

# **Moral Reframing: A Perspective-Taking Approach to Political Arguments**

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## **Abstract**

Moral foundations theory posits that there are five foundations of morality from which Americans make political decisions: 1) Care/Harm, 2) Fairness/Reciprocity, 3) Ingroup/Loyalty, 4) Authority/Respect, and 5) Purity/Sanctity. Previous research finds that liberals primarily endorse foundations 1 and 2, while conservatives primarily endorse foundations 3, 4, and 5. To examine which moral values are most persuasive to liberals and conservatives, political arguments aimed at decreasing support for an issue were reframed to appeal to foundations 1 and 2, or to foundations 3, 4, and 5. Results indicate that conservatives might be persuaded by arguments grounded in ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity values, but might not be persuaded by arguments grounded in care/harm, or fairness/reciprocity values. Liberals might be persuaded by arguments grounded in any of the five foundations. Moderates were the only group that showed no evidence of persuasion.

The political divide between liberals and conservatives in the United States stems from a deep-rooted moral divide, which underpins the way that liberals and conservatives make political judgements (Graham, Haidt, et al., 2011; Graham, Nosek, et al., 2009). Recent research has found that the divergent moral values endorsed by liberals and conservatives act as a starting point from which they formulate and analyze political arguments. When liberals are asked to make persuasive political arguments targeting conservatives, they generally ground their arguments in the values that liberals endorse, such as fairness, equality, care, and protection. Likewise, when conservatives are asked to make persuasive political arguments targeting liberals, they generally ground their arguments in the values that conservatives endorse, such as loyalty, patriotism, respect for authority, and purity. Because these arguments are grounded in moral values that are unappealing to the target, they are generally not persuasive (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). The present study seeks to examine a perspective-taking approach whereby political arguments are reframed to better align with the moral values of the target in an effort to increase the persuasive power of the arguments.

### **Background**

#### **Kohlberg and Haidt – A Brief Historical Survey Culminating in the Moral Foundations Theory**

For much of the late 20th century, Lawrence Kohlberg was regarded as the leading theorist in the field of moral psychology. The origins of Kohlberg's theory of moral judgement largely grew from Jean Piaget's early work mapping the moral development of children. Kohlberg sought to expand and develop Piaget's work on moral development with the proposal of the cognitive developmental model of morality (Kohlberg, 1969). According to the cognitive developmental model of morality, morality is a product of reasoning. The better ability one has to reason about the world, the better one's moral judgement can be. Therefore, Kohlberg's cognitive developmental model posits that morality develops through stages, similar to Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1932). As a reasoning ability develops and improves, so too should the quality of one's moral judgements (Kohlberg, 1969). Kohlberg's cognitive developmental model prevailed as the dominant theory in moral psychology for about 30 years after its inception.

In the late 1990s, Jonathan Haidt began doing research on the origins of moral judgement by presenting hypothetical scenarios to participants and asking them to make moral judgements about the scenarios (Haidt, 2012). Haidt noticed that participants were able to quickly make moral judgments about hypothetical scenarios, but when asked to provide the reasoning that led to a particular judgement, participants often struggled to find a logical explanation that could fit the scenario (Haidt, 2012). Moreover, when

participants searched for an explanation but could not find one, their moral judgements remained just as strong. Among many participants it was observed that “even when the servant (reasoning) comes back empty-handed, the master (intuition) doesn’t change his judgement” (Haidt, 2012, p. 50).

The observation that moral judgments can occur and remain strong without justifiable reasoning led Haidt to propose four reasons to doubt that reasoning is the source of moral judgements (Haidt, 2001). First, reasoning and intuition both play a part in moral judgments. Due to the prominence of the cognitive developmental model of morality, reasoning has been overemphasized and intuition has been understudied. Second, reasoning is motivated. People are generally motivated to find evidence to support their intuitions. Third, most of what we believe to be objective reasoning is simply post-hoc rationalization. Fourth, “moral action covaries with moral emotion more than with moral reasoning” (Haidt, 2001, p. 815). For these reasons, Haidt proposes the social intuitionist model as an alternative to the cognitive developmental model to explain moral judgements (Haidt, 2001). The social intuitionist model posits that the basis for moral judgment is intuition rather than reasoning. According to the social intuitionist model, one first has an intuition, or gut feeling, about the morality of a scenario in question, then makes a judgement, followed by a post-hoc reasoning for the judgment.

### **Moral Foundations Theory**

With the presupposition that moral judgments are a product of intuition rather than reasoning, researchers surveyed people in several countries around the world asking about issues that were morally important to them (Graham, Haidt, et al., 2011; Graham, Nosek, et al., 2009). Results indicated that there are five universal moral foundations by which people make intuitive moral judgements: 1) Care/Harm: concerns about defending, caring for, and protecting others, especially the vulnerable, 2) Fairness/Reciprocity: concerns with reducing bias, discrimination, and unfair treatment, 3) Ingroup/Loyalty: concerns about maintaining solidarity and loyalty to an ingroup, 4) Authority/Respect: concerns about maintaining control, order, obedience to authority, and respect for hierarchy, 5) Purity/Sanctity: concerns about modesty, piety, innocence, and purity, especially related to sexual behavior. Additionally, researchers found that liberals and conservatives generally tend to endorse different sets of moral foundations (Graham, Nosek, et al., 2009). Liberals tend to endorse the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations to a greater degree than conservatives. However, conservatives tend to endorse the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations to a greater degree than liberals.

### **Support for the Moral Foundations Theory**

The applicability of the moral foundations theory has been demonstrated across

many domains. In one study of moral reasoning in video game play (Krcmar et al., 2016), participants were given the moral foundations questionnaire (Graham, Haidt, et al., 2011), then asked to play video games. Participants were asked to report aloud the reasons for their video game decisions in real time. Decisions were coded as either “strategic” or “moral.” The moral decisions were then coded according to the moral foundations theory. Results indicated that participants’ scores on the moral foundations quiz were positively associated with moral reasoning during video game play. In a more realistic study, business and accounting students at a large Midwestern university were given the moral foundations questionnaire (Graham, Haidt, et al., 2011), then asked to report how they make moral judgments when presented with scenarios associated with business or accounting. Students’ scores on the moral foundations questionnaire predicted their moral judgements (Andersen et al., 2015).

Further studies highlight the differences between individuals who endorse the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations and individuals who endorse the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations. In a multi-country study consisting of participants from Germany, Italy, and Spain, participants were asked to take the moral foundations questionnaire to determine the degree to which they endorse each of the five moral foundations (Milesi et al., 2019). Next, they were asked to read both sides of a rape case in which the man and the woman give conflicting information. The woman claimed that while on a date the previous night “she understood that she could not further resist without being injured; [the man] pushed her to the ground and raped her” (Milesi et al., 2019, p. 115). In contrast, the man claimed that “although at the beginning the woman was a little bit reluctant, she never gave him reason to think that she was not consenting” (Milesi et al., 2019, p. 115). Participants were then asked to make a determination as to who was to blame for the incident. Overall, higher scores on the authority/respect and purity/sanctity measure predicted higher level of victim blaming, while higher scores on the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity measures predicted lower levels of victim blaming.

For most individuals, religion plays an influential role in many scenarios involving moral judgement. To gain an understanding of the divergent moral foundations that are associated with religious and non-religious individuals, researchers in Italy examined the moral foundations that were most salient in regular religious attenders and compared them with the moral foundations that are most salient in non-religious individuals (Di Battista et al., 2018). Results found that individuals who identify as religious tend to endorse the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations to a higher degree than do non-religious individuals.

In terms of the relationship between political ideology and moral foundations, research supports the notion that right-wing and left-wing individuals fall along predictable sets of moral foundations (Hahn et al., 2018). In a study examining terrorist group motivations in the United States, extremist right-wing ideologies were associated with the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations while extremist left-wing ideologies were associated with the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations.

### **Critiques of the Moral Foundations Theory**

The moral foundations theory operates from the premise that it is intuition rather than reasoning that leads to moral judgement. However, recent research undermines the assumption that cognitive ability plays no role in moral judgements. In a Japanese study examining the relationship between moral values and cognitive ability, the care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, and purity/sanctity foundations were positively associated with cognitive ability for all participants, while the ingroup/loyalty, and authority/respect foundations were statistically significant for participants below the age of 50. Although these results do not invalidate the intuitive nature of the moral foundations, they do provide evidence for a significant interaction with cognitive ability.

### **Moral Foundations Theory as an Instrument of Persuasion**

Given that different groups of people endorse predictable sets of moral foundations, researchers have hypothesized that messages can be more or less persuasive depending on the degree to which the message aligns with one's primary moral foundations. In one analysis, researchers examined the association of moral foundations language with monetary donations to charities (Winterich et al., 2012). Results found that when the management process and mission statement of various charities displayed the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations, donations from liberals increased. Similarly, conservative donors increased their donations when a charity displayed the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, or purity/sanctity foundations.

Further research suggests that by reframing an issue to better align with the moral foundations of the target, one can increase the persuasiveness of the message. In an archival study of *New York Times* articles, researchers discovered that more than a decade of articles used arguments that were grounded in language associated with specific moral foundations. This occurred in articles supporting stem cell research as well as articles opposing stem cell research. Further, the use of moral language proved to be an effective persuasive strategy. The authors state that "both proponent and opponent moral language had the expected effects on public opinion: increasing support for the targeted position" (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 670).

Additional work suggests that political issues that have been reframed to better

align with the moral values of the opposing political party can be effective in bridging the gap between divergent opinions (Feinberg & Willer, 2013, 2015). In an analysis of newspaper op-eds and public service announcements, researchers found that concerns about the environment are generally framed using the care/harm foundation. However, when researchers reframed concerns about the environment to conform to the purity/sanctity foundation, conservatives dramatically increased their concern for the environment to such a degree that the differences between liberals' and conservatives' attitudes towards the environment were largely eliminated (Feinberg & Willer, 2013). In a parallel line of research, the reframing of political issues proved successful in increasing conservative support for same-sex marriage and universal healthcare, as well as increasing liberal support for military spending and making English the official language of the United States (Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

### **The Present Research**

Although much research has been done to test the effects of moral reframing for increasing support for political issues, the effects of moral reframing have not been tested on attempts to *decrease* support for political issues. This study seeks to test the effectiveness of the moral reframing technique when used to decrease support for 1) gun control, an issue that liberals generally support, and 2) the death penalty, an issue that conservatives generally support. My hypothesis is that for both the gun control group and the death penalty group, arguments that are grounded in the moral foundations that align with one's political ideology will be more persuasive than arguments that are grounded in moral foundations that do not align with one's political ideology.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

In order to obtain participants for this study, 61 university instructors in 52 academic departments were contacted via email asking for permission to administer a survey to students during class time. Of the 61 instructors who were contacted, 17 instructors granted permission to administer the survey. Of the 17 who granted permission, ten classes within eight different academic departments at MTSU were included in the study. The remaining seven classes were not included in the study due to an unforeseen campus closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The departments included in the study were Criminal Justice, Dance, Engineering Technology, Computer Information Systems, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Youth Education, Sociology, and Philosophy. Within these departments, 186 participants volunteered to take part in the study. Upon consenting to participate in the research, participants were randomly assigned to participate in either a "gun control" group or "death penalty" group.

Due to random assignment, half of the participants (n = 93) were in the gun control group and half (n = 92) were in the death penalty group. The average ages, gender, and race were consistent across both groups. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 44. The students' average age was 21 years old. A little more than half were female, and about three-quarters were white (see tables 1.a & 1.b).

**Table 1.a**

*Gun Control Group Demographics*

Gender	Number	Percent	Race	Number	Percent
Male	39	41.9%	White	69	74.2%
Female	52	55.9%	Black/African American	12	12.9%
Other	2	2.2%	Hispanic/Latino	9	9.7%
			Asian	3	3.2%

**Table 1.b**

*Death Penalty Group Demographics*

Gender	Number	Percent	Race	Number	Percent
Male	41	44.6%	White	64	69.6%
Female	50	54.3%	Black/African American	17	18.5%
Other	1	1.1%	Hispanic/Latino	6	6.5%
			Asian	4	4.3%
			American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	1.1%

One participant who indicated that he was a communist on both social and economic policy was removed from the study due to the inability of communist ideology to fit easily into the liberal/conservative spectrum.

**Procedure**

***Gun Control Group***

Participants were given a demographic questionnaire that included a two-item measure of 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?”). Response items for both questions were scaled 1 (Very liberal) to 7 (Very conservative). Responses provided were combined to create a political ideology scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ) ranging from 2 to 14 with higher scores indicating greater conservatism ( $M = 7.63, SD = 3.13$ ). Participants who scored 2-6 were categorized as liberal, those who scored 7-9 were categorized as moderate, and those who scored 10-14 were categorized as conservative.

After providing demographic information, participants read a brief article and

responded to a questionnaire measuring their support for gun control measures. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three article conditions. The first condition, liberal foundations condition, contained an article in favor of reducing gun control measures, which was framed using a combination of care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations (i.e., the presence of a firearm can provide vulnerable communities with reliable deterrence from harm). The second condition, conservative foundations condition, also contained an article in favor of reducing gun control measures but was framed using a combination of ingroup/loyalty, and authority/respect foundations (i.e., we should respect the authority of our founding fathers and remain loyal to the Constitution). Articles were constructed using words from the *Moral Foundations Dictionary* (Graham, Haidt, et. al., 2009) that were associated with the foundation being employed (e.g., *care/harm*: suffer, security, peace; *fairness/reciprocity*: honest, reasonable, unjust; *ingroup/loyalty*: betrayal, nation, patriotism; *authority/respect*: obey, status, leaders). A third condition, control condition, was randomly assigned to read a non-political article on the history of skiing. Each article was approximately 300 words in length.

After reading the article, participants were asked to respond to a four-item questionnaire measuring their attitudes towards gun control measures (e.g., “To what extent do you agree with raising taxes on firearms and ammunition?”, “To what extent do you agree with expanding background checks on gun sales?”). Participants responded to these questions on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). Scores obtained from this questionnaire were combined to create a *support for gun control composite* ( $\alpha = .85$ ) ranging from 4 to 28, with higher scores indicating stronger opposition to gun control measures.

### ***Death Penalty Group***

Just as in the gun control group, participants were given a demographic questionnaire that included a two-item measure of 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?”). Both questions were answered on a scale from 1 (Very liberal) to 7 (Very conservative). Answers provided were combined to create a political ideology scale ( $\alpha = .8$ ) ranging from 2 to 14 with higher scores indicating greater conservatism ( $M = 7.73$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ). Participants who scored 2-6 were categorized as liberal, those who scored 7-9 were categorized as moderate, and those who scored 10-14 were categorized as conservative.

As before, participants read a brief article and responded to a questionnaire measuring their support for the death penalty. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three conditions. The first condition, liberal foundations condition, contained an

article in favor of reducing the death penalty, which was framed using a combination of care/harm and fairness/reciprocity foundations (i.e., the death penalty is cruel and unjust). The second condition, conservative foundations condition, also contained an article in favor of reducing the death penalty but was framed using a combination of ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations (i.e., the death penalty poses a threat to the integrity of the criminal justice system and its ability to maintain order). Articles were again constructed using words from the *Moral Foundations Dictionary* (Graham, Haidt, et al., 2009). A third condition, control condition, was randomly assigned to read a non-political article on the history of skiing. Each article was approximately 300 words in length.

After reading the article, participants were asked to respond to a three-item questionnaire measuring their attitudes towards the death penalty (e.g., “How acceptable is it for the death penalty to be legal by lethal injection?”). Participants responded to these questions on a scale from 1 (perfectly acceptable) to 7 (totally unacceptable). Scores obtained from this questionnaire were combined to create a *support for the death penalty composite* ( $\alpha = .87$ ) ranging from 3 to 21, with higher scores indicating stronger opposition to the death penalty.

## Results

### Gun Control Group

The data were analyzed using a 3 X 3 factorial ANOVA. The first independent variable was political ideology (categorized as liberal, moderate, or conservative based on the previously mentioned criteria). Of the 93 respondents, 35 (37.6%) were categorized as liberal, 31 (33.3%) were categorized as moderate, and 27 (29%) were categorized as conservative. The second independent variable was article condition (control condition, liberal foundations condition, or conservative foundations condition). The dependent variable was the average score on the support for gun control composite (higher scores indicating greater opposition to gun control measures).

The main effect for political ideology was significant,  $F(2, 84) = 18.11$ ,  $MS_E = 25.76$ ,  $p = .000$ . The mean for the liberal participants was the lowest at 7.75 (SD = 3.62). The mean for the moderate participants increased to 12.35 (SD = 4.5). The mean for the conservative participants was the highest at 15.67 (SD = 6.45). Overall, opposition to gun control measures among liberals, moderates, and conservatives indicated that higher conservatism is associated with more opposition to gun control measures.

The main effect for article condition was not significant,  $F(2, 84) = .075$ ,  $MS_E = 25.76$ ,  $p = .928$ . The mean for the control condition was 11.33 (SD = 6.51). Relative to the control condition, the mean for the liberal foundations condition was slightly lower at 10.93 (SD = 5.25). The conservative foundations condition indicated a slight increase

relative to the control condition with a mean of 12.21 (SD = 6.04). Overall, opposition to gun control measures among the three conditions suggested that the conservative foundations condition was the most persuasive and the liberal foundations condition was the least persuasive. However, the differences between the three were negligible.

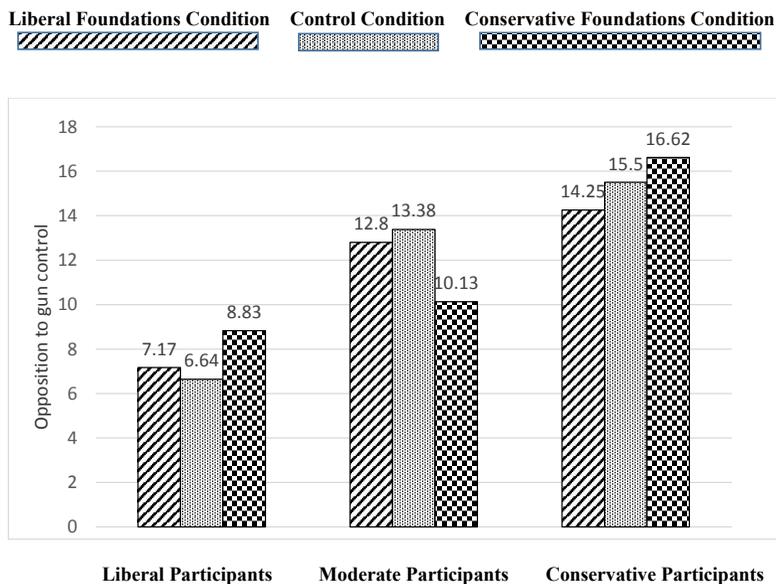
The main effect for political ideology X article condition interaction was not significant,  $F(4, 84) = 1.03$ ,  $MS_E = 25.76$ ,  $p = .395$ . Among liberal respondents in the *control condition*, the mean was 6.64 (SD = 3.17). Among liberal respondents in the *liberal foundations condition*, level of opposition showed a slight increase with a mean of 7.17 (SD = 3.21). The highest increase in opposition among liberal respondents was seen in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 8.83 (SD = 4.28).

Among moderate respondents in the *control condition* the mean was 13.38 (SD = 5.5). Among moderate respondents in the *liberal foundations condition*, level of opposition showed a slight decrease with a mean of 12.8 (SD = 3.64). An even larger decrease in opposition was found among moderate respondents in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 10.13 (SD = 3.64).

Among conservative respondents in the *control condition*, the mean was 15.5 (SD = 8.55). Among conservative respondents in the *liberal foundations condition*, opposition decreased slightly with a mean of 14.25 (SD = 5.85). Level of opposition was highest among conservative respondents in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 16.62 (SD = 6.12). The data are illustrated in graph 1.

**Graph 1**

*Gun Control Attitudes*



## **Death Penalty Group**

The data were analyzed using a 3 X 3 factorial ANOVA. The first independent variable was political ideology (categorized as liberal, moderate, or conservative based on the previously mentioned criteria). Of the 92 respondents, 25 (27.2%) were categorized as liberal, 46 (50%) were categorized as moderate, and 21 (22.8%) were categorized as conservative. The second independent variable was article condition (control condition, liberal foundations condition, or conservative foundations condition). The dependent variable was the average score on the support for death penalty composite (higher scores indicating greater opposition to the death penalty).

The main effect for political ideology was significant,  $F(2, 83) = 5.55$ ,  $MS_E = 24.38$ ,  $p = .005$ . The mean for the liberal participants was the highest at 16.88 (SD = 3.9). The mean for the moderate participants decreased to 15.04 (SD = 4.63). The mean for the conservative participants was the lowest at 11.81 (SD = 6.27). Overall, opposition to the death penalty among liberals, moderates, and conservatives indicated that higher conservatism is associated with less opposition to the death penalty.

The main effect for article condition was not significant,  $F(2, 83) = .81$ ,  $MS_E = 24.38$ ,  $p = .449$ . The mean for the control condition (M = 14.14, SD = 4.19) and the liberal foundations condition (M = 14.78, SD = 6.4) were similar. The mean for the conservative condition showed a slight increase at 15.41 (SD = 4.57). Overall, opposition to the death penalty between the three conditions suggested that the liberal foundations condition had little to no persuasive power, while the conservative foundations condition had slightly more persuasive power. Again, the differences between the three were negligible.

The main effect for political ideology X article condition interaction was not significant,  $F(4, 83) = .83$ ,  $MS_E = 24.38$ ,  $p = .512$ . Among liberal respondents in the *control condition*, the mean was 15.5 (SD = 3.55). Among liberal respondents in the *liberal foundations condition*, level of opposition showed an increase with a mean of 17.25 (SD = 4.65). A similar increase was found among liberal respondents in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 17.78 (SD = 3.56).

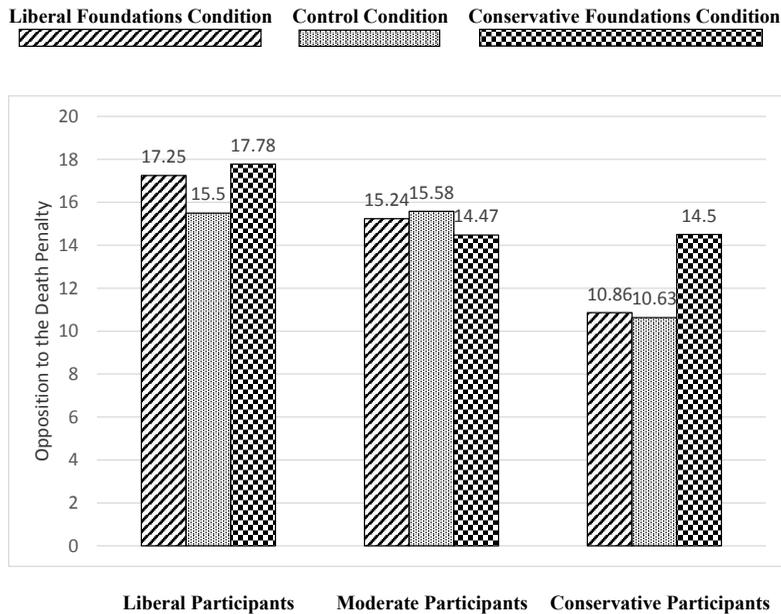
Among moderate respondents in the *control condition*, the mean was 15.58 (SD = 3.26). Among moderate respondents in the *liberal foundations condition*, level of opposition showed a slight decrease with a mean of 15.24 (SD = 6.15). A slightly larger decrease in opposition was found among moderate respondents in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 14.47 (SD = 3.83).

Among conservative respondents in the *control condition*, the mean was 10.63 (SD = 4.31). Conservative respondents in the *liberal foundations condition* displayed a

similar level of opposition with a mean of 10.86 (SD = 7.69). Level of opposition was considerably higher among conservative respondents in the *conservative foundations condition* with a mean of 14.5 (SD = 6.95). The data are illustrated in graph 2.

**Graph 2**

*Death Penalty Attitudes*



**Discussion**

The hypothesis of this study was “arguments which are grounded in the moral foundations that align with one’s political ideology will be more persuasive than arguments that are grounded in moral foundations that do not align with one’s political ideology.” The purpose of the two political issues (gun control and death penalty) was to test the persuasiveness of reframed arguments in decreasing support for a political issue that already has a high degree of support. The underlying assumption with this design is that on average, liberals have a high degree of support for gun control measures relative to moderates and conservatives and that conservatives have a high degree of support for the death penalty relative to moderates and liberals. Although the sample size in this study was limited due to an unforeseen campus closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the consistency of results across both groups emphasizes the reliability of the data.

**Gun Control Group**

The analysis of the degree of support for gun control measures by political category confirmed that all three political categories were significantly different in their support for gun control measures and that higher conservatism predicts higher opposition

to gun control. Simply put, the significant main effect for political ideology confirmed the underlying assumption that liberals support gun control measures to a greater degree than do moderates and that moderates support gun control measures to a greater degree than do conservatives.

The main effect for condition was not expected to be significant because any given condition was expected to have a different effect depending on the political ideology of the respondent. For example, the conservative foundations condition was expected to increase opposition to gun control measures for conservative respondents, but for liberal respondents, the same condition was expected to have little or no effect. Similarly, the liberal foundations condition was expected to increase opposition to gun control measures for liberal respondents, but for conservative respondents, the same condition was expected to have little or no effect. Therefore, any given condition was not expected to vary in one direction uniformly throughout all three groups.

Although the overall sample size for the gun control group was  $N = 93$ , participants were divided into three subgroups (liberal, moderate, and conservative). Moreover, each subgroup was again divided into three more subgroups (liberal foundations condition, control condition, and conservative foundations condition). This resulted in nine subgroups within the larger gun control group. As a result, each subgroup only consisted of, on average, 10.33 participants. This small sample size within each of the comparison groups could serve as an explanation as to why the main effect for political ideology X article condition was not significant. However, the mean comparisons between the groups strongly imply that the data is leaning towards an identifiable pattern.

For liberal participants, an argument grounded in *liberal moral foundations* was effective in increasing opposition to gun control measures. However, an argument grounded in *conservative moral foundations* was also effective in increasing opposition to gun control measures. Moreover, the argument grounded in conservative moral foundations was more persuasive than the argument that was grounded in liberal moral foundations. Therefore, results imply that, for liberals, opposition to gun control measures will increase regardless of the framing of the argument. Further, arguments that were framed in conservative moral foundations were most persuasive for liberals.

For moderate participants, an argument grounded in *liberal moral foundations* was not effective in increasing opposition to gun control measures. Interestingly, not only was the argument ineffective, but results indicate that it had a slight reverse effect. Participants who read this article slightly increased their support for gun control measures relative to the control group. For moderate participants who received the argument grounded in *conservative moral foundations*, results showed a magnified trend in the same direction. That

is, participants who read this article increased their support for gun control measures relative to the control group, and they did this to a much higher degree than the participants who read the argument grounded in liberal moral foundations. Taken together, results imply that for moderate participants neither frame is persuasive in increasing opposition to gun control. Additionally, arguments with a conservative moral frame tended to have a reverse effect for moderates, resulting in increased support for gun control.

For conservative participants, an argument grounded in *liberal moral foundations* was not effective in increasing opposition to gun control measures. Results imply that this argument had the reverse effect (i.e., increased support for gun control measures). However, an argument grounded in *conservative moral foundations* was effective in increasing opposition to gun control measures. Therefore, results imply that, for conservatives, only arguments which are grounded in conservative moral foundations will be persuasive.

### **Death Penalty Group**

The analysis of the degree of support for the death penalty by political category confirmed that all three political categories were significantly different in their support for the death penalty and that higher liberalism predicts higher opposition to the death penalty. Simply put, the significant main effect for political ideology confirmed the underlying assumption that conservatives support the death penalty to a greater degree than do moderates and that moderates support the death penalty to a greater degree than do liberals.

As previously discussed, the main effect for condition was not expected to be significant because any given condition was expected to have a different effect depending on the political ideology of the respondent. Therefore, any given condition was not expected to vary in one direction uniformly throughout all three groups. Further, the sample size for the death penalty group was approximately the same as the gun control group ( $N = 92$ ). Therefore, the small sample size within each of the comparison groups might again serve as an explanation as to why the main effect for political ideology X article condition was not significant. However, the mean comparisons between the respondents in the death penalty group strongly mirrored the data found in the gun control group. This provides further support for the implication that the data is leaning towards a consistent pattern.

For liberal participants in the death penalty group, results showed the same pattern as they did in the gun control group. Both liberal-framed arguments and conservative-framed arguments were effective in increasing opposition to the death penalty. Although opposition increased slightly more for participants who received the conservative foundations condition, both arguments were almost equal in their persuasive power.

Results again imply that opposition will increase regardless of the framing of the argument.

For moderate participants, results again showed the same pattern as they did in the gun control group. Neither the liberal frame nor the conservative frame was effective in persuading moderate participants to increase their opposition to the death penalty. Participants again showed a slight reverse effect for both arguments with the larger effect being attributed to the conservative foundations condition.

For conservative participants, results showed a similar but more distinct trend compared to the gun control group. An argument grounded in liberal moral foundations was not effective in increasing opposition to the death penalty. However, an argument grounded in conservative moral foundations was considerably effective in increasing opposition to the death penalty. Therefore, results are consistent with those found in the gun control group; conservatives are only persuaded by arguments that are grounded in conservative moral foundations.

Overall, the mean comparisons between the conservative respondents in both groups indicate partial support for the hypothesis. However, the mean comparisons between the liberal respondents do not support my hypothesis. These results partially conflict with Feinberg & Willer (2015), which found moral reframing to be effective for both liberals and conservatives. Furthermore, the data obtained from the moderate respondents provide an additional layer of complexity to the process of moral reframing that was previously unavailable.

Liberal participants' openness to both the liberal foundations argument and the conservative foundations argument could indicate that the liberal participants in the study consider a wider spectrum of moral foundations than was originally assumed. The social environment in which the participants have learned to make moral judgements could lead to an explanation as to why liberals seemingly consider this wider spectrum of moral foundations. Because participants in the survey were recruited from a large state university in a majority conservative state in the southern United States, there is a high likelihood that most of the participants in the study were born and raised in a majority conservative society. If the liberal participants in this study had been socialized into a society in which most members are conservative, then this would facilitate higher exposure to conservative moral foundations. In contrast, if the conservative participants in this study had been socialized into a society in which most members are conservative, then this would lead to lower exposure to liberal moral foundations. Taken together, this would lead to the findings displayed in this study.

Future research on moral reframing should examine the persuasive power of

morally reframed arguments between liberals who have been socialized in conservative majority states and liberals who have been socialized in liberal majority states. For example, future studies could examine the moral reframing technique on liberals in Vermont (one of the most liberal states) and liberals in Wyoming (one of the most conservative states). In general, liberals in the United States tend to endorse issues such as same-sex marriage and universal healthcare (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). If the social environment in which the participants have learned to make moral judgements does indeed impact their ability to consider a wider spectrum of moral foundations, then liberal participants who were born and raised in Vermont should be persuaded to decrease their support for political issues (such as same sex marriage or universal healthcare) only by arguments that are grounded in liberal moral foundations. In contrast, liberal participants who were born and raised in Wyoming should be persuaded to decrease their support for political issues (such as same sex marriage or universal healthcare) by arguments grounded in either liberal moral foundations or conservative moral foundations. This outcome would be expected because liberals in Vermont can be assumed to have a low exposure to conservative moral foundations due to the liberal social environment on both the state level and the individual level. In contrast, the outcome with the participants in Wyoming would be expected because liberals in Wyoming can be assumed to have a high exposure to both liberal moral foundations and conservative moral foundations due the combination of a conservative social environment on the state level and a liberal social environment on the individual level.

Keeping with the same theory of socialization, a similar line of research should be carried out for conservatives in liberal majority states versus conservatives in conservative majority states. For example, future studies could examine the moral reframing technique on conservatives in Vermont (one of the most liberal States) and conservatives in Wyoming (one of the most conservative states). In general, conservatives in the United States tend to endorse issues such as increasing military spending and making English the official language of the United States (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Given these general trends, conservative participants who were born and raised in Wyoming should be persuaded to decrease their support for political issues (such as increasing military spending and making English the official language of the United States) only by arguments that are grounded in conservative moral foundations. In contrast, conservative participants who were born and raised in Vermont should be persuaded to decrease their support for political issues (such as increasing military spending and making English the official language of the United States) by arguments grounded in either conservative moral foundations or liberal moral foundations. This outcome would be expected because conservatives in Wyo-

ming can be assumed to have a low exposure to liberal moral foundations due to the conservative social environment on both the state level and the individual level. In contrast, the outcome with the participants in Vermont would be expected because conservatives in Vermont can be assumed to have a high exposure to both liberal moral foundations and conservative moral foundations due the combination of a liberal social environment on the state level and a conservative social environment on the individual level. Studies such as these could provide valuable insight into the degree to which moral foundations are a product of the social environment as opposed to a biologically innate pattern of behavior.

Although previous research on moral reframing contributes to an understanding of the divide between liberals and conservatives, this is the first study to examine moderate participants as a third category, separate from the other two. Examining moderates as a distinct category provides information that was previously imperceptible in other studies. In both the gun control group and the death penalty group, results implied that moderate participants were not persuaded by either argument. Moreover, moderates were the only group in the study for which neither argument was persuasive. The reason for the lack of susceptibility to morally-reframed arguments among moderates might have to do with the emotional nature of the arguments used in the study. According to Haidt (2012), the five moral foundations are triggered by an innate feeling or emotion that then leads to a moral judgment. Therefore, arguments that employ the moral foundations are emotional arguments. It could be the case that the more extreme one is in their political views, the more susceptible they are to arguments with emotional appeal. If this were the case, then one would expect individuals with moderate political views to be less susceptible to arguments with emotional appeal. Given that moderate participants do not appear to be persuaded by arguments with emotional appeal, future research should examine the persuasive power of fact-based arguments on politically moderate participants. This could provide further insight into the processes by which individuals make political moral judgements depending on the space that they occupy on the political spectrum.

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