



# The desire to maintain the social order and the right to economic freedom: Two distinct moral pathways to climate change scepticism



Isabel L. Rossen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Patrick D. Dunlop<sup>b</sup>, Carmen M. Lawrence<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for the Study of Social Change, School of Psychology, University of Western Australia, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Psychology, University of Western Australia, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 10 February 2015

### Keywords:

Climate change scepticism  
Moral foundations theory  
Social conservatism  
Liberty  
Political ideology

## ABSTRACT

It is well established that climate change scepticism is primarily found among those who identify as right wing. Applications of moral psychology suggest that climate change may not register as an issue of moral concern for those who identify as right wing due to their tendency to prioritise morality in the forms of the maintenance of tradition and order. Other researchers argue that the right wing tendency to be sceptical of climate change is derived from support for the free market, which may be related to the novel moral domain, 'liberty'. In a survey of the Australian public ( $n = 301$ ) climate change scepticism, and moral beliefs were measured. Regression analysis showed that climate change scepticism is not only predicted by morality aimed at maintenance of the social order, but also independently by morality concerned with the right to liberty. Implications for the development of climate change communication are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

There is substantial evidence indicating that those who identify as right wing are more likely to reject the reality, seriousness and anthropogenic nature of climate change, compared to their left wing counterparts. One possible explanation for this divide comes from moral foundations theory, which holds that conservatives tend to base their political opinions on a moral position which gives priority to the maintenance of social order, whereas environmental risk is normally constructed in terms of left wing moral priorities of harm reduction and fairness (Feinberg & Willer, 2013). There is also evidence that doubt surrounding the credibility of climate change may be motivated by right wing neo-liberal attitudes that lead climate change to be perceived as a threat to the integrity of the free market (Heath & Gifford, 2006; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

In the current paper, we argue that the two potential pathways to climate change scepticism, namely maintenance of social order and free market ideology, are consistent with a converging body of evidence demonstrating that political ideology consists of two relatively independent dimensions. The first, social conservatism, is

concerned with the maintenance of security, tradition and order, whereas the second, economic conservatism, is characterised by a tolerance of inequality, preference for competition, personal responsibility and a society unhindered by government interference (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). These two political dimensions are underpinned by the moral domains maintenance of the social order, and 'liberty', respectively. However, the latter pathway to conservatism 'liberty', thus far, has not been captured within applications of moral psychology to climate change scepticism. Furthermore, it is unclear if the two moral domains that underpin political conservatism contribute incrementally to the prediction of climate change scepticism or if they, together, simply capture the same common variance. In the present study, we show that both a moral preference for maintenance of the social order, and additionally, a moral preference for the right to liberty, account for unique variance in climate change scepticism, implying that distinct communication strategies will be necessary to change attitudes.

### 1.1. Politicisation of climate change

It is well established that those who identify as right wing are more likely to express scepticism about anthropogenic climate change than those who identify as left wing, at least in western, developed nations (McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Tranter, 2011). Doubt

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [isabel.rossen@research.uwa.edu.au](mailto:isabel.rossen@research.uwa.edu.au) (I.L. Rossen).

about the credibility and seriousness of climate change is primarily advocated by groups and individuals associated with the political right, such as conservative media, think-tanks, industry organisations, and politicians. This contrasts with the general acceptance of the science and calls for action on the political left (e.g. environmental groups, left wing politicians/media) (Fielding, Head, Laffan, Western, & Hoegh-Guldberg, 2012). Given the observed political divide, psychologists have employed theories of the psychological basis of political ideology to understand the characteristics of a conservative ideology that lead to climate change scepticism. One line of research suggests that environmental issues may largely fail to 'activate' morals held by those who are politically right wing, and furthermore, the legislative implications of mitigating climate change may even have the potential to threaten the core tenets of a conservative ideology (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Heath & Gifford, 2006; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). We review this research below.

## 1.2. Moral foundations theory and climate change scepticism

Moral foundation theorists propose that political disagreements over the ideal nature of society can be explained in part by differences in the relative importance that liberals and conservatives place on five core moral domains (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Research of a variety of different socio-political settings shows that issues tend to be perceived worthy of moral concern for those that identify as left wing, insofar as they involve matters of *harm* or *fairness* (termed the individualising foundations), that is, they pose a threat to safety or wellbeing of individuals or a violation of an individual's rights. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to endorse these two moral foundations as well as three additional foundations said to bind people into groups; *in-group loyalty* (favouring one's in-group first, which underlies values such as patriotism), *authority* (a preference for traditional societal structures which underlies virtues such as obedience) and *purity* (an abhorrence for a hedonistic lifestyle or giving in to base impulse, which underlies values such as chastity) (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007).

It has recently been proposed that the differences in moral considerations described above may be at the heart of the observed political divisions about climate change. The effects of climate change quite naturally speak to the moral concerns of harm avoidance and fairness (e.g. climate change will harm the most vulnerable in the world first), but not necessarily to morality focussed on in-group loyalty, deference to authority and personal restraint<sup>1</sup> (Markowitz, 2012; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012). This line of reasoning has been applied to understanding political polarisation in environmental attitudes. Feinberg and Willer (2013) show that pro-environmental messages in the context of the U.S.A tend to be constructed around moral appeals aimed at protecting the vulnerable, to the preclusion of messages based on the three binding foundations (in-group, authority and purity). Furthermore, they show that conservatives are less likely than liberals to perceive environmental degradation as a moral issue, and are more likely to perceive environmental destruction to be a concern when framed in terms of the typically right wing foundation, purity. Importantly, moral foundations theory has not been

applied to the context of climate change scepticism per se, but rather to environmental degradation more broadly. While environmental degradation and climate change are similar areas of concern, we believe it is worth also confirming the role of the binding moral foundations in the specific context of climate change, given that climate change may be more politically polarised than environmental degradation.

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear whether climate change as an issue simply fails to activate right wing morality, or whether the notion of *acting on* climate change is considered to be morally threatening to conservatives. We suggest that it is the latter. For example, legislation designed to mitigate climate change may be perceived to place the interest of international communities over and above that of the individual's own country, which would conflict with the moral foundation, *in-group*. Similarly, facing up to the reality of climate change leads to questioning the collective wisdom of the current social and economic order, built upon extraction and consumption of fossil fuels, thus potentially actively challenging the moral domain of *authority*. If the notion of acting on climate change is indeed morally threatening to conservatives, then it is likely that endorsement of the binding moral foundations (ingroup, authority and purity) will be associated with climate change scepticism.

## 1.3. Climate change scepticism and free market ideology

An alternative approach to understanding the political division in perceptions of climate change suggests that those who identify as right wing are motivated to reject the reality of climate change because of a tendency to favour economic freedom. Seen in this light, climate change scepticism is derived from the perception that the legislative policies designed to mitigate climate change have regulatory implications, counter to the tenets of a free market ideology in which unfettered markets or the 'Invisible Hand' are seen to provide the best social and economic outcomes for society. This notion has ecological validity. For example, historians Oreskes and Conway (2010) have documented evidence to show that climate change denial has been deliberately orchestrated by a small but vocal group of *laissez-faire*, free marketeers. There is also empirical evidence demonstrating that holding a free market ideology is strongly linked to rejection of the reality and the risks associated with climate change, accounting for up to 80% of the variance in climate change denial (Heath & Gifford, 2006; Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Although the proportion of variance explained appears very high, it should be noted that several of the items in the Heath and Gifford measure of free market ideology refer specifically to the trade-off between the preservation of the free market and environmental concerns. One could then argue the free market measure is confounded with the climate change scepticism measure. To disentangle these two constructs, we reconceptualise the measure of economic liberty using moral foundations theory, which captures a more abstract notion of the right to economic freedom (see below).

## 1.4. Liberty as part of the moral domain

Does the concept of the right to economic liberty constitute a moral concern? At first glance, concerns about freedom do not seem to be captured within the space of the five moral foundations. Recently, however, 'liberty' has been proposed as a potential candidate for a sixth foundation. Moral foundations theorists suggest that such a moral domain may be based on privileging the rights of the individual above all else and the principle of personal responsibility (in which success is due to hard work, and failure due to a personal failing or lack of effort). From this perspective,

<sup>1</sup> Arguably, environmental concerns have in fact been constructed in terms of personal restraint. This, however, likely relates to a left wing preference for living in a modest, careful way by avoiding waste and desecration of the environment, a type of morality not currently captured within the space of moral foundations, whereas purity concerns within the moral foundations framework refers to avoiding base, carnal desires, such as sexual acts.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7245825>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7245825>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)