

**Questioning Our Competence:  
Tasks, Institutions, and the Limited Practical Relevance of Common  
Political Knowledge Measures**

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**Incomplete and Preliminary.** This manuscript represents initial drafts of Chapters 2-4 of the book manuscript, *Who Can Increase Civic Competence? Science and Elitism in the Quest to Create Better Citizens*. Parts of the argument are quite loose. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the role of persuasion in civic education and the conditions under which various civic competence goals can be achieved. Chapters 6-9 focus on applications of the theoretical framework to scholarship and educational programs involving voting, the media, deliberative democracy, and race and politics. A concluding chapter discusses implications of various civic education strategies for individual freedom and the extent to which it must be sacrificed to achieve socially valuable goals.

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## Introduction

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1981: 227) defines a person as *competent* if she has "requisite or adequate ability or qualities." As synonyms, it lists *able* and *sufficient*.

Webster's definitions for *able* (1981:3) include "having sufficient power, skill, or resources to accomplish an object" and "marked by intelligence, knowledge, skill, or competence."

My focus is on competence in the political domain. I call this kind of competence *civic competence*. Civic competence refers to a citizen's ability to accomplish well-defined tasks in roles such as voter, juror, bureaucrat or legislator.

Civic competence is a central preoccupation of people who believe that important segments of the population lack critical skills and who conclude that they make political decisions in an inferior manner. The following statement is representative of a common point of view.

Overall, close to a third of Americans can be categorized as "know-nothings" who are almost completely ignorant of relevant political information (Bennett 1998) -- which is not, by any means, to suggest that the other two-thirds are well informed.... Three aspects of voter ignorance deserve particular attention. First, voters are not just ignorant about specific policy issues, but about the basic structure of government and how it operates (Neuman 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996, ch. 2; Bennett 1988). Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 707-71). This suggests that voters not only cannot choose between specific competing policy programs, but also cannot accurately assign credit and blame for visible policy outcomes to the right office-holders.  
Ilya Somin 1999: 417

If citizens are civically incompetent, what is the optimal response? Actual responses vary. Many simply decry the situation, doing nothing more than bashing the masses for their inattention to politics. Others attempt more constructive responses. They seek to change the amount and content of political information available to citizens.

Prominent scholars, legislatures, and foundations participate in this endeavor. Scholars contribute by attempting to document extant levels of political knowledge and then extolling the virtues of knowing such things. Public and private entities direct resources towards activities such

as voter education campaigns and deliberative activities. When such efforts enhance civic competence, they constitute valuable public goods.

But something is wrong with many of these attempts – they are built from flawed assumptions about how information affects choice. Elsewhere, I show that many civic education studies and schemes are based on assumptions about learning that are either logically inconsistent with well-established premises about human cognition or have no credible empirical foundation (Lupia 2002, 2004, N.d.). Here, I make a parallel argument about the questions commonly used to assess civic competence. I find that they are of limited practical relevance to efforts to increase the extent to which citizens have “sufficient power, skill, or resources to accomplish” common political goals.

My goal is to improve how political scientists and practitioners conceptualize and measure civic competence. By improvement, I mean constructive principles that move competence-oriented efforts towards practices that are more likely to create tangible social value. I develop such principles in two steps.

First, I examine the relationship between information and choice in political contexts. I am particularly interested in the extent to which common political knowledge questions provide reliable assessments of a person’s ability to make competent political decisions. I conclude this step by offering advice on how to improve the survey-based measurement of political competence.

Second, I address the question “Given the relationship between information and choice established in step 1, which informational investments are most beneficial to the cause of increasing civic competence?” Arguments about the soundness of informational benefits – the extent to which the benefits of such investments justify the sacrifice needed to acquire them -- can be answered from several normative perspectives, including that of the individual making the investment, a group in society, or society as a whole. I filter such claims by the extent to which they are consistent with a set of unavoidable technical facts about political decision making. I

conclude this step by offering advice how to improve the effectiveness of strategies that are designed to increase civic competence.

A summary of the argument is as follows. Both steps begin with the premise that political competence is vitally important. People who perform politically critical tasks must possess certain skills if society at large is to accomplish normatively desirable democratic goals. However, these goals do not require that all people possess all skills. Different democratic actors have varying responsibilities. I work from the premise that what we ask citizens to learn in the name of civic competence should be consistent with what they can accomplish given their societal roles and ambitions.

In the cases on which I focus, the focal skill entails knowing how to apply information to a choice. The concepts of knowledge and information, therefore, are critical to assessments of political competence. Like many previous scholars, I agree that asking people questions about what they know can be an effective way to measure their competence. I also agree that upon finding that people are unable to answer certain kinds of questions, societies may benefit from implementing programs that deliver to focal democratic decision makers the information they need. But my agreement with much of the existing literature stops here. Put simply, we have asked the wrong questions.

Consider, for example, the practice of using answers to well-known political knowledge questions as measures of citizens' civic competence. A problem with this practice is that it is based on dated and inaccurate notions of the correspondence between information, choice, and outcomes in political contexts. I will show that the ability to answer such questions has little, if any, connection to democratic tasks that our society needs citizens to perform. For those who want to increase civic competence, such questions have little practical relevance.

What political information questions, then, should we ask on surveys? The answer depends on two factors. One is the connection between the question's answer and a citizen's ability to perform a particular task. All else constant, the most informative questions are those for

which knowing the answer is a *necessary condition* for accomplishing key civic tasks. In many cases, the presence of information shortcuts limits the extent to which knowledge of particular facts is a necessary condition for accomplishing these important tasks. In such cases, concluding that people are incompetent because they cannot answer factual questions is premature, at best.

The second step in determining what questions we should ask is the connection between an individual's ability to accomplish a task and her ability to affect a socially relevant outcome. Existing competence measures do not take this factor into account. Instead, they focus on topics and issues for which respondents have no chance at efficaciousness. Once these attributes of common political knowledge are well understood, an important implication for practice emerges. Concentrating civic education resources on providing information to people who are not well positioned to make constructive use of it is a tragic social investment – tragic because well-meaning people are induced to participate in schemes that have little practical relevance to democratic skill-building. Greater attention to basic correspondences between information, individual decisions, and collective outcomes makes more effective strategies viable.

These insights also help us place extant political knowledge questions in a broader context. Following the presentation of the second step, I evaluate common political knowledge measures and find that using these questions as measures of civic competence reflects a particular worldview of what citizens should know. I argue that this worldview (which overemphasizes civics textbook claims, policy minutiae, and national-level phenomena) is one in which many journalists and political scientists have a valid, professional interest. Less clear is whether individuals or societies are better off when the mass public spends time and effort learning how to act in accordance with this worldview (i.e., to learn the answers to common “political information” questions). So while the questions have other scholarly uses, they have little or no relevance to the stated goals of many who study or attempt to increase civic competence. I find that some existing practices are tantamount to some elite actors in our society compelling others to make sacrifices with little or no demonstrable benefit to participating individuals or society in

general. I conclude that efforts to measure and increase civic competence in ways that benefit individuals and society will be greatly enhanced when existing metrics are replaced by ones that are logically consistent with well established principles of social choice, collective decision making, and human cognition.

In sum, those who wish to improve democratic outcomes through the enhancement of civic competence are more likely to achieve normatively desirable collective goals if they act from a transparent and empirically defensible understanding of what information socially valuable activities require. I contend that greater attention to basic social scientific principles can help people who want to increase civic competence use the generosity of donors and the goodwill of well-intentioned citizens more effectively.

### **Step 1: Measuring Our Competence**

Civic competence has been defined in many ways. Common definitions point to a list of facts that people should know before making a decision. A problem with such definitions is that there is little consensus on what facts should be on the list. Some people use the term competence in an ideological manner – asserting that a set of statements *with which they agree* should be privileged in social decision making. In the debate over the legalization of abortion, for example, pro-life participants implore others to elevate information about the fetus over other available claims while pro-choice participants implore others to elevate claims about the woman's well-being over other available claims. The point of this section is to establish a basic framework for evaluating such claims.

In this pursuit, I begin as before, by defining competence as the ability to accomplish a task. I also focus on attempts to evaluate competence through surveys. Given this focus, the relationship between information and task performance is critical to understand. Suppose, for example, that a person who knows facts X, Y, and Z can successfully accomplish task T. It is consistent with the definition given above to call this person competent at T. This definition is a

technical one – analogous to definitions used in research on expertise and competent performance in fields such as cognitive science and the study of artificial intelligence (see, e.g., Newell 1990).

With this definition in hand, what questions measure civic competence reliably?

Kuklinski and Quirk (2001: 287) offer a framework for answering the question:

We propose that there are four principal conceptual components in any evaluation of performance. First, one must identify the *task* that the actor is asked to undertake.... Second, one must state a *criterion* by which the performance is to be evaluated – that is the property or attribute that is taken to constitute the quality of performance. Third, one must recognize at least one empirical *indicator* of that criterion. Finally, to categorize levels of performance, one must identify *standards* with respect to the indicator. Standards map levels of the indicator onto a set of evaluative categories: satisfactory or unsatisfactory; very good, good, fair, poor and the like.” (Emphasis in original.)

Kuklinski and Quirk go on to point out the extent to which existing research on public opinion in the United States fails to adopt this approach. In that regard, this section of the paper echoes many of their concerns. The authors also call for more work at the conceptual level of competence scholarship (2001:306). This article constitutes such work -- indeed, the main point of this paper is to argue for empirical indicators that correspond directly to well-defined tasks. In the rest of this section, I focus on what Kuklinski and Quirk refer to as criteria – I specify the relationship between the ability to accomplish certain kinds of tasks and the ability to answer certain kinds of questions about it. In the second step, I focus on standards – particularly on the extent to which various kinds of knowledge constitute socially valuable skills.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that the pursuit of an evaluative standard is complicated by the fact that such standards have normative and technical components. In the end, the standard implies a “desired information set” – that is, a normative claim about the informational foundations of a competent choice. Throughout the first step of my argument, I will occasionally make reference to this set. In this section, however, the concept will serve as a placeholder for normative issues that are addressed in Step 2.

### **Tasks, Necessary Conditions, and Proxies**

In thinking about what questions render reliable measures of civic competence it is important to understand the relationship between the content of the question and the task on which the competence assessment is to be based. Of particular importance is whether a particular fact is *necessary or sufficient* for competent performance.

To see the importance of necessity, consider the following problem:

A voter knows a set of 26 facts that we can label A-Z. Suppose we can agree that knowing such facts allows the voter to accomplish a particular task competently (i.e., to cast a vote for the alternative that best represents a set of normative principles to which we have previously agreed) Is there a different set of facts, perhaps even a subset of facts A-Z, that also allows her to accomplish the task?

If the answer to the question is no, then we know that knowledge of every fact from A to Z is a necessary condition for the voter to choose competently. We can, therefore, assess her competence reliably by quizzing her about A through Z. If we find her deficient in her knowledge of even one fact, we have enough information to determine her present incompetence for the task at hand. If we want to increase her competent at this task, moreover, we know that a necessary condition for success is providing her with the knowledge of all such facts for which the quiz reveals her ignorance.

So, when a particular set of facts is necessary condition for competent performance, the measurement of competence is relatively straightforward, ask her if she knows the required facts. The problem with this approach is that it is not generally applicable. To see why, recall that many scholars and pundits use responses to “knowledge questions” on political surveys to draw conclusions about citizens’ competence as voters. Their arguments take the form “Person A does not know fact X or Y or Z, therefore Person A will vote incompetently in election T.” Proving that such arguments are logically consistent requires a demonstration that knowledge of X, Y, and Z *is necessary for competence* (i.e., that no subset of these facts or alternate set of facts also allow task T to be accomplished successfully.)

Many critics who use political knowledge questions to make broad claims about civic incompetence fail to attempt or complete such proofs. For example, evidence that citizens cannot provide correct answers to common political survey questions is equivalent to observing that a person does not know fact *Z* in the example above. The conclusion that such observations constitute *prima facie* evidence of citizens' incompetence as voters is premature, at best. If facts other than *Z* are sufficient for citizens to accomplish the stated task, then knowing *Z* cannot be a necessary condition for competence.

How do we measure civic competence when multiple kinds of knowledge are sufficient for competent performance? To place my answer to this question in an empirical context, I ask you to consider the case of referendums. A common attribute of referendums is that nearly all ask voters to make a binary choice (e.g., vote "yes" or "no"). The typical referendum allows voters to choose one of two alternatives -- the piece of legislation described on the ballot or the pre-existing status quo.

In the referendum context, let us -- for the moment -- define a voter's choice as competent if it is the same choice that she would make given the most accurate available information about its consequence. Two things about this definition are worth noting. First, if our focus is on her competence with respect to this particular task, then we should evaluate her as competent regardless of how she comes up with the inference -- it is her performance that matters. As a result, she may not need to remember every attribute of the best available information to choose as if she did. Moreover, she need not even have thought about or been exposed to every single available piece of information. A subset of available information may be sufficient for her to choose competently. Second, once she can choose competently, additional information cannot increase her competence with respect to this task. She does not have the ability to draft amendments or to approve only parts of the ballot measure. She is restricted to a simple yes or no. Once she has information sufficient to make this binary distinction, it is impossible for additional

information to increase her competence with respect to this task. Even if the ballot measure and status quo are very technical, it is sufficient just to know the difference.

The number of ways that a voter can make this inference determines whether any particular fact is a necessary condition for competence. If there is one and only one fact that will allow a voter to make a correct determination about whether the referendum is better or worse for her than the status quo, then the fact is necessary. In many cases, however, there is more than one such fact. In the referendum context, these alternatives often take the form of endorsements. Interest groups, politicians, newspapers and other public entities often offer public endorsements for or against particular ballot measures. In some circumstances, the endorsements are sufficient to allow a voter to make a correct inference about whether the ballot measure in question is better or worse for her. Consider, for example, a referendum on gun control that the National Rifle Association (NRA) comes out against. For people who know that their stance on all such issues parallels that of the NRA, the endorsement can serve as an effective proxy for other information (such as the actual text of the referendum).

In the same way that drivers use the trajectory of oncoming headlights to draw accurate inferences about the future locations of other cars, and consumers use brand names such as Mercedes-Benz and Coca-Cola to draw accurate inferences about particular qualities of certain consumer goods, citizens can use endorsements to draw accurate inferences about important attributes of political phenomena. Voters' continuing reliance on proxies such as candidates' party labels is a testament to the power of endorsements in a wide range of political contexts. Moreover, the use of such heuristics is not unique to politics. In almost every aspect of our lives, we use proxies such as brand names, the advice of others, and regularities of nature to come to quick – and often reliable conclusions about the consequences of our actions.

When citizens can use endorsements to cast the same vote that they would have if in possession of the best available information, the finding that citizens do not know these details is a less reliable measure of their competence. In cases where the number of reliable proxies are

many, and the proxies are easier to evaluate than the detailed information itself, the finding that citizens lack knowledge of a measure's details becomes increasingly irrelevant.

For many political actors, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a particular fact and the ability to act competently. Even professional legislators regularly use endorsements from their research staff and party leaders as substitutes for reading every word of every potential piece of legislation themselves. As a result, asking them about details of particular policies or issues provides an unreliable measure of their ability to make the same choices they would have made if they were in direct possession of the best available information.

Since informational proxies are common, both in their existence and their usage, we need a different strategy for survey-based competence assessments. I close this section by sketching the strategy.

An important concept in understanding the relationship between proxy use and competence is sufficiency. Someone who wishes to assess another's competence via questioning should ask, "What proxies are sufficient for competent performance?" Particularly scholars who offer blanket criticisms of the quality of heuristic decision-making often overlook the notion of sufficiency. An endorsement offered by the entity such as the Democratic Party or the NRA means nothing in isolation, but if people know enough to draw correct inferences about what such endorsements imply about the consequences of certain actions they can take, using the proxy is sufficient for competent performance.

The kind of information needed is one that allows them to derive a reliable inference about a triangular relationship. One side of the triangle is the relationship between the person and the endorsement on issues such as the one in question. The second side is the relationship between the endorsement and the choice. The third side is the relationship between the person and the choice. The proxy is sufficient to increase the person's competence (i.e., to allow them a reliable assessment of the triangle's third side) only if they are incompetent initially and they have enough information about the first two sides of the triangle. They must understand the

relationship between themselves and the endorser as well as the relationship between the endorser and the consequence of their choice. An endorsement from a complete stranger is not typically sufficient for increased competence because the person is uncertain about the stranger's motives and knowledge. Similarly, an endorsement from someone you know is less likely to be helpful if you don't know her relationship to the issue. The endorser may, for example, be ignorant of the consequence of your choice. If, however, you know that the endorser shares your interests with regard to the issue at hand and is knowledgeable about its consequences for you, then a triangular operation of the form "If she is voting for X, then I should too" that induces a person to change her vote to the one she would have chosen given the desired information set is sufficient for an increase in competence.

In sum, people can use proxies to draw correct inferences only if they have other information. This implies that a proxy that is sufficient for one person to vote competently need not be sufficient for another. It also implies that different kinds of tasks require different kinds of proxies. In what follows, I offer a categorization of kinds of political choices and the types of proxies that are most likely to aid civic competence. As the kinds of proxies that are most effective change so do the kinds of questions needed to assess competence.

The simplest kind of choice is a binary choice, where the choice itself completely determines the relevant outcome. In such cases, a proxy simply needs to convey a relative property (better/worse) of two objects.

Other political choices pose additional challenges, such as when a voter must make a series of binary choices rather than just one. While we referenced a voters' competence with respect to a single election, others may wish to impose a different evaluative standard. We may, for example, wish to label a voter competent only if they make competent choices in a large number of elections – instead of only one.

In such cases, the voter's task is more complicated than a simple binary comparison. If competence is measured with respect to a voter's performance in  $N$  elections, then there are  $2^N$

possible choices that they can make. For 2 elections, with the first being between candidates A and B and the second being between candidates C and D, the voter can make four decisions: vote for A and C, A and D, B and C, or B and D. When the basis of the evaluation is 20 two-candidate elections, then the number of choices is 1,048,576 and for 30 elections, there are over a billion possible combinations of votes to cast.

If one really wants to judge a voter's competence by her performance in many elections, the number of options just described might make it seem extremely unlikely that competence can be obtained – particularly by people who do not spend much time attending to politics. It may also be that a person's inability to answer standard political knowledge questions provides a reliable measure of whether they can accomplish such a complex task. The presence of proxies, however, should caution us against reaching either conclusion prematurely.

Numerous studies of American politics have shown that a candidate's partisan identification is a powerful force in not only her electoral fortunes but also in her likely legislative activities. To the extent that a voter in possession of the desired information set would choose a particular kind of candidate across an extended series of elections and to the extent that such choices correspond well to partisan proxies, party cues can engender competence even in the situations described above. If the desired information set would reveal that voting Democratic is the best choice a particular voter can make at any level of government, then simply voting for the Democrat instead of the Republican leads to the same outcome as would the desired information set. The proxy is sufficient for competent performance. The implication for competence assessments in such environments is that evidence that a particular voter is misinformed about a particular minute detail of a candidate's background or activities need not imply that they pull the wrong lever in the voting booth.

Again, that proxies exist does not ensure competence. People must have enough know enough to apply the proxy effectively. Moreover, as relatively simple proxies such as party identification are applied to complex problems, such as voting competently in a string of 20 to 30

elections, the proxies must, paraphrasing Sniderman (2000:74), “cut nature at its joints.” In the case of two candidate elections, where one candidate is a Republican and the other is a Democrat and the proxy associates the party label with particular social outcomes in the way that the desired information set would, the proxy can be effective. Correspondingly, in such cases, people who have enough information to distinguish the Democratic and Republican candidates in the voting booth should not be categorized as incompetent because they cannot answer standard political knowledge questions. Of course, as the reality of the situation diverges from this description, relying on the proxy is more hazardous (and it should be said that such divergence does not increase the reliability of conventional political knowledge questions for assessing civic competence). In the limit – where the partisan identification provides no reliable information about what the voter would choose if she were in possession of the desired information set – evidence that the voter knows a candidate’s party identification provides little evidence in favor of the voter’s competence.

Corresponding logic applies to the competence of professional politicians. Consider, for example, attempts to draft legislation or bureaucratic rules. Such tasks can be categorized as more complex than a simple binary decision.

For legislators and bureaucrats, or their staffs, the choice is what words to use and how to order them. The number of possible combinations of word orderings for any bill or procedure is effectively infinite. Laws typically describe relationships between people, actions, circumstances, and outcomes. Legislatures must not only choose which people, actions, circumstances, and outcomes they wish the law to cover, but also exactly how to describe each of these entities. From these infinite sets of word combinations relatively few word combinations will achieve the author’s desired goals. While a solitary “better” worse endorsement can be a tremendous help to a voter who simply must choose one of two alternatives, more detailed proxies are needed to help someone who wants to choose the best, or at least a very good, alternative from an infinitely numbered set. As a result, the kinds of proxies that are most

effective at the drafting stage are thorough reports from staff and other experts on what language to use.

### ***Implications for Existing Practice***

Increasing competence through the provision of information requires changing another person's beliefs and actions in particular ways. But *not any belief change will do*. Suppose, for example, that we can define a competent vote as the one that a person would cast if she knew where a specific set of candidates stood with respect to a well-defined list of major policy debates. For our effort to increase her competence she must *not* be voting competently initially and the information we provide must *cause* her to do so. Note that merely observing that our efforts induced her to report belief changes provides no direct evidence of increased competence. Instead, we must observe belief and behavior changes consistent with the stated criterion for task completion. In the example given, we must observe a person voting as she would have if she knew where the set of candidates described above stood with respect to the list of major policy debates described above.

While not any belief change is sufficient to increase competence, it is also false to say that competent performance requires full or complete information in the presence of effective proxies. Indeed, competence and information are different. Competence is the ability to make accurate predictions; information is data. Competence requires information because accurate predictions require some data. By contrast, you can know a long list of facts and fail to put them together in a way that allows you to make accurate predictions. Thus, while competence requires information, you can have information without being competent.

In critiquing the heuristics school, many scholars and observers make this mistake. They claim that the heuristics approach is flawed because people must have other information to use the cues effectively. I agree that people must have other information, but this makes the approach flawed only if the claim is that cues are sufficient for competence when administered in isolation of all other knowledge. The most effective heuristics are those that are sufficient to allow people

to choose competently given what they know. When the choice is binary and the cue “cuts nature at its joint” then the amount of information that the voters must have to render the cue sufficient for competence is relatively low. As the nature of the problem and the content of the cue diverge, then sufficiency is less likely.

A way to make questions pertaining to civic competence more relevant to the choices that citizens actually make is to take time to determine what kinds of information accomplishing the task in question requires. If knowing a particular fact or set of facts is a necessary condition for competent performance, then questions that accurately gauge a citizen’s knowledge of these facts will be an effective instrument. In many cases, however, no information will have this characteristic – information substitutes will be available. In such cases, the kinds of civic competence inferences drawn from conventional political knowledge measures are likely to be incorrect. Knowledge scales will be more relevant to practice and more reliable gauges of skill if they are constructed and evaluated with the knowledge that information substitutes are available. If a scholar cannot determine the entire membership of the set of facts that are sufficient for competent performance, then they should admit as much when drawing inferences about others competence. We do less damage in admitting that a set of questions constitutes an extraordinarily blunt and unreliable instrument than in pretending otherwise.

Before leaving this topic, I want to return to the question of claims about competence, and the desired information set, that have partisan or ideological bases. The easy critique is that the claims are self-serving and have no role in academic discourse. Advocates of a particular position are claiming that an audience should privilege certain facts in their decision calculus not because the advocate has thought about the problem from the audience’s point of view but because having the audience think about the problem in this way will lead to an outcome that he prefers. My view on this matter is that we should evaluate such claims from the perspective of the audience in question and the extent to which the facts proposed for privileged treatment serve as effective proxies. In the best case scenario, the underlying ideology corresponds directly to

what we agree is not only the actor's enlightened self-interest but also the best representation of the public interest and the privileged facts are perfect proxies – they are sufficient conditions for the actor to accomplish their task competently. In less desirable scenarios, the connection between the underlying worldview and either the actor's enlightened self-interest or the public interest are dubious and the privileged facts have little or nothing to do with tasks the actor must face. In such cases, the partisan claims reflect the speaker's attempt to impose their own worldview on audiences for whom the worldview may not be beneficial. In such cases, it is unlikely that such conceptions of competence or attempts to “increase competence” by making others learn these facts yield positive social value.

## **Step 2: The Value of Competence**

If competence depends on information, what information should citizens have? If they do not have information sufficient for competent choices, then what cost should be paid to deliver it and who should pay? My answer to these questions begins with the premise that political contexts pose important challenges – challenges that are foreign to other domains in which competence is assessed and education attempted. To help readers adapt to such challenges, I offer a framework for understanding and evaluating how common attributes of political contexts affect the return to investment of civic education strategies.

I begin with a simple scenario. One voter casts a single vote that determines which of two political parties will have complete control over all aspects of government for the rest of time. Everyone in society agrees that when evaluating competence and the actions of government, only the voter's well being matters. One of the two parties is better for the voter because its actions will enhance her well being more than the other. We call this party “the correct party” and the other “the incorrect party.”

In this situation, competence and the investment value of increasing civic competence are relatively easy to define. The voter acts competently if her actions yield better consequences for her – if she votes for the correct party. The social value of information that is sufficient to induce

the voter to choose the correct party is the value of her well being when she chooses the correct party minus the value of her well being when she chooses the incorrect party. Given the premise that only her well being matters, investing in her competence produces positive net social value when the cost of giving her information that is sufficient for her to choose the correct party is less than the return on investment just described. If, however, the voter would choose this party in the absence of an attempt to provide her with new information or if all available information would be insufficient for her to change her choice, then any investment in conveying information provides no social value. Similarly, such investments are difficult to justify in terms of net social value if the difference between the parties with respect to the voter's well being is sufficiently small – small enough that the investment value as defined above is less than the cost of conveying the information that would induce the voter to cast the correct vote. Costs, in this example, are determined by the value of the alternate uses of the resources needed to convince the voter to choose the competent party. If a change in vote requires an effort that is costless to produce, then the benefit required to justify the investment can be small. As the value of these resources increases, the extent to which positive social value is done by directing the resources to the cause of civic education must increase as well.

In this simple example, three simple principles of evaluating the return on an investment in civic competence are displayed. First, the benefit is determined by subtracting the value of the outcome absent the investment from the value of the outcome after the investment. Second, the cost is determined by the alternate opportunities for the resources required to convey information sufficient to induce a competent choice. Third, the net social value of the investment is the benefit minus the cost (henceforth, I will refer to such investments as justifiable if the benefit is greater than or equal to the cost). These principles will serve as the foundation of the approach that follows. However, the applicability of the example requires changing almost everything else about it.

The situation described above – that of one person acting alone to determine the entire government and of social welfare being measured entirely in terms of that person’s welfare -- is unrealistic. For most political actors, be they voters, legislators, jurors, or bureaucrats, the situation is far more complex. In the real world, decisions are often made collectively. A voter is one of many, as is a legislator, and as are most bureaucrats. Political decision makers often have many options – some, such as those who write legislation – have many more than two options. Some have to make many complicated decisions over sustained periods of time.

My goal in this section is to address questions about the value of having or manufacturing various kinds of civic competence in these more realistic environs. My approach entails evaluating claims about what people should know against challenges posed by common attributes of political domains. The first set of challenges follows from the preceding discussion of competence measurement. They are: questions about the value of knowing “all the facts” for many political actors and about what those who assess civic competence must know or assume about those who they judge. The second set of challenges follows from other sources. They are:

1. **The Collective Decision Problem.** Voters are not pivotal. Unlike the example above, their choice is unlikely to have a direct impact on how actions of government affect their well being. In such cases, their incentive to invest in political information acquisition is limited. The social value of conveying such information to them is limited as well, though in a different way. Individuals may adapt by attempting to “free ride” off of the information collection efforts of others. Analogous adaptations by civically-oriented groups can produce substantial increases in competence and social value.
2. **The Collective Governance Problem.** A single vote does not determine a government. Government consists of many elected and appointed offices. Political institutions are structured to induce delegation and coalition building amongst these actors. Such exercises affect the correspondence between what any single voter or group of voters does and the actions of government that ultimately have a direct effect on citizens’ well being. What can citizens, from voters to legislators to bureaucrats to chief executives, know about the correspondence between their choice and their welfare? The actions of governance depend on many actors and negotiations whose key players and bargaining dynamics may be hard to foresee.
3. **The Collective Preference Problem.** As scholars such as Arrow have demonstrated, there are multiple ways to organize society and multiple ways to evaluate organizational schemes. All organizational schemes involve individual sacrifices. Efforts to increase civic competence are not immune. The question becomes “Who must sacrifice and how much?” The multiplicity of evaluative accounting schemes complicates seemingly simple

questions such as “What constitutes an equal sacrifice across people or across situations?,” “If perspectives on the costs and benefits of a particular civic education scheme differ, whose perspective should prevail?” and “If all but one believe that all are asked to make equal sacrifices – are the sacrifices equal?” The social choice literature provides a way of navigating these questions. It helps us rank order normative claims about collective outcomes by their consistency with basic logical principles of preference aggregation.

Confronting these challenges supply a foundation for stronger scholarship and practice.

For as complex as political contexts can be, research in each of the areas listed above reveals that the challenges have an underlying logic. This logic contains insights that can help scholars and practitioners forge more reliable and empirically relevant definitions of civic competence.

Confronting these challenges can help us distinguish impossible from impossible outcomes and efficient from inefficient ways of increasing civic competence.

In the process of making an argument about the costs and benefits of various political competences, I will also make my own normative perspective clear. The core of my normative approach is this: First, we should not ask individuals or societies to make sacrifices if we cannot demonstrate their benefits. The benefits need not accrue to those who make the sacrifices, but they do need to accrue. Second, if there are two ways of accomplishing a normatively desirable collective goal and one imposes lower costs on everyone who is asked to pay, then the less costly one should be chosen. While these premises are not particularly complex, many existing practices violate one or both of them. I see as a main contribution of my approach the demonstration that greater attention to existing social scientific insights can increase social welfare by resulting in fewer violations of these principles.

### ***Here Comes the Judge***

*A competence assessment requires an actor and a judge.* Of course, introspection allows one person to play both roles – they must contemplate themselves as a chooser and compare themselves to a standard of performance. To keep attention on the more socially relevant case – we focus on cases where the actor and judge are separate people – where a judge is attempting to assess another actor’s competence.

The judge's assessment is a product of his perceptual and interpretive capabilities. The assessment need not only represent attributes of the actor, it may also be a function of the judge's attributes. Put another way, it is at least partially objective (of the subject making the observation) and not wholly objective (of the object being observed). When adopting a particular measure of competence, therefore, it is reasonable to inquire about how the judge's attributes bias his assessments.

For example, the actor who is being judged has reasons for what he is doing. People do not take wholly random actions. They perceive a situation and draw a conclusion about what they should do. While we can debate the quality of these conclusions, for now, I want to draw your attention to the fact that these reasons may or may not be readily apparent to the judge. In many cases, the judge does not know the reasons and must make an inference. Here is where things get tricky. The judge's inference may be thought of as an attempt to reconstruct the situation. The reconstruction need not be accurate.

If the judge knows enough about the actor or his circumstances, he can correctly infer the goal the actor was trying accomplish. In such a case, he can explain with accuracy why the action was (or was not) consistent with the actor's goals. If the judge knows less, his inference is more likely to be erroneous. Moreover, the judge may never learn the error of his ways. This often happens. Many observers base assessments of others' competence on a projection from their own experience (e.g., "When I was in your position I took action X and observed outcome Y. Therefore, if you want to be considered competent, you should take action X as well.") The validity of such claims depends on the judge's ability to understand (a) whether the action the judge took will indeed lead to the same outcome for the person to whom they are offering advice and (b) whether such an outcome will benefit the actor or society as the judge alleges.

Undermining the prospects for validating such claims is the fact that the actor may have a different set of actions available than did the judge. If so, what was best for the judge when he made his decision may not be best for the actor. Moreover, the correspondence between actions

and outcomes may be different than was the case when the judge made his own choice. It may be that the judge's action leads to a different consequence than the actor's choice. It also implies that an action that the judge could have taken but didn't leads to a different outcome. If true, then it may be the case that the judge's choice of action X led to the best possible outcome for him, but the change in circumstances means that the actor realizes a more desirable outcome if they choose differently.

In addition, it may be that the actor has different a utility function than the judge. Even if the set of actions, and the correspondence between actions and outcomes, is the same for the actor as it was for the judge the correspondence between the outcomes and the actor's utility may be different than it was for the judge. For example, when the judge chose action X, the consequence was the opportunity to drink a strawberry milkshake, which is his favorite kind. The actor, however, is allergic to strawberries, and having such a drink is one of his worst possible outcomes.

A judge also chooses a place and time for the assessment. This choice need not be simple. Consider your vote for president. Is its competence best judged at the moment you cast the vote, at some point during the president's term, at the end of the president's term, or perhaps far into the future when the full consequences of a president's actions are fully realized? Underlying every competence assessment is the judge's answer to that question. Add to the question of time the fact that a competence standard can emanate from many different points-of-view. A judge may assess competence with respect to their own well being, the actor's well being, a particular conception of the public good or many other sources. Again, underlying every competence assessment is a point of view.

In sum, a competence assessment typically involves at least two people – an actor (the person whose competence is being judged) and a judge (the person who is doing the judging). When the judge lacks complete information about the actor's objectives or about cause-and-effect in the actor's environment, and needs to draw an inference about these phenomena, her

competence assessment will have a subjective component. This subjective component will be a function of the judge's experiences and perceptions, *attributes of the subject* making the assessment *rather than the object* (the actor and her decision) being assessed.

So, given this information, who is competent who judge others competence? My answer is that almost all of us are, if we are careful and avoid the pitfall of claiming more than we know about what is good for others. Consider, for example, what psychologists call *the fundamental attribution error* (Jones and Harris 1967). Suppose you see someone trip over a sidewalk. A common reaction to such observations is something of the form "What a klutz." In other words, the outcome is viewed as a function of a trait. However, if you trip over a sidewalk (infrequently) then you may view the outcome as one of circumstance (e.g., Usually, I navigate curbs very well but in this instance I was distracted.). People do not always make such errors and what we know about why they make them facilitates error correction. The error is more likely when people are distracted or when the event is not highly salient. In such cases, the person is the primary reference point. When we observe our own actions, by contrast, we also know many of the situational factors. To correct for the error, therefore, it can help to consider the other's person's circumstances before immediately blaming the outcome on a trait.

The fast-growing literature on many aspects of cognition, including those on attention and memory, reveal other biases (see, e.g. Schacter 2001, Kandel et. al. 2004) for reviews. Of course, there are conditions under which such conclusions are valid. But such situations follow a logic – one where the judge knows enough about the person and their circumstance to reliably estimate what the person would have done given a different information set. Such lesson impose a special burden on those who wish to educate others about civic matters – before you advise a person to change their practices, seriously consider whether the benefit to them or society is worth the cost. The histories of intellectual movements such as eugenics are riddled with people mistaking in-group familiarity for an out-group's lack of skill. We must be careful not to

characterize others as ignorant or irrational merely because the behaviors or thoughts we observe do not compare well with our possibly quirky notions of what the person should have done. Those of us who want to improve the measure and practice of civic competence can choose to ground our efforts in transparent and replicable studies of the relationship between information and choice. We need not repeat the mistakes of the past.

### ***The Value of “All the Facts”***

There is a difference between political competence and other kinds. Competence in political contexts has an individual element and a collective element. Individuals have needs and some political acts can determine whether and how those needs are met. Unlike competence at a task like tying a shoe, however, individual political acts can have collective consequences. So there are always at least two default categories of standard that we should consider – does the action benefit the individual and does the action benefit society.

Those who engage in civic competence scholarship and practice tend not to put much weight on individual-centered standards. The collective good of informed citizens is a premise regularly invoked. To evaluate the social value of civic education efforts and to validate such premises, we need to ask two questions. First, what is the value of the collective good? Second, who should pay?

For any collective action to succeed, certain individuals must take certain actions. When discussing competence, this implies that some people must have some information. But for the same reason that societal actions entailing every person sacrificing everything are difficult to justify so are claims about the distribution of information in politics that imply that everyone must know everything. Even for cases where we can imagine “knowing everything” to be possible, the question remains “What costs should society pay to gain such knowledge and who in society should pay?”

Even if it were possible for everyone to know everything, it is possible that societies would not choose to be fully informed. The reason is costs and benefits. When asking “What is

the difference in social value between a citizenry informed in the way that a particular civic competence scheme allows and the citizenry as presently informed?" they may determine that it is less than the cost. In a later chapter (Lupia N.d), I examine the conditions required for particular schemes to have competence-increasing effects. It turns out that the conditions are far more difficult to satisfy than many observers appreciate. For now, however, I simply give advocates of these plans the benefit of the doubt and assume that they can do what they claim. Even then, the questions remain "What is the societal benefit of the gain?" and "Who should pay how much?"

The answers will depend on citizen's societal roles. A critical economic fact about demand elasticity can provide far more social value in the hands of a person drafting a new tax law than it can in the hands of a randomly selected citizen. The implication for making socially valuable investments in civic competence is that people should have information that allows them to perform their tasks competently.

The notion that a random, general, and undirected distribution of political information will somehow lead to greater civic competence is a recipe for ineffectiveness and waste. Civic education programs operate with limited resources. They have an incentive to measure target attributes accurately and to choose attributes for which they can cause improvement. Effective scholarship on civic competence can be valuable to society when it helps such groups target decision makers and tasks more effectively.

### ***Collective Decision Making and the Return on Informational Investments***

"Who should pay for increased civic competence?" While the notions of payment and increased civic competence are not often mentioned in the same breath, the latter requires the former. Increasing civic competence requires conveying information to people who lack competence. This takes effort. Those who are charged with the task of providing information may have to sacrifice other opportunities to succeed. Moreover, the targets of the competence effort must pay attention to the new information. Sending information and processing require payments

of time and effort – scarce resources that can be devoted to many other activities. If the information is ignored, it cannot become part of a person’s decision calculus.

Asking someone to pay for an increase in civic competence is justified only if the sacrifice yields a benefit. What constitutes a benefit can be controversial. For the moment, I place one requirements on what counts as a benefit -- the benefit is more valuable if it is tangible. While the benefit need not accrue to the person or people who make the sacrifice, it must accrue to someone. While simplistic, this requirement is sufficient to rule out as effective some existing practices taken in the name of civic competence. Consider, for example, the claim that more information is always better and that society would be best off if all citizens knew everything. I would not disagree with such statements if becoming informed or competent was free, but it is not.

To meet most widely accepted normative goals for democratic societies, some people must know some things. But everybody need not know everything. Different people can know different things. If it is very costly to acquire information or become competent, and if every single person’s assent is not required for every social decision, then it can be inefficient and ineffective for everyone to know everything. Civic education efforts can increase competence more efficiently if they define competence in terms of the tasks their target audience faces. A competence is valuable only if a person can act on it.

An evaluative criterion that makes sense to impose in political contexts is the extent to which an action affects the actions of government. The end product of most political activity is that a person or group of persons with statutory or constitutional authority to, take actions on behalf of a polity does so. These actions include making laws, implementing them, and enforcing them.

A criterion that ties the value of an action to its affect on a collective outcome has several advantages. First and foremost, it highlights the notion politics can engender wasted effort. We can induce people to learn facts upon which they can never act and actionable facts that affect no

person's well being. It is possible in the name of civic education to induce people to practices that ultimately fail to accomplish anything of significant social value. To the extent that we value impact and output, it is helpful to minimize wasted effort when possible. The benefits of minimizing wasted effort are magnified when the effort could be devoted towards more valuable activities.

With a basic understanding of the benefits of an informational investment in hand, what kinds of investments in increasing civic competence are likely to yield social value. To address this question, I turn to a brief discussion of the relative value of various investments.

Investments typically entail a short-term sacrifice of time, money, or other valuable resources in exchange for an opportunity to reap future rewards. People invest time in obtaining an education with the hope that what they learn will benefit them in the future. People invest money in real estate, stocks, and mutual funds with the hope that the assets will increase in value over time.

When considering the value of an investment, it is important to contemplate the return. The importance comes from the opportunity cost of the resources being sacrificed in the short term. If an investor sacrifices \$100 of her current wealth for a stock "A" that is worth \$105 dollars at the time she needs to sell, the soundness of the investment depends on what else she could have done with the \$100. If investment opportunities exist that will be worth \$200 at the time she needs to sell, then the benefit of investing in stock "A" is less than the opportunity cost of the short-term sacrifice.

And so it is with political information. For many political decisions, especially those that receive great attention from scholars, interest groups, and the press, a great deal of political information is available. In some cases, such as presidential elections, more information is produced than any person can possibly digest. In such cases, the opportunity cost of attending to and attempting to process any particular piece of information depends on the value of other available uses of your time and energy.

The return on an investment in information depends, in part, on what you can do with it. Consider, for example, the case of a consumer in the produce section of a grocery store. When he is in the store and decides to buy an onion, his volition plays a huge part in determining whether or not he ends up owning it. He can act directly on information about the correspondence between onions and aspects of his well being. He can cause the onion to be at his dinner table that evening. The next day, that consumer heads to the ballot box. He will cast a vote for a member of his city council. He favors candidate Chang and he can base his vote on things he has learned about Chang and his opponents. However, he is very unlikely to cause Chang to be on the school board. The consumer is but one of tens of thousands of people who are casting a vote. His vote will not break a tie in the electorate – it will have no impact on who holds office. The informational investment may still be valuable – if the criteria we use to judge value is the consumer’s ability to choose a candidate whose policy stances match his own (a standard about which I raise questions below). But the opportunity cost issue remains – what should the consumer or society as a whole sacrifice in order to accomplish this outcome? If the opportunity cost entails Chang knowing less about an important decision that has great social value and performing incompetently there, then serious questions can be raised about the soundness of the investment.

In addition to real estate and stocks, people also regularly invest in insurance. Here the short-term sacrifice purchases an opportunity to improve a bad outcome whose occurrence cannot be anticipated perfectly. Information can also act as insurance. It can be worthwhile for people to acquire information that they know, and perhaps hope, they will never have to use. Here too, however, the value of an insurance policy depends on the probability of the bad event occurring and the extent to which having insurance improves outcomes in such circumstances. People and societies do not insure against every possible catastrophe. They tend to select those that are reasonably likely to occur, would cause great damage if unprepared, and where preparation can improve outcomes considerably.

All else constant, the return on an informational investment is highest when the information causes a more valuable outcome to occur— such as when you learn to distinguish fresh and rotting onions. If you invest in information that you can never use or information that you can use but never affect an outcome, the return is less. All else constant, if you can use a particular piece of information to create better outcomes in multiple circumstances, it is more valuable than information that can be used in only one of those instances.

An implication of the investment properties of political information is that different kinds of political actors are likely to seek different kinds of information. Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is a classic statement of this implication. He contends that voters who are unlikely to be pivotal in large elections have very little incentive to invest in detailed information about the election in question. Instead, they will rely on information that is very inexpensive to acquire, such as the proxies described earlier.

An additional implication of this kind of thinking is that as the tasks confronting a political actor change so does the soundness of different informational investments. To see how, consider the plight of an individual who has a particular amount of time and energy that they can devote to civic activity. A question arises, should they spend the time learning about the policy positions of the presidential candidates or that of the local school board? While many scholars and pundits will be quick to answer this question, I am not.

A school board acts on behalf of citizens in a school district. They make many important decisions. Many people can and do have an impact on the actions of school boards. They put signs in their yards, talk to neighbors and the like. Due to the relatively small size of most voting districts in school board elections, single voters or small blocs of voters have a far greater chance of casting the pivotal vote in a school board election than they do in any federal election. Given the fact that school board elections typically have far lower turnout than most federal elections, the likelihood of being pivotal is magnified for those who bother to turn out.

With such facts in hand, the question becomes – For individuals or blocs of individuals who have finite time to devote to civic issues, which is a better investment of their time – learning about the details of a president’s promises – details on which these voters may never have a chance of acting (they vote for presidents not issues) – or learning about school board candidates.

To the extent that people can have a greater impact on school boards than they can on the U.S. Congress there is an argument towards directing civic competence activities towards increasing the likelihood that people make school board related choices competently. Of course, the actions of the typical school board have far less of an impact than the most important decisions of the federal government. To determine the social value of a particular competence the scale of the government action must also be factored in. Even taking this factor into consideration, I think that the answer to the question “how should voters invest their civically-oriented time” is not a slam-dunk in favor of the national race.

Some people read Downs a different way and ask whether it was rational for voters to collect information at all. Answering this question in terms of the investment properties of informational investments, I draw your attention to the task. If the person were only ever to cast one vote, then the returns on informational investments relative to that vote are minimal. But if we suspect that people will engage in multiple political actions -- such as voting in many elections, influencing others in conversations, organizing others – the returns on certain kinds of information will increase. Again, however, the value of the information is contingent on what people can do with it.

In general, we cannot know everything about most of the civic phenomena we encounter. Nature sets boundaries on what we can know and learn. Learning also requires effort. As a result, more is not always better when it comes to information. More information can lead people to make incompetent choices or it can have no affect on their choices. In either case, the social value of investing in providing them with such information or in trying to induce them to learn the information is questionable. So even if “all the facts” could be delivered to citizens, questions

would remain about the social value of doing so. Any attempt to assess or increase civic competence in a socially valuable manner should be sensitive to basic facts about how and whether such information is encountered, perceived, remembered and acted upon.

Of course, some people will disagree with the notion that questions of civic competence should be answered by insights about investments. Others, I suspect, will even be offended. But many responses of this ilk patronize rather than help many of the people who are trying to mend continuing civic competence problems.

Increasing civic competence is costly. It is costly to those who provide information. It is costly to those who are asked to pay attention to or base their opinions on new things. To increase civic competence, people must be compensated.

Target audiences must be compensated. A challenge is that while the costs of being a more effective political actor are real and tangible, the benefits are often remote and abstract. Asking people to pay more attention to politics is akin to asking them to trade something real for something ethereal. This is why blanket critiques of the mass public for being inattentive are not very helpful. More constructive are efforts to make politically relevant information better investments for those whose incompetence has tangible societal costs.

Those who work on behalf of civic competence must also be compensated. For many of them a valuable form of compensation is results. In later chapters, I describe the conditions under which various methods of education and persuasion can deliver such results. Here, staying within the investment/collective decision context of this section, I offer a simple suggestion.

My suggestion follows from Mancur Olson's *A Logic of Collective Action*. Olson argues that large groups underproduce socially valuable goods when the benefits of the goods are diffuse and the costs are concrete. He contends that *selective incentives* are a way to induce greater investments by individuals towards collective goods. Selective incentives are tangible private goods that partially compensate individuals for their contribution to the group. Evidence that this approach works is provided by labor unions, who provide discounted life insurance and magazine

subscriptions to members, and public television, who offer mugs, Sesame Street puppets and Ken Burns videos to people who make contributions. An implication for increasing political competence is that if you want a target audience to pay more attention to aspects of politics that will help them perform critical tasks properly, then it may be wise to offer them selective incentives. Pay them, if you will, for attending to the information sufficient to increase their competence. To some civic competence advocates, the idea of paying people to pay attention is blasphemous. Some feel that it is wrong to pay people for what they “ought” to be doing anyway. The difference between this perspective and my description is the difference between viewing people in comparison to an unrealistic and idealized view of human nature and viewing them as they are. If you want to increase civic competence, reality provides a more reliable foundation.

### **Governance**

At the beginning of this section on the value of civic competence, I began with a simple example. In it, a single person was able to determine which of two parties would completely control the government for the rest of time. Competence is relatively simple to define in such cases because there is a direct connection between the person and the outcome in question. The voter chooses the correct party or she does not. In reality, it is not so simple.

In the example, one voter chooses one of two alternatives. His choice affects his utility directly. The outcome affects no one else, nor does it affect any other decision he makes.

The simple case, however, is not a familiar case. Focusing on the role of voters in modern democracies, the relationship between a voter’s choice and its consequences is far more complex. Voters sometimes choose from more than two alternatives. With two alternatives, it is sufficient to draw a correct inference about which is “better” than the other. Once this is known, the actor does not benefit from obtaining even more information. When the number of alternatives grows, the simple binary comparison “better” may no longer be longer sufficient. If competence requires choosing the best element of the set, then the actor must be able to draw a more complicated inference.

A voter need not affect the outcome directly. Indeed, such influence is extremely unlikely when he is but one member of a large electorate. The relationship between his action and anything that affects society – such as an action of government – entails the actions of other people. Even more people are involved when the electorate can cast votes for multiple levels of government and when those elected have the power to appoint other government actors. Such cases are much better descriptions of the kinds of factors that affect the relationship between a particular person's or group's actions and the actions of government that can affect their well being.

If what we care about is the correspondence between an individual's choice and the actions of government, the relationship can be quite remote. It is certainly far more intricate than many people who make quick assertions about citizens' competence appear to appreciate. But its important aspects of this correspondence are not beyond our capacity to understand.

In recent decades, scholars have derived a set of very valuable insights about the potentially convoluted relationships between the many participants in democratic decision-making. In what follows, I will apply some of those insights to questions of how to conceptualize civic competence and evaluate various claims made about the virtues of increasing such competence. My method entails starting with a simple situation, making it sequentially more complicated, and then spelling out the implications for competence questions. In what follows, I continue the practice established above of focusing on definitions of competence that are based in the relationship between what a person does and the impact of their choice on the actions of government.

I begin with the situation of a single voter, you, whose task is to vote in a large election that will determine the identity of a single member of a large legislative assembly. There are two or more candidates for the office. Above, we have discussed the basic informational criteria for this kind of choice. There, however, we treated the choice as if your choice determined your outcome.

Even if your vote broke a tie and determined the winner of the election in question, your vote would not determine the actions of government directly. It would only if your elected representative were made dictator of the legislature. This will not happen. Therefore, to accomplish anything, your legislators will have to work with others over whom you have no control. How your representative works with others, and with whom they work, will play an important role in the relationship between your vote and the actions of government. With whom they *coalesce* and to whom they *delegate* will affect the consequence of your vote.

### **Coalescence**

Whoever wins the election in your district will be but one member of a legislative body with hundreds of members. To get anything done, the members of this body will have to forge agreements. Some of these agreements will involve compromise. Your representative may have to give up something he or she wants, or perhaps even promised during the election, to achieve a result that is also desirable. Most of these agreements will involve negotiation – some of which will be bitter or protracted. The agreements forged from these negotiations will turn not only on the policy preferences of the representative or his constituents but also on the bargaining skills of various legislators. Your representative's bargaining skills are not the only ones that matter. Other participants' bargaining skills can sway the negotiations, persuade other legislators and affect what, if any, influence your representative has. As a result, the bargaining dynamics of the legislature will affect the relationship between your vote and the actions of government. But there is more to the story.

At the time of an election, even the most learned legislative expert will be uncertain about what issues will come up during the legislative session and how they will be resolved. Of course, many experts can name bills or issues that will definitely be raised. However, they will be hard pressed to anticipate crises that will unexpectedly occupy legislative attention. Those circumstances need not cut across traditional partisan or ideological lines. They may split the parties or unify people who hold different positions on most other issues. In recent years, for

example, Ted Kennedy and George W. Bush have coalesced for the purpose of forwarding an education bill, while various members of the House's Republican majority have joined with Democrats to block various kinds of legislation. These new schisms or alliances may have spillover effects – they may make it more difficult, or easier, respectively, for legislators to coalesce on other issues – even those whose occurrence was totally anticipatable by learned legislative experts. The manner in which legislative alliances evolve will affect the relationship between your vote and the actions of government – perhaps in counterintuitive ways.

Consider, for example, the notion that a voter is better off choosing a candidate whose policy views are closest to his or her own. Such views are common in political science and have been used as recently as the 2000 presidential elections to characterize voter competence. Several studies have noted that some Bush voters were “closer on the issues” to Gore with some going so far as to claim that these voters should have voted for Gore. There are many problems with such statements as valid competence claims. In short, the relationship between your representative policy preferences and either your well being or the “public good” depends on factors that neither you nor your representative can control.

A problem arises when your chosen representative is not a dictator. To pass laws, they must negotiate with others. While presidents have the capacity to render executive orders, such orders remain the product of at least implicit negotiations – as Congress has the authority to overturn any such order through the creation of a new statute.

An implication of negotiation is compromise. In negotiations it is only sometimes better to be represented by a legislator “who is like you.” To see why this is only sometimes true, suppose that you hold a moderate position on an important policy issue and will cast the decisive vote in an upcoming election. It may be beneficial for you to have moderates such as yourself negotiating on your behalf in the legislature. If, however, moderates compromise in ways that extremists do, then being represented by moderates may lead to an outcome you like less.

Assume for the moment that there is no conflict between your self-interest in this case and an agreed-upon notion of the public good. You most prefer policy S. To the extent that a policy other than S will be passed, you prefer that the policy be as close to S as possible. Another group of people is against your position. They want policy ~S.

Assume that legislators representing the two groups determine that the best outcome they can achieve is one that splits the difference between S and ~S – splitting the difference is a common means of resolving bargaining impasses (see, e.g., Gigerenzer, et. al. 2001). If a moderate represents you in this case, splitting the difference will lead to a policy outcome half way between S and ~S. If, however, you choose someone whose preferences are more extreme in a particular direction (e.g., policy S is half way between policy ~S and the extremists' most preferred policy Z), and they split the difference with supporters of policy ~S, then the outcome will be your ideal policy. In this case, your interests and that of the public good benefit when you choose a representative that is more extremist than yourself.<sup>1</sup> So if we agree to judge your competence by its impact on the actions of government, the competent vote would be for the extremist.

Of course, your representative will consider multiple issues. It may be the case that some of the issues your legislator will face will be like the one just described – cases where you prefer someone a little more extreme than you to represent your interests. However, other issues will be of a kind where it is better to have someone like you – where from your point-of-view, and perhaps that of the public good, the extremist will carry things too far. To tie your competence assessment to your vote, will require weighting the many actions that governments can or cannot take. An implication for current practice is that many people are quick to judge the competence of others because individuals lack concrete knowledge of a specific policy topic. For people who are able to make topic-by-topic choices, such information could be worth an investment of time and

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical studies of voting patterns in several countries suggest that many voters make such decisions (see, e.g., Kedar 2003).

effort. Most people, however, do not have an opportunity to choose one representative per bill or per topic. As a result, issue-specific information may not be the best kind of informational investment they can make nor would social investments in conveying such information be a likely creator of social value. While it is true that the effectiveness of governmental actions requires some, and perhaps many people to be knowledgeable about the details of particular decisions, it does not require that everyone know everything.

### **Delegation**

After an agreement is struck, someone must implement it. It will not be the legislators themselves in most cases. Legislatures delegate such tasks to bureaucrats, most of who are employed in administrative agencies. The bureaucrats vary in their expertise and personal policy preferences. Some carry out the laws exactly as they are written. Others do not. Since bureaucrats are most often the people in society who are acting on behalf of the government understanding their motivations plays as much as a role in understanding the relationship between a citizen's vote and the actions of government as does the motives for the citizens' vote itself.

A substantial scholarly literature clarifies the consequences of delegation. It begins with the premises that bureaucrats and other government employees need not do what legislators tell them to do. In some cases, the interpretative discretion available to bureaucrats is a result of vaguely worded legislation. In other cases, they just reject the legislative mandate.

This literature's main lesson is that information plays a big role in determining the extent to which those to whom power is delegated (i.e., agents) act in accordance with the preferences of those who delegated power to them (i.e., principals). Principals need not be fully informed about their agents' activities to induce their principals to act as if the agents were fully informed. Principals who have access to effective proxies (e.g., simple ways of learning the consequences of a particular action or ways of detecting false statements – each of which can be provided by knowledgeable interest groups – i.e., the “fire alarms” of McCubbins and Schwartz 1987) and

means of sanctioning wayward agents will be more successful in having their desires become bureaucratic action than those who do not.

Not surprisingly, such insights are commonly brought to bear when scholars and other analysts assess legislators' competence at achieving desired policy outcomes. They also have implications for assessments of citizens' competence. If we agree to base our competence assessment on the relationship between a citizen's action and the actions of government, then competence will be more closely tied to the preferences of legislative majorities in cases where bureaucrats faithfully execute legislative instructions. In cases where bureaucrats run amok, competence assessments will depend on how they run amok.

## **Conclusion**

Given the large set of interactions that connect the political actions of individuals and groups to the actions of government and given the premise that it is reasonable to judge a person's civic competence by the extent to which their choice corresponds to desired governmental actions, we must conclude that dynamics of legislative agenda setting, coalition building, delegation and implementation are relevant to understanding civic competence. While the sequence of negotiations that affect delegation and coalescence may seem convoluted they follow a logic from which we can learn.

This logic also reveals the potential benefits of conditioning civic competence assessments on properties of political institutions. For example, consider an implication of the fact that many countries have electoral and legislative systems that induce political parties to share legislative power. Indeed, the modal form of democracy around the world – at the national level – is parliamentary democracy and that the modal form of government within a parliamentary democracy is a coalition government. In such cases, the election determines how many seats in the legislature each political party will occupy. Coalition governments arise because no party obtains a majority of seats – the fraction required to legislate. The identity of the government is determined by post-election negotiations. These negotiations determine the

identity of the executive branch (i.e., the prime minister and all other cabinet ministers). These decisions, in turn, affect the relative bargaining power of different interests in the legislature. So even if you are a voter or member or a group that casts the decisive vote with respect to a single member of parliament, the connection between your vote and the actions of government need not be correct. Judging competence by the correspondence between a vote and the actions of government in such cases implies different assessments for participants in systems where a single party runs the government, such as England at the national level, than in systems where parties must share power.

A more general implication of the relationship between individual choices and the actions of government is that the limited value of the notion of “full information.” At the time of an election, even an elected representative is unlikely to be certain about which coalitions and agreements will follow and on how bureaucrats and government employees will react to new legislative mandates. In such cases, it is unlikely that anyone knows “all the facts” about the consequences of a particular election. This fact does not exclude blanket ignorance, but it does imply that concrete progress in assessing and improving political competence can come from more realistic standards. In the cases upon which political scientists, media commentators, and civic advocates concentrate most, the icon of the fully informed voters is a fiction. It is a complete fantasy.

Moreover, some people are hesitant to vote because they do not know “all the facts.” In light of the preceding discussion, this outcome is tragic. The first response to such a statement should usually be that no one knows all the facts. As the preceding discussion makes clear, for most large-scale elections there are two kinds of people, those who believe that they do not know all the facts and those who are deluded about how much they know. To the extent that elite rhetoric about the necessity of “knowing all the facts,” or being able to answer a set of political knowledge questions whose relevance to their own democratic responsibilities is minimal, has caused people not to participate, this outcome is truly tragic if, in fact, these people have

something to contribute. Of course, some may argue that society is better off if uninformed people stay home. The problem with that claim is that we are all uninformed to one degree or another. The real question is can we vote our complete our other critical democratic tasks in the way that we would if we had the desired information set.

### ***Social Choice [Preliminary]***

What political information is valuable for people to learn? That is, if people or society must sacrifice other diversions or beliefs in order to learn new facts – what price should be paid and who should pay it? Two currencies in which answers to this question can be given are the well being of the decision maker and the well being of society. If our sole concern is with the well being of the individual, then a critical part of the evaluation is determining what is best for the person. And if, in this case, we want to gauge competence we should do so with the results of that evaluation in mind.

Civic actions can have consequences whose affects go beyond the well being of any particular actor. In scholarship, most calls for greater civic competence are couched in terms of a greater good – usually a collective good. Since very few people who study or work on the topic of civic competence seem interested only in the private benefits of public actions, I use this section to examine the consequences evaluating civic competence and the value of informational investments in terms of collective preferences.

I begin by returning to the case where such questions are easiest to answer. In this case, there is one actor and two alternatives. The choice corresponds directly to a utility consequence for the actor. Suppose that the alternatives are such that one produces a better outcome for the actor. Assume, moreover, that there is no conflict between self-interest and the public interest, that the choice is linked to no other that can affect the actor or society, and that once the choice is made, there is no possibility for unintended consequences.

In this case, competence is easy to define. The actor should choose the alternative that leads to the desired outcome. In this case, competence is easy to assess. The actor chooses the

alternative that leads to the desired outcome or he does not. In this case, the value of information is relatively easy to describe. Any piece of information that induces the actor to choose the alternative that leads to the desired outcome is more valuable than information that lacks such attributes. In this case, the requirements for increasing civic competence are straightforward. Find people who lack information sufficient to induce them to choose the alternative that leads to the desired outcome. Find a way to convey this information so that the actor pays attention to it and remembers things about it that induce him to choose the alternative that leads to the desired action.

As we increase the number of issues and the number of actors in government, competence becomes harder to define. These aspects of political decision making differentiate civic competence from many other kinds. When multiple people are involved, evaluative standards can be more difficult to define. This is especially true for politics because issues are not born political – but they can become political. Politics is the domain where groups and societies deal with issues that are not otherwise easy to resolve. We do not need politics to address issues on which we all agree.

Politics is a means by which people with some interests in common and others in conflict can act as a group to accomplish things that no individual or small set of individuals can. Many of these things are valuable. They can improve the quality of life for everyone. But two problems are endemic. First, collective goods can vary in the extent to which they improve particular lives. Second, all require that individuals make sacrifices. There is the basic question of who should sacrifice.

Against this there is an incentive problem. As Olson pointed, individuals in large groups have an incentive to free ride. If they can, they are better off attempting to benefit from the collective enterprise while minimizing their own contribution.

But if the collective good is to be produced, someone must pay. Politics is a means by which we determine who should pay. The decisions that a polity makes depend in large part on

what people believe about the preferences of the collective. Many claims about the value of information and of civic education are made with reference to the same preferences.

The problem is that collective preferences are different than individual preferences when members of the collective disagree about what they want. The likelihood of such outcomes on issues that become political make claims about the “public good” contestable.

Many people like to talk about competence as if this problem did not exist. I can recall several local development campaigns from my time in San Diego. Several campaigns described their desired development scheme with the tag line “It’s better for everyone.” Given the fact that the matter had to be settled on a ballot after failure in local legislatures and given the existence of an organized opposition, I knew one thing about the campaign before reading anything else – its tag line was false.

The study of this problem, as it occurs in work on social choice theory, alerts us to the notion that statements about what the collective preference is requires interpersonal comparisons of utility – where such comparisons often have a subjective component. One cannot necessarily expect person A’s assessment of person B’s well being to be the same as person B’s assessment or the assessment of another person C. Someone who wants to assess competence or the social value of information investments with respect to the greater good makes these comparisons as well.

Such collective preference statements also require a weighting of object attributes. Almost all objects over which collective decisions can be made have multiple attributes. Certainly all of the political objects to which political scientists pay attention have these attributes.

George W. Bush. Man. From Texas. Went to Yale. Owned a baseball team. Medium height. Athletic. Selected African-Americans for National Security Advisor and Secretary of State. Advocated the war on Iraq. Pushed for tax cuts whose direct beneficiaries were primarily the wealthy. Has two daughters. And so on.

When attempting to make a claim about the collective preference on an issue, these attributes must be weighted. Depending on the group, it is entirely possible to render a weighting that no individual in the group possess (e.g., assume for the moment, that you can accurately gauge the individual benefits of a particular action of government, then represent the collective preference by the average individual benefit – no individual need receive exactly the average). For political issues, people are likely to disagree on weighting schemes. In assessments of what position on the legality of, and the government’s role in, abortion is a competence one some weigh the plight of the woman more heavily, while others emphasize the well being of the unborn child. There is not as yet, a universally accepted measure of which is more important which makes a universally accepted measure of competence with respect to abortion-related politics impossible.

Indeed, the reason why people with different ideologies and partisanship assess political competence differently is that they perceive and weigh attributes differently. If an object had only one attribute and an actor had only one possible objective in relation to the object, then there is no possibility of disagreement. It is the multiplicity of attributes combined with the boundaries of perception and variations in potential judges’ beliefs that lead different people to observe the same situation and draw drastically different competence assessments.

The social choice problem – both its existence and the perception-based complications that it causes -- makes political competence more difficult to define. We should not run from this problem. Instead, we should attempt to make our standards for evaluating aspects of collective decision making relate to it in a transparent way. When we claim that a particular behavior or outcome is socially valuable – it is possible to do so with the understanding of the interpersonal tradeoffs we are implicitly endorsing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth that some people read social choice theory as implying that “collective preferences” cannot exist. While it is true that this literature provides reasons to be skeptical about broad and imprecise claims about the “will of the people” nothing in that literature proves as false all possible inferences about collective preference (see, e.g., Lupia and McCubbins 2004).

Choosing to spend money on health care, rather than defense leads to outcomes that leave certain people – perhaps everyone – differentially better off. Choosing to have taxes at one level and not another does the same. Choosing to stay within a budget or to run a deficit, which is in effect spending money now for which people in the future will have to pay – it is not free, does the same. Public policy affects people in different ways and the decision to choose one over another implies an interpersonal comparison of utility.

Not everyone likes to think of policy in this way. Advocates of certain programs like to direct people's attention to the benefits of their program and to what would happen if the program is not supported at a particular level. They are less apt to specify the costs in other sectors that their preferred program entails. By being vague about the opportunity costs, the costs can seem less important. But every such claim, when made in the domain of public policy or in most political domains, implies a decision to privilege some claims at the expense of others. If the resource in question has an alternate use, this is most likely true. Claiming that a particular policy makes everyone better off is usually akin to arguing that death is curable. It would be great if the claim was true, but politics seldom allows it.

When competing claims about social value are made, the question “Which is the better argument?” is hard to answer. However, some clarity can come from evaluating such claims by their consistency with the underlying logic of preference aggregation. In the same way that people may disagree over which of two designs for a new bridge is more beautiful at the same time as engineers can conduct reliable scientific analyses of the designs' ability to withstand extreme weather and variations in load, people can argue about which policies or attributes of policies should be most heavily weighted in assessments of social value and civic competence at while social scientists conduct reliable analyses of what you would have to assume about preference aggregation to render various claims true. Stated less grandly, at the same time that people discuss the moral competence of a particular government, a certain percentage of children

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live in poverty or they do not. To the extent that social value comes from reducing this percentage, we can rank order claims about competence by whether available actions reduce the percentage. For other matters, where underlying technical issues do not resolve conflicts the question is more difficult.

In reality, politics will be filled with people who make claims about what others should know. They will assert that certain facts should take precedence in decision-making. If they are talking about politics they are also likely to be making an appeal for a particular way of thinking about interpersonal utility comparisons. You may or may not agree with this way of thinking. But you should understand that it is not the only way. It is probably contestable.

Consider for example, Bartels' argument in the paper "Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind." The paper's argument (2004:4) is that "most Americans support tax cuts not because they are indifferent to economic inequality, but largely because they fail to connect inequality and public policy." Later, he explains this pattern as a result of citizens basing their opinions on "simple-minded and sometimes misguided considerations of self-interest." The data offered in support of these claims come from several cleverly-designed surveys in which respondents are queried about their feelings about inequality as a general matter and about changes to the tax law advanced by President Bush and the Republican majorities in both houses of Congress.

Underlying Bartels' argument are very strong presumptions about the kinds of outcomes citizens *should* favor and the kinds of connections citizens *should* make. He finds it surprising that people favor tax cuts from which they are unlikely to benefit directly and that increase economic inequality that elsewhere they claim to be against. Leaving aside for the moment the question of what others should think when making a political choice, is it really unreasonable that people have not made the connection in the way that Bartels wants them to. After all, no one has offered them the ability to act on individual tax proposals. The connection Bartels seeks is not

one on which most citizens can act efficaciously. The information required to make the connections may reasonably be seen by most citizens as offering a low return.

Citizens do not get to vote from among a long list of possible tax policies. They can choose a president, a House member and a Senator who, to varying degrees can affect tax cut debates. Their representatives, however, will also tackle many other issues. For better or worse, Republicans in the last two decades of the twentieth century gained new credibility with portions of the electorate who either used to vote for Democrats or were politically inactive. They have made the change because they perceive – in most cases accurately – that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to seek political outcomes of a particular variety. While some people may find these outcomes repugnant, for others it better coincides with core values than the claims of contemporary Democrats. If citizens had the ability to vote on tax cuts, Bartels would be on to something about their competence. But given his evidence, it is impossible to reject the hypothesis that many people eschewed investing in information upon which they can never act in favor of other information – which may be that the Republicans are less interested in downwards redistribution of income than in other social issues for which they perceive Bush to be very strong. While some undoubtedly fit the “couch potato” stereotype, many others who pay little attention to nuances of Bush’s tax policy may have concluded that information about state, local, or neighborhood level civic activities are a better investment of their time.

Indeed, as hard as it is for many who oppose Bush to believe, a large proportion of the people who voted for George W. Bush in 2000 will vote for him again in 2004. This group will include many very intelligent people who are very knowledgeable about the actions of government, people who knowingly did not benefit from the tax cut, and who regard most or all of his decisions are entirely consistent with an incontrovertible notion of the public good. Of course, some in this group will base their support for Bush on very diffuse stereotypes of the consequences, but this fact will not distinguish these voters from many who vote for Kerry. Voters will choose each candidate with varying levels of awareness about the impact of his

economic and military strategies. They will do so because given how they weigh the large number of factors on which a presidential vote can be cast, Bush is far better for their worldview than any Democrat. That Democrats reach a different conclusion is not sufficient evidence to render the Republicans wrong.

To use a study such as “Homer” to reach the conclusion that voters are casting inferior votes requires a great deal of speculation – speculation that, I contend, ultimately undermines the credibility of the effort in policy circles. The Homer study is careful and innovative in many respects and is important for those who care about the causes of inequality. For that reason, it should be taken seriously and it should have the capacity to inform decision makers. However, even if we can agree that the basis of inequality is economic and the repercussions are social, the fact of the matter is that the problem will be resolved politically. What will be done about inequality is largely a political question. Careful scholarship can contribute to this conversation, but the credibility of the scholarly enterprise in a politicized environment depends on the extent to which it can break free from partisan worldviews. If such scholarship is viewed as inherently liberal, potentially persuadable moderates will take it less seriously.

Instead of categorizing people as misguided because their rationale does not fit into categories we create as scholars, it may be more instructive to conduct scholarship that attempts to fit our comparative advantage into their rationales. We will be more influential if we can explain how they see political issues than we will be by merely pointing out that they are not like us. Such improved inferences are within the capabilities of contemporary social science, but they require a much more serious inquiry into key attributes of American minds. While I am excited to see what such explorations teach us, we can already anticipate one implication of these findings -- the fact that a person is not like us is not sufficient evidence of their civic incompetence.

### **Implications for Political Knowledge Questions**

Many citizens spend very little time attending to the details of politics. This makes us suspicious of what they have in mind when they vote. Since voting scholars cannot observe

voters' thoughts directly, they often turn to surveys for proxy measures. In most cases, surveys ask voters for their political opinions. Some surveys also ask political knowledge questions. These questions are much like the quizzes administered in civics classes. They reveal who can answer questions such as "What is the political office currently held by Dick Cheney?"

As noted above, many citizens have a difficult time answering these questions. A recent book by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) provides a comprehensive study of the evidence on this matter. It covers several decades and hundreds of surveys. It describes which questions people can and cannot answer and shows how this ability varies over time and across socioeconomic groups. They show that what Converse said in 1975 remains true today, "the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys ... is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low" (1975:79).

Many analysts use data such as this to conclude that voters are incompetent. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) do not draw this exact conclusion, focusing instead on the differences between groups. They do, however, maintain that "more information is better than less information" (pp. 14, 269) and that "how informed the citizenry is and who is informed become important considerations in understanding the civic competence of the general public" (p. 152). Indeed, doubts about voter competence are advanced regularly by political pundits (e.g., Will 1994) and by people who question the wisdom of policy making by initiative and referendum (e.g., Cain and Miller 2001).

In recent years, some scholars have taken these arguments one-step further. Many now construct "political knowledge" scales, by counting the number of correct responses to small numbers of these of questions. While these data may be useful for other purposes, I contend that they reveal little about voter competence on big choices. Using the logic presented above, I now make two points about these measures. First, I show that the relationship between socially valuable forms of civic competence and the ability to answer one or a few political information

questions is loose, at best. Second, I argue that recent claims about the "validity" of such measures are not based on valid theories of human cognition.

### ***Loose Relations***

Suppose that a voter's choice is competent if it is the same choice that she would make given sufficient information about its consequence. The heuristics school reminds us that shortcuts are available for many political choices, which implies that there is more than one informational pathway to a competent choice. If answering the types of questions that appear on political surveys were either necessary or sufficient for competence on a particular issue, then data on citizens' ability to answer these questions would provide important data about their competence. But this is not generally true. Indeed, the existence of shortcuts makes it very unlikely that knowing the answer to any particular survey question will be a necessary condition for competence on any particular vote, especially a big choice.

Of course, findings such as "only 10 percent of the public could define the meaning of "liberal" or "conservative" (Converse 1964), and an even smaller percentage actually used such ideological categories in evaluating candidates and parties (Campbell, et.al. 1960)" (as reported in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 41), have led many scholars to portray ordinary citizens as stupid. These conclusions come from the belief that the concepts underlying the survey questions have a critical meaning. And they do. To many analysts, these concepts are critical to the way that *they* understand politics. It is clear, however, that these same ideas do not have the same importance to citizens.

If there are multiple informational pathways to competence (i.e., effective shortcuts), then voters need not adopt elite categories to make competent choices. While analysts may find terms such as liberal or conservative, useful, there is no reason to expect citizens to do the same -- for them alternate concepts such as Democrat and Republican or "liked by people I respect" and "disliked by people I respect" work just fine. While answers to extant "political knowledge" questions and scales may have other important uses, their relevance to voter competence debates

is distant, at best. Observing that voters answer the political information questions incorrectly does not determine their competence as voters. It may also be evidence that survey researchers misinterpret responses to political information questions or that they ask citizens the wrong questions in their search for a gauge of voter competence.

### ***Validity Problems***

When I first offered this argument orally at conferences, I was assured that recent work established the validity of the political knowledge scales. And, indeed, there is work that claims to do this. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 151-152), follow Smith (1989), and Bennett (1990) in using factor analysis to defend the assumption that "a scale with a limited number of factual items, if carefully constructed, can be used to approximate what citizens know more generally about politics." Delli Carpini and Keeter later conclude that such measures represent "important considerations in understanding the civic competence of the public." I agree that these statistics show that people who are good at answering some survey questions are also good at answering others. It is not, however, clear that these measures imply anything about a voter's competence in the voting booth or political competence considered more generally.

To see the problem with such validity claims, consider analogous debates about the measurement of intelligence elsewhere in the social sciences. Gould, for example, in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996) examines the argument that intelligence can be meaningfully abstracted as a single number. His argument against this type of scale is powerful, though much of it is directed towards racial prejudice, a topic about which "political knowledge" scholars are quite careful. An important part of his critique, however, goes beyond prejudice and into the properties of statistical inference. Indeed, the core of his methodological argument is about whether factor analysis can be used to determine the validity of intelligence measures. He (p. 48) argues "the key error of factor analysis lies in reification, or the conversion of abstractions into putative real entities." In particular, he shows the flaws in attributing too much to the first

principal component in a factor analysis -- the precise statistic upon which "political knowledge scale" scholars' base their claim of validity.

The first principal component is a mathematical abstraction that can be calculated for any matrix of correlation coefficients; it is not a "thing" with physical reality. Factorists have often fallen prey to a temptation for *reification* - for awarding *physical meaning* to all strong principal components. Sometimes this is justified; I believe that I can make a good case for interpreting my first pelycosaurian axis as a size factor. But such a claim can never arise from the mathematics alone, only from additional knowledge of the physical nature of the measures themselves. For nonsensical systems of correlation have principal components as well, and they may resolve more information than meaningful components do in other systems. A factor analysis for a five-by-five correlation matrix of my age, the population of Mexico, the price of Swiss cheese, my pet turtles' weight, and the average distance between galaxies during the past ten years will yield a strong first principal component. This component - since all the correlations are so strongly positive - - will probably resolve as high a percentage of information as the first axis in my study of pelycosaurs. It will also have no enlightening physical meaning whatsoever. (Gould 1996: 280).

If this argument is correct, then the validity of using "knowledge scales" as evidence of voter competence, or even general political intelligence, depends on "additional knowledge of the physical nature of the measures themselves."

What additional knowledge can validate political knowledge scales? The additional knowledge needed here is on how people convert political information into voting decisions. Such knowledge exists in the recent work of cognitive scientists, economists, psychologists, and political scientists, many of whom find that people use various substitutes for detailed information as the basis for competent performance. These findings contradict the idea that questions in the scale are equivalent to necessary or sufficient conditions for voter competence -- the premise underlying political knowledge scales' claims to validity in the context of voter competence. That the knowledge scales have anything close to this property is extremely unlikely, as "the selection of specific items remains fairly subjective, guided by the goals of the research and influenced by factors not easily quantified" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 299).

The claim that common knowledge scales provide valid measures of voter competence is itself invalid. These scales undoubtedly reflect the extent to which citizens are aware of facts

taught in basic civics classes, which can be valuable things to know. But there is no tangible evidence that correct answers to the kinds of questions that drive political knowledge scales are anywhere near necessary or sufficient conditions for most political actors to perform their most common or important political tasks competently.

### ***Our National Fixation***

I contend that our discipline can make a more constructive and relevant contribution to the topic of civic competence when we recognize a bias that affects our work – we must admit that we have a national fixation. Scholars focus far more on presidential elections than they do on others, far more to congresspersons than to legislators at the state and local level, and far more to federal bureaucrats than to their counterparts at other levels of government. Without minimizing the importance of focal federal activities, it is important to recognize that such activities constitute but a handful of all of the politically relevant actions that occur on any given day. Randomly selected Americans are far more likely to be pivotal at politically-relevant activities taken at the local, parish, or neighborhood levels, than they are for any of the national level activities on which many scholars and journalists are fixated. Perhaps the masses are more competent than those who judge them in that they realize that investing heavily in the minutiae of federal politics is akin to tilting at windmills. An objection often raised to such suggestions is “OK, but where would we be if everyone ignored these facts?” The question, I think is interesting, but applying this criterion generally reveals the problem. Of course, a democracy would be a farce if no one in the population knew basic facts about the operation or character of government. But now apply the standard to the question “Where would we be if everyone knew these facts?” The answer is not so clear. The first complicating factor is that, as established above, knowing such facts is neither necessary nor sufficient for most socially valuable tasks. So beyond satisfying the purveyors of such questions, it is not clear that we would be any better off. The second complicating factor is what it would cost individuals or society to gain such knowledge. The argument offered above makes interesting the question of to whom such a cost is

merely an imposition with no redeeming virtues. In sum, the fact that a properly functioning democracy requires some people to engage in effective oversight comes nowhere near implying that it is a socially beneficial investment for all citizens to memorize the minutiae.

When scholars and pundits criticize the mass public for their inattention to national level issues, the New York Times and their inability to answer common political information questions, they are criticizing others for not sharing their “national fixation.” This is not to say that scholars and many of those in the media are incorrect to have such a fixation. After all, most of them have professional and career incentives that are helped tremendously by establishing a national reputation. Journalists who work for or aspire to work for the nation’s most influential news outlets must ultimately learn to produce stories that can be relevant to a broad audience. Similarly, the leading political science journals service national and international clientele. Articles that end up in a journal of only local or regional interest do not fuel the career advancement of political scientists in the ways that articles of national interest. To this day, it remains difficult to publish articles that focus on local politics. And given the economies of scale involved in journal publishing, such national biases are strongly justifiable.

But most citizens are neither political scientists nor journalists. Because our ability to achieve professional success corresponds to a national fixation does not make the same true for citizens. Perhaps the reason that they find our categories not worth their concentration is because they have figured out that they can make more of a difference at other levels of social interaction. To be sure, many fit the couch potato stereotype. Just as surely, many others are engaged in socially valuable activities that common civic competence knowledge measures do not gauge well.

We should measure what they do. Where possible, we should base the questions we ask them on necessary and sufficient conditions for accomplishing the tasks they face. This strategy will reward those who learn the lessons more than citizens who are encouraged to do better on contemporary tests.

### ***When are Partisans and Single-Issue Voters Competent?***

Many people judge others' competence. Yet, numerous studies find publics that are very knowledgeable about issues that affect them directly, but less knowledgeable about the kinds of issues raised in common political knowledge studies. These "single-issue" voters are regularly singled out as incompetent or not sufficiently attentive to the public good. But who is to say? It may be that the single-issue voters' lives and experiences are such that the one issue really constitutes the best investment of the resources that they devote to civic purposes. Thinking again about the possibly limited public value of extending our national fixation to all manner of applications in the realm of civic competence, we can conclude that it is extremely presumptuous for critics to draw the conclusion that single-issue voters are incompetent or irresponsible.

A similar retort can be offered for partisan civic competence claims. Examples of such claims include pro-life activists who implore others to put more weight on the plight of the fetus in their abortion policy-related decision contexts, the pro-choice advocates who make parallel claims for pregnant women, and those who ask society to pay greater attention to any particular problem or population. I do not want to claim that such claims are incorrect or unhelpful. For some people, it may be that even if they knew everything there was to know about the political world, that their life experiences would lead them to hold interests consistent with others privileging a special set of facts when making decisions. If these conditions do not hold, then partisan competence definitions are less useful and more pejorative. In the worst case, they inhibit others' freedom without conferring a benefit on those people or society in general.

If a randomly selected citizen called by a survey company by surprise in the middle of their daily routine cannot name their congressional representative, what cost does society pay? It may be more important that they have information about matters they can affect. If the same citizen answers questions about what terms such as liberal and conservative mean in ways that are inconsistent with how academics or *The New York Times* use the terms (which is not to say that

there is anything approaching perfect consistency of use within these groups), what cost does society pay? To some extent, all of us are ignorant of the tradeoffs inherent in societal decision. While “liberal” and “conservative” is one way to frame these tradeoffs, their use in common parlance presumes particular tradeoffs and weightings of policies on which government can act. These terms do not, however, reflect the only possible tradeoffs and weightings. Castigating the public for not knowing these terms says as much about us in the academy and the press as it does about citizens. It shows that we are not above judging others not by whether they can perform particular tasks but by whether or not they are like us.

### ***The Desired Information Set***

At the end of debates about the meaning and value of civic competence, some participants will persist in their search for a simple definition of the “desired information set” – the catchall set of things that responsible citizens should know. I hope that this chapter suggests that such sets can be derived though their constitution will be different than many people imagine.

In previous sections, I have argued that the idea that “more information is better” is of limited value and that competence assessments depend, in part, on the judge herself. Underlying both of these ideas is the fact that people base choices not on all of the information they encounter, but only a select subset of it. Even if we could convey “all the facts” to a decision maker, they would have to process the information and, in the ends, some of the facts would turn out to be irrelevant. If it is costly to acquire information and if it requires effort to process and remember it, then knowing everything is inefficient if you will never act on or benefit from most of what you know.

Questions that ask people for about detailed aspects of a particular policy or ask people to recite themes in classic civics texts certainly gauge a kind of competence. If you are making the policy or have to pass a quiz on the text to achieve a concrete goal, they are very useful. They are also useful if you are a political science, public policy, or law professor. The facts can help you make many arguments more forcefully and provide a way of demonstrating to others that you

really are knowledgeable about politics. They can also be useful in political trivia contests, whether organized formally or whether informal as occurs when people in a conversations feel a need to show off their knowledge of particular facts.

But are the answers to the questions asked on political surveys or in other attempts to assess political competence useful to voters? Is knowledge of them the best way for individuals to provide social value? Or is it not more important to know where the closest emergency room is, or the phone number of an elderly neighbor, or the address of a church? I do not, by any means, wish to imply that complete ignorance is bliss or even effective. I do mean to imply that the relationship between facts and tasks is not anywhere near as loose as many people who comment about or study civic competence allege. If your objective is to accomplish a particular task or set of tasks, then some of the many possible facts you could know can help you. Most others will not. If the goal is to increase political competence in a way that imposes minimally on individuals and society, the key is knowing the difference.

The key is understanding that different citizens have different civic responsibilities. For each of them, the desired information set should correspond to the tasks inherent in their responsibilities. For those citizens who have greater civic ambitions, there is an argument to be made for higher standards. Societies do well to invest in their futures, and offering civic information to potential leaders is important business. It is too important to be the product of a narrow worldview rather than of worldviews that target audiences are more likely to encounter. It is too important to be based on myth and hand waving. While I hope to have cast substantial doubt on the practices and claims of many people who conduct scholarship or programs in the name of civic competence, I also hope to have reinforced the importance of getting civic competence dynamics correct.

In such endeavors, it is important to remember that democratic societies include many people performing many different tasks. The effort they devote to these tasks is their sacrifice – the benefits of collective endeavors their reward. However, all else constant, the more we demand

of people, the less freedom they have and freedom is principal among the products that democratic societies can produce. It is imperative therefore to join the contemporary emphasis on well-informed citizens with realistic evaluations of the sacrifices we are asking individuals to make. The burden of civic competence judges is to minimize the burden on individuals whenever possible. The key step to this goal is making her theory of relationship between individual tasks and societal goals transparent.

## **Conclusion**

Almost all people who want to assess or improve political competence work with limited resources. If we believe it important for such activities to succeed, then it is also important for such people to direct their resources to the constructive purposes. Endeavors that are likely to fail should be avoided, as should endeavors whose social value is difficult or impossible to discern.

While many efforts to increase civic competence are well intentioned, failed attempts have serious consequences. In addition to the social costs that come from propagating extant civic incompetence, society pays a cost when entities capable of providing valuable public goods induce well-meaning individuals and foundations to invest in schemes *whose failure and inefficiency are anticipatable*. When scholars and advocates, however admirable their goals, induce others to invest their time and energy into flawed competence-generating mechanisms, they cause precious resources to be squandered or, at best, used inefficiently. It is important, therefore, to understand when and how proposals to enhance civic competence can have the effects that advocates claim.

One way in which efforts to increase civic competence can be more effective and efficient is to base them on measures of civic competence that correspond to socially valuable outcomes. To take such a step requires greater attention to tasks, the relationship between the ability to accomplish a task and the kinds of questions people can be asked and the relationship between the ability to perform a particular task and collective outcomes of high social value. Such efforts will clarify the kinds of information that people need to fulfill their civic obligations.

An additional normative benefit of such moves is greater freedom at little or no expense to society. Present practices that are based on the notion that citizens can be competent only if they know a wide range of political minutiae upon which they can never act provide no benefit to society but can impose great costs. On society they impose the costs associated with investing ineffective civic education programs. On individuals they impose the psychic cost of inadequacy and the social cost of withdrawal when people falsely believe that they have nothing to contribute to civic life because they are constantly comparing themselves to the unrealistic icon of the perfectly informed citizen.

A person's contribution to society depends on their ability to perform certain tasks competently. Unless competent performance requires that the task be performed in a particular way, society does not benefit from attempts to regulate how people approach the task. If one person achieves competence in ways that are foreign or unfamiliar to another, and if the unfamiliar means of performing the task does not hurt anyone else, then the person in question should be free to choose the means by which they contribute. The person should not have to alter his practices, or privilege certain facts in his decision-making, because would-be judges of civic competence who have not thought through the consequences of their own edicts do not like them. Unless would-be judges of civic competence can offer a transparent, credible, and replicable explanation of why a particular set of facts are necessary for a particular set of socially valuable outcomes, they should remain humble when offering proscriptions for others.

My approach can also limit the extent to which some people imposing their narrow worldviews on others in ways that provides no benefit to the individual and is costly to society is confounded with the normatively desirable goal of increasing civic competence. In politics, I find, increasing the citizenry's competence and making them learn facts that are important to elites are rarely one in the same.

The book's other theoretical chapters focus on the dynamics of persuasion and learning in political contexts and on applying these ideas to help the many citizens and groups who want to

help key target audiences be more effective members of their democratic communities. While such theories can be built upon a much more cursory conceptualization of political competence, the practical relevance of these ideas (i.e., our ability to apply the theoretical insights to real cases) requires a comprehensive understanding of how to measure competence in particular situations. In so doing, I also hope to help scholars and practitioners avoid common mistakes of the past that resulted from basing efforts on incorrect notions of the correspondence between information and choice in political contexts.

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