

Don't Just Ask Me for Facts!

Measuring Political Sophistication using Open-Ended Responses

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Abstract

There is a broad consensus among scholars of political science and public opinion that the American electorate is not well informed about politics. Interestingly however, there is no agreement in the discipline about *how to measure* how little citizens actually know. While many studies rely on simple factual political knowledge questions to assess sophistication, others have criticized this approach from methodological and theoretical perspectives. We propose a new measure of political sophistication based on open-ended survey responses about individual preferences and evaluations of the most important problem facing the country. We presents results from the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) and show that ...

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1 Introduction

One of the fundamental concepts in the study of political attitudes and behavior is political sophistication and knowledge (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). While most scholars emphasized how little people know about politics, the question of how to assess individual knowledge has been subject to re-occurring scholarly debate (e.g. Mondak, 2000; Mondak and Davis, 2001; Sturgis, Allum, and Smith, 2008; DeBell, 2013; Pietryka and MacIntosh, 2013). Many analyses exclusively rely on individual levels of political information measured by factual knowledge questions. However, recent research points to important differences between types of knowledge questions that have previously been disregarded (Barabas et al., 2014). Furthermore, scholars argued that factual political knowledge as measured in many surveys may not be theoretically relevant (Lupia, 2006) and the conceptualization of political sophistication should rather take into account how people structure their attitudes and beliefs (e.g. Luskin, 1987). As such, measuring sophistication solely based on answers to political trivia may misclassify respondents who cannot recall these facts, but do indeed have a coherent framework of political ideas.

We propose an alternative measure of political sophistication based on individual responses to open-ended questions about attitudes towards major parties and presidential candidates. We make inferences about the respondents' level of political sophistication and belief constraint by focusing on *how* respondents describe their preferences and beliefs. More specifically, we consider the diversity in topics raised by respondents based on structural topic models (Roberts et al., 2014) as well as other characteristics of individual open-ended responses, in order to assess the degree to which political attitudes are structured and expressed in a more complex manner. We suspect that the diversity in topics a respondent discusses, or the detail with which they speak about the topics they mention, will covary with other political knowledge measures. We therefore compare the text-based measures to common factual knowledge items as well as the interviewer assessment of the respondent's political knowledge as benchmarks.

Overall, we hope to show that our measure of political sophistication can provide novel insights compared to conventional knowledge measures, since it is conceptually closer to the

actual structure and constraint of political belief systems Tetlock (see for example 1983); Luskin (see for example 1987). Furthermore, developing valid measures of political sophistication based on open-ended responses will provide new opportunities for comparisons of political knowledge across time and contexts.

2 Political Knowledge and Sophistication

In his seminal study, Converse (1964) examined the degree to which citizens hold constrained belief systems about politics. In the paper, belief systems are defined as “a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence” (Converse, 1964, 207). The analyses showed that the majority of the electorate does not hold structured and constrained belief systems, understand abstract ideological concepts, or hold stable issue positions.

This pessimistic view regarding the competence of the US electorate has been supported in multiple subsequent analyses. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) showed that large parts of the American electorate are not sufficiently informed about politics. Furthermore, there are systematic differences in political attitudes and behavior between citizens who are well informed compared to those who are not. Such a finding is problematic from a normative perspectives, since it indicates that differences in levels of information can result in unequal representation in the political system (see also Althaus, 1998; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Gilens, 2001). However, rather than relying on the degree to which individuals hold constrained belief systems, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), conceptualized knowledge as the awareness of key democratic values, which was measured using factual knowledge questions (see also Carpini and Keeter, 1993). A broad range of studies focused on similar factual knowledge measures as indicators of sophistication (e.g. Zaller, 1991; Jacoby, 1995; Gomez and Wilson, 2001). Most prominently, Zaller (1992) argued for the measurement of political awareness using tests of neutral factual information about politics, since they “more directly than any of the alternative measures, capture what has actually gotten into peoples

minds” (Zaller, 1992, 21). However, other research casts doubt on this assertion, both from an empirical as well as a theoretical perspective.

From a methodological perspective, many studies raised issues related to the validity of factual knowledge questions. One fundamental problem discussed in the literature are potential biases due to guessing (Mondak, 2000, 2001; Mondak and Davis, 2001; Miller and Orr, 2008). Knowledge items that offer a “Don’t Know” option essentially convolute two very distinct concepts: the individual information level as well as the propensity to guess. Based on this argument, Mondak and Anderson (2004) showed that conventional knowledge measures overestimated the gender gap in political knowledge due to the fact that male respondents are more likely to take a guess if they are not fully informed (see also Pietryka and MacIntosh, 2013, for a more recent discussion of differential item functioning as an explanation for knowledge gaps). The conclusions drawn from this body of literature were to rely on closed rather than open-ended knowledge questions that omit “Don’t Know” response options (but see Sturgis, Allum, and Smith, 2008; Luskin and Bullock, 2011). Other scholars further criticised open-ended factual knowledge questions such as those administered in the American National Election Study due to problematic coding rules, which do not accurately capture partial knowledge (Krosnick et al., 2008; Gibson and Caldeira, 2009; DeBell, 2013).

Focusing on factual political knowledge has also been criticised on theoretical grounds.

- (Lupia, 2006): type of knowledge is not interesting + role of shortcuts Lupia (1994)
- (Prior, 2014): Visual cues are important
- (Barabas et al., 2014): knowledge items measure different dimensions of information
- (Prior and Lupia, 2008; Bullock et al., 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna, 2015): response behavior is conditional on motivation and partisanship

Alternative theoretical perspective: (Tetlock, 1983; Luskin, 1987; Feldman, 1988; Gerring, 1997)

3 Open-Ended Responses

Tetlock used open-ended responses to measure integrative complexity. However, he relied on manual coding, which is very resource intensive. Our approach will capture the same concept but relying on automated coding procedures.

4 Measurement Approach

5 Hypotheses and Validation Strategy

6 Data and Methods

7 Descriptive Results

8 Validation Performance

Ideas for evaluation:

- Increase in consistency b/w policy attitudes (e.g. [Prior, 2014](#))
- replicate common findings, e.g. gender gap in political knowledge (e.g. [Barabas et al., 2014](#))

9 Discussion and Conclusion

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