



# Revisiting Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development in Contemporary Society

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## ABSTRACT

Modern democracies face mounting challenges of political polarization, institutional distrust, and rising authoritarianism. This perspective argues that a significant portion of this dysfunction traces to the moral-cognitive development of citizens themselves. Applying Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory and decades of empirical research using the Defining Issues Test (DIT), the research suggests that most adults reason at conventional levels, prioritizing group loyalty and deference to authority over principled evaluation. This developmental limitation helps explain rising political polarization, susceptibility to authoritarian appeals, and the erosion of democratic norms across modern societies. Education emerges as the strongest predictor of post-conventional development, with implications for civic education and higher education access. Addressing democratic fragmentation therefore requires consideration not only to institutional design and policy, but also to the moral-cognitive capacities that citizens bring to democratic life.

**KEYWORDS:** Kohlberg moral development, Post-conventional reasoning, Defining Issues Test, Political polarization, Democratic erosion, Moral judgment development, Authoritarian susceptibility, Modern society, Contemporary society, Democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern democratic societies across the world are facing a growing challenge, social fragmentation, and the erosion of democratic norms. Political polarization has increased across the globe. Public trust in institutions is eroding, and even foundational democratic expectations, such as respecting electoral outcomes and factual truth, have weakened. Political disagreement has evolved from viewing opponents as merely mistaken to perceiving them as fundamental threats to one's existence. Observers warn that extreme partisan sectarianism can destabilize or even "destroy" democracies.<sup>1</sup> Explanations for this growing problem typically argue that structural factors such as social media algorithms, economic inequality, geographic sorting, or declining institutions are responsible. While such explanations are not without merit, they ignore a more fundamental factor: the moral-cognitive development of citizens themselves.

This perspective advances a different premise. Drawing on Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development and five decades of empirical research, we suggest that a substantial proportion of contemporary social dysfunction can be traced to

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the failure of most adults to progress beyond conventional moral reasoning. When many citizens in a democracy approach moral and political questions primarily through conformity to group norms, deference to authority, and preservation of the existing social order, the outcomes are predictable. As a result, populations tend toward tribalism, susceptibility to authoritarianism, and an inability to address ethical challenges or bigger social issues that extend beyond group boundaries.

This argument is not simply theoretical. Decades of theory and research using standardized instruments, including James Rest's Defining Issues Test and its successor the DIT-2, offer solid data on

how moral reasoning stages are spread across adult populations. The findings are sobering. While Kohlberg himself originally suggested *post-conventional reasoning as uncommon in adult populations, modern scholars suggest only* that between ten and forty percent of people reach this advanced level of moral reasoning.<sup>2,3</sup> This raises important concerns about the sustainability of modern democracies. Democratic citizenship demands post-conventional reasoning, but most citizens rely on conventional and even pre-conventional thinking that works against genuine democratic deliberation. This raises a troubling question: Can democracies continue to function well when so few citizens reason at the highest moral level?

## Stages of Moral Development



**Figure 1.** Overview of Kohlberg's Moral Development Stages

### BACKGROUND

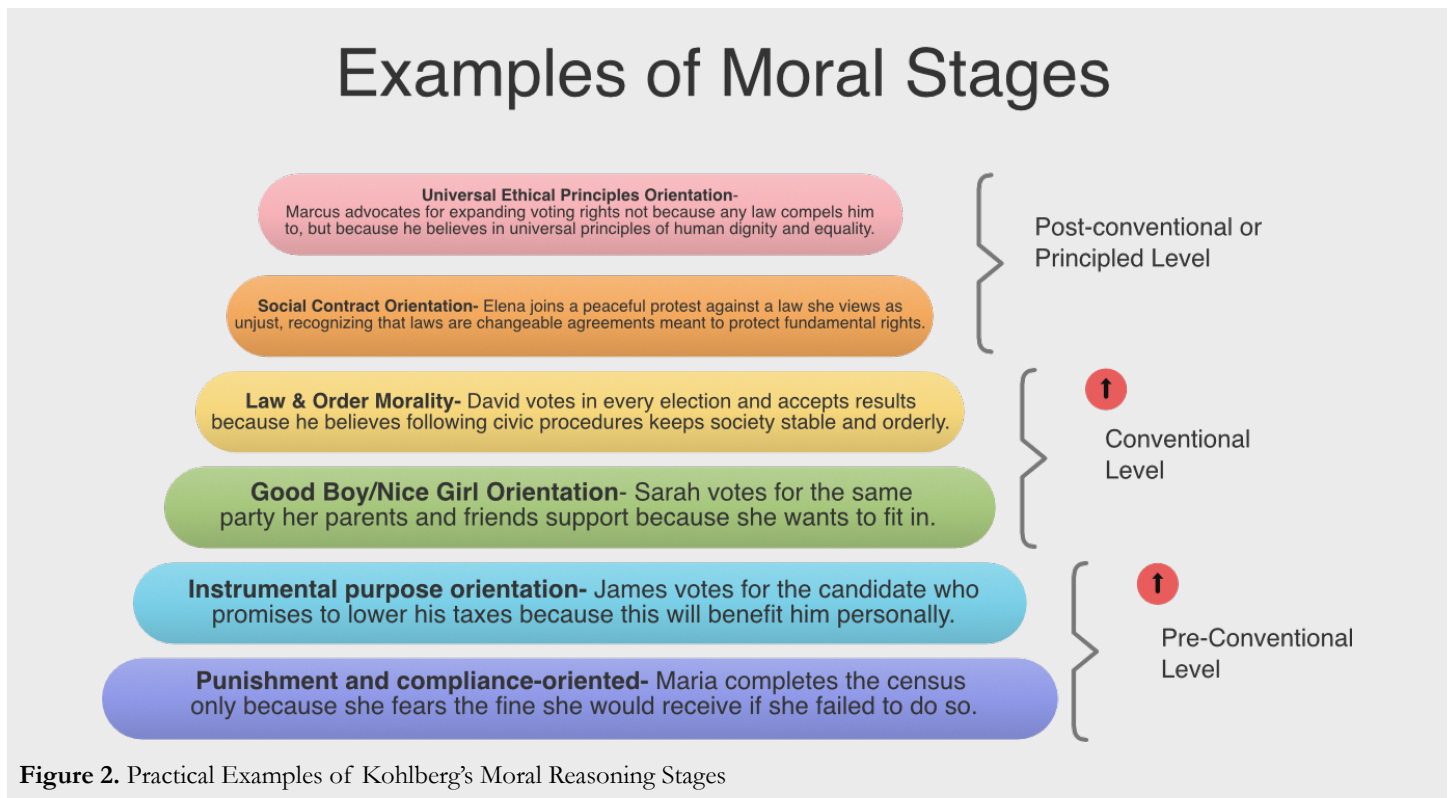
Drawing on theoretical foundations laid by Piaget, Mead, and Baldwin, Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory focuses on moral reasoning. This theory which has been refined over subsequent decades, models that moral judgment develops through a fixed sequence of stages. These stages are organized into three levels, with each level having two stages. The pre-conventional level begins with Stage 1, characterized by obedience to authority motivated by fear of punishment, and is followed by Stage 2, characterized by instrumental exchange and satisfaction of individual needs. The conventional level includes Stage 3, defined by conformity to interpersonal expectations and the desire for approval, and Stage 4, which is characterized by orientation toward maintaining social order, respecting authority, and doing one's duty within established systems. The post-conventional level, which includes Stages 5 and 6, represents a significant and elevated shift in moral reasoning. At Stage 5, individuals recognize that laws and social systems are social contracts established for mutual benefit, that these contracts can be legitimately modified through democratic processes, and that certain

fundamental rights take precedence over particular laws. Stage 6, which Kohlberg himself acknowledged was more theoretical ideal than empirical reality, involves reasoning from self-chosen universal ethical principles such as justice, human dignity, and equality.<sup>2,4</sup> It represents the apex of moral reasoning.

The important distinction between conventional and post-conventional reasoning is the source of moral authority, where people find their moral compass. Those reasoning at the conventional level look to external sources for guidance, drawing on the expectations of respected others, institutional demands, or the responsibilities that come with their social roles. However, post-conventional thinkers, by contrast, have developed their own sense of moral principles that let them step back and question social norms. This means they can see when a law serves injustice rather than justice, when people in positions of authority overstep what their power legitimately allows, or when loyalty to their group would require them to violate deeper ethical commitments. This distinction has significant implications for civic engagement. Democracy depends on citizens who can weigh different policy proposals on their actual merits rather than simply

following what party leaders tell them. It needs citizens who can recognize when groups outside their own have legitimate complaints, who can accept that political opposition plays a valid role, and who can change their minds when presented with solid evidence

and reasoning. These abilities reflect post-conventional thinking. Conventional reasoning works differently. It puts group loyalty first, treats established authorities as the final word, and defends existing arrangements even when they perpetuate injustice.



## RESEARCH ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF MORAL REASONING

If post-conventional reasoning is important for healthy democracies, decades of literature on the actual distribution of moral reasoning stages presents cause for concern. Research building on Kohlberg's theory provides empirical evidence on the actual distribution of moral reasoning stages. While comprehensive longitudinal research is limited, the largest longitudinal study of moral development, conducted by Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, and Lieberman provides important insight into the rarity of post-conventional moral reasoning. This study, using Kohlberg's original interview methodology, followed participants for twenty years. By age twenty-six, roughly fifteen percent of participants had reached post-conventional levels. The majority remained at Stage 4, oriented toward maintaining social order and respecting established authority.<sup>5</sup> Although this foundational study reveals troubling deficiencies in post-conventional moral development, its exclusive focus on male participants represents a significant limitation that excludes half the population and potentially skews the results. More recent research using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) confirms this pattern. DIT was developed as a more efficient alternative to Kohlberg's labor-intensive interview method and has been administered to hundreds of thousands of participants over multiple decades and across numerous countries. The DIT yields a P-score representing the percentage of moral reasoning attributable to post-conventional

(principled) considerations. Research consistently shows that education level is the strongest predictor of P-scores, accounting for thirty to fifty percent of variance.<sup>6</sup>

Rest's original US based study using the DIT suggested between twenty and sixty-three percent of students achieve post-conventional levels, increasing based on education level.<sup>6</sup> In his later work, the amount of post-conventional levels was found to be similar, between about nineteen percent to sixty-five percent also increasing based on education level. This study suggested that about forty percent of adults overall achieve some level of post-conventional morality.<sup>7</sup> Studies of professionals in the 1990's also found adult post-conventional levels in the US to hover around forty percent.<sup>8</sup> However, more recent research based on over 73,000 participants suggests that post-conventional moral reasoning levels in the general population range from twenty-nine percent among vocational/technical respondents to forty-two percent among professional-degree holders, with females scoring higher than males across all education levels and age groups.<sup>9</sup> These levels are significantly higher than originally suggested by Kohlberg but it's important to note that the DIT does not distinguish between Stage 5 and 6 levels of attainment.

However, international studies show far more concerning trends. A study in 2005 of Mexican students found that between twenty-one and twenty-eight percent reach post-conventional levels

increasing based on education level.<sup>10</sup> A Jordanian study of 512 pharmacy students/alumni participants found roughly eighteen percent reached post-conventional moral reasoning levels.<sup>11</sup> Even more concerning is a 2022 study of Mexican citizens that found only twenty-one percent of their total sample reasoned at the post-conventional level. Among participants without professional degrees, the pattern was even more concerning with only about five percent reaching post-conventional levels.<sup>12</sup> Across these studies, both in the US and abroad, consistent themes emerge with post-conventional reasoning remains relatively uncommon in the general population, while higher education consistently correlates with increased levels of post-conventional reasoning. However, it's important to note that these studies are cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies would be beneficial to track how moral reasoning develops within individuals over time and whether post-conventional thinking emerges at specific life stages.

### CONVENTIONAL MAJORITY AND DEMOCRATIC DYSFUNCTION

Understanding that most adults reason at conventional levels provides insight into why modern democracy often fails to function as it should.<sup>13</sup> Combined with empirical findings on moral reasoning distribution, this raises serious concerns for democratic functioning. Consider political polarization, arguably one of the biggest threats to a functioning modern democracy and society.<sup>14</sup> From a moral development perspective, polarization represents the predictable consequence of citizens whose reasoning functions primarily at Stages 3 and 4. Stage 3 reasoning prioritizes conformity to the expectations of one's immediate reference group and seeks approval from those whose opinions matter. In a democracy, this translates to adopting the positions of one's political tribe and viewing those positions as self-evidently correct because they are what good people like us believe. Stage 4 reasoning extends this logic to larger social systems, emphasizing loyalty to one's party or ideological movement as a matter of duty and obligation. The problem lies in that neither stage provides cognitive or moral understanding to recognize legitimate perspectives held by political opponents. The conventional reasoner cannot easily step outside their group's beliefs and norms to evaluate them critically or recognize that opponents might have valid reasons for thinking differently or valuing different priorities. Political opponents are understood not as fellow citizens with different views but as fools or as threats deliberately undermining society. Similar issues emerge in democratic deliberation, minority rights protections, institutional legitimacy, and policy deliberation.

van Ijzendoorn in 1989 provided empirical support for this analysis, finding that moral judgment level was negatively correlated with both authoritarianism and ethnocentrism.<sup>15</sup> Individuals reasoning at higher developmental levels were less likely to exhibit rigid in-group preference and less likely to defer unquestionably to authority figures while those at conventional levels showed greater susceptibility to authoritarian appeals and greater hostility toward out-groups. This means that when loyalty to a party or group clashes with democratic basics, like accepting election results or acknowledging uncomfortable facts, people reasoning at the conventional level have no anchor that lets them put democratic integrity or greater

society above winning for their side. Those operating at the post-conventional level can do this because they evaluate political systems against principles that sit above any group's interests. They understand that legitimate democratic processes and the greater good must be protected even when the results go against their own side.

Interestingly, research by Fishkin, Keniston, and MacKinnon in 1973 found that self-identified liberals were more likely to engage in post-conventional reasoning while conservatives more often employed conventional reasoning. More recent research by Emler, Tarry, and St. James echoes these findings.<sup>16,17</sup> However, these findings do not imply that conservatism is inherently inferior or that all conservatives reason conventionally while all liberals reason post-conventionally. The distributions overlap substantially. Rather, it appears that the psychological appeal of certain political messages varies with developmental level. Appeals to group loyalty, traditional authority, and maintenance of established order resonate more strongly with conventional reasoners, while appeals to abstract principles, individual rights, and critical evaluation resonates more strongly with post-conventional reasoners.

### FAILURE OF POST-CONVENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RISING AUTHORITARIANISM

This research on moral reasoning stages offers a compelling explanation for the global rise of authoritarian movements in modern democracies. Authoritarian leaders typically appeal to Stage 4 concerns focused on restoring order, respecting traditional authority, punishing rule-breakers, and protecting the in-group from threatening outsiders. These appeals persuade conventional reasoners whose law-and-order moral orientation leads them to perceive authoritarian promises to restore hierarchy and punish transgressors as morally necessary rather than democratically dangerous. Post-conventional reasoners resist authoritarian appeals because they judge leaders by principles of justice and human rights, not by their position in the power structure. They recognize that authority is legitimate only when exercised within appropriate bounds and in service of justifiable ends. They can distinguish between legitimate concern for social order and authoritarian overreach. They understand that strong leaders who promise to restore order by circumventing institutional constraints pose threats to the very foundations of democratic governance.

Research by Mudrack and Mason supports this assertion, finding connections between moral reasoning patterns and both Machiavellianism and authoritarianism, with lower developmental levels associated with greater susceptibility to them.<sup>18</sup> van Ijzendoorn's study, referenced earlier, substantiates this view, finding that moral judgment level was negatively correlated with authoritarianism.<sup>15</sup> Bostyn, Sevenhant, and Roets similarly found relationships between right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and patterns of moral cognition.<sup>19</sup> The pattern of democratic backsliding seen in many nations over the past two decades is consistent with these dynamics. The foundation for such support lies in conventional moral reasoning is precisely what Kohlberg described decades ago. Movements that emphasize absolute loyalty to charismatic leaders, frame political opponents as existential threats, and express willingness to violate democratic norms in service of perceived higher duties reflect classic conventional reasoning patterns. This



means that authoritarian attraction reflects fundamental differences in how people reason about moral obligations, not simply personality traits or political ideology.

## EDUCATION AS THE KEY TO POST-CONVENTIONAL REASONING

If limited post-conventional development contributes to democratic dysfunction and rising authoritarian acceptance, understanding what promotes such development is critical. The literature consistently suggests education as the most significant contributing factor. The study by Rest discussed earlier, found that DIT scores (post-conventional principles) continued to increase for individuals who attended college but remained stable for those who did not, even controlling for age.<sup>6,7</sup> This is echoed by King and Mayhew (2002) who reviewed research on moral judgment development in higher education and found dramatic gains in moral development associated with college participation.<sup>20</sup> However, the relationship between education and moral development appears to involve more than simple exposure to information. Schlaefli, Rest, and Thoma's 1985 meta-analysis of intervention studies using the DIT found that programs emphasizing moral dilemma discussion and psychological development produced modest but significant effects, with optimal treatment duration between three and twelve weeks. Mere instruction itself was less effective than approaches requiring active engagement with competing perspectives.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that higher education environments promote moral development through exposure to diverse perspectives, engagement with complex ideas, requirements to defend positions, and communities valuing critical inquiry over conformity. When functioning well, higher education drives post-conventional development; when it fails or is inaccessible, conventional reasoning predominates.

Contemporary concerns about higher education impact this analysis. If universities increasingly emphasize vocational training over liberal education, if political polarization makes students reluctant to engage with challenging perspectives, or if economic pressures reduce access to genuine higher education, the developmental consequences are significant. In the United States, soaring tuition costs and stagnant wages have made higher education increasingly inaccessible, particularly for working-class students who would benefit most from exposure to diverse perspectives and post-conventional moral frameworks. Recent legislative efforts to restrict university programs promoting diverse perspectives and discussions of systemic inequality further limit citizens' exposure to the different viewpoints essential for post-conventional moral development. This creates a stratified system where access to moral development correlates with existing socioeconomic advantages and prescribed curriculum boundaries, entrenching conventional reasoning in communities lacking educational pathways. These dynamics are not isolated to the United States, affecting democratic societies wherever educational access is limited or educational quality compromised.

## CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS

The perspective advanced here requires acknowledging some of the legitimate criticisms of Kohlberg's framework. Kohlberg's original stage theory and subsequent studies raised concerns about gender bias

and an emphasis on justice-oriented reasoning. This was highlighted Carol Gilligan who suggested that Kohlberg's stage sequence reflected a masculine emphasis on abstract justice while neglecting a feminine orientation toward care and relationships.<sup>22</sup> However, the development of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) has addressed many of these concerns. Subsequent meta-analyses by Walker and Jaffee and Hyde found minimal gender differences in moral reasoning stage when education and occupation were controlled, though Gilligan's work contributed to a further understanding of moral orientations beyond Kohlberg's original framework.<sup>23,24</sup>

Cross-cultural critiques have also been raised. Snarey reviewed Kohlbergian research across multiple cultures and found that while the stage sequence appeared cross-culturally valid, post-conventional reasoning as Kohlberg defined it was rare outside Western contexts.<sup>25</sup> These concerns are echoed in international research showing lower DIT rates than US based studies. Early critiques by Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller argued that Kohlberg's framework privileged Western liberal values as superior and as the pinnacle of moral development.<sup>26</sup> However, more recent research by Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, and Snarey in the early 2000's revisited these criticisms and found more support for cross-cultural universality than earlier critics suggested, though they acknowledged that cultural context shapes how developmental stages are expressed.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while advanced moral reasoning models can be applied cross-culturally, cultural context is important when interpreting results.

Another criticism to Kohlberg's framework concerns the gap between moral reasoning and moral behavior. Some scholars argue that advanced moral reasoning is neither required nor enough for moral action. A review advanced by Blasi serious questions about whether cognitive development alone can adequately explain moral behavior.<sup>28</sup> These concerns contributed to the development of the DIT Four Component Model, which argued that moral behavior requires not only sound reasoning but also moral sensitivity, motivation, and character.<sup>6</sup> It's suggested that moral reasoning typically explains only about ten percent of the variance in moral behavior, meaning the vast majority of moral action remains unexplained by Kohlberg's stage sequence. Although an important consideration, the capacity for advanced moral reasoning is important since citizens cannot make genuinely informed decisions without the ability to understand and critically evaluate competing moral arguments and differing points of view.

## IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Stabilizing democracy and reducing social dysfunction means improving the moral-cognitive development of citizens, not mere policy changes or structural reform. This presents several implications for civic institutions and public discourse. First, civic education warrants renewed attention and expansion. Current approaches emphasize general knowledge about government institutions while not focusing on the developmental foundations of democratic citizenship. Programs should expose students to genuine moral dilemmas, require engagement with competing perspectives, and cultivate capacity for critical thinking about civic issues. Understanding the moral foundations of democracy, rather than how institutions operate is important for creating an engaged

citizenry capable of sustaining it. Second, access to quality higher education is important both for individual economic mobility and for democratic health. Returning to the model of low-cost or tuition-free public higher education may be the best approach for sustaining democracy. When economic pressures, student debt, or institutional changes impact access to higher education, the consequences extend beyond individual students to impact greater democracy.

Third, approaching political opponents as developmentally different rather than morally deficient may prove more productive than current approaches. Recognizing that conventional reasoners are not stupid or evil but are operating from a different cognitive framework enables more effective political communication and reduce the polarization that characterizes contemporary discourse across many societies and nations. Finally, this perspective places distinct obligations on political leaders and institutions. It's not enough to judge leaders solely on policy positions or electoral success. We must also ask whether their rhetoric and behavior promote or hinder citizen development. Leaders exploiting conventional reasoning through tribalism and authoritarianism undermine democratic foundations even when politically effective, while those modeling post-conventional reasoning contribute to long-term democratic health.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The perspective advanced here is not that moral development explains everything about contemporary social fragmentation and the erosion of democratic norms, nor is it suggesting that structural factors are irrelevant. Social media, economic inequality, geographic polarization, and institutional decline all contribute to current problems. But these factors are based on populations with different moral and cognitive reasoning characteristics. A population reasoning at post-conventional levels responds to social media algorithms, economic stress, and institutional failures differently than a population reasoning at conventional or pre-conventional levels. Kohlberg himself understood his work as having democratic implications. He believed that Stage 5 reasoning, with its recognition of social contracts and fundamental rights, provided the cognitive foundation for constitutional democracy. The empirical evidence suggests that few citizens actually reason at this level. The consequences are seen today in polarization that treats political opponents as enemies, in authoritarian movements that promise order through strong leadership, and in inability to address growing collective challenges requiring transcendence of tribal loyalties.

Addressing society's moral development deficit will require long-term commitment to educational approaches that promote genuine cognitive and moral growth, not merely knowledge acquisition. It will require institutional arrangements that expose citizens to diverse perspectives and require engagement with competing values. And it will require leaders willing to appeal to citizens' highest capacities rather than exploiting their developmental limitations. Whether democratic societies prove capable of meeting this challenge remains an open question, but the argument advanced here suggests that without attention to moral development, structural reforms alone are not enough.

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