

RETHINKING BUDGETING

How Value Systems Affect Viewpoints

Overcoming political polarization with moral psychology

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Fairness is elemental to the role of the public finance officer. In today's political environment, it is impossible to discuss fairness without discussing political polarization. This article introduces the field of "moral psychology" to explain how people of different political persuasions see the world differently. When the finance officer understands differences in underlying value systems, it is easier to navigate the conflicts posed by political polarization.

Moral Psychology

How we decide what is just and fair is rooted in moral thinking. Different opinions on justice and fairness can stem from different values and how those values are applied. A leading theory in moral psychology is Moral Foundations Theory. This framework asserts that all people have the same six moral foundations (building blocks from which they form their

moral worldview). We all have access to these foundations, but we build upon them in personalized ways and to different degrees, ultimately developing our personal moral values and viewpoints.

The theory puts forth six foundations of morality:

- 1 | CARE/HARM:** We've evolved to feel (and dislike) the pain of others, leading to virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.
- 2 | FAIRNESS/CHEATING:** Stemming from reciprocal altruism, we value justice, rights, and autonomy, expressed as the pursuit of equality and/or proportionality.
- 3 | LOYALTY/BETRAYAL (IN-GROUP):** Due to our history of grouping with other people for safety and shared goals, we value the idea of being a loyal member of groups, explaining affinity for patriotism and self-sacrifice in favor of groups.

- 4 | AUTHORITY/SUBVERSION:** Humans have always had hierarchies, like other primates, resulting in a preference in favor of respect for authority, leadership/followership, and respecting traditions.

- 5 | SANCTITY/DEGRADATION:** From the psychology of disgust and contamination, these concerns evolved into religions, the idea that the body is a temple (and can be desecrated), and ways of striving to be elevated above our animal nature.

- 6 | LIBERTY/OPPRESSION:** We dislike when we, or others, are restricted or dominated by bullies or authority figures, causing us to oppose oppression in solidarity with other people.

While we all share the same moral foundations, people value and apply these foundations in different ways and to different degrees. Research shows that political liberals and political conservatives tend to

prioritize different sets of moral foundations. Political liberals tend to prioritize care, fairness, and liberty more than the other values. Conservatives tend to apply more consistent weights to each dimension, but rate loyalty, authority, and sanctity as more important than liberals do.^{1,2} We can see this in the following graphic. You can explore your own moral foundations at the Your Morals website, moralfoundations.org.

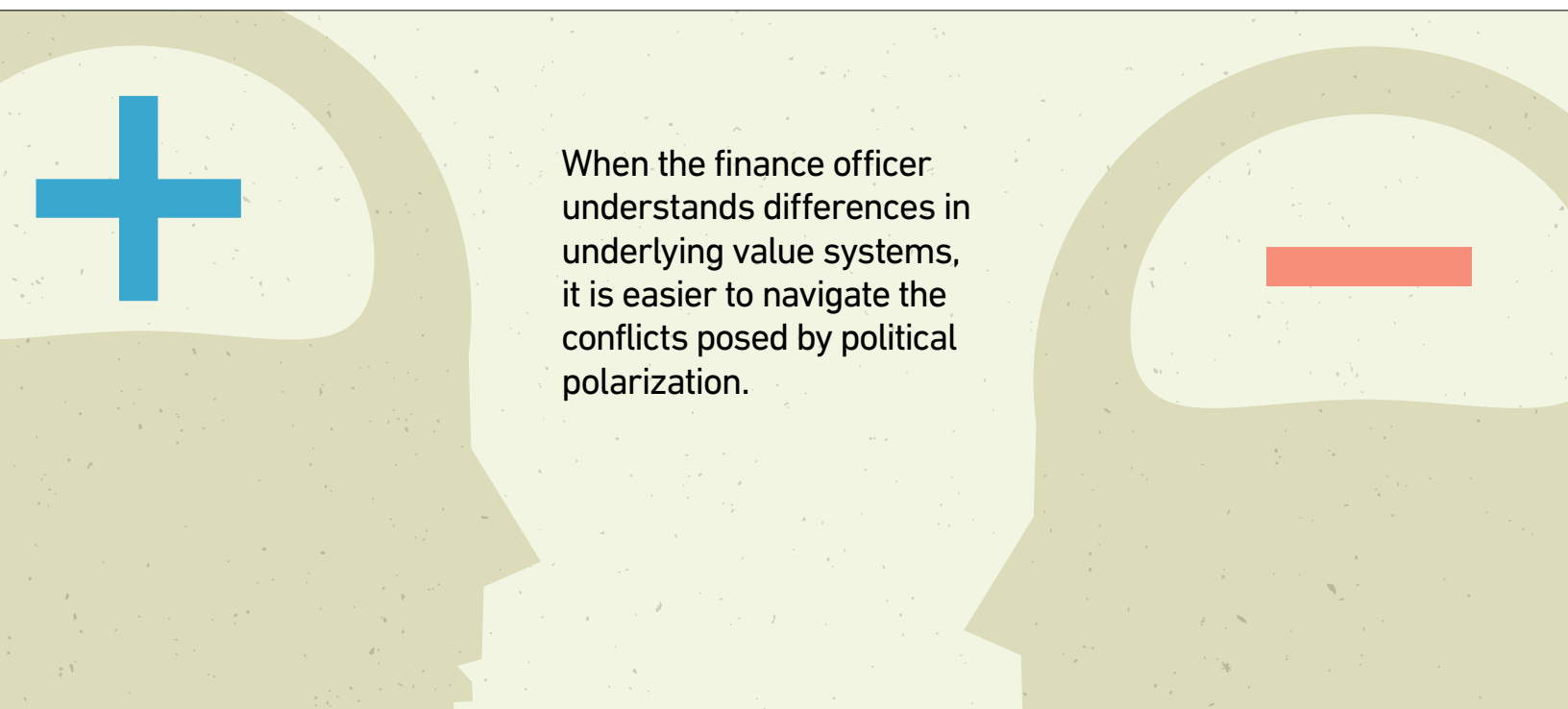
Not only do political liberals and political conservatives tend to prioritize different foundations, but they also apply the foundations in different ways. For example, liberals and conservatives both care about fairness yet interpret it differently. Those on the political left tend to think about fairness in terms of equality: Everyone should have equal outcomes. This interpretation of fairness is the root of prioritizing “equity.” It reflects an interpretation of fairness that relies heavily on care. In contrast, those on the political right tend to think about fairness in terms of proportionality: People should reap benefits in

proportion to their contribution. This interpretation relies more on purity (among other foundations); personal responsibility is noble, and leeching off of others is immoral. These two models of fairness arrive at vastly different conclusions despite a shared interest in fairness (as defined by the individual).

Differences in how people view issues of justice and fairness can often be traced back to differences in how they weight the moral foundations. For example, the concept of “equity” as a definition of fairness has received a lot of attention recently. Equity sits at the intersection of the “care” and “fairness” values. This translates into policy prescriptions like providing services that do more than meet basic needs, regardless of the individual’s role in earning this care, and like equalizing the quality of outcomes, not just the equality of opportunity. Equity, as a definition of fairness, seems to have gained more traction in large cities—places where liberal values predominate (who weight care and fairness heavily).

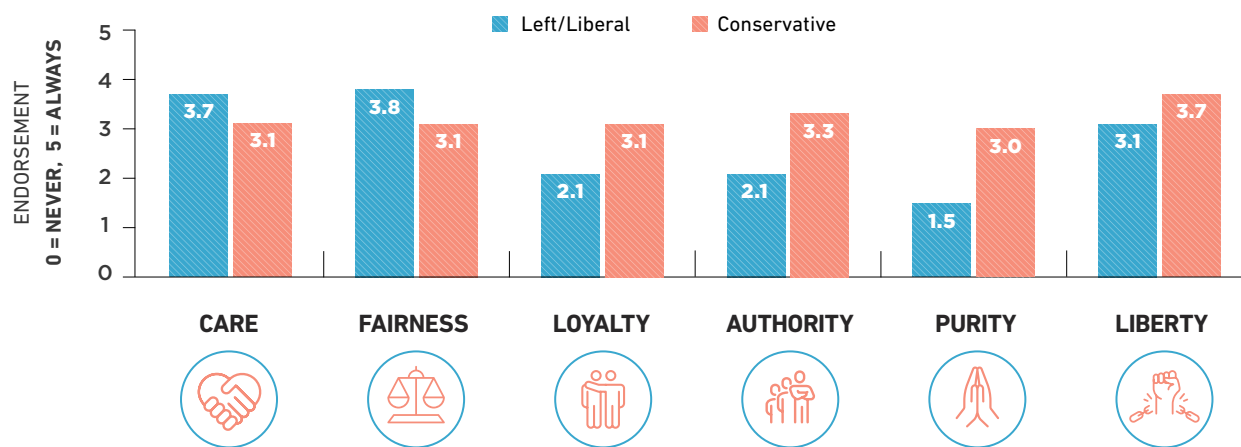
In another example, let’s consider the case of policing, which has been high in the public consciousness since the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. There was broad agreement at the time that the actions of Officer Derek Chauvin were unacceptable*—his actions violated moral standards for care and fairness for how citizens should be treated by police. The duration and severity of the restraint, and the death of the victim, likely violated the care/harm standards of most people regardless of politics. Because liberals place more emphasis on care/fairness and less on loyalty to and authority of the police, they were more likely to judge police as a whole for these actions. Conservatives were more likely to think of Chauvin as a bad apple while still supporting the police.

Moral foundations can also be more nuanced. For example, someone can support authority without supporting the police if they do not view the police force as a legitimate source of authority.³ Those who oppose police funding may share the value of providing safety to everyone equally, but



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MORAL FOUNDATIONS BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION



they may not believe that the police provide this protection, or they may believe that the budget used on policing could be better spent elsewhere. This objection may be based on unequal treatment or endangerment on the basis of race or a belief that the police are oppressive or ineffective.

A key point of moral foundations is that nearly everyone, regardless of their moral values, is in their own mind supporting the things they believe are good. Even extreme rhetoric such as “eat the rich” and “welfare makes people lazy” are viewed by those speaking as part of making the world a better place. Redistributing wealth, using the power of the state, is seen by those who support it as a just means to increasing living conditions. Ending social welfare programs, despite removing a safety net, is believed to improve lives by reducing dependence.

So, what can we do with this information on moral foundations in practice? This knowledge makes it easier to respond empathetically, and persuasively, to differing opinions. One way to do this is to use the technique of moral reframing or

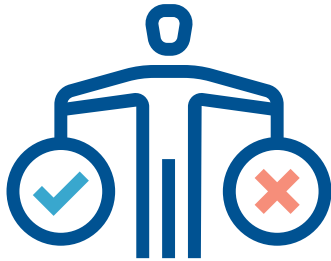
tailoring the message to the moral foundation(s) of most salience to persons or groups across the political spectrum.^{4,5}

Imagine a scenario where an equity-based proposal (grounded in caring and fairness) for investing in libraries for poor communities is opposed by some citizens because they don't want to pay for it or they don't need/want the benefit. If we assume that those in opposition are conservative, then we can also attempt to frame the value of this program in terms of a conservative value such as loyalty. The library program could be described as loyalty to United States citizens, honoring the commitment of the founding fathers to make the pursuit of happiness accessible to all as an inalienable right. Examples to support this would include proving the lack of internet access, educational materials, or study environments in poorer areas.

What about an example with the politics reversed? Imagine that a government is considering the expansion of concealed carry permits for weapons (grounded in the sanctity of constitutional rights, caring, and liberty). Opponents likely invoke caring, as the different sides of this

argument disagree which policy keeps people most safe. Attempting to persuade on caring will lead to an endless fight over which side has better proof (such as lives taken by guns versus lives saved by guns). Carrying a gun is typically thought of as empowering the individual but a risk to others. Despite this, appealing to a liberal opponent on equality can be very successful. A familiar argument here is that guns equalize individuals of differing physical abilities. Examples of how this supports equality include preventing sexual assaults (mostly against women), providing protection for targets of violence (like LGBTQ people, immigrants, activists), and reducing risks for people living in high-crime areas.

In daily work, government finance officers can use this information about moral psychology to understand the moral foundations that inform people's thinking. One potential source of optimism is that the moral foundation of care seems to be the most universally embraced, suggesting that people share the same goal of improving the human condition.^{6,7}



Focus on Fairness

Moral Foundations Theory shows us that both liberals and conservatives value fairness but weight it differently relative to other values. Liberals and conservatives also define fairness differently.

Summary and Actions to Take

How we decide what is just and fair is rooted in moral thinking. Different opinions on justice and fairness can stem from different values and how those values are applied. A leading theory on moral psychology is Moral Foundations Theory. The theory puts forth six foundations of morality. You can use the foundations to better understand how people view issues of justice and fairness.

- ➔ If a debate or dispute seems divisive and unproductive, broaden the frame to include other benefits that appeal to people with different moral foundations.
- ➔ Invoke care for the community as an overarching goal. Look for opportunities to foster that sense of community in discussions, regardless of differences over which opportunities are most important.
- ➔ Ask questions and seek to understand the values of others before embarking on any negotiation or persuasion effort. Ask open-ended questions. Do not make assumptions about people's beliefs and values—they may not be what you expect. Remember that most people are pursuing ideas that they view as just, according to the weights they place on the moral values we described.

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¹ Graham, J.; Haidt, J.; Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(5), 1029–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141>

² Haidt, J.; Graham, J. (2007) When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research*. 20:98–116. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4858184/#R22>

³ Beal, Bree (March 1, 2020). What are the irreducible basic elements of morality? A critique of the debate over monism and pluralism in moral psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(2), 273–290. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691619867106>

⁴ Feinberg, Matthew; Willer, Robb (December 9, 2019). Moral reframing: A technique for effective and persuasive communication across political divides. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 13(12), e12501. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/spc3.12501>

⁵ Day, Martin V.; Fiske, Susan T.; Downing, Emily L.; Trail, Thomas E. (October 6, 2014). Shifting liberal and conservative attitudes using moral foundations theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167214551152>

⁶ Isler, Ozan; Yilmaz, Onurcan; Doğruyol, Burak (January 2021). Are we at all liberal at heart? High-powered tests find no effect of intuitive thinking on moral foundations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 92, 104050. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104050>

⁷ Kivikangas, J. M.; Fernández-Castilla, B.; Järvelä, S.; Ravaja, N.; Lönnqvist, J.-E. (2021). Moral foundations and political orientation: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(1), 55–94. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000308>

Fairness is essential to a well-functioning public finance system. Fairness is recognized as essential by the GFOA's Code of Ethics and Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities. However, fairness is a multi-faceted and nuanced concept. This means fairness can be difficult to achieve. To help, GFOA has teamed up with EthicalSystems.org to explore the most important elements of fairness and provide practical strategies for enhancing fairness in public finance.

Check out all the resources in this series at gfoa.org/fairness.

