

Week 3
Political Knowledge and Sophistication

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How's it going?

Week 3 check-in



We're underway with semester one and we want to check in to see how you are going.

Week 3 is a good time to:

- ✓ Ask for help if you need it.
- ✓ Make sure you know who to contact in each course if you have questions.
- ✓ Check that you're keeping up to date with all your course activities.
- ✓ Confirm your assessment deadlines.
- ✓ Check how to apply for an extension on an assessment task.
- ✓ Look into [getting help with studying](#) and support for your [wellbeing](#).

Feeling stressed about study?

- ✓ You can apply for [Special Assessment Consideration](#) where appropriate.
- ✓ [Talk to someone](#) about your study load, noting the Census Date is **31 March 2022**.
- ✓ Visit the [Census Date](#) website or [Swapping or Dropping a Course](#) to learn how to make changes to your study program and the deadlines for such changes.
- ✓ Check out the [financial support](#) that is available to students.



Let's start taking a survey:

<https://forms.gle/8CFuZrYt41ULq6zEA>

Motivation: Inconsistency across survey responses and the debate on the effects of political ignorance.

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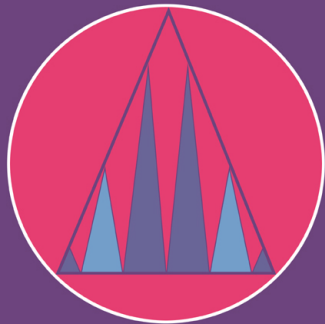
How citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion?

Motivation: Inconsistency across survey responses and the debate on the effects of political ignorance.

How citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion?

- How citizens learn about matters that are for the most part beyond their immediate experience?
- How they convert the information they acquire into opinions?

THE NATURE
AND ORIGINS OF
MASS OPINION



JOHN R. ZALLER

(Political) Opinion

Informed judgments about political matters. A combination of information and values—information to generate a mental picture of what is at stake and values to make a judgment about it.

Information

The flow of political information in the media, including news reports, commentaries, and elite leadership cues. (An examination of the effects of the media on opinion.)

Values

Any relatively stable, individual-level predisposition to accept or reject particular types of arguments. Values may be rooted in personality, philosophy, ideology, gender, experience, religion, ethnicity, occupation, interest, and party identification.

Consideration

Any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other. Considerations, thus, are a compound of cognition and affect—that is, a belief concerning an object and an evaluation of the belief.

Example of a consideration:

“By invading Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin violated his neighbor’s sovereignty and international laws.” (CNN, February 26, 2022)

The cognitive element in this consideration is **information** about Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine, and the **affect** is the negative evaluation of it. [It does not need to be negative.]

Political messages can be of two types:

1. **Persuasive messages:** Arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view; if accepted by an individual, they become considerations.

Example: A speech by a politician charging that “President Putin’s decision is a shame and a delusion.” [Not necessarily rational; it can involve feelings, emotions, subliminal images, even fake news.]

2. **Cueing messages** consist of “contextual information” about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message. These messages enable citizens to perceive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions, which in turn permits them to respond critically to the persuasive messages.

Example: A Republican voter in the US will be more likely to reject criticism of President Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine if she recognizes that the politician making the criticism is a Democrat.

The Model

Zaller's model consists of four axioms about how individuals **respond** to political information they may encounter and **use** it to formulate opinion statements of their political preferences.

A1. Reception Axiom.

The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement [political attentiveness or political awareness or political knowledge] with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a word, to **receive**—political messages [persuasive messages and cueing messages] concerning that issue.

A2. Resistance Axiom.

People tend to **resist** arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

A3. Accessibility Axiom.

The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from **memory** and bring them to the top of the head for use.

A4. Response Axiom.

Individuals **respond** survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.

Opinion statements, as conceived in Zaller's four-axiom model, are the outcome of a process in which people **receive** new information, decide whether to **accept** it, and then **sample** at the moment of answering questions. Therefore, the **Receive-Accept-Sample** or **RAS Model**.

The model outlines how people acquire information from the political environment and transform that information into survey responses.

From this model we can derive testable empirical implications to explain numerous aspects of mass (or public) opinion, e.g., how it is formed, its distribution, and how it changes over time.

An application of RAS Model (Zaller, APSR 1991):

- ▶ How do individuals respond to media messages, keep or change their opinion, and answer surveys?
- ▶ How this process shapes mass/public opinion?
- ▶ A two-message version of the **reception-acceptance** model

Defining a two-message model

New concepts:

- ▶ *Supporting messages*: Those media messages **consistent** with an existing opinion (i.e., values predispositions such as party identification);
- ▶ *Opposing messages*: Those media messages **inconsistent** with an existing opinion (i.e., values predispositions such as party identification).

Previous axioms:

- ▶ *Reception Axiom*
- ▶ *Resistance Axiom*

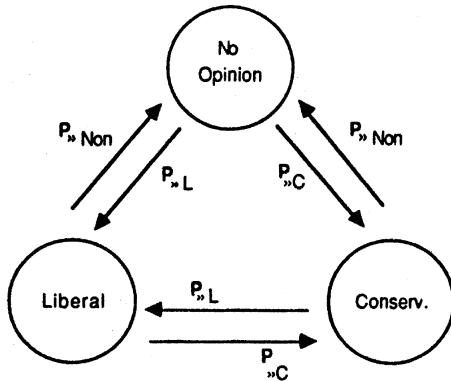
New axiom:

Axiom 3

Two types of opinion change—conversion and decay—may occur:

- (a) when a person accepts an opposing message, having received it, and does not accept a supporting message (whether receiving it or not), the person converts to the opposing view, and;
- (b) if a person accepts no messages in a given period or accepts both a supporting message and an opposing one, the person's initial opinion decays toward no opinion with a fixed probability of d .

Figure 1. Framework of the Two-Message Model



The reception function R_{ijt} in the Reception Axiom can be represented as the following logistic function:

$$Prob(Reception)_{ijt} = (1 + e^{[\alpha_0 jt - \alpha_1 Aware_i]})^{-1} \quad (1)$$

Where:

- ▶ The loudness of messages in the media is captured by the α_0 ;
- ▶ The steepness of the awareness-induced rise is captured by the α_1 parameter;
- ▶ The subscripts vary by individual i , message j , and time t .

The acceptance function A_{ijt} in the Resistance Axiom can be represented as the following logistic function:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & Prob(Accept | Reception)_{ijt} \\
 = & (1 + e^{[\beta_0 j - \beta_1 Aware_i + \beta_2 jt Values_i + \beta_3 (Time \times Values + \beta_4 Time \dots \beta_n X)]})^{-1}
 \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Simulating Zaller (APSR 1991):

<https://www.desmos.com/calculator/flbxlvrso>

Criticisms of Zaller's RAS model:

- ▶ Top-down model of opinion formation and change;
- ▶ Passive citizens;
- ▶ The role of activism, interest groups, and politicians;
- ▶ Rely heavily on ideologies;
- ▶ Certain opinions are not easily shaped by elites (mass media).
- ▶ When messages will be influential and when they will not?
- ▶ The ability of the media to influence public opinion is overstated

Correct Vote (Lau and Redlawsk 1997, p. 586)

A vote decision that is the same as the choice which would have been made under conditions of full information.

1. Experimental research design to operationalize the ideal of fully informed voters determining for themselves what is the correct vote decision;
2. Use this operationalization as a means of validating an easily obtainable measure of correct voting (from subjective to external/objective measure)
3. Use surveys to validate the measure;
4. Normative question: What ought to be required of citizens by democratic theory?

Lau and Redlawsk's results:

1. Voters in the experiment do a pretty good job of selecting the candidate for whom they would have voted had there been no constraints on their information-gathering capabilities, but;
2. They could clearly do better than they do under current circumstances, given more time or presented with information in a more easily “digestible” manner, and;
3. Researchers or external observers can determine fairly accurately who individual voters, given full information, would want to pick as their best choice.

Lau and Redlawsk (1997):

- ▶ The human mind is severely limited in how much information can be kept in active memory at any given time (Simon 1979);
- ▶ So, human beings have adaptively developed a series of cognitive heuristics or shortcuts that allow them to make good judgments most of the time.
 - ▶ We don't need to be fully informed to make optimal decisions, including "voting correctly;"
 - ▶ "Voting correctly" is a personal decision, that can be measured and predicted with survey data

Munger et al. (2022)

- ▶ The era of Social Media
- ▶ Social media, a blessing or a curse?
- ▶ Messages from traditional media vs. Direct messages from parties and candidates

Issue placement means and standard deviations, Waves 1 and 4

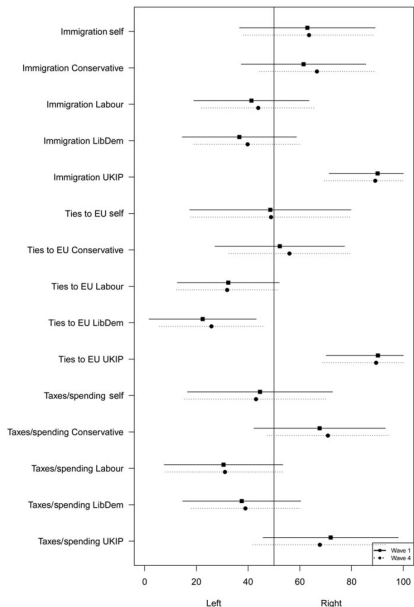


Figure 1. Respondent and party placement on issues: means and standard deviations, Waves 1 and 4
 Note: means and standard deviations of respondents' placements of parties and themselves on the three issues under study, at Wave 1 (top lines, with squares) and Wave 4 (bottom dotted lines, with circles) of the survey. The sum of the mean and standard deviation of UKIP's placements on immigration and the EU exceeded the maximum value of 100, so we truncate them.

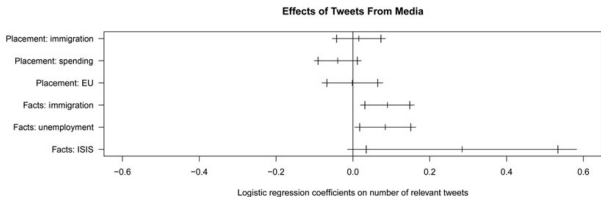


Figure 5. Effect of tweets sent by news media on political knowledge, by topic

Note: (top) estimates of the effect of topical tweets received from news media on the probability of correctly identifying the relative party placement in Wave 4, by topic. (Bottom) estimates of the effect of topical tweets received from news media on the probability of correct knowledge of issue-relevant facts in Wave 3, by topic.

Source: Table 10 in Appendix C (page 6).

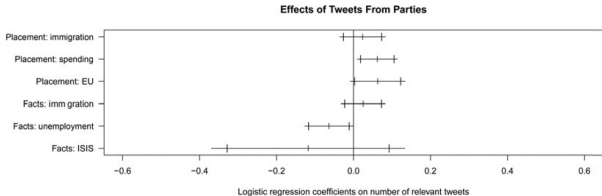


Figure 6. Effect of tweets sent by parties on political knowledge, by topic

Note: (top) estimates of the effect of topical tweets received from political parties on the probability of correctly identifying the relative party placement in Wave 4, by topic. (Bottom) estimates of the effect of topical tweets received from political parties on the probability of correct knowledge of issue-relevant facts in Wave 3, by topic.

Source: Table 10 in Appendix C (page 6).

► **Thursday, 17 March**

Week 4. Mobilisation and Campaign Effects

Compulsory readings:

- Karp, Jeffrey A., Banducci, Susan A., and Bowler, Shaun. 2008. “Getting out the vote: Party mobilization in a comparative perspective.” *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (1): 91–112.
- Kalla, Joshua L. and Broockman, David E. 2018. “The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections: Evidence from 49 field experiments.” *American Political Science Review* 112 (1): 148–166.
- Magalhães, Pedro C., Aldrich, John H., and Gibson, Rachel K. 2020. “New forms of mobilization, new people mobilized? Evidence from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.” *Party Politics* 26 (5): 605–618.