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### The Absolutist Advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in Contemporary Presidential Debate

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# The Absolutist Advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in Contemporary Presidential Debate

MORGAN MARIETTA

*Sacred rhetoric invokes nonnegotiable convictions rather than reasoned consequences. This form of rhetoric, grounded in transcendent authority and moral outrage, provides an electoral advantage by inspiring greater political engagement and valorizing candidates in the eyes of voters. A study of the language employed in contemporary presidential debates from 1976 to 2004 illustrates that while Democrats made sacred appeals in a few political domains, Republicans employed sacred rhetoric more frequently across a broad range of issues. Democrats have relied more heavily on projected numbers and plans rather than protected values and bounds, often yielding to Republicans an absolutist advantage.*

**Keywords** sacred rhetoric, sacred values, presidential debate, valorization, Lakoff

A sacred political position is akin to Martin Luther's dictum, "Here I stand, I can do no other." The test of a truly sacred value—that we would rather die than yield—rarely comes to pass in democratic politics, but language that invokes absolutism is much more frequent. In common political language, we can observe a distinction between negotiable rhetoric grounded in reasoned consequences and sacred rhetoric that rejects consequentialism in favor of protected values that are upheld regardless of their influence.<sup>1</sup> Rhetoric that embodies the nonconsequentialist and nonnegotiable aspects of sacred values, grounded in appeals to authority, invocations of established boundaries, and expressions of moral outrage at their violation, can create a political advantage if it is employed by one party more than the other. One of the roots of this advantage is the valorization effect, or the increased perception of positive character traits in politicians who employ absolutist rhetoric. Leaders who do so are perceived as more principled, virtuous, and determined than others, enhancing their electoral prospects. But this effect is not shared equally between the two contemporary parties. This article examines the partisan distinction in recent presidential rhetoric that provided an absolutist advantage for Republicans.

## The Democratic Disadvantage, Language, and Lakoff

Between the Kennedy/Johnson era and the Obama victory, Republicans gained the presidency in 7 out of 10 electoral contests. In those four decades, only Jimmy Carter, who ran as a Washington outsider with strong religious beliefs, and Bill Clinton, whose program was grounded in a move to the center and his own remarkable charisma, led successful

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Democratic campaigns. During the same period, four different Republicans were elected. The more strategic use of language may be one of the important factors explaining the Republican dominance of this period.

Perhaps the most prominent proponent of the argument that a Republican advantage resides in language—not in their positions or personalities, but in their more strategic communication—has been George Lakoff. As Lakoff (2008) phrases it, language is so significant because it “is far more than a means of expression and communication. . . . It organizes and provides access to the system of concepts used in thinking” (p. 231). One way of understanding this article is that it supports Lakoff’s essential position on the language advantage enjoyed by Republicans but expresses disagreement on its source.

Lakoff offers something unusual among social science scholars—a thematic research agenda with each book building on the foundations of the previous works, leading to a comprehensive view of the role of metaphor in politics.<sup>2</sup> In Lakoff’s terms, this makes him more like Republicans than Democrats. One of his central observations is that Democrats tend to offer a laundry list of policies, while Republicans see the larger connections among their positions and offer a comprehensive worldview that makes them more persuasive and influential. Lakoff’s argument is that the Republican worldview is framed around the strict father metaphor, which sees the world as dangerous, competition as natural, and therefore a protective father figure who provides discipline as a necessary fixture. This metaphor undergirds and connects many different policies, from the Iraq war to free markets to guns. This is the case because citizens understand language and argument through metaphor, and the central metaphor in American politics is “the Nation as Family.” Liberals are disadvantaged because they fail to attach their policies to their own central family metaphor of the nurturant parent who sees empathy rather than authority as the highest value. When political questions are understood through this metaphor, we reach the opposite positions on the same range of domestic and international policies (see especially Lakoff, 1996).

Lakoff (2008) provides a succinct summary in his most recent book: “Metaphorical thought is natural. We have a Nation as Family metaphor. We have two very different idealized models of the family, which are mapped by the metaphor onto two very different views of the nation. Our modes of moral and political thought are taken from these models” (p. 82). Because Republicans frame their policies in terms of the strict father metaphor, link their policies together into a cohesive whole under that umbrella, and repeat their message frequently in carefully crafted language, they have been more successful than Democrats, who have not made the same metaphorical connection, linked their policies together in a cohesive whole, or employed the necessary repetition. As Lakoff explains in his 2006 *Whose Freedom?*, “language can be used to reframe a situation . . . in politics, whoever frames the debate tends to win the debate,” and “those frames and metaphors get there, to a remarkable extent, through repetition in the media” (pp. 11, 16).

Lakoff (2008) reaches several conclusions that my research supports: “When conservatives answer liberals’ facts and figures with no facts or figures, but with their own morals-based frames presented with emotion and symbolism, their framing will win” (p. 53). “Conservative strategists consistently outdo progressive strategists when it comes to long-term, overall strategic initiatives” (Lakoff, 2006a, p. 111). This means, as Lakoff (2008) phrases it, that “understanding language is not just nice, it is necessary” (p. 232). I agree that differences in language alone provide Republicans with a distinct advantage, but I offer a different perspective on its source. The Republican advantage is grounded in more than the invocation of strict father morality. It is grounded in the greater use of sacred rhetoric, invoking sacred values, their boundaries, and moral outrage at their violation.

Democratic success may be more than a matter of offering the opposing metaphor of the nurturant parent. It may be aided more by identifying and invoking the authentic sacred values of the left to match the more articulated ones of the right. This perspective is grounded in the psychology of sacred rhetoric.

### The Psychology of Sacred Rhetoric

While most Americans are conflicted over basic value choices, a smaller number of citizens hold specific values as absolute, or sacred.<sup>3</sup> This description combines two aspects of research on the nature of belief systems: value pluralism (Berlin, 1970, 1992; Tetlock, 1986) and sacred values (Tetlock et al., 1996, 2000; Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock, 2003). In terms of this synthesis, for any given value dimension (such as individualism versus communitarianism) citizens vary along a spectrum of internal value conflict on which most Americans are characterized by value pluralism (adherence to conflicting values), some have increasing degrees of strong value preferences (less internal value conflict), and usually a minority hold any specific value as sacred (little or no internal value conflict). In this sense, internal value conflict is the opposite of sacredness; high internal value conflict allows for negotiability, while the lack of internal value conflict allows absolute belief. Clearly the more closely a value is tied to religion, the more easily it is accorded sacred status. But it is important to note that while many sacred values are clearly religious, many are not. Sacred in the sense discussed here does not mean holy; it means absolute, which is often but not exclusively religious.<sup>4</sup> Sacredness is the 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 a principle that is held to be absolute, resisting tradeoffs with other values.*

Sacred rhetoric is the political expression of this form of belief. It does not depend on either the political domain in question or the ideological direction of the position taken. For example, one can take a sacred stand against abortion just as one can take a nonsacred stand. The same applies to the anti-abortion side, or to arguments both for and against the death penalty. 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 a more consequentialist form of 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 perhaps 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 more limited. 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.

It is important to note that in the final analysis all reasoning is grounded in a value system, whether explicitly stated or implied; in the end, even a fully consequentialist position relies on a value judgment of the specific consequences at hand. But this similarity in philosophical underpinning does not alter a difference in rhetoric or the way the argument is presented. An important distinction is whether we *begin* or *end* with values. Absolutist reasoning chooses a value to exalt above others, beginning and ending with that

first principle. Consequentialist reasoning only relies upon values at the very end, once the chain of consequences is complete. The value that one applies at this point depends on the nature of the consequences at hand. Both modes of reasoning resort at least implicitly to values, but one begins with values of one's choosing, while the other ends with values that one does not necessarily foresee. Perhaps a more important distinction between the two modes of reasoning is that in one it is legitimate or even mandatory to weigh competing consequences and values, while in the second such weighing is illegitimate from the outset, identifying a person as unethical or morally suspect. In this sense, additional information or facts are helpful to consequentialist reasoning, but are at best a distraction to absolutist reasoning. While it is an important normative point that all arguments reduce in the end to value justifications, it is an important empirical point that some arguments arrive there more quickly and immovably than others.

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

- *Protected status*: placing a value beyond question or set apart from trade-offs with other values
- *Nonconsequentialism*: privileging values over costs or consequences
- *Non-instrumentalism*: rejecting calculated self-interest
- *Nonnegotiability*: denial of the legitimacy of compromise
- *Citation of boundaries*: invoking a boundary of what is acceptable or tolerable
- *Citation of authority*: invoking an authority for the value or boundary
- *Moral outrage*: expressing anger at the violation of a value or boundary

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, concentrating on practical means rather than moral ends. Most importantly, it employs consequentialist reasoning. This scheme provides a direct means of evaluating any given political appeal or justification. By taking note of each of the elements of absolutist reasoning in a given argument, we can assign it a value from zero (containing no elements of sacred rhetoric) to seven for an extremely absolutist argument (containing all seven absolutist elements). For example, take the following statement in favor of the death penalty:

The death penalty makes a clear moral statement about what we will and will not allow in our society. Heinous crimes cannot be tolerated. We must be clear about what sort of justice they require. Both the victims and especially their families are due the form of justice that both our religious and secular traditions call for. The Bible is clear about the demands of an eye for an eye, and the Constitution itself specifically mentions capital punishment as part of our legal system. The issue is not deterrence; it is the strongest possible statement of what outrages the community—of what is allowable and what is not.

This appeal invokes at least five elements of absolutist reasoning (protected status, nonconsequentialism, boundary, authority, and moral outrage). Compare this to the following statement, also in favor of the death penalty:

The death penalty is our last line of defense against the most violent and dangerous criminals in our society. Some argue that capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime, but common sense tells you that at least some potential

murderers will be stopped by the knowledge that they may be put to death. We must also protect society by removing the most vicious criminals from our midst, which cannot be done with certainty by imposing long prison sentences that later parole boards can lessen. Opponents argue that if one innocent man is executed then the system must be stopped. But how different is this from one innocent man who is held in prison for the rest of his life? We cannot stop from determining justice only because a mistake might rarely be made. Even if an innocent man is executed in the rare case of a mistake, this is more than balanced by the number of lives saved by making sure that the most vicious criminals cannot kill again.

While this appeal argues for the same policy as the first one, it does so in a consequentialist fashion, employing no elements of absolutism.

The influence of sacred rhetoric may be grounded in the invocation of inviolability, which makes a sacred political position unquestionable and its opposition unconscionable. In regard to a mundane or negotiable value, the expression of its opposite is merely a difference of opinion, perhaps an annoying but not a fundamentally offensive act. The violation of a sacred value, on the other hand, inspires moral outrage.<sup>5</sup> The public denigration of a cherished value results in a negative emotional reaction, which may require defensive expressions or acts to cleanse. Hence sacred values may lead citizens to be publicly value protective, defending the collective standing or reputation of a sacred value. Acts of moral cleansing include public statements, but they may also extend to political participation.

Previous research has demonstrated two political consequences of sacred rhetoric: a reasoning effect and an activation effect, which can be summarized in the observation that about sacred things we think differently and care more (Marietta, 2008). Citizens exposed to sacred rhetoric employ a greater degree of absolutist reasoning, altering their form of public justification. They also become more motivated to engage in politics. Exposure to sacred rather than mundane rhetoric increases citizens' intentions to engage in political discussions, convince others of their positions, and donate to political campaigns (Marietta, 2008). The activation effect may be the more important influence of sacred rhetoric for partisan politics (Finkel, 1993). If one party motivates citizens to participate more than its rival, this creates a significant advantage.

Political absolutes may not only alter how we think and act, but also how we perceive others who invoke them. A publicly acknowledged sacredness puts good people who disagree in a corner, because to question such things (which is a profanity) brings their goodness into question. Hence sacredness carries a social as well as internal pressure; violations create not only private disappointment but public shame. The opposite side of this effect is the valorization of those who uphold sacred values. Because violation of the sacred is intolerable, rectifying such conditions becomes a noble, valorous act. By valorizing political positions and their defense, sacredness may alter our perceptions of those who employ sacred language.

### **The Valorization Effect**

In addition to increasing citizens' political engagement, leaders who employ sacred rhetoric gain an electoral advantage grounded in the perception of the candidates themselves. This could be termed a valorization effect, or an enhanced impression of the speaker's virtue. When citizens evaluate political candidates, their gut appraisal is influenced by perceptions

of character. Considerable empirical evidence indicates that citizens are swayed by assessments of candidates' personal qualities, above and beyond evaluations of political values or policies (Doherty & Gimpel, 1997; Funk, 1999; Goren, 2002; Miller et al., 1986; Norrander, 1986). Some of the central qualities that influence voters are whether a candidate appears to be principled and determined, exactly the traits that sacred rhetoric emphasizes (Barker et al., 2006).

In order to test the hypothesis that sacred rhetoric valorizes the speaker, we can rely on a straightforward experimental manipulation that allows us to compare the effects of sacred versus nonsacred rhetoric. A sample of citizens were asked to read brief political appeals from a single politician regarding gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, and guns. These issues were chosen to represent a cross-section of contemporary American politics, focusing on issues in which either one or both sides tend to employ sacred rhetoric. The participants, drawn from the undergraduate subject pool at a large state university, were randomly exposed to either sacred or negotiable appeals arguing for the same political positions. The sacred rhetoric statements contained at least five of the 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. Participants then evaluated the character traits of the politician along a scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely) with respect to being caring, competent, determined, intelligent, principled, and virtuous, traits that have been shown to influence citizens' vote choice.

As illustrated in Table 1, citizens perceived the candidate employing sacred language to be distinctly more principled, virtuous, and determined. The average increase for the sacred speaker was .8 along the 4-point scale for principled, .6 for virtuous, and .4 for determined, representing a distinct difference in perception. However, a possible concern in employing sacred appeals is that while increasing citizens' perceptions of a candidate's determination and principle, they could simultaneously decrease perceptions of caring or intelligence. This concern fits with the insistence by some political strategists on not dumbing down the quality of political discourse. By appealing to simple principles that

**Table 1**  
Valorization effect experimental results

Character trait	Effect
Principled	$F = 20.92$ ( $p = .001$ ) (3.46, 2.71)
Virtuous	$F = 16.83$ ( $p = .001$ ) (2.62, 2.00)
Determined	$F = 7.68$ ( $p = .010$ ) (3.46, 3.07)
Caring	$F = 2.31$ ( $p = .130$ ) (2.46, 2.25)
Competent	$F = 1.44$ ( $p = .230$ ) (2.62, 2.79)
Intelligent	$F = 0.68$ ( $p = .410$ ) (2.65, 2.79)

*Note.* Results are  $F$  statistics derived from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), comparing the sacred rhetoric treatment to the negotiable rhetoric treatment. The numbers reported beside the  $F$  statistics are the means of the dependent variable for the sacred and negotiable groups, respectively. Participants read either sacred or mundane appeals for all four domains and then were asked their impressions of the speaker.  $N = 108$ .

lack nuance, candidates may appear to be less intelligent and competent. But citizens' perceptions of caring, competence, and intelligence did not vary between the sacred and nonsacred conditions. The sacred group displayed only small and statistically insignificant differences from the mundane rhetoric group: .2 higher in caring, .2 lower in competence, and .1 lower in intelligence, all of which were in the range of random variations, unlike the strong effects on principle, virtue, and determination. This indicates that sacred rhetoric influences perceptions of the specific character traits that reflect the valorization of the speaker but does not influence other traits, providing an advantage to the sacred speaker.

### **Sacredness in Contemporary Presidential Debate**

One of the more important questions about sacred rhetoric may be whether its advantages are gained equally by the two major parties. Is it the case that sacred language is more prominent on the right? Or do Democrats have their own sacrednesses, also employing the language of limits? More than just a matter of understanding partisan beliefs and tactics, this question has important ramifications for the electoral success of the competing parties. If one party employs a substantially greater degree of sacred rhetoric, they may inspire greater political engagement by their supporters and valorize their candidates. In a closely divided political environment, this could provide a critical margin for one party over the other, what could be called the absolutist advantage.

To evaluate the comparative degree of sacredness across the breadth of party rhetoric would be a daunting task. Even limiting the inquiry to recent years, the total amount of political speech is staggering, including the party convention speeches, presidential addresses, news conferences and their rebuttals, as well as the campaign speeches, television ads, and public discussions for multiple offices at national, state, and local levels. Rather than attempt to identify a cross section of party language, it may be more advisable to choose a quintessential form of competing party rhetoric. For this task, the presidential debates may be the most meaningful test of rhetorical differences. They take place on a national stage, in sequential events separated by extensive commentary and analysis. They are a straightforward case of attempted persuasion, pitting the two party leaders in direct competition. Unlike the usual form of partisan rhetoric in which citizens hear only a single appeal at a time from one side or the other, such as a political advertisement, presidential news conference, or party convention, in the debate forum the party leaders face each other directly over a range of topics in one session. Perhaps most importantly for the purpose of gauging partisan differences, the presidential debates are the most influential case of an explicit simultaneous comparison of the two parties. For these reasons, the presidential debates may represent the best field in which to examine differences in partisan rhetoric.

To compare the use of sacred rhetoric by the two parties, this study employs a content analysis of the presidential debates from 1976 to 2004.<sup>6</sup> This approach allows for a quantitative gauge of the differences among the candidates across the spectrum of contemporary presidential contests. Because the debates are divided into a series of exchanges on distinct topics, this allows an examination of the degree of sacredness in each exchange. For each candidate for each question, I recorded the use of any of the seven facets of sacred rhetoric, creating a range from zero (employing no elements of sacred rhetoric) to seven (employing each element). The results for each exchange ranged from zero to five, with a great deal of variation across candidates and issue areas.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most illustrative examples of the differences between the parties are the debates of the George W. Bush era. For this reason, I begin with the 2000 Bush-Gore and

2004 Bush-Kerry debates before comparing these results to evidence from previous contests. Table 2 illustrates the results of the analysis for each of the three debates in 2000. The most important finding is that Republican appeals entail a substantially greater degree of sacred rhetoric. For each exchange, Bush's language averaged 1.3 more elements of sacred rhetoric than Gore's in the first debate, 1.2 in the second, and 1.8 in the third. The overall average was 1.5 more elements of sacred rhetoric in each exchange. This is clearly a statistically significant difference, even though the numbers involved are relatively small (a total number of 34 meaningful exchanges).<sup>8</sup> When we compare the candidates' closing statements—the most prepared language of the debates—the difference is more stark, with Bush employing an average of 3.7 more elements of sacred rhetoric. While it is clear that Republican rhetoric was more sacred on the whole, this was not the case with every topic, nor was there always a great difference. The issue areas where Bush displayed a more decisive difference were predictably the moral issues (abortion, gay marriage, character, and public morality), but also issues of principled disagreement such as guns and taxes. The exchanges involving the inheritance tax and public school accountability entailed some of the greatest distinctions in rhetorical style due to Bush's invocation of strong boundaries, limits, and standards compared to Gore's discussion of policy consequences.

To examine these differences, it may be useful to move beyond the raw data to examples of the competing rhetoric. Some of the most illustrative exchanges are the candidates' closing statements, which they had ample time to prepare and to phrase in their preferred fashion. Below are the closing sentences of the final debate, the last impression each made on the viewers:

*Gore:* We've made some progress during the last 8 years. We have seen the strongest economy in the history of the United States. Lower crime rates for 8 years in a row. Highest private home ownership ever, but I'll make you one promise here. You ain't seen nothing yet. And I will keep that promise.

*Bush:* Should I be fortunate enough to become your president, when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of the land, but I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God. Thank you very much.

Both candidates offered promises, but they are commitments of a very different nature. The first is to reach certain results or consequences, while the second is to uphold certain values and boundaries. Gore's promise dealt with the economy, crime, and home ownership—personal standards of living—while Bush's dealt with public dignity—personal values. In one sense, Bush's words are a reference to the previous Democratic president's indiscretions as well as an invocation of traditional religious values. In another sense, his entire concluding statement can be understood as a series of simple values and limits: "There is a big difference between big federal government and somebody who is coming from outside Washington who will trust individuals"; "a promise made will be a promise kept"; "I don't think the surplus is the government's money, I think it's the people's money"; "I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office."

This theme is also apparent in the closing statements from the first debate. When given a free choice of words, unconstrained by a questioner and with ample opportunity to prepare, Bush opens with a value statement: "I want to empower people in their own lives." In other words, individualism is paramount, such that government is not to be trusted compared to individual decision makers. Gore, on the other hand, opens quite

**Table 2**  
Sacred rhetoric in the 2000 presidential debates

	Bush	Gore	Difference	Reversals
<i>Debate 1 average</i>	2.0	.7	1.3	
Social Security	3	1	2	
Oil supply & environment	0	1	-1	X
Abortion	4	2	2	
Yugoslavia	0	0	0	
Use of force	0	2	-2	X
Domestic political philosophy	3	0	3	
Education	2	0	2	
Financial crises	1	1	0	
Social Security	2	1	1	
Character	3	0	3	
Closing statements	4	0	4	
<i>Debate 2 average</i>	2.3	1.1	1.2	
U.S. power	1	3	-2	X
Racial profiling/hate crimes	2	2	0	
Gay marriage	3	0	3	
Guns	4	0	4	
Health insurance for kids	1	0	1	
Environment	1	3	-2	X
Closing statements	4	0	4	
<i>Debate 3 average</i>	1.9	.1	1.8	
HMOs	0	0	0	
Drug prices	0	0	0	
National health care	2	1	1	
Educational accountability	3	0	3	
Teachers	2	0	2	
Middle East	2	1	1	
Military preparedness	1	0	1	
Guns	3	0	3	
Family farms	2	0	2	
Inheritance tax	4	0	4	
Morality & Hollywood	2	0	2	
Youth apathy	2	0	2	
Inclusiveness	2	0	2	
Taxes	2	0	2	
Capital punishment	1	0	1	
Closing statements	3	0	3	
<i>Total average</i>	2.0	.5	1.5	
<i>Average difference of morals, guns, taxes, and school</i>			3.0	
<i>Average difference of closing statements</i>			3.7	

differently. His first lines are “I want to thank everybody who watched and listened tonight because this is indeed a crucial time in American history. We’re at a fork in the road.” In other words, what happens next is what counts the most; it is the direct consequences of our actions that we should consider.

Even when the two agree on an issue, they express it in different language. On the death penalty they seem to agree, but in another sense they do not; both are in favor but in different ways. When asked if he was “proud of the fact that Texas is number one in executions,” Bush’s response was:

I was sworn to uphold the laws of my state. Some of the hardest moments since I’ve been the governor of the state of Texas is to deal with those cases. But my job is to ask two questions, sir. Is the person guilty of the crime? And did the person have full access to the courts of law? . . . I’m proud of the fact that we hold people accountable.

In Bush’s rhetoric, it is a simple matter of enforcing the bounds set by the people of his state. The standards of doing so are relatively simple. Gore, however, takes a different view:

I support the death penalty. I think it has to be administered not only fairly with attention to things like DNA evidence, which I think should be used in all capital cases, but also with very careful attention. If, for example, somebody confesses to the crime and somebody is waiting on death row, there has to be alertness to say wait a minute, have we got the wrong guy? If the wrong guy is put to death, then that’s a double tragedy.

He is in favor of capital punishment but immediately points to its problems and limitations; he emphasizes its flaws, not its virtues. The standard is neither simple nor fully endorsed. It is instead a consequentialist endorsement, limited by its effects, not a full endorsement grounded in the values it promotes or the public boundaries it sets.

While it is clear that Bush is more prone to sacred rhetoric, it is also the case that Gore seems to have his own sacred domains, leading to partisan reversals on two issues: the environment and nation building. In the two exchanges devoted to the environment, it is clearly Gore who is the more sacred speaker and Bush the more consequentialist. The only Biblical quote of the debates (from the Book of Matthew) comes from Gore in regard to the environment. While Gore does cite the consequences of further pollution and global warming, he also speaks of fundamental values, boundaries, and authorities:

Now, another big difference is Governor Bush is proposing to open up some of our most precious environmental treasures, like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the big oil companies to go in and start producing oil there. I think that is the wrong choice. . . . Domestic exploration yes, but not in the environmental treasures of our country. We don’t have to do that. That’s the wrong choice. I know the oil companies have been itching to do that, but it is not the right thing to do.

In regard to the environment, Bush is essentially consequentialist, arguing that we simply need the oil reserves and that environmental issues should be seen as simple tradeoffs.

But the clearest reversal of the normal pattern of the debates is in regard to the use of military force and the dispute over nation building. Bush argues for American self-interest

and a more instrumental approach. When questioned about whether he has formulated guiding principles for the use of force, his first lines are “I have, I have. First question is what’s in the best interests of the United States? What’s in the best interests of our people?” Gore’s response to the same question is “I’ve thought a lot about that particular question, and I see our greatest national strength coming from what we stand for in the world. I see it as a question of values.” The dispute is connected to Bush’s well-known antagonism toward nation building (though this position changed dramatically following 9/11). In regard to Somalia, his criticism is that it “started off as a humanitarian mission and it changed into a nation-building mission, and that’s where the mission went wrong. The mission changed. And as a result, our nation paid a price. And so I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation building.” Gore, on the other hand, sees this as an issue of values and leadership: “We have a fundamental choice to make. Are we going to step up to the plate as a nation the way we did after World War II, the way that generation of heroes said okay, the United States is going to be the leader.”

We should bear in mind that these exchanges took place before 9/11 and the dramatic change in Bush’s foreign policy approach. By the time of the 2004 debates, Bush was no longer arguing for a narrow view of self-interest, but a grander vision of spreading democracy and American leadership of the free world, a rhetorical approach much closer to Gore’s. This suggests that at least one of the two partisan reversals evident in 2000 is unlikely to have continued.

### **The 2004 Bush-Kerry Debates**

The first debate in 2004 focused entirely on foreign policy, highlighting one of the clearest changes from 2000: The discussion of the use of military force reversed dramatically. Kerry employed none of Gore’s emphasis on values as a justification for American intervention, but spoke in consequentialist terms about the war in Iraq, emphasizing policy outcomes, mistakes made, and better plans. Bush, on the other hand, abandoned his previous instrumentalism in foreign policy for a decided emphasis on protected values, calls for sacrifice, and the necessity of holding the line in the face of adverse circumstances. The president even made reference to his change of heart: “I understand how hard it is to commit troops. Never wanted to commit troops. When I was running—when we had the debate in 2000, never dreamt I’d be doing that.” But he makes it clear that 9/11 changed everything, so this is not an example of flip-flopping or being wishy-washy (a topic to be discussed below).

An exchange on Iraq in the first debate illustrates the rhetorical divide. Bush invokes freedom as a value with protected status: “A free Iraq will set a powerful example in that part of the world that is desperate for freedom. A free Iraq will help secure Israel. A free Iraq will enforce the hopes and aspirations of the reformers in places like Iran. A free Iraq is essential for the security of this country. . . . We have a duty to our country and to future generations of Americans to achieve a free Iraq, a free Afghanistan.” The trope of a free Iraq is repeated not just within these sentences, but throughout the debates. Bush was asked by Jim Lehrer of PBS if the casualties of the conflict were worth it, a difficult question to answer well. But he invokes the values that make the sacrifices worthwhile, in one of the more sacred responses of the debates:

You know, every life is precious. Every life matters. . . . That’s what distinguishes us from the enemy. Everybody matters. But I think its worth it, Jim. I think it’s worth it because I think—I know in the long term a free Iraq, a free

Afghanistan, will set such a powerful example in a part of the world that is desperate for freedom. It will help change the world, that we can look back and say we did our duty.

In his rebuttal, Kerry immediately moves from values to plans:

Now, we have a choice here. I've laid out a plan by which I think we can be successful in Iraq: by doing better training, faster, by cutting—by doing what we need to do with respect to the UN and the elections. There's only 25 percent of the people in there. They can't have an election right now. The president's not getting the job done. So the choice for America is, you can have a plan that I've laid out in four points, each of which I can tell you more about or you can go to [johnkerry.com](http://johnkerry.com) and see more of it, or you have the president's plan, which is four words: more of the same. I think my plan is better.

The focus of the 2004 debates was clearly foreign policy (55% of the questions asked), and Bush's sacredness in this realm was a dramatic change from 2000. But the discussion of the environment also shifted, although this was a much smaller part of the debates. Kerry displayed none of Gore's sacredness about environmental protection. In the single exchange on the environment, Kerry focused on criticizing the environmental achievements of the Bush administration but stated no protected values, bounds, or authorities as Gore did. The sacred advantage on the environment in 2000 may have been held by Gore himself rather than Democrats in general.

The two Democratic reversals of 2000 did not seem to hold in 2004, but as illustrated in Table 3, the central pattern of 2000 is still present, a substantial sacred advantage to the Republican. While the domains shifted, the degree of sacred language remained, with Bush employing on average 1.4 more facets of sacredness than Kerry in each response, and 2.3 in the closing statements (compared to 1.5 and 3.7 in 2000). This is the case even though the debate also shifted away from the domestic topics where Bush had the sacred advantage in the previous debates. Questions on morals, guns, taxes, and school made up 39% of the questions in 2000 and only 29% in 2004. But Bush remains effective at setting nonnegotiable bounds in several arenas. When asked about a potential draft, his second sentence is "We're not going to have a draft, period," and his closing sentences are "Now, forget all this talk about a draft. We're not going to have a draft so long as I am president." Kerry, on the other hand, continues Gore's avoidance of clear boundaries. In the second debate, the candidates were asked about government funding of abortions. When Kerry gives a nuanced answer about whether he would approve or disapprove of state funding, Bush responds, "I'm trying to decipher that. My answer is, we're not going to spend taxpayers' money on abortion."

### **Fuzzy Math and Flip-Flopping**

Two rhetorical accusations in the debates reflect the distinction between sacred and consequentialist language: the well-known charges of "fuzzy math" in 2000 and "flip-flopping" in 2004. One of the most discussed features of the first Bush-Gore debate was their numbers squabble, or the accusation of fuzzy math. While this may appear to be a simple tactic by Bush to discredit Gore's criticisms of his proposed tax changes, it takes on a different meaning in the context of the discussion of sacredness. Bush's second comment of the debate begins "Let me just say that obviously tonight we're going to hear some

**Table 3**  
Sacred rhetoric in the 2004 presidential debates

	Bush	Kerry	Difference	Reversals
<i>Debate 1 (foreign policy)</i>	2.5	.4	2.1	
How to prevent terror	2	0	2	
Who would prevent terror	2	0	2	
Bush administration misjudgments	3	1	2	
Osama or Hussein the priority	3	1	2	
How to increase homeland security	0	1	-1	X
Criteria to bring home troops	5	0	5	
Was Iraq war a mistake	2	0	2	
Miscalculation of postwar Iraq	3	0	3	
Lying about Iraq war	3	1	2	
Has war been worth the casualties	4	0	4	
Plan for ending war	4	1	3	
Preemptive military action	3	0	3	
Nuclear proliferation in Iraq & North Korea	2	0	2	
Intervention in Darfur	0	1	-1	X
Character as commander in chief	2	0	2	
Greatest threat to national security/proliferation	0	1	-1	X
Putin moving away from democracy	4	0	4	
Closing statements	3	0	3	
<i>Debate 2 (town hall format)</i>	1.7	.4	1.3	
Kerry wishy-washy	1	0	1	
Without WMD, should we have invaded Iraq	2	0	2	
Future of Iraqi government	2	0	2	
International opinion of U.S.	4	0	4	
Iran nuclear weapons	0	0	0	
Reinstituting the draft	3	1	2	
Post-9/11 security	2	0	2	
Canadian drug imports	1	1	0	
Lawsuits & medical costs	0	0	0	
Deficit spending	3	1	2	
Will Kerry raise taxes	0	1	-1	X
Environmental protection	1	0	1	
U.S. competitiveness in manufacturing	0	0	0	
Patriot Act	2	2	0	
Stem cell research	2	0	2	
Supreme Court nominations	2	0	2	
Abortion	3	1	2	
Examples of wrong decisions	2	0	2	
Closing statements	3	1	2	
<i>Debate 3 (domestic policy)</i>	1.4	.5	.9	
Domestic security	3	1	2	
Flu vaccine shortage	1	0	1	
Taxes & deficits	0	0	0	

(Continued)

**Table 3**  
(Continued)

	Bush	Kerry	Difference	Reversals
<i>Debate 3 (domestic policy)</i>				
Outsourcing	1	0	1	
Federal government role in job creation	1	0	1	
Gay marriage	2	1	1	
Catholic Church opposing Kerry over abortion	1	2	-1	X
Health insurance costs	0	0	0	
Taxes for new health care spending	0	0	0	
Social Security privatization	1	0	1	
Social Security retirement age	1	0	1	
Immigration	1	0	1	
Minimum wage	2	1	1	
Overturing <i>Roe v. Wade</i>	1	3	-2	X
Back-door draft	3	0	3	
Assault weapons ban	2	1	1	
Affirmative action	0	0	0	
Faith & public policy	3	0	3	
Political polarization	0	0	0	
Closing statements	3	1	2	
<i>Total average</i>	1.8	.4	1.4	
<i>Average difference of closing statements</i>			2.3	

phony numbers about what I think and what we ought to do.” And later in the first debate: “Look, this is a man who has great numbers. He talks about numbers. I’m beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator. It’s fuzzy math.” Then he immediately argues for an easily understood boundary: “I set one-third. The federal government should take no more than a third of anybody’s paycheck.” The justification for the specific boundary of one-third is uncertain, but perhaps also irrelevant, as it is the boundary-setting itself that counts. It is a clear statement of principle over consequence: Don’t count up the effects with your intellect, but feel what is right with your values.

Gore clearly takes another rhetorical style. His next statement following Bush’s Internet jibe is “It’s clear you can go to the Web site and look. If you make more than \$25,000 a year, you don’t get a penny of help under the Bush prescription drug proposal for at least 4 to 5 years, and then you’re pushed into Medicare.” Bush goes on to mention fuzzy math three more times: “The man is practicing fuzzy math again”; “This man has been disparaging my plan with all this Washington fuzzy math”; “I can’t let the man continue with fuzzy math.” The meaning of the phrase emerges as not merely incorrect calculation, but unimportant, irrelevant consequences. It is a statement about what counts and what does not. For Bush it is values and boundaries, not consequences and instrumental calculation.

For both Gore and Kerry, a recurring theme is numbers and plans. In the 2004 debates on domestic policy, Kerry cites figures 149 times, compared to Bush’s 88 times. But this is not as striking as the disparity in the final 2000 Bush-Gore debate on domestic policy, when Gore cites numbers 47 times to Bush’s 17. The Democrats also emphasized the importance of having plans. Kerry said “I have a plan” (or a close variant such as “I have a

better plan”) 26 times, while Bush used the phrase twice. In the first debate on Iraq, Kerry insists, “I have a plan to do it. He doesn’t.” In Bush’s response, the phrase in his lexicon is not that he has a plan, but that “I have a solemn duty.” Later in the second debate Kerry argues that “labels don’t mean anything. What means something is, do you have a plan?” The emphasis is not on having the right goals but having the best plans, not on valued ends but efficient means.

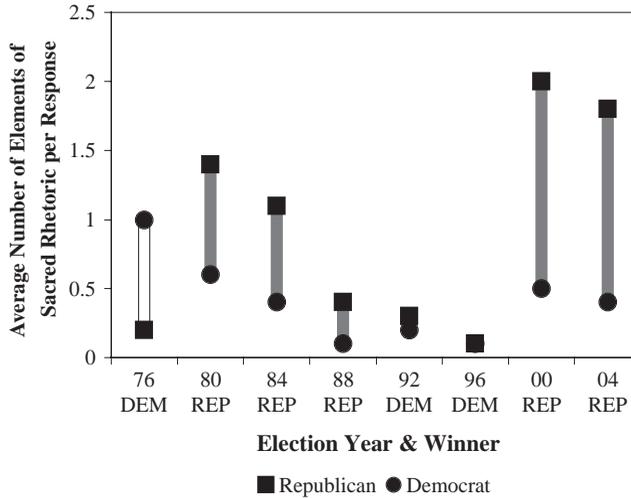
While Kerry’s signature repetition of the debates is either having or not having a plan, for Bush it is the accusation of sending mixed signals. When the president says in the first debate, “I know we won’t achieve if we send mixed signals,” this has an interesting double meaning. “Mixed signals” is Bush’s accusation that Kerry does not possess the nonnegotiability necessary for leadership in wartime.<sup>9</sup> The charge invokes the boundaries in Bush’s stances and the implicit accusation that Kerry would be weak, or as Margaret Thatcher once said to George H. W. Bush, “This is no time to go wobbly.” But on a second level Bush is arguing that a leader cannot achieve *politically* if he sends mixed messages; it is a statement about domestic rhetoric as well as foreign relations, as much about Bush’s prospects as the war’s outcome.

The mixed signals accusation became a major campaign message, most clearly articulated in the charge that Kerry was a “flip-flopper.” This interpretation of Kerry gained such currency that the very first question addressed to him in the town hall debate was “Senator Kerry, after talking with several coworkers and family and friends, I asked the ones who said they were not voting for you, ‘Why?’ They said that you were too wishy-washy. Do you have a reply for them?” Later in the debate, Bush brings up one of Kerry’s most noted campaign statements: “He complains about the fact our troops don’t have adequate equipment, yet he voted against the \$87 billion supplemental I sent to the Congress and then issued one of the most amazing quotes in political history: ‘I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it.’” Kerry’s most repeated remark of the campaign was made at a campus rally in March, and in September on *Good Morning America* he described it as “one of those inarticulate moments.” In the debates, he explained the comment (twice) by saying “I made a mistake in how I talk about the war. But the president made a mistake in invading Iraq. Which is worse?” A reasonable answer, but not one that erases the invocation of negotiability inherent in the famous quote.

### Sacred Rhetoric in Presidential Debate, 1976–2004

A Republican advantage in sacred rhetoric has been a general but not absolute trend in recent presidential elections. As illustrated in Figure 1, during the three successful Democratic campaigns of 1976, 1992, and 1996, the absolutist advantage for Republicans does not appear. This was not the result of the Democratic candidates displaying unusual sacredness as much as it was the Republican candidates falling to levels similar to their Democratic counterparts. Democrats have varied less across time, while Republicans have ranged considerably in the use of sacred appeals. In 1976, Gerald Ford preferred to concentrate on policy debates regarding taxation and foreign affairs. In that race it was Jimmy Carter who spoke of moral leadership, public trust in Washington following Watergate, and a value-based foreign policy, creating the only contemporary race in which the Democrat held a substantial advantage in sacred language.<sup>10</sup>

In the two successes by Bill Clinton, he also faced Republicans who did not emphasize sacred rhetoric. Both George H. W. Bush and Bob Dole stuck more to policy debates rather than staking out sacred boundaries. Bush is famous for his boundary statement,



**Figure 1.** Sacred rhetoric in presidential debate, 1976–2004. Data points represent the average number of elements of sacred rhetoric (absolutist reasoning) in each response by the competing candidates. Entries on the x-axis represent the election year and winning party. The candidates are as follows: 1976, Carter and Ford; 1980, Carter and Reagan; 1984, Mondale and Reagan; 1988, Dukakis and Bush; 1992, Clinton and Bush; 1996, Clinton and Dole; 2000, Gore and Bush; and 2004, Kerry and Bush.

“Read my lips, no new taxes,” which likely helped him in 1988 and then hurt him in 1992 after he became infamous among conservative voters for violating it, losing his nonnegotiable credentials. While several factors contributed to the Democratic victories in 1976, 1992, and 1996, including scandal in the incumbent party, poor economic performance, and third-party candidates, these campaigns were also the occasions when the absolutist advantage for Republicans was not present. One way to summarize the trends in this era is that in some races no absolutist advantage occurred for either side (notably 1992 and 1996), but that *when a substantial difference in sacred rhetoric existed* between the candidates, the more sacred speaker seems to have gained an advantage, which occurred in at least five of the eight races, aiding Carter once and both Reagan and George W. Bush twice.

### Language and the Democratic Predicament

It is important to note that employing sacred rhetoric is an aid to electoral victory rather than a guarantee of it. But in a close contest, any one of several factors could turn an election. In a marginal electoral environment, even small advantages can matter a great deal. This is not to say that Democratic candidates cannot win while employing nonsacred rhetoric, bolstered by other factors such as the state of the economy, scandal, policy failure among the opposition, or simple fatigue with the incumbent party. But they are disadvantaged when facing a sacred-speaking opponent, especially in close races. Candidates who employ sacred appeals will gain the advantages of activation and valorization, motivating greater political engagement and improving perceptions of their character.

My argument is not that in order to win, Democrats must be Republicans, only that they are advantaged when they speak more like Republicans. Given the party’s values, Democrats are not *necessarily* permanently disadvantaged. Instead, it is their habitual way

of expressing those values that creates the detriment. By consciously framing appeals in the most sacred way possible, they could have greater prospects. Democrats are permanently disadvantaged to the degree that they take consequentialism and material interest as central tenets. But these are not necessarily the core of liberal belief systems or language. The core Democratic value of equality is often discussed in terms of consequentialism and material interest, but it does not need to be. My point is that it would be more effective if discussed in terms of absolute requirements, boundaries, and moral imperatives. Other Democratic core values such as civil liberties and internationalism can also be expressed in more absolutist terms. The environment and government deception are other issues that have been framed successfully in sacred rhetoric (the first by Gore and the second by Carter) but are usually not, to the Democrats' detriment.

It may be instructive to compare the perspective offered here with the prominent work of George Lakoff on political framing and metaphor. Lakoff grounds his understanding of the Democratic disadvantage in Republicans' more effective usage of the "Government as Family" metaphor and Democrats' refusal to believe that the repetition of facts cannot defeat the repetition of frames. Lakoff advises Democrats to refuse to be trapped in framings based on the strict father metaphor, with its central value of authority, and instead emphasize their own frame of the nurturant parent, with its central value of empathy.<sup>11</sup> While my own research supports important parts of Lakoff's perspective, I see two central problems with his synthesis. As a starting point, it is not clear that the central division between liberals and conservatives is the family metaphor.<sup>12</sup> Lakoff's argument that the family metaphor seems to fit the liberal/conservative split on almost any political issue of our time is hard to dispute (for empirical support, see Barker & Tinnick, 2006). But a more simple and standard view of the core distinction between liberals and conservatives is a positive versus negative view of human nature, which also leads to the same list of liberal versus conservative political positions. Other scholars see the belief or rejection of moral absolutism as the central division (Hunter, 1991; see also Layman et al., 2007, who demonstrate that moral values divide the electorate more strongly than parenting values).

I would argue that another way to understand the core difference between liberals and conservatives is their opposing empirical assumptions about the essential fragility of our society, or whether democratic institutions are inherently stable or dangerously fragile. If our society and the achievements of the Founding are fragile, either because of a negative human nature, external enemies, or simply entropy, then we need a strong military, a unified culture, protection from God, individual gun ownership, or in short all of the conservative political goals. The reverse is true if our democracy and society are essentially stable. We do not need to emphasize military power, can encourage multiple cultures, and do not need the stability or protection offered by religion, the respect for traditional family arrangements, or personal weapons. In the economic realm, the fragility premise leads to the emphasis on individual production and economic efficiency; if things are unstable, individuals need to compete over available resources, and society needs to maximize the total economic output for national strength. If we do not need to worry about stability, then we can be concerned about fairness and equity rather than competition and efficiency. If the fragility premise is an essential division between liberals and conservatives, this may increase the significance of sacred rhetoric, as perceptions of instability may be linked to admiring invocations of sacred and hence stable values.

A second criticism of Lakoff's synthesis is that it is not clear that the strict father metaphor and its opposite are equally effective, especially because emphasizing the nurturant parent metaphor may cede masculinity to conservatives. Lakoff takes pains to

emphasize that the opposite of a strict father is a nurturant *parent*, as the progressive worldview is gender neutral. But using the term “parent” does not eliminate the feminine connotations of nurturance, especially when paired as the opposite of the strict father approach; as Lakoff argues persuasively, we are heavily influenced by our brains’ existing metaphorical frames. Ceding masculine ground to conservatives may be particularly ineffective if Lakoff is correct about the advantages of strict father thinking during emergency or wartime. To state a direct contrast between the two perspectives on the language foundations of the Democratic disadvantage and their resulting prescription for effective rhetoric:

- *Lakoff (metaphorical reasoning)*: avoid accepting the strict father metaphor of conservative language; discuss political positions in the frame of the nurturant parent metaphor, emphasizing empathy and protection; and unify Democratic proposals under this approach rather than offering a laundry list of policy proposals
- *Absolutist advantage*: employ sacred rhetoric, concentrating on authentic absolutist positions; avoid consequentialist arguments about material interest, refocusing on absolute boundaries and moral requirements; and avoid taking negotiable or seemingly contradictory positions, especially ones that violate boundaries of personal honor or dignity

While these two perspectives are grounded in different psychologies and result in different prescriptions for effective language, it is important to note that this is a dispute within a similar broad approach. Both perspectives recognize the powerful role of rhetoric and the potential advantages that arise from its strategic use. Both argue that the Republican advantage in the post-Vietnam era, and perhaps most notably the Bush era, was in part grounded in language. The intent of this article is to present an alternative source of the rhetorical advantage and to continue the conversation about how “language can be used to reframe a situation” and hence bring about political change (Lakoff, 2006b, p. 11).

### Conclusion: Prospects and Impediments

Following the 2004 election, Bush began to outline his domestic agenda, especially the introduction of Social Security private accounts. When pressed by reporters for details, he responded that he refused to “negotiate with myself in public.”<sup>13</sup> Like many of his phrases, this one may be more strategic than it appears. To “not negotiate with oneself” is to remain absolute, uncompromising, sacred. To refuse to do so in public is to privilege sacred rhetoric. The Republican form of rhetoric emphasizes boundaries, protected values, and citation of authority. Democratic candidates, on the other hand, tend to prefer the logic of consequences and the instrumentality of policy effects. Rather than the simplicity of values, symbols, and bounds, Democratic rhetoric offers the greater complexity of numbers, details, and plans. The evidence from the 1976 to 2004 presidential debates indicates that in certain specific domains and races, Democrats have been the more rhetorically sacred party, but on the whole Republicans employ a decidedly more sacred form of discourse.

Is the Democratic failure to employ sacred rhetoric in the effective fashion of their Republican counterparts a matter of simple neglect or a preference for an alternative strategy? One interpretation is that the resistance to invoking protected values that are bounded and nonnegotiable may be tied to two other commitments that block Democrats from seizing the advantages of sacred rhetoric: complexity and policy. Many thinkers on the mainstream American left see social causation as complex and therefore not easily reduced to either simple propositions or clear notions of right and wrong.<sup>14</sup> In this view, because social conditions or world events are multicausal, we should not lower ourselves to simplistic views or

dumb things down for the voting public. Instead we should educate voters, raising citizens *up* rather than taking the discussion *down*. This is in accord with H. L. Mencken's view that "[f]or every complex problem there is a simple solution. And it's always wrong." If things are complex, then answers are only contingent, and positions are rarely nonnegotiable. We should avoid setting bounds or upholding unyielding authorities. We can't say for sure ahead of time, or in Hillary Clinton's phrase from the second 2008 primary debate, "We're not going to engage in these hypotheticals." Because things are dynamic and fluid rather than certain or sure, we won't look to sacred values but to reasoned consequences.

Democratic rhetoric is also focused on offering the best policy. What is most important is getting it right, or in Kerry's language, "What means something is, do you have a plan?" This concentration on policy is connected to the assumption of complexity. Emphasizing complexity is in opposition to two alternative views that inhabit the far ends of the same spectrum. The first is that some things are simple enough to have an overarching principle that can clarify and unify our actions—Isaiah Berlin's hedgehogs, who understand one big thing. The second view is on the opposite side of the spectrum, that things are truly hyper-complex such that analysis or prediction exceeds human abilities; we therefore should simply do what is normatively right, following our core values (which is to say that if you have no confidence that you can do what's best, simply do what's right). But Democrats tend to walk the middle path of neither simplicity nor hyper-complexity, but policy expertise. Things are not so simple that we follow the obvious value, nor so complex and beyond our abilities that we again follow the obvious value, but are instead within the range of human knowledge. But only if we get it right.

A focus on complexity and policy means that in the end it is the consequences that count. The important thing is the public's material welfare over their emotional state or collective beliefs. In this sense, consequentialist approaches usually offer bread but no circuses—physical well-being but not inspiration. Another way of describing this is that Democrats are publicly committed to doing what is best, while Republicans are publicly committed to doing what is right. While both can be valid ways to look at things, the second has communication advantages that the first does not.

Whether Democrats would desire to employ a more sacred approach if they recognized its effects of activation and valorization, or be able to do so given their other commitments, is an open set of questions. The Democratic emphasis on complexity and policy creates substantial impediments, while Republicans seem much more comfortable with sacred appeals. Whenever this difference occurs, Republicans are likely to enjoy the absolutist advantage.

## Notes

1. Weber describes the distinction between consequentialism and nonconsequentialism as "instrumental rationality" versus "value rationality," or pursuing a principle "independently of its prospects for success" (Weber, 1978, p. 25). Jon Elster describes this as binding, or commitments that limit decisions regardless of circumstances or consequences (Elster, 1984). March and Olsen (1989) refer to this distinction as employing the logic of appropriateness (following expected norms) rather than the logic of consequences (calculating expected effects).

2. Lakoff's major works on the nature of metaphor and political reasoning include *Metaphors We Live By* (1980); *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987); and *Moral Politics* (1996). His more recent works applying these concepts to contemporary politics are *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004), *Thinking Points* (2006), *Whose Freedom?* (2006), and *The Political Mind* (2008).

3. "Sacred 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, p. 320).

4. “Sacred values are often ultimately religious in character, but they need not have divine sanction. Sacred values can range from fundamentalists’ faith in God to the liberal-social democratic dogma of racial equality to the radical libertarian commitment to the autonomy of the individual” (Tetlock et al., 2000, p. 853).

5. See Tetlock et al. (1996, 2000) and Fiske and Tetlock (1997). See also the work by psychologist Jonathan Baron (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Ritov & Baron, 1999; Baron & Leshner, 2000). Tetlock describes the reaction to the violation of a protected value as the sacred value protection model, which predicts that the abrogation of sacred values leads to moral outrage and moral cleansing (Tetlock et al., 2000).

6. Presidential debates in the contemporary format first emerged in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, but did not take place in 1964, 1968, or 1972. Beginning in 1976, they were organized by the League of Women Voters, and from 1988 onward by the Commission on Presidential Debates.

7. A random subset of responses from each debate (approximately one out of four) were recoded by another researcher to test the reliability of the measures. The average correlation between coders across the four domains was over .8, meeting usual levels of intercoder reliability.

8. The *t* value was 5.16, which with 33 degrees of freedom represents a *p* level of .001, or a 99.9% chance that Bush and Gore employ different levels of sacred rhetoric. Three of the exchanges were excluded from the analysis because they were in response to fluff questions, producing no meaningful response. These were on whether the candidates could handle unexpected events, whether they had credibility, and whether they would keep their pledges if elected. The answers offered by both candidates were essentially yes, yes, and yes. It is also important to note that the differences in sacred rhetoric are not due to explicitly religious language. The 2000 debates included only a few direct references to God, the Bible, or faith (seven from Bush and one from Gore). These were only considered an element of sacred rhetoric if they were a clear citation of authority, so pro forma references such as “God bless America” were not counted. Of these meaningful examples, only four for Bush and one for Gore were included in the totals. If these are removed from the analysis, Bush’s average of absolutist reasoning per response only drops from 2.0 to 1.9.

9. To quote just a few of Bush’s repeated accusations (in the same order they appear in the first debate): “I don’t see how you can lead this country and succeed in Iraq if you say wrong war, wrong time, wrong place. What message does that send our troops? What message does that send to our allies? What message does it send to the Iraqis?” “I sit down with the world leaders frequently and talk to them on the phone frequently. They’re not going to follow somebody who says ‘This is the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time.’ They’re not going to follow somebody whose core convictions keep changing because of politics in America.” “I think what is misleading is to say you can lead and succeed in Iraq if you keep changing your positions on this war. And he has. As the politics change, his positions change. And that’s not how a commander in chief acts.” “The only consistent about my opponent’s position is that he’s been inconsistent. He changes positions.”

10. An example of Carter’s sacred rhetoric is his repeated call for morality and nonnegotiability in foreign policy: “as far as strength derived from commitment to principles . . . as far as strength derived from the respect of our own allies and friends, their assurance that we will be staunch in our commitment, that we will not deviate and that we’ll give them adequate attention, as far as strength derived from doing what’s right.” Carter concludes the second debate by arguing that “We ought to be a beacon for nations who search for peace and who search for freedom, who search for individual liberty, who search for basic human rights. . . . It ought to be a quiet strength based on the integrity of our people, the vision of the Constitution, and an innate strong will and purpose that God’s given us the greatest nation on Earth—the United States.”

11. It may be useful to distinguish between Lakoff’s use of the term “framing” and how political psychologists have employed the same term. What political psychologists such as Tom Nelson and his colleagues call “framing” (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997) is what Lakoff calls “surface framing” rather than his emphasis on “deep framing.” While surface framing entails crafting each message so that it changes the conscious considerations that are in play, deep framing involves crafting all political messages so that they invoke the same central nonconscious metaphor (the nurturant parent). The more the deep frame is established in the public mind (i.e., government as protector),

the more effective subsequent surface frames will be. Lakoff's use of the term "frame" may be more akin in political psychology usage to "schema" or "script."

12. In a review of Lakoff's *Whose Freedom?*, Geoffrey Nunberg, also a linguist at Berkeley, writes, "Why should the 'nation-as-family' metaphor be paramount in dividing the sides, and why should everything follow from that one schema? . . . Lakoff doesn't give any direct evidence for that hypothesis: no surveys, interviews, case studies or ethnographic investigations; no database counts or empirical investigation of language use; no historical or contrastive analyses; no experiments that support the centrality of the family metaphor over others" (Nunberg, 2006).

13. See the *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2004, p. A1, column 3.

14. See Lakoff (2006a): "In surveying conservative and progressive arguments, we have noticed another important regularity. Conservatives seem to argue on the basis of direct, individual causation, while progressives tend to argue on the basis of systemic, complex causation" (p. 62). See also Lakoff (2006b, chap. 7).

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## Appendix: Sacred and Nonsacred Appeals

*Gay Marriage Sacred:* The institution of marriage is under attack, and we must save it before the one man–one woman definition of marriage is completely and radically redefined. We cannot allow the imposition of gay marriage and the degradation of one of our most sacred institutions. This is true regardless of the unsubstantiated claims by some groups that not changing the definition of marriage limits the rights of homosexuals. That claim ignores the greater good of our community and the right to protect our most foundational principles. Marriage as it is currently defined is ordained by the Bible and also by our longest traditions. We should be angry that it is being threatened and not stand for it any longer. (reasoning = 5—protected status, boundary, authority, moral outrage, nonnegotiability)

*Gay Marriage Nonsacred:* Changing the law to allow for gay marriage is not a step that we should take lightly without considering its consequences. After gay marriage, what will become of marriage itself? One of the possible effects of gay marriage is to take us down a slippery slope to legalized polygamy and group marriage. Marriage could be transformed into a variety of relationship contracts, linking two, three, or more individuals (however weakly and temporarily) in every conceivable combination of male and female. In a democratic society, we can protect the institutions that are in the best interests of the majority. (reasoning = 0)

*Death Penalty Sacred:* The death penalty makes a clear moral statement about what we will and will not allow in our society. Heinous crimes cannot be tolerated. We must be clear about what sort of justice they require. Both the victims and especially their families are due the form of justice that both our religious and secular traditions call for. The Bible is clear about the demands of an eye for an eye, and the Constitution itself specifically mentions

capital punishment as part of our legal system. The issue is not deterrence; it is the strongest possible statement of what outrages the community—of what is allowable and what is not. (reasoning = 5—protected status, boundary, authority, moral outrage, nonconsequentialism)

*Death Penalty Nonsacred:* The death penalty is our last line of defense against the most violent and dangerous criminals in our society. Some argue that capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime, but common sense tells you that at least some potential murderers will be stopped by the knowledge that they may be put to death. We must also protect society by removing the most vicious criminals from our midst, which cannot be done with certainty by imposing long prison sentences that later parole boards can lessen. Opponents argue that if one innocent man is executed then the system must be stopped. But how different is this from one innocent man who is held in prison for the rest of his life? We cannot stop from determining justice only because a mistake might rarely be made. Even if an innocent man is executed in the rare case of a mistake, this is more than balanced by the number of lives saved by making sure that the most vicious criminals cannot kill again. (reasoning = 0)

*Environment Sacred:* The environment is a sacred trust that we must not allow to be destroyed. Natural wonders like our wilderness areas, national parks, and the wildlife themselves must be left for future generations to enjoy. Species that are lost are gone forever, as are natural settings that have been despoiled. The Bible entrusts the Earth to us to husband. In that sense it is not ours to destroy, any more than we can deny its beauty to our grandchildren who will inhabit it in the future. In addition to religious authority, our secular traditions teach the same lesson—some of our greatest presidents, such as Teddy Roosevelt, were also our greatest environmentalists. Greed is not an adequate excuse for destroying nature. We can achieve both preservation and profits without sacrificing what is irreplaceable. We should be angry at the destruction of our natural environment and tolerate it no longer. (reasoning = 6—protected status, boundary, authority, moral outrage, non-instrumentalism, nonconsequentialism)

*Environment Nonsacred:* Protecting the environment is not a matter of beauty or nature or the fate of owls or any other motive that could be thought of as soft-hearted. It is purely self-interested, as our own health and welfare depend on a clean environment in which to live. Industrial pollutants in air and water are one of the major sources of cancer-causing agents. Our lives are shortened now by the build-up of toxins in our bodies, and in many cases this has led directly to early deaths for thousands of people. This is likely to only increase in the future, as pollutants continue to build up. Protecting the environment is not a small concern for the welfare of a few animals. It is a major concern for the health of all humans. (reasoning = 0)

*Guns Sacred:* 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 Second 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. (reasoning = 6—protected status, boundary, authority, moral outrage, non-instrumentalism, nonnegotiability)

*Guns Nonsacred:* 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. (reasoning = 0)