

Dear participants in the UNC American Politics Seminar,

I am presenting new and preliminary work on a book whose working subtitle is “A Scientific Approach to Improving Civic Competence.” Its basic storyline is as follows.

Important populations that lack critical information about political phenomena. A wide range of public and private activities, including a considerable range of scholarship, is devoted to helping these populations. Voter education campaigns, deliberative opinion polls, public interest websites, as well as research on political knowledge, are all directed to such ends. The problems begin when we attempt to gauge the success of such endeavors. Much of this activity, including the scholarship, employs very vague notions of what is to be accomplished and ignores well-established principles of belief change. Since increasing civic competence requires that particular kinds of belief change occur, many mistakes are made and several common mistakes are tragically repeated. As a result, many well-intentioned efforts fail to improve civic competence in the ways that their makers anticipate.

The book’s purpose is to help people, particularly scholars in this field, work on civic competence more effectively. Part I explores what various people in the area of civic competence say they want to accomplish and clarifies how we can measure the extent to which these attempts succeed. It clarifies the kinds of belief change that are necessary or sufficient for commonly stated goals, the kinds of information that are necessary or sufficient to induce these belief changes and, most important, the kinds of endeavors or strategies that are necessary or sufficient to provide the information in question. Part II examines how to improve civic competence in specific domains: voting, web design, deliberation, and with respect to racism.

At a minimum, I want the book to induce people to stop and think about what it takes to increase the competence of others in political contexts – which, because of the underlying conflict that makes an issue political, poses unique challenges not present in other areas of education. My main goal, however, is to help scholars and practitioners who are concerned about civic competence succeed in their important tasks.

At this point the book consists of an outline with sporadic completed passages and about 250 pages of notes. I am in the process of turning it into a compact 50-100 page prospectus ready for distribution early next year. In another sense, however, I have been working on this argument for a few years and the three short papers I attach preview critical parts of it. These papers will not appear in my book, however, they establish core themes of my new endeavor. My talk will focus on the first two papers, the third provides helpful background and provides a link from the new work to my older work. If you are unfamiliar with debates on the topic, you may want to read this paper first.

I am anxious to know what you think of the thesis and I look forward to seeing you this Friday.

Sincerely,
Skip Lupia

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**Can Web Sites Change Citizens?
Implications of Web White and Blue 2000**

Arthur Lupia* with Zoë Baird**

* Professor, Department of Political Science, and Senior Research Scientist, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan

** President, The Markle Foundation

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Preface

The “Introduction” is co-authored by Zoe Baird and Arthur Lupia. It builds from themes and content first presented in Baird (1999). Subsequent sections draw on a report entitled “Evaluation: The Web White and Blue Network 2000” by Arthur Lupia. The interpretations of data in those sections represent Dr. Lupia’s professional judgments and not the views of Ms. Baird, the Markle Foundation, or any of the Web White and Blue 2000 charter sites. The full report is viewable at www.umich.edu/~lupia and www.markle.org/news. A free CD appropriate for classroom use contains the full report, an executive summary, and a multimedia presentation on Web White and Blue. To request a copy, please contact lupia@umich.edu. Quantities are limited.

Introduction

In its first decade of widespread use, the Internet has changed how millions of people learn about their world. It provides new and compelling ways to tell stories and makes growing amounts of information directly available to anyone who seeks it. How citizens learn about their elected officials has not been immune from these changes. Numerous web sites make information about politics and government available at any time of day or night. These sites give students, teachers, and researchers of politics new opportunities to explore politics in creative ways.

Many people believe that the Internet has only begun to transform the relationship between citizens and elected officials. As more people gain the capacity to transfer files at ever-greater speed, and as we move from primarily PC-based interactions to wireless Internet access, this potential seems to grow. However, we are still very much in the early stages of understanding what successful and meaningful applications to the political process will look like. Indeed, there is great uncertainty about how to make effective use of the Internet, particularly for public service oriented purposes.

You can help reduce this uncertainty. While the Internet economy has been going through a Wild West period in recent years, it is now entering a time in which new commercial, cultural, social and institutional norms will be established for the long term. This is a crucial period of definition for the Internet and its influence on the relationship between citizens and government. Political Science, so diverse methodologically and possessing special knowledge of so many aspects of politics, can apply its arsenal of qualitative and quantitative skills to shape the Internet's impact on future generations. Two kinds of activity are particularly important.

The first activity is providing expertise on strategies for providing political information more effectively and efficiently. By its very nature, the Internet has the potential to foster an unusually rich culture of exploration and awareness of ideas and perspectives. It also has the ability to dramatically change the ways in which individuals participate in democracy. But this won't happen by itself. Enterprising and energetic individuals and organizations must design web sites that attract and retain viewers' attention long enough to deliver critical information. While the early years of the Internet have generated substantial progress on this front, much more remains to be done.

The second activity is careful scientific analysis of the conditions under which promising strategies work. Particularly fruitful analyses will focus on the concepts of *choice* and *impact*.

Internet viewers have many choices. They can tailor what they see and when they see it. This follows because the Internet is a more interactive communications medium than its predecessors -- newspapers, radio, and television. Knowing how people choose among the billions of pages available to them is essential to explaining which strategies for providing news and information are even viable candidates for boosting political interest and participation. Understanding the impact of web sites or web pages entails taking choice seriously.

Scientists should also develop reliable measures of a web page or web site's *impact*. Of particular interest are measures that clarify how a web site or page *changes* those who view it. By change, we mean that the page or site leaves a unique cognitive or emotional residue. For

example, for a site to increase citizens' interest in politics or level of political participation, its' content must leave a cognitive or emotional residue that induces viewers to be more interested and active in politics than they otherwise would have been. If the site cannot produce such changes, it can have no impact. As the study described below reveals, such measures are well within the reach of contemporary science.

If Political Scientists undertake such activities, they increase the likelihood that new and future content providers will replace the mysterious and rampant speculations (on which so many failed Internet strategies have been based) with reliable guidance from transparent and replicable explanations. Of course, Political Scientists can explore many topics. Students, teachers, and researchers of politics may reasonably ask whether now is the most socially beneficial time to act. Perhaps they can have a greater impact once the medium is more established. History provides several relevant lessons, each of which points to the importance of acting now.

This is not the first time, after all, that new media have promised to improve the way we live. In radio's early years, the medium was seen to have characteristics analogous to those of the Internet today. There was great expectation that radio would transform democracy, create communities across borders, and produce a more educated and enlightened population. Amateur use dominated radio in the early 1900's; before 1928, more than 95 percent of radio broadcasters were non-commercial. Soon, however, commercial broadcasters began to dominate the airwaves, and although radio has done much for society, it never fulfilled its full potential as an informational or community building tool.

Television's story is similar. In 1948, the first season of network television was produced. From the late 1940's to the early 1950's, networks engaged in extensive experimentation and innovation. Once they identified profitable business models, however, these models predominated for decades. By the time public television was formed almost two decades later, it was essentially tacked onto a commercial system that had already been established. Other public needs were met

periodically as regulatory requirements came and went, but it has not been possible for television to achieve its potential by trying to retrofit it with social objectives.

Social scientists, by applying their skills sooner rather than later, can shape how the Internet changes politics. Indeed, scholarly innovations can help the commercial and non-commercial sectors improve political communication -- and helping both sectors is important. Major media corporations have not yet figured out how to generate substantial revenue streams from the provision of political news and information online. This fact has led to limited funding for basic research on effective ways to deliver such information. While such research could produce a model where a socially optimal provision of political information wholly consistent, it is more likely that such research will identify the distinct advantages of commercial and non-commercial entities. With such discoveries in hand, political science could help both sectors understand to dedicate their resources more effectively (i.e., it can direct commercial sites to provide kinds of socially beneficial information for which target audiences are willing to pay and it can help non-commercial sites understand where their Internet strategies can make the biggest difference.) Indeed, many people and organizations want to use the Internet to improve civic education about politics, Political Science well positioned to help show them how.

Emerging communications media and information technology create unprecedented opportunity to improve people's lives. If history is any indication, the window of opportunity to shape the Internet's role in fostering political interest and participation may not be open for long. Therefore, there is no time like the present to create new Internet strategies and to conduct careful studies about how to maximize the social value of the changes that the Internet can bring.

The remainder of this article presents one example each of the two activities just mentioned. The Internet strategy is a project called Web White and Blue. The scientific analysis is a multi-faceted study of how Web White and Blue changed citizens. This collaboration between leading commercial and non-profit sites -- in the case of Web White and Blue -- and between a private foundation's vision and a novel scientific approach -- in the case of the study --

is unique in many ways including the fact that, unlike many leading studies of how particular web sites affect citizens, its findings and methods are being made available to the public for free.

The Markle Foundation, as part of its general strategy to promote the development of communications industries that address public needs, created Web White and Blue in 1998 with Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and America Online. The goal was to highlight the potential of the Internet to expand citizen participation and interest in politics. In 2000, a reinvented Web White and Blue entailed new partnerships and services. Web White & Blue became a non-partisan consortium of 17 of the largest Internet news and news organizations. The Charter Sites of the Web White and Blue 2000 Network were ABCNews.com, America Online, Excite, CNN.com, FOXNews.com, I-Village.com, MSN.com, MSNBC.com, Netnoir.com, MTV.com, NPR.com, NYTimes.com, Oxygen.com, PBS.com, WashingtonPost.com, USAToday.com and Yahoo.com. All charter sites had reciprocal links with the site webwhiteandblue.org (henceforth, WWB.org) and all could draw content from the site for their own use at no cost.

Among the many new features on WWB.org was the first Rolling Cyber Debate between the presidential candidates. Designed to complement traditional televised debates, the Rolling Cyber Debate – active from October 1 through November 8 2000 – consisted of a daily exchange between the candidates on topics provided by the campaigns themselves and by citizens via the charter sites of the Web White and Blue Network.

WWB.org also offered citizens a daily compilation of political information online, which provided reporters and citizens with up-to-date listings of online political activity. Thousands of sites from the non-profit community participated as well, with WWB.org highlighting such efforts on a regular basis. The state-to-state directory, another resource of the site, offered information that became particularly useful during the Florida recount, as it provided easy access to the Florida Secretary of State's site and other relevant sites.

In what follows, select findings on the impact of this effort are reviewed. Researchers, students and teachers who want to learn more about Web White and Blue 2000 can find archives at www.webwhiteandblue.org or can read the full report at www.markle.org/news.

The Study

In the fall of 2000, Dr. Lupia conducted a study of how news and information web sites affect citizens. The charter sites of the Web White and Blue Network were the study's primary focus. The study was designed to provide the public with new insights on how the Internet affects politics and to fill critical gaps in scientific knowledge on the topic.

The study's components include an analysis of WWB.org usage statistics, a survey of WWB.org users, elite interviews with decision makers at the Web White and Blue Network's Charter Sites, a randomized national Internet survey that gauges the impact of multiple web sites, and laboratory experiments that clarify why some web pages are more effective than others. Some of these components, such as the usage statistics, elite interviews, and survey of site visitors, were standard fare for Internet studies in 2000. The combination of laboratory experiments and Internet polls, by contrast, provided an innovative edge. This combination produced improved estimates of a political web site's impact under normal usage conditions (i.e., a person sitting in front of a computer with the freedom to choose which pages to view). Collectively, the five components reveal which of the web sites examined changed citizens in ways such as boosting their confidence in the quality of political information online and raising their interest in politics. What follows is a sample of the findings.

Analysis of Internet Usage Data

From its launch on June 28, 2000 through November 8, 2000, WWB.org received 7,518,608 page views. One page view is equal to one pair of eyeballs viewing one page on a web site. Jonah Seiger of Mindshare Internet Campaigns LLC collected the data and we used it to identify trends in the kinds of web pages that attracted viewers' attention. Figure 1 depicts one

such trend. It presents page view data for the Rolling Cyber Debate’s “Question of the Day” (henceforth QOD).

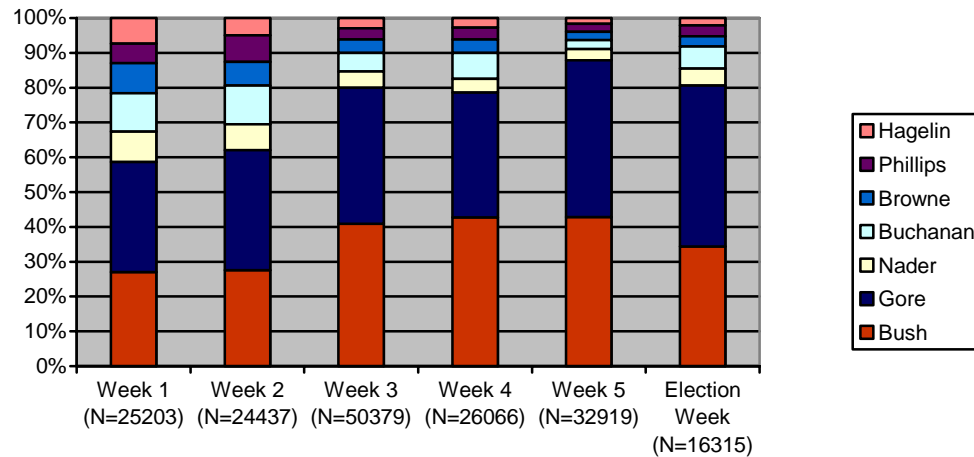


Figure 1. Page view distribution for Question of the Day by Candidate and Week

The “Question of the Day” allowed unusually direct interactions between citizens and candidates. Citizens participated by submitting questions through the charter sites, in chat rooms and in other online forums. The questions were then reviewed and selected by Web White & Blue with the supervision of the charter site editors. One question was posted per day. The posted questions sometimes asked for clarification or a follow-up on existing campaign themes. In other cases, the Question of the Day led candidates to discuss new issues (e.g., Napster.) In most cases, candidates responded within 24 hours and they frequently offered rejoinders to the answers given by their competitors. Citizens visiting the site could read the QOD and then follow links to the candidates’ responses. For each question, each candidate’s response had its own unique page. Our data includes viewer choices of whose responses to read.

Figure 1 shows the relative percentage of QOD page views by candidate for each of the Rolling Cyber Debate’s six weeks of operation. It shows an important variation in which candidates’ responses QOD viewers sought. Early in the debate, minor party candidates drew relatively high levels of attention. As answers to open-ended questions in our laboratory experiments suggest, the interest was partially due to the perception that minor party candidates’

responses were less “canned” and more sincere than Bush and Gore. Some viewers also appreciated that Pat Buchanan was particularly timely with rebuttals, which kept his viewer share high relative to his poll numbers, particularly in early October.

As Election Day approached, QOD viewers turned to the frontrunners. The percentage of QOD page views devoted to major party candidates rose from 59% at the beginning of the debate to 81% at the end. An increased interest in Bush QOD pages drove 76% of the total increase in weeks 3 and 4. This surge occurred at the same time that Bush public opinion poll numbers were rising (CNN’s tracking poll had Bush ahead by 4 points on October 14th – the end of the cyber debate’s second week, by 11 points on October 21 – the end of week 3, and 14 points on October 27th – the end of week 4.) Increased interest in Gore QOD pages accounted for almost all of the subsequent increases in the major party viewer share. This surge corresponded to Gore’s rise in the polls – by week six, Bush’s lead in the CNN poll was back down to 4 points.

The data shows that as the election tightened and as its outcome became more uncertain, users focused their attention more on the front-runners and less on the rest of the pack. The trends are evidence that citizens’ informational needs evolve over an election cycle. They also imply that content providers with limited resources who want to provide citizens with the information they desire should plan to devote increasing attention to delivering new information on major party candidates as Election Day approaches.

Analysis of the Voluntary User Survey

Page views provide data on viewership trends. To learn how viewed pages change citizens, Dr. Lupia asked that a voluntary user survey be added to WWB.org. The survey joined questions about viewers’ Internet habits and prior interest in politics with questions about how they judged WWB.org, its Rolling Cyber Debate, and its links. The survey was added to the site on October 11, 2000, was completed 3052 times, and provided new information about responses to the site.

To increase what we could learn from the survey, we repeated questions from a survey placed on WWB.org in 1998 (N=925) by Pippa Norris and Marvin Kalb. Comparing responses from 1998 and 2000 revealed several interesting findings, including the following. Figure 2 depicts responses to the question “During this election what is your primary media source for election information?” The percentage of respondents citing newspapers as their primary source of information dropped approximately 14 points from 1998 to 2000 while the percentage citing the Internet as their primary source increased by about the same margin. The percentage of people citing other mediums stayed relatively constant. The following question on both surveys queried respondents’ secondary media source. From 1998 to 2000 no secondary source moved more than three percentage points: the Internet (33.9 in 1998 to 33.4 in 2000) and newspapers (23.3 to 21.2) as secondary sources were down slightly, while television was up slightly (26.7 to 29.0).

Put together, these statistics are evidence of a sizeable exodus from newspapers to the Internet as the primary source of election information for WWB.org users. It wasn’t just that newspapers and the Internet switched places in users’ *top two* sources of electoral information. To the extent that the 1998 and 2000 respondents are otherwise comparable, the data shows that a sizeable portion of the WWB.org user population have *substituted* the Internet for newspapers as one of its two main election news sources (i.e., newspapers went from first place to third place or lower in many users rankings while the Internet did the opposite.) In other words, the main victim of our respondents rush to the web is the newspaper.

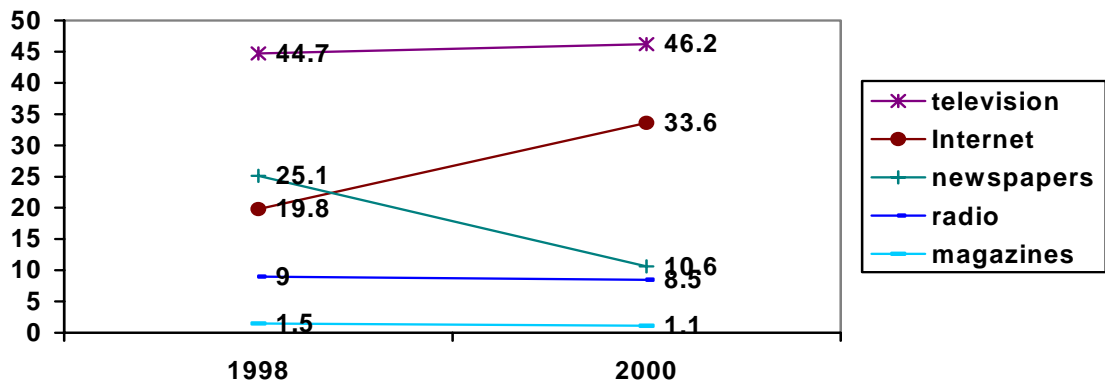


Figure 2. WWB.org users' primary source of political information.

This survey, by allowing users to express their views about WWB.org, provides information that usage statistics cannot. However, such responses – as is true of the responses to all site-based surveys – must be understood for what they are. The people who take such surveys are not like broader populations. They are the select few who are so interested in news and politics that they find WWB.org and then stay on it long enough to answer questions about it. They are, as a result, more likely to say nice things about the site than would a more representative sample. While there is no reason to doubt that the survey tells us about *these users'* experiences with the site, a more general understanding of its impact requires additional data.

Analysis of the Internet-Based Survey

To learn about how news and information websites affect a more representative population, we contracted with Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, CA – the Industry leader in national random Internet-based surveys -- to administer a unique aspect of the study. Like telephone-based public opinion polls, Knowledge Networks recruits respondents via telephone. Using random digit dialing to increase the likelihood of contacting people from all walks of life, they offer free Internet access to respondents who agree to participate in web-based interviews. This firm has assembled representative national samples for a growing number of academic and commercial clients (Krosnick and Chang 2001). The advantages of Internet-based surveys include

the fact that images, audio, and streaming video can be sent to respondents during questioning – which widens the kinds of hypotheses analysts can test (see, e.g., Lerner, et.al. 2002, Prior 2002).

We presented Knowledge Networks with a new design. In it, subjects begin a seemingly standard interview about their political interest and Internet usage. Then, without warning, the interview was interrupted, subjects were sent to one or two randomly selected sites for five minutes each, and subjects were told that the interview would continue after the viewing session. When the interview resumed, respondents answered questions about what they saw. A week later – and again without prior notice -- all respondents were contacted for a brief follow-up interview. Between October 13 and November 6, 1199 participants completed our surveys.

This way of examining a web site’s impact produces interesting findings. One such finding focuses on WWB.org and is displayed in Figure 3. The figure depicts the effect of WWB.org from the respondents’ perspective. The first bar shows responses to the question “Have you ever heard of webwhiteblue.org?” Only 1% of the randomly selected respondents were initially aware of the site. Since WWB.org was not designed as a destination site -- it accomplishes many of its goals by providing content, and sending users, to other sites and did not engage in extensive self-promotion -- such numbers are not unexpected.

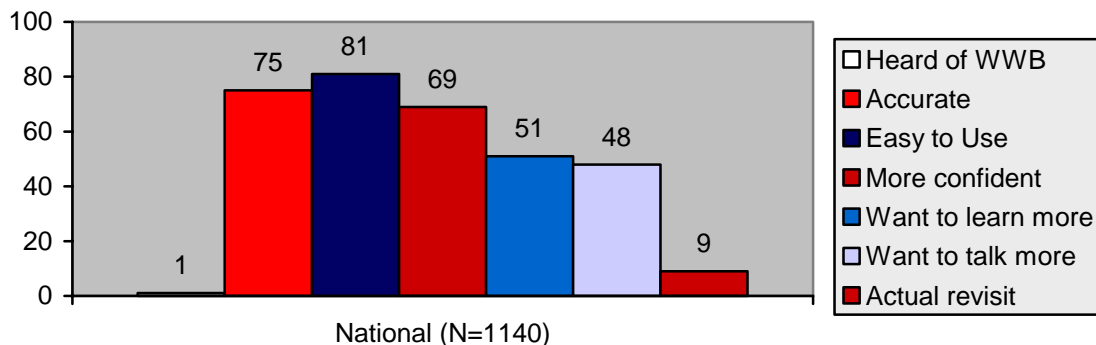


Figure 3. Percent responding yes to WWB questions.

Not many people knew the Web White and Blue brand name. This fact, however, provides no data on whether site could cause important changes in those who view it. To

determine whether such changes occurred, we first asked respondents to “agree” or “disagree” with statements such as: “I can use the site to find information that is accurate and non-partisan” and “I can use the site to get the information I want quickly and easily.” As Figure 3 shows, most respondents -- about 99% of whom were viewing the site for the very first time – judged WWB.org as “accurate” and “easy to use.”

We then attempted to gauge how viewing the site would affect citizens’ subsequent beliefs and behaviors. We asked respondents to “agree” or “disagree” with statements such as: “The site makes me feel more confident about the quality of political information available on the Internet”, “The site makes me want to learn more about politics”, and “The site makes me more likely to talk about politics with others.” Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents who agreed with such statements. These responses reveal that a single five minute viewing period changed how these new viewers would next engage the political process, with 69% expressing greater confidence in the quality of political information on the Internet, 51% wanting to learn more, and 48% more likely to discuss politics with others.

Another way in which we attempted to measure the effect of a single exposure to a particular web site was in the follow up interview a week later. In that interview, we asked if they had revisited the sites we showed them. 9% revisited WWB.org. When we recall that only 1% had even heard of the site before, we can see that a single five-minute exposure to WWB.org by our respondents, most of whom were not very interested in the political side of the Internet, induced a substantial increase in the number who chose to revisit the site on their own time.

Indeed, revisitation rates provide an interesting measure of how a site affected individuals because there is an important difference between feeling good about a site after viewing it and actually taking the time to revisit it later. Revisitation suggests a level of interest so large that a respondent would choose to view that site over all of the other things that he or she could do. Table 1 documents revisitation rates for other news and information sites that we tested. As a

benchmark for evaluating the extent to which the single site view during the interview could have prompted the revisit, we also include the sites' initial awareness numbers in the figure.

Initial Awareness	%	Revisited in the Following Week	%
CNN.com	80	CNN.com	25
Foxnews.com	66	Vote-Smart.org	18
USAToday.com	59	Foxnews.com	16
NYTimes.com	46	USAToday.com	14
Vote-Smart.org	7	Politics.yahoo.com	9
I-Syndicate.com	6	WWB.org	9
Politics.yahoo.com	5	I-Syndicate.com	7
PoliticalInformation.com	1	NYTimes.com	4
WWB.org	1	PoliticalInformation.com	3

Table 1. Respondent Reactions Affect Revisits

Before drawing conclusions from the table, it is worth noting that the numbers in the two columns are not strictly comparable. Brand awareness does not constitute evidence of prior use. And just because 80% are aware of CNN does not mean that we should expect 80% to use the site within a given week. With those caveats in mind, here is how to interpret the data.

Three of the four sites for which respondents were most aware in the initial interview are also the ones that respondents were most likely to visit afterwards (CNN, Fox, and USA Today). The site for which this pattern does not hold is the New York Times site, which – it is worth noting – was the only one that required registration as a condition for viewing most of its content and was among the lowest rated sites we tested in almost every dimension. Taking the Times' place among the top four revisited sites is Vote-Smart, the site that respondents regarded as best on several qualitative dimensions.

Respondents made other distinctions as well. Of the two least known sites initially, politicalinformation.com and WWB.org, the percentage revisiting WWB.org was more than triple the percentage revisiting politicalinformation.com. It is also true that respondents ranked WWB.org higher than politicalinformation.com on every qualitative dimension that we measured. Yahoo's political site, also consistently evaluated more favorably than politicalinformation.com, was also far more likely to be revisited.

Indeed, respondents' site evaluations not only tell us how they feel about a site but also signal whether they are likely to revisit that site in the future. When users identified sites that they regarded as inferior in terms of performance (e.g., which we measure in terms of responses to agree/disagree questions such as "I can use [SITE NAME] to find information that I have not seen elsewhere" and "I can use [SITE NAME] to get the information I want quickly and easily"), they refused to revisit – a justifiable choice given the presence of numerous other sites providing similar information. By contrast, they returned voluntarily to sites they rated more favorably. In sum, citizens make choices and those who want to use the Internet to increase their political interest or participation should learn as much as they can about the choices.

Analysis of Laboratory Experiments

Our laboratory experiments address a problem associated with drawing inferences about a web site's impact from more commonly available kinds of data. The problem is that people who choose to view one political web site are likely to also view others (e.g., a user who views CNN is more likely to also view other news sites – i.e., the New York Times site -- than is a user who does not view CNN.) As a result, it can be difficult to determine how a user's exposure to *a specific site* changed them. Our experiments are designed to reduce this problem.

We conducted the experiments at the University of California, San Diego from October 16 through November 4, 2000. There, experimental subjects – who were students or non-student members of the local community -- were brought to a laboratory and paid \$35 for participating in a 1-hour study of the Internet. In the middle of each experimental session, subjects were instructed to use certain web sites to learn as much as they can about the upcoming presidential election. The key experimental variation was that subjects were randomly assigned to one of eight web site lists. The lists varied from "use WWB.org only" to "use the following 15 sites" to no direction at all. The point of the variations was to document how changes in the subjects' freedom of choice affects their responses to questions about individual web sites. If, for example, what people say about a site when it is the only one they view is the same as what they say about it

under more normal usage conditions (i.e., when they have increasing amounts of freedom to choose which sites to view), then we should take the response more seriously than if differences in the context leads them to change their responses.

We administered questionnaires before and after the viewing period to gauge the impact of content viewed during the experiment. We also employed several kinds of specialized software to compile a record of all sites visited during the experiment with time stamps. Such data provides important information about the sequence of sites that users visit – data that we can use to evaluate how specific web pages affect subject reactions and subsequent behaviors. For a limited number of subjects, we also employed software that collected screen captures every 20 seconds. This data reveals which parts of a page people focus on. Such data is among the best available for answering questions about what aspects of page design affect users’ subsequent beliefs and actions.

Comparison of data across experimental treatments produced many interesting findings including the following. Figure 5 depicts subject responses from three distinct groups. The first group was instructed to view WWB.org only. The second group also had vote-smart.org on their list. The third group’s list added foxnews.com as well. The figure shows the percent of subjects responding “true” to the question “I can use [name of site] to get the information I want quickly and easily.”

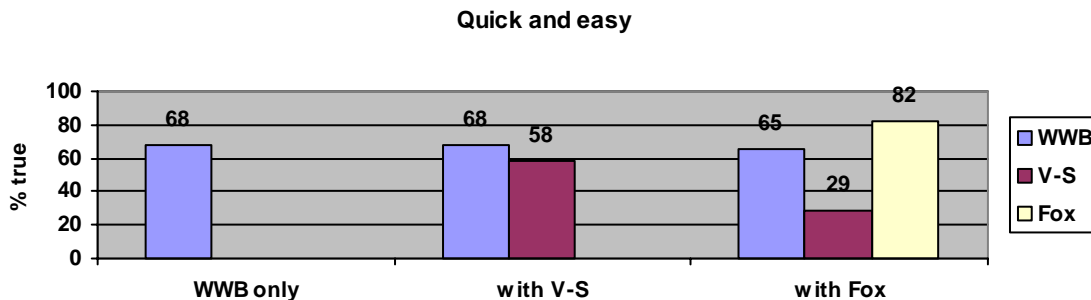


Figure 5. Greater freedom of choice changes reactions to individual sites.

Subject evaluations of WWB.org on this dimension drop slightly when they are able to view either of the other sites. In this case, as we move away from induced viewing of WWB.org only towards contexts with greater freedom of choice, responses to the question are relatively stable. Subject evaluations of vote-smart.org, however, drop dramatically once foxnews.com is introduced. This is noteworthy because the site is not changing across the treatments. Therefore, the cause of the different responses was the experimental condition – the change in the user’s freedom of choice.

In fact, we saw this same pattern throughout the experiments and across many questions – when users saw vote-smart.org alone, they said very different things about it than when foxnews.com was also viewed (CNN.com had a similar effect on WWB.org responses in a parallel experiment). Part of the explanation for the pattern is that as we increased the number of sites on subjects’ lists, they spent more of their time on sites with established brand names. This finding suggests that the lure of brand names is high in the political Internet. The implication for those who want to increase political interest or participation is that smaller dot-coms or non-commercial dot-orgs must provide unique content or presentational strategies if they are to attract an audience. Trying to outdo the current leaders at their own game is a recipe for ineffectiveness, as the backers of now bankrupt sites such as voter.com have now learned.

Among the other headlines emerging from the experiments is the Internet’s power to affect citizens’ evaluations of presidential candidates. After viewing various web sites, we asked all 428 of our experimental subjects the following true/false question: “[Site X] makes me think about at least one of the candidates in the presidential election in a new way.” 316 subjects viewed webwhiteblue.org and Figure 5 summarizes their responses. Approximately 50% of the subjects reported a change in how they viewed at least one of the candidates, with an even split in whether these revised evaluations were more positive or negative.

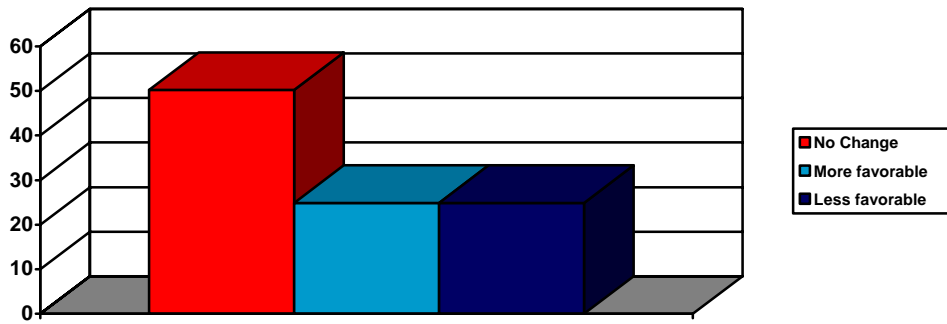


Figure 5. One exposure to WWB.org affected many candidate evaluations.

A caveat to keep in mind when interpreting these results is that many of our subjects had not previously used the Internet to learn about the election – so the effects we witness are partially attributable to the fact that some of our subjects may have been thinking deeply about the candidates for the first time. This finding does, however, signal the substantial potential for political learning that effective Internet presentations can provide.

Conclusion

It is fashionable to claim that the Internet did not have an important effect on the 2000 elections and has only limited potential for affecting politics in the immediate future. But what does it mean to say that the Internet has had little or no effect? In a year where the presidential election was determined by a few hundred votes in the state of Florida and where the balance of power in the U.S. Senate was determined by a similarly close margin, it was possible for even a small Internet effect to change electoral history.

A problem with debates about the Internet’s political impact is that systematic data about its effects is difficult to come by. Hit counts can reveal who saw a web site, but they provide little credible evidence about the extent to which a web page or web site changes its viewers. This study reduces uncertainty about the Internet’s political impact by documenting and analyzing how key political websites affected citizens. Future scholars should build on this research by using the research design described above to compare the impact of political web sites to newspaper editorials, political ads or other means of communication. If conducted carefully, such research

can provide important discoveries on the most effective ways to provide political information. It is our hope that this work can help others, particularly Political Science students, teachers and researchers -- – apply their talents and energy towards making the Internet a more effective means for increasing political interest and participation.

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**Deliberation Disconnected:
What it Takes to Improve Civic Competence**

Arthur Lupia
University of Michigan

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I. Introduction

Webster's defines people as *competent* if they have "requisite or adequate ability or qualities."¹ As synonyms, it lists *able* and *sufficient*. Webster's definitions for *able* include "having sufficient power, skill, or resources to accomplish an object" and "marked by intelligence, knowledge, skill, or competence."²

Such definitions are worth noting because concerns about a special kind of competence motivate many public and private activities as well as a widely read strain of contemporary philosophy. The competence in question is *civic competence*, by which I mean a citizen's ability to accomplish well-defined tasks, particularly in their roles as voters, jurors, or legislators.³

Civic competence is a central preoccupation of people who want citizens to base political choices on a broad and accurate understanding of their consequences.⁴ Such desires, however, are dashed by evidence that citizens spend little time and effort engaging politics. The widely replicated finding that many Americans cannot answer common survey questions about a wide

¹ WEBSTER'S NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 227 (1981).

² *Id.* at 3.

³ I focus on competence as a technical skill, by which I mean the following. Suppose that a person who knows facts X, Y, and Z can perform task T. It is consistent with the definition given above to call this person competent at T. In politics, scholars and pundits often use survey responses to draw conclusions about citizens' competence as voters. Their arguments take the form "Person A does not know fact X or Y or Z, therefore Person A will cast a vote in election T incompetently." Proving such arguments requires a demonstration that knowledge of X, Y, and Z *is necessary for competence* (i.e., that no subset of these facts or alternate set of facts also allow the successful performance of T.) Critics who make broad claims about civic competence regularly fail to even attempt such proofs. For example, evidence that citizens cannot provide correct answers to common political survey questions is equivalent to observing that a person does not know fact Z in the example above. Many critics cite such data as evidence of citizens' incompetence as voters. Such conclusions, however, are premature. Drawing such conclusions without completing the proof leaves critics vulnerable to confounding recall of what may be little more than political trivia with the ability to perform a discrete task, such as the choice of candidates from a limited menu, competently. In other words, it leaves critics vulnerable to a general incompetence at judging voter competence. Arthur Lupia and Richard Johnston, *Are Voters to Blame? Voter Competence and Elite Maneuvers in Referendums*, in REFERENDUM DEMOCRACY: CITIZENS, ELITES AND DELIBERATION IN REFERENDUM CAMPAIGNS (Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin, eds. 2001).

⁴ Some people use the term competence in a narrow, ideological manner – asserting that a set of statements *with which they agree* should be privileged in social decision making. My usage of the term is orthogonal to such uses. So, here, I neither support nor refute specific claims about the kinds of premises that should be privileged in political discussions. Instead, I clarify conditions under which the introduction of an information-generating device – such as a new opportunity for deliberation -- leads any given piece of information to affect civic competence.

range of political phenomena, for example, dampens many observers' confidence in civic competence.⁵

If citizens are simple and politics is complex, what is the optimal response? Actual responses vary. Many simply decry the situation, doing nothing more than bashing the masses for not being more interested in politics. A special few, however, do something more constructive. They advocate mechanisms designed to change the amount and content of information available to target audiences. In short, they attempt to improve democracy by enhancing civic competence.

Scholars, legislators, and foundations public and private advocate various means to enhance competence. These means include conducting civic education campaigns, developing web sites and sponsoring academic conferences. They focus on topics such as the relationship between smoking and lung cancer, the relationship between sexual activity and AIDS, the plight of distant populations and the quality of voter and juror decisions, all in an effort to help citizens better understand the often consequences of their actions. When such efforts enhance civic competence, they constitute valuable public goods.

Something, however, is wrong with many of these attempts. The problem is that they are based on flawed assumptions about how citizens seek and process information. One manifestation of the problem is that many advocates of competence-generating proposals proceed as if merely providing new information is sufficient to improve competence. The transmission of socially relevant information, however, is no "field of dreams." It is not true that "If you build it, they will come" nor is it true that if they come, the effect will be as advocates anticipate.

Indeed, many efforts to improve civic competence provide information that target audiences ignore. Others produce information flows that confuse those for whom greater clarity was intended. Either outcome entails serious consequences. In addition to the social costs that come from propagating extant civic incompetence, society pays a cost when entities capable of

⁵ MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI AND SCOTT KEETER, WHAT AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT POLITICS AND WHY IT MATTERS (1996) contains a recent inventory of such findings.

providing valuable public goods invest in schemes whose failure is anticipatable. When advocates induce others to invest their time and energy into flawed competence-generating mechanisms, they cause precious resources to be squandered. It is important, therefore, to understand when and how proposals to enhance civic competence have the effects that advocates claim. With this point in mind, I turn to the topic of deliberation.

Many people claim that deliberation can enhance civic competence. Such claims are often based on arguments made by prominent philosophers and political theorists. The arguments conclude that an expanded use of deliberation in politics produces a number of tangible benefits including increased civic competence.

A brief version of such arguments is as follows: assembling groups of people who have diverse abilities into settings that are designed to generate new information flows results in the less knowledgeable participants gaining a broader and more accurate understanding of the consequences of their actions. Participants not only learn more by increased exposure to the ideas of others, but the specter of public justification – having to justify one’s own claims before an audience of equals – induces speakers to constrain the extent to which their arguments reflect their self-interests. So not only do deliberation participants receive new information, but also the content is different than that which the media or purely self-centered introspection provide.

Contemporary thinking on the benefits of expanded deliberation in politics focuses on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, particularly his claims about the properties of what he calls an “ideal speech environment.”⁶ Fishkin characterizes this environment as follows:

“In this situation, all arguments are answered in a context of free and equal discussion. All arguments deemed relevant by anyone in the discussion are given as extensive a hearing as anyone wants and people are willing to consider all the arguments on their merits. We can imagine questions receiving a virtually unlimited amount of time so that, in the end, the only force leading to a resolution of any question is the “force of the better argument.”⁷

⁶ JURGEN HABERMAS, *THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION* (1984) and *BETWEEN FACTS AND NORMS* (1986).

⁷ JAMES S. FISHKIN, *THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE* 40 (1995).

Are deliberative proposals, whether “ideal” in Habermas’ sense or striving to achieve other ideals, capable of elevating the “force of the better argument” in citizens’ political decision making? Or are deliberative mechanisms among the many competence-generating ideas that cannot live up to their advocates’ advance billing?

There are reasons to doubt the advocates. Consider, for example, that deliberative groups must adopt explicit or implicit agendas that determine the order in which participants speak. Since statements must be made in some order, the phenomenon that psychologists refer to as priming can occur.⁸ If priming occurs in deliberative settings, what people learn from deliberation can depend as much on the order in which statements are made as they can on the content of the statements themselves.⁹ Similarly, studies of complex systems, artificial intelligence, and organizational decision-making provide mixed messages about when we should expect deliberation to breed competence. Indeed, there are many situations in which the aggregation of opinions can *decrease* what individuals understand about the consequences of their actions (e.g., the organizational malady known as *groupthink*).¹⁰ Studies of the incentive effects of institutions in political science and economics further reveal how explicit and implicit rules of a deliberative

⁸ Klaus Fiedler, *Processing Social Information for Judgments and Decisions*, in INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, SECOND EDITION 140-143 (Miles Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe and Geoffrey M. Stevenson, 1996).

⁹ E.Tory Higgins, William S. Rholes, and Carl R. Jones, *Category Accessibility and Impression Formation*, 13 J. OF EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 141-154 (1977). Thomas K. Srull and Robert S. Wyer, *Category Accessibility and Social Perception: Some Implications for the Study of Person Memory and Interpersonal Judgments*, 38 J. OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 841-856 (1980). Barbara Tversky and Michael Tuchin, *A Reconciliation of the Evidence on Eyewitness Testimony: Comments on McCloskey and Zaragoza*, 118 J OF EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: GENERAL 86-91 (1989).

¹⁰ “Groupthink obtains when the decision process of a highly-cohesive group of like-minded people becomes so overwhelmed by consensus seeking that their apprehension of reality is undermined.” Eddy Van Avermaet, *Social Influence in Small Groups*, in INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, SECOND EDITION 518-520 (Miles Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe and Geoffrey M. Stevenson, 1996). For a more general and multi-disciplinary overview, consult NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, LEARNING, REMEMBERING, BELIEVING: ENHANCING HUMAN PERFORMANCE (1994).

environment can dramatically affect how speakers represent their ideas, thus limiting what target audiences can learn.¹¹

Such findings reveal as false the presumption that the more knowledgeable people in a deliberative environment are necessarily more influential – even on average. As the alleged benefits of many deliberative devices depend on those with greater knowledge being more persuasive than people who lack knowledge, such findings can undermine important claims about deliberation’s benefits. Particularly imperiled is the claim that proposed deliberative mechanisms necessarily or even frequently elevate the “force of the better argument.”

If deliberation advocates base their claims on unreliable assumptions, is there an alternate way for them to support their claims? And can this alternate basis be of use to other people who make investments in other competence-generating mechanisms, such as civic education campaigns and public service web sites? In what follows, answer yes to both questions. I base my answer on an examination of the relationship between deliberation and competence. The examination has two steps.

I first evaluate Christopher H. Schroeder’s argument about whether evidence of deliberation’s benefits can be derived from its alleged similarity with legal decision-making. Schroeder begins with the premise that some deliberation advocates support their claims by referencing the superiority of legal decisions. He then finds that important differences between legal and political decision making render such references invalid. My evaluation is largely supportive of Schroeder’s argument, though it differs on the issue of what to do next if he is correct. I contend that if the benefits of deliberation cannot be explained by a law-politics analogy, then our conclusion about them should consider other explanations.

¹¹ Joel Sobel and Vincent Crawford, *Strategic Information Transmission*, 50 *ECONOMETRICA* 1431 (1982) is a famous example of a class of models that set out a simple communicative environment in which preference divergence between a speaker and his target audience decreases what the latter learn from the speaker’s statements. ARTHUR LUPIA AND MATHEW D. MCCUBBINS, *THE DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA: CAN CITIZENS LEARN WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW* (1998) use models and experiments to clarify how the structure of political institutions affects who can learn what from whom.

I then present an alternate foundation for deliberation advocates' claims. I use empirical findings on human cognitive capacities and structural premises about the incentive effects of institutions to identify a set of necessary conditions for competence-generating mechanisms to produce desired outcomes. These conditions are not trivially satisfied and stand in stark contrast to a view upon which many advocates' claims depend. The alternate view is that making relevant information available or promoting discussion between free and equal participants is sufficient to boost competence. The necessary conditions reveal such views as seriously flawed. And while the necessary conditions reveal serious barriers for those who advocate mechanisms such as deliberation, they also suggest engineering principles that can help people adapt to the subset of barriers that can be overcome. I conclude that new ways of thinking are necessary to help those who want to increase civic competence make more effective decisions.

2. Disconnecting Deliberation from Law

Perceived flaws in the means by which target audiences make decisions motivate people to advocate competence-generating mechanisms. For prominent deliberation advocates, one such flaw is that people pay too much attention to private interests when making decisions whose impact is public. Legislators, for example, are often depicted as allowing interest group favoritism and material self-interest to supplant public-spirited or scientific considerations as a basis for decision.

Prominent deliberation advocates cite legal decision making as entailing methods that constrain private interests in public decisions. They refer to the evidentiary presentations and discussions that precede the decisions of judges and juries and conclude that such processes would improve political decisions. The Supreme Court's deliberative norms are particularly well regarded, with eminent thinkers such as John Rawls citing them as an exemplar.¹²

¹² John Rawls, *The Idea of Public Reason*, in DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY 108-144 (James Bohman and William Rehg, eds. 1997).

Should people who want to improve civic competence by increasing deliberation base their investments on analogies to legal decision-making? Christopher H. Schroeder addresses this question in “Deliberative Democracy and the Effort to Replace Politics with Law.” His argument begins with the observation that “the theory of deliberative democracy sketches a model of politics that borrows significant elements from models of law and legal decision making.”¹³ He then examines the extent to which cited properties of legal decision making provide reliable evidence of how prominent deliberative proposals will affect political decision making. His conclusion is that “the analogy deliberative democracy draws between legal reasoning and political reasoning fails.”¹⁴

Schroeder supports his conclusion by comparing critical aspects of politics and law. He finds important differences between the kinds of legal decision-making environments referenced by prominent deliberation advocates, such as Gutman and Thompson, and the political environments where deliberation is alleged to be effective.¹⁵ In law, for example, “[b]oth civil and criminal legal systems separate the adjudicative and judicial functions, assigning one to lawyers and other advocates, while assigning the other to judges, magistrates and other decision makers.”¹⁶ In politics, by contrast, “these two functions can reside in the same individuals...the same people who petition the government for policy action are involved in making those decisions.”¹⁷ Such differences imply that the norms and institutions that constrain private interests in law will be insufficient in politics. Put another way, legal institutions can impose requirements on their participants that political institutions cannot impose on their participants (i.e., requirements that are attractive to deliberation advocates and incentive compatible in law are not

¹³ Christopher H. Schroeder, *Deliberative Democracy and the Attempt to Replace Politics with Law*, 65 LAW AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS 4, 2002 (pages cited from this source are those of the conference manuscript).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁵ AMY GUTMAN AND DENNIS THOMPSON, *DEMOCRACY AND DISAGREEMENT* (1996).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 7-8.

incentive compatible in politics.)¹⁸ As a result, we can expect difference in the properties of knowledge transfer in political and legal settings.

Schroeder also shows that legal decision makers' incentives contradict what deliberation advocates want for political decision makers. For example, he conveys accurately many advocates' desire that "[d]eliberative citizens are required to be sincere in the arguments they advance. Arguments are not to be advanced merely for strategic purposes, as when some politician broadcasts allegations of disloyalty or scandal about an opponent without believing the allegations herself, but does so nonetheless because such allegations have worked effectively in polling and focus groups."¹⁹ Law, by contrast, encourages strategic argumentation as lawyers, while "under obligations not to deceive the court with respect to facts," also have an "obligation to their clients to advance the best arguments for their clients' case."²⁰

Schroeder's effort disconnects claims about deliberation's benefits from analogies to law. He wants this conclusion to lead his readers to revise, in a negative direction, their estimates of deliberation's expected benefits. He then turns his attention to the costs of deliberation, concluding that they are higher than commonly realized. The challenge he poses to deliberation advocates clarifies his view on this matter:

"Deliberative democracy must still confront a problem that any prescription to pursue a single objective faces: justifying its tradeoffs. Deliberative democracy's goals will consume many resources, and the activities competing with deliberation for those resources are highly valued. Justifying the trade-offs is therefore quite necessary—and very difficult."²¹

¹⁸ Id. at 13, "...the structure that deliberativists seek to impose is one that can only be adopted by political actors as they engage in political practice. This is unlike the structure that politics imposes on the practice of law, where people engaged in legal practice come to it with its basic structure in place. No institution or practice stands similarly prior to politics to impose the structure on politics that deliberativists seek. Deliberativists attempt to take out of political practice decisions that should be endogenous to that practice."

¹⁹ Id. at 9.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Id. at 15.

Prominent deliberation proposals require citizens to spend large amounts of time listening to others' arguments. When the group is large and everyone is allowed to have a say – venues in which some deliberation advocates are especially keen to spread their practice -- such requirements can be particularly onerous.²² The costs of deliberation, however, include more than the time and energy citizens would have to take from other activities.

Schroeder points out that the costs for some proposals also involve a loss of freedom. Indeed, the masses are not yet clamoring for the deliberative proposals of scholarly elites. So, if deliberative requirements are implemented, should we really expect citizens to participate or pay attention? If they do not, if deliberative effectiveness hinges on broad participation, and if the only way to achieve broad participation involves some form of compulsion, then effective deliberation entails a loss of individual freedoms – a substantial cost. Of course, pointing out the existence of such costs does not imply that delegation is incapable of producing net benefits. Schroeder is correct, however, to state that such costs should be factored into any decisions to invest in deliberation.

In sum, Schroeder concludes that claims about the benefits of deliberation that depend on analogies between legal and political decision-making are invalid because the quality of the analogy is insufficient. He also finds that prominent deliberative proposals impose larger costs than advocates claim or perhaps even realize. These findings are compelling.

I am less compelled by what Schroeder sees as an implication of these conclusions. He questions whether the spread of deliberative mechanisms in politics can be justified at all and urges theorists currently engaged in deliberative advocacy to “turn their attention to more constructive pursuits.”²³ Schroeder's demonstration that arguments for the benefits of greater deliberation cannot credibly be based on faulty analogies to law implies nothing about the

²² GUTMAN AND THOMPSON at 40, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, *Deliberation Day*, manuscript presented at DELIBERATING ABOUT DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY conference, University of Texas (2000). Available online at <http://www.la.utexas.edu/conf2000/papers.html>.

²³ *Id.* at 24.

plausibility of other possible justifications.²⁴ Evaluating such alternatives is *the* constructive pursuit that is consistent with both Schroeder's argument and the goals of many deliberative advocates.

Advocates of competence-generating mechanisms and those who want to construct such mechanisms, have incentives to be knowledgeable about the conditions under which they produce beneficial results. Such constructive pursuits should revolve around a more accurate understanding of the relationship between institutions, incentives, and decisions in settings that – unlike law -- are suitable analogies to political communication.

3. Reconnecting Deliberation to Better Foundations

Many advocates of competence-generating mechanisms are motivated by the idea that a target audience lacks the information it needs to make competent choices in an important choice domain. Schroeder has demonstrated that analogies to legal decision-making do not provide a reliable basis for assessing the costs and benefits of competence generating mechanisms. Can other evidence fill the void?

In this section, I describe how advocates and critics can better assess the likely benefits of competence-generating mechanisms. The method I advocate focuses attention on a set of conditions that mechanisms must satisfy if they are to generate the kinds of outcomes that advocates desire. I focus here on identifying necessary conditions for the claim that a particular mechanism “advantages the force of the better argument.”

²⁴ It is inevitable that some theorists will respond by contending that implementing deliberative strategies produces a procedural justice whose benefits – even if they have no consequences on outcomes such or on eliminating the role of private interests – more than justify the costs, even if they are as high as Schroeder suggests. When such reactions come, they should be treated as question begging, for if deliberation cannot be justified in terms of tangible outputs (i.e., different individual choices or social outcomes) then it does not merit the human and capital resources that would have to be invested in it to make it work – which is the substantive point of Schroeder's argument and my own.

A. Existence Conditions

To advantage the force of the better argument, it is first necessary that there, in fact, be “a better argument.” The existence of such arguments in political contexts motivates interesting debates. Since much of my argument shows how difficult advantaging such arguments is, I give advocates the benefit of the doubt at this juncture and proceed as if such arguments exist.

For a competence-generating mechanism to advantage the force of the better argument it is also necessary that it include at least two types of participant: those who come to, say, a deliberative session possessing the better argument and those who do not – for if everyone comes to the session possessing the argument, then there are no students, and if no one comes to the session possessing the argument, there are no teachers. It is also necessary that the participants be allowed to communicate in ways do not arbitrarily prevent the better argument from being conveyed or received. Deliberative theorists’ call for recognizing all participants as free and equal is usually sufficient to satisfy the condition. Such attributes are not, however, sufficient to satisfy the necessary conditions that follow.

B. Persuasive Conditions

To advantage the force of the better argument (again employing an accounting scheme favorable to advocates), it is necessary that the mechanism cause the people with the better argument to persuade *at least some* people who do not initially possess the argument to do so.²⁵ At the same time, the mechanism should not cause people who initially possess the better argument to be persuaded against it. If, for example, the better argument is that “choosing A is best for everyone,” then the mechanism should not persuade people to replace that belief with a contrary one.²⁶

²⁵ Persuasion is “human communication designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes.” Herbert W. Simons, *PERSUASION: UNDERSTANDING, PRACTICE, AND ANALYSIS* 21 (1976).

²⁶ I use the term belief to reference a concept that psychologists often call attitudes and economists often call preferences. My motivation is that we are focally concerned with an individual’s orientation towards an object and in the conditions under which the orientation can change. The orientation will be based in part

What conditions are necessary for a competence generating mechanism to produce such patterns of persuasion? To answer this question, it is helpful to think about the currency of exchange in communicative environments. I refer to this currency as an utterance. An *utterance* is a cluster of sounds or images that people use to convey ideas.

A casual view of human communication treats utterances as if they allow ideas to travel from one mind to another unadulterated – as if the ideas motivating the utterance are absorbed *en masse*. Yet this view is contradicted by a basic fact about human communication – all but the simplest utterances are *parsed*. People assign meaning to a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a speech, by breaking it down and paying attention to some parts while ignoring many others.²⁷ For example, when reading a newspaper or watching a television program, people vary in the attention that they pay to certain aspects of it, they do not simply consume all of the content as a whole – they pick the presentation apart.

For a competence generating mechanism to advantage the force of the better argument, it is necessary that a speaker's target audience parse utterances in a way that allows the better argument to supplant the argument they initially held. Many advocates of mechanisms such as expanded deliberation overlook this requirement. Doing so is equivalent to assuming that persuasion is a seamless process for which universal aspects of how people parse utterances present no important complications – which is in error.

on beliefs about what will happen as a result of interactions with the object and beliefs about how the person will feel given potential outcomes of that interaction. Across the social sciences, there are big differences in the labels used to express these concepts. My choice is motivated by a desire to clarify important aspects of belief/attitude/preference change in an intuitive and brief manner for a multi-disciplinary audience.

²⁷ Steven Pinker, *THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT: HOW THE MIND CREATES LANGUAGE* 196-222 (1994). Indeed, the same point can be made about a much wider range of environmental stimuli such as images Patricia S. Churchland, Terrence J. Sejnowski, *THE COMPUTATIONAL BRAIN* 141-238 (1991). Also see Eric R. Kandel, James H. Schwartz, Thomas M. Jessell, *ESSENTIALS OF NEURAL SCIENCE AND BEHAVIOR* 387-406 (on the parsing of visual images) and 667-694 (on the processing of language).

C. Success Requires three Cognitive Victories

Many researchers examine why, when and how one person can induce another to change her ideas. Psychologists conduct laboratory experiments on persuasion that document correspondences between the attributes of a speaker or his utterances and the reactions of his target audience.²⁸ Economists construct models of strategic communication that clarify how factors such as self-interest and competition affect the kinds of utterances that others will find credible.²⁹ Cognitive scientists develop neural networks that document the kinds of experience patterns or motivation an organism would need to change its orientation towards certain claims about how to perform.³⁰ These and other scientific literatures provide important insights about when and how ideas can be transferred.³¹ As such, they provide evidence useful for understanding when a competence-generating mechanism can advantage the force of the better argument.

Collectively, this work shows that if a competence-generating mechanism is to increase a target audience's competence, it must satisfy three additional necessary conditions:

1. The better argument must win the battle for attention.
2. The better argument must win the battle for memory.

²⁸ Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, Harold H. Kelley. COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION: PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF OPINION CHANGE (1953). William J. McGuire *Attitudes and Attitude Change*, in HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY (Gardner Lindzey, Elliot Aronson, eds. 1985).

²⁹ At least two economic literatures are relevant. One is the literature on strategic communication which includes A. Michael Spence. MARKET SIGNALING: INFORMATIONAL TRANSFER IN HIRING AND RELATED SCREENING PROCESSES (1974); Vincent Crawford, Joel Sobel, *Strategic Information Transmission*, 50 ECONOMETRICA 1431-51; and a review by Jeffrey S. Banks, SIGNALING GAMES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE. (1991). The other is the literature on mechanism design which includes Roger Myerson, *Mechanism Design by an Informed Principal*, 51 ECONOMETRICA 1767-98 (1983) and a review by Thomas R. Palfrey, *Implementation in Bayesian Equilibrium: The Multiple Equilibrium Problem in Mechanism Design*, in ADVANCES IN ECONOMIC THEORY, SIXTH WORLD CONGRESS, VOL. 1 (Jean-Jacques Laffont, ed. 1992)

³⁰ Patricia S. Churchland, Terrence J. Sejnowski. THE COMPUTATIONAL BRAIN (1992). Andy Clark, ASSOCIATIVE ENGINES: CONNECTIONISM, CONCEPTS, AND REPRESENTATIONAL CHANGE (1993).

³¹ Samuel L. Popkin, THE REASONING VOTER: COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS (1991). Diana C. Mutz, Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A Brody (eds.), POLITICAL PERSUASION AND ATTITUDE CHANGE (1996). James L. Gibson, *A Sober Second Thought: An Experiment in Persuading Russians to Tolerate*, 42 *Am. J. Polit. Sci.* 819-50 (1998). Shanto Iyengar, Nicholas Valentino, *Who Says What? Source Credibility as a Mediator of Campaign Advertising*, in ELEMENTS OF REASON: COGNITION, CHOICE AND THE BOUNDS OF RATIONALITY (Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins and Samuel L. Popkin, eds, 2000).

3. The better argument must win the battle at the precipice of choice.

These cognitive battles represent themes in the research described above most relevant to questions about when competence-generating mechanisms have desired effects.

1. The Battle for Attention

When one person attempts to convey an idea to others, the utterance is but one of many stimuli to which a target audience can attend. In the battle for attention, an utterance must fend off competitors such as aspects of prior or future events with which a person may be preoccupied, the simultaneous actions or utterances of others, background noise, the color of the wallpaper, and so on. For the utterance to deliver a specific idea, the target audience must also pay specific attention to the parts of the utterance necessary to convey the idea. For example, if someone says “George Bush pulled the United States out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty” and knowing this fact is essential to possessing “the better argument,” then the target audience must parse the utterance in a way that leads to them adopt this particular view of the relationship between Bush, the United States, and the treaty. If the target audience focuses *exclusively* on one aspect of the statement, say it hears George Bush and starts thinking about other things he does, then that exposure to the utterance will not advantage the better argument.

The fact that paying attention to an utterance precludes attention to other stimuli in one’s environment implies that attention is associated with what economists call opportunity costs – a metric for sacrificed opportunities. Such costs give people an incentive to direct their attention in ways that make such sacrifices beneficial. Advantaged will be stimuli that are very likely to cause a large increase in the pleasure one experiences or a large decrease in the pain (e.g., people in the path of a fast-moving train have an incentive to direct much of their attention to any stimulus that will help them to avoid the train).³² If the better argument is conveyable in utterances that provide greater decreases in pain or increases in pleasure than other available stimuli, then it will win the

³² Lupia and McCubbins at 21-30.

battle for attention. If, by contrast, the audience views the utterance less urgently, the better argument will not get attention and persuasion is impossible.

Moreover, if adopting the better argument requires attention to a complex string of utterances – some of which are not seen as urgent – then the argument’s battle for attention is harder to win. Such dynamics underlie the phenomena psychologists and political scientists refer to by names such as priming, framing, and agenda setting – phenomena where an early part of an utterance changes the manner in which people attend to, and otherwise process, later elements of the utterance.³³ If, for example, priming causes a person to ignore the latter part of an utterance and if understanding the better argument requires attention to the latter part, then priming prevents the mechanism from advantaging the better argument. The phenomenon labeled cognitive dissonance can have related effects as people who anticipate that an utterance will produce an aversive emotional state may ignore the utterance in an attempt to avoid the state.³⁴

Other research provides important clues about how people choose the utterances to which they attend. One clue, from linguistics, is the fact that most ideas can be expressed in multiple ways.³⁵ So, if a speaker wants to persuade others to adopt the better argument, he may have an incentive to present the idea in a particular way. That is, he will have an incentive to condition his utterance on the audience’s likely reaction. At the same time, the audience – knowing that most words have multiple meanings – may need to seek additional information about the circumstance the produced the utterance in order to infer its meaning. In politics, where *who* a particular argument benefits can provide valuable information about whether something is personally beneficial, the audience may have an incentive to condition its reaction to the utterance on the

³³ See, for example, David O. Sears, *Symbolic Politics: A Socio-Psychological Theory*, in *EXPLORATIONS IN POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY* (Shanto Iyengar and William J. McGuire, eds. 1993) and James N. Druckman, *The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence*, 24 *POLITICAL BEHAVIOR* (2002, forthcoming).

³⁴ LEON FESTINGER, *A THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE* (1957).

³⁵ For different views on the correspondence between ideas and their expression, see GEORGE LAKOFF, *WOMEN, FIRE, AND DANGEROUS THINGS: WHAT CATEGORIES REVEAL ABOUT THE MIND* (1987) or STEVEN PINKER, *WORDS AND RULES: THE INGREDIENTS OF LANGUAGE* (1999).

speaker's motivation for offering it. If, for example, I know that you have the same preferences as I do on trade policy with Mexico, then I may use this information to derive a meaning from your utterance that I might have interpreted differently had I known us to have conflicting interests. Such communication is properly categorized as *strategic interaction*.

Anyone who observes legal argument, legislative debate, negotiations, or a political campaign does not need to be told that participants are strategic in how they choose what to say and what to believe. Game-theoretic analyses of such situations show that if a target audience *perceives* a speaker to have sufficiently conflicting interests, or no expertise on the issue at hand, then they will ignore any utterance from that speaker.³⁶ Such analyses parallel efforts in psychology that identify speaker attributes that affect persuasiveness.³⁷ Since an audience is often uncertain about such speaker attributes, perceptions of such attributes drive how they parse utterances.³⁸ So even if a speaker possesses the better argument, his or her low source credibility can prevent the better argument from prevailing.³⁹

I have listed only a few hurdles that the better argument must overcome to win the battle for attention. Many mistakes about the likely success of a competence-generating mechanism can be avoided by paying greater attention to attention. For example, many people proceed as if their mechanism is akin to a "field of dreams" believing that "if you build it, they [an audience] will come." As Schroeder points out there are already many opportunities for civic engagement and most operate at far less than full capacity.⁴⁰ In a world where any particular issue is one of many

³⁶ Crawford and Sobel at 1448, Lupia and McCubbins at 54-55.

³⁷ Daniel J. O'Keefe, *PERSUASION: THEORY AND RESEARCH* (1990) at 130-157.

³⁸ Lupia and McCubbins at 50-51.

³⁹ This phenomenon appears to affect jury decision-making. There, the proportion of high-status white males selected to act as jury foreman is extraordinarily unrepresentative of their numbers in the juror population. Phoebe Ellsworth, *Are twelve heads better than one?* 52 *LAW AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS* 213 (1989). Whether this difference is consequential for the jury's competence depends on the extent to which the foremen are more likely to possess better arguments and to be more persuasive than others.

⁴⁰ Schroeder at 17.

potential concerns, winning the battle for attention will be difficult. But for a mechanism to increase competence, the battle cannot be ignored -- it must be waged.

2. *The Battle for Memory*

Once a stimulus earns attention, it must be processed. If it is processed in certain ways, aspects of it can be stored in memory and retrieved for future use. If it is not processed in these ways, it is – from a cognitive perspective – gone forever. If it is gone forever, it provides no basis for new beliefs. This is another way of saying that persuasion is impossible.⁴¹ Therefore, a necessary condition for a competence-generating mechanism to advantage the force of the better argument is that the utterance carrying the argument be parsed in a way that produces a unique residue in memory.

Several lines of social scientific research reveal how we can make better predictions about when something such as “the better argument” will battle for memory. Examples include the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the Heuristic Systematic Model from Social Psychology.⁴² Each model draws inferences from combinations of theory and experiment and reveals that if a stimulus is sufficiently engaged (i.e., the central/systematic route of information processing), it will leave a stronger and more robust residue in memory.

In other words, when people take the time to contemplate what a speaker says (i.e., when they generate internal counter-arguments for the purpose of comparison; when they elaborate) these aspects of the utterance are more likely to be coded as distinct from prior aspects of memory. These aspects of the utterance are, as a result, more likely to survive as distinct new memories. The alternative (peripheral/heuristic) route, by contrast, entails processing of details

⁴¹ I depict memory here as a process in a stimulus can create a new memory that is not necessarily the stimulus itself. My motivation for this phrasing is work on on-line processing, which demonstrates that a stimulus can affect beliefs (and attitudes) without the stimulus itself being memorized. Reed Hastie and Nancy Pennington, “*Notes on the Distinction Between Memory-Based versus On-Line Judgments*” in *ON-LINE COGNITION IN PERSON PERCEPTION* (John N. Bassili ed., 1989).

⁴² Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo, *COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION: CENTRAL AND PERIPHERAL ROUTES TO ATTITUDE CHANGE* (1986). Alice H. Eagly, Shelly Chaiken, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTITUDES* (1993).

from which inferences are easily drawn (e.g., noticing that an endorsement comes from the Sierra Club rather than reading its argument.) When an audience does not take the time to elaborate on an utterance, the utterance is less likely to generate distinct memories.

If an utterance does not generate a distinct memory, then the audience's beliefs must be derived from only old memories.⁴³ Put another way, if the utterance does not generate new memories, then persuasion is impossible and the mechanism cannot advantage the better argument. By implication, the many advocates of competence-generating mechanisms who implicitly assume that an audience will use the central route to process utterances are likely to have erroneous and unduly optimistic expectations about their endeavors. Many other lines of research about memory carry the same lesson – it is wrong to simply assume that a stimulus that wins the battle of attention also wins the battle of memory.⁴⁴

3. The Battle at the Precipice of Choice

Suppose that all of the necessary conditions listed above have been satisfied. Suppose, that is, that a better argument exists, that we have given some who possess the argument and some who do not an opportunity to communicate, that the better argument is communicable, and that utterances containing the better argument have won the battles for attention and memory. In such a case, at least one more condition must be satisfied for the mechanism to advantage the force of the better argument.

This is the “battle at the precipice of choice,” where the choice in question ranges from which vote to cast to which opinion to defend in conversations with others. For the better argument to be advantaged – to lead to a change in a future choice -- it must replace a prior belief.

⁴³ For a penetrating examination of the ways in which utterances are reconstructed in the mind, consult Mark Turner, *COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE* (2001). Id. at 63-70 provides a particularly good example.

⁴⁴ For example, “The clear expectation is that most, if not all, citizens will be biased reasoners, finding it nearly impossible to evaluate any new information in an evenhanded way. The tendency is to evaluate incoming information to support preconception and to devalue contrary evidence.” Milton Lodge and Charles Taber, *Three Steps Towards a Theory of Motivated Reasoning*, in *ELEMENTS OF REASON: COGNITION, CHOICE, AND THE BOUNDS OF RATIONALITY* 184 (Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Samuel L. Popkin eds. 2001).

So, if the better argument is “Blue is the best color of all” and if the mechanism is to advantage the argument, then the mechanism must lead this argument to replace beliefs such as “Red is the best color of all,” “There is some chance that blue is the best color of all but I am not certain,” or to create a new belief for targets who have never before contemplated the correspondence.

Thus, the final battle is between old beliefs and new ones. When people are motivated to hold correct beliefs, victory depends on the extent to which the new beliefs better correlate with prior observations.⁴⁵ If an argument contains elements easily shown to be false, its credibility is less. If prior experience or relevant analogies provide only supportive evidence, then credibility is greater. Without this final victory, any advantage the mechanism offers to the better argument is inconsequential to the target audience’s future actions. As a result, it cannot affect their competence.⁴⁶

D. Implications for Deliberation

Deliberative strategies are members of a class of mechanisms that people advocate as effective ways to counter perceived civic incompetence. To work, these mechanisms require investments of effort and capital. If such investments are based on flawed assumptions – such as assumptions derived from analogies to law or based on folk theories of how we learn -- and if there are other valuable endeavors to which the resources could have been directed, then the consequences of well-intentioned mistakes are tragic. Those who study topics such as deliberation can use their skills to reduce the number and magnitude of these tragedies.

Paying greater attention to the necessary conditions listed above can help theorists and practitioners achieve this aim. At a minimum, merely recognizing that such conditions exist can

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Stroebe and Klaus Jonas, Attitude Formation and Strategies of Change, in INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, SECOND EDITION 257-8 (Miles Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe and Geoffrey M. Stevenson, 1996).

⁴⁶ Moreover, if an argument other than the better one is able to prevail at this juncture, then persuasion can occur, but competence can fall. Suppose, for example, we want to improve a target’s ability to get from point A to point B in a specific amount of time. If the most persuasive people in the room (i.e., the people perceived to be the most knowledgeable and trustworthy) do not, in fact, possess the better argument (i.e., they think they know the way, but they are mistaken), then mechanisms that facilitate deliberation can reduce the target’s competence.

dissuade people from assuming that providing new opportunities for information transmission are equivalent to improved civic competence. Greater attention to these conditions will have the added benefit of generating questions that advocates of competence-generating mechanisms should ask if they want to reconcile their claims about performance with the actual capacity of the devices they support.

I advocate greater attention to these necessary conditions as a way to improve the competence of those who seek to improve civic competence. By the standards set out above, if my allegedly better argument is to persuade my target audience, then it must defeat their old beliefs about what makes mechanisms effective. I close this section by presenting one such set of beliefs and by explaining why it should be abandoned.

E. A Memory and A Folk Theory That Induce Undue Optimism

Many people are overly optimistic about the likely benefits of competence-generating proposals because they base their projections on flawed foundations. Schroeder showed analogies to legal decision making to be one such foundation. Here is another.

Almost everyone can all remember times *when they did not know something that they now know*. For some readers, one of those times will occur within seconds. In the United States and Europe, it is common to believe that warm places lie south of cold places. As a result, many people do not know that Venice, Italy (a place known for lovely gondolas traversing its flowing canals) is north of Buffalo, New York (a place known for long, harsh winters) and often-cold Denver, Colorado is south of often-warm Rome.

In memory, times of not knowing what they now know are accompanied by *moments of discovery*, times at which they are presented with new information that contradicts and then changes their prior beliefs. Such memories reinforce *a widely-shared folk theory* of how people learn: take ignorance, add information, and then gain competence at tasks such as knowing which of two remote cities is farther north. The human ability to recall such sequences is nearly universal. So is the ability to describe them. As a result, the folk theory is easy to communicate.

Relative to more complex explanations of how we learn, we should expect this one to suffice in casual conversations where the cost of being incorrect is insubstantial.

But the folk theory can be deceptive. The deception takes the form of inducing people to derive a causal story about how people learn from datum insufficient for that task. The deception is a consequence of what statisticians call “selecting on the dependent variable.” In other words, people recall the cases where the theory is accurate (e.g., we start incompetent at a particular task, we pay attention to a new piece of information, it changes our views, and we gain the ability to accomplish the task) and not cases in which it fails (e.g., we start incompetent at a particular task, we either ignore new information or use it in a way that does not increase our intelligence, and we gain no task-relevant abilities).

We select on the dependent variable described above not on purpose, but because a “state of not knowing something that we now know, moment of discovery” sequence is advantaged in memory. Its advantage comes from the fact that it is built *only* from events that have occurred.⁴⁷ The theory-counteracting sequence “state of not knowing something that we now might have known, moment of learning what we would have known had attended or reacted to the information in a different way”, by contrast, contains counterfactuals – objects not directly retrievable from memory. Counterfactual construction requires substantial cognitive effort; effort that comes only if a person is sufficiently motivated.⁴⁸

I contend that many people can more easily recall instances where more information led to greater competence than they can to instances where such attempts failed. The consequence of this tendency is to overestimate the extent to which “take ignorance, add information, and then

⁴⁷ In other words, the cognitive act of attempting to construct a causal story of the form “A causes B” requires access to states “not A and not B, A and B.” If either of the two states “not A and not B” and “A and B” is impossible to access, then the sequence cannot be constructed and the causal story cannot emerge. On basic properties of memory, consult Kandel, et. al. at 651-663. For a recent review of what flaws in memory imply for legal decision making see DANIEL L. SCHACTER, *THE SEVEN SINS OF MEMORY: HOW THE MIND FORGETS AND REMEMBERS* (2001). Schacter at 91-98 focuses on properties of misattribution.

⁴⁸ Petty and Cacioppo at 81-90. The articles in PETER M. GOLLWITZER, JOHN A. BARGH (EDS.) *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ACTION* (1995) also focus on the correspondence between motivation and cognition.

gain competence at tasks such as knowing which of two remote cities is farther north” is a valid analogy to a proposed mechanism’s performance. Such tendencies explain many advocates’ resistance to contemplating what features are necessary or sufficient for their proposal to produce desired outcomes.

Indeed, a problem with many claims made by advocates of deliberation and other competence-generating proposals is that they are disconnected from empirical work on belief change in the social and cognitive sciences. They do not attend to discoveries regarding aspects of perception, attention, and retention that affect how people process new information. By ignoring this literature, advocates cannot articulate what conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for their proposal to cause any particular belief or behavior change. It is, therefore, not surprising that the returns to investment in competence-generating proposals are so poorly understood.

Fortunately, an alternative strategy is available. The social and cognitive sciences are providing a set of cognitive and psychological universals from which those who theorize about or attempt to build competence-generating mechanisms can derive principles of effective design. By paying closer attention to the circumstances under which an utterance wins and loses the battles of attention, memory, and choice, people who want to enhance civic competence can allocate their scarce resources more effectively and efficiently.⁴⁹

4. Conclusion

This essay is devoted to clarifying how competence-generating mechanisms work. It’s preliminary goal is to steer those who want to build civic competence away from flawed analogies in legal decision-making and unreliable folk theories of learning. Its primary goal is to steer these same people towards a more productive and constructive way of thinking about

⁴⁹ Instances of such work on the topic of deliberation include Joseph Heath, *COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND RATIONAL CHOICE* (2001); James Johnson, *Arguing for Deliberation: Some Skeptical Considerations*, in Jon Elster (ed.) *DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY* (1988); Michael A. Neblo, *THINKING THROUGH DEMOCRACY: DELIBERATIVE POLITICS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago Department of Political Science (2000) and Lynn Sanders, *Against Deliberation*, 25 *POLITICAL THEORY* 347-376 (1997).

building civic competence. That is why I advocate greater attention to fundamental properties of proposed and extant competence generating mechanisms.

With respect to deliberation, I believe that there are conditions in which it can have many of the effects that its advocates claim. I also find conditions under which deliberation can have no effect as well as effects that are counterproductive to its advocates' aims. For deliberation, and for the construction of civic competence generally, the road to progress lies in learning how to tell the difference. In other words, progress will come from arguments that bind themselves to practical relevance through a commitment to building from scientific discoveries.

**What We Should Know:
Can Ordinary Citizens Make Extraordinary Choices?**

Arthur Lupia
University of California, San Diego

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The editors of this volume ask us to contemplate “how ordinary people make extraordinary political choices.” The extraordinary choices they have in mind are about “one single issue,” “very salient, broadly encompassing and practically irreversible.” Examples of such choices are national referendums on fundamental questions of social organization, such as votes on the status of Quebec in Canada and votes on European Union membership throughout Europe.

The editors’ choice of words reveals an interesting tension between citizens’ capabilities and democratic governance. The description of citizens as *ordinary* prompts images of people who pay little attention to politics. The description of certain choices as *extraordinary* brings to mind the underlying complexity of politics and very high stakes critical referendums. So when we juxtapose ordinary citizens and extraordinary choices, it is only natural to ask whether the match is a good one. *Are ordinary people competent to make extraordinary choices?*

Questions about the competence of ordinary people are a common facet of debates about mass democracy. Many people hold the view that ordinary citizens are not competent because they base political choices on insufficient factual foundations. Two statements of this view, though separated by over 200 years, are representative.

"The proposition that [the people] are the best keeper of their liberties is not true. They are the worst conceivable, they are no keepers at all. They can neither act, judge, think, or will"
John Adams, 1788

Overall, close to a third of Americans can be categorized as “know-nothings” who are almost completely ignorant of relevant political information (Bennett 1998) -- which is not, by any means, to suggest that the other two-thirds are well informed.... Three aspects of voter ignorance deserve particular attention. First, voters are not just ignorant about specific policy issues, but about the basic structure of government and how it operates (Neuman 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996, ch. 2; Bennett 1988). Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 707-71). This suggests that voters not only cannot choose between specific competing policy programs, but also cannot accurately assign credit and blame for visible policy outcomes to the right office-holders.
Ilya Somin 1999: 417

Supporting this point of view are answers to what pollsters call “political information” questions. Ordinary people routinely provide incorrect answers to such questions on national surveys. On a recent survey of 1067 randomly selected Americans, for example, only 61% correctly identified Republicans as the majority party in the United States House of Representatives and only 22% correctly identified the number of Supreme Court justices as nine (The Second Multi-Investigator Studies, 1999).

With such evidence abundant and widely publicized, it is difficult to imagine that ordinary people are competent to make extraordinary political choices. And yet, this is precisely what I will argue. In what follows, I first identify conditions under which ordinary people are competent to make the extraordinary political choices described above. I then use these conditions to conclude that ordinary people are competent in a wider range of circumstances than many critics presume. I support this conclusion by offering evidence for three premises.

1. The choices in question (a.k.a., big choices) are binary choices, which reduces considerably the cognitive requirements for voter competence.
2. Simple and widely available pieces of information (i.e., cues) can help voters vote as they would have if they knew more about the big choice in question.
3. The salience of big choices makes it easier for ordinary people to use cues effectively.

Taken together, these premises imply that big choices stack the deck in favor of competent voting -- even by ordinary people who cannot answer common survey questions about politics.

To say that ordinary people are more competent than many critics allege, however, is not to say that instances of voter incompetence are trivial or non-existent. Instances where ordinary people lack access to critical pieces of information are surely widespread. Scholarly analyses, however, can provide effective and efficient remedies to competence problems only if they can distinguish malignant informational contexts from benign ones. The advantage of the focus I adopt – examining *the conditions* under which ordinary people can make big choices competently -- is that we can use its insights to clarify the contexts in which voter incompetence most likely

arises. With such clarifications in hand, we can target voter education efforts more effectively. I end the chapter with such suggestions.

Before continuing, I should add that I consider myself an ordinary person in the sense that I make most political choices using means very similar to the people whose behaviors I examine. So do you and so do professional legislators. We base most of our choices, even complex and important ones, on very simple kinds of information. Making choices in this way leaves us vulnerable to mistakes, but we proceed in this fashion because we have no other choice. Each of us has thousands of choices to make every day. We cannot know detailed information about, or conduct rigorous research on, the consequences of every choice we face. Yet to survive and prosper we must make these choices in particular ways. Since we cannot know everything, our choices will be based on the few rules of thumb or heuristics that we adopt. For ordinary people to make extraordinary choices competently, there are certain things that we should know. This chapter clarifies what we should know to make big choices competently.

The plan of the chapter is as follows. First, I define competence in a way that is appropriate to the context at hand. Then, I draw on evidence from several sources to build the voter competence argument outlined above. I reinforce the argument by explaining why survey data on answers to “political information” questions are badly suited for assessing competence in the domain of big choices. I then use distinguishing characteristics of cases where we should expect to find limited voter competence to suggest ways to reduce voter errors.

A Definition of Competence

The point of this chapter is to examine whether ordinary people are competent to make extraordinary decisions. Questions about competence are important; for if voters are seen as incompetent, then an electorate’s big choices are perceived to be less legitimate and the idea that voters can hold government accountable for its subsequent actions becomes less plausible.

We can define voter competence in many ways. Common definitions define a list of facts that people should know, or values that people should hold, before making a decision. A problem

with such definitions, from an analytic perspective, is that there is very little agreement on what facts or values should be on the list. In ideological debates, for example, partisans often decry their adversaries as less competent than themselves because they have not devoted sufficient attention to facts that they favor. It is my experience that many debates about competence have this flavor. Such instances are not venues for which social scientific inquiry can trump core ideological assertions.

Instead of engaging in an argument about which worldview others should have, I opt for a definition of competence that we can analyze more precisely and use to improve an important democratic skill. I define competence as the ability to accomplish a task. This definition is a technical one – analogous to definitions used in research on expertise and competent performance in fields such as cognitive science and the study of artificial intelligence (see, e.g., Newell 1990).⁵⁰ I derive my definition from questions such as the following:

A voter knows a set of 26 facts that we can label A-Z. Suppose we can agree that knowing such facts allows the voter to accomplish a particular task successfully (i.e., to cast a vote for the alternative that best represents her interests.) Is there a different set of facts, perhaps even a subset of facts A-Z, that also allows her to accomplish the task?

If the answer to the question is yes, then we know that there are multiple information sets that allow competent performance. If not, then we know that facts A-Z are necessary for competent performance.

It is important to note that competence and information are different. Competence is the ability to make accurate predictions; information is data. Competence requires information because accurate predictions require some data. By contrast, you can know a long list of facts and fail to put them together in a way that allows you to make accurate predictions. Thus, while competence requires information, you can have information without being competent.

What does this definition of competence imply about big choices? Big choices, as editors define them, are primarily referendums. A common attribute of referendums is that nearly all ask

⁵⁰ I derive much of this argument from more comprehensive treatments of the topic in Lupia and McCubbins (1998) and Lupia and Johnston (2001).

voters to make a binary choice. The typical referendum allows voters to choose one of two alternatives -- the piece of legislation described on the ballot or the pre-existing status quo.

In the big choice context, I define a voter's choice as competent if it is the same choice that she would make given the most accurate available information about its consequence. Would she make the same decision if more informed about the consequences of her actions? If yes, then her choice is competent. So, all that the voter needs to do, regardless of how complex the referendum, is to figure out whether the policy described on the ballot is *better* or *worse* with respect to his or her interests than the policy entailed by the status quo. Even if both alternatives are very technical, it is sufficient just to know the difference.

The Case for Voter Competence

My case for voter competence follows from work on the use of heuristics in political science (see, e.g., Kuklinski, Metlay, and May 1982; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). This work builds from insights developed in economics, psychology, and more recently, cognitive science. It attempts to build explanations of voter behavior from premises about their cognition and incentives.

I will argue that many voters make big choices competently by demonstrating two points. First, I demonstrate that voters can use simple pieces of information as substitutes for the detailed information that political surveys show them to lack. Second, I argue that attention paid to big choices helps voters use simple information substitutes effectively. Since most big choices are binary, effective information substitutes are often available for big choices, and the attention paid to many big choices stacks in favor of using these substitutes effectively, I conclude that many voters make big choices competently. I then end this section by explaining why common survey measures that seem to reveal voter incompetence imply little about the conclusion I reach.

Point 1: Voters Can Use Information Shortcuts

My definition of competence stipulates only that the voter chooses *as if* she had a certain amount of information. It leaves open the possibility that encyclopedic information about issues is not required. This definition stands at odds with definitions of competence in political science that demand levels of knowledge which are encyclopedic in character and focus on attentiveness to political detail (see, e.g., Luskin 1988, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). For something like knowledge of details to be a necessary condition for competence, however, the following must also be true: people can make reliable predictions about the consequences of their actions *only if* they know a particular, detailed set of facts about these actions. But this assumption is false. Citizens can and do use limited amounts of information to make the same choices they would have made if they had more information.

Suppose, for example, that knowledge of a particular set of facts is sufficient for a competent choice (e.g., suppose that knowing George W. Bush's position on 100 political issues is sufficient for a competent vote in the 2000 U.S. presidential election). Then, if a person does not know these facts, and cannot access any other facts that allow her to make the same choice, then she cannot choose competently. If, however, there exists another, perhaps simpler, set of facts that leads her to make the same choice (i.e., the Republican Party and the NRA endorse Bush), then knowing the initial set of facts is not a prerequisite for competence. When simple information substitutes (i.e., information shortcuts) can lead citizens to make the same choices as more detailed information, citizens can be competent without knowing these details. Competence and information are different.

Indeed, we look for quick and effective cues about the likely consequences of many of our daily actions. Traffic lights, brand names, and personal reputations are all shortcuts that allow us to make complex decisions quickly and effectively. And this mode of reasoning is not something that we turn on and off, but a fundamental characteristic of how we live (Churchland and Sejnowski 1992, Pinker 1998, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Since research on

human cognition has settled that people will use devices such as short cuts in contexts such big choices, the key to understanding referendum voters' competence is to determine *how* they use available short cuts.

Lupia (1994a, also see Lupia and Johnston 2001) reports on an example of how people use short cuts in a binary choice context. His findings are the result of an exit poll whose purpose was to determine the extent to which relatively uninformed voters could use information short cuts to cast the same votes they would have cast if better informed. The exit poll surveyed California voters who were confronted by five complex propositions regarding the regulation of the insurance industry. Three of the propositions were placed on the ballot by the insurance industry, while trial lawyers and consumer activists put one each on the ballot.

My pollsters asked respondents how they voted on the propositions, some socioeconomic and insurance rate-related questions, and a series of questions about the propositions. These latter questions were intended to learn not only what respondents knew about the details of the insurance reform debate but also to gauge respondent beliefs about the preferences of persons or groups who took public stands on the initiatives.

The study's central finding identifies a class of voters who, while possessing relatively low levels of information about the content of the insurance reform initiatives, used an information short cut that allowed them to emulate the behavior of well informed voters. It shows that relatively uninformed voters who could correctly identify the insurance industry's official position on a particular proposition were much more likely to emulate the behavior of relatively well informed voters on that proposition than were similarly uninformed voters who did not know the insurance industry's position.

The study's main finding is clarified by sorting respondents into three categories. The first category contains voters who knew neither the answers to the detailed questions about the propositions nor the insurance industry's preferences. The second category contains "model citizens" -- voters who consistently gave correct answers to detailed questions about the insurance

initiatives and who knew the insurance industry's preferences. The third category contains respondents who could not answer questions about the propositions' details but, like the model citizens, knew the insurance industry's preference.

The conclusion that knowledge of the insurance industry's preferences provided an effective short cut for voters who lacked encyclopedic information comes from a comparison of these three voter categories. Voters in the second and third categories cast similar vote patterns, while voters in the first category (who were ignorant of the endorsements) look very different than the other voters. Voters in the third category voted as if they were "model citizens."

Why should the insurance endorsement work in this way? First, the insurance industry spent over \$65 million attempting to pass the three initiatives sponsored by its members and to defeat the other two. Second, the campaign made the insurance industry's position on each issue widely known. Consumer activist Ralph Nader, in particular, made frequent public appearances. His efforts generated substantial media coverage of the fact that the insurance industry was pouring unprecedented amounts of money into the campaign. Third, most voters had prior interactions with the insurance industry and believed that their future insurance rates were at stake. In particular, the initiatives sponsored by insurance companies (Propositions 101, 104 and 106) would allow insurance companies to raise premiums and lower benefits, while the activists' initiative (103, the only one of the five to win on Election Day) restrained the industry's abilities to make these moves. As a result, when many less-informed people learned the insurance industry's preferences, they voted against them. While we cannot be certain that this was an optimal move for the less-informed voters, the fact that the best-informed voters acted the same way is suggestive of the prior group's competence.

This finding provides support for the claim that low-information voters can use information short cuts to emulate the voting behavior they would have exhibited if they were as informed as were the best-informed persons in the survey. More rigorous analyses in Lupia (1994a) demonstrate that this result is robust to the introduction of a wide variety of contextual

and socioeconomic factors. I also observed analogous results in a variety of laboratory experimental settings (Lupia 1994b).

Point 2. People are systematic in whom they choose to believe.

In large campaigns, many claims are made and many opinions are available. No voter can attend to all of them; voters must choose to whom and to what to listen. Moreover, competitive campaigns produce contradicting claims. As a result, voters must make choices about which to believe and which to dismiss.

In the latter part of the 1990's, I made the case that voters, legislators, and jurors are systematic in how they choose whom to believe in common political contexts. To make the case, I integrated formal models (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, chapter 3), laboratory experiments (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, chapter 7), and survey experiments (Lupia 2001). Here, I will summarize the formal model's conclusions while noting that the empirical work shows that these conclusions are far more consistent with observed behavior than are numerous rival explanations.

The model builds from a generation of economic signaling models that produce precise insights about how people overcome problems associated with possibly strategic communication. These models complement theories of persuasion in psychology (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986, Eagly and Chaiken 1993) by detailing how the costs of communication affect what speakers choose to say and whom listeners choose to believe (see, e.g., Milgrom and Roberts 1986, Farrell and Gibbons 1989, Banks 1991, Farrell and Rabin 1996).

These models, paraphrased for the purpose at hand, begin with the premise that a voter may lack the information she needs to make a big choice competently. While relying on others for information often requires less of the voter's time and effort than does conducting her own investigation of the issues at hand, such dependence can also entail substantial peril. Not all people from whom voters can seek advice are trustworthy or knowledgeable. They have an incentive to seek advice from people who are credible and to avoid information providers who provide vague or misleading reports.

My work with Mathew McCubbins (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, chapter 3) clarifies conditions under which voters can choose whom to believe in a way that allows them to vote competently. Our model includes a third party (i.e., a speaker, advice giver, or interest group) who can advise voters about how to vote -- he can say that an alternative is better or worse than the status quo and he need not tell the truth. Voters in the model may be uncertain about how much the advice giver knows (i.e., whether or not he is an expert on the topic at hand) and his preferences (i.e., the location of his ideal point). The speaker gives advice in the context of up to three external forces. We call these forces verification, penalties for lying and costly effort. Together, they cover the range of effects that external forces can have on communication (Lupia and McCubbins 1998: 54).

Verification works by posing the threat that voters can discern true claims from false ones. This threat changes the speaker's incentives in the following way: as the probability of verification increases, the probability that he can benefit from making false statements decreases. Therefore, *verification decreases the expected value of making false statements*. When the threat of verification has this effect, it provides voters with a more effective way to judge a speaker's credibility. Political institutions increase the likelihood of verification when they provide new actors with incentives to verify existing information (e.g., institutional variations that induce competition among advice givers can have this effect, so can the practice of cross-examination in courtroom settings; see also Milgrom and Roberts 1986).

Penalties for lying help voters gain information by giving both the sender and intended recipient of advice a reason to believe that the latter can distinguish truth tellers from liars. In general, voters who believe that a speaker faces a penalty for lying can make one of the following two inferences upon hearing the speaker: (1) the statement is true; or (2) the statement is false and the penalty is not big enough to deter the speaker from lying. When penalties for lying have this effect, they allow voters to better judge a speaker's credibility. Common penalties for lying in political contexts include the loss of a valued reputation or legal penalties for perjury.

When institutions induce people to take *observable and costly efforts*, they can also affect what people know. The logic underlying this effect is seen in many economic signaling models and closely follows the old adage; “actions speak louder than words.” When a speaker takes a costly action (i.e., exerts effort), he reveals information about how much a particular outcome is worth to him. If, for example, a speaker pays \$100 for the opportunity to persuade us, then we can infer that the difference between what the speaker expects us to do after hearing his statement and what he expects us to do without his statement is worth at least \$100 to him. Therefore, even if he ultimately delivers his statement in a language that we do not understand, the speaker’s payment informs us that our choice is important to him. More generally, when we can distinguish the claims of others by the amount of effort they put into making them, we have yet another tool for assessing credibility.

Our model clarifies the joint logical implications of the assumptions about voters, third parties and the communicative contexts in which they interact just described. Our main result, paraphrased for the purpose at hand, is as follows:

Proposition: *A voter can make a competent choice only if:*

- *the voter’s prior knowledge is sufficient for this task or*
- *she can correctly perceive a third party to have common interests and the knowledge she desires or*
- *the presence of external factors provides effective substitutes for her lack of knowledge about the third party's knowledge and interests.*⁵¹

This proposition implies that voters need not know many details of a big choice in order to vote as if they did. For example, if voters have access to reliable advisers then they need not be very knowledgeable about the details of the choice at hand. And, if institutions generate the external forces that clarify others' incentives, then competent voters can also lack information about information providers. Seen in this light, the requirements for voter competence in big

⁵¹ In Lupia and McCubbins (1998: 240-260), we offer more precise statements about how each institutional force affects player incentives, player behavior, and the outcome of the game. The statement of the proposition here is offered to enhance intuition with a minimum of technical detail.

choice contexts can be quite minimal.

The content of the proposition is the product of logic and modeling. On its own, however, it is not sufficient to answer questions about voter competence with respect to any particular big choice. To answer such questions, we must assess whether the proposition's conditions are satisfied when societies make big choices. I contend that most big choices stack the deck in favor of voter competence. They are, for example, made after long and public debates. If the issue is big enough, many well-known people and groups take a stand. If the competition is fierce enough, well-known people defend and refine their views. Combatants also gain incentives to expose flaws in the views of their rivals. Salience and competitiveness by no means ensure competence, but such forces do increase penalties for lying and the probability of verification. Therefore, their marginal effects increase the likelihood of voter competence.

As Lupia and Johnston (2001) argue, it may also be true that polities encounter issues for which experts are themselves not well informed. In this case there are two possible scenarios. In the first scenario, no one in the polity is sufficiently well informed. In such a case, letting the voters make the big choice rather than leaving it to the legislature causes no loss in competence. In the second scenario, some elites are knowledgeable, but the electorate's experts are not. In a closed society, where the channels of communication are centrally controlled or in a society where effective channels of communication do not exist, the second scenario is imaginable. In such a situation, letting voters make big choices can do considerable damage. European and North American states, however, are not closed societies. Each has access to modern forms of communication and competitive political environments in which referendums occur. If someone has the opportunity to expose the opposing side's weaknesses, the competitive nature of politics gives them a strong incentive to go public. In such cases, it is possible, but unlikely, that competing elites will conspire to withhold important information from potential supporters in the electorate. In sum, if there are people who are willing to provide simple cues to voters and if there

is sufficient competition for voters to learn the motives of people they listen to, then voters can better approximate the binary choices they would have made if more informed.

Common Survey Measures Reveal Little About Voter Competence

Many citizens spend very little time attending to the details of politics. This makes us suspicious of what they have in mind when they vote. Since voting scholars cannot observe voters' thoughts directly, they often turn to surveys for proxy measures. In most cases, surveys ask voters for their political opinions. Some surveys also ask political knowledge questions. These questions are much like the quizzes administered in civics classes. They reveal who can answer questions such as "What is the political office currently held by Dick Cheney?"

Many citizens have a difficult time answering these questions. A recent book by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) provides a comprehensive study of the evidence on this matter. It covers several decades and hundreds of surveys. It describes which questions people can and cannot answer and shows how this ability varies over time and across socioeconomic groups. They show that what Converse said in 1975 remains true today, "the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys ... is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low" (1975:79).

Many analysts use data such as this to conclude that voters are incompetent. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) do not draw this exact conclusion, focusing instead on the differences between groups. They do, however, maintain that "more information is better than less information" (pp. 14, 269) and that "how informed the citizenry is and who is informed become important considerations in understanding the civic competence of the general public" (p. 152). Indeed, doubts about voter competence are advanced regularly by political pundits (e.g., Will 1994) and by people who question the wisdom of policy making by initiative and referendum (e.g., Cain and Miller 2001).

In recent years, some scholars have taken these arguments one step further. Many now construct "political knowledge" scales, by counting the number of correct responses to small

numbers of these of questions. While these data may be useful for other purposes, I contend that they reveal little about voter competence on big choices. I support this conclusion by making two points. First, I show that the relationship between the ability to make a big choice competently and the ability to answer one or a few political information questions is loose, at best. Second, I argue that recent claims about the "validity" of such measures are not based on valid theories of human cognition.

Loose Relations

A voter's choice is competent if it is the same choice that she would make given sufficient information about its consequence. The heuristics school reminds us that shortcuts are available for many political choices, which implies that there is more than one informational pathway to a competent choice. If answering the types of questions that appear on political surveys were either necessary or sufficient for competence on a particular issue, then data on citizens' ability to answer these questions would provide important data about their competence. But this is not generally true. Indeed, the existence of shortcuts makes it very unlikely that knowing the answer to any particular survey question will be a necessary condition for competence on any particular vote, especially a big choice.

Of course, findings such as "only 10 percent of the public could define the meaning of "liberal" or "conservative" (Converse 1964), and an even smaller percentage actually used such ideological categories in evaluating candidates and parties (Campbell, et. al. 1960)" (as reported in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 41), have led many scholars to portray ordinary citizens as stupid. These conclusions come from the belief that the concepts underlying the survey questions have a critical meaning. And they do. To many analysts, these concepts are critical to the way that *they* understand politics. It is clear, however, that these same ideas do not have the same importance to citizens.

If there are multiple informational pathways to competence (i.e., effective shortcuts), then voters need not adopt elite categories to make competent choices. While analysts may find terms

such as liberal or conservative, useful, there is no reason to expect citizens to do the same -- for them alternate concepts such as Democrat and Republican or “liked by people I respect” and “disliked by people I respect” work just fine. While answers to extant “political knowledge” questions and scales may have other important uses, their relevance to voter competence debates is distant, at best. Observing that voters answer the political information questions incorrectly does not determine their competence as voters. It may also be evidence that survey researchers misinterpret responses to political information questions or that they ask citizens the wrong questions in their search for a gauge of voter competence.

Validity Problems

When I first offered this argument orally at conferences, I was assured that recent work established the validity of the political knowledge scales. And, indeed, there is work that claims to do this. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 151-152), follow Smith (1989), and Bennett (1990) in using factor analysis to defend the assumption that “a scale with a limited number of factual items, if carefully constructed, can be used to approximate what citizens know more generally about politics.” Delli Carpini and Keeter later conclude that such measures represent “important considerations in understanding the civic competence of the public.” I agree that these statistics show that people who are good at answering some survey questions are also good at answering others. It is not, however, clear that these measures imply anything about a voter's competence in the voting booth or political competence considered more generally.

To see the problem with such validity claims, consider analogous debates about the measurement of intelligence elsewhere in the social sciences. Gould, for example, in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996) examines the argument that intelligence can be meaningfully abstracted as a single number. His argument against this type of scale is powerful, though much of it is directed towards racial prejudice, a topic about which “political knowledge” scholars are quite careful. An important part of his critique, however, goes beyond prejudice and into the properties of statistical inference. Indeed, the core of his methodological argument is about

whether factor analysis can be used to determine the validity of intelligence measures. He (p. 48) argues "the key error of factor analysis lies in reification, or the conversion of abstractions into putative real entities." In particular, he shows the flaws in attributing too much to the first principal component in a factor analysis -- the precise statistic upon which "political knowledge scale" scholars' base their claim of validity.

The first principal component is a mathematical abstraction that can be calculated for any matrix of correlation coefficients; it is not a "thing" with physical reality. Factorists have often fallen prey to a temptation for *reification* - for awarding *physical meaning* to all strong principal components. Sometimes this is justified; I believe that I can make a good case for interpreting my first pelycosaurian axis as a size factor. But such a claim can never arise from the mathematics alone, only from additional knowledge of the physical nature of the measures themselves. For nonsensical systems of correlation have principal components as well, and they may resolve more information than meaningful components do in other systems. A factor analysis for a five-by-five correlation matrix of my age, the population of Mexico, the price of Swiss cheese, my pet turtles' weight, and the average distance between galaxies during the past ten years will yield a strong first principal component. This component - since all the correlations are so strongly positive - will probably resolve as high a percentage of information as the first axis in my study of pelycosaurians. It will also have no enlightening physical meaning whatsoever. (Gould 1996: 280).

If this argument is correct, then the validity of using "knowledge scales" as evidence of voter competence, or even general political intelligence, depends on "additional knowledge of the physical nature of the measures themselves."

What additional knowledge can validate political knowledge scales? The additional knowledge needed here is on how people convert political information into voting decisions. Such knowledge exists in the recent work of cognitive scientists, economists, psychologists, and political scientists, many of whom find that people use various substitutes for detailed information as the basis for competent performance. These findings contradict the idea that questions in the scale are equivalent to necessary or sufficient conditions for voter competence -- the premise underlying political knowledge scales' claims to validity in the context of voter competence. That the knowledge scales have anything close to this property is extremely

unlikely, as "the selection of specific items remains fairly subjective, guided by the goals of the research and influenced by factors not easily quantified" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 299).

The claim that common knowledge scales provide valid measures of voter competence is itself invalid. These scales undoubtedly reflect the extent to which citizens are aware of facts taught in basic civics classes, which in other domains of politics may be vital things to know. But big choices are binary choices and there is no tangible evidence that correct answers to the kinds of questions that drive political knowledge scales are anywhere near necessary or sufficient conditions for ordinary people to make extraordinary political choices competently.

Finding and Treating Incompetence

I have argued that ordinary people are competent in a wider range of circumstances than critics presume. To reach this conclusion, I cite research that clarifies the conditions under which such competence is possible. Because arguments in favor of voter competence are relatively rare, I have focused on conditions under which heuristic decision-making breeds competence. These conditions, however, are not satisfied by all big choices. There are circumstances in which we can expect voters to lack the information they need to vote competently. Understanding these circumstances is of utmost importance for efforts to increase the quality of political participation by enhancing voter competence. I offer a few ideas for enhancing voter competence that stem from the conditions under which heuristic decision-making does not lead to competence.

Kuklinski and Quirk (2000), for example, use insights from cognitive science and psychology to reveal important pitfalls of heuristic decision-making. They document instances where people exhibit suboptimal patterns of information usage including overconfidence in predictions, resistance to correction, and the increased influence of arguments that are easy to state (e.g., it was easier to label Lani Guinier a quota queen than to explain that the tag was inaccurate). Drawing attention to such judgmental errors people is useful. These concerns are especially important for political choices that are nowhere near binary and where mechanisms to learn the interests and incentives of information providers are more difficult.

Cain and Miller (2000) express a related concern -- one that is reminiscent of scholars ranging from Michels (1915) to Weber (1946). They contend that if voters rely on shortcuts "then they delegate power to a new class of mediators, who are also unaccountable if something goes wrong (p. 28)." Their concern is valid. The key to competence in big choices is that voters who use shortcuts (which is to say nearly all voters all of the time) make correct decisions about whom to trust. The research cited above reveals that transparency and feedback regarding the interests of those who attempt to persuade voters is an essential element of voter competence. For many "small choices" and for big choices where voters cannot get information about elite incentives, reliance on shortcuts is indeed a risky move.

Another concern is distributional. Most "heuristics aid competence" conclusions are general possibility or existence claims. If the claims are not proven to be true of everyone in a given electorate, then it may be that only certain people benefit from common shortcuts. To the extent that this is the case, Delli Carpini and Keeter's work is instructive. They show that variations in the ability to answer political information questions correspond to differences in socioeconomic status.

These concerns signal a need for a competitive and open market for political information to exist whenever big choices are made. Voters are more likely to cast competent votes when the veracity of the information shortcuts available to them are easy to verify. Competition and openness provides opportunities for such verification. More to the point, people who want to enhance voter competence would do better to design communicative institutions in ways that make it easier for voters to receive verifiable feedback on the credibility of their advice givers than to provide citizens with elongated information packets that most will never read.

Delli Carpini and Keeter's work also shows the value of multi-pronged approaches to information transmission. People with different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds come to an election with a diverse set of reference points. Further research on political cognition will clarify these differences (e.g., what kinds of icons or endorsements are especially useful to

people who would seek more political information if it were easier to understand). The alternative is to insist that everyone know the same set of facts. But *what we should know* is that people can come to a competent decision in many ways. Different segments of the population respond to different cues. Treating cases of incompetence requires understanding the richness of these variations.

Indeed, the way forward is, to coin a phrase, is a more *behavioral institutionalism* (see Lupia 2002). In 1966, V.O. Key said, "the voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the output (p. 2)." In 1966, Delli Carpini and Keeter added that the voice of the people "also bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the shape of the chamber itself (p. 20)." We should do more to show how the "shape" of institutions affects what people believe, what they choose. Voters, when they make big choices, are affected by internalized memories and experiences that as well as external institutional incentives.

But the study of preference formation and change and the study of institutions have evolved with only limited interaction. As Sniderman (2000: 68) notes:

"Initially, we asked how citizens effectively can simplify political choices so as to make them coherently. Putting the question this way led us, like virtually everyone else, to start the explanatory process by focusing on the characteristics of citizens. How much attention do they pay to politics? What do they know about it? ... Answer these questions, and we should be in a position to figure out how citizens make political choices. Or so it seemed then. Now, I am persuaded, we had the order of things wrong. Citizens do not operate as decision makers in isolation from political institutions. If they are in a position to overcome their informational shortfalls by taking advantage of judgmental shortcuts, it is because public choices have been organized by political institutions in ways that lend themselves to these shortcuts."

The lack of attention to belief change in the study of institutions (both the rational choice and historical variants) and vice versa hampers our discipline's ability to give precise answers to questions about how institutional variations affect social outcomes such as big choices. The research described above takes a step in this direction showing how institutionally manipulable factors such as the size of penalties for lying or the likelihood of verification can affect the kinds

of voters who can learn enough to cast competent votes. By understanding more about how internal and external forces interact in the context of political decision-making, we should gain valuable insights into why voters and electorates make big choices in the ways that they do.

Other scholars go beyond focusing on the conditions under which heuristic decision-making fails by arguing that the heuristics approach promotes a thin view of citizenship.

Schudson (2000: 20) states the case directly:

"The realism of the political heuristics school is an indispensable corrective to unwarranted bashing of the American public. Americans are not the political dolts they often seem to be. Still, the political heuristics approach has a potentially fatal flaw: It subtly substitutes voting for *citizenship*. Cognitive shortcuts have their place, but what if a citizen wants to persuade someone else to vote for his or her chosen candidate? What may be sufficient in the voting booth is inadequate in the wider world of the democratic process: discussion, deliberation, and persuasion. It is possible to vote and still be disenfranchised."

The minimization of public participation in politics is a valid concern. It is not, however, a problem for which the heuristics school can be blamed. I study how people use heuristics because it is what they do, not because I want them to or think they always should. I study voting because it is, in some senses, a measurable act. Citizenship, while an important concept, evades scientific treatment because people have made numerous assertions about, but have never agreed upon, the measure of a "good" citizen. To the extent that political actions broader than voting lend themselves to replicable scientific analyses, there is merit in doing such work. Otherwise, scientists have little comparative advantage in making general assertions about what "good citizens" should know.

Conclusion

Large electorates can make competent binary choices if knowledgeable interests have the incentive and the freedom to state their views and if the institutional foundations of political debate make it easier to people to determine the interests and incentives of those who attempt to influence them. The research I summarize above also points to ways that we can improve our

understanding of voter competence. At a minimum, they illuminate the problems inherent in using a small number of responses to survey questions as evidence of voter competence.

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