***Incentives to Know: Differences in State Level Policy Knowledge***

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***Abstract***

Previous literature on voter knowledge has focused on explaining the distribution of political sophistication across various demographics and the implications of these differences, how institutions condition sophistication, and what incentivizes people to learn about politics. Yet, we still do not understand whether and how incentives to collect information vary across specific issues. To investigate this, I provide a statistical analysis of the ‘ANES 2012 Direct Democracy Study’ - data detailing the opinions of American voters across a series of state level referenda - and argue that differences in referenda awareness across demographic groups are a function of demographic sensitivity. In other words, the extent to which a particular group may be affected by a particular policy conditions that group’s incentives to collect information about the referendum.

***Introduction***

Elucidating what inspires political sophistication in mass publics - the incentives that drive it, the institutions that structure it, the demographic characteristics that modulate it - has been a salient goal amongst political scientists for decades. Discourse on the nature of political information acquisition overwhelmingly signals the priority to consider individual *ability, motivation, and opportunity* as the central determinants of differentials in sophistication data across populations. (Luskin, 1990) Amongst these, discerning what motivates people to seek out political knowledge has been focal to ensuing research, illustrating a far more vivid picture than once imagined. Yet, this picture still lacks definition.

Assessing proclivities to acquire political knowledge has led to the conclusion that one demographic characteristic - sex - is a reliable predictor of political sophistication, revealing that men generally have more political knowledge than women. (Dow, 2009) However, across *specific* political issues, namely those concerning women’s rights and health policy, women tend to be considerably more knowledgeable than men. (Dolan, 2011) The apparent gap of gender specific political information between men and women accentuates the idea that knowledge has relative utility; those who need to know, most likely will. These assessments, however, have only largely concerned issues in the national political context, attenuating the importance of potential variance in political knowledge at the state or municipal levels across demographics.

Considering the extent to which many state referenda subject particular demographics to their aim and scope, I argue that the degree of impact a policy generates towards a group will influence that group’s propensity to recognize a referendum and offer their opinion on the subject. I question the notion that political knowledge can be holistically measured through the issuance of surveys with content restricted to the national level.

To test my hypothesis, I review data from the ANES 2012 Direct Democracy Study; a nationally distributed series of surveys which gauge the opinions of Americans in their respective states over a multiplicity of state level referenda. I analyze policies that have both implicit, and direct associations with a particular demographic group.

***Literature Review***

Distinguishing the political know-it-alls from the know-nothings has been the core feature of voter knowledge research since the beginning of its practice. It has provided a stable baseline for cross temporal analysis of sophistication in the American public *(Carpini and Keeter, 1991)*, and is key in answering why and how political knowledge develops. Early works suggest that a presence of ‘issue publics’ - groups of people that have knowledge restricted to certain political domains due to occupation or circumstance - is abundant within the United States. *(Converse, 1964)* Naturally, one might find that an oil field worker will know more about energy infrastructure because they frequently hear tailored information from their company contrasting oil and renewable energy policies. As a result, sweeping generalizations about the dimensionality of political knowledge have become a common point of contention in ensuing literature.

Carpini and Keeter (*1996*) issued one of the more widely accepted empirical developments on this idea, revealing that people actually tend to be political generalists rather than specialists; meaning that those with a good understanding of one political issue will likely have a good understanding of other issues. Such reasoning denotes the struggle between ‘unidimensional knowledge’, as argued by Delli and Carpini, and ‘multidimensional knowledge’, which reasons that people can have low levels of general political knowledge, but may still have a good understanding of more focalized issues. *(Neuman 1981, Zaller 1991)*

Given this theoretical schism, focusing solely on *how* information exists and operates within the United States becomes a fruitless approach. The more rewarding effort to know *why* information differentials exist has thus been given larger attention. Perhaps the most abundant source of subsequent literature follows from the theoretical development that knowledge can be more accurately gauged in mass publics by examining the variance in ability, opportunity, and motivation amongst individuals. *(Luskin, 1990)* This framework places importance in understanding the structural factors and the differences in psychological abilities between individuals that frame disparities in political knowledge.

Much attention in political psychology has been given to the *ability* side of this equation, in efforts to map out innate individual capacities that bolster or inhibit the retention of political information. Moreover, extensions of the *opportunity* element of Luskin’s theory give way to a more complete picture of the way individual ability might be affected. Namely, the positive association that media exposure and educational attainment have with political knowledge have helped furnish a stable foundation to answer for such ambiguities. *(Galston 2001, Barbaras and Jerit 2009, Barbaras et. al. 2015)* If a respondent in a survey indicates that they watch the news frequently, or have earned a Ph.d in a social science, it makes sense that they would come into contact with more political information. What place, then, does *motivation* take amongst these factors?

To understand what tempers political motivation, scholars have examined the effects that incentives have in promoting higher survey scores. Although the offering of monetary incentives to political survey respondents has proven to increase scoring (*Prior and Lupia, 2008*), the notion of incentive based knowledge acquisition remains clouded at best. Such findings are valuable in that they reveal a respondent may be more likely to try harder when questioned in the survey environment if money is at stake. However, illuminating the effects that immediate, tangible incentives have on survey motivation shows us that we know what may entice a more concerted survey attempt, but the incentives that drove the respondent to be more or less equipped for the survey in the first place cannot be accounted for. This illustrates a critical gap in the literature, that the long term motivations which encourage sophistication remain opaque.

This is not to say, however, that extant theories of voter knowledge have been useless in developing an approach to explain sustained motivation. Past literature has proven that demography is a strong correlate with political knowledge, yet has not been all inclusive. Specifically, work detailing the interaction between demographics and knowledge has found its focal point around gender and race *(Dow 2009, Dolan 2011, Verba and Schlozman 1997, Jacobsen and Linkow 2012)*, but does not consider the notion that demography may not actually be a reliable predictor of sophistication. Rather, it may be a tentative predictor of *the incentives people have to become sophisticated.*

National assessments of political competence have long held that women and racial minorities have a tendency to know less about politics than their white male counterparts; a concept often referred to as the ‘knowledge gap’. *(Dolan 2011)* Such methods of assessment, however, have been on tumultuous grounds since the introduction of localized or policy/program specific political measures of sophistication, which have demonstrated a total reversal of the knowledge gap for women and some minority groups. *(Shaker 2012, Stolle and Gidengil 2010)* Moreover, Mondak and Andersen *(2004)* have found that a larger portion of the gender gap in knowledge can be accounted for by showing that men more frequently guess on surveys, which skews data to suggest that men are actually smarter. Incidentally, men simply take more risks on surveys that might produce correct answers.

Given these advancements, groups with historically low levels of knowledge have received far more analytical attention. It turns out that blacks, once considered the least politically knowledgeable of all racial groups, tend to know more about local politics than other races, especially when a black mayor is in office. *(Bobo and Gilliam 1990, Shaker 2012)* Conversely, when questioned about government programs, women tend to score higher than men do, especially with respect to questions that deal with health specific programs. *(Stolle and Gidengil, 2010)*

Such findings demonstrate that political knowledge might not be so unidimensional after all, and prompts my assertion that demographics may indeed inspire the motivation to seek out specific types of political knowledge. Speculation on these confounds has manifested into a laundry list of simplifications, most of which rest on empirically fallible grounds. Frequency of contact with government programs, wealth, and education among other factors, have been reasoned out as holistic explanations. (*Bartels 1996, Stolle and Gidengil 2010, Shaker 2012*)

This obscurity prompts my first inquiry. Does the potential impact a demographic group may face from a given policy drive up their propensity to know about it?

It stands to reason that, given the work noted above, the direct or residual effects women and racial minorities experience as a result of government programs and policy may be what incentivizes them to collect information about it. Thus, I theorize that demographics which are more likely to endure the conditions of referenda will be more prone to know about it. I extend Luskin’s *(1990)* notion of motivation by inspecting the nuances of political knowledge which exist at a deeper demographic level. I posit the argument that, as units of analysis, the focus on women and racial minorities inhibits a more exclusive understanding of the relationship demographics share with political knowledge. By narrowing the gaze on state level politics and broadening a demographic analysis to include groups outside of the current gender/race focus, I avoid the chance of overlooking multidimensional aspects of political knowledge.

The way people channel their political knowledge through daily interactions also speaks volumes to the question of motivation. Although men are generally more outward with opinion expression, women have been shown in some instances to be more likely to voice their opinions on political issues if a woman is running for political office, implying a sense of empowerment through political identity. *(Hansen, 1997)* Yet, motivation in this form has also fallen short of a more all encompassing demographic examination, precluding the chance to test whether or not group identity contributes to the expression of political knowledge.

The lack of work on this subject inspires my second inquiry. Will subjects of a particular demographic be more likely to offer their opinion on a policy if they are the target population? Political engagement has been widely associated with political sophistication, and may serve as an effective indicator of the incentives at play in various referenda. Therefore, I reason that groups with a bigger stake in referenda will be more likely to offer their opinion on the subject.

By demonstrating the validity of both lines of reasoning, I contend that a new theoretical framework of political knowledge should be utilized in future research.

***The Demographic Incentive Model***

Rather than focusing on the static factors that alter voter knowledge between each demographic group, I argue that demographic status is, in itself, a key reason for policy-centric knowledge incongruities. Consider the fact that government has, at all levels, historically crafted laws that do not necessarily concern the political collective, but have considerable impacts on one demographic group or another. Perhaps, then, the variance in policy-specific knowledge and engagement can be engendered through the influence policies have on different groups; if you belong to a demographic that is most greatly affected by a policy, you may be more likely to know about that policy, and vice versa. As such, I assert the ‘demographic incentive’ theory - a model which accounts for the relative utility of political information as a primary motivator for political knowledge procurement and engagement - should be explored to test this assumption.

My ‘demographic incentive’ theory of political motivation reads simply: *that demographically tailored policies mold group-level motivations to acquire policy-specific knowledge.* Given the American public’s lack of knowledge about policy specific survey questions, (referred to as *surveillance* based knowledge) as compared with its higher performance on historical or procedural based survey questions, contrasting the *types* of knowledge a demographic possesses should serve up the foundation of my argument. That being, that one type of knowledge (procedural/historical) will remain constant amongst all groups, while other policy knowledge will show robust variance between each demographic, but will still be more common in the group affected by that policy.

In consolidating this line of reasoning, my argument contends that all groups will have the same distribution of procedural/historical knowledge as to be expected, most groups will know little about policy issues, and certain demographics will know more about a policy if it has a discernable, focused impact on their group. If a policy’s target demographic has a more extensive and accurate opinion on a policy than other groups, the correlation between obscure political knowledge and demographic motivation will become difficult to overlook.

My hypothesis thus follows: **If a demographic is the main subject of a state policy, it will be more knowledgeable about that policy’s content.**

Testing this hypothesis is particularly intriguing, because the rejection or acceptance of its premise yields implications for the study of voter knowledge at both ends. Provided the data confirm my assumptions, there stands a compelling reason to reconsider the extent to which surveyors use historical/procedural knowledge questions to delineate the level of political knowledge in the United States. Moreover, if the data speak for acceptance, the unwavering indication that Americans tend to be ignorant of policy should certainly lose some degree of consideration in the crafting of future political knowledge surveys. If political knowledge truly does differ in value between demographics insofar as I reason, the multidimensionality theory of political knowledge previously discussed becomes an ever stronger contention, and ought to be more widely emphasized as we move forward with holistic measurements of political sophistication.

In the instance that my hypothesis fails, its rejection serves two purposes. First, it strengthens the longstanding assessment of voters in the United States as being a generally policy-ignorant population. Second, it exhibits that, after accounting for the content policies targeted towards certain demographics, the impact of policies on particular groups at the state level is not a generalizable conditioner of long term political motivation. More candid, this means that even if a person belongs to a group that is the main subject of a policy, they still probably won’t know much, if anything about it. Indeed, such a result would be grim for an optimistic outlook on political motivation and knowledge in the United States.

*Data Description*

Before I begin my test, I offer up the following list of variables I employ from ANES 2012 Direct Democracy dataset, and a description of the study’s methodology to more cogently express my measurement components. This study was designed to collect public opinion data in the United States on a variety of ballot measures and referenda at the state level. The study utilized a time series design, sampling 13 states, of which 5,415 respondents were surveyed. Data was collected during the pre and post election periods during the 2012 election cycle, from October 2012 through January 30th, 2013. Respondents were recruited through address based sampling and random digit dialing. This question set in particular yielded three different opportunities to look at demographically focused policies out of the eighty-one that were included in the study.

The aforementioned difference between procedurally/historically based political knowledge and surveillance/policy based political knowledge will be illustrated through the comparison of the “Procedural Knowledge” variable, and the “Surveillance-Policy Knowledge” variable. The former extends from a question that has been valued as a steady measurement for procedural/historical knowledge for decades; what is the term length of a United States Senator? The latter, “Surveillance-Policy Knowledge” inquires the degree of ease or difficulty respondents had in understanding the effects of a given policy.

Both of these variables will be tested through a few different avenues, as this particular ANES study has provided statistics on three key policy issues that have lucid impacts on a specific demographic, while remaining benign to the larger political community. The first state policy I will use reads: “California Proposition 30 increases taxes on earnings over $250,000 for seven years and sales taxes by ¼ cent for four years, to fund schools. It guarantees public safety realignment funding.” Given the fact that the subjected demographic of this policy has already consistently held higher levels of political knowledge in prior empirical analysis, controlling for the more widely accepted conditioners of political knowledge - sex, race, socioeconomic status, and age - is a necessary step to ensure that the policies are, indeed, the true cause for any variation in the data.

The same caveat applies to the second demographically targeted policy I use from the data, which reads: “Florida Amendment 11 would enable the state legislature to authorize counties and municipalities to offer additional tax exemptions on the homes of low-income seniors. It will also provide an additional exemption to low-income seniors if counties and municipalities choose to offer it.” Because greater age, too, has been positively associated with political knowledge, testing the conditioners discussed above against both procedural and surveillance-policy types of political knowledge limits the possibility to overlook any tangible relationships in the data.

The third and final opportunity to graph this relationship stems from Arizonan policy on homeownership and property values, which reads, “Proposition 117 sets a limit on the annual percentage increase in property values used to determine property taxes to no more than 5% above the previous year, and establishes a single limited property value as the basis for determining all property taxes on real property, beginning in 2014.” The burden of analysis here rests on an ability to not only account for the status of homeownership, but on the larger base of assets possessed by homeowners, which has been shown in prior research to positively correlate with higher levels of political knowledge.

By casting a gaze on procedural knowledge, rather than focusing solely on surveillance information, a stable comparative baseline emerges for the *type* of knowledge I am seeking to measure. If, in fact, a demographic does have an easier time understanding a policy that features their own group as the primary subject, it will be impossible to tell if this relationship actually exists unless we know that other types of political information remain constant.

I use 6 cross tabulation graphs to effectively illustrate this idea, paired in couplets for each of the three respective states that I observe. The first graph for each state lists the target demographic, and that demographic’s ability to comprehend the effects of a policy on their political community. The question reads, “the effects of some ballot measures are easy to figure out while others are hard to figure out. How hard or easy is it to understand the effects of each of the following ballot measures from this election?” Respondents answered according to a seven point scale, one being that the respondent very well understood the effects, and seven being that the respondent had a very difficult time understanding the effects. Scores of three or lower were coded to have a positive value within the policy relationships I observe.

*Results*

The consistencies of this data with prior research sends the blaring signal that people, regardless of demographic, tend to be largely unaware of the effects policies have on their day to day lives. First, take the case of California. The referenda tested in California is arguably the most straightforward measure, posing a clean cut tax increase on people belonging to the $250,000+ income bracket to fund state education and other governmental services. Of those in the highest available income bracket listed in the study, ($179,000+) less than 15% of the respondents had an easy time understanding the effects of the policy on their demographic. People belonging to income brackets lower than $179,000 had a notably easier time discerning the effects that the proposed tax increase would have on members of their state. Albeit, the sample size for those with a higher income value is significantly smaller than others, but proportionally speaking, the demographic in question displayed a less keen understanding of the policy that affected their group as compared to others. Table 1.1 provides this reference below.

As far as the Procedural measure is concerned, however, the data challenges what is accepted as truth within the research community; that wealthier individuals tend to have a better understanding of governmental procedures and history than those with less income. While the sample still proves a sizable obstacle to this measure as far as proportions are concerned, the difference between the PH measure and SP measure show a robust divergence from one another, providing my first substantive picture of the relationship between these two types of knowledge. Table 1.2 provides the reference below.

Table 1.1 - Californian Policy Awareness By Income Bracket

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Income | Doesn’t know policy | Knows policy | total |
| > $179,000 | 567 (82%) | 123 (18%) | 690 |
| < $179,000 | 25 (83%) | 5 (17%) | 30 |
| total | 592 | 128 | 720 |

Table 1.2 - Californian Procedural Performance By Income Bracket

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Income | Procedural -  Incorrect | Procedural - Correct | total |
| > $179,000 | 359 (52%) | 331 (48%) | 690 |
| < $179,000 | 17 (57%) | 13 (43%) | 30 |
| total | 376 | 344 | 720 |

The second point of inquiry finds itself through Arizonan homeownership, which limits the annual property tax increase that can be posed by the state government to 5%. With table 1.3 below, the fact that all Arizonans, regardless of homeownership status, have a difficult time reasoning out the effects of property tax policy becomes apparent. Roughly 75% of non-homeowners had a difficult time elucidating the impacts such a policy has on their state, while roughly 60% of homeowners gave a similar response. The respondents that understood the policy exist within a 10% frame of each other, which gives little indication that homeownership is, indeed, a predictor of policy awareness with respect to property taxes, especially considering the smaller non-homeowner sample size.

True to form, the procedural measure for Arizonans shows that non-homeowners have a slightly greater performance than homeowners, supporting the notion that possessed assets are a determinant of political knowledge at the state level. While one demographic displayed that exactly 50% of their group was incorrect when questioned about senate terms, homeowners were correct at a margin of 5% higher than non-homeowners. In both cases, Arizona displays an intriguing example of the variance in political knowledge at the state level that challenge the conventional wisdom of procedural and surveillance based knowledge outcomes. Refer to tables 1.3 and 1.4 below.

Table 1.3 - Arizona Policy Awareness By Homeowner Status

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Residence | Doesn’t Know Policy | Knows Policy | total |
| Non-homeowner | 47 (75%) | 15 (15%) | 62 |
| Homeowner | 200 (61%) | 128 (39%) | 328 |
| total | 247 | 143 | 390 |

Table 1.4 - Arizona Procedural Performance By Homeowner Status

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Residence | Procedural - Incorrect | Procedural - Correct | total |
| Non-homeowner | 31 (50%) | 31 (50%) | 62 |
| Homeowner | 147 (45%) | 181 (55%) | 328 |
| total | 178 | 212 | 390 |

The final case of Florida - a policy about enabling tax breaks for low income senior citizens - shows another instance in which both demographics have a closely tied degree of understanding about a policy. People over the age of 65 exhibited ease in interpreting policy at 55% of the overall sample, while people below 65 fell within the same margin. This is notable because people over age 65 have historically been more attuned to the dealings of national level politics, revealing the a slight inequality of surveillance based knowledge distributions at the state level. Given the size of this sample, similarities between both groups are, at face value, more generalizable to the overall population.

With the procedural measure in Florida, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Both groups fell within a 10% margin of one another, with a slight advantage for people over the age of 65 by 5%. This remains consistent with prior examples of the broader ability of senior citizens to better understand their political environment, yet shows that knowledge distributions at both the surveillance and procedural levels of analysis are stable regardless of the knowledge being tested. Refer to tables 1.5 and 1.6 below.

Table 1.5 - Florida Policy Awareness By Age Distribution

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Doesn’t Know Policy | Knows Policy | total |
| - 65 | 87 (55%) | 71 (45%) | 158 |
| + 65 | 209 (53%) | 184 (47%) | 393 |
| total | 296 | 255 | 551 |

Table 1.6 - Florida Procedural Performance

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Procedural - Incorrect | Procedural - Correct | total |
| - 65 | 72 (46%) | 86 (54%) | 158 |
| + 65 | 207 (53%) | 186 (47%) | 393 |
| total | 279 | 272 | 551 |

*Discussion/Conclusion*

While the direction of demographic based knowledge analysis should certainly head towards a more open-ended view on the dimensionality of political knowledge, this serves as another example of the deficit of policy-based knowledge in the United States. Referenda that specifically affected people across all three ballot measures were unable to be understood by nearly ½ to ¾ of all respondents, and showed little variance between the groups I study. The content of each ballot measure had little observable impact on survey outcomes for the respondents, even when considering the importance of resources and age within this relationship.

Surprisingly enough, however, each state had similar distributions of procedural political knowledge, all falling within a 43-54% range. This hints that, while surveillance knowledge respecting state policy remains in a state of flux depending on which issue and which demographic is being studied, procedural knowledge dealing with subjects like the ‘term limit of a senator’ remain, more or less, unwavering. This has some important implications for the future path of demographically focused political knowledge studies. First, it shows that the motivation side of the theoretical argument I mentioned previously has a similar level of influence with respect to procedural knowledge, but not surveillance knowledge. Second, the notion that demography itself exists as a conditioner of political knowledge should not be overlooked. Statistically, using more effective regression models for future analysis of this topic may indeed yield something of a noticeable relationship between policy knowledge and demography.

In the interest of further expansion on this line of research, future theoretical models of voter knowledge should consider exploring the demographic incentive model beyond the limitations of my own study. There still has yet to be a larger explanation as to why information differentials have become increasingly present in empirical works, and the opportunity to develop a route for long term political motivation will stand as an increasingly rewarding line of study as we further uncover these obscurities.

Perhaps in the case of the three states I examine, the designate policies would be perceived differently by members of another state. Perhaps the demographics in question did not have a compelling enough reason to dedicate time to studying these policies beforehand. Perhaps, if the content of a policy were more consequential on a population, these results would appear different. These are all assumptions that, while alluring and potentially valid, cannot be realized until this model is refined and remodeled for future studies.

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