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THE EFFECTS OF ISSUE-FREE CUES

by

Timothy Alan Dukeman

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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I propose an addition to the existing literature: “issue-free cues.” I hypothesized that candidates are able to brand themselves with issue-free cues (things like flags, poses, family, etc.) and that these cues can cause voters to attribute positions to the candidate that do not necessarily line up with the candidate’s actual positions, or these cues could activate particular beliefs held by voters, rendering those beliefs more influential in their decision-making than they otherwise would be. Or, finally, they could use symbolic imagery to produce an emotional reaction that motivates voters to make their vote choice in a less logical manner. I tested the effects of visual stimuli on candidate selection, finding that candidates can, with even a small, subtle cue such as the background of the picture, determine which issues drive the decision-making of the very voters who are supposed to be holding them accountable.

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Review of the Literature

There is a clear consensus in Political Science literature that American voters are not well-informed. Delli Carpini and Keeter quote Paul Blumberg, who says, “Vast numbers of Americans are ignorant—not merely of the specialized details of government which ordinary citizens cannot be expected to master, but of the most elementary political facts—information so basic as to challenge the central tenet of government”, calling it “America’s embarrassing little secret.”¹ Delli Carpini and Keeter put forth that no political system can operate “effectively and democratically” without an informed electorate, and discuss the fact that such an uninformed electorate could constitute a “crisis” in American politics.²

Manipulation

What sort of crisis might be produced by an uninformed electorate? These concerns can be summed up in one word: manipulation. The essence of democracy is the ability of the people to hold government accountable and replace poor legislators with representatives who are sufficiently concerned with the interests of their constituents. If this accountability mechanism has been somehow compromised, the very foundations of democracy are threatened. The legitimacy of elections is severely undermined if they do not actually accomplish the goal of holding governmental figures accountable for their actions.

Electoral integrity is compromised most severely when, on a large scale, legislators are able to escape accountability by manipulating the public’s

¹ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 23.

² Ibid.

perception of them. For clarity, I do not mean that manipulation is occurring when a candidate powerfully and persuasively makes his case on the issues and convinces voters to support him. It is manipulation when a candidate is able to increase his support using tactics not even *related* to political issues (even tangentially).

I propose an addition to the existing literature: “issue-free cues.” For clarity, I conceive manipulation occurring in three distinct ways: symbols, information, and priming. I put forth that candidates are able to brand themselves with issue-free cues (things like flags, poses, family, etc.) and that these cues can cause voters to attribute positions to the candidate that do not necessarily line up with the candidate’s actual positions, or activate particular beliefs held by voters, rendering those beliefs more influential in their decision-making than they otherwise would be. Or, finally, they use symbolic imagery to produce an emotional reaction that motivates voters to make their vote choice in a less logical manner.

In cases of manipulation through information/branding, I posit that, instead of researching the candidate further, voters simply assume that the candidate is substantively similar to candidates who exhibit similar *secondary characteristics*. In other words, if socially conservative candidates typically brand themselves in very specific ways (beyond issue preferences, of course), then voters will also expect a candidate who displays the same secondary characteristics (issue-free cues) to be socially conservative. For example, since many socially conservative candidates intentionally brand themselves as being extremely patriotic, then an

American Flag may act as an issue-free cue in this way, allowing the candidate to manipulate voters. It could also mean things such as safety and security, leading voters to perceive a candidate as more hawkish on national defense issues than he actually is.

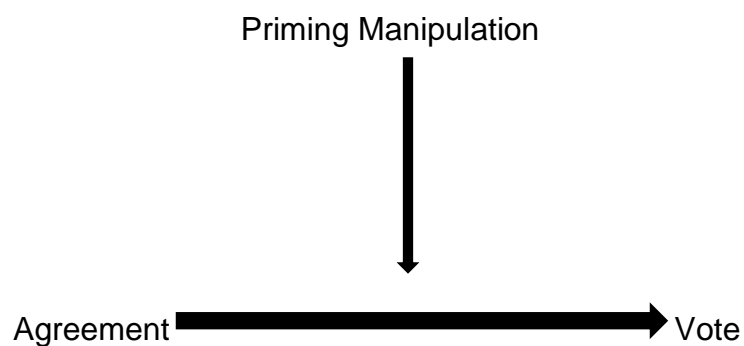
An information manipulation would work by causing voters to think that they agree with the candidate more, making them more likely to vote for him. This is a mediating relationship: the information manipulation produces increased agreement, which increases both support and the odds that a voter will choose that candidate. See below:

Information Manipulation \longrightarrow Increased Agreement \longrightarrow Vote

Additionally, an American Flag also evokes emotion, and can act as a symbol, which could produce the second type of manipulation: manipulation through symbols. In symbolic manipulation, voters' emotions are evoked, producing a much less logical decision-making process, and replacing an evaluation of interests with a vague sense of sentiment. This is a mediating relationship: the symbolic manipulation produces increased emotion, which increases both support and the odds that a voter will choose that candidate. See below:

Symbolic Manipulation \longrightarrow Increased Emotion \longrightarrow Vote

Finally, there is priming manipulation, where a visual, verbal, or other cue is used to focus the voter's attention on particular issues and to prioritize those issues, bringing them to salience. This is a subtle form of manipulation, which can warp voters' decision-making process, allowing important issues to be ignored in favor of much less significant ones that are favorable to the candidate (obviously, drawing attention to an issue is not always manipulation). This is a moderating relationship: the priming manipulation moderates the effect of agreement on vote choice, which increases support and the odds that a voter will choose that candidate (if they agree on those issues). See below:



Unit 1. Information

Many researchers propose that citizens use heuristics, or information shortcuts, to circumvent the cost of acquiring information and their own limitations in understanding complex political issues. Further, there is evidence to show that voters who utilize heuristics are often able to vote similarly to those

with nearly complete information.³ Advocates of heuristics note the diminishing returns of information, and it is also important to emphasize that heuristics will be even more effective in a polarized political environment such as the one we see today.

Arthur Lupia, in “Busy Voters, Agenda Control, and the Power of Information” discusses the use of heuristics in a public referendum vote. He notes that one of the criticisms of referendum votes charges that voters are not sufficiently informed to make complex policy decisions. The default solution is to educate voters about the intricacies of policy, ensuring that they are equipped to make informed decisions.

He argues for a different approach, since he asserts (reasonably) that many voters would not volunteer to acquire such information, since they are much more concerned with the affairs of daily life. Lupia’s solution is to sort out which situations could be addressed by the existence of credible cues to help voters make more accurate inferences, stating that those who desire more informed outcomes would do well to make certain that credible cues are provided to voters, who, in the aggregate, have an interest in electoral outcomes, the capability of simple comparative reasoning, and other duties commanding their attention. Most importantly, his study finds particular circumstances under which an uninformed voter can utilize heuristics, even with a possibly unreliable information provider, to increase the likelihood of making the same decision the

³ Lupia, Arthur. "Busy Voters, Agenda Control, and the Power of Information." *American Political Science Review* 86, (1992): 390-404.

voter would have made if completely informed.⁴ Lupia has demonstrated that voters do respond to clear cues, but he does not examine the possibility of using such cues to manipulate voters.

Another approach to heuristics is provided by Brady and Sniderman who defend against the charge of an uninformed electorate by proposing that voters can and do use a simple “likability” heuristic, noting that many in the mass public clearly have only a minimal knowledge about politics and believe many things about the world of politics that are only “minimally interconnected.” Regardless, Brady and Sniderman purport, the general public is “remarkably accurate at figuring out the issue positions of groups,” including liberals and conservatives, who would “hardly seem to be highly salient to the general public.”⁵

Lupia later studied the results of a California election, concluding that political scientists should seek a deeper understanding of how voters adjust to the ambiguity that typifies many of their important decisions. He suggests that directing our efforts into the provision of “credible and widely accessible ‘signals’” may be a more effective and efficient method of maximizing the sensitivity of electoral outcomes to the predilections of the electorate.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Henry Brady and Paul Sniderman, “Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections,” *The American Political Science Review* 79, no. 4 (December 1985): 1073.

⁶ Arthur Lupia, “Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections,” *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 1 (March 1994): 72.

Richard Lau and David Redlawsk challenge the often unproven supposition that cognitive "heuristics" improve the decision-making abilities of everyday voters. They find that cognitive heuristics are at times employed by almost all voters and that heuristics are much more commonly utilized when the choice situation facing voters is complex.⁷ This would seem to suggest that informational manipulation would be extremely effective, especially on complex issues.

Lau and Redlawsk show an interaction between political sophistication and heuristic use on the quality of decision making. Their data show that heuristic use generally increases the probability of a correct vote by political experts but decreases the probability of a correct vote by novices.⁸ This is compelling because, as we saw in Delli Carpini and Keeter, most American voters are political novices (see also Converse 1964⁹). Lau and Redlawsk also show that experts are also sometimes led astray by heuristic use.¹⁰

Clearly, the efficiency of heuristics is not yet a closed case in political science literature; further study is needed. Additionally, is it possible that political

⁷ Richard Lau and David Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (October 2001): 951-71.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Converse, P. E. *The nature of belief systems in mass publics*. In D. E. Apter (Ed.). *Ideology and discontent*. New York: Free Press, 1964.

¹⁰ Richard Lau and David Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (October 2001): 951-71.

candidates, knowing that heuristics can lead even the most sophisticated voters astray, might be incentivized to take advantage of this phenomenon in a less-than-honest way?

Representativeness and Bias in Heuristics

Having explained the concept of informational manipulation through issue-free cues, I will now explain the mechanism for this phenomenon. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, in their seminal article “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases”, detail that heuristics are frequently utilized when people have to make decisions in situations highlighted by uncertainty. However, individuals specifically utilize one type of heuristic above all others: representativeness. In spite of compelling reasons to believe otherwise (basic statistical theory, simple probability, sample size, etc.), most people base their judgments almost entirely on representativeness, or how similar one thing is to another.¹¹

It is important to realize, that, even in uncertain circumstances, individuals are very confident in their judgments based on representativeness. Kahneman and Tversky explain this as an illusion of validity. Specifically, when people see a repeated pattern of events, they express much greater confidence in predicting that this pattern will continue. There is also a high degree of bias in judgment due to the retrievability of instances.¹² I cite these two particular biases because

¹¹ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185 (Sept. 27, 1974): 1124-31.

¹² *Ibid.*

issue-free cues trade on retrievability and representativeness. If voters become accustomed to seeing hawkish, socially conservative candidates brand themselves in a particular way, then they will expect this pattern to continue. Their confidence in their judgments will be further increased by the fact that they can easily recall instances of candidates with certain characteristics branding themselves in certain ways.

In many ways, testing issue-free cues is testing the effects of representativeness. A similar method of testing this concept was undertaken by Kyle Mattes, Michael Spezio, Hackjin Kim, Alexander Todorov, Ralph Adolphs, and R. Michael Alvarez. They presented subjects with images of political candidates and asked them to make four trait judgments based solely on viewing the photographs.

Respondents were asked which of the two faces revealed more competence, attractiveness, deceitfulness, and threat, which are perhaps four of the most salient attributes that can be conveyed by faces. They then compared subjects' choices to the actual election outcomes, and found that the candidates chosen as more likely to physically threaten the subjects actually lost 65% of the real elections, and their data show a positive correlation between the competence judgments and the real election outcomes.¹³

¹³ Kyle Mattes, Michael Spezio, Hackjin Kim, Alexander Todorov, Ralph Adolphs and R. Michael Alvarez. "Predicting Election Outcomes from Positive and Negative Trait Assessments of Candidate Images" *Political Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 2010), pp. 41-58 Published by: International Society of Political Psychology. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655444>

It is important to understand the ramifications of this research: if there is a strong correlation between visual judgments and electoral outcomes, this signals that voters are (partially) making their decisions based on such cues. And, if candidates learn how to present their appearance in the most flattering way, then their appearance, while devoid of issue content, could be interpreted as information regarding what kind of candidate they are (especially if there is a pattern of candidates looking that way). In this way, issue-free cues are simply applied psychology.

Elite Cues

Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes' *The American Voter*¹⁴ found that party identification is much more stable over time than issue preferences, suggesting that voters are indeed resolving cognitive dissonance by amending their issue preferences to match the platform of their chosen party. In contrast, Matthew Levendusky argues "that elite polarization, by clarifying where the parties stand on the issues of the day, causes ordinary voters to adopt more consistent attitudes."¹⁵ He suggests that, once elites have provided clear cues, voters will change their preferences to match the cues.

Larry Bartels argues that, rather than party identification being a result of voters matching their preferences with the party platform, it is actually

¹⁴ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: University Of Chicago Press, 1980), 223.

¹⁵ Matthew Levendusky, "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 1 (2010): 111.

backwards, that party identification directly causes issue preference, “partisan loyalties have pervasive effects on perceptions of the political world...partisanship is...a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world.”¹⁶ One could argue that party identification results in a voter adopting his party’s values, and therefore having his interests represented as a member of that party. If Bartels is correct, the implications for democracy are severe. For democracy to function, voters must not be so pliable, so easily convinced of what is in their best interest.

The On-line Model

Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau argue that citizens’ collective lack of ability to recall information is not actually damning, since what actually takes place is an updating of voter preferences with each new piece of information, after which the information is discarded and forgotten. They find strong support for an on-line model of the candidate evaluation process that shows that adjust their overall evaluation of the candidates in response to their instant evaluation of campaign messages and events. Over time, they put forth, people forget most of the campaign information they are exposed to but are nonetheless able to later recollect their “summary affective evaluation of candidates” which they then use to inform their preferences and vote choice.

They describe this process, as a ‘bounded rationality’ model of candidate evaluation and vote choice that “turns the memory-based assumption on its head

¹⁶ Larry Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions,” *Political Behavior* 24, no. 2 (June 2002): 138.

in arguing that citizens can be (and in fact typically are) responsive to campaign information—their overall evaluations reflecting their assessment of all the information they are exposed to—but are unable, for good reasons, to recollect accurately the considerations that entered into their evaluations.”¹⁷ Issue-free cues are relevant to a discussion of the on-line model, since the model requires accurate information to correctly function. In a case of information manipulation using issue-free cues, a candidate could cause a voter’s on-line model to malfunction if he can get the voter to view issue-free cues as information, changing the running tally to his favor.

Unit II. Symbols

It is a truism that candidates often make ambiguous statements about the policies they intend to pursue. In theory, ambiguity affects how voters make choices and who wins elections. Michael Tomz and Robert Van Houweling conducted survey experiments by manipulating what is likely the most common form of ambiguity: the imprecision of candidate positions. They find that, on average, ambiguity does not decrease a candidate’s support, and it may even attract voters.¹⁸

Tomz and Van Houweling show that in the absence of party cues, voters who have neutral or positive attitudes toward risk are more likely to respond

¹⁷ Milton Lodge, Marco R. Steenbergen and Shawn Brau, “The Responsive Voter: Campaign Information and the Dynamics of Candidate Evaluation,” *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (June 1995): 309-10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2082427> (accessed December 1, 2011).

¹⁸ Michael Tomz and Robert Van Houweling, “The Electoral Implications of Candidate Ambiguity,” *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 1 (February 2009): page nr.

positively to ambiguous rhetoric, along with those who feel uncertain about their own policy preferences.¹⁹ Surprisingly, in partisan settings, voters respond even more positively to ambiguity, optimistically perceiving the locations of ambiguous candidates from their own party.

Curiously, Tomz and Van Houweling do not find that voters pessimistically perceiving the viewpoints of vague candidates from the opposition, however. To bring more practicality to their results, they also tested and found that candidates do use ambiguity and voters do recognize it, concluding that ambiguity can be an effective strategy, especially in partisan elections.²⁰

Issue-free cues fit into the framework of ambiguity, since, if indeed voters are interpreting issue-free cues as information, it is likely that the information is ambiguous, and also likely that the effects observed by Tomz and Van Houweling (voters optimistically locate candidates when candidates are ambiguous) would also be present with issue-free cues. This also speaks to a different aspect of issue-free cues: since Tomz and Van Houweling have demonstrated that candidates have good reason to be ambiguous, it also stands to reason that there is electoral incentive to utilize issue-free cues, if indeed they function as I hypothesize, since issue-free cues may produce many of the same effects. Further, if the American flag symbolizes safety and security, then there should be measurable effects from exposure to an American flag, especially with regards to risk-positive voters (more on symbols later).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Ambivalence

But why does ambiguity work? Why do voters optimistically perceive candidates who utilize ambiguous rhetoric? Part of the answer lies in the way voters themselves approach the issues. If voters are truly ambivalent regarding many important issues, then it makes sense for voters to respond positively to ambiguity. Specificity requires a candidate to delve into at least some of the hard cases, the aspects of the issue that pose problems for his view. But, if a candidate remains safely ambiguous, he can pick up the positives of ambivalence, namely that the voter feels that he represents them, without the negatives (their difficulties in reconciling issue positions with their broader values, for example).

But are voters ambivalent? If so, to what degree? Howard Lavine tested this, providing empirical data to support the widely held belief that voters' political opinions are not only positive or negative, but are often simultaneously positive and negative. Lavine found that ambivalence created instability in candidate evaluations, and also significantly delayed the development of citizens' voting intentions. Lavine's results showed that effects of ambivalence were "independent of and typically larger than those of partisanship strength, information, education, and attitude strength, and could not be meaningfully accounted for by any of these factors."²¹

²¹ Howard Lavine, "The Electoral Consequences of Ambivalence toward Presidential Candidates," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (October 2009): 915-29.

Once again, I would argue that issue-free cues will work in much the same way (and for some of the same reasons) that ambiguity works, and issue-free cues are more effective because of citizens' ambivalence. They allow voters to not think about the intricacies of the issue and simply focus on the symbolic aspects of the candidate's presentation.

Symbols

Is it possible that there are conditions under which issue preferences are not even relevant to a voter's decision-making? Bringing more clarity to the picture of how voters make decisions is a seminal article by David Sears, Richard Lau, Tom Tyler, and Harry Allen, which studied the effects of short-term self-interest with respect to longstanding symbolic outlooks. Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen found that the various self-interest measures have little effect in shaping both policy preferences or voting behavior.

In contrast, symbolic attitudes (liberal or conservative ideology, party identification, and racial prejudice) had significant effects.²² Even more compellingly, Sear, Lau, Tyler and Allen found that self-interest does not create constraint in the attitudes of voters, even on issues that were used in the study. Murray Edelman also outlines a compelling model of symbols as an integral part of how humans make sense of their surroundings, emphasizing the significance

²² David Sears et al., "Self-Interest Vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting," *The American Political Science Review*, 74, no. 3 (Sep. 1980): 670-84.

of ceremony, sanctity, procession, pomp, and circumstance as organizing factors in the way citizens view the world.²³

He delineates between two sorts of symbols: condensation symbols and referential symbols. Even though every symbol has referential properties, referring to something other than itself, symbols also evoke attitudes, impressions, and encourage viewers to see a pattern of events associated through time, space, logic, and imagination and to associate these events with that symbol.

He defines referential symbols as economical ways of referring to objective elements (those things that everyone can agree on in a situation). This is in contrast to condensation symbols, which are used to evoke specific emotions, imbue events with particular qualities, be they tragedy, corruption, threat, etc. He also notes that symbols are important for capturing things like patriotic pride, anxieties, memories of past glory, and promises of future greatness.²⁴ Truly, Edelman argues, the sources of emotion in politics are symbols.

Where does this leave us? Are there alternative explanations? Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen show that, even under conditions designed to induce more self-interested political attitudes, such as individualistic personal values, a perception of the policy area as a major national problem, high political sophistication, a perception of responsive government, or a strong sense of political efficacy, there

²³ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Illini books ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), page 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

was still no effect.²⁵ Clearly, there is strong empirical support for the effects of symbols on voter attitudes and behavior. Since the literature already demonstrates that symbols affect voting behavior, this is strong support for my argument regarding symbolic manipulation using issue-free cues.

Emotion

How does this less reflective process work? How does a politician induce voters to focus on the symbolic aspects? Victor C. Ottati, Marco R. Steenbergen, and Ellen Riggle discuss how previous literature suggests that beliefs and emotions operate as partially distinct determinants of political attitudes, and, while positive and negative beliefs about a political object are “bipolar in structure,” positive and negative emotions have been shown to be relatively independent. In this past, researchers tested beliefs and emotions with different measures, but Ottati, Steenbergen, and Riggle hypothesized that responses to survey items may often be influenced by the manner in which the researcher poses the questions, which would cast doubt on the conclusions.²⁶

Consequently, it remains unclear whether the uniqueness of these belief and emotion measures reflects a “bona fide difference between two underlying constructs, or merely an artifactual difference induced by differing methods of

²⁵ David Sears et al., “Self-Interest Vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting,” *The American Political Science Review*, 74, no. 3 (Sep. 1980): 670-84.

²⁶ Ottati, Victor, Marco Steenbergen and Ellen Riggle. "The Cognitive and Affective Components of Political Attitudes: Measuring the Determinants of Candidate Evaluation." *Political Behavior* 14 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/586573> (accessed April 11, 2013).

measurement.” Ottati, Steenbergen, and Riggle show that beliefs and emotions operate as “partially unique predictors of candidate evaluation” even when employing corresponding methods of measurement.²⁷ Their results demonstrate that emotion and beliefs must be tested and examined separately.

In much the same way, I expect to observe that issue-free cues will elicit emotions, but I add to Ottati, Steenbergen, and Riggle’s model by proposing that instead of merely changing the way citizens make decisions, citizens actually derive *information* (on a limited basis) from issue-free cues. So, while research like Ottati, Steenbergen, and Riggle’s will show that emotions are driving the effects, I believe that there are other effects that (to this point) have yet to be measured. This is important because I believe that the same issue-free cue can produce both effects.

Unit III. Priming

How do important psychological concepts such as priming fit into this discussion? Priming has a significant place in psychological literature, and it also has a measurable effect on candidate choice. In *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance*, Gabriel Lenz tests the effects of priming, but there is one particular test that is especially relevant. After running other tests on priming, Lenz re-ran the test on a specific subset of participants: those respondents who already knew the parties’ or candidates’ positions on issues before the issue came to prominence and still knew them afterward. Among this smaller group of voters (those who should be most affected by

²⁷ Ibid.

priming), Lenz does not find evidence for priming, and, in his results, the average effect across all the cases is close to zero.²⁸

However, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder tested this in *News That Matters*, finding that priming has a robust effect on candidate selection, across parties and still significant in different experimental arrangements.²⁹ Additionally, Iyengar and Kinder test and confirm that television news networks call attention to some issues while ignoring others, effectively providing citizens with a framework to evaluate governments, presidents, policies, and candidates.³⁰

James Druckman finds compelling evidence that a political campaign did in fact prime “exposed and attentive voters to base their decisions on the issues and images emphasized in the campaign”, enhancing our understanding of campaign effects, and showing that “findings from basic political psychology research apply to actual electoral settings”, (demonstrating the external validity of priming research).³¹

Christine A. Kelleher and Jennifer Wolak examined the degree to which the content of an issue prime drives its use in presidential approval. While

²⁸ Gabriel S. Lenz, *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), 77-81.

²⁹ Donald R. Kinder and Shanto Iyengar, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion (American Politics and Political Economy Series)* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63-72.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Druckman, James. "Priming the Vote: Campaign Effects in a U.S. Senate Election." *Political Psychology* 25, No. 4 (2004), Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792410> (accessed March 27, 2013).

disparities in the effectiveness of media priming are traditionally ascribed to individual differences in political sophistication and news exposure, Kelleher and Wolak use a macro level approach, combining public opinion data on presidential approval from 1981 to 2000 with content analyses of presidential news coverage to test how media attention affects the way issues are weighted in presidential approval. They find that “the effectiveness of issue primes depends on issue content, such that familiar and understandable issues are more likely to be primed than more complex and difficult issues.”³²

I wish to clarify that issue-free cues are not only an instance of strategic priming. In cases of priming, the presentation of issues brings them to salience, creating a new framework by which the voter will evaluate candidates, policies, etc. In my framework of issue-free cues, rather than changing the evaluative structure of information, issue-free cues can also act *as information*, and, sometimes, at the expense of better information, as we saw in Kahneman and Tversky’s results. Additionally, the same issue-free cue can also have a symbolic effect by evoking emotion.

Place in the Literature

This study falls into much of the existing literature by testing ideas surrounding heuristics, symbols, information processing, priming, and ambiguity. Most specifically, I tested the effects of visual stimuli on candidate selection. These issue-free cues cause voters to “fill in the gaps”, so to speak, and assume

³² Kelleher, Christine and Jennifer Wolak. "Priming Presidential Approval: The Conditionality of Issue Effects." *Political Behavior* 28, No. 3 (2006), Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4500220> (accessed March 27, 2013).

that the candidate agrees with their issue positions, even on issues that the candidate has not taken a position, cause voters to view particular issues as more important than they otherwise would, and also act symbolically to elicit emotion.

I argue that since the voter already expects the candidate to be socially conservative, for example, then the voter will naturally (and automatically) fill in the candidate's platform (at least partially) with the positions the voter understands to be socially conservative. Since voters are conditioned by elites to see issue preferences in packages, they will simply apply that idea, resulting in the voter filling in issue preferences that fit the package.

This functions as a heuristic of sorts, but a much less reliable one than endorsements, party identification, etc. While issue-free cues are heuristics, they differ from the typical conception in that issue-free cues are not always efficient or accurate heuristics, and candidates can take advantage of voters' use of issue-free cues to possibly brand themselves in a misleading fashion for the sake of ingratiating themselves to voters who do not share their issue preferences.

It may be, however, that issue-free cues function also as a priming mechanism, causing voters to think more deeply and carefully about particular issues, bringing those issues to prominence and resulting in the voter making his or her decision with those issues a central part of the decision-making process.

Additionally, I believe that this theory has implications for the on-line model, since it may demonstrate that the information used to form opinions may not actually be information at all, and merely issue-free cues gleaned from

associations. If it can be compellingly demonstrated that issue-free cues can and often do drive candidate choice, the implications for the on-line model would be significant: voters are making decisions not based on a running tally of *information*, but actually based on a running tally of information and also issue-free cues. While Lodge may have anticipated this eventuality in crafting his model, it certainly would have implications for representative democracy.

Research Design

I utilized an experiment to collect my data, presenting participants with two candidates who have similar issue positions and asking them which candidate they would be more likely to support. The issue positions of both candidates were moderate in nature (borrowed from conservative democratic Senators Ben Nelson and Bill Nelson), but with slight alterations to make results clearer. To avoid party effects, they were not labeled as Democrats or Republicans.

Procedure

The first condition will be the control condition, which will flesh out if there is any reason to believe that one candidate is naturally more popular, without the help of issue-free cues. The results from Condition 1 will provide a baseline for comparison, allowing me to establish the effects of issue-free cues, since the other two conditions will otherwise be identical.

The second condition kept the first candidate exactly the same as he appeared in Condition 1, but the second candidate was manipulated. Candidate Two was presented with a giant American Flag in the background. Otherwise, he was completely identical to Condition 1. The third condition again kept Candidate One constant, but Candidate Two was in a forest.

I stress that the *only* difference between the conditions is the background of the picture of Candidate Two (Sean Stevens. See Appendices and the chart below), since the conditions are completely identical other than the background of the pictures (issue positions, poses, dress, etc.). Because the conditions are so rigorously controlled, I can be confident that any observed differences

between the groups were due to the independent variable, issue-free cues. See the chart below for further details.

Condition	1	2	3
Candidate	Randall Johnson Sean Stevens	Randall Johnson Sean Stevens	Randall Johnson Sean Stevens
Issue Positions	Same issue positions	Same issue positions	Same issue positions
Control candidate (Johnson) background	Beige Wall	Beige Wall	Beige Wall
Experimental candidate (Stevens) background	<i>Brick Wall</i>	<i>Flag</i>	<i>Forest</i>

I am primarily concerned with the difference between conditions. It is considerably less important how popular each candidate is. What matters, for the purpose of this study, is whether or not Candidate Two (Sean Stevens) is

perceived differently in the experimental conditions than in the control condition.

Unit I: Data

My data was derived from a convenience sample of University of Memphis students. While there may be some concern regarding the use of a convenience sample, I argue that a study of this type was not significantly skewed by the use of a convenience sample. Even though knowledge levels may vary with a sample such as this one, there is no reason to believe that the underlying psychological processes being measured in this study do not function the same way that we might see in a more diverse sample. I tested a new idea: issue-free cues, and while it would be ideal to conduct a large study of a nationally representative sample, but that would be cost-prohibitive, and this serves as an able pilot study.

Recruitment

To recruit subjects, I simply asked permission from professors to administer a survey in their classes. I will enter a class, and the students who wish to participate will be given surveys. Students who do not wish to participate were given the option to receive extra credit by writing a short essay on how they believe responsible citizens should select candidates. This gave me a sufficiently large sample (255 students) to attain statistical significance in my variables.

Unit II: Measures

I utilized post-test measures to determine the effects of issue-free cues on voter behavior. The first part of the experiment was the ballot portion. Each participant received a survey with a ballot paper-clipped to it. Participants were instructed to first make a decision on which candidate they would like to vote for.

After voting for their candidate of choice, they handed in their ballot and started the survey portion.

The first set of questions were a basic set of party identification questions, allowing me to look at partisans separately, followed by some emotion questions to shed light on the possible effects of symbols, testing whether or not emotions were being affected by issue-free cues.

Additionally, there were also be questions about the subject's own political views, so I can determine if the issue-free cues induce some groups of voters more than others to support a candidate, and to also determine if certain groups of voters may be induced to *not* support a candidate who uses specific issue-free cues. If the experimental conditions had produced a statistically significant effect on issue positions, then that would have provided extremely strong support for the theory, especially if the effects were in issue areas related to the stimulus (such as national defense or environmental issues).

The next set of questions was about the candidates' respective positions. Participants were asked to rate both the control candidate and the experimental candidate on how conservative or liberal they are on a range of issues (social, military/defense, economic, environmental). These questions allow us to see if the issue-free cues produced a statistically significant effect on perceptions. For example, if the flag condition produces more conservative ratings on military/defense issues than the other two positions, or if the forest condition produces more liberal ratings on environmental issues, then that would support my theory.

Next, the participants will be asked to rate how much they agree with each candidate on different types of issues. This will illuminate if the issue-free cues are causing participants in the experimental conditions to agree with the candidate more often, even though the issue positions remain the same. If liberal democrats agree with the experimental candidate more in the forest condition than the control condition, that will support my theory.

Finally, there were questions about the candidates' real positions (listed on the original ballot that participants are given) and other questions about issues that the candidates did not actually take a position on. These questions tested if issue-free cues introduced systemic error in the recall of the candidates' issue positions.

Unit III: Hypotheses

I expect that certain types of voters are responsive to certain issue-free cues, resulting in certain groups moving toward or away from candidates in response to their perceptions about that candidate. More specifically, I expect to see Democrats supporting the experimental candidate significantly more often in Condition 3, in response to the issue-free cue of the forest background, because the forest will signal a strong environmental perspective. Correspondingly, given the nationalistic nature of much Republican culture, I expect to see Republicans supporting the experimental candidate significantly more in the flag condition. In this way, I expect the effect of issue-free cues to be moderated by party effects.

Confirmation/Disconfirmation: Specifically, this hypothesis is confirmed if the

experimental conditions are statistically significant variables when candidate choice is the dependent variable.

Hypothesis One: Republicans will support the experimental candidate more often in the flag condition, and Democrats will support the experimental candidate more often in the forest condition.

I hypothesize that participants will attribute issue positions to both candidates that they have not taken, but especially to the candidate utilizing issue-free cues. Since voters are conditioned to receive issues in packages, I put forth that the issue-free cues will result in greater attribution of issue preferences. If preference attribution is equal across conditions, then it is not confirmed. This will test the information manipulation discussed earlier.

Confirmation/Disconfirmation: Specifically, this hypothesis is confirmed if the amount of issue preference attribution is not the same (which we would expect from random error) in the experimental conditions as it is in the control condition.

Hypothesis Two: In response to the information manipulation, participants will attribute positions not taken by the candidate (to both candidates) more frequently in the experimental conditions.

Issue-free cues will cause participants in the experimental conditions to perceive the experimental candidate's issue preferences differently (even though the candidate's *actual* issue preferences have remained the same). Specifically, I expect that in the flag condition, the experimental candidate will be perceived as a more social/economic/military/defense conservative (across party lines) and in

the forest condition, the experimental candidate will be perceived as more environmentally liberal.

Further, I predict that this will happen in spite of the fact that the experimental candidate (in all three conditions) is more of a military/defense *liberal* (who also opposes a ban on flag desecration) and an environmental *conservative*. I have intentionally designed the candidates' issue positions for the purpose of ascertaining the scope of the effect of issue-free cues. Specifically, if participants read the issue-free cues as information that *overrides* the stated issue positions on the ballot, then I will have observed a powerful effect indeed. This will also test the information manipulation mentioned before. This is a mediating relationship that I will confirm by examining the agreement questions.

Confirmation/Disconfirmation: Specifically, if participants agree with the experimental candidate more often in the experimental conditions and rate his positions as closer to their own, then Hypothesis Three is confirmed.

Hypothesis Three: Issue-free cues will be interpreted as information, and this information manipulation will override the issue positions on the ballot.

I expect to see evidence of the symbolic aspects of issue-free cues. In response to the symbolic cue, participants will display increased emotion in the experimental conditions, and this will be measurable in the questions that ask participants about their current emotional state. Specifically, I expect to see a mediating relationship in which the mediator (emotion) is affected by the treatment, and the mediator affects the dependent variable (vote choice). If I do not find the first effect, it will not be necessary to test the second.

Confirmation/Disconfirmation: The mediating relationship proposed in Hypothesis Four will be confirmed if participants are more emotional in the experimental conditions than in the control condition.

Hypothesis Four: Exposure to the treatment will increase emotion in response to the symbolic manipulation.

Finally, Issue-free cues will act as a priming mechanism, producing an interaction between the experimental conditions and how much the subjects agree with the experimental candidate on issues such as national defense and the environment. I expect that participants who agree with the experimental candidate on national defense issues and flag desecration will vote for him more often in the flag condition, and correspondingly, those who agree with his position on environmental issues will vote for him more often in the forest condition. In this way, I expect to see a moderating relationship; the issue-free cue will moderate the effect of agreement on vote choice. To test this, I will examine the interaction of agreement with the experimental conditions.

Confirmation/Disconfirmation: The moderating relationship proposed in Hypothesis Five will be confirmed if the interaction of the experimental conditions with agreement is statistically significant.

Hypothesis Five: Exposure to the treatment will increase the effect of agreement on vote choice in response to the priming manipulation.

Survey Questions

1. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?
 - A. Republican
 - B. Democrat
 - C. Independent
 - D. Any other party
 - E. Don't Know/ Prefer not to Answer

2. Would you call yourself a strong REPUBLICAN or not a very strong REPUBLICAN?
 - a. Strong Republican
 - b. Not a Strong Republican
 - c. Don't Know/ Prefer not to Answer

3. Would you call yourself a strong DEMOCRAT or not a very strong DEMOCRAT?
 - A. Strong Democrat
 - B. Not a Strong Democrat
 - C. Don't Know/ Prefer not to Answer

4. Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?
 - A. Closer to the Republican Party
 - B. Closer to the Democratic Party
 - C. Neither
 - D. Don't Know/ Prefer not to Answer

5. As an individual, to what extent do you feel angry about politics?
 - A. Not at all
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
 - F.
 - G. Very Much (7-point scale)

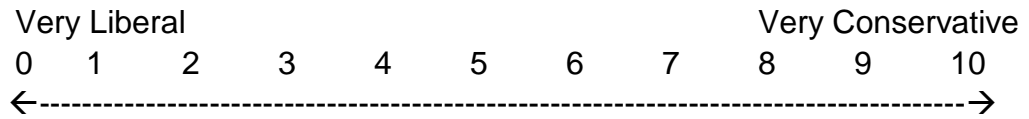
6. As an individual, to what extent do you feel afraid about politics?
 - A. Not at all
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
 - F.
 - G. Very Much (7-point scale)

7. As an individual, to what extent do you feel proud about politics?
 - A. Not at all
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
 - F.
 - G. Very Much (7-point scale)

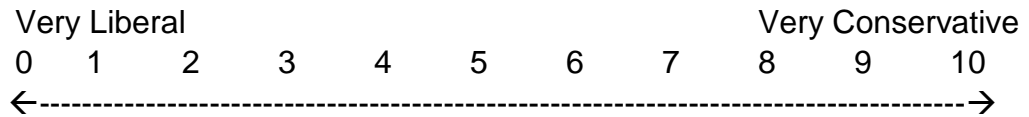
8. As an individual, to what extent do you feel hopeful about politics?
 - A. Not at all
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
 - F.
 - G. Very Much (7-point scale)

9. As an individual, to what extent do you feel enthusiastic about politics?
 - A. Not at all
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
 - F.
 - G. Very Much (7-point scale)

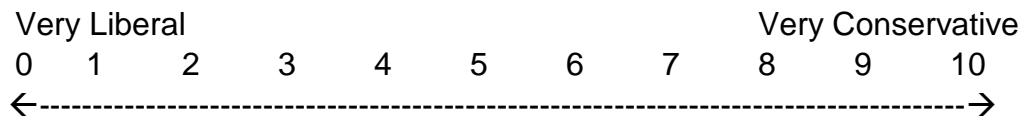
10. How would you rate YOUR OWN positions generally?



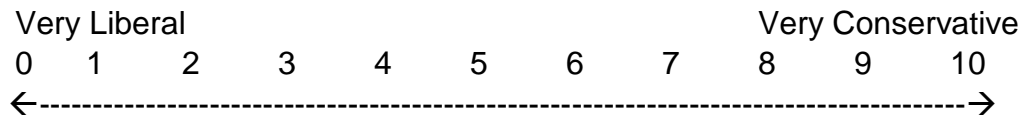
11. How would you rate YOUR OWN positions on economic issues?



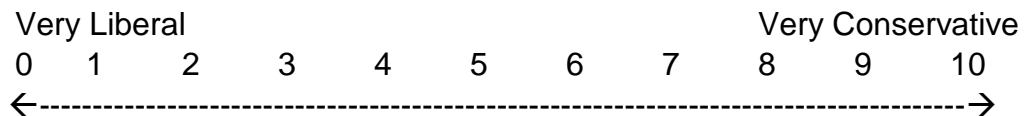
12. How would you rate YOUR OWN positions on social issues?



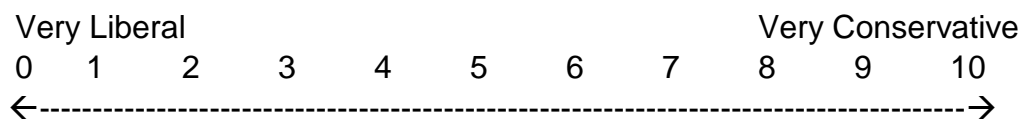
13. How would you rate YOUR OWN positions on military/defense issues?



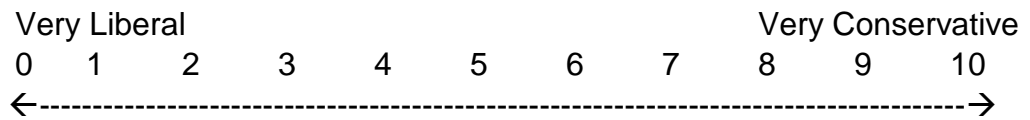
14. How would you rate YOUR OWN positions on environmental issues?



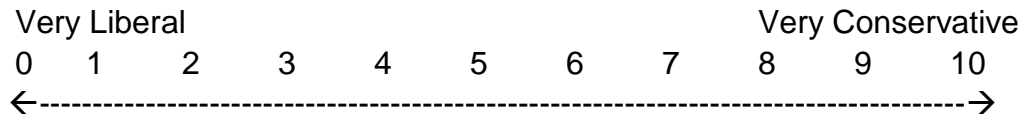
15. How would you rate RANDALL JOHNSON's positions generally?



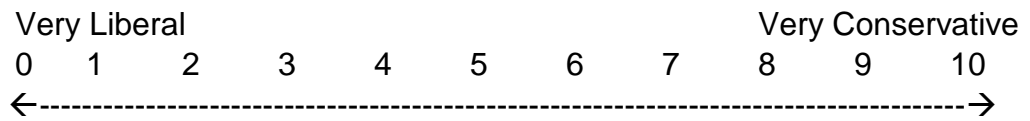
16. How would you rate RANDALL JOHNSON's positions on economic issues?



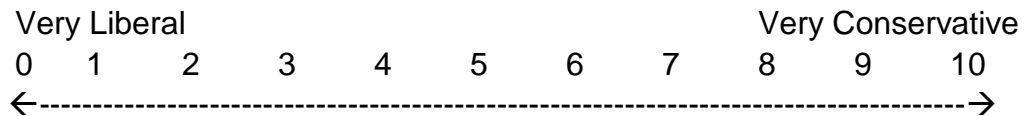
17. How would you rate RANDALL JOHNSON's positions on social issues?



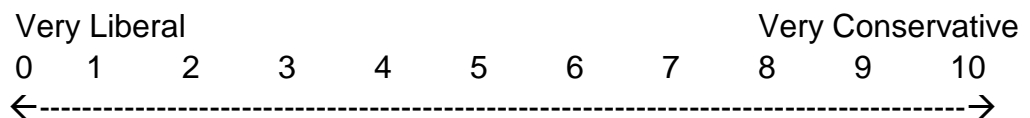
18. How would you rate RANDALL JOHNSON's positions on military/defense issues?



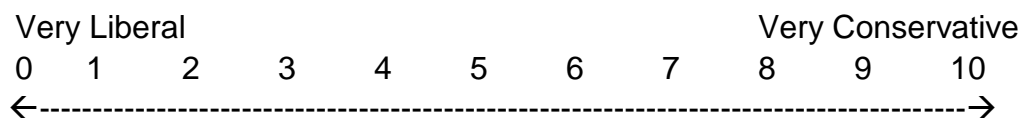
19. How would you rate RANDALL JOHNSON's positions on environmental issues?



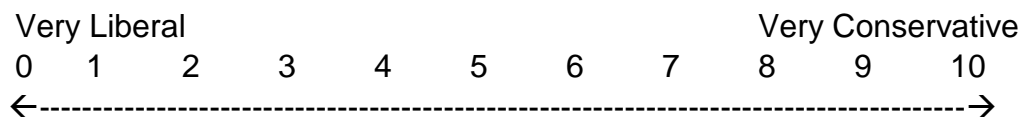
20. How would you rate SEAN STEVENS' positions generally?



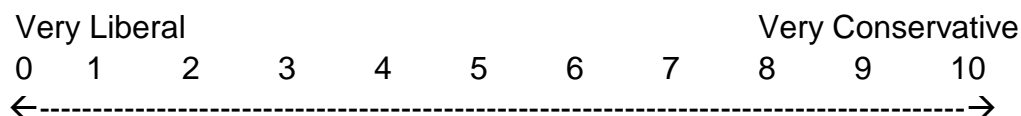
21. How would you rate SEAN STEVENS' positions on economic issues?



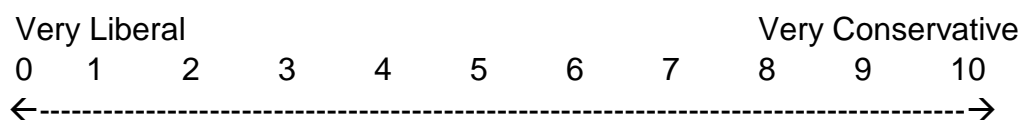
22. How would you rate SEAN STEVENS' positions on social issues?



23. How would you rate SEAN STEVENS' positions on military/defense issues?



24. How much would you rate SEAN STEVENS' positions on environmental issues?



25. How much would you say that you agree with RANDALL JOHNSON overall?



26. How much would you say that you agree with RANDALL JOHNSON on economic issues?

Disagree Completely							Agree Completely			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←-----→										

27. How much would you say that you agree with RANDALL JOHNSON on social issues?

Disagree Completely							Agree Completely			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←-----→										

28. How much would you say that you agree with RANDALL JOHNSON on military/defense issues?

Disagree Completely							Agree Completely			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←-----→										

29. How much would you say that you agree with RANDALL JOHNSON on environmental issues?

Disagree Completely							Agree Completely			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←-----→										

30. How much would you say that you agree with SEAN STEVENS overall?

Disagree Completely							Agree Completely			
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
←-----→										

36. If you can remember, what was RANDALL JOHNSON'S position on a Constitutional ban on flag desecration?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
37. If you can remember, what was RANDALL JOHNSON'S position on bringing the troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
38. If you can remember, what was RANDALL JOHNSON'S position on tighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
39. If you can remember, what was RANDALL JOHNSON'S position on same-sex marriage?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
40. If you can remember, what was RANDALL JOHNSON'S position on military intervention, if necessary, to prevent nuclear Iran?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember

41. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on abortion?
- A. Pro-Life
 - B. Pro-Choice
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
42. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on a Constitutional ban on flag desecration?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
43. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on bringing the troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
44. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on tighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember
45. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on same-sex marriage?
- A. Support
 - B. Oppose
 - C. He did not take a position
 - D. I don't know/I can't remember

46. If you can remember, what was SEAN STEVENS' position on military intervention, if necessary, to prevent nuclear Iran?

- A. Support
- B. Oppose
- C. He did not take a position
- D. I don't know/I can't remember

47. What is your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female

48. Do you consider yourself primarily White or Caucasian, Black or African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latino or something else?

- A. Black or African American
- B. Asian or Pacific Islander
- C. Hispanic or Latino/Latina
- D. Native American
- E. White or Caucasian
- F. Other

Results

Before discussing my hypotheses, I must clarify that, while the United States is composed of about half Republicans and half Democrats, the University of Memphis is overwhelming Democratic, leaving me with too few Republican participants (only 64 out of 255 total participants) to analyze. Consequently, my results regarding the effects of issue-free cues on Republicans are inconclusive, and thus my discussion must be severely limited.

Table 1.

Party Identification	Number of Participants
Republicans	64
Democrats	113
True Independents	37
Independents (leaning Republican)	19
Independents (leaning Democrat)	22
Total	255

Table 2.

Hypothesis	Result
I. Republicans will support the experimental candidate more often in the flag condition, and Democrats will support the experimental candidate more often in the forest condition.	Confirmed (among Democrats)
II. In response to the information manipulation , participants will attribute positions not taken by the candidate (to both candidates) more frequently in the experimental conditions.	Not Confirmed
III. Issue-free cues will be interpreted as information, and this information manipulation will override the issue positions on the ballot.	Not Confirmed
IV. Exposure to the treatment will increase emotion in response to the symbolic manipulation .	Not Confirmed
V. Exposure to the treatment will increase the effect of agreement on vote choice in response to the priming manipulation .	Confirmed (among Democrats)

My first hypothesis (see Table 2) predicted that Democrats would vote for the experimental candidate more often in the forest condition. The data show a few things very clearly: first, that one of the experimental manipulations (the forest condition) most definitely has a measurable effect on particular participants' voting behavior. As predicted, the forest condition variable achieved statistical significance as soon as the analysis was limited to Democrats. These

results strongly support the idea that a difference as small as the background of a candidate's picture can have a substantial effect on even something as important as candidate choice.

As Table 3 shows, the Democrats did indeed vote for the experimental candidate more often when he had a forest in the background. We know this because that coefficient, .506, is statistically significant. This result demonstrated that issue-free cues did have an effect on participants' voting behavior, but further investigation is needed to determine the precise nature of the relationship between issue-free cues and candidate choice. Specifically, Hypothesis One is confirmed because the experimental condition (forest condition) is a statistically significant variable when candidate choice is the dependent variable.

My second hypothesis predicted that participants would more frequently attribute incorrect positions to both candidates in the experimental condition. While null results are, by definition, inconclusive, the data suggest that this prediction may have been refuted outright. Specifically, Hypothesis Two is not confirmed because the data do not show a statistically significantly greater amount of issue preference attribution (in contrast to the same amount, which we would expect from random error) in the experimental conditions than in the control condition.

Table 3. The Impact of variables on Democrats' (and leaners') candidate choice

	Candidate Choice (without Interaction terms)	Candidate Choice (with Interaction terms)
	Coefficient	Coefficient
	(Standard Error)	(Standard Error)
Flag	.300 (.265)	.594* (.32)
Forest	.506* (.265)	.683* (.377)
Agreement on Environment		.301*** (.099)
Interaction of Flag*Agreement on Environment		-.031 (.132)
Interaction of Forest*Agreement on Environment		.846** (.423)
Constant	-.180 (.180)	-.394* (.218)

p < .1*
p < .05**
p < .01***

Note: models are probit regressions.

Information, Symbols, or Priming?

The nature of the relationship between issue-free cues and candidate choice is significant. However, we must determine if this relationship is one of symbols, if issue-free cues are being interpreted as information, or if they are actually priming participants to focus on certain issue areas and bringing those issues to the forefront of their decision-making calculus. Symbols are difficult to measure meaning that an argument for symbols can only be made after examining other explanations and possible causes.

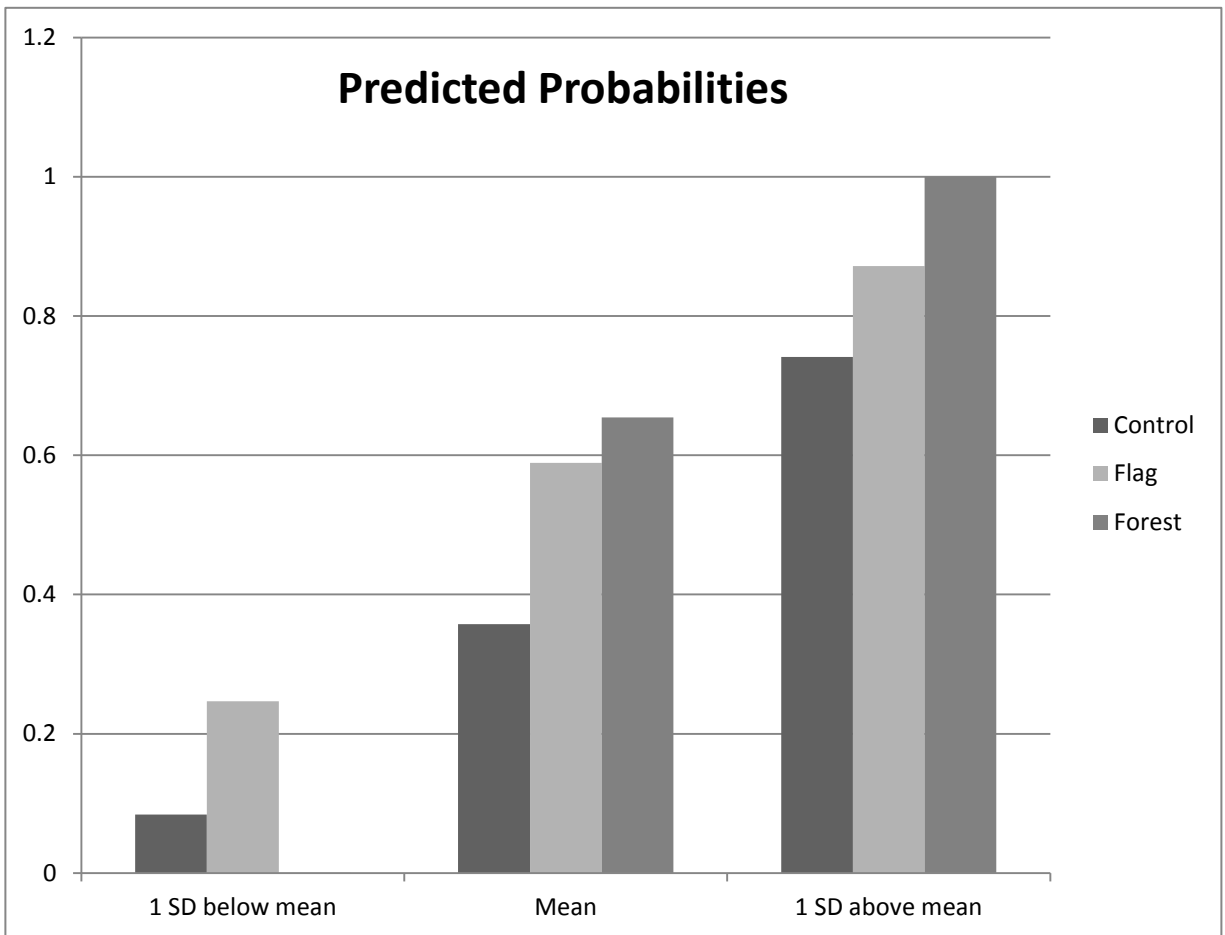


Figure 1.

Particularly, since issue-free cues are certainly having an effect on candidate choice, is it because participants perceive the issue-free cues as information, which then influences their understanding of the candidate's issue positions? Or is there an interaction in play here—the issue-free cues are moderating the effect of issue positions on vote choice?

There is no evidence that issue-free cues have been interpreted as information, since the forest condition did not produce statistically significant results for questions about:

- How participants perceived the candidates as liberal or conservative (even on the environment)
- How much the participants agreed with the candidate on issues other than the environment
- How well the participants recalled the respective issue positions taken by the candidates on the ballot.

Consequently, if issue-free cues do act as information, we cannot know that from the data. Specifically, because participants did not agree with the experimental candidate more often in the experimental conditions and rate his positions as closer to their own (at a statistically significant level), Hypothesis Three is not confirmed.

Further, there are several questions at the beginning of the posttest that measure emotion, and none of them were statistically significant, which casts doubt on a symbols story. Once again, like with the possibility of issue-free cues as information, it is possible that this is happening, but we simply cannot know it

from the data. Perhaps symbols and information do form part of the story, but measurement error prevents them from showing up. A more powerful stimulus is probably necessary to test such an idea, perhaps something with more symbolic power than (part of) a flag or a forest that could affect participants on an emotional level. A future study involving powerful evocative imagery would be in order. Specifically, the mediating relationship proposed in Hypothesis Four was not confirmed because participants were not more emotional in the experimental conditions than in the control condition. Since participants were not more emotional, it is clear that increased emotion did not affect their vote choice.

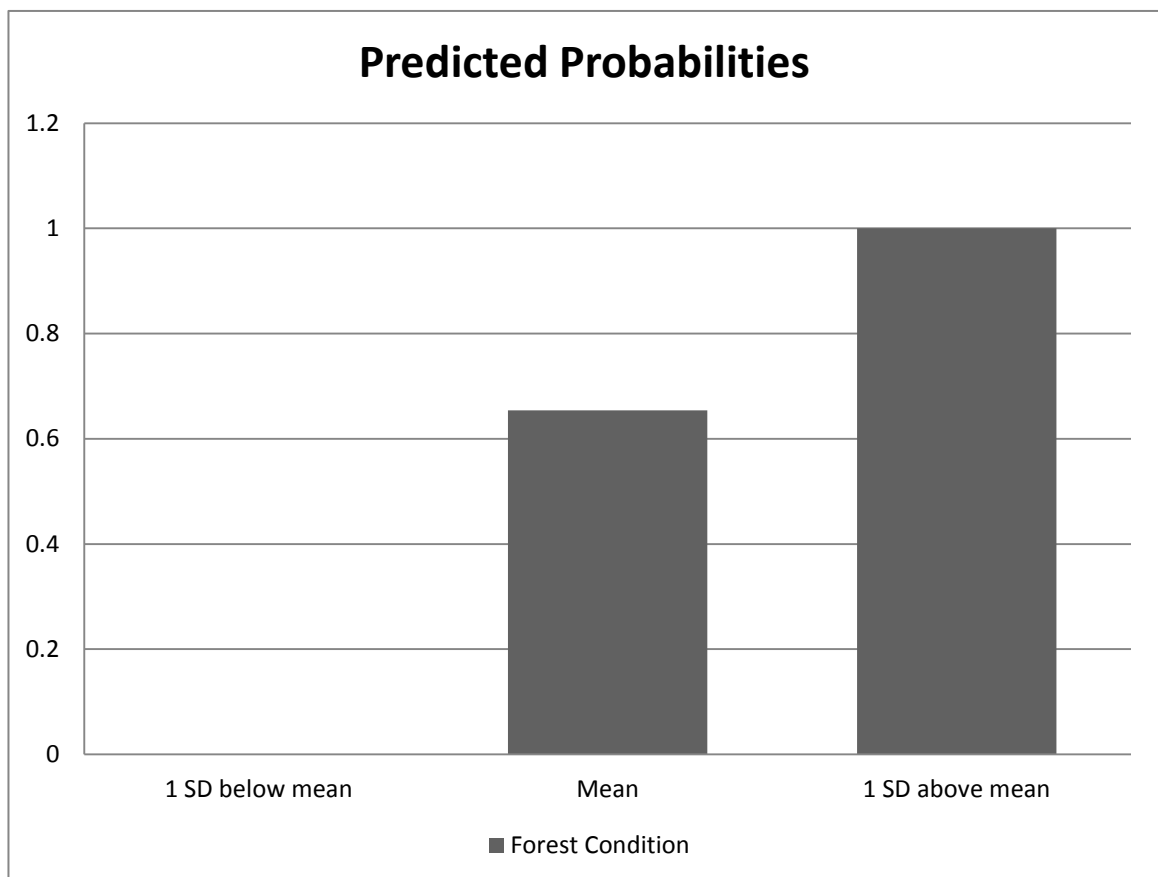


Figure 2.

If we look at Figure 1, and the results in Table 3, there is a strong, statistically significant relationship between how much agreement with the experimental candidate on the environment affects Democrats' vote choice and the forest condition. Specifically, Figure 1 clarifies the broad shape of the data in an important way: as agreement increases (see the bars representing each of the three conditions), the likelihood of voting for the experimental candidate also increases in all three conditions.

The important thing is that it increases significantly faster in the experimental conditions (but especially the forest condition). When voters see the forest in the background, their agreement with the experimental candidate on environmental issues begins to drive their vote. In the forest condition, the experimental candidate's views on environmental issues were much more important than in the other two conditions. This is an evident priming story; there is a moderating relationship: the effect of agreement with the experimental candidate's environmental views on candidate choice is moderated by the issue-free cue of the forest background.

Figure 2 shows the effect more clearly in the forest condition: at one standard deviation below the mean, participants almost never voted for the experimental candidate, while at one standard deviation above the mean, they voted for the experimental candidate every time. Figure 1 shows the relative effects of the treatment, and it is clear that the experimental conditions increased the effect of agreement on vote choice in both directions. As Table 3 shows, the moderating relationship proposed in Hypothesis Five was confirmed because the

interaction of the experimental conditions with agreement is statistically significant. Given the clear trend in the data of an effect (Democrats having higher support in the forest condition) and a reasonable, well-supported cause, I am confident in asserting this conclusion: priming was the most important part of the story.

Implications

Where does this leave us? First, it is important to note that a priming story produces a much more optimistic portrayal of democracy than either of the other possibilities discussed earlier. If the data showed a symbols story, that would leave the American electorate susceptible to intense manipulation and prone to very emotional decision-making. If the data showed an information manipulation, this would be a most vexing condition, since voters would be easily deceived, even in circumstances where reliable information is actually available. Such a story would threaten the very foundations of representative democracy if it could be conclusively demonstrated and replicated.

However, a priming story is still not encouraging, since it demonstrates that candidates possess the power to determine the field on which the game will be played: they can, with even a small, subtle cue such as the background of the picture, determine which issues drive the decision-making of the very voters who are supposed to be holding them accountable. This development does not produce excitement regarding the reliability and functionality of representative democracy, especially if this effect could be demonstrated to work such that insignificant issues are outweighing significant issues in voters' calculus (and I

believe that it would work that way). I am left to conclude that we should discard democracy as soon as a better alternative presents itself, but, since such an alternative probably does not exist; we will have to muddle through with the current system.

Recommendations

Further studies should seek to examine the moderating effect more closely. First, a study examining the effects of issue-free cues on Republicans is in order, since data limitations prevented such analysis here. Are there particular demographics among Democrats that are especially sensitive (or impervious) to this effect? As mentioned before, it would be ideal if a study similar to this one tested the ability of candidates to prime insignificant issues to see if an issue-free cue could induce voters to make their decisions based on insignificant issues rather than significant ones.

What explanation is there for so many Democrats agreeing with a candidate with such conservative views on the environment? (Or does this mean that perhaps the Democratic Party's policies on the environment are much more liberal than the views of its base?). Is there a yet-unmeasured symbols effect for issue-free cues? Can more emotionally evocative imagery yield measurable symbolic results? Do issue-free cues act as information in ways unforeseen (and untested) by this study? Further study is needed, but I feel confident in having made a small contribution to the body of political science literature.

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Appendix I: Stimuli

RANDALL JOHNSON



VOTE!

SEAN STEVENS



- Supports additional anti-recession stimulus spending.
- Supports modifying bankruptcy rules to avoid mortgage foreclosures.
- Supports additional spending for an economic recovery package.
- Opposes reduced federal overall spending until the economy recovers.
- Strongly favors requiring companies to hire more minorities.
- Opposes bringing the troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible.
- Supports Constitutional ban on flag desecration.
- Supports loosening restrictions on cell phone wiretapping.
- Opposes parents choosing schools via vouchers.
- Supports higher spending for federal education & HHS projects.
- Supports tighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks.
- Supports shifting money from corporate tax loopholes to education.
- Supports funding smaller classes instead of private tutors.
- Supports making income tax flatter & lower.
- Supports governmental regulation of carbon emissions.
- Opposes paying down federal debt by rating programs' effectiveness.
- Supports military intervention, if necessary, to prevent nuclear Iran.
- Opposes increasing tax rate for people earning over \$1 million.
- Opposes raising estate tax exemption to \$5 million.
- Supports permanence of estate tax cuts.

- Supports additional anti-recession stimulus spending.
- Supports modifying bankruptcy rules to avoid mortgage foreclosures.
- Opposes paying down federal debt by rating programs' effectiveness.
- Supports bringing the troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible.
- Supports new spending for "21st century community learning centers".
- Strongly favors requiring companies to hire more minorities.
- Opposes governmental regulation of carbon emissions.
- Supports loosening restrictions on cell phone wiretapping.
- Supports shifting money from corporate tax loopholes to education.
- Opposes repealing the Alternative Minimum Tax.
- Opposes Constitutional ban on flag desecration
- Opposes raising the Death Tax exemption to \$5M from \$1M.
- Opposes reduced federal overall spending until the economy recovers
- Opposes military intervention, if necessary, to prevent nuclear Iran
- Supports additional spending for a new economic recovery package.
- Opposes tighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks.
- Supports supporting permanence of estate tax cuts.
- Supports permanently repealing the 'death tax'.
- Supports \$47B for military by repealing capital gains tax cut.
- Supports extending the tax cuts on capital gains and dividends

RANDALL JOHNSON



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- Supports loosening restrictions on cell phone wiretapping.
- Opposes parents choosing schools via vouchers.
- Supports higher spending for federal education & HHS projects.
- Supports tighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks.
- Supports shifting money from corporate tax loopholes to education.
- Supports funding smaller classes instead of private tutors.
- Supports making income tax flatter & lower.
- Supports governmental regulation of carbon emissions.
- Opposes paying down federal debt by rating programs' effectiveness.
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- Opposes governmental regulation of carbon emissions.
- Supports loosening restrictions on cell phone wiretapping.
- Supports shifting money from corporate tax loopholes to education.
- Opposes repealing the Alternative Minimum Tax.
- Opposes Constitutional ban on flag desecration
- Opposes raising the Death Tax exemption to \$5M from \$1M.
- Opposes reduced federal overall spending until the economy recovers
- Opposes military intervention, if necessary, to prevent nuclear Iran
- Supports additional spending for a new economic recovery package.
- Opposes lighter regulations on oil & gas smokestacks.
- Supports supporting permanence of estate tax cuts.
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RANDALL JOHNSON

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