



# Incorrect voting in the 2012 U.S. presidential election: How partisan and economic cues fail to help low-information voters



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## ABSTRACT

The importance of voting in undisputed, yet scholarly works attempting to understand the causes and consequences of incorrect voting are relatively scarce. Building on the works of Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006; Lau et al., 2008), I design and implement a new survey method measuring incorrect voting I call Self-identified Incorrect Voting (SIV). This method allows survey respondents to determine for themselves if they voted incorrectly in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. I conducted the SIV survey of a national sample of voters and use the results to test traditional hypotheses regarding the value of partisanship and the economy as cues to help low-information voters behave in the same manner as high-information voters.

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*What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Hearts of America* (Frank, 2004) spent more than two months on the New York Times best seller list in 2004. Its simple argument being that blue-collar America has been duped by the Republican Party into supporting politicians and policies antithetical to their own wellbeing. Political pundits hailed it as the best book on politics of the year and others took its lessons and applied them to the reelection of George W. Bush that November (e.g., Kristof, 2004; Seelye, 2004; Wills, 2004). Bartels' (2005b) subsequent dismantling of the book's central thesis and further analyses (Fiorina et al., 2006; Gelman, 2008) showing that "the culture war," to the extent that it is happening at all, is happening across states at the top of the economic strata, have not diminished the popular belief that large segments of the American population do not know what is in their best interest and support, through voting, the wrong candidates. Yet despite significant public interest in this topic,

scholarly work attempting to understand the phenomenon and implications of incorrect voting is still in its infancy.

Part of the reason there is such a large gap between public interest and scholarly production on the topic is that much of the work that touches on correct or incorrect participation (e.g., people voting for a candidate that they would not support if they had better knowledge of the candidates' policy positions) in politics is a byproduct of scholarly concern about the effects of varying levels of political knowledge. That is, researches are focused on explaining the causes (e.g., Esterling et al., 2011; Jerit et al., 2006) and consequences (e.g., MacDonald et al. 1995; Waldman and Jamieson, 2003) of variance in political knowledge. For example, Bartels (1996) shows that incumbent presidential and Democratic presidential candidates did better in reality than they would have if all voters were fully informed. This is a fascinating result, which shows that incumbents and Democrats do better among the ill-informed. It does not demonstrate that they have voted for the wrong candidate because it does not measure incorrect participation (see also Goren, 1997). Thus, these types of works are clearly suggestive that there

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is a potential problem with voters seemingly participating in ways that are inconsistent with their personal interests and/or preferences, but the answers have been limited to the role of political knowledge.

Another reason for the relatively small amount of work directly focused on understanding correct/incorrect voting (rather than as a byproduct of political knowledge research) is the thorny problem of identifying how individuals ought to be voting. The scientific desire to be objective balks at what can appear to be pronouncements from the ivory tower about what simple minded voters should be doing. The very label “correct voting” smacks of elitism. In attempting to obviate the objective versus subjective nature of what is deemed to be correct, the works of [Lau and Redlawsk \(1997, 2006; Lau et al., 2008\)](#) provide the most thorough scholarly treatment of the subject.

These works provide two separate methods of measuring correct/incorrect voting. The first, and most well known, is a method that utilizes existing surveys (i.e., ANES) to impute the respondents' overall policy relationship to the two presidential candidates ([Lau and Redlawsk, 1997; Lau et al., 2008](#)). Those individuals who voted for the presidential candidate closest to their own set of policy desires voted correctly, those that did not, voted incorrectly. This method allows individuals to provide their own policy positions rather than having the omniscient scientist decide what is in the best interest of the particular voter. It also allows for measuring correct/incorrect voting in real elections with readily available data. However, the researcher is still part of the process to determine the correctness of a vote. That is, the researcher is still determining how an individual is or should aggregate their disparate policy concerns that stretch across varying numbers of issues and are held with varying levels of intensity.

The second method [Lau and Redlawsk \(2006\)](#) use is experimental and involves subjects observing fictitious elections and then voting for candidates in both a primary and general election. After the simulated election is over, subjects are given complete information about each of the candidates and asked if they would change their vote. The virtue here is that individuals themselves are the ones determining if they voted correctly or not. In this case, the researcher is entirely removed from determining the correctness of the vote. The problem is that the experimental setting is not the same as a real world campaign and thus the results are only suggestive of what is actually happening during an election.

In what follows I take the best parts of each of these lines of work (i.e., the individual deciding for themselves that they voted incorrectly from the experimental method and the applicability to the real world of presidential elections found in the survey method) and produce a survey experiment, which I refer to as Self-identified Incorrect Voting, that provides the first direct measure of the amount of correct/incorrect voting in a presidential election that takes the researcher out of the equation. This is done through a national survey administered after the 2012 presidential election. The survey was conducted less than two weeks after the election between November 15th and 19th, while the campaign remained fresh in the minds of respondents.

The Self-identified Incorrect Voting survey consisted of two parts. The first part contains standard survey questions using ANES wording that elicit typical demographic information along with partisanship, ideology, political knowledge and personal and sociotropic beliefs about the economy. The key question asks the respondents' presidential vote choice. The second part is a set of policy positions for two fictitious candidates for office corresponding to the positions of both Obama and Romney (subjects are not told their names or party affiliation). Respondents then indicate who they would vote for based solely on these sets of policy positions. Agreement or disagreement between the actual vote and the candidate chosen based on issue positions provides the measure of correct/incorrect voting. This way, each voter determines for themselves if they voted correctly or not. The result is a new way to measure correct/incorrect voting and frees scholars from the limits of existing surveys designed for other purposes.

While of critical importance to a complete understanding of the functioning of democratic governmental systems, the value of this work is not limited to simply measuring correct/incorrect voting. In what follows I will apply this new Self-identified Incorrect Voting data set to test hypotheses related to the great debate in the political knowledge literature regarding the value of cues and heuristics as substitutes for actual political knowledge. Two of the most commonly pointed to cues are partisanship and the state of the economy. Scholars have argued that cues can be used by low information voters in order allow them to behave as if they were high information voters ([Popkin, 1994](#)). However, there is not any scholarly work directly testing the idea that the use of cues leads to a decrease in the probability of voting incorrectly.

In what follows, I test hypotheses regarding voters' ability to use cues to choose the candidate who best matches their own set of issue positions. I find (1) that as strength of partisanship increases, the probability of voting incorrectly also increases and (2) that the more one feels their personal economic wellbeing has improved, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly for the incumbent president (Obama in this case). All told, these findings indicated that more than 20 percent of voters did so incorrectly and that cues, such as party identification and pocketbook economic beliefs, drive voters to the wrong candidates.

## 1. Political participation: right or wrong?

The ideal democratic government is put in place by a well informed democratic citizenry ([Barber, 1984](#)). Unfortunately, from ancient to modern times scholars and theorists have despaired at just how far the average citizen falls short of the democratic ideal (e.g., [Aristotle, 1984; Converse, 1990](#)). In their classic work, [Delli Carpini and Keeter \(1996\)](#) demonstrate quite conclusively how little factual political knowledge the average American possesses. However, political theorists' concerns for the democratic citizen are not limited to simply a measure of their political knowledge, but also the source. [Rousseau \(1988\)](#) argues forcefully for a model of direct democracy, but recognizes that individual will can be subverted by factions, saying: “But when factions, partial associations, are formed

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