

Political Participation, and the Political Knowledge of Adults and Adolescents

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Introduction

In a recently published book (Milner 2002), I attempt to establish the relationship between the level of political knowledge and political participation in advanced western democracies. In this paper, I reflect on the implications of my findings, as well as of new research that has emerged since the work was completed, on the debate surrounding contemporary analyses of voter turnout and its apparent decline. I take the position that if the knowledge dimension were better incorporated into their theoretical frameworks and research designs, political scientists, and thus policy makers, could better direct their efforts toward addressing declining political participation. And I suggest how we might move in this direction.

This is not to imply that there is an absence of scholarly interest in political participation. Quite the contrary.¹ In recent years we have seen a large and growing number of public testimonies, both academic and lay, to the decline in voter turnout in many democratic countries. These have been based on, and, in turn, given rise to an impressive quantity of research on its possible causes and consequences. Nevertheless, for all the spurt in interest and insights into political participation, the knowledge or information dimension is not given the attention it deserves – at least in comparative analysis. While single-nation surveys are increasingly including knowledge-related questions, the same cannot be said for comparative research. A partial exception to this rule, studies of adolescents, seems to be emerging, but, as we shall see, applying the findings from such studies to the behaviour of adults appears to raise as many problems as it solves.

Political Knowledge in Political Science: Underresearched and Overestimated?

The absence of the needed systematic comparative research leaves us, political scientists and pundits alike, unable to in effect adequately distinguish between two different phenomena related to non-voting. Among non-voters who explain the fact by stating that “all politicians are the same”, there are both politically informed individuals who reject voting in favour of some other form of activity they see as politically oriented and which they consider more meaningful, and others who are, in fact, revealing that they lack the information to adequately distinguish among the candidates and/or parties. Not infrequently, contemporary lay and even expert writing on the subject asserts or at least implies that declining turnout reflects an increase the first group; yet the evidence suggests rather that it is the latter, the uninformed citizen, that is on the rise.

But existing evidence is insufficient to allow for the needed systematic analysis of the relationship between voting and political knowledge. The comparative research has not been done. In its absence, political scientists follow their own instincts. As good democrats, we have a hard time accepting that the demos is less than it can be.² This makes us less skeptical than we should be about “soft” surveys finding, for example, people to be “interested in politics,” and less concerned about getting data from “hard” surveys, which in effect test whether that interest was actually invested into effort to gain political information. (Why we need to is starkly revealed by a simple American experiment in which the order of political interest and political knowledge questions was reversed. When first asked about their interest, 75.9 percent reported following politics most or some of the time; however, when political knowledge

questions were first posed, the percentage expressing interest dropped to 57.4 percent - Scharwz and Schumer, 1997).

Political scientists sometimes also avoid the “hard” aspects in another way, by, in effect, defining away the knowledge dimension. For example, a term central to this discussion, that of the “competent voter,” has been defined as follows by Arthur Lupia, a leading figure in the debate: a voter is competent if seen to have made the same choice that he or she would have been made if fully informed (Lupia and Johnston, 1999). One could say that such an approach is analogous to defining as literate a person who learns to take the door marked “exit” to leave by watching other people as literate. I use the analogy of literacy because I take the view that a competent voter is necessarily a knowledgeable voter. Looked at this way, the level of voter competence is thus – like the level of functional literacy – a social fact, and not merely an artifact of the application of the researcher’s operational definition to a given situation.

We need to be sensitive to such tendencies because political scientists suffer from a professional deformation that makes us prone to underestimating the importance and effect of low political knowledge. It lies simply in the fact that, as individuals, political scientists are knowledgeable about politics. Consider how Blais’ (2000: 143) concludes his recent insightful investigation into possible explanations of voting and non-voting. In a rare (for political scientists) display of introspection, Blais asks why he himself usually votes. His answer is that he believes in democracy and it would be inconsistent to abstain. So far so good. But, he adds, he would not vote if the parties or candidates were indistinguishable so that it made no difference who won. And on this note the book ends. Understandably, no entertainment is given to the thought that there might in fact be differences that, were he aware of them, the outcome would matter enough for him to vote. The problem is that, unable to imagine such a situation concerning himself, the political scientist can overlook the fact that this is just the situation many others are in: for the potential voter with insufficient information to distinguish between the parties and candidates, it does not, by definition, make a difference as to who wins.

Rational Choice and Voting

At another level, we can see the tendency to undervalue the importance of information in the treatment accorded by political scientists to the seminal work on the rational choice (RC) approach to politics, that of economist Anthony Downs (1957). Both political scientists who have embraced Downs’ RC approach, and, especially, those critical of it, tend to downplay the information dimension. Among the latter, the most important is Green and Shapiro’s well-known critique of RC explanations of voting, which associates Downs with a “voters paradox” in which “individuals are asked to sacrifice time and transportation costs on behalf of a public good, the election of a particular candidate or party” (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 47). This critique misses the importance Downs places on information when calculating the costs of voting. The real paradox, for Downs, is the contradiction between, on the one hand, rational citizens wanting democracy to work well so as to gain its benefits and knowing it to work best when citizens are well-informed, and, on the other, the fact that the benefits to individuals from informing themselves are outweighed by the costs they must bear in doing so. In the “political market,” unlike the product market, “whether [the citizen] is well informed has no perceptible impact on the benefits he gets” (Downs 1957: 246).

Cast in this way, I contend, Downs' voters' paradox is not inescapable: a rational voter is not a contradiction in terms. His critics notwithstanding, Downs was not especially concerned by the "costs" of the *act* of voting. For an economist, the cost of getting to the product and services market is normally exogenous; and, in the analogy, the same is true of getting to the poll - especially given the simplification of the registration and voting process that has taken place since Downs' time. While Downs' is not necessarily the last word on the costs and, especially, benefits of voting, it is to their own loss that political scientists have failed to adequately follow Downs down the path of information-cost analysis. In the next section of this paper I set out my own approach to incorporating this dimension into comparative analysis and, thus, suggest how our research and analysis might contribute to reducing information costs, or, in less Downsian terms, fostering an informed citizenry.

Political Knowledge and Social Capital

Policies and institutions affecting political knowledge and hence, voting turnout, operate at what I term the demand and supply side. For example, those on the demand side affect the politically relevant knowledge of adults, directly through, for example, continuing education programs, and indirectly through reducing the costs of political information in the form of newspaper subsidies and various measures facilitating the transmission of politically relevant information in election campaigns. In addition, there are educational programs in the form of civics courses and similar programs directed at adolescents, i.e. voters-to-be.

With regard to the media, my research supports those who see television consumption as the major cause of declining civic engagement (e.g. Putnam, 1995), except that it stresses the knowledge-reducing effect due to the replacement of newspapers and public service radio and television by commercial television as the primary source of political information. This appears to matter more than the fact that people watch TV instead of bowling together. Underlying this difference is my approach to the associational participation stressed in the social-capital literature: we should be concerned about such activities to the extent that they add to the politically-relevant knowledge of members, rather than assuming that what matters is that they engender trust.³

This distinction is important given the widespread application of the social-capital perspective in current research. I contend that application of this perspective to questions of political participation has placed undue emphasis on social trust to the detriment of knowledge. Scholars working within this perspective too often simply assume that declining social capital explains, or is part of the same phenomenon as, declining voter turnout.⁴ The immense popularity of Putnam's work has had the result that it is taken for granted that the social capital paradigm captures voting and non-voting: people who trust others are defined as good citizens, and good citizens vote. Yet the empirical evidence for this is not very strong.⁵ Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that trusting citizens have less reason to vote and participate in politics, than do distrustful ones.

The social capital paradigm is even more problematic on the supply side. On the supply side are historical developments outside the realm of institutional reform that in themselves make the political

world easier or more difficult to understand. In this category can be placed explanations for declining turnout suggesting that with the maturing of the welfare state and the end of the Cold War, the narrowing of differences between major parties of the left and right makes it becomes harder to distinguish among political alternatives, leaving people effectively less politically informed. But the supply side is by no means limited to historical givens. The social capital perspective downplays the crucial institutional dimension,⁶ more specifically, the impact of political institutions. This effectively ties its practitioners' hands when it comes to proposing remedies to declining social capital. We see this in the concluding chapter of *Bowling Alone* in which Putnam's "agenda for social capitalists" turns to politics only after education, work, urban design, religion, the media, and culture - "Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 many more Americans will participate in the public life of our communities - running for office, attending public meetings, serving on committees, campaigning in elections, and even voting" (Putnam 2000: 412) - failing even then to address how institutions frame such choices, including those to "even" vote.

In my terms, the social capital approach focuses almost exclusively on the demand side to the exclusion of the supply side in its approach to the problem of declining civic engagement, hence leaving no place for the insights of Lijphart (1997) and many others on the effect of political institutions. Particularly when we focus on the neglected political knowledge dimension of civic engagement, we cannot ignore institutions, since "capable people, in environments where information is available may choose to be uninformed if that information is expensive and difficult to accumulate (Gordon and Segura, 1997:129), and "citizen competence is largely a function of the political environment, which often gives the citizen difficult tasks and little support for performing them" (Kuklinski, Quirk and Jerit, 2001: 1).

Institutions frame the incentives affecting the level and kind of "effort" on the part of political actors to get voters to the polls. Some of these take the form of regulations that operate both on the supply and demand side, specifically those concerning party and election financing, party access to the media, and various other rules affecting access to information. At least two other institutional factors among the many discussed in the literature linking regulations and voter turnout are relevant to this discussion. One of these is compulsory voting which, we know, boosts turnout,⁷ but it also reduces the incentive on parties to "get out the vote" and thus inform voters. And we do not know if this effect is compensated by efforts of citizens who would otherwise not vote to inform themselves of the relevant issues and facts.

The second factor is the frequency and complexity of elections and referenda: Does "information overload" due to frequent multi-level elections and referenda account for low turnout in Switzerland and the US in particular? There is surely something to this (see Wattenberg , 1998), but less than meets the eye, since information gathered at one level or in a referendum can be used in an election at another level. We know, for example, that while American turnout is relatively low at all levels, Switzerland moves from the bottom to the middle ranks when we go from national to local-level voting (Milner 2002, ch.6).

Electoral Systems, Political Knowledge and Political Participation

At the centre of the discussion of supply side effects lie electoral institutions. I argue (see Milner 1999, 2002) that the well-established turnout boost associated with electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR) is, in large part, due to what can be described as PR's increasing the supply of political knowledge, by simplifying the political map and reducing the incentives for politicians to distort information.⁸ PR boosts voter turnout - Lijphart (1997) estimated it to be between 9 and 12 percent - due, first, to every vote counting equally under PR, so that every voter in a PR election is comparable to a resident in that fraction of well contested single-member districts under first-past-the-post (FPTP).⁹ This direct effect on bringing otherwise excluded citizens to the voting booth is especially notable in disaffected sectors of the community who seek representation from small parties incapable of breaking through in winner-take all contests (Powell, 1989; Karp and Banducci, 1998).

From an RC perspective, the overall effect of making every vote count is less a matter of the individual's increased chance of affecting the outcome, which, in reality, is still minuscule, than of the different incentives placed on political parties. In an FPTP election, parties ignore voters in many constituencies, investing effort and money to get the attention of voters in close contests.¹⁰ Under PR, parties have an incentive to inform all voters of their programs, rather than just targeting the median voter through stressing personality at the cost of issues.

In addition, over the long term, the representational logic of PR-based, multi-party systems is to inhibit precipitous changes in a party's principles or identity, that is, the elements that constitute its place on the political map. Political actors, and the voters themselves, can thus count on a relatively clearly drawn and stable political map on which to plot their own paths.¹¹ Moreover, FPTP exaggerates a party's weakness, creating a disincentive to being involved locally in regions where it is weak. Over time, this tends to remove parties from effective presence in local politics. As a result, voters cannot easily apply political knowledge from one level to another, in effect increasing the cost of political knowledge.

In the next section, I try to integrate these elements into a model of the factors affecting the decision to vote or abstain. Doing so raises the question of the level of analysis in which we are engaged. The model is necessarily an individual one, yet the various supply and demand side factors linked to political knowledge mentioned reflect societal institutional and policy choices. This means that much of the relevant data needed to test any such model must be aggregate, i.e. can be derived only from comparative research linking turnout to differences in institutions and policies. As we shall see, it is the failure to develop a research design to transcend this dichotomy that inhibits progress in this area and sets the challenge for future research.

Will the Rational Citizen Vote?

We begin with the standard RC formula which sets out the utility of the vote as a simple cost-benefit calculation in which the citizen acts in a political market analogous to a consumer in a product and services market:

$$Uv = PxB - C$$

The formula states simply that, the utility of voting (U_v) is the probability (P) of affecting the outcome times the value placed on that outcome (B) minus the costs entailed (C). If U_v is positive, then the citizen, presumably, casts a ballot.

Let us now look at each of these elements in greater detail, teasing out the information aspect, $I(1-5)$, an aspect which, as noted, was central to Downs' understanding of the costs:

- P is the [knowledge of the = $I1$] possibility of the outcome being different than would be the case if one did not vote, a possibility affected by such factors as the [knowledge of the = $I2$] number of seats in the electoral district divided by the number of eligible voters, and the competitiveness of the election.
- B is based on the [knowledge of the = $I3$] policy differences (in program and practice) among parties and/or candidates relevant to the voter's values.

Moreover, the original formula is incomplete. We now expand it to include other aspects not included in the original but compatible with it: i.e.

$$U_v = P \times B + E + CD - C(v+i)$$

- E is entertainment value, i.e. voting as expressing a desire for the "home team" to win, which enhances appreciation of the exercise (see Toka, 2001);
- $CD =$ Civic Duty: CD comprises, first, the social pressure to conform to social norms; second, the desire not to be hypocritical in one's own eyes, (or in those in whom one confides) when one believes in democracy. Both aspects are beyond the capacity of policy makers to directly influence - at least as far as adults are concerned - though the latter can be affected indirectly by reforms that make democratic institutions work better. There is a knowledge-related aspect to the latter ($I4$), since it presumes a minimal knowledge and understanding of the workings of democratic institutions.
- C (Cost) is broken into two components: the [knowledge of - $I5$] cost of going to the poll (C_v) and the cost of informing oneself so as to choose meaningfully (C_i)
 - C_v is affected by such factors as, weekend voting, postal voting, passive versus active registration. C_v is net of the possible costs (fines or public embarrassments) faced by the non-voter in a system with compulsory voting. As noted above, C_v is normally very small.
 - C_i does not include efforts to gather political information unrelated to voting as such those due to professional obligations of journalists, researchers, lawyers, etc.
 - $i = (I1 + I2 + I3 + I4 + I5)$,

The evidence suggests that *I1* (knowledge of the odds of being the pivotal voter) seems to have very little effect (Blais, 2000); *I2*, knowledge of the closeness of the campaign, can have an influence, as we can see from the literature on the effects of regulations restricting the publication of Gallup polls in the last day(s) before the election. But meaningful application of such regulatory measures is effectively mooted today by communications technology. *I5* does matter, but we do not have any literature allowing us to distinguish between the effects of reducing the costs of voting through procedures making access to the ballot easier and those of efforts to inform potential voters of these new procedures. In sum, while *I5*, knowledge of voting procedures, and, related to it, *I4*, understanding of democratic institutions, are not to be ignored, *I3*, knowledge enabling the citizen to distinguish between the policies of alternative parties or candidates is the crucial factor.

Note that these various elements in the model are presented as working alone, but this is not always the case. For example, the competitiveness of elections enhances their entertainment value. Sometimes they can work in two opposite directions. For example, postal voting decreases the cost of voting, but may reduce the incentive for the citizen to seek out, or for the parties/candidates to supply, relevant information.

Overall, the formula brings into relief the importance of information. While programs aimed at fostering the political participation of adolescents can legitimately and, perhaps, effectively aim at civic duty, this is not the case for adults. When targeting voters rather than voters-to-be, measures to stimulate voter turnout should and foremost seek to reduce the cost of relevant information, *I(3-5)*, through both the demand and supply-oriented policies discussed here.

Optimal Voter Turnout and Civic Literacy

Let us look in a bit more detail at the factors affecting the costs of relevant information for the citizen. In principle, in a given political context, we assume, even if we cannot adequately describe, a minimum level of political information (which we denote as *Im*), below which the citizen normally cannot be expected to vote. Hypothesizing such a minimum does not preclude the effect of civic duty, since we may assume that, under such normal circumstances, a highly developed sense of a civic duty to vote would extend to seeking out *Im*. Conversely, I assume that there would not be many politically knowledgeable citizens in a well-functioning democracy who abstain as a matter of course out of a lack of civic duty.

This assumption raises the issue of those informed citizens who divorce their civic duty as citizens from voting, rejecting participating in "politics as usual" through the ballot box in favour of another form of politically oriented activity that they consider more meaningful. With the possible exception of Norway, where its stark decline in (especially) young people's level of turnout in recent years may be significantly linked to such a phenomenon (Bjorklund, 2000), I am not aware of data from other countries that makes this connection. Indeed, the decline in Finland, the Nordic country that has seen the most precipitous decline in turnout over the last generation, is attributed particularly to the abstention by poorly-educated, uninformed young men (Martikainen 2000). I have recently come upon Canadian data

(O’Neil, 2001) that shows that young people are less well informed, vote less, but are more supportive of “politics as usual.”

Overall, there is no hard evidence of the existence of a large stable group of reasonably well-informed citizens in the advanced democracies who do not vote as a matter of course, while there is a great deal of evidence of a large and apparently growing uninformed segment of the population that is excluded from political participation. Hence, though we cannot be sure that a strategy based on policies and institutional reforms that optimize political knowledge will reverse the decline in voter turnout, it is nonetheless the best available strategy.

Of course, we could view the situation positively, namely that democracy is not threatened by political ignorance and abstention from voting, that, indeed, it is well served by the uninformed abstaining – if that abstention is not based on a rejection of democracy itself. Hence rather than asking if people vote or what they know we need concern ourselves with how they feel about democracy. This might reassure us, especially concerning those youthful non-voters among whom there appears to be no appreciable decline in the support for democracy. Hooghe and Stolle (2001), for example, give credence to a view they set out as follows:

While respect for politicians and parties and interest in party politics goes down, along with turnout, danger to democracy arrives only when there is loss of respect for democracy per se. Maybe formal participation mechanisms and traditional political organizations have been necessary during the development phase of mass democracies, but in contemporary societies they have lost much of their relevance.... The decline of traditional political integration is conceptualized as being a part of a global and structural transformation of value patterns in western societies.... These younger age cohorts are firmly in favor of democracy, and therefore the spread of their value pattern does not threaten the stability of democracy as we know it.

But such an analysis ignores political knowledge, which, I contend, may be a crucial intervening variable between satisfaction with democracy and voting. When political knowledge is low, it is possible to have low turnout with satisfaction with democracy, but when political knowledge is high, satisfaction with democracy goes hand in hand with high turnout. Hence the low turnout combined with high satisfaction with democracy apparently characteristic of a high proportion of new potential voters sends a danger signal: it suggests that either young people will acquire the needed knowledge over time and thus begin to vote, or they will become increasingly dissatisfied with democracy. While, with previous generations, socialization to civic duty could be counted upon to motivate uninformed young people as they took their place as citizens, to acquire the needed knowledge, cast a ballot, and perhaps even join a political party, this is quite apparently less the case with regard to current generations.

Of course, it might be argued that the problem is merely a matter of perception, that questions of political knowledge typically measure familiarity with politics as usual, rather than the more postmodern political concerns. Yet we have no solid evidence of this. What we do know reinforces the suspicion that young people know less of politics – however one defines it. For example the Pew News Interest Index, tells us that

The great divide seems to be between those over 30 and those under 30. On average, 36% of those under 30 answered the information questions correctly, this compares with 45% of those age 30-49 and those 50 and over.” As expected, “generation gaps can be seen on questions dealing with campaigns and elections and national politics. Only 26% of young people answered our campaign-related questions correctly, this compares with 38% of those 30-49 and 42% over those 50 and over. On national politics, young people averaged 32% correct, compared to 44% of middle aged Americans, and 48% of those 50 and older.” Yet, “big gaps also exist on international politics and policy, domestic policy, and military and terrorism. It is only on “crime, scandal and personality issues, ... business and finance” that the gap narrows (Parker and Deane, 1997).

Some Guidelines for Enhancing Civic Literacy

Hence, rather than being complacent, we should learn from those societies where informed political participation appears to be highest, those we conceptualize as optimizing the level of civic literacy. (I use the term civic literacy, rather than political knowledge, which invites the inference that one person reading five books is the equivalent of five reading one, an inference excluded by the term literacy. In normal usage, one is either literate or one is not, and when used as an aggregate for comparative purposes, it is clearly understood that a society's level of literacy refers to the percentage of the population corresponding to whatever criteria are used to determine literacy.) Optimizing civic literacy is first a matter of identifying and implementing policies on both the demand and supply side that raise or maintain the level of civic literacy. Second, where appropriate, it is a matter of selecting policies that address in particular the political knowledge and cognitive capacities of those at the margin in terms of available resources, those for whom political information is most costly.

In part, of course, this takes the form of transfers improving the economic position of those at the bottom. There is no shortage of data to show that civic literacy and political participation is lower among those lacking basic economic resources.¹² But transfers should not be only material in content. Key are specific measures that strengthen the simple reading skills and habits of those who leave school with marginal levels of verbal cognitive proficiency.¹³

On the demand side, policies fostering adult education, stimulating newspaper readership, and the like should be directed especially at those for whom it can make a difference between civic literacy and illiteracy. On the supply side, a series of institutional choices affecting elections and representation can have a similar result by making alternative choices (parties) more easily distinguishable. For example, the simple act of placing the political affiliation of the candidate on the ballot significantly increases the numbers of voters choosing among them (Schaffner and Streb, 2000).

PR electoral systems, of course, play an important role in enhancing the cohesion, stability and consistency of political parties. They make it easier to identify with a political party, and to use that

identification as a guide through the complexities of issues and actors over time and at various levels of political activity, from the most local to the intergovernmental. By thus simplifying a complex political reality, PR fosters political participation especially at the lower end of the income and education ladders where information is at a premium. The effect of such regulations on turnout among those at the margin is especially salient in local elections where the greatest variation in regulations affecting the presence of political parties is to be found.¹⁴

Indeed, it is at the local level that there is the greatest variation in regulations affecting the presence of political parties and thus, indirectly, level of turnout. Bridges (1997) shows how such institutions have been used to discourage turnout of those at the margins in Southwestern American cities. Apart from institutional barriers to voting such as registration restrictions, poll taxes and literacy tests, and the placement of polling stations, which discouraged voting by the poor and racial minorities, there was also the effect of institutional arrangements associated with reform politics, such as nonpartisanship and non-concurrent elections. Naturally enough, turnout was highest in affluent neighbourhoods, but even there was still lower than overall turnout in cities with institutions more favourable to partisanship. (In votes cast in municipal elections from 1946, Phoenix, Albuquerque, and Dallas averaged less than 20 percent, while New York averaged 43.6, Chicago 54.3, and New Haven 57.3).

Fostering Literacy among Adolescents and Adults

This is by no means all there is to be said on these matters, and a number of related issues are addressed in my recent work (Milner, 2002). I will use the rest of this paper to explore an aspect not fully covered in the book and on which the findings of very recently published research sheds new light. I have argued that political knowledge is a crucial intervening variable between satisfaction with democracy and voting, that low turnout combined with high satisfaction with democracy sends a danger signal – especially as regards the youngest group of potential voters whose sense of civic duty to vote appears likely to remain comparatively low. This is something that, in principle, could be addressed via civic education in schools. But what do we know of the relationship between experiences relating to civic literacy during adolescence and political participation in adulthood?

I begin with data that is explored at some length in my book, namely that concerning reading comprehension, since individuals who lack the capacity to meaningfully read the relevant material are unlikely to acquire minimum level of political information *Im* (the minimum level of political information). The data compares the capacity of adults in democratic countries to comprehend the written materials necessary to competently exercise citizenship and is drawn from cognitive proficiency test developed by Statistics Canada and administered via the OECD in twenty countries. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) tested the comprehension of a large sample of the population aged 16 and over on three types of written materials: narrative prose; documents, such as train schedules and medication instructions; and problems requiring application of basic arithmetic skills (OECD, 1997; 2000).

The Y-axis of **Figure 1**, drawn from Milner 2002, displays the average percentage score in the prose reading test for each of the fourteen mature democracies that participated in the IALS. In that book, I develop a "combined civic literacy scale" based on a series of indirect indicators linked to political

knowledge. Since I cannot here recount the lengthy process developed to derive this scale, I offer here (on the X-axis of Figure 1) a representative surrogate covering many of the same OECD countries. This is a survey that tested respondents' ability to identify the United Nations' Secretary General (from a list of 5) and to name a UN agency (Millard, 1993). The relationship between the two emerges clearly.

**[Figure 1
about here]**

An analysis of the IALS data (OECD, 1997: 68-71), distinguished the scores of 16 to 30 years old from those between 30 and 50, in six countries found average scores generally higher in the first group – except in the United States, where young Americans scored significantly lower. This would help account for the especially high generational drop in political knowledge in the US recorded in, for example, the Pew News Interest Index cited above.

It would appear that, in the United States at least, the education being provided to current generations – even though it is educating more of them longer – is failing to do the job it once did at least when it comes to functional (and thus civic) literacy. Yet singling out today's schools as the culprit is too easy when it comes to declining civic literacy. Even in cases where the current educational system has maintained or improved the rates of functional literacy of students, this appears to provide no safeguard against declining civic literacy among young people. In Canada, for example, where, as we shall see, the schools are doing a relatively successful job when it comes to functional literacy, there appears to have been a significant decline in the level of political knowledge in the last 10 to 15 years.

In a 1990 survey carried out for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 5 percent of Canadians could not name the Prime Minister. In a similar survey commissioned by IRPP in March 2000, this had grown to 11 percent. . . . In 1990, 56 percent of 18 to 29 year olds were able to answer at most one of three political knowledge questions correctly (Who is the PM? Who is the Liberal [opposition] leader? Who is the NDP leader?). For the survey sample as a whole, the figure was 16 points lower at 40 percent. By 2000, the younger group was lagging further still: when asked to identify the PM, finance minister and official opposition, fully 67 percent of 18 to 29 year olds scored no more than one out of three compared to 46 percent for the sample as a whole (Howe, 2001).

New data allows us to put these questions into comparative perspective. To examine in detail the functional literacy level of adolescents, the OECD initiated the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a 32-country survey modeled on IALS (and incorporating items from it), but adapted to adolescents. From the early results released at the end of 2001, we find a significant disconnect between aggregate functional literacy among adolescents and functional and civic literacy among adults. This flies in the face of common-sense expectations that adolescent success in teaching adolescents to comprehend written materials would translate into high levels of adult functional literacy and, thus, civic knowledge. Indeed, PISA explicitly targets civic literacy, announcing in its press release,

its "aim to assess to what degree students approaching the end of their compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society."

PISA assesses three literacy domains, reading, mathematics and science, of between 4,000 and 10,000 15-year-old students in each participating country.¹⁵ The assessment was administered in school, during regular school hours, in April and May, 2000. The Y-axis of **Figure 2** displays the average score for each country in the PISA reading comprehension test. An obvious first question to be asked is whether the scores are consistent with those of adults in the IALS. These are displayed on the X-axis. As we can see, the relationship between the means in both tests is not random, but quite a bit weaker than expected. Functional literacy among adolescents is not a very good predictor of high functional literacy among adults and vice versa.

**[Figure 2
about here]**

What about civic literacy per se? Does a country's score in the level of reading comprehension of its adolescents, like that of its adults as we saw in Figure 1, correspond to the level of civic literacy. **Figure 3** replicates Figure 1 except that the mean scores in PISA replaces those from the IALS. As we can see, we go from a fairly strong correlation in Figure 1, to a random one in Figure 3. Countries that attain high comparative levels of reading comprehension in adolescents do somewhat better when it comes to reading comprehension levels of adults but this does not seem to translate into adult civic literacy – despite the fact that high scores in adult functional literacy does translate into high civic literacy.

We can look at this relationship more intensively by incorporating data from another recent international survey. On the Y-axis of **Figure 4** are results from the current IEA study (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). The IEA (the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), surveyed the civic knowledge of students in its comprehensive Civic Education Study, which, in February, 2001, released results based on the responses 90,000 14 and 15 year old students in 28 countries, many of which had participated in IALS and PISA. As we can see, the aggregate scores show effectively no relationship between the civic knowledge of young people and our indicator of the level of (adult) civic literacy.¹⁶

Muddying the waters further is the surprising lack of a connection between the aggregate scores in the IEA civic knowledge survey and those of PISA for adolescents of roughly the same age in countries participating in both surveys in **Figure 5**. One problem for drawing any conclusions from this lack of fit is that the civic knowledge score in the IEA survey is based on different kinds of questions than those in the UN survey, and other surveys used to measure adult political knowledge. The extreme outlier in Figure 4, Poland, is suggestive. Polish 14 year olds led in civic knowledge, according to the IEA, yet trailed badly in reading comprehension in PISA.

**[Figures 3, 4, and
5 about here]**

The IEA questions tested the students' knowledge of democratic principles, skills in interpreting political communication and using concepts of democracy and citizenship, as well as attitudes related to trust in institutions, the nation, opportunities for immigrants, and women's political rights, and expected participation in civic-related activities. Since it did not pose knowledge questions comparable to identifying the secretary-general of the United Nations, we should not expect any clear direct relationship between the IEA and adult civic literacy scores. But the absence of a relationship between civic knowledge and reading comprehension levels among adolescents remains puzzling. It could be that since the questions were essentially ones getting at what might be called appropriate democratic understanding, the test may have gotten at differences in cultural expectations of appropriateness as much as political knowledge or cognitive abilities.¹⁷

Whatever the explanation, the lack of fit of both functional and civic literacy among adolescents with civic literacy among adults suggests that what happens in adolescence is less important than we may think when it comes to civic literacy. More specifically, appropriate democratic understandings among adolescents in itself does not appear to affect whether adults will seek out political information associated with democratic citizenship. The country highest ranked in the functional literacy of its adolescents, Finland, is also significantly higher than its Nordic neighbours in their civic knowledge, though all are roughly the same when it comes to adults. At the bottom in civic literacy, the US does quite a bit better than New Zealand and Australia in the civic knowledge of its adolescents but to no effect when it comes to adult functional and civic literacy. Of course, it may be that contemporary schools will prove so much better, relatively speaking, at fostering civic knowledge of its graduates than did those that educated today's Finnish and American adult citizens. But past experience suggests that it is most unlikely that we will see these relationships apply to adults in a generation's time

I suggest that a crucial factor is reinforcing functional literacy. Countries that attain higher levels of functional literacy among adolescents *and* are able to maintain that level into adulthood are those most likely to generate higher levels of civic literacy. Hence Finland's leading rank in PISA should give it a future advantage vis-à-vis the countries scoring high in civic literacy among current adult generations, especially its Nordic neighbours. Canada will constitute a good test among the low civic-literacy countries. Will the high PISA scores of its students today translate into high functional literacy and, thus, higher civic literacy among its adults in twenty years? The answer will hinge on the extent to which individuals build on their earlier acquired reading skills and rudimentary knowledge of political concepts and democratic principles to inform themselves on relevant issues.

I suspect that efforts to maintain the high levels of adult literacy through programs and policies directed at adults (see Milner 2002, ch. 8-9) will reduce the gap between Finland and the other Nordics, while the absence of such policies will result in Canada losing the advantages derived from the literacy levels it is able to inculcate among its adolescents. In low-civic literacy countries like the US and Canada, in contrast to Sweden and other high-civic literacy countries, there are indications that adolescents' potential for informed citizenship is not likely to be fulfilled in adulthood. For example, "the Pew Research Center Biennial News Use Survey (of 4,002 adults taken in Spring 1998) revealed that only 33 percent of Americans aged 18-29 made an effort to keep up with the news compared to 68 percent of seniors (Bennett, 1998). . . . Those over 50 are almost twice as likely as members of Generation X to

say they follow national politics and domestic policy very closely, and 10 percentage points more likely to follow election campaigns and international politics.” A study of first-year college students (reported in the *New York Times*, 12 Jan, 1998: A10) found "a record low of 26.7 percent [who] thought that 'keeping up to date with political affairs' was a very important or essential life goal, compared with 29.4 percent in 1996 and a high of 57.8 percent in 1966." Moreover, the pattern is different from that of the past. A 1990 study by the Times Mirror Center reported that young people have not always trailed in political knowledge. Survey results from the 1940s through the 1970s reveal that previous generations of young people knew as much as, if not more, than their elders (Putnam, 2000: 219).

Worrisome figures such as these has led many to look to more and more compulsory civics courses in high schools as the solution. So far, there is not much evidence that such courses, given during adolescence, have much lasting effect.¹⁸ More promising, potentially, are such courses when offered later, closer to voting age. Westholm, Lindquist and Niemi (1989) found that upper secondary students taking civics courses were more likely to retain knowledge about international organizations (11 percent more) and international events (6 percent more) when retested two years later than those in a control group.

It is possible, thus, that late administered civics courses help account for the apparently smaller age-based differences in political knowledge in high-civic literacy countries like Sweden. Yet, even here, political institutions matter, and perhaps matter more. In June 1997, International IDEA published a report entitled *Youth Voter Participation - Involving Today's Young in Tomorrow's Democracy*, which provided a comparative analysis on the political activity of young people in 15 Western European countries. While the average turnout level for voters between 18 and 29 years old was 8% below the overall participation rate, in Sweden it was only 4.3%. The most significant factor accounting for differences was an electoral system facilitating access to representation in parliament for small parties. In such countries, the youth turnout rate was found to be almost 12 percentage points higher than in countries where access for small parties is not present (IDEA, 1999).

Conclusion: Meeting the Challenge of Comparing Levels of Political Knowledge

As emerges from the above discussion, lack of needed data on matters such as these means that we are engaging in little more than guesswork. To assess the effects of institutions in particular, we require aggregate level data on political knowledge. Without it, we enter the discussion of how to maintain and perhaps even increase the level of political participation and voter turnout with one hand tied behind our backs. Existing data is inadequate when it comes to adolescents and it is effectively non-existent when it comes to adults, those in a position to exercise the franchise that comes with citizenship. The IEA Civic Education Study of adolescents was a remarkably ambitious effort, yet it did not pose questions of the type: what is the name of your country's finance minister, or how many chambers are there in its legislature? But it did pose the same questions in participating countries. There is no equivalent for adults, for whom absence of such information is especially grave. The fact that such questions are nowadays frequently posed in single country surveys indicates that there is a desire to measure, explain, and analyze the effects of political knowledge.

Why then are there no comparative studies analogous to the IEA Civic Education Study when it comes to adults? Of course, it is not easy to standardize such questions, especially given the variety of institutions in the participating countries. But there is also a political obstacle. Any sort of question that allows a publicly-drawn conclusion that the people in one country are less informed than those in another can be unsettling to those whose support is needed to fund the research. But to explain is not to excuse. The time has come to turn similar, indeed greater, resources, to developing and applying an instrument for comparing the political knowledge of adults. In this final section of the paper, I set out steps to be taken.

Note first that we are by no means starting from scratch. There are numerous international surveys regularly being carried out linked to various aspects of political participation. And many national surveys these days include questions that get at political knowledge, (i.e. have a right or wrong answer). Researchers are overcoming their natural reluctance to reveal ignorance (Lambert *et al.*, 1988: 360). The problem is that there is no systematic effort to standardize the political knowledge questions increasingly being posed in national election and similar surveys. For their part, when the international studies do not avoid political knowledge questions altogether, they tend to set very general parameters and leave it up to the research teams in each participating country to determine the actual content. So we find ourselves lacking aggregate data on political knowledge comparable, say, to that provided by the World Values Survey about trust, associational participation, and efficacy, which has spawned wide literatures associated with social capital, political efficacy and postmaterialism (Dalton, 1998).

Furthermore, while more difficult to construct the questions, answers to political knowledge questions have an independently verifiable right or wrong answer, and are thus more reliable than standard questions related to trust, efficacy etc., which, we know, are very much affected by social expectations - for example, we know that more people say they voted, or will vote, than actually do vote.¹⁹ So we should be very careful not to confuse the reluctance on the part of researchers to reveal ignorance which can be set in comparative international context, with an inability to construct a standardized instrument for measuring political knowledge.

Hence, I propose that those interested in comparative research into political knowledge and political participation integrate into their research agenda the objective of developing and applying an Index of Civic Literacy (ICL) based on comparative results in responses to a battery of political knowledge-oriented questions. The task would consist of, first, assembling and distilling international and national surveys in Western democracies that test political knowledge, systematically identifying what we do know in terms of the types of questions asked and in which countries, and, then, filling in the gaps. Beyond the increasing number of national surveys exploring political knowledge, the starting point should be the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) group based at the University of Michigan. CSES member teams include political knowledge questions in their national electoral surveys, but, rather than using common or equivalent political knowledge questions, each team determines the content of their questions. Some similarity does emerge out of the stipulation that there be a minimum of three, their content such they could be answered correctly respectively by roughly 2/3, 1/3, and 1/2 of respondents. By now (early 2002), a large enough number of countries has taken part, so that countries conducting

their first survey, as well as those taking part a second time, will be able to choose from among a range of questions already posed.

By identifying the converging common elements in the political knowledge questions posed in CSES and other relevant surveys, we would be able to begin to focus on the missing elements needed to construct an initial index of civic literacy, and we could work to incorporate such questions in ongoing surveys. In this way, it should be possible to assemble sufficiently systematic data to derive a preliminary ICL on the basis of which we could construct a grid on which we place countries, and, thus, further identify missing elements.

In this manner, though initially patched together from questions in other surveys, the ICL would gradually take shape as a separate instrument for comparative research. Based on my observations of the situation with regard to political knowledge questions presently being posed, as well as the analysis of the different types of political knowledge relevant to the citizen's capacity to participate politically - the discussion of *I(1-5)* above - I envisage an ICL consisting of a battery of the following kinds of questions.

The first set of questions will test knowledge of the names of political leaders in their country (e.g. prime minister, finance minister, mayor, leader of the opposition, local candidates) their political affiliation and their position, and/or that of their party, on key current issues. A second set will test knowledge of basic constitutional and institutional practices such as the time lapse between general elections, the composition of legislative committees and the powers of local governments, as well as the fundamental differences of principle among major parties, redistributive-non-redistributive, socially conservative-progressive, centralist-decentralist.... The latter would be phrased in concrete terms emerging from political debate taking place in the country. (Because, unlike in the IEA Civic Education Survey, we would, at least initially, limit ourselves to mature OECD democracies, the relevant political experience would not be all that varied.) In both cases, the questions will be similar, but not necessarily identical, in each participating country; and, by using a battery of questions, we can work toward compensating for the advantage particular questions give to specific countries. To further reduce possible bias, a third set - in this case identically worded - set would test familiarity with the role, structure and leadership of international institutions, such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Such an instrument would inevitably be imperfect, and require continuous updating. It would nonetheless constitute a major advance in comparative research. By placing countries on our ICL, we would be able to test the effects of the various policies and institutions we presume to affect political knowledge and (thus) political participation. On the institutional side, it would enable us to get a better handle on the various claims concerning the effects of different electoral systems. And on the policy side, it would enable us to test the measures affecting the knowledge of adolescents against policy interventions to reduce the cost of political information to adult citizens.

To conclude, I do not claim that only information matters: civic duty remains a key component of the decision to vote. Indeed, it is not impossible to imagine increasing civic duty through the civic education of adolescents. Yet, even for young people, civic duty is somewhat akin to religious conviction, largely outside the realm of policy choices addressed by political science. Hence, I suggest, if civic duty is

indeed in decline in the stable democracies, political scientists can best serve by looking for practicable means of compensating for it. At its most general, the approach must be one of sustaining and improving democratic processes in the expectation that the citizen of a reasonably well-functioning democracy, a citizen who, like Blais and Downs' rational voter, believes in democracy, will feel at least a little uncomfortable in abstaining.

Our first duty, as political scientists, remains to do what we do best: to develop and apply a research agenda to help policy makers improve institutions so that individuals have less reason to see them as inefficient and corrupt and, thus, be motivated to translate their belief in democracy into action – at least by informing themselves and voting regularly.

Figure 1

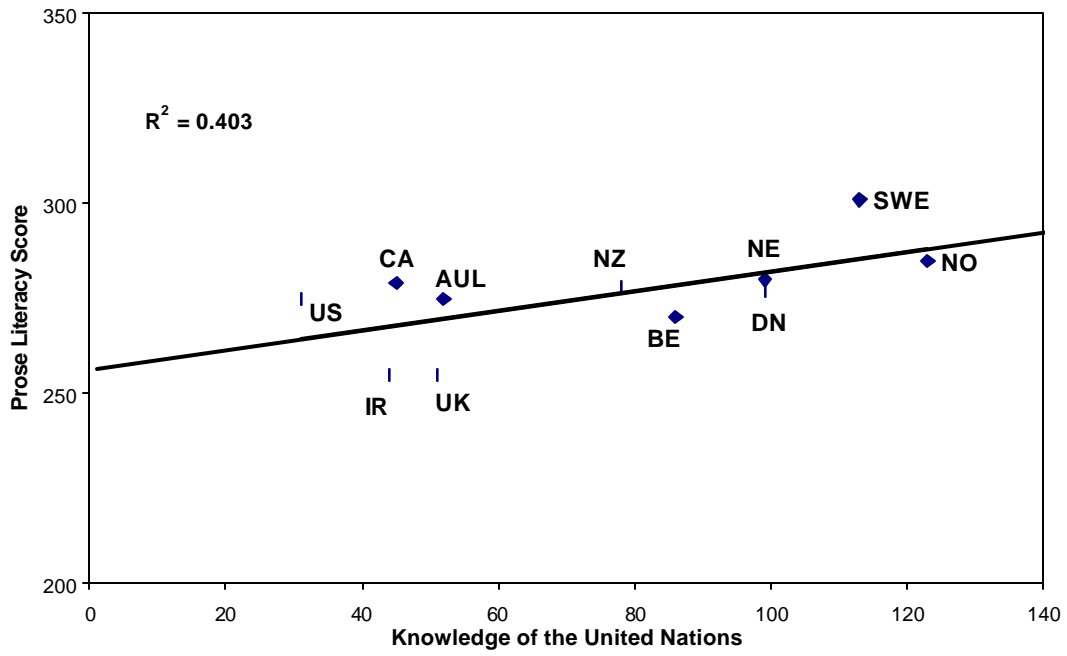


Figure 2

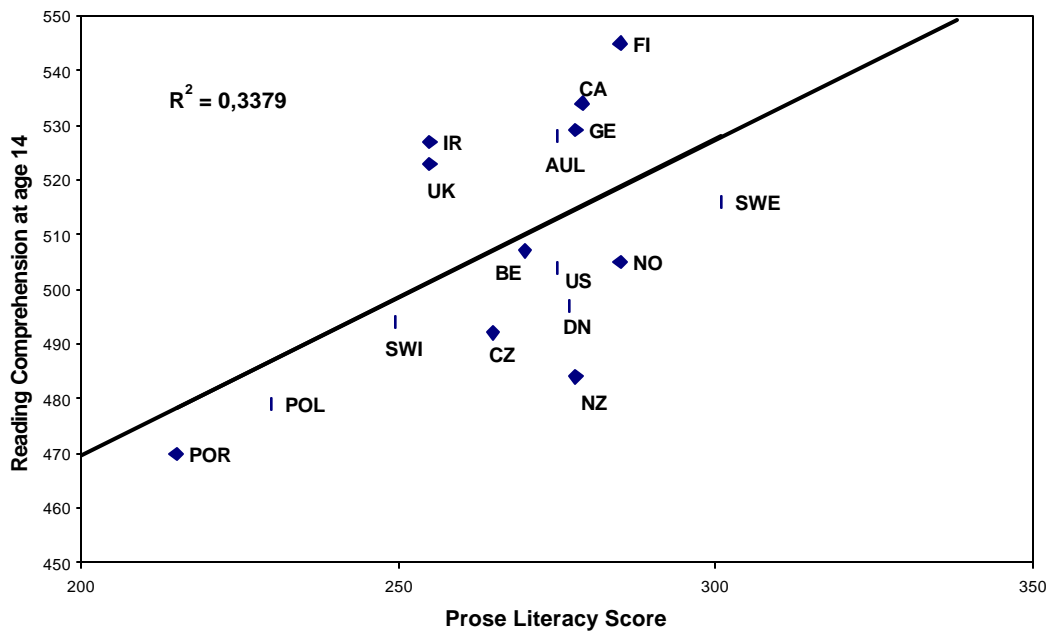


Figure 3

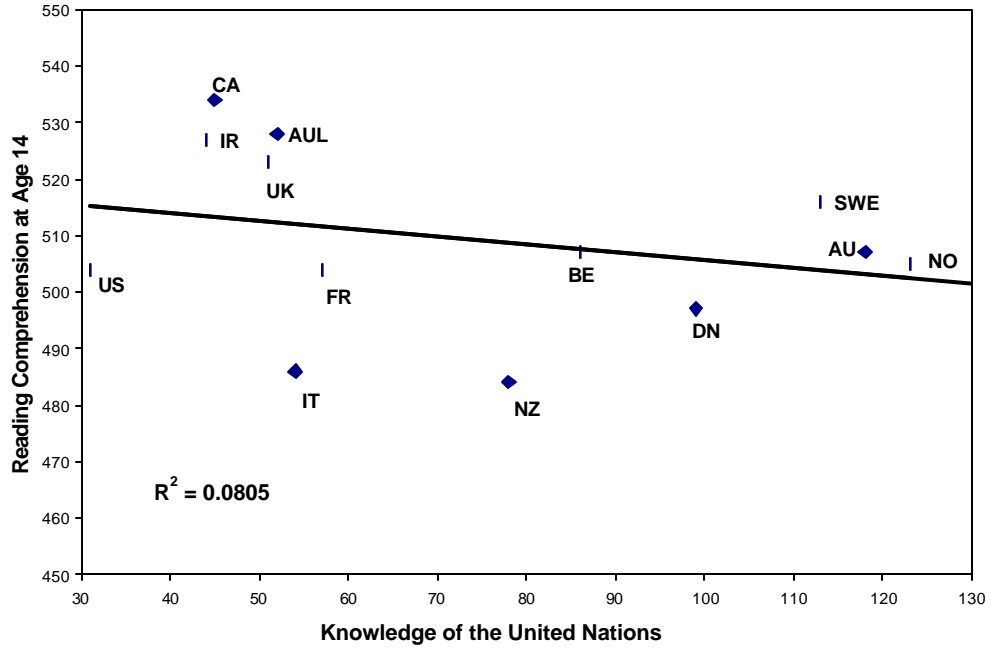


Figure 4

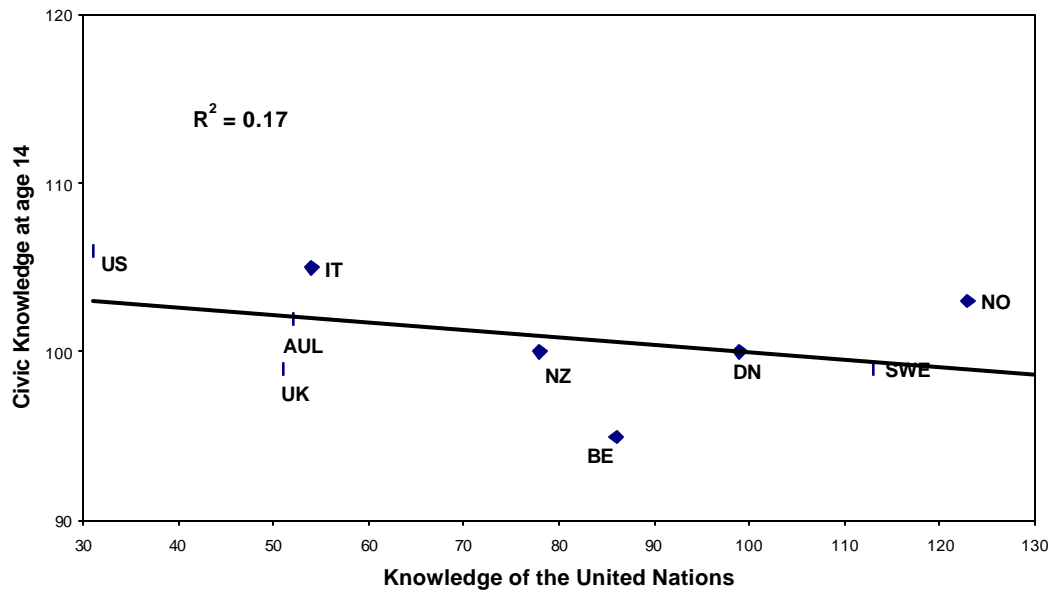
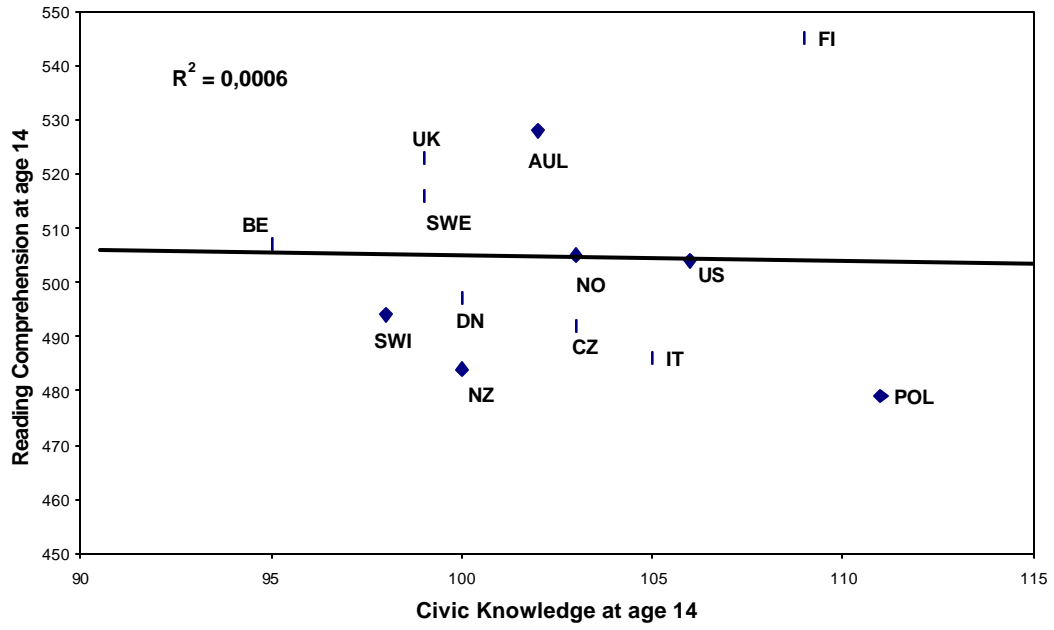


Figure 5



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NOTES

¹ A preliminary sifting of the literature to identify the different factors that have been looked at in relation to voting reveals six basic categories. One set of studies deals with the quality of political information, especially during election campaigns, provided in the various media, new and old; a second concerns information-related campaign regulations (party access to mass media, campaign finance); a third identifies the various individual characteristics that correlate with voting and being more politically informed (education, age, generation, gender, occupation,...), while a fourth looks for patterns of relevant individual experiences (political socialization), e.g. civics education, participation in organizations, experience of democracy in the educational system, availability of books at home, etc. In addition, there is the separate, wider literature already referred to which takes into account electoral systems and related political institutions and another that connecting voting with intermediate factors such as stable patterns of party self-identification and competitiveness of elections. I have not yet found any systematic efforts to explore a connection suggested in my own work, namely to participation in adult education.

² This is especially true where and when doing so seems to associate one with poll tests and other devices used in the past to keep members of racial minorities from the ballot box.

³ Verba *et al.* (1995: 338-9) find that only organizations in which members acquires “civic skills” affect political participation. And, by giving emphasis to face-to-face voluntary associations, the dominant social capital paradigm is in effect de-emphasizing political organizations, members of which are typically “chequebook” members - see Wollebeck and Selle, 2001).

⁴ Putnam often points to declining turnout as an indicator of disappearing social capital and voter turnout is one of the fourteen indicators that together constitute the Social Capital Index used to rank American states; yet turnout as such is seldom if ever the dependent variable in social capital research. The term civic engagement glosses over the distinction between social capital and traditional notions of political participation. Yet political participation is understood to refer to activities linked to political outcomes, from voting to party membership to running for office, while social capital theory analysis does not distinguish participation in specifically political organizations from other associational activities.

⁵ With the assistance of Professor Richard DeLeon of San Francisco State University, I have analyzed the data from xxx

⁶ Putnam's critics take him to task for treating social capital as inhering in individuals (norms and attitudes such as trust) unrelated to the institutional context (e.g., Foley and Edwards, 1998: 4-5; see also Jackman and Miller 1998, 1996).

⁷ One analysis comparing turnout in Australian states and for the Commonwealth in the election before and after the introduction of compulsory voting, found an increase averaging 23 percent, varying from a low of 12.4 to a high of 37.8 (McAllister and Mackerras, 1998:2). The Netherlands changed in the opposite direction, eliminating compulsory voting. The average difference in Dutch elections before and after the change was only 10 percent. This latter number corresponds rather closely to the additional difference in presidential election turnout between those Austrian provinces which maintained compulsory voting and those that removed it during the 1980s (Hirczy, 1994).

⁸ While I stress the effects of the electoral system, it should be noted that PR systems typically go hand in hand with other regulations facilitating smaller parties playing their representational role (Bowler, Carter and Farrell, 2000).

⁹ For example, the Center for Voting and Democracy’s statistical analysis of the 1994 elections for the House of Representatives, found a clear correlation between margin of victory and voter participation: the more competitive an election, the higher the turnout:

Margin of Victory	Turnout	Number of Races
0.0% - 9.9%	42.7%	87
10.0% - 19.9%	39.7%	72
20.0% - 39.9%	39.7%	132

40.0% - 59.9%	38.5%	84
60.0% - 100.0%	29.7%	54

(plus 6 uncontested)

¹⁰ “Four of the nation's top eight media markets -- Boston, Dallas, New York City, and Washington, DC -- had a grand total of six presidential ads aired, while eight media markets in battleground states each aired more than 6,500 presidential ads.” (November 22, 2000, electronic report of the center for Voting and Democracy - www.fairvote.org.)

¹¹ Under PR, there is also less incentive for political leaders - who may very well need their opponents’ support to form coalitions after the election - to inhibit the awareness of the electorate of alternative positions on the issues of the day than for FPTP-based political actors, who know that the choices of a relatively small number of voters can make the difference between monopolizing political power and having none whatsoever.

¹² For example, a recent American study found that: “the voting rate of persons below the poverty line was 25% in 1992... and of persons above the poverty line ... was 65% (Leighley and Nagler, 2000:1).

¹³ See Milner 2002, chapters 8 and 9. Bennett et al (2000) find, not unexpectedly, that controlling for education, income etc., Americans who read more are more politically knowledgeable. Similarly, Nie, Junn and Stehlik, (1996:40-4; 67) include the well-validated measure of verbal cognitive proficiency in the form of a vocabulary test from the general social survey, finding a fairly strong correlation between verbal cognitive proficiency and voting.

¹⁴ On Switzerland, see Ladner and Milner, 2000.

¹⁵ In Canada, approximately 30,000 15-year-old students from more than 1,000 schools participated in PISA in order to collect information at the provincial level and to allow for estimates for both official language groups.

¹⁶ A similar lack of fit is to be found with the relevant results of the "Youth and History" research project conducted among 32,000 teenagers in 27 European countries in the mid 1990s (Angvik and von Borries, 1997), namely the questions in which respondents were given 10 pairs of five events in modern political history (the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the decolonization of Africa, the foundation of the UN, and World War II) and asked to put them in chronological order.

¹⁷ A glance at the outliers in Figure 5 suggests that it is the older more secure and “sophisticated” democracies (Belgium, Sweden, the UK...) that are more prone to produce functionally literate but “democratically challenged” adolescents.

¹⁸ Civics courses taken one hour per week from grade 7 or 8 by practically all German students (Händle et al, 1999) seem to have little effect on the adolescents, while in the Dutch case, there was a correlation only for the less than 10 percent of students (Hahn, 1998: 15) who took the civics course (called “society”) as a part of their formal program leading to the final examination (Dekker, 1999) suggests that its effects are likely to prove short-lived.

¹⁹ An indicator that the distance between expressed good intentions and concrete actions can be a long one is to be found in the responses to a question asked in *Eurobarometer #50* in October-November 1998. More than 7 in 10 EU citizens stated their intention to vote in the June 1999 European Parliament elections; when it came time to vote, only 43 percent bothered to do so. (The same question was posed in *Eurobarometer #51*, in March-April. It found that those planning to vote had declined by 4 percent to 67.)