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Rights and Morals, Issues, and Candidate Integrity: Insights into the Role of the News Media

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In recent American political discourse, elections and debates tend to be presented by the news media as collisions of basic principles, with opposing parties advancing beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. When news coverage of an election campaign focuses on issues that emphasize rights and morals, voting behavior may be affected in two ways: Citizens become likely to form and make use of evaluations of the integrity of the candidates, and citizens become motivated to seek an issue-position "match" with candidates on those issues for which discourse is ethically charged (particularly when they hold a similar interpretation of the issue). These ideas were tested in an experiment in which labor union members and undergraduate students were presented with news stories about the contrasting positions of fictional candidates for elective office. Across three political environments, all information was held constant except for systematic alteration of a different issue in each environment. These three issues (abortion, gun control, and health care) vary in the types of value conflicts emphasized in news coverage. The results shed light on how individuals process, interpret, and use issue coverage in choosing among candidates.

KEY WORDS: media, rights and morals, candidate character, issue interpretations.

In recent years, a focus on rights and morals has become a prominent feature of American political discourse (Glendon, 1991; Monroe, 1995; Wuthnow, 1989).

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Increasingly, political contests and debates are presented as a collision of basic principles, with opposing parties and candidates often relying on the same core democratic values of life, liberty, equality, and justice to advance their beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. The manifest cultural and social cleavages reflected in such issues as abortion, gay rights, euthanasia, capital punishment, and gun control suggest that this trend may have substantial implications for the political process (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Brooke, 1993; Brown & Carmines, 1995; Chong, 1993; Dworkin, 1993; Flanagan, 1987; Luker, 1984; Moen, 1984). Indeed, several studies have found that abortion and other issues tied to "deeply held values" significantly influence voting behavior in both national and state elections (Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996, p. 334; see also Abramowitz, 1995; Cook, Jelen, & Wilcox, 1994; Smith, 1994). Moreover, news media emphasis on conflict in political coverage (Graber, 1996; Patterson, 1993) virtually ensures that ethically charged discourse will continue to be a central part of contemporary politics.

However, scholars have given relatively little attention to the question of whether or how such discourse influences citizens' political cognitions and judgments with respect to "issue voting" as described above. As Glendon (1991, p. 3) contended, the language of rights helps political figures "to persuade, inspire, explain, or justify" their issue policies *and* enhance their public image. Some research supports this view, suggesting that emphasis by politicians and news media on rights and morals increases the likelihood that voters will interpret issues in an ethical manner (Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). Other work suggests that such discourse encourages individuals to make attributions about candidate integrity (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998a; Luker, 1984; Page & Clelland, 1984). Hence, decisions by politicians and journalists about what values to emphasize in issue debates may exert substantial influence on the types of considerations used by citizens as they choose among candidates. These studies, however, have not placed these suggested relationships among political discourse, news coverage, and citizens' issue and candidate evaluations within a broader model of voting behavior. The importance of doing so is highlighted by research showing that character evaluations often play an important role in electoral decisions (e.g., Graber, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crête, 1992; Just et al., 1996; Kinder, 1986; Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, & Sullivan, 1990).

In this research, we posit that issues commonly discussed by politicians and news media in the language of rights and morals (e.g., abortion and gun control) exert qualitatively different effects on citizens' political cognitions than issues (e.g., health care) that also contain salient ethical dimensions but are rarely discussed in terms of rights and morals. Specifically, we theorize that issues commonly discussed in an ethically charged manner may not only influence voting behavior *directly,* because of citizens' acceptance or rejection of candidates on the basis of issue stands, but also *indirectly* as thoughts about these issues trigger other political evaluations (such as assessments of candidate character or rights-based issue interpretations) that contribute in an important way to electoral choices. To

test these ideas, we conducted an experiment in which we systematically altered a single issue—which varied in the types of value conflicts emphasized in news coverage—across three otherwise constant political information environments to examine how individuals process, interpret, and use issue coverage in choosing among candidates.

Literature Review

It is widely accepted that cognitive knowledge structures, or schemata, that enter active thought can influence how individuals evaluate a wide range of concepts and ideas. Some scholars have studied how cognitions frequently or recently activated in response to a stimulus become more readily "accessible"—that is, more easily retrievable from memory—for application to attitude objects (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Graber, 1988; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & King, 1981). For familiar objects, the relevant schemata are highly accessible and thus easily activated and used; when objects are more obscure, research suggests that contextual cues may activate relevant cognitive structures to guide information processing and the construction of attitudes (Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989; Lau, 1989; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988; Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Once activated, schemata remain on top of the mental bin, making them highly accessible for at least a period of time (Srull & Wyer, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1989). In turn, these accessible schemata, particularly if judged to be applicable, may alter the basis for evaluating other objects in the political environment because judgments often "depend less on the entire repertoire of people's knowledge and more on which aspects of their knowledge happen to come to mind" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 64).

Building on these insights, a growing body of research in political communication indicates that shifts in the availability of particular types of information in one's contextual environment can increase the accessibility of certain ideas for individuals, which then shape the criteria—such as issues and image factors—considered while forming political judgments (see Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar & Simon, 1994; Johnston et al., 1992; Keeter, 1987; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Schleuder, McCombs, & Wanta, 1991; Shah et al., 1996; Willnat & Zhu, 1996). In particular, the discussion of campaign issues in terms of conflicting values, or what Ball-Rokeach and Loges (1996) called "value-choices," has been found to influence how voters understand and use issues when making electoral decisions. For example, Domke and Shah (1995) argued that voters form different psychological linkages with political issues on the basis of the interaction of their core values with news media coverage; in turn, these "issue interpretations" influence both what information is processed and how much information is integrated in casting a vote (see also Lau, Smith, & Fiske, 1991; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1997). Particularly relevant to this research is the finding that when

individuals interpret issues in ethical terms, candidate choice tends to be driven predominantly by a "match" between the voter and candidates on the ethically interpreted issue (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998b).

Support for this perspective is offered in functional and motivational orientations on attitudes and social behavior. Several scholars have advanced perspectives emphasizing psychological phenomena that function to demonstrate and maintain individuals' underlying morals, ethics, and values (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989; Rokeach, 1973; Snyder & DeBono, 1989; Tetlock, 1986, 1989). These viewpoints suggest that issue voting may be a means for individuals to verify and affirm their self-conception (see Abelson, 1988; Greenwald, 1989; Monroe, 1995; Swann, 1984), particularly if an issue is discussed by politicians and news media or interpreted by individuals as closely tied to ethical or moral values.

The evidence is more mixed, however, regarding the ability of campaign news coverage to activate thoughts about a candidate's integrity (i.e., morality, trustworthiness or honesty, and compassion).[1] Mendelsohn (1996) found that as media exposure increased, voters focused more on trustworthiness and less on partisanship in evaluating candidates in the 1988 Canadian election. However, in experimental research specifically examining whether *issue coverage* prompts thoughts about politicians' character, Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnick (1984) found that integrity concerns were "absent" when news coverage emphasized the predominantly fiscal issues of energy, defense, and inflation; they speculated that their results might have been different had they instead presented individuals with "a collection of news stories bearing on 'moral' performance" (p. 786; see also Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Consistent with this view, considerations of candidate integrity were found to be present when media coverage emphasized issues commonly discussed in moral terms (Domke et al., 1998a), but the implications for voting behavior were not considered.

The need for further research on these relationships is particularly suggested by social psychological models of voting. Perceptions of candidate character commonly have been identified as a critical component of citizens' electoral behavior (e.g., Graber, 1996; Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995), regardless of a voter's degree of political expertise (Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Pierce, 1993). For example, research on the 1984 U.S. presidential election suggested a voting process in which both high and low political sophisticates used candidates' issue positions to form "judgments of [candidate] personal qualities as well as judgments of personal competencies"; in turn, these assessments contributed substantially to candidate comparisons and the

[1] Factor analysis in several studies has demonstrated that voters focus on two correlated but empirically distinct dimensions of candidate character—integrity and competence (see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982). Integrity has been operationalized primarily in terms of morality, honesty, trustworthiness, degree of power-hungriness, and/or compassion.

resulting vote decision (Rahn et al., 1990, p. 191). Results consistent with this model were found in research on the 1988 Canadian elections (Johnston et al., 1992) and the 1992 U.S. presidential election (Just et al., 1996).

Theoretical Argument

In this research, we posit that political candidates and news media, through selection and emphasis of certain values and issues in an electoral campaign, are likely to influence which cognitions are activated as voters evaluate a political environment. In this process, we expect that the value conflicts accentuated in particular issue debates will interact with individuals' cognitions, encouraging citizens to form issue interpretations and make character evaluations that are contingent on what issues are emphasized in media coverage. In turn, we expect that these activated political judgments will function as important influences on vote choice.

In particular, discussion of political issues in the language of rights and morals may have important implications for individuals' evaluations of candidate integrity, especially morality, because positions on these issues are likely to foster thoughts about a candidate's deeper values and convictions. We expect attributions about candidate integrity to be formed in part because candidates and interest groups often discuss issues such as abortion, gun control, pornography, and capital punishment in ethically charged terms "to legitimate to themselves and to communicate to others why their choice is more moral" than that of their opponents (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996, p. 279). Because citizens often encounter the value conflicts in these issues through protests, issue initiatives, talk shows, dramatic news events, and so on, it seems likely that, first, the values and schemata associated with ethically charged issues are highly accessible as individuals frequently draw on them in processing information about their social and political environments, and, second, a linkage may exist between rights and morals discourse and consideration by voters of candidate integrity. In turn, activated thoughts about candidate integrity seem likely to influence voting choices, with individuals either favoring candidates perceived to be high in integrity or rejecting candidates thought to be lacking. Such a process seems particularly likely to occur when contextual cues—such as rights and morals discourse about issues—effectively *encourage* voters to apply ethically based evaluations in their decision making.

It also seems likely that such discourse may activate cognitive considerations that lead individuals to interpret the issues as closely tied to their core values—that is, in an ethical manner. If so, research (Domke et al., 1998b) suggests that individuals who form such ethical interpretations—as opposed, say, to more economic or pragmatic interpretations—are likely to be strongly motivated to choose a candidate with whom they agree; that is, voters become likely to make a voting decision that is driven primarily, although not necessarily exclusively, by a desire to find a candidate who shares their stand on the ethically interpreted issue.

As suggested by Swann (1984) and Tetlock (1986), this type of decision-making process seems particularly likely to occur when individuals face a choice—such as a vote—that has implications for whether they perceive themselves as moral and principled, or, conversely, as compromising basic values. In contrast, individuals who do not interpret issues in an ethical manner are likely to be much less motivated to achieve a "match" between their position and candidates' stands on any particular issue.

In sum, then, we posit that rights and morals discourse about issues affects citizens' cognitions and contributes to voting behavior in two distinct but conceptually related ways: Citizens become likely to form and make use of evaluations of the integrity of the candidates, and citizens become likely to seek an issue-position "match" on those issues for which discourse is ethically charged (particularly when they hold a similar interpretation of the issue).[2] To be clear, we recognize that other factors—including party affiliation and various socioeconomic variables—also are likely to influence voting behavior. Nonetheless, we believe that the presence of ethically charged discourse about issues exerts important and distinct influences on vote choice. Specific hypotheses are presented below.

Method

Sample

This study was part of a research program examining how citizens in distinctly different subpopulations process media messages and evaluate issues and candidates in making voting decisions. The present sample included members of two subpopulations: 88 labor union members in an upper Midwestern state and 204 undergraduate students in a large Midwestern city. Data were collected in small group settings between February and October 1996. These populations were chosen for four reasons. First, labor unions have demonstrated renewed prominence in several recent elections. Second, despite the political relevance of labor union members, there has been little systematic study of their political cognitions. Third, union members and students were expected to be ideologically liberal on the issues in this study, thereby providing an opportunity for scholarship on issues discussed in terms of rights and morals to expand beyond a common focus on religious conservatives (Domke et al., 1998a; Luker, 1984; Moen, 1984; Olson & Carroll, 1992; Shah et al., 1996). Finally, union members and students were expected to

[2] The recognition that behavior may be affected by dual processes—conceptually related yet independent routes of influence—is central to a number of theories on the psychology of attitudes, including the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), the heuristic systematic model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), and protection motivation theory (Rogers, 1983). In referencing these theories, we do not intend to suggest that one cognitive route is more or less systematic than the other, but rather to emphasize that political discourse focusing on rights and morals may affect vote choice in differing ways.

hold similar ideological and issue preferences but to differ substantially in their demographics.

Expectations about the political orientations of the two groups were borne out. For example, 44% of the union members were Democrats, 45% were independent, and 11% Republicans—a clearly left-leaning distribution. The students were a bit more moderate but also leaned to the left, with 36% Democratic, 42% independent, and 22% Republican. Both populations also were liberal on the key issues in this study. Among union members, 62% "strongly" or "mildly" supported abortion rights, 65% supported gun control,[3] and 75% supported a national health care plan, a distribution similar to the students (67% supported abortion rights, 90% supported gun control, and 77% supported a national health care plan). In addition, the level of political involvement was almost identical, with roughly 24% of both populations indicating that they discussed politics at least 3 days in the past week.

The two populations differed significantly in several respects. Union members tended to be much older (mean age 39.8) and had a wider range of ages (25 to 62) than the students (mean age 20.9, range 18 to 47). Educational levels also varied; the highest grade completed was a high school diploma for 45% of union members versus 28% of the students. Finally, 71% of union members were male compared to 34% of the students. In sum, we used the same experimental design with two populations that share a liberal ideological orientation yet differ substantially in life experiences.

Research Design

The core of this research strategy is the controlled presentation of political information environments. Each environment contained newspaper articles, written by a former professional journalist, that contained the contrasting views of three candidates on four issues in a primary campaign. Articles were presented in a format consistent with recent "issue-oriented" political media coverage (see Miller, 1994; Schaffer & Cloud, 1996). The issue positions of the fictitious candidates—Richard Hancock, Michael Garrett, and David Williamson—were based on positions of actual candidates and, in recognition of the complexity of the modern political arena, avoided portrayals that were purely conservative or liberal (see Table I for a summary of the positions).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three political information environments. Each environment presented articles on three issues that emphasized fiscal dimensions (education, economy, government cuts), hereafter referred to as the "controlled" issues. Each environment also included a fourth article on a

[3] It is not surprising that a considerable minority of union members in this study favored gun rights, given that some of them resided in rural parts of the state, where hunting is a popular recreational activity. Nonetheless, a solid majority of union members (65%) favored the position of gun control, which places them on the liberal side of this issue, consistent with the students.

Table I. Candidate Positions on All Issues

	Candidates		
	Richard Hancock	Michael Garrett	David Williamson
Manipulated issues			
Abortion	Opposes abortion rights (conservative)	Supports abortion rights (liberal)	Supports abortion rights (liberal)
Gun control	Opposes waiting period (conservative)	Supports waiting period (liberal)	Supports waiting period (liberal)
Health care	Free market (conservative)	Govt. intervention (liberal)	Govt. intervention (liberal)
Controlled issues			
Economy	Raise taxes on wealthy (liberal)	Raise taxes on wealthy (liberal)	Capital gains tax cut (conservative)
Education	Opposes vouchers (liberal)	Favors vouchers (conservative)	Opposes vouchers (liberal)
Government cuts	Opposes massive cuts (liberal)	Favors massive cuts (conservative)	Favors massive cuts (conservative)
Summary	Conservative on manipulated issues; liberal on controlled issues	Liberal on manipulated issues; conservative on most controlled issues	Liberal on manipulated issues; conservative on most controlled issues

different manipulated issue: abortion in the first environment, gun control in the second environment, and health care in the third environment.

Abortion was discussed in terms of rights and morals by pitting the sanctity of an unborn child's life against the personal liberty of a woman to control her body and destiny. Gun control was discussed in terms of rights and morals by pitting personal and societal security against the constitutional liberty of a person to quickly purchase and own a gun. Health care was *not* discussed in terms of rights and morals; instead, the principle of a free market was pitted against the need for government intervention to control costs. Varying these issues across conditions created two environments (abortion, gun control) with issues that are commonly discussed in ethically charged language but differ in their recent salience in U.S. politics. The third environment (health care) contained a longstanding issue, often discussed in a mix of ethical and material dimensions, that was discussed here in material terms. Thus, these three environments allowed comparisons of attributions about candidate integrity as well as comparisons of ethical interpretations of issues when media coverage does or does not include an issue discussed in the language of rights and morals.

Several steps were taken to ensure that (1) any observed differences between participants across research conditions were due to media coverage of different issues, and (2) any observed cognitive effects within participants were initiated by processing of issue information, not image information. Across political environments, all information was held constant except for varying the issues of abortion, gun control, and health care. Within environments, participants were provided with

only four items of (identical or nearly identical) personal information about the candidates: gender, age, educational background, and occupational background. Candidates and issues were then rotated in each packet of articles to avoid order effects. Each participant read the articles, then filled out a questionnaire; most of them took 35 to 45 minutes to complete the materials.

Measurement

The questionnaire (see the Appendix) began by asking participants to make a candidate choice. This selection became the dependent measure when analyzing factors that influence voting behavior. Specifically, three separate measures of candidate choice were constructed, with each candidate isolated once. For example, in one of the permutations of the variable, participants who chose Hancock were coded as 1, and those who selected either of the other candidates (Garrett or Williamson) were coded as 0. Thus, we had three variables, each representing choice of one of the candidates, allowing for close examination of the factors contributing to the selection of each candidate.

After choosing a candidate, participants answered a series of open-ended questions probing the factors considered in the decision. These questions were designed to assess specific decision-making strategies used in making a candidate choice, serving essentially as a "memory dump" for participants (Ericsson & Simon, 1984; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Among other things, responses provided insight into how much consideration participants had given to the few personal items about the candidates (i.e., age, gender, education, and occupation). Very few responses mentioned these factors, which increased our confidence that issue criteria served as the primary foundation for evaluations of the candidates.

Participants' perceptions of candidate integrity were assessed with a closed-ended checklist of personal attributes identified by previous research on candidate character (e.g., Graber, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston et al., 1992; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982). Participants were asked whether they thought each candidate, if elected, would or would not possess each of three attributes; they could also answer "not sure" in each case. We expected that *morality* might tap participants' impressions of a candidate's deeper convictions and sense of principles (i.e., to do what is right); *honesty* might tap their impressions of a candidate's truthfulness and forthrightness (i.e., to be consistent in one's words and behavior); and *power-hungriness* might tap their impressions of a candidate's ability to place the public interest before personal ambition (i.e., to do what is best for society). Previous political communication research has often identified these three factors as components of candidate integrity, but has not explored whether they serve distinct roles in information processing and decision making.

Three points are noteworthy about these measures of candidate integrity. First, as mentioned, they allow us to examine whether there is a relationship between the issues that are emphasized in the political environment and the components of

integrity that become activated in citizens' candidate evaluations. Second, this measurement strategy is candidate-specific; that is, perceptions of each candidate's attributes are separately assessed. These candidate-specific attributions, in turn, can be examined for their potential influence on participants' "vote" choice. Third, this approach includes directionality; that is, perceptions of whether a candidate possesses or lacks morality are tapped. It seems plausible that either impression by a citizen might influence a judgment among candidates.

Participants' own positions on the issues were measured by their level of agreement with statements corresponding to the policy positions on each issue. Possible responses were placed on a 5-point continuum ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The importance that participants placed on the issues in their voting decision was examined via 7-point scales, ranging from "not at all important" to "extremely important," for each issue in the environment to which they were assigned: education, government cuts, economy, and the manipulated issue (abortion, gun control, or health care).

Next, individual interpretations of the issues were measured by three open-ended questions that engaged participants in a thought-listing procedure to tap how the issues related to their personal values, concerns about society, and personal life situations. Twelve students and six union members did not answer these questions. For the remaining participants, each issue was coded for whether or not it received an ethical interpretation. Issues were coded as receiving an ethical interpretation if the individual discussed the issue within the framework of human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal principles. An issue was coded as receiving a non-ethical interpretation if the individual discussed the issue in terms of economics, expedience, practicality, or personal self-interest (see Brown & Carmines, 1995; Shah et al., 1996). For the union members, two coders agreed on 306 of 328 individual-issue codings, producing an intercoder reliability coefficient of .93. For the students, two coders agreed on 708 of 768 individual-issue codings, producing an intercoder reliability coefficient of .92. All remaining issue codings were discussed and then classified.

The last part of the questionnaire focused on demographic and orientational variables.

Results

Our first prediction is that individuals evaluating a political environment that includes an issue discussed in terms of rights and morals will be more likely to form attributions about candidate integrity than individuals evaluating a political environment that does not contain such an issue. We created dependent variables to examine participants' attributions about the three components of integrity: morality, honesty, and power-hungriness. These variables were constructed in two steps. First, for each candidate, participants who developed an impression of the candidate on a particular trait—by indicating that a candidate either would be or would

not be moral if elected, for example—were given a score of 1, and participants who said they were not sure were given a score of 0. Next, these scores were added together to create indices of the total number of candidates for whom participants made attributions regarding morality, honesty, and power-hungriness (range of each index, 0 to 3). A one-way analysis of variance using the least significant differences post-hoc test was then performed for each population to examine differences between experimental conditions and these indices. The results are presented in Table II.

The results of post-hoc tests show that in both populations, participants evaluating a political environment containing the issues of abortion or gun control made significantly more attributions about the morality of candidates than did participants evaluating a political environment containing the issue of health care. Among the union members, significant differences also were found between the first two environments: Participants who received the issue of abortion were more likely to make attributions about candidate morality than those who received the issue of gun control. This pattern of results may explain why the F test is significant at $p < .05$ among union members but not among students. At the same time, however, in both populations differences between experimental conditions were *not* found for attributions about candidate honesty or power-hungriness; this finding suggests that participants made meaningful distinctions when considering the components of candidate integrity. These results, then, simultaneously indicate that (a) politician and media emphasis on issues commonly discussed in an ethically charged manner can prompt individuals to develop perceptions of candidate morality, and (b) citizens may make important distinctions in their impressions of candidate integrity.[4]

Our second prediction is that individuals evaluating a political environment that includes an issue discussed in terms of rights and morals will be more likely to interpret that issue in an ethical manner than individuals evaluating a political environment that contains an issue not discussed in that way. To test this prediction, we ran cross-tabulations in both populations between the experimental conditions and participants' interpretations of the manipulated issues. The results (Table III) show strong support for the prediction. In both populations, participants were significantly more likely to form an ethical interpretation of the issues of abortion or gun control than the issue of health care. Among the union members, in their respective political environments 89% interpreted abortion in an ethical manner

[4] Another noteworthy point about the Table II results is that the students consistently made more attributions about candidate integrity than did the union members. In every comparison across the three indices, the number of attributions about candidates was higher for the students than for the union members. These results may be suggestive that individuals who are less knowledgeable about politics and whose issue schemata are not as developed or cognitively integrated are more likely to focus on candidate character, which is relatively easy to evaluate and has been a prominent feature of U.S. national politics in recent years. However, because we do not have measures of political sophistication or knowledge, this perspective is only speculative.

Table II. Political Environment by Amount of Candidate Integrity Attributions

	Political environment			
Integrity attributions	Abortion	Gun control	Health care	*F* tests
Labor union members				
Morality	1.82[a]	1.35[b]	0.87[c]	$F = 6.71$, df = 80, $p < .05$
Honesty	1.07	1.05	0.97	$F = 0.07$, df = 80, n.s.
Power-hungriness	1.54	1.52	1.37	$F = 0.18$, df = 80, n.s.
n	28	23	30	
Undergraduate students				
Morality	1.99[a]	1.99[a]	1.71[b]	$F = 1.89$, df = 201, n.s.
Honesty	1.44	1.38	1.54	$F = 0.46$, df = 202, n.s.
Power-hungriness	1.88	1.72	1.65	$F = 0.89$, df = 201, n.s.
n	68	68	66	

Note. Values in table are numbers of candidates about whom participants made attributions (range, 0 to 3). Means with differing superscripts are significantly different from one another (least significant differences post-hoc tests, $p < .05$).

Table III. Political Environment by Interpretations of the Manipulated Issues

	Political environment		
Issue interpretation	Abortion	Gun control	Health care
Labor union members			
Ethical	88.9%	41.7%	25.8%
Non-ethical	11.1%	58.3%	74.2%
Totals	100% ($n = 27$)	100% ($n = 24$)	100% ($n = 31$)
	$\chi^2 = 24.2$, df = 2, $p < .05$		
Undergraduate students			
Ethical	89.6%	56.7%	31.0%
Non-ethical	10.4%	43.3%	69.0%
Totals	100% ($n = 67$)	100% ($n = 67$)	100% ($n = 58$)
	$\chi^2 = 45.1$, df = 2, $p < .05$		

and 42% interpreted gun control in an ethical manner, compared to 26% who formed an ethical interpretation of health care. Among the students, in their respective political environments 90% interpreted abortion in an ethical manner and 57% interpreted gun control in an ethical manner, compared to 31% who formed an ethical interpretation of health care. These results, then, support earlier findings in this research program (Domke et al., 1998b; Shah et al., 1996) that emphasis on rights and morals in news coverage increases the likelihood that voters will interpret issues in an ethical manner.

Next, before testing whether these activated cognitions influenced participants' choice of a candidate, we turn to a close examination of the cognitive associations. As the results (Tables II and III) show, discussion of issues in the language of rights and morals spurred both candidate morality attributions and ethical issue interpretations. We theorize that these two effects represent distinct

cognitions that are triggered by the same ethically charged discourse about issues. It may be the case, however, that these effects occurred primarily among the same individuals and indicate activation of essentially the same schema. Examination of the relationship between these variables is therefore important for two reasons. First, their relation sheds light on potentially differing ways that a discourse of rights and morals exerts influence on political cognitions; second, their relation is crucial in considering how integrity evaluations and issue interpretations may influence voting behavior.

With this in mind, we ran correlations between participants' candidate morality attributions and issue interpretations within each political environment, an approach that allowed us to get "within the cognitive system of the individual" (Lavine, Sullivan, Borgida, & Thomsen, 1996, p. 298). If the experimental effects represent the same cognitive structures, then a positive correlation should exist between candidate-specific morality attributions (0 = no attribution about candidate, 1 = attribution about candidate) or total morality attributions (range, 0 to 3 candidates) and issue interpretations (0 = non-ethical interpretation, 1 = ethical interpretation). In contrast, if these are separate and distinct cognitions, as we believe, no pattern of correlations should emerge. We did not include candidate honesty and power-hungriness attributions in this or further analyses after observing no experimental effects on these cognitions. To increase variance, we combined students and union members. Partial correlations were then run, controlling for participant population. The results (Table IV) suggest that participants' candidate morality attributions and ethical issue interpretations, both triggered by the discussion of abortion and gun control in an ethically charged manner, represent cognitively separate effects. Only two of 12 correlations are statistically significant, and both of these are quite modest in magnitude and indicate a *negative* relationship between these two cognitions. In short, no clear pattern can be discerned from the correlation matrix. These results suggest that politician and media emphasis on rights and morals in issue debate exerts distinct cognitive effects on how individuals think about (a) issues and (b) candidate integrity.

Finally, we considered whether the activated cognitions exhibited a priming effect on participants' "votes." For this analysis, we followed the strategy of previous "priming" research (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990) that compared the relative contributions of specific cognitive criteria to the same political judgment under differing political conditions. Using this approach, we focused first on the impact of candidate morality attributions on candidate choice, comparing participants in the differing political environments. Our prediction is that candidate morality appraisals will contribute more substantially to the vote choice among participants receiving issues discussed in an ethically charged manner than among those receiving issues not discussed this way, even when their positions on the issues, the importance they place on the issues, and other relevant influences are taken into consideration.

Table IV. Partial Correlations Between Issue Interpretations and Candidate Morality Attributions

Morality attributions	Issue interpretations		
	Abortion	Gun control	Health care
Williamson	–.20* (n = 93)	.07 (n = 89)	–.05 (n = 87)
Hancock	–.12 (n = 93)	–.01 (n = 90)	–.10 (n = 87)
Garrett	.00 (n = 92)	.12 (n = 89)	–.06 (n = 87)
Total attributions	–.18* (n = 92)	.08 (n = 88)	–.11 (n = 87)

Note. Correlations control for participant population. Issue interpretations are coded as 0 = non-ethical, 1 = ethical. Morality attributions are coded as 0 = no attribution about candidate, 1 = attribution about candidate.

*$p < .05$.

To examine this prediction, we returned to participants' original responses of whether they thought candidates would be moral (or not) if elected, or if they were uncertain. For each candidate, a response of "would not be" moral was coded as 1, "not sure" was coded as 2, and "would be" moral was coded as 3. Next, separate measures of candidate choice were constructed, with each candidate isolated once (as discussed above). Logistic regressions then were run with candidate choice (coded as 0 = candidates not chosen, 1 = candidate chosen) regressed on age, political party affiliation, issue importance, issue positions, total morality attributions, and attributions regarding the morality of each candidate.[5] The intent here was to make comparisons between participants whose political environment included an issue discussed in an ethically charged manner (abortion or gun control) and those whose environment did not include such an issue (health care). The results are presented in Table V. Four points should be noted about these regressions:

1. The overall regression equations performed well in explaining participants' "vote" choices, as indicated by the goodness-of-fit tests and variance explained. In five of the six equations, the model accounted for 45 to 50% of variance in candidate preferences.

2. As expected in this controlled study in which the candidates were all Democrats, political party affiliation exerted no meaningful influence on candidate

[5] To maintain consistency across measures and to clarify interpretation of the analysis, we coded participants' positions on each issue as 1 = strongly conservative to 5 = strongly liberal. In the regressions in Table V, age is included because it functions as a surrogate for the subpopulation variable (age and population r = .83), and political party affiliation is included because it has been found to be an important predictor of voting behavior in a great deal of political research. In addition, a variable regarding the total number of candidates about whom participants made morality attributions was included for two reasons. First, we were interested in whether participants who made a high number of attributions tended to choose a particular candidate (and, in contrast, whether those who made very few attributions also tended to choose a specific candidate). Second, controlling for this variable increases confidence that any relationships between candidate-specific morality attributions and candidate choice are not limited to participants (i.e., the students and union members in the abortion environment) who made considerably more morality attributions than did other participants.

Table V. Regression of Candidate Choice on Demographics, Orientations, Issue Positions, Issue Importance, and Candidate Morality Attributions

	Candidate choice					
	Garrett		Williamson		Hancock	
	Health care	Abortion/ gun control	Health care	Abortion/ gun control	Health care	Abortion/ gun control
Party affiliation	.00	–.07	.00	.00	.00	.00
Age	.00	–.08	.00	.05	.17	.00
Economy importance	–.08	.00	.11	.00	.00	.00
Education importance	–.21*	.00	.07	.00	.19*	.00
Govt. cuts importance	.00	–.09*	.09	.00	–.12	.05
Manip. issue importance	.00	.00	.05	.00	.00	.00
Economy position	.18*	.19*	–.25*	–.28*	.18	.16*
Education position	–.12	–.25*	.12	.18*	.00	.14*
Govt. cuts position	.00	.00	.00	–.12*	.00	.07
Manip. issue position	.00	.17*	.00	.19*	.00	–.32*
Total morality attributions	.00	.00	–.07	–.08	.00	.00
Garrett morality	.10	.21*	.00	–.12*	.00	–.08
Williamson morality	–.15*	–.16*	.15*	.20*	.00	.00
Hancock morality	.00	.00	–.09	–.08	.00	.16*
Goodness of fit	98.9	134.0	78.5	99.9	30.5	109.1
Cox & Snell R^2	.53	.48	.49	.48	.31	.44
n	83	173	83	173	83	173

Note. Values in table are *R* coefficients. Dependent variables are coded as 0 = candidate not chosen, 1 = candidate chosen.

*$p < .05$.

selections. This result suggests that participants focused on the candidates' issue positions in making their choices. In addition, age, which would have captured any differences between populations, had no consistent impact on candidate selection.

3. As expected, participants' issue positions consistently had the greatest influence on candidate choice. Particularly salient is that positions on the manipulated issue significantly contributed to the "vote" when the political environment included ethically charged abortion or gun control (*R* coefficients of .17 to .32 across equations) but made negligible contributions when health care was inserted into the environment. These results are consistent with the impact of such issues found in election research (Abramowitz, 1995; Cook et al., 1994; Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996; Smith, 1994). At the same time, economy and (to a lesser degree) education also often contributed to the "vote." Notably, the relative influence of each issue on candidate choice varied depending on what positions distinguished the candidates. For example, because Hancock was the lone conservative on the ethically charged issues, participants' positions on abortion and gun control powerfully predicted whether he was selected ($R = –.32$, indicating that social conservatives chose him at high rates). For similar reasons, participants' positions on the

economy strongly predicted whether Williamson was selected (*R*s = –.25 and –.28, indicating that economic conservatives preferred him), whereas their positions on education predicted whether Garrett was selected (*R* = –.25 in ethically charged environments, indicating that education conservatives preferred him).[6]

4. The results provide consistent evidence of a priming effect of morality attributions on candidate choice. In all three comparisons, participants' appraisals of candidate morality contributed more strongly to the vote choice among those receiving issues discussed in an ethically charged manner than among those receiving issues not discussed in this way. When Hancock was isolated, attributions regarding his morality significantly (and positively) contributed to candidate choice among participants receiving the issues of abortion or gun control (*R* = .16) but not among those receiving the issue of health care (*R* = .00). Similar results were found when Garrett was isolated as the candidate choice (*R* comparison across conditions of .21 to .10). The gap was not as large but nonetheless consistent when Williamson was isolated as the candidate choice (*R* comparison of .20 to .15 across conditions). Further, the results suggest that ethically charged discourse about issues also prompted participants to become more likely to use negative candidate morality appraisals in deciding to avoid candidates. In two of three comparisons, attributions that particular candidates were lacking in morality contributed in a much more substantial manner to candidate choice among participants whose political environment included the issues of abortion and gun control.

The pattern of evidence, then, suggests that even after accounting for participants' issue positions, issue importance, age, party affiliation, and the total number of candidate attributions, discussion of issues in terms of rights and morals by politicians and news media not only increased the likelihood of attributions about candidate morality but also significantly altered the weight that participants placed on these appraisals in candidate choice.[7]

[6] When considering the regressions with the "vote" choice as the dependent variable (Tables V and VI), the *R* coefficients reveal that the relative influence of each issue on candidate choice varied depending on what positions most clearly distinguished the candidates. For example, Hancock was heavily preferred by moral conservatives, Williamson was strongly preferred by economic conservatives, and Garrett was preferred by education conservatives. In all cases, we could have stated the inverse relationships: Hancock was heavily avoided by moral liberals, Williamson was strongly avoided by economic liberals, and Garrett was avoided by education liberals. For ease of discussion, we state the relationships between issue positions and candidate choice in their positive form. Further, if our research design had instead isolated one moral liberal against two moral conservatives, or one economic liberal against two economic conservatives, we expect that liberals would have been the participants heavily preferring certain candidates.

[7] The regressions in Table V include 14 independent variables, which produces a participants-to-variables ratio of 6:1 for participants in the health care environment, a ratio lower than what is ideal for such statistical analysis. A similar ratio is in Table VI. To make certain that the observed relationships were not in some way an artifact of this analysis, we computed several additional regression equations with fewer variables, in many differing combinations. These analyses produced results closely consistent with the results in Tables V and VI, thereby increasing our confidence in these findings.

As a second step in these final analyses, we examined the contribution of ethical issue interpretations to candidate choice. A general expectation in this research is that individuals in their voting selections are likely to place considerable weight on candidates' positions on issues for which discourse is ethically charged, an expectation that has received support in previous research (Abramowitz, 1995; Cook et al., 1994; Domke et al., 1998b; Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996; Smith, 1994) and in this study (Table V). However, a potentially important contingency for this expectation is whether individuals form an ethical issue interpretation that, in essence, "agrees" with the emphasis on rights and morals in the political environment they encounter. If such an agreement occurs, it seems likely that voters would become substantially motivated to find a candidate who offers a position "match" on the ethically interpreted issue. In contrast, individuals who do not interpret issues in an ethical manner would seem likely to be much less motivated to achieve a match with a candidate on any particular issue.

Our final prediction, then, is that participants' positions on issues discussed in terms of rights and morals will contribute more substantially to the vote choice among participants who interpret the issue in an ethical manner than among those who do not interpret the issue in an ethical manner, even when issue importance and positions on other issues are taken into consideration. Thus, this claim was tested using only participants who received the issues of abortion or gun control, which were presented in a language of rights and morals. We again used as dependent variables the separate measures of candidate choice in which each candidate was isolated once. Paralleling the analysis in Table V, logistic regressions were run with candidate choice (0 = candidates not chosen, 1 = candidate chosen) regressed on participants' issue positions and the importance placed on each of the issues in the political environment, with the intent to make comparisons between participants who interpreted abortion or gun control in an ethical manner and those who did not form such an interpretation. The results (Table VI) are noteworthy for two reasons:

1. The overall regression equations explained a fairly consistent amount of variance in candidate preferences, between 36 and 43% across the equations. The goodness of fit, however, always was considerably better among participants who interpreted abortion or gun control in an ethical manner.

2. The results provide consistent evidence of a priming effect of ethical issue interpretations on candidate choice. In all three comparisons, participants' positions on issues discussed in terms of rights and morals contributed more substantially to the vote choice among those who interpreted the issue in an ethical manner than among those who did not interpret the issue in this manner. When Williamson was isolated as the candidate choice, participants' position on abortion or gun control significantly contributed to candidate choice among those with an ethical issue interpretation ($R = .25$) but not among those who did not form an ethical interpretation ($R = .00$). Although the gap was not quite as large, similar results were found when Garrett was isolated (R comparison across issue interpretations

Table VI. Regression of Candidate Choice on Issue Positions and Issue Importance for Participants With Differing Interpretations of Abortion or Gun Control

	Candidate choice					
	Garrett		Williamson		Hancock	
	Non-ethical	Ethical	Non-ethical	Ethical	Non-ethical	Ethical
Economy importance	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Education importance	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Govt. cuts importance	.00	–.14*	.00	.09	.00	.09
Manip. issue importance	.00	.00	.00	.00	–.09	.00
Economy position	.20*	.28*	–.31*	–.40*	.10	.05
Education position	–.28*	–.21*	.17*	.13*	.00	.15*
Govt. cuts position	.00	.00	–.07	.00	.09	.00
Manip. issue position	.12	.28*	.00	.25*	–.29*	–.44*
Goodness of fit	40.6	129.3	47.2	113.4	33.1	101.0
Cox & Snell R^2	.36	.39	.41	.41	.36	.43
n	53	131	53	131	53	131

Note. Values in table are *R* coefficients. Dependent variables are coded as 0 = candidate not chosen, 1 = candidate chosen.

*$p < .05$.

of .28 to .12) and when Hancock was isolated (*R* comparison of –.44 to –.29 across issue interpretations). The pattern of evidence, then, suggests that ethical interpretations of issues, made much more likely by candidate and news media discussion of issues in terms of rights and morals, significantly altered the weight that participants placed on their positions on these issues as they made a candidate choice.

Discussion

These findings suggest that emphasis by politicians and news media on rights and morals in political discourse has an influence on citizens' evaluations of issues and candidates in electoral contests. Four central findings emerged in this study. First, experimental tests indicated that media emphasis on issues discussed in an ethically charged manner prompted individuals to make attributions about the morality of candidates. Such discourse, however, did not lead participants to make attributions about the candidates' honesty and power-hungriness, suggesting that people may make important distinctions when developing impressions of candidate integrity. Second, experimental results indicated that media emphasis on issues discussed in terms of rights and morals significantly increased the likelihood that individuals would interpret those issues in an ethical manner, again found in both subpopulations. Third, although candidate morality attributions and ethical issue interpretations were triggered by the same discourse of rights and morals, individual-level analysis showed no linkage between the two effects, suggesting that these activated cognitions represented distinct effects. Finally, examination of the factors

influencing participants' "vote" choices indicated that candidate and media discussion of issues in terms of rights and morals significantly increased the weight that participants placed on (a) candidate morality appraisals, and (b) the candidates' positions on the ethically charged issues, particularly when people shared an ethical interpretation of the issues.

It may be, then, that emphasis by politicians and news media on issues commonly discussed in terms of rights and morals (abortion, gun control, euthanasia, gay rights, pornography, and so on) affects political behavior in ways not sufficiently explored. The data in Tables V and VI indicate that individuals place substantial weight on issues discussed in an ethically charged manner in choosing among candidates, as earlier research has shown (Abramowitz, 1995; Cook et al., 1994; Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996; Smith, 1994). More notable in this study, however, is the finding that a discourse of rights and morals may prompt citizens to engage in *ethically based, yet cognitively bounded* evaluations that appear to set in motion two distinct processes. For some individuals, the ethical cognitions activated by rights and morals discourse appear to be directed toward the emphasized issues; that is, people become significantly more likely to form ethical interpretations of the issues discussed in ethically charged terms, a finding consistent with previous research (Domke et al., 1998b; Shah et al., 1996). For others, the ethical cognitions activated by rights and morals discourse appear to be directed toward candidates; that is, people become significantly more likely to make attributions about candidates' morality (and perhaps other elements of candidate integrity not examined in this study). The present results suggest that both of these cognitive processes may, in turn, ultimately contribute in an important way to individuals' electoral choices.

It would appear, therefore, that greater consideration needs to be given to gaining a more nuanced understanding of how issues, particularly ones discussed by politicians and news media in ethically charged terms, interact with citizens' values to influence voters' appraisals of a political context. In particular, this research provides support for scholarship that over the years has questioned the common dichotomy in popular understanding of the roles of political issues and candidate images in voting behavior (see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston et al., 1992; Rahn et al., 1990; RePass, 1976). At a minimum, it appears that issue stands not only define candidates in an ideological sense, but also are likely to activate related cognitive considerations among some voters as "issue stances become opportunities to examine candidates' priorities and characters" (Just et al., 1996, p. 220). Specifically, our research shows that issues discussed in ethically charged terms are not only used consistently by citizens as a basis to choose among available options, but are much more likely than stands on primarily fiscal issues to activate voters' thoughts about candidate integrity—in particular, morality—probably because positions on these issues foster thoughts about a candidate's deeper values and convictions. As a result, politician and news media decisions about what values to emphasize in issue debate may substantially influence which cognitive routes to

decision making are followed by citizens as they choose among candidates, because character considerations consistently have been found to influence voting behavior (Graber, 1996; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982; Pierce, 1993).

We recognize that there are limitations to the study's research design. Participants were presented with relatively limited information about candidate positions on only four issues, and little information was provided about the candidates; indeed, we intentionally minimized candidate differences on personal characteristics. The strength of the research design, however, is in maximizing internal validity by (a) carefully controlling a variety of variables that may influence individuals' information processing, and (b) measuring and then statistically controlling for other potentially confounding variables. What is most difficult in studying underlying *cognitive processes*—as opposed to examining factors that influence a specific vote choice—is being able to ascertain the information available to individual citizens *and* then to determine how that information is used by these voters in arriving at a decision. Research designs that control available information and carefully measure the ways in which the information is processed are more effective than questionnaire-based field studies for close examination of the mental processes used by voters.

Generalizability of the findings of this study is another matter, of course. It is nearly impossible to conduct the same kind of carefully controlled study with random assignment to different political environments using a random sample of voters. Nevertheless, we have taken several steps in our research program to broaden generalizability. First, we have constructed political information environments closely modeled on "real" political discourse. The construction of political discourse emphasizing value conflicts—particularly conflicts including ethical arguments—is common in contemporary politics as political actors attempt to justify certain positions and views as deserving of public support and journalists attempt to craft compelling news stories (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996; Graber, 1993; Patterson, 1993). Second, we have varied the ethically charged issue included in the political environments, thereby creating different value conflicts. In this study, the use of two issues discussed in ethical terms (abortion and gun control) enabled examination of the theorized relationship across issues that differ in several characteristics. Third, we have tested several populations of adults besides college students, selecting subpopulations that vary considerably in a number of important respects: education level, age, gender, occupation, party affiliation, and orientations toward relevant issues. Comparing and then pooling data, as we have done here with labor union members and undergraduate students, enables examination of hypothesis tests across differing populations. When the pattern of findings across the research populations consistently supports our hypotheses, as occurs in this study, confidence in the generalizability of the theory is increased.

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APPENDIX
Question Wording

Vote choice

Of the candidates presented, which one would you be most likely to vote for? [please mark small box] (Garrett, Hancock, Williamson)

Integrity attributions

As a Congressman, which of the following characteristics do you think each of the candidates would have? Check the appropriate column [for each candidate] (1) Would be, (2) Not sure, (3) Would not be

- Moral
- Honest
- Power-hungry

Positions on the issues

Please mark whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about each issue. If you do not have a position on the issue, mark the box titled "no opinion": (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Mildly disagree, (3) No opinion, (4) Mildly agree, (5) Strongly agree

- I support legislation that provides women with the choice of legalized abortions.
- I support legislation that would require a waiting period for handguns.
- I support a plan that provides health insurance for all individuals.
- I support a plan that would raise taxes on wealthy and cut taxes for lower and middle classes.
- I support government financial assistance to send children to private schools.

- I support a plan to "re-invent government" that would include massive spending cuts.

Importance of the issues
In determining your candidate choice, rate how important, from one (1) to seven (7), each of the issues was to you. One (1) means "not at all important," four (4) means "moderately important," and seven (7) means "extremely important."

- [Each issue listed separately]

Interpretations of issues
In answering the following questions, you may simply list words or phrases that capture any ideas, feelings or beliefs you have concerning the issues.

- When you consider the [particular] issue, what ideas, feelings, and beliefs come to mind?

Demographic and orientational variables
Answer the following questions about yourself:

- Indicate your gender: (1) Male, (2) Female
- Indicate your age: ____ years old
- What is the highest level of schooling you have attained? (e.g., high school sophomore = 10; high school graduate = 12; technical school degree = 14; college junior = 15; college degree = 16; master's degree = 18) ____
- How important is your religious faith to you? (1) Not at all important, (2) minimally important, (3) moderately important, (4) substantially important, (5) extremely important
- Identify your political party affiliation: (1) Democratic or DFL,* (2) Independent/unaffiliated, (3) Republican or IR,* (4) Other _____
- How many days within the last week did you have discussions with others about politics or public affairs? ____
- Indicate your household income: (1) less than $20,000, (2) between $20,001 and $30,000, (3) between $30,001 and $40,000, (4) between $40,001 and $50,000, (5) between $50,001 and $60,000, (6) between $60,001 and $70,000, (7) between $70,001 and $80,000, (8) between $80,001 and $90,000, (9) more than $90,001

*DFL, Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party; IR, Independent-Republican Party (the versions of the national parties in this state).