amazon Mechanical Turk replicate these findings for the issues of gambling, polygamy, and incest. See Table B.1 in Appendix B for these results.} As shown in the preceding sections, moral confidence, or an individual’s perceived level of moral knowledge, appears to be a strong predictor—and, indeed, the only consistent predictor—of combined moral opposition and legal support for the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. These findings have important implications for the study of public opinion and concerns over moral divisions in the United States.

First, these results help us better understand the roots of the morality-legality gap in public opinion. As noted in Chapter 3, common demographic, political, and religious variables failed to explain why some individuals were unwilling to impose their moral beliefs on others. Even moral relativism, a belief in the idea that morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow a single standard, failed to account for this belief. As I have shown, this gap in opinion is driven by individuals’ perceptions of their own
moral knowledge. While people are generally quite confident in their moral knowledge, some are less confident than others. Those with relatively low moral confidence are much more likely to say they legally support issues that they believe are morally wrong. That is, they are less willing to impose their moral beliefs on others.

Moreover, these findings may potentially offer some solution to the moral conflicts that many believe divide the United States. The respondents with low moral confidence exhibit unwillingness to impose their moral beliefs suggests others may also be able to resist their moral urges. If so, America’s moralistic tendencies need not be so divisive. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even among those with low moral confidence, willingness to legally oppose an issue that one morally opposes is higher than we might expect. Although the probability of legal tolerance is much higher, it is still lower than one might hope for someone who acknowledges they are not very confident in their ability to explain their moral beliefs. Even for the morally humble, there exists a worrisome tendency to legally impose one’s moral beliefs on others. This gives added weight to the concerns of Hunter (1991) and Morone (2003).

The observed relationship between moral confidence and the morality-legality gap in opinion also has implications for the potential malleability of moral decision-making. If individuals’ decisions on moral issues are influenced by their level of moral confidence, we would expect changes in moral confidence to produce changes in their positions on moral issues. As has been discussed already, prior research has shown that individuals can be made aware of their relative lack of knowledge in other knowledge domains, including knowledge of technical processes and political issues. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, this can also be accomplished in the area of moral knowledge by prompting respondents to explain the sources and content of their moral judgments. Moreover, making respondents aware of their lack of moral knowledge makes them more supportive of moral issues.
CHAPteR 6

IlliSuory knoWledge aNd MoraL OveRCONFIDENCE

As I have expressed repeatedly in the preceding chapters, there is good reason to believe Americans’ high levels of moral confidence are inflated. While they may be highly confident in their moral knowledge in general, Americans are not necessarily well-informed about morality. As noted above, Americans perform relatively poorly on measures of moral observance, religious adherence, or knowledge of common moral sources (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). In fairness, such knowledge may be unnecessary, as moral judgments are generally the result of quick, automatic evaluations rather than a priori reasoning (Haidt 2001).

Nevertheless, as shown in the previous chapters, they believe themselves to possess such knowledge. Similar to beliefs about technical knowledge and political issues, moral beliefs also appear to rely heavily upon the kind of illusory knowledge that people may believe they possess, but which they are ultimately unable to explain. Thus, I hypothesize that exposure to the illusory nature of this knowledge—specifically, to their inability to explain in depth the source of their moral beliefs—will lead respondents to be less morally confident and more supportive of same-sex marriage.

The focus of this chapter is the illusion of explanatory depth in moral knowledge and its consequence for individuals’ beliefs about certain moral issues. Specifically, I examine the illusion of explanatory depth in respondents’ beliefs about the morality of same-sex marriage and abortion. To demonstrate the illusory nature of moral knowledge and its political impact, I make use of two survey experiments modeled on the work of earlier research on the illusion of explanatory depth. As noted in previous chapters, Rozenblit and
Keil (2002) demonstrate the possibility of reducing overconfidence in self-assessments of knowledge by requiring respondents to explain the processes about which they claim to possess knowledge. As expected, participants became significantly less confident in their own knowledge when confronted with their inability to explain complex processes or phenomena.

Using a survey experiment fielded via the YouGov Omnibus survey in 2013 and another experiment fielded via Amazon Mechanical Turk in 2016, I measure how support for same-sex marriage and abortion change when respondents are prompted to explain in detail the basis for their moral beliefs. I prompt a randomly assigned subset of respondents to explain the sources of their moral beliefs and to detail these sources’ positions on these moral issues. I then gauge this group and a randomly assigned control group’s level of support for the issues. My results suggest that (a) the illusion of explanatory depth bolsters moral confidence, (b) respondents can be made aware of their own relative moral ignorance, and (c) being made aware of their relative moral ignorance affects their political decision-making on moral issues.

In the proceeding sections, I begin by reviewing previous research on the illusion of explanatory depth and adapt it to the topic of moral knowledge. I subsequently discuss the experimental design used in this study, and I then present the results of the two experiments. I conclude with an evaluation of these results and a few final remarks about this study’s implications and avenues for further research.

6.1 The Illusion of Explanatory Depth in Moral Knowledge

As noted above, prior research has demonstrated both that people generally overestimate their knowledge across a range of areas and that it is possible to reduce overconfidence in self-assessments of knowledge by confronting individuals with a requirement to explain their beliefs. Rozenblit and Keil (2002) asked participants to rate how much they understand an array of items. These included a speedometer, a zipper, a piano key, a toi-
let, a cylinder lock, a helicopter, a watch, and a sewing machine. Participants generally rated their knowledge of each of these item quite high. Participants were then asked to provide detailed explanations of how some of the items work. After attempting to explain their function, participants were asked again how well they understood the items. As expected, participants rated their understanding significantly lower after actually attempting to explain the items. The explanatory prompt exposed participants to the depth of their ignorance, and in the process it revealed the overconfidence present in their initial responses. Indeed, participants became significantly less confident in what they believed they knew when made aware of the gaps in their explanatory ability.

While Rozenblit and Keil’s initial experiments dealt primarily with knowledge about the technical workings of devices, the illusion of explanatory depth persists across multiple knowledge domains, including those involving political issues. For example, earlier work by Bishop et al. (1980) demonstrated respondents’ willingness to give opinions on topics about which they knew little or nothing as a result of underlying social-psychological disposition. Indeed, they found that many respondents claimed to have opinions on a completely fictitious public affairs issue. Bishop, Oldendick and Tuchfarber (1984) also showed in a subsequent study that, when confronted with their own political ignorance on political knowledge questions, respondents were less inclined to report themselves as interested in politics. This suggests they previously believed themselves to know more about politics than was actually the case. Upon realizing they were less informed than expected, they revised their assessment of their interest in politics.

More recent work has specifically examined the illusion of explanatory depth in political knowledge. For example, Alter, Oppenheimer and Zemla (2010) show that respondents from both major parties reported understanding their favored 2008 presidential candidate’s policies better than they actually did when asked to express those policies in writing. Upon being asked to explain their favored candidate’s policy positions, they became aware of
their relative lack of knowledge about these candidates. Consequently, these respondents moderated their support for their favored candidates after their attempted explanation.

Similarly, Fernbach et al. (2013) show that individuals can be made aware of their relative ignorance on political issues. They asked respondents about a series of policies including sanctions on Iran, cap-and-trade policies, Social Security, health care, taxes, and merit-based pay for teachers. Respondents tended to take relatively extreme positions on each issue, but they nevertheless struggled to explain these policies when challenged to do so. As a result, they became aware of their relative ignorance on the issues, moderated their positions, and expressed less willingness to donate to interest groups involved in advocacy on the issues.

While Fernbach et al. demonstrate the existence of an illusion of explanatory depth in knowledge about political issues, they do not examine the role of illusory knowledge in opinions on moral issues. Issues such as abortion and gay marriage evoke intense debate among both elites and members of the general public. Philosophers, theologians, and legal scholars may provide a wide range of complex and well-reasoned justifications for a moral position, but most people lack such well-developed moral knowledge. Despite this lack of depth in their knowledge, however, members of the general public are better able to take extreme positions on moral issues than the kinds of technical policy issues that Fernbach et al. examine.

Just as knowledge in these other domains is largely illusory, I hypothesize that many individuals tend to be morally overconfident. In keeping with the social intuitionist model, I posit that many people make moral judgments based on intuitions rather than a process of reasoning (Haidt 2001). As a result, they are able to make judgments with very little knowledge. However, I argue that many people are generally confident in their ability to explain their positions until forced to do so. They make decisions with complete confidence that, if asked, they could explain the reasons for these decisions. Nevertheless, they can be made aware of their relative ignorance through a process of explanatory challenges.
similar to those used by social psychologists. Only when challenged does the illusion of explanatory depth begin to erode. What is more, I contend that making individuals aware of their ignorance will influence the positions they take on moral issues. In short, if people were less ignorant of their own ignorance, their decisions would likely differ. This would further support my argument that moral confidence undergirds political decision-making on moral issues.

6.2 Experimental Design

To demonstrate the possibility of undermining moral judgments by exposing respondents to their own lack of explanatory moral knowledge, I first fielded a survey experiment in the YouGov Omnibus survey in 2013.\(^1\) Respondents (\(n = 1,000\)) were divided randomly\(^2\) into two groups: (1) a treatment group that received a two-step explanatory prompt and (2) a control group that received no prompt. Members of the treatment group were repeatedly prompted to provide detailed explanations of the sources of their moral beliefs.\(^3\) First, members of the treatment group were asked to describe the source (book, group, person, etc.) of their moral beliefs:

**Question 1**: Please describe the primary source (book, group, person, etc.) of your moral beliefs. Additionally, please explain your reason for trusting this source for information about morality.

Then, on a subsequent page, members of the treatment group were asked to state specifically what the source said about the morality of same-sex marriage:

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\(^1\)YouGov, an internet-based market research firm, operates an online panel of over one million U.S. respondents, which it uses to provide a representative pool of respondents for online surveys. Though it is an online survey, YouGov is generally regarded as a high quality sample of the U.S. population, and the data are weighted to ensure representativeness.

\(^2\)See Table B.4 in Appendix B for the demographic composition of both the control and treatment groups. I observe no significant differences on major characteristics between the two groups, which suggest random assignment was successful.

\(^3\)See Illusory Moral Knowledge Survey in Appendix A for the precise wording of each survey item.
Question 2: What specifically does this source say about the morality of gay marriage? If possible, please quote the source directly.

Respondents were given open-ended text boxes in which to respond to both questions, allowing them to write as much or as little as they preferred. This is in keeping with prior research on the illusion of explanatory depth in other areas of knowledge. In particular, this literature suggests that an assessment of one’s explanatory knowledge differs from argumentation. Asking an individual to give a reason for his or her position on an issue may cause them to selectively access a supportive rationale and take a more extreme position. Prompting them to explain a secondary feature of the issue—or, in my case, the source of their moral beliefs—prompts individuals to confront their lack of understanding without engaging in a reasoning process that might be motivated by argumentation.

To gauge their level of support for same-sex marriage, members of both the treatment and control groups were asked to rate their support or opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage from 0 to 100 (0 = Strongest Opposition; 100 = Strongest Support). As noted above, I hypothesized that members of the treatment groups, upon being required to explain the source of their moral knowledge, would express significantly less opposition to same-sex marriage than members of the control group.

In addition to these variables, YouGov collects a host of demographic, political, and religious variables from its respondents. Because I am particularly interested in those respondents for whom moral knowledge is likely to be especially inflated, I would expect nonpartisans and those with low interest in news and public affairs to be especially susceptible to the effects of my treatment. The respondents are more likely to lack the information conveyed by partisanship via elite cues and heuristics or gained directly from following news sources or public affairs. Moreover, Clifford et al. (2015) show that those with greater interest in politics are more likely to receive moral cues from elite rhetoric. That is not to say the politically uninterested do not feel informed; rather, I expect their sense of informedness is the most likely to be inflated by illusory knowledge. Thus, I test
for conditional treatment effects within these categories. I count as independents those who declined to identify with a party in both an initial question about their partisan identification and a subsequent question about the party to which they feel closer (n = 169). I count those who do not pay attention to news or public affairs “most of the time” (n = 410) as having low interest.4

As shown in Chapter 4, both of these variables are related to expressed levels of moral confidence. While moral confidence was higher than we might expect—and likely amplified by illusory knowledge—for even these groups5, independents were significantly less morally confident than Democrats and Republicans on several issues, and interest in news and public affairs was the strongest predictor of moral confidence.

6.3 Illusory Moral Knowledge and Same-Sex Marriage

The results of the first survey experiment are displayed in Table 6.1. While I observe no overall treatment effect, I do observe effects for both independents and those with low information.6 These are precisely the groups I would expect to be most susceptible to the effects of the treatment. For independents, the effect was statistically significant (p < .10) and resulted in an estimated 15 point increase in support for same-sex marriage. For those

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4This includes respondents who said they followed the news “some of the time,” “only now and then,” or “hardly at all.” The full text of the question was “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?”

5Although it varies slightly by issue, those who follow the news and public affairs hardly at all have a mean rating of moral confidence around 60, and the mean moral confidence level of independents is above 70 on every issue. See Figure 4.7, Figure 4.6, and Table 4.2 in Chapter 4 for a full comparison of moral confidence across levels of interest in news and public affairs and by partisanship.

6In addition to these subgroups, I also tested for heterogeneous treatment effects for those who were unregistered to vote, a third potential measure of political sophistication, interest, and engagement. The results are shown in Table B.5, Figure B.1, and Figure B.2 in Appendix B. The subgroup of unregistered voter is fairly small (n = 82), and the subgroup of unregistered, independent, and low news voters is even smaller (n = 31), which limits the generalizability of these findings. However, as shown, the treatment significantly increased support for same-sex marriage by approximately 16 points in the former group and 34 points in the latter group.
TABLE 6.1

EFFECT OF TREATMENT ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE SUPPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Support for Same-Sex Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Effect</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Entries are differences in means. (Standard Errors)
*p <.10, **p <.05, two-tailed test

with low interest in news and public affairs, the effect was also statistically significant (p <.05) and similarly resulted in about a 13 point increase in support for same-sex marriage. The cumulative effect for those in both categories was significant (p <.05) and resulted in an estimated 26 point increase in support for same-sex marriage.

While qualified, these results are quite strong given the salience of the same-sex marriage issue and the relatively modest nature of my treatment. Respondents’ beliefs were not challenged, and no arguments were given to either support or oppose same-sex marriage. Moreover, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in Hollingsworth v. Perry, a nationally prominent same-sex marriage case, on March 26, 2013, while my survey experiment was fielded on April 9. The media was saturated with arguments from prominent political figures on both sides of the debate. That I was able to observe movement on a salient issue in such a polarized environment through unobtrusive prompts encouraging circumspection is compelling evidence in support of my hypothesis.

To facilitate interpretation, Figure 6.1 shows the average support for same-sex marriage by treatment assignment and condition. As shown, support for same-sex marriage is significantly higher for the treatment group within the three sub-groups. The mean level of
support for all those in the control group regardless of condition is near the halfway point between support and opposition. For those in the treatment groups, the means are in the upper half of the range of support. This suggests the effect of treatment is to move the average level of support for same-sex marriage from approximately neutral to approximately supportive.

Looking exclusively at differences in the means, however, obscures the true nature of the treatment effect. The treatment does not simply move those who are neutral to become slightly supportive. As shown in Figure 6.2, the story is more complicated. These figures display kernel density estimates for the distribution of observations along the spectrum of support for same-sex marriage. The density estimates for the treatment and control groups are overlaid to show how the groups differ. Across all three conditions, there is movement...
at both extremes of the spectrum. That is, the treatment decreases the frequency of strongly opposed and neutral responses, while increasing the frequency of supportive responses. Importantly, these data show (a) independents and the inattentive in the control groups take extreme positions despite their relatively apolitical attributes, and (b) the treatment undermines responses at the extreme negative end of the spectrum. This is in keeping with the overall distribution, as Figure 6.2 shows that opinion about same-sex marriage in the control group is pooled at the extremes.
6.4 Sources of Moral Authority and Support for Same-Sex Marriage

While the primary purpose of the explanatory treatment described above was to force participants to provide explanations as a means of revealing to them their lack of knowledge, their responses to these open-ended questions provide additional insights. Moreover, as I have argued that many of these respondents lack knowledge, it is worth considering how their answers—or attempted answers—to these questions relate to the primary dependent variable of interest. Although the nature of my experimental design precludes me from drawing comparisons between the treatment group’s answers and those of the control group, their answers may nevertheless reveal more about the types of individuals or moral views that are most susceptible to the effects of the treatment.

Although many respondents admitted they could not identify a source for their moral beliefs, most attempted to name some source. A few respondents named internal sources such as “common sense” or an “internal thought process,” but most identified some external source for moral guidance. As we might expect, the majority of respondents identified some component or aspect of Christianity as their primary source of moral beliefs. These sources ranged from generic Christian figures or texts like “Jesus” or “the Bible” to more specific denominations such as “Catholicism” or “the Pope.” Respondents also frequently mentioned Judeo-Christian figures and texts such as “God” and “the Ten Commandments.” Other religious sources such as “Islam,” “Buddhism,” and “Taoism” were named less frequently. Beyond religious sources, the most common sources named were family members, including parents, grandparents, and spouses. Other sources included secular, historical figures such as “George Washington,” inspirational celebrities such as “Oprah Winfrey,” and important texts such as the “U.S. Constitution.”

To examine patterns in these responses, it is necessary to group these answers into larger categories. I have coded open-ended responses using the following scheme. Responses to the first treatment question regarding the sources of their moral beliefs were categorized as naming a religious source (the most common response), a family member
or members (the second most common response), or another type of source (these included famous public figures, organizations, books, films, etc.). These responses were not mutually exclusive. Thus, if a respondent named both the Bible and his or her mother as moral sources, the respondent was included in both categories.

Similarly, responses to the second treatment question regarding the sources specific message regarding homosexuality were coded as being negative, positive, or neutral. Across all of the moral sources listed above, respondents described the authorities as negative, positive, and neutral. That is, the same religious sources identified as being against same-sex marriage by some respondents were described as favoring same-sex marriage or having no position by other respondents. As with moral sources, positions were not mutually exclusive. For example, a respondent who named his or her mother as being in favor of same-sex marriage and the Bible as against same-sex marriage was grouped in both categories so long as he or she identified both as sources of his or her moral beliefs.

I combined these categories to divide sources of moral authority by whether the respondent said the source was negative, neutral, or positive on the issue of same-sex marriage. The prevalence of each category is displayed in Figure 6.3. Figure 6.3 also shows the prevalence of each category across the three subgroups where I observed heterogeneous treatment effects in the preceding section. As shown, the moral sources and stances named in participants’ open-ended responses varied widely. In the overall sample, religious sources of moral authority were identified as overwhelmingly negative on the issue of same-sex marriage. Familial sources were more evenly divided on the issue. However, negative, religious sources were also the most commonly named in the overall sample. While independents were less likely to name religious sources than the overall sample, those with low interest in the news were nearly as religious. Similarly, those with low

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7For the raw percentage of respondents in each category, see Table B.6 in Appendix B.

8As noted, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, the percentages in Figure 6.3 do not add up to 100%. Each percentage represents the portion of the overall sample or subgroup.
interest in the news were also about as likely as those in the overall sample to say their source of moral beliefs was opposed to homosexuality.

However, the respondents’ specific responses are less telling than the effect of the treatment on participants by response. Figure 6.4 displays participants’ mean level of support for same-sex marriage by moral stance and condition. While we cannot know with certainty how members of the control group would have responded to these questions, the dotted line represents the mean level of support for those in the control group from the specified subgroup. As Figure 6.4 shows, members of the treatment group express rela-
tively high support for same-sex marriage regardless of their responses to the treatment question. While those who say their moral source supports homosexuality are approximately where we would expect them to be, those whose moral sources are negative toward homosexuality are near or above the mean of the control group in all three conditions. This suggests that the treatment affects even those who have stated that the source of their moral beliefs opposes homosexuality. Despite saying their primary source of moral beliefs is opposed to same-sex marriage, these respondents display a reluctance to oppose the issue. I contend that this is because these respondents are less confident in how well they actually understand these sources of moral authority as a result of actually being required to provide an explanation.
Figure 6.5 displays participants’ mean level of support for same-sex marriage by moral source and condition. As shown in Figure 6.3, the majority of all respondents who cited a religious source as the source of their moral beliefs stated that the source was opposed to homosexuality. Only 1% of respondents in all three conditions named a religious source that was positive toward homosexuality. Despite this opposition, Figure 6.5 shows that respondents in the three conditions—but especially independents who have little interest in news—who name religious sources are relatively supportive of same-sex marriage. These results suggest that being forced to explain one’s moral beliefs has a positive effect on support for same-sex marriage even when the moral beliefs described are relatively negative toward homosexuality. As I have suggested above, this is likely because participants have been made aware of their relative lack of moral knowledge. They provide explanations,
but the process of explaining reduces their confidence, which in turn leads them to reduce their opposition to same-sex marriage.

6.5 Illusory Moral Knowledge in Moral and Legal Support for Abortion

The data for the issue of same-sex marriage, however, do not actually allow us to examine the separate effect of the treatment on moral and legal support. Nor do they allow us to examine the direct effect of the treatment on moral confidence. To examine these relationships, I fielded a second survey experiment based largely on the same design as the first in 2016. Subjects \( n = 800 \) were recruited via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

In order to gauge respondents’ moral and legal support for moral issues, respondents were asked to rate how strongly they believed abortion was either moral or immoral and should be legal or illegal on a scale from 0 to 100.\(^9\) Before receiving these questions, however, half of respondents were randomly assigned to receive explanatory prompts similar to the two used in the previous experiment. They were first asked to identify the primary source of their moral beliefs and subsequently asked to state what that source says specifically about the morality of abortion. As noted above, this treatment is designed to make subjects more cognizant of their relative lack of moral knowledge.

Based on the results of the prior experiment, I restricted my analyses to the subsample of respondents who are least knowledgeable. I once again base this categorization in part upon these respondents’ partisan identification and interest in news and public affairs. Thus, I exclude those who identify with a political party and who say they follows the news and public affairs “most of the time.” In addition to these variables, however, I also restrict the sample based on an actual gauge of respondents’ political knowledge via three questions. Respondents were asked to identify both the current Chief Justice of the U.S.

\(^9\)See Illusory Abortion Knowledge Survey in Appendix A for the precise wording of each survey item.
### TABLE 6.2

**EFFECT OF TREATMENT ON MORAL AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR ABORTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Effect</th>
<th>Moral Support</th>
<th>Legal Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>9.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.04)</td>
<td>(5.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Entries are differences in means. (Standard Errors)

* p < .10, two-tailed test

Supreme Court and the current Speaker of the House of Representatives from four possible options. They were then asked whether the U.S. spends the least amount of money on foreign aid, medicare, national defense, or Social Security. I exclude from the sample those respondents who were able to answer all three questions correctly. As was discussed above, these respondents with the least connection to a political party, least in public affairs, and less knowledge of basic political information are precisely the individuals we would expect to possess less knowledge in general and less moral knowledge in particular. Having less knowledge upon which to rely, they are the most likely to struggle to provide an answer to any request for an explanation of their moral beliefs. In the absence of such a request, however, they would still likely possess a high assessment of their knowledge. Thus, these respondents might be expected to be the most negatively affected by a prompt designed to force them to assess their moral knowledge. The results are presented in Table 6.2.

As reported in Table 6.2, the treatment increased legal support for abortion by an average of approximately 9 points. This demonstrates that the effect of the explanatory treatment observed for the issue of same-sex marriage extends to the issue of abortion. As

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10 However, the direction and significance of the effects presented below hold when the sample is not restricted by these political knowledge questions.
discussed in Chapter 2, opinion on the issue of abortion has not changed substantially over the decades polls have asked about it, and it has certainly not been subject to the rapidly liberalizing trend we have observed in opinion on same-sex marriage. Therefore, there is good reason to expect opinion on abortion to be more resistant to change. Nevertheless, we do observe movement in opinion on the issue as a result of explanatory

What is more, the treatment had a positive and statistically significant effect on respondents’ legal support for the issue of abortion, but it had no significant effect on respondents’ moral support for abortion. The results observed in the previous experiment were not unique to a single issue. Furthermore, these results demonstrate that being prompted to explain the source and content of their moral beliefs had no effect on respondents’ moral position on the issue of abortion, but the prompt did affect how willing they were to translate those moral beliefs into actual policy positions. That is, after being prompted to explain their moral knowledge, these individuals became less confident in their knowledge and resultanty less likely to impose their beliefs on others despite being no less morally opposed to the issue. These results further confirm my theory of moral confidence’s role in mitigating the translation of one’s moral beliefs into policy positions, which is the source of the morality-legality gap in public opinion.

Nonetheless, these results do not definitively confirm whether reduced confidence is actually the driving force in the observed effect. To help determine whether or not moral confidence was the causal mechanism, respondents were subsequently asked to rate their confidence in their ability to explain their moral beliefs on the issue of abortion. While the treatment groups exhibited no significant change in their mean level of moral confidence, the overall distribution of respondents in self-rated moral confidence was affected. As Figure 6.6 shows, members of the treatment group are much less heavily concentrated than members of the control group at the top of the spectrum of moral confidence (once again, the moral confidence among the control group confirm that moral confidence is generally much higher than we might expect if it were based upon an accurate assessment of one’s
moral knowledge). Indeed, after being prompted to explain their moral beliefs, respondents are significantly less likely ($p < .10$) to rate their moral confidence as 100. This suggests that the treatment does directly reduce respondents’ confidence in their moral knowledge, which makes them less likely to seek to legally impose their moral beliefs.

6.6 Discussion

As shown above, for the subset of respondents who were unaffiliated with a political party (17%), uninterested in news or public affairs (41%), or both (9%), the effect of being forced to explain the source and content of their moral beliefs related to same-sex marriage was a large and statistically significant increase in support of same-sex marriage. I observe
similar results for less putatively knowledgeable respondents for the issue of abortion. Without being asked to provide any explanation of the source of their beliefs, people are much more likely to express opposition to moral issues. However, when they are prompted to explain, those opposed moderate their legal opposition significantly. Consistent with my hypothesis, these results suggest—for at least the subset of respondents we might expect to possess the least knowledge on controversial issues—an illusion of explanatory depth exists in moral knowledge.

These results have important implications. First, while previous studies have shown the existence of illusory explanatory knowledge on technical processes and political issues, these results demonstrate the illusion of explanatory depth extends into knowledge on moral issues. Furthermore, these results suggest an additional implication of the social intuitionist model. People do not just lack reasons for their moral judgments; many also overestimate their ability to give reasons, which affects how they apply their moral judgments.

Additionally, these results show that illusory knowledge has political consequences beyond simple self-assessments of one’s knowledge. Based on moral knowledge they believe they possess, individuals impose their moral beliefs on others. However, they can be made aware of their relative lack of knowledge, which leads them to be less willing to engage in the kind of moral coercion Morone (2003) argues has been rampant throughout American history. While it is impossible to determine with these data whether this effect is lasting, the size of this effect is relatively large given the relatively unobtrusive nature of the treatment.

One normative conclusion that might be drawn from these findings is that deep divisions such as the so-called “culture wars” might be best solved by asking for explanations rather than through counter-argumentation. Indeed, a range of prior research suggests that individuals resist or discount arguments against their preexisting attitudes and unquestionably accept arguments in favor of these positions (Taber, Cann and Kucsova 2008). In fact,
rather than moderating their opinions, counterarguments may actually lead individuals to become more extreme (Taber and Lodge 2006). These results suggest that giving respondents greater space to explain their knowledge may lead them to moderate their opposition by making them more cognizant of their relative lack of knowledge.

While this study makes several important contributions, it leaves several unanswered questions that future studies could expand upon or refine. Interestingly, these results differ in an important way from previous findings pertaining to the illusion of explanatory depth in knowledge on political issues. Fernbach et al. (2013) observed a moderating effect from explanation for opinions at both extremes on political issues, but only the opposition is affected in my study. This suggests either that the upper range of support for moral issues is not based on assumptions about moral knowledge or that it is not as dependent upon confidence in the sources of moral knowledge. The default position in the absence of moral confidence may be support rather than neutrality. Further research is necessary to refine our understanding of how support and opposition to moral issues differ in their reliance on moral knowledge and beliefs.

Furthermore, while I have demonstrated an effect for same-sex marriage and abortion, it remains to be seen how the illusion of explanatory depth in moral knowledge affects opinion on other moral issues. Future studies might replicate these experiments to address other kinds of moral issues that evoke different considerations, involve greater nuance, or deal with acts that are considered more taboo or marginal. Same-sex marriage and abortion, while controversial, are both at a point where support is a relatively safe position to adopt; other moral issues lack such widespread, mainstream support to facilitate the transition in opinion.

Finally, these effects are limited to a rather small subset of the population. Moreover, this subset might also be less likely to engage in politics more broadly. As has been noted, moral issues bring in members of the public who are otherwise unengaged, but it remains to be seen whether more politically interested, active, and knowledgeable members of the
public can be affected by explanatory prompts. While some of these respondents may simply be well-informed on moral issues, the innocuous nature of the prompt leads me to suspect that the treatment used here may simply not have been strong enough to dislodge these respondents’ high assessments of their knowledge. Future research may experiment with more involved challenges to respondents’ perceptions of their moral knowledge.

Nevertheless, these results suggest that the explanation of one’s views may actually change one’s opinions. Thus, allowing or encouraging individuals to explain themselves may serve as a potential corrective for the kind of extreme, under-informed moralization that has come to characterize American politics. Warnings about the so-called “culture war” are frequent and dire, and this suggests that a greater emphasis on explanation—as opposed to argumentation—may offer a potential path to moral conciliation between the opposing sides in this conflict.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In describing the “culture war” between the morally orthodox and secular progressives he believes is rending the United States in two, James Hunter characterizes the nature of the conflict as one of fundamentally incompatible moral visions:

The central dynamic of the cultural realignment is not merely that different public philosophies create diverse public opinions. These alliances, rather, reflect the institutionalization and politicization of two fundamentally different cultural systems. Each side operates from within its own constellation of values, interests, and assumptions. At the center of each are two distinct conceptions of moral authority—two different ways of apprehending reality, of ordering experience, of making moral judgments. Each side of the cultural divide, then, speaks with a different moral vocabulary. . . . Each side represents the tendencies of a separate and competing moral galaxy. They are, indeed, “worlds apart.” (Hunter 1991, 128)

That is, Hunter casts the moral conflict in American society as something more severe than a difference of opinion. As he describes them, the two camps may as well inhabit different planets. In such a conflict, can there be any hope for compromise or are moral conflicts in the U.S. truly intractable?

Morone (2003) provides at least some basis for believing the conflict is less dire, suggesting that these kinds of moral conflicts are not necessarily as new to American politics as Hunter suggests. As he argues, the issues and participants may change, but putatively moral issues have been a persistent source of political strife throughout American history. The moralistic urge appears to be a particularly prominent feature of the American psyche and has been since almost the moment Europeans first began settling here. Indeed, Morone argues the history of American politics has thus far been a series of moral tidal waves.
While Morone’s perspective may make contemporary moral conflicts seem less novel, however, it does not necessarily provide comfort. As Morone describes them, these periodic moral tidal waves rise and fall, but they also serve to radically reshape society and government in the process. Numerous acts of violence have been committed as part of these crusades, and even when moral outrage does not lead citizens to take arms, it often leads them to use the coercive power of the state to impose their moral views, which in turn expands the power of the state. Even if the American tendency to moral fervor is a cyclical feature that is inevitably quelled, the damage incurred during the height of the moral outrage would still seem to be cause for alarm and attention.

Is there no way to resist the current of these moral waves? Is moral fervor a necessary feature of American politics, or can we overcome—both individually and collectively—our moralistic tendencies? The goal of this dissertation has been at least partially to provide an answer to this question. Scholarship in both psychology and political science has taken the link between moral judgments and legal positions for granted. Given the moralistic nature of American politics, this might be a reasonable assumption. As a consequence of this assumption, however, little or no effort has been made to explain why these positions need be so tightly linked, or whether they are indeed tightly linked for everyone. Indeed, some scholars have argued that moral issues, by definition, must evoke punitive attitudes (Ryan 2014). That is, for an issue to be moral, individuals must wish to punish those they see as wrongdoers. Thus, issues like abortion and homosexuality should naturally lead moral opponents to not simply condemn those who undergo and provide abortions or engage in sexual acts with members of the same gender, but to punish them via legal means.

If true, this suggests there is little hope for moral coexistence in the United States. Disagreement should inevitably lead to conflict, with peace achieved only when one side compels or persuades enough opponents to adopt their moral position. This description certainly fits the pattern of moral conflict observed by Morone (2003) in his analysis of American history, and, lest we relegate this kind of moralization to this distant past, it
should be recalled that the act of homosexuality was only decriminalized in many states as recently as 2003 by court order in *Lawrence v. Texas*. While the decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) to allow same-sex couples to marry may represent progress, in the earlier—but relatively recent—ruling of *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), the Supreme Court ruled that members of the same gender did not even possess a right to consensual sex. Chief Justice Burger was particularly opposed to homosexual sex, which he considered abhorrent to long-standing moral beliefs and traditions. He described prohibitions against homosexual sex as ancient, and quoted historical thinkers who describe homosexual sex as an “infamous crime against nature” and worse than rape. Presumed in Burger’s argument is the assumption that moral beliefs should guide jurisprudence. If even members of the Supreme Court are prone to impose their moral beliefs in this way, is legal imposition an inevitable feature of moral disagreement?

As I have endeavored to show throughout this dissertation, moral disagreements need be neither uncompromising nor punitive in nature. Despite what prior research has assumed, individuals are capable of believing an act is immoral without believing it should be illegal. People are capable of resisting their moralistic urges. That is, despite morally opposing issues such as abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide, these individuals refrain from legally opposing the acts. These individuals resist their desire to impose their moral beliefs on others not because they have been swayed morally, but because they recognize they may not know enough about their moral beliefs or judgments to legally coerce others. They exhibit what I have called low moral confidence, but which might just as accurately be termed moral humility.

Nor is this kind of moral humility limited strictly to members of the public. After all, the Supreme Court did not reverse itself in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) as a result of moral persuasion on the issue of homosexuality. They did not suddenly conclude that homosexuality was moral after all. Rather, the majority of the court decided that the moral beliefs of some—or even the majority—could not be imposed at the expense of the rights
of others. As Justice Kennedy wrote, “[t]he petitioners are entitled to respect for their private lives. The State cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime.” Even the nation’s highest court may occasionally exhibit moral humility.

Not only do these individuals lack sufficient confidence in their understanding of moral issues, sources of moral authority, and the processes by which they render moral judgments to impose their moral beliefs on others; as I have argued above, many others are actually morally overconfident, believing they know more about morality than they actually do. Consequently, they are quick to impose their moral beliefs on others with little or no reflection. To help reiterate these points and emphasize the need for greater moral humility in American politics, I summarize the findings of this dissertation in more detail below and expand upon their relevance to political science and broader social dilemmas. I conclude by pointing to possible extensions of this work for future research.

7.1 Moral Issues

To explore moral decision-making, I focused my examination on public opinion on four purportedly moral issues. Abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide serve as prime examples of how moral issues divide the American public. Each of the four issues raises considerations of what might be considered fundamental principles and values: the value and dignity of human life, individual self-determination, the natural order, etc. As a result of deep-seated disagreements over these core values, political elites and activists have grown increasingly divided and resistant to compromise on each of the four issues. In turn, they have helped foment divisions within the American public over the issues. A substantial portion of the public views each of the four issues as moral. Based on data from the Gallup Values and Beliefs poll, 42% Americans view

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1 As shown in Table B.1, these results also hold for issues with greater moral acceptance (gambling) and greater moral opposition (polygamy and incest).
abortion as morally acceptable, 52% view physician-assisted suicide as morally acceptable, 58% view homosexuality as morally acceptable, and 61% view capital punishment as morally acceptable (Riffkin 2014).²

Nevertheless, the four issues are also distinct. While abortion and homosexuality may be construed as sexual in nature, capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide are rarely, if ever, framed in these terms. Similarly, attitudes on abortion, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide may relate to considerations of death, opinions on homosexuality should not be driven by such concerns. Capital punishment, as a state-sponsored activity, also likely evokes separate considerations about government power and authority than abortion, homosexuality, and physician-assisted suicide, which might also be tied to concerns over an individual’s bodily autonomy.

In this way, these four issues highlight a fundamental challenge to the study of moral issues: they often seem to defy easy categorization. While most Americans immediately recognize this set of issues as “moral,” their common identifying features are not self-evident. We often speak of a collection of moral issues without any overarching definition of them. As such, analyses of any set of moral issues often feels either disorganized or post hoc; issues are grouped either on the basis of convenience or a scheme is developed after the fact to justify their grouping.

To help resolve this dilemma, scholarship on the moral issues has increasingly moved away from a definition based on any intrinsic issue characteristics toward a study of how issues are discussed and perceived. These more psychological approaches allow for the inclusion of a broader set of moral issues, as almost any issue may potentially be strategically moralized by a group for political gain or seen as related to core moral convictions by at least a lone individual.

²See Table 2.1 in Chapter 2 for a full comparison between the moral acceptability of these issues and fifteen additional moral issues.
Nevertheless, not all issues seem to be equally prone to moralization. Only a subset of issues seem to consistently induce moral considerations across a wide swath of the public in contemporary American politics. Thus, I adopt a hybridized approach to understanding moral issues that takes into account the distinct psychological responses that ultimately characterize moral issues, but which focuses upon issues which elicit such responses from large segments of the population. While this does not resolve the continued problems inherent in defining moral issues, it hopefully serves as some form of middle ground.

7.2 The Morality-Legality Gap

Despite their contentiousness and salience across a wider swath of the public, however, opinion on these moral issues is not devoid of nuance. Scholars have long recognized that contextual factors play a large role in individuals’ decision-making on issues such as abortion, but they have nevertheless failed to recognize a secondary complication in individual opinion on these issues: moral and legal opinions differ in both the aggregate and at the individual-level. A subset of individuals legally support issues to which they are morally opposed. This incongruence in opinion is most common for the issues of abortion and homosexuality, but moral and legal opinions differ even on issues such as capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide.

Using both preexisting data from the Gallup Values and Beliefs poll and data collected via an original survey, I show that Americans have consistently been and continue to be more legally supportive of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide than they are morally supportive. Across time, issues, and a variety of survey formats, respondents who consider an act morally wrong refrain from legally imposing this moral belief on others. While this could be assumed from the morality-legality gap in the Gallup data, it is confirmed more clearly in the individual-level analyses conducted using data collected via the YouGov Omnibus survey. I observe not only a statistically significant numerical gap in support, but also a substantively significant difference in opinion.
A subset of respondents exhibit categorically higher levels of legal support for each of the four issues than moral support.

Most directly, these findings have implications for the study of moral psychology in political science. While social psychology has now developed extensively in its study of moral judgments and reasoning, it has yet to thoroughly explore the political impact of these moral judgments. Conversely, political scientists often measure attitudes on moral issues with little regard for the underlying psychological processes. As I have shown, moral and legal attitudes are distinct, but they are also linked by individuals’ assessments of their moral knowledge. Exploring this connection further helps us better understand both the origins of moral judgments and their ultimate impact in the external world.

Furthermore, political scientists have also occasionally conflated moral and legal attitudes on these issues. These findings emphasize the importance of measuring moral support and legal support for moral issues as separate dimensions of public opinion. The two are often conflated under the assumption that respondents will automatically legally oppose issues that they morally oppose. As I have shown, however, this is certainly not the case for all respondents. Equating legal support with moral support, or vice versa, may lead one to mistakenly assume congruence in respondents’ positions on moral issues. To the extent that arguments about the so-called “culture wars” are based exclusively upon either moral attitudes or legal opinions about these issues, dire warnings about the polarized nature of American politics may be greatly exaggerated. Particularly when legal positions are assumed on the basis of moral beliefs, scholars may be overstating moral opposition to these issues. As these results indicate, many Americans display greater resistance to the moral urges that divide America than scholars like Hunter (1991) and Morone (2003) suggest is the case.
7.3 Moral Knowledge and Moral Confidence

While certain factors help predict simultaneous moral opposition and legal support on individual issues, differences in moral and legal support are not consistently explained by existing variables. We must look elsewhere for an explanation for this gap in opinion. To understand these incongruous moral and legal positions, we must take moral confidence into account. Moral confidence is consistently higher than we might expect across groups and across issues. That is, people generally think they know a lot about right and wrong, the sources of their moral beliefs, and the process by which they reach moral judgments. This perceived knowledge exhibits itself in their assessments of how confident they are in their ability to explain their moral judgments.

Nevertheless, these results show that some individuals are significantly less confident than others. I show that this variation in moral confidence accounts for the morality-legality gap in public opinion. As a result of their diminished moral confidence, respondents are less willing to impose their moral beliefs upon others. As shown, moral confidence appears to be a strong predictor—and, indeed, the only consistent predictor across issues—of combined moral opposition and legal support for the issues of abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, and physician-assisted suicide. Those with relatively low moral confidence are much more likely to say they legally support issues that they believe are morally wrong. Despite their moral opposition, they are unwilling to impose their moral beliefs on others, because they are not confident in their ability to actually explain why they believe an issue is wrong.

Moreover, this type of moral humility may be a potential solution to the ongoing moral and cultural divisions in American politics. That respondents with low moral confidence exhibit an unwillingness to legally impose their moral beliefs suggests others may also be able to resist their moral urges. If so, America’s moralistic tendencies need not be so divisive. The moral conflicts in American history Morone (2003) recounts largely stemmed not from a diversity of moral beliefs in the private sphere, but from a clash of those private
values in the public sphere. Americans need not reach moral consensus, so long as they can tolerate others engaging in acts they believe to be immoral. As I have shown, this may only require greater humility in our beliefs about our own knowledge and moral understanding.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that even among those with low moral confidence, willingness to legally oppose an issue that one morally opposes is higher than we might expect. Although the probability of legal tolerance is much higher, it is still lower than one might hope for someone who acknowledges they are not very confident in their ability to explain their moral beliefs. Even for the morally humble, there exists a worrisome tendency to legally impose one’s moral beliefs on others. This gives added weight to the concerns of Hunter (1991) and Morone (2003).

7.4 Illusory Moral Knowledge and Decision-Making

An additional roadblock in this path to moral coexistence is the fact that most individuals are actually highly confident in their moral knowledge. As noted, however, this perceived moral knowledge is distinct from actual moral knowledge, and despite their high confidence, there is good reason to doubt that Americans know as much as they claim they do about morality. To the extent that we are able to gauge actual moral knowledge, Americans seem to know relatively little. That is, most people are not only confident, but overconfident. They imagine themselves to know much more about morality than they actually do. This is further evidenced by the surprisingly high mean level of confidence exhibited by groups across moral issues. This matters, because it suggests that the most divisive issues in politics are politicized by a group of people who largely fail to recognize their own ignorance.

Why do individuals tend to overestimate their knowledge? It is primarily because they do not realize how little they know. They are largely ignorant of their own ignorance (Kruger and Dunning 1999). Furthermore, those who may realize how little they know do not like to admit it to either others or themselves. For example, Bishop et al. (1980) argued
that respondents are willing to give opinions on topics about fictional policies because they wish to save face (particularly with a white, middle class interviewing staff calling form a university). Nevertheless, these respondents’ overconfidence in their knowledge can have tangible political effects.

Despite these tendencies, I have shown that at least some individuals can be made aware of their own relative ignorance. What is more, these changes in individuals’ moral confidence drive them to become more supportive of moral issues. When asked to explain their moral knowledge, individuals become cognizant of how little they know. This causes them to be less willing to impose their moral beliefs on others. A subset of respondents become more supportive of same-sex marriage and abortion when prompted to explain the source and content of their moral beliefs. Without being asked to provide any explanation of the source of their beliefs, people are much more likely to express opposition to same-sex marriage and legal opposition to abortion. However, when they are prompted to explain, those opposed moderate their opposition significantly. Consistent with my hypothesis, these results suggest—for at least the subset of respondents we might expect to know the least about moral knowledge on controversial issues—an illusion of explanatory depth exists in moral knowledge.

While previous studies have demonstrated the impact of illusory explanatory knowledge on opinions on political campaigns and policies (Alter, Oppenheimer and Zemla 2010; Fernbach et al. 2013), these results show that the illusion of explanatory depth extends into knowledge on moral issues. Furthermore, these results suggest an additional implication of the social intuitionist model. People do not just lack reasons for their moral judgments; many also overestimate their ability to give reasons, which affects how they apply their moral judgments. In his work on the intuitive nature of moral judgments, Haidt noted that, after having their moral judgments challenged several times, participants acknowledged, “I don’t know, I can’t explain it, I just know it’s wrong” (Haidt 2001, 814). However, these participants conceded their lack of knowledge and explanatory ability only
after repeated challenges to their knowledge and reasoning. As I have shown, many people are at least initially morally overconfident.

Additionally, these results show that illusory knowledge has political consequences beyond simple self-assessments of one’s knowledge. Based on moral knowledge they believe they possess, individuals impose their moral beliefs on others. However, they can be made aware of their relative lack of knowledge, which leads them to be less willing to engage in the kind of moral coercion Morone (2003) argues has been rampant throughout American history. While it is impossible to determine with these data whether this effect is lasting, the size of this effect is relatively large given the relatively unobtrusive nature of the treatment.

One normative conclusion that might be drawn from these findings is that deep divisions such as the so-called “culture wars” might be best solved by asking for explanations rather than through counter-argumentation. A range of prior research suggests that individuals resist or discount arguments against their preexisting attitudes and unquestionably accept arguments in favor of these positions (Taber, Cann and Kucsova 2008). Indeed, rather than moderating their opinions, counterarguments may actually lead individuals to become more extreme (Taber and Lodge 2006). These results suggest that giving respondents greater space to explain their knowledge may lead them to moderate their opposition by making them more cognizant of their relative lack of knowledge.

These results suggest that the explanation of one’s views may actually change one’s opinions. Allowing or encouraging individuals to explain themselves may serve as a potential corrective for the kind of extreme, under-informed moralization that has come to characterize American politics. Warnings about the so-called “culture war” are frequent and dire, and this suggests that a greater emphasis on explanation—as opposed to argumentation—may offer a potential path to moral conciliation between the opposing sides in this conflict. In sum, a potential means of diffusing moral strife in the United
States might simply be to give people the opportunity to explain themselves to one another.

7.5 Unanswered Questions

While this study makes several important contributions, it also leaves several unanswered questions that future research should explore. First, future work could explore how the factors described above function in relation to other issues, both moral and non-moral. Indeed, as I have noted previously, some research in moral psychology suggests that any given issue is potentially moral at the individual-level (Ryan 2014). That is, while most of the public does not consider issues such as those related to limits on federal spending to be moral in nature, an isolated individual may view the issue in moral terms. It remains to be seen how moral confidence functions in isolated circumstances such as these, where a person may have no wider group of like-minded opponents or supporters to reinforce their beliefs. Holding such an uncommon position may reduce an individual’s moral confidence in the first place, or it may make individuals more susceptible to dissuasion via explanatory prompts.

Conversely, by virtue of having formed an opinion distinct from that of the mainstream, these individuals may be even more confident or resistant to dissuasion. In fact, by holding an unconventional view, these individuals may face real-world explanatory challenges on a regular basis. In sum, future work should explore whether opinion on other putatively moral issues and individualized moral issues follow the same patterns observed for the four conventionally moral issues discussed in this dissertation.³

³As shown in Table B.1, however, initial results suggest that opinion on fringe issues, such as polygamy and incest, and opinion on the more morally accepted act of gambling follow these patterns. The latter shares many of the characteristics of an individualized moral issue; while still opposed for a variety of reasons, gambling is no longer viewed in moral terms by much of the population. Nevertheless, those who do oppose gambling for moral reasons are more likely to legally support it if they exhibit lower moral confidence.
Furthermore, the results observed in my experimental manipulation of individuals’ moral confidence via explanatory prompts differ in an important way from previous findings pertaining to the illusion of explanatory depth in knowledge on political issues. When they were asked to explain what they knew about the policies, Fernbach et al. (2013) observed that individuals at both extremes moderated their opinion on political issues such as sanctions on Iran, cap-and-trade policies, Social Security, health care, taxes, and merit-based pay for teachers. However, I have demonstrated an effect only for the opposition on moral issues. That is, while opponents moderate their legal opposition on moral issues, supporters do not appear to moderate their support on these same issues. In fact, even supporters in the treatment groups appear to increase their level of support. This suggests that support and opposition to moral issues are not symmetric. The default position in the absence of moral confidence may be support rather than neutrality. Further research is necessary to refine our understanding of how the factors that drive support for moral issues differ from those that determine support on other types of issues.

Moreover, I observe effects only for those respondents who are relatively politically uninterested, unattached, and unknowledgeable. While these individuals may be the only respondents whose moral confidence is illusory, it is much more likely that other respondents are simply unwilling or unable to reassess their moral knowledge in response to the relatively unobtrusive explanatory prompt used here. Unlike other areas of knowledge, one’s views of one’s moral knowledge are more deeply connected to core beliefs and strongly held convictions. Although this makes it all the more impressive that I was able to induce movement on these issues at all, it also suggests that more challenging questions or a face-to-face survey format might push a wider swath of respondents to more deeply reevaluate what they think they know about right and wrong.

Finally, many of the questions addressed in this dissertation relate to a larger and more complicated question: why do some issues generate moral judgments in the first place? As Morone (2003) discusses, moral issues rise and fall over time. Or, rather, issues become
morally contentious and subsequently lose their moralistic quality. While alcohol laws are still contested, the debate lacks the moral tone that it held in the period prior to Prohibition. This pattern does not hold for all issues, though. Some maintain moral status much longer than others. As shown in Chapter 2, opinion on abortion has been far less variable over time than opinion on issues such as homosexuality. While evidence suggests that issues can be made moral for individuals through framing (Feinberg and Willer 2012; Wolsko, Ariceaga and Seiden 2016), these effects are not directly generalizable to the process by which issues become moral on a national scale. Better data over a longer period of time are necessary to capture and understand the process by which issues gain and lose moral status in American society.

As I have shown, individuals can and do moderate their moral views. It is possible that the recession of moral tides we have seen in American history are ultimately the result of reduced confidence. In order to legally impose one’s private values, moral crusaders must debate these beliefs in the public sphere. This necessarily entails some justification or explanation, which I have shown can lead subjects to become more supportive. For example, if one commits to personally refraining from alcohol consumption for moral reasons, it is relatively easy to do so with little justification to others or, perhaps, even oneself. Similarly, families and insular communities (e.g., the Amish) may maintain alternative moral norms among themselves. However, imposing these moral norms and strictures on others demands far greater explanation. Although this may be unlikely among the most highly committed activists and political elites, the wider base of opposition may erode slowly given sufficient time. With enough prompting, these public debates may cause some crusaders to question the very beliefs that they sought to impose on others. That is, in trying to persuade others, moral opponents may ultimately be dissuading themselves.

If true, this is likely only one of many factors that cause an issue to become non-moral. However, given the stakes to both supporters and opponents of moral issues, the scope of the conflict, and the gravity of the underlying questions, the rise and fall of moral issues
deserves greater attention. Unlike the confidence one has in one’s knowledge of a sewing machine, moral confidence leads individuals to condemn and restrict others’ actions. To the condemned and the condemner, these issues concern their freedom and their core principles and beliefs, respectively. I have attempted to show how and why the latter impose these core principles and beliefs on the former, but continued research is necessary to help us understand the moral urge at the heart of American politics.
A.1 Morality Item Comparison Survey

**Variable Label:** Confidence 1  
**Question Text:** How confident are you in your ability to explain your moral judgments on the issue of abortion?  
**Outcomes:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Very Unconfident” (0) to “Very Confident” (100)

**Variable Label:** Confidence 2  
**Question Text:** How confident are you in your ability to explain your moral judgments on the issue of abortion?  
**Outcomes:**  
1. Very Unconfident  
2. Unconfident  
3. Somewhat Unconfident  
4. Neither/Not Sure  
5. Somewhat Confident  
6. Confident  
7. Very Confident

**Variable Label:** Confidence 3  
**Question Text:** How much do you know about the issue of abortion?  
**Outcomes:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Very Little” (0) to “Very Much” (100)

**Variable Label:** Confidence 4  
**Question Text:** Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am able to explain my moral judgments on the issue of abortion to other people.  
**Outcomes:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)
Variable Label: Confidence 5
Question Text: How often do you doubt your moral judgments on the issue of abortion?
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Never” (0) to “Often” (100)

Variable Label: Relativism 1
Question Text: Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)

Variable Name: V8
Variable Label: Relativism 2
Question Text: Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: Moral standards should be seen as individualistic: what one person considers moral may be judged as immoral by another person.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)

Variable Label: Relativism 3
Question Text: Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave and should not be used when making judgments of others.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)

Variable Label: Relativism 4
Question Text: Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The question of what is moral for everyone can never be resolved because what is moral or immoral is up to the individual to decide.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)

Variable Label: Relativism 5
Question Text: Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: Everyone should be held to the same moral standard.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)
Variable Label: Conviction
Question Text: To what extent is your position on abortion a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Not at All” (0) to “Very Much” (100)

Variable Label: Moral Support
Question Text: Please indicate how strongly you believe abortion is moral or immoral.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Immoral” (0) to “Moral” (100)

Variable Label: Legal Support
Question Text: Please indicate how strongly you believe abortion should be legal or illegal.
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Illegal” (0) to “Legal” (100)

Variable Label: Age
Question Text: In what year were you born?
Outcomes:
Drop down menu with response options from 1900 to 2016

Variable Label: Gender
Question Text: What is your gender?
Outcomes:
1. Male
2. Female

Variable Label: Race/Ethnicity
Question Text: Please specify your race or ethnicity.
Outcomes:
1. White
2. Hispanic or Latino
3. Black or African American
4. Asian/Pacific Islander
5. Native American or American Indian
6. Other
Variable Label: Education
Question Text: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
Outcomes:
1. Less than high school
2. High school degree
3. Some college, no degree
4. Associate Degree
5. Bachelor’s Degree
6. Graduate Degree

Variable Label: Party ID
Question Text: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or independent?
Outcomes:
1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Independent/Other

Variable Label: PID Strength
Question Text: Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or not so strong [Democrat/Republican]?
Outcomes:
1. [If PID = 1] Strong Democrat
2. [If PID = 2] Strong Republican
1. [If PID = 1] Not so strong Democrat
2. [If PID = 2] Not so strong Republican

Variable Label: PID Lean
Question Text: Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?
Outcomes:
1. The Democratic Party
2. The Republican Party
3. Neither

Variable Label: Religion
Question Text: What is your religious preference? Are you Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?
Outcomes:
1. Protestant
2. Catholic
3. Jewish
4. Atheist
5. None
Variable Label: Born-Again
Question Text: Do you consider yourself an evangelical or born-again Christian?
Outcomes:
1. Yes
2. No

Variable Label: Attendance
Question Text: How often do you attend church or religious services?
Outcomes:
1. Never
2. Seldom
3. A few times a year
4. Once or twice a month
5. Once a week
6. More than once a week

Variable Label: News Interest
Question Text: Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs...?
Outcomes:
1. Most of the time
2. Some of the time
3. Only now and then
4. Hardly at all
A.2 Moral Confidence Survey

**Variable Label:** Moral Judgment  
**Variable Type:** GRID  
**Question Text:** For each of the following issues, please tell us how strongly you believe it is immoral or moral.  
**Columns:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Immoral” (0) to “Moral” (100)  
**Rows:**  
V1 Abortion  
V2 Homosexuality  
V3 The Death Penalty  
V4 Doctor-Assisted Suicide

**Variable Label:** Legal Opinion  
**Variable Type:** GRID  
**Question Text:** For each of the following issues, please tell us how strongly you believe it should be illegal or legal.  
**Columns:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Illegal” (0) to “Legal” (100)  
**Rows:**  
V5 Abortion  
V6 Homosexuality  
V7 The Death Penalty  
V8 Doctor-Assisted Suicide

**Variable Label:** Moral Confidence  
**Variable Type:** GRID  
**Question Text:** How confident are you in your ability to explain your moral judgments for each of the following issues?  
**Columns:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Very Unconfident” (0) to “Very Confident” (100)  
**Rows:**  
V9 Abortion  
V10 Homosexuality  
V11 The Death Penalty  
V12 Doctor-Assisted Suicide

**Variable Label:** Moral Relativism  
**Question Text:** Please consider the following statement and rate your agreement: Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.  
**Outcomes:**  
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Disagree” (0) to “Strongly Agree” (100)
Variable Label: Age
Question Text: In what year were you born?
Outcomes:
Drop down menu with response options from 1900 to 2016

Variable Label: Gender
Question Text: Are you male or female?
Outcomes:
1. Male
2. Female

Variable Label: Race/Ethnicity
Question Text: What racial or ethnic group best describes you?
Outcomes:
1. White
2. Black or African-American
3. Hispanic or Latino
4. Asian or Asian-American
5. Native American
6. Middle Eastern
7. Other

Variable Label: Education
Question Text: What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Outcomes:
1. Did not graduate from high school
2. High school graduate
3. Some college, but no degree (yet)
4. 2-year college degree
5. 4-year college degree
6. Post-graduate degree

Variable Label: Married
Question Text: What is your current marital status?
Outcomes:
1. Married, living with spouse
2. Separated
3. Divorced
4. Widowed
5. Single, never married
6. Domestic partnership
Variable Label: Party ID
Question Text: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or independent?
Outcomes:
1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Independent/Other

Variable Label: PID Strength
Question Text: Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or not so strong [Democrat/Republican]?
Outcomes:
1. [If PID = 1] Strong Democrat
2. [If PID = 1] Not so strong Democrat
1. [If PID = 2] Strong Republican
2. [If PID = 2] Not so strong Republican

Variable Label: PID Lean
Question Text: Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?
Outcomes:
1. The Democratic Party
2. The Republican Party
3. Neither

Variable Label: News Interest
Question Text: Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs...?
Outcomes:
1. Most of the time
2. Some of the time
3. Only now and then
4. Hardly at all

Variable Label: Registered
Question Text: Are you registered to vote?
Outcomes:
1. Yes
2. No
Variable Label: Religion

Question Text: What is your religious preference? Are you Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?

Outcomes:
1. Protestant
2. Roman Catholic
3. Mormon
4. Eastern or Greek Orthodox
5. Jewish
6. Muslim
7. Buddhist
8. Hindu
9. Atheist
10. Agnostic
11. Nothing in particular

Variable Label: Born-Again

Question Text: Do you consider yourself an evangelical or born-again Christian?

Outcomes:
1. Yes
2. No

Variable Label: Attendance

Question Text: Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?

Outcomes:
1. Never
2. Seldom
3. A few times a year
4. Once or twice a month
5. Once a week
6. More than once a week
A.3 Illusory Moral Knowledge Survey

Variable Label: Source Morality
Question Text: Please describe the primary source (book, group, person, etc.) of your moral beliefs. Additionally, please explain your reason for trusting this source for information about morality.
Outcomes:
Open-Ended Text Response

Variable Label: Gay Marriage Morality
Question Text: What specifically does this source say about the morality of gay marriage? If possible, please quote the source directly.
Outcomes:
Open-Ended Text Response

Variable Label: Gay Marriage Stance
Question Text: Do you oppose or support the legalization of gay marriage?
Outcomes:
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Strongly Oppose” (0) to “Strongly Support” (100)

Variable Label: Party ID
Question Text: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or independent?
Outcomes:
1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Independent/Other

Variable Label: PID Strength
Question Text: Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or not so strong [Democrat/Republican]?
Outcomes:
1. [If PID = 1] Strong Democrat
2. [If PID = 2] Strong Republican
1. [If PID = 1] Not so strong Democrat
2. [If PID = 2] Not so strong Republican

Variable Label: PID Lean
Question Text: Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?
Outcomes:
1. The Democratic Party
2. The Republican Party
3. Neither
Variable Label: News Interest
Question Text: Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs...?
Outcomes:
1. Most of the time
2. Some of the time
3. Only now and then
4. Hardly at all

Variable Label: Registered
Question Text: Are you registered to vote?
Outcomes:
1. Yes
2. No
A.4 Illusory Abortion Knowledge Survey

**Variable Label:** Moral Source
**Question Text:** Please describe the primary source (book, group, person, etc.) of your moral beliefs. Additionally, please explain your reason for trusting this source for information about morality.

**Outcomes:**
Open-Ended Text Response

**Variable Label:** Moral Stance
**Question Text:** What specifically does this source say about the morality of abortion? If possible, please quote the source directly.

**Outcomes:**
Open-Ended Text Response

**Variable Label:** Moral Support
**Question Text:** Please indicate how strongly you believe abortion is moral or immoral.

**Outcomes:**
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Immoral” (0) to “Moral” (100)

**Variable Label:** Legal Support
**Question Text:** Please indicate how strongly you believe abortion should be legal or illegal.

**Outcomes:**
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Illegal” (0) to “Legal” (100)

**Variable Label:** Confidence 1
**Question Text:** How confident are you in your ability to explain your moral judgments on the issue of abortion?

**Outcomes:**
0–100 Slider Labeled from “Very Unconfident” (0) to “Very Confident” (100)

**Variable Label:** Party ID
**Question Text:** Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or independent?

**Outcomes:**
1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Independent/Other
Variable Label: PID Strength  
**Question Text:** Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or not so strong [Democrat/Republican]?

**Outcomes:**
1. \[If \text{PID} = 1\] Strong Democrat
2. \[If \text{PID} = 2\] Strong Republican
3. \[If \text{PID} = 1\] Not so strong Democrat
4. \[If \text{PID} = 2\] Not so strong Republican

Variable Label: PID Lean

**Question Text:** Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?

**Outcomes:**
1. The Democratic Party
2. The Republican Party
3. Neither

Variable Label: News Interest

**Question Text:** Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs...

**Outcomes:**
1. Most of the time
2. Some of the time
3. Only now and then
4. Hardly at all
5. Don’t know

Variable Label: Political Knowledge 1

**Question Text:** Who is the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court?

**Outcomes:**
1. Anthony Kennedy
2. David Cole
3. John Roberts
4. Larry Thompson

Variable Label: Political Knowledge 2

**Question Text:** Who is the Speaker of the House of Representatives?

**Outcomes:**
1. John Boehner
2. Harry Reid
3. Eric Holder
4. Paul Ryan
Variable Label: Political Knowledge 3

Question Text: On which of the following does the U.S. federal government spend the least money?

Outcomes:
1. Foreign aid
2. Medicare
3. National defense
4. Social Security
APPENDIX B
SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

TABLE B.1
CONFIDENCE, MORAL OPPOSITION, AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR GAMBLING, POLYGAMY, AND INCEST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gambling</th>
<th>Polygamy</th>
<th>Incest</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Confidence</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>−.02**</td>
<td>−.02**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Relativism</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02*</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>.69</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
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<td>−.96</td>
<td>.46</td>
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<td>−.02</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.19</td>
</tr>
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<td>News</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>−.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>−1.58*</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−2.65*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>.42</td>
<td>−2.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
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<td>−.04</td>
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<td>None</td>
<td>−1.49*</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>−1.76</td>
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<td>Atheist</td>
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<td>−.88</td>
<td>−1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R²  .09     .10     .14
N          242     235     218

NOTE: Entries are logit coefficients.
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
TABLE B.2

DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF MORAL CONFIDENCE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>White</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Latino</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Asian</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College*</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
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<td>Democrat</td>
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<td>Watch News Some of the Time*</td>
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<td>Registered</td>
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<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Church a Few Times a Year*</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 1,000

NOTE: Entries are percentages.

* Mean Category
### TABLE B.3

**MORAL CONFIDENCE AND PROBABILITY OF MORAL OPPOSITION AND LEGAL SUPPORT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Homosexuality</th>
<th>Capital Punishment</th>
<th>Assisted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Confidence</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>−.01**</td>
<td>−.03**</td>
<td>−.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** Entries are logit coefficients.  
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed
### TABLE B.4

**DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF ILLUSORY MORAL KNOWLEDGE SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Treatment Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch News Some of the Time*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Church a Few Times a Year*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>491</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: Entries are percentages.*

*Mean Category*
TABLE B.5

EFFECT OF TREATMENT ON UNREGISTERED SUPPORT FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unregistered</th>
<th>Unregistered, Independent, Low News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Effect</td>
<td>16.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 82 31

NOTE: Entries are differences in means. (Standard Errors)
*p < .10, **p < .05, two-tailed test
Figure B.1. Support for Same-Sex Marriage by Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Support for Same-Sex Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Treatment
- Control
Figure B.2. Support for Same-Sex Marriage by Treatment | Unregistered, Independent, and Low Interest in News and Public Affairs
TABLE B.6

MORAL SOURCES AND MORAL STANCES BY CONDITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Source</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Source</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Source</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>509*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Source</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Source</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Source</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>99*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low News</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Source</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Source</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Source</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>211*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent, Low News</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Source</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Source</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Source</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, entries are percentages.

*Total Number of Respondents


Clinton, Bill. 1996. “Acceptance Speech.”. Given at the Democratic National Convention, Chicago, IL.


Reston, Maeve. 2016. “At Ted Cruz Event, Phil Robertson Calls Gay Marriage ‘Evil’.” CNN.


