Political Ideology, Persuasive Appeals, and Sustainability

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The authors examine the influence of political ideology on sustainable behaviors. We develop a conceptual model of how the congruence of political ideology and persuasive appeals enhance sustainable behaviors. In three studies including a longitudinal field study, we demonstrate how messages congruent with the moral foundations influence actual recycling behavior.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1011606/volumes/v40/NA-40

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:
At the forefront of the sustainability movement are efforts to increase environmental consciousness and promote sustainable consumption (McDonagh, Dobscha, and Prothero 2012). Yet, many consumers are either skeptical of or reluctant to embrace green marketing efforts (Luchs et al., 2010). Considerable research has been devoted to understanding and overcoming this reluctance through policy, regulatory, market, and technological innovations (Crittenden et al., 2011). However, very little progress has been made in actually changing behavior (Polonsky 2011; Prothero, et al. 2011). Given the sharp divide in attitudes toward many sustainability issues (e.g., climate change) between groups on different sides of the political aisle (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Kim, Rao, and Lee 2009), surprisingly little attention has been paid to understanding how differences in political ideology might influence sustainable behaviors. For example, might conservatives and liberals be differentially likely to engage in specific sustainable behaviors like recycling or purchasing green products? Might different types of appeals targeted to these two groups of consumers, based on their underlying ideological differences, be more effective at persuading them to adopt environmentally conscious behaviors? If so, what process can inform us about how these consumers are influenced?

In this research, we investigate the impact political ideology has on sustainability practices and propose ways to appeal to liberals and conservatives based on their underlying moral foundations. In addition, we uncover the mechanism by which political appeals influence intentions and demonstrate how the behaviors of each ideology can ultimately be changed through tailored persuasive appeals.

In our efforts to address these issues, we make four main contributions. First, we examine the understudied area of how political ideology affects consumer behavior in order to understand its impact on sustainability. Second, we highlight the underlying moral foundations of each ideology and develop persuasive appeals based on these foundations to influence disposition behavior (recycling) as well as the spillover effects on acquisition (selection of sustainable products) and usage (conservation of resources) behaviors. Third, we examine the effectiveness of these persuasive appeals in a 113-household longitudinal field study on recycling behavior. Fourth, we offer practical implications for marketers, public policy officials, and environmental scientists interested in changing acquisition, consumption, and disposition-related behavior.

Matching Persuasion to Moral Foundations
We developed persuasive appeals that are congruent with conservative and liberal moral foundations to promote enhanced sustainable behaviors. Given that conservatives value duty, authority, self-discipline, and actions consistent with their in-group’s social norms (Graham et al. 2009; McAdams et al. 2008), we created a persuasive appeal designed around the message to “join the fight” to help the environment. This type of messaging incorporates adherence to social norms and in-group effects while promoting actions that will strengthen the social order (Janoff-Bulman et al. 2009). This is also consistent with a binding moral foundation in this appeal uses terms like we, citizens, duty, and our as well as images of patriotism. Conversely, liberals value empathy, fairness, and individuality (McAdams et al. 2008; Morrison and Miller 2008). We developed a message designed to appeal to liberals underlying moral foundation revolving around “making a difference.” This type of messaging sets the individual apart as one who helps others while promoting behaviors or actions that improve overall social justice (Janoff-Bulman et al. 2009). This is consistent with an individualizing appeal through a call to individual action, images of helping and fairness, and relies on a caring nature.

Study 1
Eighty-two undergraduate business students completed measures of political ideology and moral foundations. Specifically, 40 participants saw a “Join the Fight” binding appeal while 42 participants saw the “Make a Difference” individualizing appeal. Next, participants completed a thought listing task and a manipulation check measure assessing the moral foundations associated with the appeals. Lastly, participants completed recycling intention measures.

A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant difference in the number of foundational thoughts generated by the different appeals. In addition, the full model was also significant (F(3, 78) = 2.98, p < .05). The results revealed a significant interaction of political ideology by appeal (ß = .82, t(78) = 2.37, p < .05). The results of study 1 supported that congruent moral foundation appeals affect intentions to recycle depending upon one’s political ideology.

Study 2
Study 2 was conducted to examine the mediating effect of fluency on the relationship between the interaction of political ideology and appeal to recycling intentions. We also rule out two alternative possibilities that might reasonably result from message congruence.

Specifically, 73 participants saw the “Join the Fight” appeal while 69 participants saw the “Make a Difference” appeal. Next, participants completed process measures pertaining to fluency, involvement, and recycling efficacy related to the appeals, and finally their intentions to recycle, purchase compact fluorescent light bulbs, and to conserve water.

The indirect effect of the interaction onto recycling intentions through fluency revealed a positive and significant indirect effect (ß = .10) as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (CI: .02 to .26). Study 2 demonstrated that appeals congruent with moral foundations are more effective due to fluency than incongruent appeals. Enhanced fluency positively influenced intentions to recycle as well as have spillover effects on acquisition and usage disposition intentions.

Study 3
Study 3 was conducted to assess the effectiveness of our persuasive appeals on actual recycling behavior in a longitudinal field setting. Specifically, a 14-week field study was conducted to assess the effects of the two persuasive appeals on recycling behaviors of households from a typical southeastern U.S. city.

Study 3 provided an examination of persuasive appeals designed to initiate recycling behavior across 113 households. The congruent appeals resulted in greater recycling than the control conditions (t = 2.04, p < .05 and t = 2.47, p < .05). Appeals congruent with underlying moral foundations were found to influence actual recycling behavior for both liberals and conservatives over a 14-week period.


