The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes

Matthew Feinberg¹ and Robb Willer²
¹Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Stanford University, and
²Sociology Department, University of California, Berkeley

Abstract
Americans’ attitudes about the environment are highly polarized, but it is unclear why this is the case. We conducted five studies to examine this issue. Studies 1a and 1b demonstrated that liberals, but not conservatives, view the environment in moral terms and that this tendency partially explains the relation between political ideology and environmental attitudes. Content analyses of newspaper op-eds (Study 2a) and public-service announcements (Study 2b) found that contemporary environmental discourse is based largely on moral concerns related to harm and care, which are more deeply held by liberals than by conservatives. However, we found that reframing proenvironmental rhetoric in terms of purity, a moral value resonating primarily among conservatives, largely eliminated the difference between liberals’ and conservatives’ environmental attitudes (Study 3). These results establish the importance of moralization as a cause of polarization on environmental attitudes and suggest that reframing environmental discourse in different moral terms can reduce the gap between liberals and conservatives in environmental concern.

Keywords
morality, policymaking, personal values, scientific communication

Received 12/19/11; Revision accepted 4/17/12

Recent decades have seen ever-increasing polarization on environmental issues, with liberals positioning themselves as guardians of the environment and conservatives generally opposing reforms intended to protect the environment (e.g., Dunlap, Xiao, & McCright, 2001; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). One reason for this polarization may lie in differing perceptions of whether environmental concern is a moral issue; such views may emerge from the type of moral rhetoric with which environmental concerns are typically discussed. In the studies reported here, we investigated the possibility that liberals, but not conservatives, view environmental issues in moral terms because of a tendency for these issues to be discussed in terms of harm- and care-based morality, moral concerns that resonate more with American liberals than with American conservatives (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Furthermore, we explored the possibility that conservatives are more likely to adopt proenvironmental positions if these positions are discussed in moral terms that resonate with their moral commitments.

Morality and Environmental Attitudes
A multidisciplinary body of research attests to the powerful sway that moral concerns have over individuals’ attitudes and behavior (Chen, Pillutla, & Yao, 2009; Lakoff, 1996). When a person’s attitudes are rooted in morality, they become intertwined with intuition and emotion (Haidt, 2001). The individual is assured that such an attitude is correct, responding viscerally to counterattitudinal challenges (Mullen & Skitka, 2006). Morality is especially influential in the formation of political attitudes. Moral convictions and the emotions they evoke shape political attitudes (Emler, 2003; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005) and spark increased political engagement (Marietta, 2008). Past studies have demonstrated that moral convictions are strong predictors of voting preferences and turnout in presidential elections for both liberals and conservatives (Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2010; Skitka & Bauman, 2008).

Specific to environmental attitudes, past research suggests that perceiving environmental issues in moral terms is related to the valence and strength of individuals’ environmental attitudes (e.g., Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999). Such research, often grounded in the Schwartz norm-activation model (S. H. Schwartz, 1977), demonstrates that the more individuals recognize the consequences of environmental