



Expanding the range of environmental values: Political orientation, moral foundations, and the common ingroup



Christopher Wolsko, PhD

Oregon State University – Cascades, Graduate and Research Center, 650 SW Columbia St., Bend, Oregon 97702, United States

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ABSTRACT

Resolving widespread political polarization on environmental issues, particularly in the U.S., remains an intractable problem. Data from a pair of experiments illuminate a way forward in which a range of different moral and political values may be affirmed under the rubric of a common environmental destiny. Findings from Experiment 1 demonstrated that conservatives' pro-environmental attitudes substantially increased after an appeal to binding and liberty moral concerns. In Experiment 2, drawing from work on the common ingroup identity model in intergroup relations, a second experiment demonstrated the enhanced efficacy of an appeal that affirmed diverse ideological and moral values in the context of a shared concern for the health of the natural environment. Discussion focuses on the social identity processes responsible for such effects, the resistance to change of some environmental attitudes such as climate change skepticism, and strategies to achieve common moral ground across the political spectrum.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Political polarization

Widespread political polarization is commonly observed in assessments of environmental attitudes and behaviors, especially in the U.S. Relative to liberals, conservatives tend to report lower levels of engagement in environmentally friendly behaviors, weaker support for environmental regulation, and reduced 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; Rossen, Dunlop, & Lawrence, 2015). Guided by the interpretive frameworks of system justification theory (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) and moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007), scholars have recently suggested that this profound divergence may be precipitated to a significant degree by the prototypical framing of environmental issues in ideological and moral language that is more appealing to liberals and egalitarians (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Feygina et al., 2010; Kidwell, Farmer, & Hardesty, 2013; Rossen et al., 2015). In

essence, a proverbial liberal preaching to the choir may compel conservative audiences to reject many pro-environmental messages in the service of affirming their own social identity and associated ingroup values – including respect for the socioeconomic status quo, obedience to religious doctrine, and protection of individual liberty. Liberal moral cues present in persuasive appeals thus have the potential to create a sense of value dissimilarity with conservative targets and to facilitate rejection of the message content that is paired with them. In fact, it may not be concern for the natural environment per se which is chiefly being rejected by conservatives, but rather the moral tone and the ideological implications of the prevailing environmental discourse, in which practicing “environmentalism” signifies being unfaithful to one's political ingroup and associated values.

1.2. Moral foundations and the narrow range of environmental appeals

The present research examines how key concepts from moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007) help us understand the range of environmental attitudes that exist and the conditions under which they may be expressed differently. Moral foundations theory posits that moral concerns and the cultural patterns (e.g., norms, values) that they shape coalesce around five core “foundations,” characterized by attention to whether the

E-mail address: chris.wolsko@osucascades.edu.

following are present in a given situation: (1) harm vs. care; (2) fairness, justice, and reciprocity; (3) ingroup loyalty, or patriotism; (4) obedience to authority in an established hierarchy; and (5) purity and sanctity. Additionally, a sixth foundation has been more tentatively proposed, characterized by concerns about personal liberty and whether freedom is being maintained in relationship to one's lifestyle and to one's economic situation (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). While different cultures will emphasize different foundations in daily life, the theory and associated empirical work suggest that this is the set from which they choose (for a review, see Graham et al., 2012).

Within the U.S., studies have confirmed that political liberals tend to be primarily concerned with the first two foundations (harm/care and fairness/justice), referred to together as *individualizing* because they give primacy to the rights and well-being of individuals. In contrast, political conservatives tend to be more concerned with the other three core foundations (ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and purity/sanctity), referred to collectively as *binding* because they emphasize maintaining group integrity and social order (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2012). In terms of the *liberty* dimension, there is some indication that conservatives are generally more strongly concerned with preserving freedoms from economic and government regulations than are political liberals (Iyer et al., 2012; Rossen et al., 2015).

These different patterns of moral concerns have major relevance for understanding environmental attitudes because recent data indicates that the framing of environmental appeals tends to be relatively narrow and biased towards those individualizing values cherished by political liberals. For example, Feinberg and Willer (2013) demonstrate that media communications strongly favor framing environmental issues in terms of *harm* and *care*. Similarly, 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 fairness and justice dimension of liberal moral concerns (see also Markowitz & Shariff, 2012; Nisbet, Markowitz, & Kotcher, 2012). Thus, when confronted with such liberal moral appeals, conservative audiences may reject pro-environmental messages because doing so feels like an affirmation of conservatives values and identity. But what if pro-environmental appeals were more inclusive, and served to promote moral values across the political spectrum?

1.3. Reframing environmental appeals

If we assume that conservatives and liberals generally have different patterns of moral concerns and that we desire to increase pro-environmental attitudes, then a next step in this research trajectory is to consider framing issues in ways that are more consonant with the moral concerns of conservatives – to expand the range of environmental values, or, as Nisbet et al. (2012, p. 18) put it, to “appeal to a greater bandwidth of moral foundations.” The goal is not to deceive audiences with lip service to particular moral taglines, but rather to observe the ways in which certain conservative values have been chronically marginalized from pro-environmental discourse and to think creatively about how including conservative values in a collective conversation may galvanize support for environmental causes. We conducted a pair of experiments in order to examine the influence of different moral communications on the environmental attitudes of political liberals vs. conservatives in the U.S.

These two experiments built on insights from four recent investigations into moral framing effects on environmental attitudes. In one of these studies, 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. Feinberg and Willer (2013) found that framing pro-environmental rhetoric in terms of purity and sanctity, binding moral values resonating to a greater degree with conservatives, largely eliminated the difference between liberals' and conservatives' environmental attitudes. And finally, persuasive appeals congruent with conservatives' binding moral concerns have also been shown to increase intentions to recycle and actual recycling behaviors (Kidwell et al., 2013), as well as donations to an environmental organization, conservation intentions, and concern about and belief in climate change (Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). Together, this research suggests that framing environmental issues in terms of values that have greater appeal to political conservatives may substantially increase their pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors.

The experiments described below offer unique extensions of this existing work by: (1) incorporating the moral dimension of liberty into message frames; (2) assessing the effects of moral framing on connectedness to nature, a core construct with a great deal of explanatory power in emerging work on environmental attitudes and behavior; (3) investigating a mediating pathway focused specifically on the issue of perceived value similarity between the target and source of the pro-environmental message; and (4) drawing from the social psychological and literature on intergroup relations and self-affirmation to develop and test a novel moral frame that both affirms conservative values and asserts a common ingroup and shared goal of environmental protection across the political spectrum.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Overview

Despite the strong political polarization observed on environmental issues, it is interesting to entertain the possibility that there may actually be nothing inherently anti-environmentalist about conservative values. Instead, conservative opposition to environmentalist agendas may, in large part, be a casualty of the political culture wars in the U.S., in which one often feels compelled to take sides in the service of affirming one's social identity. Messaging may be most effective when issues are framed in such a way that practicing environmentalism affirms rather than ignores, or outright clashes with, one's values and identity.

In this first of two experiments, participants were exposed to one of three pro-environmental appeals that either emphasized the chronic *individualizing* moral concerns of liberals, the *binding and liberty* moral concerns of conservatives, or simply presented a general appeal to be concerned about the health of the natural environment. Specifically, in the *individualizing* condition (designed to represent a traditional pro-environmental appeal, corresponding with the moral concerns of political liberals), 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 and liberty* condition (designed instead to correspond with the moral concerns of political conservatives), the pro-environmental message focused on the importance of loyalty to the ingroup (especially in terms of patriotism and pride in the United States), respect for authority, maintaining purity and sanctity, personal responsibility, and freedom from government intervention. Participants in a *control* condition instead received a brief, generic call to address environmental issues.

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