

POLITICAL OBLIGATION: AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH*

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Pointing to a paucity of empirical studies on political obligation, Reid and Henderson (1976) recently employed Q technique and factor analysis to test the allegiance of citizens toward eight classical theories, and found Hobbesians, followers of Rousseau, judicial conservatives, libertarians and utilitarians. They also found that principal support was given to a moral commitment to the public good, and that while the 'putative interest of the citizen has been shown to exist for some factors, ... even for the most hard-bitten Hobbesian it exists *after* mention is made of the community interest' (p.252).

Although the Reid-Henderson study is professedly 'a preliminary exploration,' ours is an effort to use the possibilities offered by Q methodology to make an additional probe of attitudes toward political obligation; our approach is somewhat different, however, and our conclusions depart from the original exploration. Reid and Henderson were concerned only with the degree of conformity toward eight theories of political obligation as elaborated a priori, hence they

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drew Q statements from representative presentations of those positions. Our purpose, on the other hand, was not to *evaluate* the consistency of theoretical performances, but to *discover* naturally existent attitude structures. This dictated that we inquire of individuals rather than texts; consequently we requested short essays from students in an introductory political science class who were asked to respond to two questions: (1) Why do you obey rules laid down by government? and (2) Under what conditions would you disobey the law?

Certainly, the students were not unacquainted with some of the issues involved, but they had not been treated in the class previously in any direct or systematic manner. From the essays were derived five sentences for each of the eight theories represented in the earlier study, but 19 additional propositions were found that reflected a variety of positions antagonistic to theories of political obligation, ranging from statements specifying particular circumstances where no obligation was felt (e.g., drug laws) to a variety of anarchist views. The 59 statements were then administered in a Q sort to the original group of 16 American government students, to 12 advanced students, and to 15 individuals involved in a number of walks of life in the larger community. The results were factor analyzed as in the earlier study, and three factors emerged.

THREE ATTITUDES TOWARD POLITICAL OBLIGATION

Individuals who define factor A express views tending toward anarchism:¹ They insist that they will only

(1) Inasmuch as explaining the factor scores requires judgment to which all scholars can contribute, we should have liked to display all the significant statements on each factor with the factor scores so that the reader could see how the attitudes toward different statements vary from factor to factor, but space is too limited; however, a complete breakdown of the factor scores is available from the authors.

comply with rules which they think are right; they distrust the basic wisdom of lawmakers, as they distrust their own ability to determine what is good for society; they feel that obedience and disobedience are matters of personal judgment, and that their judgments tend to concern only themselves; and they insist that they know what is right for them and that they should determine what is moral and comply with their own judgments. While they will not go out of their way to break laws, they feel no moral obligation to obey duly constituted authority merely because it is duly constituted. This group has no conception of 'what is good for the country.' They will actively resist intrusion of what they conceive as the personal sphere; however, they cannot be viewed as self-seeking individualists since their ethical judgments turn in good part on the consequences of their actions for other people.

A few of the defining statements which support our interpretation of this attitude complex include the following (scores to the right for factors A, B, and C respectively):

I will not follow laws that to me are immoral.	+5	+2	-4
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I obey governmental rules only when I feel that I, myself, can justify their validity in my own life.	+4	-5	-3
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By this time in life, I have some knowledge of good and evil, and I am able to apply it in my reasoning towards obeying and not obeying the laws.	+4	-1	+1
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I don't know what to do about so- cial problems, so I just obey the laws made by those who know better.	-5	-2	0
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In light of these and other statements which distin-

guish this factor, our interpretation of this attitude complex as fundamentally anarchistic turns upon a notion of anarchism which endorses the sovereignty of the individual conscience above any other consideration. Presumably, one could imagine a polity so arranged that no general rule infringes upon individual moral choice or opinion, but for the individuals who appear on this factor even this situation would be contingent upon each act of the legislator. And there is no general will upon which allegiance can be placed:

I would disobey any rule that dis- +3 -3 -2
 agrees with a rule that I would
 make for myself.

In contrast to the anarchists of factor A, factor B must be viewed as including usually deferential citizens. They agree with Reid and Henderson that rules are important, and that in the absence of civil obedience there would be chaos. Consequently, in spite of some skepticism about the wisdom of various solons, individuals on this factor comply regardless of personal scruples and preferences. According to this view, laws are good in themselves; consequently, factor B individuals are unlikely to engage in actions to resist the law even when it appears to interfere with personal rights and especially if it is likely to provoke violence. However, this group has standards: They would stand up for personal rights in other than rebellious ways and would reluctantly oppose laws that threatened themselves or those they love. In general, however, compliance to the law is regarded as the highest responsibility. Individuals in this group, if placed in authority, would expect willing deference by their subjects, and when they are subjects they are cooperatively compliant to the law. Among the statements supporting this interpretation are the following (scores for A, B, and C):

If people constantly disobeyed go- 0 +5 -1
 vernmental rules, our world would
 be in a state of chaos.

I obey most rules because they +2 +5 +2
make sense, such as traffic laws.

When rules prohibit me from doing -1 -5 -3
what I like, I do it anyway.

The crux of the matter for factor B is that rules are useful as a hedge against human nature. From the standpoint of this attitude complex, it is the responsibility of government to make rules which stand between social life and chaos, and individual conscience ought not to be interposed. Consequently,

I see the law as a protection in +1 +4 +2
that not all people respect another
person's life or possessions.

I obey governmental rules only when +4 -5 -3
I feel that I, myself, can justify
their validity in my own life.

Whereas factor B is obedient from a sense of duty, individuals on C comply because of a sense of personal threat. Although extremely skeptical of solons, they exhibit a Hobbesian realism that authorities, to be successful, must keep the interests of their subjects in mind. Accordingly, these individuals do not view compliance with law as approval, and they do not view their isolated acts of noncompliance as efforts to establish a new form of authority. Acts of noncompliance are undertaken primarily for self-protection, and secondarily for the protection of loved ones--in short, for precisely the same motives as factor B gives for compliance. Curiously, the following of rules for C is viewed as 'playing a game,' and widespread disobedience to government is not viewed as tantamount to chaos. Clearly, the issue is not a moral one, but a question of what game is being played, and how it can be played to advantage. For factor C, advantage is defined in purely personal terms, not, as in B, with a view toward a larger social benefit.

The pragmatists of factor C indicate their colors through these and other statements:

Basically, I obey the law because I am afraid of punishment by the government. -1 0 +5

I feel that I should obey the rules that the government makes because you have to play the game by the rules to succeed. -4 0 +4

I obey government's rules because our representatives are full-time experts who have the time to carefully consider these problems. -4 0 -4

I will not follow laws that to me are immoral. +5 +2 -4

Still, in spite of overt cynicism, factor C shares with Hobbes the prudent trust that if a state is to survive it must be well ordered:

I believe that most of the laws are made with the interests of the people in mind. -1 +1 +5

As is apparent, the accuracy of this statement depends upon the factor to which one belongs. Obviously, neither A nor B is so 'hopeful.'

DIFFERENT BASES FOR CONSENSUS

Q method allows the student of behavior to investigate two complementary areas. The observer is able to see the attitudes of individuals as they fit together into a more-or-less coherent package, i.e., he can point to differences between types of people. At the same time, similarities can be located as well. The existence of consensus statements, where factor scores do not differ significantly, leads one to be thankful that the language can at least be

shared. This point cannot be pushed too far, however, for, in context, apparent consensus can disintegrate into the most fundamental disagreement. The responses yield two consensus statements, and the first shows most clearly the underlying disagreement among the three factors:

When considering the validity of a +3 +3 +3
law, one must think of other people.

The approval given by factor A is best translated as follows: 'One should always think of the consequences to other people in determining the validity of any maxim.' Factor B individuals, however, are rule-oriented and primarily concerned with how rules deploy people to preclude a feared anarchy: Rules are the ends, people the means. Factor C is primarily concerned with the threat posed by other people, and this Q statement can therefore be rephrased as, 'Only those laws which are enforced are valid. Absent witnesses, I could be tempted to violate the law.' Briefly, our anarchists value others as individuals, our good deferential citizens view others as necessary for a valued collective enterprise, while our Hobbesians fear other players of the game and regard politics as amoral.

The second consensus statement seems to point to a genuine sharing of attitude:

If laws made by the government +4 +4 +3
threaten me or the ones that I love,
then I would break them.

For individuals on factor A, acceptance of this statement is not surprising in light of their over-all antiauthority perspective. For factor B, this is the *only* point at which governmental decrees would be disobeyed. In the case of factor C, we find one point here where persons of this kind might be flushed out of their gamesmanship: Here is where they might be forced to confront the other players openly. The differences among the factors vis-a-vis this

statement are due to the fact that it represents one ground for resistance amongst many for factor A, the only basis for resistance for factor B, and the only basis for open resistance for factor C. The commonality that the statement represents involves the recognition that here is where the metaphor of a social contract ceases to bind men together and pushes them apart instead.

CONCLUSIONS

The messages of this paper are both methodological and substantive. We would argue that the major substantive differences between the Reid and Henderson paper and our own are artifacts of methodology, and that these differences are intimately interrelated. The agreement found by Reid and Henderson, that all factors presumed a conception of 'community interest,' is the consequence of the eight theories of obligation they tested, each presuming some form of civic obligation. The disagreement about this question that we found was equally the result of our method which commenced with current expressions of attitude among our students. Because we found opinions contrary to civic obligation, they were incorporated in our Q sample, and the subjects of our study were able to make considered judgments concerning a wider range of possible opinions. Although the respondent samples (P-sets) of the two studies were different, we doubt that these differences are major explanations for the differences in findings. Manifestly, our findings do not cover all possible views to be found in this community or in the larger society.

Another major difference is that we sought to investigate attitudes as they exist, not coherence to logical positions. Whereas the positions of great political philosophers are themselves interesting, as is the degree to which they influence attitudes, the relevance of attitudes of common people cannot be denied either. Because we proceeded to seek the attitudes of citizens, both the statements we were able to employ and the factors we were able to discover

are much more natural and interesting.

Lastly, implicit in our study as well as the Reid-Henderson paper is the question of the components of a theory of obligation. There are no objective criteria for the components of any theory, i.e., only subjective reasons demand that a theory of political obligation deal with obedience, power, conscience, judgment, etc. That the essays from comparatively uninformed students provided statements which fell so neatly into the eight theories of political obligation that Reid and Henderson used (as well as four general bases for resistance to political authority) must therefore create wonder. In this connection, Holton (1973: 47-67) suggests that science is concerned with more than what is empirical and rational in any theory; there is also a *thematic* component: In the same way that the physicist must be concerned with force--although he 'sees' it nowhere and only reasons about it by appealing to its supposed effects--so the political philosopher must be concerned with power and obligation. Our study indicates that the themata involved in a theory of political obligation are more numerous than Reid and Henderson suggest, and that these themata are evident to citizens and scholars alike, no less than they were to Hobbes, Rousseau, Bentham, and other thinkers of centuries past.

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