The Importance of Core Values for Hard and Easy Issues

Dissertation

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Abstract

There are few points of consensus in political science as prominent as the finding that Americans are generally lacking in political knowledge and ideological structure to their opinions. If not knowledge nor ideology, then what drives political attitudes? Are individuals - particularly those lacking political knowledge - capable of forming political preferences that are consistent with some sort of guiding belief system? I argue that core values, such as commitment to liberty and equality, drive political attitudes, even among those who exhibit almost no understanding of political affairs. More so, I argue that these values shape attitudes for issues on the political agenda that are most difficult to understand.

Given the grim findings regarding political sophistication in the mass public, some scholars have turned to core values as a substitute for ideology. Researchers argue that while Americans may not be particularly knowledgeable about politics, they are able to use their innate, guiding values in order to discern their preferences on key political issues. While this provides some reason for optimism with respect to the capacity of the general public to form political preferences, there is a large gap within this literature.

For nearly thirty years, political science scholarship has differentiated
between two types of issues: hard and easy. “Easy” issues are long-standing on the political agenda, and offer clear partisan divides: examples include desegregation and abortion policy. “Hard” issues, such as nuclear energy policy, lack clear partisan divisions. They are often technical, complex, and temporally brief.

Research investigating the role of values in shaping political attitudes has focused upon the one issue area in which values are most likely to drive attitudes: easy issues. Despite the recognition that there are easy and hard issues, scholars have largely failed to differentiate between these two types in empirical tests of the relationship between values and political attitudes. In this sense, values have been subjected to the “easy” test for guiding political preferences. The aim of this dissertation is to put them to the “hard” test.

Here, I present research from two data sources: the first is an original census-representative survey that asks participants to consider a myriad of political issues to determine whether the public actually perceives differences between hard and easy issues. Next, I test the relationship between values and political attitudes on these hard issues. I then replicate these findings on a suite of issues from the American National Election Studies Time Series data set dealing with same-sex rights. Overall, I find that values indeed pass the “hard” test for shaping political attitudes, although other considerations such as partisanship and affect toward the policy beneficiaries more strongly and consistently predict issue preferences.
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Chapter 1: Values, Issue Difficulty and the Sophistication Problem

“Guys like [George W. Bush and I], we’re not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We’re not members the factinista…Every night on my show, the Colbert Report, I speak straight from the gut, okay? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument. I call it the ‘No Fact Zone.’ FOX News, I hold a copyright on that term. I’m a simple man with a simple mind. I hold a simple set of beliefs that I live by. Number one, I believe in America. I believe it exists. My gut tells me I live there.”

- Stephen Colbert, at the 2006 White House Correspondents’ dinner

In The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, John Zaller explains that, “Every opinion is a marriage of information and predispositions” (1992, p. 6). However, as Stephen Colbert famously notes, many individuals - even President Bush, he implies - make decisions in the absence of factual political information. Empirical studies of the matter suggest that when it comes to the mass public, information is generally lacking (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This widespread absence of political information, then, suggests that predispositions are doing much of the heavy lifting when it comes to political attitudes.

In this dissertation, I explore the extent to which predispositions - specifically, core political values - guide opinions on issues for which there is little political information readily available to the general public. Specifically, I draw
upon Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) theory of issue difficulty to explore the extent to which individuals can use core values such as liberty and equality to drive their preferences on “hard” political issues, or issues in which the parties have not staked a clear claim. Through an original survey, as well as analysis of data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), I assess the baseline competence of everyday citizens to make decisions about hard political issues, even when they know very little about politics.

There are generally few points of consensus in the political science literature; the low levels of political information amongst the American public is one of the most notable exceptions (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Feldman, 1988). By and large, American public opinion is not driven by fact. For example, the vast majority of Americans oppose Genetically Modified (GM) foods (Funk & Rainie, 2015). However, scientific evidence overwhelmingly suggests that GM foods are safe for human consumption. The most recent report comes from the National Academy of Sciences, which reviewed over 900 studies spanning twenty years and found that there is no evidence to connect GM foods to the number of risks with which it has been associated, including autism, diabetes, food allergies, and other health concerns (National Academy of Sciences, 2016). Yet, skepticism of GM foods remains amongst the general public.

We see a similar trend with global warming attitudes. If information were the dominant driver of political attitudes, then global warming would be a
relatively uncontroversial topic. Amongst the scientific community, there is very little debate on the matter: global warming is real, and it is due, in substantial part, to human activity. 97.2% of empirical studies on the matter have come to this conclusion (Cook et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2016). However, over the course of the past decade, public opinion has remain not only unchanged, but also divided (Kiley, 2015).

The disconnect between information and opinion has been explained in a few ways, but as Kahan et al argue “none seems complete” (2011, p. 147):

“If the answer were that members of the public are simply less informed than experts (Irwin and Wynne 1996), one would expect disagreement on issues like climate change to abate in the face of widespread dissemination of scientific findings. Trust in experts varies across groups, and laypersons often evaluate information about risks and benefits with criteria that differ from those used by scientists (Slovic 2000; Jenkins-Smith 2000). Yet public debates rarely feature open resistance to science...The problem, it seems, is not that members of the public are unexposed or indifferent to what scientists say, but rather that they disagree about what scientists are telling them” (2011, p. 148, emphasis added).

If opinions are the union of information and predispositions, then predispositions are the key drivers of political attitudes, given that most individuals are ignorant of or resistant to factual information about politics. In this dissertation, I focus on one set of predispositions in particular: core values. I argue that individuals use their core values or guiding principles in order to make decisions about politics. It has been established that core values indeed serve as a source of structure and consistency in American political attitudes, serving as a
stable belief system under which individuals can form their preferences (Feldman, 1988). This project, however extends this line of inquiry by asking: Are values equally predictive for all people and all issues? Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate that values guide issue attitudes, not only for those who are the least knowledgeable about politics, but also for issues that offer the fewest cues to the American public.

In this project, I demonstrate three things: First, the public indeed perceives real differences between hard and easy issues. I find that when an issue is hard - in other words, when an issue lacks clear partisan signals - people offer fewer thoughts and are more uncertain in their attitudes. Secondly, I demonstrate that despite the difficulties associated with considering hard issues, core values predict opinions toward these matters. Third, I find that this relationship often holds even for those who know almost nothing about politics. Overall I demonstrate that the American public ought to have the most difficulty applying their core values to hard political issues. Yet, they are often able to do this.

In short, this is a dissertation that makes the case for the minimum competence of the average citizen to form preferences that align with notions of what a democracy ought to look like. Scholars have long touted the desirability of certain characteristics of citizens in a representative democracy. Primary among these features is the ability for citizens to consider and voice preferences that not only consider the individual, but also the broader community (Lazarsfeld,
Berelson, & McPhee, 1954). However, the scholarly understanding of this capacity has often been called into question, mostly on the account that Americans are woefully uninformed about political affairs and lack ideological guidance to their attitudes (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). In this dissertation, I demonstrate that even those who know the least about politics are generally able to form preferences driven by their values, even for the issues in which we should least expect it.

This chapter will focus upon laying out the concepts that will be used throughout this dissertation, as well as the overarching theory for how values ought to guide preferences for hard issues. I will begin by defining the key concepts of interest, including: values, sophistication, and issue difficulty (easy versus hard issues). I will then present the theory and hypotheses, as well as the methods to be used within this investigation. I will conclude by discussing the implications for this work, and the trajectory for the remaining chapters.

The Role of Values in Guiding Political Attitudes

In total, there are nearly 51 million Americans who exhibit almost no understanding of politics at all (American National Election Studies, 2015). However, when asked about their issue attitudes, even on relatively obscure political issues such as nuclear energy policy, 98% of Americans offer a response
Perhaps even more profound is the fact that low-information citizens vote. 38% of political novices - or, those who know almost nothing about politics - report having voted in the past election, and as a whole, constitute 17% of American voters in national elections (American National Election Studies, 2015). Those with only slightly higher levels of political knowledge - sophistication moderates - constitute about 38% of those who cast their ballot in national elections. This project broadly asks: How does the vast majority of the American public who generally lacks political knowledge make decisions about politics without knowing the facts and complexities of the political issues at stake?

The lack of an overarching ideology and general political knowledge in the American public has been documented extensively in the political science literature over the course of the past fifty years (Bartels, 1996; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Kinder sums up the scholarly understanding of the issue succinctly: “when it comes to politics, most citizens are ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent outlook on public policy, in possession of genuine opinions on only a few issues, and knowing damn little” (Kinder, 2006, p. 199). Some, however, have contested the notion that lack of knowledge equates to sheer ineptitude. Primarily, this work

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1 This pattern also remains for political issues that are simply nonexistent, such as the fictitious 1947 Metallic Metals Act, in which 70% of respondents expressed an opinion (Neuman, 1986).
has centered on the extent to which core values can serve as the basis for political attitudes, even amongst those who exhibit low levels of political information.

**Core Values**

Values are, put simply, the bridge between human psychology and politics. While there are a multitude of definitions regarding what constitutes a value, or principle, several key themes exist. Values are stable, broad notions of right and wrong that guide our behaviors and help us evaluate information and events.

Rokeach defines a value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence that is personally and socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct and end-states of existence” (1968, p. 160). Schwartz identifies five key features of values: “Values (1) are concepts or beliefs, (2) pertain to desirable end-states or behaviors, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by their relative importance” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 4). In short, values are stable, can be effectively ordered in terms of priority given to the most preferred values over others, and they guide our behaviors. While it may be difficult for one to choose between two values, such as equality and liberty, most of us are able to do so, even in the absence of a great deal of political knowledge (Jacoby, 2006).

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2 While the standard convention in psychology is to refer to these constructs as values, political scientists often call them principles. I use the terms interchangeably here.
Values are evolutionary constructs that allow humans to engage in group-related behaviors (Rokeach, 1973). They are our vision for what the rules of society ought to be, and how the world should work. Prior to the existence of formalized laws and regulations, group conduct was rooted in core values that drove the extent to which a society was individualistic or egalitarian, punitive, or rehabilitative. Politics today deals with the same types of issues as our early ancestors: how do we allocate limited resources? How do we balance individual interest versus group goals? Core values are key psychological constructs that drive our evaluations of everyday events and issues, and in essence, allow us to balance the often competing interests of group and self.

Human values can be categorized into many different types: social, political, terminal, and instrumental, among others (Rokeach, 1973). This analysis, like many others in political science, focuses upon political values, which are those that are deeply ingrained within the American ethos: notions of equality, liberty, and personal responsibility. These are transmitted through political socialization – childhood upbringing, civics education, and American culture more broadly (Jennings & Niemi, 1968).

Values constitute one’s worldview, or the notions of right and wrong that guide our thoughts and behaviors. Values are our perceptions of how the world ought to work. Should the gap between the rich and the poor be narrowed (equality of outcome), or should individuals pull themselves up by their
bootstraps (individualism)? Should we prioritize individual freedoms or the community interest? Is hard work rewarded with a stable income and position in life, or are there institutional barriers that get in the way? One’s answers to questions such as these - as well as how important one thinks the question is to begin with - constitutes his or her value structure, which in turn, shapes the way one sees the world. One’s value structure is a stable construct, that endures throughout one’s life cycle. The same values we prioritize as children tend to stay with us as adults (Jennings & Niemi, 1968).

Feldman puts the importance of these predispositions simply: values are “the ultimate underpinning of attitudes” (2003, p. 479). Attitudes are essentially the summation of beliefs (information) and affect (feelings), and the weight we attribute to each of these items. But, the critical component that predisposes us to be receptive to certain types of information, or to feel certain responses with respect to that information are our values. Values are prior to information or fact (Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil, & Cohen, 2009). They serve as filters for sorting which stimuli are “good” or “bad.” Our core values are the dispositions that lead us to feel positive or negative affect toward political events and information.

Values are also integral to how much we’re willing to believe or give weight to objective facts and figures. One example of this involves the risks and benefits associated with HPV vaccination. Even when presented with the same information about the HPV vaccine, the perceptions of the actual consequences of
mandatory vaccination are shaped by commitment to egalitarianism and individualism. Those who place a heavy emphasis upon equality perceive the HPV vaccine as significantly less risky than those with more individualistic tendencies. That is, despite receiving the same information about HPV vaccinations, including their effectiveness at preventing cancer and possible side effects, individuals differ significantly in their response to that information based upon their value orientations - and subsequently in their evaluations of mandatory vaccinations as a whole. Values, therefore, play a powerful role in determining the types of information we accept or reject (Kahan, Braman, Cohen, Gastil, & Slovic, 2010).

Values: A Foundation for Political Reasoning

The values literature in political science has sought to assess the capacity of the American public to effectively formulate attitudes and make decisions about political issues in the absence of a clear left-right ideology or extensive political information. Scholars investigating political values have posited that although attitudes do not hinge on ideological structure, most Americans are able to use their core values to make meaningful decisions regarding politics. Existing scholarship has by and large revealed that social and political values are vitally important to public opinion. There is strong evidence that values are related to a wide range of political behaviors and attitudes: viewpoints toward different social groups, political participation, policy preferences, parties, candidates, and many
other key aspects of political life (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Jacoby, 2006).

Figure 1.1 illustrates how values are related to the issue of expanding background checks for gun purchases. This hypothetical example includes two people with differing value orientations. Person A prioritizes communitarianism above individualism, meaning that they believe that it is the responsibility of the individual to attend to the needs of the community over the needs of the self. Person B thinks individualism is more important: they believe in the freedom of action for individuals without interference from others.
Persons A and B are evaluating the same issue: Should background checks be expanded for all gun sales? Federal law currently requires that individuals purchasing guns from *licensed firearm dealers* undergo a background check in order to make the purchase. According to the US Department of Justice, firearm dealers are considered to be anybody who “devotes time, attention, and labor to dealing in firearms as a regular course of trade or business” (US Department of Justice, 2016, p. 2). Those purchasing their firearm as a *private sale* are not required to undergo a background check. Therefore, purchases made from individuals “who make occasional sales, exchanges, or purchases of firearms for the enhancement of a personal collection or for a hobby,” are *exempt* from the background check requirement (ibid).
Persons A and B are evaluating the same issue, but with different value priorities. As a result of these differing priorities, these two individuals have different considerations regarding the issue. Person A, who is more concerned about communitarian goals, worries mostly about the potential negative impacts of gun ownership on the community. She also considers a widely-cited statistic by gun control advocates: that 40% of gun sales take place without a background check. As a result, Person A is mostly concerned about the safety of the community, and therefore decides that background checks ought to be expanded.

Person B on the other hand, places more emphasis upon personal liberties. Rather than primarily considering potential risks to public safety, Person B considers the fact that most gun owners are law-abiding citizens who do not aim to engage in violence. She also considers the flip side to the same statistic as Person A: if 40% of gun sales are conducted without background checks, then the vast majority are conducted with background checks. Person B’s individualist inclinations cause them to place a higher priority upon the individual rights at stake in the background check debate, and to evaluate the same information as Person A differently. As a result, Person B comes to the conclusion that background checks do not need to be expanded. In short: one’s values shape the priority one gives to different arguments, as well as their response to objective information.
Feldman argues that almost all individuals structure their political attitudes on their values because there exists a political ethos, which passively ingrains certain values in the mass public. Sophistication is not a precondition for making this connection because political values are culturally entrenched (Feldman, 1988). Values such as liberty and equality are repeatedly reinforced throughout one’s education and upbringing. Starting in elementary school, children are taught about the values ingrained in the Constitution and founding documents, and the extent to which the nation has (or has not) lived up to these expectations throughout its history. These values are also reinforced at home as parents socialize their children about what is fair, and how one should treat others. Because these values are socialized so persistently over the course of one’s upbringing, most people know what liberty and equality mean and which they think is most important. Goren builds upon Feldman’s work by explicitly testing the link between sophistication and value preferences and finds that although political expertise sometimes strengthens the link between values and policy preferences, virtually all citizens are able to connect their values to political attitudes (Goren, 2001).

Importantly, values potentially provide a solution to the ideology problem. Whereas Americans generally do not think about issues on a left-right continuum, they are able to meaningfully rank and prioritize political values in a consistent manner (Jacoby, 2006). Jacoby finds that value choices are transitive. Say, for
example, that someone reports that liberty (A) is more important to them than economic security (B). Then, that person reports that economic security (B) is more important to them than equality (C). When rating liberty (A) and equality (C), that person ought to report that liberty (A) is more important. Importantly, Jacoby finds that even those who know relatively little about political affairs exhibit value transitivity. In this way, values offer the structure and consistency to political attitudes that scholars expected ideology to supply (ibid). Whereas ideology is inaccessible to most citizens, core principles or values are concepts that people encounter on a daily basis. As Goren explains, “In essence, policy principles lie in the sweet spot of mass belief systems, neither too abstract such as liberal-conservative worldviews nor too concrete such as particular issues to elude all but the most diligent citizens” (Goren, 2013, p. 10).

Although a great deal of existing scholarship has established that values are key predictors of political preferences, much remains to be understood regarding the values-to-attitude link. Feldman evaluates the current state of the literature, noting that values research in political science has been conducted haphazardly, which has hindered cumulative knowledge in this subject area. Additionally, existing work has yet to specify a theory of the relationship between values and attitudes (2003). In particular, work investigating the extent to which one must be a political expert to apply core values to political issues is largely inconclusive (Goren, 2000).
Like these authors, I argue that we cannot fully understand political attitudes without a deeper comprehension of the values that structure them. Yet, the relationship between values and attitudes becomes more complicated when we consider the role of political sophistication, or the extent to which individuals are informed about and interested in politics. Not all scholars agree that the majority of citizens are capable of applying their core values to political issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992). Additionally, those who have tested for an association between core values have done so only for those issues for which this relationship ought to be most apparent: issues that are symbolic of long-standing partisan divides, and readily familiar to the general public. The goal of this dissertation is to bridge this gap and assess the extent to which values continue to predict the attitudes for issues which are largely lacking in partisan cues.

**Sophistication**

Much of the work involving political values has hinged upon the extent to which sophistication moderates the relationship between values and attitudes. Sophistication refers to one’s ability to make sense of the political world, be it by having the necessary knowledge to understand what’s going on, or the cognitive ability or motivation to do so. Although a great deal of attention has been given to political sophistication, “the discipline has no generally accepted measure of
the public’s knowledge about national politics” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993, p. 1180).

There are indeed a variety of definitions of sophistication. Luskin provides a broad account: “a matter of cognition,” ranging from simple cognitive constructs such as rote memory, to more complex constructs in which different associations are linked together (1987, p. 857). McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh define sophisticates as “individuals who possess a large amount of well-organized knowledge about the political realm, these organized knowledge structures resulting from their greater interest in, and attention to, politics” (1990, p. 44). Thus, sophistication taps into size, constraint, and the range of political cognitions one has and is able to recall at any given time. These terms are interconnected: The more information one has, or the more diverse that range of knowledge is, the more organized it is likely to be. This organization also makes it more likely to retain and recall political information.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) provide one of the most extensive accounts of political knowledge in the mass public. The authors test a series of knowledge-based questions appearing on the National Election Study survey, assessing the questions’ face validity and ability to discriminate between the most and least knowledgable citizens. Ultimately, they argue in favor of the following five fact-based questions: which party controls the US House, the percentage vote required to override a presidential veto, location of parties on an ideological scale,
which institution exercises judicial review, and identification of the current vice president.

Most work investigating the influence of sophistication upon political attitudes uses factual knowledge questions as the primary measure (Goren 2001; Jacoby 2006; Zaller 1992), though others still may emphasize domain-specific knowledge (Gilens, 2001; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), or education levels (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991). Sophistication in this project will be operationalized in two ways, each taking into account the multi-faceted nature of the concept. In the original study reported in Chapters 2 and 3, sophistication is measured as a composite score that includes not only factual knowledge, but also self-reported measures of interest in and attention to politics. In Chapter 4, I use the ANES interviewer’s overall assessment of one's interest in, attention to, and knowledge about politics.

**Values and Political Sophistication: The Connection**

When narrowing in on the relationship between core values and attitudes, existing scholarship has elaborated on one important moderator: sophistication. This line of work has explored the extent to which Americans can apply their core values to political issues in order to formulate their attitudes. This work has for the most part revolved around testing the Sophistication-Interaction Model (SIM). The core tenet of the SIM is that guiding principles such as liberty and equality will more strongly predict the attitudes of those who are very
knowledgeable about politics: political sophisticates (Goren, 2001; Jacoby, 2006; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). The reason for this is that sophisticates possess a wider range of political information, and that this information tends to be better-organized, relative to those who lack such extensive knowledge. In other words, the SIM asserts that the ability to use core values is conditional upon political knowledge. Political knowledge is necessary in order to perform the complex skill of connecting one’s guiding principles to a specific policy outcome.

However, another model has also been proposed. Proponents of the General Use Model (GUM) argue that values are so deeply ingrained in the political ethos, that one need not know all of the intricacies and details about the political system in order to apply their deeply-held principles to a policy outcome (Feldman, 1988). Those who know nothing about politics can use values to drive political decisions because values, in essence, are the lowest common denominator. Even without explicitly paying attention to politics, values like hard work and freedom are so pervasive that we are all aware of them, know where we stand on them, and can use our commitment to these principles to guide our preferences. Indeed, empirical investigations of the GUM have found repeatedly that this is the case (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2001; Jacoby, 2006), while also finding some support for the SIM (Goren, 2001; Jacoby, 2006).

What this means is that there are essentially two competing theories with
respect to the capacity of the American public to voice grounded, consistent preferences. The SIM asserts that this capacity is not well-represented in the masses. The GUM, however, represents the “everyman’s hypothesis” - according to the GUM, values are deeply imbedded in our psyche. Even if one avoids all political information, he or she still knows what equality and liberty mean (Feldman, 1988). More so, these values are so familiar and powerfully ingrained that even in the complete absence of discrete political facts, one knows which value is more important to him or her and can apply this in a variety of contexts (Jacoby, 2006). The SIM contends that because sophisticates have a coherent web of political knowledge, they are more capable of attaching their core values to specific issues. The GUM challenges this, and instead argues that because this is a skill that individuals exercise in a variety of contexts, political sophistication is not necessary to connect values to attitudes.

What is at stake between these two competing models are the conclusions we can draw about the capacity of the average citizen to meaningfully participate in our democracy. Recall that values are one’s notion of right and wrong; they are broad conceptualizations of what is best for society. They transcend mere self-interest and pertain to desirable outcomes for the community at large. If the SIM is correct, then anywhere from 17%-38% of our voters in national elections are unable to form preferences that are consistent with one’s perception of positive outcomes for society as a whole. This does not bode well from a normative
standpoint. This would suggest that voters are merely self-interested, or even worse, basing their attitudes on racist, sexist, or other negative group-oriented criteria.

However, if the GUM is correct, there is a bit more reason for optimism when considering the capacity of the general public to meaningfully engage in the political process. While levels of political knowledge in the mass public remain low, support for the GUM indicates that despite this dearth of political information, the general public is capable of tying preferences to some notion of societal benefit. This would also indicate that there is some basis or structure to expressed political attitudes. Even if the information is lacking, if the GUM is supported, we can at least be assured that something is binding that attitude to a larger belief system.

There is currently support for both models. Goren concisely sums up the findings in this area: “...while political expertise promotes deductive political reasoning, a lack of expertise does not preclude it. And while the performance of the unsophisticated does not approach that of the highly sophisticated, the fact that significant effects emerge for most citizens is critical” (Goren, p. 175, 2001). In other words, sophistication is a helpful, but not necessary condition for using values to drive preferences.

What neither one of these models argues - nor do I - is that values are the end-all-be-all of democratic reasoning. In fact, neither information nor values, in
isolation, yield well-reasoned attitudes. As Lupia explains, our acceptance of rejection of information is *contingent upon* our predispositions: “Even when we pay attention to information, we often do so in ways that make effective learning unlikely. We are easily distracted. We almost always prefer quick and simple explanations over more detailed and accurate ones. We also sometimes evaluate information based on whether it makes us feel good, rather than on whether it helps us make better decisions” (2015, p. 3). However, values are critical to assessing the virtues of certain pieces of information in terms of the consequences for broader society.

Values provide a consistent criteria by which to evaluate political information. This, at bare minimum, is necessary for a functioning democracy. Lupia emphasizes that when we consider competence, we must think deeply about what competence *means*:

“...what a citizen needs to know depends on what we are asking him or her to do. Competence is defined with respect to a task. Competence at some political tasks, such as writing a constitution or constructing a complex piece of legislation can require considerable expertise in many highly technical areas. Competent performance at other tasks, such as voting for or against a simply worded ballot measure, does not require the same kind of expertise” (2016, p. 34).
Values are a key component to one’s competence to evaluate political information in a manner that considers the implications for broader society, and with a connection to a stable belief system. Core values make it possible for individuals to evaluate information, not on the basis of pure self-interest, but with an eye toward the normative implications for their fellow citizens. Even those who place a heavy emphasis upon individualism are not interested in individualism purely as a means to protect their own freedom. Values inherently transcend mere self-interest (Rokeach, 1973). That is, if one supports the protection of their own liberties, they also support the protection of that same liberty for others.

That being said, values are not the sole criteria for most political decisions. Scholarly evidence supports the notion values are often a supplement to, rather than replacement for other cues in the political arena. Models comparing the influence of core values relative to other political cues such as partisanship and ideology, suggests that the effects of values are similar (Jacoby, 2006). Therefore, it is often not the case that individuals are relying on some pure conception of a guiding principle to evaluate issues. Rather, values are used in conjunction with other political attachments and evaluations. The purpose of this dissertation is not necessarily to assess the quality of issue evaluations in low information conditions, but rather to assess the capacity of citizens to apply values to complex, difficult issues.
To date, all of the work assessing the relationship between values and attitudes has focused upon whether the political novice is even capable of making this connection. No work has explored whether there are situations in which values serve as stronger predictors for novices, relative to sophisticates. Therefore, in the interest of thoroughness, I also investigate the possibility of a Reverse Sophistication Interaction Model (RSIM), in which values more strongly predict the issue attitudes of novices. While the SIM argues that the relationship between values and attitudes is stronger for sophisticates, and the GUM asserts that values are indeed predictive for novices, the RSIM considers that perhaps there are conditions in which values will actually be stronger predictors for novices. One of the contributions of this project, therefore, is to create a more comprehensive account of the extent to which values are predictive of political attitudes for novices relative to sophisticates.

**Hard vs. Easy Issues**

While existing work has emphasized that Americans are indeed capable of connecting core dispositions to preferences, they have only looked at a single subset of political issues: easy issues. Easy issues are those which offer clear, long-standing political divisions and are readily understood by the general public. In distinguishing between hard and easy issues, Carmines and Stimson ask “what makes possible a gut response elected equally from well-informed and ill-informed, from interested and uninterested, from active and apathetic voters” (1980, p. 80).
In other words, what makes an issue so simple that even someone who knows nothing about politics can offer a response? Carmines and Stimson offer three requirements:

“1. The easy issue would be symbolic rather than technical.
2. It would more likely deal with policy ends than means.
3. It would be an issue long on the political agenda” (p. 80, 1980).

By this definition, it is even more apparent why it is necessary to look for evidence of value-based constraint amongst hard issues: easy issues, \textit{by definition}, elicit a gut reaction from novices. It is, therefore, no surprise that values shape attitudes toward issues that fit the above three criteria.

Carmines and Stimson conceptualize the term “symbolic” via a previous definition posited by Sears et al: issues in which “one’s relevant personal ‘stake’ in the issue is an emotional...one [that] triggers long-held, habitual responses” (1979, p. 371). According to Sears et al., symbolic issues are those that represent long-standing attitudes toward issues that were integral to shaping one’s partisan identity in early adulthood (1979). Indeed, this partisan distinction is one that is key to Carmines and Stimson’s empirical test of whether an issue is easy or hard.

Carmines and Stimson outline the importance of the role that parties play in making this distinction:

“How can we tell empirically whether a particular issue is easy or hard? Our theory suggests simply enough that the relationship between \textit{hard} issues and vote choice should be \textit{conditional} on level of political information possessed by voters. Issue position should exert a considerably stronger causal influence on the votes of the well-informed because they,
more than the ill-informed, accurately map party and issue stances. The ill-informed show a tendency to mix ‘correct’ responses with ‘incorrect’ ones in the aggregate, and therefore display an apparently weaker relationship between issue and vote. No such distinction should hold if the issue is easy. That the ill-informed can respond appropriately is a defining characteristic of the easy issue” (p. 82).

They further establish why desegregation ought to be regarded as a quintessential easy issue: because it “led to a permanent reshaping of underlying party loyalties” (1980, p. 80). Carmines and Stimson identify desegregation as an easy issue because it deals with policy ends rather than mean, and is representative of long-standing differences in partisan attitudes toward race.

Hard issues are less clear-cut. They are so difficult to understand, that meaning is constructed by parties and elites. Carmines and Stimson point to the Vietnam War as an exemplary hard issue for two key reasons. First, the political parties offered relatively similar positions on the issue in that the presidential candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties in the 1968 election announced that they wished to end the war. In this sense, it was nearly impossible for the average citizen to take their preferred position and connect it to one of the two major parties because in terms of outcome, their stances were the same: get out of Vietnam.

This is closely related to the second criteria of a hard issue: hard issues deal with policy means, rather than ends. While both Nixon and Humphrey announced during the campaign that they wished to end the Vietnam War (and therefore, offered the same “ends”), each proposed different “means.” In essence,
both parties established that they were committed to the same goal, but sought
to achieve this goal in different ways, thus making it even more difficult for the
average voter to connect his or her preferences to a particular candidate.

In short, I expect that values will predict attitudes toward both hard and
easy issues for novices and sophisticates. However, the thought processes for
novices and sophisticates will differ, particularly for hard issues.

*Easy Issues: Novices*

Easy issues are considered as such because regardless of how much an
individual knows about or is interested in politics, they are relatively well-
understood. Imagine someone who knows virtually nothing at politics - they
don't follow the news, they are not particularly interested in political happenings,
and they can barely identify who is running for presidential office. This person
would be considered a political novice.

If you asked this person to explain the concept of affirmative action,
however, they could probably muster an explanation. It might not be fully
accurate or particularly detailed, but this individual is likely able to explain that
it’s some sort of program that provides access to certain opportunities for
minority groups. This person is able to provide this explanation because it is an
“easy” issue - it has been present on the political agenda for a long time. Even if
it is not something that is explicitly discussed within this person’s social group, a
political novice has likely picked up some facts and details about affirmative
action just as a product of living within our political system.

What’s more, is even without much knowledge about how politics operates, this individual likely has an opinion on it, and is able to reasonably ascertain which party best represents that opinion. That is why this issue is easy - it doesn’t take a great deal of political information or interest to have some familiarity with the issue, and it’s pretty easy to tell where each party stands on it because it’s symbolic of the different stances between Democrats and Republicans. One can imagine any number of other political issues where this is the case, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, or increasing funding for welfare. This isn’t to say that these issues are personally easy - abortion in particular can be emotionally-laden and requires one to make tough decisions about prioritizing the interests of the mother versus the fetus. But politically the issue is considered to be easy because it doesn’t take very much knowledge about the political context to attach one’s preferences to a political party.

*Easy Issues: Sophisticates*

The overarching theme with easy issues is that they are readily understood by nearly everyone. If political novices can explain an easy issue like affirmative action, then of course political sophisticates can as well. More so, if novices can pinpoint that the Democratic Party is more likely to be supportive of abortion rights, then naturally sophisticates can too. Sophisticates are likely to have more information about these issues, and are better equipped to describe the nuances
of easy political issues. However, in terms of ability for one to (1) recognize their preferences on the issue, and (2) place the issue in the broader political context (usually measured by identifying where the parties stand), novices and sophisticates alike can perform this task fairly readily when it comes to easy issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). Regardless of the extent to which one pays attention to or consumes political information, the political understanding of an easy issue like abortion is pretty straightforward: Democrats generally support it, Republicans usually don’t.

*Hard Issues: Novices*

Of course, not every issue is as easily understood as abortion or affirmative action - some issues are “hard”. Take, for example, attitudes on nuclear energy expansion. When it comes to this issue, novices are operating on very little information. They are especially unlikely to know where the parties stand on the issue. Novices are likely to be aware of the risk of nuclear power, considering the high profile nuclear meltdowns that have occurred in the past and the fact that expansions are often proposed in order to generate more energy in the United States. However, novices have little else of which they are aware. They cannot rely on their parties to offer a signal on which option is most preferable because they do not know each party’s position on the issue.

Novices’ attitudes on nuclear energy policy are likely influenced by an assessment of whether the risk associated with nuclear energy (i.e. a meltdown)
outweighs the benefits (i.e. more energy). Because they do not have their parties
to tell them the extent to which the risk outweighs the benefit, novices have only
their values to guide them: does one’s individual right to use energy outweigh the
potential risk to the community? Therefore, hard and easy issues have the same
first step: recognizing one’s opinion on the issue. However, hard issues are
differentiated because that second criteria is not met: novices are unable to
identify where the parties stand on the issue because it is too obscure and/or
difficult. Novices are unable to place hard issues within the broader political
context.

Hard Issues: Sophisticates

Political sophisticates find themselves in a very different position than
novices when it comes to hard issues. Only those who are very knowledgeable
about politics are likely to have some information about the issue, or know where
the parties stand on it. Going back to nuclear energy expansion, sophisticates are
more likely to be able to explain the key tenets of the initiative, and the economic
benefits. They are likely more aware of the actual risk of nuclear energy facilities,
compared to their effectiveness at generating additional power, and the additional
drawback of nuclear waste management. They are also more likely to identify
that the Republican Party tends to be substantially more supportive of nuclear
energy expansion than Democrats, which provides an additional cue by which to
evaluate the issue. Thus, sophisticates are able to (1) voice their opinion, and (2)
connect it to a political party.

This is contrasted with an easy issue like abortion, in which novices and sophisticates alike (1) express an opinion, and (2) place the issue within the broader context in terms of partisan stances. Sophisticates are able to perform these tasks for both easy issues, as well as hard ones. They have the knowledge and understanding necessary to be able to connect their preferences to one of the two major parties; novices, on the other hand, cannot do this for hard issues.

**Issue Difficulty: Why it Matters**

The key distinction between hard and easy issues is not that some issues are personally easy, but rather politically so: easy issues are readily understood by people who know nothing about politics; hard issues are not. Although issue difficulty has been examined in the existing literature (Johnston & Wronski, 2015; Pollock, Lilie, & Vittes, 1993), its role as a moderator has mostly been unexplored. It has largely been taken for granted that the public actually perceives differences between hard and easy issues. Little work has been done to examine whether this is actually the case, and if so, what this means for the way people think and reason about political issues.

We know that values predict attitudes for a variety of issues, such as affirmative action, tax cuts, and government spending on social welfare (Feldman, 1988; Jacoby, 2006; Kinder and Sanders, 1990). However, this is exactly where one would expect this relationship to exist. If values are not predicting attitudes
for issues that can be easily explained by nearly any member of the general public, then values simply do not predict attitudes. Fortunately, it has been established that this is not the case - values, in short, have passed the “easy” test. However, we currently have no idea whether values continue to predict hard issue attitudes.

One thing to bear in mind is that issue difficulty is not a static trait. Easy issues can be conceived as hard, and vice versa, depending on how they are presented to and understood by the public. As Carmines and Stimson explain, “All issues have intrinsically simple and complex facets; which particular facets predominate at a given time is an empirical question” (1980, p. 81, emphasis added). Indeed abortion is a quintessential easy issue (Cizmar & Layman, 2009), but it can be made hard. This is illustrated in Alvarez and Brehm’s investigation of attitude ambivalence (1995). Abortion, they argue, is an issue in which an individual may or may not feel ambivalence or value conflict, depending on how it is understood by the public. They demonstrate that abortion is “easy” or free of value conflict in certain situations, such as when the life of the mother is at risk, or in cases of rape or incest. Abortion becomes “hard” for scenarios that are less black and white because these situations induce value conflict. Such examples include if the mother is too poor to have more children, simply does not want any more children, or does not have a partner to help her raise the child.

Yet, Carmines and Stimson would likely still classify this issue as easy
because of the clear differences in party stance, and the general level of understanding in the mass public. Carmines and Stimson (1980) and Alvarez and Brehm (1995) both offer different conceptualizations of issue difficulty; the former relies upon ease of understanding and ability to place the issue in the larger political context, while the latter focuses upon the ease or difficulty with which one makes up their mind about the issue. However, one key thread remains: people differentially perceive some issues as more difficult than others, and that there is some elasticity to this relationship. At times, an issue may be hard, and at others, it may be easy.

Throughout this project I will rely on Carmines and Stimson’s conception of issue difficulty because it provides a clearer barometer by which to assess this trait. An issue can be classified as easy or hard by asking two questions: (1) Is someone who is poorly informed about politics likely able to explain what the issue is (as rough as this explanation may be); and (2) can that person identify where the parties stand on it?

Why does the distinction between easy and hard issues matter? My research demonstrates that issue difficulty has important consequences for understanding the formation of political attitudes. Previous work has made a theoretical distinction between hard and easy issues, but has not (a) assessed the extent to which the public differentially perceives hard and easy issues, nor (b) how this distinction affects the processes that shape attitude formation (for an
exception, see Pollock, Lillie, and Vittes, 1993). A large part of this project is obtaining a better understanding of how the public processes hard versus easy issues, and how this shapes the mechanisms that drive attitudes: here, I explore values. In this dissertation, I demonstrate that Americans can and do use their core values to reason about hard issues.

Figure 1.2 sums up existing literature on the relationship between values, issue difficulty, and political attitudes:

**Figure 1.2: Summary of Existing Scholarship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Easy Issues</th>
<th>Hard Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIM</td>
<td>Support found in Goren, 2001; Zaller, 1992</td>
<td>Support found in Pollock, Lilie, and Vittes (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSIM</td>
<td>Not investigated</td>
<td>Not Investigated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.2 highlights the gaps in the existing literature. Extant scholarship has found that while values often predict the issue attitudes of novices, this relationship is sometimes stronger amongst sophisticates. However, there is only one study to date that has investigated the relationship between values and hard
issues. Pollock, Lilie, and Vittes examine the extent to which economic, versus moral values predict attitudes toward nuclear energy policy for political sophisticates and novices (1993). Overall, they find that economic values more strongly predict nuclear energy attitudes for sophisticates, relative to novices. They find that novices, on the other hand, are more likely to rely on moral values, as measured by religious involvement. This dissertation builds upon this work to incorporate a broader range of hard issues, while providing a more thorough investigation of the relationship between values and hard issue attitudes.

Data, Theory, and Hypotheses

By and large, this is not merely a project about values, but rather a broader investigation of public opinion. Here, I offer two key contributions that will help scholars understand how the public thinks and reasons about political matters. The first contribution is to provide evidence that the general public is indeed capable of using their core values to reason about hard political issues. It is well-known that individuals, by and large, do not use ideology to guide their preferences. This, then, begs the question, what are they using - are Americans basing their judgments off of self or group-centric interests, are they using some sort of guiding notion of right and wrong? The second contribution is that this project will better elucidate how the public thinks and reasons about hard issues - how this affects one’s depth of processing, and even the elements that underlie
their expressed attitude on the issue, such as their core values. Throughout this
dissertation, I make the case that value-based reasoning amongst hard issues is
particularly notable because these issues are the least familiar to the general
public. Thus far, existing scholarship has found that values predict easy issue
attitudes. Further evidence of this relationship amongst hard issues indicates a
more rigorous test of the theory that the values predict attitudes.

Data

The theory and hypotheses to follow are tested with two separate data
sets. Study 1 constitutes a census-representative survey of 1,079 US citizens
conducted through Qualtrics in the summer of 2015. Participants in this survey
mimic the demographic makeup of the United States in terms of age, sex, and
race, as of the 2010 Census. The Internet-based survey includes a battery of
questions about participants’ value preferences, political knowledge, as well as
interest and attention to politics. Study 1 also includes measurement of fourteen
political issues, including participants’ opinions on each issue, the thoughts they
have as they consider each issue, the extent to which they feel they understand
the issue, and several other meta-cognitive questions.

The second data source comes from the American National Election
Studies Time Series Data set. The data set includes all questions that have been
asked at least three times between the years 1948 and 2012. Because political
values are not consistently included until 1984, the analysis is restricted to
between 1984 and 2012. The theory and hypotheses listed below are tested on a suite of three different political issues, each dealing with same-sex rights: adoption by gay and lesbian couples, military service, and anti-discrimination laws.

Theory and Hypotheses

My theory is simple: because values are deeply-rooted evolutionary forces that are transferrable from situation to situation, they will continue to inform policy preferences for hard issues, even for political novices. By very definition, values are broad and abstract. Individuals use them to evaluate any sort of stimuli, whether deciding to purchase a union-made car or recycle their plastic. For most, political issues are just another set of things, among many, to evaluate. Individuals don’t separate overtly political events from apolitical ones, using a left-right ideological continuum for judging whether they think affirmative action is fair, and then transition back to a different set normative criteria to make decisions about everyday life. The same sense of fairness drives evaluations in both the political and apolitical-arenas.

This, in a sense, provides even the most poorly informed citizen with at least one tool to evaluate political issues. He may not have a great deal of information, but he has his gut instinct, which is driven by his values. Again, values are primary to information. One’s values drive the extent to which they accept or reject information; they serve as the foundation on which information is
weighed (Kahan, 2010). As Kahan demonstrates with his work on attitudes toward HPV vaccination, it does not matter whether the information presented is true, objective, or empirically-supported: these considerations are secondary to values, which help one decide whether to believe or discount that information (2010).

Additionally, previous work has also demonstrated that belief in conspiracy theories is not moderated by one’s information-level, but rather, their dispositions, such as belief in the supernatural, or that we’re currently living in the Biblical End-Times (Oliver & Wood, 2014). The key point here is that information is not what underlies an attitude, though it is certainly a factor. Values are what shapes our responses to that information. Therefore, values ought to still be applied even in scenarios in which information is very low.

Thus, my first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Core values will predict the attitudes of novices and sophisticates for hard issues.

It is now well-understood that values predict attitudes for the most visible, politically divisive issues in the American landscape (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2001; Feldman, 2003). There are several reasons to believe that this will continue to be the case for hard issues. First, individuals are already skilled at applying their values in various contexts; that is exactly what values are meant to do (Rokeach, 1973). Additionally, individuals are generally able to glean at least small bits of
information from various stimuli. Therefore, very few political evaluations are truly made in the dark. This ability to glean information and use shortcuts is what makes it possible for the politically unsophisticated to make at least basic inferences about how their values apply to political issues.

*Information Shortcuts*

In many ways, the lack of information amongst the American public makes sense. As Downs argues, obtaining information about political matters is costly, and the payoff for being an informed voter is relatively low (Downs, 1957). There are several streams of research that suggest that individuals are able to make inferences, even while being able to recall very little information. Of course, all of this is predicated upon the notion that individuals have been exposed to some sort of information to begin with.

Extant literature has recently highlighted how individuals - often inadvertently - obtain information (in varying degrees of relevance) from a variety of unlikely sources, such as late night comedy. For example, in the year 2000, Bill Clinton was the target of a joke on at least one of the top network comedy shows over 800 times; George W. Bush earned this distinction nearly 900 times (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). There are enough political references in *The Simpsons* and other television shows in popular culture that countless publications have been devoted to their study (Foy, 2008; Holbert, 2005; Woodcock, 2006, 2008). And, although individuals seeking out entertainment on
“fake” news shows such as The Daily Show or The Colbert Report tend to be the same ones seeking information from hard news sources, it has also been found that when a political novice does encounter “infotainment,” they are able to answer more questions correctly about the content matter than political sophisticates (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Thus, even if one is not explicitly seeking political information, they are likely receiving at least some notions about politics from popular culture.

Work on heuristics and “thin slice” judgments have also demonstrated that individuals are able to draw inferences based on minimal information. Participants who viewed a 30-second silent clip of an instructor offered the same instructor ratings as those who took their semester-long course, even when controlling for the physical attractiveness of the teacher (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). In another study, participants were able to correctly identify another person’s sexual orientation from viewing a 10 second silent video clip 70% of the time. When watching a 1 second silent video clip, they were able to correctly identify the person in the video’s orientation 60% of the time (Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999). Of course, interpersonal communication offers a much richer basis of information than simply being presented with a brief description of a political issue. However, the broader point is that individuals are generally able to essentially absorb information from unexpected sources, even without being overtly aware of this relationship.
Work on heuristics has similarly highlighted how individuals can use limited information to form inferences about politics. Lupia’s study on attitudes toward California insurance reforms demonstrates how individuals can skillfully use limited information to form opinions on the putatively hard issue of insurance reform (1994). This particular referendum serves as a textbook example of a hard issue. Rather than a simple yes or no vote, there were actually five different referenda on the ballot; in total, the text of the reforms constituted about 26,000 words. Additionally, insurance reform is hardly symbolic of partisan divides, therefore partisanship was not an available cue for voters. Yet, the voter behavior of those with limited information was indistinguishable from those who knew only which types of groups supported each outcome (Lupia, 1994).

In fact, some have even suggested that values themselves may serve as heuristics: “In this sense, values function in a manner similar to other symbolic predispositions or heuristic devices like party identification and liberal-conservative ideology” (Jacoby, p. 721, 2006). Of course, work on heuristics has also established that opinions formed on the basis of little to know information can lead to the incorrect expression of preferences (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). However, the broader point is that individuals form preferences based on very little information, and can often do so effectively.

Finally, research in the area of candidate evaluations demonstrates that individuals often retrieve overall evaluations of candidates, even without being
able to access discrete pieces of information about the candidate from his or her long-term memory (Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989). The on-line processing model has been used to explain the way in which citizens evaluate political candidates, even when they cannot recall specific facts about the person. Rather than remembering factual tidbits of information, individuals store their cumulative affective evaluations of such information in his or her long-term memory. Evaluations are not memory based, but impression-driven. Although one may not remember each of the particular facts about a candidate, individuals do keep an on-line tally of their evaluations, forming an overall impression (McGraw, Lodge, & Stroh, 1990). This is relevant here because it suggests that individuals continually update their on-line tally of evaluations of political matters, even if they do not remember the specific facts that lead them to their conclusion.

One important thing to point out is that the on-line model assumes that individuals have been exposed to information to begin with; the fact that one is usually unable to recall discrete facts is not because the judgement was made in the absence of information. Rather, individuals tally up their information to which they react positively or negatively to constitute their overall impression. Therefore, sophistication still plays a substantial role in this process. Sophisticates are more likely than novices to rely upon their on-line tallies than novices, who tend to use information stored in memory (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh, 1990). However, the on-line model demonstrates that individuals are
continuously updating their overall impressions of political stimuli. Coupled with the fact that political information is often present in apolitical sources, we can reasonably expect that most novices have some bare minimum of political information, even if they are unable to recall discrete facts.

In pulling together these various streams, it is apparent that individuals likely encounter at least some political content in their everyday lives, although the quality and depth of this information varies from source to source. It is also apparent that even novices can use core values to deduce preferences, and that they are constantly updating their overall impressions of political events and candidates. While information is certainly helpful in ensuring that one expresses an opinion that indeed aligns with their preferences (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), values are what we use to evaluate that information to begin with. Because values are secondary to information, we ought to expect that individuals can use their values to drive their preferences, even for issues where information is very low: namely, hard issues.

**Values, Sophistication, and Issue Difficulty**

While extant scholarship has demonstrated that values are indeed predictive of easy issue attitudes, and that individuals can glean political information from their daily lives, the SIM nonetheless asserts that novices ought to have particular difficulty applying their values to political matters (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller 1992). The existing work on the extent to which
this is the case is currently inconclusive. For some easy issues, such as attitudes toward reducing social welfare spending, a stronger relationship between core values and policy preferences have been found. But even within the same study, evidence demonstrates that core values are similarly predictive affirmative action policies for both novices and sophisticates (Goren, 2000). This has therefore led to the conclusion that “the politically sophisticated and unsophisticated seem to draw about the same on equality beliefs...political expertise does not automatically promote reliance on core beliefs and values” (Goren, 2000, p. 132, emphasis added). This is to say that while the relationship between values and attitudes may sometimes be stronger for sophisticates, this isn’t necessarily always the case, and it shouldn’t be assumed as such.

However, we do know that novices and sophisticates differ in terms of the way in which they process political information in important ways. To return to the discussion about heuristics, it has been demonstrated that these shortcuts are indeed most effective for those who already know something about politics. Nearly everyone uses information shortcuts to make political decisions; sophisticates, however, do so more effectively (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001).

Perhaps the most important work in establishing the distinctions between the way in which novices and sophisticates reason about political issues is Zaller’s *On the Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion* (1992). One of the key contributions of this work is the demonstration that sophisticates have many more
considerations to bring to bear when evaluating political stimuli than novices. Using this framework, we can understand the ways in which values may differentially play a role for sophisticates, relative to novices when evaluating hard political issues. I argue that this informational asymmetry is even more pronounced for hard issues.

Take, for example, the easy issue of affirmative action. This issue is so easily understood by the mass public, that it essentially has a party label - Democrats favor affirmative action, Republicans don’t. Therefore, the considerations in play when evaluating this issue are relatively similar for sophisticates and novices alike. Figure 1.3 contains the hypothetical considerations that sophisticates and novices may have when considering this easy issue.

**Figure 1.3: Considerations for Affirmative Action**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sophisticate</th>
<th>Novice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>Feelings toward blacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings toward blacks</td>
<td>Special privileges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past history</td>
<td>Not fair to treat people differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special privileges</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not fair to treat people differently</td>
<td>Quotas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>What does this mean for my job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does this mean for my job?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Considerations: 8</td>
<td>Number of Considerations: 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the above figure illustrates, sophisticates and novices are expected to have roughly the same number of considerations with respect to the easy issue of affirmative action. By definition, easy issues are those which are readily understood by the masses. There should not be any significant differences in the understanding of these issues, although it can reasonably be expected that sophisticates will have a few more considerations on which to draw. This serves as the basis for my second hypothesis:

\( H_2 \): Novices and sophisticates should have a statistically similar number of considerations for easy issues.

This, however is not the expectation for hard issues. Hard issues are relatively obscure and complex. Therefore, we can expect that for a hard issue such as nuclear energy policy, sophisticates will have significantly more considerations than novices, as a result of their greater exposure to and understanding of the context of such policies. Figure 1.4 highlights the hypothetical differences in the considerations between novices and sophisticates when considering this hard issue.
Figure 1.4: Considerations for Nuclear Energy Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sophisticate</th>
<th>Novice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better than fracking</td>
<td>Possibility of a meltdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats probably on board?</td>
<td>Preserve the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve the environment</td>
<td>What to do with waste?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility of meltdown</td>
<td>Number of Considerations: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to do with waste?</td>
<td>Number of Considerations: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce dependence on foreign oil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For hard issues, novices are less likely to have been exposed to information regarding the issue - even accidentally. This is because novices tend to have less interest in politics, and therefore, consume less political information. Thus, their information is contingent upon those pieces that are essentially absorbed simply by existing in our political society. In other words, a novice’s level of knowledge is essentially limited to what’s covered in popular culture and late-night television; these sorts of outlets do not tend to engage an in-depth analysis of complicated political issues, but rather focus on quick jokes that are relatively easily understood (Niven et al., 2003).

Sophisticates, on the other hand, are likely to have encountered at least some information about this complex issue, as a result of their greater interest in
and attention to politics. Additionally, even if they don’t know a piece of
information outright - such as where the parties stand on the issue of nuclear
energy - they are better equipped to infer it, which provides an additional cue by
which to base one’s judgment. Therefore, we can expect sophisticates to offer
significantly more thoughts about complex political issues:

H₃: Sophisticates will have significantly more considerations about hard political
issues, compared to novices.

The question then becomes, what does all of this mean for values? The
Sophistication Interaction Model (SIM) posits that only sophisticates are able to
attach values to attitudes. If the SIM is correct, then we ought to expect values
to guide the hard preferences of sophisticates, but not novices. However, when
looking at the differences in information levels between the two groups, it is
apparent that novices have little else by which to base their judgment.
Sophisticates have a variety of criteria that factor into their overall evaluation of
nuclear energy policy. While values (in this example, environmental preservation)
are certainly one of them, they have several other considerations at their disposal.

This lays the foundation for an alternative to the SIM and GUM. Rather
than values serving as a stronger predictor of attitudes for sophisticates, guiding
principles may be stronger predictors of attitudes for novices because it is the
only criteria they have to evaluate the issue. I call this the Reverse Sophistication
Interaction Model (RSIM), which is tested as an exploratory hypothesis.
throughout this dissertation:

E-H\textsubscript{4}: When evaluating hard issues, values more strongly predict the issue attitudes of novices, relative to sophisticates.

Values form the basis of one’s gut response to a particular stimuli. It is an instinctual reaction, that shapes the perceptions of that political issue down the line. Therefore, regardless of one’s information level, presentation with a hard issue like nuclear power will usually result in an affective tag. The extent to which one finds a proposed law to increase spending on nuclear energy desirable, however, will be based upon their perceptions of whether this is a good or a bad thing. This immediate perception is driven by one’s values. We can expect that values may serve as stronger predictors of political attitudes toward hard issues because values, are in a sense, a heuristic: does the proposed policy “feel” right? Novices often do not have the information necessary to try to use their partisan identifications as a shortcut, or to consider the unexpected or more nuanced consequences of a policy. Sophisticates, on the other hand, do have this information. Because values are essentially the only criteria by which novices can evaluate some hard issues, it may be the case that values actually serve as stronger predictors of hard issue attitudes for novices.

\textit{Applications to Broader Understanding of Public Opinion}

As Lodge and Taber explain, “Our field has not been kind to the democratic citizen. Normative democratic theory imposes heroic expectations
about the capacity and motivation of *homo politicus*, while modern empirical research finds many citizens to be *homo-not-so-sapiens*” (p. 475, 2005). The aim of this project is to demonstrate that the vast majority of the American electorate has the capacity to rely on core values, even when evaluating hard issues. While values are not a substitute for political information, the reality is that most Americans are not informed about politics; even when they are exposed to objective information, their values still shape how they process it. Therefore, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of how values inform political attitudes, and whether they continue to do so for hard, complex issues.

The first contribution to public opinion lies within establishing the nature of issue difficulty in the mass public. Although the political science scholarship has pressed the importance of the hard/easy distinction for political issues for the past thirty years, very little is known about how this alters perceptions of these issues. By introducing issue difficulty as a moderator for the relationship between values and attitudes, this project will provide a richer understanding about the extent to which public perceptions of hard and easy issues matches with existing theoretical accounts.

Secondly, this project tests two existing models of political attitudes in a new context, while additionally positing a previously unconsidered hypothesis for the relationship between political values and attitudes. Inconsistent support has been found for both the SIM and the GUM. Additionally, scholars have yet to
consider the possibility that values may actually serve as stronger predictors of political attitudes for novices. This dissertation pits these three hypotheses against one another in a way that better accounts for the reality that many political issues are complex, obscure, and lacking in partisan cues. The result is a more rigorous test of the predictive ability of core values.

Finally, a better understanding of how values inform political attitudes has important implications for the extent to which Americans are willing to compromise on political issues, particularly in light of recent work suggesting increased partisan polarization (Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006). As parties have become more polarized, it has become easier for individuals to sort themselves into one of the two camps (Levendusky, 2009). It has also become easier for individuals to connect their values to each one of the parties (Jacoby, 2014). This is coupled with the fact that partisanship is an important social identity for most Americans (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). This creates a grim scenario for compromise: when one’s deeply-held core values are also fused with their social identity in the political realm, it is unlikely that individuals are willing to yield on political issues. In this sense, values may be a double-edged sword: they provide the basic capacity for citizens to reason about political issues, but may also make them less willing to compromise, particularly when the issue has clear partisan cues.
Conclusion and Chapter Outline

Here, I have presented a detailed account of several key concepts within the study of public opinion - attitudes, the values that underlie them, and issue difficulty. This project broadly seeks to determine the extent to which values continue to predict hard issue attitudes for those who are poorly-informed about politics. In the remaining chapters, I will present evidence that demonstrates that values often do predict attitudes for political novices evaluating hard issues. I also highlight the importance of considering how issue difficulty alters the public’s perceptions of hard and easy issues, and empirically evaluate the extent to which theory in this area aligns with the realities within the general public.

The remaining chapters of this dissertation are as follows:

Chapter 2: Toward a Better Understanding of Issue Difficulty. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to explore the key moderator of interest in this investigation: issue difficulty. Because this is a concept that has been theorized, but not heavily tested, it is imperative to obtain a better understanding of how the public actually differentiates between hard and easy issues - or whether they do so at all. Here, I present results from an original survey that provides an in-depth analysis of fourteen political issues, some of which are easy, and others that are hard. I demonstrate that the public does consider hard issues differently than easy ones, and that these differences are exacerbated amongst political sophisticates. This chapter establishes that testing for value-based constraint
amongst hard issues is indeed one of the most rigorous tests for the ability of the general public to use their core values to reason about hard issues.

Chapter 3: The Influence of Values on Hard Issues. Chapter 2 establishes that the issues under consideration in Chapter 3 are indeed amongst the “hardest” on the political agenda. Chapter 3 consists of the first formal test of the extent to which values are predictive for hard issues. Overall, I find that although values are often predictive for novices evaluating hard issues, this relationship is frequently stronger for sophisticates.

Chapter 4: The Influence of Values on Gay Rights Attitudes. Chapter 4 investigates the role of core values attitudes toward a suite of related issues over a thirty-year time span, using the American National Studies Time-Series Data Set. This analysis exploits the fact that issue difficulty is a function of the extent to which the parties have staked a claim on the issue in a particular election year. It is therefore possible to examine the extent to which equality predicts attitudes towards an issue when it is easy, compared to when that same issue is hard.

Overall, I find that sophisticates indeed rely upon more cues than novices, such as partisanship or affect toward the policy beneficiary. Additionally, I find that equality often fails to predict easy issue attitudes when controlling for partisan identification and affect toward gays and lesbians, suggesting that equality is so ingrained in these two elements that it fails to exert predictive power above and beyond those of affect and partisanship.
Chapter 5. Conclusion and Future Directions. The final chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to summarizing the key findings within Chapters 2 through 4, and discussing their implications. Avenues for future research are also suggested.
Chapter 2: Toward a Better Understanding of Issue Difficulty

In Chapter 1, I laid out a theory of value-based reasoning in the general public. This work stems from an area of research dedicated to addressing Converse’s (1964) findings that Americans, by and large, lack political knowledge and ideological consistency in their political preferences. Converse’s seminal work revealed that nearly a quarter of the American public knew very little about policies as they related to the dominant political parties, while less than 12% of the population used ideological dimensions to inform their attitudes. In light of these troubling findings, scholars have sought to pinpoint what does account for attitudes in the mass public. As Feldman explains, “People may not view the world in ideological terms, but they do have political attitudes, beliefs, and preferences that need to be explained” (Feldman, p. 417, 1988). This line of scholarship has posited that while Americans generally fail to base their preferences off of a left-right ideological continuum, they do use guiding principles such as liberty and equality to form their attitudes.

The overall argument in this dissertation is that the vast majority of Americans are indeed capable of applying their core values to real-world political issues. This is, in a sense, old news (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2001). However,
previous investigations have focused exclusively upon easy issues - those that have been long-standing on the political agenda, and in which parties have offered clear alternatives to one another. The key contribution of this dissertation is to extend these findings to hard political issues. Values have passed the easy test as a mechanism for guiding political preferences in the mass public in that they predict attitudes toward highly visible issues that are symbolic of partisan divisions. In this dissertation, I subject values to the hard test to see if their predictive ability holds up even for those issues where we should least expect it.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: (1) provide a clear assessment of exactly what makes a political issue hard, rather than easy, and (2) test the hypotheses laid out in Chapter 1 that demonstrate the mechanism by which values operate for these hard issues.

In this dissertation, I make a claim about the public’s capacity to engage hard issues. Specifically, I argue that even those who know nothing about politics are capable of connecting their core values to political preferences on hard issues. This claim carries with it important implications for democratic functioning. If there is nothing binding together the public’s attitudes on difficult, complex issues, are these attitudes actually meaningful? Is the public capable of reasoning about political issues in which their parties have offered little guidance? It is therefore critical to very clearly establish what separates hard issues from easy ones. In other words, I must establish that the issues I’m exploring are actually
hard if I’m going to draw conclusions regarding the public’s capacity to reason about them. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to drill down what it actually means for an issue to be easy, versus hard.

Carmines and Stimson’s theory on issue difficulty asserts that not all issue voting signifies political sophistication. A key feature of issue difficulty is the extent to which political novices are able to sort their preferences along partisan lines, relative to sophisticates. Certain issues are regularly invoked during political campaigns to either rally the base or garner support for one’s side (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). Through this process, political candidates distinguish themselves from one another based on their differing stances on these key issues. Over time, parties are known as “owning” certain issues (Petrocik, 1996).

Due to repeated exposure to the issue over time, as well as the claims staked by the parties, the public becomes increasingly familiar with the issue in a number of ways. First, candidate stances on easy issues are prominently - and strategically - invoked. This provides voters with some basic familiarity about the nuts and bolts of the issue itself: they know that the issue is, and what the policy options are because candidates use their stances on these issues to differentiate themselves from the other side. This makes it easier for voters to sort their preferences along partisan lines. Additionally, because voters have had more time
to consider these types of issues, as opposed to a new or obscure issue, they ought to be more certain in their attitudes.

The key difference between hard and easy issues is the extent to which political novices are able to sort their preferences along partisan lines. However, little work has been done to examine how or whether the public actually perceives easy issues differently from hard ones. The goal of this chapter is to examine the extent to which the public actually sees the differences in issue difficulty theorized by Carmines and Stimson. Before drawing conclusions about whether the public is capable of applying values to hard issues, it is first necessary to determine that hard issues actually exist in the minds of the public.

**Review of Main Theory and Hypotheses**

My overarching theory within this dissertation is that core values indeed drive attitudes toward hard political issues. The reason for this is that core values - even those that most easily pertain to politics - are not unique to the political arena. Individuals have deeply ingrained senses of values like equality and individualism as a product of simply living within our political society (Feldman, 1988). They use these guiding orientations in their everyday lives. Take, for example, the seemingly simple matter of grocery shopping. For some individuals, their values guide which store they patronize - some will go out of their way to support local business and avoid the big chain store. Others will go to the big chain instead because the employees are unionized. Most of us simply go to the
store that is closest and/or cheapest. Even there, one is faced with a myriad of decisions: do you pay extra to get the Fair Trade Coffee because part of the profits go to the workers? When the checkout clerk asks if you want to round up your total to donate to the food bank, do you say yes, or do you decide to keep the change for yourself? Every day, we make countless decisions, both at work and at home. Our values are the criteria we use to assess the desirability of these alternatives (Rokeach, 1973).

That being said, some political issues are more easily understood by the general public than others: some issues are easy, and others are hard. In order to have a firm understanding of the conditions under which we can expect values to be predictive of political attitudes, this issue heterogeneity must be taken into account. I argue that values are one of many considerations one can use to evaluate political issues. These considerations, however, differ between sophisticates and novices when evaluating easy, versus hard issues. Easy issues are so easily understood, that novices and sophisticates alike are operating with virtually the same levels of information.

However, there are potentially large informational asymmetries between sophisticates and novices as they evaluate hard issues, relative to easy ones. This, in turn, shapes the way values predict the issue attitudes of these two groups of people. Novices likely have little else upon to base their judgment other than

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3 See Figures 1.1 and 1.2 in Chapter 1 for a depiction of this.
values - they are unlikely to know where their parties stand on the issue, or the full range of consequences for the policy option. Sophisticates, on the other hand, have a variety of other considerations they can use in *addition* to values.

Although we know that sophisticates tend to have more considerations from which to sample when informing their attitudes (Zaller, 1992), the extent to which informational asymmetries fluctuate as a product of issue difficulty has yet to be determined. A key argument in this dissertation is that novices have little else upon which to base their attitudes *other* than their values, while sophisticates have a myriad of other considerations they can use. I argue that this difference is exacerbated when the issue is hard. The purpose of this chapter is to determine whether this is actually the case. The following hypotheses were posited in Chapter 1:

\[ H_{1.2} \]: Novices and sophisticates should have a statistically similar number of considerations for easy issues.

\[ H_{1.3} \]: Novices will have significantly fewer considerations about hard political issues, compared to sophisticates.

These hypotheses will be explored in-depth throughout this chapter in order to provide support for the theoretical framework in the chapters to follow.
Issue Difficulty: Background

Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) work on issue difficulty was the first to establish that not all issue voters are the same. They point to a history within the political science scholarship of equating issue voting with sophistication. The authors argue that “The common - indeed, universal - view has been that voting choices based on policy concerns are superior to decisions based on party loyalty or candidate image” (1980, p. 79). However, they assert that some issues are actually very easy for the average voter to understand. “Easy” issue voting, they argue, “occurs when a particular issue becomes so ingrained over a long period that it structures voters’ ‘gut responses’ to candidates and political parties” (1980, p. 78).

In short, they argue that issue voting is not necessarily a sign of sophistication. Rather, some issue voting is a sign of a lack of sophistication. Throughout their piece, they differentiate between hard and easy issues by determining the extent to which the issue is so deeply ingrained that political novices use them to form their evaluations about political parties. Essentially, they argue that some issues are so well-understood by those who know very little about politics, that the issue essentially comes with a party identification. A political novice might not know much about politics, but she knows that she opposes same-sex marriage, and that the Republican party does too - and she’s able to structure her vote based upon placing her position with the party’s. This
is indeed issue voting, but not a sign of a sophisticated understanding of the way politics works. It does not require much effort on the part of the voter to understand same-sex marriage, because it has been debated heavily in the court of public opinion (and in the actual court system, receiving quite a bit of press in the process) for many decades. One obtains a rudimentary understanding of this issue - and where the parties stand on it - essentially through osmosis, by living in our political system.

However, issue voting can be sophisticated. Some issues do not come readily with a party identification. Stem cell research, nuclear energy, and immigration reform are all issues that most individuals do not use to sort between the parties. A novice might know that she supports stem cell research to help find a cure for common diseases, but this is not an issue in which the parties have consistently and clearly staked their position. Only those who pay careful attention to politics are likely aware of the differences in party platforms. Therefore, the novice does not know how to sort their preference between the parties.

These issues are no less important than easy issues (take, for example, the issue of nuclear energy and the Three Mile Island disaster), however we know that a relatively large proportion of the American electorate does not know enough about where the parties stand on the issue to inform their vote choice. Making political sense of these issues - in other words, knowing how to tie one’s
preference to one of the two major parties - requires some deep thought and understanding on the part of the voter. Voters must have some basic understanding of the issue, and then be able to pinpoint which party best represents their interests. This is much more difficult for a new or technical issue, like nuclear energy, compared to a recurrent wedge issue, like abortion. Political sophisticates are well-poised to make these distinctions because they are more interested in and attentive to politics. As a result, they are either explicitly aware of where the parties stand, or are able to infer each party’s position, using positions on similar issues. This provides them additional cues on which to structure their attitude.

Issue difficulty is a crucial concept for this particular project because the values literature has upheld guiding principles as the unsophisticated citizen’s primary substitute for ideology (Feldman, 1988). However, Carmines and Stimson’s work establishes that there are real differences in the extent to which the public is capable about making sense of political issues, and that this key difference hinges upon sophistication. Therefore we cannot draw the conclusion that novices and sophisticates alike can use their values to form grounded preferences about all issues when we have only investigated easy issues.

**Issue Difficulty: Measurement**

While issue difficulty has been used as a framework for conceptualizing public opinion on political issues, no single form of classifying issues as easy or
hard exists. Most recently, scholars have routinely assumed that easy issues are social or moral, whereas hard issues are economic (Johnston & Wronski, 2015; Mooney & Lee, 2000; Mooney & Schuldt, 2008). There are two key problems with this method.

First, as Johnston and Wronski explain, “...the categorization of issues as ‘easy’ or ‘hard’ is to some extent a subjective enterprise and may often be applied on an issue-to-issue basis” (p. 39). The problem, in other words, is that the categories are quite nebulous. More importantly, “non-moral” and “moral” are not mutually exclusive. For example, the classic hard issue in Carmines and Stimson’s investigation of issue difficulty is the Vietnam War (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Although technical, complex, and lacking clear partisan cues, the Vietnam War is a deeply moral issue, invoking notions of equality, life, death, peace, and modern-day colonialism. As Ryan explains, opponents of the Vietnam War in particular saw this issue in moral terms (Ryan, 2014, p. p. 382). One cannot simply assume that moral issues must be easy, because most political issues are multi-faceted.

The moral/easy conflation is particularly problematic given recent work in political communication which has demonstrated that a single political issue can be described with over a dozen frames (Boydstun, Card, Gross, Resnick, & Smith, 2014). Religious freedom laws, for example, have recently been passed to allow business owners to refuse services to same-sex couples on the grounds that
homosexuality violates their religious beliefs. To some, this is an issue of values: either treating all couples equally, or the freedom to exercise one’s religious liberty. To others, however, it is an economic issue because it deals with commerce and the rights of business-owners. This, like many other political issues, do not fit neatly into a single category.

Secondly - and more importantly - these definitions stray from the emphasis that Carmines and Stimson place on the extent to which individuals are able to sort their preferences along party lines. In distinguishing between hard and easy issues, Carmines and Stimson focus upon whether sophisticates and novices alike can pin their preferences onto the two political parties (1980, p. 80).

Carmines and Stimson acknowledge that their theoretical criteria is somewhat opaque. Therefore, they also propose an empirical method that relies upon the following equation:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_1 X_1 \cdot \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon \]

where \( Y \) = Vote Choice, \( X_1 \) = Issue Preference, and \( X_2 \) = Sophistication. Vote choice is a way of measuring whether an individual can attach one’s preferences to one of the two major political parties, since regardless of the particular presidential year, there are generally only two choices: Democrat or Republican. Vote choice, therefore, is the key dependent variable of interest because it serves as a proxy for measuring the extent to which one is able to take his or her issue position and assign it to a political party. Carmines and Stimson’s use of this
particular dependent variable again highlights the importance of partisan perceptions in distinguishing issue difficulty.

The independent term of interest here is the interaction between issue preference and sophistication. Easy issues are so simple that nearly anyone can sort which party comes closest to his or her preferences. This is because the issue is so well-understood by the masses, and is, by nature, symbolic of the key differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. Due to these reasons, the interaction between issue preference and sophistication should be insignificant for easy issues, meaning that the relationship between issue preference and vote choice is not conditioned on sophistication: sophisticates and novices alike can make enough sense of the issue that they can place their preferences on to one of the two parties.

Hard issues, however, differ in that only sophisticates are likely to place their preference with either of the parties. Hard issues are not readily understood by the masses. Novices still have attitudes on these issues, but are unable to discern which party best represents their position. As a result, the interaction term between issue preference and sophistication should be significant, indicating that only sophisticates are able to pin their preference to the parties. The following table highlights the expectations when empirically classifying hard and easy issues, according to Carmines and Stimson (1980):
Table 2.1: Operationalizing Hard and Easy Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Type</th>
<th>Preference X</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>Insignificant</td>
<td>Issue so readily understood, sophisticates and novices structure evaluations of parties based on them. No significant differences between each group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>Issue <em>not</em> readily understood; only sophisticates structure evaluations of parties on them. Significant differences between the groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this empirical classification method is theoretically useful in terms of offering a method by which to clearly differentiate hard and easy issues, in practice, it rarely fails to provide a useful classification.

One reason for this is that the empirical method only applies to issues that are actually salient during a given election. For example, it is reasonable to imagine that attitudes toward nuclear energy policy were on the minds of voters immediately following the Chernobyl or Three Mile Island disasters. However, it is much less likely that voters were thinking about this issue when evaluating candidates in the 2012 presidential election - there is simply no a priori reason to expect that any significant number of voters were worried about this issue several decades after these prominent disasters.

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This makes operationalizing issue difficulty complicated. If neither sophisticates nor novices are using attitudes toward nuclear energy to inform their vote choice in a particular year, then the issue invariably comes up as “easy” during the empirical classification: nobody is significantly structuring their vote choices on this issue, therefore there are no significant differences in the extent to which sophisticates relate their attitudes on nuclear energy to vote choice, relative to novices. This does not mean that people do not have attitudes on the issue - rather, they simply aren’t using it as a primary way to distinguish their vote choice.

This is exactly what I find when replicating Carmines and Stimson’s model on fourteen political issues, using data from an original survey conducted in the summer of 2015.

Sample

Study 1 consists of a census-representative survey of 1,079 US citizens over the age of 18 years old.⁴ 49 respondents were eliminated from the study after failing an attention screening question, for a total usable sample size of 1,030. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics in the summer of 2015, and the survey was administered online at a location of the participant’s choosing.

⁴ Census-representative indicates that in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity, the sample mimics the characteristics of the broader US population. According to the most recent US census, males make up 49.2% of the general public, while females comprise 50.8%. Whites comprise 63.7%, while African-Americans constitute 13.2%.
Overall, the sample is 48.54% male and 51.46% female. Whites comprise 62.72% of respondents, while African-Americans comprise 13.20%.

While the sample is representative of the general public in terms of age, sex, and race, it does differ in terms of education and partisanship. In general, my sample is more educated than the general population. According to the most recent census, 86.3% of those over 25 years old have at least a high school education. In my sample, almost 97% have at least a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, the Census reports that 29.3% of Americans have at least a bachelor’s degree (United State Census, 2010). In my sample, that number is 33.2%. Thus, my sample has a higher minimum level of education, and individuals are slightly more likely to have a college degree.

In terms of partisanship, Democrats (including leaners) comprise 47% of the sample, compared to 45% in the general public. Republicans make up 32% of my sample, compared to 26% of the general public. Thus, my sample is slightly more likely to identify as a partisan. Additionally, 52% of my sample reports having supported Barack Obama in the 2012 election, compared to 51% of the general public (Federal Election Commission, 2013). Therefore, my sample is largely representative of the general population on most dimensions, though they are slightly more educated and likely to identify as a partisan. These features would be problematic if there were not sufficient variation on the sophistication scale. However, simply because one is more likely to identify as a Democrat or
Republican does not mean that one is well-versed in each party’s platforms on the issues. In the analysis to follow, we will see novices still struggle to identify partisan platforms.

In the interest of clarity, I present the following figure depicting attitudes toward nuclear energy to highlight not only the relationship between vote choice and difficulty, but also why we cannot rely on the regression results provided by Carmines and Stimson’s model alone to distinguish hard and easy issues. Participants were randomly assigned to answer a series of questions about four, out of fourteen, political issues. The nuclear energy question informs respondents that “[Nuclear energy] is the idea that the United States should expand the use of nuclear power to provide energy to the United States,” and then asks “To what extent do you support expanding the use of nuclear energy to provide energy to the United States?”
Figure 2.1 demonstrates a pattern that is consistent with a hard issue classification. The x-axis ranges from 1 (Strongly Oppose) to 6 (Strongly support), while the y-axis demonstrate the probability that one will support President Obama. This, again, is a proxy for the extent to which an individual pins their preferences to one of the two major parties. Vote choice, therefore, represents the extent to which the issue has been constructed by elites, and whether the issue is “easy” enough for political novices to pick up on this.
Novices exhibit about a 68% probability of support Obama, regardless of their attitudes toward nuclear energy. The wide confidence intervals for novices exhibit the uncertainty regarding the estimates for predicted support for Obama based on opinion on nuclear energy expansion. However, the perfectly horizontal line for novices highlights the finding that, at least for novices, this issue has not been constructed by elites. They are just as supportive of President Obama, regardless of their opinion on nuclear energy.

Sophisticates, on the other hand, exhibit a different pattern. Sophisticates who strongly oppose nuclear energy expansion have an 82% probability of voting for Obama. Those who strongly support nuclear energy expansion are only half as likely to report voting Democratic in the 2012 election. One thing to note here is that of those who voted for one of the two major presidential candidates in 2012, 56% report having voted for Obama, compared to 38% who voted for Romney. As a result, most individuals have over a 50% probability of supporting Obama, regardless of their attitudes on any one particular issue. However, investigating the differences in probability between those highly supporting a policy versus those opposing it can be illustrative, as is the case with sophisticates here.

The overall point here is that we cannot rely on regression results alone when investigating issue difficulty. Nuclear energy expansion is an issue that meets all the theoretical criteria for being a hard issue, however is empirically easy. Using Carmines and Stimson’s empirical methodology, the interaction
between sophistication and issue preference is insignificant (p=.49). However, it is incredibly technical, and the parties lack clear stances on the matter. In fact, it has been used as a quintessential hard issue in later investigations of issue difficulty (Pollock, Lillie, and Vittes, 1993). This example demonstrates how using Carmines and Stimson’s method may in fact produce a “false negative” with respect to identifying hard issues. If the issue is not salient in a given election, then the insignificant interaction between sophistication and issue preference may be simply be a reflection of the fact that neither group is giving it a considerable amount of weight when assessing the presidential candidates. That does not mean that attitudes on the issue are unimportant; rather, that this particular test fails to capture difficulty for these types of issues.

A second reason why the empirical classification scheme is not particularly helpful is that the attitudes of novices are inherently noisier than those of sophisticates’. Therefore, while trends may suggest that novices are sorting along partisan lines, it’s almost impossible to identify significant relationships, particularly in relation to the well-crystallized attitudes of sophisticates. More recent attempts to use the interaction between sophistication and issue preference to classify an issue as easy versus hard have also suffered from this problem (Cizmar and Layman, 2009).

In fact, while Carmines and Stimson propose the statistical model above, it is actually not the primary criteria used to distinguish issue difficulty in their
paper. Rather, they look at charts like those in Figure 2.1 and base their assessment of difficulty off of the slope of the line for novices (1980, p. 83). In fact, Carmines and Stimson don’t even include confidence intervals in their charts to see the extent to which preferences between novices and sophisticates significantly differ. Thus, the classification of easy and hard is not a cut and dry empirical process, even in the original piece on the subject.

Clearly, there are many problems with attempting to empirically classify hard and easy issues. The model proposed by Carmines and Stimson only works for issues that were salient during a given election year. Additionally, the estimates for novices are, not surprisingly, much noisier than sophisticates. This makes a cut and dry classification scheme based upon a significant interaction a particularly high bar - one that is not even used in Carmines and Stimson’s seminal work.

In this chapter, I will outline a series of measures which ought to tap into the broader theoretical framework posited by Carmines and Stimson to examine the extent to which we can classify hard and easy issues, as well as how the public views these issues.

**Hypotheses**

Here, I engage in an exploratory analysis of the multiple dimensions associated with issue difficulty to ascertain another method by which to sort hard and easy issues. While theoretical distinctions between hard and easy issues have
been posited, no work to date has examined the extent to which the public actually perceives issues as differentially hard versus easy. This is critical to assessing the likelihood that sophisticates and novices indeed have different considerations regarding easy and hard issues, and in turn, the theory behind why values ought to strongly predict hard issue attitudes, even for novices.

In line with Carmines and Stimson’s theoretical criteria, several metacognitive questions were posed to participants in Study 1 to assess the extent to which participants actually see political issues as differentially easy or hard. These dimensions include: the number of thoughts one has about the issue, understanding of the issue, the extent to which one needs more information before making a decision about the issue, and predicted partisan stances\(^5\).

My hypotheses for these criteria are as follows:

**Hypothesis 1: Thought-Listing**

Regardless of level of sophistication, easy issues ought to be more readily-understood by the general public because they serve as symbolic sources of conflict within our political system. As a result, an individual should be able to offer more thoughts about easy issues, relative to hard ones.

\(^{H_2.1}\) Individuals will offer significantly more thoughts about easy issues, relative to hard issues.

We can also expect to observe the largest sophistication-based differences

\(^5\) Many of these items are adapted from Mooney and Schuldt (2008).
amongst hard issues because, by definition, hard issues are only accessible to political sophisticates.

\[ H_{2.1A} \]: Sophisticates will offer significantly more thoughts on hard issues, relative to novices.

\[ H_{2.1B} \]: Sophisticates and novices will offer a similar number of thoughts regarding hard and easy issues.

**Hypothesis 2: Understanding**

For the same reasons listed above, we also ought to observe differences in the extent to which individuals understand easy, versus hard issues.

\[ H_{2.2} \]: Individuals will rate their understanding of easy issues as significantly higher than hard issues.

\[ H_{2.2A} \]: Sophisticates will rate their understanding of hard issues significantly higher than novices.

\[ H_{2.2B} \]: Sophisticates and novices will offer similar ratings of their own understanding for easy issues.

**Hypothesis 3: More Information Needed**

One of the key features of an easy issue is familiarity: the issue ought to be so familiar that even novices construct their responses to each party’s candidates based upon their attitudes toward the matter. Therefore, I expect that
individuals will, by and large, report that they are less familiar with hard issues than easy issues.

H2.3: A higher percentage of individuals will say that they need more information before making a decision about hard issues, relative to easy ones.

H2.3A: Sophisticates will be significantly less likely to say they need more information about hard issues, relative to novices.

In other words, when novices and sophisticates evaluate hard issues, I expect that sophisticates will have a better sense of understanding the issue than novices. Due to their increased attention to and interest in politics, sophisticates ought to already feel they have some additional background on the issue. The issue should be less familiar to novices because it has not been as visible on the political agenda.

H2.3B: Sophisticates will be significantly less likely to say they need more information about easy issues, relative to novices.

The same logic for hard issues applies to easy ones. When individuals evaluate easy issues, I expect that sophisticates will be more familiar with the issue than novices due to their increased attention to and interest in politics.
Hypothesis 4: Certainty

Due to a lack of familiarity with hard issues, relative to easy ones, I also expect individuals to be less certain in their attitudes. Again, this difference should be exacerbated amongst hard issues when comparing the certainty of novices versus sophisticates.

H\textsubscript{2.4}: Individuals will be more certain in their easy issue attitudes, relative to their hard issue attitudes.

H\textsubscript{2.4A}: Sophisticates will be significantly more certain in their hard issue attitudes, relative to novices.

H\textsubscript{2.4B}: Sophisticates will be significantly more certain in their easy issue attitudes, relative to novices.

Hypothesis 5: Party Stances

A defining feature of Carmines and Stimson’s typology is the extent to which the least informed segments of society can discern party differences amongst policy positions. Therefore, I expect that individuals will, overall, be able to more accurately place one party’s stances, relative to the other, for easy issues compared to hard issues. Additionally, sophisticates ought to be able to correctly identify the party positions of hard issues more often than novices. Finally, novices and sophisticates should be able to similarly place partisan stances for easy issues.
H2.5: Individuals will be better able to correctly estimate party position on easy issues, relative to hard issues.

H2.5A: Sophisticates will be better able to correctly estimate party positions for hard issues, relative to novices.

H2.5B: Novices and sophisticates will be able to similarly estimate the correct party positions for easy issues.

Methods

In total, the survey asks respondents about their attitudes toward fourteen political issues; participants were randomly selected to respond to four out of these fourteen. The issues were selected because they represented a myriad of both hard and easy issues, according to Carmines and Stimson’s theoretical criteria. The political issues, as well as their descriptive statistics, are listed below:

Table 2.2: Issue Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1 (Legal In All Circumstances)</td>
<td>4 (Illegal in All Circumstances)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Taxes on the Wealthy</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1 (Decrease Tax Rate)</td>
<td>3 (Increase Tax Rate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-Sex Marriage</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative Action</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death Penalty</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Freedom Laws for Same-Sex Weddings</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0 (Allowed to Refuse Services)</td>
<td>1 (Required to Provide Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Freedom Laws for Vaccines</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Reform</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran Nuclear Deal</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Needles for Drug Users</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion Opt-Out Laws</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear Energy</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana Legalization</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Cameras on Police Officers</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1 (Strongly Oppose)</td>
<td>6 (Strongly Support)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These particular issues were selected because they represent a wide range of political issues, from social to economic, and with varying degrees of partisan symbolism. For example, I expect same-sex marriage in 2015 to be an easy issue. While same-sex marriage has had a complicated history with both political parties (which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4), there has been a clear partisan divide in the issue for the past fifteen years. Since 2001, Democrats have been at least twice as likely as Republicans to favor legalizing gay marriage (Pew Research Center, 2015), suggesting that individuals have been sorting their attitudes along party lines. This is contrasted with a putatively hard issue like nuclear energy, in which neither party clearly owns this issue.

Because this is the first systematic empirical assessment of issue difficulty, it is necessary to examine the correlation and structural relationships between the various indicators of difficulty to determine the extent to which these metrics tap into the same dimension. Variables measuring this include:

**Party Difference Score.** After each issue, participants were asked the extent to which each party supported the measure, on a scale of 1 (Strongly Oppose) to 7 (Strongly Support). If participants correctly estimated which party was more supportive of the measure, their response was coded as 1. If participants failed to accurately report which party was more supportive, their response was coded as 0.
**Number of Thoughts.** “Please list the thoughts that come to mind as you think about how you formed your opinion about [issue]. You do not need to fill in all the boxes below.”

**Understanding.** “How well do you feel you understand the issue of [issue]?” (1 = Don’t Understand at All; 7 = Understand Very Well)

**Information.** “Do you feel you need more information before forming an opinion on [issue]?” (0=No, 1=Yes)

**Morals.** “Is this an issue where people need more information to decide, or where they just need to use their basic morals?” (1=More Information; 2=Basic morals)\(^6\).

**Certainty.** “How certain are you in your opinion about [issue]?” (1= Very Uncertain; 7=Very Certain).

**Policy Experts.** “To what extent do you rely on experts (i.e. scientists, policy analysts) to form your opinion about this issue?” (1= Not At All) 3 = (A Great Deal)\(^7\)

**Religious Leaders.** “To what extent do you rely on religious leaders to form your opinion about this issue?” (1= Not At All; 3 = A Great Deal)\(^8\)

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\(^6\) This question was adapted from Mooney & Schuldt, 2008.

\(^7\) This question was adapted from Mooney & Schuldt, 2008.

\(^8\) This question was adapted from Mooney & Schuldt, 2008.
These questions allow for two types of experts: scientists/policy analysts, and religious leaders. The “Policy Experts” variable is designed to tap in to the extent to which one relies on someone with a very technical understanding of the scientific or policy-oriented consequences of a policy. “Religious Leaders” is also included because these individuals provide expertise on the moral or religious consequences of an issue. Both of these groups are considered to be experts, but in different domains.

Factor analyses were estimated for each of the fourteen political issues. To highlight general findings, attitudes toward abortion will be illustrated. First, a pairwise correlation matrix between all eight variables is presented, in order to demonstrate the appropriateness of factor analysis for this set of items and the extent to which each item is related to one another.

Table 2.3: Pair-Wise Correlation Matrix for Abortion Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Party Diff.</th>
<th># of Thoughts</th>
<th>Underst.</th>
<th>Info.</th>
<th>Morals</th>
<th>Certainty</th>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Rel. Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Diff.</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Thoughts</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>.13+</td>
<td>.11+</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-.50***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morals</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>-.50***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certainty</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.11+</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>-.49***</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-.11+</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-19**</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Leaders</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.10+</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+p<.10, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***
Table 2.3 indicates that a number of dimensions are indeed significantly correlated with one another. Accurately placing each party’s stance relative to one another is significantly correlated with the number of thoughts presented, as well as certainty in one’s opinion on the issue. The number of thoughts one offers about abortion is positively related to perceived morality of the issue. The more one understands the issue, the less likely they are to say that they need more information. Understanding is also positively related to seeing the issue as a moral one, and certainty in one’s opinion. Finally, relying on experts and religious leaders are both related to one another.

The correlation matrix confirms that a number of the variables are related, and that an exploratory factor analysis is appropriate to examine the extent to which these items load onto the same dimension. Although the scales vary, some on a 7-point, and others on a 3-point, the factor analysis is estimated using a correlation matrix rather than a covariance matrix, thereby adjusting for any differences in the scales between the measures (O'Rourke & Hatcher, 2013). Factor 1 has an eigenvalue of 1.76, indicating that it explains 22% of the total variance in the set of items. However, many of the Factor 1 loadings fall far below the standard conventional minimum of 0.3, meaning that the variable only weakly explains Factor 1 (Thompson, 2004). In fact, only understanding, information, morals, and certainty are meaningfully related to Factor 1. The Kaiser-Meyer
Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is .68, which exceeds the recommended value of .60, thus indicating the factorability of the above items. Table 2.3 shows the results of the model, with varimax rotation⁹.

Table 2.4: Rotated Factor Loadings for Abortion Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Thoughts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morals</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certainty</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>222.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors falling below the standard of an eigenvalue of 1 are omitted from this table. Experts and religious leaders all load onto a second factor, but the eigenvalue of 0.47 suggests that this factor does not explain a significant proportion of the variation in the set of eight items. The party difference score loaded onto a third factor, with an eigenvalue of .28.
Given these results, one can conclude that knowing the party’s stances on abortion, the number of thoughts, and relying upon experts and religious leaders do not load onto the same factor for abortion. Additionally exploratory factor analyses were estimated for all eight variables on each of the fourteen political issues investigated here. Three variables consistently load onto the same factor on across the issues: understanding, information, and certainty. These are also the three variables that most strongly load onto the issue difficulty factor for abortion policy. Because understanding, information, and certainty most consistently explain variation in the difficulty factor across all fourteen issues, I re-estimated the factor analysis for abortion policy using these three variables.

Table 2.5: Pared-Down Factor Loadings for Abortion Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certainty</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>242.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 Understanding and information load onto the primary difficulty factor for all fourteen issues. Certainty loads onto the factor for all issues except body cameras on police officers.
Cronbach’s alpha for the above model is .71, suggesting an acceptable level of internal consistency on the scale. For each issue, I created a mean rating of issue difficulty, based upon these three items. The scale was then recoded to range from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating the “hardest” issue, and 1 indicating the “easiest” issue:

Table 2.6: Issue Difficulty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>issue</th>
<th>Difficulty Ranking</th>
<th>Difficulty Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear Energy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran Nuclear Deal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion Opt-Out Laws</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Needles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFLV</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative Action</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Freedom Laws for Same-Sex Weddings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Reform</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax Increase</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death Penalty</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Cameras</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-Sex Marriage</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.6 ranks all fourteen political issues, from hardest to easiest. Not surprisingly, nuclear energy policy and the Iran nuclear deal comprise the hardest issues, while abortion and same-sex marriage are the easiest.

Regardless of issue difficulty, classifying political issues upon a single dimension is a complicated process. Even the easiest political issues are multifaceted, and complex. Therefore, any method that attempts to reduce such issues into a single dimension will oversimplify the matter, or may obfuscate many of the intricacies inherent in political affairs. However, the key to such classification tasks is to ensure that the “distinction is valid, on average” (Johnston and Wronski, 2015, p. 40). Looking at the ranking system in Table 2.5, it is clear that issues meeting Carmines and Stimson’s theoretical criteria for being hard trend toward the lower end on the difficulty scale, while easy issues tend to be at the higher end. In order to distinguish between hard and easy issues, I use a median split. As a result, issues 1-8 are considered hard, while 9-14 are easy.

**Public Perceptions of Hard and Easy Issues**

The next task is to examine the extent to which public perceptions of political issues actually differ, based on whether it is classified as easy or hard. This assessment is critical to the following chapters because it will verify whether the public *actually perceives* hard and easy issues to be different, while also allowing me to rank the issues in terms of difficulty relative to one another.
Because each issue itself constitutes an observation, the sample size here is very small: just eight observations for hard issues and six for easy. To account for this small sample size, a Wilcoxon Rank Sum test is used to assess differences in perceptions between hard and easy issues. This process is the non-parametric analog to a two-sample t-test, thus removing any assumption of a normal distribution. It is additionally insensitive to outliers because rather than relying on the actual values of the observations, it is based upon ranking the order of the observations. The test statistic for the Wilcoxon Rank Sum test, $W$, is calculated by ranking the observations between both groups, starting with a ranking of 1 for the observation with the smallest value, then a ranking of 2 for the next smallest, etc. The ranks in each group are then added together, and then tested for the extent to which the rank sum of one group significantly differs from the other.

One thing to note about the analysis to follow is that the scale used to determine issue difficulty is reliant on many of the variables that were included in the factor analysis, such as certainty and level of understanding. In other words: these items were included in the very metric that was ultimately ranked the issues from easiest to hardest. The analysis to follow is therefore, in a sense, redundant but necessary. The factor analysis indicates that understanding of the issue, the percentage of respondents needing more information, and professed certainty about one’s opinion load onto the issue difficulty factor. It is not surprising, then, that the public reports that they understand easy issues
significantly better than hard ones, or are significantly more certain in their easy issue attitudes.

However, I include the following analysis for three reasons: the first, is clarity. The factor analysis is necessary to illustrate that certain metrics of issue difficulty “go together.” However, this does not clearly explain differences in how the public actually perceives these issues. The table below provides a much clearer illustration to aid in interpretation of the factor analysis. The second reason I include the following analysis is to confirm that the differences in perceptions of issue difficulty are not only often statistically significant, but substantively meaningful. Finally, the factor analysis is based upon the extent to which the variables load onto the same factor within the same issue (in this case, abortion policy). The analysis does not compare these metrics across issues. The proportion of respondents correctly placing the parties on the issue, for example, does not load onto the issue difficulty factor for abortion. However this does not mean that this variable tells us nothing about the differences between hard and easy issues because these metrics were not included in the factor analysis across issues.
Figure 2.2: Hard vs. Easy Issue Difference of Medians
Figure 2.2 highlights two important findings related to this dissertation: that the public indeed differentially perceives hard and easy issues on many dimensions, and that hard issues are the least likely platform for value-based constraint. These results suggest that in many cases, the public sees hard issues much differently than easy issues.

Overall, individuals offer significantly more thoughts about easy issues relative to hard ones, and report understanding easy issues better (H$_{2.1}$, H$_{2.2}$). Participants are more likely to say that they need more information before making a decision about hard issues (H$_{2.3}$), and are significantly more certain in their opinions on easy issues (H$_{2.4}$). This trend persists not only for items included in the factor analysis (percentage of respondents needing more information, and opinion certainty), but also for items that did not load onto the difficulty factor, such as the percentage of respondents who say that morals are necessary to decide on the issue. Taken as a whole, the findings in this investigation suggest that hard issues are the least familiar to the general public. Thus, if values-based constraint exists for these relatively obscure and poorly understood issues, then individuals are capable of utilizing their core values for even the most difficult problems in American politics.

Finally, H$_{2.5}$ addresses perceived differences in party stances. I predicted that individuals will, overall, perceive larger partisan stances for easy issues, relative to hard ones. Although individuals are 11% more likely to estimate the
correct party positions for easy issues relative to hard ones, this difference is not statistically significant ($z=1.16$, $p=.24$). That being said, the sophistication-based results ($H_{2.5A}$ and $H_{2.5B}$) provide some interesting findings. The median percentage of correct responses for easy issues is 64% for novices and 82% for sophisticates, which, as predicted, is not statistically significant ($z=1.12$, $p=.26$). Additionally, sophisticates are significantly more likely to provide the correct issue positions for hard issues, relative to novices. The median for sophisticates is 75% correct issue positions for hard issues, versus 45% for novices ($z=-2.94$, $p=.00$). This suggests that sophisticates and novices are similarly able to estimate where each party stands for easy issues, but only sophisticates are able to do so for hard issues. Thus, while the overall result for $H_{2.5}$ fails to attain statistical significance, $H_{2.5A}$ and $H_{2.5B}$ provides evidence that sophistication is a crucial component to placing party positions on hard issues.

Several other sophistication-based effects were also hypothesized. Overall, the results suggest that sophisticates differ significantly from novices in their understanding of hard issues, which supports my theory that sophisticates have more considerations when it comes to such issues, relative to novices. First, sophisticates offer significantly more thoughts about hard issues, relative to novices ($Md_{Soph}=2.91; Md_{Nov}=1.92; z=-3.37, p=.00$). However, sophisticates also offer significantly more thoughts about easy issues compared to novices.
This suggests an informational asymmetry between the two groups as they consider both hard and easy issues.

H2.2A is also supported: sophisticates rate their understanding for hard issues significantly higher than novices ($Md_{Soph}=4.61; Md_{Nov}=3.67; z=-3.26, p=.00$). However, sophisticates also rate their understanding of easy issues much higher than novices ($Md_{Soph}=5.03; Md_{Nov}=4.38; z=-2.88, p=.00$). This suggests that novices have more difficulty reasoning about easy and hard issues alike, and that these differences are exacerbated for hard issues.

H2.3A and H2.3B assert that sophisticates are significantly less likely than novices to say they need more information about both hard and easy issues. Although novices tend to be more likely to say they need more information before making a decision about hard issues, this difference is only marginally significant ($Md_{Soph}=30\%; Md_{Nov}=43\%; z=1.79, p=.07$). The same pattern holds for easy issues ($Md_{Soph}=22\%; Md_{Nov}=29\%; z=1.60, p=.11$). Thus, even though novices rate their understanding of hard issues significantly lower than sophisticates, they are not significantly more inclined to say they need more information about it.

H2.4A and H2.4B suggest that sophisticates ought to be significantly more certain about their issue attitudes than novices. This is the case for hard issues ($Md_{Soph}=4.71; Md_{Nov}=3.84; z=-3.36, p=.00$), as well as easy issues ($Md_{Soph}=5.03; Md_{Nov}=4.49; z=-2.88, p=.00$).
### Table 2.7: Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Supported?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.1} ): Individuals will offer significantly more thoughts about easy issues, relative to hard issues.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.1A} ): Sophisticates will offer significantly more thoughts on hard issues, relative to novices.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.1B} ): Sophisticates and novices will offer a similar number of thoughts regarding easy issues.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.2} ): Individuals will rate their understanding of easy issues as significantly higher than hard issues.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.2A} ): Sophisticates will rate their understanding of hard issues significantly higher than novices.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.2B} ): Sophisticates and novices will offer similar ratings of their own understanding for easy issues.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.3} ): A higher percentage of individuals will say that people need more information before making a decision about hard issues, relative to easy ones.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.3A} ): Sophisticates will be significantly less likely to say they need more information about hard issues, relative to novices.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.3B} ): Sophisticates will be significantly less likely to say they need more information about easy issues, relative to novices.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.4} ): Individuals will be more certain in their easy issue attitudes, relative to their hard issue attitudes.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.4A} ): Sophisticates will be significantly more certain in their hard issue attitudes, relative to novices.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.4B} ): Sophisticates will be significantly more certain in their easy issue attitudes, relative to novices.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.5} ): Individuals will be better able to correctly estimate party position on easy issues, relative to hard issues.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.5A} ): Sophisticates will be better able to correctly estimate party positions for hard issues, relative to novices.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( H_{2.5B} ): Novices and sophisticates will be able to similarly estimate the correct party positions for easy issues.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

This chapter represents one of the first systematic attempts to study the nature of issue difficulty in the general public. Although scholars have assumed that the public perceives hard and easy issues differently, few studies have systematically tackled how to measure issue difficulty, and the way in which difficulty shapes public perceptions of political issues. Overall, I find that the public indeed thinks about hard and easy issues differently, and that these informational asymmetries are exacerbated between political novices and sophisticated.

What happens when an issue is easy? In other words, what happens when the Democratic and Republican parties have staked clear and opposing claims on a long-running political issue? First, individuals offer more thoughts about these issues, although political sophisticated have significantly more thoughts about both hard and easy issues, relative to novices.

Secondly, individuals admit that they better understand easy issues, relative to hard ones. However, sophisticated report a better understanding of both easy and hard issues, which suggests that novices have more difficulty reasoning about political issues, regardless of whether the parties have voiced their positions. Third, when an issue is familiar to the public and the parties have offered clear cues, individuals are significantly more certain in their issue attitudes, though sophisticated tend to be more certain in their issue attitudes.
than novices for both easy and hard issues.

Finally, the results here demonstrate that those who know nothing about politics are just as able to estimate the position of each party on easy political issues as those who know a great deal about politics. This relationship is not replicated for hard issues: only sophisticates are able to place the party’s stances relative to one another.

Taken as a whole, the results here suggest that novices should have particular difficulty applying their core values to hard issues. They have fewer thoughts about these issues than sophisticates, they report understanding them less, they are more uncertain, and they are not even able to rely upon partisan cues for guidance. These findings are important for two reasons. First, the values literature has largely assumed that if values predict the easy issue attitudes of novices, that this relationship will hold for hard issues. The results here suggest that novices should have difficulty with hard issues; thus evidence of value-based constraint would be particularly striking amongst this group. Secondly, this study provides evidence suggesting that on quite a few dimensions, the public has more difficulty dealing with hard political issues.

Finally, very few pieces have delved into how to measure issue difficulty, instead relying on problematic assumptions about “moral” issues versus “technical” issues, as if these categories are mutually exclusive. The findings here demonstrate the need for a more specific theory for how hard issues actually
differ from easy issues in the minds of the public. Here, I provide three metrics that have proven helpful in classifying issue difficulty in the mass public: needing more information, understanding of the issue, and attitude certainty.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for the empirical analyses of the relationship between core values and political attitudes to follow. Here, I demonstrate that Carmines and Stimson’s empirical classification method is insufficient to distinguish hard versus easy issues. Given the utility of examining issue difficulty as a moderator even in non-presidential election years, it is necessary to devise a system that allows researchers to make this distinction even when an issue is *not* salient in a given election. Indeed, many of the hardest issues are not particularly salient to voters, even in an election year. More so, the core of my theory is value-based constraint amongst novices would be a particularly powerful indicator of their capacity to reason about political issues. The results here demonstrate that novices do indeed have a more difficult time considering hard issues, which makes the case that I am providing a hard test for values in the following chapter.

In order to drill down what makes an issue easy or hard, I also present the first semi-continuous measure of issue difficulty that allows for one to quantify the extent to which an issue is easy or hard, even when the issue is not particularly salient in an election year. This is the first step to assessing the extent to which
values inform attitudes on everyday political issues, some of which are more visible than others. Again, if one is to make claims about the capacity of the public to reason about hard issues, it is necessary to examine the extent to which the public actually perceives the issue as hard. In this chapter, I demonstrate that these perceptions indeed exist in the general public.

Now that a clear understanding of the key moderator of interest has been obtained, the remaining chapters will turn to examining the way values operate amongst varying degrees of issue difficulty.
Chapter 3: The Influence of Values on Hard Issues

Thus far, I have presented a theory of value-based reasoning which argues that the vastly uninformed American public is indeed capable of using core political values to inform their policy preferences, even on the most politically difficult issues. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that the public perceives meaningful differences between hard and easy issues. The general public has more thoughts about easy issues, relative to hard ones, they are more likely to admit they need additional information before deciding on hard issues, and only sophisticates are able to accurately place partisan differences for hard issues, relative to novices. Now that we know there are real, substantive differences between easy and hard issues amongst the American public, the question remains: Can the least informed segments of society use their core values to reason about hard issues?

In this chapter, I will explore the extent to which core values such as liberty and equality are predictive of hard issue attitudes, and whether this relationship is stronger amongst sophisticates. Evidence of value-based constraint for hard issues is important because previous investigations of this type of reasoning in the mass public have only looked for this relationship in the most likely place: easy issues. The easy issue is inherently symbolic and naturally
“structures voters ‘gut responses’ to candidates and political parties” (Carmines and Stimson, 1980, p. 75). In this way, past investigations have failed to account for the fact that hard issues actually exist, and are no less important than their easy counterparts. Yet, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which the public is capable of using their values to structure their preferences on these difficult issues. This chapter seeks to bridge this gap.

**Hypotheses**

The key hypothesis in this chapter is that values structure the preferences of the general public when evaluating hard issues.

H$_{3.1}$: Core political values will significantly predict the hard issue attitudes of novices and sophisticates.

Thus far, two competing hypotheses have been posited in the literature. The first is the Sophistication Interaction Model (SIM), which asserts that only sophisticates have the political knowledge and skills necessary to attach values to attitudes on specific political issues (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller 1992). This is because sophisticates possess a denser web of interconnected political knowledge, which allows them to see the connections between their values and their attitudes.

The SIM is contrasted with the General Use Model (GUM), which emphasizes the psychological function of values. Values are evolutionary constructs that allow us to assess desirable outcomes using our gut instincts.
(Rokeach, 1973). In essence, applying values to real-world issues is something that individuals do by nature: politics should be no different. This is coupled with the idea that political values are culturally entrenched; they are continually reinforced via socialization through families and schools. As a result, “people do not need to be ideologues in order to evaluate politics on the basis of beliefs and values. To some extent, policies and actions are simply judged right or wrong because of their implications for deeply held values” (Feldman, 1988, p. 418).

Though both models have enjoyed some support in the political science literature, these investigations have focused exclusively upon easy issues (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2001). In this chapter, I extend the SIM and GUM to investigate the potential for values to continue to serve as attitudinal predictors for hard issues. The overall goal of this chapter is to more fully account for the role that core political values play in shaping public opinion on political issues.

I hypothesize that values will predict political attitudes toward hard issues because political content is virtually inescapable in our society. Though novices may not seek out or pay attention to politics, political content is embedded in a variety of sources. There is quite a bit of empirical evidence to suggest that even politically uninterested individuals are (1) exposed to political information, and (2) able to make use of it.\(^\text{11}\) As mentioned in Ch. 1, the American public is regularly exposed to political content (Niven et al., 2003). More so, recent work

\(^{11}\text{A more thorough review of this literature is provided in Chapter 1.}\)
on “thin slice judgements” in social psychology suggests that individuals are far more perceptive of their surroundings than we often give them credit for (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999). Finally, scholarship on heuristics in political science demonstrates that in many cases, individuals can get by with minimal information (Lupia, 1993; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). This, of course, is all in addition to the information about politics provided through childhood socialization and formal education. Taken as a whole, these threads suggest that political novices have some minimal foundation about politics, even if they are not explicitly paying attention to current affairs or able to answer the textbook-like questions about politics that political scientists so often ask.

Values are, in a sense, the lowest common denominator of human reasoning. They serve a variety of evolutionary goals to advance survival of the individual and the group. As Schwartz explains, values are “cognitive representations of three universal requirements: (a) biological needs, (b) interactional requirements for interpersonal coordination, and (c) societal demand for group welfare and survival” (Schwartz, p. 550, 1987). The application of values to specific problems is a deeply-rooted feature of human cognition. Therefore, anyone ought to be able to apply them to specific issues, even if they are not particularly informed about that topic.
Chapter 2 also demonstrated that sophisticates have significantly more considerations about hard issues, relative to novices. These considerations likely include values, but also other, more concrete criteria such as partisan stances, or unintended consequences of the policy. Novices, on the other hand, are not privy to these considerations because they lack the basic knowledge necessary to place a hard issue within the broader political landscape. As a result, novices likely have little else upon which to base their attitude other than their core values. This opens up the possibility that values may therefore be stronger predictors for political novices evaluating hard issues, because it is their only signal about the acceptability of the policy proposal. I call this possibility the Reverse Sophistication Interaction Model (RSIM).

This yields an exploratory hypothesis that has been previously unconsidered: that values may actually be stronger predictors of hard issue attitudes for novices rather than sophisticates:

E-H₃.2: Values will more strongly predict the hard issue attitudes of novices, as opposed to sophisticates.

**Methods**

Data for this investigation are drawn from Study 1, which is described more fully in Chapter 2. To review, the study consists of a census-representative sample of 1,079 American adults. The sample was acquired through Qualtrics in the summer of 2015. 49 respondents were eliminated after failing an attention
screening question, which left a total of 1,030 respondents. Full study
characteristics are found in the appendix.

Participants answered a series of questions about their political values,
which were derived from the 2006 American National Election Studies Pilot. The
questions include:

**Equality (General):** How much like you is someone who believes everyone
should be treated equally?

**Liberty:** How much like you is someone who believes that there should be a
guarantee of the widest freedom possible to everyone to think and act as they
consider most appropriate?

**Equality of Outcome:** How much like you is someone who believes in
narrowing the gap in wealth and power between the rich and the poor?

**Tolerance:** How much like you is someone who supports another person’s right
to speak or act as they wish, even if you don’t agree with it?

**Personal Responsibility:** How much like you is someone who believes that
people should be held responsible for their actions and decisions?

A rating of 1 indicates “Not very much like me,” while a rating of 6
indicates “Very much like me.”
The 2006 ANES Pilot tests two types of values questions. The first consists of questions similar to the ones described above, in which participants are asked to indicate “How much like you is someone who...” These questions are derived from the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) designed by Schwartz (2003). The second type is a set of questions derived from the World Values Surveys (WVS). In-depth comparisons of the two approaches have found that the PVQ is preferable to the WVS, as the binary nature of the WVS questions “do a poor job of conceptualizing the multifaceted, variable, and generally-positive valence of human values” (Hitlin & Kramer, 2007, p. 5). For this reason, as well as the substantial evidence speaking to the validity and reliability of the PVQ measures (Schwartz et al., 2001), the PVQ question format was adopted for my own measures.

Table 3.1: Support for Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of Outcome</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pers. Resp.</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although most respondents rate the above values quite favorably, there is still some variation in the extent to which certain values are rated more highly than others. Personal responsibility and equality enjoy the highest support, while equality of outcome is the least supported value.

Participants also answered a series of demographic questions, as well as questions assessing their interest in, attention to, and knowledge about politics. As explained in Chapter 2, a Principal Component Analysis was conducted in order to simplify the sophistication measures onto a single scale. Knowledge, interest, and attention all load onto the same factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .68$) and were therefore combined into a single sophistication measure ranging from 0 (novice) to 1 (sophisticate). More details about this process can be found in Chapter 2 and the appendix.

Following these preliminary items, participants were then randomly assigned to evaluate four political issues, out of a total of fourteen (see Table 2.1). These issues include putatively “easy” issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as hard ones, such as nuclear energy policy. Chapter 2 was dedicated to exploring the differences between hard and easy issues, and generating a continuous classification system that allows issues to be ranked, relative to one another, in terms of difficulty (see Table 2.5). This ranking was then used to determine which issues represented the easiest and hardest of the set.
In order to test the main hypothesis and exploratory hypothesis in this chapter, nuclear energy expansion, providing clean needles to drug users and religious freedom laws for vaccinations are used as exemplary hard issues, while abortion and same-sex marriage are used as easy issues for comparison. These issues were selected because (1) they meet Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) theoretical criteria for hard and easy issues, and (2) the analyses in Chapter 2 suggests that the public indeed perceives nuclear energy, abortion opt-out laws for medical practitioners, and religious freedom laws as significantly more difficult than same-sex marriage and abortion\(^\text{12}\).

The question wording for each issue is as follows:

**Nuclear Energy.** To what extent do you support expanding the use of nuclear energy to provide energy to the United States? (1 = Strongly Oppose; 6 = Strongly Support).

**Abortion Opt-Out Laws.** To what extent do you support or oppose a law that allows pharmacists and health providers to opt out of providing medicine or surgical procedures that result in abortion? (1 = Strongly Oppose; 6 = Strongly Support).

\(^{12}\) Abortion opt-out laws and clean needles for drug users occupy the third and fourth positions on the issue difficulty ranking from Chapter 2, respectively. These were used for investigation rather than the second hardest issue (the Iran nuclear deal) because there was little a priori reason to believe that the values investigated here would actually apply to this issue.
Needle Exchange Programs. To what extent do you support government funding to provide clean needles to drug users in an effort to prevent the spread of infectious diseases? (1 = Strongly Oppose; 6 = Strongly Support)

Abortion. Do you think abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances? (1 = Legal under any circumstances; 4 = Illegal under any circumstances)

Same-Sex Marriage. This is the idea that marriages between same-sex couples should be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights are traditional marriage. To what extent do you support or oppose same-sex marriage? (1 = Strongly oppose; 6 = Strongly support).

Using support for needle exchange programs (NEP’s) as an example, the following table highlights my expectations for the key variables in each model. Needle exchange programs are initiatives that provide clean needles to intravenous drug users in order to prevent the spread of infectious disease. I expect that equality will be positively related to support for these programs because they, broadly, provide services to those in need while also benefitting the public at large.
Table 3.2: Expectations for Needle Exchange Programs (NEP’s):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Expectation</th>
<th>GUM</th>
<th>SIM</th>
<th>RSIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novice Rating of NEP’s:</strong></td>
<td>Equality variable is statistically significant</td>
<td>Interaction between sophistication and equality is statistically significant</td>
<td>Interaction between sophistication and equality is statistically significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Equality Priority: 2/6</td>
<td>Low Equality Priority: 1.5/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Equality Priority 4/6</td>
<td>High Equality Priority 5.5/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sophisticate Rating of NEP’s:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Equality Priority: 2.5/6</td>
<td>High Equality Priority 4.5/6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantive Example</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novices:</strong> 4 points, or 67% of NEP scale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SophISTICS:</strong> 2 points, or 34% of NEP scale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abs. value of difference between high and low prioritizers</th>
<th>GUM</th>
<th>SIM</th>
<th>RSIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 points, or 34% of NEP scale</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 points, or 67% of NEP scale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If the GUM is supported, then the equality variable should be statistically significant. This variable is interpreted as the effect of equality on attitudes toward NEP’s when all other covariates - including sophistication - are 0. Thus, a significant coefficient indicates that equality predicts the issue attitudes of political novices. If the GUM is supported, we ought to see at least a moderate difference between novices who highly prioritize equality and those who don’t. The hypothetical values provided here indicate such a relationship (a 2-point difference, which represents 34% of the full NEP scale).

Evidence for the SIM and RSIM rest within the interaction: we ought to observe a statistically significant interaction for the Sophistication*Equality coefficient. Which model is supported, however, depends on the nature of the interaction. If the SIM is supported, high prioritizing sophisticates should offer much higher evaluations of NEP’s than low prioritizing sophisticates. The absolute value of this difference ought to be much larger than that that of novices. In the hypothetical scenario in Table 3.2, there is a 4-point difference in support for NEP’s between high and low prioritizing sophisticates. Conversely, if the RSIM is supported, the absolute value of the difference between high and low prioritizing novices should be much larger than that of sophisticates.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the pattern that is indicative of hard issues: issue position should be tied to vote choice for sophisticates, but not novices. This indicates that the issue has been constructed by elites for those who are
interested in and attentive to politics, but not for those who aren’t - they have not been exposed to this information. Easy issues are well-understood by the masses, whereas only sophisticates are able to make political sense of hard issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). Using abortion opt-out laws as an example, we see that this issue indeed fits the hard pattern.
Figure 3.1 is the result of replicating Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) model of determining issue difficulty, using the following equation:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_1 X_1 \times \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon \]

where \( Y \) = Vote Choice, \( X_1 \) = Issue Preference, and \( X_2 \) = Sophistication.

The y-axis in Table 3.1 represents the probability that one reports having supported Barack Obama in the 2012 presidential election. The x-axis is one’s attitudes toward laws that allow medical providers to opt out of services that result in an abortion, such as providing the prescribed medication or performing
the procedure itself. Those who are *most* supportive of these laws should be *least* likely to support the Democratic candidate. The horizontal line for novices indicates that novices do not tie their attitudes on this issue to presidential vote choice. Novices who strongly oppose abortion opt-out laws have a 75% probability of supporting Obama, which is consistent with the expectation for this issue. However, novices who strongly support these laws are actually *more* likely to support Obama, with an 82% probability.

This does not mimic the behavior of sophisticates. Sophisticates who strongly oppose these laws have an 80% probability of supporting Obama, which again, is what one would expect. However, those who strongly support the opt-out laws have only a 30% probability of supporting Obama. This pattern is consistent with the expectation for hard issues. The attitudes of novices do not mimic those of sophisticates. Additionally magnitude of the difference in attitudes between novices and sophisticates is seven times that of novices. Clearly, sophisticates are much more adept at mapping their preferences on this issue along partisan lines.

Given the present evidence, we can be reasonably assured that the difficult issues of interest in this chapter are indeed hard. While nuclear energy policy, abortion opt-out laws and programs to provide clean needles to drug users are sometimes covered in the news, these issues are far more obscure to the average voter than an issue like same-sex marriage or abortion. Due to this relative
obscurity, it is not immediately clear where each party stands on the issue. These are not issues that are often debated by national candidates, and generally not issues in which candidates from either party consistently take a clear stance. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that one’s position on these issues forms the novice’s “gut response” to the parties, thus fitting Carmines and Stimson’s theoretical criteria for hard issues (1980). Additionally, using the metrics that were explored in Chapter 2, it is clear that nuclear energy, abortion opt-out laws, and needle exchange programs represent three of the most difficult issues in the data set for which political values are theoretically relevant.

**Analysis**

The dependent variables of interest are attitudes toward expanding nuclear energy, abortion opt-out laws, providing clean needles to drug users, abortion, and same-sex marriage. To assess the extent to which values predict attitudes toward each of these issues, the attitude is modeled as a function of:

**Partisan Identification**\(^{13}\). Measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican).

**Education.** Measured on a 8-point scale ranging from 1 (Middle School) to 8 (Professional/Phd).

**Age.** Measured on a 15-point scale ranging from 1 (18-20 years old) to 15 (85+).

\(^{13}\) Full descriptives on these issues can be found in the Appendix.
**African-American.** Measured as a dichotomous variable where 0 = not African-American, and 1 = African-American.

**Income.** Measured on a scale ranging from 1 (Less than $10,000/year) to 11 ($500,000/year or more).

**Gender.** Measured dichotomously where 1=Male, and 2=Female.

**Sophistication.** Measured on a continuous scale from 0 (novice) to 1 (sophisticate).

**Relevant Value.** Each model is estimated using one relevant value (such as equality of outcome, or tolerance).

**Sophistication*Relevant Value.** The relevant value is also interacted with sophistication to examine the extent to which the use of that value is conditioned on political expertise.

Hypothesis 3.1 predicts that values ought to predict the hard issue attitudes of novices and sophisticates alike. Therefore, we should expect the “Relevant Value” coefficient to be statistically significant, which would support the GUM. Sophistication is coded on a scale from 0 to 1, meaning that a significant coefficient for values indicates that the value predicts the issue attitude *even for those who score 0 on the sophistication measure* - in other words, novices.
The SIM predicts that the relationship between values and attitudes ought to be stronger for sophisticates, than for novices. This would be indicated by a significant interaction between the value and sophistication. In other words, if the SIM is supported, sophisticates who prize a particular value ought to offer significantly different opinions than sophisticates who do not prize that value. On the other hand, novices ought to offer relatively similar opinions, regardless of the priority they place upon the value.

Exploratory Hypothesis 3.2 suggests the opposite relationship: that values are stronger predictors for novices evaluating hard issues, compared to sophisticates. In Chapter 2, I established that sophisticates indeed have significantly more hard issue considerations than novices. This opens up the possibility that novices have nothing else upon which to base their attitude other than their values. If this is the case, we ought to observe the opposite pattern: novices who highly prioritize a value ought to offer significantly different opinions than novices who place low priority on the value. For the RSIM to be supported, sophisticates would then have to offer relatively similar opinions about the issue, regardless of the priority they place upon the value.

Results

Hard Issue 1: Nuclear Energy Policy

Nuclear energy expansion is a quintessential hard issue (Pollock, Lillie, and Vittes, 1993). It’s technical, obscure, and the analysis from the previous chapter
indicates that it is indeed the most difficult issue within this data set. It deals with policy means, rather than ends (how to create more energy), and it is not an issue that is symbolic of long-standing partisan divisions. Additionally, participants are least likely to see this issue in moral terms: 27% say that one ought to just use basic morals to make a decision about this issue; 63% say they need more information.

Egalitarians ought to be more opposed to nuclear energy expansion than non-egalitarians. Previous scholarship has found that egalitarians tend to oppose nuclear energy expansion due to their belief that an unregulated nuclear market exacerbates income inequality (Peters & Slovic, 1996; Smith, 2001). Egalitarians, in other words, believe that nuclear energy generates income for wealthy power companies, while doing nothing to improve the economic standing of the poor. This, in turn, widens the gap in wealth and power between socioeconomic classes. Therefore, we can expect that those rating equality of outcome highly will be more opposed toward nuclear energy expansion than those who give this value a lower rating.14

Support for nuclear energy policy is estimated via OLS regression with robust standard errors. Because nuclear energy is not a political issue

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14 In the interest of thoroughness, support for nuclear energy expansion was estimated using each of the five values included in the survey. Individuals scoring highly on the measure of tolerance are more likely to support nuclear energy expansion (p=.04); this effect is not conditioned by sophistication (p=.50). The remaining values in the survey (equality, liberty, and personal responsibility) are not significant, nor are their interactions with sophistication.
representative of partisan cleavages, I do not have expectations for the role of partisanship. Nor is there any reason to believe that women ought to be significantly more supportive of nuclear energy than men (or vice versa), or that the preferences of African-Americans will differ significantly from non-blacks. That being said, these demographic variables, as well as several others are included in the model as controls to account for any systematic differences between various demographic groups.
Table 3.3: Support for Nuclear Energy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Equality Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>0.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>0.48+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>2.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of Opp.</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph*Equality</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

Table 3.3 demonstrates that Republicans tend to be more supportive of nuclear energy expansion, than Democrats, (p=.02). On average, strong
Democrats rate nuclear energy expansion at a 3.5, versus strong Republicans, who offer a rating of 4.1, all else equal. Thus, while Republicans tend to be more supportive of nuclear energy expansion the preferences of both groups are relatively moderate.

On average, African-Americans are also slightly more supportive of nuclear energy policy, however, this is also only marginally significant (p=.07). African-Americans rate the issue at 4.1, all else equal, while whites and other non-black groups rate it at a 3.7. Thus, regardless of race, individuals tend to be relatively supportive of nuclear energy. Substantively, there is little difference between racial groups in support for this issue.

Sophistication on it’s own, surprisingly, predicts support for nuclear energy. Those who score more highly on the sophistication scale are significantly more supportive of nuclear energy expansion than political novices (p=.05). On average, sophisticates rate nuclear energy a full point higher than novices (4.09 versus 3.08). One reason for this could be that sophisticates have the technical knowledge necessary to understand that nuclear power plants are actually quite safe, despite well-publicized nuclear meltdowns. Nuclear events such as Chernobyl or Fukushima Daiichi were indeed catastrophic. However, there are hundreds of nuclear power plants operating across 30 different countries. Thus, while nuclear meltdowns are disastrous, they are also incredibly rare. Sophisticates are likely more aware of this information than novices when evaluating the desirability of
nuclear power plants. Therefore, sophisticates tend to be more supportive of nuclear energy expansion.

Why is it that sophistication predicts attitudes toward nuclear energy policy, while education does not? Education actually fails to predict support for any of the issues explored in this chapter, while sophistication predicts attitudes for some of the issues.\textsuperscript{15} This is largely because education, though correlated with political sophistication, is a much broader concept ($\rho=.33$, $p=.00$). One can have a PhD in Biochemistry, and not be particularly interested in or knowledgeable about politics affairs. In other words, sophistication is a more precise measure of interest, attention, and knowledge of political affairs specifically than the education measure. Education builds the \textit{capacity} for one to understand political affairs, thus increasing the likelihood that they are interested in and attentive toward such matters. However, the education variable on its own taps a much broader concept than that of sophistication.

Neither equality nor its interaction with sophistication predicts support for nuclear energy policy ($p=.13$ and $p=.22$, respectively). Sophisticates provide nearly the same rating, regardless of the emphasis they place upon equality of outcome (4.2 for low prioritizers, versus 4.0 for high). The difference in rating between low and high prioritizing novices is much larger, though it still fails to attain statistical significance. Low prioritizing novices rate nuclear energy

\textsuperscript{15} This result is robust to several coding schemes.

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expansion an average of 2.1; high prioritizing novices rate the issue at 3.5. Thus, the differences between novices is nearly 24% of the full scale of nuclear energy support; for sophisticates, the difference between high and low prioritizers is only 3% of the scale.

The results for the hard issue of nuclear energy suggest that although the relationship between equality and attitudes toward nuclear energy expansion is substantively stronger for novices, as evidenced by the larger difference in support amongst novice high and low prioritizers, versus sophisticated high and low prioritizers, equality does not significantly predict the attitudes of any of these groups. Low and high prioritizers of equality offer statistically similar opinions on nuclear energy expansion, regardless of their level of sophistication. Overall, this suggests that sophisticates and novices alike have difficulty applying core values to this hard issue.

These results conflict with previous research, which has suggested that high egalitarians are significantly less supportive of nuclear energy (Peters & Slovic, 1996; Smith, 2001). However, equality here is measured differently than in these studies. Peters and Slovic use a composite measure of egalitarianism, that is based on a series of agree/disagree statements. Some of these items have an intuitive relationship with common notions of egalitarianism, such as “We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country,” or “If people in this country were treated equally, we would have fewer problems.” However, some of their
other measures are less inherent, such as “I have very little control over risks to my health,” or “Those in power often withhold information about things that are important to us” (1996). Not only this, but their equality measure conflates equality in the sense of treating everyone the same with equality as conceived as narrowing the gap in wealth and power between the rich and the poor. In other words: their measure of egalitarianism measures multiple dimensions of equality, combined with a broader orientation toward being skeptical of authority.

Smith’s measures also combine multiple concepts of equality. His measure is based on three statements assessing the extent to which one agrees that “The world would be a more peaceful place if its wealth were divided more equally among nations,” “We need to dramatically reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor, whites and people of color, and men and women,” and finally, “What our country needs is a fairness revolution to make the distribution of goods more equal” (2002, p. 176). These, again, tap into notions of not only narrowing the gap in wealth within the country, but also amongst countries, in addition to gender and racial equality.

In contrast, I use a more simplistic and fine-tuned measure of egalitarianism than other scholars who have explored the relationship between egalitarianism and nuclear energy. One reason why equality here is not significant, then, may be due to its measurement. However, equality, at least in this study, does not significantly predict the attitudes of novices nor sophisticates.
Thus, in the case of nuclear energy, I find no support for the GUM or SIM.

**Hard Issue 2: Abortion Opt-Out Laws**

Abortion opt-out laws focus upon a physician’s or pharmacist’s right to refuse to provide services that result in abortion on the grounds that providing the service would conflict with their religious beliefs. 45 states have some type of law that allows medical providers to refuse services that result in abortion. Note that this concept is different from allowing providers to refuse contraceptive services - only 12 states allow this in some form. In this study, 36% of respondents report that they need more information before making a decision about this issue (compared to 23% who say they need more information before making a decision about abortion). 60% say this is an issue in which people need to just use their morals (compared to 72% who say this about abortion).

Access to abortion services is often couched in terms of equality of outcome. Proponents cite the economic inequalities at stake when abortion services are restricted. Legal scholars, for example, arguing in favor of abortion rights assert “that abortion restrictions deprive women of control over the timing of motherhood and so predictably exacerbate the inequalities in educational, economic, and political life engendered by childbearing and childrearing” (Siegel & Siegel, 2012, p. 163). Therefore, equality of outcome is the primary value used in this model.

Support for opt-out laws is estimated via OLS regression with robust
standard errors. I anticipate that Republicans will be more supportive of opt-out laws than Democrats. I also control for the frequency of religious service attendance. I expect those who attend church more frequently will be significantly more supportive of the opt-out laws. Finally, I expect that those more supportive of equality will be significantly less supportive of the opt-out laws than those who are least supportive of equality.
Table 3.3: Support for Abortion Opt-Out Laws

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Equality Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Service</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.13+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>1.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>0.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph*Equality</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.05)</td>
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<table>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10
As Table 3.3 demonstrates, Republicans are indeed significantly more supportive of opt-out laws than Republicans (p=.00), as are frequent church attendees (p=.00). However, no age-based differences are found, suggesting that older individuals are not more opposed to these laws than younger individuals.

Interestingly, sophistication predicts support for opt-out laws (p=.00). On average, novices rate the law at 4.02, all else equal, while sophisticates rate it at 3.45. Substantively, this represents about a 20% difference in the scale. Why is it that novices would be so supportive of opt-out laws, even when controlling for things like partisanship and religious service attendance? The open-ended responses provide some clues. Novices were more likely to focus on one specific feature of this law: that it prevents abortions. Even those who strongly oppose the law focus on this feature. One novice strongly opposing opt-out laws offers the following considerations in their response: “baby,” “right to live,” and “not fault of infant.” Out of all of the novices responding to this question, the vast majority focus on the fact that the law presumably prevents abortions, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the law.

Sophisticates, on the other hand, offer much more varied responses. Sophisticates supporting the opt-out law tended to list similar thoughts to novices across all spectrums of support, such as “life begins at conception” and “murder.” However, sophisticates supporting the measure also listed other types of arguments, such as “religious freedom,” and “no one should be forced to end a
life.” Therefore, even sophisticates who agree on the opt-out law offer very different responses as to why it should be permitted. Some focus on the abortion aspect, while others focus on the freedom aspect.

While novices tend to focus on abortion in their listed thoughts regardless of whether they supported the opt-out law or not, sophisticates at varying ends of the opt-out law spectrum offered different sorts of thoughts. Some focus on the egalitarian arguments against the law. One sophisticate cites “unfairness to the poor” as a thought they had while considering the issue, while another lists “availability of treatment to all women.” Others cite the the health consequences of allowing providers to refuse services, or even legal precedent regarding abortion rights. On average, sophisticates offered nearly twice as many thoughts on this issue as novices (3.00 vs. 1.69). These findings suggest that not only do the number of thoughts vary between the groups, but so do the types.

Equality predicts attitudes toward this hard issue (p=.02), as does the interaction between equality and sophistication (p=.00). However, the negative sign on the interaction indicates that equality does not predict the attitudes of novices and sophisticates in the same manner.
As predicted, sophisticates scoring low on the equality measure are highly supportive of the opt-out law, while sophisticates scoring highly on the measure are less supportive; the difference in support represents 23% of the opt-out law scale. Novices exhibit the opposite pattern. Those scoring highly on the equality measure are most supportive of opt-out laws, while those scoring lowest on equality are the least supportive. The difference in support equates to 37% of the scale. This indicates that values play a stronger role for novices, but in the opposite pattern than predicted.

Given that novices are significantly more likely to support the opt-out laws relative to sophisticates, it is perhaps not surprising that egalitarian novices are
also highly supportive. As mentioned previously, this is likely a product of the extent to which novices focus almost exclusively on the prevention of abortion with respect to this law, as opposed to other considerations such as the right of the health care provider to exercise their religious liberty. What is surprising, however, is that novices placing a low emphasis upon equality are amongst the most opposed to this law. These individuals are amongst the few novices who offer considerations that differ in nature from the rest of the group, such as “Roe v. Wade,” and “too much judgment.” Novices who score low on equality but are opposed to opt-out laws seem to focus, at least in their listed thoughts, upon the liberty of the mother, as opposed to the considerations regarding the fetus. Thus, low novice egalitarians place more emphasis upon the liberty aspect of the law than the equality aspect.

**Hard Issue 3: Clean Needles for Drug Users**

Needle exchange programs are a relatively obscure issue in the public health domain. This is an initiative to provide clean needles to intravenous drug users to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, such as hepatitis, or HIV. In this study, 32% of respondents reported that they needed more information about the issue; this is more than six times the proportion of those who say they need more information about the easy issue of same-sex marriage. 62% say that people just need to use their basic moral values to make a decision about clean needle
programs. In contrast, 82% say people need to use their basic moral values to make a decision about same-sex marriage.

In order to assess the influence of values in shaping attitudes toward providing clean needles for drug users, two models are estimated using OLS regression with robust standard errors. The first model includes equality of outcome as the key value of interest, and the second model includes tolerance. Equality of outcome is relevant to this issue because it relates to the belief that individuals ought to be supported, regardless of their particular position in life. Individuals who score highly on the measure of equality should be more supportive of providing clean needles to drug users because it is a way of assisting a group in need (both in terms of income and health) for the benefit of the broader population.

Similarly, tolerance is important to understanding support for providing clean needles, because it taps into the extent to which one is willing to support someone else’s actions, even if they disagree with those behaviors. Individuals who score highly on measures of tolerance are likely willing to recognize that although intravenous drug use should not be condoned, using dirty needles is problematic from a public health standpoint. Therefore, while they don’t support
the individual’s decision to use intravenous drugs, the proliferation of dirty needles within these circles is something that should be mitigated.¹⁶

Support for needle exchange programs is estimated using OLS regression with robust standard errors. I anticipate that although the parties have not publicly debated the issue, Republicans will be significantly less supportive of needle exchange programs than Democrats. Republicans tend to view drug use more harshly than Democrats (Chambliss, 1999); additionally, the question calls attention to the fact that such programs would be paid for through government funds.

Existing literature has demonstrated that blacks receive harsher drug penalties than whites, particularly amongst younger drug offenders (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). Therefore, I would usually expect being African-American to predict more lax attitudes toward drug policies. However, this issue is not about drug offenses or penalties - it is about the intersection of public health and drug use. Therefore, I do not anticipate any significant differences in attitude based on race. Similarly, there is no a priori reason to believe that women will significantly differ in their evaluations from men.

¹⁶ As with nuclear energy, each value included in the survey was used to predict attitudes toward needle exchange programs. The values most intuitively tied to the issue are presented in the main text above. Treating people equally is marginally significant in predicting these attitudes (p=.09), and this effect is stronger for sophisticates (p=.02). Liberty does not significantly predict support for needle exchange programs for novices (p=.73) or for sophisticates (p=.36). Personal responsibility also does not play a role for novices (p=.17) nor sophisticates (p=.21).
Table 3.4: Support for Providing Clean Needles to Drug Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Equality Model</th>
<th>Tolerance Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>-0.26***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.08)</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.05)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-3.35*</td>
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<td>302.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10
Table 3.4 demonstrates that all else equal, Republicans are indeed significantly less likely to support needle exchange programs than Democrats (p=.00). Strong Democrats rate the issue at a 4.0, while strong Republicans give a rating of 2.4, all else equal.

As with nuclear energy policy, sophistication on its own significantly predicts support for needle exchange programs. Here, novices offer higher evaluations of needle exchange programs than sophisticates (p=.01 in the Equality Model, and p=.04 in the Tolerance Model). In both the Equality Model and the Tolerance Model, novices rate the program at 3.5, while sophisticates rate it at 3.1. Thus, although sophistication predicts support for needle exchange programs, substantively, both novices and sophisticates tend to be relatively neutral toward the measure.

Equality of outcome significantly predicts support for needle exchange, even for political novices (p=.03). The interaction between equality and sophistication is also statistically significant (p=.02). Novices who place a low emphasis upon equality are most supportive of needle exchange programs, rating it an average of 4.8. Novices who are highly supportive of equality give a rating of only 2.7; thus the differences in support between both groups of novices equates to about 35% of the scale. Sophisticates who place a low emphasis upon equality
are least supportive of the program, giving it a rating of 2.4, while sophisticates placing a high emphasis upon equality give the program an average rating of 3.6, all else equal. This represents a difference that spans about 20% of the scale.

Yet again, in terms of percentage difference in the scale, novices exhibit a larger spread. However, the 95% confidence intervals for sophisticates are tighter, and (contrary to novices) do not overlap. This suggests that equality is a more precise predictor for sophisticates, relative to novices.

Equality predicts the attitudes of both groups, simultaneously supporting the GUM and SIM. Equality significantly predicts the attitudes of novices, but it is a more precise predictor for sophisticates. Additionally, the patterns yield a puzzling trend: why is it those who are most supportive of needle exchange programs are novices who place a low emphasis upon equality? One argument may be that high equality prioritizers are troubled by the fact that drug use perpetuates cycles of poverty. Not only does drug use divert funds that are used for basic necessities and savings, but it also impedes individuals from maintaining steady jobs.

In looking at the open-ended responses, however, this does not seem to be the case for high prioritizing novices, nor sophisticates who oppose needle exchange programs. Both groups offer the same types of thoughts regarding drug use. Almost all of these fall into one of two categories: (1) that the program encourages illegal drug use, or (2) that tax dollars should not be given to an
illegal activity. One novice scoring .14 out of 1 on the sophistication scale, with a high rating of equality offers the following thoughts: “we shouldn’t support a bad habit,” and “drug use is against the law.” Another individual scoring .84 on the sophistication measure echoes these same sentiments: “encouraging use,” “danger,” and “crime.” Thus it appears that amongst high prioritizers who oppose the measure, the reasons center around the notion of encouraging illegal behaviors, not about the economic consequences for those who use intravenous drugs.

Why is it, then, that low prioritizers are so supportive of the programs? I investigated the open-ended responses of those who place a low emphasis upon equality, but are supportive of needle exchange programs. By and large, their responses fit into only one category: disease prevention. Regardless of sophistication level, low egalitarians who support the measure mention things like “AIDS prevention,” “this could prevent Hep C and other diseases,” and “safety.” Therefore, high egalitarians who oppose needle exchange programs are more focused on the potentially enabling aspect of the law; low egalitarians who support the exchange program are focused on preventing the spread of disease.

The relationship between tolerance and needle exchange attitudes is not as strong. Tolerance does not predict the issue attitudes of novices, holding all else constant (p=.36), and the interaction between tolerance and sophistication is only marginally significant (p=.09). Novices and sophisticates who place a high priority upon tolerance rate exchange programs at 3.27 and 3.52, respectively. In
other words, both groups are relatively neutral toward needle exchange programs. Novices placing a low priority upon tolerance are again most supportive of needle exchange programs, rating it at 4.26. Sophisticates placing a low priority on tolerance are least supportive, rating the issue at 1.62. The difference between high and low prioritizing sophisticates spans about 32% of the scale; for novices, is only about half that, at 17% of the scale. Thus, we see that tolerance is a stronger predictor for sophisticates, however, the 95% confidence intervals for each of the four point estimates in this model overlap. This suggests that tolerance is not as precise a predictor of attitudes toward needle exchange programs as equality.

This makes intuitive sense. Tolerance is typically conceptualized as support for others to exercise their civil rights: for example, allowing a hate group to exercise their right to free speech (Cigler & Joslyn, 2002; Nelson et al., 1997). Intravenous drug use, of course, is not a civil right. Thus, the relationship between tolerance and needle exchange programs is likely too abstract for it to significantly predict issue attitudes in this area. Tolerance is not seen as particularly relevant to this issue.

**Easy Issue Comparison: Same-Sex Marriage and Abortion**

Thus far, I’ve investigated the role of core values in explaining hard issue attitudes. How does this compare to easy issues? Both same-sex marriage and abortion are highly symbolic of partisan divisions. The classification system from
Chapter 2 reveals that same-sex marriage and abortion are the first and second “easiest” issues within the data set, respectively. Equality is a key value for both issues. Proponents of same-sex marriage assert that same-sex couples ought to be given equal recognition under the law. Additionally, pro-choice activists often couch the issue of abortion in terms of providing equal opportunities to women.

Support for same-sex marriage is estimated via OLS regression. Opposition to abortion is measured on a four-point scale; therefore, an ordered logit model is used. Attitudes toward both issues are estimated with robust standard errors. I expect that Republicans will be significantly less supportive of same-sex marriage and abortion than Democrats. I also expect that older individuals will be less supportive of these issues. African-Americans have traditionally been opposed to same-sex rights, as they tend to have a literal interpretation of the Bible (Pew Research Center, 2015). Therefore, I support African-Americans to be significantly less supportive of same-sex marriage than non-blacks. Finally, I also control for the frequency of church attendance in both models, due to the fact that more religious individuals also tend to be more socially conservative.
Table 3.5: Support for Same-Sex Marriage and Abortion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Same-Sex Marriage</th>
<th>Abortion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educ</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.09*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Af. American</td>
<td>-0.78**</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.09+</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.82***</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel. Attendance</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td>0.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>-1.82</td>
<td>-2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.15)</td>
<td>(2.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.48+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph*Equality</td>
<td>0.49+</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.49***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Obs.</td>
<td>297.00</td>
<td>294.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10
As expected, Republicans are significantly less supportive of same-sex marriage than Democrats, and significantly more opposed to abortion (p=.00 in both models). While older individuals are indeed less supportive of same-sex marriage (p=.01), they are not more opposed to abortion than younger individuals (p=.18). Additionally, African-Americans are significantly more opposed to same-sex marriage than other racial groups (p=.01). Finally, regular church attendees are more opposed to same-sex marriage and abortion than less frequent attendees (p=.00).

Turning now to the role of equality in same-sex marriage attitudes, equality does not significantly predict the issue attitudes of political novices (p=.36), but the interaction between sophistication and equality is significant (p=.04). Statistically, political novices offer similar ratings of same-sex marriage, regardless of their orientation toward equality. Novices placing a low emphasis upon equality are actually quite supportive of the issue, rating it an average of 3.9, all else equal. Novices placing a high emphasis upon equality actually provide a lower rating of 3.1. This difference represents about 14% of the same-sex marriage scale.

Sophisticates, however, differ significantly in their opinions, based upon their commitment to equality. Sophisticated prioritizers are highly supportive of same-sex marriage rights, giving the issue an average rating of 4.26. Sophisticated non-prioritizers are least supportive of same-sex marriage, rating the issue at a
2.45, all else equal. This represents a difference of 30% in the scale, which is over twice that of novices.

Why is it that equality fails to predict the issue attitudes of novices? In investigating the open-ended responses, there were a number of sophisticates and novices alike who scored highly on the equality measure, but opposed same-sex marriage. Similarly, there were a number in each group who scored low on the equality measure and supported same-sex marriage. One novice (with a sophistication score of .22 out of 1) reports, despite their low evaluation of equality, that “I believe everyone should have equal rights.” It seems then, that though they don’t view equality as particularly important, this does not preclude them from supporting the rights of same-sex couples. Another individual featuring a sophistication score of .27 rated equality highly, but strongly opposed same-sex marriage. In the open-ended response, the person wrote “religion.”

These types of attitudes are not isolated to novices. One sophisticate (with a sophistication score of 1 out of 1) giving equality the highest score but opposing same sex marriage writes in the open-ended response: “It’s Gods law,” “It’s an abomination,” and “Men should marry women.” However, the most likely explanation is that these “mismatches” between support for equality and same-sex marriage are more frequent amongst novices. As a result, equality is a more precise predictor for sophisticates, relative to novices. Indeed, the confidence intervals around the point estimates for novices are much greater than for
Turning now to abortion policy, equality is marginally significant for novices (p=.07). Yet, the interaction between sophistication and equality is not significant (p=.24). Regardless of support for equality, sophisticates have about a 25% probability of reporting that abortion should be legal under all circumstances, and a 15% probability of reporting that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.

Novices rating equality highly have a 29% probability of reporting that abortion should be legal in all circumstances. Novices who do not place a high emphasis upon equality have only a 5% probability of agreeing with this statement. Although novices placing a high priority upon equality are over 5 times more likely than low prioritizers to support the legality of abortion, the wide confidence intervals for novices suggest that the relationship between equality and abortion attitudes are yet again less precise than for sophisticates.

Here, we explored the role of core values in predicting the attitudes of two easy issues, and saw two different effects. Statistically, the results for same-sex marriage offer support for the SIM, but not the GUM. Equality fails to predict the issue attitudes of novices for this issue, in large part because of the inconsistency of the relationship between equality and support for same-sex marriage for this group. However, equality is a more precise predictor of sophisticates. For abortion attitudes, however, the opposite relationship is
exhibited. Novices who prioritize equality are over five times more likely to support abortion legality than novices who don’t prioritize equality. Sophisticates offer similar responses regardless of their commitment to this values.

Discussion

This chapter draws upon the findings of Chapter 2 in order to assess the role of core political values in shaping political attitudes toward three hard issues: nuclear energy policy, providing clean needles to drug users, and religious vaccination exemptions. These findings are contrasted with the easy issues of same-sex marriage and abortion.

In this chapter, I posit the hypothesis that core values will continue to predict the hard issue attitudes of the ill-informed. I also suggest the exploratory hypothesis that values may be stronger predictors for novices, rather than sophisticates. This is primarily because sophisticates have many considerations upon which to draw when forming their attitude. Novices only have those considerations which are innate: core values.
Table 3.6: Ch. 3 Results List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hard Issues</th>
<th>GUM</th>
<th>SIM</th>
<th>RSIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear Energy (Eq. of Outcome)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Trend is suggestive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion Opt-Out Laws (Equality)</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needle Exchange (Equality)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needle Exchange (Tolerance)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (Marginally)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Easy Issues</th>
<th>GUM</th>
<th>SIM</th>
<th>RSIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same-Sex Marriage (Equality)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (Marginally)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion (Equality)</td>
<td>Yes (Marginally)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Trend is suggestive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates the relationship is in the opposite direction than hypothesized

Table 3.6 provides an overview of the findings from this chapter. One of the key takeaways is that the relationship between values and attitudes of political novices is much more inconsistent than that of sophisticated. Estimates of political attitudes taking into account the interaction between sophistication and values yield much wider confidence intervals for novices, relative to sophisticated. As such, the influence of core values often fails to yield significant results for novices. Although the preferences expressed by high and low
prioritizing novices are often substantively different, they are not significantly so.

That being said, when comparing the extent to which the point estimates of preferences between high and low prioritizers differ from one another, we see that these differences are sometimes exacerbated amongst novices, relative to sophisticates. In the case of nuclear energy, for example the difference in estimates between high and low prioritizing novices is nearly eight times that of sophisticates. Yet, confidence intervals around these point estimates suggest much more volatility in the relationship between values and attitudes for novices. As a result of this relative fitfulness, the GUM is only statistically supported for two of the four hard issues here, and for one out of two easy issues. Comparatively, the SIM is more consistently supported for hard issues.

Conclusion

This investigation hinges on comparing hard issues and easy issues. Because hard and easy are mutually exclusive categories, this necessitates an apples-to-oranges comparison. At any given point in time, an issue is either easily understood by the public, or it is not. It either structures one’s gut responses to the parties, or it doesn’t. Therefore, the influence of values for nuclear energy is compared to an easy issue, like abortion. However, a more thorough test of the moderating role of issue difficulty is to compare the same issue in situations when it is easy and then when it is hard.
In the next chapter, I will take advantage of the fact that issue difficulty varies as a function of the extent to which it has been actively invoked during a campaign. Using the American National Election Studies Time Series Dataset, I will demonstrate how the role of core values differs amongst a related group of issues: those aimed at rights for same-sex couples. Gay rights have become more prominent within the political discourse over the course of the past thirty years. Therefore, the public’s level of understanding with respect to these issues have evolved. Gay rights were marginalized, or hidden from public view during the early 1980’s. During this time, the parties were also relatively similar in their positions. However, over time, gay rights have become more prominent on the political agenda and the parties have largely diverged in their issue positions. This allows me to test for differences in the relationship between core values and attitudes for years when the same issue is easy, rather than hard.
Chapter 4: The Influence of Values on Gay Rights Attitudes

“It takes no compromise to give people their rights…it takes no money to respect the individual. It takes no political deal to give people freedom. It takes no survey to remove oppression” – Harvey Milk

As Harvey Milk suggests, values such as individualism and liberty are so fundamental that their application to the political sphere ought to be relatively uncomplicated. Values, he asserts, are above petty politics. However, some research in political science has called into question the extent to which the American public is capable of using their core values to shape their political attitudes. Primarily, the Sophistication Interaction Model (SIM) suggests that only the politically sophisticated have the capacity to connect their core values to policy preferences because they have the necessary knowledge and understanding of politics to do so (Goren, 2001; Jacoby, 2006; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1992).

The overarching hypothesis in this dissertation is that the vast majority of Americans - though woefully uninformed - can make sense of political issues by drawing upon their core values. Extant literature in the area has suggested that this is indeed the case, but has only investigated the small subset of issues in
which values are *most* likely to influence policy preferences. The key contribution of this project is to provide evidence that values such as equality predict the attitudes of even the most uninformed segments of society evaluating hard political issues.

Thus far, I have presented a theory of political values which argues that political novices are indeed capable of using their core values to guide their preferences on hard issues. This is for two key reasons. First, values are innate features of human reasoning (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). They are rooted in the evolutionary drive to pursue desirable outcomes, both individually and within group dynamics. Long before formalized laws, humans were using notions of equality, individualism, and justice to regulate the behavior of themselves and their fellow social group members. Values are the utmost foundation of attitudes, whether in the political arena or otherwise (Feldman, 2003).

Secondly, we know that even if novices are not paying *attention* to politics, they are still *exposed* to it. As frustrating as it may be for the politically uninterested individual, it is simply not possible to exist in an apolitical vacuum. Political topics are regularly covered not only via traditional news sources, but also on entertainment shows, from *The Simpsons* to *South Park* (Foy, 2008; Holbert, 2005; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Woodcock, 2006; 2008). Individuals also regularly glean information about the economy from their everyday activities, such as purchasing gas or balancing their checkbooks
(Popkin, 1991). Taken as a whole, these two points suggest that political novices are capable of using their core values to reason about political issues. However, the extent to which this is the case for hard issues has not yet been investigated.

While somewhat more obscure than easy issues, hard issues are no less important. Take, for example, needle exchange programs. One study found that cities providing free needle exchange programs experienced an 11% decrease in HIV prevalence, relative to similarly situated cities that did not provide this type of program (Lurie et al., 1993). Although it is a hard issue, needle exchange programs have a substantial impact upon public health more broadly. The SIM would predict that political novices cannot connect their core values to a hard issue such as this. The purpose of this dissertation is to test the General Use Model against the Sophistication Interaction Model.

In Chapter 2, I laid the foundation for the moderating role of issue difficulty in value-based constraint. My theory hinges on the assertion that sophisticates have many more considerations about hard issues than novices. Chapter 2 was dedicated to testing this theoretical underpinning, and found that ultimately, the American public does perceive key differences between hard and easy issues. More so, these differences are exacerbated based on political sophistication. Sophisticates offer significantly more thoughts about hard issues, relative to novices, and they report understanding hard issues better. Sophisticates are also better able to estimate the party positions of hard issues,
relative to novices. This suggests that perceptions of hard issues indeed differ as a function of sophistication.

Taken as a whole, the results from Chapter 2 suggest that hard issues make values-based constraint particularly difficult for novices. Hard issues are less understood by the masses, and individuals are significantly less likely to say that moral reasoning is necessary for these types of issues. Chapter 3 was dedicated to examining what this means for the role of core values.

Three models were tested in Chapter 3: The Sophistication Interaction Model (SIM), the General Use Model (GUM), and the Reverse Sophistication Interaction Model (RSIM). The SIM suggests that political novices lack the knowledge and skills necessary to tie their values to their preferences. The GUM asserts the opposite relationship: that values are indeed significant predictors of issue attitudes for novices. The RSIM is an extension of the GUM, which argues that core values are actually stronger predictors for novices than sophisticates. While both the SIM and GUM were consistently supported in Chapter 3, there was no evidence supporting the RSIM.

One of the drawbacks with comparing easy and hard issues using a single survey, however, is that these categories are mutually exclusive. Within a given snapshot in time, an issue can only be easy or hard. Therefore, assessing the effects of issue difficulty requires comparing two completely different issues, such as nuclear energy (hard) and same-sex marriage (easy). Using evidence gathered
at one point in time to examine the moderating role of issue difficulty, in other words, necessitates comparing apples to oranges.

The purpose of this fourth and final substantive chapter is to induce more control in this comparison by leveraging the fact that issues evolve over time. Carmines and Stimson highlight this in their seminal study on the matter: “All issues have intrinsically simple and complex facets; which particular facets predominate at a given time is an empirical question” (1980, p. 81, emphasis added). Simply because an issue like nuclear energy is hard one year does not mean that it will not become easy at a later point in time, depending on the extent to which it is debated by elites and covered on the news. Any hard issue can become an easy one, and vice versa. This is a product of how the public conceptualizes the issue, which is due, in large part, to the extent to which it is prominently discussed and debated at the national level. Some years an issue may be invoked by candidates who wish to rally their base or draw in voters from the other side. In other years, the issue may lay dormant because it offers little strategic value (Hillygus & Shields, 2014). Using a time series data set allows me to capitalize upon this issue evolution, and therefore, compare apples to apples.

In this chapter, I will investigate a suite of issues relating to a common area within American politics: same-sex rights. By using data from the American National Election Studies Time Series data set, I can examine the influence of values on these attitudes over time, and can compare years in which the issue is
easy to years in which it is hard. This will allow me to compare the extent to
which political novices are capable of applying their core values to hard, versus
easy issues, while holding the issue area itself constant.

**Background: Same-Sex Rights in the United States**

Perhaps in no other arena has public opinion changed so drastically in
such a short period of time than attitudes toward same-sex couples. As Brewer
explains, American public opinion on the matter was consistently hostile to
toward same-sex couples from 1973 to 1991. During this time, percentages of
Americans stating on the General Social Surveys (GSS) that “sexual relations
between two adults of the same sex” is “always wrong” ranged from 68% to 75%
(Brewer, 2003). From 1993 to 2000, this proportion dropped steadily from 65% in
1994 to 55% in 2000 (Brewer, 2003). The 2014 iteration of the GSS reports that
this percentage is now down to 39%.

Until the 2003 Supreme Court ruling of *Lawrence vs. Texas*, physical
relationships between same-sex partners were illegal in 14 states. Just twelve
years later, the Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell vs. Hodges* that marriage is an
inalienable right that cannot be denied to same-sex couples. In just a little over a
decade, the United States went from a nation that effectively criminalized same-
sex relationships to one that granted Constitutional protection to them. The
cause for this rapid shift in public opinion is not the focus of this particular
project, but has been covered in other pieces (see Brewer, 2003; Lewis & Gossett,
Rather, the purpose here is to examine the way in which values have shaped attitudes toward these sets of issues at different points in time: when the issue is easy, and when it is hard.

Same-sex rights is a particularly rich area of study with respect to issue difficulty. Looking at the history of the gay rights movement, it is one that went from relatively obscure to highly successful within a matter of just a few decades. Unfortunately, the ANES Time Series Data Set does not inquire about attitudes toward same-sex marriage. However, each party’s stances on same-sex marriage over time serves as a useful lens to conceptualize each party’s attitudes towards gay rights as a whole.

Up until 2008, a majority of Democrats and Republicans alike opposed same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, party platforms had begun their subtle divergence nearly fifteen years previously. Same-sex couples received their first mention in the Republican Party platform in 1992, stating that “Republicans oppose and resist the efforts of the Democrat Party to redefine the traditional American family,” and then more clearly, “We oppose any legislation or law which legally recognizes same-sex marriages and allows such couples to adopt children or provide foster care” (Republican Party Platform, 1992). In 2008 and 2012, Republicans offered the same sentiment in their party platform: that traditional marriage is defined between a man and a woman.
The 1984 Democratic Party platform makes its first mention of same-sex rights within the context of hate crimes: “Violent acts of bigotry, hatred and extremism aimed at women, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and gay men and lesbians have become an alarmingly common phenomenon. A Democratic Administration will work vigorously to address, document, and end all such violence” (Democratic Party Platform, 1984). Anti-discrimination was the sole focus of the Democratic Party’s platform regarding gay rights until 2000, when the party added that “We support full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life of our nation and seek equal responsibilities, benefits, and protections for these families.” (Democratic Party Platform, 2000). However, the party then reaffirmed their support for states to decide issues of marriage for themselves. This was the official party position until 2012, when the party explicitly stated that “We support marriage equality and support the movement to secure equal treatment under law for same-sex couples” (Democratic Party Platform, 2012).

Thus, the Democratic Party was the first and only political party to directly take on the issue of discrimination against gays and lesbians. However in terms of broader rights - specifically, for same-sex couples to be recognized as familial units with the same standing as opposite-sex couples - each party’s platform differed only in nuance until 2012. This is an important point, because this speaks to cues available to the general public throughout this period of time. To the casual observer of politics, the parties did not officially offer radically
different stances on the issue until the late 2000’s. However, to those paying close attention, it was clear that the Democratic Party was more supportive of same-sex rights than the Republican Party.

Key Democratic figureheads offered ambiguous cues on same-sex rights throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s. President Clinton’s signing of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell in 1994 was far from an endorsement of gays serving in the military - homosexual servicemen and women were forbidden to be openly gay while serving until 2011. Meanwhile, every Democratic Party platform since 1984 made it a point to denounce discrimination against same-sex couples. However, President Clinton also signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which defined marriage for federal benefits as between one and one woman, and allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

In 2012, President Barack Obama coined the new favorite term used by Democratic and Republican politicians to describe their stance on gay marriage: “evolution.” While in 2008, Obama publicly opposed gay marriage, in 2012 he announced that he “had been going through an evolution” on the issue (Obama, 2012). Since then, it has become acceptable for Democratic candidates, and some prominent Republicans, to voice their support for same-sex unions.

It wasn’t until recently that members of the party considered to be most favorable to same-sex unions publicly voiced their support of it. However, those who have been paying attention have had a variety of other cues not available to
those who failed to pay attention to political affairs. While Clinton’s signing of DOMA and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell drew criticism from gay rights activists, he was also seen as far more progressive on the issue than any other president before him. He was the first major presidential candidate to meet with LGBT groups during his candidacy, and the first president to address the Human Rights Campaign.

The takeaway here is that even though same-sex rights may be regarded as an easy issue due to its social underpinnings, sophisticates had access to considerably more information about each party’s stances than novices. Publicly, the Democratic Party was not particularly supportive of same-sex rights until well into the 2000’s. However, those who were paying attention to politics knew that Democratic elites tended to be more supportive of same-sex rights than Republicans. What does this informational asymmetry mean for the extent to which values are predictive of attitudes toward these types of issues? While novices were in the dark on the party stances, were they reasoning with their values, or were they resorting to how they felt about gay people? Do sophisticates rely more heavily on their values, or do they defer to their partisan loyalties? The goal of this chapter is to answer these questions.
Hypotheses

The overarching hypothesis of this dissertation is that values will continue to predict hard issue attitudes for the American public. Therefore, the first hypothesis of this chapter is as follows:

H\textsubscript{4.1}: Core political values will significantly predict the hard issue attitudes of novices and sophisticates (GUM).

As I explained in Chapters 1 and 3, existing theory suggests that any individual living with in our political society - whether they are interested in politics or not - is exposed to political information. This exposure often happens “accidentally,” through socialization (Feldman, 1988), entertainment sources that take on political topics (Niven et al., 2003; Xenos & Becker, 2009), or by simply engaging in commerce, such as purchasing gas or banking (Popkin, 1991). While political novices are certainly not exposed to as much information as sophisticates who actively seek out this type of material, they have some access to political principles and events.

Although novices are indeed exposed to political information, this does not mean that they process political stimuli the same as sophisticates (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lodge & Taber, 2007; McGraw et al., 1990). This is due in large part to the conveniences associated with political sophistication: namely, sophisticates have a denser web of interconnected knowledge than those who are not attentive to or interested in politics (Luskin, 1990). One of these additional
conveniences is understanding the partisan implications of different political issues (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, sophisticates differ significantly from novices in their understanding of hard issues in particular. They have more thoughts about hard issues than novices, and report that they understand hard issues significantly better than novices.

Because the defining feature of hard political issues is that sophisticates are able to attach their preferences to a particular party, I expect that partisanship will more strongly predict the issue preferences of sophisticates, relative to novices:

H\textsubscript{4.2}: Partisan identification will more strongly predict the issue attitudes of sophisticates evaluating hard issues, compared to novices.

This would provide evidence that sophisticates have access to a clear cue by which to base their judgment, compared to novices who do not have this type of information. Existing evidence suggests that when one is aware of their partisan stance on an issue, they are more likely to update their preference, not their partisan identification (Layman & Carsey, 2002). Because novices lack such cues, I argue that novices are forced to rely on those instincts that are available: their commitment to core political values. When an issue is so hard that it’s not immediately clear where each party stands, the political novice must evaluate the policy with their gut instinct. Sophisticates, on the other hand, are more likely to
know what their party leaders have to say about the issue, which offers a clearer barometer for judgment.

The intersection between political attitudes and group-centric considerations is also relevant here. For some political issues, such as voter identification laws, the winners and losers of such a policy are not readily apparent. One must be fairly sophisticated about politics to understand that those without the proper ID tend to be the poor, and/or minorities. One must also recognize that such a law would benefit the Republican Party, as poor minorities tend to vote Democratic.

This is not the case for the issue of same-sex rights. The beneficiaries are clear, even to the most casual observer of American politics. Legalizing same-sex marriage necessarily provides benefits to gay and lesbian couples: one need not make any inferences to recognize that. Therefore, for this particular suite of issues, novices ought to have an additional cue: their attitudes toward the policy beneficiary. Existing research demonstrates that group-centrism is a key feature of political attitudes (Nelson & Kinder, 1996), and when the policy beneficiary is as clear as is the case here, I expect that affect will play a role in evaluations of the policies at hand. More so, because novices have so few cues on which to base their judgment, I argue that, consistent with other work in the area (Sniderman et al., 1991), affect toward the policy beneficiary will be a stronger predictor for the hard issue attitudes of novices, relative to sophisticates:
H_{4.3}: Affect toward gays and lesbians will more strongly predict the issue attitudes of novices evaluating hard issues, compared to sophisticates.

Finally, we turn to the exploratory hypothesis that has been considered throughout this project: that values will serve as stronger predictors for hard issue attitudes for novices, as opposed to sophisticates:

E-H_{4.4}: Egalitarianism will more strongly predict the issue attitudes of novices evaluating hard issues, compared to sophisticates (RSIM).

The key reason this is possible is because novices have significantly fewer criteria by which to base their judgment than sophisticates; as a result, those few resources they do have ought to serve as particularly strong predictors of the attitude.

I will also be evaluating evidence for the SIM, since this has been pitted against the GUM as a model for explaining the relationship between core values and political attitudes. If the SIM is supported, then we should observe a significant interaction between values and sophistication, suggesting that core values exert a stronger influence for sophisticates, relative to novices.

**Methods**

Data for this chapter was drawn from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Data Set. The data set consists of every question that has been asked in at least three ANES Studies between 1948 and 2012. The
ANES began consistently including questions about political values in 1984. In that same year, the study first asked respondents to offer their feeling thermometer rating of gays and lesbians. Starting in 1988, respondents were asked about specific policy issues involving homosexual rights.

In this study, the following gay-rights attitudes are examined:

**Anti-Discrimination Laws.** Do you favor or oppose a law to protect gays from discrimination? (1 = Favor Strongly; 4 = Oppose Strongly).

**Gay Military Service.** Do you favor or oppose gays serving in the military? (1 = Favor Strongly; 4 = Oppose Strongly).

**Gay Adoption.** Should gays/lesbians be able to adopt children? (1 = No; 2 = Yes).

Full variable descriptives can be found in the Appendix.

As mentioned previously, support for same-sex rights has changed drastically over the course of the past twenty years.
Figure 4.1 highlights the growing trend in acceptance toward same-sex rights since 1988. Since 1988, a majority of Americans have supported anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians; since 1992, a majority of Americans have supported gay military service and anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians. The issue seeing the least support amongst the general public is gay adoption: Only 25% of Americans supported the right for gays and lesbians to adopt children in 1992, however this has more than doubled in the past twenty years.
The goal of this particular analysis is to examine the influence of core values when the same issue is easy or hard. Of course, this first requires me to assess issue difficulty in each year.

Assessing Issue Difficulty

In Chapter 2, I outlined the various methods by which previous scholars have classified an issue as easy or hard, as well as the drawbacks associated with each. One common assumption is that easy issues are social or moral, while hard issues are economic or scientific (Johnston & Wronski, 2015; Mooney & Schuldt, 2008). However, this oversimplifies the complexities inherent in real-life political issues: almost all issues have features of being technical, economic, social, or moral. Recent work in political communication, for example, has found that the same issue can be conceptualized in nearly a dozen ways, ranging from economic, to moral, to constitutional (Boydstun, Card, Gross, Resnick, & Smith, 2014). This makes it virtually impossible to assume that an issue is easy simply because it is “moral” because the same issue can reasonably be defined as economic or scientific.

Carmines and Stimson provide a method for empirically classifying political issues as easy or hard (1980), but this method has its own disadvantages. Carmines and Stimson propose the following equation to assess issue difficulty:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_1 X_1 \times \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon \]
where $Y = \text{Vote Choice}$, $X_1 = \text{Issue Preference}$, and $X_2 = \text{Sophistication}$. This equation is designed to tap into the theoretical question assessing whether an issue is easy or hard: "what makes possible a gut response elected equally from well-informed and ill-informed, from interested and uninterested, from active and apathetic voters?" (Carmines and Stimson, p. 80, 1980). Vote choice is the dependent variable of interest because in assessing issue difficulty, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the general public can pin their preferences to a particular party.

Issue preference is then interacted with sophistication in order to assess whether the ability to pin preference onto party is conditional on political information. For easy issues, this interaction should be insignificant. This indicates that novices and sophisticates alike are capable of identifying which party best represents his or her preference. For hard issues, the interaction should be significant. This suggests that some background information on politics is necessary to discern which party best represents one’s preferences. Table 2.1 in Chapter 2 highlights these expectations.

The benefit of this approach is that it is clear-cut: an insignificant interaction between preference and sophistication indicates an easy issue, while a significant interaction denotes a hard one. However, this classification is only valid for issues that are widely salient during a presidential election year. Take, for example, the issue of nuclear energy expansion. While important, it is unlikely
to be the top priority for most voters when casting their ballot in a presidential election. If Carmines and Stimson’s method is implemented for this issue, it invariably comes up as easy, as we saw in Chapter 2. One’s preference for expanding nuclear energy does not significantly explain his or her vote choice, regardless of whether she is a sophisticate or a novice. This yields an insignificant interaction between sophistication and opinion, because there are no significant differences in the extent to which novices versus sophisticates structure their vote choice, based upon this preference. However, the results from Chapter 2 confirmed what scholars in the past have assumed: nuclear energy is an unequivocally hard issue (Pollock, Lillie, and Vittes, 1993).

How, then can we assess whether an issue is easy or hard, without making problematic assumptions about the inherent morality or technical nature of multi-faceted political issues? One way is to examine the root of Carmines and Stimson’s argument. The crux of their argument is that not all issue voting is sophisticated. Some issues are easy enough that even those who know nothing about politics can essentially mimic the preferences of sophisticates. Carmines and Stimson demonstrate that this is the case for affirmative action, and in Chapter 2, I showed that this is also the case for abortion and same-sex marriage, at least in 2015.

According to Carmines and Stimson, novices ought to structure their gut responses to the parties in a similar fashion to sophisticates if the issue is easy.
Take, for example, the issue of same-sex marriage. Given the party platforms on marriage and family, as well as the cues provided by prominent candidates and office-holders, we ought to see that those who are favorable toward same-sex marriage ought to be least supportive of the Republican candidate. Those are unfavorable toward gay marriage ought to be most supportive of the Republican candidate. If the issue is easy, then novices would mimic the voting pattern of sophisticates because the issue similarly structures voter responses to the parties.

If the issue is hard, we ought to see the pattern described above for sophisticates - they have the knowledge and understanding necessary to pin their preference to each party. However, novices will not mimic the behavior of sophisticates. Novices highly favorable toward same sex marriage would support the Republican candidate to a greater extent than novices who oppose the issue because they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to pin their preference to the parties. Or novices, will not differ in their support of the Republican candidate at all, based upon their preferences on the issue.

Using this framework, I consider years in which the preferences of novices mimic those of sophisticates to be easy, and those in which the preferences of novices do not mimic those of sophisticates to be hard. This closely aligns with Carmines and Stimson’s original conception of issue difficulty outlined in their 1980 paper. Easy issues are familiar enough to the general public that even novices can structure their responses to parties based on their opinion on the
issue. For hard issues, only sophisticates have the information necessary to make
this connection.

Of course, the ideal methodology for classifying an issue as easy or hard
would be some sort of empirical test or rating system, such as the one outlined in
Chapter 2. However, most nationally-representative public opinion surveys are
more concerned with capturing political attitudes, as opposed to the meta-
cognitive indicators that feed into those attitudes. While more qualitative in
nature than the rating scheme posited in Chapter 2, this system is no more
subjective than previous classifications of issue difficulty. Indeed, this system is
even more useful because it allows one to assess issue difficulty even in years
when an issue is not particularly salient. In Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) piece,
they simply examine patterns associated with the $R^2$ of their regression models
predicting support for the Republican presidential candidate. As mentioned
previously, other accounts have simply assumed that moral means easy,
disregarding the fact that hard issues, such as war, are also inherently moral. By
comparing the patterns in voting behavior amongst sophisticates and novices, I
am able to explore a wide array of issues without making the problematic
assumption that moral means easy, while at the same time remaining true to
Carmines and Stimson’s original intent.

One may wonder: how is it that an issue may be easy during one election
cycle, and hard during another? Political parties and candidates strategically
invoke certain issues during elections in order to appeal to persuadable voters (Hillygus & Shields, 2014). Therefore, certain issues are made salient during particular election years, and then fade into the background during others. When an issue is invoked over the course of a campaign, it is usually because the parties have clearly staked their position on it. This makes it easier for novices to pin their preferences to a particular party - because the parties are offering a clear signal. In other election years, the issue is not as prominent. Therefore, only sophisticates are aware of each party’s stance. This variation in the extent to which certain issues are highlighted versus obfuscated makes it possible for an issue to be hard one year, and easy in another.

Estimating the Influence of Core Values

The influence of core values on hard and easy issues is estimated via regression analysis with robust standard errors. The key dependent variable of interest is attitudes toward each of the three gay rights issues included in the data set. The independent variables of interest are commitment to equality and sophistication. Equality is measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 12 using three measures designed to tap into egalitarian ideals (Cronbach’s α = 0.66):

Society. Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. (5-point scale ranging from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly).
**Fewer Problems.** If people were treated equally in this country we would have fewer problems. (5-point scale ranging from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly).

**Equal Chance.** One of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance. (5-point scale ranging from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly).

Sophistication is measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 “Very Low” to 4 “Very High.” This is based off of the interviewer’s assessment of the respondent’s level of information at the time of the interview, and is used because its measurement is comparable across all of the years of data.

Partisanship (H_{4.2}) is measured on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 “Strong Democrat” to 7 “Strong Republican.” Affect toward the policy beneficiaries (H_{4.3}) is measured through a feeling thermometer, which ranges from 0 “Very Cold” to 100 “Very Warm.” Additional covariates in the models include age, sex, and race.

In the Results section to follow, I will discuss gay military service, gay adoption, and anti-discrimination laws each in turn. Each analysis will begin with an explanation for how the issue was classified as easy or hard in each year. This will be followed by a presentation of the regression results that test H_{4.1}, H_{4.2}, H_{4.3}, and E-H_{4.4}. 

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Results

Gay Military Service

Figure 4.2: Gay Military Service and Issue Difficulty

Figure 4.2 demonstrates that the slope of the line representing support for gay military service is nearly flat in 1992. Novices who strongly favor gay
military service have a 38% probability of voting Republican; novices who strongly oppose gay military service are only slightly more likely vote Republican (43%). This is not the case for sophisticates. Sophisticates who strongly favor gay military service are nearly six times less likely to vote Republican than sophisticates who strongly support gay military service. Novices clearly are not mimicking the behavior of sophisticates here, therefore the issue is classified as hard.

In 2008, the slope of the line for novices is again nearly horizontal; there is only a 4% difference in support for the Republican candidate amongst novices who strongly oppose and strongly favor gay military service. What’s more is that novices opposing gay military service are less likely to vote for the Republican candidate than those who support gay military service. This is not at all how sophisticates behave with respect to this issue. Sophisticates who strongly oppose gay military service are over twice as likely to support the Republican candidate compared to those who strongly support gay military service. In 2012, novices who strongly support gay military service are nearly 10% less likely to support the Republican candidate than those who strongly oppose it. Again, this pattern fails to mimic the behavior of sophisticates, therefore the issue is classified as hard.

While attitudes toward gay military service are not as strongly predictive for novices as they are for sophisticates, novices are better able to mimic the
behavior of sophisticates in 1996, 2000, and 2004. In 1996, novices who strongly oppose gay military service are 16% more likely to support the Republican candidate than those who strongly oppose the issue. The difference between sophisticates, meanwhile is 60%. The difference between novices at either end of this issue is even more pronounced during 2000 and 2004, when the issue was heavily debated during the presidential elections. Because novices are essentially able to copy the vote choices of sophisticates during these years, the issue is classified as easy.

The question then becomes: to what extent are values predictive for this issue when it is hard, relative to when it is easy? The SIM would assert that only sophisticates are capable of applying their core values to political issues, particularly a hard one. If this is the case, we ought to see a significant interaction between sophistication and equality. If the GUM is correct, then the equality coefficient ought to be significant. This indicates that the value of equality significantly predicts the attitudes of those scoring 0 on the sophistication scale. If the RSIM is correct, we ought to see a greater absolute value in the preferences of novices at each end of the equality scale, relative to sophisticates at each end of the equality scale.

Support for gay military service is estimated with an ordered logit model with robust standard errors. I anticipate that age will be positively associated with opposition toward gay military service, as older individuals have
traditionally been more opposed to gay rights than younger cohorts (Pew Research Center, 2015). I expect that women will be more supportive of gay military service than men, as women have faced a similar battle for the ability to serve in combat positions. African-Americans tend to be socially conservative on same-sex rights issues, in large part to their religious backgrounds (ibid). Therefore, I expect them to be more opposed to gay military service.
Table 4.1: Regression Results for Gay Military Service

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Easy Model 1</th>
<th>Easy Model 2</th>
<th>Easy Model 3</th>
<th>Hard Model 1</th>
<th>Hard Model 2</th>
<th>Hard Model 3</th>
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**p<.001; ***p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

Gay military service is coded so that higher values equate to greater opposition toward gays serving in the military. When the issue is easy, age significantly predicts opposition to gay military service: older individuals are
more opposed. As expected, the party identification variable is positive and significant: being more strongly Republican corresponds with greater opposition toward gay military service. The feeling thermometer also predicts opposition to gay military service: the lower one rates gays and lesbians, the more opposed one is to their serving in the military.

Model 1 includes equality and it’s interaction with sophistication in order to test the SIM, GUM, and RSIM. Table 4.1 reveals that equality is not a significant predictor for gay military service in Model 1, regardless of whether the issue is easy (p=.58) or hard (p=.21). This suggests that equality does not significantly predict attitudes for novices: Strike 1 for the GUM. However, the interaction between sophistication and equality in Easy Model 1 is not significant either (p=.56), which suggests that values are not structuring the attitudes of sophisticates either, therefore the SIM is not supported either.

Why is it that equality does not significantly predict anybody’s preference when the issue is easy? This appears to be due to the fact that the feeling thermometer and party identification measures are such strong predictors of opposition to gay military service. Equality does not exert an effect upon opposition to military service above and beyond the effect of the feeling thermometer or partisan identification. Commitment to equality is significantly correlated with the feeling thermometer (\( \rho = .11, p = .00 \)), as well as partisan identification (\( \rho = .26, p = .00 \)). This value is key to structuring partisan identities,
as well as affect toward other groups. Therefore, variation in the equality scale fails to uniquely predict support for gay military service when partisanship and the feeling thermometer are included in the model.

When the issue is hard, however, the interaction between sophistication and equality is statistically significant and negative (p=.03). High egalitarian sophisticates are significantly more likely than low egalitarian sophisticates to support gay military service: about 82% and 69%, respectively. This is consistent with expectations. However, this relationship is perfectly reversed for novices: low egalitarian novices have an 80% probability of supporting gay military service, while high egalitarians have a 66% probability. This provides support for the SIM: equality significantly and intuitively structures the attitudes of sophisticates, while novices behave in the opposite manner. The absolute value of the differences between novices and sophisticates are nearly the same (16% and 13%, respectively), therefore there is no evidence to suggest that the relationship between values and hard issue attitudes is stronger for sophisticates.

Model 2 contains the interaction between partisanship and sophistication. In both the easy and hard scenarios, partisanship fails to predict the support for those scoring 0 on the sophistication measure (p=.21 and p=.84, respectively). However, the interaction is significant in both cases. Sophisticated Democrats are consistently more favorable to gay military service than sophisticated Republicans, in both the easy (p=.01) and hard (p=.00) conditions. Democratic
and Republican novices, however, offer statistically similar ratings of the issue. Thus, partisanship structures the responses of sophisticates, but not novices.

Model 3 contains the interaction between the feeling thermometer and sophistication. I anticipated that feelings toward gays and lesbians would more strongly predict the hard attitudes of novices, relative to sophisticates because this provides a strong affective cue to individuals who otherwise lack information about the issue. The feeling thermometer is significant in both Easy Model 3 (p=.00) and Hard Model 2 (p=.00): the more negatively one feels toward gays and lesbians, the more likely she is to oppose gay military service, even amongst those scoring 0 on the sophistication measure.

The interaction between sophistication and the thermometer is insignificant when the issue is easy, as expected (p=.64). When the issue is hard, however, the interaction is significant (p=.01) and negative. Novices and sophisticates rating gays and lesbians at a 75 have at least a 90% probability of supporting gay military service. Novices rating this group at a 25 have a 58% probability of supporting gay military service; sophisticates providing this same rating have a 66% probability.

Thus, the investigation surrounding gay military service reveals that when an issue is hard, values indeed exert a differential effect for novices and sophisticates. Whereas no sophistication-based differences are observed in terms of values when the issue is easy, values significantly structure the attitudes of
sophisticates when the issue is hard. Novices, it appears, rely on group-centric cues when forming their attitudes about hard issues: the feeling thermometer toward gays and lesbians more strongly predicts their attitudes when gay military service is hard, however, not when it is easy. Finally, the evidence here suggests that in both easy and hard scenarios, sophisticates make use of their partisanship as a guide for evaluating political issues to a greater extent than novices.

\textit{Gay and Lesbian Adoption}

The ANES asked respondents about their attitudes toward the ability for same-sex couples to adopt a total of five times. This issue is classified as hard in all years except 2000.
Given the Republican Party’s platform on a traditional conception of family throughout the 1990’s, it is expected that individuals opposing gay adoption would continue to oppose it.
adoption ought to be more likely to support the Republican candidate than those favoring gay adoption. As Figure 4.3 demonstrates, this is certainly the case for sophisticates: in 1992, sophisticates favoring gay adoption have only a 12% probability of supporting the Republican candidate. Sophisticates opposing gay adoption are nearly five times more likely to vote Republican. Meanwhile, this difference amongst novices is only 9%; they are just about as likely to vote Republican regardless of their opinion on this issue.

If the issue were easy, we would expect the voting behavior of novices to mimic sophisticates. However, this is not the case. In 1992, 2004, 2008, and 2012 novices have nearly the same probability of voting Republican, regardless of their stance on the issue. Clearly, opinion on gay adoption is not structuring novices’ “gut responses” to the candidates in the same way as sophisticates. In 2000, the difference in the likelihood of voting Republican for novices who oppose versus favor the issue is much smaller than that of sophisticates, however we observe the general trend that novices favoring gay adoption are less likely to vote for the Republican candidate than those who oppose the measure.

Attitudes toward gay adoption are estimated using an ordered logit model with robust standard errors. The predictions regarding the controls are the same for gay military service: older individuals and African-Americans ought to be more opposed toward gay adoption. Although there is no a priori reason to
believe that women will be more or less opposed to gay adoption than men, gender is still included in the model as a control.

### Table 4.2: Regression Results for Gay Adoption

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***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

As anticipated, older individuals tend to be more opposed toward gay adoption, as well as African-Americans. The more strongly one identifies as a Republican, the more opposed she is to gay adoption as well. As with the
previous issue, Model 1 refers to the values model that tests the SIM, GUM, and RSIM. Model 2 tests the influence of partisan identification, and Model 3 test the influence of affect toward gays and lesbians.

As with gay military service, the baseline effect for equality is insignificant in all models. Again, this is likely because equality is highly correlated with several of the other indicators in the model, such as partisanship and the feeling thermometer. Commitment to equality is a defining feature of one’s partisan attachment, and is also clearly related to how one views marginalized groups. Thus, the direct effect of equality does not exceed the effects of partisanship and group affect. Unlike the previous issue, the interaction between equality and sophistication is insignificant, regardless of whether the issue is easy or hard. Equality does not differentially predict the issue attitudes of novices, nor sophisticates. This suggests that the influence of values is shadowed by other variables in the model.

Turning now to Model 2, the pattern mimics that of gay military service: partisan identification fails to predict the attitudes of novices, but it does for sophisticates in both the easy and hard conditions (p=.01; p=03). Democratic and Republican novices offer statistically similar evaluations of gay adoption in the easy and hard conditions. Sophisticated Democrats, however, are significantly more supportive of gay adoption than sophisticated Republicans in both scenarios.
In Model 3, the main effect for the feeling thermometer is statistically significant in the easy condition (p=.00) as well as the hard (p=.00). This indicates that political novices indeed use their affect toward the policy beneficiary to shape their attitudes, which is consistent with expectations. However, the interaction between sophistication and the feeling thermometer is insignificant in the easy condition (p=.34), and significant in the hard condition (p=.00). In the easy condition, novices and sophisticates offering warm ratings of gays and lesbians are about as likely to support gay adoption: 64% for novices, and 72% for sophisticates. There is also little difference for those offering cold ratings of this group; the probability of supporting gay adoption for novices and sophisticates giving cold ratings ranges from 24% to 27%.

In the hard condition, the significant interaction is due to the difference in support for gay adoption amongst novices and sophisticates who offer a warm rating of gays and lesbians. Novices giving warm ratings are 20% less likely to support gay adoption than sophisticates giving the same rating. However, novices offering warm ratings are still significantly more likely to support gay adoption than novices giving cold ratings (63% vs. 27%). Thus the gap between those giving a cold versus warm affect is much larger amongst sophisticates (58%) than novices (35%). Affect toward gays and lesbians predicts support for both novices and sophisticates, however affect plays a stronger role for the latter.
Within the context of gay adoption, values fail to exert a direct effect upon political attitudes - this holds for novices as well as sophisticates, and in both the easy and hard scenarios. Instead, it appears that novices and sophisticates utilize the group-centric consideration of affect toward the policy beneficiary. Surprisingly, the magnitude of this effect is larger for sophisticates, which suggests that this group is not immune to group-centric reasoning. Perhaps this is because political sophisticates tend to have stronger political attitudes to begin with; part of this may be due to stronger feelings toward political reference groups. Indeed, the feeling thermometer is highly and significantly correlated with the seven-point partisanship measure. We also see that in both the easy and hard scenarios, sophisticates make use of an additional cue that novices don’t: political affiliation. This mirrors the findings from the gay military service analysis.
Finally, we turn to the issue of anti-discrimination laws. These are laws put in place by state legislatures and city governments to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in the workplace, or when seeking living arrangements. The issue is classified as easy in 1996 and 2000, and hard in 1992, 2005, 2008, and 2012.
Figure 4.4: Opposition to Anti-Discrimination Laws and Issue Difficulty
One would expect that, once again, given the party platforms on gay rights and the cues offered by elites, that those opposed to anti-discrimination laws would be most supportive of Republican candidates, while those who support these laws would be least supportive. Consistently, this is the behavior that sophisticates display: each year, sophisticates who oppose anti-discrimination laws are at least twice as likely to support the Republican candidate as those who support anti-discrimination laws.

To what extent do novices mimic this behavior? In 1996, novices who oppose anti-discrimination laws are over three times more likely to support the Republican candidate, relative to novices who support these laws. This is consistent with expectations. In 2000, novices opposing anti-discrimination laws are over twice as likely to support the Republican candidate than novices who support the laws. Because the voting behavior of novices mimics those of sophisticates, 1996 and 2000 are classified as easy years. In the remaining years, the slope of the line for novices remains nearly horizontal; indicating that attitudes toward this issue do not structure their vote choices. Therefore, 1992, 2004, 2008, and 2012 as considered to be hard.

Opposition to anti-discrimination laws is estimated via an ordered logit model with robust standard errors. I expect that older individuals will be more opposed to anti-discrimination laws than younger individuals. Given African-Americans’ past history with discrimination, I expect them to be less opposed
than other groups. I also expect that women will rate anti-discrimination laws more favorably than men, for the same reason.

Table 4.3: Regression Results for Opposition to Anti-Discrimination Laws

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<th>Easy Model 3</th>
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***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10
Age predicts attitudes toward anti-discrimination laws in two of the models above above, but only marginally so (p=.09). Thus, it appears that age influences same-sex rights to the extent that the right is family-oriented; otherwise, older individuals do not offer significantly different opinions than younger ones. In each model, women are significantly more supportive of anti-discrimination laws than men, which aligns with expectations.

Interestingly, when the issue is hard, African-Americans are significantly more opposed to anti-discrimination laws than non-blacks. However, there are no significant differences when the issue is easy. By definition, parties have been active in constructing public understanding of the issue in “easy” years. African-Americans are overwhelmingly more supportive of Democratic candidates than Republican ones. In the easy years, they may be voicing opinions consistent with the dominant Democratic platform - this information is readily available as a cue. During the hard years, however, this cue is largely absent from political discourse. Given the fact that African-Americans tend to be socially conservative on the issue of gay rights more broadly, it also makes sense that they would be opposed to anti-discrimination laws, absent party cues on the issue. Past investigations of black public opinion on the issue has suggested that African-Americans do not identify their own struggle with civil rights to that of gays and lesbians (Pew Research Center, 2015).
Turning to Model 1, equality significant predicts the attitudes of novices when the issue is easy (p=.00), as well as when it is hard (p=.04). However, the negative sign on the equality coefficient in Easy Model 1 indicates that novices who are more supportive of equality are less supportive of anti-discrimination laws. This trend is reversed in Hard Model 1: novices who are more supportive of equality are also more supportive of anti-discrimination laws, which is the expected relationship. This suggests that when parties have been active in framing the issue, novice egalitarians are not particularly supportive of the measure.

More so than the other gay rights issues discussed here, anti-discrimination laws may be seen as an extension of *special privileges*, as opposed to granting gays and lesbians the *same* privileges as heterosexuals. Gay military service and gay adoption call simply for extending the same rights to gays and lesbians as heterosexual individuals. However, anti-discrimination laws specifically provide protections for gays and lesbians. Thus, novices may see this as an *additional* privilege for gays and lesbians, and are therefore may see it as less egalitarian. Sophisticates on the other hand have also been exposed to this framing, but may see anti-discrimination laws as necessary to ensuring equal treatment of gays and lesbians in the workplace and in housing. Thus, egalitarian sophisticates are still quite supportive of the law.
The interaction between sophistication and equality is not significant (p=.37) in the easy condition, suggesting that equality is similarly predictive for both novices and sophisticates. This provides support for the GUM, but not the SIM or RSIM. This suggests that values are similarly relevant to novices and sophisticates when the issue is easy. The interaction between sophistication and equality is, however, significant in the hard condition (p=.00). Low egalitarian novices are more supportive of anti-discrimination laws than high egalitarian novices when this issue is hard: 53% to 35%, respectively. This is the opposite relationship for sophisticates: high egalitarians have a 73% probability of supportive the law, while low egalitarians have a 31% probability. This supports the SIM: equality structures the preferences of sophisticates to a greater extent than novices. High egalitarian novices do not mimic the behavior of their sophisticated peers, suggesting that equality fails to drive the preferences of novices evaluating hard issues.

As with the other two issues explored here, partisanship more strongly predicts the issue attitudes of sophisticates, as opposed to novices, once again demonstrating that this serves as an additional cue that is available to those who are interested in and attentive to politics. In both the easy and hard conditions, Democratic and Republican novices alike have between a 62-70% probability of supporting anti-discrimination laws. For novices in either condition, partisanship fails to significantly predict attitudes toward this issue. This is not the case for
sophisticates, however. Sophisticated Democrats are significantly more likely to support anti-discrimination laws than sophisticated Republicans, which suggests that sophisticates operate on cues that novices do not.

Model 3 examines the role of affect toward the policy beneficiaries. The largest sophistication-based differences are seen for the hard condition ($p=.00$). Sophisticates giving warm ratings in the hard condition have a 93% probability of supporting anti-discrimination laws; novices who give warm ratings have a 78% probability. Sophisticates giving cold ratings are still fairly likely (62%) to support anti-discrimination laws, as are novices who give cold ratings (55%). Thus, feelings toward the policy beneficiary drive attitudes toward this issue in both the easy and hard scenarios, for sophisticates and novices. However, the magnitude of this effect is exacerbated amongst sophisticates.

Taken as a whole, affect toward policy beneficiaries most consistently drives attitudes toward anti-discrimination laws. That being said, equality does predict support for this issue, though the relationship is stronger for sophisticates in the hard condition. Additionally, partisan identification serves as a stronger predictor for sophisticates, as opposed to novices, which provides additional support for the theory that sophisticates are operating with additional cues that novices are not.
Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to compare the predictive influence of core values for hard and easy issues, while holding issue area constant. By capitalizing on the way in which issues evolve in the public eye from election to election, I was able to determine whether political novices are indeed capable of using their values to reason about hard political issues, and compare this to the same issue when it is easy. The results from this chapter are summarized in the following table:

Table 4.4: Results List

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<th>SIM</th>
<th>RSIM</th>
<th>Party ID</th>
<th>Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hard Issues</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NS for Novice; Sig. for Soph.</td>
<td>Sig for Novice and Soph.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NS for Novice; Sig. for Soph.</td>
<td>Sig. for Novice; Stronger for Soph.</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NS for Novice; Sig. for Soph.</td>
<td>Sig for Novice; Stronger for Soph.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gay Adoption</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>NS for Novice; Sig. for Soph.</td>
<td>Sig for Novice; Stronger for Soph.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates the relationship is in the opposite direction than hypothesized
For gay military service and gay adoption, equality fails to significantly predict attitudes in most of the models. More so, this trend persists amongst sophisticates in the gay adoption scenario: equality does not significantly predict the attitudes of either novices nor sophisticates. The most likely explanation for this is that equality is so deeply embedded in other pertinent evaluations, such as partisan identification and feelings toward the policy beneficiary that the value itself fails to yield a direct effect upon the attitude. This possibility provides an interesting avenue for future exploration. That being said, equality does structure the attitudes of sophisticates evaluating gay military service when the issue is hard.

For anti-discrimination laws, equality significantly predicts the issue attitudes of novices in both the easy and hard conditions. As Chapter 2 established, value-based reasoning should be most difficult for hard issues. However, we have one example here where equality structures the attitudes of those rated as having “Very Low” levels of political information - even when the issue is hard. Therefore while the SIM enjoyed the most support in this chapter, the notion that values guide the preferences of political novices should not be discounted.

Values tend to be a stronger predictor for sophisticates, relative to novices. This is not to suggest, however, that sophisticates coolly evaluate political issues
using their core values as a guide. Partisan identification also serves as a strong
cue, for both hard and easy issues. Partisan identification is a much stronger
predictor of issue attitudes for sophisticates rather than novices when the issue is
easy and when it is hard. This is somewhat surprising, as the hallmark of an easy
issue is the extent to which novices are able to structure their preferences along
partisan lines. However, partisanship does not significantly predict the issue
attitudes of novices in either the easy or hard conditions when the interaction
between partisanship and sophistication is included in the model.

Where partisanship fails to predict the issue attitudes of novices, however,
the feeling thermometer picks up the slack. Gay rights issues have a clear and
undeniable policy beneficiary. This, rather than partisanship, drives the attitudes
of political novices. This makes sense; political novices are unlikely to have strong
ties to their political party. Even if they are abundantly aware of their party’s
stance on the issue of gay military service or gay adoption, the driving force
behind their attitude is how they feel about gay people.

It is important to note, however, that group-centric thinking is not limited
to novices. In fact, group affect yielded greater effects for sophisticates, relative to
novices in each of the hard conditions. That is to say: both sophisticates and
novices utilize notions of group-centrism in evaluating gay rights policy. This
relationship is actually stronger for sophisticates. However, sophisticates make
this evaluation in conjunction with their values and partisan attachments.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the results for this chapter provide some support for the SIM and GUM, but not for the RSIM. Novices are indeed capable of using core values to drive their hard issue preferences; however, the relationship between values and attitudes is more consistent and stronger for sophisticates. The fact that the GUM is not supported for each issue is notable, as previous work investigating the GUM has found that “everyone uses egalitarian beliefs to guide their gay rights positions” (Goren, p. 174, 2001). This chapter demonstrates that the capacity for novices to engage in value-based reasoning for political issues - even for social ones - may be more limited than previously thought.

When evaluating political issues, whether they are easy or hard, novices tend to rely on group-centric cues, as opposed to values or partisanship. However, sophisticates also engage in this type of group-centric thinking. They simply combine this evaluation with their partisan identity and values. The implications of this finding, as well as the other findings throughout this dissertation, will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Over the course of this dissertation, I have unpacked the relationship between core values and attitudes on political issues. A great deal of scholarship in political science has focused upon the importance of issue voting in American politics. In 1980, Carmines and Stimson made the controversial, yet compelling case, that not all issue voters are sophisticated. Some issues are deeply ingrained enough that even individuals who know nothing about politics can identify which party represents their views. These issues, Carmines and Stimson, argued are “easy” (1980). Other issues, they argued, are “hard” - relatively obscure, and requiring a great deal of knowledge to make sense of it. These are issues in which the parties have not clearly staked their positions, thus making it even more difficult for the average voter to grasp.

This theory has been updated and expanded upon in a variety of ways, most notably in Hillygus and Shields’ work on persuadable voters (2014). In this piece, they argue that campaigns strategically invoked “wedge issues” - issues in which parties clearly state their position in order to garner persuadable voters from the other side. If we conceptualize wedge issues as easy issues, then hard issues are latent ones - points of political conflict occupying space at the edges of mainstream political discourse. We do not know when these issues will be brought
to the forefront, but we do know that the general public holds attitudes about them.

While existing scholarship has highlighted the differences in various issue domains, most have failed to account for what drives attitudes within those areas. Some account for “predispositions,” but generally only in terms of partisanship or ideology: clunky indicators of general beliefs that are differentially familiar to various segments of the population. The goal of this dissertation is to highlight the key role of values - guiding orientations of right and wrong that we use to evaluate outcomes both inside and outside the political arena. Values are more specific than partisanship or ideology, but they are also more integral to our decision-making, from an evolutionary standpoint (Rokeach, 1973).

The goal of this dissertation was to share a kinder portrait of the average voter than has been detailed in the past. Though largely uninformed, I set out to argue that the general public is indeed capable of using their core values to drive their political attitudes. Here, I will review the key findings, as well as implications and directions for future work.

**What Did We Learn?**

This dissertation pulls together two related, but previously unsynthesized threads within the political science scholarship: issue difficulty, and core values. In the process, we learned a few things about both of these elements.
54% of the general public states that politics is too complicated for someone like them to understand (American National Election Studies, 2012). When so many members of the general public rate their own ability to understand politics so low, how can they still reason about political affairs? To date, issue difficulty has been examined from a theoretical level, without assessing the extent to which the American public actually perceives the differences between hard and easy issues that political scientists say they do. In Chapter 2, I interrogated public understanding of these issues. In doing so, I shed light on what happens when political parties take a clear stance on a political issue. How does the public differentially consider easy issues, relative to hard ones?

Here, I demonstrated that the public perceives real and meaningful differences between hard and easy issues. I presented a series of measures designed to tap into the difficulty associated with a wide variety of issues, from abortion, to nuclear energy policy. I found that issue difficulty is not merely theoretical jargon - there are indeed significant differences in the extent to which the public makes sense of easy political issues, relative to hard ones.

When an issue is easy - or in other words, when parties take clear stances on an issue - people report that they are more certain in their issue attitudes, and that they are less inclined to need more information before making a decision. Sophisticates and novices rate their understanding of easy issues similarly;
however, sophisticates rate that they understand hard issues significantly better than novices.

Additionally, sophisticates offer significantly more thoughts about hard issues, relative to novices. This suggests that for certain segments of the population evaluating hard issues, they have fewer considerations by which to base their attitude. Chapter 2 demonstrates greater evidence for what Carmines and Stimson have long argued: not all political issues are the same. The public indeed sees some issues are more difficult than others. This means that novices in particular have even less information off of which to base their judgment than other political issues. The content of those attitudes was explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

Investigating the role of core values and issue difficulty, I also delineated three methods by which to assess whether an issue is easy or hard. The first served as a review of the classification method posited by Carmines and Stimson in 1980, but this method falls short of being useful in practice. The primary drawback is that relying solely upon a significant interaction between sophistication and opinion in explaining vote choice often fails to detect whether novices are actually able to place a value within the context of partisan politics (Cizmar and Layman, 2009).

A much more useful endeavor is to examine the patterns associated with sophistication and opinion preference in explaining vote choice. The key feature of
the easy issue is that both novices and sophisticates are able to pin their preferences to one of the two major parties. Looking at the patterns in the data, as I did in Chapter 4, relaxes the rigorous parameters imposed by Carmines and Stimson to more fully capture scenarios in which novices are able to at least mimic the behavior of sophisticates. This method allows one to identify issue difficulty while using variables often included in major national surveys.

The foundation of whether an issue is easy or hard is the extent to which novices can structure their opinions along partisan lines, which makes the method in Chapter 4 particularly useful. However, I also documented the cognitive consequences of issue difficulty in Chapter 2. In particular, I demonstrated that when parties stake a clear claim on an issue, this affects the extent to which one reports that they understand the issue, the extent to which they need more information about the issue, and their certainty in their opinion.

*Values*

How do people form judgments about hard political issues? Here, I argued that absent partisan cues, individuals go with their gut - in other words, they use the core values that are inherent in most of their everyday decision-making. In doing so, I tested three models of value-based reasoning in the general public: The General Use Model (GUM), Sophistication Interaction Model (SIM), and the Reverse-Sophistication Interaction Model (RSIM). Overall, out of six hard issues investigated here, I found evidence for the GUM in three, and evidence of the
SIM in four. Thus, in many instances, values indeed constrain the attitudes of sophistscates and novices alike for hard issues. This is particularly notable, as the investigation in Chapter 2 demonstrated that value-based judgments should be least likely for hard issues. Thus, even political novices can indeed use their core values to reason about hard political issues. In this way, values have passed the “hard” test for political reasoning, at least for some hard issues presented here.

While values significantly predict hard issue attitudes for novices, there is no strong evidence suggest that values are more influential for this group.

When sophisticates evaluate hard issues, they indeed rely on more cues than novices. Values more strongly predict the hard issue attitudes of sophisticates, but this is in conjunction with partisanship and affect toward the policy beneficiary, if applicable. This is notable because it has traditionally been assumed that political novices are most likely to resort to group-centric considerations when evaluating political issues (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1992). While group affect does predict the attitudes of novices in Chapter 4, this relationship is most often stronger for sophisticates, as opposed to novices.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This dissertation serves as the starting point for a number of future projects relating to public opinion on political issues. As any starting point, there are various limitations that ought to be acknowledged. The first is the measurement of values in both Study 1 and the ANES Time Series Data. While
these measures are valid for tapping into one’s commitment to core values, they fail to capture the trade-offs that are inherent when applying values to complicated political issues. Individuals are highly supportive of nearly every value - however, rating systems tell us the extent to which one prizes liberty, versus equality (Jacoby, 2006). A rating system would likely provide a more accurate depiction of the role of core values in shaping political attitudes because it accounts for these trade-offs. Future work ought to explore the extent to which a measure of values based on a rating system yields different results from the ones presented here.

Another limitation is with the sample in Survey 1. Although it is census-representative, it is not a probability sample. Respondents were provided by Qualtrics. Part of the process of becoming a Qualtrics respondent, however, is to opt in to a pool of potential respondents for survey research. Thus, drawing conclusions about the behavior of the American electorate at large becomes problematic, because not all members of the American public had an equal probability of participating in the survey.

In addition to these limitations, there is still a great deal more work to be done with respect to understanding the underpinnings of political attitudes in different issue domains. One thing we learned in this piece is that while values are indeed predictive of the attitudes of novices, affect toward the policy beneficiary is a much stronger and more consistent predictor. This begs the question: what

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considerations are indeed most important to novices as they reason about political issues? A future content analysis of the open-ended responses from Survey 1 will provide a fruitful assessment of this question.

Affect toward policy beneficiaries also significantly predicted the attitudes of sophisticates. Group-centric thinking has largely been considered the purview of political novices (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991). However, we also know that there are some issues in which the policy beneficiaries are not as transparent as an issue domain such as same-sex rights. One example of this is strict voter identification laws. Although at face-value, these laws apply to all voters, we also know that these laws make it more difficult for poor and minority voters to obtain the proper identification needed to vote - and that this, in turn, favors Republicans electorally (Barreto, Nuño, & Sanchez, 2009). However, only those who are interested in and knowledgeable about politics are likely to know about this. Therefore, to what extent do values, versus group-centrism, play a role in the attitudes of political sophisticates evaluating political issues with concealed beneficiaries?

Another future direction is to investigate the relationship between partisanship and values. The extent to which values cause partisanship or vice versa has been debated in the literature (Goren, 2005; Jacoby, 2014). In reality, this is likely a mutually reinforcing cycle: individuals are drawn to parties that resonate with their values. Identification with a party - primarily in terms of
voting - reinforces those values even further because partisanship is part of one’s identity. Future work should look at time series data to assess the extent to which Democrats and Republicans have polarized in terms of values over time. Are Democrats becoming more egalitarian? Are Republicans becoming more committed to individualism? Examining values in the mass public over time may provide clues into the relationship between values and partisan identification.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that the public indeed perceives differences between hard and easy issues. Yet, an overarching theory of issue difficulty has yet to be posited. Studies of various issue domains tend to occur in isolation, using different terminologies and theoretical underpinnings. Further studies should examine the intersections between these threads of study to generate a unifying theory of the influence of issue difficulty on political attitudes and electoral behavior.

Conclusion

To conclude, this dissertation demonstrates that values often drive the preferences of political novices when evaluating hard issues. This constitutes a “hard” test of the relationship between core values and political attitudes. However, this relationship is often stronger for political sophisticates. Values, in short, constitute a useful and often normatively desirable tool for evaluating political issues. The good news is that there is some evidence to suggest that most citizens are competent at applying core values to issues that provide few
cues.

However, group affect is the single-most consistent predictor of hard issue attitudes for novices. Thus, novices are capable of using their belief system to inform their preferences, but feelings toward the policy beneficiary constitute a much more affectively-charged shortcut. What’s more is that sophisticates rely on group-centrism as well. In fact, affect toward the policy beneficiary is often a stronger predictor for sophisticates, rather than novices.

In short, this dissertation demonstrates that the minimum criteria for citizen competence is often met, even for hard issues. Those who know nothing about politics can connect their core values to their preferences. However, sophisticates are more adept at this. Additionally, values do not predict attitudes for novices nor sophisticates as strongly as partisanship and group affect. Thus, while most Americans are capable of reasoning with their values, they often rely upon more concrete shortcuts instead.
Bibliography


Appendix

Appendix A: Study 1 Question Wording

**Same-Sex Marriage.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of same-sex marriage. This is the idea that marriages between same-sex couples should be recognized as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriage. To what extent do you support or oppose same-sex marriage? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support)

**Body Cameras.** This set of questions refers to the political issues of body cameras on police officers. This is a proposed law that requires police officers to wear body cameras while on patrol. To what extent do you support or oppose a law that requires police officers to wear body cameras while on patrol? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support)

**Abortion Opt-Out Laws.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of abortion opt-out laws. This is a proposed law that allows pharmacists and health providers to opt out of providing medicine or surgical procedures that result in abortion. To what extent do you propose a law that allows pharmacists and health providers to opt out of providing medicine or surgical procedures that result in abortion? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Religious Freedom Laws: Same-Sex Weddings.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of religious freedom laws. This is a proposed law that allows businesses to refuse services to same-sex couples for religious reasons. If a business provides wedding services, such as catering or flowers, should it be allowed to refuse those services to same-sex couples for religious reasons, or required to provide those services as it would other customers? (1=Allowed to refuse; 2 = Required to provide services).

**Religious Vaccination Exemptions.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of religious vaccination exemptions. This is a proposed law that allows parents to waive the requirement that their children be vaccinated before attending public school if they oppose the vaccinations on religious grounds. To what extent do you support a law that allows parents to send their unvaccinated

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children to public school if they have refused the vaccination on religious grounds? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Needle Exchange Programs.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of clean needles for drug users. This is a proposed law that provides government funding to provide clean needles to drug users in an effort to prevent the spread of infectious disease. To what extent do you support government funding to provide clean needles to drug users in an effort to prevent the spread of infectious diseases? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Iran Nuclear Deal.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of negotiating with Iran on nuclear weapons. This refers to the idea that the United States should negotiate directly with Iran over its nuclear weapons program. To what extent do you approve or disapprove of the United States negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Abortion.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of banning abortion. This refers to the idea that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. Do you think abortion should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances? (1=Legal under any circumstances; 4=Illegal under any circumstances).

**Tax Increases for the Wealthy.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of increasing taxes for the wealthy. This is the idea that the tax rate for the wealthiest Americans should be increased. Do you think we should increase the tax rate for the wealthiest Americans, decrease it, or keep it the same? (1=Decrease tax rate for the wealthy; 3 = Increase the tax rate for the wealthy).

**Death Penalty.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of the death penalty. This is the idea that the death penalty should be available as a sentence for those convicted of murder. To what extent do you favor or oppose the death penalty for those convicted of murder? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Marijuana Legalization.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of marijuana legalization. This is the idea that the use of marijuana should be legal for adults in the United States. To what extent do you agree that the use of marijuana should be legal for adults? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Affirmative Action.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of affirmative action. This is the idea that colleges should implement programs
designed to increase the number of black and minority students on college campuses. In general, do you support or oppose affirmative action programs designed to increase the number of black and minority students on college campuses? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Immigration Reform.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of immigration reform. This is the idea that the United States should expand the number of undocumented immigrant workers permitted to stay and work in the United States. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should expand the number of undocumented immigrant workers permitted to stay and work in the United States? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).

**Nuclear Energy Expansion.** This set of questions refers to the political issue of nuclear energy expansion. This is the idea that the United States should expand the use of nuclear power to provide energy to the United States. To what extent do you support expanding the use of nuclear energy to provide energy to the United States? (1=Strongly Oppose; 6=Strongly Support).
## Appendix B: Chapters 2 and 3 Sophistication Factor Analysis

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<th>Item</th>
<th>Sophistication Factor</th>
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<td>Pol. Interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pol. Attention</td>
<td>0.59</td>
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Eigenvalue = 1.36

\( n = 1029 \)

\( \chi^2 = 515.22 \)

\( df = 3 \)

Bartlett’s Test: \( p=0.00 \)

KMO = .66

Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .68 \)
Appendix C: Chapters 2 and 3 Sophistication Measures

Knowledge

How many times can a US president be elected?
Which party currently holds the most seats in the US House of Representatives?
Which party currently holds the most seats in the US Senate?
Which party tends to be more conservative at the national level?
Whose responsibility is it to determine whether a law is constitutional or not?

Political Interest

How much interest do you have in politics? 1 = None at all; 6 = A great deal

Political Attention

How many days in a week do you pay attention to the news on television, newspapers, or the Internet? 1 = Never; 5 = Every day
Appendix D: Chapter 2 Issue Difficulty Measures

Thought Listing: Please list the thoughts that come to mind as you think about how you formed your opinion on [issue]. You do not need to fill in all of the boxes below.

Understanding: How well do you feel you understand the issue of [issue]? 1 = Don't understand at all; 6 = Understand very well.

More Info Needed: Do you feel you need more information before forming an opinion on [issue]? 1 = Yes, 2 = No

Morals Needed: Do you feel that [issue] is an issue where more information is needed to have an opinion, or is this an issue where people just need to use their basic moral values to have an opinion? 1 = More information is needed to form an opinion; 2 = People just need to use their basic moral values

Certainty: How certain are you in your opinion about [issue]? 1 = Very uncertain; 6 = Very certain

Experts: To what extent do you rely on experts (scientists, policy analysts) to form an opinion on [issue]? 1 = Not at all; 3 = A great deal

Religious Leaders: To what extent do you rely on religious leaders to form an opinion on [issue]? 1 = Not at all; 3 = A great deal

Party Stance: Where does the Democratic (Republican) Party stand on the issue of [issue]? 1 = Strongly oppose; 7 = Strongly support; 8 = DK
### Appendix E: Study 1 Sample Characteristics

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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Std. Dev.</th>
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<td>2.14</td>
<td>1 (Strong Dem.)</td>
<td>7 (Strong Rep.)</td>
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<td>8 (Other)</td>
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<td>9 (Several times/week)</td>
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### Appendix F: ANES Time Series Descriptives

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<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0 (Non-Black)</td>
<td>1 (Black)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55,571</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0 (Male)</td>
<td>1 (Female)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>50,333</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1 (0-16th%)</td>
<td>5 (96-100th%)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td>54,020</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1 (Dem)</td>
<td>3 (Rep)</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Election Info</td>
<td>30,775</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0 (Very Low)</td>
<td>4 (Very High)</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>22,696</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>0 (Low Egal.)</td>
<td>12 (High Egal.)</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>