

The Paradox of Political Knowledge*

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Political knowledge is viewed by many scholars as a foundation of representative democracy. People who know more about the political world engage in a variety of normatively desirable behaviors: they are more likely to vote, be tolerant of others, and have logically organized issue attitudes, among other things. Yet, the theory of motivated reasoning poses several challenges to this understanding. Indeed, one of the most striking results from this research program is that people with the *highest* levels of political knowledge are the most susceptible to bias. Given the general tendency of people to seek out confirming information and/or refute information that challenges their preexisting opinions, seemingly objective facts have a contested status in theories of motivated reasoning. In contrast to the view of knowledge as the “currency of citizenship,” Lodge’s work raises the question of whether a factually informed citizenry is desirable, let alone possible.

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In contemporary representative democracies such as the United States, public opinion plays a critical role, both in the turnover of elected officials and as an input in the policy making process. But can ordinary people fulfill their responsibilities as democratic citizens? Do they have meaningful preferences to which political elites should respond? These are not trivial questions given that our political system was designed in part to limit the direct participation of the masses. For example, in *Federalist No. 68* Alexander Hamilton justified the electoral college on the grounds that a “small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations” (Hamilton, Madison, Jay 1961, 412). Similarly, John Adams wrote: “The proposition that [the people] are the best keepers of their liberties is not true. [The people] are the worst conceivable, they are no keepers at all. They can neither act, judge, think or will” (1788, 7, cited in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 25).

The research of Milton Lodge has contributed significantly to our understanding of citizen competence through its focus on political cognition—that is, by studying *how* people form their preferences. The idea, of course, is that the manner in which citizens process political information influences the content of the political attitudes they end up holding. Yet Lodge’s research raises serious questions about the ability of people to arrive at reasoned judgments and instead suggests that people are held captive to their existing views and predispositions. Through decades of clever experimentation in the area of political cognition, Lodge’s research program—particularly his work on online processing and motivated

reasoning—challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the effects of political knowledge.¹ Whereas political knowledge is viewed by many scholars as the foundation of representative democracy, the theory of online processing/motivated reasoning poses several challenges to this understanding. Indeed, one of the most striking results from this research program is that people with the *highest* levels of political knowledge are the most susceptible to bias. Our essay considers this paradox and the various ways it might be resolved.

We begin by outlining the conventional view of political knowledge as a prerequisite to citizen competence. Decades of research have shown that political sophistication is among the most important political resources a person can have, especially when it comes to how people reason about politics. The next section outlines how Lodge’s work challenges the conventional wisdom, resulting in what we call the “paradox of political knowledge.” In particular, Lodge’s distinctive focus on *mechanisms*—i.e., the chain of mental events that occur in the decision making process—forced researchers to confront important questions about the normative status of political knowledge. In the final section of this chapter, we attempt to reconcile these diverging perspectives. One of the lasting contributions of Milton Lodge’s career is the research that has been stimulated by the troubling implications of his work on political cognition.

¹ We employ Delli Carpini and Keeter’s definition of political knowledge “as the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long term memory” (1996, 10), and use the terms “political knowledge,” “political sophistication,” and “political awareness” interchangeably (for a similar approach, see Althaus 2003 or Zaller 1992).

The Conventional View: Knowledge as a Prerequisite to Citizen Competence

“For citizens who are the most informed, democracy works much as intended, while for those who are the most uninformed, democracy *is* a tragedy or farce.” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 60, emphasis original)

“The less sophisticated the public, the less alert to its interests, the less active and unswerving in pursuit of them, and the less resistant to manipulation from above—the further, in short, from the democratic ideal.” (Luskin, 1990, 331)

For decades (if not centuries), theorists and researchers have argued for the importance of a factually informed citizenry. On this view, citizens need to possess some minimal level of political knowledge to partake in the “vital tasks of democratic citizenship”: forming preferences about public policy issues, selecting candidates to political office, and holding accurate perceptions of political reality (Lavine, Johnston and Steenbergen 2012, p. 201-202). Even though “democratic theory has never been terribly explicit about the precise requirements of knowledge” (Neuman, 1986, p. 8), an informed citizenry has long been viewed as the pillar of a functioning democratic system (e.g. Converse 1964). People who possess more political knowledge differ in consequential ways from those who have lower levels of political information—a finding that led to a flurry of research in the United States and abroad on the environmental determinants of political knowledge (e.g., Barabas and Jerit 2009; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Curran et al. 2009; Gordon and Segura 1997; Jerit 2009; Nicholson 2009; Strömbäck 2016). In seeking to determine which features of the political environment were associated with higher levels of political knowledge (sophistication), this body of work shares the sentiment, elegantly stated by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 8), that political information is the “currency of citizenship.”

And the evidence regarding benefits of political knowledge is convincing. People with higher levels of political knowledge are more tolerant than those with lower levels of political

knowledge, even after controlling for a person's level of education (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; also see McClosky 1964; McClosky and Zaller 1984).² Because political knowledge also includes facts specifically related to the act of participating in politics (what some researchers call "mobilizing information"; Lemert 1981), knowledge is related to higher levels of voting as well as other forms of participation. Finally, the well-informed differ from the less-informed in a myriad of ways relating to opinion quality:

"the well informed ...are more likely to express opinions in the first place. They are more likely to possess stable opinions—real opinions, opinions held with conviction. They are more likely to use ideological concepts correctly, to cite evidence in political discussions, and to process information sensitively. They are better at retaining new information. They are more adept in the deployment of heuristics. They vote more consistently with their political interests. Information matters." (Kinder 2006, 207)

Moreover, differences in information become magnified in the American political system where there is a multiplicity of civic responsibilities. In addition to voting in national elections, people select representatives for local and state offices, and they often vote directly on policy issues through initiative and referenda. While some of these responsibilities entail a binary choice between fixed options—and would thus seem to require little political sophistication (e.g., Sniderman 2000)—other tasks, such as selecting the party's candidate or voting on initiatives, are arguably more complex. Add to this the various ways a person can

² Political knowledge usually is operationalized in terms of a person's ability to correctly answer objective knowledge questions, such as identifying the party that has a majority in the U.S. House or naming the Vice President. According to Mondak, "there is compelling evidence that political awareness is best represented with data from survey batteries that measure factual knowledge" (2001, 224; also see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Fiske, Lau, and Smith, 1990; Zaller 1990).

participate in politics (contacting elected officials, demonstrating, contributing time and/or money to a campaign) and it is clear that knowledge is a crucial political resource.

One of the most persuasive arguments regarding the importance of political knowledge comes from researchers who have studied the aggregate-level consequences of an ill-informed citizenry (e.g., Althaus 1998; 2003; Bartels 1996). Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, Althaus (2003) shows that the uneven distribution of knowledge has important implications for collective opinion. This occurs because of the tendency for informed people to: (1) have higher levels of opinionation, and (2) possess preferences that are more consistent with their political predispositions. As a result of the first difference, knowledgeable people are more likely to have their voices represented in an opinion poll (i.e., they give opinions more frequently than their less informed peers). Indeed, Althaus reports that “unequal [Don’t Know/No Opinion] rates give knowledgeable respondents the equivalent of two opinions for every one given by ill-informed respondents” (2003, 69).

The second difference relates to variation in information processing across people with high and low levels of knowledge. The opinions of the well informed tend to disperse evenly across response categories because these individuals draw from a broader range of considerations than the less informed. In contrast, the less informed “organize around heuristic cues or frames of reference generated by the survey instrument or around common pieces of knowledge that have been recently or frequently activated in the minds of respondents by news reports or other common sources of knowledge” (Althaus 2003, 90). The end result, Althaus concludes, is that knowledgeable people are better represented by polls than their less informed peers. This is an important conclusion in and of itself, but Althaus’s

argument is useful for highlighting the differences in how people with varying levels of knowledge think about politics.

To wit, there has been an accumulation of studies documenting the information processing advantages of the politically knowledgeable. This research shows that people with high levels of political sophistication have well-developed associative networks which translate into more accessible and better organized knowledge (compared to those with low levels of political sophistication; see Fiske, Lau, and Smith 1990). As a result of these differences in cognitive organization, people with higher levels of knowledge can generate more thoughts in response to a political object and they are more effective at recalling relevant material. Knowledge bestows upon them “information-processing efficiency and effectiveness” (Fiske, Lau, and Smith 1990, 45).

In addition to these differences in cognitive structure, there is variation in the content and style of information processing. The politically sophisticated have belief systems that are “large, wide-ranging, and highly constrained” (Luskin 1990, 861; also see Converse 1964). They “take account of nearly everything, including the kitchen sink” (Sniderman, Glaser, and Griffin 1990, 127). Consequently, people with higher levels of knowledge make more complex (i.e., distal) causal attributions (Gomez and Wilson 2001); they are better able to distinguish credible from non-credible sources and update evaluations accordingly (Alt, Lassen, and Marshall, 2016); they are more likely to draw upon “issue-relevant values” in the opinion formation process (as opposed to party cues; see Kam 2005); and they are better able to reconcile value tradeoffs (Jacoby 2006). Political sophisticates are more likely to be exposed to the currents of elite debate, but they possess “cueing information” that allows them to understand the relationship between the persuasive messages they receive and their

political predispositions (Zaller 1992; Clifford, Jerit, Rainey, and Motyl 2015). More generally, Kam observes, “the politically aware are not just citizens who happen to know more about politics, they are citizens who are *effortful* processors of politics” (2005, 167, emphasis added; also see Hsu and Price 1993). On this interpretation, the politically knowledgeable are more likely to be *systematic* processors—engaging in the slow, deliberative processing that forms the basis of Kahneman’s (2011) System 2.³

Thus, a coherent image of the politically knowledgeable citizen emerges from previous research. As we elaborate in the next section, this portrait is not compatible with the evidence from Lodge’s studies of online processing and motivated reasoning. Not only does Lodge’s work challenge the notion that sophisticates have a proclivity for open-minded, deliberative thinking, but it also identifies these individuals as the most susceptible to biased decision making.

A Different Interpretation: Knowledge Facilitates Bias

“Motivated, passionate, and knowledgeable citizens are the bedrock of democracy. And yet, the very passions that motivate action drive biases and polarization.” (Lodge and Taber, 2013, 168-9)

³ “System 1” and “System 2” are two styles of processing popularized by Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (also see Stanovich and West 2000). System 2 involves effortful mental activities and comprises our deliberate and analytical reasoning about the world. System 1 operates automatically, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. The operations of System 1 are associated with a wide range of heuristic judgements and their associated biases.

“Sophistication (qua objective knowledge of politics) turns out to be a double-edged sword. While it facilitates political understanding, it also makes it easier for citizens to defend their political attitudes through motivated bias.” (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012, xiv)

People approach the political world with varying amounts of political knowledge, that much is clear. Yet the conventional wisdom tells one story about how this variation matters—i.e., more information is better (Kuklinski and Coronel 2012, 192)—while Lodge’s research program implies a different interpretation.

We begin with the earliest elaborations of the online model (e.g., Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Stroh, and Wahlke 1990; Lodge 1995; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995) because these studies raise important questions about the value of political knowledge—and whether a person’s ability to recall facts is a valid indicator of citizen competence. At this time, most public opinion research presumed a memory-based process in which there was a straightforward relationship between voter memory (e.g., candidate likes and dislikes) and candidate evaluation.⁴ Lodge’s experiments challenged the prevailing view because they convincingly demonstrated the fallibility of human memory. For example, in an experiment in which participants were exposed to the issue stands of two hypothetical candidates (in a “campaign fact sheet”) and then asked to evaluate the candidates at a later time, the overwhelming majority could not recall a single issue stand (Lodge, Steenbergen,

⁴ This view is exemplified by Kelley and Mirer’s “simple act of voting” model, which states: “The voter canvasses his likes and dislikes for the leading candidates and major parties involved in an election. Weighing each like and dislike equally, he votes for the candidate whom he has the greatest number of net favorable attitudes” (1974, 574).

and Brau 1995).⁵ This does not mean, however, that the participants in Lodge’s experiment study were unresponsive to campaign information. Quite to the contrary, there was a strong (and statistically significant) relationship between a participants’ affective reaction to the issue stands and their subsequent candidate evaluations—a pattern that is consistent with online reasoning.⁶ Even though the level of recall for candidate issues stands was “dismal” (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995, 314), participants integrated specific bits of information into a global evaluation as they encountered this information (also see Hastie and Park 1986; Cassino and Lodge 2007; or Coronel et al. 2012 for additional evidence).

These findings have serious repercussions for researchers who take *observed* levels of knowledge at face value. If recall is not a valid indicator of citizen competence in the voting booth, of what worth is it to recall political facts more generally? As the following passage suggests, this question lurks beneath the surface of Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau’s (1995, 310) study:

“Our criticism, then, is not just directed against memory-based models of the vote choice but, more broadly, challenges the memory-based assumption underlying contemporary analyses of political behavior in general, and still more broadly, the negative normative conclusions routinely drawn from the citizenry’s failure to recall [political facts].”⁷

⁵ Roughly two-thirds of participants were unable to recall the general issue stance (called a “gist” by the authors), while an even higher percentage (80%) were unable to recall the specifics of the candidates’ issue stands (a “specifier”).

⁶ The authors do not have a direct measure of participants’ on-line tally, so they create what seems like a reasonable proxy (see Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995, 316 for discussion).

⁷ See Lodge, Taber, and Verhulst (2011) for a related observation regarding the emphasis on conscious, as opposed to unconscious, processing.

In subsequent years, other scholars would raise concerns about objective measures of political knowledge. For example, Lupia (2006, 223) writes: “observing that survey respondents answer questions about ideological labels or common political knowledge incorrectly means nothing more, in itself, than that the respondents cannot (instantly) recall terms that political scientists and journalists know well” (2006, 223; also see Graber 1993; Boudreau and Lupia 2011). Druckman (2012) challenges the “information holding” standard as well, though for slightly different reasons. He calls for more emphasis on *process* and the conditions under which a person is motivated by accuracy versus directional goals. Likewise, Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2013, 220) contend that ambivalence—rather than “decontextualized information holding per se”—prompts the type of thought praised by democratic theorists (e.g., thought that is critical, systematic, and open-minded). These critiques of political knowledge, while compelling on their face, take on even greater force when combined with Lodge’s evidence regarding the limited role for recall in mediating the influence of campaign rhetoric (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995).

The challenge to the conventional wisdom regarding knowledge goes deeper, though. It is one thing to claim that people can make effective decisions without being able to recall political facts, it is quite another to argue that the people who retain more information (i.e., the politically sophisticated) are the most susceptible to decision making biases. Yet this is the conclusion of subsequent elaborations of the online model, most notably Lodge and Taber’s award winning book, *The Rationalizing Voter*. To have an online tally for a candidate or issue is to have affect toward that object. This is the phenomenon of “hot cognition” (Abelson 1963), whereby concepts in memory carry an affective charge (positive, for liking; negative,

for disliking).⁸ Bias enters through the retrieval of considerations from memory, which is influenced in the direction of initial affect (through the processes of “affective contagion” and “motivated bias”; see Lodge and Taber 2013).⁹ Thus, once an object has been evaluated, subsequent information processing, including the evaluation of facts and arguments that appear in elite discourse, will be biased in the direction of the existing online tally (the well-known confirmation and disconfirmation biases; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is not to say that the deliberative thinking of System 2 does not take place, but it requires sufficient time, effort, and motivation to overcome the processes set in motion by hot cognition.

However, and somewhat paradoxically, being politically knowledgeable makes this *less* likely to occur. Because political sophisticates have thought about and repeatedly evaluated political objects, they are anchored by numerous evaluative tallies. (The less sophisticated, for their part, have fewer affective associations mooring them to prior opinions). Thus, the very characteristics that have been portrayed as virtues of the politically informed facilitate bias in Lodge’s account: A more structured (i.e., efficient) memory enhances the effects of unconscious primes; a greater information base becomes the “ammunition” sophisticates use to counter-argue incongruent facts and arguments (Lodge and Taber 2013; 152; also see Taber, Cann, and Kuscova 2009); and deliberation reinforces, rather than corrects, these pathologies, strengthening preexisting attitudes in the process.

This results in what we call the “paradox” of political knowledge. Decades of research show that knowledge is associated with a host of normatively desirable outcomes. And yet,

⁸ A concept that has both a positive and negative charge results in ambivalence.

⁹ See Lodge and Hamill (1986) for related evidence in the context of partisan schemas.

Lodge's innovative research on political cognition reveals the politically knowledgeable to be biased information processors. Other scholars have noted, but not resolved, this contradiction. For example, Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen observe that "Political sophistication has complex normative implications: It increases citizens' responsiveness to diagnostic information, but it also makes it easier to defend their beliefs through motivated bias" (2012, 219). It seems implausible, however, that political knowledge can predict both good citizenship *and* biased reasoning.

In the remainder of this essay, we look to the existing literature to reconcile these diverging perspectives. To foreshadow the argument that follows, there are two ways in which the paradox of knowledge may be resolved. The first pertains to measures of objective knowledge and what this measure represents in the theoretical model of *The Rationalizing Voter*. A long line of research has noted the ambiguities of political knowledge scales (e.g., Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, and Rainey 2014; Mondak 2001; Prior and Lupia 2009). In particular, the same operational measure has been used to represent concepts as varied as media exposure, political awareness, and political expertise, just to name a few examples (Kuklinski and Quirk 2001). The question we pose here is whether observed levels of knowledge are the best indicator for the theoretical construct in Lodge's model—i.e., prior affect. A second line of argumentation points to the importance of the information environment, by which we mean information from the mass media. Although evidence consistent with motivated reasoning continues to accumulate (e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Gaines et al. 2007; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Lebo and Cassino 2007), recent scholarship suggests that the information environment can also play a corrective role.

A Paradox Resolved?

“Voters are not either motivated reasoners or rational processors. Instead...voters can be both depending on the information environment in which they are operating” (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010, 590).

“Neutral factual knowledge is a *consequence* of two motivations, so it cannot separate people who are motivated to support partisan or accuracy goals” (Parker-Stephen 2011, 25, emphasis original).

One method of resolving the aforementioned paradox involves closer consideration of the role of political knowledge. In *The Rationalizing Voter*, political sophisticates are described as having “greater interest” in the political world, which leads them to evaluate political objects more frequently and to “develop attitudes for a broad range of political objects” (Lodge and Taber 2013, 90). According to this account, people with the highest levels of political knowledge represent individuals who “have thought about and repeatedly evaluated most of the political leaders, groups, and issues...[and by implication formed affective associations in memory toward these objects]” (Lodge and Taber 2013, 90). Thus, it is not knowledge-as-information-holding that contributes to bias, but the existence of a prior attitude one wants to defend—known in the literature as having a “directional” motivation (Kunda 1990). In line with this interpretation, the facilitation effects predicted by hot cognition are *strongest* for people who have “accessible, univalent” attitudes toward an object and they are the *weakest* for those who do not—namely, people who are ambivalent. This happens, Lodge and Taber (2013, 91) argue, because individuals who are ambivalent about an object have “*conflicting* hot cognitions.”¹⁰

¹⁰ This is distinct from having weak or non-attitudes. In that situation a person lacks hot cognitions altogether.

Importantly, there is a parallel finding in Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012) in which univalent partisans make “worse” decisions than ambivalent partisans. In the Lavine et al. (2012) study, univalent partisans were more likely than the ambivalent to follow a counter-stereotypical party cue and mistakenly support an ideologically incongruent policy. Thus, *both* Lodge and Taber (2013) and Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012) come to the conclusion that ambivalent people make normatively more desirable decisions. Lodge and Taber report that people who were ambivalent “showed no discernable evidence of automatic hot cognition” (2013, 91). Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012) find that ambivalence increases the accuracy with which people perceive political events and leads to a stronger relationship between a person’s attitudes and self-interest and values, among other things. Ambivalence, by either account, contributes to citizen competence. But herein lies the rub: *previous research has shown that an important predictor of ambivalence is a person’s level of political knowledge* (Rudolph and Popp 2007).

Thus, one resolution to the paradox of political sophistication is to recognize that having high levels of objective political knowledge may not, by itself, result in biased information processing. According to the theory outlined in *The Rationalizing Voter*, the antecedent to biased information processing is prior affect—i.e., having a preexisting opinion about a political object. On this view, hot cognition—not political knowledge *per se*—sets the stage for biased processing through “affective contagion” and “motivated bias” (in which a

prior attitude influences the evaluation and retrieval of considerations, respectively).¹¹

According to the theoretical model in *The Rationalizing Voter*, the individuals who are most prone to engage in motivated reasoning are those with strong affect (i.e., a prior opinion) towards an object. In practice, however, these individuals are identified on the basis of their performance on objective knowledge questions. Thus, political knowledge is doing the work of a similar, but nevertheless distinct, concept.

A related observation was made in an insightful paper by Parker-Stephen (2011). He argues that the typical practice of measuring sophistication with knowledge scales conflates two different kinds of people: those who are influenced by directional goals and those who are motivated by accuracy. The first type, Parker-Stephen explains, are people who “support specific candidates and issues” and are thus motivated to see the world in a way that supports their partisan predispositions (2011, 2). This first type knows a lot about politics, objectively speaking, but they are rooting for a specific (partisan) team. These individuals are likely to have “stronger, affectively charged links” as postulated by *The Rationalizing Voter* (Lodge and Taber, 2013, 116; also see Taber and Lodge 2016). The second type of person enjoys following politics, and it is for this reason he or she has high levels of political knowledge. According to Parker-Stephen, the fact that “rooters” and “followers” both have neutral factual knowledge is problematic for tests of motivated reasoning. “The strongest

¹¹ In a study that examines how the information environment contributes to mass polarization, Leeper (2014) comes to a similar conclusion, writing that “only individuals with strong, personally important attitudes are likely to engage in attitude-defensive reasoning” (2014, 30).

test,” he writes, “...would ask, not about perceptual differences across knowledge, but about these differences across levels of motivation” (2011, 4).¹²

A second way to reconcile the paradox of political sophistication relates to the nature of the information environment. Even if scholars conclude that the prevalence of good decision making depends on individual-level motivations (Druckman 2012), the decision making context matters. And here, there is emerging evidence that motivated reasoning does not continue indefinitely: after a certain point, incongruent information can cause even motivated reasoners to update their attitudes (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010; see Barabas 2004 for related evidence). In fact, several recent studies identify the information environment as a crucial determinant to the quality of citizen decision making. The information environment occupies a crucial place in Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen’s (2012) theory of partisan ambivalence, largely in the form of “exogenous shocks” (e.g., scandals, economic downturns) that cause a disjuncture between a person’s long term identification with a party and their contemporary evaluation of the party’s performance. The doubt engendered by this internal conflict prompts a deliberative style of thinking in which

¹² Parker-Stephen (2011) and Nir (2011) are among the few studies that explicitly operationalize partisan and accuracy motivations. In addition to political knowledge, Lodge and his collaborators use other individual-difference variables (e.g., attitude strength) to identify those who are most likely to engage in motivated reasoning. Such measures would seem preferable to political knowledge for another reason: If individuals’ recall is as bad as Lodge’s early research suggests, it is not clear what individual-level difference political knowledge scales are capturing.

people seek out diagnostic information and become more open-minded. Yet people would not experience ambivalence were it not for the fact that information from the “real world” causes them to question the reliability of partisan cues (and to abandon simple partisan cue taking).¹³

Thus, although there is considerable debate in the literature regarding the prevalence of partisan perceptual bias (e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Gaines et al. 2007; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015), it seems impossible to deny the potentially corrective role of the information environment. Recent studies provide a glimpse of how correction might take place. Parker-Stephen (2013) proposes a theory of “contextual motivated reasoning” in which the information environment can facilitate or inhibit partisan rationalization (see Druckman, Peterson, and Slothus 2013 or Slothus and DeVresse 2010 for examples in the literature on framing). When “all the facts push in one direction,” Parker-Stephen writes, it becomes difficult for motivated reasoners to deny reality. This is because even strong motivated reasoners draw their preferred conclusion “only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it” (Kunda 1990, 483).

Parker-Stephen (2013) focuses on judgments about the economy, but another study shows that facts can matter, even in a highly politicized situation such as the lead-up to armed conflict. In their examination of the Iraq War, Feldman, Huddy, and Markus (2015) show that Democrats and Independents were motivated to seek out and process credible critiques of the Bush administration’s case for war. In what truly seems like a triumph of the information

¹³ A similar argument is made by Groenendyk (2016) who argues that the political environment can stimulate anxiety, which in turn reduces partisan bias (also see Brader 2006 or Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emerson 2010).

environment, the authors show that the individuals most likely to be exposed to the critical reporting of regional and non-elite newspapers were the most critical of the administration's pro-war position. Feldman, Huddy, and Markus conclude that, "Americans can sift through complex information on foreign policy and arrive at an independent political judgment under the right conditions... The most important factor is the *availability* of information" (2016, 2-4, emphasis added; also see Bullock 2011).

In the end, it seems inconceivable (to us) that possessing factual information about the political world would by itself be detrimental. We agree with Delli Carpini and Keeter that raw facts, such as "the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line, how the line is determined, and how the percentage has changed over time provide a foundation for deliberation about larger issues. They prevent debates from becoming disconnected from the material conditions they attempt to address" (1996, 11; also see Gilens 2001). Lodge's research demonstrates that insofar as the politically knowledgeable possess strong (i.e., univalent) attitudes toward an issue or candidate, these individuals will also be the most prone to biased reasoning. But this is hardly a foregone conclusion, as work by Parker-Stephen (2013) and Feldman, Huddy, and Markus (2015) reveals. Recent research in political psychology—in part stimulated by Lodge's provocative conclusions—thereby provides a glimmer of hope that people will relinquish prior beliefs in the face of compelling evidence (see, for example, Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014 or Nyhan and Reifler 2015). One important task for future scholars is to more fully elaborate the conditions under which that occurs.

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