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Does Sophistication Affect Electoral Outcomes?

It is widely assumed that a representative democracy requires an enlightened citizenry in order to function properly. The competence of citizens has been studied extensively and the sociodemographic determinants of political sophistication are particularly well known. Much less is known about whether and how citizen competence affects electoral behaviour and outcomes. This article reviews the existing literature on these topics. Despite the widespread consensus that, generally speaking, citizen competence matters for electoral outcomes, the review produced a mixed result: some studies suggest that the political left would benefit from a better-informed electorate, while other studies suggest the opposite. Although the majoritarian electoral context is overrepresented in the evidence, the review shows that at the individual level, political knowledge greatly increases a person's ability to match personal preferences with the right candidate or party in an election. The article also identifies several gaps in existing knowledge, thereby suggesting future research questions.

Keywords: political knowledge, political sophistication, voting, electoral results

A WIDESPREAD SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS HOLDS THAT THE FUNCTIONING OF representative democracy requires a politically sophisticated citizenry.[1] As the much-used quote from Berelson et al. (1954: 308) puts it, the democratic citizen should show interest in politics and be well informed about it. To address this normative statement empirically, numerous studies have been devoted to examining the socioeconomic and demographic determinants of citizens' political sophistication. Middle-aged men with high education and income have typically been found to be positively related to general political knowledge[2] (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Fraile 2011; Verba et al. 1997; see also Rapeli 2013 for review).

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Recent advances have made this overall picture sharper. A growing body of evidence suggests that various types of issue-publics exist. These are groups of people who are very attentive to and knowledgeable about some aspect of politics but relatively oblivious to other aspects (Converse 1964; Henderson 2014; Hutchings 2001; Sides and Karch 2008). For example, several studies have shown that although men are generally more knowledgeable than women, the gender gap diminishes or even disappears when knowledge about issues that are closer to the life experiences of women is measured (Dolan 2011; Stolle and Gidengil 2010). A similar pattern has recently been discovered in regard to the gap between the Latino minority and the White majority in the US (Pérez 2015). Moreover, young people, who have been branded as a particularly ignorant group, are at least as knowledgeable about the European Union as older age cohorts (Rapeli 2014). The conventional measures of general political knowledge therefore seem to suffer from a certain degree of bias that underestimates the sophistication of certain sociodemographic groups. When digging a little deeper, well-educated and well-to-do middle-aged males no longer appear to be the undisputed champions of political knowledge. In addition to mapping out the sociodemographic landscape of political knowledge, scholarship has found many links between knowledge and political opinions.

While the individual determinants of political behaviour and attitudes provide valuable insight into how representative democracy functions, representative democracy ultimately rests on election results. This raises the crucial question of whether the public's political sophistication also affects electoral behaviour and outcomes. If it does not, the meaningfulness of the entire research field is greatly reduced.

To better understand the significance of citizen competence for democracy, scholars have increasingly begun to shift their focus from studying the socioeconomic predictors of political knowledge to studying its electoral consequences. This article is a research inventory and critical examination of studies which have examined whether and how electoral behaviour and election results look different depending on what people know about politics. It seeks to answer three closely related questions:

1. Would citizens be able to cast votes which better correspond with their personal preferences if they were more knowledgeable about politics?

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2. Which political parties and candidates, if any, would benefit if citizens were able to cast more informed votes?
3. Would changes in vote choices which are attributable to increased knowledge levels lead to dramatically different electoral results?

The first question addresses the importance of increased information for the quality of vote choice. The second question examines the possible direction of change in electoral results due to an increase in information levels; the third question examines whether that change would be substantial enough to affect the outcome of the democratic process. By providing answers to these questions, this article presents the current state of knowledge concerning the significance of political knowledge for elections.

ENLIGHTENMENT OR LOW-INFORMATION RATIONALITY?

Although scholars acknowledge that some degree of sophistication is needed for political action, there is no scholarly consensus in regard to how much. The true significance of political sophistication among democratic publics is a question that divides the researchers who study it. Althaus (2006) has contended that the call for an enlightened public has in fact resulted from a careless reading of classic democratic theorists. According to his persuasive account, democratic theory does not make nearly as stringent demands about citizen competence as depicted by the modern empirical literature on the topic.

Even if the theoretical foundations were off the mark, empirical questions about citizen competence remain. Referring to survey findings, one group of scholars has typically painted a very pessimistic picture of citizen competence, while others have offered various reasons explaining why this is *not* a problem. Perhaps the most influential, or at least the most debated, argument relies on the 'low-information rationality' principle. Developed most notably by Popkin (1991) and Lupia and MacCubbins (1998; see also Erikson 2007), proponents of this view argue that although survey measures make them look ignorant, citizens skilfully and efficiently utilize various shortcut techniques to make sense of politics and to arrive at decisions of the same quality they would have, had they been more politically knowledgeable. While citizens undoubtedly make use of

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various shortcuts, such as party identification, empirical accounts provide little support for the idea that low-information rationality makes people equally informed (but see Lupia 1994). Arnold (2012: 797) has argued that the model only tends to get support in laboratory experiments which are designed to model US presidential elections. Restricted to a specific context which is by no means representative of other electoral contexts, such experiments are unable to produce generalizable results. The problem is that the least knowledgeable people, who are in most need of information shortcuts, are also the least able to use them effectively (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). A recent study by Dusso (2015: 59) concludes that 'high knowledge voters do not need cues at all, while the stronger low-information voters identify with a party, the more likely they are to vote incorrectly'. According to Dusso, party identification therefore has the opposite impact on the quality of voting among the low-sophistication stratum, as it reduces their ability to find the right candidate.

Another account relies on the Condorcet jury theorem. It claims that although individuals may not live up to the expectations, an electorate as a whole nevertheless has stable preferences which it effectively communicates through elections because sub-optimal choices cancel each other out in a large crowd (Page and Shapiro 1992). But research does not convincingly support the idea that aggregation of opinion miraculously saves democracy from ignorance. The problem is that there is systematic variance in public opinion and electoral behaviour which is related to citizen competence. Certain types of individuals and groups are less knowledgeable than others and they also participate in different ways than more knowledgeable people. Sturgis (2003) concludes that while the effects of knowledge differences might cancel out each other in many instances, in at least as many other cases they do not; the assumed self-correcting mechanism of public opinion is neither predictable nor reliable.

A third set of studies has criticized the survey measures which have produced the image of an ignorant public. Many scholars have argued against the use of questions that measure encyclopedic knowledge about politics, such as the names of key office-holders (e.g. Lupia 2006: 219; Norris 2000: 227–8). According to critics, such questions bear little significance to actual political behaviour and fail to reveal the range of knowledge people actually might have about politics. The survey method itself also seems to depress knowledge scores. Prior and Lupia (2008) have shown experimentally that

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providing a monetary incentive to make a real effort to answer questions correctly raises the number of correct responses up to 24 per cent. The most recent critique by Prior (2014) suggests that in addition to the verbally expressed knowledge measured in surveys, we should also measure visual political knowledge. Most of the political information citizens nowadays receive is in visual format, and the human memory is very effective in storing things visually. A related possibility suggests that political preferences that underlie vote choices are based on a continuous process of online processing (e.g. Lodge et al. 1989; Zaller 1992): new information becomes incorporated into the existing stock of information. Although many pieces of information thereby may affect political attitudes and behaviour, they may not be retrievable from memory. Due to these several possibilities, survey measures are likely to fail to capture the entire breadth of knowledge that citizens actually possess.

Despite these serious methodological concerns, knowledge seems to be related to attitudes and behaviours that are important for the functioning of democracy. Politically knowledgeable individuals are particularly supportive of a representative conception of democracy which emphasizes voting as the primary means of political action (Bengtsson and Christensen 2016). Summarizing previous research, Visser et al. (2008: 133) conclude that 'a good deal of evidence suggests that people who possess a large store of political knowledge are better able to recognize links between particular policies and their own material interests or other core predispositions, and they are better able to identify political candidates who are likely to share their views and work to enact laws that they support'. They refer to the body of literature which has found, for example, that the opinions of knowledgeable people are better attuned to their preferences or ideology (Bennett 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Federico and Hunt 2013; Zaller 1992) and that knowledgeable people hold more stable opinions (Feldman 1989; Sciarini and Kriesi 2003). These individual-level findings seem to have collective consequences. In his seminal study, Althaus (1998) showed that the public's policy preferences would be different approximately 20 per cent of the time if the public was fully informed about politics. Although policy preferences would therefore remain unaffected by knowledge gains in most cases, Althaus considers the distortions caused by public ignorance to be significant. Gilens (2001) found that policy-specific knowledge considerably affects citizens' political

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decisions and that gaps in knowledge cause serious distortions in collective preferences.

To summarize, the evidence suggests that political sophistication affects the democratic process by influencing opinion formation. The formal expression of opinions in a democracy occurs through elections, and it is therefore arguably in elections that we must look for the true significance of citizen competence for democracy.

SOPHISTICATION AND ELECTIONS

It is commonly understood that the democratic citizen needs to be informed about politics in order to be able to cast a meaningful vote (see e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 14; Downs 1957: 215; Weissberg 1974: 71). Although it is unclear precisely how much information is enough for an informed vote in any given institutional setting, it is at least implicitly assumed that, generally speaking, more information leads to better vote choice and therefore to better government responsiveness to citizen preferences.

This attractive reasoning has produced a set of studies which originate from the pioneering work by Lau and Redlawsk (1997). They developed the concept and measurement of 'correct voting' in order to analyse the extent to which citizens are able to vote according to their own preferences. It builds on the directional theory of issue voting by Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989), which assumes that people's vote choices are based on preferences along a (left–right) continuum which corresponds to the positions of candidates who stand for election. By measuring how well people can match themselves with candidates on a preference continuum – and vote for the most suitable candidate – Lau and Redlawsk provided a metric that has inspired many other scholars. They do not, however, claim to say anything about how 'good' a vote is in terms of the interests of the society. Instead, they define the goodness of a vote as being 'based on the values and beliefs of the individual voter' and 'that [it] is the same as the choice which would have been made under conditions of full information. Ideally, this determination can best be made subjectively, by the voter, on an individual basis' (Lau and Redlawsk 1997: 586). Defined in this manner, the correctness of a vote ultimately rests on the subjective judgement of the voter. The authors also measured correct voting based on expert judgements of

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the actual positions of parties/candidates on issues. The two measures correlated strongly, but given that the first measure requires an experimental design, the second one has been more widely used in subsequent literature which has relied on survey data. Thus, correct voting has typically been operationalized either as a measure of whether a person votes for the option that best matches personal preferences or as a function of party identification and satisfaction with politicians' performances. In this literature, political knowledge has been employed as a predictor of correct voting.

Another set of studies that are of interest to the research questions has addressed sophistication in terms of how it affects actual election results. This literature is also dominated by a method developed in the US during the mid-1990s. In what quickly became a landmark study in the field, Bartels (1996) undertook the task of examining what the electoral consequences (if any) would be if voters in US presidential elections had more political knowledge. He created a counterfactual method where a hypothetical fully informed electorate is created from survey data. Although admittedly artificial in many ways, the method allows the researcher to compare reported voting behaviour with simulated 'fully informed' voting behaviour. The Bartels method has been used in practically all studies examining the impact of sophistication on electoral outcomes since 1996, which offers comparability across studies.

The following section reviews studies published since the study by Bartels in 1996 which marks the starting point of the recent wave of empirical analyses concerning the electoral consequences of citizen competence.[3] Attempting to evaluate the current state of the discipline, the analysis is restricted to studies that focus explicitly on the consequences of political knowledge on the quality of vote choice and election results. The dependent variable in the reviewed studies is either a measure of correct voting or an election result, and all studies include a measure of political sophistication as an independent variable.

ANALYSIS

The body of literature to be reviewed was searched for in two complementing ways. First, following the example of Smets and Van Ham (2013), 12 leading political science journals that regularly publish studies on political knowledge were scrutinized.[4]

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Second, the literature reviews and references in the articles found in these journals were searched for more studies. The resulting 32 studies represent the most significant contributions to this particular research agenda from the past 20 years. Because the analysis only includes studies that have undergone rigorous peer review in prominent journals, some commendable conference papers, for instance, fall outside the scope.[5]

The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The tables report the type of data and method the studies have used, and the countries included in the analyses. They also report what elections the studies cover, what knowledge indicator has been used and what the main findings of each study are. A reported finding means that the study in question has found a statistically significant (at 0.05 level or more significant) relationship between the examined variables. The column marked 'DV' reports the dependent variable. Let us begin with Table 1, which primarily answers the first research question: Would voters be better able to cast informed votes if they were more knowledgeable about politics?

The answer to the question of whether voters would be able to cast better quality votes if they were more knowledgeable about politics is a cautious 'yes'. Taken as a whole, the analysed studies much more often than not find that sophistication increases voting according to a person's preferences. The reviewed studies are, however, dominated by the US and therefore by a majoritarian electoral context with only a very few competitive parties. Apart from the comparative study by Lau et al. (2014), proportional, multiparty systems are largely absent among the reviewed studies. Considering the finding by Roy (2011) that sophistication matters even more when the electoral setting is complicated, the lack of studies from more complex electoral environments is troubling. In terms of methods, data, key variables and election coverage the findings seem more robust and comparable. Most studies rely on national election studies with similar political knowledge items and measures for policy preferences and voting behaviour.

While the other studies examine voting in parliamentary or presidential elections, three recent studies from Switzerland (Lanz and Nai 2014; Milic 2012; Nai 2015) provide unique evidence of correct voting in direct legislation ballots. They find that sophistication also increases the likelihood of correct voting in the context of choosing between policy proposals. The Swiss studies show that the quality of direct democracy is also enhanced if the citizenry is informed.

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Table 1

Consequences of Political Knowledge on Vote Choice

Study	*Country*	*Data/method*	*Knowledge indicator(s)*	*DV*	*Election(s)*	*Conclusions*
Lupia (1994)	US	Exit poll	Election-specific knowledge	Vote choice	Car insurance reform	The poorly informed were able to emulate the behaviour of the well informed
Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996)	US	ANES 1984–92	General political knowledge	Issue-consistent vote	PRES 1984–92	Sophistication increases vote choices consistent with personal preferences
Lau and Redlawsk (1997)	US	Experimental design	Information about candidate	Correct vote	Simulated PRES 1996	Gains in information lead to better candidate choice, i.e. more frequent correct voting
Andersen et al. (2002)	UK	British Election Panel Study 1997–2001	Knowledge of parties' policy positions	Party choice	PARL 2001	Knowledge increases ability to match preference to corresponding party
Heath et al. (2003)	UK	British Election Study 1997	General political knowledge, knowledge of parties' policy positions	Correct vote[a]	PARL 1997	Knowledge increases ability to match preference to corresponding party
Baum and Jamison (2006)	US	ANES[b] 2000	Political awareness	Consistent voting[c]	PRES 2000	Sophistication has no direct impact on consistent voting
Lau et al. (2008)	US	ANES 1988–2004	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES 1988–2004	Political knowledge increases the probability of a correct vote by up to 20%
Richey (2008)	US	ANES 2000	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES 2000	Political knowledge does not increase correct voting, but (perceived) sophistication of one's social network does
Weisberg and Nawara (2010)	US	ANES 2000	General political knowledge, education, levels of conceptualization	Candidate choice	PRES 2000	Knowledge decreases probability of voting for the Republican candidate (Bush)
Roy (2011)	US, CA, AS, NZ, UK	National election studies	General political knowledge	Vote incumbent or not	PARL (n = 21, 1988–2005)	Knowledge matters more when electoral setting is complicated
Ryan (2011)	US	Experimental design	General political knowledge	Correct vote	Simulated election	Information from social networks is useful for independents, but not for partisans. For knowledgeable individuals, social networks may lead to less correct voting
Milic (2012)	CH	VOX survey data 2009	Policy-specific knowledge	Correct vote	DLB[d] 2009	Sophistication increases the probability of correct voting in a direct legislation ballot
Sokhey and McClurg (2012)	US	ANES 2000	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES 2000	Political knowledge does not increase correct voting
Lau (2013)	US	Six-wave online survey	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES Pri 2008	Political knowledge increases the probability of a correct vote by 7%

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Table 1: (*Continued*)

Study	*Country*	*Data/method*	*Knowledge indicator(s)*	*DV*	*Election(s)*	*Conclusions*
Bergbower (2014)	US	1990, 1992 Senate election studies	General political knowledge	Correct vote	SEN 1990, 1992	Sophistication increases correct voting, along with campaign intensity. Correct voting is less prevalent in senate than in presidential elections
Lanz and Nai (2014)	CH	VOX survey data 1999–2005	Policy-specific knowledge	Consistent voting	DLB 1999–2005[e]	Sophistication increases the probability of consistent voting in direct legislation ballots
Lau et al. (2014)	32 countries	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems	General political knowledge, education	Correct vote	PARL/PRES, 1996–2006	Sophistication increases the probability of a correct vote by 4%
Bergbower et al. (2015)	US	ANES 2000–2008	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES 2000–8	Sophistication increases correct voting. Imbalanced campaign context may decrease correct voting
Dusso (2015)	US	Online survey	General political knowledge	Correct vote	PRES 2012	Political knowledge increases the probability of a correct vote
Nai (2015)	CH	VOX survey data 1999–2005	Composite variable including policy-specific knowledge	Correct vote	DLB 1999–2005[f]	Sophistication increases the probability of correct voting in direct legislation ballots

Notes: [a] Defined simply through one-dimensional policy positions.
[b] ANES = American National Election Studies.
[c] Same as correct voting, although authors use the term consistent voting.
[d] DLB = for direct legislation ballot.
[e] In total 51 ballots during this period.
[f] In total 75 ballots during this period.

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Table 2
Consequences of Political Knowledge on Electoral Results

Study	*Country*	*Data/method*	*Knowledge variable(s)*	*DV(s)*	*Election(s)*	*Conclusions*
Bartels (1996)	US	ANES 1972–92	Interviewer assessment	Party choice	PRES 1972–92	Democratic candidates benefit 2 percentage points and incumbent candidates 5 percentage points from low knowledge
Althaus (2001)	US	ANES 1988–98	General political knowledge	Party choice, turnout	PARL 1988–98	(1) Democrats benefit up to 8 percentage points from low knowledge in House elections (2) Republicans benefit up to 11 percentage points in Senate elections (3) Turnout in a fully informed electorate 30 percentage points higher
Oscarsson (2007)	SE	Swedish National Election Studies 1985–2002/Fully informed simulation	General political knowledge	Party choice	PARL 1985–2002	(1) Fully informed electorates would have on average increased right-wing voting by 2.1 percentage points (2) For some elections, these changes would have led to a different government coalition
Toká and Popescu (2007)	RO, MD	Survey data from Romania and Moldova	General political knowledge	Party choice	PARL 2004 RO, PARL 2005 MD	Increased information would only lead to negligible changes in electoral outcomes
Toká (2008)	37 countries	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems/Fully informed simulation	Knowledge of party locations on left–right dimension	Party choice, quality of governance	PARL 1996–2006[a]	Fully informed electoral choices lead to better quality of governance when effects are measured over multiple elections
Blais et al. (2009)	CA	Canadian Election Studies 1988–2006/Well-informed simulation	General political knowledge, election-specific information	Party choice	PARL 1988–2006	(1) Liberals benefit from low knowledge (2) Low-information voters choose the most visible option
Hansen (2009)	DK	Danish Election Studies 1971, 2005/Fully informed simulation	General political knowledge	Party choice	PARL 1971, 2005	(1) Social democrats benefit from low knowledge (2) Fully informed elections would have changed government composition
Bhatti (2010)	DK, SE, FI	European Election Studies/Fully informed simulation	Knowledge of party locations on left–right dimension	Party choice, turnout	EP 2004	(1) 30 percentage points higher turnout when electorate is fully informed (2) Social democrats benefit very slightly from low knowledge

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Table 2: (*Continued*)

Study	*Country*	*Data/method*	*Knowledge variable(s)*	*DV(s)*	*Election(s)*	*Conclusions*
Dow (2011)	US	ANES	General political knowledge		PRES 1992–2004	Due to increased turnout, democratic candidate would have benefited substantially in 1992 and 2004
Arnold (2012)	27 countries	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems/Fully informed simulation	Knowledge of party locations on left–right dimension	Party choice	PARL 2001–5	(1) Between 27% and 82% of voters would have switched vote if they had been better informed (2) Voters from low socioeconomic strata were more likely to switch (3) Switching between ideological blocs varies between countries
Oscarsson and Holmberg (2013)	SE	Swedish National Election Studies	General political knowledge	Party choice	PARL 1985–2010	(1) Fully informed electorate would have resulted in almost 10% net decrease in votes for Social Democrats and 7% for the Moderate Party
Fowler and Margolis (2014)	US	Experimental design	General political knowledge + policy-specific knowledge	Attitudes towards parties	-	Republicans benefit from low knowledge

Note: [a] The time frame is for the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data. For some countries, elections for which individual turnout is measured may extend further back than 1996.

When the general pattern is fairly uniform, the details can be revealing. Several studies have examined correct voting in the 2000 US presidential elections with the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2000 data – but reached different conclusions: Baum and Jamison (2006), Richey (2008) and Sokhey and McClurg (2012) did not find that sophistication increases correct voting, while Bergbower et al. (2015) did. Baum and Jamison created a political awareness index from several variables, political knowledge among them. However, it seems that the potential impact of knowledge on voting disappears in this composite variable. Richey and Sokhey and McClurg both include a measure of the self-assessed sophistication of one's social network, Bergbower et al. do not. It seems that including the network sophistication variable in the equation overrules the impact of political knowledge. This is possibly symptomatic of an endogeneity problem: a person's own level of knowledgeability is probably related to that of one's social network and – at least in the 2000 ANES data – the latter has more statistical power than the former in explaining correct voting. Richey speculates that the statistical insignificance of political knowledge is due to the presence of education in the model, which is similarly insignificant. This explanation does not seem particularly likely since Sokhey and McClurg also include the same variables and find education to be statistically significant. In addition to the possible confounding effect of network sophistication, it seems possible that minuscule differences in the coding and operationalization of closely related variables can lead to slightly different results even when using the same data. Given these uncertainties, it is currently very difficult to draw sound conclusions about the impact of network sophistication on correct voting. It is to be hoped that future contributions to this particular agenda will try to disentangle this confusing set of interrelated factors.

Excluding these perplexing cases, which are potentially quite problematic analytically, the existing research overwhelmingly suggests that sophistication helps people vote according to their personal wishes and attitudes. Table 2 provides answers to the two remaining research questions: who benefits from increased sophistication, and would that sophistication cause substantial shifts in political power?

There is more variation in terms of national and electoral contexts among these 12 studies than among those in Table 1. Party choice, which is used to calculate aggregate election results, is the most

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typical dependent variable. There are two exceptions. Fowler and Margolis (2014), who unlike the other studies rely on experimental data, use party evaluations as the dependent variable.[6] Toká (2008) also uses quality of governance as a dependent variable in addition to party choice to model the effects of information on the democratic output. Although most studies examine knowledge effects in parliamentary elections, Bartels (1996) studies presidential elections and Bhatti (2010) elections to the European Parliament. The time span, the years from 1971 to 2006, is extensive.

The underlying hypothesis, explicitly stated by Arnold (2012) and Fowler and Margolis (2014), is that increased information would benefit parties and candidates on the political left, for which the poorly informed and socially disadvantaged segments constitute a 'natural constituency'. Using the counterfactual method for simulating fully informed electoral behaviour, the existing research offers little support for the natural constituency hypothesis. In fact, the political right would more often benefit from higher voter sophistication. This holds across different countries and political systems which are relatively well represented among the studies. Findings from the majoritarian systems in the US and Canada and from the proportional, multiparty systems of Scandinavia both suggest that right-wing parties would often gain several percentage points in votes if electorates were more informed about politics. In many, but not all, cases the vote shifts would also have led to government formations different to those that actually materialized.

There are, however, enough exceptions to confuse this overall pattern. Interestingly, one study that contradicts this finding is also the only study to use experimental rather than survey data. According to Fowler and Margolis, knowledge increases would lead the low socioeconomic strata to better identify the (US) Democratic Party as the defender of their interests. Dow (2011) argues that the Democratic presidential candidate would have received substantially more votes in the 1992 and 2004 elections because turnout would have been so much higher in a fully informed electorate. Offering much-needed comparative analysis of information effects in different types of political systems, Arnold (2012) finds several instances where the left would gain from increased sophistication. According to his analysis, the net increases of leftist voting were considerable (>10 per cent) in Brazil, France, Finland, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Taiwan and the UK. There were, however,

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significant net losses in almost as many countries: Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, New Zealand, Poland and Sweden. As Arnold (2012: 810) also concludes, the pattern is inconsistent and there is no clear reason why the countries differ from each other. The answer of who would benefit if popular knowledge levels were higher is therefore mixed. While research suggests that someone would in most cases benefit, and that it would be the political right slightly more often, no general rule of thumb can be established based on existing knowledge.

Additionally, Toká and Popescu (2007) make an interesting contribution by analysing two newly democratized nations, Romania and Moldova. As the authors explain, informational shortcuts through widely familiar political stances of parties and politicians are not as readily available to voters in new democracies as they are in old democracies. While this could supposedly open up the possibility of larger information effects in elections, Toká and Popescu do not find the effects of increased sophistication on election results to be particularly convincing.

The answer to the third and final question concerning the extent of change in electoral results due to information gains among voters is similarly mixed. Moreover, only a handful of studies provide an assessment of this crucial question. Although Arnold (2012) does not explicitly calculate the real-life consequences, the magnitude of vote switching in his findings – which varies between 27 and 82 per cent of voters in the analysed countries – is so large that fully informed elections would most likely have produced different governments in many, if not most, cases. Hansen (2009) and Oscarsson (2007) conclude that for Denmark and Sweden, respectively, the effects of fully informed voting would in some elections have resulted in other government coalitions than the ones they actually produced. For the US the effects are more modest, which suggests that information effects may be more significant in multiparty contexts with less clear lines of political responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the majority of existing research, sophistication increases the ability to cast a vote which agrees with one's political attitudes. With a good amount of hesitation, it can be concluded that

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the political right, rather than the left, would slightly benefit from a more sophisticated electorate. In some cases, the votes from more sophisticated voters would have resulted in a different government or president, but the available evidence does not suggest major electoral shifts would routinely occur due to increased sophistication. There is, however, great diversity between countries and elections.

These conclusions come with several important restrictions. What we know about people's ability to vote correctly depends entirely on the assumption that people make a directional, left–right dimensional calculation when they decide how to vote – and that the candidates can also be positioned along the same dimension. Recent advances from other fields cause some discomfort with this approach. There is some degree of consensus from various countries that the left–right dimension is now accompanied by another, cross-cutting dimension, often termed the cultural dimension (e.g. Mattila and Raunio 2006, 2012; Thomassen 2012; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). This has profound consequences for the formation of voter preferences and party positions and makes determining 'a correct vote' a good deal more complicated. Moreover, the correct voting literature is almost invariably restricted to analyses from the US and the UK, which are not representative of all political systems. Both are examples of majoritarian electoral systems, with very few effective parties, sharing many features common to the Anglo-American (political) culture.

The only comparative study which breaks this pattern shows that voters are better able to cast informed votes in political systems that are simple to understand – systems with clear lines of government responsibility and only a few, ideologically distinct, parties competing for power. Although being knowledgeable increases the probability of a correct vote across all systems, it is still unclear how knowledge interacts with system-level differences to predict correct voting – that is, whether knowledge is a stronger individual-level predictor of correct voting in systems that are complicated, as would seem intuitive (see also Gordon and Segura 1997). The impact of knowledge on correct voting under different systemic circumstances can thus be identified as a gap to be filled by future research.

Contrary to what might have been expected, evidence from both majoritarian and proportional electoral systems and various types of elections suggests that parties of the political right would at least as often as the political left benefit from a better-informed electorate. The unified front is broken by two studies. Unlike all others, Fowler

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and Margolis (2014) do not rely on the statistical imputation of a 'fully informed electorate' from survey data. Their experimental evidence suggests precisely the opposite, namely that information gains would benefit the political left. Arnold's (2012) cross-national study also indicates slightly higher benefits of information gains for the political left. There is, thus, an obvious conflict, which calls for more attention. If the results are consistently contradictory depending on the method that is being used, it seems obvious that the choice of method is driving the results.

Moreover, the counterfactual method itself, on which this body of research almost exclusively relies, has been questioned. In their persuasive study, King and Zeng (2007), argue that counterfactual analyses tend to extend the limits of the empirical data being used to a point where the results can no longer be trusted. Such analyses rely on cross-sectional survey data, which causes much concern among scholars. Levendusky (2011) points out that panel data would be optimal for examinations of information effects on voting. According to Levendusky, the analyses such as those reviewed in this study suffer from serious omitted variable bias which can at least partly be dealt with through the use of matching techniques. His analysis showed substantially smaller information effects on elections when matching instead of statistical imputation was used. In similar fashion, Pierce (2015) has suggested that the driver behind what has been interpreted as information effects is actually psychological differences between high- and low-information individuals. Casting further doubt over the use of cross-sectional survey data, Fowler and Margolis (2014) make the simple yet powerful point that it is hardly surprising that the behaviour of people on the left often shows more change due to increased information, because they tend to come from those sections of society where political knowledge is lower. Consequently, in their view, experimental research can more reliably isolate the true impact of information despite suffering from the ever-present problems of external validity (Fowler and Margolis 2014: 109). MacGregor (2013) adds another potential worry. His analysis with Canadian data shows that rates of correct voting are much lower when the correctness of a vote is calculated from parties' policy positions using the Comparative Manifestos Project data instead of relying only on survey data or expert opinion. Although he does not control for the impact of sophistication for the estimates of correct voting, MacGregor's results suggest that alternative measures of

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correct voting may lead to very different findings. The case against the nearly total reliance on cross-sectional survey evidence for understanding information effects is quite compelling. In order to offer a counterweight to the current dominance of observational studies, it is to be hoped that future research will produce more experimental research.

The studies concerning information effects on aggregate election results also suffer from an analytical weakness. They are based on the behaviour of hypothetical 'fully informed electorates'; that is, on counterfactual analysis where all voters are made equally, fully informed. But increased information levels could affect voters differently, depending on: (1) how informed they were to begin with; and (2) how strong partisan beliefs they hold. Added information would presumably be more valuable and helpful to people who know very little, while largely redundant to people who already know a lot. Consequently, instead of bringing everyone up to a 'fully informed' state, it could be useful to assess information effects if everyone was made more knowledgeable by an equal amount (see also Toká and Popescu 2007). This could greatly enhance our understanding, because there is reason to believe that different types of people are affected differently by increased information (as Pierce and Levendusky have also suggested). The literature on motivated reasoning (see e.g. Hartman and Newmark 2012; Kunda 1990), for instance, suggests that strong partisan beliefs make voters immune to added information. If this is the case, future studies on information effects should pay much more attention to the strength of partisanship as an explanatory variable which conditions the impact of information on electoral behaviour.

All things considered, the review nevertheless brings an encouraging message to students of citizen competence. The existing literature predominantly shows that the political sophistication of citizens affects the electoral behaviour of individuals as well as the aggregated outcomes of elections. But it is yet another question whether different, counterfactual electoral results would change democratic societies through substantially different policy outputs and the distribution of resources. Toká (2008) is the only study that makes an effort to go beyond examining information effects on elections and to see whether the quality of government output is affected by fully informed electoral choices. His conclusion is tentatively positive. According to Toká, a single election does not seem to have much of

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an effect on the quality of democratic governance, but there is an impact over multiple elections. Findings from the field of health policy offer another perspective and more conclusive support. In an extensive analysis of OECD countries over a 50-year period, Navarro et al. (2006) found that leftist (or 'social democratic' as the authors call them) parties adopted more redistributive policies than their rightist counterparts, and that the policy impacts led to diminished social and health-related inequalities. The findings by Navarro et al. strongly suggest that, at least in terms of social spending and public health, it matters who wins elections.

Considering the reviewed literature, we should follow Toká (2008) and devote more future research to determine the impact of citizen competence on policy output and the quality of democratic governance. This strategy would extend the current research agenda on correct voting to assessing the concrete consequences of more informed voting on democracy. Secondly, much more scholarly attention is needed in addressing methodological issues. Several scholars have expressed serious doubts over the use of cross-sectional survey data and counterfactual analysis and instead called for more experimental research in order to get more reliable estimates of the impact of information, without obfuscation from other factors, on voting behaviour.

In addition to methodological concerns, there are also unexplored topics which deserve attention. As already mentioned, more comparative work is needed to cover existing variation in political institutions and different types of elections. What is also lacking is an understanding of whether the quality of voting, measured as a function of citizen competence, has changed over time. Although political ideologies, party systems and electoral contexts are fairly stable, they are nevertheless not static, and when they change, the difficulty of casting an informed vote also changes. Unfortunately, existing literature offers no insight into temporal fluctuations in correct voting, for example. Despite the methodological issues, future research has a solid ground to build on to attempt to resolve these and other themes which have thus far remained outside scholarly focus.

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NOTES

[1] Although being politically knowledgeable is often conceptually distinguished from being sophisticated, the two are often used interchangeably, also in this study. For exact definitions, see Rapeli (2013: 16).

[2] By 'general political knowledge' I mean knowledge that is typically measured in e.g. post-election surveys, which, instead of being policy- or domain-specific, measure knowledge of institutions and processes and/or people and parties. See also Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 14).

[3] Since Lau and Redlawsk published their similarly influential study about correct voting only one year later, the time frame seems particularly appropriate. Lupia (1994) was published before 1996, but is included because of its importance for the research field.

[4] The journals are *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Electoral Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *Political Behavior*, *Political Studies*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *The Journal of Politics* and *International Political Science Review*. Articles published early online by 15 September 2015 were also included.

[5] Most notably Sekhon (2004).

[6] Their study was nevertheless included for two reasons. Firstly, it was considered useful to present evidence based on different research designs. Secondly, the authors draw conclusions about electoral behaviour on the basis of their results.

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