

## **Framing Effects on Environmental Politics and Policy**

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This paper lays out a research agenda for studying the effects of framing on environmental politics. While moral frames can motivate individual behavior, they make it difficult to compromise. This paper begins with the micro-level effects of moral framing on individual behavior, then turns to the effects of moral framing on legislative behavior and macro-level policy effects. For each, it considers the observable implications and research design considerations.

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The story of environmental politics in the US is often recounted in simple terms. At the dawn of the modern American environmental movement in the 1950s, the environment was not a comparatively pressing political issue, and the political divisions over environmental issues did not fall along partisan lines. These environmentalists tended to agree on broad justifications for improving the condition of the environment: pollution should be curtailed because of the harm it caused to people, America's natural resource should be used to improve peoples' lives, and these ends could be achieved to benefit future generations. The central challenge in enacting environmental policies was to strike deals that balanced costs of environmental protection with benefits to social welfare. This pragmatic, optimistic and nonpartisan tone continued to flavor environmental politics into the 1970s. The 1970 Clean Air Act, the 1972 Clean Water Act, and the 1973 Endangered Species Act were enacted with large, bipartisan majorities. However, the course of environmental politics shifted over the next several decades, reflecting the broader trends toward polarization in American politics. Parties became more ideologically pure, with conservative Republicans replacing "yellow dog" Democrats in the South and Democrats replacing moderate Republicans in the Northeast. In spite of these ideological shifts, there remained room for agreement; the 1990 Clean Air Act was enacted with broad bipartisan support. By the 2000s, however, the ideological alignment on the environment was more dramatic than ever before; the Democrats had become the "environmentalists" party, while scarcely a single Republican holding national elected office could be considered an environmentalist.

This simple story of increasing environmental partisanship, though accurate in broad terms, ignores a possible second important change in reasoning that also led to shifting positions on both sides of environmental debate. Democrats and Republicans both appear to have added moral frames to the pragmatic frames for their environmental positions. The 2000 Democratic National Party Platform even explicitly stated "We have to do what's right for our Earth because it is the moral thing to do." Meanwhile, Republicans use different language but also invoke a moral dimension.

The extent to which environmental debates have shifted from pragmatic to moral frames can have profound consequences for environmental policymaking. Moral frames connect environmental issues to deeply held beliefs about right and wrong. On both sides of the debate, moral framing may make the environment more salient. Moral framing may make environmentalists more likely to contribute time and money to environmental causes and support pro-environmental political candidates. Moral framing may make non-environmentalists more steadfast in their opposition to environmental protection. Framing can do more than activate and intensify beliefs, it can also change the types of decisions and policies people are willing to accept. When making decisions that tap their deeply held moral beliefs, people may be less accepting of partial solutions and less willing to separate the means and ends of an action or policy. After all, it is impossible to compromise over sin.

In this paper, we present the implications of environmental framing and its political precursors and consequences, drawing on literature from across the social sciences. We then examine the consequences of moral framing for mass political attitudes and behavior for those in favor and opposed to environmental protection. For those on both sides of the

debate, moral framings can harden their pre-existing positions. We conclude with a discussion regarding moral framing's potential impact on political behavior, from micro-level mobilization to macro-level legislative behavior and policy outcomes. We outline a research agenda designed to discern the role of framing in each of these areas.

### **Framing Defined:**

Substantial attention has been paid in recent academic journals and mass media to how frames encourage or attempt to encourage specific thoughts in the interpreter of the frame. In the case of ongoing environmental policy debate, the use of frames is constantly on display in media portrayals of the climate change issue, hydraulic fracturing, the proper role of the EPA, and numerous other issues.

Frames are the conceptual structure organizing how people think (Lakoff 2010). The central idea behind framing theory is that individuals' attitudes on an issue are a composite of their component evaluative beliefs about the issue, with these beliefs having a direction and a salience (how influential the beliefs are for the attitude) (see Chong and Druckman 2007, Nelson et al. 1997). When expressing an attitude, whether responding to a survey question, deciding which candidate to support in an election, or buying a product, individuals access their underlying beliefs and formulate an attitude by combining the direction of beliefs, weighted by their salience. External contexts can shape attitudes by altering which beliefs are accessed and how much weight is applied to them.

Frames are generally conceived as ways for political elites to communicate information about political issues to constituents. This communication is variously described as a "bridge," "linkage," "interpretive storyline," or other similar metaphor, each of which calls to mind an attempt to close an otherwise sizeable gap between topics that people think about in the course of their everyday lives, and the policy issues that elites want them to think about.

### **Moral Framing:**

Of particular importance are beliefs that are closely aligned with people's emotions. Frames can be effectively used to elicit moral reactions from those interpreting them, because frames are able to connect morally relevant intuitions to a policy issue. By doing so, these frames greatly increase an issue's relevance to the interpreter, even if he only subconsciously links his moral intuitions with analysis of the specific policy issue at hand (Nisbet, Markowitz, and Kotcher 2012). In this construction, use of moral frames may be effective because moral intuition can act as a form of mental shortcut. Individuals who are likely to employ such a shortcut will also be more likely to respond to such frames, independent of their level of knowledge of environmental issues. We can define absolutist reasoning more clearly as being characterized by a combination of the following attributes:

- Protected status: placing a value beyond question or set apart from trade-offs with other values
- Nonconsequentialism: privileging values over costs or consequences
- Non-instrumentalism: rejecting calculated self-interest

- Nonnegotiability: denial of the legitimacy of compromise
- Citation of boundaries: invoking a boundary of what is acceptable or tolerable
- Citation of authority: invoking an authority for the value or boundary
- Moral outrage: expressing anger at the violation of a value or boundary” (Marietta 2009)

In spite of past political science literature that has tended to play down the importance of moral considerations in public opinion and individual political activity<sup>1</sup>, a number of recent papers have indicated that individuals’ moral values do predict political action (Sitka and Bauman 2008, Wiesberg 2005). Koleva et al. (2012) find that individuals’ moral foundations predict support for a number of policy issues generally thought of as “culture war” issues. Equally relevant to this paper are findings by Braman, et al. (2007) that knowing a voter’s opinion on these cultural issues strongly predicts opinions regarding issues not usually considered values or “culture war” issues. Democrats have employed this sacred rhetoric (akin to moral rhetoric in that it is held to be absolute and resists tradeoffs) more than Republicans in recent history (Marietta 2009).

### **Frames Changing over Time**

The first step in evaluating the effects of framing is understanding how framing has changed over time within the area of the environment. Environmental organizations still consistently employ images and language focused on protection of wildlife and wilderness areas – the major environmental issues of the early and middle twentieth century – because the long legacy of these issues still resonates with many Americans. Moreover, the frames used are clearly intended to conjure thoughts of majestic but threatened animals and unsullied wilderness, even if the major environmental policy debates in Washington have little to do with these issues. None of the major current and burgeoning environmental problems like environmental justice, global climate change, and renewable energy have similar histories to offer as reference to potential supporters.

### **Framing and Political Mobilization**

Moral framing has consequences for mass political attitudes and behavior. On one hand moral framing motivates individuals to participate in political action, such as voting or signing petitions. On the other hand, it has the paradoxical effect of making compromise difficult, which may lead to less overall political action on the issue. This section establishes the pathways by which framing can affect political mobilization. The first piece in the much larger puzzle of how frames influence environmental policy is the connection between frames offered by political elites and the beliefs and actions of the mass public.

Frames can have the effect of motivating individual political mobilization. At their core, environmental frames are intended to encourage constituents to pay attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bartels (2005), “What’s the Matter with What’s the Matter with Kansas?”, Working Paper; Fiorina (2005).

issue that is the focus of the frame. As distinct from political messaging that attempts to persuade voters to believe a certain policy position, frames act to draw constituents' attention to an issue by initiating the recollection of information that the individual already has at his disposal, even if subconsciously (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). At the same time that the framer is able to direct the respondent's attention back to information already in his possession, the framer also attempts to steer that information in a specific direction – for example, toward conclusions regarding the cause of a political issue, and the best way to solve it (Nisbet, Markowitz, and Klotcher 2012). As a result, frames allow individuals without well-formulated or recently considered positions on an individual policy to engage with it. Frames are not just mechanisms for spinning policy debates in ways that encourage constituents to support a specific politician's position, though that may be a primary motivation; frames provide essential context that allows constituents to interpret policy issues. This ability to engage citizens in politics may lead to more political mobilization (Pagano and Huo 2007). For example, citizens exposed to sacred rhetoric become more motivated to engage in politics, including in political discussions and donating to campaigns (Marietta 2008).

The effects of framing are magnified for individuals who are more politically knowledgeable about the issue referenced in the frame (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Druckman and Nelson 2003). Political knowledge is essential for individuals to be able to make connections between elites' framed messages and their own beliefs (Druckman and Nelson 2003). While knowledge increases the effects of framing, the impacts are moderated by the extent to which individuals have pre-existing opinions regarding the issues being framed (Druckman and Nelson 2003). This tendency has been referred to as a need to evaluate (NE) construct, with low-NE individuals dependent on recent information and heuristics and high-NE individuals more inclined to constantly consume information and evaluate their opinions (Jarvis and Petty 1996; Bizer et al. 2000). Those individuals who are generally knowledgeable about environmental politics, but who tend to form their political opinions based on heuristics, will be strongly influenced by environmental frames. Meanwhile, individuals who either are not previously knowledgeable on an issue, or tend to require sustained information before forming an opinion, are unlikely to be influenced to action by environmental frames.

These moral frames may lead to increased difficulty in reaching political consensus on environmental issues. To the extent that moral frames encourage comparative increases in moral thinking about political issues, these attitudes are likely to be more strongly held and thus to be more likely to predict political behavior than issues that would not be considered moral in nature (Skitka and Bauman 2008). Likely because of the relative strength of political convictions that stem from moral reasoning, people generally find it more difficult to compromise on issues that draw on morality, or fundamental first principles. Moreover, additional information about these policies is less likely to influence opinions on moral issues than on other issues that are not deemed to be questions of morality (Mooney and Schuldt 2008). Interestingly, people do not seem to think that others will act the same way; they are more likely to engage in debates to try to convince others of their position if that position was formed through moral reasoning (Marietta 2008).

The process of framing environmental issues is complicated by the inevitable interconnection between scientific inquiry and values (Miller 2000). Environmental policy necessarily relies on scientific research to allow humans to understand what is happening in our environment and what role we play as a part of it, in a way that is distinct from many other policy arenas. Environmental policy formation requires definition of how we value the environment and thus how we might deploy scientific knowledge in pursuit of those values.

#### *Research on Individual Mobilization and Compromise:*

This broader project seeks to understand not just how framing can mobilize individuals but how moral frames can, paradoxically, also inhibit compromise. At the micro-level, this research has two parts. First, focusing on political behavior, such as signing a petition, we seek to establish the link between moral framing and political mobilization. Using a survey experiment, we will vary whether respondents receive a moral framing or a more technical framing. By asking them to sign an online petition, we can observe whether those who received the moral framing are more likely to sign.

The second part of micro-level behavior that we will investigate focuses directly on compromise. Using laboratory experiments, we will assess whether those exposed to moral frames find it more difficult to compromise on environmental issues, as Mooney and Schuldt (2008) suggest.

### **Moral Framing and Legislative Compromise**

One observable implication if moral framing makes compromise on political issues more difficult (Lakoff 2002, Speth 2006) is that we should simply observe less compromise in the legislative process. In turn this lack of compromise should result in less legislation designed to solve public problems.

Legislators are affected by the framing of issues in three ways: via electoral incentives, via interest groups, and via their own individual beliefs. In a prior section, we argued that moral framing has two effects on the public. First, it increases their political mobilization. Because moral framing motivate individuals to participate, the public is likely to be more engaged in issues that are framed in a moral way. Legislators facing a reelection incentive (Mayhew 1974) have every incentive to respond to their constituency. Moral framing, to the extent that it mobilizes constituents, changes the calculus of which constituents are important to a candidate. Moral framing can move some constituents from the broadest circle of consistency into the smaller categories of constituency more likely to vote and more likely to offer time to a political campaign. In Fenno's (1978) formulation, moral framing can move constituents into the inner circles of the constituency. Thus, candidates have incentives to pay increased attention to those who are mobilized by the moral framing. This effect of framing is likely to operate asymmetrically across the parties. In the area of the environment, only Democrats will be incentivized to accommodate the motivated constituents, since they form a portion of their reelection coalition.

These same constituents who are mobilized by the moral framing are less likely to accept compromise in this area. Thus, a responsive legislator, whose reelection constituency is mobilized on an issue framed in moral terms, must try to legislate on that issue but not compromise on it. This leads to the prediction that issues framed in moral terms will garner more legislative attention, but less cross-aisle cooperation.

Second, moral environmental frames constrain interest group strategies. Sharp and pure issues become riper targets for interest group activism as pragmatic compromise risks alienating their morally motivated supporters. Such constraints translate into the legislative arena.

Third, legislators are not, themselves, immune to the effects of moral framing. They are subject to the same reasoning that both mobilizes voters and makes them less likely to accept compromise. Thus, we would expect Democratic legislators to become more mobilized, and thus more active in the legislative arena, by moral framing of the environment. But we would also expect them to find it difficult to identify common ground for compromise.

#### *Research design:*

There are three possible ways to test these observable implications. First, we can observe the change in framing of environmental issues over time and also observe amount of legislation introduced and the degree of compromise on environmental issues. One difficulty with this method of observing the relationship is that the differences between the parties have also been changing over the post-World War II period, with increasing polarization (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006, Brady and Han 2007, Theriault 2008). Nonetheless, observing that the two move in tandem would offer preliminary evidence that moral framing may affect compromise.

There are at least two ways to measure cooperation. One is the degree of party voting, which is also used as a measure of polarization. A better measure for our purposes is cosponsorship of legislation by members of different parties. In particular, following Harbridge (2012), we consider legislation to be cosponsored across parties if at least 20% of the cosponsors come from the opposite party as the sponsor.

A second way of testing the relationship between framing and compromise is to characterize how different issues are framed and observe the amount of legislation and the level of compromise in each issue. Across issues, those issue framed in a more moral way should also exhibit more compromise. This method would avoid the cross-time changes in polarization and any other factors that might be changing over time, but it also requires a consistent means of coding the framing of issues. Since the language of morality can be specific to issues, such a coding may be difficult to achieve. This could be extended over time.

Finally, the third way to assess the relationship between framing and compromise is to take advantage of the natural experiment that events such as court rulings can create. A

possible example of such a change is the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling, in which the Supreme Court essentially addressed what had been a moral question with a technical solution involving gestational age. While this has not permanently or completely shifted the terms of the debate, such a change in the framing of the topic in the area of the environment might offer an opportunity to observe a shift in framing, while almost all other factors are constant.

### **Conclusion**

This paper outlines a theoretical approach and research directions for studying the evolution of environmental framing and its consequences for American politics. Such research may offer important insights into how framing shapes public opinion and political action and how these shape legislative action on environmental policy.



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