The Electoral Challenge
Theory Meets Practice

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

Stephen C. Craig
University of Florida

David B. Hill
Auburn University and Hill Research Consultants

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4 Voter Competence

Stephen C. Craig and Michael D. Martinez

Democratic theory has never been specific about how much information and knowledge is needed in order for individuals to be able to fulfill the obligations of effective citizenship. Most would agree, however, that at a minimum a basic understanding of the policy differences that exist between candidates for office, and between the parties they represent, is required. Without such an understanding, the public will be unable to cast its ballots wisely and, hence, unable to hold its elected leaders accountable. Unfortunately, more than half a century of empirical research has left the distinct impression that “[v]oters have a limited amount of information about politics, a limited knowledge of how government works, and a limited understanding of how governmental actions are connected to consequences of immediate concern to them” (Popkin 1991, 8).

Academics are not the only ones to have reached this conclusion. A poll sponsored by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum in 2006, for example, revealed that whereas just one in four Americans could name more than one of the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition for redress of grievances), and one in one thousand could name all of them, 22 percent were able to name all five members of TV’s cartoon family The Simpsons (more than half could name at least two) (see Grace 2006). Surveys done by the National Constitution Center show that

[m]ore than a third [of Americans cannot] list any First Amendment rights; 42 percent think that the Constitution explicitly states that “the first language of the United States is English”; and 25 percent believe that Christianity was established by the Constitution as the official government religion. The young are even more ignorant than their parents and grandparents. About half of adults—but just 41 percent of teenagers—can name the three branches of government. . . . The vast majority of both adults and teens have no idea of when or by whom the Constitution was written. Among the teenagers, nearly 98 percent cannot name the Chief Justice of the United States (Jacoby 2008, 299–300).
To be sure, failure to identify the five freedoms or name the chief justice does not, in and of itself, signify that a person is incapable of casting a well-informed vote that is consistent with his or her political interests or values. But it does (or should) raise something of a red flag for anyone who believes that a certain “degree of civic and political knowledge is required to be a competent democratic citizen” (Galston 2001, 218)—and that the number of citizens who possess such knowledge is a leading indicator of the quality of democracy that exists in a nation, including our own.

In the following section, we provide a more complete overview of both the level and distribution of political knowledge in the United States; in doing so, we note how the public’s informational shortcomings may help to shape the character of public opinion, at least on some issues. Next, in keeping with the central theme of this book, we assess the degree to which campaigns succeed in informing voters about the issues and about candidates’ and parties’ positions on those issues. Finally, we look at whether voters are able, notwithstanding the limited information that many of them possess, to make “rational” or “correct” choices when they go to the polls on election day. In conclusion, we note that while normative democratic theorists have reason to be alarmed by what the average citizen does not know, there is evidence that Americans are perhaps not quite as clueless as some contemporary social critics would have us believe (Jacoby 2008; Shenkman 2008).

Voter Knowledge and the Structure of Public Opinion

“The political ignorance of the American voter,” according to Larry Bartels (1996, 194), “is one of the best-documented features of contemporary politics.” In fact, this is not a recent development. For more than half a century (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), one study after another has confirmed a basic fact: “popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of an informed observer, astonishingly low” (Converse 1975, 79).

And even though these levels may fluctuate over time in response to changes in the political environment (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Popkin 1994; Hillygus and Shields 2008; see also the next section in this chapter), there has been no long-term increase in voter knowledge despite societal developments that should have produced some fairly dramatic changes in that direction.

Russell Dalton, for example, described a process of cognitive mobilization that supposedly “has raised the public’s overall level of sophistication” by increasing
citizens' "ability to acquire political information and [their] ability to process political information" (Dalton 2008, 19; see also Dalton 1984; Inglehart 1990). Most scholars agree that individual variations in political knowledge are a function of three basic elements: ability, motivation, and opportunity (Luskin 1990). The cognitive mobilization phenomenon addresses all three of these, especially with reference to two important trends: rising educational levels since the end of World War II (which should have made more people capable of learning and increased their motivation to be informed) and the development of television, radio, the Internet, and various other sources of political information (which provided people with more opportunities for learning). Yet despite these changes, there is little to suggest that the American public is significantly better informed about politics and government today than it was fifty or sixty years ago (E. Smith 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; S. Bennett 1996; Althaus 2003). One can argue, of course, that information is not the best standard by which to judge the competence of mass electorates. According to Thomas Patterson (2006, 40–41), "politics is largely about the mobilization of bias, that is, the efforts of people to promote their beliefs and interests. A thoughtful vote is rooted in core values, not bits of information." Philip Converse (2000, 333), however, while conceding that "knowledge of minor facts, such as the length of terms of U.S. senators, cannot address what voters actually need to vote properly," maintained that "differences in knowledge of several such 'minor' facts are diagnostic of more profound differences in the amount and accuracy of contextual information voters bring to their judgments" (see also Neuman 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

A case can certainly be made that estimates of the (very low) levels of information possessed by voters are a reflection, to some degree, of shortcomings in the manner in which political knowledge is typically measured in opinion surveys. Jeffrey Mondak (2000, 2001; but see Sturgis, Allum, and Smith 2008), for example, observed that when respondents are asked factual questions and told that it's acceptable to say they "don't know" if they're unsure about an answer, the result is that some of them will venture a guess, and some of these will guess correctly. Those who choose to guess and guess correctly will appear to be more knowledgeable than those who fail to guess (perhaps due to a lack of self-confidence) even though the two groups are, objectively speaking, equally knowledgeable. But when "don't know" responses are discouraged (or eliminated altogether; see M. Miller and Orr 2008), the proportion of respondents who provide correct answers is often at least somewhat higher. In a slightly different vein, Markus Prior and Arthur Lupia (2008).
argued that standard measures of political knowledge are flawed because they fail to take into account that (1) some respondents know the answers to questions but lack the motivation to search their memories carefully enough to retrieve the information, and (2) even when it is not readily accessible in memory at the time of the interview, many people will be able to find the correct answer if given the time to do so. The authors’ experimental data indicated that, as predicted, a fair number of those who appear to be “know-nothings” based on traditional measures can answer questions correctly when given a small incentive (in this case, $1 for each right answer) or extra time (twenty-four hours versus one minute; see Prior and Lupia 2008, 171) to complete the task.

All of the above is well and good, but, in the end, it does not alter the fact that a large segment of the public has been and remains woefully ignorant about virtually every aspect of American politics. The most thorough overview of this topic was provided by Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996), who examined nearly 3,700 questions in surveys conducted from 1940 to 1994 that tapped respondents’ knowledge of the processes, participants, and policies of government in the United States and worldwide. They found that there were some things about which citizens were generally well informed; almost everyone, for example, knew who the president was, and most could identify certain other leading political figures of the day (such as the governor of their state). It also appears that a majority of citizens during this period had at least limited knowledge, if not always a full understanding, of many matters relating to the institutions and processes of American government (length of a president’s term, role of the courts in determining constitutionality of laws, the meaning of such terms as “inflation” and “federal deregulation”) and to policies and issues both domestic (the minimum wage, energy shortages, existence of a federal budget deficit) and foreign (which countries are/were communist, existence of a U.S. trade deficit with Japan, conflict between Israel and its adversaries in the Middle East). It is not difficult, however, to find huge gaps in the public’s awareness of certain facts that are central to the debates and controversies that characterize contemporary political discourse. Less than one-third, for example, knew the substance of the Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade decision in 1986, the meaning of “affirmative action” in 1985 (one suspects that the figure for both of these questions would be somewhat higher today), or the nature of Saudi Arabia’s government in 1990.⁴

What do things look like now? As any student or professor knows, essay tests and multiple choice tests often yield very different results—and the same is true for measures of political knowledge. Ask someone to name, without
promoting, the U.S. vice president or the governor of her state, and there is a reasonably good chance that she will be unable to do so (the figures in a 2007 poll were 69 percent and 66 percent, respectively, which actually represented a decline from a similar survey conducted in 1989). Even when survey respondents are presented with a range of possible answers, and even when the options are reduced to a bare minimum (as with which party holds a majority of seats in the U.S. House; see below), the results are not always impressive—although many people do exhibit a greater recognition of political facts than is suggested by questions that employ an open-ended format. With this distinction in mind, a survey conducted in fall 2009 confirmed that there still is much that the public does not know about the contextual details of American politics. Based on a multiple-choice methodology, results indicated that

- 75 percent knew that the Democrats held a majority of seats in the U.S. House;
- 65 percent could identify Sonia Sotomayor as the newest member of the Supreme Court;
- 61 percent knew that health spending was higher in the United States than in most of Europe;
- 53 percent knew that the current unemployment rate was close to 10 percent;
- 40 percent could identify Glenn Beck as a TV/radio host;
- 33 percent could identify Ben Bernanke as chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve;
- 28 percent knew that the current U.S. troop level in Afghanistan was around seventy thousand;
- 23 percent knew that the “cap and trade” proposal dealt with energy and the environment; and
- 18 percent could identify Max Baucus as chair of the Senate Finance Committee.

Although one could reasonably argue that anyone who knew all of these facts was extremely well informed, the bad news is that almost no one did. Of twelve total questions asked in the Pew survey (only nine are listed above), just 44 percent of respondents answered six correctly, 25 percent answered eight, 12 percent answered ten, and 2 percent answered all twelve (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009b).
What are the consequences of such low levels of political knowledge among the American public? In the grand scheme of things, does it really matter all that much whether citizens can name their state’s governor or know which party controls Congress? According to William Galston (2001, 221–222), there are a number of ways in which “civic knowledge” is important in a democracy. Among these are the following: First, knowledge helps us to “understand the impact of public policies on our interests” and, as a result, to promote those interests more effectively through political action, including voting. Second, “[u]nless citizens possess a basic level of civic knowledge ... it is difficult for them to understand political events or to integrate new information into an existing framework. (By analogy, imagine trying to make sense of the flow of events in a sports competition for which one does not know the rules of the game.)” Third, knowledge “can alter our views on specific issues,” from immigration policy to national security to the death penalty. Fourth and fifth, citizens with higher levels of knowledge tend to be more supportive of democratic values (such as tolerance) and more politically active.

We will return to some of these themes later in the chapter. In the meantime, it should be understood that political knowledge is not evenly distributed throughout the electorate. To the contrary, studies have shown that knowledge levels are significantly higher among those who are politically and/or socially advantaged—that is, among individuals with higher incomes, more formal education, men, whites, and young people. Thus, when the Pew Research Center asked twenty-three political information questions in a 2007 survey, it found that certain types of people were much more likely than others to fall into the “high knowledge” category (fifteen or more correct answers): 63 percent of college graduates (versus 20 percent of those with a high-school diploma or less); 75 percent of respondents with incomes of more than $100,000 (versus 35 percent of those earning between $30–50,000, and 14 percent of those earning less than $20,000); 45 percent of men (versus 25 percent of women); 37 percent of whites (versus 24 percent of blacks); and 43 percent of those aged 65 and older (versus 15 percent of those aged 18–29) (see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007). Further, although there is some variability, it does not appear that such “knowledge gaps” have changed much over time: those who once had high levels of political knowledge still do (relatively speaking), while those who never did have high knowledge haven’t gained much ground.

An occasional point of difference among scholars has been the question of whether political knowledge is unidimensional (with those who know more in one area generally knowing more in others as well), or whether it is more
domain specific (with citizens paying more attention to, and being better informed about, issues that are personally relevant or about which they care deeply for whatever reason). To the extent that the latter is true, we would expect to find patterns of knowledge that reflect "group differences in experiences, interest, and access to information," and a citizenry that is divided into numerous "issue publics" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 138; see also Converse 1964; Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1990; Hutchings 2003) whose members are better informed primarily about the issues central to their concerns (Y. Kim 2009, 225). Indeed, there is some evidence that is consistent with the issue publics model, for example, that blacks are better informed than whites about racial issues, and women are as knowledgeable as men about gender-related issues and issues related to local politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 175; see also Hutchings 2003; Price et al. 2006). As a general rule, though, the kinds of people who are either well or poorly informed tend to be well or poorly informed across the board (Neuman 1986; E. Smith 1989; S. Bennett 2003).

At first glance, one factor that does not appear to play a large role here is partisanship. When the focus is on knowledge of basic political facts, Democrats often are found to be less informed than Republicans in part because the former are disproportionately drawn from elements of society (lower social status, blacks, women) that possess less information for reasons having little to do with their party preferences; however, observed differences between partisan groups tend to be fairly small. Thus, the 2007 Pew survey placed 69 percent of self-identified Democrats in either the "high" (correct answers to at least fifteen of twenty-three questions) or "medium" (correct answers to ten to fourteen questions) information category, compared with 74 percent of Republicans and 64 percent of independents. Looking at the 2009 Pew knowledge data another way, the mean number of correct answers (out of twelve questions) was 5.7 for both Republicans and independents, versus 5.0 for Democrats (see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007, 2009b).

Against this backdrop, an interesting controversy emerged following the election of Barack Obama in 2008. A survey of 512 Obama voters nationwide, conducted by Zogby International on behalf of former talk radio host, author, and conservative Web site publisher John Ziegler, included twelve multiple-choice questions that tested respondents’ "knowledge of statements and scandals associated with the presidential tickets during the campaign." Results indicated that an overwhelming majority (more than 80 percent) correctly named Sarah Palin as "the candidate with a pregnant teenage daughter" and as "the candidate associated with a $150,000 wardrobe purchased by her political party," and correctly
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ber of houses he owned”; in contrast, 83 percent “failed to correctly answer that
Obama had won his first election by getting all of his opponents removed from
the ballot,” 56 percent were unaware that “Obama started his political career at
the home of two former members of the Weather Underground” (a domestic
terrorist group in the 1960s), and 72 percent “did not correctly identify [Joe
Biden as the candidate who had to quit a previous campaign for president
because he was found to have plagiarized a speech.” On a more neutral note,
57 percent of Obama voters failed to identify the Democrats as having a con-
trolling majority of seats in both houses of Congress during the period leading
up to the election. Overall, just 54 percent were able to provide correct answers
to at least six of the twelve questions (Zogby International 2008). This story
quickly produced a storm of reaction, not only from Obama supporters but
from professional pollsters and political analysts who pointed out that many of
the questions asked in the survey were biased and misleading (Allen 2008; Bialik
2008; Silver 2008). One other obvious shortcoming of the poll is that, even if
the questions were valid, it provided no basis for comparison between those
who supported Obama versus those who supported McCain. 10

In fact, one does not have to look very hard to find examples of limited
knowledge on the Republican side. In 2004, for example, a national survey
revealed that “Americans who plan to vote for President [George W.] Bush have
many incorrect assumptions about his foreign policy positions. [John] Kerry
supporters, on the other hand, are largely accurate” in assessing their can-
date’s positions (Kull 2004). More recently, a poll done in July 2009 showed
that 58 percent of Republicans (compared with 7 percent of Democrats) either
did not believe that President Obama was born in the United States (28 per-
cent) or weren’t sure (30 percent) (Thrush 2009). Earlier in 2009, more than
two months into Obama’s presidency, only 46 percent of Republicans correctly
identified his religious affiliation as Christian (17 percent thought he was Mus-
lum) (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009a). 11 Results such
as these bring to mind the distinction between being uninformed (not knowing
what the facts are) and being misinformed (being confidently wrong about
those facts) (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Not knowing Barack Obama’s religious
preferences is one thing, but believing him to be a Muslim in the face of
numerous news reports to the contrary is quite another. According to James
Kuklinski and colleagues (2000, 794–795), many people overrate the accuracy
and reliability of their factual beliefs; when they do, their policy preferences
may be very different than would otherwise be the case.

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It is likely that being misinformed is, to some extent, a function of one’s partisan leanings; that is, some people may accept the accuracy of (false) information that is consistent with their partisanship, while rejecting the accuracy of (true) information that is not. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a national opinion poll revealed that more than half the public believed that Iraq either was directly involved in carrying out the terrorist attacks in New York City and Arlington, Virginia, on September 11, 2001, or gave substantial support to the al-Qaeda terror network without being directly involved; more than 20 percent thought that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had been discovered in Iraq after the incumbent regime fell; and one-fourth said the invasion was supported by most people in other countries around the world—all of the above statements are factually incorrect. As we anticipated, a substantially higher proportion of Bush supporters were misinformed (68 percent on Iraq links to al-Qaeda, 31 percent on WMD, and 36 percent on world opinion) on these matters than respondents who planned to vote for a Democrat in 2004 (31 percent, 10 percent, and 11 percent, respectively). Further, Bush supporters who said they followed the news “very closely” (and especially those who watched Fox News) were the most likely to hold incorrect beliefs and, perhaps not incidentally, the most likely to endorse U.S. military action in Iraq (86 percent, compared with between 53 percent and 76 percent of Bush supporters with a lower level of news attentiveness, and less than one-quarter of all Democratic nominee supporters).

We do not intend to single out Republicans since partisans on both sides, as they go about deciding “which information to attend to and how to interpret that information,” will tend to “strive for consistency” with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs (Kuklinski et al. 2000, 794); in other words, dissonant information is often ignored or disregarded. This does, however, raise questions about the degree to which ordinary voters are able to acquire information, process that information, and then use it to make decisions about which candidates and policies most closely conform to their political interests and values. Let us consider, then, the “educability” of the American voter within the context of a campaign system that is often criticized for making it harder rather than easier for people to fulfill their role as democratic citizens.

Campaigns and Political Learning

We began this chapter by suggesting that democratic accountability depends, at a minimum, upon citizens having an understanding of the important policy
to some extent, a function of one’s partisan affiliations, while rejecting the accuracy of (false) information, deems the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a war whose very existence is disputed. More than half the public believed that Iraq was involved in terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, or gave substantial support to having direct involvement; more than half believed that nuclear weapons (WMD) had been discovered; and one-fourth said the invasion triggered wars in other countries around the world—all incorrect. As we anticipated, a substantial majority (68 percent) supported a Democrat (2 percent), respectively). Further, Bush received “very closely” (and especially overall), Bush was the most likely to hold incorrect beliefs (67 percent) to endorse U.S. military action between 51 percent and 76 percent of respondents, and less than one-third (31 percent) existed since partisans on both sides, as expected, to attend to and how to interpret “consistency” with their preexisting views, dissonant from the evidence. This does, however, raise questions about whether voters are able to acquire information and use it to make decisions about which political to their political interests and values of the American voter within the public sphere. It is criticized for making it harder rather than easier for democratic citizens.

Democratic accountability depends, therefore, on a clear understanding of the important policy differences that exist between the candidates and parties. While conceding that voters may be ill-equipped “to handle every possible situation that comes their way,” Patterson (2006, 42) argued that “the critical question is not whether voters are competent but whether election campaigns foster or frustrate their efforts to cast a thoughtful vote. Campaigns can be run in ways that make it easier for voters to render a thoughtful judgment about the candidates, or they can be run in ways that make the task considerably more complicated.” Political campaigns in the United States are not, according to Patterson, very “voter friendly” due to a number of factors, including (1) “the capacity of interest groups in a money-driven electoral process to pull candidates away from the center . . . where most voters are, and therefore make it harder for them to determine which party better represents their interests” (44–45); (2) a steady drumbeat of negativity as candidates attack each other relentlessly and many citizens are worn down “to the point where they begin to lose interest in the electoral process as a whole” (47); (3) campaign coverage by the news media that focuses on “strategy, tactics, and maneuvering” while diverting attention from “larger issues” of policy and the candidates’ proposals for how to deal with those issues (48–49); and (4) a complex system of election structures and laws (frequent elections, nomination by primaries, separate ballots for executive and legislature) that make it difficult to be fully informed, and a lack of competition for many offices that gives voters “little reason to invest time and energy” in races where the outcome is never in doubt (49–53). In sum, a credible case can be made that campaigns “provide little, if any, information to the electorate—and that whatever information is disseminated by the campaigns is distorted by the mass media and even ignored by voters” (Alvarez 1997, 7). Especially when candidates fail to take clear positions or address the issues of greatest concern to their constituents (Shepsle 1972; Page 1978; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; but see Franklin 1991; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Spilotes and Vavreck 2002), it is hardly surprising that there is a high degree of confusion and uncertainty about who stands for what.

Yet even if Patterson’s observations are correct (and with one exception, we believe they generally are), there is evidence indicating that much of the knowledge that citizens do possess regarding candidate and party differences is acquired within the context of spirited electoral competition. Campaigns provide the “single most compelling incentive [for the average person] to think about government” (Riker 1989, 1), and the instability in public opinion polls that often occurs over the course of a presidential election is thought by many.
scholars to be a direct result of information flow; that is, as additional information about candidates and issues is acquired, voters' preferences may shift as they become better able to identify the choices that are consistent with their preexisting political attitudes, beliefs, and interests (Gelman and King 1993). Indeed, numerous studies reveal that a significant amount of learning occurs during campaigns (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; T. Patterson and McClure 1976; Bartels 1993; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Alvarez 1997; T. Patterson 2002; Althaus 2003; see also Arceneaux 2006, as well as chapters 1 and 6 in this volume). While such learning is most likely to be observed in high-visibility presidential contests (because the information flow is greater), we also would expect to find evidence of it in some races for lower office (where candidates will initially be less familiar to voters than their counterparts at the top of the ticket).

The basic pattern, then, is clear: at least in high-visibility races, a significant amount of learning occurs during campaigns. The origins of that learning are not yet fully understood, however. Communication scholars agree that, for most people most of the time, the primary source of campaign information is the mass media. Despite their usual preoccupation with the horse race (campaign strategy and poll results) (see Sigelman and Bullock 1991; Just et al. 1996; Cappella and Jamieson 1997), and with scandals and candidate gaffes (Sabato, Stencil, and Lichter 2000), both newspapers and television provide a considerable amount of issue-related information to voters. Not everyone would agree with this assessment, of course. In their landmark study of the 1972 election, Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure (1976, 54) concluded that television news "may be fascinating. It may be highly entertaining. But it is simply not informative." As for newspapers, the absence of local coverage in Pittsburgh due to a strike had no noticeable impact on voter knowledge in the 1992 campaign; the evidence in this case was, according to Mondak (1995b, 99), "shattering for any theory of print superiority." Even less respect is afforded a third channel of campaign communication: paid ads, which often contain more issue content than typically acknowledged (West 2009; Geer 1998) but are regarded by many critics as little more than "self-serving puffery and distortion" (Popkin 1992, 164).

Unfortunately, there is no consensus as to the relative contribution of different communication channels to the learning that takes place during campaigns. Some studies conclude that voters learn more from reading newspapers than from watching television news programs and that, in fact, the latter adds little or nothing to a voter's ability to place candidates on key issues (T. Patterson and McClure 1976; Robinson and Levy 1986); others indicate that TV news
may be a significant source of issue awareness after all (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Bartels 1993; Graber 2001; Weaver and Drew 2001). As for campaign ads, Patterson and McClure (1976, 116–117) reported that “[o]n every single issue emphasized in presidential commercials [in 1972], persons with high exposure to television advertising showed a greater increase in knowledge [about the candidates’ positions] than persons with low exposure.” Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1995), in their experimental study of races for governor and U.S. Senate in California, reached a similar conclusion: “Though political advertisements are generally ridiculed as a serious form of campaign communication, our results demonstrate that they enlighten voters and enable them to take account of issues and policies when choosing between the candidates” (59). Not everyone is ready to jump on the campaign ad bandwagon, however. For every Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004) or Brians and Wattenberg (1996, 185), who argued that “political advertising contributes to a well-informed electorate,” there are scholars in the opposite camp whose findings suggest otherwise (Zhao and Bleske 1998; Weaver and Drew 2001; Huber and Arceneaux 2007). Further research is obviously required to determine which of these perspectives is correct.

Another unsettled question has to do with whether campaigns, in general, tend to narrow or widen the information gap that exists between the relatively more and less engaged segments of the electorate. Whereas some studies indicate that people who are more active or knowledgeable to begin with are the ones most likely to acquire information during a campaign (Craig, Kane, and Gainous 2005; Stevens 2005; Nadeau et al. 2008), others conclude that exposure to campaigns primarily benefits those with limited knowledge (Alvarez 1997; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; see also Moore 1987; Arceneaux 2006; and Holbrook 2002b, who reports mixed results). Given that knowledge is correlated with one’s overall interest in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Converse 2000), and that interest levels tend to rise among marginally involved citizens during campaigns (especially presidential campaigns) (Althaus 2003), it is reasonable to assume that information gains will be concentrated closer to the bottom than to the top of the knowledge chain. The evidence to date suggests, however, that this is not invariably the case.

Finally, if campaigns facilitate learning to some degree, does it matter whether the tone of the campaign is positive or negative? Once again, the answer is a firm maybe. Negative campaigning, and negative advertising in particular, is frequently defended for providing information without which it would be “much more difficult for the voters to make intelligent choices about
the people they elect to public office” (Mayer 1996, 450; see also Geer 2006). As for whether voters learn more from positive or negative ads, the jury is out. Some studies show little difference between the two (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), while others suggest that negativity promotes greater learning (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Kahn and Kenney 2000, 2004). If the latter is true, it could be due to any of several factors, including (1) the higher issue content of negative ads (Geer 2000, 2006; West 2009); (2) the propensity of negative ads to heighten feelings of anxiety, thereby causing voters to seek out more information about candidates’ issue stands or other attributes (Marcus and MacKuen 1993); (3) the tendency for people to have greater recall of negative ads (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; but see Geer and Geer 2003); and (4) the tendency for people to give greater weight to negative information than to positive information (Lau 1985; A. Holbrook et al. 2001). Nevertheless, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we must again conclude that further research is needed.21

The practical importance of political knowledge (and of all the issues that we have raised in the chapter thus far) is, of course, the belief that having more of it will affect how people vote, specifically, that it will assist them in holding leaders accountable and in casting a ballot that is consistent with their political values, beliefs, and interests. In the next section, we will look at whether this is indeed the case.

Casting an Informed Vote

Despite the accumulated evidence that Americans’ overall awareness about politics leaves much to be desired, some scholars still argue, in V. O. Key’s (1966, 7) memorable words, that “voters are not fools.” According to this view, the lack of specific knowledge about certain political facts or particular officeholders does not necessarily undermine the ability of voters with limited information to make meaningful political choices. In fact, there are three separate theories that allegedly explain how it is the electorate can make choices that generally reflect its political interests: (1) retrospective voting, (2) the miracle of aggregation, and (3) cue-taking. In this section, we will briefly discuss each and explain why each still leaves us with the feeling that our explanatory glass is, at best, only half full.

Retrospective Voting

Baseline political polls now commonly ask voters whether they believe the country (or state) is headed “in the right direction” or is “off on the wrong
track.” Even voters with minimal awareness of policy debates in Washington or their state capital still have some idea of whether it is getting harder or easier to make ends meet, whether most people seem to be able to find and keep good jobs, whether the streets are getting safer or more dangerous, whether traffic is flowing better or getting more congested, whether America is respected or reviled abroad, and so on. People who use their votes as rewards or punishment don’t really need to know how the country got to its current condition; they simply need to have some idea of who was in charge when we started moving in the right direction or veered off on the wrong track. Those who cast their ballots based on “vengeance or rewards” (Key 1942) are known as retrospective voters.

Although retrospective voting by definition includes votes cast based on any politically relevant conditions (including the state of foreign affairs and social policy), most research on the topic examines the effects of economic evaluations on voter preference. Investigations of retrospective economic voting have led to a curious puzzle: whereas aggregate analyses show that incumbent parties generally fare better at the polls (winning more elections, receiving a higher percentage of the vote) when economic growth is robust (Kramer 1971), there is only weak and somewhat inconsistent evidence that individual voters who are personally better off are more likely than those who are struggling financially to support incumbent parties and candidates (Grafstein 2009). Instead of thinking just about their own pocketbooks, voters appear mostly to weigh the state of the nation’s economy and, to a lesser extent, the fortunes of citizens most like themselves when casting their ballots (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 1981; Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989; but see Markus 1988, 1992). In short, most retrospective voters seem to evaluate their leaders through a national (or “sociotropic”) frame rather than through a personal (or “pocketbook”) frame.

In his classic treatise, Morris Fiorina (1981) argued that retrospective voting is common among those with both low and high political sophistication. Further research, however, has looked more closely at whether higher levels of political knowledge promote pocketbook or sociotropic voting. One view is that while everyone can make some judgment about whether they are struggling or prospering personally, the natural tendency might be to attribute personal successes more to hard work and to attribute family financial squeezes to idiosyncratic bad luck or life transitions—thereby discounting the effects that national economic policy might have in shaping either personal good fortunes or struggles. According to this view, only the most knowledgeable people who are able to connect the dots between their personal financial conditions and macro fiscal

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policies are likely to cast pocketbook votes (Gomez and Wilson 2006). Other research suggests that knowledge of national economic conditions, such as inflation and unemployment rates, is more accessible to voters with higher political knowledge, which in turn increases the likelihood of sociotropic voting among those who are more sophisticated (Goren 1997; Godbout and Bélanger 2007). People with higher levels of political knowledge also appear to be more sensitive to structural political conditions in casting retrospective votes, weighing economic outcomes less in open-seat elections than when incumbents seek reelection (Godbout and Bélanger 2007), and attributing responsibility for economic conditions to both the president and Congress (Gomez and Wilson 2003).

Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that political knowledge has an effect on the weight people attach to economic assessments in determining their vote choices. If more voters had high levels of political knowledge, we would expect that governments would be held even more accountable for economic outcomes than they are currently, especially when incumbents seek reelection under conditions of exceptional clarity of responsibility (Powell and Whitten 1993). Conversely, low levels of political knowledge may allow governments to escape responsibility for poor economic outcomes or to receive less of an electoral benefit from good economic outcomes than might otherwise be the case. The irony is that presidents and other incumbents often get more credit and blame than they deserve for their management of the economy, which is much more likely to be affected by global economic cycles and fiscal policies of central bankers than by actions taken by elected leaders. Nevertheless, while retrospective evaluations are relatively easy to come by, political knowledge does appear to enhance voters' ability to use those evaluations when casting their ballots.

The Miracle of Aggregation

Public opinion is the aggregated sum of millions of individual opinions on any given issue, and while low levels of knowledge may distort the beliefs of many people, some argue that voters' errors in judgment will more or less cancel each other out. As a result, the balance of public opinion as a whole rests in the hands of those who actually have and can successfully express well-considered issue positions. Converse's seminal essay titled "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964) showed that only a few people had reasonably well-thought-out and tightly knit political beliefs, whereas most Americans had unstable and incoherent opinions on most policy issues, characterized by a
Other nations' economic conditions, such as the economic conditions of the United States, are more accessible to voters with higher levels of political knowledge. However, the likelihood of sociotropic voting increases the likelihood of sociotropic voting being effective. (Gomez and Wilson 2006) The notion of “white noise” or random error suggests that those ill-formed political opinions may not matter in the aggregate if, for example, roughly half of respondents with no true opinion on an issue said they were “liberal” on that issue and the other half said they were “conservative”; that is, if errors in political judgment basically cancel each other out, then the minority of Americans who do hold well-formed, stable, and coherent beliefs on any given issue will determine what public opinion as a whole looks like on that issue. Looking at it another way, imagine a hypothetical ballot measure that is confusing in its wording but, if passed, would make everyone in the state better off. Objectively, everyone should vote for the proposition, but many people have trouble deciphering the ballot language and are unsure what the proposal would actually do. Lupia (2001) observed that under those conditions, even if the probability of any single individual deciding to vote for the proposal barely exceeds the chance of a simple coin flip, it is almost certain that the collective decision represented by millions of individuals’ votes put together would result in passage of the universally beneficial proposal. Over time, then, while many people may appear to change their minds randomly from one time to the next, the “miracle of aggregation” produces an impressive stability of opinion for public opinion as a whole.22

Aggregate analyses support this view by showing that when public opinion as a whole does change, it seems to do so in sensible ways. For example, shifts in opinion generally track commentary by media anchors and experts, who are widely perceived by the public as (relatively speaking) objective sources of information, but not to commentary by interest group representatives who have axes to grind. Further, public preferences seem to respond to pronouncements by popular presidents, but not to those by unpopular presidents (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). There also is evidence that the public updates its preferences based on what the government is doing; that is, as government policies move in one direction, either left or right, public opinion will often arc when it’s time to tap on the brakes. For example, as government increases spending in a particular policy area, such as defense, public support for even more spending in that area tends to wane. Thus, while most individuals lack concrete information about how much the government actually spends on defense, education, foreign aid, or anything else, the public mood still acts something like a thermostat (Stimson 1999; Wlezien 1995), letting government know if its policies are getting too hot or too cold.

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Many scholars, however, are not so sanguine about the assumption that errors among the least informed citizens balance out in the aggregate, and they suggest that overall public opinion might well be different if the public were more fully informed. For one thing, misperceptions of facts are usually one-sided, as illustrated by people’s beliefs about the number of minorities (including gays and lesbians) in the population, the proportion of immigrants who are here illegally, and the amount of money spent by the federal government on foreign aid. Those estimates are rarely too low, and are sometimes too high by orders of magnitude. Perceptions (and misperceptions) of facts such as these are interwoven into value orientations, and thus may help shape abstract principles and the ways in which those principles are (or are not) applied in forming particular opinions (Hochschild 2001). In some cases, specific knowledge about a policy proposal is closely related to opinion about the policy, as illustrated by a Gallup (1977) report issued during the ratification debate on the Panama Canal treaties championed by the Carter administration in the 1970s. Gallup’s polling data showed that people who had not heard or read about the debate were solidly opposed to ratification (by a margin of 39 percent to 23 percent), but that people who were aware were more closely divided in their opinion (48 percent opposed, 40 percent in favor), and those who were informed about three key facts of the treaties’ provisions tilted slightly in support of the treaties (by a narrow margin of 51 percent to 46 percent).

Gallup’s findings on the Panama Canal treaties debate are illustrative of the potential for knowledge effects on policy preferences (see also Gilens 2001), but simple contrasts of the opinions of the most and least informed can be misleading if political knowledge depends in part on social class. For example, working class people have both lower levels of political knowledge and more isolationist opinions on foreign policy, so it is not clear whether their relative isolationism stems from their low knowledge or their class interests. Careful analyses tackle this problem by estimating the differences in opinion between high-knowledge and low-knowledge people within certain social categories; for example, looking at the differences in opinions between Catholics who are more knowledgeable and Catholics who are less knowledgeable. At the same time, these analyses estimate the effects of political knowledge on the opinions of members of other groups, including women, men, blacks, young, middle-aged, old, married, single, union members, occupation groups, income groups, people living in different regions of the country, Republicans, Democrats, independents, and so on. The cumulative
tanguine about the assumption that its balance out in the aggregate, and it might well be different if the public misperceptions of facts are usually beliefs about the number of minorities in population, the proportion of immigrant money spent by the federal states are rarely too low, and are some- they may help us determine which those principles are (or are perceptions (and misperceptions) of values orientations, and thus may help us determine which those principles are (or are opinions (Hochschild 2001). In some cases, the proposal is closely related to opinion polls (1977) report issued during the the treaties championed by the Carter Administration, revealing data showed that people who were solidly opposed to ratification (48 percent opposed, 40 percent in support of the two key facts of the treaties' the treaties (by a narrow margin of 1 percent). Natural treaties debate are illustrative of policy preferences (see also Gilens and his colleagues, 2007) report the most and least informed people. It depends in part on social class. For example, higher levels of political knowledge are more relevant to informed voters. However, the effect of low knowledge or their class interaction by estimating the differences in low-knowledge people within certain groups on the differences in opinions between whites and nonwhites. It is clear that the differences in economic status of other groups, including women, married, single, union members, occupying different regions of the continent, and so on. The cumulative contrasts give us an idea of what public opinion on any issue would look like if everyone had higher levels of information, but retained their basic demo-graphic and partisan characteristics.

Results of these analyses show that lower knowledge does bias collective opinion on a variety of issues, although the effects of knowledge vary from issue to issue and group to group. If, hypothetically, all members of the public were fully informed, collective public opinion would be more pro-choice on abortion, more supportive of the principle of affirmative action, more supportive of parental leave policies, and less supportive of prayer in schools than public opinion polls have shown it to be. Conservatives, for their part, would find consolation with a more knowledgeable electorate that would be more supportive of free market solutions to health insurance problems, more supportive of decreased spending on welfare, and more hawkish on the federal deficit (Altschul 2003, 128-138; also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Similarly, an "enlightened public" that had the expertise of a Ph.D. running an economics department would likely be less concerned about the possible negative effects of business profits and executive salaries being too high, technology displacing workers, companies downsizing and outsourcing jobs, and trade agreements between the United States and other countries (Caplan 2007, 50-93).

Thus, the "miracle of aggregation" does not entirely temper our concerns about the implications of low knowledge on the bias in public opinion. It is not the case that about half of the less knowledgeable people are more liberal and half are more conservative than one would expect based on their interests, objectively defined. Rather, it appears to us that a more informed electorate would likely be more liberal on some (mostly social) issues and more conserva-tive on other (mostly redistributive) issues. Because a more informed elec-torate might possess a different set of collective preferences about both kinds of policy, the issue coalitions currently needed to win in general elections may be at least partly a function of the relatively low levels of knowledge present in the American electorate.

**Cue-taking**

There is some debate about whether cues help people with low levels of political knowledge to reach vote decisions that are similar to the decisions of individuals with higher levels of knowledge. Without knowing a lot of detailed facts about policy, players, or institutions, voters might rely on a variety of heuristics, or cues, to lead them to make reasonable choices in the voting booth. Every day, people make scores of snap judgments based on limited and...
somewhat biased information, so it seems hardly a stretch to suggest that many people can make a reasonable choice between candidates with only limited information. Analyses of both experimental simulations and survey data from actual elections led Richard Lau and David Redlawsk (1997) to the conclusion that about 70 percent of voters “vote correctly”—that is, they make the same choice they would have if they possessed full information; the estimated proportion is even higher when choices are relatively easier (fewer candidates, clearer issue differences, roughly equal resources for the competing campaigns). But even when choices are slightly more difficult, the fact that a supermajority “gets it right” suggests that a limited amount of information can get most voters a long way.

There is no shortage of cues available to help the average voter try to make sense of a blizzard of potential information; the real question is whether cues are helpful in getting voters to a decision that actually reflects their interests and values. Some cues from the campaign apparently do help, as Lupia (1994) found in his analysis of multiple referenda on insurance reform in California. Though the provisions in those proposals were highly technical, the preferences of those who were knowledgeable about the positions advocated by the insurance industry on various propositions were very similar to those of voters with more “encyclopedic” knowledge of specific provisions in the propositions; in other words, the cues provided by elite groups in the debate served much the same purpose politically as more detailed knowledge about the proposals themselves. If voters have some information about who the protagonists are, they can often get on the “right” side without knowing too much about what all the fuss between the protagonists is about.

Cues are useful substitutes for actual knowledge to the extent that they are relatively accurate, relevant, and available to those who need them the most. Unfortunately, those conditions often fail to hold. When voters look for shortcuts, they are not necessarily seeking the most accurate predictors of information about the candidates that they can find. Rather, they often employ the “drunkard’s search” for the information that is most accessible and helps them to paint some picture of the candidate in their heads, accurate or not (Popkin 1991). For example, some people use readily available gender stereotypes to help construct images of relatively unknown female candidates, but those stereotypes often lead people to believe that female candidates are more liberal than they actually are (Koch 2002; King and Matland 2003). Like other heuristics, gender stereotypes have developed over many generations to help humans adapt to unfamiliar situations, but that does not mean that these
Heuristics are accurate or relevant in electoral settings (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). Even cues developed within the context of elections, such as partisanship, can overwhelm the role played by candidate policy positions in voter decision making, thereby making the vote choice less a reflection of the voter’s preferences than we might expect (Rahn 1993; Arceneaux 2008). Moreover, there is some debate about whether cues help less knowledgeable citizens to reach decisions that approximate choices they would have made with more information. While there is some evidence that endorsements can improve unsophisticated voters’ decisions (Boudreau 2009; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009a), it appears that the use of partisanship as a cue helps to produce “correct” votes more among the most politically knowledgeable but produces more “errors” among the less politically knowledgeable (Lau, Andersen, and Redlawsk 2008). In effect, then, partisanship may be a more psychologically accessible and useful cue to high-knowledge voters, who need it the least.

The question about whether votes or election results would be different if more voters were better informed is complicated by the fact that political knowledge is concentrated among groups in society (higher education, higher income, men, whites) who are naturally more likely to vote Republican, so simple comparisons of the vote choices between politically knowledgeable and politically naïve voters might simply reflect the class, gender, racial, and other demographic cleavages that exist in contemporary American society. One approach to overcoming this problem is to model vote choice as a function of a “kitchen sink” full of demographic and partisan variables, political knowledge, plus the interactions between knowledge and other variables, thereby producing estimates that can be used to simulate the aggregate vote of a fully informed citizenry that otherwise retains its basic demographic characteristics.

The most comprehensive study of this type shows that politically knowledgeable people appear to vote differently than those with less political knowledge but who are otherwise like them; however, the type of bias that is present depends on the electoral context. In particular, low levels of knowledge in the electorate (as compared to a hypothetical fully informed electorate) produce about a 2 percent tilt toward Democratic candidates and a 5 percent tilt toward incumbent candidates of both parties in presidential elections (Bartels 1996). Once again, it appears to us that errors among the less knowledgeable voters do not simply “cancel out”; rather, there are real consequences of the low levels of knowledge evident in the American electorate (see also Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000).
Conclusion

Reflecting on nearly a half century of research on the political sophistication of the American electorate, Converse (2000, 331) observed that “where political information is concerned, the mean level is very low but the variance is very high.” The data and research reviewed in this chapter underscore the first half of Converse’s characterization and give us pause about whether most Americans fulfill the basic obligations of democratic citizenship. As we have seen, many people lack information about the leaders, institutions, and policies at the center of American political life, and there is reason to believe that the lack of basic knowledge has very real implications for both the shape of public opinion and the choices that people make in the voting booth.

At the same time, Converse’s observation about the diversity in the level of information in the mass public is often underappreciated. While there are a great many “know-nothings” in contemporary American politics, there are also a few “know-it-alls” who recognize most of our leaders and are quite conversant about a lot of what those leaders are doing. Indeed, this group embodies the counterfactual that enabled Scott Althaus (2003) and Larry Bartels (1996) to estimate the significance of the overall low levels of political knowledge in the public as a whole. The presence of some high-knowledge voters, plus a few others who manage to piece together reasonable political choices for themselves from imperfect information, leads us to believe that the glass of voter competence is far from empty. But for many citizens, the lack of motivation to overcome severe limits in their information levels leads to choices that do not truly reflect their own political interests. That diversity in voter competence, thus, leaves us holding a glass that remains only about half full.

Many campaigns implicitly recognize the variation in competence among voters by working through a variety of group opinion leaders. The assumption here is that most such leaders (union officials, prominent businesspeople, influential ministers, and veteran political organizers, among others) are, relatively speaking, politically savvy and both able and willing to assist candidates in (1) connecting their messages to group members’ concerns and (2) disseminating the campaign’s basic themes to the majority of voters whose relevant political knowledge may be limited, especially for “down ballot” races. Despite a limited base of information, voters (or at least those who make it to the polls on election day) will ultimately make a choice. The challenge for candidates is to craft a message that allows their campaigns to fill in some of the blanks in a way that resonates with segments of the electorate whose support is essential to victory.
THE POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS RESPOND

Mark M. Blumenthal

I wish Craig and Martinez’s chapter could be required reading for anyone who participates in, writes about, or otherwise pontificates on the subject of American politics. I say that not because I question the competence of the American electorate, but because Craig and Martinez do an exemplary job reviewing the “half-century of empirical research” showing the limited information, knowledge, and understanding of politics and government among voters. I restate their theme because we simply cannot repeat it enough. If I had to choose one piece of advice to offer aspiring campaign strategists, it would be this: you can almost never underestimate the level of information about politics and government possessed by the voters who typically decide the outcome of elections.

Consider some anecdotal evidence. Over a span of nearly twenty years as a campaign pollster, I had the chance to conduct or observe hundreds of voter focus groups—informal, unstructured discussions with eight to ten participants that, while not random sample surveys, do typically strive to roughly represent a particular population of interest. In political campaigns, focus groups of “persuadable voters” (those who have not yet formed strong attachments to the candidates) are often the first step in a research process that ultimately proceeds to more rigorous, representative samples of all voters. As such, these early groups are deliberately skewed to exclude the best-informed “know-it-alls” among the electorate. Despite this skew, the paucity of basic information among persuadable voters almost never fails to surprise. Toward the beginning of most groups, a typical practice is to discuss the “most important issues” of the day, with follow-up questions about other pressing issues or controversies—the kinds of issues that would be familiar to anyone who reads a daily newspaper. Yet, more often than not, these issues are unfamiliar to many focus group participants. Voters never have trouble identifying broad areas of concern, such as the economy, taxes, education, crime, or the cost of health care. But what should government do or, alternatively, refrain from doing? What specific responses are being debated in Washington or the state capital? Whenever I asked these questions, I typically got little more than blank stares in response.

So, do these experiences leave me cynical and jaded about the basic competence of the American electorate? No. V. O. Key (1966) had it right, that “voters are not fools.” In those same focus groups, I also saw vivid examples of the mechanisms described by Craig and Martinez that allow voters “with limited information to make meaningful choices.” Persuadable voters may not know every detail of what
happens in Washington or their state capital, but they are able to apply their existing values and preferences when confronted with new candidates and controversies. Sadly, many of my campaign consultant colleagues are likely unfamiliar with the academic literature on retrospective voting and cue-taking, but they share a belief in the underlying concepts. Campaign strategists know, for example, that voters often rely on broad retrospective judgments about an incumbent’s performance in office, and are heavily influenced by their perceptions of the condition of the economy when deciding whether to support his or her reelection. They understand that voters apply a wide variety of stereotypes, that is, inferences based on a candidate’s party affiliation, age, gender, race, religion, place of residence, profession, or personal appearance—what Popkin described as “information shortcuts and rules of thumb . . . to obtain and evaluate information and to simplify the process of choosing between candidates” (1991, 7).

I will leave to others the debate over whether these sorts of cues and shortcuts translate into “rational” or “correct” voter choices. Instead, I want to focus on the unfortunate consequences of assuming that voters know too much rather than too little.

The “jury box” fallacy.

Too much of modern political commentary suffers from the implicit assumption that all Americans follow politics the way members of a jury follow a trial: as if they are a captive audience sitting at rapt attention, carefully weighing the testimony of each new witness. Our leaders are fond of pontificating about what “the American people” want or believe, but the reality is that relatively few Americans pay close attention to the ongoing debate about policy and politics in Washington, D.C., or in their state or city.

Rather than think about the level of knowledge among voters, consider some statistics on the typical audience for television news. Despite growing use of the Internet, television remains the dominant news source for a majority of the public. A CBS News/New York Times survey conducted in January 2009 found that 60 percent of respondents got most of their news “about what’s going on in the world” from television, while less than half that number named newspapers (14 percent) or the Internet (13 percent). Yet the actual audience as measured by The Nielsen Company looks considerably smaller than these survey estimates might lead us to believe. Consider the following Nielsen estimates for the 2009–2010 season through mid-February:

- The average combined audience for the three broadcast network evening news programs (ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News) was just over twenty-four million.
The average combined audience for the three broadcast network morning shows (the Today Show, Good Morning America, and the Early Show) was a little more than thirteen million.

The average combined audience for the three major cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) over the course of their broadcast day was roughly two million.

As of this writing, we are a nation of approximately 304 million persons (of all ages), including 286 million who live in television households. So the combined audience statistics for typical network evening news broadcasts represent about 8 percent of Americans in these households. Even if we assume, implausibly, that the various counts are mutually exclusive—that is, there is no overlap whatsoever among viewers of the three categories of news programming—we would have a combined audience on a typical day of about thirty-nine million. That amounts to roughly 14 percent of television households.

Unfortunately, Nielsen does not publish the number of Americans who watch at least one news broadcast of any type during a typical day or week. Even if we had such a statistic, it would not include those who get their news exclusively from other television or radio programming, or from the Internet or print media. Nonetheless, these admittedly crude statistics still make my point: on any given day, most Americans do not tune in to evening news, morning news, or cable news broadcasts, even though most say they rely on television to get their news. No wonder knowledge of government and politics is limited.

Misinterpreting issue polling.

All too often, the jury box fallacy rears its head in the way we interpret poll questions on public policy issues. We ask questions about unfamiliar concepts that leave the consumers of polling data assuming that Americans are more informed and engaged in political debate than they really are. Consider this example from the fall of 2009: the Washington Post and ABC News conducted a national survey in October that included questions on the health care reform debate then raging in Washington. In the survey, virtually all respondents offered an opinion when asked whether they would support (57 percent) or oppose (40 percent) “having the government create a new health insurance plan to compete with private health insurance plans.” That result led the poll’s front-page coverage in the Post, topped by the headline “Public option gains support: clear majority now backs plan” (Balz and Cohen 2009).

Yet just two weeks earlier, the Pew Research Center (2009b) had fielded a survey testing voter knowledge—the same survey cited by Craig and Martinez. Included among their multiple-choice questions was an item showing that only
56 percent of Americans knew that “the public option discussed in Congress” concerned health care. Then, a few weeks later, a poll conducted by CBS News for 60 Minutes and Vanity Fair found that only 26 percent of Americans felt they could “confidently explain what exactly the ‘public option’ is to someone who didn’t know.” Clearly, many of those answering the public option question on the Post/ABC survey were offering a reaction formed upon hearing the question rather than sharing a preexisting opinion on the “public option” being debated in Congress.³

Pollsters should not be surprised that respondents form on-the-spot opinions in reaction to their questions. Decades of experimental research have shown that a third or more of poll respondents will offer an opinion on a fictional issue, such as the nonexistent “Public Affairs Act of 1975” (Bishop 2005). Ironically, that same research shows a process of mental shortcuts at work, in which respondents take cues from the words of the question and draw upon real values and beliefs in forming answers. The problem, then, is one of interpretation: if we assume that all voters are engaged and paying attention, we will likely misread the results.

Misreading the horse race.

The poll question most familiar to political junkies is the one that names the candidates for an office and asks, “If the election were held today, for whom would you vote?” When asked a few days before an election, the so-called horse-race question usually provides an accurate measurement of actual voter intentions. However, when asked months or even years before an election, when voters have not yet engaged in the campaign and may be unfamiliar with the candidates, the question can easily mislead.

Some of the most glaring examples of this come from questions measuring voter preferences in presidential nominating campaigns. The eventual Democratic nominees for president in 1972, 1976, 1980, 1988, 1992, and 2008 trailed badly, sometimes receiving just single-digit support, in early polls conducted prior to those campaigns (Plouffe 2009; Blumenthal 2007). Throughout most of 2007, Barack Obama trailed Hillary Clinton by double-digit margins in national polling on the Democratic nomination contest. Obama’s campaign chose, wisely, to ignore the polls and focus instead on winning the precinct caucuses in Iowa, assuming that an early state win would help boost Obama’s fortunes nationally when voters elsewhere started paying attention to the campaign in early 2008.

Even though front-running candidates have been upended in many previous contests, the national media and political insiders sometimes continue to treat national horse-race polls as determinative. Consider this bit of reporting in the Washington Post from October 2007:
Since he announced his intention to run for the presidency, Obama—and the powerful ebb that surrounded him wherever he woke, spoke, ate and sat—seems to have withered beneath the supernova that is the Clinton campaign. Today, the senator from New York carries with her a fortified sense of inevitability. ... A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll shows Clinton leading Obama by more than 20 percent, with a lead of 13 percent among African-American voters (Pappu 2007).

When voters engaged in the race in earnest a few months later, those early preferences changed rapidly. The mistake was assuming that the early expressions of support were grounded in real engagement or complete knowledge.

Political campaigns see the gaps in voter knowledge explored in the foregoing chapter as opportunity. As Craig and Martinez put it, campaigns craft messages that aim to “fill in some of the blanks in a way that resonates with segments of the electorate whose support is essential to victory.” They look for bits and pieces of information that will change the way voters view the candidates or prove persuasive in policy debates. That communication of information is the essence of political campaigning. Whether the process fosters or frustrates voter efforts “to cast a thoughtful vote,” as Thomas Patterson puts it (2006, 42), is a question for wiser minds than mine, but it is surely the reality of American politics as we know it.  

1See www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/SunMo_poll_0209.pdf.

2These statistics were provided to the author by The Nielsen Company. I obtained totals for each category of broadcast by adding together Nielsen’s estimate of the average audience size during any given minute of the broadcast, a method that likely underestimates the total weekday audience (Prior 2009).


Notes

1. To be clear, we recognize that Dalton’s argument goes beyond the question of how much information a person has and considers how that information is processed and used. Nevertheless, it is difficult to process and use information that one does not possess in the first place.

2. Perhaps it is not education per se, but rather some factor(s) related to education—for example, cognitive ability—that drives information levels. If so, this might help to explain why an increase in the proportion of the public attending college has not produced comparable gains in political knowledge; see Highton (2009).

3. Typical wording might go something like this: “Many people don’t know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don’t know, just tell me and we’ll go on.”

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4. See Delli Carpinie and Keeter (1996, chap. 2) for a more comprehensive discussion of their results.

5. The figures in 1989 were 74 percent for both vice president and governor; see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2007).

6. On those occasions when Pew has asked essentially the same question in an open-ended format (without offering response options for Democrats and Republicans), the percentage of respondents who answer correctly drops, for example, to 53 percent in May 2008 (Democrats), 58 percent in October 2006 (Republicans), and a shockingly low 31 percent in June 2001 (Republicans); see http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/554.pdf. Similarly, in the 2008 American National Election Study in-person postelection survey (which did not provide the "Democrats or Republicans" response option), only 40 percent of respondents correctly identified the Democrats as the majority party in the House prior to the election, and 34 percent correctly identified the Democrats as the majority party in the Senate; see www.electionstudies.org/studyPages/2008Prepost/2008Prepost.htm. In contrast, data from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey (which provided response options) reveal that 68 percent and 66 percent of respondents correctly identified the majority party in the House and Senate, respectively; see http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/material/CCES_Guide_2008_Rough_Draft_v2.pdf.

7. One reason for this disparity may have to do with the differential impact of media—that is, "[d]ifferences in knowledge that have been attributed to education become greater in environments in which information is plentiful" (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006, 278). Thus, increased coverage of political news alone is unlikely to reduce the knowledge gap between the better and lesser educated. A more effective approach might be for the media to emphasize contextual information via stories that "provide comparisons with related issues, discuss the consequences of political developments, or supply background information" (Jerit 2009, 449). At the same time, as we noted earlier (see note 2), the impact of education per se on knowledge may be less than scholars have generally assumed.

8. See Delli Carpinie and Keeter (1996; also Neuman 1986; Althaus 2003), who noted that class and gender differences were the most consistent over the period covered by their research (163). The case of gender is especially puzzling, as it once was assumed that increased opportunities for women in education and the workplace would eventually reduce and perhaps eliminate the knowledge and participation deficits that have long characterized the role of women in American politics. Recent studies suggest, however, that there is more to the story, specifically, that to some degree men (in the aggregate) may simply have a greater "taste" for politics than do women (Dow 2009, 132; see also Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997; Mondak and Anderson 2004).

9. One of the main goals of political campaigns today is the identification of such issue publics (although consultants probably won't call them that) and the targeting of communications that address the things they care most strongly about.

10. While defending his organization's work, John Zogby conceded that it was "not our finest hour" and declined Ziegler's offer to sponsor a similar survey of McCain voters; instead, he expressed a willingness to "do a poll of both Obama voters and McCain voters, with questions that I formulated and sponsored either by an objective third party or by someone on the left, in tandem with a John Ziegler on the right—but poll questions that have my signature" (Allen 2008). To our knowledge, no such survey had been done as of the time this chapter was written.
for both vice president and governor; see Press (2007).

asked essentially the same question in an additional options for Democrats and Republicans correctly identify, for example, to 53 percent in October 2006 (Republicans), and a 42 percent (and a 42 percent, respectively) were better, but not by much. Forty-one percent of the sample either didn’t know or declined to answer the question.

12. Support for the president was actually more important than party identification per se—that is, Democrats and independents who backed Bush’s re-election were more likely to hold mistaken beliefs about Iraq than their counterparts who planned to support his Democratic opponent. Nevertheless, to state the obvious, most Bush supporters also happened to be Republicans.

13. The opposite pattern was evident among Democratic supporters, although watching Fox News, in particular, was also associated with high levels of misinformation among this group.

14. These findings are based on nationwide polls conducted from June through September 2003 by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland and Knowledge Networks, a private firm that conducts surveys over the Internet. See PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," "www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqMedia_Oct03/IraqMedia_Oct03_rpt.pdf.

15. Trait differences (regarding strength, intelligence, empathy, and so on) also weigh heavily in voters’ choices, and there is evidence that different traits matter according to the level of voter sophistication (Funk 1997). It also appears that voters sometimes infer a connection between candidate traits and policy positions (Sullivan et al. 1990; Rapoport, Metcalf, and Hartman 1989).

16. This is at odds with the traditional view that while primaries may force candidates to appeal to their parties’ respective core voters (whose views tend toward the ideological extremes), the American two-party system encourages those who are nominated to move toward the center (Downs 1957) or to avoid taking clear positions altogether (Page 1978) during the general election.

17. For example, see Craig, Kane, and Gainous (2005); Partin (2001). Results from the latter study support the information-flow model in that aggregate knowledge levels in 1990 gubernatorial races were higher in states where the races were more hard-fought or “intense” (measured in terms of campaign spending).

18. Some scholars maintain that neither newspapers nor TV news facilitate learning to any appreciable degree (Price and Zaller 1993) or, perhaps more plausibly, that it depends less on the medium per se than on the content of the message being delivered (Norris and Sanders 2003). We also should note the potential impact of political comedy programs such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, which is especially popular among young people (for example, see Cao 2008).

19. Another possibility is that “different types of information have differential impacts on different segments of the population” (Nadeau et al. 2008, 243).

20. According to Dalton (2008, 22), there has been a long-term secular trend toward heightened interest in politics since the 1940s; Gallup surveys reveal an irregular but generally upward trend since 2001 in the extent to which Americans claim to follow news about national politics (Saad 2009). It is not clear, however, that these developments have either reduced the knowledge gap or stimulated a significant increase in overall information levels among citizens.

21. An interesting twist on this topic was provided by Jeffrey Koch (2008), whose analysis of 1998 U.S. House races led him to conclude that an increased volume of negative ads was associated with voters being more confident that they knew the targeted candidate’s ideological position—and a greater degree of error associated with that perception; in

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other words, “issue attack ads lead citizens to believe they know more than they actually do” (609).

22. James Kuklinski and Paul Quirk (2000, 159–160) note the irony that the collectivist view of rational public opinion hinges on Converse’s assertion that errors in judgment are mostly random.

23. We refer here to the Neutrality Treaty, in which both Panama and the United States guaranteed the neutrality of the canal operations, and the Panama Canal Treaty, which outlined the gradual ceding of control of the canal from the United States to Panama from 1979 to 1999. President Jimmy Carter (along with foreign policy veterans of previous administrations) argued that the treaties defused the potential for unrest among Panamanian nationalists and possible sabotage of canal operations. Capitalizing on doubts and fears that Ronald Reagan had raised in his unsuccessful bid for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination, conservatives argued that Panamanians might not be willing or able to operate the canal effectively or defend it against communist attacks. Survey respondents who knew that the canal would be turned over to Panama in 1999, that the United States would retain the right to defend the canal against third-party attacks, and that the biggest aircraft carriers and supertankers were unable to use the canal in any case were more supportive of ratification.

24. Technically, position on a public policy issue (such as abortion) is regressed on a measure of knowledge, various other characteristics (such as education, age, gender, religious affiliation, marital status, union membership, and partisanship), and the interactions between knowledge and all the other characteristics in the model. Coefficients on the interaction terms indicate how knowledge affects the opinions of each group of people or, more precisely, the differences in opinions on abortion of high-knowledge people with a particular characteristic (for example, being married) versus low-knowledge people with the same characteristic, controlling for other known characteristics. These results are used to simulate how a hypothetical “fully informed” public opinion would differ from actual opinion, assuming that the public retained the same demographic characteristics (Althaus 2003). Bartels (1996) uses the same approach to model the effects of knowledge on voter choice.

25. In an ingenious experiment, Wendy Rahn (1993) manipulated the presence of partisan cues in issue debates among fictional candidates. Groups that were exposed to strong partisan cues tended to rely more on their partisanship, and less on their actual issue preferences, in deciding which candidate to support. In a similar vein, Arceneaux (2008) found that low-awareness voters did not punish counter-stereotypical candidates (for example, pro-life Democrats or pro-choice Republicans) as much as high-awareness voters, suggesting that partisanship inhibited the former’s ability to act on their issue preferences.