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## INTERPRETATION OF ISSUES AND VOTER DECISION- MAKING STRATEGIES: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON "ISSUE-ORIENTED" ELECTION COVERAGE

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By David Domke and Dhavan V. Shah

*This study investigated the relationship between ethical and societal interpretations of issues and voters' decision-making strategies within systematically varied electoral issue environments. Analysis across two issue milieus using two measures of the decision-making process found that individuals who ascribed an ethical interpretation to issues were more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy, which focuses on one or two key issues in the decision-making process, than individuals who ascribed a societal interpretation to issues. This relationship held when the number of issues considered important and the importance placed on "social-moral" issues each were controlled.*



Political communication studies have consistently found that media devote their election coverage to almost anything but candidate issue positions.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the 1988 presidential campaign 59% of preprimary and primary election stories by the three television networks and the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* focused on the "horse race."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Buchanan's comprehensive analysis of broadcast and print media found that 36% of campaign stories focused on the horse race, 21% on candidate conflicts, and less than 10% on policy issues.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992, however, several news organizations attempted innovative approaches to campaign coverage.<sup>4</sup> In North Carolina, the *Charlotte Observer* teamed with WSOC-TV and the Poynter Institute of St. Petersburg, Florida, to "help voters regain control of the issues"; and, in Kansas, the *Wichita Eagle* worked with local broadcasters to focus attention and clarify issues.<sup>5</sup> Following the success of these projects, major news media in Boston, Dallas, Wichita, San Francisco, and Seattle initiated similar "issue-oriented" coverage during the 1994 election season.<sup>6</sup>

The media's increased focus on issues may lead to voting decisions based less on candidate images and more on issue positions. If so, research on the role of issues in electoral campaigns becomes more important. Most research on issue voting behavior has focused on factors influencing the selection of a specific candidate. Unfortunately, this approach fails to explore the process by which these decisions were reached and tends to be election-specific. Examination of voters' underlying decision-making processes may shed light on voting behavior across elections. For example, what strategies do voters use to process issue information? How do individual interpretations of issues influence decision-making strategies? Do differing issues

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*David Domke is a doctoral candidate and Dhavan V. Shah is a doctoral student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota. The authors contributed equally to this research. The authors wish to thank the School of Journalism and Mass Communication for support in conducting this research and Daniel Wackman for encouragement, comments, and suggestions.*

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share common characteristics that lead to similar decision-making processes? This research attempted to answer some of these questions.

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### **Decision Making and Information Processing**

A great deal of behavioral and consumer research examines the cognitive processes decision makers use when faced with a number of alternatives.<sup>7</sup> If one option dominates all other alternatives on attributes deemed important, an individual's decision-making process is relatively easy. However, conflict often arises when one option does not dominate across all attributes.

Researchers commonly assume that decisions are based upon the willingness to "trade off more of one valued attribute against less of another valued attribute."<sup>8</sup> In this *compensatory* model, a negative evaluation on one criterion can be balanced, offset, or "compensated" by a positive evaluation on another.<sup>9</sup> In using this decision-making strategy, individuals evaluate the alternatives across a number of attributes, processing a great deal of information in assessing an alternative's "overall level of worth."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Both the compensatory model and spatial theory have been criticized, however, in part because they assume highly calculative decision makers.<sup>12</sup> Hence, *noncompensatory* strategies, in which individuals focus on fewer attributes in the evaluation of information, have also been theorized.<sup>13</sup> In this decision-making strategy, a positive evaluation on one attribute cannot compensate for a negative evaluation on another. Thus, "trade-offs may not be made explicitly in many cases" as individuals place greater emphasis on a few salient attributes rather than an alternative's overall worth.<sup>14</sup>

Research has identified a number of decision-making strategies, most of which fall under the broad rubrics of either compensatory or noncompensatory processing.<sup>15</sup> In addition, some theorists have suggested that the decision-making process employed may not be purely compensatory or noncompensatory, but somewhere between these strategies.<sup>16</sup>

Further, some research on decision making and information processing is grounded in schema theory, which posits that, based on experience, people organize their perceptions of the environment into cognitive knowledge structures, actively constructing reality.<sup>17</sup> Once activated, schemata, which "facilitate top-down or conceptually driven processing,"<sup>18</sup> continually structure information processing to provide individuals with meaning and understanding.<sup>19</sup>

Miller advocates application of information-processing concepts to the study of political phenomena because they "provide a different view of political cognitions from those presented by previous theories."<sup>20</sup> A number of studies drawing from schema theory have examined the relationship between cognitive strategies used to process issue information communicated by news media and various psychological factors, such as affective state or political expertise.<sup>21</sup> However, little of this research has focused on the relationship between individual evaluations of issues and information processing.

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### **Issue Salience and Interpretation**

Political communication research on the role of issues in voting behavior has produced conflicting findings. Many election studies have found that candidate images have the largest influence on the voting decision, and that concern with issues is not likely to play a prominent role in

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electoral choice.<sup>22</sup>

Key, however, suggested that issues are more important than earlier studies indicated, and researchers have argued for a broader conception of issue voting to include "valence issues," on which all candidates agree.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a number of studies have found issue salience to be an important predictor of voting behavior.<sup>24</sup> For example, research on the 1964 and 1968 campaigns found voters reported a number of salient issues, with the conclusion that "on the individual level, any issue singled out as personally most important plays a substantially greater role for those who so view it than it does for others."<sup>25</sup>

A number of studies also have found that "social-moral" issues – such as abortion, homosexuality, and pornography – have symbolic importance for individuals who wish to assert their values to the broader community.<sup>26</sup> Wuthnow argues that a number of contemporary issues grow out of differing moral or ethical viewpoints, and he speculates that many future political conflicts will be moral- or value-based.<sup>27</sup> While others disagree as to the extent of potential cleavage, they agree that social-moral issues will serve as critical areas of political conflict.<sup>28</sup>

That media increase salience for certain issues has been a consistent finding in agenda-setting studies,<sup>29</sup> especially "unobtrusive" issues, which do not directly affect individuals.<sup>30</sup> Further, a number of theorists have argued that media frames – by organizing and ordering audience perceptions through inclusion and exclusion of certain messages – shape individual interpretations of an issue's salience.<sup>31</sup> Extending this concept beyond its grounding in critical theory, Tankard et al. and others have discussed approaches to the conceptualization and measurement of the media frames surrounding an issue.<sup>32</sup> Implicit to these studies is the perspective that media frames effectively control the criteria that "create the meaning (or acceptable range of meaning) of an issue."<sup>33</sup> However, Gamson et al. argue that, regardless of how a media text encodes reality, individuals "may decode it in different ways" and a framed message is "not a leaden reality to which we all inevitably must yield,"<sup>34</sup> suggesting that more important than the media frames of issues is an individual's interpretation of messages.

However, the different ways in which an issue can be interpreted by individuals, and the impact of these interpretations on their decision-making processes, has remained under-explored. Psychology researchers have theorized that an individual's self-identity, which provides the context through which questions about the "purpose" and "meaning" of one's life are evaluated, plays a crucial role in the interpretation and processing of information.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, of particular interest to this study is a meta-analysis by Johnson and Eagly of thirty-eight studies which examined the effect of self-concept involvement on persuasion; the authors found different effects depending upon whether individuals were involved based upon values, personal consequences, or image concerns.<sup>36</sup> These findings suggest that information is processed differently dependent upon whether it relates to central or peripheral aspects of the self-concept. Although some disagree with these distinctions,<sup>37</sup> Johnson and Eagly argue that the specific "aspect of the self-concept [that] is activated" markedly influences an individual's information processing.<sup>38</sup>

Further, Domke and Shah, in research during the 1992 election season, suggested that types of salience attached to issues differ substantially and that these distinctions affect voter decision making: An issue linked to personal values may serve as a critical factor in the voting process, while an

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issue considered important but with less personal linkage often acts as only one of a number of influences on a voting decision.<sup>39</sup> The authors concluded that the *type of psychological linkage* a voter has with an issue may significantly influence the decision process.

This research, however, categorized issues as having particular types of salience for specific subpopulations on the basis of their dominant media frame without examination of how individual voters interpreted the issues. As Gamson et al. argue, individuals do not automatically internalize the public frame of issues.<sup>40</sup> Thus, since each individual has a unique combination of values, interests, and priorities, it seems necessary to examine whether individual interpretations of an issue are related to the decision-making strategy utilized.

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## Hypotheses

Therefore, the findings of Johnson and Eagly, as well as Domke and Shah, suggest that voters' decision-making strategies may be influenced by which aspect of their self-concept is activated by the issues they encounter. We propose, further, that voters may have distinct *interpretations* of an issue based on the activation of central or peripheral aspects of the self-concept. While the importance assigned to issues also is likely to influence the decision-making process, these interpretations of issues, due to the varying nature of their ties to an individual's self-concept, seem most likely to guide the manner in which information is used in making decisions, for reasons discussed below.

We posit that individuals may interpret issues as salient on the basis of ethical concerns or societal concerns. Individuals who assign an *ethical interpretation* to an issue consider the issue salient due to concerns for human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal ethics. Individuals who assign a *societal interpretation* to an issue consider the issue salient due to concerns for their situations in society or for the health of society at large. The present study attempts to link voters' interpretations of issues to the decision-making strategies employed.

Individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue seem likely to place that issue in a central position as they assess an issue environment, because their sense of ethics or morals is critical to their self-concept and identity. In evaluating a set of candidates, then, individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue will first consider each candidate's position on that issue. As a result, these individuals focus their attention on a single attribute, shaping the manner in which information is processed while they arrive at a candidate decision. Therefore, in evaluating an issue environment, voters are likely to use an issue assigned an ethical interpretation, if present, to guide their decision-making process: candidates who do not share their ethical position may be eliminated or, in a more simplified approach, the vote may be determined solely on that issue.

On the other hand, individuals who assign a societal interpretation to an issue probably do not link the issue to their identity with the same intensity as issues tied to ethics or morals, even though there may be potential personal consequences. When candidates are evaluated on the basis of issues assigned societal interpretations, individuals are likely to allow a candidate's stands on various issues to compensate for one another. Such compensatory processing seems unlikely if individuals disagree with a candidate on an issue ascribed an ethical interpretation. Thus, in the absence of an issue related to ethical aspects of their self-concepts, individuals are likely to consider a number of issues that impact society and their position in it,

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resulting in more extensive, or compensatory, information processing. Accordingly, we state the first research hypothesis:

H1: Individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue environment will be more likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy than individuals with a societal interpretation of an issue environment.

A contrasting perspective, suggested by some of the decision-making literature, argues that when individuals consider a number of attributes (i.e., issues) important, they are likely to use a compensatory decision-making strategy.<sup>41</sup> According to this perspective, individuals considering three or four issues as important in a voting decision weigh all of these issues in a relatively equal manner, processing more information in making a voting choice than individuals who consider only one or two issues as important. This perspective, however, assumes that all issues have relatively equal potential to influence a decision. Our perspective suggests that issues have differential potential for shaping a decision, based on their linkage to an individual's self-concept. In particular, issues interpreted in ethical terms, which are strongly linked to self-concept, are more central to the decision-making process than issues interpreted in societal terms, which may have personal consequences but are less closely linked to self-concept. Accordingly, we state our second research hypothesis:

H2: Individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue environment will be more likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy than individuals with a societal interpretation of an issue environment, regardless of the number of issues considered important.

How important a particular issue is to a person also may significantly influence the type of decision-making strategy employed. For example, a number of theorists have argued that the importance individuals place on "social-moral" issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, serves as a critical factor in voting decisions.<sup>42</sup> This raises the question of which has more influence on individuals' decision-making strategies—the importance placed on a "social-moral" issue or their interpretation of that issue. While the importance may be a factor, we posit, consistent with our earlier arguments, that individuals' interpretations of a "social-moral" issue as either ethical or societal in nature would seem more likely to guide the decision-making process. Accordingly, we state our final hypothesis:

H3: Individuals with an ethical interpretation of a "social-moral" issue will be more likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy than individuals without an ethical interpretation of a "social-moral" issue, regardless of the importance placed on that issue.

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This study is part of a broader research program examining how members of various subpopulations process political issue information, particularly about "social-moral" issues, in making voting decisions. This line of research, by examining how voters in distinctly different populations

## **Method**

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evaluate political issues, is an attempt to identify and examine underlying issue interpretations and decision-making strategies.<sup>43</sup> In part because of the complexity of these cognitive processes, which are not easily examined by traditional methodologies, researchers have generally given little consideration to message-processing strategies and media effects.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, we have adopted an approach which attempts to develop and test the theory proposed here by exploring how various subpopulations process media messages about particular issues.<sup>45</sup>

In this study, 191 active-duty and reserve naval military personnel in a large Midwestern city were presented copies of newspaper articles and a questionnaire. Eighty-five percent of subjects were men; ages ranged relatively evenly between 18 and 54; and 85% of subjects had attended at least some college.<sup>46</sup> Respondents took 35-45 minutes to complete the materials.

**Design.** At the center of this research is the controlled presentation of issue environments. The study design contained three candidates and four issues,<sup>47</sup> and allowed for the concurrent testing of hypotheses across two research groups. Each group received an issue with ethical dimensions: one group received an article on the issue of abortion, the other received an article on the issue of gays in the military. Both groups also received articles on the issues of economy, education, and health care.<sup>48</sup>

As suggested by previous research,<sup>49</sup> abortion and gays in the military were expected to receive an ethical interpretation because both frequently have been framed in the public arena as issues of rights and morals. However, there are some differences between these two issues: Abortion has been an issue of considerable importance for some time, whereas gays in the military has come only recently to the political forefront. Conversely, the issue of gays in the military was expected to have greater salience to many in the subject population. Both issues, however, were expected to have considerable impact on a person's processing of information in the issue environment. Each of the three remaining issues, economy, education, and health care, were expected to receive a societal interpretation because they predominantly have been framed in the public arena as issues that impact an individual's situation in society as well as society as a whole.

A former journalist for the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* and *Orange County Register* wrote articles for a political campaign. In the articles, a number of possible confounding variables (e.g., political party affiliation, gender, and subject familiarity with candidates) were controlled.<sup>50</sup> Two steps were taken to ensure that no candidate or issue received greater prominence: (1) order of issue articles was randomized, and (2) candidate positions within the articles were rotated.

**Measurement.** After reading the articles, subjects completed a questionnaire about their voting process. Definitions for the decision-making strategies were developed: in a compensatory process, individuals weigh candidates' stands on each relevant issue in order to calculate which candidate, overall, is the best choice. In a noncompensatory process, individuals initially focus on one or two issues, which are used either to make the voting decision or to narrow the field of candidates; thereafter, additional information may be considered.

Two very different approaches were used to measure the dependent variable, decision-making strategy. The first measure was a series of open-ended questions asking subjects to describe their decision process.<sup>51</sup> Responses were content analyzed, based on operational definitions of decision-making strategies.<sup>52</sup> Fifteen subjects did not answer these questions or

**TABLE 1**  
*Factor Analysis of Nine Statements Corresponding to Compensatory or Noncompensatory Decision-Making Strategies*

	Factor Loadings
(1) How the candidates stood overall on the issues was more important to me than how they stood on a particular issue. (compensatory)	-.692
(2) I compared candidates only on the issues that were important to me. (noncompensatory)	.689
(3) I eliminated a candidate because we disagreed on an issue that was important to me. (noncompensatory)	.634
(4) I used all the information provided to make my choice, looking at each candidate's stand on each issue. (compensatory)	-.673
(5) I eliminated a candidate who did not meet certain set standards on an issue that was important to me. (noncompensatory)	.586
(6) I looked for a candidate who agreed with me on the issue I thought was most important. The candidate who was closest to my position on that issue is the one I voted for. (noncompensatory)	.688
(7) Using all the information, I weighed each candidate's stand on each issue before making my final choice. The candidate who seemed the best overall is the one I voted for. (compensatory)	-.740
(8) All the issues played a role in my decision among the candidates; while some issues were given less consideration than others, all the issues affected my candidate choice. (compensatory)	-.592
9) Not all the issues factored into my candidate choice; the decision was based on one or two key issues. (noncompensatory)	.705

provided responses that could not be coded; of the remaining 176 respondents, two coders agreed on 157 as compensatory or noncompensatory, yielding an inter-coder reliability coefficient of .89. Using the formula for Scott's pi, which corrects for agreement by chance, inter-coder reliability was determined to be 78% greater than by chance.<sup>53</sup> The remaining 19 responses were discussed and then classified. Note that 58% of subjects receiving the issue of gays in the military were coded as compensatory, compared to 62% of subjects receiving the issue of abortion.

The second dependent measure contained nine statements corresponding to behaviors that commonly occur when either a compensatory (four items) or noncompensatory (five items) strategy is used. For each statement, subjects were asked to rate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This "decision-making strategy" index attempted to address the possibility of mixed models or use of different models at different stages in the decision-making process.

Following data collection, factor analysis was performed on these statements. A confirmatory forced one-factor solution was computed because previous research suggested a conceptualization of compensatory and noncompensatory decision-making strategies along a one-dimensional con-

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tinuum.<sup>54</sup> If so, compensatory and noncompensatory statements should have inverse loadings (see Table 1). As predicted, the four compensatory items loaded strongly negatively and the five noncompensatory items loaded strongly positively, supporting the conceptualization of decision-making strategies as one-dimensional. The factor analysis accounted for 44.6% of variance in the index. The responses to the compensatory items were then reverse-coded and used to build an additive decision-making strategy index. The index, with mean inter-item correlations of .375, had a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

Among individuals receiving the issue of gays in the military, the index had a .56 correlation with the open-ended decision-making measure; for individuals receiving the issue of abortion, the index had a .59 correlation with the open-ended decision-making measure.<sup>55</sup> The strength of these correlations increased confidence that the dependent variables tapped the same construct; conversely, that the correlations were not stronger also suggests that the dependent measures, in part, tapped different aspects of the construct.<sup>56</sup>

The next measures focused on the importance of issues in the candidate choice. Subjects were asked to rate the importance in their voting decision of four issues: abortion or gays in the military, economy, education, and health care. For each, a seven-point scale was used, ranging from "not at all important" to "extremely important."

Individual interpretations of the issues were measured by a pair of open-ended questions asking subjects to explain which issues were important and the manner in which they were interpreted as salient.<sup>57</sup> Operational definitions then guided the coding. Each issue was coded as having received an ethical interpretation, societal interpretation, or as having not been mentioned/ignored. Issues were coded as receiving an ethical interpretation if the individual explicitly discussed the issue within the framework of human rights, civil rights, religious morals, or personal ethics. Issues were coded as receiving a societal interpretation if the individual discussed the implications of the issue for society at large or for society's future well-being; or if the individual indicated the issue had a direct impact on his or her current life-situation in society, or the current life-situation of a relative or close friend. A small number of responses ( $n=6$ ) indicated that issues had components of both an ethical interpretation and a societal interpretation; these responses were carefully analyzed to assess which interpretation had received greater emphasis, and then coded accordingly.

Fourteen subjects did not answer these questions or failed to provide enough information to reliably code; for the remaining 177 respondents, two coders agreed on 641 of 708 individual-issue codings of ethical interpretation, societal interpretation, or not mentioned/ignored, producing an inter-coder reliability coefficient of .91. Using Scott's pi, inter-coder reliability was determined to be 86% greater than by chance. The remaining 67 individual-issue codings were discussed and classified.

These individual-issue codings were then combined to create the variable of overall interpretations of the issue environments. As guided by our theory, individuals who ascribed an ethical interpretation to at least one issue were coded as having an ethical interpretation of the overall issue environment. Individuals who did not assign an ethical interpretation to at least one issue but did have at least one societal interpretation were coded as having a societal interpretation of the overall issue environment. Note that 36% of subjects in the group receiving the issue of gays in the military had an



ethical interpretation of the issue environment, compared to 43% in the group receiving the issue of abortion.

Finally, subjects were asked a number of demographic questions, including gender, age, military status, and education.

## Results

The study's design allowed for the replication of hypotheses tests across two sets of subjects with differing issue environments using two differently measured dependent variables.

**Hypothesis One.** The first hypothesis predicted that individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue environment will be more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than individuals with a societal interpretation of an issue environment. It received strong support.

As a first test of hypothesis one, crosstabs for each research group were run between individual interpretations of the issue environment and the decision-making strategy described in the open-ended measure (see Table 2). As predicted, subjects with an ethical interpretation of the issue milieu were significantly more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than subjects with a societal interpretation of the issue milieu. These results were found in both research groups.

For a second test of hypothesis one, with the decision-making strategy index as the dependent variable, t-tests were run to compare the means of

**TABLE 2**  
*Percentage of Subjects Ascribing an Ethical or Societal Interpretation to an Issue Environment Whose Open-Ended Responses Indicated the Use of a Compensatory or Noncompensatory Decision-Making Strategy*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

Strategy Used	Type of Interpretation	
	Societal	Ethical
Compensatory	77%	25%
Noncompensatory	23%	75%
Totals	100%	100%
	(n=57)	(n=32)

$X^2=22.9$ , d.f.=1,  $p=.000$

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

Strategy Used	Type of Interpretation	
	Societal	Ethical
Compensatory	92%	22%
Noncompensatory	8%	78%
Totals	100%	100%
	(n=49)	(n=37)

$X^2=43.9$ , d.f.=1,  $p=.000$

**TABLE 3**  
*Mean Decision-Making Strategy Index Scores of Subjects Who Ascribed  
 an Ethical or Societal Interpretation to an Issue Environment*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

	<i>Societal Interpretation (n=59)</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation (n=32)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Index Mean	21.6	25.9	2.83	.006

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

	<i>Societal Interpretation (n=49)</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation (n=37)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Index Mean	20.3	28.1	5.06	.000

Index: Low is compensatory, high is noncompensatory

subjects with an ethical interpretation of the issue environment and subjects with a societal interpretation of the issue environment (see Table 3). As predicted, individuals with an ethical interpretation of the issue milieu were significantly more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than individuals with a societal interpretation of the issue milieu. Note, however, that the difference in mean index scores was much larger for subjects receiving the issue of abortion than for subjects receiving the issue of gays in the military, though both easily achieved statistical significance. This disparity is consistent with the view that individuals attach greater ethical weight to abortion because of its prominence for the past two decades; thus, for individuals who view the issues ethically, abortion has more influence on the decision-making process than gays in the military.

**Hypothesis Two.** The second hypothesis also received support. As predicted, individuals with an ethical interpretation of an issue environment were significantly more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than individuals with a societal interpretation of an issue environment, regardless of the number of issues considered important.

To test this relationship, the issue-importance scales were used to construct an index of the number of important issues. The index was built in three steps. First, frequencies were run for the importance of each issue (see Table 4). Next, as suggested by these frequencies, subjects reporting an issue as at least a "6" in importance were assigned a coding of 1; subjects reporting the issue as less than a "6" in importance were assigned a coding of 0.<sup>58</sup> These new codings were then added together for each subject, producing a possible range of 0 to 4 important issues.

To test hypothesis two, multiple regressions were run separately for each subject group. The individual interpretation of the issue environment (dummy-coded as 0=societal, 1=ethical) and number of important issues were the independent variables; the open-ended decision-making strategy measure (dummy-coded as 0=compensatory and 1=noncompensatory) and decision-making strategy index alternately served as the dependent variables.<sup>59</sup> For all regressions, the independent variables were entered simultaneously (see Table 5).

**TABLE 4**  
*Percentage of Subjects Reporting Gays in the Military or Abortion, Health Care,  
 Economy, and Education at Different Levels of Importance*

**Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military**

<i>Importance</i>	<i>Gays/Military</i>	<i>Health Care</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Education</i>
1	6%	2%	3%	2%
2	6%	0%	2%	0%
3	14%	2%	3%	1%
4	9%	13%	6%	13%
5	18%	23%	17%	25%
6	9%	27%	30%	21%
7	38%	33%	39%	38%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100% (n=99)</b>	<b>100% (n=99)</b>	<b>100% (n=99)</b>	<b>100% (n=99)</b>

**Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion**

<i>Importance</i>	<i>Abortion</i>	<i>Health Care</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Education</i>
1	1%	1%	0%	0%
2	3%	0%	2%	2%
3	10%	1%	3%	1%
4	6%	14%	8%	10%
5	23%	23%	15%	15%
6	20%	23%	21%	30%
7	37%	38%	51%	42%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100% (n=92)</b>	<b>100% (n=92)</b>	<b>100% (n=92)</b>	<b>100% (n=92)</b>

Importance scales: 1=not at all important to 7=extremely important

As predicted, even when controlling for the number of issues considered important, subjects with an ethical interpretation of the issue milieu were significantly more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than subjects with a societal interpretation of the issue milieu. These results were found across both research groups using both measures of the decision-making process.

Three additional points are noteworthy. First, the beta weights indicate that, in three of four regressions, an individual's interpretation of the issue environment had the greatest influence on the decision-making strategy, and in the fourth regression, the interpretation of the issue milieu remained statistically significant. Second, in two of four regressions the number of issues considered important was a statistically significant predictor of a compensatory strategy, suggesting that importance also influences the decision-making process.<sup>60</sup> Third, the beta weights indicate that an ethical interpretation of the issue milieu with abortion had greater influence on the decision-making process than an ethical interpretation of the issue

**TABLE 5**  
*Beta Weights for the Relation between Interpretation of the Issue Environment, Number of Issues Considered Important, and the Decision-Making Strategy Used*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military		
	<i>Open-ended<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy Index<sup>b</sup></i>
Environment interpretation <sup>c</sup>	.50**	.27**
Number of important issues <sup>d</sup>	-.14	-.32**
Adjusted R square	.26	.16
Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion		
	<i>Open-ended<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Strategy Index<sup>b</sup></i>
Environment interpretation <sup>c</sup>	.71**	.45**
Number of important issues <sup>d</sup>	-.01	-.23*
Adjusted R square	.50	.27

- (a) Coded as 0=compensatory, 1=noncompensatory  
 (b) Compensatory is low, noncompensatory is high  
 (c) Coded as 0=societal, 1=ethical  
 (d) Range: 0 to 4 issues

\*  $p < .05$       \*\*  $p < .001$

milieu with gays in the military.

To gain greater insight into these results, the relation between individual interpretation of the issue environment and decision-making strategy was examined separately for each set of subjects considering the same number of issues important.<sup>61</sup> This analysis was conducted for both research groups using both measures of the decision-making strategy (see Table 6).

These results indicate that in seven of eight comparisons between subjects with 1-2 issues important and subjects with 3-4 issues important, the use of a noncompensatory strategy declined as the number of important issues increased, particularly for individuals with an ethical interpretation of the issue milieu. Nonetheless, in all eight comparisons between interpretations of the issue milieu, subjects making an ethical interpretation were more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than individuals making a societal interpretation, regardless of the number of issues considered important. Thus, the overall pattern of these results are consistent with earlier findings and strongly support hypothesis two.

**Hypothesis Three.** To build upon our understanding of the relation between the interpretation of an issue environment and the number of issues considered important, the third hypothesis focused on the relation between the interpretation and importance ascribed to the two "social-moral" issues, gays in the military and abortion, and the decision-making process. Hypothesis three – that individuals who have an ethical interpretation of a social-moral issue will be more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than individuals who *do not* have an ethical interpretation, regardless of the importance placed on that issue – received strong support in both research

**TABLE 6**  
*Relationship between Interpretation of the Issue Environment, Number of Issues Considered Important, and the Decision-Making Strategy Used*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

Number of Important Issues	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>b</sup>	
	Societal Interpretation	Ethical Interpretation	Societal Interpretation	Ethical Interpretation
1 or 2	32% (n=22)	83% (n=18)	23.9 (n=23)	28.2 (n=18)
3 or 4	19% (n=32)	64% (n=14)	20.2 (n=33)	22.9 (n=14)

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

Number of Important Issues	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>b</sup>	
	Societal Interpretation	Ethical Interpretation	Societal Interpretation	Ethical Interpretation
1 or 2	6% (n=18)	94% (n=18)	21.0 (n=18)	33.1 (n=18)
3 or 4	10% (n=30)	71% (n=17)	19.8 (n=30)	23.8 (n=17)

(a) Percentage of subjects using a noncompensatory decision-making strategy

(b) Mean decision-making strategy index scores (high is noncompensatory)

groups.

To examine whether, as expected, gays in the military and abortion were the issues most likely to receive an ethical interpretation, frequencies were run to examine individual interpretations of each issue (see Table 7). These frequencies show that gays in the military and abortion were the issues predominantly ascribed an ethical interpretation. Twenty-eight percent of subjects receiving the issue had an ethical interpretation of gays in the military, while 42% of subjects receiving the issue had an ethical interpretation of abortion.<sup>62</sup> No other issue received an ethical interpretation by more than 6% of subjects.<sup>63</sup>

To test hypothesis three, partial correlations<sup>64</sup> were run separately for each subject group between the individual interpretation of the social-moral issue, importance of the issue, and the decision-making strategy.<sup>65</sup> The open-ended decision-making strategy measure and decision-making strategy index alternately served as the dependent variables (see Table 8). As predicted, subjects with an ethical interpretation of gays in the military or abortion were significantly more likely to use a noncompensatory strategy than subjects without an ethical interpretation, even when controlling for the importance placed on the issues. Further, the partial correlations, which detect spurious relationships, indicate that individuals' *interpretations* of these social-moral issues were more strongly related to the decision-making strategy than the *importance* ascribed to these issues. In addition, the corre-

**TABLE 7**  
*Percentage of Subjects with Ethical Interpretations, Societal Interpretations, or Not Mentioned/ Ignored, for Gays in the Military or Abortion, Economy, Education, and Health Care*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

	<i>Gays/Military</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Health Care</i>
Societal Interpretation	49%	82%	77%	75%
Ethical Interpretation	28%	0%	3%	6%
No mention/ Ignored	23%	18%	20%	19%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

	<i>Abortion</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Health Care</i>
Societal Interpretation	39%	74%	70%	70%
Ethical Interpretation	42%	0%	5%	1%
No mention/ Ignored	19%	26%	25%	29%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

lations suggest that, consistent with earlier results, an ethical interpretation of abortion had greater influence on the decision-making process than an ethical interpretation of gays in the military.

To gain greater insight into these results, the relation between individual interpretation and decision-making strategy was examined at each level of importance of the social-moral issue.<sup>66</sup> This analysis was conducted for both research groups using both measures of the decision-making strategy (see Table 9).

The results indicate that in all eight comparisons, subjects making an ethical interpretation of the social-moral issue were more likely to use a non-compensatory strategy than subjects making a societal interpretation of the social-moral issue, regardless of the importance placed on the issue. Thus, these results are consistent with earlier findings and strongly support hypothesis three.

## **Discussion**

The findings reported here are consistent across two sets of subjects exposed to differing issue environments, and are replicated with two different measures of the decision-making process. These results strongly support the perspective that individuals' interpretations of issues have a significant impact on the decision-making strategy utilized. The findings across hypotheses one, two, and three clearly demonstrate that an ethical interpretation is strongly related to the use of a noncompensatory strategy. Further, this relationship remains strong even when the number of important issues and

**TABLE 8**  
*Zero-order and Partial Correlations between Interpretation and Importance of Gays in the Military or Abortion, and the Decision-Making Strategy Used*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>a</sup>	
	Zero order	Partial <sup>b</sup>	Zero order	Partial <sup>b</sup>
Issue interpretation <sup>c</sup>	.48**	.41**	.24*	.24*
Importance of gays/military	.31*	.14	.04	-.07

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>a</sup>	
	Zero order	Partial <sup>b</sup>	Zero order	Partial <sup>b</sup>
Issue interpretation <sup>c</sup>	.69**	.61**	.49**	.48**
Importance of abortion	.44**	.21*	.14	-.10

(a) Low is compensatory, high is noncompensatory

(b) Independent variables alternately controlled

(c) Coded as 0 = societal, 1 = ethical

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .001$

the importance ascribed to a specific social-moral issue are each controlled.

Therefore, voters with an ethical interpretation of an issue appear likely to place that issue at the center of their evaluation of the issue environment, where their stand on the issue functions as a filter through which candidate information will first be processed. Due to the strong linkage of ethics and morals to one's self-concept, an ethical interpretation of an issue is likely to shape an individual's decision-making strategy. A candidate who does not share a voter's position on an issue receiving an ethical interpretation is found to be inconsistent with an individual's self-identity, and therefore is removed from consideration. Thus, the entrance of another salient issue into an issue environment may not automatically mean more information will be evaluated; in contrast, if individuals view the new issue in an ethical manner, the amount of information processed may actually drop and the decision-making strategy may be simplified.

What is most convincing about these findings is their consistency across two issue milieus. In both subject groups, the same underlying theoretical relationship was observed, suggesting that an ethical interpretation can be ascribed to different issues in otherwise similar issue environments. By shifting the issues of gays in the military and abortion, the dynamics of the voting environment were altered. As noted earlier, abortion received an ethical interpretation by a greater percentage of individuals than gays in the military (42% to 28%, respectively). This is most likely due to the almost purely moral debate surrounding abortion for the past twenty years; in contrast, gays in the military, at least for this study's sample population of

**TABLE 9**  
*Relationship between Interpretation and Importance of Gays in the Military or Abortion,  
and the Decision-Making Strategy Used*

Group 1: Issue Environment with Gays in the Military

<i>Importance of gays/military</i>	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>b</sup>	
	<i>Societal Interpretation</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation</i>	<i>Societal Interpretation</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation</i>
1-4	27% (n=26)	–	24.4 (n=27)	–
5-6	20% (n=20)	67% (n=6)	18.9 (n=21)	22.2 (n=6)
7	38% (n=16)	88% (n=17)	22.8 (n=16)	28.2 (n=17)

Group 2: Issue Environment with Abortion

<i>Importance of abortion</i>	OPEN-ENDED <sup>a</sup>		STRATEGY INDEX <sup>b</sup>	
	<i>Societal Interpretation</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation</i>	<i>Societal Interpretation</i>	<i>Ethical Interpretation</i>
1-4	6% (n=16)	–	21.4 (n=16)	–
5-6	9% (n=23)	69% (n=13)	19.2 (n=23)	25.8 (n=13)
7	20% (n=10)	86% (n=22)	20.6 (n=10)	29.0 (n=22)

(a) Percentage of subjects using a noncompensatory decision-making strategy

(b) Mean decision-making strategy index scores (high is noncompensatory)

military personnel, was interpreted as salient due to a number of societal and situational, in addition to ethical, concerns.

These findings also indicate that, for individuals who do not ascribe an ethical interpretation to an issue, there is less of a filtering process; instead, issues receiving a societal interpretation compete in a relatively equal manner because no issue is linked to an individual's identity as centrally as issues tied to ethics or morals. Thus, when voters do not ascribe an ethical interpretation to any issue, they are more likely to continue processing issue information about a candidate even if a candidate's stand on a particular issue is inconsistent with their own. Such compensatory processing was relatively infrequent when a voter disagreed with a candidate on an issue assigned an ethical interpretation.

In addition, as suggested by the results of hypothesis two, the number of issues that individuals consider important does play a role in shaping the



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decision-making process. As the number of issues considered important increases, individuals are more likely to use a compensatory strategy, consistent with arguments in the literature on decision making. The number of issues considered important, however, appears to have less influence on the decision-making strategy used than individuals' interpretations of an issue environment.

Further, the findings of hypothesis three shed light on the role of social-moral issues in the decision-making processes of voters. It appears that the interpretation of these issues, not the importance assigned to them, has the greatest impact on an individual's decision-making strategy. This would be significantly different than the impact of social-moral issues envisioned by Page and Clelland, Lorentzen, and Luker, who argue that the importance of these serves as a critical factor in voting decisions. The findings of this study clearly suggest that individuals who ascribe an ethical interpretation to a social-moral issue are likely to approach the voting decision in a unique manner: Such an interpretation will affect *how much*, as well as *what*, information is processed within an issue milieu.

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The theoretical relationship suggested by these findings has broad implications. Understanding the effect of issue interpretation on decision-making strategies may shed light on how individual voters process issue information in making voting decisions. The findings suggest that voters may not view issues in isolation but rather as part of the broader environment of issues: Their processing may be bound by the interpretations of issues found within the issue milieu. On this basis, a number of research possibilities deserve further exploration.

Future studies might examine how various groups of voters respond to milieus containing issues with the potential to receive ethical interpretations. For example, disadvantaged minorities may ascribe an ethical interpretation to the issue of affirmative action. Similarly, firearm owners may assign an ethical interpretation to the issue of gun control, while evangelical Christians may do the same with school prayer and pornography. The results of this study suggest that voters interpreting issues in an ethical manner would be likely to use a noncompensatory decision-making strategy. Studies involving specific subgroups would allow the theoretical relationship to be tested across systematically varied issues.

Researchers may also attempt to influence the interpretation of issues by manipulating their media frames. Issues predominantly ascribed a societal interpretation may be framed to emphasize their ethical implications. Health care currently may be undergoing such a transformation, as its salience is being recast on the basis of every individual's fundamental right to certain medical coverage. If placing an ethical frame on an issue alters its interpretation, this may influence the decision-making strategy used by voters in evaluating an issue milieu. If successfully framed, voters may make ethical interpretations of these issues, resulting in the use of a noncompensatory decision-making strategy.

The theoretical relationship proposed here also has implications for media coverage of political campaigns. The attempts of such newspapers as the *Charlotte Observer* and *Wichita Eagle* to focus attention more on political issues rather than images, while commendable, may create a new set of problems regarding the amount of issue information voters cull from newspapers or broadcasters. The manner in which media present electoral issues

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### **Implications for Future Research**

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- particularly whether media focus on their societal or ethical implications - may influence how voters process not only that information but also the candidates' stands on other issues. Thus, researchers may wish to examine actual issue-oriented election coverage and voters' reactions to this type of campaign information.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (NY: Praeger, 1980); Michael J. Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, "How the Networks Learned to Love the Issues," *Washington Journalism Review* (February 1980): 15-17; Michael J. Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80* (NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983); Christopher F. Arterton, *Media Politics* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1984); Emmett H. Buell Jr., "'Locals' and 'Cosmopolitans': National, Regional, and State Newspaper Coverage of the New Hampshire Primary," in *Media and Momentum*, ed. Gary R. Orren and Nelson W. Polsby (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1987), 60-103; Thomas E. Patterson, "The Press and Its Missed Assignment," in *The Elections of 1988*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 93-109; Marjorie R. Hershey, "The Campaign and the Media," in *The Election of 1988*, ed. Gerald M. Pomper (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), 73-102.
2. Thomas J. Johnson, "Filling Out the Racing Form: How the Media Covered the Horse Race in the 1988 Primaries," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (summer 1993): 300-310.
3. Patrick Buchanan, *Electing a President: The Markle Commission Report on Campaign '88* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).
4. For a general overview of media coverage during the 1992 election season, see Everette E. Dennis, Wendy Zeligson Adler, Martha FitzSimon, John Pavlik, Edward C. Pease, Deborah Rogers, Dirk Smillie, and Mark Thalheimer, *The Finish Line: Covering the Campaign's Final Days* (NY: The Freedom Forum, 1993).
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6. Edward D. Miller, "Pioneering Efforts in Wichita and Charlotte Encourage Further Experiments in 5 Cities," *Poynter Report*, spring 1994, 3-4.
7. See, for example, Stanley F. Biggs, Jean C. Bedard, Brian G. Graber, and Thomas J. Linsmeier, "The Effects of Task Size and Similarity on the Decision Behavior of Bank Loan Officers," *Management Science* 31 (August 1985): 970-87; Jagdish Sheth and Bruce I. Newman, "A Model of Primary Voter Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research* 12 (September 1985): 178-87; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions," *Journal of Business* 59 (October 1986): 251-578; Gunilla A. Sundstrom, "Information Search and Decision Making: The Effects of Information Displays," *Acta Psychologica* 65 (July 1987): 165-79; Robin M. Hogarth, *Judgment and Choice* (NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1987); Paul Slovic, Sarah

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Baruch Fischhoff, "Decision Making," in *Stevens' Handbook of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 2 *Learning and Cognition*, ed. R. D. Atkinson, R. J. Herrnstein, G. Lindzey, and R. D. Luce (NY: Wiley, 1988), 673-738; Oswald Huber, "Information-Processing Operators in Decision Making," in *Process and Structure in Human Decision Making*, ed. Henry Montgomery and Ola Svenson (Chichester: Wiley, 1989), 3-22; Max H. Bazerman, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 2d ed. (NY: Wiley, 1990); Robin M. Hogarth, *Insights in Decision Making: A Tribute to Hillel J. Einhorn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

8. John W. Payne, James R. Bettman, and Eric J. Johnson, "Behavioral Decision Research," *Annual Review of Psychology* 43 (1992): 87-131.

9. James R. Bettman, *An Information Processing Theory of Consumer Choice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 173-228; Robert S. Billings and Stephan A. Marcus, "Measures of Compensatory and Noncompensatory Models of Decision Behavior: Process Tracing Versus Policy Capturing," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 31 (June 1983): 331-52; William M. Goldstein, "Judgments of Relative Importance in Decision Making: Global vs. Local Interpretations of Subjective Weight," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 47 (December 1990): 313-36; Jane Beattie and Jonathan Baron, "Investigating the Effect of Stimulus Range on Attribute Weight," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 17 (May 1991): 571-85.

10. Peter Wright and Fredric Barbour, "The Relevance of Decision Process Models in Structuring Persuasive Messages," *Communication Research* 2 (July 1975): 246-59.

11. Melvin J. Hinich and Walker Pollard, "A New Approach to the Spatial Theory of Electoral Competition," *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (May 1981): 323-33; John A. Herstein, "Keeping the Voter's Limit in Mind: A Cognitive Processing Analysis of Decisionmaking in Voting," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40 (December 1981): 843-61. According to the spatial theory of voting, candidates are perceived as points in a multi-dimensional space. Along each issue dimension voters must compute the distance between their position and each candidate's position. These issue "distances" are weighed and summed to produce an overall measure of distance between voter and candidate, and the candidate found to be closest to the voter is chosen.

12. See, for example, Donald E. Stokes, "Spatial Models of Party Competition," *American Political Science Review* 57 (June 1963): 368-177; William L. Wilkie and Edgar A. Pessemier, "Issues in Marketing's Use of Multi-Attribute Models," *Journal of Marketing Research* 10 (November 1973): 428-41; James Onken, Reid Hastie, and William Revelle, "Individual Differences in the Use of Simplification Strategies in a Complex Decision-Making Task," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 11 (February 1985): 14-27; George Rabinowitz, "On the Nature of Political Issues: Insights from a Spatial Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (November 1978): 793-817; George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, "A Directional Theory of Issue Voting," *American Political Science Review* 83 (March 1989): 93-121; John W. Payne, James R. Bettman, and Eric J. Johnson, "The Adaptive Decision Maker: Effort and Accuracy in Choice," in *Insights in decision making: A Tribute to Hillel J. Einhorn*, ed. Robin M. Hogarth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 129-153.

13. Two primary types of noncompensatory decision-making strategies have been theorized: *conjunctive* and *lexicographic*. In the conjunctive strat-

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egy, 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, or is the best among remaining choices. In the lexicographic strategy, individuals compare candidates on one issue considered most important. The candidate that is closest to the subject's belief on that issue is chosen. If candidates tie, they are compared on the next most-important issue. See Wright and Barbour, "The Relevance of Decision Process Models in Structuring Persuasive Messages."

14. Payne, Bettman, and Johnson, "Behavioral Decision Research." See also Joshua Klayman, "Children's Decision Strategies and Their Adaptation to Task Characteristics," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 35 (April 1985): 179-201; Amos Tversky, Paul Slovic, and Shmuel Sattath, "Contingent Weighting in Judgment and Choice," *Psychological Review* 95 (July 1988): 371-84.

15. See, for example, Peter Wright, "Consumer Choice Strategies: Simplifying vs. Optimizing," *Journal of Marketing Research* 12 (February 1975): 60-66; John W. Payne, "Contingent Decision Behavior," *Psychological Bulletin* 92 (September 1982): 382-402; Sirkka-Liisa Jarvenpaa, "The Effect of Task Demands and Graphical Format on Information Processing Strategies," *Management Science* 35 (March 1989): 285-303; Eric J. Johnson, Robert J. Meyer, and Sanjoy Ghose, "When Choice Models Fail: Compensatory Representations in Negatively Correlated Environments," *Journal of Marketing Research* 26 (August 1989): 255-70; Sirkka-Liisa Jarvenpaa, "Graphic Displays in Decision Making - The Visual Salience effect," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 3 (October-December 1990): 247-62.

16. See Wright and Barbour, "The Relevance of Decision Process Models in Structuring Persuasive Messages"; Bettman, *An Information Processing Theory of Consumer Choice*, 214-216. Wright and Barbour also theorize that individuals may use affect-referral, a decision-making strategy that is neither compensatory nor noncompensatory. In this strategy, individuals make a decision based primarily on an affective feeling about the various alternatives or attributes, of which they have previous information. For reasons discussed in the method section, the present research did not examine the strategy of affect-referral.

17. See, for example, Susan T. Fiske and Donald R. Kinder, "Involvement, Expertise, and Schema Use: Evidence from Political Cognition," in *Personality, Cognition and Social Interaction*, ed. Nancy Cantor and John F. Kihlstrom (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981), 131-190; Arthur H. Miller, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Oksana Malanchuk, "Cognitive Representations of Candidate Assessments," in *Political Communication Yearbook 1984*, eds. Keith R. Sanders, Lynda Lee Kaid, and Dan Nimmo (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press., 1985), 183-210; Doris A. Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, 2d ed. (NY: Longman, 1988).

18. Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

19. Hazel Markus and R. B. Zajonc, "The Cognitive Perspective in Social Psychology," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, 3d ed., ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (NY: Random House, 1985), 137-230; Ruth Hamill, Milton Lodge, and Fredrick Blake, "The Breadth, Depth and Utility of Class, Partisan, and Ideological Schemata," *American Journal of Political Science* 29 (November 1985): 850-870.

20. Arthur H. Miller, "Where Is the Schema? Critiques," *American Political*

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*Science Review* 85 (December 1991): 1357-1382.

21. Alice M. Isen and Barbara Means, "The Influence of Positive Affect on Decision-Making Strategy," *Social Cognition* 2, no. 2 (1983): 18-31; Susan T. Fiske, Donald R. Kinder, and W. Michael Larter, "The Novice and the Expert: Knowledge-Based Strategies in Political Cognition," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 19 (July 1983): 381-400; Alice M. Isen and G. A. Diamond, "Affect and Automaticity," in *Unintended Thought*, ed. James S. Uleman and John A. Bargh (NY: Guilford, 1989), 124-152; Dan Nimmo, "Principles of Information Selection in Information Processing: A Preliminary Political Analysis," in *Mass Communication and Political Information Processing*, ed. Sidney Kraus (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), 3-18; P. M. Sniderman, J. M. Glaser, and R. Griffin, "Information and Electoral Choice," in *Information and Democratic Processes*, ed. John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 117-135; Mei-Ling Hsu and Vincent Price, "Political Expertise and Affect: Effects on News Processing," *Communication Research* 20 (October 1993): 671-95.

22. See, for example, Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1960); Thomas R. Marshall, "Evaluating Presidential Nominees: Opinion Polls, Issues, and Personalities," *Western Political Quarterly* 36 (December 1983): 650-659; Arthur H. Miller, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Oksana Malanchuk, "Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates," *American Political Science Review* 80 (June 1986): 521-540; Barbara Norrander, "Correlates of Vote Choice in the 1980 Presidential Primaries," *Journal of Politics* 48 (February 1986): 156-166. For a general overview of voting behavior research, see Herbert B. Asher, *Presidential Elections & American Politics* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1992).

23. V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate* (NY: Vintage Books, 1966); Donald E. Stokes and John J. DiIulio, "The Setting, Valence Politics in Modern Elections," in *The Elections of 1992*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993), 1-19. On valence issues, since all candidates agree on the desired end result – such as a strong economy, reduced crime, and no corruption – voters make their choice based on the perceived competency of the candidates to achieve these goals.

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26. Ann L. Page and Donald A. Clelland, "The Kanawha County Textbook Controversy: A Study of the Politics of Life Style Concern," *Social Forces* 57 (September 1978): 265-81; Louisa J. Lorentzen, "Evangelical Life Style Concerns Expressed in Political Action," *Sociological Analysis* 41 (summer 1980): 144-54; Faye Ginsberg, "The Body Politic: The Defense of Sexual Restriction by Anti-Abortion Activists," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 173-88; Kristen Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Matthew C. Moen, "School Prayer and the Politics of Life Style Concern," *Social Science Quarterly* 65 (December 1984): 1065-71.

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28. Ethel Klein, *Gender Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Stephen R. Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Daniel V. A. Olson and Jackson W. Carroll, "Religiously Based Politics: Religious Elites and the Public," *Social Forces* 70 (March 1992): 765-86.

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32. James W. Tankard, Jr., Laura Hendrickson, Jackie Silberman, Chris Bliss, and Salma Ghanem, "Media Frames: Approaches to Conceptualization and Measurement" (paper delivered at the AEJMC annual convention, Boston, MA, 1991); William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach," *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (July 1989): 1-37; J. Swenson, "News Coverage of the Abortion Issue: Framing Changes in the 1980s" (paper delivered at the AEJMC annual convention, Minneapolis, MN, 1990); Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43 (autumn 1993): 51-58.

33. Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Milton Rokeach, "The Future Study of Public Opinion: A Symposium," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 supplemental (winter 1987): 184-185.

34. William A. Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson, "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 373-393.

35. James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3 (May 1966): 551-558; Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (NY: Norton, 1968); Seymour Epstein, "The Self-Concept Revisited: Or a Theory of a Theory," *American Psychologist* 28 (May 1973): 404-416; Barry R. Schlenker, "Self-Identification: Towards an Integration of the Private and Public Self," in *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 21-62; Michael D. Berzonsky, "Self-Theorists, Identity Status, and Social Cognition," in *Self, Ego, and Identity: Integrative Approaches*, ed. Daniel K. Lapsley and F. Clark Power (NY: Springer-Verlag, 1988), 243-262; Michael D. Berzonsky, "Identity Style and Coping Strategies," *Journal of Personality* 60 (December 1992): 771-788.

36. Blair T. Johnson and Alice H. Eagly, "Effects of Involvement on Persuasion: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 106 (September 1989): 290-314. The authors claim that research on involvement "has taken three distinct forms in attitude-change research, depending on whether the aspect of the self-concept that was activated is one's enduring values. . . , one's ability to obtain desirable outcomes. . . , or the impression one makes on others." Notably, with a specific focus on *one of these components of the self-concept*, researchers have manipulated the degree of individual involvement (high vs. low). Johnson and Eagly's meta-analysis indicates, however, that researchers have not examined individual differences *between these differing aspects of the self-concept*, which is the focus of this study.

37. Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, "Involvement and Persuasion: Tradition Versus Integration," *Psychological Bulletin* 107 (May 1990): 367-374.

38. Blair T. Johnson and Alice H. Eagly, "Involvement and Persuasion: Types, Traditions, and the Evidence," *Psychological Bulletin* 107 (May 1990): 375-384.

39. David Domke and Dhavan Shah, "Information Presentation and Issue Salience: Their Relationships with Voter Decision-Making Strategies" (paper delivered at the AEJMC annual convention, Kansas City, MO, 1993).

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40. Gamson et al., "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality."

41. For example, Goldstein, "Judgments of Relative Importance in Decision Making: Global vs. Local Interpretations of Subjective Weight"; Billings and Marcus, "Measures of Compensatory and Noncompensatory Models of Decision Behavior: Process Tracing Versus Policy Capturing"; Beattie and Baron, "Investigating the Effect of Stimulus Range on Attribute Weight."

42. For example, Page and Clelland, "The Kanawha County Textbook Controversy: A Study of the Politics of Life Style Concern"; Lorentzen, "Evangelical Life Style Concerns Expressed in Political Action"; Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*.

43. The examination of how particular groups react to specific political communications has been suggested by some scholars (see, for example, RePass, "Issue Salience and Party Choice"). In addition, this study represents an attempt to build a theory; at this exploratory stage of research, theorists have argued that issues of internal validity are of greater concern than issues of external validity (see Yagade and Dozier, "The Media Agenda-Setting Effect of Concrete Versus Abstract Issues").

44. For an overview of possibilities and problems in research on information-processing and media effects, see Seth Geiger and John Newhagen, "Revealing the Black Box: Information Processing and Media Effects," *Journal of Communication* 43 (autumn 1993): 42-50.

45. Subpopulations in this research program include military reservists, ROTC members, college students, and evangelical Christians.

46. Although a high percentage of the sample subjects were men, the concern of the study is not to generalize to the public but rather to test the validity of the theorized relationship within a specific subpopulation. Thus, issues of internal validity are of greater concern than external validity at this stage of the research.

47. The combination of three candidates and four issues was chosen in an effort to balance concerns about information overload with the ability to distinguish decision-making strategies. More information probably would have led to overload, and fewer candidates or issues would have made it more difficult to differentiate compensatory or noncompensatory strategies. Affect-referral decision-making processes were not addressed in this research because subjects previously were unfamiliar with the candidates' stands on the four issues, while other possible affect-referral attributes were randomized or controlled (i.e., party affiliation, age, education, gender). For this research, then, the possibility of affect-referral was minimized.

48. To clarify, then: 92 subjects received articles on health care, education, economy, and abortion; 99 subjects received articles on health care, education, economy, and gays in the military.

49. For example, Lorentzen, "Evangelical Life Style Concerns Expressed in Political Action"; Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*; Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism*.

50. The candidates' positions were composites or variations of actual political stances, taken from several campaigns. The fictitious candidates were male and were competing for the Democratic nomination in a Congressional District primary in a nearby state, a political sphere likely to be unknown among the subjects. All of the articles were given female bylines. To avoid presenting subjects with too much information, for each issue two of the three candidates held the same position, with each candidate in disagreement once, except on the issues of abortion and gays in the military.



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On those two issues, there were mild differences between the two candidates in agreement. For abortion, the candidates held the following views: (1) anti-abortion; (2) politically pro-choice but personally anti-abortion; (3) politically and personally pro-choice. For gays in the military, the candidates held the following views: (1) anti-gays in military; (2) moderately in favor of repealing the ban on gays; (3) strongly in favor of repealing the ban.

51. The questions, in order, were: (1) Please describe, as completely as possible, how you arrived at this candidate choice. For example, what comparisons, if any, did you make?; (2) Please explain why you did not choose the other two candidates; (3) How did you use the information you were provided? What information was particularly important to you, and what information did you ignore?

52. Responses were coded as compensatory if the subject seemed to weigh each issue position without quickly eliminating a candidate due to his stand on an issue deemed salient. Subjects were coded as noncompensatory if they eliminated a candidate early in the information processing, after which information regarding that candidate was no longer considered; if there was mention of a minimum standard or litmus test that each candidate must meet to remain in consideration; or if only one issue was clearly predominant in the decision-making process. In the few cases where none of these responses were present (e.g., only a few issues mentioned as salient and no candidate was quickly eliminated), the responses were carefully analyzed to determine if greater weight was placed on one particular issue early in the decision-making process. If so, the subject was coded as noncompensatory.

53. William A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19 (fall 1955): 321-325.

54. Wright and Barbour, "The Relevance of Decision Process Models in Structuring Persuasive Messages"; Hogarth, *Judgment and Choice*; Domke and Shah, "Information Presentation and Issue Salience: Their Relationships with Voter Decision-Making Strategies."

55. Individuals receiving the issue of gays in the military had a mean index score of 23.3, with a range from 9 (strongly compensatory) to 44 (strongly noncompensatory); for these subjects, the standard deviation was 7.05 and there was a positive skew of .340. Individuals receiving the issue of abortion had a mean index score of 23.6 with a range from 9 to 45; for these subjects, the standard deviation was 7.90 and there was a positive skew of .404.

56. Methods variance, an inevitable occurrence when using substantially different approaches to measure the same construct, may explain why these correlations are not stronger. For example, in analyzing open-ended responses, we were particularly able to identify subjects who quickly eliminated one candidate and then considered the remaining two candidates in a compensatory fashion. The index may not have been able to as finely tap this "two-stage" decision-making model, which is consistent with the *conjunctive* type of noncompensatory strategy discussed by Wright and Barbour, "The Relevance of Decision Process Models in Structuring Persuasive Messages." A qualitative review of index scores for specific "two-stage" subjects supports this contention: subjects tended to agree with noncompensatory index items 3 and 5 while also agreeing with compensatory index items 1, 4, 7, and 8.

57. The question prompts, in order, were: (1) For the issue(s) you regarded as most personally important, please explain how the issue(s) impact your life?; (2) For the issue(s) you regarded as most important to society, please

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explain how the issue(s) would impact society?

58. The split was made between "5" and "6" in importance for three reasons. First, an importance of "6" is only one scale point removed from "7," the scale point labeled "extremely important"; thus, individuals reporting an issue as a "6" or "7" probably considered the issue as at least fairly important. Second, so as to maintain consistency across issues, only one cut point was used, and the split between "5" and "6" closely approximated the mean importance score of each issue more consistently than other possible splits. Third, the cut point between "5" and "6" yielded a fairly normal distribution of the new variable, number of issues considered important, for both subject groups.

59. Although the dependent variable, the open-ended decision-making strategy measure, was a dichotomous variable, linear regressions were run in order to examine more closely the beta weights – particularly their direction – for each independent variable. Logistical regressions were also run to compare the results, and there were no distinguishable differences between the linear and logistical regressions.

60. For each subject group, the number of issues considered important was statistically significant in the multiple regression with the decision-making strategy index as the dependent variable. As stated earlier, this may be due to the different aspects of the decision-making process construct tapped, in part, by the open-ended and index measures. Since the open-ended measure coded individuals based on their dominant decision-making process, it may not have been able to account for the more subtle aspects of decision-making strategies. On the other hand, the index attempted to tap numerous distinct dimensions of the decision-making process, and thus may have been able to distinguish individuals who used aspects of both compensatory and noncompensatory strategies in a multi-stage process.

61. In the results shown in Table 6, subjects were collapsed into 1-2 or 3-4 issues important in order to increase the number of subjects in each cell. Individuals who considered zero issues as important were not shown because there were only three subjects in each group, resulting in extremely unstable figures. Such individuals were not collapsed into either of the other categories because they were thought to be different than individuals who considered a few or many issues important.

62. A number of factors may influence the number of individuals who ascribe an ethical interpretation to an issue. In a related study by the authors using a different subpopulation, which included a relatively equal percentage of men and women, abortion received an ethical interpretation by 58 percent of subjects. In addition, the issue of gays in the military, for the military personnel in this study, was often interpreted as salient due to its impact on the situations of military personnel or for its impact on the readiness of military to defend American society. Another possible factor reducing the percentage of ethical interpretations of gays in the military was raised during a debriefing session following the data collection. Some subjects said that they paid little attention to the issue, despite personal feelings, because it was an issue over which they had no control – i.e., the decision whether to admit homosexuals into the military would be decided by legislators and military leadership, not the rank-and-file of the military. This would seem to be consistent with military protocol to follow orders regardless of personal disagreements.

63. Notably, these individual interpretations also support the view that individuals do not automatically adopt the dominant media frames of issues.

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While the large majority of subjects ascribed societal interpretations to economy, education, and health care – thus matching their frames – far fewer subjects matched the dominant frames of gays in the military and abortion as having an ethical interpretation. Thus, it appears that regardless of the prevalent media frame placed on an issue, individuals may interpret the issue in differing manners.

64. Partial correlations were run due to the collinearity between the importance and interpretation of the social-moral issues. Importance and interpretation of gays in the military had a correlation of .41 ( $p < .001$ ), while importance and interpretation of abortion had a correlation of .44 ( $p < .001$ ). The partial correlations examined the relationship of interpretation and importance with the decision-making strategy while alternately controlling for these variables. This allowed for the detection of spurious correlations.

65. For individual interpretations of these issues, subjects with a societal interpretation and subjects who ignored/did not mention the issues were combined into the category of “no ethical” interpretation. This was done so that the relation between interpretation and importance of the social-moral issues would be examined for all subjects in the sample population. If this variable had not been collapsed in this manner, approximately 20 percent of subjects would have been lost from analysis.

66. In the results shown in Table 9, the reported importance of the social-moral issues was collapsed into “1-4,” “5-6,” or “7” in order to increase the number of subjects in each cell. Cells with fewer than five subjects were not shown in the table because the figures were considered extremely unstable.