

Correct Voting in Senate Elections¹

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ABSTRACT

Longstanding research in political behavior tells us that citizens pay very little attention to politics and, in turn, are not civically engaged. Recent studies on heuristics argue that citizens can make good decisions based on limited information; however, the quality of those decisions is questionable. Notably, and for the purposes of this paper, Lau and Redlawsk (1997; 2006) examine “voting correctly” and find convincing evidence on voters’ ability to match their political preferences to presidential candidates. Nonetheless, questions concerning voter ability remain—such as the possible existence of demographic group variation and whether voting incorrectly is more likely to occur in sub-presidential elections. Based on data from the 1990 and 1992 Senate elections, this study finds that individual characteristics of a political nature, such as political knowledge and ideological extremism, do a far better job of predicting a correct vote than an individual’s demographics.

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks following the 2010 election, the PEW Research Center administered a nationwide poll examining public familiarity with current events. After the Republicans’ historic victories in November, less than half of those surveyed knew that the GOP had taken over the House.² This same survey showed that Americans did not know the unemployment rate and few knew who would be the new Speaker of the House. Results such as these are not unusual in American politics. Since the advent of modern polling, political scientists have frequently addressed Americans’ poor understanding of how government works and lack of familiarity with who represents them (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In addition to low levels of knowledge, evidence also exists that the public is less interested in politics than citizens of earlier generations (Neuman 1986).

A number of concerns arise from the public’s poor knowledge of and interest in politics. At the most basic level, a lack of political knowledge affects the quality of representation because voters may not be able to link their political preferences to candidates who would best represent those preferences (Nicholson, Pantoja, & Segura, 2006). Adding another layer of complication, the public’s poor level of political knowledge is not equally distributed across all groups in society. In fact, research indicates that some groups in American society are consistently less knowledgeable, interested, and engaged (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001).³ Given this, some individuals and groups may be better able to link their preferences to candidates and, subsequently, better represented in government (Verba, Burns, & Scholzman, 1997).

The ability to link political preferences to candidates is a tall order for any voter. Given the likely absence of complete information, how are voters able to make good decisions at the ballot box? In the 1990s, researchers began to advance the notion that people use information shortcuts, or heuristics, in place of full information to make voting choices (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Tetlock, 1991). This means that voters can operate within a complex political world by using simple cues, such as party identification, to develop an opinion or cast a politically representative vote (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Schaffner & Streb, 2002).

This paper examines the link between voters’ political values and beliefs and their selection of U.S. Senate candidates. In particular, I ask whether voters in a Senate election can

use heuristics in place of full information and make the same voting decisions they would make if they were fully informed. I investigate this question by adapting Lau and Redlawsk's (1997; 2006) correct voting measure to Senate elections. Assessing the "accuracy" of Senate vote choices, I find that voters tend to be less likely to connect their policy positions to Senate candidates than presidential candidates. Further, I find that those who have more extreme ideological views are better able to match their preferences to the candidates. Most importantly, the results indicate that differences in quality voting are independent of a person's demographic characteristics. This latter finding provides further evidence that all voters are able to successfully use heuristics and vote as if they were fully informed regardless of their demographic background. This contribution is particularly noteworthy because certain groups in society disproportionately engage within American democracy, but these same groups show no difference from others in the quality of the voting decisions they make.

INFORMATION AND VOTING DECISIONS

Pundits and political scientists alike spend a good deal of time discussing the competency levels of voters. Voters are sometimes called "unsophisticated" and "irrational" (Campbell, 1960; Bartels, 2008) while at other times they are described as "ignorant" and "stupid" (Shenkman, 2008). These types of common characterizations are typically the result of surveys that ask basic civic knowledge questions. Even though the American public is more educated now than ever before, they continue to score low on questions pertaining to government operations and American history (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; 1996; Galston, 2007). Given this, questions arise in regards to what we ought to expect from the American public. Is the public lazy and irrational for ignoring politics? Perhaps politics is becoming secondary to Americans due to more complex life commitments and decreasing lack of interest in politics (Bennett, 1989).

Democracy's functionality depends on its citizens' participation. Arguably, citizens exercise their greatest democratic responsibility during elections. Their performance during elections, however, has been a subject of inquiry for political scientists since the early Columbia and Michigan studies. For instance, Campbell and his coauthors (1960) found that voters are not only mostly uninformed on issues presented by candidates, but also unaware of their own opinion on such issues. And, as more recent research contends, "about half of the electorate continues to think about politics in very limited ways, with only tenuous connections to general ideologies or specific policy controversies" (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008, p. 290). While ideally such disengagement and "ignorance" would be equally distributed across society, it is not. When it comes to political knowledge, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) nicely summarize their conclusions on social and demographic groups as:

Groups of citizens vary in knowledge in ways that mirror their standings in the social, political, and economic world, calling into question the fundamental democratic principle of equality among citizens. In particular, women, African Americans, the poor, and the young tend to be substantially less knowledgeable about politics than are men, whites, the affluent, and older citizens. (p. 271)

One might respond to such findings by asking, "so what? Why does it matter that the public is generally uninformed?" To begin, the fact that knowledge is unequally distributed across groups negatively affects the collective political voice of the American public by, for

example, distorting our understanding of public opinion (Althaus, 2003) and the quality of government representation these groups receive (Swers, 2002). Furthermore, electoral studies frequently recognize the unequal distribution among demographic groups surrounding voter turnout and civic engagement (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Because of this group variation, it is argued that government responsiveness is skewed toward the socially advantaged (Verba et al., 1997). However, a lack of knowledge also affects voters' choices on Election Day. For example, Bartels (1996) finds that support for incumbent presidents and Democratic presidential candidates would actually decrease if the electorate were fully informed. Thus, we might question whether, given the public's low levels of knowledge, voters are selecting candidates that represent their interests.

Some argue that concerns about citizens' abilities to make "good" voting decisions based on limited information are exaggerated. Here, it is suggested that the public does not have to be highly informed about government processes or the issues facing the country, they can instead rely on information shortcuts, or heuristics, to make good decisions based on limited information (Tversky & Kahneman, 1982; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1991; Tetlock, 1991; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). According to this view, voters do not need to know all the details of the candidates and their policy platforms, but they can instead rely on their party identification or other cues to guide them towards the same vote choice they would have made if they were fully informed (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

Because voters are not fully informed, certain personal characteristics may be used as cues in their evaluations of candidates. For starters, it makes sense to expect more knowledgeable individuals to use heuristics accurately (Sniderman et al., 1991). Other contentions suppose that voters will be more likely to support political candidates with whom they share demographic characteristics (Dolan, 1998). This is a form of "cognitive bias" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1982), which proves that identity politics matter in voter evaluations. Terkildsen (1993) argues that a voter's race plays a role in the positive and negative evaluation of candidates based on their race. One underlying theory behind identity politics is that it acts as a judgment cue for individuals to vote for "someone like them," independent of one's party affiliation (Plutzer & Zipp, 1996). On the other hand, if voters and candidates are of different backgrounds this may cue personal stereotypes over that of more thoughtful reflections (Devine, 1989). This conclusion recognizes that identity politics matter in voter decision making, but the quality of these decisions, once again, may not be accurate to one's political values and beliefs.

What is the extent to which heuristics actually work as a replacement for full information? Given that the public does not meet the classic textbook definition of a fully informed citizenry, would voters make the same decisions if they were fully informed? Lau and Redlawsk's (1997; 2006) research normatively evaluates the decision making process of voters, coining the term "voting correctly." A correct vote is defined as a decision "that is the same as the choice which would have been made under conditions of full information" and is based on the "values and beliefs of the individual voter" (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997, p. 586). The difficulty of determining a "correct" vote is admitted by Lau and Redlawsk (1997) and is worth reiterating here. Indeed, voters obviously choose the candidates they like, or at least the lesser of two evils. So, are not all voters voting correctly? They are only doing so if all voters rationally select candidates who are politically representative of their attitudes and beliefs, a notion this study does not assume. In a complex world of media politics, where information is frequently distorted (Lipmann, 1922), we should not simply expect voters' sincere political beliefs to be fairly represented in their evaluations of candidates for office. Furthermore, scholars recognize

the limited political interest and cognitive abilities of voters (Lau & Sears, 1986). As such, voting correctly considers voter decision making as it would be under conditions of full information.

Previous literature argues that certain personal characteristics of the voters also factor into the choices they make. Classic political behavior studies recognize individual membership in unions and belonging to the Catholic Church as predictors of vote choices (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Campbell et al., 1960). More recently, studies find that personal characteristics of voters, such as gender (King & Matland, 2003) and race (Kam, 2007; Weaver, 2011), are reflected in voter evaluation of candidates. But, are such cues reliable? Racial minorities often share political interests, such as concerns about civil rights and advancement out of economically poor circumstances (Kaufmann, 2003). Do these commonalities translate into consistent patterns of voting correctly for racial minorities, who predominately vote for Democrats? Individual backgrounds of the voters are seen as powerful heuristics that affect their perceptions. While group identification may “make a difference” in voter decision making, we still know little about the quality of these decisions.

Given that some groups are less politically knowledgeable, engaged, and interested, we may expect them to be less likely to vote correctly. But, those proponents of heuristics recognize that political predispositions can be still be accurately exercised in decisions despite low information. These conflicting expectations for voting correctly create a research gap on voter decision making and demographic groups.

DATA AND METHODS

This study focuses on correct voting in Senate elections and utilizes state respondent data from the 1990 and 1992 National Election Studies Senate Election Study. This dataset is widely used to study Senate elections (e.g. Krasno, 1994; Kahn & Kenny, 1999; Sulkin, 2001; Highton, 2006) because of its representative sample of state populations for the 1990 and 1992 Senate elections. For this analysis, these data are also ideal because it includes a large battery of policy position questions.

Much of the data on Senate candidates are collected from content that analyzes a major newspaper in each state with a Senate election.⁴ A total of 59 Senate races (118 candidates) constitute the sample considered. I code newspaper coverage of each Senate candidate from September 1 to Election Day. This timeframe generally represents the most intense part of a campaign (Kahn & Kenny, 1999). Appendix A lists the Senate races and newspapers analyzed. This study relies on Senate campaign newspaper coverage for several reasons. First, local newspaper coverage of Senate races provides rich documentation of campaign events. For instance, Mondak (1995) finds that newspaper coverage has informational benefits for voters and can effect decisions based on the quality of coverage. Also, Druckman (2005) finds local newspaper coverage is representative of the topics and debates in the actual campaign (see also, Westlye, 1991). In addition, it is difficult to collect data on the policy positions of Senate candidates, particularly Senate challengers. Although newspapers may not cover political candidates equally in the number of articles published, they nonetheless spend a significant amount of time covering a variety of Senate campaign events such as political debates, speeches, advertisements, and other campaign activities that mention policy positions (Kahn & Kenny, 1999). Finally, this paper builds on previous studies that use newspaper content to understand voter evaluations of Senate candidates (e.g. Kahn, 1991; 1993).

MEASURING A CORRECT VOTE

In order to determine the extent to which voters correctly match their preferences to Senate candidates, I adapt Lau and Redlawsk's (1997; 2006) correct voting measure.⁵ The Senate voting correctly calculation is based on four key components. The first three elements match respondents and the candidates running for Senate in their state based on (1) issue positions, (2) support for the president, and (3) party identification. The other component is respondent job approval ratings of their incumbent Senator (if the incumbent is running for reelection). Taken together, these four assessments result in an overall utility score for the respondents' political closeness to their state's Senate candidates.

Each assessment is scaled on an interval between -1 and +1. For example, in the first assessment, agreement with candidates' policy stances, -1 means the respondent completely disagrees with a candidate's policy position, while +1 means the respondent completely agrees with a candidate's policy position. Missing items are scored as 0 (or neutral). The four performance assessments are addressed in more detail below.

Assessment #1: Agreement with Candidates' Policy Stances

In this assessment I estimate the proximity between the respondents' and the candidates' issue preferences. All policy positions elicited in the Senate Election Study are considered in this measure. This equates to a maximum of 21 issues considered for 1990, and up to 23 issues for 1992.⁶ Agreements with candidates' policy stances are incorporated in only those instances where a newspaper covered that particular issue for the candidate. Those articles that mention a candidate's policy position are recorded using the same scale as the Senate Election Study's policy questions.⁷ These policy questions range from the need for government to increase or decrease funding for certain programs to pro-life and pro-choice views on abortion. If the newspaper does not present a candidate's stance on a particular issue, it is not included in the assessment.

I calculate the symmetry between the Senate candidates' issue positions and those of the respondents by using Rabinowitz and MacDonald's (1989) directional issue effect calculation, $[(candidate\ location\ average - neutral\ point) \times (voter\ location - neutral\ point)] \times 4$. The outcome of this equation ranges from -1 (opposite viewpoints on an issue between the candidate and the respondent) to +1 (agreement between the candidate and the respondent).⁸ Because issues are of particular importance in terms of the representation of voters' preferences in government, each issue is included as a separate component in the final calculation of the correct voting measure.⁹

Assessment #2: Presidential Support

A large body of research suggests that citizens' evaluations of the president are linked to votes for lower political offices. Theories such as the "presidential coattail effect" and "surge and decline hypothesis" predict that presidential approval and congressional election outcomes are intertwined (Campbell, 1960; Erikson, 1988; Mondak, 1990). Indeed, it might be that voters who support the president reward candidates who follow suit. At the same time, voters who disapprove of the president punish candidates who are supportive. Gronke, Koch, and Wilson (2003) conclude that the impact of presidential approval on congressional elections is conditional to the incumbent's level of support for the president and the administration's policies. Likewise, I suspect that voter perception of a Senate candidate's link to the incumbent president is a function of the degree to which the Senate candidate publicly supports the president.

In order to measure citizens' approval of the president, I use the Senate Election Study's question, which asks respondents to place their approval of the president on a four point scale (strongly approve, approve, disapprove, strongly disapprove). In order to capture the extent to

which a candidate supports the president, I rely once again on the content of newspaper articles. For the sampled data, these include newspaper articles that may portray, for example, an incumbent Democratic Senator agreeing with President George H.W. Bush on a piece of legislation or attacking his foreign policy. As another example of what is coded, an article may discuss Bush assisting in a fellow Republican's fundraising campaign to unseat a Democratic incumbent. Each article that linked Bush to a Senate candidate is coded as supportive, neutral, or unsupportive. For each candidate, I create an aggregate measure of presidential support based on their average support of Bush over the course of the campaign. In order to assess the level of agreement between each respondent's support of the president and that of the Senate candidates in their state, I again use Rabinowitz and MacDonald's (1989) directional theory of issue voting.

Assessment #3: Strength of Partisan Attachment

Party affiliation has a long-standing tradition in explaining how people vote. From an information shortcut perspective, party identification is a simple cue that citizens use when making voting decisions (Schaffner & Streb, 2002). This is particularly true for those who are strong partisans. Thus, it is important to incorporate party identification into the measure of a correct Senate vote. For this particular component, self-identified strong Republicans are coded +1, Republicans are coded as +0.66, and independents with Republican leanings are coded as +0.33 in their evaluations of the Republican candidates. These same Republican partisans are coded as -1, -0.66, and -0.33 respectively in their evaluations of Democratic candidates. This scale is multiplied by -1 for self-identified Democratic respondents and independents are coded as neutral (0).

Assessment #4: Job Approval of Incumbent Senator

Studies on voting behavior in presidential elections often incorporate incumbent job approval (see, for example, Finkel, 1993; Abramowitz, 2004). As for studies on Senate campaigns, voters' views of their incumbent senators are usually disregarded, but recent research argues that performance evaluations of incumbent senators are a key component to understanding voting behavior (Highton, 2008). As such, the Senate voting correctly calculation includes whether respondents strongly approve (+1), approve (+0.5), disapprove (-0.5), or strongly disapprove (-1) of their Senate incumbents' job performance.

Final Calculations

Each respondent has a comprehensive utility score for the Republican and the Democratic candidate based on these four assessments. From these two scores, a respondent is considered as voting correctly, or better matching their preferences to a candidate, if they vote for the candidate with the higher numerical value. Thus, the dependent variable in the analysis is coded as 1 if a respondent voted for the candidate with the higher score and 0 otherwise. Because of the subjectivity of content analyses, a trained undergraduate and graduate student conducted separate content analyses on a random selection of Senate contests. The intercoder reliability scores for the voting correctly measures, based on the separate content analyses, is high (81.2 percent agreement) with a Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient of 0.73 (Kuder & Richardson, 1937).

PREDICTORS OF A CORRECT VOTE

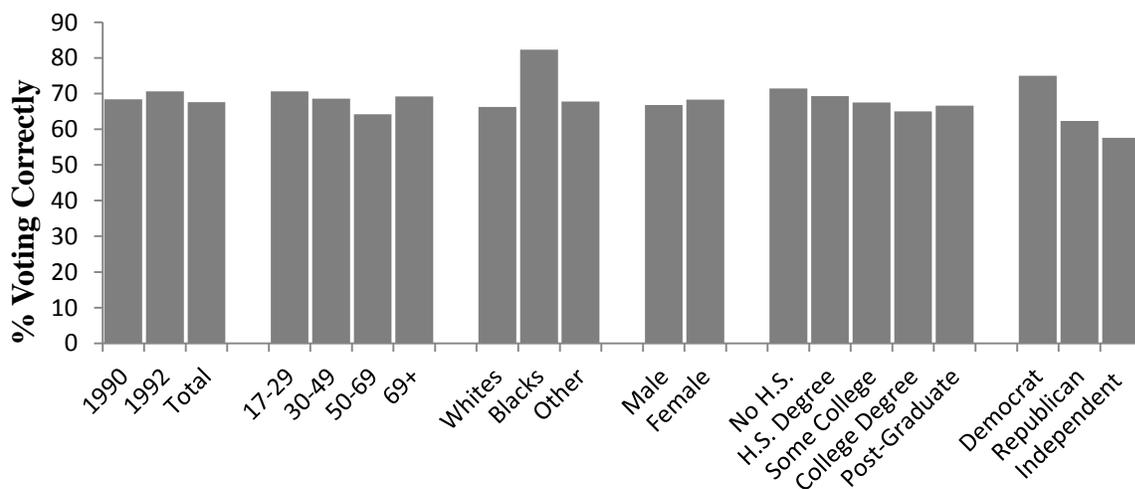
This study examines the extent to which citizens correctly vote based on a variety of demographic and political characteristics. As detailed above, the literature offers two theoretical expectations about demographic groups' behavior in politics and decision making. Heuristics tell us that ill-informed voters can make decisions as if they were fully informed and political behavior literature tells us that certain demographic groups are less knowledgeable, engaged, and

interested. Below, I examine differences in correct voting based on gender, age, education, and race. Previous studies consistently find that discrepancies in, for example, political sophistication and engagement exist within these groups (Verba et al., 1995; Delli Carpini & Ketter, 1996; Althaus, 2003) which leads to the suggestion of voting correctly discrepancies. In addition, there might be certain political attributes that impact quality voting. I also examine how political interest, party identification, and ideological extremity affect citizens' ability to connect their preferences to candidates. Those who are interested in the campaign ought to attend more to the information presented in the campaign and thus correctly vote at higher levels. Since ideology is seen as a decision making heuristic for voters, it seems reasonable that those with more extreme ideological tendencies are more likely to vote correctly (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Appendix B details the measurement of the independent variables.

VOTING CORRECTLY IN SENATE ELECTIONS

In their analysis of presidential elections from 1972 to 2004, Lau, Anderson, and Redlawsk (2008) find that roughly 75 percent of the American public vote correctly, with the largest percentage of the public voting correctly in the 2004 election (85 percent) and the least amount during the 1980 election (51 percent).¹⁰ These results lead the authors to hold an optimistic viewpoint about the public's ability to make informed decisions. These "high" levels of correct voting in presidential elections are expected due to the fact that presidential campaigns are the most visible and salient in the U.S. (Wolfinger, Rosenstone, & McIntosh, 1981). It would be difficult for any voter not to have at least some exposure to presidential campaigns during such elections because news coverage is typically fixated on the race and advertisements often dominant the television airwaves (especially in swing states). Lau and his coauthors (2008) find that campaign intensity is a predictor of quality voting, leading to the notion that less salient elections, even by nature of the office, may experience less quality voting.

FIGURE 1. VOTING CORRECTLY PERCENTAGES IN SENATE ELECTIONS, 1990-1992



The results for the 1990 and 1992 Senate elections support this conclusion. As seen in Figure 1, 67.6 percent of voters act on their sincere political preference in their vote for senator. We may expect lower quality voting during presidential election years because voter attention is heavily skewed toward presidential candidates and the public is less likely to identify who is the best Senate candidate for them. On the other hand, presidential elections increase the political saliency environment as a whole, which may provide information benefits to voters for their evaluations of non-presidential candidates. Neither line of thought is upheld here. In 1992 there is only a slight increase, though not statistically significant, in voting correctly as compared to 1990.¹¹

As mentioned above, demographic groups vary in political knowledge levels and this variation may be linked to how well voters match their preferences to candidates. However, this is not demonstrated in Figure 1. For instance, women have a slightly higher correct voting average (68.3 percent) compared to men (66.8 percent). Furthermore, differences in age and education are minimal. Surprisingly, less educated voters have a higher average of preference matching (71.4 percent) compared to those with more education. It is common knowledge that African Americans overwhelmingly choose Democratic over Republican candidates (Dawson, 1994). It appears that this choice, more often than not, is representative of their political beliefs. African Americans are casting a correct vote at around 82 percent, compared to whites at 66 percent. The comparison in means test on the two races reveals a statistically significant relationship (F -value = 7.55; p < .01).¹² In general, the percentages do not vary greatly amongst most of the groups, particularly in the cases of age, gender, and education. Although we know that demographic groups' knowledge levels are unequally distributed, at first glance it appears that these differences may not hold up in terms of the quality of their decision on Election Day. The next section empirically analyzes the extent to which differences in voting correctly exist across demographic groups and individual political characteristics.

MODELING CORRECT VOTING

Table 1 presents two models predicting the dependent variable, a correct vote. Model I analyzes the effects of individual characteristics and demographics on quality voting. Model II includes political knowledge as an independent variable, thereby capturing its effects on correct voting.

Overall, after controlling for a race's competitiveness and including individual political characteristics, the demographic variables in Model I have no significant effect on correct voting. Being female fails to have a negative effect on voting correctly, despite previous studies that frequently show a gender gap among political sophistication trends (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; 1996; Verba et al., 1997). While African Americans are voting correctly at a higher percentage, the model finds no effect on race and quality voting. The same can be said of education and age effects. These findings strengthen the argument that differences in demographic group behavior are not universal. That is, we ought not to expect demographic "gaps" or "unequal distributions" across all forms of political behavior. The evidence suggests that the use of heuristics is equally distributed across demographic groups. Simply put, those groups with less knowledge are just as able to link their preferences to candidates as those groups that are more knowledgeable.

TABLE 1. VOTING CORRECTLY PROBIT REGRESSION MODELS

Variables	Model I	Model II
	β (Robust S.E.)	β (Robust S.E.)
Age	-0.04 (.05)	-0.03 (.05)
Female	0.09 (.09)	0.11 (.09)
African American	0.10 (.18)	0.14 (.18)
Education	-0.01 (.04)	-0.04 (.04)
Ideology Strength	0.15** (.05)	0.14** (.05)
Political Interest	0.09 (.07)	0.05 (.07)
Competitiveness	0.10* (.04)	0.10* (.04)
Democrat	0.24** (.09)	0.27** (.09)
Political Knowledge	--	0.12** (.04)
Year	-0.09 (.09)	-0.08 (.09)
Constant	-0.21 (.27)	-0.28 (.27)
	N = 2126	N = 2126
	Pseudo R ² = .02	Pseudo R ² = .03

** p. < .01; * p. < .05

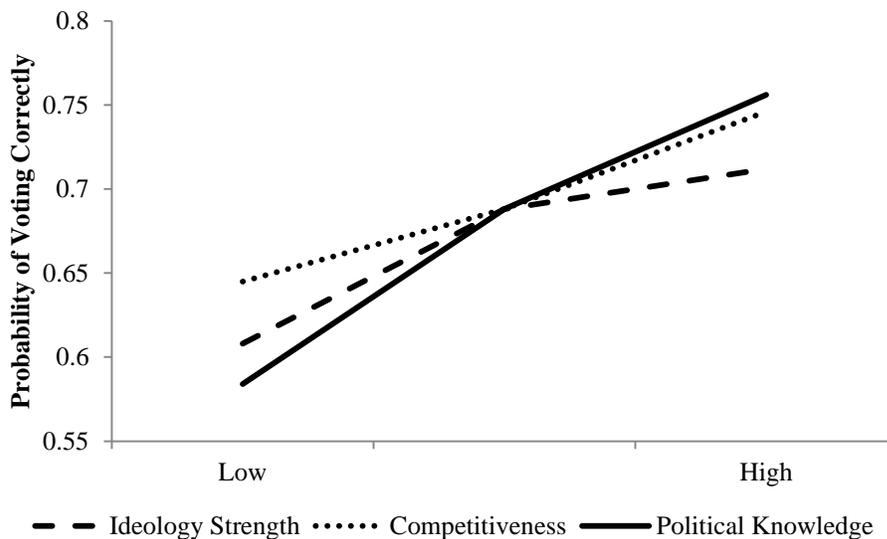
Dependent variable = (1) correct vote; (0) incorrect vote.

Source: 1990-1992 Senate Election Study and data collected by the author.

What about the effects of other individual characteristics? The strength of one's ideology is an individual characteristic that has strong roots in political behavior research (Holm & Robinson, 1978) and can easily be seen as a heuristic to assist voters in their decision making process. In the model, those with more extreme ideological views have a stronger likelihood of

voting correctly. This is expected because voters with more extreme ideologies have an “easier” decision making process. In the Downsian (1957) sense, these voters cannot be identified as the “median voter” because they are so far to the left or right of the political spectrum that only one candidate emerges as the closest to them. Political knowledge is included in Model II and also reveals an effect on correct voting. In the employment of certain heuristics, using whatever cues that may exist, evidence in Model II suggests that having higher levels of political knowledge increases a voters’ likelihood of employing those heuristics appropriately (see also Sniderman et al., 1991; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). This expected effect is highlighted further in Figure 2 with predicted probabilities. Holding all other values at their means, those individuals with the highest levels of political knowledge have a 75 percent probability of voting correctly compared to 58 percent for those with the lowest levels of political knowledge. Political interest surprisingly has no effect on correct voting despite the expectation that those individuals who admit to being “interested” in political campaigns are also more likely to match their preferences to the candidates running for office. Overall, the models demonstrate that political attributes do a far better job predicting voting quality compared to demographic characteristics. The unexpected results from Democratic voters seen in Figure 1 and Table 1 deserve some further exploration. The next section dissects the strong relationship seen between Democrats and voting correctly.

FIGURE 2: PREDICTED PROBABILITIES OF VOTING CORRECTLY



Note: Probabilities based on estimates presented in Model II. Estimates determined based on all other values held at the means.

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS

Surprisingly, Democratic voters have a much higher percentage of voting correctly (75 percent) compared to an alarming low percentage of Republicans (62.3 percent). Similar results can be found in Lau and Redlawsk’s (2006) work as they find that, on average, correct votes for Al Gore were 20 percent higher than for George W. Bush in 2000 and 17 percent higher for Bill Clinton over Bob Dole in 1996. Establishing a concrete theoretical justification for this

phenomenon is difficult, but some discussion of the electoral context in 1990 and 1992 is warranted. First, as mentioned above, the surge and decline (Campbell, 1966) and presidential penalty (Erikson, 1988) hypotheses, for example, expect midterm election losses for the president's political party. This may have given Democrats more credibility in their issue and character appeals and with their attacks on the Republican party during the 1990 elections. Second, because ideologically extreme voters are more likely to vote correctly, a lack of GOP enthusiasm for the 1992 Bush campaign (Caesar & Busch, 1993) means less conservative voters showing up to the polls, but higher levels of liberal voters turning out to vote for Clinton (Brady, Cogan, Gaines, & Rivers, 1996). Third, the 1992 elections are typically characterized as the Year of the Woman because of the number of female candidates running for congressional offices. Their presence in many Senate elections may act as another ideological heuristic for voters to identify which candidate is best for them (McDermott, 1997).¹³ Finally, one could point to Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* as rationale for Democrats voting more correctly than Republicans. Frank's (2004) assertion is that the popularity of the modern day Republican party is rooted in their stances on social issues and messages of traditional values over that of their economic concerns.¹⁴ With these thoughts in mind, some further discussion on the issue proximity between the sampled respondents and Senate candidates is warranted.

Following the median voter theorem, candidates adopt those policy positions that represent the average voter (Downs, 1957). Downs's spatial model places voters on a left-to-right ideological scale and candidates position themselves as close to the median voter as possible. Using this logic, Table 2 lists the average issue positions for the sampled Senate candidates and voters.

The first 14 policy positions focus on government funding for specific policy areas and the corresponding ideological placements of candidates and voters in such areas. Over the past few decades a paradox in explaining American public opinion towards government funded programs has emerged. That paradox revolves around Americans' favorability towards most government programs, but a lack of interest in paying for such programs. The results seen in Table 2 suggest most Americans have liberal viewpoints on government funding for programs, including those relating to Social Security, the environment, and public schools. Indeed, the table indicates that voters hold liberal viewpoints on a vast majority of government funding areas. Of those 14 government funding programs listed, only 4 areas (food stamps, foreign aid, war on drugs, and the space program) tend to elicit more conservative views.¹⁵ Again, this finding is not unique, for public opinion data consistently finds that the average voter is liberal on most federal government expenditures.¹⁶ From this, one may ask, if voters are generally liberal on federal government programs, why are many voters supporting political candidates who are more conservative on such matters? This question is not necessarily new to researchers, and some even extend the question to why voters are unwilling to pay taxes for government programs they support (Welch, 1985).

The data included in this study considers some social issues echoed by Frank (2004) in his justification for voters supporting Republican candidates. Of the social policies considered, three address abortion and another addresses the death penalty. Table 2 reveals that Republican candidates are slightly closer to voters on death penalty views and government funding for abortions, but they are around equidistant to Democratic candidates on parental consent for abortions and pro-life/pro-choice abortion views. Thus, we should look at the proximity of other issues to determine why Republicans are voting incorrectly. Here, the data suggests that of those 12 issues mentioned the most in the sample, voters, for a majority of these issues, are closer to

the Democratic candidates. Specifically, when we consider only those issues that are discussed the most in newspaper articles, Republicans are closer to voters on only 4 issues while Democrats are closer to voters on 8 issues. This means that of those salient issues addressed in 1990 and 1992, Democrats are closer to the voters' issue positions than Republicans. Therefore, the sampled time period must be considered when determining if votes for Republicans are more likely to be incorrect. In electoral environments where GOP strengths are the dominant issues of the day (Jacobson, 2003), votes for Democrats may more likely be incorrect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

America is typically characterized as a representative democracy serving the "will of the people," but what if a relatively large sector of the electorate is not casting votes that best represent the voters' own political predispositions? As President John Kennedy once stated, "the ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all." The results found in this study shed some light on Kennedy's concern and are not without previous support (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Compared to presidential elections, this study finds that voting correctly is less likely in Senate elections. With a host of unsalient state and local elections presented to voters every Election Day, the potential for an even greater number of incorrect votes is likely.

However, this study also finds that the "accurate" use of heuristics does not correspond with certain demographic segments of the population. Specifically, the lack of politically representative vote choices is not a byproduct of demographics, but one of a more political nature. Individuals who hold strong ideological opinions and keep up-to-date on politics are those who perform the best at the ballot box, regardless of a person's gender, age, or education level. With other political phenomena remaining to be explored, such as campaign related variables germane to the sub-presidential level, a greater understanding of heuristics working at the ballot box remains for future research. Specifically, it makes sense for voters to gain informational benefits from campaign stimuli, such as advertisements and news coverage. In addition, races with two quality candidates with previous experience in politics should increase levels of politically representative vote choices. Arguably, these campaign effects are expected because individual social characteristics are not strong predictors of voting correctly, unlike political knowledge, interest, and awareness.

Future research may also explore what heuristic cues lead to stronger levels of voting correctly. As discussed earlier, the fact that the congressional elections of 1992 were characterized as the Year of the Woman may have led women voters who voted for a female Democratic candidate to make an easy, accurate decision at the ballot box (McDermott, 1997). Similar behavior is seen by African-American voters (Bullock, 1984). However, it could be hypothesized that more polarized candidates send ideological cues to voters that improves their decision making process. The logic here is that when candidates are more polarized, they are easier to distinguish on issues. If voters are sorting themselves out along polarized camps like candidates and other political elites (Levendusky, 2009), than voting correctly ought to increase as well. With the wealth of literature that recognizes the use, and normative value of informational shortcuts in campaigns, there remains room for greater exploration on the accuracy of shortcuts and what individual and campaign related characteristics increase their accuracy.

TABE 2. AVERAGE SENATE CANDIDATE AND VOTER ISSUE POSITIONS, 1990-1992

Issue	Most Liberal		Most Conservative		# Candidate Mentions	Dem.
	Dem.	Voter	Voter	Dem.		
Funding for Environment	○	●	●		49	42
Funding for Public Schools	○	●	●		26	40
Funding for Social Security		●	○	●	23	20
Funding for Food Stamps	○		●	●	2	0
Funding for Unemployment Assistance	○		●	●	7	16
Funding for Fighting AIDS	○	●		●	4	8
Funding for Child Care	○	●	●		31	29
Funding for the War on Drugs			●	○	7	14
Funding for Medical Care	○	●	●		41	48
Funding for Foreign Aid			○	●	16	10
Funding for Homelessness		●	●		5	5
Funding for Space Program			●	●	8	10
Funding for Aid to Big Cities	○	●	●		6	3
Funding for Defense	○	●	●		43	47
Limits on Foreign Imports (1992)		○	○	●	20	23
Views on Abortion	○	●	●		52	13
Views on Taxes to Reduce the Budget Deficit			○	●	56	53
Views on Persian Gulf War (1990)			○	●	21	21
Views on Persian Gulf War (1992)	○			●	7	11
Views on Death Penalty			○	●	19	23
Views on Gov. Funding for Abortions	○		●	●	25	21
Parental Consent for Abortions			○	●	17	17
Gov. Assistance to African Americans (1990)	○	●	●		16	9

○ — Dem. ● — GOP ● — Voter

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APPENDIX A. STATE NEWSPAPERS CODED AND DATA SOURCES

<i>1990 – State</i>	<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Source</i>
Alabama	<i>Birmingham News</i>	Microfilm
Alaska	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Newsbank
Arkansas ^a	-----	-----
Colorado	<i>The Rocky Mountain News</i>	Newsbank
Delaware	<i>The News Journal</i>	Microfilm
Georgia ^a	-----	-----
Hawaii	<i>Honolulu Advertiser</i>	Microfilm
Idaho	<i>Idaho Statesman</i>	Microfilm
Illinois	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Newsbank
Indiana	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Microfilm
Iowa	<i>Des Moines Register</i>	Microfilm
Kansas	<i>Wichita Eagle-Beacon</i>	Newsbank
Kentucky	<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>	Newsbank
Louisiana ^a	-----	-----
Massachusetts	<i>Boston Globe</i>	Newsbank
Maine	<i>Bangor Daily News</i>	Microfilm
Michigan	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Newsbank
Minnesota	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Newsbank
Mississippi ^a	-----	-----
Montana	<i>Billings Gazette</i>	Microfilm
Nebraska	<i>Lincoln Journal Star</i>	Microfilm
New Hampshire	<i>Manchester Union-Leader</i>	Newsbank
New Jersey	<i>The Record</i>	Newsbank
New Mexico	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Microfilm
North Carolina	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Newsbank
Oklahoma	<i>Oklahoma City Daily Oklahoman</i>	Newsbank
Oregon	<i>Portland Oregonian</i>	Newsbank
Rhode Island ^b	-----	-----
South Carolina	<i>The State</i>	Newsbank
South Dakota	<i>Sioux Falls Argus Leader</i>	Microfilm

Tennessee	<i>The Commercial Appeal</i>	Newsbank
Texas	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Newsbank
Virginia ^b	-----	-----
West Virginia	<i>The Charleston Gazette</i>	Microfilm
Wyoming	<i>Casper Star-Tribune</i>	Microfilm

1992 - State	Newspaper	Source
Alabama	<i>The Huntsville Times</i>	Newsbank
Alaska	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Newsbank
Arkansas	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Microfilm
Arizona	<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	Newsbank
California ^c	<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	Newsbank
Colorado	<i>Denver Rocky Mountain News</i>	Newsbank
Connecticut	<i>Hartford Courant</i>	Newsbank
Florida	<i>Miami Herald</i>	Newsbank
Hawaii ^b	-----	-----
Georgia	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Newsbank
Idaho	<i>The Lewiston Tribune</i>	Lexis-Nexis
Illinois	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Newsbank
Indiana	<i>Post-Tribune</i>	Newsbank
Iowa	<i>Cedar Rapids Gazette</i>	Newsbank
Kansas	<i>Wichita Eagle-Beacon</i>	Newsbank
Kentucky	<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>	Newsbank
Louisiana ^a	-----	-----
Maryland	<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	Newsbank
Missouri	<i>St. Louis Post Dispatch</i>	Newsbank
Nevada	<i>Las Vegas Review Journal</i>	Microfilm
New Hampshire	<i>Manchester Union-Leader</i>	Newsbank
New York	<i>New York Times</i>	Lexis-Nexis
North Carolina	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Newsbank
North Dakota	<i>Grand Fork Herald</i>	Newsbank
Ohio	<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	Newsbank
Oklahoma	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>	Newsbank
Oregon	<i>Portland Oregonian</i>	Newsbank
Pennsylvania	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Newsbank
South Carolina	<i>The State</i>	Newsbank
South Dakota ^b	-----	-----
Utah	<i>The Desert News</i>	Newsbank
Vermont ^b	-----	-----

Washington	<i>The Seattle Times</i>	Newsbank
Wisconsin	<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>	Newsbank

^aSenate candidate not challenged.

^bMissing data.

^cCalifornia has two Senate races for 1992.

APPENDIX B. MEASUREMENT OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

- *Age* is coded as a respondent being (1) between the ages of 17-29, (2) between the ages of 30-49, (3) between the ages of 50-69, and (4) 69 and above.
- *African American* is coded as (1) African American and (0) other.
- *Female* is coded as (1) female and (0) male.
- *Education* is coded as (1) no high school degree, (2) high school graduate, (3) some college, (4) college degree, and (5) post-graduate.
- *Political Interest* is measured as a respondent who is (3) very much interested in political campaigns, (2) somewhat interested in political campaigns, and (1) not much interested in political campaigns.
- *Political Knowledge* is measured from a battery of questions that address the ideological location of the president, the ideological differences between the two parties, and the specific names of their senators.
- *Democrat* is coded as (1) self-identified Democrat (including independents with Democratic leanings) and (0) all other identifiers.
- *Competitiveness* is based on the *CQ Weekly Report*'s election forecast. Senate races are coded as (1) safe, (2) likely towards one party, (3) leans towards one party, and (4) toss-up.
- *Year* is coded as (0) for 1990 and (1) for 1992.

NOTES

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² Survey results can be viewed at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1804/political-news-quiz-iq-deficit-defense-spending-tarp-inflation-boehner>.

³ The groups considered in this paper are based on gender, race, age, and education. As one reviewer recognized, "low" and "high" levels of political participation among these groups cannot be easily argued due to group variations in the host of specific actions that may be considered political participation and the interconnected relationship between, for example, gender, race, age, and education.

⁴ Data from newspaper articles are gathered from three different sources. First, candidates from 44 Senate elections are coded from newspapers archived in the online databases *Lexis-Nexis* and *Newsbank*. Some states do not have newspapers with a publicly available internet database dating back to the early 1990s. In these cases, 15 races total, microfilm copies of the newspapers are used. In total, the content analysis provides a total of 2,313 articles that mentions at least one policy position for at least one of the candidates in the 59 Senate races considered.

⁵ See Lau and Redlawsk's Appendix (1997: 595-597) for an explanation on the calculation for presidential elections. Due to data availability and the nature of Senate elections compared to presidential elections, some alterations to the measurement of voting correctly are needed. This should not be a cause for concern because previous analyses of voting correctly also alter the measure in efforts to improve upon it (Lau, Anderson, & Redlawsk, 2008).

⁶ See Table 2 for the list of issues coded along with the average placement of the Democratic candidates, Republican candidates, and voters.

⁷ In those cases where multiple articles placed candidates at different viewpoints, the average placement of the candidate is used. Variation in viewpoints may be the result of newspapers presenting different information on the campaign (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998) or candidates may have inconsistent viewpoints.

⁸ The equation is multiplied by four simply to scale the numerical output between -1 and +1. The neutral point is 0.5.

⁹ This method is consistent with Lau and Redlawsk's (1997; 2006) measurement. These evaluations are also weighted equally. Previous voting correctly calculations explore adding weights to certain evaluations and find little difference in the results when considering, for example, single-issue voters (see R. Lau's data availability at www.votingcorrectly.com). Also, Lau et al. (2008) explore further alternatives to weighting and find little difference in their performance.

¹⁰ They argue that the low results in 1980 are a consequence of a viable third candidate.

¹¹ $\chi^2 = 1.24$, $df = 1$, $p = .27$.

¹² Adjusted Wald test used to control for clusters in means tests.

¹³ When modeling this hypothesis with the specifications seen in Model II, a positive coefficient emerges for women voting correctly compared to men in those races where a Democratic female Senate candidate is present. However, the effect does not reach traditional levels of statistical significance ($p < .12$).

¹⁴ This argument is not without its critics. While Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2006) find some evidence of moral value voting, they find greater strength and consistency in economic based voting (see also, Bartels, 2006; Gelman, Park, Shor, & Cortina, 2008).

¹⁵ It is expected that these viewpoints vary through time. Salient issues of the day change from election year to election year and national events sway public opinion in different directions. For instance, both voters and candidates for office (Republicans and Democrats) held fairly liberal viewpoints towards defense spending in 1990 and 1992. This makes sense for two reasons. One, the end of the Cold War sparked a new debate on reforming the Defense Department away from battling the Soviet Union and communism. Second, budget deficit concerns emerged during the early 1990s and the Defense Department was frequently targeted as a major expenditure that could easily be cut to help balance the federal budget. Republicans drastic movement to more liberal stances on defense spending during this time period fits within Downs's (1957) theory of candidate movement to the median voter. At other points in time, such as the early 1980s (Bartels, 1991) and the mid-2000s (Kam & Kinder, 2007), public opinion has taken a more conservative approach to national defense and favored increased spending.

¹⁶ See Pew Research Center poll results at http://voices.washingtonpost.com/behind-the-numbers/2011/02/new_poll_same_public_resistanc.html.