Selling just preservation
Commentary on **Treves et al.** on *Just Preservation*

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Abstract: Treves et al. argue for better representation of voiceless groups in current policy decisions. We agree with the argument but believe it will be challenging to convince enough people of its importance to change policy — especially those political groups who are not predisposed to agreeing with these kinds of arguments. We draw on the social psychology literature to recommend three principles for increasing the persuasiveness of the argument to the public: pre-suasion, framing, and tailoring for the audience. We apply these principles to make concrete recommendations for framing the argument to persuade the American political right.

Keywords: persuasion, political psychology, morality, environmentalism, attitude change

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Treves et al. (2019) present powerful arguments in support of giving voice to three currently mostly voiceless groups: human youth, non-humans, and the humans and non-humans of the future. To protect these groups, Treves et al. argue for representing their needs in policy decision-making, because "consensus" decisions without their voice are inevitably made at their expense. We agree that counting the currently uncounted is an admirable and important goal, but it may be difficult to convince voters and politicians wielding power that this is necessary. In this commentary, we outline three general principles from the social psychological literature on political and moral persuasion to help convince the unconvinced.

Persuasion begins with pre-suasion. Before a message can change people's minds, they must trust the source enough to listen to it (Légal et al., 2012). Often people pay more attention to who the information comes from than what the information says (Cialdini, 2016; Kruglanski et al., 2009). They trust messages from ingroup members more than from members of groups to which they do not belong (Bolsen, Palm, & Kingsland, 2019). In politics, this is known as the "party over policy effect" — i.e., people tend to support policies their own party supports, sometimes even

disregarding the actual content of the policy (Cohen, 2003). Moreover, people trust favored authority figures, often accepting their conclusions even without paying attention to the cogency or even the content of the argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, people are generally supportive of ideas coming from familiar places. But what can be done to persuade people in different groups and with different ideological predilections?

One idea is to express shared values while avoiding things that might emphasize your role as an "outgroup member." People are more easily persuaded if they have *something* in common with the persuader, even something trivial, like shirt color or favorite pizza topping (Tajfel et al., 1971; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Cialdini, 2001). Shared moral values may be especially important. People care a great deal about other people's moral character (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014) and will listen to outgroup members, if first they know they are good people (Schein, 2018). Cultivating trust by demonstrating credibility and moral character is essential to being heard by the outgroup.

Framing your arguments. Would you rather undergo a life-saving surgery that had a 90% chance of survival, or one with a 10% chance you would die? Intuitively, the 90% successful surgery is far more appealing — even though the statistics describe the same surgery. By reframing choices to emphasize either gains or losses, one can dramatically shift how appealing they are (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). The framing effect is one of the most robust findings in the social sciences (Steiger & Kühberger, 2018), and should be wielded as a tool to enhance the persuasiveness of providing a voice for the voiceless.

Knowing your audience. To frame a *moral* argument effectively, you have to know your audience so you can tailor the framing to their values. Supporters of conservation tend to be politically liberal, and political conservatives tend to be skeptical of environmental action (Feinberg & Willer, 2013), often believing that such efforts are code for "taking away jobs." Conservatives are a large audience likely to disagree with the proposals outlined in *Just Preservation.* However, recent researchers have found a way to make pro-environmentalist messages appeal to conservatives: by reframing the argument to appeal to values that conservatives find important (Day et al., 2014). Liberals tend to emphasize moral concerns such as taking care of the vulnerable and ensuring fair outcomes. Conservatives value these but also care a great deal about loyalty to one's ingroup (e.g., country, family), respect for authority, and moral purity concerns (e.g., decency, chastity; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). One can broaden support for environmental messages by formulating them to appeal to these conservative values. For example, conservatives are just as persuaded as liberals if a message aligns environmental protection with patriotism and keeping the environment clean and pure (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). Conservative readers are more persuaded by this if they feel it is coming from someone who shares their conservative moral values (Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). To be clear: we are not suggesting that advocates misrepresent themselves as something they are not, but that emphasizing their shared moral values with the audience may make their message more persuasive (Schein, 2018).

Selling *Just Preservation*. Using these principles from the social psychology of persuasion, we recommend the following concrete steps in promoting *Just Preservation* to a broader audience:

1. **Pre-suasion:** *Build a broad coalition of experts to appeal to liberals, independents, and conservatives*. Similar strategies have been fruitful in selling other environmental arguments — albeit not as fruitful as one would like. For example, one study found climate change appeals are more persuasive if they come from Republicans or military leaders (less so from Democrats or climate scientists), because they recruit the support of otherwise doubtful conservatives, without losing much Democratic support (Bolsen, Palm, & Kingsland, 2019).
2. **Framing:** *Frame the argument to appeal to purity, not just harm.* For example, conservatives support efforts to clean polluted rivers to "purify" the environment (Feinberg & Willer, 2013).
3. **Audience:** *Appeal to patriotism*. People often oppose reforms to familiar systems because they worry change will be costly and difficult (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010). The drive to put a human on the moon was notably difficult and costly — but it received near universal support from Americans because winning the space race was a source of national pride. We believe environmental reform could benefit from similar messaging (in the version tailored to persuade the USA): America should be the world leader in protecting the planet.

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