

# Framing discourse around conservative values shifts climate change attitudes

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Conservatives' attitudes toward climate change and other environmental concerns shift when the issues are reframed in terms more closely aligned with their values, a new study from Oregon State University indicates.

Researchers found that people who identified as conservative were more likely to support "pro-environmental" ideals when the issues were framed as matters of obeying authority, defending the purity of nature and demonstrating patriotism.

The study underscores the ways in which discussions of important topics are informed by a person's moral and ideological perspective, said the study's lead author, Christopher Wolsko, an assistant professor of psychology at OSU-Cascades.

"We think we're just discussing issues, but we're discussing those issues through particular cultural values that we normally take for granted," Wolsko said. "If you re-frame issues to be more inclusive of those diverse values, people's attitudes change."

The findings were published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Co-authors are Hector Ariceaga and Jesse Seiden, who are alumni of OSU-Cascades.

Wolsko studies ecopsychology, a field that examines the relationship between humans and the natural world from both a psychological and

ecological perspective. The goal of his latest research is to better understand the widespread political polarization occurring around [environmental issues](#) such as [climate change](#).

"This political polarization has been a big issue, even in the current presidential campaign," Wolsko said. "Why is that? What, exactly, is going on psychologically?"

Moral foundations theory suggests that liberals and conservatives respond differently to broad moral categories. Liberals respond more favorably to moral issues involving harm and care, or fairness and justice, and conservatives respond more favorably to issues framed by loyalty, authority and respect, and the purity and sanctity of human endeavors, Wolsko said.

In a series of experiments, the researchers tested how shifts in moral framing affected attitudes toward environmental issues such as climate change. They reframed questions about conservation and climate change around ideals of patriotism, loyalty, authority and purity and paired them with imagery such as flags and bald eagles.

They found that reframing the issues around these moral foundations led to shifts in attitudes for conservatives, who were more likely to favor environmental concerns in that context. There was no noticeable shift in attitudes among liberals, which isn't a big surprise, Wolsko said.

Environmental issues are typically framed in ideological and moral terms that hold greater appeal for people with liberal views. Conservatives may not so much be rejecting environmental concerns, but rather the tone and tenor of the prevailing moral discourse around environmental issues, he said.

That does not mean people should reframe critical discourse to

manipulate [attitudes](#) about [environmental concerns](#), Wolsko said. Rather, the goal should be to find more balanced ways to talk about the issues in an effort to reduce the polarization that can occur.

"The classic move is to segment people along these ideological lines," he said. "But if we're more inclusive in our discourse, can we reduce the animosity and find more common ground?"

Future research should look at messaging that is considered more neutral and appeals to people with both liberal and conservative ideologies, Wolsko said.

"I'm really interested in the extent to which we can bring everyone together, to be more inclusive and affirm common values," he said. "Can we apply these lessons to the political and policy arenas, and ultimately reduce the vast [political polarization](#) we're experiencing right now?"

**More information:** Christopher Wolsko et al, Red, white, and blue enough to be green: Effects of moral framing on climate change attitudes and conservation behaviors, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2016.02.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.02.005)

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