

Applying moral foundations theory to the 2019 Australian federal election

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Abstract

Moral foundations theory argues that human moral judgement is based on at least five ethical concerns: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Surveys find that left-wing individuals primarily endorse the care and fairness foundations when making moral judgements, while right-wing individuals ground their sense of morality in loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Moral reframing is a persuasive technique that takes these differences into account. It involves taking a left-wing (right-wing) political position and framing it in right-wing (left-wing) moral foundations. Research finds that moral reframing can increase electoral support for political candidates by making a politician's political positions more appealing to voters who would typically lean towards the candidate's opposition. Although much evidence points to moral reframing's utility, little is known if politicians implement it in practice. Therefore, this paper investigates the question 'what moral foundations do politicians appeal to during election campaigns?' and focuses specifically on the case of the 2019 Australian federal election. Through qualitative content analysis of the campaign launch speeches of the Australian Labor Party (ALP; Australia's primary left-wing party) and the Liberal Party of Australia (the Liberal Party; Australia's primary right-wing party), I find that the ALP relies heavily on appeals to the care and fairness foundation while largely ignoring loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party mentions loyalty, authority, and sanctity significantly more than the ALP but also relies heavily on care and fairness appeals. This suggests that, in practice, the ALP does not tend to use moral reframing, while the Liberal Party does.

Introduction

In politics, differing conceptions of moral right and wrong play a significant role in the formation of political attitudes (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010). One leading theoretical framework for understanding this moral political landscape is *moral foundations theory*. Moral foundations theory argues that human moral judgement is based on at least five ethical intuitions: concerns for care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Haidt, 2012). Research finds that politically left-wing¹ individuals primarily endorse the care and fairness foundations, while right-wing individuals are more likely to endorse loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost et al., 2003). Moral reframing is a persuasive technique that takes these differences into account. It involves taking a left-wing (right-wing) political position and framing it in right-wing (left-wing) moral foundations. Research finds that moral reframing can increase electoral support for political candidates by making a politician's political positions more appealing to voters who would typically lean towards their opposition (Voelkel & Feinberg, 2017; Voelkel & Willer, 2019).

Although the benefits of moral reframing are clear, it is largely unknown whether politicians implement such strategies in practice. Therefore, this paper investigates the research question 'what moral foundations do politicians appeal to during election campaigns?' The importance of this question is that if political candidates do not already reframe their arguments in the moral values of their opposition, then moral reframing may prove an effective means of increasing vote share. This paper focuses specifically on the case of the 2019 Australian federal election. Through qualitative content analysis of the campaign launch speeches of the Australian Labor Party (ALP; Australia's primary left-wing

¹ The moral foundations literature typically uses the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' instead of left- and right-wing. However, in the Australian case, this terminology may be confusing given Australia's primary conservative party is known as the Liberal Party of Australia. Thus, this paper prefers to use the latter terminology. Van Leeuwen and Park (2009) find that in most countries outside the USA, 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' are interchangeable with 'liberal' and 'conservative'.

political party) and the Liberal Party of Australia (the Liberal Party; Australia's primary right-wing party), I find that the ALP relies heavily on appeals to the care and fairness foundation while largely ignoring the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party made significantly more mentions of loyalty, authority, and sanctity but also relied heavily on care and fairness appeals. This suggests that, in practice, the ALP does not tend to use moral reframing, while the Liberal Party does.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I outline the literature surrounding moral foundations theory and moral reframing. Second, I propose two hypotheses and introduce the present research. Third, I outline the methods, materials, and results. Lastly, I discuss the implications of these results and conclude the paper.

Literature review

Moral foundations theory

Moral foundations theory is a descriptive theory of human moral psychology. The theory makes two essential claims: (1) moral judgements tend to be grounded in innate ethical intuitions rather than in rational, conscious reasoning, and (2) we can categorise these intuitions into discrete cognitive modules that each process different moral stimuli (Haidt, 2012). Drawing on primatology (de Waal, 1996), anthropology (Schweder et al., 1997), psychology (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990), and experimental evidence (Haidt, 2001), researchers currently propose at least five of these ethical intuitions: concerns for care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011). Care represents our dislike of suffering and signs of pain in others; fairness represents notions of justice and reciprocity; loyalty encourages placing the group above the individual and condemns betrayal; authority represents respect for hierarchy and tradition; and sanctity represents notions of purity and contamination and underlies notions of striving for a noble/elevated life (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012).

While proponents of moral foundations theory argue that its five ethical intuitions are inherent to human psychology (Graham et al., 2009), the importance an individual ascribes to each foundation varies among the population. One of the most well-studied variances are the differences between those who identify as politically left- versus right-wing. Left-leaning individuals tend to emphasise care and fairness when making judgements of right and wrong, grounding their morality in compassion and social justice. In contrast, right-leaning individuals tend to prioritise loyalty, authority, and sanctity, grounding their morality in patriotism, traditionalism, and religious purity (Capara et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost et al., 2003; Lakoff, 1996).

These findings hold regardless of country, culture, or even research design (Haidt, 2012). For example, left-wing individuals prefer dog breeds with caring and equalitarian traits, while right-wing individuals want obedient and loyal ones (Haidt, 2012, p. 161). Left-wing individuals are more disturbed by violent images than right-wing individuals (Iyer et al., 2011). EEG (encephalogram) scans have even found differences in left- and right-wing brains, with left-wing brains showing more shock than right-wing ones when flashed sentences that reject care and fairness in favour of loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Graham et al., 2010).

Moral reframing

Moral reframing argues that we can take these insights from moral foundations theory to influence people's political views. Moral reframing involves taking a traditionally left-wing (right-wing) political position and framing it in terms of right-wing (left-wing) values (Feinberg & Willer, 2019, p. 3). For example, promoting universal healthcare (a left-wing political position) because 'we have a duty to help our fellow compatriots' (an appeal to loyalty; a right-wing foundation). Essentially, moral reframing works by matching a political message to the underlying concerns and values of those it intends to persuade (Feinberg & Willer, 2019).

A growing literature points to moral reframing as a consistently effective tool for political persuasion. For example, right-wing individuals demonstrate significantly higher support for pro-environmentalist policies when environmentalism is framed as a sanctity issue (such as that the natural world is sacred and we have a duty to protect it) than when environmentalism is framed as a care issue (such as that climate change is harming people and animals) (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Kidwell et al., 2013; Wolsko et al., 2016). Similarly, left-wing individuals demonstrate significantly higher support for increased military spending when the military is framed as an institution offering economic opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. a fairness frame). In comparison, arguments for increased military spending based on American global dominance (authority) and patriotism (loyalty) fail to influence the attitudes of left-leaning participants (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Researchers have replicated similar results for policy issues like same-sex marriage, immigration, universal healthcare, abortion, and making English the official language of the USA (Bloemraad et al., 2016; Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

One area of politics where moral reframing has proven particularly advantageous is in election campaigns. Specifically, political candidates who appeal to the moral values of their ideological opponents tend to receive greater electoral support (Voelkel & Feinberg, 2017; Voelkel & Willer, 2019). This is because moral reframing makes candidates more appealing to voters who would typically oppose their campaign, while voters from the politician's ideological base support the candidate regardless of the moral frame they employ (Voelkel & Feinberg, 2017; Voelkel & Willer, 2019).

Despite the mounting evidence for the benefits of moral reframing, it is largely unknown whether politicians use these tactics in practice. Therefore, this paper investigates the research question 'what moral foundations do politicians appeal to in election campaigns?' The importance of this question is that if political candidates do not already frame their arguments in the moral values of their opposition, then moral reframing may prove an effective means of increasing vote share.

I hypothesise that politicians do not actively employ moral reframing. This is because previous studies find that moral reframing does not come intuitively to most individuals, even when incentivised to persuade those from one's ideological opposition (Feinberg & Willer, 2015), likely because doing so feels like a betrayal of one's moral values. Specifically, I propose the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Left-wing politicians appeal mostly to care and fairness rather than loyalty, authority, and sanctity during election campaigns.

Hypothesis 2: Right-wing politicians appeal mostly to loyalty, authority, and sanctity rather than to care and fairness during election campaigns.

Case selection

To investigate these hypotheses, this paper looks at the case of the 2019 federal election campaigns of Australia's two major political parties, the Australian Labor Party (the ALP; Australia's primary left-wing party) and the Liberal Party of Australia (the Liberal Party; Australia's primary right-wing party). I chose this case for several reasons. Firstly, despite claims of universalism, the vast majority of the moral foundation's literature focuses on the USA (e.g. Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Haidt, 2012; Voelkel & Willer, 2019). Australia is a suitable initial case for exploring moral foundations beyond America's borders for two reasons. First, Australian voters display the same left-right moral foundations divide as their US counterparts (e.g. Haidt, 2012). Second, voters strongly identify the ALP and Liberal Party with left- and right-wing ideology, respectively (see McAllister et al., 2019, for how voters place these parties on a left-right political spectrum). This means that party identity is a strong proxy for classifying political candidates as either left- or right-wing. Furthermore, I chose to focus on the 2019 federal election, given that this election is (as of writing) the most recent election campaign, meaning the results are more likely to reflect the present state of moral rhetoric within each party.

Methodology

Materials

To investigate the moral rhetoric employed during the 2019 federal election, this paper draws on the campaign launch speeches of the ALP and Liberal Party (for speeches, see MOADOPH, 2019a, 2019b). These speeches serve as a representative sample of the moral rhetoric voters are likely to hear throughout the election campaign, given that parties use these speeches to publicly outline their goals, principles, and vision for the country. The 2019 speeches were delivered by Bill Shorten (leader of the ALP) on 5 May 2019 and Scott Morrison (leader of the Liberal Party) on 12 May 2019.

Method

To analyse these speeches, this paper uses qualitative content analysis as its method. Content analysis is a way of identifying themes across multiple evidence types (Meyer & McNeal, 2011). This analysis often uses coding, where observations within a text are assigned labels related to specific themes (Hodder, 1994). Coding may involve manifest content (content that is readily understood at face value) or latent content (content that first requires interpretation to uncover its hidden meaning) (Lee et al., 2001). By analysing the transcripts of each campaign launch speech, this paper will identify the moral claims made by each politician and then code these moral claims into the five moral foundations identified by the moral foundations theory literature. Importantly, I will code sentence by sentence. This means that each sentence in the speech is coded into one of six categories: either one of the five moral foundations or as a non-moral sentence. Some of this coding will involve manifest content, such as if the sentence explicitly mentions ‘preventing harm’ (the care foundation). However, some interpretation will be required when foundations are not mentioned explicitly (latent content). This paper performed multiple rounds of coding to ensure no interpretational moral claims were missed or mis-coded.

Given the coding frame is based on the five moral foundations of moral foundations theory, the coding frame is deductive. Table 1 provides the definitions used to judge the moral foundation category of specific moral appeals (adapted from Haidt, 2012; Lin et al., 2017) and examples of the kinds of sentences coded as belonging to these categories.

Table 1: Coding frame and examples.

Moral Foundation	Definition	Example
Care	Represents a dislike of unnecessary suffering and sensitivity to pain in others.	'I make this promise to my fellow Australians ... help with the cost of living for families, including cheaper childcare' (para. 4) Bill Shorten
Fairness	Represents notions of fairness, justice, and reciprocity. This foundation condemns free-rider behaviour, unequal treatment, and inequality.	'If you vote Labor, we will put the fair go into action' (para. 4) Bill Shorten
Loyalty	This foundation condemns betrayal and praises self-sacrifice for the 'greater good'. It manifests through notions of group affiliation.	'They sacrificed and they also served' (para. 2) Scott Morrison
Authority	Represents notions of fulfilling social roles, respect for hierarchy, traditions, and strong leadership.	'A country where older Australians are respected ... ' (para. 8) Scott Morrison
Sanctity	Represents notions of purity and contamination and underlies notions of striving for a noble/elevated life. Sanctity implies that certain things must be treated in certain ways given their inherent value, and can apply to objects, places, ideas, behaviours, and people.	'A country where you can live in an environment that is clean and healthy and the envy of the world' (para. 8) Scott Morrison

Source: All quotes from MOADOPH, 2019a, 2019b. Summary of moral foundations by author.

Next, by compiling all the moral claims made by each leader, we can calculate the percentage each moral foundation makes up of the total number of claims. If hypothesis 1 is correct, then we would expect care and fairness to make up a significantly higher proportion of the moral claims of Shorten’s speech than loyalty, authority, and sanctity. If hypothesis 2 is correct, then we would expect loyalty, authority, and sanctity to make up a significantly higher proportion of the moral claims of Morrison’s speech than care and fairness.

Results

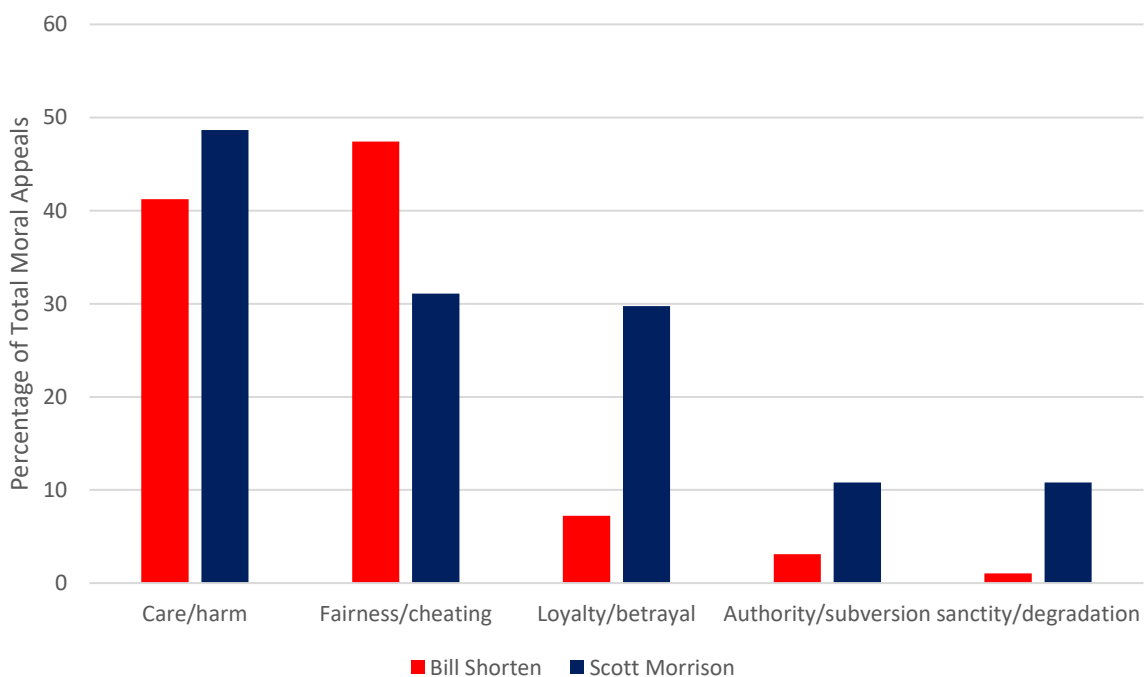
The results are summarised in Table 2 and Figure 1. Shorten’s speech contained 326 sentences, of which 97 contained an appeal to one of the five moral foundations. Morrison’s speech contained 396 sentences, of which 74 contained an appeal to one of the five moral foundations. The vast majority of Shorten’s moral sentences contained appeals to either care or fairness (approximately 89 per cent), with the rest coming from loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Morrison made relatively more appeals to loyalty, authority, and sanctity (around 20 per cent of all moral sentences) but also heavily relied on care and fairness appeals (approximately 80 per cent of moral sentences).

Table 2: Number of sentences belonging to each moral foundation.

Moral Foundation	Bill Shorten	Scott Morrison
Care/harm	40	36
Fairness/cheating	46	23
Loyalty/betrayal	7	22
Authority/subversion	3	8
Sanctity/degradation	1	8
Total	97	74

Source: Speech text form MOADOPH, 2019a, 2019b, coding by author.

Figure 1: The five moral foundations as a percentage of total moral appeals made by each leader.



Source: Speech text form MOADOPH, 2019a, 2019b, coding by author.

Discussion

The results largely support hypothesis 1 but not hypothesis 2. Shorten relied overwhelmingly on care and fairness moral appeals and largely neglected the other three foundations. These results support hypothesis 1 and suggest that Shorten's campaign did not utilise moral reframing. Although Morrison made many more appeals to loyalty, authority, and sanctity than Shorten, Morrison still relied heavily on care and fairness claims. These results do not support hypothesis 2 and suggest that Morrison's campaign may have—to some extent—utilised moral reframing.

These results imply that the implementation of moral reframing as a campaign tactic would have the greatest benefit for the ALP. The ALP appears to largely ignore the three right-wing foundations, possibly because appealing to right-wing moral rhetoric would feel like a betrayal of the party's values. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party appears to already rely heavily on left-wing moral foundations, suggesting moral reframing would be of more limited benefit to their campaigns.

One reason the Liberal Party heavily appealed to care and fairness may be due to right-wing individuals' more diverse moral profiles. Although moral reframing finds that right-wing subjects are more convinced by arguments framed in loyalty, authority, and sanctity, right-wing individuals do not outright reject the moral values of their ideological opposition (unlike left-wing individuals, who show very little support for right-wing foundations; Haidt, 2012). Moral foundation surveys find that right-wing respondents tend to endorse care and fairness to the same extent as the other three foundations (Haidt, 2012), at least when considering interpersonal—rather than intrapersonal—comparisons across moral domains (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Thus, appealing to care and fairness may come more naturally to Morrison than appealing to loyalty, authority, and sanctity does for Shorten.

Overall, this paper took a rigorous approach to analysing the content of each speech. Manual coding allows one to interpret moral claims in context and to incorporate sentence syntax and structure to categorise certain ethical appeals—something that computational content analysis lacks (see, for example, the 'Moral Foundations Dictionary' of Graham et al., 2009). However, one limitation of this paper is that its analysis relied on a single coder. This may bias the results given that the individual coder may interpret data in a way that favours their expectations (Lacy & Riffe, 1993). As such, the true test of the validity and reliability of qualitative content analyses lies in replicating similar results with multiple coders who are familiar with the coding framework but blind to its hypotheses (Neuendorf, 2016). Such robust analysis must come from future research. However, the results of this paper still serve as a preliminary investigation into the moral frames politicians tend to use in their election campaigns—results which might inform later studies of expanded scope and rigour.

Conclusion

To conclude, mounting evidence suggests that moral reframing is an effective tool for political persuasion. However, little research explores whether politicians implement such rhetoric in practice. This paper addressed this gap in the literature with a preliminary investigation that qualitatively analysed the 2019 federal election campaign launch speeches of the ALP and Liberal Party. I found that the ALP overwhelmingly relied on moral appeals congruent with their supporters' moral foundations (that is, care and fairness), while appealing very little to the three right-wing foundations. This suggests that, at least in the 2019 campaign, the ALP did not actively employ moral reframing. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party appealed significantly more to the three right-wing foundations than the ALP. However, the majority of the Liberal Party's moral appeals came from the two left-wing moral foundations (care and fairness). This suggests that, at least to some extent, the Liberal Party tends to implement some form of moral reframing.

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