ChangeMyView: Can Moral Appeals Facilitate Persuasion and Agreement?*

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The American electorate is becoming increasingly polarized. According to research in moral psychology, these growing disagreements between liberals and conservatives can be attributed to fundamental differences in the moral frameworks that shape individual ideology. Indeed, scholars suggest that ideologues would be more likely to come to agreements if both sides spoke the same "moral language." While this implicit assumption certainly has intuitive appeal, it remains largely untested empirically. Drawing on a unique dataset from the online discussion board *Reddit*, this paper examines how moral appeals can affect individual persuasion and the likelihood of agreement and consensus building through deliberation.

Keywords: Moral Foundations, Attitude Change, Persuasion, Political Agreement

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in partisan polarization in the United States. Politically engaged citizens hold more diverging policy views, are more ideologically extreme, and exhibit stronger negative affect towards out-partisans than in the past (Hetherington, 2001; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe, 2015; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). A growing literature in moral psychology—Moral Foundations Theory—attributes this divide (at least partially) to fundamental differences in moral frameworks that guide liberals and conservatives (Haidt, 2012). According to this view, liberals focus on *individualizing* moral foundations, which unclude care/harm and fairness/cheating. Conservatives, on the other hand, also emphasize the remaining *binding* foundations of loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2012). Differential emphasis on these moral dimensions is systematically related to attitudes towards a wide variety of divisive political issues (e.g. Koleva et al., 2012; Kertzer et al., 2014; Low and Wui, 2015), personality traits like individual social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) (Federico et al., 2013), as well as voting behavior (Franks and Scherr, 2015). Overall, this body of research suggests that liberals and conservatives

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endorse different moral foundations and that these differences are related to political attitudes, evaluations, and behavior.

Political discussions among individuals holding diverging views can mitigate the polarizing effects of partisan motivated reasoning (see also Mendelberg, 2002; Eveland, Morey, and Hutchens, 2011). In general, diverse social networks have been shown to reduce attitude extremity (Levitan and Visser, 2009) and enhance the understanding of opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2002). Deliberation in particular increases political sophistication (Gastil and Dillard, 1999) and shapes attitude change towards a common consensus (Vinokur and Burnstein, 1978; Barabas, 2004).

Druckman and Nelson (2003) directly investigated how discussions can moderate elite framing effects and showed that discussions in homogeneous groups had a polarizing effect, whereas discussions in heterogeneous groups had a depolarizing effect (see also Druckman, 2004). As such, deliberation in diverse groups can decrease the effect of polarizing elite communication. Similar research was conducted by Klar (2014)}, who manipulated group compositions in terms of the participants' party affiliations rather than comparing heterogeneous and homogeneous framing conditions. Her results showed that homogeneous group discussions resulted in more intense partisan motivated reasoning: individuals reported stronger preferences for the policies of their in-party and perceived them to be more effective compared to policies of their out-party. On the other hand, preferences were less extreme if the social setting was ideologically heterogeneous.

Morality could be viewed as such a potential moderator of deliberation effects. Whether individuals perceive issues in terms of their fundamental moral principles can be expected to influence the nature and tone of political discussions and therefore to moderate the downstream effects of deliberation in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Consider two scenarios where individuals with opposing attitudes discuss their views on abortion as compared to the appropriate tax rate. While both scenarios could result in fierce debates, we can presume that a group of pro-life and pro-choice advocates will have a harder time to find a common ground than a group of tax critics and proponents. One might argue that this difference is simply due to the nature of the issues themselves. However, how could we then explain potential differences in willingness to compromise between groups discussing the same issue? Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005) provided a possible answer to this question by introducing the concept of *moral conviction*} (or *moral mandates*) as unique features of attitude strength. In their view, moral conviction should be re-

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garded as independent from other dimensions of attitude strength such as extremity, importance, or accessibility.

Moral convictions are characterized as attitudes that are perceived as "absolutes, or universal standards of truth that others should also share" (Skitka, 2010, 269). As such, they combine the following attributes (Skitka, 2010): they are viewed by individuals as applying to everyone (universality), they do not require an immediate underlying rationale but are rather seen as facts about the world (objectivity), they can be independent of authority and group norms (autonomy), they elicit strong emotional reactions, and they have an inherent motivational quality (motivation/justification).

Building on this work, Ryan (2014) argued that moral convictions are not restricted to issues that are traditionally perceived as "moral", such as abortion or same-sex marriage, but can also include other issues such as economic policies.

The degree of moral conviction may therefore vary between individuals as well as across issues. Ryan (2014) further showed that the propensity to moralize – i.e. the tendency to view an issue as a question of "right and wrong" – is related to political participation, extreme political attitudes, arousal of negative emotions, and hostility. In a subsequent study, Ryan (2016) suggested that moralization as a distinct characteristic of attitude intensity reorients behavior from maximizing gains to the general adherence to rules. Across multiple studies, the author showed that this tendency translates into stronger opposition to compromises about political issues and decreased support for compromising politicians. These patterns should also translate into attitudes towards – and interactions with – others who hold opposing views. Indeed, moral conviction has been shown to be related to stronger preferences for social distance from (and hostility towards) attitudinally dissimilar others and lower cooperativeness in groups holding heterogeneous views (Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis, 2005).

The literature on moral conviction, however, is only beginning to elaborate on the political implications as the theories were mainly applied in psychology and did not explicitly consider the political context. As such, little is known about when and how individuals form moral convictions for specific political attitudes. For example, what is the role rhetoric in raising moral mandates and how does moralization affect subsequent attitude formation and belief updating? Another important question that is largely unexplored is how people react towards others who

raise potentially conflicting moral considerations in social interactions? Overall then, all three literatures can benefit from an integration of the different perspectives, which is the focus of the next section.

"Across all four studies, liberal morality was primarily concerned with harm and fairness, whereas conservative moral concerns were distributed more evenly across all five foundations. These findings help explain why liberals and conservatives disagree on so many moral issues and often find it hard to understand how an ethical person could hold the beliefs of the other side: Liberals and conservatives base their moral values, judgments, and arguments on different configurations of the five foundations" (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009, 1040).

Description of Dataset

ToDos

- clean original posts (links etc)!
- adjust confidence intervals to correct for multiple comparisons
- add more comments in functions!
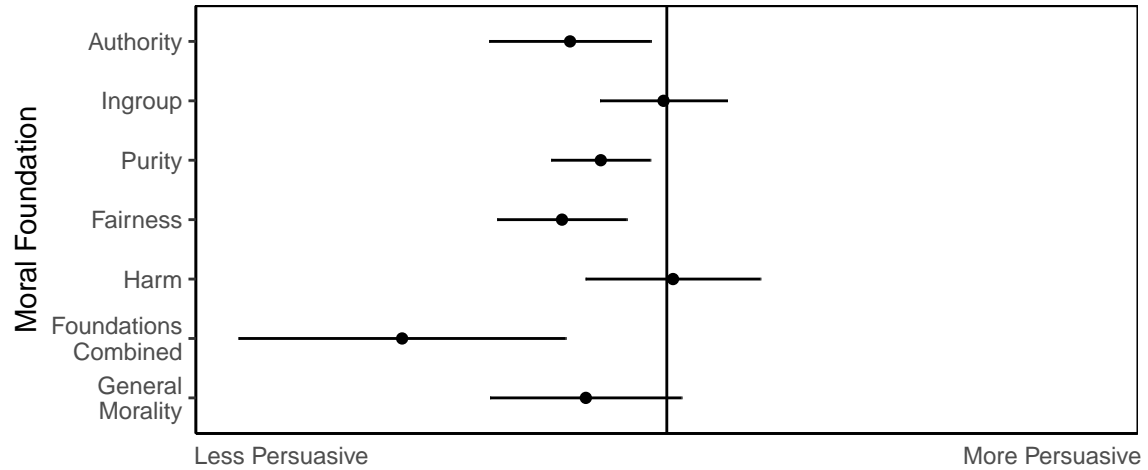
Moral Foundations and Persuadability

Moral Foundations and Persuadability
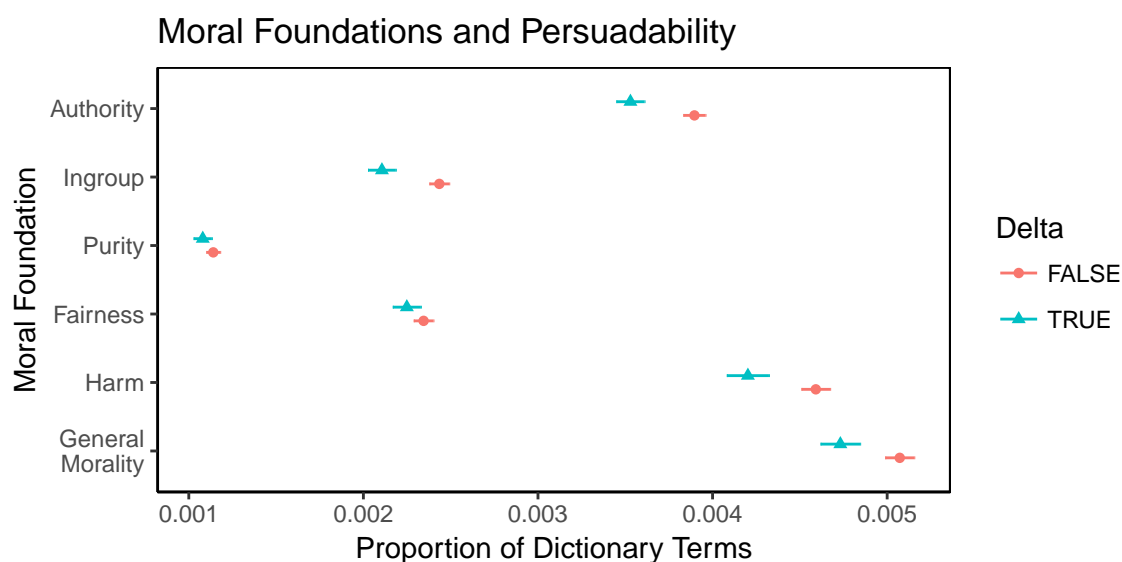
Is Moral Consistency Convincing?
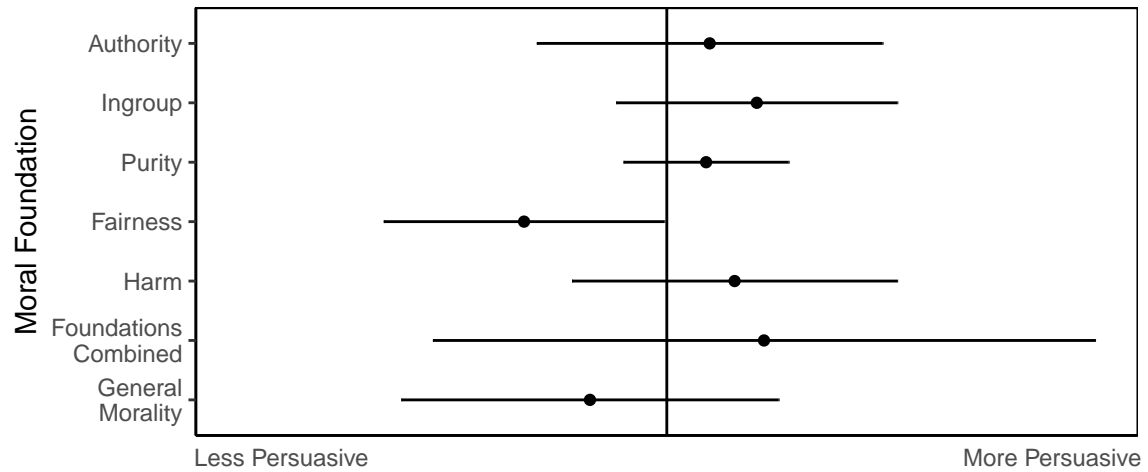
Authority

Search Query (2620 hits):

abide; allegian; authorit; bourgeoisie; caste; class; command; complian; comply; ⟨

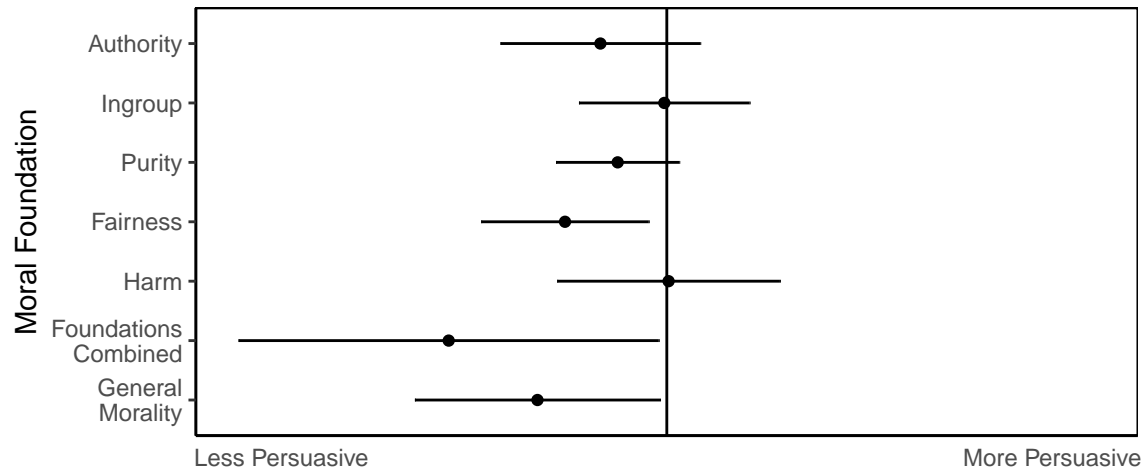### Search Query (481 hits):

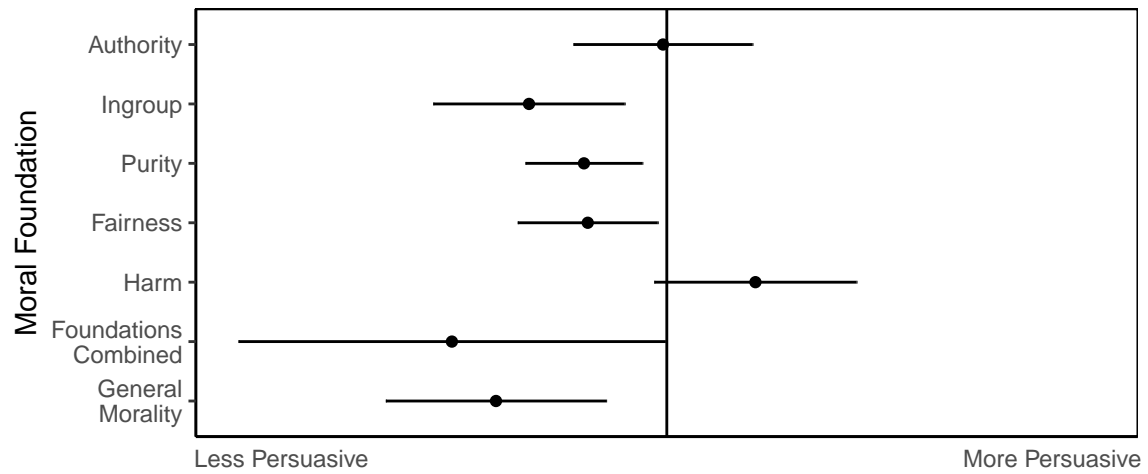agitat; alienate; apostasy; apostate; betray; defector; defian; defy; denounce; des⟨

Ingroup

Search Query (3074 hits):

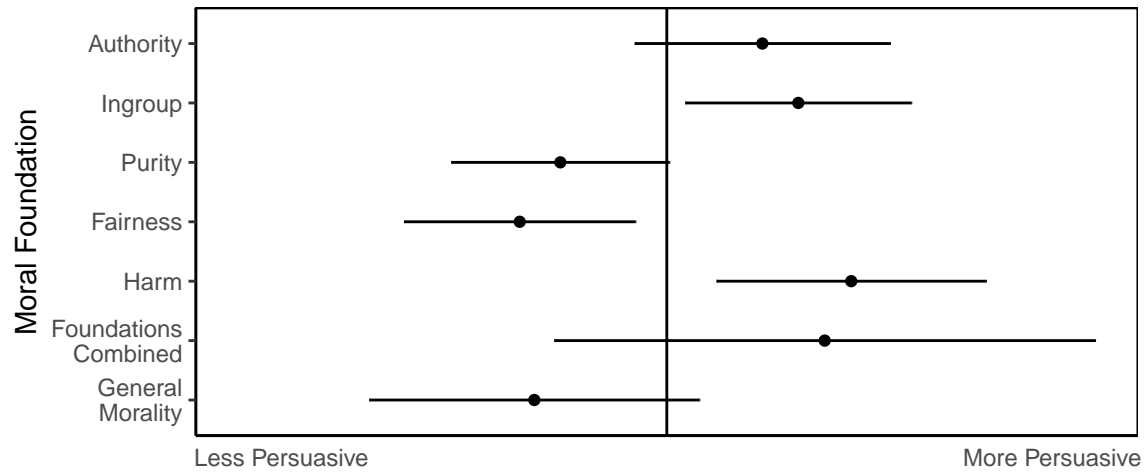ally; cadre; cliqu; cohort; collectiv; communal; commune; communis; communit; c

Less Persuasive   More Persuasive

Search Query (597 hits):

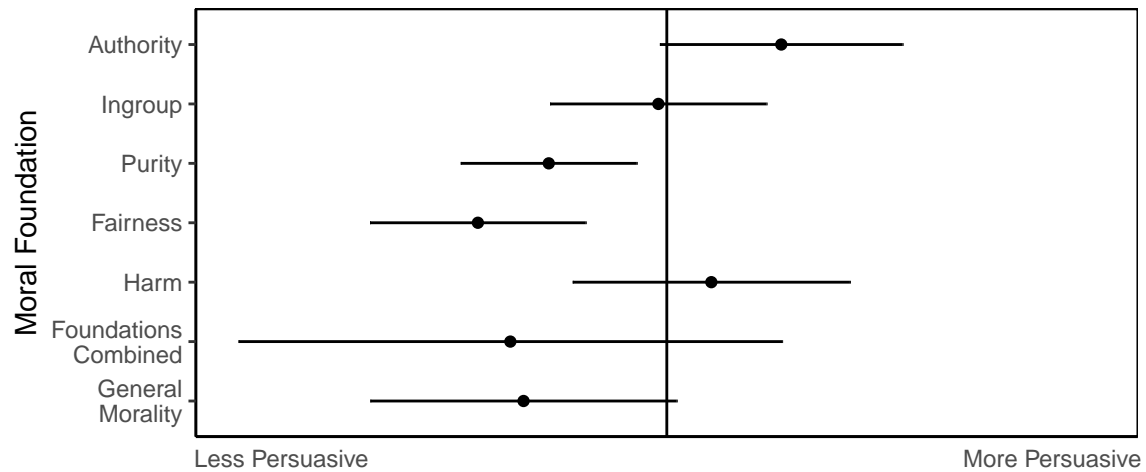abandon; apostasy; apostate; betray; deceiv; deserted; deserter; deserting; disloy

Less Persuasive   More Persuasive

Purity

Search Query (483 hits):

abstemiousness; abstention; abstinen; austerity; celiba; chast; church; clean; dec
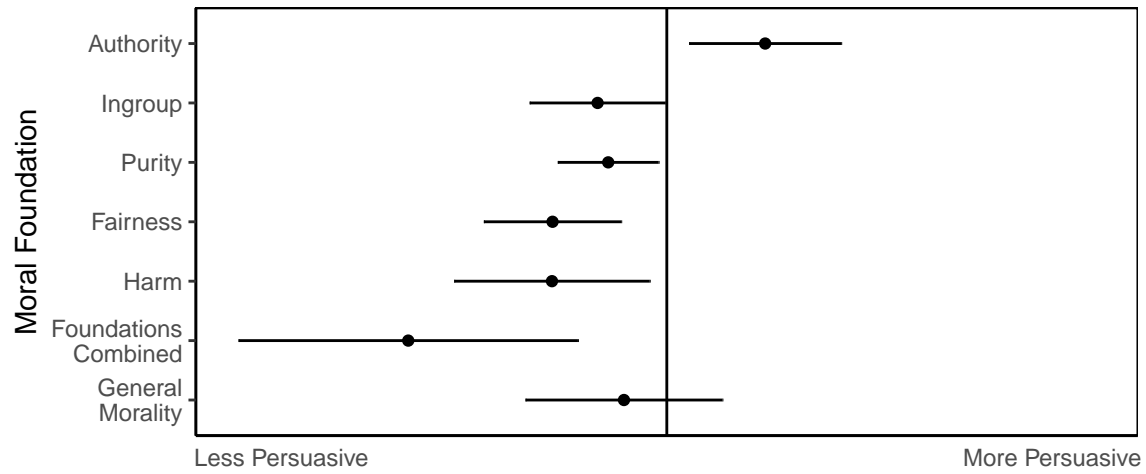

Search Query (2075 hits):

adulter; apostasy; apostate; blemish; contagio; debase; debauche; defile; deprav;
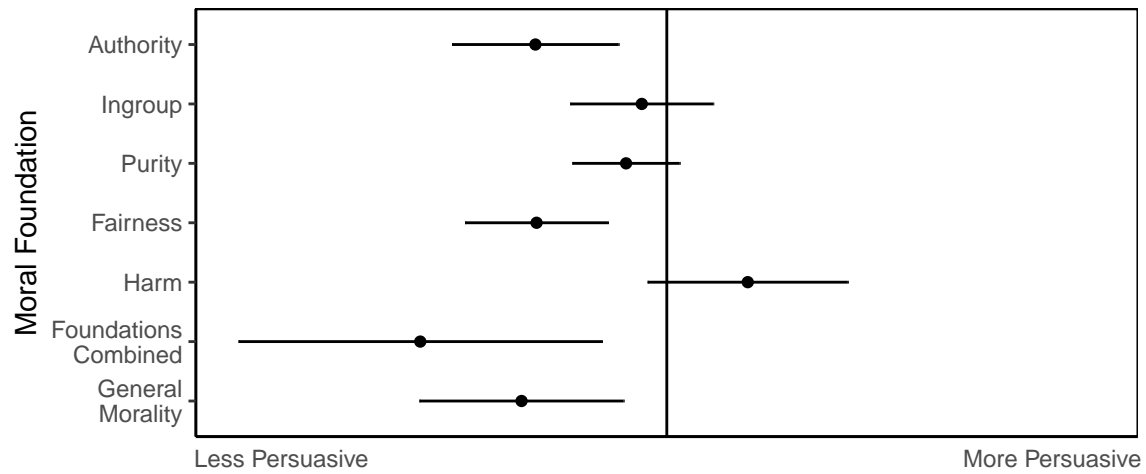

Harm

Search Query (1430 hits):

amity; benefit; care; caring; compassion; defen; empath; guard; peace; preserve;

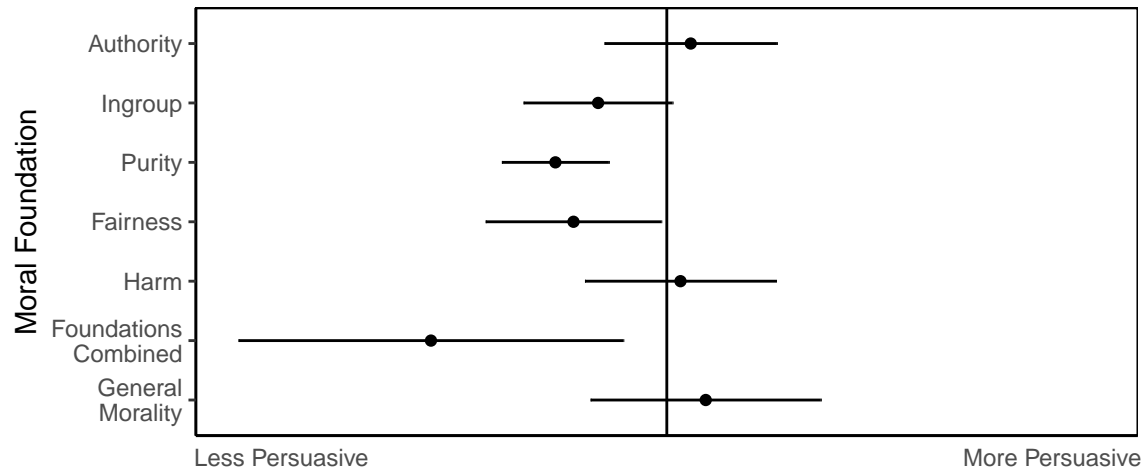
Search Query (1925 hits):

abandon; abuse; annihilate; attack; brutal; cruel; crush; damag; destroy; detrimen
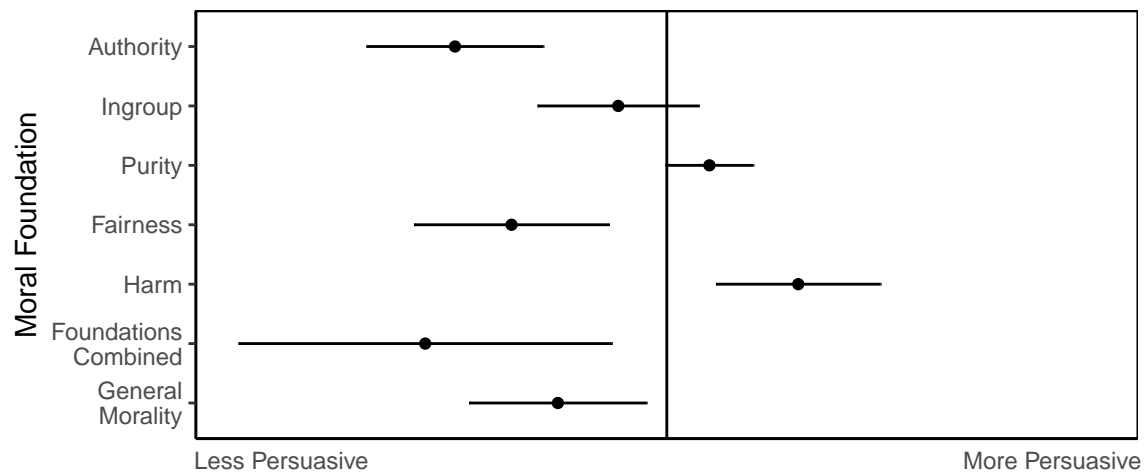

Fairness

Search Query (1385 hits):

balance; constant; egalitar; equable; equal; equity; equivalent; evenness; fair; fair·
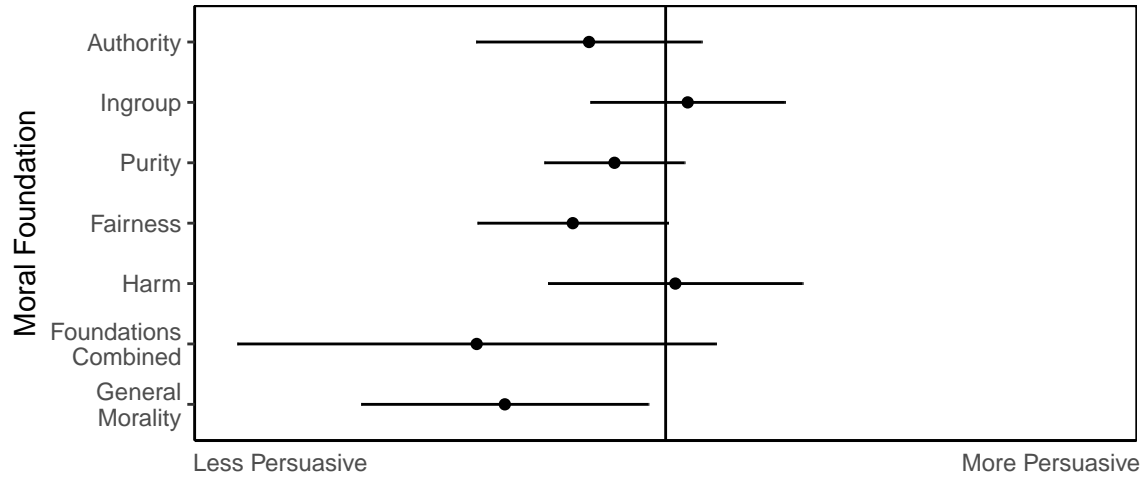

Search Query (544 hits):

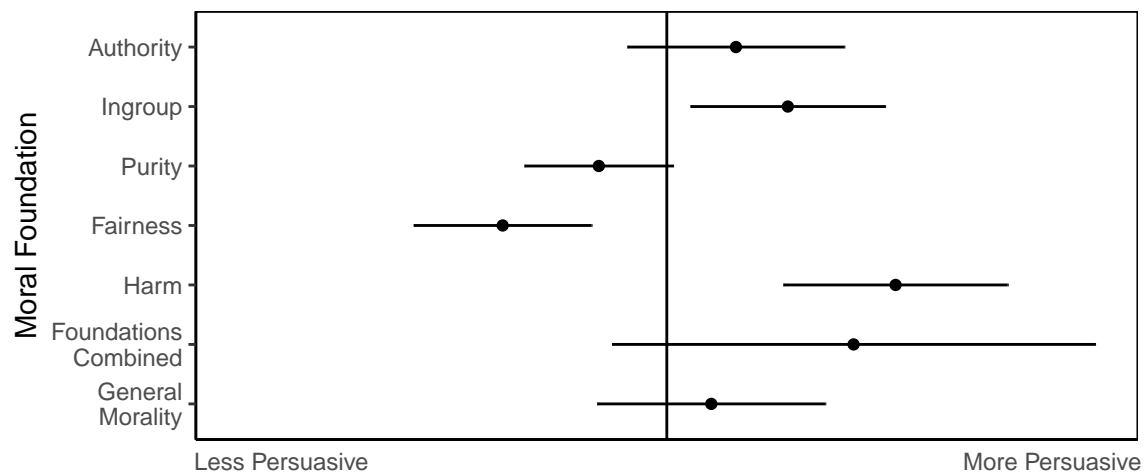bias; bigot; discriminat; dishonest; disproportion; dissociate; exclud; exclusion; fav·

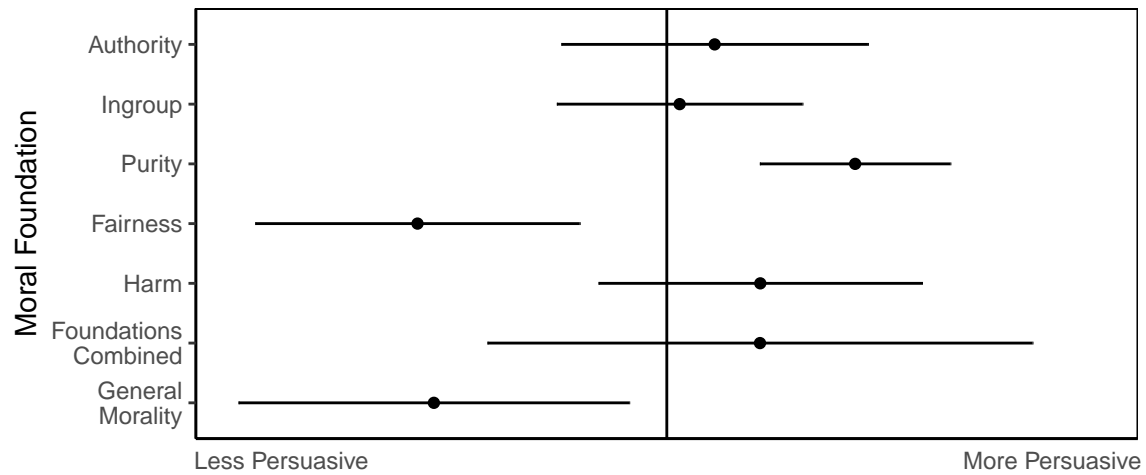**How about other topics?**

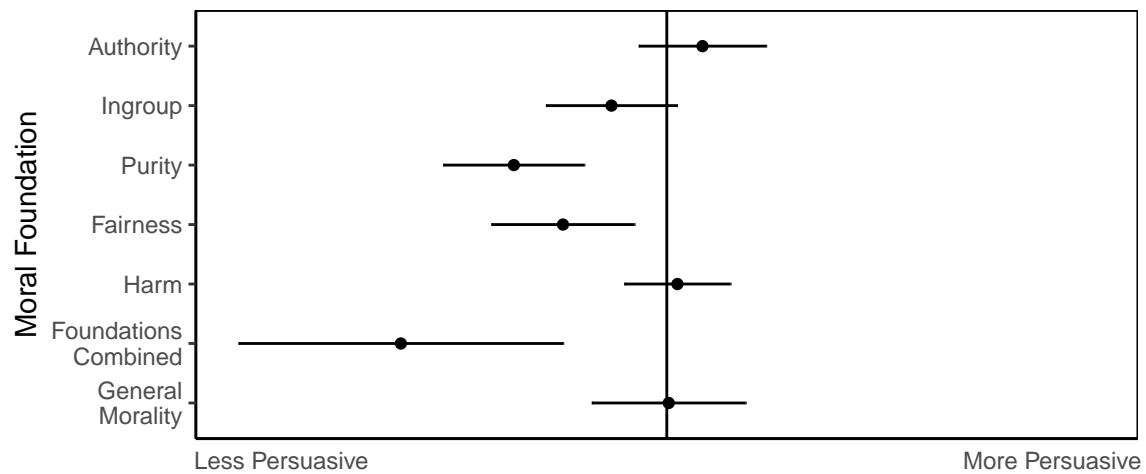## Search Query (3456 hits):

Search Query (362 hits):

politic

Search Query (155 hits):
liberal; conservati

Moral Foundation

Authority
Ingroup
Purity
Fairness
Harm
Foundations Combined
General Morality

Less Persuasive — More Persuasive

Search Query (84 hits):
democrat; republican

Moral Foundation

Authority
Ingroup
Purity
Fairness
Harm
Foundations Combined
General Morality

Less Persuasive — More Persuasive

Search Query (46 hits):
climate

Moral Foundation

Authority
Ingroup
Purity
Fairness
Harm
Foundations Combined
General Morality

Less Persuasive — More Persuasive
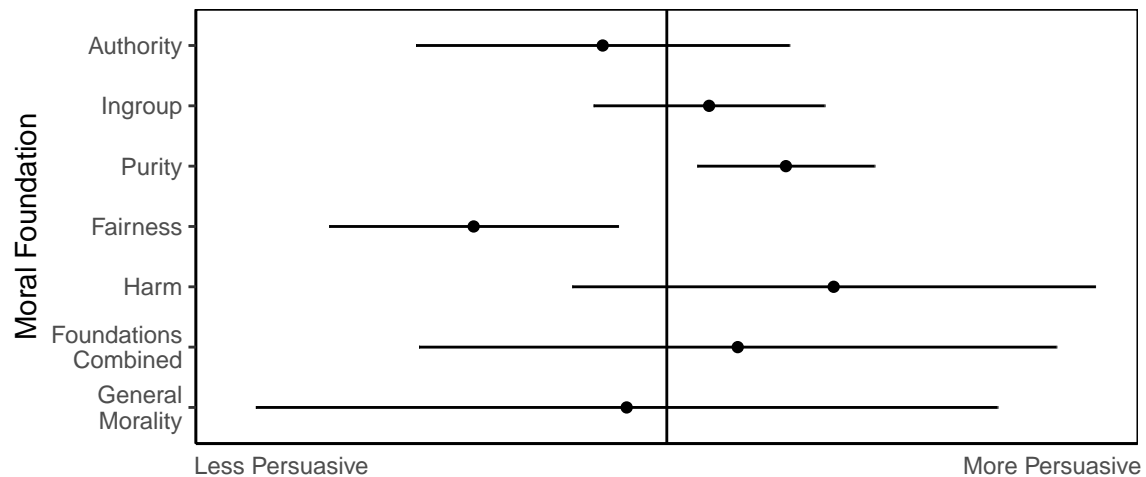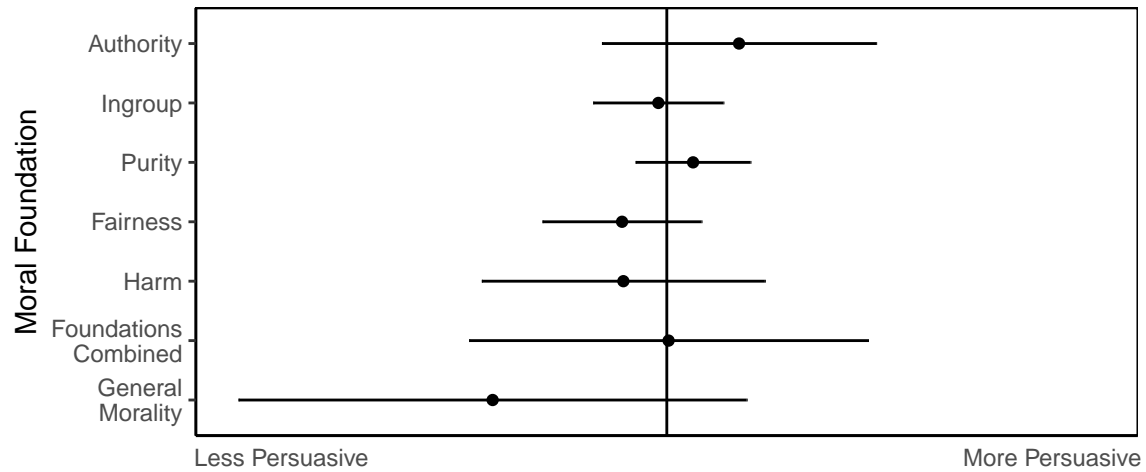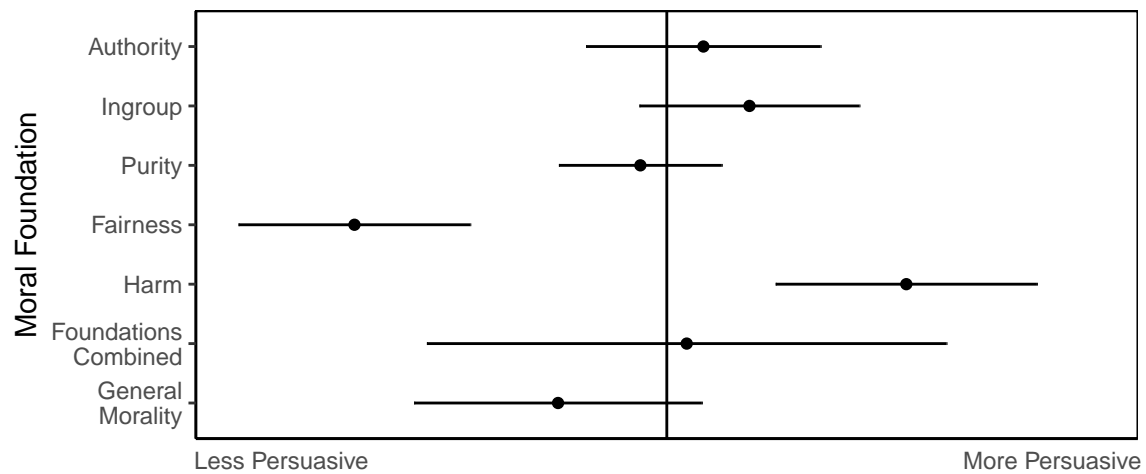
Search Query (55 hits):

climate change; global warming

Search Query (549 hits):

politic; liberal; conservati; democrat; republican; president; climate change; global

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