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Undergraduate

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### Voter Unsophistication: A Review.

The number of citizens who cast their votes during presidential and primary elections continues to decrease. Many Americans claim that their lack of trust in the government is the reason. Yet, there is also an issue with the individuals that do cast their votes. The problem is that many citizens cast their votes without having enough knowledge to make well thought out decisions. The lack of knowledge has made several political scientists label American voters as unsophisticated for not having basic knowledge regarding the US government. The following review will provide an insight at some of the explanations that political scientists have concluded regarding controversial voter political behavior.

**Introduction:**

Due to the lack of knowledge that most voters have regarding politics, they are unable to explain the reasoning behind their decisions, appearing unsophisticated to political scientists who observe and analyze voter behavior. Scientists refer to political sophistication as having the ability to understand complex political issues and have basic knowledge regarding the government, such as being aware of the three branches of government, and having the ability to connect political facts with broader concepts.

The percentage of voter turnout in the United States continues to decrease. As of 2012, only 53 % of eligible voters in the U.S. cast their ballots (Regan). The fact that Americans are not taking the time and effort to vote during presidential or primary elections is an issue that leads to other problems. For instance, another major issue is the fact that amongst the individuals that do decide to vote, most lack the right amount of knowledge regarding United States politics. According to Forbes magazine, approximately 53 % of the Americans that cast their votes, only 34 % of Americans can even name the three branches of the federal government” (Meyer). Not having the ability to recall enough information regarding the United States government makes political scientists question if Americans have the basic knowledge that is necessary to make smart decisions during election days.

Even though many American voters are portrayed as uneducated, uninterested, and unsophisticated for not having the ability to recall their support for certain

political issues, political scientists explain that their behavior is a result of human nature. Here I review conclusions that political scientists have supported with regards to voter behavior in the United States. More specifically, the review focuses on the effect that political information has on the less informed voters.

This review will discuss why uninformed voters are a problem to the field of politics, and more importantly why not having enough information affects elections. It will also discuss the mental process that influences less knowledgeable and less educated voters to vote the way they do. In addition, this journal will provide an overview of the experiments and methods that were conducted in order to determine the psychology behind voters’ behavior during elections. This review will also discuss the results from each study, and the significance behind the findings regarding voter behavior.

**American Voter Behavior:**

The lack of basic civic knowledge that voters possess was noticed years ago. A group of political scientists explain that American voters are misjudged by most political scientists who conduct surveys and polls to test voter knowledge regarding current politics and news. For example, according to Lodge Milton et al., a political scientist who supports the idea that labeling American voters as unsophisticated is absurd and unfair, explains why voters are unable to retain a reasonable amount of information and recall specific facts to provide reasonable answers (Lodge, Steenbergen and Braun).

Two major issues drive this discussion. The first major issue is the fact that voters make quick and uninformed decisions. The second issue is the vulnerability and the low interest that most voters have about American politics. The two issues presented contain other aspects that political scientists have also determined to be controversial to their field and therefore an interest for further research. For instance, some of the issues involve persons providing contradicting responses when they are surveyed, and easily changing the reasoning as to why they support a specific candidate or proposition.

Why is this the case? First, individuals who are less knowledgeable about politics easily change their mentality when asked for their opinions during surveys. For example, according to John Zaller et al., political scientists address the issue by arguing that during surveys, voters provide a specific answer to a question. Yet, if the individual is asked the same questions multiple times using different wording, asked in a different order, or within a different context, the voters change the original answer that they had provided. Zaller explains that most individuals are unable to pay enough attention to notice that the same question was being asked (Zaller and Feldman). In addition, Chong found that individuals analyze the questions they are being asked as separate questions. Individuals do not think that they are being asked a continuation to the same question or much less that they are being asked the same question (Chong). Chong's conclusion provides a possible explanation as to why most individuals provide different answers

when asked the same question.

Second, the vulnerability that certain American voters possess regarding political news is also an area of interest for political scientists. Scientists state that the issue is that less knowledgeable voters easily change their opinions, whereas more informed voters maintain their original political beliefs and continue to look for evidence as support (Taber and Lodge). In addition, due to how easily less informed voters change their political opinions, interest groups target those individuals. Interest groups do not have to follow specific guidelines and provide accurate information to the public. Therefore, the main goal for most interest groups is to acquire the most supporters and talk to them about the issues enough to get their vote for the propositions that they advocate. For this reason, the less informed voters are an easy target for interest groups. During elections, voters make their final decisions based on limited and sometimes inaccurate knowledge. According to Wegenast, the lack of information makes individuals prone to be targeted by advertising groups such as interest groups (Wegenast).

### **Experiments on the mechanisms of voter behavior:**

To comprehensively understand voter behavior, political scientists have conducted research studies in order to deepen their understanding regarding the psychological process that voters go through when finalizing their political decisions.

Lodge et al., a group of political scientists, conducted an experiment that consisted of three parts. The first part of the

study required the researchers to conduct a number of interviews. Next, the interviewers were instructed to wait between one to 31 days to conduct a second set of interviews. Once again, the individuals were randomly chosen from the group of people who had already been interviewed during step one. In the final part of the experiment, researchers conducted one last interview with the same group of people that were interviewed during the previous part. During this final part of the study, the researchers decided to conduct the interview over the phone instead of in person to avoid intimidating the individuals who were being interviewed in any way possible (Lodge, Steenbergen and Braun).

Similarly, John Zaller and Stanley Feldman conducted a similar study that resembled the general steps taken in Lodge et al., experiments. During this experiment, the researchers also decided to perform interviews, but unlike other previous researchers, they focused on conducting only a single interview. During this specific interview, the scientists observed and counted the amount of opposing remarks made by everyone's responses. For instance, the interviewers tallied the number of liberal comments made versus the number of conservative responses. At the end of the interviews, the interviewers summed the total number to determine the amount of times that the average voters contradict its own beliefs (Zaller and Feldman).

Another similar result was concluded by Dennis Chong, a political scientist who conducted similar interviews. Whereas the other scientists conducted face-to-face interviews, Chong decided to administer

telephone interviews. He conducted a two-hour telephone interview where interviewers were instructed to ask voters questions regarding common political issues such as: crime, human rights, abortion, freedom of speech. During the interviews, Chong specified that the interviewers must allow the interviewees to speak freely, but more importantly, avoid interrupting the interviewees at all costs. The interviewers were also specifically instructed to not provide any additional background on the questions to avoid distorting and altering the voters' responses (Chong). Chong found that when individuals were not interrupted, they provided responses that more accurately reflected their true opinions rather than providing contradicting responses.

In addition, there are other journals that observe political behavior from a different perspective. The following two studies focus on the effects that interest groups have on citizens. For instance, Taber et al. conducted interviews that followed a specific two-step process. The first step consisted of the interviewers providing the voters with belief-relevant evidence and later asking a question. The second part of the process required the interviewers to integrate additional pieces of information into a new set of questions. The purpose of this experiment was to see if voters' responses would alter their initial responses after being provided more information.

The final study, conducted by Wagenast, was completely different from Taber et al. The study focused on a cross-sectional analysis conducted across 49 out of the 50 states, excluding the state of Nebraska. The study analyzed the amount of

contributions made towards interest groups, and then observed the support that interest groups received from American voters. Researchers also considered the type of voters that were most likely to demonstrate their support towards interest groups, and found that one specific group of American voters was being especially supportive towards the interest groups.

### **Implications for politics:**

All three experiments conducted discuss the findings in regard to voter behavior observed when surveyed. Even though some of the interviews were conducted over the phone or in person, or with other certain limitations, together they all provided similar results.

Particularly, there was significant amount of data based on how much relevant and specific information people are able to retain and recall in great detail. The first result that political scientists concluded was that individuals tend to forget information after a short period of time. Yet, researchers concluded that recalling specific information does not determine voter sophistication. They found that even though people cannot remember the specific reason why they would vote a certain way; it is likely that there was a specific piece of information that left an effect on them. The feeling that they had while receiving the information is what they remember and use as a reason when they make their final political decisions. In addition, it is most likely the voter will be able to remember the effect and the feelings that they felt regarding the information (Lodge, Steenbergen and Braun).

To add to the previous experiment, John Zaller and Stanley Feldman found that when surveyed, individuals respond a question by providing the first thought that comes to mind. This is since individuals want to appear as if they are well informed when it comes to politics. Political scientists also found that voters tend to add up their likes and dislikes regarding a subject to decide on the answer that they want to provide. Additionally, researchers also found that voters will not provide the same response to a question regardless if asked multiple times, for example if the question is asked within a different context, rephrased, or asked in a different order. In addition, political scientists found that candidate endorsement, regardless if it is by a famous or ordinary person, also plays a large role on how much it influences and individual's decisions. Finally, the interviews unveiled that it is most efficient to allow an individual to answer a question freely without any type of interference. By respondents not being interrupted, they had the ability to express all of their thoughts thoroughly without feeling pressured to answer a certain way (Zaller and Feldman).

In addition, scientists found that individuals are more likely to think of each question as an independent question, rather than some as continuation questions. As a result, interviewees tend to provide different answers to questions that often address the same topic as the previous question. This leads to the answers being contradictory and that the voters appear to not have enough knowledge regarding the subject. They also found that persons do not take enough time to think about the answer that they are

providing. Rather, they give the first idea that comes to mind. This then leads the individuals to realize that they might not support the idea entirely, and later changing their mind. This also makes them appear less knowledgeable and aware regarding politics. The political scientists also found that people tend to answer survey questions based on the way that they are personally affected by the issue in question. Therefore, when asked to support their responses with actual data, they fail because they provide personal beliefs rather than evidence with facts on how the law and the government work (Chong).

### **Common Interpretations of Interests Groups:**

Through their studies, Taber et al. and Wagenast found that when answering questions, more better informed and better educated Americans tend to maintain the same opinion regarding the issues that they demonstrate an interest for. Better educated individuals tend to not be easily persuaded into thinking and answering differently regarding the questions that they are being asked.

In contrast, they found that less knowledgeable voter and people who do not watch the news, are easily to convince to change their minds easily, based on new pieces of information that are provided. Similarly, the authors found that many of the less knowledgeable voters are more likely to be influenced by the information that political parties deliver. This happens although some of the information provided by the interest groups may or may not be completely accurate (Wegenast) (Zaller and

Feldman).

### **General Discussion:**

American citizens may not necessarily be unsophisticated and uninformed regarding politics. Rather, due to human nature, voters forget information after a very brief amount of time. Additionally, researchers found that even if individuals are given enough time to think out their responses, people still provide answers without the full support of relative information; this is also since people do not have the ability to retain information for a long period of time. In addition, the political scientists found that in order to be able to learn regarding voter's opinions, it is best to let them speak freely without interrupting them, so that voters do not feel pressured to answer a certain way. By avoiding any interruptions, respondent are more likely to provide answers that reflect their true opinions rather than providing the answer that they believe the interviewer wants to hear, or a response that they believe sounds smart. Therefore, after the interviews came to an end, it was concluded that it is a much more effective strategy to conduct interviews rather than surveys when trying to analyze how much a person knows regarding politics (Lodge, Steenbergen and Braun).

The data collected demonstrated that it is important that less knowledgeable voters put more effort into informing themselves about political issues. If they do not take the time to learn about issues from reliable sources of information, then they become prone to unreliable information from interest groups. Interest groups aim for

less knowledgeable voters because they are aware that they are easier to change their minds, and easier to persuade into following groups that they have never heard of. The groups are also aware that people who are less educated, are more likely to use every new piece of information and strongly demonstrate their support for it, regardless of it being accurate.

**Conclusion:**

Surveys are the least effective way to help determine the amount of information that American citizens have regarding United States government. Surveys contain bias in the wording of the questions, and the content. In addition, during survey questionnaires, individuals provide one-word answers which limit the interviewees from providing full throughout answers that demonstrate a respondent's full opinions regarding issues. Therefore, political scientists found that by conducting interviews, and allowing respondents to speak freely without being interrupted, people are more likely to deliver responses that demonstrate their true beliefs.

Additionally, political scientists found that if people cannot recall specific information about the US government, it does not mean that they are unsophisticated. Instead, not having the ability to recall specific details comes because of human nature. The researchers claim that people are not meant to remember every single aspect regarding politics to be considered well informed.

Finally, another point discovered by political scientists, was the fact that those who remain unfamiliar with United States politics are more likely to be targeted by interest's groups. Interest groups target the less knowledgeable and less educated voters because they are aware of the ease that it takes to persuade them into believing every new piece of information provided.

Voter behavior continues to be an issue of observance that will remain an area of interest for political scientists. The fact that political scientists have found the best method to learn about voter's beliefs will help contribute to the tactics that researchers consider in the future when addressing American voters.



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