Boundaries of Obligation:

Geographic, National, and Racial Communities in American Politics

Cara J. Wong
University of Michigan

A famous scene from the movie *Boys Town* shows a young Mickey Rooney carrying an even younger child on his back. When asked about his burden, Rooney's character responds, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." The articulation of "my brother" helps viewers see the act as an obligation to be embraced, rather than as an encumbrance to be avoided. More generally, the answer to the question of "who counts as my brother?" or "who is a member of my community?" is central in a democracy where citizens debate to whom the government should allocate resources. This book focuses on how people define their communities — particularly in regards to geography, nation, and race — and examines the extent to which these psychological community boundaries affect the redistributive attitudes and beliefs of individuals.

Although this connection between membership and obligation is obvious in the rhetoric of legislative debates and Sunday morning sermons, scholars of public opinion tend to rely on self-interest, group-interest, and ideology as explanations for how decisions are made about who has a right to services and resources; we want to help ourselves, help those in our groups, and apply our values and ideas about the role of government more broadly. However, each of these motivations has boundaries that are subjective and blurred. Self-interest may include one's immediate family, but it could also apply to one's relatives and friends. Group-interest — whether it is used as a proxy for self-interest or as a spur for action irrespective of self-interest — also depends on how one defines the boundaries of one's group or groups; does a white American, for example, really want to help *all* whites and *only* whites? Even ideology, which appears on its face to apply broadly a set of beliefs, is almost always constrained by boundaries: egalitarians seek equality of opportunity (and often outcome) for all Americans, but it is rare that they seek an adjustment of the American standard of living to match that of Sierra Leone or of

Cambodia. Where the boundaries of self-interest, group-interest, and ideology are drawn all rely on how people define their communities.

My work makes explicit that perceptions about membership are linked to judgments about obligation in the minds of ordinary people. In this book, I argue that Americans make choices about the obligations and responsibilities of their government based on their own understandings of who belongs in their community (and who does not belong). In order to understand individual attitudes and decisions about public policies, I explain that we must first understand whom individuals include within the boundaries of their community and who falls outside those boundaries. I show that "community" is a concept that helps us understand the decision making of ordinary Americans more easily and fully than other concepts; it is a higher order concept that subsumes within itself calculations of self and group interests and applications of ideology or values. I demonstrate that perceptions of community can be measured in the minds of individual people, and thus it can be a powerful tool in empirical analyses of the attitudes of Americans.

This book explains how people define their communities, and it examines the extent to which these definitions affect their redistributive attitudes and beliefs. It is intuitive to most Americans that redistributive policies should privilege the needs of people living in the United States over those in other countries. This simple intuition is an example of the power of parochialism — or the limits imposed by one's community boundary, in this case the nation — in the assessments of obligation by citizens. Moral parochialism may be even more restrictive: one's sense of obligation may be limited to the needy of "our own neighborhood," "our race," or more generally, "people like us." I argue that in the real world, each person has his or her own "circle of we" within which obligations and duties function, and thus, an individual's perception of community boundaries does not always coincide with the larger social definitions of groups to which an individual belongs. We as social scientists often assume that a Jew cares mainly for other Jews, or that a black woman pays closest attention to issues that affect other black women, but these assumptions may not correspond with how individuals see themselves and their communities. In this book I emphasize the difference between an "objective" group to which one might

be assumed to belong (a practice generally accepted in the political science literature on self- and group-interest), and the subjective communities an individual actually perceives. As I show in my book, their effects on political attitudes are distinct and different. In fact, subjective communities are equally, if not more, important than the former.

People define those to whom they have special duties in two ways: (1) people differentiate among others on the basis of community boundaries defined geographically, and (2) people differentiate among others on the basis of community ties defined socially. In this book, I focus on three types of communities — local, national, and racial — and how they are interrelated. Generally, the local communities are geographic, the racial communities are social, and the national communities are both geographic and social. Scholars have studied the dynamics of gated communities and neighborhoods, how notions of American identity affect immigration attitudes, and the political effects of racial identity and consciousness, but usually these topics are treated in isolation from one another. In this book, I argue that focusing on people's sense of community provides us with an overarching concept that unifies theories of reference groups, social identities, and ethnocentrism across the realms of local, immigration, and racial politics.

Overview of the chapters

This argument about the effects of community is developed over the course of six chapters. The introductory chapter summarizes the argument and situates it in the previous literature. It then provides an outline of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 explains the concept of community as it has been used historically by scholars, and also how it is used in everyday language by Americans. I begin by discussing how political scientists, sociologists and psychologists study communities and groups. Then I clarify how my argument fits into the broader literature. However, how scholars understand community is only part of the larger picture; therefore, I also focus on how ordinary citizens think of their own communities.

My analyses in this chapter involve different types of research methods, and this diversity, I believe, makes my discussion richer and fuller. I use open and close-ended questions that I designed for the 1997 National Election Studies (NES) Pilot Study to measure the composition of membership in communities — i.e., what are the different groups in society that people perceive to fall within the boundaries of one's community? I also draw on transcripts of interviews that were conducted for the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke as part of a national documentary project on civic engagement. The interviews capture how people talk about "community" and whether some sense of obligation or duty is implied by its usage and definition. I use these transcripts to provide a rich content analysis, which complements the analyses of survey responses.

Each of the three chapters that follow address a different type of community, explaining the tensions between objective and subjective boundaries, while showing variations in the categorization of the self and others into the community. Each chapter provides evidence that how people define their community affects who they are willing to help and who they think should benefit from government policies. I focus on three separate communities that not only serve as examples of the range from geographic to relational communities, but that also highlight many important issues in the ongoing American debates about multiculturalism and identity politics.

Chapter 3 focuses on the extent to which people feel a sense of community based on geography. Geography can be defined as one's neighborhood or even one's continent. Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Social Benchmark Survey, my analyses demonstrate that a sense of geographic community matters for attitudes about political institutions, policies that affect groups in that locality, and political participation. For example, I show that Americans' feelings of belonging within their neighborhoods are related to greater civic engagement and trust in government. More specifically, I show that those who feel they belong to their community are more willing to act on its behalf than those who do not include others physically nearby in their community. In addition, my work shows quite definitively that this sense of community is portable. As they move from place to place, Americans are able to pull up roots and resettle relatively quickly, repeating the process of developing feelings of

community belonging in new locations. Even though our citizens are relatively mobile, they seem to shift community boundaries as they move: one's heart or community, it appears, is truly where one's home is.

Chapter 4 examines how an individual may draw the boundaries of her national community. Using data from the GSS, the chapter provides evidence that the exclusion of those deemed not "truly American" affects not only attitudes about immigrants, but also attitudes towards policies regarding other groups in the United States. I show that most Americans are not willing to extend the boundaries of their national community to encompass the legal definitions of citizenship. One particularly significant finding is that many people believe that being born in America, for example, is important in defining the line between Us and Them. The importance of this restrictive definition of who is "truly American" cannot be overstated, for it drives attitudes about who can partake of the American Dream and who should benefit from government services. Thus, while Chapter 3 showed how people's sense of community shifts with them as they move from place to place, Chapter 4 demonstrates how citizens treat those outside certain important community boundaries differently than those within. When it comes to judgments about public policy, it is clear that "objective" or legal definitions do not matter nearly as much as the individual psychological boundaries that define a person's idea of his or her national community.

Chapter 5 provides a similar argument about the importance of people's perceptions of communities based on racial and ethnic characteristics. However, in this chapter the subjective community is larger than the objective one, which is limited to others of the same race or ethnicity. Using data from the NES, GSS, National Black Election Study, and the Latino National Political Study, I show that when Americans choose to extend the boundaries of their perceived community to cross DuBois's "color line," this extension of group boundaries has strong effects on their racial attitudes. My groundbreaking study in this chapter shows clearly that whites who include African-Americans in their community are more likely than whites who do not to support government efforts to help blacks and affirmative action. Much research has focused on the United States being "two nations" — white and black — or a "nation within a nation," but we need to rethink the intuition (scholarly and otherwise) that our fates, attitudes, and actions are decided solely by the race society assigns us. In a democracy based on

the ideal of pluralism, it is only communities that extend beyond color lines that can lead to policies that benefit numerical minorities.

By analyzing three different types of communities and more than seven national surveys in the book, I find empirical support for the theoretical argument that Walzer makes in *Spheres of Justice* (1983, 31): "The primary good that we distribute to one another is membership in some human community. And what we do with regard to membership structures all our other distributive choices: it determines with whom we make those choices, from whom we require obedience and collect taxes, to whom we allocate goods and services."