

When Knowledge is Futile, and When It Counts

Abstract:

This research paper tests two competing operationalizations of information effects to shed light on the impact of cross-country variations in institutional arrangements on the effect of citizens' political literacy on their behaviors and attitudes. Previous literature has argued that heuristics and cues can help uninformed citizens emulate the electoral behavior of their more informed peers (Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1994), and discussed the conditions under which this can be achieved (Boudreau, 2009). This paper shows how some familiar institutional arrangements, such as party system polarization, bicameralism, federalism, or the electoral system can act as cues for citizens' evaluations of their political system and their perception of responsiveness and accountability. Under the assumption that citizens' perceptions will align to the reality of the responsiveness and accountability of their governments in a hypothetical fully informed condition, less informed citizens are likely to have perceptions similar to those of their more informed peers to the extent that their political reality reveals itself in more readily understandable ways. I test the theory using a correlational approach to information effects as well as simulation models (Bartels, 1996; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), whereby the effect of political knowledge on the outcome of interest is estimated via multiple pathways, specified as interactions with a plurality of socio-economic variables. One of the goals of this research paper is also to illustrate the power of simulations to find substantively relevant information effects of low magnitude, which would otherwise be obscured by measurement error with the correlational approaches that constitute the norm. The analyses were all performed on the three modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, the only polities excluded from the sample are the ones lacking information on the variables of interest.