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The Conception of Citizen Knowledge in Democratic Theory

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The Conception of Citizen Knowledge in Democratic Theory

The Theories, Concepts and Practices of Democracy

General Editor: Jean-Paul Gagnon, University Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian Catholic University, Australia

The discourse of democracy suffers from ambiguity: its literature is too vast and there is no codified understanding of its theories, concepts and practices. The uncertainties surrounding the meaning of democracy resulted in serious political problems for all levels of democratic government – both historically and presently. The literature on democracy is so vast that it is highly improbable for one person to understand the core of this mass. Such an understanding is, however, needed to resolve the problematic ambiguity associated with democracy.

The aim of this book series is to define, analyze and organize democracy's hundreds of theories, concepts and practices. The objectives, supporting this aim, are as follows:

- Curate and consider works on democracy;
- Identify and fill gaps in the literature on historical and contemporary democracies;
- Find opportunities to synthesize or separate specific theories, concepts or practices of democracy.

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List of Tables

1.1	The key concepts, definitions and	
	empirical indicators	16
3.1	Knowledge questions in recent	
	national election studies: a comparison	
	of 15 countries	42
3.2	Summary of empirical results:	
	socio-demographic factors	51
3.3	Summary of empirical results:	
	political learning	54
3.4	Summary of empirical results:	
	opinions and values	59
4.1	Political involvement and knowledge	
	in models of democracy: a typology	74

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I have had the joy of being involved in three different academic institutions during the preparation of this book: political science departments at the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University and Aronia Research and Development Institute, all located in Finland. All three institutions have been very supportive of my book project.

For me this book is an important product of the work I began in 2007 as a young doctoral candidate. Since then I have mainly focused on the topic of political knowledge and this book is my version of an 'Introduction' to that theme. Many people have helped me during these years and I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to professors Kimmo Grönlund, Maija Setälä, Henri Vogt and Matti Wiberg. They have greatly influenced my career by offering valuable comments to this book manuscript, and also by offering advice to a young researcher – along with employment. I also wish to thank Vesa Koskimaa for contributing with insightful comments, as he tends to do.

I would not, however, have had the chance to write this book without Jean-Paul Gagnon. I was of course flattered by being requested to write it. But more than anything else, I was pleased to be able to publish a book about my own topic in his series. Jean-Paul is an impressive scholar whose work is already having a real impact on contemporary democratic theory. In addition to his academic merits, Jean-Paul has a fantastic ability to help others with their manuscripts. His comments were crucially important for this book and his ideas have revealed a side of democracy I was not aware even existed. Jean-Paul: thank you for giving me this opportunity and for believing in this book.

Contents

List of Tables		vi
A	Acknowledgments	
1	Introduction	1
2	Democratic Theory and Political Knowledge	18
3	The Empirical Study of Political Knowledge	39
4	Linking Together Theory and Practice: A Framework for Evaluating Political Knowledge	65
5	Discussion	79
A	Appendix	
Re	References	
In	Index	

1 Introduction

Abstract: The book begins by explaining the objectives and the plan of the book. The next section establishes why citizen political knowledge is of growing importance for the study of political action in modern societies. It is argued that knowledge is essential for making sense of the complexities of political issues. This aspect, as the argument goes, has become accentuated because technological advances provide us with an ever-growing number of alternatives to choose from.

The primary focus of the Introduction is to establish how political knowledge and its kin concepts are defined and how these conceptualizations relate to one another.

1

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This book has two objectives. The first and primary one is to review the theoretical and empirical literature regarding political knowledge. The second objective is to introduce a framework for analyzing political knowledge in different conceptions or models of democracy.

The first objective leads us to seek answers to the following questions: What, according to democratic theorists, should the ordinary citizen know about politics? What do empirical studies about political knowledge conclude? Are the standard measures for determining citizens' political knowledge adequate? What gaps are there to be filled by future research? And why should one care what people know about politics in the first place?

By asking these questions, the book will offer the reader a quick yet comprehensive overview of what has been achieved in the field during the past several decades of research. The literature around the topic is of immense proportions, which justifies the need for a comprehensive summary, but also makes it improbable to include all works in one overview. Although much of the relevant literature is based on findings from the US, other Western democracies will also be present in this inquiry in order not to confine the analysis to just one political context. Hence, the reviewed literature includes studies using data from other areas besides North America.

The first objective is therefore to summarize and clarify both the theoretical arguments and the empirical findings regarding political knowledge. The extent to which the ordinary citizen is capable of understanding politics and participating in it has in some form consistently been an integral part of debates concerning the very core of democratic governance. As usual in regard to all truly fundamental questions, two opposing camps exist. One has faith in the average citizen and an individual's ability to self-govern. The other is more cynical and propagates rule by elites, while assigning the commoners only a limited role. Indeed, the debate on the scope of citizen political involvement has to a large degree been a debate on the political competence of the citizen.

In the modern empirical study of political science the primary indicator of citizen competence is political knowledge, that is, correct factual information pertaining to politics. Ever since the beginning of widespread and systematic survey research some 60 years ago, the two camps have had ample amounts of evidence of the public's political knowledge. Empirical observations have not, however, led to consensus about citizen competence. The dynamic of the battle is powered by

subjective evaluations and will therefore not likely resolve in the near term. There is no universally accepted method for arranging political knowledge on a scale and determining what value on that scale distinguishes the politically knowledgeable from the ignorant. The discipline is nonetheless much more than a perpetual dispute between scholars. It has theoretical roots going back several centuries and a vast body of empirical literature stretching into the decades across practically all Western democracies. There is no doubt that the modern study of political knowledge has provided valuable insight into the political behavior of ordinary citizens.

The main character in the narrative that surrounds political knowledge is the ordinary citizen. The ordinary or average citizen is the person whose role in democracy underlies all analyses of political competence. It is the ordinary citizen, not the elected politician, whose political knowledge is under scholarly scrutiny. Consequently, this book is devoted to the political knowledge of the ordinary citizen. The question with which researchers have been confronted in their quest for the enlightened democratic citizen has been both depressing and confusing: how has representative democracy survived and continued to conquer new land during the past 200 years when the citizenry appears unaware of even the most basic political facts? Most research on political knowledge during the era of survey research has grown out of this dilemma and the trend looks to continue. But there is more than meets the eye. The last two decades have begun to produce a deeper and more diversified understanding of what citizens really know about politics and why it makes a difference.

The second objective will make an independent contribution to the research field by introducing an analytical framework for approaching the role of political knowledge in different conceptions of democracy. The need for such a framework comes from the main argument put forth in this book, which has previously also been articulated by other observers, most notably James Kuklinski and Paul Quirk (2001). It is argued here that empirical studies of political knowledge have been insufficiently based on a sound and explicit theoretical basis and have lacked a connection to the various concepts of democracy. There is not one grand theory of democracy nor is there only one model of how democratic principles are applied in practice. There are, of course, many conceptions and each assigns different roles to the citizen; consequently, they expect different things in terms of what the citizen knows about politics.

4

Hence, it all depends on what type of democracy we wish to study, since the extent to which citizens' knowledge about politics is adequate depends on how (much) they are expected to participate in political decision-making. This is, of course, something where there are great differences among various conceptions of democracy. Based on this argument, the book provides the reader with a concrete and simple categorization that connects democracy type with citizen knowledge: the more societal engagement that is expected from citizens, the more knowledge is expected at the same time. The extent and depth of participation thus becomes the focal point of the relationship between theory and observation in the study of political knowledge.

While the primary audience for this book is undoubtedly scholars who have an academic interest in the subject, it also will be a useful guide for anyone interested in understanding the concept of political knowledge. It will be especially helpful to anyone who wants to organize their work within the field or to simply grasp the essentials within the study of political knowledge; how it has been conceptualized, measured and interpreted, and what is yet to be done. New empirical evidence concerning political knowledge will not be presented in this book. The objective is to dissect, organize and explain previous research. Reaching that goal does, however, necessitate descriptions of what has been studied in the field, and what the main results and their implications have been. A descriptive analysis of survey questions used to measure political knowledge in national election studies in different countries will also be conducted.

The plan of the book is as follows. Chapter 2 presents an overview of what has been said about political knowledge in literature relating to democratic theory. It begins by summarizing the origins of the debate that can be traced back to Ancient Greece, but the focus of the chapter is on modern versions of representative democracy. The chapter also discusses how, both theoretically and in concrete terms, standards for citizens' political knowledge have been set. Chapter 3 is a review of empirical research concerning political knowledge. The chapter explains the most decisive empirical findings in the field as well as the most significant scholarly debates. The empirical overview is based on a categorization of different themes or sub-fields within the discipline. The aim is to present a wide variety of studies using data from different countries and contexts. Chapter 4 presents the above explained analytical framework, based on the argued need for the establishment of a clear link between theory and

observation in the study of political knowledge. The concluding chapter discusses the meaning of the observations made in the preceding chapters and speculates about the future of the discipline.

1.1 The increasing relevance of political knowledge

There are many reasons why political knowledge is relevant in the broadly defined study of democratic governance.1 Firstly, the argument that the complexity of political issues has increased in modern democracies is commonplace in contemporary societal debate. This, as the argument typically posits, is due to two inter-related events that for some time have defined and profoundly molded our existence: rapid technological advances and globalization. One would be hard pressed to find someone living under some degree of urbanized conditions who did not feel in any way affected by technological innovations. These innovations have fundamentally and at an ever increasing speed changed the conditions of everyday lives. This has happened many times during the past 100 years or so. And if future decision-making develops into a combination of increased issue complexity and increased ideological confusion, which seems possible, political knowledge will become a key component in the study of political behavior. In order to understand how democracy functions or fails to function, it will become particularly important to understand how political information is produced, managed, presented, received, utilized and recalled.

As the conditions of our lives change at a rapidly growing pace, so do the conditions of political decision-making. Technological advances and global connectedness add to the complexities of life by adding to the number of possibilities we continuously face. It no longer suffices that one manages to make a simple choice between different brands of cereal at the grocery store. Many of us have doubtless found ourselves suddenly wondering about the impact the production of the various cereal brands have had on the environment and the various technological alternatives available for the production chain that ends at one's own breakfast table. This development underlines the need for competence and knowledge. If we wish to be able to make such choices and decide wisely, we need to worry about competence.

But it is not always clear whose competence we should be most worried about; that of the ordinary citizens or that of decision-makers, the

elite? Emphasizing the former, there is an increasing demand for, at least among its advocates, a more participatory form of democratic governance. According to this view, the delegation of power by voting is no longer enough for the modern democratic citizen who wants more direct engagement. Proponents of the counter-argument say that the growing complexity of modern times fits well together with an opposing trend, namely the demand for a professionalization of politics. In this view, the time of the amateur politician is inevitably over, because understanding current political issues requires fulltime employment, often even at the local level.

Paradoxically, no matter from which of the two perspectives one chooses to approach modern political life, factual knowledge and competence seem to have become accentuated. The possible development toward more participation by ordinary citizens naturally suggests the need for an equal and simultaneous increase in their capacity to make sense of politics. While the role of the ordinary citizens would arguably be that of observers and evaluators (as in the monitory democracy of Keane, 2009) if political decision-making were to become more professionalized, the importance of keeping informed would not diminish. Such a model of democratic governance might instead lead to a need for even better informed citizens as an uncompromising check on the power of the policymakers in exchange for more freedom for political action for the latter.

Another similar development of fundamental importance may also contribute to an increased need for political competence. The supremacy of the left-right (or liberal-conservative) ideological cleavage, which has traditionally characterized ideological thinking in most Western countries, has become less salient. As usual with most research questions, there is evidence and counter-evidence, but many recent studies have provided support for the general idea that new cleavages coexist with and perhaps in some cases override the left-right cleavage (Thomassen, 2012, 14-15). To the extent that the left-right 'super' issue is diminishing in relevance, its usefulness as an aid helping people make sense of politics also weakens. And if, as it seems, it is not being replaced by some other super issue but instead by other cross-cutting cleavages, then politics is surely becoming more arduous for ordinary citizens to follow. If it no longer is enough to place political issues and events on a single dimension, but at least two dimensions, then from the citizens' viewpoint politics has unquestionably become more complicated.

Finally, it seems it is necessary to consider the changes in the world of mass media, when considering the mechanisms of democracy. Regardless of domain, more information is available to more people than ever before and the ease of access is unprecedented. The potential consequences for the formation of public opinion and mass political behavior are immense and to some degree still unclear. What seems nonetheless obvious is that due to a massive increase in media choices it is now easier than ever before to either keep well informed or to tune out from politics completely. Hence, variations in personal motivation will, according to the argument presented by Markus Prior (2005; see also Eveland et al., 2003), lead to variations in political knowledge, because accidental political learning through the media will greatly diminish as choice increases. Another version of the same is Cass Sunstein's (2001) thesis that people increasingly seek out information that suits their views (for counter-evidence, see Garrett et al., 2013). The apparent consequence would be a more uneven distribution of political knowledge among the citizenry.

From a normative point of view this could be seen as a problem. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996, 8) argue that political knowledge is the currency of citizenship; like money in economics, the more one has of it, the more power and freedom of action one has. Serious distortions in its distribution are a likely cause of disruptions in democratic mechanisms, which assume a great deal of equality in terms of resources such as political knowledge.

Moreover, a combination of more diffuse politics and an overwhelming supply of political information through the media may be interrelated processes, which affect and speed up one another. The general sentiment that politics was somehow clearer and easier to understand in the past may partly be a result of changes in the media environment, not just in politics itself. Perhaps the clear-cut nature of left-right ideological politics seemed so unambiguous when political information was supplied through very few media outlets. Today the media no longer measures its success in mediating political information to the public in journalistic terms, but in commercial terms, market shares and viewer ratings (Holtz-Bacha, 2007, 64). Although an empirical investigation of the proposition is beyond this study, it seems possible that politics may not have become more complex or diffuse, or at least not as much as we tend to think, but the over abundance of political messages and information we are nowadays bombarded with just makes it look that way.

Together these broad development patterns of political life in Western democracies suggest consequences for everyone who follows politics and engages in societal issues. In terms of the investigation at hand, the major consequence is an increased need for an understanding of the factual circumstances of politics, if one is to make any sense of the information flow one is confronted with. Understanding politics has consistently required some factual knowledge about politics and it seems as if that requirement is in the process of becoming increasingly pronounced.

Although we are here making the contentious case for the necessity of factual knowledge in regard to politics and especially from the viewpoint of the individual citizen, it is perhaps good to be reminded about the other alternative as well. Even if we accept the general idea that to the average citizen politics feels more complicated and ideologically diffused today than ever before, the reaction from the citizen is not necessarily that of active information seeking. Instead, citizens may react by looking for new guiding posts that are better adjusted to the new information environment and that save them from the tedious task of acquiring more knowledge themselves. One version of this possibility is the concept of stealth democracy, where citizens retreat from the frontline of politics, minimize their own role as political participators and only monitor the battlefield from a safe distance (see especially Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). In a stealth democracy the arguments for an increased relevance of political knowledge would not apply, but so far there is not much proof of citizens actually striving for such a passive state of being (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009). We should in any case not assume that a perceived increase in the relevance of political knowledge would necessarily lead ordinary citizens to react with increased political engagement.

Before going any further, let us at this point clarify what the concept of political knowledge refers to in scientific literature.

1.2 The definition of political knowledge

It seems safe to claim that there is a reasonably extensive scholarly consensus regarding the meaning of political knowledge, at least in a general sense of the term. As explained by Henry Milner (2002, 53), political knowledge can simply be conceptualized as 'information [about politics] that is (presumed to be accurate)'. Another and a more widely used definition is that by Delli Carpini and Keeter, according to whom political