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The Effects of Moral Framing on Environmental Attitudes

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Introduction

Environmental issues are especially controversial in the current political landscape. The purpose of this project was to better understand the effect of framing environmental issues in terms of the following values: (1) harm: disliking pain in others, (2) fairness: justice according to shared rules, (3) loyalty: standing with and sacrificing for your group, (4) authority: deference to tradition and legitimate authority, and (5) purity: avoiding that which is disgusting and revering that which is sacred. We were particularly interested in the effects of the loyalty and purity treatments, as these are frames that are not traditionally engaged in environmental messages. We hypothesized that the loyalty and purity frames would have a stronger effect than the other frames among conservative subjects, as these are more conservative values.

Methodology

For our research, we created treatments and questions for a multi-project survey that was conducted in Britain in May of 2019. For our treatments, we randomly exposed each subject (n=2794) to a moral foundation treatment or control condition. The treatments consisted of a persuasive message about the environment that used words and images to evoke the moral foundation assigned: either harm, loyalty, authority, purity, or fairness. The purity treatment can be seen in Figure 1. Subjects then answered questions about their public land use and environmental attitudes. We also had each subject answer questions from Haidt’s Moral Foundation Questionnaire to determine their moral foundation score. A moral foundation score refers to how important a foundation is in an individual’s decision making and opinion forming.

Results

By running statistical regressions, we found that care, loyalty, and authority had a statistically significant positive effect on conservative subjects and a negative effect on liberal subjects. If we removed those with moderate ideologies from the regression, most of the results become insignificant. Using a new interflex interaction technique we found that purity had a statistically significant increase among those with highly conservative ideologies and a null effect on those with liberal ideologies. The results of this interaction can be seen in Figure 2.

Discussion

The results of our research partially confirm our hypothesis. The strong effect of the purity treatment on conservative subjects provides strong evidence that conservatives and liberals react differently to different values. Using traditional interactions, we found mostly insignificant result. This may be due to the strength of our treatments or the questions we used to measure environmental attitudes. We are continuing our research and have used the results of this survey to strengthen our treatments and refine our survey questions. In addition, we conducted this survey in Britain, and there may be slight differences in British
ideology and culture that made our treatments less effective than they would have been in America. Our future research will be conducted in America, so we hope to avoid that issue.

Conclusion

Although further research is needed, there is clear evidence that moral values have unique effects on conservatives and liberals. By understanding and engaging moral foundations, we will find ways to talk about controversial environmental issues in a unifying, rather than dividing manner. Bridging this divide will allow us to work together to produce effective solutions to the environmental challenges we face moving forward.

Figure 1 – Purity treatment. Subjects randomly assigned to the purity condition were shown this image before answering questions about their environmental attitudes.

Purity Interaction on Index: All Ideologies (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

Figure 2 – Interflex interaction technique shows the purity treatment had a larger effect on those with a highly conservative ideology.