"Moral Referendums": Values, News Media, and the Process of Candidate Choice

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Relatively unexplored in political communication research are the mental processes involved when political issues, particularly those framed by news media in moral terms, interact with individuals' personal values in an electoral context. This study explored how the process of candidate choice is influenced by interactions between (1) individuals' values and (2) news framing of issues in terms of contending values. Subjects were presented simulated newspaper articles about an election contest and asked to make a candidate choice. Across four otherwise constant political environments, a single issue—which varied in the ethical dimensions emphasized—was systematically altered to create parallel examinations of how voters process, interpret, and use issue information in choosing among candidates. Data from two differing subpopulations, evangelical Christians and undergraduate students, were gathered and pooled in analysis. Findings indicate that, in combination, an individual's interpretation of issues and news media framing of issues influence the type of decision-making process used, even after accounting for a variety of demographic, orientational, issue importance, and issue position variables.

Keywords construct activation, decision making, media framing, motivation, moral issues, values, voting behavior

In recent decades, scholars have given increasing attention to cultural and moral differences in contemporary politics, often reflected in issues such as abortion, school prayer, gay rights, and euthanasia (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Brooke, 1993; Brown & Carmines, 1995; Dworkin, 1993, Flanagan, 1987; Luker, 1984; Moen, 1984; Wuthnow, 1989). For example, several studies have found that abortion and other issues tied to "deeply held values" significantly influence voting behavior (Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996, p. 334; see also Abramowitz, 1995; Cook et al., 1994; Smith, 1994). The resulting cleavages in many political campaigns suggest that individuals with contending values often turn elections into what Monroe (1995) called moral "referendums." However, relatively unexplored by scholars are the mental processes involved when voters' values interact in an electoral context with political issues, particularly those discussed in moral terms.

Our interest in these relationships is particularly piqued by the central role values play in the framing of political issues. Research on news discourse about abortion and health care, for instance, indicates that media, often taking cues from political elites, commonly frame issues to emphasize the "value choices" involved (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990; Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996). Framing an issue in terms of competing values has great utility both for political groups, who wish "to legitimate

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to themselves and to communicate to others why their choice is more moral or competent than their opponents'," (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996, p. 279) and for journalists, who see values as central to a good news story because "they are lay language terms, they are efficient, they speak to conflict, and they may be communicated in dramatic terms likely to generate cognitive and affective responses" (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996, p. 292; see also Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Gans, 1979; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Shah et al., 1996). In turn, this kind of political discourse almost certainly influences citizens, since values function as a heuristic device for a wide variety of people—from the politically unsophisticated to the politically knowledgeable.

This study explored how the process of candidate choice is influenced by the interaction between (1) individuals' values and (2) news media framing of issues in terms of contending values. To examine these relationships, we systematically altered a single issue—which varied in the ethical dimensions emphasized in media coverage—across four otherwise constant political information environments to create parallel examinations of how individuals process, interpret, and use issue information in choosing among candidates. The sample included subjects from two subpopulations: evangelical Christians and university undergraduate students. In addition, we used two different approaches to examine subjects' decision-making processes, which are difficult to measure with traditional methodologies.

Literature Review

Insight into voters' issue interpretations and decision-making strategies may be gained from research on information processing, particularly the roles of values and motivation. Much information processing research reflects a grounding in schema theory, which posits that, on the basis of experience, people organize their perceptions of the environment into cognitive knowledge structures, that is, mental clusters of information. Once activated, schema facilitate and shape the processing of information, thereby providing the raw materials upon which individuals form evaluations and come to understand the social world (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Graber, 1988).

Research suggests that a number of factors influence which schema are used to guide information processing and decision making—frequency and recency of construct activation, information processing goals, and patterns of prior knowledge (Domke et al., 1998; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & King, 1981; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988; Wyer & Srull, 1989). For example, rather than drawing upon all applicable cognitive constructs to guide information processing, people tend to oversample "accessible" schema. For familiar objects, the relevant schema are highly accessible; however, when objects are more ambiguous, no schema are readily activated, forcing a search for relevant cognitions (Chaiken, 1980; Fazio, 1986, 1989; Krosnick, 1988). In such instances, contextual factors—such as media framing of issues—may cue relevant cognitive structures that are then used to structure information processing and judgment (Iyengar & Simon, 1994; Rumelhart, 1975).

As Zaller and Feldman (1992) argued, media coverage, or frames, may activate certain "considerations," which interact with a person's predispositions to help guide the construction of attitudes (see also Edelman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Graber, 1988; Zaller, 1992). Such a perspective recognizes that while individuals "do not slavishly follow the framing of issues presented in the mass media" (Neuman et al., 1992, pp. 76–77), people do draw cues and ideas from news media which influ-

ence their thinking about issues. Values are likely to play a central role in this interpretive process for two reasons: (1) Values are central to a person's view of the world, and (2) participants in political discourse use values to simplify communication with the broader public (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Wuthnow, 1989). This view is supported by research on the relationship between media presentation of issues and individual cognitions within the context of decision making. For example, Domke and Shah (1995) argued that voters form different psychological linkages with political issues based on the interaction of their core values with media coverage; in turn, these "issue interpretations" influence both what information is utilized and how much information is processed (see also Lau et al., 1991; Shah et al., 1997).

Motivational perspectives also suggest information processing patterns that individuals may follow. Fiske and Taylor (1991, p. 13) described individuals as "motivated tacticians" who may choose particular information processing strategies in the interests of accuracy, speed, social adaptability, ego defense, or value expression (Herek, 1986; Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989; Snyder & DeBono, 1987). Others have advanced perspectives exploring psychological phenomena that function to demonstrate and maintain individuals' core morals, ethics, and values (Boninger et al., 1995; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Rokeach, 1973). For example, Tetlock (1989) asserted that individuals' understanding of political issues is "powerfully shaped by the fundamental values they are trying to advance in particular policy domains" (p. 130).

These insights, then, suggest that the expression of values in political discourse and voting may be a means for individuals to verify and affirm their self-conception (Abelson, 1988; Greenwald, 1989; Monroe, 1995; Swann, 1984). As Tetlock (1986, p. 819) argued, "People find it dissonant and threatening to their self-esteem to acknowledge that they are capable of cold-blooded trade-off decisions that require compromising basic values." Little research, however, has examined the impact of values, ethics, and morals in shaping the process by which people make decisions in political contexts.

Researchers concerned with choice processes commonly assume that decisions are based on the willingness to trade off more of one salient attribute against less of another salient attribute to determine which alternative has the greatest overall worth (Payne et al., 1992). In this *compensatory* model, positive and negative evaluations on multiple criteria can balance or offset one another (Bettman, 1979; Beattie & Baron, 1991). This model, with its weighting and summing of attributes, shares some theoretical commonality with the spatial theory of voting, the central model of electoral choice for the past four decades (Endersby & Hinich, 1992; Herstein, 1981).

Both the compensatory model and spatial theory, however, have been criticized, in part because of their assumptions of highly calculative decision makers (Onken et al., 1985; Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989; Stokes, 1963). Hence, *noncompensatory* strategies, in which a positive evaluation on one attribute cannot offset a negative evaluation on another, have also been theorized. In this decision-making process, "trade-offs may not be made explicitly in many cases" as a single overriding criterion may serve as the basis for choice (Payne et al., 1992, p. 93; see also Tversky et al., 1988). In sum, a number of decision-making strategies have been identified, most of which fall under the rubric of either compensatory or noncompensatory processing (Billings & Marcus, 1983; Wright & Barbour, 1975).

Research Hypothesis

The perspective in this research is that an emphasis on values in political discourse, particularly in the framing of issues by news media, substantially influences voters' information processing and decision making, since values function as a heuristic for many citizens. It is not that media texts determine voting behavior; rather, we argue, media coverage interacts with individual predispositions to guide voters' issue interpretations, which in turn shape the process of candidate choice.

On the basis of conceptual distinctions articulated by Shah et al. (1996), we suggest that voters may develop distinct interpretations of issues based on the activation of particular cognitions. Individuals who form an *ethical interpretation* of an issue understand it in terms of human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal principles. Individuals who form a *material interpretation* of an issue understand it in terms of economics, expedience, practicality, or personal self-interest. As theorized by Snyder and DeBono (1987) and Monroe (1995), cognitive structures related to moral or ethical values are likely to be closely related to one's self-conception and thus be both highly accessible and particularly functional.

It seems probable that voters form a variety of ethical and material issue interpretations when evaluating a multi-issue political environment. Given the centrality of ethical considerations to one's sense of self, we posit that an ethical interpretation will "trump" material interpretations in guiding information processing and decision making. That is, in evaluating a set of candidates, individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue will first consider each candidate's position on that issue, which thereby serves as an overriding attribute, shaping the manner in which information is processed while they arrive at a candidate decision. This process is likely to occur because individuals will place an ethically interpreted issue in the center of their political assessments, as the reinforcement of ethical or moral values helps to maintain their self-conception.

Therefore, voters with an ethical interpretation of at least one issue seem likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making process: that is, candidates who do not share a voter's ethical position may be eliminated, or in a more simplified approach, the vote may be determined solely on that issue. Stated another way, for such voters the candidate choice is likely to be driven primarily, although not necessarily exclusively, by the match between the voter's position and the candidates' stands on the ethically interpreted issue. As suggested by Swann (1984) and Tetlock (1986), this type of process seems particularly likely when individuals face a choice that has implications for whether they perceive themselves as moral and principled or, conversely, as compromising basic values.

On the other hand, we posit that individuals with a material interpretation of an issue probably do not link the issue to their sense of self with the same intensity as issues tied to ethics or morals, even though the issue may have personal consequences. As a result, when candidates are evaluated on the basis of issues solely interpreted in material terms, individuals are likely to allow candidates' stands on various issues to balance or offset one another because these voters are not strongly motivated to achieve a match between their position and the candidates' stands on any single issue.

The linkages between an ethical issue interpretation and noncompensatory decision making may be most likely to occur when an electoral campaign contains at least one issue commonly framed and interpreted in ethical terms. In such a

political environment, the availability of the ethical rationale for candidates' positions enables a citizen to perceive an ethical agreement or disagreement with each candidate. Voters can then use this information in a noncompensatory strategy based primarily on the ethically interpreted issue. We argue, therefore, that noncompensatory decision making will occur frequently in an electoral context only when two conditions are met: (1) An issue is framed in ethical terms, thereby revealing the candidates' ethical stances on it; and (2) the voter interprets this issue (and perhaps other issues) in an ethical manner. Clearly, individuals exposed to issues framed only in material terms still may assign an ethical interpretation to the issues or use a noncompensatory strategy. However, they are limited by a lack of information about the ethical basis of candidate positions; thus, use of a noncompensatory strategy seems unlikely to occur with high frequency. The research hypothesis may now be stated:

> When a political environment contains an issue discussed in ethical terms,
> (1) individuals with an ethical interpretation of that issue will be highly likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy, and
> (2) individuals with a material interpretation of that issue will be highly likely to use a compensatory decision-making strategy.

We posit that these relationships will remain robust even after *controlling* for several variables primarily studied in relation to voting *outcomes,* but which may influence the process of decision making as well. Specifically, variables that need to be examined include features of individuals, such as gender, education, and household income, and personal orientations, such as political party affiliation, issue involvement, religiosity, and political involvement (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Spicer, 1994). The relationships also may be attenuated by the importance attached to issues and voters' positions on issues, factors long regarded as integral in voting behavior (Lavine et al., 1996). Further, Tetlock (1989) suggested that individuals who are more ideologically conservative may use less cognitively complex strategies when evaluating and integrating information. While these factors may be influential, we argue that individuals on both sides of the political continuum will use a noncompensatory decision-making approach when they form an ethical interpretation of a political issue.

Method

This study is part of a research program examining how citizens in distinctly different subpopulations process media messages and evaluate issues and candidates in making voting decisions.

Research Design

The core of this research strategy was the controlled presentation of political information environments. Each environment contained newspaper articles, written by a former professional journalist, that contained the contrasting views of three candidates on four issues in an electoral campaign. Articles were presented in a format consistent with recent "issue-oriented" political media coverage (see Schaffer & Cloud, 1996; Miller, 1994). Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four environments.

All subjects received the same three articles on issues framed to emphasize material dimensions (economy, education, government cuts), hereafter referred to as the *controlled* issues. Each environment also included a fourth article on a single manipulated issue.

The manipulated issue, systematically altered across political environments, included issues varying in their duration in U.S. politics and in the particular value conflict involved. The first three environments included an issue framed in ethical terms. One environment contained the long-standing issue of abortion, which pits the sanctity of an unborn child's life against the personal liberty of a woman to control her body and destiny. A second environment contained the more recently emerging issue of euthanasia, which pits the sanctity of all life against individual decisions about the quality of one's own existence. The third environment contained the recent issue of health care reform, which pits personal responsibility to provide for oneself against equality and compassion in access to medical treatment. The fourth environment, which served as a baseline in this study, contained a different version of health care framed to emphasize material dimensions by pitting the merits of the free market against the need for government intervention to control costs. In summary, then, three political environments contained one ethically framed issue and three materially framed issues, and the fourth environment contained four materially framed issues.

In the articles, a number of possible confounding variables (e.g., party affiliation, gender, and subject familiarity with candidates) were controlled, and several steps were taken to ensure that no candidate or issue received greater prominence. Each subject read the articles, then filled out the questionnaire described below. Most subjects took 35 to 45 minutes to complete the materials.

Measurement

The questionnaire began by asking subjects to make a candidate choice, followed by a series of questions examining subjects' decision-making processes. Because of the methodological challenges inherent in research on information processing (Bartels, 1993; Bower & Clapper, 1989; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Geiger & Newhagen, 1993), we used two different approaches to measure the decision-making strategy used.

The first measure was a series of four open-ended questions asking subjects to describe their decision-making process in choosing a candidate. Research suggests that questions about cognitive activities can effectively elicit a "memory dump" if asked immediately after a given task has been carried out (Ericsson & Simon, 1984; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Guided by previous research on compensatory and noncompensatory strategies, we content analyzed the responses.[1] Of the 373 subjects, 13 did not answer these questions or provided responses that could not be coded; for the remaining 360 respondents, two coders agreed on 306 as compensatory or noncompensatory, yielding an intercoder reliability coefficient of .85, which is 76 percent greater than by chance (Scott, 1955). The remaining 54 responses were discussed and then classified.

The second measure of decision making utilized a measurement approach that did not require subjects to self-report their cognitive activities. The key element in this measure was comparison of the chosen candidate's issue positions with the subject's own issue positions. One candidate—Richard Hancock—was positioned

as ideologically conservative on the manipulated issue (i.e., the issue framed in ethical terms in the first three environments) and as ideologically liberal on the three controlled issues. The other two candidates—Michael Garrett and David Williamson—were ideologically liberal on the manipulated issue and ideologically conservative on two of the three controlled issues. By having candidates hold these issue positions, we avoided stereotypes of ideologically consistent conservative or liberal candidates (see Table 1 for a summary). We explain in the Results section how we used the candidate choice to assess voters' decision-making process.

Subjects' own positions on the issues were measured by asking whether they "*agreed,*" "*had no opinion,*" or "*disagreed*" with statements corresponding to policy implications of each issue in the environment. Subjects also were asked to rate the importance in their voting decision of each issue: economy, education, government cuts, and the manipulated issue (abortion, euthanasia, or health care). A seven-point scale was used, ranging from *not at all important* to *extremely important.*

Individual interpretations of issues were measured next with three open-ended questions that engaged subjects in a thought-listing procedure to tap how the issues related to their personal values, concerns about society, and personal life situations. Each issue was coded as having received an ethical interpretation, material interpretation, a combination of these two, or as not mentioned (or stated as ignored). Issues were coded as receiving an ethical interpretation if the individual discussed the issue within the framework of human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal principles. Issues were coded as receiving a material interpretation if the individual discussed the issue in terms of economics, expedience, practicality, or

Table 1
Candidate positions on all issues

	Richard Hancock	Michael Garrett	David Williamson
Manipulated issues			
Abortion	Pro-life (conservative)	Pro-choice (liberal)	Pro-choice (liberal)
Euthanasia	Opposes euthanasia (conservative)	Supports euthanasia (liberal)	Supports euthanasia (liberal)
Health care (ethical)	Personal responsibility (conservative)	Fundamental right (liberal)	Fundamental right (liberal)
Health care (material)	Free market (conservative)	Govt. intervention (liberal)	Govt. intervention (liberal)
Controlled issues			
Economy	Raise taxes on wealthy (liberal)	Raise taxes on wealthy (liberal)	Capital gains tax cut (conservative)
Education	Opposes vouchers (liberal)	Favors vouchers (conservative)	Opposes vouchers (liberal)
Government cuts	Opposes massive cuts (liberal)	Favors massive cuts (conservative)	Favors massive cuts (conservative)
Summary	Conservative on manipulated issue; liberal on controlled issues	Liberal on manipulated issue; conservative on controlled issues	Liberal on manipulated issue; conservative on controlled issues

personal self-interest. Individuals could receive a coding of either ethical or material regardless of whether they discussed the issues in personal terms or in relation to the broader society.

Eight subjects did not answer these questions or failed to provide enough information to reliably code; for the remaining 365 respondents, two coders agreed on 1,309 of 1,460 individual-issue codings, producing an intercoder reliability coefficient of .90, which was 80 percent greater than by chance. The remaining 151 individual-issue codings were discussed and then classified.

A manipulation check examined whether, as expected, the combination of issues and media emphasis on ethical dimensions produced differences in subjects' interpretations of the manipulated issues. Data in Table 2 confirm that individuals were significantly more likely to ascribe an ethical interpretation to the issues framed in ethical terms than to the issue framed in material terms (baseline environment). However, even though abortion and euthanasia have been discussed consistently by news media and politicians in ethical terms and were framed similarly in this study, one-fourth of the subjects interpreted these issues in material terms, as did over half of the subjects exposed to the ethically framed version of health care. These figures clearly indicate that many people do not automatically accept the media's framing of an issue, even in a controlled research setting.

Guided by our theory and in an effort to maintain reasonable cell sizes for hypothesis testing, we collapsed individual interpretations of the manipulated issues into two categories: ethical or material. Subjects with a combination of ethical and material issue interpretations were placed in the ethical interpretation category, and subjects who ignored or did not mention the issue were included in the material interpretation category. The data were combined in this fashion for two reasons: (1) Our theory suggests an ethical interpretation will trump a material interpretation in decision making; and (2) without exception, subjects who ignored or did not mention the manipulated issue still formed an interpretation of other issues in the environment.

Next, the variable "interpretation of the controlled issues" was constructed by combining subjects' interpretations of education, economy, and government cuts. These issues typically are discussed by media and politicians in material terms, and

Table 2
Interpretations of abortion, euthanasia, and health care (both versions)

			Health care	
Issue interpretation	Abortion (n = 96)	Euthanasia (n = 93)	Ethical frame (n = 90)	Material frame (n = 86)
Ethical	47%	38%	21%	2%
Ethical and material	23%	15%	23%	11%
Material	24%	29%	52%	73%
Not mentioned or ignored	6%	18%	4%	14%

χ^2 = 86.1, df = 9, p < .001.

they were framed materially in this study. Subjects were coded as having an ethical interpretation of the controlled issues if they interpreted any of these issues in ethical terms, and, as expected, relatively few did so—only 15 percent.

The last part of the questionnaire focused on demographic and orientational variables. The sample was evenly split by gender (52 percent male), highly educated (only 21 percent had not attended any college), fairly affluent (44 percent reported a household income of more than $45,000), and not too politically involved (only 9 percent said that they were *substantially* or *extremely* involved). Finally, population subgroup was coded, enabling exploration of whether the hypothesized relationship occurred in both subpopulations or only among evangelical Christians (as conventional wisdom might have it).

Sample

The sample included subjects from two subpopulations: 172 members of five evangelical Christian churches and 201 undergraduate students, both groups residing in a large city in the midwestern United States. These groups were chosen for three reasons: (1) Evangelical Christians have demonstrated increasing prominence in recent elections; (2) many have speculated about the values and voting behavior of evangelical Christians in electoral contexts, yet there has been little systematic study of their political cognitions; and (3) students served an ideological counterpoint to evangelical Christians since the two groups could be expected to differ considerably in political party affiliation, degree of religiosity, and positions on issues included in this study.

For example, 50 percent of the evangelical Christians were Republicans, 41 percent were independent, and 9 percent were Democrats; in contrast, among the undergraduate students, only 20 percent were Republicans, 47 percent were independent, and 33 percent were Democrats. Further, 99 percent of the evangelical Christians reported their religious faith as *substantially* or *extremely* important (on a five-point scale); in contrast, among students, only 40 percent said their religious faith was at least substantially important whereas fully 34 percent said it was *not at all* or *minimally important.* Last, the two subpopulations held markedly differing positions on the manipulated issues. Among the evangelical Christians, 63 percent opposed abortion, 70 percent opposed euthanasia, and 42 percent opposed a national health care plan. In contrast, among the undergraduate students, only 10 percent opposed abortion, 20 percent opposed euthanasia, and 27 percent opposed a national health care plan.

Results

All tests of the research hypothesis were performed within political environments at the individual level, an approach that allowed us to get "within the cognitive system of the individual" (Lavine et al., 1996, p. 298). Our hypothesis predicted that when a political environment contained an issue discussed in ethical terms, individuals who formed an ethical interpretation of that issue would be highly likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy, while individuals who formed a material interpretation of the issue would be highly likely to use a compensatory decision-making strategy. We expected support for the hypothesis among subjects receiving the first three environments, which contained issues framed in ethical

terms. Conversely, we did not expect the theorized relationship to be supported among subjects in the final environment, which contained only materially framed issues.

As a first test of the hypothesis, crosstabs for subjects in each political environment were run between individual interpretations of the manipulated issue and the decision-making strategy described in the open-ended measure. Data in Table 3 show a very strong relationship between issue interpretation and decision making. Among subjects receiving the first three environments, roughly three-fourths of those with an ethical interpretation used a noncompensatory strategy in each environment. Conversely, at least 70 percent of subjects with a material interpretation used a compensatory strategy in each of these environments. The results among subjects in the baseline environment also shed light on our theory: When health care was framed in material terms, very few subjects formed an ethical issue interpretation, and of those, only about a third used a noncompensatory strategy, while the vast majority of subjects forming a material interpretation used a compensatory strategy. These results provide strong support for the hypothesis.

As a second test of the hypothesis, we examined the degree to which subjects' positions on the issues appeared to serve as the criteria for choosing among candidates. For each issue, analysis determined the congruence between the issue positions of (1) subjects and (2) their chosen candidate—that is, whether subjects "voted" for a candidate sharing their position on the issue.[2] In this analysis, correlations were run separately for subjects with an ethical interpretation and subjects with a material interpretation of the manipulated issues because our theory suggests that differences in issue interpretation will lead to different patterns in using criteria (i.e., issues) when choosing among candidates.

Table 3
Interpretation of the manipulated issue by percentage of subjects using a noncompensatory decision-making strategy

	Issue interpretation			
Political environment	Ethical	Material	χ^2 value	*p*
Abortion	81% (*n* = 67)	21% (*n* = 29)	31.0	< .001
Euthanasia	76% (*n* = 49)	21% (*n* = 44)	28.1	< .001
Health care (ethical frame)	74% (*n* = 39)	29% (*n* = 48)	17.6	< .001
Health care (material frame)	36% (*n* = 11)	16% (*n* = 70)	2.7	*ns*

Cell entries are the percentage of subjects in each political environment with a specific issue interpretation who used a noncompensatory decision-making strategy. To determine the percentage of subjects with the same issue interpretation who used a compensatory strategy, subtract the cell entry from 100 percent.

This form of analysis provides insight into the decision-making process—whether it was based on an overriding criterion or on multiple criteria—using a method that did not require subjects to self-report their cognitive activities. Table 4 shows the partial correlations between the subject's position on each issue and the chosen candidate's position on that issue, controlling for the subject's positions on the other issues. The pattern of results provides support for the relationship theorized in this article. In particular, two points merit discussion.

First, among subjects forming an ethical interpretation, results suggest that the manipulated issue exerted the strongest influence on candidate choice in each of the first three environments: The partial correlation coefficient between the issue position of (1) subjects and (2) their chosen candidate was .77 for abortion, .63 for

Table 4
Partial correlations between the issue positions of subjects and their chosen candidate

	Issue interpretation	
	Ethical	Material
Environment 1		
Abortion	.77***	.46**
Economy	.33**	.57**
Education	.31**	.42*
Government cuts	.05	−.22
	(*n* = 66)	(*n* = 29)
Environment 2		
Euthanasia	.63***	.10
Economy	.34*	.64***
Education	.15	.49**
Government cuts	.36**	.06
	(*n* = 48)	(*n* = 44)
Environment 3		
Health care (ethical frame)	.62***	.42**
Economy	.25	.67***
Education	.46**	.57***
Government cuts	.23	.13
	(*n* = 40)	(*n* = 49)
Environment 4[a]		
Health care (material frame)		.31**
Economy		.50***
Education		.37***
Government cuts		.28**
	(*n* = 11)	(*n* = 72)

Correlations control for positions on each of the other three issues; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

[a]Sample for ethical issue interpretation was not sufficient for a meaningful analysis.

euthanasia, and .62 for the ethical version of health care. Further, in two of the three environments (abortion and euthanasia), the coefficient for "matching" on the manipulated issue was nearly double that of any other issue. The pattern of results among these subjects, then, suggests use of a noncompensatory decision-making process.

In contrast, among subjects with a material interpretation, the pattern of correlations suggests that individuals weighed candidates' stands on a variety of issues relatively evenly in making a vote choice: In two of the environments containing an ethically framed issue (abortion and health care), three issues had comparable issue-matching coefficients. Similarly, for these subjects, correlations for all four of the issues achieved statistical significance in the baseline environment. These results are consistent with use of a compensatory decision-making strategy.

Results with both measures, then, suggest that forming an ethical interpretation of an issue leads an individual to use a noncompensatory decision-making process when the ethical basis for candidates' positions is known. When this information was not available (i.e., health care framed in material terms), even among subjects who interpreted the issue ethically, fewer than half used a noncompensatory strategy. Thus, the combination of making an ethical issue interpretation *and* knowing candidates' ethical stances on that issue appears to foster high levels of noncompensatory decision making. If both of these conditions are not met, individuals are much more likely to use a compensatory decision-making process.

Tests of Robustness

Next, we examined the robustness of the theorized relationship. Among other concerns, we were interested in whether the findings were restricted to the evangelical Christians, as conventional wisdom might dictate, or occurred among both subpopulations. Tests of robustness were performed only among subjects receiving the political environments containing abortion, euthanasia, or health care framed ethically because only these environments provided information on candidates' ethical rationale for their issue positions, a condition stipulated by our theory as necessary for facilitating use of a noncompensatory strategy.

For the first tests of robustness, 16 independent variables were included in regression analysis. These variables consisted of demographics (gender, education, household income), personal orientations (subject group, political party affiliation, political involvement), subjects' positions on the controlled issues (economy, education, government cuts) and the importance assigned to these issues, subjects' positions on the issue discussed in ethical terms (abortion, euthanasia, or health care) and the importance assigned to this issue, and subjects' interpretations of the manipulated issue and the controlled issues (both coded as 0 = material, 1 = ethical). Age and religiosity were not included in tests of robustness because they were highly correlated with the subject group variable (for age, $r = .69$; for religiosity, $r = .63$).

Logistic regressions were run separately for each political environment, with the decision-making strategy measure (coded as 0 = compensatory, 1 = noncompensatory) as the dependent variable (see Table 5). Results across all three environments revealed that the relationship between issue interpretation and decision-making strategy remained robust even after a host of demographic, orientational, issue importance, and issue position variables were accounted for.

Table 5
Regression of open-ended measure of decision-making strategy on relevant variables

	Abortion environment	Euthanasia environment	Health care environment
Demographics			
Gender	−.08	.00	.00
Education	.00	−.10	.00
Household income	.00	.00	.00
Orientational			
Subject group	.00	.00	.00
Political party affil.	.00	.00	.13*
Political involvement	.00	.00	.00
Controlled issues			
Economy importance	−.13*	.00	−.14*
Education importance	.00	.00	.00
Govt. cuts importance	.00	−.05	.00
Economy position	.00	.00	.00
Education position	−.03	.00	.00
Govt. cuts position	.00	.00	.26**
Manipulated issue			
Importance	.00	.00	.23**
Position	.00	.00	.00
Issue interpretation			
Controlled issues	.00	.07	.05
Manipulated issue	.30***	.25**	.22**
Goodness of fit	70.8	78.3	91.9
Cases correctly predicted	87.2%	80.7%	82.9%
Cox & Snell R^2	.50	.38	.44
	(n = 86)	(n = 83)	(n = 82)

Dependent variable coded as 0 = compensatory, 1 = noncompensatory; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Four points should be noted about the relationship between issue interpretation and decision making as revealed in the regression equations shown in Table 5. First, the overall equation performed well in explaining subjects' decision-making strategies, as indicated by the goodness-of-fit test and high percentage of cases correctly predicted. For all three equations, the model explained between one-third and one-half of variance in decision making. Second, the robustness of the theoretical relationship is supported by the values of .30, .25, and .22 for interpretation of abortion, euthanasia, and health care, respectively. These coefficients indicate that interpretation of these issues remained a powerful predictor of an individual's decision-making strategy when the contribution of all the other independent variables was simultaneously accounted for. Third, the relationship between issue interpretation and decision making was found across both subpopulations, as indicated by the lack of

contribution by the subject group variable (students or evangelical Christians). Finally, interpretation of the issue framed in ethical terms was the only variable significantly related to decision making in all three environments. In short, it is clear that in a political environment containing an issue discussed in ethical terms, an individual's interpretation of that issue in either ethical or material terms exerts substantial influence on the process used in making a voting decision.

As a second test of robustness, we returned to our earlier examination of the degree to which subjects' positions on the issues appeared to serve as criteria for choosing among the candidates. Partial correlations were run separately for subjects with an ethical interpretation and subjects with a material interpretation of the ethically framed issues, controlling for gender, education, household income, subject group, political party affiliation, political involvement, and positions on the other issues. The pattern of results from this analysis also provides support for the theorized relationship (see Table 6).

Among subjects forming an ethical interpretation the results suggest that the manipulated issue played the strongest role in the candidate choice in what appears to be a noncompensatory decision-making process: The partial correlation between the issue position of (1) subjects and (2) their chosen candidate was .55

Table 6
Partial correlations between the issue positions of subjects and their chosen candidate

	Issue interpretation	
	Ethical	Material
Environment 1		
Abortion	.55***	.39*
Economy	.40**	.63**
Education	.26*	.53**
Government cuts	.05	−.22
	(n = 60)	(n = 28)
Environment 2		
Euthanasia	.51***	.26
Economy	.32*	.46**
Education	.15	.52**
Government cuts	.43**	.30
	(n = 47)	(n = 39)
Environment 3		
Health care (ethical frame)	.56***	.42**
Economy	.24	.62***
Education	.34*	.61***
Government cuts	.38*	.13
	(n = 39)	(n = 47)

Correlations control for gender, education, household income, subject group, political party affiliation, political involvement, and positions on each of the other three issues; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

for abortion, .51 for euthanasia, and .56 for the ethical version of health care (all $p < .001$). Further, in two of the three environments (abortion and health care) the coefficient for matching on the manipulated issue was substantially stronger than that for any other issue. In contrast, subjects with a material interpretation appeared to consider candidates' stands on a variety of issues relatively evenly in what seems to be a compensatory decision-making process. In all cases for subjects with a material interpretation, the issues of economy and education had comparable issue-matching coefficients, and in two of the three environments (abortion and health care), the manipulated issue also was associated with the candidate choice.

Therefore, these results suggest the theorized relationship is robust even after controlling for a host of potentially confounding variables considered likely to influence the voting process.

Discussion

This study offers insight into how voters' information processing and decision making are influenced by interactions between (1) individuals' personal values and (2) news media framing of issues in terms of value conflicts. Tests of the hypothesis demonstrate a strong, consistent, and robust relationship between an ethical issue interpretation and use of a noncompensatory decision-making strategy across three political environments containing an issue framed in ethical terms. As expected, this relationship was not found in the baseline political environment, which contained only issues framed in material terms.

We recognize that there is a degree of artificiality in the study's research design. Subjects were presented with relatively limited information about candidate positions on only four issues, and little information was provided about the candidates; indeed, we intentionally minimized candidate differences on personal characteristics. The strength of the research design, however, is in maximizing internal validity by (1) carefully controlling a variety of variables that may influence individuals' decision making and (2) measuring and then statistically controlling other potentially confounding variables. What is most difficult in studying underlying decision-making processes—as opposed to examining factors that influence a specific vote choice—is being able to ascertain the information available to individual citizens and then to determine how that information is used by these voters in arriving at a decision. Research designs that control available information and carefully measure the ways subjects process the information, utilizing several approaches to measure decision making, are more effective than questionnaire-based field studies for close examination of the mental processes used by voters.

Generalizability of the findings of this study is another matter, of course. It is nearly impossible to conduct the same kind of carefully controlled study with random assignment to different political environments using a random sample of voters. Nevertheless, we have taken several steps in our research program to broaden generalizability.

First, we have constructed political information environments closely modeled on real political discourse. The construction of news frames emphasizing value conflicts—particularly conflicts including ethical or moral values—is common in media coverage as journalists and political actors attempt to justify certain positions and views as deserving of public support. Second, we have varied the ethically framed issue included in the political environments, thereby creating different value conflicts.

In this study, the use of three issues discussed in ethical terms, abortion, euthanasia, and health care, enabled examination of the theorized relationship across issues that differ in several basic characteristics. Third, we have tested several populations of adults besides college students, selecting subpopulations that vary considerably in a number of important respects: education level, age, gender, occupation, religiosity, party affiliation and ideological orientations toward relevant issues. Pooling data, as we did here with evangelical Christians and undergraduate students, enables examination of hypothesis tests across differing populations. Fourth, we have used several different approaches to measure the key dependent variable, type of decision-making process. Consistency in results across the differing dependent measures, as in this study, increases confidence in both individuals' ability to self-report their cognitive activities and in our ability to tap those processes. When the pattern of findings across the research program consistently supports the basic hypothesis, as occurred in this study, confidence in the generalizability of the theory is increased.

In addition, support for generalizability can be found outside the laboratory. Data from national polls examining public opinion on a variety of political issues buttress our basic argument. For example, in a 1992 election survey 24 percent of randomly sampled adults said that regardless of a candidate's position on other issues, they would "never" vote for a candidate who "favors abortion," while 34 percent said they would "never" vote for a candidate who "would restrict a woman's right to have an abortion." Similar data are available for issues with other value conflicts. For instance, when adults were asked how they would react if they found a candidate whose views they agreed with on most issues, but who "took a position on controlling air and water pollution and cleaning up acid rain and toxic waste dumps that [they] disagreed with completely," 60 percent said they "probably" or "certainly" would not vote for that candidate.[3] These poll data, then, in combination with steps we have taken in executing this study, lend support to the generalizability of the theory presented here.

These findings suggest that voters with an ethical interpretation of an issue are motivated to place that issue at the center of their evaluation of a political environment and to use their own stand on the issue as a filter through which candidate information is initially processed. A candidate who does not share a voter's position on an ethically interpreted issue is in conflict with the voter's self-identity and therefore is removed from consideration by means of a noncompensatory process. This process probably occurs because of the strong linkage of ethics and morals to one's self-conception. On the other hand, for individuals who do not form an ethical interpretation of an issue, there is less filtering; instead, materially interpreted issues are considered in a relatively equal manner since none of the issues are tightly linked to an individual's self-conception. Consequently, voters who do not interpret an issue in ethical terms become more likely to use multiple criteria to arrive at a decision.

This research also may offer insight into the influence of news media in the political process. As noted earlier, reference to values—particularly ethical or moral values—is a substantial part of contemporary political discourse. Ball-Rokeach and Loges (1996, p. 278) contended, for example, that claims by candidates and advocacy groups of the superiority of their value system over others' represent "the most common currency of justification" for particular issue positions and policy goals. As central players in transmitting as well as generating political views, journalists regularly present political news coverage in terms of competing values because such a frame is easily communicated by elites and groups and is easily

understood by citizens. Just as important, a frame of competing values also fulfills the news criteria of conflict, which is central to much of political coverage (Graber, 1993; Patterson, 1993). Such news frames, our research suggests, significantly influence citizens' thinking about issues and their subsequent candidate choice. Since value conflicts almost certainly will continue to be used widely as a political discourse strategy, much further research on the interactions among values, news media, and political cognitions appears warranted.

Notes

1. Responses were coded as compensatory if the subject seemed to weigh each relevant issue position without quickly eliminating a candidate because of his stand on an issue deemed salient. In other words, subjects apparently used multiple criteria to evaluate the candidates' overall worth. Initially, three different types of noncompensatory strategies were coded. In the *lexicographic* strategy, individuals compare candidates on one issue considered clearly most important. The candidate who is closest to the subject's belief on that issue is chosen. If candidates tie, they are compared on the next most-important issue. In the *conjunctive* strategy, individuals have certain minimum standards on issues considered important. To remain in consideration, candidates must meet these minimum standards; if they fail to do so, they are eliminated. The decision is based on which candidate remains after the necessary steps of elimination. This study also allowed for a *two-stage* strategy, in which (1) individuals eliminate a candidate because of his position on the issue considered most important, after which the remaining candidates are evaluated in a compensatory fashion, or (2) individuals initially try to consider all the issues but then abruptly shift to an eliminative strategy when confronted with a particular issue. Implicit to each noncompensatory strategy is the use of an overriding criterion to eliminate a candidate if he does not satisfy certain standards on which voters will not compromise. Because of small cell counts, for analysis these three types of noncompensatory strategies were collapsed into one overall noncompensatory category.

2. Within each environment, correlations were run separately for each issue between subjects' positions and the position of the candidate they selected. Because candidates alternated positions across issues, four versions of the dependent variable were constructed. In each case, candidates with similar positions on the issue were grouped together (with 0 = conservative position and 1 = liberal position). For example, for economy Williamson's position was coded as 0 while Hancock and Garrett's positions were coded as 1; in contrast, for education, Garrett's position was coded as 0 while Hancock and Williamson's positions were coded as 1. Essentially, the dependent variables were dummy coded as the presence or absence of a liberal position by the candidate on a given issue. By constructing differing versions of the dependent variable for each issue, the potential for the position of subjects on any given issue to explain the candidate choice was maximized. To maintain consistency across measures and to clarify interpretation of the analysis, we coded subjects' positions on each issue as 1 = conservative, 2 = no opinion, and 3 = liberal, to parallel the coding of the candidates' positions.

3. Poll data were obtained from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut. The poll with questions on abortion was conducted April 9, 1992, by Time/CNN, with a national sample of 1,250 adults. The poll with questions on environmental concerns was conducted April 5–8, 1986, by Harris, with a national sample of 1,254 adults.

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