Political Science 146 – Public Opinion and Mass Media: Citizens’ Democratic Basics

Loren Collingwood, Political Science

November 1, 2017
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- Participatory democratic theorists says yes because “political info. is to democratic politics what money is to economics: currency of citizenship.”

- Elite democratic theorists say no because citizens use info. shortcuts, such as cues from elites, groups they trust, social networks to form their political opinions
Table: “Next I’d like to ask about some things that have been in the news. Please answer as best you can.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue / fact</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
<th>% Incorrect</th>
<th>DK/Ref</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Child Left Behind is about? (Education)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton’s job? (Secretary of State)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moammar Gadhafi is leader of? (Libya)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current unemployment rate (9%)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founder of Facebook? (Zuckerberg)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker of the house? (Boehner)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pct. of Americans who are obese (25%)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans have majority in? (House)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of Political Knowledge

To be knowledgeable about politics, well informed in 3 areas: 1) Rules of the game, 2) Substance of politics, 3) People and players (including parties and groups)
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- People less knowledgeable about substance of politics (i.e., what is greenhouse gas effect?, what is Keystone pipeline?)
- Same with people and players. Citizens know presidents, but have a harder time identifying parties with certain stances, and knowledge about foreign leaders.
Participatory democratic theorists argue citizens should be well informed so they can: 1) figure out their interests, 2) recognize which policies serve those interests, 3) identify which political parties, interest groups, and politicians pursue those interests.
How Knowledgeable/Attentive Should Citizens be?

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- “It is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other scarce resources” (Anthony Downs)
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- **Limited Information Processors**: People use heuristics not because of its rationality, but because it is impossible to be fully informed – the world is complex, changing, and the media can only cover so much.
Misinformation

- Distinction between people who are informed, uninformed, and misinformed
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- **Informed**: People have factual beliefs, and the beliefs must be accurate
Misinformation

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Distinction between people who are informed, uninformed, and misinformed

- **Informed**: People have factual beliefs, and the beliefs must be accurate
- **Uninformed**: If people do not hold factual beliefs at all
- **Misinformed**: Hold factual beliefs that happen to be wrong
“Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al Qaeda terrorist organization?”
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Misinformation & the Iraq War

▶ “Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al Qaeda terrorist organization?”
▶ “Since the war with Iraq ended, is it your impression that the US has or has not found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction?”
▶ “Do you think that the majority of people in the world oppose the US having gone to war, or Views are evenly balanced?”
## TABLE 1

**Evidence of Link between Iraq and al Qaeda**

(Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>8–9/03</th>
<th>7/03</th>
<th>6/03</th>
<th>(6/03–9/03)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US has</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US has not</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(No answer)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.*
Misinformation and the Iraq War: WMDs
Misinformation and Support for Iraq War

FIGURE 5
Cumulative Effect of Having Key Misperceptions on Support for the War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for War Among Those Who Have:</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Misperceptions</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Misperception</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Misperceptions</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Misperceptions</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Composite of Polls Conducted June-September 2003
## TABLE 4

*Frequency of Misperceptions per Respondent: WMD Found, Evidence of al Qaeda Link, and World Majority Support for War (percentages)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of misperceptions per respondent</th>
<th>Fox</th>
<th>CBS</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>NBC</th>
<th>Print Media</th>
<th>NPR/PBS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None of the three</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more misperception</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Measuring Political Knowledge

▶ Are citizens generalists or specialists?

Generalist is knowledgeable across all political topics. Can name secretary of state, know minimum wage, etc.

Specialist has knowledge on some topics, but not others.

Delli Carpini and Keeter found that citizens can best be characterized as generalists, which makes measurement much easier. These scholars recommended 5 questions.
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▶ Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by [current vice president]?
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- Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not – the president, Congress, or Supreme Court?
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- How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and house to override a presidential veto?
- Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this/last month?
- Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?
Demographic Differences in Political Knowledge

- Gender gap: women overall less knowledgeable but more knowledgeable about gender specific issues (like health care).

- Racial gap: Whites more knowledgeable, but this disappears with respect to racial issues. Even apparent among high schoolers and middle schoolers.

- Age gap: Younger people less knowledgeable, have fewer political experiences.

- Income and education gap: Education improves cognitive abilities, allows people to obtain jobs where knowledge of politics is necessary (university professor, lobbyist, etc.).
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Table: “The chief justice of the Supreme Court is John Roberts. Can you tell me if he is generally considered a liberal, a moderate, or a conservative?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Answered Correctly (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18-29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 30-49</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 50-64</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20K</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50-75K</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100K +</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS or less</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>