An Ignorant and Easily Duped Electorate?

David O. Sears

Uninformed: Why People Seem to Know So Little about Politics and What We Can Do About It. By Arthur Lupia. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 360p. $29.95.

Unspoken Politics: Implicit Attitudes and Political Thinking. By Efrén O. Pérez. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 228p. $29.99.

Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics. By Jennifer L. Hochshild and Katherine Levine Einstein. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 248p. $21.95.

The dilemma of America's commitment to universal suffrage paired with recognition of the citizenry's limited political knowledge and capabilities has been a constant theme in both normative accounts of democracy and behavioral descriptions of how it operates in practice. The Founders worried about how much authority to give ordinary citizens, given their spotty understanding of the issues and processes involved in self-governance. H.L. Mencken, with little respect for representative democracy, famously described the electorate as "boobs." Intellectual elites often flog the electorate as acting in ignorance of readily-available scientific knowledge, as in the Scopes trial of a century ago, the fluoridation controversies of half a century ago, or today's battles over climate change. Lupia cites many polls claiming to document the ignorance of the electorate, though somewhat skeptically.

Equally common are charges that the electorate is gullible and has often been deliberately misled by disinformation campaigns carried out for political advantage. Memorable examples include the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion;* Senator Joseph P. McCarthy's charges of the many "known Communists" employed by the State Department; the leader of the John Birch Society's charge that President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy; and expensive advertising campaigns by Big Tobacco trying to persuade the public that tobacco posed no great health risks, and by Big Oil that fossil fuels posed no great immediate environmental risk to life on planet Earth. By the 1990s, charges of widespread falsehoods being propagated in politics were so common that self-appointed "fact-checkers" began to pop up in the press, trying to correct deliberate mis-characterizations of facts.

The books reviewed here address three quite different slices of the generic problem of inadvertent or strategically motivated ignorance on the part of the general public. Hochschild and Einstein present a series of case studies in which the public has either seemingly been indifferent to important information or been systematically misinformed, and they examine the consequences of both for a self-governing citizenry. Pérez's research challenges the outdated psychological theories of information processing persisting in much of political science, suggesting that factual information may not be as influential in the public's political decision-making as common sense and conventional behavioral research would suggest; attitudes that people may not even be aware of may be as, or more, powerful. Judging by the title of his book, Lupia would seem to take up the question of whether or not the general electorate is too ignorant to carry out its main responsibility (though, as will be seen, the book seems actually to be largely focused elsewhere altogether).

Hochschild and Einstein test Thomas Jefferson's proposition that knowledge of "the facts" protects the people from having their government be perverted into tyranny. They set up a 2X2 taxonomy of political issues, in which the public's correct versus incorrect factual knowledge is crossed by their acting versus not acting on that knowledge. The focus is particularly on contrasting the consequences of ignoring correct information as opposed to acting upon misinformation. They present a series of

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case studies from contemporary politics, in which either Democrats or Republicans have contributed to misinforming the public. For example, the public has ignored a flood of scientific evidence about the urgency of dealing with global warming, and in another, most refused to demand action on the charges of perjury against Bill Clinton in the Lewinsky affair. They argue that those committed to good governance might feel some frustration if the public accepts accurate information but fails to demand action, but the negative effects do not generally go much further than that.

However the main argument of the book is that these two cells of the 2X2 have asymmetrical effects. Implementation of incorrect information is probably more dangerous than ignoring correct information, since inertia ("do no harm") is likely to have fewer destructive side effects than action. Strategically-generated misinformation, however, can do great damage. A case in point is the "birther" claim that President Obama was not born in the United States. This claim divided the American public and damaged his effectiveness from the beginning of his presidency. Other cases of the dangers from the active use of incorrect information were the false charges that "Obamacare" included provisions for "death panels," and claims that Clarence Thomas would be a strong supporter of civil rights on the Supreme Court, disregarding his longstanding conservatism on such issues. In both cases partisan elites were central to the disinformation campaigns. Large numbers of people believed that death panels were included in the impossibly encyclopedic ACA, and many blacks supported Thomas' elevation, believing he would be a friend of civil rights.

Other case studies describe the dangerous effects produced by the false claims that Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction or that childhood vaccinations cause autism and should be avoided to protect children. No WMDs were ever found, and there is no scientific evidence of a link between vaccinations and autism. Yet an extremely costly and destructive war was initiated, one that seems likely to have triggered a long period of global destabilization with a focal point on the Middle East, and Iraq in particular. Reduced rates of childhood vaccination compromise herd immunity against diseases that can prove fatal to children. Ironically the anti-vaccine activists are often highly-educated liberals, proving that ignoring expert knowledge is limited neither to the poorly educated nor to the Republican "dumb party."

What is the solution? The conventional recommendation is for more research and education. One example is the Surgeon General's report on the link between tobacco and lung cancer. That had the long-term effect of greatly reducing, though far from eliminating, cancer-producing smoking. Another example is dissemination of information about the Holocaust, whose long-term effect, hopefully, has been to place international obstacles in the way of genocidal acts. Yet it is hard to forget that tobacco companies' long and lavishly-funded resistance to the Surgeon General's warnings has contributed to the early deaths of millions of smokers in the years since 1964. The failure (or inability) of Allied governments to respond effectively to the warnings coming from Jewish groups about mass genocide early in World War II failed to prevent millions of deaths in the Holocaust. That historical lesson has, however, not prevented later genocides, in Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq, and the Islamic State.

Hochschild and Epstein offer other suggestions, including maneuvering around the public, giving a nudge in surreptitious ways, shaming, or simply ignoring the actively misinformed. None of those options is without its challenges, both ethical and practical. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the problems posed by the public's sometime gullibility in the face of disinformation are impossible to prevent altogether, and may have terrible consequences. This book seems to me to therefore provide a useful corrective to others depicting a more "rational public." The common ground between those views, perhaps, is that the majority may often ultimately come around to a more reality-based position, but it may be too late, e.g., for, the many Iraqis who died in the ensuing civil war, the Jews gassed in camps, or island nations submerged by the oceans.

Pérez reports a coherent and multi-faceted series of empirical studies investigating the root causes of Americans' opposition to immigration reform, in the contemporary style of mixing survey analysis and media content analysis with experimental studies. It explicitly promotes the current psychological approaches to information processing founded on the dual-process models that have become increasingly common in cognitive, social, and political psychology.

Dual-process models, of which there are several whose differences are secondary to both Peérez's book and this essay, hinge on a distinction between "System 1" processing—automatic, often non-conscious, and affective—and "System 2" processing—more deliberate, controlled, cognitive. Affect is immediate and primary, and readily spreads to other cognitively linked objects by a process of "affect transfer" or "affect contagion." That distinction, when applied to political attitudes, is between "implicit" attitudes, as in an immediate negative affective response to a picture of a Latino laborer, and "explicit" attitudes, as in a policy position communicated to a pollster. The relationship between the two depicted by Pérez and others (though not necessarily by all) is described as "motivated reasoning," in which System 1 immediate affective responses to a political stimulus are justified by more deliberate System 2 cognitive rationalizations. Pérez takes the additional step, given his substantive focus on public opinion about immigration, of postulating "group-centrism," in

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which attitudes toward groups are especially likely to be implicated in automatic System 1 processing. The media are central players in bringing group-centric stimuli to the attention of the voters.

The empirical analysis begins with a content analysis of recent television and newspaper coverage of immigration issues. This makes a good case that coverage of "illegal" immigrants is much more common than coverage of legal immigrants, and usually with negative connotations. In reality, legal immigrants are considerably more numerous, but stories about "illegals" are more sensational and so feed the media's need for attention. This mismatch is crucial to his argument that the general public's immediate affective responses to immigration are dominated by negative feelings about illegal immigration, thereby warping public opinion in a direction favoring nativism and unfavorable to humane immigration reform.

Several studies are presented utilizing the Implicit Association Test (IAT), the most common test for implicit attitude, based on student and national samples. Hispanic immigrants draw strongly negative implicit attitudes. Explicit attitudes toward immigrants of all kinds are closely related to implicit attitudes toward Hispanic immigrants. Implicit and explicit attitudes toward Hispanic immigrants are related, but implicit attitudes have independent effects on opposition to immigration, an example of affect transfer. So the IAT captures evaluations of Hispanic immigrants that are not spoken, or easily controlled, and that are specific to Hispanic and not to other immigrants.

Further experiments show that implicit attitudes toward illegal Hispanic immigrants produce affective contagion even to other immigrant groups (e.g., Irish or Chinese legals). The argument is that non-conscious affective contagion has broadly—ramifying political effects. A caution is in order, however. Some of these effects do not reach the usual standards of statistical significance (a problem that seems to recur in political psychology experiments, perhaps because of political scientists' determination to have them as realistic as possible, unlike experiments in social psychology).

The Lupia book is an odd mixture of two things that are not so obviously connected to each other. Its main ostensible goal seems to be to argue that civic education is currently being mishandled, and to provide a guidebook for more successful civic education. The jargon is that of educational curricular plans: how can "educators" help "learners" to develop "civic competence," defined in terms of "the learner's" ability to fulfill such civic roles as jurors or voters. Each chapter is framed at the start and summarized at the end in bullet-point lists of the main "lessons" about how to successfully increase "the learner's" "competence" by supplying information that will embed knowledge in "the learner's" memory.

The style of the book is quite deliberate, slow and earnest, in the style of formal lesson plans, with writing that is often somewhat plodding and thick with educational jargon. For example, an early overview of a "legitimate plan of action" involves eight bullet points covered in 14 subsequent chapters. The "logic of competence" later focuses on how "educators . . . must provide information that is necessary or sufficient to increase valuable types of knowledge and competence" (p. 17).

The first two-thirds of the book is a lengthy presentation of such advice for educators. Capturing a learner's attention is crucial. Learners must find the information useful: "Attention is directed only to phenomena that a person recognizes as highly relevant to their wants and needs" (p. 94). The educator must therefore learn what the audience's concerns are. Educators must have credibility, which can be attained primarily by communicating the interests they have in common with the learners' interests. Learners' decisions about whether or not to pay attention to the educators reflect their cost-benefit tradeoffs. So, "the audience is the ultimate arbiter of what is relevant to them" (p. 80).

The last third of the book turns rather abruptly into a critique of the conventional treatment of the public's political information by political scientists. Most surveys measure information with a few fact-based questions. Voters don't usually do well. "Knowledge critics" therefore hold that voters must be incompetent. "*This assumption is almost always incorrect*" (emphasis original; p. 9). Research on how voters would have voted if fully informed suggests that the "knowledge critics" may set too high a threshold, because the knowledge questions often do not test for knowledge critical to the voting decision.

For example, one common information question asks for the recall of the name of the Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. But what is the benefit to the ordinary citizen of cluttering up his brain with that fact? "The personal or social benefit of having citizens memorize the justices' names is not self-evident" (p. 159). Similarly, some "knowledge critics" set as a goal having voters try to learn "all the facts" during a campaign, which is impossible and unnecessary for making a competent decision. Lupia argues, quite sensibly, that voters often make quite rational decisions just by voting for their preferred party's candidate. On the other hand, paying close attention to national politics is less rational than attending to local politics, where information is more readily accessible and fewer voters participate, so one's influence can be greater. But is information about local city council deliberations really more available than about the Congress? And would one really want citizens to pay closer attention to pothole repairs than to the Supreme Court?

Much space is devoted to a harsh critique of the ANES information items. Lupia argues that they do not measure information that is useful by the standard of a voter's

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cost-benefit analysis, because they fail to represent all the domains of information a voter might care about. Instead they are "a narrow and oddly selected slice of questions about the federal government that a small group of elites has privileged" (p. 220). Instead he advocates exhaustively enumerating the full universe of possible questions from the many domains of politics, sampling from them, and then creating scales by assigning weights to individual items. However desirable such a procedure might be in principle, to me it sounds both impractical and likely to add little value. Most political scientists simply seek a scale reflecting individual differences in attention to politics, most often as a moderator of other effects rather than as a point estimate of the electorate's knowledge in specific political domains. Little concrete evidence of the possible shortcomings of the ANES items is presented in this volume, outside of marginal improvements resulting from more permissive coding of accuracy and providing an incentive for correct answers.

The book also takes issue with "ignorance critics" who too often confuse their own political preferences with "facts" they think everyone should include in their knowledge of the world: "Many 'ignorance critics' are really about one person demanding that others privilege his values over their values" (p. 107), while others "equate difference with ignorance" (p. 122). There is surely some justification for that view. One person's vital facts may be irrelevant to another's preferences, which are based on different premises. The examples supplied often seem extreme, however, and do not address the kinds of ignorance that Hochschild and Einstein detail.

As far as I can see, the "ignorance crisis," in Lupia's view, would be better characterized as *rational* ignorance. Voters do pretty well just voting the party line. Aggregation across many partially informed individuals produces pretty rational decisions. To the extent that the voters seem poorly informed, it is because their information is being poorly measured. Messages from those who would inform the public miss the point of what the public cares about. That claim would no doubt come as quite a surprise to the political professionals who pour millions of dollars into focus groups and polling as a way to find out exactly what ordinary voters' concerns are.

All three books are fundamentally works of political psychology. But the underlying psychological assumptions could not be more different. Hochschild and Einstein implicitly utilize the psychology of cognitive consistency (or in more contemporary terms, motivated reasoning): people acquire mistaken ideas because of their values and predispositions, especially party identification. I should hasten to add that they are quite cautious about such causal claims, but that seems to be what they are talking about. Pérez quite explicitly depends on a dual-process model in which System 1 is non-conscious, immediate, and affective, while the contrasting System 2 is conscious, slow, and deliberate (Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow,* 2011; though Pérez uses the language of "implicit" and "explicit").

The psychology lying behind Lupia's book, though never spelled out explicitly, is that of rational choice. The language throughout is of "interests," "cost-benefit analyses," "tradeoffs," and "good investments." For example, to get learners' attention, educators must need to recognize that learners are making cost-benefit calculations about what to attend to. Educators' credibility depends on learners' perceptions that the two have common interests. Learners make decisions using cost-benefit analyses, minimizing the costs of accumulating information they do not really need. Learners' willingness to pay attention to educators' messages is analogous to investors' willingness to make financial investments that "will produce increased value over time relative to other investments; . . . people have incentives to compare the returns on attempting to learn any particular piece of information with the returns from other things in which they can invest time and effort" (pp. 166–7). Even when responding to information questions in sample surveys, voters are portrayed as making cost-benefit analyses about how hard to struggle for accuracy. Providing cash incentives may increase estimates of accurate knowledge (though, actually, not by very much; one experiment gave a dollar for correct answers, but only raised accuracy by an average of 11 percent). This rational choice psychology is mainly limited to System 2 processing. Most contemporary cognitive psychologists would think that an account of human information processing that excludes the pervasive automatic and affective System 1 would be both rather dated and narrowly limited, especially in a domain so charged with affective preferences as mass politics.

One caveat about Pérez's dichotomy of "implicit" and "explicit" attitudes. Implicit attitudes, especially as measured by subtle reaction time techniques as the IAT, represents only a subset of the broader category of System 1 responding. A difference of a few milliseconds between two responses in a sterile and quiet laboratory is a different animal than the full-throated roar that emerges from mass audiences listening to political rhetoric about "murderers and rapists" or "crooked Hillary." The highly affective attitudes in System 1 can be highly crystallized themselves. They do not necessarily require elaborate System 2 justifications. That is especially so in the heated politics of group-centrism around matters of illegal immigration, faith-based politics, and the racist claims of birthers and others. Much of the evidence to date about the role of implicit attitudes in voters' decisions has pitted it against explicit attitudes. As measured by techniques such as the IAT or AMP, implicit attitudes do not always compete well. That is why I would caution proponents of the more contemporary accounts of information processing embodied in dual-process models in political psychology not to

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rest their case exclusively on such measures of implicit attitudes.

Finally, the misinformation described by Hochschild and Einstein seems frequently to have a strong partisan complexion. It cannot be fully considered when taken out of the context of today's partisan polarization. While Fiorina and Abrams (2008) have shown some limits to how far polarization has penetrated into public opinion about the subtler issues of the day, there can be little question about the public polarization around the parties and presidential candidates in recent years (whatever occured in the 2016 elections, which at the time of this writing could not be anticipated). Social media and other forms of networking must be part of that story, though research has not yet caught up to technological change. As Pérez argues, that polarization is difficult to analyze without reference to the deep social and cultural cleavages today around race, ethnicity, religion, region, and urban vs. rural life. Looking back, the society described by the Columbia sociologists well over a half-century ago seems quite bucolic, by comparison, even while touching on some of the same demographic cleavages.

Reference

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