An Irony of Political Learning: Factual Political Knowledge Is Unrelated to Understanding the Path of Obtaining Factual Political Knowledge

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Abstract

This study examines whether factual political knowledge is a pre-requisite for understanding the process of obtaining political knowledge. It uses a multiple choice test to determine levels of factual political knowledge and a three-tiered ranking scale to determine levels of understanding the process of obtaining political knowledge. Surveys containing these measures were given to a representative sample of 186 undergraduate students at a small Midwestern college, and simple regressions were conducted on the collected data. The findings of this study suggest that factual political knowledge is unrelated to an individual’s level of understanding how to obtain more political knowledge. Individuals with more factual political knowledge do not necessarily also have a greater understanding of how to get more knowledge, and many individuals with a good understanding of how to obtain more political knowledge are not politically knowledgeable. This is a previously unexplained phenomenon in the study of political learning.
**Introduction**

Political knowledge is one of the largest sub-fields in the study of political behavior. Much of the existing research on political knowledge focuses on what factors predispose people to be more or less politically knowledgeable than others (e.g. Dancey and Sheagley; Delli Carpini and Keeter; Kenski and Stroud; Lambert et al.; Lyons et al.; Niemi and Junn; Prior; Wolak and McDevitt; Xenos and Moy). This study uses this pre-existing literature and a survey to assess whether individuals can identify those “knowledge factors,” with the goal of analyzing how much people understand about the process of obtaining political knowledge. Specifically, this study theorizes that there is a causal connection between factual political knowledge and an understanding of how factual political knowledge is obtained. The expectation is that the more factual political knowledge people have, the greater their understanding of the factors which make people politically knowledgeable. Although the direction of this relationship seems counterintuitive, the manner in which the American education system operates as well as the typical relationship between “knowledge” and “understanding,” suggests that political knowledge is acquired before a meta-understanding of how knowledge is actually learned (Brown et. al, 8-17).

Using a sample of college students from a small liberal arts college in the Chicago suburbs, this study uses a survey to measure both the factual political knowledge levels of students at the college, as well as measure the understanding those students have of the factors which allow people to obtain factual political knowledge. Although the original hypothesis was that factual political knowledge would cause a greater understanding of how political knowledge is obtained, there is no apparent relationship between these two variables. Individuals that are politically knowledgeable do not necessarily think about how they have become politically
knowledgeable, whereas some individuals that are not at all politically knowledgeable know how political knowledge is obtained. This irony has broad-ranging implications both for the future study of political learning, as well as practical implications for political education in the United States.

**Literature Review**

Political knowledge is studied from a wide array of different perspectives. Various studies generally show that Americans possess low levels of political knowledge (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter; Galston; Lyons; Prior), argue how much knowledge citizens should have (e.g. Dancey and Sheagley; Delli Carpini and Keeter; Michaud et al.; Popkin and Dimock), and observe the causes of political knowledge (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter; Kenski and Stroud; Niemi and Junn; Wolak and McDevitt). However, although the literature on political knowledge is substantial, there is a significant shortage of research about what people understand about the process of obtaining political knowledge. In fact, there is limited research that treats knowledge as a process at all, with a few exceptions (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter; Niemi and Junn; Popkin and Dimock). This study uniquely attempts to link the process of obtaining political knowledge, a learning process, with political knowledge viewed as an end result, in the form of factual knowledge. Since there is significantly more research that treats political knowledge as an end result rather than exploring how political knowledge is learned, a majority of the upcoming discourse will focus on previous studies which have treated political knowledge as an end result, even though this study emphasizes that knowledge can be viewed dually as both a learning process and as an end result.

The literature review will begin by addressing what political knowledge is, why political knowledge matters, and how much political knowledge Americans possess, focusing on political
knowledge as an end result. Then, the discussion will shift towards describing what makes people politically knowledgeable, focusing on political knowledge as a learning process. There will then be a brief summary of literature before two types of political knowledge—factual knowledge and understanding how factual knowledge is obtained—are converged in a hypothesis.

*What Is Political Knowledge?*

Political knowledge, just like any other field of knowledge, is highly complex. Knowledge can be broken down into knowledge of different sub-fields within politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 12), can be separated into factual knowledge and conceptual knowledge (Lambert, 4), and can be short term or long term (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 11). However, for the purposes of this study, political knowledge will be defined as the range of factual information about politics that an individual can verify at a particular time (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 10-11). More specifically, this range includes knowledge of government institutions and processes, people involved in politics, domestic affairs, and foreign affairs (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 68). This definition is based on Delli Carpini and Keeter’s model of knowledge, but replaces the terminology of knowledge being “long-term” with the terminology that it is can be “verified at a particular time” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 11).

Delli Carpini and Keeter’s model provides several advantages over other previous models. First, this model accounts for a broad range of political knowledge, rather than knowledge of a specific field. Second, the definition is clear in its depiction of knowledge as factual information. Although political knowledge is also conceptual, a focus on factual information ensures that the study is reliable. Simple facts about politics can be agreed upon by almost everyone, whereas conceptual knowledge in the political sphere can often be debated. A
third advantage of defining knowledge based on factual information is that it distinguishes political knowledge from both political values and aggregate cognitive abilities such as logic or reasoning skills (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 10-11). Last, this definition of knowledge allows for knowledge levels to be accurately tested. By defining knowledge based on peoples’ current abilities to verify factual information, there can be a consistent scale created to measure levels of political knowledge.

*Why Does Political Knowledge Matter?*

Political knowledge is often a precursor to various political actions. Thus, the study of political knowledge not only allows researchers to view what people know about politics, but can assist in predicting what actions citizens will take with that knowledge. One of the most important actions that citizens take is, of course, voting (Lambert et al., 360).

There is a practical necessity for political knowledge in democracies, because in democratic nations citizens have the ability to elect candidates whom will take actions in their best interest. However, in order for voters to make a rational decision, they must know something about politics. The more informed a voter is, the more rational they shall vote (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 56). Since democratic theory is based on the principle that people should elect to office candidates which serve their interests, lack of knowledge amongst voters decreases the effectiveness of democratic governments.

Several arguments claim that only small amounts of political knowledge are necessary for the electorate. Most of these arguments are rooted in the notion that people can use various heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to vote rationally. The basic heuristics argument claims that as long as a voter understands what each party stands for, they should be able to vote rationally by voting for the party which serves their interests more effectively (e.g. Dancey and Sheagley...
However, party heuristics are not always effective. Even in a polarized Congress, there are drastic differences within each party. Although using party heuristics to vote functions relatively well when members of Congress vote with their party, informed voters that use heuristics become misinformed when their member votes against their party (Dancey and Sheagley, 312). Furthermore, even if heuristics did work perfectly in allowing voters to make rational decisions when supporting candidates, voters need a baseline amount of political information to use those heuristics. Specifically, voters must have information on the internal mechanisms of governance. This political knowledge is necessary for voters to update the cues that influence them to vote for one party or the other (Popkin and Dimock, 118). It is important to note that few scholars argue about the necessity for voters in a democratic state to have political knowledge; rather, the argument is centered on how much knowledge the electorate should possess.

Amounts of political knowledge clearly affect how people participate in political institutions. However, there is also evidence to suggest that political knowledge impacts how people perceive cultures. Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith argue that there is a relationship between the consistency of cultural values and levels of political knowledge (Michaud et al., 27). In general, the more political knowledge people have, the more consistently people identify with either egalitarianism or individualism as cultural ideologies (Michaud et al., 40). In other words, there is a key connection between political knowledge and understanding the ideologies of different worldviews. Thus, increasing levels of political knowledge does not only alter the effectiveness of democratic institutions, but can also lead to a greater understanding of worldviews.
How Much Do Americans Know about Politics?

The most complete account of Americans’ political knowledge comes from Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter’s *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. They examined national surveys from 1940 to 1994 which contained factual questions about political knowledge. Overall, their analysis is expansive. Using data from the Roper Center, the National Election Studies, and their own surveys conducted in 1989, the researchers trace over 3700 factual questions on surveys in the past which measured political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 66-67). Some example questions include: naming the three branches of government (from a 1952 survey) (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 71), knowing who George Wallace is (from a 1967 survey) (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 74), or stating the size of the federal budget (from a 1989 survey) (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 80). Because they trace different data sets over long periods of time, this meta-analysis represents an aggregate average of data on political knowledge from 1940 to 1994.

On average, American citizens are able to correctly answer roughly four out of ten basic, factual questions about politics in the time span measured. In Delli Carpini and Keeter’s study, the median amount of political knowledge questions answered correctly is 41% (68). However, knowledge levels vary slightly based on what type of question is being asked. Delli Carpini and Keeter stratify their data by dividing questions into four types: questions about the institutions and processes of government, questions about the people and players of government, questions about domestic politics, and questions about foreign affairs. For questions about institutions and processes, the median percentage of correct answers on surveys is 49%, the median percentage for questions about people and players is 38%, the median percentage for questions about domestic politics is 39%, and the median percentage for questions about foreign affairs is 44%
Delli Carpini and Keeter’s study measures political knowledge of national politics. Although the knowledge levels of national politics are low, the knowledge levels of state politics are even lower (Lyons et al., 183). One anecdotal datum that encapsulates this phenomenon is that more people can name the vice-president of the United States than can name their state’s governor (Lyons et al., 192). Because the vast majority of political knowledge research is on knowledge of the national government (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter; Mondak; Niemi and Junn; Popkin and Dimock), previous studies may have actually overstated how much Americans know about politics.

Perhaps even more striking than the absolute amount of political knowledge that Americans possess is the amount of political knowledge relative to previous times and other nations. Political knowledge levels have not improved much since World War II, even though the average American today has more resources and is more educated than the average American in 1950 (Galston, 217). Also, relative to comparable nations, United States’ citizens are less politically informed, especially when it comes to naming key people in politics (Delli Carpini, 138-140). Thus, Americans are seriously lacking in political knowledge at all levels, both in absolute and relative terms.

While the data on political knowledge is not encouraging, there is some research to suggest that people are not as politically ignorant as past studies show them to be. For one, most measures of political knowledge, including Delli Carpini and Keeter’s study, are bi-dimensional. If a person on a survey answered a knowledge question incorrectly, then they are considered
uninformed on that particular question, and if a person answered correctly, then they are considered informed on that particulate of knowledge (Mondak, 57). However, there are distinctions between being uninformed, misinformed, and partially informed (Mondak, 59). Thus, the bifurcation of data used by almost all researchers in political knowledge is not entirely valid (Mondak, 57). Specifically, the fact that partial knowledge cannot be accounted for in most political knowledge tests can make it seem like people are less knowledgeable than they actually are.

Also important to note is that almost every political knowledge test is strictly verbal in nature. We gather much of our political information visually when we watch the news, see videos of public officials, or even watch events and see people. However, very few political scientists measure knowledge using visual cues along with verbal cues (“Visual Political Knowledge”, 41). When pictures are presented next to a verbal question in political knowledge tests regarding naming positions of various politicians, people score slightly better than on tests with only verbal cues. Although this increase is small, it is statistically significant (“Visual Political Knowledge”, 54). Americans are marginally less politically naïve than it would appear from the analysis of political knowledge data sets alone.

Lastly, although Americans do not score well on political knowledge tests, and although political participation and efficacy has decreased in the last 50 years, civic engagement has actually risen in the United States (Galston, 219). This is especially true of high school students. However, rather than engagement in the political realm, people frequently characterize their volunteering as a substitute for political engagement. This implies that people are not so apathetic as to abandon community action, but simply fail to align community action with political action (Galston, 219-220).
What Makes People Politically Knowledgeable?

Before exploring the latent causal mechanisms that drive people to become politically knowledgeable, it is important to distinguish between proximate factors of political knowledge and underlying factors that affect political knowledge levels indirectly. Niemi and Junn write about the process of political learning as a two-pronged event for an individual. First, a person has to be exposed to political information. Second, a person has to have the internal motivation and ability to retain that information (Niemi and Junn, 54).

Using Niemi and Junn’s model, it becomes clear that demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age or income levels do not constitute the most proximate causes of political knowledge, since they do not affect exposure or retention to political knowledge ipso facto. Rather, they are underlying characteristics that are related to knowledge levels only through the vehicles of more proximate factors (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 180). For instance, there has been substantial research into explaining the gender gap in political knowledge. Males have significantly more political knowledge than females on average (Wolak and McDevitt, 505). However, it is not gender itself which causes males to be more politically knowledgeable than females. Rather, gender can affect political knowledge levels through the channel of political interest. Males are typically more politically interested than females because they are socialized to be more engaged by competitive partisan debates than females. Since partisan debates are a widespread mechanism in which people can be exposed to political knowledge, males tend to be more politically knowledgeable because they are more interested in the manner in which political information is disseminated (Wolak and McDevitt, 520). Political interest affects both the exposure to political information, as well as the internal motivation for an individual to retain that information. Because demographic characteristics are factors which cannot affect political
knowledge levels on their own, per se, they will not be primary factors under consideration of this study.

Delli Carpini and Keeter conducted the most authoritative study of political knowledge to date in the United States. In addition to the aforementioned meta-analysis of political knowledge that Delli Carpini and Keeter use to describe political knowledge levels of Americans over a fifty year period of time, they also measure the relationship between political knowledge and various factors which lead people to become politically knowledgeable. Using data from the 1988 National Election Study and a 1989 survey of their own creation, Delli Carpini and Keeter observe the extent to which certain individual factors correlate with political knowledge levels of individuals. Under consideration in this study are both potential direct causes of political knowledge, such as “discussion of politics,” that either expose people to political information or are involved in a person’s capacity to retain political information, as well as indirect correlates of political knowledge, such as “race,” which cannot have a direct effect on political knowledge, but which play into more proximate causes of knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 180-183).

As is made clear Delli Carpini and Keeter’s data, there is a whole set of factors which correlate significantly with political knowledge levels, and many of these factors drive political knowledge since they directly expose people to political information or help to give individuals the motivation and/or ability to retain political information. It is also clear that certain factors, both correlative and causal, have a far greater impact influencing a person’s political knowledge levels than other factors. The merely correlative factors in Delli Carpini and Keeter’s data set, in order of importance, include: income levels, sex, race, region, party identity strength, attitude on women’s rights, children under six in home, and age. The causal factors in this data set, in order of importance, include: education level, political interest, discussion of politics, internal efficacy,
politically relevant employment, read news in newspapers, use newsmagazines as a source of political news, external efficacy, sense of civic duty, use the radio as a source of political news, watch TV news, and civics instruction.

Other researchers have written extensively on the various factors which cause people to become politically knowledgeable, and much of their data has supported Delli Carpini and Keeter’s findings. Focusing solely on how media usage affects political knowledge, other research shows that people who pay attention to campaign news on television and the radio are more likely to be politically knowledgeable at a significant level (Xenos and Moy, 713). Also, since 1996, using the internet as a source for political knowledge has become commonplace. It might be intuitive to believe that this increase in accessibility to information has substantially increased knowledge, but a study done in 2000 shows that internet usage has a very small impact on political knowledge, although it does account for a marginally statistically significant increase in political knowledge (Kenski and Stroud, 187). Using data from 2004, another study shows that people who saw campaign news online are more likely to be politically knowledgeable than people who did not (Xenos and Moy, 713). Although this research also demonstrates that the correlation between internet use and political knowledge is significantly lower than all other media sources, the correlation between internet use and knowledge had increased from 2000 to 2004 (Xenos and Moy; Kenski and Stroud). In recent years, there has not been much research in how internet use affects political knowledge, which is problematic because of the rapid changes in internet usage. Internet use may have increased in importance as a cause of political knowledge since 2004. However, another study from 2005 postulates that internet use will never increase political knowledge drastically. Although the internet allows some people to acquire political information quickly, it also drives some people to become more apolitical, since the
internet contains endless amounts of “mind-numbing” entertainment (Prior, 587). Thus, the distractions of going online have been shown to counterbalance the potential benefits of easy information acquisition.

Although most of Delli Carpini and Keeter’s findings are found to be consistently true in regards to national political knowledge, levels of state political knowledge in the United States have been shown to function quite differently. In their study on levels of state political knowledge, Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak discovered that although knowledge of national politics is usually determined by individual dispositions, like education and political interest, knowledge of state politics is generally determined by the political environment of each state (Lyons et al., 183). The findings demonstrate that in states where the political arena was competitive or when the government was underperforming, citizens of those states possessed more state-level political knowledge (Lyons et al., 183).

Finding the Path to Political Knowledge: A Summary of Literature

Although the path to political knowledge is not always the same for everybody, it can be summarized from previous literature that certain factors have the ability to affect peoples’ political knowledge levels by influencing their exposure to political information or increasing people’s abilities to retain political information. Typically, these factors affect political knowledge at varying degrees, listed previously in order of greatest to least importance. This path of political knowledge attainment is well-known and intuitive to many scholars of political science, but little research has been done citing how much the average citizen understands about the process of gaining political knowledge. This is largely problematic. Because of the supposition that knowledge is pivotal to democracy, how well average people understand how to
obtain political knowledge is thus a pertinent question to understanding how to build a better democracy.

**Hypothesis: Linking Factual Political Knowledge to Understanding the Learning Process**

This study sets out to explore how factual political knowledge affects how well individuals understand how political knowledge is obtained. The prediction is that factual political knowledge is a prerequisite for being able to understand the path to political knowledge. The more factual political knowledge individuals possess, the greater their understanding of what leads people to have political knowledge. Some might argue that this relationship is circular, and that understanding the path to political knowledge is what allows people to gain factual political knowledge. However, this is highly unlikely due to the nature of how the American school system teaches children, and how people process information. In most curricula in grades K-12, memory is emphasized more so than understanding (Brown et al., 8). Textbooks are filled with factual information, and tests assess students’ abilities to remember those facts; tests do not measure how well students see patterns, relationships, or find discrepancies between those facts (Brown et al., 9-17). Most students possess vast amounts of factual knowledge before understanding concepts. Furthermore, understanding in education is usually defined as the ability for a student to construct patterns and relationships between facts (Brown et al., 17). Thus, before understanding a concept people have to possess the facts. Extrapolating from this concept, people must possess factual political knowledge before being able to make the connections necessary for realizing how political knowledge is actually obtained.
**Methods**

This study uses an anonymous survey administered to ten different classes at a small, liberal arts college in the suburbs of Chicago. All of these classes were general education classes in which random segments of the College’s population were enrolled across major and area of study. This survey tests both the factual political knowledge levels that respondents possess and the respondents’ levels of understanding how political knowledge is obtained. This survey also contains a section obtaining limited demographic information from respondents (see the Appendix for the complete survey). The total number of survey respondents is 186, comprised of 94 males, 88 females, and 2 students who do not self-identify as part of a gender binary. The age range of respondents is between 18-26 years of age, with most respondents under the age of 20, and over 80% of respondents indicate that they are white.

*Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable in this study is the level of understanding people have of the process of obtaining political knowledge. This variable is quite complex, because “understanding” as a construct is very conceptual. For the purposes of this study, individuals’ levels of understanding the process of how political knowledge is obtained is operationalized using a Likert-like scale which asks respondents to place nine “factors affecting political knowledge levels” into three categories: those factors which are *very important* at affecting political knowledge levels, those factors which are *somewhat important* at affecting political knowledge levels, and those factors which are *minimally important* at affecting political knowledge levels. The factors chosen to be placed in these categories are all causal factors of political knowledge which clearly fit into different categories of importance in comparison with one another, and could be written out on the survey in ways which most college students would
understand. On the survey, respondents are asked to place three of the nine factors in each category. Respondents are then graded based on how well they identified factors which fit into the three tiers of very important, somewhat important, and minimally important. Thus, understanding the process of obtaining political knowledge is a measure of how well respondents to the survey can identify how much certain factors predispose people to be politically knowledgeable in relation to each other. This variable is measured on a scale of 0 to 9, depending on how many “factors affecting political knowledge levels” respondents are able to place in the correct tier of importance.

**Independent Variables**

The independent variable in this study is the amount of factual political knowledge that respondents possess. As discussed previously, factual political knowledge can be separated into four main subfields: knowledge of government institutions and processes, people involved in politics, domestic affairs, and foreign affairs (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 68) Thus, to measure the factual political knowledge that respondents possessed, the survey includes three multiple choice questions of each component of factual political knowledge. Each multiple choice question has four possible answers, and respondents have to select one answer that they believed is the correct one for each question. This variable is measured on a scale of 0 to 12, depending on how many multiple choice questions each respondent answers correctly.

Control variables in this study include respondents’ age, gender, major/intended major, ethnicity/race, and religious affiliation. These variables are studied because of their potential to influence both the independent and dependent variables, and because they are often factors under consideration in studies involving political knowledge (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Wolak and McDevitt 2011).
Findings

Overall, the findings of this study illustrate that factual political knowledge is unrelated to an individual’s understanding of how to obtain political knowledge. Not only then, is the hypothesis of this study proven to be incorrect, but the theory is as well. Moreover, the control variables under consideration in this study had minimal effects on both the dependent and independent variable. These data are contrary to several previous studies which have linked certain demographic factors to political knowledge.

Running an initial ordinary least-squares regression between the independent and dependent variables, while controlling for age, gender, and Hispanic identification, yields a result of Beta= -.025 at a .743 level of significance (major/minor, race, and religious affiliation could not be included in the regression because these were operationalized as categorical variables). This means that the amount of factual political knowledge individuals possess does not have an independent and statistically significant effect on an individual’s understanding of how to obtain factual political knowledge. This data can be seen in the table below, in which the regression between the independent variable (factual political knowledge) and dependent variable (understanding how to obtain factual political knowledge) is highlighted:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>3.153</td>
<td>1.399</td>
<td>2.254</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual knowl.</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>-.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.574</td>
<td>.207</td>
<td>-.206</td>
<td>-2.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hisp. ID</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.345</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Understanding How to Obtain Factual Political Knowledge
Additionally, the negligent effects of age and identification as Hispanic are shown in this table, as they have Betas of .067 and -.001 respectively, at levels of significance which invalidate these variables as predictors of the dependent variable. However, this table shows that gender has a small influence on how well respondents understand how political knowledge is obtained, with a Beta= -.206 at a .01 level of significance, meaning that males score slightly better than females on the dependent variable, which corroborates past studies which have shown this trend (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Wolak and McDevitt 2011).

As well as running a regression to determine if higher political knowledge levels cause higher levels of understanding how political knowledge is obtained, a two-tailed Pearson test of correlation was run between the independent and dependent variables of this study, and the simple r value is found to be -.002. This demonstrates conclusively that factual political knowledge is unrelated to an understanding of how to obtain political knowledge.

Additional tests between control variables and the dependent variable were conducted. The table showing the ordinary least-squares regression between the variables of age, gender, and Hispanic identification has already been discussed. However, the control variables of race and religious affiliation, categorical variables, can be measured by comparing means across different responses. When mean scores on the dependent variable are analyzed across respondents of different races and religious affiliations, no significant differences in mean scores are found as a result of varying responses to any of these variables at the .05 level of significance. These tables are found below:
Tests were also run between the control variables of this study and the independent variable, which is the factual political knowledge levels of respondents. Just as in the relationship between control variables and the dependent variable in this study, the relationship between these variables and the independent variable are also non-existent. When an ordinary least-squares regression was run between age, gender identification, Hispanic identification, and factual political knowledge, each Beta value was low, especially given the level of significance in this test. The results of this test are below:

### DV * religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>religion</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Judaism)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Islam)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Catholicism)</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Evangelical Prot.)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Mainline Prot.)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (Other Christian)</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (Non-affiliated)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.414</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 (Affiliation not listed)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>180</td>
<td>1.447</td>
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</table>

### DV * race

<table>
<thead>
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<th>race</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (White)</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1.457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Black)</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (Asian)</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Not listed)</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>1.432</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, when mean scores on the independent variable are analyzed across different races and religious affiliations, no significant differences in mean scores are found as a result of varying responses to either of these variables at the .05 level of significance. These tables are shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV * race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>race</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (White)</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Black)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (Asian)</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Not listed)</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.613</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>174</td>
<td>1.835</td>
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IV * religion

<table>
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<tr>
<td>1 (Judaism)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.414</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (Islam)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Catholicism)</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1.656</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (Evangelical Prot.)</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Mainline Prot.)</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (Other Christian aff.)</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (Non-affiliated)</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.885</td>
</tr>
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<td>10 (Aff. not listed)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>1.828</td>
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**Discussion**

The null hypothesis is shown to be correct in this study. Rather than factual political knowledge being a driving force for individuals’ levels of understanding how political knowledge is obtained, factual political knowledge has no effect on this variable. Furthermore, not only does political knowledge not drive understanding how political knowledge is obtained, but there is no relationship at all between these variables; an understanding of how political knowledge is obtained also does not predict whether or not an individual will be politically knowledgeable.

There could be a variety of reasons for why these two variables are so disconnected. First, it is possible that understanding the factors that make people politically knowledgeable is more a test of general intuition than it is any type of a particularly political understanding. Realizing what factors are more or less important at developing political knowledge may have more to do with someone’s overall abilities to think conceptually, for instance, than any sort of political understanding. Second, realizing the importance of these factors may also be more closely tied to someone’s abilities to predict how efficacious different media are at allowing
“viewers” to retain the information they receive from that media source, since so many factors that help people become politically knowledgeable include different media usage patterns.

There are a couple important consequences of this study’s findings. First, these findings demonstrate that people do not necessarily need to be politically knowledgeable in order to understand how to obtain more political knowledge. This has one very positive implication, and has one implication that is rather bleak for a democratic state. It shows that even if many people do not already have high degrees of political knowledge, they have the potential to become highly politically knowledgeable since they might understand how political knowledge is obtained even without much pre-existing factual knowledge. However, because political knowledge levels are both low and stagnant in the United States, this means that many people understand how to obtain political knowledge, but simply do not expose themselves to political information. Thus, an important future direction would be to explore why people that understand how to obtain political knowledge, but do not possess it already, might not make more active attempts to become knowledgeable. Can this lack of motivation to learn about politics be attributed more to a lack of time or resources, or is a lack of external efficacy to blame for this phenomenon?

Second, these findings suggest that those that have high levels of political knowledge, and want to inform others on how to also be politically knowledgeable, may not understand how most people gain political knowledge. This seemingly counterintuitive finding means that people who are knowledgeable may point a less knowledgeable person in a somewhat less efficacious direction in their quest for more political knowledge. For instance, it is easy to imagine someone who is deeply politically knowledgeable, but lacks a deep understanding of how knowledge is obtained, to say to someone who is less knowledgeable to watch CNN more to become more
politically knowledgeable. However, the less politically knowledgeable person might be better suited by having a long conversation about politics with the more knowledgeable person, since interpersonal conversations about politics are more strongly related to political knowledge than watching news on TV (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 180-181). Because educators, especially those that teach social science or government, are tasked with making children more politically knowledgeable, it is important that they realize how it is that individuals tend to obtain more political knowledge. Do educators know that besides education, political interest and interpersonal conversations about politics are typically the most important at leading individuals to be politically knowledgeable? If they do, do they actively attempt to inspire interest in the classroom, or encourage political conversation? This is another important future direction of this research.

Another interesting finding of this study is the clear disconnect between control variables under consideration and how well individuals understand how political knowledge is obtained. Just like factual political knowledge levels, age, race, gender identification, religious affiliation, and identification as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish have no significant effects on how well individuals understood how political knowledge is obtained. This means that this type of understanding is not only independent of factual political knowledge levels, but also independent of many demographic factors that typically have some sort of significant effects on variables related to political knowledge. Perhaps then, this shows that previous differences in political knowledge levels between different cross-sections of society are not rooted in how well certain individuals understand how to obtain knowledge, but rather in the ability for certain individuals to be motivated to and have the resources to actually obtain political knowledge. Of course, the fact that this study uses college students as the only respondents may have moderated variances
in how different cross-sections of society actually understand how political knowledge is obtained.

Related to this last point, there was also a disconnect between control variables under consideration and how well individuals scored on a brief test of factual political knowledge. Age, race, gender identification, religious affiliation, and identification as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish had no significant effects on how well individuals scored on factual political knowledge tests, even though some of these factors have been shown in the past to have measurable correlations with political knowledge levels. This could represent a change in political knowledge levels of certain segments of the American populace, but it is more likely that doing this study on a college campus moderated the variation in political knowledge levels of certain segments of broader American society. The extent to which college moderates broader society’s variations in both political knowledge and political understanding are questions for further research.

Limitations

There were a variety of limitations to this study. First, the data set obtained for this research was relatively small and homogenous. There were only 186 survey respondents for this study, and all of these survey respondents came from a single, small, liberal arts institution in the Chicagoland area. Furthermore, survey respondents tended to be similar to each other. Although there was an almost even split in male and female respondents to the survey used for this study, the vast majority of survey respondents were white and either Catholic, not religiously affiliated, or had an “other Christian affiliation.” A larger and more diverse data set might garner different results for this study. Second, the multiple choice test used to measure factual political knowledge levels of individuals in the survey was relatively short and simple. Measuring factual political knowledge levels with the use of multiple choice questions does not accurately measure
the complexities of this variable (Mondak, 57; “Visual Political Knowledge”, 41). Also, even if it did, 12 multiple choice questions, even if carefully crafted to include equal amounts of questions related to knowledge of government institutions and processes, people involved in politics, domestic affairs, and foreign affairs, is not large enough to get a true sense of an individual’s factual political knowledge levels. Finally, the dependent variable in this study was operationalized in a way that may not accurately reflect how well individuals understand how political knowledge is obtained. Political learning is a complicated process of access and retention, and scoring how well individuals can put factors that predispose people to be politically knowledgeable in different categories of importance may not fully capture the complexity of this process.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that factual political knowledge and understanding how political knowledge is obtained are not at all related to one another. Somewhat ironically, this means that those that are politically knowledgeable do not necessarily think about the conditions in which they were brought up in that have made them politically knowledgeable, whereas some people that are not at all politically knowledgeable intuitively know how political knowledge is obtained. For those that believe that political knowledge of the citizenry is necessary for a healthy democracy, this is extremely pertinent. It adds complexity to the narrative of political knowledge by relating this variable to political learning. By demonstrating that people can have a lot of factual political knowledge without understanding the process of obtaining political knowledge, this research presents evidence that is contrary to previous studies which have tended to claim that people are for the most part either entirely politically competent or entirely politically naïve (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter).
This is one of only a handful of studies that treats political knowledge as a learning process, and one of even fewer that examine the relationship between the learning process of obtaining political knowledge, and political knowledge as possession of factual information. More research on the relationship between these topics should be done with the end goal of political learning—the acquisition of political information—in mind, because making this process better is conducive to a more efficient democracy.

This study is also one of the few studies in the social sciences which focuses on meta-learning, or learning about learning (Novak, 8). Although meta-learning is a popular term in the realm of education, it could be applied to specific disciplines at higher frequencies to explore the differences in how people learn about particular subjects. Future research on this topic can also explore how well educators in the social sciences and government teachers in particular understand the process of obtaining political knowledge. Additionally, how certain people can have a deep understanding of how political knowledge is obtained, yet not possess much factual political knowledge is a question that needs to be addressed. Most importantly, however, more work should be done on finding more effective methods to educate the citizenry on political matters, as Americans’ political knowledge levels are both low compared to similar nations, and stagnant.
Works Cited


Appendix A

Below is a list of factors that affect individuals’ political knowledge levels at varying degrees of importance. For all factors listed, please consider whether you believe each factor is very important, somewhat important, or minimally important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels. After reading through the list, please choose three factors that you believe to be very important, three factors that you believe to be somewhat important, and three factors which you believe to be only minimally important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels, and write your choices in the lines provided. You must choose three factors to place in each category.

Factors Affecting Political Knowledge Levels

1) A person’s interest in politics
2) A person’s attention to news on television
3) The frequency with which a person reads print media
4) A person’s formal education level
5) A person’s level of internet usage
6) A person’s attention to news on the radio
7) The frequency with which a person has interpersonal conversations about politics
8) The degree to which a person thinks politics matters
9) The degree to which a person feels it is a citizen’s duty to pay attention to politics

List the three factors that you believe are very important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels by writing the number of the chosen factors from above:

1) _________  2) _________  3) _________

List the three factors that you believe are somewhat important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels by writing the number of the chosen factors from above:

1) _________  2) _________  3) _________

List the three factors that you believe are minimally important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels by writing the number of the chosen factors from above:

1) _________  2) _________  3) _________

Out of the three factors that you marked above to be very important at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels, please choose one that you believe to be the most important factor on the line below:

______________________________________________________________________________
After indicating what you believe the most important factor at affecting individuals’ political knowledge levels is, please write 3-5 sentences describing why you believe this factor is the most important on the lines provided:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Please circle what you believe to be the correct response for each question.

1. Who is the current Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?
   a. Dick Durbin
   b. Joe Biden
   c. John Boehner
   d. Paul Ryan

2. How many United States Supreme Court justices are there?
   a. 4
   b. 5
   c. 7
   d. 9

3. What area of Ukraine allegedly voted to join Russia in 2014?
   a. Crimea
   b. Donetsk
   c. Chechnya
   d. Odessa

4. What is the official name of “Obamacare?”
   a. American Health Care Act of 2010
   b. Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
   c. The American Health Care Reform Act
   d. The Affordable Health Care for America Act
5. In what three countries have over 1,000 people died of Ebola during the current epidemic in West Africa?
   a. Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Ghana
   b. Mali, Guinea, and Liberia
   c. Nigeria, Mali, and Liberia
   d. Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone

6. Who lost the 2004 presidential election to George W. Bush?
   a. Al Gore
   b. Mitt Romney
   c. Hillary Clinton
   d. John Kerry

7. In which borough of New York City did Eric Garner die in on July 17, 2014?
   a. Staten Island
   b. Manhattan
   c. Brooklyn
   d. Bronx

8. How many amendments have been made to the United States Constitution?
   a. 25
   b. 18
   c. 32
   d. 27
9. What is the approximate current United States national debt?
   a. $11 trillion
   b. $14 trillion
   c. $17 trillion
   d. $18 trillion

10. After China and India, what is the most populated country in the world?
    a. United States
    b. Pakistan
    c. Indonesia
    d. Russia

11. What is the youngest age a president of the United States can be?
    a. 18
    b. 25
    c. 30
    d. 35

12. Who is the current Secretary of Defense for the United States?
    a. Chuck Hagel
    b. John Kerry
    c. Jack Lew
    d. Eric Holder
How old are you?

What is/are your gender identification(s)?

What is/are your intended major(s)?

Do you consider yourself to be of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? Please circle a response:

1) Yes
2) No

What race do you identify with? Please circle all responses that apply:

1) White
2) Black or African American
3) American Indian or Alaskan Native
4) Asian
5) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
6) A race or races not listed

With which of the following religious traditions do you most closely affiliate with? Please circle all responses that apply:

1) Judaism
2) Islam
3) Hinduism
4) Buddhism
5) Catholicism
6) Evangelical Protestantism
7) Mainline Protestantism
8) Other Christian affiliation
9) Non-affiliated
10) Religious affiliation not listed