



# Red, white, and blue enough to be green: Effects of moral framing on climate change attitudes and conservation behaviors



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants were presented with one of three different moral frames.
- Political liberals were consistent in their pro-environmental attitudes across conditions.
- Political conservatives displayed more pro-environmental attitudes after a binding moral frame.
- Attitude change was mediated by perceptions that the moral frame came from the ingroup.

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## ABSTRACT

Widespread political polarization on issues related to environmental conservation may be partially explained by the chronic framing of persuasive messages in ideological and moral terms that hold greater appeal for liberals and egalitarians. A series of three experiments examined the extent to which variations in the moral framing of pro-environmental messaging affect liberals' vs. conservatives' conservation intentions, climate change attitudes, and donations to an environmental organization. While liberals did not generally differ across conditions, conservatives shifted substantially in the pro-environmental direction after exposure to a binding moral frame, in which protecting the natural environment was portrayed as a matter of obeying authority, defending the purity of nature, and demonstrating one's patriotism to the United States. This shift was pronounced when conservatives perceived the congruent appeal to be a stronger argument. Evidence of mediated moderation is also presented, in which the attitudinal and behavioral shifts for conservatives were a function of the degree to which the values present in the pro-environmental appeal were perceived as coming from the ingroup. Discussion focuses on future directions for more precisely specifying moral framing effects, and on considering the pros and cons of targeted messaging for the sustainability of environmental attitude change.

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## 1. Introduction

It has been clearly established that there is substantial political polarization on environmental attitudes and behaviors. Relative to conservatives, liberals tend to report greater engagement in environmentally friendly behaviors, support for environmental regulation, and concern about environmental problems, such as climate change (Dunlap, Xiao, & McCright, 2001; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Gromet, Kunreuther, & Larrick, 2013; Guber, 2013; Konisky, Milyo, & Richardson, 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). One recent explanation for this divergence is that environmental issues are typically framed in ideological and moral terms that hold greater appeal for liberals and egalitarians (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Feygina et al., 2010; Kidwell, Farmer, & Hardesty, 2013). In other words, it may not be concern about the

environment which is primarily being rejected by conservatives, but rather the moral tone of the prevailing environmental discourse, in which practicing “environmentalism” signifies being unfaithful to one's ingroup and associated conservative values.

A few studies have highlighted the relatively narrow and biased moral framing of environmental communications. For example, work by Clayton, Koehn, and Grover (2013) indicates that the common tendency to present environmental crises as *injustices* is not highly appealing to conservatives, and is much more consonant with the moral concerns of liberals. Similarly, Feinberg and Willer (2013) demonstrate that media communications strongly favor framing environmental issues in terms of levels of *harm* and *care*, which are more relevant to liberals than conservatives, as predicted by Moral Foundations Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). These findings are consistent with those reported by Nisbet, Markowitz, and Kotcher (2012), who summarize the chronic emphasis of environmental campaigns on liberal morals, and argue that we need to “appeal to a greater

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bandwidth of moral foundations and to be fluent in a variety of moral languages” (p. 18) (see also Markowitz & Shariff, 2012).

Mindful of the political polarization on environmental issues and the evidence that environmental discourse is prototypically presented in terms of liberal values, three recent investigations have manipulated the moral framing of environmental problems in order to examine how this may moderate conservatives' attitudes and behaviors. Feinberg and Willer (2013) found that framing pro-environmental rhetoric in terms of purity and sanctity, moral values resonating to a greater degree with conservatives (Graham et al., 2009), largely eliminated the difference between liberals' and conservatives' environmental attitudes. Kidwell et al. (2013) demonstrated that persuasive appeals congruent with conservatives' "binding" moral concerns (e.g. ingroup loyalty, respect for authority) increased conservatives' intentions to recycle and their actual recycling habits. Feygina et al. (2010) found that framing a pro-environmental message as patriotic and environmental conservation as that which will "protect and preserve the American way of life" increased high system justifiers' intentions to engage in conservation behaviors and willingness to sign a pro-environmental petition. Taken together, this research suggests that framing environmental issues in terms of values that have greater appeal to political conservatives may substantially increase pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors.

These recent efforts to shift environmental attitudes and behaviors can be valuably interpreted through the lens of persuasion research on matching effects. In general, work in this area indicates that attitude and behavior change will be greater when persuasive communications are congruent with the content, structure, and/or function of the recipient's attitude in the relevant domain (Maio & Haddock, 2015; Watt, Maio, Haddock, & Johnson, 2009). The strategic use of assorted moral and linguistic frames to alter environmental attitudes by Feinberg and Willer (2013) and others appears to be effective, at least in part, by virtue of its success in matching the self- or value-expressive functions of respondents' attitudes.

In highly politicized and contentious domains, such as with environmental issues in the U.S., the attitudes of political liberals and conservatives are likely to serve important self-expressive functions, acting as vehicles for conveying ingroup identity and core ingroup values. As Kahan (2013) explains, ideologically-motivated reasoning is often highly relevant to environmental decision-making and people may act, first and foremost, in a manner consistent with affirming their loyalty and membership in important groups. From this perspective, liberals' expression of more positive environmental attitudes may be seen as an affirmation of their liberal identity (i.e. the attitude is consistent with the attitudes of other ingroup members whom they know and like) and as an expression of their moral concerns about issues of harm/care and fairness/justice – the liberal moral preoccupations (Graham et al., 2009) in which environmental messages are prototypically framed (Clayton et al., 2013; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012). In contrast, many conservatives may generally express more negative environmental attitudes as an affirmation of their conservative identity (i.e. expressing doubt about the seriousness of climate change is consistent with the attitudes of other ingroup members) and as a rejection of the liberal voices and moral concerns that are most frequently paired with pro-environmental messages.

Just as an attitude may persist because it meets a functional need, so to, "attitude change occurs to meet a functional need" (Watt et al., 2009, p. 194). Presently, the functional need under consideration is the acknowledgement and affirmation of ingroup membership and important ingroup values. Interpreted in this manner, conservatives in Feinberg and Willer's (2013) Study 3 were able to fulfill this self-expressive function through asserting *more positive* environmental attitudes because doing so was framed as an affirmation of conservatives' moral concerns about purity and sanctity. Similarly, the more positive environmental attitudes and behavior of high system justifiers in Feygina et al.'s (2010) Study 3 fulfilled a self-expressive function because doing so

became a declaration of patriotic values. For conservatives then, attitudes appear likely to shift in the pro-environmental direction under conditions in which self- or value-expressive functions can actually be fulfilled – rather than stifled, threatened, or deemed irrelevant – by agreeing with a pro-environmental agenda. Prior research suggests that moral framing may not substantially influence liberals' environmental attitudes (e.g. Feinberg & Willer, 2013), perhaps due to greater attitude internalization in this domain (see Kidwell et al., 2013, for an exception, which we return to in the General discussion section), bolstered through the chronic presentation of environmental issues in terms of liberal values.

The present investigation extends this work on environmental messaging by examining the effects of frames that completely match (vs. mismatch) the moral values of liberals vs. conservatives, as informed by Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009). Additionally, we (1) examine the effects of these appeals on a broader range of environmental attitudes than has previously been assessed, (2) evaluate participants' subjective perceptions of the message source as a novel mediating pathway, and (3) take a first look at the relevance of perceived message strength in helping us understand this and other emerging research on moral framing.

The few prior experiments that have incorporated domains relevant to Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) in pro-environmental messages have either utilized subsets of the individualizing and binding morals or contained small confounds. For example, Feinberg and Willer (2013) manipulated only harm/care vs. purity/sanctity. Feygina et al. (2010) examined the effects of just a patriotic appeal – inspired by system justification perspectives (e.g. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), but clearly overlapping with the ingroup/loyalty dimension of MFT. And Kidwell et al. (2013), in Studies 1 through 3, explicitly referenced purity (a conservative moral domain) only in the individualizing (liberal) appeal and did not address respect for authority figures in the binding appeal; and, in Study 4, explicitly addressed purity in both the binding and individualizing appeals.

In the present series of three experiments, participants were exposed to pro-environmental appeals that very explicitly addressed the full set of moral domains identified by Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009): the *individualizing* domains of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, and the *binding* domains of ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. In the *individualizing* condition (designed to match the moral concerns of political liberals and mismatch those of political conservatives), a pro-environmental message focused on the importance of a caring and compassionate attitude, on protecting nature from harm, and on the pursuit of fairness and justice in nature and humankind. In the *binding* condition (designed to match the moral concerns of political conservatives and mismatch those of political liberals), the message provided arguments for how a pro-environmental agenda demonstrates loyalty to the ingroup, respect for authority, maintenance of purity and sanctity in human endeavors, and patriotism and pride in the United States. In our first two experiments, some participants instead received a *control* appeal, containing a brief, generic call to address environmental issues.

In Experiment 1, we examined the effects of political orientation and moral framing condition on intentions to engage in a set of conservation behaviors and attitudes about climate change. In general, it was hypothesized that the effects of political orientation on environmental attitudes and behavior would be moderated by the moral framing of the pro-environmental appeal to which participants were exposed. In other words, we expected to see the typical political polarization in the control condition (which should mimic public opinion poll data) and in the individualizing condition (which was designed to affirm liberal, but not conservative morals). In contrast, we anticipated a relative *increase* in pro-environmental attitudes among conservatives in the binding condition, where conservative morals were affirmed, providing a functional match on identity and values for this end of the political spectrum.

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