

MISINFORMATION & THE CURRENCY OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: A RETROSPECTIVE

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Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship

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Scholars have documented the deficiencies in political knowledge among American citizens. Another problem, misinformation, has received less attention. People are misinformed when they confidently hold wrong beliefs. We present evidence of misinformation about welfare and show that this misinformation acts as an obstacle to educating the public with correct facts. Moreover, widespread misinformation can lead to collective preferences that are far different from those that would exist if people were correctly informed. The misinformation phenomenon has implications for two currently influential scholarly literatures: the study of political heuristics and the study of elite persuasion and issue framing.

In the final chapter of *Voting*, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) make a statement that is among the most influential and widely quoted in scholarly works on American politics. “The democratic citizen,” they state, “is expected to be *well informed* about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, . . . *what the relevant facts are*, what alternatives are proposed, [and] what the likely consequences are” (308, emphases added). Berelson himself not only rejected these expectations as unrealistic, he went on to proclaim widespread citizen apathy as an essential element of democracy.

Berelson’s legacy has been his statement of conventional democratic norms, not his rejection of them. From the publication of Converse’s classic (1964) to the present, the normative thrust in public opinion research has been unwavering: citizens should be factually informed.¹ Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) state

Many colleagues have offered valuable comments on this study. We thank Scott Althaus, Michael Caldwell, Michael Dawson, Michael Delli Carpini, Brian Gaines, Milt Lodge, Bob Luskin, and Jay Verkuilen. Three anonymous reviewers encouraged us to consider the implications of our findings for research on political heuristics and on framing and elite persuasion; we discuss those implications in the concluding section.

¹Ironically, Berelson’s unorthodox and controversial conclusion that a political system requires uninformed and uninvolved citizens gave life to the very words he rejected. Scholars overwhelmingly construed Berelson’s conclusion as undemocratic and thus advocated an informed citizenry more strongly than ever.

THE “MISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE”

- WHAT CAUSES PEOPLE TO BE MISINFORMED ABOUT POLITICAL PHENOMENA?
- WHAT IS THE DIRECTION OF CAUSALITY BETWEEN BELIEFS AND PREFERENCES?
- WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INACCURACY AND CONFIDENCE?
- UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS CAN MISINFORMATION BE OVERCOME?
- WHAT KINDS OF FACTUAL BELIEFS DO PEOPLE HAVE?
- HOW WIDESPREAD IS MISINFORMATION?

CAUSES OF MISINFORMATION AND THE BELIEFS-PREFERENCES RELATIONSHIP

- **WHAT WE KNOW**

- DIRECTIONAL GOALS AS A DETERMINANT OF MISINFORMATION, AT INDIVIDUAL LEVEL
- DESIRE TO MAINTAIN PREEXISTING PREDISPOSITION/ISSUE ATTITUDE BIASES INFORMATION PROCESSING, WHICH CAN RESULT IN INACCURATE BELIEFS
- SEVERAL INSTANCES IN WHICH FACTUAL BELIEFS APPEAR TO BE THE CONSEQUENCE RATHER THAN THE CAUSE OF ONE'S ATTITUDES (BUT NOT ALWAYS!)

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- **AREAS OF AMBIGUITY**

- HOW A PERSON'S PROCESSING GOALS VARY ACROSS POLITICAL CONTEXTS (E.G., ISSUE TYPE)
 - EVIDENCE THAT ENVIRONMENT CAN MAKE **EITHER** GOAL SALIENT
- MEASURING A PERSON'S PROCLIVITY TO ADOPT ONE OR THE OTHER PROCESSING GOAL
 - SEVERAL POSSIBILITIES, LITTLE CONSENSUS: SCIENCE CURIOSITY (KAHAN), COGNITIVE STYLE VARIABLES (NIR; ARCENEUX AND VANDER WEILEN)

INACCURACY AND CONFIDENCE

- **WHAT WE KNOW**
 - IN ORIGINAL STUDY, THOSE WHO WERE THE MOST INACCURATE ALSO WERE THE MOST CONFIDENT

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- **AREAS OF AMBIGUITY**

- SINCERITY OF MISINFORMATION AND EXPRESSIVE RESPONDING
 - EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON BOTH SIDES (COMPARE BULLOCK OR PRIOR WITH BERINSKY)
 - THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS
- THE “FIX” DEPENDS ON THE PROBLEM
 - GENUINE MISINFORMATION → NEED TO CHANGE RESPONDENTS’ BELIEFS VIA CORRECTION
 - EXPRESSIVE RESPONDING → NEED TO CHANGE SURVEY INSTRUMENTATION

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- HOW DOES A PERSON'S PROCESSING MOTIVATION CHANGE ACROSS CONTEXTS AND WHAT ARE THE CONTEXTUAL UNITS OF MOST INTEREST TO SCHOLARS?
 - ISSUE TYPE
 - ELITE RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENT
 - DIFFERENT FORMS OF SURVEY INSTRUMENTATION
 - SOMETHING ELSE?