

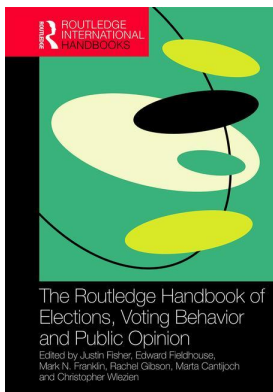
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### Political knowledge

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## 29

## POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

## Measurement, misinformation and turnout

*Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson***Introduction**

This chapter examines a key dimension of public attitudes – political knowledge – its measurement and impact on policy preferences and turnout. Specific attention is given to the role of misinformation – that is, confidently held, but factually incorrect beliefs – and whether misinformation can be corrected. In so doing it casts a wide net over a volume of literature on knowledge and political participation, with an emphasis on the former. Throughout the chapter, attention is given to methodology and measurement, showing how experimental political science in particular, has reshaped the way we approach the study of political knowledge.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on political knowledge – citizens’ factual beliefs about political processes, actors and institutions. I provide a brief review of two “schools” of thought on political knowledge – what I term “traditionalists” and “revisionists” – and how these approaches have influenced the measurement of political knowledge. I show how measurement issues are at the core of some of the more robust findings in the literature and illustrate this with an in-depth look at the literature on the gender gap in political knowledge.

I then turn to a key development in the literature on political knowledge, Kuklinksi et al.’s (2000) concept of misinformation, confidently held, but factually incorrect beliefs. The literature has convincingly demonstrated the consequences of misinformation on policy preferences and vote choice; however, studies of correcting misinformation are fewer in number and with limited evidence of success. The second part of this chapter looks at the consequences of political information for one form of political participation, turnout.

**Political knowledge: measurement, misinformation and corrections**

The study of political knowledge has occupied scholars of political behavior for nearly a century. Understanding political knowledge helps to answer one of the fundamental questions of democratic politics: can citizens participate in political life and what do they need to know in order to do so? Political knowledge has been defined in a variety of ways, commonly as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 10), and alternatively as, “a measure of a citizen’s ability to provide correct answers to a specific set of fact-based questions” (Boudreau and Lupia 2013: 171). Both definitions highlight

the centrality of “objective facts” in measuring and understanding citizens’ political knowledge which has long been taken as given, but has recently come under scrutiny (Shapiro and Bloch Elkon 2008; Gaines et al. 2007). But these two definitions do more than frame the concept; they illustrate an underlying tension or difference in approach to understanding the concept of political knowledge, which has played out in the literature. Two “schools of thought” have developed, what I term “traditionalists” and “revisionists” (see Table 29.1).

The traditionalist school dates back to the early and mid-twentieth century. Within this approach, the idea that “information matters” was a widely accepted norm: citizens need to be politically knowledgeable to execute their democratic duties. The normative thrust of this approach was firmly linked to Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, who wrote:

The democratic citizen is expected to be well-informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards, the voter falls short.

(1954: 308)

Despite rejecting this view as too demanding a set of expectations for the modern citizen (Kuklinski et al. 2000), it nevertheless became an anchor for a generation of research on political knowledge (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). The *key* finding to emerge from this literature was the ignorance of the average (American) voter.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere was the ignorance of the average American more laid bare than in Delli Carpini and Keeter’s (1996) *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, which resurrected scholarly interest in political knowledge and its relationship to political behavior. It also illustrated the normative thrust of the traditional school: political knowledge matters because it helps to inform preferences and behavior based on cognitive, rather than simply emotional or affective engagement. “Political information,” they argued “is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 8).

Drawing on thousands of historical survey questions on political figures, institutions, processes, policies and politics – among their many valuable findings – three warrant detailing briefly. They too, find more evidence documenting Americans as a nation of “know-nothings”: just over half of respondents could answer four (or more) of ten knowledge items correctly. Second, knowledge was unevenly distributed among the public – with white, educated, older males at the top end of the scale. Third, low and uneven knowledge matters for political participation, particularly turnout. Those with higher levels of political knowledge are more likely to turn out to vote, and have a greater sense of efficacy and interest in politics. Consequently, how politicians view and respond to public opinion may be skewed toward the politically knowledgeable at the expense of the less informed.

The traditionalist approach stands in contrast to the “revisionist” school in understanding how citizens participate in political life and what they need to know in order to do so. Table 29.1 draws out the key distinctions between the two approaches. Here, scholars have taken a less critical view of the average citizen: few citizens pay close attention to politics, they have different interests in and appetites for political information (Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). That few citizens meet the standards of democratic citizenship is less worrying for revisionists because citizens can use heuristics or shortcuts available to them (e.g., partisan or elite cues) to help inform preferences (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). How citizens process available information is of more importance than the absolute level of knowledge they have (Bartels 1996).

Table 29.1 Two schools of thought on political knowledge

	<i>Traditionalists</i>	<i>Revisionists</i>
Normative position	Citizens should be factually informed	Low levels of political knowledge are not worrisome for democratic government or responsiveness
Argument	Citizens should be well-informed; facts are important	Citizens use heuristics or shortcuts to overcome lack of knowledge
Citizens have	Knowledge; facts are used to inform judgments and policy preferences	Rationality; can process information by reasoning
Key works	Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954); Converse (1964); Delli-Carpini and Keeter (1996); Althaus (1998)	Popkin (1991); Page and Shapiro (1992); Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991); Lupia and McCubbins (1998)
Does public opinion reflect public's interests/preferences?	No – political knowledge is not evenly distributed among the public but concentrated in the better educated and politically interested	Yes – errors are random so aggregating opinion cancels out opposing preferences
Criticism/weakness	Even the well-informed fall short of normative expectations; “facts” can be interpreted differently	Cues are not neutral; subject to framing

At the individual level, shortcuts allow citizens to arrive at “true” preferences even if they start from low levels of knowledge. Rational and “reasoning” citizens simply make use of the information available to them. Moreover, revisionists worry less about the unequal distribution of knowledge in the population and its consequences for meaningful public opinion, because the process of aggregating (uninformed) individual preferences produces meaningful collective preferences. Any errors in preference formation at the individual level are assumed to be random and therefore cancel each other out in the aggregate (Bartels 1996).

A key question arising then is how would collective preferences change – if at all – if citizens were fully informed? Are low knowledge levels consequential for collective public opinion? The evidence suggests there are indeed consequences of poorly informed publics. Althaus (1998) asks, is there evidence of an “information effect” or “bias in the shape of collective opinion caused by the low levels *and* [emphasis added] uneven social distribution of political knowledge in a population” (1998: 545). Using data from the American National Election Study (ANES), he simulates fully-informed preferences in four policy issue areas: fiscal, foreign policy, social policy and operative. He finds real and sizeable changes – roughly 7 percent on average – in collective policy preferences between the simulated fully-informed and actual knowledge levels. One consequence of an uneven distribution of knowledge is that the US public looks more conservative on some issues and more progressive on others.

Using simulated data from the ANES as well as an experimental design, Gilens (2001) compares the macro policy preferences of fully-informed respondents with and without policy-specific information. Using both statistical imputation of preferences and an experimental design to help tease out whether the manipulation of information affects preferences, Gilens shows that policy-specific information matters. Respondents who perform well on general political knowledge items, fall short on policy-specific knowledge, which affects their preferences to a greater extent than general political information. In other words “what separates actual political

preferences from hypothetical ‘enlightened preferences’ is due to ignorance of specific policy-relevant facts, not a lack of general political knowledge or the cognitive skills or orientations that measures of general political information reflect” (Gilens 2001: 380). He also shows that policy-specific information has a stronger influence on those with high levels of political knowledge. For those who “don’t know much,” the addition of policy-specific information does not shift their preferences much; but for those who “know a lot” already, the addition of policy-specific information has a substantial effect on the preferences.

Shifting focus to vote choice in US Presidential elections from 1972–92, Bartels’ (1996) evidence finds little support for the revisionist claim that at the micro-level uninformed voters can use heuristics accurately, and at the macro-level errors in preference formation cancel each other out. Moreover, the deviations are not random but directed. Substantively, he claims that “the deviations [from fully informed voting] display two clear and politically consequential patterns: relatively uninformed voters are more likely, other things being equal, to support incumbents and Democrats” (Bartels 1996: 218).

Taken together these studies do not provide sufficient evidence to reject revisionists’ claims, although they do challenge them. In the section below, I show how the study of “misinformation” and attempts to correct it have changed the course of study on political knowledge. But questions remain as to how robust these findings are for different political contexts. Notwithstanding Gilens’ (2001) experimental approach, future work could adopt experimental designs to better tease out the mechanisms by which individual preferences do/do not reflect collective ones. Future work exploring the impact of information on preferences in other contexts would also help to determine the robustness of these findings: how do these processes work in contexts with better/worse information environments, in different types of political systems or in emerging democracies?

### ***Measuring political knowledge***

Political knowledge has become, as Mondak (2001: 238) notes, “a cornerstone construct in research on political behavior”; however, measuring political knowledge remains subject to debate. In this section, I outline debates around content, construct and item validity and how this has shaped the political knowledge research agenda going forward.

What does it mean for a citizen to be politically knowledgeable? Barber (1973) argued that “citizens need to know what government *is* and *does*” (cited in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 63); in other words, to be politically knowledgeable was to know general “facts” of political life.<sup>2</sup> Historically, this has meant being able to answer questions on political institutions; for example, the number of Supreme Court justices or which party controls the lower chamber or about political people; for example, identifying the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Britain, Charles de Gaulle or Ruth Bader Ginsburg. More recent measures have attempted to move away from people and institutions to include both domestic and international policy and politics and social and political history, but the emphasis on knowing “the facts” has persisted.

Correct answers to fact-based knowledge items are then summed and the resulting knowledge scales used, most commonly, as predictors of political behavior. This approach was exemplified by work by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993), who argued that knowledge was a uni-dimensional concept and can be measured with a handful of items with relative accuracy. Using five items from the large battery in the US National Election Study, they show that “carefully chosen items can measure political knowledge with an acceptable level of reliability and validity” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993: 1202).

There are three critiques of the traditional summative knowledge scales approach that, with some variation, has become the standard for measuring political knowledge. The first challenge relates to content and construct validity; a second relates to item validity; and a third challenge comes from experimental approaches which show the limitations of survey response in observational data.

How (content) valid are knowledge scales or do they measure what they intend to? In other words, do fact-based measures of political knowledge capture citizens' ability to understand the broad tenets and workings of the political system, the choices on offer and the potential outcomes of each choice? Lupia's (2006) critique asserts that a form of elitism underpins standard measures of political knowledge and does little to help citizens translate or make use of information in determining their preferences. He argues that it remains unclear how factual information about the number of legislators helps them to make choices among candidates, parties or policies.

The construct validity of standard knowledge scales has also been challenged. First, traditional knowledge scales may measure other properties than factual knowledge. Mondak (1999) shows evidence that traditional knowledge scales also measure underlying personality traits: self-confidence, competitiveness and propensity to take risks. Second, the distribution of "Don't know" and incorrect items, which are usually collapsed into a single category, are substantively different. Survey respondents who offer incorrect responses may have partial information – they are not inattentive to politics – but may be missing key bits of information or have confused information in answering the item. But incorrect responses have historically been treated the same as "Don't know" responses, introducing imprecision in measurement.

"Don't know" response options have been the subject of much study. Mondak's (1999: 79) contribution was to advise scholars to "discourage 'Don't knows,' provide them randomly to help account for guessing, or test experimentally so the consequences of encouraging and discouraging DKs could be assessed in head-to-head tests." Miller and Orr's (2008) experimental analysis of encouraging, discouraging and omitting "Don't knows" has led them to recommend removing the DK option from knowledge items altogether. They show that eliminating the DK option "yielded higher estimates of knowledge, both on a per-item and aggregate basis for political and general knowledge" (Miller and Orr 2008: 775). Because DK options conceal information, they reveal less about citizens' political knowledge.

Finally, Boudreau and Lupia (2013) show how manipulating the survey context undermines the validity of fact-based knowledge measures, which are affected by:

question wording, variation in respondents' incentives to think before answering, whether respondents feel threatened by unusual aspects of survey interview contexts and personality variations the make some respondents unwilling to give correct answers to survey interviewers even when they are knowledgeable about the subject matter.

*(Boudreau and Lupia 2013: 173)*

For example, Prior (2014) has shown that simply adding visuals to equivalent knowledge items increases the number of correct items.

Prior and Lupia (2008) find that existing measures may underestimate citizens' political knowledge because they neither incentivize respondents to perform well, nor do they helpfully differentiate between quick recall and political learning, the latter of which is deemed fundamental to citizens' ability to acquire political information and use it to inform their preferences. Their study experimented with financial incentives for answering questions correctly and time. Respondents were randomly allocated to one of four groups: a control group where

respondents had one minute to answer each of the 14 knowledge questions; a group where respondents had one minute to answer each question and were incentivized \$1 for each correct answer; a group with 24 hours to answer all questions; and a final group with 24 hours to answer all questions and the \$1 incentive for each correct answer.

The results showed that, compared with the control group, simply incentivizing respondents a small amount of money resulted in an average 11 percent increase in the number of items answered correctly. And importantly, there were differential effects for demographic sub-groups. “Among respondents who report being moderately interested in politics, the monetary incentive increased correct answers by 32%. Men, white Americans, and those between 35–59 years of age also improved their performance disproportionately...” (Prior and Lupia 2008: 175). And similar to the financial incentives, allowing respondents to take extra time to complete the knowledge items resulted in an 18 percent increase in the number correct compared to the control group, and 24 percent for the group with extra time and financial incentives. And here too there were heterogeneous effects: women performed better with extra time. Prior and Lupia show that the gender gap in political knowledge – which I take up in the next section – is exacerbated by traditional measures of political knowledge because women do “not carry as much political information in declarative memory as men, but when given an opportunity to employ their procedural memory their scores increased more on average than those of men” (Prior and Lupia 2008: 177).

What these studies and others like them show is that small but important changes in survey measurement and context produce significant changes in the profile of citizens’ political knowledge. While the evidence and the received wisdom has been that citizens fail to live up to the standard of “informed democratic citizenship,” recent work has shown citizens to be more knowledgeable or have different motivations, incentives or means to becoming politically informed. However, it is not just by experimental methods that our understanding of political knowledge has been advanced. Recent work by Barabas et al. (2014) has shown political knowledge questions to have two key dimensions, a temporal dimension (i.e., when a fact was established) and a topical dimension (i.e., whether information is general or policy-specific). Their framework shows how the questions used to measure knowledge affect observed levels. They show that the mechanisms of becoming informed “operate differently across types of knowledge questions” (Barabas et al. 2014: 851),<sup>3</sup> which has particular implications for gender differences in political knowledge, to which we now turn.

### ***Mind the gender gap? Differences in men’s and women’s political knowledge***

One of the more robust findings in the literature is evidence of a gendered dimension to political knowledge: on balance, men perform better than women on knowledge items in surveys (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Kenski and Jamieson 2000; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Lizotte and Sidman 2009). The standard survey items that ask respondents to identify political leaders, the roles and functions of government or the relative positions of candidates and parties on issues show sizeable and meaningful differences in men’s and women’s knowledge of politics (Dolan 2011).

However, the robustness of the gender gap finding has been called into question on two fronts, both relating to measurement. Kenski and Jamieson (2000), and more explicitly, Mondak and Anderson (2004), first raised the alarm on differences between men’s and women’s political knowledge, arguing that the gap was a result of question format, hypothesizing that men were less likely to opt for “Don’t know” response options than women, effectively inflating the chances of getting items correct and widening the gap between men and women on these items.



They show that women are more likely to use the “Don’t know” option, even when they know as much (or more than men) and, second, removing the “Don’t know” option reduces the gender gap by approximately 50 percent. The gap still persists, but its magnitude is significantly smaller than once thought. These findings are supported by Lizotte and Sidman (2009), who identify women’s risk aversion as the mechanism for being more likely to tick “Don’t know,” and more recently by Ferrin, Fraile and Garcia-Albacete (2015). Using survey experiments, they show that question format – that is, open vs. closed-ended items – do not help explain the gap in political knowledge, but even where treatments do discourage the use of “Don’t know” options, women are more likely than men to say they don’t know.

A second critique comes from feminist scholars who have argued that traditional knowledge items capture masculine dimensions of knowledge or, that women and men may know about different things. The notion of domain-specific knowledge was first raised by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), who found that differences in political knowledge disappear when the knowledge being tested was gender related – that is, on issues relevant to women’s lives and experiences. The importance of testing domain-specific items was taken up by Sanbonmatsu (2003), who demonstrated the link between types of political knowledge and policy preference, showing that different types of knowledge help shape preferences. Sanbonmatsu (2003) tested the hypothesis that knowledge about the level of women’s representation in the US explains support for electing more women to Congress. She found that men were more accurate in their estimates of the percentage of women in the House. Women, however, were more likely to overestimate the percentage of women representatives, which made them less likely to support increasing women’s representation. The consequence, she notes, is that the “gender gap in gender-related political knowledge has consequences for the ability of women to further their group interests” (Sanbonmatsu 2003: 368).

Using data from a Canadian telephone survey, Stolle and Gidengil’s (2010) study explicitly takes up the feminist critique of traditional political knowledge items, by asking respondents questions where experience of government services and provisions and their daily lives intersect – public services and welfare policies. They find evidence that this more “practical” type of knowledge of politics offsets or reverses the gender gap. Importantly, however, they show that while the more expansive measure of knowledge reduced the gap between men and women, it also showed wider gaps in knowledge among women, particularly for low-income, immigrant and older women. Similarly, they make the point that this type of knowledge has political consequences: “the more women know about these matters (benefits and services), the more likely they are to vote for a party of the left, and the less likely they are to be attracted to a party of the right” (Stolle and Gidengil 2010: 103). Dolan (2011), comparing the traditional items to “gender-relevant” items, found that gender differences in knowledge do not emerge when taking into account measures that are “women friendly.” Like previous studies, she finds significant differences between women and men when modeling drivers of traditional political knowledge items; however, these differences disappear when modeling knowledge of gender-relevant items.

### ***What about the misinformed?***

A key development in the literature on political knowledge is the introduction of “misinformation,” which moved scholarly focus from a binary distinction between the politically informed vs. the uninformed, to a third category – *the misinformed* (Kuklinksi et al. 2000).

To be *informed* means, first, that people have factual beliefs and second, that the beliefs be accurate. If people do not hold factual beliefs at all, they are merely *uninformed*.



They are, with respect to the particular matter, in the dark. But if they firmly hold beliefs that happen to be wrong, they are *misinformed* – not just in the dark, but wrongheaded.

(Kuklinski et al. 2000: 792–793)

Their work spawned two decades of research relating to three questions. First, if knowledge matters for policy preferences and outcomes, what happens if the public is misinformed? Second, what happens if people hold policy preferences, they would have not otherwise, if they were better informed? And third, can misinformation or misperceptions be corrected? I take up each of these questions and their findings in turn below.

The argument for a well-informed citizenry is that information or factual beliefs are prerequisites determining policy preferences. If facts are not readily available or citizens cannot use them in informing their preferences, a deficit in democratic functions exists. But the question for Kuklinski et al. (2000) is what happens when misinformed citizens – people who confidently hold incorrect beliefs – use them to form their policy preferences? Their experimental findings show a majority of respondents hold mistaken beliefs on welfare in the US, and those with the most inaccurate views were also the most confident in their beliefs. Importantly, the most confidently “wrongheaded” were also the strongest partisans.

But does giving respondents correct information matter for their policy preferences? Kuklinski et al. (2000) test this in two ways, first in a “soft test” by comparing a group that received the facts on welfare and a group that didn’t. The evidence suggests the facts didn’t change individual respondents’ policy preferences, including strong partisans. A second, “hard test” shows what they call the “limits of resistance” to the facts. Respondents were asked to estimate how much was spent on welfare and how much they prefer to be spent; half were then told how much was spent on welfare. For the group given the facts, neither their initial estimate nor their preferred spending levels mattered on their policy position, but both mattered for the group who didn’t get the facts. They conclude that explicit corrections of information can inform policy preferences, but the effects may not be long-lasting (Kuklinski et al. 2000: 805).

More recently, scholars have taken up the question of whether it is possible to correct misperceptions and the lasting effects thereof (see Table 29.2). Nyhan and Reifler’s (2010) analysis moved the debate forward in two ways. First, they examined the effectiveness of corrections in news stories – a more natural and “less authoritative” manner – and second, by measuring the impact of the correction on the factual belief itself, rather than on policy preferences. Using an experimental design they test for corrections across three policy domains: weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, tax cuts and stem cell research. Their findings help to illustrate why misperceptions persist and are difficult to correct. First, they show that corrections vary depending on the respondent’s degree of ideological commitment – that is, corrections are more likely to change misperceptions where respondents are less partisan. Similar to Kuklinski et al. (2000), they find that corrections do not change misperceptions for the most ideologically committed (i.e., strong partisans), and can in some cases strengthen incorrect factual beliefs. The persistence or “backfire” effect of corrections has also been demonstrated for the politically knowledgeable (Nyhan, Reifler and Ubel 2013).

As shown in Table 29.2, there is limited evidence that corrections work. Research from experimental psychologists looking at the effectiveness of corrections offers insights into the perseverance of misperceptions. Johnson and Seifert (1994) show that misinformation can influence judgments and perceptions regardless of whether the correction was given early or later in a sequence of information. They argue that belief perseverance or the tendency to hold onto one’s beliefs despite conflicting or contradictory information limits the effectiveness of correcting misinformation. However, the news is not all bad. They also find evidence that

Table 29.2 Key studies on correcting misperceptions

Research	Question	Outcome	Data/method	Do corrections work?	Going forward
Kuklinski et al. (2000)	How does misinformation affect policy preferences?	Preferences on welfare policy	Telephone survey experiment	Mixed – receiving factual information doesn't work; need to "hit them between the eyes" with relevant facts	Preferences are hard to shift; use of heuristics may be problematic
Nyhan and Reifler (2010)	Can misperceptions be corrected? (Policy domains: Iraq, WMD and tax cuts)	Respondents' factual beliefs	University students survey experiment using mock-up newspaper articles	No – ideology moderates responses to corrections, strongest partisans report a "backfire effect" where corrections can increase misperceptions	Investigate misperceptions in view of "motivated reasoning"
Nyhan, Reifler and Ubel (2013)	Does aggressive fact checking to correct for misperceptions work? (Affordable Care Act [ACA], death panels)	Policy views on ACA	Opt-in internet panel; survey experiment	Yes – for respondents who had unfavorable views of ACA and Sarah Palin or who had favorable views of Palin, but low knowledge; corrections fail for highly knowledgeable Palin supporters	Difficulty in correcting misperceptions for motivated, knowledgeable respondents
Lawrence and Sides (2014)	What are the consequences of innumeracy in estimating racial composition of US, median income, unemployment and poverty?	Respondents' attitudes towards public policies	Survey experiment	No – for any of the policy domains examined	What are the conditions under which corrections work? What are citizens' motivations for incorporating facts or new information?

rather than just negating previously held views and information, offering an alternative explanation – that is, engaging with the belief and showing another possible alternative – helps to reduce the effect of misperceptions.

Research on misperceptions and corrections has not yet “bottomed out.” There is much more to be done to better understand why some citizens, particularly the politically interested, knowledgeable and ideologically committed, are more immune to corrections. More work needs to be done to understand Nyhan and Reifler’s “backfire” effect. This body of research is all the more timely in the current political climate where evidence of a more polarized and divisive politics is emerging. It also suggests a “dark side” to partisanship – or more committed partisanship – than has previously been identified. Finally, and with reference to the 2016 US presidential election contests, more research is needed to understand the interplay between misinformation and corrections, in the context of digital information environments.

### **The impact of political knowledge on political participation: a brief look at turnout**

In this section, I look at political knowledge as a correlate or predictor of turnout. Similar to section one, this review is motivated by a similar question: do more knowledgeable voters turn out more than their less knowledgeable counterparts? If so, what consequences are there for this disparity? It also looks at the methods used in examining links between knowledge and turnout, highlighting how, with few exceptions, studies that rely on observational data remain plagued by problems of endogeneity and potentially spurious correlations.

What evidence is there for a link between political knowledge and turnout?<sup>4</sup> Political knowledge sits within the resource model of voting, which posits that resources help citizens make sense of complex processes or unfamiliar choices (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). In terms of vote choice, citizens with more knowledge are better able to choose from among the range of politicians, parties or policies that best reflect their preferences. As political knowledge is not randomly distributed, individual-level differences in this resource can produce unequal turnout for citizens with varying levels of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, are the consequences of the inequalities in turnout? Howe’s (2006) study of Canada and the Netherlands shows that, while knowledge levels have fallen in both countries, particularly among the youngest cohorts, there are differential effects on turnout. In Canada, the decline in knowledge has negatively affected turnout, but the same is not true in the Netherlands. Howe attributes this to differences in civic literacy in the two countries, arguing that the same erosion in civic literacy in Canada has not taken place in the Netherlands. Consequently, broader cultural differences may help to explain these divergent findings.

Combining both individual and institutional level factors, Fisher et al. (2008) examine how the proportionality of the electoral system and knowledge affect turnout. They show that citizens with low-level knowledge are less likely to turn out under plurality rule elections; a robust finding controlling for a range of individual and macro-level variables. Finally, Wells et al. (2009) examine how voters’ values and political knowledge affect their understanding of facts related to an initiative. They show differential relationships among political sophisticates.

For high-sophisticates or respondents who knew something about endorsements around the initiative, attitudes towards government regulation are predicted by one’s views of the facts related to the initiative. But for low sophisticates, their values did not distort their views of initiative-related facts.

*(Wells et al. 2009: 965)*

Can the media be effective in moderating the relationship between knowledge and turnout and does the source of information matter? Prior (2005) shows how increased choice of media outlet widens gaps in both political knowledge and turnout. His analysis shows that, as media choices proliferate, citizens can become more selective in where they receive news. For the less motivated who wish to avoid political news altogether, this is rather easy to do. Citizens with access to the internet and who prefer news are more knowledgeable and more likely to turn out. But there is also evidence to indicate that, with wider access to media outlets, those who have preferences for entertainment over news are less knowledgeable and less likely to turn out. In short, the increasing diversity in the media environment isn't a panacea to the political ignorance problem because citizens can select in, and out, of political news.

Lassen (2005) also takes up the question of whether better-informed citizens are more likely to turn out. Exploiting a natural experiment in Denmark, four of fifteen districts were selected for a decentralization experiment whereby a majority of services formerly handled at the municipal level were devolved to the district. He finds a causal effect for being informed on the likelihood to vote in the referendum. However, a potential weakness of Lassen's study is his use of a subjective measure of being informed – that is, whether respondents thought the referendum went “well, medium-well, or bad.” If respondents indicated yes to any of these options, they were considered “informed,” otherwise they were considered not to have an opinion. While there is some evidence that subjective and objective measures of knowledge are correlated, other research has cast doubt on the use of subjective measures.

Studies like Lassen (2005) go some way to addressing the issue of causal identification in studies of knowledge and turnout. Most studies have relied on observational data, reporting correlations rather than identified causal effects. As he notes: “The problem is that information acquisition is endogenous and, therefore, that both the decision to vote and the decision to obtain an education or become informed about political issues can be caused by some third, unobservable factor” (Lassen 2005: 104).

There are fewer examples of experimental approaches in studying the relationship between information and turnout, but a useful example is Larcinese's (2007) instrumental variables approach. Using data from the 1997 British general election, he “instruments political knowledge by using various measures of the information supply to which voters have been exogenously exposed” (Larcinese 2007: 391). Larcinese's analysis usefully differentiates education and information on turnout, the former not a significant predictor, the latter significant across different model specifications controlling for a range of observed factors. Moreover, he finds significant effect sizes: voters with the highest level of knowledge are roughly one-third more likely to turn out than voters at the lowest level.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter shows that, while political knowledge has long been considered a prerequisite for healthy democratic politics, most empirical studies show low levels of political knowledge, with negative consequences for individual and collective policy preferences and political participation. It has also considered the limits of fact-based measures of political knowledge. First, they can be weak on content validity: knowledge of people and institutions captures only a small proportion of what we might consider to be politically relevant knowledge and they are gendered. Second, knowledge items may be measuring other constructs, such as personality or appetite for risk. Third, experimental approaches show the limitations of survey response in observational data.

Acknowledging these limitations is not a call for fact-based approaches to be abandoned – quite the contrary. Moving forward, there are two additional challenges for scholars interested

in political knowledge and its relationship to political behavior. The first relates to content validity and whether fact-based measures remain the best way to measure political knowledge in twenty-first century politics. Do fact-based measures of political knowledge remain fit for purpose? Lupia (2006) posed a similar challenge many years ago, arguing that a form of elitism underpinned the dominant approach. Do current measures conceal more than they reveal about citizens' ability to form preferences, make informed policy choices and understand the political process? Are there alternative measures of political knowledge that may yield more insight, for example, measuring political experience or more practical forms of knowledge (see Stolle and Gidengil 2010) as a companion to a fact-based approach?

Second and related, what role is there for fact-based measures of knowledge given widespread misinformation in political life and discourse? What are the implications for political life when we cannot agree or choose not to agree on the facts? Recent events, such as the rise of Donald Trump in US politics and the UK referendum on membership in the European Union, or "Brexit," have led many a commentator to make the claim politics is now post-fact or post-truth. In other words, if political discourse and debate has largely abandoned the use of evidence and mutually agreed "facts," do current measures of political knowledge help us understand political behavior better? The prevalence and impact of "misinformation" or firmly held but incorrect beliefs will undoubtedly be important in understanding the policy preferences and behavior of citizens and electorates going forward.

### Notes

- 1 See Bartels (1996). Much of the evidence here is limited to the US context but political ignorance is well-documented in other democratic contexts – for example, Grönlund and Milner (2006).
- 2 See Gilens (2001), who documents the importance of policy-specific knowledge. Delli Carpini and Keeter acknowledge in their 1993 article the idea of issue specialists or citizens with domain-specific knowledge and that this may not be highly correlated with general political knowledge.
- 3 Barabas et al. (2014: 851) find that the gender gap is robust: "the shrinking of the knowledge gap between men and women on gender-relevant topics is invariant to differences across the questions."
- 4 There is a separate and substantial literature (see, for example, Franklin 2004 and Blais 2006) that examines aggregate level predictors or turnout: institutional arrangements (e.g., nature of the electoral system – specifically proportional v. majoritarian systems, unicameralism, voting rules and compulsory voting); socio-demographic factors (e.g., education, age, economic growth); and party systems.
- 5 Education is another resource that is highly correlated with political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995), and a separate and substantial literature has documented the relationship between knowledge and turnout at the individual level (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Although highly correlated, education and political knowledge are separate constructs. Education reduces the costs of acquiring political information; consequently, better-educated voters are more likely to be more knowledgeable. As shown above, citizens have to have access to and make use of information that is available to them. Education facilitates that process, but it does not determine it.

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