

POP CULTURE FRAMEWORKS FOR MORAL EXPRESSION
IN LEFT-WING POLITICAL TALK

Megan Genovese

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Supervisor of Dissertation

Barbie Zelizer, Ph.D.

Raymond Williams Professor of Communication

Associate Dean for Research

Graduate Group Chairperson

John B. Jermott III, Ph.D.

Kenneth B. Clark Professor of Communication and Psychiatry
and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies

Dissertation Committee

Michael X. Delli Carpini, Ph.D.

Oscar H. Gandy Professor of Communication & Democracy

Guobin Yang, Ph.D.

Grace Lee Boggs Professor of Communication & Sociology

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ABSTRACT

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Megan Genovese

Barbie Zelizer

Within contemporary American political discourse, the right is understood as ‘owning’ morality, which allegedly confers a rhetorical and partisan power that the left lacks due to its religiously diverse and partly areligious constituency and unwillingness to make universal statements of moral perspective with religious language. However, this aspect of right-left political difference depends on the conception of morality and moral engagement with politics as exclusively religious, and normatively conservative evangelical Christianity. These circumstances make left-wing moral engagement illegible in political discourse, but do not support the assumption in commonplace and scholarly conceptions of a right/left difference in modes of political engagement. I argue that the left moralizes uses alternate, non-religious frameworks from different discursive spheres that can be studied using moral vocabularies analysis. This project uses interview and focus group data with members of transformative media fandom to investigate how the contemporary left in America expresses moral engagement with politics in the discursive sphere of popular culture. These data align with the observations of and predictions about the American left made in both the preponderance of political science and the moral theory of Charles Taylor. Despite their lack of a normative language provided by political institutions to describe a leftist moral engagement with politics, my analysis also shows that morality is central to these fans’ engagement with politics. They draw on media texts and fandom experience as frameworks for moral expression that fellow fans will understand. This project shows the importance of looking beyond normative venues and frameworks of political discourse when studying and conceptualizing of the role of morality in politics and defining right/left political difference in contemporary American politics.

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Chapter 1: Politics, Fandom, and Morality

In modern American political discourse, the right is widely represented as “owning” morality, conferring a rhetorical power that some credit with its disproportionate political victories. There is belief in a corresponding deficit on the left, with the implication that the left either does not want or does not know how to engage morally with politics often partially blamed for its electoral and policy failures. This pattern of unequal attribution of moral engagement with politics aligns with the narrow identification of “morality” and “moral values” with socially conservative Christians, specifically white evangelicals who are overrepresented on the right. It does not accommodate non-normative frameworks of expression or expressions of moral engagement that occur beyond the bounds of political discourse. It is possible that frameworks in venues other than political discourse both represent moral political thinking and provide a guide to deep-seated beliefs and attitudes that play a role in political decision-making. It is also possible that understanding different expressions of moral political thinking might usefully complicate the fundamental distinctions that today appear to separate right- and left-wing identities and modes of political engagement.

This dissertation attempts to counter the emphasis on religious morality in American political discourse by addressing the presence of moral frameworks in a widely-used alternative venue: popular culture. Specifically, this project examines the role morality plays in left-wing political thinking as expressed in the discursive sphere of popular culture. Though existing academic work on morality in modern, post-World War II American politics has identified an association with religious rhetoric on the right, it has not shown a similar link with the left, which has been instead characterized as failing to organize or retain a recognized claim to moral politics. This reinforces the contemporary understanding in media coverage of politics and public common sense that the right owns morality. In that a dearth of empirical scholarly research addresses left-wing morality in contemporary American politics

from a non-religious framework, justified in part by the heterogenous and increasingly areligious demographics on the left, it inadvertently implies the left's lack of moral engagement with politics.

This project considers the possibility that moral engagement on the left may be happening in a space excluded by the narrow, religious conception of morality in American politics, via an alternate framework for understanding that helps make morality on the left visible. Scholars of popular culture and fandom have long argued that moral engagement with narratives and their political implications is deeply embedded in fanish praxis. This project therefore aims to examine whether fan practices of engagement are ripe for appropriation into left-wing political talk as an expression of moral political thinking. Popular culture provides a common rhetorical and cultural framework that might be highly viable for mobilizing moral rhetoric for progressive goals and articulating the morality of left-wing political engagement and identity.

This chapter discusses three aspects of theoretical literature relevant to the project. It first looks at the primary division of American political identity, as it has emerged in party affiliation and binary political alternatives. It then addresses the place of morality in that binary structure, with special attention to the role of religion as a moral framework on the right and the absence of a clear moral framework on the left. Next, this chapter explores popular culture as an alternative to prevalent political discourse, with the aim of considering whether or not and to what degree fan praxis and popular culture provide a framework for moral engagement with politics.

American Political Identity

American politics is defined by a primary division into two parts. Across many political contexts, these two parts are labeled as right/left or conservative/liberal, the latter of which is more commonly used in American political science but is largely interchangeable with the

former (Fuchs & Klingemann 2014). The two parts are often further subdivided or positioned as poles on a continuum in specific contexts, but the basic premise of dyadic right/left political identity is common shorthand in American political discourse (Fuchs & Klingemann 2014; Arian & Shamir 1983).

Conservative/liberal terminology indexes ideology, but its primary value in American political discourse and political talk is symbolic. Identifying ideology as the root cause of political difference in the United States during the first half of the 20th century, political elites defined conservative/liberal in terms of disparate attitudes toward government intervention in the economy and social life, with conservatives objecting to government intervention and liberals advocating for it (Levinson, Parker, & Williams 2016; Carr 2010). But Americans do not draw consciously on ideological principles when they formulate opinions or describe political identity (Conover & Feldman 1981), and voters' self-described ideology has only weak correlation with expert-defined conservative/liberal theory (Hanson, O'Dwyer, & Lyons 2019; Kinder & Kalmoe 2017). Indeed, polls consistently show that the majority of Americans take policy positions that experts designate as ideologically liberal, but roughly half the electorate still considers itself conservative; about 30% of self-described conservatives hold liberal opinions on both economic and social policy (Ellis & Stimson 2012). Thus, the ideological component of the right/left distinction rarely has a discernible function at the level of individual engagement with politics.

However, the terms conservative/liberal have symbolic utility in producing political cohesion. As the political landscape moved away from debates over economic and global policy in the 1940s and 1950s and toward "culture war" social issues like desegregation, civil rights, and abortion, conservative/liberal terminology helped keep policies tied together in political platforms, even if the ideological justification was muddled or contradictory (Barker & Carman 2012; Ellis & Stimson 2012). Describing a candidate or policy in these terms allows political actors to communicate which issues are relevant to the political divide and create

constellations of policy positions and opinions linked by a terminological mark implying an ideological foundation (Ellis & Stimson 2012; Arian & Shamir 1983). The designation of conservative/liberal therefore can describe predictable patterns of political engagement as political actors orient their decision-making to their idea of what it means to be on one side of the political partition instead of the other (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner 2012; Conover & Feldman 1981). Thus, even without a common agreement on or employment of ideological bases, political actors, policy positions, and opinions become patterned under conservative/liberal ideological labels.

Overlaying this systematized political behavior is the practical infrastructure of party politics. In the United States today, there are two primary parties: the Republicans and the Democrats. Historically, both ideological patterns of political behavior were present in each party's membership, but under decades of hyper-polarization, conservative has become synonymous with Republican (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner 2012; Levendusky 2009); in parallel, albeit with some ambivalence, the term liberal has become closely associated with the Democratic Party (Hanson, O'Dwyer, & Lyons 2019; Levendusky 2009). As Jarvis's (2005) longitudinal study of political terminology shows, Democrats did little to defend the idea of liberalism when Republicans began attaching negative connotations to the term 'liberal' in the 1960s and employed this rhetorical tactic heavily in the 1980s and 1990s. This convergence of ideological terms with party politics is how voters can understand themselves in ideological terms but hold policy opinions that apparently contradict their alleged ideological principles; the party provides rhetorical as well as practical infrastructure. According to social identity theory, political parties index opinions and policy stances with terminological and demographic markers so people come to identify with their party affiliation, especially in a highly polarized two-party system like the contemporary United States (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017; Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner 2012). Internalizing conservative/liberal labels, electoral victory, and policy implementation as intrinsic to one's

identity as things like gender, race, and religion intensifies individuals' investment in the success of the party and drives political engagement. Thus, party affiliation, not self-described ideology, is the best predictor of policy positions and voting patterns; "No other single variable comes close to accounting as well or as consistently for American political behavior" (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017, p. 1).

However, understanding American politics in purely Republican/Democrat terms fails to account for people who do not affiliate with either major party, or those who identify with one ideological label but for some reason affiliate with or support the other's label's corresponding party. This has been increasingly common over recent decades as both parties and their ideologically-marked policy platforms have grown more polarized and dogmatically enforced, leaving a growing portion of the population that holds a mix of ideologically-marked positions not well served by either party (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner 2012). The party system is so fundamental to our understanding of political that "most of the time American discourse does not allow us to think outside of it," yet there is discontent with the parties' increasing dogmatism (Jarvis 2005, p. 196). The apparent paradox is resolved by elites retaining party and ideological purity of terms while flattering and courting "independent" voters as the decisive faction of the electorate actually deliberating between the parties (Jarvis 2005). According to the Pew Research Center (2018), the share of the electorate registered as independent or affiliated with third parties has accounted for a greater percentage of the public than either major party every year since 2013. Thus, Republican/Democrat terminology does not encompass the entirety of American political identity, and ideological conservative/liberal terms are similarly inadequate for describing contemporary politics. Right/left terminology has broader connotations that encompass independents as well as major party voters and conventional patterns of ideologically marked behaviors. To position my work clearly in the context of contemporary American politics,

which is both highly partisan and characterized by disassociation with major parties, I use right/left to describe political identity.

How do the right and left function as American political identities? If we consider the right/left division in American politics as a means of organizing difference, which differences does the contemporary right/left partition symbolize? To answer these questions, recent studies of partisanship in multiple national political contexts have drawn productively from social identity theory. Social identity theory holds that political actors are motivated by their perceived closeness to a political group as defined by both policy stances and social demographics, their internalization of that political group's victories and defeats, desire to increase group status, and the development of ingroup bias (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017). Thus, the strength of partisanship is correlated with political attention, engagement, participation in elections, and vote choice independent of issue preferences (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017). Ideological markers and other party-linked language attached to issues, policies, and candidates have a symbolic function of delineating the content of partisan identity (Jarvis 2005; Conover & Feldman 1981). "Partisanship" refers to the intensity of party identification, and political social identity research in the United States naturally has centered on the Republican and Democratic Parties (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017). Studies of independents' partisanship and behavior have had mixed results because the group lumps together ideological opponents to the major parties, the politically apathetic, and so-called masked partisans attracted to the status elites confer on the label independent (Klar & Krupnikov 2016; Jarvis 2005). But given the large proportion of the American populace that is independent, political identity cannot be equated with party affiliation. For the purposes of my project, social identity theory's insights into Republican and Democratic identity function as the central nodes of right- and left-wing identity in a more expansive conception of the political divide.

Right/left identity is primarily based on the convergence of personal characteristics in a partisan prototype – in other words, the stereotypical Republican/Democrat and the party base that fits that description. In their review of the literature, Huddy and Bankert (May 2017) conclude that the weight of empirical evidence supports the expressive model of social identity theory, rather than the idea of a rational voter in instrumental social identity. In the expressive model, “partisanship is an enduring identity strengthened by social affiliations to gender, religious, or ethnic and racial groups,” resulting in a stable political identity that can withstand poor party performance, weak or schizophrenic leadership, and changes in policy platform (p. 2). Expressive partisanship also produces animosity against outgroups and their stereotypical constituents as competitive threats to the partisan ingroup’s status and success (Iyengar, Good, & Lelkes 2012). The foundational logic of political social identity, then, is social categorization of issue opinions and demographic cues. Voters sort themselves into party affiliations and political behavior based on fit with partisan prototypes, and the strength of their partisanship correlates with the strength of their affinity to type (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017). In the United States, Republican identity has merged with affiliations to white identity, evangelical religion, and holding conservative social policy opinions; Democratic identity has merged with black identity, secularism, and liberal social policy opinions (Mason 2015, 2016). Partisan identity is rooted at the nexus where these characteristics overlap, and partisanship is stronger with voters with perceived affinity with multiple stereotypical characteristics (Roccas & Brewer 2002). For instance, the effect of partisanship on voting choice is strongest among African-Americans who feel affinity with both racial and Democratic policy characteristics (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017). Measuring fit with stereotypical partisan characteristics is a better predictor of partisanship than self-described strength of partisanship (Mason 2016).

Institutional elites in the parties and the news media help communicate and reinforce these political identities in their branding of issues, candidates, voters, and political

movements. Voters consume and evaluate the trustworthiness of different news sources according to the same social identity and categorization process that leads to party affiliation: perception of the stereotypical audience or constituency and their affinity with it (Cassino & Besen-Cassino 2009). Top-down branding from party elites and news media observers builds from the partisan stereotype with specifics of the political moment, allowing flexibility in evolving circumstances. Party leaders delineate the content of the political divide and the prototypical partisan, while news media mutually help shape public understanding of the political sphere, designating which issues and players matter and who is “winning” at messaging, fundraising, votes, and other measures of political success (Huddy & Bankert, May 2017; Baym 2010). For instance, in her study of the 2010 midterm backlash against Democratic President Obama, Costley White (2018) argues the Tea Party movement successfully drove the Republican Party farther to the right in its policy platform by building onto the core stereotype of a white, evangelical, socially conservative Republican by branding a nexus associated with working- and middle-class white identity, “constitutionalism, militarism, religiosity, anti-Obama[ism, and] anger” (p. 5). The news media played a significant role, wittingly or not, in boosting the Tea Party’s visibility as a relevant and formidable political faction long before it had any popular weight behind it, contributing validity to the Tea Party’s bid to become the Republican core constituency (Costley White 2018). Right-wing political identity condensing around this ultraconservative, hyper-invested core, Costley White argues, now defines the contemporary Republican Party and drives right-wing political engagement (cf. Cosgrove 2007).

Conversely, the left’s political identity is not as easily defined or visible in contemporary political discourse. Recent academic and elite evaluations of the contemporary left diagnose a failure to match the strength of the right’s partisan identity, branding, and political success (e.g., Duncombe 2019; Lakoff 2014, 2016; Ricci 2016; Kitchens & Powell 2015). These analyses primarily place blame on communicative failures from Democratic

party elites relative to their Republican counterparts, failing to account for a foundational difference in partisan demographics. According to longitudinal survey data from the Pew Research Center (2016), the right is more homogenous than the left. Growing partisan policy dogmatism has been matched by increasing demographic homogeneity on the right but contradicted by increasing heterogeneity on the left. The United States has been increasing in racial and ethnic diversity and secularism, but these trends have been underrepresented on the right and overrepresented on the left. White voters constitute a diminishing but still solid majority of 70% of the right; Black voters are a steadily growing minority of 21% on the left, which also has disproportionately large shares of Hispanic, Asian, and other non-white voters (Pew 2016). On the right, white Christians are the majority, with white evangelicals forming a consistent core plurality of 30-35% of the right since 1996 (Pew 2016). African Americans are the most religious racial group in the United States and the majority are Christian (Pew 2014), but Black Christians do not dominate the image of the left in political discourse the way white evangelicals do for the right (Cep 2020, Jun 11). The contemporary left is highly diverse in its makeup of religious affiliations, but a plurality of 29% is religiously unaffiliated (Pew 2016). Thus, it is mathematically impossible for as many people on the left to have a strong affinity with the left-wing prototype of a Black, secular, liberal Democrat as do people on the right with the right-wing prototype of a white, evangelical, ultraconservative Republican.

The summary conclusion of this literature suggests that it is simply easier to brand and message political identity on the right than on the left. Correspondingly greater partisanship and engagement on the right seem to explain its enduring viability and even dominance in American politics, despite more people supporting left-wing policies and identifying with the left overall (Pew 2016; Prothero 2016; Ellis & Stimson 2012). But is there a misleading assumption about political identity that shapes political discourse to the right's advantage? Social identity theory accurately describes and explains right/left identity and

partisanship, but it is grounded in political discourse. Does American political discourse constrain public and scholarly understanding of politics and political identity in a manner that has not kept pace with the growing diversity and secularism on the left? Limiting the study of political identity and partisanship to data from traditional political discourse venues – electoral politics, policy platforms and debates, political news coverage, punditry, public opinion on policy, etc. – sustains a traditional understanding about which factors shape political opinion and identity and how they might be expressed. Instead of inherent weakness or complexity of its politics, does the left’s inability to match the strength of right-wing political identity and partisanship reflect a narrowness of our understanding of politics? To address this possibility, my project looks at one aspect of political identity and engagement: morality.

Morality in Right/Left Binary Politics

Scholars trying to diagnose and treat the left’s failure to fulfill its numerical advantage have focused on the rhetoric of political identity and branding. They have pointed to the right’s branding of its homogeneous core of white evangelicals and their moral motivation to support conservative candidates and policies as the key to driving partisan identification and political participation. For example, in a comparative study of grassroots activism, Hart (2001) argues that the rightward drift in electoral and legislative outcomes out of step with left-leaning public opinion is due to the left’s failure to embrace messaging that connects “religion, morality, or transcendent values and political discourse,” effectively ceding “the discursive high ground” and a powerful tool for mobilization to the right (pp. 20-21). In the same diagnostic vein, Lakoff (2016) preaches that in order to triumph consistently over the right, left-wing political identity and policy stances “must be articulated fully, communicated clearly, and defended staunchly, not on an issue-by-issue basis, but as a whole, as a deeply moral perspective on politics” (p. 336). But the left’s stereotypical political identity is secular,

so its ability to co-opt the right's religious moral rhetoric is complicated. A few like Duncombe (2019) have argued that popular cultural imaginaries have political potential, but atop the difficulty of finding a common morality for its diverse constituents to identify with, left-wing morality is a foreclosed possibility within normative political discourse.

The narrative that the right owns morality is attributable to two factors: 1) the narrow identification of morality with religion in American political discourse, and 2) exclusive social identification of the right with politically active religious people. To the first point, morality is a broadly accepted part of politics, and yet the term is rarely defined in political discourse except by implication. Typically, it is invoked in the context of the right/left divide to identify a failure of the opposition (Kitchens & Powell 2015). Partisans gesture to "morality" as the basis for their beliefs and policy positions, shared by their intended audience, and in doing so, suggest an unimpeachable and objectively correct political motivation. However, the speaker's morality is not explained in positive support of a policy position, only implied in the attack on the opposition's immorality for not agreeing with them. "Morality" is a rhetorical contrast employed to criticize and demonize partisan opponents for lacking a moral heuristic that should be in everybody's politics.

Attempts to define *which* moral heuristic usually fall into the normative tendency in American discourse to conflate morality and religion. Religions offer moral systems, rules for correct decision-making and right action that adherents believe better individual lives and communities. Though the United States has no official state religion, political elites have generally considered the moral authority of religion, particularly Protestant Christianity, to be a social and political good, perhaps even necessary for the success of the nation (Kitchens & Powell 2015; Lambert 2008). In this strain of thought characteristic of the 18th and 19th century, for the best social outcomes, one's personal political thinking and activity should be guided by moral tenets derived from religion. On a structural level, religious organizations and voting blocs coalescing around religious identification engage with politics as lobbying

groups, endorsers, and constituencies. Lambert (2008) notes that religious coalitions have been politically activated by shared moral opposition to existing policy and therefore “seek by political means what the Constitution prohibits, namely, a national religious establishment, or, more specifically, a *Christian* civil religion” that would revoke and/or implement target policies (p. 5).

Therefore, religious morality can be, and historically has been, used for both right- and left-wing activism in the United States. Pro-slavery advocates and black and white abolitionists all used the Bible to demonstrate the morality and social necessity of the continuation or demise of the institution of slavery (Gerbner 2018; Lamb-Books 2016). On issues of women’s sexual liberation, access to contraception and abortion, and gay rights in the 20th century, partisans have used appeals to morality and the integrity of the nation to argue for either expanding or denying civil liberties and cultural acceptance (Griffith 2017). Major left-wing policy victories in the United States have been won with advocacy from morality movements. Many Christian denominations as well as Jewish and Catholic activists contributed to the 18th and 19th century development of the social gospel movement, which engaged moral indignation and compassion to advocate for liberal policies to alleviate socio-economic ills like child labor, alcoholism, and poverty (Evans 2017). The 20th century Civil Rights Movement was propelled by black religious leaders and church congregations and voiced in the rhetoric of black liberation and racial equality through Biblical allegories and Christian imagery (Selby 2008; Findlay 1993). Still today, both religious scholars and political actors see moral imperatives from their religious convictions to support and advocate for left-wing policy on issues including climate change, disability and chronic illness, and immigration (Yukich 2013; Gottlieb 2002).

Yet despite this rich and ongoing history of left-wing moral engagement with politics, the prevailing representation of morality in contemporary political discourse presents it as belonging to the right. This apparent paradox results from the conflation of the concept of

morality with religion and the changing demographics of the major political parties. As previously noted, the right is more homogeneous than the left, the majority being white Christians and anchored by an activated core constituency of white evangelicals. Their unshakable and morally motivated partisanship makes them reliable voters credited with driving right-wing electoral successes (Lambert 2008). In addition to greater diversity of racial and religious backgrounds that complicate efforts to articulate common moral grounds on the left, a plurality is religiously unaffiliated. If our only understanding of morality in politics is through the shared religious convictions of political actors, American political discourse does not and conceptually cannot identify morality with the left. Thus, the “Religious Right” is a widely recognized movement and voting bloc, whereas the “Religious Left” is an absent counterpoint, its potential emergence to challenge the right’s ownership of morality and political dominance constantly under speculation and in doubt (Cep 2020, Jun 11; Lambert 2008; Sullivan 2008).

So who are the Religious Right, and how did they come to own morality? Or to think about this question through the lens of social identity theory, when and how did white evangelicals become part of the partisan prototype of the right? In recent literature on religion and politics, one main focus is the post-World War II rise and influence of the Religious Right, a partisan political faction with unusual power in American history (Lambert 2008). This research reveals two key periods that helped establish white evangelicals as the normative face of religion and morality in contemporary American political discourse: Nixon’s 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns, and the Reagan campaigns and administrations of 1980-1988.

The first of these are the presidential campaigns of Richard Nixon, which rhetorically identified as their constituency the “Silent Majority.” “Silent Majority” was an intentionally vague descriptor in which the conservative politics of normatively Christian, middle-class, suburban whites were elevated to the status of “majority” politics throughout the late 1960s

and 1970s. Nixon's campaigns contrasted this Silent Majority with the threat of chaotic upheaval from the left in the growing Civil Rights movement and the beginnings of student radicalism (Lassiter 2006). In particular, the 1968 riots surrounding Martin Luther King's assassination and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago shocked conservative but politically passive white evangelicals into becoming active right-wing partisans (Swartz 2012; Lambert 2008). Nixon's campaigns recruited extant local church and neighborhood groups organized against desegregation and school busing for image-burnishing, canvassing infrastructure, and national policy inspiration, establishing the "political language of private property values, individual taxpayer rights, children's education privileges, family residential security, and white racial innocence" used for political cover while disadvantaging people of color and the poor (Lassiter 2006, p. 304). Thus, the Nixon campaigns played a key role in linking the religious, mostly fundamentalist evangelical, beliefs of white suburbanites to partisan political engagement. White evangelicals and their politics started becoming ideologically enmeshed with and embraced by the right's party institutions (Howison 2014; Swartz 2012; Lassiter 2006).

Race politics moved from political text to subtext during the 1970s, but the relationship they had helped forge between the right and religion only deepened during this time. The expansion of women's rights and legalization of abortion energized a right-wing evangelical movement that gained national prominence as the "Religious Right" in the 1970s and 1980s (Griffith 2017; Lassiter 2006). Religious demographics also became more officially centered in right-wing electoral strategy in this period, with white evangelicals playing a leading role in right-wing political organizing and rhetoric during the Reagan years (Howison 2014; Hogue 2012). Whereas Nixon had implied the racial and religious identity of the Silent Majority, Ronald Reagan was explicit about the conservative Christianity of his base. To win the 1980 race for president, Reagan readily adopted white evangelical positions and rhetoric around their focal issues of sexual control, criminalizing abortion,

promoting “family values,” and protecting religious freedom to run segregationist, anti-evolution, abstinence-only church schools (Howison 2014; Lynerd 2014). He campaigned on televangelists’ programs and once endorsed the evangelical audience instead of asking for theirs (Howison 2014; Hogue 2012). Instead of the elective affiliation of activist groups to policies typical to that point, Reagan fatefully put the right’s party apparatus at the disposal of the “Moral Majority” evangelical movement. This gambit to create active, ardent partisans paid off; a 1988 Times Mirror report developing a grounded typology of voters listed religious faith first among the “basic values and orientations that both drive—and divide—Americans” (Ornstein, Kohut, & McCarthy 1988, p. 1). The Republican Party’s “Moralist” bloc, its size “increased by the evangelical movement” to become the party’s “second bedrock” (p. 3; 13), was the only group in this report labeled with a non-policy, non-demographic identifier. By the late 1980s, a significant portion of the right was an overwhelmingly white (92%), suburban, middle-class group defined by fundamentalist evangelical Christianity (Ornstein, Kohut, & McCarthy 1988). White evangelicals became a “captured group,” a voting bloc tied to one political party such that its loyalty is never in question, only its enthusiasm and turnout for a given candidate (Howison 2014, p. 131). The Religious Right remains the pluralist core of right-wing voters and the driving force behind the right’s electoral victories up to the present day.

Scholars have also pointed to the Reagan years as the period in which the left lost any claim it had on religious morality. Whereas right-wing institutions embraced the activism and politics of white fundamentalist evangelicals, the contemporaneous attempt by progressive evangelicals to organize on the left as Evangelicals for Social Action was neither welcomed nor able to maintain unity (Swartz 2012). The failure started with the white, male leadership of the heterogenous coalition at the 1973 founding congress neglecting demands of the women, non-white, and politically marginal delegates, some of whom quit the congress rather than sign onto its Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern. Trying to strike a middle

ground to keep the rest of the coalition together, the Declaration combined a traditional social gospel perspective on issues like war, civil rights, and social security with fundamentalist insistence on doctrinal and sexual fidelity (Evans 2017; Swartz 2012). In addition to objecting to the principle of creating an explicit bond between political and religious spheres, the latter planks of this platform made the left-wing political establishment skeptical of the evangelicals' liberalism (Swartz 2012). This lack of institutional support in the political sphere cemented the failure to establish a Religious Left at the same time that the roots of the Religious Right took hold and flourished.

Since 1989, the Religious Right has stayed at or near the center of right-wing politics. Its visibility and potency have been enhanced in the 21st century by a media environment and news coverage that disseminates and rewards partisan extremes (Peck 2019; Costley White 2018; Cosgrove 2007). The Religious Right has had particular influence in moments such as the 2010 midterm election, in which the Tea Party renewed the strong ties between fundamentalist evangelical Christianity, white working-class identity, and racist backlash to Barack Obama and the post-Obama left (Butler 2021; Costley White 2018). The success of the Tea Party movement in driving right-wing partisanship emerged from news media tropes, biases, and structures that framed the Tea Party as a formidable political faction long before it had any popular weight behind it (Peck 2019; Costley White 2018). Evangelicals' latent racism and mistrust of non-Christians suffused right-wing resistance to Barack Obama's presidency and his administration's policy agenda (Butler 2021; Costley White 2018). In 2016, right-wing opposition to Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential bid and support for Donald Trump hinged on long-standing political priorities of fundamentalist white evangelicals: the maintenance of white, Christian purity in their communities, anti-feminist and homophobic "family values," and restricting or criminalizing abortion (Griffith 2017).

Thus, the conflation of morality with religion and the exclusive association of white evangelicals with the right over the past forty years has led to contemporary American

political discourse that frames moral engagement with politics as a domain of right-wing political actors. In contemporary America, morality is consequently categorized as a characteristic primarily of right-wing political identity. This narrative persists in the public understanding in spite of the lack of empirical evidence supporting the idea either that the left is morally deficient or that the right is more morally motivated than the left (e.g., Wang & Inbar 2021; Skitka, Hanson, & Wisneski 2017; Turner-Zwinkels, van Zomeren, & Postmes 2016; Skitka & Bauman 2008). And where does this leave morality on the left? Though individuals who identify with the left might be religious and religious people might find moral compulsion toward left-wing policies, a religious language to express their morality fits poorly with the left-wing partisan prototype. Within a social identity theory of political divide, morality in politics is exclusively right-wing morality in service of right-wing politics. There is no Religious Left that can match the homogeneous fervor and unity of the Religious Right, and the diversity of the contemporary left makes that possibility unlikely.

The left has internalized its supposed deficit of moral engagement and the perception that it has caused its electoral defeats. As leftist pundits and intellectuals concede, “It makes sense, then, that – in a culture whose framework for morality has relied on religion for centuries – many liberals would struggle to find the words to talk about what moves them at the deepest level” (Smarsh Aug 4, 2018). If “a moral crisis requires moral language,” to defeat the right in the contemporary political moment, pundits advise that the left needs to find leaders who can lead a “moral revolution” (Gabler Oct 4, 2018). But what they’re suggesting is that the left adopt the religious language of right-wing morality, or some non-denominational, spiritual-not-religious equivalent. The demographics of the left, particularly the 29% plurality that considers itself religiously unaffiliated, make this difficult, if not impossible. And even if it were possible to find an equivalent left-wing religious morality, is it necessary? Empirical research suggests that, even if the left don’t have a coherent, consistent moral framework recognized in political discourse, there is coherent, consistent

moral reasoning on the left as much as there is on the right (Haidt 2012; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek 2009; Emler, Renwick, & Malone 1983).

This raises multiple questions relevant to this project. Does the left actually have a deficit of moral engagement with politics? Or is the left's morality simply not apparent in political discourse? If we accept that it is morality derived from and described with Christian frameworks leading voters to support policies and identify as partisans on the right, why couldn't morality from some other source and represented with some other language be contributing to political thinking and behavior on the left? If we look to an alternate discursive venue, is there evidence that the left already has a moral mode of political engagement? My project investigates this possibility in the discursive venue of popular culture.

Popular Culture and Moral Engagement

Recovering the role of morality in leftist politics requires thinking about morality in a different way than previous scholars. This involves both looking beyond political discourse and imagining moral engagement with a non-religious framework. Therefore, this dissertation proposes looking to popular culture and moral convictions honed in habitual engagement with its narratives rather than in relationships with religious tenets or identity. In this section, I define popular culture as I am using it, address its potential for moral engagement, and situate popular culture in relation to politics. If moral engagement is already part of left-wing politics, one way it may be expressed is with language drawn from or developed in interaction with narrative media.

Culture is "the subjective forms we live by," the material and symbolic means of producing and perpetuating social meaning (Johnson 1986, p. 43). The materiality and activity of engagement with institutions, texts, objects, rituals, and behaviors is not formally taught but nonetheless is understood by participants through what Williams (1998) terms "structure of feeling." Structure of feeling is the cultural fluency that participants develop

simply because culture is what society lives in and through; without culture, society would be unintelligible to its members and therefore nonexistent. Culture is both individual and collective, both agentive and structured in its possibilities for engagement, and simultaneously dynamic and bounded by its historical, technological, and receptive social contexts (Williams 1998; Johnson 1986). Thus, a society and its culture are reciprocal, mutually reinforcing frames for defining what it means to be a part of “the public:” people who participate in the culture are part of society, and the multiple parts of society are unified by culture.

Consequently, no discussion of culture can disregard questions of power. Because culture constitutes recognized ways of being and participating in society, the divisions recognized between people often correlate with divisions in appropriate participation in public life as an expression of power hierarchies. For instance, based on characteristics of age, gender, race, education level, or religion, there would be behaviors or choices of clothing that would be normative and tacitly supportive of existing hierarchies of power, and those that would signify a resistance to or defiance of expectations. Williams (1998) describes these respectively as the unmarked and marked cases. Unmarked cases reify existing power dynamics across difference, often by being literally unremarkable, just the way things are. Society does not tolerate marked cases, those individuals and groups that attempt to engage with institutions, texts, objects, rituals, and behaviors that they have been denied access to, or do so in a novel or disruptive way that contradicts the status quo. Participants in marked cases are punished by assertions of power, which can be as comparatively mild as rhetorical othering or as severe as the execution of sovereign state power (Bennett 1998; Williams 1998). The earlier exploration of right/left political division and morality in political discourse was a sketch of the political sphere of public life, a subcategory of culture. As that overview showed, politics has recognized ways of participating, that is, the traditional strains of political discourse, and unmarked and marked modes of participating. Within that set, the

only unmarked mode of moral participation in politics is right-wing religion. Leftists adopting religious moral frameworks or trying to forward alternate moral frameworks for political engagement are marked cases of participation, literally remarkable in the sense that left-wing morality is treated as unusual, bizarre, or inauthentic.

Popular culture is a different subcategory of culture. Generations of scholars have defined and redefined what constitutes popular culture, often relying on an interface of high/low value contrast between the institutions, texts, objects, rituals, and behaviors produced by and for social elites and those by and for the masses (Eagleton 2000; Williams 1998). The exact parameters of what is for elites and for the masses have never been clear, and have been further complicated by the postmodern blending and appropriation of cultural forms traditionally considered part of either high or low culture into an all-pervading middlebrow culture (Radway 1997; Macdonald 1957). As a rule of thumb, the “popularity” of popular culture denotes high-volume interaction with widely accessible texts and objects, often but not always mass-produced (Fiske 2010). Popular culture is also broadly understood to be in contrast with more formal, legitimate spheres of culture and society, including the political sphere. Consequently, popular culture is a mutable category, one that can be fitted to different arguments about its value to society, its ability to impose institutional and social power on the public, and people’s ability to resist or reform its content (Horkheimer & Adorno 2001; Hall 1982; Shils 1960).

Following Fiske’s (2010) dictum that “[p]opular culture is to be found in its practices, not in its texts or their readers” (p. 37), I inscribe the discursive sphere of popular culture as individual or collective meaning-making in the deliberate production, sharing, interpretation, and remaking of texts and objects in response to industrially produced popular cultural texts. As Hall (1981) phrases it, popular culture “is the ground on which the transformations [of social meaning] are worked;” popular culture is the venue in which people negotiate their position in and understanding of society (p. 228). To put it another way, the value of a given

text is determined by the creative, communal labor of audiences to give it meaning, not production values or commercial distribution and promotion (Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013). This is a definition of popular culture focused on reception, how audiences understand and use manufactured texts and objects to comprehend and create society and themselves as members of society. Thus, engagement is fundamental to popular culture as I define it.

One concentrated and well-studied mode of popular culture as engagement is fandom. Fans, or the people who do fandom, are the quintessential participants in popular culture as I have defined it here. Any audience may participate in popular culture discourse, but fans do so intentionally and habitually. Fandoms coalesce around a fannish object, which can be just about anything, including sports teams, bands, brands, games, dance and exercise genres, and material objects. In a variety of practices including but not limited to textual analysis, critical reading, fine and digital art creation, writing, role playing, community development, and content regulation, fans “actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions” (Jenkins 1992, pp. 23-24). They are self-conscious participants in the simultaneous perpetuation of society and culture through interaction with institutions, texts, objects, rituals, and behaviors. Fandom is an orientation to meaning-making, a habit of creative participation undertaken as individuals and within groups. And given that popular culture is a facet of public life, fandom can also be understood as an orientation to meaning-making in society as a whole, broadly applicable to institutions, texts, objects, rituals, and behaviors beyond its initial fannish objects.

Is morality part of the fannish mode of engagement with popular culture and society? The variation across the wide range of audiences, activities, and forms of expression that can be understood as fandom makes it difficult to make a universally applicable statement. Moral engagement is a marked case in some fandoms, but unmarked in others. For instance, Perks (2015) argues that media series like the *Harry Potter* books and movies or

the long-running show *Mad Men* immerse audiences in narrative morality for long periods, which heightens the inherent qualities of narrative as a communicative form to make moral evaluations of events and characters an inherent part of fans' interaction with the text. Conversely, audiences' consumption of a fan object such as a celebrity like Taylor Swift is affective or performative in nature, not morally immersive (Bennett 2014a; Duffett 2014). Moral evaluations of Taylor Swift's music and public persona are possible but not interpellated by the fan object herself, and thus likely to be marked cases among her fans. Therefore, I focus on fandoms organized around narrative media, particularly fictional narratives in film and television. Moral engagement is the unmarked case in transformative media fandom because of the interactive invitations of mass media narratives.

Narrative is a form of communication, defined most simply as a text that conveys a story (Genette 1980). Different popular culture sites interpellate different kinds of interaction, and narrative has the particular quality of being understood to have meaning, which invites interaction by a given audience to determine and evaluate the intended or actual meaning of a text (Berger 2016, 1996; Booth 2010). Narratives can be non-fiction or fiction, simple or complex, and conveyed in a diverse range of mediums, but they function as conceptual frameworks for both understanding and conveying experience (Berger 2016). Consequently, narratives represent and can reinforce or challenge society's status quo, and an audience's encounter with narrative offers further opportunities to reinterpret, renegotiate, or reject the status quo (Radway 1991; de Certeau 1984; Hall et al. 1973). When looking for moral engagement in popular culture, then, it makes sense to look at fandom oriented to objects whose form interpellates engagement, rather than non-narrative fannish objects like clothing brands or musical artists. Moreover, the overt distance from factuality in a fictional narrative requires interpretation or imagination to situate its story into the viewer's experience and understanding of the real world (Gray 2008; Booth 1983; Barthes 1978). Therefore, it is no surprise that fandoms commonly coalesce around fictional narratives in mass media of film

and television, texts whose industrial distribution brings them into contact with massive numbers of people and whose form invites engagement (Gray 2008; Jenkins 1992).

Turning to the issue of right/left division in the contemporary United States under examination in my project, all of this raises the question of whether moral engagement is associated with popular culture. And if so, does popular culture allow moralities other than the predominant religious mode recognized in political discourse? Hall et al. (1973) says that the viewer's generic assumptions, values, attitudes, and social contexts shape their interpretation of what a text means, but how does morality become a mode of engagement in transformative media fandom rather than merely one parameter of interpretation? The audience's engagement with a fictional narrative can be 1) parasocial or social, simply seeking closure from the story's development and completion as an individual or as a group of viewers; 2) intellectual or metatextual, interpreting the literal content and/or the intent of its authors given the context of its creation; and 3) qualitative or aesthetic, evaluating the use of known narrative genres and tropes (Booth 1983). These different kinds of interaction with narrative have varying levels of complexity and critical distance from the story, but Phelan (2007) argues that ethical judgments are an inherent part of any kind of engagement with narrative. Moreover, these judgements proceed from the morals and ideology embedded within the narrative as well as from the audience's internal value systems (Phelan 2007; Booth 1983).

A fictional narrative requires certain ideological concessions from its audience for the representation and development of its plot and characters to make logical sense (Booth 1983). The moral values in narratives usually are societally normative, generally on the order of "murder is bad" and "telling the truth is good." Additionally, contemporary audiences are acculturated to moral ambiguity in fictional narratives and agency to apply their own moral interpretations and contradict or reframe the text (Carter, Donald, & Squires 1995; Booth 1983). In its most fundamental activities, fandom fosters capacities to refine and reject the

perceived intended message of a popular culture narrative if fans identify some other meaning (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992) Therefore, moral engagement in popular culture is not as restrictive or narrowly defined as moral engagement in politics.

In terms of morality in popular culture, then, does moral engagement in evaluating and negotiating the meaning of fictional narratives transcend the encounter with an individual text? How do fictional narratives become a vector for moral engagement and expression in popular culture and society as a whole? Moral engagement in popular culture is not limited to religion as it is in politics, nor does it have a specific form. Encountering an individual fictional narrative necessarily involves interaction, including moral engagement, but fandom is an ongoing, deliberate practice of interaction with fictional narratives in which morality is a normative mode of engagement. Fans move from one media object to the next, both as individuals and as groups, applying the same modes of meaning-making to their engagement with many successive texts (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). Groups of fans develop specific moral tenets through their interaction with narratives that can then be applied to other narratives in popular culture and in other venues beyond popular culture (Jenkins et al. 2016, 2013; Street, Inthorn, & Scott 2013). The exact content of narrative morality depends on a given audience's *preexisting* moral frameworks and their communal interpretation of texts.

It is clear, then, that morality can be a part of popular culture and that it is a habitual mode of engagement in transformative media fandom. Narrative morality is fluid and mutable, not the strict Christian religion of morality as it is understood in political discourse. But are these two kinds of morality and their respective venues actually comparable? What is the relationship between popular culture and politics? Do they have analogous functions in society, or receive analogous treatment from the public? As a discursive venue, popular culture shares some similarities with politics. Like politics, popular culture informs and

reflects the public imagination, the patterns of representation and categorization through which we perceive, classify, and shape the social world (Perrin 2006; Dahlgren 1995).

Most noteworthy for my project is the shared provision for citizenship that features in each. Citizenship, like partisanship, is a form of expressive identity that internalizes one's position in society relative to other people and civil institutions (Dahlgren 1995). Prothero (2016) defines culture war issues as questions of morality, religion, and civic identity that permeate both political and popular culture discourse. The issues of the day are issues because they are inescapably present in everyday popular culture as well as in traditional political venues. Like politics, popular culture is a venue in which individuals and groups enact citizenship by interacting with the materiality and the conceptualization of their society. Both the industrially produced content of popular culture and interactions with it constitute part of the public sphere, a space and activity in which "citizens [...] gather as public bodies to discuss issues of the day, specifically those of political concern," and deliberate individual policy solutions and societal ideals (Dahlgren 1995, p. 7). This description of how people interact with popular cultural media is echoed in Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini's (2009) definition of discursive participation, "the process of citizens talking, discussing, and deliberating with each other on public issues that affect the communities in which they live," which they evidence to contradict the narrative in political science that Americans are politically apathetic (p. 3). With Williams, Delli Carpini (1994; 2001) has also argued that political scholars have disregarded the role that non-political aspects of culture, particularly "conversational" interactions with both news and entertainment media, play in the development of political opinion. Political scholars' reinforcement of the hierarchy of power between politics and popular culture has obscured the obvious reality that people "are *simultaneously* citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth," drawing subjective forms to live by in their political lives from a diverse range of experiences (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001, p. 161).

Though politics is a more formal discursive sphere and popular culture more informal and fluid, the practical distinction between them is porous. There is crossover adoption in the ways people engage with politics and popular culture, with scholars remarking on public engagement with politics as if it were entertainment media (Penney 2017; Woodward 2007; van Zoonen 2005) and uses of popular culture as a means of developing and forwarding activist agendas, both on specific policies and broader philosophies around topics like race and gender (Gray, Jones, & Thompson 2009; Iton 2008; Radway 1991). Their forms and content interact and borrow from each other (Williams & Delli Carpini 2011; Baym 2010), and scholars have argued that popular culture can act as a bridge to politics or potentially a replacement for it. Popular culture, especially narrative media, “provide[s] us with ways to escape from our personal preoccupations and open us up to a broader sense of possibilities,” creating space for a critical engagement with and reevaluation of society that may be closed off in more formal, specialized political discourse (Berger 1996, p. 133). Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova (2020) catalogue a plethora of case studies in the use of popular cultural frameworks as tools of civic imagination. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova (2020) catalogue a plethora of case studies in the use of popular cultural frameworks as tools of civic imagination. Political thinking and participation in elections, protest, and volunteerism correlates with engagement with certain popular culture forms and content, occasionally drawing directly from fictional narratives for models of political behavior (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd 2016; Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013; Gray et al. 2009). Popular culture can acculturate people to political participation, with some empirical results showing that interacting with popular cultural texts helps young people connect their private lives to broader issues and become politically activated (Street, Inthorn, & Scott 2013; Gray 2008; Dahlgren 1995).

Conversely, multiple scholars have argued that people turn to popular culture in the contemporary moment because they feel alienated from political discourse and/or political

processes (Street et al. 2013; Iton 2008; Dahlgren 1995; Lipsitz 1990). Despite the need for public deliberation to be universal, inclusive, rational, consensus-building, and effective in the political process to make citizens politically informed and engaged, the political sphere is often seen as elitist, exclusionary, manipulative, divisive, and politically insignificant (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini 2009). In offering shared experiences with the same fictional narratives, popular culture can provide common ground where other factors – race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, education, religion, and even language – promote division. Gray (2008) describes his personal experience as an immigrant to America and fictional narratives from television providing a bridge across difference, with popular culture acting “not only a way of communicating, but an entity that *allows* communication” with his new peers by imparting a shared language to understand different experiences (p. 12). This is particularly relevant in a context like the contemporary United States, in which a common heritage or equal access to recognized ways of participating in politics across such differences is under partisan contestation (Iton 2008; Eliasoph 1998; Lipsitz 1990). In terms of affordances for acts of citizenship, then, popular culture is similar to politics, but popular culture is the more accessible, democratized venue of expression. For instance, O’Meara (2018) observes social media circulation of screen dialogue from female characters from popular film and television in order to comment on politics and critique the Trump administration. Thus, popular culture may be a more useful and productive discursive sphere for individuals and groups whose participation in politics is limited in some real or perceived manner.

My project builds from both perspectives on the relationship between politics and popular culture, with novel insights from fan studies. Popular culture is similar to politics both in its affordances for citizenship and how audiences interact with each sphere. At the same time, popular culture can play a unique role in providing a discursive venue of political or civic engagement for people who feel alienated from political discourse and electoral politics. These points have been made by previous scholars, but their work has looked at how the

content of entertainment media can increase political knowledge or provoke political discussion in its audience (Gray et al. 2009; Jones 2009; Delli Carpini & Williams 2001), or at the proto-political popular cultural interactions of demographics understood to be inactive in politics, especially youth (Street et al. 2013; Dahlgren 1995; Lipsitz 1990). The most recent scholarship from Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, & Shresthova (2020) is most similar to this project, though they propose that popular cultural frameworks facilitate civic imagination rather than express moral engagement with politics. There has not yet been work on the relationship between popular culture and politics specifically looking at the role of morality in politics. An additional innovation of my project is the assumption that what makes audiences' engagement with popular cultural media relevant to politics is fan praxis, that is, the productive labor of their orientation to media, not whether its content is explicitly political. Moreover, the relationship between popular culture and politics is not correlative or causal; instead, popular culture and transformative media fandom offer rhetorical frameworks for expressing moral motivation behind political actions.

Where Is Left-wing Morality?

The question, then, is not *whether* there is morality in the different spheres of public life, but one of *who* does moral engagement in which venue. The right has a widely recognized control over moral engagement in politics, the unmarked case narrowly defined as Christian religion. Those who adopt right-wing political stances and identity have a ready venue and framework for expressing moral engagement with issues. If there is morality on the left, where is it and what does it look like? Popular culture potentially attracts individuals and groups alienated from political discourse. If their morality is inexpressible in contemporary American political discourse, do leftists in need of a venue for their moral engagement with politics turn to popular culture? Do they participate in transformative media fandom and its moral engagement with fictional narratives as a replacement or proxy for

moral engagement with politics? In other words, my project investigates whether the contemporary right-left divide over morality is not a matter of unequal ownership but a matter of unequal recognition of discursive venues and alternate frameworks for moral engagement.

To address the morality aspect of right/left political division, my project attempts to locate and characterize left-wing moral engagement in popular culture. Specifically, given the high degree of interaction in fandom and the affordances of interaction with fictional narratives in mass media, I look for non-religious moral frameworks in transformative media fans' political talk. What might moral expression look like in a popular culture venue? There have been many competing definitions of morality in different intellectual fields, and concerns about the moral impacts of media content have been a historical driver of media studies (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis 2013). My project predicts that fans express left-wing moral engagement using habits and frameworks of their communal labor of meaning-making with narratives. Therefore, I follow Haidt (2001, 2012) and Cushman, Young, and Greene (2010) in conceptualizing moral expression as an emotional and intellectual dual process, rooted in the emotional or affective response developed in social contexts that makes a person understand something as good or bad, which is then intellectually justified and refined as a systematic structure evaluating good and bad action in the world. Christianity is one systemic moral structure that, in the case of right-wing politics, also provides a normative, unmarked rhetorical framework for describing moral motivation. Since transformative media fandom consists of a systematic orientation to social, intellectual, and aesthetic labor to make meaning from narratives, which themselves require moral engagement (Perks 2015; Phelan 2007), it is probable that fans develop moral structures and borrow rhetorical frameworks for describing moral motivation from fictional mass media narratives.

The porous distinction between politics and popular culture means that moral frameworks developed with and first applied to media narratives can be appropriated into political discourse. I expect that this appropriation is already happening at a greater societal

scale, but that it will be most apparent among transformative media fans. Their simultaneous interaction with both discursive spheres of public life is a point of crossover between popular culture and politics. Historically, fandom has been a marked case of participation in popular culture to the point of being pathologized, but it is much less marked in the contemporary United States; many practices and behaviors of transformative media fandom specifically are now becoming unmarked cases in popular culture (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington 2017; Jenner 2017; Jenkins 1992). One example relevant to my project is the fannish logic undergirding contemporary mass media production, which has led to a saturation of the popular cultural media market with franchises and serial media intended and marketed for immersive, repeat viewing that invites moral engagement with the narrative (Perks 2015). Therefore, transformative media fans' patterns of moral engagement with politics can be considered analogous to, and potentially predictive of, patterns of moral engagement in American society.

For the purposes of this project, I define the population of "transformative media fandom" as those who participate in communal production of meaning through interaction with fictional narratives in popular cultural media. This is an intentionally broad definition to avoid delimiting my potential sample based on my assumptions about what that participation looks like based on my own experiences with fandom.

Transformative media fandom as both a descriptive label and parameter for sampling is related to but subtly distinct from existing definitions used to study and describe fandom. Within fan studies, the fundamental divides attributed to media fans have historically separated fans and non-fan audiences by their perception of being "active" that distinguishes between types of fan activity. The focus on specific activities in these definitions and sampling methods tend to exclude fannish participations that are not productive of discrete objects like fanfics or vids. Among fans themselves, one relevant division between different kinds of fans is between curatorial fandom, typified by collecting and ordering content or

information provided by source material or IP owners, and transformational fandom, typified by activities that respond to or build from source material irrespective of its IP owners' intent or wishes (Curative Fandom, 2020, Feb 3). Stereotypically, curatorial fandom is associated with male audiences and transformational fandom with female audiences, though this correlation has been thoroughly critiqued as both reductive and unrepresentative of how individual fans interact differently with different media at different times (ibid). The activities associated with transformational fandom seem to be crucial to the development of the moral behavior I'm interested in, but I argue that which activities fans participate in is less significant than the fact of their participation in transformative media fandom.

In terms of political alignment, transformational fandom has been stereotypically associated with LGBTQ+ positivity and therefore with liberalism because of the creation and consumption of slash fic in that fandom economy. Slash is a strain of transformational fandom that centers on queer interpretations of media texts, especially interpretations that excavate or posit a romantic and/or sexual dynamic between male characters. Participation in slash fandom can lead to a presumption of fans' political liberalism, but slash fandom has been critiqued as heteronormative and cissexist regarding gay men and gay sex, homophobic against queer women, and obsessively narrow in its interest to the point of being racist and sexist (Pande 2018; Hunting 2012; Scodari 2009; Cicioni 1998). Moreover, it is possible to participate in the activities that typify transformational fandom without being involved in slash fandom at all, or being virulently opposed to slash for a variety of reasons, including reasons that seemingly align with a right-wing perspective such as homophobia and deference to the IP owners' wishes. There is no obvious content- or activity-based reason for transformational fandom to be aligned with either the contemporary American right or left.

In short, there are complications inherent in defining different kinds of fandom that make scholars and fans themselves hesitate to assume the political beliefs and behaviors of

fans. I am asserting a slightly different classification of fandom activity in calling my participants transformative media fans. Transformative media fans are united by *praxis*, in this case, a shared habitus of seeking emotional, intellectual, analytic, and/or creative stimulation in the consumption of media, not always but usually in community with others. In underscoring a habitual orientation to media rather than specific activities, this definition encompasses fans' disparate levels and types of engagement with different media and different fan groups. Transformative media fans as defined by praxis may be more likely to identify with the American political left than the right.

An understanding of the inherent limitations of research scope is necessary for studying fandom. What fandom looks like is often a function of the technological and habitual affordances of the site from which one's study samples them (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington 2017). Therefore, my project will mitigate this effect collecting data in multiple ways from samples drawn from multiple sites of fan participation. My methods for data collection and analysis will be discussed further in the next chapter.

I do not limit the population I'm interested in or the samples I draw by political partisanship or by past voting behavior. The confusion about what the divisions in contemporary American politics are given the conflation of right/left, conservative/liberal, and Republican/Democrat terminologies, as well as the large portion of the public that considers itself independent, moderate, unaffiliated, or simply disengaged from politics, means that screening potential study participants on these criteria would likely exclude groups that would more fully position my findings in relation to the broader American public. However, the preponderance of existing literature leads me to believe that the transformative media fandom might not have a partisan makeup similar to that of American society writ large. In part, this is numerically logical. While there are no definitive numbers on fandom demographics, scholars and fans themselves have noted that participants in stereotypical media fandom activities like writing and reading fanfiction are disproportionately white

women and queer people (centrumlumina 2013; Stanfill 2011). Additionally, a wide range of fan labor and behavior conducted online requires a level of technological aptitude more often found in younger people. All of these groups – women, queer people, and young people – are disproportionately left-wing in their politics (Pew 2018b).

Additionally, discursive patterns and hierarchies of power might drive the left to media fandom and media fandom to the left. The high/low binary that early theorists of popular culture used to define it against the culture of elites is still reflected in the relative societal importance attached to the spheres of politics and popular culture, elevating the former over the latter. Because it seems that the right has a normative religious framework and an outlet for moral engagement in the more prestigious sphere of politics that keeps right-wing morality in that mode and space, I suspect that transformative media fans who employ popular culture morality to engage with political issues will be disproportionately left-wing in their policy opinions and identification.

If my study shows that people do use frameworks from popular cultural texts and transformative media fandom to express moral engagement with political issues, it will contradict the assumption in political discourse that the left suffers from a lack of moral engagement or lacks a language to express it. Moreover, such a finding would also suggest that our understanding of contemporary American politics is hampered by a myopic focus on traditionally studied streams of political discourse and consequent assumptions about what divides right from left. If transformative media fans are overwhelmingly on the left, it would support the idea that the left can turn to popular culture for its moral frameworks and a venue to express their moral engagement with issues because the right seemingly owns normative morality in political discourse. Whereas the existing understanding of moral engagement and partisan participation and identification is heavily weighted to the right, this dissertation shows that this understanding is flawed due to its narrow understanding of where the public does its moral engagement with politics and what it looks like. And if this one facet is flawed,

then is our understanding of right/left division systemically flawed? Do the traditional sites in which we study politics and the data we recognize as political skew our picture of reality? Does understanding the contemporary moment in American politics and predicting our future require reimagining and redetermining what truly divides right from left?

Chapter 2: Moral Theory and Moral Expression from Fandom

I have left what I mean by “morality” and “moral expression” vague up to now.

Morality is difficult to define in the vernacular, let alone in academic language. Institutionally, different disciplines conceptualize and measure morality differently. Personally and professionally, a postmodern, multicultural context and normative values make me hesitate to assert a definitive parameter of which data speak to morality and which do not. Yet defining terms is foundational to scholarly work, and particularly so for this project, which rests in part on an assertion that the concept of morality in America has been *incorrectly* limited to conservative religious convictions. I do not hold a positivist idea of universal, inherent morality or amorality, but neither am I a strict linguistic descriptivist willing to accept the connotation of the term as limited and therefore the concept must be limited. Personally and intellectually, I believe “morality” should and does encompass a concept broader than religious conviction. I believe that “moral expression” is an important, inextricable aspect of being in the world, including and especially in public spheres. I bring those convictions to my analysis and argument, so these concepts must be explained.

For the purposes of this project, then, the intellectual concept of morality examined in this dissertation is informed by the works of philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor’s definitions are extremely useful in balancing the fact that the concept of morality is out of fashion in the contemporary western world with the instinctive conviction that it is still part of our social landscape. In short, morality is the phenomenological experience of having moral ideals that influence interaction with the world. As Taylor (1991) defines it, a moral ideal is “a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where ‘better’ and ‘higher’ are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but *offer a standard of what we ought to desire*” (p. 16; emphasis mine). Morality is personal, but not necessarily unique; there is a normative dimension to the formation and maintenance of moral ideals. Moral ideals are formed in social contexts, whether in acceptance or rejection of parents, institutions, and so on, as part

of identity formation. The expression of these ideals is also inherently an expression of identity “in dialogue with others, in agreement or struggle with their recognition of us” (pp. 45-46). This definition of morality does not discount the individual’s agency to reason and act in the world, but it foregrounds the idea that no one is an island; what they think is moral or not and when they enact moral decisions are always in conversation with society and their situation.

How consciously does a moral actor employ these ideals? Taylor argues that morality has become one victim of the elevation of individualism, instrumental reason, and what he calls “liberalism of neutrality” in western society (1991, p. 17). Like scholars from many fields (e.g., Kinder & Kalmoe 2017; Lakoff 2014; Smith 2003; Eliasoph 1998; Bloom 1987), Taylor (1991, 2007) observes a correlation between individualism, social detachment, and relativism, such that the ontological limits of personal reason and knowability seem to deny any right to put a civic-minded, legitimate challenge to another person’s values and decision-making. Individualism is valued in western societies as a fundamental corollary to capitalism and the project of civilization. However, this liberal valuation of the individual and individual rights comes with an uneasy ambivalence for the apparently necessary loss of socially imposed structures of religion and monarchy from premodern eras. In the vacuum of a world without order other than what personally matters to and advantages the individual, Taylor argues that decision-making naturally relies heavily on instrumental reason, which values only what is directly measurable and prioritizes efficiency, technology, and short-term gains. While an ideal such as honesty may exist within western culture, it “sinks to the level of an axiom, something one doesn’t challenge or acknowledge but also never expands” (1991, p. 17).

In this context, morality is still understood to be part of politics as a cultural hangover and phenomenological instinct. In the contemporary western world, especially for people who subscribe to liberalism, diversity, and multiculturalism, the push against socially imposed

order and the allure of technocratic solutions from instrumental reason decenters moral engagement in politics (Taylor 1991, 2007; Smith 2003). Any serious discussion of what a “better” or “higher” life would entail in political decision-making is relegated to the fringes of public political discourse, usurped by measurable demographic markers, fiscal figures, and punditry. Even freedom is understood to be an inherent, non-moral good, measurable in economic growth, personal prosperity, and endless consumer choice between brands. Individualism and instrumental reason form a closed loop between motive, action, and outcome that is attractive

not in terms of their moral force but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want, and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is (Taylor 1991, pp. 20-21).

In politics, the good life becomes a talking point in a larger campaign to be on the winning team, largely for the sake of beating the opposition. Exploiting data on demographic voting patterns and regional special interests to make ads the most effective at discouraging the wrong voters while turning out the right ones is abetted by raising enough money to keep running those ads in strategic media markets, changing colors from red to blue or vice versa on a graphic visualizing results and perhaps passing a bill or two between fundraising to keep your district your color.

Assuming this is a problem, can it be solved without a reversion to pre-modern social organization? Is liberalism or leftism reconcilable with morality in the contemporary public sphere? In fact, Taylor argues that morality never left, only our acknowledgement of its role in thinking about our place in the world (cf Smith 2003). Even if morality is conventionally understood in terms of religion, particularly as an anachronistic, unfair imposition on the individual, “[w]e may still need to see ourselves as part of a larger order that can make claims on us” (Taylor 1991, p. 89). Instead of a necessarily social institution like a church, this order may be individual and expressed in “languages of personal resonance” (ibid). He

offers the metaphor of a moral horizon, an orientation to the social even in the privacy of one's own thoughts as foundation for any kind of intelligible engagement with the world. Though individualism and instrumental reason foster relativism, which suggests that all decisions are personal and irreproachable, there is a clear disconnect between the cultural valuation of relativism and the reality in which decisions about how to live and represent oneself are not trivial. The turn to the private and the "ordinary" over the public or political sphere as the most important part of life only means something if we recognize that our decisions about how to live are sites in which we seek to be socially recognized and fulfilled. That is, decisions about how to live in the world are necessarily moral decisions.

Taylor's theory of morality in the modern world aligns persuasively with contemporary American political circumstances. For instance, in the 2004 election, there was a great deal of political discourse making sense of George W. Bush's winning coalition resting on "values voters"—those who decided late who they would vote for and told pollsters that "values" were behind their decision—and the solid religious homogeneity forming on the right while the left continued to diversify. Hitlin (2008) says this was more conventional narrative in political discourse than a fair representation of the data, which in fact showed the number of people who were self-described "values voters" declining from 2000, even though Bush won more decisively in 2004 than in 2000. But the narrative stuck, effectively synonymizing "values" and religion, which is to say Christianity, and fixing their place in politics with the American right. This narrative provided an explanation for why right-wing politicians and voters, while defining themselves with support of policies to create cultural encouragement of individualism and personal responsibility, at the same time could oppose policies like access to abortion that would also increase personal freedoms and remove impairments on individual choices. The narrative of religious values smoothed over the inconsistency and the explanation was unassailable politically because of the Constitutional right to religious practice and because of the ontological unknowability of another person's religious

convictions. Incidentally, the right also attempted to discursively link itself to the very idea of being American, and more recently to the concept of being a capitalist, often paired with dog-whistle references to suburbia, the nuclear family, and nostalgia for the mid-twentieth century, as further inoculation from criticism. To criticize or reject the right's policies would be tantamount to criticizing and rejecting America itself.

The left achieved no such discursive alignment of concepts. The unavoidable tension between personal freedoms and the imposition of government authority in their policy positions was left to be explained by other often instrumental reasoning of dry data and statistical projections. Because of the way the right has strategically employed religious and national values in its rhetoric, any leftist criticism of the right must be prefaced with a capitulation of their apparently core values of individual freedom, especially religious freedom, patriotism, and capitalism. In other words, up until the very recent moment that politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who openly espoused socialist politics were able to move into the mainstream, the left's ability to present a clear contrast with the right in terms of *how* they approached politics was hamstrung. They had to concede the starting point, tread lightly in their criticism of a right-wing opponent lest they be accused of religious bigotry, and only quibble with the specific policy direction and outcomes. This leads to the commonplace idea in political discourse that the left suffers from a rhetorical deficit of religious language, an invisibility of moral engagement with politics that leaves the left's policies exposed to accusations of being out of touch, illiberal, and perhaps even un-American. But it would be grossly presumptive to affirm this absence of moral evidence in political discourse as evidence of moral absence in left-wing political engagement. Thus, we must seek out clues as to what moral horizons orient the contemporary American left's political decision-making, understanding that these horizons may be in guises other than religious convictions.

The phenomenological experience of morality is not directly measurable, and moral ideals are formed gradually and largely subconsciously over lifetimes of social influences and experiences. Therefore, studying morality requires a sociological epistemology. For the purposes of this project, I analyze moral expression, which is to say the self-report of people's experiences of morality, data that are necessarily subjective and based in sociohistorical context. My unit of analysis is what Lowe (2010) calls moral vocabularies, contextually useful "code words, evolving meanings, collections of moral terms, resources, symbols and understandings" that convey moral engagement (p. 293). Moral vocabularies are used in the sociological activity of moralization, "the process through which activities, practices, phenomena, objects and subjects acquire a moral standing that transcends personal preference or mere cultural convention," the means of which are derived from and used for group identity production (p. 294). Similar to political discourse analysis, moral vocabulary analysis understands utterances as claims for action, derived from precepts about reality and situations and directed toward a goal. In moralization, the goal is enacting a moral ideal. As much as the ideal is good for its own sake within the moral vocabulary of the claimsmaker, the claim is also one of social reasoning, defining a thing or action in moral terms intelligible to an in-group, explicitly or implicitly against an opposing group and its moral terms. Echoing Taylor's theory of moral ideals formed in interpersonal and social contexts, moral expression is as much utilized to identify with and against social groups as it is to describe the individual's personal motivations when interacting with the world (Lowe 2010; Stets 2010; Hitlin 2008). The goals of making oneself intelligible both in public and personal spheres are inextricable from each other. Therefore, personal morality is inextricable from public or political morality.

I would expect, therefore, to hear people describe moral ideals, either what they strive for or vehemently oppose as part of a conception of a better life, as factors in their political priorities and activities. But if we do not assume that religious rhetoric is a one-to-

one marker of moral engagement in politics, if morality can be expressed using other frameworks, then how do we discern it? Moral vocabulary analysis is therefore applied as data analysis, both to cast a broad net in distinguishing rhetorical frameworks participants employ in describing moral engagement and to critically examine whether their allusions to media fandom objects and behaviors indeed constitute a moral vocabulary as I hypothesize. The social aspect of moralization and political expression has been taken into account in this design. If the left uses media fandom as a framework to express moral engagement with politics, participants would reach for it in these interviews and focus groups because it would be contextually intelligible within the project, titled to them as “Media Fans and Politics,” to the researcher, identified as a fellow fan, and to any other focus group participants as mutual constituents of the same fan space.

This chapter elaborates on the two intellectual strands of philosophy and sociology that inform my theory and analysis of frameworks of moral expression appropriated from transformative media fandom. Taylor’s philosophical theory of the role of morality in modern western society provides a broad definition of morality that leaves open the possibility of ideals and languages not derived from religion, and moral vocabulary analysis provides a means of discerning them. Sociology offers a structure for thinking about how this theory is concretized in social contexts. It is necessary to think about the American political left in oppositional dialogue with the right as it is understood in public political discourse. We must also think about transformative media fandom as a specific community with a specific set of cultural resources to use in moral expression, both from the content they engage with and the habits of engagement their community cultivates. Given the dearth of a non-religious moral language in the political sphere, the left must find other vocabularies and perhaps turn to another sphere entirely to articulate the moral horizons orienting them toward the good life in their political engagement.

Mapping Taylor's Model of Morality to Politics

How does morality impact daily life and political engagement? How do the often conflicting notions of a better life influence complex decision-making? Even if the phenomenological experience is not directly measurable, the theoretical mechanism by which a non-material ideal contributes to taking action in the world suggests potentially measurable indicators of experiencing morality. This section enumerates the sociological operationalization of Taylor's theory of morality and, as a preliminary stress test, contextualizes this model with what we know about contemporary American politics. Morality is a social tool, a way to understand oneself and others as actors in the world and to make oneself understandable to others. Therefore, measuring morality in politics involves measuring expression in some fashion, hearing how participants explain their motives and how they interpret other social actors' decisions within the larger systems of American politics.

What should we listen for to distinguish between moral motives and other motives? Recalling from Taylor (1991) that moral ideals "offer a standard of what we ought to desire" (p. 16), Smith (2003) elaborates that morality is "an orientation toward understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, that are not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, *providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged*" (p. 8; emphasis mine). In other words, morality is an orientation to decision-making that imagines ourselves and our potential actions from the external point of view of society or the universe and judges the right and wrong things to do from that perspective. Morality being an aspect of our engagement with politics is only natural, as the political process is about picking leaders who will represent us and our priorities, the things

we value that rest on “a core sense of how the world should be” and should not be (Hitlin 2008, p. 5).

At first glance, this comports with the commonplace understanding of morality in political discourse: that morality is an imposed system of beliefs, perhaps chosen by the individual adherent, but externally structured by some authority or institution, particularly a church. It can be the case that our ideals are learned in churches, and relationships to social institutions and groups are inextricable from the development of self-concept. However, morality as this project is concerned is not what is taught but what we learn. A pastor may preach compassion and suggest donating to charity as an expression of compassion, but we cannot assume that a person’s attendance at the church means they agree with that moral ideal or obey its suggested enactment. In politics, the homogeneity of self-reported religious affiliation cannot and should not be treated as a sign of uniform moral motivation in political opinions. It is better to ask whether the parishioner volunteers and donates to charity, and then ask why. Does the parishioner say compassion is a moral ideal because it structures their internalized concept of how to live a good life, or do they say it because it is a mark of their adherence to the parish and its teachings? And if a non-parishioner also donates to charity, why has he done it? Has he learned compassion from some demographically illegible source, or does he adhere to a group identity that we do not acknowledge as a marker of morality in political discourse because it is not religious?

Sociologically, personal conviction and social ties are equally valid facets of morality. Bandura (1999) divides morality into its inhibitive and proactive elements, essentially the “should-nots” and “shoulds.” The “shoulds” are further divided into duties, what we feel compelled to do because of social or cultural factors, and ideals, what we feel is right in itself. For the sake of clarity, doing something because you feel like you should is different from doing something because you feel like you have no other viable option; concession is not the same thing as coercion. If one acts in a moral way according to their own moral compass,

whether it is because of an elective association with a group they don't want to disappoint or disrespect or because of privately held convictions, the exact nature of the motivation does not affect the material outcome. Even if the two proactive facets of morality are not in alignment or actively clash, it likely has little impact on the phenomenological outcome of feeling like one did the "right" thing. Moral ideals often come into conflict with each other and individuals have to prioritize one over another. Returning to the example of the parishioner donating to charity, unless he feels compelled to do so for fear of some material harm if he does not donate, it is not coercion. If he does so despite privately thinking that charity promotes laziness or some other unworthy characteristic in its recipients, for instance, then he has obeyed some other moral ideal structuring his idea of how to live the good life that is furthered by donating to charity. Perhaps that ideal is harmony with his parish community or obedience to the church's authority, but he prioritizes it over whatever privately held moral ideal balks at donation.

Returning to Bandura's typology of moral impulses, how do the two facets of the initial division impact engagement and decision-making? How do inhibitive and proactive morality interact with each other? Hitlin borrows Ainslie's (2001) terminology of bright lines and bright lights to describe how the inhibitive and proactive aspects shape our moral engagement with the world. We are attracted to bright lights, the duties and ideals that are learned and internalized as part of our identity in society. But imaginatively mapping out all the possibilities and weighing different moral goals against each other is a complex task, too complex to be practically employed every time one makes a decision. If our hypothetical parishioner indeed has both "compassion" and "self-reliance" as moral bright lights, what is the correct thing to do when he is asked to donate to charity? Hitlin suggests that this question rarely arises in our minds this way. Instead, we draw bright lines that delineate what is morally unacceptable, the possible directions for decision-making preemptively denied as "should-nots." These bright lines are shortcuts for everyday pursuit of the morally good life

we envision in positive ideals. Rather than what is most right, our instincts are attuned to avoiding what is most wrong. In most cases in everyday living, choices are limited already by circumstance and these instincts give us a sense of the wrong thing, and thereby the right thing, to do in a situation, and then “our conscious mind often produces after-the-fact logic to build the best case possible for a pre-ordained, automatically derived first-order reaction” (Hitlin 2008, p. 34). If our parishioner’s bright line is “disobedience of authority” or “alienation from the community,” assuming that the pastor and community have linked the ideal of compassion with the act of donating to charity, he would acquiesce to his sense of duty. If the bright line is “abetting degeneracy,” then he would uphold his private ideal and likely have a small sense of unease with his affiliation with that parish that asked him to violate his ideal.

Remember that morality is a social tool for ourselves and others to understand where we fit in the fabric of our society. Social groups define themselves in terms of what is most relevant, the points that describe how they are different from other groups. Avoiding the appearance of aligning oneself with the wrong groups by rejecting what you and your group perceive to be their aesthetics, habits, perspectives, priorities, and choices is often the best way to iteratively align yourself with the right group. Morality is a way we structure our understanding of these social choices, how we make them, and how we judge others’ choices in those situations. As already discussed, bright lights are less precise for decision-making than rejection or instinctive disgust. Distinguishing which positive ideal is most important on which time scale might be complicated, and properly enacting the correct ideal is fraught with counterfactuals of what one could have done instead or more effectively. Thus, prohibitive morality, the bright lines around the things that we absolutely should not do to avoid becoming the people we should not be, is typically the easier and therefore more often employed aspect of our moral engagement with the world. But there is an inextricable link, morally and socially speaking, between rejecting one thing or identity and aligning

oneself with another (Hitlin 2008). In moralization, therefore, the explanation of how one's moral ideals impacted a decision can be cast post hoc in a variety of different lights, but actors and groups of actors are understandably reluctant to cast themselves in the moral wrong.

These dynamics comport with the high level of partisanship in contemporary American politics, with left-wing failures to match the right's fervor, and with the increasing number of political actors who identify as independents or refuse to participate at all. For those who identify with a political grouping, particularly one as well-defined as a party, social self-definition by rejecting the outgroup is morally heightened by the fundamental understanding of democratic government as being about choosing leaders who will do the right thing on our behalf and rejecting those who would do the wrong thing. To be a Republican is, first and foremost, to reject being a Democrat or anything like a Democrat, and vice versa. This prohibitive aspect is especially morally heightened on the right, both by the routinized invocation of morality with explicit rhetorical frameworks from religion and by the broader political discourse that understands the right partly in these religious, "values voters" terms. It should be noted that right-wing moralization has tended to cast its decisions in terms of the positive moral ideals of self-reliance, liberty, and heteropatriarchy, but in recent years, the bright line of rejecting the left or "owning the libs" as a moral ideal in itself has been increasingly foregrounded.

The left's positions are also morally heightened by the conviction that they are doing the right thing. But the left has a harder time than the right in mobilizing this conviction into partisanship and turnout because, for them, "the right thing" is multiculturalism, secularism, and tolerance for difference. Moreover, in rejecting the right's aesthetics, habits, perspectives, priorities, and choices, at least nominally, the left rejects much of the rhetoric and many tactics that pundits credit with the right's electoral and legislative success. Thus,

the left's prohibitive bright line and proactive bright lights contradict each other, creating a foundational tension in left-wing partisan identity that the right does not have.

Identifying as an independent in the two-party system or abstaining from political systems as a whole are also predictable in this model. As noted in the previous chapter, most independents are actually fairly consistent in aligning their political choices with the left or right, and there are non-moral benefits of attention and prestige in political discourse to not belonging to either of the major parties. However, in American culture, independence is highly valued alongside the instrumental reason that typifies Charles Taylor's modernity, both of which create a moral valence and superiority around the idea of ostensibly not having party-ordained bright lines and considering all the options before making a decision. But while a "society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts'" can lend a prestige to political status as an independent, alienation from the social and moral dimensions of political decision-making can also lead to apathy and disengagement (Taylor 1991, p. 9). For those who do not identify with the parties and are cynical about the political system itself, seeing little difference between the two halves of the political spectrum and little positive impact from their attempts to engage with officials or bureaucracies, there can be a kind of moral despair in politics. Taylor diagnoses these circumstances as a "soft despotism" of mildness and paternalism in vast, impenetrable systems against which the individual "feels, correctly, powerless" to exercise the liberty of self-determination; "This demotivates the citizen even further, and the vicious cycle of soft despotism is joined" (p. 10). He prescribes a reinfusion of consciously social morality into politics to counteract the apathetic dangers of individualism. In line with other critiques of contemporary American politics calling for a renewed investment in the local over the national, Taylor advocates creating a "virtuous circle" of moral identification and action with a community at the small scale and reinvigorating democracy on the large scale (p. 118).

In studying morality in politics, then, what does this model point to as key indicators of moral engagement? Firstly, morality is baked into the democratic theory of politics of choosing the right people to lead us in the right direction. People are extremely unlikely to represent themselves as bad actors in a moral sense (Hitlin 2008), so we can expect them to frame their political behaviors as the right thing to do and, potentially, as insufficient. That is, if participating in politics is good and emblematic of some moral ideal, participants will potentially feel the need to acknowledge the counterfactuals of what more or better they could have done to enact that moral ideal.

Secondly, the dyadic aspect of performative social identity and the two-party system likely will mirror the prohibitive and proactive aspects of morality. Do participants see political actors dissimilar to them and political positions other than theirs as morally wrong or amoral? Do they seem to find it easier to express anger or frustration with an opposition or unwanted outcome than to articulate a positive goal? If media fans trend to the left as I expect, I would also expect to hear many participants hesitate or equivocate on questions of morally right and wrong actions in politics as an expression of the foundational tension between the prohibitive and proactive aspects of morality in politics on the left.

Thirdly, despite the right-wing ownership of the title “values voters,” the larger cultural contexts of individualism and instrumental reason lead to resistance in contemporary American politics to treat morality as the primary lens through which to evaluate political issues, particularly on the left. If explicitly asked about morality, do participants shy away from that characterization of their political activities, or not? Do they express ambivalence about political systems and their potential roles in those systems, or show the tendency towards feeling hopeless and apathetic that Taylor observed in the 1990s? Or after twenty years of changes in the political landscape and upheavals such as the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections, has the left reforged identifications with their communities and joined a

virtuous circle of moral engagement and democratic will? Do they in fact embrace morality as a core motivator of their politics?

If it is the latter, what kind of morality motivates them? Functionally, it doesn't matter if political actors make choices based on a sense of duty to a group or their own ideals, as the material outcome remains the same. For the purposes of this project, though, the distinction between duties and ideals is interesting because of the relationship between political elites and their constituencies or audiences. In theory, there is a mutualistic relationship between the two, elites providing structure and direction while publics provide raw resources, energy, and mandates to action. As we have seen, however, a large proportion of Americans feel disconnected or alienated from parties, candidates, platforms, and political discourse, choosing to not affiliate with the two major parties or to avoid politics altogether. In this context, the difference between what individuals feel obliged to do because of social circumstances and what they want to do for its own sake is interesting, particularly if they feel what they want is impossible to achieve within the contemporary political system or within party infrastructure. My sample of transformative media fans willing to talk about their politics unavoidably skews to people who have chosen to engage with the system, yet they often harbor strong doubts as to how that system works and its universe of possible outcomes. Is that choice to participate an expression of duty, or of an ideal? Do they feel their moral ideals align with the social identity of the left or the Democratic party, or do they feel apart from it? And for those who do feel alienated or discouraged, what ideals have been subordinated and which have been prioritized to continue in politics? What can we hypothesize, then, about the moral priorities or moral despair of millions of eligible voters who are able to participate but do not?

Methods for Identifying Moral Expression in Left-wing Political Talk

Because of the need to sample from both offline and online sites of fandom and to provide demographic contextualization, I use a combination of focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys. A representative sample of fandom is impossible to achieve because there is no universally accepted way of defining fandom, let alone counting everybody in fandom. Even in the most broadly accepted categories of participation in media fandom, such as fanfiction writers or vidders, the liminality and overlap of fan spaces both off- and online as well as questions of how much or how recent participation must be in order to count the participant as a fan forestall any definitive description of the participating population (Napoli & Kosterich 2017). Instead of measuring representativeness, then, the context of fandom data should be foregrounded. Analyzing data in light of where the subjects of fan research have been found and their demographic makeup allows scholars to explain the relative breadth of their findings; that is, whether a fannish behavior is only evidenced in a specific space or the fandom for a specific object or across multiple, disparate spaces and fandoms, and how the fan sample compares with other, non-fan populations on factors such as age, gender, race, education level, etc.

I want to capture both offline and online transformative media fandom, so I draw samples from attendees at fan conventions and from online participants in fannish meaning-making. Fan conventions are fan-run, small- to mid-scale gatherings of about fifty to one thousand people, organized around individual fannish objects, object categories like superheroes or science fiction, or simply around the idea of being a fan (Fancon 2017, Dec 5). Individual fan conventions (fancons) may be one-off events or recurring events held once a year or once every two years. Some fancons have home cities, and some rotate through different locations to accommodate participants from different regions. Like many aspects of fandom, their liminality makes it difficult to estimate how many are held in a calendar year in the United States; my list of potential data sources includes more than twenty fancons. Unlike for-profit conventions run by corporations that run to tens of thousands of attendees,

fan conventions are a manageable size for research conducted by one person which aims to gain full community consent for data collection. There is a cost to participation in fan conventions that makes their participants likely to be disproportionately white, urban, and middle-class compared to participants in other fan sites (Bacon-Smith 1992).

The offline fandom of conventions and online fandom have considerable participant overlap, but some relevant differences justify them as distinct sites. Online participation in transformative media fandom has a low cost threshold resulting in a more diverse and massively larger population than offline fandom. Fans can do fannish activities in any online space but have been particularly fond of social media sites such as LiveJournal, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr that allow them to congregate and aggregate fan productivity (Bennett 2014). Fans also build their own spaces and knowledge systems through dedicated sites like Archive of Our Own and dissemination tools like listservs, podcasts, and newsletters (Bury 2016; Coppa 2013). While I am not able to claim my samples are representative of the whole of transformative media fandom, the range of sites and demographic factors I cover demonstrate that the appropriation of popular culture morality into political thinking is not specific to a particular site or kind of fan. My data demonstrate that this behavior is common across many sites and demographic factors and is readily expressed in fans' engagement with political issues.

I conducted focus groups at fan conventions, which I moderated using a standardized, pre-written interview guide. The four fancons I have been able to attend depended on funding, scheduling, and the consent of convention committees. Convention committees were contacted ahead of time for permission to attend the convention in a research capacity and to recruit participants through official listservs or programming announcements. The discussion's focus on political issues was disclosed to all conventiongoers, but not my interest in left-wing morality. Prospective participants were provided written consent so that the session could be videotaped and the data used in my

dissertation. They were allowed to provide this consent under their legal names or under a pseudonym, knowing that I would anonymize all participants in publication. Conventiongoers may have preferred or only been able to sign up for individual interviews, but individual interviews were not conducted during the convention. Focus groups ranged in size from five to thirteen participants. Due to high interest, I conducted a second focus groups at two of the four conventions. Ideally, consent forms should have been filled out ahead of time, but I had paper consent forms available if necessary and to allow walk-on participants. My moderation focused on keeping the discussion on topic, ensuring everybody contributed, and keeping to the time limit agreed to with the convention committee and participants. To remain focused on the discussion, I took minimal notes during the session. There were two cameras to record each session from different angles to provide an audio redundancy and facilitate attribution in the transcription.

Focus groups are ideal for collecting data at fan conventions for multiple theoretical and practical reasons. 1) Their structure shows the communal aspect of meaning-making in discussion and interaction between participants (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015). Communally developing, refining, and appropriating meaning from popular cultural texts is an essential characteristic of transformative media fandom as I have defined it. Interpersonal and communal deliberation over issues is a key political process that can lead to participation in electoral politics (Klofstad 2011; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Caprini 2009). Data from focus groups reflects this process in the development and expression of a shared moral framework in political discussion among the group members (Delli Carpini & Williams 1994). 2) The main logistical hurdle of getting participants to the same place is a moot point when participants are drawn from conventiongoers. I attempt to address the geographic bias of participants in each given convention by attending a collection of fancons as regionally diverse as was possible. 3) A focus group is likely to be more appealing when recruiting conventiongoers than individual interviews. Fans often attend the same conventions every year and/or attend

multiple conventions with the same groups of people, establishing communities that may meet in person only two or three days a year (Bacon-Smith 1992). Data collection methods that would attempt to isolate participants there for the offline communal experience of a convention would be unlikely to attract many volunteers, or else place severe limitations on the time each participant would be willing to give to the project. Focus groups do not isolate fans from group activities and allow for the efficient collection of data from multiple participants simultaneously (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015). Finally, 4) limiting data collection at fancons to the clear boundaries of a focus group allows ethical negotiation of access with convention committees and participants. Best practice in any research, but especially qualitative research of low-status subcultures, involves building explicit expectations, maintaining transparency, and earning the informed consent of all study participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014). Given the small size of fan conventions and fans' wariness of being misrepresented or sensationalized in representation, it is therefore both prudent and ethical to adhere to community-based research (CBR) guidelines. CBR attempts to make community members full partners in the research process from start to finish and is useful in producing research that is valid and beneficial to all parties (Halseth, Markey, Ryser, & Manson 2016). The clear parameters of a scheduled focus group session rather than observation of all community activities is useful in gaining convention committees' approval to collect data during their event, and eases concerns among conventiongoers that their non-focus group activities might be under observation.

To gather data from participants in online sites of transformative media fandom, I use individual interviews. Since the distinction between offline and online fandom is more artificially imposed to organize data than it is reflective of how fandom actually works, conventiongoers who prefer individual interviews to a focus group are treated as online fans. Other interviewees were recruited by enlisting information gatekeepers such as podcast hosts and newsletter editors to disseminate the call for participants as broadly as possible.

As with the focus groups, I disclosed the political topic of the interview, but not my interest in left-wing morality, and all potential participants provided written consent. Since potential participants were geographically dispersed, individual interviews were conducted over BlueJeans, a remote conferencing website that allows in-application audio and video recording. The format allows for in-depth questioning, so the prewritten individual interview guide was more extensive and detailed than the focus group interview guide. In both cases, the guide was written with the intent of eliciting moral reasoning from participants without them realizing what I'm interested in and responding to meet expectations.

Individual interviews add to the richness of my data and conclusions in two ways. First, they allow my sample to extend far the attendees of fan conventions, which are likely to be disproportionately white, middle-class, and urban or suburban relative to the rest of transformative media fandom and American society. Though I do not make any claims that my sample is representative of any population, a more diverse sample is both appropriate and conducive for my argument. Given the diverse coalition that makes up the contemporary American left, it is important to demonstrate that any left-wing morality I identify in transformative media fandom is not specific to a splinter demographic. Second, individual interviews show that popular cultural moral engagement with political issues is an internalized, personal process as much as it is a communal, deliberative process. Individuals' contributions to a focus group cannot be understood or treated as independent of the group dynamic (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015). The addition of individual interviews showing the same kinds of moral reasoning in support of left-wing policies and identity from respondents expressing themselves one-on-one demonstrates that these forms of moralization are internalized and individually meaningful. That is, these frameworks of expression are not restricted in communicative value or use only to group or public settings.

The final form of data and analysis to round out my project is survey data. As previously mentioned, all participants in focus groups and individual interviews filled out

demographic surveys so that they can be placed in the context of the American electorate. Participants took the survey as part of their onboarding to the project, before they participated in either a focus group or interview. Walk-on participants in focus groups were allowed to take it afterward. For ease of contextualization with previously cited data, I used a modified version of the Pew Research Center's demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). Pew's questionnaire includes measures of gender, age, race, religious identification and observance, education level, income, partisanship, household size, and region. For my purposes, I exclude questions about marital status, parenthood, and birthplace, both because they are immaterial to the project and to streamline the survey and increase completion. I've made additions to Pew's questionnaire to allow respondents to enter a gender identity other than male or female, and to ask about their recent political activity: whether they voted in the 2016 and 2018 elections, and if in the past year they have voted in a local election, participated in a demonstration or protest, or donated to, volunteered with, or worked for a political campaign or activist organization. The purpose of these questions is to show whether these fans' interest in politics, virtually certain if they volunteer for this project, is correlated with participation in political processes. After completing the other questions, all participants were asked for their email address for coordination purposes, and focus group participants were asked to provide the name of the convention they would be attending. Individual interviewees were asked at the end of the survey where they heard about the project, so I have an idea of how broadly I was able to recruit participants across different online sites.

Both the focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed for analysis. Because I'm interested in the political ends of popular cultural morality, I employ two levels of analysis. The first level of analysis, which allows me to identify political claims, is political discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). Political discourse analysis is an innovation of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that recognizes discursive formations are in

service of deliberation. Whereas CDA illuminates discursive traces of power hierarchies and bias in the interest of society-wide justice and equity, political discourse analysis (PDA) analyzes how “discourses (and orders of discourse, as structures) provide agents with reasons for action” (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012, p. 237). Without disregarding the influences of structural power on proposed policies and outcomes, PDA is interested in the form of practical reasoning for practical argumentation, “the social and rational *activity* of attempting to justify or refute a certain claim, and aiming to *persuade* an interlocutor (a *reasonable* critic) of the acceptability (or unacceptability) of a claim” (p. 36). Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) propose a general structure of practical reasoning that highlights the role of values in the agent’s goal formation and evaluation of their circumstances. Briefly, values (what we care about) predict goals (states in which our values are realized) that, in light of relevant circumstances, produce a claim for action (how to effect positive change).

In normative political discourse, religious morality functions as a value producing goals and claims to action on the right. According to the normative understanding of morality in politics, the left’s apparent lack of corresponding moral values rhetorically weakens the persuasiveness or acceptability of their goals and claims to action. PDA identifies political claims and with moral vocabulary analysis shows whether in popular culture, and specifically among transformative media fans, a left-wing moral framework developed and expressed with fictional mass media narratives functions as the moral value foundation for political goals and claims to action. An example of this proposed kind of moral framework in political discourse would be a sign carried during the 2017 Women’s March on Washington that read, “Trump is Voldemort, but we are Harry Potter,” thus framing the marchers’ motivation to protest the new president as a moral opposition to evil and oppression.

Synthesizing these three streams of data – focus groups, interviews, and surveys – allows me to say several things definitely: whether respondents identify themselves and their politics as left-wing, whether they engage with politics using a non-religious moral

frameworks, and where they fit into the American electorate. PDA allows me to describe the moral frameworks media fans use, whether it reflects fan praxis and their orientation to mass media fictional narratives, and how they use it. Is it broad or specific in its tenets? Do fans' moral frameworks show commonality or difference? Do specific fictional narratives or types of fictional narratives feature prominently in popular cultural morality? Do fans use popular cultural morality to support certain types of political opinions or candidates more than others? A combination of questions across all three streams of data allows me to say if these fans are engaging with issues or participating in electoral politics or not, and whether they feel alienated from political discourse or the political process. Their demographic information shows how wide of a cross section of the left's voting coalition I was able to sample, and thereby whether these findings are reasonably distinct from demographic factors like age, race, religious affiliation, education, and income.

To begin to answer questions of whether the left has a moral mode of engagement with politics, we have to know how to identify non-normative rhetorical frameworks moral expression. Taylor's theoretical model and its sociological elaboration presupposes that morality is an inherent part of how we approach basic democratic functions, but political discourse does not recognize that engagement unless it is framed in narrow Christian terms. How can we distinguish the actual experience of morality, the mechanisms of ideals and their impact on our actions in the world, from that normative framework for expressing it, and then link morality to other frameworks in other discursive spheres?

A moral vocabularies approach to discourse analysis both identifies expressions of moral motives and "works to map these claims and their underlying assumptions in order to provide a more holistic perspective on the world view(s) from which they emanate" (Lowe 2010, p. 294). This approach also foregrounds the sociological aspects of moral development and moralization, recognizing the inextricability of morality from the formation, organization, and maintenance of identity in social contexts. Moral claims are made about

something being worthy of condemnation or praise, and the content or vehicle of the claim signals and creates solidarity with other people who share the same ideals or same vocabulary. For instance, in speaking about abortion in contemporary American politics, one moral vocabulary refers to a “right to life” and another refers to a “right to choose.” These vocabularies are highly linked to the respective groups that use them, such that using a given vocabulary signals a particular group membership as much as a group membership creates an expectation of one’s moral vocabulary. As “claims, terms, and code words” become systematically linked and organized in relation to each other and a community that employs them, the moral vocabulary itself “becomes a *device for moral analysis*” of novel social objects and proposals (p. 295). Applying the moral vocabulary to determine whether the novel thing is to be praised or condemned confirms and solidifies one’s self-identification with a group, and a reified moral vocabulary homogenizes feelings and interpretations among group members across geographic and temporal distance. That is, the assemblage of a moral vocabulary itself contains social meaning as much as do each of the individual terms and phrases that constitute it. Additionally, moral vocabularies create information by establishing unimpeachable truths for their adherents, giving them the rational means to “ignore, downplay, or dismiss data seemingly at odds with the meaning of a given moral vocabulary” (p. 297). In the highly mediated culture of contemporary America, the multitude of available sources of information can thereby be readily sorted “into categories of significance and insignificance” and accordingly imbued with moral clarity or turpitude (p. 297).

The model of moral vocabularies resonates with the highly partisan and polarized nature of contemporary American politics. The right and left talk about policy and social issues in diametrically opposed ways. There is a partisan divide in the ways we consume news and other media, interpret expert opinions, and incorporate information into our disparate understandings of the world. But as previously noted, only the right’s moral

vocabulary is understood in political discourse as reflecting moral engagement with politics as well as a conservative or Republican political ideology. The left's vocabulary is understood to be purely ideological in nature, its moral dimension obscured at best, completely denied at worst. This is true both among political commentators and some members of the left themselves. To recover the left's moral engagement, a moral vocabularies approach must be coupled with a theoretical distinction between discursive spheres and rhetoric constrained by sociocultural contexts and the phenomenological experience of morality.

In Taylor's terms, this is an issue of the manner and the matter or content of moral struggle. Moral struggle is similar to political activism defined as a continuing labor rather than discrete events, or fandom defined as making do and transforming poached cultural texts for alternate uses. It is about becoming more consciously aware of and deliberate in practicing our moral ideals "by making more palpable to its participants what the ethic they subscribe to really involves" (Taylor 1991, p. 72). The struggle is not a question of defining some facet of one's identity or one's culture as right or wrong and then embracing or rejecting it whole cloth. He suggests "we look not for the Trend, whatever it is, up or down, but that we break with our temptation to discern irreversible trends, and see that there is a struggle here, whose outcome is continually up for grabs" in our lives and our society (p. 79). In short, moral struggle consists of seeking how one can continually work with the resources at hand and within one's circumstances in the world to pursue the good life.

The ideals we seek to enact and the consequences of our morally engaged decisions are the matter of moral struggle. The manner of moral struggle is the expression of our ideals and engagement; in sociological terms, the manner is our moralization. Moralization is subjective, which is to say that we have to be cognizant of the sociocultural and interpersonal contexts of a person's moralization and our interpretation of it (Lowe 2010). However, Taylor argues that the *matter* of moral struggle should not be subjective. As far as we are able to be

empirical and clear-eyed without succumbing to the morality-denying extremes of instrumental reasoning, we should attempt to be objective about our ideals and their realization in our actions.

For this project, it is impossible to judge this on the individual level of participants. Even if participants were able to articulate perfectly their experience of morality, my interpretation of their moralization is an inevitable imposition of subjectivity. Yet this distinction between matter and manner is productive in the interpretation for two reasons: first, to probe the tension between the assertion that morality is inherent to our lives in society and the argument, made by both Taylor and later political commenters, that the left is particularly apt to deny morality as part of their lives. As contends Ricci (2011), one such commenter, the left prefers “to look for theories rather than stories, for mathematical explanations rather than theological axioms,” to the point that even when they see the electoral benefits of the right’s stories and axioms, “personal inclinations would make it difficult to believe in, and consistently promote, such stories—and beyond them, a large-scale story, narrative, or vision” of the good life (p. 5). If that is the case, does that inclination extend from the public to the personal level? Beyond the lack of access to religious frameworks in political discourse, does the left not have habits of moralization on the interpersonal level of talk? For my analysis, this means looking for participants’ level of comfort with explaining their motivations and ease of articulation. Does it sound like something they’ve talked about before? Do they have habits of talking politics with other people? If so, do they talk with people they agree with or disagree with politically, and with what intent? With a number of my participants, the conversation moved in such a way that I was able to directly ask as a follow-up question about the role of morality in politics. When prompted overtly, did participants feel comfortable with that characterization of their perspective on and engagement with politics? Did they equate morality with right-wing religious rhetoric, or did they have a more expansive view of what morality connotes?

Moreover, did they describe a habit of evaluating moral matter, the intents and outcomes of actions in the world, compared to moralization? In other words, do political actors also see a distinction between matter and manner of moral engagement, and is it part of how they interpret politics?

Second, how do they moralize? In the superimposed social contexts of being on the left in American politics and in transformative fan spaces, what frameworks do participants employ as moral vocabularies? Again, the social contexts and available cultural resources must be taken into account. This is to say that communities do not independently produce the signifiers through which they communicate with each other and to others. The phrases, symbols, beliefs, practices, and historical events and persons that constitute moral resources are extant in the host culture, which is to say contemporary American culture, and they have given parameters and capacities to orient and facilitate action, as well as being inherently contestable in their meaning. Lowe (2010) likens moral resources to Williams's definition of cultural resources and Geertz's of symbols: in each terminology, a text's meanings are produced in its iterative and evolving use by different individuals and groups in their particular sociohistorical sites. In being taken up into a moral vocabulary, these resources are systematized and made coherent with other resources in the vocabulary, imbued with obligation for those who subscribe to that vocabulary and the community that uses it. The process of taking up a resource also situates the group's moral vocabulary in or against the larger culture and in contrast with other communities' vocabularies. Evaluating social dynamics with present and absent interlocutors is an important part of moral vocabularies analysis as a consequence (Lowe 2010). For the purposes of this project, analyzing participants' moral vocabulary requires keeping in mind what moral resources transformative media fans have available to them and how they employ them relative to the institutions of politics and other political groups, both those on the left and the right and the disengaged.

I hypothesized that the left might reach for some other rhetorical resource more freely available to them than religion for their moralization. This is a question of what cultural resources transformative media fans have available to them for appropriation into mutually intelligible and meaningful moral vocabularies (Lowe 2010). A plurality of my participants, thirty-eight of sixty-nine, identified themselves as having some religious affiliation. These identifications were not homogenous, ranging from Buddhism to Protestantism to paganism, and the remaining thirty-one identified themselves as nothing in particular, an unspecified something else, atheist, or agnostic. Did those who are religious reach for familiar frameworks for moralization? Or as secular leftists, were they reluctant to use that rhetoric in political talk? I prompted all participants to consider whether, in their personal experiences, the spheres of fandom and politics had any overlap or influence on each other. Did they see links between their habits in fandom and their political activities? If there was a parallel between the two, did they reach for that understanding of fan praxis, shared with the interviewer and other focus group participants, to frame their moralization of political action?

There are two basic features that render a moral resource capable of being appropriated into a moral vocabulary: presence in the host culture and significance to the group defining the vocabulary. These are low bars that popular culture texts easily meet for transformative media fans. But some resources have better capacity for use than others because of their perceived significance or centrality in the host culture (Lowe 2010). Rather than searching for the perfect, incorruptible cultural resource as a vehicle for moralization, Taylor suggests looking for something ambiguous but ubiquitous, and therefore potentially transformative to society if people are willing to engage the tension contained within it. If the goal is not merely to talk about morality, but to create group cohesion, shape adherents' interpretations of the world, urge particular choices, and change society or the larger discourse in some way, then the criteria for choosing a moral vocabulary are stricter. In the case of the American political left, faced with the inaccessibility of homogenous religious

language and the limitations of political discourse while under critique for not using the right's Christianity-based moral vocabulary to stir up their base, this is an urgent dilemma.

Given the criterion of ubiquity, it's reasonable to start looking to popular culture for moral resources. For transformative media fans, who have a habitus of connecting with, analyzing, and creating from entertainment media texts, it is likely intuitive to do so. But popular culture resources for moral vocabularies have disadvantages that religious resources do not. As Lowe (2010) takes pains to emphasize in describing a moral vocabularies approach to discourse analysis, the "creation of moral vocabularies is coupled to the dominant moral resources of the host society, the status of various moral claimsmakers, the roles of institutions and the state in embracing, challenging, and/or suppressing a particular moral vocabulary, as well as the presence or absence of other moral vocabularies within the same social space" (p. 302). After resources are activated for a given population, there may be opposition or obscurity to overcome and labor to be done to make these resources socially relevant on a public level. This moral entrepreneurship, as Lowe terms it, requires strategic negotiation of "the advantages and burdens imposed by existing status hierarchies and narratives as vehicles for moral vocabularies" (p. 305; cf Woody 2015). In other words, a ubiquitous moral resource is not necessarily one easily wielded. On the contrary, ubiquity creates multitudes of opportunities for other groups to assign meaning to the resource that contradicts one's own.

This is one obvious drawback of popular culture as a source of moral resources. In addition, there is the problem of popular culture's hierarchical status in the host culture, especially in relation to politics. Unlike religious rhetoric, popular culture does not have an established role in American politics. In fact, many aspects of popular culture have low status *because* of their ubiquity or association with fan communities. There is an obvious potential for confusion, backlash, or ridicule in attempting to use popular culture to talk about politics. This was clearly evidenced in the infamous moment in the 2016 presidential election when

Hillary Clinton invoked a mobile video game fad to encourage political participation. At the time, both left and right excoriated her for saying, “I don’t know who created *Pokémon GO*, but I want to figure out how to get them to have *Pokémon GO* to the polls,” and even in 2020, it still gets brought up as an example of bad, cringe-worthy pandering. Part of the critique is the perceived inauthenticity of the citation, using a moral resource as a mere meme or aesthetic filter to project intended moral content to a group without bothering to find something truly held in common with them and building a shared moral vocabulary. But even if it were perceived to be authentic, political discourse normatively excludes popular culture texts as amusements or distractions from real politics. Modes of engagement associated with popular culture are also low status; simply having an associated fandom can be seen as evidence of unseriousness (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 2010). For all that contemporary political campaigns’ strategies and tactics bear a striking resemblance to fandom (Street, Inthorn, & Scott 2013; Cassino & Besen-Cassino 2009; van Zoonen 2005), transformative media fandom praxis with its foundation in affect is far from the rational deliberation and data-driven analysis lauded in the political sphere of discourse (Baym 2009; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini 2009; Delli Carpini, Huddy, & Shapiro 2002; Dahlgren 1995).

All moral vocabularies are formed out of poached and contestable resources, so these are hardly unprecedented complications. Even with their rarified status in American political culture, religion and patriotism in the right’s moral vocabulary do not go totally unchallenged. But alongside its drawbacks, popular culture has capacities to engage us emotionally, intellectually, and morally in profound ways that invite appropriation into moral vocabularies (Gray 2008; Phelan 2007; Levi-Strauss 1995; Ang 1985; Barthes 1978). Transformative media fandom habituates communities to these critical and imaginative modes of engagement and to the idea of translating the engagement to various objects (Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2018; Hargreaves & Hartley 2016). Narratives that link actions and ideas together are a significant tool with which “moral claims, understandings, and resources

are shared and reinforced” (Lowe 2010, p. 301). Moreover, one of the suggested tactics of moral entrepreneurship for forwarding a moral vocabulary into social relevancy is to appropriate texts and trends already in the mainstream (Woodly 2015; Lowe 2010). Therefore, the tensions between the hierarchical status, ubiquity, and capacities of popular culture texts and modes of engagement makes them a potentially productive moral resource if the left chooses to take them up.

What does all this mean for the left-wing political talk and moralization of transformative media fans? To avoid the temptations of cherry-picking and overgeneralization, I want to preface my findings with a clear accounting of the parameters of what they are able to tell us. While they cannot provide a detailed map of left-wing moral engagement or a rhetorical check list for provoking partisan enthusiasm and participation, my findings can demonstrate the fault in assuming the left is less morally engaged with politics than the right.

As should be expected given the social nature of moral development and moralization, social and cultural contexts have an enormous, and not fully knowable, impact on what participants said and what I heard. For a start, all of my interviews and focus groups took place before the twin upheavals of COVID-19 and the uprisings responding to George Floyd’s murder in 2020. As a consequence of those upheavals, political discourse has become much more focused on the practicalities of democratic processes and access than is reflected in my participants’ comments. The internal culture of transformative media fandom has also been transformed by pandemic shutdowns and reckonings over racial justice. What fans said in late 2019 through February of 2020 already seems from another time. Some events, such as the collapse of the Romance Writers of America and the finale of *Supernatural*, have had less impact on the nation but lasting ripple effects in fandom. Participants might reach for those recent landmarks in fan experiences to frame their more expression if interviewed today. And I am interpreting their words at a remove, even more

keenly aware of the overwhelming whiteness of my participants and their perspectives than I was at the time. These contextual factors cannot be helped but must be acknowledged as intrinsic to my findings.

There are also unavoidable constraints on the epistemological and ontological perfection of the discourse analysis I performed and the moral expression of my participants. Low status and lack of a normative role in political discourse means that there is likely to be a small range of contexts in which people would feel it was appropriate or acceptable to use popular culture frameworks to describe their moral engagement with politics. As a methodological difficulty, my design of approaching fans in their own spaces as a fellow fan overcomes this issue as well as it could. I expected transformative media fandom to lean left, and at least in the spaces I knew how to access, this proved true. My participants seemed to assume that I and their fellow fans would generally be on the left; the one participant who identified explicitly with the political right said she participated in the project specifically because she figured I would not hear from many people like her. Despite age, regional, religious, and demographic disparities, this overall partisan and fan-identified commonality made for as likely a scenario for a popular culture moral vocabulary to be employed between a researcher and participants as could be hoped for.

As an analytic dimension, the limited acceptability of a pop culture or fannish mode of expression in political discourse suggests two things. First, that the interpretation of the underlying worldview, the moral content conveyed in a fannish moral manner, is recursively inflected by what participants reasonably expected me to understand and accept. Explicitly linking fandom and politics in the description of the project opened that door, but as an interlocutor, I was a constraint on and contributor to what respondents saw as our common frame of reference. Transformative media fandom is a mode of engagement that transcends its objects, but there are unique aspects to each fandom that are not intelligible to people outside of them. The point of a moral vocabulary is that it translates shared understanding

and perspective into transmissible information and moral conviction, and knowing which moral resources are shared between interlocutors is necessary to avoid an interpersonal “*Pokémon GO* to the polls” moment of jarring disconnect. As specific fandoms were mentioned in interviews and focus groups, I reacted in ways that showed if I was familiar or not with the text and sometimes shared if I had experience in the fandom. I have to assume, therefore, that participants leaned more on frameworks drawn from the fandoms I indicated I knew intimately or from experiences in fandom generally than they might have with an interviewer more familiar with other media texts.

Second and relatedly, the specific language used by these fans talking in this context cannot be expected to scale to public discourse. What is socially intelligible and mutually agreed upon between members of a particular community is not necessarily so on larger stages in popular culture, let alone transplanted into the discursive sphere of politics. I would discourage the conclusion that left-wing political candidates should try to activate their base by likening their opponents to Darth Vader, or that popular culture is the sole answer to the left’s problem of expressing moral engagement. The moral vocabulary of transformative media fans probably can’t be taught to people who aren’t in transformative media fandom. The mechanism of moral vocabularies, after all, is mutually identifying with a *shared* understanding and frame of reference.

These caveats are instructive to how I analyzed the interview and focus group data, not detrimental to the goal of this project. The unifying resonance of the disparate strands of fan studies, culture studies, and moral theory I’m drawing on in this project is that people make do with what they have, regardless of norms and prevailing opinion. My project is not to prescribe to the left how to engage morally with politics, or how to express that engagement. As I turn to my data and findings in the next three chapters, it should become clear that they hardly need the instruction. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that the left, as much as anybody else in America today, is already morally engaged with politics and that

they have already found at least one mode for moralization. There is reason to think that there would be other non-normative moral modes of engagement and frameworks of expression to be found among other groups beyond religion and the political sphere.

Demographic Sketch of the Sample

Before getting into the moral data, let's look at the sample as a whole. There are a total of sixty-nine respondents who completed the survey and participated in either a focus group or interview in the last quarter of 2019 and very early 2020. Forty-four sat in five different focus groups sessions at three fancons and twenty-five completed individual interviews (see Appendix A, Graph 1). The fancons were held in Washington, California, and Minnesota, so those three states are understandably highly represented in the regional distribution of participants (Appendix A, Chart 1). In spite of my effort to increase regional diversity by using remote interviews in addition to focus groups, there is a notable dearth of respondents from the midwestern and southern regions for which I have not found an adequate explanation. One reason may be that the unrepresented states are more right-wing and that political trend might follow through to transformative media fans in those states, making them reluctant to participate in the project. I endeavored to correct for bias in either direction, but either the correlation with leftism in the transformative media fandom spaces to which I have access is extremely strong or there was something in my call for participants that made more centrist and right-wing fans disinclined to answer. Certainly, the sample is overwhelmingly left-wing even considering the states that are represented (Appendix A, Graph 8).

Politically, this sample is heavily skewed left and reports a high level of participation. Fifty respondents are affiliated with the Democratic Party compared to only one with the Republican Party (Appendix A, Graph 8). A combined seventeen out of these eighteen people who are independent or fully affiliated lean toward the Democrats and only one

toward the Republicans. Seven respondents provide descriptions of their political identity that are some version of either socialist or progressive. When choosing between the ideological labels of conservative/liberal, a commanding majority of sixty-four respondents consider themselves liberal or progressive, thirty-eight of whom consider themselves very liberal or progressive. Respondents were able to choose among a variety of direct political actions and interactions with political campaigns and activist organizations to report their political activities in the year prior to taking the survey (Appendix A, Graph 9). Sixty-one respondents say they voted in a local election or primary, which correlates with findings that strong ideological alignment with one's party increases peoples' perception of the importance of and intent to vote in non-presidential elections (Pew 2018c). Thirty-four respondents, or about 49%, attended a protest or demonstration in the year before taking the survey in late 2019, compared to 11% of American adults in the past year and 29% in the past five years before 2018 (ibid.). This discrepancy between the sample and the national survey result from Pew predates the explosion of public demonstrations in support of Black Lives Matter in 2019, so it indicates a higher than average level of direct political action among project participants than among the general public. Similarly, my sample reports a higher rate of interactions with political campaigns than is evident among American adults. Whereas 29% of American have contributed money to a campaign and 16% worked or volunteered for a campaign in the past five years (ibid.), 55% of respondents donated money to and about 19% worked or volunteered for political campaigns in the past year (Appendix A, Graph 9). The high rate of donation in particular may be due to the ramping up of left-wing fundraising in the 2020 presidential election cycle in recognition of Trumpism as a real threat compared to 2016. Respondents report even higher rates of interaction with activist organizations or causes, possibly reflecting the disaffection fans feel with political institutions, which is explored in Chapter 3.

Demographically, the sample is diverse in some ways and highly homogeneous in others. The measure with the widest range and most even distribution is respondents' age. Other than a low number of people in their forties, respondents were distributed fairly evenly between the ages of 19 and 73 (Appendix A, Graph 3). This suggests that transformative media fandom is neither a youth phenomenon nor a holdover among people who were around from the 1960s for the earliest stages of modern media fandom. Household income also shows an intriguing range, though not in such a way that mirrors the distribution of income in the United States as a whole. Nearly half of my sample reports a 2018 income that is below the national median income for 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). On the other hand, twenty-five respondents report a household income over \$100,000, well above the national median (Appendix A, Graph 5). This heavy weight toward high income households is surely correlated with respondents' unusual level of education. Only one respondent's highest level of education is a high school diploma, with all others having at least some college and twenty-nine respondents having postgraduate degrees (Appendix A, Graph 4). This is jarringly out of step with the national average, which sees only about a third of adults over twenty-five with a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). Perhaps it's more shocking that such a highly educated bunch still have a peak in their income distribution below the national median. However, the dip in the middle of the income distribution is as puzzling and unexplained as the low number of respondents in their forties.

One of the sample's most homogeneous measures is gender. Sixty-three of sixty-nine respondents identify as female. Only two identify as male, while three describe themselves as agender and one describes themselves as nonbinary (Appendix A, Graph 2). There is a similar level of homogeneity in respondents' ethnic and racial identifications. Sixty-four are white, with two identifying as Hispanic or Latino whites and four choosing both white and "other" (Appendix A, Graph 6). Again, these biases in the sample are probably attributable in the largest part to the fandom spaces in which I moved at the time of placing

the call for participants. My sense is that I have since drifted into fandom spaces where there are more men and more fans of color, so the sample might look different if I placed a call for participants now. Another factor that may have been at work in the gender and race skews in this sample is a discrepancy in which fans feel comfortable responding to a call from a researcher with a stereotypically feminine and stereotypically white name. Because of the difficulty in estimating the demographics of the overall population of fans, it is impossible and unproductive to say that this sample is or is not representative of fandom. When thinking about how this sample compares to the national polity, though, it is interesting to consider that the topic of politics and fandom (perhaps in combination with assumptions made about the researcher) seemed to attract so many highly educated, high income, left-leaning white women. White people with a college degree or more education only make up 28% of registered voters on the left (Pew 2020), but they are also more likely to engage in political talk on a regular basis (Pew 2018c).

Given the normative convergence of morality with Christian religiosity in political discourse, I'll conclude this brief sketch of the sample with a discussion of respondents' religious affiliations. Of all measures, this may be the closest match to what we know about the demographics of the American left. About half of Democrats and voters who lean Democratic are Christian, split evenly between whites and non-whites (Pew 2020), while this sample has twenty affiliates of Christian denominations, or about 29% (Appendix A, Chart 2). Given that this sample includes only one Black or African American respondent, this closely aligns with the proportion of white Christians on the American left. An additional four respondents chose the religious identity "something else" but do consider themselves Christian. It should be noted that none of these self-described Christians consider themselves to be evangelical. A plurality of twenty-seven respondents, or 39%, are atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular, which corresponds with the 38% of left-leaning voters who are religiously unaffiliated (Pew 2020). Because of the dearth of non-white respondents, the

proportion of people in this sample who are affiliated with non-Christian religions and faith identities is much higher than in the American left overall, in which non-Christians make up 9% (Pew 2020). The most notable outliers are the comparatively high number of Jews – five, or 7% of the sample – and the eleven people (16%) who identify as “something else” besides the enumerated categories but do not consider themselves Christian (Appendix A, see Chart 2 for religious affiliations and Graph 7 for elaboration on the category “something else”). As we will see in Chapter 4, some fans see their faith lives as intrinsic to their approach to politics and a few use religious frameworks of moral expression. But these are few and far between relative to the proportion of religiously affiliated fans as well as compared to fans’ frequent use of frameworks for moral expression that are drawn from popular culture.

Chapter 3: Affect and Praxis in Fandom and Politics

In this chapter, I look at the intersection of fandom and politics at a structural level. Before examining questions of morality and moral expression, it is important to establish that fandom and politics have a relationship in transformative media fans' lives, and that this relationship is a useful site for probing the question of morality and the American left.

The distinction between right and left is commonplace in both scholarly and general understandings of contemporary American politics. Due to escalating sociopolitical tensions referred to as culture wars, this political division fuels stereotyped ideas about other divisions in American life, from the rural/urban divide of where people live (Pew 2018a) to which brands of products people buy (Banet-Weiser 2012). Popular culture is inevitably part of this perceived division into right/left-type camps. Along with the well-documented tendency of partisans to seek different news sources (Forgette 2019; Iyenger & Hahn 2009; Hollander 2008), perceived and real divisions in political affiliation and attitudes lay behind what kinds of television shows and movies people watch (Rogers 2020; Castle & Stepp 2018).

While partisan difference has not been centered in descriptions and divisions of different kinds of fandom, based on my data I argue that there are three notable relationships between transformative media fandom and politics. One, there is a structural analogue between fans' motivations to participate in fandom and politics. Two, the leftward political slant of transformative media fans is in some cases a result from experiences in fandom affecting the development of participants' political ideas and beliefs. And three, many fans see fandom and their left-wing politics as inherently and explicitly linked. This final relationship reinforces my argument that this sample reflects a coherent strain of left-wing politics for whom fandom is a site and means of political expression.

Diving In/Dropping Out: Affect as Structure

What brings people to participate in fandom or in politics? Most of my participants have been in transformative media fandom for years, often migrating from one fandom to another as shows go off the air, their interests shift, or they follow groups moving toward new fan objects. When asked about the most important fandom in their lives, though, the answers are often about their first fandom, or the fandom through which they first bonded with important people in their lives. In other words, what makes participating in fandom important is how it forges or clarifies one's sense of being in society.

Harper *Star Wars* was probably my first big fandom. My mom was really into it. She's been a *Star Wars* fan since *Star Wars* first came out in the theaters. She's from Indiana so being really, really into *Star Wars* and being a woman in rural Indiana was a lot for her. She kind of wanted to make sure that myself and my sisters had the chance to experience that with her. It's always been really important to me, but then my own fandoms—I tend to have watershed fandoms for important moments in my childhood (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

Mary I have been a part of organized fandom for probably over twenty years at this point. It's been a lot of moving from one thing to the next. I think probably in terms of the group of people that I have become closest to, it would probably be *Rent* the musical. I'm still friends with a lot of people that I met at that time in my life, including some of my best friendships, and a lot of the people who I have become close to since then, I met through those people. So even though it was only sort of a blip, I would say it was probably the most personally important one. [...] It was very contained to the last couple years of high school, the first couple years of college as a fannish experience. Those were the times that I was allowed to leave my home and go into the city and interact with all of these friends that I had made without my parents for the first time. But that end of high school, beginning of college is such a transitory period in life that the person who I was then is not necessarily a person who I was before that or after that. Like that little section of time when my brain was finishing cooking and I was finishing becoming an adult were really very brief compared to the periods of my life that came before and after (Personal interview, 2020, February 4).

Both Harper and Mary¹ point to fandoms that shaped them in different but equally foundational ways. For Harper, *Star Wars* is emblematic of being a stigmatized or non-normative audience asserting a claim on the source text. Defining themselves as members of the same non-normative audience with their mother and sister and having a shared, multi-generational experience with the text, Harper and their sister came to deepen their understanding of and relationship with their mother. Mary's most important fandom, *Rent*, coincided with a pivotal "section of time when my brain was finishing cooking" and she began to exist in the world as an adult rather than a child. While Harper still feels some connection to *Star Wars*, Mary emphasizes that her personal growth during that time and the relationships she formed in *Rent* fandom as the sole reasons it is the most important fandom of her life.

In other words, transformative media fandom is a community, offering members a way of seeing themselves in society as part of a group they chose for themselves. Specific texts or activities are conduits for expressing a sense of being in community with each other, often in contrast to non-fans or in defiance of the sense that they are interacting with the text wrongly. Even for those who ascribe a transformational definition of being in fandom as doing specific activities, the desire to connect or the feeling of being connected drives participation in those activities:

Alice	I started going to DragonCon in Atlanta, huge convention, back in college, honestly before I was even into fandom. I was just a fan as opposed to being in fandom, if that makes sense. The draw was things like meet your favorite actors, meet your favorite writers, and hang out with people who are like you. It was an incredible experience. The first time I went, I walked in, I was like, I am among my people. I've never felt like this before. I think that definitely helped me to feel like fandom was a warm and welcoming place and something I wanted to be part of. [...And then] with <i>X-Men</i> , that's where I kind of tipped over from being a silent observer of fan things to actually participating—writing, talking, reading, you know, instead of just waving at it as it went by (Personal interview, 2020, January 18).
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¹ All respondents are identified by pseudonyms.

Alice's description of feeling she had found "her people" in fandom even before taking a more active role than "silent observer" points to a consistent implication in the data: fans doing fandom ("writing, talking, reading, you know, instead of just waving at it as went by") are expressing that they feel connected to the community established with other fans. This is especially clear in Brianna's experience of discovering fandom and its creative practices after decades of feeling alienated from other viewers because of the strength of her feeling for *Starsky and Hutch*.

Brianna The only fandom I'm in is *Starsky and Hutch*. *Starsky and Hutch* is a show that I discovered when I was ten and I was immediately drawn to them, to their friendship, their love for each other, their bond. Even as a ten-year-old, I recognized that in them. [...] Long after the show went off the air, I still thought about them. I still played scenes in my mind, I still remembered the episodes so clearly, even thinking I was never going to see another episode in my life. I never forgot it. And when I discovered the fandom in the early 2000s, I was shocked that there were other people out there who loved the guys the way I did. I thought I was the only one. I didn't have any friends that watched the show or liked the show or even really—I mean, they heard of it. It was popular. But I didn't share that fandom love with anybody growing up, at all. So to find the fandom, it was like, Oh there's other people like me! There's other people that like them, too! [...] I thought I was weird. I thought I was strange for liking them the way I did (Personal interview, 2019, October 28).

Despite having the technical capacity and strength of emotion to make fanworks before stumbling into fandom in 2004, Brianna began doing so-called active fandom only after finding a community of other fans. Perhaps she didn't bother to expend the effort before knowing she would have an audience, but other fans report creating fanworks by and for only themselves before learning it is a common practice in fandom. Even in that case, these fans clearly distinguish between feeling or acting fannish about a media text and the social context of fandom in which they *became* a fan. Each fannish object has some inherent appeal and creative affordance in itself, but the content of the text isn't what makes media consumers identify as fans or what makes a fandom important in one's life. Rather, the social affordance of coming to understand oneself as being part of a community of fans, as one

member of a group of people who see a text or interact with media the same way, is what brings people into fandom and keeps them there.

Unsurprisingly, then, the loss of this sense of community is what leads people to fall out of fandom. Mary (Personal interview, 2020, February 4), whose most important fandom coincided with a pivotal moment in her personal and social development, later noted that a “bad fandom breakup” due to reasons unrelated to the text marked the end of her five years in *Rent* fandom. This underscores the point that a sense of connection is the fundamental allure and defining feature of fandom experiences, and its absence leads to fandom attrition. From what Mary and others say, leaving a specific fandom is typically due to a change in one’s sense of connection, and it facilitates moving to a new group around a new object with which one feels more affinity, as with Harper’s (Personal interview, 2020, January 31) evolving interests and lingering affection and affinity for *Star Wars*, or because of a “bad breakup” with other fans in the community. Whereas Mary’s (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) breakup with *Rent* was not about the text itself, which makes sense for a standalone text, other fans of serial media texts share that they fell out of fandom because the text or its fandom moved in a direction they didn’t like or feel affinity for. Alternately, squabbles among fan subgroups or interpersonal conflicts have the same effect of making individual fans feel no longer welcome or eager to be part of specific fandoms. My data do not go far enough to say why some people end up dropping out of fandom entirely because everyone who participated in this project is a self-identified fan. If they had experienced this neutral drift or negatively valenced loss of connection from a singular fandom, everyone in my sample moved on to other texts immediately or retained their affinity with fandom even while they lay dormant and waiting for a new text through which to express that sense of community.

How does the community basis of transformative media fandom compare to the political system? The experience of politics in America can be seen as structurally analogous

to transformative media fandom. Individuals can see themselves as fans and citizens due to their feeling of connection to those identity labels describing participants in fandom or politics, to communities of other fans or citizens they feel similar to, or to specific texts, which in politics would be politicians, electoral outcomes, or policy goals. In fandom, these feelings of connection tend to overlap and flow into each other as transformative media fans start with one text and develop a holistic identity in fandom even with shifts in their interests and friend groups over time. If participation in politics is also like participation in fandom, then people do politics—which is to say they vote, donate, volunteer, protest, and otherwise attend to politics—because it helps them to feel connected in one or more of the ways described above.

Does this analogy hold up to what we know about contemporary American politics? Do fans' descriptions of their experiences reflect broader conclusions from political science and support the parallel I have drawn? As previously noted, contemporary American politics is characterized by both increased partisanship and an increasing share of the population that rejects partisan affiliations and/or does not participate in electoral politics at all. This occurrence of simultaneously high and low or non-existent affinity for group identities is reflected in fans' descriptions of their political experiences. In describing the most important political moment in their lives, they often highlight a feeling of heightened partisanship, both positive and negative, and the affinity they feel for the people with whom they engage in politics most actively.

Kate	The most important political moment, I suppose, was when Donald Trump was elected president, which was you know a complete horrifying shock. Sorry, I guess you're probably trying to be impartial, but I can't be. And then after that, I participated in a couple of marches. I went to one in Washington and then I went to one in my community locally. It was really exciting. It was very cool to be with a bunch of like-minded people and there was a lot of energy. You know, it just made me feel a part of something that I thought was going to be important. [...] Because I knew that his election was going to really have a detrimental effect on the country and on our democracy, so I
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needed to be a part of a group that would let the community know that (Personal interview, 2019, December 30).

Eileen I volunteered with Barack Obama's first—was it 2008? Yes, in 2008. [...] I was seventeen. I couldn't vote, but we had to for our government class get involved in some sort of government something. When I was in a senior in high school in 2008-2009, a bunch of my friends decided to stick it to our government teacher who was like a huge Republican. We were all like, What if we all volunteered for the Barack Obama campaign? And so we did. I did door-to-door and phone calls and stuff. So that was probably the most impactful. And then he won, obviously, so that was sort of cool, like I volunteered for that. [...] I grew up in a very red county in a rural part of the state. It was kind of interesting. My dad is for sure very conservative. My mom is more toward the middle I think, but I—I don't know. Through fate or serendipity or whatever, I ended up with a bunch of friends who were more liberal. I'm sure that impacted how I formed my political opinions when I was younger, but as I grew up, I felt more aligned with liberal ideas and stuff like that. [...] Volunteering for the Obama campaign] wasn't something that I just went along with my friends. It wasn't 100% out of spite. (both laugh) It was definitely something that I believed in and then I volunteered in [his reelection campaign] 2011-2012 in college (Personal interview, 2020, January 20).

Both of these descriptions point to the importance of feeling connected to political outcomes or to a community in order to participate in politics. Kate had been a voter for years before the moment she describes as the most important in her political life and Eileen's most important political moment was her first time engaging with an election, but they both pick moments that index their feeling of belonging to a group within society. Specifically, belonging to "the left, or whatever we want to call it" (Personal interview, 2020, January 20) and additionally, as they both explicitly note, in opposition to the other political group in American society, underscores a dyadic juxtaposition of left and right that is virtually unavoidable in a two-party system. It's notable, though, that both Kate and Eileen emphasize that their primary motivation is their positive affiliation with the left. Kate attended protests for the first time because her negative perception about Trump and his electoral victory made her feel like she "needed to be a part of a group that would let the community know" he was dangerous. In other words, her belief in what would be good for the nation preceded and

informed her negative assessment of President Trump. Similarly, Eileen seemingly realizes that she had characterized her work for the 2008 Obama campaign as spiteful revenge against her Republican teacher, and she hastens to clarify that she had an affinity for Barack Obama over his opponent, John McCain, that led to her choice of where to volunteer. Moreover, she stresses that her choice between Obama and McCain was not an affinity of degree where she found little difference between them, nor was it an affinity primarily for the company of her friends who would volunteer with her on the Obama campaign. Eileen (Personal interview, 2020, January 20) instead asserts that she had developed her own political beliefs, influenced but not dictated by her social network, with which she evaluated the candidates and found in Obama “something I believed in,” a positive connection that also motivated her volunteerism for his reelection campaign in the absence of the additional motivation of spiting her teacher.

These experiences suggest that the feeling of connection inspires participation in the activities of politics, the same way that I argue it precedes participation in fandom. Kate (Personal interview, 2019, December 30) adopted a new political behavior because of the desire to be with a community that shared her opposition to the Trump administration. Spending time with friends was an implied factor of Eileen’s decision to volunteer with the Obama campaign (Personal interview, 2020, January 20), the same friends who seemingly influenced her political development away from her more conservative parents’ perspective. The similarity of these experiences to the affective structure of fandom is significant because of the fundamental dissimilarities between fandom and politics in the overall culture. Unlike fandom, politics is a normative participatory sphere in American culture. Factors including age, race, education, and income mediate the social incentive to be politically active, with Americans who are older, white, highly educated, and in higher socioeconomic strata being more likely than others to be politically engaged (Szewczyk & Crowder-Meyer 2020; Pew 2018c; Solt 2008; Leighley & Vedlitz 1999; Verba, et al., 1993). Apart from age, which was

fairly evenly distributed across a range of nineteen to seventy-three, these demographic groups are overrepresented in my sample of transformative media fans (see Appendix A, Graphs 3 through 6), with some describing an upbringing in which paying attention to politics and voting was understood as an unavoidable, duty-bound part of being an adult. This is very different from the kinds of relationships with media and activities that occur in transformative media fandom, which have been and often still are understood in broader American culture to be aberrant behavior (Staiger 2005; Jenkins 1992). Getting started in politics is therefore not as significant a moment for most fans as is the first time they took part in fandom. However, many fans noted that recent political history has made them feel much more connected to politics, to the point that they began paying attention to or participating in politics more than before or, like Kate (Personal interview, 2019, December 30), in novel ways other than voting.

Paige My parents instilled in my siblings and I, you got to go vote at the very least in the presidential election because it's your civic duty, but it never really went beyond that. [...] It wasn't until the 2008 election that I really, really started paying attention to every single election cycle, small and large. I've gotten progressively more involved. Making sure not just that I am informed about what's going on, but that I'm voting in every single election and making sure my friends are registered, making sure my wife is registered, and that we're all going. I'm the person who's sending everybody texts the day before like, So you're voting tomorrow, right? To make sure that our voices are heard in whatever minimal way we can be. Whereas in my younger years, in my late teens and early twenties when I was a new voter, it was like, I guess I just have to do this once every four years, no big deal (Personal interview, 2020, February 4).

As with the earlier examples of the most important political moment in fans' lives being ones that heightened their feeling of being connected to political outcomes or a political community, these descriptions of fans' relationship with politics evolving over time and in reaction to specific events contradict a possible conclusion that the relationship is purely reactive. Paige doesn't specify what about the 2008 campaign made her pay more attention to politics, but she implies that something about recent politics has resonated with her sense

of how to be in the world. Her stated intent of “making sure that our voices are heard” suggests that before she felt personally connected to politics, Paige either didn’t think of politics as a means of expression or that what was expressible in politics was “no big deal.” It was only once she began to see political outcomes as an important expression of her and her community’s voices that she put the effort into a higher level of participation than required by a rote sense of duty. Whatever factors in 2008 led to that shift in her perception, Paige had to hold an internal sense of what is a big deal and value her community’s voice before she could connect them to politics as a mode of expression.

Similarly, the Trump campaign in 2016 clashed with Iliana’s preexisting sense of connection to political outcomes with clear delineations of which would be acceptable or not.

Iliana I always cared about it to some extent. After I got out of high school, I started paying a little more attention to—because I did care about social justice and I did care about especially people getting treated well and treated equally because they’re people and not because they’re like a member of a higher, privileged group or because they look this way or they act this way. Everyone should be getting these basic rights, and it wasn’t happening. But I noticed with the run-up to the 2016 election it was when I really started getting involved was when Trump started hitting scene because I was hearing all this stuff coming everywhere that was like—you know, like all the stuff he said. Racist against Mexicans and against Muslims and he had Pence, who was very anti-gay. There was so much hatred being spread and there were all these people who were going for that. [...] So I decided, Okay, I’m going to campaign. I’m going to actually donate this time around. I’m going to try to get my candidate in office. I went to the state delegation as a delegate for Bernie Sanders. Yeah, and it all culminated the night Trump got elected. It was just this huge moment of people are excusing this behavior and allowing these prejudices. Like maybe a bigger part of the country doesn’t care about people as a whole as much as I thought they did. So that was a big moment and now I keep up with it (Personal interview, 2020, February 15).

Though the stimulus was negatively valenced, it led Iliana to expand her participation in the political process in positive pursuit of desired outcomes. Negative partisanship or blocking something she opposes from occurring is an obvious corollary to this behavior, and many fans express strong negative feelings toward political opposition, particularly Donald Trump

and occasionally the right as a nebulous whole. But the fact that Trump provoked so many on the left to engage more deeply with politics should not be mistaken for the left being driven by negative partisanship. Rather, these fans describe reconnecting or connecting for the first time with a strong sense of what they want and rediscovering or discovering for the first time a belief that politics is a means of creating what they want in the world.

This intensification of connection leading to an intensification of engagement with politics is analogous to doing fandom as an expression of feeling in community with other fans. And as with fandom, this conclusion is further supported by examples of dropping out of politics because their feeling of connection was lost or forcibly severed.

Barbara I don't think of myself as having a political life. [...] I don't pay attention to politics because it makes me feel bad. (laughs) I vote, so I pay just enough attention to make a voting decision, but I'm not plugged into it just because I feel such an intense despisement (sic) of it. [...] I'm just pretty mistrustful of public institutions in general. I just think so many of the people that are in my life or that I meet in my days just seem like better people than a lot of politicians. [...] I vote, yeah. But, you know, I actually—like in local elections. My neighbors, who I'm friends with and who I trust and respect as people and who seem to share a lot of values with me, they're very into politics. I'll actually get a list from them of names (laughs) and that's how I'll vote. [...] So it's still a personal thing, because I just can't—I don't feel good about operating on this abstract level. But if somebody I know is involved with it and plugs in, then I'll do that. [...] I used to a little more plugged into politics. But then at a certain point, I kind of checked out. Probably after the election of Trump, I kind of couldn't handle being as involved as I was. But yeah, it's never been a huge thing in my life (Personal interview, 2019, October 9).

In describing herself as not politically active, Barbara is an outlier in my sample. She told me that she volunteered for a project called “Media Fans and Politics” specifically because she expected I would not hear from many people who had checked out of politics altogether. I'm not able to draw conclusions from a single data point, but I'm grateful that her involvement allows me to note how closely her reasoning and experience echo Elena's, even though Elena remains politically active and engaged in her adopted community in another state.

Elena I've been politically active in some way pretty much my whole life. My great-grandmother was a really hardcore feminist in the south, like marching for

the ERA. [...] I came out as queer very deliberately in my very conservative, religious community and workplace. That was—I did that sort of as a political statement because I was working at a high school at the time. I had never—if I had not had fandom, I would never have had that representation in my life as a high schooler, of people that are queer and living happy, healthy lives and are normal people. [...] I think also voting for the first time in the—that was the 2012 election. It was interesting for me because I had a lot of complicated feelings about that, because I was so excited to vote for Obama and for all that represented. The fact that he won that election made it more powerful. But also feeling that my vote counted for nothing where I was living, and that being really one of the first moments I was starting to realize, This is not a community I feel safe or represented in. And then 2016, the aftermath of that election and what my eyes were opened to and what they had previously been closed to because of the privileged life that I had led and roles that I had. That really solidified that idea that I could not live in that community anymore. [...] There were a number of reasons it was time for me to leave, but the aftermath of 2016 and how devastated and unsafe I felt in my county or parish in Louisiana. It had voted I think 89% for Trump and just the heartbreak and the betrayal and also the guilt. [...] I had grown up in this community. I felt like there was—I was used to being around people whose political beliefs were very much at odds with my own. I think what had changed over the year of 2016 was the lack of—I used to be able to find some common ground with people. Even if we were coming at it from totally different ways, there was generally a kernel of we do want the same thing, whether it's better opportunities for our children or to feel unafraid or whatever. That sort of began to vanish (Personal interview, 2020, January 25).

Barbara (Personal interview, 2019, October 9) and Elena both began to feel disconnected from political outcomes because the intensity of their feeling of connection was not matched by a return from the political system or other participants in that system. Despite the structural factors in Louisiana that made her feel ineffective and eventually unwelcome in her community there, Elena's worldview, developed in a family and a queer activist community that she feels deeply connected to, leads her to still feel that the system of politics remains a viable means of expression. Once in Maine where she felt more welcome and in community with other people engaging with politics, Elena could pick up where she left off. Conversely, Barbara has a worldview of radically small-scale politics, which she has come to believe are uncorrupt and effective only at the scale of individual interactions. Thus, she participates in

politics only insofar as it is an expression of respect for her friends' investment in that system. For herself, Barbara feels that the structural factors that make her personal involvement irrelevant also make her feel that continued investment of energy in that system, on which there will be only bad returns, would be counterproductive. Both women lost their sense of connection with outcomes, that they could personally change electoral results or legislative decisions. But only Elena still feels connected to communities that value political engagement, whether in the vague way that many middle-class whites view voting as part of being an adult or in the activist sense of a community with activist goals of creating something deliberately with politics. Barbara's sense of community does not invest her back into politics, and yet it does maintain her participation in the electoral system as an expression of feeling connected to her trusted neighbors.

This structural similarity between fandom and politics echoes throughout participant's experiences with each. Since engagement is an expression of feeling connected, positive or negative feedback loops are created by evolving circumstances and the outcomes of individual engagement. Consequently, even though my sample consists of committed fans with higher-than-average political participation, they often express feelings of ambivalence for the systems they engage with. Consider this focus group discussion of first fandoms and most important fandoms:

- Teresa I'm split, *Harry Potter* and *Supernatural*. *Harry Potter* I did fanfic.net, but I did not engage with anybody, so I don't consider myself necessarily like a big part of that fandom. *Supernatural* was my first real fandom where I made friends, I started making content, and I was in *Supernatural* for a while. I'm currently mostly in MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe]. I'm fading out of it but that's still my one right now. I'm dabbling in *Buzzfeed Unsolved*. I might go back to *Supernatural* because it's ending. Who knows. I shouldn't. I shouldn't do that to myself.
(all talking)
- Gwen [...] *Drake Mage (?)* is the first thing I engaged in fannishly. It was the first time in my entire life that I felt compelled to create, like write a fic. I was like, I like it, I'll read stuff, but I never had this compelled to write something until that. That was a really important gateway into this whole situation for me. I think if you talk about the fandom that defines me, I don't think it is that,

although that was a really important part of me. But football RPF [real person fiction] is, like, that's me. That's in my soul at this point. Those are my two. And then the other one that I'm in, for better or worse, now is tennis RPF. I tried, I swore to not, but I have a lot of feelings about them. So here we are. (Focus group, 2019, October 20)

Teresa and Gwen's affinities for their first fandoms came from the irresistible attraction to create something because a media text and the other people in fandom inspired them to do so. Teresa moved on from *Harry Potter* to *Supernatural*, a fandom she was in "for a while" and in which she developed a network of fandom friendships before moving on. When contemplating a return to *Supernatural* fandom for a last hurrah during its final season, though, Teresa argues with herself that she "shouldn't do that to herself." Similarly, Gwen adds the caveat that her tennis player fandom is "for better or for worse" and implies she was initially resistant to the affinity she felt for it. Without speculating why they feel this way about these individual fandoms, other participants also express ambivalence about the intra-fandom politics that affect their willingness to be identified with specific fandoms and fandom generally.

The political parallel to this is the negative feelings that participants also express about the Democratic Party, the Democratic presidential primary, and structural inequities such as gerrymandering. Likely as a consequence of this dynamic, many participants also state a preference for smaller scale fandoms and local politics. Juggernaut media and national politics might be a large part of a person's life as a fan or citizen, but they are anchored by individuals' connections with specific content (the fan object or the candidate/issue at hand) and/or specific co-participants. On a smaller scale, these personal relationships are a larger part of the total experience, and participants feel that their engagement with the community is more likely to be rewarded with reciprocation and positive outcomes. But at the national scale, they scoff at the idea of trusting the political system and its outcomes even as they describe ongoing engagement and determination to see their goals realized by a flawed system. When respondents explain how they resolve these

conflicting feelings, they again make sense of their participation as an expression of feeling connected. For instance, after her first experience volunteering with friends for Obama's 2008 campaign and his historic success, Eileen was energized to be politically engaged. After being on the losing side of several elections, though, she describes her motivation to continue in terms of her connections to others and draws an explicit parallel to fandom:

Eileen Honestly, the people around me. I think that honestly should be everyone's motivation. The people in Washington are going to do what they do. [...] I think that what's kept me engaged and caring and not apathetic in a time that it's very easy to become apathetic and detached and hopeless or whatever. I think that just looking at the person next to you and being like, Hey, are you good? Are we good? What are we doing? What's the next step? How do we keep our people feeling good, feeling energized? How can we help other communities? [...] And [good relationships are] helpful when people push back, because you're always going to have somebody that's like, Why are you talking about this? We're not having fun. To have somebody to be like, Well, I'm not having fun, either, but we need to talk about this! I'm not having fun because we aren't talking about this. Yeah, it's kind of like fandom that way. The people are what bring you back, I think. I think it's hard to be engaged—even if you're a lurker, quote-unquote a lurker in fandom, it's hard to be engaged in fandom if you aren't connecting with people, whether that be—you know, not necessarily forming relationships, but not reading or seeing posts and stuff like that. It's hard to become engaged, so that's what it's all about. Whatever connection you can make (Personal interview, 2020, January 20).

Parts of the system might not be trustworthy and election losses are felt strongly, but as with fandom, whether participants feel like they are in it for and with each other defines the experience overall as good or bad. I will argue that the left's moral engagement with politics leads them to seek connection in the first place, but first I want to look at the partisan dimension of politics and its intersection with fandom.

Structured for Intimacy: Community, Fandom, and Leftism

Partisanship is a critical and central component of contemporary American politics. Is political partisanship also relevant to transformative media fandom? The fact that only one person in my sample identified as a Republican or conservative in her political leanings

would suggest that it must be. As with politically disgusted Barbara (Personal interview, 2019, October 9), I don't want to make too much of an outlier data point, but, just like Barbara, Jackie expressed an expectation that she would be an outlier and a wish to make sure that I knew her point of view exists in transformative media fandom. She was a focus group participant, and other participants' interactions with her are as informative on the question of political partisanship in fandom as are Jackie's own utterances.

- Jackie I'm Jackie. I'm from Houston. I'm here because I'm pretty sure there wouldn't be any other conservative voices here because I believe in diversity.
- Mae I'm sorry!
- Gina Thank you for representing.
- Jackie I believe in IDIC, and I have found that when there's talk about we shouldn't be assuming things about people that everyone assumes if you're at a convention you're a progressive. So I just came to represent. I've been in fandom since the late eighties.
(Focus group E2, 2020, February 22)

Jackie's citation of IDIC refers to infinite diversity in infinite combinations, a philosophy from the 1960s science fiction program *Star Trek*. She is not the only participant in this project to cite IDIC to describe her personal beliefs, though she is the only one to do so in a context that also implicitly rebukes her fellow fans for failing to live up to its principles. Mae apologizes after Jackie introduces herself because she had been speaking about the right to the rest of the group in a dismissive manner, apparently assuming that there was nobody representing the right in the room. Along with Gina's statement of thanks to Jackie for coming to the focus group, this apology typifies how the rest of group adopted a welcoming deference to Jackie as soon as they learned the group was not as homogeneously left-wing as expected. This revelation also provoked an explicit discussion about the intersection of partisanship and fandom.

- Gina Can I ask a question before we—is it fandom in general that we're perceiving as progressive, or is it slash fandom? These may not be interchangeable.
- MG Mm, that is a concern. Well, since we're at [slash convention], maybe this particular fan space. Why do we perceive it that way?

Gina It's a very specific fan space. (agreement) It's not a typical fan space.

Gaby Yeah, that's—yeah, go ahead.

Jackie I see it—I was here before y'all became a progressive safe space. (laughter) I carried out a load of slash zines from a convention in Oklahoma because some twit at Disney, Roger Elwood, had called the police. So I don't think I have to apologize for what I have—did you almost get arrested for carrying slash at a convention? No. So I don't see it as being—I was here first. It's like there's been a fandom—politics as a fandom it seems to me that a lot of your share out here. And to assume that someone is one particular persuasion, I mean, it's a big assumption to make. And it's just so natural that people draw back, you know, very odd and being in that space, that my being here somehow makes somebody unsafe and it's like—I mean, not here-here. (laughter) But just the idea of this whole safe and unsafe.

Mae I think some of that is what many of us—what I tend to assume is meant by conservative. The encounters I have with people who call themselves conservative are people online who are adamantly against so many aspects of my life that I cannot imagine them wanting to be in a space that I'm comfortable. And obviously that is not you. You are here, you are comfortable here more or less, or you wouldn't be here. I realize that I don't know why you call yourself conservative. It is presumably not because you think that men having sex is a great evil and must be stopped at all costs.

Jackie I don't remember reading that in Burke. (laughter)

Gaby I think that's actually a key point here. You know, this is [convention]. The purpose of [convention] is for women who are interested in men in general having a romantic and sexual relationship with each other. We see—and that is transgressive.

Jackie Well, I think it used to be transgressive. I think y'all fondly remember the days when we were transgressive, but I don't think that's really transgressive anymore.

Gaby Well, I think it depends on where you are from and where you're at. I mean, I get you because my relatives are rural Oregonian, okay? I grew up in basically 1930s Appalachia in my family, even though it was the hills of Oregon. My mom's cousin married my dad's sister. We are that kind of family that people make fun of. We were dirt poor. My mom literally was born on poverty row in Oregon. So when you say, you know, I have these sorts of things and I don't think they agree with all of you other people, I had conversations at my uncle's funeral where my cousin's husband is trying to figure out what does transgender mean, because he has no exposure to that. I'm from the big city and so he's trying to talk about that with the people who are the kids of the city cousins as opposed to the country cousins. When you talk about—do you have family that made a log cabin up in the hills? Yes, I do. I have loggers and farmers and ranchers in my family. So I don't think there's much in our backgrounds that separates us.

- Jackie Right.
- Gaby And I think that our interest in the sexuality of people, however you want to frame it, that's not what separates us. I think we've just gotten to a place where, like you said, politics are important to me. Gay rights are important to me. Social programs are important to me. And I want to support people. How do we do that now that's something that we're really trying to work on and figure out? But I don't want to take a safe space from you in order to make other people feel safe.
- Jackie I don't like the word safe. (laughs)
(Focus group E2, 2020, February 22)

To unpack this lengthy interaction, it's necessary to note that the convention at which this focus group took place was a slash-focused convention. Historically, slash fandom has been one of the more secretive and stigmatized aspects of transformative media fandom because of both the homophobia of other fans and the larger society and fears of anti-slash legal threats from intellectual property owners acting on an assumption that queer interpretations could devalue their IP (Tushnet 2017, 1997; Jenkins 1992). In fan studies, slash fandom often has been treated as the case study for the activities and behaviors of transformational fandom. For the purposes of this project, slash fandom's insularity and slash fans' migratory patterns of engagement with media make it an exemplar of transformative media fandom as habitus. The habitus of consuming, analyzing, and creating as an orientation to media is the same, regardless if the specific content of fans' participation is slash or non-slash.

In the interaction quoted above, the delineation of slash from non-slash fandom is first posited as important to the question of political partisanship because of the specific content of slash. Gina (Focus group E2, 2020, February 22) notes correctly that slash fandom and a slash-focused fan convention are not "typical fan space," gesturing to the broader world of transformative media fandom and other non-transformative and non-media-oriented fandoms (e.g., sports, music). Making this point in this context makes some excuse for Jackie being an outlier because the space itself is an outlier, but it also emphasizes Jackie's out-of-placeness in the space of a slash-focused convention. Jackie responds by asserting that "I was here before y'all became a progressive safe space," paying her dues

with a high level of participation in the 1980s when slash fandom was more culturally and legally precarious. However, this response does not refute and in fact capitulates that present-day slash fandom leans left.

The idea that slash is a primary cause of leftism in fandom is one I heard from many participants. The high level of partisanship around civil rights for queer people and especially marriage equality in recent years creates a reasonable conjunction between slash fandom, defined by its intense focus on queer attraction between male characters, and fans being on the political left. As Lois (Focus group K2, 2019, November 2) says: "I think it'd be a little hypocritical if you like two guys getting it on [in fanfic] and then in real life, you're like, Nah, gay marriage is ridiculous." Both Mae and Gaby (Focus group E2, 2020, February 22) point to this apparent alignment of political belief and fan identity in grappling with their focus group's assumption that fans are "progressive." Mae concludes that her assumptions about the right's political orthodoxy must be incorrect if Jackie is "here, [and] you are comfortable here" in a slash-positive, and therefore presumably queer rights-positive, space.

Interestingly, Jackie doesn't really make a case for an interest in slash or queer rights being less partisan than Mae originally assumed. Instead, she scoffs at the idea that slash fandom is still as "transgressive" today as it was when she got into fandom. Gaby retorts that fans' interest in slash, if no longer transgressive in itself in contemporary American society, can be transgressive for individual fans from backgrounds that would tend to be inhospitable and limit exposure to queer people. She makes a claim to authority from experience the same way Jackie did about her fannish credentials, but she also implies that the leftism of slash fandom is not limited to the association with queerness and sex positivity: "that's not what separates us. I think we've just gotten to a place where, like you said, politics are important to me. Gay rights are important to me. Social programs are important to me. And I want to support people." She starts these statements as general and then qualifies them as personal, potentially in deference again to Jackie, but what Gaby implies is that slash

fandom resonates with leftist politics on a broader scale than singular policy issues. That is, Gaby pushes back against Gina's implication that the delineation of slash and non-slash fandoms due to specific content is relevant to the question of partisanship. When Gaby says that "we've just gotten to a place..." (Focus group E2, 2020, February 22), it can be read as a statement about transformative media fandom. Slash fandom is one kind of this fandom, but she's redirecting the attention from content to the mode of engagement that slash fandom exemplifies, which she characterizes as inherently more compatible with the political left than the political right. Given that everyone assumes and even Jackie concedes the link between fandom and leftism, the correlation seems uncontested.

Is this correlation the expression of a selection bias of people who feel a pull to transformative media fandom also being more likely to be leftist? Or is there a structural bias that not only disproportionately attracts leftists but positively inculcates participants in transformative media fandom to identify with leftist politics? The preponderance of data from this project supports the latter hypothesis. The structures that encourage intimacy and community across difference are inherent to transformative media fandom. The alignment of leftism and transformative media fandom is the result of people who are both on the left and in fandom seeing a natural overlap between the philosophical underpinnings of their political beliefs and fannish practice.

Since fan identification and participation express feelings of connection and a desire to connect with other media viewers, transformative media fandom puts a high cultural value on successfully finding or forming community. As in other social formations, this interest in group integrity can result in tribalism, cohesion through exclusion, and intra- and inter-fan group conflicts (Pande 2018; Reinhard 2018; Radway 1991). On the other hand, it can also foster a culture that does not adhere closely to mainstream American society's hierarchy of importance placed on race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, etc., prioritizing instead the shared mode of engagement with media. This realignment of priority in fandom allows fans

to forge connections across demographic differences. Many fans reference the bad side of fandom's focus on maintaining community at the expense of excluding or silencing some fans, especially Black and other non-white fans, but they report personal experiences that favor fandom's capacity to build bridges across social difference.

Ilina I'd say more of the stuff I read makes me more aware. The stuff I read, the stuff I watch, the fandoms—I don't interact with a lot of them because they get so toxic. Like there is a reason I don't like *Supernatural* anymore and it's not only because of the show. When you get exposed to fans online, and especially because I usually use Tumblr, but nobody is just posting about the one show. They'll put in little pieces of political and you find that a lot of people are very open about being LGBT, being disabled, being mentally ill, being a person of color, being a person of a religion that's not Christianity. They're very open about that. [...] But getting exposed to all these, I think it's actually made me more liberal because it's like you start to realize these struggles that people who aren't like you are going through. [...] And some of that I think is intentional, but a lot of it is more a function of we don't feel represented enough. Like I said, I'd never seen an ace character until I started listening to this podcast—what, two weeks ago? And that's it. I'm twenty-five! So we don't see that. We do it for ourselves, but it also makes people think. It made me think because obviously I'm white, so I didn't get to the point where I was thinking about how people of color were—like I knew there were prejudices, obviously. I wasn't completely oblivious. But really thinking about how that affects every single day and that affects the political things that happen and then that affects their jobs and then that affects their safety (Personal interview, 2020, February 15).

Ilina's description of fandom as a site of exposure and education that influences her political development is representative of the majority of my sample who saw fandom and politics as linked. While there is a difference between exposure and education that fans sense when they encounter politics in fandom, fan spaces often have both taking place side by side. Many fans note that Tumblr is a particularly politics-heavy fan space and the same comingling of fannish and political interests occurred on LiveJournal, another microblogging site fans used heavily in the early 2000s before migrating to other platforms. Earlier digital fandom was more like convention-based fandom, in that the line between fandom and politics is more likely to be enforced to keep explicit politics out of fan spaces; fans who attend conventions as a large part of their fan activity up to today and fans who were active

in the listserv and personal website era of early web fandom both report that some moderators in these spaces are strict about putting fandom in a bubble as much as possible. On the other hand, some fan-run convention moderators are happy to allow attendees to organize panels and workshops around political topics, and the microblogging era of fandom seems to have no cultural aversion to comingling the two spheres. Additionally, LiveJournal and Tumblr have very different interfaces, so that the crossover of fannish and political content in fan spaces is not merely a question of affordances from platform architecture.

This continuity across distinct platforms and on- as well as offline spaces supports my notion that, at least now and in the recent digital past, some number of fans see political and fannish expression as mutually intelligible aspects of their social lives. The structural bias toward connection with others in transformative media fandom encourages fans both to bring the important aspects of their non-fan life into fandom spaces (“nobody is posting about just the one show”; Iliana, Personal interview, 2020, February 15) and to treat these expressions of different personal experiences and political opinion as internal to one’s community members (“you start to realize these struggles that people who aren’t like you are going through”; Iliana, Personal interview, 2020, February 15). In other words, transformative media fandom tends to acculturate its participants to seek community across difference and to value the liberal ideals of multiculturalism and diversity.

Apart from the structural bias to community, fans themselves are active agents in making fandom part of their political life and vice versa. This is clear in the fact that some fans see these as separate spheres, to the point that a few respondents describe fandom as a space they use to escape politics and other aspects of their daily life. This is an inherently privileged position that relies on the fan feeling no alienation or discomfort with the culture and ideology of their media objects, and likely also excludes from their fannish space anyone whose relationship to the fan object involves negotiation with its culture and ideology. This option is theoretically available to many fans and especially white fans, yet it is uncommon to

hear that fandom is an apolitical space. The overwhelming majority of my sample see the spheres of politics and fandom as linked, and these experiential linkages clarify the issue of partisanship in fandom.

Following the data, the first categorical distinction to make between different linkages is between exposure and education. Exposure to ambient sources of political content (e.g., textual content, fandom attitudes, and ‘casual’ disclosures from other fans) is a distinct phenomenon from political talk in fan spaces that intends to inform and educate. Like Iliana (Personal interview, 2020, February 15), many fans experience the overlap of politics and fandom as one of exposure to new ideas and perspectives that lead them to question their assumptions (“a lot of people are very open about being LGBT, being disabled, being mentally ill, being a person of color, being a person of a religion that’s not Christianity”). As previously noted, getting involved in slash fandom means exposure to a lot of ambient queerness, whether from fanworks that posit queer relationships between characters or from queer fans in slash fandom. Exposure to difference can take many forms, though. For instance, some older fans report that part of their fandom experience is exposure to younger people’s perspectives, and a few even use fandom as a deliberate counterweight to generational drift rightward.

Rosemary Tumblr helps me because there’s a lot of younger people on it. Because I really—I don’t want to be that old fan who’s waving her cane and saying, “You whippersnappers, get off my lawn.” I know that it is impossible for me to completely keep up with modern culture, but social issues, I can keep up with those. I just have to read and pay attention. So I have been trying to become more educated on issues about trans rights. I mean, this whole thing about the bathrooms, I’m like, Are you kidding me? This is a thing? That somebody actually will care who’s using the bathrooms? Come on! So I’m becoming more educated in those areas, and [...] it gets very easy to project other people’s struggle and say, Well yeah, I support their struggle. How is it different from what I went through? No, I haven’t become more—in fact, I’ve worked hard not to become more conservative as I’ve gotten older. Many of my friends have become more conservative, and I’ve worked really hard at not doing that. It happens easily. It creeps in. I hear myself thinking, Oh for heaven’s sakes, why can’t they just do x? And then I have to stop and

realize this is not the world I grew up in. [...like m]y world was different from my mom's (Personal interview, 2020, January 13).

Rosemary's politics are informed by her lived experience as a lesbian, but she credits fandom with facilitating her capacity to translate her experiences to empathize with the current political struggles of other queer people, specifically trans people. She is not the only older fan to cite trans rights as a political issue that she had little to no understanding of before exposure to fans' disclosures and discussions of trans experiences and political talk in fan spaces about issues of trans rights.

For that matter, younger fans also list trans rights among the political issues they learn about in fandom. Fans often place trans rights in a spectrum of linked political concepts that bridge fannish concerns like representation in media and real-life political policies. According to many respondents, fandom was the site of their first introductions to philosophical and critical theories like feminism, queer liberation, and critical race theory that ended up influencing or wholly transforming their political outlooks. These introductions could take the form of exposure, but the educational talk of peers in fandom helped guide many fans to broaden an interest in interpreting a single media text or sympathizing with another fan's individual experience to systemic political thinking.

Riley Part of my fandom experience has helped me in figuring out how to speak about politics. I mean, to a small extent, it has made me figure out what my politics are. But I think probably more substantially, it has given me the language to talk about these things. Because when people are talking about meta—there were some people—I can't remember the name of this person, but there was someone in a LiveJournal community that was about *Drake and Josh* from Nickelodeon. She was like a very political lesbian and she would write these long blog posts about queer theory and relate it to whatever Nickelodeon show that she was watching, and it was amazing! It was the first academic-type thing that I could read and I could sort of understand because it was in the context of this thing that I watched. So even though there were some terms that I was unfamiliar with—and oftentimes she would define those terms because she knew that she was talking to fangirls and not an academic audience. [...] I learned about subtext and the implications of people's—I don't remember if she used the word, but basically heteronormativity and gender roles and those sort of things. [...] It

was taking these complicated, heady ideas, academic ideas, but it was played out in a more understandable way because it was through this lens of fandom (Personal interview, 2020, January 12).

Candice I got into *Stargate Atlantis* as my first fandom where I was actually active and not a lurker, where I participated. And this coincides with important parts in my life politically in that—and it might have been before that too, but politically what comes to mind is when I voted for Obama the first time. The background for that is that my parents are conservative Christians. I was raised Mormon. And they are very conservative in everything, in their politics and stuff like that. So it was like an awakening for me, like, Oh, I'm not this conservative person. This is not who I am. [...] Most importantly I think, I encountered slash fandom and it normalized gay relationships for me. [...] That was the first introduction to that and through—and LGBT issues were addressed in some stories I read. There would be stories talking about homophobia, [...] and just in the social circles I followed because I was following them on Dreamwidth, I would see them talking about other issues tangential to those things or just other liberal issues that I came across because of the people I followed in fandom. There was some talk around other things, like women's issues came up with the erasure of female characters and how they were treated in fandom and stuff like that. So like I took my first baby steps into feminism when people were like, Why aren't there any female characters? (Personal interview, 2019, December 12).

It's notable that Riley and Candice describe similar experiences with political education in fandom despite their respective educations occurring in fandoms with dramatically different media objects. *Drake and Josh* is a high school sitcom on a network aimed at child and young teen audiences, whereas *Stargate Atlantis* is action/adventure science fiction with a military setting aimed at adults on the Sci Fi Channel. Fans' interest in applying the same political lens of interpretation to such dissimilar texts points to a habituation to that mode of engagement in transformative media fandom. Of course, all media are political (Fiske 2010), so could it be that the texts themselves invite this kind of engagement? Given its intended audience, it seems exceedingly unlikely that *Drake and Josh* intended to provoke analyses of heteronormativity using queer theory. The genre of science fiction, on the other hand, often explores social and political questions as text or subtext (Shippey 2016; Bould & Vint 2011). Since Candice mentioned that the military setting of *Stargate Atlantis* led to a number of analyses and fics that incorporated the American military's then-policy of don't ask, don't tell

for queer service members, I asked a follow-up question about whether the political discussion she encountered emerged from the content of *Stargate Atlantis* or from fans' interests:

Candice Oh, 100% [from fans]. It wasn't the content of the show at all. Like the show has no LGBT representation. The female characters, some of them were competent but it had a lot of issues with stuff like that and representation of certain things. *Stargate* in general is a step forward from other shows, but it wasn't leaps and bounds ahead by its time. It wasn't doing that. It was definitely the fan space I was interacting in that brought those issues to my attention (Personal interview, 2019, December 12).

This and data from other respondents suggest that political talk in transformative media fandom is not driven by the content per se of media objects. While each text provides fodder that can be more or less fertile ground for political interpretation and exploration, fans can and do apply a political lens to anything and everything. In short, political engagement is something fans would do anyway, and fandom is merely the site of their expression.

Content may shape what fans feel is the most appropriate political engagement with a text, but this is a relationship of like attracting like rather than determination. Instead, the political elements in fandom are expressions of fans' thinking and interests that transcend individual fandoms. Then it is perhaps unsurprising that, as both Riley and Candice say, the politics they found in fandom grew beyond their first encounter and even beyond fandom itself. The "complicated, heady, academic ideas" made understandable in their application to *Drake and Josh* helped Riley (Personal interview, 2020, January 12) form her political ideas and taught her "how to speak about politics" generally. Candice's (Personal interview, 2019, December 12) encounters with political talk in fandom prompted her to seek out additional information outside of fandom and started a political awakening, culminating in what she characterizes as the most important moment of her political life: rejecting her religious, conservative upbringing to vote for Barack Obama in 2008. Fans bring as much or as little of their experiences to their fannish engagement as they want, and reciprocally they can take as much or as little of their fan experience into other parts of their lives. Transformative

media fandom is a conducive space for encountering and exploring political ideas for the first time because of its bias toward building connection and community across difference. The correlation between fandom's affective structure and leftist political ideals of multiculturalism and diversity helps explain why the political ideas they find in fandom are often leftist, and therefore the leftward bias among transformative media fans.

Understanding politics in fandom as a lens of engagement that emerges from the fans' identities as citizens in the political sphere recapitulates the reality that fandom exists within the larger culture. In both fandom and politics, participation expresses the participant's sense of being connected to other actors and/or outcomes. However, the analogous affective structures of these systems are not matched by analogous size or scope. Simply put, politics is a large sphere in American society in terms of total participants, impact on populations, and spillover into people's experience and perception of other spheres. Even if fandom experience has a large impact on individual participants, transformative media fandom is orders of magnitude smaller than politics on every metric. Moreover, with fandom being a subculture sphere, it is affected by the spillover from politics. Not only do fans speak about the political sphere in ways that are wholly in line with what political science research predicts, the ways that they talk about political aspects within the sphere of fandom also reflect contemporary American politics' characteristic partisan polarization and widescale lack of trust and participation.

Many fans embrace the opportunity afforded by transformative media fandom to express their discontent with the status quo and imagine a better reality, either in the medium of fannish engagement or simply in the space of fandom with peers. However, this dynamic is not without nuance; even fans who appreciate political talk in fandom are often ambivalent about politics as a lens of fannish engagement with texts or in interactions with other fans. Most who report that they talk about politics with other fans clarify that they only do so with people they know.

Harper When I talk to fans individually, like if I share a fandom with somebody, yeah, I'll get into the political implications of something. Just because it's a valid way, in my opinion, to explore where narratives fall apart. Looking at something's political leanings or what it may or may not be saying about politics, religion, all these other things, that can be fun, provided I know the person really well. If I don't know somebody well and they—it's the reason my *Star Wars* tattoo is kind of incomprehensible. It's in Aurebesh, so people looking at it generally don't one, recognize it's *Star Wars*, and two, know what it says. I do that kind of intentionally because I don't want random people approaching me and wanting to engage in that sort of conversation, either about my feelings on *Star Wars*, which are a lot, or about the politics of *Star Wars*. For me, having a good political conversation is a lot different than just having one. [...] So for me, generally what happens is if somebody I don't know well comes at and is trying to immediately engage on a political level about something that I enjoy in fandom, I am usually pretty skittish because I don't want to spend the next five or six hours arguing with you. Because I will. I know who I am, and I will fight. This might not be the best use of my next six hours, though (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

Aurebesh is a constructed language in the *Star Wars* universe. It is not featured prominently enough that many casual viewers would immediately make a connection between the film franchise and Harper's tattoo. Even fans are unlikely to be able to read it, providing a layer of privacy for something that represents their relationship with their mother as much as it does their relationship with *Star Wars*. The parallel Harper draws between the interplay between public display and maintaining privacy with their fan identity and their willingness to engage politically in fandom illustrates again the centrality of feeling connection to community. As is true for many Americans (Eliasoph 1998), fans try to avoid the conflict that they associate with politics by avoiding the subject except with known interlocutors. In physical fan spaces, this can result in the situation we saw with Jackie, who had attended a slash con with the other focus group participants for years but never engaged with them politically before our discussion, even though many other con attendees would discuss politics with each other. On a site like Tumblr, the discussion may happen in the semi-public setting of posts that others can see and even try to interact with, but the posters can choose who to respond to and who to ignore. Most social media sites have blocking functions that fans readily use to

prevent or react to negative interactions, including over political difference. While some fans are happy to have discussions across differences of opinion, they draw a line between different left-wing policy positions and the difference between right and left; nearly every fan admits that they curate experiences that either never encounter or never engage with people who they consider right-wing.

Within these curated spheres of interaction, political engagement with texts and with other fans is still treated with ambivalence. One dimension is the scale difference between fandom and politics, with the concern being that fandom can become over-politicized while politics itself is diminished in fans' concerns.

Rachel I think in fandom you see a wider—there's a weird vulnerability to fandom, I think. People definitely hide behind their screen names and all of that good stuff, which makes perfect sense. I think that allows people to express things that they would not otherwise be comfortable expressing. You see that in fandom. It comes out in stories, it comes out in fan art, and it comes out in just dialogue that people are having with each other about the import of this or that thing in whatever story they're engaging with. I think that does impact how I view politics because I think it has given me a new perspective on people and who's out there and what's important to them, and more importantly, what they need to be healthy and whole. And then in terms of politics impacting fandom, I think in fandom we also have a tendency to create needs out of wants sometimes. Like we'll go too far down a rabbit hole on something being absolutely critical, and if you take fifteen steps back, it's perhaps less critical than you thought. [...] Yes, we all have needs and wants and some of them are very particular, but we have to respect other people as we do that. [...] I think [fandom] does it better [than politics] most times. I think there are spots where it doesn't. Especially when a fandom gets wrapped around the axle on something, it tends to stop being able to listen and then it sounds remarkably like a political party (Personal interview, 2020, January 27).

Rachel's critique of fans "get[ting] wrapped around the axle" by sublimating things they want into things they feel they are entitled to demand from media and other fans points to the ambiguous effects of fannish and political expression becoming entangled. Fandom and being a fan are often very important to its members' sense of being in the world, investing them deeply in what that space looks like and what is indexed in fan identity. This seems to

be why fans bring their political selves into fandom, because these two aspects of their lives are both important to their self-perception of being in the world. While Rachel values the exposure and education she receives in fan spaces as a consequence, she does not want fandom's internal interests and priorities to eclipse the political sphere. As she and other respondents note, the focus on things that matter a great deal to fans, such as diversity in representation, can obscure other political issues that are more relevant and pressing to real people's daily lives, like legal protections and financial stability for women, queer people, people of color, poor people, sex workers, etc.

At the same time, Rachel (Personal interview, 2020, January 27) suggests that in her experience transformative media fandom is a more viable space for political talk than the institutions of proper politics because conflict is a possibility in fandom and a guarantee in politics. If fans disagree over what fandom should look like or what being a fan means, however minor that disagreement is, it could be perceived as a dire threat to fans' self-concept and escalate into pitched conflict. When fandom gets too embroiled in its own objects this way, the community-building mechanism of connecting with other people breaks down; fans "stop being able to listen and then [fandom] sounds remarkably like a political party." This criticism echoes the growing discontent with the major political parties in contemporary American politics. It also mirrors many fans' open mistrust of political systems and the Democratic Party, even though most of the same fans admitted to avidly following the then-ongoing Democratic primary and having enthusiasm and/or cautious optimism for particular candidates.

These layers of nuance to politics in fandom illustrate the tension between fandom's structural bias toward connection across difference and overarching cultural hierarchies and divisions, including increased partisan polarization. Especially online with site architecture to aid them, fans curate the experience they want. For many, this includes exposure to and education about left-wing political ideas and/or political talk with known interlocutors. But as

previously noted, some fans use fandom as an escape from their political life or prefer fan spaces in which moderators enforce a separation between the two. For those who report doing fandom this way or speak positively of the practice, they often see this segregation of fandom from politics as the result of the political divide in America having grown too wide for fandom to bridge.

Brianna The more right the right gets, the more left I get. (laughs) I don't know any other way to answer that, really. I've always felt this way. I've never been pushed to feel the way I feel as far as—my beliefs have not changed over the years. I don't ever remember a time when I ever felt any differently than I do about people, about the rights of people, about the poor, about—just the environment, the planet. I don't understand not taking care of the whole world and the whole planet and the whole population of individuals. [...] If everybody isn't taken care of, everybody loses. And I've never understood a view that doesn't think that. So the more right the right gets and the more they want to exclude animals, the more they want to exclude immigrants, the more they want to exclude the poor, the more they want to disregard the environment, the health of the planet, the health of everybody, the more I disassociate myself, actually, from the right at all. [...] The divide is so—there's just so little in the middle anymore. And I think that's why [Moderator] doesn't let us bring it up at [fancon] anymore. Not that she ever did, but why she makes a point of saying at the beginning, "Don't bring it up" because there just is no middle ground anymore for people. There really isn't. The parties have come so far that you can't talk to anybody. I mean, I can't talk to a Trump supporter. They're never going to see my point of view, and I am never going to see theirs. So there's just no point in talking about it (Personal interview, 2019, October 28).

Brianna has attended the single-object fancon she mentions here for years, and the moderator has always dictated that neither politics nor other fandoms are supposed to come up at the con. However, Brianna makes a point of specifying that increased polarization and tension made the moderator state the rule more prominently at the 2019 con. Her view that there is "just no point in talking about" politics with people on the right anymore is only slightly more extreme than the view held by many respondents that they prefer not to engage with other fans across too wide a political difference. The distinction is that Brianna thinks fandom and politics can be separated, while many other fans do not.

Nearly all fans consider it acceptable to block, ignore, or avoid confrontations over politics in fan spaces, typically citing the fact that fandom is a hobby that they want to enjoy. For many, though, politics is something intrinsic to being in the world, including being in fandom. As they encounter and internalize fandom's left-leaning politics about representation in media and connect with people across difference and distance, if they didn't already believe it, fans often come to the conclusion that doing fandom is one facet of being in the world, not an escape from it. They typically hesitate to disparage people like Brianna (Personal interview, 2019, October 28) who use fandom as an escape, instead admitting puzzlement that escapist fans do not understand the implications of their practice.

Eileen I know people who are in fandom who use fandom as an escape—and this is not to dog on them, but a lot of people who don't want to talk about traditional politics or don't want to talk about those kind of political aspects of fandom or political aspects of the content that they watch, a lot of those people tend to be privileged in some way. Whether they be white people in fandom, or straight people, or cisgender people, or able-bodied. You know, on and on. They tend to be the ones that say, "I don't want to talk about politics. I just want to watch my show, or I just want to read my comic. I just want to watch this movie." Which like, you know, I also want to do all those things. But unfortunately, sometimes we have to think about the yucky stuff (Personal interview, 2020, January 20).

Fans' complicated relationship with politics as a lens of engagement within fandom shows the influence of contemporary American politics on this subculture. Eileen's interpretation of escapist fans' perspective diagnoses insufficient political awareness or engagement. To put it in plainer political terms, this is a leftist critique of complicity in society's inequities evidenced by silence and purposeful ignorance.

This viewpoint animates a progressive wing of the American left in contrast to a more institutionalist strain of leftism, complicating efforts to unite against the right in electoral and legislative conflicts. The same internal tension exists between escapist and politically-minded fans, but unlike in politics fans with different viewpoints have no external motivator to force the different factions to mingle if they do not wish to. Even if politically-minded fans think

negatively of escapist fans, they have no reason to coax them into political circles or force their way into escapist circles. Fans who prefer to avoid political interpretations of their favorite texts and political talk typically can. It should be noted, however, that this kind of transformative media fandom seems to be on the wane. Forty years ago, escapism was fandom's mainstream. As social movements and progressivism have had increasing presence in American society and politics, the idea that politics is everywhere and should not be ignored has rippled through fandom, too. The advent of online platforms may have helped facilitate this political drift, but the fact that so many fans recount changes in their traditionally political and fannish behavior in congruence with shifts in atmosphere or specific political events suggests that fandom's relationship with politics is more systemic.

Transformative media fandom and contemporary American politics are linked in part because of a structural similarity in participant experience. Feeling personally connected to others and to community outcomes is foundational to participation in both spheres. Equally, people become disillusioned with and withdraw from both fandoms and politics when they feel alienated from community and outcomes. This similarity is interesting in itself, but it also points to important differences between politics and fandom—namely, that the roles these respective spheres play in society and how they shape people's perception of their participation in each. Politics carry with it the weights of obligation and consequence for participants and non-participants alike. In comparison, fandom is unweighty or even weightless, a hobby rather than a civic duty. This dynamic informs how media fans regard political engagement within fan spaces. Some prefer to keep the spheres as separate as possible, while others individually negotiate a level and intensity of political engagement with texts and with other fans they find enjoyable.

This feedback loop is not unique among subcultures to transformative media fandom, but fans' perception that their experiences in fandom and politics are parallel is important

groundwork for patterns of moralization observed in the next two chapters. As we look forward to addressing the question of morality in politics, how do these complementary similarities and differences show up in the moral expression of the political community of transformative media fans? Given the feedback loops that occur in both spheres and the role of political engagement in fandom, can positive feedback in fandom ameliorate negative feedback in politics? In other words, can fandom function in the fashion of Charles Taylor's (1991) small-scale community restoring morality to politics through a virtuous cycle of engagement?

Another notable link between transformative media fandom and American politics is the prevalence of partisanship. The overlap between the philosophical and structural biases of fandom and the liberal values of diversity and multiculturalism has resulted in a strong correlation between fandom and leftism. Some fans can barely fathom the idea of a right-wing fan, and even those who do specifically curate their fannish spaces and experiences to avoid conflicts over political difference. The divide between right and left and the lack of communication across that difference in fandom mirrors contemporary American politics writ large. It also means that the participants in transformative media fandom who self-selected into this project are relatively homogeneous in terms of high political attention and participation and partisan identification with the left.

This is significant for two reasons. First, it reaffirms that transformative media fandom is a productive site for interrogating morality as a lens of political engagement. Because morality is typically conflated with religion, specifically evangelical Christianity, and therefore with the right in contemporary American politics, probing the general role of morality in politics requires addressing the supposed lack of moral engagement on the left. The common experience of fans learning about leftist political issues and adopting or deepening a leftist political identity because of exposure or education in fandom points to a direct link between participation in fandom and politics. This also leads to the second point of

significance, which is that the role of fandom in participants' political lives supports the idea that fandom may be the kind of political community Taylor believes capable of moral politics. To find out whether this is the case, the next chapter will examine the question of morality using the data from focus groups and interviews with transformative media fans.

Chapter 4: Religion, Relativism, and Morality

This chapter investigates whether the data from transformative media fans fit the blueprint of normative morality in politics from American political discourse and reflect Charles Taylor's (1991) moral theory. In describing how they see morality in politics, how do fans represent the relationship between morality and the political right? Do they adhere to a postmodern version of liberalism that, according to Taylor, shies away from moral reasoning in the name of relativity? Are they uncomfortable with the idea of morality, preferring instrumental reason about the means and ends of politics?

As with the aspects of contemporary politics explored in the previous chapter, transformative media fans generally fit the expected patterns for American leftists on the point of morality. They often conflate the concept of morality with both religion and the right. They show reluctance to call the right immoral, and fans who are willing to call the Republican Party and individual politicians fascistic or evil become tentative when ascribing motive or passing value judgements about religious people on the right. Distrust of the right's religious moral rhetoric makes fans leery of morality in politics. Even fans who are personally religious and religiously motivated in their political lives do not prescribe this kind of relationship to politics at scale. For society as a whole, they affirm the liberal ideal of secularism. This is because, as Taylor predicts of the left, fans have fully internalized the tenet of relativity. Thus emerges the contemporary American left's conundrum of being excluded from the discursively legible religious language for morality in politics with a philosophical reluctance to press the issue.

Partisan Status Quo: Morality as Right-Wing Religiosity

In contemporary American politics, morality is conflated with religion, especially Christianity, and non-religious forms of morality are illegible in political discourse. Any

discussion of morality in politics must therefore begin with an examination of how people view religion and its role in politics.

Few fans speak about the intersection of religion and politics in general, non-partisan terms. Following Charles Taylor's prediction of left-wing aversion to universalist morality as being against liberal principles, those that do address the role of religion in politics generally seem to view it negatively.

Paige What people consider morality isn't universal, but I would definitely think that both the politicians and the voters are using morality as sort of a barometer for what they're allowed to talk about and how they're allowed to talk about it, and how that shapes people's views of different issues. [...] What I'm judging as moral versus not moral is a consideration for whether this is going to be helpful to the highest number of people possible. I don't have any religious affiliations that are skewing my perception of morality one way or another. Looking at it from a societal perspective, you know, if this law passes, who is it going to help? Who is it going to hurt? That kind of thing (Personal interview, 2020, February 4).

Nodding at relativism, Paige provides a general definition of morality in politics as a "barometer" for thinking about and engaging issues. This definition aligns closely with Taylor's (1991) theorizing of moral horizons, and it is applicable to political actors at any level of participation. For her, this barometer is a question of outcomes for different groups ("if this law passes, who is it going to help? Who is it going to hurt?"). Interestingly and atypically for the sample, Paige draws a clear distinction between morality and religion with regard to politics. She states that she personally lacks "any religious affiliations" that could "skew" her moral compass, implying that religiosity is counterproductive to political thinking. It isn't clear from context whether she means only institutional religiosity, like the outsize role of white evangelical Christians in American politics, or if individual religiosity is equally detrimental.

While Paige (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) is the only respondent to directly imply this about religion, she is not alone in favoring a mode of engagement with politics that leans into instrumental reason. For all that many fans lament feeling alienated from political

community and outcomes, a few respondents spoke in favor of approaching politics from an emotional remove.

Jonas The treating of everything as a crisis I think is a huge mistake. Most things work pretty well and I'm pretty happy with how most things are in my life and my town and my city and my country. You know, I thank God I don't live in someplace like Hong Kong or Venezuela where the politics are life and death issues. [...] There's a difference between treating something of importance and treating something as a crisis. One of the unfortunate effects of democracy is that fear is one of the more effective ways to win an election, so it works for all parties involved to treat every election as the most important election in the history of the republic. But they're not. [...] You know, one of the questions that comes up a lot when people do discuss politics is why do Americans care so little about it in most cases? And it's rational ignorance. We live in a time and place—I pay attention to politics because it interests me. But the reality is, if I never voted, it would have very little impact on my life (Personal interview, 2019, October 29).

Of all respondents, Jonas makes the most explicit and general case for the perspective that people caring too much about politics has negative consequences for the polity. I would be remiss if I didn't note the high level of social privilege inherent in Jonas's experience of "most things work[ing] pretty well" in his life and his judgment, right or wrong, that the range of possible political outcomes will have little effect on him one way or another. But Jonas is not unreasonable or alone in thinking that politics have become too emotionally charged and polarized by partisanship. Other fans make similar critiques of contemporary politics as lacking sufficient rationality. For instance, some fans cite both Republicans and Democrats as getting inappropriately "fannish" about individual politicians like Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders at the expense of larger political goals. This recalls the critique described in the previous chapter of fans who use politics as a lens of doing fandom getting "wrapped around the axle" of minor issues and losing sight of the bigger picture of material reality.

Litigating the relative value of emotion and rationality in politics is quite beyond the scope of this project. I bring up Paige's (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) and Jonas's (Personal interview, 2019, October 29) explicit and implicit criticisms of religious and/or moral engagement with politics because they illustrate that some fans embrace the postmodern

trend identified by Charles Taylor (1991) prioritizing instrumental reason for the means and ends of politics. They see religion as obstructing the political decision-making of individual voters and elected officials. Later in this section, there will be more arguments for a secularism like Paige's. It is significant, though, that these are the only two respondents who speak about the role of non-rational modes of engagement like religious morality in such general terms. As with most aspects of contemporary American politics, the role of religion as morality is filtered through high partisan polarization and alignment with the right.

As previously noted, recent decades have seen the American political right and its policies become demographically and rhetorically anchored by white evangelical Christians. As general public opinion has been shifting left on so-called culture war issues since the 1990s, the right has increasingly explained its unpopular policy positions as coming from religious conviction, thus seemingly placing the right's platform beyond good-faith criticism (Costley White 2018; Chapp 2012; Stecker 2011). Using Hitlin's (2008) terminology for the different kinds of moral imperatives, right-wing morality in politics is almost entirely inhibitive. The right not only opposes left-wing policies, but it also paints a bright line between right and left, calls the line Christianity, and decries policies beyond that line as harbingers of the downfall of religious liberty and American society itself. Given the seriousness of this ostensible threat along with aforementioned demographic shifts, it is unsurprising that moral opposition to anything the left supports is at the core of a lot of contemporary right-wing rhetoric and organization. In fact, the implication of a moral imperative is often all there is to this rhetoric.

For leftist fans, this strategy reads as disingenuous. Though put more bluntly than most, Paige's (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) assessment of religion in politics generally displays the same skepticism that fans express about right-wing religious morality in contemporary American politics. Apart from Paige, fans seem to presuppose that religiosity is a valid form of individual moral engagement with politics, but they generally

disagree with how the right has institutionalized religious morality. The following excerpt illustrates the two main points of criticism: perceived hypocrisy from right-wing religious people and the liberal principle of secularism.

Brianna I know that politics have shifted a lot. But nowadays I think of conservatives as also being—tending to be religious, tending to be Christian, tending to be intolerant of the gay and lesbian community, being intolerant of abortion, being intolerant of things like that because of their religion. Which I also think is ironic because, you know, Christ preached taking care of the poor and that's also something that the right doesn't like to do. I never really understood—I've never understood conservative Christians, to be honest with you. [...] The right tries to live by its own morals, which come from the Bible, and say that abortion and lesbian and gay rights and so many things are against the word of God and so we need to legislate them. And then again, I say that the reason that I don't have respect for that belief is that the Bible also preaches giving to the poor and the Bible also preaches tolerance. You can't pick and choose, I don't think, what you want to think is biblical and what you want to think isn't biblical because—that's just innately unfair. And I think that's why the founders of our country wanted a separation of church and state. [...] That's the problem with the far Christian right, is that they're trying to impose their religious beliefs, their religious morals, on the legislative process. People on the left are saying, "Freedom of religion means you're free to practice your religion. It doesn't mean you're free to make everybody else practice your religion." There's a difference. And that's where that fight is between left and right because Christian conservatives, they want their beliefs to be the rule of the land. That's where it's wrong. And who's—you know, this country was founded on separating that. The far right wants that again or has never stopped wanting it. It's really difficult to separate church and state for them (Personal interview, 2019, October 28).

The shift in politics referred to at the beginning of this quote is the difference between the state of the major parties in the 1960s versus the present. In simple terms, Brianna is alluding to the general trends in party demographics and partisan polarization over the so-called culture war issues described in Chapter 1, emphasizing the religious homogeneity of the contemporary right. Though Brianna says at another point that she herself is "not religious" and doesn't claim expertise, she perceives the right's religiously motivated positions as not comporting with her understanding of the Bible or its role in Christianity. Specifically, she brings up the hypocrisy of cherry-picking political goals that curtail social

freedoms like access to abortion while “the Bible also preaches giving to the poor and the Bible also preaches tolerance. You can’t pick and choose, I don’t think.”

Brianna (Personal interview, 2019, October 28) also brings up the historical and political idea of secularism as a core tenet of America’s political system. She and other fans understand the separation of church and state as a key motivator in America’s eighteenth-century independence movement and essential to the founders’ intent. Given this understanding, fans like Brianna view the right’s goal of making policy based on religious belief at least suspect and at most illegitimate. For Brianna, this seems to be a standing assessment of what she calls “Christian conservatives” and “the far right.” But in conjunction with the increasing partisan polarization discussed in the previous chapter, fans often note that religion as morality is a significant aspect of recent changes in political dynamics. Regardless of what they previously thought of the right, they see the election of Donald Trump and the actions of his administration as intensifying the hypocrisy of the religious right.

Elena I think that when it comes to religion and the way that intersects with politics, that’s something that I’ve really struggled with these last several years. I’m not religious. I’ve never been particularly religious. I really struggle with the fact that largely the people that I grew up with are—what I see as pretty blatant hypocrisy of people whose values claim to be love thy neighbor and you know, that Jesus Christ was the one who was giving food to the poor and saying, “If you have no place to go, we are here to give you a seat at the table”—were the people that are holding so strongly to Christian values, the evangelical Christian values, as a reason to support the current administration when the actions that administration is taking, whether it’s separating families at the border or endangering the lives of LGBT youth, things that are really quite literally resulting in direct harm to people. I can’t make sense of that and I’ve tried. I have really tried. I’ve had the hard conversations with people that I love. I have asked, “How does this work in your mind?” I think I was saying earlier that before 2016, back when I was a younger adult, I could have those hard conversations and walk away feeling like, Okay, we still disagree, that hasn’t changed at all, but I understand where they are coming from. That has changed a lot. I can no longer make sense of how somebody can hold their own religious values and claim to honor them and to live their lives by them while also casting votes for and supporting politicians whose actions are, in

my view, completely antithetical to what those values would speak to (Personal interview, 2020, January 25).

Elena names the kind of right-wing Christianity she considers hypocritical as evangelical Christianity in particular. Additionally, she marks 2016 as the inflection point between a religious right that she felt able to talk to and understand its thinking and a religious right that thinks so differently from her that she cannot connect with people on the right across that difference, let alone understand them.

I hypothesized in Chapter 2 that the dyadic aspect of performative social identity and the two-party system would lead to political actors seeing themselves as moral and their opponents as immoral. This is certainly the case with right-wing religious rhetoric, and we can see from the above excerpts that left-wing fans are quite willing to question the moral integrity of the right. However, they are not willing to directly question right-wing *religiosity*. It is interesting that even Paige's (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) view, which is the most baldly stated rejection of the right's moral engagement with politics, still does not go as far as explicitly calling the right immoral or accusing it of making false claims of religiosity. Her critique seems to be based on the principle of secularism and a belief that religion has no place in American politics whatsoever. The more common tenor of criticism, exemplified by Brianna (Personal interview, 2019, October 28) and Elena's (Personal interview, 2020, January 25) comments, is couched in an unwillingness to claim expert knowledge of religion in general or the personal religious beliefs of others; rather, they foreground their own confusion and frustration with the specific uses to which the right puts its religious rhetoric. This tactic comports with the rhetorical untouchability of Christianity and the characteristic foregrounding of individualism and relativity in contemporary American political culture.

Additionally, the excerpts from Brianna and Elena's interviews address another question raised in Chapter 2: to what extent are left-wing fans attentive to the manner versus the matter of moral engagement with politics? In other words, are they interested in the manner of expressing moral motivation or in the ideals motivating policy and its material

outcomes? Elena's (Personal interview, 2020, January 25) argument clearly offers a criticism of the matter of the right's morality, pointing directly at the Trump administration's policies such as family separation at the border with Mexico as "things that are really quite literally resulting in direct harm to people." She is baffled that someone with Christian values could support "actions [that] are, in my view, completely antithetical to what those values would speak to," but she does not criticize the Trump administration or Trump voters for justifying such policies with religious moralization. Brianna (Personal interview, 2019, October 28) makes more explicit criticism of the manner of expression ("You can't pick and choose, I don't think, what you want to think is biblical and what you want to think isn't biblical"), but her ultimate conclusion—"that's just innately unfair"—gestures toward a skepticism that the ideals truly motivating the right are not what they claim to be. The religious manner of the right's moral expression, Brianna suggests, is a false mask on moral ideals that only leads to biblically ordained opposition to queer rights or abortion access but not to biblically ordained compassion for the poor.

But as they all state or imply, all three of these fans are not religious, and each brings up religion in order to critique the right's mode of engagement with politics. Thirty-nine of sixty-nine total respondents declare an affiliation with various religious identities, reflecting the overall makeup of the American left as a mix of non-religious and religious people (Pew 2014). What do religious people on the left think of religion as morality in politics? Do they use religious frameworks for political moralization as people on the right do?

Religion on the Left: Citizenship as Moral Imperative

Everyone who brought up religion in relation to the political right did so to criticize the conflation of religion with morality, but some fans describe their own religious lives as important to their experience of being on the left. The perceived quality of this religious approach to politics does not seem to be the same across partisan affiliation, however. Whereas fans' conception of the right's religious engagement with politics sees it as

motivating or rhetorically justifying policy positions, religious fans see their faith as one factor in their orientation to the world. For instance, when Bonnie says that *Harry Potter* had a huge impact on her moral and political development, I ask if it was a change in perspective or if she had identified with the left before *Harry Potter*.

Bonnie I mean, I was, insofar as I grew up in a liberal household with liberal and supportive parents, a lesbian rabbi. It's not as though [*Harry Potter*] was the only place I was hearing these things. Even growing up loving *Star Wars*, something—Luke, the way he goes out for his friends and like, “I’m a Jedi like my father before me.” Yeah, this was something that was being constantly reinforced in other aspects of my life. *Animorphs* was also a huge thing that I loved growing up and that was a much darker take, ultimately. But it was again the similar message of you have a responsibility to do the right thing. Which is actually also a very Jewish message, which I think I also took for granted growing up, the ways in which hearing something like tikkun olam, which means “to repair the world,” that’s sort of a central tenet of Judaism. It’s all about—I don’t want to use the word synergy. I’m so sorry. (laughs) But it certainly felt and still feels, looking back, as though everything was growing in the same direction. I don’t—I would have had to work really hard, I think, to turn out much differently than I did (Personal interview, 2020, January 19).

That Bonnie lists three different media properties as influences on her outlook before Judaism shouldn’t be taken out of the context of this project. She has been approached in the role of a fan and prompted specifically to think about fandoms that have been important to her. But her comment points back to the argument that transformative media fans’ engagement with each other and with media texts can impact worldviews beyond one’s fannish experience. In the previous chapter, I raised the cases of fans who had been moved to the left by transformative media fandom’s structural bias toward the acceptance of difference and exposure to left-wing political talk in fan spaces. For Bonnie, fandom provided a reinforcing rather than a transformative message, helping her to internalize the Jewish teaching she “took for granted growing up.”

Bonnie’s left-leaning fandom experience, “liberal” upbringing, and the tenets of her religion were all “growing in the same direction,” impressing upon her that she has “a responsibility to do the right thing.” In the context of this project, this is a statement about

morality in politics. But it isn't a statement about what the right thing precisely is, only that there is a moral obligation to do the work necessary "to repair the world." This articulation of religious morality for someone on the left is in contrast to fans' sense of right-wing morality as mandating or justifying very particular policies. Other fans join Bonnie (Personal interview, 2020, January 19) in representing participation in the political system as the primary moral imperative of their religious lives.

Sara Depending on how you cut the generations, I'm either an old millennial or I'm in between the millennials and Gen X. And I see a lot of people saying millennials and Gen Z in particular are really inspiring and giving a lot of hope. I agree with that, but I also feel like that's a very easy way to let older folks off the hook. (agreement) That's one thing I feel like, as a millennial or as just before the millennials, it is inspiring to see what the kids are doing, but also why should it have to be them? Right, that's a cop out. That's the cheap option. Like, "Well, they'll fix it for us." No, we can't do that. So that's one thing. I would say another is, as a person of faith, I don't feel like I have an option. I feel like I'm called to make the world a better place, that we all are. So inasmuch as I can, I have to do that, and there's hope in that. There's hope in the action. You know, faith is an action. It's not something you hold in your head. It's something you do. It's acting in whatever way I can to improve my circumstances and the circumstances of those around me, and the circumstances that touch the whole world. That's what I have to do.

[...]

Serrena I think for me what gives me hope is the knowledge that a better world is possible and that we're working towards it. For me, it's important to remember that hope isn't just mindless, naïve optimism. Hope is hard work. (agreement) It was Saint Augustine that said that hope has two daughters, anger and courage. That's where we are right now, right. That's what it going to take. And it's going to take community and take all of us working together. Not everybody has to do everything. We don't all have to do what I'm doing. Right, you can do what you can do. You can do what you can do and being able to figure out what that is and doing it. I'm a person of faith, too, and in the Jewish tradition, the Talmud is like, You are not obligated to complete the work, yet you are obligated to get started. (agreement) That's what we all need to do, is to say that I can't do everything. I can't possibly do everything. It's overwhelming to think of that. But I can do my part, and we are called to do that part.
(Focus group K2, 2019, November 2)

Sara and Serrena brought up their faiths during a focus group in response to a question about what gives them hope or motivation to continue with politics. The discouragement and

alienation from politics that many fans feel, which was described in the previous chapter and will be explored further in a later section, gave the focus groups and interviews an overall negative valence, so I endeavored to end on a more positive note if participants would provide it. Sara was the first in the group to bring up religion. Between her contribution and Serrena's follow-on comments, the group spoke only of non-religious topics. But from the agreement expressed in response to both of them, it seems that the religious sentiment was as positively received as Sara's belief that being buoyed by the political activation of "the kids" is not license to "let older folks off the hook" for making change in the world. Whether from politeness or from a more moderate view on secularism than Paige (Personal interview, 2020, February 4) expresses, there was no pushback from other members of the focus group on this left-wing version of religious morality in politics.

One explanation is that the role that religious belief plays in these fans' experiences does not match fans' perception of the role of religious morality on the right as anti-secularist. The left-wing refrain on secularism, as Brianna (Personal interview, 2019, October 28) states, is that "the problem with the far Christian right is that they're trying to impose their religious beliefs, their religious morals, on the legislative process" in violation of the separation of church and state. Whereas fans see the right's religious moral imperative as mandating a political agenda with policy implications for everyone, regardless of their religious convictions, Sara and Serrena's (Focus group K2, 2019, November 2) moral imperative is individual to their commitment to participate in the political system in pursuit of their goals. The moral ideal they see as religiously mandated is citizenship, doing politics because it is the way to shape society. Even though their visions of "a better world" made possible by certain policies would likely be shared by the other left-wing fans in the focus group, both Sara and Serrena only say that "faith is an action" and "hope is hard work" to make the society one wants to live in. In doing so, they make a slight but clear distinction between their religious beliefs and their political thinking, implying that they do the latter

relying on something other than the former. Put another way, the manner of their moral expression is the same as the right's, which is to say that they use religious language, but from fans' perspective, the matter or content of their morality is quite different from the right's.

I have comparatively little data on left-wing religious morality because few participants spontaneously bring up their religion in the same manner as Bonnie (Personal interview, 2020, January 19) and Sara, consequently allowing few opportunities for fans like Serrena to pick up that talking point (Focus group K2, 2019, November 2). The number of fans who speak about a faith life is far fewer than the number who identify with a religious affiliation in the survey (see Appendix A, Graph 5). This indicates that transformative media fans typically do not express moral engagement using the manner of religious rhetoric. To wit, other than critiques of the right, the most common way in which fans bring up religion in politics is by describing a transformation of their own political outlook that also transformed their relationship to religion.

Victoria I'm more with [Jody] about it being just the gestalt. I don't think them as two things that are intertwined for me, politics and fandom. But I definitely went through a big change growing up. I was raised by a very conservative family but a divorced family, so one side was kind of hippie and one side was very, very conservative. That was my dad's side and he tried very early on to indoctrinate me into a very conservative ideology. And I grew older and I went through high school and came to know myself as a queer person and when I went through college, I just kept taking more and more steps away from his ideology to where I'm completely the opposite now (laughs) of where he's coming from. And around that same time is when I got into *Star Trek*. College is when I got into—the 2009 movie came out for me. Also to piggyback on what you were saying, it is that optimism and that idea that it can be better than this and it's worth fighting for. You have to find your crew. You have to find your people who believe that same thing and who are willing to work with you. And that ties over into lots of aspects of my life including politics, including religion. Because I'm involved in a church, but I found a church that was inclusive, like radically inclusive, such that they don't care if you actually say you're a Christian or not. They're like, No, everyone's welcome here. We're all for social justice and things like that. Right. So it informs everything. It's all of it for me (Focus group K1, 2019, November 2).

Following on another focus group member's similar story, Victoria sketches a shift from a "very, very conservative" upbringing implied to have a religious component to her current left-wing politics and "radically inclusive" faith community. She interprets the relationship between her introduction to *Star Trek* fandom and the transition from her upbringing as correlation rather than causation. *Star Trek* is one facet alongside other factors like her sexuality and the new social context of college, but one reason she became involved in the fandom is that *Star Trek* is emblematic of the "optimism and that idea that it can be better than this and it's worth fighting for" that she came to embrace as a young adult as part of the "gestalt" of her life experiences. This comports both with the previous chapter's findings about how fans feel connected with media texts and fandoms and with the implication made by Sara and Serrena (Focus group K2, 2019, November 2) that religious people on the left do not perceive religious beliefs as dictating their political stances. Rather, Victoria (Focus group K1, 2019, November 2) puts religion into a category alongside politics as a site in which her underlying moral ideals of optimism and "find[ing] your crew" can be expressed and enacted. This subordinates religion to the matter of her moral ideals, but what about the manner of expressing them? Notably, Victoria has an obvious opportunity here to use religious language to explicate what her moral ideals are. Illustrating the importance of shared referents in moral language, she instead borrows *Star Trek* terminology ("finding your crew") that another focus group member had previously invoked to describe how the series is important to them.

Aside from Victoria's (Focus group K1, 2019, November 2) lateral move between different faith communities, everybody else who talks about experiencing a religious transformation describes a move away from faith. For some, this move was something of a drift away from religion as one aspect of a gradual transformation of perspective.

Harper	For me, a lot of it came down to when I was in elementary school. [...] I spent a lot of time reading and a lot of time existing in a quasi-fantasy world. I started attempting to write my first books when I think I was in like fifth grade,
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I think was when I started just not paying attention in class and reading under my desk and writing instead of taking notes. I think honestly doing a lot of reading, really involving myself with conceptualizing thought points outside my own—because I would read a lot of books like *Little Women* and then I read Terry Brooks's *Shannara* series, which is about high fantasy and magic and people who exist outside gender binary, outside of heterosexual relationships. *The Old Kingdom* series was also very important because it was just about women primarily and they were allowed to be mad and angry and get in people's faces. For me, I also know, of my family members, I'm the one that reads the most and I'm the one that interacts the most with different types of fiction. [...] The utilization of other people and sympathizing with what other people, fantasy people, are experiencing kind of just informed how I started approaching actually socializing with people. Just actually empathizing with this person has a complete story somewhere. What is it? Why is it? What informed that? And then, I don't know. I was raised Catholic. I always was taught that you're supposed to really, genuinely care about people. So I try to really, genuinely care about people, even though I don't follow the Catholic faith anymore. But really, I've been asked that a lot because people will meet my parents and then talk to me and they're like, I don't understand how this happened. I was like, "I don't know what to tell you. I just woke up one day and was like, Hang the parasites, all power to the people. It just happened!" (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

The way Harper describes the impact of reading diversely is similar to fandom's structural biases for affect and connection that I outline in Chapter 3. Harper sees a common thread between their heterogenous reading habits and Catholic upbringing, one of learning to "really, genuinely care about people" across difference. Having different media consumption habits and ultimately a different relationship to faith than the other members of their family was part of a change in perspective that also made their politics dramatically distinct from their family's politics. Their explanation for why they no longer identify as Catholic hits on many of the points that non-religious fans make about right-wing religious hypocrisy; in Harper's view, Catholics and the Catholic Church do not put in practice biblical commandments to be generous and loving "because there's too many caveats on the "Be Christ-like" for them." After renouncing Catholicism, Harper still felt an affinity for being in a faith community and certain Christian beliefs, but they also decided not to join a community

like the “radically inclusive” church Victoria (Focus group K1, 2019, November 2) found after a similar shift leftward.

Harper For me, what it ended up coming down to and why I didn’t join any of those was because it felt like I would be doing too much explaining to anybody if I was like, “I’m Catholic, but not that sort of Catholic.” It just—it is an intensely Catholic thing, but there is another line in Scripture that is [like], You shouldn’t have to draw attention to what you’re doing. “They will know you’re Christian by how you love.” That’s one of the most beautiful lines in the entire Bible. “They will know that you are Christian by how you love.” So I don’t want to describe myself as Catholic. I don’t want to describe myself as Christian. I would rather just live the life that any god could be proud of. I would rather want to be remembered as somebody who was compassionate and kind and who would do anything for the people they care about, than somebody who followed a particular creed. I don’t want it to ever be said that I’m doing these things because of a creed. I want it be said that I was doing these things because I thought it was right (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

This is a clear statement about valuing the material matter of moral engagement with the world over the manner of its expression. Harper is far more explicit in their moralization than many fans, no doubt because they are practiced in thinking and talking about religion from personal interest and study. Clarity aside, they are expressing similar sentiments to other religious fans about the relationship of their faith to their political life. “I don’t want it to ever be said that I’m doing these things because of a creed” reiterates the idea that religion is not the deciding factor in left-wing fans’ policy positions. Rather, there is an underlying moral ideal that the world “can be better than this and it’s worth fighting for” that someone like Victoria (Focus group K1, 2019, November 2) engages with in the site of religion as well as in politics, and someone like Harper engages with by abstaining from religion to focus on moral action in their daily life and political thinking.

Whereas Harper’s (Personal interview, 2020, January 31) change in perspective and drift away from religion seem to have been gradual, other formerly religious fans had abrupt awakenings. Kate’s experience dovetails with the previously noted impacts that fans feel from increasing partisan polarization and the lightning rod of the 2016 presidential election.

Kate I've dialed back my social media. I used to be really active on Facebook when Facebook was a lot of fun, and then it just became this political battleground with everybody saying these nasty things to each other and spreading all kinds of disinformation. So I just dialed it back. I don't participate like I used to. I just post really simple things like it's my birthday. (laughs) Just really, really simple things. But another thing that really hurt, and I don't know if this'll be part of your research or not, but I also was very active in my church and I had to stop. I had to quit going because—and it's hard to say. I was active in my women's group and it just got down to that's what they were talking about, was we have to pray for Trump and Hillary's an evil woman, Muslims are evil. And I just couldn't. I said, "You guys, I'm done. I'm just totally done. I cannot be a part of this. It's wrong." So I totally quit going. And I would love to go back to church again because I think I'm a very spiritual person, but as long as they're talking that kind of nonsense, I'm like, You guys, no. You're wrong. (laughs) You're wrong. I don't know. Maybe someday I'll find out I'm wrong (Personal interview, 2019, December 30).

Like other fans, Kate seems to experience her church community as a site of engagement with the world comparable to other sites, such as social media. Increasing partisan polarization and the fallout from 2016 have led her to feel irreconcilably alienated from people on the political right, and she experiences this alienation on social media and in her women's group at church. She not only feels unable to connect or communicate with the right any longer, but the magnitude of alienation has caused her to retreat entirely from these sites of engagement ("I'm just totally done. I cannot be a part of this.").

Alienation explains why fans would avoid political talk and moralization of any manner, religious or otherwise, with people on the right. But why do so few of the fans who are religious bring it up when talking to other fans in their community who are politically similar to themselves? Why is religious language not the standard means of moralization on the left as it is on the right? The heterogeneous demographics of the left previously discussed provide some explanation, but the data from fans suggest there is another component to this phenomenon.

Rachel I am religious, but I just kind of try not to bring it in to conversations that aren't explicitly religious if I don't know the other person's feelings on that topic. One, because it can be really triggering to people that were harmed by that in their past. And then two, just because I think it can get distracting if you open with

religious language because immediately, there are eighty-seven different assumptions people are going to bring from their perspective on that. And if I don't bring it in, I find it's just a more open conversation. [...] If I was having a conversation with somebody who was religious with whom I disagreed politically, I would probably use religious language to talk about how I got to where I got. Not in like a "let's hurl scripture at each other" kind of way, but religion at its best is a narrative and theme that tells us how best to live, essentially. Who are we? Why are we? And who are we to each other? I would use religious language if I was speaking to a religious person and we disagreed about why are we here and who are we to each other and what the certain mutual responsibilities there. I think it'd actually be a more fruitful conversation in that case. [...] But religion itself—I mean, religion reflects culture and culture reflects religion. You can't really separate them, as much as we try to do so. Even having a conversation with a very religious person who is very much on the opposite side of the political spectrum from me, the ability to even use religious language to bridge the gap seems to be getting smaller over the years. Which is also worrying (Personal interview, 2020, January 27).

Here Rachel lays out the theory behind moral vocabulary analysis, which is that the primary value of cultural resources appropriated for moral expression is their mutual legibility to interlocutors. Religious language is potentially useful only among people who will understand and feel an affinity for that framework, and that may not be information interlocutors have when they begin speaking to each other ("if I don't bring it in, I find it's just a more open conversation"). Conversely, the religious framework is potentially upsetting for the disproportionate number of people on the left who have moved away from religious upbringings and are dedicated to secularism. Either way, "it can get distracting if you open with religious language" rather than some other framework.

Apart from not knowing whether an interlocutor will identify with religious frameworks for expression, Rachel (Personal interview, 2020, January 27) notes two additional things that make her hesitate to employ religious language to talk about politics. Like Harper (Personal interview, 2020, January 31), Rachel feels the weight of the assumptions about religious people because of how they are stereotyped in American political discourse: that they are right-wing or that they engage with politics in the way the right does, with their

religion seemingly dictating political stances that are beyond question in public. Though this is not true of Harper or Rachel's personal orientation to politics, the assumption negates the bridge-building possibility from a shared religious language. Secondly, even if Rachel knows that an interlocutor is religious, she finds that increasing partisan polarization has lessened the bridge-building potential of the shared language. The normative inextricability of religiosity and right-wing politics in political discourse renders the discussion of political difference through the lens of religion less productive than talking directly about the issues. As I have heard from many fans previously quoted, though, talking at all about politics across partisan difference is increasingly difficult and often avoided.

Looking at morality through the discursively normative lens of religion reaffirms the centrality of partisan polarization in contemporary American politics. It also begins to show that left-wing transformative media fans display what Charles Taylor (1991) identified as a defining feature of postmodern liberalism and the culmination of the trends of individualism and instrumental reason: relativism and its impact on the left's view of morality.

The Left's Paradox: Liberalism, Relativity, and Morality

Something notable throughout the excerpts in the preceding sections but especially evident at the end of Kate's (Personal interview, 2019, December 30) reply above is fans' tendency to equivocate when talking about the right and right-wing religion. The fans who speak about their own religious experiences are more confident in what they're saying. But when speaking about the right or, in Kate's case, making an assertion about religion and morality that directly implicates the right as immoral, it comes with caveats of "I don't know. Maybe someday I'll find out I'm wrong." What she firmly believes about right and wrong clashes with her hesitance to make a universal assertion.

This fundamental tension between the proactive and inhibitive aspects of left-wing morality discussed in detail in Chapter 2 is most obvious when fans talk directly about the

right or religion. In the latter case, the untouchability of religious liberty in normative American political discourse is a contributing factor, too. But the philosophical tenet of relativism can confound fans when talking about any subject. In this section, I illustrate how relativism crops up when fans discuss politics and morality in empirical support of Taylor's theory that a paradoxically dogmatic insistence on relativism hamstrings the left's capacity for the explicit discussion of morality in politics.

Many fans express frustration with the current political system, and I asked some a follow-up question about how they would fix it. Reforming political systems has become an increasingly central topic in left-wing political discourse to which the politically attentive fans in my sample would likely have exposure. When asked about the topic, though, fans demur and apologize for not being expert political scientists.

Candice I'll be honest here, our politics system, I only know so much. Like probably someone in the sixth or seventh grade could bound how our system works better than I could on that. And with other countries' political systems, I'm not as aware as how they work. I know the parts of our system that are broken right now and not functioning, but I have no idea how to go about and make that—I have some idea. Like obviously, get rid of the electoral college. One vote for one person. Not a two-party system. Like just everyone get equal time on that and some ideas on that so that big money can't donate to campaigns the way they are right now. But I don't know what the ideal system would be. [...] (laughs) I'm like, I don't know! I feel like you should probably get a professor or someone, a bunch of them? [...] Like I said, I'm not as knowledgeable as a lot of other people are on a ton of these subjects. I have some ideas. I'm basically parroting other things that I've heard that I think sound good and sound like they could be good solutions. From smarter people than me have said. (pause) Or we could just eat the rich? There's that (Personal interview, 2019, December 12).

One aspect of instrumental reason, deference to expertise, is obviously evident in Candice's suggestion that I bring the question of reform to "a professor or someone" instead of her. But at the same time, Candice is sure of herself when she asserts "I have some idea" of how to fix the system, giving the example of "obviously, get rid of the electoral college," before walking it back with the caveat that she's "parroting other things that I've heard." In doing so, she is foregrounding the relativity of her perspective by its limitation to what she has heard

and, with her limited expertise, judges “could be good solutions.” Even if she had heard of reforms that had ultimately been proposed by experts, she’s hesitant to make a universal claim about the “ideal system” from her relative position. At the end, she turns the conversation back to more casual talk with the joke about “eat[ing] the rich,” a meme about capitalism that is popular on social media sites where transformative media fans congregate. The meme has clear political implications but at a level of joking remove and ubiquity that absolves the joker of responsibility for making a universal assertion.

The tension between what fans personally think is true about the world and what they are willing to assert as true is also evident when talking about how people participate in politics. Most pertinent to this project is the question of how morality impacts political participation and decision-making. Some interviews progressed in such a way that we ended up speaking directly about the role of morality in politics. In this scenario, some fans did all but quote Charles Taylor’s (1991) description of relativism.

Jonas Sure[, morality is a factor in politics]. On the other hand, the usual—how morality is defined is also an interesting question and not one that’s consistent across times and places. [...] Having said that, you know—I’m trying to think of the right way to phrase this. Morality is—there does seem to be a moral instinct among humans. But exactly what that instinct is is not universal either. But we’re born knowing certain things are—we seem to be born knowing that certain things are right and certain things are not. How we act upon those instincts determines a lot of how we function as people (Personal interview, 2019, October 29).

Whereas Candice (Personal interview, 2019, December 12) expresses relativism primarily in hesitation and backtracking, Jonas expresses it through carefully limited phrasing. He starts out asserting that “we’re born knowing certain things,” but he rephrases to make the claim reflect the relativity of his own observation: “we *seem* to be born knowing certain things are right and certain things are not” (emphasis added). Jonas agrees with Taylor that humans have what Jonas calls a “moral instinct,” the inescapable need for a moral horizon to orient

them in the world. Unlike Taylor, Jonas does not think that the moral instinct should be intrinsic to political engagement in the polity at scale. This expresses Jonas's staunch secularism as well as relativism. At other points in our conversation, Jonas stresses a distinction between moral ideals, which are universal in scope and only systematized in religion, and the sociohistorically situated constructs of ethics, specific rules and conventions established for the implementation of non-religious ideals. He feels that the problem of morality being both universal and yet lacking agreed-upon parameters within societies makes ethics more feasible, and therefore more important, in politics. In other words, Jonas thinks that an individual might have moral ideals or religious beliefs that affect their judgment of political issues, but when participating in the system, individuals and societies should be invested first in maintaining standards of behavior and the longevity of the system itself.

Jonas (Personal interview, 2019, October 29) sees morality as basically irrelevant to politics, but transformative media fans who disagree with him on that point often still agree that morality should not be a normative lens of political engagement. These sentiments are consistent with the previous finding that transformative media fans associate morality in politics with right-wing evangelical Christian rhetoric and right-wing reactionary policies. When imagining a society that sees politics as a moral question, left-wing fans conjure a specter of people who would vote in ways fans think are wrong but that the imagined opposition zealously pursues as a moral imperative.

Lily No, I don't think about it in terms of morality, although I understand that there's like moral implications of what I'm saying. But you're right. I don't really think in terms of that word. But our conversation does beg the question, is morality relative or is some camp correct? [...] That's tricky. As a psychologist who works with clients, I want to respect everybody's values and on an individual level, help them move towards their values. So like on an individual level, if a client comes in and tells me that they really value their relationship with God, great, I'm going to help them move towards that. But at a political level, if someone tells me that their value is like freedom and so that means that they get to carry around a machine gun because they don't want somebody to tell them what to do and the (audio glitch) of that is that someone else can get a machine gun and shoot up whatever. Right? Like then it becomes—on an

individual level, I was okay with a person having whatever values. But then once you zoom out, I disagree with myself. Or my view—I don't want to say it becomes inconsistent because that's not fair because it's a different set of implications. But I don't know how to reconcile that. Like I do think that feminism is more right, but I also understand that I live in a world where everybody thinks that they're right, so who am I to say that I'm better? Like my morality is more moral than yours? (Personal interview, 2020, February 27).

Mary My personal morals—yes, I think everyone should have my personal morals and apply them to politics as a whole. I hesitate to say people should base their political whatever on their own morality because I know there are people out there whose morality does not meet up with mine in that way. Like looking out for number one might be one of the morals that was really drilled into them, which is not really super conducive to society as a whole. So if I could make everybody base their politics on my morals, (laughs) I would one hundred percent do that. But I hesitate to say everyone should base politics on their own personal morals because morals are subjective (Personal interview, 2020, February 4).

The relativity of different individuals' moral ideals and modes of engagement makes fans leery of the prospect of morality moving toward the political norm. Lily and Mary both frame this as a question of scale: certain moral ideals that are acceptable for individuals to hold and enact in their daily lives have a capacity to cause harm if politically implemented on a societal scale. Lily draws an implicit comparison between her professional stance as a psychologist who is happy to help a client who “really value[s] their relationship with God” incorporate that ideal into their therapeutic goals and her discomfort as a citizen with the prospect of moral ideals that contradict her own becoming policy. And yet, as is implied in these comments, morality is a key component of how Lily and Mary see themselves as political actors. Mary is so confident in her moral horizon's ability to orient her to right action that she jokes that she would be pleased to “make everybody base their politics on my morals.” She simply does not trust other people to come to the same conclusions, because individual morals are “subjective” and potentially right-wing. Due to this problem of relative moralities, Lily and Mary conclude that it might be better that other people not see politics as a question of morality.

Other times, the topic of morality in political participation came up explicitly in the context of partisan difference. As we have seen already, the principles of religious liberty and relativism make fans loath to call the right's religiously based political stances immoral. But even when religion is removed from the equation, relativism still causes fans to equivocate on whether they think people who hold opposing political viewpoints are thinking or acting morally.

Christina No. (laughs) [...] No, I don't. I don't know. Especially now, it seems like so many people are like, Well, I don't want my taxes raised. I'm like, I live very comfortably and I can afford to have my taxes raised, so why shouldn't I have my taxes raised in order to ensure that other people get healthcare and get housing and get food on the table? If that's not—like just the basic shit that you need to survive. If me paying a little bit more money to the government ensures that other people get that, then why wouldn't I vote for it? Why wouldn't I want that to happen? And other people are like, I don't want my taxes raised. If you're in a low-income bracket, the point is that I'm voting in such a way that they won't be raised. I don't understand. But if you're like Jeff Bezos, shut the fuck up, dude. [...] Honestly, I don't know. It's hard to speak for others, you know? I can't speak to what is going on in their minds when they cast these votes. Certainly it's okay to vote kind of selfishly in that if you are in a low-income bracket and you are voting to raise taxes on the rich, that is a selfish decision that you are making, but it's also a decision that's benefitting people that have been disenfranchised. It's okay to make selfish decisions sometimes, you know? But it can't—it's not necessarily coming from the same place as like, I feel like I can take this tax hit if it means that other people are going to suffer less, you know? So I don't know if it's necessarily from the same mindset that I have, and I can't say that people who are voting for the opposite necessarily—I don't think that people think that they're evil. I don't think that people voting for Donald Trump perceive themselves as bad people. I think they have a mindset that they're protecting their way of life (Personal interview, 2020, February 8).

Like Candice (Personal interview, 2019, December 12), Christina answers with what she seems to honestly think, laughing at her own quickness or daring to say unequivocally that the political right is not moral. And like Candice, that knee-jerk response is soon followed by an extensive walking back to the level of relativism acceptable in left-wing political discourse. She expresses this relativism in two ways: first, by trying to imagine the right-wing perspective based on what she knows of right-wing rhetoric. Using the example of taxes,

Christina presents her own lens of engagement as the moral question of “why shouldn’t I have my taxes raised in order to ensure that other people get [...] the basic shit you need to survive?” As far as she knows, the right’s perspective is based on simply not wanting to pay more taxes, which she later implies is selfish. Even after breaking down the right into low- and high-income brackets, Christina still seemingly cannot imagine a moral basis for holding the anti-tax position. Not wanting to say that explicitly, she expresses relativism a second way by foregrounding the ontological impossibility of knowing exactly “what is going on in their minds when they cast these votes.” She points out that someone who votes in the same way as she does might have selfish motivations of wanting the benefits of raised taxes instead of having the same moral intention as she does of alleviating someone else’s suffering. But in the end, the most positive ideal that she can imagine grounding the right’s positions is “protecting their way of life,” and she doesn’t seem to think much of that ideal. In short, fans like Christina see many right-wing positions as amoral or immoral, but the standards of political discourse make them reluctant to say so outright.

A side effect of relativism becoming normative in the political discourse of liberal democracies like the United States, and especially so on the left, is that the discussion of morality gets shuffled to the sidelines (Taylor 1991). The main exception is the religious rhetoric of right-wing evangelical Christians, a rhetoric to which the left lacks access for the variety of demographic, partisan, and philosophical reasons previously outlined. Consequently, the left tends to see morality as incompatible with or unfeasible to consider in politics compared with the measurable certainty of instrumental reason. My data show the continuity between the left’s internalization of these circumstances and their discomfort with explicit and normative consideration of morality in politics. For instance, Eileen sees political issues as moral questions of alleviating or causing harm, but she is vehement that few people on either side of the political spectrum interpret issues in those terms.

Eileen	Absolutely fucking not. No. I mean, I can’t say how many on the left or how many on the right would agree. I think that there is culpability on either side of
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the aisle. I think people might say, “It’s always Republicans. They don’t care about the people.” And in some cases, that’s correct. But I think that you can also look at people who have done things on the left, who have taken money, who have voted for certain things, and have also hurt people. I don’t—(laughs) I think if you pose this question to people in the Senate or Congress, some people would be very honest and say, “Yeah, I absolutely vote like it’s a moral—like people matter.” I think we see that especially in a lot of our newer folks entering into politics. People like AOC, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. I think she might say, “Yes, this is a moral question,” because I think she has literally said something similar to that in an interview before. I don’t think every Democrat would say the same thing. I’d be really interested in having this question posed at one of the Democratic debates. Do you feel political activity is a moral or ethical situation? Just to see what everyone says. But I think it’s that whole thing of distancing. If you are directly a part of it, if you’re directly voting, if you’re directly taking money, if you’re directly benefitting or not benefitting from whatever, you are not going to want to say flat out, “Yes, it’s a moral and ethical situation, and I’ve just decided to be a very shitty person.” Because whether people want to acknowledge that or not within themselves, they’re certainly not going to admit it to other people. That kind of breaks the whole illusion. If we start thinking about politics as ethics, then it’s like, Man, we have to actually really think about this (Personal interview, 2020, January 20).

Here relativism first rears its head in the form of what is often called both-sides-ism, avoiding the appearance of partisanship by showing that a criticism of one side of the political spectrum also applies to the other. Eileen seemingly assumes that I will attribute her reflexive rejection of the idea that other political actors use the same moral lens of engagement that she does to her seeing the right as amoral or immoral. Instead of walking that impression back as Candice (Personal interview, 2019, December 12) and Christina (Personal interview, 2020, February 8) do, Eileen goes to lengths to show that she in fact thinks “there is culpability on either side of the aisle.” She also talks about the actions of candidates and elected officials rather than those of other voters, but makes a similar point that people either don’t think of themselves as immoral or have justifications for acting immorally. Politicians in particular, she seems to think, will be reluctant to cast themselves as moral actors because they will inevitably make compromised decisions. Eileen admires the new cohort of more radical left-wing politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for affirming

that “I absolutely vote like [...] people matter,” thus opening herself up to voters holding her to a higher standard.

At the same time, Eileen makes an additional argument I also heard from several other fans that expecting immaculate morality from politicians over their careers or on every conceivable issue at once is not practical. If that is the case, these fans suggest that relativism is an adaptive mindset for voters to have.

Eileen I feel like a lot of politicians want to distance themselves from maybe some of the questionable decisions that they've made. And again, with moral and ethical things, there is a chance for growth and there's a chance for apologies and things. There's certainly been people in the government who voted for things that were directly harmful in the past and then who have changed over time. [...] But even so, it's like, no one's perfect. We can't hold these people to a perfection standard because they are human. I think there's a way to see like, Okay, this person is attempting to be morally responsible. I also think everybody feels like their ethics are different. What I find ethical might not be ethical to someone else, you know? You know, we're humans. It's all very complicated (Personal interview, 2020, January 20).

Instead of using a universal standard and being paralyzed by impure options or fruitlessly seeking to construct the case that their candidate is morally pure while tearing other candidates' credentials down, they can parse the options available relative to each other to choose the lesser of evils. Morality can be a part of this parsing, but fans admit that they typically have just a few issues like upholding the Affordable Care Act, abortion access, and the civil rights of queer people on which they are totally unwilling to compromise when picking a candidate. In the context of the Democratic presidential primary happening contemporaneously with these interviews, the differences between candidates are not these watershed issues. At the core of fans' judgement between the Democratic hopefuls are attempts to predict electoral outcomes in the general election and the palatability of the candidates and their platforms to other voters or members of Congress. Thus, as Taylor predicts, the question of morality gives way to instrumental reason.

The one significant difference between what Taylor's moral theory predicts and what fans themselves say is the idea of morality as a lens of personal political engagement versus a normative mode of engagement. Taylor seems to argue that the left's abrogation of morality is pervasive from elites shaping partisan talking points down to individual citizens' political thinking. In my data, there is a noticeable contrast between fans' discomfort with the idea that *other* voters would see morality at the core of American politics and the admission that morality is important to their *personal* political thinking. What explains this deviation from Taylor's prediction that leftists' devotion to liberal values leads to an inability to acknowledge the role of morality in public life?

I interpret my data as showing a left-wing backlash to the circumstances Taylor observed in the 1990s. The trends of individualism, instrumental reason, and relativism in western culture have affected citizens' overall relationship with the political system. Fed up with a lack of change and feeling alienated from communities and outcomes as enumerated in the previous chapter, individuals have lost faith in political institutions and discourses.

Kate We're in a point where we're—oh, what's the word? Is it oligarchy? Our politics have boiled down to we're being led by a small group of wealthy people. That's oligarchy, right? Yeah, I think that's the term. [...] There's just a small group of very wealthy men who are basically in charge. They get what they want and the rest of us never even know the machinations that go on behind the scenes. We're just kind of—(laughs) We're just totally used. So I don't know. It's like we're the end stages of a Monopoly game. Eventually, all of the power gets into the hands of one person, and that's where we're at (Personal interview, 2019, December 30).

Illiana I think we are relying on systems and documents and ideas that are hundreds of years old and that, from what I understand of how our country was formed and everything, weren't necessarily meant to remain the governing system for all of that time. I think it's—especially with things like, oh—people will point at the Constitution for everything. It's like, We need to be evolving with the times and not just say, This is how it's always been done so this is how it has to be done, because this is what the piece of paper says. And right now, it's getting very, very, very hard to do anything bipartisan. We need to have some unity and people are just—I feel like a lot of times politicians—and normal people but obviously it's more noticeable with politicians. They will vote party line instead of voting for what they think is right or what they think will be the best

choice, because they feel like otherwise they're betraying their party. Quite frankly, I'd be happy if we just threw the party system out and were just like, You need to vote for people based on what they're actually wanting to do. Which is never going to happen, but right now, people are so focused on party, party, party. The morals are being decided by the overarching party instead of being decided [as] this is what would be a good idea to do. And you know what? You're not in the same party as me but your idea is good, so I'm going to go with that. It's more like, Yeah, they have a good idea but they're from the other party, so I'm going to pretend it's a bad idea. And that's happening on both sides, like don't get me wrong. The Democrats are not innocent in this (Personal interview, 2020, February 15).

Kate and Illiana are frustrated with the structural factors they see as alienating individual voters from political systems and outcomes. Political elites have become a class unto themselves, "a small group of very wealthy men" who make decisions insulated from the interests of the vast remainder of the polity. The established systems of government are insufficient to meet the needs of the modern nation, and yet the obeisance to America's founding documents in normative political discourse forestalls the possibility of reform. Partisan polarization and the incentives it offers to elected officials perpetuates an unwillingness to compromise "because they feel like otherwise they're betraying their party" and the entrenchment of divisions that gridlock Congress. Many fans confess themselves to be hopeless or struggling to maintain faith in the system. They are tired of feeling like things are not happening or not happening fast enough.

And yet, over and over, transformative media fans talk about the necessity of being politically involved. Immediately after describing how the system was rigged, Illiana (Personal interview, 2020, February 15) talks about telling her younger brother to vote and pay attention to politics. This is not just the rote submission to a socially imposed duty. As noted in the previous chapter, many fans feel a baseline moral obligation to vote as part of how they conceptualize citizenship. Beyond that baseline, all the fans I spoke to seem to want to participate further in the systems that frustrate them, and they're apologetic for not being able to do as much as they feel is necessary. The consistent frustration with the status quo,

culminating in the crisis that the Trump presidency presented to the American left, and the attraction of alternate visions of political outcomes and systems offered by progressive movements like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and democratic socialism as presented by figureheads like Senator Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have radicalized many fans' political thinking. Individualism, instrumental reason, and relativism have proven themselves not only unsatisfying but ineffective, and the failure of these normative modes has caused a reevaluation of the left's engagement with politics.

In these circumstances, fans approach politics not as an obligation to fulfill dispassionately, but as a site for expressing their most deeply held moral ideals. Even if they shy away from the idea of morality, the language of moral values and ideals emerges when I ask fans what makes them care about politics to the extent that they do. Like many fans, Angela can rattle off a list of issues that matter to her and still insist that she is forgetting some that are equally important but don't spring to mind when I put her on the spot. I ask her why she cares about these issues more than others:

Angela Well, it's hard to say more than. It's—belief that human lives deserve dignity and respect, is the core of all of them. So that's—and in terms of social movements like Black Lives Matter, which, God, is appalling to me is that's even a controversial statement, but it is. Or the Women's March, things like that, it's simply saying every human life has value in being a human life. Addressing climate change ties directly into that because this is the biggest threat to all human lives that we're facing right now. [...] As the effects of climate change become more extreme, it's just going to continue widening those divisions between the affluent and the powerful and those who are neither of those things, because certain human lives will be valued higher than others. They always are. So to me, it's all one issue. God, it's the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I don't understand why that's so hard. [...] It's very easy to get into that tribal mentality of, As long as me and mine are okay, I don't care what happens to anyone else. The more you're scared of losing what you have, whether what you have is money or what you have is very little, the more extreme that mindset can become. So it's not that people who disagree with me or are approaching it from a different perspective are wrong or bad necessarily. It's just it's hard to not be blinkered by that. God knows, we're all guilty of this. I can't—there's only so many people you're capable of caring about at once. [...] It's hard to resist it, but I try to think outside that when it comes to how I vote. It's not about what's best for

me. It's understanding that what lifts everyone else up ultimately is what is best for me. It's trying to take a broader view (Personal interview, 2020, January 30).

This mix of fluster and passion is representative of how fans struggle to put into words feelings and ideals about which they seem to have internal clarity. One factor is surely the left's internalization of relativism and its previously discussed impact on the left's willingness to think about morality in politics at scale. From this relativism, Angela engages in both-sides apologia, insisting that "we're all guilty of" falling into a tribal mentality that hardens you against everyone outside of "me and mine." Another factor behind fans' apparent difficulty in finding language to express their moral lens of engagement with politics is the normative partisan dichotomy in political discourse that morality in politics is strictly right-wing evangelical Christianity. Elites from the Democratic Party rarely model moralization, and if they do, it is met with skepticism. News sources and pundits presume the absence of left-wing moralization or dismiss its presence as pandering. There are moral implications to the left's opposition to the right and their stated policy goals of reducing inequality and increasing diversity and acceptance in society, but there is no explication of the underlying ideals. When the assumption from both within and beyond the American left is that its collective modes of engagement do not include morality, it does not develop habits of moralization in its political talk.

And yet, the failure to develop habits of moralization does not necessarily show a lack of moral engagement. Angela (Personal interview, 2020, January 30) is obviously describing a moral lens of engagement that she brings to all political issues when she says that "to me, it's all one issue." This was a common sentiment that fans expressed when talking about how they approach political issues and questions. So what is this one issue that Angela sees uniting her political interests? She states and restates the moral ideals she cannot name as such in an attempt to find the right language to express them through triangulation. Saying only "that human lives deserve dignity and respect" proves insufficient

as Angela goes through specific issues and comes to climate change and its exacerbation of inequalities “because certain human lives will be valued higher than others,” even if the baseline is above zero. Adding a component of mutualism to the ideals of dignity and respect, she references “the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” She acknowledges that she has to be mindful in enacting this principle consistently, but her belief that “what lifts everyone else us ultimately is what is best for me” expresses a moral lens for envisioning a just society as well as for engaging with individual political questions. Belying her both-sides backtracking, Angela wonders “why [it]’s so hard” for other political actors to see human dignity, respect, and mutualism as fundamental principles for political thinking as she does.

Despite this potential willingness to see themselves and their political actions in terms of moral engagement, the left still lacks a unified moral vocabulary to express it. Angela (Personal interview, 2020, January 30) is not the only fan to reference the golden rule, but it is not a framework in common for a majority of even this small sample of a small and insular community. It is a framework that Angela herself seemingly thinks fails to encompass or adequately express her moral ideals because she neither starts nor ends with it in describing her approach to politics. And even if the golden rule were adequate, only the rhetoric of right-wing evangelical Christianity is recognized as moral engagement in political discourse. Consequently, as this chapter has shown, fans think of religion’s moral role in politics as primarily or exclusively right-wing. Those who are themselves religious do not use religious language to express their moral engagement with specific political issues. Rather, they only use religious frameworks to express a sense that the participation in political processes is itself a moral imperative.

This lack of access to and facility with politically legible moral language is the left-wing paradox that so many commentators have misdiagnosed as an absence of moral engagement or lack of moral language. If moral engagement is present, we must expect fans

to use a variety of alternate, non-religious means of moral expression. Given the high degree of the left's internalization of the tenet of relativism illustrated in this chapter, we must also expect fans' moral expression to be heavily couched and unfixed in form. The specific manners of expression will be in dynamic relationship with the cultural resources that individual interlocutors have available to and in common between them, as well as contextualized in their previous rapport. The ways in which I recruited these participants and structured the focus group and interview questions positioned media fandom to be the shared cultural resource at hand, but whether fans see media texts and fandom as useful frameworks for moralization remains to be seen. Therefore, the next chapter examines the content of fans' moral engagement with politics and the manners in which they express it.

Chapter 5: Fannish Expressions of Left-wing Moral Engagement

Only some transformative media fans are willing to embrace the label of moral actor, but following Charles Taylor (1991), I argue that they all display moral engagement with politics. In this chapter, I use moral vocabulary analysis to explore the variety of frameworks fans employ to express moral engagement and the underlying ideals I interpret them to be expressing. The purpose of a moral vocabulary is to convey moral motives, assumptions, and claims within the contexts of social identity formation and maintenance (Lowe 2010). One reason the left appears to lack a moral identity in the political sphere is because it does not have a unifying moral vocabulary linked with its group identity. Its moralization is instead ad hoc and dependent on the frameworks and identities individuals that find in common. Therefore, one way to find left-wing moralization is to find a group of leftists with a unified identity distinct from political identity that makes available specific cultural resources for moral expression. Though they are not the only frameworks present in these data, fans commonly appropriate frameworks from the sphere of transformative media fandom for moral expression.

Because morality is ontologically impenetrable and epistemically mediated by expression, I have organized this chapter according to the patterns of moralization shown in the focus groups and individual interviews. My interpretation of fans' moral ideals serves to illustrate the mechanism of moralization, but I do not want to overdetermine their significance for either the individual or the sample as a whole, to say nothing of the contemporary American left in its entirety. Rather, this project seeks to address the questions of where left-wing morality is expressed and in what manner. I posit that one set of answers to these questions is: in popular culture, and with frameworks from fandom engagement with popular culture. These frameworks include the content of fan object media, the praxis of fannish participation, and the internal dynamics of transformative media fandom.

Repackaged for Individual Use: Media Content as Moral Vocabulary

For moral expression to be successfully communicated, its vocabulary must be first and foremost intelligible to both interlocutors. Given the co-construction of social identity and morality, the interlocutors must also interpret the referent and its relationship to the interlocutors and their conversational topic the same way or agree that each party's interpretation is valid. As we saw in the previous chapter, many fans who can understand right-wing religious rhetoric do not think that the right is correct in its interpretation of the tenets of Christianity with regard to policy or the role of religion in politics overall. This disagreement over the meaning of the referent confounds the referent's capacity to serve as a framework for moralization. In an excerpt in Chapter 4, Rachel explained that one reason she hesitates to use religious rhetoric in political talk is because this widening gulf between the interpretation of Christianity on the right and that of religious people like herself on the left makes the shared referent totally useless for communicating across a partisan gap. But, as she goes on to say, religion is simply a commonly used referent in moral vocabularies, not the only viable resource for that use.

Rachel You know, fandom actually operates that way sometimes. If you are in the same fandom, you can use metaphors from fandom in order to do that or from whatever the show or movie or book or whatever it is. Which is one really nice thing about—well, about religion. It operates in metaphor, but then a lot of things operate in metaphor. So the key is, where can we find shared metaphor? And it might be I hate *Atlas Shrugged*. Somebody loved *Atlas Shrugged*. Okay, let's talk about *Atlas Shrugged*. Why do you love it? Tell me about that. How do you feel about this part? I kind of read this as that, and so on and so forth. So I think you can do it with a lot of things. Religion's just really convenient because it's so expansive and so generally widely known, although increasingly less so. But I think you can do it with a lot of things. [...] I don't [have a go-to media metaphor]. It kind of just depends on whether we're into similar stuff. Like if somebody's into fantasy and sci-fi, I can usually find something. But sometimes it's just totally divergent and you just have to have your conversation, see if you can land on anything (Personal interview, 2020, January 27).

Approaching political talk with other fans in this manner is a short logical step from the way in which transformative media fandom develops in its participants habits of connecting with others through interactions with the same text. As Rachel suggests, shared textual referents are not systematized into reified moral vocabularies like right-wing evangelical Christian rhetoric, so they require front-end investment from interlocutors to find whether it provides a viable vocabulary for communicating ideas (“How do you feel about this part? I kind of read this as that, and so on and so forth”). Once the shared referent is in place and the parties at least understand and respect each other’s interpretations of its meaning, the text can be used as a framework for conveying moral thinking.

If a shared fandom object can provide a common referent, how does it function as a signifier for moral expression? Because moralization is inextricably linked to identity in society, it is more readily applied to signaling and strengthening group affiliation than persuasion. Rachel (Personal interview, 2020, January 27) brings up *Atlas Shrugged* and trying to talk across different readings of that book in the context of how she might try to talk to people who are politically different from herself. Like many fans, Rachel finds that talking to right-wing people can be technically difficult as well as emotionally challenging. Rachel is personally interested in trying to understand why individual people on the right think the way they do and help them understand why she thinks differently, but most fans report avoiding such conversations, preferring to talk about politics only with people whom they know are in agreement with them. In other words, transformative media fans are unlikely to moralize if they find themselves interacting with someone who loves *Atlas Shrugged*, and unlikely to use *Atlas Shrugged* as a moral signifier. Rather, they more often talk within the transformative media fandom group and use familiar fan objects as referents.

The mutuality that transformative media fans see between the spheres of fandom and politics impacts their likelihood of engaging in political talk with each other, and, in addition, helps shape the form that talk takes. A foundational aspect of the praxis of

transformative media fandom is the interpretation and analysis of media objects. Fans therefore have a habitual orientation to finding and interpreting artistic features such as symbolism, metaphor, allegory, and subtext in their favorite media. This habit, along with the widespread interest in politics among transformative media fans, results in interpreting media and transforming fannish objects for political messaging. This extant link between fandom and politics primes the cultural resources of media texts and their components for appropriation into a moral vocabulary. When talking with an interlocutor who shares the same fannish frame of knowledge, small and disparate referents can be strung together to express moral thinking larger than each referent on its own.

Bonnie [I]n a political conversation I had a friend the other day, I definitely brought up what is right versus what is easy. [...] It's this feeling of being responsible for other people. Now, every moral message in any book I've ever read, even if it's articulated slightly differently, things that have hit me and stayed with me have always been that message, over and over and over. Because you know, it's said in slightly different ways. I think it's kind of that *Onion* headline of like, I don't know how to explain to you that you should care about other people. (laughs) It's pretty much just that over and over and over again. Like, you should care about other people! And I think that for me, that's the main thing of being politically active, is the things that we do should help the most people the most ways (Personal interview, 2020, January 19).

Bonnie's first reference to "what is right versus what is easy" is from *Harry Potter*, which she had said in a previous excerpt provided her with an early vocabulary for moral and political thinking. She thinks that she was moved by that message of "being responsible for other people" in *Harry Potter* because it aligned with her nascent moral ideals, and she has connected to that message in other media texts since then. The headline she cites—"I don't know how to explain to you that you should care about other people"—did not originate with the satirical newspaper *The Onion*; it is in fact the title of a 2017 editorial in *HuffPost* about the moral divide in American politics. By itself, the headline circulates as a meme on social media platforms for the same uses that Bonnie puts it to here: stating the commonsensical nature with which she regards the moral ideal of selflessness. She goes on to talk about the

typical modes by which “liberal” and “conservative” people engage with the concept of change, and her own approach:

Bonnie I think there’s that sense of if-then, the actions and the consequences, in a vast overstatement, liberal folks tend to react to that question with hope, with a sense of “things could change.” Conservative people tend to react with a feeling of fear and protectiveness, of “I don’t want things to change, things are great the way they are.” [...] Which is tricky, because the innate nature of life is change. Things are not stagnant. So again, it feels like there’s this inherent conversational breakdown of “You’re trying to defend something that doesn’t exist, has never existed, and couldn’t possibly exist because life isn’t a still life. It moves.” There’s this quote that my girlfriend and I talk about all the time. There’s a recapper who used to write *Doctor Who* recaps on *Television Without Pity* named Jamie Clifton. Something he talked about a lot is change feels like dying because it is. And on a fictional character, that’s this really acute feeling of, for example, we don’t want the Doctor and Rose to be separated because they love each other and that’s hard. But also, both of them become, one could argue, better, smarter, more capable, adaptable, more resilient people in their mutual absence of each other. That doesn’t mean that it has to feel good that it happened, that they fell apart. But when you are becoming something—God forgive me, I’m going to quote Kylo Ren: “Let the past die. Kill it if you have to.” You know, there’s a feeling of, in order to become something better, you have to kill the caterpillar you once were to become the butterfly. You can’t stay a caterpillar and become a butterfly. There has to be a moment of change and change is hard, and it’s scary and you don’t know what it’s going to look like on the other side. I think that there’s a kind of person who finds that reassuring, or at least challenging in a good way. And I think there’s a kind of person who would rather do literally anything but that, because they don’t trust what’s on the other side or they don’t think it’ll be as good for them as what has come before (Personal interview, 2020, January 19).

Bonnie’s quick and easy statement of the trope that liberals are in favor of change while conservatives are suspicious of it reflects how common and familiar it is in political discourse. By contrast, describing her own thinking about the potential for transformational change in society employs a metaphor from a *Doctor Who* plotline, a quote from *Star Wars*, and a metaphor about butterfly metamorphosis. All of these references together make the point that Bonnie sees left-wing morality as privileging the need to change society for the sake of others’ betterment over the comforting stability of the status quo. They also add nuance to the commonplace trope, sympathizing with the fear of and resistance to change because “it

feels like dying because it is.” The important thing is not how it feels to one person, though, but that the goal of change is to “become something better” than before. Even if “let[ing] the past die” is frightening, Bonnie thinks it is necessary because striving for betterment in society is the paramount moral ideal.

As Bonnie’s mixing of media references and general metaphor suggests, this is an idea that can be expressed in many ways. In fact, another fan described the low value she puts on personal comfort in more direct language.

Emma I’ve never examined it that closely, what my motives are, other than this feels wrong to me. This law, this treatment, this expectation feels wrong. I may be a little more knee-jerk than most people because like I said, I came from a background that was racist, highly religious, very distrusting, and not prone to any charitable thoughts to anybody. I broke from all that and it’s—that might be my criteria. If it feels like something from my teens, I don’t want it. I don’t want to experience that again. I don’t want to experience that comfort again (Personal interview, 2019, October 28).

Juxtaposing these examples of moralization shows how choosing to use a media content signifier in a moral vocabulary does not affect the capacity to impart meaning. Rather, Bonnie and Emma’s choice of how to moralize seemingly reflects their personal preferences and judgment of meaningfulness. From our conversations in full, Bonnie’s experience in fandom seems to have been wider ranging, more contemporary, and more online than Emma’s, which by name includes only two texts, *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Starsky and Hutch*, and which has been primarily in-person rather than online. Conversely, Bonnie’s political history is shorter and simpler, not including a dramatic shift like Emma’s from her upbringing to her current worldview. Given these contexts, it’s reasonable that Bonnie would reach for resonant metaphors from popular media to explain her approach to politics, whereas Emma has personal experience that is more immediate to and descriptive of her thinking than fictional texts.

Apart from personal preference, the content of media influences its appropriability into moral vocabulary. As mentioned in Chapter 3, fans find certain media more rewarding to

analyze in depth than others, generally because of the volume, complexity, or content-appropriateness of the text compared to others. Texts that interpellate extensive analysis often are more fruitful as moral vocabulary as well. *Star Trek* came up often in these conversations, and not only because one of the conventions I attended was *Star Trek*-specific. Fans see science fiction in general and *Star Trek* in particular as more invested than other genres and texts in asking questions about human nature, society, and the right thing to do when faced with moral dilemmas. Fans think more about political and moral questions in the context of *Star Trek* than with other texts, and consequently they can reach for *Star Trek* more readily than other media to talk about real world political and moral questions.

- Olive I find when I try to express what my political views are, I tend to rely on *Star Trek* terminology to do it. (agreement) Because reason is that it's a good shorthand.
- Misti I think it's a way we understand each other, right? I mean, [Sylvia] was talking about your understanding of politics and your understanding of fandom. I think partly that's because the narrative puts some of these concepts in a comprehensible format and being able to understand, Okay, in this situation, this is human behavior. Okay, so I can extrapolate into this situation and maybe understand that a little bit better. I think we're all here for *Star Trek* and part of the reason this is a useful place to do this is because it does envision a future from what we assume to be our world, right? That we're projecting this society into a future and looking at what it looks like. Other science fiction, like, you can get a lot of lessons from *Star Wars*, but it's not our galaxy explicitly. I think you can also draw conclusions and have political ideology around it, but I think this is different because it is explicitly positing this is a future. They even reference it on the show. "Hey, three hundred years ago, we were backwards. We were misguided." All this kind of stuff, so I really do think it's hard to separate that. But I do think you folks are right when you say it kind of informs each other. Like it's hard to say I am this way because I watched *Star Trek*, or I obviously like *Star Trek* because my mom was a politician. You know, it's more like they kind of informed each other.
(Focus group K1, 2019, November 2)

As Misti says, *Star Trek* presents the changes to our present reality that the creators of each franchise think are necessary to achieve a utopian future. Apart from a few time travel plots that allow characters to comment on our present day society directly, this is typically represented in the setting's implications (e.g., human society no longer uses money of any

kind in the future) or plot allegory (e.g., an alien species that conducts war via computer simulation to avoid property damage while each side executes the predicted number of casualties from the simulated attacks in the name of fairness). The audience still has to interpret these representations, and these fans seemingly do so with the understanding that the question of how society should be and what *Star Trek* presents as an answer are both fundamentally moral and political. That is, they hold ideals that shape how they interpret both *Star Trek* and political circumstances or issues, and it is this same moral orientation to the different spheres of experience in their lives that lets them see this media text as an appropriately analogous framework for expressing their interpretation of politics. When speaking with each other, then, fans of *Star Trek* can use the text as a “shorthand” that is both convenient and apt for conveying moral and political meaning.

Occasionally, fannish objects require no priming from analysis to be ripe for appropriation. At the time of data collection, there was a popular sitcom called *The Good Place*, the premise of which is four people who have been sent to ‘the bad place’ after death for being bad people in life and are learning together how their ways of being in the world made them ‘bad’ and how they can become better people. One of the main characters is a moral philosophy professor, so discussions of different ideas about morality are an overt aspect of the show. It is unsurprising, then, that many fans brought up *The Good Place* when asked about their political decision-making process and whether moral engagement is part of politics.

Christina Yeah, but I think there’s probably a moral dimension to everything, right? [...] Like—oh, man. Did you watch *The Good Place*? [interviewer says yes] Okay, one, that’s a really fucking good show. (laughs) But I think that *The Good Place* really encompasses a lot of my beliefs in that we have a responsibility to others. We have benefitted from other people in our lives and we therefore should try and be good and kind and actively work toward making the world a better place for the people around us. [...] I think that kind of idea, that we have a responsibility to other people and to making the world a better place to live in, I think that’s important. I think that we should try and be the best people that we can be, and part of that is by actively making decisions in your politics

to ensure that other people get a fair shake, too. I mean, obviously, I'm not perfect. I've definitely fucked up and I've done incredibly selfish things and I've justified kind of shitty decisions that I've made with like, Well, this is the best thing for me. But also, you got to think about the people who are coming after you (Personal interview, 2020, February 8).

Because the morally significant content of *The Good Place* is obvious enough that it doesn't require analysis, Christina only has to name-check the show to convey its relevance to someone who has also seen it. This is an unusual situation; there aren't many sitcoms explicitly written to convey concepts from moral philosophy. However, its political relevance is still up for interpretation, even if transformative media fans see this as a very short logical leap. Referencing *The Good Place* as Christina does functions as a sort of check with the other interlocutor that they have a shared understanding and thereby, with this specific show, signal a certain level of expertise on the topic of morality and politics. She still expresses relativism by starting most sentences with "I think" and admitting her inability to live up to her moral ideals sometimes, but Christina does not struggle to moralize because the show has provided a vocabulary tempered by characters' discussions and plot developments. Speaking to someone else who has seen *The Good Place*, Christina can be confident that she can use that vocabulary without being challenged to justify it further.

As these examples illustrate, the primary utility of moralization frameworks drawn from media content compared to other potential frameworks is their strength as metaphors for conveying ideas that are otherwise difficult to express in a more popularly comprehensible manner. They allow fans to frame an issue or policy in terms potentially accessible to as large an audience as that of the original media text. Moreover, a political metaphor drawn from media texts has the inherent capacity to convey a moral judgement and imperative because of the basic structures of narrative discussed in Chapter 1. Fans intuitively understand and exploit this capacity when they use media frameworks in political talk between themselves and more so when they do public politics.

Phoebe Directly, I do things in fandom and I do things in politics and they don't touch. Indirectly, fandom highlights a great many of the current political problems, largely by being the opposite. So you—I wind up thinking about politics while I'm in fandom, and if I wrote something today, it would most certainly involve a commentary on politics through whatever show I was talking about.

[...]

Gereon I don't see a whole lot of—I don't see my fandom influencing my politics too much or my actual political activities in life, but I think that my politics really influence how I watch shows and think about them and talk with other people about them. Yeah, I definitely think that when I've like—mulling through stories in this particular way, it's like informed my learning but not necessarily my activities and the world outside of my ideas. [...]

Lauren I don't know that my fandom has necessarily informed my politics or that my politics has necessarily informed my fandom. But I do know that, I mean, I've been involved in fandom for forty years and it has informed my lifestyle. I mean, I've met people from all over the world, people from different ethnicities, different religions, different beliefs, and I think fandom roots you in being more accepting, as other people said. What to people outside fandom is the other or the strange or the not acceptable, so maybe to that extent—I mean, I was always liberal, so I could gravitate toward fandom because for the most part I find fans more liberal.

Petra In a general sense, everything [Lauren] said. (laughs) But more specifically, I'm a graphic artist and cinematographer and my fandom life has always been fandom, and political stuff has always been involved peripherally, passively. I would do stuff occasionally. That all changed in 2016 and one of the things I noticed the most of the fandom overlap is that politics coopted our symbols. All of our logos and it became normal to see a *Star Wars* rebel starbird everywhere. I have one on my car now. Before this, I never would have put it there. But there's one on the back of my car. I wear a *Rogue One* red sweatshirt with a Che Guevara image on it to protests and I don't feel uncomfortable about that because people know what it means now. I see all of that imagery. I see *Doctor Who* stuff at protests (agreement) and it's like, they took all of our images and expanded them. Now it's really melding in really interesting ways, at least for me because I see that crossover happening all over the place (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21).

I've excerpted several focus group participants' answers to the question of whether they see fandom and politics intersecting or influencing each other to show the full context in which Petra brings up fandom in public politics. Phoebe, Gereon, and Lauren all raise points of fandom and politics being mutual praxis within transformative media fandom that I've addressed in earlier chapters: that fans do political thinking about media texts and through

fanworks, that fandom is for some a mental and emotional refuge from real world politics, and that transformative media fans trend left politically because of structural bias in the affective experience of being in fandom. It's notable that these fans do not see the first and second points as mutually exclusive, and that Petra's synopsis of her perception of the interplay between fandom and politics builds from all three previous points. She explicitly agrees with Lauren that "fandom roots you in being more accepting" and therefore fans as a group seem politically liberal, and she implies having previously seem fandom and politics as separate spheres as Gereon does. Then, like many fans, Petra identifies 2016 as a watershed moment, before which fans were typically only doing "commentary on politics through whatever show" (Phoebe, Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) captured their attention within fanworks, but after which fans began doing so as public politics.

She observes that "politics coopted our symbols" in 2016, by which Petra (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) means that fannish modes of expressing moral engagement through media metaphors went mainstream, especially at protests. She cites three properties by name, elaborating a little on *Star Wars* and *Rogue One*, but relies on the media fluency of her audience of fellow fans to understand the metaphorical usefulness of each one. As there are several different directions she could be heading in, I hesitate to interpret her citation of *Doctor Who* from the name alone. What little she adds to the other two examples makes her use of them immediately evident to anyone else in the fandom. The *Star Wars* "starbird" is an emblem associated with the rebel forces attempting to survive and ultimately dismantle an oppressive imperial power. It has further symbolic meaning in the universe of the narrative as a callback to the Jedi Order and the Republic that existed prior to the empire, along with associated values of peace, diplomacy, and relative equality between different planets and species that the empire inverts to war, subjugation, and supremacist hierarchy. *Rogue One* is a *Star Wars* offshoot specifically about the rebellion as a guerilla insurgency, transplanting it from the lighter space opera genre of *Star Wars* to something darker that ends with all the

main characters sacrificing themselves on a mission. Mixing that media reference with Che Guevara draws a parallel between the fictional rebel force and a real world leftist revolutionary, both of whom are understood to have died like martyrs for the sake of a cause larger than themselves. In wearing that image to a protest and putting a starbird decal on her car, Petra aligns herself and her actions in response to the Trump administration with a revolutionary's devotion to a moral vision and political agenda of resisting and overturning unjust power.

Of the three different kinds of fannish moralization I identify in this project, only frameworks drawn from media content have crossed over from intra-fandom talk to public politics. This is unsurprising given the high thresholds for understanding frameworks drawn from transformative media fandom praxis and internal dynamics. By contrast, using frameworks from media content exploits the accessibility of the metaphor from its ubiquity as popular culture. This accessibility cuts both ways, expressing a thought in a way that is legible to a potentially wide audience while repurposing resources that the fan already has in their possession. These can be material as well as intellectual resources, as Nichole describes from her experience protesting Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's 2011 attempt "to ram through anti-union legislation in the guise of a budget bill."

Nichole There was a lot of protesting at the capitol and I wasn't as involved as some people were. I did not sleep on the floor of the capitol. But I definitely attended protests and had a sign. On my sign, I was including lyrics from *Newsies* in particular because of the union striking sort of themes, but I was also wearing a Captain America t-shirt. I remember sitting on the floor of the capitol during the sit-in, reading the newest issue of *Captain America* because it was a Wednesday, and feeling like the idealism of that character and the ways in which he embodied what the US should be was what I was trying to internalize and emulate in that political action. [...] There was a lot of pop culture being invoked in those protests, and I think we've only seen that more and more in political activity in more recent years, the ways in which pop culture characters and in-jokes in signs have become more and more a part of the political conversation. And obviously, this isn't totally unique. This has always been part of it, but I think the amount has only multiplied, where it's like, Someone's dressed as Batman at a protest. Okay, that's happening. Like, I'm not sure I totally understand what's going on there, but they have a reason. [...] I think—

with Batman, I don't know. But a lot of times, it's just clever—like I remember specifically with the protests against Scott Walker, there were people bringing out Imperial walker costumes from *Star Wars*, which takes two people to operate because it's a giant quadruped droid, and it was like, "Stop the Imperial Walker." You know, because his name was Scott Walker, so I think a lot of it is just based on cleverness and puns, which is totally legit. But like, I wasn't the only one wearing Captain America imagery and I think it was for similar reasons. There is a vision of what our country should be and this is not it. What Scott Walker was doing was not it. And I think sometimes it's just drawing strength from fictional characters. Like, you may be nervous about going to a protest, but Batman wouldn't be. I think sometimes it's just as simple as that. People who perceive the world through or with fictional characters and properties in mind are going to utilize those for various purposes (Personal interview, 2019, October 23).

Nichole was already a fan of the film and musical *Newsies* and of Captain America, both the character and the comic book title. In quoting *Newsies* and wearing a Captain America t-shirt, she was using media referents that were already part of her daily life as a fan and her thinking about the political issues being addressed at the protest because the value of unions and what America should be are intrinsic to how she interprets those respective texts. She saw other people similarly using their existing relationships to and merchandise from properties like *Star Wars*, Captain America, and Batman as part of their performance of protest. As Penney (2017) argues about displaying and wearing signals of political affiliation or belief, these public expressions are primarily for an external audience, which is why Nichole thinks attention-grabbing displays of funny and clever expressions like "Stop the Imperial Walker" are "totally legit." What she speculates about the motivation of the Batman protester and her own experience shows the equal importance of self-affirmation that these modes of expression provide to fans: "sometimes it's just drawing strength from fictional characters. [...] People who perceive the world through or with fictional characters and properties in mind are going to utilize those [tools]." The gratification of being able to make a public display of one's fannish identity and group allegiance in the political performance of protest is compounded by the gratification of using the connection between fannish framework and political circumstance for moralization.

In addition to employing Captain America's overall narrative to express a moral judgment like she did with *Newsies*, Nichole identifies with and wanted to express the way she sees Captain America as a moral exemplar for actively seeking to realize "a vision of what our country should be" (Personal interview, 2019, October 23). Set in the context of a protest with an overt partisan and policy milieu, this display of public politics is likely to be understood by most audiences in the way that she intends. In other contexts, fans might wear their media frameworks of moralization on their sleeves with the same internal motivations but no expectation of external comprehension.

Margaret It's been interesting for me just in the past couple of months getting more actively into MCU. [...] But just how huge it is and my neighbors are wearing Avengers Halloween costumes and I saw a guy at my workplace wearing a Captain America t-shirt at some point while I was reading "Known Associates," right? [...] That became Steve Rogers for me and you know, [Louise] did the podfic of "Steve Rogers: PR Disaster." Those have affected—even if I'm reading another fic that doesn't mention politics at all, it's like, Oh yeah, Steve Rogers believes in what's right. Steve Rogers is on the side of queer people (unint)—

Storm He's a queer socialist, basically.

Margaret —pro-union and all of that. And I see a White guy at work wearing a Captain America t-shirt and I have no idea if the feelings in that is like, Oh yeah, we're both into Captain America and how that connects. Of course, even within fandom, you're not sure if like, Oh you're into the pairing that I'm into, but for you, does it represent American military might.

Storm I feel so similar. Right in this moment, I was choosing a costume for something I'm doing this weekend and I decided to go with Captain America because of all my "Known Associates" et cetera fandom feelings about Steve Rogers being an actually morally good person with liberal politics that align with mine. And I'm sure that my own perspective influences how I feel about that, but for me, I look at Captain America and I see traumatized military queer veteran. And various other things that I identify with on a whole other—so I'm going to be wearing a Captain America costume to this thing this weekend and I'm realizing—which isn't going to stop me from doing it—that people are going to see that and they could interpret it the way that I am and the way that most of us who are in MCU fandom are, and then there are going to be some people who are like, Yeah, rah-rah military fight people. Which is very different. And I don't think there's a problem with people seeing me and seeing that differently in a split second because that's how they interpret the character, but that's very different.
(Focus group, 2019, October 20)

Fans are clearly aware that the same ubiquity that makes media texts attractive for appropriation into moral vocabularies also means that their meaning is contestable by different audiences. In this case, Captain America is synonymous for Margaret and Storm with the interpretation of his character in two fanfics they cite by name that posit him as “an actually morally good person with liberal politics that align with” theirs. That’s how they read and connect to his character iteration in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and what Storm means to convey and embody when they wear a Captain America costume, but they and Margaret both know that this is not necessarily how other people read the character or interpret their fannish displays. As Margaret says, the Captain America signifier could represent a very different idea to other people, even one she finds morally repugnant like celebrating “American military might.” At least for Storm, the potential for being misunderstood does not outweigh their need to express a moral judgement about their own identity and experiences using the Captain America framework.

Moral frameworks drawn from media content show the interplay between public and private contexts in fans’ considerations about how to moralize. Within the private spaces of fandom and speaking with people known to them, frameworks drawn from closely read media texts have the capacity to be more communicative and information-rich than non-media language. Being friend with or knowing interlocutors from being in the same fannish spaces means that fans can be confident that their audience will have the background knowledge that lets fans avoid having to moralize in plain language, which, as I have shown in Chapter 4, they are often uncomfortable or hesitant doing. Conversely, when fans are considering more public political talk and performance, the internal gratifications of the moral expression and identity work they intend from using media content frameworks tend to be more important. As Storm says: “I’m going to be wearing a Captain America costume to this thing this weekend and I’m realizing—which isn’t going to stop me from doing it—that people are going to see that and [...] there are going to be some people who are like, Yeah, rah-rah

military fight people” (Focus group, 2019, October 20). The potential disconnect between being perceived in this way and Storm’s intent to display Captain America as “a queer socialist, basically” is an uncomfortable but not discouraging prospect. Storm plans to go ahead with their cosplay *in spite of* communicative pitfalls that they see as inevitable, because it is satisfaction enough to publicly wear Captain America’s costume as synecdoche for what the character means to Storm.

Popular culture is accessible to the left in way that plain language may not be and politically legible frameworks for moral expression absolutely are not, so the communicative element of frameworks appropriated from media content should not be discounted. But as much as they might hope to convey moral engagement using quotes, puns, narrative metaphors, and other allusive displays, there is the potential to be misinterpreted as glorifying the military rather than criticizing it, or simply not being heard. Even with the context of a political demonstration and her own experience using a similar fannish display for perspective, Nichole (Personal interview, 2019, October 23) has to guess at why someone would dress specifically as Batman to protest Scott Walker. Regardless of whether they do it in public or private, though, fans’ moralization through media content frameworks reflects their ideals and their engagement with politics in and through the texts. In the next two sections, I look at other modes of moralization that transformative media fans use only in private with other fans.

Doing Politics By Doing Fandom: Appropriating Participation

Fandom is a community that can drive Charles Taylor’s (1991) virtuous circle of moral identification and action at the small scale to reinvigorate its members’ commitment to democracy. Participation in fandom is a significant aspect of transformative media fans’ identity and day to day living. As I have shown in Chapter 3, fans also see their fannish life as intertwined with politics in some way. For some, this is merely the fact that their moral and

political judgments of right and wrong interplay with which texts they find interesting to begin with. Many others see politics as a mode of fannish praxis, a lens through which they interact with media texts and with other fans. This section examines the different ways in which participation in fandom is mobilized as a framework for political moralization. Fans report these behaviors in general terms, describing habitual orientations they themselves have to fannish activities or that they have observed in others. Therefore, the only interpretable moral ideal underpinning this manner of moralization is the urgency of citizenship by participating in politics.

Fans often express the sense that political participation is not only a civic duty but a moral obligation. This is clear in the fact that many fans assert a high level of attention to and participation in politics but feel guilty for the occasional lapse or failure to do even more.

Louise I take civic duty very seriously. I go vote in every election, no matter how small. Although I'm a bit of a hypocrite because I did not go vote in the school board election last week. It wasn't totally my fault. I couldn't find enough information on the candidates. I tried. I tried. But I think I have a duty to be a part of the discussion. Because again, if you're just apathetic, people are getting hurt. People are dying. I don't want to just let things happen that I know I might have at least some small part in addressing or helping or doing something about. I don't like to sit still, you know? Just sitting still, not saying anything, not doing anything, that's often just being complicit in something bad that's happening. Which is not to say everything political that happens is bad, but lately, that's what it feels like. [...] If you're not part of the conversation, you're not part of the solution, if that makes sense (Personal interview, 2019, November 9).

This is not a perception of the electoral process that is exclusive to fans or Americans on the political left. It is notable that, within my sample, the recurring representation of the political role of an individual citizen is fans' sense of a personal responsibility to society. For Louise and many other respondents, politics is not the equivalent of a sport where the point of participating is achieving victory over an opponent; politics is the realm in which she

participates in deciding the fate of people in society. Understanding politics in this specifically moral light is why Louise sees that “not saying anything, not doing anything, that’s often just being complicit in something bad that’s happening.” She uses plain language, offering the slightly paraphrased axiom “If you’re not part of the conversation, you’re not part of the solution” to sum up her moral perception of citizenship as a responsibility for the betterment of society.

This view and the desire to do more politically can also be expressed with fannish frameworks for moralization. One of the modes of fannish participation appropriable as a framework for moral expression is the reading and writing of fanfiction. In the last chapter, we saw that a lot of fans have experienced an awakening to or an intensification of their attention to and investment in politics in the past few years. They have come to perceive politics and their participation in that sphere as intrinsic to their identities, in much the same way as they do fandom and fannish participation.

- | | |
|--------|--|
| June | I think for what feels important, a lot of things feel just dire. Everything feels important and in a kind of overwhelming and desperate way. So the things that I choose do activism about are what I feel like I have to give and what I can do. Not to feel like, This is the most important thing, but, This is a thing I can do to help. So most of the activism I do is about prisoners’ ability to access books. I do activism with that, also an organization that mails books to prisoners and helps staff the local jail libraries. That’s just because I’m a librarian so I have some of that background, and that feels very connected to the sort of things that I have to offer fandom and what I have to offer professionally and what I have to offer in activist spaces. Choosing based on that rather than what feels important leads to me—just so many things feel important and in a way that makes it impossible to prioritize everything. |
| Elaine | Too much is important. Because there’s so much noise, but it’s what you can do. |
| June | Like, What do I have to give? |
| Elaine | Yeah, I get that. |
| Lauren | And it’s overwhelming. I mean, it’s women’s rights, its human rights, it’s justice, it’s environment, it’s healthcare. I get up in the morning and I look at the newspaper or listen to the news and I wonder why I even keep torturing myself. I mean, I’ve had a pit in my stomach for four years (agreement), and I fear that I will have it for another four years. |

- Hunter I feel like there's been a very interesting rise in the number of fics that take a trope and explore inequality through it. Specifically what I mean by that is the number of, like, fics about werewolves not having equal rights and trying to address that in a dystopian environment. Or omegas or alphas not having equal rights and exploring that through an A/B/O scene. You're still trying to create a sense of fairness and justice, but they're doing it with something in a fantasy setting so you can solve it. You can have a good ending. You can get all the happiness and satisfaction that we don't necessarily get with our personal dystopias.
- Carleigh I think I tend to agree or sympathize with vulnerability, and that's vulnerability with all the different humans and problems and the animals on the planet, and the planet itself. I think that's what ties in with my fandom and the protector who comes in and helps. It's what I relate to.
(Focus group E1, 2020, February 21)

The problems fans see in the world are overwhelming in number and scope, so there is a danger of becoming paralyzed with despair or disillusionment when one's best efforts are in vain ("I wonder why I even keep torturing myself"). Nearly everyone that I interviewed mentioned feeling hopeless in general or taking a retreat from politics after disappointing failures to win an election or implement a policy. And yet, they remain engaged. As we can see in this focus group excerpt, fans exploit the affective structure of both fandom and politics to maintain the virtuous cycle of moral engagement that keeps them participating in an overwhelming and frustrating political system. June takes stock of "the sort of things I have to offer fandom and what I have to offer [...] in activist spaces" to find communities and activities in which she feels connected to outcomes. Earlier, she had spoken about being involved in the organization of fanfiction metadata on Archive of Our Own as an example of finding a way to employ her library training, and here June describes an activist application with increasing access to books in prisons and jails. This is an example of employing the same moral lens in both fandom and politics: finding an answer to the question "What do I have to give?" appropriate for each sphere that provides satisfaction of the moral imperatives that June sees stymied in politics.

In this focus group exchange, there are also two examples of how the similar affective structures of participation in fandom and politics can increase fans' sense of

reciprocity between these spheres. As noted before, most of the interviewed fans see politics as a legitimate lens of engagement in fandom. Here, Hunter and Carleigh (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) describe how fans can also engage with fandom as a proxy for politics when politics is not eliciting in them the sense of fulfillment they seek. Hunter observes “a very interesting rise in the number of fics” that depict analogues to real world social inequalities within familiar fannish genres and tropes. Exploring such concepts within the framework of fanworks allows authors and readers to experience those inequalities being corrected and thereby “get all the happiness and satisfaction that we don’t necessarily get” in seeking political and social change in the real world. Following on from Hunter and June, Carleigh offers an anecdote about her fannish habits of consumption matching her lens of political engagement. Agreeing with another participant’s comments about enjoying character dynamics that juxtapose protectiveness and vulnerability, Carleigh adds that the dynamic appeals to her within fandom because it parallels how she sees political issues. Each issue embodies a vulnerable group or entity in need of recognition or protection, and she “relate[s] to” the role of protector in her engagement with politics. In both of these examples, fans want to enact moral ideals in politics to create a better world as implied in the ideas of rectifying inequalities and protecting the vulnerable. The inability to do so in a satisfactory manner or time frame leads them to seek temporary fulfillment of the moral urge through the medium of fandom.

Crucially, these fans do not see fandom as a replacement for politics. Indeed, as we saw in the last chapter, many fans are ambivalent about the politicization of fannish modes of engagement with media texts precisely because they are concerned about real world politics being subordinated to fandom’s internal interests. The fulfillment they seek in fandom by the means June, Hunter, and Carleigh (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) are talking about reflects the same underlying moral ideals of fairness, security, and mutualism that orient their engagement with politics. Because fans see participation in fandom and participation in

politics as similar affective experiences and they feel alienated from political processes and outcomes, they can exploit fandom to feel connected to community and idealized outcomes as a means of self-regulation to avoid despair and abdication from politics. In terms of moral expression, their fannish productivity of analyzing, reading, and writing about political issues at a slight remove from the real world reflects back on their perception of and commitment to real world politics.

The interpretation of political themes in fanworks has some basis in their creators' intent. Hunter's (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) observation that more fics address political topics now than before is matched by a few fans reporting that they include political commentary in their writing. There are varying degrees of centrality with most works focused more on plot or character points than on politics, but some authors make deliberate political allegories in fanworks to express their perspective and moralization in the hope that someone will understand and internalize a political message.

Harper I think my politics are more important person-to-person, like in the community directly around me. [...] And that does include online communities because I have quite a lot of friends that live all over the world. Trying to do what I can for them, trying to support them, being aware of issues and politics that are happening to them. Like today is Brexit Day. I have a very close friend in Scotland. I can't do much for the community there, but I can support him and he can help his community because he knows he has an emotional support system elsewhere. And trying to do what I can in every community that I can actively be good in, to be good. To be like, capital-G Good, because I am an asshole and I know that about myself. But being genuinely good and actively caring about somebody and actively choosing to care about things instead of going, It's all over, blegh. It's like, Okay, the world might be hurtling towards a fiery hellscape in the next thirty years but I can help my friends. I can be a positive influence for them. I can be a positive influence for other people in different communities. I can reach out, I can radicalize people through my fanfic, which is so delightful to do, is just sneak in real seditious bit, like slide that politics right on into it because people of all ages read fanfic. People of all ages are on Archive of Our Own. Not getting into anything about that, but when I completely rewrite *Dragon Age: Inquisition* to allow somebody from a culture that's being oppressed to actively express the aggression and give that sort of character agency within the story and be like, No, she's right. My story is never going to say that she's wrong for being mad about what's happening to her culture, that she's wrong for being upset that people aren't listening to

her. [...] And I get to have people who are interested in reading smutty fanfiction about *Dragon Age: Inquisition* also have to grapple with me being like, And this! They're like, No, the smut parts are really good. And I'm like, And also—(sound effect) Which is good and fun for me. Because people can choose to interact or not interact with it, I don't feel bad about being like—just going off with all these political things. And it never outright says, I'm a liberal and I believe everybody should be gay! It's more like, Have you considered—yeah, there's a bunch of sex. Don't worry, I'm really good at writing that part. But also some plot, and this plot is really angry about politics and you're trapped now! My dastardly plan has come to fruition! You came here for the sex. Unfortunately, you're a communist socialist now! Ha ha! (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

Harper had said their ability to impact broader scale politics is limited. Apart from simply being one person, being from a reliably blue state with long-term incumbents in the Senate leads Harper to feel like their participation in state-wide and national politics ultimately has little value. Their political investment at the hyper-local level, “being genuinely good and actively caring about somebody and actively choosing to care about things” in their communities, fulfills their sense of the moral imperative to participate. For Harper, online communities are local regardless of how geographically dispersed their participants are, so that the same moral ideals that drive their political participation in institutional and personal politics also apply to internet-mediated relationships. In fandom, one manifestation of this investment is in “reach[ing] out” through the medium of fanworks to “radicalize” readers. The ways in which they already participate in fandom get appropriated as frameworks for moral expression about political issues as complex as hegemony and cultural oppression. Despite their ambivalent view of political talk in fandom, Harper sees this practice as legitimate because it allows for fans to choose whether and how they engage with it. The political content is textual, but “[b]ecause people can choose to interact or not interact with it, I don't feel bad about being like—just going off with all these political things” (Personal interview, 2020, January 31).

Source text content and the habits of specific fandoms are especially significant mediators for this kind of intentional use of praxis for moralization. Harper might always write

with the goal of trapping their readers into thinking about politics, but *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a better fit for the particular topics of hegemony and cultural oppression than fan objects in which those are not acknowledged questions within the fandom, let alone textually present as they are in that game. If a fandom for a specific media object is accustomed to a political mode of analyzing their object text, fans also become primed to accept as valid appropriations of both the text's content and fanwork praxis for political moralization.

Grace [A shared fandom] gives you a common frame of reference. Although the fandom kind of depends, whether they'd have a political discussion or not. Like *Star Trek*, if the person I'm talking to is open to having a political discussion, I am very down for that. But like say the *Teen Wolf* fandom, they tend to be very aggressive and kind of argumentative about a lot of things, so I'd probably hesitate a lot more to get into a discussion like that, because they tend to turn. I've seen a couple of fandoms—like, I'm not in the *Sherlock* fandom, but they're pretty well-known for their really large blowouts over a lot of things. So I think that the fandom it is depends kind of how open I am to having those discussions. But when I've had them, it does give you a common frame of reference for everybody to talk, because I might be talking to somebody that's from England or somebody from the deep south, or just has a very different background from me, but we still have some common ground at least to start with because we both like a show or a book or whatever it is that we're in a fandom for. [...As an] icebreaker or just, you know, sometimes you can put a particular argument or the case can be made through a character or a situation that you're both familiar with and are comfortable with. [...] It's harder with somebody that you don't have some kind of frame of reference or common ground to go back to. Just a person that, say, you work with, I don't talk politics with my coworkers because I don't have that kind of ground and it can cause interpersonal conflicts that I probably can't get out of over time, you know? Fandom changes but they'll forget a conversation that wasn't maybe as pleasant or they'll just have time to relax or feel better about the conversation later if we're, say, on differing sides of the topic. But I don't know, somebody I work with or maybe that I'm only a passing acquaintance with, I don't necessarily have that buffer to fall back on (Personal interview, 2019, November 20).

Grace contrasts the politically-habituated *Star Trek* fandom to two television fandoms that she perceives as not having established modes of political analysis and discussion, whether in relation to their source texts or just among their participants. Interestingly, she implies a similarity between how she evaluates the viability of political talk with people in different

fandoms and with people outside of fandom. Just having the shared referent of being together in the same fandom or the same workplace is not necessarily enough to lay the groundwork for productive political talk. The extant political praxis in a fandom like *Star Trek* gives participants practice in moving past disagreements and abiding people they don't agree with, if only because the media text acts as a "buffer" to put political issues at a plausible degree of separation from the people discussing them. In a fandom that does not have a habit of political engagement and is "well-known for their really large blowouts" over disagreements more minor than political differences, the buffer effect is a moot point. Similarly, with neither a textual buffer nor the habit of political engagement in place between them, Grace judges political talk with her coworkers as too risky to attempt. These considerations underscore the perceived hurdles that left-wing fans navigate as they choose when, to whom, and how they moralize given the absence of a normative framework from political discourse.

Appropriating fandom praxis for political moralization relies on the interaction between fans who are producers and those who are consumers of fanworks. In the most literal sense, fandoms exist as communities of affinity that can be addressed specifically as the audiences for a message. Previous scholars have described how this characteristic makes media and non-media fandoms available to calls to political actions like volunteering, donating, and activism (e.g., Hinck 2019; Hargreaves & Hartley 2016; Leavitt & Horbinski 2012). These studies have focused on organized, top-down messaging from figures of authority to a target fandom's general masses. My data show that fans also make calls for political action as individuals among the masses. In appropriating their writing praxis, for instance, Harper also exploits their existing audience of readers who already know and enjoy their writing. Others utilize their most basic platforms as transformative media fans by appropriating participatory modes like microblogging and convention-going.

Iliana [A]most all of the fandom blogs I've seen, coming election time, you see posts about go out and vote. Go out and vote, go out and vote. And a lot of them

nowadays are saying, “I don’t care if you don’t like the Democratic candidate. You go and you vote blue because we can’t have another four years of this happening.” That stuff’s definitely more on the intentional side than the things like writing fanfiction where a character’s bi (Personal interview, 2020, February 15).

Mallory I think by around the 2016 election, a lot of the people were primarily communicating through Twitter. The fandom people that I knew were on—so they would tweet about fandom but then also politics kind of gradually took over. So a lot of people I knew started volunteering on different levels. One person I know who is still—you know, runs a genre book blog and has a ton of fandom background basically started running her Indivisible chapter in her area after the 2016 election. And one of the cons I go to every year, I go to WisCon, which is a feminist sci-fi con and it’s all—there’s always been that overlap in feminism and political activism with fandom, but it’s just kind of—again, we end up talking about the activism end more, I think, recently. There’s definitely people who they’ll do panels like “What can *Star Wars* teach us about political resistance?” That kind of thing. I think that it probably has to do with people just having the ways they were used to communicating about fannish stuff and then your concerns change when you’re concerned about things going on in the world, and those networks and communications are still there. Like, people follow me on Twitter who met me because I was talking about the *X-Men* and then they asked me questions about election work and stuff like that, so we’re able to expand in that way (Personal interview, 2019, October 12).

Like using fanfic as a vehicle for political sentiments, the addition of political talk into fannish spaces and relationships demonstrates to their audience the urgency with which fans regard politics. Particularly since 2016, the left is increasingly attentive to and engaged with political issues but has had few recourses to effect change under the Trump administration. This heightened contemporary moment along with the trend of treating a political lens of engagement as normative in transformative media fandom and the affordances of social networking platforms allow the “intentional” cooptation of the fannish modes that Iliana and Mallory describe. Fandom consists of “networks and communications” that can be appropriated for political messaging and moral expression to satisfy fans’ frustrated desire to feel like their participation matters (Personal interview, 2019, October 12). As Mallory describes it, “politics kind of gradually [takes] over” leftists’ everyday thinking and simply

continuing to use “the ways they were used to communicating about fannish stuff” for political talk. This can take many forms, from a fannish blog exhorting fans to participate in politics or using fannish analysis of media objects like *Star Wars* to talk at fancons about effective political resistance.

Combined with fans’ leftward lean and their stated perceptions of the contemporary political moment, we can infer that the moral imperative of citizenship connotes a specific drive for societal change instead of maintaining a status quo. It should not be forgotten that a moral perspective on politics is one oriented to the good life on a broad scale, the way that society should be for the betterment of all. For the contemporary American left, which at the time of these interviews held little power in the federal government, the status quo is not only insufficient to what it imagines the good life to be but actively detrimental to it. This is supported by Illiana’s (Personal interview, 2020, February 15) observation that Tumblr bloggers exhort their audiences to vote and to “vote blue” even if they are personally unsatisfied with the eventual Democratic candidate “because we can’t have another four years of this happening.” The “this” that cannot be borne is not only the Trump administration but the shift of power in America toward reactionary politics that the left opposes.

In both morality and politics, the personal and social dimensions are inextricable from each other. When they perceive threats to their policy goals and society as a whole, a political group regards its political participation as a moral imperative. Institutional politics can be slow, frustrating, and alienating, and especially so for the left in the contemporary moment, denied a cohesive moral identity by political discourse. People hold this moral judgement individually, and they express it using fandom or other frameworks available to them in order to connect this moral identity with their group identifications. Melding the enactment of existing social identities with political engagement is a tactic to meet the affective need to feel one is acting morally and is part of a morally correct community.

Paige It definitely feels good to turn in the ballot. Filling it out and getting my “I voted” sticker. There’s a little bit of moral superiority that comes into that. That’s why

we post them all on social media after we're done. I am no stranger to that. But the reason that I go and vote isn't just for that personal satisfaction, but it's hoping that my voice is one of many that is bettering society in the long run. [...] It's funny because I would never easily consider myself or vocally say that I'm an optimist, but there is some optimism. There is some hopefulness. You know, if my candidate wins, if this measure passes, if this, if that, things will get better and this process will be one of those things that gets better. And we've seen that in fits and starts throughout at least the modern era of the electoral system. You know, the 2008 election, the 2018 midterms are definitely up there in like there seems to be a hopeful tide. [...] There's a little bit of that, I think, in my process of choosing what vote for and who to vote for. You know, if we can get candidates like this person and that person in office, then they can work together to fix the system. There's definitely a lot of that as well. But how I stay motivated, how I stay optimistic, I couldn't tell you. (laughs) Right now, it's just a whole lot of spite. I do not want the current administration to continue being in power. The next election cycle, who knows? (Personal interview, 2020, February 4).

Making politics public, whether by participating in protests as in previous excerpts or wearing "I voted" stickers and posting them to social media, displays the activity of citizenship. That activity is a referent that means different things in different contexts to different groups. In the context of contemporary American politics and for leftist fans, it connotes moral opposition to the Trump administration and the moral necessity of seeking societal transformation through political processes even when it seems hopeless. Making it a public display simultaneously expresses the perceived moral dimension to the audience of community peers and, perhaps, influences other members of the community to share that moral perspective on politics. The semi-public politics of political talk in fandom works the same way. Thus, engaging in political talk through fannish modes is a way to satisfy the basic human need to see oneself as morally good and the aspiration to be seen as such by one's community.

Compare and Contrast: Frameworks from the Fandom Community

The previous section looked at examples of participation in fandom as frameworks of moral expression. By doing fandom in a certain manner or setting, fans can also do politics. The mutuality fans see between their participation in the spheres of fandom and politics also

allows them to appropriate transformative media fandom itself as a framework of moral expression. That is, fandom provides not only a venue for political engagement and moral expression but an experiential frame of reference for making sense of politics.

The structural parallels fans perceive between transformative media fandom and politics lead them to compare and contrast the two as communities. In Chapter 3, I argued that fans perceive their participation in fandom and in politics in similar, if oppositely valenced, affective terms. This conclusion is further evidenced by fans' use of the framework of fandom to moralize about the importance of political participation.

Emma Well, I started out [our conversation] saying, "Hey, Trump got elected, I got drunk." That doesn't sound too positive. I didn't stay drunk and I'm not going to stay drunk. I'm going to try to stay active. I think that may be something you find in a lot of fandom politics. Especially the *Starsky and Hutch* fandom, we know we need to be active. [...] It's not *Star Trek* but it's managed to survive all these years. Why? Because it builds and wanes, you know, but a few people stay active and they keep it going. And then we'll have, pardon the expression, kids like you discover it. [...] They find it and they say, "This is interesting." Or I hope they say that. And they find the fandom and they say, "Wow, these are great people to hang with." And from what I've seen on the Facebook group and at [convention], these are active people. These are people who care about their world and do something about it. I mean, we've got a lot of different experiences. We've got a common core and we've got a dedication (Personal interview, 2019, October 28).

Star Trek and *Starsky and Hutch* are older fandoms originating in television shows that originally aired in the late 1960s and late 1970s respectively. The massive scale of *Star Trek* fandom, then and now, has helped seed modern media fandom and propelled the creation of half a dozen successive franchises in the *Star Trek* universe that have helped maintain that fandom's size, enthusiasm, and productivity in the ensuing decades. Then and now, *Starsky and Hutch* retains an exponentially smaller fanbase; a 2004 reboot movie widely panned by original fans has been the property's only new content since coming off the air in 1979. As Emma points out, the *Starsky and Hutch* fandom has survived almost as long as *Star Trek*'s without the aid of new content to drive interest because "a few people stay active and they keep it going" for new people to discover a show that they otherwise would never see. Her

comparison of *Starsky and Hutch* fandom to American politics in the moment immediately after the 2016 Trump electoral victory characterizes participation as existentially necessary. One can only “try to stay active” even when it feels futile because inaction means obsolescence. The stakes are different, but fandoms and political movements both depend on ongoing participation to exist and will die if their participants move on or become disillusioned.

This structural similarity is not followed by an experiential similarity, however. Between fandom and politics, there is a distinct difference in affective return on investment that makes fandom an enjoyable hobby and politics a moral obligation. Fandom reliably provides a sense of being in community and having one’s contributions to that community be meaningful. Politics, meanwhile, often leaves its participants feeling alienated and ineffectual. Elena uses this difference in experience to describe the need for Americans to recall that the moral question of how to make society better is at the heart of politics.

Elena One of the things about fandom that is nice is that there really is almost always—like I was talking about trying to find that common ground. Everyone’s there because they’re excited about something. That’s a great—I think that’s something that a lot of fans need to remember, (laughs) that they’re there because they love something deeply and they want to share that love with other people that are experiencing it. I think that fandom is evolving in some ways quite like politics, where depending on what fandom you’re in, there’s a right way to do this and there is a wrong way to do this. That’s not good. But I think that if politicians or individuals in America could remember that, or reconfigure their thinking to remember that we are, in theory, in this because we want the best outcome. We want to be excited about creating a world or a nation, a society that is going to be better. Just having some of that excitement, having something—rather than it just being—I think everybody feels so worn down right now. That’s really dangerous because if everybody’s worn down, then who’s going to be fighting for the things that matter? (Personal interview, 2020, January 25).

Elena’s wish that politics would feel more like transformative media fandom comes with the caveat that fandom has its own problems. She sees fandom as “evolving in some ways quite like politics” to be too prescriptivist and restrictive in potential modes of participation, making people feel unwelcome and alienated from community. What keeps Elena and other fans

engaged in fandom despite its shortcomings is holding onto the sense of being in community, “learning from and sharing a love of something with people from so many different places and backgrounds.” She wants “some of that excitement, having something” of a unifying orientation to the moral horizon to keep everybody going despite how “worn down” and discouraged contemporary politics makes people feel.

One result of these disparate feedback cycles is the previously noted political uses of fannish texts and modes as prostheses or proxies for the frustrated moral imperative to participate in real-world politics. Another consequence of this difference in experience is that fans comparing the two spheres as communities feel more personally invested in the integrity of transformative media fandom than they do in the American polity. As the following discussion illustrates, fans feel more responsible to account for fellow fans that they perceive as morally wrong compared to other Americans. The lead-in was a conversation about racism in fandom in which they seemingly agreed that while individuals are not personally responsible for the group’s collective sins, fans have a moral duty to be self-aware and mindful in their own engagement and to enforce an anti-racist community standard. Asked if they felt the same level of responsibility in non-fandom settings, nearly everyone said no.

Maya Because fandom is my community and I have a duty to fix my community. (agreement) I would feel similarly about a—I mean, I haven’t been a part of a religious congregation or anything since I was a teenager, but I think I would feel similarly about that or like a neighborhood association. [...W]hereas the wider world, I absolutely—[Storm] and I went to the anti-Trump protest when he was here two weeks ago. I mean, I made a fandom protest sign that was very popular. It was an *Untitled Goose Game* [meme]. I’ll show you later. But for that, I’m like, Obviously, we have to do that. But I don’t see the same—for similar reasons as we were talking about earlier. I don’t see the same duty to connect with Trump voters as I do with somebody who I already have fandom in common with, who I feel like there is a tangible—we probably already have relatively similar politics. Not to say that there aren’t people in fandom who I do think are beyond—we had a discussion at lunch yesterday about how I used to be friends with [fan], speaking of the racist *Star Wars* sequels fandom. I have since seen what she’s written about that and heard her double down on things and me and most people I know are no longer friends with [her]

(laughs) because I don't view her as somebody who's going to respond to that in a way where she's reachable. What were you saying, [Cary]?
Cary Just the things that I would want to engage with and change about fandom feel so small compared to the amount of shit that's wrong with the world that I'm not going to fight for my fandom thing in the grand scheme of "Let's all just acknowledge that we're people and we deserve to live." And then we can start working on other stuff.
(Focus group, 2019, October 20)

Maya contrasts her perception that "fandom is my community and I have a duty to fix my community" with a more fraught relationship with the polity. Her alienation from any sense of political community has to do primarily with partisan polarization and the perception that right and left are simply too different to coexist. Presented with the opportunity to protest President Trump when he is in town, she seemingly feels a moral obligation that "[o]bviously, we have to do that" and express dissent. Otherwise, she places people who are too politically different from her in the same category as transformative media fans who are too belligerent to be reasoned with about racism in fandom: not worth engaging because they are not "reachable." The implication is that the number of fans who are unreachable is on the scale of individual interpersonal relationships ending without altering the community as a whole. Whereas in politics, the number of unreachable "Trump voters" makes a nation-wide political community impossible, and therefore she feels no duty to maintain or "fix" it. Similarly, Cary articulates a rationale for having different responsibilities to the communities of fandom and politics because of the scale of the issues in each sphere. Cary perceives the problems in fandom as fine-tuning the dynamics of a more or less functional community. The problems in politics are on the level of the inability of the right and left to agree "that we're people and we deserve to live," fundamental disagreements that fracture the foundation of any sense of community.

After Cary's contribution, the conversation continues:

Storm I've always been that person who's like, If I don't do it, who's going to? In every aspect of my life forever. So yes, I feel similarly to fandom. I don't engage socially in fandom spaces as much as you all do, but I feel similarly in

- the wider world, in trying to unionize my workplace. I do try to have conversations with people who disagree with me, including the person I try not to have conversations with. I feel like if I'm going to bitch about it, I have to do something. So as opposed to the ringing no, yes. I feel like I need to engage with those things or similar things and the way I do it is going to be different, but yes.
- Maya Yeah. I mean, I feel differently because I don't feel less, but I feel differently. I don't feel like it's the same. It's not less.
- Gwen Yeah. I feel different. It's a different—
- Sierra Because the things that I care about people having wrong opinions about in reality are things that I don't necessarily want to be thinking about in my pretend funtimes space. I am much more education, ban private schools, like all that. I don't really want to write about that. I want to write about people having sex. (laughs)
- Maya But also you do not want people being gross and racist in your pretend funtime space.
- Sierra Exactly. [...]
- Bridget And one thing is in my real life, not fannish life, I'm going to do what I can, but in fandom, I feel like I have a responsibility because I am creating something. So I need to think there is a higher responsibility to educate myself. It's the same education I would give myself if I was voting, but I'm doing that way less frequently than I am recording a podfic and I need to think about it. So it's sort of a scale of the ways I am engaging.
- (Focus group, 2019, October 20)

Sierra and Bridget come at the question of why they feel differently about each community from their disparate modes of participation in each. Sierra argues for a separation of the spheres in saying that the “wrong opinions” people hold in the real world “are things that I don't necessary want to be thinking about in my pretend funtimes space.” Her sense of moral obligation to political issues like “education, ban private schools, like all that” in the real world emerges from an ideal other than the “duty to fix my community” that Sierra feels for transformative media fandom. She agrees when Maya says that some level of political engagement and agreement is necessary for fandom to be an enjoyable space, but she prefers to write fanfic only about emotionally ‘fun’ topics rather than as a proxy or vehicle for political topics like previously quoted fans do. Bridget also separates the two spheres by modes of participation, though for her they are distinguished by the *intensity* of her

participation. Her opportunities to be politically productive in ways she considers analogous to “creating something” in fandom are relatively rare. In those instances, Bridget does feel the same sense of obligation to “do what I can” and “educate myself” in politics as she does in fandom. Cumulatively, though, she feels the obligation more often in fandom simply because that sphere is more accessible for her to be active than is politics.

Even as they deny feeling the *same* level of obligation to politics that they do to fandom, Maya, Cary, Sierra, and Bridget (Focus group, 2019, October 20) all either imply or admit feeling *some* level of obligation to politics. This is clear as early as Maya’s admission of feeling obliged to attend the anti-Trump demonstration, but it’s also in response to Storm pushing back on the rest of the group’s agreement and arguing that the obligation is the same. Storm feels that “if I’m going to bitch about it, I have to do something” in both spheres, echoing the previously noted perception of many fans that participation in politics is itself a moral act and obligation. Interestingly, Storm also notes that they are less “socially” involved in fandom than the other focus group members, likely referring to the online sites of fandom alluded to in the earlier discussion about racist responses to the *Star Wars* sequels. An affective experience of fandom based on interpersonal or individual modes of engagement more than the public and semi-public modes of online spaces may help explain why Storm does not make a distinction between the spheres of fandom and politics. They perceive less of the community of transformative media fandom beyond the small group of people that they personally know and what they hear about from people that they know. Therefore, fandom feels to Storm similar to American politics. Acknowledging that their approach to the same problem might have to be different because of the disparate scales of fandom and politics, Storm still sees their moral responsibility to each as equal. In reply, Maya amends her answer to make it clear that she does feel some obligation to the moral correctness of politics “because I don’t feel less, but I feel differently.”

This discussion underscores the significance of fans' conception of community in their sense of moral obligation, as predicted by the inextricable social dimension of moral theory (Lowe 2010; Hitlin 2008; Taylor 1991). It also supports my argument that fans perceive fandom and politics as having similar affective structures but different valences for most fans because of positive feedback they receive for participation in fandom compared to the negative feedback returned by politics. The underlying similarity allows the contrasting comparison between these two spheres and offers a model for imagining how politics could become better by being more like fandom. For instance, members of the same focus group brought up fannish modes as exemplars when talking about how to convince people who are politically different from themselves.

- Bridget I think that's actually something where fandom is a really good medium because part of the thing that we do is—I'm not going to tell you what I feel. I'm going to show you a story that makes you understand it. [...] Which is a way better way to convey something in my experience than "Here are my views and here are why I have my views and you're not going to get it because I'm just laying it out like facts," rather than being like, "Here is a lens for you to see the thing that I'm talking about and come to the conclusion I have come to by giving you that feeling." But that's hard to do in a debate situation.
- Maya I mean, I do it by almost exclusively using personal experience stories and the stories of people that I know and are close to and the things they have told me. Because as you said, I know that being like—I know that my facts are all logically consistent and line up and I'm right and they're wrong, but me saying that, they're just going to say the same thing. I know the way to change people's opinions is to show them with a story.
(Focus group, 2019, October 20)

Importantly, these fans reject the instrumental reasoning that's normatively associated with left-wing politics. Bridget characterizes the rhetorical failure in instrumental reason as simply stating that "here are why I have my views and you're not going to get it because I'm just laying it out like facts." Left-wing fans believe that the "facts are all logically consistent and line up and I'm right and they're wrong," but they have observed that the facts alone have been ineffective in achieving the left's political goals. They contrast the rhetorical limpness of instrumental reason with the persuasive capability of storytelling to create an emotional

response to a political circumstance that has moral dimension in its narrative presentation. How to tell an effective story is something fans often learn to do by participating in fandom and doing analysis on media texts or writing their own stories. As Maya points out, framing a political issue as a moral choice through an emotionally resonant narrative is a skill that can be transferred to representing real world experiences in political talk.

It's notable that the main non-structural problem that fans identify in contemporary politics is the habituation to instrumental reasoning. They see both the left and right as failing to connect with the lived experiences and problems of real people. Disagreements are centered over what to measure or how to interpret data:

Riley [...] because people aren't seeing these things as a moral decision. They are seeing these things as a technical, maybe budgetary sort of position. I mean, the way that people talk about like refugees, they make them seem like they're just numbers on a page instead of human lives that have—actually thinking about the number of years, (laughs) the number of things that happen in a person's life at almost any point. The fact that you're living within your own body and then you're imagining there's another person who has lived that same amount of time, but they've had entirely different experiences. Like, it's bonkers! So the idea that you could—and at some extent, of course you can't see every individual person. Your brain can't do it. That would be impossible to see, you know, a million individual people with their super complex lives. At a certain point, it does have to be a numbers game. But we can't say that the numbers matter more than the lives just because they are easier to understand and to calculate (Personal interview, 2020, January 19).

This issue in normative political thinking and discourse is in contrast to fandom's structural bias toward affect and connection, regardless of measurable or quantifiable factors of difference. Riley doesn't bring up fandom explicitly, but their critique of instrumental reasoning aligns closely with Bridget and Maya's comments (Focus group, 2019, October 20). When representing the issue of people seeking refuge in the United States, for instance, right- and left-wing arguments in political discourse are normatively framed as "a technical, maybe budgetary sort of position" rather than a moral question of human suffering. Riley balks at the idea of "the number of years, the number of things that happen in a person's life" to put them where they are being reduced to a "numbers game" (Personal interview, 2020,

January 19). Data are useful in representing scale, but they cannot “matter more than the lives just because they are easier to understand and calculate.”

In this, transformative media fans agree with many extant criticisms of the left as failing to tell voters a story about politics that can compete successfully with the right's religious rhetoric and moralization. But unlike other critics, transformative media fans have clear ideas about what can augment or replace instrumental reasoning. Bridget's (Focus group, 2019, October 20) description of fandom teaching its participants to convince people of a position “by giving you that feeling” instead of “laying it out like facts” encompasses two previously described possibilities: frameworks for moral expression appropriated from media content and fannish modes like fanfic and meta. Since these specifically fannish modes are “hard to do in a debate situation,” Maya abstracts these fannish practices to storytelling. Using narratives and characters, whether from media or from one's real-life experiences, provides a framework to communicate the moral dimensions of political circumstances that is more influential than dry figures on potential decision-making. Teresa brings up another practical consideration for political discussion, which is that it is often textually mediated online.

Teresa I think too—you mentioned fandoms would be a good tool via storytelling, but I also feel it gives you—it teaches you to communicate a little bit better. The way I engage with people online has changed the way I engaged with people in my life. [...] It's really hard to convey tone through Twitter. People have a lot of discussions and it's really hard to toe the line between we're friends, we're sharing opinions here, but I don't want to sound like I'm coming for you specifically. I'm not here to attack you. You learn different phrases to say to—not necessarily soften the blow but to be very clear. This is what I'm saying and I'm not trying to come for you, I'm not trying to say that you're an awful person, but here's my experience or the people I care about's experiences. Here's why I care so much about this. I'm not saying that you don't, but maybe you didn't consider this side of the story from this perspective (Focus group, 2019, October 20).

It can be difficult to convey a non-combative tone online, which can break down discussion and the possibility of persuasion. Fans who participate in online spaces have had to develop

“different phrases” to signal tone and avoid intra-community conflict on social media platforms. This sensitivity to the limitations of text is readily applicable to attempting political talk in similar circumstances.

Of course, fans are as aware as anyone that transformative media fandom is not perfect, let alone a perfect model for politics. Its positive characteristics are highlighted in contrast to politics’ downsides, but fans also find parallels in comparing the spheres’ respective negative characteristics. For instance, the tactics for conveying tone that Teresa identifies as a positive attribute of fandom have arisen in part because of the need to avoid confrontations that would otherwise happen. Fans have had and for some continue to have intra- and inter-fandom conflicts over the relative artistic value of certain media texts compared to others or between different interpretations of those texts. This aspect of fandom experience resembles the difficulty of trying to speak across political difference in the context of seemingly insurmountable partisan polarization in contemporary American politics.

Mallory Sometimes you’re just wasting your time. But they’ll usually announce that. I mean, I think the talking about people’s core values is a way to communicate with people who maybe hold opinions that they haven’t thought about very much. Like they say, “Well, obviously this is the way that it’s done,” and then if you say, “Well, have you ever thought about how that affects people who don’t make as much money? Have you ever thought about how that’s unfair to some folks?” [...] See, this is a slippery slope because I’m one of those people who always thinks that if you explain stuff enough, then people will be like, Oh, of course. I mean, that’s a little bit—just to go back to fandom, this guy one time was like—I said something like “I don’t really like Batman.” This is this guy, he’s like, “No, Batman’s the best.” And he sat down and told me about how Batman was motivated because his parents were murdered, just told me the story in detail. Like, you know what? I have heard that about Batman. But I know that I kind of do the same thing when people are like, I don’t—like, “Wolverine’s dumb, he’s just a stupid person who cuts people up.” I’m like, “Let me tell you what you don’t know about Wolverine.” (laughs) Sometimes, like in fandom, people will be like, “I never read that story, maybe I’ll go do it and see what it says.” But then other people will just be like, “Well, I just don’t like him. He was mean to Colossus one time.” And then you’re like, “Okay, that person is never going to be my fandom buddy.” It is a little bit actually like when you [asked] about can you talk people into something. It’s a little bit like shipping. That’s sort of like—this person ships themselves with Donald Trump and nothing that you say is going to break—you know, if you give them more

information, they'll just incorporate that into—just like if somebody ships Buffy and Spike. Whatever you say about “Well, Spike’s a bad person and he did this, this, and this,” that person’s not going to change their mind because of what you think is your very convincing argument about why—I do ship Buffy and Spike. But that’s one of the ones where people will be like, Do you know that ship is problematic? And then everybody just gets mad at each other. [...] If you understand a lot of political arguments in terms of ship wars, then it helps you realize when you’re completely wasting your time. I hadn’t thought of that before. That’s a good one, though (Personal interview, 2019, October 12).

Mallory speaks from the experience of door-to-door political canvassing when she draws a parallel between some of those conversations with potential voters about left-wing candidates and the difficulty of speaking with fans with ironclad, emotionally invested views of characters like Batman and Wolverine that are incompatible with her view of them. In both situations, it doesn’t take long for all parties to realize that “you’re just wasting your time” trying to convince each other to change an opinion held so strongly. She admits to falling for the temptation to try anyway because she “always thinks that if you explain stuff enough, then people will be like, Oh, of course,” but she characterizes this mindset as a “slippery slope.” This echoes the sentiment of many fans around choosing to avoid contentious fandom interactions and political conversations because they are inevitably exhausting and futile.

Mallory then shifts the comparison of politics to the fandom analogues of shipping and ship wars. Shipping is a fannish mode of creative analysis that posits a relationship, usually romantic or sexual, between two characters that typically do not have such a relationship in the source text. How fans judge a ship as having legitimate textual support and a compelling dynamic is by nature arbitrary, but the practice of shipping can be emotionally invested and strongly tied one’s sense of fannish identity. From this model, Mallory characterizes Trump voters as “ship[ping] themselves with Donald Trump and nothing you can say is going to break” their belief in the bond with Trump. Their emotional and identarian investment in the belief is beyond reasonable doubt for the believer and

cannot be argued against rationally. Much like fans do with their ships, “if you give them more information, they’ll just incorporate that into” their unimpeachable belief in their relationship with Trump.

Ship wars are arguments between fans over which ships are most correct or appealing. They typically involve fans making coordinated attempts to shun peers and stamp out fanworks based on their association with ships judged textually incorrect and/or morally “problematic.” For instance, some fans see the ship of Buffy and Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as gross or morally wrong because Spike, a vampire who acts an antagonist for most of his tenure the series, has a history of verbally abusing and being physically violent to Buffy, including an instance most audiences agree is a sexual assault. Using ship wars as a framework for describing “a lot of political arguments” foregrounds the futility and therefore the performativity of the conflict. Mallory and other fans who ship Buffy/Spike, for instance, are typically aware of the aspects of their canonical history that are “problematic” and enjoy the ship anyway. If other fans try to convince them to stop shipping Buffy/Spike or harass them for doing so, “everybody just gets mad at each other” to no productive end. Similarly, Mallory sees some political disagreements as irreconcilable and not worth pursuing because neither party will be convinced by any argument or accusation from the other. In these circumstance in which “you’re completely wasting your time” from a persuasive standpoint, getting into the argument anyway can only be a performance of outrage to prove one’s own moral uprightness. In fandom, the uneasiness and frustration around purity culture would suggest that most fans represented in my sample do not appreciate confrontational moral crusading. Since so many fans also report avoiding political conversations with people on the right, it would seem that neither do fans see much value in moral self-aggrandizement as public politics.

As a final point of analysis on this excerpt, Mallory concludes her comparison of shipping and ship wars with politics and the circumstance of partisan polarization by saying:

“I hadn’t thought of that before. That’s a good one, though” (Personal interview, 2019, October 12). Her pause for reflection on her own talk affords an opportunity for me to also step back for a moment from the granularity of specific comparisons between fandom and politics to look more broadly at the act of comparing the two spheres. I designed my data collection to juxtapose fandom and politics in a way that I expected would lead to moralization with fandom referents while trying to avoid leading interviewees to the parallels and moral frameworks I had seen before expressed in situ as a participant in transformative media fandom. From my awareness of the space and culture of fandom, I began this project confident that I would hear instances of fans’ moralization using fannish frameworks *already in place* in individual fans’ thinking because they circulate in fandom. Certainly, that has been true for many previously cited examples, and obviously so when fans like Maya (Focus group, 2019, October 20), Hunter, and Petra (Focus group E1, 2020, February 21) talk about concrete actions taken in the past. Mallory’s (Personal interview, 2019, October 12) comment of “I hadn’t thought of that before,” by which she meant comparing shipping and politics is something that arose only because of our conversation, shows that these frameworks also can be elicited as novel modes of moral expression. The contours of this project put fandom and politics in explicit conversation, affording an opportunity for respondents to articulate novel linkages between the spheres.

Far from invalidating fannish frameworks of moralization in political talk, the fact that my data turned up examples of both preexisting and spontaneous uses of these frameworks helps illustrate the theory behind the moral vocabularies approach. Recall that moral vocabularies are both communicative tools for making claims about moral value and social tools that, by the content or vehicle of moral claims, signal or create solidarity with others (Lowe 2010). The contemporary American left has been shown by previous scholars and in the previous chapter to be unable to access a unifying moral identity and rhetoric. Therefore, I posit that left-wing moral expression is dynamic in form and contextually situated. Among

transformative media fans who participated in this project, the relevant contexts are 1) the specific resources available for appropriation as frameworks for moral expression and 2) the two group identities virtually all interlocutors have in common: the political left and fandom.

These invocations of fannish frameworks for moral expression show again that these two spheres are perceived by fans as linked in some way that makes fannish frameworks useful for political moralization. In particular, the derivation of frameworks from fannish praxis and from broad dynamics within fandom depends on fans' perception of the underlying similarity in the affective structure of the experience of participation in both spheres detailed in Chapter 3. The spontaneous uses of fannish frameworks in the course of data collection also support this conclusion of perceived appropriateness as well as highlight the social aspect of moralization. The respondents are in need of a means of expressing their political thinking and judgement of circumstances to the interviewer. The interviewer is someone that they know is a fellow fan and at least suspect shares a political identity with them, whether because of some aspect of the personal interaction or because of the assumption of leftism among transformative media fans. By design, the project places fandom and politics in conversation with each other, priming fannish cultural resources as potential referents for moralization. Many fans then use these fannish frameworks as quoted above because of their appropriateness in general and accessibility in context. In Mallory's (Personal interview, 2019, October 12) excerpt, we can see how the framework of shipping and ship wars to describe political behavior communicates a moral claim to the interviewer by appealing to the mutually shared context of the social identity of transformative media fans. She has already articulated the framework expressing an aspect of her moral engagement with politics before Mallory realizes "That's a good one"—a good way of communicating her perspective both as a fan and as a leftist in post-2016 American politics in this context.

This chapter has shown the different ways that transformative media fans appropriate fannish frameworks for moral expression. Frameworks drawn from media content, fan praxis, and fandom as a community have different respective affordances for moralization that fans choose to use depending on the content and context of their moral expression. These data from fans provide evidence that the left is morally engaged with politics in a language and venue beyond normative political discourse. Yet it should not be forgotten that moral vocabularies are expressive, not determinative. To that end, I conclude this chapter with the following excerpt encapsulating what I interpret to be the central moral ideal with which most fans approach political issues and their participation in a system that is often disappointing and frustrating.

Andrea Why do the things that matter to us matter? I feel like [we] should—I should ask myself that every day. Why do these things matter? Well, let me see if I can summarize my views on this. (pause) Life is short. Kindness matters so much. Kindness is so important. Because life is short, and I suppose again this goes back to me as an educator of students with special needs. Those people can't always verbalize what is important to them, but they matter. Those who can't speak matter. I guess that's my whole life's work, is to make things more fair. Because life isn't fair. Life isn't fair. So why not work to make it better? It's not fair. It's not fair when somebody's born without a limb, it's not fair when one person doesn't have the intellectual capacity that another person does. It's not fair, and nobody's going to step in and make it fair. Whether you have a belief in a deity or not, you know what, since Christ walked the earth, I haven't seen anybody down here curing the blind. We can stand around here and wait for him, or we can try to help the blind. To me, that's my way of thinking. And this again speaks to my dad and his common sense. Like, that's great, you can stand around and wait for the second coming, but what are you going to do with the suffering until then? (Personal interview, 2019, December 10).

I chose this quote to sum up transformative media fans' morality in part because Andrea does *not* use a fannish framework for her moral expression. She is wonderfully clear that her highest moral ideals are fairness and kindness, and because life is inherently unfair, her approach to politics is to be attentive to the ways in which people need kindness.

My data collection was designed to capture and provoke frameworks derived from fandom to make an example of how the left makes do for moral expression given its exclusion from the normatively religious mode of moralization in political discourse. The moral vocabularies with which the left moralizes are varied and variable, dependent on the speaker's preference and situation. Transformative media fandom is a scholarly convenience for me as a fan. There are many other sites of affinitive group identity—reading clubs, historical costumers, horticultural society members, etc.—that could be studied to see how the group's objects and praxis are appropriated as frameworks for political moralization. Such sites are productive for research into left-wing morality when respondents already know that they share cultural resources appropriable into moral vocabularies with the interviewer and fellow interlocutors. But even in the context of this project, some fans choose to express morality as Andrea does here, with plain language and religious frameworks. Her allusion to Christianity and “the second coming” refers back to an earlier moment in the conversation when Andrea talked about her frustration over trying to talk about politics with right-wing coworkers. Like other fans, Andrea perceives the right as misusing the Bible to justify political stances that are incongruous with how Andrea perceives Christianity. Her father's “common sense” religiosity embodied in kindness and generosity in daily life is what shaped Andrea's moral orientation to the world. Her moral investment in grappling with what makes a good society and a better future shapes her fannish interest in science fiction media and dovetails with her choice of career as a teacher for students with special needs. Perhaps it is her daily engagement with her deepest moral ideal that allows Andrea to articulate it as simply as “Life isn't fair. So why not work to make it better?”

Chapter 6: Meaning Making, Within Fandom and Beyond

Acknowledging that moral expression in political talk can take forms other than the religious Christian rhetoric of the contemporary American right allows us to explore previously illegible or unrecognizable left-wing moral expression. In looking at the political talk of transformative media fans, I have shown that they readily employ frameworks drawn from popular cultural texts that are the object of their fannish activity and their experiences in fandom to express their moral engagement with politics. Some frameworks were extant in fandom spaces and fannish thinking, and some were elicited as novel expressions of moral engagement when fans' participation in focus groups and interviews presented a previously unconsidered juxtaposition between fandom and politics. This project therefore demonstrates the fallacy of the assumption in normative political discourses that the contemporary American left lacks a moral mode of engagement with politics. Consequently, it casts doubt on the normative definition of the left in contrast with the right's political identity as reactionary "values voters" rooted in evangelical Christian morality.

This chapter will put these findings in the relevant contexts, showing their specificity to a study of transformative media fandom and possible directions for future study. I will conclude with a discussion of the significance of these findings for the field of political science.

Structural Limitations From Within Fandom

First, a word on the limitations of my findings. I have argued that transformative media fandom constitutes a coherent identity with a leftist political alignment and a moral investment in political action. I have also shown that both scholars studying media industry dynamics and fans themselves see the fannish modes of media engagement as becoming more normative to media culture in the United States. These factors in combination allow behaviors that exist within fandom to move out into the political sphere. One example of this

transference already taking place is fans' use and observation of media metaphors and allusions at political protests to communicate their perception of political circumstances and the moral imperative of protesting those circumstances. The recently published *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination* (Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, & Shresthova, 2020) provides a series of detailed case studies in fans' use of popular cultural frameworks for imagining political change that echo the anecdotal examples in my data. It is tempting, therefore, to postulate that transformative media fandom represents a bellwether for the American left, the possibility for a future rejuvenation of moral expression through polysemic frameworks drawn from *Harry Potter* and superhero movies. However, such a conclusion would not only be overreaching; it would also betray a foundational misunderstanding of how those behaviors exist in transformative media fandom in the first place.

The very structures that predispose transformative media fandom toward liberal political philosophies of diversity and solidarity equally predispose fans to forms of tribalism they lament in politics. Affective return on investment is central to how fans contrast their experiences in fandom and politics. Politics is frustrating because of an overall sense of alienation for the individual from outcomes and other people. By contrast, fans continue to invest in fandom because of a positive feedback loop that rewards participation with a sense of impact on outcomes for other participants and the community as a whole. As already described in Chapter 3, the fandom cycle can be disrupted by individual bad actors or shifts in the participant's perception of their affinity with the group. The fans I spoke to represent these episodes of alienation in fandom as transitory, both in terms of being short-lived and in that they often literally coincide with the fan's transition from one specific fandom to another. That is, these fans remember the episodes in which they *felt alienated* and then regained their sense of community in another group of fans. Given the political inclination of the fans who participated in this project, perhaps some occasions in which they felt alienation were due to encounters with fandoms that were opposed to overt political analysis and critique of

their media object. We can easily flip the dynamic and imagine the fans who *caused* this alienation did so, intentionally or otherwise, in the course of preserving their own experience in fandom as a positive feedback loop of affinity and affective reward.

That fans' narrow investment in their own experience can lead to inadaptability to change and violent rejection of critique is not a new observation in fan studies. Like most subcultures, fandom is prone to a mentality in which sociocultural shifts and calls for change are perceived to be threats against the integrity of the group and its members (Fiske 2010; Hebdige 1979). Fans and fan scholars have particularly noted the systemic instantiation of this mindset as a gatekeeping device and punitive cudgel against non-white fans (Stitch 2020, Jan 22; Pande 2018; Stanfill 2018). This pattern of tribalism did not show up in my data because my sample of transformative media fans is overwhelmingly white, including only three participants who identify with defined, non-white census categories (see Appendix A, Graph 6) who are apparently comfortable in predominantly white fandom spaces. Some of my participants mention racism in fandom as something they have observed or heard of, describing it as an ill in the community but not as something they have personally experienced either as a victim or a perpetrator. This lacuna in the data reinforces our understanding of the narrowness of this sample, and adds nuance to the conclusion that participants in transformative media fandom lean leftward. It is imperative that we do not wave away racism in fandom in any case, but especially when thinking about transformative media fans as leftists. Despite their political beliefs and criticism of racism in the entertainment industry, white fans sometimes react with defensiveness and retaliation to accusations of racism, both in their own community and even in media texts they enjoy. They perpetuate white supremacy in fandom spaces, treating the perpetual alienation of fans of color as the acceptable cost of protecting white fans' pleasure in the affective feedback loop (Stitch 2021, Aug 12; Pande 2018; Stanfill 2018).

An infamous case study in the insidious racism which pervades fandom *because* of its affective structure is that of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy. A full account of the series of conflicts that arose around these three movies could be its own dissertation. To give the barest of summaries, the sequel trilogy saw first a backlash against the mere presence of a Black lead character, then a counter-backlash to the subsequent drastic reduction of that character's role in the latter two installments as well as the fandom's overwhelming focus on ships involving the white villains and excluding the Black, Latino, and Asian heroes, and finally, a counter-counter-backlash against both the Black actor and fans flagging racism with accusations they were being misogynistic against the white female lead and other fans (Stitch 2019, Dec 14; Pande 2018; Coker & Viars 2017). In addition to illustrating how fandom's affective structure can prime fans for conflict as much as like-minded solidarity, this protracted furor also demonstrates that left-leaning political ideology too much enmeshed in affect is at risk of exploitation and subversion to the alt-right. For instance, an analysis of tweets sent to the director of the second film in the trilogy after its release finds that alt-right agitators used the existing conflicts over race, gender, and ships to prosecute a broader case for right-wing ideologies and against leftism in the United States (Bay 2018). There is even evidence suggesting that the emotionally charged, oppositional investments of large audiences in *Star Wars* enticed "Russian influence operators" to insert themselves into the discourse to manipulate and spread misinformation in order to worsen partisan conflict in the popular cultural arena as they do in other venues, inflating media attention to and general perception "that America is divided and in chaos" (§ 6).

Thus, there is a danger that the cycle of affective fulfillment can not only tempt fandom into perpetuating societal inequities in their subculture, but could also be the lure on the hook of radical right-wing ideologies. By the tiny minority of non-white respondents, my data certainly point to the former; in terms of the latter, multiple respondents voiced concern about the rise of purity culture, an orthodoxy movement that arose on Tumblr and is

perceived by its opponents as “conservative protestantism with a gay hat” (queerpyracy 2017). Purity culture is obsessed with strictly correct modes of engagement between people and with media texts, particularly sexual engagement, with violations and even association with violators punishable by excommunication and shunning. The stated concerns about purity culture I heard from my respondents did not extend to politics beyond fandom, focusing instead on the deleterious effect purity culture can have within fan spaces. From personal experience, though, I know that some transformative media fans are sounding the alarm that fandom’s flirtation with reactionary politics makes it a potential recruiting ground for right-wing movements like trans-exclusionary radical feminism and leads fans ultimately to embrace the alt-right. There are too few leaps in logic for comfort between the paranoia about widespread pedophilia in purity culture and latent white supremacy in fandom and the conspiratorial theorizing about pedophilic sex cults in QAnon. The plausibility of this eventuality for transformative media fans is evidenced by the exploitation of the *Star Wars* controversy (Bay 2018), as well as the Gamergate harassment campaign against women and minorities in video game culture, in which a backlash beginning in 2014 was stoked and inflamed with violent strains of misogynistic, white supremacist, and authoritarian rhetoric that, with the facilitation of platform architecture, put men and boys emotionally invested in video games on a path to right-wing radicalization (Munn 2019; Winter 2019; Bezio 2018; Salter 2018; Massanari 2015). Both purity culture and the systemic racist gatekeeping and retaliation in fandom are relevant counterpoints to the rosy view that many fans, including myself, sometimes hold of the political aspects of our fannish experiences. These dark undercurrents show how the centrality of affect to fannish engagement can lead to dangerous and exclusionary political stances as much as it could inspire some of my respondents to move away from such beliefs and to the left.

An additional structural parameter of transformative media fandom that cannot be separated from my findings is its objects. The habituated orientation of media fandom to

media objects unavoidably increases the importance of representational politics in participants' minds. The contents of the text are what make it the text to which the fan feels affinity; exploring the hermeneutics of the text's creation is one way of exploring the mechanisms of that affinity. Many fans note that they first came to left-wing theory and philosophy in fandom because of discussions and critiques of the representation of gender or race in the shows and movies they were interested in. In Chapter 5, I showed that some fans appropriate their own habits of participation in fandom as political and moral activism. Fandoms have proven their capacity to mobilize for political action when called on to do so by trusted messengers, either fellow fans or respected leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Jenkins, Peters-Lozano, & Shresthova 2020; Kelly 2020, Nov 3). At the same time, many of the same fans express concern that fandom's interest in politics would become bogged down in the representational and internal politics of the community, to the detriment of fans' investment in material politics in the real world. All of these kinds of politics are 'real' politics that intersect and interact with each other, but when thinking of transformative media fandom as a political community, it is important to remember that some participants are more involved in community politics than traditional politics.

As we saw in one focus group discussion, fans sometimes see community or local politics as the more urgent and achievable obligation. Even if fans can express their moral and political opinions using fannish frameworks, the question remains of how to persuade people to become as invested and engaged in politics as they are in their own lives. Moreover, if fans and Taylor (1991) are both correct that local community is the most inspiring place for rediscovering the moral heart of political participation, then the difficulty is not only broadening attention to and engagement with politics from small- to large-scale issues, but also building and maintaining solidarity between communities with similar moral perspectives but different senses of the 'local.' The difficulty of achieving solidarity is neither new nor unique to a discussion of transformative media fandom, but it is notable when fans

view the political problems in their own community as significant and more actionable than those in the world beyond fandom.

The last structural factor that limits the scope of my conclusions because of its inextricability from the site of transformative media fandom is its architectures. By architectures, I mean the spaces and platforms that fans inhabit, employ, and are acculturated to in their modes of engagement. The social and political problems embedded in the affordances and cultures of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Discord that many fans use have been well-enumerated in scholarly literature (e.g., Rogers & Niederer 2020; Salter 2016; Trottier & Fuchs 2015; Gillespie 2010). Though these data exceed the bounds of this project, multiple fans expressed concerns about the proliferation of dis- and misinformation, the tendency of groups online to form tribalistic echo chambers, and platform-based capacities for violence without consequence on social media. These have implications for what kinds of expression are not only technically possible but socially acceptable online, shaping how users gauge what to say and how to say it, what to self-censor, and how to judge and respond to what others say. As previously noted, there are tools embedded into most social media platforms that fans use to curate their experience online, but to what extent do these self-protection measures and the culture around their use also allow fandom to perpetuate its worst impulses of exclusionary gatekeeping?

Offline fandom does not have even the mixed bag of protective measures that social media platforms afford. The real-world spaces of fandom such as the fancons where I recruited focus group participants inherently exclude those fans who do not have the resources to attend them or feel alienated by the milieux that form among their attendees. Whether a fancon works to mitigate the gatekeeping effect is dependent entirely on the character of the individuals on the convention committee to seek out expertise, hear criticism, and implement reform. Certainly one consequence of these architectures in both spaces is the massive majority of respondents to this study identifying as white. Whether this

is because of an actual exclusion or absence of non-white fans from the parts of fandom with which I am familiar or a higher degree of comfort white fans feel talking to a white academic, I cannot say conclusively. The whiteness of my sample should not ever be detached from my conclusions, not because I think the political perceptions and behaviors I describe are exclusive to white fans, but because both the whiteness and the behavior are symptomatic of the same deeper architectures.

A Structure Transcending Fandom?

The structural factors detailed above are parameters specific to transformative media fandom that limit my specific study of the appropriation of non-religious frameworks into moral vocabularies for left-wing moral expression in political talk. I have previously enumerated the ways in which transformative media fandom is only one type of fandom, and my sampling method was unavoidably limited to certain corners of transformative media fandom to which I have access, and therefore, which corner of contemporary leftism for which I can answer. But to what extent are those early methodological decisions determinative of my findings? Is transformative media fandom like other groups, fannish or otherwise, that I could have studied in this manner? In other words, is the social identity of transformative media fan and its interaction with political identity typical of group identities more broadly? Yes and no; no reasonable scholar considers transformative media fandom wholly unique among groups, and yet, one of my findings is that fans see their fannish and political lives as intertwined in ways that are not typical of other facets of their lived identities. I propose a hypothesis that the relevant distinction between groups that would and would not act like fandom in the analysis of moral vocabularies is what brings the members of the group into community.

Transformative media fandom is an identity anchored by praxis. The relevant praxis for fandom is the making of meaning, both in and as a group, via various modes of analysis,

creation, and exchange. I've argued from my data that this praxis correlates with a bias toward leftist politics because the praxis itself is structurally and culturally aligned with liberal and progressive philosophies. In some cases, these correlations are profound enough that being in fandom contributed to a shift in participants' political thinking and affiliation to the left. Fans consistently see their fandom and left-wing politics as interlocked aspects of their lives because of significant correlations in the content and the affect of their participation in each sphere. It is because of this preexisting sense of kinship or overlap between their fandom and politics that transformative media fans readily employ frameworks from fandom for moral expression in political talk. For my findings to be potentially predictive of other groups' patterns of moralization, therefore, that group likely would have to 1) have an identity based in praxis, which is to say culturally meaningful activity engaging with specific cultural resources, and 2) perceive a significant connection between their praxis and politics, allowing the appropriation of group-specific cultural resources into moral vocabularies for political talk.

Abstracting my conclusion in this way aligns with the fact that religious groups have been prominent in the history of political organization across the right/left divide as well as the site from which normative frameworks of contemporary moralization emerge. Religious group identity is based in the praxis of theological meaning-making and provides participants with a wide array of theological and experiential cultural resources. Historically and into the present day, there are political implications and alignments wrapped up in the teachings and identities of different denominations across religious America. Foremost of these today, of course, are the white evangelical Christians at the core of the contemporary right. That the historically new group identity of transformative media fandom functions in the same way as religiosity in providing frameworks ripe for appropriation into moralization suggests that group identities based in politically aligned praxis might be generative for moral expression in ways that other group identities are not. If this theory is true, it would be true on both side of the

right/left divide. However, the pattern of appropriating novel frameworks of moralization from group praxis may be more common on the left than the right because of the contemporary circumstances that deny or discourage the left's access to politically normative frameworks derived from religion. Further study would have to test both right- and left-leaning groups united by praxis that their participants view as politically aligned. Such groups might include gun clubs or Civil War reenactors on the right and farming collectives or mutual aid societies on the left.

The corollary cases—groups that are either not united by praxis or whose participants do not view the praxis as politically aligned—also should be studied to see if those groups' members do not appropriate their cultural resources for moralization. The first of these hypotheticals seems a foregone conclusion. Groups that do not have a praxis in common and are affiliated only by geography or a demographic commonality are, in the absence of shared activity with cultural significance, only loosely affiliated. It is through participation in praxis that members make the group's cultural resources referents with shared social meaning, which are therefore appropriable as a framework for moralization. What meaningful common frame of reference is there between members of, say, the same condo association, who neither have much else in common nor engage in activities specific to being in the same condo association? The manners of moral expression among the members of such a group are not likely to hold any pattern specific to the group. Rather, their moralization in political talk would probably follow the general trends of the American public.

The moralization patterns of the second hypothetical group, which is united by praxis but in which the participants do *not* perceive any political alignment, are more difficult to predict. On the one hand, it is possible to imagine a group of, for instance, 3D printing enthusiasts who do not see any relevant overlap between their activities and contemporary politics, and therefore do not draw on their group's cultural resources as frameworks for moral expression. On the other hand, because of the prevailing forces of capitalism in

American society today, any subcultural praxis of creation or consumption is invested with a value judgement of creation and consumption that is, at some level, unavoidably political. People who are interested in 3D printing might come to that activity because of a philosophy that values independent manufacture or the collaborative exchange of knowledge among makers. Alternately, those who first came to 3D printing as a hobby could develop such philosophies from the praxis of designing and creating objects themselves and using sites like Thingiverse, where makers can freely share digital model files and post their modifications and experiences with different makes for other community members' edification. Those philosophies might also shape their perception of issues in the political sphere like the right to repair, intellectual property rights, planned obsolescence, commercial monopoly, and waste consumption. Or the political potential of the making may be made evident in the objects themselves, as exemplified in the recently publicized case of the open-source 3D printing design for a pill bottle that mitigates a user's lack of manual dexterity that had been inspired by a TikTok video from an American athlete with Parkinson's to illustrate an everyday struggle that pharmaceutical companies fail to address (Johnson 2021, Jan 21). In any of these instances, 3D printing enthusiasts could come to see a relevant intersection of politics and their praxis, allowing a moral vocabulary to form among the group's members to talk about politics.

It is possible that a praxis of making, whether physically in manners like 3D printing and other craft or intellectually in manners like meta-analysis and creative writing in transformative media fandom, is a causal factor in relating group identity and praxis to politics. If this is true, the porous distinction between the praxis and politics of making together would be what allows the group's participants to see their cultural resources as appropriable frameworks for moral expression in political talk. At the very least, there seems to be a correlation between the praxis of making and politics. Adamson (2021) argues that craft and communities of makers have been intertwined with political mobilizations

throughout American history, tracing these intertwined histories from the artisans who made up the eighteenth-century Sons of Liberty to the knitters and crocheters who made pink pussy hats the symbol of anti-Trumpism at the 2017 Women's March. But if this relationship between praxis and politicization exists, the potential for inversion of left-wing political engagement that I have described in the context of transformative media fandom would have to be present for other praxis-based group identities as well. To return to the hypothetical of politically activated 3D printing enthusiasts, I would expect the demographics of the group reflecting the cost prohibition of owning a printer and suspect there could be an internal hierarchy valuing printers who code their own makes or service their own machines over those who rely on the skill of others. As much as 3D printing praxis could lead its participants to the left, these internal dynamics could equally trend toward or be exploited by libertarian philosophies and conservative politics of rugged self-reliance. These suppositions should be tested in future studies of moralization in political talk to see whether other groups of praxis behave like transformative media fandom in the appropriation of frameworks for moral expression.

The Left, Morality, and Study of Politics

To conclude this dissertation, I want to recall the questions that prompted this project and elaborate on the significance of my findings as answers to them. Foundationally, there is the question raised by the moral aspect ascribed in normative political discourses to the right/left divide in contemporary American politics: does the left have a moral mode of engagement with politics? And in searching for an answer to that first question, the social qualities necessary for a moral vocabulary along with the innate qualities of popular culture culminate in the leading question: can a left-wing expression of moral engagement be found in popular culture? This project has examined a sample of participants in transformative media fandom, a group habituated to analytic and creative engagement with popular cultural

texts, and answered: fans do use a moral vocabulary drawn from media texts and fandom experience, alongside vocabularies that use normatively religious frameworks and plain language, to describe, interpret, and make moral claims about political issues, circumstances, and engagement. This indicates that, like members of the American right, leftists consistently employ moral ideals and orientations to the world in order to develop and justify their policy positions.

These findings show that the commonplace understanding of morality in politics is flawed. The assumption that the right 'owns' morality reflects a rhetorical flattening of the concept of morality to the reactionary religiosity of white evangelical Christianity and the analytic ease of noting the right's demographic and oratorical emphasis on religious homogeneity compared to left's emphasis on diversity. To my knowledge, there has never been a rigorous study of the American left that observes an absence of moral engagement with politics. In fact, I know of no comparative study of moral engagement or expression in American political talk that supports the idea that the right is either singularly or more intensely moral in its approach to politics. Despite this lack of evidence, the stereotype persists even to the point of being a defining aspect of the political divide between right and left. My project is limited, but it is internally sound. I have no reason to believe that the respondents are political or moral outliers among American adults. They are morally engaged and expressive leftists, heretofore invisible only because of a public and scholarly failure to question the parameters of normative political discourses or seek data on moral engagement beyond them.

Not only do my findings contradict the assumed moral shortcomings of left-wing politics, but they show the costs of the prevailing understanding of morality in politics as religious, normatively Christian, and owned by the right. When political institutions and the news mediations of political information embrace instrumental reasoning because it is easy, there is a cost to political actors' sense of agency and trust in political processes. My

participants are passionately invested in political participation and outcomes for themselves and their communities, both morally and emotionally, and yet they are also cynical and apathetic about political institutions. What would they be able to accomplish if they could believe in the American political system? What would political participation look like if leftists – or indeed, all Americans – could believe that their investment in political decision-making would be matched by their representatives' resolve and integrity of process?

There is a cost to our theories of contemporary politics and their historical development. Scholarly and public understanding of political participation, division, and divestment is hamstrung by thinking that there is a partisan divide in political actors' modes of engagement. Demographic and survey data can map the polity at scale, but they do not allow for the nuances of expressions of moral engagement. This disproportionately impacts our understanding of the American left because of its demographic diversity and philosophical discomfort with universal claims, leaving the impression of moral muteness. Even with a small sample size of a niche subgroup of leftists, this project shows that future scholarly study of and political organizing on the left should not make assumptions about what moral engagement looks like and where it takes place that discounts non-religious frameworks of moral expression as invalid. But the reliance on instrumental reasoning probably also limits our understanding of the American right by tying together their presumed moral mode of engagement and reactionary positions on social issues like abortion and queer rights that are associated evangelical Christianity. What diversity of expression and moral matter might be uncovered by listening to political actors on the right describe their motives instead of relying on surveys of religious identification and observance?

Ultimately, there is a cost to society in thinking of morality as a mere rhetorical tool one side has successfully wielded and their opponents have failed to master. Morality and politics are both fundamentally about imagining the good life and seeking to build it. It should go without saying that the right and left have different concepts of the ideal society, but the

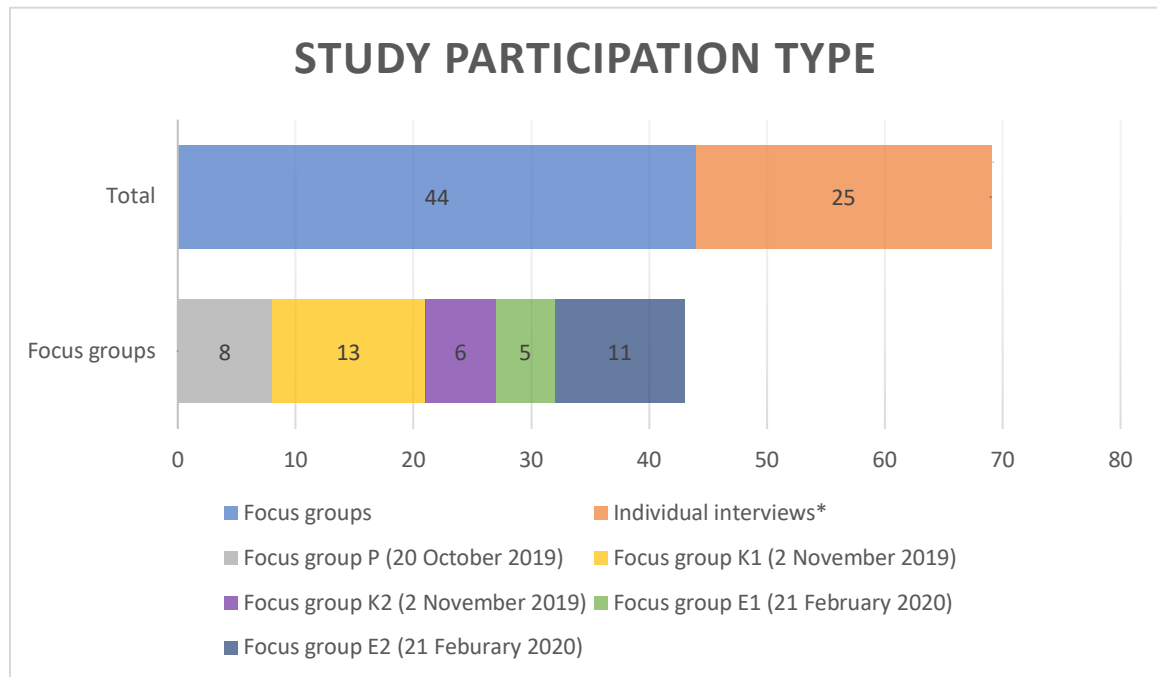
norms of political discourse shift focus to the measurable now, pushing the imagined someday to the fringe. Society becomes trapped in the loop of the achievement of measurable goals, of gaining and holding onto public offices so the map stays the right color and getting bills passed only for the sake of saying that you have done so when asking for donations and advertising your reelection campaign. But listening to individual political actors describe their motives, winning for its own sake is not why they identify with one faction over another or why they participate. Political difference should not be defined by presence versus absence of talking about moral engagement, but rather by the moral horizons orienting us to being in the world. The imagined someday should be understood as the core of difference and placed at the center of the study of politics.

Though deeply troubling, the current crises in American and global politics offer an opportunity to reevaluate. Alarm over creeping authoritarianism around the world has renewed public and scholarly interest in defining and critiquing the long-term goals and consequences of political movements. In the United States, the rise and persistence of Trumpism, culminating in the attempted coup of January 6, 2021, has led to the scholarly and public acknowledgment that free and democratic society itself is at stake in contemporary politics. In response, the left has been organizing for the explicit purposes of resisting right-wing attempts to rescind or disregard civil rights and advancing systemic social change in recognition of longstanding societal inequity. Progressive politics and revolutionary rhetoric are now in productive conflict with the staid instrumental reason and tepid liberalism of the late twentieth-century Democratic Party.

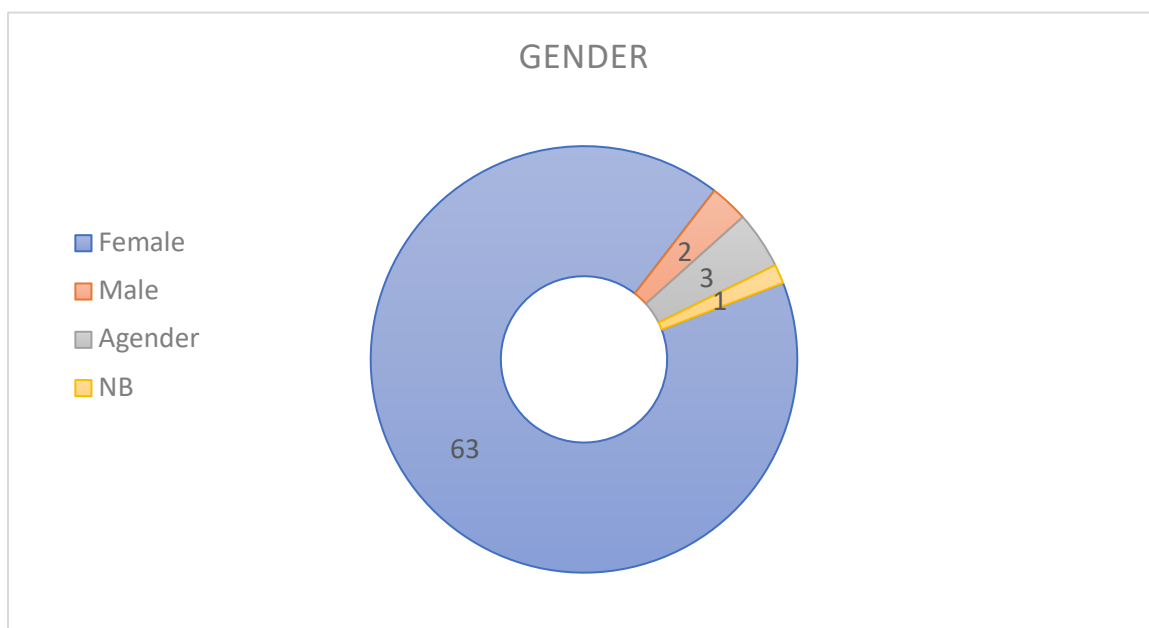
Now is the moment to think and inquire about what left-wing moral engagement and expression could look like beyond the narrow notions of normative political discourse. Already, scholars are calling attention to the potential and actual political uses of frameworks drawn from popular culture (Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, & Shresthova 2020; Duncombe 2019; Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013; Street, Inthorn, & Scott 2013; Iton 2008). In mainstream

political commentary, the illogic of conflating right-wing religiosity with morality while ignoring or discounting moral engagement on the left is beginning to be recognized (Butler 2021; Cep 2020, Jun 11). The non-religious emancipatory rhetoric and policy agendas of movements like Occupy, Time's Up, and Black Lives Matter have been properly credited as expressive of and motivated by a distinctly left-wing morality (Gabler 2018, Oct 4; Smarsh 2018, Aug 4). My hope is that this project has shown that the pieces are all here. All they need is to be put together.

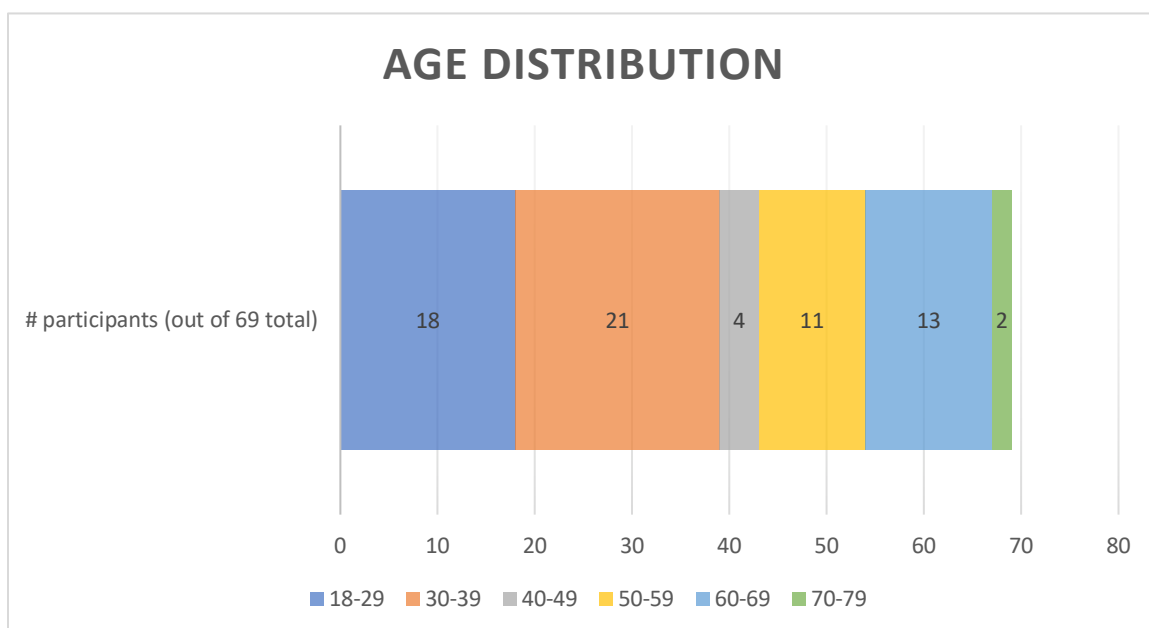
Appendix A: Figures from Demographic Survey Responses



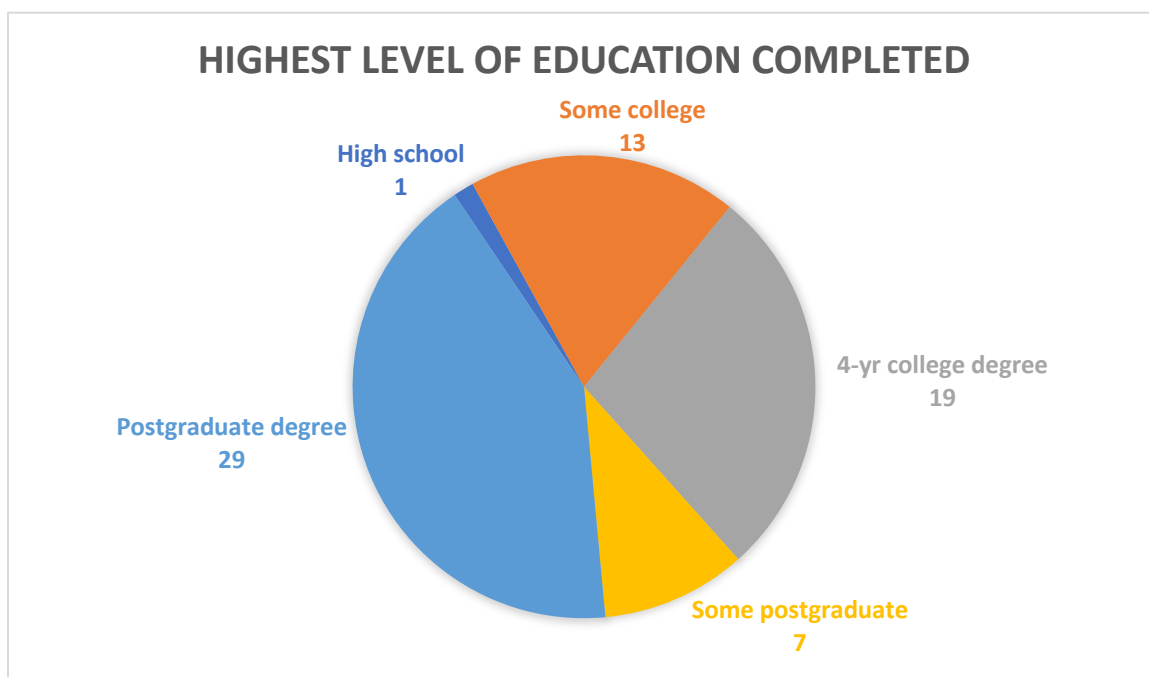
Graph 1. Study participation type. Most respondents participated in focus groups, which were held at fancons taking place in Washington, California, and Minnesota. Plans to add another fancon in a different region were forestalled by COVID-19. The individual interviews were conducted remotely via BlueJeans. *Two respondents were interviewed jointly for their convenience.



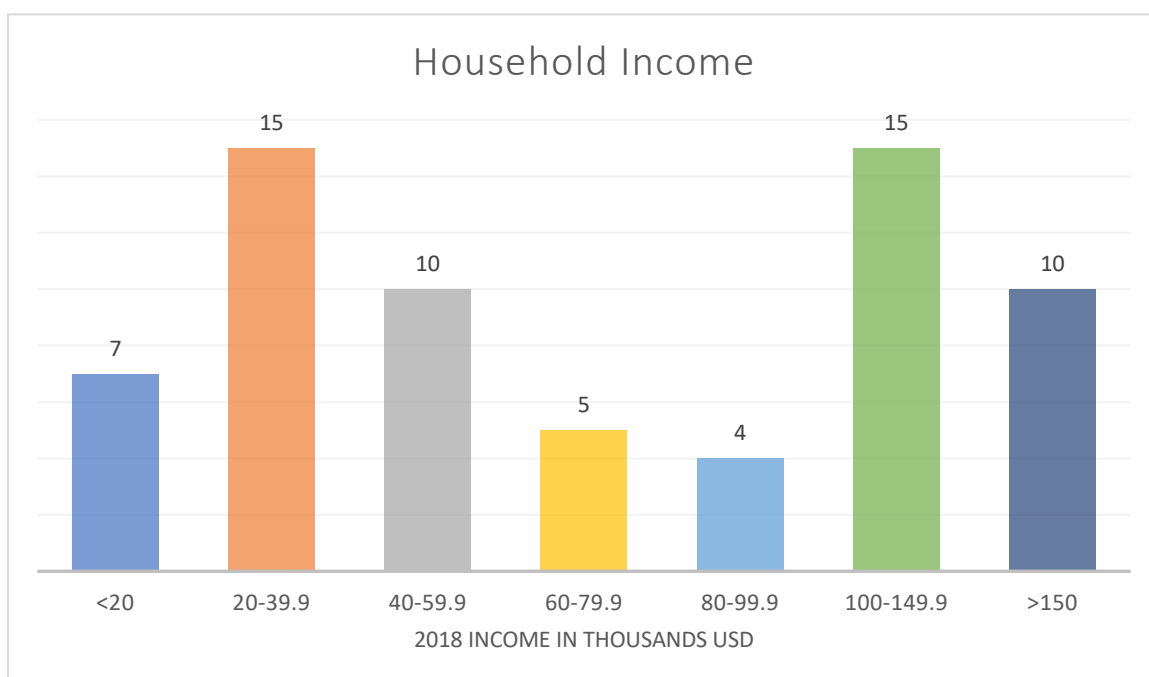
Graph 2. Gender. This sample is overwhelmingly female, which may reflect the larger population of transformative media fandom or more likely, bias in the spaces to which I personally have access. The agender and nonbinary categories for gender were supplied by participant elaboration on selection “Other.”



Graph 3. Age distribution. There is a notable range of age across the sample, with nearly as many participants aged 60+ as there are younger than 30. The youngest participant was 19 when surveyed and the eldest 73. The reason for the small number of participants in their 40s is unclear.



Graph 4. Education. This sample is highly educated compared to the national population according to 2019 census data, which shows only 36% of adults over 25 have a college degree or more education (U.S. Census Bureau 2020).



Graph 5. Household Income. The distribution of study participants skews toward incomes both lower and higher than typical compared to the national population. The median income of all US households in 2020 was \$67,521, and \$74,912 for non-Hispanic white households (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Three participants did not report their 2018 income.

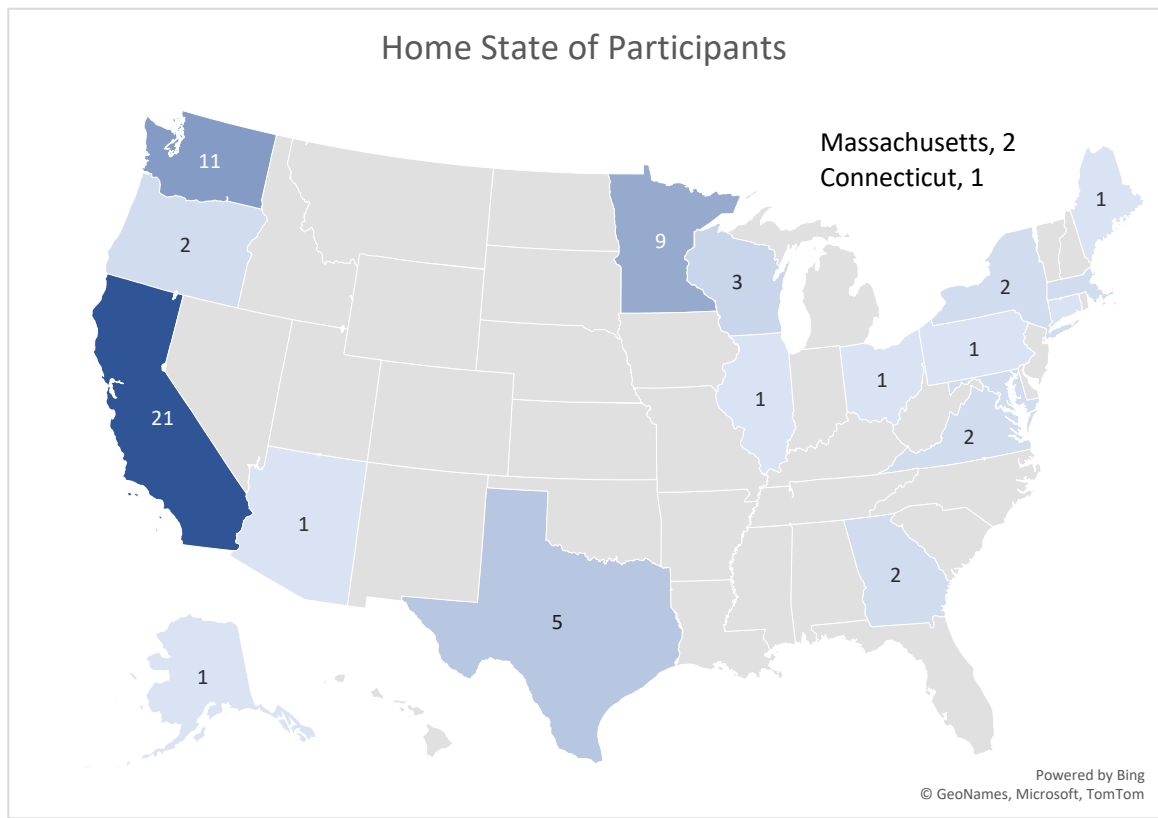
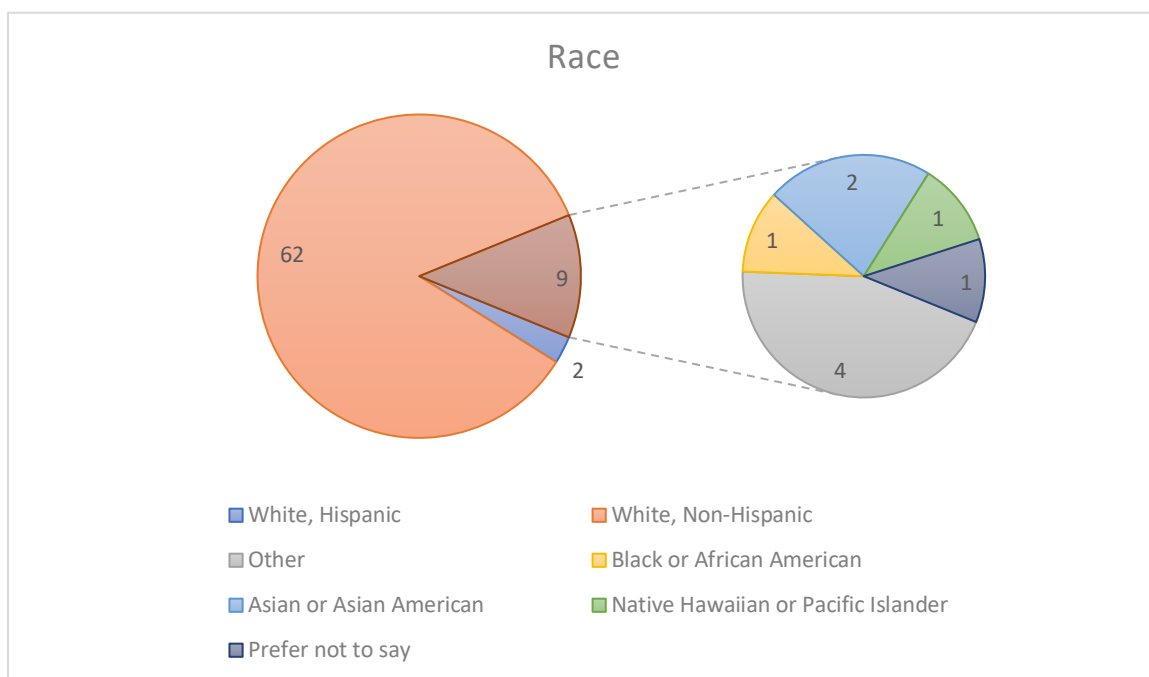


Chart 1. Regional distribution. The heavy skew toward the west coast is due to the locations of the fancons I was able to attend, two being in Washington, one in California, and one in Minnesota.



Graph 6. Race. Respondents were able to say whether they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin and then choose as many as apply from the Pew Research Center's race/ethnicity categories (see Appendix B). In addition to "White," four people chose "Other" and elaborated this to mean {Mutt; Jewish; Ashkenazi Jew; Caucasian/Middle Eastern}.

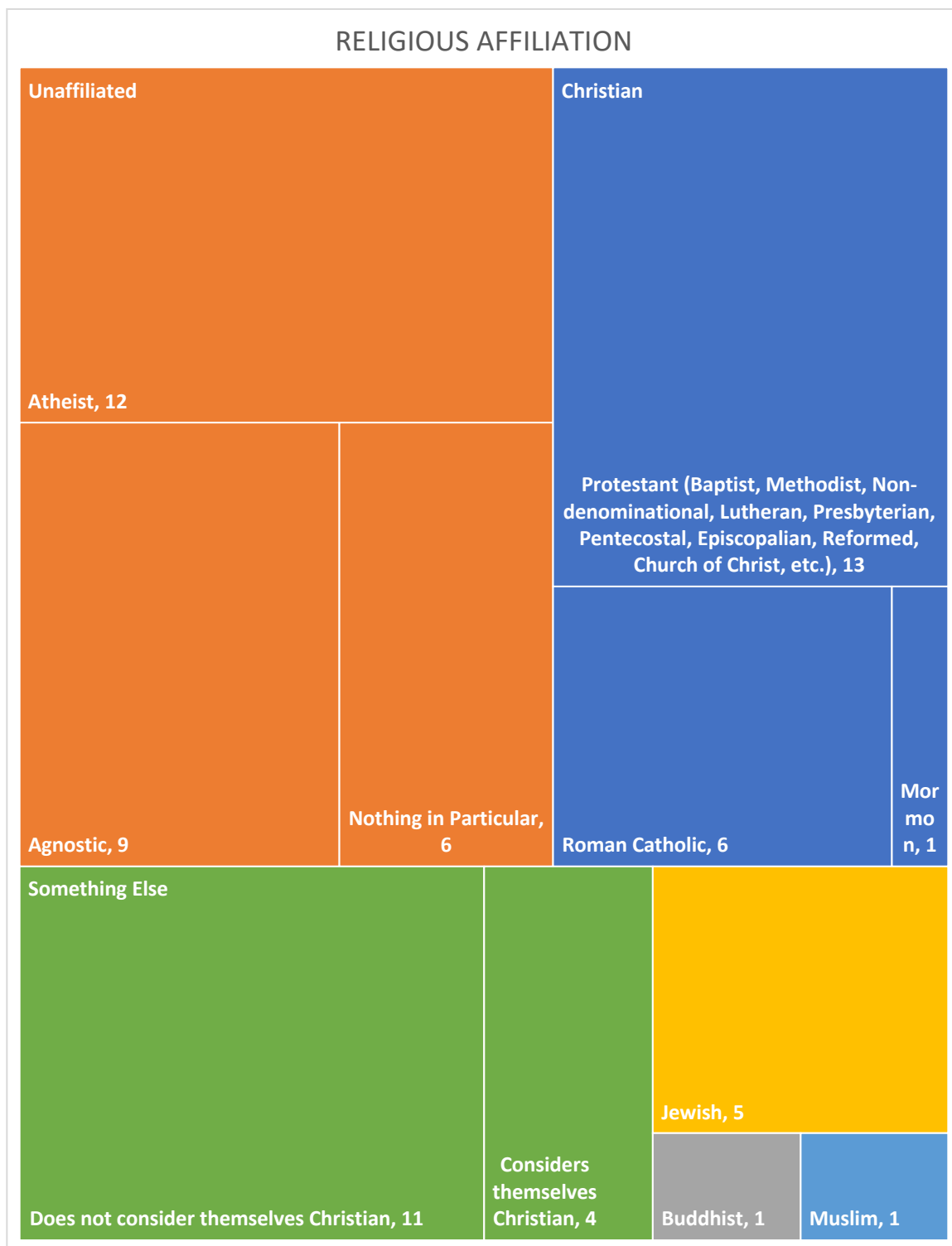
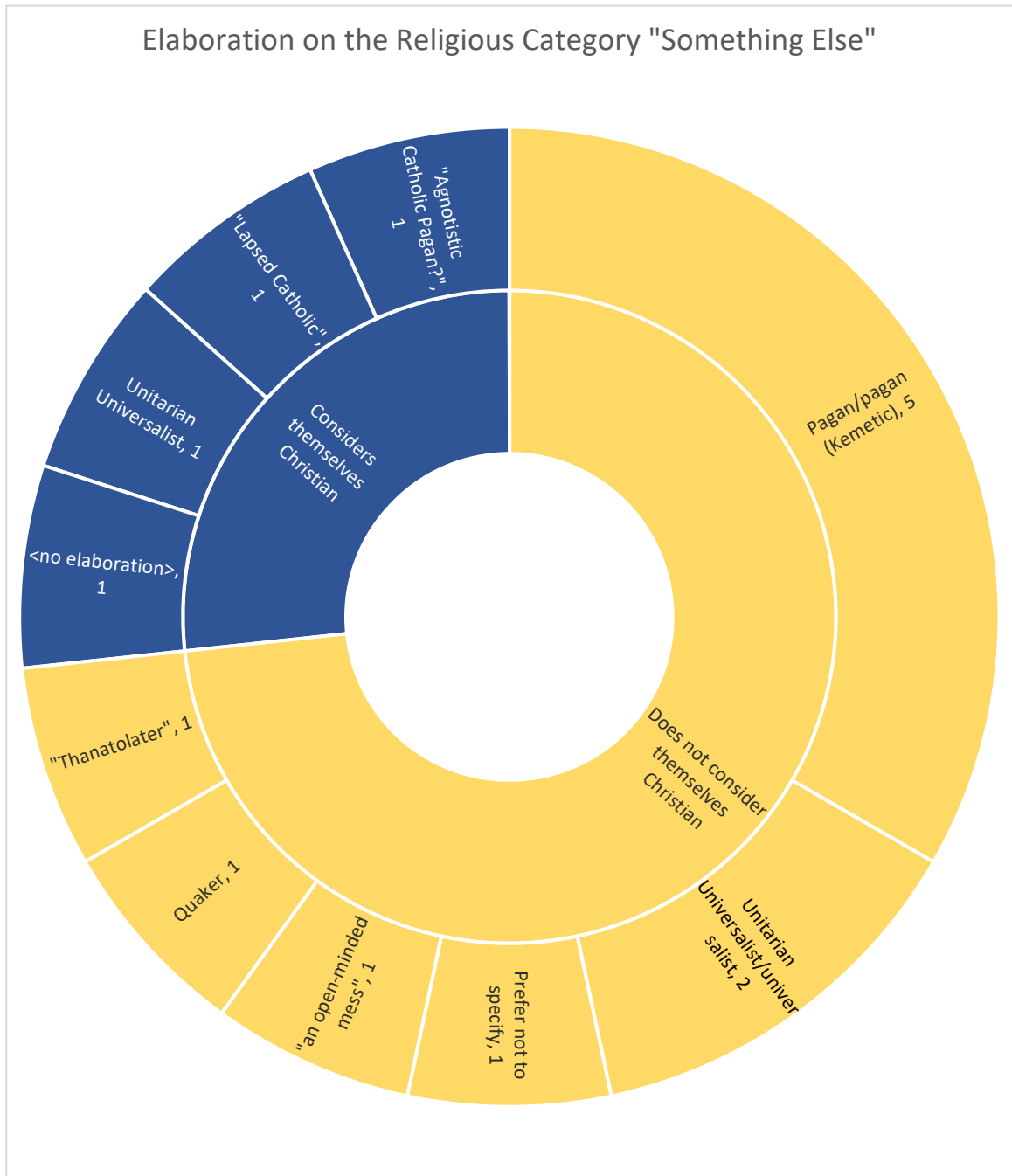
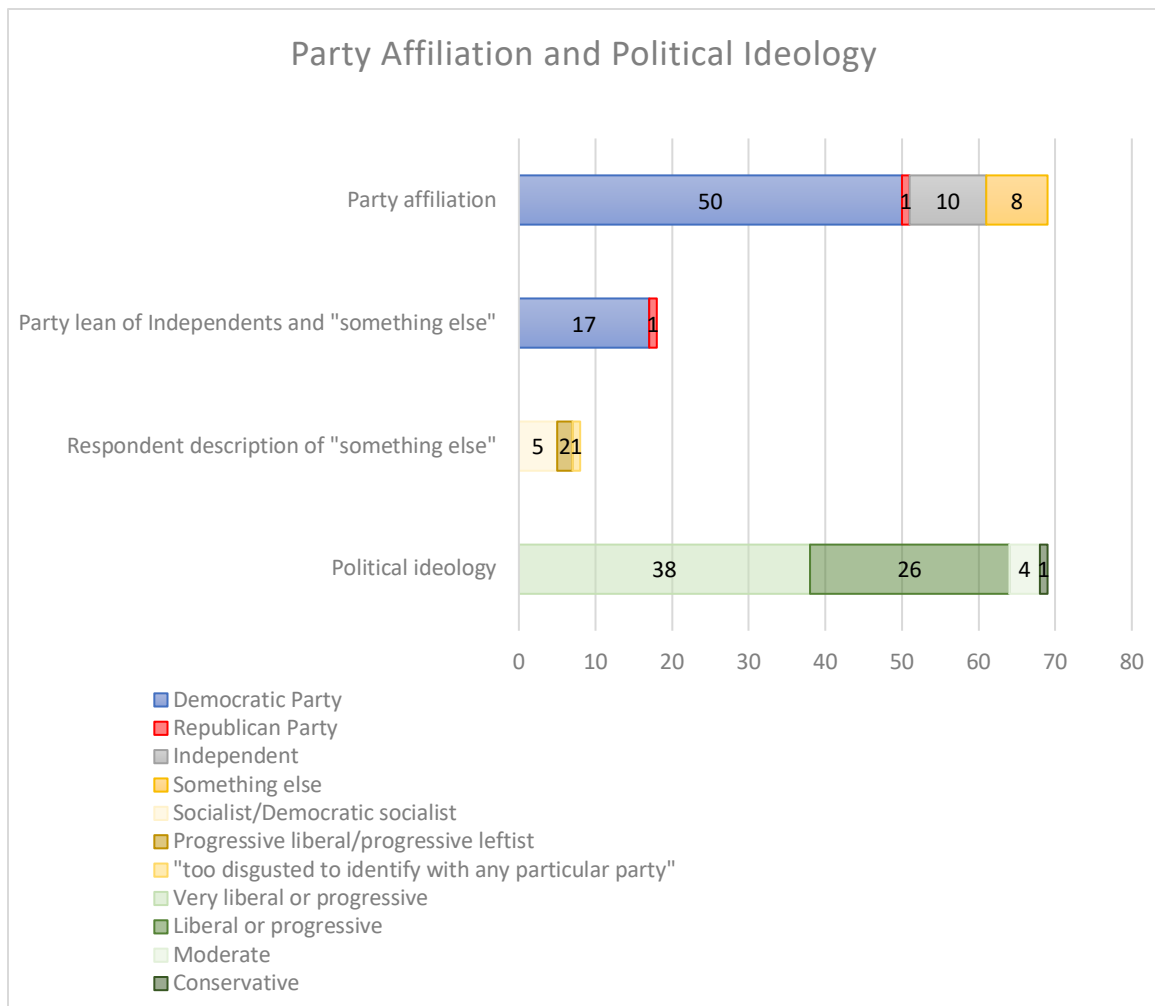


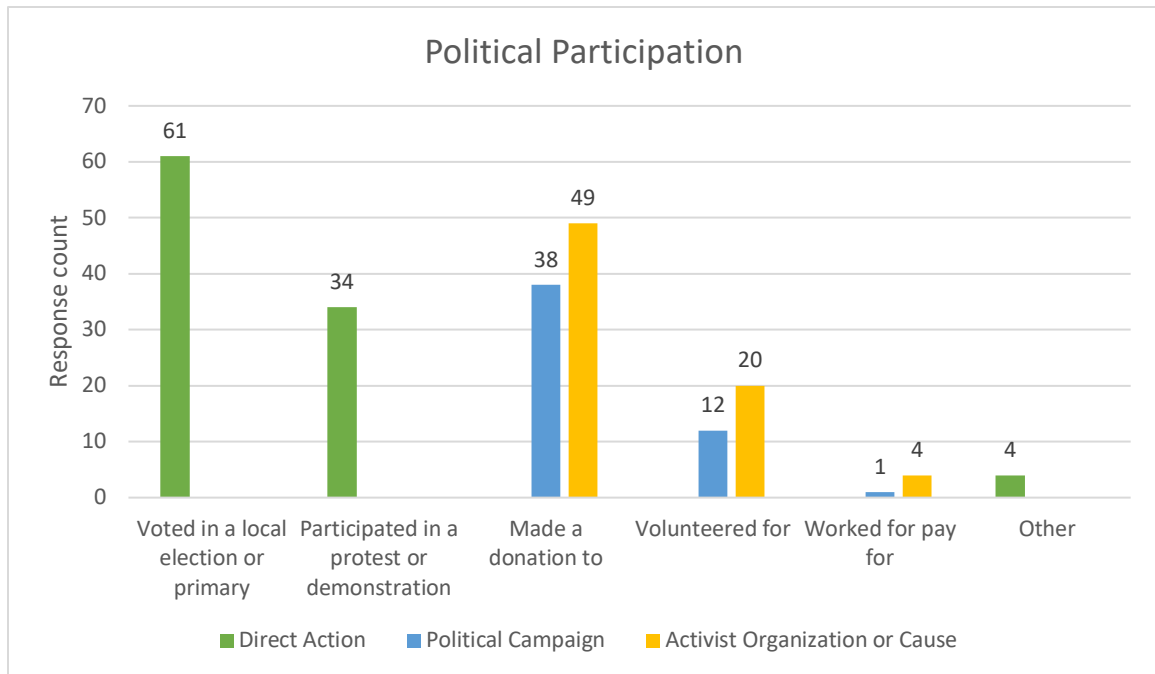
Chart 2. Religious affiliation. In line with expectations of the left, a plurality of respondents is religiously unaffiliated. Of everyone who identifies with an enumerated Christian denomination or as “Something Else” but considers themselves Christian, none consider themselves to be evangelical. See Graph 7 for elaboration on the “Something Else” category.



Graph 7. Elaboration on the religious category "Something Else". These respondent-generated labels are too granular to be compared to national demographic data, but they are instructive of how wide-ranging leftists' religious affiliations are, both compared to the increasingly homogeneous right and despite decreasing overall religiosity on the left.



Graph 8. Partisan identity and ideology. Along with the overwhelming leftist and liberal skew of the sample, note the high number of those who, when given the option, choose not to identify with the two major parties.



Graph 9. Political participation. Despite often feeling like they should do more, the sample reports a wide variety of political participation in the year before taking the survey. In addition to the categories above, all respondents report that they voted in the 2016 presidential and 2018 midterm elections, excepting two who were not eligible to vote in 2016 and one who was still not eligible in 2018.

Appendix B: Demographic Survey

This printout was generated by Qualtrics.

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 Thank you for your interest in the Media Fans and Politics project!

This survey will help determine if you meet the requirements for the project and provide demographic data. This data will be used only in aggregate.

At the end, you will be asked for an email address so I can coordinate your participation. Your email and any other identifying information will NOT be included in any published report. If you have questions or concerns about this project, please email Megan at genme@upenn.edu.

It should take about 6 minutes to complete this survey.

Page Break

Q2 Are you an American citizen?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you an American citizen? = No

Q3 Are you an adult, aged 18 or older?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you an adult, aged 18 or older? = No

Q4 Are you volunteering for a focus group or an individual interview?

☐ Focus group (1)

☐ Individual interview (2)

Page Break

Q5 All focus groups and interviews will be recorded for analysis purposes. Participants' names, images, and other identifying information will NOT be included in any published reports.

Will you sign a consent form to allow your focus group or interview to be recorded?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If All focus groups and interviews will be recorded for analysis purposes. Participants' names, imag... = No

Q6 What is your gender?

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Other (3) _____

Page Break

Q7 What is your age?

▼ 18 (1) ... 90 (73)

Page Break

Q8 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- ☐ High school incomplete or less (1)
- ☐ High school graduate or GED (includes technical/vocational training that doesn't count toward college credit) (2)
- ☐ Some college (includes some community college or associate's degree) (3)
- ☐ Four year college degree/bachelor's degree (4)
- ☐ Some postgraduate or professional schooling, no postgraduate degree (5)
- ☐ Postgraduate or professional degree (includes master's, doctorate, medical, or law degree) (6)

Page Break

Q9 Last year, that is in 2018, what was your total family income from all sources before taxes?

- ☐ Less than \$10,000 (1)
- ☐ \$10,000 - \$19,999 (2)
- ☐ \$20,000 - \$29,999 (3)
- ☐ \$30,000 - \$39,999 (4)
- ☐ \$40,000 - \$49,999 (5)
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$59,999 (6)
- ☐ \$60,000 - \$69,999 (7)
- ☐ \$70,000 - \$79,999 (8)
- ☐ \$80,000 - \$89,999 (9)
- ☐ \$90,000 - \$99,999 (10)
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$149,999 (11)
- ☐ More than \$150,000 (12)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (13)

Page Break

Q10 Are you or your spouse a member of a labor union?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Not sure (3)

Page Break

Q11 What is your zip code?

Q12 Do you own or rent your home?

☐ Own (1)

☐ Rent (2)

Page Break

Q13 How many people, including yourself, live in your household?

Display This Question:

If If How many people, including yourself, live in your household? Text Response Is Greater Than 1

Q14 How many, including yourself, are adults, age 18 or older?

Page Break

Q15 Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (3)
-

Q16 Which of the following describes your race? Select as many as apply.

- ☐ White (1)
- ☐ Black or African American (2)
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- ☐ Asian or Asian American (4)
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- ☐ Other (6) _____
-

Page Break

Q17 What is your present religion, if any?

- ☐ Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Non-denominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Reformed, Church of Christ, etc.) (1)
- ☐ Roman Catholic (2)
- ☐ Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or LDS) (3)
- ☐ Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other Orthodox church) (4)
- ☐ Jewish (5)
- ☐ Muslim (6)
- ☐ Buddhist (7)
- ☐ Hindu (8)
- ☐ Atheist (9)
- ☐ Agnostic (10)
- ☐ Something else (11) _____
- ☐ Nothing in particular (12)

Display This Question:

If What is your present religion, if any? = Something else

Q18 Do you think of yourself as a Christian or not?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
-

Display This Question:

If What is your present religion, if any? = Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Non-denominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Reformed, Church of Christ, etc.)

Or What is your present religion, if any? = Roman Catholic

Or What is your present religion, if any? = Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or LDS)

Or What is your present religion, if any? = Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other Orthodox church)

Or Do you think of yourself as a Christian or not? = Yes

Q19 Would you describe yourself as born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Page Break

Q20 Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?

☐ More than once a week (1)

☐ Once a week (2)

☐ Once or twice a month (3)

☐ A few times a year (4)

☐ Seldom (5)

☐ Never (6)

Page Break

Q21 Which of these statements best describes you?

- ☐ I am ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN that I am registered to vote at my current address (1)
- ☐ I am PROBABLY registered, but there is a chance my registration has lapsed (2)
- ☐ I am NOT registered to vote at my current address (3)

Page Break

Q22 In politics today, do you consider yourself a

- ☐ Republican (1)
- ☐ Democrat (2)
- ☐ Independent (3)
- ☐ Something else (4) _____

Display This Question:

If In politics today, do you consider yourself a = Something else

Or In politics today, do you consider yourself a = Independent

Q23 As of today, do you lean more to

- ☐ The Republican Party (1)
 - ☐ The Democratic Party (2)
-

Q24 In general, would you describe your political views as

- ☐ Very conservative (1)
- ☐ Conservative (2)
- ☐ Moderate (3)
- ☐ Liberal or progressive (4)
- ☐ Very liberal or progressive (5)

Page Break

Q25 Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential election?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential election? = No

Q26 Were you eligible and registered to vote in 2016?

- ☐ Yes, I was eligible AND registered (1)
- ☐ I was eligible but NOT registered (2)
- ☐ No, I was not eligible to vote in 2016 (3)

Page Break

Q27 Did you vote in the 2018 Midterm elections?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
-

Display This Question:

If Did you vote in the 2018 Midterm elections? = No

Q28 Were you eligible and registered to vote in 2018?

- ☐ Yes, I was eligible AND registered (1)
- ☐ I was eligible but NOT registered (2)
- ☐ No, I was not eligible to vote in 2018 (3)

Page Break

Q29 In the year previous to taking this survey, have you participated in politics in the following ways? Select as many as apply.

- ☐ Voted in a local election or primary (1)
- ☐ Participated in a demonstration or protest (2)
- ☐ Donated to a political campaign (3)
- ☐ Volunteered with a political campaign (4)
- ☐ Worked for pay for a political campaign (5)
- ☐ Donated to an activist organization or cause (6)
- ☐ Volunteered with an activist organization or for an activist cause (7)
- ☐ Worked for pay for an activist organization (8)
- ☐ Other (9) _____
- ☐ None of the above (10)

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 5

Display This Question:

If Are you volunteering for a focus group or an individual interview? = Focus group

Q30 Thank you for volunteering for a focus group! For coordination purposes, please provide your email address and the name of the convention you're attending.

☐ Email address (1) _____

☐ Convention name (2) _____

Display This Question:

If Are you volunteering for a focus group or an individual interview? = Individual interview

Q31 How did you hear about this project?

☐ Fan convention (1)

☐ Post on social media site (2) _____

☐ Fan site (3) _____

☐ Newsletter (4) _____

☐ Podcast (5) _____

☐ From another fan (6)

☐ Other (7) _____

Display This Question:

If Are you volunteering for a focus group or an individual interview? = Individual interview

Q32 Thank you for volunteering for an individual interview! For scheduling purposes, please provide your email address.

End of Block: Block 5

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