

# Using Descriptive Research to Better Theorize What It Means to “Know” in American Politics

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## Introduction

What kind of information (if any) do ordinary citizens draw on when thinking about and reacting to political phenomena? An extensive literature in American politics has documented the role (or lack thereof) of factual information on political decision making (Converse 2006; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968). For instance, Converse (2006) argued that the typical “man in the street” did not organize their thoughts about politics on the liberal-conservative continuum. Rather, only a small group of political elites exhibit well-formed opinions on political issues—for everyone else, their beliefs are both inconsistent and fragmented.

Following Converse, decades of research investigated the formation of political attitudes and found that the public largely relies on heuristics such as party labels to reason politically (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Pomper 1972). Departing from this work, Popkin (1994) claimed that voters make reasoned evaluations of parties, candidates, and issues—they just do so based on premises they have gleaned from their surroundings including their past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaigns. He argued that ordinary voters draw on this information and use their “guts” to decide how they feel about different leaders and policy issues.

A growing area of research on policy feedback and proximal contact has extended Popkin’s findings about how individuals circumvent the high costs associated with information gathering by employing “low information rationality” (1991, 5). Specifically, this scholarship has pointed to the influence of experiential learning on political decision making. That is, the role of firsthand experience with street level bureaucrats on political attitudes on the one hand; or, on the other hand, the influence of proximal contact with state actors and institutions via the encounters of family members and friends.

In this memo, I examine the potential for scholars to use descriptive research as a tool to theorize about how individuals’ intimate relationships correlate (or not) with political decision making. Specifically, I argue that descriptive research could be used to adjudicate different potential mechanisms (e.g., intimacy of relationship versus frequency of contact) and formulate theoretical expectations about how vicarious learning occurs in the world of politics via one’s social network. Research in this area would advance existing scholarship by broadening how political scientists conceptualize political knowledge. More, it would add nuance to discussions of the implication of the public’s lack of factual political knowledge on democratic governance and accountability.

## How the Public Formulates Impressions about Government and Policymaking

Individuals can form impressions about government and the policymaking process from at least three different sources. First, they may learn about government and policy issues from newspapers or television news outlets such as CNN and Fox News. Information from these sources is commonly referred to as *mediated knowledge* (Mutz 1998). Second, individuals may gather information about government and policy issues through their own direct experiences with government actors; this type of learning is sometimes called firsthand or experiential knowledge (Cramer and Toff 2017; Lerman and McCabe 2017; Soss 1999). Third, individuals may learn about government and public policies via information gathered through their social network—what is referred to as indirect or *secondhand knowledge* (Carlson 2018; H. Walker 2014; H. Walker, Roman, and Barreto 2020). Existing scholarship suggests that these different forms of knowledge have important political implications including shaping people’s perception of their competency to participate in politics, understanding of policy issues, trust in government, and willingness to engage in nonelectoral political activity (Lawless and Fox 2001; Soss 1999; H. L. Walker 2020).

For the most part, existing scholarship on political communication and political decision making has primarily focused on studying the political implications of mediated and firsthand knowledge. For instance, early work on political communication and attitude formation suggests that individuals' personal experiences with policy issues only become relevant when people see that these experiences match the content and tone of news coverage of these issues (Mutz 1998). Given this finding, subsequent work has primarily focused on how the content of news coverage, specifically how issues are *framed*, influences attitude formation (Chong and Druckman 2007; Iyengar 1991; Lawrence 2004; McGinty et al. 2015; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Swalve and DeFoster 2016; Wiest, Raymond, and Clawson 2015). Scholarship on framing effects has convincingly demonstrated how even subtle differences in the presentation of political arguments can substantively alter individuals' political beliefs and behavior. Yet, for the most prevalent social and policy problems individuals are likely to have more than mediated information to parse when forming their policy views. Indeed, they themselves may have firsthand experience with these issues. Or, at the very least, individuals may know people in their social networks who are affected by ongoing social and policy problems.

The ongoing opioid epidemic offers a powerful example of the relevance of studying the influence of mediated information *as well as* secondhand knowledge derived from one's social network on attitude formation. The United States is currently in the midst of the stubborn opioid epidemic where nearly 500,000 Americans have died since 1999 (CDC 2020). At least two million others have been diagnosed with opioid use disorder (Dydyk, Jain, and Gupta 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, 46 percent of Americans have a friend or family member with a current or past drug addiction (Gramlich 2017). These statistics suggest that nearly half of the U.S. population is being exposed to elite discourse about drug use and addiction and are drawing comparisons in the main takeaways from mediated information *as well as* secondhand knowledge that they have gleaned from individuals in their social network.

Unfortunately, existing literature has little to say about how individuals in this context may formulate different opinions based on the source of this information—mediated versus secondhand? Moreover, does the proximity of the relationship with the person who is struggling with addiction matter? For instance, are individuals more likely to counterargue mediated information when the person they know who is affected by the issue is a close friend versus a neighbor?

### **Motivating the Study of Secondhand Knowledge in Political Decision Making**

But why would we expect the social and political experiences of others to matter in the world of politics? Psychologists have long studied how people learn through social interactions. According to Bandura and Walters (1977), individuals not only learn from their direct experiences but also through vicarious experience wherein they observe other people's behavior and the associated consequences. From this perspective, vicarious learning increases individuals' capacity for learning by allowing them to amass considerably more information than they could as a result of their own trial and error experiences. According to work in this area, vicarious learning allows individuals to “solve problems symbolically without having to enact the various alternatives; and they can foresee the probable consequences of different actions and alternatives” which can help them make more insightful decisions that benefit from foresight (Bandura and Walters 1977). In fact, Bandura and Walters (1977) contend that most behaviors are learned vicariously—for instance, learning to communicate with others. Much of this vicarious learning accrues as a result of casually watching or focused observation of exemplars with visual or live demonstrations being more effective for learning than written lessons.

Policy issues from which individuals can acquire secondhand knowledge are wide ranging—from drug policy to social welfare or family leave policy. Indeed, political scientists have already begun to observe how the vicarious experiences of those with whom we have social ties influence political beliefs and behavior (Michener 2018; H. L. Walker 2020). For instance, researchers who study the criminal justice system have explored how direct and indirect contact with the carceral state informs political engagement (Lerman and Weaver 2014; Roman, Walker, and Barreto 2021; H. Walker 2014; H. L. Walker 2020; H. L. Walker and García-Castañón 2017; H. Walker, Roman, and Barreto 2020; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Work in this area suggests that there are likely generalized and consistent impacts of secondhand experience on political beliefs and behavior. However, to date these findings have focused exclusively on proximal contact within the context of the criminal justice system.

Descriptive research is a tool that could be leveraged by researchers who study a range of public policies to gather information about the mechanisms at work when vicarious learning occurs in the world of politics. Are individuals more likely to hold onto lessons they've learned about government and public policy because the person from whom they acquired this information is a more intimate contact (child versus coworker)? Or, is it simply the case that people remember lessons from people with whom they interact more frequently and therefore have more opportunities to overhear relevant political information?

Descriptive research is an invaluable tool in adjudicating these two potential mechanisms. Researchers could track the references individuals make to the experiences of people in their social network when justifying their political beliefs and use these data to generate a typology of politically relevant relationships from which scholars could generate theories of level of intimacy versus frequency of contact. This typology could then be used to create games modeling strategic interactions and decision-making that mimic a range of behavioral outcomes from resource allocations to contacting political representatives. From this vantage point, researchers would expand our conceptualization of what it means to know in politics and begin studying the impact of different types of knowledge on relevant political outcomes.

### **Preliminary Research Using Description to Motivate the Study of Secondhand Knowledge**

In December 2017, I administered a survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk that provides critical insight into the information individuals use to rationalize about social issues—in this case, drug use and addiction in the United States. The study sample included 1,394 non-Hispanic White individuals. Of these respondents, 46% were men, 89% were college educated, 25% self-identified as Republican, 41% as Democrat, and 31% as Independent.

During the survey, respondents were asked the following question: “Thinking about some of the problems facing communities in the US today, do you think drug abuse and addiction is a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem?” Immediately after this question was a follow up that asked survey respondents to explain *why* they believed drug abuse and addiction was a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem. 1,309 self-identified White individuals provided a justification for their beliefs—589 White men and 703 White women. I used these responses to assess how often (if at all) individuals invoked secondhand knowledge versus mediated information to justify their perceptions of the scale of this problem in the United States.

To track the rate at which respondents referenced secondhand knowledge versus mediated information, I conducted a content analysis of the open-ended follow up question that asked respondents to explain their perception of the scale of the drug problem in the United States. Following (Dirix and Gelders 2010), I generated a list of questions to systematically analyze and

code the open-ended responses. A response was coded as invoking secondhand knowledge if the answer to any of the following was true:

- Explicitly refers to someone the respondent knows who is affected by drug misuse and addiction?
- Explicitly refers to what the respondent has learned as a result of knowing someone who is affected by drug misuse and addiction?
- Refers to or describes drug misuse and addiction in the respondents' local community?
- Refers to what the respondent has heard about drug misuse and addiction?

Along the same lines, a response was coded as invoking mediated information if the answer to any of the following was true:

- Explicitly refers to what the respondent has seen, read, or heard about drug misuse or addiction in the news?
- Explicitly refers to what the respondent has seen or heard about drug misuse or addiction in television shows, documentaries, or movies?

Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of respondents' perceptions of the scale of the drug misuse and addiction problem by self-reported race and sex. Unsurprisingly given staggering statistics frequently repeated in media coverage of this issue, respondents overwhelmingly believed that this issue was a major problem. More specifically, 73% of White men (N=429) and 86% of White women (N=607) reported that drug abuse and addiction was a major problem in the United States. At the same time, 23% of White men (N=135) and 12% of White women stated that drug abuse and addiction was a minor problem. Finally, 4% of White men (N=25) and 1% of White women shared that drug abuse and addiction was not a problem.

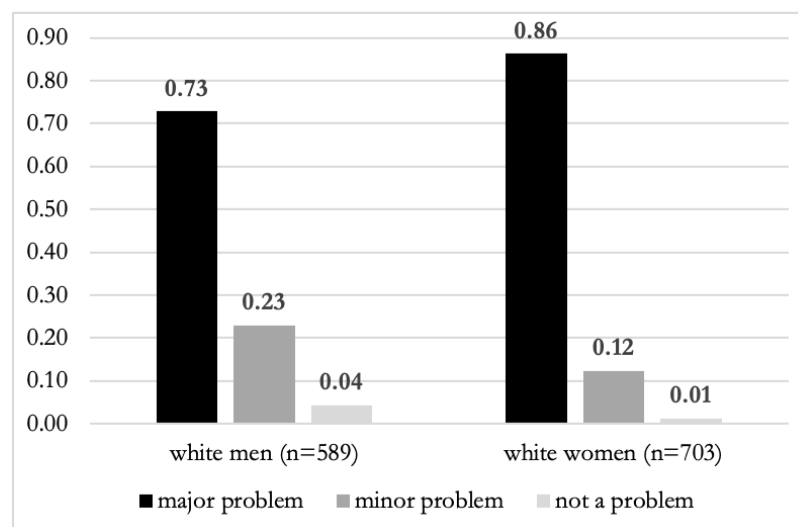


Figure 1: Survey respondents' perception of the scale of the problem of drug abuse and addiction in the United States. The dependent variable is the proportion of respondents who reported that drug abuse and addiction was either a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem at all. Higher values correspond with a greater proportion of respondents who endorsed the perception of the scale of drug abuse and addiction.

Figure 2 illustrates trends in the content of respondents' open response entries that asked individuals to justify their beliefs about drug abuse and addiction. The analysis revealed that 12

percent of these justifications invoked mediated information. For example, one White male respondent wrote, “Mostly because of news reports about how prevalent drug abuse and addiction are.” A White female respondent explained, “I do not know anyone who abuses drugs, but according to the news every night, it is a major problem. I guess that it must be then.” Others vaguely referenced things they learned “in a study” or “in stories” about the issue but did not name a specific individual as the source of this information. For example, a White female respondent stated, “I hear stories all the time of average people and how they were found unconscious with children in their vehicles, or in their homes by themselves, or just not being able to make ends meet because of drug addiction.”

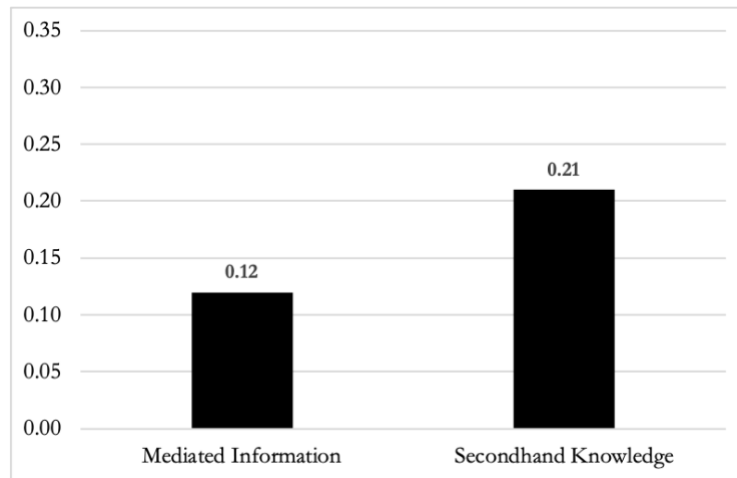


Figure 2: Source of justifications for survey respondents’ perception that drug abuse and addiction is a major problem, minor problem, or not at all a problem in the United States. The two types of justifications were references to mediated information and secondhand knowledge. Mediated information refers to information presented in the news or media more generally. Secondhand knowledge refers to a range of indirect experiences including what happened to a respondents’ family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or observations about local community members. Higher values are associated with more responses that made explicit references to these forms of information when respondents were asked to explain the reason why they believed that drug abuse and addiction was a major problem.

Secondhand knowledge references were more common justifications among survey respondents. Indeed, 21 percent of justifications referred to secondhand knowledge related to this issue. These responses referred to a range of topics including individuals’ observations about how drug addiction and abuse were affecting their surrounding neighborhood, anecdotal accounts of friends and family members who are currently addicted to drugs, as well as the ease with which they have seen people receive prescriptions for pain pills from doctors, etc. For example, a White male who believed that drug abuse and addiction is a major problem explained that he “used to live in Akron OH and the county morgue has to use refridgerated [sic] trailers to store bodies in because there are so many overdose victims.” A White female who similarly believed that this issue was a major problem wrote, “A lot of people that I grew up with were really into drugs, some lost their lives, some ended up in jail or rehab, and others decided to finally get their life together.” These findings suggest that White men and women were more likely to invoke secondhand knowledge than mediated information. In fact, they referenced secondhand knowledge at *nearly twice* the rate of mediated information when justifying their beliefs about this issue.

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