

Response to Jonathan Fox Letter: Errol A. Henderson

I think it necessary to address some issues recently raised in Jonathan's Fox's accusations regarding my publication with Ze'ev Maoz (M&H 2020). My response will be focused and limited, at this point, for a variety of reasons, the most important one being that I'm presently on medical leave.

Before addressing substantive claims and responses, I want to make clear that given that Fox seems to try to rationalize his actions based on, inter alia, some alleged lack of timeliness in Maoz and Henderson's response to his initial email during a global pandemic should, maybe more than anything else, exposes his true motives. Nonetheless, given that Fox's comments are addressed to me as well, I think it appropriate to weigh in.

Let's get straight to the point:

The context for what Fox critiques on pp. 55-6 of M&H 2020 is this on p. 55:

"Methodological issues emerge even when the claims are based on descriptive evidence. First, consider the argument about religious resurgence that we reviewed above. In many cases, no evidence is provided to substantiate this far-reaching claim. In other cases, quantitative evidence is provided, but a close inspection reveals that it is quite misleading. For example, Jonathan Fox—one of the targets of the anti-quantification literature (e.g. Fitzgerald 2011)—has collected a valuable dataset on religion–state relations, and we use this dataset along with several others throughout this book. However, Fox (2015, 232) claims that "states have been heavily involved in religion, and this trend has been consistently increasing in strength between 1990 and 2008. The increasing ubiquity of government involvement in religion is perhaps the most obvious and incontrovertible result that emerges from this analysis." One of the figures he provides shows a consistent rise in the levels of religious discrimination, religious regulation, and religious legislation over this period. However, as Figure 2.1 shows, this trend is meaningful only if one does not control for the number of states in the international system."

The very next sentence we state:

"Over the period 1989–2008, the number of states in the international system increased by 19.9 percent (from 161 to 193)."

We never explicitly state that Fox's data begin at 1989—only that our analysis of Fox's data does. We could've been clearer in making this point but it's hardly the "grievous error" Fox pretends it to be. Fox has no sense of irony or sarcasm, when Maoz refers to a "grievous error" he is obviously being tongue in cheek—and the original email Maoz intended to put that reference in quotes to indicate as much. This is because Fox's original claim in the email was so ridiculous that it was clear he was at best making a mountain out of a molehill. Let me explain, without needless duplicating Maoz's previous points but reinforcing some where necessary.

Fox is confused in referring to *Table 2.1* when he means *Figure 2.1* in the following in the letter he posted to his website, the ARDA website, and sent to a list of recipients he continues to refuse to share with us so that we can share our responses to the same audience to which Fox made his initial accusations:

“On pages 55 to 56 they analyze data they *claim* to be from my RAS dataset to critique one of my findings. The finding they critique is that religious legislation, religious discrimination against minorities, and government regulation of the majority religion have been consistently rising since 1990. They use what they say is round 2 of RAS (RAS2) to challenge this claim. In table 2.1 on page 56 they provide results which finds, using the year 1989 as a baseline, that this is not the case for two of three dependent variables both they and I analyze.”

Then Fox makes this unambiguous claim, whose most relevant part I highlight:

“To be clear, both the text and the table in Maoz and Henderson’s book on pages 55 and 56 clearly state 1989 is the baseline year for their analysis. ***Yet I have never collected data from 1989 as part of the RAS dataset.*** All versions of the RAS dataset begin in 1990.”

But the coding, as Maoz pointed out in his response letter and subsequent email to Fox, indicates that Fox **must have collected data from 1989** because the coding of one of his variables is that they are from “**1990 or earlier**”. For this coding in Fox’s data to be correct then some of the data Fox collected **must be** from earlier than 1990.

This clearly contradicts Fox’s exaggerated claim that “***I have never collected data from 1989 as part of the RAS dataset***”. ***If he has never collected 1989 data, then users of his data are obliged to ask the question: from what years did Fox collect data prior to 1990 to make this coding rule accurate?***

We interpreted “1990 or earlier” as 1989. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption given Fox’s own description of his data in his data set. For this to be an error such as Fox pretends it is, then the actual year for the observations must be prior to 1989—since Fox’s coding’s list “1990 or earlier”, and if we are incorrect in inferring this is 1989 then it must be 1988 or some earlier time point.

So, here’s a direct question for Fox: “From what years did you collect data for those cases that you claim are from “1990 or earlier””?

Surely a scholar as attentive to such detail regarding data points and representations of data can provide a simple, single sentence answer to that question?

Further, following Fox’s logic as applied to M&H 2000: Fox’s failure to specify the actual temporal range of his variable which is presumed to be 1990 but may derive from 1989 or even earlier calls into question ***all of his analyses and publications*** that rely on RAS2 and RAS3 since—following Fox’s (il)logic as applied to M&H 2000—it is a “grievous error” to rely on 1989 observations when utilizing Fox’s data because he has “***never collected data from 1989 as part of the RAS dataset***”; and according to Fox “***Using data from 1989 from my RAS dataset should be impossible unless the data was somehow manipulated or extrapolated***”; but his own coding rules indicate that he relies on observations from 1989 or prior. This is the logical, empirical and practical conundrum of taking Fox’s accusations seriously. I am not suggesting that this (il)logic should be applied to Fox’s work—or that of any other scholar—but only making the point that this is what Fox’s contradictory logic as applied to our work suggests.

But as Fox has demonstrated in his “non-answers” to Maoz’s claims and questions in his response letter, he is not interested in the substantive issues his “critique” logically implicate: he wants to

pretend that he is “outraged” that we drew inferences consistent with his coding rules from his ambiguous data.

What is clear is that the ambiguity is in Fox’s data itself. To take from this ambiguity and then assert that users of his data are incorrect in drawing reasonable inferences from it is at best inconsiderate and at worst self-serving.

But Fox doesn’t stop there, he goes on to assert that

“Using data from 1989 from my RAS dataset should be impossible unless the data was somehow manipulated or extrapolated. There is no indication anywhere in the book that such a manipulation or extrapolation had been done and if it had been done I would expect this to be explicitly documented in the book which, again, it is not.”

No. it doesn’t, it just requires a reasonable inference that “1990 or earlier” may refer to 1989.

Instead of addressing this ambiguity in his data, and noting that our inference was reasonable—even if mistaken given the ambiguity in Fox’s coding rules, he attempts to turn this molehill into a mountain and attempts to declaim our broader critique of his findings using these data on the specific points in Figure 2.1 and then to generalize these to the findings in the entire book. This takes quite a bit of nerve.

So, when Fox says “my critique of this analysis not only calls into question their conclusions regarding my findings, but it reveals basic errors which call into question all findings presented in the book”; It shows how disingenuous is his later claim that his main concern was what appears on pp. 55-6 of M&H 2020.

Fox is also incorrect in his assertion that:

“Rather, in multiple parts of the book they claim that the 1989 data is part of the original RAS2 dataset. This claim is absolutely incorrect.”

We make no such claim in the book. Fox, please provide the page numbers of these “multiple parts of the book” where we claim that the 1989 data is part of the original RAS2 dataset. Show the pages where we make this explicit claim.

A reader has only to turn to Table A5.1 to see that it is clear that we represent Fox’s Religion and State Dataset (RSD) data accurately acknowledging that it begins in 1990.

Our use of 1989 only comes into question because of Fox’s coding rule in his data—which he has yet to address, much less deny—that states his observations are from “1990 or earlier”, as Maoz pointed out in his initial response letter.

Fox later claims that:

“Based on my reading of their table 2.1, if 1989 had not been included in their analysis, which would make 1990 the baseline (as it was in my analysis), their results would likely have not contradicted my original findings.”

Fox is clearly wrong; and Maoz's response letter demonstrates this clearly and unequivocally. Fox includes no additional analyses that support his claim—in my belief because he has no interest in evidence in this regard. In contrast, Maoz provides evidence from re-analysis of Fox's latest data that our conclusions are justified, supported, and reinforce our findings in M&H 2020.

Still Fox fails to respond to Maoz's reanalysis of the data in question—even using Fox's updated data—to show that our findings in the book are still supported (i.e. they contradict Fox's empirical claims in that regard); but he admonishes that we need to re-run all the analyses in the book while he fails to even provide any analysis to support his baseless claim that “if 1989 had not been included in their analysis, which would make 1990 the baseline (as it was in my analysis), their results would likely have not contradicted my original findings”.

Fox has not responded substantively to this with his own results or acknowledged that his conclusion “based on [his] reading”, which suggests our “results would likely have not contradicted my original findings” is wrong. The re-analysis only further contradicts his original findings.

Instead, Fox attempts to divert attention from this obvious flaw in his argument and hollow justification for his “outrage”—an “outrage” so great that he was compelled to alert the religion and IR academic community regarding it. Fox's attempt at diversion is obvious.

Fox attempts to condemn the entire project with his claim that “an unacceptable lack of rigorousness in how their dataset was constructed that is so significant it would not be inappropriate to characterize it as carelessness.” This takes quite a bit of nerve given that Fox has not reviewed our data and his own data from which he has published a book and several articles has clear ambiguities such as that which Maoz outlined in his previous letter.

It's clear that his intention is not to “set the record straight” about the one table because if it was then he would engage the findings from the additional analyses Maoz provided; but he ignores those. Instead it's evident that his actual intention is to impugn the research and the entire study itself which is why he attempts to call all of the conclusions into question.

What Fox's exchanges with Maoz has demonstrated is that his aim is to obfuscate. He hopes that observers will read his long-winded and poorly focused response and ignore the detailed response Maoz has provided to his baseless claims.

I hope that editors, foundations and grant-making institutions, will recognize Fox's tremendous biases and apparent willingness to misrepresent with respect to our work that he not serve as a reviewer of any of our work related to this publication. The most positive aspect of Fox's engagement of our work is that it exposes this bias.

Finally, as I noted above, that Jonathan Fox seems to try to rationalize his actions based on some alleged lack of timeliness in Maoz and Henderson's response to his initial email during a global pandemic should, maybe more than anything else, expose his true motives.

Errol A. Henderson 5/8/20