Political Knowledge after September 11*

by
Markus Prior,
Stanford University and
Princeton University

Since the beginnings of survey research more than half a century ago, political scientists have repeatedly found that most people know very little about politics. Study after study has shown that the structure of government, details of policy, as well as most politicians and public figures are unknown to many Americans.[1] Philip Converse's (1975, 79) comment is still valid: "The most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low." The year 2001 prior to 9/11 was no exception. Surveys showed, for instance, that less than one-third of Americans knew in June that the Republican Party had a majority in the House of Representatives, and that less than 20% correctly said that the federal government was spending less money than it was taking in that year. In stark contrast, by November, 90% of the American public knew that inhaled anthrax was more difficult to treat than cutaneous anthrax, and more than 80% were aware in early 2002 that the Northern Alliance had been fighting on the side of the United States and Britain in the Afghanistan war.[2]

In this article, I examine how 9/11 and the subsequent efforts to combat terrorism have affected what people know about politics. My analysis suggests three main differences between knowledge before and after 9/11. First, knowledge of 9/11 and the "war on terrorism" shot up to uncommonly high levels, just as common sense and our theories would predict. The second point is less intuitive: Heightened interest spread to issues not directly related to the terrorist attacks and appears to have increased knowledge of politics more broadly. Finally, a comparison between knowledge related to 9/11 and general political knowledge reveals that some of the usual obstacles to learning did not matter in the aftermath of 9/11. A low sense of civic duty, lack of faith in government responsiveness, and a full-time job all kept people from getting informed about politics in general, but not from learning about the terrorist attacks and the war on terrorism.

Knowledge of the Events of September 11 and the "War on Terrorism"

Some scholars are not terribly surprised about people's low levels of political knowledge. People have lives to live and many more important things to think about. It is surely a better use of your memory to remember when to pick up your kids after school than what office is held by Tom Daschle. Most people do not bother to become informed about politics because there are few downsides from not doing so (Downs 1957). Incentives to learn about politics are low, as the direct personal benefits that arise from political knowledge are minimal. The chances are less than minuscule that your vote is going to be the tiebreaker in an election and that it actually matters whether you made an informed choice between the candidates. Therefore, the "rational" behavior arising from this calculation would be that people not waste *any* time on politics: "Voters are irrational—not because they have so little information, but because they have so much!" (Fiorina 1990, 335).

If one focuses only on elections, one ignores that political knowledge offers more benefits outside the electoral context. Knowing how your local government works or the politicians who represent you, for example, allows you to ask for favors or claim benefits more effectively. Moreover, people selectively seek information that is personally relevant to them (e.g., Iyengar 1990; Sears and Freedman 1967). For instance, senior citizens who follow news about social security reform may be in a better position to organize their retirement savings efficiently, thus obtaining material advantages from knowledge about the issue. In short, some information seeking and learning is instrumental and reflects people's self-interest.

September 11 gave the terms "self-interest" and "instrumental news seeking" a dramatically different meaning. In an election context, it is highly unlikely that one's political knowledge will change anything about the outcome. On and after 9/11, it appeared crucially important to find out what had happened and whether it might happen again. In the long run, the impact of many policy decisions, such as social security and health care, may be much bigger than the impact of decisions on how to react to 9/11. But in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, learning about anthrax or the likelihood of new attacks promised potentially much higher and more direct payoffs than learning about politics in 'normal' times.

This argument can easily be carried too far. The image of a rational actor trying to figure out the relative payoffs from learning more about anthrax compared to checking his stocks is misleading. In the face of threat, gathering facts about the situation is an

immediate, hard-wired reaction. In a study of emotional reactions to presidential candidates, Marcus and MacKuen (1993, 672) show that "threat powerfully motivates citizens to learn about politics." The part of the brain's limbic system that monitors the environment inhibits ongoing behavior and directs attention to the threat. If relatively modest threats such as presidential candidates automatically stimulate the brain to learn, it is easy to imagine a powerful, immediate impulse to gather information as a result of 9/11. Regardless of whether this impulse was caused by a hard-wired reaction or rational calculations, we would expect very high levels of knowledge of matters that could have an immediate impact on people's lives. For example, both rational behavior and the imminent threat should lead people to know that inhaled anthrax is more dangerous than cutaneous infections, as 90% did by November 2001.

Most of what people know about politics, however, is unlikely ever to benefit them directly and materially. A more important reason why some people learn about politics is that they are curious and enjoy knowing what is going on in the political world (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Knowledge of 9/11 and the war on terrorism is high even for aspects that are less likely to provide material benefits. This sort of knowledge may be more readily attributed to high interest, rather than instrumental news seeking. As Figure 1 shows, almost everyone followed the news about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the defense against possible future acts of terrorism. Interest in the U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan did not quite reach those levels, but was still clearly higher than interest in the economy.

These extraordinarily high levels of news interest were satisfied by an unprecedented amount of media coverage in the days after the terrorist attacks. The four big broadcast television networks provided coverage uninterrupted even by commercials for four days. The WB network and many cable channels, including MTV, TNT, and ESPN, carried news feeds instead of their usual entertainment and sports programming. Many music radio stations switched to around-the-clock news.[3] News magazines produced special editions covering the attacks and the rescue efforts.[4] While television was people's primary news source, traffic on news web sites increased dramatically. The number of unique visitors to cnn.com on September 11 and 12 increased by 680% to 11.7 million visitors. The 9.5 million unique visitors to msnbc.com represented a 236% increase (Rainie and Kalsnes 2001).

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The immediate threat and the uncommonly high levels of interest, combined with a ready supply of information, created a situation in which learning was bound to occur. The poll results summarized in Table 1 illustrate this. Almost two-thirds of the population knew in November 2001 that some Muslim countries were cooperating in the war on terrorism. In early 2002, roughly 85% of all U.S. residents were aware that the Northern Alliance was fighting with the United States and Britain in the Afghanistan war, and that Pakistan and Afghanistan had a common border. Still more than three-quarters knew that the Office of Homeland Security was founded after 9/11, and almost 60% understood that Pakistan and Russia, but not Turkey, possess nuclear weapons.

These numbers contrast markedly with knowledge of foreign affairs before 9/11. While more than 60% of the population knew in early September 2001 that a U.S. spy plane collided with a fighter jet from China, only 14% were aware of the issue addressed by the Kyoto agreement. Less than a quarter could name the Russian prime minister, and only 2% knew that the Canadian prime minister was Jean Chretien. I must note that all post-9/11 knowledge questions about foreign affairs which I located for this article are multiple-choice format, which is generally easier than open-ended questions (such as those pre-9/11 questions mentioned here). We should not read too much into the absolute percentages since they are affected by question topics, question wording, and the particular set of response options. But it is still telling that in April 2001, only 2% could give the Canadian prime minister's name, while 85% knew in February 2002 that Pakistan, but not Russia, Iraq, or Kazakhstan, shared a border with Afghanistan.

We can, moreover, compare post-9/11 knowledge of the war on terrorism with knowledge of domestic issues as assessed by multiple-choice questions. Less than half of the population is aware that the projected budget surplus for 2001 was smaller than expected. Only around 20% know that the government spent less in 2001 than it took in, that taxes are lower in the United States than in Western

Figure 1
News Interest