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An Overview of the State of Citizens' Knowledge About Politics

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Abstract

In a letter to W. T. Barry, James Madison wrote that "a popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both." Much like Madison's words to Barry, the title of this book *Communicating Politics: Engaging the Public in Democratic Life* is based on two principal assumptions: that an informed public is crucial to democracy; and that the key to assuring such a public is the availability of engaging yet informative and accessible campaign communication. While many of the studies and essays contained in this volume are devoted to assessing, and making recommendations for improving, the current state of campaign communication, this chapter provides an overview of what Americans know about politics and why it matters. The information presented here draws heavily from my previous work in this area (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The literature on political knowledge provides fairly compelling evidence for five characterizations regarding what Americans know: (1) the average American is *poorly informed* but not *uninformed*; (2) aggregate levels of political knowledge have remained relatively stable over the past 50 years; (3) Americans appear to be slightly less informed about politics than are citizens of other comparable nations; (4) "average" levels of knowledge mask important differences across groups; and (5) knowledge is tied to many attributes of "good" citizenship.

Disciplines

Social Influence and Political Communication

An Overview of the State of Citizens' Knowledge About Politics

In a letter to W. T. Barry, James Madison wrote that “a popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.” Much like Madison’s words to Barry, the title of this book—“Communicating Politics: Engaging the Public in Democratic Life”—is based on two principal assumptions: that an informed public is crucial to democracy; and that the key to assuring such a public is the availability of engaging yet informative and accessible campaign communication. While many of the studies and essays contained in this volume are devoted to assessing, and making recommendations for improving, the current state of campaign communication, this chapter provides an overview of what Americans know about politics and why it matters. The information presented here draws heavily from my previous work in this area (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The literature on political knowledge provides fairly compelling evidence for five characterizations regarding what Americans know: (1) the average American is *poorly informed* but not *uninformed*; (2) aggregate levels of political knowledge have remained relatively stable over the past 50 years; (3) Americans appear to be slightly less informed about politics than are citizens of other comparable nations; (4) “average” levels of knowledge mask important differences across groups; and (5) knowledge is tied to many attributes of “good” citizenship.

The Average American Is Poorly Informed, but Not Uninformed

Over 50 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, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964, 1975; 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 entitled “That’s U.S. Senator.” The article noted:

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. (p. A4)

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, 1990, p. 3). 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% of a random sample of likely voters knew that the Bush’s family dog was named Millie and 89% knew that Murphy Brown was the TV character criticized by Dan Quayle, only 15% knew that both candidates favored the death penalty and only 5% 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 President George Herbert Walker 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 Me 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. This list, of course, could go 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), as well as other pieces of information.

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 senator. 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% 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 50 years ago (Bennett, 1988, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 105–134; Neuman, 1986, pp. 14–17; Smith, 1989, pp. 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 “sound-bite” 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 are 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% of those surveyed saw the Democratic Party as more liberal on federal aid to minorities than the Republican Party, while

about the same percentage 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% of those surveyed saw the Democrats as the more liberal party on aid to minorities, while only 7 to 11% saw the Republican Party as the more liberal. And 50 to 56% saw the Democrats as more liberal on school desegregation, compared to only 7 to 9% 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% 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 '72 and '76 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, as Klein (1984) notes, 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. (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% in 1980 and 1984, while the percentage seeing the Republicans as the more liberal party held about constant at 10%.

*Americans Appear to Be Slightly Less Informed About Politics
Than 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 nuclear 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, Bennett, Bennett, and Flickenger (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 10-item scale measuring knowledge of the U.S. Congress, compared to Great Britains, who averaged over 6 correct out of 10 questions about their parliament, and Canadians, who averaged a remarkable 9.8 correct out of 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% for Americans, 99% for the French, 96% for the British, 95% for West Germans, and 89% 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* (1963) 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 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 sixth out of the nine countries included in the survey. More specifically, Americans were above average in locating places relatively close to them (e.g., 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 (such as 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 the 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% correct. But the most informed 30% of the sample averaged better than 7-in-10 correct answers, while the least informed 30% 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 Michael Schudson (1998) does, 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 varies 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 incomes,² 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.

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% while for the 1988 sample it was 5%, 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% correct on the 1989 scale and 76% 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 has remained relatively unchanged over the past 40 years, and the 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, p. 3) 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 & Keeter, 1996; Junn, 1991; Leighley, 1991; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Research also suggests that more-informed citizens are more likely to have opinions about the pressing issues of the day (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Krosnick & Milburn, 1990), are more likely to hold stable opinions over time (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Erikson & Knight, 1993; Feldman, 1989), are more likely to hold opinions that are ideologically consistent with each other (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 235–238; McCloskey & Zaller, 1984, pp. 250–251; Neuman, 1986, pp. 64–67; Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1979, p. 154; Zaller, 1986, pp. 10–11), and are less likely to change their opinions in the face of new but tangential or misleading information (Kinder & 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 & Keeter, 1996, p. 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 & 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 & Keeter, 1996, pp. 251–258).

Summary and Conclusion: Informing the Public's Discretion

Not surprisingly, findings such as those summarized above have 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 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 (1990) 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. (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 (1960), 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. (pp. 135–136)

In this view, "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 theory and 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).

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 and practitioners 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. 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 that 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.

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!”⁶ In some ways this exchange captures the shortcoming of arguments intended to demonstrate that democracy can operate without benefit of citizens who meet civic requisites such as knowledge of politics. Competent civic decision making may rest “on the backs” of elites or some simple heuristic shortcuts. 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 shortcuts. 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.

Notes

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.
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.
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.
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).
6. 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).

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