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# From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?

Matthew Feinberg<sup>1</sup> and Robb Willer<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Much of contemporary American political rhetoric is characterized by liberals and conservatives advancing arguments for the morality of their respective political positions. However, research suggests such moral rhetoric is largely ineffective for persuading those who do not already hold one's position because advocates advancing these arguments fail to account for the divergent moral commitments that undergird America's political divisions. Building on this, we hypothesize that (a) political advocates spontaneously make arguments grounded in their own moral values, not the values of those targeted for persuasion, and (b) political arguments reframed to appeal to the moral values of those holding the opposing political position are typically more effective. We find support for these claims across six studies involving diverse political issues, including same-sex marriage, universal health care, military spending, and adopting English as the nation's official language. Mediation and moderation analyses further indicated that reframed moral appeals were persuasive because they increased the apparent agreement between the political position and the targeted individuals' moral values.

## Keywords

moral psychology, political psychology, influence, political polarization, empathy

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American politics has reached historic levels of partisan division and animosity (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014). In explaining political convictions and the divisions they produce, many researchers argue that the most strongly held and contested political views are those grounded in moral convictions (Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Lakoff, 2002; Skitka & Bauman, 2008). Consistent with this, research finds that liberals and conservatives possess systematically different moral profiles, leading to divergent moral intuitions and attitudes (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Because individuals' moral convictions are typically experienced as factual and universally applicable (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005), political attitudes rooted in morality are especially inflexible and resistant to influence (Skitka & Morgan, 2009; Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). Despite the inflexibility of political positions rooted in morality, political advocates on both sides of the ideological spectrum regularly advance moral arguments for their political positions. Indeed much of contemporary U.S. political rhetoric is characterized by liberals' and conservatives' competing arguments for why their respective political positions are morally correct (Lakoff, 2002). But do advocates' messages succeed in winning over their rivals?

Here, we explore when morally based political messages are effective. We hypothesize that political advocates tend to

spontaneously craft arguments grounded in their own sense of morality rather than the morality of those targeted for persuasion, but that such moral arguments will typically be less persuasive than arguments reframed to appeal to the values of those supporting the opposing political position. Because moral convictions can shape political attitudes (Graham et al., 2009; Lakoff, 2002; Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2010), framing a given position as consistent with individuals' moral commitments should increase their willingness to adopt that position, even if they currently oppose it. This analysis suggests that the tight relationship between moral convictions and political views—so often a source of division and rigidity—can also be a basis for opinion change, political influence, and coalition formation.

Our analysis also provides one explanation for why political advocates likely do not employ this rhetorical strategy; their own moral convictions reduce both their capacity and

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motivation to couch arguments in terms of the morals of those targeted for persuasion (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Skitka et al., 2005), leading them instead to advance arguments grounded in a morality that the targets of persuasion do not endorse. In this way, the most effective moral arguments may be the least obvious ones to those with strong political convictions.

## Morality and Political Attitudes

Recently, political psychology has emphasized the role that moral concerns play in political attitudes and behavior (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008; Morgan et al., 2010). Along those lines, Marietta (2008) argues that citizens tend to reason about a political issue in either a consequentialist or an absolutist way. Where consequentialist reasoning involves cost-benefit analysis and tends to afford compromise, absolutist reasoning involves unwavering stances and the rejection of any form of compromise (see Tetlock et al., 2000). He finds that highlighting the moral sacredness of a political issue engenders greater absolutist reasoning than does discussing the issue using non-sacred language. Furthermore, he shows that such sanctification leads to polarization by eliciting more extreme political stances. Similarly, other research has found that individuals treat sacred issues differently, rejecting typically rational ways of reasoning, like cost-benefit calculation, and prioritizing the defense of moral principles over other, non-moral considerations (Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000).

Recent research on moral intuitions further highlights the significance morality plays in political reasoning (Haidt, 2012). Moral intuitionists argue that moral judgments are primarily driven by emotion-laden moral intuitions. When presented with a morally questionable behavior, individuals' gut reactions determine whether the behavior feels immoral or not, forming the basis of subsequent judgments (cf. Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko, & John, 2012). This research finds that liberals and conservatives often hold divergent moral intuitions; what conservatives find intuitively immoral may be perceived as perfectly acceptable to liberals, and vice versa (Haidt, 2012). For example, in one study conservatives rated homosexual sex to be more offensive than liberals did because conservatives have much stronger moral intuitions regarding traditional sexual purity (Haidt & Hersch, 2001). However, liberals find failing to recycle more offensive than conservatives because they have stronger moral intuitions about harming the environment (Feinberg & Willer, 2013).

## Moral Convictions and Political Attitudes

The above suggests that divergent moral convictions help account for the tensions between liberals and conservatives on many political issues. But what are the specific moral convictions liberals and conservatives endorse? Moral Foundations

Theory (MFT) provides a useful framework for examining such differences. MFT researchers surveyed thousands of people around the world regarding the concerns that were morally relevant to them (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011). Results led to the proposal of five primary moral foundations—harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Importantly, this research finds that liberals tend to endorse foundations based on caring and protection from harm (*harm*) and maintenance of fairness and reciprocity (*fairness*) more strongly than conservatives. However, conservatives tend to endorse moral concerns related to ingroup-loyalty (*loyalty*), respect for authority (*authority*), and protection of purity and sanctity (*purity*) more than liberals. Related research largely supports these findings (Caprara et al., 2006; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Lakoff, 2002; Thorisdottir et al., 2007), and together, this body of work indicates that liberals possess stronger moral convictions related to fundamental aspects of harm and fairness (e.g., benevolence, nurturance, equality, social justice), and conservatives possess stronger convictions related to group loyalty, authority, and purity (e.g., patriotism, traditionalism, strictness, religious sanctity). As a result of these differing moral commitments, liberals and conservatives tend to view the world through different moral lenses and often have contrasting viewpoints on morally charged issues.

## Moral Convictions and Political Arguments

The moral value differences between liberals and conservatives have been shown to influence how they view and discuss morally relevant topics. For instance, when recounting pivotal moments in their lives, liberals rely more on the harm and fairness moral foundations than conservatives, whereas conservatives rely more on the loyalty, authority, and purity foundations (McAdams et al., 2008). Similarly, sermons in liberal church congregations tended to employ more themes around the harm and fairness moral foundations than did sermons in conservative congregations. Conversely, sermons in conservative congregations were grounded in more conservative moral foundations (e.g., authority, purity) than sermons in liberal congregations (Graham et al., 2009).

Liberal and conservative political arguments likely reflect these differences in morality as well, with liberals basing their arguments in the more liberal foundations and conservatives basing their arguments in the more conservative foundations. Some evidence exists in support of this possibility. An analysis of newspaper op-ed pieces and video advertisements arguing for environmental protection—a primarily left-leaning position (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2013)—found that when moral rhetoric was employed, it was typically grounded in the liberal moral foundations (Feinberg & Willer, 2013), suggesting liberal advocates argue for environmental protection in moral terms that appeal primarily to other liberals.

Arguments that appeal to one's own moral convictions may resonate with those who ascribe to a similar political ideology (because they share similar moral values), but these arguments are likely unconvincing to those with a differing political ideology (because they do not share the same moral convictions). Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that, even when targeting their political opponents for persuasion, liberals and conservatives will rely predominantly on their own moral values as the basis of their political arguments. Scholars have conjectured that advocates rarely recognize the moral foundational differences between themselves and others (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 2002), particularly because they suffer from what Ditto and Koleva (2011) theorize to be a "moral empathy gap," or the inability to comprehend moral worldviews different from their own. Such a gap likely impairs the perspective-taking needed to craft an argument that appeals to the convictions of those with different moral values (Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010). Thus, it stands to reason that when political tensions are rooted in divergent moral perspectives, individuals on either side of the divide will tend to speak past one another, advocating for a given position in the moral terms they themselves find most convincing—the same moral terms that may have led them to adopt the position in the first place.

From this reasoning, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** When targeting their political counterparts, both liberals and conservatives will employ moral arguments that reflect their own, rather than their audience's, moral values.

We also advance a second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** When targeting their political counterparts, moral arguments reframed to appeal to the audience's moral values will be more persuasive than arguments framed in a way that appeal to the messenger's own values.

To that end, we test whether messages in support of traditionally liberal (or conservative) positions aimed at conservative (or liberal) targets will be more convincing when framed in terms of moral values endorsed more by conservatives (or liberals).

Some existing research suggests the plausibility of moral reframing as a strategy for political persuasion. Within the persuasion literature, research demonstrates the value of matching the characteristics of a message with those of its targets (Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera, 1982; Petty & Wegener, 1998). A variety of studies show that messages are more persuasive when they match traits of the target—for example, the target's regulatory fit (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004), self-schemata (Wheeler, Petty, & Bizer, 2005), personal goals (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994), self-monitoring (Lavine & Snyder, 1996), and need for cognition

(Haddock, Maio, Arnold, & Huskinson, 2008). In addition, experimental studies that manipulated whether participants formed an affect-based or cognition-based attitude toward an object found that subsequent arguments were more persuasive when they matched the type of initial attitude (e.g., Edwards, 1990; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). According to this literature, matched messages engender a sense that the message "feels right," and this feeling in turn influences judgments of the message's position and the larger issue in question (Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Cesario et al., 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004). We propose that morally reframed messages that fit with recipients' values should be particularly persuasive. The centrality of morality to an individuals' self-concept and worldview (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Haidt, 2001, 2007; Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014) should make moral arguments that fit with one's values uniquely impactful, and the tendency for moral issues to foster gut intuitions and affect (Haidt, 2001) means moral arguments may evade close, analytical scrutiny from their recipients.

A few studies have found evidence consistent with our moral reframing hypothesis. Feinberg and Willer (2013, Study 3) found that conservatives demonstrated greater support for pro-environmental legislation when advocacy statements were framed in terms of the more conservative value of purity than those presented with arguments framed in terms of the more liberal value of harm or a control. Similarly, Kidwell, Farmer, and Hardesty (2013) found that presenting pro-environment arguments couched in terms of loyalty, authority, and purity increased the likelihood that conservatives would recycle, and found that these effects persisted over a 14-week period. Together, these studies suggest moral reframing can serve as an effective means for promoting pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in conservatives. Neither of these studies, however, looks beyond environmental issues, nor do they study whether moral reframing might affect liberal targets. Another recent study found evidence that moral arguments that fit a target's political orientation could be persuasive across multiple issues (Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014). However, this effect did not occur consistently across studies, and was found only among conservatives, not liberals. It is possible that the inconsistency of the moral framing effects in these studies owed to the sparse sentence-long, stimuli used in the studies.

## The Present Research

We test our hypotheses across six studies. The first two examine whether liberals (conservatives), when asked to craft a persuasive argument to convince conservatives (liberals) to support a liberal (conservative) position craft the message in terms of their own moral values, rather than the moral values of the target of the message. Next, Studies 3 through 6 test the efficacy of our moral reframing hypothesis. In each, we present a polarized political rhetoric and reframe the moral rhetoric around it so that it is based on the moral

foundations of the side traditionally opposed to it. We also test our reasoning for why such moral reframing might be influential, examining the extent to which reframed moral appeals lead the target audience to consider the policy stance to be more in line with their own moral principles.

## Study 1

In Studies 1 and 2, we instruct participants to write persuasive arguments specifically aimed at influencing those supporting a rival position. In Study 1, we recruited liberal participants to write arguments supporting same-sex marriage that would appeal to conservative targets. Then, in Study 2, we recruited conservative participants to write arguments in favor of making English the official language of the United States that would appeal to liberal targets.<sup>1</sup> We hypothesize that both liberal and conservative advocates will employ moral arguments, but will couch these arguments in terms of moral values distinctive of their own ideological group, not their rival's.

## Participants

Ninety-three (54 male, 39 female) participants were recruited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk website for a small payment (please see online materials for more information about determining sample sizes for our studies). We used a two-step recruitment procedure. First, we invited participants to complete a short prescreening demographic questionnaire that included a question measuring their political ideology on a scale from 1 (*strongly liberal*) to 4 (*moderate*) to 7 (*strongly conservative*), and a second question that asked, "What is your position on same-sex marriage? Are you in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage in the U.S. or are you opposed to it?" Participants indicated either *in favor* or *opposed*. Liberal participants ("3" or below on the political ideology scale) in favor of same-sex marriage were filtered into the study.

## Procedure

All participants took part online. Participants read,

Now, we would like you to write a persuasive argument (4-5 sentences) aimed at convincing conservative Americans who oppose same-sex marriage of why they should be in favor of same-sex marriage.

*Note: In a follow-up study, we will actually present your argument to conservative Americans who oppose same-sex marriage to see if they are persuaded by your argument. Participants who are able to effectively persuade these future study participants will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 bonus.*

Once participants finished writing their arguments, the computer interface informed them that the study was complete.

## Argument Coding

Four research assistants unaware of our hypotheses, first read background information about MFT and the five foundations of morality (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Then these research assistants coded each participant's argument on three variables: *Fit With Conservative Morality*, *Contradicted Conservative Morality*, and *Fit With Liberal Morality*. In each case, coders indicated either "yes" or "no." For *Fit With Conservative Morality*, coders indicated "yes" for an argument if the argument's rhetoric reflected at least one of the three moral foundations endorsed at higher levels by conservatives (loyalty, authority, and purity; e.g., "Our fellow citizens of the United States of America deserve to stand alongside us, deserve to be able to make the same choices as everyone else can . . . Our goal as Americans should be to strive for that ideal. We should lift our fellow citizens up, not bring them down.") For *Contradicted Conservative Morality*, coders indicated "yes" for arguments that negated or challenged at least one of the more conservative moral foundations (e.g., "Although you may personally believe your faith should be against such a thing . . . your religion should play no part in the laws of the United States."). And, for *Fit With Liberal Morality*, coders indicated "yes" for arguments in line with the two more liberal moral foundations (e.g., "Why would we punish these people for being born a certain way? They deserve the same equal rights as other Americans."). For instances when arguments appealed to both liberal and conservative morality, or appealed to and contradicted one type of morality, coders indicated "yes" for each of these instances—that is, arguments could be coded with more than one "yes." In addition, if participants received a "yes" for any of the coded variables, they were also coded as having made a moral argument.

Reliability across coders was moderate (average  $\alpha = .70$ ). Instances where two coders selected "yes" and two selected "no" were resolved by a fifth coder. Arguments that received 3 or 4 "yes" ratings were scored as fitting with the coded variable, whereas arguments receiving fewer than 3 "yes" ratings were scored as not fitting with the variable.

## Results

Table 1 presents how often participants made any type of moral argument, appealed to conservative morality, contradicted conservative morality, or appealed to liberal morality. In all, 86% of participants employed moral rhetoric of some type, and, in line with our hypothesis, only a small minority of liberals (9%) made arguments that reflected more conservative moral principles. Instead, as predicted, a majority of participants made arguments reflecting liberal moral foundations in their same-sex marriage arguments (74%). Furthermore, we found that a portion of the participants wrote arguments that actually contradicted conservative morality (34%). Comparisons of these percentages using a McNemar's test found that participants' arguments were significantly more likely to reflect their own



**Table 1.** Frequencies in Which Participants in Studies 1 and 2 Wrote Moral Arguments That Appealed to Their Own Moral Values, Appealed to The Targeted Group's Moral Values, and Attacked The Targeted Group's Moral Values.

Study 1. Liberals instructed to write arguments in favor of same-sex marriage aimed at convincing conservatives who oppose same-sex marriage.

	Moral argument	Fit With Conservative Morality	Fit With Liberal Morality	Attacked Conservative Morality
Yes	80	8	69	32
No	13	85	24	61

Study 2. Conservatives instructed to write arguments in favor of official English aimed at convincing liberals who oppose official English.

	Moral argument	Fit With Liberal Morality	Fit With Conservative Morality	Attacked Liberal Morality
Yes	66	7	59	12
No	18	77	25	72

moral foundations than those of their conservative targets,  $\chi^2(1) = 49.32, p < .001$ , and they were actually more likely to contradict conservative morality than they were to appeal to it,  $\chi^2(1) = 14.69, p < .001$ .

## Study 2

### Participants

Eighty-four (46 male, 38 female) participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk took part for a small payment. Recruitment involved a similar procedure as Study 1, however instead of asking about same-sex marriage attitudes, the prescreening questionnaire asked participants whether they were in favor or opposed to making English the official language of the United States (see online materials for complete text). Only conservative participants (5 or higher on the political ideology scale) in favor of making English the official language were filtered into the study.

### Procedure

The instructions were identical as those in Study 1 except that Study 2's instructions asked the participants to write a persuasive argument aimed at convincing liberal Americans who oppose making English the official language of the United States why they should support making English the official language.

### Argument Coding

The coding procedure was the same as in Study 1 except that in Study 2, we used five coders. Coders indicated whether or not each argument *Fit With Liberal Morality* (e.g., "By making English our official language, there will be less racism and discrimination . . . upon the very groups that are being persecuted."), *Contradicted Liberal Morality* (e.g., "So those of you preaching diversity and equality, who think everyone should take advantage of us, should think real hard."), and

*Fit With Conservative Morality* (e.g., "Every country needs to be unified. Making English the official language will help unify the country as we all can communicate with each other and speak the same national language."). In addition, as in Study 1, if participants received a "yes" for any of the coded variables, they were also coded as having made a moral argument.

Reliability across coders was moderate (average  $\alpha = .76$ ). In instances where three coders selected "yes," a sixth coder read the argument and provided an additional "yes" or "no" rating. Arguments earning 4 or more "yes" ratings for a given variable were then scored as being in line with that variable, whereas arguments with 3 or fewer "yes" ratings for a given variable were scored as not being in line with the variable.

## Results

Table 1 presents how often participants made a moral argument of any type, appealed to liberal morality, contradicted liberal morality, and appealed to conservative morality. A total of 79% of participants' arguments used some type of moral rhetoric. Only 8% of participants wrote arguments that fit with the more liberal moral foundations, whereas 70% wrote arguments that fit with their own more conservative moral foundations. Furthermore, 14% of participants wrote arguments that contradicted liberal moral values. As in Study 1, McNemar's test revealed the participants were significantly more likely to write arguments reflecting their own moral values than the values of their intended liberal targets,  $\chi^2(1) = 39.41, p < .001$ . However, there was no significant difference between the percent of participants writing arguments reflecting liberal moral values and the percent writing arguments contradicting liberal moral values,  $\chi^2(1) = .84, p = .359$ .

## Discussion

Studies 1 and 2 support our first hypothesis that political advocates, in attempts to persuade those with rival political

positions, typically compose arguments based on their own moral values rather than those of the individuals targeted for persuasion. Our results, however, do not distinguish whether participants' egocentric bias was due to them being incapable of recognizing that their audience possesses different values, their inability to recognize that appealing to those different values would be persuasive, or potentially, their inability to successfully write arguments that appeal to those different values. Furthermore, our results also do not explore the possibility that participants were motivated to avoid using, and tacitly endorsing, moral arguments they might themselves disagree with—an issue that we discuss further in the general discussion. Regardless of the underlying mechanism, such a failure to tailor their arguments to their audience's moral values, we believe, will result in these arguments being ineffective, when compared with arguments reframed to appeal to the values of those supporting the opposing political position. We test this reasoning in Studies 3 to 6.

### Study 3

In Study 3, we present participants with arguments in favor of universal health care framed in terms of fairness, the sort of moral rhetoric typically invoked in support of national health care (i.e., access to health care is a right), or in terms of purity (i.e., sick people are disgusting). We then measure participants' attitudes toward national health care and the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare). If our more reframing hypothesis is correct, we would expect that the purity-based arguments will be more persuasive to conservative participants than the fairness-based argument.

### Method

**Participants.** In all, 288 participants (150 male, 138 female) were recruited from across the United States using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants received a small payment for their participation. Because Mechanical Turk participants may take participation in studies less seriously than more volunteer-based participants, we took precautions to ensure that we excluded individuals who demonstrated that they did not take participation seriously. We measured how long participants spent on the webpage that presented the persuasive moral message (see below). Based on speed-reading trials by research assistants, we determined that participants who spent less than 20 s on this page could not have fully read the argument and did not truly take part in the study (Johnson, 2005; Mason & Suri, 2012). We removed these participants, leaving a total of 258 participants (139 male, 119 female).

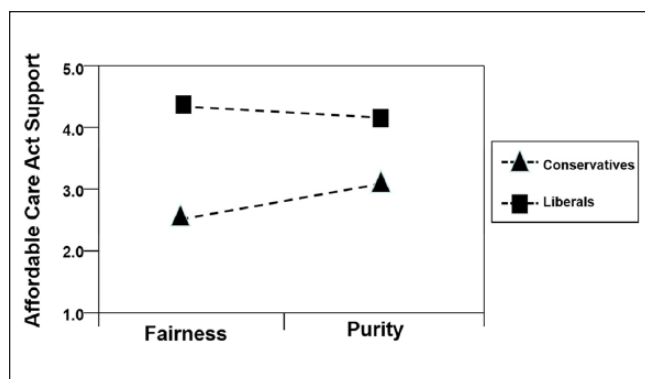
**Procedure.** Participants completed a demographic questionnaire including a two-item composite measuring political ideology ("When it comes to social policy, do you consider yourself liberal or conservative?" and "When it comes to

economic policy, do you consider yourself liberal or conservative?" ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Participants answered both items on a scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 4 (*moderate*) to 7 (*very conservative*;  $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ). They then learned that they would read a short opinion article and answer some questions about their impressions of it. Participants were randomly assigned to read a short article in support of universal health care framed either in terms of fairness (health coverage is a basic human right) or purity (uninsured people means more unclean, infected, and diseased Americans). Both articles were modeled after newspaper opinion pieces and were of similar length (approximately 350 words) and style. In addition, to ensure that we successfully grounded the arguments in each foundation, we utilized words from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2009) that corresponded with the argument's specific moral foundation (e.g., *Fairness*: unfair, unjust; *Purity*: unclean, disgusting). Pilot testing further confirmed that each article strongly represented the intended moral foundation (see online materials for full text).

After reading their assigned article, participants completed a three-item questionnaire measuring their support for universal health care (e.g., "I am in favor of universal health care"), followed by a four-item questionnaire gauging endorsement of the Affordable Care Act (i.e., ObamaCare; for example, "The Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) was a mistake that should never have become a law" [reverse-scored]). Participants answered these items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The reliabilities for these two measures were high ( $\alpha = .83$  and  $.94$ , respectively), so we averaged each together to form *universal health care support* and *ObamaCare support* composites.

### Results and Discussion

We ran multiple regression analyses entering messaging condition, political ideology, and their interaction as predictors of both universal health care and ObamaCare support separately. For both dependent variables, there was no significant effect of condition,  $bs < .09$ ,  $ps > .47$ ; a significant effect of ideology,  $bs < -.37$ ,  $ps < .001$ ; and a significant interaction,  $bs > .15$ ,  $ps < .025$ . Simple slope analyses indicated that the conservative participants (+1  $SD$ ) in the purity condition demonstrated significantly greater support for ObamaCare,  $b = .38$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .032$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.03, 0.72], and marginally more support for universal health care,  $b = .26$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $p = .066$ , 95% CI = [-0.02, 0.54], than conservative participants in the fairness condition. There was no effect of condition for the liberal participants (-1  $SD$ ),  $bs < -.19$ ,  $ps > .17$  (Figure 1). Overall, these results show that arguments in support of universal health care framed in terms of purity concerns led conservatives to be more supportive of universal health care, and specifically, ObamaCare.



**Figure 1.** The interaction between political ideology and message framing on support for the Affordable Care Act (i.e., ObamaCare; Study 3).

## Study 4

Study 4 extends our research in several ways. First, instead of presenting reframed arguments in favor of a typically liberal position that fit with conservative moral foundations, we presented arguments in favor of a typically conservative position that fit with a moral value endorsed more by liberals. Specifically, we presented participants with arguments in favor of maintaining high levels of military spending framed in terms of either fairness or authority and loyalty. In addition, we included questions that allowed us to capture whether any movement in liberal attitudes was due to agreement between the message and the targeted participants' moral values—specifically, whether the message convinced liberals that the military as an institution serves to increase fairness in society. We also asked participants how persuasive and convincing, as well as how novel, they found the argument to be. Including these questions allowed us to further verify that the reframed arguments swayed participants because they found them persuasive and not due to other possibilities such as the article's novelty.

## Method

**Participants.** In all, 306 volunteers (88 male, 217 female, 1 did not indicate) were recruited from across the United States via Craigslist.org. For participating, participants were entered into a drawing for a US\$50 gift certificate.

**Procedure.** As before, participants completed a demographic questionnaire including the two-item measure of political ideology ( $\alpha = .72$ ), with higher scores indicating greater conservatism ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). Participants learned that they would read an opinion article and be asked about their impressions of it. Participants were then randomly assigned to read a short article in favor of maintaining high levels of military spending grounded in terms of fairness (through the military, the disadvantaged can achieve equal standing and

overcome the challenges of poverty and inequality) or a combination of loyalty and authority (the military unifies us and ensures that the United States is the greatest nation in the world). The articles were similar in length (approximately 260 words) and style, and employed words from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (e.g., *Fairness*: equal, inequality; *Loyalty and Authority*: nation, loyal, leader, oppose). Pilot testing confirmed that each article best fit with the intended moral foundation (see online materials for full text).

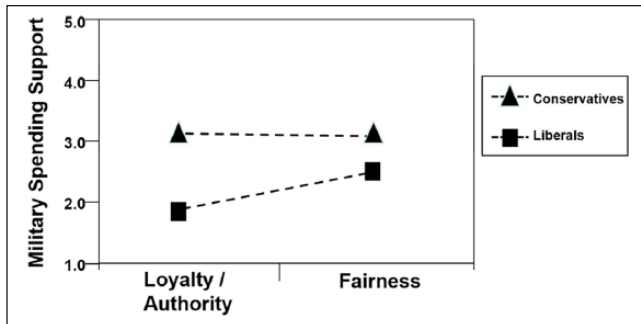
After reading their assigned argument, participants answered two questions gauging how persuasive they found the article to be: "How convincing was this article?" and "How persuasive was this article?" ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and an item measuring the novelty of the article ("How original was the article's argument?"). Participants responded to these items on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Next, participants completed a three-item questionnaire measuring how much they viewed the military as an institution that promotes fairness in society (e.g., "The military is an institution that helps reduce inequality in the United States."). Participants responded to each item on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Reliability among these items was high ( $\alpha = .81$ ), so we combined them into a *military promotes fairness* composite. Finally, participants completed a three-item questionnaire that measured participants' attitudes toward maintaining high levels of military spending (e.g., "Cutting funding to the military would be a mistake."). Participants indicated how strongly they agreed with each statement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Reliability across these items was high ( $\alpha = .91$ ), so we averaged them to form a *military spending support* composite.

## Results and Discussion

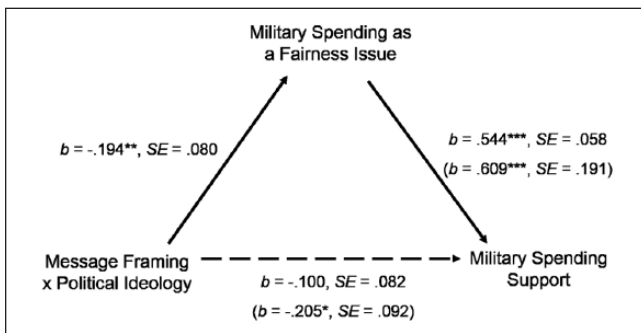
**Military spending support.** A multiple regression analysis entering experimental condition, political ideology, and their interaction as predictors of military spending attitudes yielded a significant effect of condition,  $b = .25$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .038$ ; a significant effect of ideology,  $b = .34$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and a significant interaction,  $b = -.21$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .026$ . Simple slope analyses found that liberal participants ( $-1$   $SD$ ) in the fairness condition scored significantly higher than the liberals in the loyalty/authority condition,  $b = .52$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .003$ , 95% CI = [0.18, 0.86]. Conservative participants ( $+1$   $SD$ ) did not differ due to experimental condition,  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .910$  (Figure 2).

**Persuasiveness.** We conducted a parallel multiple regression analysis entering the persuasiveness composite as the dependent variable. This analysis yielded a significant effect of condition,  $b = .60$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ ; a significant effect of political ideology,  $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and a significant interaction,  $b = -.25$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ . Simple slope analyses confirmed that liberal participants ( $-1$   $SD$ ) in the





**Figure 2.** The interaction between political ideology and message framing on support for military spending (Study 4).



**Figure 3.** Depiction of the mediating role participants' perceptions of military spending as an issue of fairness has on the relationship between the interaction and support for maintaining high levels of military spending (Study 4).

fairness condition found the argument significantly more persuasive,  $b = .93$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.60, 1.26]; whereas conservative participants (+1  $SD$ ) did not differ due to condition,  $b = .27$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .108$ .

**Moral-fit mediation.** We next explored the possibility that scores on the military promotes fairness composite would explain why liberal participants were more supportive of military spending when presented with the fairness message. A multiple regression analysis entering experimental condition, political ideology, and their interaction as independent variables and scores on the military promotes fairness composite as the dependent variable yielded a main effect of condition,  $b = .37$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p < .001$ ; a main effect of ideology,  $b = .10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .012$ ; and a significant interaction,  $b = -.19$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .016$ , finding that liberal participants (−1  $SD$ ) in the fairness condition scored higher on the military promotes fairness composite than liberals in the loyalty/authority condition,  $b = .63$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.33, 0.92]. There was no effect of condition for the conservative participants (+1  $SD$ ),  $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .436$ .

We next conducted mediated moderation analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to explore whether the military promotes fairness composite explained the effect of condition

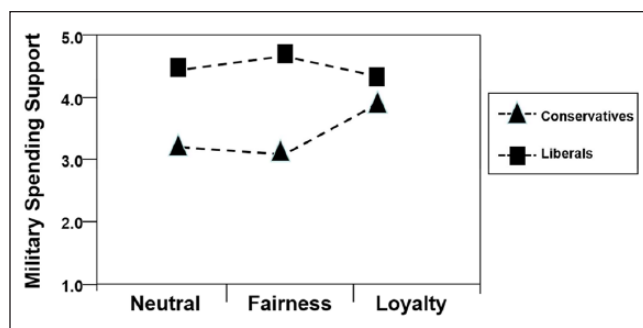
on the liberal participants' attitudes toward military spending. The 95% CI for the indirect effect did not include zero [−0.21, −0.02] (Figure 3), suggesting that the fairness message persuaded liberals to be more supportive of military spending by increasing their perception that the military promotes fairness, thus increasing the apparent fit between the position and their moral values. In addition, we conducted parallel mediated moderation analyses to examine whether perceptions that the fairness message was novel might also explain why liberal participants in the fairness condition reported greater support for military spending. We found that perceptions of novelty was a significant mediator, but entering both novelty and the military promotes fairness composite as simultaneous mediators revealed that only the military promotes fairness composite remained significant (for details, see supplementary materials).

These results complement and extend the findings of Study 3. In line with our moral reframing hypothesis, when arguments in favor of maintaining high levels of military spending were presented as consistent with the moral value of fairness, liberals found them to be more persuasive and reported greater support for military spending than if they read a more typical loyalty/authority-based message. These results, along with those of Study 3, suggest that morally reframing political messages can be effective in persuading both liberals and conservatives. In addition, we found evidence that the fairness message was persuasive to liberal participants because it led them to view the military as promoting fairness, a moral value generally held at high levels among liberal Americans. These results provide support for our hypothesis that moral reframing shifts individuals' attitudes by leading them to view an issue stance they would normally oppose as more in line with their moral values.

## Study 5

In Study 5, we test whether moral reframing can influence conservatives' attitudes regarding same-sex marriage. As Study 1 suggests, typical arguments in favor of same-sex marriage tend to be grounded in the more liberal moral foundations, particularly fairness concerns that emphasize the immorality of denying equal rights to individuals because of their sexual orientation. In line with our moral reframing hypothesis, we predict that grounding same-sex marriage support in loyalty-based moral concerns will be more persuasive to conservatives, leading them to be more supportive of legalizing same-sex marriage.

In addition, in Study 5 we include a neutral condition where participants read about an unrelated, amoral topic. We have claimed that the morally reframed messages influenced the attitudes of conservatives (Study 3) and liberals (Study 4) such that they became more supportive of a stance they would traditionally oppose. Yet, possibly, rather than the morally reframed message shifting attitudes, the more typical moral arguments prompted reactance in participants,



**Figure 4.** The interaction between political ideology and message framing on participants' support for same-sex marriage (Study 5).

pushing them to be more opposed to the stance than they would normally be. By comparing same-sex marriage attitudes of conservatives in the morally reframed (loyalty-based) condition with the attitudes of conservatives in the neutral condition, we can assess whether the morally reframed message actually increases conservative support for same-sex marriage.

We also more closely explore the mechanism underlying the effectiveness of moral reframing. Specifically, to test that moral fit between the reframed argument and the targeted audience's values drives the persuasive impact of moral reframing, we directly ask participants to indicate how much the arguments we present to them resonate with their moral values.

### Participants

A total of 261 (89 male, 172 female) participants were recruited from a volunteer-based university alumni pool. For their participation, participants were entered into a raffle for a US\$50 gift certificate.

### Procedure

As before, participants completed a demographic questionnaire including the two-item measure of political ideology ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ). Participants then learned that they would be presented with an opinion article to read and afterward answer questions about their impressions of it. Participants were randomly assigned to read a short article (approximately 280 words) in support of same-sex marriage framed in terms of either fairness (all citizens should be treated equally) or loyalty (same-sex couples are proud and patriotic Americans), or to read a neutral article describing the history of skiing. To help ensure that we successfully grounded the fairness and loyalty arguments in their respective foundation, we utilized words from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Graham et al., 2009) that corresponded with the argument's specific moral foundation (e.g., *Fairness*: fair, equality;

*Loyalty*: patriotic, community). Pilot testing confirmed that each article strongly represented the intended moral foundation (see online materials for full text).

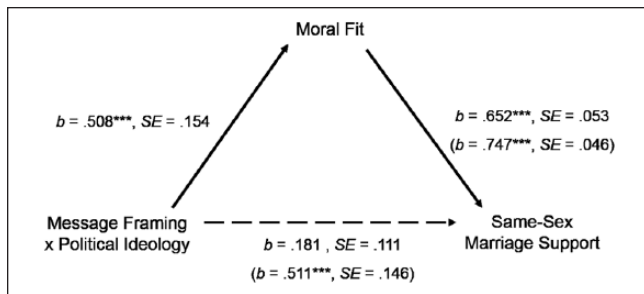
After reading their assigned argument, participants answered the following measure of *moral fit*: "To what extent do you feel the article's message resonates with your values?" on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a whole lot*). Then participants completed a six-item measure of same-sex marriage attitudes (e.g., "The government should allow same-sex couples to marry legally"), answering each item on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Results and Discussion

**Same-sex marriage attitudes.** We first dummy-coded whether participants were in the neutral condition or the fairness-based argument condition. Then we entered these two dummy-coded variables, political ideology ( $z$  scored), and the interaction of each dummy-coded variable and political ideology as predictors of participants' same-sex marriage attitudes. This analysis yielded a non-significant effect of the neutral condition,  $b = -.16$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p = .338$ ; a non-significant effect of the fairness condition,  $b = -.07$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .631$ ; a significant effect of political ideology,  $b = -.29$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p = .011$ ; a significant Neutral-Dummy  $\times$  Political Ideology interaction,  $b = -.36$ ,  $SE = .70$ ,  $p = .032$ ; and a significant Fairness-Dummy  $\times$  Political Ideology interaction,  $b = -.51$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .001$ . We next conducted simple slope analyses to compare the effect of each experimental condition on conservative participants' same-sex marriage attitudes. We found that conservative participants ( $+1 SD$ ) indicated more same-sex marriage support in the loyalty condition than in the fairness condition,  $b = -.58$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.98, -0.18]$ . This result indicates that morally reframing the issue of same-sex marriage as an issue of loyalty was more persuasive to conservatives than the more typical fairness-based argument, a result that conceptually replicates the findings of both, Studies 3 and 4.

We also found that the conservatives ( $+1 SD$ ) in the loyalty condition demonstrated greater same-sex marriage support than conservatives in the neutral condition,  $b = -.52$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p = .039$ , 95% CI =  $[-1.02, -0.02]$ . This result helps verify that our moral reframing findings are not solely due to the targeted group (in this case, conservatives) becoming more opposed in response to the more typical moral argument (in this case, a fairness-based argument). In addition, a third simple slope analysis demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the conservatives ( $+1 SD$ ) in the neutral and fairness conditions,  $b = .07$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $p = .786$  (Figure 4).

A parallel set of analyses looking at the effect of experimental condition on liberal participants ( $-1 SD$ ) found no differences between the neutral and loyalty conditions,  $b = .21$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .343$ , or the neutral and fairness



**Figure 5.** Depiction of the mediating role of message fit on the relationship between the experimental Condition (fairness vs. loyalty)  $\times$  Political Ideology interaction and participants' support for same-sex marriage (Study 4).

conditions,  $b = -.23$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .293$ . However, we did find that the liberal participants in the fairness condition reported greater same-sex marriage support than liberal participants in the loyalty condition,  $b = .44$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .049$ , 95% CI = [0.00, 0.88].

**Moral fit.** Finally, we explored whether scores on the measure of moral fit mediated the effect of condition (comparing the fairness and loyalty conditions, and comparing the neutral and loyalty conditions) that we found among conservative participants. First, we conducted the same multiple regression analysis as before, but entered scores on the moral-fit measure as the dependent variable. This analysis yielded a significant effect of the neutral condition,  $b = -1.78$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; a non-significant effect of the fairness condition,  $b = .03$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p = .838$ ; and a significant effect of political ideology,  $b = -.31$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .008$ . We also found a significant Neutral-Dummy  $\times$  Political Ideology interaction,  $b = .39$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .025$ , and a significant Fairness-Dummy  $\times$  Political Ideology interaction,  $b = -.51$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .001$ . Simple slope analyses demonstrated that conservatives (+1 *SD*) in the loyalty condition indicated that the argument fit with their moral values more than the conservatives in either the neutral,  $b = -1.39$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [-1.91, -0.87], or fairness conditions,  $b = -.48$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .024$ , 95% CI = [-0.90, -0.06]. Next, we conducted mediated moderation analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to test whether participants' moral-fit scores explained the difference between conservatives' same-sex marriage attitudes when in the fairness versus loyalty conditions or neutral versus loyalty conditions. Bootstrap analyses revealed that for both comparisons the 95% CI did not include 0 (*loyalty vs. fairness*: [0.11, 0.55]; *loyalty vs. neutral*: [0.01, 0.21]; Figure 5), suggesting that conservatives in the loyalty condition were more favorable toward same-sex marriage than their counterparts in the other two conditions because the loyalty message resonated more with their values.

Overall, Study 5 provides further support for our moral reframing hypothesis within the context of same-sex marriage.

Importantly, in Study 5, we found that conservatives in the loyalty moral argument condition were more supportive of same-sex marriage than conservatives in the neutral condition, and that conservative participants in the neutral and fairness condition demonstrated no significant differences in their same-sex marriage support. Together, these results suggest that the moral reframing effects we have found throughout our studies are not due to the targeted group taking a stronger oppositional stance when they are presented with a typical moral argument. In addition, Study 5's moral-fit mediation finding more directly establishes that the fit between the reframed argument and the targeted audience's values drives the persuasive impact of moral reframing.

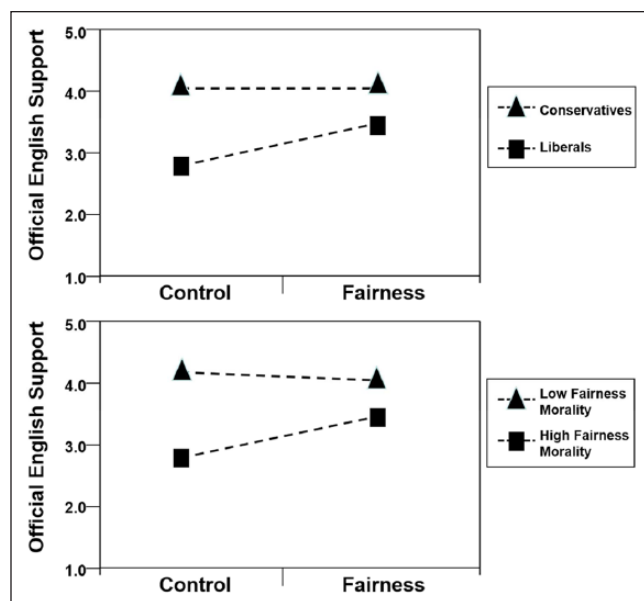
## Study 6

In Study 6, we present participants with an argument in favor of making English the official language of the United States, or a neutral message. As Study 2 suggests, supporters of "official English" typically frame their support in terms of group loyalty, arguing that the English language is something that unifies Americans and is a fundamental part of a larger cultural assimilation process. We reframed this position in terms of the more liberal moral value of fairness, emphasizing how making English the official language of the United States would compel immigrants to learn the language, leading them in turn to face better job prospects and less discrimination.

In Study 6, we also sought to address some alternative explanations for our earlier findings. In Studies 3 to 5, we used participants' reported political ideology as a proxy for the moral values they endorse, assuming that liberals endorse harm and fairness at higher levels than conservatives and conservatives endorse loyalty, authority, and purity at higher levels than liberals. Past research has consistently established these moral value differences between liberals and conservatives (Graham et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Lakoff, 2002). However, to ensure that our results were indeed due to such differences, in Study 5 we directly measure participants' endorsement of the moral value of fairness. By doing so, we can more precisely test whether a political argument based on fairness moral principles is more persuasive to those who hold this moral value most strongly.

## Method

**Participants.** A total of 290 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed the online survey (167 male, 122 female, and 1 did not indicate). To ensure we gathered high quality data from our online source, we included two attention checks (Downs, Holbrook, Sheng, & Cranor, 2010; Moral Foundations Questionnaire [MFQ], 2012). Thirteen participants did not successfully complete these items (described below), leaving a total of 278 participants (163 male, 114 female, 1 did not indicate). Participants



**Figure 6.** The interaction between political ideology and message framing (top panel) and between fairness morality and message framing (bottom panel) on support for making English the official language of the United States (Study 6).

received modest compensation for participation.

**Procedure.** Participants completed the same demographic questionnaire as before, including the political ideology composite ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ). Participants then completed the 30-item MFQ (Graham et al., 2011;  $\alpha_{\text{Harm}} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Fairness}} = .66$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Loyalty}} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Authority}} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Purity}} = .86$ ). Participants indicating that being good at math was relevant to determining whether someone was moral or not ( $n = 8$ ), a filter item from the MFQ, were removed from all analyses. Furthermore, instructions explained that a recent theory proposes that there are five moral foundations, listing each foundation along with a brief example of reasoning based on each—for example, “Fairness (example: it is immoral to not treat others fairly/justly)” —to ensure participants understood the distinction between domains. Participants indicated how they would rank the importance of the five foundations (from 1 to 5) when determining whether an act is moral or immoral.

Participants then learned that they would read a brief opinion article and answer questions about their impressions of it afterward. Participants were randomly assigned to either the neutral or the fairness condition. Participants in the neutral condition read a short article about the history of wearing ties containing no moral content. Participants in the fairness condition read a persuasive message in favor of making English the official language of the United States (both messages were approximately 350 words). Using fairness-based words from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (e.g., fair, equal), this message argued that making English the official language would lead to more fair outcomes for immigrants

and help them avoid discrimination. Pilot testing confirmed that the article strongly represented the fairness moral foundation (see online materials for full text).

After reading their assigned article, participants completed a four-item *support for official English* questionnaire measuring support for making English the official language of the United States (e.g., “I am in favor of making English the official language of the United States”;  $\alpha = .95$ ). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of these items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In addition, embedded in this scale was a “check” item that directed participants to select the “agree” option for that item to verify they were paying attention and taking the task seriously (i.e., not randomly clicking responses). Six participants failed this attention check, two of whom also failed the “math” check item described above, and were eliminated from analysis.

## Results and Discussion

**Political ideology.** We examined whether the fairness message impacted individuals differently depending on their political ideology. A multiple regression analysis entering condition, political ideology, and their interaction as predictors of support for official English yielded a non-significant effect of condition,  $b = .20$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .113$ ; a significant effect of political ideology,  $b = .32$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and a marginally significant interaction  $b = -.14$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .082$ . Simple slope analyses showed that liberal participants ( $-1 SD$ ) in the fairness condition were more supportive of official English than liberal participants in the control,  $b = .42$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95% CI = [0.07, 0.77]. There was no significant effect of condition for the conservative participants ( $+1 SD$ ),  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .909$  (Figure 6). Thus, these results conceptually replicate the results of Studies 3 to 5.

**Fairness endorsement.** We measured endorsement of the fairness foundation in two ways. First, we calculated each participant’s average score on the fairness scale and subtracted out the average of the four remaining moral domains. Doing so allowed us to capture each participant’s specific endorsement of the fairness foundation, while accounting for the tendency for some participants to report high levels of endorsement across all the foundations, labeling this measure *fairness score—continuous*. Second, we used participants’ ranking of the fairness foundation, relative to the other foundations, labeling this measure *fairness score—rank*.

Next, we examined the correlations between fairness score—continuous, fairness score—rank, and political ideology. Fairness score—continuous correlated  $-.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , and fairness score—rank correlated  $-.24$ ,  $p = .001$ , with political ideology. Thus, in line with past research (Graham et al., 2009), the more conservative participants were, the less strongly they endorsed the fairness moral foundation (see also Jost et al., 2003).



Next, we tested Study 5's central hypothesis that participants who strongly endorse the fairness moral foundation will be most influenced by the fairness-based argument. A multiple regression analysis entering experimental condition, fairness score—continuous, and the interaction of the two as predictors of support for official English yielded a non-significant effect of experimental condition,  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p = .262$ , and a significant effect of fairness score—continuous,  $b = -.53$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ , revealing that the more individuals endorsed the fairness foundation, the less likely they were to support making English the official language. The analysis also yielded a significant interaction,  $b = .39$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .009$ . Simple slope analyses revealed that among participants who endorsed the fairness foundation at high levels (+1 *SD*), there was a significant effect of experimental condition,  $b = .48$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .008$ , 95%  $CI = [0.12, 0.84]$ , such that those in the fairness message condition endorsed official English more than those in the control condition. We found no effect of condition among those who endorsed the fairness foundation at low levels (−1 *SD*),  $b = -.20$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .276$  (Figure 6).<sup>2</sup>

As a second test, we conducted a parallel regression analysis entering fairness score—rank as the measure of endorsement of the fairness moral foundation. This analysis yielded a non-significant effect of experimental condition,  $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $p = .391$ ; a significant effect of fairness score—rank,  $b = -.26$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .002$ ; and a significant interaction,  $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p = .049$ . Simple slope analyses revealed that for participants who ranked the fairness moral foundation high (+1 *SD*), there was a significant difference due to experimental condition,  $b = .40$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .040$ , 95%  $CI = [0.02, 0.79]$ , such that those in the fairness condition endorsed making English the official language more than their counterparts in the control condition. Among participants who ranked the fairness moral foundation low (−1 *SD*), there was no difference due to experimental condition,  $b = -.17$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $p = .406$ .

Results of this study demonstrate that a fairness-based political argument was uniquely persuasive not only to liberal participants but also, in parallel analyses, to participants who endorsed the value of fairness at high levels. Such results offer discerning evidence for our theoretical reasoning that reframed messages influence recipients through agreement with their deeply held moral values.

## General Discussion

Liberal and conservative advocates often use moral rhetoric in attempts to persuade their rivals. We hypothesized that because liberals and conservatives face a moral empathy gap, even when targeting the other side for persuasion, both groups will typically frame their arguments in a way that fits with their own sense of morality rather than the morality of the intended audience. As a result, their moral arguments will be less effective than arguments reframed to appeal to the

values of those holding the opposing political position. Specifically, we reasoned that people would support an opposing political stance more when messages illustrated consistency between the stance and their most cherished moral values.

Results of six studies supported our hypotheses. We found that both liberals and conservatives composed persuasive messages that reflected their own moral values, not values unique to those who typically would oppose the political stance (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, these moral messages framed in a manner consistent with the moral values of those already supporting the political stance were less persuasive than moral arguments reframed to appeal to the values of the intended audience—those who typically oppose the political position that the messenger is arguing in favor of (Studies 3–6).

These findings offer important theoretical insights. For instance, our results support the claim that moral values can causally influence political attitudes. Although abundant correlational research links morality and politics, far less work has established this causal link, leading critics to suggest that values are only tools for self-justification and sense-making that have few causal effects in the political domain. This is not to say, however, that morality is necessarily the primary cause of the correlation between morality and politics, and it is likely that the relationship between these concepts is bidirectional.

In addition, our results support the efficacy of moral rhetoric and framing. Where political strategists and theorists have emphasized the importance of moral content in political advocacy (Atran & Axelrod, 2008; Lakoff, 2002; Luntz, 2007), little systematic, academic research has tested their claims. Indeed, evidence from the field is ambivalent, as both successful (e.g., the civil rights movement) and unsuccessful (e.g., universal background checks for guns) political efforts often feature moral rhetoric prominently. Our results provide nuanced support for claims that political arguments couched in moral terms can be more persuasive, demonstrating that the effectiveness of moral framing depends critically on fitting the values underlying a message to those held by the targeted audience.

Our results align well with existing persuasion research conducted outside the moral domain. As with this past research, we found that matching messages were particularly effective in persuading the targeted group, and that perceived fit drove these persuasion effects (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 1982; Cesario et al., 2004; Petty & Wegener, 1998). That said, in the present research we did not explore the cognitive and affective processes that underlie the moral-fit effects we observe. Previous research on message matching suggests that the fit between the message and an individual's characteristics engenders a sense that the argument feels right, and these feelings transfer to judgments of the message's position and the larger issue in question, and facilitate cognitive processing regarding the topic (Avnet & Higgins, 2006;

Cesario et al., 2004; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Given that the influence of morality on individuals' judgments occurs largely at an intuitive and emotional level (Haidt, 2001), morally reframed messages should be particularly likely to trigger positive intuitions about the message—so much so that moral reframing can lead liberals and conservatives to increase their support for positions they typically would not endorse. Examining further the cognitive and affective processes underlying the moral reframing effects we document would be a worthwhile avenue for future research.

The results of our studies suggest that arguments appealing to the messenger's values rather than the audience's values were not only unpersuasive to the target audience but also did not impact the attitudes of those already in favor of the political position being argued for. For instance, conservatives presented with a military spending argument grounded in loyalty and authority concerns did not show any greater support for military spending than conservatives presented with an argument grounded in fairness concerns. One reason for these non-effects could be that the two arguments were equally persuasive for a group already supporting the position. However, in Study 5, we included a neutral condition and found no difference in liberal support for same-sex marriage between the neutral, the argument grounded in fairness concerns, and the reframed argument grounded in loyalty concerns, suggesting that neither moral argument in favor of same-sex marriage had an effect on liberals' attitudes. These null results could be the product of a ceiling effect because liberal participants' support for same-sex marriage was close to the top of the 5-point scale ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). Still another possibility is that this type of fairness-based argument was not persuasive because it was not novel. However, this would imply that a highly novel message that appealed to liberal moral values would be persuasive to liberals, which may seem at odds with Study 4's results showing that increased liberal support for military spending after a morally reframed argument was not driven by the novelty of this argument. Still another possibility is that novelty impacts the persuasiveness of pro-attitudinal messages grounded in relevant moral concerns, but not of counter-attitudinal messages grounded in relevant moral concerns. Overall, we believe, the most parsimonious account for these non-effects is that there was a ceiling effect, but hope future research might explore this issue further.

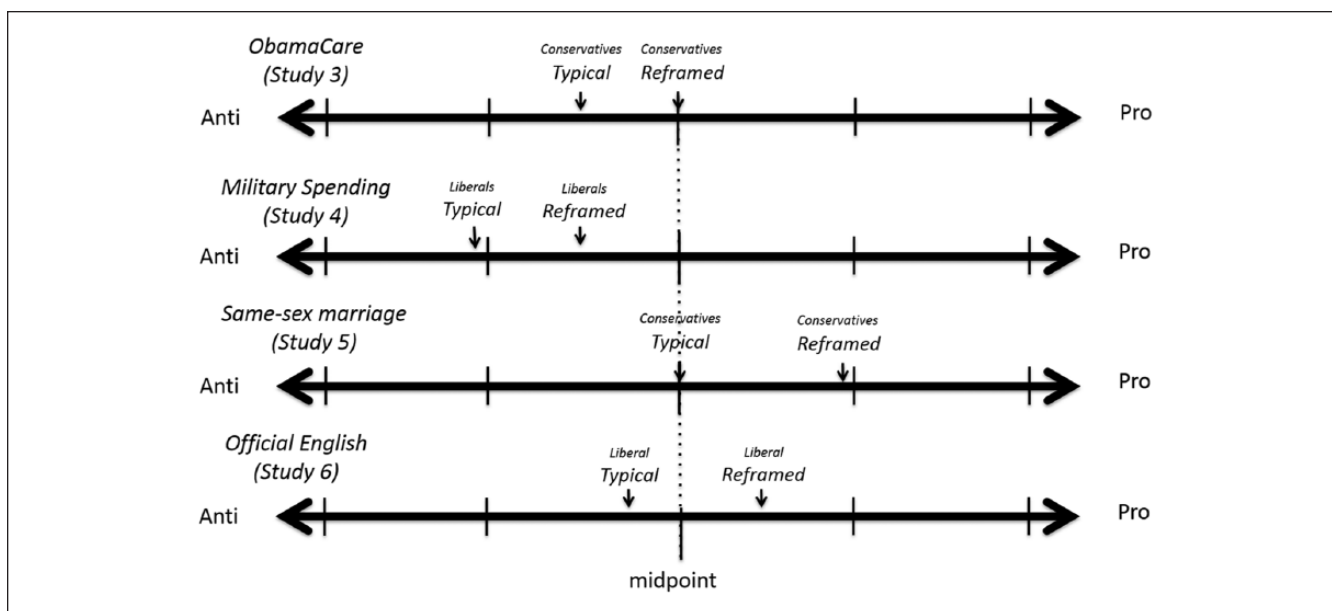
Why did so few participants in Studies 1 and 2 tailor their arguments to appeal to the moral values of their target audience? It could be that people are unable to recognize that ideologically different others endorse moral values that are different from their own, and thus find different moral arguments convincing. Or, it could be people understand this, but they do not want to advance moral arguments they disagree with. As an initial investigation of this question, we had 171 liberal participants read both the same-sex marriage arguments used in Study 5, and 105 conservative participants read both of the military spending arguments used in Study

4. We asked these participants "Which article do you think would be more effective at persuading political conservatives [liberals] who oppose same-sex marriage [military spending] to be more supportive of same-sex marriage [military spending]?" and "Which article would you select to present to conservatives [liberals] who oppose same-sex marriage [military spending] if you wanted to persuade them to be more in favor of same-sex marriage [military spending]?" We found that a majority of participants (64% of liberals, 85% of conservatives) identified the morally reframed argument as the more persuasive one. Considering a large majority of participants in Studies 1 and 2 did not write morally reframed arguments, it appears most individuals do not spontaneously make morally reframed arguments, but can recognize the persuasive value of such arguments. In addition, we found that among those who reported that the morally reframed argument would be more persuasive, a small minority (20% of liberals, 6% of conservatives) indicated they would not present the reframed argument. Thus, a small portion of participants identified the argument that was more persuasive, but indicated they would not send it, perhaps because it was articulated in terms of moral values they did not endorse.

These results, coupled with those found in Studies 1 and 2, suggest that although few individuals spontaneously constructed morally reframed arguments, most were able to recognize the persuasive value of morally reframed messages when presented with them. This disjuncture is likely attributable to both capacity- and motivated-based factors. Regarding the former, it is more difficult to craft a highly persuasive argument than it is to recognize one. Regarding the latter, a minority of participants were not motivated to make reframed arguments, though they viewed them as likely to be more persuasive. We hope future research might delve deeper into the reasons why advocates typically employ egocentrically biased arguments when trying to win over those holding an opposing stance.

Future research could also investigate whether these dynamics occur in non-moral contexts. For instance, will highly affect-oriented managers fail to recognize the usefulness of tailoring directives to employees in cognitively oriented ways? And, do they do so because they are unable or unwilling to communicate more persuasively? We believe the failure of individuals to spontaneously craft arguments that resonate with a very different target audience will likely occur in many other contexts as well, though the effects may be weaker in non-moral settings where individuals may have greater capacity to imagine another's perspective and are less motivated to be true to the reasons for their own positions.

While we found that the morally reframed arguments we tested in Studies 3 to 6 were persuasive to the target audience, in crafting those arguments, we relied upon insights from research on the foundations of liberal and conservative morality—research lay advocates would be largely unaware of. Thus, it remains unknown if lay people can



**Figure 7.** Depiction of key results from Studies 3 through 6 demonstrating how moral reframing affected political attitudes of the targeted group.

craft persuasive, morally reframed arguments. As an initial investigation of this question, we randomly presented a set of liberal participants ( $n = 364$ ) with one of the morally reframed arguments in favor of official English that conservative participants wrote in Study 2 or one of the non-reframed moral arguments participants wrote in that study. Likewise, we presented a set of conservative participants ( $n = 339$ ) with one of the morally reframed arguments in favor of same-sex marriage that liberal participants wrote in Study 1 or one of the non-reframed arguments that participants wrote. We found that the morally reframed arguments conservatives wrote in favor of official English were more persuasive to the liberal targets than the other messages, and this difference was mediated by the extent to which liberal participants reported that the message resonated with their moral values more. However, we found that the two types of messages liberals composed did not differentially affect conservative attitudes toward same-sex marriage (see supplementary materials for a complete description of study methods and results). These results offer some evidence that lay people, in this case conservative participants, can construct effective, morally reframed arguments. Future research should explore whether directing individuals to strategically reframe their moral arguments might increase the number of people able to compose such reframed arguments.

It should be noted that although our research primarily utilized MFT's five moral foundations as a framework for testing our hypotheses, moral reframing is not necessarily tied to that framework. It is likely that other moral typologies (e.g., Lakoff, 2002; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Shweder,

Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) could be used to morally reframe political, and other, messages in terms that would also be persuasive. In fact, a more comprehensive integration of the different moral frameworks could result in more consistently effective, morally reframed messages.

Although we found significant effects across our studies, it is important also to scrutinize the size of those effects. Figure 7 gives mean levels of support among the targeted ideological groups in the treatment and control conditions of Studies 3 to 6. Although many of our effect sizes appear moderate, we would argue that these differences between conditions are large in the context of political attitudes research, which has found that views on morally charged political issues are uniquely strong and resistant to influence. A critic could reasonably note that we did not study the effects of the reframed messages on whether attitude change endured over time, or the efficacy of reframing effects in the face of counter-arguments. These are all important avenues for future research, though it would likely be necessary to strengthen the reframed messages (perhaps through repeated presentation across time), as our treatments in this article were quite minimal.

Although our results demonstrate the efficacy of framing moral arguments in terms that appeal to the values of those on the other side of the political spectrum, the method could have a variety of unintended consequences. Appealing to the other side's values might reinforce or validate those values (e.g., Lakoff, 2002). For instance, if liberals reframe support for same-sex marriage in terms of the more conservative moral principles, their arguments may legitimize those principles, facilitating their use to support conservative positions

in the future. Relatedly, advocates might be reluctant to use moral reframing because they feel doing so compromises their own beliefs, a position apparently taken by a small number of participants in the above auxiliary study. Furthermore, moral reframing could lead advocates to assimilate to, or soften in their views of values they previously opposed.

Finally, our theorizing and results may seem somewhat contradictory to claims that, conservatives endorse all five moral foundations equally whereas liberals only endorse the harm and fairness foundations. Although descriptive results for the MFQ suggest conservatives do endorse the five foundations equally (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2012), importantly, the questionnaire was not designed or scaled for intra-personal comparisons across the moral domains, but rather for inter-personal comparisons. Furthermore, if conservatives endorsed all five foundations equally, we should have found that they were less likely to suffer from the moral empathy gap, and *any* morally grounded argument should have persuaded them. But we did not find those effects. Moreover, results from a large political psychology literature challenge the notion that conservatives endorse the fairness and care foundations as much as they do the other foundations. Indeed much of this literature suggests conservatism is based fundamentally on the acceptance and legitimization of inequality, and the willingness to prioritize the ingroup's goals over the welfare of those in the outgroup (e.g., Caprara et al., 2006; Jost et al., 2003; Lakoff, 2002; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). If conservatives endorsed the five moral foundations equally, we would expect them to take an ambivalent stance on many morally polarizing issues like same-sex marriage and immigration, yet they do not. Overall, even if conservatives advocate strongly for things like fairness, equality, and social justice on paper, their political stances suggest they are also willing to discount these values in forming their political attitudes when other moral values, such as loyalty, authority, and purity are at stake (e.g., conservative attitudes toward war, tax policy, and same-sex marriage).

## Conclusion

Although fundamental to social order and group solidarity (Haidt, 2012), a darker side of morality is revealed in the domain of politics, where it often divides those who do not share the same convictions (Skitka & Morgan, 2009). Morality contributes to political polarization because moral convictions lead individuals to take absolutist stances and refuse to compromise (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Marietta, 2008; Skitka et al., 2005). Recognizing morality's influence on political attitudes, our research presents a means for political persuasion that, rather than challenging one's moral values, incorporates them into the argument. As a result, individuals see value in an opposing stance, reducing the attitudinal gap between the two sides. This technique not

only substantiates the power of morality to shape political thought but also presents a potential means for political coalition formation.

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## Notes

1. Making English the official language of the United States is supported more among conservatives than liberals (Rasmussen Reports, 2010), and was added to the official Republican platform in 2012.
2. We also tested the effects of a full regression model that included political ideology, fairness score, experimental condition, and both Political Ideology  $\times$  Condition and Fairness Score  $\times$  Condition interaction terms. The two interaction terms for this model were both non-significant, likely due to issues of multicollinearity (the Variance Inflation Factor for each is greater than 5). Even so, the Fairness Score  $\times$  Condition interaction appeared to be a more robust predictor,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .132$ , relative to the Political Ideology  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $\beta = -.099$ ,  $p = .570$ .

## Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at <http://pspb.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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