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Pauls, Inga L.; Shuman, Eric; van Zomeren, Martijn; Saguy, Tamar; Halperin, Eran

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Does crossing a moral line justify collective means? Explaining how a perceived moral violation triggers normative and nonnormative forms of collective action

Inga L. Pauls<sup>1,2</sup>  | Eric Shuman<sup>3,4</sup>  | Martijn van Zomeren<sup>4</sup> | Tamar Saguy<sup>5</sup> | Eran Halperin<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philipps-University Marburg, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Technical University Berlin, Germany

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

<sup>4</sup> University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

<sup>5</sup> Reichman University (IDC Herzliya), Herzliya, Israel

## Correspondence

Inga L. Pauls, Philipps-University Marburg, Gutenbergstraße 18, 35037 Marburg, Germany.

Email: [inga.pauls@uni-marburg.de](mailto:inga.pauls@uni-marburg.de)

Inga L. Pauls and Eric Shuman contributed equally and order was determined alphabetically.

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## Abstract

In three studies conducted in the United States, we examined whether a perceived moral violation motivates willingness to engage in normative and more radical collective action. Using value-protection and identity-formation models, we explored whether increased endorsement of moral convictions and relevant opinion-based group identification could explain such effects. Study 1, using the “travel ban” for Muslims as the focal issue, experimentally found that a strong violation, compared to a weak violation, increased normative and nonnormative collective action, moral convictions and opinion-based group identification. Study 2 replicated these results in a longitudinal design and supported a mediating effect of increased endorsement of moral convictions and opinion-based group identity. Study 3 used a real-world violation (the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris climate agreements) to replicate the findings cross-sectionally. We conclude that a perceived moral violation motivates normative and nonnormative collective action because the violation makes one’s moral conviction and opinion-based group identification more salient.

## KEYWORDS

moral conviction, moral violation, nonnormative collective action, normative collective action, value protection

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Violated morals can be a powerful trigger for motivating participation in collective action to achieve social change. For example, in January 2017, US citizens took to the streets after President Trump signed an executive order that banned people from several Muslim countries from entering the United States. The aftermath of outcries of outrage made it clear that many felt a moral line was crossed. Indeed, Muslims as well as non-Muslims joined in protests defending the moral principle

that no one should be discriminated on the basis of their religion. This exemplifies the idea we test in the current article—that a sense of violated morals can be the trigger to motivate action in defense of one’s morals or solidarity-based collective action on behalf of disadvantaged groups in society. Collective action is typically defined as action that individuals undertake as group members with the aim to achieve group goals (Wright et al., 1990). However, as is also clear from this example and recent work on opinion-based groups, sometimes people engage in collective action in solidarity with others, or because they want to

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protect morals shared by a so-called opinion-based group (or community of believers; van Zomeren et al., 2011).

Surprisingly, research has often assumed but not tested empirically such a mobilizing effect of a perceived moral violation. We define a perceived moral violation as an act directly at odds with a person's moralized conviction that disrupts the perceived non-negotiable truth behind the conviction. Whereas moral convictions (i.e., one's attitude on an issue reflecting one's core moral values and beliefs; Skitka, 2010) have been linked to collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2012), their violation has not explicitly been studied. While this research tells us that individuals with stronger moral convictions are generally more likely to act, it does not indicate what events might act as a trigger, driving people to collective action. Some past research has found perceived violation of rights to be linked to collective action in a correlational design (Mazzoni et al., 2015), but such correlations do not indicate whether a perceived violation can be a causal trigger to action.

The current article aims to systematically test the idea that such *perceived violation* acts as a *trigger* for a broader value protection process that results in collective action (which may materialize as a need to change the reality to conform to one's values; Tetlock et al., 2000). We suggest that while moral convictions offer the potential for a person to proactively engage in collective action (e.g., through their motivation to promote their convictions), the violation of moral conviction can trigger a reactive motivation to act (which we will refer to as the *violation hypothesis*). As an extension of this hypothesis, we investigated the effects of such a trigger on normative and nonnormative action. The strong imperative to act created by a perceived moral violation may lead people to disregard societal norms and thus motivate nonnormative collective action, as well as more normative action (e.g., vigilantism; see Skitka & Houston, 2001; see also Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Zaal et al., 2011). This is because they should believe that their moral ends (defending the violated conviction) justify their means (Skitka & Mullen, 2002), and hence we will refer to this extension of our main hypothesis as the *ends justify the means hypothesis*.

We report systematic tests of these hypotheses in three studies in the context of US politics, featuring a combination of experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal designs. In these studies, we either experimentally manipulated the presence of a strong versus weak perceived moral violation (Studies 1 and 2) or exposed participants to a real-world moral violation (Study 3), and then measured participants' motivation for different forms of collective action. In addition, and based on value-protection and identity-formation models of collective action (discussed in more detail in the discussion of Study 1), we explored the role of increased endorsement of *moral convictions* and *opinion-based group identity* as potential mechanisms for the effects of perceived moral violation in Study 1. Then Studies 2 and 3 were aimed to provide a confirmatory test of the hypothesis that the effect of perceived moral violation on action was driven by increased endorsement of the conviction, and the relevant opinion-based group identity (or community of believers).

## 1.1 | Perceived moral violations instigate value protection processes

A number of theories argue that when values that people see as moral or sacred are violated, and thus a moral line is crossed, a psychological process of value protection is triggered (see Durkheim, 1925; Skitka, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000). The underlying logic of these value protection models rests on the idea that thinking about, experiencing, or witnessing a violation of a moral value or standard should be threatening to people's sense of who they are and what they stand for. People then cope with this threat via value protection processes: actively trying to reaffirm their core values (moral cleansing), and/or through seeking change in the social world around them (moral outrage, see Tetlock et al., 2000). Thus, a perceived moral violation could trigger collective action in defense of the violated moral conviction.

We focus specifically on violations of moral convictions because of their recent integration in social psychological models of collective action (Van Zomeren, 2016), and because they reflect the extent to which a specific attitude is based on an individual's core moral values and beliefs (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Morgan, 2014). As such, moral convictions are conceptually similar to sacred values, which are seen as absolute and non-negotiable (Tetlock et al., 2000). Those who hold strong moral convictions are more likely to engage in action because moral convictions are characterized by a number of unique features (Skitka, 2010). First, they are perceived as objective and thus as non-negotiable truths. This imbues moral convictions with the potential to be strong motivators for emotional and behavioral responses in line with said convictions. Secondly, they are perceived as universal, meaning people believe their convictions apply to everyone, everywhere, at any time. As such, moral convictions render those who hold them more intolerant towards deviating views, in both social and political contexts (Skitka & Morgan, 2014). While these characteristics imbue moral convictions with the potential to drive action, so far research has not explained what activates this potential and triggers people to act.

## 1.2 | The moral violation hypothesis

We hypothesize that perceived moral violations are potent triggers for people to defend their moral convictions in the form of normative collective action (the *moral violation hypothesis*). This hypothesis is rooted in value protection models adopted from theories on sacred values, which suggest that a violation of moral values will trigger defensive action. As people hold a "zero-tolerance" policy regarding deviations from the content of their convictions (Skitka, 2010), when this content is violated people should engage in value protection manifesting in collective action (Tetlock, 2002). In line with this view, empirical work has provided correlational evidence that perceived rights violations (e.g., the human right to safety) predicted collective action intentions (Kutlaca et al., 2019; Mazzoni et al., 2015). Surprisingly, however, this hypothesis has not been tested experimentally or longitudinally to

date, and thus it remains unclear whether the perceived moral violation is indeed the trigger that leads people to act collectively upon their moral convictions. Our research addresses this gap by experimentally inducing a perceived moral violation in order to disentangle its effects from moral convictions.

### 1.3 | The ends justify the means hypothesis

We extend this original hypothesis to state that a perceived moral violation motivates action even if this involves more radical, nonnormative collective action (the *ends justify the means hypothesis*). Normative action is defined as action that conforms to the norms of the dominant social system, which could include laws and regulations, whereas nonnormative action violates these norms and rules and goes beyond the 'acceptable' or 'legal' (Wright et al., 1990). However, as this definition refers to the prescriptive norms of the dominant social system, it may not be shared by everyone particularly those engaging in action. Specifically, moral convictions provide a mindset where people are less concerned with the means used to achieve the moral goal, while the perceived moral violation triggers the action to achieve the goal—even through less normative means, if necessary. Thus, a violation of a moral conviction may lead people to be less concerned with whether a type of action is generally considered normative or nonnormative.

This is in line with Skitka and Mullen's (2002) argument that moral convictions can justify *any* means—and thus any form of action—that lead to the desired outcome as the goal becomes so strong that the means of how the goal is pursued become secondary. For example, Skitka and Houston (2001) found that when thinking in terms of moral mandates, people judged a punishment of a guilty defendant as equally fair, regardless of whether the punishment was achieved through a fair (court decision) or unfair (vigilantism) procedure. Similarly, Zaal and colleagues (2011) argue that when the achievement of a moral goal is seen as necessary, how the goal is achieved does not matter as holding moral convictions should override normative objections towards nonnormative forms of action. While previous research on nonnormative collective action focused on different processes behind this form of action in comparison to normative action (Shuman et al., 2016; Tausch et al., 2011), we argue that the same trigger—perceived moral violation—can motivate both normative collective action and more radical collective action.

### 1.4 | Overview of the current studies

We tested our two hypotheses in three studies in the context of US politics. In these studies, we either experimentally manipulated the presence of a perceived moral violation (Studies 1 and 2) or exposed participants to a real-world moral violation (Study 3), and then measured participants' motivation for different forms of collective action. In Studies 2 and 3, we used a longitudinal measure of moral convictions to bet-

ter disentangle the effects of moral violation and moral convictions. In Study 1, we also explored potential mechanisms for the hypothesized effects, namely post-violation moral convictions and opinion-based group identification (i.e., identification with a group formed around opinions; Bliuc et al., 2007), and then conducted confirmatory tests of these mechanisms in Studies 2 and 3.

## 2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 made use of the uncertainty in the days following the inauguration of President Trump in January 2017. During the campaign, Trump had expressed support for extreme policies, for example, forcing all Muslim citizens to register with the government. However, in the period between his election and inauguration, Trump appeared to make statements walking back some of his earlier, more radical positions. Thus, in the days following his inauguration, it was unclear what kind of policies President Trump would pursue: those he expressed as a fire-brand candidate or those he expressed as a more moderate President-elect (Blake, 2016). We took advantage of this uncertainty to credibly manipulate the presence of a perceived moral violation in the form of a policy forcing Muslim citizens to register.

We aimed to provide experimental evidence for our main hypotheses: first, that a strong perceived moral violation would trigger increased support for collective action (the moral violation hypothesis), and second, that this increased support would apply to all forms of collective action (the ends justify the means hypothesis). To test our ends justify the means hypothesis more fully, we examined support for three types of collective action: nonviolent normative action, referring to any action that is within socially accepted and legal norms of society (hereafter referred to as *normative* action), nonviolent nonnormative action, referring to forms of action that are not societally normative but also not violent (hereafter *nonnormative* action; see Shuman et al., 2020), and violent nonnormative action, referring to action that is not societally nonnormative and violent (hereafter *violent* action; see Tausch et al., 2011). According to the ends justify the means hypothesis, a perceived moral violation should increase willingness to engage in all three types of action. Importantly, we are not predicting that support for each type of action would rise to be equal to one another, but rather that a strong violation increases all types of action compared to a weak violation.

In addition, we aimed to disentangle the effects of a specific perceived moral violation and people's pre-existing moral convictions about an issue on collective action. In order to not prime the specific conviction by measuring it before the manipulation of the violation, we placed our measure of moral convictions at the end of the study. We further explored whether opinion-based group identification (i.e., group identities formed around a shared, possibly political, opinion; Bliuc et al., 2007; McGarty et al., 2009) relevant to the moral conviction may be related to moral conviction and collective action as recent research has found moral convictions and identity to be at the core of motivation for action (see Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021).

## 2.1 | Method

### 2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were 182 Americans who indicated that they did not vote for Trump. Sample size was based on previous studies in which the relationship between perceived moral violation and collective action ranged from  $r = 0.16$  to  $r = 0.33$  (see Kutlaca et al., 2019; Mazzone et al., 2015). Assuming an effect size of  $d = 0.4$  ( $r = 0.2$ ), a power analysis in G\*Power indicated we would need 200 participants for 80% power. We originally aimed to have 200 participants but stopped data collection early when Trump issued the first iteration of the “Travel Ban” as it was too similar to the context in this study. The exclusion criteria of not having voted for Trump used as a rough proxy for holding moral convictions *against* discrimination on the basis of religion.<sup>1</sup> Participants were recruited via MTurk and 19 participants were excluded as they spent less than 15 s reading the manipulation article or failed two or more reading or attention checks, leaving a final sample of 163 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.26$ ,  $SD = 12.16$ , 57.7% male).

Participants were invited to participate in a study concerning memory of newspaper articles to conceal the real aim of the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the strong violation condition or the weak violation condition and asked to read an article that was meant to either strongly or weakly violate individuals' moral convictions about discrimination based on religion. In the *strong violation* condition, the article described that Trump issued an executive order to create a registry for all Muslims living in the United States, a policy that clearly targets members of a specific religious group and thus should be perceived as a violation of the relevant moral conviction. In the *weak violation* condition, the article described an executive order to create a registry for visitors to the United States on visas from countries that had experienced high levels of terror (more than 20 terror attacks in the past year). While this standard could be read as applying primarily to Muslim countries, it was less likely to be perceived as a strong violation of the relevant moral convictions as it did not mention religion or explicitly single out Muslim-majority countries.

### 2.1.2 | Measures

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

#### *Violation of moral conviction*

We measured violation of moral convictions with three items: “The policy proposed in the article is a violation of my core moral values about discrimination based on religion”, “The policy proposed in the article is a violation of my beliefs about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ about discrimination based on religion”, “The policy proposed in the article is a violation of my core moral beliefs and convictions about discrimination based on religion” ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

#### *Opinion-based group identification with those opposed to this policy*

This was measured with four items adapted from van Zomeren et al. (2011), for example, “I identify with other people who oppose this policy” ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

#### *Collective action intentions*

We measured normative nonviolent collective action with five items adapted from van Zomeren et al. (2012) (e.g., participate in a demonstration, donate money to civil rights organizations,  $\alpha = .94$ ). We measured nonnormative nonviolent collective action with six items (e.g., block a counter-demonstration, occupation of a public space), and nonnormative violent action with five items (e.g., vandalism, joining a riot), which were tailored to the context of the current study. Factor analyses supported the differentiation between the three types of action. A maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation including all items measuring collective action produced two factors. The items measuring normative collective action loaded onto one factor and the items measuring violent action loaded onto the second factor. However, the items measuring nonnormative nonviolent action were cross-loaded between the factors (for detailed list of these items, see Table 1). To some extent, this cross loading makes sense as the nonnormative nonviolent items shared one feature with the normative items (nonviolence) and one feature with the nonnormative violent items (nonnormativity). However, it could also indicate that the nonnormative nonviolent items, while typically considered nonnormative, are seen by these participants as slightly more normative. We conducted another factor analysis only of the nonnormative (both violent and nonviolent) items and found the hypothesized two-factor structure. The nonviolent items loaded onto one factor, with the exception of one item that loaded onto the second factor (“I would graffiti government offices set up to carry out this policy”). The violent items loaded onto the second factor; however, two items were cross-loaded between the factors (“I would be willing to clash with police sent to shut down a demonstration against this policy”, “I would be willing to clash with other demonstrators who are supporting this policy”). We conducted another factor analysis excluding those items and found the hypothesized factor structure (see Tables 1– and 2 for factor loadings). Therefore, we excluded these items from further analyses. Again, the same item intended to measure nonviolent action loaded onto the second factor, so we used the item for the violent action scale. This resulted in a nonnormative action scale with five items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and a violent action scale with four items ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

#### *Demographic variables*

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, including gender, age, education, ethnicity, employment, political ideology, and political party affiliation (for detailed breakdowns of all samples on demographic variables, please see the [supplementary materials](#)).

#### *Moral convictions*

Moral convictions were measured with three items adapted from Reifen-Tagar et al. (2014): “My feelings about discrimination based on

**TABLE 1** Factor analysis of all collective action items in Study 1

Items	Factors		Communalities
	Normative	Nonnormative	
<i>I would participate in a demonstration against this policy.</i>	0.83		0.78
<i>I would sign a petition that has the aim of stopping this policy.</i>	0.86		0.76
<i>I would like to do something together against this policy.</i>	0.94		0.85
<i>I would donate money to civil rights organizations engaged in legal action against this policy.</i>	0.77		0.70
<i>I would write a letter to my congressmen in order to urge them to act against this policy.</i>	0.83		0.75
<i>I would try to block a demonstration supporting this policy, for example, by blocking streets.</i>	0.63	0.57	0.81
<i>I would participate in an effort to spam the email of the department responsible for carrying out the policy in an attempt to crash their servers.</i>	0.49	0.54	0.56
<i>I would register myself because if enough normal citizens sign up it makes the registry ineffective.</i>	0.65	0.47	0.63
<i>I would participate in a sit-in to block access to offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>	0.68	0.56	0.83
<i>I would participate in disrupting politicians who support of the policy, by making noise (using whistles, etc.) to drown out their speeches.</i>	0.48	0.77	0.81
<i>I would graffiti government offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>		0.73	0.57
<i>I would be willing to harass politicians speaking in support of the policy by throwing objects at them on stage.</i>		0.78	0.64
<i>I would be willing to break windows and destroy property of government offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>		0.70	0.72
<i>I would be willing to join in a riot protesting these policies.</i>		0.68	0.68
Rotated eigenvalue	7.84	2.33	
% of explained variance	56.0%	16.6%	

**TABLE 2** Factor analysis of only nonnormative collective action items in Study 1

Items	Factors		Communalities
	Nonviolent	Violent	
<i>I would try to block a demonstration supporting this policy, for example, by blocking streets.</i>	0.88		0.77
<i>I would participate in an effort to spam the email of the department responsible for carrying out the policy in an attempt to crash their servers.</i>	0.66		0.53
<i>I would register myself because if enough normal citizens sign up it makes the registry ineffective.</i>	0.69		0.58
<i>I would participate in a sit-in to block access to offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>	0.89		0.82
<i>I would participate in disrupting politicians who support of the policy, by making noise (using whistles, etc.) to drown out their speeches.</i>	0.78	0.46	0.80
<i>I would graffiti government offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>		0.63	0.57
<i>I would be willing to harass politicians speaking in support of the policy by throwing objects at them on stage.</i>		0.66	0.63
<i>I would be willing to break windows and destroy property of government offices set up to carry out this policy.</i>		0.92	0.71
<i>I would be willing to join in a riot protesting these policies.</i>		0.76	0.68
Rotated eigenvalue	5.39	1.40	
% of explained variance	59.8%	15.6%	

Note. Factor loadings below 0.3 are not displayed.

**TABLE 3** Bivariate relationships between Study 1 variables

Condition	M (SD)		<i>d</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Weak violation ( <i>n</i> = 84)	Strong violation ( <i>n</i> = 79)						
1. Moral conviction	4.67 (1.60)	5.13 (1.45)	0.30	–				
2. Perceived violation	3.86 (1.93)	5.73 (1.62)	1.05	.53**	–			
3. Identification	4.19 (1.77)	4.96 (1.56)	0.46	.48**	.72**	–		
4. Normative CA	3.60 (1.82)	4.58 (1.69)	0.55	.53**	.74**	.84**	–	
5. Nonnormative CA	2.57 (1.52)	3.06 (1.63)	0.31	.37**	.46**	.56**	.75**	–
6. Violent CA	1.52 (0.83)	1.74 (1.18)	0.22	.12	.07	.20**	.33**	.60**

Note. All condition differences are significant except for violent collective action.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

religion are a reflection of my core moral beliefs and convictions”, “My feelings about discrimination based on religion are deeply connected to my beliefs are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’”, “The struggle against discrimination based on religion is at the core of my moral values” ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

## 2.2 | Results

### 2.2.1 | Manipulation check

We tested whether the experimental conditions differed in the extent to which they were perceived as violating moral convictions. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that the article aimed to induce a strong moral violation was indeed perceived as more of a violation than the article that was meant to induce a weak moral violation,  $t = 6.64$ ,  $p < .001$  (means and standard deviations for all variables are in Table 3).

### 2.2.2 | The moral violation and the ends justify the means hypotheses

We tested our prediction that a strong moral violation would increase support for (all forms of) collective action using independent samples *t*-tests. We found a significant effect of the condition (strong vs. weak violation) on normative collective action,  $t(161) = 3.53$ ,  $p = .001$ , and nonnormative collective action,  $t(161) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .049$ , but not on violent action,  $t(161) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .165$ . Participants in the strong violation condition were more willing to engage in normative action and nonnormative action than participants in the weak violation condition, but this was not the case for violent action.

### 2.2.3 | Disentangling moral violation and moral convictions

Surprisingly, despite the fact that moral convictions are generally thought to be stable and were measured at the very end of the study, we found a marginally significant effect of the condition on moral con-

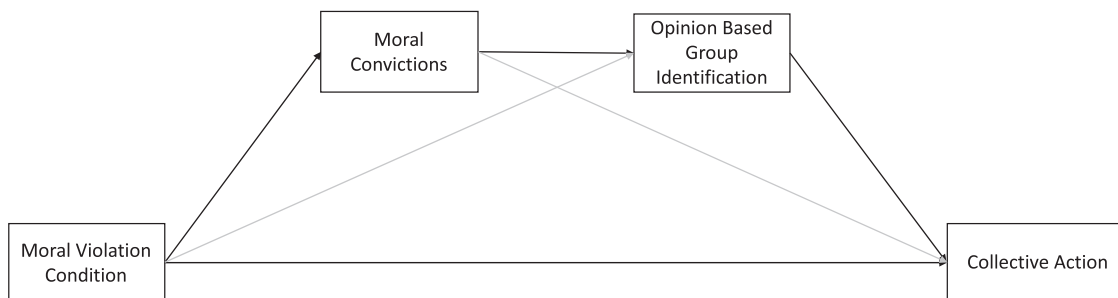
victions,  $t(161) = 1.91$ ,  $p = .058$ . Participants in the strong violation condition reported somewhat stronger moral convictions than participants in the weak violation condition. This made disentangling the effects of perceived moral violation and convictions difficult and suggested that part of the mechanism by which violation drives action might be heightening the endorsement or adherence to the violated conviction (see more discussion of this below).

### 2.2.4 | Exploring potential mechanisms

In a next step, we examined the effect of the perceived moral violation manipulation on opinion-based group identification. Participants in the strong violation condition reported higher levels of opinion-based group identification than participants in the weak violation condition,  $t(161) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .004$ . Furthermore, mediation analyses in PROCESS (model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples) indicated that opinion-based group identification mediated the effect of violation on both normative action (indirect effect = .17, 95% CI [.06, .28]) and nonnormative action ( $b = .12$ , CI [.04, .21]). Building on the unexpected findings above, we developed the exploratory hypothesis (see more discussion below) that strengthened moral convictions following the violation might help drive opinion-based identification around this conviction. As an initial exploration, we tested a serial mediation model (see Figure 1) where violation predicted moral convictions, which predicted opinion-based identification, and then action. The indirect effect through convictions and opinion-based group identification was significant for both normative action ( $b = .10$ , CI [.02, .20]) and nonnormative action ( $b = .07$ , CI [.01, .15]).

## 2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 provided strong support for the moral violation hypothesis—participants in the strong violation condition expressed significantly higher willingness to engage in normative collective action than participants in the weak violation condition. The ends justify the means hypothesis received support but also signaled a boundary to the



**FIGURE 1** Hypothesized serial mediation model. *Note.* Paths in grey are not hypothesized to be non-significant, rather they are not the focus of our main hypothesis

hypothesized effect. Specifically, a strong moral violation (compared to a weak violation) indeed increased participants' willingness to engage in nonnormative action, in addition to normative action. However, there was no difference between conditions in willingness to engage in violent action. Thus, results for this study suggest that there may be a boundary to the "ends justify the means" mindset. However, we will not interpret this further until this finding is replicated in Studies 2 and 3.

A potential limitation of Study 1 was that disentangling the effects of moral violation and moral convictions appeared less successful as the violation condition affected participants' convictions, with marginally higher moral convictions in the strong violation condition. Although it is not statistically significant, we believe this might hint at an increased endorsement of their threatened conviction. This interpretation would fit with the increased identification with the relevant opinion-based group in the strong (vs. weak) violation condition, potentially indicating an increased endorsement of this group identity (or community of believers). We therefore developed more specific hypotheses about potential moral conviction and opinion-based group identity mechanisms that might explain why a stronger violation triggered a stronger willingness to act normatively and nonnormatively (yet not violently) in Study 1.

Specifically, using value protection models (Durkheim, 1925; Skitka, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000), we considered the idea that a violation can induce a process of *moral cleansing*, which involves *reaffirming* one's (personal) moral beliefs and convictions and reaffirming connections to one's moral community. We theorize that, in the context of moral convictions about political issues, these moral cleansing processes can build a psychological bridge between the perceived violation of (individual) moral values and (collective) action to defend them. Specifically, moral cleansing by reaffirming one's personal commitment to a conviction might manifest in situationally *stronger moral convictions*, or at least a stronger endorsement of those convictions and presumably a stronger need to protect them when needed. Further, reaffirming a connection to the moral community might lead to increased salience of a community of believers (Tetlock et al., 2000), or put differently, increased opinion-based *group identification* that provides people with a relevant group to act with in defense of their morals. We look at the reaffirmation of connections with the moral community—and thus the particular group identification—based on the corresponding moral

conviction that is violated. Therefore, by definition, the moral conviction is at the core of the respective opinion-based group identity.

Thus, aside from wanting to test our key hypotheses, in Studies 2 and 3 we wanted to test this more specific idea about the value protection process presumably triggered by a perceived moral violation. First, if perceived moral violation leads to value reaffirmation, then stronger violation should increase the endorsement of the moral conviction (the *reaffirmation hypothesis*). Second, if perceived moral violation leads to reaffirmation of individuals' connection with their moral community, then stronger violation should increase the salience of the relevant opinion-based group identity (the *identification hypothesis*). These hypotheses are thus based on the idea, generated in part by the Study 1 findings, that reaffirmation of moral convictions, as triggered by perceived moral violation, can form the basis of relevant group identities (i.e., a community of believers), for which moral stances are the defining attribute of the group, and thus help explain why perceived moral violation increases the motivation to act collectively. We see this as a potential link between the violation of individual convictions and collective action, as moral convictions and group identification are seen as the central predictors of action in the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA model, van Zomeren et al., 2008; see also van Zomeren et al., 2018). For example, a recent meta-analysis provided strong support for the "two-chamber model" of collective action (see Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021), which showed that morality and identity are the core predictors of collective action, the beating heart of the protester so to speak, whereas group-based anger and group efficacy are more downstream motivations (the bloodstream, metaphorically) that explain additional variance in action. Therefore, we focus on moral convictions and group identity but we report effects of the manipulations on anger and efficacy for all studies and more detailed analysis of the full SIMCA model in the [supplementary materials](#).

### 3 | STUDY 2

The goals of Study 2 were to test our two core hypotheses (the violation and the ends justify the means hypotheses) and our two additional, more specific hypotheses (the reaffirmation and identification hypotheses) in a confirmatory manner (after the exploratory results found in Study 1). First, we aimed to replicate support for the moral



violation hypothesis and to further examine the ends justify the means hypothesis by replicating the effect on nonnormative action and testing again for a (boundary) effect on violent action.

Secondly, we hypothesize and test if a violation of moral convictions can increase the endorsement of moral convictions (the reaffirmation hypothesis) and strengthen the salience of the relevant moral community (the identification hypothesis). Finally, we propose that a violation results in a situational increase in the endorsement of moral convictions and that this leads to a stronger salience of the relevant opinion-based group identity, which in turn should increase collective action.

In order to disentangle the effects of moral convictions from their violation and provide a stronger test of our hypothesis that the violation would lead to an *increase in* moral convictions, we added a baseline measure of moral convictions, measured 2 months prior to the main study in which the violation was manipulated. This way we did not prime (and thus already make salient) the conviction immediately before its violation. We conducted a brief preliminary study measuring participants' moral convictions on 10 relevant political issues. In a follow-up study, we experimentally manipulated perceived moral violation and measured moral convictions, opinion-based identification, and collective action.

### 3.1 | Method

#### 3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants in the preliminary survey measuring different moral convictions were 1008 Americans who volunteered via MTurk to participate for free in a brief survey that would make them eligible for participation in follow-up studies for which they would be paid. After 2 months, participants from this larger sample pool<sup>2</sup> were invited to participate in the study. All participants from the preliminary survey who did not vote for Donald Trump were invited to participate in the current study that paid \$1. After 200 participants had completed the study, the study was closed. After 150 participants had responded, we examined the distribution of the sample in terms of moral convictions—no other analyses were conducted at this time. This revealed that the distribution of moral convictions was extremely skewed. Forty-three percent of this sample reported time 1 moral convictions of 7, and another 32% reported time 1 moral convictions of 6. This extremely skewed sample and the ceiling effect made it almost impossible to test our hypotheses about a change in moral convictions from time 1 to time 2. Therefore, we limited participation for the remaining 50 participants to those who reported 5 or lower on moral convictions at time 1 in an attempt to make our sample slightly more normally distributed. After excluding nine participants who failed both attention checks included in the study and spent less than 15 s reading the manipulation article, our sample consisted of 191 non-Trump voters ( $M_{\text{age}} = 39.32$ ,  $SD = 11.97$ , 32.8% male).

The turbulent political context in the United States at the time made it possible to reuse our manipulation from Study 1. Hence, we had a

mixed study design with a manipulation of perceived moral violation (strong vs. weak violation) and a pre- and post-measure of moral convictions (all other variables were measured only at time 2). Immediately after our first study, Trump issued the first version of what is now known as the "Travel Ban", which was quickly challenged and ultimately stayed by the courts. At the time the second study was run, there were rumors that Trump was contemplating another executive order relating to national security and Muslim residents or immigrants as a way of reasserting his authority (de Vogue & Jarret, 2017). Thus, in this context the manipulation involving Trump creating a registry either for Muslims or for a certain class of temporary residents was again relevant and credible.

#### 3.1.2 | Measures

We report the main variables here; other measures are reported in [supplementary materials](#).

##### *Main study variables*

**Violation of moral conviction.** We reduced the measure of violation of moral convictions to one item capturing the core of moral conviction violation: "The policy proposed in the article is a violation of my core moral convictions about discrimination based on religion".

**Moral convictions** were measured with the same item used in the pre-measure ("My feelings about discrimination based on religion are a reflection of my core moral beliefs and convictions").<sup>3</sup>

The measures of **opinion-based group identification** ( $\alpha = .96$ ), **collective action intentions** (normative nonviolent  $\alpha = .95$ , nonnormative nonviolent  $\alpha = .85$ , nonnormative violent  $\alpha = .86$ ) and demographics were the same as in Study 1.

### 3.2 | Results

#### 3.2.1 | Manipulation check

As in Study 2, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that the article aimed to induce a strong moral violation was indeed perceived as a stronger violation than the article that was intended to induce a weak moral violation,  $t(190) = -8.41$ ,  $p < .001$  (means and standard deviations for all variables are in Table 4).

#### 3.2.2 | The moral violation and the ends justify the means hypotheses

Replicating the Study 1 findings, an independent samples *t*-test revealed significant differences between the strong violation and the weak violation condition on normative action intentions,  $t(190) = -4.39$ ,  $p < .001$ , and nonnormative action intentions,  $t(190) = -3.40$ ,  $p = .001$ , but not on violent action intentions,  $t(190) = -1.29$ ,  $p = .20$ . As in Study 1, participants in the strong

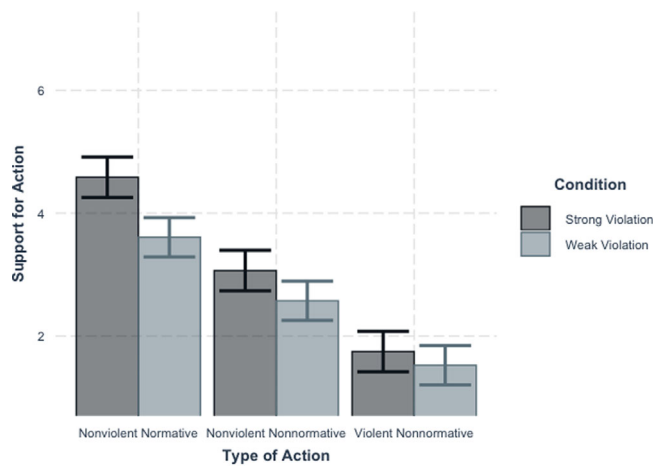
**TABLE 4** Bivariate relationships between Study 2 variables

Condition	M (SD)		d	1	2	3	4	5
	Weak violation (N = 89)	Strong violation (N = 103)						
1. Moral conviction T1	5.44 (1.61)	5.38 (1.75)	-	-				
2. Moral conviction T2	5.29 (1.47)	5.88 (1.31)	0.42	.39**	-			
3. Perceived violation	3.87 (1.89)	5.97 (1.58)	1.21	.23*	.66**	-		
4. Identification	4.21 (1.56)	5.16 (1.44)	0.63	.26**	.64**	.57**	-	
5. Normative CA	3.53 (1.90)	4.72 (1.84)	0.64	.29**	.73**	.66**	.72**	-
6. Nonnormative CA	2.51 (1.42)	3.22 (1.46)	0.49	.14	.51**	.45**	.56**	.80**
7. Violent CA	1.30 (0.75)	1.45 (0.94)	0.18	.04	.11	.08	.08	.22*

Note. All condition differences are significant except for violent collective action.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

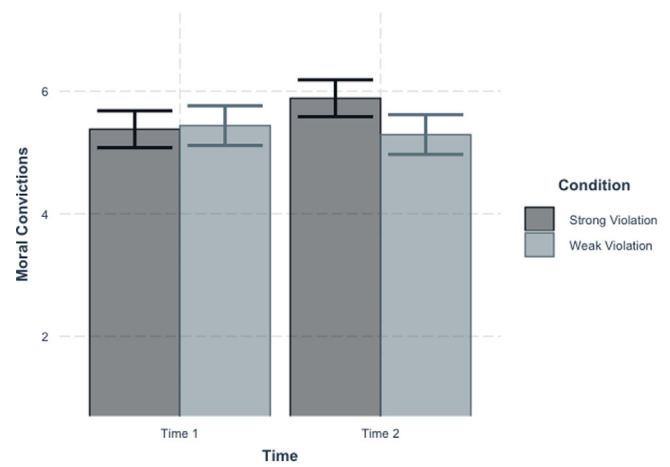


**FIGURE 2** Effect of moral violation condition on support for action in Study 2

violation condition reported higher normative and nonnormative action tendencies than participants in the weak violation condition (see Figure 2), but violence appeared to be a clear boundary.

### 3.2.3 | The reaffirmation and identification hypotheses

To test our hypothesis that a strong moral violation would increase participants' reported moral convictions, we conducted a 2 (condition) × 2 (time of moral conviction measurement) mixed measures ANOVA on the moral convictions. While there were no main effects, the interaction effect between condition and time was significant,  $F(1,190) = 6.05, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Planned comparisons using an Bonferroni adjustment revealed that participants in the strong violation condition reported significantly stronger moral convictions at time 2 than at time 1,  $t = 2.56, p = .006$  (see Figure 3). By contrast, there was



**FIGURE 3** Effect of moral violation condition on moral convictions across time in Study 2

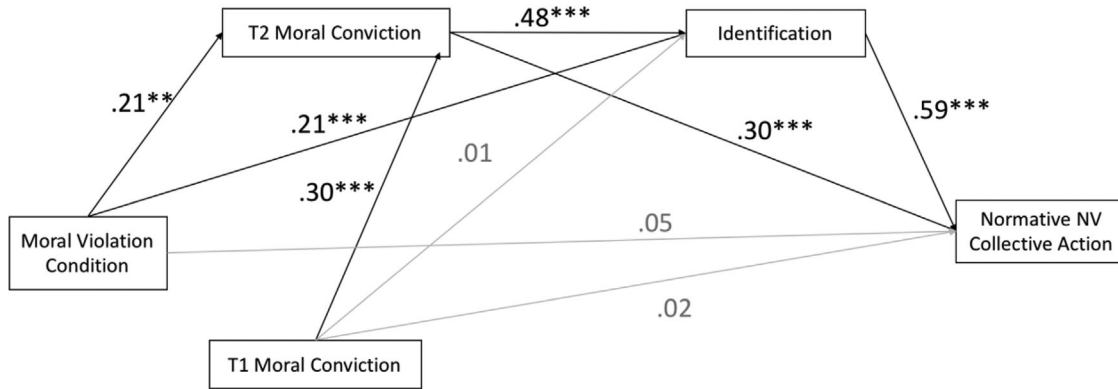
no change in moral convictions for participants in the weak violation condition,  $t = 0.13, p = .45$ . We then tested the identification hypothesis by conducting independent samples  $t$ -tests comparing opinion-based group identification in the strong violation and weak violation condition. As expected, opinion-based group identification was higher in the strong violation condition compared to the weak violation condition,  $t(190) = 4.42, p < .001$ .

We examined the serial mediation model by conducting path analysis on the hypothesized pathways for each form of collective action, while controlling for moral convictions at time 1 to demonstrate these effects were above and beyond general moral convictions (see Table 5 and Figures 4–6 for indirect effects). In line with expectations, the strong violation condition led to an increase in moral convictions at time 2, which in turn predicted increased opinion-based group identification. Similarly, the strong violation condition directly caused an increase in opinion-based group identification. These increases in convictions and identification were associated with normative and nonnormative action, but not with violent action.

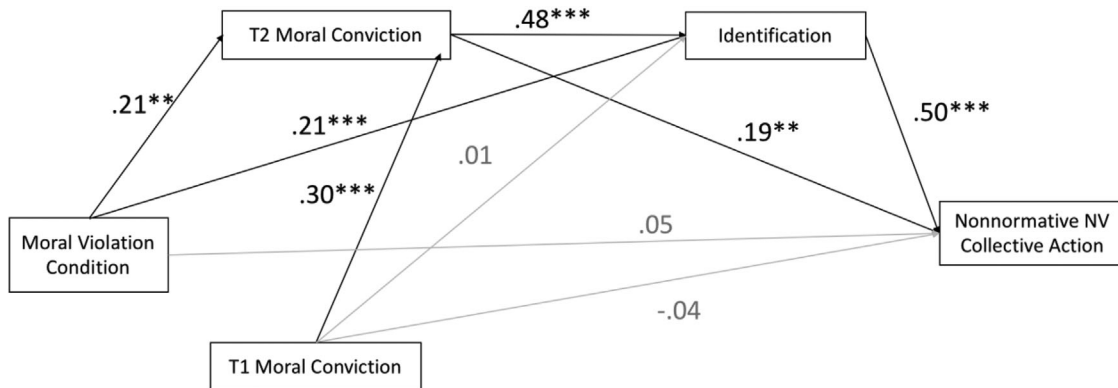
**TABLE 5** Study 2 indirect effects of perceived moral violation condition on collective action

	Indirect effect via moral convictions	Indirect effect via identification	Indirect effect via moral convictions and identification
Normative CA	.24 [.08, .42]	.49 [.20, .84]	.23 [.09, .37]
Nonnormative CA	.12 [.03, .22]	.31 [.12, .53]	.15 [.05, .24]
Violent CA	.01 [−.04, .06]	.03 [−.03, .10]	.01 [−.01, .05]

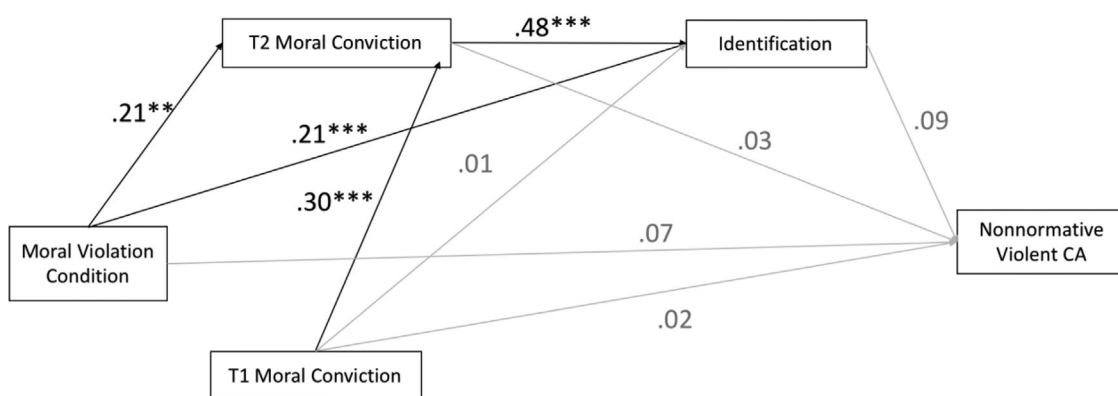
Note. Table displays unstandardized beta's and their 95% confidence interval, based on 5000 bootstrap samples.



**FIGURE 4** Examination of overall model in predicting normative nonviolent action of Study 2. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



**FIGURE 5** Examination of overall model in predicting nonnormative nonviolent action of Study 2. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



**FIGURE 6** Examination of overall model in predicting nonnormative violent action of Study 2. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### 3.3 | Discussion

Study 2 largely supported our two core and two additional hypotheses. A strong perceived moral violation increased support for normative collective action (the moral violation hypothesis) and nonnormative action, but not violent action. Thus, the ends justify the means hypothesis again received mixed results and offered a clear boundary. A strong violation also increased the endorsement of moral conviction compared to a time 1 baseline (the reaffirmation hypothesis) and the salience of a relevant opinion-based group identity compared to weak violation (the identification hypothesis). In addition, it provided support for our serial mediation model, where perceived moral violation increased moral convictions and led to opinion-based identification and then collective action, above and beyond the effects of moral convictions before the violation. This is in line with the idea that perceived moral violation triggers the motivation for normative and nonnormative (but not violent) collective action because it triggers a need to reaffirm the conviction and the associated community of believers.

Because there was a manipulation of moral violation, we can draw causal conclusions about its effects on moral convictions, identification, and collective action, and thus conclude that moral convictions and identification explain a significant amount of the effect of the moral violation condition on collective action. While this supports our hypotheses about moral convictions and opinion-based identification being important parts of the value protection process, and these findings are in line with our hypothesized model, we acknowledge that we cannot make causal claims about the sequence of these mediators, or that they are the only mechanisms involved in the process. On the other hand, this pattern of results was not observed for violent action.

The current and previous study used a fake policy supposedly instituted by the Trump Administration as our manipulation. While we argue that it was credible and that the dynamics captured in our studies are in many ways analogous to the reactions to the “Travel Ban” (which did indeed spark massive protests and emerged only days after our data collection for Study 1), we did not empirically capture directly these real events as they unfolded, participants’ motivations to act, or real behavior in real time. The goal of Study 3 was to test our hypotheses in a more ecologically valid context by taking advantage of such a real event and measuring collective action behavior in real time. While this meant returning to a correlational design, we feel that it adds important insights to our experimental studies and to past correlational work. First, while experimental work is important for demonstrating causality and thus increasing internal validity, we feel it is important to corroborate such findings by studying real world events to demonstrate that experimental conclusions are also ecologically valid. Further, while past work has demonstrated that perceived moral violations are correlated with action, this work was conducted regarding perceived violations of a general issue and with a specifically activist sample. Past research has found differences between the motivations of seasoned activists and the general population (see Blackwood & Louis, 2012; Hornsey et al., 2006), thus it is worthwhile to replicate these results in the general population as otherwise we do not know if

these processes necessarily apply to the general public. In our study, we wanted to examine whether a specific trigger event that was perceived as a moral violation could generate collective action by increasing commitment to moral convictions and the relevant identity.

## 4 | STUDY 3

Study 3 aimed to use a real action of the Trump administration that might be perceived as a moral violation to empirically capture the real-world effects of a moral violation and its consequences: the decision to leave the Paris climate accord in June 2017. Additionally, we used this context to add a measure of action behavior to reduce our reliance on self-report of intentions to engage in collective action. While self-report measures of action intentions are common in collective action research (e.g., see Shuman et al., 2016; Tausch et al., 2011), we wanted to provide stronger support for our hypotheses by measuring actual behavior.

### 4.1 | Method

#### 4.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants for Study 3 were recruited from the preliminary survey pool, which contained a measure of climate change moral convictions. All participants from this pool who had not participated in Study 2 were invited to participate in a study on current events that paid \$1 and was open to 300 participants. The total sample included 303 participants (because some had already begun the survey when the 300th participant finished). In this study, we did not use presidential voting as a proxy for participants’ attitudes. Rather, we measured participants’ attitudes about climate change and included only participants who supported action to combat climate change in the analyses.<sup>4</sup> Sample size was based on the same power analysis as the previous studies, but we oversampled because we expected to exclude participants who did not hold the relevant moral conviction. We changed our exclusion criteria in this study to address what we see as a weakness of the prior studies as presidential voting does not directly capture attitudes towards any one issue, as people must weight many different issue positions when making their voting choice. Therefore, in this study we selected participants specifically based on their issue stance by excluding participants who disagreed with the statement “I believe climate change is an important problem that needs to be addressed” or who agreed with Trump’s decision to leave the Paris agreement ( $n = 72$ ). We also excluded 16 participants who spent less than 15 s reading the manipulation and failed two or more reading or attention checks. The final sample was 215 participants ( $M_{age} = 39.32$ ,  $SD = 11.97$ , 32.8% male). In the study, participants were reminded of Trump’s decision to leave the Paris climate accord, which had occurred that week, with a news article. Participants then completed measures of perceived violation of their moral convictions and the measures from the earlier studies tailored to this context.

## 4.1.2 | Measures

### Main study variables

**Perceived Violation of Moral Conviction.** We used the one item capturing the core of moral conviction violation already used in Study 2, tailored to the context: “The withdrawal from the Paris climate accord is a violation of my core moral convictions about preventing climate change”.

**Moral convictions** were measured immediately after the reading check with the same item used in the pre-measure (“My feelings about preventing climate change are a reflection of my core moral beliefs and convictions”).<sup>5</sup> The baseline measure of moral convictions was collected 5 months before this study.

The measures of **opinion-based group identification** ( $\alpha = .96$ ), **collective action intentions** (normative nonviolent  $\alpha = .95$ , nonnormative nonviolent  $\alpha = .85$ , nonnormative violent  $\alpha = .86$ ), and demographics were the same as in Study 2, tailored to the context.

**Behavioral Measure of Collective Action.** We measured participants’ actual normative collective action behavior by giving participants the option to engage in collective action in an optional part of the study. Based on methods used by Shuman et al. (2018), participants were told that because of the political nature of the study, the researchers wanted to give participants the opportunity to take action about the issues presented. They were told that this section of the survey was optional and given the chance to skip it. In this section, participants were given the opportunity to sign a petition calling on the White House to reverse its decision and remain in the Paris accord. Then they were given an opportunity to write a letter to their senators explaining their position. Lastly, participants were told that they would be given a 50-cent bonus for completing the survey and were given the opportunity to donate some of this money to two different organizations working on climate change, as well as provide their email to receive more information about these organizations. For analysis, collective action was scored by giving each participant one point for each piece of the collective action portion of the survey with the highest possible score of six (signing the petition, writing a letter, donating amount to one organization, donating amount to the other organization, providing the e-mail address to one organization, providing the e-mail address to other organization). Fifty-three percent of the sample did not engage in any action, 3.7% engaged in one action, 9.3% in two actions, 8.4% in three actions, 12.6% in four actions, 8.8% in five actions, and 4.2% in six actions.

## 4.2 | Results

### 4.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

In a first step, we checked if the event used as a natural violation was indeed perceived as a violation of moral convictions. Overall, 64% of the sample agreed that the decision to leave the Paris climate accord was a moral violation and only 28% of the sample disagreed. Furthermore, the mean of perceived violation was moderately high, with

$M = 4.87$  ( $SD = 1.92$ ), suggesting that the withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement was indeed on average perceived as a violation of people’s moral convictions about preventing climate change in this sample (for all summary statistics, see Table 6).

### 4.2.2 | The moral violation and the ends justify the means hypotheses

Linear regression analyses revealed that the perceived moral violation significantly predicted all forms of collective action when controlling for time 1 moral convictions. In line with predictions, normative action was predicted with  $\beta = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining a large portion of the variance in this form of action intentions. Similarly, nonnormative action was predicted with  $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ , and in contrast to our two previous studies, moral violation predicted violent action (albeit much more weakly,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Most importantly, perceived moral violation predicted actual collective action behavior,  $\beta = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### 4.2.3 | The reaffirmation and identification hypotheses

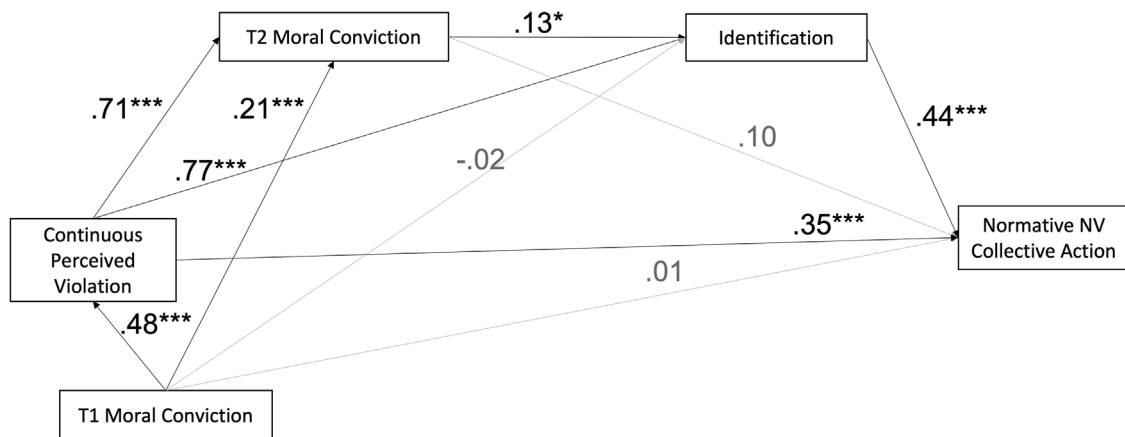
We then examined the effect of the perceived moral violation on moral conviction and opinion-based group identification. While there was a significant difference in mean moral conviction between time 1 and time 2, the mean of moral conviction was actually lower at time 2 ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) than at time 1 ( $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ),  $t(214) = -4.56$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, closer inspection suggested that this was due to a ceiling effect at time 1 and regression towards the mean. As most participants at time 1 were already highly convicted, there was little room for the moral convictions to increase and an increase was only observed among participants with lower moral convictions at time 1. As this is not a direct test of our hypothesis, we examined the effect of perceived violation on the difference score between time 1 and time 2 moral convictions. We found a significant positive correlation between violation and the difference score in moral conviction ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $p = .001$ ), such that the stronger the violation was perceived, the higher the difference score between time 2 and time 1. Thus, the stronger people felt a moral violation, the more they reported an increase in moral convictions at time 2. Violation and time 1 moral conviction were positively correlated ( $r = 0.48$ ), which indicates that the strength of perceived violation is related to the moral conviction at time 1. Therefore, we controlled for time 1 moral conviction in a correlation of violation and time 2 moral conviction. This correlation was positive ( $r = 0.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the stronger the violation was perceived, the stronger moral convictions (time 2) were reported, independently from pre-existing moral convictions (time 1). These findings are consistent with the idea that perceived moral violation increased the endorsement of moral conviction over time, and thus with the reaffirmation hypothesis.

In addition, we examined whether perceived moral violation was related to increased opinion-based group identification. Indeed, linear

**TABLE 6** Bivariate relationships between Study 3 variables (N = 215)

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Moral conviction T1	5.63 (1.44)	-					
2. Moral conviction T2	5.18 (1.49)	.51**	-				
3. Perceived violation	4.87 (1.92)	.48**	.73**	-			
4. Identification	4.55 (1.84)	.41**	.66**	.85**	-		
5. Normative CA	1.97 (1.29)	.18**	.29**	.40**	.42**	-	
6. Nonnormative CA	3.94 (1.84)	.42**	.66**	.82**	.82**	.55**	-
7. Violent CA	1.26 (0.64)	.06	.04	.18**	.17*	.47**	.22**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .



**FIGURE 7** Examination of overall model in predicting normative nonviolent action of Study 3. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

regression analyses revealed that the perceived moral violation significantly predicted opinion-based group identification,  $\beta = .85, p < .001$ , explaining a large portion of the variance. This finding is consistent with the idea that perceived moral violation increased the salience of this group identity, and thus with the identification hypothesis. Thus, our findings supported both the reaffirmation and identification hypotheses.

We examined our overall value protection model by conducting path analysis on the hypothesized pathways for each form of collective action, while controlling for moral convictions at time 1 (see Figures 7–10). All indirect effects are displayed in Table 7. As predicted, perceived violation positively predicted moral convictions at time 2, which in turn predicted increased opinion-based identification. Similarly, the perceived moral violations were related to increased identification. For normative action and the behavioral measure of action, the direct effect of perceived violation on action remained significant, in addition to the indirect effect through time 2 moral conviction and identification, replicating our results from Study 2. We note that, in this sample, some results differed slightly from the previous study. There was no direct effect of time 2 moral conviction on action. For nonnormative action, only the indirect pathways via time 2 moral conviction and identification, and identification alone, were significant. In line with previous findings, violent action was not significantly predicted by any of the predictors in the model.

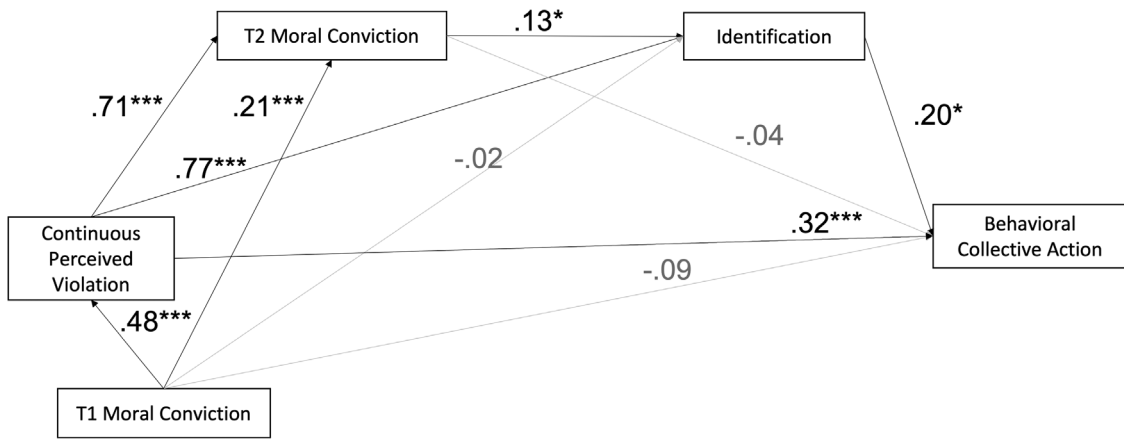
**TABLE 7** Study 3 indirect effects of perceived moral violation on collective action

	Indirect effect via moral convictions	Indirect effect via identification	Indirect effect via moral convictions and identification
Behavioural CA	.04 [−.09, .18]	.18 [−.02, .37]	.03 [−.003, .09]
Normative CA	.08 [−.003, .17]	.30 [.19, .43]	.05 [.01, .10]
Nonnormative CA	.04 [−.04, .13]	.15 [.04, .26]	.03 [.002, .06]
Violent CA	−.02 [−.08, .03]	.02 [−.04, .07]	.003 [−.007, .02]

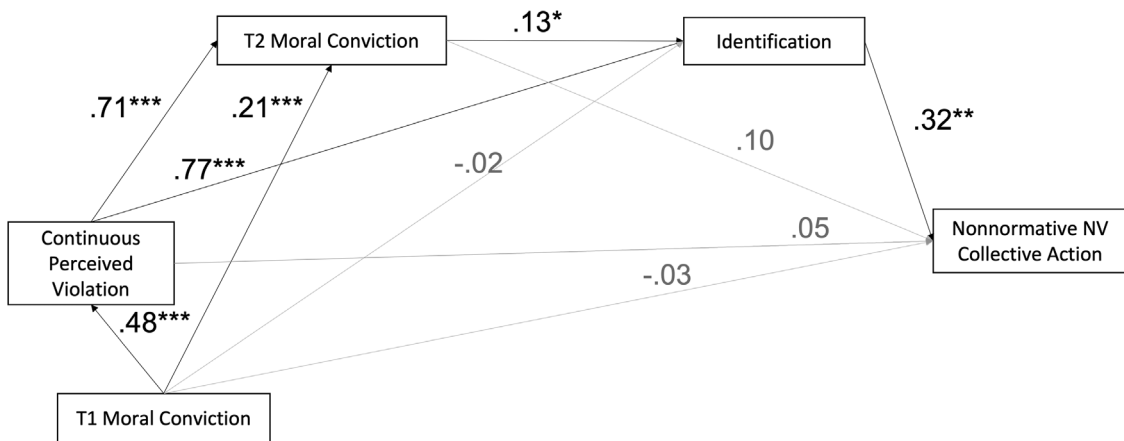
Note. Table displays unstandardized betas and their 95% confidence interval, based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

### 4.3 | Discussion

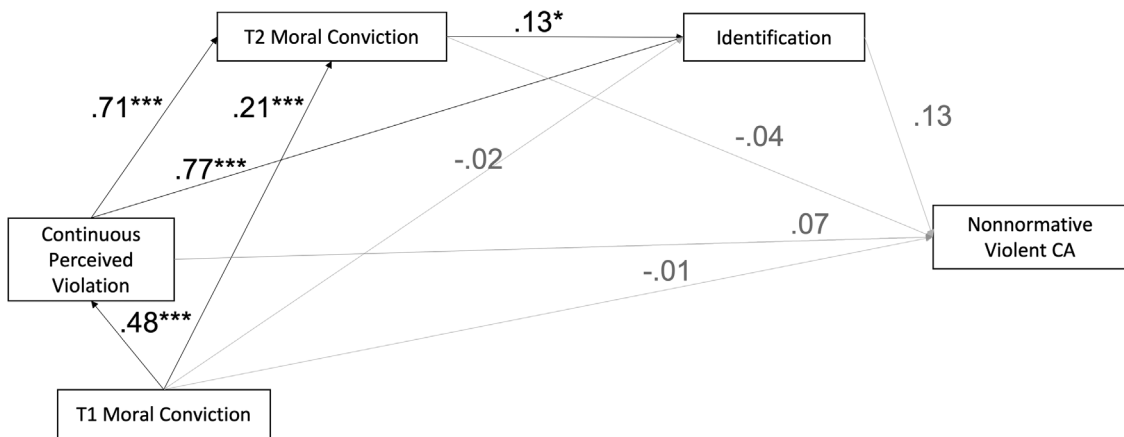
Study 3 provided further support for our hypotheses. First, the extent to which participants perceived the withdrawal from the Paris climate accord as violating their moral convictions significantly predicted their willingness to engage in normative, nonnormative, and (although with a small effect) even violent collective action, and actual behavior related to the issue. The significant finding on violent action



**FIGURE 8** Examination of overall model in predicting collective action behavior of Study 3. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



**FIGURE 9** Examination of overall model in predicting nonnormative nonviolent action of Study 3. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



**FIGURE 10** Examination of overall model in predicting nonnormative violent action of Study 3. Note. Significant paths are displayed in black and nonsignificant paths in gray. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

differentiates Study 3 from Studies 1 and 2. While violation of some convictions, like protecting the climate, might justify violent action, others, such as discrimination based on religion, might not. This might be a hint that the specific violated moral issue can be of importance for violent action, which would make violent action qualitatively different from nonviolent action. Furthermore, this effect of moral violation was stronger than the effect of participants' pre-existing convictions on action, which suggests that moral violations are a trigger that drives action. Lastly, perceived violation predicted an increase in moral convictions over time and higher opinion-based identification, which mediated the effect of moral violation on normative and nonnormative action. This is in line with the idea that perceived moral violation triggers a value protection process that leads to a need to reaffirm the threatened conviction (thus increasing its endorsement) and to connect with the community of believers (thus increasing the salience of the relevant opinion-based group identity), which motivates individuals to act collectively through normative or nonnormative means.

## 5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research aimed to examine the effects of a perceived moral violation on normative and nonnormative collective action. Specifically, we predicted that a strong perceived violation of moral convictions would lead to (willingness to engage in) collective action in defense of the violated conviction. We found correlational and experimental support for this moral violation hypothesis in the context of US politics across all three studies. In addition, the longitudinal measures of moral convictions in Studies 2 and 3 allowed us to demonstrate that this effect of perceived moral violation was beyond that of general pre-existing moral convictions. We further predicted that a perceived moral violation would motivate nonnormative forms of collective action (the ends justify the means hypothesis). The current research provided partial support for this hypothesis as a violation of moral convictions increased nonnormative collective action but increased violent action only in one out of three studies. Therefore, our findings qualified the latter hypothesis by offering a boundary condition, namely that a perceived moral violation might affect different forms of nonnormative collective action differently.

In addition, over the course of these studies, we developed and tested a more specific model of how a perceived moral violation motivates collective action, namely through increased endorsement of the relevant moral conviction (reaffirmation hypothesis) and the relevant opinion-based group identity (identification hypothesis). In other words, a perceived moral violation should trigger increases in endorsement of the conviction and an opinion-based group identity on this conviction, which in turn both help motivate action. Results from Studies 2 and 3 supported both the reaffirmation hypothesis and the identification hypothesis as participants reported higher moral convictions and stronger identification after a violation. In addition, moral convictions and identification serially mediated the effect of violation on normative and nonnormative collective action, suggesting that a value protection process is triggered that increases the endorsement of one's moral con-

victions and associated group identity. We discuss the implications of our findings below, including a suggestion for a two-step model of value protection as derived from the current set of findings.

### 5.1 | Theoretical implications

Overall, the current findings examine how processes related to value protection can form the psychological bridge that helps people act collectively in defense of their personal moral values. While research has shown evidence for a link between moral convictions and collective action (see van Zomeren et al., 2018, for a review) and correlational evidence for a link between rights' violation and collective action (Kutlaca et al., 2019; Mazzoni et al., 2015), the current research provides the first experimental and longitudinal evidence for a value protection process driving collective action as triggered by a perceived moral violation.

We identified a situational trigger that can explain *when* collective action is more likely to occur—namely, when a moral line is crossed. While people with moral convictions may be generally more active, our research suggests that a perceived violation can trigger action, helping to understand and predict when large collective action movements may be likely to occur. Therefore, the current work advances our understanding of moral conviction's motivational behavioral component, specifically when these motivations are triggered to drive action.

Next, this research further extends research on moral convictions and collective action by demonstrating how moral convictions and their violations can be linked to normative and nonnormative action. Our findings suggest that a perceived moral violation of moral convictions can motivate engagement in nonnormative as well as normative collective action to defend their violated convictions. This is in line with Skitka and Mullen's (2002) suggestion that the means become secondary as long as the ends are achieved when people hold strong moral convictions. We extend this research by providing evidence that a perceived moral violation can indeed motivate action that steps outside of the usual norms that regulate behavior (Wright et al., 1990), namely nonnormative action.

However, in the current research, this "ends justify the means" mindset had a near-consistent boundary—a violation did not increase violent collective action in two out of three studies (and in Study 3, its effect was very small). A violation motivates any kind of action, as long as it is not violent. This implies that a moral violation might not be the crucial factor tipping people towards violent action. This aligns with research suggesting different pathways to nonviolent and violent action, such as research differentiating different emotional pathways with anger-motivating normative nonviolent action and contempt-motivating violent action (while not differentiating between different forms of nonnormative action; Becker & Tausch, 2015; Tausch et al., 2011).<sup>6</sup>

Violence might constitute a different moral line that at least our participants in these studies indicated they would not cross. We believe this pattern of findings highlights the importance of distinguishing



between nonnormative but nonviolent action on the one hand, and nonnormative violent action on the other hand. Alongside work by Shuman et al. (2020), our research qualifies between these types of nonnormative action and suggests that different factors might play a role for nonnormative nonviolent and nonnormative violent action. Specifically, we believe it is possible that violence is not merely a subtype of nonnormative action, but represents a moralized (rather than simply normative) boundary. In other words, people may refuse to engage in violent action because they see nonviolence as a moral imperative, whereas other forms of nonnormative action violate group norms but not moral boundaries. While normative and nonnormative action share moral violation as a motivator, violence potentially requires more or other preconditions. Quite possibly, perceived moral violation motivates action to the extent that means justify the ends, as long as the means are nonviolent. One other potential explanation for this effect is that from the perspectives of activists themselves both normative and nonnormative action could be seen as normative (even if nonnormative action is seen as violating norms by the general public). However, the normative or moralized line of violence may still be an important consideration as it might create divisions within the group, as some may worry about the damage of the moral image of the ingroup.

Lastly, throughout this research process, we developed an interpretation of our findings as suggesting that value protection processes form the psychological link between perceived moral violation and collective action. This umbrella allowed space to differentiate between potentially different yet related subprocesses (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000). First, our findings suggest a moral cleansing process (Tetlock et al., 2000) triggered by perceived moral violation, in which individuals reaffirm their conviction and (as a result) reconnect with their relevant moral community (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000). This more inward-directed mechanism of moral cleansing might underlie the publicly directed reaction to the violation, the moral outrage as manifesting in action. As such, this value protection process can bridge the gap between individual moral convictions and collective action. The value protection process aligns with research on moralization and increased efforts for a social movement in response to political developments in opposition to the movement's stances (Lizzio-Wilson et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2020).

In the first step of this process, we theorize that people situationally strengthen their moral convictions (i.e., their endorsement is increased). We suggest that a violation does not necessarily change the content or strength of the conviction but rather affirms existing convictions, which aligns with findings that highly emotional shocks related to a conviction can produce situational increases in moral convictions (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). As a second step, the perceived moral violation strengthens people's commitment to groups who share those convictions (i.e., a community of believers, or opinion-based groups). In turn, an increased endorsement of conviction and group identity is likely to increase motivation for collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2018). We believe this order of these steps is most likely. Group identities and especially opinion-based group identities can be seen as malleable, reactive properties that group members negotiate in context (Louis et al., 2020). Moral convictions facilitate the creation of quick

and clear "us versus them" delineations, the key basis for psychological groups and identities (Skitka & Morgan, 2014), which predestines them as the content on which the group identity is built. The strengthened commitment to the conviction and moral community gives individuals a group to act with. However, in the case of existing groups with strong and meaningful identities, it also seems possible that group values may offer the impetus, when violated, to form and increase moral convictions. Future research is needed to more specifically test the validity of either order of the two steps we developed and researched.

By highlighting the key role of moral convictions and opinion group based identities in this process, these results also help connect value protection processes to the psychology of collective action as defined by SIMCA (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). In a recent review of collective action research and the SIMCA model, Agostini and van Zomeren (2021) show that these two variables are the central predictors of collective action, activating more downstream variables such as group-based anger and group efficacy that form the full psychological infrastructure for collective action. As such this research shows that value protection processes activate this psychological infrastructure via moral convictions and efficacy. In addition, while they are not the focus of this article, we report analyses of anger and efficacy, and the entire SIMCA model in the [supplementary materials](#). In general, both anger and efficacy were affected by the manipulation of moral violation. When all SIMCA measures were included in a model predicting the three types of action, only anger and not efficacy predicted any form of collective action (except for one very weak relationship between anger and normative action in Study 3). This is in line with recent literature (see Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021) that suggests that efficacy may not be as critical a predictor of action as the other SIMCA variables.

## 5.2 | Limitations and future directions

The current research has some limitations and raises new questions. Our sampling criteria methodologically limit our ability to investigate the effects of moral violation on violent action. While the United States was a relevant context for studying this phenomenon given the increasing moralization of political issues in the United States (Finkel et al., 2020), its unique cultural context also poses potential limitations to our findings. Americans, especially American liberals, tend to have strong moral convictions against the use of violence (Graham et al., 2009). In other cultural or ideological samples where violence is less moralized, we might find that moral violations drive an increase in all types of action including violent action. As such, future research should examine the link between perceived moral violation and violent action with more diverse samples, especially since we found a small, but significant, effect on violent action in one of the studies. This may be because Study 3 had higher power than our previous studies, allowing us to detect a potentially smaller effect of perceived moral violations on violent action. In addition, the null effect of violent action could be due to a number of theoretical explanations, for example, moral violations may make people disregard normative but not moral boundaries, or violent action requires a nothing-to-lose mindset, that is, a mindset that

associated with low efficacy that since the activists have little chance of achieving their goals they might as well try more violent or radical tactics (Tausch et al., 2011). Future research should explore these possibilities.

In addition, it is not completely clear yet what occurs psychologically during the reaffirmation stage of the value protection process. Our research did not investigate why violations (situationally) increase convictions or what the characteristics of the increase are. We establish that moral convictions can change as a result of a situational violation. We suggest that this change likely reflects an increase in situational endorsement of these convictions. Future research could build on this change in more depth, testing whether it simply reflects a brief situational change, or a more long-term increase in moralization of the issue. In other words, whether it reflects a qualitative shift (the development of new convictions, i.e., moralization), the strengthening of existing convictions, or whether it is simply increased salience of existing convictions. Such research could advance our understanding of moralization processes.

Further, there were methodological limitations to the generalizability of our findings to the entire population. First, all studies were conducted in predominantly liberal samples in the United States so our results might not generalize to other populations. In all studies, the violation was something that political leftists would consider a moral violation, thus the findings may not generalize to political rightists. Future research could make use of a more politically diverse sample in two ways: firstly, a moral violation of a liberal topic such as in our studies should not constitute a violation for rightists. Including them in the sample would extend the research question and allow us to investigate how political orientation, or more specifically even support for versus opposition to the issue at hand, might affect the mobilization process we developed. This would allow us to test for and provide fruitful insights into effects of mechanisms of violated versus reaffirmed morals. Since answering these questions is beyond the scope of the current research, future research should investigate these questions. Building on this, secondly, it would be interesting to examine our and the previously described questions with a topic that would constitute a moral violation for rightists to determine if leftists' and rightists' reactions differ.

As a second methodological limitation, we aimed to investigate clearly morally convicted individuals, so our findings may not generalize to people who do not hold the relevant conviction (nor were they intended to). Because we aimed to sample people who held the relevant conviction, a majority of the participants held strong moral convictions. We can therefore be confident that our results apply to highly convicted people. However, we can be less sure about people who hold relevant but weak convictions. It might be the case that a perceived moral violation only motivates those who hold a strong conviction but not those who hold a weak conviction. A direction for future research could be to investigate those who hold a weak conviction and examine how they react to a moral violation. A moral violation would possibly have no effect—if the value the violation tackles is too weak, there would be no need to protect it and the value protection process would likely not be triggered. For people with weak convictions, a broader vio-

lation of a general (political) stance might be more effective in triggering action.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This research indicates that a perceived moral violation motivates people to stand up for their moral convictions and collectively (re)act to reinstate their convictions. A moral violation acts as a trigger for a value protection process that leads people to reaffirm their commitment to their morals and their moral community. People are willing to step beyond social norms in order to defend their convictions. These processes highlight the diverse effects of moral violations on a broader social level. On the one hand, perceived moral violations can galvanize a process that motivates people to stand up in defense of their moral principles. This can lead to an active and engaged citizenry that acts together to defend its moral values. On the other hand, this same process could have more deleterious social consequences—people are willing to engage in more extreme nonnormative actions to defend their convictions and disregard societal norms of civility. Violations of moral convictions can thus be a slippery slope between engaged activism and solidarity and an erosion of norms that govern debate and dissent.

### ORCID

Inga L. Pauls  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9415-2176>

Eric Shuman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3830-4926>

### Notes

- 1 This is not a perfect proxy, as there are likely to be people who held moral convictions about discrimination based on religion but voted for Trump for other reasons, and vice versa. However, we did not want to ask participants directly about their convictions in the screening, and thus prime their convictions before the manipulation, so necessitating the use of this proxy.
- 2 Sample size was based on the same calculation as in Study 1.
- 3 There were two other items measuring moral convictions, but we did not use them in the analyses because they were not measured at time 1. The results remain the same regardless of the use of the three-item measure or the time 2 one-item measure.
- 4 In an attempt to avoid the problems we encountered in Study 2 regarding the distribution of moral convictions, we used a stratified sampling method from the participants at time 1. We opened seven studies (one for each level of moral convictions) and the number of slots for participants in each study was based on the proportion of the time 1 reported moral convictions (e.g., participants with moral convictions of 1 composed 5% of the sample at time 1, and thus these participants were invited to participate in a study with 15 slots (5% of 300), etc., for each level of moral conviction). This ensured that the time 2 sample matched the time 1 sample in distribution of moral convictions at time 1.
- 5 Two other items measuring moral convictions were included, which we did not use in the analyses because they were not measured at time 1. The results remain the same if we use the three-item measure as the time 2 measure.
- 6 We tested and found that moral violations relate to anger and in turn predict nonviolent action, but possibly more on the periphery than the core of the motivational path to action. For the full analysis and test of the SIMCA model, see [supplementary material](#).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no potential conflict of interest regarding the contents of this article.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors declare that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as authors' national ethics guidelines.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data files and materials for all studies can be found at <https://osf.io/vspf2/>.

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