

PHD REVIEW

‘Where Is the Structure? The Ecological Foundations of Voters’ Consistency’

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Are citizens politically sophisticated? In other words, are they competent about politics? This is an important question given the implications for a negative response: if citizens are not politically sophisticated, how can they be expected to make decisions at the ballot box? Indeed, this issue is crucial for both scholars and anyone who cares about and promotes democratic principles. In fact, democracies tout the idea that elections are important for choosing officials, who in turn run almost every aspect of society. From fixing roads to establishing and collecting taxes and tariffs, the standard by which a democratic system is considered well-functioning is dependent on citizens and their capacity to make decisions at the ballot box. But what if the average citizen does not know anything about politics? This seems problematic as it suggests uninformed decisions are made come election time. If this is the case, then is democratic rule simply rule by the worst class? Or perhaps it is, as Aristotle would suggest in *The Poli-*

tics, that democracy is one of the ‘defective and perverted forms’ of government? The implications associated with a lack of political sophistication are quite clear and, unfortunately, much of the literature suggests that citizens are not politically sophisticated.

Feeling unsatisfied with existing studies on political sophistication, Marta Gallina tackles the issue in her doctoral thesis *Where is the Structure? The Ecological Foundations of Voters’ Consistency*. Gallina investigates the issue of political sophistication by reversing the focus of interest. While many studies focus on why citizens do not care about politics, she begins her investigation with a focus on why pundits believe citizens do not care about politics. Using this strategy, she raises two major questions of interest. First, how do citizens structure their opinions? Second, what factors strengthen (or weaken) this opinion structure at the individual and contextual levels? Gallina’s response and primary argument is that political parties are the key to understanding voters’ decision-making processes, but she takes the reader on a comprehensive and systemic journey to reach this response.

The literature on political sophistication is complex and, in many cases,

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unclear owing to a complex puzzle. Specifically, if the purpose of voting is to make electoral decisions, why are voters so badly informed, not interested and not coherent in their opinions? In other words, if politics plays a crucial role in everyone's life, why do people simply not care for fostering political knowledge? Perhaps more problematic, however, is that the diffusion of political news varies with levels of awareness (Zaller, 1992). This is pressing given that a gap exists in the literature on diffusion of information between sophisticates and non-sophisticates. If Zaller (1992) is correct, we may see that political cues favour more sophisticated voters over less sophisticated voters. This would suggest the already sophisticated stand to gain more from political cues. What about the unsophisticated? How can those voters with fewer individual tools to identify and interpret political information fill the gaps between themselves and the more sophisticated? Does such a problem suggest scholars need to accept that some people simply lack the means to understand politics? Gallina rejects this possibility by examining opinion constraint as her starting point, which she defines using Converse (1964) as the extent to which we can predict voters' positions on one issue knowing the positions on others.

Gallina breaks down the dissertation into four parts to disentangle this puzzle. In the first section, she critically appraises and simplifies the electoral studies literature on political sophistication. She establishes a typology here by distinguishing both between the pragmatic and the cognitive notions of sophistication, as well as the sources of sophistication; that is, whether they are internal or external in origin. Galli-

na's typology provides the reader with a clear structure on the body of the sophistication literature, splitting it into four sectors: the expertise approach, the education approach, the psychological approach and the mobilising approach. Using these classifications, she establishes that voter consistency neither overlaps perfectly nor separates completely from the concept of sophistication. In the second section, Gallina focuses on individual-level analyses of mass issue attitudes through a replication of Lupton et al. (2015). While the original study focused on the American context, Gallina applies this framework to the European context to investigate whether politically sophisticated voters structure their attitudes consistently relative to their ideological orientations. She finds that ideology and belief systems are not irreconcilable concepts. Moreover, since ideology's relevance is not generalisable to all European countries, it needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

In the third section, Gallina proposes and tests a new indicator to measure opinion constraint in the form of convergence between individual policy preferences and political party policy preferences. She refers to this as the 'top-down approach'. Applying this measure, she finds that the top-down approach to opinion constraint is weakly correlated with pre-existing measures. These findings lead to the fourth and final section, where Gallina examines affective polarisation both at the societal and at the political levels with a focus on populist rhetoric as a driver of polarisation. She finds that both societal and political affective polarisation have a negative impact on opinion constraint, although the negative relation-

ship is stronger when parties emphasise anti-elitism.

Thus, Gallina does manage to resolve the puzzle by providing an empirical criterion to replace a theoretical one. By focusing on the role of political parties, she is able to determine the situations in which voters are consistent or inconsistent in their policy preferences. Interestingly enough, while scholars have previously considered that voters' attitudes combine with ideology to aid in the decision-making process, Gallina finds no generalisable evidence for these expectations. Rather, she finds there are differences in individual sources of voters' consistency across European countries, such that issue attitudes do not conform to ideological dimensions in all cases. Likewise, there are a variety of differences across voter consistency relative to pre-existing indicators of sophistication. Nevertheless, consistency among voters can be undermined by specific social and political characteristics, such as in a society with two opposing and polarised camps.

Gallina's dissertation provides multiple contributions to the literature. First, it establishes a common parlance for scholars in the field to discuss their research. Given the density of the literature on the subject, this contribution is not one that should be easily overlooked. The direct benefit of an unequivocal definition for sophistication is that everyone is referring to the same concept, which in turn makes operationalisation of the concept more standardised across studies. Second, Gallina expands the literature on how voter opinions are structured within the European context. This is significant given that the American context is often the focal point of this area of re-

search. The focus on Europe provides a new avenue for researchers who may be interested in understanding different sets of voters across different electoral system dynamics. It can also help scholars determine what aspects of the literature from the American context fit into the European context, all while discerning similarities and differences between electorates. Third, the dissertation provides a methodological contribution through multiple operationalisations of different sophistication aspects, including the more complicated consistency concept. This point overlaps with the second benefit since the provided measure for sophistication is simple and replicable across countries and over time. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, resolving the sophistication puzzle helps resolve the democratic issue haunting unsophisticated voters. In other words, democracy is not a lost cause simply because not all voters are fully aware of each and every political debate or issue at the time. Rather, voters can gather information via shortcuts and cues that can add to their level of sophistication and fill in the gap between themselves and more sophisticated voters. In fact, the latter group may be more sophisticated because of these information shortcuts. Democracy is not a failed endeavour.

Nevertheless, there are limitations with the study. To begin with, the quality of information that voters receive is not discussed in the project. This is an important consideration because not all political parties provide voters with objectively, or in some cases even subjectively, good information. Bad quality information could in turn make it more difficult for less sophisticated voters to remain consistent and, ultimately, may

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spark a move away from partisanship as we currently understand if voters lose faith in parties. In addition, not all data in this area of research will be coherent. In other words, without institutionalising the findings of this project into existing survey research, future data sets may fail to provide adequate data to replicate the measure. This is true at both the individual (citizen) and the aggregate (elite) levels. While these are significant limitations, they both open up new avenues for future research, for which Gallina's dissertation will serve as a pioneer.

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