

**ARTICLE**

# Moral reframing: A technique for effective and persuasive communication across political divides

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Email: matthew.feinberg@rotman.utoronto.ca**Abstract**

The political landscape in the US and many other countries is characterized by policy impasses and animosity between rival political groups. Research finds that these divisions are fueled in part by disparate moral concerns and convictions that undermine communication and understanding between liberals and conservatives. This “moral empathy gap” is particularly evident in the moral underpinnings of the political arguments members of each side employ when trying to persuade one another. Both liberals and conservatives typically craft arguments based on their own moral convictions rather than the convictions of the people they target for persuasion. As a result, these moral arguments tend to be unpersuasive, even offensive, to their recipients. The technique of *moral reframing*—whereby a position an individual would not normally support is framed in a way that is consistent with that individual's moral values—can be an effective means for political communication and persuasion. Over the last decade, studies of moral reframing have shown its effectiveness across a wide range of polarized topics, including views of economic inequality, environmental protection, same-sex marriage, and major party candidates for the US presidency. In this article, we review the moral reframing literature, examining potential mediators and moderators of the effect, and discuss important questions that remain unanswered about this phenomenon.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*"It is necessary to have regard to the person whom we wish to persuade ... what principles he acknowledges ... and then observe in the thing in question what affinity it has with the acknowledged principles."*

--Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (1669/1976)

Politics in the US and many other countries are characterized by high levels of polarization (e.g., Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2017; Groskopf, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014; van der Eijk, Schmitt, & Binder, 2005), with liberals and conservatives disagreeing on political issues and also harboring deep animosities toward one another.<sup>1</sup> Research finds that both attitude polarization and antagonism between political groups are associated with underlying moral divisions (Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) describes the moral domain in terms of five distinct foundations that underlie moral attitudes and judgments: *care*—relating to the prevention and mitigation of suffering; *fairness*—relating to equality and discrimination concerns; *loyalty*—relating to the prioritization of one's group and its needs; *authority*—relating to showing respect for traditions and high ranking others; *sanctity*—relating to the protection of purity and sacredness (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011).<sup>2</sup> Survey results find that, relative to conservatives, liberals more strongly endorse the care and fairness foundations, grounding many of their political positions in notions of compassion, nurturance, and social justice. Conservatives, in contrast, more strongly endorse the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations, and therefore ground many of their political stances in patriotism, traditionalism, and religious purity concerns (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Lakoff, 1996; but see also Voelkel & Brandt, 2019).

The rhetoric employed by advocates on the left and right often reflects these moral differences (Lakoff, 1996; Marietta, 2008),<sup>3</sup> with liberals arguing for policy positions in terms of the care and fairness foundations, and conservatives arguing for policy positions in terms of the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). Use of moral rhetoric in this way may be an effective means for persuading, uniting, and motivating those who already share one's moral and political convictions, but it is likely to be an ineffective, even counterproductive, strategy for persuading political rivals. Indeed, research suggests that exposure to the other side's moral rhetoric can even result in increased commitment to one's existing stance and greater animosity toward those on the other side (Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, & Inbar, 2019; Gadarian & van der Vort, 2018; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), thereby exacerbating political polarization.

Recent research, however, suggests a means by which political advocates can persuade those who hold a different political ideology. *Moral reframing* is a technique in which a position an individual would not normally support is framed in a way that it is consistent with that individual's moral values. For example, an appeal in support of same-sex marriage is likely to garner greater support from conservatives if it is framed in terms of patriotism (e.g., "Gay Americans are proud and patriotic Americans") than if it were framed in terms of equality (e.g., "Gay Americans deserve equal rights"), because patriotism is a value more associated with conservatism, while equality is more associated with liberalism. Below, we summarize the emerging literature on moral reframing, highlight key demonstrations, and discuss when and why the technique is effective. We also point to some unanswered questions relating to moral reframing, puzzles that we hope will inspire future research on the topic.

### 1.1 | A review of moral reframing research

Framing is the use of a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning (to an issue or event)" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143; see also Druckman, 2001; Gitlin, 1980; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). When the guiding force underlying the story line is grounded in moral concerns, this can be considered "moral framing" (e.g., Lakoff, 1996, 2004). Results of moral framing research across disciplines points to its effectiveness as a persuasion tool, especially in political discourse (e.g., Andrews, Clawson, Gramig, & Raymond, 2017; Barker, 2005;

Dehghani, Sagae, Sachdeva, & Gratch, 2014; Feinberg et al., 2019; Hoover, Johnson, Boghrati, Graham, & Dehghani, 2018; Lakoff, 2004; Marietta, 2008; Valenzuela, Piña, & Ramírez, 2017; van Zant & Moore, 2015).

Of note, however, persuasion research highlights the fundamental importance of matching an argument or frame to the message recipient's personal concerns and values (e.g., Boote, 1981; Hirsh, Kang, & Bodenhausen, 2012; Shen, 2004; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Watt, Maio, Haddock, & Johnson, 2008). Without such a match, the persuasive argument is less likely to resonate with the recipient and therefore will have little influence. Along these lines, the effectiveness of moral framing will be bounded by how closely the morality underlying the argument fits with the moral convictions of the target (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). Indeed, a moral frame that appeals to some individuals (e.g., liberals) could even offend others (e.g., conservatives), if the two groups ascribe to different moral foundations (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Koleva et al., 2012). As a result, moral appeals that move one group, can actually backfire and result in the other group becoming more strident in its opposition. For instance, because conservatives strongly endorse the sanctity foundation, purity-based arguments such as those often made against immigration ("immigrants pollute society" Cisneros, 2008; "immigrants contaminate the purity of our nation" Valverde, 2008) may uniquely resonate with conservatives. However, because liberals do not endorse this foundation and often view it as contradictory to more foundations they do endorse (e.g., fairness), such arguments fail to persuade and may even backfire, strengthening liberals' pro-immigration stances (Gadarian & van der Vort, 2018; Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil, & Cohen, 2007; Marietta, 2008; Tetlock et al., 2000).

A specific type of moral framing that can be effective for speaking across political divides is *moral reframing* (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015; Voelkel & Feinberg, 2018). In the political arena, moral reframing involves arguing in favor of a political position that members of a political group would not normally support in terms of moral concerns that the members strongly ascribe to. Fitting a message to a particular audience in this way is persuasive because it makes the position relevant to and concordant with the audience's deeply held moral convictions. Seen through this lens, the purpose of moral reframing is to transform positions that would otherwise seem morally wrong to an audience, into something morally acceptable or even desirable.

Evidence for the effectiveness of moral reframing has built over the last decade. Most moral reframing research has focused on persuading liberals and conservatives to be more supportive of the other side's policy positions. In particular, a series of articles have examined how morally reframed arguments about the environment and climate change can persuade conservatives to be more supportive of pro-environmental policies and behavior (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Kidwell, Farmer, & Hardesty, 2013; McCright, Charters, Dentzman, & Dietz, 2016; Whitmarsh & Corner, 2017; Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). These studies have shown that conservatives are more persuaded by pro-environmental arguments that appeal to the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations. For example, Feygina et al. (2010) found that those more apt to be conservative (measured in their study in terms of the highly related trait of system justification) reported greater pro-environmental intentions and were more likely to sign a pro-environmental petition when presented with arguments emphasizing that being pro-environmental is consistent with the "American way of life" and therefore a patriotic duty. Similarly, Feinberg and Willer (2013) found that conservatives reported greater environmental concern, support for pro-environmental legislation, and belief in climate change when presented with a purity-based argument that emphasized how dirty, disgusting, and impure environmental degradation is, compared with a more typical, harm-focused argument that emphasized the devastation and dangers a failing environment can cause (for similar findings, see also Kidwell et al., 2013; Maibach et al., 2013; Wolsko et al., 2016).

Research shows that moral reframing is an effective means for persuasion on political issues far beyond the environment (Bloemraad, Silva, & Voss, 2016; Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Franks & Scherr, 2019; Simon & Gilliam, 2013; Thomas, 2017). For example, Feinberg and Willer (2015) found that liberals were more supportive of military spending when presented with fairness-focused arguments emphasizing the military's role in helping to overcome income inequality and racial discrimination than they were presented with more typical, authority- and loyalty-focused arguments that emphasized that the military demonstrated American patriotism and world dominance. In a representative sample of registered voters in California, Bloemraad et al. (2016) found that arguments in favor of legalizing the

status of undocumented immigrants were effective in persuading conservatives only when the argument appealed to the loyalty foundation, in particular to family unity. In a field experiment, Kalla, Levine, and Broockman (2019) found that door-to-door canvassers' pro-choice appeals were persuasive if articulated in terms of a moral value canvassers' elicited from residents early in the interaction.

A second category of moral reframing research has focused on voters' support for political candidates. This research builds on findings showing that individuals who more strongly endorse the care and fairness moral foundations tend to vote for Democratic candidates while individuals who strongly endorse the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations tend to vote for Republican candidates (Enke, 2018; Franks & Scherr, 2015). Voelkel and Feinberg (2018) presented American participants with arguments for why they should not support Donald Trump for president of the US. The arguments emphasized that Trump was unfit for office, either because he discriminates against minorities and promotes prejudice (fairness frame), or because he showed disloyalty to the country by dodging the draft during the Vietnam War (loyalty frame). Results showed that conservative participants were less supportive of Donald Trump's candidacy when they were presented with the loyalty frame. Additionally, a preregistered, nationally representative study found that an economically progressive candidate who articulated his platform in terms of more conservative values like patriotism and cultural traditionalism was supported more by self-identified conservatives, as well as moderates (Voelkel & Willer, 2019).

Finally, a third category of moral reframing research has explored its efficacy in shaping liberals' and conservatives' attitudes on issues that are largely nonpolitical or, at least, not strongly aligned with either liberal or conservative political ideologies. These studies have targeted outcomes like vaccine hesitancy, diversity and inclusion, and stem cell technology (Amin et al., 2017; Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, & Higginbotham, 2018; Clifford, Jerit, Rainey, & Motyl, 2015; Hoover et al., 2018; Kljajic & Feinberg, 2019; Lee, Yoon, Lee, & Royne, 2018; Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013). Along these lines, a handful of studies have examined the effects of moral reframing on liberals' and conservatives' tendencies to donate money to different types of charities. In a broad examination of moral reframing's impact on the donation behavior of liberals and conservatives, Kljajic and Feinberg (2019) found that certain charities were recognized as more "liberal charities" or "conservative charities," and morally reframing these charities' messaging led liberals to donate more to the "conservative charities" and conservatives to donate more to the "liberal charities." Similarly, Lee et al., (2018) examined the effects of different types of moral arguments in charity advertising on both liberals' and conservatives' donation behaviors, finding that arguments appealing to equality-based moral concerns were much more effective for liberals than conservatives (see also Winterich et al., 2013).<sup>4</sup>

## 2 | MECHANISMS DRIVING MORAL REFRAMING EFFECTS

Why does moral reframing work? The primary explanation is that morally reframed messages are influential because targets perceive a "match" between their moral convictions and the argument in favor of the other side's policy position. Moral convictions are one of the key underlying bases of people's attitudes. They are central and immutable parts of one's identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Atran & Axelrod, 2008; Kovacheff, Schwartz, Inbar, & Feinberg, 2018; Skitka et al., 2005; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). Because moral convictions are so strongly held, arguments that appeal to them are difficult to discount, even when used to argue for a position one would typically oppose. As a result, when individuals face a morally reframed argument that resonates with their fundamental moral convictions, they are more likely to evaluate the argument positively and revise their relevant attitudes as a result. In line with this theorizing, moral reframing studies have found that perceived overlap between the message's argument and the moral convictions of the target mediates the effect (Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

This perceived overlap between a message's moral basis and the target's moral convictions may also give rise to subsequent mediating mechanisms. For instance, the overlap may evoke feelings of comfort or familiarity in the message recipient, making the argument easier to comprehend and process, encouraging a positive evaluation. Along these lines, Kidwell et al. (2013) found that conservatives' increase in pro-environmental intentions after reading

morally reframed environmental messages was mediated by the extent to which they reported that the message was clear and relatable (i.e., processing fluency; see also Gantman & Van Bavel, 2014). Additionally, moral reframing may signal to the message recipient that the message source is a fellow ingroup member and therefore someone who is credible and trustworthy (Cohen, 2003; Kalkhoff & Barnum, 2000). Wolsko et al., (2016), for example, found that conservatives presented with morally reframed environmental appeals were persuaded largely because they perceived the values being expressed in the message as coming from a conservative source.

## 2.1 | Potential moderators of moral reframing effects

Although a number of studies have shown the efficacy of moral reframing, potential moderating factors that either strengthen or weaken the effect remain largely unexplored. One category of potential moderators concerns features of the message itself. For instance, a morally reframed message that fails to connect a policy position to the moral foundations of the target audience will likely be ineffective. This might occur because the association with that moral foundation is not emphasized strongly enough to resonate with the target, because the argument made does not make a compelling case for viewing the policy as promoting the moral foundation, or possibly because the moral argument is obscured by other nonmoral arguments also included in the message. These possible moderating factors may help explain some studies that have found inconsistent evidence for moral reframing (e.g., Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014; Peterson & Simonovits, 2017; van de Rijt, Akin, Willer, & Feinberg, 2016).

Conversely, a morally reframed argument might be particularly effective if it evokes strong moral emotions related to the moral foundation being targeted. Research has shown that different moral emotions correspond with, and reinforce, different foundations (Horberg, Oveis, & Keltner, 2011). For instance, the sanctity foundation corresponds closely with the emotion of disgust (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). With this in mind, morally reframed messages targeting conservatives via the sanctity foundation should be particularly potent if the message elicits moral disgust in the target. Consistent with this reasoning, Feinberg and Willer (2013) found that the persuasive effect of a purity-based argument in support of environmentalism (e.g., "pollution in our environment inevitably contaminates us and our bodies") among conservatives was mediated by conservatives' self-reported disgust after reading the message. Although this research focused on disgust as a mediator rather than a moderator, these results suggest that a sanctity message that elicits disgust may be more effective at persuading conservatives than one that does not.

The effectiveness of a morally reframed message may also depend on which aspects of the targeted moral foundation the message highlights. Although the relationship between political ideology and each of the five moral foundations has proven robust (Graham et al., 2011), certain aspects of the different foundations are likely more fundamental to liberal and conservative morality. For instance, although liberals very strongly endorse the care foundation, this may be primarily due to liberals' emphasis on compassion and alleviating the suffering of those most in need, rather than other aspects relating to protection and security concerns (Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010; Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011). As such, morally reframed messages that speak to concerns about being compassionate and alleviating suffering would likely be more persuasive for liberals than emphasizing national security (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Similarly, egalitarianism and social justice may be aspects of the fairness foundation that resonate most strongly with liberals, compared to other aspects of fairness like proportionality (i.e., equity; Haidt, 2012; Jost et al., 2003). As a result, morally reframed messages that speak to these values are likely to be more persuasive for liberals. Indeed, in one moral reframing experiment, liberals were more likely to donate to a charity when the message appealed to egalitarian concerns, but when the argument appealed to proportionality fairness concerns, conservatives were more persuaded (Lee et al., 2018). Conversely, for conservatives, aspects of the loyalty foundation pertaining to national pride and patriotism would likely be more effective in moral reframing than loyalty appeals beyond the national level (see Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Feygina et al., 2010; Wolsko et al., 2016).

Message source will likely also have a strong moderating effect on the impact of moral reframing. For example, in a study of moral messaging around environmental issues, Wolsko et al., (2016) found that one reason moral reframing

worked was because message recipients perceived the source to be part of their political ingroup. But what would happen if the message source was a known political outgroup member? One recent study (Voelkel & Willer, 2019) found that conservatives were significantly more supportive of a Democratic presidential candidate if the candidate appealed to conservative value concerns such as patriotism and respect for tradition than if he appealed to more liberal value concerns like social justice and egalitarianism. This suggests that moral reframing effects can be effective enough to be persuasive, even when seen as coming from a political outgroup. At the same time, it is unlikely that moral reframing would be effective if the source was a reviled political outgroup member. For example, an argument in favor of military spending that highlights how the military provides a level playing field for the poor and minorities in the US would likely be unpersuasive to liberals if the messenger was Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, or Donald Trump. Political psychology research suggests that the effect of moral reframing would be substantially muted, if not eliminated, in this situation (Cohen, 2003; see also Goren, 2005), because the target would approach the message with outgroup bias and would be strongly motivated to reject the argument before even reading it (Kahan, 2015).

Lastly, national context is likely another important moderating factor. Although in many ways, political ideology manifests similarly across cultural and national contexts (Lakoff, 1996), the bases of economic and social ideology can vary markedly across nations and political systems (Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Lelkes, 2014). With this in mind, a moral reframing strategy for economic policy in some countries might need to be quite different than it would be in the US. One example might be post-Soviet countries, where conservatives often support greater government regulation of the economy because of the historical legacy of communism as the traditional status quo. In these countries, arguments for greater regulation of the economy would need to target liberals, linking government regulation with the more liberal moral foundations to be effective.

## 2.2 | Effects of moral reframing on untargeted individuals

It is worth noting that most moral reframing studies to date have found nonsignificant effects for the untargeted group—that is, the group that already supports the policy stance being argued for. For example, Feinberg and Willer (2015) found that liberals showed similar levels of support for universal health care regardless of whether they read a typical moral message appealing to equality or a reframed message appealing to purity concerns. Likewise, conservatives showed similar levels of support for increased military spending regardless of whether they read a message appealing to loyalty or egalitarian concerns. These null effects suggest that untargeted groups were not persuaded by messages grounded in moral language they oppose, nor by messages grounded in moral language they endorse. Bolstering this point, in the handful of moral reframing studies with a control condition, the untargeted group's level of support did not differ across any condition. It appears that in situations where the argument is congruent with one's policy stance, how that argument is made may matter little.

These null results for the untargeted group have important implications for individuals speaking to audiences consisting of both liberals and conservatives. If the type of messaging has no effect on the untargeted group, but morally reframed messages positively influence the targeted group, then speakers in these situations should rely on morally reframed messages. However, we believe future research should explore this in more depth. Existing moral reframing research may have found the null effects because it has focused primarily on highly polarized political issues where the untargeted group's level of support is close to a ceiling, leaving little room for increases in support. Nonetheless, in situations where the untargeted group's support is not crystallized, moral messaging could still have an impact. Additionally, even if moral messages do not affect the untargeted group attitudinally, they may still have behavioral effects. Considering moral motivations are important for collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears, & Bettache, 2011), moral messages that appeal to existing supporters may not strengthen their support, but still influence their willingness to act (Marietta, 2008, however, see Voelkel & Willer, 2019). With this in mind, it may behoove individuals speaking to diverse audiences to employ a mix of moral frames—some appealing to existing supporters, others appealing to nonsupporters. We hope future research might explore the benefits (or possible pitfalls) of using such mixed frames.

### 2.3 | Why people do not use moral reframing

Even though research suggests moral reframing is an effective strategy for persuading those on the other side of political divides, people rarely employ the strategy spontaneously. Feinberg and Willer (2015) found that fewer than 10% of liberal or conservative participants wrote morally reframed appeals when asked to write political arguments aimed at persuading their political counterparts and despite being offered a cash prize for effectively doing so. If moral reframing is typically effective, why is it so rarely employed?

One possibility is that people do not realize that moral reframing is effective. Research indicates that individuals experience their moral convictions as objective truths about the world (Skitka et al., 2005). As a result, it can be difficult to recognize that there are different “truths” that other people believe in (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Kovacheff et al., 2018). Indeed, polling data indicates that people are apt to perceive someone who does not endorse their morality as simply immoral or evil, rather than morally different (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). Without recognizing that one’s political rivals possess different morals, and without a clear understanding of what those different morals are, using moral reframing becomes impossible. Moreover, even if individuals are aware of the moral differences, they may still not use moral reframing because a morally reframed argument might intuitively seem weak or ineffectual because it does not resonate with them personally.

Alternatively, individuals may have the knowledge needed to craft morally reframed messages, but refuse to do so on principle. Strategically making arguments that appeal to moral values that one does not strongly endorse may feel unethical. In fact, research on the concept of “taboo trade-offs” (Tetlock, 2003) finds that even entertaining the possibility of compromising one’s moral convictions to achieve strategic ends—such as buying body parts for transplants or hiring another person to serve one’s prison sentence—can feel immoral and unacceptable. In the context of moral foundations, for many liberals, aspects of the authority foundation may contradict moral beliefs about equality and progressivism. As a result, making arguments grounded in the authority foundation could feel immoral. Moreover, individuals might also fear that others, particularly those who share their moral beliefs, will judge them harshly for appealing to “false morals”. Finally, people might be averse to making morally reframed arguments because they believe doing so could indirectly reinforce values they disagree with (Lakoff, 2004), perhaps leading to short run gains on a given issue, but serving to validate moral values that are anathema to their moral and political worldview in the long-term.

In initial explorations of why most individuals do not use moral reframing, Feinberg and Willer (2015) found that when participants were asked to identify whether a morally reframed argument or a more typical moral argument would be more persuasive to those on the other side of the political spectrum, 64% of liberal participants and 85% of conservative participants correctly selected the morally reframed argument. This suggests that most individuals can recognize the persuasive appeal of morally reframed arguments even if they do not spontaneously use them. In addition, results indicated that when participants were asked to choose one of the arguments to send to a member of the rival ideological group they were tasked with persuading, 80% of liberals and 94% of conservatives who previously indicated the morally reframed argument would be more persuasive also chose to send the morally reframed argument, suggesting that most individuals would not object to using morally reframed arguments on principle. Taken together, these findings suggest that the most likely barriers to individuals using moral reframing spontaneously are (a) they do not think to use it, or (b) they do not know how to, rather than an inability to recognize the persuasive power of these arguments, or an unwillingness to use them. However, more research is needed to fully understand why few use morally reframed arguments.

## 3 | CONCLUSION

In his classic of applied social psychology, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie (2017 [1936]) underscored the importance of accounting for the interests and perspective of a target of persuasion:

*For example, one day Ralph Waldo Emerson and his son tried to get a calf into the barn. But they made the common mistake of thinking only of what they wanted; so he stiffened his legs and stubbornly refused to leave the pasture. The Irish housemaid saw their predicament. She couldn't write essays and books; but on this occasion at least, she had more horse sense, or calf sense, than Emerson had. She thought of what the calf wanted; so she put her maternal finger in the calf's mouth and let the calf suck her finger as she gently led him into the barn.*

This principle applies not only to the finger suckling of recalcitrant calves, but also—as we find in the above-reviewed studies—to bridging one of the most fundamental divides in American society. A growing roster of studies attest to the potential effectiveness of moral reframing as a persuasive tool.

In all, moral reframing offers a means for creating political consensus, which can have many benefits. In deeply divided polities, such as the contemporary US, consensus may be a valuable end to itself, facilitating effective governance and preserving the legitimacy of democratic institutions. For advocates, moral reframing may be attractive as an alternative to simple compromise on political issues, at present the dominant model for building political consensus. Indeed, one prior study found that subjectively reframing the apparent moral virtues of a policy was more impactful than the extremity of that policy on a liberal–conservative spectrum, suggesting compromise might often be less effective than moral reframing (e.g., Voelkel & Willer, 2019).

Further, beyond being effective for building consensus, moral reframing may produce other valuable outcomes. Moral reframing may reduce animosity individuals feel for those on the other side of a significant political divide (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). Though people would likely use moral reframing for the strategic purpose of winning over their rivals, effectively using the technique requires developing a clear understanding of what the other side values and believes. Thus, inherent in using moral reframing is seeking out and understanding the moral perspective of one's rivals. Developing a more accurate understanding of others' perspectives may also have downstream effects on affective polarization, which research shows stems in part from exaggerated and inaccurate stereotypes of political outgroup members (Farwell & Weiner, 2000; Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012). When individuals have a better sense of a rival group's perspective, they will be less likely to degrade them or view them as clearly evil. Future research should explore the possibility that moral reframing of divisive political issues could be helpful in this way to reduce antipathy and negative affect between rival political groups.

Of course, it would be naïve to suggest moral reframing will always have positive effects. In fact, many of the greatest atrocities in human history have been supported by political projects that employed strategic moral reframing. Where the Third Reich employed purity, loyalty, and authority arguments, Stalin and the Khmer Rouge built their regimes on the values of authority and fairness. These and countless other examples show that, like any pragmatic tool, moral reframing can be no more moral than the ends to which it is put. That said, while any technique of political persuasion could in principle be used to ameliorate intractable and destructive political divides, or to justify cruelty and brutality, there is reason to hope that the everyday practice of moral reframing, because its effective use requires careful attention to the perspective of one's political rivals, could foster that rarest of things in a bitterly divided society—mutual understanding.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Whereas in the US, the political divide is between “liberals” and “conservatives” (or Democrats and Republicans), both the substance of political divides and the terms used to describe them vary across cultural contexts (Malka et al., 2014). However, research suggests that the liberal–conservative divide on social issues in particular manifests in similar ways across cultures (e.g., Feinberg, Wehling, Chung, Saslow, & Melvær Paulin, 2019; Graham et al., 2011).

<sup>2</sup> There is also evidence of an additional moral foundation relating to *freedom* (see Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012).

- <sup>3</sup> Although we focus primarily on liberals versus conservatives in our review, the reasoning and insights from this review apply as well to the highly related political divisions between the left and right and Democrats and Republicans.
- <sup>4</sup> In addition, they found that arguments appealing to proportionality-based rewards were more effective for influencing conservatives' donation behavior. These findings speak to the possibility that the fairness moral foundation may have two components—one that relates to egalitarian concerns and one that relates to proportionality concerns, with the former being a central moral concern of liberals, and the latter being of concern to conservatives (Haidt, 2012).

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