

## *Candidate Strategies to Prime Issues and Image*

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A burgeoning literature shows that campaigns exert substantial influence on voters by *priming* selected policy *issues*. We extend this research by offering a framework that (1) incorporates a model of campaign *image* priming and (2) describes the political conditions that shape campaign priming strategies. We test our framework in the context of Richard Nixon's 1972 presidential campaign. Using internal campaign memoranda, Nixon's private public opinion polls, and a comprehensive content analysis of Nixon's public statements, we find that Nixon engaged in both issue and image priming. Specifically, White House polling reports of strong public support for particular domestic policy positions prompted Nixon subsequently to prime those issues and positions. Moreover, poll reports of negative evaluations of his personality traits led Nixon to emphasize foreign policy issues so as to convey an impression of his competence and strength. We conclude that candidates tailor issue and image priming strategies to the parameters of public opinion and the strategic opportunities offered by the political conditions of their time.

**T**he questions of how political campaigns strategize and how campaigns affect voters have puzzled political scientists for over a half century. For many years, analysts focused on the persuasive effects of campaigns, finding that campaigns typically had minimal success in persuading voters. Over the past fifteen years, however, a diverse group of scholars have challenged the "minimal effects" result. They have done so, in large part, by showing that campaigns exert substantial influence on voters through the process of *priming* (e.g., Druckman 2004; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). For example, voting and public opinion scholars show that extensive media coverage or candidate discussion of specific policy areas (e.g., economic policy) prime voters to give more weight to those areas when assessing candidates (e.g., Johnston et al. 1992) and presidents (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Scholars have expanded priming research from looking at its influence on voters to also examining how campaigns use priming as a strategy (e.g., Riker

1996). Candidates engage in priming by emphasizing certain issues—by giving those issues more space in their statements—with the goal of inducing voters to put more weight on those issues when choosing among candidates (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954, 253–73; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Jacoby 1998; Johnston et al. 1992; Page 1978; Petrocik 1996; Riker 1996; Sellers 1998). A critical part of the priming strategy involves using public opinion polls to pinpoint advantageous issues for the campaign to emphasize (Geer 1996; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). For example, if campaign polls show that the public supports a candidate's position on reducing taxes, then that candidate might devote a disproportionate amount of public comments to his or her popular position, with the hope of causing voters to base their selection among the candidates on the tax issue (and the candidate's popular tax position).

Research on priming has greatly enhanced our understanding of campaign strategy by opening up the black box of candidate rhetoric (Riker 1996, 4). Yet, significant questions remain. For example, what dimensions of voters' candidate evaluations do campaigns attempt to prime? Previous research focuses almost exclusively on candidate attempts to activate specific issues as the primary considerations in vote choice. Neglected have been candidate efforts to elevate the salience of certain *image* perceptions or personality traits. These efforts would appear strategically attractive to campaigns given evidence that candidates' personality traits can be a decisive influence on voters (e.g., Funk 1999). If candidates attempt to prime image perceptions, which personality traits do they focus upon and how do they draw voter attention to them? Do campaigns treat priming strategies aimed at issues and image as mutually exclusive or complementary? In addition, what explains the content and direction of candidate priming strategy? How do factors such as exogenous political events affect candidate strategy?

In this paper, we build on political psychology and candidate behavior research to investigate priming as a *campaign strategy*. We build a framework that introduces two innovations. First, we incorporate the concept of image priming as an important, though previously underdeveloped, component of campaign strategy. We argue that issue and image priming are inherently linked and that an image-issue dichotomy is misleading (e.g., Jacobs 1993). Second, we recognize that political conditions influence how candidates design and implement their priming strategies. We hypothesize that candidates' priming strategies are affected by three political conditions: existing public evaluations of policy issues and candidate personality, the candidate's characteristics, and exogenous events that limit the public agenda.

We investigate our expectations about priming strategy with a unique data set—the extensive and private survey research that President Richard Nixon conducted to prepare for his 1972 reelection campaign. After generating specific hypotheses, we conduct the first statistical analysis of Nixon's private polling and, in particular, its effect on his public policy statements. We also investigate the strategic intentions of Nixon's campaign by examining the internal memoranda

from the White House and Nixon's reelection committee as well as the voluminous diary entries by Nixon's chief of staff (H. R. Haldeman) on his personal meetings with the President. In the end, we find impressive evidence for campaign efforts to prime both issues and image in politically sensitive ways.

## How Campaigns Prime Issues and Image

Candidates attempt to prime "advantageous" issues so as to induce voters to focus on those issues and, as a result, offer more positive overall candidate evaluations. But what makes an issue advantageous to a candidate? Also, do candidates engage in the priming of favorable images, and, if so, how? Finally, what political conditions influence the calculations of candidates as they develop priming strategies? In what follows, we offer a framework that addresses these questions.

### *Advantageous Issues for Candidate Priming*

Although it is clear that campaigns can influence voters by altering their perceptions of issue salience, it is not clear which criteria candidates use when they select (an) issue(s) to prime. Prior work suggests three possibilities: an issue is advantageous for a candidate to prime when the public gives high evaluations to the *candidate's handling of the issue* (Miller and Krosnick 2000; Petrocik 1996), when the public supports the *candidate's position on the issue* (Jacoby 1998; Mendelsohn 1996; Riker 1996), or when the *public ranks the issue as nationally important* (Hammond and Humes 1995; Traugott and Lavrakas 2000, 31). Determining which dimension candidates focus upon is ultimately an empirical question requiring a comparative test.

### *Image Perception in Candidate Strategy*

While campaign scholars recognize the incentives to build an appealing image (Fenno 1978; Page 1978; Popkin 1994) and voting scholars point to the potential of candidates to prime image instead of issues (Funk 1999; Mendelsohn 1996), campaign research has not specified how candidates use priming to influence image perceptions. Moreover, public opinion priming research largely ignores image perceptions in favor of focusing on issues (although see Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 73–81, and Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). To develop a theory of image priming, we first specify what we mean by image, and then we detail strategies for priming image.

Political psychologists highlight four images or personality characteristics that the public finds appealing and may be strategically attractive to campaigns: competence, strength, warmth, and trust (e.g., Funk 1999, 702; Kinder 1986).<sup>1</sup> These four attributes fall into two broad clusters: the *performance-based traits* of com-

<sup>1</sup> This research sometimes labels these characteristics with different monikers.

petence and strength, and the *interpersonal characteristics* of warmth and trust (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 73–74). Because voters tend to treat performance traits—especially competence—as most important, candidates face particular incentives to boost voters’ perceptions of their competence and strength to handle tough problems (Funk 1999; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kinder et al. 1980; Lau 1985; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Miller and Krosnick 1996; Page 1978; Sellers 1998). Although candidates may focus on interpersonal characteristics under certain circumstances, we expect more emphasis on performance traits (all else constant).

Campaigns also face stronger incentives to counteract negative candidate evaluations than to capitalize on positive evaluations. Negative perceptions of personality attributes often have more of an impact on vote choice than favorable evaluations (Fiske 1980; Lau 1985), and thus, when distributing their scarce resources, candidates will work hardest to reverse negative evaluations.

In attempting to prime image—particularly *to counteract negative public evaluations and, specifically, eroding perceptions of performance characteristics*—campaigns have at least three available strategies. First, similar to issue priming, candidates can directly emphasize the importance of certain images in evaluating candidates (Druckman 2004; Funk 1999, 716; Mendelsohn 1996, 115–16). Second, candidates can employ an indirect priming strategy by invoking visual cues that enhance the salience of images; for example, Popkin (1994, 88–89) argues that a sitting President can highlight and improve perceptions of his strength by campaigning from the White House Rose Garden (also see Druckman 2003).

Third, candidates can emphasize issues that send signals about their image (i.e., they use issues to prime image). For example, candidates can build empathy by focusing on issues that concern voters (Fenno 1978), or they can elevate voters’ perceptions of their competence by highlighting issues on which they have expertise (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986; Sellers 1998). Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 73–81) show that the news media’s emphasis (i.e., priming) of issues related to energy, defense, or inflation influenced voters’ perceptions of President Carter’s competence.

Candidates thus have several options for priming image; we propose an extension to the third strategy of using issues to prime image. Drawing on international relations research and the importance of policy domain, we suggest that candidates can emphasize bold and aggressive *foreign policy* initiatives (e.g., hawkish defense policy) to combat declining performance evaluations (which, as noted above, are of paramount importance) (see DeRouen 2000; Foyle 1999; Ostrom and Job 1986). Conversely, candidates will avoid conciliatory positions on defense issues that can project, or be portrayed by their opponents as revealing, a soft, timid, or passive personal character (Nincic 1990).<sup>2</sup> As we will discuss, this requires the availability of a foreign affairs issue on which the candidate can

<sup>2</sup>Foreign policy also is an attractive area because the President might face less domestic opposition that could thwart efforts to demonstrate strength (e.g. Wildavsky 1966). That said, it is possible that candidates substitute tough domestic issues, such as crime, to build strength.

capitalize so as to offer a portrait of strength (without appearing reckless or risky). Using issues to prime image in this way resembles issue priming in that candidates invoke discussion of issues; however, the focus is on promoting image rather than on influencing voters' issue preferences (see Druckman and Holmes n.d.). The important, and rarely recognized, point is that image and issue priming are not mutually exclusive strategies—issues and images are linked (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 73–81; Jacobs 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994).

### *The Political Conditions that Influence Priming Strategy*

Of course, candidates do not prime issues and image in a vacuum; rather, their distinctive strategies are the product of calculations regarding political conditions. While some work depicts candidates as having autonomy in priming on the assumption that “merely verbalizing the issues render[s] it salient” (Riker 1990, 49), other research suggests that the construction of an appealing candidate image and the shaping of issue salience are constrained. For example, Winter (1987, 201–202) shows that voters are attracted to the personality traits of a politician that “fit” or “match” the “situational demands” of their times. Other scholars such as Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Krosnick (1990), and Miller and Krosnick (2000) demonstrate that various candidate and voter characteristics affect which issues can be successfully primed. The implication is that candidates face strong incentives to tailor strategically their statements and actions to “situational demands” in order to encourage advantageous perceptions. We draw on extant research to posit three political conditions that influence candidates' priming strategies: voters' existing attitudes, candidate characteristics, and exogenous events.<sup>3</sup>

First, candidates are sensitive to the existing attitudes of voters and, more generally, public opinion in selecting their priming strategy. If voters have strong prior beliefs about the relevance or irrelevance of an issue or image, then candidate rhetoric will presumably not alter voters' focus. We therefore expect that candidates will avoid priming criteria that the public believes are clearly irrelevant, and, similarly, candidates will not spend scarce time priming highly salient criteria since those criteria will already play a role in voters' choices.

Second, candidate characteristics are also important. In the context of election campaigns, candidates undoubtedly appreciate that increased credibility expands their leeway in priming (Miller and Krosnick 2000), and they search for targets of particular opportunity—a “primable” dimension of evaluation for one candidate may not be one for another politician. Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 90, 81) explain that priming depends on the extent to which a voter connects an issue or personality trait to a specific candidate, as illustrated by Senator Edward Kennedy's presidential campaign: “by virtue of his distinctive personal history, for Kennedy alone among a set of 1980 presidential contenders, judgments of

<sup>3</sup> We assume that candidates learn what works (e.g., evolutionarily from political consultants), and that public opinion priming research has isolated factors that determine what works.

integrity were more consequential in determining preference than were considerations of competence . . ." The implication is that each candidate engages in distinctive calculations regarding the particular criteria to prime (e.g., other 1980 candidates did not follow Kennedy's attempt to prime integrity).

Third, exogenous events or what Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 81) call "the tenor of the times" and Winter (1987) refers to as "situational demands" also shape candidate strategies. Major issues, beyond the control of the candidates, will enhance the prominence of certain criteria (i.e., there could be a trumping issue) while reducing the importance other criteria. For example, Watergate primed trust as an evaluative criterion and vitiated the importance of other characteristics such as leadership (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 81). Candidates need not prime these criteria given their inherent prominence; they also must consider how these dimensions affect their success in priming alternative related criteria (e.g., an ongoing international war may prevent the successful priming of other foreign affairs issues). These events thus exert their influence, in part, by affecting voters' existing attitudes.

In short, public attitudes, candidate characteristics, and exogenous events affect campaign decisions regarding the particular constellation of candidate statements and actions that are chosen to prime to voters. These factors also work in concert with one another—for example, successfully priming performance traits with a foreign policy issue requires not only the availability of the issue but also perceptions of the candidate on that issue as strong rather than reckless. Overall, the critical research question raised by our framework is whether and to what extent these three political conditions influence the specific ways individual campaigns combine issue priming and image priming.

### Evidence from Nixon's Reelection Campaign

We test expectations derived from our framework by utilizing a unique data set from Nixon's campaign to win the 1972 presidential election (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). In particular, we quantitatively analyze the relationship between Nixon's public statements leading up to the 1972 election and his private polling data on voter policy preferences and image perceptions. We complement our quantitative analysis with a qualitative analysis of his campaign's internal deliberations and strategies, drawn from archival records and Haldeman's extensive diary on his daily meetings with Nixon.

In focusing on a single campaign, we follow a long line of distinguished research that examines a single campaign (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Jacoby 1998; Petrocik 1996, 836; Riker 1996), or, similarly, the behavior of legislators during a single session (e.g., Bartels 1991). Although these scholars recognize limits in the generalizability of their findings, this work has generated important, if temporally bound, results, theories, and research questions. In addition to working within this tradition of single-time period studies, our analysis of the Nixon presidency takes a new step by analyzing the actual data that the candi-

date (Nixon) used in developing campaign strategy. As such, we are able to offer a direct test of our framework.

Our analyses cover 1969 through November 1972. Although the period of a campaign is often defined in procedural terms—by the candidate selection process within each party and then the fall general election—extensive archival evidence from the Nixon White House and reelection committee suggests that the Nixon team began to develop its reelection strategy in 1969 as part of a long-term concern with voter attitudes.<sup>4</sup> The early and sustained attention to reelection stemmed from the calculation by the Nixon team that “first impressions” count and are hard to dislodge once formed. Waiting until 1972 to track and attempt to influence public attitudes was considered as too late effectively to shape the election’s outcome. Instead, Nixon’s aides aimed to create an “aura” and “mystique” around Nixon early in his term in order to “develop the sixth sense among voters which generates support when the times are tough or in times of crisis.”<sup>5</sup> Our finding that Nixon’s campaign planning began substantially before election day is consistent with both previous research on his 1972 campaign (Troy 1991, 227) and a growing body of research on “permanent campaigning” and its long-term nature (Kernell 1997). We next posit our specific expectations and then describe our data.

### *Expectations*

Evidence from the Nixon archives and, especially, the White House’s extensive private polling allow us to examine competing explanations for how candidates select advantageous issues and engage in issue and image priming (particularly the use of issues to prime image). It also allows us to study the impact of political conditions—existing public attitudes, candidate characteristics, and exogenous events—on the nature of priming strategy.

In Nixon’s case, the ongoing Vietnam War was a powerful exogenous influence on his campaign strategy; even if he had so desired, there was no need to prime Vietnam as it was already extraordinarily salient. Indeed, in his private polls, Nixon often excluded Vietnam as a possible answer to questions soliciting the public’s ranking of the country’s most important problems because he knew it would top the list.<sup>6</sup> In addition, our framework suggests that the extraordinary salience of Vietnam would prevent Nixon from priming alternative foreign affairs issues; he would have had little success shifting people’s attention when it came to foreign affairs *issues* (however, notice this does *not* preclude using Vietnam to prime *image*, as we will shortly discuss). Thus, our *issue priming* hypothesis is that *Nixon did not attempt to prime foreign policy issues and instead focused on*

<sup>4</sup> Interview with David Derge, 5/17/93; Haldeman Diaries (CD-Rom), 2/2/72.

<sup>5</sup> Memo to Derge from Higby, 12/28/70, HRH Box 403.

<sup>6</sup> When Nixon included Vietnam as a possible response to the most important problem question, it was indeed ranked as most important.

*priming advantageous domestic policy issues.*<sup>7</sup> That is, we expect Nixon to emphasize those domestic issues that his polls showed to be most advantageous; we also will test the aforementioned competing explanations for what makes an issue advantageous.

Vietnam did, however, offer Nixon an opportunity in terms of *image priming*. Our framework's image priming hypothesis predicts that *Nixon focused on aggressive Vietnam-related initiatives and foreign policy more generally to prime performance-based personality traits (i.e., competence and strength) and counter falling performance evaluations*. When his polls showed eroding performance perceptions, we expect him to emphasize foreign policy.

We also expect that audience and speaker characteristics led Nixon to downplay the possibility of priming interpersonal characteristics. Nixon's aides such as campaign pollster, Robert Teeter, discounted the efficacy of devoting campaign resources to bolstering the public's consistently negative perceptions of Nixon's interpersonal traits: he bluntly reported that Nixon was "not perceived as frank, warm, extroverted, relaxed, [or possessing a] sense of humor" and recommended that "no special effort needs to be directed to [reversing these perceptions]."<sup>8</sup> According to our framework, Teeter's warning also is consistent with the more general point that interpersonal characteristics are less important and more difficult to prime (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 75). In contrast, we find no consistent archival evidence from senior White House officials of analogous concerns about negative perceptions of Nixon's performance characteristics (e.g., when it came to strength and competence, the polls did not report inherent negative perceptions of recklessness). In what follows, we test our issue and image priming hypotheses.

### *The Nixon Public Opinion Research Center*

To test our expectations, we use the private polling results that Nixon's campaign team assembled and utilized. This provides a unique opportunity to examine how candidates use the data they actually possess to design strategy. Importantly, public opinion polls were treated by Nixon's team as an indispensable instrument for plotting the "strategic thrust [of] the campaign" and to "give us our margin of victory."<sup>9</sup> In sharp contrast to the assumption in some research that candidates lack credible information about voters (e.g., Kollman, Miller and Page 1992), we find that Nixon received a steady supply of new information and

<sup>7</sup>In other circumstances, a politician may prime foreign policy issues as a way to divert public attention away from less popular domestic issues (e.g., DeRouen 2000). This type of strategy is consistent with Miller and Krosnick's (1996, 82) hydraulic effect where priming one issue lessens the impact of another. Interestingly, Nixon may have engaged in a "reverse" diversionary tactic by priming domestic issues to divert attention away from controversial foreign policy.

<sup>8</sup>Memo to Mitchell from Teeter, regarding "Final First Wave Analysis, 5/11/72," HRH Box 362.

<sup>9</sup>Memo to Mitchell from Teeter, 3/3/72, HRH Box 362; "Position Paper: The 1972 Campaign, 4/18/72," HRH Box 358.



that he and his advisers treated it as highly reliable and strategically essential. Echoing a theme that emerged in numerous memoranda, senior campaign aides explained, “polling brings out [voters’] current attitudes on the issues and candidates . . . [and this] provide[s] a solid basis for strategic and tactical campaign decisions,” especially with regard to “voter attitudes and perceptions. . . . of issues . . . [and] personality attributes.”<sup>10</sup> From January 1969 to November 1972, the Nixon team’s demand for polling on issues and image resulted in 233 private surveys, exceeding the number of surveys assembled by Kennedy by a factor of over 10 and Johnson by nearly a factor of two (Heith 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995).<sup>11</sup> The Nixon White House contributed substantially to the growing institutional development of the presidency to rigorously monitor public opinion (Jacobs 1992).

The public opinion data that the Nixon campaign collected capture the core theoretical concepts underlying issue and image priming. As mentioned, theories of issue priming have been unclear whether candidates respond to issue-specific job performance measures, policy-position measures, or measures of issue importance. In each case, the expectation is that the candidate pinpoints specific issues that would lead voters—if they focused on these issues—to offer positive overall evaluations of the candidate. We can test the three alternative measures against one another because Nixon measured all three items.

To measure the *public’s approval of Nixon’s policy performance* on various issues, Nixon’s team asked questions such as: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Nixon is handling the Vietnam situation?” Higher values signify increased approval. Notice that these questions do not refer to Nixon’s specific issue position, though they do focus on Nixon’s performance on a specific issue.

An example of a question that gauged the *public’s support for Nixon’s policy positions* on specific issues is: “Do you support President Nixon in his plan to end the war in Southeast Asia?” Higher values mean greater public support for Nixon’s policy position. Finally, the Nixon team tapped *issue importance* by measuring how many respondents viewed a particular problem or issue as the single most important one facing the country.

We also can examine image priming using the data that Nixon and his team collected on the public’s perception of the President’s personality traits. Specifically, they relied on paired semantic differentials that asked respondents to rate Nixon on a series of opposite adjectives (such as “Competent” and “Incompe-

<sup>10</sup> Memo to Mitchell from Flanigan, 9/30/71, HRH Box 368; “Position Paper: The 1972 Campaign,” 4/18/72” HRH Box 358; Haldeman Diary, 1/15/71, 4/3/71, and 7/18/71; Memo to Derge from Higby, 1/14/71, HRH Box 341. Archival evidence indicates that Nixon used the polls to plot rhetorical strategy and not to measure the effect of his rhetoric on public opinion. This is not to understate the importance of mass communication effects, but rather, to make clear that our focus on campaign strategy follows that of Nixon’s team.

<sup>11</sup> Polling quickly became an institutionalized feature of Nixon’s campaign; not surprisingly, it picked up during the election year with 60% of the surveys occurring in 1972.

tent” or “Strong” and “Weak”) along a seven-point scale. The White House’s polling team narrowed down the list of semantic differentials to 18 that were categorized into the four scales familiar in scholarly research on personality attributes (indeed, it was explicitly modeled on research published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*; Berlo, Lemert and Mertz 1969): *competence*, *strength*, *warmth*, and *trust*.<sup>12</sup> Higher scores on each scale meant an increase in the given trait. Nixon’s campaign also always included a general measure of *conservatism* in his image polls because they saw this as a fifth important image variable. The campaign’s personality trait scales were quite reliable—our reanalysis shows (alpha) reliability coefficients of over .9.

To test our hypotheses, we created monthly aggregated measures of each of the variables. For each month where data were available, we created measures of the public’s approval of Nixon’s policy performance on each of 49 issues, the public’s support for Nixon’s policy position on each issue, the public’s ranking of issues as important, and its evaluations of the image variables—competence, strength, warmth, trust, and conservatism.<sup>13</sup>

### *Tracking Nixon’s Statements*

Nixon’s public statements were carefully fashioned by his campaign as a critical strategic tool for satisfying his demand for a “totally oriented commitment to relating everything we do to the political side . . . [and constantly asking,] does this help us politically?”<sup>14</sup> The Nixon campaign calibrated the emphasis and space that the President allocated to particular issues as a tool to “create issues” and “focus” public attention.

We captured the campaign’s strategic use of Nixon’s public statements through an intensive content analysis of his statements on 49 issues as recorded in the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* and the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* for the period before the November 1972 election. In particular, we coded all of the President’s news conferences and addresses to the nation plus a random selection of half of the President’s other statements including messages to Congress, speeches, and press releases.

<sup>12</sup> Public opinion survey, “Illinois Statewide I,” December 1971, HRH, Box 381, p.42. Given our focus on explaining Nixon’s behavior, we create the scales in the same way as the campaign. This involved averaging specific items as follows: the competence scale includes “experience,” “trained,” “informed,” and “competent;” the strength scale includes “tough” “bold,” and “aggressive;” the warmth scale includes “humor,” “up-to-date;” “warm,” “relaxed,” “frank,” and “extroverted;” and the trust scale includes “open-minded,” “honest,” “safe,” and “just.”

<sup>13</sup> White House memoranda and other evidence led us to create the monthly aggregated scores by averaging polling items on similar issues across geographic areas (state and national) within the same month. The data’s validity is another important issue. What is important for our analysis is that archival records demonstrate that Nixon’s team treated the polling data as valid and reliable. Moreover, the quality of the polling is striking—each poll was conducted with random sampling methods, samples approximating 750 to 1000 respondents, and well-trained phone interviewers.

<sup>14</sup> Haldeman Diary, 6/10/71 and 2/28/71.

For each statement, we coded the amount of *space* Nixon devoted to each of the 49 issues (i.e., the number of lines Nixon devoted to each issue). We then aggregated the statements for each month so that we could study the extent to which Nixon emphasized each issue over the time period. Our dependent variable, then, is the space Nixon devoted to each one of the 49 issues during one of the months.<sup>15</sup>

### *Analysis of Nixon's Public Opinion Data and Statements*

For each of the 49 separate issues, we created monthly measures of the White House's polling results and Nixon's policy statements. The unit of analysis is each issue for each month. Although we potentially have 2,303 observations (49 issues and 47 months), Nixon's campaign team did not collect public opinion data for each type of survey question for the 49 issues for the entire time period.<sup>16</sup> For example, it collected more data measuring support for his positions than data measuring his job performance. As a result, our data sets are consistently smaller than what is theoretically possible and they also vary based on which question types we analyze.<sup>17</sup>

We used time lags for the public opinion data to reflect the campaign's operations and decision-making process. Our lag captures the time it took the survey organizations to enter and analyze their results, for the Nixon team to weigh the results and incorporate them into Nixon's statements, as well as the lingering effect of polling results before the next batch of survey findings arrived. White House records and Haldeman's diaries suggest that Nixon and his aides used the previous set of results—even if this meant going back in time. Accordingly, our lag used the most recent public opinion data completed at least one month earlier. For instance, we related Nixon's policy statements in April 1972 to his polling data on that policy issue in March 1972 or, if data were not available in March 1972, in the previous month for which data on that policy issue were available.

## Results

The empirical question is whether and to what extent Nixon acted in ways consistent with the predictions from our framework. Did he use his private polling

<sup>15</sup> We examined the reliability of the content analysis by having three research assistants engage in a comparative coding. The results showed levels of agreement of over 74%. Details are available from the authors. Also, if Nixon did not mention a particular issue in any of his statements for a given month, we coded that as a 0 for space on the assumption that Nixon was choosing to ignore the issue. Nixon made no comment on 44% or 1016 of the observations.

<sup>16</sup> For each observation, then, the dependent variable is the amount of space Nixon devoted to a particular issue in a given month and the independent variables are percentages from Nixon's polls (one of or a subset of his 233 polls).

<sup>17</sup> We do not impute missing values since archival evidence suggests that Nixon and his aides did not try to impute missing data. Thus, we do not expect any such data to affect Nixon's behavior.

TABLE 1  
Summary of Hypotheses

<i>Issue Priming Hypothesis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The space devoted to (or emphasis on) an issue will significantly increase as (1) the public's approval of Nixon's performance on an issue increases, (2) the public's support for Nixon's policy position on an issue increases, and/or (3) the issue importance increases, all else constant.</li> <li>• This provides a comparative test of the three ("advantageous") independent variables.</li> <li>• Evidence for issue priming (as defined by the prior hypothesis) will be significant for domestic policy and not foreign policy.</li> </ul>
<i>Image Priming Hypothesis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The space devoted to foreign affairs issues will significantly increase as the public's perceptions of candidate performance characteristics (i.e., competence and strength) decrease, all else constant (i.e., controlling for inter-personal characteristics of warmth and trust).</li> </ul>

data to engage in issue and image priming as we predict and summarize in Table 1? After examining the evidence for each hypothesis, we simultaneously test for the relative impact of issue- and image-based data.

### *Evidence for Issue Priming*

To examine issue priming, we regress the amount of space Nixon devoted to each issue (i.e., our measure of issue emphasis) on the public's approval of Nixon's policy performance, the public's support for Nixon's policy position, and issue importance. This allows us to evaluate whether Nixon was engaging in issue priming by emphasizing issues that favored him, as well as to investigate which of the three independent variables most influenced his calculations about the strategic advantage of specific issues. We base our analysis on the subset of observations where all three types of independent variables are available,<sup>18</sup> and we use negative binomial regression since our dependent variable of space is an event count.<sup>19</sup>

Table 2 displays our results for all issues and separately for domestic and foreign policy domains. We separate domestic and foreign policy because, as explained, we expect, in Nixon's case, issue priming only to occur on domestic

<sup>18</sup>In other analyses, we find that this subset of data focuses on relatively important issues. Details are available from the authors. Also, Nixon selected these issues and data, and thus, we do not have a selection bias problem. Nonetheless, our main results are robust if we run bivariate regressions with each independent variable, regardless of the availability of the other variables.

<sup>19</sup>The statistical significance of the alpha coefficient in the analyses confirms the appropriateness of the negative binomial (Long 1997, 230). The results also are robust to a variety of other specifications including the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable. Details are available from the authors. We do not include issue dummy variables because our independent variables change over time very slowly and, in some cases, not at all (Beck 2001, 285).

TABLE 2  
Effects of Issue Data on the Space of Nixon's Statements

Dependent Variable: Nixon's Issue Emphasis (Space Devoted to Each Issue)			
	All Cases/All Issues	Domestic	Foreign
Approval of Nixon's Policy Performance	-.009 (.009)	-.017 (.010)	.044 (.024)
Support For Nixon's Policy Positions	.031* (.016)	.043* (.019)	-.056 (.067)
Issue Importance	.006 (.020)	.010 (.022)	.048 (.041)
Constant	3.22** (.674)	3.09** (.948)	5.28 (4.48)
$\alpha$ (alpha)	2.44** (.274)	2.66** (.335)	1.26** (.307)
N	182	153	29
Log Likelihood	-921.26	-747.9	-167.69**
Wald $\lambda^2$ (3 d.f.)	8.56*	7.71*	5.48

Note: Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$  for two-tailed test.

policy. Two findings stand out. First, on all issues, there is a relatively strong and significant coefficient for support for Nixon's policy positions (.031) and substantially weaker and insignificant findings for the other two types of public opinion data. The substantive interpretation is that if support for Nixon's position on a given issue increased by 10% over the average (from 47.89% to 57.89%) and we hold importance and performance approval at their means, we would see an average increase of 38% in the space Nixon devoted to an issue.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Nixon attempted to prime issues on which the public supported his positions with the hope of inducing voters to focus on these issues.

Second, we find strong policy domain effects: issue priming is only evident for the domestic policy domain. Table 2 shows that the .043 coefficient for domestic policy is stronger than the overall result (.031), while the result for foreign policy is not statistically significant.<sup>21</sup> The substantive interpretation is that if support for Nixon's position on a domestic issue increased by 10% over the overall average (from 47.89% to 57.89%), and we hold importance and approval

<sup>20</sup> We calculated this using *Clarify* (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 1999). Details of the specific expected values for this and other substantive interpretations are available from the authors.

<sup>21</sup> The lack of significance of the Wald chi-square test suggests that the coefficients in the foreign regression add nothing above the constant. We acknowledge the number of observations for the foreign policy regression is relatively low (e.g., Long 1997); however, we also point out that all analyses with finite samples are potentially problematic (Greene 1993, 114), and, more importantly, our results are robust using other models such as a Poisson regression and OLS.

at their means, the space Nixon devoted to a domestic issue would increase an average of 58%. The Nixon campaign tailored its issue priming strategy to the domestic tilt in public opinion—this is exactly what we expected given the political conditions of the time especially with regard to the salience of Vietnam. Of course, under other political conditions, a candidate might choose to prime foreign policy instead of or in addition to domestic issues.<sup>22</sup>

These results contribute to the priming literature in three ways. First, they provide perhaps the most extensive direct evidence of issue priming; we use a politician's private polls to look at behavior over a longer time period than previous work. Second, we add clarity to the poorly defined debate about *how* politicians prime issues. Specifically, Nixon focused on the public's support for his issue positions—more than information on its evaluations of job performance or issue importance—to figure out which issues to prime (e.g., Riker 1996). This is consistent with internal campaign memoranda as well as Haldeman's diary that the purpose of polling was to determine “whether *our position* [on specific issues] has gone up or down in the eyes of the public” (emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> Nixon and his aides calculated that highlighting “issues where the President is favorably received” would make “Americans realize that the President is with them on these issues” and counteract the opposition's “attempt to capitalize on the mood of a substantial portion of the electorate. . . . [that] the government isn't concerned or responsive.”<sup>24</sup> Third, we show that *issue priming* depends on the context of the times—in this case, the overwhelming salience of the Vietnam War led Nixon to focus exclusively on domestic policy.<sup>25</sup>

### *Evidence for Image Priming*

We next turn to the first empirical examination of image priming as a campaign strategy. We focus on how Nixon may have used issues to prime image. Our expectation is that he increased his public discussion of aggressive foreign policy to combat falling ratings of his performance traits of competence and strength.

The Nixon campaign pursued an image-based strategy in a way that complemented its issue priming approach; the campaign did not view the two as

<sup>22</sup>Our policy domain finding, however, is consistent with the popular perception *among politicians* that citizens tend not to base their evaluations on foreign affairs (e.g., Almond 1950).

<sup>23</sup>Memo to Derge from Higby, 1/14/71, HRH Box 341.

<sup>24</sup>“Position Paper: The 1972 Campaign, 4/18/72,” HRH, Box 358; Memo to JNM from RMT re “Interim Analysis Report” 4/17/72, HRH Box 362.

<sup>25</sup>We also find evidence that Nixon was significantly more likely to make a statement on an issue when public opinion data on that issue were available. For example, when he had data on the public's support for his policy position on an issue, he made statements on that issue 76% of the time, compared to 49% of the time when he lacked such data. He also was more likely to make a statement when he had data on the public's approval of his performance and/or issue importance data, although to a lesser extent. Details are available from the authors.

mutually exclusive. Indeed, archival records indicate that Nixon systematically tracked personality attributes in his polls and adjusted the policy areas he publicly discussed in response to information on his image. The campaign's intense investigation of public perceptions of Nixon's personality reflected the focus of the President and his chief of staff on "the job we're to do on the personality side" and the strategic need to launch an "overall game plan and presidential offensive project, specifically on the President's image."<sup>26</sup> Nixon directed his aides to track whether they were "get[ting] across what kind of a man the President is" and to pay particular attention to boosting the public's evaluation of the "President's competence" and "performance oriented personality"—the "President's performance as *Chief Executive*."<sup>27</sup> Nixon's campaign pollster (Robert Teeter) warned, "we would have trouble trying to fight the campaign on a series of specific issues" alone because the "general attitude in the country toward government and politics is very negative."<sup>28</sup>

We use a negative binomial regression to investigate whether and how private polling data on personality traits influenced the space that the Nixon devoted to distinct policy areas. Specifically, we regress the space of Nixon's public statements on the personality dimensions noted above for the subset of data where these variables are available. We include a variable tapping voter perception of Nixon's conservatism—as discussed, Nixon saw it as another important image variable.

Table 3 shows that polling information revealing the public as harboring negative evaluations of Nixon's performance trait of competence caused him to increase his overall public statements during his entire term (−3.24). By contrast, negative evaluations of his interpersonal traits of warmth and trust led to fewer public comments (2.23 and 5.39, respectively). The implication is that eroding performance traits, particularly competence, led Nixon to talk more while he did not bother to commit the political resources to trying to correct weaknesses on interpersonal traits and, in fact, pulled back further on his comments. This calculation reflects Teeter's aforementioned warning about conserving resources and not needlessly investing in the daunting task of constructing favorable perceptions of Nixon's warmth and trust. In fact, our results suggest that Nixon may have thought the only way to prevent further erosion of perceptions of his interpersonal traits was to minimize his statements and/or appearances.

Archival records reinforce these statistical findings that Nixon focused on counteracting negative evaluations of performance traits. Nixon and senior aides were most alarmed about "very clear weak points" in the public's perception of his performance traits of competence and strength: Haldeman reported that Nixon's greatest worry during their private meetings were polling results on "presidential personality standings. . . . [that] showed [Nixon] had declined in the

<sup>26</sup> Haldeman Diaries, 8/25/69, 10/18/69, 11/5/69, and 2/15/71.

<sup>27</sup> Haldeman Diary, 8/25/69, 10/18/69, 11/5/69, 4/24/70, 12/3/70, 1/5/71, 2/15/71.

<sup>28</sup> Memo to Mitchell from Teeter, "Campaign Theme," 4/12/72.

TABLE 3  
Effects of Image Data on the Space of Nixon's Statements

Dependent Variable: Nixon's Issue Emphasis (Space Devoted to Each Issue)			
	All Cases/All Issues	Domestic	Foreign
<i>Performance Characteristics</i>			
Competence Index	-3.24** (1.27)	-1.31 (1.33)	-6.57** (1.89)
Strength Index	-.382 (1.41)	2.63 (1.58)	-6.46** (1.39)
<i>Interpersonal Characteristics</i>			
Warmth Index	2.23* (.958)	.195 (.960)	4.81** (1.48)
Trust Index	5.39* (2.33)	-.195 (2.45)	15.09** (2.97)
<i>Ideological Placement</i>			
Conservatism	-.583 (.555)	-1.62** (.627)	1.48** (.582)
Constant	-8.98 (5.60)	6.20 (5.68)	-29.23** (8.30)
$\alpha$ (alpha)	6.04** (.239)	6.09** (.311)	5.77** (.359)
N	1,715	1,015	700
Log Likelihood	-6,380.71**	-3,772.68**	-2,597.88**
Wald $\lambda^2$ (5 d.f.)	30.72**	18.00**	46.45**

Note: Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$  for two-tailed test.

rating of strength and decisiveness, the two characteristics [Nixon] feels are most important for us to get over" along with being perceived as a "leader."<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting his campaign's use of issues as a tool for promoting his image, Nixon instructed his aides to highlight "issues that will give us a sharp image" (emphasis added).<sup>30</sup> The campaign carefully calibrated Nixon's most extensive comments in order to widen the public's "exposure" to policy areas that "illustrate" and "reflect the man" and "convey the true image of a President."<sup>31</sup> Aides recommended that Nixon appear "totally consumed by the enormous issues of war and peace" and "remain[n] very presidential on a pedestal above the battle" because it would "get across the leadership image" by "demonstrat[ing]" to voters that he is committed to the performance of his job rather than to "politics."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Haldeman Diary, 1/8/70, 1/12/71, 2/15/71, 5/31/72. Memo to Haldeman from Nixon, 6/28/71 PPF, Box 3.

<sup>30</sup> Haldeman Diary, 6/9/71.

<sup>31</sup> Memo to Haldeman from Nixon, 3/1/71, PPF, Box 3; Memo to Haldeman from Dick Moore, 1/25/71, HRH Box 350.

<sup>32</sup> Memo to Nixon from Charles Colson, 1/19/72, POF Box 16.



As predicted, Table 3 also reveals a domain effect: tracking of Nixon's personality traits influenced his statements on foreign policy but had no significant impact on his domestic policy statements. In particular, Nixon increased his public comments on foreign affairs when informed of the public's decreasing rating of his performance traits. In his public statements on foreign policy, Nixon specifically increased his comments on dovish diplomatic policy to counter the slide in the public's evaluations of his competence, while he emphasized both diplomatic and hawkish military policy to bolster the public's perceptions of him as strong.

Our findings of Nixon's use of the foreign policy domain to boost his performance attributes are echoed in the campaign's internal deliberations. Nixon instructed Haldeman to use his "major accomplishments: Cambodia, the Middle East, and the Vietnam Speech. . . . [to] get across the courage, the independence, the boldness . . . of the President [and allow them] to come through."<sup>33</sup> Nixon also emphasized that his trip to China should be used to boost his "leadership image" because it could make him "appear bold" and that his initiative on Cambodia offered an opportunity to "get across" and "project . . . leadership [and] boldness."<sup>34</sup> The key to reelection was to use foreign policy areas to invite "the people . . . [to] see the President as the best man to provide America with peace" and to "perceive [him] as being able to handle problems with international scope."<sup>35</sup> The evidence thus suggests that Nixon did not just rely on aggressive military initiatives to build strength, but he also emphasized diplomatic efforts to negotiate with the Chinese, Russian, and Vietcong communists. Nixon and his advisors may have seen this as a way to temper a potentially overly reckless military image, and build an overall picture of strength and competence.

We also find that as perceptions of Nixon's interpersonal traits declined, Nixon decreased his foreign policy statements. This presumably reflects the aforementioned strategy of speaking less as a way to counter declining interpersonal perceptions; also, higher interpersonal trait scores afforded Nixon more leeway in focusing on tough foreign affairs issues that may hurt perceptions of warmth and trust. Finally, the public's rating of Nixon as a conservative had a significant negative effect on his domestic statements and a significant positive effect on his foreign policy statements. These findings, however, raise the question of whether the conservatism measure is simply acting as a proxy for the public's policy concerns—a possibility we examine in the next section.

In sum, Nixon's campaign's issue-priming strategy reflected its information on public support for domestic policy issues; by contrast, the campaign responded to information that the public negatively evaluated Nixon's personal image (specifically, his performance traits) by devoting more attention to foreign policy

<sup>33</sup>Haldeman Diary, 12/3/70.

<sup>34</sup>Haldeman Diary, 1/15/71, 7/18/71, 8/16/71.

<sup>35</sup>"Position Paper: The 1972 Campaign, 4/18/72," HRH Box 358.

issues. These findings provide strong support for our issue and image hypotheses, and our framework more generally.<sup>36</sup>

### *Evidence for Issue and Image Priming*

We next investigate the relative impact of issues and image on the volume of Nixon's statements. Specifically, we present a set of regressions that include all of the image dimensions and the public's support for Nixon's policy positions, on the set of observations where these variables are available.<sup>37</sup> The results, reported in Table 4, confirm the bifurcation in Nixon's strategy toward distinctive policy domains. The coefficients for personality traits are statistically significant for foreign policy and not for domestic policy; the domestic issues that Nixon emphasizes in his public statements are not affected by any of the personality attributes. In addition, we continue to have strong evidence that Nixon increased his statements on foreign policy in response to information that his performance traits were declining. Similarly, declining public ratings of Nixon's warmth and trust continue to influence the decision of Nixon and his aides to reduce his statements, especially on foreign policy. Presidential promotion of foreign policy is seen as an effective instrument for boosting his reputation for performance and accomplishment rather than inviting a perception of Nixon as a warm and trustworthy person.

While falling performance traits fueled more statements on foreign policy, his decision to expand his comments on domestic policy were influenced by support for his policy positions. Table 4 shows that—as we previously found—increased support for Nixon's domestic policy positions significantly caused him to devote more space to those issues. In contrast, support for Nixon's positions had no effect on all issues taken together or just foreign policy issues. Put simply, Nixon engaged in a domestic issue priming strategy: when Americans thought about whether Nixon listened to their policy preferences, he wanted his most popular domestic policy positions to come to mind.

Finally, Nixon was not responsive to ideology beyond his focus on the public's support for his positions. While Table 3 showed that ideology had a statistically significant effect on Nixon's statements when he received information about personality attributes, Table 4 demonstrates that the introduction of policy concerns makes the ideology coefficients insignificant. These findings indicate that Nixon's team treated ideology as a proxy for policy preferences rather than as a measure of the public's perception of Nixon's personality traits.

<sup>36</sup> An anonymous reviewer raised the point that Nixon made a substantial number of statements on issues for which he had no public opinion *issue* data. In an extensive set of analyses—that are available from the authors—we find that Nixon made statements without the aid of issue data largely on foreign affairs where the data were not being used (as we showed), as well as on miscellaneous minor issues or other issues very early in his term (before issue data were widely available).

<sup>37</sup> We exclude performance approval and issue importance because neither was significant in previous analyses.

TABLE 4

## Effects of Image and Issue Data on the Space of Nixon's Statements

Dependent Variable: Nixon's Issue Emphasis (Space Devoted to Each Issue)

	All Cases/All Issues	Domestic	Foreign
<b>I. IMAGE</b>			
<i>A. Performance Characteristics</i>			
Competence Index	-3.56* (1.77)	-1.29 (1.49)	-7.03* (2.97)
Strength Index	-2.53* (1.14)	-1.16 (1.33)	-5.44** (1.53)
<i>B. Interpersonal Characteristics</i>			
Warmth Index	1.98 (1.47)	-.179 (1.14)	5.29* (2.47)
Trust Index	6.91** (2.81)	2.21 (2.41)	15.05** (4.53)
<b>II. ISSUES</b>			
Support of Nixon's Policy Positions	.006 (.007)	.028* (.013)	-.012 (.007)
<b>III. IDEOLOGICAL PLACEMENT</b>			
Conservatism	.241 (.472)	-.051 (.539)	.708 (.701)
Constant	-7.48 (8.38)	5.36 (6.59)	-28.52* (13.84)
$\alpha$ (alpha)	3.47** (.234)	3.69** (.286)	2.59** (.374)
N	523	383	140
Log Likelihood	-2,439.09	-1,739.93	-687.96
Wald $\chi^2$ (6 d.f.)	18.82**	13.24*	34.08**

Note: Entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$  for two-tailed test.

Overall, our results show that Nixon and his aides engaged in issue and image priming in ways that were sensitive to voters' existing attitudes, candidate characteristics, and exogenous events. Indeed, a controversial and intractable war in South East Asia meant that voters would invariably see the War as important. As a result, Nixon bifurcated the policy domain and drew on his polling data to tailor his statements to existing public attitudes. Because he could neither meaningfully alter his foreign policy position nor readily prime other popular foreign policy positions, he focused on priming the public's domestic policy preferences. He used foreign policy statements to signal Americans that, although they may not agree with America's situation abroad, he was a competent and strong leader tackling a difficult set of problems. Moreover, Nixon's stubbornly low interpersonal

characteristic ratings meant that he made no active attempt to build perceptions of warmth or trust.

## Conclusion

A growing body of evidence shows that campaigns direct much of their energies towards priming advantageous issues (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Johnston et al. 1992; Riker 1996; Sellers 1998). Building on these findings, we offer a framework that specifies how candidates employ distinctive priming strategies. We extend prior research, most notably, by incorporating image priming and describing the political conditions that influence candidate priming strategy. We discuss how candidates can design strategies that appeal to voters based on both issues and image. Our framework for campaign priming suggests that the content of issue and image priming strategies is guided by the contours of public opinion (namely, the public's support for existing candidate positions, and its perception of the candidate's personality traits), the characteristics of candidates, and exogenous events.

We also generated predictions from our framework about Nixon's reelection campaign. Using internal campaign memoranda, Nixon's private polls, and a content analysis of his statements, we tested the predictions and, on all counts, we found strong supportive evidence. As discussed, we recognize that like other single election or single legislative session studies, our empirical results are time-bound. The salience of Vietnam meant that Nixon had little incentive to prime foreign policy issues, and thus, he focused his issue priming attention in the domestic realm. Foreign policy did, however, offer Nixon a tool for bolstering declining public perceptions of his performance characteristics of strength and competence (also see Druckman and Holmes n.d.). That our framework was able to accommodate these unique circumstances speaks to its potential for generalizability, and we suspect that it will have success in explaining other campaigns.

Our results also raise intriguing questions relevant to voting research. Much as earlier research on the impact of priming on voters has influenced new analyses of campaigns, work on candidate priming strategies raises questions about current assumptions that image and issue positions can serve as effective heuristics for voters (e.g., Popkin 1994). Evidence of sophisticated campaign strategies to selectively draw attention to narrow aspects of candidate issue positions and personality traits suggests that future research on voting should make a more concerted effort to incorporate the strategic behavior of candidates (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

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