

Is There a Rational Public?*

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Popular notions of democracy assume that citizens have policy preferences that can and should be reflected in public policy. Elections provide citizens with the opportunity to select representatives with whom they agree, and opinion polls track the mood of the public, providing additional information for those who are elected. This system thus demands quite a lot on part of the citizens, who are ultimately supposed to be in charge. If the average citizen were completely uninformed and uninterested in politics and public policy, a fundamental condition for democracy as a form of government would appear to be missing. Justifying the privileged status of public opinion as a guide for public policy would indeed be hard under such circumstances.

Yet existing scholarship is divided on whether this very basic condition of well-functioning democracy is fulfilled. A number of scholars working in this area can be identified as either optimists or pessimists, and their lines of work follow long traditions in democratic theory. The idea that the will of the people should be the ultimate guide for public policy is found, for example, in the works of Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau (1997[1762]). Two centuries later, Dahl stated “a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971, 1). Yet Dahl was also doubtful about the prospects of achieving full-fledged democracy, noting that existing practices fell short of his ideals. Still more pessimistic, Schumpeter “had a low estimation of the political and intellectual capacities of the average citizen” (Held 1996, 180), and famously argued “democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms ‘people’ and ‘rule’” (Schumpeter 1976, 284).

Current scholarship is more carefully empirical, yet different authors still provide strikingly different pictures of the capacities of average citizens and their ability to influence public policy. Echoing Schumpeter, Achen and Bartels (2016) argue that popular notions of government responsiveness to public preferences – what they refer to as “the folk theory” of democracy – “has been severely undercut by a growing body of scientific evidence presenting a different and considerably darker view of democratic politics” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 1). Their argument stands in notable contrast to two other literatures. The first explores the ways in which even a scarcely informed electorate can reach reasonable decisions (Lupia 1994, Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Popkin 1991). The second strand, which is further discussed in

* Forthcoming in Fisher, J., Cantijoch, M., Fieldhouse, E., Franklin, M., Gibson, R., and Wlezien, C., editors, *The Routledge Handbook of Voting Behavior and Public Opinion*. London: Routledge.

Wlezien's contribution to this volume (Chapter 33), demonstrates that governments indeed often are responsive to public opinion (e.g. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).

This chapter presents an overview and discussion of how these strands of literature fit together. The chapter starts with a discussion of the political sophistication of individual citizens and moves on to the question of whether the citizenry as a collective is able to act as a rational guide for public policy.

The Bad News

In an ideal world, all citizens would read the news every day, have stable and coherent political views, yet be open to deliberation and adjust their views when faced with new information or better arguments. They would carefully develop informed opinions and vote accordingly. But this is, of course, quite unrealistic. In fact, the earliest studies of (American) voter behavior painted a dismal picture of the political sophistication of ordinary citizens (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 2006[1964]). While the most educated and informed members of the public showed some understanding of the liberal-conservative spectrum, the majority of voters appeared not to engage in such abstract thinking (Converse 2006[1964]). In the former group, ideology served to “constrain” voter's opinions, in the sense that their position on one issue would help predict their position on other issues. Among the majority, however, positions appeared non-ideological and many voters seemed to answer completely at random. When interviewed repeatedly at a two-year interval, “only about thirteen people out of twenty manage to locate themselves even on the same side of the controversy in successive interrogations, when ten out of twenty could have done so by chance alone” (Converse 2006[1964], 45).¹

Another troubling observation was that party attachments appeared to explain vote choices far better than other variables, including ideological ones (Campbell et al. 1960). Party identification appeared to act as an “unmoved mover”, placed early in the “funnel of causality”. Thought to be formed early in life, based on the influence of parents, family members, and others, party identification was presented as “an attachment widely held through the American electorate with substantial influence on political cognitions, attitudes, and behavior” (Campbell et al. 1960, 146).² Rather than choosing the party that best fit their policy preferences and ideological positions, many voters seemed to first form a party attachment, and then adapt their perceptions and opinions to fit this attachment.³ Accordingly, partisanship has been presented as a key factor determining how individuals react to new political information (Zaller 1992, Bartels 2002). Overall, the findings discussed above have

¹ However, as Erikson discusses in his contribution to this volume, such tests may underestimate the degree of latent opinion stability. See also Inglehart (1985).

² For early critiques, see e.g. Key (1966), Fiorina (1981), or Franklin and Jackson (1983).

³ The mechanism typically held to be driving such behavior is cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), which has also been used to explain other aspects of attitudinal change (e.g. Bølstad, Dinas, and Riera 2013).

held up quite well, and they form some of the key arguments reiterated by Achen and Bartels (2016).⁴

Following the work of Campbell et al. (1960), a number of authors have argued that voters rationalize party preferences by either perceiving their party's position to be closer their own than it truly is, or by altering their own position, moving it closer to their party (Brody and Page 1972, Markus and Converse 1979, Conover and Feldman 1982). The implication is that the extent of true policy-based "spatial voting" will be (even) lower than estimates based on naïve recursive models would suggest. Yet, it is worth noting that taking the position of the party – often referred to as "persuasion" – may be a rational approach for a low-information voter. It may indeed serve as a useful heuristic of the kind discussed in the next section. In line with this notion, Carsey and Layman (2006), argue that voters are more likely to be persuaded by their party on issues they do not find important, whereas they would be more likely to reduce their support for the party when they disagree on important issues.⁵ This puts such behavior in a more slightly favorable light, although the combination of partisan voting and rationalization in general appears problematic from a democratic perspective.

Another line of work has focused specifically on political knowledge. In their seminal study, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) confirm that American voters generally know very little about politics and that the level of knowledge has not changed much over the last 50 years, despite rising levels of education and increasing access to information (see also Prior 2007). As Delli Carpini and Keeter focuses on the US (just like much of the relevant literature, as well as this chapter), a key question is whether Americans are particularly uninformed about politics. Yet this does not seem to be the case to any large extent (Delli Carpini 2005, Grönlund and Milner 2006). A more important point is that knowledge tends to be more equally distributed in more egalitarian societies. For example, individual levels of knowledge are much more dependent on education in the US than in countries with smaller income differences (Grönlund and Milner 2006). Accordingly, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) find considerable inequalities in knowledge, with older, richer, white men having the most. This matters because those with more knowledge are "more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, [and] more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their own attitudes" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 272).

Cues and Heuristics

While findings such as those above may seem to leave little hope for a well-functioning democratic process, other authors have pointed out that it may not be necessary for voters to be fully informed. In fact, people never have full information about anything, and yet they often manage to get through their lives just fine. It appears that bounded rationality often

⁴ More generally, Achen and Bartels (2016) argue group membership and identity are key factors that have received too little attention in electoral research. This is in line with recent studies, such as Bølstad and Dinas (forthcoming), who find in-group biases in spatial voting.

⁵ See Hutchings and Jefferson's contribution to this volume for a more detailed discussion of partisanship.

works satisfactory. The idea that voters in the absence of complete information use shortcuts to assess the utility they would get from seeing a particular party in office was discussed already in Downs' (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, and later work has elaborated on this idea. Relying on a theory of low-information rationality, Popkin (1991) argues that voters are able to assess candidates based on the limited pieces of information they gain through their daily lives. They learn about the economy from the way it impacts them as well as the way it is reported in the media; they notice which opinion leaders they agree with and learn to trust their opinions; and they discuss new information with the people around them as a way to develop their opinions.

According to Popkin, voters use several types of heuristics. One example is comparing a candidate to a stereotype of how a class of people acts. They may compare the limited information they have about a candidate to how a person who "does the right thing" would act or to what "a good president" should be like. Such considerations may be based on a politician's voting records, but personal information tends to be more important, as such information is more suited to constructing narratives about the candidates. In fact, voters may put more emphasis on how "presidential" a candidate looks than on their actual political track record. Furthermore, voters let media framing influence their assessments: The media help determine which issues are considered more or less important, and which aspect of an issue, such as the state of the economy, is given priority.

Popkin also notes that people use information in a way akin to a "drunkard's search". This metaphor refers to a drunk looking for his lost keys under the streetlight, even though that is not where they were lost. It is simply where there is light. Similarly, voters are likely to focus on easily available and accessible information, conducting one-dimensional assessments, relying on single traits, symbols, or events. They may focus more on traits like sincerity or competence than issue positions. Another interesting point is that people dislike uncertainty and will be more confident in their assessments when they can use heuristics. They will also be more certain (or over-confident) when all information points in the same direction or when probabilities are close to zero or one, as more intermediate probabilities are harder to understand and work with.

Partly drawing on Popkin, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) make a similar argument. In particular, they argue that reasoned choice does not require full information, but ability to predict the consequences of available choices – which they refer to as knowledge. They note that people disregard most of the information they could acquire, and rely on a very limited set of information. They further view representation as a principal-agent problem, where voters (as principals) must trust representatives (agents), because it is too costly for the former to monitor every move the latter makes. This problem can be reduced by the presence of a "speaker" that takes on the task of monitoring and assessing the agents. Potential speakers include, for instance, commentators, other politicians, or friends.

In line with a lot of earlier work, Lupia and McCubbins note that people learn both from personal experience and from others. A key point, however, is that such learning is active, and that people choose which sources to rely on, i.e. from whom they learn. The authors "define

persuasion as one person’s successful attempt to change the beliefs of another”, and argue “[i]n settings where reasoned choice requires learning from others, persuasion is a necessary condition for reasoned choice” (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 40). The question is when speakers are persuasive, and the authors argue this is the case when speakers have interests in common with the voter and appear to be knowledgeable about the topic – traits that the voter can gain information about and assess over time. Furthermore, institutions can clarify the incentives of different speakers, and thus facilitate the decision on whom to trust. In sum, the argument is that advice from others can help voters reach reasoned decisions in the absence of relevant information.

The Shortcomings of Shortcuts

While heuristic approaches have been presented as a potential solution for voters to overcome their lack of information, they are unfortunately not without problems. As Achen and Bartels (2016) note, the notions of bounded rationality and heuristics were introduced by psychologists who reexamined economic behavior. Ironically, one of their main interests was to examine the potentially irrational and adverse effects heuristics can have (e.g. Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982). If we consider the ideal that voters elect representatives who will produce policies and outcomes in line with their preferences, it is clear that many heuristics may lead people astray also in the political arena. Notably, most of the limited information involved in the behaviors discussed by Popkin is unrelated to policy. Assessing a candidate based on whether he or she appears “presidential” or seems to be a person “who does the right thing” will only work if voters with different policy preferences define these notions differently and candidates who fit their stereotypes also share their preferences. Unfortunately, this appears unlikely. It seems more likely that voters who rely on such heuristics will make superficial, if not irrational, choices.

The argument of Lupia and McCubbins (1998) requires that there are reliable observers or “speakers” that voters can trust to do the more careful monitoring and assessment for them. Furthermore, the voters need to identify those speakers that will help them make the right choice, which itself can be a demanding task. As Lupia and McCubbins note, relying on the advice of others not only offers an opportunity for enlightenment, but also a risk of being deceived, in the sense that “the testimony we hear reduces our ability to predict accurately the consequences of our actions” (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 8). The authors argue that voters reduce this risk by taking the advice of actors they perceive to be knowledgeable and trustworthy, which in turn requires an accurate assessment of these two characteristics. They argue speakers are more trustworthy when they face penalties for lying (e.g. reputational loss), and that they can demonstrate their trustworthiness by sending costly signals. The problem is that this model may already put too great demands on the voters, in terms of acquiring and processing relevant information. After all, the voters who could use reliable advice the most are the ones with the least information in the first place (cf. e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). A study by Lau and Redlawsk (2001) even suggests that while reliance on heuristics can improve the accuracy of votes cast by political experts, it *decreases* the probability of a correct vote by low information voters.

The “Miracle of Aggregation”

Another line of work suggesting that the public can make reasonable choices despite widespread ignorance is based on the “miracle of aggregation” (a term coined by Converse 1990). While aggregation simply refers to the process of gathering items, in this context we typically mean the construction of summary measures of individual data, for example estimating average popular opinion by taking the mean of a sample’s survey responses. Or, for that matter, letting the electoral system translate individual votes into a distribution of parliamentary seats, or the selection of a presidential candidate – the key inputs to the political system are nearly always aggregated in some sense.

The “miraculous” feature of this process is that random noise cancels out. Consider a typical survey question, such as “how much responsibility do you think governments should have to ensure sufficient child care services for working parents?” This question can be found in the European Social Survey, and the answer categories range from (0) “Not governments’ responsibility at all” to (10) “Entirely governments’ responsibility”. Now, assume each citizen has a hypothetical opinion that they would be able to state after gathering sufficient information and contemplating the issue thoroughly. We could then define the mean of those opinions as the “true” public opinion on the issue. Let us also assume that most people lack sufficient time and information, which introduces an error in their response. If those errors are distributed randomly (and independently), with a mean of zero, the consequences would be fairly limited. Any particular response would most likely be an inaccurate reflection of a given respondent’s views, but the mean of the responses would still be a good estimate of the average public opinion, as the errors sum to zero and thus cancel each other out.⁶ All we need is a sufficiently large sample to minimize the impact of particular errors. Fortunately, both survey research and elections typically involve large samples.

Moving from the individual to the aggregate level may thus serve to remove noise and crystallize the underlying signal from the public. This can be particularly useful for identifying changes in public opinion over time. An example of pioneering work in this area is Stimson’s *Public Opinion in America* (Stimson 1991), which pieced together an extensive set of data from different surveys. Focusing on policy issues (rather than valence issues and symbols), Stimson finds that the survey responses generally can be mapped onto the liberal-conservative dimension. Furthermore, he finds long-term trends in aggregate opinion – representing what he refers to as the public policy mood. This mood behaves largely as observers of American politics would expect. For example, “popular culture ... holds the 1960s to have been a time of great liberalism, the 1980s equally conservative”, which is what the data show – with the exception that “the preference measure is ahead of cultural expectations” (Stimson 2004, 89).

Another key contribution relying on aggregation is *The Rational Public* by Page and Shapiro (1992). The authors argue that the American public is predominantly rational, in the sense that

⁶ Note that this example ignores any effect of dealing with a bounded scale. Especially if the true population mean were close to 0 or 10, the errors might pull the aggregate estimate away from the closest bound and towards the center.

it “as a collectivity, holds a number of real, stable, and sensible opinions about public policy, and that these opinions develop and change in a reasonable fashion, responding to changing circumstances and to new information” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 1). On most of the issues examined by the authors, aggregate public opinion showed no significant change, and most of the identified changes could be explained by such factors as external events, new information, and generational replacement. According to the authors, these features of public opinion imply that the public “has the capacity to govern” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 383).

Indeed, the shift in focus to aggregate public opinion has triggered a comprehensive literature on the public’s capacity to govern. In line with the notion that the public behaves rationally, Wlezien (1995) develops a model of “the public as thermostat”, suggesting that public calls for “more” of a certain policy should weaken as “more” of this policy is delivered. Such a negative response has indeed been found in a number of settings (Franklin and Wlezien 1997, Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005, 2010).⁷ Furthermore, building on the notion of a policy mood, Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson (1995) develop a model of “dynamic representation”, where calls for more of a certain policy are followed by increases in such policy. This type of responsiveness has also been found in a number of settings (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, Soroka and Wlezien 2010, Bølstad 2015, Hakhverdian 2010). Overall, this literature seemingly attests to the public’s ability to respond rationally to changes in public policy, as well as its ability to shape public policy according to its wishes.⁸

The Weakness of Aggregation

Unfortunately, aggregation is not quite the miraculous cure it might seem either. Its limited promise bears in it what we might call “the weakness of aggregation”: Aggregation will crystallize *any* signal, whether it is relevant or not. It will only cancel out random noise, while all systematic influences are incorporated in the aggregate measure. Alas, a situation in which all noise is random is extremely unlikely – some surely will be, but a lot if it will not.⁹ As the literature on heuristics may illustrate, voters are likely to sometimes be swayed by *the same* irrelevant or erroneous considerations. If a great number of voters decide to vote for the candidate who appears to be “a good guy” or looks the most “presidential”, their aggregate vote may not be very representative of their policy preferences.

The aggregate signal may also appear irrational in other ways. For instance, a key theory in the vast literature on voting behavior is that voters punish incumbents for bad economic conditions and reward them for good ones, which may seem like a rational choice for voters who value economic growth and stability.¹⁰ However, as Achen and Bartels (2016, ch. 6) note,

⁷ This pattern has also been found to influence election outcomes (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), but it is not clear whether such “thermostatic voting” – effectively punishing incumbents for implementing their programs – is rational on part of the electorate (Bølstad 2012).

⁸ This literature is discussed in more detail by Wlezien, in Chapter 33 of this volume.

⁹ “Random” here means distributed independently with a mean of zero.

¹⁰ Although subjective assessments of the economy are often endogenous to political affiliations (van der Eijk et al. 2007).

voters tend to be *myopic*, focusing almost exclusively on the last quarter preceding the election, while ignoring the rest of the term. Such behavior gives incumbents an incentive to stimulate the economy before elections (Nordhaus 1975), but it turns out to be a very poor basis for selecting candidates with superior economic competence. Achen and Bartels (2016, 168) find “no support for the notion that retrospective voters can reliably recognize and reward competent economic management”. Instead, a close election may hinge on whether the incumbent is lucky with the state of the economy during the campaign. According to Achen and Bartels (2016, 176), “the voters toss a coin”.

Perhaps more troubling, voters appear to reward and punish incumbents for events that are blatantly out of their control. In the summer of 1916, for example, a string of unprecedented shark attacks led to four deaths and one injury along the Jersey shore, which in turn caused economic losses for nearby resorts. Examining the presidential election in November that year, Achen and Bartels (2016, ch. 5) estimate a substantial loss for incumbent president Woodrow Wilson in the most affected communities. In a more general analysis, they further argue that voters hold incumbent governments accountable for droughts and floods, even if “the government could not possibly have prevented the problem” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 135). A potential counterargument is that voters hold governments accountable for their disappointing responses to the natural disasters, rather than the disasters themselves, but this would imply that American voters almost invariably find the responses disappointing – even those that are above average. This would seem to suggest that voters have unrealistically high expectations, while also failing to incentivize their governments by rewarding those that perform better. In the words of Achen and Bartels, voters engage in “blind retrospection”.¹¹

A final issue is that aggregated opinions and votes may systematically misrepresent the opinions of groups with lower levels of political information and participation. At first glance, the literature on dynamic representation suggests that public policy over time will stay reasonably close to public opinion on salient issues. Furthermore, the parallelism found in public opinion trends among different segments of the population (Soroka and Wlezien 2008, Page and Shapiro 1992, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) might seem to limit the scope for inequalities in representation. Unfortunately, the resulting equilibrium level of public policy may still be biased if not all voters are equally informed and making their voices heard. That is, if a certain segment of the population is less likely to answer surveys accurately, or to vote in accordance with their preferences, this segment may fail to influence public policy to the extent others do. While Soroka and Wlezien (2008) argue that preference similarities across different groups limit the scope for such inequalities, others such as Gilens (2009), disagree. There is a sizeable literature arguing that public policy tends to reflect the preferences of the highest income groups (Bartels 2009, Gilens 2005, 2012), and that opinion polls and election outcomes would look different if the whole electorate were better informed (Bartels 1996, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Althaus 1998, Lau and Redlawsk 2006)

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011), examining the 2002 Elbe flooding in Germany find a 7-percentage-point *gain* for the incumbent party in the affected areas, following a massive policy response.

Conclusion

The existing literature offers strikingly different images of the public's ability to serve as a rational guide for public policy. What most observers agree upon is that citizens generally hold very limited information about their nation's politics and policies. "[T]he 'average' citizen is woefully uninformed about political institutions and processes, substantive policies and socioeconomic conditions, and important political actors such as elected officials and political parties" (Delli Carpini 2005, 28). It seems most citizens simply do not have the time or motivation to obtain such information. The question is whether and to what extent this matters for democratic governance. Unfortunately, while heuristics may help low-information voters reach a choice, there is no guarantee that this will be a *good* one – there is even evidence suggesting that heuristics may lead such voters to worse decisions.

Furthermore, while aggregation cancels out random noise, crystallizing a "signal" from the public, this signal is not necessarily a meaningful and rational one. In this regard, there is a striking contrast between the pessimistic views of Achen and Bartels (2016) and the optimistic views of Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) and Soroka and Wlezien (2010). When we consider opinions on specific issues, it seems reasonable that these respond "thermostatically" to policy change, as uninformed voters may largely produce random noise, while the informed may respond rationally. Such behavior attests to the public's ability to provide useful aggregate input to the political system. Yet when we turn to votes, there are a number of other systematic, but essentially irrelevant influences that also come into play – such as superficial candidate evaluations with no connection to actual policy positions, or penalties for random natural disasters and external economic shocks.

Interestingly, while Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) find the public policy mood to have a strong influence on election outcomes (offering an important way for this mood to influence public policy), Achen and Bartels (2016) leave the public mood out of their models, noting that most forecasters do the same (including Erikson and Wlezien 2012). Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) also find covariation between their political and economic variables, and suggest such relationships may be part of the larger macro political system. As analyses in this area often rely on relatively few observations, such covariation may pose a notable challenge to proper identification of causal effects. A key task for future research may thus be to further examine these relationships with a view to better distinguish between correlation and causation. Another key task (and ongoing effort) is to expand the geographical reach of this debate, including, for instance, countries with proportional electoral systems.

Another interesting question is *why* the electorate appears uninformed. Downs (1957) posited that a single vote plays such a small role in the overall election result, that many voters will remain rationally ignorant. One might even hypothesize that low engagement with politics signals a general satisfaction with the current state of affairs, allowing more personal preoccupations to take priority. The attractive promise of the dynamic representation model of Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) is that a sufficiently dissatisfied public can make its voice heard and change public policy – that is, the policy mood serves as an error-correction mechanism. It could be that the public takes a hands-off approach to politics because things are going reasonably well. The only trouble with this interpretation is that the least privileged

voters tend to have the least information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), suggesting that low engagement is the result of hardship rather than privilege. There is thus a risk that the least well off are continuously under-represented while being dissatisfied with public policy.

The general picture emerging from the literature is one in which a small part of the electorate is reasonably well-informed and responding rationally to new information, while a majority is considerably less informed and dependent on cues and heuristics that at best help them make good decisions, and at worst may lead to very bad ones.¹² It is thus hard to avoid the conclusion that the typical citizen's low level of information leaves the political system very vulnerable. The aggregate behavior of the public appears to be quite predictable, but not necessarily rational, as it often hinges on circumstances not controlled by those up for election – such as short-term fluctuations in the economy. One might say the public is boundedly rational, at best. Fortunately, this may also suffice, as it appears to be the case that the public – despite its faults – often gets policies that are broadly in line with what it wants.

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¹² Note that the parallelism in mood trends reported by Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) and others does not deny this point. Parallelism only requires that there are some citizens (possibly a minority) within each examined subgroup that change their opinions in the same direction.

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