

What  
Americans  
Know about  
Politics  
and  
*Why It*  
*Matters*

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and

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## The Consequences of Political Knowledge and Ignorance

That men if freed from . . . intellectual error . . . would live together harmoniously . . . cannot be proved or disproved except by trial. But such a proposition is basic to any demand for or justification of a democratic society.—C. B. MACPHERSON, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*

Say first, of God above or man below,  
What can we reason but from what we know.

—ALEXANDER POPE, *An Essay on Man*

### Faith

Faith is an island in the setting sun  
But proof, yes  
Proof is the bottom line for everyone.

—PAUL SIMON, "Proof"

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Why be concerned if Americans know less about politics than an informed observer would deem appropriate? If the information explosion and growth of public education have done little to increase aggregate levels of knowledge? If some citizens are significantly less informed than others? One answer, inspired by the views of Rousseau, Pateman, and others who write from the tradition of communitarian democracy, is that being informed about the workings of government is something to be valued for its own sake, a civic equivalent to Socrates' belief that the important life is not worth living and his entreaty to "know thyself." Thus, uncovering the patterns of what citizens know and don't know is important in its own right, and the individual and group differences in knowledge documented in this book constitute prima facie evidence of systematic failures at this fundamental level of democratic politics.

Knowledge is also an instrumental good that helps to enlighten one's self-interest and to translate it into effective political action. A broadly and equitably informed citizenry assures that the public will is determined fairly and that government action is viewed as legitimate. If more knowledgeable citizens are better equipped to articulate their interests and better able to reward and punish political leaders for their actions, then when interests clash, less informed citizens are at a decided disadvantage.

Is there tangible evidence in support of these propositions? Many of the individual and collective effects of an informed citizenry are likely to be too subtle to be easily measured with the kinds of survey data available. In particular, because most surveys focus on opinions and behaviors tied to electoral politics, the impact of knowledge for civic roles outside of this arena is not well documented. Nonetheless, in this chapter we will demonstrate a number of ways political knowledge contributes to good citizenship and thus to the polity more broadly. First, political knowledge promotes civic virtues like political tolerance. Second, political knowledge edge promotes active participation in politics. Third, political knowledge helps citizens construct stable, consistent opinions on a broad array of topics. Fourth, political knowledge helps citizens identify their true interests and connect these with their political attitudes. And fifth, political knowledge helps citizens link their attitudes with their participation so that their participation serves their interests. On all five of these dimensions, the differences between the best- and least-informed citizens in the United States are substantial and often dramatic.

The value of political knowledge is situational, relative, and collective. First, although the wide variety of political choices citizens are asked to make and the numerous activities they can engage in suggest that an effective citizen needs to be broadly informed about politics, the instrumental benefits of knowledge usually derive from specific information relevant to a particular situation. For example, knowledge of civil liberties and judicial processes promotes political tolerance, and knowledge of where candidates stand on abortion is necessary if a voter is to use this issue to choose among candidates.

Second, the value of political knowledge is relative in that, for most manifestations of citizenship, additional increments of knowledge produce measurable improvements in the performance of those roles. All things being equal, the more informed people are, the better able they are to perform as citizens. Moreover, the most knowledgeable group in several of our analyses—the top quartile—is not composed of superhumans who have been required, in Walter Lippmann's skeptical words, "to yield an unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity, and effort" (1925:2). And yet they arguably meet high standards of citizenship.

Third, the benefits to individuals are also consequential for the system as a whole—that is, the value of political knowledge is collective. All interests in society benefit from a greater consensus on democratic values and an accompanying tolerance for divergent viewpoints. Broader participation increases the legitimacy of the government and provides it with greater authority to act on behalf of society's interests. A better-

informed citizenry allows for a more subtle and sophisticated public discourse about the issues of the day. And a better-informed citizenry places important limitations on the ability of public officials, interest groups, and other elites to manipulate public opinion and act in ways contrary to the public interest.

Citizens with greater or lesser amounts of knowledge differ in many ways other than in what they know, and these differences can confound the search for knowledge's effects. In most of our analyses we utilize statistical controls and other techniques in an effort to isolate the effects of knowledge. But because knowledge is intimately tied to other characteristics of good citizenship—for example, it is both a cause and an effect of political interest and participation—it is not always possible nor sensible to disentangle it from other related qualities. Indeed, by controlling for other variables in an attempt to isolate the independent contribution of knowledge, we may be underestimating knowledge's impact in some instances. Consequently, raising knowledge levels could have, in addition to the direct benefits we describe, a number of indirect benefits as well.

### Promoting Support for Democratic Values

It is axiomatic in a democracy that although conflict over the proper course of public policy may be inevitable, there is consensus on fundamental procedures for resolving conflicts and determining policy. To function well, a democracy needs a consensus among its citizens on a number of specific values, such as majority rule and minority rights, the rule of law, or freedom of the press. Political knowledge entails an awareness of key democratic values. Equally important, political knowledge promotes the acceptance of these values.

One key democratic value is *political tolerance*, "a willingness to permit the expression of ideas or interests one opposes" (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982: 2). Sparked by evidence from a number of surveys conducted since the 1950s, there is considerable debate over the extent of political tolerance among the public. There is nearly unanimous public agreement on the basic principles of free speech and other civil liberties, but their application to specific cases involving feared or despised groups is much more controversial (Prothro and Grigg, 1960; McClosky and Brill, 1983). For example, majorities of the public appear willing to deny members of certain groups the right to run for office, hold public rallies, teach in the public schools, or even belong to such a group (Gibson, 1992: 340).<sup>1</sup>

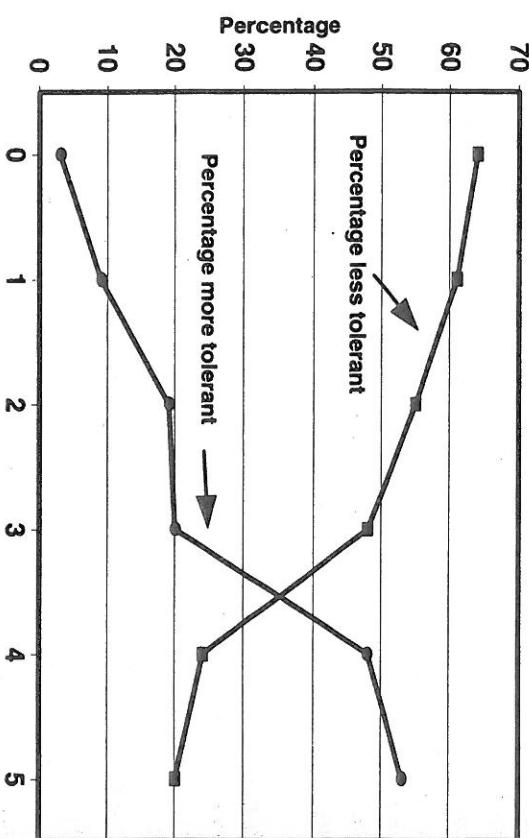
To test the impact of political knowledge on tolerance, we placed a small module of tolerance items on our Survey of Political Knowledge.

Respondents were asked which of three groups (communists, atheists, or the Ku Klux Klan) they liked the least.<sup>2</sup> They were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed with permitting members of that group to make a speech in the city or town where they lived or to teach in the public schools.<sup>3</sup> Just over one-fourth (27 percent) of the sample said they would permit a member of their chosen group to teach in the public schools, and 58 percent said they would permit them to make a speech.<sup>4</sup> We constructed a simple tolerance index by summing responses to the two items.<sup>5</sup>

Political tolerance increases dramatically as knowledge of civil rights and liberties increases (see figure 6.1). But what is the dynamic driving this relation? The answer may be found in considering the explanations for why education is related to tolerance. Several studies suggest that education is strongly correlated with tolerance (Nunn, Crockett, and Williams, 1978; Bobo and Licari, 1989), but the mechanism by which it does so is not obvious.<sup>6</sup> Three major routes of influence have been hypothesized. First is simply the exposure to diverse ideas that is an inevitable consequence of formal education. As Samuel Stouffer put it: "Schooling puts a person in touch with people whose ideas and values are different from one's own" (1955: 127). This contact with alternative views occurs within the context of an institution that ostensibly values diversity and argument. Second, education promotes cognitive sophistication, which may promote a closer connection between general norms and specific applications (Bobo and Licari, 1989). Third—and most central to our focus here—education may provide specific instruction regarding the norms and procedures of a liberal democracy. Knowledge of these key societal values would seem a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the development of a tolerant public (McClosky and Brill, 1983).

We fashioned a test of the third explanation—the so-called social learning hypothesis. If the utility of political knowledge is situation-specific, then political tolerance should be especially affected by information that is relevant to this democratic norm. Among the knowledge items in the survey were several that dealt with issues of civil liberties and the principal institution associated with disputes over them, the Supreme Court. An index was created using five of these items ( $\alpha = .63$ ).<sup>7</sup> The remaining knowledge items in the survey were used to form an alternate index. The net impact of civil liberties knowledge on tolerance was estimated using a multiple regression analysis. In addition to knowledge, the model included several variables known to be related to tolerance: education, family income, ideology, age, sex, race, residence in the South, and political engagement.<sup>8</sup> The results of this analysis with and without political knowledge included in the equation show that knowledge of civil lib-

Figure 6.1 Political Tolerance by Knowledge of Courts and Civil Liberties



erties was a much stronger predictor than any other factor in the model (table 6.1). Including it in the equation doubled the explained variance of the model (from 8 to 16 percent). In addition, two variables that were significant predictors of tolerance when political knowledge is not included were weakened considerably when knowledge entered the analysis. Most notably, education lost nearly all of its predictive power. Gender was the only other variable with a statistically significant coefficient (though its effect, too, was weakened).

Table 6.1 Multivariate Regression Model of Political Tolerance (continued)

Variable	Without Knowledge		With Knowledge	
	Unstandardized <i>b</i> and Standard Error	beta (standardized regression coefficient)	Unstandardized <i>b</i> and Standard Error	beta (standardized regression coefficient)
Income	-0.035 .052	-.03 .03	-0.070 .050	-.06 .00
Age	0.003 .004	.03 .000	0.000 .003	.01 .01
Race (black)	-0.148 .207	-.03 .200	0.024 .158	.06 .06
Region (South)	0.085 .120	.03 .115	0.024 .115	.08 .08
Political engagement	0.116 .035	.15*** .060	0.060 .034	.00 .00
Ideology (conservative)	0.029 .050	.03 .048	-0.002 .048	.16 .00
Constant	5.78 .588	5.74 .562	5.74 .562	.00 .00
Adjusted <i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	.08	.16	.16	.16
Standard error of the regression	1.27 1.22	1.27 1.22	1.27 1.22	1.27 1.22
<i>N</i>	503	503	503	503

Source: 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge.

Note: The top entry in the cell is the unstandardized regression coefficient (*b*). The bottom entry is the standard error.

\* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . \*\*\*\* =  $p < .0001$ .

This suggests that political knowledge is a significant influence on political tolerance, independent of education and other factors. But is it the particular type of knowledge—knowledge about civil liberties and the Supreme Court—that matters, as suggested by the social-learning hypothesis? Political knowledge is a very general characteristic. Perhaps the crucial aspect is overall political awareness or general cognitive sophistication and not the specific type of knowledge captured by the civil liberties index. When substituted for the civil liberties index, the alternate index (composed of all other knowledge items) performs about as well in the regression analysis. But this is because individuals who are knowledgeable on the civil liberties index are also likely to be generally knowledgeable about politics (the correlation between the two indexes is .69). When the two indexes are included in the regression together, the coefficient for the alternate index shrinks to insignificance, but the civil liberties measure remains strong. Although this falls short of proving Macpherson's proposition "that men if freed from . . . intellectual error . . . would live together harmoniously," it is striking evidence of

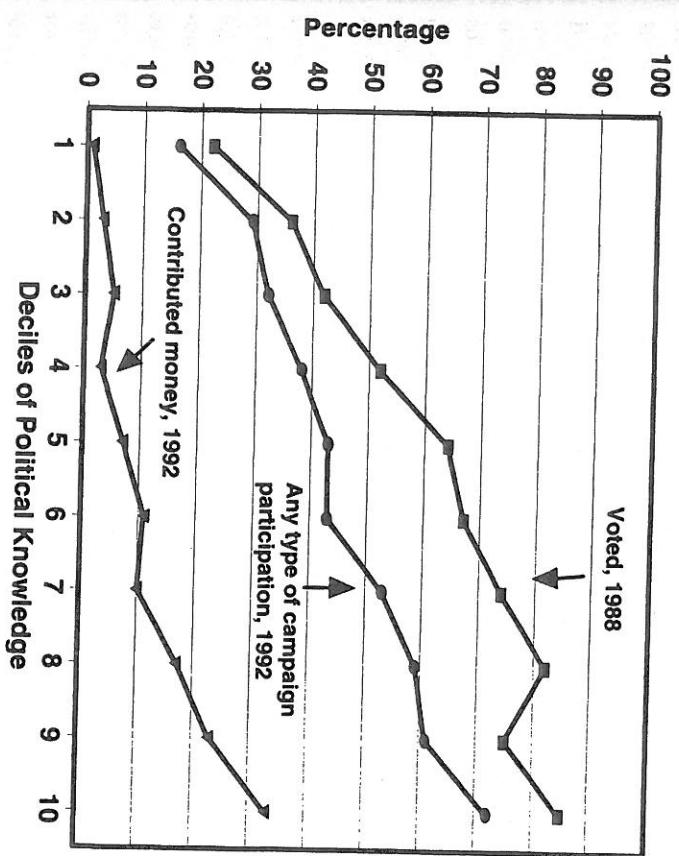
the import of an informed citizenry and of the situation-specific utility of political information.

Evidence suggesting that relevant political knowledge promotes other democratic norms and values is provided by James Fishkin's experiment with a "deliberative opinion poll" in Great Britain. In this study, a randomly selected panel of voters who were provided with three days of extensive (and politically balanced) briefings on crime and the criminal justice system became substantially more supportive of measures to ensure the procedural rights of criminal defendants (1994: 28). Although the group remained very concerned about crime and was quite supportive of punitive measures to reduce it, a greater familiarity with the procedures and logic of the system led many to support protecting the rights of those accused of crimes.

### Promoting Political Participation

A politically active citizenry is a requisite of any theory of democracy. At a minimum, this means regular participation in the electoral process. Knowledge is a principal correlate of several forms of electoral political participation. In the 1988 presidential election, nearly nine out of ten of the most knowledgeable 10 percent of respondents voted; by comparison, among the least-informed decile, only two in ten did so.<sup>9</sup> In between, we observe a nearly monotonic increase in turnout as knowledge rises (figure 6.2). The same pattern is apparent in other elections (Neuman, 1986: 84–89).<sup>10</sup> Other types of electoral participation are also strongly related to knowledge. In the 1992 election, only 16 percent of the least-knowledgeable decile of citizens reported any type of campaign participation, such as trying to influence the vote of others or working for a candidate; by comparison, 72 percent of the best-informed decile did so. These data, as well as the percentage who contributed money to a candidate, group, or party, are shown in figure 6.2. Knowledge also boosts participation in nonelectoral activities, such as working to solve a local community problem or contacting a public official (see chapter 5; Junn, 1991; Leighley, 1991).

Knowledgeable citizens participate in politics more than less knowledgeable ones. But what accounts for this? Several straightforward explanations exist. Knowledge promotes a number of civic attitudes and behaviors (such as political interest and efficacy) that motivate participation. Political knowledge boosts participation because it promotes an understanding of why politics is relevant. It is noteworthy that in the 1992 National Election Study, political knowledge—compared with such vari-



ables as media use, interest in politics, efficacy, or demographic characteristics—was the strongest predictor of whether an individual said she or he cared about the outcome of the election.<sup>11</sup>

But knowledge should also have a more direct impact on participation by providing the specific facts necessary to make citizens aware of opportunities to participate, and of how to participate once aware of these opportunities—so-called mobilizing information (Lemert, 1981). Although it is difficult to avoid being aware of a presidential election, most other elections are less visible. Furthermore, registering to vote often requires an awareness of where and when to do so, and the location of polling places is not always obvious. Other avenues for political participation are more difficult to discover and may require considerable knowledge to find and use. For example, if one wished to be involved in a party's nominating process for a state or local office, one would need to know something about the rules and procedures, and one would need to know them well in advance of the election to which they applied.

We lack the kinds of specific factual questions for a direct test of Lemert's notion of mobilizing information. But our analysis of political tolerance demonstrated that information is used situationally. In addition,

because our general knowledge scales are designed to measure what citizens know more broadly about politics, we can assume that those who are more informed about the survey items are also more knowledgeable about facts that are directly relevant to the act of participating. We can use this assumption to indirectly test the impact of knowledge on participation. If knowledge promotes participation by providing mobilizing information, then it should remain a significant predictor of participation even when we control for other attitudinal, behavioral, and demographic variables that are known to be correlated with both knowledge and participation. If, however, knowledge has no impact on participation once these other variables are controlled for, then its impact must be primarily through its effect on motivation.

**Table 6.2** Predictors of Voter Turnout (Logistic Regression Coefficients) (continued)

Predicted Probability of Voting for Typical Respondent (all other variables set at their mean or mode)	
Level of Political Knowledge	Probability
1 standard deviation below mean	.50
At the mean	.59
1 standard deviation above mean	.69

\* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . \*\*\*\* =  $p < .0001$ .

To determine if the relations shown in figure 6.2 persist when other personal and political characteristics are held constant, we regressed a dichotomous participation variable (0 = didn't vote, 1 = did vote) on the political knowledge index, along with several attitudinal and demographic variables thought to influence participation (including sex, age, race, personal income, politically impinged occupation, education, region of residence, attention to politics, media use, external and internal political efficacy, and trust in government).<sup>12</sup> The results of this analysis for voter turnout in the 1988 NES survey (based on a validated vote) are presented in table 6.2. To ease in interpretation, the predicted probabilities that an otherwise typical individual (that is, someone at the mean or mode

Consistent with the notion that knowledge has a direct and independent impact on participation, the knowledge index remained a highly significant predictor of turnout. The predicted probability of voting for a typical respondent who was one standard deviation above the mean on political knowledge was .69, compared with .50 for those who were one standard deviation below the mean (while holding other characteristics and attitudes constant at their means or, where appropriate, their mode). Having more knowledge—regardless of one's social status or reported levels of interest, efficacy, and media use—is a strong predictor of voting. The fact that knowledge has a strong independent impact is notable in that voting, compared with other forms of participation, requires relatively little knowledge.

This analysis suggests that part of knowledge's impact on participation is through the provision of relevant, mobilizing information. Of course, dis-

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Although political participation can be seen as a good in and of itself (Patterson, 1970), its primary value is as a means for translating individual and collective interests into public action. Political attitudes are a

critical building block of instrumental political behavior. When expressed in the form of opinions in surveys, attitudes can influence political candidates, elected officials, interest groups, and other citizens. To the extent that attitudes guide the choices of citizens in voting and other forms of political participation, they can have a direct impact on public policy. Knowledge, in turn, leads citizens to develop more numerous, stable, and internally consistent attitudes.

### *What Are Attitudes and How Do They Develop?*

Observable political behavior is the raw material social scientists have to work with in studying attitudes and their formation, and its most common form is the expression of opinions in a survey. *Opinions are considered to be the visible manifestations of attitudes, defined as relatively durable orientations toward an object.*<sup>15</sup> More fundamental than either attitudes or opinions are values, which are enduring standards for what is desirable (Rokeach, 1973). Among other functions, a value serves as "a standard or criterion . . . for developing and maintaining attitudes toward relevant objects and situations" (Rokeach, 1968: 450).

Values are tied to attitudes and opinions through beliefs (see, for example, Dawson, 1979: 103–5). Beliefs are distinctly cognitive elements that link an individual's values to her or his attitudes and opinions about a concrete issue and what—if anything—should be done about it. Beliefs do not have to be true, of course. Through this concept, however, political knowledge becomes relevant to a consideration of values, attitudes, and opinions. For example, one's attitude toward the welfare system does not flow directly from relevant core values like individualism or equality, but from the linkage of these values to what is known or believed to be true about the specific program and the environment in which it will operate. Does the welfare system actually weaken individual responsibility and initiative? Is the welfare system rife with clients who could work but simply do not want to? How long do people typically stay on welfare? Similarly, whether one takes the position that U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war was a noble cause or an immoral folly may depend not only on one's feelings about communism as a system of government, but also on such factual knowledge as the historical roots of the war in colonialism and nationalism.

Unlike the more general notion of beliefs, political knowledge, as we define it, is accurate information about politics. We assume that the greater the accumulated store of accurate information, the more likely it is that attitudes will be based on realistic beliefs about the political world

(though the strength of this relation will vary according to the specific values involved). In addition, the greater the store of information, the more often citizens will be able to connect their values with concrete matters of politics—in other words, the more likely they are to form attitudes about political questions. If these assumptions are correct, the attitudes of the well informed should be significantly different in character from those of the ill informed.

This conceptualization of attitudes is at the heart of recent research aimed at understanding the sometimes anomalous nature of opinions as revealed through survey research. A fundamental question among attitude researchers is what the expression of opinion in a survey actually tells us about the existence of an underlying attitude. It has long been recognized that many survey respondents will provide answers to opinion questions even in the absence of a considered judgment about the topic. Some will even provide an opinion on fictitious or highly obscure issues (Schuman and Presser, 1981: 147–57; Bishop et al., 1980). The nature of the survey interview as a social exchange evidently encourages many respondents to "help" the interviewer by providing answers even when they are unprepared to do so or to answer so as to avoid appearing ignorant or unengaged. Can real opinions be distinguished from pseudo-opinions?

This stark distinction may be inappropriate. Hardly anyone—even a political scientist—walks around armed with specific opinions on every political issue. Research during the past decade or so has seen growing acceptance of the notion that many opinions tend to be constructed on the spot during political conversations or interviews for a public opinion survey. John Zaller and Stanley Feldman have offered the clearest explanation of this model: "Most citizens, we argue, simply do not possess pre-formed attitudes at the level of specificity demanded in surveys. Rather, they carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations. When questioned, they call to mind a sample of these ideas, including an oversample of ideas made salient by the questionnaire and other recent events, and use them to choose among the options offered" (1992: 579–80).<sup>16</sup>

The "mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations" to which Zaller and Feldman refer is strongly influenced by a citizen's level of political knowledge. Highly knowledgeable citizens will be exposed to and remember more ideas and considerations than will the less aware. They also will be better able to evaluate new information in terms of its consistency with their political values and other information they hold, accepting (and remembering) considerations that are consistent with their values and rejecting those that are not. Consequently, the survey responses

of the better-informed citizen will, in all likelihood, be more stable over time and more consistent with responses on related issues.

Zaller develops the implications of this model in his book *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, which draws on Converse's early work on information flow and partisan stability as a model for how public opinion is formed and changed (Converse, 1962). Although Zaller generally avoids judging opinions as good or bad, his model does have an implicit normative standard: whether or not opinions are consistent with underlying values. A key variable in ensuring this consistency is political knowledge. Knowledge, in the form of contextual information, "enables[s] citizens to perceive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions" (1992: 42). Thus, political knowledge is critical to the "effective translation of political predispositions into appropriate policy preferences" (Zaller, 1991: 129, emphasis added).

If political knowledge is integral to the development of meaningful attitudes, we should be able to observe a number of differences between well-informed and poorly informed citizens. First, better-informed citizens should have more numerous attitudes. That is, compared with the less informed, they should be able to figure out where they stand on more issues. Second, their attitudes should be more stable over time because they are based on values and information that are relatively stable. Third, their attitudes should be more durable; that is, they should be less susceptible to change from irrelevant or specious arguments or information—though perhaps more likely to change when they encounter new information that is relevant. Fourth, if the attitudes of the better informed are more closely tied to basic values and orientations, they should be more internally consistent with one another (in part because many of them stem from the same values) and display a simpler structure. The available evidence strongly confirms all four of these expectations.

#### *Knowledge and Attitudes: Opinion Holding*

Political knowledge is a very strong predictor of opinion holding.<sup>17</sup> In the 1988 National Election Study, the knowledge index we constructed was by far the best predictor of levels of *opinionation*—that is, the number of issues on which the respondent provided an opinion rather than a "don't know" response.<sup>18</sup> In a multiple regression analysis with nine demographic and political variables that were, individually, significantly correlated with opinion holding, the knowledge index dwarfed the others (beta = .35, compared with .07 for the runner-up—family income). A com-

posite variable of political interest and several media-use items barely achieved statistical significance in the model ( $p = .06$ ).

Corroborating evidence is provided by Jon Krosnick and Michael Milburn, who examined opinionation levels in NES surveys from 1956 to 1984 and found that "objective political competence" was by far the strongest predictor of opinionation (1990: 61). Political knowledge was one component of objective political competence, and in several of the surveys it was the one most strongly related to levels of opinionation.<sup>19</sup>

A telling exception to this pattern is a tendency for the best-educated survey respondents (and presumably the most knowledgeable ones) to be less likely to offer opinions on highly obscure issues about which almost no one would be aware (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick, 1986). Schuman and Presser (1981: chap. 5) report that respondents with more than a high school education were nearly 20 percentage points more likely than those with less than a high school diploma to give a "don't know" response about the Agricultural Trade Act of 1978 (a genuine issue but one that received almost no news coverage). Similarly, Krosnick and Milburn found that although objective political competence was positively related to opinionation, this relation was weakest among the best-educated respondents. They speculate that highly sophisticated individuals may be somewhat more reluctant than others to offer what appear to be simplistic summary responses to complex policy questions (1990: 64). Thus, citizens who are relatively knowledgeable about politics are more likely to have (or construct) opinions on a wide array of subjects, but less likely to offer their views on issues about which they feel underinformed or for which their opinions are not easily categorized into the available choices.

#### *Knowledge and Attitude Stability over Time*

To the extent that citizens manifest opinions that are weakly grounded in genuine orientations (or even simply random), we would expect considerable instability in individual-level survey data over time. That is, if the same respondents are asked for their opinions in a subsequent interview, many of them would provide different answers.<sup>20</sup> This pattern of low correlation between answers at two or more time points is familiar to students of public opinion, and it was the principal evidence upon which Philip Converse based his thesis that much of public opinion consisted of *nonattitudes* (1964; 1970). Indeed, the instability of opinions in surveys is a key datum for some observers who doubt the capacity of the public for effective self-government.

*Converse's* alternative view holds that the pattern of low correlations among opinions over time is principally a result of measurement error and not an absence of political orientations by respondents (Achen, 1975; Erikson, 1979; Jackson, 1979; Judd and Milburn, 1980). According to this view, most citizens are assumed to have true attitudes on most issues, but the survey process is inherently variable and unreliable. Although repeated expressions of opinion by individuals would tend to center on their true attitude, any given measurement contains errors that contribute to the perception that no true attitude actually exists.

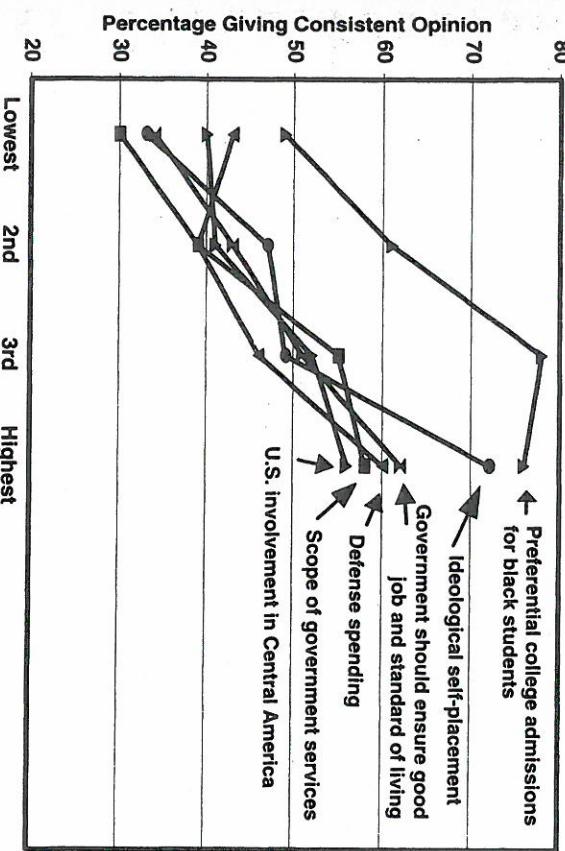
The dispute between the nonattitude and measurement-error camps is somewhat intractable; as Paul Sniderman and his colleagues have suggested, "the root issues are not methodological but ontological" (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991: 17). Both sides have very strong evidence in favor of their views. Citizens don't know much about many issues. And surveys certainly do have a great deal of measurement error in them. Can these two sources of instability be disentangled, and what does this tell us about the value of political knowledge?

Recent work by Stanley Feldman (1989) and Robert Erikson and Kathleen Knight (1993) suggests that political knowledge has a substantial impact on the extent of response variability in panel studies, a finding that favors the nonattitude thesis. Working with a five-wave panel survey from the 1980 presidential election, Feldman found general political knowledge to be a strong predictor of response stability for a wide range of attitudes. Erikson and Knight found that of several possible variables, "ideological literacy" (the ability to place the Democratic party and presidential candidates to the left of the Republicans) was the only consistent and statistically significant predictor of response variance (that is, stability and instability) in one's own self-reported ideological identification. They conclude that "the ideologically illiterate show a pattern closer to that of the classic non-attitude holder than one might think possible in empirical research. Not only do they display evidence of far more error variance, they also show very little true variance" (21–22). The authors uncover a similar, though somewhat weaker, relation between the stability of party identification and knowledge of which party controls Congress. Most of the change in party identification over the course of the panel they examined was error rather than true change, and it was concentrated among respondents who were unaware that the Democrats held a majority in Congress.

The clear relation between levels of political knowledge and opinion stability is evident in panel surveys of the National Election Studies con-

ducted in 1984 and 1990–91–92.<sup>21</sup> Identical versions of three seven-point opinion items (ranging from very liberal to very conservative responses) were asked on both interviews in each panel. To measure consistency, we recoded responses into three categories.<sup>22</sup> Respondents were considered to have a consistent opinion if they chose the same direction (left, right, or middle) as recorded by us, in both waves of interviewing. If they had no opinion in both waves, they were excluded from the analysis so as not to confound the holding of an opinion with the stability of opinions (see figure 6.3).<sup>23</sup>

Figure 6.3 Attitude Crystallization over Two Waves of a Panel Survey, by Knowledge Level



For three of the six items, only about a third of the least-knowledgeable quartile gave the same response in successive waves of interviewing. Among the best informed, an average of over 60 percent did so.<sup>24</sup> Overall stability was greatest, as one might expect, on a racial issue: preferential treatment for black applicants to college.<sup>25</sup> But even with this issue there was a 27-point difference in stability between the best and least informed—about the average for all issues. Compared with education, family income, interest in election campaigns, and general attention to politics, information was by far the strongest predictor of stable opinions.<sup>26</sup>

Response instability, a characteristic that has led many observers to

question how meaningful public opinion really is, is strongly related to political knowledge. On a variety of issues, better-informed citizens manifest more stable attitudes.<sup>27</sup>

### *Knowledge and the Responsiveness of Attitudes*

If well-informed citizens are more likely to have stable attitudes, or to have sophisticated heuristics for reasoning their way to more appropriate opinions on subjects about which they have given little or no thought, then it is also likely that they are better able to process new information and incorporate it into their belief systems. If this is true, what are the implications? On the one hand, better-informed citizens should be more likely to change their attitudes in response to certain kinds of critical information. On the other hand, they should be less susceptible to efforts to manipulate them, less vulnerable to propaganda, less affected by particular events or messages that are irrelevant, and less likely to manifest "response effects" in surveys. Evidence for these notions has been found in a variety of studies. Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1990) found that low-information respondents in a national survey were most susceptible to the way in which questions were framed. Acknowledging that the survey setting is artificial, the authors argue that it does mimic political debate in many respects: "The interference and probing that surveys necessarily impose resemble to some extent the way that citizens are provoked by politicians and political events outside the survey context" (1990: 99). Political actors, like survey researchers, have discretion over how public issues are framed.

Studies of presidential debates have also found that susceptibility to influence varies by level of information. In an examination of the impact of the presidential debates of 1980, David Lanoue (1992) found that voters who were in the lower to middle range on a political information scale were more likely than others to be influenced by the content of the debates and by the media interpretation of them. And in a study of voter reaction to the second presidential debate of 1992, we found that better-informed voters were considerably less likely than others to change their opinions of the presidential candidates as a result of viewing the debate. Among a panel of 104 undecided and weakly committed voters from the Richmond area, correlations between panelist's evaluations of the candidates before and after the debate were generally much higher for the best informed than for the least informed.

Of course, greater resistance to persuasion is not a good unto itself. A foolish consistency is more than the hobgoblin of little minds—in poli-

tics, it may also be the enemy of progress. Fundamental notions of liberal democracy—the discovery of truth through the exchange of ideas, deliberation, reconsideration—all imply that attitudes should change under certain circumstances. Political knowledge has a positive function in this process. In addition to helping citizens recognize and reject irrelevant information, knowledge should also promote a greater recognition of relevant information and facilitate its incorporation into belief systems. In broad terms, Zaller's model of the dynamics of public opinion supports this notion. One of his clearest examples is public opinion about the Vietnam war. Early in the war when most communication from elites was favorable toward U.S. involvement, public opinion was not very divided, even among the most-informed citizens. Later, when news and elite communication about the war was much more divided, public opinion became highly polarized—but only among those who were knowledgeable. Informed citizens with hawkish values were highly supportive of the war, while those with dovish values were not. Among the less knowledgeable, there was little difference between hawks and doves in terms of support for the war (Zaller, 1992: chap. 9).<sup>28</sup> A similar pattern of assimilation or rejection of elite messages and other information was observed for the issue of U.S. involvement in Central America during the mid-1980s (144–47).

Thus, political knowledge helps citizens make sense of the political world by providing them with a basis for evaluating new information in light of their own values. In many instances, this will mean that the attitudes of the well informed will be more durable. In others, however, it suggests that the knowledgeable citizen will be better able to recognize the relevance of new information and, when appropriate, adjust their attitudes and opinions accordingly.

### *Knowledge and the Structure of Attitudes*

To the extent that attitudes reflect the influence of a core value held by an individual, opinions on different but related issues should be consistent with one another. Conversely, if individuals develop attitudes with little or no guidance from more central political orientations and values, we would have little reason to expect opinions to be consistent with one another (Judd and Downing, 1990). Converse's original formulation of attitude constraint was predicated on the notion that specific attitudes derived from "some superordinate value or posture toward man and society, involving premises about the nature of social justice, social change, 'natural law,' and the like" (1964: 211).<sup>29</sup> If the link between atti-

tudes and values is facilitated by knowledge holding, the attitudes (or opinions) of better-informed citizens should be more internally consistent than those of the less informed.<sup>30</sup>

Consistency is also promoted in another, more socially constructed way. Citizens learn from political elites, interest groups, social movements, citizen activists, and from the political culture more generally, in Converse's words, "what goes with what" (1964: 212). Similarly, political elites take cues from the public in building political coalitions and developing political agendas. This social source of constraint is especially important in promoting consistency between attitudes that fall into disparate domains and for which a number of different core values could be relevant. For example, it is not necessarily obvious why a pro-choice position on abortion and support for gun control are both liberal views since they entail opposite notions of government involvement in the personal decisions of citizens. But interested groups and political leaders draw on a different set of values to forge the linkage (or consistency) between these issue positions. The tendency to aggregate somewhat disconnected opinions into fewer and simpler constructs is the inevitable outcome of the need to build governing coalitions and to provide platforms for political action. This aggregating process is especially important in a two-party system like the United States'. The national conversation through which these coalitions are formed is most likely to occur between political elites and the segment of the population most aware of elite opinion and most influential in shaping it through their participation. Thus, consistency within the public that mirrors the structure of conflict as it appears among activists and elites—whether the public's opinions were cause or effect—is apt to be greater among the better informed.

Previous research on the relation between attitude consistency and political knowledge has used a variety of methods and has produced fairly mixed evidence of a linkage.<sup>31</sup> The most direct approach was taken by James Stimson, who reasoned that if the debate over consistency was fundamentally about the dimensionality of attitudes—the extent to which opinions on the individual issues could be reduced to a simpler set of orientations—it should be possible to compare the consistency of belief systems among citizens of higher or lower knowledge through factor analysis. He divided the 1972 NES survey sample into four groups based on education and political knowledge and factor analyzed ten attitude variables within each group. The simplest structure was observed within the highest knowledge group, for whom only two factors were extracted.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, within the lowest knowledge group, four factors were extracted. Stimson concluded "that roughly the upper half in cognitive ability

[knowledge and education] seem to have structured their beliefs, at least on traditional political issues, around the left-right continuum. For the lower half, belief dimensions are more complicated, more issue-specific, less stable and less powerful" (1975: 411).

Using the 1988 NES survey, we replicated Stimson's analysis, making two modifications. First, we used our knowledge index (rather than an index of knowledge and education) to divide the sample into four groups. Second, we limited the items in the factor analysis to questions dealing with the role and scope of government in the socioeconomic sphere (for example, government services and spending, health care, spending on assistance to the unemployed). Consequently, we expected a unidimensional structure to emerge. The results of a principal components analysis of eight items show that among respondents in the lowest quartile of knowledge, three (mostly uninterpretable) factors emerged, while among the second and third quartiles two factors were extracted (see table 6.3). Only among the most knowledgeable quartile was a single factor observed. Clearly, a unidimensional liberal-conservative axis underlies the attitudes of the well informed on these questions, whereas the pattern for the less informed is much more ambiguous.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 6.3 Attitude Structure by Level of Political Knowledge**

Number of factors extracted	Knowledge Level			
	Lowest Quartile	2nd Quartile	3rd Quartile	Highest Quartile
Variance explained by first factor	30%	31%	37%	44%
Loadings of individual variables on first (unrotated) factor:				
Government services and spending	.27	.60	.68	.72
Spending on the unemployed	.69	.69	.74	.71
Spending on food stamps	.70	.59	.64	.69
Spending on the homeless	.62	.54	.67	.69
Government guaranteed job and good standard of living	.50	.56	.59	.67
Spending on minorities	.67	.63	.58	.66
Government role in health insurance	.30	.40	.49	.62
Spending on the schools	.47	.38	.42	.53

*Source:* 1988 National Election Study.

*Note:* Analysis was by method of principal components.

There is ample evidence that political knowledge is an important resource in the development of political opinions. Better-informed citizens hold more opinions, have more stable opinions, that are resistant to irrelevant or biased information (but are responsive to information that matters), and have opinions that are more internally consistent with each other and with the basic ideological alignments that define American politics.

### Political Knowledge and Enlightened Self-Interest

A healthy democracy requires a citizenry capable of knowing and expressing its interests and of doing so in the context of the broader public interest. Philosophers and theorists have long wrestled with the question of what is a citizen's political interest. Rightly enough, there is great reluctance to impute interests to individuals. At the same time, citizens clearly differ in the accuracy of their perceptions about the political world and about the likely impact of government policies on them, on important groups to which they belong, and on the polity more generally. Where perceptions on these matters are incomplete or inaccurate, we would question whether a citizen had fully comprehended his or her interest. The lack of sufficient information is one barrier to knowing one's interest. Another is incorrect information. Although political observers may debate the extent of "false consciousness" among the public—and few will offer an operational definition of it—most would agree that some citizens, on some issues, don't know their interest because they have been manipulated by others who, in Hamilton's words, "flatter their prejudices to betray their interests" (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 1787–88: #71).

We should reiterate that we do not see information or knowledge as the only determinant of a citizen's interest. One's views are based on norms and values rooted in belief systems only partially connected to the empirical world. In addition, the foundational issues of politics and society are inherently contestable (Connolly, 1983) and so cannot be solved through the technical appraisal of facts. Nonetheless, as with the other aspects of opinion formation examined in this chapter, factual knowledge can help facilitate the process by which values, attitudes, and beliefs are combined into the expression of political interests. These interests may be defined narrowly (what is in my best interest?) or more broadly (what is in the best interest of people like me? of the polity as a whole?), but to be meaningful, they must be based—at least partially—on an accurate understanding of the processes, people, and substance of politics.

Using data from the 1992 NES survey, we examined the group-level

sensus on important issues. Each individual brings a unique mix of personal experiences to his or her political calculus. Nonetheless, values, attitudes, and opinions do not develop in a vacuum, but rather are *socially constructed* out of material conditions and cultural norms. While some of these conditions and norms are likely to be similar for all members of a polity, many vary depending on one's particular socioeconomic location. For some issues at least, greater information is likely to lead to clearer and more consistent expressions of group interests.

The combined concepts of enlightened preferences and socially constructed opinions permit an empirical study of interests. If more-informed citizens are better able to discern their interests, and if material interests differ across groups in the population, it should be possible to detect the influence of information by comparing the opinions of better- and lesser-informed members of different groups. Specifically, we may look for three different but related phenomena. First, to what extent and under what conditions does knowledge sharpen the differences between groups, moving their members closer to positions that are arguably consistent with their group norms and material circumstances? Second, to what extent and under what conditions does knowledge encourage consensus building, moving citizens to positions that reflect a greater understanding of the circumstances of groups to which they do not belong? And third, to what extent and under what conditions do shifts in individual opinions collectively affect where the political center lies in the opinion environment? That is, does greater knowledge move the mean opinion a significant amount to the left or right?

A common theoretical approach to the identification of interests is through the notion of *enlightened preferences*. In this context, "enlightened" refers not to some absolute standard of what is right or just but rather to the conditions under which the individual chooses among available alternatives. For example, Robert Dahl writes, "A person's interest or good is whatever that person would choose with fullest attainable understanding of the experiences resulting from that choice and its most relevant alternatives" (1989:180–81). Similarly, Larry Bartel's (1990) work on interests draws on three theorists across the political spectrum, whose common theme is information: what would an individual choose if she or he had perfect information and could experience the results of choosing each alternative (Mansbridge, 1983; Connolly, 1972) or "saw clearly, thought rationally, [and] acted disinterestedly and benevolently" (Lippmann, 1955).

Greater information does not assure that citizens will reach a con-

ship and those who are economically more advantaged, the opinions of blacks and nonblacks, the opinions of men and women, and the opinions of younger and older citizens. We selected these groups because extant theory and research suggests that there are important material and cultural differences among members of different classes, races, genders, and age cohorts that should be and often are reflected in their expressed opinions about certain issues. We also selected them because the poor, minorities, women, and the young have been historically excluded from much of the public sphere and thus collectively have lacked many of the resources (including political knowledge) to effectively construct and articulate either their group interests or their notions of the broader public interest. We are not, of course, arguing that these are the only groups for which political knowledge is likely to be important in the construction of enlightened preferences. As evidence of this, we also compare the opinions of people who differ in their religious views.

In searching for the impact of political knowledge on group-level opinions, it is important to choose issues that are arguably relevant to the group characteristics in question—there is little *a priori* reason, for example, to expect men and women to differ systematically in their views regarding the trade or budget deficits. In the class and gender analyses, we looked at differences in opinions related to the proper scope of government in the area of social welfare, since theory and prior evidence suggest that economically troubled citizens and women are likely to draw on different values and experiences in evaluating such policies than are economically advantaged citizens or men. We also looked at gender differences in opinions about abortion—an issue of obvious relevance to women. For similar reasons we compared black and nonblack opinions on a racial attitudes scale, and the opinions of different age cohorts on such emerging social issues as gay rights, abortion, and the role of women. And we compared opinions about homosexual rights for three groups of respondents based on their views of the Bible.<sup>34</sup> In each case we reasoned that opinions on these issues are influenced by a number of factors, including an individual's social and demographic characteristics. However, the precise way in which one's social, economic, and political location affects opinions is likely to be mediated by how much one knows about politics. For example, how being African American affects one's views on social welfare is plausibly influenced not only by one's personal circumstances, but also by knowledge of how those circumstances have been affected by prior government policies, of the connection between personal circumstances and the history of blacks in America, of the current plight of other blacks, and so forth. Hence, to the extent that group

differences are influential in the construction and articulation of interests, we should be able to see this more clearly among the most knowledgeable individuals.

As a practical matter, the dearth of highly knowledgeable individuals in certain subgroups—for example, the poor and the uneducated—imposes limits on what we can learn simply by looking at those individuals in a typical opinion survey. Further, because opinions are likely to be affected by a variety of personal and demographic factors other than political knowledge, and because these factors vary within groups, it is necessary to control for these potentially confounding effects. For each of the analyses presented in the next section, we used multiple regression to estimate the impact of a set of twenty-two personal characteristics (for example, race, sex, age, income, marital status) and political knowledge on the particular attitudes of interest. The regression model also included interaction terms for political knowledge and each of the personal characteristics. These interactions permit an estimation of how knowledge affects the relation between personal characteristics and attitudes.<sup>35</sup> To simulate what the attitudes would be if all members of a group had a uniform level of knowledge, the regression coefficients from the model are used to compute an estimated attitude for each member of the group in the survey, using each person's actual data for all variables except political knowledge, which is imputed as either "uninformed" or "fully informed."<sup>36</sup>

For example, in the first analysis, two sets of estimates were computed: one assumed that everyone scored zero on the political knowledge scale, and the other assumed that everyone scored 28 (the highest possible score). Individuals were separated into three groups corresponding to the number of financial problems they had experienced in the past year. Each individual's score on each variable was inserted into the equation, along with the appropriate imputed knowledge score (zero or 28, depending on which analysis was being conducted) and the corresponding interaction terms for knowledge with the other variables. This led to an estimated attitude score for each person. These estimates were aggregated (as means) for each group and then plotted on a graph. The opinion scale, arrayed along the vertical axis, is based on factor scores. Thus, the mean score for the sample is zero, and scores are based on their deviation from the sample mean (for example, a score of 1.0 is one standard deviation above the sample mean). The scale for all graphs in this section ranges from -1.5 to +1.5 standard deviations. A fuller discussion of the methodology for this analysis is presented in Appendix 5.

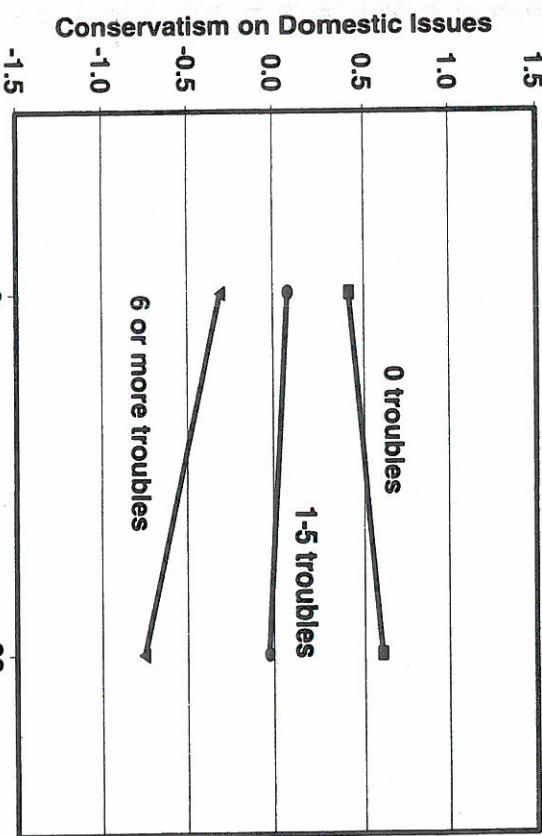
### *Political Knowledge and the Expression of Economic Interests*

Although the utility of class as an analytic concept in U.S. politics has long been debated, it is certainly true that citizens differ in their objective financial condition and in their need for certain types of government assistance. Accordingly, we followed a commonsense notion of group interest and hypothesized that economically distressed citizens, many of whom have direct experience with public assistance, would have different opinions regarding government social welfare programs and an expansive role for government than would citizens whose personal financial circumstances were more favorable. Further, and central to our argument, we anticipated that the opinions of less knowledgeable citizens within each group would be different from those of their more informed counterparts, since the latter should be better able to tie their objective conditions to larger societal and political circumstances and policies. This was precisely what we found.

The relation between opinions on an index of seven domestic issues and political knowledge for three groups of respondents in the 1992 National Election Study—those who had experienced no financial problems (about 16 percent of the sample), those who had experienced six or more problems (about 15 percent), and those in between (one to five problems; the median for the sample was three)—are shown in figure 6.4.<sup>37</sup>

After controlling for other factors, it is clear that group opinions about government's role in promoting social welfare are affected by how much citizens know about politics. Furthermore, the differences between better- and lesser-informed members of each group are substantively interpretable and intuitively plausible: knowledgeable individuals reporting no financial problems are more opposed to government social welfare than are their less knowledgeable counterparts. By contrast, knowledgeable individuals reporting six or more problems are considerably more liberal on these issues than are less knowledgeable individuals in similar economic circumstances. And for those in the middle, knowledge appears unrelated to opinion. The combined effect of knowledge on economically advantaged and disadvantaged citizens results in more polarized opinions among the better informed. Thus, political knowledge appears to facilitate a closer linkage between group interests and political attitudes. If all citizens were "fully informed" in 1992, opinions regarding social welfare policies and the role of government would have been more clearly aggregated into distinct ideological camps that were more closely tied to objective group conditions.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, there are collective consequences for a more broadly informed public. First, the range of opinion (as measured by the mean opinion of the groups) would expand significantly,

**Figure 6.4** Impact of Knowledge on Opinion, by Respondent's Financial Troubles



Note: Knowledge scale ranges from 0 (lowest possible score) to 28 (highest possible score).

broadening the public environment within which policy options are debated. And second, the net effect of these individual-level shifts would be to shift the mean opinion of the general public in a liberal direction (from zero to -.05 on the standardized opinion scale).<sup>39</sup>

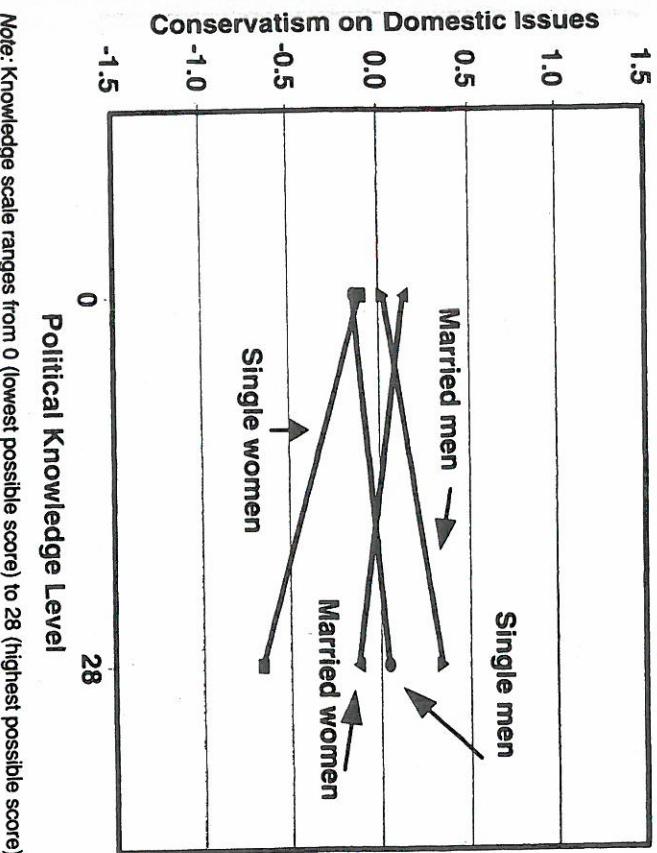
It is important to note that although our findings are consistent with traditional class-interest and false-consciousness arguments (that is, economically distressed individuals who are politically informed are more supportive of government assistance than either their less informed counterparts or more knowledgeable but financially secure citizens), nothing in the logic of our argument requires this particular pattern. It is certainly plausible, for example, that informed but economically distressed citizens might conclude that government assistance programs contribute to a cycle of dependence and a culture of poverty and thus oppose such programs. Similarly, economically advantaged and politically informed citizens might reasonably conclude that social welfare programs are valuable for the polity even if they themselves would not benefit directly. Enlightened preferences are based on the conditions under which opinions are constructed—most centrally the presence of relevant information that is equitably distributed—rather than the particular substance of the opinions that emerge from these conditions.

### *Political Knowledge and the Expression of Gender-Based Interests*

Numerous studies have documented the emergence of a gender gap in public opinion over the past fifteen years, most notably in the area of domestic social welfare policy (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986). Much of this gap is attributable to the divergent financial and social situations of men and women and the way the parties have responded to issues affecting women.<sup>40</sup> Overlaid on this are differences by marital status, which often reinforce the gender schism (Weisberg, 1987). To the extent that political interests differ by gender and marital status, we would expect to see these differences reflected in the expressed opinions of married men, married women, single men, and single women. And to the extent that knowledge facilitates the connection between political interests and public opinion, we would also expect differences between less and more informed members within each group. Whether the net effect of knowledge is to create greater polarization or greater consensus, however, depends on the specific way informed men and women define their group interests and the public interest more generally.

Among the least-informed citizens there are only modest differences in domestic political opinion among members of the four groups (married men, married women, single men, single women). As knowledge increases, however, both single and married men become slightly more conservative, while married women move slightly in the liberal direction and single women become quite a bit more liberal (see figure 6.5). These changes lead to a clear gender and marriage gap on domestic welfare issues among knowledgeable citizens. As with our economic analysis, a "fully informed" citizenry would have collective consequences, resulting in a public opinion environment that is more ideologically diverse and slightly more liberal (again, a shift of -.05 on the standardized scale).

Knowledge also promoted greater gender differences on the issue of abortion. On a four-issue abortion index, the overall attitudes of men and women were about the same, but as women become more knowledgeable (other factors being equal) they also become more supportive of abortion rights (see figure 6.6). Significantly, knowledge also promotes greater support for abortion rights among men—a pattern that could result from more knowledgeable men believing that a woman's right to choose is also in their interest or believing that the right to choose is legal and just regardless of their own interests. Although the effect for men is quite weak, it highlights the fact that increased knowledge need not always lead to movement in opposite directions among the groups in question. Nonetheless, because of the difference in the rate of change among women and

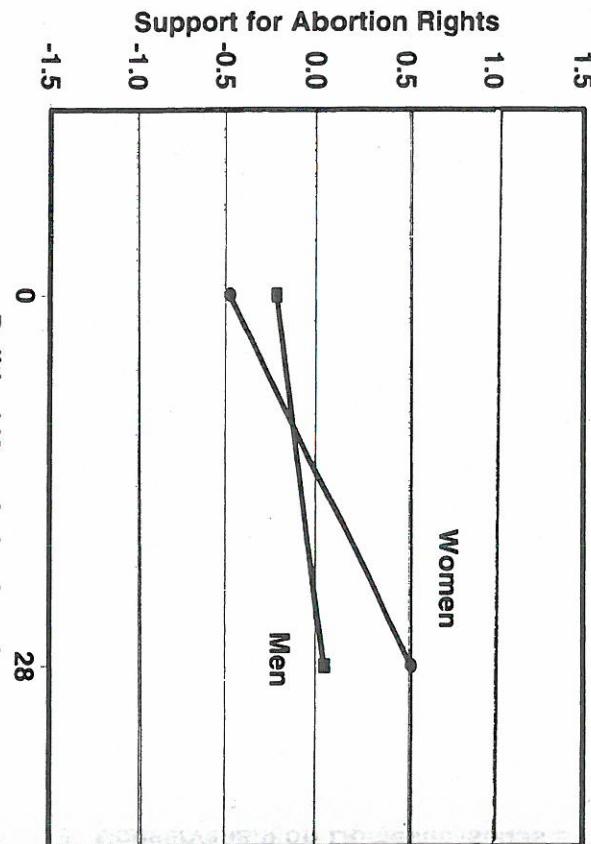


Note: Knowledge scale ranges from 0 (lowest possible score) to 28 (highest possible score).

men as knowledge rises, their relative position changes from one in which women are slightly more conservative than men to one in which women are considerably more liberal. The collective impact of a fully informed citizenry would be to shift the sample mean for attitudes on abortion in a liberal direction (from zero to +.30 on our scale).

### *Political Knowledge and the Expression of Age-Based Opinions*

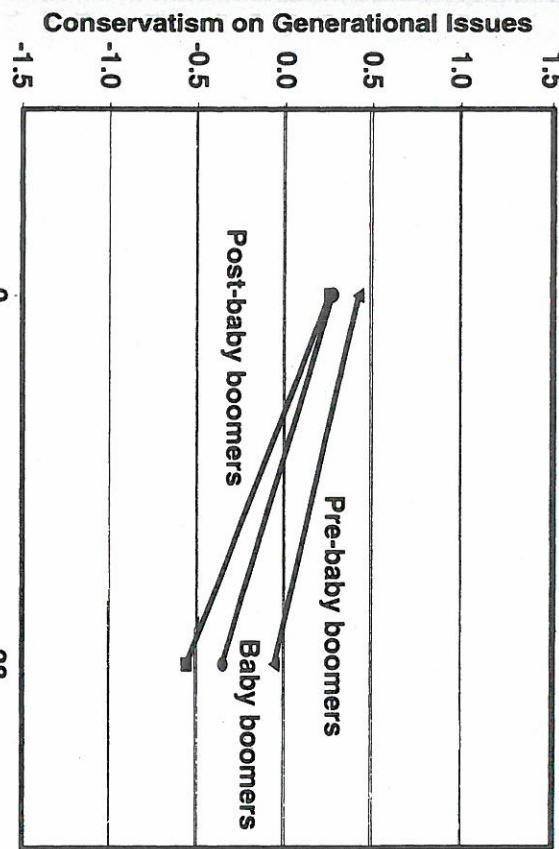
The political agenda is made up of numerous issues, some of which have endured over the centuries and others that have emerged out of new social and economic conditions. Although changes in the political agenda result from numerous factors, generational replacement is a key component (Delli Carpini, 1986; 1989). Younger citizens enter the political arena with values shaped by conditions and experiences different from those of the cohorts who preceded them. This, in turn, can lead to different notions of what government should do. At the same time, the conditions that produce changes in the political agenda are often experienced by all age cohorts (what are called "period effects"), suggesting the possibility of a more uniform shift in opinion as group members become more informed.

**Figure 6.6** Impact of Knowledge on Opinion about Abortion, by Sex

Note: Knowledge scale ranges from 0 (lowest possible score) to 28 (highest possible score).

Three political issues that have emerged over the last two decades and that are arguably driven in part by differences in generational worldviews and in part by more broadly experienced societal changes are abortion, gay rights, and the role of women in society. We created a scale of attitudes on these issues and divided survey respondents into three groups: post-boomers (born 1965 or later), baby boomers (born 1947–64), and pre-boomers (born before 1947). As with our other analyses, we expected opinion differences within each group to emerge as levels of political knowledge increased. Our expectations regarding differences across groups are less clear. To the extent that attitudes are based on age or generation, increased knowledge should lead to wider gaps in opinions across informed members of different age cohorts. To the extent that more broadly experienced conditions are driving the emergence of new issues, however, members of all age groups should move in a similar direction as knowledge increases.

Our analysis reveals that both cohort and period effects appear to be at work (see figure 6.7). Regardless of knowledge levels, the oldest cohort—the pre-boomers—is consistently the most conservative on these new agenda issues while the post-boomers are consistently the most liberal. All three groups, however, become more liberal as they become more knowledgeable. Further, because the knowledge effect is most pronounced for the post-boomers, the gap between them and the other groups is larger among the most knowledgeable segment. The net effect of a fully informed citizenry would be to shift the mean opinion of the public on these issues -.28 points in a liberal direction.

**Figure 6.7** Impact of Knowledge on Attitudes about Generational Issues, by Age Cohort

Note: Knowledge scale ranges from 0 (lowest possible score) to 28 (highest possible score).

#### *Political Knowledge and Opinions on Race*

Our final two analyses are particularly illuminating regarding the importance and the limits of political knowledge in the development of enlightened opinions. Government programs aimed at redressing the legacy of racial discrimination are among the most salient and divisive in American politics (Edsall and Edsall, 1991). Blacks and nonblacks differ markedly in their views about government's proper role in dealing with present and past racial discrimination and in their views about the reasons for the socioeconomic problems of African Americans. Research suggests several sources of these differences. Support for or opposition to race-based policies appears to be partially based on deep-seated attitudes (and prejudices)

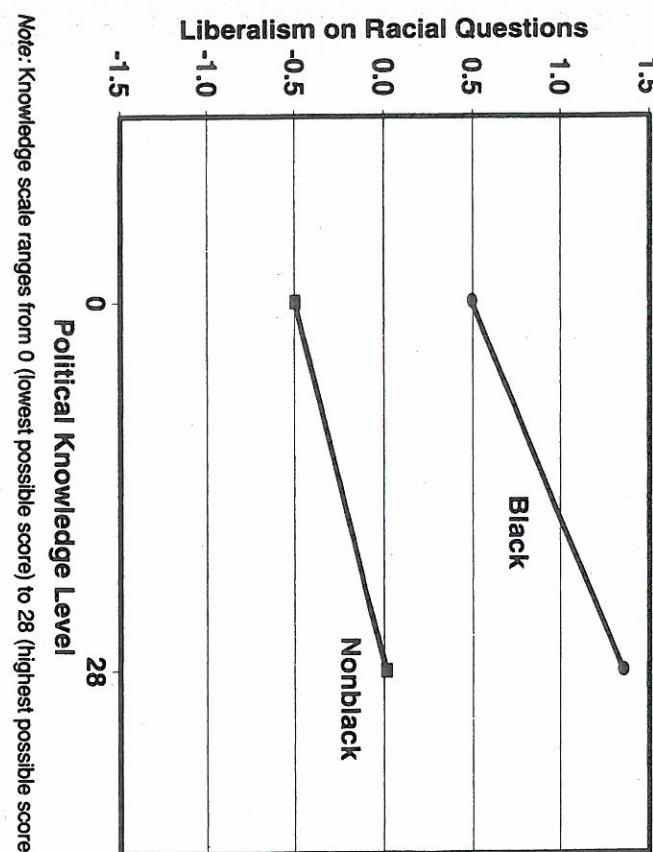
regarding the races and from simple calculations of individual or group self-interest (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Edsall and Edsall, 1991). Opinions regarding such policies are also rooted in a more complex array of values, such as ideological views about the scope of government, ethnocentrism, and notions of fair play (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993). In either event, connecting one's values to one's attitudes and opinions is eased by the obviousness of who benefits (directly, at least) from race-based policies. Indeed, race is often considered an "easy issue" because of its high salience and symbolic quality (Carmines and Stimson, 1989).<sup>41</sup>

To the extent that opinions regarding racial policies are salient, symbolic, and easily connected to underlying values, factual knowledge may play a minimal role in clarifying group interests. The sharp divide between black and nonblack opinion on this issue, and the relative stability of opinions about racial policies would seem to confirm this view. If we are correct in our argument that factual knowledge helps in grounding beliefs in historical and contemporary realities, however, then information should play a role in weakening prejudices based on misguided beliefs, in tailoring broad principles to specific circumstances, and in connecting values to specific government policies. Knowledge of the history of blacks in America, of the de jure and de facto discrimination they faced as a group, and of the current economic and social plight of a large proportion of blacks should affect the views of both blacks and whites.

The opinions of nonblacks on a four-issue racial opinion scale are, at all levels of knowledge, considerably more conservative than the opinions of blacks, a finding consistent with the notion of race as an easy issue for citizens to discern their group interests (see figure 6.8). But greater knowledge— independent of income, age, sex, education, and other factors— produces greater support for government efforts on behalf of blacks. Significantly, while the effect is weaker (though statistically significant) for nonblacks than for blacks, both groups become more liberal as knowledge levels increase.<sup>42</sup> The net effect of these shifts is to create a slightly greater opinion gap between informed blacks and nonblacks but collectively to move opinion in a direction more sympathetic to race-based government policies. (The mean opinion of a fully informed citizenry would be .18 points more liberal on our scale than the mean of the actual sample.)

#### *Political Knowledge, Religious Beliefs, and Support for Gay Rights*

Religiosity provides an interesting test of the role of political knowledge in connecting values and opinions in that for many citizens religious beliefs are based more on faith than reason. For these people, political



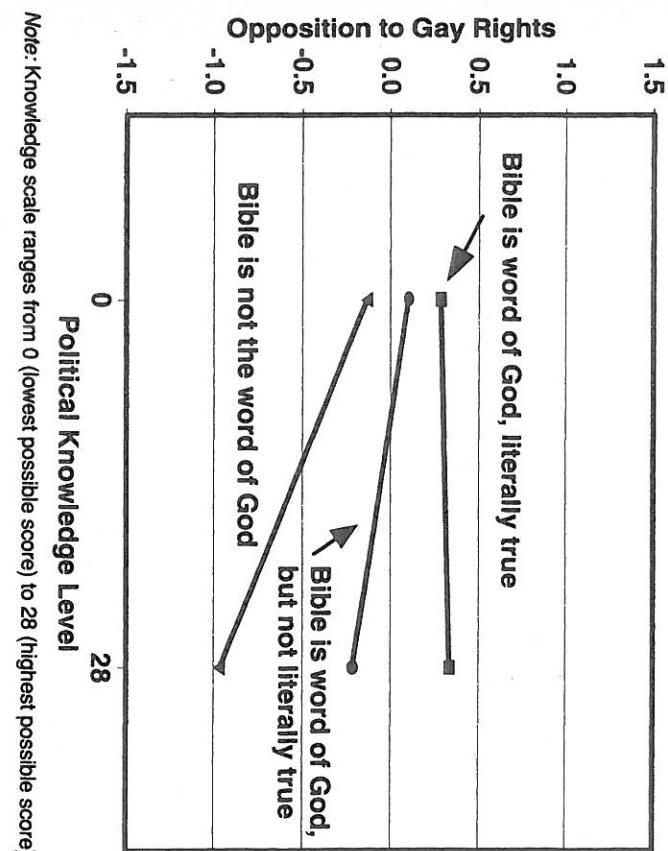
Note: Knowledge scale ranges from 0 (lowest possible score) to 28 (highest possible score).

knowledge is unlikely to affect opinions if those opinions have a religious rather than secular basis. One policy area where this is likely is gay rights. The most visible opponents to gay rights have been Christian conservative groups who see the Bible as the literal word of God, and who use the Bible as the basis of their opposition to homosexuality. Thus, citizens who are biblical literalists would be likely to draw on their religious beliefs (and on cues provided by their religious leaders) in constructing their opinions on this issue. Citizens who are religious but who do not read the Bible literally should be freer to base their political opinions on more secular values and beliefs. In addition, mainstream church organizations (whose followers tend not to be biblical literalists) have been divided over this issue, with some endorsing various rights for homosexuals and others remaining neutral. Thus, the opinions of believers who are not literalists should be more responsive to political information of the sort tapped in our surveys (for example, about civil rights and liberties). Finally, citizens who do not believe the Bible is the word of God (literal or not) should be the most likely to construct their opinions about gay rights on secular values and beliefs and so should be the most responsive to political information.<sup>43</sup>

To gauge the effect of knowledge on patterns of opinion across reli-

gious groups, we divided respondents into three groups according to their views on the Bible. We estimated the impact of political knowledge on the opinions of these groups, controlling for the impact of other demographic factors (figure 6.9). As expected, across all levels of knowledge biblical literalists are the most opposed to gay rights, those who do not believe the Bible is the word of God are the most supportive, and those who believe the Bible is the word of God but are not literalists are in the middle. Political knowledge promotes greater support for gay rights among the latter two groups, with the greatest effect occurring for those who do not believe the Bible is the word of God. Political knowledge has no significant impact on the views of the biblical literalists, however. Clearly, biblical literalists are connecting their religious values to their political opinions through beliefs that are less affected by secular concerns (and secular information). The pattern of responses demonstrates the political consequences of the biblical dictate, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God, the things that are God's." More generally, it demonstrates that certain political opinions are based on values and orientations (schemas, if you will) activated by beliefs unlikely to be affected by the type of political information measured in our surveys. Even with the lack of relation between opinions and political information among biblical literalists, the collective impact of a fully informed citizenry would be to increase the mean level of support for gay rights by .10 points.<sup>44</sup>

Taken together, these analyses of class, gender, age, race, and religion demonstrate that the ability of citizens to connect their personal needs and concerns with larger social and economic forces—to see, for example, that one's condition can arise from causes that extend beyond personal abilities and shortcomings—requires information of the sort tapped in our surveys. Such information becomes more necessary if citizens are to connect their individual and group conditions in a meaningful way to government action. The specific nature of the connection between knowledge and opinion is complex. Whereas in most instances more information leads one to support policies that benefit one's own group, there is also evidence that a broader understanding of the substance and dynamics of American politics might lead to consensus building, or at least movement in a similar direction, even on potentially divisive issues. Greater knowledge resulted in more support among older citizens for women's and gay rights, among men for abortion rights, and among whites for race-conscious government programs. It also promoted support for tolerant policies toward homosexuals among broad segments of the public. Indeed, the value of greater information is not only to better understand the political roots of one's own condition, but of the condition of others (see also



Popkin and Dimock, 1995). Information's role in the formation of opinions is not deterministic, but it emerges from its interaction with personal, group, and national notions of fairness and responsibility.

The individual-level impact of political knowledge also had tangible impacts on the collective opinion environment in which policy is debated. Were citizens fully informed, group interests would be more clearly articulated. Further, the range of opinions expressed—and thus the ideological and substantive space within which political discussion takes place—would expand significantly. Finally, the political center, as measured by the mean opinion on these issues, would shift in small but measurable ways. In short, the parameters of public discourse are affected by how informed or uninformed the public is.

#### *Political Knowledge and the Translation of Policy Views into Instrumentally Rational Attitudes*

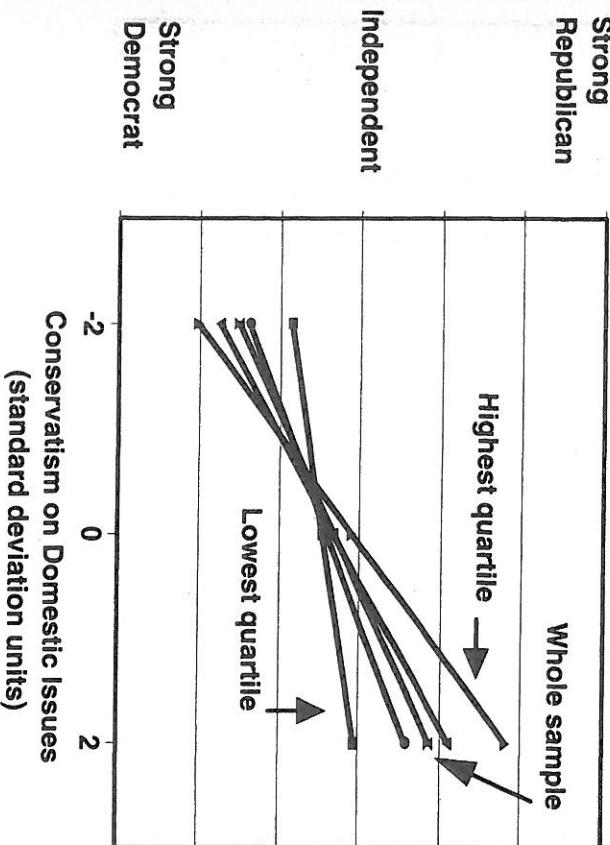
Although opinions on specific issues or policy areas can play a direct role in the actions of government, the realities of modern democracies

require that such opinions be aggregated into broader coalitions. Two critical ways this broader support is gauged are party identification and evaluations of the president's performance. We call these *second-order* opinions because they represent the aggregation of more specific evaluations about issues, candidates, and public officials. They also serve as an efficient means of articulating these aggregated views because evidence of the partisan makeup of the electorate and of the level of support for officeholders is critical in shaping the environment where policy is made. Finally, they serve an intervening role between *first-order* issue stands, such as those discussed above, and actual political behaviors, such as voting. Party identification in particular is a valuable heuristic in determining who to vote for and where to stand on issues about which one might lack relevant information (see chapter 1).

To illustrate the role of political information in the expression of instrumentally rational presidential approval and partisanship, we looked at the relation between issue attitudes and these second-order opinions for people with different levels of political knowledge.<sup>45</sup> We have already demonstrated that political knowledge can affect the direction of opinions; for the present analysis we will take a citizen's opinions as a given. Our question is: how does knowledge affect the relation between attitudes and party identification, or between attitudes and ratings of the president? The relation between party identification and opinions on the domestic issues index is shown in figure 6.10. One line on the graph shows the relation for citizens who are at the mean level of knowledge; the others show the relation for citizens at the midpoint of each of the four quartiles of knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

For the entire sample, mean Republican identification increases (moving up on the y-axis) as opinions become more conservative (moving to the right on the x-axis). But this aggregate relation conceals a great deal. Party identification among the least-knowledgeable quartile of citizens shows little relation with their stands on issues, ranging from a predicted mean of "leaning Democrat" among the most liberal citizens to "independent-independent" among the most conservative. As we move up through the quartiles of knowledge, the connection becomes progressively stronger. Clearly, knowledge is an important factor in forging a link between views on issues and one's choice of a party. This, in turn, suggests that the value of partisanship as a short cut to political decision making is dependent on citizens' ability to base that partisanship on more specific political information.

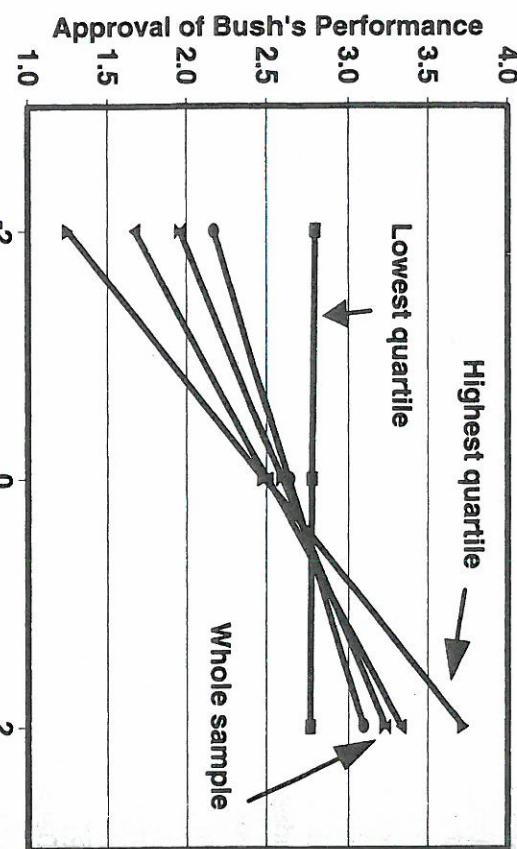
Presidential approval depends to a greater extent than party identification on short-term and nonideological factors. Still, popular control of public policy requires that presidents (and other elected officials) act on



their own issue stands and party platforms. To the extent that they do so, some citizens should like what they are doing while others will not. To be a useful indicator of the public's satisfaction with the substantive performance of a president, approval should depend in part on citizens' views on important issues. The estimated mean approval of President Bush in 1988 shows that for the least-knowledgeable quartile, views on domestic issues were unrelated to opinions of presidential performance, but for the most knowledgeable the relation was very strong (see figure 6.11).<sup>47</sup>

What is the political significance of this finding? Public approval is an important political resource; it strengthens a president's ability to negotiate with Congress as well as with other political elites (Neustadt, 1976; Kornell, 1986). It also serves as an important check on government action (and inaction), giving citizens a political voice during the critical years between elections when policy is actually made and implemented. Political knowledge increases the likelihood that approval ratings are tied to citizens' views on issues, sharpening the communications between the public and elected officials by providing more substantively meaningful cues to political elites.

**Figure 6.11** Impact of Domestic Opinion on Approval of George Bush in 1988, by Knowledge Level



they themselves want. An instrumentally rational vote requires consistency between citizens' opinions on issues and their vote.<sup>50</sup> Although we do not wish to argue that voting based on candidate qualities is misguided (surely everyone who is rational wants an honest and competent president), what elected officials do while in government ought to be at least as important as their personal qualities if the notion of republican government is to be meaningful.<sup>51</sup> If a citizen favors more government spending to assist the poor, a rational vote is usually for a Democratic candidate.<sup>52</sup> For someone who favors greater defense spending, in most elections that means she should vote for a Republican candidate. More generally, if citizens can meaningfully identify themselves—and the two parties or candidates—as conservative or liberal, what constitutes a rational vote is easy enough to infer.<sup>53</sup>

To explore the role of political knowledge in promoting issue-consistent voting, we built a simple presidential candidate choice model and tested it with data from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 National Election Studies. As we are concerned with determining which voters choose the candidate whose views are most consistent with their own, the only variables in the model are political knowledge and three opinion measures: attitudes on domestic policy (the additive index used earlier), foreign policy (an additive

index of military and foreign issues like defense spending), and self-described liberal-conservative ideology.<sup>54</sup> Unlike models designed to explain the full range of factors that determine an individual's vote choice, we included no measures of partisanship, retrospective evaluations of the incumbent president, or perceptions of candidate personal qualities.<sup>55</sup>

We used two approaches to estimate the role of political knowledge in promoting issue-consistent voting. Both methods tell the same story, but they provide slightly different ways of summarizing the effect of information and dealing with alternative explanations. One method involved splitting the sample into groups according to level of political knowledge and estimating the model separately for each level. The other approach included interaction terms for knowledge by each of the three attitudes.<sup>56</sup> If the impact of attitudes is greater for better-informed citizens, we would expect the interaction terms to be positive and significant. In both approaches, the coefficients for the model were estimated using maximum likelihood logistic regression.

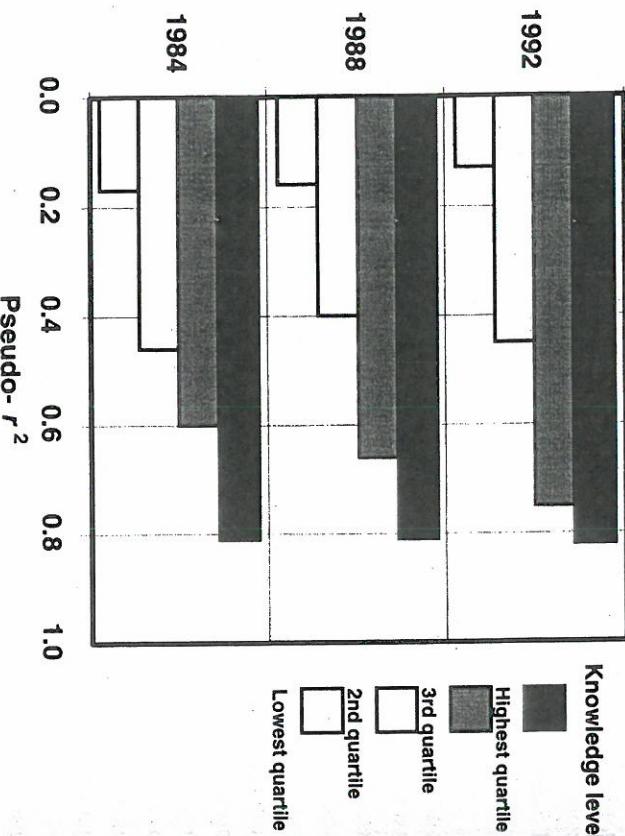
The effect of information is dramatic. The effectiveness of the model in explaining variation in presidential votes in 1984, 1988, and 1992 for four groups (quartiles) of voters divided on the basis of their scores on the knowledge index is shown in figure 6.12.<sup>57</sup> The figure plots the pseudo- $r^2$  of the model at each level of knowledge. The better we can predict how a

### Issue-Consistent Voting

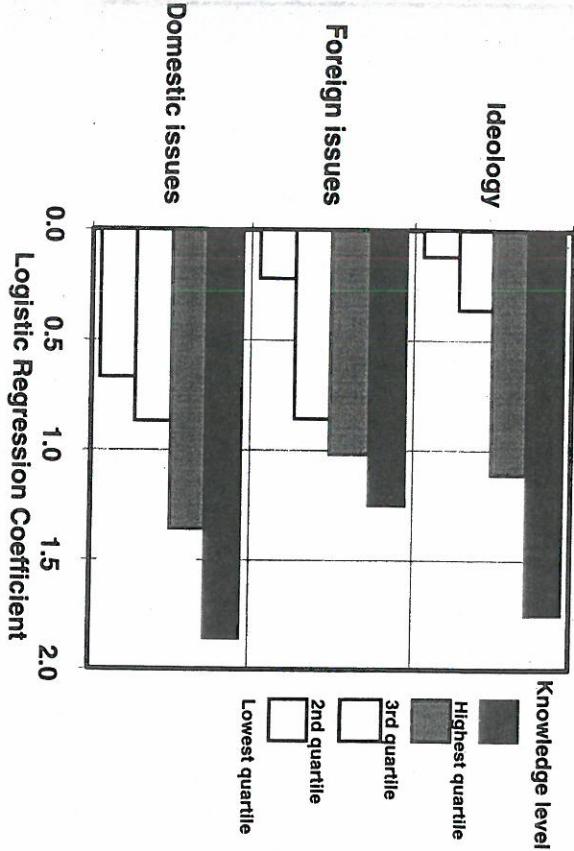
In order to cast a vote that expresses their political views, voters must be aware of both what the candidates (or the parties) stand for and what

citizen will vote simply by knowing his or her stands on issues, the higher the pseudo- $r^2$ . Among the least-informed quartile of voters, the pseudo- $r^2$  for the model was 17, 16, and 13 percent for the three elections. By contrast, among the best informed, it was 81 percent in 1984 and 1988, and 82 percent in 1992.<sup>58</sup>

**Figure 6.12** Variance of the Vote Explained by Issues and Ideology, by Information Level, 1984–92



**Figure 6.13** Importance of Issues and Ideology by Level of Knowledge, 1988 Presidential Election



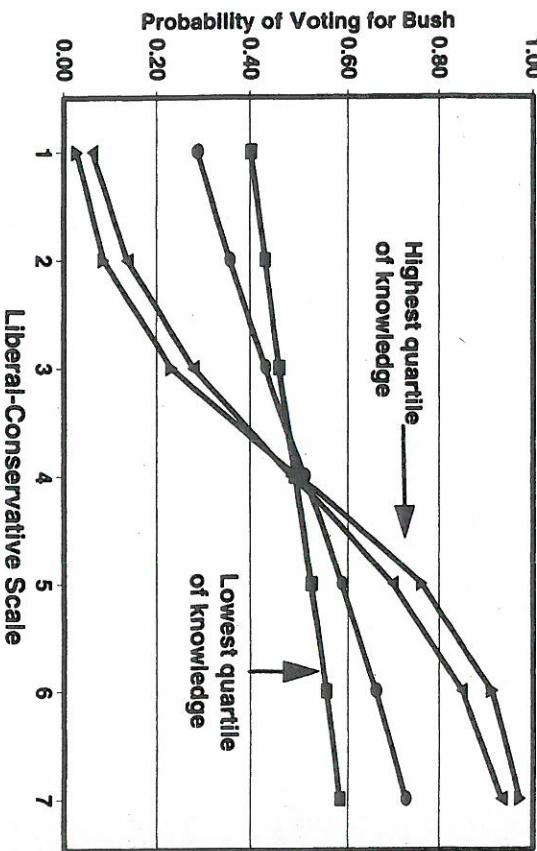
The relative value of political knowledge is clearly evident in figure 6.12. It is also evident in figure 6.13, which shows the strength of the association between the vote and each of the three types of attitudes—domestic and foreign issues, and ideology.<sup>59</sup> Among the least-informed fourth of the voters, only their domestic policy attitudes were a statistically significant predictor of the vote. As knowledge increased, all the coefficients grow and become significant. Each additional increment of knowledge tightens the connection between attitudes and the vote.

An analysis of the relation between the respondents' self-described ideology and the estimated probability of a vote for George Bush in 1988 shows the catalyzing effects of political knowledge on voters' ability to employ ideology in their evaluations (see figure 6.14). The logistic regression models for each of the four knowledge groups were used to produce

the estimates. To isolate the effects of ideology, the scores for the domestic and foreign policy variables were set at their means. For the least knowledgeable quartile of voters, the probability of a vote for George Bush rose relatively little as the respondents' self-described conservatism increased. In contrast, for the best informed, the model forecasts an almost certain Bush vote for the most conservative respondents, and an almost certain Dukakis vote for the most liberal.

Results of the other method of estimation—using the interaction terms between knowledge and attitudes—tell the same story but also make possible a test of plausible rival explanations for what appears to be a knowledge effect. Based on these tests, it is clear that the effect we observe is of knowledge and not of cognitive ability or political engagement, both of which are related to but different from knowledge. Cognitive ability is poorly measured in the NES surveys, but possible surrogates include education and interviewer-rated intelligence. Both of these, as well as a summary measure of political engagement (for example, political interest and attention to the media), were tested. When the knowledge index and its interaction terms were not included in the models, intelligence formed a modest interaction with ideology, and engagement did so with foreign attitudes and ideology (significance levels of .06 to .08). But when political knowledge interaction terms were also included in the model—providing

**Figure 6.14** Knowledge and the Impact of Ideological Self-Identification on the Vote



a head-to-head test—the rival interaction terms were nonsignificant and exceedingly weak. It is knowledge, independent of interest or cognitive ability, that makes issue-consistent voting possible.<sup>60</sup>

The fact that we can correctly forecast nine out of ten presidential votes among well-informed citizens (the top quartile) using only simple measures of their opinions on issues, and with no reliance on variables closer to the vote decision (for example, approval of the incumbent, perceptions of the candidates, economic evaluations, or partisanship), strongly suggests that, for this segment of the population, issue voting is alive and well and that the voter's information level is the key factor in determining who engages in it. In the three most recent presidential elections, voting by well-informed citizens—not a tiny elite but those able to answer most of the relatively simple and straightforward knowledge items—was issue consistent and highly predictable. Also encouraging, and consistent with our argument that the value of knowledge is relative, is that even modestly informed voters are able to connect their issue stands to their vote, though not with the same precision as more informed citizens. For the substantial portion of citizens who are poorly informed, however, voting was poorly connected to their views on issue, thus weakening the collective political impact of their participation.

Although our model indicates that issues matter even to the less informed, its overall performance for these voters—in terms of votes correctly predicted—was weak. What other factors enter into their decisions? Many studies of vote choice have found evidence that economic concerns influence the vote, either through the voter's perception of the economy's performance, the voter's personal financial condition, or both. The evidence for the role of the economy is strong, both in individual-level analyses and in aggregate data. Vote-forecasting models that rely primarily on changes in economic conditions are often uncannily accurate, rivaling election-eve surveys (Fair, 1988; Tufts, 1978; Rosenstone, 1983; Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1992; Campbell, 1992).

At the individual level a principal question about economic effects is the extent voting is influenced by personal economic circumstances—so-called egocentric voting—as opposed to one's views of the national economy—so-called sociotropic voting (Welch and Hibbing, 1991; Kiewiet, 1983; Kinder, Adams, and Gronke, 1989).<sup>61</sup> This distinction is especially relevant to our concerns for two reasons. First, one's personal economic circumstances, in the absence of considerations of how those circumstances are tied to the performance of the national economy, would seem a relatively poor mechanism for evaluating candidates. Second, sociotropic voting, because it evaluates candidates on the basis of collective rather than individual concerns, is not only arguably more politically relevant, but is also more communally driven: public rather than private interests determine one's political actions.

To examine the way knowledge affects economic influences on presidential voting in 1988, we added two economic measures to our model: perceptions of how the U.S. economy had changed in the past year (a five-point scale from much better to much worse), and changes in the respondent's personal economic circumstances (also a five-point scale). Consistent with the work of other researchers, we found evidence of sociotropic but not egocentric voting for the sample as a whole. But this general pattern masked important differences among those with different levels of political knowledge. Personal financial conditions were significantly associated with the vote for the lowest information quartile, but perceptions of the national economy were not. Moving up through the information quartiles, the independent impact of personal circumstances diminishes to insignificance, while the coefficient for national economic perceptions becomes significant (the role of issues and ideology remains roughly as it was without the economic terms included). Equally telling,

among the least-informed voters, adding the economic variables to the model improved the pseudo- $r^2$  substantially: it rose from 16 percent to 25 percent. The economic terms, however, improve the overall explanatory power of the model very little for voters above the mean in political knowledge.

These results suggest that for many of the least-informed citizens, for whom the substantive positions of the candidates (and indeed, their own views) are indistinct, voting in 1988 was based on simple retrospective evaluations that rewarded or punished the incumbent party depending on personal circumstances—at best a crude and self-centered measure of the quality of representation. Among better-informed voters, personal economic circumstances did not make an independent contribution to the vote. Rather, they tended to use national economic conditions (a heuristic arguably more politically relevant and collectively oriented) as one piece of a more complex decision-making process.<sup>62</sup>

These findings—that changes in personal financial conditions have a greater independent impact on the vote of less knowledgeable citizens than of those with greater knowledge—may appear contradictory to the notion of group interests put forth earlier. In that analysis, we described the impact knowledge had on the relation between personal financial problems and opinions on domestic issues, arguing that knowledge appears to lead to greater congruence between attitudes and objective group interests. We do not believe these results are incompatible. First,

unlike the current analysis, which focuses on relatively short-term evaluations of one's financial condition, the economy, and the performance of public officials, our earlier analysis examined more deep-seated notions of both class and politics. Issue attitudes dealing with broad questions of the proper scope of government are more basic and enduring political orientations than is the decision to vote for a particular candidate for president. Similarly, the measures of financial hardship used in our earlier analysis (putting off medical treatment, having to take a second job, receiving federal aid such as food stamps, and so forth) tap more long-term, structural aspects of economic status than do relative evaluations of one's personal financial circumstances.

Second, it is not our argument that self-interest—whether defined in class or individual terms—is irrelevant to the political decision making of better-informed citizens. Rather, its primary impact is indirect, interacting with broader considerations of the state of the nation and of the real and preferred actions of government. As evidence for this, consider the relation between our economic troubles scale, evaluations of the condition of the national economy, and the 1992 presidential vote (table 6.4). The data

in this table shows the percentage voting for George Bush among four different groups of voters, divided according to whether or not they saw the economy as having gotten worse, and whether or not they had experienced four or more financial problems in the past year. It is clear that both personal circumstances and perceptions of the national economy independently affect the vote. But one pattern is especially noteworthy. Among less knowledgeable citizens who experienced financial problems, Bush received little support (around one-fifth of the vote) regardless of their views of the national economy. But among the more knowledgeable citizens who had financial problems, views of the national economy made a significant difference in the vote. Among those who saw the economy declining, only 14 percent voted for the president. But among those who saw the national economy as unchanged or improved, Bush received a respectable 45 percent of the vote. Clearly, citizens evaluated the candidates on the basis of their self-interest. But for more informed citizens, it was, to use de Tocqueville's phrase, self-interest *properly understood*.

**Table 6.4** Percent Voting for Bush, by Personal Financial Problems and Perceptions of the National Economy, 1992 Presidential Election

Personal finances	Knowledge level: bottom half		Knowledge level: top half	
	National economy is better or same		National economy is better or worse	
	< 4 troubles	4 or more troubles	< 4 troubles	4 or more troubles
55%	29%	67%	35%	
19%	21%	45%	14%	

Source: 1992 National Election Study.

#### *The Situational Impact of Knowledge: A Case Study of the Abortion Issue*

Our analysis of NES data shows the electoral importance of issues for knowledgeable citizens when opinions are summarized into foreign and domestic indexes. Our assumption, supported indirectly by controlling for the impact of general political interest and cognitive ability, is that specific information relevant to the issues at hand drives a good deal of this relation. We tested this assumption more directly with data from a 1989 Virginia survey.

Abortion is a useful topic for examining the role of information in issue voting. Few issues have commanded as much attention or generated as much controversy. The two major parties in the United States have

taken nearly opposite positions on the issue over the past several presidential elections. The abortion issue has also figured prominently in several subnational races (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox, 1994), perhaps most notably the 1989 gubernatorial election in Virginia. The Democratic candidate, Lieutenant Governor L. Douglas Wilder, campaigned on a platform promising that no restrictions would be placed on abortion in Virginia. His opponent, former state Attorney General Marshall Coleman, favored major restrictions. Wilder won the election by fewer than 7,000 votes, becoming the nation's first elected black governor.

Interest in the abortion issue in Virginia was not confined to activists: most voters said they were concerned about it. Fifty-nine percent of registered voters surveyed near the time of the election said the issue was "very important" to them (and another 23 percent said it was "somewhat important").<sup>63</sup> But despite considerable attention to the campaign in general and the abortion issue in particular, fewer than four in ten (36 percent) of the respondents were aware of both candidates' stands on abortion (another 22 percent were aware of only one candidate's stand). Knowledge, or lack thereof, was critical to the ability of citizens to connect their attitudes with their vote. Even among those who said the abortion issue was very important to them, knowing their personal opinion about abortion was nearly useless in predicting their vote if they did not know where the candidates stood: the correlation between the vote and a four-point abortion-opinion scale for these individuals was a meager .05. In contrast, for those who felt the abortion issue was very important and who knew both candidates' positions, the correlation was a striking .74. In this group, 87 percent of those who opposed any new restrictions on abortion said they would vote for Wilder. Of those who favored major restrictions, only 6 percent would vote for him.<sup>64</sup>

Research by Alan Abramowitz provides corroborating evidence at the national level. Although there was relatively little discussion of abortion in the 1992 presidential election, survey evidence suggests that abortion was a critical issue for many voters. Among the one-fourth of the electorate (excluding Perot voters) who were aware of the candidates' relative positions on abortion and who evidenced concern about abortion by mentioning it at least once in the open-ended questions about the parties and candidates, abortion outweighed all other issues—including economic concerns—in its impact on the vote (Abramowitz, 1995: 183–84). The situational value of knowledge is clear. In both the state and national contexts, specific knowledge of candidate positions (coupled with concern about the issue) makes issue voting possible.

#### *The Collective Consequences of Political Ignorance: Evidence from the 1988 Presidential Election*

A critical consequence of a lack of information is the potential for citizens to misperceive what the government does or does not do. In many ways, the 1988 election was a referendum on the Reagan administration, without the confounding effects of Reagan's personal charisma. An interesting set of questions on the 1988 National Election Study regarding Reagan administration policies allows a glimpse of policy misperceptions and their consequences. Respondents were asked what the federal government had done during the past eight years. The survey questions did not refer to particular pieces of legislation or executive acts, but rather to the nature of government efforts in four important policy areas: federal spending on assistance to the poor, federal spending on public schools, government spending on defense, and federal efforts to improve and protect the environment. For each, the alternative responses were that government efforts or spending "increased," "stayed about the same," and "decreased" (respondents could also say they had not followed the issue). Respondents were then asked what they thought the government should have done. The combination of the questions makes it possible to sort respondents according to their perceptions of the government's actions and whether they approved or disapproved. For example, on the question of government efforts to clean and protect the environment, one group is composed of those who said the government had decreased its efforts in this area and who also disapproved of this action. For each of the categories on the four issues we computed the percentage of voters who cast their votes for George Bush (table 6.5).

**Table 6.5** The Link between Perceptions and Vote

Perception of National Government Action and Respondent's Opinion about the Perceived Action	Voted for	Voters for	Voters for	Voters for	Voters for			
	Bush (%)	Bush (%)	Bush (%)	Bush (%)	Bush (%)			
Haven't paid attention	51	20	56	10	59	19	57	23
Increased and I approve	75	24	74	43	65	19	66	21
Decreased and I disapprove	27	23	40	2	23	25	31	24
Stayed the same, but should have increased	53	21	50	2	35	16	43	19
Stayed the same, and I approve	64	7	68	4	83	9	72	6
Decreased and I approve	67	2	56	1	79	5	71	3

**Table 6.5** The Link between Perceptions and Vote (*continued*)

Perception of National Government Action and Respondent's Opinion about the Perceived Action	Environmental Protection for Voters	Defense Spending for Voters	Spending on the Poor for Voters	Spending on Public Schools for Voters
	Voted for Bush (%)	Voted for Bush (%)	Voted for Bush (%)	Voted for Bush (%)
Increased and I disapprove	47	2	25	37
Stayed the same, should have decreased	—	0	67	1
N	971	955	928	937

Source: 1988 National Election Study.

There is a strong relation between disapproving of Reagan's policies and voting against George Bush. However, the instrumental rationality of this vote is sharply curtailed by misperception of what actually occurred during the Reagan-Bush years. Eighty percent of voters correctly perceived that defense spending increased during the Reagan years. But only a quarter to a third of voters knew that federal efforts on behalf of the environment, the poor, and the schools declined during this period.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, of the 60 to 68 percent of voters who believed that federal aid in these three domestic policy areas should have increased, substantially less than half knew that it had not. Perhaps most strikingly, a sizable minority of the voting public (from one-fifth to one-fourth) thought the federal government had increased spending on the environment, the poor, and schools and said they approved of that action. In each case, a large majority of these citizens voted for Bush—in essence to continue policies that were the opposite of what they wanted. Even among respondents whose personal situations would lead to the expectation of a Democratic vote—those with incomes below \$20,000 and those who were worse off financially than one year before—about one-fifth fell into the misperceiving group, and majorities (56–60 percent) voted for Bush. Inattention was also consequential. A group comparable in size to the misperceivers said they had not paid much attention to these issues. For the items on spending for defense, the poor, and the public schools, majorities of these inattentive individuals reported voting for Bush.

In this chapter we have documented a range of sizable differences in the political opinions and behaviors of well and poorly informed citizens. These differences are manifested in several important ways. Much of the public lacks adequate information about basic democratic norms and may,

as a consequence, be less committed to those norms. Poorly informed citizens hold fewer, less stable, and less consistent opinions. They are more susceptible to political propaganda and less receptive to relevant new information. They are less likely to connect objective group conditions to their policy views or to connect their policy views to evaluations of public officials and political parties in instrumentally rational ways. Poorly informed citizens are less likely to participate, and when they do participate, they are less likely to tie their actions effectively to the issue stands and political orientations they profess to hold. Because so many of these differences bear on the issue of political power, a key implication of these findings is that the maldistribution of political knowledge has consequences: it threatens the basic democratic principle of political equality among citizens.

Although these findings would be troubling under any circumstances, they are especially so because political knowledge is not randomly distributed in the population. The very groups who are disadvantaged economically and socially are also less politically informed and, thus, disadvantaged in the struggle over the political allocation of scarce goods, services, and values. The net result is a less effective translation of their collective interests into public opinion and political behavior. Whether examining such attitudes as party identification, such opinions as the approval ratings of the president, or such behaviors as vote choice, the more informed one is, the more likely one is to send clear, policy-oriented messages to political elites (Althaus, 1994). To the extent that political elites respond to such signals—a central tenet of any theory of representative democracy—informed citizens are likely to have their concerns taken more seriously.

Despite the real challenge presented by these findings, there is good news as well. The benefits of political knowledge are not out of the reach of ordinary Americans. As Philip Converse has observed, a major argument against radical notions of the social contract and consent of the governed in the late eighteenth century was that “the common ‘citizen’ simply lacked the information necessary for any sensible contribution to debates over the grand policies of state,” and that even if provided with adequate information, most citizens would be unable to make wise or efficient use of it (1990: 369). The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that such pessimism is not warranted. Although it is demonstrably true that many citizens are innocent of any but the most trivial political cognitions, many others—perhaps a large minority—appear knowledgeable enough to shoulder the responsibilities of republican government quite well.

Taken together, our findings constitute powerful evidence that a rational, informed public, acting in ways consistent with classical norms of citizenship, is not an unrealistic ideal for America. Consider the best-informed quartile of citizens from the surveys we examined. This group is certainly not superhuman—they are, for the most part, simply people who have been afforded the social and economic benefits promised by the American dream. Yet they were highly likely to express a considered, genuine opinion on most issues—as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that a majority of them provided the same response when asked the questions months later, and by the fact that their opinions on related questions of the appropriate scope of government activities in the domestic sphere were highly interrelated, just as is the case among political elites. This group was also highly likely to vote (80 percent did so in 1988). The vast majority of voters in this group chose a presidential candidate whose views were consistent with theirs on a range of issues. By almost any standard of democratic behavior, these are desirable characteristics and would, taken together, satisfy quite rigorous standards for a rational public. That they are exhibited by a sizable minority of the public—citizens who also hold jobs, raise children, and pursue other interests in life—suggests that substantial improvement in the quality of our democracy is surely attainable without extraordinary or unrealistic changes in the citizens or the system.<sup>66</sup>

The implications of our findings for improving civic literacy depend in large part on the extent to which good citizenship is a result of knowledge rather than other civic characteristics. Our belief that knowledge is the critical factor is based on two considerations. First, in all of the analyses, plausible alternative explanations were tested statistically, usually in head-to-head contests with knowledge. In all instances knowledge emerged as the principal factor accounting for the behavior. We do not claim that simply by “injecting” adequate political information into less informed citizens, they would promptly manifest the qualities of citizenship that are related to political knowledge. Yet the interconnectedness of political interest and motivation, knowledge, and participation strongly suggest that a boost in any of these elements would lead to gains in the others.

Second and more important, for all of the phenomena we examined, a strong theoretical case exists that knowledge promotes or facilitates the behavior in question. Tolerance is logically higher among citizens who are aware of constitutional provisions for civil liberties. Attitudes about issues are doubtless more stable and better connected to values and interests among citizens who know a lot about the issues. Instrumentally rational voting behavior must be more common among citizens who know how

candidates stand on the issues that matter to them. And perceptions of one's interests, and how the political world affects them, must be clearer for citizens whose views are not, as Robert Lane put it, morselized or personalized (1962).

The behavior and capabilities of the public are important not only for their role in empowering (or enfeebling) individual citizens. They also set the context for the behavior of public officials and other political actors. Numerous observers have remarked on the deplorable state of contemporary public discourse over issues and the trivial and misleading style of election campaigns. These problems could be mitigated by broader and deeper public comprehension of politics. The irony is that such improvement on the public's part probably cannot occur without substantial change in the behavior of political elites. As long as the latter have incentives to polarize the public with false choices (Dionne, 1991), or to shroud themselves in ambiguity that leads ill-informed voters to view them simply as moderates (Alvarez and Franklin, 1994), it will be difficult for the public to learn what they need to learn. The public's gullibility increases the incentives for elites to employ such tactics. The consequence of this is, as E. J. Dionne, Jr., has argued, ineffective and often paralyzed government, which leads in turn to cynical and withdrawn citizens who are even more susceptible to the techniques of modern campaigns (Dionne, 1991; Entman, 1989). There is no magic way out of this conundrum. But we hope this chapter, and indeed all of what we have attempted to demonstrate in this book, show that the goal of an informed citizenry is not utopian, and that the effort to achieve one is well worth the effort.