Boundaries of Obligation in American Politics

Geographic, National, and Racial Communities

This book shows how ordinary Americans imagine their communities and the extent to which their communities' boundaries determine who they believe should benefit from the government's resources via redistributive policies. By contributing extensive empirical analyses to a largely theoretical discussion, it highlights the subjective nature of communities while confronting the elusive task of pinning down "pictures in people's heads."

A deeper understanding of people's definitions of their communities and how they affect feelings of duties and obligations provides a new lens through which to look at diverse societies and the potential for both civic solidarity and humanitarian aid. This book analyzes three different types of communities and more than eight national surveys. Cara J. Wong finds that the decision to help only those within certain borders and to ignore the needs of those outside rests, to a certain extent, on whether and how people translate their sense of community into obligations.

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Acknowledgments

Books gather debts like snowballs rolling down hills – the longer the hill, the bigger the snowball. A book that began as a dissertation eons ago is like a tiny pebble at the center of an immense avalanche. Gratitude and joy overwhelm me when I think about the many people who lavished support while I worked on this project. However, this gratitude comes with guilt; as I step back and take stock, I wonder, "How does one have the help of such an amazing community and not produce a weightier, more substantial tome?" *Mea culpa*.

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Preface

"… [T]hese children are ours now, and we don't look at them any other way."

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina damaged and destroyed homes along the Gulf Coast of the United States, from Florida to Texas. The storm forced hundreds of thousands of residents of New Orleans to leave the city, many of whom went to Baton Rouge and Houston. Kip Holden, the mayor of Baton Rouge, described the evacuees from Hurricane Katrina as "New Orleans thugs," and gun sales increased sharply in his city. At the same time, however, a spokesperson for the Houston Independent School District called the thirty thousand largely poor and black children from New Orleans who suddenly appeared in Houston schools "ours." Why would the black elected leader of a city only 80 miles from New Orleans worry about "thugs" and violence from the newcomers while a white spokesman (Terry Abbott) of a white- and Latino-led school district in a Texas city 280 miles from New Orleans welcomed the children?[1] Why were the reactions so different?

This book will help provide a framework for understanding how it could happen that people in Houston might see those children as a part of their community. It will also help us understand why many citizens of neighboring Baton Rouge sharply circumscribed the help that they offered to fellow Louisianans in need. For example, the law school at Louisiana State University absorbed Tulane's law students but did not

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[1] In the book, I will use the term "white" as a shorthand for "non-Hispanic white," and "Hispanic" and "Latino" are treated as synonyms. I also use the terms "African American" and "black" interchangeably, as both are almost equally chosen for self description (Sigelman et al. 2005).

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otherwise organize to house or feed or help non-law students. The black population of Baton Rouge worked through churches to help black evacuees and often avoided contact with FEMA, which many distrusted. This book offers a theory that encompasses both hard-to-understand hostility (why buy guns when people from a nearby city – many of whom have ties to your family and friends – arrive in distress?) and compassion (why absorb tens of thousands of new children into your schools when the education of your own children could be compromised by this action?).

In many ways, Houston's reaction to the Katrina refugees is difficult to understand for social scientists. In contrast, there are a number of theories to explain the opposite response, including emphases on self-interest and group interest, intergroup conflict, prejudice, contact between groups under conditions of competition and stress, and rapidly changing environments. When a choice is to be made to benefit oneself and one's family or to benefit someone else, self and group interests drive the decision toward helping oneself; given that property taxes are used to fund public schools, sharing a finite number of resources could be at the expense of one's own schoolchildren. Similarly, "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) and related concerns would dictate that Houston residents consider the problems arising from the levees' destruction by Katrina as New Orleans's problems, not Houston's. In a zero-sum situation with finite resources and overcrowding, visible group boundaries can also compound competition with prejudice and discrimination; many of the children from New Orleans were African American – in contrast to the more diverse mix of white, Latino, and black schoolchildren in Houston – and even if there were no preexisting racial prejudice (or anti-Louisiana prejudice) in Houston, competition could certainly stimulate favoritism of Us and denigration of Them (Sherif and Sherif 1979; Tajfel 1982). The New Orleans schoolchildren who were relocated to Houston were also, relatively speaking, poorer than the average New Orleans child; many of the wealthier children had not needed to be evacuated en masse by FEMA. Furthermore, media stories of the "refugees" exaggerated their violence and criminal behaviors, fanning the flames of fear gripping host populations about marauding invaders (Davis 2005; Fox News 2005). Distorted visions of rape and pillage by the homeless black poor of New Orleans drove up sales of firearms across Louisiana, prompting the mayor of New Orleans to ban and confiscate guns.

Above and beyond the effects of interests and competition, Katrina produced a situation where prejudice could easily overcome rationality, let alone fellow-feeling and humanitarian values. Evacuations – both

voluntary and assisted – had the greatest and most immediate impact on nearby cities such as Baton Rouge. New Orleans residents originally hoped they would be able to return to their homes soon after the storm, and FEMA also concentrated initially on relocation nearby. This type of rapid influx of outgroup members is exactly what researchers have found to bring prejudice to the fore (Green et al. 1998). Diversity alone is not necessarily a predictor of prejudice and resulting discrimination; large changes in a short period prompt negative attitudes about and actions against the newcomers in ways that go beyond material self-interest. So, even in a racially diverse city like Houston, the sudden appearance of more than a hundred thousand people could have sparked conflict even in the absence of explicit threats to the self-interest of the community, such as increasing the class sizes at public schools. Although social scientists have also found that contact between ingroup and outgroup members can lead to a diminution of prejudice, this positive outcome occurs in situations where the groups have equal status and have a common goal that can only be achieved by intergroup cooperation (Allport 1954; Sherif and Sherif 1979). The post-Katrina situation did not lend itself to such conditions, given the straitened circumstances of the evacuees in contrast with the native residents.

Given all the reasons to expect Houston residents to expel or attack rather than embrace the newcomers, one would think that such a terrible outcome would have been inevitable. And yet, despite all these conditions working in the direction of *not* helping, fueling potential competition and negative feelings, there was outreach: the city of Houston extended a helping hand to the victims of Katrina.

Of course, such help might have arisen merely out of fear and a desire for social control (Piven and Cloward 1971). Hungry hopeless people fleeing a city already associated with crime and poverty could as easily be seen as potentially violent as they could be seen as pitiful. Therefore, receiving cities could choose to help the victims of Katrina in order to placate them. Of course, if these fears were great enough, one would assume the cities would have refused to open their doors altogether. Alternatively, Houston did not have to open its doors to as many evacuees as it did and would have been less likely to do so if it had been motivated by fear. The city also could have limited social support to policies that would ensure temporary residence, rather than longer-term investments and community incorporation such as schooling; and it could have segregated the New Orleans residents in Houston stadiums or concentrated them in certain housing projects if social control had been of paramount concern. In

fact, such segregation did not happen in Houston. In Baton Rouge, where fear of violence was in the forefront of the public imagination, many of the evacuees stayed with relatives and friends because the social networks between Baton Rouge and New Orleans are much denser and tighter than between New Orleans and Houston. More than six thousand people who did not have family or friends in Baton Rouge were concentrated in the Baton Rouge civic center.

A much less cynical explanation for Houston's response is altruism. The citizens of Houston helped the tragic victims of Katrina, not because of calculations of interest, but because of a simple desire to help. Certainly there were individuals across the region, the country, and even worldwide who provided aid and solace. People's values and religions advocate helping those in need, including strangers; the story of the Good Samaritan is only one example of helping in times of crises. And research has shown that helping hands are extended more readily when the miserable circumstances or disasters suffered are not of the victims' own making (Skitka and Tetlock 1992, 1993). Clearly, the evacuees from New Orleans were not responsible for the hurricanes. However, research has also shown that helping behavior in response to a natural disaster depends on characteristics of the potential recipients of the aid, all of whom are located in the same area. Whites are more likely to help white victims of a hurricane, and blacks are more likely to help black victims (Skitka 1999). Nature may wreak havoc across racial boundaries, but humans – consciously or unconsciously – are not so blind when they choose whom to help.

It is common knowledge among philanthropic organizations that giving is consistently greater for domestic causes than international ones. So, while Katrina was disastrous in 2005, killing about two thousand people and damaging homes along the Atlantic coastline, the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 killed about three hundred thousand people and wiped out entire villages across multiple countries. Nevertheless, $1.8 billion was donated in the United States for aid to the victims of Katrina, compared with $1.3 billion donated in the United States by October 2005 for aid to victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami (Strom 2005). The scale and scope of devastation caused by the tsunami was much, much worse, in both deaths and monetary costs of the damages, yet much more money was given for Katrina; the fact that people gave differentially means that something else matters, something more than simply the need of those receiving aid or the altruistic values of those who give aid.

Why should Americans privilege the victims of the hurricane over those of the tsunami? Is it because of the potential effect of their contributions?

This cannot be the case, because a U.S. dollar in Indonesia has much greater buying power than the same dollar in New Orleans.[2] Is the reason behind the domestic bias a fear of corruption by international aid organizations? During the years preceding these natural disasters, it was not uncommon to read about aid dollars ending up in Swiss bank accounts. Thus, perhaps more money was given to the victims of Katrina by U.S. citizens because they worried about whether a dollar donated would result in even a dime for its intended beneficiaries. In this case, however, many of the same organizations that were working on the U.S. Gulf Coast post-Katrina were also working around the Indian Ocean post-tsunami, and stories about government corruption in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast in general were probably just as available as stories about problems in Thailand or Indonesia; therefore, the degree of efficiency and corruption was largely held constant. So why would Americans donate more money to help the victims of Katrina?

The answer is that more Americans chose to express their generosity and compassion to other members of their national community, helping those at home before helping others. Even if Americans considered victims of the tsunami to be members of their global community, it is clear that members of their national community received priority. We often think of charity as giving above and beyond any sense of obligation or duty; it is a manifestation of compassion and sympathy for the recipients, rather than a moral duty. Even if one accepts this distinction, however, the question still exists: why was there greater compassion and sympathy for victims of this particular hurricane than for the victims of a more devastating tsunami.

The answer in this case is that interest, altruism, and values must all operate within boundaries. If someone motivated by material interest asks, "Do my costs outweigh my benefits?" even a simple tit-for-tat calculus is made with reference to a particular context: refusing to help a neighbor could be Pareto suboptimal, but if someone is too distant, the equilibrium is not to interact strategically with an individual from whom no benefits could flow. If someone motivated by humanitarian values or who is otherwise altruistic is asked to help, they may ask themselves, "Would I be able to live with myself if I refused? How badly would I feel about refusing?" The answers to these questions again depend crucially

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[2] In addition, Van de Kragt et al. (1988) conducted experiments to determine reasons for altruistic cooperation, and found that the magnitude of the external benefit and the cost to the subjects did not predict acting for the benefit of others.

on the existing relationship between the helper and the person needing help under the assumption of finite resources. Contributing help to ease distant suffering, such that little time or money remains to help a neighbor, would be strongly sanctioned by most of the most common value systems.

In this book I talk about the process of defining the boundaries within which interest, values, or other helping-relevant motivations operate as the process of defining a "community." The community of a person (as understood by that person, and as defined with reference to a particular set of relationships in a given moment of time) is the set of people for whom questions about helping are most meaningful. At the limit, the suffering of certain beings is not of concern even for the more altruistic among us (say, the extinction of a species of bugs). And even the person with the very least fellow-feeling may calculate that helping a neighbor is worthwhile. This book shows that the boundaries of community matter.

The adoption of New Orleans children into the Houston school system is a case where people redefined the bounds of their local community. Terry Abbot, a spokesperson for the Houston Independent School District, redrew the community to include these new schoolchildren from New Orleans when he said,

> We have asked the state government for resources to get them up to speed. That will be a concern, *but these children are ours now, and we don't look at them in any other way.* (Steinhauer 2006, emphasis added)

The New Orleans students, in other words, were now seen as part of the Houston community of schoolchildren, and Houston was willing to fight to get resources for all their community members, new and old. Where people draw their community boundaries helps us explain phenomena such as reactions to Hurricane Katrina (and the Indian Ocean tsunami), above and beyond what self-interest, humanitarianism, or patriotism would predict.

a note on the models

This book has a short appendix with the data that are most central to my arguments. The full statistical models and results can be found at http://carawong.org/Boundaries-Appendix.pdf.

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