

are motivated to provide information to citizens and citizens find the information useful. In such a political context, citizens are more knowledgeable about politics.

The political context in the United States is dominated by men, which has an effect on levels of political knowledge among women. A study by Nancy Burns, Kay Schlozman, and Sidney Verba asked the question, "What if politics weren't a man's game?"⁶⁵ Burns et al. found that women living in states with a female senator or a female Senate candidate were substantially more knowledgeable about politics than women living in states without those characteristics. Specifically, only 51 percent of women from male-dominated states could name one of their U.S. senators, whereas 79 percent of women could do so when the political context included powerful female politicians.⁶⁶ This is a huge difference and suggests that the knowledge gap between men and women could close if more women served in elective office.

Jennifer Jerit, Jason Barabas, and Toby Bolsen examined another aspect of the political context—how the information environment affects citizens' political knowledge.⁶⁷ They argue that citizens will be better informed about politics when the information environment is rich. In other words, when the media pay a great deal of attention to political issues, the public becomes more knowledgeable as a result. An information-rich environment, however, helps the better educated more than their less-educated counterparts. Thus, information does not level the playing field; instead, well-educated citizens are better equipped to integrate new knowledge into their existing stores of information, which allows them to move even further ahead of those who are less educated. Thus, the knowledge gap between the less educated and better educated is exacerbated by an information-rich environment.

Does it matter whether the information-rich environment is created by news stories in print or on television? Yes, it does. Jerit et al. examined the relationship between different types of media coverage and political knowledge of forty-one issues, ranging from understanding how the West Nile virus is spread to knowledge of the Supreme Court's ruling on partial-birth abortion to knowing about President George W. Bush's drug plan. The researchers found that on issues with low levels of media attention (such as Bush's drug plan), highly educated people were only slightly more likely to answer questions correctly than those with less education, whereas there was a large knowledge gap on issues receiving a great deal of media attention (such as how the West Nile virus is spread). Furthermore, this knowledge gap was exacerbated when the issue received extensive coverage in the print media. In contrast, for issues receiving extensive television coverage, both less-educated and highly educated people gained. A knowledge gap remained, of course, but the important point is that the gap was not increased by the television coverage.⁶⁸ Media critics have complained about the simplicity

and inanity of television news compared with print, but these findings suggest that television presents information in a way that benefits those who are least knowledgeable.

Overall, these studies suggest the political context matters a great deal. Citizens are more knowledgeable when the political context is a favorable one. This is consistent with the views of participatory democratic theorists. If you are interested in boosting levels of political knowledge, as participatory democratic theorists are, then it makes sense to structure the political environment in a way that encourages and enables citizens to easily and efficiently acquire information.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE?

Does it matter whether citizens are politically knowledgeable or ignorant? This is a normative question to be sure. As we have already discussed, different democratic theorists have different views on the consequences of political ignorance. But it is also an empirical question. By examining the differences between those who are knowledgeable and those who are not, we can get a handle on the consequences of political ignorance.

Delli Carpini and Keeter identify a number of ways in which knowledgeable citizens differ from others.⁶⁹ First, well-informed citizens are more likely to demonstrate political tolerance, a fundamental norm in a democratic society. Second, knowledgeable citizens participate at higher rates than their counterparts. Third, knowledgeable citizens are more likely to have stable issue opinions and structure their opinions along a liberal-conservative continuum. Fourth, informed citizens are more likely to recognize their interests, bring their issue positions into line with their party identification, and vote accordingly. Fifth, knowledge begets knowledge. In other words, knowledgeable citizens are able to handle new information with ease; existing knowledge allows citizens to efficiently incorporate new tidbits into their belief systems. All these things are critical in a democracy, according to Delli Carpini and Keeter. "Because so many of these differences bear on the issue of political power, a key implication of these findings is that the maldistribution of political knowledge has consequences: it threatens the basic democratic principle of political equality among citizens."⁷⁰ Delli Carpini and Keeter find this maldistribution particularly alarming because those who are already less powerful in society (such as women, minorities, the poor, the less educated, and young people) are the ones who are less knowledgeable.

Political ignorance also has an effect on policy attitudes and vote choice. Recall the studies on misinformation we discussed earlier in the chapter.⁷¹ The Kuklinski et al. study showed that incorrect beliefs led citizens to be more opposed to welfare spending than they otherwise would be, and the Kull et al. research demonstrated that citizens who held more misperceptions about the war in Iraq were more likely to support the war. Another study used an experimental design

to show that when citizens were provided with accurate information about the decrease in crime in recent years, they were more likely to say the government was spending too much money on building prisons.⁷² Other scholars have demonstrated that uninformed citizens would vote for different candidates if they were fully informed.⁷³ Thus, this research highlights the important policy and electoral impact of citizens' lack of knowledge.

ARE CITIZENS INTERESTED IN AND ATTENTIVE TO POLITICS?

Are citizens interested in politics and political campaigns? Do they pay attention to political news? These are important questions because citizens who are interested in and attentive to politics tend to have higher levels of political knowledge than citizens who are not engaged.⁷⁴ And, as we just discussed, knowledge has important political consequences.

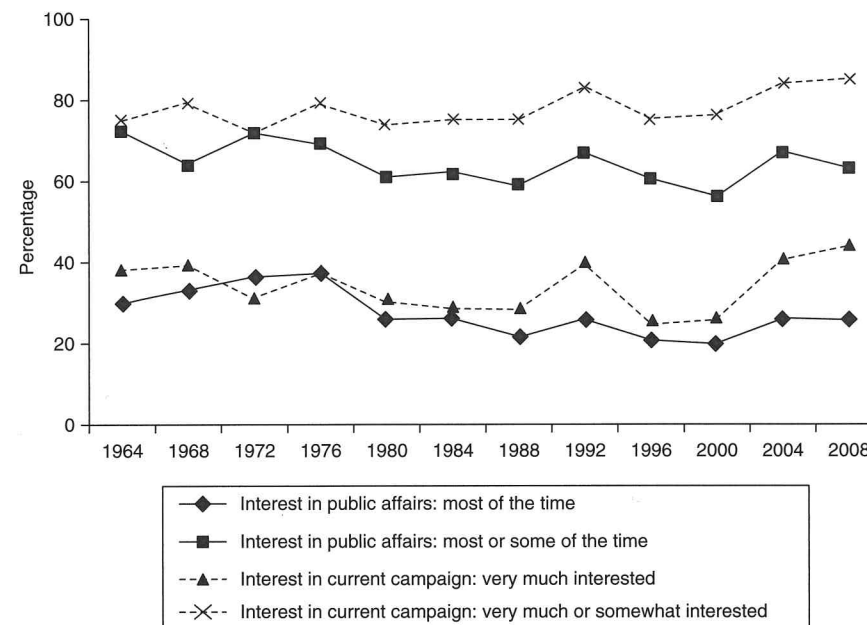
Interest in Public Affairs and Political Campaigns

Let's first examine public **interest in politics**. Citizens are modestly interested, according to ANES surveys.⁷⁵ In 2008, 26 percent of citizens said they "follow what's going on in government and politics most of the time." Another 37 percent indicated they were interested "some of the time" (see the solid lines in Figure 8-2). Over time, the proportion of citizens highly interested in politics has decreased. In the 1960s and 1970s, roughly one-third of respondents said they were following politics most of the time. From the 1980s until the present, it was only about one-quarter.

What about interest in political campaigns? In 2008, citizens were quite interested.⁷⁶ Forty-four percent said they were "very much interested" and another 41 percent said they were "somewhat interested" (see the dotted lines in Figure 8-2). This was the highest level of interest in political campaigns recorded since the survey's inception in 1952. It at least partially reflects the Obama campaign's ability to mobilize young people and minority groups. As Figure 8-2 shows, there is quite a bit of variation in campaign interest over time. As in 2004 and 2008, citizens indicated significant interest in 1992, but they were less engaged in 1996 and 2000. Nevertheless, in every presidential election year since 1964, at least 70 percent of respondents have said they were somewhat or very much interested in political campaigns. Overall, then, citizens seem to perk up during the presidential campaign season but are somewhat less engaged when it comes to day-to-day politics.

As with political knowledge, levels of interest vary across demographic groups.⁷⁷ Men and whites are generally more interested in politics. Likewise, those with more education and higher incomes are more concerned with political happenings. Age, in particular, has a strong relationship with political interest; older individuals follow public affairs more than young people. Partisans and ideologues are also much more likely to follow politics than independents or moderates.

Figure 8-2 Interest in Public Affairs and Current Campaign, 1964–2008



Source: The American National Election Studies (www.electionstudies.org), *The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, producer and distributor).

Notes: Interest in Public Affairs question wording: "Some people seem to follow (1964: think about) what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?"

Interest in Current Campaign question wording: "Some people don't pay much attention to the political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been/were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns (so far) this year?"

The political context also matters. During the 2008 presidential campaign, for example, 51 percent of blacks said they were very much interested in the campaign compared with only 44 percent of whites. Further, in 2004, only 32 percent of blacks said they were very much interested in the campaign. Clearly having Barack Obama on the ballot stimulated a great deal of interest among black Americans in 2008.⁷⁸ Similarly, in states where females hold statewide offices (such as senator or governor), women are significantly more interested in politics than in states without such female representation.⁷⁹ Similarly, women

in states with competitive female candidates are more likely to discuss politics and try to convince others to support a political candidate than women in states without viable female contenders.⁸⁰ The political context is also important for adolescents. Girls, for example, are more likely to anticipate future political involvement when they see women run high-profile, viable political campaigns.⁸¹

What do democratic theorists have to say about variation in levels of political interest? Participatory democratic theorists would be concerned with the demographic differences in political interest, and they would argue that changes in the political context are necessary to ensure all citizens are interested in politics. Some elite democrats, on the other hand, would wonder why so many citizens are interested in politics. From their point of view, it is irrational for citizens to spend time on politics. The likelihood that a citizen, even an interested and informed one, could make a difference is so small that it simply doesn't make sense for him or her to devote resources to such an endeavor.

Attention to the War in Iraq

U.S. military action in Iraq began in early 2003 and ended with the removal of U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. During those nearly nine years, over 4,400 U.S. soldiers died, tens of thousands more were wounded, and over 50,000 Iraqis were killed.⁸² Furthermore, the Iraq war lasted longer than World War II and cost taxpayers billions of dollars. Among political elites, the Iraq war was one of the most controversial and agonizing issue of our times. So, did citizens pay attention to the events in Iraq?

When the war first began, between one-half and two-thirds of citizens said they were following news stories about the war in Iraq "very closely," according to weekly surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center to measure **attention to politics**. By 2007, that number had dropped to about one-third. In 2008 and 2009, attention to the war dropped even further as news of the economic crisis dominated the media. By the end of 2010, fewer than 20 percent were following news about Iraq very closely.⁸³ In 2011, Iraq was largely absent from news coverage, making it extremely difficult for citizens to follow the course of the war.

Given the life-and-death importance of the war, participatory democratic theorists would argue there is a heightened need for citizens to hold leaders accountable for their war-related decisions. Thus, citizens should be attentive to the news about Iraq, and they should be highly knowledgeable about the situation. The evidence is mixed in this regard, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in June 2007, a time when the war was still receiving extensive coverage in the news media.⁸⁴ On the one hand, more than 60 percent of Americans knew that the number of casualties was higher in 2007 than the

year before and that the number of troops in Iraq had gone up recently. Forty-nine percent knew that the deaths of U.S. troops numbered around 3,500 at the time, with another 20 percent saying 2,500 and 12 percent guessing 4,500. Overall, these data suggest the public had a general understanding of what was happening in Iraq. When it came to the details, however, the public was not nearly as informed. Most Americans were either uninformed or misinformed about which group is the largest in Iraq. Only 41 percent could identify the Shia as the group with the largest population. And most Americans could not name either the U.S. commander in Iraq or the head of the Iraqi government. These are not unimportant facts; they capture fundamental aspects of the conflict in Iraq.

Given the high stakes, participatory democratic theorists would expect more from the public. Paying attention to the conflict when it was initially instigated was a good first step for citizens, but citizens should continue to pay attention to have the knowledge necessary to monitor, evaluate, and hold elites accountable. Elite democratic theorists, on the other hand, would be satisfied by citizens' very general understanding of the situation in Iraq. Because voting is the main expectation that elite democrats have for citizens, extensive knowledge of the conflict is unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

Are citizens highly knowledgeable about politics? No, many people are not particularly well informed, and some citizens are outright misinformed about important political issues. Nevertheless, people are not as ignorant about politics as some observers have suggested. Further, citizens have not become more ignorant over time; levels of political knowledge have been remarkably stable over the last fifty years. There is a controversy about how to measure political knowledge, with several scholars arguing that Delli Carpini and Keeter's method is too narrow or that it underestimates citizen competence. Indeed, Graber argues that citizens do know useful political information but do not have the brain capacity to deal with every little detail.

Why are some citizens more knowledgeable than others? Citizens differ in ability, motivation, and opportunity. Formal education, for example, provides citizens with the cognitive ability to become informed about politics. Other demographic characteristics matter as well; men, whites, higher-income, and older people are more likely to be knowledgeable. Motivational factors, such as interest, attention, discussion, and how people use the media, lead citizens to be informed. The political context also acts as either a facilitator or inhibitor of political knowledge.

Are there consequences of political knowledge? Yes, indeed there are. Citizens who are knowledgeable are more likely to endorse democratic values and participate

in political activities. They have opinions on issues that are more stable and more closely linked to their ideology and party identification. In addition, knowledgeable citizens are capable of dealing with new information in an efficient manner, making it easier for them to learn even more about politics. And perhaps most important, informed citizens hold different issue opinions than they otherwise would. Thus, political knowledge has significant ramifications for policy preferences among the public.

Are citizens interested in and attentive to politics? Citizens demonstrate modest interest in politics and fairly high interest in political campaigns. They paid quite a bit of attention to the war in Iraq when it was covered regularly in the media, but then their attention moved on to other issues. At one point, citizens held general knowledge about the war but were sketchy on the details. Today it is likely that citizens are largely uninformed about Iraq, given the paucity of media attention and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country.

Overall, do people live up to the democratic ideal of knowledgeable, engaged citizens? Participatory democratic theorists would say no. They would argue that citizens should be more knowledgeable so they can play an active role in the democratic process. Informed and engaged citizens are at the heart of a democracy. They are necessary to influence elite behavior and hold elites accountable. Participatory democratic theorists find the demographic differences in political knowledge especially troubling because they are concerned with inequalities in society. These theorists do not blame individuals for their lack of political savvy and interest, however. Instead, they point to the barriers that limit citizen engagement and knowledge.

In sharp contrast, some elite democratic theorists are curious about why citizens are interested and knowledgeable at all, given the low odds that their voices will be influential. In their minds, the puzzle is not why so many people lack knowledge but why so many people are informed. Elite democrats who think government works best when the public interferes least would probably be satisfied with the low levels of knowledge and modest levels of political interest. Scholars who emphasize that citizens can make sensible political decisions by using heuristics would be troubled by the lack of knowledge about such things as party stances on the issues. Some citizens can use cues to effectively muddle their way through, but many people do not even have those basic insights.

You are an expert now on political knowledge, interest, and attention. You understand the different normative approaches to citizen competence, and you have a good grasp of the empirical research findings. So, what do you think? Are citizens knowledgeable enough, interested enough, and attentive enough to function effectively in a democracy?

KEY CONCEPTS

attention to politics / 236	multiple choice questions / 226
civic education / 231	news grazers / 231
focus groups / 228	people and players / 215
gender gap in political knowledge / 224	political knowledge / 215
generalist / 221	political structure / 231
heuristics / 213	racial gap in political knowledge / 229
information environment / 232	rules of the game / 215
informed / 216	short answer questions / 226
interest in politics / 234	specialist / 222
limited information processors / 214	substance of politics / 215
low-information rationality / 213	timebound / 220
misinformed / 216	uninformed / 216

SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

- Davis, Darren W., and Brian D. Silver. "Stereotype Threat and Race of Interviewer Effects in a Survey on Political Knowledge." *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003): 33–45.
- McGlone, Matthew S., Joshua Aronson, and Diane Kobrynowicz. "Stereotype Threat and the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006): 392–398.

These scholars argue that stereotype threat explains at least part of the racial and gender gap in political knowledge. Stereotype threat occurs when blacks and women feel pressure to perform well on political knowledge questions because they are aware of negative stereotypes about their intellectual abilities. As a result of stereotype threat, blacks and women do worse on political knowledge tests—not because they are less knowledgeable but because the stress of the situation interferes with their ability to answer correctly.

- Galston, William A. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 217–234.
- Niemi, Richard G., and Jane Junn. *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998.

The Galston article reviews the literature on the connection between civic education and political knowledge. Galston discusses recent research (including Niemi and Junn's book) that shows civic education in high schools can bolster political knowledge. If you are an education major, you will find these pieces particularly interesting.

- Luskin, Robert C., and John G. Bullock. "'Don't Know' Means 'Don't Know': DK Responses and the Public's Level of Political Knowledge." *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011): 547–557.