Abstract
Most of us consider that democracy works better to the extent that citizens actually know what they are voting, signing petitions, giving money, or demonstrating for or against. In some minimal, sense, of course they generally do know. Not many people will pull the lever for John Kerry this November, thinking he’s actually George Bush. But those who vote for Kerry—or Bush—may not, in a deeper sense, really know what they are doing. They may be casting votes at odds with their own more fundamental values and interests.

The scholarly battle over the distribution of political information (and kindred variables like knowledge and sophistication) has been over for some time. Some rearguard activity, reflected, for example, in recent claims that both don’t-know (DK) and incorrect responses to knowledge questions commonly reflect more information than they are conventionally given credit for, persists. But, by and large the struggle over the past decade-plus has been over the differences made by acknowledged disparities in information.

A sizable extenuationist literature claims that while most people don’t know or think much about politics, they nonetheless manage to grope their way toward something approximating their “full-information” preferences. Other studies, on the whole more credibly, suggest a much greater difference between actual and full information preferences.

Of course these disputed effects on preferences are not the only reason we might want citizens to be as informed as possible. Information and its relations may also affect the
level of participation, the respect accorded to other citizens with differing views, and the degree of support for the democratic system, among other things.

My remarks will center on the following:

1. The differences and (mainly) similarities between information, knowledge, sophistication, etc.

2. The state of the evidence regarding evidence regarding the distribution of information in mass publics. I shall say something about the recent to-do about the treatment of DK and incorrect responses to knowledge items.

3. The state of the evidence regarding information’s effects, especially on the gap between actual and “full-information” preferences. Among other things, I’ll talk about the Deliberative Polling project, which provides a quasi-experimental window on the question. This in turn subsumes several important topics:

   a. The nature of “full-information.” What can be measured in a survey or imparted in a Deliberative Poll obviously falls well short of it.

   b. The nature—and possible non-monotonicity—of information’s effects. Does increased information move the distribution of preferences left or right—or first one then, after a point, the other? How may the effects vary by issue and circumstance?

   c. How to interpret estimates of information’s effects? To some extent, the disagreement over their magnitude is a glass-half-empty or half-full problem.

   d. The models by which “full-information” preference distributions are simulated and how the choice of model influences the results.

4. What can be done to lift chronically low levels of political information?

**Biography**

Robert C. Luskin is Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin, Chercheur Associé at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Grenoble (part of the Université de Grenoble), and Senior Fellow at the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University. He has also taught at the University of Alabama, Indiana University, Princeton University, and the Université de Paris I (la Sorbonne) and in the ICPSR Summer Program in Quantitative Methods of Social Research at the University of Michigan, the ECPR Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection at the University of Essex, and the Summer School on Advanced Methods in the Social Sciences at the Università della Svizzera Italiana (Switzerland). He has been a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford and Chercheur Associé at the Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique Française (CEVIPOF) of the Fondation Luskin.

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Nationale des Sciences Politiques (Sciences Po), Paris. His general interests include public opinion, voting behavior, political psychology, deliberative democracy, and statistical methods, and he has published papers on these and other topics in the American Political Science Review, the American Journal of Political Science, the British Journal of Political Science, and other scholarly journals. He has been a member of the Advisory Board of the Texas Poll and of the Editorial Boards of Political Analysis and the American Political Science Review.