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Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics

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MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI
SCOTT KEETER

Abstract The U.S. public's current knowledge about politics is compared with levels of knowledge in the 1940s and 1950s. Fourteen questions asked by Gallup on various surveys from 1945 to 1957 were included on a larger survey of political knowledge conducted by telephone in 1989 with a randomly selected sample of 610 adult U.S. residents. On 8 of the 14 items, the percentage answering correctly in 1989 was higher than in the earlier surveys (by 4–15 points). One item showed an increase of 1 percent, two were down 1 percent, and three others declined by 5 percent, 9 percent, and 10 percent. When level of education is controlled, however, levels of knowledge appear to have declined for most of the items. A reanalysis of some of the original Gallup data is used to estimate the effectiveness of schools in transmitting political information in 1989 compared with the earlier years.

An informed citizenry is an implicit requisite for any theory of democracy. However, public opinion surveys of the 1940s and 1950s consistently demonstrated the average citizen's limited knowledge concerning public affairs and the basic workings of parties, politics, and government (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1962, 1964; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). In 1962 and 1963 Erskine published four articles in *Public Opinion Quarterly* cataloging how informed the American citizenry was on a host of political and public concerns (Erskine 1962, 1963a, 1963b,

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1963c). The articles brought together national survey questions asked from 1947 through 1962.

Since the late 1950s the number and range of political knowledge questions asked on national surveys have declined precipitously. Using a national telephone survey, we have replicated several of the items reported by Erskine to document what, if any, changes have occurred in the U.S. public's political knowledge. First we summarize extant research on political knowledge, pointing out its conclusions as well as the shortcomings that result from a relative lack of current data. Next we discuss the design and validity of our survey and examine the willingness of respondents to complete a survey devoted mainly to a test of political knowledge. We then turn to the Gallup polls used in our comparisons, explaining adjustments that are necessary due to sampling bias. We follow with a comparison of marginals for 14 knowledge questions. Finally, we explore the changes in political knowledge (and lack thereof) in light of societal changes in educational achievement.

Prior Research

Is there any reason to believe that citizens should have different levels of political knowledge today as compared to 35 or 40 years ago? Such an expectation stems from societal changes that have occurred over the past 40 years. However, observers differ in their views of the impact of these changes.

On the one hand, the greater availability of public education and the concurrent rise in the average number of years of schooling achieved since the 1940s lead some to expect a more informed citizenry (Inglehart 1977). On the other hand, concerns about the quality of education have led others to suggest that mass education is failing (Bloom 1987; Hirsch 1988). Ravitch (1983) suggests that misuse of the notion of "progressive education" has made public education since 1945 much less effective than it might have been. And Janowitz (1983) argues that civic education in particular has declined since 1945.

Similar disagreements exist concerning the effects of mass communication. Some see the "information explosion" created by the electronic media as opening the door to a more sophisticated citizen (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988; Barber 1984; Toffler 1980). Yet others argue that this development has split the population into the information poor and the information rich (Bell 1973; Burnham 1978). The emergence of television as the dominant source of public information, changes in the style and structure of campaigns, the decline in party organization, the proliferation of grass roots organizations and

PACs, generational change, and so forth either have been credited for strengthening citizenship or blamed for weakening it (Boyte 1980; Inglehart 1977; Janowitz 1983; Robinson 1976; Sabato 1981, 1984, 1988).

Despite its assumed importance and the debate concerning the impact of societal changes, knowledge is the least studied aspect of citizenship (Bennett 1989; Luskin 1987). Systematic data concerning political knowledge are relatively rare. This is especially true when one is interested in studying change in levels of knowledge. The tendency to survey about opinions rather than factual information was noted by Erskine in 1963, when she wrote that the polling field's "concern about how much people know has decreased almost to the vanishing point in the last few years" (p. 133).

Of course, political knowledge questions can be found on contemporary surveys. The National Election Studies, the General Social Surveys, Gallup, Roper, and the national media polls all periodically ask such questions. The utility of these data for studying change is limited, however, since the specific knowledge asked about varies from survey to survey. In addition, few surveys ask more than two or three questions that directly measure political information.

As a result of these limitations, researchers are forced to make concessions. Most analyses are limited to a single time period (Entman 1989; Glenn 1972; Hyman and Sheatsley 1947; Kuklinski, Metlay, and Key 1982; Owen and Stewart 1987; Sigelman and Yanarella 1986; Zeigler and Haltom 1989). Longitudinal analyses must depend on the few questions that are repeated over time, on different knowledge questions in different years, and/or measures that use perception, recognition, exposure, or education as surrogates for information (Bennett 1988, 1989; Kessel 1988; Neuman 1986; Smith 1970). In addition, longitudinal studies are necessarily limited to the time points for which data exist, regardless of the theoretical arguments concerning the expectation of change over the period in question.

Despite these constraints, a consensus has emerged concerning contemporary levels of political knowledge. Studies by Neuman (1986) and Bennett (1988, 1989), the three most systematic longitudinal analyses, suggest that knowledge is at best no greater than it was 2–4 decades ago and may have even declined on some measures. Our research, using a wider range of knowledge questions, confirms these findings.

Methods and Data

We conducted a national telephone survey of 610 randomly selected adults between March 21 and May 8, 1989. The questionnaire con-

tained approximately one hundred items, 50 of which were factual questions about government and politics. Nonfactual questions included political trust and efficacy, political interest and participation, media use, party identification, ideology, opinions on issues, and demographics.

Selecting the knowledge questions was a multifaceted process. Replication of items from the Erskine articles was one criterion. A second criterion was to measure a range of substantive political knowledge, including government institutions and procedures, contemporary issues, civil rights and liberties, and current government policy. Out of the one hundred or so questions reported by Erskine, we chose 14 items for direct replication (those that covered a range of topics, that were still politically relevant, and that could be replicated over the phone). With minor exceptions, question wording was identical to that of the original. We do not claim that the questions on the survey reflect the only “facts” a citizen should know. We do think, however, that they measure several important types of political knowledge, ranging from understanding basic institutions and processes of government (e.g., knowing what is contained in the Fifth Amendment), to comprehending particular issues and policies (e.g., knowing what effect a high tariff on foreign goods might have), to keeping surveillance of the current personalities and partisan alignments in national politics (e.g., knowing the name of your current representative or which party controls the Senate).

Interviewing for the survey was conducted by a university-based survey research center using CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) and a commercially prepared random sample. Respondents within households were selected randomly by the CATI software following a household enumeration. The simple response rate was 38 percent, while the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) rate, which is adjusted for “no answer” and “busy” outcomes, was 36 percent (see App. A). Interviews averaged 23 minutes in length. The sample was weighted on gender, race, and education according to 1986 population estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau. Weighted and unweighted demographics of the sample are shown in Appendix B.¹

The low response rate raises concerns about the representativeness of the sample. The organization that conducted the survey has an average response rate of 68 percent and followed standard telephone field work practices in this study; for example, all numbers were called at least 12 times on different interviewing shifts before being aban-

1. The largest weight applied was 3.85 for black males with no high school diploma; the smallest weight was .479 for black females with some college education.

done. Conversion of refusals was attempted, although due to budget limitations, only about 60 percent of households that had initially refused were contacted a second time. Much of the nonresponse is attributable to a high rate of initial refusals, many of which occurred during the use of a stringent—and perhaps overly intrusive—process of household enumeration and respondent selection that was different from the one the organization normally used. However, nonresponse was not a result of respondent resistance to being tested on political knowledge, since the study was introduced as a survey on important issues; respondents who asked for more detail were told that the study dealt with politics and government. We recognize, however, that some individuals are averse to talking about public affairs in general, whether or not they would be tested on the subject.

Despite the low response rate, the sample appears valid, based on a number of criteria. We compared key variables from our sample with surveys by two well-known organizations, the National Election Studies (NES) of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and the 1982, 1987, and 1989 General Social Surveys of National Opinion Research Center (NORC).² The samples were nearly identical in the distribution of partisanship and very similar—with one exception—in most reported levels of political activity, including turning out to vote, reading a daily newspaper, watching network television news, and discussing politics with family and friends.³

Knowledge questions available for comparison also indicate no serious bias. Compared with the 1987 General Social Surveys (GSS) sample, our sample was a little less able to name their governor (74 percent in our sample; 78 percent in the GSS) or House member (29 percent compared with 36 percent). Compared with the 1988 NES survey, our sample was a little more knowledgeable regarding partisan control of Congress—68 percent and 55 percent of our sample said that the Democrats had a majority in the U.S. House and Senate, compared with 59 percent and 54 percent in the NES survey.

Will Respondents Cooperate with Telephone Surveys Measuring Knowledge?

Relatively few surveys—especially telephone surveys—are designed to tap knowledge. No survey we found measured political knowledge

2. A table showing the detailed comparisons may be found in App. A.

3. In our study, 44 percent reported that they follow politics "most of the time," while the 1988 NES percentage was half as large—22 percent (this figure has varied in the NES from 37 percent in 1976 to the figure of 22 percent observed in 1988). In the 1982 General Social Surveys (GSS)—the most recent GSS on which this item was asked—36 percent said they followed politics "most of the time."

as extensively as the present study. It is an axiom of the profession that surveys should avoid questions that respondents may interpret as stigmatizing: "Because the tradition of survey research emphasizes the development and maintenance of rapport with respondents, researchers are reluctant to ask factually oriented knowledge questions for fear of embarrassing interviewees. As a result, direct measurement of political knowledge is rare" (Neumann 1986, p. 15).

Considering the length of the survey and the number of factual questions, data collection went reasonably well. Once the survey was underway, 95.6 percent of respondents completed it. Of the 28 who terminated, 23 did so during the knowledge questions (which began with the twenty-sixth item). Terminations were spread throughout the questionnaire, with many coming near the end of the survey. Interviewers were asked to rate the cooperativeness of respondents; 78 percent were rated as "very cooperative," 20 percent "somewhat cooperative," and 2 percent "not very" or "not at all cooperative."

One concern was that citizens might be knowledgeable about political matters that we did not ask about in our survey. To gauge this, we asked respondents at the conclusion of the interview if they thought our questions were a fair test of what they knew about politics. Ninety-four percent said "Yes," while 2 percent said "No" (the others said "Some were fair; others were unfair" or did not offer an opinion). Many respondents told the interviewer they were ashamed at how little they knew or that the test was hard. Many said they wanted a report of the results and gave their name and address.

The Gallup Surveys

Nearly all of the comparisons discussed below involve Gallup surveys conducted between 1945 and 1957. We obtained data sets for two Gallup surveys from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut and had the Roper Center produce frequencies and crosstabs on five others. Because the comparisons over time depend upon the validity of the sampling at both ends of the comparison, some discussion of the Gallup samples and our adjustments to them is warranted.

Many of the samples employed by Gallup in the 1940s as well as some used in the 1950s significantly underrepresented certain groups in the population, including females, nonwhites, southerners, and persons with low levels of education (Glenn 1975, p. I-36). Since each of these groups tends to manifest lower levels of political knowledge than their counterparts on many questions, the overall level of knowledge

for the Gallup samples, compared with the general public, will be overstated to some extent.

Gallup data from the 1940s and 1950s stored at the Roper Center are unweighted, and no standard weighting scheme has been developed. The four 1947 Gallup data sets we examined had three major sampling flaws. First, individuals with low levels of education were underrepresented. Those without a high school diploma averaged 53 percent, compared with a population estimation (based on an extrapolation of census data) of nearly 70 percent. Second, nonwhites accounted for about 4 percent of the samples, compared with an estimated 9 percent in the population (in addition, there were almost no southern nonwhites in the sample). Third, the percentage of southerners ranged from 10 percent to 14 percent, compared with an estimated 28 percent nationally.

By comparison, the particular 1950s samples we used were relatively unbiased on these key demographics. Nonwhite representation averaged 8.5 percent in three samples examined (compared with an estimated 9.9 percent in the population), while southern residents accounted for 25–30 percent of the samples (vs. an estimated 26 percent in the population). Individuals without a high school diploma were still underrepresented but by a much smaller amount than in the 1940s (55–56 percent in the surveys compared with an estimated 60 percent in the population).

The sampling problems were apparently recognized by the Gallup organization in the 1940s, as all of the published marginals for knowledge items from the 1947 surveys we examined appear to have been adjusted downward by 4–7 percentage points (compared with frequencies calculated from the raw data). Perhaps because the samples for the 1950s surveys were much less biased than those of the 1940s, Gallup made no adjustment in the 1950s-published marginals, all of which matched the raw data at the Roper Center.⁴

We made two types of adjustments in the data reported here. First, the two data sets we acquired were weighted on education, race, and state population so that the resulting distributions matched estimated population parameters as closely as possible.⁵ These weights were applied for calculating marginals reported in table 1 and for the logistic regression analysis reported in table 3. Second, the marginals reported in table 1 for the remaining questions (those for which we did not obtain the original data sets) were adjusted so that each educational

4. Officials at the Gallup organization were unable to confirm that adjustments in the published data had been made.

5. Even though the male-female distribution in the samples was appropriate, gender was taken into account into the weighting since there were differences between men and women in educational achievement.

group in the sample is weighted according to its estimated proportion in the population (see Glenn [1975] for a discussion of this technique). A further adjustment is made for region in 1947 where a strong relationship exists between knowledge and region. However, since race and region are related to education, the adjustment for education alone corrects nearly all of the bias. For the data reported in table 2, which are broken down by education, no adjustment was made.⁶

Change in Knowledge: Comparing Marginals over 40 Years

Table 1 presents the exact question wording and marginal percentages for the 14 questions asked in 1989 and in earlier years. Based on these comparisons, the public today appears a little more knowledgeable than in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷ On 8 of the 14 items, the percentage answering correctly in 1989 was higher than in the earlier surveys (by 4–15 points). One item showed an increase of 1 percent, two were down 1 percent, and three others declined by 5 percent, 9 percent, and 10 percent.

More striking than the differences is the overall similarity. Only three items show increases greater than 10 percentage points (there were 15-point increases in those knowing what the first 10 amendments are called and that Congress could override a presidential veto, and a 12-point increase in ability to define “presidential veto”). Over 40 years, the level of public knowledge of some basic facts about the political system has remained remarkably stable.

Findings of the Gallup organization in its study of geographic literacy parallel ours, adding to our confidence that our sample is a valid one for comparison with Gallup data gathered 30 and 40 years ago. In 1988, Gallup replicated surveys of 1947–48 and concluded: “Overall, it appears that there has been no improvement over 40 years in the ability to identify countries and states from the maps among the total adult population” (National Geographic Society 1988).

6. To assess the need for adjustment in this table, we compared the weighted and unweighted results, using the data sets we had obtained. In 24 comparisons (six possible responses to the questions among four education groups), the mean difference between the weighted and unweighted result was $-.2$ of 1 percent; the median difference was 0. The largest observed difference between weighted and unweighted results was 5 percentage points (on defining a presidential veto) among individuals with no high school diploma.

7. By 1952 Alben Barkley had served nearly 4 years as vice president, while Quayle had only been in office a few months in 1989 (though the controversy surrounding Quayle’s nomination should also be taken into account). Also, in 1989 the Democrats had controlled the House for far longer (almost 35 years) than the Republicans had in 1947 when they took control for the first time in 15 years.

Table 1. Wording of Questions and Comparison of Marginals, 1940s/50s and 1989

| | 1947 | 1989 |
|--|------|------|
| For how many years is a president of the United States elected—that is, how many years are there in one term of office? | 92 | 96 |
| Will you tell me what the term “veto” means to you? For example, what does it mean when a president vetoes a bill sent to him by Congress? | 8 | 4 |
| | 77 | 89 |
| | ... | 5 |
| | 23 | 6 |
| Asked of those who answered correctly: If the president vetoes a bill, can Congress override his veto? | 67 | 82 |
| | 4 | 3 |
| | 6 | 4 |
| Asked of those who knew Congress could override a veto: How much of a majority is required for the Senate and House to override a presidential veto? | 23 | 11 |
| | 43 | 42 |
| | ... | 21 |
| | 57 | 37 |
| | 1952 | 1989 |
| Will you tell me who the vice president of the United States is? | 67 | 74 |
| | 33 | 26 |
| | 1947 | 1989 |
| Do you happen to know which party—the Democratic or Republican—has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives? | 63 | 68 |
| 1989: As a result of the election last year, which party now has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington? | 10 | 16 |
| | 27 | 16 |

Table 1 (Continued)

| | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------|------|
| And do you happen to know which political party has the most members in the Senate? | Correct | 56 | 55 |
| 1989: As a result of the election last year, which party now has the most members in the U.S. Senate? | Incorrect | 9 | 17 |
| | Don't know | 35 | 28 |
| When you read about a business recession [1989: an economic recession], what does that mean to you? | Correct | 51 | 57 |
| | Incorrect or vague | ... | 22 |
| | Don't know | 49 | 21 |
| Correct answers included: "Economic slowdown," "Businesses not doing well; closing, failing," "Unemployment; unemployment increases." | | 1946 | 1989 |
| From what you've heard, what kind of an effect do you think a high American tax on foreign goods would have on our trade? | Reasonably correct | 51 | 52 |
| Correct answers included: "U.S. would buy less from foreign countries," "Would make trade deficit go down; improve balance of trade," "Other countries would retaliate; trade war," "Create U.S. jobs; help U.S. industry; buy American." | Don't know or Incorrect | 49 | 48 |
| What are the first 10 amendments to the Constitution called? | Bill of Rights | 1954 | 1989 |
| | Incorrect | 31 | 46 |
| | Don't know | ... | 5 |
| | | 69 | 49 |

| | | | |
|---|------|------|-------------------------|
| | 1957 | 1989 | |
| What is the Fifth Amendment? [When you hear or read about the Fifth Amendment, what does it mean to you?] | 41 | 50 | Correct answer |
| | 59 | 50 | Incorrect or Don't know |
| | 1945 | 1989 | |
| Do you happen to know the names of the two U.S. senators from your state? | 35 | 25 | Both correct |
| | 57 | 55 | One correct |
| | 43 | 45 | None |
| | 1947 | 1989 | |
| Can you remember offhand the name of the U.S. congressman from your district? [Can you remember offhand the name of the person who represents your district in the U.S. House of Representatives—that is, your congressman or congresswoman?] | 38 | 29 | Correct |
| | 62 | 71 | Don't know |
| | 1945 | 1989 | |
| Can you tell me the name of the current governor of your state? | 79 | 74 | Correct |
| | 21 | 26 | Incorrect or Don't know |

SOURCES.—For 1989: telephone survey of 610 adult residents of the United States, conducted by the authors. For veto questions (1947): Gallup study #USAIPO 47-0396. For Bill of Rights and senators (1954): Gallup study #USAIPO 54-0526. Both Gallup data sets obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Name of the House member (1945) and effect of tariff on foreign trade (1946) from Erskine (1963a, 1963b). Name of governor (1945) from a Gallup survey (cited in Erskine 1963b). Other items from Gallup study tabulations produced by the Roper Center (AIPO 47-392, 47-393, 47-401, 52-491, 57-581).

NOTE.—Data for 1989 have been weighted on education, race, and gender according to estimates of the U.S. population. Gallup data for the Bill of Rights, naming senators, and knowledge of presidential veto have been weighted on education, gender, race, and region. The remaining Gallup data for 1945 and 1947 reflect an adjustment in which the distribution of educational achievement in the sample was weighted to conform with population estimates.

Change in Knowledge in Light of Change in Educational Achievement

In 1940, a few years before most of the surveys reported here were conducted, the median number of years of education was 8.6, three-fourths of the public had not finished high school, and only 10 percent had some college experience. By 1986 the median number of years of education was 12.6, with only one-fourth not having finished high school and 36 percent having had college experience.

In light of this phenomenal increase in education, and because political knowledge and education are associated with one another at the individual level, the aggregate comparisons presented above suggest a decline in knowledge among similarly educated persons. Using the Gallup data sets and analyses prepared by the Roper Center, we compared change over time in knowledge among individuals with the same level of education attainment. Table 2 presents these data along with the number of cases and the arithmetical difference between 1989 results and those from the earlier surveys.

The overall pattern is one of decline in knowledge among educational groups. In 37 of the 48 possible comparisons, knowledge levels were lower than in the earlier survey; in 21 of these 37, the decline was 10 points or greater. Only one increase of greater than 10 points was observed.⁸

This pattern of stability and decline in political knowledge among educational groups is suggestive concerning the culpability of the educational system.⁹ Formal education can increase political knowledge in three different ways. First, the educational system teaches specific pieces of information about politics. “Civics” education—knowledge of the institutions and procedures of government—is taught throughout primary and secondary education, and most college students are exposed to some of this kind of information as well. Second, educational institutions provide skills and contextual information that should make learning about politics easier and more efficient for citizens outside of school. A citizen who emerges from the schools with good

8. Gallup's study of geographic literacy, which compared surveys conducted in 1988 with those of 1947–48, found a similar pattern of decreased knowledge among population groups with comparable levels of education. They concluded that “controlling for education, it is apparent that knowledge of geography has actually declined” since the 1940s (National Geographic Society 1988).

9. It is important to note that years of formal education is an imperfect measure of the educational process per se, especially when comparing two disparate eras like the 1940s and the 1980s. In particular, years of formal schooling is confounded with other status factors such as income. Therefore, changes over time in the relationship between educational attainment and knowledge might reflect other systemic factors that are also correlated with educational attainment.

Table 2. Change in Knowledge over Time, by Level of Education

| | 1947 | N of Cases | 1989 | N of Cases | Difference |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Able to name member of House: | | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 34 | (1,552) | 22 | (75) | -12 |
| High school diploma | 45 | (799) | 25 | (193) | -20 |
| Some college | 51 | (314) | 37 | (167) | -14 |
| College graduate | 66 | (312) | 41 | (171) | -25 |
| | <hr/> 1952 | | <hr/> 1989 | | |
| Can name U.S. vice president: | | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 57 | (738) | 49 | (75) | -8 |
| High school diploma | 80 | (336) | 75 | (193) | -5 |
| Some college | 89 | (132) | 86 | (167) | -3 |
| College graduate | 94 | (102) | 97 | (171) | 3 |
| Knows presidential term is 4 years: | | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 89 | (738) | 89 | (75) | 0 |
| High school diploma | 96 | (336) | 97 | (193) | 1 |
| Some college | 100 | (132) | 99 | (167) | -1 |
| College graduate | 96 | (102) | 99 | (171) | 3 |
| | <hr/> 1947 | | <hr/> 1989 | | |
| Knows which party controls the House: | | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 59 | (1,494) | 52 | (75) | -7 |
| High school diploma | 77 | (749) | 71 | (193) | -6 |
| Some college | 87 | (309) | 67 | (167) | -20 |
| College graduate | 90 | (306) | 90 | (171) | 0 |
| Knows which party controls the Senate: | | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 53 | (1,483) | 36 | (75) | -17 |
| High school diploma | 69 | (749) | 54 | (193) | -15 |
| Some college | 79 | (310) | 65 | (167) | -14 |
| College graduate | 85 | (306) | 78 | (171) | -7 |

Table 2 (Continued)

| | 1957 | | 1989 | |
|---|------|---------|------|-----------|
| Knowledge of the Fifth Amendment: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 28 | (895) | 30 | (75) 2 |
| High school diploma | 52 | (485) | 51 | (193) -1 |
| Some college | 66 | (128) | 65 | (167) -1 |
| College graduate | 80 | (121) | 67 | (171) -13 |
| | 1947 | | 1989 | |
| Knowledge of "business recession": | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 44 | (1,576) | 37 | (75) -7 |
| High school diploma | 68 | (775) | 58 | (193) -10 |
| Some college | 79 | (325) | 62 | (167) -17 |
| College graduate | 91 | (342) | 81 | (171) -10 |
| Able to define presidential veto: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 75 | (1,653) | 79 | (75) 4 |
| High school diploma | 94 | (741) | 93 | (193) -1 |
| Some college | 96 | (306) | 92 | (167) -4 |
| College graduate | 99 | (314) | 93 | (171) -6 |
| Knows Congress can override veto: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 62 | (1,653) | 74 | (75) 12 |
| High school diploma | 87 | (741) | 86 | (193) -1 |
| Some college | 93 | (306) | 83 | (167) -10 |
| College graduate | 98 | (314) | 87 | (171) -11 |
| Knows two-thirds vote needed for override: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | 36 | (1,653) | 18 | (75) -18 |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|-----|
| High school diploma | 57 | (741) | 31 | (193) | -26 |
| Some college | 71 | (306) | 43 | (167) | -28 |
| College graduate | 83 | (314) | 58 | (171) | -25 |
| | <u>1954</u> | | <u>1989</u> | | |

First 10 amendments are "Bill of Rights":

| | | | | | |
|------------------------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| No high school diploma | 17 | (803) | 18 | (75) | 1 |
| High school diploma | 45 | (415) | 44 | (193) | -1 |
| Some college | 59 | (113) | 58 | (167) | -1 |
| College graduate | 75 | (122) | 79 | (171) | 4 |

Ability to name U.S. senators:

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----|-------|----|------|----|
| No high school diploma: | | | | | |
| Named neither | 60 | (804) | 59 | (75) | -1 |
| Named one | 40 | | 41 | | 1 |
| Named both | 23 | | 15 | | -8 |

High school diploma:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|----|-------|----|-------|-----|
| Named neither | 42 | (415) | 49 | (193) | 7 |
| Named one | 58 | | 51 | | -7 |
| Named both | 36 | | 21 | | -15 |

Some college:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|----|-------|----|-------|-----|
| Named neither | 38 | (113) | 34 | (167) | -4 |
| Named one | 62 | | 66 | | 4 |
| Named both | 38 | | 27 | | -11 |

College graduate:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|----|-------|----|-------|-----|
| Named neither | 22 | (122) | 25 | (171) | 3 |
| Named one | 78 | | 75 | | -3 |
| Named both | 61 | | 47 | | -14 |

reading skills, a basic knowledge of simple concepts of economics, and basic facts of U.S. history is reasonably well prepared to observe and understand much of what goes on in the political world. And, third, schools can demonstrate the relevance of the political world and contribute to the development of citizen interest in politics, or at the least, in the development of a sense of “civic duty.”

The items in table 2 vary in the degree to which they measure specific facts that are taught in school versus facts that change frequently and so require surveillance on the part of citizens. “Taught facts” we asked about include knowledge of the president’s veto power, the Fifth Amendment, or the fact that the first ten amendments are called the Bill of Rights. “Surveillance facts” include knowledge of who is the vice president, who represents the state in the U.S. Senate, or which political party has a majority in the House and Senate.

The levels of knowledge about most of the “taught” items remained relatively stable within education groups across the time (table 2). Only for the most difficult of the veto questions (the size of the majority needed for override) was there a substantial decline in the percentage of each educational group able to answer correctly.

Most of the “surveillance” items, however, show declines in the percentage of all educational groups answering correctly. The percentage able to name both senators declined by 8–15 points (depending upon which education group) from 1954 to 1989. Similarly, the percentage who correctly stated which party controlled the House and Senate declined by 6–20 points from 1947 to 1989 (except for college graduates, regarding control of the House). Ability to name one’s House member declined by 12–25 points from 1947 to 1989.

Further circumstantial evidence that schools are better at teaching political facts than instilling a sense of civic duty can be found in the performance of the youngest respondents in the surveys, since they are recent products of the educational system. Gallup respondents aged 18–24 years were compared with those in 1989; where possible, educational achievement within this group was standardized to the level of the 1989 sample (the results are not substantially different using unstandardized data). While the results of this comparison are mixed, and there is some evidence of decline in knowledge in “taught facts” over the past 40 years, again the greatest and most consistent decline is found in facts that change over time and so require active surveillance on the part of citizens (data not presented here). The fact that the most consistent decline in political knowledge occurs in the surveillance items rather than in the “taught facts” does not absolve the educational system of its responsibility (and is consistent with Janowitz’s argument that the public schools have become less effective

in instilling a sense of civic duty since 1945), but it does suggest that systemic factors may share the blame.

A different measure of the efficacy of the schools in civic education—the size of the “gap” in knowledge between citizens with different levels of education—supports this contention. Of course, individuals with different levels of educational attainment also differ in ways that may confound a comparison based on political knowledge. But as a rough indicator of the benefits of education, the differences among groups within a given survey and a comparison of the magnitude of these differences across time ought to provide a useful measure of the effectiveness of schooling (see, e.g., Smith 1989, pp. 215–19). By this standard, education appears to have about the same impact now as in the 1940s and 1950s. The percentage differences between education groups in ability to answer correctly are about the same in 1989 as in the earlier surveys (table 2).

A more precise way of gauging the difference between education groups is through a multivariate analysis in which the importance of education as a predictor of knowledge is weighted along with other factors; the relative importance of education for a given survey item can then be compared across time. Using multivariate logistic regression, we constructed models with age, education (using four categories), and gender as independent variables for comparing our data with those of the 1947 and 1954 Gallup surveys. Since logistic regression coefficients alone are difficult to interpret, we used the coefficients to calculate the probability that male and female respondents of approximately the mean age of the samples (40 years old) at each level of education would correctly answer the knowledge question. The difference in probabilities between education groups in 1947 or 1954 was compared with the corresponding change in 1989. For example, males with no high school diploma in 1947 had a .43 probability of knowing that a two-thirds vote of Congress was needed to override a presidential veto. Males who had completed high school had a probability of .69 (a difference of .26). The comparable difference between those with high school diplomas and those without in 1989 was .20. Thus, for this particular piece of political knowledge, we might conclude that the “value” of finishing high school in 1989 was slightly lower in 1989 than in 1947. Table 3 shows the probabilities of correct answers to several items along with the difference between education groups for 1989 and the earlier years.

The relative importance of education appears very similar in 1989 and 1954 for the question on the Bill of Rights; the changes in probability from one education group to the next were remarkably similar in the two surveys. For the veto item (knowledge that a two-thirds majority is

Table 3. Logistic Regression Analysis of the Effects of Education over Time

| | Probability of Correct Answer 1947 | Change in Probability from One Education Group to the Next | | Probability of Correct Answer 1989 |
|--|---|--|------|---|
| | | 1947 | 1989 | |
| Knowledge that two-thirds vote is needed to override presidential veto: | | | | |
| Males: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .43 | ... | ... | .26 |
| High school diploma | .69 | .26 | .20 | .46 |
| Some college | .83 | .14 | .14 | .60 |
| College graduate | .88 | .05 | .12 | .72 |
| Females: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .22 | ... | ... | .08 |
| High school diploma | .45 | .23 | .09 | .17 |
| Some college | .65 | .20 | .10 | .27 |
| College graduate | .74 | .09 | .11 | .38 |

| | β | Standard Error | Significance |
|-------------------------------------|---------|----------------|--------------|
| 1947: | | | |
| Age | .0079 | .0027 | $p < .01$ |
| Gender | -.9790 | .0818 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -1.2746 | .0828 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | -.2155 | .0977 | .03 |
| Education (some college) | .4448 | .1364 | $p < .01$ |
| Constant | .7139 | .1438 | $p < .01$ |
| Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2 = 2944.181$ | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 66 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = $p < .01$) | | | |
| 1989: | | | |
| Age | .0148 | .0056 | .01 |
| Gender | -1.4469 | .1944 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -1.0858 | .1873 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | -.1860 | .1437 | .20 |
| Education (some college) | .3904 | .1785 | .03 |
| Constant | .8954 | .3519 | .01 |
| Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2 = 619.044$ | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 71 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = .29) | | | |

Table 3 (Continued)

| | Probability of Correct Answer 1954 | Change in Probability from One Education Group to the Next | | Probability of Correct Answer 1989 |
|---|---|---|-------|---|
| | | 1954 | 1989 | |
| Knowledge that the first ten amendments are called the "Bill of Rights": | | | | |
| Males: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .21 | . . . | . . . | .23 |
| High school diploma | .50 | .29 | .29 | .52 |
| Some college | .65 | .15 | .13 | .65 |
| College graduate | .81 | .16 | .18 | .83 |
| Females: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .14 | . . . | . . . | .15 |
| High school diploma | .38 | .24 | .25 | .38 |
| Some college | .53 | .15 | .14 | .52 |
| College graduate | .72 | .19 | .22 | .74 |

| | β | Standard Error | Significance |
|------------------------------------|---------|----------------|--------------|
| 1947: | | | |
| Age | -.0213 | .0050 | $p < .01$ |
| Gender | -.4856 | .1349 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -1.4967 | .1123 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | -.1813 | .1198 | .13 |
| Education (some college) | .4365 | .1631 | .01 |
| Constant | 1.0383 | .2403 | $p < .01$ |
| Goodness-of-fit χ^2 1348.670 | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 75 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = .42) | | | |
| 1989: | | | |
| Age | -.0039 | .0052 | .46 |
| Gender | -.5354 | .1821 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -1.4890 | .1814 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | -.1793 | .1365 | .19 |
| Education (some college) | .3502 | .1720 | .04 |
| Constant | .9457 | .3529 | .01 |
| Goodness-of-fit χ^2 = 603.495 | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 68 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = .45) | | | |

Table 3 (Continued)

| | Probability of Correct Answer 1954 | Change in Probability from One Education Group to the Next | | Probability of Correct Answer 1989 |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|------|---|
| | | 1954 | 1989 | |
| Ability to name both U.S. senators: | | | | |
| Males: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .24 | ... | ... | .14 |
| High school diploma | .47 | .23 | .10 | .24 |
| Some college | .51 | .04 | .09 | .33 |
| College graduate | .68 | .17 | .19 | .52 |
| Females: | | | | |
| No high school diploma | .12 | ... | ... | .07 |
| High school diploma | .28 | .16 | .06 | .13 |
| Some college | .30 | .02 | .06 | .19 |
| College graduate | .47 | .17 | .15 | .34 |

| | β | Standard Error | Significance |
|-------------------------------------|---------|----------------|--------------|
| 1954: | | | |
| Age | .0201 | .0047 | $p < .01$ |
| Gender | -.8576 | .1305 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -1.0320 | .1106 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | .0160 | .1198 | .89 |
| Education (some college) | .1493 | .1634 | .36 |
| Constant | -.9263 | .2238 | $p < .01$ |
| Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2 = 1336.525$ | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 75 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = .52) | | | |
| 1989: | | | |
| Age | .0304 | .0060 | $p < .01$ |
| Gender | -.7502 | .2048 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (combined) | ... | ... | $p < .01$ |
| Education (no high school diploma) | -.8891 | .1997 | $p < .01$ |
| Education (high school diploma) | -.2740 | .1561 | .08 |
| Education (some college) | .1898 | .1916 | .32 |
| Constant | -1.3494 | .3866 | $p < .01$ |
| Goodness-of-fit $\chi^2 = 574.923$ | | | |
| Correctly predicted = 76 percent | | | |
| (Significance level = .76) | | | |

SOURCES.—For 1989: telephone survey of 610 adult residents of the United States conducted by the authors. For veto questions (1947): Gallup study #USAIPO 47-0396. For Bill of Rights and senators (1954): Gallup study #USAIPO 54-0526. Both Gallup data sets obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

needed for override), education's estimated impact was similar among men but appears to have declined among women. The relationship between having completed high school and one's ability to name both senators was weaker in 1989 than in 1954; for the other education categories, this relationship was similar in both periods.

As with education, the multivariate analysis suggests that the relationship between gender and knowledge has remained relatively constant over the past 35 or 40 years. At each level of education, men were more likely to be able to answer the questions than women; comparing the 1947 and 1954 surveys with 1989, the differences between men and women are of similar magnitude.

This finding is something of a surprise, given a number of important changes in society during the intervening years. The level of educational attainment of women in 1989 was about equal to that of men; voter turnout among women was comparable to that of men; labor force participation (and, presumably, its attendant politicizing consequences) among women increased dramatically during the past 20 years; and the number of women who have successfully sought public elective office has risen sharply. All of these changes would suggest that on basic questions of government and politics, the knowledge gap between men and women today would be smaller than in the immediate postwar years.¹⁰ Our analysis suggests that no such narrowing of the differences has occurred (an examination of other empirical studies suggests that there is no consensus on this issue—see Bennett 1988, 1989; Glenn 1972; Rapoport 1985; Sigelman and Yanarella 1986).

Conclusion

While factual knowledge is not the only standard by which to measure a citizenry, one can make the case that knowledge about the people, institutions, processes, and substance of national politics is a necessary, if not sufficient, prerequisite for an effective democracy. While we do not claim to have identified the specific bits of information the public must know, we think the information "tested" in this paper is both important in its own right and is a reasonable sample of the larger pool of knowledge one might expect from an educated citizenry.

The percentage of correct answers on our "civic quiz" (all items, not just those replicating the Erskine data) ranged from 10 percent (for knowing when the Constitutional amendment for women's suffrage

10. However, to the extent that women have taken on new economic responsibilities in the market while retaining their traditional responsibilities for child rearing and home-making, one can certainly argue that women have less time for information gathering about politics than in years past.

was adopted) to 96 percent (for knowing how long a presidential term is), with a median of 50 percent correct. In addition, men, older adults, and more educated individuals were, on average, more knowledgeable than women, younger adults, and less educated individuals. There are several standards against which one might evaluate these findings. While determining an absolute standard is impossible, several of the findings are at the least, unsettling. It is certainly hard to imagine that a citizen can have a meaningful grasp of or play a vital role in the politics of the day without knowing which party controls Congress, what a recession is, what the Bill of Rights is or says, and so forth. And while not knowing the names of political figures or what percentage of Congress is necessary to overturn a presidential veto might seem trivial to some, we suggest it is symptomatic of a larger lack of the contextual knowledge that is critical for understanding and using the daily barrage of discrete bits of information we all face in today's media environment.¹¹

A fairer standard may be to compare current levels of knowledge to those in the 1940s and 1950s. The results of our survey indicate relative stability in the public's knowledge of some fundamental facts about the political system, with gender and education appearing to have about the same relative effect today as 40 years ago. That knowledge has been stable during a period of rapid changes in education, communication, and the public role of women seems paradoxical. We have provided some partial evidence concerning the responsibility of the educational system in this decline. Schools appear to be about as good at teaching basic facts about the institutions and processes of government today as in the past. However, individuals emerge from the educational system with a lower level of knowledge about current political figures and alignments than 30 or 40 years ago. And individuals of all ages are less able to answer questions about current politics than their counterparts with similar educational backgrounds in the past.

We suspect that Bennett (1988, 1989) and Neuman (1986) are correct in pointing to declining political interest as the proximate culprit for this decline in political surveillance, though our data do not allow us to test this. And while it is the responsibility of schools to instill an interest in politics, there are many other reasons why politics does not now interest citizens—of all ages—to the extent that it did in the past. It is not clear, however, what larger societal forces are at work in leading to this declining interest and how it specifically interacts with learning about politics. What is clear is that the subject of what the public knows, and why it does or does not know it, deserves more

11. As mentioned earlier, most respondents described the survey as a fair test of their knowledge about politics.

attention from the public opinion research community than it has received during the past 40 years.

Appendix A Response Rate Data and Calculation

DISPOSITION OF TELEPHONE CALLS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Completions | 610 |
| Single refusals | 300 |
| Double refusals | 393 |
| Terminations | 28 |
| Selected respondent not reached during study period | 214 |
| Answering machines (presumed households) | 61 |
| No answer (multiple attempts) | 242 |
| Busy (multiple attempts) | 15 |
| Nonworking number of business/government | 723 |
| No eligible respondent in household | 19 |

The simple response rate was calculated using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Completions}}{(\text{Completions} + \text{refusals} + \text{selected respondent not available} + \text{answering machines} + \text{terminations})}$$

The CASRO rate includes in the denominator a term that adjusts the response rate by apportioning calls of unknown status ("no answer" and "busy") based on the proportion of known residences in the numbers for which a determination was made.

Appendix B

Comparison of 1989 Sample with Other Surveys (Percentages)

| | Unweighted 1989 | Weighted 1989 | NES 1988 | GSS 1989 |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Education: | | | | |
| Less than high school diploma | 12.4 | 25.4 | 22.0 | 23.4 |
| High school diploma | 31.8 | 39.1 | 35.7 | 32.0 |
| Some college | 27.6 | 18.0 | 22.5 | 25.2 |
| College graduate | 28.3 | 17.4 | 19.8 | 19.5 |

Appendix B (Continued)

| | Unweighted 1989 | Weighted 1989 | NES 1988 | GSS 1989 |
|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Race: | | | | |
| White | 85.9 | 82.4 | 83.5 | 85.8 |
| Black | 7.4 | 10.8 | 13.2 | 10.2 |
| Hispanic | 3.4 | 3.9 | ... | } 4.0 |
| Asian | 1.1 | 1.3 | .8 | |
| Other/no answer | 2.1 | 1.7 | 2.5 | |
| Gender: | | | | |
| Male | 45.7 | 47.3 | 42.7 | 42.9 |
| Female | 54.3 | 52.7 | 57.3 | 57.1 |
| Annual family income: | | | | |
| Less than \$10,000 | 8.1 | 10.0 | 19.1 | 15.9 |
| \$10,000-\$19,999 | 18.4 | 22.4 | 22.4 | 22.9 |
| \$20,000-\$34,999 | 32.0 | 31.4 | 26.5 | 25.6 |
| \$35,000-\$49,999 | 21.9 | 20.8 | 16.4 | 16.0 |
| More than \$50,000 | 19.6 | 15.4 | 15.6 | 19.5 |
| Age: | | | | |
| 18-24 years | 10.6 | 10.2 | 9.6 | 10.8 |
| 25-34 years | 24.9 | 23.6 | 24.1 | 23.1 |
| 35-44 years | 22.9 | 22.3 | 23.7 | 20.4 |
| 45-54 years | 15.2 | 14.7 | 12.2 | 15.2 |
| 55-64 years | 10.7 | 11.2 | 12.4 | 11.0 |
| 65 years and older | 15.7 | 18.0 | 18.0 | 19.5 |
| Party identification: | | | | |
| Strong Republican | 13.3 | 10.8 | 13.9 | 15.3 |
| Republican | 20.5 | 19.3 | 14.1 | 21.9 |
| Leaning Republican | 10.3 | 9.4 | 13.5 | 8.7 |
| Independent | 13.3 | 14.6 | 10.8 | 12.5 |
| Leaning Democrat | 9.7 | 9.6 | 12.0 | 7.8 |
| Democrat | 20.0 | 20.6 | 18.0 | 21.5 |
| Strong Democrat | 13.0 | 15.7 | 17.8 | 11.4 |

Comparison of Samples with Regard to Political Activity (Percentages)

| | Unweighted 1989 | Weighted 1989 | NES 1988 | GSS 1982 |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| How often follow politics: | | | | |
| Most of the time | 49.3 | 43.8 | 22.4 | 35.5 |
| Some of the time | 34.1 | 35.2 | 36.9 | 34.9 |
| Now and then | 11.0 | 13.3 | 25.5 | 18.7 |
| Hardly at all | 5.6 | 7.6 | 15.2 | 10.0 |

Appendix B (Continued)

| | Unweighted 1989 | Weighted 1989 | NES 1988 | GSS 1989 |
|---|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| How often discuss politics with family and friends: | | | | |
| Every day | 11.8 | 9.5 | 20.7 | ... |
| Three to four times per week | 22.5 | 19.6 | 15.6 | ... |
| One to two times per week | 30.7 | 28.9 | 27.7 | ... |
| Less often than once per week, or never | 35.1 | 42.0 | 36.0 | ... |
| How many days last week watched national network TV news: | | | | |
| 0 | 12.5 | 13.6 | 12.4 | ... |
| 1 | 4.4 | 4.2 | 3.7 | ... |
| 2 | 12.0 | 11.3 | 7.3 | ... |
| 3 | 8.2 | 7.6 | 6.8 | ... |
| 4 | 8.4 | 8.6 | 6.0 | ... |
| 5 | 14.8 | 14.4 | 6.1 | ... |
| 6 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 2.0 | ... |
| 7 | 36.7 | 37.0 | 55.6 | ... |
| How many days last week read a daily newspaper: | | | | |
| 0 | 16.7 | 19.5 | 23.4 | ... |
| 1 | 5.9 | 6.9 | 9.1 | ... |
| 2 | 8.9 | 9.2 | 7.6 | ... |
| 3 | 7.5 | 7.3 | 6.7 | ... |
| 4 | 4.6 | 4.6 | 4.4 | ... |
| 5 | 6.9 | 6.7 | 4.0 | ... |
| 6 | 2.8 | 2.6 | 2.1 | ... |
| 7 | 46.7 | 43.2 | 42.8 | ... |
| Did respondent claim to have voted in November 1988 elections? | | | | |
| Yes | 76.1 | 72.0 | 69.7 | 64.5 |
| No | 23.1 | 28.0 | 30.3 | 32.0 |

Knowledge Items

| | Weighted 1989 | NES 1988 | GSS 1987 |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Named political leaders: | | | |
| U.S. representative | 29 | ... | 36 |
| Governor | 74 | ... | 78 |
| Said Democrats have majority in: | | | |
| House of Representatives | 68 | 59 | ... |
| U.S. Senate | 55 | 54 | ... |

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