

has hampered social scientists' ability to compare the development of political efficacy across time, but in every presidential election year in the United States there has been at least one indicator of one of the dimensions of political efficacy in the NES studies (see Table 1). One consistent approach the NES has taken since 1988 is that the response categories for all the questions have been on a five-point scale ranging from agree strongly to disagree strongly. This has increased both the range of the scales measuring political efficacy and our ability to further discriminate between citizens having the highest and lowest levels of political efficacy.

Though the NES studies have been the primary source for our measures of political efficacy, social scientists have used many of these items in contexts outside of national elections in the United States. Sometimes adapted to fit the population under investigation, the items have appeared in studies of other countries, such as China and Russia; in more local contexts in the United States; and even in experimental research. In 1976 the NES itself included three political efficacy items asking respondents how they perceive their local political contexts. Recent research indicates that these adaptations are more than likely reliable and valid, especially with regard to the new internal efficacy scale (see Morrell 2003). This indicates that investigators can utilize these items across research projects and methodologies, thus increasing our cumulative knowledge of this important political concept. Further conceptual and empirical exploration of our measurements of political efficacy is still necessary, especially regarding external efficacy and its various possible dimensions.

Further Reading

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Web Sites

The Web site of the National Election Studies, available at <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nsguide/nsguide.htm>, features a guide to public opinion and electoral behavior, allowing direct access to data about several attitudes regarding politics and the political system.

Michael E. Morrell

Political Knowledge

Political knowledge is the body of information that citizens have regarding political institutions, actors, and developments. Political scientists also have referred to this concept as "citizen knowledge" and "political information." Although

citizens possess knowledge on topics ranging from domestic policy to political geography, for it to exert a meaningful impact on a person's attitudes and behavior it must exist in the person's long-term memory and be available for retrieval. Citizen knowledge typically is measured by survey respondents' ability to recall the correct answer to objective knowledge questions (e.g., "Which party is in control of Congress?").

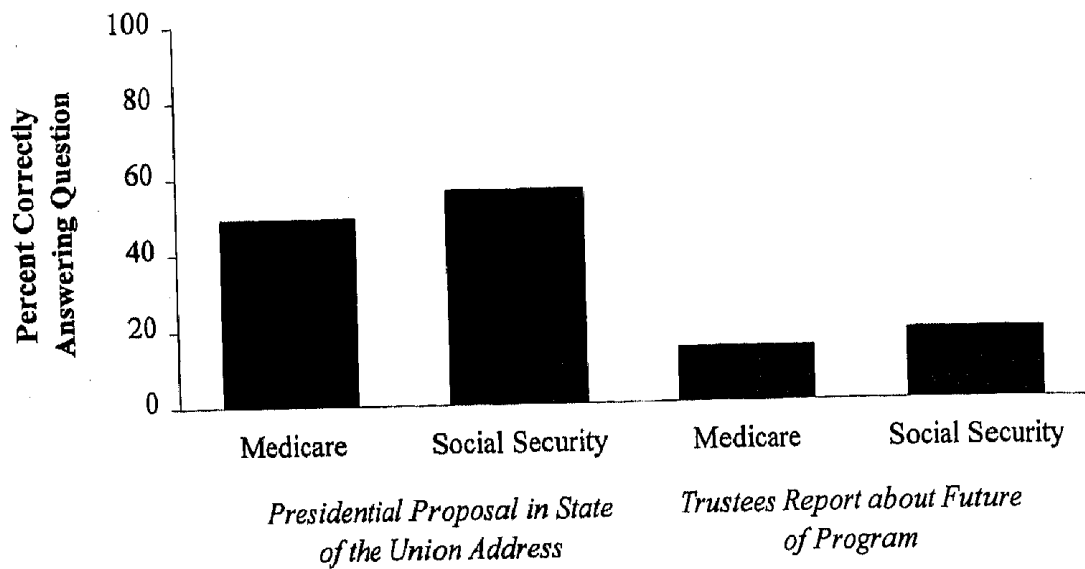
If information is a vital resource for citizens in a democracy, how well equipped is the average American? The answer depends on what question is being asked. According to professors Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, authors of one of the most comprehensive studies of citizen knowledge, there is a wide array of facts about which substantial percentages of the public are aware. Large majorities of citizens know that the U.S. Constitution can be amended; identify visible political actors, such as the president; and demonstrate familiarity with important social indicators like the minimum wage. Overall, however, there is a tremendous amount of variation in levels of citizen knowledge across different topics.

Citizen knowledge about the institutions and processes of politics is higher than knowledge about political actors and policies. This difference is attributed to the fact that the institutions and processes of politics are fairly stable and therefore require less monitoring of the political landscape. Across all categories, however, citizens display greater knowledge about objects that are more visible. For instance, a 1989 poll showed that 89 percent of the public could define a presidential veto; only 20 percent could name two of the First Amendment rights. Similarly, research has shown that nearly all citizens can identify the president of the United States, while far fewer can identify their representative in Congress, leaders of other countries, or even their own state representative.

Figure 1 displays a similar level of variation in citizen's knowledge about two important domestic policies: Medicare and Social Security. These data come from two surveys administered in February and April of 1999 by Princeton Survey Research Associates. In the February survey, citizens were asked if they could identify proposals to reform Medicare and Social Security that had been mentioned in then-President Clinton's *State of the Union* Address. In the April survey, citizens were queried about recent trustees' reports regarding the future financial condition of both of these programs. The bars in Figure 1 show the percentage of people correctly answering these questions. Citizens demonstrate greater levels of knowledge about Social Security and Medicare when the president is talking about them in a visible context (i.e., a nationally televised address). They show much lower levels of knowledge about these same programs when the source of the information are the boards of trustees overseeing them. Other surveys administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates in the late 1990s show that citizens had higher levels of knowledge about visible policies. Seventy-five percent of the public knew about then-President Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy regarding gays in the military while only 25 percent could identify aspects of the settlement between the tobacco industry and the states.

On the whole, Delli Carpini and Keeter's evidence shows that a majority of citizens can provide correct answers to about half the questions in a comprehensive political information survey, with very few citizens at either extreme (i.e., answering all the questions correctly or incorrectly). A few caveats to this general finding are worth noting. First, recent research has shown that the misin-

Figure 1. Citizen Knowledge about Social Security and Medicare, by Source of Information



Source: Princeton Survey Research Associates, February and April 1999.

formed—or those who provide incorrect answers to objective knowledge questions—tend to be the most confident in their answers and therefore the most difficult to correct. In addition to those who are providing incorrect responses to political knowledge questions, a large number of individuals give a “don’t know” response (see *No-Opinion Response Options*). Finally, some scholars insist that measuring levels of general political knowledge is less preferable than measuring the public’s level of knowledge about specific policy problems, such as crime or the environment. These scholars note that people who have high levels of general political knowledge may nonetheless be ignorant of policy-specific information that might alter their judgments about those policies.

Why do some citizens know a lot about politics while others know relatively little? In an attempt to answer this question, many researchers have focused on individual-level factors, such as social and economic status. The dominant conclusion from empirical studies of socioeconomic status is that traditionally disadvantaged groups tend to know less about politics. For example, women, low-income, and younger citizens are less informed than men, wealthy, and older citizens. It is also the case that people with higher levels of education and Caucasians know more about politics. Combinations of these traits prove to be particularly powerful predictors of political knowledge. Using data from the late-1980s, Delli Carpini and Keeter have shown that older males whose family income exceeded \$50,000 correctly answered 66 to 75 percent of the factual questions on two nationally representative surveys. These scores were more than two and a half times higher than those of the least informed group in their sample: black women whose family income was less than \$20,000 per year.

Although they are powerful determinants of knowledge, demographic and social characteristics change slowly if at all. As a result, scholars also have inves-

tigated the behavioral causes of knowledge. Of the many possible sources of motivation to learn and retain political facts, interest in politics is among the most important. Those who care about and seek out political information tend to know more. However, it is also the case that previously learned knowledge increases the likelihood of exposure to and reception of additional facts.

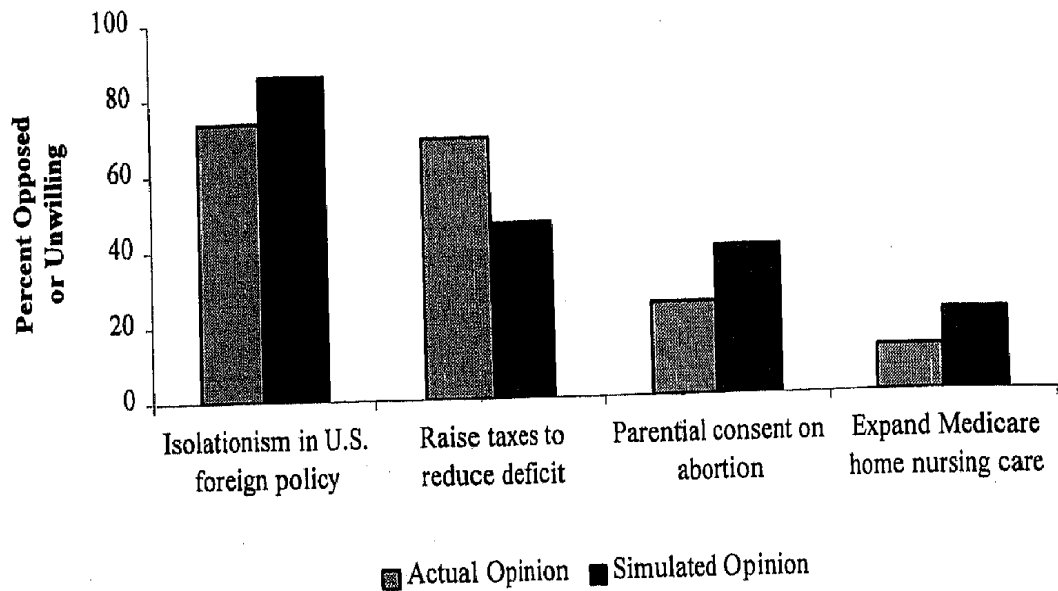
Attention to political issues or the news media only increases knowledge to the extent that the environment supplies factual information. Studies have shown that citizen knowledge is driven by the importance of a particular subject in the news and the amount of coverage it receives in the media. When there have been gains in knowledge on a subject over time, scholars have attributed those gains to increased media coverage. Over a five-year period in the mid-1980s, for example, citizen knowledge about U.S. policy in Nicaragua increased by more than 25 percentage points. The increase was likely due to heavy media coverage of the congressional debate over aid to the Contras. Thus, one important conclusion arising from research in this area is that levels of knowledge ebb and flow with the supply of information about a particular subject (*see Agenda Setting*).

Construed broadly, the information environment on any given topic varies considerably. On some issues, such as outbreaks of the West Nile virus in the United States, the news media provide a substantial amount of coverage and expert testimony. On other issues, such as changes in health insurance coverage costs, televised and print news sources provide only minimal treatment. The quality of coverage is also a concern. When the news media disseminate inaccurate or misleading information, there may be lower levels of citizen knowledge. Historical examples include inaccurate public perceptions of the missile gap between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. A more recent illustration might be the alarmist rhetoric surrounding the financial health of the Social Security system. Studies have shown that citizens overestimate the financial problems of this program, making errors that likely stem from the content of media coverage on this issue. Although political information often originates from media sources, it spreads indirectly via informal political discussion networks. As citizens discuss and deliberate about politics, they tend to learn and know more.

Finally, scholars are beginning to understand that how they measure political knowledge may affect their conclusions. Citizens often are classified as informed, misinformed, or uninformed. Those who are classified as informed provide the correct response to a factual question about politics; the misinformed provide incorrect responses; while the uninformed do not provide any response, right or wrong. Most studies of political knowledge focus on the informed group, but recent studies have shown that "don't know" or "refuse to answer" responses are not distributed randomly. In particular, scholars have shown that personality characteristics lead members of some sub-groups, such as women, to appear as though they are uninformed even when they might be able to guess the correct answer. In short, some respondents are risk takers who guess even when they might not know the answer while others play it safe by not guessing. The implications are that some respondents may appear uninformed due to survey methods that discourage guessing rather than a lack of substantive knowledge.

For decades scholars have debated whether people need extensive knowledge on political issues to make good decisions. Although it can be argued that citi-

Figure 2. Actual Opinion versus Simulated Estimates of Fully Informed Opinion



Source: Althaus (1998).

zens who rely on cognitive shortcuts can make reasonable decisions, in many cases knowledge has no substitute. The best evidence on this score comes from studies that show that collective choices would differ were the public's level of political information greater.

According to research by Professor Scott Althaus, the preferences of a hypothetical fully informed citizenry would look much different. Some of these knowledge-based differences in public opinion are shown in Figure 2. Using the National Election Studies data from 1988 and 1992, Althaus has shown that Americans would have been 12 percentage points more likely to oppose isolationism in U.S. foreign policy, 23 percentage points more willing to raise taxes to offset the federal deficit, 15 percentage points more opposed to parental consent for minors seeking an abortion, and 10 percentage points more likely to oppose expanding Medicare to include a home nursing care benefit. While many of these movements are in a liberal direction, simulating opinion to produce fully informed citizens does not yield reliably liberal or conservative judgments (*see Liberalism and Conservatism*).

Not only do attitudes differ, but opinions are also more stable when citizens are knowledgeable. In other words, when asked for their views on the same question at two or more time points, those who know the most are typically the most consistent over time. Knowledge also helps citizens translate their political predispositions into the most logical or appropriate policy preferences.

In addition to its effects on opinions, political information promotes civic virtues, such as tolerance. Those who know more are more willing to permit the expression of ideas or interests even if they conflict with a person's own values. People who are knowledgeable also participate in politics more than those who do not know much. According to one analysis of an election study in 1988, respondents who were highly knowledgeable were 20 percentage points more likely

to vote than respondents at the low end of the scale, even after controlling for a variety of demographic and attitudinal factors. Not only does knowledge structure the decision to vote, it also affects vote choice. According to one study, a hypothetical fully informed electorate is less likely to vote for incumbent presidents.

Scholars are expected to develop an even better understanding of how the broader information environment affects citizen knowledge. As existing research has shown, exposing citizens to more information tends to increase their knowledge about politics. However, given most citizens' limited appetite for news about politics, there likely is a declining marginal effect for increasing amounts of political information. We also know relatively little about the precise features of the information environment that increase citizen knowledge, and whether knowledge varies according to the source of the information, the quality of the news coverage, or the particular issue being covered. We anticipate that scholars will answer these and related questions in the coming years.

Further Reading

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Web Sites

A number of organizations disseminate data about public opinion and citizen knowledge on their Web sites. Three useful references are: The Gallup Organization (<http://www.gallup.com/>); the University of California, Berkeley's Survey Documentation and Analysis Web site (<http://sda.berkeley.edu/>); and the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research Web site (<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>).

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Political Talk Radio

Talk radio refers to the ubiquitous trend in radio programming in which a host talks directly to an audience, with or without guests, and takes call-in questions, statements, or comments. As a great deal of such programming is explicitly political in content, scholars have begun to consider the role of political talk radio in shaping public opinion. That talk radio does influence opinion is beyond doubt. However, the how's, why's, and "so what's" implied are neither simple nor straightforward.

Although most studies concerning political talk radio and its role in society have been published within the past decade, research predates the 1990s. The