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In Search of the Information Citizen: What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters

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Abstract

In *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson describes four interconnected but ultimately distinct eras of American civic life, each characterized by the dominance of a particular model of citizenship. In the first era, roughly corresponding to the 18th and early 19th centuries, citizens deferred to the leadership of political elites – civic responsibility consisted mainly of affirming the legitimacy of this ruling caste. The second era, in place throughout the remainder of the 19th century, was characterized by the dominance of political parties. In this period, citizens played a more central role, though this role was orchestrated by strong local party organizations that mobilized the masses through the tangible incentives of patronage, entertainment and other individual, material rewards rather than through detailed appeals to ideology or issues.

Comments

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**In Search of the Informed Citizen:
What Americans Know
About Politics and Why It Matters**

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The Pew Charitable Trusts and Barnard College

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“The Transformation of Civic Life”

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In The Good Citizen Michael Schudson describes four interconnected but ultimately distinct eras of American civic life, each characterized by the dominance of a particular model of citizenship. In the first era, roughly corresponding to the 18th and early 19th centuries, citizens deferred to the leadership of political elites – civic responsibility consisted mainly of affirming the legitimacy of this ruling caste. The second era, in place throughout the remainder of the 19th century, was characterized by the dominance of political parties. In this period, citizens played a more central role, though this role was orchestrated by strong local party organizations that mobilized the masses through the tangible incentives of patronage, entertainment and other individual, material rewards rather than through detailed appeals to ideology or issues.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, yet another transformation occurred, in large part a reaction to the particular brand of partisan politics that preceded it. This era, in place until the 1950s, was characterized by two, somewhat competing models. The dominant model, emerging from Progressive reforms, emphasized managerial efficiency, a non-partisan professional press, and government by experts. The second, less dominant model, focused on the importance of the direct input of citizens into the substance of politics and policymaking and was characterized, on the one hand, by local discussion groups, salons, and other forms of civic deliberation, and on the other, by the emerging art and science of public opinion polls. The final era described by Professor Schudson, beginning in the 1950s and characterizing much of today's non-electoral politics, is dominated by the "rights-conscious" citizen. In this model, individual and collective rights drive the plot lines of politics, and the judicial rather than the executive or legislative branches becomes the center stage on which these dramas unfold.

The description of civic life in The Good Citizen is more nuanced than this brief overview

suggests. Professor Schudson is careful in showing that there were alternative models in play in each of these eras; that elements of deference, partisan politics, expertise, direct democracy, and civil rights could be found in each era; and that each new model of citizenship overlaid rather than replaced prior models. He is also careful in pointing out that each of these models of civic life carry with them positive and negative implications for the quality of democracy. But running throughout The Good Citizen is a consistent theme: that the role of the citizen in American civic life has always been more circumscribed in practice than idealized models of “rule by the people” would imply and that, viewed historically, the current state of civic life is at a minimum no less vibrant than in past eras and is arguably a preferable mix of elite and mass democracy.

While there are numerous strands to this argument, it is played out most directly in Professor Schudson’s critique of what he views as the problematic ideal of “the informed citizen” which emerged most explicitly at the end of the 19th century. In a recent address at the 1999 James K. Batten Awards and Symposium for Excellence in Civic Journalism, he elaborated on his concerns. Professor Schudson argues that this ideal has few roots in the theories and practice of American democracy which preceded this era; that its ascendancy in the 20th century has led to a sanitizing of politics, stripping it of the visceral, emotional elements that served as powerful motivating forces in earlier eras; that it sped the rejection of partisan politics and of a politics “intertwined and inextricable from every-day social life and social relations;” and that it has created such impossible intellectual demands on citizens that it serves to weaken rather than strengthen efforts to create a more participatory, democratic civic life.

In the conclusion of The Good Citizen, Professor Schudson writes that “the model of the informed citizen.... still holds a cherished place in our array of political values, as I think it

should, but it requires some modification” (p.309). His recommendation is for a more realistic model in which most citizens regularly “monitor” or “scan” the political and social environment, learning enough to be “poised for action if action is required” (p. 311). And while he acknowledges that “[t]here is surely some line of willful ignorance that, once crossed, crosses out democracy itself... [and that the] teaching of democracy and the modeling of democracy should never stop,” he also argues that “we should have in view plausible aims that integrate citizenry competence with specialized expert resources” (pp. 311-312). In the end, “[t]here must be some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands of self-government” (p.310).

That the ideal of the informed citizen has been used (consciously and unconsciously) to restrict democracy is incontrovertible: one of the strongest arguments against democracy over the past 2000 years has been the fear that “the masses” lacked the intelligence and knowledge to exercise their power in a responsible way. As Professor Schudson documents, throughout the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries the failure of citizens to meet often unrealistic standards was the stated justification for many of the laws and norms designed to limit the franchise to anglo, male, economically well off, and educated citizens. And much of the power behind progressive-era arguments in favor of government-by-experts derived from the belief that average citizens lacked the ability to govern themselves. Certainly it is no coincidence that the rise of the informed citizen model is paralleled by a precipitous decline in voter turnout.

Professor Schudson would find a great deal of support for his argument in much of the political science literature. Public opinion polling since the 1930s has consistently documented low levels of political knowledge among the American public, leading Philip Converse to write that “the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys is that popular levels of information about

public affairs are, from the point of view of an informed observer, astonishingly low” (1975: p. 79). Imbedded, as this research was, in an era in which the model of the informed citizen was dominant, these findings produced a great deal of concern. “It seems remarkable,” wrote Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, “that democracies have survived through the centuries.... That is the paradox. Individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists” (1954: p.312).

It is not too great a simplification to suggest that most of the public opinion theory and research that has emerged over the last 40 years has been an attempt to resolve this apparent paradox. There is a consensus that most citizens are politically uninformed. There is no consensus, however, on the causes or implications of this state of civic affairs. Many observers, starting from the premise that an informed citizenry is the *sine qua non* of democracy, conclude that American politics is in crisis: that the tensions inherent in its theory and practice have made it either ungovernable, undemocratic, or both. Robert Entman, in his aptly titled book, Democracy Without Citizens, argues that "people who participate regularly and knowledgeably form a distinct minority," and thus, the U.S. system "represents the general public less well than Americans deserve" (1989: p. 28). Paul Blumberg puts it more starkly:

America's embarrassing little secret...is that vast numbers of Americans are ignorant, not merely of the specialized details of government which ordinary citizens cannot be expected to master, but of the most elementary political facts – information so basic as to challenge the central tenet of democratic government itself. (1990: p. 1)

However, not everyone agrees that low levels of civic knowledge constitute a threat to democratic politics. Starting from a "realist's view," many believe that the need for a generally informed citizenry is overstated. For these scholars the solution to Berelson's paradox is not to change citizens – or the system in which they operate – but to rethink the definition of democracy itself. This

view is reflected in the words of E.E. Schattschneider, who wrote:

It is an outrage to attribute the failures of American democracy to the ignorance and stupidity of the masses. The most disastrous shortcomings of the system have been those of the intellectuals whose concepts of democracy have been amazingly rigid and uninventive. (1960: p. 135-136)

In this view (one that is quite consistent with that articulated in the last chapter of The Good Citizen), real democracy functions through some combination of government by experts, the availability of "attentive publics," the resourceful use of heuristics and information shortcuts by citizens, and/or the beneficent effects of "collective rationality" wherein the whole of citizen awareness is greater than the sum of its parts.

Much of this research is motivated by a desire to salvage liberal democracy from its critics, to show, as Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have put it, that "ordinary citizens are not to be feared" and that "skepticism and disdain [for the civic capacity of the public] are not well founded" (1992: pp. xi, 1). In the remainder of this paper I would like to summarize what the political science literature tells us about what Americans know about politics and why it matters, drawing heavily from my own work (co-authored with Scott Keeter) in this area. In providing this overview I will attempt to do justice to the various points of view that are reflected in the literature. It is my argument, however, that in attempting to rehabilitate the image of ordinary citizens by downplaying the possibility or necessity of an informed public, scholars run an equally great risk of selling both citizens and democracy short. Put more bluntly, I am suggesting that democracy becomes more responsive and responsible the more informed, and the more equitably informed, is its citizenry.

The Average American is Poorly Informed, But Not Uninformed

Over fifty years of survey research on Americans' knowledge of politics leads to several consistent conclusions. The most powerful and influential of these conclusions is that the "average" citizen is woefully uninformed about political institutions and processes, substantive policies and socioeconomic conditions, and important political actors such as elected officials and political parties (Bennett, 1988; Campbell, et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Ferejohn, 1990; Neuman, 1986). This conclusion has been reinforced, even mythologized, by popular press accounts of public ignorance, as when a 1986 ABC/Washington Post poll reported that, shortly after the widely covered Geneva summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, a majority of Americans could not name the leader of the Soviet Union. A similar, if less scientific, example was given in a 1991 New York Times column:

THAT'S U.S. SENATOR

Several members of the New York State Senate reported last week that they had received dozens of calls from constituents with urgent advice on how they should vote on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. The trouble was, the nomination was in the hands of the United States Senate.

Books such as Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (1987), Diane Ravitch's and Chester Finn's What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know (1987), and E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy (1988), have also contributed to this negative image of the American public. Indeed, D. Charles Whitney and Ellen Wartella conclude that a "virtual cottage industry has arisen in the past few years in making out the American public as a bunch of ignoramuses" (1989: p. 9). This characterization is so well-established that, according to John Ferejohn, "Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics" (Ferejohn, 1991). Evidence from recent presidential campaigns has done little to rehabilitate the American voter's image. For example, a 1992 report by the Center for the Study of Communication at

the University of Massachusetts found that while 86 percent of a random sample of likely voters knew that the Bush's family dog was named Millie and 89 percent knew that Murphy Brown was the TV character criticized by Dan Quayle, only 15 percent knew that both candidates favored the death penalty and only 5 percent knew that both had proposed cuts in the capital gains tax.

There is seemingly no end to the examples one can find to illustrate the public's ignorance of politics. The single most commonly known fact about George Bush's opinions while he was president was that he hated broccoli. More people were able to identify Judge Wapner (host of the television series, *The People's Court*) than Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist. More people know John Lennon than Karl Marx, or know Bill Cosby than either of their U.S. senators. More people know who said "What's Up Doc," "Hi Yo Silver," or "Come Up And See Me Sometime" than "Give Liberty or Give Me Death," "The Only Thing We Have To Fear Is Fear Itself," or "Speak Softly And Carry A Big Stick." More people knew that Pete Rose was accused of gambling than could name any of the five U.S. Senators accused of unethical conduct in the savings and loan scandal. And so on.

However, while there is no question that levels of public knowledge are less impressive than "an informed observer" might hope, a more systematic overview of the past 50 years of survey research on what Americans know about politics reveals a much more complex picture than normally assumed. In doing research for our book, What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters, Scott Keeter and I collected over 2000 survey questions tapping factual knowledge of politics that were asked over the past 50 years. These questions covered a range of topics one might expect an informed citizen to know, including knowledge of institutions and processes (for example, how a bill becomes a law, or what rights are guaranteed by the U.S. constitution), of substantive issues and indicators of the day (for example, whether there is a

federal budget deficit or surplus, or the percentage of Americans living in poverty), and of public figures and political organizations (for example, the name of your U.S. Representative, the stands of presidential candidates on the key issues of the day, or which party controls the Senate).

Unsurprisingly, the average level of knowledge was low – only 4-in-10 of these questions could be answered correctly by over half of those surveyed. But the average alone does not tell the full story. Many of the more commonly known facts included rudimentary but potentially important pieces of information such as details about the separation of powers across branches and levels of government; the definitions of key terms such as veto, inflation, or party platform; civil rights such as the constitutional guarantee to a trial by jury, free speech, and religious freedom; the stands of presidential candidates and political parties on some of the major issues of the day (such as social security, health care, and foreign relations), social and economic conditions (such as the existence of a budget deficit or surplus, or the illiteracy rate), and the like.

None of this is to suggest that Americans are generally well-informed. Among the 6-in-10 questions that less than half of the public could answer (and the 1-in-4 that fewer than a quarter of the public could answer) were many facts that seem equally or more crucial to effective citizenship: definitions of key terms such as liberal, conservative, primary elections, or the bill of rights; knowledge of many individual and collective rights guaranteed by the Constitution; the names or issue stands of most public officials below the level of president or governor; candidate and party stands on many important issues of the day; key social conditions such as the unemployment rate or the percentage of the public living in poverty or without health insurance; how much of the federal budget is spent on defense, foreign aid, or social welfare; and so on. Further, there is little evidence that citizens are most knowledgeable about those things that are

arguably most important: for example, there is little substantive reason for most Americans to know the name of the Vice President but not the name of their U.S. Representative or Senators. It does suggest, however, that Americans are neither as uninformed nor as unwilling or incapable of being informed as is often stated.

Another way to make this point is to look at the results of surveys that include multiple knowledge items. For example, in a 50-question “quiz” covering a range of topics designed to tap knowledge of three key areas (institutions and processes, current issues and social conditions, and key political actors and groups) the average score for a national sample of American adults was about 50 percent correct – evidence perhaps of an *under*-informed public, but not of an *uninformed* one.

Aggregate Levels of Political Knowledge Have Remained Relatively Stable Over The Past 50 Years

Clearly the average American is poorly informed about politics when compared to an idealized citizen. Another, arguably “fairer” way to assess the state of political knowledge among the American public is to compare current levels of knowledge to past levels. While data allowing for a systematic comparison of knowledge levels over the past 50 years is less comprehensive than one would hope, the evidence strongly suggests that Americans are about as informed about politics today as they were fifty years ago (Bennett, 1988; 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 105-134; Neuman, 1986: 14-17; Smith, 1989: 159-222).

These findings could be seen as good news or bad news, depending on one’s perspective. The good news is that, despite concerns over the quality of education, the decline in newspaper readership, the rise of soundbite journalism, the explosion in national political issues, and the

waning commitment to civic engagement, citizens appear *no less* informed about politics today than they were half a century ago. The bad news is that despite an unprecedented expansion in public education, a communications revolution that has shattered national and international boundaries, and the increasing relevance of national and international events and policies to the daily lives of Americans, citizens appear *no more* informed about politics today than they were half a century ago.

This relative stability in levels of political knowledge should not be mistakenly interpreted as suggesting that Americans are unable to monitor changes in the political environment. As evidence of this, consider the following example. In most years for which data is available, majorities of the public were correctly able to place the Democratic party and its presidential candidates to the left of their Republican counterparts on issues such as women's role in society, aid to minorities, jobs, education, and school desegregation (Stimson, 1990: pp. 352-353). However, while the stands of the Democratic and Republican parties are usually distinct on these issues, in many years the distinctions are subtle at best, making it more difficult for citizens to learn where the parties stand relative to each other. When the stands of the parties become more distinct, substantial portions of the public appear to learn this fact.

For example, in 1956 and 1960 about 20 percent of those surveyed saw the Democratic party as more liberal on federal aid to minorities than the Republican party, while about the same percentage that saw Republicans as the more liberal party. The two parties were rated similarly on their stands regarding school desegregation. This balance is reflective of the actual stands of the two parties during this period. While Truman led the way to desegregating the military, the initial efforts to pass civil rights legislation in the 1940s and 1950s were often championed by

Republicans. Moreover, the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down during Eisenhower's presidency, and it was Eisenhower who issued the executive order to desegregate the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. By 1968, however, both civil rights and federal aid to blacks had become strong planks in the Democratic party platform, while the Republican party had moved away from its long-term emphasis on the former, and often actively opposed the latter. This shift was not lost on a significant portion of the American public: in 1964 and 1968 between 50 and 60 percent of those surveyed saw the Democrats as the more liberal party on aid to minorities, while only 7 to 11 percent saw the Republican party as the more liberal. And 50 to 56 percent saw the Democrats as more liberal on school desegregation, compared to only 7 to 9 percent who saw the Republicans in this light.

A similar example of the public's ability to survey the changing political terrain is provided by the parties' developing stands on the role of women in society. In 1972 and 1976, about a third of the public saw the Democratic party as more liberal than the Republican party on this issue. In contrast, only about 10 percent of the public saw the Republican party as more liberal. Again, these modest differences fairly accurately reflected the small differences between the two parties in the early 1970s (for example, while the Democratic party and candidates were somewhat more committed to feminist issues, both parties supported the ERA and all four presidential candidates were nominally pro-choice). By 1980, however, the Republican party had become firmly "captured" by social conservatives who aggressively expounded more conservative rhetoric on issues such as the role of women (for example, in 1980 the Republican party removed its support for the ERA from its platform, and added planks advocating a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion and supporting legislation "protecting and defending the traditional American

family"). At the same time, the Democratic party strengthened its commitment to feminist concerns, including

support for the ERA, opposition to reversals of past ratification of the ERA, a pledge to hold no national or regional party meetings in unratified states, endorsement of the 1973 Supreme court decision allowing abortion, support for increased federal funds for child-care programs, and commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work. (Klein, 1984: p. 157)

As a result of this more sharply defined difference between the two parties, the percentage of the public knowing that the Democratic party was the more liberal on women's roles in society increased to around 60 percent in 1980 and 1984, while the percentage seeing the Republicans as the more liberal party held about constant at 10 percent.

Americans' Appear To Be Slightly Less Informed About Politics As Are Citizens of Other Comparable Nations

Yet another way to assess Americans' political knowledge is to compare them to citizens of other countries. Good comparative data are again relatively sparse, especially for knowledge of domestic politics. What evidence there is provides a somewhat ambiguous picture. Recent evidence on knowledge of foreign affairs suggests that Americans lag behind residents of many western nations in awareness of key political actors and events. For example, surveys conducted in eight nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Spain, The United Kingdom, and the United States) in 1994 by the Times Mirror Center found that, in terms of the percentage able to answer the current events questions correctly, Americans placed third on one item (knowing which nation was threatening to withdraw from the nonproliferation treaty), sixth on two others (knowing the ethnic group that had conquered much of Bosnia, and the name of the group that Israel had recently reached a peace accord with), and came in seventh (naming the president of Russia) and

eighth (identifying Boutros Boutros Ghali) on the other two. Of seven nations for which summary tabulations were made, Americans had the second-lowest mean number correct (only Spain fell behind; Mexico was not tabulated). Thirty-seven percent of Americans missed all of the questions, the highest percentage among the seven nations to do so.

Research by Baker, et al. (1994), comparing knowledge of national legislatures in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, also suggests that Americans are less informed than are citizens of other nations. U.S. citizens averaged less than three correct answers on a ten-item scale measuring knowledge of the U.S. Congress, compared to Great Britains, who averaged over 6 correct out of ten questions about their parliament, and Canadians, who averaged a remarkable 9.8 correct out 11 questions about their parliament.¹

A somewhat less grim picture emerges from a 1986 cross-national survey that asked about world leaders. Americans equaled or exceeded respondents from the other four nations in their ability to name their own head of state (99 percent for Americans, 99 percent for the French, 96 percent for the British, 95 percent for West Germans, and 89 percent for the Italians). Americans were about as likely as the others to know the prime minister of Japan, but were considerably less able to identify the heads of state of Western European nations. And the five-nation survey that formed the basis for Almond and Verba's The Civic Culture found a considerably higher percentage of Americans and Germans able to name four or more party leaders when compared with the English, Italians, or Mexicans. Americans were behind the Germans, but comparable to the British, in the ability to name four or more cabinet offices.

Finally, a 1988 National Geographic survey asked representative samples of adult citizens

¹ The specific questions asked varied from nation to nation, making comparisons of specific scores somewhat problematic. Nonetheless, the general point – that Americans are less informed about their national legislature than are citizens of Canada or Great Britain – is compelling.

from nine countries to locate 16 "places" on a map of the world (14 countries and two bodies of water). Overall Americans correctly located an average of 8.6 places, putting them 6th out of the 9 countries included in the survey. More specifically, Americans were above average in locating places relatively close to them (Canada, Mexico, Central America, the Pacific Ocean, and the United States itself), while they were below average in identifying areas that are geographically more distant (the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, Sweden, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf).

“Average” Levels of Knowledge Mask Important Differences Across Groups

The portrait of the American citizen presented thus far is generally consistent with Professor Schudson’s (and others’) call for a more realistic set of expectations regarding the informational requisites of civic life. This picture becomes more complicated, and to my mind, problematic when one looks at the variance in knowledge across citizens, however. Too often “the citizenry” is described in monolithic terms. The evidence suggests, however, that there are dramatic differences in how informed Americans are. For example, as noted above, a 50-question “quiz” of political knowledge given to a national sample of American adults produced an average score of almost 50 percent correct. But the most informed 30 percent of the sample averaged better than 7-in-10 correct answers, while the least informed 30 percent could only answer 1-in-4 questions correctly. In short, there is no *single* portrait of the American citizen: a substantial percentage is very informed, an equally large percentage is very poorly informed, and the plurality of citizens fall somewhere in between.

One could argue, as does Professor Schudson, that these differences simply reflect the fact that “[t]here must be some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands

of self-government” (p.310), and ultimately that civic life must “integrate citizenry competence with specialized expert resources” (pp. 311-312). The problem with this view is that differences in levels of knowledge parallel other, more traditional indicators of political, social, and economic power such as race, gender, class, and age.

The extent to which knowledge levels vary across groups of citizens is clearly seen using data from two surveys conducted in the late 1980s. While the size of the knowledge gaps about national politics vary from item to item, the overall pattern is compelling: men are more informed than women; whites are more informed than blacks; those with higher incomes are more informed than those with lower incomes²; and older citizens are more informed than younger ones.

The extent of these differences can be summarized in several ways. Of the 68 questions asked across the two surveys, for only five was the percentage correct for women as high or higher than for men, and in no case was the percentage correct for blacks as high as for whites, or was the percentage correct for low income citizens as high as that for upper income ones. The comparison across age cohorts reveals a somewhat more variable pattern, though 55 of the 68 questions were answered correctly by a greater percentage of "pre-baby boomers" than "post-baby boomers."³

The sizes of these gaps in knowledge are substantial. For example, the median percent correct across all the items in the 1989 survey for men was 1.35 times that for women, the median percent correct for pre-baby boomers was 1.38 times that for post-baby boomers, the median percent correct for more affluent citizens was 1.59 times that of relatively poor citizens, and the median percent correct for whites was over twice that for blacks.

² "Low income" was defined as family income below \$20,000; "middle income" as between \$20,000 and \$50,000; and "high income" as over \$50,000.

³ Pre-Baby Boomers are defined as those born prior to 1946; Baby Boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964; and Post-Baby Boomers are those born after 1964.

The cumulative effect of these question-by-question differences can be gauged by summing across all the items to make a knowledge index. Fully three quarters of the women in the 1989 survey scored below the median for men. Substantially more than three quarters of those from families earning under \$20,000 a year scored below the median for those earning over \$50,000, as was the case for post-baby boomers when compared to pre-baby boomers. And three quarters of black Americans scored below three quarters of white Americans, a knowledge gap of dramatic proportions. Similar patterns were found in the 1988 data.⁴

As a final demonstration of the extent of group differences in political knowledge, one can compare the average scores on the two knowledge scales (measured as the percent of the questions answered correctly) for members of different segments of the population. The average score for the total 1989 sample was 49 percent while for the 1988 sample it was 50 percent, meaning that the "typical" citizen could answer about half the questions correctly. However, this average masks substantial differences across different segments of the population. These differences are especially dramatic when considered for groups of citizens that combine the advantages and disadvantages associated with age, class, race, and gender. The most informed citizens were older, white males whose family income exceeded \$50,000 (65 percent correct on the 1989 scale and 76 percent correct on the 1988 scale). These scores were over two and a half times higher than those achieved by the least informed group in our sample: younger black women whose family income was less than \$20,000 a year. More generally, the patterns demonstrated in both samples show the exceptionally close fit between political knowledge and socioeconomic status. Surprisingly, the size of the race, gender, and class knowledge gaps have remained relatively unchanged over the past 40 years, and the

⁴ The one exception was race, where the knowledge gap was less dramatic than in the 1989 survey (approximately three quarters of blacks scored below the median for whites). We attribute the smaller knowledge gap to the predominance of party-oriented questions in the 1988 survey.

size of the generational knowledge gap appears to have increased.

Knowledge is Tied to Many Attributes of “Good” Citizenship

Politics is ultimately about “who gets what” from government, or as David Easton (1965) put it, “the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values.” With this in mind, evidence of systematic differences in political knowledge that are tied to other socioeconomic indicators of political power should give one pause. The political significance of these knowledge gaps depends, however, on whether or not knowledge matters to effective citizenship. While there is some disagreement on this, my own work and my reading of the larger literature strongly suggests that informed citizens are “better” citizens in a number of ways.

Specifically, research has found that more-informed citizens are more accepting of democratic norms such as political tolerance, are more efficacious about politics, are more likely to be interested in, follow and discuss politics, and are more likely to participate in politics in a variety of ways, including voting, working for a political party, and attending local community meetings (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Junn, 1991; Leighly, 1991; Marcus, et al., 1995; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). Research also suggests that more-informed citizens are more likely to have opinions about the pressing issues of the day (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Krosnick and Milburn, 1990), are more likely to hold stable opinions over time (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Erikson and Knight, 1993; Feldman, 1989), are more likely to hold opinions that are ideologically consistent with each other (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 235-238; McCloskey and Zaller, 1984: 250-251; Neuman, 1986: 64-67; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1979: 154; Stimson, 1975; Zaller, 1986: 10-11), and are less likely to change their opinions in the

face of new but tangential or misleading information (Kinder and Sanders, 1990; Lanoue, 1992) but more likely to change in the face of new relevant or compelling information (Zaller, 1992).

There is also evidence that political knowledge affects the opinions held by different socioeconomic groups (for example, groups based on race, class, gender, and age differences). More-informed citizens within these groups hold opinions that are both significantly different from less-informed citizens with similar demographic characteristics, and that are arguably more consistent with their material circumstances (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 238-251).⁵ For example, informed women are more supportive of government programs designed to protect women's rights, informed but economically disadvantaged citizens are more supportive of government programs designed to provide jobs and improve their standard of living, and so forth. These group differences are large enough to suggest that aggregate opinion on a number of political issues would be significantly different and more representative of the public interest were citizens more fully and equitably informed about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Althaus, 1998).

Finally, political knowledge seems to increase citizens' ability to consistently connect their policy views to their evaluations of public officials and political parties, as well as to their political behavior. For example, more-informed citizens are more likely to identify with the political party, approve of the performance of office holders, and vote for candidates, whose policy stands are most consistent with their own views (Alvarez, 1997; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 251-258).

Alternatives to the Informed Citizen Model

While the evidence that knowledge matters, and thus that systematic differences in levels of

⁵ In some cases greater information also seems to lead "advantaged" citizens (e.g., whites) to hold opinions that are more supportive of government policies designed to assist the less-advantaged (e.g., minorities).

knowledge are problematic, is compelling, there are a number of arguments which, if correct, could serve to lessen or eliminate these concerns. Two of the most powerful arguments – the “heuristic model” and the “on-line processing model” – focus on the way individuals make political decisions.

One of the major criticisms of the “informed citizen” model is that it expects citizens “to yield an unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity, and effort” (Lippmann, 1925:2), thus setting standards so high as to make democracy impossible (Schattschneider, 1960: 134-136). An alternative view is that citizens can make reasonably effective decisions even if they are only moderately-informed (Berent and Krosnick, 1992; Graber, 1988; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992; Lau and Sears, 1986; Popkin, 1991; Shapiro, et al., 1991; Stroh, 1992). With only a few exceptions this model accepts the three assumptions that drive the informed citizen model – that beliefs are the mainspring of attitude formation; that beliefs can be based on more or less accurate information; and that attitude formation and expression is an *active* process. However, citizens are further seen as “cognitive misers” (Hewstone and Macrae, 1994) who attempt to make efficient, rational decisions under circumstances of limited ability to process information, limited incentives to become politically engaged, and limited information (Downs, 1957; Mondak, 1994; Popkin, 1991). Citizens achieve this low-information rationality through the use of information short-cuts or heuristics:

Citizens frequently can compensate for their limited information about politics by taking advantage of judgmental heuristics. Heuristics are judgmental shortcuts, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice.... Insofar as they can be brought into play, people can be knowledgeable in their reasoning about political choices without possessing a large body of knowledge about politics. (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991: 19)

The notion of heuristic decision making is rooted in Anthony Downs’ economic theory of

democracy (1957) and research by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1972; 1973; 1982a; 1982b; 1984; Tversky and Kahneman, 1973; 1974; 1980; 1981; 1982a; 1982b). Kahneman and Tversky identified four different simplifying heuristics: representativeness, availability, adjustment and anchoring, and simulation. *Representativeness* is assigning an item to a particular class and then using what one believes about that class to form opinions about the item in question. For example, I know Bill Clinton is a Democrat, so I use what I believe about Democrats to make judgements about him.

Availability refers to the ease with which an individual can retrieve relevant information from long-term memory. For example, in being asked my opinion about the job Bill Clinton is doing as president, I might easily recall that he recently raised taxes, and so give him an unfavorable rating, since I am opposed to raising taxes. *Anchoring and Adjustment* is a simplifying process in which individuals form an initial response, and then adjust that response by considering additional information related to that response. For example, I might give Clinton an unfavorable rating based on his raising taxes, but then adjust my opinion in a more favorable direction as I think of ways in which he might have improved economic conditions. Thus, my initial opinion anchors my subsequent reflections.

Finally, *simulation* “facilitates decision making when information is lacking.... decision makers mentally play out [hypothetical] sequences of events relevant to the judgement under consideration” (Mondak, 1994: 123). For example, in deciding whether to vote for Bill Clinton or Bob Dole, I draw on easily accessible information and beliefs to “predict” how each candidate *might* address issues of importance to me.

Popkin (1991) uses both representativeness and availability in theorizing about how citizens are able to use heuristics in coming to political judgements, and Ottati and Wyer (1990)

and Iyengar (1990) discuss an “accessibility” heuristic that is similar to “availability.” Ottati and Wyer (1990) also discuss the use of “stereotypes” in a way that is similar to Kahneman and Tversky’s representativeness heuristic. In addition, political scientists have hypothesized and tested other heuristics. For example, Sniderman, et al., (1986) and Sniderman, Brody, and Telock (1991) refer to a “desert heuristic” in which individuals make political judgements based on whether they believe an individual or group is deserving of the action or policy in question. And Riggle (1992) and Riggle, et al., (1992) distinguish “procedural” heuristics (rules for how information should be processed) from “categorical” heuristics (rules for what kinds of information should be use in different circumstances).⁶

The heuristic model goes a long way towards reconciling evidence of low levels of information with the assumption that citizens can make reasoned decisions that reflect their true preferences. The distinction between the heuristic and informed citizen models is less sharp than often suggested, however, and four related issues make it unclear whether the heuristic model offers a satisfying solution to the paradox of a democracy based on poorly and inequitably informed citizens.

First, both the informed voter *and* the heuristic models assume citizens come to political judgement with less than full information. Research suggests that even elites such as foreign policy makers make decisions under conditions of imperfect information and use heuristics in making decisions (Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992; Larson, 1985). The use of short cuts describes a human condition rather than a particular form of decision making. Thus, the issue in both models is not whether people use partial information to make decisions, but the reliability, validity, and

⁶ For an excellent, comprehensive review of heuristic decision making and its use in political science, see Mondak, 1994. I draw on this article for much of my discussion of heuristics in this paper.

relevance of the information used.

Second, the heuristic model is based on *low* information rationality, not *no* information rationality. Heuristic models assume that citizens are able to use short cuts precisely because they can draw on relevant information stored in long-term memory. True, the heuristic model suggests that many of the “textbook” facts tapped in quizzes of the public may be unnecessary for making reasoned judgements (Graber, 1994). However, much of the information that *is* necessary for heuristic decision making – for example, the party affiliations, ideological leanings, past issue stands, and personal characteristics of public figures – is precisely the kind of information that many citizens lack.

Third, while research suggests that many citizens can make reasonably good decisions based on limited information, it also suggests that the process by which such decisions are made, and the quality of the ultimate decisions, is still dependent upon the amount and quality of information citizens have available to them (Sniderman, Brody, and Telock, 1991; Riggle, et al., 1992). This is an especially important consideration, given the systematic group differences in political knowledge documented earlier in this paper.

And fourth, while most of the political science literature focuses on the *value* of heuristics in reaching decisions that accurately reflect one’s true preferences, much of the psychological literature in this area emphasizes the tendency for such simplified processes to lead to *decision errors*. At some point the amount or quality of information used for making decisions can become so limited as to be useless or misleading (Kuklinski, et al., 1997). For example, a large percentage of those who voted for George Bush in 1988 did so because they wrongly inferred specific policies to the prior Reagan-Bush administration (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 263-264). Similarly, heuristic decision making is often at the heart of many of the negative (and inaccurate) stereotypes that drive problematic ethnic

and racial attitudes and behaviors (Peffley and Shields, 1996; Smith, 1996).

While the informed citizen and heuristic models differ in their views about how much and what kinds of factual information is necessary for citizens to make political decisions, both see beliefs – or cognitive assumptions about what is true – as the driving force of attitude formation and expression. Alternative approaches, while acknowledging that beliefs matter, place a more central emphasis on the role of affect or emotion.

One well-developed approach to the interaction of emotions and factual information in attitude formation has been developed by Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh (1989; 1990; Also see Anderson and Hubert, 1963; Lodge Steenbergen and Brau, 1995; Sanbonmatsu and Fazio, 1990). According to this model of information processing (known alternately as the “impression driven” or “on-line” model), individuals make political evaluations at the moment information is presented, storing their affective impressions in memory and then “‘forgetting’ the actual pieces of evidence that contributed to the evaluation” (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh, 1989: 401).⁷ Affective judgements – rather than factual information – about particular individuals, groups, or issues are mentally stored in a running tally that is updated when new information is encountered. It is these emotional tallies that are retrieved into short-term memory when citizens encounter new information and/or make decisions about the person, group, or issue in question.

The “on-line model” differs from both the informed citizen and heuristic model in two important respects. First, it suggests that findings of generally low recognition and recall of political facts tell us little about people’s exposure to or use of political information. Citizens may have little memory of such facts, yet have used them to develop their attitudes. For example, I may

⁷ The theory is ambiguous on whether the factual information is actually forgotten or is simply stored but no longer relevant or easily accessible. The central point, however, is that the factual information itself is not consciously used in decision making.

be able to tell you I disapprove of the job the president is doing, and have based that opinion on a wealth of factual information, but be unable to recall what those specific facts are. Second, it suggests that people's political decisions are driven by affective rather than cognitive schema – citizens come to political judgement about many issues through visceral emotions rather than deliberation and thought. In this model, political sophistication is defined as the speed and efficiency with which citizens can process factual information into affective tallies. At best, tests of factual knowledge are indicators of one's cognitive processing ability, rather than substantively important pieces of information that are called up for active use in forming and expressing political opinions.

Emotions have also been found to play a role in heuristic decision making. One example is the “likability heuristic” (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Carmines and Kuklinski, 1990; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991). As the name implies, this model assumes that citizens use short cuts in making political decisions. However, these short cuts are driven by how one *feels* about the issue, person, or group in question. In the version of this model developed by Brady and Sniderman (1985) and Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991), citizens infer stands to individuals and groups by attributing their own views to individuals and groups they like, and attributing opposing views to those they dislike. For example, if I am pro-gun control, and like Bill Clinton, then I assume he is pro-gun control as well. Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) also assume that affect (likability) drives decision making, but argue that one's feelings towards the individual or group, coupled with beliefs about where they stand, cues citizens as to where they themselves stand on the issue in question. For example, if I like Bill Clinton, and I believe he supports gun control, then I decide that I, too, must support gun control. While the direction of causality is important, the point here is that both models see affect, rather than beliefs or knowledge, as the mainspring of attitude

formation and change.

Recently, Lodge and Taber (1996) have further developed the “on-line” model, combining it with the concepts of *hot cognitions* and heuristic decision-making to develop a theory of motivated political reasoning. According to this theory, *all* social information is affectively charged at the moment the information is encountered, and this “affective tag” is stored directly with the concept in long term memory (p. 2). These hot cognitions (Abelson, 1963) are then updated and revised in the face of new information through the on-line process discussed earlier. Finally, when asked (implicitly or explicitly) to evaluate a political object, people will use the “how-do-I-feel” heuristic (Clore and Isbell, 1996) by moving the affective tally into working memory and using the resulting feelings to guide their response, with negative net tallies producing a negative judgement and positive net tallies producing a positive judgement.

Taken as whole, this research clearly shows that emotions play important, multiple roles in political information processing. They can create moods that affect one’s motivation to attend to or avoid politics, thus affecting the likelihood of learning political facts (Marcus et al., 1996: 52). They can interact with knowledge and beliefs, affecting the way information is perceived, stored, and used (Carmines and Kuklinski, 1990; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989; 1990; Lodge and Taber, 1996). And they can substitute for factual information in the formation and expression of political attitudes (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Lodge and Taber, 1996; Marcus, et al., 1996: 47-51; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991).

What is also clear, is that the specific role played by emotions (and factual knowledge) is context dependent. Lodge, McGraw and Stroh (1989; 1990) found that when experimental conditions encouraged forming *immediate* impressions (for example, when subjects are told, before being given information about candidates, that they will be asked to evaluate them) political

“sophisticates” (significantly, defined as those scoring highest on a test of factual knowledge) are most likely to process new information “on-line.” But when the experimental conditions are altered (for example, when subjects are not told they will be asked to make an evaluation until after information is presented) or when the topic being evaluated is relatively complex (for example, a policy issue rather than a candidate), political sophisticates are the most likely to draw on information that is stored in memory. And Lodge and Taber (1996) suggest that the “how-do-I-feel” heuristic is most likely to be employed under certain conditions, including those where affective judgement is called for, where the consequences of being wrong are minor, where objective information is not readily available, where disconfirming evidence is not highlighted, and where one is distracted or under time pressure (p. 3).

More research is needed on the conditions under which various information-processing strategies are employed, and the specific roles of factual information, beliefs, and emotions in these various strategies. In addition, more research is needed on the impact of different information processing strategies on the *quality* of resulting opinions and behaviors. While research suggests that misinformation and/or certain heuristics can lead to poor decisions, there is little research on the potentially negative consequences of emotion-driven decision making.

In addition to these individual-based theories that potentially mitigate the low and varied levels of knowledge among citizens, there are also several more systemic, collective theories which, if correct, would also suggest that concerns about a poorly and inequitably informed citizenry are misplaced. It is possible that, while there are indisputable gaps in knowledge, these gaps mask a more equitable distribution among the most informed, active citizens. Drawing on the logic of elite theories of democracy, perhaps a focus on the general public, while well-intentioned, is overly idealistic. According to this argument, in the real world of liberal representative democracy, meaningful civic

engagement is limited – by choice or necessity – to a relatively small percentage of citizens. These "watchdogs" keep government honest, and, if necessary, sound the periodic alarms that mobilize less engaged citizens to action.

There is evidence in defense of this notion of limited democracy. For example, voters are more informed than non-voters, the former averaging 25.4 correct answers on the 1989 index of knowledge as compared to 19.3 for the latter. Strong partisans are also more informed than true independents, averaging 24.1 and 21.4 respectively. Similar patterns are found using the 1988 data: voters were more informed than non-voters (12.2 correct answers to 7.1) and strong partisans were more informed than independents (11.7 to 7.2). However, these findings conceal important differences among groups whose political views are likely to differ. For example, while partisans are more informed than non-partisans, strong Republicans are significantly more informed (26.1 in the 1989 survey and 13.3 in the 1988 survey) than are strong Democrats (22.7 and 10.3). Further, voters and partisans are not random subsets of the general population: the very groups most likely to be politically uninformed are often the most likely to be underrepresented among these more activist citizens. Finally, politics in the United States extends well beyond partisan politics and voting in periodic elections.

A more direct test of the elite model is to examine the demographic makeup of the most informed segment of society. If women, blacks, the poor, and the young are fairly represented within this "guardian class," then discrepancies in the larger population, while perhaps still a matter of concern, become less serious. A comparison of the demographic makeup of the population to that of the most informed fifth of the population strongly suggests that this is not the case, however. For example, women (who constitute over half the population) make up only 29 percent of this information elite. African Americans, about 12 percent of the population, make up only 3 percent of this more informed group. Low income citizens, well over 30 percent of the population, make up only 16 percent

of the “information rich.” And so on. The under representation of women, blacks, the poor, the young, and their various combinations, coupled with the overrepresentation of men, whites, the affluent, and older citizens is profound, rivaling the demographic distortions found in comparisons of the general public with elected officials. Thus, to the extent that the real world of politics occurs in the exchanges between elected officials, administrative officials, and a small but informed elite citizenry, this conversation is one that mutes the voices of a large segment of the American public.

Alternative readings of the state civic life have attempted to address the normative and empirical shortcomings of elite democracy. One such approach is to distinguish aggregate from individual public opinion. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, echoing and refining the view first expressed by Aristotle, describe the process by which a polity can move from "individual ignorance to collective wisdom":

...at any given moment an individual has real policy preferences, based on underlying needs and values and on beliefs held at the moment. Furthermore, over a period of time, each individual has a central tendency of opinion, which might be called a "true" or *long-term preference*, and which can be ascertained by averaging the opinions expressed by the *same individual* at several different times. If the individual's opinions fluctuate randomly around the same central tendency for a sustained period of time, his or her true long-term preferences will be stable and ascertainable, despite observed momentary fluctuations in opinion.

If this picture of individuals' opinions is correct, then at any given moment the public as a whole also has real *collective* policy preferences, as defined by any of various aggregation rules.... Moreover--and this is the key point--at any given moment, the random deviations of individuals from their long-term opinions may well cancel out over a large sample, so that a poll or survey can accurately measure collective preferences as defined in terms of the true or long-term preferences of many individual citizens. (1992: p. 16)

Thus, collective public opinion (and, by extension, collective political participation) can be rational even if much of the individual opinion or behavior underlying it is not, because the random views of uninformed citizens cancel each other out, leaving the true choices of more informed citizens to carry the day.

While collective rationality is evocative of John Stuart Mill's argument that truth is produced from its "collision with error," in fact it makes no such claims. Rather, it argues that *error is eliminated in its collision with error*. A polity may have little to fear from uninformed mass opinion or participation, but only because the opinions and behaviors of most of the masses are inconsequential. Such a notion is not inevitably elitist, in that it is possible that most Americans do make informed judgments. But the low levels of political knowledge which motivate scholars like Page and Shapiro to come to democracy's rescue also suggests that many Americans do not make informed decisions. Further, as in all theories that depend upon the few to speak for the many, the representativeness of the voices that emerge out of the din produced by the collision of ignorance is critical (Miller, 1986). Thus, proponents of collective rationality are forced to argue, implicitly, that "all those individuals whose interests are indisputably included in those of other individuals may be struck off without inconvenience," an argument no more compelling today than it was when James Mill made it in the early 19th Century.

A final attempt to reconcile low and inequitable levels of knowledge with democratic politics has been to argue that while most Americans are generally under informed, citizens are "information specialists," knowing more about those issues that matter most to them. In this "pluralist" model, citizens are able to engage the political system effectively on the issues they know and care about, producing a collective politics that is a reasonable approximation of individual and group interests. The evidence belies this vision, however. Despite some evidence of specialization, knowledge about different areas of national politics appears to be highly inter-correlated: put simply, citizens who are more informed about one area of politics (for example, foreign affairs) are generally more likely to be informed about other areas of politics (for example, domestic politics, institutions and processes,

and/or political actors) (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; 1996: 138-151; Zaller, 1986).⁸

In sum, there is a good deal of theorizing and research suggesting that effective democracy is possible even if citizens are not fully informed about the details of politics and policy. However, all of these theories still require some non-trivial level of individual and/or collective knowledge, all of them concede (or imply) that the quality of decisions improves as the amount of information increases, and none of them adequately addresses the implications of systematic differences in knowledge among different segments of the population.

Summary and Conclusion: Informing the Public's Discretion

The American political system is an enigma. It celebrates the individual while longing for a sense of community. It allows almost unlimited participation while doing little to facilitate it. It combines "thick" civic responsibilities with "thin" civic identities. It has emerged as the world's leading democracy, but is partly designed to limit the impact of the *vox populi*. And, perhaps most fundamentally, it is built upon both an abiding faith in and a deep-seated suspicion of the public. In his later years, Thomas Jefferson often lamented the lack of trust most of his contemporaries had in the general public. While he agreed that people often fell short of the civic ideal, he argued that the political system, by minimizing what was expected of citizens, guaranteed the nature of their public behavior: "We think one side of this experiment has been long enough tried, and proved not to promote the good of the many; and that the other has not been fairly and sufficiently tried" (Jefferson, 1939: p.

⁸ There is some evidence, however, that certain groups (e.g., blacks) are more likely to be informed about issues and figures that connect more directly to them, and that knowledge of local politics is distinct from that of national politics. Even in these cases, however, there are sizable inter-correlations across issue-domains. Most research on the structure of knowledge tends to focus on broad measures of knowledge-domains, however, and it remains an open question as to whether or not some citizens specialize in very specific kinds of political information.

44).

I share Jefferson's concern about the lack of trust in the people themselves, a suspicion that, in many respects, is as prevalent today as it was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I also share his beliefs that an *informed* citizenry is the only true repository of the public will; that, given the incentive, education, and opportunity, the general public is capable of exercising political power in an enlightened way; and that the context in which citizens operate – the social, political, and economic structure – is a critical factor in determining whether or not they are motivated and capable.

Ironically, the belief that most citizens simply cannot or will not acquire sufficient political knowledge drives the arguments of *both* the proponents and critics of contemporary democracy (this tension is also seen in the period, described in The Good Citizen, during which the informed citizen model emerged). It is my view, however, that attempts to salvage democratic theory and practice by downplaying the responsibilities of citizens or the importance of an informed public do an injustice to the very values they seek to defend. Regardless of what conception of democracy one holds – whether thin or thick, direct or indirect – information is necessary for citizens to function effectively. Further, the real world of American politics makes a surprisingly large number of demands on citizens. While it is impossible to identify *the* specific pieces of information necessary for assuring good citizenship within this context, clearly some information is important, and all other things being equal, more information is better than less information. Arguments that it is irrational for citizens to become politically informed are based on *economic* models of rational choice, when *civic* models are normatively and empirically more appropriate. And while it is certainly true that we all take advantage of heuristics that reduce the amount of information necessary for making political decisions, these short cuts themselves require a nontrivial amount of knowledge to be used effectively.

Throughout this paper I have attempted to provide empirical support for the Jeffersonian vision

of the importance and possibility of an informed citizenry, while at the same time confronting those places where the American public falls short of this vision. This overview suggests the following.

First, it is nearly meaningless to talk about how much "the public" as an entity knows about politics. While political knowledge levels are, in many instances, depressingly low, they are high enough among some segments of the population, and on some topics, to foster optimism about democratic possibilities. More than a small fraction of the public is reasonably well informed about politics – informed enough to meet high standards of good citizenship. Many of the basic institutions and procedures of government are known to half or more of the public, as are the relative positions of the parties on many major issues of the day. Further, knowledge levels are too high for us to accept the view, offered by some proponents of the rational choice school, that acquiring and retaining information is fundamentally irrational.⁹ Indeed, given their socioeconomic and educational status, the people who are politically well informed are precisely the kind we would expect to engage in rational behavior. None of this discounts the need for increasing the level of public knowledge, nor ignores the fact that large numbers of American citizens are woefully under informed and that overall levels of knowledge are modest at best. Nor is it to downplay the often dramatic disparities in knowledge found between the most and least informed citizens, disparities that rival those found in the distribution of income and wealth in the United States. Rather it demonstrates that enough citizens are able to obtain and retain information in the current political environment – an environment that is only partially supportive of this task – to believe that a more fully and equally informed public is possible.

Second, despite the numerous political, economic, and social changes that have occurred since World War II, overall political knowledge levels in the United States are about the same today as they

⁹ Morris Fiorina (1990) offers a thoughtful essay on the dilemma this poses to the rational choice school.

were 40-to-50 years ago. This stability presents the greatest challenge to the notion that political knowledge levels are strongly affected by structural and contextual conditions. At a minimum it underscores how difficult raising aggregate levels of knowledge may be, and could be construed as evidence of the fundamental intransigence of political ignorance. However, it is important to keep in mind that many of the changes occurring over the past half century seem as likely to depress as increase citizens' civic knowledge. For example, while educational attainment levels in the population have risen, increasing the potential for political knowledge, other changes have clearly depressed levels of public interest and engagement in politics among citizens of all educational levels. Thus, I conclude that the stability in political knowledge is the result of offsetting forces. Further, while long-term trends show little change in what citizens know, short-term patterns suggest that, given the right mix of ability, opportunity, and motivation, citizens are capable of significant political learning. This, coupled with the strong and significant relationship between socioeconomic status, the political and information environment, and political knowledge levels, strongly suggests the potential for improvement.

Third, most citizens are political generalists, rather than specialists, meaning that those who are knowledgeable about one aspect of politics tend to be knowledgeable about others. Several exceptions to this general pattern exist, most notably that women, blacks, and partisans are relatively more informed about gender, race, and party issues, respectively, than they are about other political topics, and that knowledge of local politics is somewhat distinct from knowledge of state or national government. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that different socioeconomic groups are drawn to politics through a variety of distinct pathways, but that in the long run, differences in the ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn about *politics in general* outweigh differences in the ability,

opportunity, and motivation to learn about *specific domains of politics*. At the individual level this means that someone who has the resources to learn about one aspect of politics is also likely to have the resources to learn about other aspects of politics. At the aggregate level this means that rather than a pluralist information society in which different groups and classes bring different information to the marketplace of ideas, political information of all kinds tends to be concentrated in the same hands.

A fourth conclusion follows from the third. Inequality in citizen knowledge is not simply an idiosyncratic characteristic of individuals. Groups of citizens vary in knowledge in ways that mirror their standings in the social, political, and economic world, calling into question the fundamental democratic principle of equality among citizens. In particular, women, African-Americans, the poor, and the young tend to be substantially less knowledgeable about politics than are men, whites, the affluent, and older citizens. Much of the knowledge gap between these groups persists even when relevant personal characteristics such as education or occupation are taken into account, pointing to a legacy of the long-term exclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged citizens from many aspects of the public sphere. These systematic differences in political knowledge have serious implications for the ability of some groups to perceive and act on their self interest or their notion of the public interest. If Jefferson is right that the people themselves are the best protectors of their own interests, then many groups are hindered in this effort by their relative lack of political information.

Fifth, being politically informed is the result of many factors. As in most spheres of life, motivation is important in learning about politics. Motivation increases with age, education, social status, a sense of efficacy, and a belief that the political world is directly relevant to the individual. But motivation is only one influence. Individuals with higher levels of cognitive skill and relevant contextual knowledge will tend to learn much more about politics than will others. Cognitive skill and contextual knowledge fall under the rubric of "ability," and are strongly related to one's level of formal

education. Indeed, education is the strongest single predictor of political knowledge. Yet while personal factors such as ability or motivation strongly affect knowledge levels, the persistence of, for example, the gender gap in knowledge suggests that these characteristics are themselves greatly influenced by cultural and structural factors, and are not solely the result of autonomous personal choices. Moreover, a key element for political learning is the opportunity to do so, which is neither as constant nor as vast as commonly believed. Where adequate political information is available, in a form easily comprehended, citizens learn more. Indeed, the relationship between availability of information and citizen knowledge levels is so strong in certain situations that the nature of the information environment is the most important predictor of knowledge, surpassing education and interest. Overall, while it is true that individuals with the greatest cognitive skills are likely to learn the most about politics, the type of political information needed to function effectively as a citizen is not especially complex and is well within the reach of individuals with modest cognitive ability – given the motivation and opportunity to do so. With all due respect to Albert Einstein, politics is not harder than physics!

Finally and perhaps most important, informed citizens are demonstrably better citizens, as judged by the standards of democratic theory and practice underpinning the American system. They are more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their own attitudes, and more likely to support democratic norms such as extending basic civil liberties to members of unpopular groups. Differences between the best and least-informed citizens on all of these dimensions are sizable. The impact of political knowledge is independent of, and thus over and above, that of other factors such as interest in politics and political efficacy.

The American political system was designed to balance a belief in the public's civic authority

with doubts about the public's civic competence. The negative consequences of uninformed input were originally controlled through legal restrictions on the participation of the public, with the greatest restrictions aimed at particular classes of citizens thought to lack the necessary qualities of good citizenship. The public voice was tempered further through an elaborate system of checks and balances. At the same time, however, the inherent equality of citizens, the importance of civic virtue, and the tradition of participatory democracy were important undercurrents in American political thought. Driven largely by these undercurrents, *de jure* restrictions on political participation have slowly disappeared, and today all citizens are given a great deal of latitude in how, and how much, they participate in the public sphere.

The opportunities for political participation have resulted in a system that can be very responsive to the interests of engaged citizens. However, to take even modest advantage of these opportunities, citizens need a number of political resources. Central among these resources is political information. In a public sphere that is only partially designed to facilitate informed civic input, and a public philosophy that sends mixed messages regarding the importance of such input, there are few assurances that the voice to which government responds is spoken by or for the general public. Many citizens lack the *de facto* ability to participate, especially in more costly but more influential ways. Further, even when they do participate – either directly through the vote or indirectly through opinion polls – low absolute and relative levels of information lower the likelihood that this participation will accurately reflect the individual, group, and collective interests of the public.

Suggestions that the negative consequences of low levels of political information can be offset by an informed elite, collective rationality, heuristic decision-making, and the like underestimate the importance of political information to these very theories. For elites to represent the general public effectively, they must still be accountable to the public. For collective opinions and decisions to

accurately reflect the public interest, either all citizens must be able to discern and articulate their interests, or the portion who can do so must be representative of the larger citizenry. And for citizens to use simplifying strategies in reaching their individual decisions, they must still have enough information to assure that these cues effectively tie their interests to their political behavior. This would be true even if political interests were always consensual or if those with information were representative of those without it. It is all the more important when interests clash and when the disparities in information are closely tied to different conceptions of the public good.

One cannot resolve the paradox of modern democracy by assuming away the importance of an informed public. The fundamental question is not if the American system is democratic, but how democratic it is and for whom. Thus, in the end the paradox of democracy is no paradox at all. For citizens who are the most informed, democracy works much as intended, while for those who are the most uninformed, democracy *is* Madison's tragedy or farce.

The modern world is bewilderingly complex, and mastering the facts relevant to the myriad of issues addressed in national politics is admittedly impossible – Schattschneider is correct in saying that by some absolutist standard nobody knows enough to run government. But Schattschneider and others who mirror the thrust of his argument draw the wrong conclusion from this "fact." Being informed is not an either/or proposition, *it is a more or less proposition*. True, the American political system is well-insulated from many of the negative effects of non-participation and of participation by citizens who are poorly informed. The political system does not collapse when a president is elected with less than half the popular vote and less than a quarter of the eligible vote. Nor does it go into crisis when a majority of citizens express an opinion regarding aid to the Contras without knowing where Nicaragua is relative to the United States or who the Contras are. But none of this suggests that the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values – decisions about who gets what, where,

when, and how – would not be significantly altered if more citizens participated in more informed ways. Finally, it is true that many citizens show remarkable resourcefulness in using partial, often meager information to extrapolate to opinions and decisions that, on the face of it, would appear to require more complex deliberation. But this ability still requires *some* information, and it in no way assures that the decisions made are satisfactory for the individual or the polity, or that such decisions would not be improved by more information.

I am *not* arguing that contemporary democracy requires that all citizens be expert on all facets of national politics, but I do suggest that the more citizens are passingly informed about the issues of the day, the behavior of political leaders, and the rules under which they operate, the better off they are, the better off *we* are. Similarly, I acknowledge that even democracies require "information elites"-experts who are especially informed about particular issues and to whom the rest of the citizenry turns for advice or leadership. But the greater the range of these experts, and the greater the percentage of the general public that is able to fulfill these roles (even as intermediaries in the flow of information), the more democratic that flow of information is likely to be.

During a public lecture on astronomy in which he described the earth's orbit around the sun, Bertrand Russell was challenged by an elderly woman in the audience who exclaimed, "What you told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." Russell, thinking he had the woman trapped by her own logic, asked, "But what is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," was the woman's response, "But it's turtles all the way down!"¹⁰ In some ways this exchange captures the shortcoming of arguments intended to demonstrate that democracy can operate without benefit of citizens who meet civic

¹⁰ The story, which is probably apocryphal, has been retold in several fashions. This version is found in Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988).

requisites such as knowledge of politics. Competent civic decision making may rest "on the backs" of elites or some simple heuristic short-cuts. But on what do these elites rest? These heuristics? To argue it is "elites all the way down" is to define away the meaning of even limited democracy. And to suggest it is "heuristics all the way down" is to destroy their conceptual utility – that they are information short-cuts. In the end one cannot use these models to argue that democracy can operate effectively without an informed public because, ultimately, democracy rests on the backs of its citizens.