

POL 473 — Prospectus: Investigating the impact of  
moral framing on climate change action

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## 1 | Objective

To investigate whether priming subjects with moral arguments for action on climate change mitigation will change their perceived willingness to make a personal effort, as well as whether more action is actually taken

## 2 | Literature review

This project will involve a review of the relevant literature on framing effects generally, framing effects in the realm of the environment, and theories and experimentation on motivating subjects to take action on environmental issues.

## 3 | Participant selection

Mailing addresses for a random selection of Ontario residents will be purchased from a private company. A link to an online survey will be provided by mail, both for the initial survey and for the follow up. Funding levels will determine the sample size to be used.

## 4 | Method

The study will use an online survey, operated through a website visited by survey participants. Three types of moral arguments will be considered:

1. **Utilitarian:** using fossil fuels today creates an immediate benefit, but causes harm that stretches far into the future. There argument here is that we are causing a disproportionate amount of harm to future generations, relative to the benefit we are receiving
2. **Planetary stewardship:** the current generation inherited a planet capable of sustaining human prosperity, and thus has an obligation to pass along a planet in similar or better condition for those who will follow
3. **Harming the defenceless:** moral philosopher Henry Shue argues that by imposing the harm and risk of climate change on future generations, we are willfully and unjustly imposing harm on innocent and defenceless people who can do no harm to us.<sup>1</sup>

For each argument, there will be four kinds of prompts, one of which will be shown at random to each participant:

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<sup>1</sup>See: Shue, “Deadly Delays, Saving Opportunities”.

- a A short passage of text or set of leading questions that establishes the moral argument specifically in the context of climate change
- b A short passage of text or set of leading questions that establishes the moral argument in a sphere other than climate change. For instance, the ‘planetary stewardship’ argument could be made in terms of children in a wealthy family inheriting a substantial estate and then treating it in ways that either protect and enhance it or squander it
- c A short passage or set of questions unrelated to ethical issue or climate change, as a control
- d No priming.

After being primed, each participant will be asked whether they expect to engage in any of the following activities during the following year: contact an elected representative to express concern about climate change or advocate policies meant to mitigate it; attend a climate change protest; provide information about climate change to a church, community organization, or other civil society group; sign a petition calling for climate change action; or make consumer choices designed to reduce their personal climate impact. They will also be given an open-ended space to specify another action they expect to take. Participants will also complete one page of questions on demographic information including age, income, education, level of involvement with environmental groups, political orientation, and other potentially relevant factors. Participants will be asked for permission to contact them again in one year to ask whether they have actually engaged in any of the listed actions or in other actions.

## **5 | Hypotheses**

It is expected that prompt d (no priming) will produce similar results to prompt c (unrelated priming). All non-control arguments and styles of prompting are expected to have some effect on perceived willingness to act on climate change, as well as the probability of actually taking an action. The size of the effect of each of the three moral arguments is expected to vary according to the political orientation and possibly the education level of the subjects. Moral frames that explicitly make reference to climate change are expected to produce more of a response than those that avoid directly mentioning it, in terms of perceived willingness to act and actual action. Given the disjoint between the level of public concern about climate change and the seriousness of efforts to address the problem through public policy, there seems to be a strong basis for investigating issues of motivation in this area.

## References

Shue, Henry. "Deadly Delays, Saving Opportunities". In: *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*. Ed. by Stephen Gardiner. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.