Leaders' Use of Moral Justifications Increases Policy Support

Alex B. Van Zant[1]

Don A. Moore[1]

[1] Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley

Word Count: 990

Corresponding Author:

Alex Van Zant

Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley

Student Services Building #1900

Berkeley, CA 94720

619-972-9268

vanzant@haas.berkeley.edu

Abstract

Leaders must choose how to justify their organization's actions to stakeholders. We differentiate *moral frames*, or justifications based on moral values, from *pragmatic frames*, or justifications based on practical costs and benefits. Experiments 1A and 1B find that moral policy frames elicit more support than pragmatic frames across a variety of scenarios. This effect is mediated by the perception that leaders who offer moral justifications possess relatively greater moral character. Experiment 2 finds that perceptions of a leader's private motives have a stronger influence on policy support than does the leader's public stance. Experiment 3 demonstrates that, irrespective of how a policy is framed, people are most supportive of policies championed by leaders high in moral character. In Experiment 4, we document an additional benefit of moral policy frames: they allow leaders to mitigate the moral outrage generated by reneging on a policy.

Keywords: morality, judgment, values, social perception, policy making

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William Ford, Jr., the former CEO of Ford Motor Company, said that "creating a strong

business and building a better world are not conflicting goals—they are both essential

ingredients for long-term success" (Ford, 2010). Indeed, leaders seen as ethical are also

perceived as effective and elicit commitment from their followers (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison,

2005; Mayer, Aquino, & Kuenzi, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009).

Yet by focusing on *what leaders do* at the expense of considering *why they do it*, prior

research has neglected the impact of how leaders frame or justify their decisions. Many policies

have both economic and ethical implications; leaders like William Ford, Jr. must decide how to

justify them to stakeholders. Stakeholders' support of policies affects their willingness to

sacrifice for them, take action for them, and join organizations supporting them (Kahneman &

Knetsch, 1992; Kahneman, Ritov, Jacowitz, & Grant, 1993; McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock,

2012). As such, obtaining the support of stakeholders both inside and outside the organization is

critical for the success of any policy. However, little research has compared how outside support

for an organization's actions is affected by justifications for those actions. We attempt to do so

here.

We capitalize on the distinction between *moral frames* and *pragmatic frames* offered by

Kreps and Monin (2011). Moral frames justify policies on the basis of moral values while

pragmatic frames justify policies on the basis of economic and organizational benefits. To

illustrate the distinction between these two means of justifying a policy, consider a CEO's plan

to provide employees with free, healthy meals. On one hand, the CEO could justify the policy on

the basis of a moral obligation to care for employees' health (a moral frame). On the other hand,

the CEO could explain that the availability of meals will motivate employees to work longer

hours (a pragmatic frame).

We propose that moral frames will enhance support for leaders and their policies relative

to pragmatic frames. The *moral character account* hypothesizes that leaders' justifications signal

something about their moral character. Scholars have suggested that leaders with high moral

character may be perceived as more effective and persuasive than those with low moral character

(e.g., Den Hartog, House, Hanges, & Quintanilla, 1999; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam,

1996). Because actors' intentions are fundamental to making sense of their actions (Knobe,

2003), moral justifications may signal moral character (cf. Sripada, 2012) and rally more support

than pragmatic justifications.

We contrast this account with a more straightforward *moralization account*. Moralization

involves the attachment of moral significance to an issue (Rozin, 1999). When an issue acquires

moral weight, it grows in perceived importance (Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1999) and people

become resistant to considering tradeoffs that render the issue economically fungible (Tetlock,

2003; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). While this account suggests that moral

frames may generate more support than pragmatic frames because they cause people to moralize

policies, it also suggests that perceptions of leaders' moral character should be relatively

unimportant drivers of policy support.

Experiment 1

Experiments 1A and 1B compare the impact of moral versus pragmatic frames on policy

support. In Experiment 1B, we replicate and extend Experiment 1A by including a measure of

moralization along with a control measure to understand whether any effect of policy frame on

policy support is an artifact of particular frames (i.e., pragmatic frames) making policies appear more unethical or immoral as opposed to amoral.

Pilot Testing

Prior to conducting Experiment 1, we conducted a pilot study to validate a measure of policy support. Based on an intuition about a likely effect size, we aimed to enroll 100 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk and wound up with 107. They were randomly assigned to read six hypothetical policies that were either framed in moral or pragmatic terms by a leader before evaluating the policies. Participants evaluated the policies by responding to four items that we adapted from measures of policy support used in prior research (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; McGraw et al., 2012; Staw & Ross, 1980). Participants indicated their attitudes towards the leader in each scenario (*very negative* to *very positive*), perception of the leader's plan (*immoral* to *moral*), rating of the leader's performance (*very poor* to *outstanding*), and the extent to which they agree with the leader's plan (*not at all* to *very strongly*). All items were scored on seven-point scales on which higher numbers indicated more support. A factor analysis found that all items loaded onto a single factor ($\alpha = .96$), so we averaged all four items into a single measure. Policies framed in moral terms ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.64$) generated more support than those framed in pragmatic terms ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 0.92$), $t(105) = 4.44$, $p < .001$, $d = .87$.[1]

Experiment 1A

Participants. Following Simonsohn's (2013) recommendation for confirming the existence of an effect using 2.5 times the sample size of a prior study, we enrolled 385 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk. They participated in a survey on managerial decision-

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[1]The data for all of our studies is available at https://osf.io/c2gaf/.

making in exchange for $1.25. Among those participants, 374 successfully passed two reading

comprehension checks. The remaining 11 participants were prevented from continuing with the

study, so we did not collect any dependent measures from them. Participants' mean age was 35

years ($SD = 12.37$) and 50% of them were female.

      Procedure. To examine the effect of policy frames across both private and public

sectors, we employed a 3 (policy frame: moral, pragmatic, or ambiguous) X 2 (policy sector:

private or public) mixed design with policy frame manipulated between-subjects and sector

manipulated within-subjects. We analyzed sector to see whether any effect of policy frame is

robust to whether the organization is expected to accomplish communal goals (public sector) or

to follow market-pricing norms (private sector; see McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). We

preregistered this design, measures, and analyses at https://osf.io/wptk5/.

      Manipulations. Each participant read six policy proposals. Three came from the public

sector (a politician's plan to fund a retirement planning agency, a state governor's plan to repave

state highways, and a president's plan to outlaw child labor in a developing country) and three

from the private sector (a CEO's plan to invest in greener technology, a marketing executive's

plan to target sales of a new tablet PC towards public schools, and a CEO's plan to provide

healthy meals to employees). The scenarios appeared in a different randomly determined order

for each participant.

      The framing manipulation randomly assigned participants to read about six scenarios that

were all framed in either moral terms, pragmatic terms, or ambiguous terms. For example,

participants who read about a politician's policy to fund a retirement planning agency either

heard about the importance of ensuring that retirees "live with comfort and dignity" (moral

frame), "do not drain public funds" (pragmatic frame), or "have sufficient funds" (ambiguous

frame). Similarly, participants who read about a CEO's plan to provide healthy meals for employees either saw the plan justified in terms of the organization's moral imperative to look out for its employees' well-being ("increased access to meals should improve our employees' well-being") or the organization's self-interest of keeping employees productive ("increased access to meals should improve our employees' productivity"). In the ambiguous frame, they saw a justification with ambiguous motives ("increased access to meals should improve the status-quo"). See the Supplementary Online Materials (SOM) for the full versions of each scenario.

Leader moral character. Individuals who are kind, compassionate, and caring are generally perceived to possess high moral character (Aquino & Reed, 2002). As such, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which the traits *kind*, *compassionate*, and *caring* described the leader in each scenario on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). The items were averaged to form an index ($\alpha = .98$).

Policy Support. After reading each scenario, participants responded to the same measure of policy support validated in the pilot study ($\alpha = .93$).

Results. As per our preregistered data analysis plan, we analyzed policy support and leader moral character using 3 (policy frame) X 2 (policy sector) mixed ANOVAs. Finally, we conducted a mediation analysis.

Policy support. The results reveal a main between-subjects effect of policy frame, $F(2, 371) = 4.92$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, replicating the results of the pilot study. Participants were more supportive of policies framed in moral terms ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 0.74$) than policies framed in pragmatic terms ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(250) = 3.08$, $p = .002$, $d = .39$, 95% CI = [.14, .64]. Policy support in the ambiguous frame fell in the middle ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 0.70$) and did not

significantly differ from either the moral or pragmatic frames (both $ps > .071$). We also found an

unexpected main effect of policy sector such that participants were more supportive of policies in

the private sector ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.77$) than those in the public sector ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.84$),

$F(1, 371) = 4.09$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, $d = .21$ [.01, .41]. The interaction between policy frame and

sector (public vs. private) did not attain statistical significance, $F(2, 371) = 2.86$, $p = .059$.

Leader moral character. As expected, the results show a main effect of policy frame on

leader moral character, $F(2, 371) = 22.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Planned comparisons revealed that

participants perceived leaders who framed issues in moral terms ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 0.75$) to

possess greater moral character than those who framed issues in pragmatic terms ($M = 4.96$, SD

$= 1.05$), $t(246) = 6.30$, $p < .001$, $d = .80$ [.54, 1.06]. Furthermore, participants perceived leaders

who framed issues in ambiguous terms ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 0.73$) as less moral than those who

framed issues in moral terms, $t(246) = 3.57$, $p < .001$, $d = .46$ [.21, .71], but more moral than

those who framed issues in pragmatic terms, $t(250) = 3.49$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$ [.19, .69]. We also

found a main within-subjects effect of policy sector such that participants perceived leaders in

the private sector to possess *less* moral character ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.99$) than those in the public

sector ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.96$), $F(1, 371) = 23.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, $d = .50$ [.29, .71]. We did not

find evidence of an interaction, $F(2, 371) = 1.25$, $p > .250$.

Mediation analysis. We assessed whether, across all policies, leader moral character

mediated participants' greater support of policies framed in moral terms as opposed to pragmatic

terms. When regressing policy support on leader moral character and policy frame, we found that

leader moral character continued to predict policy support, $\beta = .84$, $t(371) = 23.98$, $p < .001$, but

that the effect of policy frame reversed in direction (from $\beta = .19$ to $\beta = -.12$), $t(371) = 3.20$, $p = $

.004. A bootstrap procedure with 10,000 replications revealed an indirect effect of leader moral

character, $z = 6.02$, $p < .001$, indirect effect $= .47$, 95% CI $= [.33, .60]$. Taken together, these

results suggest that the power of moral frames is attributable to perceptions of leaders' moral

character. This effect held across policies in both the public and private sector. We also note that

when controlling for the influence of leaders' moral character, issues framed in pragmatic terms

actually generated more support than issues framed in moral terms.

Experiment 1B

 Participants. Given the inclusion of an additional control variable to this study and its

potential to reduce statistical power, we planned to recruit 575 individuals via Amazon

Mechanical Turk to complete a survey in exchange for $2. A total of 606 attempted to complete

the study and we collected dependent measures from 578 who successfully passed two reading

comprehension checks. Their mean age was 35.26 years ($SD = 11.30$) and 47% of them were

female.

 Procedure. As in Experiment 1A, this experiment has a 3 (policy frame: moral,

pragmatic, or ambiguous) X 2 (policy sector: private or public) mixed design with policy frame

manipulated between-subjects and policy sector manipulated within-subjects. Unlike Experiment

1A, all measures were presented in a randomized order in Experiment 1B. This design, all

measures, and analyses are preregistered at https://osf.io/wptk5/.

 Manipulations. Framing manipulations were identical to those in Experiment 1A.

 Leader moral character. We assessed leader moral character using the same measure as

Experiment 1A ($\alpha = .98$).

 Issue Moralization. To understand whether participants' moralization of issues may

explain the impact of policy frame on policy support, we presented participants with four items

assessing the extent to which they viewed the issue that a particular policy addresses as being

morally significant. Specifically, we informed participants that a policy they just read about is

relevant to a particular issue and then asked them to indicate their agreement with four

statements about the issue on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*):

"there are moral implications associated with this issue", "my stance on this issue is guided by

my moral convictions", "it would be foolish to attach moral significance to this issue", and "this

issue is no different from any other routine economic issue that leaders face on a daily basis." As

the measure is intended to capture the extent to which a participant has moralized an issue, we

reverse-scored the latter two items. The four items were reliable (α = .83) and thus averaged to

form a single index.

      Policy Support. We measured policy support using the same items as Experiment 1A (α

= .94).

      Policy Ethicality. As a control variable, we asked participants to indicate their agreement

with the statement "the policy is unethical" on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7

(*strongly agree*). We reverse-scored this measure.

      Results. As per our preregistered data analysis plan, we analyzed policy support, leader

moral character, and moralization using 3 (policy frame) X 2 (policy sector) mixed ANOVAs.

We also conducted a series of follow-up ANCOVAs that treated policy ethicality as a covariate.

Finally, we conducted a mediation analysis using leader moral character and moralization as

potential mediators. See Table 1 for the conditional means and standard deviations of all

measures.

      Policy support. As in Experiment 1A, there was a main between-subjects effect of policy

frame, $F(2, 575) = 7.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Participants were more supportive of policies framed

in moral terms than policies framed in pragmatic terms, $t(383) = 3.62$, $p < .001$, $d = .37$ [.24,

.50]. As in Experiment 1A, policy support in the ambiguous frame fell in the middle and did not significantly differ from the moral frame condition, $t(385) = 0.80$, $p > .250$. However, it did differ from the pragmatic frame condition, $t(382) = 2.87$, $p = .004$, $d = .29$ [.16, .42]. Replicating the pattern in Experiment 1A, participants were more supportive of policies in the private sector ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.78$) than those in the public sector ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.86$), $F(1, 575) = 9.34$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, $d = .25$ [.09, .41]. The interaction between policy frame and sector (public vs. private) did not attain statistical significance, $F(2, 575) = 1.28$, $p > .250$.

When controlling for the extent to which a policy was perceived as unethical, the effect of policy frame held, $F(2, 574) = 6.33$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Thus, the effect of policy frame on policy support is robust to a policy's perceived ethicality. However, the effect of policy sector was not robust to policy ethicality and reduced in magnitude, $F(2, 574) = 0.36$, $p > .250$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, $d = .05$ [-.11, .21]. The policy frame X policy sector interaction remained non-significant when controlling for policy ethicality, $F(2, 575) = 0.63$, $p > .250$.

Leader moral character. Replicating the pattern of results in Experiment 1A, we found a main effect of policy frame on leader moral character, $F(2, 575) = 18.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Leaders who framed issues in moral terms were perceived as possessing greater moral character than those who framed issues in pragmatic terms, $t(383) = 5.82$, $p < .001$, $d = .60$ [.40, .80]. Furthermore, participants perceived leaders who framed issues in ambiguous terms as less moral than those who framed issues in moral terms, $t(246) = 3.57$, $p < .001$, $d = .46$ [.21, .71], but more moral than those who framed issues in pragmatic terms, $t(385) = 2.33$, $p = .021$, $d = .24$ [.04, .44]. We also replicated the main within-subjects effect of policy sector in Experiment 1A where participants perceived leaders in the private sector to possess less moral character ($M = 5.14$, SD

= 1.02) than those in the public sector ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.91$), $F(1, 371) = 18.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 =$

.03, $d = .65$ [.48, .82]. We did not find evidence of an interaction, $F(2, 575) = 0.27$, $p > .250$.

The effect of policy frame was robust to the inclusion of policy ethicality as a covariate,

$F(1, 574) = 31.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, as was the effect of policy sector, $F(1, 574) = 14.53$, $p <$

.001, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, $d = .39$ [.23, .55]. When controlling for the influence of policy ethicality, the

policy frame X policy sector interaction remained non-significant, $F(2, 574) = 0.15$, $p > .250$.

Moralization. Though we did not identify a main effect of policy frame on moralization,

$F(2, 575) = 1.48$, $p = .228$, we did find a policy frame X policy sector interaction, $F(2, 575) =$

6.75, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. For policies in the public sector, we found a main effect of policy frame

on moralization, $F(2, 575) = 3.10$, $p = .046$. Participants ascribed more moral significance to

public sector policies framed in moral terms ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.81$) than to those framed in

pragmatic terms ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(383) = 2.08$, $p = .038$, $d = .21$ [.01, .41]. Though

participants did not moralize issues framed in ambiguous terms ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.86$) any more

than those framed in pragmatic terms, $t(382) = 0.12$, $p > .250$, they moralized issues framed in

ambiguous terms to a lesser extent than those framed in moral terms, $t(385) = 2.26$, $p = .025$, $d =$

.23 [.03, .43]. In contrast, we did not identify evidence of a framing effect on moralization for

private sector issues, $F(2, 575) = 1.98$, $p = .139$. We also found a main effect of policy sector

such that participants moralized issues in the public sector ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.84$) to a greater

extent than issues in the private sector ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 575) = 82.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 =$

.13, $d = .76$ [.59. 93]. The results imply that moral policy frames may cause people to moralize

public sector issues more than private sector issues.

When controlling for the extent to which participants perceived a policy as unethical, the

policy frame X policy sector interaction held, $F(2, 574) = 7.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, as did the

main effect of policy sector, $F(2, 574) = 28.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, $d = .44$ [.27, .61]. We again

failed to find evidence of a main effect of policy frame, $F(2, 574) = 1.49$, $p = .227$.

Table 1

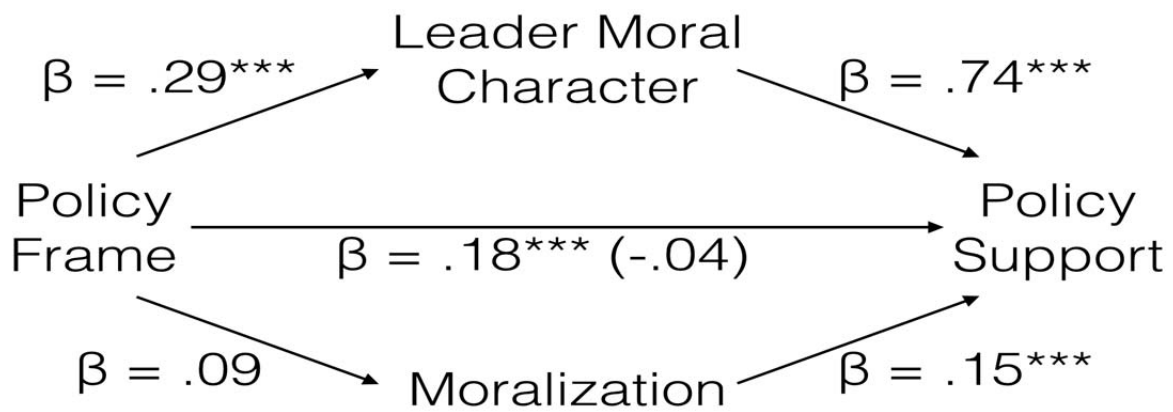*Study 1B: Means and Standard Deviations by Policy Frame Condition*

Variable	Moral Frame	Ambiguous Frame	Pragmatic Frame
Policy Support	5.73$_a$	5.67$_a$	5.46$_b$
	(0.71)	(0.70)	(0.76)
Leader Moral Character	5.45$_a$	5.27$_b$	4.93$_c$
	(0.76)	(0.79)	(0.98)
Issue Moralization	4.47$_a$	4.42$_a$	4.32$_a$
	(0.81)	(0.87)	(0.90)
Policy Ethicality	6.13$_{ab}$	6.24$_a$	6.03$_b$
	(0.92)	(0.90)	(0.86)

Note. Numbers represent conditional means (standard deviations in parentheses).
Numbers with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Mediation analysis. We wanted to understand whether differences in leaders' perceived

moral character account for the relatively greater support for policies framed in moral as opposed

to pragmatic terms above and beyond any potential impact of moralization. Thus, we conducted

a mediation analysis treating leader moral character and moralization as potential mediators. As

illustrated by Figure 2, when regressing policy support on leader moral character, moralization,

and policy frame, the main effect of policy frame was reduced to non-significance (from $\beta = .18$

to $\beta = -.04$), $t(381) = 1.25$, $p = .212$. Furthermore, both leader moral character, $t(381) = 21.51$, p

$< .001$, and moralization, $t(381) = 4.55$, $p < .001$, predicted policy support. As in Experiment 1A,

a bootstrap procedure with 10,000 replications revealed an indirect effect of leader moral

character, $z = 6.08$, $p < .001$, indirect effect $= .32$, 95% CI $= [.21, .43]$. However, the indirect

effect of moralization did not attain statistical significance, $z = 1.49$, $p = .136$, indirect effect $=$

.02, 95% CI $= [-.004, .04]$. In a follow-up analysis that included policy ethicality as a covariate,

the indirect effect of leader moral character held, $z = 5.86$, $p < .001$, indirect effect = .29, 95% CI

= [.18, .40], while the indirect effect of moralization continued to be non-significant, $z = 1.53$, p

= .125, indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = [-.004, .04]. Overall, we replicated the findings of

Experiment 1A suggesting that the relatively greater support elicited by moral frames relative to

pragmatic frames can be attributed to their ability to signal leaders' moral character.

Additionally, this set of analyses suggests that these effects are not merely a byproduct of

participants moralizing issues framed in moral terms. We found limited evidence that the

moralization of policies can explain participants' greater support for policies framed in moral as

opposed to pragmatic terms; this does not lend support to the moralization account. Instead, we

find that leader moral character uniquely mediates the link between policy frames and policy

support in a manner that is robust to a policy's perceived ethicality.

Leader Moral
Character

β = .29***   β = .74***

Policy
Frame   β = .18*** (-.04)   Policy
                                          Support

β = .09   Moralization   β = .15***

*** $p < .001$.

Note. Policy Frame = 1 for moral frames, 0 for pragmatic frames.

Figure 1. *Experiment 1B: Mediation Analysis*

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 asks whether it is more important that a leader take a public moral stance or believe it privately. Should the relative effectiveness of moral policy frames be driven by perceptions of a leader's moral character, public justifications for a policy should be relatively inconsequential when private motives are transparent.

Participants

With the goal of obtaining enough participants to detect a private frame main effect of d = .39 (the effect size obtained in Experiment 1A) with at least 80% power, we recruited 262 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a survey on managerial decision-making in exchange for $0.50. Ten participants failed a reading comprehension test and were not allowed to complete the dependent measures, leaving a final sample of 252. Participants' mean age was 29.76 years (SD = 8.49) and 33% of them were female.

Procedure

Participants read an adapted version of the "healthy meals for employees" policy in Experiments 1A and 1B. We manipulated a leader's private and public policy frames in a 2 (private frame: moral or pragmatic) X 2 (public frame: moral or pragmatic) between-subjects design. We preregistered the study design, all measures, and analyses at https://osf.io/wptk5/.

Participants first learned about a CEO's goal to either improve employee well-being (moral frame) or productivity (pragmatic frame). This served as the private frame manipulation. Below is the first paragraph explaining the motives behind the policy [moral private frame / pragmatic private frame]:

> Looking to improve [employee well-being / productivity], the CEO of a large company
> assigned a task force to identify solutions that could [encourage employees to adapt a

healthy lifestyle while improving their quality of life / motivate employees to work

longer hours in the office while taking fewer sick days]. Ultimately, the task force

recommended a plan where full-time chefs would be hired to provide free, healthy meals

to employees throughout the day. Convinced that this plan would [make for a healthier

workforce / improve the company's bottom line], the CEO decided to adopt the plan

immediately.

In the following paragraph, participants learned about the CEO's public justification for the

decision. This served as the public frame manipulation. The text is below [moral public frame /

pragmatic public frame]:

In a company-wide announcement, the CEO proclaimed that "increased access to meals

should prevent our employees from engaging in unhealthy dietary habits. By ensuring

that our employees eat healthier food, we can [help them lead healthier lives / ensure they

are more productive]. Easy access to healthy meals should improve our [employees'

well-being / company's bottom line]."

Leader moral character. After reading about the policy, participants indicated the

extent to which nine different traits described the CEO. The traits were selected from Aquino and

Reed (2002), who found them to be associated with moral identity. In addition to the three traits

used in Experiments 1A and 1B, participants indicated the extent to which the traits *honest*,

helpful, *hardworking*, *friendly*, *generous*, and *fair* described the CEO on a scale ranging from 1

(*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). The nine items were reliable ($\alpha = .95$) and averaged into a single

measure.

Policy support. We used the same measure of policy support as Experiments 1A and 1B
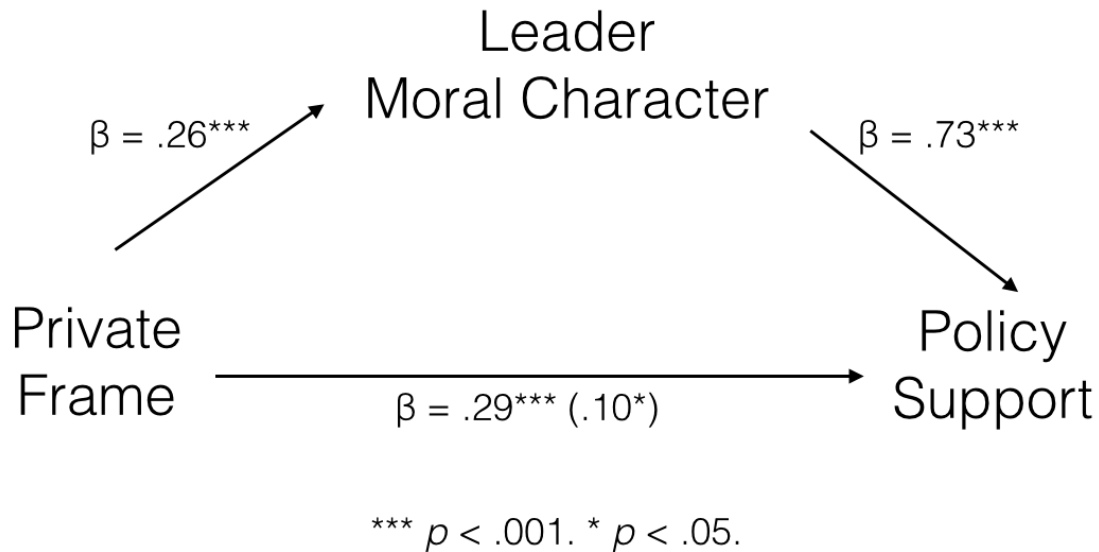
($\alpha = .91$).

Results

We analyzed leader moral character and policy support using 2 (private frame) X 2 (public frame) ANOVAs before conducting a mediation analysis.

Policy support. As expected, the private frame manipulation affected policy support. Participants were more supportive of the policy when the leader's private motivation was moral ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.03$) rather than pragmatic ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 248) = 23.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, $d = .72$ [.47, .97]. As for our manipulation of the leader's public stance, neither its main effect ($M_{moral\ public\ frame} = 5.77$ vs. $M_{pragmatic\ public\ frame} = 5.55$), $F(1, 248) = 2.07$, $p = .15$, nor its interaction with private motives, $F(1, 248) = 2.89$, $p = .09$, attained statistical significance.

Leader moral character. We also identified a main effect of private frame such that participants perceived the CEO whose private motives were moral ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.00$) to possess greater moral character than the CEO whose motives were pragmatic ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 248) = 17.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, $d = .53$ [.28, .78]. As for the leader's public stance, neither its main effect ($M_{moral\ public\ frame} = 5.44$ vs. $M_{pragmatic\ public\ frame} = 5.26$), $F(1, 248) = 1.57$, $p = .212$, nor its interaction with private frame attained significance, $F(1, 248) = 0.38$, $p > .250$.

Mediation analysis. As illustrated by Figure 2, after regressing policy support on leader moral character and private frame condition, leader moral character continued to predict policy support, $t(249) = 6.25$, $p < .001$. While private frame condition continued to predict policy support, $t(249) = 2.40$, $p = .017$, the effect reduced in magnitude (from $\beta = .29$ to $\beta = .10$). A bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 replications revealed an indirect effect of leader moral character, $z = 4.09$, $p < .001$, indirect effect = .43, 95% CI = [.24, .64]. Overall, the analysis suggests that leader moral character partially mediated the support generated by the private

moral frame. Consistent with the moral character account, we found that the benefits of moral

frames are contingent on a leader being perceived as privately motivated by moral values.

Figure 2. *Experiment 2: Mediation Analysis*

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 directly tests whether moral policy frames promote policy support via their

ability to signal a leader's moral character. We hypothesized that people would lend more

support to leaders of upstanding moral character, regardless of whether the leader frames policies

in moral or pragmatic terms.

Participants

We sought to obtain a sample of similar size to that obtained in Experiment 2 (a

minimum of 250 participants). We wound up getting 254 participants via Amazon Mechanical

Turk. Of those, 251 passed a comprehension check and completed all dependent measures. Their

mean age was 32.46 years ($SD = 11.10$) and 36% of them were female.

Procedure

We adapted the materials from Experiment 2 to develop a study with a 2 (moral character: high or low) X 2 (policy frame: moral or pragmatic) between-subjects design. We preregistered the study design, all measures, and analyses at https://osf.io/wptk5/. Participants followed the same procedure as Experiment 2 with two exceptions. First, we did not assess their perceptions of a leader's moral character since it was manipulated. Second, we adapted the first paragraph of the scenario to include a manipulation of the leader's moral character. To manipulate the leader's moral character, we described the leader using the three adjectives from the moral character measure used in Experiments 1A and 1B in the high moral character condition. In the low moral character condition, we used antonyms of these adjectives. These adjectives were inserted into the following paragraph [high moral character condition / low moral character condition]:

> The CEO of a large company has been described by employees as [kind, compassionate, and caring / inconsiderate, cruel, and neglectful]. Recently, the CEO devised a plan for the company to hire full-time chefs to provide free, healthy meals to employees throughout the day.

Following this paragraph, participants read the same second paragraph that they read in Experiment 2. This paragraph contains the same manipulation of policy frame as the public frame manipulation in Experiment 2.

Policy support. After reading the scenario, we presented participants with the same measure of policy support used in Experiments 1 and 2.

Results

As per our preregistered data analysis plan, we analyzed policy support using a 2 (leader moral character) X 2 (policy frame) ANOVA. As hypothesized, we found a main effect of leader moral character such that participants were more supportive of the leader's policy when the leader was described as high ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.13$) as opposed to low in moral character ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 247) = 45.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, $d = .86$ [.60, 1.12]. Neither the main effect of policy frame ($M_{moral\ frame} = 5.73$ vs. $M_{pragmatic\ frame} = 5.67$), $F(1, 247) = 0.16$, $p > .250$, nor its interaction with leader moral character attained significance, $F(1, 247) = 0.47$, $p > .250$. Irrespective of how the policy was framed, participants' support for it was largely contingent on whether they perceived the leader as being high or low in moral character.

Experiment 4

Reneging on policies tends to generate disapproval (Staw & Ross, 1980) that manifests itself in the form of moral outrage when it renders moral values economically fungible (Tetlock et al., 2000). However, should perceptions of a leader's moral character dictate policy support, then framing an issue in moral terms should signal that the leader possesses ethical motives— even if the policy is abandoned. In contrast, if policy support is driven by the moralization of an issue, then a leader's decision to renege on a policy framed in moral terms should elevate moral outrage. As such, the moral character account would predict that leaders should generate less moral outrage after reneging on a policy framed in moral terms while the moralization account would predict the opposite. Experiment 4 pits these accounts against each other.

Participants

We planned to collect enough data to detect a main effect of a policy's initial framing equivalent to $d = .3$ with 80% power. To achieve a sample of at least this size, we recruited 371 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to complete a survey on managerial decision-making in

exchange for $0.75. Seventeen participants failed a reading comprehension check and were prevented from responding to the study's dependent measure, resulting in a final sample of 354 participants from whom we collected data. Their mean age was 30.88 ($SD = 10.80$) and 37% of them were female.

Procedure

We randomly assigned participants to a 2 (policy frame: moral or pragmatic) X 2 (post-abandonment frame: moral or ambiguous)[2] between-subjects design. Participants read about a nascent clothing company known for developing young, talented designers. After the company was starting to achieve financial stability, its CEO decided to increase designers' salaries.

Policy frame manipulation. We manipulated policy frame by altering the manner in which the CEO justified the planned salary increase for employees. In the moral frame condition, the CEO made an appeal to fairness by stating that "it is only fair for us to make sure that their talent and dedication is recognized the way it deserves to be." In the pragmatic frame condition, the CEO instead emphasized the benefits to the organization: "we need to pay them better to keep them productive and likely to stay with our company for the long term."

Following this explanation, all participants read that, in light of unanticipated economic difficulties, the CEO was unable to raise salaries. See SOM for the full versions of each scenario.

Moral outrage. Our key dependent measure was participants' moral outrage in response to the CEO's decision to renege on the prior commitment. We used an index developed by Tetlock et al. (2000), which is composed of the six seven-point items rated on bipolar scales:

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[2] In an exploratory vein, we manipulated whether the leader used a moral or ambiguous post-abandonment frame to evaluate whether any effect of policy frame could later be mitigated by the leader's justification for abandoning the policy.

bad-good, *wise-foolish* (reverse-scored), *negative-positive*, *immoral-moral*, *unfair-fair*,

disgusted-not at all disgusted. Items were reverse-scored so that higher scores indicate more

outrage (α = .91).

Results

We conducted a 2 X 2 ANOVA and identified a main effect of policy frame such that the

CEO's decision to abandon the planned salary increase was met with less moral outrage when

the policy had originally been framed in moral terms (*M* = 3.32, *SD* = 1.22) as opposed to

pragmatic terms (*M* = 3.67, *SD* = 1.33), $F(1, 350) = 6.66$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, $d = .28$ [.07, .49].

Neither the main effect of post-decision frame ($M_{moral\ post\text{-}decision\ frame}$ = 3.50 vs. $M_{pragmatic\ post\text{-}decision}$

$_{frame}$ = 3.50), $F(1, 350) = 0.002$, $p > .250$, nor its interaction with policy frame, $F(1, 350) = 0.74$,

$p > .250$, attained statistical significance. Consistent with the moral character account and

counter to the moralization account, we found that use of a moral policy frame somewhat

insulated a leader from moral outrage—even after reneging on the policy.

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General Discussion

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Some have argued that a corporation's prime directive should be to maximize profits and

that the pursuit of any other goal, including contributing to the broader welfare, is wrong

(Friedman, 1962). However, not everyone shares this prime economic directive. Our results

suggest that, at least for our research participants, the perceived morality of organizational

leaders was a powerful determinant of their support for policies championed by those leaders.

While consistent with prior findings that actions are often judged on the basis of actors' moral

character (Nadler & McDonnell, 2012), the current research also suggests that despite their

attempts to be vigilant against hypocrisy (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz,

2009), people will overlook inconsistent framing and broken commitments so long as they

appear motivated by moral concerns.

Author Contributions

A.V.Z. and D.M. developed the study concept, contributed to the study design, and drafted the manuscript. Testing, data collection, and data analyses were performed by A.V.Z. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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