

How Sophisticated and Competent is Public Opinion? April 2004, Robin Collins

Philip Converse argues that individuals' contextual grasp of belief systems is measurable, but also demonstrably different when comparing elites to mass publics (Converse:247). He also claims that because this is true, there is a disturbing disconnect between social concepts and choices that are made (opinions) "as one moves from the more to the less politically sophisticated in the society" (273). This short paper looks at this view and compares it with those suggesting that while knowledge is stratified, Converse's findings do not accurately reflect the sophistication and competence of mass public opinion. The importance of basic political knowledge, level of education, information "shortcuts", opinion stability and aggregate opinion are briefly considered.

Converse outlines the existence of "important and predictable differences in ideational worlds as we progress downward through" the belief systems of elites to those held by mass publics.¹ While simple political knowledge is expected to be broadly accessible, including "constraint among idea-elements" linked to that knowledge, Converse argues that elite understanding is not shared by the mass public, not even by many of those who claim to "support" elite views (250).

Gerbner and Lupia agree that voters' low level of political knowledge is "overwhelmingly" recognized in the "long-standing critiques of voter competence – study after study suggests that voters know almost nothing about almost everything" (Gerber and Lupia:147). David Elkins also agrees that people have specialized knowledge in only a few areas, and "appalling ignorance of most topics" (Elkins:30). However, he argues there is a complementary pluralistic sophistication -- useful in an operating democracy -- and the broad sophistication demanded by Converse is therefore much less important, and even undesirable. Public competence should be judged, not by general political knowledge, argues Elkins, but by determining what matters to (different) people and admitting the value of specialized sophistication. Yet Elkins also argues that the conception of a "single hierarchy" of expertise is not useful because the concept of *sophistication* is broader than Converse (or those in agreement with him) claim. There is a "political division of labour" that the public draws on to "exert pressure on political elites". While Elkins' approach

¹ His observation bears heavily on our assumptions about democratic theory, particularly because the "contextual grasp of 'standard' political belief systems fades out very rapidly" (Converse:247) when sought outside the segment of the population that is university educated.

claims the existence of coexisting pockets of knowledge and competence that Converse fails to admit, it does not test the public for basic political knowledge, which is Converse's primary interest.

As evidence of an existing hierarchy of knowledge and opinion based on it, Converse suggests that the public's understanding of the conservative-liberal continuum is a "highly serviceable yardstick" (Converse:154) that can be used to delineate levels of sophistication. For example, a "shift to the right" in the United States, in the electoral change from a Democratic to Republican administration, should reveal a genuine public understanding of concomitant policy repercussions linked to partisan choice and change.² Converse finds³ that those who do show this understanding (defined as "ideologues" and "near-ideologues") together comprise only 11.5% of the total population⁴ (Converse:258).

Whether or not one agrees that Converse's left-right/liberal-conservative test is *sufficient* evidence of sophistication, there is some intuitive logic to it where it reflects possession of basic political knowledge.⁵ When measures of sophistication are offered, some (as in Converse's case) are based on education level attained; others focus on different techniques for information gathering and processing. In their study, Gerber and Lupia define voter competence as consistency in the casting of votes, whether or not voters possess all available knowledge. Competence can be gained even while "postpon[ing] the collection of information until just before the election". Contrary to Converse's conclusions, Gerbner and Lupia find that "access to credible endorsements" can adequately substitute for missing knowledge and will quickly aid in the analysis of how ballot propositions (direct single issue voting) will affect one's "broad or narrow conceptions of self-interest" (Gerbner and Lupia:149).⁶

Popkin and Dimock disagree with Gerber and Lupia about the quality of public knowledge (and therefore agree here with Converse) in pointing out that citizens "seldom know the facts about issues and have little knowledge about government in general" (Popkin and Dimock:117). However, they question whether factual knowledge should

² It could be argued that because the technical meaning of "liberal" and "conservative" have been switched (with liberal denoting free market, and conservative being linked to protectionism), the continuum that Converse points to, is neither clear to elites nor mass publics.

³ Converse notes that while his intention is not to link level of education to "grasp", the 10% of Americans who completed college in the 1950s show significant understanding of political ideas on the most part lost to the bulk of the population (Converse:253).

⁴ Estimates of the size of the informed sector of the population vary (see Neuman's numbers, for instance); the point, however, is that only a minority can be said to be sophisticated enough to grasp basic political understanding.

⁵ As Converse points out in an example, politicians (but not mass publics) favouring federal spending on education likely also favour an "internationalist posture in foreign affairs" because both opinions are linked by "liberalism" (270). However Converse (267) also finds that a small percentage of the *most* sophisticated among the elite show an aversion to partisanship, contrary to the general claims he makes equating partisanship to sophistication. This anomaly he describes as a "small and special case" (267).

⁶ They also find that even while voters will know more about issues than about candidates, they can still cast competent votes in support of candidates if they have "access to simple cues, such as the endorsements of individuals or groups whose interests are well known" (159).

be the sole or most important determinant of citizen competence. The link between knowledge and competent opinion is not clear: Political knowledge⁷, they argue, does not determine whether citizens can make rational and reasonable decisions even if it affects “how new information is incorporated into their evaluations”. The distinction is important because there are other strategies that can be used, including “information shortcuts”. If knowledge recall is critical to making good political decisions -- more so than access to subjective impressions and “summary judgements” -- then the information deficit might be more serious. But, the authors seem to suggest, if alternative mechanisms providing adequate “substitutes for harder to obtain kinds of data” will suffice (120), then mass publics’ electoral behaviour still involves a process of legitimate reasoning.⁸

Popkin and Dimock do not suggest, however, that basic political knowledge is not useful or necessary. They point out that the “information-shortcut” model can even undervalue “the difference that knowledge makes to which shortcuts people use and how well they assemble the data into a choice” (121). Those with low knowledge, however, can still evaluate the character or *integrity* of politicians, and may focus on such proxy knowledge instead of an assessment of the programs being offered. Publics may identify with a political party for partisan reasons, even if lacking substantive understanding of government and policy.⁹ Yes, citizens may as a result fail to clearly distinguish between the different political platforms of politicians. Nonetheless Popkin and Dimock find that reliance on “standing evaluations of the [political] parties” sometimes suffices (135).¹⁰

Converse sees a divide that distinguishes elites from non-elites based to a large degree on level of education (Converse:264). Not all researchers agree that education level is a sufficient guide to competence. Popkin and Dimock note that while education may enable abstract thinking skills, “political knowledge is a distinct and relevant

⁷ The authors consider the term “political knowledge” as a dimension of “sophistication” that has a strong bearing on “certain forms of political reasoning” (Popkin and Dimock:125).

⁸ Page and Shapiro also draw attention to the likelihood that publics are subject to extensive manipulation, particularly though misinformation in the area of foreign and defence policy, where Americans seem “definitely to have been manipulated” over many decades (1999:367). Elkins (31) agrees that it is “naïve to deny that manipulation is commonplace.” Despite this, Page and Shapiro argue that publics are “surprisingly resistant” to manipulation in the “medium to long run” in part because there are limits to the “efficacy of official opinion manipulation”. There is also evidence that even while Americans are exposed to a great volume of half-truths and misinformation on some subjects, there appears to be a capability for “rational calculations” (1999:381).

⁹ This would also appear to contradict the assumption made by Converse that partisan identification is a key indicator of political sophistication.

¹⁰ They also find that low turnouts at election time are not primarily due to distrust of politicians or public apathy (136). There is, rather, a “positive relationship between basic political knowledge and turnout” (137), which means that voters retain a certain minimum competence that non-voters may lack. Neuman, on the other hand, argues that the “measures of citizen apathy and public knowledge are straightforward and self-evident” (Neuman:46). While clearly more optimistic about the minimum level of voting knowledge required at the ballot box, Popkin and Dimock do not significantly challenge Converse’s primary argument about the impact on opinion *sophistication* of low levels of political knowledge among mass publics overall.

factor shaping political reasoning”, and quite separate from one’s level of education (Popkin and Dimock:124; see also Achen in Neuman:48). Page and Shapiro, however, find that not only does educational background have a significant impact on “receptivity to new information” (Page and Shapiro, 1992:314), but “people with more education have also tended to be more liberal than others on a wide range of social and life-style issues” (315). Nonetheless, they find that opinion is generally stable – and stability is a key indicator of “rationality” in their view regardless of education level.

For Converse, the consequences of the education deficit are very important. The “stuff of politics” is dependent on a comprehension of often “remote and abstract” concepts accessible on the most part from higher learning, and therefore this type of knowledge needs to be considered if we are to understand the “bulk of mass political behaviour” (254). He challenges, therefore, the comfort level held by other researchers, based on their linking stability of types of opinion (“parallel publics” in the phrase of Page and Shapiro) to competence.

Is mass public opinion in aggregate form, when relatively stable, evidence of “rationality”? Gallup and Rae suggest that collective public opinion shows an enhanced measure of reasonableness and moderation over individual opinion (Gallup and Rae:148). When aggregated, random or erratic changes made by individuals are “canceled out”.¹¹ Page and Shapiro agree that Converse’s data reveal unstable public views because individuals do often contradict themselves in surveys. But “public opinion as a whole” is different from “opinions of individual citizens, taken one at a time” (Page and Shapiro:7-8) and can be “real, highly stable”, and even “wise”. Converse might agree with them that uninformed opinions held by the majority of citizens, once aggregated, will produce “meaningful public opinion based on the underlying central tendencies of individuals’ opinions” (32). He would disagree however that the aggregate opinion, *whether or not* it is contrary to informed elite opinion, would be suitably informed and therefore *sophisticated* opinion.

Even if not “rational” and while sometimes wrong, Page and Shapiro argue, public opinion is sufficiently elegant to be “capable of rather sensible, even sophisticated, political reasoning” (1999:94). They offer nine criteria

¹¹ They suggest that much of the wide variation is ironed out using “models explicitly allowing for measurement error”, which begs the question as to whether an irrational public *is at all measurable* or only being obscured by such standards. Neuman argues that the critics are ignoring the fact that there are “few ambiguities in the linkage between the data and the theoretical conclusions”, and the evidence points to high levels of “citizen apathy, low levels of public knowledge, unstructured political thinking, pseudo opinions, and issueless politics” (Neuman:46).

that can be used to evaluate the competence of “collective policy preferences”¹² -- their indicators include opinion stability and consistency, coherence, meaningful delineation of alternatives, comprehension, predictability, and sensibility. For several of the most telling indicators, however, Page and Shapiro show little confidence in their own methodology. They admit, for instance, “there is room for argument over just how coherent the patterns are and just how well they fit with particular beliefs and values” (104). Changes in policy preference found “plausible explanation[s], likely cause[s]” but assertions as to the “sense” of changes could not be made “with as much certainty”, and are “inevitably open to charges of subjectivity.”

This paper has outlined some of the views challenging Philip Converse’s position that public opinion is highly stratified, and only a small percentage of the population exhibit sophisticated views -- a conclusion that one would think bears strongly on the strength or weakness of democratic processes. Several of those challenges provide reasons why we might want to broaden Converse’s criteria for defining sophisticated opinion, particularly because his liberal-conservative ideological “yardstick” seems too narrow and confining. Nonetheless, Converse’s analysis points to some disparities that seem uncontested, even though as Neuman notes, “democratic theory provides no clear numerical benchmarks against which to assess the acceptable quality of public sophistication”.

Drawing attention to possible shortcomings in opinions among mass publics, as did Philip Converse, is still a useful exercise whether we next seek refuge in alarm, denial, or smug elitism. More constructively, we could explore prescriptive measures.

¹² Because aggregated public opinion changes relatively slowly over time, it is (by definition) “more” stable. Certain changes are measurable and reveal a logic and direction, but simultaneous radical change in opposite directions can also produce the impression of stability (Page and Shapiro, 1991:33). Page and Shapiro are not suggesting that citizens have “meaningful opinions on all matters”. They admit that uncertainty is “sometimes quite high”, depending upon the issue. (1999: 96) Less convincingly, the authors suggest that opinions offered about “fictional policies” might even be “meaningful indications of what people think of current proposals” associated with “key words in the questions”(97). The distinctions Page and Shapiro record do show considered tendencies by publics and drift where there is movement of shared opinion. This may reveal opinion stability, even if that opinion may not be politically sophisticated.

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