

**POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF
UNDERSTANDING CITIZENS' ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR**

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Abstract

The theory of democratic governance envisages the active participation of citizens in the political life of the country through control, accountability, voting, protests, petitions, rallies, demonstrations, etc. The active involvement of citizens in politics, a basic understanding of the functioning of the state apparatus, the principles of domestic and foreign policy help the electorate to maneuver gracefully between political forces and, most importantly, to effectively link their own interests with the manifestos of political parties, party leaders and presidents, as well as to make a retrospective assessment of the government's achievements. From a sociological perspective, education is an important predictor of electoral participation, but the existing scientific discussion shows that it is rather a proxy factor that shapes other affiliated characteristics of an individual that actually directly affect the level of participation. Another thing is an individual's political knowledge (not to be confused with education), which is more of a political factor and is seen to have a greater explanatory power for electoral behavior, participation, and choice. Having accurate factual political beliefs reduces the number of resources citizens spend on processing the pre-election information flow, improves their ability to navigate the political spectrum and to position themselves in relation to different political forces and vice versa (political forces – in relation to themselves).

In a demanding political environment, a high level of political knowledge is a reliable predictor of turnout and electoral participation. Education, as a more formal sociological characteristic of the population, does not always yield positive results in the context of correlation with turnout, because despite the rapid spread of higher education, access to knowledge, the development of algorithms and AI, turnout continues to decline steadily, which is a paradox of participation. Moreover, in today's context of criticism of classical/formal education, traditional educational institutions, methods and forms, the spread of alternative forms of education, constant updating of information, financial instability and economic demands of the market, focus on quick results, etc. it is difficult to determine the level of classical education of even two different individuals.

Keywords: education, political knowledge, electoral participation, absenteeism, facts, resource model, limited awareness

We will begin our discussion with the interpretation of the concepts of demography, demographic factors and education. The term 'demographics' refers to the personal characteristics of a society that are commonly used in government reports and national population censuses. In particular, it refers to gender, age, marital status, level of education, economic status or income, language, race, religion, mobility, ethnicity, etc. For researchers, the attractiveness of these indicators lies in their accessibility and systematic correlation with turnout, voting participation, political preferences, and party identification/affiliation. While scholars may take different approaches to the above indicators, the operationalization of demographic concepts has been fairly uneventful. The relative stability of many demographic characteristics also adds to the concept of supporters, as reverse causality is often impossible or unlikely. For example, voting in the last election is unlikely to change a citizen's age, gender, education, or income. However, it is worth mentioning the problems that scientists face when uncritically exploiting sociological variables. First, it is the fact that scientists can rely on established factors and their confirmed and seemingly predictable results without rechecking the patterns/correlations (for a particular election, a specific state, a specific time period, etc.), which leads to

simplified or even false conclusions. Secondly, the interpretation and measurement of demographic factors is characterized by high variability. For example, if we talk about the level of education, what do we mean by 'one citizen is more educated than another'? Is higher education obtained at Ukrainian and U.S. universities comparable? Can a person who has completed a two-year degree at an Ivy League university have a higher level of knowledge and general competence than a full-fledged graduate of a leading technical university in Ukraine? Is it possible to compare a degree earned in 1970 with the same degree from a similar university in 2020? Third, differences in research quality can sometimes tip the scales in favor of the better measured concept, leading researchers to erroneously conclude that one variable is more important than another. Fourth, the volatility of certain demographic factors can mislead researchers in interpreting their effects. For example, a person classified as married, divorced, or single may have been in their current status for a month, a year, or a decade. Accordingly, the strength of the impact on behavior will be different, as will the behavior of two individuals with the same socio-demographic statuses. Moreover, instability lies in a person's self-identification (sexual, religious, ethnic) at different stages of life. The same respondent identifies as African-American

today and as a mixed-race person a year later, and such differences create problems for analysis, forecasting, and correlations. Fifth, society has changed dramatically since the pioneers of behavioral research began using demographic data to predict political behavior. First and foremost, the roles of men and women have changed, gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps have widened, the line between white- and blue-collar workers has blurred, higher education has become more accessible, and race and ethnicity have become plural. These processes complicate attempts to measure, interpret, and evaluate the political implications of socio-demographic affiliations. Indeed, demographic classifications remain important variables in determining the political and electoral choices of citizens, but scholars must go beyond their uncritical use in the context of the complexity of social life [2; 4].

Apart from age, no other demographic variable attracts as much attention as education. For a long time, educational attainment has been identified as one of the most important predictors of voter turnout and political participation. The assumed cause-and-effect relationship has not been revised for four decades, despite the apparent paradox that voter turnout in Western countries has been declining even as education levels have been rapidly increasing. Since the 2000s, the first attempts to identify the causal effect of education on turnout using instrumental variable methods have yielded contradictory results. For example, scholars suggest talking about relative rather than absolute levels of education, or even better, the general level of competence, or referring to a generation cohort in the analysis. A study of Swedish voters showed that the influence of education is manifested even before graduation. Other American researchers have not found a casual relationship between education level and election participation. This suggests that formal education and the products of education (cognitive abilities or future income) have minimal or no impact on the decision to vote, while the preconditions of educational attainment (such as family of origin, early and subsequent personal socialization) have a higher explanatory power.

An interesting concept that can reveal and help understand the electoral behavior of the masses is the concept of political knowledge. Political knowledge is defined in different ways, most often as a range of factual information about politics stored in long-term memory or as a measure of a citizen's ability to give correct answers to a certain set of fact-based questions. In other words, it is familiarity with general political data and facts.

There are two schools or approaches to assessing citizens' political competence: traditional and revisionist. The main idea of the first school is that citizens should be politically knowledgeable in order to fulfill their democratic responsibilities (history, political facts, institutions, alternatives, consequences, party system, etc.), but the empirical results are disappointing, as researchers have exposed the so-called 'political ignorance' of the average citizen. For the traditional school, political knowledge matters because it helps shape preferences and behavior based on cognitive ra-

ther than emotional or affective engagement, and political information is considered the currency of citizenship.

For revisionists, political knowledge itself and its role are of lesser importance – scholars are less critical of the citizen. Indeed, they recognize that few citizens pay close attention to politics and have different interests and appetites for political information, but individuals can use heuristics or any other methods available to them to shape their political interests. People never have complete information and yet often manage to live a decent life with acceptable choices, so 'bounded rationality' works satisfactorily, which leads to the theory of low-information rationality. The uneven distribution of knowledge is compensated for by aggregated political opinion. Another type of political information is the concept of principal-agent, where voters as principals must trust representatives (agents) and the speaker, who takes on the task of monitoring and evaluating the agents' activities.

In fact, the very method of processing the available information is more important than the absolute level of knowledge possessed by voters. Such labels as ideology, political narratives, representative appearance, media framing, or other political markers allow average citizens to make their choice as well as those with greater information resources [1].

Contemporary researchers are revising methods of measuring citizens' political knowledge and providing critical remarks on the traditional approach to the scale of total knowledge that has become the standard for measurement. The question arises as to whether citizen surveys/tests based on facts, correct/incorrect answers, including the option of 'don't know', can measure the general competence of citizens regarding the principles and mechanisms of the political system? Critics argue that these surveys can measure basic personality traits: self-confidence, competitiveness, and risk-taking. For example, women are more likely than men to choose the 'don't know' option, even if they have partially or completely correct information. New experimental analysis also showed that removing the 'don't know' and 'not sure' options led to higher knowledge scores, both at the level of individual items and in aggregate for political knowledge. Furthermore, manipulating the context, lack of time to think, the way the question is phrased, personality variations, or perceived threats can all impair survey results. However, for example, simply adding visuals to equivalent test items increases the number of correct answers. Other studies show that incentivizing respondents to perform well, including financially, for correct answers and response time, resulted in an average increase in correct answers of 11 percent [6].

Thus, although research shows that citizens do not meet the standard of an 'informed citizen', recent academic research shows that citizens are more aware or have sufficient incentives, motivation, and means to become politically informed.

We would like to focus on the gender gap and differences in political knowledge between men and women. For example, a significant inequality in knowledge has been proven, with the largest share being possessed by wealthy older white men, who are

more likely to participate in politics, have a more meaningful, stable attitude towards politics, are better at choosing candidates who meet their interests, and are better at linking their own interests to ideologies [1]. The researchers demonstrate that these differences lie in the fact that women do not store as much political information in declarative memory as men, but they use their procedural memory better, and when focused on it, they perform better than men on average. In other words, women have less political knowledge of facts, but men are less likely to choose the 'I don't know' option and are more risk-averse, which increases the chances of a correct answer, thus widening the gap between men and women in these questions. It is important to understand the importance of specific knowledge, for example, when the questions designed to determine political competence are gender-related, i.e., they relate to women's lives and experiences. Analysts emphasize that the 'practical' type of knowledge about politics (public services, social welfare policy) compensates for or reverses the gender gap [8].

The binary distinction between politically informed (accurate factual convictions) and uninformed (no factual beliefs) was supplemented by the concept of 'mis-/disinformation' (false beliefs), thus creating a third type – the category of misinformed. The category of the misinformed with the strongest false beliefs are the most categorical party supporters. Corrections do not change the misconceptions of the most ideologically committed (i.e., strong partisans), and in some cases can reinforce the misconceptions. Resilience or 'backlash' has also been demonstrated for politically knowledgeable people. Rather than simply denying previous views and information, offering an alternative explanation – i.e., interacting with beliefs and showing another possible alternative – helps to reduce the impact of misconceptions.

A logical question that follows from the previous discussion is whether more informed voters vote more often than their fellow citizens, and whether political knowledge (again, not to be confused with education) can be considered a correlate or predictor of turnout.

Political knowledge is part of the resource-based model of voting, which argues that resources help citizens understand complex processes or unfamiliar choices. In terms of voting, citizens with better political knowledge are better and more easily able to choose among a range of politicians, parties or policies that best reflect their preferences, so the relative ease of voting choices increases their chances of turning out to vote.

Combining individual and institutional factors, analysts examine how the proportionality of the electoral system and the level of knowledge affect voter turnout [3]. They show that citizens with low levels of knowledge are less likely to participate in pluralistic elections; this is a robust finding that controls for a number of individual and macro-level variables.

Media can be an effective variable in modeling the relationship between knowledge and turnout. Various analysis shows how an increase in media choice increases gaps in both political knowledge and voter turnout – on the one hand, as media choice increases, citizens may become more selective in where they receive

news, and on the other hand, citizens who are less motivated may easily avoid political news in favor of entertainment content [7]. Citizens who have access to the Internet and prefer news are more informed and more likely to turn out to vote. But there is also evidence that with greater access to media, those who prefer entertainment over news are less informed and less likely to turn out to the polls. In other words, increasing diversity in the media environment is not a panacea for the problem of political ignorance, as citizens can easily select or reject political news [9].

V. Larcinese's analysis of the 1997 British general election distinguishes between general education and political knowledge and their impact on turnout and shows that the former is not a significant predictor of turnout [5].

Thus, although political knowledge has long been considered a prerequisite for healthy democratic politics, most empirical studies show that low levels of political knowledge have negative consequences for individual and collective political participation. Nevertheless, citizens, guided by a common heuristic, can make acceptable choices and decent decisions. This discussion proves that political knowledge is a more convincing correlate of electoral participation than the general phenomenon of formal education. However, we should be careful when choosing an instrument for assessing the level of political knowledge of citizens, considering the structure and content of the survey, as well as realizing the role of specific knowledge and lived experience (in the words of Fukuyama, 'Erfahrung' and 'Erlbnis') of different social groups. We aspire to continue this debate in future studies and to find more convincing evidence in favor of the dependence of turnout on citizens' political knowledge.

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