

How communication about environmental issues can bridge the political divide

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A relatively new theory that identifies universal concerns underlying human judgment could be key to helping people with opposing views on an issue coax each other to a different way of thinking, new research suggests.

The study tested the effectiveness of pro-environment messages guided

by moral foundations theory, which suggests that at least five foundational principles influence our decisions about right and wrong.

Researchers wrote two experimental messages that were designed to urge readers to support a move away from [fossil fuels](#) as a primary energy source in the United States. The framing of one message appealed to conservative moral foundations (by noting that reliance on foreign resources is a national security concern) and the other drew on [moral principles](#) most meaningful to liberals (by citing the need to protect vulnerable citizens from a toxic environment).

The overarching finding: The conservative moral message framing was more effective than liberal framing at increasing conservatives' support for transitioning away from fossil fuels, especially when research participants were told the message came from a conservative source.

A January 2020 Pew Research Center survey notes the persistent partisan gap in this policy area: 85% of Democrats say protecting the environment should be a top priority for the president and Congress. Fewer than half as many Republicans (39%) rate [environmental protection](#) as a major priority.

Previous research has shown, in the context of moral foundations theory, that communication of traditionally conservative ideas to liberals and traditionally liberal ideas to conservatives does not routinely change minds, said Kristin Hurst, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral research associate in behavior and sustainability in The Ohio State University School of Environment and Natural Resources.

"It's not always the case that the issues are fundamentally incompatible with the other side's values," Hurst said. "It's more that people on both sides of the political spectrum tend to frame their own issues using the language and arguments that align with the moral convictions of their

own group.

"We can have a hard time recognizing the legitimacy of each other's moral convictions and, because of that, find it difficult to craft arguments that resonate with people who prioritize a different set of values—those on the other side of the political spectrum."

Hurst conducted the work with co-author Marc Stern of Virginia Tech while she was a graduate student there. The study is published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

The first journal article about moral foundations theory was published in 2004, and the 2012 book *The Righteous Mind*, by leading moral foundations theorist Jonathan Haidt, captured the attention of scholars and the public alike.

According to the theory, liberals tend to base their judgments on two moral foundations emphasizing the care of and fairness for people as individuals. Conservatives are more likely to rely on five principles—care and fairness plus those that increase group cohesiveness through loyalty and authority—as guides for their decisions. The fifth principle important to conservatives is sanctity, or purity, which refers to protecting the sacredness of valued objects, people, places and beliefs.

The researchers ran a pilot study asking students to identify their political leanings and seeking their agreement or disagreement with five statements about various environmental concerns, including global warming and endangered wildlife protection. The statement with the least support was an assertion that the United States should transition away from fossil fuels—so the researchers used that subject for their primary studies.

Using the online survey platform Prolific, Hurst and Stern recruited a

total of 924 self-identified liberals and conservatives to participate in the studies. The researchers wrote two messages designed to urge readers to support a move away from fossil fuels as a primary energy source—one appealing to conservative readers and the other targeted to liberals. The researchers told participants the source of the message was either a liberal, neutral or conservative nonprofit organization.

The conservative appeal cited the need for the United States to reduce dependence on energy resources from countries linked to terrorism by being more competitive in the renewable energy marketplace. The liberal appeal emphasized that corporations favor fossil fuels because of profit potential and termed the transition to renewable energy a "compassionate and equitable choice."

Both messages touched on such concerns as pollution, the economy, jobs and worker safety.

The researchers conducted two surveys—one with both liberal and conservative participants and a second with only conservatives. Hurst and Stern found, as in previous research, that the moral framing doesn't tend to matter when a group—liberals, in this case—already agrees with the issue.

To gauge a change in support for the issue, the questionnaire asked people if they were more likely to support the transition away from fossil fuels now than they were before they read the message assigned to them. Conservatives reported more concern about and support for a reduction in U.S. fossil fuel use when they read the conservative message from a conservative source compared to those who read the liberal message from the liberal source.

"We found, sort of surprisingly, that the moral frame alone wasn't effective," Hurst said. "We found that this combination of the

conservative moral frame with the conservative message source was key to resonating more with conservatives. That drove home the importance of the source."

The sources were not well-known media outlets or organizations. Because they were described as generic unnamed nonprofits that supported traditional conservative or liberal causes, Hurst said there might be a lesson in that: "Maybe a communicator or practitioner can seek out trusted nonprofit organizations or local leaders that are trusted more by conservative communities if they're willing to help you get your message across."

Hurst also noted that the purpose of framing messages according to moral foundations theory is about recognizing each other's deeply held moral convictions rather than dismissing them.

"This is not about getting conservatives to think like liberals," she said, "but rather changing how we communicate about environmental issues to highlight that caring about the environment is not just a liberal issue—it is also compatible with deeply held conservative values."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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