



Editor Choice

Processing the papal encyclical through perceptual filters: Pope Francis, identity-protective cognition, and climate change concern



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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that when individuals encounter new information, they interpret it through perceptual 'filters' of prior beliefs, relevant social identities, and messenger credibility. In short, evaluations are not based solely on message accuracy, but also on the extent to which the message and messenger are amenable to the values of one's social groups. Here, we use the release of Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical as the context for a natural experiment to examine the role of prior values in climate change cognition. Based on our analysis of panel data collected before and after the encyclical's release, we find that political ideology moderated views of papal credibility on climate change for those participants who were aware of the encyclical. We also find that, in some contexts, non-Catholics who were aware of the encyclical granted Pope Francis additional credibility compared to the non-Catholics who were unaware of it, yet Catholics granted the Pope high credibility regardless of encyclical awareness. Importantly, papal credibility mediated the conditional relationships between encyclical awareness and acceptance of the Pope's messages on climate change. We conclude by discussing how our results provide insight into cognitive processing of new information about controversial issues.

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1. Introduction

"People who complain that all that [Pope Francis] has done thus far is more style than substance are missing their Marshall McLuhan, that 'the medium is the message. . . ' He is clearly a man of the people, and the people are responding in kind."

[Catholic Deacon William T. Ditewig, Ph.D. (2013).]

Written only weeks after Pope Francis's papacy began, Deacon William Ditewig's words remain remarkably prophetic as the Pope has repeatedly offered an influential voice on a variety of issues, ranging from the plights of refugees to diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. His popularity, resonating as much with general populations of Catholic constituents (e.g., Europe, United States, Latin America; see [Pew Research Center, 2014a](#)) as with A-list public figures (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah Winfrey; see [Asay, 2016](#)), has crystallized into a sort of celebrity status as "The People's Pope" ([Chua-Eoan & Dias, 2013](#)).

The long history of celebrity appeals suggests that popular figures can leverage their own status to raise awareness and motivate action (see [Hoffman & Tan, 2013](#)).¹ A few months prior to the watershed Paris Climate Conference² of 2015, Pope Francis issued his own "celebrity" appeal urging global action toward climate change mitigation. His papal encyclical,³ *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* ([Francis, 2015](#)), was released in June 2015 to much fanfare from climate change mitigation advocates. The effect of the document hinged largely on Pope Francis leveraging his moral authority to influence public opinion on issues related to climate change. In particular, *Laudato si'* advanced the message that there

¹ Such appeals do not always coincide with scientific evidence; controversies surrounding vaccines and genetically modified organisms demonstrate that celebrity appeals can succeed in direct conflict with scientific consensus ([Caulfield & Fahy, 2016](#)).

² The Paris Climate Conference resulted in an agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that aimed, among other things, to hold the increase in global average temperatures to less than 2 °C above pre-industrial levels. The United States signed the agreement on April 22, 2016.

³ A papal encyclical is a letter concerning Catholic doctrine written by the Pope and typically disseminated among bishops and Church leadership. *Laudato si'* was notable for, among other things, addressing the entire global population rather than just Catholic leadership ([Goodstein & Gillis, 2015](#)).

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is a moral imperative to act to address climate change because, among other reasons, it threatens God's creation and disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable. Advocates for climate change mitigation hoped that this moral appeal by the popular leader (see [Pew, 2014b](#)) of a socially-conservative religious institution would increase climate change concern among U.S. conservatives in general and Catholic conservatives in particular.

Was *Laudato si'* effective? Previous research demonstrated that, while Pope Francis may have amplified perceptions that climate change is a moral issue, American climate change attitudes remain polarized along party ideology after the release of *Laudato si'* ([Li, Hilgard, Scheufele, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2016](#); [Schuldt, Pearson, Romero-Canyas, & Larson-Konar, 2017](#)). In this study, we examine *Laudato si'* in the framework of climate change cognition. Specifically, we ask whether awareness of the 2015 encyclical influenced beliefs about two of the pope's arguments: the seriousness of climate change and the effects of climate change on the poor, and whether perceptions of papal credibility on climate change mediated these relationships. We also predicted that political ideology and Catholicism would moderate the influence of awareness, given the role that group membership and prior values play in both source credibility assessments (e.g., [Landrum, Eaves, & Shafto, 2015](#)) and beliefs about controversial science (e.g., [McCright & Dunlap, 2011](#); [Brossard, Scheufele, Kim, & Lewenstein, 2009](#)).

1.1. The role of credibility assessments

Despite the strong consensus among expert climate scientists that human-caused global warming is happening and that it presents a global threat (e.g., [Anderegg, Prall, Harold, & Schneider, 2010](#)), there is still a sizeable population of climate change skeptics in the U.S. These skeptics' concerns range from complex and debatable questions (e.g., the economic viability of various responses to climate change) to conspiratorial beliefs impugning climate scientists' values and motives ([Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013](#)). Such beliefs can be especially damaging to climate science specifically—and arguably the process of science broadly—by undermining researcher credibility and trustworthiness. If climate scientists lack credibility and trustworthiness among large segments of the population, more substantive political debates about economics and solutions are nonstarters while scientists instead struggle to engender public acceptance of unimpeachable scientific findings.

The process of making judgments about the credibility and trustworthiness of communicators (and sources in general) is also known as epistemic trust (e.g., [Hendriks, Kienhues, & Bromme, 2016](#); [Koenig & Harris, 2005](#); [Landrum, Mills, & Johnston, 2013](#); [Shafto, Eaves, Navarro, & Perfors, 2012](#); [Wilholt, 2013](#)). When audiences evaluate a communicator's credibility or trustworthiness, they often do so based both on their perceptions of that communicator's expertise, or competence, (truth-relevant criteria) and their judgment that the communicator shares their cultural beliefs and values (group-congenial criteria; [Fiske & Dupree, 2014](#); [Lupia, 2016](#)). In many cases, despite sound reasons to perceive communicators as experts, audiences instead doubt the trustworthiness of those sources based on group-congenial criteria, suggesting that this social dimension may be more important for credibility assessments than expertise (e.g., [Clark & Maass, 1988](#); [Landrum et al., 2013](#); [White, 2005](#)).

When interacting with a communicator, audiences update their prior beliefs along two paths that jointly influence one another over time ([Landrum et al., 2015](#)). While people use their perceptions of a communicator's credibility, such as beliefs about that persons' knowledge and motivations, to influence how they perceive a message, they also use information contained in the message to update their beliefs about the messenger's credibility

([Landrum et al., 2015](#)). This further underscores the notion that audiences evaluate information not only on how likely it is to be accurate, but also on the extent to which it reflects their own cultural values and the cultural values of the source ([Kahan, Braman, Cohen, Gastil, & Slovic, 2010](#)).

The important point to note here is that credibility assessments are not necessarily consistent across domains nor are they stable over time. Although Pope Francis might be granted credibility in the context of compassion for the poor, we expected that he would be granted less credibility in the context of climate change solutions. Moreover, it is possible that by attempting to influence public opinion on a polarizing social issue like climate change, Pope Francis may have undermined his own credibility, particularly among those who—because of their group affiliations and worldviews—are predisposed to be skeptical of messages concerning the causes and consequences of climate change.

1.2. The role of identity-protective cognition: Priors and group membership

As previously mentioned, audiences may decrease or increase perceived credibility of a figure based on the extent to which communicated information is group—or identity—congenial. When information or evidence comes into conflict with worldviews or identities, people often engage in “identity-protective cognition” ([Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Mertz, 2007](#)), a type of motivated reasoning ([Kunda, 1990](#)). Identity-protective cognition can involve reactions such as moderating risk perceptions ([Kahan et al., 2012](#)) or reducing credibility assessments of sources.

The extent to which information is identity-congenial can be evaluated in many ways, including whether the information agrees or conflicts with people's “priors” (i.e., prior values, beliefs, goals, and affective judgments), or whether that communicator is perceived to be an in-group member.

1.2.1. Priors

Priors operate as perceptual filters through which new information is interpreted ([Jackson & Hogg, 2010](#)). The importance of priors in evaluating novel scientific information has been demonstrated in risk and benefit perceptions of topics such as nanotechnology ([Brossard et al., 2009](#); [Liang et al., 2015](#)), embryonic stem cell research ([Ho, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2008](#)), and the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine ([Kahan et al., 2010](#)). Specifically, individuals are more likely to accept information that fits their priors (confirmation bias, [Nickerson, 1998](#)) and dismiss information that conflicts with their priors ([Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979](#)).

Importantly, having different priors can lead to different interpretations of the same information. For instance, when provided with the same information about the risks and benefits of nanotechnology, individuals who value market autonomy grant more weight to the benefits and individuals who are more skeptical of market autonomy grant more weight to the risks ([Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil, & Cohen, 2009](#)). Similar effects have occurred in the context of climate change: politically conservative individuals (who tend to favor market autonomy and eschew government intervention) are suspicious about the existence of climate change and rate it as low risk. In contrast, politically liberal individuals (who tend to favor social equity and are suspicious of industry) express more climate change concern and rate climate change as high risk ([Dunlap & McCright, 2008](#); [Kahan et al., 2012](#); [McCright & Dunlap, 2011](#)).

1.2.2. Group membership

Group membership also influences how information is processed ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)) as predicted by social identity theory (e.g., [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#); see also [Turner & Oakes,](#)

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