

# Moral values influence level of climate change action

November 16 2016, by Melissa Osgood

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Two moral values highly rated by liberals—compassion and fairness—influence willingness to make personal choices to mitigate climate change's impact in the future, according to a new multidisciplinary study by Cornell University researchers.

The findings also suggest that a moral value rated more highly by conservatives - purity - also appears to have a positive effect, though not as pronounced as compassion and [fairness](#).

Those insights from a group of four researchers at Cornell - Janis Dickinson, professor of natural resources; Poppy McLeod, professor of communication; Robert Bloomfield, professor of management and professor of accounting; and Shorna Allred, professor of natural resources - were published in *PLOS ONE*. While prior research has investigated the relationship between [moral values](#) and environmental attitudes, this work extends this investigation to intentionality with respect to changes in environmental behavior.

The authors' work is based on Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory. A professor at New York University, Haidt identifies five "moral axes" around which humans develop individual moral reasoning: compassion/harming, fairness/cheating, in-group loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and purity/degradation.

Previous research using Haidt's moral foundations has found that those who identify as liberal prize the values of compassion and fairness most

highly. Those who consider themselves conservative place nearly as high a value on compassion and fairness, but place a substantially higher value on in-group loyalty, authority and purity.

The Cornell researchers also found that belief in [climate change](#) was significantly associated with increased willingness to act, while those who identified as politically conservative, and who were older and male, were less inclined to act.

Given that liberal attitudes tend to favor action on climate change, Dickinson was not surprised that compassion and fairness correlated strongly with individual willingness to make lifestyle changes.

"Compassion and fairness make perfect sense, because climate change is an environmental justice issue, and being willing to do something about climate change also requires that we care about future generations. Both of those things require compassion and a sense of fairness," said Dickinson, the study's lead author. "But it's not as clear why purity would be important. It may be because within the religious community, leaders have been focusing on the ideas that we are stewards of the earth and that there's something impure about destroying natural systems."

The association between the valuation of purity and a willingness to make personal lifestyle changes, while not as strong as for [compassion](#) and fairness, indicates the potential for alternative pathways to climate change action for liberals and conservatives.

"Our finding that willingness to take action on climate change was related to moral values embraced by both liberals and conservatives suggests that it is too simplistic to use political ideology alone to predict support for climate change action," said McLeod.

"As we learn what's important to different kinds of people with respect

to climate change, that information can help us communicate in ways where the problem can be heard," said Dickinson. "And I think we may be missing arguments that are important to people if we ignore moral diversity."

**More information:** Janis L. Dickinson et al. Which Moral Foundations Predict Willingness to Make Lifestyle Changes to Avert Climate Change in the USA?, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0163852](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0163852)

Provided by Cornell University

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