

Research Synopsis
**Political Knowledge, Persuasion
and Campaign Rhetoric¹**



Research suggests that many Americans are ill-informed about politics and that, **as the costs of gathering political information increase, political knowledge decreases**. Research has also shown that **a lower level of political knowledge generally increases one's susceptibility to persuasion** from negative advertising and emotional appeals as part of campaign rhetoric.

QUESTIONS Given these initial conclusions, what factors influence levels of political knowledge among the electorate? And how is campaign rhetoric influenced by politicians' awareness of variation in the electorate's political knowledge?

SEEKING ANSWERS Anthony Downs, writing in the 1950s, suggested that the costs to a voter of acquiring political information influences political knowledge, which in turn affects politicians' campaign behavior. These costs may take the form of money, time, or effort.

However, recent research shows each voter's experience of information costs, information-gathering, and political knowledge are influenced by at least three things:

1. an array of individual-level factors (such as age, gender, level of education, expressing interest in public affairs, having parents who are more knowledgeable about politics, identifying with a political party and taking a political science course),²
2. the number of races on which voters are expected to vote at the same time (with more than three simultaneous races being detrimental), and³
3. specific characteristics of the U.S. media system that affect the availability and quality of information (widely available "hard news" content is more conducive to political knowledge, but the U.S. media system emphasizes entertainment, especially in prime time hours).⁴

Unfortunately, decreasing the costs of gathering political information by making it widely accessible through **digital media in addition to traditional news sources will not increase average political knowledge in the United States if most Americans continue to prefer entertainment to political news**, and if, as a comparison with countries like Denmark and Finland with public-service oriented media systems suggests,⁵ it is relatively easy for Americans to avoid news in favor of entertainment.

Political knowledge among the electorate remains low. As such:

- Voting research shows that a majority of American voters rely on such "shortcut" informational cues as party affiliation, candidate ideology, interest-group endorsement of candidates, and candidate likeability to make voting decisions.⁶
- Further, research has found that people who rely more on such cues to make their voting decisions are more open to political persuasion than are their more politically knowledgeable peers.⁷
- Researchers in a 2004 study found that, among those who were ill-informed about politics, mudslinging campaigns involving "smear tactics, relentless attacks, deceptive messages [or] unwarranted or unconscionable criticisms" adversely affected evaluation of both incumbents and challengers. The politically knowledgeable remained unaffected by campaign mudslinging.⁸

- A 1997 study found that those with less political awareness were more readily persuaded by “easy” arguments against policy proposals (with easy arguments being those concluding that a policy would have bad effects without explaining how or why it would do so).⁹

In short, the politically knowledgeable may be better able to resist the impact of “easy” arguments, and better able to resist the persuasive power of mudslinging, and of emotional appeals.

IMPLICATIONS Unfortunately, **political candidates may find the use of negative campaign tactics and personal attacks on opposing candidates more acceptable if they think that their constituency is politically uninformed.**¹⁰ A 2007 nationwide study surveyed almost 3,000 political candidates running for office at all levels of government between 1996 and 1998. Candidates were more likely to find the use of negative campaigning – including push polls, focusing on opponents’ negative characteristics, making statements of fact out of context, and negative advertisements, as well as of personal attacks based on such behaviors as infidelity, previously unpublicized homosexuality, and youthful illegal drug use – to be acceptable if the candidates believed that the electorate was poorly informed about politics.¹¹

¹ This synopsis is based on the National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 5: Political Knowledge, Persuasion and Campaign Rhetoric by J. Taylor Danielson, Department of Sociology, and Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, dated August 30, 2011.

² M. Kent Jennings, “Political Knowledge over Time and Across Generations,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, 2006, pp. 228-252; ²Kimmo Grönlund and Henry Milner, “The Determinants of Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective.” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 29, 2006, pp. 386-406.

³ David J. Andersen, “The Electoral Environment and House Races: Political Knowledge, Political Interest, and Government Evaluations as a Function of Electoral Density,” Presentation prepared for the 2009 Midwest Political Science Association, 2009

⁴ Shanto Iyengar, James Curran, Anker Brink Lund, Inka Salovaara-Moring, Kyu S. Hahn, and Sharon Coen, “Cross-National Versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information: A Media Systems Perspective,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinions and Parties* 20, 2010, pp. 291-309.

⁵ Shanto Iyengar, James Curran, Anker Brink Lund, Inka Salovaara-Moring, Kyu S. Hahn, and Sharon Coen, “Cross-National Versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information: A Media Systems Perspective,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinions and Parties* 20, 2010, pp. 291-309.

⁶ Teresa Capelos, “Feeling the Issue: How Citizens’ Affective Reactions and Leadership Perceptions Shape Policy Evaluations,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 9, 2010, pp. 9-33; Shelly Chaiken, “Heuristic Vs. Systematic Information Processing and the Use of Source Versus Message Cues in Persuasion,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39(5), 1980, pp. 752-766; Richard R. Lau, David J. Andersen and David P. Redlawsk, “An Exploration of Correct Voting in Recent U.S. Presidential Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52(2), 2008, pp. 395-411; David W. Schieder and Paul J. Quirk, “Missed Cues: Judgment Heuristics and Citizen Competence,” Paper presented at Midwest Political Science Association, 2004.

⁷ Ryan L. Claassen, “Political Awareness and Electoral Campaigns: Maximum Effects for Minimum Citizens? *Political Behavior* 33, 2011, pp. 205-223

⁸ Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenny, “Do Negative Messages Work? The Impact of Negativity on Citizens’ Evaluations of Candidates,” *American Politics Research* 32, 2004, pp. 570-605, 578.

⁹ Michael D. Cobb & Kuklinski. “Changing minds: Political arguments and political persuasion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1), 1997, pp. 88-121.

¹⁰ Peter L. Francia and Paul S. Herrnson, “Keeping it Professional: The Influence of Political Consultants on Candidate Attitudes toward Negative Campaigning.” *Politics & Policy* 35(2), 2007, pp. 246-272.

¹¹ *Ibid.*