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The political consequences of uninformed voters

Anthony Fowler [a,*], Michele Margolis [b]

[a] Harris School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago, 1155 East 60th Street, Room 165, Chicago, IL 60637, USA
[b] Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, E53-408, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA

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ABSTRACT

Americans fail to meet the democratic ideal of an informed electorate, and the consequences of this political ignorance are a topic of significant scholarly debate. In two independent settings, we experimentally test the effect of political information on citizens' attitudes toward the major parties in the U.S. When uninformed citizens receive political information, they systematically shift their political preferences away from the Republican Party and toward the Democrats. A lack of knowledge on the policy positions of the parties significantly hinders the ability of low-socioeconomic-status citizens to translate their preferences into partisan opinions and vote choices. As a result, American public opinion—and potentially election results and public policy as a result—is significantly different from the counterfactual world in which all voters are informed.

1. Introduction

Americans fall short of the democratic ideal of a well-informed electorate. As a result, citizens may have difficulty translating their policy preferences into partisan opinion and vote choices. This, in turn, can cause aggregate opinion and election results to diverge from the counterfactual world in which all voters are informed. This paper aims to assess the extent of this dilemma in the American political context. What are the consequences of the public's lack of political knowledge? What would happen if the American public were more informed?

Previous studies have tackled this question with observational data both in the United States (Althaus, 1998; Bartels, 1996; Gilens, 2001; Levendusky, 2011; Sekhon, 2004) and elsewhere (Bhatti, 2010; Hansen, 2009; Oscarsson, 2007; Tóka, 2007), concluding that more political knowledge in the electorate would have minimal effects or benefit right wing parties. However, confounding variables, reverse causation, and measurement error could plague the interpretation of these results and bias their estimates of the effects of information.

In order to overcome these methodological challenges, we present two, independent, randomized, controlled experiments which test for the effects of information about the parties' policy stances on aggregate partisan opinion. Despite many significant differences between the two experiments including the experimental designs, subject pools, the issues discussed, and the method by which information is delivered, both experiments yield the same result. Exogenous increases in policy-specific political knowledge produce a relative increase in support for the Democratic Party. In short, American public opinion—and potentially election results and public policy as a result—appears to be significantly different from the counterfactual world in which all voters are informed about the positions of the parties.

2. How much do people know and how much does it matter?

In the context of this paper, the terms *political knowledge* and *political information* are used interchangeably to refer to citizens' knowledge about the major party's

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 773 834 8555.
E-mail addresses: anthony.fowler@uchicago.edu (A. Fowler), margolis@mit.edu (M. Margolis).

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positions on key issues of public policy. While the effects of general political knowledge may be interesting and distinct from the effects of domain-specific knowledge, they are outside the scope of this study.[1] Early survey researchers measured the extent of political knowledge in the American electorate, and the results are disconcerting: citizens did not know what the parties stood for (Berelson et al., 1954) or the main points about major policies (Campbell et al., 1960). The subsequent decades saw little improvement, despite the fact that average educational attainment increased significantly (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1991, 1996). These findings have real implications, as information about the parties' stances and policies allows voters to update their partisan preferences and political beliefs (Carsey and Layman, 2006; Dancey and Goren, 2010; Levendusky, 2009). Taken together, the literature calls into question the quality of collective public opinion and the effectiveness of the entire democratic process (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964).

Optimistic scholars have tried to alleviate concerns about the public's lack of political knowledge by arguing that heuristics and aggregation produce outcomes that look *as if* a fully informed electorate made the decision. While voters can use cognitive shortcuts (Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Popkin, 1991; Robertson et al., 1976; Schaffner and Streb, 2002), researchers have not demonstrated that they use these shortcuts regularly and effectively. In fact, reliance on cues can lead voters astray (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994) and less informed citizens are less able to employ shortcuts successfully (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997).

A second defense against public ignorance is that random errors in collective opinion cancel out in a large electorate (Condorcet 1785; Page and Shapiro, 1992). This claim, however, requires the assumption that random errors occur equally. For example, if the same numbers of people incorrectly vote for the Democrats and the Republicans, then the election outcome will be no different than in the case in which all voters are fully informed. However, this assumption of symmetric errors is unsupported by empirical evidence. There are systematic differences in political knowledge throughout the population, and this should affect the relative number of uninformed voters within each party's camp.[2] In the Supporting Information we present a more formal treatment of this question—a model of an election with uninformed voters—which informs our hypothesis about the effects of political knowledge in the American context.

Cognitive shortcuts and statistical aggregation do not solve the problem of political knowledge, but does this matter? Althaus (2006) echoes the views of many democratic theorists in questioning whether the entire enterprise of research on political information is misguided: "But what core tenet of democratic theory is being offended by the mass public's apparent lack of civic-mindedness?" (p. 83). The purpose of this paper is not to take a stand on how the existence of uninformed citizens challenges democratic theory, but rather to answer a specific empirical question that stems from the political ignorance found within American society. Would public opinion—and potentially elections and public policy as a result—be different if the population were more informed? Because the ability to form political attitudes that are aligned with our interests is "mediated by the quality and quantity of political information we can bring to bear on an issue" (Althaus, 1998, 547), uninformed citizens may be less able to translate their policy preferences into partisan opinions. By experimentally testing for the effects of political information, we assess the extent of this problem and suggest potential remedies which will improve the extent to which public policy reflects the preferences of citizens.

3. Previous empirical evidence on the effects of information

Previous researchers have taken several methodological approaches to assess the effects of political knowledge, the most prominent of which is correlational. Informed citizens are more likely to be ideologically extreme (Palfrey and Poole, 1987), vote for incumbent presidents, and support Republican presidential candidates (Bartels, 1996). Researchers find a similar trend in Europe: knowledge is correlated with support for right leaning parties in European Parliament, Danish, and Swedish elections (Bhatti, 2010; Hansen, 2009; Oscarsson, 2007). However, confounding variables and reverse causation could plague the interpretation of these results.[3] Even panel methods which aim to overcome these problems (Levendusky, 2011; Sekhon, 2004) potentially suffer from the similar problems of time-varying confounding variables, reverse causation, or attenuation bias.

Deliberative polls (Fishkin, 1991, 1997) provide another opportunity to assess the effects of political information, and researchers find that opinions do change over the course of deliberation (Sturgis, 2003). However, these attempts at creating a knowledgeable public sphere generate problems similar to those of the correlational analyses. First, participants typically self-select into attendance (Denver et al., 1995; Tringali, 1996) and there is no comparable control group, which is needed to estimate the causal effect of deliberation. Second, a weekend of debate and deliberation is not the same as raw information. Biases in the material and presentations could sway the results

[1] See Zaller (1985, 1986, 1992) and Iyengar (1986) for discussions and analyses of general political knowledge and its relationship to domain-specific knowledge.

[2] College graduates and high-income individuals demonstrate greater levels of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Additional research shows further informational inequalities: white, male, and older individuals are on average more informed than minority, female, and younger individuals (Bennett, 1988; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Sigelman and Yanarella, 1986).

[3] In this context, an example of omitted variable bias is that watching cable news or listening to talk radio might cause a citizen to both become more informed and to change her attitudes in systematic ways. An example of reverse causation would be that voters who already support the Republican Party may be more likely to become informed. Either problem could lead to significant biases when estimating the causal effects of information.