

Moral Rhetoric, Extreme Positions, and Perceptions of Candidate Sincerity

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Abstract. Most Americans believe that politicians do not try to keep their campaign promises. This deep level of cynicism threatens to break a fundamental link in representation and undermines the legislative process. If candidates cannot credibly convey their positions, then voters will not trust them to enact policies. Yet, we know little about the strategies politicians might take to convey the sincerity of their claims. We argue that politicians can signal sincerity by justifying their stances in moral terms or by taking more extreme positions. Across three experiments, our results suggest that moral justifications tend to enhance perceived sincerity, while extreme positions do not. In a fourth study, we show that extreme stances increase polarization in candidate evaluations, but moral justifications do not. Taken together, our findings suggest that moral justifications are a useful strategy to reduce cynicism without contributing to rising levels of polarization.

Statement on Ethics: All studies reported in this manuscript were reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board.

The electoral and legislative processes create a need for politicians to cultivate reputations for sincerity among the public.¹ If citizens cannot trust that a politician will follow through on campaign statements, then they can't rely on those policy platforms in the voting booth. Distrust and cynicism can also undermine politicians' ability to make policy. For voters to support major legislation, such as immigration reform, they must believe in the sincerity of the goals of the politicians involved (e.g., Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Fairbrother 2019; Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Rudolph 2009; Rudolph and Evans 2005). In the absence of this trust, politicians are unlikely to earn bipartisan support for policy change, making it "harder for governments to get anything done" (Citrin and Stoker 2018, 62). Thus, being perceived as sincere is critical as both a candidate and an elected official.

Politicians, of course, understand the importance of building trust and most tend to follow through on their promises (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Sulkin 2009, 2011; Thomson et al. 2017). Even so, the American public remains cynical about the intentions of politicians. In the 2016 General Social Survey, only 21% of the public agreed that "people we elect to Congress try to keep the promises they have made during the election." Similarly, a 2016 CBS poll found that only 8% of the public thinks most politicians "tell people what they really believe most of the time," while 90% instead believe that politicians "tell people what they think people want to hear." These surveys reflect a more general trend of declining trust in nearly all facets of American government (Citrin and Stoker 2018).

A key challenge for politicians, then, is to communicate their platforms in a way that conveys their sincerity. Yet, we know relatively little about how candidates can use their

¹ Replication data is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AKKDGC>.

campaign messaging to display sincerity. We examine two strategies that might be used to convey a politician's commitment to a topic. First, building on moral and organizational psychology (Effron and Miller 2012; Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017; Kreps and Monin 2014), we argue that politicians who frame their message in moral terms are seen as more sincere and more likely to follow through with their promises. Second, we examine the expectation that extreme stances are perceived as more sincere. Given that extreme stances can be electorally costly (e.g. Hall 2015), voters may perceive them as a consequence of internal motivations rather than the product of a calculated electoral strategy.

While these strategies may signal sincerity, the overarching goal of building trust may be undermined if attempts to convey sincerity also fuel affective polarization. Both extremity (e.g., Rogowski and Sutherland 2016) and moralization (Garrett and Bankert 2018) have been linked with affective polarization. However, moralized positions may also convey a positive signal about personal character (Zlatev 2019), providing competing expectations. Thus, we test the possibility that extremity may signal sincerity at the cost of contributing to affective polarization, while moralized position-taking may yield the same benefits without the costs.

We examine and compare the effectiveness of moralized position-taking and extreme stances across three survey experiments, including a probability-based national sample. Then, in a fourth study, we analyze the implications for polarization. Our studies support past findings that moralized stances are seen as more sincere (Kreps and Monin 2014), and confirm that these findings also hold in explicitly political and partisan contexts. Extending this work, we also find that moralized stances do not contribute to affective polarization. In fact, the results suggest that moralized stances cause more favorable evaluations of a politician's character even among out-partisans. In contrast to some arguments, we find no evidence that extreme positions help to

convey sincerity, though they do contribute to higher levels of polarization. We conclude with a discussion of how candidates respond to an environment characterized by polarization and distrust, and how these individual strategies potentially shape the larger political context.

Candidate Position-Taking in an Era of Polarization and Cynicism

Policy platforms are an integral part of the election process. Voters use the signals sent by campaign promises to form beliefs about candidates and cast their votes (Born, van Eck, and Johannesson 2018). Even in the hyper-partisan context of modern U.S. politics, voters show a strong preference for elected officials who offer policy representation (Costa 2021). Thus, candidates spend countless hours and dollars developing and promoting their issue positions. For example, even in the swing state of Florida, neither major party candidate in the state's 2018 gubernatorial race shied away from staking out clear, ideological positions. Democrat Andrew Gillum was upfront about his desire for more progressive policies like an assault weapon ban and a \$15 minimum wage,² while Republican Ron DeSantis' hard-lined stance on immigration was on clear display in a television ad showing him teaching his toddler to build a wall out of toy blocks.³ These messages are not simply cheap talk; research indicates that these types of issue statements are credible indicators of how politicians will behave once in office (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Sulkin 2009, 2011; Thomson et al. 2017).

Candidate position-taking is strategic, however. Though there are instances where issues are so salient that they cannot be avoided, decisions about which issues to address and how to

² <https://forwardfla.com/our-work/>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/14/politics/immigration-campaign-ads-midterms/index.html>

address them are generally calculated and follow predictable patterns (Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014). For one, candidates should be more likely to discuss an issue when they are confident that a majority of constituents agree with their stance. In such cases, revealing that stance should carry minimal risk and offer higher potential for reward. But even if a candidate isn't confident in the popularity of his or her stance, stating it clearly may still be the best strategy if voters are risk-averse and prefer certainty to the unknown (e.g. Shepsle 1972). Focusing on the issues can also benefit a candidate if it diverts attention from other areas of weakness (e.g. character, experience), highlights an opponent's weakness, or rallies support from the partisan base and donors (Groseclose 2001; Stone and Simas 2010).

While clear position-taking can be important for issue-based voting, as Fenno (1978) argued more than four decades ago, the most important consequence of an issue stance is how it portrays a candidate as a person. Campaigns seem to share this view and frequently “dovetail” issue stances with character appeals to strengthen their effects (Just et al. 1996; Kahn and Kenney 1999). And experimental evidence shows that people draw inferences about candidate's character traits from their issue stances (Peterson 2005; Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989), and that different issue stances differentially affect specific trait dimensions (Clifford 2014, 2022). Additionally, recent work suggests that being perceived as “authentic,” or true to one's own beliefs and values, may be valuable in and of itself (Stiers et al. 2019). Thus, “[a] good issue for a candidate is, in this view, one that allows him to present himself as a person in a favorable light” (Fenno 1978).

Staking out a clear position on an issue is thus clearly motivated by electoral goals, whether by appealing to issue voters or by crafting a personal image. It is this self-serving motivation that likely undermines the sincerity of candidate statements and thus the benefits of

these statements. Indeed, members of the public are aware of the various motives of politicians and express dissatisfaction at behavior perceived to be driven by political self-interest (Doherty 2015; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Suspicion or skepticism about a politician's motives for taking a particular stance can also induce uncertainty (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2002), which can in turn diminish the weight given to policy agreement and trait evaluations (Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Glasgow and Alvarez 2000; Peterson 2004, 2005). Conversely, politicians' claims are more likely to be viewed as sincere if doing so may potentially run counter to those electoral goals. For example, politicians are more effective at debunking rumors when they stand to benefit from the spread of those rumors (Berinsky 2017). In addition, people are more likely to update their perceptions of a political party when the party takes an unpopular position and more likely to discount policy program moves that run counter to the beliefs of core supporters (Fernandez-Vazquez 2018a, 2018b). Thus, political cynicism makes it so that candidates will only benefit from a clear position-taking strategy to the extent that voters are willing to believe that those positions are more than just electoral pandering.⁴

Building on these works and the psychology of attitude strength, we investigate two rhetorical strategies that candidates can employ to signal sincerity – taking an extreme position and justifying one's stance in moral terms. At the level of individual psychology, extreme and morally convicted positions tend to be moderately to strongly correlated. These two types of positions also share many features of strong attitudes that should make them more likely to

⁴ This statement is consistent with a growing body of work showing that the relative success of clarity vs. ambiguity is dependent upon a number of conditions (e.g, Milita et al. 2017; Simas 2021a; Simas, Milita, and Ryan 2021).

influence future behavior, such as resistance to persuasion, temporal stability, and having a heightened impact on thought and action (for a review, see Petty and Krosnick 1995). To the extent that voters perceive these aspects of attitude strength, a politician's display of an extreme or moralized position on an issue should signal to voters that they are likely to follow through with their stance. However, the reliable association between extreme and morally convicted attitudes at the mass level does not necessarily translate to a similarly strong association among politicians, who face a unique incentive structure for the positions they stake out. Moreover, as we discuss in more detail below, these two types of strong attitudes are also differentiable in important ways.

Research on the psychology of attitude strength offers considerable evidence that viewing an issue in terms of right and wrong changes how a person thinks about the issue (Skitka and Morgan 2014). In particular, people holding views with moral conviction tend to think about the topic in a deontological, or rule-based, fashion, while people who do not hold a view with moral conviction are more likely to think in consequentialist terms, or in terms of costs and benefits (Ryan 2017, 2019). Supporting this contention, people tend to view their own moralized attitudes as objectively and universally true (for a review, see Skitka et al. 2021). Research on perceptions of leaders' attitudes also supports this view, as leaders who explain their stance in terms of consequences are seen as expressing less of a moral view than those who explain their stance in deontological terms (Kreps and Monin 2014).

Several important consequences follow from this distinct style of thinking that characterizes moral conviction. When people moralize an issue, they are less likely to change their mind over time (Luttrell and Togans 2020), less willing to compromise (Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2020; Ryan 2017), and are more resistant to group influence (Aramovich, Lytle, and

Skitka 2012). All of these effects are above and beyond other aspects of attitude strength, such as extremity. Thus, moralized attitudes seem to be particularly resistant to change and compromise.

Indeed, research on electoral behavior shows that voters are more likely to punish parties and politicians for changing positions on issues with a greater tendency to be moralized (e.g. same-sex marriage, transgender rights), but offer more leeway on issues like taxes or budgets, which are generally regarded as pragmatic (Simas, Milita, and Ryan 2021; Tavits 2007). More directly, research in organizational behavior finds that leaders who use moral justifications are perceived as more sincere and committed (Kreps and Monin 2014) and are punished more for changing their minds (Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt 2017). But while many of the studies in this latter body of research focus on the U.S. political context, none include the partisanship of the speaker – a factor that interacts with subjects’ own partisanship to influence perceptions (Cormack and Karl 2021).⁵ Thus, we provide a more robust test of this hypothesis across explicitly partisan contexts, across many salient political issues, and using a nationally representative sample.

Taking an extreme stance should also help convey sincerity by signaling attitude strength, but it should do so by narrowing a candidate’s appeal. Whereas less decisive policy positions can leave room for voters to project their preferred positions onto a candidate (Somer-Topcu 2015), more extreme positions limit this potential and can even swing the electorate to the other side by alienating party moderates and motivating the opponents’ supporters (Hall and Thompson 2018).

⁵ Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt (2017) do advance a partisanship hypothesis, but they focus on agreement with the second of two conflicting stances taken by the speaker, not shared party identity.

In addition, when candidates stake out extreme positions, they open themselves up to the electoral penalties that result from later flip-flopping or failing to deliver on those promises (Aragones and Neeman 2000; Simas, Milita, and Ryan 2021).

Thus, relatively extreme stances should be more likely to be perceived as motivated by a politician's own personal views than by strategic electoral goals. This claim is supported by evidence that people are more likely to view a politician's issue stance with skepticism when it is delivered to an audience that agrees, rather than disagrees with the stance (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2002). It is also consistent with evidence that people give higher integrity ratings to more ideologically extreme candidates from their own party (Simas 2021b). Given that perceived authenticity is a crucial aspect of a candidate's public image (Stiers et al. 2019), there may be benefits to taking extreme stances that outweigh the costs, particularly in an era of high levels of cynicism.

The Downstream Effects of Candidate Strategy

While taking extreme or moralized stances may help convey sincerity, these strategies may also contribute to polarization. Candidates who take more ideologically extreme positions generate more polarized reactions from the public (e.g., Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017) and more stereotypical character evaluations (Clifford 2020). The expectations are less clear for moralized stances, however. If moral justifications cause listeners to also view the topic through a moral lens, then it could have polarizing effects. Indeed, people holding moralized attitudes tend to desire greater social distance from disagreeing others (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis 2005), have stronger emotional reactions to disagreement (Garrett 2019; Ryan 2014) and are generally more affectively polarized (Garrett and Bankert 2018).

However, this dynamic may not play out because a politician's statement of their own position may have little effect on public moralization, and thus on polarization. Moral conviction on a topic tends to be highly stable over time (Skitka 2010), suggesting that it is relatively difficult to influence. Indeed, while lengthy moral and emotional frames can cause moralization on novel topics (Clifford 2019; Kodapanakkal et al. 2022), these effects are quite limited for salient political issues (Ciuk and Rottman 2020). Thus, while we expect that position-taking messages can effectively portray whether or not a politician views an issue in a moral light, it seems unlikely that these messages will also influence others' tendency to moralize a salient political topic.

In contrast, taking a moralized position may make a positive impression even on those who disagree with the stance. Some psychological research suggests that when people view others as caring deeply about a political issue, they view them as more trustworthy – and this effect holds even when they disagree with that person's position on the issue (Zlatev 2019). In other words, moralizing a stance may have positive effects on character evaluations even for out-partisans, which could actually reduce polarization. Overall, we have conflicting expectations about the effects of moral justifications on polarization, while the expectations for extremity are clear.

Taken together, we expect that stances that are explained in moral, rather than pragmatic, terms will be perceived as more sincere (H1). We also expect that extreme stances, relative to more moderate stances, will be perceived as more sincere (H2). As for downstream consequences on polarization, there is clear evidence that extreme positions should heighten affective polarization (H3). But since existing evidence offers conflicting expectations on the

effects of moralized positions on affective polarization, we investigate this question without stating a formal hypothesis.

Study 1

As an initial test of our main hypotheses, we recruited respondents through the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform on July 19, 2019. Respondents were required to be located in the US and have an approval rate of at least 95%. Due to recent concerns about fraudulent respondents, we embedded code in our survey to check respondent IP addresses and exclude respondents who were trying to take the survey from outside the US or were using a virtual private server to mask their location (Kennedy et al. 2020). This gives us a final sample size of 189.

Design

Respondents first completed a series of questions on partisan identity and ideology. Next, respondents were told they would see a series of statements drawn from the websites and social media posts of candidates for the US House of Representatives. Each respondent viewed a series of 10 statements in random order. Five statements were made by Republican candidates and five by Democrats. The partisanship of the speaker was clearly stated above each statement. While within-subjects designs such as this one sometimes raise concerns about demand effects or consistency effects, systematic tests of these concerns find little evidence for these biases (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021; Mummolo and Peterson 2019).

Within each statement, we manipulated two factors in a 2×2 design. First, the issue stance was either moderate or extreme. For example, a moderate Democratic stance on education calls for a reduction in the costs of higher education, while the extreme Democratic demands free access for all. Second, the stance was justified in either moral or pragmatic terms. The five

Democratic topics were renewable energy, homelessness, taxes, immigration, and education. The five Republican topics were the national debt, welfare spending, environmental regulation, gun control, and immigration. All stances were party-consistent, and extremity was always manipulated toward the ideological extremes of the in-party. See the Appendix for the full text.

To manipulate the use of a moral justification, we largely relied on “general” moral language that does not refer to a specific moral principle (cf. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). For example, the moral treatments referred to a “moral obligation” or “moral responsibility,” or described something as “immoral” or “morally wrong.” This design choice increases the likelihood that respondents interpret the treatment as intended. However, many statements also included reference to more specific moral concerns, such as fairness, harm, and authority. Thus, our treatments take on a variety of forms, but surely do not represent all forms of moral claims.

After each statement, respondents were asked two questions about the candidate’s sincerity: how likely the candidate is to change their stance in the future, and whether the candidate truly believes the stance or is just saying what people want to hear. Next, respondents answered three questions that serve as manipulation checks. The first asked whether the candidate’s stance is mostly due to their beliefs about right and wrong or their beliefs about costs and benefits. To capture extremity, the final two asked respondents to rate how well the candidate’s stance represents the views of the average American voter and the average voter from the candidate’s party.

Manipulation Check

We use OLS to model each outcome variable as a function of dichotomous indicators of each treatment condition, fixed effects for each issue, and respondent random effects. Results are

substantively identical when using respondent fixed effects rather than random effects. Standard errors are clustered on the respondent.

Starting with the manipulation checks, respondents perceived a candidate's stance as more motivated by their moral beliefs in the moral condition than the pragmatic condition ($b = .23, p < .001$), while the extremity condition had only a weak effect on perceptions of moral motivations ($b = .04, p = .089$). This pattern holds for both the extreme ($b = .27, p < .001$) and moderate ($b = .26, p < .001$) moral conditions, providing no evidence for an interaction between the two treatments.

Turning to the extremity manipulation, respondents rated the extreme stance as significantly less representative of the average American voter ($b = -.17, p < .001$), while the morality manipulation did not affect perceptions of representativeness ($b = -.002, p = .952$).⁶ When considering the representativeness of co-partisans, the effect was also negative, but smaller and not distinguishable from zero ($b = -.07, p = .114$). Thus, any benefits of extreme stances cannot be due to perceived popularity among a candidate's base.

Results

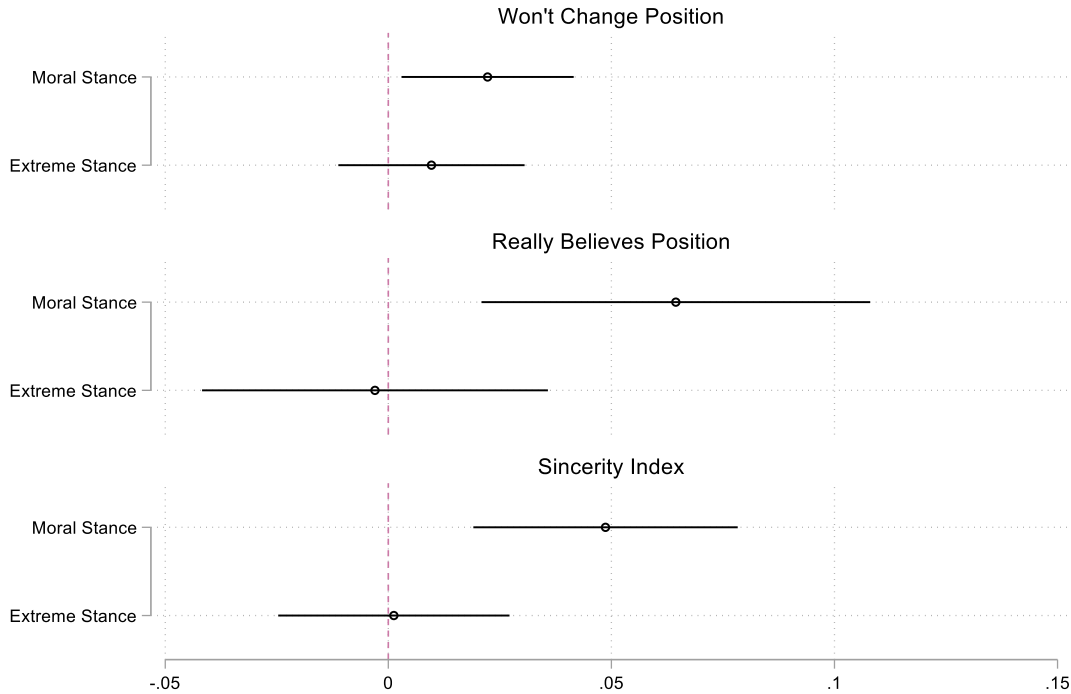
Given that the manipulations worked as intended, we turn to our two primary outcomes. Averaging across experimental conditions, between 48% and 70% of respondents said that the candidate really believed in their stance. Similarly, between 55% and 72% said that the candidate was "not likely at all" or "not too likely" to change their position on the issue. However, these

⁶ Again, we find no evidence of an interaction, as the effects are similar for the extreme pragmatic condition ($b = -.15, p = .005$) and the extreme moral condition ($b = -.22, p = .001$).

two items were only moderately related ($\rho = .33$), so we analyze them separately as well as modeled together as a latent variable. All dependent variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

We begin with a simple model including a dummy variable for the extremity conditions and the moral rhetoric conditions. This assumes no interaction between the two treatments, which we explore further below. Coefficients from each model are plotted in Figure 1. Starting with the belief outcome, respondents are significantly more likely to think the candidate actually believes the stance when justified with moral, rather than pragmatic language ($b = .06, p = .004$). However, extreme positions did not significantly differ from more moderate positions ($b = -.003, p = .880$). Turning to the change outcome, respondents are significantly more likely to think that the candidate won't change their mind when the stance is justified in moral, rather than pragmatic terms ($b = .02, p = .024$). Again, though, more extreme positions are not seen as less likely to change than moderate positions ($b = .01, p = .364$). We also find a similar pattern when combining the two outcomes into a standardized index: moral justifications suggest greater sincerity ($b = .05, p = .001$), while more extreme positions do not ($b = .001, p = .925$). Additionally, as shown in the Appendix, we find similar results for both in-party and out-party candidates, suggesting that moralizing is a broadly effective strategy for conveying sincerity.

Figure 1. Moral justifications, but not extreme stances, increase perceptions of sincerity (Study 1)



Note: dependent variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1. The sincerity index combines the two main dependent variables using an item response model.

Although we did not have clear expectations as to how extreme positions and moral language might interact, we explored this possibility by analyzing the sincerity index as a function of dummy variables for the three treatment conditions, with the pragmatic moderate condition excluded as the baseline (for full details, see Appendix). Compared to the pragmatic moderate condition, both the moral moderate ($b = .08, p < .001$) and moral extreme ($b = .05, p = .017$) conditions increase perceived sincerity, while the pragmatic extreme position does not ($b = .03, p = .140$). However, only the moral moderate condition conveyed significantly more sincerity than the pragmatic extreme condition ($p = .015$). Thus, there is some suggestive

evidence that moral language is most effective when it is paired with moderate rather than extreme positions.

Study 2

While Study 1 provides some evidence that moral justifications make issue stances appear more sincere, this study has a number of limitations, particularly the reliance on a small convenience sample. We address this in Study 2 with a larger sample ($N = 769$) that was fielded by NORC on the probability-based AmeriSpeak panel during May 12-24, 2020.⁷ Study 2 used the same experimental stimuli as Study 1, though three design features differ. First, unlike Study 1, respondents were only asked to evaluate co-partisan candidates, as the highly partisan nature of politics and voting (e.g. Abramowitz and Webster 2016) emphasizes the importance of studying a candidate's most relevant constituency. Pure independents ($n = 122$) were randomly assigned to evaluate either Republican candidates or Democratic candidates, but not both.

Second, the issue stances were embedded in a larger candidate biography. Full texts of our treatments are available in the Appendix, but each was modeled after the type of biography available through websites like Project Vote Smart and included information about the candidate's gender, age, family, education, and political experience. We added this extra information to prevent respondents from reading specific candidates into our hypothetical scenarios. But because this added information requests more time and effort from respondents, we made a third change, which was to reduce the number of candidates evaluated to three.

⁷ The weighted AAPOR RR3 cumulative response rate was 6.3%. This study was funded and fielded by Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences.

We also altered the measurement of sincerity. Given that our two outcome measures were only weakly related in Study 1, we conducted a pilot study to examine a wider variety of outcome measures that assess perceptions of the sincerity of a politician's issue stance (see Appendix for details on the pilot). From it, we selected four outcome variables that ask whether the candidate truly believes their stance, how committed they are to the stance, how likely it is they will be a leader on the issue, and how likely it is they will flip-flop on the issue in the future. Thus, our four items include content about the politician's beliefs, motivation, and likely behavior. The four variables are strongly related, so we rescaled each to range from 0-1, then averaged them into a sincerity index.⁸ We used the same morality manipulation check from Study 1. To test the extremity manipulation, we again asked how well the stance represents the views of the average American.

Manipulation Checks

As in Study 1, we take a within-subjects approach and stack the data such that respondents each provide three observations. We use linear regression and include respondent random effects, issue fixed effects, and cluster standard errors on the respondent. Again, results are substantively identical when using respondent fixed effects rather than random effects.⁹ Finally, we include a dummy variable representing the moral justification condition and a dummy representing the extreme stance condition.

⁸ Across the three candidate trials, the Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.78 to 0.79.

⁹ Specifically, they are identical in sign and significance, and highly similar in effect size. We maintain random effects to be consistent with models that incorporate individual differences (e.g., partisan identity).

As expected, the moral justification treatment increased the likelihood that respondents perceived the stance as morally motivated ($b = .24, p < .001$), and the extremity of the stance did not affect these perceptions ($b = -.002, p = .929$). Turning to the extremity outcome, extreme stances were seen further from the views of the American public ($b = .08, p = .006$), while the moral justification treatment did not affect this outcome ($b = -.04, p = .209$). Overall, the manipulations worked as expected.¹⁰

Results

Turning to our primary outcome, the sincerity index, we start with the simpler modeling approach described above. As expected, the moral justification is perceived as significantly more sincere than the pragmatic justification ($b = .021, p = .002$). The extreme position, on the other hand, is seen as slightly, but not significantly less sincere than the more moderate position ($b = -.007, p = .295$). Thus, consistent with Study 1, moral justifications increase sincerity, but extreme positions do not.¹¹

We again explore the possibility of an interaction between extremity and moral rhetoric by including dummy variables for each condition, with the exception of the pragmatic moderate condition. Relative to the pragmatic moderate condition, the moral moderate condition increased perceived sincerity ($b = 0.029, p = .001$), while the moral extreme condition did not ($b = 0.014, p = .142$), though these two conditions were not significantly distinguishable ($p = .083$). Finally,

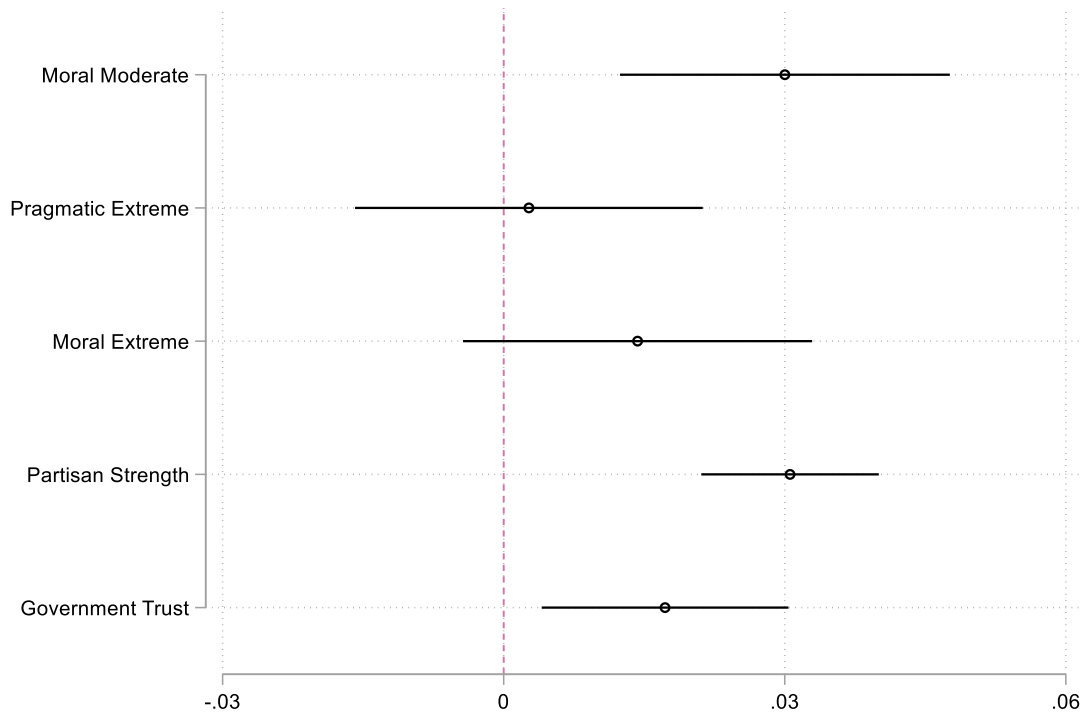
¹⁰ We find no evidence of interaction effects between the treatments for either outcome ($ps > .59$).

¹¹ We also explored whether the results are consistent across issues and find no evidence that the results are driven by a specific issue.

the pragmatic extreme condition had no effect relative to the pragmatic moderate condition ($b = 0.002, p = .825$). Thus, while moralized positions are generally, more effective at conveying sincerity, the effects are clearest when paired with a moderate position.

To illustrate the magnitude of the treatment effects, we re-estimate the model reported above, while adding controls for partisan strength and trust in government – two variables that should have strong effects on judgments about the sincerity of a co-partisan candidate’s issue stance. The coefficients are plotted in Figure 2. The moral moderate position increases sincerity by .03 ($p = .001$), or about 0.17 standard deviations. In contrast, a moral extreme position increases sincerity by about .014 (0.08 standard deviations), though this effect is not statistically significant ($p = .133$). For comparison, a one-unit increase in partisan strength (e.g., pure independent to leaning toward a party) is associated with an increase in sincerity of about .03 ($p < .001$; 0.17 standard deviations). And finally, a one-unit increase in government trust (e.g., the government can be trusted “almost never” to “only some of the time”) is associated with an increase in sincerity of 0.017 ($p = .010$; 0.09 standard deviations). In short, a simple shift in how a politician describes their stance can have a *within-subjects* effect that is on par with the between-subjects effects of stable individual differences, like partisan strength and government trust, that are notoriously difficult to move.

Figure 2. Moral justifications, but not extreme stances, increase perceptions of sincerity (Study 2)



Note: dependent variable is the sincerity index, rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Of course, one concern is that this strategy may work only among citizens who are already predisposed to trust politicians and fail among those who are most in need of convincing. To test this concern, we leverage three distinct measures of trust that were measured prior to our study. In addition to government trust, the survey also included questions on how much the average citizen can influence politics (external efficacy), and how much people in general can be trusted (social trust). These three items were only weakly related, so we analyze them individually in separate models. In non-interactive models, government trust ($b = .02, p = .003$), social trust ($b = .04, p < .001$), and external efficacy ($b = .01, p = .021$) are all associated with higher perceived sincerity. However, none of these variables significantly interact with the moral justification treatment ($ps > .34$). Thus, it appears that moral language may be able to help politicians signal sincerity to even the more skeptical members of the electorate.

Study 3

Our evidence from Studies 1 and 2 consistently show that moral justifications increase perceived sincerity. However, both studies relied on hypothetical candidates, raising the question of how easily politicians can manipulate the perceived moral basis of their issue stances. To investigate this question, we embedded a pre-registered experiment in a team module of the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES)¹² that tested how moral vs. pragmatic justifications impacted respondents' perceptions of then-presidential candidate Joseph Biden's sincerity. The choice of a highly-salient and long-standing public figure makes this a particularly difficult test.

Respondents were first randomized into one of two issues: criminal justice or immigration. Within each issue, respondents were randomized into either a pragmatic or moral stance on the issue. For both issues, the particular stance and extremity of the stance was held constant to reflect his actual position. To avoid deception, we borrowed text from statements made by Biden on the two topics that highlighted either moral or pragmatic concerns. Thus, our design has high levels of realism, but lower experimental control. The treatments are shown below.

Immigration:

¹²Formerly the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Principle Investigators Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Sam Luks. For more information, see <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

“Joe Biden has promised to modernize the U.S. immigration system. He has defended this position by arguing that [*Pragmatic*: key industries rely on immigration and that working-age immigrants keep our economy growing. / *Moral*: the U.S. should have an immigration policy that reflects the core values of the nation.]

Criminal Justice:

“Joe Biden has promised to shift focus from incarceration to crime prevention. He has defended this position by emphasizing the [*Pragmatic*: costs of federal prisons and the economic impact of removing incarcerated individuals from the workforce. / *Moral*: ideals of equality, equity, and justice.]

Following the treatment, respondents were asked to rate the likelihood that Biden would follow through on his promises using a 5-point scale ranging from “not likely at all” (1) to “extremely likely” (5). Respondents were then asked the manipulation check question used in Study 2.

Following our pre-registration, we pool across issues and predict perceived sincerity as a function of a treatment indicator and an issue indicator. The effect of the moral justification was positive, but not statistically significant ($b = .07, p = .434$). Controlling for pretreatment covariates did not alter the substantive conclusion. While the results conflict with our two prior studies, it may be difficult to manipulate views of a well-known politician due to pretreatment (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Slothuus 2016). This is supported by analyses of our manipulation check. In this experiment, the coefficients were less than half the size of those obtained in Studies 1 and 2 (criminal justice: $b = .10, p = .024$; immigration: $b = .07, p = .133$), and the effect was not statistically significant in the immigration condition. These results suggest that for well-

known politicians, a single message may not be enough to cultivate the perception of being morally motivated on an issue.

Study 4

The evidence above suggests that moral justifications for issue stances can increase the perceived sincerity of that stance, but that extreme stances are not perceived as more sincere than more moderate stances. In our final study, we examine the consequences for these strategies on political polarization. Study 4 was fielded on April 28, 2020 on Mechanical Turk. Respondents were required to be located in the US and have a HIT approval rate of at least 95% and were paid \$1.00 for completing the study. A total of 1,003 respondents completed the study, but we exclude pure independents ($n = 71$) and respondents whose IP address indicated they were not located in the US or were masking their location (Kennedy et al. 2020), leaving an effective sample size of 865.

In this design, we used stimuli from Study 2 to create four pairs of candidates, each consisting of a Democrat and Republican who make a party-consistent statement on the same topic: the environment, social welfare and homelessness, taxes and spending, or immigration. Respondents were randomly assigned to two pairs such that each respondent saw and rated a total of four politicians: two Democrats and two Republicans.

For each respondent, one pair consisted of two candidates who both took a moderate, pragmatic stance on the issue. This represents our baseline condition. The other pair of candidates was randomly assigned to one of the three remaining treatment conditions such that both candidates took either an extreme and pragmatic stance, a moderate and moral stance, or an

extreme and moral stance. Respondents evaluated each candidate sequentially. The order of the pairs was randomly assigned, as well as the order of the candidates within each pair.

After viewing each candidate biography, respondents were asked to rate their favorability of the candidate, as well as perceptions of the candidate's ideology and moral character.¹³ Additionally, respondents rated how enthusiastic and how angry they would feel if the candidate were elected to their district. For our key outcomes – favorability, character, and emotions – we calculate comparative candidate evaluations within each condition by subtracting the respondent's rating of their outparty candidate from their rating of the inparty candidate. Given these dependent variables are now measures of polarization, we rescale each to range from -1 to +1 so that a negative value indicates that the respondent gave a higher evaluation to the outparty candidate, a positive value indicates that the respondent gave a higher evaluation to the inparty candidate, and a value of 0 indicates that the respondent did not perceive a difference.

Results

To evaluate the effects of the treatment conditions, we stack the data so that each respondent provides two observations: one comparative candidate evaluation for each experimental condition or candidate pair. In contrast to the prior studies on sincerity, we find no evidence of an interaction between the conditions.¹⁴ Thus, we model the comparative candidate evaluation scores using linear regression with dummy variables for the extreme policy stance and

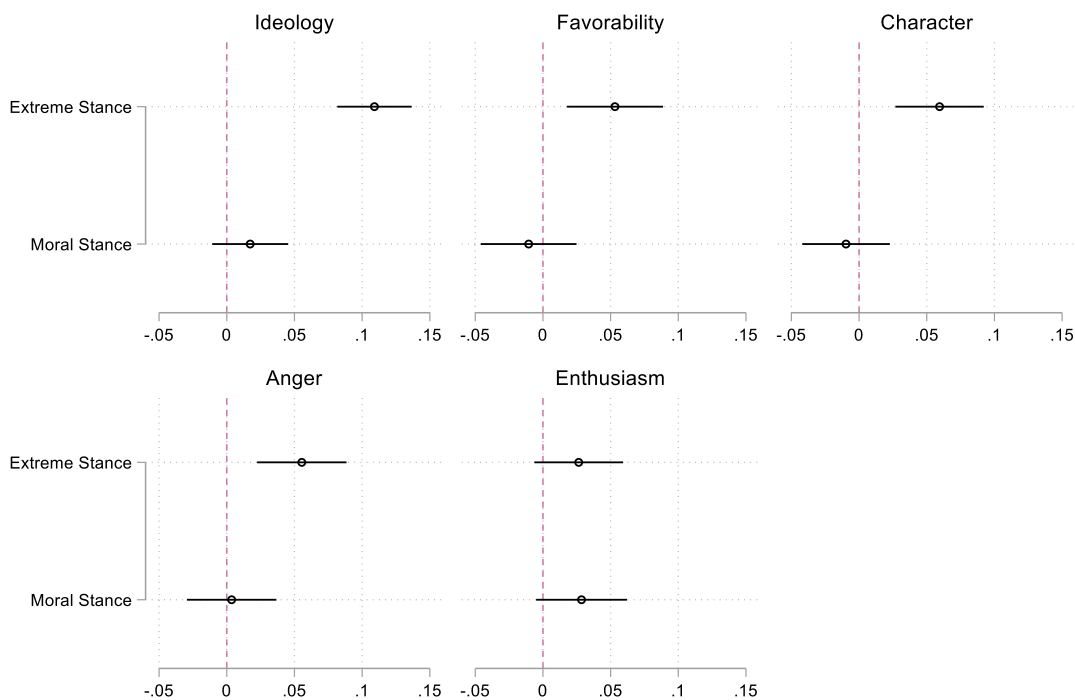
¹³ We measured several character traits, but these traits loaded on multiple factors, so we focus on the “moral” trait as the most relevant. We get substantively identical results when instead analyzing “compassionate.”

¹⁴ For details, see the Appendix.

the moral justification, respondent random effects, and fixed effects for each combination of issues. Standard errors are clustered on the respondent.

Extreme positions consistently polarized evaluations, increasing gaps in perceived ideology ($b = .11, p < .001$), favorability ($b = .05, p = .003$), character ($b = .06, p < .001$), and anger ($b = .06, p = .001$), though not enthusiasm ($b = .03, p = .114$). Morally justified positions, however, did not significantly affect any of these outcomes ($ps > .05$). Crucially, the difference between the effects of these two strategies is statistically significant for ideology ($p < .001$), favorability ($p = .029$), and character ($p = .011$), though not for anger ($p = .063$). These findings suggest that while extreme stances consistently polarize candidate evaluations, moralized stances do not.

Figure 3. Extremity, but not moralization, polarizes voters



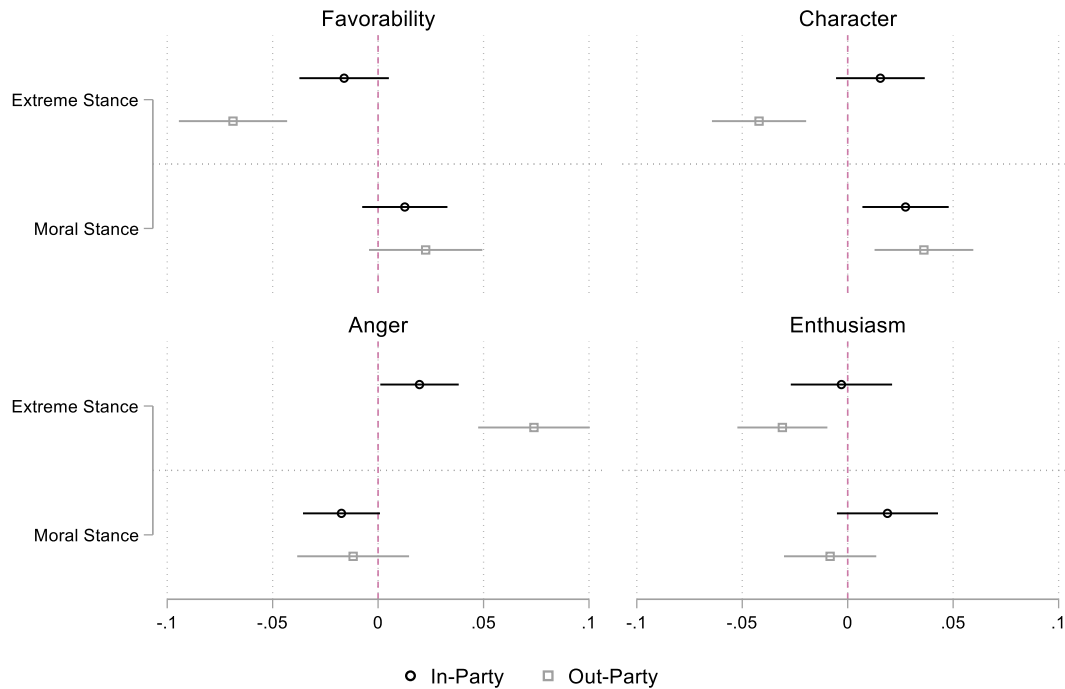
Note: dependent variables are comparative candidate ratings calculated by subtracting out-party ratings from in-party ratings, with the exception of ideology. Comparative candidate ideology is calculated by subtracting ratings of the Democratic party from ratings of the Republican party (where higher values indicate conservatism). All dependent variables are rescaled to range from -1 to 1.

In-Party Gains or Out-Party Penalties?

We now dig further into these results to determine whether these effects are primarily driven by changes in evaluations of the in- or out-party candidate. When focusing on out-partisan candidates, the differences between extreme and moralizing strategies becomes even clearer. For out-partisans, extreme stances significantly decrease favorability and character evaluations, while increasing anger and decreasing enthusiasm. However, moral stances do not significantly affect favorability, anger, or enthusiasm, and actually increase character evaluations. In all cases, the effect of an extreme position is significantly different from the effect of a moralized position ($ps < .01$).

The effects of both strategies are more muted for in-partisans. Extremity has no significant effect except to increase feelings of anger toward the candidate. Moralized stances on the other hand, serve only to increase character evaluations. Taken together, there is little for candidates to gain from extremity, at least as operationalized here, as it may even hurt evaluations among the in-party. For moralized stances, however, candidates stand to gain among both the in- and the out-party.

Figure 4. Polarization is driven by out-party evaluations



Note: dependent variables are evaluations of in-party (gray) and out-party (black) candidates. All DVs are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Conclusion

Candidates and representatives face the challenge of working with a public that possesses low levels of political trust and deep skepticism of the claims and promises made by politicians. Overcoming this cynicism is crucial not only to gaining many of the purported benefits of campaigning, but also to effectively delivering policy change. Candidates continue to devote time and resources to constituent communication with the belief that it will be effective, yet we have little systematic evidence of the strategies politicians can use to make their appeals appear more sincere.

Our evidence suggests that one way to signal sincerity is through the use of moralized justifications for their issue stances. Candidates using moral justifications were seen as more likely to truly believe their stance and less likely to change their mind in the future. There also seems to be little downside to this strategy. We found no evidence that moral justifications increase polarization or harm evaluations of a candidate. In fact, the use of moral justifications led to more favorable impressions of a politician's character, even among partisan opponents. Nonetheless, there is significant variation in when parties and politicians decide to engage in moral rhetoric (Jung 2020), raising important questions about the antecedents of this strategy.

We found no evidence, however, that more extreme stances are perceived as more sincere. One potential reason for these null findings is that we did not consider the full context of the electoral environment. We conceptualized extremity as relative to the general election constituency. However, these voters are just one of several audiences to which a candidate must appeal. So, while a moderate position may be perceived as pandering to this broader group, an extreme stance may also be seen as pandering to primary voters, donors, or party elites who often favor these types of more ideological positions (e.g., Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Broockman et al. 2021; Stone and Simas 2010). Thus, it is possible that extreme statements may have effects in more specific contexts. However, the logic above also illustrates the challenges to using extremity to convey sincerity – given the various audiences a politician might appeal to, extremity and moderation can both be perceived as pandering.

It may also be the case that for any given issue, the benefits of both extremity and moralization are conditional on the politicians' broader record and reputation. For example, it seems likely that the effects of extremity are conditional on the perceived fit with a candidate's overall ideological viewpoint. An otherwise moderate candidate taking an extreme stance may be

more likely to be charged with pandering than an extreme candidate taking one more extreme stance. Likewise, a moral appeal may only be perceived as sincere if it is perceived as consistent with the broader set of values the candidate has espoused. Thus, to understand how and when candidates might adopt extreme or moralized stances to signal sincerity, it may be necessary to account for contextual factors such as the audience and/or constituency, the candidate's reputation, and the candidate's broader policy profile and communication style. To be sure, we consider the null results from Study 3 as support for this proposition and evidence of the need for further investigation into the circumstances that make different rhetorical strategies most effective.

Candidates and voters are not, however, the only actors that need to be considered. Interest groups and activist factions within parties can also contribute to the apparent costliness of a political position. For example, even though a majority of Americans support legislation such as requiring background checks on all gun sales and banning assault weapon sales,¹⁵ the possibility of opposition and/or retribution from the National Rifle Association (NRA) makes it seem courageous for a candidate to espouse such policies. So, on this and other issues, a politician may be able to portray his or her view as virtuous and costly opposition to a popular view, even though few may actually hold that view. Overall, the work presented here is an important first step toward a better understanding of how political candidates can earn the trust of those they are supposed to represent.

¹⁵ <https://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1207a2GunPolicy.pdf>

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