Why liberals are winning the cultural war

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Titel
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Tid

Plats
Rum 357, Frescati Hagväg 14, plan 3.

Ansvarig avdelning
Biologisk psykologi.

Presentation/abstract
The culture war refers to the struggle between conservative and liberal values. In the US this struggle has focused on a set of moral issues surrounding sexuality, religion, race, gender and guns. Surveys show a dramatic movement on certain issues (e.g., gay rights), whereas public opinion has barely moved at all on other issues (e.g., abortion rights). If issue positions are categorized as liberal vs. conservative, we can see that the majority of the movement in public opinion has been toward the liberal positions.

But why are the liberals winning the cultural war? And why does public opinion move more on some issues than on others? Here we show that the rate at which a position is gaining in the polls, over the long term, is related to the arguments that support the position. Specifically, those positions that are more strongly supported by arguments relying on harm and fairness considerations tend to gain in the polls. The reason, we argue, is that harm-and-fairness arguments influence both liberals and conservatives, whereas arguments based on other moral foundations tend to influence only conservatives.

As predicted by this theory – but contrary to intuitions about ongoing political polarization – we demonstrate that opinions trend in the same direction among both liberals and conservatives and that liberals are leading the trend. Public opinion is moving away from conservatives because liberals’ refusal to be influenced by certain kinds of arguments allows them to move it in their direction and thereby win the culture war.