

How Moral Motives Link Party Stereotypes¹

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Abstract. Citizens hold robust stereotypes about the parties and their leaders, including the issues they are most competent at handling and the character traits they exemplify. Yet, we know less about whether and how party stereotypes are linked in the minds of voters. I argue that there are strong links between issues and traits, and that these links are not merely the byproduct of elite ideology. Rather, issue ownership is structured, in part, by the moral problems those issues represent (e.g., suffering) and the character traits (e.g., compassion) that are relevant to solving those problems. As a result, there should be strong and widespread links between the issues and character traits that parties own. Alternatively, any issue-trait linkages might be wholly a product of elite behavior, in which case these links should be limited to the politically engaged. I find support for my hypotheses across three studies that include a national sample, within-subjects analyses, and open-ended responses. Issue-trait linkages are not reducible to ideology and persist even among the least politically informed. These findings help explain the structure of issue ownership, why issue ownership is so stable over time, and how politicians might successfully trespass on their opponent's owned issues.

¹ Replication data and code is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/78ZHZH>

Citizens hold a variety of beliefs and stereotypes about the parties that help them structure the political world. Republicans have long been perceived as better able to handle issues like defense, terrorism, and crime, while Democrats are seen as more competent on the environment, poverty, Social Security, and health care (Egan 2013; Petrocik 1996). The parties also “own” a set of character traits that they are seen as better exemplifying. Republican presidential candidates have consistently been seen as stronger leaders and having greater personal morality than Democratic candidates. Democrats, in contrast, have been seen as more compassionate and empathetic (Hayes 2005). For both issue and trait ownership, these are not just beliefs about specific candidates, but also extend to stereotypic beliefs about the parties (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017) and their supporters (Clifford 2019). These stereotypes help voters make decisions about which party’s candidates are better able to handle the particular problems and threats facing the country (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009b, 2015).

While ownership theories play a prominent role in understanding electoral behavior, we know relatively little about the relationship between issue and trait stereotypes. For example, there is evidence that politicians’ issue *stances* can influence trait perceptions (Clifford 2014; Peterson 2005; Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989). However, issue ownership is about more than a party’s *position* on an issue (e.g., Stubager and Slothuus 2012; Therriault 2017), and there is no systematic evidence that the parties’ stances create the observed patterns of trait ownership.

I argue that the valence issues involved in issue ownership are reciprocally linked with particular character traits. This is because each set of owned issues (e.g., poverty and health care) represents a particular type of moral problem (e.g., suffering) and people who exemplify particular character traits (e.g., compassionate) are seen as more motivated to solve that problem. These intuitive links between issues and traits provide useful cues for voters, who can draw inferences about a party’s or politician’s issue competencies from their character, or about their character from

their issue emphases. Unlike theories holding that issue-trait linkages are merely the product of elite behavior or elite ideology, my theory predicts that issue-trait linkages will be clear even among the least politically aware.

I assess the link between party ownership of traits and issues in several ways. First, using a large national survey, I show that people consistently associate each party's owned issues with their owned traits. Second, using a within-subjects design, I demonstrate that each party's owned issues elicit distinct types of moral concerns and create a demand for corresponding aspects of moral character. These differences in moral thinking, in turn, predict which party is perceived as better able to handle the issue. Finally, I replicate the within-subjects findings using open-ended trait importance measures. Contrary to an elite-driven perspective, these findings tend to persist even among the least politically knowledgeable and cannot be explained by ideology. Overall, the results suggest that issue and trait ownership are strongly linked in the minds of the public, providing new insights into the nature of each.

The Ownership of Issues and Traits

Issue ownership is “the perception in a voter’s mind that a specific party over the long term is most competent at handling—in the sense of delivering desired outputs on—a given issue” (Stubager 2018, 349). This perception of competence, or ownership, is said to stem from “a history of attention and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them” (Petrocik 1996, 826). Supporting this view, aggregate perceptions of issue ownership are best explained by a party’s past attention to the issue, though not by actual performance (Egan 2013; but see Ponder et al. 2015 on ownership of economic prosperity). Decades of campaign and legislative activity have given Democrats stable ownership over issues such as the environment, poverty, and

health care, while Republicans have long owned issues related to national defense, crime, and terrorism.

Issue ownership is valuable because it provides a party and its candidates an electoral advantage when their owned issues are salient (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Egan 2013; Petrocik 1996). Campaign messages are more effective when they focus on owned issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994) and candidates are covered more favorably in the news when focusing on a candidate's owned issues (Hayes 2008). Parties, in turn, often attempt to reap the benefits of their issue advantages by focusing their attention on these issues (e.g., Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003).

Drawing on the issue ownership literature, Hayes (2005) proposed that the parties also own particular character trait dimensions. His analysis of seven presidential elections demonstrates that Republican candidates are consistently seen as stronger leaders and as having greater personal morality, while Democratic candidates are seen as more compassionate and empathetic. More recent work shows that these same trait stereotypes apply to both the parties in general (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017) and partisans in the mass public (Clifford 2019), though trait ownership is less apparent among candidates in U.S. Senate races (Hayes 2010).

Similar to issue ownership, candidates benefit when their owned traits are made salient. For example, when facing the threat of terrorism, voters place a premium on strong leadership (Lawless 2004; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009b, 2009a). More generally, the public prefers dominant, aggressive leaders during times of conflict (Laustsen and Petersen 2017). Other research suggest that political scandals and corruption can heighten the importance of trustworthiness and honesty, while reducing the importance of leadership and dominance (Bøggild and Laustsen 2016; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Politicians attempt to take advantage of these dynamics by priming their character

strengths through their campaigns and behavior in office (Benoit 2004; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004).

While there are clear parallels between issue and trait ownership, these two theories are rarely studied in tandem. As a result, we know little about whether and how issue and trait ownership are connected. The initial research on trait ownership argues for specific links between owned issues and traits (e.g., poverty and compassion) and speculates that trait ownership is caused by candidates' issue stances and campaign behavior (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Rahn et al. 1990). While there is some evidence that politicians' *stances* on divisive issues affect perceptions of their character (Clifford 2014; Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989), there is little evidence on the relationship between character and the consensual topics that are central to issue ownership (Egan 2013).

While past literature has suggested that causation primarily flows from issues to traits, there is reason to believe that the reverse is true as well. Traits are not just understood as descriptive of behavior (e.g., she tripped, which is clumsy), but as causes of behavior (e.g., she tripped *because* she's clumsy) (Kressel and Uleman 2010, 2015). Trait perceptions are useful because they represent others' intentions and abilities, and thus help us predict their behavior. A useful illustration comes from research on facial appearance. People automatically draw trait inferences from faces on multiple dimensions such as trustworthiness and dominance (Todorov et al. 2008). And facial appearance has a causal effect on vote choice, which is driven by perceptions of competence, rather than other characteristics (Laustsen 2014). Thus, character traits offer an easily accessible grounds for evaluating politicians, even among the least informed.

The Structure of Trait Perceptions

There are numerous typologies of trait dimensions, but understanding issue ownership requires a typology that helps explain the types of social problems people are motivated to solve. For this reason, I focus on moral character, which, by definition, focuses on a person's good (or

bad) intentions for their interactions with others. A variety of recent studies demonstrate that moral character is distinct from other trait dimensions, such as sociability and competence, and that perceptions of moral character are a stronger predictor of overall favorability of people and groups (for a review, see Goodwin 2015).

In contrast, other trait typologies often conflate morality and sociability. For example, the stereotype content model includes the dimensions of competence and warmth (e.g., Bittner 2011; Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007), the latter of which includes both moral traits (e.g., loyalty, compassion) and sociability traits (e.g., funny, outgoing). Another large body of research has focused on masculine (e.g., assertive, rational) and feminine (e.g., warm, talkative) trait stereotypes (e.g., Dolan and Lynch 2014; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004). But these dimensions also conflate moral traits with other aspects of character. For this reason, I turn to a framework for moral character.

Moral character is itself multi-faceted (Goodwin 2015), but there is little consensus on its dimensionality. Fortunately, moral foundations theory (MFT), which was grounded in cross-cultural perceptions of moral virtues and vices (Haidt and Joseph 2004) offers a useful framework for thinking about moral character. MFT is a descriptive theory of the structure of moral judgment that has been well validated (Graham et al. 2011). The theory has also been integrated with political science research (e.g., Federico et al. 2013; Kertzer et al. 2014; Kraft 2018; Weber and Federico 2013), providing a useful framework for theorizing about the role of different aspects of moral character in politics (Clifford 2014, 2018).

According to MFT, morality is best described by five “foundations,” or sets of intuitions. Each moral foundation has a set of traits that represent a dispositional motivation to uphold that foundation. The Care and Fairness foundations are more strongly endorsed by liberals than by conservatives, though both are widely valued (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). The Care

foundation is about minimizing harm and is exemplified by character traits like compassionate, caring, and sympathetic. The Fairness foundation was originally defined both in terms of equality and proportionality, though more recent work conceptualizes it primarily in terms of proportionality (Haidt 2013, 167–86). Virtues include being impartial and fair-minded.

The remaining three foundations are more strongly endorsed by conservatives (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). The first is Loyalty, which has to do with upholding the interests and reputation of one's group, such as a family, country, or sports team. The most widely shared and politically relevant group identity is patriotism, so I focus here on loyalty to one's country. The next foundation is Authority, which has to do with maintaining social order, typically through supporting hierarchy, rules, and tradition. Corresponding virtues involve either leadership or followership, depending on one's social position. For the purposes of evaluating a politician, leadership traits are clearly the most relevant, such as being assertive or commanding. The last foundation is Sanctity, which represents concerns about physical and spiritual purity, and is linked to the emotion of disgust. Character virtues involve self-control and denial of carnal pleasures, such as wholesome or modest.

Linking Trait Dimensions to Issue Domains

Given that moral character traits can be understood as dispositional motivations to uphold particular moral goals, they should help citizens infer whether a candidate is sincere and committed to solving a problem. Each consensus goal, such as reducing poverty, begins with a specific type of moral problem. In the case of poverty, the problem is that some people are suffering due to poor financial conditions. Character helps us understand who will prioritize the issue because it tells us who is most dispositionally motivated to address that type of moral problem. So, if poverty is primarily a problem related to suffering, then politicians who are perceived as particularly compassionate should be seen as more motivated and thus better able to handle that issue.

Democrat-owned issues primarily focus on social welfare, such as poverty, health care, education, and Social Security. These issues all share the same general moral problem of helping those who may be suffering. Thus, compassion should be a strong predictor of a candidate's ability to handle these issues. Fairness likely also plays a role in the handling of Democratic issues, given that inequality is also a core theme to Democratic issues like poverty and health care. However, given that fairness can be understood in a variety of ways (e.g., procedural fairness, reciprocity, equality), the expectations for this foundation are less clear.²

Republicans own issues like national security, terrorism, and crime. These issues share common themes of defending the interests of the country and maintaining law and order. As a result, politicians who are perceived as more patriotic and more authoritative should be seen as more motivated and better able to handle these issues. The Sanctity foundation is less relevant, however, because it is primarily associated with attitudes on divisive issues (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage), rather than the consensus issues involved in issue ownership (Egan 2013). As a result, sanctity traits are less likely to play a role in issue ownership. To summarize, moral character traits represent a dispositional motivation to solve particular moral problems that underlie different issue domains, creating links between certain traits and issues.

The competence dimension should work differently from moral traits, however. Rather than representing a person's intentions, it captures their ability to bring about those intentions. Whether a politician is trying to alleviate poverty or protect the country from terrorism, competence should

² Specifically, notions of fairness rooted in equality tend to be associated with more liberal political outlooks, while notions of fairness based on proportionality tend to be associated with more conservative views (Haidt 2013; Skurka et al. 2019). Thus, depending on how a person interprets fairness, it may be linked to different types of issue competencies.

facilitate that goal. As a result, competence should facilitate issue ownership, but should do so equally across issues. Thus, while competence surely provides an advantage, it is unlikely to contribute to partisan patterns of issue ownership. This logic fits well with past findings that while competence is widely desired by voters, it is not owned by either party (Hayes 2005).

Taken together, my argument holds that people see issues as representing specific types of moral problems. Democrat-owned issues correspond primarily with moral concerns about Care and Fairness, while Republican-owned issues correspond more with concerns about Authority and Loyalty. These moral concerns create a demand for a specific type of person – one who is dispositionally motivated to alleviate that type of moral problem. As a result, voters see specific traits as being tied to handling particular issues. And this link should be driven at least in part by voters inferring competence on the basis of a politician’s character.

Of course, there are alternative explanations to the expected patterns described above. First, it may be that issue-trait linkages are entirely elite driven. On this view, there is nothing intrinsic about the connection between toughness and crime or between compassion and poverty. Politicians, for whatever reason, tend to associate particular traits with particular issues, and voters have learned these associations. If this is the case, then the issue-trait linkages should be strongest among the politically knowledgeable, but weak among the many citizens who pay little attention to politics.

A second and closely related alternative explanation is that the patterns described above are reducible to ideology. On this view, preferences for particular traits are merely expressions of ideology (e.g., Hatemi, Crabtree, and Smith 2019). Citizens learn the traits and issue competencies that are associated with being liberal or conservative. Then, upon learning the ideology of a candidate (or party), people make inferences about that candidate’s traits and issue competencies. According to this alternative viewpoint, the unique relationships between issues and traits is spurious, and can be accounted for by ideology. Additionally, because ideological reasoning is

limited to only the most politically sophisticated (Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), this viewpoint also predicts that the links between traits and issues should only hold among politically knowledgeable respondents.

Study 1: Linking Owned Issues and Traits in a National Sample

As a first test of whether there are unique links between owned issues and owned traits, I designed a series of questions embedded in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Of the 1,000 respondents who completed the first wave, 839 also completed the post-election wave, which is analyzed here. Respondents were asked to rate how well six traits describe Republican and Democratic politicians, each on a five-point scale, in randomized order. Traits were selected to reflect the five moral foundations (compassionate, fair-minded, strong leaders, patriotic, wholesome), plus competence (intelligent). Respondents were then asked whether Democrats, Republicans (or neither) “would do a better job” dealing with several issues. Two issues are owned by Democrats (poverty, environment) and two are owned by Republicans (national defense, crime).

As expected, basic patterns of issue and trait ownership hold up in the data (see Appendix for details). Republicans were more likely than Democrats to rate the opposing party as better able to handle poverty and the environment. And Democrats were more likely to rate the opposing party as better able to handle crime and defense. Similarly, Republicans were more likely to rate the opposing party as more compassionate, while Democrats were more likely to rate the opposing party as more patriotic³ and as stronger leaders. Notably, fairness is not clearly owned by either party,

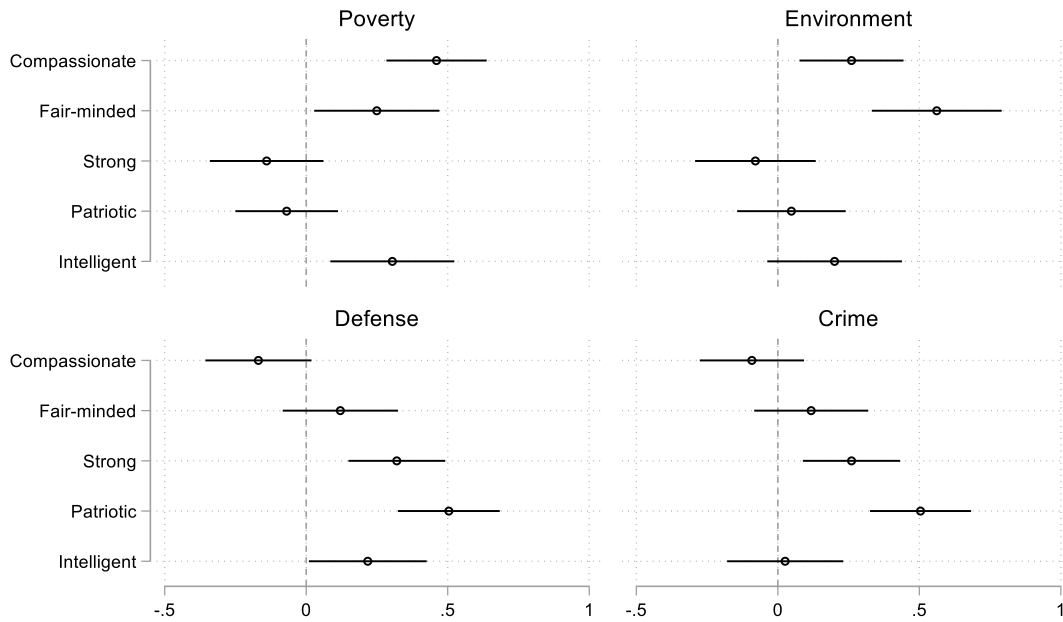
³ Notably, patriotism is widely viewed as an important trait for politicians to have (Clifford 2018), suggesting it is also a valence trait.

consistent with the possibility that partisans are interpreting the term differently. Intelligence is also not clearly owned by either party. Overall, the results largely fit with past findings.

To test the relationship between issue and trait ownership, I predicted each issue handling rating using ordered logit models. Issue handling ranges from Democrats (-1) to neither (0) to Republicans (1). The independent variables are the comparative trait rating scores ranging from -4 to 4, where positive values indicate that a respondent scored Republicans more favorably than Democrats.⁴ I also control for respondent partisanship, ideology, education, gender, and race. Of course, the direction of causation is likely reciprocal, so these models are not meant to imply a causal direction, but to demonstrate associations in the minds of voters. The coefficients for each trait dimension are plotted in Figure 1 (full model details shown in the Appendix). Starting with the environment, both compassionate ($b = .46, p < .001$) and fair-minded ($b = .25, p = .027$) are significant predictors of issue handling. A two standard deviation shift in either variable increases the probability of perceived Democratic ownership by 39 percentage points and 23 percentage points, respectively. In contrast, none of the Republican-owned traits are significant predictors ($ps > .10$). A similar pattern emerges for poverty. Both compassionate ($b = .26, p = .006$) and fair-minded ($b = .56, p < .001$) are significant predictors, while none of the Republican traits are ($ps > .10$). A two standard deviation shift of either Democrat-owned trait leads to an increase in perceived Democratic ownership by 24 and 50 percentage points, respectively. So far, the results consistently support strong and unique links between Democrat-owned traits and Democrat-owned issues.

⁴ I also control for the “wholesome” trait dimension, but do not discuss these findings here as they are less theoretically relevant.

Figure 1. Linking Party Issue Handling and Trait Evaluations



Note: figure shows estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from a series of ordered logit models. Controls for partisanship, ideology, gender, race, and education are included in the models but not shown in the figure.

The bottom left panel of Figure 1 displays the results for national defense. Neither of the Democratic-owned traits are statistically significant ($ps > .10$), but strong leader ($b = .26, p = .003$) and patriotic ($b = .50, p < .001$) each predict better handling of this issue. A two standard deviation shift in either Republican-owned trait increases perceptions of Republican ownership by 22 and 42 points, respectively. The last owned issue, crime, is shown in the bottom right panel of Figure 1. Again, neither of the Democratic-owned traits are statistically significant ($ps > .05$). But strong leader ($b = .32, p < .001$) and patriotic ($b = .50, p < .001$) both predict better handling of this issue. A two standard deviation shift in either Republican-owned trait increases perceptions of Republican ownership by 24 and 38 points, respectively. Notably, in spite of the fact that patriotism has been overlooked by past literature, it emerges as the strongest predictor of handling national defense and crime.

While the patterns above are consistent with expectations, it's crucial to test whether the effects of traits differ from each other and across outcomes. To reduce the number of tests, I

simplified the models in two ways.⁵ First, I reduced the number of outcome variables by averaging the Democrat-owned issues and Republican-owned issues into two separate indices. Second, I reduced the independent variables by averaging the Democrat-owned traits (compassionate, fair-minded) and Republican-owned traits (strong, patriotic). As expected, the Democrat-owned traits are more strongly related to Democrat-owned issues than to Republican-owned issues ($p < .001$), and more strongly related to Democrat-owned issues than are Republican-owned traits ($p < .001$). Similarly, the Republican-owned traits are more strongly related to Republican-owned issues than to Democrat-owned issues ($p < .001$), and more strongly related to Republican-owned issues than are Democrat-owned traits ($p < .001$). Finally, as expected, the coefficients for competence did not differ across models ($p = .283$), consistent with the idea that competence is not linked to any particular issue domain, but instead represents a general ability to carry out one's goals.

Testing Ideology as an Alternative Explanation

An alternative explanation to these linkages between trait and issue ownership is ideology. On this view, the traits ascribed to the parties are merely ideological labels, and the results above are being driven by ideological perceptions. If this is the case, then controlling for perceptions of the parties' ideologies should undermine the patterns described above. To test this alternative explanation, I re-estimated the full models above while controlling for perceptions of comparative ideology (perceptions of Republican party conservatism minus Democratic conservatism; full results shown in the Appendix). The party seen as comparatively more conservative is seen as significantly more competent on defense and crime and less competent on the environment. However, controlling for comparative ideology does not change any of the substantive findings above, with

⁵ In the full models reported in Figure 1, there are 32 differences between coefficients that test the main argument. Of these 32 tests, 27 are statistically significant. See Appendix for details.

the exception of fairness, which becomes a significant predictor of handling the Republican-owned issues as well. This again suggests that fairness is strongly endorsed across the political spectrum and the least clearly owned.

Are Issue-Trait Linkages Limited to the Politically Aware?

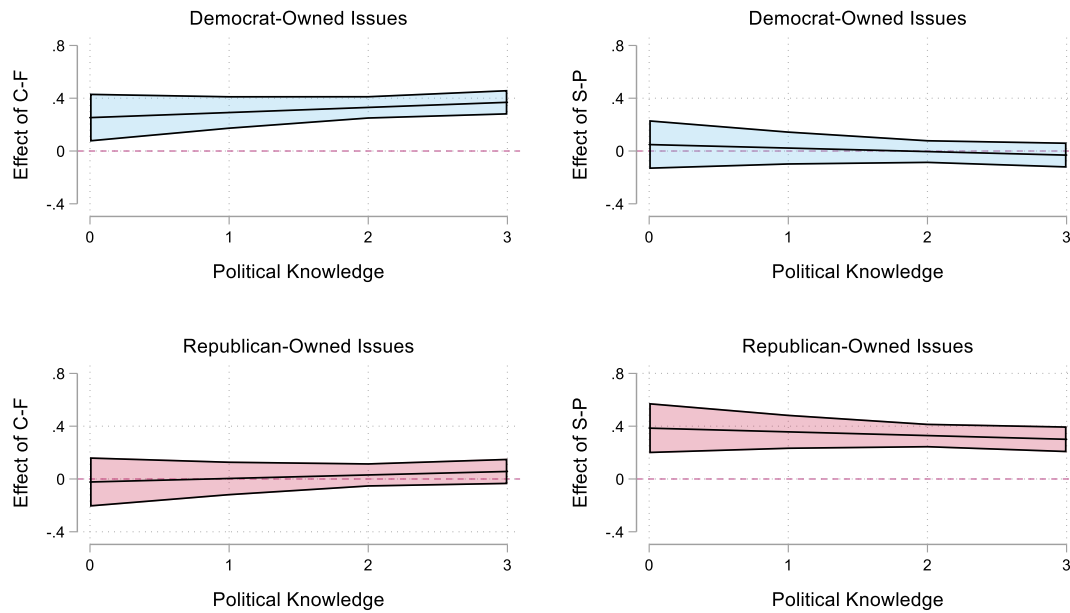
According to my argument, citizens intuitively link issues and traits due to underlying moral problems. However, a long line of research suggests that people are heavily reliant on elite messaging and only the most politically aware are able to employ ideological concepts. Similarly, if the links between issues and traits are elite-driven, then the links should be strongest among the most politically aware. In contrast, if there is an intuitive basis for issue-trait linkages, then we should observe these patterns even among the least politically informed.

To examine this question, I modified the simplified model above by including a measure of political knowledge and an interaction between political knowledge and each trait index.⁶ Figure 2 plots the effect of each trait index across political knowledge (full model details shown in the Appendix). As shown in the top-left panel, the compassion-fairness index is a significant predictor of Democrat-owned issue handling across the full range of knowledge, including at the lowest level of knowledge ($p = .007$). Moreover, the interaction term is not statistically significant ($p = .269$). The effect of strong-patriotic, however, is not statistically significant at any level of knowledge. Turning to Republican-owned issues, the compassion-fairness index is not statistically significant at any level of knowledge. But, the strong-patriotic index is significant across the full range of knowledge, including at the lowest level of knowledge ($p < .001$). And again, the interaction term is not

⁶ Political knowledge is a three-item index of awareness of partisan control of the US House and Senate, and relative ideological placement of the parties ($\alpha = .73$).

statistically significant ($p = .443$). These results suggest that political knowledge is not required for citizens to link issues and traits.

Figure 2. Issues and Traits Are Linked Among the Least Politically Knowledgeable



Note: figure plots the effect of relative party trait perceptions on issue competence ratings across levels of political knowledge. C-F = average of compassionate and fair-minded traits. S-P = average of strong and patriotic traits.

Study 1 Overview

Overall, a consistent pattern emerges. Democratic-owned traits, particularly compassion, are consistently associated with handling of Democratic-owned issues, but not Republican-owned issues. And the Republican-owned traits of leadership and patriotism are linked with Republican-owned issues, but not Democratic-owned issues. Consistent with expectations, the effects of intelligence did not differ across models, suggesting that competence functions differently than aspects of moral character. Auxiliary analyses showed that these effects cannot be explained by perceptions of the parties' ideological positions and they persist even among the least politically knowledgeable. Together, these results suggest a strong, intuitive link between issues and traits.

Study 2 & 3: Linking Moral Concerns to Issue and Trait Ownership

Study 1 provides evidence for the link between issue and trait ownership, but has limitations. Studies 2 and 3 improve on this evidence in several ways. First, both studies test for issue-trait linkages when no party cues are present. Second, both studies use a within-subjects design, which helps rule out potential confounds. Third, Study 3 relies on open-ended trait measures to prevent forcing a particular structure on responses (for discussion, see Kraft 2018). Additionally, these studies provide further evidence that issue-trait links cannot be explained by respondent ideology (Study 2) and that the issue-trait links exist even among the least politically aware (Study 3).

Data

Respondents for both studies were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) during June 12-14 (Study 2; N=500) and January 31, 2019 (Study 3; N=797). To be eligible, respondents in study 2 had to have a minimum approval rate of 95%, while respondents in Study 3 needed to complete at least 100 HITs, have an approval rate of 97%, and all were required to reside in the US. In both studies, respondents whose IP address indicated they were not located in the US or were using a virtual private server to mask their location were excluded from analysis (Kennedy et al. 2020). Clearly, neither sample is nationally representative, but MTurk samples consistently replicate research conducted on national samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Coppock 2018; Mullinix et al. 2016).

Design

In both studies, respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate one of three Democrat-owned issues (environment, poverty, health care) and one of three Republican-owned issues (national security, terrorism, and crime), in random order. Respondents were asked to rate the traits that are most important for handling each issue, using either a closed-ended format (Study 2) or an open-ended format (Study 3). Additionally, in Study 2, respondents were asked to report their moral concerns about each issue. After evaluating the issues, respondents rated each party's handling of

those issues. Because respondents evaluated two issues, all analyses are within-subjects, which hold constant all individual differences such as partisanship and ideology.

To measure trait preferences, respondents in Study 2 were asked “When you think about the type of politician who would best handle the issue of [issue], how important is it for that politician to have each of the following traits?” (compassionate, fair-minded, strong leader, patriotic, intelligent). In Study 3, respondents were instead asked to list the first three traits that come to mind. A research assistant, who was blind to the purpose of the study, coded the open-ended traits using a coding scheme developed from the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Clifford 2014; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). For example, traits like “compassionate” and “caring” were classified under the Care foundation, while traits like “tough” and “assertive” were classified under the Authority foundation (see Appendix for details). The author and a research assistant independently a sample of 106 traits. The agreement rate was 76% with a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.70.⁷ After resolving all disagreements, the research assistant coded the remaining responses. Although respondents were instructed to list three traits in response to each prompt, some listed more and some listed fewer. To maintain similarity across respondents, I analyze only the first three traits listed and calculate the proportion of each type of trait (e.g., Care) mentioned.

To measure moral concerns in Study 2, I adapted questions from the relevance section of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ). Specifically, respondents were asked “When you think about the issue of [issue], to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?” Respondents were asked three questions corresponding with each foundation, such as “whether or not someone suffered emotionally” (Care foundation). For the Loyalty foundation,

⁷ Notably, a majority of the disagreement between coders involved the *relevance* of the traits to the foundations, rather than disagreement about which foundations they represent.

questions were adapted to specify the country as the relevant group. See Appendix for full question wording.

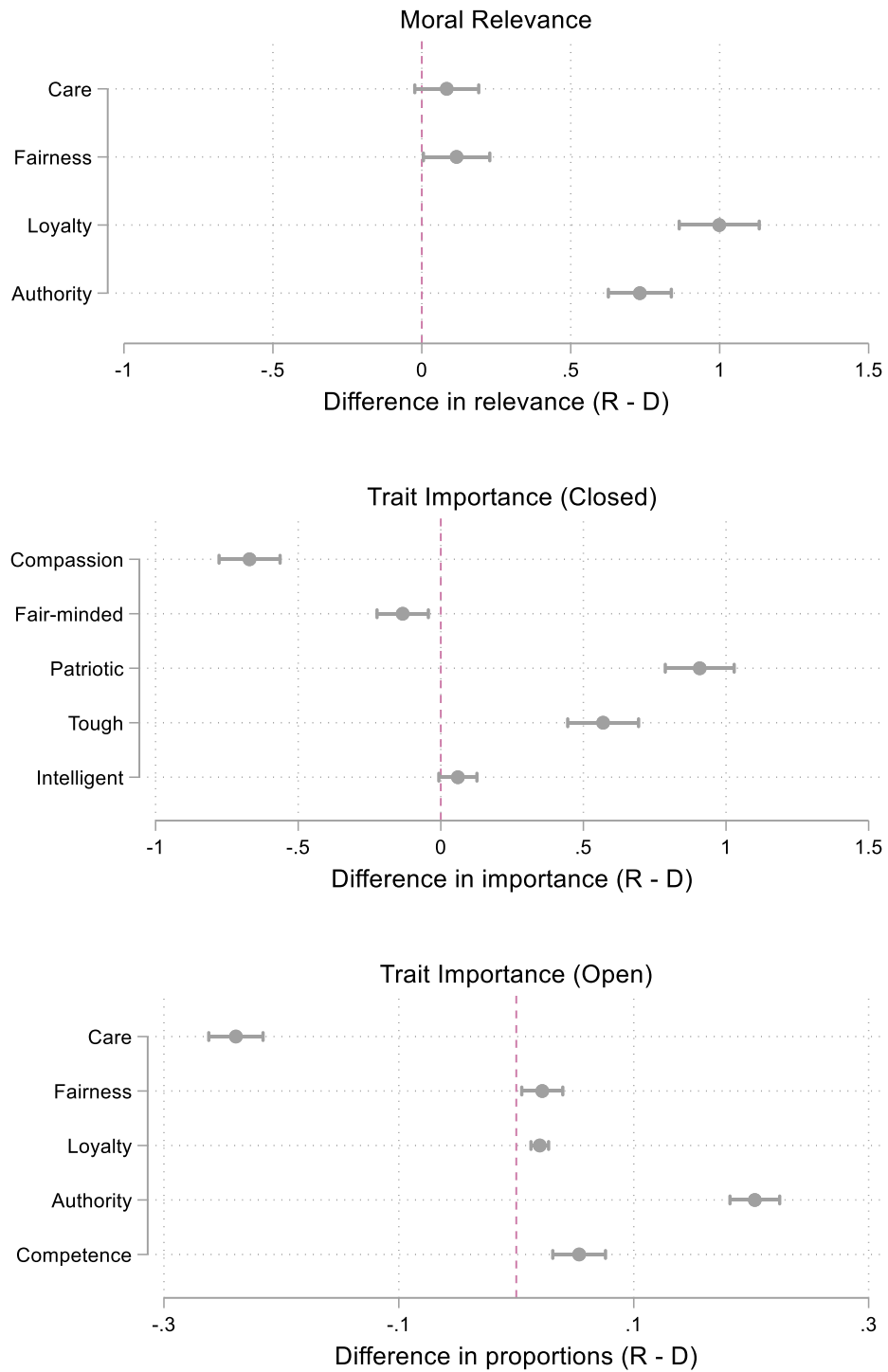
To provide an additional test of the potential moderating influence of political knowledge, Study 3 included four factual knowledge items similar to those used by Carpini and Keeter (1993).⁸ Using these items, I test whether issue-trait linkages are moderated by political knowledge.

Results

I first examine whether respondents' moral concerns differ for Democrat-owned and Republican-owned issues. Because all respondents were asked about one of each issue type, I take a within-subjects approach by differencing a respondent's rating on a Republican-owned issue from that same respondent's rating on a Democrat-owned issue. The moral relevance difference scores are plotted in the top panel of Figure 3 below. Contrary to expectations, there is no significant difference in Care relevance (difference = .08, $p = .13$), and respondents placed slightly less moral relevance on Fairness for Democrat-owned issues than Republican-owned issues (difference = .12, $p = .04$). The patterns for the remaining foundations support expectations, however. Respondents placed more weight on both Authority (difference = .73, $p < .001$) and Loyalty (difference = 1.00, $p < .001$) when evaluating Republican-owned, rather than Democratic-owned, issues. Thus, while Care and Fairness were rated similarly across issues, Authority and Loyalty were seen as substantially more relevant to Republican-owned issues. This is consistent with the Care and Fairness

⁸ The items were: knowledge of the Chief Justice, the Senate Majority Leader, presidential veto override requirement, and the party known for supporting smaller government.

Figure 3. Moral Priorities Across Owned Issues



Note: left panel displays difference in relevance of each moral foundation between Democrat and Republican-owned issues. Center and right panel display difference in trait importance by issue ownership. Center panel relies on closed-ended trait importance (Study 2). Right panel relies on open-ended trait listing (Study 3). Higher values indicate greater importance for Republican-owned (vs. Democrat-owned) issues.

foundations being widely endorsed, and Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity foundations being more divisive (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

Respondents should also display different preferences for the traits of a politician depending on the issue at hand. The middle panel of Figure 3 displays the difference in trait importance ratings in Study 2. As expected, respondents rated compassion as significantly more important when considering a Democrat-owned issue (difference = $-.67$, $p < .001$). Respondents also rated fair-mindedness as slightly more important for Democrat-owned issues (difference = $-.13$, $p = .004$). However, respondents placed significantly more importance on toughness (difference = $.57$, $p < .001$) and patriotism (difference = $.91$, $p < .001$) when considering Republican-owned issues. Intelligence was not statistically distinguishable by issue type (difference = $.06$, $p = .08$).

Turning to the open-ended trait importance questions in Study 3, the bottom panel of Figure 3 plots the within-subjects difference in proportions for each trait. As expected, Care traits were mentioned much more frequently on Democrat-owned issues ($M = 30.1\%$) than on Republican owned issues ($M = 6.3\%$; $p < .001$). Fairness traits, on the other hand, were mentioned slightly more often on Republican-owned traits ($M = 13.5\%$) than Democrat-owned traits ($M = 11.3\%$; $p = .013$), again suggesting a lack of clear ownership of this trait. Loyalty traits, as expected, were mentioned more frequently on Republican-owned issues ($M = 2.5\%$) than Democrat-owned issues ($M = 0.5\%$; $p < .001$). A large difference emerged on Authority traits, which were common on Republican-owned issues ($M = 23.6\%$), but much less so on Democrat-owned issues ($M = 3.3\%$; $p < .001$). Finally, although no difference was expected for competence, these traits were mentioned slightly more frequently on Republican-owned issues (25.8% vs. 20.4% ; $p < .001$). Across the two studies, respondents clearly preferred compassion when considering Democrat-owned issues, but toughness and patriotism when considering Republican-owned issues.

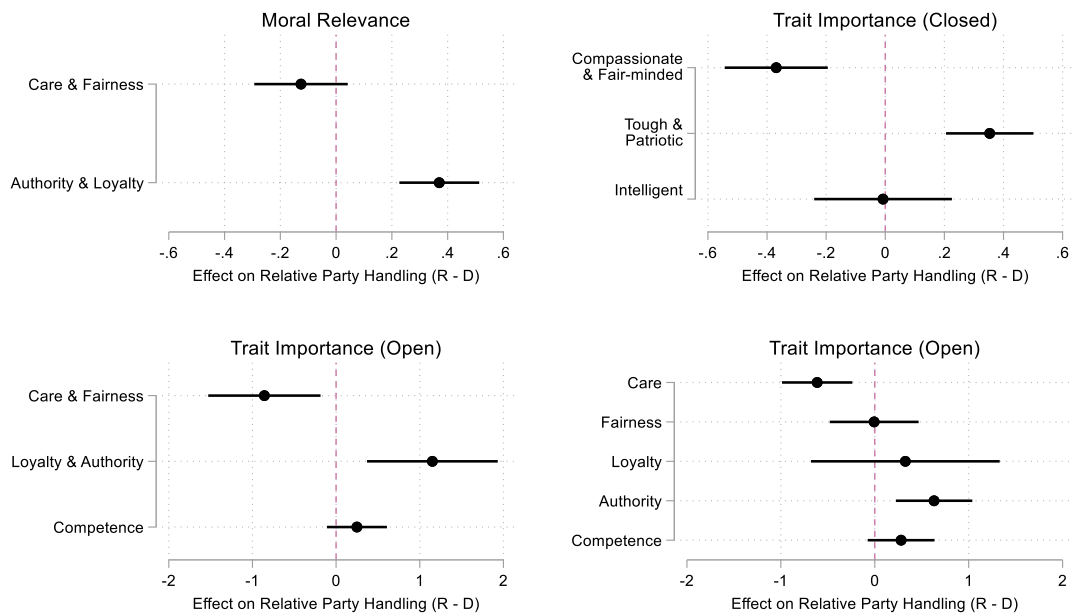
So far, respondents exhibit different moral concerns when thinking about different issues, which should help explain patterns of issue ownership. Specifically, when respondents see an issue in terms of Care and Fairness (Loyalty and Authority), they should be more likely to see the Democratic (Republican) party as more competent. To test this hypothesis, I take a repeated measures approach by stacking the data such that each respondent provides two observations. For each model, the dependent variable is the respondent's relative rating of party competence on the target issue (Republican handling minus Democrat handling), ranging from -4 to 4. The independent variable is either the respondent's moral relevance ratings (Study 2), closed-ended trait importance ratings (Study 2), or open-ended trait listing (Study 3). I account for individual differences with respondent fixed effects and for issue differences with issue fixed effects. Additionally, standard errors are clustered on the respondent. Thus, the model provides a completely within-subjects analysis.

Starting with the moral relevance ratings, a model including all four foundations generated problematic levels of multicollinearity, so I average the Care and Fairness foundations and the Authority and Loyalty foundations. The top left-hand panel of Figure 4 shows that respondents who give higher ratings of relevance for Care and Fairness on an issue are marginally more likely to rate Democrats as better able to handle that issue ($b = -.13, p = .141$). Respondents who give higher ratings of relevance for Authority and Loyalty on an issue are significantly more likely to rate Republicans as better able to handle the issue ($b = .37, p < .001$). These findings are largely consistent with expectations, but again suggest that variation in the relevance of the Authority and Loyalty foundations is most important to determining issue handling.

The next analysis uses respondents' the closed-ended trait importance ratings. Due to multicollinearity, I also averaged compassionate and fair-minded and tough and patriotic into two indices, while also controlling for intelligence. The coefficients are plotted in the top right-hand

panel of Figure 4. Respondents who saw compassion and fairness as more important for the issue were more likely to rate Democrats as better able to handle it ($b = -.37, p < .001$). Respondents who placed more importance on toughness and patriotism, however, rated Republicans as better able to handle the issue ($b = .35, p < .001$). Finally, ratings of the importance of intelligence were unrelated to perceptions of issue handling ($b = -.01, p = .950$). Thus, consistent with expectations, each party's owned traits were rated as more important for a politician handling that party's owned issues.

Figure 4. Moral Concerns on an Issue Predict Perceived Party Competence



Note: the top left panel plots coefficients for moral relevance on relative party handling (R - D) of an issue. The remaining three panels plot the coefficients for trait importance on relative party handling of an issue.

The open-ended measure of trait importance did not pose any multicollinearity issues, perhaps due to the use of open-ended responses and the larger sample size. Thus, I analyze each of the four trait categories separately, but also replicate the reduced models used for Study 2. Consistent with Study 2, the bottom left-hand panel of Figure 4 shows that respondents who place greater importance on Care & Fairness traits for an issue are more likely to perceive Democrats as better able to handle the issue ($b = -.86, p = .012$; see Appendix for model details). The lower right-hand panel, which plots the coefficients for each trait separately, shows that this

result is driven entirely by Care traits ($b = -0.61, p = .001$), while Fairness has little apparent effect ($b = -0.01, p = .979$).

The lower left-hand panel of Figure 4 also replicates the Loyalty & Authority findings from Study 2 ($b = 1.15, p = .004$). The lower right-hand panel shows that this effect is clearly driven by Authority traits ($b = 0.63, p = .002$), but the contribution of Loyalty ($b = 0.33, p = .525$) is less clear due to wider confidence intervals. Finally, the importance placed on competence is again unrelated to perceptions of comparative party competence ($p > .10$).

Testing Ideology as an Alternative Explanation

Because the analyses above are within-subjects, they rule out all individual differences as explanations, such as partisanship. However, it is possible that the results were actually driven by issue-specific attitudes. Respondents who take more conservative positions on the policy favor the more conservative party and prefer more conservative traits and values. Fortunately, Study 2 included measures of respondents' issue-level ideology (see Appendix for details). While issue-level ideology is a strong predictor of perceptions of issue handling ($ps < .001$), none of the substantive conclusions change after controlling for ideological views (full model details shown in the Appendix). These results suggest again that ideology cannot explain issue-trait linkages.

Are Issue-Trait Linkages Limited to the Politically Aware?

Study 3 included a measure of political knowledge, allowing further tests of how widespread issue-trait linkages are among the public. Among respondents at the bottom quartile of political knowledge, the issue differences in trait importance (open-ended) closely replicate patterns among the full sample. When considering Democrat-owned (rather than Republican-owned) issues, low knowledge respondents are more likely to prioritize Care traits (difference in proportions = .29, $p < .001$), and less likely to prioritize Authority ($-.21, p < .001$) and Loyalty traits ($-.02, p = .027$). Similar to the full sample, there is only a marginal difference in Fairness traits ($-.03, p = .082$) and

competence traits ($-.05, p = .012$). These findings indicate that even the least knowledgeable respondents clearly associate owned traits with owned issues.

Similar to Study 1, we can also test whether low-knowledge respondents are able to use their trait importance on each issue to evaluate the parties' issue competencies. I re-estimated the simplified model above (bottom left panel of Figure 4) among those at the bottom quartile of knowledge (see Appendix for model details). Similar to the findings above, Care & Fairness traits are associated with greater Democratic ownership ($b = -.56, p = .461$) and Authority and Loyalty traits are associated with greater Republican ownership ($b = .89, p = .281$), but neither effect is statistically significant, perhaps due to the limited sample size. However, a model including an interaction between political knowledge and each trait index fails to reject the null hypothesis that political knowledge does not moderate trait effects ($ps > .34$). Thus, while low-knowledge respondents can link owned issues with owned traits as well as high-knowledge respondents, it is less clear from this study whether low-knowledge respondents are as capable at using these issue-traits links to evaluate the parties (though see Study 1).

Conclusion

Issue and trait ownership have played a fundamental role in our understanding of campaign strategy, voter behavior, and election outcomes. Yet, little has been done to link these partisan stereotypes. The findings here provide some of the clearest evidence for specific links between character traits and issue handling in the minds of voters. Across three studies, I showed that Democratic-owned traits, particularly compassion, are associated with issue competence on Democratic-owned issues like the environment, poverty, and health care. The Republican-owned traits, strong leadership and patriotism, are linked with issue competence on Republican-owned issues like national security, crime, and terrorism. Thus, issue and trait ownership are not two

separate phenomena, but are closely intertwined (for evidence of the causal effects of candidate traits on issue competence, see Appendix). These findings were robust to controls for perceptions of the parties' ideological positions, respondent ideology and issue attitudes, within-subjects comparisons, and tend to hold among even the least politically sophisticated.

Guided by psychological theories of the structure of morality, I also examined trait dimensions that have been overlooked in previous analyses, yielding new insights into the nature of ownership. First, patriotism emerged as the trait most clearly owned by the Republican party, and as the strongest predictor of handling Republican-owned issues. These findings suggest that future research ought to incorporate patriotism into our understanding of party reputations and candidate evaluations. Second, fairness came out as the least clearly owned trait dimension. While Democrats may have a slight advantage, both parties claimed the trait and relatively few partisans were cross-pressured. Moreover, while fairness tended to be associated with Democratic-owned issues, there was also some evidence fairness is linked with Republican-owned issues, and these two patterns were not statistically distinguishable. These results suggest that past claims about liberal prioritization of fairness (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009) may be because the most popular measure of the moral foundations, the MFQ, captures a more liberal concept of fairness than the one that is currently endorsed by proponents of MFT (for discussion, see Clifford, Iyengar, et al. 2015; Haidt 2013).

Notably, even in the absence of party cues, the links between traits and issues emerged among even the least politically knowledgeable respondents. This finding stands in contrast to a wide variety of evidence that political awareness is crucial to structuring political attitudes, including the link between personality traits and political ideology (Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017). The clear effects among the least knowledgeable suggests that issue-trait links are not entirely the product of top-down elite communication. Rather, these patterns may be the result of intuitive beliefs about

the types of leaders who are more able to cope with particular cooperative challenges (for discussion, see Laustsen and Petersen 2017). Of course, this is not to say that the links between morality and issues are all completely intrinsic (cf. Clifford, Jerit, et al. 2015), but it does suggest that attitudes toward owned, valence issues are not completely structured by elites.

Understanding how perceptions of character and issue competence are linked in the minds of voters lends a new perspective on issue ownership. Democrats and Republicans each own a set of issues, such as the environment, poverty, and health care, but why these issues? The evidence here suggests that the issues in each set represent a similar moral problem. Poverty, health care, and the environment all involve minimizing harm and suffering. Crime, terrorism, and national defense all involve maintaining social order and protecting citizens against threats. Thus, by demonstrating compassion or patriotism, a party or candidate can earn ownership over multiple issues that are linked to that underlying moral concern.

The results here may also help explain why issue ownership rarely changes hands (Egan 2013), even as issue salience shifts (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003). Following the logic above, if a party can maintain ownership over the trait tied to a particular issue, it may be able to retain ownership of that issue even when it is dormant. For example, a party seen as tough and patriotic will maintain ownership over terrorism even when the issue is not salient. As a result, perceptions of issue ownership are unlikely to change quickly, even in the face of a shifting political environment. But this same logic suggests that issue trespassing will be difficult. Politicians will need to convince voters that they are deeply motivated to solve that problem. For example, a Republican trying to trespass on a Democrat-owned issue will need to credibly portray themselves as compassionate, as reflected by “compassionate conservatism” messaging in recent presidential campaigns. But this strategy will be a tough sell for the candidates of a party known for taking conservative stances on issues like welfare and health care, which work against an image of

compassion. Thus, because issues and traits are linked together through common moral problems, successful trespassing will rarely occur on single issues.

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