2022 Mayhew Lecture
From gulf to bridge: Moral reframing of issues and candidates facilitates political persuasion

Dr. Robb Willer

Political persuasion is a multimillion dollar industry, a major area of academic research, and a critical mechanism for social change. Yet research suggests that political persuasion is very hard, and that most attempts fail. One factor contributing to this difficulty in the U.S. is political polarization. Because partisans interact primarily with like-minded others, they struggle to take the perspective of those who do not already agree with them. This is compounded by liberals' and conservatives' divergent moral values, which make political communication particularly challenging. While people naturally construct persuasive appeals in terms of their own moral values, those appeals could be more effective if they were instead framed in terms of the values of the person targeted for persuasion. In this talk, I present research – conducted by our lab and others' over the last decade – showing the effectiveness of "moral reframing" for a wide range of polarized topics, including views of environmental protection, same-sex marriage, immigration, and U.S. presidential candidates. I also spotlight studies that do not find persuasive effects and propose boundary conditions of moral reframing. This research highlights that the ability to take the perspective of politically dissimilar others – a scarce resource in polarized times – is helpful for building the popular support needed for social change.

Dr. Robb Willer is a Professor in the Departments of Sociology, Psychology (by courtesy), and the Graduate School of Business (by courtesy) at Stanford University. He is the Director of the Polarization and Social Change Lab and the Co-Director of the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society. The primary area of his research looks at the social and psychological forces shaping Americans' political attitudes. He has a particular interest in techniques for overcoming polarization to build political consensus. He studies how political psychology findings can be applied to construct persuasive political messages. His research has appeared in a number of outlets, including *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. His popular writing has appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, Vox, and Scientific American. He has consulted for the Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency, the AFL/CIO, and a number of political campaigns.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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