

Unequal Policy Knowledge Amongst Voters and its Impact on Representativeness

Unequal policy knowledge amongst voters can potentially result in policy outcomes that do not reflect majority public opinion. I will outline the theoretical hypotheses for why uninformed voters would result in non-representative policies, present an analysis of empirical evidence supporting the claim that increasing a respondents' political knowledge sways their opinion (which suggests that uninformed voters may not be conveying what would be their true, informed opinion), and provide studies of how California voters' political knowledge effects their opinions on ballot initiatives. Overall, political knowledge does impact one's opinion and thus uninformed voters could result in unrepresentative policy outcomes, but voters also use other cues, such as campaign arguments, to make a decision that best represents their interests.

There are several theoretical hypotheses for why uninformed voters could cause non-majoritarian policy outcomes. First, uninformed voters may be more susceptible to manipulation by the media, campaign advertisements or interest groups and thus vote in a way does that not reflect their true opinions, but rather inflates support of a policy that benefits an elite subset of the population. This manipulation would be possible because uninformed voters would not have the factual evidence to defend or refute claims. Second, uninformed voters could unintentionally select a policy or candidate that holds conflicting views or interests to their own; if this happens in unequal proportions on each side, it could lead to a policy that does not reflect true aggregate opinion. Third, uninformed voters may not understand a policy's implications, even if they do know the basic facts, and thus support a policy that does not align with their best interests. Many theorists defend the model that if each voter chooses the policy that will benefit them individually, in aggregate the chosen policy will be best for the population as a whole: however,

this theory fails if voters unknowingly choose policies that do not benefit them. Finally, uninformed voters may be more likely to simply choose to not vote, and thus the election results may be neglecting the opinions of a large subset of the population. It is difficult to analyze causality in this hypothesis (do uninformed voters choose not to vote, or do non-voters choose to remain uninformed?), but it is possible that one who does not have sufficient information will choose to abstain, and their views will not be represented at all.

Martin Gilens provides evidence that political knowledge does affect one's policy stance, and thus ignorance could result in an outcome that does not truly reflect public opinion. Gilens studies how survey respondents' knowledge of policy facts (for example, trends in unemployment rates or the size of the foreign aid budget in comparison to the federal budget) influences their opinions on these policies. Gilens finds that there is an approximately 11% difference in opinions when comparing otherwise similar voters with high or low specific policy knowledge. (Gilens 2001) When studying the effect of knowledge regarding the federal deficit on an individual's stance on taxes, Gilens found that while 74% initially opposed a tax increase, when informed about the rising deficit, that number dropped to 56%, resulting in an "effect of ignorance" of 18%. (Gilens 2001) While this data is convincing, the correlation between past trends and future policies is not always perfect; the respondent may not know which policies were the source of a positive trend, or which policies would best address a negative trend, and policy-specific facts may not be enough to fully comprehend what policy best represents their interests. However, Gilens still convincingly shows that among otherwise alike voters, policy knowledge does impact their opinions.

California's initiative process allows for study of a direct correlation between public opinion and electoral results, since votes correlate to a specific policy instead of a candidate with

several policy preferences. In “Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias,” Arthur Lupia analyzes the effect of different types of policy information (state-provided summaries of the initiatives, state-provided voter pamphlets, and the arguments provided in the campaign waged by relevant interest groups) on California voters’ decisions for complex insurance reform initiatives. Lupia finds that “respondents who possessed relatively low levels of factual knowledge about the initiatives used their knowledge of insurance industry preferences to emulate the behavior of those respondents who had relatively high levels of factual knowledge.” (Lupia 1994) On five unique propositions, there was a 0 to 3% difference in support for a proposition between voters with high or low “policy-fact” knowledge when they both were aware of insurance industry preferences, compared to a 7 to 47% difference when comparing low “policy-fact” knowledge voters who were aware or unaware of insurance industry preferences. (Lupia 1994) Though not all voters have equal information, this data suggests that “cues” from campaigns provide sufficient information to result in similar electoral outcomes to what their hypothetical fully informed (“encyclopedic knowledge”) opinions would be. Lupia suggests that:

“while scholars and pundits propose that we educate the public about politics in order to lessen the impact of uninformed votes on the responsiveness of democratic decision-making institutions, a deeper understanding . . . suggests that directing our efforts into the provision of credible and widely accessible "signals" may be a more effective and cost-efficient way to ensure the responsiveness of electoral outcomes to the electorate's preferences.” (Lupia 1994)

Lupia concludes that although voters do possess unequal policy knowledge, this does not lead to non-representative outcomes because these voters are able to ascertain information by taking cues from the campaign waged by involved parties. Similarly, other scholars argue that

“campaign activity increases the likelihood that electoral outcomes are responsive to (perhaps, otherwise badly informed) voter interests” and while the voters are still able to make thoughtful decisions based on these cues. (Bowler and Donavon 2000) Thus, an initial analysis of the California initiative process shows that the effects of unequal policy knowledge among voters is negated by other cues, and elections still result in representative outcomes.

In conclusion, evidence shows that policy knowledge does have an impact on voter opinion. Therefore, a lack of policy knowledge, especially if unequally distributed amongst socioeconomic demographics, could result in unrepresentative electoral outcomes. However, voters are able to use “cues,” such as the opinions of interest shared in campaigns, to make electoral decisions that are in line with their hypothetical “fully informed” opinions. Thus, perhaps representativeness can best be improved by providing the platforms for these interest groups to provide “cues” to uninformed voters. An example of an attempt to provide these cues is the California Voter Guide, in which voters can see the organizations that endorse different candidates and initiatives and summaries of each side’s arguments. One potential further study would be to analyze the relative impacts of these two types of information. Would voters make the same decisions if they only saw endorsements or only saw summaries? Finally, the conclusion that voters lack specific policy knowledge, but can convey their opinions by taking cues from campaign activity or interest group endorsements, brings into question the true necessity of democracy. If the opinions of interest groups or campaigns are the driving factors of public opinion, why should legislators care about individuals at all, when they could instead evaluate the relative opinions of interest groups? However, it is still important for individuals to distill the various cues and policy-specific knowledge into an opinion that best represents their views in order to ensure policies that represent us all.

SOURCES

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