Should we study political behaviour as rituals? Towards a general micro theory of politics in everyday life

Paul Marx [iD]
University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany; University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

Abstract

Political behaviour research is divided into several explanatory approaches. They have in common that they disregard, to varying extents, the social bases of their explanatory concepts. To fill this void, the present article explores the theoretical advantages of applying Randal Collins's ritual theory to political behaviour. The central claim is that any cognitive factor, such as interests, values, norms or identities has to be infused with emotional resonance in concrete social interaction in order to become a relevant motivation for political behaviour. Based on this argument, the article develops four testable propositions and discusses how they relate to existing approaches. The article concludes that ritual-based emotions are a unified motivational basis for political behaviour, which help understand which cognitive factor becomes politically relevant in a specific situation. The theoretical discussion is complemented with suggestions of how to study political rituals empirically.

Corresponding author:
Paul Marx, Institute for Socio-Economics, University of Duisburg-Essen, Lotharstr. 65, DE-47057 Duisburg, Germany.
Email: paul.marx@uni-due.de

To study democratic societies, it is essential to understand variation in citizens' political behaviour. A vast literature from political science, sociology and psychology is dedicated to this goal. It has produced a plethora of explanatory variables, including material interests, values, identities, networks, elite framing, emotions, personality and genes. While it seems difficult to add to this encompassing list, the present article argues that existing theory does omit a fundamental and often causally prior explanatory factor: rituals.

Rituals are particularly intense, focussed and rhythmically coordinated social interactions with the potential to bond participants through positive collective emotions. Ranging from formalized ceremonies to mundane encounters, they are a prominent concept in classical and contemporary social theory. Famous examples are the works of Émile Durkheim, Erving Goffman, Mary Douglas, Randall Collins or Jeffrey Alexander. While the term ritual used to be reserved for formalized social interactions in special occasions (often religious), Goffman and Collins in particular theorize rituals as ubiquitous building blocks of social life.

Given rituals' influence in sociology and, more recently, psychology (Páez et al., 2015), it is unsatisfactory that their potential has not been considered systematically in political behaviour research. This omission motivates the goal of the present essay to explore the potential payoff from *theorizing political behaviour as rituals*. Justifying such a gestalt shift requires critical examination of weaknesses in existing theories – and an assessment as to whether a new ritual-based alternative can contribute to overcoming them.

What are these weaknesses? One problem hampering cumulative knowledge building in the field of political behaviour might be the fragmentation into various explanatory approaches with unclear theoretical relationships. Material interests, identities, values, adherence to social norms or networks are hardly independent of each other. And yet, they are often discussed in separate literatures or even tested against each other.

This fragmentation can be related to a general tendency of using these and similar concepts on an unduly abstract level. They are placed in incomplete causal chains that omit the (social) processes through which they emerge in the first place. This makes us forget sometimes that many of our explanatory variables themselves – or at least their political relevance – need an explanation. If we avoid the question of what exactly makes an interest, value or identity a motivation for political behaviour, we sacrifice explanatory power. Fragmentation and truncated causal chains bring us in a weak position when it comes to answering the crucial question of how voters navigate the *multiplicity of competing motivations* and ultimately 'choose' one to base their behaviour upon.

What makes the dialogue with ritual theory attractive for our sub-discipline is that it offers and explanation of just that. I will focus the discussion on Randall Collins's (2004) *Interaction Ritual Chains*, arguably its most elaborate version (Rossner and Meher, 2014; Summers-Effler, 2006; Wollschleger, 2017). At its core is the argument that human motivation is grounded in the pursuit of 'emotional energy', which can only be generated in physical encounters with other humans. Cognitions or material objects primarily derive their motivational force from their symbolic (and sometimes practical) role in such rituals. For any belief, norm, interest or identity to become a salient factor in political behaviour, it has to be infused with positive emotions that can only be created in interactions. Rituals, then, are the root cause of the relative importance of any cognitive factor for political behaviour at any moment in time.

Hence, the promise of ritual theory is not so much that it could replace existing arguments. Rather, it can integrate them into a more complete causal chain and, through explicating a unified motivational basis, achieve theory reduction.

Three more benefits of ritual theory are worth mentioning. First, it can overcome the unfortunate individualism in many existing arguments by *radically theorizing political behaviour as relational* (which is something that, as I will argue below, even the political network literature struggles with). Second, it takes up findings in psychology about the *fundamental role of emotion in judgement*. The notion of 'hot cognition' has been forcefully advocated in the realms of politics and morality (Haidt, 2012; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Ritual theory adds an argument about the social origins of these emotional influences (von Scheve, 2013). Third, by shifting the unit of analysis from the individual to the situation and by making *stability contingent upon reproduction in rituals*, it offers an inherently dynamic perspective that can accommodate change.

I would argue that now is a good time for 'taking stock' in political behaviour research by reconsidering its theoretical micro-foundation. Populism and inequality in political participation have contributed to a tangible desire to better understand voters' subjectivity (Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Mckenzie, 2017). And this subjectivity is, to a large extent, constituted in face-to-face encounters (Gamson, 1992; Walsh, 2004). So far, attempts to take seriously the political relevance of micro-encounters have mainly led to adjusting empirical strategies towards ethnographic approaches and not to re-theorizing political behaviour as such. Whether ritual theory can fill this gap is the question addressed in this essay.

It begins with a brief introduction to Collins's ritual theory, followed by a review of psychological evidence for it. Subsequently, I derive theoretical

implications for the study of political behaviour and discuss its relationship to existing accounts. A final section concludes.

Randall Collins's ritual theory

I can only give an incomplete sketch of Collins's ritual theory in the space constraints of this essay. Its fullest elaboration can be found in his 2004 book *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Useful shorter discussions are given by Summers-Effler (2006), Rossner and Meher (2014) and Kemper (2011).

Collins (2004) provides a general social theory in which all human behaviour can be traced back to a single motivation: to experience positive emotion in the interaction with other humans. Building on Durkheim and Goffman, he argues that the source of positive emotion are rituals. These are defined as social interactions in which people are physically co-present, focus on a common object, follow a joint rhythm and develop a common mood. The classic example is a religious service. But one could also think of a political discussion, rally or demonstration or a football match. Also spontaneous and informal interactions, such as small talk, are rituals in this theory.

Rituals imply physiological processes that have the potential to produce what Durkheim (1995 [1912]) called collective effervescence: an enthusiasm that can only be generated in groups. Under conditions of co-presence and mutual focus, humans have a hard-wired disposition to become entrained in a common rhythm of movements, song or speech. Through focus and rhythm, they develop a common mood and situational solidarity. Intensity of entrainment and shared feelings correspond to each other, so ritual outcomes range from mild satisfaction to effervescence. Hence, Collins's argument turns on emotional *arousal* and *valence*, not so much on discrete emotions.[1] If rituals fail, that is, if rhythmic entrainment does not come off, participants feel awkward or ashamed. Social life is composed of a constant succession of successful or failed rituals. Fluent versus halting conversation, electrifying versus dull speeches, ecstatic versus awkward sexual encounters or exuberant versus lame parties.

The appealing property of Collins's theory is that he builds a general social theory from the highly intuitive effects of such micro interactions. Immediate consequences of successful rituals are situational solidarity, self-transcendence and positive mood. These effects tend to fade quickly, but rituals can also produce long-term effects. One lasting outcome are group symbols that receive their emotional significance in rituals and, metaphorically speaking, store positive emotions for periods between rituals. Many things can serve this symbolic function: flags, emblems, clothes, accents, catchphrases, ideas, persons or political opinions.
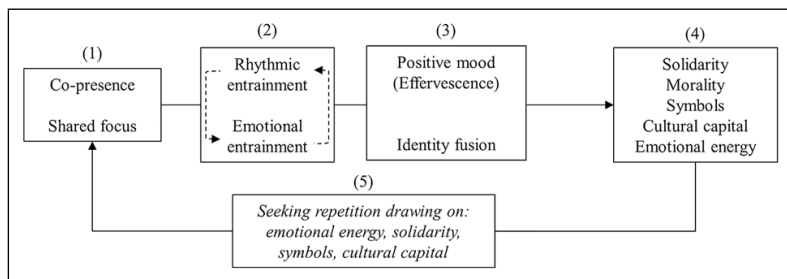
Figure 1. Schematic representation of Collins's interaction ritual chains.

If ritual success is stable over time, it translates into a long-term resource that Collins calls emotional energy (EE) and that is key to his theory. The continuum between high and low EE essentially captures the differences between people experiencing happiness, efficacy, self-esteem, drive, pride and recognition on the one side and depressed and lonely people, who lack initiative and confidence, on the other. Consequently, *EE is the prime motivation of human behaviour*. Which encounters people seek, how they behave in these encounters, which symbols they invoke and so on are guided by an intuitive process of EE maximization.[2] It is possible to describe this maximization as 'rational' behaviour, if rationality is not equated with individual, affect-free calculation or even the conscious consideration of alternatives.[3]

As a consequence of the motivation to seek successful and to avoid energy-draining rituals, people move in what Collins calls interaction ritual chains (IRCs). IRCs describe a feedback loop in which rituals produce the motivation, confidence and ability to seek and engage in future rituals. Symbols serve as 'EE batteries' in between rituals and as cultural resources to help future rituals succeed (for instance, as objects of shared focus). IRCs are depicted in Figure 1.

While this sketch does not give justice to all implications of Collins's ritual theory, it illustrates the fundamental difference to premises in other political behaviour theories. I would like to highlight four of them.

Motivation is uniquely grounded in the pursuit of EE through rituals. Material objects are only attractive to the extent that they provide access to rituals or have a symbolic value in rituals.

Morality does not exist independently of rituals. It is produced in rituals and can only be sustained if it is repeatedly charged with ritual-based positive emotion. Moral sentiments, values, norms and identities fade if they are not socially affirmed in groups. We can treat these variables neither as (internalized) individual properties, nor as independent macro concepts.

The self, as a consequence, is a superfluous concept. The same person's values can be meaningless or a powerful driver of behaviour depending on whether a group has socially reaffirmed or not this value in a given situation. The individual is, therefore, replaced with the situation as a unit of analysis. Apparent individual stability really disguises constant reproduction in stable IRCs.

Social stratification is based on an unequal distribution of EE. Access to successful rituals is often conditional on material or cultural capital. Possessing EE creates positive feedback effects, because it raises attractiveness as a ritual partner for others and because it provides the confidence to pursue material benefits. Both allow reproducing EE in successful rituals.

In sum, ritual theory calls into question some widespread features of political behaviour research, particularly its individualism, the emphasis on stable dispositions and the negligence of face-to-face encounters. Before deriving more concrete implications for this literature, I would like to point to psychological research buttressing the fundamental claims underlying Collins's theory.

The psychology of rituals and their components

Rituals and their effects are not only themes in social theory or anthropology. There is a recent and growing (partly Durkheim-inspired) literature in psychology and neurobiology that, taken together, supports empirically the mechanisms theorized by Collins. I will briefly summarize some important findings, organized by the numbered steps in Figure 1.

Rhythmic and emotional entrainment is ubiquitous in social life. As exemplified by mirror neurons, humans are hard-wired to automatically align their behaviours in social interactions, which comes with heightened empathy, willingness to cooperate and affiliation (Chartrand and Lakin, 2013; Iacoboni, 2009; Launay et al., 2016). This implies a general susceptibility to move through steps (1)–(3) in Figure 1. Joint attention (1) is central in Tomasello's (2019) evolutionary account of infant-caretaker bonding and emotion sharing. Regarding the link between (2) and (3), rhythmic coordination of bodily movements has indeed been found to facilitate social integration (Hove and Risen, 2009; Wiltermuth and Heath, 2009). A recent meta-analysis of experimentally induced synchrony revealed significant effects on prosocial behaviour, perceived social bonding and positive affect (Mogan et al., 2017). Although behaviour in reality often is not as tightly coupled as in the lab, emotional reactions to rhythmic coordination should be stronger in a natural compared to experimental settings (Mogan et al., 2017).

The reported findings for prosociality are already supportive of solidarity-enhancing effects of rituals (4). Research on morality as a ritual outcome is suggestive but tends to be correlational (Rossano, 2012). However, Páez et al. (2015) and von Scheve et al. (2014) provide experimental and longitudinal evidence that emotional entrainment in effervescent experiences does strengthen group-specific symbols, values and identities. Regarding step (4), one should also mention the overwhelming evidence that social relations are a key ingredient for happiness and health (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Concerning the last step of the model (5), there are indirect but compelling hints at feedback effects on ritual success. For one thing, happiness is – as claimed by Collins – a *cause* of success in several life domains, including social relations (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Directly relevant to this article, research strongly suggests that political attitudes and identities are symbolic resources in ritual *initiation* (Hatemi and McDermott, 2016; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). This is shown, for instance, by political sorting in mating behaviour (Alford et al., 2011; Huber and Malhotra, 2017) and even employment relationships (Gift and Gift, 2015). As will become clear below, I believe it makes a lot of sense to interpret such findings through the lens of ritual theory.

Finally and crucially, ritual theory can be linked to arguments about the fundamental role of affect in judgement and decision-making (Barrett, 2017; Damasio, 2018; Haidt, 2012; Hatemi and McDermott, 2016). Lodge and Taber (2013) make a strong case for the primacy of emotions in 'motivated' political reasoning. They show that political stimuli are affectively tagged in long-term memory and that political judgements are essentially rationalizations of this initial valence affect. They arrive at a conclusion strikingly similar to Durkheim or Collins: 'Were there such a thing as affect-free cognitions, any such 'cool' links from belief to feeling to behaviour would be weak because of their lack of motivational thrust' (p. 210). If we now assume that the generation of affective tags is a social process (as argued by von Scheve, 2013), motivated reasoning theory provides a well-substantiated mechanism through which ritual communities exert an automatic and pervasive influence on political or moral judgement.

Deriving implications for political behaviour

If we accept for a moment ritual theory's fundamental assertions – what would be the consequences for theorizing political behaviour? In the following section, I will try to answer this question by deriving four testable propositions. A brief note on terminology: I use 'political behaviour' broadly to include the expression of political attitudes or preferences. This violates the convention to separate attitudes and behaviours, but it reflects that

attitudes have to be somehow manifested behaviourally to matter in an interaction. The usage explicitly includes mundane activities not covered by many definitions of political participation (Van Deth, 2014), such as expressing a political opinion in everyday conversations. It is important, for the present argument, however, to semantically differentiate behaviours from the intensity of the underlying motivation. I use 'political conviction' to refer to the emotional significance of political behaviours for individuals.

A ritual-based theory of political behaviour has to be ultimately based on face-to-face encounters. I believe it intuitively makes sense that personal conversations are an important way in which people experience politics. Collins sees the potential for rituals as ubiquitous in such conversations. Hence, we are on safe ground to formulate as

> *Proposition A: Political conversations are rituals that can succeed or fail in generating positive emotion.*

Hence, political conversations can be placed on a continuum of the extent to which they produce shared focus, rhythm and mood. This seemingly harmless proposition has profound implications. It essentially means abstracting away the content of political expressions and analysing them with regard to their function of fostering ritual success. It opens the possibility that people do not discuss politics to convince others or to receive new information, but as a reliable way to get rituals going and to produce EE (e.g. providing the topic for a fluent conversation that allows for rhythmic and emotional entrainment). This is consistent with the observation that people prefer discussing politics with like-minded people (Hatemi and McDermott, 2016; Klofstad et al., 2013). Preaching to the choir makes a lot of sense from a ritual perspective. It would also explain why political talk is rarely original. Stereotyped political expressions are proven recipes to produce conversational flow and shared emotions (such as righteous anger). Treating political conversations as rituals in Collins's sense directly leads to

> *Proposition B: Political behaviours are chosen and adjusted to maximize EE.*

The motivation for political behaviours follows from their relevance for ritual success and EE. The famous question of why many people vote despite miniscule chances to affect the outcome of an election (Gintis, 2016) is not puzzling at all from a perspective of EE maximization. Symbolically affirming a ritually charged conviction through the act of voting feels good.

It is also usually a prerequisite to wholeheartedly enjoy future rituals focussed on politics. In this sense, one might consider voting rational.

Generally, people gravitate towards political convictions whose expression maximizes usefulness in rituals and, hence, EE. In situations, in which people can choose between values, identities or opinions they can bring to bear on a political issue, they (intuitively) go for the one with most EE potential. This applies not only under conditions of physical co-presence. The ritual charging of political convictions with emotions reverberates for some time. When encountering politics in isolation, say by watching the news or in the voting booth, the emotional reaction to any presented position will be a function of the symbolic meaning of this position for one's own ritual community as well as the momentary solidarity felt with this community. Intensity and recency of ritual experiences will determine just how 'hot' your cognition and how 'motivated' your political reasoning are *in isolation*. When engaged in political talk outside one's usual ritual community, one sometimes has to balance the emotional costs of dissonance with the *mentally present* community and the emotional costs of ritual failure with the *physically present* conversation partners. Again, the rule of EE maximization applies.

Hence, Proposition B does *not* imply that people freely adjust their political behaviour to any given situation. This is prevented by the fact that they are typically placed in rather stable IRCs. Long-term inclusion in ritual communities creates emotional commitments that constrain EE maximization in individual situations. The notion of IRCs leads to

> *Proposition C: Political behaviours are inputs to and outcomes of rituals in a feedback loop.*

Political behaviours often appear stable. Ritual theory is able to account for this path dependence through IRCs, which imply that individuals follow a path of structured rituals that tend to reproduce existing views. This means that, on the one hand, appropriately expressed political convictions are resources to make rituals successful (input). On the other hand, political convictions can be seen as outcomes of rituals. This is true in several ways. First, only rituals give political views their emotional resonance and hence the motivation to use them as inputs for future rituals. Second, rituals turn political behaviours into symbols that represent the group's virtues and that can be worn as a badge of honour. Third, rituals provide the cultural capital and the confidence to 'perform' political convictions in a skilful way. This is necessary to secure the success of future rituals. In sum, if political behaviours appear stable, this is because people have a baggage of IRCs during

which they acquire motivations and resources that steer them towards path-dependent political rituals. This path-dependent logic notwithstanding, I would formulate as

> *Proposition D: The strength of political convictions varies over time with the intensity of political rituals.*

Making stability in political behaviour conditional upon reproduction in rituals implies that perfect stability can only be expected if people (a) have strongly circumscribed contacts producing little cross pressure or (b) regularly participate in intense political rituals that produce sufficient EE to trump any incentives from rituals outside that community. People who do not fall in either category experience situational fluctuation in the intensity of their political convictions. An extreme case is a complete or partial disruption of IRCs (e.g. through unemployment, divorce or relocation), which should open up room for change. More common are probably patterns of fluctuation in which the intensity of political convictions decays after ritually generated peak moments and moves, until reproduced, towards apathy. Such excitement-boredom cycles can usually be observed in social movements (Jasper, 2018; Summers-Effler, 2010).

Relationship to existing political behaviour theories

To assess whether the ritual-based explanation of political behaviour has something new to offer, we have to place it within the body of existing theories. Below, I discuss a set of concepts that represent the variety of explanatory approaches in political behaviour (without claiming completeness). I begin with the common distinction between material self-interest and non-material motivations such as values or identities. This will include party identification, a core concept in existing research. Next, I will contrast ritual with network arguments, the approach that comes closest to a relational explanation of political behaviour. A further crucial question is how a supposedly dynamic ritual perspective relates to arguments claiming long-term stability based on personality or socialization. Finally, I briefly comment on the link between rituals and elite framing.

Material self-interest

Do people primarily engage with politics to maximize economic gain as traditionally assumed in political economy? Ritual theory would see this as a rare form of political behaviour and can theorize the general conditions

under which it occurs. I should clarify that in a ritual-based approach, it usually does not make much sense to distinguish expressive from instrumental motivations (Engelen, 2006; Huddy et al., 2015; Schuessler, 2000). According to Hamlin and Jennings (2011), 'Behaviour is expressive to the extent that it reflects, wholly or partly, underlying concerns that derive directly from the meaning or symbolic significance of actions [...]' (p. 655). Moreover, such behaviour 'is to be understood relative to an audience'. From a ritual perspective, this definition is acceptable; but it conceptualizes expressive behaviour as ubiquitous and leaves little to the instrumental realm. Symbols are integrative parts of rituals and they are what ties IRCs together. Only very basic actions are devoid of symbolism. Money and making money certainly are not (Zelizer, 1994). And, because rituals always involve other people, they inevitably are 'relative to an audience' (Alexander, 2011; Kemper, 2011). In short, for ritual theory, *political expressions are instrumental* to maximize EE.

Political rituals and convictions often do focus on material aspects. But rather than taking this at face value, we need to clarify the motivations to pursue material gain (Frank, 1988). This is relatively easy in case of acute need: hungry people want something to eat, the unemployed likely support welfare benefits (unless they are in rituals that charge the notion of proud self-reliance with sufficient EE). In the absence of acute needs, material goods are – according to ritual theory – only appealing to the extent that they translate into EE (Collins, 1993). This is the case (a) if access to rituals depends on material resources (exclusive golf club) or (b) on costly cultural capital (private school); (c) if possession of material goods places one in the centre rather than the periphery of rituals (status symbols); (d) if money-making itself becomes an emotionally charged group symbol (investment banking); (e) if attention in rituals is focussed directly on economic issues so that these issues themselves become emotionally charged group symbols (trade unions, anti-austerity movements, left parties).

Put differently, money is a resource that in various contexts can be converted into EE. But there are real-world milieux, such as some religious groups or 'serious' artists, in which material success is frowned upon and in which rituals thrive on entirely different symbolic resources. Hence, material interests always compete with other cognitions that can become salient and action relevant in rituals; EE is the 'common denominator' (Collins, 1993) to decide among these alternatives ('decide' is a potentially misleading term here, because it describes a largely unconscious mental process). Practically, if we can observe people in ritual interactions and if we gain knowledge about the symbols to which they become emotionally committed in these interactions (big ifs, admittedly), we are in a strong position to explain when and why material aspects influence political behaviour.

Clearly, empirical challenges loom behind this statement. Money and EE are so deeply interwoven in modern society that the distinction becomes problematic. In a sense, Collins's maximization argument resembles a 'wide' version of rational choice that stretches utility to include psychic rewards. Flexible utility definitions create the risk of appearing tautological. In the words of Kroneberg and Kalter (2012), 'the core of the wide version [of rational choice theory] is almost empty' (p. 82). It is 'able to assimilate almost any psychological concept or theory' so that 'the whole burden of rational choice explanations relies on the auxiliary assumptions'. As an explicit theory of motivation, ritual theory does not share this 'empty core' problem. It has the advantage of *theorizing the causal process underlying utility itself*. Rather than bringing in exogenous (and arbitrary) sources of utility, it opens the socio-emotional black box of how these sources receive their relative significance in any given situation.[4]

This is not only a theoretical advantage. As discussed above, ritual engagement has measureable physiological and behavioural implications. The key for successful applications of ritual theory is to operationalize content, success and intensity of rituals as explanatory variables so that arguments are falsifiable (see Section 'How to study political rituals empirically?').

Non-material motivations: values and identities

Material benefits are often contrasted with ideational or cultural factors. One example are values – durable beliefs about what is good and bad that apparently give some coherence to political preferences across issues (Schwartz et al., 2014). For practical and theoretical purposes, it is important to note that political values often compete not only with economic interests, but also with other values (Druckman and Lupia, 2016). The challenge then is to specify how people navigate the various abstract values that potentially bear on any given political issue. One possible answer is that elite framing connects values to issues. But this only begs the question of how value frames succeed in competition with counter frames (Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Feinberg and Willer, 2015).

As mentioned already, moral psychology argues that which values we apply to a situation has little to do with conscious thought. Rather the situational relevance of values is based on automatic affective responses, which only later are rationalized in arguments about good and bad. But where do the initial affective responses come from? Haidt (2012), one of the theory's main proponents, sees them as partly innate. However, drawing heavily on Durkheim, he also theorizes effervescent group experiences as a key motivational force behind morality (he does not speak of rituals but the 'hive

switch'). For Haidt as for Collins, the prime way to make moral beliefs salient and action relevant is through affectively charging them in rituals (or hive). Cognitive availability and affective resonance, in turn, increase the likelihood of a moral concern to be triggered *automatically* in a situation (Lodge and Taber, 2013; Verplanken and Holland, 2002). Particularly if affective experiences are repeated in IRCs, it is highly likely that unconscious moral intuitions are shaped by past social interactions (von Scheve, 2013). Hence, rituals arguably influence which 'gut feelings' steer cognitive responses to political stimuli. Variation in IRCs *across* individuals should influence how political stimuli are affectively tagged in long-term memory (Proposition C); variation in ritual engagement *within* individuals should influence the situational salience and action relevance of moral beliefs (Proposition D). Against the background of these arguments, it is interesting that Lupton et al. (2015) show empirically that the political relevance of values indeed declines with disagreement in social networks (i.e. the absence of a coherent ritual community).

Similar points can be made about identity. Social identity consists of a set of self-descriptions, typically in the form of subjective membership in more or less clearly demarcated groups or social categories. They become politically relevant if politics touches upon group interests or values. The problem, again, is that individuals have multiple memberships that could matter for political behaviour, say, based on gender, ethnicity, religion, class, local community or lifestyle (Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Mason and Wronski, 2018; Suhay, 2015). Psychological identity theories address the context dependence of identity salience, for instance by pointing to cognitive processes of situation-specific social comparisons (Turner et al., 1994). Collins (2004) shares the situational perspective, but emphasizes the role of emotions in automatically steering people towards certain identities. How salient and motivating an identity is depends on the concrete experience of emotionally gratifying solidarity in rituals.

Interestingly, the need to 'energize' identities has been recognized in the social-movements' literature more than in the voting literature (Jasper, 2018; Klandermans, 2014; Summers-Effler, 2010), possibly because the critical social component is more apparent in this type of mobilization. The key point is that a salient identity is not an exogenous resource to draw on, but something that has to be created through social interaction. Impressive evidence for collective gatherings *strengthening* identity has recently been provided by Páez et al. (2015). From an explicitly Durkheimian perspective, they show that even randomly allocated political protests chosen by experimenters can cause a stronger identity among participants. For a pre-post design revealing similar results in a real-world setting, see von Scheve et al. (2014).

A particularly relevant type of social identity for the present topic is party identification (Huddy et al., 2015), which motivates people to minimize dissonance between themselves and the respective party. Ritual theory complements this view by adding that the underlying emotional bond depends on social interactions in which parties or candidates become emotionally charged group symbols. This argument is consistent with a growing body of research showing that party identity varies with characteristics of personal networks (Klofstad et al., 2013; Lupton et al., 2015; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2006; Sinclair, 2012). The more politically diverse a network is, that is, the more one is confronted with the challenge to achieve ritual success despite ideological differences, the more ambiguous these variables become. Klar's (2014) recent experiment demonstrates the social and situational logic of partisanship forcefully. The alignment with the preferred party's position becomes considerably stronger if participants are randomly assigned to homogeneous rather than heterogeneous discussion groups before taking the survey. Although the cited literature neglects whether ritual success mediates effects, it clearly points to the need to account for social processes underlying identity salience.

Political networks

Rapidly growing social network explanations of political behaviour share, on the face of it, ritual theory's scepticism towards individualistic accounts (Huckfeldt, 2014; Klofstad et al., 2013). That said, there are key differences. The two theoretically central variables in network explanations are information and social pressure (Levitan and Verhulst, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018; Sinclair, 2012; Suhay, 2015). People adjust their behaviour to their network because they receive cheap but politically biased information from it and because they want to avoid social sanctions. In this way, social relations are relegated to an environmental variable in an ultimately individualistic decision calculus. This comes with a tendency to assume a difference between some sort of 'true' vis-à-vis a social self. For ritual theory, in contrast, there is not much more to the self than its history of IRCs. Absent social relations, there would not be any political behaviour worth speaking of. Hence, it moves more decidedly towards a relational theory.

Networks certainly are a convenient way to pick up arguments *en passant*. But why do people adopt arguments from one particular network rather than from other sources? And what motivates people to discuss politics in the first place? Ritual theory predicts that people adopt preferences from networks not primarily through cognitive processes, but as a by-product of EE maximization. To the extent that a ritual community (viz.

network) is able to base successful interactions on political talk, it turns political expressions into emotionally charged symbols of the group, generates cultural capital to perform the political expression appropriately and creates a strong motivation to repeat the political ritual (see Figure 1). Hence, information matters, but it has to be infused with emotion.

Social norms are impossible to deny as a motivational force, but the underlying mechanisms have to be theorized (Kroneberg et al., 2010; Rossano, 2012; Suhay, 2015). It is at the root of the theory proposed here, that communities use rituals to make their morality binding (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). What ritual theory adds to mainstream political network theory is that it specifies in greater detail *how* norms unfold their power over political behaviour.

There are two further noteworthy differences. First, network research has focussed heavily on the *content* of attitudes but neglected their *strength* (Robinson et al., 2018). Ritual theory has the appealing property that it provides a unified framework to understand the content (Proposition B) as well as the strength of political convictions (Proposition D). Second, ritual theory offers a different theoretical take on the unresolved debate about agreeable versus disagreeable networks (Klofstad et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2018). On balance, agreeable networks probably are more conducive to successful IRCs. However, disagreeable networks can produce extremely strong political convictions, if a vital ritual community regularly encounters 'sacrilegious' outsiders. This can produce righteous anger and polarizing tendencies.

Stabilizing factors: personality and socialization

Political psychologists argue that people have stable dispositions with 'elective affinities' (Jost et al., 2009) to political leanings. For instance, the trait 'openness to experience' predicts liberalism, while conscientiousness predicts conservatism (Gerber et al., 2010). Current debates focus on whether or not biological differences underlie such correlations (Hatemi and McDermott, 2016).

Personality psychology is a valid lens to study aspects of political behaviour, but it is unlikely to get the full picture. Few psychologists would argue that personality (epiphenomenal to genes or not) can predict behaviour alone. It is widely acknowledged that personality interacts with *situations* – which allows introducing rituals as a decisive environmental factor. And if the theory should allow for change, the variable social translation should occupy centre stage rather than the stable individual disposition. Personality, however, probably underlies sorting into ritual communities so

that both variables, in practice, arguably reinforce each other. Crucial questions, which can only be answered empirically, then are what happens in situations of ritual deprivation or cross-pressure (i.e. if dispositions and rituals point in different directions).[5]

Many theories discussed above implicitly or explicitly make a socialization argument of internalization between childhood and early adolescence. I maintain that socialization really is an abstraction of a long chain of concrete interactions. Usually, these interactions are emotionally rewarding to some extent, which accounts for the socialization effect we typically observe (of course, children are also highly constrained in their exit options for some time and, hence, in EE maximization). There are plenty of examples from real life and research showing that transmission is far from automatic (Jennings et al., 2009; Lazer et al., 2010; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2006). For ritual theory, socialization critically depends on functioning rituals in the family and it is bound to fail if children find access to ritual communities that provide more EE than their parents and the milieu they represent. The distinction between impressionable and unimpressionable years could at least partly be explained with the crystallization of ritual communities after early adolescence.

Elite framing

Elite framing provides important heuristics for citizens who have neither time nor interest to work through policy details. This is impossible to dispute. To reiterate what was written above, the crucial question is what makes a frame powerful in competition with other information (Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Feinberg and Willer, 2015). Ritual theory provides an answer, because it contains an argument about which frames have the emotional resonance that underlies receptiveness. Moreover, in a ritual perspective one can assign a critical role to political entrepreneurs by conceptualizing *framing as ritual*. After all, politicians are among the few actors that have a highly conscious and strategic approach to rituals (Alexander, 2011). Political victories depend on creating successful rituals in which parties, candidates or policies become symbols. Manipulating and using emotions are politicians' daily bread. Rituals and symbols are their tools.

To sum up, there are a number of important explanatory concepts in political behaviour. The discussion covered interests, values, self-categorizations, norms and information (from personal networks or elites). Ritual theory does not deny their relevance; it points to the social and emotional processes that explain how these cognitive factors become a relevant motivation for political behaviour.

How to study political rituals empirically?

Political rituals should not remain a theoretical subject. Some of the implications discussed here might strike readers as hard to measure. But political behaviour scholars have shown considerable empirical ingenuity in the past and I am convinced that challenges posed by ritual theory for our research designs are far from insurmountable.

How could the empirical value added of a ritual perspective be demonstrated? In fact, the possible applications are so numerous that I can only point out some examples. A good starting point arguably would be documenting the social function of political conversations. According to Proposition A, such conversations can be located on continuum of ritual quality. Proposition B stipulates that people adjust their political expressions to maximize this quality within the constraints of prior emotional commitments. Researchers should, therefore, ask how participants use political topics to create entrainment in conversations and how they navigate situations in which they might fail (e.g. because of disagreements). Moreover, they should relate the variable quality of interactions to subjective outcomes, such as affect and solidarity.

Qualitative approaches should have a strong role in this research. Political conversations could be studied ethnographically (Cramer, 2016; Summers-Effler, 2010) or in focus groups (Gamson, 1992). In any case, researchers should pay less attention to the content of conversations and focus instead on physical and verbal indicators of ritual quality and affiliation (body posture, facial expressions, synchrony of actions, prosody, etc.). In this regard, established tools of conversation analysis or computational linguistics could prove useful (Collins, 2004; McFarland et al., 2013).[6] Ideally, researchers can directly observe interactions (personally or on tape). But it is also possible to interview participants *after* a relevant interaction to relate their emotional 'energy traces' (Rivera, 2015) to political outcomes.

The qualitative knowledge generated this way could be used to manipulate the conditions for ritual success experimentally (Páez et al., 2015). This will be particularly helpful to firmly establish the effects of rituals on political preferences and behaviours[7] (Proposition C and D). The above-mentioned experiment by Klar (2014) is an example of a suitable approach – if measures capturing the quality of the interactions are included. A promising alternative to manipulating the chances for ritual success between participants is to use trained confederates (e.g. Barsade, 2002), which gives more experimental control over the interaction. The psychological literature can provide plentiful further inspiration for how rituals can be manipulated (Koudenburg et al., 2017; Launay et al., 2016; Mogan et al., 2017).

Proposition D predicts variability of political behaviour over time, which requires longitudinal designs. It would be particularly appealing to use pre-post designs or repeated experiments with the same subjects. Alternatives are exploiting positive or negative shocks (Páez et al., 2007; von Scheve et al., 2014) or zooming in on life transitions that predictably come with ritual variation, such as leaving home, graduating or changing jobs (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2006). Finally, despite ritual theory's emphasis on co-presence, some contributions argue and show that rituals can be studied online (DiMaggio et al., 2019). Reliance on text produced in computer-mediated interaction would greatly increase the material available to trace IRCs over time.

Conclusion

This article started out with the question of whether a ritual perspective could add to our theoretical understanding of political behaviour. I would now answer it in the affirmative. The contrast with existing perspective has revealed that ritual theory does not replace or contradict them. Rather, it enriches and synthesizes them into a more complete but still parsimonious framework. This framework provides mechanisms to explain how people choose among competing motivations, to understand when strength and direction of political convictions might change and to account for the fundamentally social nature of political behaviour.

Considerably more work is needed before a ritual theory of political behaviour can unfold the potential indicated in this contribution. I would like to mention a few topics that deserve particular attention. One straightforward promise of ritual theory already touched upon is to provide a unified framework to study the *direction and strength* of political preferences. Ritual communities turn certain political expressions into symbols, which accounts for the direction. The intensity of the rituals can still vary considerably, ranging from 'too low to even bother to vote' to risking one's life for political convictions. Hence, what happens in rituals should explain preferences as well as the likelihood to act upon them.

Another avenue for further theorizing concerns the link between micro-rituals and macro-structure (von Scheve, 2013). Turner (2015) theorizes rituals, for instance, as *embedded* in a societal meta-ideology that constraints or facilitates EE maximization. In times of intensifying political culture struggles, it is worth asking if we have an ideological bias in favour of some political rituals or symbols – and what the consequences of that would be.

In a similar vein, ritual theory invites us to think about how political rituals relate to the overall societal distribution of EE. People experience rewarding or draining rituals at work, at home or in their communities.

Hochschild (2016) recently observed that many American voters have had socio-economic experiences that systematically deprive them of positive emotion. Collective effervescence in Trump campaign events helps them to cope with this; it serves as 'a great antidepressant' (p. 226). In principle, ritual theory can account for both observations: the emotional consequences of losing out economically or ideologically. And how emotional deprivation lays the ground for populist rituals around specific symbols.

To end with a broader point, this essay should be seen as an invitation to interdisciplinary theory dialogue about political behaviour. Irrespective of how prominently rituals will figure in this dialogue, I am convinced that it will, to the very least, sharpen our understanding of what is missing in the field. If the present discussion has contributed to this, it was a worthwhile exercise.

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Notes

1. For Collins, successful rituals are emotion *intensifiers* (they are arousing) and emotion *transformers* (they turn any individually felt emotion into more positively valenced mood). This works even for negative emotions, such as grief. The focus on arousal and valence can, of course, be criticized for missing part of the picture (Jasper, 2018: 82) and there is a long-standing debate in psychology about dimensional versus discrete models of emotions. Collins's theory can be seen as a sociological counterpart to biological perspectives, which describe the human body as a multi-sensory screening device that, for evolutionary reasons, is able to detect ever so subtle threats to social bonds in interactions. Emotional valence, in these perspectives, is a fundamental homeostatic impulse with a pervasive influence on cognition (Barrett, 2017; Damasio, 2018; Eisenberger, 2016; Launay et al., 2016). This is not to deny that discrete emotions can have additional explanatory power for specific phenomena.

2. Given how unpredictable EE generation is, it might be more realistic to assume a satisficing process. I will stick to Collins's term 'EE maximization' out of convenience.

3. Ritual theory is consistent with some models in the rational choice family (Collins, 1993, 2004: chapter 4). If the rationality concept becomes as flexible as, for instance, in Gintis (2016), for whom it even applies to bacteria, EE maximization is inevitably rational. Rationality here only requires the pursuit of consistent preferences and people in ritual theory have, in any given context, a consistent (albeit unconscious) preference for whatever brings them most EE. Confusingly, ritual theory could also be invoked by critics, who argue that cognition is so deeply intertwined with emotion and relational concerns that rationality is at risk of becoming a misleading concept (Barrett, 2017; Damasio, 2018; Frank, 1988; Haidt, 2012; Jasper, 2018; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Kemper, 2016; von Scheve, 2013). All depends on the exact definition of rationality. What is noteworthy, in any case, is that ritual theory endogenizes preferences through clearly specified social mechanisms, which makes it a substantive theory of human motivation. This contrasts with standard rational choice approaches, whose application usually requires the ad hoc introduction of auxiliary assumptions (Kroneberg and Kalter, 2012). Moreover, as discussed below, the EE concept provides a more plausible alternative to money as a general metric to 'compare' the utility of alternatives (Collins, 1993).

4. Collins's argument overlaps with recent rational choice models that emphasize variable rationality in a dual-process framework (e.g. Kroneberg et al., 2010), although it would be misleading to equate, as Wollschleger (2017) does, EE maximization with system 1 and instrumental rationality with system 2 processing. For Collins, individual 'choices' generally reflect EE maximization, but ritual-based emotions can be so strong that people do not even consider alternatives (Collins, 1993: 223–225). This goes beyond alternative theories by specifying the social processes that make norms, scripts or other cognitions sufficiently strong to produce an automatic-spontaneous rather than a rational-calculating decision mode (see also discussion in subsequent sub-sections).

5. Collins (2004: chapter 9) even suggests that individual personalities are results of IRCs. This is too complex an issue to be dealt with in this article.

6. Which measure is appropriate depends of course on practical constraints and the exact research question. There are also established survey instruments tapping EE (see Baker, 2019 for an overview) as well as physiological measures (Launay et al., 2016).

7. And vice versa, experiments could also be designed to study effects of past experiences on selection into rituals.

ORCID iD

Paul Marx https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4310-9228

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