

How Do Citizens “Reason” about Politics and “Learn” in a Political Context?

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Teaching Agenda

- 1 Information, Persuasion & Political Communication networks
- 2 Role of Endogenous Preferences in Reasoning
- 3 Explicit Self-Interest in Reasoning
- 4 Do Citizens Learn in a Political Context?

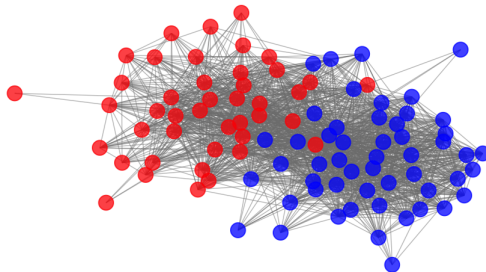
Citizen Reasoning & Learning Question



Motivating Question

How do you think citizens “reason” and “learn” about politics? In a democracy, what do you think the fundamental role of the “group basis” is for representation?

Thinking of the *Group Basis* of Politics–Networks



Setting the Stage

- ▶ The importance of *context* in political science shaped early work on political science
- ▶ First studies used to assess the heterogeneity of political opinion given *geographic contexts*
 - ▶ Example: V.O. Key's *Southern Politics* assessing white racial antagonism across demographic varying counties in the U.S. South
- ▶ Evolution of *geographic studies* to how *citizen network* “reason” about politics
- ▶ Methodological challenge: how should political scientists study the effects of information & persuasion on citizen political behavior?

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Persuasion as *Interdependent* Processes

Avoiding the *Ecological Fallacy Problem*

“Ignoring individual interdependence creates the potential for specifying the effects of both the individual and the aggregate factors that underlie political behavior.” (Huckfeldt 2009)

- ▶ Example: *Why does environment matter for evaluating how citizens form political behavior?*
- ▶ Consider the example in Sweden: *Why would working-class voters be more likely to vote for Socialist Parties?*
- ▶ *Ecological & Individual Fallacies* underpin the importance of considering social networks in the study of political reasoning & learning

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Defining of *Interdependent Processes*

Endogeneity of Social Networks

"This abstract life space might be created in response to the numerous locations of the individual in time, space, and social structure, thereby including all the opportunities that an individual has for social interaction. Conceived in such a manner, networks must be seen as being endogeneous both to individual preference and to the contexts where individuals are located." (Huckfeldt 2009)

- ▶ What does this mean for the interdependence between citizens and networks? What are the implications for reasoning about politics?
- ▶ *Role of Misinformation in Networks*: "... not only are main respondents less likely to perceive a discussant's viewpoints accurately if they disagree with the discussant, but they are also less likely to perceive a discussant's viewpoints accurately if they believe that other individuals in the network hold a preference that is different from that reported by the particular discussant."

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Reasoning in Networks

- ▶ Little evidence to suggest that individuals are uncomfortable to acknowledge political disagreement—why?
- ▶ Citizens that engage in politics may be less likely to be troubled by disagreement or feel disagreement as “extreme or unreasonable” given the inherent subjective nature of politics

The Role of “Opinionated” Citizens

“Citizens with strong, unambiguous preferences are more likely to be correctly perceived, and they are, correspondingly, more likely to be influential. It is not that individuals with strong preferences are incapable of recognizing disagreement when they encounter it, citizens with strong preferences are excellent messengers, and their ability to perceive the messages of others is not compromised.”

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Reasoning in Networks

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- ▶ “Disagreement is more likely to be sustained in these circumstances because disagreeing individuals frequently receive support for their preferences elsewhere in their communication networks, from individuals who are not connected to the source of disagreement.”
- ▶ Normative implications about persuasion of political tolerance, manipulation by “elites”, democratic preferences?
- ▶ What about the role of networks in solving *collective action problems* in terms of political participation?

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The Role of Endogenous Preferences in Reasoning: *Income*

- ▶ *“A key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.” -Robert Dahl*
- ▶ Recall that the ideal democratic citizen is *“expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what the alternative are . . . [and] what the likely consequences are.”*
- ▶ Against backdrop, Martin Gilens asks: *“How the preferences of the public are related to the policy decisions of the national government, and how equally influence over government policy extends to more and less well-off Americans.”*
- ▶ Why would the ability to “reason” about political affairs vary by an endogenous preference, such as income?

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Variation in Policy Congruence: Agreement on Issues

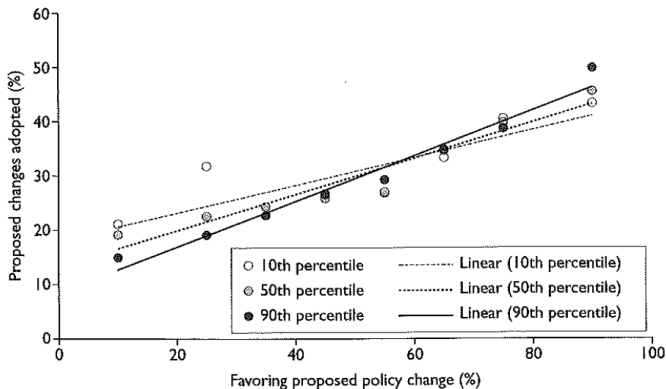


Figure 3.1 The Preference/Policy Link for Respondents at the 10th, 50th, and 90th Income Percentiles.

Note

Based on 2,245 survey questions concerning proposed policy changes asked between 1964 and 2006.

Variation in Policy Congruence: Disagreement on Issues

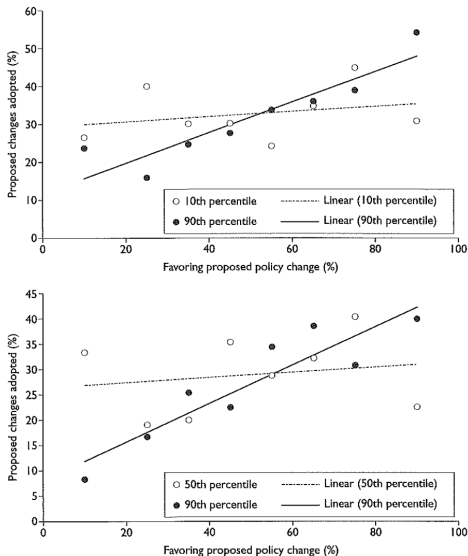


Figure 3.2 The Preference/Policy Link when Preferences at the 10th or 50th Income Percentiles diverge from the 90th Income Percentile.

Example: Social Security & Senior Citizens

- ▶ Research Question? While the literature suggests that lower-income citizens are less mobilized to participate in politics, do these patterns hold among senior citizens eligible for receiving social security benefits?
- ▶ Why would senior citizens, particularly those of low-income, be motivated to participate in politics?
- ▶ *Theory:* Seniors reason and participate about politics on the basis of social security, with low-income citizens participating more in politics by being motivated by preferences & “stakes.”
- ▶ Key mechanism → “dependence on government transfers” (Campbell 2002)

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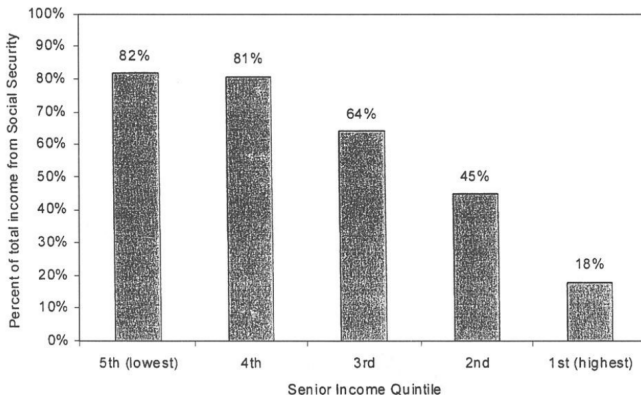
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The Stakes: Reasoning around Income Share

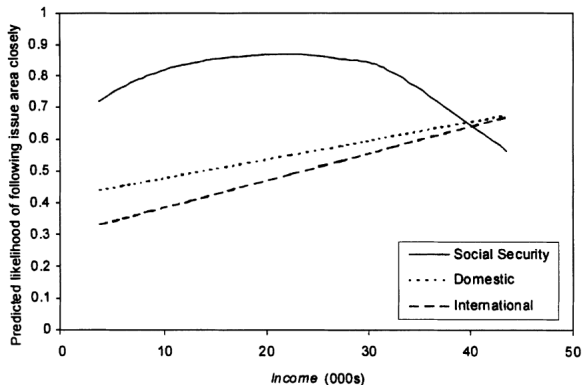
FIGURE 1. Percentage of Senior Income from Social Security by Total Income Quintile, 1992



Source: *Older Americans 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being* (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics 2000, 66).

Variation in Political Interest by Income & Topic

FIGURE 2. Predicted Interest in Social Security, Domestic, and International Issues among Seniors by Income

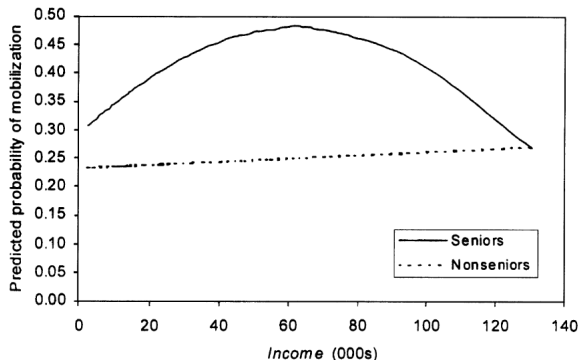


Source: Roper Survey 8108 (Roper Organization 1981).

Note: Interest in Social Security estimated with logistic regression; interest in domestic and international issues, with OLS.

Variation in Political Mobilization among Seniors & Non-Seniors

FIGURE 4. Political Party Mobilization of Seniors and Nonseniors by Income



Source: 1996 National Election Study (Rosenstone et al. 1998).

Citizen Capacity to *Update*

- ▶ Fundamental distinction between *misinformation* & uninformed—what do you think this distinction is and why would this matter?
- ▶ Misinformation can be subject to partisan bias—example: belief of WMDs in Iraq war
- ▶ Recall resistance axiom: citizens may fail to *update* political beliefs & preferences in the face of new information
- ▶ Nyhan & Reifler (2010) use two rounds of experiments to assess the extent to which corrective information reducing prominent misconceptions about politics
- ▶ First experiment: Test *effects* of a correction embedded in a news report on beliefs that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction immediately before the U.S. invasion.
- ▶ Second experiment: Test *effects* of a correction embedded in a news report on beliefs that Bush tax cuts increased government revenue

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Doubling Down on *Misconceptions*

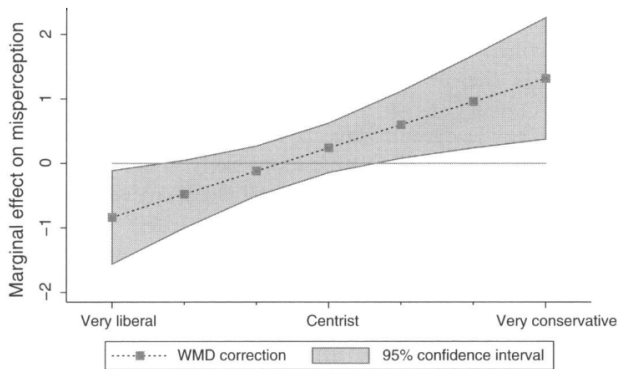


Fig. 1 Effect of correction on WMD misperception. Estimated marginal effect by ideology: fall 2005

Dependent variable: Level of agreement, on a scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) with the following question “*Immediately before the U.S. invasion, Iraq had an active weapons of mass destruction program, the ability to produce these weapons, and large stockpiles of WMD, but Saddam Hussein was able to hide or destroy these weapons right before U.S. forces arrived.*” ↑ **Agreement** = ↑ **Misconception**

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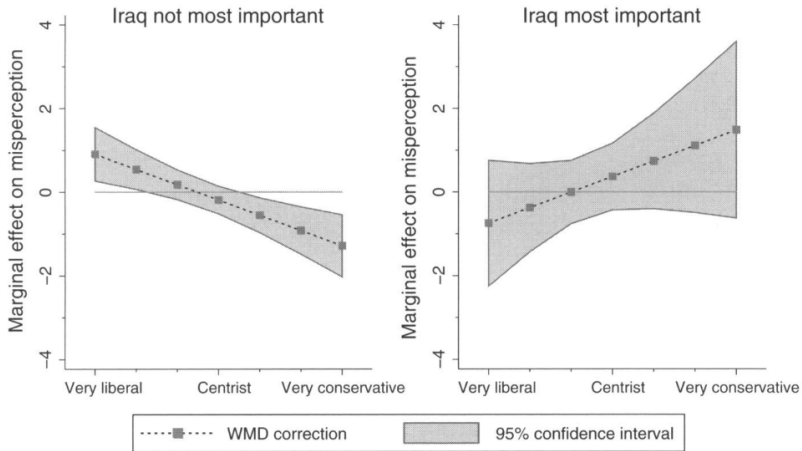


Fig. 2 Effect of correction on WMD misperception. Marginal effect by ideology/issue importance: spring 2006

Dependent variable: Same as previous side... \uparrow **Agreement** = \uparrow **Misconception**

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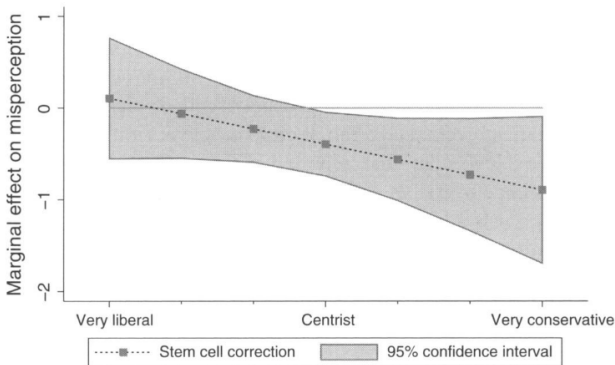


Fig. 4 Effect of correction on stem cell ban misperception. Estimated marginal effect by ideology: spring 2006

Dependent variable: Level of agreement, on a scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) with the following question “*President Bush has banned stem cell research in the United States.*” \uparrow **Agreement** = \uparrow **Misconception**

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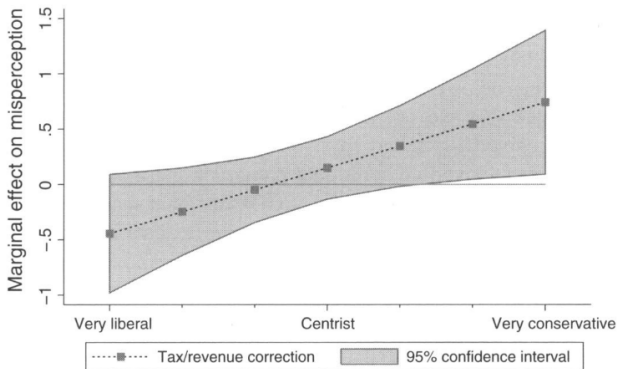


Fig. 3 Effect of correction on tax/revenue misperception. Estimated marginal effect by ideology: spring 2006

Dependent variable: Level of agreement, on a scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) with the following question “*President Bush’s tax cuts have increased government revenue.*” ↑ **Agreement** = ↑ **Misconception**

Key Points

- ➊ Early political scientists recognized the importance of *context* in the study of citizen political reasoning by focusing on geography
- ➋ Contemporary political scientists focus on the role social networks play in how citizens reason and learn about politics; these are **exogenous** factors
 - ▶ Social networks allow citizens to select who to discuss politics with & ultimately has bearing in how individual preferences are formed
- ➌ However, there is a normative down-side, that misinformation may persist in these social networks (be aware of Nyhan & Reifler's experimental findings of how citizens fail to correct for misconceptions in political beliefs)
- ➍ Preferences and reasoning may be *endogenous* and rooted in rational self-interest, such as social security preferences among the elderly
- ➎ Citizens are generally able to learn about politics, but this is limited on their prior held beliefs and political values