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How Much Knowledge Does Democracy Require?

The phrase “weapons of mass destruction” came to most people’s attention for the first time when President Bush began warning the United States about Saddam Hussein and Iraq’s threat to world peace and American lives. During the months building up to the war, President Bush and his allies talked about weapons of mass destruction so frequently that newspapers began using the abbreviation WMD. The message was simple: Saddam Hussein had the weapons, and we had to stop him from using them.

In the months after the Iraq War, weapons of mass destruction continued to hit the front pages. At first the failure to find the WMDs merely caused surprise. U.S. troops had been told to expect Iraqi attacks with biological or chemical weapons, and they presumed that they would quickly find them. In the following months as U.S. forces still found none of the promised WMDs, the news media and the president’s critics began to attack the president on the failure to produce the evidence used to justify the war. WMDs and the president’s efforts to persuade the nation to go to war emerged as likely campaign issues for 2004. Did the nation’s intelligence agencies bungle their intelligence-gathering efforts, or did President Bush lie to the nation about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction?

Despite the enormous media attention given to WMDs, a good portion of the American public failed to understand what was happening. By June 2003 — a month after President Bush declared that hostilities were over — a national poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland showed that 41 percent of the public either thought that the weapons had been found or admitted that they did not know. On what could turn out to be a pivotal issue in the next election, the public was seriously uninformed.

The public’s lack of knowledge about the discovery of weapons of mass destruction is not a fluke. Since scientific, public-opinion polling began in the 1930s, pollsters have been regularly producing results about the public’s lack of knowledge — some of which seem almost surreal. With whom was the United States negotiating nuclear-arms limitations in the SALT talks in Geneva during the 1980s? Canada? No, the Soviet Union, but only 23 percent of the public got that answer right.

The public is certainly not ignorant about everything. Table 1 presents a selection of knowledge questions showing that there are facts about politics which a majority knows. Unfortunately, on too many issues, the public does not know a great deal.

The reason for the public's lack of knowledge about politics is not that people are stupid, but that politics is not interesting or important for most people. When pollsters ask people to name the most important issues in their lives, people talk about their jobs, their health, their families, and other personal matters. Politics rarely comes up. Still, the public's lack of knowledge about politics raises troubling questions.

THE DANGERS OF PUBLIC IGNORANCE

Democracy requires some reasonable level of public understanding of the issues. We govern ourselves through elections. In the extreme case, if we knew nothing at all about candidates or public policies, we would be casting votes randomly, and we would have no influence on the direction of government.

Citizens' need for political knowledge for democracy has been recognized since the founding days of our nation. James Madison, one of the principal framers of the Constitution, wrote:

Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.

To put the argument in contemporary terms, political knowledge is important because knowledge allows people to vote for what they want. If people are uninformed, they may vote for candidates who will do the opposite of what they want their elected officials to do. This phenomenon actually has been demonstrated empirically by political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, who show that informed voters are more likely to vote for candidates who agree with them on the issues. As Sir Frances Bacon observed more than four hundred years ago, "Knowledge is power."

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars gave a great deal of attention to the problem of the public's lack of knowledge and its effects on democracy. The attention stemmed from concerns about the consequences of ignorance. What if we were unwittingly to elect a tyrant — perhaps a homegrown version of Adolf Hitler?

One source of hope that we would avoid such a disaster lay in the rising levels of public education. Some scholars expected that as the public became better educated, it would become more politically informed as well. The average American is, in fact, much better educated now than fifty years ago. Since 1960, the high school graduation rate has increased from 41 percent to 84 percent, and the college graduation rate has increased from 8 percent to 26 percent. Moreover, 60 to 70 percent of American adults now have internet access, with its virtually infinite offerings of information.

Despite the growth of education and the spread of the internet, repeated studies have shown that the public is not any better informed now than it was fifty years ago. The reason is apparently that the number of people who find politics

Table 1. The Public's Knowledge about Politics and Issues

Year	Item of Knowledge	Percent Who Know
1989	The name of their state's governor	73%
2000	Senator Joseph Lieberman is Jewish	66%
2000	Which party holds the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives	62%
1999	Kosovo was site of ethnic Albanian-Serbian conflict	66%
2000	Which political party won the majority in the U.S. Senate	54%
1991	The U.S. must import oil to meet its energy needs	50%
1999	Dennis Hastert is Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives	30%
1980	Definitions of liberal and conservative	42%
1996	What the federal minimum wage is	42%
1991	What majority is needed to override a presidential veto	37%
2000	Tony Blair is Prime Minister of Great Britain	29%
2000	Vladimir Putin is President of Russia	18%
1989	What percentage of Americans live below the poverty line	18%
1991	Canada is America's largest foreign trading partner	8%
2000	William Rehnquist is Chief Justice of the United States	8%
2000	Jean Chretien is Prime Minister of Canada	2%

Source: Peverill Squire, et al., *Dynamics of Democracy*, 3rd edition.

interesting has remained roughly constant over the years. A good way to think about politics is that it is a hobby (at least for most Americans). Some people find politics interesting, and they learn about it. Others find football or flower-arranging or fine food more interesting, and those people learn about their hobbies (but not about politics). Greater education and more opportunities to learn using the internet helped people learn about their hobbies and other interests, but because interest in politics did not grow, neither did knowledge about politics.

So the American public is poorly informed, and the situation is likely to remain unchanged in the future. The question remains, what does this mean for the quality of our democracy?

In the last decade, a consensus has begun to form around the conclusion that although the low level of knowledge is hardly ideal, it is not a serious problem. There are two reasons for this belief: the Condorcet Jury Theorem, and findings that the public does seem to behave rationally when examined collectively.

CONDORCET JURY THEOREM

The Condorcet Jury Theorem, originally proposed by the Marquis de Condorcet in 1785, is mathematically complex, but the central ideas are quite simple. Consider two cases in which a group of people is voting on a decision. For example, consider a jury voting on the innocence or guilt of a person accused of a crime. In the first case, each juror votes by flipping a “fair” coin — that is, a coin that comes up heads 50 percent of the time and tails 50 percent of the time. In this situation, the odds of the person being found guilty are 50-50. The process is random and has no hope of arriving at the truth.

In the second case, each juror votes by flipping a coin that is “biased” in favor of the truth — that is, a coin that comes up with the correct answer, say, 51 percent of the time. In this situation, the odds that the group arrives at the truth by majority vote are much better than 51-49. The likelihood of a majority voting for the truth grows as the size of the jury grows. With a group of 400, the likelihood of a majority voting for the correct answer is 66 percent. With groups the size of even small towns, the likelihood of being correct is well over 90 percent.

The likelihood of being correct also increases with the probability that each person in the group gets the right answer. If each member of the group of 400 had a 55 percent chance of being right, then the group as a whole would have a 98 percent chance of being right. The central idea of the Condorcet Jury Theorem, then, is that the individual mistakes that

people make cancel out, so that society as a whole is likely to make correct decisions.

Many scholars maintain that the Condorcet Jury Theorem offers a good analogy which helps answer the question, how much knowledge does democracy require? If most voters have some knowledge — at least enough to be right more than half the time — then collectively, society should perform well. We do not have to worry about how little individuals know.

Condorcet’s theorem, of course, is just a piece of mathematics. It does not correspond perfectly to the real world of politics. Some critics point out that the theorem should break down if a majority of people were mistaken, or perhaps misled, about the facts. Before the Iraq War, most Americans believed that Saddam Hussein had a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction which were ready to be used. We now know that he did not have them. Would the United States and its allies have invaded Iraq if we knew that it had no WMDs? Advocates of the war presented many reasons why the United States should attack, but we cannot know whether the public would have accepted them, or whether President Bush would have acted without majority support. So perhaps the Iraq War is one case in which the theorem failed.

COLLECTIVE PUBLIC RATIONALITY

Despite a few cases such as the Iraq War, the conclusions of people who study the Condorcet Jury Theorem largely have been supported by empirical research. In their groundbreaking study, *The Rational Public*, political scientists Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro agreed that most individuals are poorly informed, but they described the American public as “collectively rational.”

Page and Shapiro’s case stands on two sets of evidence. First, they found that Americans’ political opinions are remarkably stable over time. Since the earliest years of our nation, political observers have speculated that public opinion swings wildly and without sound reason. For example, in the *Federalist Papers* — the series of essays arguing that Americans should agree to sign the U.S. Constitution — Hamilton, Madison, and Jay claimed that the public was subject to “violent passions,” that “transient impulses” sometimes governed their thoughts, and that the “whimsy of the majority” was a potential danger to the republic.

In fact, public opinion is quite stable. Page and Shapiro collected all of the public opinion time-series available from the major commercial and academic survey organizations from 1935 to 1990.

That is, they found every instance in which a public-opinion survey question was asked more than once of a national sample. They discovered that fewer than half of the answers to these repeated questions changed at all, and that when they did change, most of the changes were quite modest. Fewer than 7 percent of all public-opinion items changed as much as 20 percent. All the speculations about the whimsical, passionate nature of the public seem to be wrong.

Second, Page and Shapiro found that when Americans did change their views, they altered them in response to dramatic events or major changes in economic or social conditions in ways that make sense. The Persian Gulf War and the September 11 attacks caused jumps in support for defense spending. The rising crime rates from the 1960s through the 1980s caused an increase in support for government spending to fight crime. The rising cost of health care in the 1990s caused an increase in support for government-funded health insurance. All of these trends make perfect sense.

The changing attitudes of Californians toward offshore-oil drilling offers another nice example. Californians have sometimes been described as unwavering opponents of oil drilling along their coast. Yet as Figure 1 shows, when gasoline prices rise, so does support for more oil drilling. And when gasoline prices fall, support for more drilling falls as well. Californians may hold strong environmental values, but they also respond rationally to the cost of oil. In short, what Page and Shapiro found, as the title of their book declares, is that Californians respond as a rational public.

So what does all this mean for the quality of our democracy? Most citizens are not very well informed about the political issues that our nation faces, but collectively, we seem to respond in an intelligent, rational fashion.

To be sure, the situation could be better. If our citizens were better informed, our government would be more responsive to them and less responsive to special interests. This sort of problem probably will never go away. In addition, it is unlikely that we will ever agree on basic values. Some people favor liberal solutions to problems, while others favor conservative solutions. So disagreement about the direction of government is bound to continue. Still, although we may disagree about both values and facts, the evidence at hand shows that the public does know enough to make rational decisions. We may have causes for concern about the quality of our democracy, but the public's understanding of political issues is not one of them.



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Figure 1. Trends in Support for Offshore-Oil Drilling and the Price of Gasoline

