

CHAPTER 8

Knowledge, Interest, and Attention to Politics

DO YOU KNOW who the speaker of the house is? Do you know whether the United States spends more money on Medicare or on interest for the national debt? Do you know which job Hillary Clinton currently holds? If you are like a majority of Americans, you cannot identify John Boehner as the speaker of the house even when provided with a list of names from which to choose. It is likely that you are also sadly misinformed about how the government spends its money; only 29 percent of Americans know that the government spends more money on Medicare than on interest on the national debt, education, or scientific research. You can probably identify Hillary Clinton's current job when provided with a list of possible positions, but a little more than one-quarter of you cannot do so. If you are under the age of thirty, you are more likely to know that Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook than to know that Hillary Clinton is the secretary of state.¹ See Table 8-1 to learn what citizens do and do not know about politics, according to a Pew Research Center poll conducted in March 2011.

Does it matter that many citizens are not highly knowledgeable about key political figures and facts? Participatory democratic theorists say yes. "Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship."² Thus, without knowledge, citizens cannot function effectively. From this perspective, democracy *requires* informed citizens, as well as interested and attentive ones.

Other scholars argue that citizens can make reasonable decisions without being knowledgeable about or particularly interested in and attentive to politics. Citizens can use informational shortcuts, such as cues from individuals or groups they trust, to form their political opinions.³ Because many of the cues citizens rely on come from elites, this perspective is in line with the thinking of elite democratic theorists. A more extreme position taken by some elite democratic theorists is that citizen ignorance actually allows democracies to flourish.⁴ Clearly, elite democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists have very different views on how engaged the public should be.

Table 8-1 Political Knowledge, March 2011

"Next I'd like to ask about some things that have been in the news. Please answer as best you can. If you don't know the answer just tell me and we'll move to the next question."

<i>What the public does and does not know</i>	<i>Answered correctly</i>	<i>Answered incorrectly</i>	<i>Don't know/refused to answer</i>
"No Child Left Behind" is about? (Education)	80%	9%	11%
Hillary Clinton's job? (Secretary of state)	73	16	10
Moammar Gadhafi is leader of? (Libya)	71	12	16
Wisconsin protests over? (Union rights)	63	10	27
Current unemployment rate? (9%)	57	28	14
Founder of Facebook? (Mark Zuckerberg)	55	10	35
Speaker of the house? (John Boehner)	43	27	30
Most U.S. electricity comes from? (Coal)	40	42	19
Percent of Americans who are obese? (25%)	39	51	11
Republicans have majority in? (House)	38	35	27
Government spends most on? (Medicare)	29	50	22

Source: "Political Knowledge Update," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Washington, D.C., March 31, 2011, <http://people-press.org/files/2011/03/Knowledge-Update-Topline-Mar-17-20-2011-Omnibus.pdf>.

Note: Correct answers are in parentheses.

In this chapter, we discuss the competing visions of elite democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists regarding levels of citizen knowledge, interest, and attention to politics. Next, we examine how knowledgeable citizens actually are about politics. As with so many concepts, there is controversy over how to measure political knowledge; we discuss that debate. Then we turn to an analysis of why some citizens are more knowledgeable than others. We consider the effect of individual characteristics and political context on knowledge. We also examine the consequences of political knowledge and ignorance. Finally, we discuss whether citizens are interested in politics, and we examine attention to politics by focusing on citizens' attentiveness to and knowledge of the war in Iraq. We conclude the chapter by considering whether citizens are knowledgeable enough, interested enough, and attentive enough to function effectively in a democracy.

HOW KNOWLEDGEABLE, INTERESTED, AND ATTENTIVE SHOULD CITIZENS BE IN A DEMOCRACY?

Democratic theorists debate about how much knowledge, interest, and attention to politics is necessary for citizens to function effectively in a democracy.⁵

Participatory democratic theorists argue that citizens should have high levels of knowledge and be actively engaged in the political world so they can hold elites accountable. Citizens should be well informed so they can (1) figure out their interests, (2) recognize which policies serve those interests, and (3) identify which political parties, interest groups, and politicians are pursuing those policies. These theorists argue that citizens need to be on the ball because elites may try to misrepresent the facts or may not even know the facts to begin with.

Participatory democratic theorists assume that all citizens have the ability to understand what is going on in the political arena. Thus, if citizens are not knowledgeable, interested, and attentive, there must be barriers that keep citizens from engaging. For example, participatory democratic theorists might point to the shortcomings of the media as an obstacle to citizens acquiring the knowledge they need to successfully evaluate elite behavior.

Elite democrats, on the other hand, are not particularly concerned about levels of citizen knowledge, interest, and attention to politics. In fact, some scholars argue that it is *irrational* for citizens to spend time on politics.⁶ Why is that the case? First, there are substantial costs to acquiring information about politics. It takes significant time for citizens to arm themselves with the knowledge necessary to form opinions, evaluate policy proposals, and understand the political process. Staying informed also requires financial resources. Buying newspapers or traveling to public meetings, for example, entails a monetary commitment on behalf of citizens. Second, citizens can expect very little in return for becoming knowledgeable. The voice of a citizen would be just one of many; thus, it is extremely unlikely that a single person could influence the adoption of a particular policy or the outcome of an election. If citizens were assured a payoff from becoming informed, it would be rational for them to invest in gathering information. But because that is not the case, it does not make sense for them to spend time and money becoming knowledgeable. In the words of acclaimed rational choice theorist Anthony Downs, "In general, it is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other scarce resources."⁷

Even though it is irrational to become knowledgeable about politics, citizens can still function in a democracy because they can rely on cues in their environment to make reasonable political judgments.⁸ Citizens can use heuristics (shortcuts), such as party identification and ideology, to figure out where they stand on issues. They can take cues from trusted groups and individuals to determine which politicians best represent their interests. Scholars refer to this as low-information rationality. From this perspective, citizens can get by with fairly minimal levels of knowledge. As long as they know enough to take cues from political parties, interest groups, and other elites, citizens can function effectively. Note that taking cues from interest groups is consistent with the pluralist vision of a democratic society.

Other scholars emphasize that citizens use heuristics not because it is irrational to become informed but because it is impossible for citizens to become fully informed. The political world is extremely complex, and citizens are **limited information processors**. They simply do not have the cognitive abilities to systematically process the vast amounts of political information out there. Instead, they rely on whatever shortcuts are available to simplify complex material and thus function efficiently, if not always accurately.⁹

Hard-core elite democrats make a different argument about citizen knowledge, interest, and attention to politics. They believe that democratic nations are actually better off when citizens are apathetic and ignorant. From this perspective, elites do the heavy lifting, and citizen engagement would just complicate matters. These theorists remind us that many features of the U.S. government, such as the Electoral College and the Supreme Court, were specifically intended to keep citizens at bay. Moreover, because the institutions of government were designed to check and balance each other, it is not necessary for citizens to hold elites accountable. Some citizens might be political junkies, but most people are not interested in, and many are even turned off by, the conflict and compromise that are part and parcel of democratic decision making.¹⁰ And that's a good thing according to some elite democratic theorists.

ARE CITIZENS KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT POLITICS?

"Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics."¹¹ In this section, we discuss the empirical evidence that speaks to this claim. Is it the case that citizens are uninformed about politics? Also, are citizens misinformed about politics? Have citizens become more or less knowledgeable over time?

Are Citizens Informed or Uninformed?

As we have briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter, citizens are not deeply informed about politics. Thirty percent of citizens aren't willing or able to guess who the speaker of the house is even when presented with four options, and most citizens do not know that the Republicans currently have a majority in the House of Representatives (refer back to Table 8-1). Yet a large majority of citizens recognize that the No Child Left Behind Act has to do with education policy and know that Hillary Clinton is the secretary of state. Seventy-one percent can identify Moammar Gadhafi as the leader of Libya, which suggests that political knowledge is not simply a function of *ability* and *motivation* but also of *opportunity*. Not only has Gadhafi been a prominent figure on the international stage for four decades, he was all over the news at the time of the survey because the United States and its allies were conducting airstrikes on his forces after those forces attacked Libyans protesting the regime. Overall, the Pew

Research Center poll results presented in Table 8-1 show that citizens are well informed about certain political facts but that there are also gaping holes in citizens' knowledge.

To delve further into this topic, we turn to the classic research of Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. They define **political knowledge** as "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory."¹² To be knowledgeable about politics, Delli Carpini and Keeter argue citizens should be well informed in three areas: (1) the rules of the game, (2) the substance of politics, and (3) the people and players (including parties and groups).¹³ To assess citizen knowledge in these areas, Delli Carpini and Keeter pulled together fifty-four years of national survey data. They examined numerous polls conducted between 1940 and 1994, which included over 2,000 questions regarding factual knowledge of politics.

Overall, Delli Carpini and Keeter found a mixed bag when it comes to levels of citizen knowledge.¹⁴ On the one hand, citizens clearly did not live up to the standards set by participatory democratic theorists. "Only 13 percent of the more than 2,000 questions examined could be answered correctly by 75 percent or more of those asked, and only 41 percent could be answered correctly by more than half the public."¹⁵ Furthermore, many citizens did not even know enough to use heuristics. For example, bare majorities of the public could identify party positions on key issues. Thus, for those who didn't know party positions, it would be impossible to use party as a cue. On the other hand, citizens were not as ignorant of politics as suggested by some observers. Most citizens were aware of some basic facts, such as the length of a presidential term (96 percent), the name of their governor (86 percent), that there is no religious test for political candidates (81 percent), that Cuba is a communist country (82 percent), and that Social Security does not provide job training (89 percent).

Citizens did best at answering questions about the rules of the game. This is probably due to the fact that the institutions and processes of politics rarely change over time. Further, this is the type of knowledge citizens are exposed to in high school civics classes. Turn to Table 8-2 for some examples of what citizens knew and didn't know. In 1985 virtually everyone knew that the United States was a member of the United Nations, but in 1989 hardly anyone could name two Fifth Amendment rights. Before you make fun of the public, can you name two Fifth Amendment rights?

Citizens were a bit less knowledgeable when it came to the **substance of politics** and the **people and players**. Again, Table 8-2 contains several examples. Citizens were well informed about the steel dispute back in 1952 but shockingly uninformed about Watergate in 1972. In terms of foreign affairs, only about one-half of the public knew that black South Africans could not vote in 1985, and a mere 11 percent could describe Glasnost—a Soviet policy of openness—in 1987.

Table 8-2 Examples of Political Knowledge and Ignorance, 1940–1994

Knowledge of	Answered correctly
Rules of the game	
U.S. is a member of the UN (1985)	96%
Accused are presumed innocent (1983)	50
Name all three branches of government (1952)	19
Name two Fifth Amendment Rights (1989)	2
Substance of domestic politics	
What is the steel dispute about (1952)	96
What is greenhouse effect (1988)	50
What is Watergate about (1972)	22
Percentage of population that is black (1990)	8
Substance of foreign affairs	
Ozone damage affects whole world (1988)	94
Black South Africans can't vote (1985)	51
Number of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam (1965)	17
Describe Glasnost (1987)	11
People and players	
U.S. president (1986)	99
Andrew Young (1977)	48
Republican party stance: pro-life amendment (1980)	21
President of Mexico (1991)	3

Source: Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

Basically everyone could identify Ronald Reagan as president in 1986, but only 3 percent could name the president of Mexico in 1991.

Are Citizens Misinformed?

James Kuklinski, Paul Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert Rich make an important distinction among people who are **informed**, **uninformed**, and **misinformed**.¹⁶ They explain the differences this way:

To be *informed* requires, first, that people have factual beliefs, and second, that the beliefs be accurate. If people do not hold factual beliefs at all, they are merely *uninformed*. They are, with respect to the particular matter, in the dark. But if they firmly hold beliefs that happen to be wrong, they are *misinformed*—not just in the dark, but wrongheaded.¹⁷

Using survey data from a representative sample of Illinois residents, Kuklinski et al. demonstrated that citizens were largely misinformed about welfare policy.¹⁸

For example, citizens were asked what percentage of the federal budget is spent on welfare. The survey used a multiple choice format and provided the following options: 1 percent, 5 percent, 8 percent, 11 percent, or 15 percent. The correct answer is 1 percent, but a whopping 90 percent of the respondents selected one of the other options. Although citizens were the most misinformed about this fact, more than a majority of citizens demonstrated they were “not just in the dark, but wrongheaded” on five other questions regarding welfare. Furthermore, when asked how confident they were of their answers, a majority of citizens said they were very or fairly confident about their responses. Thus, many citizens were not just wrong, they were quite confident in their wrongheadedness.

In general, citizens tended to be misinformed in an antiwelfare direction. For example, believing that a much higher percentage of the budget is spent on welfare than actually is would probably make people less supportive of welfare. Indeed, Kuklinski et al. found that misinformation led people to be more opposed to welfare spending than they otherwise would be. Because Kuklinski et al.'s survey respondents were from Illinois, the authors were careful not to generalize their findings to American citizens in general. Nevertheless, their research raises significant concerns about the public's ability to understand and evaluate important public policies.

In an important study of misperceptions regarding the war in Iraq, Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis found that many citizens were confused about facts pertaining to the war.¹⁹ These scholars collected survey data from a random sample of 1,362 respondents between June and September 2003. They were interested in whether citizens had misperceptions about the war and whether citizens receiving news from particular sources were more likely to hold those misperceptions. Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis crafted three questions to measure misperceptions:

Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al Qaeda terrorist organization?

Since the war with Iraq ended, is it your impression that the US has or has not found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? (Note that the end of the war wording here refers to the end of major combat operations, as declared by President George W. Bush in May 2003.)

Thinking about how all the people in the world feel about the US having gone to war with Iraq, do you think: The majority of people favor the US having gone to war; The majority of people oppose the US having gone to war; or Views are evenly balanced.²⁰

Because the United States did not find a clear link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda or weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (despite occasional Bush administration statements implying otherwise), answering “has” to the first two

questions were coded as misperceptions. Saying world opinion favored the war in response to the third question was also coded as a misperception because public opinion polls showed that most people around the world opposed the war. Kull et al. found that 60 percent of Americans held one or more of these misperceptions about the war.

Next, Kull et al. examined whether citizens' levels of misperceptions varied with their news source. Indeed, they found stark differences in beliefs about the war based on where citizens tended to get their news (see Figure 8-1). Viewers of Fox News were particularly likely to believe one or more of the misperceptions. More than a majority of CBS, ABC, CNN, and NBC viewers held one or more of these misperceptions; slightly less than a majority of print media users were confused about the facts. Three-fourths of the NPR and PBS audience did not hold any misperceptions. The relative accuracy of the NPR and PBS audience demonstrates the importance of noncommercial outlets in a media environment dominated by conglomerates.

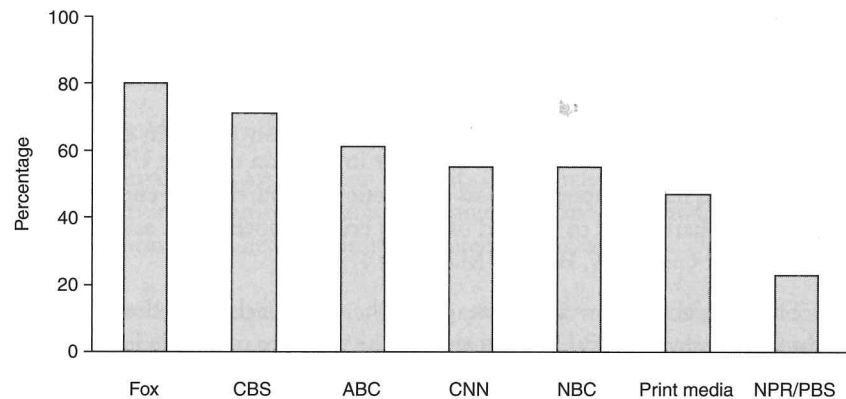
What makes the high level of misperceptions among the public particularly troublesome is that the more misperceptions citizens held, the more they supported the war in Iraq. For example, only 23 percent of citizens who had no misperceptions supported the war, whereas 86 percent of those with three misperceptions supported it. Kull et al. did not demonstrate that the news sources caused the misperceptions or that the misperceptions caused support for the war. Nevertheless, the associations between news sources and misperceptions and between

misperceptions and support for the war raise serious questions about the sources, extent, and effect of misinformation in a democratic society.

Clay Ramsay and his colleagues conducted a similar survey of citizens' misperceptions shortly after the 2010 midterm elections.²¹ The survey included eleven questions asking about citizens' knowledge of issues debated during the campaign, such as the recently enacted health-care reform law, climate change, campaign contributions by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and President Barack Obama's place of birth. Many citizens were misinformed on these issues. Take Obama's place of birth, for example. Fifty-six percent of citizens knew that Obama was born in the United States, but 27 percent said it was not clear whether he was born in the United States and another 15 percent said he was not born in the United States. This is a striking level of ignorance about the president of the United States. Citizens were also quite ill informed when it came to perceptions of expert opinion. When asked about economists' views of the health-care reform law on the federal budget deficit, only 13 percent of citizens knew that more economists estimated the act would not increase the deficit over the next ten years. Citizens were more knowledgeable about expert opinion on climate change, but still 45 percent incorrectly believed that scientists were evenly divided or that most did not think that climate change is occurring.

The average level of misperception-holding was higher in 2010 than in the 2003 study of misperceptions about Iraq for all news sources.²² "Consumers of all sources of media evidenced substantial misinformation, suggesting that false or misleading information is widespread in the general information environment."²³ In most cases, citizens with more exposure to news sources were better informed; however, those who watched Fox News almost daily were significantly more likely to be misinformed on several topics than those who never watched it. To illustrate, 63 percent of daily Fox News viewers did not know that President Obama was born in the United States, compared with 32 percent of citizens who never watched Fox News.²⁴ In general, citizens were most likely to be well-informed if they got their news from NPR and PBS or MSNBC, although a majority of their audiences incorrectly believed that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce was spending foreign money to back Republican candidates.

Figure 8-1 Misperceptions by News Source



Source: Data from Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003–2004), 582.

Note: Bars represent the percentage of people holding at least one misperception about the Iraq War by primary news source.

Have Levels of Political Knowledge Changed over Time?

To examine whether citizens have become more knowledgeable over time, Delli Carpini and Keeter collected national survey data from randomly selected respondents in 1989. Their survey included political knowledge questions matching those asked on surveys from the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, Delli Carpini and Keeter were able to compare levels of political knowledge across time. Before we turn to their results, let's discuss why we might expect citizens to be more informed in 1989 than fifty years earlier as well as why we might expect citizens to be less informed.

There are certainly reasons to believe that citizens would be significantly more informed in 1989.²⁵ First, citizens' ability to understand politics should have increased because levels of formal education have risen dramatically over the years. Second, citizens' motivation to understand politics should have increased because the government has become significantly "bigger" over the last few decades. Both domestically and on the world stage, the U.S. government plays a much larger role today than it did in the 1940s. Thus, citizens should be more concerned with all the ways the government affects their daily lives and how U.S. power is wielded around the world. Third, citizens should have more of an opportunity to learn about politics given the huge leaps in communication that have occurred since the 1940s.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. There are also reasons to suspect that citizens would be less knowledgeable in 1989 than in the 1940s.²⁶ Although levels of formal education have increased, that does not necessarily mean a corresponding increase in civics education. Moreover, some observers have lamented the low quality of education in today's schools. More students may be graduating, but with fewer skills and knowledge than once was the case. As for motivation, it may be that a larger and more visible government turns citizens off rather than encouraging engagement. And certainly changes in communication technology provide citizens greater access to news, but they also provide greater access to entertainment that draws attention away from the politics of the day.

So, there are arguments in both directions regarding whether citizens should be more knowledgeable in 1989 than several decades ago, but ultimately this is an empirical question. By comparing levels of knowledge in 1989 to roughly fifty years earlier, Delli Carpini and Keeter found that "the level of public knowledge has remained remarkably stable."²⁷ For example, over 90 percent of the public knew that a presidential term lasts four years and roughly two-thirds of citizens knew which party controlled the House in both 1947 and 1989. There were some questions on which people demonstrated significant increases or decreases in knowledge, but many of these changes seem understandable given varying patterns of media coverage and elite emphasis over time.

More than twenty years have passed since Delli Carpini and Keeter conducted their 1989 study, and during that time period the Internet revolution has occurred, providing citizens with unprecedented access to information. With a few keystrokes on the computer or a smartphone in hand, citizens can hunt down political information at the drop of a hat. Have citizens become more knowledgeable as a result? Perhaps Delli Carpini and Keeter's conclusions about the stability of political knowledge are **timebound**.

We turn to survey data collected by the Pew Research Center to address this issue. Pew conducted knowledge surveys in 1989 and 2007 that included nine identical or comparable questions.²⁸ The Pew data do not show that citizens have become markedly more knowledgeable in recent years; instead, citizens were more knowledgeable about some topics in 2007 but less informed about others

Table 8-3 Political Knowledge, 1989–2007

<i>Political knowledge</i>	1989	2007	<i>Difference</i>
Percentage who could correctly name:			
The vice president	74%	69%	-5
Their state's governor	74	66	-8
The president of Russia ^a	47	36	-11
Percentage who knew:			
U.S. has a trade deficit	81	68	-13
The party controlling the House	68	76	+8
The chief justice is conservative	30	37	+7
Percentage who could correctly identify:			
Tom Foley/Nancy Pelosi	14	49	+35
Richard Cheney/Robert Gates	13	21	+8
John Poindexter ^b /Scooter Libby	60	29	-31

Source: "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Washington, D.C., April 15, 2007, <http://people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions/>.

^aData from 1994.

^bData from 1990.

(see Table 8-3). Citizens were less likely to correctly name the vice president, their state's governor, the president of Russia, and an administration official involved in a scandal (Scooter Libby in 2007, who was in the midst of a trial for perjury and obstruction of justice in a case involving the outing of a CIA agent, and John Poindexter in 1990, who was in the midst of a trial for involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal). They were also less likely to know the United States has a trade deficit. On the upside, the public was more aware of which party controlled the House and the ideology of the chief justice. They were also more likely to identify the speaker of the house and the secretary of defense. Overall, the Pew surveys suggest citizens have not become more knowledgeable as a result of technological changes making information easier to access. Therefore, it seems that Delli Carpini and Keeter's research findings are not timebound; levels of citizen knowledge have stayed roughly the same from the 1940s until the present.

MEASURING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

When it comes to measuring political knowledge, a key question is whether citizens are generalists or specialists. A **generalist** would be knowledgeable across all political topics. For example, a generalist would be able to name the secretary of state, identify the largest U.S. trading partner, know the minimum wage, and

identify two Fifth Amendment rights. In contrast, a **specialist** would have knowledge on some topics but not others. For example, a specialist might be well informed about foreign affairs but pay little attention to domestic politics.

If it is the case that people specialize, then measuring political knowledge would be quite difficult. It would require lots of survey questions covering a wide range of political topics. Survey researchers would need to include multiple questions on the substance of domestic and foreign policy, rules of the game (both domestic and foreign), and people and players (again both domestic and foreign). If, on the other hand, citizens are generalists, then a relatively small set of survey questions would provide a valid and reliable measure of political knowledge.

Delli Carpini and Keeter analyzed a variety of survey data to determine whether citizens are generalists or specialists.²⁹ They found that citizens can best be characterized as generalists.³⁰ In other words, the same person who can name the president of Russia also tends to know which party controls the House, who declares war, what a recession is, and whether the United States has a trade deficit. Likewise, a person who does *not* know the Russian president doesn't know other political facts either. As a result, Delli Carpini and Keeter argued it is possible to successfully measure political knowledge using a small set of items. Based on their extensive analyses, they recommended using five questions to measure political knowledge.³¹ Those items, as well as the introduction they suggested, are presented in Table 8-4.

Table 8-4 Measuring Political Knowledge

"Last, here are a few questions about the government in Washington. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don't know just tell me and we'll go on."

"Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by [insert name of current vice president]?"

"Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not . . . is it the president, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?"

"How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?"

"Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this/last month?"

"Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?"

Source: Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 305–306.

There are two noteworthy exceptions to the argument that citizens are generalists. First, Delli Carpini and Keeter's research shows that some people specialize in state or local politics.³² These citizens are knowledgeable about political events and issues in their states or in their local communities but are not as aware of national politics. Consequently, Delli Carpini and Keeter's measure of political knowledge may classify some people who are highly informed about state and local politics as ill informed. Thus, their measure is not a good indicator of state and local political knowledge.

Second, some people may specialize in knowing about issues and people particularly pertinent to them or groups to which they belong. Delli Carpini and Keeter's research, for example, shows that blacks have lower levels of political knowledge than nonblacks, in general, but are just as knowledgeable on race-related issues.³³ Similarly, in a 2007 poll, the Pew Research Center found that blacks identified then-senator Barack Obama and then-secretary of state Condoleezza Rice at the same level as whites but that blacks were less informed than whites in other areas.³⁴ A study conducted a few months after the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon showed that citizens living in the Northeast were more knowledgeable about the events of 9/11 than people living in other parts of the country but not better informed about politics in general.³⁵ Overall, then, the research demonstrates that some citizens have domain-specific knowledge in areas that are particularly important to them.

Delli Carpini and Keeter's method of measuring political knowledge has greatly influenced how political scientists study the concept. Not all scholars agree, however, that their conceptualization and measurement are the best. Indeed, research conducted by Kathleen Dolan raises concerns about Delli Carpini and Keeter's narrow definition of politics and the gender differences in knowledge that result from that limited understanding of politics.³⁶ In addition, several scholars have demonstrated that levels of citizen knowledge are underestimated by the open-ended type of questions recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter.³⁷ Yet another scholar, Doris Graber, argues that Delli Carpini and Keeter's emphasis on factual knowledge measured through surveys is misplaced.³⁸ We discuss these critiques next.

Gender-Relevant Domains of Knowledge

Noting that many studies have documented that men are more knowledgeable about politics than women, Kathleen Dolan argues that scholars should broaden their conceptualization of political knowledge to include "gender relevant domains of knowledge."³⁹ Delli Carpini and Keeter's understanding of politics emphasizes electoral politics and the institutions of government, but those are not the aspects of politics most important to women. Women are more likely to be interested in government programs, women's issues, and female leaders. Therefore, questions

that measure knowledge about these topics should be included on surveys, which would reduce, if not reverse, the **gender gap in political knowledge**.

To test this proposition, Dolan conducted an online survey of a random sample of 1,039 adults. The survey included several items designed to measure gender-relevant knowledge, including asking respondents the name of the speaker of the house (who was a woman at the time), the name of any woman serving in the U.S. Congress, the number of women Supreme Court justices, and the percentage of women serving in Congress. For comparison purposes, the survey also included one traditional political knowledge item that asked respondents which party held a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. In Table 8-5, we see that women were significantly less informed about who controlled the House, but comparable to men in terms of naming Nancy Pelosi as house speaker, naming a woman House member, and knowing how many women were on the Supreme Court. Further, the gender gap was reversed when it came to knowing the percentage of women serving in Congress. Women members made up 16 percent of Congress at the time, so Dolan coded any answer between 15 and 20 percent as correct. Women were significantly more likely than men to answer correctly, whereas men were more likely than women to underestimate the presence of women in Congress. Dolan's point that survey researchers should conceptualize and measure political knowledge in a way that represents the experiences of men and women is well taken; nevertheless, even with gender-relevant items included, the conclusion is still that political knowledge among the American public is modest at best and woefully low at worst.

Table 8-5 Traditional and Gender-Relevant Political Knowledge

	Answered correctly	
	Women	Men
Traditional political knowledge		
Majority in House	58%	68%
Gender-relevant political knowledge		
Speaker of house	39	39
Woman member of Congress	51	54
Women on Supreme Court	43	47
Percentage women in Congress	34	28

Source: Adapted from Table 1 of Kathleen Dolan, "Do Women and Men Know Different Things? Measuring Gender Differences in Political Knowledge," *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011), 102.

Note: The boldface percentages indicate statistically significant gender differences.

Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective

BOX 8-1 GENDER AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE IN CANADA

Canadian political scientists have also raised concerns about traditional measures of political knowledge. Similar to Kathleen Dolan, Dietlind Stolle and Elisabeth Gidengil argue that the conventional conceptualization and measurement of knowledge are too narrow because of the focus on electoral politics and government institutions.¹ They prefer a broader measure that assesses citizens' knowledge of government programs and services. Such knowledge is practical and useful; it helps citizens "know how to access welfare and other government services that are essential to their own well-being and that of their families."² This knowledge is especially critical for women, who use government services at a higher rate, are more likely to have jobs in the public sector, and support welfare state policies more than men.

Because this information is so relevant to women, Stolle and Gidengil argue that women are as knowledgeable as men, if not more informed, about important government services and benefits. Thus, the typical gender gap in knowledge will disappear when a wider range of questions is used to measure political knowledge. To investigate this issue, Stolle and Gidengil conducted a survey of Canadian citizens living in Montreal and Toronto. The survey included traditional questions about key political leaders and political parties, but it also included questions measuring knowledge of several government programs, such as legal aid, the availability of free health-screening tests, and where to turn if someone knew of a child being abused.

	Answered correctly	
	Women	Men
Traditional political knowledge		
Prime minister	91%	92%
Party forming official opposition	56	73
Female cabinet minister	38	44
Knowledge of government programs		
Legal aid	83	81
Health-screening tests	76	50
Child abuse	68	62

Source: Dietlind Stolle and Elisabeth Gidengil, "What Do Women Really Know? A Gendered Analysis of Varieties of Political Knowledge," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (2010), 99.

Note: The boldface percentages indicate statistically significant gender differences.

(continued)

Stolle and Gidengil found that men and women were comparable in their knowledge of high-profile political leaders, such as the prime minister, but that women tended to be less knowledgeable than men on the other measures of conventional political knowledge. In sharp contrast, women generally outperformed men when it came to knowledge of government services and benefits. For example, women were much more likely to know about free health-screening tests available through their health-care plans than men.

Stolle and Gidengil acknowledge that knowledge of conventional politics is important, but argue quite persuasively that practical knowledge is also essential in democratic societies. Thus, they recommend including questions that measure both types of information on surveys assessing political knowledge.

1. Dietlind Stolle and Elisabeth Gidengil, "What Do Women Really Know? A Gendered Analysis of Varieties of Political Knowledge," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (2010): 93–109.
2. *Ibid.*, 94.

Recall versus Recognition

Another concern with the measurement of political knowledge is the use of **short answer questions**.⁴⁰ People are more likely to say "don't know" to these questions than to **multiple choice questions**. People who are semiconfident may not be willing to toss out an answer with a short answer question but will articulate a response once they hear the option mentioned in a multiple choice format. Further, multiple choice questions may jog people's memories, allowing them to recognize the correct answer.

Table 8-6 presents survey data from the Pew Research Center that illustrate the differences between short answer and multiple choice questions.⁴¹ Note the data presented here are not from a split-half survey in which respondents were randomly assigned to receive one type of question or another. Instead, they are drawn from two national representative surveys, one conducted in February and the other in March 2007. Thus, it could be the case that factors other than the question format affected levels of political knowledge. We should be cautious in interpreting these results; nevertheless, the data suggest that format matters. On both items, citizens appear more knowledgeable with a multiple choice question. And notice the dramatic difference on the question about the president of Russia—citizens go from being fairly ignorant to fairly well informed with the switch in format.

Table 8-6 The Perils of Measuring Political Knowledge: Short Answer versus Multiple Choice Questions

<i>Answer</i>	<i>Short answer format February 1–13, 2007</i>	<i>Multiple choice format March 9–12, 2007</i>
	"Can you tell me who Robert Gates is?"	"Is Robert Gates the U.S. Secretary of Defense? A senator from Michigan? The chairman of General Motors? Or is he something else?"
U.S. secretary of defense	21%	37%
Anything else/ don't know/refused	79	63
	"Can you tell me the name of the president of Russia?"	"Can you tell me who is the president of Russia? Is it Boris Yeltsin? Vladimir Putin? Mikhail Gorbachev? Or is it someone else?"
Vladimir Putin	36%	60%
Anything else/ don't know/refused	64	40

Source: "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Washington, D.C., April 15, 2007, 23–33, <http://people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions/>.

Too Much Emphasis on Factual Knowledge?

Doris Graber raises an even more fundamental concern with Delli Carpini and Keeter's measure of political knowledge.⁴² She argues that political scientists should focus on what citizens need to know to function in a democracy rather than emphasizing "precisely remembered factual knowledge about historically important past and current events."⁴³ Why? Because citizens are *limited information processors*. Graber reviews research by communication scholars, psychologists, biologists, and neuroscientists and concludes that it is simply not possible for citizens to remember every little detail about politics because our brains are not designed to do so. Moreover, our brains are not set up to quickly recall political knowledge in the context of a survey.⁴⁴

This does not mean, however, that citizens are clueless about politics. Instead, they pay attention to issues that are relevant to them. People are interested in understanding the impact of political events on their lives and on the well-being of the country, not on memorizing the names of politicians or constitutional

rights. Citizens want useful information, not factoids. Graber argues, for example, “There may be areas of knowledge where the poor, trained in the school of hard knocks, may excel. But scores of streetwise knowledge are not usually gathered and reported.”⁴⁵ To substantiate her claims, Graber analyzed transcripts of nine **focus groups** conducted in the Chicago area.⁴⁶ The ninety-eight focus group participants ranged from suburban voters to city voters to young people to homeless people. The focus groups began with the moderator asking, “What are the issues that are most important to you in your community, however you define that? What would you tell an elected official?”⁴⁷ Graber coded for whether participants’ responses were “simple,” such as statements of fact or description, or “complex,” such as statements that showed understanding of a variety of perspectives and drew connections among different ideas.

Here is an example of a black voter discussing economic problems using complex statements: “I would like to hear a political person say that one of the viable alternatives to crime in our neighborhoods is really lobbying for minimum wage standards . . . not just talking about minimum wage but how do we get people who have smaller stores to expand and employ more people. . . . How do we talk to Sears about having part-time staff with no benefits?”⁴⁸ Overall, Graber found that people often made complex statements or a mix of complex and simple statements when talking about political topics. Simple statements dominated the discussion in only 18 percent of the issue areas discussed by the focus groups.

Graber admits these people would not score well on Delli Carpini and Keeter’s measure of political knowledge, but she does not expect them to given the inherent limitations of the brain. Instead, Graber argues that the focus group participants “possess reasonably sophisticated, politically useful knowledge about current problems that confront them and that the issue areas covered by this knowledge are generally quite well suited to carrying out the actual tasks of citizenship that most Americans perform.”⁴⁹ Participatory democratic theorists would prefer, of course, that American citizens perform a wider variety of citizenship tasks than they currently perform and thus would argue that citizens need substantially greater political information than what Graber thinks is necessary.

WHY ARE SOME CITIZENS MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE THAN OTHERS?

In this section, we turn our attention to understanding why some citizens are more informed than other citizens. Citizens vary in political knowledge based on their abilities, motivations, and the opportunities available. We begin with a discussion of the relationship between demographic characteristics and political knowledge. Next we examine the role of motivation. Then we turn to a discussion of contextual factors that affect political knowledge.

Demographic Groups and Political Knowledge

Several studies have demonstrated substantial differences in political knowledge across demographic groups.⁵⁰ We have already discussed the gender gap in political knowledge at some length and mentioned the **racial gap in political knowledge** on issues that are not race-related. It is also important to mention that these gender and racial gaps extend to young people. A study of students at six middle schools in Maricopa County, Arizona, showed that white adolescents were significantly more knowledgeable about politics than African American, Latino, and Native American adolescents.⁵¹ Further, a national representative survey of high school seniors demonstrated that boys have slightly more civics knowledge than girls and that whites have substantially more civics knowledge than Hispanics and African Americans.⁵²

Levels of political knowledge also differ across age groups. In general, older folks are better informed than younger ones. This appears to be due to both life cycle and generational effects. As people progress through the life cycle, they are simply exposed to more political information. Older citizens have experiences, such as buying a house and paying property taxes, that younger people are less likely to have. These experiences result in an increase in political knowledge. Also, older people were raised in a more politically engaged era than today’s young people. Accordingly, this early socialization put the older generation on a track to pay attention to, and thus be knowledgeable about, politics throughout their lives.

Income and education also matter. Wealthy citizens are better informed than their poorer counterparts. Similarly, citizens with higher educations are substantially more knowledgeable than those with a minimal education. Education is critical, of course, because it improves citizens’ cognitive abilities to learn about politics. But it also boosts interest in politics, which motivates citizens to become more knowledgeable. In addition, education affects the opportunities citizens have to become informed; formal education allows people to obtain jobs in which politics matter on a regular basis (such as lawyers, business executives, and political science professors) and places people in social networks that value political knowledge. Indeed, “formal education is the single most important factor differentiating those who know more about politics from those who know less. Citizens who spend more years in school simply know a lot more about politics.”⁵³

In Table 8-7, we illustrate demographic differences in political knowledge by examining citizens’ familiarity with Chief Justice John Roberts’s political ideology. The February 2007 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center asked respondents whether Roberts is generally considered a liberal, a moderate, or a conservative.⁵⁴ We see that 37 percent of citizens correctly identified the chief justice’s political ideology as conservative. There is striking variation, however, across sex, race, age, education, and income. Men, whites, older citizens, wealthier people, and those