

How to "Spin" Conservatives Into Worrying About the Environment

Make them feel disgust, say researchers.

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According to the polls conservatives have become less concerned about environmental issues than liberals. In 1992, reports the Pew Foundation, 93 percent of Democrats and 86 percent of Republicans agreed that “there needs to be stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment.” In 2012, however, Democratic support for more environmental regulation hadn’t dropped while Republican support had fallen to just 47 percent. The Pew pollsters concluded, “Views on the importance of environmental protection have arguably been the most pointed area of polarization.” In another poll, the Pew Research Center reports that [85 percent of Democrats believe that there is solid evidence for man-made global warming](#) whereas only 48 percent of Republicans believe so.

Why is the gap on environmental issues between liberals and conservatives growing? A new study in the journal *Psychological Science*, “[The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes](#),” by Stanford University sociologist Matthew Feinberg and University of California Berkeley social psychologist Robb Willer argue that, in part, it’s because liberals and conservatives differ in their moral views with regard to the natural environment. Feinberg and Willer claim that liberals regard the environment in moral terms whereas conservatives do not. They then go on to suggest a rhetorical strategy for getting conservatives to moralize the environment.

The two researchers apply [moral foundations theory](#) developed by New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues to their analysis. Haidt proposes that most ethical thinking is intuitive and rests on six evolved psychological/emotional foundations: (1) care/harm; (2) fairness/cheating; (3) liberty/oppression; (4) loyalty/betrayal; (5) authority/subversion; (6) sanctity/degradation. (An earlier column of mine, “[The Science of Libertarian Morality](#)” reported some of Haidt’s findings, and his article, “[Born This Way](#),” was the cover of *Reason*’s April 2012 issue.) Feinberg and Willer apply an earlier version of moral foundations theory that does not include the liberty/oppression dimension.

Haidt’s research finds that liberals and conservatives have different moral profiles when it comes to the five moral foundations. Liberals score higher on the care/harm and fairness/cheating dimensions whereas conservatives tend to score more equally on all five dimensions. Feinberg and Willer conducted five different studies to probe the salience of this insight. In their first study, nearly 190 subjects were asked about their ideological views ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Then they were read three vignettes about a person eating lunch. In one he recycles his plastic water bottle, in another he does not; in the control, the bottle is not mentioned. The participants were then asked how moral they thought the guy was. Conservatives basically didn’t think he was any more or less moral in any version of the story, whereas liberals rated him significantly less moral when he chucks the bottle into the garbage.

In a second study, about 500 undergraduates again rated their ideology and then were asked how important it was to behave in an environmentally friendly way on a six point scale. Finally, they were asked to write a couple sentences explaining their answers. More often than conservatives, liberals used moral terms to justify concerns about the environment. Willer and Feinberg concluded that these studies “support our claim that liberals but not conservatives view environmental issues in moral terms and that this helps explain liberals’ stronger proenvironmental views.”

Why do liberals see environmental issues in moral terms? To find out, the two researchers conducted two studies. The first winnowed through professionally made youtube.com videos lasting no more than two minutes with at least 10,000 views using search terms *global warming*, *pollution*, *climate change*, *environmentalism*, *environment*, and *environmentalist*. The second study identified 402 newspaper op-eds printed from January 2009 through March 2011 in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* containing keywords *environment*, *climate change*, *global warming*, or *pollution*. Coders blind to the study hypothesis rated on a seven point scale the extent to which each video and op-ed was grounded in the five moral domains. “Content analysis of environmental rhetoric from both video and print media revealed that such rhetoric resides primarily with the harm/care domain,” report the researchers. This (over)emphasis on the harm/care moral domain might thus account for “the stronger

proenvironmental attitudes of liberals relative to conservatives.”

So how might conservatives be persuaded to moralize the environment? In their final study, Feinberg and Willer next had more than 300 subjects score their ideology and then randomly exposed them to three different narratives. The control narrative was a history of neckties. The other two were crafted around harm/care and purity/sanctity moral concerns. The harm/care message focused on the damage humans are causing and emphasized the need to protect the Earth, accompanied by pictures showing a clear cut, a barren coral reef, and a drought-cracked mudflat. The sanctity/purity message described the contamination of the environment and stressed the importance of purifying the natural world, accompanied by pictures of air pollution, a person drinking contaminated water, and a forest covered in garbage. Participants then were asked about their attitudes with regard to how important it is to protect the environment; their support for environmental legislation; and their belief that humans are causing global warming.

Conservatives were significantly less concerned about the environment than liberals in both the control and harm/care conditions. However, there was no statistically significant difference in pro-environmental attitudes between liberals and conservatives exposed to the purity/sanctity message. The researchers found that the purity/sanctity message provoked the moral emotion of disgust in conservative study participants boosting their concern about the environment. Therefore, the authors conclude that their “results suggest that political polarization around environmental issues is not inevitable but can be reduced by crafting proenvironmental arguments that resonate with the values of American conservatives.” They add, “The current research suggests that reframing environmental issues in different moral terms offers one way to improve communications between opposing sides.”

The central question not answered by the study is why are environmental issues moralized in the first place? Moralizing issues takes them out of the realm of trade-offs, costs, and compromise and puts them in the polarized domain of right and wrong. For an environmental moralist, asking how much it costs to [save the endangered Delhi sandfly](#) or an old growth forest is like being asked how much it would take to sell their kids. It's a kind of blasphemy. Morality is meant to trump any considerations of trade-offs and costs. The background assumption of this study is that environmental issues are in fact moral concerns.

For example, study co-author Willer [said](#), “Reaching out to conservatives in a respectful and persuasive way is critical, because large numbers of Americans will need to support significant environment reforms if we are going to deal effectively with climate change, in particular.” This highlights the fact that the implicit goal of the research is to figure out how better to propagandize conservatives into accepting liberal environmentalist policy goals. Assuming that man-made climate change is a significant problem, trying to enlist people into a moral crusade to impose “significant environmental reforms” like cap-and-trade carbon rationing is not necessarily the best way to deal with it. Moral foundations theory is correct that we are all differentially motivated by moral intuitions, but I believe that real moral progress has been steadily made and more firmly grounded by the application of reason to facts.

Aware of the implications of his study, Willer told the [SF Weekly](#), “I think this speaks to the dangers and promise of propaganda—that there [are] ways of presenting issues that are more effective. Strategically reframing an issue ... could be canny moral strategy or a dangerous political weapon.”

Of course, what one person sees as a canny strategy is another's propaganda.