From My Cold, Dead Hands: Democratic Consequences of Sacred Rhetoric

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Political rhetoric often appeals to sacred values, or nonnegotiable convictions grounded in transcendent authority rather than reasoned consequences. Sacred convictions are treated as absolutes that resist normal value tradeoffs and cast doubt on the moral standing of citizens who violate them. This study examines the political meaning of this form of persuasion in political domains such as guns, gay marriage, the death penalty, and the environment. Experimental evidence suggests that the distinctive effects of sacred appeals are on citizens' political reasoning and motivation rather than on their expressed opinions. Sacred rhetoric is not more effective in changing minds, but in shifting the nature of public discourse and increasing levels of political intensity. The democratic consequences of sacred rhetoric include greater citizen participation but lesser prospects for meaningful deliberation, a contradictory influence on the health of American democracy.

Some of our best-known political speeches have centered on what could be characterized as sacred rhetoric. JFK's vow that we would "pay any price, bear any burden" is an example that is frequently invoked. Another is Churchill's famous declaration that "we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be . . . we shall never surrender." One of the clearest invocations of sacredness in contemporary American politics is the NRA slogan "From my cold, dead hands."[1] The literal meaning of this phrase is that you will have to kill me in order to take my gun away, because I will not yield it. In symbolic terms, it is a clear statement of a sacred boundary. But *what are the effects of phrasing an argument in sacred rather than mundane terms? How do we explain the mechanics of these influences or the psychology of sacred rhetoric?* And perhaps most importantly, *what are the ramifications of sacred rhetoric for competing theories of democracy?* One way to summarize the argument is that about sacred values we think differently and care more. The consequences of shifting a political domain from the mundane to the sacred realm include *reasoning in a*

different way, as well as *becoming more motivated to engage in politics*. These two effects have important consequences for the nature of civic engagement and democratic representation.

Democratic Consequences of Sacred Rhetoric

This study is grounded in Isaiah Berlin's concept of value pluralism—that ultimate ends are several and contradictory and can be neither justified nor reconciled (Berlin 1970, 1992). While most Americans are conflicted over basic value choices, a smaller number of citizens hold specific values as absolute, or sacred (Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Tetlock 1986, 2003; Tetlock, Peterson, and Lerner 1996; Tetlock et al. 2000).[2] In this sense, internal value conflict is the opposite of sacredness; value conflict allows for negotiability, while the lack of value conflict—moral clarity—is coterminous with absolute belief. Sacredness is the

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[1] See Charlton Heston's NRA Presidential Address in 2000, which not only concludes with the slogan, but also refers to the concept of sacredness elsewhere: "we know that there is sacred stuff in that wooden stock and blued steel." JFK's language is in his Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961, and Churchill's in the Address to the House of Commons, 4 June 1940.

[2] "[S]acred values are those values that a moral community treats as possessing transcendental significance that precludes comparison, trade-offs, or indeed any mingling with secular values" (Tetlock 2003, 320). See also the work by Jonathan Baron (Baron and Leshner 2000; Baron and Spranca 1997; Ritov and Baron 1999). This line of research employs the term *protected values*, or values that "are protected from being traded off for other values" (Baron and Spranca 1997, 1).

sense in which some things are inviolable, such that it is offensive to weigh them against other considerations or perhaps even to question their validity. A sacred value is held to be absolute, resisting tradeoffs with other values.[3]

One could make the case that current American political divisions revolve around value conflicts that have sacred dimensions, including abortion, gay marriage, gun rights, the death penalty, and environmentalism. This is the case with *both* sides of the abortion debate: pro-life advocates clearly hold the life of a fetus to be sacred, while some pro-choice advocates make seemingly sacred claims about the reproductive rights of women. Similarly, some gun rights advocates argue that the Second Amendment establishes a nonnegotiable boundary. The death penalty is for many people an example of a nonconsequentialist value statement—capital punishment is not justified by a deterrent effect, but instead is upheld as a moral statement of the requirements of justice (often combined with the biblical injunction of blood for blood). Environmentalism is a clear case where a sacred assertion (protecting a specific species from extinction is an absolute requirement) can be challenged quickly by budgetary realities (how much money will we *really* spend before we reluctantly see the last animal of its kind?). Nonetheless, sacred rhetoric is often heard in regard to the preservation of natural wonders and endangered species. The long list of possible examples of sacred domains in American politics can be concluded with a current topic of much discussion—same-sex marriage. For many citizens this question brings forth immediate feelings about defining acceptable limits, of public homosexuality on one side and of exclusionary practices on the other. The degree to which the debate over gay marriage has become a clear dividing line within American politics illustrates the political significance of sacred boundaries.

The rhetoric of nonnegotiable boundaries—the language of limits—is an enduring facet of American politics, from the Revolution to Abolition to the Culture Wars. The much-noted shift in contemporary political discourse from redistribution to the recognition of identity has included the prominence of intense, unyielding, and nonnegotiable claims that go far beyond the bounds of the religiously or traditionally sacred. Modern sacredness has come to comprise both the religious and secular sacred, grounded in pluralistic sources of authority that establish for different individuals and groups the limits of the tolerable and negotiable, the boundaries of the sacred. While the political psychology literature emphasizes citizens' political ambivalence (Alvarez and Brehm 2003; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Hochschild 1981), it is equally the case that the political rhetoric that citizens encounter is often unconflicted, extreme, and strident, taking positions that ignore compromise or negotiation, upholding the inviolability of a favored set of values while dismissing others.

The sacredness of an argument centers less on its content than on its process of reasoning. Sacredness does not depend on the position taken or its ideological direction, as one can take a sacred stand against abortion just as one can oppose it in a consequentialist or negotiable fashion. The same applies to the anti-abortion side, or to arguments both for or against the death penalty. Because sacred rhetoric is characterized by the form of argument rather than its ideological direction, it may follow that its greatest influence is on citizens' process of reasoning. Sacred rhetoric may be no more effective than consequentialist arguments in altering citizens' expressed opinions, but may have a particular influence on their form of reasoning and justification. Specifically, I argue that *sacred rhetoric influences the form of reasoning that citizens employ, shifting them away from consequentialist reasoning and toward absolutist reasoning.* Employing absolutist reasoning may or may not change the outcome of a citizen's judgment, but the importance of a reasoning shift does not rely on an accompanying shift in outcome. If the justifications people give in public are more absolute and less willing to acknowledge trade-offs, then the character of public debate changes. Nonconsequentialist reasoning leads toward a clash of cultural authorities rather than reasoned consensus or compromise. Greater invocations of moral outrage engender a more strident form of politics. In this sense the process of reasoning alone is an important aspect of political discourse.

Deliberative democrats argue that all forms of political engagement are *not* created equal. In this view the most normatively appropriate form of civic engagement is unrestrained discussion leading toward reasoned agreement (Dryzek 1990; Fishkin 1991; Habermas 1984, 1996). But communication within the public

[3]Sociologists such as Berger, Durkheim, and Eliade describe the defining feature of the sacred as inviolability, which makes a sacred political position unquestionable and its opposition unconscionable. The sacred is something set apart for special reverence. In Durkheim's phrase, sacred things are "set apart and forbidden" ([1912] 1995, 44); for Berger "the sacred is apprehended as 'sticking out' from the normal routines of everyday life" (1967, 15–26). In Eliade's language, it is "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order" (1957, 11). Durkheim famously argues that all human societies divide their mental worlds into two distinct realms of the sacred and nonsacred ([1912] 1995). The second is open to normal discussion and negotiation, but the first is inviolable.

sphere—the zone between the privacy of families and the official scrutiny of the state—requires a commitment to limited forms of conviction, allowing room for compromise and most importantly for respect toward opposing positions, what deliberative theorists refer to as reciprocity, or the norm of employing political reasoning that is mutually justifiable. A necessary element of reciprocity is a recognized standard on which to base arguments, such as their consequences for public welfare. Reasoning that is absolute or grounded in competing authorities allows little room for compromise or mutual agreement, lowering the prospects for meaningful deliberation.

As distinct from the deliberative approach, advocates of participatory democracy emphasize the value of direct political action among all sectors of society as well as the extension of democracy into institutions such as the workplace (Barber 1984; Pateman 1970). The essence of democracy in this view is full participation that develops more competent and civic-minded citizens. While both deliberative and participatory democrats emphasize increased citizen involvement, the form of engagement that they value is different. An important distinction between the participatory and deliberative traditions is that participatory democrats expect citizens to have recognized interests and fully formed opinions, while deliberative democrats emphasize the importance of a willingness to engage in discussion, rethink views, and find a consensus rather than a victor. For advocates of participatory democracy, it is not the development of consensus, but the expression of opinion that is paramount.

The participatory and deliberative approaches to democracy are often seen as espousing compatible virtues, as both advocate greater civic engagement. However, recent empirical work demonstrates that the two are in important senses antithetical. Deliberation discourages participation, because it increases ambivalence and forces citizens to reveal political positions that can exact social costs. Greater participation discourages deliberation because engaged citizens become more politically extreme and committed, limiting their own and others' discussion of alternatives.[4] Hence the two normative goods are at times empirically contradictory.

[4]For a discussion of these tensions, see Mutz (2006), Eliasoph (1998), and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002). As Mutz argues, people often value social harmony more than political expression, leading to observable tensions between deliberation and participation. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that it is specifically the exposure to conflict and discord that turns many Americans toward apathy and alienates them from our political institutions.

The influence of sacred rhetoric represents a specific case where deliberation is disadvantaged by the same mechanism that increases participation. In addition to influencing citizens' form of political reasoning, *the second distinctive effect of sacred rhetoric is on political motivation, increasing democratic participation*. The sacred intrudes on our consciousness in a way that the mundane does not; we feel emotions more deeply in its presence and are more concerned about perceived violations, which are noted and remembered over simple error, falsehood, or failure to maximize. About the sacred we simply care more and are therefore more politically motivated. The proposed influences of sacred rhetoric can be summarized in these hypotheses:

H1: Sacred rhetoric influences citizens' process of justification, increasing the degree of absolutist reasoning (a process or reasoning effect).

H2: Sacred rhetoric encourages political intensity and engagement (an activation effect).

These effects represent the democratic consequences of sacred rhetoric, or a simultaneous boost in participatory democracy and degradation of deliberative democracy. How we evaluate this depends on how we value the two normative approaches. Do we emphasize the ability of sacred rhetoric to encourage citizens to rise from a state of apathy or descend into a state of unreason?

Sacred Rhetoric and Absolutist Reasoning

We can understand sacred rhetoric as a form of reasoning or a way of thinking through the relation between values and public policy opinions. This form of appeal makes an argument in a manner that sets a political issue apart, reasoning about it in a different way. *Sacred rhetoric employs absolutist reasoning, while nonsacred or negotiable appeals employ consequentialist reasoning*. Absolutist reasoning is characterized by applying established principles or boundaries to a given situation and then privileging these principles over the consequences of the decision. It may also entail citing specific authorities for the principle and engaging in expressions of anger or moral outrage at perceived violations. Consequentialist reasoning, on the other hand, begins from the expected effects or outcomes of the decision and applies a give-and-take form of negotiation, with authorities seen as pluralistic and expressions of moral outrage being limited. One succinct example of the core difference is

illustrated by two competing arguments for why one shouldn't steal—is it because it is wrong, or because crime does not pay? Both argue for the same result, but in a distinct fashion, one absolutist and the other consequentialist.

We can define absolutist reasoning more clearly as a combination of the following attributes:

1) *Protected status*: placing a value beyond question and set apart from trade-offs with other values;
2) *Nonconsequentialism*: privileging values over costs or consequences;
3) *Noninstrumentalism*: rejecting calculated self-interest;
4) *Nonnegotiability*: denial of the legitimacy of compromise;
5) *Citation of boundaries*: invoking a boundary of what is acceptable or tolerable;
6) *Citation of authority*: invoking the relevant authority for the boundary; and
7) *Moral outrage*: referencing anger, especially at a boundary violation.

As opposed to sacred rhetoric, nonsacred or negotiable political rhetoric emphasizes consequences and outcomes; it cites figures and data rather than principles or authorities. It is phrased in the language of policy experts. Most importantly, it employs consequentialist reasoning characterized by these attributes:

1) *Relativism*: implying value trade-offs or comparability with other competing values;
2) *Consequentialism*: invoking costs or consequences;
3) *Instrumentalism*: referencing calculated self-interest;
4) *Negotiability*: invoking compromise;
5) *Denial of boundaries*: denying the validity of a boundary;
6) *Denial of authority:* denying the validity of a known authority for the boundary; and
7) *Denial of moral outrage*: denying the validity of moral anger.

This scheme provides a means of evaluating any given political appeal or justification. By taking note of each of the elements of absolutist or consequentialist reasoning in a given argument, we can assign it a value from 7 for an extremely absolutist argument (containing all seven absolutist elements) to –7 for a strongly consequentialist argument. For example, take the following statement in favor of gun rights:

> The ability to keep and bear arms is a protected right of free citizens. The Constitution gave us that right because our forefathers knew that it must be preserved against future encroachments. It is this principle that counts. The 2nd Amendment is no better or no worse than the other parts of the Bill of Rights. We must preserve it just as we must preserve First Amendment rights to free speech, and Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. We should be angry at the efforts by false leaders to take away our long-standing freedoms, and refuse to allow ourselves to go down the slippery slope of one concession after another. We cannot negotiate away our sacred rights.

Protected status	Relativism
Nonconsequentialism	Consequentialism
Noninstrumentalism	Instrumentalism
Nonnegotiability	Negotiability
Boundary	Denial of boundaries
Authority	Denial of authority
Moral outrage	Denial of moral outrage

This appeal invokes six elements of absolutist reasoning (marked in bold above). Compare this to the following statement, also in favor of gun ownership:

> Citizens must be allowed to keep firearms in order to protect themselves. Allowing citizens to own guns is simply a matter of weighing the consequences of law-abiding citizens having them versus what would happen if solid citizens did not have guns. Having firearms may lead to some accidental deaths by those who do not store their guns properly or teach their children how to respect them. But the consequence of not upholding gun rights is the inability of citizens to protect themselves against criminals, as well as the increased boldness of criminals because they know that homeowners are not armed. This would result in a much larger number of deaths and a more violent society. It is simply not true that we can rely on the police to protect us. They do not, and we must be able to protect ourselves.

Protected status	**Relativism**
Nonconsequentialism	**Consequentialism**
Noninstrumentalism	**Instrumentalism**
Nonnegotiability	**Negotiability**
Boundary	Denial of boundaries
Authority	Denial of authority
Moral outrage	Denial of moral outrage

While this appeal argues for the same policy as the first one, it does so in a consequentialist fashion, employing at least four elements of consequentialist reasoning and none of absolutist (–4 in terms of absolutist reasoning).

The language of gun rights advocates is certainly framed in sacred terms: the common NRA slogan, "From my cold dead hands," is one of the clearest statements in contemporary American politics of an

absolute principle that refuses any sort of trade-off. The NRA takes a strong nonconsequentialist position that accidental or violent deaths resulting from gun ownership are not germane to the issue, as the right to bear arms is a principle that transcends these concerns. But sacredness is not as much a part of antigun language, which is about cause and effect rather than transcendent principle. Supporters of antigun positions must be convinced of negative consequences to be avoided rather than absolute principles to be upheld. This raises an interesting question about the comparative power of the pro- and antigun positions. It is often assumed that the power of the NRA comes from their large coffers. An alternative hypothesis about the source of their power is the advantage gained by advocating a sacred position against a consequentialist one. Political domains involving sacred values can be characterized as *single-sided* or *double-sided*, depending on whether only one or both sides of the issue have sacralized the underlying values in question. Just as some political domains clearly have a greater sacred component than others, the two opposing sides of a given issue may have different propensities toward sacredness as well. In this sense the gun rights position may enjoy a rhetorical advantage over its detractors.

The Psychology of Sacred Rhetoric

Both the reasoning and activation effects of sacred rhetoric deal with political persuasion. But they are not the usual form of persuasion that we consider, what is thought of as attitude change, or altering a citizen's opinion of a policy, candidate, or other object. The two particular effects of sacred rhetoric are not changing minds, but instead changing forms of reasoning and levels of political engagement. This second consequence is most often referred to as an *activation effect*, or increasing political action by connecting citizens' previously held beliefs to their political meaning. But the other form of persuasion is less frequently considered. Most forms of persuasion in the political psychology literature concentrate on outcome effects, or the final opinion that citizens hold or express. But we can make a distinction between effects on *outcome*, or a citizen's final position, and effects on *process*, or a citizen's form of reasoning. A change in a listener's way of thinking distinct from a change in attitude can be termed a *reasoning effect*, shifting the modes or forms of reasoning that citizens employ.

I hypothesize that one effect of sacred rhetoric is increasing citizens' reliance on absolutist reasoning (Hypothesis 1). Sacred rhetoric may be no more persuasive than negotiable rhetoric on outcome (opinion), while having a substantial effect on process (the form of reasoning employed and the justifications given). Psychologists argue that humans have a propensity to be "cognitive misers," expending only the minimum amount of mental energy sufficient to the task at hand (Simon 1985; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). In this view, citizens rely extensively on shortcuts or rules of thumb known as heuristics, especially in regard to decisions made with chronically low levels of information (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Political decision making by most citizens definitely falls into this category given their scant political knowledge (DeCanio 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996). In this sense, absolutist reasoning may be more efficient. Citizens do not have to weigh alternatives or consider competing consequences that are hard to verify. It is much less cognitively taxing to default to principles, rules, and norms that provide established judgments. The cognitive misery of citizens suggests that political reasoning would be prone to absolutism, and therefore that citizens should be vulnerable to sacred appeals.

Along with the process effect of greater absolutist reasoning, we could also expect an activation effect (Hypothesis 2). Activation would be considered an outcome effect, but the outcome is not a different opinion, but greater political action. Just as value-laden arguments are simpler to comprehend, as in the distinction between "easy" and "hard" issues, sacred rhetoric should allow citizens to see the connections between their core values and political action more clearly (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Why some citizens engage in politics more than others is central to understanding democratic representation, but the motivation to participate is often unclear. In the view of more rationalist approaches, differences in participation are tied to disparities in the calculated benefits to be received (Downs 1957). In some cases, leaders may be able to overcome the collective action problem by offering citizens exclusive benefits for participation (Olson 1965). But these factors may be largely out of the control of political actors. On the other hand, the choice of language and rhetoric is fully within their control and may be their best avenue of influence. Interestingly, Olson himself identifies an alternative explanation for citizen engagement that dovetails with the role of sacred rhetoric: citizens are motivated by "an individual,

non-collective satisfaction in the form of *a feeling of personal moral worth*, or because of *a desire for respectability or praise*" (1965, 160; italics added). These may be the key mechanisms that lead to activation—valorization and cleansing. Antisacred acts or opinions are not merely wrong; they are a violation. If sacred rhetoric can create this shift in citizens' minds, from seeing political opposition as ordinary wrongheadedness to perceiving it as an indecent act, then participation in the service of the sacred is valorized, increasing our sense of dignity or righteousness. And participation allows us to morally cleanse any disquieting or disreputable affiliation with a sacred violation (Tetlock et al. 2000).[5] Political engagement in this service not only ennobles us in our own minds, but perhaps in the minds of those around us. Hence sacredness carries a social as well as internal pressure; violations create not only private disappointment, but public shame. As Olson suggests, political participation is not merely a personal but also a public act, allowing us to establish or reestablish our moral standing. For these reasons sacred status offers the combination of carrot and stick to encourage civic engagement—the benefit of personal valorization and the detriment of contamination if one does not morally cleanse.

A successful sacred appeal can therefore be expected to politically activate citizens in several possible ways. One aspect is political engagement, such as the intention to vote, to take part in political discussions, or to participate in campaigns. Another aspect is political intensity, which we can observe in increased issue importance and a decline in the perceived legitimacy of opposing arguments. Even though a citizen's opinion may remain the same, the issue itself is of greater note and opposition less legitimate. The greater the degree that one's values are absolute and unquestionable, not to be weighed against competing concerns, the more central they are to political decisions and the less one has to view opposing positions with any respect. If sacred rhetoric is particularly effective in these ways, then we can expect significant persuasion effects, though not the ones we are most accustomed to examining. The most powerful influences should be on reasoning and activation, emphasizing process as well as outcome

effects. Purely process effects have received less attention in the political psychology literature, perhaps because their significance is less obvious. But the nature of discourse alone has much to do with the functioning of civil society and health of American democracy.

The Sacred Rhetoric Studies: Reasoning Effects

Our empirical test of the influence of sacred rhetoric relies on an experimental manipulation that allows us to compare the effects of sacred versus nonsacred rhetoric in four different political domains: gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, and guns. These issues were chosen to represent a cross-section of contemporary American politics, but also to include a distinction between issues in which only one or both sides tend to employ sacred rhetoric. Same-sex marriage is a potentially double-sided domain that is also an important contemporary political issue. The sacred element of the antigay marriage position is seen both in terms of an established authority opposing the public legitimacy of homosexuality and in terms of drawing boundaries of the acceptable. Gay marriage is framed by its very nature as an issue of defining limits and roles, especially the boundaries of what we call marriage. For the opposing side of the debate, the sacred element entails a different framing of limits, in this case to bigotry and exclusion. The sacred value is inclusiveness, equal treatment, and nondiscrimination.

Another potentially double-sided domain is the death penalty, which has both religious and secular sources of authority on both sides of the question. Some opponents of the death penalty base their opposition on the Christian sanctity of human life. But advocates of the death penalty also cite a religious authority, grounded in explicit Biblical sanction.[6] Some antideath penalty advocates take a more secular stand that killings by the state should be absolutely forbidden because they brutalize the state itself. But supporters of the death penalty also take a secular sacred position that the death penalty makes an unequivocal statement of right and wrong, regardless of any deterrent or nondeterrent effect. In this sense the death penalty provides a domain with different

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[5]In the Sacred Value Protection Model (SVPM), Tetlock argues that violations of sacred values lead citizens to "engage in symbolic acts of moral cleansing designed to reaffirm their solidarity with their moral community" (Tetlock et al. 2000, 855). This effect is not limited to literal acts or opinions that violate sacred boundaries, but is triggered by mere contemplation.

[6]The usual Biblical references are *Genesis* 9: 6 and *Exodus* 21: 12. The phrase "shall be surely put to death" (or a close variant) is repeated over 40 times in the first five books of the Bible.

sources of religious and secular authority on both sides of the question.

The third domain is environmentalism, which is potentially single-sided from the left (the absolute requirement to save natural resources, wonders, or species). It is generally secular, though there are some religious foundations as well.[7] But the antienvironmental side seems to be more consequentialist than sacred. This may be because the motivation is not really opposition to the environment, but is instead proeconomic development or probusiness, a distinctly consequentialist position. They are not in favor of destroying natural resources, but are simply not willing to pay the costs of preservation, in terms of either government spending or forgone business revenues.[8] The final domain is guns, which is potentially single-sided from the right, as discussed above.

In order to test the influence of sacred versus nonsacred rhetoric in these realms, I asked a sample of citizens to read brief political appeals regarding gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, and guns. The sample comprises 237 undergraduate students at a large state university, drawn from the psychology department subject pool.[9] For each domain, participants were randomly exposed to either sacred or negotiable rhetoric arguing for the same political position, and then asked to respond to a series of questions about their political views. The sacred rhetoric statements contained at least five of the seven elements of absolutist reasoning described above, while the nonsacred statements contained none (see the appendix for the wording of the sacred and nonsacred appeals). The statements were designed to mimic actual language employed by public advocates within those political domains, increasing the external validity of the tests.

An initial consideration is whether the sacred rhetoric manipulation was successful, in the sense that readers saw the ostensibly sacred appeal in that light and reconsidered their view of the topic. Citizens may use different terms for the distinction between sacred and nonsacred values, but its essence is that the domain is special in an important way that means it is to be dealt with differently. In regard to each topic, participants were asked "How would you describe [gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, gun ownership]? (A) It is the same as most political issues. It should be decided through the normal democratic politics of discussion and negotiation. Or (B) It is not like most political issues. It is too important or sacred to be decided by the normal democratic politics of discussion and negotiation." Participants in the sacred rhetoric condition were significantly more likely in three out of four domains to choose the second option.[10] This provides initial evidence that the rhetorical manipulation was successful, leading citizens to alter their view of the domain in question, recategorizing it as sacred or set apart from normal issues.

But did the sacred appeals lead citizens to reason differently about these domains? At the outset it should be noted that sacred rhetoric is not more persuasive than nonsacred rhetoric in the sense of altering policy opinions to a greater degree. After reading the political appeals, participants were asked their view on each topic: "What is your opinion on [gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, guns]?"[11] As illustrated in Table 1, opinions on gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, and guns were *not* altered more on average by sacred appeals than by negotiable ones. Instead, the distinctive influence of sacred rhetoric is on the process of reasoning. After reading the political appeals, participants were asked "Please tell us more about your thinking on this question. Can you explain why you

[7]These are grounded in the Noadic covenant to husband the earth, which is often interpreted to mean that we are obliged to preserve resources (*Genesis* 9: 1–2).

[8]An exception to the lack of sacredness on the antienvironmental side is in regard to property rights, which many citizens as well as intellectuals view as inviolable. However, this provides a sacred argument only in some situations that impinge directly on property rights.

[9]The representativeness of the sample relies not on the essential similarity between these students and other Americans, but on the essential similarity in how they react to political stimuli—in how their minds operate. Because students tend to have less solidified attitudes than older Americans, this may seem at first glance a potential bias in the results. But our test is not whether sacred rhetoric will persuade, but whether it does so more or less than negotiable rhetoric. If students are biased toward being persuaded, they should be more persuaded by both equally. If anything, students should hold fewer sacred values than older citizens and be *less* persuaded by appeals to sacredness.

[10]In regard to the environment there is no discernable effect, but we see meaningful differences with gay marriage, the death penalty, and guns: $F = 3.44$ (p=.065); $F = 9.96$ (p=.002); $F = 7.77$ (p=.006). The statistical tests in this paper employ an analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA), comparing the sacred rhetoric group to the nonsacred rhetoric group. This is a straightforward way of comparing the variance in categorization, reasoning, opinion, or other variables between the sacred rhetoric and nonsacred rhetoric groups.

[11]Responses were along a 7-point scale anchored by "Laws should be changed to allow gay marriages; Gay marriages should not be allowed"; "The death penalty should be ended; The death penalty should be continued"; "We need greater controls on damage to the environment; We do not need greater controls on damage to the environment"; and "Gun rights should be more limited; Gun rights should be more protected."

hold the view that you hold?'' Their responses (which averaged 42 written words) were coded for their form of reasoning as described above. By taking note of each of the facets of absolutist or consequentialist reasoning present in a given response, we can assign it a value from 7 for an extremely absolutist argument (containing all seven absolutist elements) to –7 for a strongly consequentialist argument.[12] When we compare the form of reasoning employed by the two groups, we find consistent and strong evidence that exposure to sacred rhetoric increases the degree of absolutist reasoning. In all four domains there is a statistically significant and substantively influential effect ($F = 9.37$ [$p = .002$], $F = 15.93$ [$p = .001$], $F = 16.56$ [$p = .001$], $F = 8.37$ [$p = .004$]).[13] We can state with confidence that there is a strong effect of sacred rhetoric on reasoning process.

But how pervasive is the reasoning effect? One of the important questions about sacred rhetoric is whether the reasoning shift only applies to those who agree with the message, or if listeners who oppose the appeal are influenced as well. But we should consider how this could be moderated by the single or double-sidedness of the issue. If the advocates of both sides of an issue employ sacred rhetoric, then listeners have a ready default of absolutist arguments on either side. If they take up the absolutism of a message, they can apply it easily in the direction of their original inclination. However, if only one side employs sacred language, then listeners who disagree with a sacred appeal do not have an obvious example of absolutist arguments on the opposing side. Because of this distinction, we can expect greater absolutist reasoning by those who disagree with a sacred appeal, but only in regard to clearly double-sided political domains. To test this hypothesis, I limited the sample to those who disagreed with the statement and again tested for differences between the sacred and nonsacred groups. For example, in regard to the anti-gay marriage statements, I selected only participants who gave opinions in favor of gay marriage (a 1, 2, or 3 on the 7-point scale). The same procedure was applied to the death penalty, environment, and guns. In regard to gay marriage and the death penalty, citizens who were exposed to sacred rhetoric but disagreed with its message still employed absolutist reasoning at higher rates than those exposed to nonsacred rhetoric ($F = 5.35$ [$p = .023$], $F = 6.61$ [$p = .011$]). Their form of argumentation was affected significantly even though they continued to dispute the appeal itself. But this is not the case in regard to the environment and guns, domains that are not characterized by sacred arguments on both sides. Hence the lack of result in the gun and environmental domains, but a strong effect in the case of gay marriage and the death penalty provides support for the argument. The finding that sacred rhetoric affects reasoning processes within clearly double-sided domains even among listeners who disagree with its message is important evidence of its pervasive influence.

The Sacred Rhetoric Studies: Activation Effects

To test an activation effect of sacred rhetoric, it is important to see if absolutist language has influences across a spectrum of political action. This can be divided into effects on citizen intensity (the perceived importance of the issue and the perceived legitimacy of opposing arguments), as well as effects on citizen engagement (the intent to vote, to take part in political discussions, to convince others of your position, or to contribute to political campaigns). Table 1 demonstrates the influence of sacred rhetoric on the perceived importance of the issues discussed.

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[12]The coding of these responses was carried out separately from subjects' other responses in order to maintain blind coding procedures. A random subset of the participants' responses (100 out of 237) was then coded by another researcher to test the reliability of the measures. The average correlation between the two coders across the four domains was .86, meeting usual levels of intercoder reliability. A few examples of the results obtained, for gay marriage and the death penalty (in the citizen's own language, including grammatical errors): "Well I recently got saved and am into church. The Bible says woman and man, not woman and woman. I think it is gross and unacceptable. Homosexuality is a choice, and a very wrong one at that." (Absolutist Reasoning = 3 [boundary, authority, moral outrage]) "I hold my view because I don't feel that marriage is so sacred that it should only be one man-one woman. People get married and divorced so quickly now that marriage is not such a traditional and holy thing. Besides, if a gay couple got married, how could that affect me one way or another?" (AR = −2 [denial of boundary, instrumentalism]) "I believe in the principle 'An eye for an eye'" (AR = 1 [citation of authority]) "I do not believe in the death penalty. Yes the Bible says an eye for an eye but it also says though [sic] shalt not kill. What as individuals gives us the right to decide if he should die, leaving there [sic] blood on our hands. What if yrs down the road they find that the person didn't do it – you can't bring him back. But if sentenced to life with no parole he could be released." (AR = −3 [denial of authority, relativism, consequentialism])

[13]It is important to note that the meaningful comparison is the group exposed to sacred rhetoric versus the group exposed to negotiable rhetoric, rather than a normal control group that received no message at all. Comparing the sacred rhetoric group to a group exposed to nothing does not address the real question at hand—whether sacred rhetoric has different influences than a nonsacred appeal that provides the same message but in a more measured and negotiable form.

TABLE 1 Experiment I

| | Issue Area | | | |
| | Double-Sided Sacred | | Single-Sided Sacred | |
Dependent Variable	Gay Marriage	Death Penalty	Environment	Guns
	Hypothesis 1: Sacred Rhetoric Increases Absolutist Reasoning			
Opinion	F = 1.32 (p = .25) (3.83, 4.17)	F = 0.62 (p = .43) (4.60, 4.39)	F = 0.80 (p = .37) (2.58, 2.43)	F = 0.99 (p = .32) (3.87, 4.16)
Absolutist Reasoning	**F = 9.37 (p = .01)** (.95, .56)	**F = 15.93 (p = .01)** (.45, −.03)	**F = 16.56 (p = .01)** (.16, −.51)	**F = 8.37 (p = .01)** (.99, .62)
Reasoning By Those Who Disagree	**F = 5.35 (p = .02)** (.58, .17)	**F = 6.61 (p = .01)** (.36, −.06)	F = 0.39 (p = .53) (−.16, −.25)	F = 0.52 (p = .47) (.18, .00)
	Hypothesis 2a: Sacred Rhetoric Increases Political Intensity			
Importance of the Issue	**F = 4.46 (p = .03)** (2.69, 2.44)	F = 1.58 (p = .21) (2.55, 2.69)	F = 0.11 (p = .74) (2.66, 2.70)	**F = 6.93 (p = .01)** (2.56, 2.18)
Illegitimacy of Opposing Arguments	F = 0.61 (p = .44) (3.11, 2.91)	**F = 5.97 (p = .02)** (4.11, 3.52)	**F = 3.33 (p = .06)** (4.21, 3.86)	F = 0.24 (p = .62) (3.26, 3.19)

Results in each of the tables are F statistics derived from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), comparing the sacred rhetoric treatment to the negotiable rhetoric treatment. Statistically significant results are in bold. The numbers reported below the F statistics are the means of the dependent variable for the sacred and nonsacred groups respectively. N = 237.

Opinion is reported along a seven point scale, where lower scores are more ideologically liberal. Absolutist Reasoning is gauged along a range of consequentialism to absolutism, based on the participant's answer to the open-ended question "Please tell us more about your thinking on this question. Can you explain why you hold the view that you hold?" Answers ranged from −2 (consequentialist reasoning) to 3 (absolutist reasoning). Reasoning By Those Who Disagree is restricted to participants who disagreed with the direction of the appeal (i.e., responded from 1 to 3 on the 7-point scale of opinion). N = 107, 72, 48, and 137, respectively.

Importance of the Issue is reported along a 4-point scale: 1 = Not at all important; Somewhat important; 3 = Important; 4 = Very important. Illegitimacy of Opposing Arguments is recorded along a 7-point scale derived from "Opponents of same-sex marriage argue that it would degrade traditional marriages. How legitimate is that argument?" 1 = Legitimate; 7 = Not Legitimate. The wording for other domains was: "Opponents of the death penalty argue that it does not deter crime; Opponents of environmental controls argue that it lessens economic growth; Opponents of gun rights argue that gun ownership leads to more violent deaths."

After reading the political statements, participants were asked, "How important to you is [gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, guns] as a political issue?" In two out of four domains, sacred rhetoric increased perceptions of the importance of the issue (F = 4.46 [p = .033], F = 6.93 [p = .009]). Participants were then asked about the legitimacy of opposing arguments (see the table for question wording). Citizens exposed to sacred rhetoric were more likely to consider the opposing arguments to be less legitimate in two out of four domains (F = 5.97 [p = .015]; F = 3.33 [p = .061]). Both of these facets of intensity—the perceived importance of the issue and the perceived illegitimacy of opposing arguments—are increased by exposure to sacred rather than negotiable rhetoric. Each of the tests was not upheld in each of the domains, but there is a pattern of increasing intensity.

In order to test aspects of political engagement as opposed to intensity, a second experiment was designed to focus on these effects. In this experiment, participants were randomly selected to receive either sacred or negotiable messages for all four domains, rather than randomizing each exposure as in the first experiment. If the exposure to sacred or negotiable rhetoric were mixed, we could not determine an overall effect on participation, but in this fashion the causal influence is clear. The sample comprises 136 students, drawn from the undergraduate subject pool. After reading all of the arguments, participants were asked how likely they were to vote, to engage in political discussions, to try to convince someone

TABLE 2   Experiment II

Dependent Variable	Total	Agree	Disagree
Hypothesis 2b: Sacred Rhetoric Increases Political Engagement			
Intent to Vote	F = 0.68 (p = .41) (6.14, 5.93)	F = 0.15 (p = .90) (5.95, 6.00)	F = 0.94 (p = .34) (6.14, 6.48)
Intent to Discuss	**F = 6.19** **(p = .01)** (5.99, 5.28)	**F = 6.87** **(p = .01)** (6.26, 5.09)	F = 0.29 (p = .59) (5.87, 5.61)
Intent to Convince	**F = 8.94** **(p = .01)** (4.96, 3.99)	**F = 4.02** **(p = .05)** (4.84, 3.68)	F = 0.03 (p = .88) (4.70, 4.61)
Intent to Contribute	F = 1.94 (p = .17) (2.84, 2.41)	**F = 6.50** **(p = .02)** (3.58, 2.14)	F = 2.13 (p = .15) (2.27, 3.00)

In the second experiment, participants were exposed to only sacred or nonsacred rhetoric for all four domains. N = 136. Intent to Vote, Discuss, Convince, and Contribute are gauged with 7-point scales derived from "How likely are you to vote in the next national election?" "... engage in political discussions in the next campaign season?" "... try to convince someone you know to support your political views during the next national campaign?" "... contribute money to a candidate who supports your views during next campaign season?" (1=Very Unlikely, 7=Certainly) The Agree group is restricted to participants whose opinion agreed with the direction of the argument in at least three out of the four domains (N = 41). The Disagree test is identical in the opposite direction (N = 44).

they know to support their political views, and to contribute money to a candidate who supports their views during the next campaign season.

As illustrated in Table 2, we find significant effects of sacred rhetoric in two of the four aspects of civic engagement: citizens' intent to discuss politics (moving on average from 5.3 to 6.0 on a 7-point scale), and to convince others to see things their way (shifting from 4.0 to 5.0 on the scale). The differences for voting and contributing were also higher in the sacred rhetoric condition (by .2 and .4), but these increases were not statistically significant (for voting, F = 0.68 [p = .41] and for contributing, F = 1.94 [p = .17]). There is, however, a strong indication of why voting in particular did not demonstrate a significant effect: respondents were already clustered at the top of the scale, with over half of the participants in each condition recording a 7 ("certainly") for their intent to vote. Whether true or not, survey and experimental participants often claim that they intend to vote, not allowing enough variation for the rhetorical

influence to show an effect. But for both discussing politics and attempting to convince others, exposure to sacred rhetoric has a strong influence.

But is there a backlash? Does sacred rhetoric activate only citizens who support its cause, or does it also activate those in opposition? If a sacred appeal is equally motivating to those who are impressed and those who are annoyed, there may be no net benefit for its advocates. The overall level of political engagement would rise, but the partisan advantage of political activation is lost. In order to test this possibility, we can split our sample into those who are highly in agreement with the appeals and those who are in dissent. For the four domains, I identified the participants who agreed with at least three of the four appeals. In the group that agreed with the messages, the influence of sacred rhetoric is roughly the same in regard to their intent to discuss politics and to convince others. Moreover, while the influence of sacred rhetoric on the intent to contribute to campaigns was not statistically significant in the whole sample (moving up only .4 on the seven point scale), in the group more in agreement with the messages it jumped nearly one-and-a-half points on the scale, from an average of 2.1 to 3.6, an extremely statistically significant difference. However, in the group that largely disagreed with the appeals, there were no effects at all within all four forms of political engagement. The numbers employed in these tests were necessarily small (N = 41 and 44, respectively), meaning that we cannot have the same degree of confidence in these findings. But the disparity between the agreeing and disagreeing groups is highly suggestive that the activation effects are contingent on agreement. The initial evidence at least indicates that a backlash effect is unlikely.

Conclusion: The Psychological Effects and Normative Implications of Sacred Rhetoric

The psychological effects of sacred rhetoric are distinctive and in a sense contradictory. The persuasive effects are distinctive because they represent a form of persuasion centered on process rather than outcome, an aspect of persuasion that has not been emphasized by political psychologists. But the democratic influence is a contradiction, advantaging one normative view of democracy while disadvantaging another. This concluding section offers final thoughts about these two aspects of the study—the psychology of sacred rhetoric and its democratic consequences.

The psychological importance of the findings is that this specific form of political appeal affects citizens' reasoning process and political motivation even in the absence of a distinct persuasive influence on aggregate preferences. Sacred rhetoric shifts the reasons offered rather than the opinions held, an influence on public discourse rather than public opinion. It increases the prevalence of absolutist reasoning based on principles and authorities, boundaries, and moral anger, while decreasing citizens' reliance on arguments grounded in consequences for public welfare. Because effects on reasoning process are more subtle than direct persuasion effects, they may be overlooked by political researchers concentrating on political opinions. But process rather than outcome effects represent a significant and underappreciated facet of political persuasion.

Process effects may have been studied less frequently because they are less visible. The most common concern of public opinion scholars is the final expressed opinion, and hence it is the most frequently measured variable. But the sacred distinction does not seem to have immediate effects on opinion, which may explain why it has come under less scrutiny. Studies of framing and priming also highlight the process of judgment (in the considerations at play within citizens' minds and the weights given to the different concerns), but the emphasis is still on how these effects alter the outcome of final opinions. The shift in process is not the focus, but instead scholars have emphasized what the shift does to individual judgments, or how priming and framing are employed to manipulate public opinion. The importance of process and justification alone has to do with a shift in the concerns of political theory, or the increasing importance of the concept of deliberative democracy. Earlier studies of public opinion were framed by a background of an elite or minimalist democracy, where the essential question is how elites respond to the opinions of the mass public. In the 1970s the concern shifted toward participatory democracy, or how the public's formed opinions could motivate policy through the increased engagement of ordinary citizens. But only more recently has the process of the development of those opinions and their public justifications become a focus of study. In the perspective of a deliberative democracy, the discourse effects engendered by sacred rhetoric are a prime concern, and the process of how politics is conceptualized and discussed has important implications.

But sacred rhetoric also has a powerful outcome effect in the form of activation. Sacred appeals are more effective than nonsacred rhetoric in encouraging citizens to engage in politics. The sacred shift increases citizens' level of political intensity as well as their intention to participate. About sacred objects we not only think differently, but care more. Their violation is less tolerable, and political effort to rectify such a situation is valorized. In our experiments, citizens displayed greater perceptions of the importance of the issue, and lower perceptions of the legitimacy of opposing arguments. Moreover, they expressed greater intentions to discuss politics and attempt to convince others of their political views. Activation is a major concern for both students and practitioners of contemporary politics, not only because of its implications for democracy, but because of its influence on elections. Parties and movements that can increase the engagement of their supporters have a distinct advantage in winning office or influencing society. This is particularly important in a polarized environment where few minds are changing and the decisive question is which side has the more active constituency. For this reason, the psychological effects of sacred rhetoric have important partisan consequences as well as meaning for American democracy.

It has become a common belief that citizen engagement in America has declined, leaving us with a lamentably underdeveloped civil society. The ideal of civil society depends on both cohesion and compromise—on citizens holding beliefs that inspire them to engage with other members of society, and on these same citizens nonetheless maintaining their ability to tolerate others' beliefs that conflict with their own. Strong belief systems are often what inspire citizens to participate in politics. However, convictions that do not allow for compromise may also degrade civil society and lessen the prospects for democratic deliberation. In this sense a healthy democracy requires a balance between too little political intensity and too much. The conundrum that sacred rhetoric provides is that it increases intensity and engagement at the same time that it degrades deliberation. So which do we value more, a participatory democracy or a deliberative one? A normative evaluation of sacred rhetoric depends on your view of what constitutes a healthy democracy, which is to say which of the competing democratic theories you find most persuasive. One can easily come to a negative view of sacred rhetoric, as absolutist appeals increase discord and decrease deliberation. But this may be a limited conclusion. If democratic politics should turn on the concerns of democratic citizens, then the first threshold in American politics is that citizens care at all. Usually this

threshold is not met. About most issues most of the time Americans know little and care marginally, trusting in political elites to manage things for them. Sacred rhetoric increases the democratic good of participation even as it lowers the prospects for deliberation. An assessment is hard to reach without a clear decision between these two competing virtues; sacred rhetoric is neither beneficial nor detrimental, but both simultaneously. Like many facets of democratic politics, it is a trade-off. Perhaps one of the ironies of the study of sacredness is that the same absolutist claims that reject value trade-offs create one that is irresolvable.

Acknowledgments

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