Resolving the Progressive Paradox with Professor Robb Willer

ACADEMICS WEIGH IN:
POLITICS, POLLS, & PROGRESS

Robb Willer
Professor
Stanford University
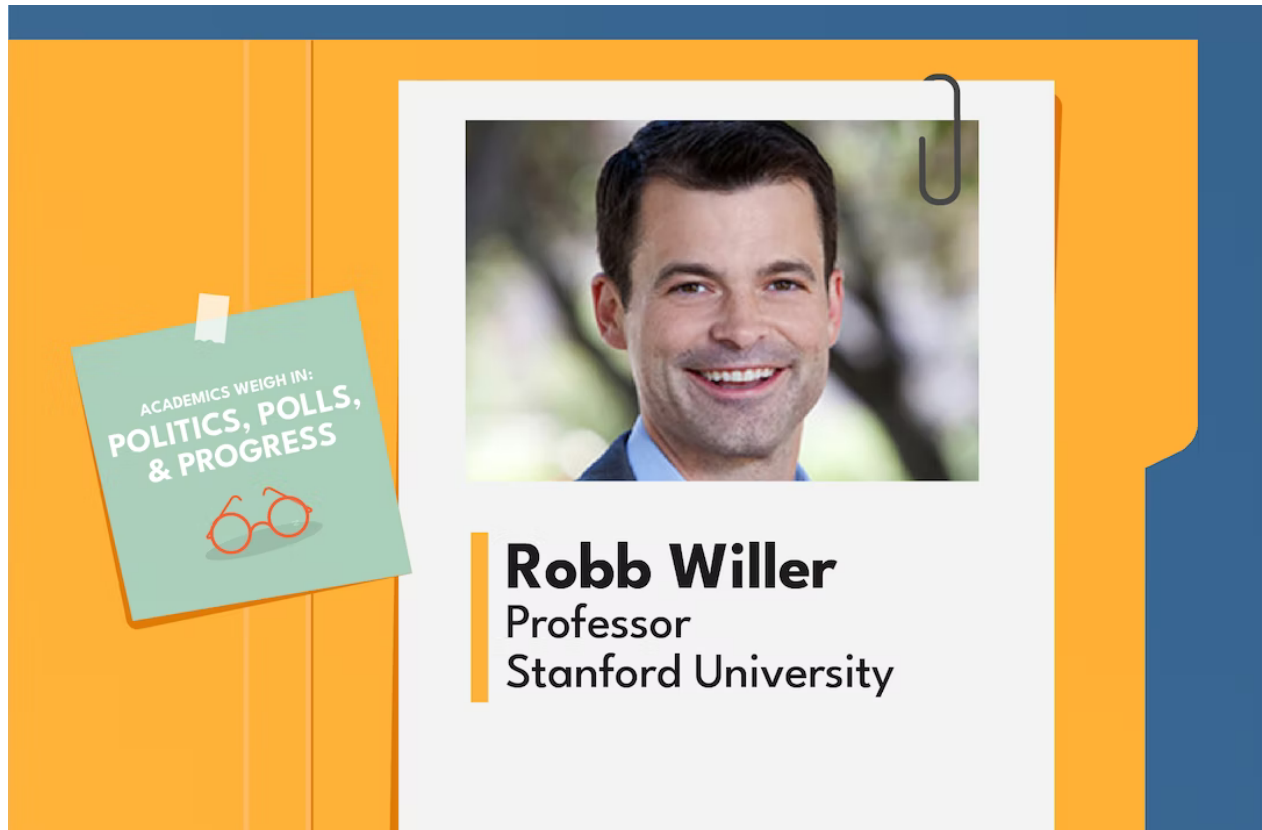
Aliza Astrow
Senior Political Analyst
@aliza__astrow

Throughout the discussion of the Build Back Better agenda, Democrats have showcased polling showing high levels of support for their policies, from raising the minimum wage to expanding health care access, to child care subsidies. This polling has also generated pushback from people who say that while these individual provisions may be popular, in the real world of politics, it is not that simple as candidates who run on these policies do not always perform well.

Professor Robb Willer addresses this conflict in his new paper, "Resolving the Progressive Paradox: Conservative Value Framing of Progressive Economic Policies Increases Candidate Support," coauthored with Jan G. Voelkel. This research studies how progressive candidates can use conservative value frames to increase support for progressive policies among moderate and conservative voters. It hypothesizes that persuasion requires progressives to understand and speak to drastically different value sets from their own.

What follows is an interview with Professor Robb Willer on his new research on political persuasion through moral value framing. This is part of a Third Way interview series with academics doing important new research that can help us better understand this political moment and bring relevant academic work into the political and policy sphere.

Can you tell me a little about yourself and your academic focus?

Sure, absolutely. I'm Robb Willer and I'm a sociologist and a social psychologist at Stanford University, and among other things, I direct the polarization and social change lab here at Stanford. Our research focuses on a number of aspects of political behavior and public opinion. I especially focus on ways to effectively intervene to create political consensus despite deep divisions in the larger American public.

In your mind, what was missing in the research and the academic literature when it comes to political messaging research?

There is a lot of research on message framing and political persuasion, political communication. What's been distinctive about the work that my lab has done is that we use a Moral Foundations Theory approach to our work. Moral Foundations Theory is a theory of the bases of people's moral intuitions and reasoning. And one of the big insights from the theory is that people with different political ideologies in the US tend to hold different moral values to different degrees. And that this can get in the way when people go to communicate persuasively about politics, because people have a tendency to make arguments in terms of their own moral values, which are their reasons for holding their political positions. But those arguments are not necessarily going to be the most persuasive arguments or appeals when they're communicated to people with very different moral values.

An example of this would be liberals tend to care a lot about issues of equality, protecting vulnerable groups from harm. Conservatives care to some extent about those things, but often care more about things like group loyalty, patriotism, religious purity, and sanctity, respect for authority, respect for tradition, and so on. And so, when liberals are making arguments in terms of equality to people who care more about patriotism and religion, often there's a missed opportunity for persuasion and the appeals fall on deaf ears.

And what we find is that, for example, if you were to make an argument in support of same sex marriage in terms of patriotism, emphasizing how gay Americans are proud, patriotic Americans who contribute to larger society in important ways and have friends and families and homes and jobs, the same as all other Americans, that those sorts of appeals resonate more with conservatives than arguments in terms of equal rights, even though the latter are more likely to be the reasons that liberals support same sex marriage. These kinds of appeals are not intuitive to people and it can

be helpful to explain how to make them and to do research documenting the ways to do it most effectively.

To get into the meat of the research a little bit, what was your overall finding? Does this more conservative value framing help get people on board with more progressive policies?

Over the last decade, we've run lots of studies on topics ranging from same sex marriage, to national health insurance, to support for economically progressive political candidates, to support for more open immigration policies, and pretty consistently find support for moral reframing. We tend to find this pattern where if you make a credible argument for why a left-leaning or progressive policy position fits with values that are more commonly held by conservatives, that appeal will increase support for the political position among conservatives without loss of support amongst liberals or progressives. We also find an increase in support among moderates, though that is less consistent.

So for this particular paper, the puzzle that we were interested in working on is something we call the progressive paradox, which is a pattern that we observe where progressive economic policies tend to be pretty popular in the general public; things like raising minimum wage or expanding access to healthcare, tend to poll as quite popular, but then economically progressive candidates that are most enthusiastic in their support for these policies don't tend to do very well in national elections traditionally.

And so that was the paradox we wanted to try to answer. We were interested in whether moral reframing could offer a way to intervene on this. The logic here would be that while more progressive politicians tend to hold these economically progressive policies that are really popular, they also tend to use moral values that don't expand support for those policies and their candidacies beyond the base. What we did was we ran a couple of experiments where we had an economically progressive candidate argue in support of their policy platform in terms of values that resonate more among conservatives. Values like patriotism, tradition, respect for elders, and respect for cultural traditions in the US. And also respect for the dignity of hard work, we found that those kinds of appeals tended to resonate more with American conservatives and increase support for an economically progressive candidate.

I think a lot of progressive folks would say that these conservative frames around hard work and things like that would create backlash with more progressive voters. It sounds like you all didn't find that to be the case, so I'm wondering why you think that is.

So, I'll just elaborate a little bit on my prior answer. For example, if a Democrat presidential candidate in 2020 with a progressive economic platform spoke in terms of the values that resonated more with conservatives than speaking exclusively in terms of values that resonate most with liberals and progressives, we found that the candidate who used what we call moral reframing tended to win more support amongst conservatives and moderates without losing support amongst their liberal and progressive base, and thus increased overall levels of support pretty substantially. And an example of the kind of rhetoric that I'm talking about, we gave materials to participants in our studies wherein this presidential candidate would say things like, "my vision for America is based on respect for the values and traditions that were handed down to us, hard work, loyalty to our country, and the freedom to forge our own path. I believe we must fight to restore the American dream. I think that if you work hard and devote yourself to your family and community, you deserve a chance at prosperity."

It used a lot of American dream rhetoric, a lot of valorizations of the American work ethic and important cultural traditions in the US, but tying those to progressive economic policies, explicitly making the link. This is an approach to persuasion that you might think would elicit backlash, with the base saying, "I like those policies, but that's not the value rhetoric that resonates most with me." And we actually didn't find significant fall off amongst the base, amongst even the most liberal or progressive participants in our studies.

We think that this fits with a larger pattern of data that we've seen in other persuasion studies where using this moral reframing for whatever reason, people that are already on board for the policy or issue position, tend to not reduce their support when they hear it articulated in terms of new values. And I think that's because there is a population of Americans who might be put off by rhetoric about hard work or American traditions, but it's very, very small. And then the extent to which they're put off is really attenuated by the fact that this is a policy position they really support.

Interesting. You also said that this conservative framing had benefits with moderate voters too, although less. Do you think that a lot of moderate voters hold these more conservative cultural values too? Why do you think that it showed benefits with moderate voters too?

I think it's because these specific values that we sought to evoke like the American dream and respect for traditions and love of family and community, these are associated with contemporary American conservatism and indeed conservative politicians have owned a lot of this rhetoric. But these are really popular values and this kind of rhetoric is very, very popular. Like if you went out and polled Americans on how much you care about your family or do you love America? Or do you value certain cultural traditions? If you went out and polled these things, they would poll with supermajorities of support. They resonate most of all among conservatives, but also among moderates and also among many liberals.

Evoking equality, social justice, those considerations, you go out and poll those and they're not as popular. And that puts a challenging choice to progressive leaders. How much do you tack towards more popular rhetoric that maybe isn't exactly in terms of the values that you most deeply hold, but is more popular and more likely to get you elected? And this research doesn't say anything about that decision. It just says, here's the data, understand the trade-offs involved, and make the choices you're going to make. But we couldn't in a study tell progressive leaders how they should talk, because it's a moral question.

That reminds me of a lot of David Shor's research in the way he advises Democratic candidates. He probably would advise Democratic candidates to use this kind of more popular messaging. And a point that he makes a lot is that the people who work in Democratic politics are very different from most voters, including the Democratic base. We hold very different values.

One thing I would tack onto that is that, that's not unique to the people involved in Democratic politics. I mean, yes, the people involved in Democratic politics tend to be very, very left of center and may struggle to take the perspective of people who have a really different political background and beliefs and values from them. But that's something everybody struggles with. We've done studies asking people to make persuasive arguments that would resonate with people on the other side. We've had conservatives do this, we've had liberals do this, and overwhelmingly people make arguments in terms of their own values, their own moral system.

So, I agree with the point that people on the inside of Democratic politics, they do tend to think first about their own reasons for supporting Democrats, not necessarily about what would be the most persuasive appeal for somebody who hasn't yet joined their side or joined their coalition. But in doing that, they are just like everybody else, who thinks of their own arguments first.

I would add one other thing which is that, again, our research doesn't make that moral or normative, we don't take positions on what somebody ought to do, we just try to provide research on the effectiveness of different approaches at least by this metric. There's a whole other approach, which says you take certain kinds of moral positions that may be unpopular and you try to make the case for them and you play a longer game. And that if you always get into the cycle of just saying the thing that will get you elected, that impedes long term change.

But I would say that even if one takes that different approach of sticking with less popular moral positions, you need to have a plan for winning the long game too, of like, how are you going to affect large scale shifts in what people value and the values people bring to their politics? And there,

again, it's helpful to understand the moral backgrounds of the people you're trying to persuade, that you're trying to move in the long term, and think of ways to make your moral and political project legible to them, given their backgrounds, interests, and values.

Absolutely. Did you look at race breaks on this as well? Because I would imagine that with a lot of Black and Latino voters, these sorts of family-centric, conservative-based appeals would be very appealing as well?

Yeah. The big thing that we find matters in terms of how much these appeals resonate is people's self-reported political ideology. These appeals don't move people that are really liberal. They are somewhat persuasive to moderates. And then they're quite persuasive with conservatives. And so that's the thing that we find conditions people's response. My answer would be that, at least in our research, the extent to which Black or Latino respondents identified as moderate or conservative indicated the extent to which they would show this effect.

I'm really curious, and this probably isn't within the bounds of your study, but how this works on social policies too. Like if a pro-choice candidate appealed to conservative values, if that would be effective at mitigating some of the attacks on social issues that Democrats face, or if this only really works for the economic policies, because progressive economic policies are more popular.

I think that our evidence suggests that this would work for increasing support for liberal and progressive social policies as well. We've not studied it as much in a candidate context, we've tended to just study it in terms of support for those policies. But that's been defined in a pretty consistent way. That if you talk in these terms, you'll increase support for a more permissive or a more open immigration policy, you'll increase support for same sex marriage. One canvasing study that used moral reframing that was conducted by Josh Kalla, David Broockman, and Adam Seth Levine. They found that when canvassers used moral reframing, they were able to make abortion attitudes more progressive among the people that they were canvassing, compared to when they did not use this technique. So, there is some evidence for this on social policies. It's not exactly been studied in a candidate context, but it would be weird if it didn't work in that context as well.

That was what I imagined. Another question I wanted to ask was about your technical frame; your study used a technical frame too. I was interested in that because, I'm a college educated white liberal, and I gravitate a lot towards candidates who make technocratic appeals. I don't know if you followed the New York city mayoral race very

closely, but there was this candidate, Kathryn Garcia, that really was very technocratic and had a lot of experience in government and framed her candidacy around competence. I really liked that, but I can check myself and realize that it's a very specific kind of person who likes those sorts of appeals. So, I'm curious what you found in terms of support for the technical type of argument.

Yes. These results were really interesting in part because they were counterintuitive to us. We made another candidate who spoke in these technocratic ways, and we based it on an op-ed by Tim Kaine. And it said things like "my vision for America is to restore the unique levels of productivity that we have lost. The American economy was once a success story, but as of last year, our gross domestic product per capita was 11th place in world, now we need economic growth and good paying jobs." It was a lot of just raw statistics and economic metrics and making cases like smart technocratic policy. It didn't have those guts and emotion of a morally evocative appeal. And our instinct was that because it did not have that moral content, it would not resonate very much.

We were surprised to see that it performed as well as this value-based rhetoric. We're still planning follow up studies to fully assess that. But one thing that's interesting is that when we asked people how much they felt like they were morally similar to the candidate, the technocratic frame moved that perception just as much as the moral rhetoric design did. I think a takeaway here is that moderate and conservative Americans may moralize economic growth and jobs from just hearing leaders they respect intone these things so repeatedly over the years. Even hearing Democrats intone these things as well as Republicans, it may have built a moral consensus around these things that might on their face not look very moral, but they may land that way for a lot of Americans. So that was a counterintuitive finding.

I also wanted to ask about the policies that you all chose to look at specifically. Obviously, you had to make choices about what policies to include. I imagine that some progressive policies might be harder to work into this kind of framing than others. There's a debate right now around eliminating student debt. And that whole idea is very based in compassion and economic justice and a fairness mindset. And you could change the way you frame that, around more conservative values like opportunity. But it might be harder because the idea is so based in certain liberal values. So, do you think that there's some progressive policies for which this would be harder to do than others?

Yeah. We did study this with the Child Tax Credit and we found some evidence that this increased support, but we did not find that it was the intuitive persuasive appeal that would most increase support. Conservative framing worked some with the Child Tax Credit, but not a lot and it wasn't the optimal message that we looked at.

On student debt cancellation, definitely think that would be tough for sure. I think that because it's a policy that's so anathema to so many conservatives in terms of their values of self-sufficiency and self-reliance and small government and it's a tough one to sell to conservatives for sure. But I could imagine making some appeal in terms of this being good for the country and runaway debt being at odds with important cultural traditions that say that access to school should be affordable, so you can pursue the American dream. I think there's a way to make an argument, but it would be an empirical question how it would land.

Looks like our time is up. Thank you so much for chatting with me today.

Thank you.