



# Left–right ideology as an inferential device in multiparty systems: Can citizens overcome low information by imputing parties' policy positions?



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which knowledge about parties' ideological Left–Right positions can be used schematically by voters to impute these parties' stances on specific policy issues. Can Left–Right familiarity help citizens, whose knowledge of political and societal issues is often limited, to overcome the low information problem? Based on two Swedish panel studies, we show that – in contrast to the American two-party context – the least knowledgeable voters benefit most from using inferences based on parties' Left–Right locations. The effectiveness of schema-based deduction is thus dependent on its place within a given political culture. In the Swedish multiparty context, the Left–Right dimension is meaningful for most voters, and can be used schematically to partly alleviate a lack of knowledge.

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## 1. Introduction

Most studies on democratic representation assert that voters need to be accurately informed about political matters in order to make reasoned choices. Various recent studies in *Electoral Studies* confirm that less knowledgeable voters generally make vote choices of poorer quality than their knowledgeable counterparts (Dusso, 2015; Singh and Roy, 2014; Fowler and Margolis, 2014). Unfortunately, a lack of such comprehensive knowledge is widespread (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Bartels, 1996). This has potentially serious consequences for the prospects of democratic representation (Druckman, 2005). How can voters decide what party deserves their vote, if they are unaware of what these parties stand for?

At the same time, there is an extensive literature suggesting that voters can make sense of politics *without* having comprehensive knowledge of it. According to this literature, cognitive shortcuts or heuristics provide efficient information about what parties stand for. The most prominent shortcut available for a party's policy orientation is its ideological location, most commonly on a

Left–Right dimension (Downs, 1957; Feldman and Conover, 1983; Fiske and Linville, 1980; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Slothuus, 2008; Tomz and Sniderman, 2004; Zaller, 1992). Knowing where a party stands in terms of Left and Right, this argument goes, can be used deductively to infer parties' standpoints on a range of specific policy issues, such as health care or taxes (Downs, 1957; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004; Knutsen, 1995a; 1995b; van der Brug, 1997). Because knowledge of parties' positions in terms of Left and Right is relatively easy to obtain and store, this would suggest voters' lack of in-depth knowledge of political affairs is less troublesome.

However, some authors have shed doubt on this view, arguing that expecting heuristics to solve the “low knowledge problem” of the majority of citizens is “optimistic” (Fowler and Margolis, 2014). One of the reasons is that studies have suggested that heuristics – in general – are mostly informative for those citizens who *already have* comprehensive knowledge about politics (Lau and Redlawsk 2001, 2006; Blais et al., 2009). At the same time, most of the existing studies about the heuristic role of Left–Right ideology were conducted in the United States, while empirical evidence from European multiparty contexts is scarce. We aim to fill this void.

We argue that Left–Right schemas, as a cue to parties' specific positions on explicit issues, are more prominent and generally accessible in a European multiparty context. Higher levels of

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prospective rather than retrospective voting, in combination with the central role of parties rather than candidates (Norris, 2004; Oscarsson, 2007a, 2007b), make Left–Right schemas potentially much more informative for voters in multiparty systems than is the case in the United States. To test this expectation, this study investigates the role of Left–Right as a voting rationale in Sweden. Sweden is a most-likely case to find such schemas to be accessible and efficient. Due to block politics and the ongoing dominance of class voting, the Swedish multi-party system is probably one of the most unidimensional multiparty systems in Europe (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Oscarsson, 2007a, 2007b; Oscarsson and Dahlberg, 2006; Krouwel, 2012). This optimizes the information contained in ideological schemas. Furthermore, the large number of parties increases citizens' possibility to triangulate their knowledge of ideological positions. Indeed, most Swedish have been shown to have some understanding of Left and Right (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008). If Left–Right schemas cannot partly alleviate the low knowledge problem for the least politically sophisticated voters in Sweden, such schemas are unlikely to play such a role in other contexts. On the other hand, if it does, this has theoretical and normative consequences for the possibility of informed voting – and, by extension, representative democracy.

Using survey data from 2006 and 2009, we examine to what extent voters' familiarity with parties' ideology in terms of Left and Right is related to their capacity to tell where these parties stand on various specific policies. By employing an innovative cross-lagged design, we aim to alleviate endogeneity problems. Our analysis yields robust evidence that knowledge about the abstract ideological position of parties is indeed used in a schematic manner, helping voters to know what these parties stand for on a range of specific issues. Respondents who improved their familiarity with parties' place on the ideological spectrum became substantially better able to correctly assess what these parties think about private health care, the six-day workweek, labor market policies etcetera. This effect remains after controlling for a range of potentially confounding variables – most importantly respondents' factual knowledge of political matters. Moreover, we show that respondents with lower levels of knowledge of political facts benefit most from Left–Right knowledge.

Respondents who knew much about societal issues were still superior in assessing what parties stand for. Heuristics thus cannot fully replace facts, and citizens' knowledge of day-to-day politics still matters. However, inferences based on Left–Right ideology can help the large number of less knowledgeable voters to partly alleviate their “low knowledge problem” – at least in the Swedish multiparty system. While it was beyond this study to test whether Left–Right schemas help citizens to vote more “correctly” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001, 2006), our findings suggests that it helps bring about an important precondition. We conclude that this study finds evidence that Left–Right schemas can play a heuristic role, but also that this role depends on the political system – thus inviting research in other settings.

## 2. Theory

Below, we first discuss how voters can potentially use shortcuts to arrive at better knowledge of what parties stand for, even if they have little information. After that, we turn to the question of how their role might depend on the party system and introduce our case.

### 2.1. Voters, knowledge, and ideology as a heuristic

Voters' knowledge of matters of a political or societal character has been a subject of study for over half a century. Many studies

have concluded that the amount of detailed information among voters is often generally poor, and that the normative requirement of reasoned choice is beyond the capability of the vast majority of citizens, who are often ignorant of the details of the decisions they face (Bartels, 1996; Berelson, 1952; Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996a, 1996b; Converse, 1964; Downs, 1957; Key, 1966; Kinder and Sears, 1985; Kuklinski, 2002; Luskin, 1987; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992).<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that a lack of factual political knowledge leads citizens to vote out of line with their preferences (Fowler and Margolis, 2014; Singh and Roy, 2014), thus reducing the quality of the vote choice. Citizens' alleged incapability for reasoned choices has been labeled a ‘democratic dilemma’, as it threatens representative democracy (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). The goal of this paper is to investigate whether voters, even in the absence of full knowledge, can still be reasonably informed about parties' positions.

It has been suggested that voters are in fact capable of making complex decisions on the basis of very little information (Adams, 2001; Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; van der Brug, 1997; Zaller, 1992). The key point here is the fact that voters use cognitive shortcuts or heuristics in their decision-making, and this is claimed to be a sufficient basis for reasoned choices (Downs, 1957; Feldman and Conover, 1983; Fiske and Linville, 1980; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Slothuus, 2008; Tomz and Sniderman, 2004; Zaller, 1992). Heuristics<sup>2</sup> enable individuals to short-circuit complex information processing by relying on cues from others or from the situation to make a decision. This is a common assertion in many studies on public opinion and voting behavior. For instance, party cues – in which voters substitute party positions for detailed knowledge about the ideological position of candidates (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013:11) – constitute one of the most studied political heuristics. Voters can rely on party labels on a ballot to infer concrete positions (“they’re called Green Party, so they probably support the environment”). A voter who follows the vote choice of close friends who have world views similar to his or hers could also be argued to rely on heuristics (Zuckerman, 2005).

In spite of the large body of literature, we still have limited knowledge about the quality of various heuristics: can such shortcuts be a substitute for more detailed information? Lupia and McCubbins tried to answer this by testing theories on connectionism in experimental studies.<sup>3</sup> Their study suggests that voters do not necessarily need detailed political information to make a reasoned choice, as the use of different cognitive shortcuts can give them sufficient information (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998, 1994; see also Tomz and Sniderman, 2004 for a similar study). More recent studies have confirmed that almost all voters utilize cognitive heuristics, especially in situations in which the decisions are complex, and that this use increases the probability of correct voting

<sup>1</sup> A valid explanation for this generally low amount of information among voters is that, among most citizens, interest in politics is often moderate (Zaller, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> A ‘heuristic’ is usually defined as a problem-solving strategy (often employed automatically or unconsciously) that serves to keep the information processing demands of a task within bounds (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Connectionism is a concept taken from cognitive science and can best be explained as the process where people systematically connect current observations of their physical world to physical or emotional responses derived from experience. Connectionist models show how people systematically attribute meaning to new or relevant objects by connecting them with already familiar objects, procedures or people. Connectionist activity underlies the capacity to recognize features or patterns given only partial information and, by focusing attention on different features of one's sensory input, the ability in an instant to see complex analogies by recalling relevant information (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Reasoned choice would require encyclopaedic information without a process like connectionism; with such a process, reasoned choice requires less information (Popkin, 1991).

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