



Memorandum

To: Interested Parties

From: Robert P. Jones, Ph.D.
Center for American Values in Public Life
People for the American Way Foundation

Re: Common Good and Golden Rule

Date: October 16, 2006

Two Moral Frames for Progressives: The Common Good and the Golden Rule

The American Values Survey examined public perceptions of two moral frameworks, the Golden Rule and the Common Good, and tested their relative effectiveness against specific public policy issues. Both of these concepts have religious roots: the Golden Rule is more commonly associated with Protestant Christianity and the Common Good has its roots in Catholic Social Teaching. But both are also widely disseminated in American culture and in American civil religion.

Despite these differences, each framework engendered overwhelmingly positive and remarkably similar responses from the majority of Americans. After hearing brief descriptions of the Common Good¹ and Golden Rule², respondents were asked whether they would be more or less likely to support a candidate who believed in these principles as a guide to policy. Most Americans said that they would be more likely or much more likely to support a political candidate who believed in the Common Good (87%) or the Golden Rule (89%); slightly less than a third said they would be *much* more likely to support candidates who drew on these concepts when making policy decisions.

<i>Would you be more or less likely to support a candidate who believed in the Golden Rule/Common Good?</i>		
	Common Good	Golden Rule
Much more likely	29	30
More likely	58	59
Less Likely	9	9
Much less likely	4	2
Total	100	100

Table 1. Support for Candidate Following the Common Good or the Golden Rule

¹ "I believe we must work for the common good. The common good means putting public needs above the privileges of the few, doing more to aid the poor and disadvantaged, and treating people with respect and dignity."

² "I believe in the Golden Rule: that we should treat others the way we ourselves would like to be treated. If we followed this simple principle, government would be there for people in need and work equally for everyone, not just the privileged few."

While there are few differences among various religious traditions, religious traditionalists remain somewhat more supportive of the Golden Rule than Common Good (83% to 76%) and secular Americans are more supportive of the Common Good than the Golden Rule (84% to 73%).

Application of the Golden Rule and the Common Good

In order to test whether respondents approved of these principles as a guide to government and policy, we next asked them whether they thought public officials guided by the Golden Rule or the Common Good would be inclined to advocate policies supporting legal protections for homosexual couples, immigration, accessible health-care and education, fair taxation and fighting poverty. Respondents rated on a scale of 1 to 5 how convincing they found each statement, with a 1 being not at all convincing and a 5 being very convincing.

<i>If public officials were guided by the Common Good...</i>	Total	African American	Hispanic	White Evangelical	Catholic	Secular
Gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships would have the same legal protections as married heterosexual couples	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.1	3.0	3.4
Immigrants who are working hard to build better lives for their families would have a chance at citizenship and the American dream.	3.6	3.7	4.0	3.5	3.5	3.5
They would enact policies that benefit everyone like access to affordable health care and good public schools	4.1	4.3	4.1	3.9	4.1	4.1
They would focus more on tax fairness for families and less on giving tax breaks to people who are already wealthy.	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.5	4.0
They would help lift families out of poverty.	3.9	4.2	4.0	3.7	3.9	4.0
<i>Issue Totals</i>	<i>3.62</i>	<i>3.77</i>	<i>3.81</i>	<i>3.37</i>	<i>3.59</i>	<i>3.78</i>

<i>If public officials were guided by the Golden Rule...</i>	Total	African American	Hispanic	White Evangelical	Catholic	Secular
Gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships would have the same legal protections as married heterosexual couples	2.9	2.8	3.0	2.4	3.0	3.8
Immigrants who are working hard to build better lives for their families would have a chance at citizenship and the American dream.	3.6	3.7	4.0	3.3	3.4	3.6
They would enact policies that benefit everyone like access to affordable health care and good public schools	4.1	4.3	4.1	3.9	3.9	4.1
They would focus more on tax fairness for families and less on giving tax breaks to people who are already wealthy.	3.8	4.0	3.5	3.8	3.7	3.9
They would help lift families out of poverty.	4.0	4.2	4.0	3.9	3.9	3.8
<i>Issue Totals</i>	<i>3.67</i>	<i>3.79</i>	<i>3.73</i>	<i>3.47</i>	<i>3.61</i>	<i>3.81</i>

Table 2. Support for Specific Policies Framed by the Common Good or the Golden Rule

Overall there were strikingly similar levels of agreement on the Common Good and the Golden Rule as convincing moral frameworks across most political issues—in some cases the average scores differ by just one-hundredth of a point.

Neither framework resonated strongly with respondents on the issue of gay rights. The average response on this issue was less than 3, meaning that more Americans found them unconvincing. However, the Golden Rule did seem to offer some advantages on this issue than the Common Good, scoring higher overall and particularly among secular Americans.

On the issue of immigration neither framework appears to have much of an advantage. Among secular Americans, the Golden Rule has a slightly stronger appeal. The Common Good frame is stronger for Evangelicals and Catholics on this issue.

On immigration, Hispanics score both the Golden Rule and Common Good higher than do most other groups and the overall population, but neither framework has an edge. The same could be said for African Americans on the issue of access to affordable health care and education. While African Americans score both frameworks higher overall on this issue than the public, there are negligible differences between them.

Doubts about the Common Good or the Golden Rule as a Guide for Government

Although a majority of voters would be more inclined to support candidates who professed to follow the Golden Rule and uphold the Common Good, Americans retain some doubts about whether either framework could be realized as a guide for government. The most frequently cited doubt about the Golden Rule was that it was simply not realistic; 28% of Americans agreed with this statement. Younger Americans were even more likely (34%) to believe that the Golden Rule was not realistic when applied to public policy and government; only 22% of those Americans older than 60 cited this reason.

Many Americans also expressed doubts about the Common Good as a guide for government. A quarter of Americans believed that society is too diverse for there to be a single Common Good. This view was especially pronounced among younger Americans (18 – 29), 38% of whom cited this concern. A large number of African Americans also expressed doubts about the Common Good albeit for a different reason. A third of African Americans felt that the policy predicated on the principle of the Common Good would ignore the needs of minorities and the disadvantaged. Interestingly, less than half as many Hispanics voiced this concern.

Doubts about the Golden Rule	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
It would lead to more tax and spend policies	11	12	9	9
It's too unrealistic	28	29	25	22
It's too religious	9	7	5	17
The Golden Rule only applies to personal relationships not government	15	16	13	20
None of the Above	32	32	39	22
Refused/DK	5	5	9	10

Table 3. Potential Doubts about the Golden Rule as a Guide for Government

Doubts about the Common Good	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
It would lead to more tax and spend policies	9	11	8	11
It's too unrealistic	14	15	8	21
It ignores the needs of minorities and the disadvantaged	17	12	33	15
Our society is too diverse for their to be one common good	25	24	27	18
None of the above	29	31	20	30
Refused/DK	6	7	4	5

Table 4. Potential Doubts about the Common Good as a Guide for Government

Conclusions

- The themes of the Common Good and the Golden Rule provide deeply-rooted moral frameworks that both support progressive policies and resonate with the vast majority of the American public.
- The Golden Rule has a better reach among Religious Traditionalists and the Common Good has a better reach among Religious Modernists and Secular Americans.
- When tested across issue domains, these frames performed strongly and in similar ways, with the Golden Rule slightly out-performing the Common Good overall. Among Hispanics, the Common Good performed more strongly than the Golden Rule, while among Evangelicals, the Golden Rule slightly outperformed the Common Good.
- The most frequently mentioned doubts about the application of the Common Good were that this theme does not adequately express diversity and the interests of minorities, and the most frequently cited doubt about the Golden Rule was that the concept was too unrealistic as a guide to policy.

Contact Information:

Robert P. Jones, Ph.D., Director and Senior Fellow
 Dan Cox, Policy and Values Research Associate
 Center for American Values in Public Life
 People for the American Way Foundation
 2000 M Street NW, Suite 400
 Washington, DC 20036
 202-467-4999

Note: The full survey report and questionnaire with top line results can be found on our website at www.centerforamericanvalues.org.