ROUNDTABLE 2: IGNORANCE AND ERROR

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JEFFREY FRIEDMAN: We won’t go in alphabetical order because Arthur Lupia has to leave early. He is the Hal R. Varian Collegiate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan and serves as the principal investigator of TESS, which we pronounce as an acronym, right? I don’t know what it stands for, but it’s a cute acronym! [Laughter] It assists scholars with innovative experiments on a wide array of public-opinion surveys. Apparently, there is an election on and Skip has to go back and play a supervisory role in the National Election Studies, which is the main source of public-opinion research. So he will go first, then we’ll revert to alphabetical order.

John Bullock is an assistant professor of political science at Yale who recently received his Ph.D. from Stanford. His most recent article, coauthored with Jonathan Bendor, is appearing in the issue of Critical Review now in press, vol. 20, nos. 1–2, which you may subscribe to using the coupon at the bottom of the flyer. [Laughter]

Paul J. Quirk is the Phil Lind Chair in U.S. Politics and Representation at the University of British Columbia, an editorial advisor of Critical Review, and the coauthor of the 2000 article, “Reconsidering the Rational Public,” and the 2007 book, Deliberative Choices: Debating Public Policy in Congress. Scott will be the discussant.

ARTHUR LUPIA: Thank you. I am currently principal investigator in the National Election Studies, and as some of you may know, this is an election year. We go into the field with our largest survey in approximately

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thirty hours. [Laughter] So I need to get back to Ann Arbor, but I’m happy to be here.

I want to start with a premise, and the premise is that if the work that we’re doing and the conversation that we’re having don’t ultimately lead to an improvement in voter competence, then its social value is limited, if it exists at all.

I’m working on a book whose working title is *How to Improve Voter Competence*, and the subtitle is *Information, Persuasion, and the Failure of Good Intentions*. A lot of people who study this topic, and a lot of people who actually advocate for various kinds of civic education, have great intentions, but I would argue, bad execution. By bad execution I mean, there’s a reliance on folk theories of learning and wishful thinking about what voters ought to do and what they do do.

Instead of having a big conversation about that topic, I want to narrow the focus of the few minutes I have with you to a single question: How should we measure voter competence?

To measure competence, it has to be competence with respect to something, such as a task. To measure competence, you have to name the task. For now, we can think of the task to be voting. We can talk about other tasks later.

Different people in the political realm have different tasks. If we are going to interview a potential Fed chair, for example, there are some things we want them to know in order to accomplish the tasks for which they will be responsible. If we are going to interview a potential Supreme Court justice, there’s a different quiz we’re going to give them, although different people would like to give them different quizzes, as we know. [Laughter]

So what kind of tasks do we need a voter to do? In a lot of cases, what a voter has to do is make a binary choice. So in a presidential election, yes, I know there are other names on the ballot, but there are two people who have a non-zero chance of winning. No one here would bet otherwise, correct? [Laughter] No one will offer that bet.

So let’s say we want voters to be competent in making a binary choice. What do they need to know?

What I want to point out to you first, is that if you take a chimpanzee and you give it a fair coin and you make its vote based on the outcome of that coin toss, the chimp gets the answer right half the time. If McCain or Obama is actually better for the chimp, simply flipping the coin and casting the vote on that basis gets the chimp the right answer half the time. So the question you might want to ask yourself is, “Is the voter in
a binary-choice situation dumber than a chimp with a coin?” I think that’s a fair place to start. People can be misled, of course, but in the end there are two viable choices in a presidential election, Republican and Democrat.

Now there are a lot of choices we make where we don’t know the details. When we buy cereals and cars and we choose colleges and things of that nature, we rely on brand names. Brand names often are not perfect; they don’t always lead us to make good decisions. But a lot of times, brand names tell us a lot. So what I want to ask you to think about, to improve our scholarship and our advocacy on this topic, is “What is it that voters need to know?” And I want to be careful here, because the one idea I want to leave you with is: “Conditions under which.”

Sometimes when people, including many people in this room, talk about voter competence, they’ll say “voters” to refer to everyone. “Voters don’t know this, voters don’t know that. . . .” I think that those comments are entertaining but ultimately have little social value. What we want to know is, “Which voters?” and “What do they need to know—under what conditions?” If we’re not asking that question, then I think we’re just entertaining each other and not making a lot of progress.

Now let’s think about what voters do need to know and how we’d measure it.

What I will say is there’s a history of intelligence testing; it’s documented in books such as the Mismeasurement of Man, or a book that I like called Even the Rat Was White, which uses a historical view of psychology to clarify how intelligence tests were used to continue racism.

What can we say about intelligence tests? We can say that there are some great ones. We can say that there are some that really do a good job at helping us to identify whether certain types of people can accomplish certain types of tasks. We can also say that there are many lousy intelligence tests. And they’re typically lousy because the people who wrote them didn’t have a well-defined task in mind; instead they just had a nebulous idea of something that they wanted to test. In those cases, the content of an intelligence test tends to be self-referential. People who put such tests together look around the room and see their colleagues and say, “What kinds of things would we be embarrassed not to know in front of a group of people like us? What are the basic things that we would not be caught dead not knowing?” The answers to these questions then go on the test. The relationship between these questions and specific tasks is assumed. So
on the military intelligence test of the 30s and 40s, a lot of the questions had to do with things that a typical urban or suburban Caucasian person would know a lot about. If you weren’t in those demographic groups, you wouldn’t do as well. Even earlier generations of intelligence tests had a lot to do with skull measurements, with the assumption that the more your skull looked like that of a white male, the more intelligent you were.

You may say, “Well, those are distant examples and of course, we don’t conduct those kinds of intelligence tests today,” but I would challenge you to ask yourselves, “Where do the questions we put on political-knowledge tests today come from?” And if you want to ask me during the Q&A, I would be happy to tell you. Their pedigree is not very good, I’m afraid.

For example, if we think about the National Election Studies, arguably the most-used source of political knowledge questions, in the 80s there was a debate about which knowledge questions to include, and one of the debates was whether people were generalists and whether we ought to measure general knowledge, or whether they were specialists and we ought to talk about area-specific knowledge. So on one of the pilot tests, they ran about forty political-knowledge questions, but ultimately the National Election Studies can’t include forty questions. I’m running it now, but don’t ask me to do it. There is not enough room on the questionnaires.

How did they get from forty questions to five? We will come back to that question in a moment.

Today, when I ask people why they think that the National Election Studies’ knowledge questions are valid, they answer: “I know they work because they scale together and because they do things like predict turnout; that’s how we know these are good questions.”

Well, let’s go back twenty years, and now I’m going to tell you how the National Election Studies got from forty questions to five. There was no objective measure of knowledge available at the time, so what they did is took the existing forty questions and they chose the ones that (a) scaled together and (b) did things like predict turnout. [Laughter]

There has been a lack of scholarly questioning about where these questions came from. As interesting is the lack of scholarly curiosity about how surveys decide which answers to knowledge questions are and are not correct. The claim that people cannot name the Chief Justice was referenced in the first panel. You may or may not know that that exact issue has been re-examined recently. Some important problems have
been found with the coding of that data which I’d be happy to tell you about in the Q&A.

The ultimate thought I want to leave you with is the question, “Can we do better? Can we do better as academics, as people involved in civic education, at helping voters accomplish the tasks that democracies need them to accomplish?” I think if we can’t be upfront about what tasks people need to accomplish, and what kinds of information are necessary or sufficient to complete those tasks, then we’re entertaining ourselves but we’re ultimately not making much progress towards the goal of improving voter competence. Thank you.

JOHN BULLOCK: One of Skip’s suggestions is that we should be clearer about the premises that guide our research on voter knowledge and error. I’m sympathetic, but I want to take a slightly different tack. I’ll start by characterizing the dominant approach to the study of voter error, and suggesting what I take to be the most basic problem with this approach. And I’ll close by suggesting two alternatives that seem more appealing to me.

The dominant approach takes voters’ interests as given and then asks whether their choices correspond to those interests. To me, this approach is epitomized by Lau and Redlawsk and their work on “correct voting.” They use survey responses to make a judgment about how each person taking the survey should vote. These responses are to questions about issue positions, evaluations of candidates, and party ID. If the respondents’ actual votes correspond to the Lau-Redlawsk judgment, the respondents are said to be “voting correctly.”

It’ll immediately occur to some of you that there are measurement problems here. Even if you grant in principle that we can figure out how a person should vote by asking him about his positions on issues, there is a more fundamental issue here.

I have trouble seeing why we should take this approach seriously—and I’m not singling out the authors I just named—because this approach is radically agnostic in its refusal to judge voters’ basic desires. By the light of this approach, the only error that a voter can make is the one that doesn’t serve his basic desires.

I stumble on this point because I think that many voters have desires that are wrong, perhaps even vile. I therefore don’t care much about whether voters make “competent” choices in the Lau-Redlawsk sense. I care instead about whether their choices further the ends that I care about. And that’s what I think you should care about, too.
The typical objection to this point of view is rooted in humility. It says that scholars are fallible and therefore shouldn’t judge voters’ desires. Well, the first part is right: scholars are fallible. Why it follows that they should abjure judgment is not clear to me. And to see where abjuring judgment leads, just think for yourself right now about some political sentiment that you consider odious. By the standard of most voter-competence research, voters who hold this odious view are competent if, and only if, they make a choice that furthers this odious view.

If this is all that voter competence amounts to—and in many studies, it is all that voter competence amounts to—it’s not clear why we should care about voter competence. It’s simply too permissive a standard to be meaningful.

There are other objections that you can raise, and I’m happy to take those up in Q&A, but I think it’s more important to look to alternative ways of thinking about voter competence.

Scott Althaus and Skip Lupia have touched on one alternative that appeals to me. It’s to think more of the set of issues, or issue areas, for which voters’ desires merit consideration. Now presumably the set isn’t empty; there really are cases in which we should care what voters think. By the same token, it seems plain to me that this set of issues is not identical with the set of all government activity or all possible government activity. Sometimes, on some matters, voters’ views should be ignored.

To say that we should be thinking more about this is clearly a call for empiricists to do more normative argument, and I know that’s not going to be appealing to many people. But this is where Skip and Scott come in. They’ve both written in the Converse issue of *Critical Review* [vol. 18, nos. 1–3] about the murkiness of the normative premises that underpin our research, and about how useful it would be for empiricists who study voter error to be more explicit about their normative assumptions. That’s what I’m suggesting: that empirical work on voter error take a normative turn.

There’s a second strategy that’s already widely used. It’s to start from a strong *a priori* assertion about what people should do, and then to ask whether in fact they do it. Bryan Caplan’s book is one good example. He starts with a set of premises about correct economic opinion and then sees whether in fact voters hold these opinions. Larry Bartels’s recent book on inequality may be a second example.
And a third example very clearly is our massive research on voter tolerance. It starts from the premise, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, that tolerance is good and intolerance is bad. Then it seeks to explain why some voters err by making intolerant choices or holding intolerant views. We don’t typically think of this kind of work as work on voter error, but we should. It may be the most important kind of work on voter error.

PAUL QUIRK: Being asked to speak for five minutes on a subject that’s very important to me feels a little bit like being told tomorrow’s the last day of your life and you have some choices about how to spend it. [Laughter] I feel like whatever I do will be disappointing. But I do want to take a second to object to the disparagement of people who open these spam messages from Nigeria. [Laughter] I always open these messages and I read them. But I am ambitious, so I always say, “It’s not enough money.” [Laughter]

I want to comment on a couple of things that I think are possible answers to points that have been made by Skip and some others. The first thing I want to think about is: Why should we say, or why do I say in the things that I write, that the public is prone to error or maybe that it lacks competence in public-policy judgments?

I think Skip is absolutely right to point out that we need some standard of the significance of the errors that people make.

There is no SAT on public policy where people need to score a 600 in order to get into the voting booth. The argument that I would make is that there is no such thing as a plausible or an intelligent standard about this matter, apart from thinking about the practical implications of concluding that errors do occur. I think that some of the difficulty in the public-opinion field—the arguments over this question—have to do with the fact that people don’t really spell out the practical implications that they have in mind, and so there is some tendency toward attributing extreme views.

For example, the argument that I make when I write about public error is that there is enough error that pressure from public opinion is the source of a very large fraction of the perversity and harm that occurs in public policy. There are other causes of perversity and harm: for example, demands from organized interest groups; sometimes the selfishness of politicians; sometimes other things. Now what would you say is a practical implication and what would you do if that’s the case?
One could imagine, and attribute to a scholar like me, such views as that we ought to find ways to limit voting participation, or that we should delegate absolutely as much policy making as we can to expert commissions, or that possibly we should limit the frequency of elections, or endorse vast increases in the amount of secrecy that the government uses: these are some of the recommendations you could make on the grounds that the public was not competent about judging policies.

I don’t go in any of those directions, though, and I don’t think one needs to in order to endorse the proposition that I stated earlier.

I think the practical implications of this view are that one should, for example, question the value of eliciting specific policy promises from politicians in election campaigns—in campaign debates, journalists like to say, “Do you promise not to do this or do you promise to do that?”

I think it’s reasonable to oppose the expansion of direct democracy—that is, to oppose more use of referendums or teledemocracy and so forth.

I think it’s plausible to applaud policy makers who appear to show signs of independence from public opinion, willingness to take electoral risks by opposing the most popular policies.

And then the practical implication that’s easiest of all for me to endorse, the least problematic—I think there are debates about any of those that I even mentioned—but it’s a very important thing to try to improve media coverage of politics and public policy, and see if there are other ways in which it’s possible to improve public opinion.

SCOTT ALTHAUS: I’d like to expand on the contributions that the three panelists have made, and tie them in with some of the things that we were hearing out of the first session this morning, by riffing off of the title of this session, “Political Ignorance and Error.” I want to suggest to you that ignorance concerns knowledge, and error concerns judgment, and competence concerns the relationship between particular types of knowledge and the validity of particular types of judgment.

One of the things that’s coming up in our conversation is, How can we define validity in concrete ways that will be useful to the democratic project that has been put before us?

The first point that I’d like to make, and I think many of the panelists would agree with this, is that knowledge does not equal judgment. Often in the literature we find a conversation about whether people have a lot of knowledge or a little bit of knowledge, and then there’s this great hand-waving, and then there’s a conversation about what this means for judgmental competence.
I think that we need to be more explicit in trying to at least define where we’re coming from when we make particular connections between knowledge that we think is important, and the kind of judgments that we think people ought to make. Skip’s work has been doing this to some degree; John and Paul have been doing this as well. But if we don’t do that—and I think that much of the literature that I’m familiar with has not, at least on the empirical side—we run the risk of going back to a view of political interests that went out with Marx: that I can sit back knowing only about your class situation, and I can tell you whether your opinions are in your interest or not.

We don’t tend to feel very comfortable with that kind of judgment anymore unless it’s appearing in the pages of the *AJPS* or the *APSR*, [Laughter] in which case we’re perfectly comfortable doing the same thing by assumption. If we say, “People are not sufficiently knowledgeable,” usually it is implied that their judgments must be corrupt or wrong. I want to suggest that there may be a plausible standard for assessing errors apart from considering their implications, and it is that good judgment is defined by context. We need to make the judgmental context more explicit in our conversation. What is the context that leads us to draw particular conclusions about the connection between knowledge and judgment?

Setting aside the work done by people in this room, less of the literature that’s been written on this topic has been very deeply entwined in the actual writings of political philosophers than probably should be the case. It turns out that there’s a huge disagreement about what democracy is. There are, as a consequence, many different models of democracy. Yet much of the conversation that moves forward seems to be premised on an idea that democratic theory requires something like knowledgeable citizens: If you don’t have knowledgeable citizens, then democracy is not going to work so well. That turns out to be a very specific argument in a particular context of democratic theory. You can trace this argument back to republican communitarianism, but it’s at odds with many flavors of liberal theory. If the origins of our theoretical commitments were more front and center in our conversation, then we could begin talking about the assumptions that are lurking behind implied connections between political knowledge and citizen competence. At present, much of the literature lacks a vocabulary for discussing these assumptions.

There are cautionary tales. One of them is the great industry that has developed among political scientists seeking to address the implications
of political knowledge ever since Philip Converse did his piece in 1964 on belief systems [republished in Critical Review 18(1–3)]. This extensive literature is almost uniformly premised on the idea of democracy requiring an informed citizenry, and this premise is said to come from something called “classical democratic theory.” Sometimes people will bandy about the name of Locke or Hobbes or John Stuart Mill. But if you actually go back, as Carole Pateman and many theorists have done, and look at what those so-called “classical democratic theorists” had to say, none of them presumed that democracy required an informed citizenry. Quite the contrary, they were writing before universal education. Most people were ignorant, according to conventional standards; they could not read. The problem of democracy was how to design a system that worked despite the fact that most people who would have had the power under universal suffrage to choose the government might lack the competence to carry out this task. That was what the democratic project was about.

We may now have moved into a situation where the complexity of the world and the scale of democracy requires re-examining whether we need something like an informed citizen. We might. But in my reading of this literature, from Locke and Hobbes all the way up, the first really well-developed theoretical explanation for why you would want a well-informed citizenry came out quite recently, in Delli Carpini and Keeter’s 1996 book [What Americans Know about Politics, Yale]. So there’s a lot more work that needs to be done in grounding the assumptions, bringing democratic theory into the conversation, and using a more nuanced reading of democratic theory, to move this conversation forward into some more productive venues.

ARTHUR LUPIA: I have three minutes and it’s now very incentive-compatible for me to speak quickly, because I have to run to the airport after this. I will make just a few points that are relevant to this conversation and how we move forward.

First, consider two psychological phenomena: one is called the fundamental-attribution error and the other is called the ingroup/outgroup bias.

The fundamental-attribution error: You see someone walking down the street and he trips. You infer that he is a klutz. The reason you think that is because you think that’s something you do not ordinarily do, and you can’t explain why he did it. You know that when you trip over a curb, you’re not a klutz, because you rarely trip. But the other person simply appears to be a klutz.
Some of the same bias spills over into an ingroup/outgroup bias: the idea that I know and can explain what people like me do and I know why people like me are reasonable—but other people are different. They all think alike and they’re like drones and they don’t think through the issues and that’s why they do what they do. They’re stupid and if we could just educate them, if they just knew what we knew, they’d be like us.

Those types of biases are inherent in a lot of the scholarship and writing on political knowledge and particularly books on political ignorance. Some of it, when you just strip it right down, argues: They don’t know what we know; therefore, they must be ignorant.

What I want to see is the proof. *Under what conditions* is a particular kind of knowledge necessary or sufficient—or I’ll even take correlated, at this point—to being able to cast a vote, to have a particular kind of conversation, and so forth? That’s a debate we can have and we’ll find important conditions under which certain types of knowledge are essential. But we haven’t had it yet; most people just assume an answer and move on.

The one example I want to give you of that is that, for twenty years now, people have been using National Elections Studies data to talk about voter ignorance. So here’s a surprise, except for those of you who heard me talk about this on Friday: How many of you know that the National Election Studies political questions are asked in an open-ended format?

They’re not multiple choice, they’re open ended. What that means is, you ask the question, the respondent says something. What happens to what the respondent says?

Because of privacy concerns, their words are not put into the data set. A staffer in Ann Arbor, for the last twenty years, has looked at those phrases, sometimes with assistance from the principal investigators, and has made decisions about which answers are correct and which answers are incorrect. And for twenty years, no one who has used this data has called the office in Ann Arbor and asked, “What’s the algorithm you used to determine what’s correct and incorrect?”

You might say, “Is that a problem?” It turns out that it is. In 2004 and in 2000, a question was, “What is the political office held by William Rehnquist?” You might ask, “What was coded as a correct answer?” Well, you had to say: “Chief Justice” and “Supreme Court.” If you said, “Chief Justice” of something like “the United States”—which, by the way, is actually the constitutional title, not Chief Justice of the Supreme Court—you were graded as “wrong.” But if you said, “Chief Justice of the Supreme Court,” you were right. If you said, “Supreme Court
justice,” you were wrong. If you said, “Chief Justice” but not “Supreme Court,” you were graded as incorrect. That’s what’s correct and incorrect in that study.

Also, it may amuse you to know that some people, when asked about the political office held by Dick Cheney—I think one respondent responded, “Devil incarnate.” [Laughter] Another person said, “Chief puppeteer.” [Laughter] They, too, were graded as incorrect. [Laughter]

For twenty years, the National Election Studies staff have assigned these grades. I don’t blame the staffers in Ann Arbor, however. It wasn’t their intellectual responsibility to ask the question, “What algorithm are you using to determine which answers are correct?”

I think it was a lack of intellectual curiosity. I think it was a spat of intellectual complacency that scholars and other writers on voter incompetence did not ask these questions. We really need to think about conditions under which certain pieces of knowledge actually are relevant to choices.

I wish I could be in two places at once but an election study awaits. Have fun and thank you. [Departs.]

JOHN BULLOCK: A few remarks, I suppose. Skip says, and he’s absolutely right, that we should have more coherent and straightforward arguments about what specific kinds of knowledge and ignorance imply for voter competence. But it doesn’t follow that we should refrain from making normative judgments of voters’ desires or interests when we discuss voter competence and voter error. Indeed, refraining from judgment in this sense is a recipe for boring, unimportant research.

Instead of taking a voter’s own fundamental desires or basic self interests as given, we should be prejudging these, or at least trying to make arguments about what sorts of interests merit more or less attention. The way forward is to do this and to be explicit about it: to reason more explicitly about premises that we think are relevant to voter competence, beliefs that we think voters must share if they are to be “competent” in any important sense.

PAUL QUIRK: I want to say a couple of things that relate to both Scott’s comments and Skip’s. I wish Skip had been able to stay for this discussion.

I think Scott makes an interesting point about there being no long pedigree for the idea that voters need to be well informed, and makes a good point that we need to think about what the context is in which people have judgment, or have information, or lack it.

In my view, a great part of the problem is that developments in relatively recent politics, perhaps in the last half century or so, have made
citizens’ opinions about public policy far more consequential to policy outcomes. One of the most important of these developments is that specific issues are now crucial elements of political campaigns. So voters now encounter rhetoric saying so-and-so voted to increase your taxes, or so-and-so cut Social Security, and then the voter is invited to wreak punishment upon the party or the candidate who has taken that position. The fact that citizens are invited to make judgments on that basis is, for me, what makes it important to know whether citizens are capable of making those judgments in ways that reflect their underlying interests and their most fundamental preferences. I think people have great difficulty in making good judgments in that circumstance, and I think there are a few psychological facts or features of human judgment that go beyond mere rational ignorance that account for the difficulty.

I think that what happens is that when people hear campaign rhetoric about issues, they first make very quick, almost automatic judgments as to their preferences about the policy; second, they are likely to be over-confident about the correctness of those judgments from their own point of view; and somewhat related to Skip’s point, they’re likely to make the so-called fundamental-attribution error in explaining the behavior of the politicians who oppose them: That is, to attribute a vote to raise taxes, or to cut Social Security, to fundamental dispositions of those policy makers—as if the policy makers like taxes or dislike Social Security—as opposed to attributing it to the circumstances in which they make these choices, such as various other competing policy considerations or constraints.

SCOTT ALTHAUS: One of the things we’re hearing is how difficult it is to pin down voters or anybody else in terms of what they know, and what difference that makes for anything else. I want to expand a little bit on what Paul and Skip had to say by giving three quick examples of when good knowledge does not equal good judgment.

One of them comes from Phil Tetlock’s great book on political experts [Expert Political Judgment, Princeton, 2005]. Surely, these people are very knowledgeable about the subjects on which they’re offering opinions that shape the world as we know it. And yet, many of them are not making good judgments, according to Tetlock. We need to wonder why that is, and what’s the role that knowledge plays.

A second example is—I believe, Paul, that you were a coauthor on the Gaines, Kuklinski et al. JOP piece [vol. 69, no. 4: “Same Facts, Different Interpretations: Partisan Motivation and Public Opinion on Iraq”—a methodologically sophisticated analysis of the same people over time,
how their knowledge of casualties in Iraq changed, whether that knowledge was accurate or not, and what relationship that knowledge had with whether they supported American involvement in Iraq. What they found in an analysis that stretched over several years was that most of the subjects in their experimental pool, both Democrats and Republicans, were pretty accurate in noting the rising numbers of casualties. And yet, what they did with that information was not what many people would expect. The people who already supported the war interpreted those new casualties as being justified for the larger good. The people who were opposed to the war interpreted the change in casualties as yet more evidence of why the United States should not be involved. In other words, changing levels of knowledge did not affect the judgments that people were making about the Iraq situation.

The third example, familiar to many of you who read the literature in political psychology, is the concept of online processing. When we talk about a survey result suggesting that a lot of people are ignorant about something, we’re making some assumptions about what’s going on in people’s minds. One of the assumptions is that the ability to recall the information and state it in a survey interview is not only sufficient, but necessary, for demonstrating that you actually have that knowledge. As it turns out, the psychology of information acquisition, retention, and recall makes that very difficult to pull off. Rationally, it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense for most of us to store all of those nuts away so we can pull them out in the wintertime when the survey researcher calls. Instead, we summarily update our judgments as we’re exposed to the information, and then we forget it. We retain an updated judgment, but we forget about its informational basis.

That’s not to say that the inability to answer knowledge questions is irrelevant. In fact, my work and that of many people in this room suggests that online processing doesn’t fully make up for a lack of knowledge. But I think online processing does make more problematic the assumption that if we demonstrate that people seem to lack the kind of information that we want them to have, they must be incapable of making informed judgments.

JEFFREY FRIEDMAN: Audience members?

BRYAN CAPLAN: It may seem churlish to criticize Arthur Lupia as soon as he leaves the room, but he leaves me no choice. I want to go back to a point that he made, which is that voters simply need to choose the better of two choices, so binary choice somehow makes democracy work
better or makes the problem of voter error less significant. I’d like to call this the “binary fallacy” just to prejudge the question.

Here’s the key point: the choices that the electorate has, the choices that the politicians offer, are themselves a function of the average level of voter knowledge. For example, if you had an electorate that was firmly convinced that the extermination of Jews was a good idea, then the median-voter theorem tells us that both candidates would go and offer platforms along those lines. The fact that the two platforms were identical would mean that by Lupia’s test, voters would be doing just fine.

In other words, Lupia’s test is that if both candidates were offering identical platforms, then both choices are equally good, and it is easy for voters to choose “the better of their two choices.” But hold on here. The fact that these two platforms are being offered depends upon the knowledge the people have or the errors that people have. The widespread belief in a Jewish conspiracy, for example, could be why we have two Nazis competing for the support of the public (hopefully not any time soon).

It’s important to realize that knowledge actually makes a big difference, not merely at the level of individual choice, but also it has a very large effect on the choices people have in the first place.

I have one other thing on Scott’s point about what Tetlock’s book says, since I did a review essay on Tetlock’s book for Critical Review [vol. 19, no. 1], and also since Tetlock told me he thought my review was great [Laughter]—one of my favorite letters, it’s on my wall.

The key thing to remember, which Tetlock explicitly states, is that his questions have two characteristics. First of all, the questions have to pass the “Don’t bother me with dumb questions” test; meaning that if the questions were easy, the questions weren’t asked. Second, the questions were generally controversial among experts themselves. If you ask questions that are controversial among experts themselves, it’s not surprising that the average expert does poorly, because they were selected in such a way that the average expert couldn’t do well. If you asked easier questions, or questions where there was an expert consensus, Tetlock’s results would have turned out differently.
that people don’t know they have. The best way to give an example is—
I like this exercise. How many of you can identify the wall closest to you?

JEFFREY FRIEDMAN: I know that whatever my answer is will be wrong. . . .

GEORGE MARCUS: I guarantee you, I’m going to ask you nothing
that’s either tricky or that you can’t do. So again, how many can identify
the wall closest to you? I assume that we all pass, 100 percent. Any of you
know how you know? None. Looking doesn’t work. You see lots of
walls, how do you know which is closest? I’ll tell you how you know.
What your brain does is look at the visual field and looks at the corners.
It has nothing to do with distance; it has to do with the corners. What
are the differences between the corners? Can anyone quickly figure it
out? All these are right angles, but they don’t look like right angles. Some
are obtuse and some are acute. The brain decodes that information and
locates you in space, and does that quickly, to use the terms that Scott
used earlier—automatically—and you don’t know how you do this. Yet
you operate in your daily lives all the time relying on these kinds of brain
calculations that enable you to perform in the world.

Online processing has nothing to do with that kind of knowledge.
What we’re assuming incorrectly is that all citizens ought to rely only on
semantic information. That is information that can be represented visually.

Another quick story—this is a famous one, an old one; you’ll see it in
most neuroscience textbooks. A French doctor, Dr. Claporiti, had a
patient who was amnesiac. She would forget instantly the name of the
person she was just introduced to, including her doctor. So Dr. Claporiti
would come in, he’d introduce himself to her, she’d be thrilled to see him,
he’d leave, twenty minutes later he’d come back in and the same thing
all over again. So he tried something. He attached a thumbtack to his hand
and when she reached out to shake his hand, she got pricked, was hurt,
and pulled her hand away. Interesting question now. For someone who’s
an amnesiac, what happens the next time that Dr. Claporiti walks in to
shake her hand? She greets him, she’s happy to see him, but she will not
shake his hand. What’s interesting is she will shake everyone else’s hand,
but not his hand. So on the one hand, she knows him and she knows what
not to do to get hurt, but she doesn’t know him if you asked her; she
would say, “I’ve never met him before.”

So this semantic notion of what is knowledge applies to only a
constrained, small subset of the human brain. We actually have two
systems of memory. One is called semantic or declared memory, and
that’s what you’re talking about when you say, “What did candidate so-and-so say in the debate?” But why you liked or disliked that candidate has very little to do with just that information. It has something to do with that information, but only under specialized circumstances. So if we want to make declarative statements about what citizens know or what they ought to know, restricting our attention only to the semantic information that’s available and retained in semantic and short-term memory will mean that we’re going to be talking about a small subset, which is only relevant under some limited circumstances; and unless you understand what those limited circumstances are, the relevance of that information for the kinds of judgments that we as political theorists or political scientists want to make, is itself going to be highly contained.

JEFFREY FRIEDMAN: Thank you, George. George is going to be here in the panel the hour after next, so stick around. Any responses from the survey-research world?

PAUL QUIRK: On George’s point, all that was very interesting, but it strikes me that there is a long way to go to demonstrate that any of these non-semantic forms of knowledge are actually important in enabling people to serve their political interests through the judgments that they make about politicians and candidates.