

T W O

## *Acquiring Data: The Process of Becoming Informed*

THIS CHAPTER focuses on what voters know, when they know it, and how they relate their knowledge to voting decisions. They may have few incentives to gather information simply for the purpose of becoming good citizens, and may thus be uninformed about politics, but they can and do apply to political decision making a great deal of information they have acquired in their daily lives. This is the by-product theory of political information: the information that people acquire to negotiate their daily lives is later applied to their political judgments and choices. The specific connections that voters make between personal information, personal problems, and personal experiences with government, on one hand, and their political evaluations and choices, on the other, will depend upon several variables: what they believe government can do; what they know about what government is doing; what they know about what other people want from government; and what they are told by the media and political campaigns.

### The By-Product Theory of Information

In economic terms, the process of procuring, analyzing, and evaluating information carries a cost—the investment of time and energy. Further, the expected return from time invested in reaching political decisions is small compared to the expected return from other uses of the same time—far smaller, certainly, than with decisions about personal consumption. For example, the health of the national economy may in fact have a greater effect on voters than whether their next vacation is fabulous or merely good; but time spent deciding where to travel leads to better vacations, whereas time spent evaluating economic policies leads not to better policies but only to a better-informed vote. Similarly, the ultimate economic well-being of a college senior may be affected more by America's economic future than by where the student goes to law school; but a week spent de-

deciding where to attend law school has a higher return for the student than a week spent evaluating alternate approaches to trade imbalances or deficits. Some people, of course, find politics so fascinating that they inform themselves even when they have no personal stake in political outcomes. But in general, voters do not devote much time or energy directly to their votes. This does *not* imply either that voters are uninformed about general conditions or that they have no knowledge of specific government programs. What it means is that most of the information voters use when they vote is acquired as a *by-product* of activities they pursue as part of their daily lives. In that sense, political uses of this information are free.<sup>1</sup>

### *Daily-Life Information*

A good deal of information is obtained in daily life about the economy and the community in which people live. Two-thirds of the country own their own homes and 55 percent have a mortgage; 84 percent have checking accounts and 81 percent have savings accounts; and 30 percent own stock. Three-quarters purchase items on credit, three-quarters go grocery shopping, and 78 percent have auto insurance. One in twelve adults is self-employed, and about the same number are actively looking for a new job at any one time.<sup>2</sup> In a typical year, 30 percent of all households will contain someone who is unemployed and actively looking for work. Some 95 percent of the people in the country file income-tax returns, and 55 percent pay someone to complete their income-tax forms.<sup>3</sup> One in five Americans knows someone who cheats on income taxes, and one in four takes steps specifically to reduce the amount owed in income taxes.<sup>4</sup>

One need not be an economist to see which way the economy is going. Generally, half the electorate knows the current unemployment rate within 1 or 2 percentage points, and about the same number have a good idea of what the inflation rate is.<sup>5</sup> These numbers, however, understate sensitivity to economic shocks. Most of the electorate buys gasoline; when gas prices rose in 1977, 40 percent of the citizenry nationwide reduced the miles they drove, and 25 percent used car pools.<sup>6</sup> When the price of gas rose faster and higher after the Shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979, 80 percent of the country cut back on gasoline consumption. As inflation rose to 21 percent, 92 percent cut back on the kinds of groceries they bought, two-thirds scaled back on vacations, and four-fifths lowered their thermostats. Not surprisingly, inflation was considered a more important problem than unemployment by five to one. Even less surprisingly, in early 1980 President Jimmy Carter received the lowest approval ratings of any president since World War II.<sup>7</sup>

While managing daily life, people also learn about crime and drugs. One person in four knows of a place where drugs are sold, and one in six sees them sold. Half of all Americans know someone hurt by drugs, and three-quarters know someone hurt by alcohol.<sup>8</sup> One in eight Americans has had a crime victim in the family within the past year, and two in five Americans have had a serious crime or felony in their neighborhood within the past year. Fifty-seven percent of all women and 28 percent of all men know a place within a mile of their home where they are afraid to walk alone at night; one in six Americans does not feel safe at home during the night.<sup>9</sup> Concern with crime and drugs is thus a prime example of a political issue growing out of daily life.

The public's monitoring of the news is sensitive to personally relevant information—on matters of health risks, for example. More voters know their cholesterol level than know their representative's name.<sup>10</sup> Health problems also generate experiences with institutions and bureaucracies. In May 1982, 47 percent of the respondents in a national health-care survey had a family member who had been in an emergency room during the last year, and 38 percent had a family member who had been hospitalized during the year. One-third of the respondents had sought a second opinion on a medical procedure, and one in five had lost health-insurance coverage for some period.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, political information is acquired while making individual economic decisions and navigating daily life: shoppers learn about inflation of retail prices; home buyers find out the trends in mortgage-loan interest rates; owners of stocks follow the Dow-Jones averages; people learn where it is safe to walk; and they learn about health and drugs. How and when this information is used remains to be shown.

#### *Information about Government Programs*

There are times when, in addition to this general information from daily life, information about specific government programs and policies is needed for planning and negotiating one's own life. For example, a student estimating his chances of being drafted spends time learning the draft policy. A businessman interested in selling his products overseas learns about technology transfer laws to develop sales plans. A senior citizen learns about Social Security benefits to plan the next year of his or her life. Home builders and prospective home buyers learn about interest rates to estimate the cost of homes.

The growth of government involvement in social and economic regulation and the extension of entitlement programs mean that whether the

electorate is better educated or not, there will be more "issue publics" (subsets of the overall public that care a great deal about particular issues; discussed below) concerned with government expenditures and policies in their areas. For example, 15 percent of the households in the country contain a government employee; 25 percent contain someone receiving Social Security old-age benefits; and 23 percent contain someone receiving Medicaid or Medicare.<sup>12</sup> One in five households has received welfare benefits at some time.<sup>13</sup>

#### *News Media*

Other main sources of information for the electorate are the news media—television, newspapers, radio, and magazines; some of this information comes directly from the media and some comes from discussions with friends, neighbors, and fellow workers.

Most Americans watch some network television news and scan newspapers several times every week. In May 1983, at a time when there were no political campaigns or major crises or political events, a general set of questions about media use was asked on a CBS News poll. The poll found that in a typical week, 80 percent of Americans see at least one network news show, and half the country sees three or more shows; that 7 percent regularly watch CNN, the Cable News Network, and another 30 percent watch it occasionally; and that over 60 percent read newspapers on a normal day.<sup>14</sup> All told, then, the time spent watching television news and reading newspapers averages over thirty minutes per day for all Americans over eighteen. Moreover, people also hear about the news from their friends and acquaintances; one-quarter of the respondents had talked in the past day about a story they saw on television or read in a newspaper (see table 2.1).

A great deal of news coverage caters to a strong public appetite for events that are exciting or frightening. Politicians, of course, pay careful attention to disasters because the public pays attention to them: In the May 1983 CBS poll about media usage, one-fifth of all conversations about news stories were about disasters. Congressmen and state legislators thus rush to the scenes of fires, crashes, floods, and droughts in order to be seen where the electorate is looking.<sup>15</sup> Steven Merksamer, the chief of staff for California governor George Deukmejian, has acknowledged this: "My biggest fear always was of not being prepared for a major disaster—and one thing about living in California is we have them. How they are handled can make or break elected officials. . . . We spent a lot of time drilling for disasters. We would have mock prison riots, mock earthquakes—eight-hour

TABLE 2.1  
Education and Media Usage

	< 12th Grade (%)	H.S. Graduate (%)	Some College (%)	College Graduate (%)	All Respondents (%)
Watch network news two or more times weekly	67	68	65	61	66
Read news magazine					
Regularly	4	7	19	37	13
Once in a while	18	34	39	32	30
Read newspaper yesterday	49	62	66	77	62
Read story yesterday about foreign country	14	24	32	50	26
Read story yesterday about national government	21	32	38	50	33
Have seen or heard story about "Most important problem facing country" in last week	50	64	74	78	64
Talked about any news event today	14	25	33	45	26
Of those who talked about news event today, the news event was:					
Local	57	36	27	24	35
National	7	16	18	29	17
Foreign	0	4	18	20	12
Disaster	14	20	21	16	19
Other/Don't know	22	24	16	11	17
Total N	(389)	(555)	(236)	(208)	(1,388)

Source: CBS News Poll, "Evennews," May 1983.

Note: Number in parentheses is number of respondents in column.

drills when we would practice making decisions, several times a year."<sup>16</sup>

A general monitoring of the media also brings people some information about events in other countries. In 1979 and 1980, for example, 60 percent of the electorate knew of the PLO or knew who signed the Camp David accords. And when the helicopters sent to rescue the American hostages in Teheran crashed, 94 percent of the country knew about the abortive raid within twenty-four hours.<sup>17</sup> Less than 40 percent of the country knows whether there are any treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union, or who is involved in the SALT talks, but when Gorbachev and Reagan met, many Americans picked up enough information from the participants and the commentators to perceive a decline in tensions. While a recent poll showed that less than 4 percent of Americans know the name of the Japanese prime minister and less than one-third know what form of government Japan has, when asked which country buys more of the other country's products, 87 percent correctly said that the United States buys more, while only 6 percent thought Japan buys more.<sup>18</sup> Here, as in all areas of knowledge, it is clear that information considered personally relevant is more readily absorbed. For example, in 1987, only 17 percent of the general public knew that convicted spy Jonathan Pollard, an American naval officer who funneled military intelligence to Israel, had been spying for Israel; among Jews the figure was 65 percent.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Media Information and Daily-Life Information*

The mass media affect how voters think about government because daily-life information and media information interact. They interact because, although daily-life information may tell us how the economy and the government have performed, it takes the media to tell us what the government is actually doing. Both political evaluations and votes depend, as I will demonstrate, upon the voters' views of the national agenda—the problems they consider most important. The importance, or salience, of national problems has traditionally been measured in Gallup polls and other national polls by asking respondents, "In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing the country?" Such a question reflects the unavoidable intermingling of two different aspects of issue salience: what is important and what is conspicuous.<sup>20</sup>

Daily-life information can tell us that energy shortages, price rises, and increased unemployment are conspicuous at the moment, but mass-media stories about these subjects, and coverage of presidential speeches about them, still affect the national agenda. A problem may be conspicuous, but it

may not necessarily be seen as “an important problem facing the country” unless it is seen as a problem *for the country*, and not just a problem many people are having. (For example, AIDS is a problem for the country; obesity is a problem for many Americans.) Information which connects a story to government also contributes to making that problem either conspicuous or important when citizens think about their government. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, investigating changes in the salience that voters assign to inflation, unemployment, and energy problems over long periods of time, found that real-world conditions which make problems more conspicuous affect the salience of these problems.<sup>21</sup> However, as I discuss later, their research shows that television news stories and presidential speeches also affect the salience of these problems.

In other words, the use of daily-life information in determining the national agenda—the problems a citizen wants the government to address—is not reflexive or mechanical; it is mediated by information about what the government is doing or what the president is concentrating on. A television news story or a presidential speech alerts people to the connections between the conditions of their economy and society and the actions of their government. (It is also the case, for every problem that Iyengar and Kinder investigated, that a single presidential speech was as important as twenty-five network news stories in influencing the agenda.)

### Issue Publics

In considering the conditions under which voters will inform themselves, researchers in public opinion and voting behavior apply the notion of the “issue public”: a subset of the overall public that cares a great deal about a particular issue, and is therefore likely to pay attention to it. Gathering and digesting details about the fate of specific bills or programs is a costly and time-consuming process; the only voters who can be expected to undertake it are those who need the details for purposes other than voting. Thus, as Jon Krosnick has noted, “only a small proportion of people are likely to be knowledgeable about and to have potent attitudes regarding any single policy option or another.”<sup>22</sup>

Few issues are followed by most of the electorate at any one time, but many issues concern sizable minorities, and the effects of specific issues and legislation can usually be registered only by isolating specific issue publics for analysis. As Philip Converse wrote, several years after coauthoring *The American Voter*, “We have come a step closer to reality when we recognize the fragmentation of the mass public into a plethora of issue pub-

lics.”<sup>23</sup> As considerable psychological evidence indicates, “attention and memory are indeed enhanced when information is personally relevant.”<sup>24</sup>

In *The American Voter*, it was assumed that an issue did not matter unless *the entire public* was aware of *specific legislation* concerning it. In Angus Campbell’s words, “there were no great questions of public policy which *the public* saw as dividing the two parties.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, “an example of public indifference to an issue that was given heavy emphasis by political leaders is provided by the role of the Taft-Hartley Act in the 1948 election. . . . Almost seven out of every ten adult Americans saw the curtain fall on the Presidential election of 1948 without knowing whether Taft-Hartley was the name of a hero or a villain.”<sup>26</sup> Given these expectations, we should not be surprised that the role of issues appeared so negligible.

In fact, what *The American Voter* demonstrates is not public indifference to Taft-Hartley, a bill designed to curb the power of labor unions, but the use of inappropriate standards for judging public opinion and inadequate survey measures for assessing public concern with unions. In 1948, voters favoring the Taft-Hartley Act voted 12 percent for Truman and 82 percent for Dewey. Voters opposing the act voted 77 percent for Truman and 14 percent for Dewey.<sup>27</sup> Further, when asked why they thought people voted for Truman, 24 percent of the electorate mentioned Truman’s association with unions. When asked why people supported Dewey, less than one-half of 1 percent mentioned support for unions.<sup>28</sup> This spectrum of opinion was about the same in 1952. In that year, again according to Campbell’s own data, the voters who took pro-labor stands on Taft-Hartley voted 29 percent for Eisenhower; those who took anti-labor stands voted 77 percent for Eisenhower.<sup>29</sup> Thus a third of all voters were aware of a specific piece of legislation, and their positions on it had a strong effect on their votes.

Today, if 30 percent of the electorate actually knew the name of a specific piece of legislation, it would be taken as evidence of an issue of great concern to most of the electorate, because a much higher percentage of voters would have general impressions about the issue without knowing any legislative details. There were high levels of concern with Vietnam in 1968 and 1972, tax cuts were widely discussed in 1980, and budget cuts were widely discussed yearly after 1985, but no one would argue that the importance of these issues could be measured solely by whether “the public” knew whether Cooper-Church (a bill concerning troop withdrawal from Vietnam), Kemp-Roth (a major change in tax rates), and Gramm-Rudman (a deficit-reduction act) were heroes, villains, fast-food chains, or rock

groups. Likewise, concern with government spending cannot be assessed simply by asking whether people have heard of Gramm-Rudman, nor can concern with stopping abortion be measured by assessing knowledge of the Hyde amendment or the wording used by the Supreme Court in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, the 1989 case that reopened many of the issues previously decided in the Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling. We come yet another step closer to political reality when we look for *general* awareness of the positions of candidates and parties, not just detailed information about specific legislation.

The growth of government has interacted with the development of specialized communications channels to create new issue publics. The importance of this fact is emphasized by the spectacularly wrong predictions in the second Columbia study, *Voting*, about a "senior citizen's vote" or a "woman's vote." "It would be difficult in contemporary America," *Voting* argued, "to maintain strong voting differences by sex, because there are few policy issues persisting over a period of time that affect men and women differently."<sup>30</sup> In the last twenty years, we have seen the development of a distinctive woman's vote: more women than men have voted more Democratic in the last four presidential elections, and there are several issues on which women and men have different attitudes and different priorities. They differ, for example, in their evaluations of whether the Great Society programs were effective. The gender gap, as it is called, developed from the growth of single-parent families and an increased government role in social welfare and child care.

*Voting* also concluded that there could be no policy movements based on the special interests of old age, such as pensions, because such a movement could not transmit itself over time.<sup>31</sup> Since 1948, of course, we have seen a major migration of retired people to senior-citizens' communities throughout the Sun Belt. Along with this, there has been the growth of organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons which communicate and transmit information about Social Security and Medicare. Not surprisingly, the elderly have higher levels of knowledge of specific Social Security and Medicare legislation than do other citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Changes in relations between gender and vote, and between age and vote, serve to emphasize that political cleavages in the electorate respond to changes in the popular culture and are influenced by the changing nature of government. Moreover, these cleavages increasingly reflect the relation of different groups to government programs like Social Security.

## Connecting Information to Government

Voters are not self-centered and reflexive in evaluating their leaders and in making voting choices. Their evaluations and voting decisions depend on whether their reasoning connects their situations to the national situation and the actions of their leaders.

The earliest voting studies, whether economic or psychological in orientation, assumed that voting would be a direct reflection of the voter's life experiences and social milieu. The first Columbia study, for example, concluded that votes could be predicted directly from knowing whether voters were urban or rural, Catholic or Protestant, blue-collar or white-collar. A combination of these factors yielded the well-known Index of Political Predisposition (IPP).<sup>33</sup> Although Paul Lazarsfeld was mostly right when he said that we *think* politically as we *are* socially, this index was a failure. The simplifying assumptions that the same few social characteristics could estimate at all times how a person "was socially," and that one could infer directly from how a person was socially to how he or she "thinks politically," were incorrect. Lazarsfeld did not realize how many different things we are socially, and how many different ways there are in which we can think politically.<sup>34</sup>

The early economic studies of voting also made simplifying assumptions about how voters connected their personal economic conditions with their votes. The economic equivalent of the IPP was "pocketbook voting"—evaluating the president's performance directly on the basis of how it affects one's personal finances. As Morris Fiorina summed up the assumptions behind it, "in order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens need only calculate the changes in their own welfare."<sup>35</sup> In fact, when voters evaluate presidential performance and choose between candidates, they do not project directly from their own social characteristics, their pocketbooks, or even their personal problems. They engage in much more reasoning than that.

Voters discriminate, first of all, between government problems and personal problems. When thinking about government, they bring to bear only those personal problems they believe are part of the political agenda, problems government should be helping with.<sup>36</sup> Even voters who have lost their jobs during a recession do not automatically connect their unemployment with the government and its policies: "Failing to understand their own predicament as tied to others, as produced by collective forces, the unemployed are likely to treat their own experience as *irrelevant* to social economics or to government performance."<sup>37</sup> People think about cause

and effect, and they are able to reason about who is responsible for a problem and who can deal with it. This is true not only for their personal economic situations but for issues as diverse as poverty, racism, and crime as well.<sup>38</sup>

Voters also distinguish between their personal performance and the performance of the government. In direct contradiction of the pocketbook-voting hypothesis, study after study has confirmed that assessments of national economic conditions have a bigger impact on voting than do changes in personal economic well-being.<sup>39</sup> When voters evaluate presidential performance, how the national economy is doing generally matters more than how their own pocketbooks are doing.<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that voters don't care about their own economic performance; it suggests instead that people find changes in the national economy to be better indicators of how the government is doing. Personal changes are, after all, due to one's own efforts, to the performance of one's company, and to health and chance. A government's economic performance is better assessed by the performance of the whole economy. Indeed, voters connect their own personal economic performance to the government only when they can "connect changes in their personal financial situation[s] to broader economic trends and government policies."<sup>41</sup>

In other words, what matters is how voters construe their own situations. Changes in one's personal situation are seen as relevant to voting when they are explained in collective, political terms.<sup>42</sup> Voters who see political reasons for changes in their pocketbooks will reward and punish political leaders; voters with only personal explanations for their situations will not. Of particular import in this regard is the difference between explanations for inflation and those for unemployment. Whereas people often blame themselves for being unemployed, they are far more likely to link inflation to government policies.<sup>43</sup> Voters, then, are sensitive to changes in the economy, but they discriminate between changes in their personal condition and changes in the condition of the economy.

Voters also distinguish among changes in economic conditions, such as inflation or unemployment, according to expected personal consequences of these changes. However, the political effects of these economic problems are not always the result of actions taken by those *most* affected. It is a common finding that the unemployed and other people suffering economic setbacks spend less time with their friends and social networks and more time trying to make ends meet; they often become anxious, depressed, and withdrawn, and vote less than others.<sup>44</sup> The unemployed may drop out, but those vulnerable to unemployment react, in their voting and in their

evaluations of the president. Blue-collar workers as a group—who are more susceptible to unemployment—are more sensitive to changes in unemployment levels than white-collar workers and retired people, whereas the retired and white-collar workers are far more sensitive to changes in the inflation rate.<sup>45</sup>

Voters also think ahead, taking account of both current conditions and long-term expectations. Just as there are differences between voters primarily concerned about inflation and those primarily concerned about unemployment, there are differences between voters who see storm clouds on the horizon and those who envision a sunny future. What voters want their government to do depends on what they think their country will be like several years from now.

In the 1980s, public concerns about the long-term economic future of the country were widespread. People who thought "the future of the next generation will be bogged down by problems left behind for them" had different preferences about government policies than did people who thought "the future of the next generation of Americans will be a good one." People anxious about the future are more oriented toward social programs and government action, while voters with a rosier view see less need for government programs and support a more limited role for government. People concerned about the future are also less willing to forgo services in order to cut the deficit, more willing to cut defense spending in order to fund domestic spending, more supportive of government programs to provide day care, less supportive of the use of the American military in foreign conflicts, and less supportive of government spending to finance anti-Communist forces around the world. In general, worries about the long-term future are associated with more concern about government action that will cushion that future and less concern with fiscal restraint, strong defense spending, and militant anticommunism abroad.<sup>46</sup> In other words, people who are pessimistic about the future are more concerned that government develop adequate insurance against hard times. The middle-aged, for example, worry the most about whether Social Security funds will be there for them when they retire. The fact that people take expectations into account when they vote emphasizes an often-ignored truth: elections test voter concern for long-term security and collective goods, not just concern for direct and immediate private benefits.

In summary, daily-life and media information are mediated by reasoning and expectations. A vote is more than a direct expression of a voter's social group, pocketbook, or personal problems; voters take account of national as well as personal conditions, and they discriminate among their own

problems and problems for the government to address which are relevant to them. Further, they take into account their expectations about the long-term future and the kinds of government programs they expect will be most relevant to them in the years ahead.

### Education and Civic Ignorance

Ever since the Columbia studies demonstrated low levels of textbook political knowledge in the mass electorate, scholars have been hoping for a more informed citizenry. They have assumed that an increase in years of schooling would lead to greater political knowledge and more attentiveness to the political debates that occur within government. Because the educated vote more often than the uneducated, it was also assumed that an increase in education would lead to a higher voter turnout. A well-educated electorate, it was thought, would be "attentive, knowledgeable, and participatory."<sup>47</sup>

Hopes for an electorate that measures up to civic ideals have not been met. Fifty years ago when the Columbia studies began, three-fourths of the electorate had not finished high school and only 10 percent had any college experience. Today, three-fourths of the electorate have finished high school and nearly 40 percent have been to college. But despite this increase in education, factual knowledge about government and current political debates is at best only marginally higher, and voter turnout is lower.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, within the electorate, the level of factual knowledge about the basic structure of government is so low, and the extent of information about specific legislation is so limited, that little information about *current* levels of knowledge is available on a regular basis. Survey researchers are generally reluctant to ask too many factual questions for fear of embarrassing respondents, who might terminate the interview or become too flustered to answer other questions.<sup>49</sup>

To directly assess the changes in levels of civics knowledge since the 1940s, Scott Keeter and Michael X. Delli Carpini recently conducted a national survey asking the same basic questions that were asked in the 1940s. They replicated questions testing knowledge of certain elementary facts, such as which party now controls the House, what the first ten amendments to the Constitution are called, the name of the vice president, the definition of a presidential veto, and how much of a majority is required for the Senate and House to override a presidential veto. Overall, they found, "the level of public knowledge of some basic facts has remained remarkably stable."<sup>50</sup>

Voter turnout in America is no higher today than in the 1940s, and people are no more likely now than they were then to know the name of their congressional representative. Despite all the publicity he received, Vice President Dan Quayle was only marginally better known in 1989 than Vice President Richard Nixon was in 1952; 75 percent could name Quayle, while 69 percent had been able to name Nixon.<sup>51</sup> Knowledge of other prominent members of government also remains low. In the week following the 1976 election, only 58 percent could name both vice-presidential nominees. In 1985, after George Shultz had been in office for more than four years, only 25 percent of the electorate could recall his name when asked, "Who is the Secretary of State?" In January 1977, when Jimmy Carter became president, only one American in four could name even a single member of the cabinet he had announced earlier.<sup>52</sup>

Acquaintance with the basic facts about issues being politically debated in the nation is also dismally scant, as four examples will suggest. (1) U.S.-Japanese trade issues have been in the news for years. However, less than a third of the country knows whether the Japanese form of government is a monarchy, a democracy, or a military dictatorship, and less than 4 percent can name the Japanese prime minister.<sup>53</sup> (2) In January 1979, only 23 percent of the public knew that the countries involved in the SALT talks were the United States and the Soviet Union. Ten months later, after the talks had been in the news for most of the year, the number had risen only to 38 percent.<sup>54</sup> (3) In 1987, after seven years of debate over Contra aid, only one-third of the public knew that Nicaragua is in Central America. When the USS *Stark* was hit by an Iraqi rocket in the Persian Gulf in 1987, 43 percent of the public had no opinion whose rocket it was, 25 percent thought the rocket was Iranian, and only 29 percent knew that it was Iraqi.<sup>55</sup> (4) For years, domestic political debate has centered on trade-offs, both implicit and explicit, involved in cutting defense spending in order to fund domestic spending, and vice versa. But in 1985 only 45 percent of the electorate knew even approximately the share of the federal budget spent on defense (just under one-third); in January 1985, 45 percent thought the share was one-quarter or one-third; 31 percent thought it was half or more, 6 percent thought it was less than one-tenth, and 20 percent had not even a guess.<sup>56</sup> These findings indicate that there are few, if any, national policy debates that the mass public can follow in their entirety.

*The Effects of Education*

Clearly, it takes more than education to bring the actual electorate into alignment with theoretical ideals. The social model of the citizen, and the role of education in increasing civic competence, need revision. Motivation to acquire and digest information must be taken into account. The Columbia insight that a person thinks politically as he is socially, as generalized by Anthony Downs to create the by-product theory of political information, indicates a wide range of knowledge and experience within the electorate. It also suggests that a voter's level of political information will vary as his or her life situation changes, and as he or she responds to new opportunities and political events. However, merely specifying daily-life experiences, familiarity with U.S. government programs, or media exposure to events in foreign countries is not sufficient to make a case that this information influences attitudes about candidates, issues, and political parties.

We need a better theory of public knowledge about politics, one that goes beyond the by-product theory to explain the differences that education *has* made, as well as the differences it hasn't made. The hoped-for "deepening" of the electorate has not occurred, because an increase in education is not synonymous with an increase in civics knowledge. Nevertheless, I contend that the changing educational level of the electorate is, in fact, changing American politics.

My hypothesis is that education affects politics not by "deepening" but by *broadening* the electorate—by increasing the number of issues that citizens see as politically relevant, and by increasing the number of connections they make between their own lives and national and international events. And therefore, given the interactions between daily-life information and media information, as noted above, any increase in the amount and kinds of information about government and the national agenda is likely to affect the ways in which voters make connections between their own lives and their government's actions. I must emphasize that this remains a hypothesis, for which I can offer only suggestive evidence.

An example of the proliferation of new concerns in a more educated public—of a widening, rather than a deepening, of politics—is the growth of concern about food additives and environmental protection. The post-World War II transformation of America into an educated, white-collar society has resulted in the growth of widespread anxiety (often approaching obsession) about toxic wastes, chemical additives, and other potential carcinogens. Tens of millions avidly followed media reports on the disasters at

Three Mile Island, Love Canal, Chernobyl, and Prince William Sound in Alaska. A new interest in health information and an age-old fascination with disasters have made ecological calamities matters of worldwide interest. Not surprisingly, then, when a few Tylenol tablets, or a few Chilean grapes, are tampered with, the news spreads rapidly. Health is only one of many topics in which symbols have proliferated because educated voters have more ability to absorb and process information than do less-educated voters.

While educational level apparently makes no difference in television news viewing, it does make a difference in newspaper reading, and an even larger difference in the reading of news magazines. According to a 1983 CBS poll, there is no difference among educational levels in exposure to television news, which is watched by 80 percent of the electorate. Educated people, however, are more likely to read newspapers and news magazines. Among those who have not been to college, only 5 percent read weekly news magazines regularly, and only 25 percent read them occasionally. Among those who have had some college, 19 percent read them regularly and 40 percent once in a while; among college graduates, 37 percent read them regularly and 32 percent occasionally (see table 2.1).

Educated people not only make more use of newspapers and news magazines; they also discuss news stories more than the less-educated do. In this same 1983 poll, 26 percent of the respondents said they had talked with others about a story that was in the news on the day they were interviewed. Among those who had never been to college, the proportion was 19 percent; among those who had been to college, 40 percent. Also, the more formal education a person has, the more likely it is that he or she reads stories about national or international news.<sup>57</sup> Among people who had not completed high school, only 7 percent of the news stories they discussed were national or international stories, as opposed to local stories and disaster stories. At the other extreme, college graduates reported that **fully half** of their discussions concerned national or international stories.<sup>58</sup>

That educated voters pay more attention to foreign news does not mean that they have a wealth of background civics information about the subjects they follow. In May of 1989, for example, one in five college graduates believed that the Soviet Union was a member of NATO.<sup>59</sup> Educated voters may know little about the actions of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, or the nuances of apartheid in South Africa, or Gorbachev's struggle with critics of *perestroika*, or Yasir Arafat's role in the PLO in Palestine. But very often they do know enough for these general subjects to influence their votes.<sup>60</sup>



If most citizens, in a knee-jerk manner, reflexively "voted their pocket-books," or voted to "fire the manager" after a bad season, or ignored the connections between their own lives and the national government's umbrellas and safety nets, then we would have to say that increased levels of education do not affect the electorate. However, since reasoning and information matter, changes in the amounts and kinds of information that voters acquire also matter, and education can change politics. Further, campaigns can matter as well.

### Information and Campaigns

In a campaign, voters are exposed to information about the differences between the candidates or parties in the election at hand. There is, however, no assurance that they will absorb information that is new to them, for it is possible that they will misperceive the messages in ways that reinforce their preexisting ideas and commitments. Indeed, misperception has troubled observers of democracy throughout the century. As Walter Lippmann noted, "Democracy in its original form never seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside."<sup>61</sup> As the authors of *Voting* noted, the voter's judgments will appear more thoughtful and well-informed than they actually are because the voter's way of perceiving campaign issues "maximizes agreement with his own side and maximizes disagreement with the opposition."<sup>62</sup>

When voters assume that their favored candidate's issue positions are the same as their own, they are "projecting" their positions onto the candidate. The campaign that exists in the voter's mind—the "campaign as perceived"—is different from the campaign as it is carried on in the real world. Voters sometimes think they are voting consistently with their principles and positions because they are projecting—assuming that the candidate they favor takes the position they wish him or her to take.

One of the most important findings in *Voting* is that the extent of misperception, or projection, by voters is related to the political campaign. Issues discussed more often and more thoroughly in the campaign were perceived more accurately by respondents than other issues. Furthermore, misperception was inversely related to the degree of conflict, and competition, on an issue: the more the candidates talked about an issue and the greater their differences on it, the more accurately it was perceived.<sup>63</sup> There was more misperception at the beginning of the campaign than at the end, and there was more misperception among people who paid less attention

to the campaign or who were less well educated or who were less exposed to campaign communications.<sup>64</sup>

Campaign communications, then, increased the accuracy of voter perceptions; misperceptions were far more likely on issues that were peripheral to the campaign. Issues at conflict between the parties received more public exposure, and the information to which voters were exposed reduced their projections. Indeed, exposure to communications was the strongest single influence on accuracy of perceptions.<sup>65</sup>

### Projection as a "Benefit of the Doubt"

When voters identify with parties or candidates, they are giving them the benefit of the doubt. When they assume that the positions they favor are the ones their party or candidate will take, or when they assume that their favorite candidate's position is acceptable, they are *projecting* on the basis of past information in much the same way that an investor in stocks projects future earnings from past corporate performance, or assumes that a company whose new president has a record of successes will improve under his leadership. This willingness to project can be taken to mean receptivity, a tendency to give one's party the benefit of the doubt when there is no other information available—a meaning consistent with the findings in *Voting*.

If the benefit of the doubt that voters give to their party or candidates were open-ended, we would have a pure "will to believe" model of voting and campaigning. If voters had such a strong will to believe in their candidates and parties that they rejected any and all data that challenged their commitments, campaigns would be very different. Even the first Columbia study, *The People's Choice*, showed clearly the limits to the benefit of the doubt that people give to their side.<sup>66</sup>

In 1940, President Roosevelt sought an unprecedented third term in office. The Republican campaign hammered away at the idea of a third term, and the Democratic party countered by arguing against "changing horses in midstream"—the stream being recovery from the Great Depression. Individual Democrats, however, had a hard time accepting their party's arguments in favor of a third term and countering the Republican arguments against it: "There was hardly a Republican who did not mention the third term as a reason for his Republican vote. And there was hardly a Democrat who tried to justify the third term as such."<sup>67</sup> On the other side, individual Republicans were defensive about charges that their party favored business interests over those of "the people." When asked about their party, they would frequently say that Republicans were for "all the

people too." They did not automatically adopt their party's claims to have policies that were best for all, and felt a need to defend themselves and their party against responsibility for causing the depression. In the 1940s, *The People's Choice* found, "The onus now rests upon a business candidate; he must somehow claim a connection with the people. No parallel obligation rests upon the candidate of the working people; he does not have to pretend to benefit business."<sup>68</sup>

As these examples from the 1940 campaign suggest, levels of voter projection and rationalization depend heavily on two variables: (1) how much benefit of the doubt voters give their party; and (2) how effective they judge the campaign arguments to be. Indeed, what is called "negative campaigning" is campaigning designed to provide voters with information that will break down their projections, to present "information to the contrary" that will show them issues on which they disagree with the stands of their party or candidate.<sup>69</sup>

#### *Campaigns Matter*

These findings about misperception still have not been completely digested within political science and democratic theory, or by critics of American political campaigns. It is critical that when a (contested) campaign focuses on an issue it leads to *less* voter misperception, not more. Psychological defenses are not so impermeable as to rule out adjustment between a voter's perceptions and "political reality." Misperception is a "psychic indulgence" that decreases when there is heated political conflict.<sup>70</sup> Political reality is strong enough that when the stakes are raised and more information becomes available, voters become more accurate in their perceptions. The more they care about an issue, the better they are able to understand it; the more strongly the parties differ on an issue, and the more voters hear about it, the more accurate their perceptions become. There is no denying that misperception is always present in campaigns. But it is also clear that campaign communications do affect choices, and that they generally make voters more, not less, accurate in their perceptions of candidates and issues.

Despite cries that campaigns have become less substantial in the television era, recent research has supported *Voting's* findings that campaign communications increase the accuracy of voters' perceptions. Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, examining the 1976 general election, found that projection, or false consensus, vanished as learning proceeded during the campaign; misperceptions occurred "primarily when there [was an] absence both of information *and* strong feelings about the

candidate."<sup>71</sup> In contradiction to the claim that voters' perceptions are "largely distorted by motivational forces," Jon Krosnick found that voters in the 1984 election were "remarkably accurate in their perceptions of where presidential candidates [stood] relative to one another on controversial policy issues."<sup>72</sup>

In addition to reducing misperception, campaign information also helps people connect issues to government and parties. In 1984, "voters who followed the presidential campaign closely were more likely to connect their personal financial situation with macroeconomic trends or government policies. . . . Attributions of responsibility for changes in economic well-being are based in part on cues received from the political environment and particularly from the mass media."<sup>73</sup> Thus in a world in which causal reasoning matters but voters have only limited knowledge of government, campaign communications heighten voters' awareness of how government affects their lives, while reinforcing policy differences between parties and candidates. People do not automatically grade government on net changes in personal benefits, financial or otherwise, nor do they automatically hold government accountable for "government-induced changes in well-being."<sup>74</sup>

Voters are ignorant of many basic facts about government, but they still pick up important information about the principal differences between candidates. In a 1976 CBS News/*New York Times* poll taken two days after the November election, respondents were asked the names of the two vice-presidential candidates, and also which task each presidential candidate was more concerned with—reducing unemployment or cutting the rate of inflation. Only 58 percent correctly recalled the names of the vice-presidential candidates. But in answering the question about the priorities of the presidential candidates, 62 percent said Ford was more concerned with inflation and 72 percent said Carter was more concerned with unemployment (see table 2.2). These answers suggest how misleading it can be to measure voters' acuity and concern simply by testing their knowledge of facts. As I demonstrate throughout this book, the low-information rationality that voters use allows them to pick up a surprising amount of information about the basic policy directions offered by opposing presidential candidates.

The authors of *The People's Choice*, the first study of an American political campaign, hoped and expected to find voters who were knowledgeable about the basics of government and voted according to their consideration of the issues. Their scholarly hopes were dashed: "The open-minded

TABLE 2.2  
Education and Voter Information in the 1976 Election

	< 12th Grade (%)	H.S. Graduate (%)	Some College (%)	College Graduate (%)	All Respondents (%)
Percentage knowing names of both vice-presidential nominees	45	54	70	84	58
Does Gerald Ford care more about:					
Unemployment	14	21	15	7	16
Inflation	45	63	72	83	62
Don't know	40	16	13	8	23
Does Jimmy Carter care more about:					
Unemployment	63	73	75	83	72
Inflation	14	14	14	7	13
Don't know	23	13	11	9	15

Source: CBS News/*New York Times* postelection poll, 1976

Note: This poll was a panel, calling back 2,400 respondents who had been interviewed in the last week of the campaign. Only registered voters were asked these questions.

voters who make a sincere attempt to weigh the issues and the candidates dispassionately for the good of the country as a whole—exist mainly in deferential campaign propaganda, in textbooks on civics, in the movies and in the minds of political idealists. In real life, they are few indeed.<sup>75</sup>

The widespread lack of knowledge about the basic operations of government has led scholars and others to produce a voluminous literature about the "incompetent citizen," replete with concern for how democracy can survive, let alone flourish.<sup>76</sup> And indeed, when half of the American public cannot name the two U.S. senators from their state, and 20 percent of college graduates think Russia belongs to NATO, and a large majority of Americans do not know that Japan has a democratic system of government, there is a real basis for concern.

On the other hand, there is much that voters *do* know about government, and many ways in which they manage to consider issues without high levels of information. They need not know what Senator Moynihan and President Bush actually said in order to be affected by news reports of their debates about Social Security; they need not know how the Japanese government works in order to be concerned about U.S.-Japanese trade is-

sues; and they need not know how many members there are in the Soviet Politburo before news about *perestroika* affects their attitudes about the U.S. defense budget. Whereas the "incompetent citizen" literature is good for telling us the many things voters do not know, it is not so good at providing clues about what they *do* know. The by-product theory, by contrast, can generate insights about where and how voters get information about government, and therefore helps describe what citizens will actually know when they vote.

In a world of pocketbook voters, education would not matter. But in a world where reasons and connections matter, education makes a difference. Though an educated electorate still will not have the basic information about legislative issues and government management that textbooks expect of ideal citizens, and no deeper understanding of older "core" issues, it *will* have limited information about a wider range of subjects, including national and international events, that are farther from daily-life experience. Political campaign communications matter precisely *because* voters do not regularly pay much attention to political news, and because they do not know many of the things that governments and candidates have done in the past.

We are now learning more about what voters know, how they reason when they vote to make sense of the many pieces of information they have. Voting is not a reflexive, mechanistic use of daily-life or media information. It involves reasoning, the connecting of some information to government performance and other information to specific government policies. People do not reason directly from personal problems to votes; they reason with ideas about governmental performance and responsibility. They consider not only economic issues but family, residential, and consumer issues as well. They think not only of their immediate needs but also of their needs for insurance against future problems; not only about private goods but also about collective goods. They think not only of how they are doing but also about how other people like themselves are doing; not just about the immediate future but also about the long term.

Somehow, without the basic civics data, voters manage to learn differences between the parties and candidates. In the next chapter, I discuss how voters use information shortcuts to keep track of the information they have—and compensate for the information they lack.