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STYLE ISSUES AND VOTE CHOICE

James E. Campbell and Kenneth John Meier

It has been an assumption common in voting research that candidates must offer and voters must perceive opposing stands on issues for those issues to have a rational influence on the vote. Though apparently reasonable, this assumption eliminates analysis of the rational impact of style in voter thinking. This article argues that style issues should not be so easily dismissed and were of some importance in the 1972 presidential election. First, the data indicate that voters considered style issues as important as position issues. Second, voters were able to detect differences between the candidates on certain style issues. Third, salient style issues and salient position issues are similar in their causal relationship to the vote. These findings lend support to the general conclusion that style issues are an important and rational element of voter deliberations and have several implications for the study of public opinion, the behavior of political leaders, and the adequacy of elections as mechanisms of governmental accountability.

Early studies of political issues produced a distinction between position and style (or valence) issues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Stokes, 1966). Briefly stated, the distinction is based on the presence or absence of conflict over intended policy consequences. If conflict is significant, the issues are positional in character. If conflict over policy intentions is insignificant, the issues are style issues.¹

Although both kinds of issues appear and are considered by voters and candidates during elections, those who have studied the rational impact of issues on the voting decision have examined only position

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issues. The fundamental assumption of these studies has been that candidates must offer different positions for the issue to be relevant in the voting decision.² For instance, in their recent study, *The Changing American Voter* (1976), Nie, Verba, and Petrocik state that "if both candidates support the same position or are both neutral, issue voting is impossible" (p. 158). Given this premise and the fact that candidates usually support the same position on a style issue for obvious electoral reasons, the unavoidable conclusion is that voters cannot rationally express policy preferences about style issues through their vote choice.

The thesis and data presented in the following pages challenge this conclusion and its premise that candidates must adopt opposing policy stands for voters to respond to that issue. Although candidates must offer a choice on an issue for that issue to be relevant in the vote decision, the choice need not be between divergent issue positions. Style issues may involve other kinds of conflict that permit voters to choose between the candidates. For instance, Steeper and Teeter (1976) recommend that "issue confidence" as well as "issue position" should be considered in examining issue impact on voters' decisions. They go on to suggest that the "key perceptions appear to be whether or not the candidate is genuinely 'concerned' about the problem, will always do the 'right thing,' and can 'get results'" (p. 813). Thus, a candidate's issue commitment or effectiveness in policy implementation may distinguish him or her from the opposition as sharply as his or her issue positions. Although this reasoning establishes an alternative to the premise of past studies, an empirical test is required to prove that voters actually respond to candidate differences on style issues in much the same way that they respond to candidate differences on position issues.

THE DATA

In testing the thesis that voters are able and willing to respond to candidate differences on style issues, three types of evidence will be provided. First, evidence of style issue salience will be examined. Second, evidence of accurate perceptions of candidate differences on style issues will be produced. Third, evidence of the causal relationship between style issues and the vote choice will be analyzed. In short, to support our thesis we must show that given a choice between candidates on style issues, voters will want to use these issues; they will be able to use these issues; and they actually will use these issues in a rational manner.

The data presented here were collected during the 1972 presidential

election. The data are from a panel survey of 731 respondents in Onondaga County, New York. Voters were asked to express their own views and their beliefs about the views of Senator McGovern and President Nixon on eleven different issues. Also solicited were voter estimations of each issue's salience and voter perceptions of the importance each candidate attached to each issue. Osgood's seven-point, semantic differential scale was the measurement technique used.

Of the 11 issues for which measurements were obtained,³ 5 were such that only one position was reasonable to present to the public. These issues were cutting government spending, putting welfare recipients to work, honoring foreign commitments, supporting law and order, and eliminating political corruption. On each of these issues a content analysis of candidate media indicated that both candidates assumed the same basic position. Also, on each of these issues voters had reached a consensus. As Table 1 shows, style issues had a greater mean value for voter attitudes and a smaller variance of attitudes than position issues. No style issue had an average attitude value of less than 1.25 or a variance of greater than 2.6, while not a single position issue had a mean attitude score that exceeded 1.0 or a variance of less than 3.8. Also, the percentage of respondents opposing the plurality position was always less for style issues than for position issues. Only about 10% dissented from the most common position on the typical style issue.

Table 1. Means and Variances of Voter Attitudes on Style and Position Issues and Percentage of Public on Minority Side of Issue Scale (in September, 1972)

Issues	Mean	Variance	% in minority
Ending political corruption	1.84	2.42	9
Honoring foreign commitments	1.25	2.60	13
Making welfare recipients work	1.94	2.50	9
Increasing law and order	2.11	2.24	8
Cutting government spending	1.50	2.54	12
Average: style issue	1.73	2.46	10.2
Guaranteed jobs	.97	4.02	23
Increasing taxes on wealthy	.82	4.20	26
Vietnam withdrawal	.66	5.17	31
Stopping busing	.91	4.52	23
Cutting military spending	.52	3.83	28
Giving draft evaders amnesty	-.81	4.37	28
Average: position issue (using absolute values)	.78	4.35	26.5

However, about a quarter of the the public disagreed with the plurality position on the typical position issue.

STYLE ISSUE SALIENCE

Voters can only reasonably be expected to evaluate candidates on issues they consider personally important. The relation of issue salience to style issues deserves close attention, since style issues may be considered less important than position issues and thus play only a minor role in voter deliberations. If no position differences are seen between the candidates, voters may regard these issues as less relevant to the election and less useful in forming their vote choices. If this thesis were valid, a positive association between position issues and issue salience should be observed. However, at least for the issues examined in this study, such an association is not present. As Table 2 shows, the typical style issue was considered slightly more important to the voter than the typical position issue. In September, 1972, the typical style issue's mean salience score was 1.3, while the typical position issue's mean salience score was .9. The average proportion of the electorate thinking a style issue at least minimally salient was 76%, compared to 67% for the average position issue.⁴

Table 2. Means and Variances of Issue Salience to Voters and Percentage of Public Regarding Issue at Least Minimally Salient (in September, 1972)

Issues	Mean	Variance	% salient ^a
Ending political corruption	.98	2.78	69
Honoring foreign commitments	1.28	2.64	76
Making welfare recipients work	.88	3.87	69
Increasing law and order	1.99	1.92	90
Cutting government spending	1.34	2.65	76
Average: style issue	1.29	2.77	76
Guaranteed jobs	1.63	2.01	84
Increasing taxes on wealthy	1.25	3.01	73
Vietnam withdrawal	1.74	2.47	85
Stopping busing	-.14	4.26	44
Cutting military spending	.82	3.08	65
Giving draft evaders amnesty	.06	3.68	48
Average: position issue	.89	3.09	67

^a The percent of voters finding an issue of at least minimal salience is that portion of the electorate placing itself in the first three points of the seven-point scale.

CANDIDATE DIFFERENCES ON STYLE ISSUES

Given this evidence that style issues are not systematically less important to voters than position issues, can voters make a rational vote choice based on these issues? The answer rests in part on whether or not candidates exhibit differences on these issues. Although candidates are not likely to differ on their basic issue positions when confronted with a style issue, they may differ significantly in their commitment to the commonly desired policy.

As a measure of a candidate's issue commitment we will use the clarity with which he or she presents his or her issue stance to the voters.⁵ To the extent that a candidate's ambiguity in presenting his issue positions reflects ambivalence rather than simply poor communication skills, a comparison of the candidates' position clarity may prove quite instructive to the voter. Whether ambiguity is a conscious campaign strategy or simply a consequence of resource limitations,⁶ if candidates are ambiguous about a style issue, the credibility of their stated positions or their commitment to those positions must be seriously questioned. Silence, excessive qualification of position, obfuscation, and similar behavior that create an impression of shallow issue concern by the candidate may serve as sound voting cues. It is only reasonable that a voter who regards a problem as very important and worthy of considerable attention would vote for a candidate sharing that perspective rather than for someone who pays passing notice to the issue and occasionally makes favorable "noises."

Based on a content analysis of political commercials and the news media for the 1972 presidential election, the candidates' positions on each style issue were classified as either having been presented clearly or left ambiguous. Table 3 presents the results. Of the five style issues

Table 3. Style Issues, Issue Position Clarity, and Expected Beneficiary

Style issue	Issue clarity		Expected to benefit
	McGovern	Nixon	
Ending political corruption	Clear	Ambiguous	McGovern
Honoring foreign commitments	Ambiguous	Clear	Nixon
Making welfare recipients work	Ambiguous	Clear	Nixon
Increasing law and order	Ambiguous	Clear	Nixon
Cutting government spending	Ambiguous	Ambiguous	No one

Note. The candidates' issue positions and the clarity of those positions were estimated by a content analysis of network newscasts and campaign commercials shown from September 18 to November 6, 1972. Details of the content analysis appear in Appendix C of Patterson and McClure (1976).

analyzed, four involved one of the candidates stating his position clearly while his opponent was somewhat ambiguous. The question now becomes: were these differences perceptible to the voter? From the evidence presented in Table 4, it appears that voters did detect differences between the candidates in the importance they attached to three of the four issues and the differences were in the expected directions.⁷ Clear differences in the expected directions are seen on the issues of political corruption, honoring foreign commitments, and law and order. Also, as expected, little difference was seen between the candidates in the emphasis they placed on cutting government spending. These findings demonstrate the general accuracy of voter perceptions of candidate differences over style issues, but this perceptual accuracy may vary according to which candidate the voter supports. That is, voter perceptions of candidate differences may be rationalized rather than independently formed.

The extent of style-issue-preference rationalization was tested in models using lagged variables. The models appear in Figure 1.⁸ The first model examines how well the early vote intention explains later style issue preference after the voters' early style issue preferences have been taken into account. It is quite evident from the model's estimated coefficients that style issue preferences were somewhat rationalized. However, it would be hazardous to conclude that style issues were particularly prone to rationalization or that style issue preferences were simply rationalizations. To set these results in some perspective, the same model was tested using position issue prefer-

Table 4. Mean Differences of Perceived Issue Salience to the Candidates for Voters Claiming the Issue to be Salient (September, 1972)

Issues	Mean difference of perceived issue salience to the candidates
Ending political corruption	- .91
Honoring foreign commitments	+1.84
Making welfare recipients work	- .24
Increasing law and order	+1.08
Cutting government spending	+ .01

Note. Those who dissent from the general position on these style issues have been excluded since candidate positions are still in question for these people. The range of perceived candidate issue salience differences is from +6 (Nixon thinks it is extremely important and McGovern thinks it trivial) to -6 (McGovern thinks it is extremely important and Nixon thinks it trivial).

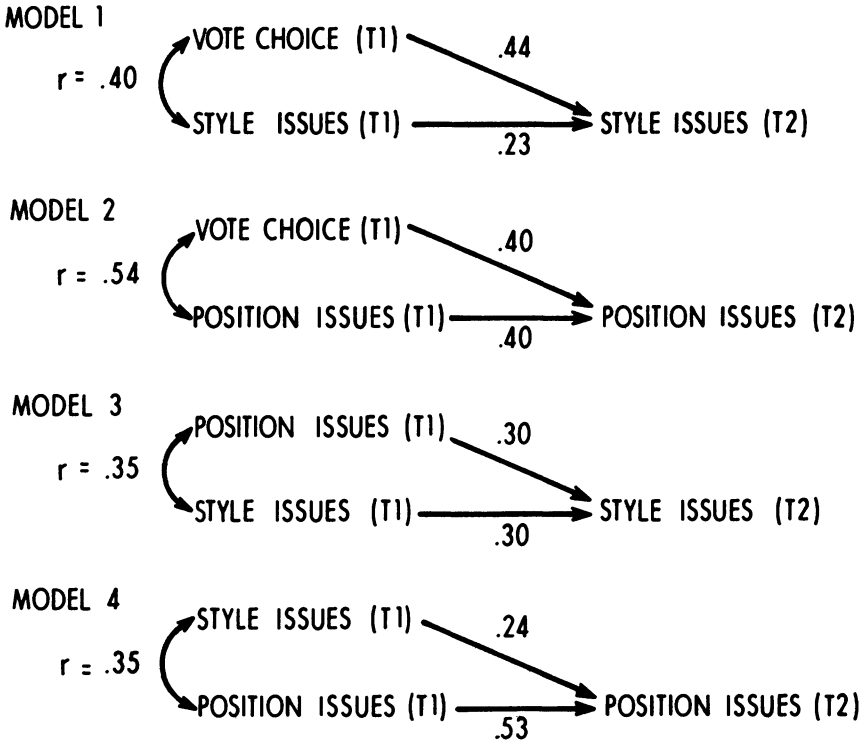


Figure 1. Rationalization Tests of Issue Preferences and Vote Choice Using Lagged Path Model

Note. Respondents were included if they were measured at all points in the survey ($n = 581$). All regression coefficients are standardized and all are significant at the .05 level. The squared multiple correlation coefficients are .33 for model 1, .49 for model 2, .25 for model 3, and .43 for model 4. The equal influence of the vote choice on both types of issue preferences and the equal influence of issue preferences on each other is also found when the independent variables are included simultaneously in the model. In the simultaneous tests the vote to style coefficient is .37, while the vote to position coefficient is .35. Also, the position to style coefficient is .14, while the style to position coefficient is .16.

ences rather than style issue preferences. As the second model in Figure 1 shows, position issues were also subject to rationalization and at rates almost identical to those of style issues. The substantial rationalization of style issues is also clarified by examining the stability of the vote choice in the period under study. Nearly 80% of our sample

possessed a stable vote preference prior to September. Thus, rather than indicating that voters determine their preferences on the basis of distorted information, the evidence may only mean that once a decision has been reached voters tend to adjust beliefs to support their pre-existing decision.

Although this seemingly lays to rest the question of style-issue-preference rationalization, the integrity of style issues as independent variables may be questioned if style issue preferences are products of position issue preferences. Applying the same time-lagged model used to test the relationship between the vote choice and issue preferences, the third and fourth models in Figure 1 indicate that position issue preferences were no more likely to influence style issue preferences than style issue preferences were likely to influence position issue preferences.

The findings presented here about the voter's perceptual accuracy of candidate differences of commitment to style issues make three points that substantiate the role of style issues as a rational consideration in the vote. First, though rationalization creates some distortion of perception, voters do perceive real differences between the candidates in the expected directions. Second, because most of the voters had made up their minds about their vote choice prior to the first measurement point, the rationalization effects may appear to be far worse than they actually are. As far as we know, rationalization may extend only to those firmly committed to a candidate and not to those in the process of making their decisions. Third, from the evidence at hand, whatever rationalization of style issue preferences is present appears to be no worse than the rationalization of position issue preferences.

STYLE ISSUE INFLUENCE ON THE VOTE

While the preceding findings strongly suggest the significance of style issues in the voters' thinking, evidence of style issue importance and utility to voters ultimately rests on the extent of style issue influence on the vote. Rational style issue influence was estimated using the lagged path model found in Figure 2. In this model, the eventual vote choice was explained by the prior vote intention and the prior style issue preference so that rational style issue influence in the vote decision could be distinguished from rationalization effects. In addition, the rational position issue influence on the vote was estimated in a similar manner to produce a standard against which style issue impact could be judged. The results in Table 6 demonstrate the importance of style issues in two ways. First, though the impact of style issues on the

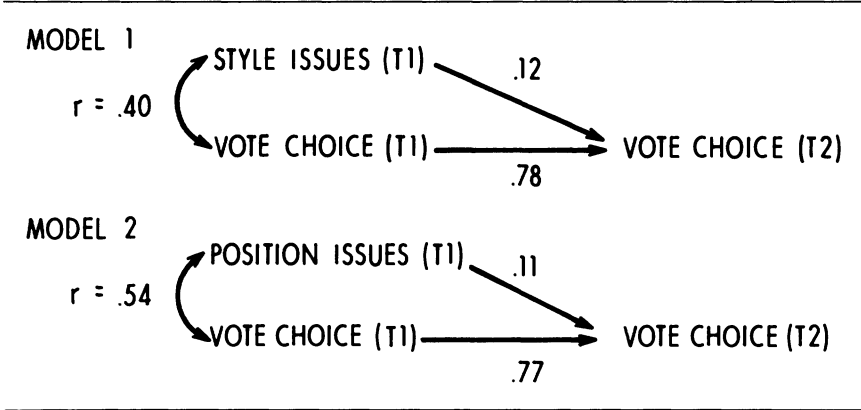


Figure 2. Tests of Rational Issue Preference Influence on the Vote Choice Using Lagged Path Model

Note. 581 respondents were included in these tests. All coefficients are standardized regression coefficients and all are significant at the .05 level. The squared multiple correlation coefficients for both models is .70. When style and position issues are included in the model simultaneously, style issue influence is .11 and position issue influence is .09.

vote during this particular segment of the campaign was not great, style issue preferences did have a significant impact; in fact, equal to that of position issues. Second, the rational impact of style issues on the vote was independent of position issues. Even when both style and position issues were included in the same model, style issues exhibited influence equal to position issue influence.

IMPLICATIONS

This research has produced four findings that demonstrate the place of style issues in American electoral politics. First, style issues do not appear to be any less important to the American voter than position issues. Second, voters can and do detect real differences of candidate commitment on style issues. Third, salient style issues are no more likely to be rationalized by a previously determined vote choice or by other issues than are position issues. Finally, salient style issues are as highly predictive of the vote as salient position issues. These specific findings and the support they lend to the general view of style issue importance in voter deliberations have three implications. These implications concern the study of public opinion, the actions of politi-

cal leaders, and the adequacy of public choice.

The evidence of style issue importance that has been assembled points to a possible source of research bias in the study of public opinion. Since those who study public opinion have paid scant attention to style issues, they may have neglected an important vote influence and risked serious misinterpretations of voter motivations.

The message to political leaders is quite clear: there are penalties paid by candidates who inadequately respond to the issues of greatest voter concern, especially on issues in which the candidates are in position agreement. The focus of any campaign will be on those issues which are of greatest importance to voters and which offer voters the opportunity to distinguish between the candidates. Candidates must satisfy the electorate on the fundamentals before proceeding to issues they think are of greater importance or offer greater electoral benefits. On many of these fundamentals the electorate may be satisfied quite easily and the candidates may fulfill their obligations almost effortlessly.

However, for some elementary style issues at certain times, pressing problems or candidates themselves have stimulated voters to demand more. The issues of law and order in 1968 and government integrity in 1976 appear to be such cases. Under most circumstances voters would simply assume that both candidates were strongly committed against crime and for honesty in government, but at other times voters must be reassured. If candidates fail to recognize this need for reassurance, they may well lose support because of it, and paradoxically, draw attention to the style issue at the expense of what they regard as more important differences between themselves and their opponents.⁹

Finally, style issues can only be neglected in the political process at the risk of substantial costs to an adequate public choice. To draw attention away from style issues, regardless of their salience, is to distort the process by requiring voters to choose a leader on other than the criteria they perceive to be the most important. Such a choice can only weaken leadership accountability to the public.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Different perspectives of the nature of public problems may complicate this distinction. What some may regard as a pair of style issues others may consider a single position issue. This is likely if voters perceive a tradeoff between style issues. For instance, views about decreased inflation and decreased unemployment may be either responses to two style issues or a single position issue, depending on whether the voter regards the pursuit of one policy as detrimental to the pursuit of the other policy. In other situations, a single style issue might be considered to be two position

- issues. For example, the style issue law and order may be split into issues of law enforcement methods and the judicial system, both of which may be position issues.
2. The idea that clear and opposing candidate issue positions are essential for a rational issue-based vote choice has been expressed throughout the issue voting literature. Although Campbell et al. (1964, p. 98) did not explicitly limit the analysis of issue voting to position issues, their statement that issue voting requires the perception that "one party represents the person's own position better than do other parties" has been interpreted as a requirement of position differences. Further examples of this premise may be found in Natchez and Bupp (1968, p. 421), Shapiro (1969), Pomper (1972), Niemi and Weisberg (1976, p. 162), Miller et al. (1976) and Page (1978, pp. 102–107 and 179–191). A more extensive list of the literature may be found in Kessel (1972) and Margolis (1977).
 3. In no sense does this group of issues constitute a sample of issues. The issues examined here are only those measured in a particular election in a particular study. The results should be considered in this light.
 4. By "minimal importance" it is meant that the voter rated the issue from +1 to +3 on a scale of -3 (unimportant) to +3 (most important).
 5. A candidate's commitment to an issue may also be questioned because of a lack of credibility or a lack of emphasis on the issue.
 6. Both views of political ambiguity have been expressed in the literature. The view that calculated ambiguity serves the electoral pursuits of the candidates has been expressed by Downs (1957) and by Shepsle (1972). The "emphasis allocation theory" of political ambiguity has been expressed by Page (1976).
 7. The issue that failed to meet our expectations was the "putting welfare recipients to work" issue. It is quite understandable that this item created confusion since it taps two policy areas. The question can either be interpreted as a question of welfare policy or of jobs.
 8. There is a great deal of literature concerning the cross-lagged panel model used in this analysis. Thorough discussions of the model, its several assumptions, and the severity of problems caused by violating those assumptions may be found in Heise (1970), Pelz and Andrews (1964), Pelz and Lew (1970), and McCullough (1978). The vote choice variable used in the model is an ordinal variable of thirteen categories. It was created by calculating the difference between the respondent's support for each of the candidates as measured on seven-point scales. The summary measures of issue preferences were computed in the following ways: the position issue preference was computed as the average product of attitudes and the differences of beliefs about candidate positions on salient issues (see Fishbein, 1967; Fishbein and Coombs, 1971; and Reynolds, 1974). The style issue preference was computed as the average difference of beliefs about the candidates' views of issue salience for all issues the voter both finds salient and shares the common policy predisposition.
 9. The possible consequences of style issue neglect by politicians does not mean that candidates should strictly and simply reflect the agendas of their political supporters. A politician may profit either by educating the public on the merits of his agenda or by adapting his agenda to the priorities of his coalition.
 10. The findings also raise doubts about the domination of the public agenda by elites (see Cobb and Elder, 1971). The evidence indicates that the elite agenda is not monolithic and that many voters can and apparently do respond to these differences.

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