Book Abstract

The trouble with voters is that there are a lot of things that they do not know about politics. Many people believe that what voters do not know about politics leads many of them to make bad political choices. Some people are so concerned about the consequences of political ignorance for civic competence that they want to do something about it. They want to "fix" ignorant citizens.

“Fixing” entails providing citizens with information that increases their competence at political tasks. There are many different kinds of fixers. Fixers include policy advocates, experts on science and medicine, social scientists who study what voters know, and many others. All of these fixers are trying to provide information that can help citizens make better decisions.

The trouble with “fixers” is that they too lack important information. Many aspiring fixers are misinformed about how citizens think and learn. Others are mistaken about what kinds of information are necessary or sufficient for competent decision making. What fixers do not know leads many of them to develop ineffective educational strategies. Such errors undermine potentially valuable attempts to improve civic competence.

This book is about how to fix “fixers” and improve citizen competence as a result. To achieve these goals, I integrate insights from the social sciences, studies of the human mind, marketing literatures, and current educational practices. These insights can help scholars and practitioners avoid common errors and design more effective educational strategies. This book is designed to help all kinds of fixers provide greater value to their respective communities by offering them ways to better conceptualize, measure, and improve civic competence.
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*this chapter included in this packet*
Preface

There are thousands of things about politics that millions of citizens appear not to know. This seeming ignorance is a matter of great concern. Many people believe that citizens’ ignorance affects political choices. Many people raise many questions about whether demonstrably ignorant citizens’ make different and less competent choices than they would have made if they knew more.

Journalists, academics, pundits, and a range of experts and advocates respond to evidence of civic ignorance in diverse ways. Some people are quite critical of the public and are quick to castigate the public for their inability to answer even seemingly basic questions about politics. Other people pursue a more constructive response. They seek to educate citizens. This book examines how to improve the effectiveness of attempts to increase civic competence – whether these attempts are carried out via education, criticism, or both.

In this book, I show that many people who are concerned about civic competence also lack important information. Many are mistaken about what citizens know. Many are misinformed about how citizens learn. One consequence of such ignorance is that many critics end up castigating citizens for lacking information that turns out to be of little or no value to the citizens in question. A related consequence is that people who seek to respond to civic ignorance in more constructive ways promulgate a very large number of ineffective educational strategies.

In this book, I argue that many of these errors are correctable. I do so by integrating and building upon a wide range of scientific and practical findings about how people think and learn. I convert this collection of insights into lessons that can help people more effectively diagnose, and respond constructively to, problems that are caused by citizens’ ignorance of politics and policy.
My motivation in writing this book is the idea that some people are correct in arguing that political ignorance is consequential. Some of these same people possess information that, if understood by broader audiences, could lead more citizens to make choices that would be better for themselves and the societies in which they live. At the same time, many people seek to who improve citizens’ choices lack important information and make consequential errors as a result. My goal is to help such people better conceptualize, measure, and improve civic competence.

This book develops a novel approach to clarifying psychological foundations and political implications of citizens’ ignorance. It is designed to help concerned citizens more effectively “fix” problems that political ignorance can cause. If you accept the idea that citizens sometimes lack the knowledge that they need to make competent political choices, that greater awareness and/or knowledge of politics and policy could improve individual decision making and lead to more desirable social outcomes, that many “fixers” are themselves mistaken about how citizens think and learn, and that many fixers – as a result – are far less successful at improving civic competence than they had hoped, then a prescription for the trouble with voters becomes clear. *We need to fix the fixers.*
How does preference diversity affect the development and defense of competence criteria? To answer this question, it is important to recall that competence criteria list and describe kinds of information and knowledge that produce competent performance. These criteria also ignore information and knowledge that have no such effect. Hence, competence criteria are claims about the relative value of various kinds of information and knowledge.

Preference diversity can lead to people to disagree about what kinds of knowledge are most valuable. These differences can pose important challenges to fixers not just because fixers can benefit from articulating competence criteria, which entail taking a stand about what kinds of information are more important than others, but also because the consequences of competent behavior in politics tend to have broader-than-usual effects. For most tasks, the individual who attempts the task is also the primary beneficiary (or victim) of his competence level. For example, while my competence at tying my shoe or crossing the street can affect other people in certain circumstances, in almost all cases I bear most or all of the consequences of my competence. When I engage in political or policy related activities, by contrast, I am attempting to affect outcomes that are meant to affect many other people.

Because so many people can be affected by political choices in so many different ways, it is possible for people to assess the value of political outcomes from many different perspectives. In many cases, policies that benefit one type of person impose costs on another type of person. Consider, for example, a policy that raises taxes on the rich and extends benefits for the needy. When assessing the social value of such a policy, people may have views on the social benefit of helping the needy and/or leaving the rich with less of what they have. In other cases, people disagree about which attributes of a policy are most important to consider when assessing the
policy’s benefit. With respect to policies that affect, say wages or income taxes, people may offer different points of view about what attribute of these policies are most important. Is it more desirable to maximize economic growth, possibly at the expense of economic equality, or is it more desirable to do exactly the opposite? There are many perspectives and many criteria from which the value of political acts and outcomes can be judged.

In this chapter, I examine common manifestations of preference diversity in existing attempts to develop and defend competence criteria. I then use knowledge gained from these examples to help fixers better manage preference diversity challenges. In Sections 5A and 5B, I describe why it is necessary for most people who are developing competence criteria to make subjective decisions about what outcomes are good and bad, what kinds of outcomes are more important than others, and whose point of view is more valuable than others. In Sections 5C-E I argue that understanding the source and content of such subjectivity is valuable for fixers because it can help them avoid mistakes that regularly undermine attempts to evaluate or improve civic competence. The mistake is to treat partially subjective competence criteria as if they are completely objective statements of fact that anyone should accept.

As a way to make these lessons of this chapter less abstract, I focus on writings that, in various ways, attempt to argue for the primacy of particular general-purpose competence criteria (i.e., silver bullets). These arguments come from people who write books, articles, and op-ed columns about civic incompetence and citizen ignorance. These critics are often employed at leading newspapers, influential magazines, and high-profile universities. In offering their critiques, many are arguing for a particular competence criterion. They are arguing that citizens must know a particular set of things in order to achieve a beneficial goal.

We will discover a problem with many of these critiques. The problem is that many critics
are deeply mistaken about the relationship between information, knowledge and competence. They often treat their claims about what citizens should know as objective and self-evident truths. In most cases, these claims are neither objective nor true.

This problem has important consequences for attempts to improve civic competence. The consequences occur because some fixers adopt the critics’ speculations as valid competence criteria and attempt to build their educational endeavors around the criteria. When fixers do this, they risk conveying information that is of little use or value to audiences. Following the flawed critiques can lead fixers to pursue educational strategies of little or no value to the societies they seek to serve.

To help fixers, much of the work in this chapter constitutes integrating the lessons of Chapters 3 and 4 into the content of the examples of Chapter 5 to identify alternative ways of developing competence criteria that more effectively manage the challenges of preference diversity. The strategic and conceptual effort to develop more meaningful and actionable competence criteria provides a foundation for more detailed efforts of this kind in subsequent chapters.

5A. Seeing Competence from Another’s Point of View

A critic’s assessment of an audience’s competence is a product of his perceptual and interpretive capabilities. Such assessments often reflect a critic’s point of view. Put another way, assessments of competence in political domains can generally be treated as partially subjective (that is, “of the subject” making the observation; i.e., a critic) and not wholly objective (that is, “of the object” being observed; i.e., an audience’s performance at a particular task). When attempting to understand a competence critique, it can be valuable to identify when and how a critic’s views affects the competence claims he makes.
For example, critics often criticize audiences for making decisions differently than the critic would. The critics often characterize such persons as basing their decisions on random or inexplicable reasoning. But the critic’s only evidence in such cases is his observation that the audience is acting differently than he would.

Just because a critic initially has a difficult time understanding the rationale behind an audience’s decisions does not mean that the audience lacks a rationale or that the rationale is simplistic or the product of a general or competence relevant ignorance. If this statement seems to be a product of common sense, many critics routinely ignore this possibility when judging others. Citizens typically have reasons for what they are doing. In some cases, these reasons are very intricate and are, from the citizen’s point of view, well thought out. Critics do not always know these reasons – particularly if they have made no attempts to interview or collect other data about the rationale underlying the audience’s decisions.

Consider, for example, a critic who bases his assessments of others’ competence on a projection from his own experience (e.g., “When I was in your position I took Action X and observed Outcome Y. Therefore, if you want to be considered competent, you should take Action X like I did.”) But the critic may be in a different situation than the audience. Information that served him well (as a reporter or as an academic who writes about politics on a regular basis) may have little or value to others.

When critics claim that competence requires others to “doing as I do”, they often ignore the fact that not everyone obtains the same benefit from a given action (e.g., people for whom the nuts in the “great dessert” cause a severe allergic reaction). Indeed, many critiques of citizen competence are not based not on careful thinking or credible evidence about whether specific pieces of information are necessary or sufficient for a specific competence, but on the critic
recognizing that the audience is making different decisions than he would have and misunderstanding how the audience came to their decision.

An alternate manifestation of the same questionable reasoning occurs when critics adopt the rhetorical strategy of naming one, two, or perhaps even ten things that an audience does not know and then claiming that this evidence is sufficient to draw broad conclusions about others’ ignorance and incompetence. At the same time, many critics are unfamiliar with how citizens think. Hence, from the perspective of their own rhetorical strategy, they are caught in a “catch-22.” In other words, the same critics who call citizens incompetent because the citizens cannot recall a small and perhaps basic set of facts about politics would fare no better if asked to answer a small and perhaps basic set of questions about the content and mechanics of actual thought processes of the audiences they criticize.

In short, a common mistake made by critics is to confound disagreement for ignorance. The critic often believes that if a citizen only knew what he knows, the citizen would see the virtue of taking the same actions as the critic. In so doing, many critics reach premature, and often self-serving, judgments about what citizens ought to know.

Of course, nothing that I have argued so far says much about the actual qualities of the political decisions that citizens make. We can agree that there are many questions about politics to which citizens do not give correct answers. We can agree that if we did collect reliable data on the decision making rationale of many citizens, we might come away very disappointed with how people make decisions.

The point of drawing our attention to critics’ tendencies to see others as ignorant or incompetent because they themselves are ignorant of others’ thought processes is to recognize that there are many things that many fixers and critics do not know – particularly about how
others think. Moreover, given the confidence that many critics have in their pronouncements, it
is also clear that many critics are ignorant of just how much about the relationship between
information, knowledge, and competence they do not know.

The fact that an audience may be unable to recall certain facts about politics does not
make a critic an expert on competent performance. This distinction matters when people base
critiques of how others think on little or no evidence about how people think, then they are using
other material to reconstruct the audience’s thought processes. My claim is that many such
reconstructions are inaccurate because critics do not have the materials they need to forge an
accurate reconstruction. Many critics are ignorant about important aspects of what the audience
knows, mistaken about the kinds of knowledge that would be necessary or sufficient to perform a
particular task at a particular level, and prone to basing claims about how citizens should think
on his own ideological or professional biases – without actually knowing whether such thinking
would produce competent or beneficial performance in others. As a result, in confounding
disagreement for ignorance, many critics are mistaking as objective (i.e., about an audience’s
actions) aspects of their argument that are subjective (i.e., about themselves) or simply incorrect.

A goal in this chapter is to help critics and fixers avoid such mistakes. A key step in
avoiding such mistakes is to learn to differentiate objective and subjective components in claims
about citizen competence. The objective components include logical relationships between
certain types of information, certain types of knowledge, and certain qualities of particular
decisions. Subjective components reflect the judge’s experiences and perceptions. They reflect
attributes of the subject making the assessment rather than the object (the actor and her decision)
being assessed. In the next section, we will discover how to detect such mistakes in others’
writing and correct them in our own efforts.
Many critics fail to recognize that their assessments of what others ought to know have a subjective component. Psychologists use a number of terms to describe how people fail to see such things. Three relevant terms are attribution error, out-group stereotyping, and motivated reasoning. Each of these terms can be used to explain a mechanism by which critics and fixers come to form inaccurate beliefs about what other people are thinking. I will discuss each of these concepts, in turn.

Suppose you see someone trip over a sidewalk. A common reaction to such observations is something like, “What a klutz.” In other words, an observer views the outcome as being caused by a long-standing trait of the person who tripped. Psychologists refer to such inferences as attribution errors (Jones and Harris 1967). The error in the inference is that the person is somehow prone to tripping. When we observe our own actions, by contrast, we also know that many situational factors affect our behaviors. So when you are the person who tripped over the sidewalk, which you do only infrequently, then you may view the outcome as one of circumstance (e.g., I’m not a klutz. This was an unusual circumstance. Normally, I navigate curbs very well but in this instance a child distracted me.) An important implication of attribution errors is that without a motivation to think deeply about why others have taken actions that we can observe we often under appreciate the situational determinants of others’ behavior.

Attribution errors can cause fixers and critics to draw inaccurate conclusions about why others are doing what they are doing. To the extent that attribution errors inhibit such accuracy, fixers and critics can benefit from learning to recognize and correct for such errors.

In the context of civic competence, attribution errors may arise when a critic observes a citizen making a decision that they would not make. When viewing the decision from their own
They may see that the decision would prevent them from achieving what they see as a desirable outcome for themselves. Were the critic to make the same choice as the person they are observing, it may well be that the choice would not be competent with respect to a competence criterion that was consequential for them. This inference, however, does not imply that the other person’s action is incompetent.

Many critics fail to consider that the citizens whose actions they are observing may be in a different situation than they are. It may be that the citizens are in a circumstance where voting as the critic would have voted leads to an outcome that is bad for the citizens. Hence, it may be that an action that would be competent given the critic’s situation is incompetent given the citizen’s situation. In such cases, the critic may be inaccurately characterizing citizens as ignorant just because they disagree with him, when in fact they have very good reasons for disagreeing. We will see several instances of such claims as the book continues.

A related phenomenon is known as out-group stereotyping. People often identify themselves as members of groups, such as women, or Democrats, or hunters. To preserve self-esteem, to facilitate various forms of social coordination, and for other reasons, people seek reasons to establish the superiority of groups to which they belong. These motivations can lead them to denigrate competitive groups, also known as “out-groups.” In America, for example, many Democrats see Republicans as an out-group, and vice versa. A common manifestation of out-group bias is stereotyping of out-group members. In polities with multiple ethnic groups, or that have people who hail from regions that correspond to distinct histories, accents, and appearances, members of groups often characterize members of potentially comparable groups through uncharitable stereotypes.
Many out-group stereotypes share important structural similarities. A common attribute of an out-group stereotype is that all members of an out-group are rigid, unthinking or unsympathetic to important concerns, and “all the same” (see, e.g., Judd and Park 1988). Out-group members so described are compared unfavorably to members of a person’s in-group who are seen as dynamic, diverse and intelligent.

I see such stereotyping occurring in academic debates all the time. Adherents of one scholarly approach portray often adherents of a competing approach as “all the same” and prone to following a set of simplistic rules at the same time that they remark on the great diversity, vibrancy, and importance of people who think as they do. These simple and sweeping edicts relieve people of having to put much thought into the potential virtues of other ways of thinking. Indeed, people often use such characterizations to absolve themselves of having to justify the value of their own practices (i.e., “At least we’re not them.”)

Out-group stereotyping is rampant in politics. One of the more famous examples from the first decade of the 21st century occurred the day after George W. Bush defeated John Kerry in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. The Daily Mirror, a British newspaper that had over 1.1 million daily subscribers as of April 2011, posted the headline “How Can 59,054,057 Be So Dumb?” alongside a photo of a smiling President Bush. The number was the official tally of Americans that had voted for Bush.

The headline fuels the idea that all who voted for Bush were ignorant. To be certain, there were many things that citizens who voted for Bush did not know. But the same could be said for many Kerry voters. Fixers who seek to accurately describe others’ competence can be well served by recognizing and countering temptations to lean on out-group stereotypes when articulating competence criteria. If fixers can obtain credible data on how what citizens know
compares to the kinds of knowledge that they would need to perform certain tasks, they can better assess the extent to which citizens’ past and current actions are – and are not – competent with respect to given criteria.

If this kind of example is not sufficiently compelling, set this book down for a moment and go to any political news website or blog that has a “comments section” – where by “comments section” I mean an area below the main article where readers (often anonymous) can add short commentaries and address commentaries written by other readers). Almost inevitably, you will see partisans of each side in political debates being quick to declare those who disagree with them are ignorant and perhaps all of a common and simple mind. In most cases, these stereotypes are not based on good evidence. They are typically used to absolve the commenter of having to seriously consider what the other side is thinking.

Throughout the book we will see several examples of fixers who attempt to validate their own point of view by arguing that “Others are ignorant, so I must be correct.” These stereotypes, once noticed, are easy to avoid.

The third phenomenon is known as motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is the practice of paying attention to, and seeking to inflate the importance of, information that is consistent with a point of view that a person already holds. It also entails efforts to ignore, or minimize the importance of information that challenges a person’s existing views. A less technical name for this phenomenon is “hearing only what you want to hear.”

A classic example of motivated reasoning was described by Sinclair and Kunda (1999). They placed experimental subjects in a room and asked them to complete various tasks. They were introduced to an authority figure who evaluated the subjects’ work. The researchers varied
whether the authority figure was black or white.\textsuperscript{1} All of the subjects were white. The researchers also varied whether the authority figure praised or criticized the work. The black and white authority figures (whose feedback was conveyed through scripted videos) used identical language to praise the subjects and identical language to criticize them.

After the evaluation, the subjects were asked to evaluate the authority figure. The study’s main finding is that when the authority figure praised subjects, the subjects went out of their way to describe him in a positive light. By contrast, when the figure criticized subjects they went out of their way to activate negative stereotypes. Put bluntly, “a Black professor who delivers praise may be categorized and viewed as a professor, whereas a Black professor who delivers criticism may be categorized and viewed as a Black person” (Sinclair and Kunda 1999: 885).

Similar dynamics lead some citizens to pay attention to, and seek to elevate the importance of, talking points offered by people (and news organizations) with whom they agree while simultaneously ignoring, or seeking to belittle, talking points offered by people with whom they disagree. Motivated reasoning also leads partisans to see their electoral victories as broad mandates that reflect their side’s deep virtues while seeing their defeats as temporary setbacks that are caused by bad luck or unusual circumstances. As Susan Jacoby (2008: xx) puts it “In today’s America, intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike, whether on the left or right, tend to tune out any voice that is not an echo.”

This way of using information resembles other fight-or-flight responses that are basic to human decision-making. When we see something threatening, we either seek to hide from it or

\textsuperscript{1} The authority figure is presented as nearby but in a different location. He communicates with subjects via video. A common video is used across subjects within an experimental group, which allows an identical presentation of the stimulus within experimental groups.
make it go away. We try to make threatening things go away when we think we are capable of doing so, such as when we kill a spider or yell at a dog that seems likely to run away if we move aggressively. We seek to run away or hide if the threatening thing seems beyond our control, such as when we encounter people or dogs who do not give the sense that our yelling will make them disappear.

Motivated reasoning can cause problems for fixers. It can prevent them from understanding why citizens are acting in ways with which the fixer does not agree. It can also lead fixers to ignore evidence that would show them that their current attempts to increase competence are not working and that an alternate approach would work better.

With a basic understanding of attribution error, out-group stereotyping, and motivated reasoning in hand, it is important to note that every single one of us has engaged in such behaviors and are likely to do so again. Moreover, it is important to note that if you are now trying to convince yourself that while others may be affected by these afflictions, you are immune to such ways of thinking, then you are almost certainly engaging in motivated reasoning.

With this knowledge in hand, it may seem reasonable to ask, “Given these challenges, who is competent to judge others’ competence in a defensible way? My answer is that almost all of us are. However, many of us can benefit by being careful about the role that our own biases play in our assessments -- particularly if they lead us to claim more than we know about the types of information knowledge that can increase others competence at particular tasks.

The histories of intellectual movements that designed to assess others’ competence are riddled with persons whose judgments were hindered by the psychological phenomena named above. Many, for example, mistook their lack of understanding of others behaviors and practices as evidence of the out-group’s lack of skill or intelligence (Gould 1996). One book details a
particularly damaging set of such practices. Here, early twentieth century psychology was interpreted to support various types of discrimination against blacks in America has a title that represents the problem well. The title is “Even the Rat was White” (Guthrie 1998). In it, self-perceived experts concluded that others were ignorant or unskilled because they did not know the same things as the experts’ peer-groups or were physically different than the members of the experts’ peer group. Attribution errors, out-group stereotyping, and motivated reasoning led such critics to satisfy themselves with the explanation that only ignorant people would make different choices than they have. As science discovered more about how people think, it was revealed that more the distribution of ignorance across these two groups was much different than the experts imagined.

Going forward, the question at hand is not whether competence requires information and knowledge. It clearly does. The question is whether people who make claims about such matters are describing these requirements accurately. There are so many different pieces of information that can be conveyed to an audience. Conveying information that is not relevant to an audience’s competence at valuable tasks is a waste of time and effort.

In the next sections, I show with greater specificity that many existing claims about what citizens need to know are based on assumptions that, when brought to light, are difficult to defend. In place of coherent logic or evidence about how audiences use different types of information to increase their competence, many critics simply claim that pieces of information that they wouldn’t be caught dead not knowing is essential for everyone else as well. Learning to recognize these biases can help fixers more accurately interpret existing claims and develop stronger competence criteria of their own.

5C. Example: How Elitism Undermines the Study of Civic Competence
Many people compare their view of what citizens ought to know with evidence about what citizens actually know. The comparisons are typically unfavorable. They lead to calls to fix citizens. The advice given is to save democracy or some variant by making sure that citizens know what the writer thinks they ought to know. In making these claims, the writers are offering criteria for competent performance. They are arguing that specific pieces of information or ways of thinking are necessary for achieving desired actions.

To help us think constructively about how to better develop and defend competence criteria, I present three such claims for us to evaluate. One is by an academic and the other two were written in the immediate aftermath of presidential elections. Claims of this kind are not hard to find. In addition to the high-profile venues in which these writings appeared, similar claims are made regularly on thousands of political blogs and in the “comments” sections under many online newspaper articles. People often claim that ignorance of essential facts is the reason that something important has gone wrong.

If you are a partisan, or consider yourself a liberal or conservative, you will likely find at least one of these three quotes to be the product of ignorance itself. If you have a particular religious background, you may even find one or more of the quotes offensive. If you are having these reactions, let me suggest that you read these quotes with an eye towards whose ox each writer is goring but with respect to what the three writers have in common. If you think that even one of these quotes is on the right track, and provides a constructive means of defending competence criteria or a credible foundation for attempts to increase competence at important political tasks, then the question I will ask is “Why do the other two quotes not have the same power?” An answer to this question provides a framework for fixers to develop competence criteria that can be defended with stronger logic and better evidence than is often the case today.
Here is the first example. The claim is made by a political scientist, Robert Luskin, and it represents a point of view that quite a few scholars have about the public’s abilities. He claims (2002: 282) that “by anything approaching elite standards most citizens think and know jaw-droppingly little about politics.” He continues,

“The mass public contains … a great many more people who know next to nothing about politics… Roughly a quarter do not know who the vice president is. The average American’s ability to place the Democratic and Republican parties and “liberals” and “conservatives” correctly on issue dimensions and the two parties on a liberal-conservative dimension scarcely exceeds and indeed sometimes falls short of what could be achieved by blind guessing. The verdict is stunningly, depressingly clear: most people know very little about politics…” (Luskin, 2002: 284)

This second example comes from an essay published on the website slate.com on the day after Democrat John Kerry lost the 2004 US presidential election to Republican George W. Bush. In this example, the number “55 million” is a reference to the approximate number of people who voted for John Kerry in the same election and the term “red states” refers to the states in which President Bush earned a majority of votes and voting majorities typically support Republican candidates.

“[T]he election results reflect the decision of the right wing to cultivate and exploit ignorance in the citizenry. I suppose the good news is that 55 million Americans have evaded the ignorance-inducing machine…. Ignorance and bloodlust have a long tradition in the United States, especially in the red states… The error that progressives have consistently committed over the years is to underestimate the vitality of ignorance in America. Listen to what the red state citizens say about themselves, the songs they write,
and the sermons they flock to….

Here is how ignorance works: First, they put the fear of God into you—if you don't believe in the literal word of the Bible, you will burn in hell. Of course, the literal word of the Bible is tremendously contradictory, and so you must abdicate all critical thinking, and accept a simple but logical system of belief that is dangerous to question. A corollary to this point is that they make sure you understand that Satan resides in the toils and snares of complex thought and so it is best not try it….The history of the last four years shows that red state types, above all, do not want to be told what to do—they prefer to be ignorant. As a result, they are virtually unteachable.

…[M]ost important, when life grows difficult or fearsome, they (politicians, preachers, pundits) encourage you to cling to your ignorance with even more fervor. But by this time you don't need much encouragement—you've put all your eggs into the ignorance basket, and really, some kind of miraculous fruition (preferably accompanied by the torment of your enemies, and the ignorant always have plenty of enemies) is your only hope. If you are sufficiently ignorant, you won't even know how dangerous your policies are until they have destroyed you, and then you can always blame others.”

Jane Smiley “The Unteachable Ignorance of the Red States” November 4, 2004
http://www.slate.com/id/2109218/

The third example comes from a press release by a well-known polling firm that ran a post-election poll after Republican John McCain lost the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election to Barack Obama. It should be noted that a debate ensued about whether the poll was nationally representative, so there are questions about the extent to which the exact percentages quoted in this example should be interpreted literally. I recommend that you treat the percentages with a grain of salt. That said, the study does convey tangible evidence about things that many Obama
voters appeared not to know.

“Just 2% of voters who supported Barack Obama on Election Day obtained perfect or near-perfect scores on a post-election test which gauged their knowledge of statements and scandals associated with the presidential tickets during the campaign, a new Zogby International telephone poll shows. Only 54% of Obama voters were able to answer at least half or more of the questions correctly.

After I interviewed Obama voters on Election Day for my documentary, I had a pretty low opinion of what most of them had picked up from the media coverage of the campaign, but this poll really proves beyond any doubt the stunning level of malpractice on the part of the media in not educating the Obama portion of the voting populace,” said [John] Ziegler.

Ninety-four percent of Obama voters correctly identified Palin as the candidate with a pregnant teenage daughter, 86% correctly identified Palin as the candidate associated with a $150,000 wardrobe purchased by her political party, and 81% chose McCain as the candidate who was unable to identify the number of houses he owned. When asked which candidate said they could "see Russia from their house," 87% chose Palin, although the quote actually is attributed to Saturday Night Live's Tina Fey during her portrayal of Palin during the campaign. An answer of "none" or "Palin" was counted as a correct answer on the test, given that the statement was associated with a characterization of Palin.

Obama voters did not fare nearly as well overall when asked to answer questions about statements or stories associated with Obama … 83% failed to correctly answer that Obama had won his first election by getting all of his opponents removed from the ballot,
and 88% did not correctly associate Obama with his statement that his energy policies would likely bankrupt the coal industry. Most (56%) were also not able to correctly answer that Obama started his political career at the home of two former members of the Weather Underground.”

Zogby International Press Release, November 18, 2008

There are plenty of other examples where attributes an outcome that they dislike to a difference between what they believe citizens ought to know and what they believe citizens to actually know. Can claims such as these help fixers develop and defend criteria that can gain the support of funders and the participation of desired audiences?

A counterargument to the idea that claims such as these are is that they are undermined by a form of elitism. The elitism in question occurs when a fixer or critic substitutes a personal bias for concrete evidence about the relationship between information and competence. In some cases, the bias has an ideological origin – as occurs when the liberal critic in the example offered above claims that bad decisions are being made because citizens do not privilege a certain type of critical thinking in their own decision making. In other cases, the bias originates in the writer’s professional incentives – as occurs when the academic critic in the example offered above, whose own credibility depends on being well-versed in abstract representations of political debate as occurring along straight lines -- claims that bad decisions are being made because citizens do not understand these abstractions.

This form of elitism leads many critics to draw inaccurate conclusions about the kinds of information that is actually helpful to increasing important competences. Recognizing when and how such elitism affects citizen competence critiques can help fixers more effectively develop
and defend their own competence criteria and provide more constructive answers to questions such as “What information is valuable for increasing an audience’s competence at a valuable political task?”

How should claims about incompetence that are based on citizens’ abilities to answer questions like these be interpreted? Are they plausible as a necessary or sufficient condition for increasing a valued competence? Consider, for example, your ability to answer a common recall question such as, “Who is the Chief Justice of the United States. If you do not initially know the answer to this question and I tell it to you, for what set of tasks are you now more competent?”

To see where elitism comes in, and how it can undermine the study of civic competence, a moment of introspection may be instructive. I suspect that most of the people who will read this book are social scientists, journalists, lawyers, students, or other people with a deep interest in some area of politics or policy. In any of these roles, we have tasks to accomplish.

For example, as a political science professor at a major research university, I am expected to teach classes, to conduct research, and to mentor graduate students and younger researchers. To accomplish these tasks, I must know certain things. Since I occasionally publish in law journals and often give lectures and conduct research on topics for which the U.S. legal system is relevant, the name of the Chief Justice happens to be one of the things that it is beneficial for me to know. There are circumstances in which, I would be embarrassed not to know it. My professional reputation would suffer. Something similar is probably true for you, too, if my impression of this book’s audience is correct.

And so it is for many commonly-asked political recall questions that provide the evidence for so many claims about citizen incompetence. Their answers are things that you and I are expected to know, given our occupations and interests. Such characteristics make us unlike many
citizens. We have unusual interests and obligations. It is not necessarily the case that the information that we feel that we must know has the same value to others. It is not necessarily the case that information that increases our competence at the tasks that we perform will increase the competence of the tasks that our target audiences face.

Other critiques of citizen competence use different evidence to draw the same conclusion. Some scholars and critics base their conclusions about civic incompetence on claims about the kinds of thoughts that citizens ought to have. Some of these claims are based on findings such as those of Philip E. Converse (1964). Converse discovered that only 10 percent of the public could define the meaning of “liberal” or “conservative” as public opinion scholars understood the terms. He showed that an even smaller fraction of the public actually used such ideological categories in evaluating candidates and parties (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). Drawing broad conclusions about civic incompetence from such evidence requires the assumption that concepts such as “liberal” and “conservative” are necessary for making competent decisions. For many tasks that citizens face, such as voting for candidates who identify themselves on the ballot as Democratic or Republican, alternate ways of knowing relevant things are available. Voters who understand how the terms Democrat and Republican correspond to outcomes about which they care need not gain additional competence on political tasks by knowing that a particular individual fits into, what is from their point of view, a needlessly abstract categorical scheme (liberal-conservative).

While ideological terms are helpful to people who write about politics for a living, they need not be as valuable to other citizens. If there are multiple informational pathways to a competent vote (e.g., cues), then voters need not value the same information that critics or fixers value. Voters can be ignorant of ideological terms or the Chief Justice’s name and still make
competent choices in the voting booth. Alternative terms, such as “Democrat” and “Republican,” or “liked by people I respect” and “disliked by people I respect,” can help citizens make the same choices they would have made had they been able to recall many related pieces of information.

Therefore, observing that survey respondents answer questions about ideological labels incorrectly or cannot recall political officeholders’ names may mean nothing more than that the respondents cannot recall pieces of information that tend to be well known by the very small segments of the political science and journalistic communities who write about voter competence. This information’s value to the competence of others, at tasks that can provide broad value to people who are quite different than the critic, is less obvious. The failure to see this difference, and to insist that others must know the information that the critic privileges, can limit the value of competence-increasing endeavors that build from such critiques.

5D. Political Knowledge -- Something Doesn’t Add Up

Many people write about citizen ignorance and incompetence. The topic is especially tempting after a critic’s favored side loses an election or public-policy battle, for they can attribute their losses to voter ignorance. Two of the three examples that started this chapter were of this variety and were penned in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the author’s favored candidate.

Other evaluations of citizen competence are not prompted by an election result. Rather they come from a more general concern about the future. These critics assert that certain pieces of information, with which they and people with whom they associate agree, should be given a privileged position in how citizens think about politics. You can see such claims in each of the three examples presented above.
In many such critiques, data on the populace’s “political knowledge” is often brought to bear. The best-known academic book on the topic of measuring political knowledge defines “political knowledge” as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (1989: 10).

In many cases, the critic’s political knowledge data comes from citizens’ answers to a small number of recall questions. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1989: 306) recommend using the following five recall questions to build a general political measure:

1. Do you happen to know what job or office is now held by [insert current vice president]?
2. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not… is it the president, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?
3. How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?
4. Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this/last month?
5. Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?

Many critics use this index, or others that are similarly constructed, as the foundation for their claims about citizen ignorance. Hence, when critics point to such data and use the bad performance to proclaim the citizenry’s incompetence, they are arguing that the ability to answer the questions on this list correlates with competence.

With respect to such questions, no one doubts that the recall questions that are commonly inserted into surveys today ask about pieces of information that academics, journalists, and politicos value. The ability to answer these questions helps such people perform competently at
tasks that are important to them. Counterproductive elitism occurs when such people assume that these questions have a similar value to citizens whose societal responsibilities can be very different from their own. When critics make this assumption, many believe that they are articulating criteria that will improve citizens’ competence at valuable civic tasks while. In reality, they are imposing on citizens shards of a worldview whose relationship to increased competence, or value to the audience, is speculative at best. Fixers who follow this path limit their ability to help improve valuable competences and may, in fact, be making matters worse.²

² Debates about what information people need to know occur in many scholarly disciplines. To see one way in which the debate plays out elsewhere, consider the content of this New York Times editorial:

“Today, American high schools offer a sequence of algebra, geometry, more algebra, pre-calculus and calculus (or a “reform” version in which these topics are interwoven). This has been codified by the Common Core State Standards, recently adopted by more than 40 states. This highly abstract curriculum is simply not the best way to prepare a vast majority of high school students for life.

For instance, how often do most adults encounter a situation in which they need to solve a quadratic equation? Do they need to know what constitutes a “group of transformations” or a “complex number”? Of course professional mathematicians, physicists and engineers need to know all this, but most citizens would be better served by studying how mortgages are priced, how computers are programmed and how the statistical results of a medical trial are to be understood.…
When I first made such arguments to colleagues, I was assured that recent work established that answers to small sets of recall questions were valid measures of broad and meaningful political knowledge. And, indeed, there is work that claims to do this. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 151–52; see also ibid., 329–33) follow previous researchers by using factor analysis to defend the assumption that “a scale with a limited number of factual items, if carefully constructed, can be used to approximate what citizens know more generally about politics.”

The word “scale” in the previous quote refers to a commonly used method for measuring what many scholars call “political knowledge.” The basic idea is this: ask a series of recall questions, add the number of correct answers, the sum becomes a scale that measures the citizen’s knowledge. While many critics proceed as if such scales accurately represent the full range of a citizen’s political knowledge, few show any evidence of understanding that knowledge can be stored as procedural memories as well as declarative memories and the fact that cues allow competence despite the inability to recall seemingly relevant facts. In other

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Traditionalists will object that the standard curriculum teaches valuable abstract reasoning, even if the specific skills acquired are not immediately useful in later life. A generation ago, traditionalists were also arguing that studying Latin, though it had no practical application, helped students develop unique linguistic skills. We believe that studying applied math, like learning living languages, provides both useable knowledge and abstract skills.” Sol Garfunkel and David Mumford “How to Fix Our Math Education” *New York Times*, August 24, 2011, page A27.
words, what many scholars and journalists call “political knowledge” measures, actually measure a citizen’s ability to recall a very small number of political questions.3

A common use of these recall scales is to examine whether people with high scores are different from people with low scores in interesting ways. The scales typically range in their values from zero to five or zero to seven, with the high number representing the number of recall questions included in the scale. So if a person answers all of the recall questions incorrectly, they get a score of zero. If they answer all N questions correctly, they get a score of N.

For as long as recall scales have been used, there have been debates about what kinds of questions to put into the scales, and what, if anything, the numbers in these scales imply about citizens’ political knowledge more generally considered. For now, a simple and very revealing

3 In previous papers (Boudreau and Lupia 2011), I have followed convention and used the term “political knowledge” to refer to such data. Since the term is commonly used, it allows me to make cogent arguments in a very short space. However, as I have learned more about what these measures actually do, I have started to add footnotes saying that the label is misleading. In Chapter 9, I convey a great deal of what I have continued to learn in this respect. With those lessons in mind, now is a good time to simply set things right. These questions and scales do not provide credible measures of general political knowledge. To avoid further confusion, I will extend Gary Langer’s advice (2007) regarding what to call these questions to the scales themselves. It is accurate to refer to these measures as “recall scales.” An implication of the argument and evidence that follows is that it is even more accurate to refer to these measures as “scales from recall questions that capture the very narrow slice of federal politics in which people who write about voter competence are preoccupied.” But this phrase is hard to type or say, so I’ll stick with “recall scales.”
question is “Do recall scales really add up to anything?” That is, when we add correct answers to the kinds of recall questions commonly asked in surveys, is the sum we get representative of the full range of political knowledge stored in long-term memory? Alternatively, are the sums too idiosyncratic to mean much? For example if you have one fish and one shoe, it is not clear what, if anything, you have two of.

Factor analysis is a method for evaluating the extent to which variations in a scale’s individual items can be accurately characterized as representing a move in a smaller number of unobserved variables called factors (Child 1973). In the context of making claims about civic competence, factor analysis is a technique that can indicate whether citizens who give a certain type of answer to a particular recall question on a survey correctly give the same kinds of answers to other recall questions on the same survey. If there is enough similarity in the kinds of people who give correct answers to the questions, then factor analysis would identify a single factor that can be interpreted as “having the kinds of knowledge necessary to answer these specific questions.” But many critics and fixers want to interpret such factors more grandly. In so doing, some make claims for which they have no evidence and others make claims that are simply mistaken.

To see the errors in such claims, consider analogous debates about the measurement of intelligence. In The Mismeasure of Man, Stephen Jay Gould argues that general intelligence cannot be meaningfully abstracted as a single number. While there is controversy about what kinds of knowledge can and cannot be so represented, there is little controversy about the accuracy of Gould’s description of the role that factor analysis can and cannot play in assessing the extent to which a factor represents general knowledge.
Gould (1996, 48) maintains that, “the key error of factor analysis lies in reification, or the conversion of abstractions into putative real entities.” In particular, he shows the flaws in attributing too much to the first principal component in a factor analysis (i.e., the main factor). Please note when reading this quote that attributing too much to the main factor is exactly what critics do when they argue that factor analyses on recall scales validate their broad conclusions about civic incompetence.

“The first principal component is a mathematical abstraction that can be calculated for any matrix of correlation coefficients; it is not a “thing” with physical reality. [Scholars who use factor analysis to validate intelligence scales] have often fallen prey to a temptation for *reification*—for awarding *physical meaning* to all strong principal components. Sometimes this is justified; I believe that I can make a good case for interpreting my first pelycosaurian axis as a size factor. But such a claim can never arise from the mathematics alone, only from additional knowledge of the physical nature of the measures themselves. For nonsensical systems of correlation have principal components as well, and they may resolve more information than meaningful components do in other systems. A factor analysis for a five-by-five correlation matrix of my age, the population of Mexico, the price of Swiss cheese, my pet turtles’ weight, and the average distance between galaxies during the past ten years will yield a strong first principal component. This component—since all the correlations are so strongly positive—will probably resolve as high a percentage of information as the first axis in my study of pelycosaurs. It will also have no enlightening physical meaning whatsoever. (Ibid. 280.)

Contemporary uses of recall scales as measures of general political knowledge is akin to the general “intelligence” of which Gould wrote. Its validity depends on *additional knowledge of*
the physical nature of the measures themselves. Gould’s challenge to contemporary users of recall scales is to locate, in the individual questions themselves, a credible theory of the relationship between information, knowledge, and competence that confers on the results of a factor analysis any relevance that goes beyond simple reification.

This means that it matters how recall questions are chosen. To validate a scale of individual items, the scale must be compared to something that is itself considered a valid measure of the underlying concept. We would not, for example, claim that a recall scale had been validated as a measure of general political knowledge or of general civic competence if we found that responses to individual recall questions were highly correlated with shoe size, because shoe size is not considered a valid measure of political knowledge or civic competence.

Similarly, we should give weight to the factor analytic finding of a correspondence among responses to a few survey-based recall questions only if at least some of those questions are themselves the consequence of a well-thought out and transparent logic about the tasks for which ability to recall the information sought is necessary or sufficient for competent performance.

So from what theoretical perspective are contemporary recall scales built? The answer is surprising to many people. As mentioned above, the most thorough book on this topic is What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters by Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996). It comprehensively reviews the use of recall questions in political surveys up through the time of its writing and it employs factor analyses to validate recall scales. Even today, it is considered the leading reference on the topic.

Delli Carpini and Keeter provide a very forthright description of how individual recall questions are chosen. They say that “the selection of specific items remains fairly subjective, guided by the goals of the research and influenced by factors not easily quantified” (1996: 299).
For critics who want to claim that current recall scales measure general political knowledge or civic competence, this state of affairs is not encouraging. The claim now depends on criteria that are “fairly subjective” and “not easily quantified.” The introduction of subjectivity is not itself an error – the fact that politics often brings together people with different preferences makes disagreement likely over what kinds of information are most important to know. The error is in treating the recall scales as if they are objective – as if the fact that the questions “scale together” is evidence that the recall scale is a valid measure of all that could be known about politics.

In Chapter 9, I will demonstrate that other prominent “political knowledge” scales, such as those developed by the American National Election Studies, are developed and evaluated in a similar manner. People who construct these scales do not attempt to scour the entire universe of things that could be known. They do they attempt to evaluate whether knowing the answers to the questions that they ask are necessary for other and more important competences. They choose questions by examining the extent to which the answers are correlated with one another and with behaviors or attitudes that they view as desirable. This selection procedure gives knowledge scales desirable statistical properties, but does not make them representative of the full set of things that could be known about politics or that are essential for specifically identified competences. Instead, “political knowledge” measures are typically built from questions that their writers would not be caught dead not knowing. The value of such knowledge to others is assumed, not evaluated.

In sum, many critics make claims about what citizens need to know. Many of these claims, and attempts to improve civic competence that are based upon these claims, are undermined by two common errors. One error is to claim that a particular piece of information or a particular group of such pieces of information is necessary or sufficient for increasing an
audience’s competence at a valuable task when, in fact, the information has no such power for the audience in question. The second error is to treat as wholly objective, partly subjective measures of what people know. When elites make such errors, they undermine the study of civic competence, and attempts to improve civic competence that are based on these studies.

5E. All Politics is Not Federal

While I have argued that elitism inhibits the relevance of many competence critiques and the effectiveness of many attempts to increase competence, it is reasonable to ask whether elitism is really an important problem in these domains. After all, lots of people complain about other peoples’ political actions, and a number of these critics would not be considered elite by any standard.

It is certainly true that many people complain about politics, but the elite group on which I am focusing typically makes these complaints in more visible venues. In this section, I will give a specific example of how heretofore unrecognized commonalities in the worldviews and professional incentives of many academics and journalists who write about civic competence lead them to have a view of “political knowledge” that is very useful for them, but are of less value to many non-elites.

To begin, it is worth pointing out that political scholars, journalists, critics, and fixers who have reached the pinnacles of their respective fields tend to write for prestigious outlets with relatively large national audiences. The lure of a national audience induces ambitious journalists and scholars to focus far more on presidential elections than local ones, far more on congresspersons than on state or local legislators, and far more on federal bureaucrats than on their counterparts at other levels of government. It is very difficult for ambitious journalists and
scholars to obtain prestigious positions and large paychecks if they spend time writing about local politics rather than the federal scene.

Without minimizing the importance of federal activities, it is important to recognize that they constitute but a handful of all of the politically relevant actions that occur on any given day. Suppose, for example, you were to take all of the people involved in some aspect of American politics on any given day and toss them into a large hat. Then, without looking, suppose you reached in and grabbed one of these people. It is far from certain that you would choose someone who is working on federal government activity. For example, at the same time that there are 435 members of the US House of Representatives, there are 1,191 mayors of cities with population 30,000 or more (http://www.usmayors.org/about/overview.asp; downloaded 8/15/2011), 7,382 state legislative seats (http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=14781) and more than 90,000 school board members across the US (http://www.nsba.org/; downloaded 8/15/2011). These numbers do not in any way diminish the important decisions that are made in Washington, but they are strong evidence that when it comes to the politics that influence people’s everyday lives and the politics in which people actively engage on a regular basis, Washington is not the only game in town. Yet if you were to look the most widely publicized “political knowledge” measures or read the most highly visible examples of elite claims about what citizens ought to know, you will rarely, if ever, any reference to activities of the nearly 100,000 people listed above (and their administrative staffs) or to others who work in government but at the state and local levels. Indeed, if these materials were all that you read about America, you could be forgiven for believing that state and local politics in America simply failed to exist.

With these numbers in mind, it is useful to raise the question of whether the critics are right in the sense that citizens who want to be competent at the tasks that provide the greatest
value to themselves and others should make learning specific pieces of information about the federal government the top priority. I suspect that a number of readers, as well as people who are active in state and local government would push back on any such claim.

In addition, individuals can typically have a bigger influence on what a group does when the group is small in size. For example, one member of a five-person school board is more likely to influence the outcome of a vote than one member of a ten million-person electorate. Hence, to the extent that citizens want to influence political outcomes, they are far more likely to have opportunities to influence political activities undertaken at the local, parish, or neighborhood levels than they are to influence any of the national-level activities on which many elite scholars and journalists are fixated. Most citizens have their greatest influence on policy, politics, and other valuable social endeavors in venues that are closer to home than Washington DC.

Perhaps citizens are more competent than commonly depicted because they realize that investing heavily in the minutiae of federal politics is akin to tilting at windmills. Anthony Downs came to a similar conclusion years ago when developing a theoretical model of voting that produced conditions under which it is rational for a voter to make an effort to become well informed politically. He argued (1957: 215-216), “Is the acquisition of this particular bit of knowledge likely to influence the decision one way or another? If so, how likely?” He concluded (1957: 216) his discussion of voter incentives to collect information about phenomena such as federal politics, that “many rational citizens obtain practically no information at all before making political decisions.”

I know that some people consider it provocative to suggest that commonly asked questions about federal politics is of limited value to citizens and their competence at meaningful tasks. Indeed, when I make such claims in front of scholarly audiences, it sometimes prompts
questions such as, “Where would we be if everyone ignored the pieces of information contained in common recall questions?” It is a good question. A democracy would be a farce if nobody knew anything at all about politics or policy. But it requires a grand leap of logic to go from this proposition to the conclusion that everyone, or even most people, ought to be able to answer a narrow and oddly-selected slice of questions about the federal government, that a small group of elites has chosen, particularly when the selection of these questions is “fairly subjective.”

Consider, too, an alternative question: Where would we be if everyone knew these facts on which academics and journalists who write about civic incompetence dote? Would we be so much better off if every American could answer questions such as “Which political party is more conservative?” or “How long is the term of office for a United States senator?” on the spot during a survey interview? In Chapter 8, I discuss the costs of conveying this and other types of information. A lesson from that inquiry is that once we realize that teaching and learning impose real costs in terms of time, effort, and money, and once we realize that some information is more valuable to convey to particular audiences, then the net benefits (benefits minus costs) of conveying various kinds of information becomes relevant. To be sure, there are things that citizens do not know that reduce their ability to provide value to themselves and others through competent performance at particular political tasks. What is less clear is whether, or under what conditions, improving citizens’ abilities to answer the kinds of questions listed above constitutes a credible means of increasing a valuable competence.

A citizen’s ability to recall idiosyncratically selected pieces of information about national-level politics and government has not yet been demonstrated as necessary for competence in performing the tasks that typically confront citizens. Some scholars claim that such knowledge surely correlates with political knowledge more broadly defined. It may do so.
But the people making the claims tend not to provide evidence that these correlations exist. Some claim that the correlation is self-evident. While there have been studies showing that a citizen’s ability to provide particular answers to recall questions correlates with other things, the most common demonstrations is that the answers correlate to answers of other recall questions, which themselves tend to be of “fairly subjective” origin. In other cases, the correlations are to variables such as voter registration and turnout, which are important politically, but are not widely accepted as valid measures of general knowledge.

When critics criticize the mass public for its inability to answer common recall questions, they are condemning others for not sharing their federal fixation. This is not to say that elite scholars (and their counterparts in the media) are wrong to have such a fixation. Journalists who work for, or aspire to work for, the nation’s most influential news outlets must ultimately learn to produce stories that can be relevant to a national audience.

Similarly, the leading political-science journals serve national and international clienteles. Scholars who write articles about the mechanics in government in only a single city or town are not in high demand in political science departments that aspire to be considered amongst the leading centers of knowledge. Hence, research of only local or regional interest tends not to advance the careers of political scientists as much as do articles of national interest.

But most citizens are neither political scientists nor journalists. Perhaps they do not concentrate on the political categories dear to elites because they have figured out that they can’t do very much with such concepts, given the very limited opportunities they have to influence national policy. There are substantial differences between the tasks that most citizens are asked to perform and the tasks that national journalists and political scientists are asked to perform. Elite attempts to assess citizen competence may be more valuable to broader groups if such
differences are taken into account when making claims about what citizens should know.

So when critics, scholars, or others attempt to defend these measures as a valid representation of general political knowledge, the question to ask, perhaps multiple times, is “How do you know this?” If the response references a factor analytic finding, your question then becomes, “You have evidence that the questions measure something when scaled together, how do you know what that “something” is?” “How do you know that your measure is representative of knowledge considered generally?” Recognize that claims about the self-evident importance of the information in question are often attempts to dodge the question. Recognize that claims that the importance of the information has been proven in some unnamed location are often the product of wishful thinking. Insist on seeing the logic and evidence that proves that point. And, as a fixer, anticipate such questions yourself.

Understanding the logic of the relationship amongst information, knowledge, and competence as presented in Chapter 3 and implications for the politics of competence for the development and defense of competence criteria as detailed in this chapter, provides a basis for giving more credible answers to this question. Chapter 9, moreover, uses these same lessons and others to show how to provide more accurate data on how certain pieces of information correspond to certain kinds of competence. While many current scholarly and journalistic claims about civic incompetence depend largely on speculation and wishful thinking in defenses of the relevance of their preferred knowledge and competence measures, future scholars and other fixers need not repeat past mistakes.

5F. Conclusion

“The stuff of politics is contestable. There is no single right way to vote, no single right position on issues, no single right set of beliefs. From the standpoint of studying citizen
performance, this observation is bad news. It means that scholars cannot evaluate the quality of decisions in a straightforward fashion. Assessing performance would be simple if liberal or conservative decisions were always the right decisions or if a select group of individuals who were known to "get it right" always agreed. For scholars who study such things, unfortunately, neither is the case.” (Kuklinski and Quirk 2001: 285).

If competence depends on information, what information should citizens have? Answers to such questions are complicated by the politics of competence – particularly, as noted in the quote above, the fact that people see political situations from many different points of view. Such preference diversity is foreign to many other domains in which competence is assessed.

The quote above recognizes a key implication of preference diversity for attempts to define and defend competence criteria – in many situations, there are no criteria that will be accepted as best by everyone. And yet, societies do reach various levels of consensus about what they want to accomplish. When such consensuses are reached, they confer value on certain types of activities and outcomes. When societies share preferences associated with such values, a key societal question becomes how to achieve these goals. They want to take actions that improve citizens’ lives with respect to the consensus of values that they have reached. As societies come to understand how the actions of certain groups and individuals affect a society’s desired goals, concerns about the competence of those citizens with respect to society’s goals emerge. When such concerns arise, and it can be demonstrated that what a certain audience does not know is preventing a valuable social outcome from occurring, the potential for fixers to provide valuable services to their societies arises. If at these moments, fixers understand the relationship between what information, knowledge, and competence with respect to the desired outcomes, the potential can be realized.