

AN EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION OF THE ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION STAGE  
OF THE EKB MODEL RELATIVE TO THE POLITICAL DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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Abstract

A report on an application of the EKB consumer decision process model to the 1984 presidential election. Voters utilize a decision process consistent with that of the model. Evaluative criteria used with presidential candidates are discussed and a demonstration of their value as predictors of election results presented.

Introduction

The Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell model is an attempt to theoretically simulate the decision making process of consumers. The model is logically persuasive and is presented in many texts dealing with consumer behavior. Empirical validations of the model are limited. Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell have applied their model to situations involving the purchase of laundry detergents and small cars. (Berkman, H.W., C.C. Gilson, 1978, p. 39). Zaltman, G., C.R.A. Pinson, and R. Angelmar (1973) indicate that though the model can be empirically operationalized, it has never been tested. Engel and Blackwell (1982, p. 689), addressing the problems encountered in applying their model, state that the function of models in explaining processes and identifying relevant variables and relationships is not invalidated by a lack of definitive empirical verification.

This research reports on an attempt to secure further empirical data on the model with specific attention to the applicability of the EKB model to voter behavior. (Some readers may also reference the Fishbein model 1967, 1975). Briefly, the EKB model postulates a decision process of five activities which occur over time.<sup>1</sup> The first activity is problem recognition wherein the individual becomes aware of a difference between the actual and desired situations which is sufficiently large to stimulate search. Relative to politics, problem recognition behavior may occur because economic, social service, or defense situations are not acceptable.

Information search follows problem recognition. It initially covers internal stored information and experience. This level of search is quick and largely unconscious and if there are fairly strong beliefs and attitudes, automatic or routine problem-solving behavior follows. If this is not the case, extensive problem-solving behavior leads to an external search. The

<sup>1</sup>James F. Engel and Roger D. Blackwell, Consumer Behavior (4th ed.; Chicago: The Dryden Press, 1982).

individual may pay close attention to media news, articles, and editorials; candidate and party communications; and conversations with peer and reference group members.

The third stage is alternative evaluation. The individual uses evaluative criteria derived from underlying motives and information from the environment to evaluate existing alternatives. The individual's estimation of the degree to which a choice satisfies the evaluative criteria leads to the sequential development of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Intentions are affected by normative compliance (e.g. influence by friends), anticipated circumstances (e.g. many factors such as being out of state on election day), and unanticipated circumstances.

Choice is the next step followed by Outcomes which are posed as satisfaction or dissonance with search for information supporting the decision.

Political Decision-Making

An exploratory telephone survey was conducted during the summer of 1983 to determine the evaluative criteria voters use in making the voting decision relative to U.S. presidential candidates. A pilot survey using open-ended, non directive questioning, was used to generate a checklist of 22 common qualities that people look for in presidential candidates. (See Appendix A). The checklist was then used by telephone interviewers to simplify the recording of responses in the survey proper. Calls were made at random to residents of a metropolitan area and a small city (12,000)/rural area. In an open-ended question, interviewers asked, "What qualities do you look for in a presidential candidate in deciding how to vote?" and "Which of these is the most important in your reaching a decision?" It is unlikely that any evaluative criteria existing at a subconscious level were elicited. Three background questions concerned party affiliation, age, and sex. Ninety-nine usable responses were obtained. **Table I** shows the most frequently named decision criteria.

The criteria named the most important were generally also supported by the number of subjects listing these among their evaluative criteria. Only one evaluation criterion, beyond the twenty-two on the checklist, was mentioned with any frequency (integrity 3). Responses on the criteria named "most important in making a voting decision" were evaluated via t tests in a series of paired comparisons. Only the six criteria in **Table I** were selected significantly (.05 level) more frequently than the other checklist criteria.

TABLE I  
DECISION CRITERIA

<u>Evaluative Criteria</u>	<u>Number Listing as an Evaluative Criterion</u>	<u>Number Listing as the Most Important Evaluative Criterion</u>
Honest/fair/truthful	45	33
Similar values and points of view	34	17
Political skills and background	25	11
Decisive, consistent, dedicated to policies and beliefs	11	6
Well-informed/knowledgeable	11	5
Conservative	8	6

Given the limited number of evaluative criteria frequently named as most important in reaching decisions on presidential candidates by voters, a decision was made to use all six criteria in the second phase of the study.

In order to gain further knowledge of evaluative criteria cited as most important, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare party affiliation (Democrat, Republican, or Independent) with each of the twenty-three evaluative criteria. Differences among party affiliates significant at the .05 level were found relative to only two criteria: Decisive/consistent/dedication to policies and beliefs and honest/fair/truthful. More Independents than Republicans and no Democrats selected the former set, although no statistical test was applied to determine if the differences were significant among party affiliates. The latter criterion set was selected by almost half of the Democrats followed by Independents and Republicans. Curiously, significant differences were not found regarding party affiliation and the criteria liberal and conservative. The explanation may lie in the very limited numbers of subjects selecting these criteria and ambiguity concerning these two terms.

The sparsity of relationships between party affiliation and evaluative criteria suggest the universality of the six criteria and a logically necessary common decision-making process by voters.

#### Voter Evaluation of Candidates

A second telephone survey was taken during the last three weeks of October 1984 just prior to the election in order to examine the extent of use of the evaluative criteria. A structured random sample was drawn with half of the responses coming from the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area and half from a smaller city of 12,000 population and the surrounding rural area. These proportions approximate the population distribution in the state. Four hundred and sixty-four (464) responses were obtained.

A reasonably good geographic balance was obtained with 53.5% of responses coming from the metropolitan area and 46.5% from the small city/rural area. While calling was done in both daytime and evening hours, female respondents made up

62.6% of the sample with 37.4% male.

The respondents classified themselves about equal in regard to party affiliation (Democrats 33.0%, Repub. 32.3%, Indep. 34.7%). They indicated their strength of support and commitment to the affiliation group on a scale of 1 to 5 (high) with the following results: 1 (12.8%), 2 (17.8%), 3 (33.9%), 4 (32.3%), and 5 (15.4%). Respondents were also asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 (high) the interest and effort they had made to learn about the candidates. The percentages obtained were: 1 (2.8%), 2 (13.0%), 3 (36.4%), 4 (32.3%), and 5 (15.4%).

#### Evaluative Criteria

Table II brings together respondent ratings (i.e. beliefs) of the two major presidential candidates relative to the six criteria which the initial survey revealed were most frequently named as important to voters in their voting decisions.

Reagan was evaluated more favorably on five of the six evaluative criteria: political skills and background; values and points of view similar to the respondents; decisive, consistent, and dedication to policies and beliefs and conservative. The candidates were dead-even on the criterion of well informed and knowledgeable. It is interesting to note that the public thought the presidential debates were very close or had each candidate winning one of the two television debates which coincides with the research findings. Mondale's only advantage, and a slight one, was on the criterion of honest, fair and truthful.

#### Voting Decision

A final question on the interview asked the respondent: If the election were held tomorrow, who would you vote for? The voter decision favored Reagan by 50.4% to Mondale's 37.9%. (9.7% of the respondents said they would not vote for either candidate and 1.9% declined to answer the query.)

The voting decisions are in keeping with the evaluation of the candidates on the six evaluative criteria and the decision process outlined by the EKB model.

TABLE II

Evaluative Criteria	Candidate	Percentage Rating					Mean	Advantage	
		Low 1	2	3	4	High 5		on Mean	Mode
Political skills and background	Mondale	9.7	11.9	33.6	32.1	12.7	3.26		3
	Reagan	8.4	13.6	26.9	32.8	18.3	3.39	+ .13	4
Similar values and points of view	Mondale	14.4	20.7	29.5	26.3	9.1	2.95		3
	Reagan	15.3	17.9	22.0	25.7	19.0	3.15	+ .20	4
Honest, fair and truthful	Mondale	10.5	16.4	24.9	33.6	14.6	3.26	+ .03	4
	Reagan	13.1	13.8	26.2	31.4	15.5	3.23		4
Decisive, consistent, dedicated to policies and beliefs	Mondale	10.2	16.0	30.1	32.9	10.8	3.18		4
	Reagan	9.3	11.9	24.8	35.9	18.1	3.42	+ .24	4
Well-informed and knowledgeable	Mondale	7.6	10.8	28.1	39.3	14.3	3.42		4
	Reagan	9.9	12.1	23.5	35.4	19.0	3.42		4
Conservative	Mondale	18.3	23.9	26.1	22.8	8.9	2.80		3
	Reagan	6.8	13.7	24.4	32.2	22.9	3.51	+ .71	4

TABLE III

Evaluative Criteria	Beta	Multiple R	R Square
Political skills and background-Mondale	-.06963	.41394	.171
Political skills and background-Reagan	-.00508	.46294	.214
Similar values and point of view-Reagan	.11272	.51181	.262
Similar values and point of view-Mondale	-.23511	.54735	.300
Honest/Fair/Truthful-Mondale	-.10153	.55603	.309
Honest/Fair/Truthful-Reagan	.06563	.55758	.311
Decisive, consistent, dedicated to policies and beliefs-Reagan	-.12000	.56179	.316
Decisive, consistent, dedicated to policies and beliefs-Mondale	-.00937	.56209	.316
Well-informed/knowledgeable-Reagan	.23601	.57544	.331
Well-informed/knowledgeable-Mondale	.02786	.57559	.331
Conservative-Mondale	-.15530	.58004	.336
Conservative-Reagan	-.13175	.58708	.345

#### The Evaluative Criteria as Predictors

The coefficients of correlation among the evaluative criteria are all quite high for both candidates (Mondale r's from .58 to .65; Reagan r's .56 to .69) with the exception of the evaluative criterion conservative where the coefficients range from .38 to .48 relative to Mondale and .42 to .51 for Reagan. The evaluative criterion conservative may play a different role in the decision making process than the other five criteria.

Table III provides a summary of the multiple regression results with the evaluative criteria as variables relative to the dependent variable of candidate choice in the voting decision.

The Beta column indicates that the evaluative criterion well informed/knowledgeable as applied to Reagan had the strongest predictor value to

the election outcome. Political skills and background relative to Reagan had the least value as a predictor.

Multiple regression indicates that 34 percent of the variance in the voting decision is accounted for by the relationship with the six evaluative criteria. While regression findings do not permit us to talk of cause and effect, the relationship found is in keeping with the EKB model's third decision process stage alternative evaluation which describes the use of evaluative criteria in the formation of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions leading to the fourth stage of choice.

#### Cross Tabulations

Cross tabulation of the evaluative criteria with the voting decision produced the expected relationships. For example, on the evaluative

criterion political skills and background relative to Mondale, most of those checking high ratings of 4 and 5 voted for Mondale (72.7%). Those giving ratings of 1 and 2 tended to vote for Reagan (34.2%). The ratings of those who said they would vote for neither candidate closely formed a normal distribution centered on the median rating of three. In summary, those giving extreme ratings (a 1 or 5 on the 1 to 5 scales) gave a very high percentage of their votes in accordance with the rating.

#### Routine vs Extensive Problem Solving Behavior

The general effort made to learn about the candidates was approximately the same among those who indicated voting preferences for Mondale and Reagan. (See row percentages [Table IV](#).) However, 69.2% of those who made the lowest (ranking of one) effort to learn about the candidates indicated a voting decision in favor of Reagan. This suggests the presence of routine or automatic problem solving behavior. This conflicts with Rothschild's view that voters in presidential elections have a high level of situation involvement. (Rothschild,

M., 1979, p. 16.) These voters had stored information and experiences concerning the candidate(s) and beliefs and attitudes strong enough to make a rather routine decision as a result of the 1980 voting decisions and the President's first term in office.

The majority of those who made the greatest effort to learn about the candidates (ranking of 5) also stated that Reagan was their choice. In accordance with the EKB Model, we would assume that the evaluative criteria, motives, reference groups, personality, and other factors lead these people to their choice.

The EKB model says that a person with strong attitudes and beliefs relative to a choice problem will engage in automatic or routine problem solving behavior, tending to quickly choose a previously satisfactory solution. Automatic problem solving behavior was tested through the research data by comparing the position of those who indicated a high commitment to a given political party with their responses to the query regarding the effort made to learn about the candidates. Those who are strongly committed to a political group should make less

TABLE IV  
Cross Tabulation of Voting Choice  
and  
Effort to Learn About Candidates

Row % Column %	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Mondale	1.7 23.1	14.3 41.7	32.6 44.5	36.6 43.8	14.9 37.7
Reagan	3.9 69.2	11.2 43.3	36.9 52.1	30.9 49.3	17.2 58.0
Neither	2.2 7.7	20.0 15.0	48.9 13.3	22.2 6.8	6.7 4.3

TABLE V  
Cross Tabulation of Commitment to a Political Group  
and  
Effort to Learn About the Candidates

Row % Column %	Effort					
	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5	
Low	1	12.3 53.8	19.3 18.6	31.6 11.1	24.6 9.8	12.3 10.3
	2	5.1 30.8	22.8 30.5	48.1 23.5	20.3 11.2	3.8 4.4
Commitment	3	1.3 15.4	12.6 32.2	41.7 38.9	33.8 35.7	10.6 23.5
	4	.0 .0	8.7 15.3	31.1 19.8	44.7 32.2	15.5 23.5
High	5	.0 .0	3.6 3.4	20.0 6.8	29.1 11.2	47.3 38.2

effort to learn about the candidates. The results did not prove this to be the case. Those who were highly committed to a political party (rating of five) also made a high effort to learn about the candidates. Over forty-seven percent of these respondents rated their effort to learn about the candidates at the highest level (see [Table W](#)).

This relationship was investigated independently for each of the three political affiliations. In each case a positive relationship was found between commitment to the political group and effort and interest made to learn about the candidates. The correlation was weaker among Independents than Democrats or Republicans.

This failure of the research data on political decision making process to correspond with the model may be due to the interest and responsibility of those highly committed to politics and political action serving as motivators for well-informed decision making even though strong attitudes and choices exist.

#### Limitations

The writer recognizes the considerable possibility of nonresponse bias, nonrepresentative samples, inadequate sample size, and the impact of ongoing political campaigns while data is being collected. A tradeoff was necessary between the number of responses collected and the duration of the collection. Preliminary general research was done the summer before the nominating and election year to obtain some isolation from individual personalities and to shorten the data collection period on the political decision making process.

#### Summary

The six evaluative criteria discovered in the initial survey are central to the political decision making process for presidential choices and appear to be operative within the alternative evaluation decision stage of the Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell model.

The research demonstrated that voters evaluated Reagan more favorably than Mondale and formed voting intentions on the basis of the six evaluative criteria used in the study. It is thus possible to project election results by obtaining voter evaluations of candidates on the six criteria. Periodic research will be necessary to determine changes over time among the evaluative criteria used by voters.

The lack of automatic or routine problem solving behavior among those with higher levels of commitment to political groups indicates that political campaigns are effective with these people in changing or reinforcing past voting patterns.

## APPENDIX A

### Pilot Study Evaluative Criteria

- I. 1. Well informed/knowledgeable
2. Intelligent
3. Interpersonal communications ability
4. Political skills and background
5. Management, business, and economic skills
- II. 6. Decisive, consistent, dedication to policies and beliefs
7. Leadership
8. Believable/sincere
9. Self-assured, confident, risk taker
10. Energetic
11. Young
12. Inquisitive
13. Physically attractive
14. Practical, logical, common sense
- III. 15. Honest, fair, truthful
16. Ethics, morals
17. Caring/compassionate
18. Religious background
- IV. 19. Liberal
20. Conservative
21. Support for social/human services
22. Similar values and points of view
- V. 23. Miscellaneous responses

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