# CHAPTER II

# THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION

Ever since the first studies of political behavior, political scientists have been aware of vast differences between the level of political knowledge of the American public and that expected in democratic theory. Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) note:

> The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the voter falls short. (308)

From this statement about the lack of knowledge of citizens, a literature on the concept of *political sophistication* (sometimes discussed using different terminology) has evolved. This chapter examines that evolution, from its roots in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) and *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957) to its present usage. In particular, it examines the divergence in how different traditions within the discipline view the concept of political sophistication. While Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996) note that "each of the three traditions [rational choice, sociological, and psychological approaches] has addressed a distinct challenge to democratic theory" and that "they have also tended to converge on a unified view of the citizen in democratic politics," (224) important differences in perspective between these branches remain—including on the meaning of the concept of sophistication.

## 2.1 *The Levels of Conceptualization*

Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes's path-breaking study of the American polity was the first to discuss the concept of political sophistication, although it did not directly employ that term. Noting the vast range in the amount of knowledge Americans have about politics, they attempted to classify the electorate into groups based on the sophistication of individuals' conceptualization of politics. They described what they sought to measure as follows:

> We are interested in the presence or absence of certain abstractions that have to do with ideology; but we are also interested in the degree to which an individual's political world is differentiated, and, most important, in the nature of the degree of "connectedness" between the elements that are successfully discriminated. In short, we are interested in the structure of thought that the individual applies to politics; and this interest forces us to deal in typologies and qualitative differences. (221–22)

Subsequently, they established a typology of four levels of conceptualization (identified as levels A–D), based on a reading of the responses to the open-ended "likes and dislikes" questions they included in the 1956 American National Election Study.[1] Level A consisted of "all respondents whose evaluations of the candidates and the parties have any suggestion of the abstract conception one would associate with ideology" and the three lower levels consisted of those expressing "fairly concrete and short-term group interest" or "ideology by proxy" (level B), attitudes reflecting their perceptions of the state of the times (level C), and those whose attitudes toward the two major parties and presidential candidates were unconnected with domestic policy (level D) (222–23). The bulk of the sample fell into levels B–D,

[1] Since 1956, the presidential-year NES studies have included a series of open-ended questions asking respondents to identify things they like and dislike about the two major parties and the two parties' presidential candidates; they have commonly been referred to as the "likes and dislikes" questions since.

| Level | Description | Approximate percentage of the 1956 electorate |
|---|---|---|
| A | Ideologues and near-ideologues | 11.5 |
| B | Group benefits (“ideology by proxy”) | 42.0 |
| C | Nature of the times | 24.0 |
| D | No issue content | 22.5 |

**Table 1:** The levels of conceptualization in *The American Voter*

with only about 11.5 percent showing some degree of ideological conception (level A) (249). Campbell et al. also demonstrated that the higher levels of conceptualization were associated with higher levels of education and political involvement. The levels and their proportion of the 1956 electorate are summarized in Table 1, reproduced from *The American Voter*.

Converse (1964) expanded on, and revised, the levels of conceptualization and introduced the concept of a “belief system” to generalize the concept of ideology used by Campbell et al.. He defined a belief system “as a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional dependence.” (207) Converse argues that the level of constraint in a person’s belief system is largely a function of the level of information that individual possesses; by information, he means both simple facts and the “contextual knowledge” or essential relationships between those facts (212–13). He examined two different approaches to measuring the level of sophistication of members of the public: the “active use” of ideology in making political decisions, a recasting of Campbell et al.’s levels of conceptualization using the same “likes and dislikes” questions, and the recognition of the ideological positions of parties and understanding of those ideological labels, based on the ability of a respondent to characterize one of the parties as more conservative than the other and give a reasonable explanation of what “conservative” meant. Converse noted that high levels of sophistication according to both measures were associated with higher

levels of political activity and education, consistent with the findings of Campbell et al..

Converse also considered sophistication in terms of the constraint of individuals' belief systems, and found relatively little constraint in the issue positions expressed by the public when measured by the correlations among those issue attitudes (227–29), suggesting again that much of the public had relatively unstructured political belief systems. He held out the possibility of more constrained belief systems within "issue publics"—subgroups with interests in particular issue domains (245–46). Both conceptions of political sophistication advanced by Converse—sophistication as ideological (or belief system) constraint and sophistication as the use, recognition, and understanding of ideology—would see further development.

The conception of political sophistication in terms of the levels of conceptualization continued to have some currency in the literature through the 1970s. Pierce (1970), Pierce and Hagner (1982) and Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976) used Campbell et al.'s levels of conceptualization in various forms to illustrate the changing role of ideology in how voters made political decisions,[2] arguing that voters had in general increased their sophistication in the 1960s and 1970s. However, these works were strongly criticized by Smith (1980), who presented evidence that the levels of conceptualization measure had neither validity nor reliability,[3] in addition to arguing that voters in general were no more ideological or sophisticated than they were at the time of *The American Voter*. More recent research appears to have abandoned

[2]Pierce (1970) and Pierce and Hagner (1982) used the interview transcripts to produce their coding, while Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976) used the set of "master codes" provided by the NES in the public dataset to preserve anonymity.

[3]For a continuation of this debate, see Abramson (1981); Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1981); Smith (1981); Cassel (1984); and Luskin (1987).

attempts to measure sophistication based on the levels of conceptualization *per se*.[4]

## 2.2 Constraint and Schematic Approaches

However, the second part of Converse's work on belief systems—the idea of ideological constraint indicating sophistication—continued to be studied. Jackson and Marcus (1975) extended the ideological constraint to belief systems other than liberalism and conservatism, and note:

> The combined consequence of issues that generate low salience and of issues that are couched in terms ambivalently or inconsequently preferred by the public will be to yield low levels of ideological thinking by the electorate. This would seem to place great importance on the ability of political leadership to select and frame issues in ways that encourage political analysis.[5] (107)

This view of sophistication as constraint was subsequently revised and extended in terms of the schematic approach, which was taken up in the field of political psychology. Fiske and Kinder (1981) made the first attempt to connect the schema concept to political sophistication, noting the links between Converse (1964)'s conception of ideology and the more general concept of a schema. They suggest that there are numerous possible schemata that citizens can apply to politics, and suggest that citizens' level of political involvement and expertise might have an effect on what schemata are used (180–81), and conclude that that is the case:

> [S]chema availability and schema use depend importantly on individual differences—especially, we have argued, on expertise and involvement:

[4]See, e.g., Miller and Shanks (1996), which mentions the levels of conceptualization only in passing (567).

[5]Also see Carmines and Stimson (1980) who make a similar point in terms of the ability of members of the public to engage in issue voting.

> The uninitiated do not have appropriate schemata available; novices possess concrete versions of consensual schemata and use them in simpleminded ways; and experts possess abstract schemata that they use in sophisticated ways. (187)

Explanation of how these schemata were formed, however, was left to future research.

Like Fiske and Kinder, Conover and Feldman (1984) make an attempt to recast the issue as a question of how people think about politics, given the substantial evidence that most voters do not use ideology directly. The authors borrow Fiske and Linville (1980)'s definition of schema: "a cognitive structure of 'organized prior knowledge, abstracted from experience with specific instances' that guides 'the processing of new information and the retrieval of stored information'," (96) and suggest that a schematic approach provides a way to unify sociological and psychological perspectives on the formation of belief systems (98–99). Like the pre-schematic approach of Converse (1964), this approach conceptualizes sophistication as the degree of association between various political beliefs; however, they indicate that "people organize their political worlds in richer and more diverse ways than implied by the traditional approaches to mass belief systems" (121), suggesting that most people have a political belief system, and hence some degree of political sophistication. However, their approach does not readily produce a measure of individual sophistication.

Hamill, Lodge and Blake (1985) defined a schema as a knowledge structure, based on both declarative (or factual) knowledge and knowledge of the associations between concepts and facts, similar to Converse's conception of information (852). As in Fiske and Kinder (1981) and Conover (1984), Hamill, Lodge and Blake found that voters with higher levels of expertise used more sophisticated and varied schemata to evaluate issues, but even the less expert had some schemata they were

able to draw on.

The use of schemata in political psychology was strongly criticized by Kuklinski, Luskin and Bolland (1991), who argued that schemas were being measured inappropriately, their applications were merely "cosmetic," and their use generally failed to give any additional insight than similar concepts such as cognitive maps and attitudes. Perhaps more relevant to the issue of sophistication, however, they noted the similarity between Hamill, Lodge and Blake's measure of partisan schema usage and measures of sophistication used elsewhere in the literature by Zaller (1986) and Luskin (1987) (1352, n.11). While their critique was disputed at the time,[6] the use of explicit schemata in political science and political psychology has fallen out of favor, even if some of the conceptual underpinnings remain in other work[7] and the concept retains its viability and validity in the wider field of social cognition (see Fiske and Taylor 1991; Rhee and Cappella 1997). Moreover, one useful and enduring concept to come out of this research line is that of "political expertise."

[6]See, e.g. Lodge and McGraw (1991); Conover and Feldman (1991); and Miller (1991).

[7]For example, Lodge and McGraw (1995) note:

> The associative network model has come to be adopted by many political psychologists . . . , and is clearly the structural "currency" of choice for most of the contributors to this volume. So we forewarn readers who my find themselves wondering "where is the schema?" that although the word itself is conspicuously absent from the text, it is conceptually present throughout. . . . [W]e must underscore the point that the *concept* of schema as an organized memory structure is still vitally important to the understanding of political reasoning and judgment, but that *specification* of the particular form such structures may take demands more precision than the ubiquitous schema term provides. (4)

Also, while Luskin (2002b) continues to reject schema theory as a whole, he suggests there might be some promise in examining individual-level cognitive mappings like those presented in Lodge and McGraw (1991).

## 2.3 *Political Expertise and Political Sophistication*

More recent works in the psychological vein have produced useful measures of sophistication, drawing on the more general concept of "expertise" used in cognitive psychology. Fiske, Kinder and Larter (1983) suggest that political sophistication is the result of acquiring knowledge about politics:

> Experts have more chunks of knowledge, and the chunks themselves contain more concepts (Chase & Simon, 1973). In addition, however, the structure of knowledge apparently changes. As people become more expert, their knowledge becomes more organized. . . . In any case, the cohesion of organized knowledge seems to be greater in experts' memory. (384)

Thus, if we can measure a person's political expertise, we are inherently able to understand their level of political sophistication. And since expertise is largely a function of knowledge, a voter's level of knowledge may be a good measure of sophistication. Fiske, Kinder and Larter indicate that political expertise includes "the interlocking set of knowledge, interest and participation" (1983: 385), although their measure largely reflects the latter two items.

Neuman (1986) suggests a definition of political sophistication resting on three factors: "political salience" (based on individual interest, attentiveness, and involvement), "political knowledge" (based on factual knowledge items) and "political conceptualization" (largely based on the levels of conceptualization in Converse (1964) and the ability to integrate political concepts).

The meaning of political expertise was further explored in an issue of *Social Cognition* devoted to the topic; Krosnick (1990a), in the introduction to that issue, explicitly relates political expertise to the conception of sophistication embodied in Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1964). However, Krosnick also notes that the

measurement and definition of political expertise is subject to considerable debate: unlike in other fields, political expertise doesn't reflect performance *per se*. Instead:

> [P]olitical experts are presumed to be keenly interested in political affairs, to expose themselves to lots of political information (both directly through behavioral participation in political events and indirectly through the mass media), to pay close attention to the political information they encounter, and to reflect on the meaning and implications of that information long after it is acquired. (4)

The authors in the issue used various measures of political expertise. Krosnick (1990b) indicates that the researchers in the volume demonstrated that

> knowledge, interest, exposure and behavioral participation have independent effects on some phenomena. . . . Taken together, this evidence indicates that the various dimensions of political expertise considered here may each have unique impacts via unique mechanisms. Thus, investigators should recognize the possibility that these dimensions can sometimes function as distinct factors. (156–57)

Zaller (1990) measures political expertise in terms of four measures of "political awareness," based on the ability to correctly locate groups and candidates on a 7-point ideological scale (the "information scale") and measures of participation, media exposure, and political interest from the 1972–76 NES panel study. He concludes:

> One is politically aware to the degree that one chronically exposes oneself to and comprehends media reports of political events, issues, and personages. It has been argued [earlier in the article] that political awareness, understood in this way, is best measured by tests of political information. (147; an extended discussion is at Zaller 1992: 333–39)

Luskin (1987) also makes an effort to consolidate various definitions of political sophistication. He first famously noted that "most sophistication research skips

rapidly past definition... trusting a citation to Campbell et al. (1960) or Converse (1964) to do the rest" (857). He defines political sophistication as "the extent to which [a person's personal belief system] is large, wide-ranging, and highly constrained" (860), and "the political case of a more general variable," *cognitive complexity* or *expertise* (861). This definition suggests that, at least to him, political sophistication and political expertise are essentially the same thing.

Luskin revisits Converse (1964), and finds little to recommend in the correlation-based measures of sophistication suggested there (and in the schema literature), but finds more promise in his "active use" (AU) and "recognition and understanding" (RU) measures, developing a sophistication measure of his own that he refers to as $S$, incorporating both knowledge of politics (or information holding) and the ideological measures derived from Converse.[8] Like Krosnick (1990b) and Zaller (1990), Luskin finds some value in using political knowledge as a measure of sophistication, although he also suggests that measures like $S$ are likely to perform better (890).

In this and subsequent articles, Luskin appears to largely gloss over the distinctions between terms like "political expertise," "political knowledge," "cognitive complexity" and "political information" (see, for example Luskin 2002b: 220), to which we might add "citizen competence" (Kuklinski, Quirk and Jerit 2001) and "political literacy" (Cassel and Lo 1997). However, he cautions against some

[8] More formally:

$$S = (I_1 + I_2 + 1)(D + 1)$$

where $I_1$ is an active use measure based on Campbell et al. (1960)'s levels of conceptualization (scored 0–2, with 0 representing "no issue content," 1 representing "group benefits" and "nature of the times" explanations, and 2 representing ideologues and near-ideologues), $I_2$ is a recognition and understanding measure (also scored 0–2) roughly similar to Converse (1964)'s, and $D$ is an eleven-point measure based on each respondents' ability to classify the two major parties and themselves correctly on 11 policy issues (respondents receive one point per issue "correct"), an approach essentially the same as Zaller's "information scale." The range of $S$ is 1–60 (Luskin 1990: 340).

aggregations like Zaller's "political awareness," which he argues "commingles sophistication, which is what he really seems to have in mind, with education, political interest, media use, and political participation." (235) He also suggests that there may be some promise in examining the role of "cognitive ability" or general intelligence as a substitute for what he views as an over-emphasis on education as an explanatory variable in models of political knowledge (239–41).

Largely independently of the psychological line of research, Smith (1989) arrives at a broadly similar conclusion about the use of political knowledge as a measure of sophistication. He argues that neither the levels of conceptualization nor measures of attitude consistency are worthwhile measures of political sophistication; he argues that for most purposes in the study of mass political behavior, political knowledge and what he terms "conceptual sophistication" are highly correlated to the point that they are essentially indistinguishable, although he concedes that that better measures of sophistication might reveal meaningful differences (226–27).

## 2.4 *Rational Choice Perspectives on Sophistication*

Rational choice perspectives on political sophistication have always largely focused on the role of knowledge or information, and in particular on the costs of obtaining that information. Downs (1957) classically argues that it low levels of political information in the public are a rational consequence of the low value of that information to most members of the public; to the extent members of the public acquire political information, it is either through passive processes or due to interest in particular issues affecting one's self-interest.

Various authors have attempted to explain how the public can behave responsibly in the absence of complete information. Much of this research has focused on

the use of heuristics or shortcuts by voters with low levels of political information. While the earlier development of ideology-based conceptions of political sophistication was of limited use to rational choice scholars, the conception of expertise and information discussed above is much more akin to that embodied in Downs and subsequent rational choice approaches.

To the extent rational choice scholars have been interested in political sophistication, it has largely to been to ask how voters with low levels of information are able to make rational political decisions. McKelvey and Ordeshook (1985) were among the first authors to attempt to reconcile rational choice models with the low levels of political information known to exist in the public:

> When voters do not possess the perfect information assumed in earlier models, and when it is costly to obtain this information relative to the presumed expected benefits, we assume that voters take cues from other sources, endogenous in the system, that are easily observable and which they believe may convey useful information. Such sources may be other voters, interest groups, historical behavior of the candidates, or poll results. (56)

Subsequent research has focused on the use of these heuristics or cognitive shortcuts by voters (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991a; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). While not all voters use these heuristic approaches, much of the early research did not ask which heuristics were used by whom, instead focusing on the ability of heuristics to make voters behave as if fully informed (see e.g. Popkin 1991); hence Luskin (2002a) criticizes this literature: "[W]hile these models shed light on some of the ways in which voters may put even crude information to use, they do not necessarily imply that very many voters successfully do so." (286; see also Kuklinski and Quirk 2000) The case for some heuristics is better than others; for example, Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) and Mondak (1993a,b) suggest that voters use signals from

"insiders" including members of Congress and the president, while Sniderman, Glaser and Griffin (1990), Huckfeldt et al. (1999), and Schaffner and Streb (2002) suggest the use of partisanship as a heuristic device, both of which should be at least somewhat effective for voters with relatively low levels of political information.[9] Yet for the most part this literature has been silent on what level of information is necessary to use a heuristic, or has failed to look at the possibility of heterogeneity in heuristic use based on the level of information possessed by voters (Rivers 1988, but see Lau and Redlawsk 2001a,b for some attempts to do just this).

Perhaps the most promising direction in this literature has been the effort to bring the lessons of political psychology into the rational choice literature. In the concluding chapter of *Elements of Reason*, Lupia, McCubbins and Popkin (2000) suggest that rational choice scholars need to recognize that "a cognition-independent concept of expected utility maximization is *not sufficient* to describe uncertainty's effects," (288) given the evidence that voters do not consciously use heuristics (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000), while at the same time indicating that scholars in political psychology ought to recognize that choice is at the heart of political behavior.

## 2.5 Toward a Unified Meaning of Sophistication

As Lupia (2002) notes, "[p]olitical psychologists and rational choice theorists do not interact very much. This silence is particularly ironic when it comes to explaining political behavior, as such explanations are a core concern of both groups." (51) It

[9] In many ways, the use of heuristics from the rational choice perspective seems to parallel the schematic approaches that were popular in political psychology in the 1980s. Notably, both approaches suggest that members of the public with more political knowledge have more schemata/heuristics that they can draw upon. However, heuristics generally appear to be less complex phenomena than the schemata posited in the political psychology literature and rely more on external actors.

is perhaps even more ironic that despite this lack of interaction, both groups' approaches to the issue of sophistication have arrived at a common ground, more-or-less independently: that an individual's level of political sophistication is observable in terms of that person's level of political awareness and political knowledge.

The literature subsequent to Luskin (1987), Smith (1989) and Zaller (1992) has mostly used the respondent's level of political information or political knowledge as the indicator of voter sophistication; see, for example, Lupia (1994), Bartels (1996), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), Cassel and Lo (1997), Althaus (1998), Duch, Palmer and Anderson (2000), Mondak (2000a,b), and Smith (2002), and in a cross-national context, Gordon and Segura (1997), although the measurement of information varies, suggesting that a broad consensus on the particular indicator to be used has been reached. More importantly, these works come from both the rational choice and political psychology traditions, suggesting that Carmines and Huckfeldt's anticipation of a consensus between the two traditions was well-founded. This consensus will be particularly valuable in the next chapter, where I consider the role that information plays in the use of heuristics (shortcuts) by voters.

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