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Perceived and Objective Knowledge About Politics as Predictors of Political Activism

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In the last major Presidential election in 2012, only 53.6% of eligible American voters showed up to the polls (Pew Research Center, 2015). Researchers have long been interested in the factors that predict one's likelihood of engaging in political and social action. Previous research suggests that knowledge of an issue is a strong predictor of attitudes and behaviors (Tolvanen et al., 2012). This, however, is predicated on the assumption that all "knowledge" is equal in veracity; some studies suggest that perceived knowledge (i.e. what people think they know) and objective knowledge (i.e. what they actually know) can be dissimilar, and may in fact predict different outcomes (Dodd et al., 2005; Klerck & Sweeney, 2007; Knight, 2006). While past studies have alluded to differences in these types of knowledge, previous research has not teased apart whether perceived or objective knowledge is a better predictor of political action.

In this study, we explored the relationship between perceived and objective knowledge about politics and linked these predictors to political activism. Prior research in our laboratory (Howansky & Cole, in preparation), explored the role of perceived and objective knowledge in predicting climate change mitigating behaviors. We found that whether people believe they have a great deal of knowledge about climate change may be more important than whether they actually know a lot when it comes to forming pro-environmental intentions. Prior work in the political domain has shown that individuals' objective civic knowledge influenced political participation (Galston, 2001). However, little research has examined the discrepancies between voters' perceived and objective knowledge of politics nor how these different types of knowledge influence political activism.

In exchange for monetary compensation, (\$0.50) 243 Americans participated in an online study on Amazon Mechanical Turk (58.8% women, Mage=37.29, SD = 13.24). Participants were informed that they would be completing a study involving knowledge of public issues.

Participants first indicated their general perceived knowledge of politics on a 1 (I know almost nothing on this topic) to 5 (I am an expert on this topic) scale. Next, participants indicated how confident they were about their political knowledge ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These two items were averaged to create a single measure of perceived political knowledge ($\alpha = .86$).

Next, participants completed a 44-item multiple-choice quiz of their objective political knowledge. The scale measured objective knowledge across five subject areas: the overall political system, the current political system, the 2016 election, current events, and the American election system. We computed objective knowledge scores by evenly weighting the percentage of items correct in each section and averaging them to create an overall objective knowledge score.

To manipulate perceived knowledge, after completing the quiz, participants received bogus feedback on their performance.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the high perceived knowledge condition ($n = 80$), participants learned that they performed better on the quiz than 83% of other individuals. In the low perceived knowledge condition ($n = 79$), they learned that they performed better than only 17% of respondents. In the control condition ($n = 84$), participants received no feedback on their performance.

Relationship Between Perceived and Objective Knowledge

Most participants reported moderate levels of perceived knowledge of politics ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.90$). On average, participants correctly answered 59.19% of objective questions correctly ($SD = 16.72$) with scores ranging from 15.22% to 88.79%. We explored whether participants' baseline perceived knowledge of politics was related to their actual knowledge of the topic. Indeed, there was a significant positive relationship between perceived and objective knowledge, $r(196) = .37$, $p < .001$. The more individuals thought they knew about politics, the more they actually knew.

Manipulation Check

Participants in the low perceived knowledge condition ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.86$) reported significantly lower levels of positive affect than those in the control condition ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(238) = -3.07$, $p = .002$, who reported significantly lower levels of positive affect than those in the high perceived knowledge condition ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(238) = 3.45$, $p < .001$.

Participants in the low perceived knowledge condition ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.93$) reported significantly lower levels of perceived knowledge of politics than those in the control condition ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(240) = -3.14$, $p = .002$, who reported significantly lower levels of perceived knowledge than those in the high perceived knowledge condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(240) = 5.57$, $p < .001$.

Predicting Action

The influence of perceived knowledge on political activism intentions was examined via an ANCOVA controlling for positive affect and objective knowledge. There were no differences across experimental conditions in the formation of voting intentions, $F(2, 190) = 1.07$, $p = .34$. However, there was a significant difference across experimental conditions in the likelihood of participants to engage in political conversation. Individuals in the low perceived knowledge condition ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 2.59$) reported being significantly less likely to engage in a political conversation than those in the high perceived knowledge condition, ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 3.51$), $F(2, 190) = 3.16$, $p = .045$, 95% CI $[-2.41, -0.26]$.

We explored whether participants' baseline perceived knowledge of politics were related to voting intentions and likelihood of engaging in a political conversation. Indeed, there was a significant relationship between baseline perceived knowledge and voting, $r(243) = .34$, $p < .001$, as well as between perceived knowledge and likelihood of engaging in a political conversation, $r(243) = .33$, $p < .001$. The more individuals thought they knew about politics, the more likely they are to vote and engage others in a political conversation. These relationships mirror that of the relationship between objective knowledge and political activism. There was a significant relationship between objective knowledge and voting, $r(196) = .23$, $p = .001$, as well as between objective knowledge and likelihood of engaging in a political conversation, $r(196) = .28$, $p < .001$. The more individuals knew about politics, the more likely they are to vote and engage others in a political conversation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between perceived and objective knowledge about politics, and to determine whether, consistent with some of our past research, perceived knowledge influences political behaviors. In this study, perceived and objective political knowledge were related, indicating people are aware

of how much they know (or do not know) about politics. Giving participants bogus feedback about their levels of knowledge did not influence their intentions to vote. However, those in the low perceived knowledge condition formed fewer intentions to discuss politics with others. Engaging in political discussions is an important aspect of the American democratic process. One sample found that 25% of individuals became more engaged in politics after discussing a political issue and 16% changed their political views after a discussion (Pew Research Center, 2012). This points to an unfortunate conundrum. If individuals with low perceived knowledge are less likely to engage in discussions, how then will they learn? Indeed, it is possible a lack of knowledge may exacerbate political inaction. If people do not know much about politics, they may shy away from situations in which their ignorance could be highlighted, which could ultimately prevent them from gaining information necessary to making informed decisions, a highly indicative factor for the upcoming 2016 presidential election.

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