

“The information-based model of politics implies that there are right answers to most political questions, if only one were adequately informed.”

A decade ago, in her path-breaking book, Diana Mutz drew our attention to fundamental tradeoffs in our conceptions of good citizenship. Through a review of existing work and her own analyses, she argued that on the one hand intense partisanship can be a good thing. A distinctive political perspective can motivate people to participate. But on the other hand, she stressed, devout partisanship can blind people to the validity of alternative views and cause biases in the way information is received and processed.

Mutz called into question the fixation on “right” answers in politics. If people disagree, does it necessarily mean that one of them is wrong? In our divisive, polarized, highly contentious political present, we should question whether the central task of good citizenship is arriving at the right answer with the right information. Instead, it would seem the central political task in these times is the ability to govern each other with compassion, justice, and equity—to understand where each other are coming from even if we disagree.

Nevertheless, many scholars continue to emphasize the importance of right and rational thinking and are troubled by citizens’ limited knowledge of consequential political facts. It is a near consensus that members of the United States public know little about politics²—and that this is a problem.³ Scholars fear that without sufficient political information, people cannot understand the relevance of political debates to their lives nor which policies advance their interests. It can also lead people to make choices based on falsehoods and misinformation as Jennifer Hochschild and Katherine Levine Einstein argue in their recent book *Do Facts Matter?*⁴ Differences in the distribution of political knowledge have been shown to be large enough to affect election outcomes⁵ and apparent majority preferences on matters of public policy.⁶

These are legitimate concerns, but like Mutz, we question whether an Information-Based Model of Civic Competence is the most relevant model for our information-saturated political environment. This model depends on two major assumptions, which are subject to considerable debate:

- (1) There exist some finite set of political facts that good citizens should be in possession of, and
- (2) When citizens are in possession of those facts (i.e., "informed"), they will make reasoned, well-considered policy and vote choices, thereby creating the

conditions for healthy democratic processes to occur.

While there are other models of civic competence, this idealized view of the importance of factual information remains highly influential in shaping how both scholars and the public conceive of the responsibilities of citizenship. As Michael Schudson argues in *The Good Citizen*, this model of civic competence, although rooted in Progressive Era values, is still “the lamp held aloft by journalists committed to their profession,” the guiding principle behind “civic education in and out of schools” and the dominant basis for “public understanding of civic obligation at election time.”⁷

But we think a new model of competence is emerging—and that it should be welcomed. Arthur Lupia argues in his recent book *Uninformed*⁸ that information alone is insufficient for citizen competence. There is nothing inherently beneficial about information itself; instead what matters is how people use it.⁹ Yes, information enables knowledge, which enables competence, but Lupia reviews wide-ranging research showing how many factors—cues, source credibility, relevance of the information, values, and stereotyping—shape what information is attended to and how it gets used in political decision-making.

Notice also how debates over the ignorance of ordinary voters generally hinge on what information people are basing their decisions on and why—questions which require a great deal of subjective interpretation. Larry Bartels’ famous analysis of support for Bush-era tax cuts and repealing the estate tax showed that even people who exhibited concern over inequality and would not themselves benefit from the tax policies nevertheless supported them.¹⁰ The implication was that people were either ill-informed or not using information appropriately. Lupia and colleagues responded that this was unfair—that people of different political leanings had different reasons for responding to the estate tax the way they did, and without knowing more about those perspectives, how could we judge whether people were using information incorrectly?¹¹

But Bartels’ analysis in the end seems less a commentary on the competency of the ordinary person than a criticism of political scientists’ assumptions about the way people reason in the realm of politics. In his recent book with Chris Achen, the authors call into question the “populist ideal” of democratic responsiveness and draw attention to the manner in which people draw upon social identity when forming political preferences.¹² Reasoning with factual information is not necessarily central to this process.

While facts matter, recent research on political knowledge suggests that our reliance on knowledge batteries as indicators of civic competence distracts us from understanding what citizens actually know. It is increasingly questionable what empirical reality these knowledge measures are capturing. In an extensive review of political knowledge questions used by scholars over a decade, Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, and Rainey concluded that “several classic findings regarding the antecedents of knowledge are conditional upon the type of question being asked.”¹³ Education levels were shown to be related to knowledge levels mainly with respect to general facts about political processes and government, whereas knowledge of time-period specific policy debates was closely related to attention to mass media coverage.¹⁴

Perhaps more troubling for the use of knowledge batteries in our quest to understand civic competence is increasing evidence that some traditional knowledge batteries are also biased toward certain social groups. Consistent findings of a “racial gap” appear in fact to be an artifact of cross-cultural differences in the way blacks and Latinos answer certain questions.¹⁵ When we include items that are more relevant to the lives of women, women score higher.¹⁶ Women are also less likely than men to guess when they do not know an answer.¹⁷ Some people appear to retain visual knowledge more than verbal knowledge, and yet visual knowledge functions similarly to the verbal knowledge most typically measured in our studies.¹⁸ Monetary incentives significantly improve performance on political knowledge scales, suggesting that some apparent gaps in knowledge reflect how much effort people are willing to expend in answering survey questions rather than how much they actually know.¹⁹ A recent study found that cheating on political knowledge questions in online surveys may also be widespread,²⁰ further drawing into question what precisely political knowledge measures are actually measuring.

These findings present enormous challenges to the first assumption of the Information-Based Model of Civic Competence—the notion that there exists some set of finite facts that citizens ought to be in possession of. A growing body of research also seriously questions the validity of the model’s second assumption. The possession of political facts does not typically seem to change minds or improve the quality of political debate. Political views typically come first and facts are rationalized or discarded accordingly. We know that people who lean strongly toward one political party or another retain facts selectively, especially on topics on which there is a ready source of information.²¹ More

information does not necessarily correct misperceptions.²² When facts are in dispute, education and knowledge equip partisans with tools for countering dissonant information, amplifying divergent interpretations of reality.²³ Even when people demonstrate greater awareness of facts, their behavior does not necessarily reflect that such facts form the basis of their political preferences. Instead, policy views and even perceptions of basic matters of fact are brought in line with partisanship.²⁴ As Brady and Sniderman noted several decades ago, “affect can be a quite efficient way of encoding and storing what is after all the most vital political information: who and what one is for or against.”²⁵

The gap between knowledge of facts and the types of information processing associated with competent citizenship may also be exacerbated by changes in the media environment. The availability of partisan sources of news and commentary provide citizens with greater opportunities to tune out dissonant information, re-interpret facts they do encounter, and access to alternative information aligned with their existing partisanship. Given this environment, the assumption that fact possession leads to civic competence seems especially questionable. In at least some cases, the most informed people have been shown to be most subject to biased processing of new information. For example, when expressing perceptions of the economy, it is the most knowledgeable who are most likely to exhibit biased information processing in favor of partisan predispositions.²⁶ More informed people were also more likely to interpret facts about the Iraq war in a manner that supported their partisan point of view,²⁷ while political elites—congressional policy advisors and scientists with expertise in a given policy area—routinely exhibit the very same biases.²⁸ In sum, even were it possible to agree on precisely what facts citizens should possess, those who appear most highly informed according to standard ways of conceiving of political knowledge tend not to use political information in the way most typically associated with good citizenship.

All of this work suggests that we are missing a lot by equating information levels as measured in traditional knowledge batteries with civic competence. By focusing on what people do not know rather than what they do know and how they use that information, we are likely missing the full empirical reality of citizens’ political knowledge.

Alternatives to an Information-Based Model of Civic Competence

In this article, we draw on fieldwork on political conversations among citizens and elites to observe what people themselves treat as knowledge and how they use it when they make sense of politics. We argue that conventional standards of democratic competence presume a model of civic behavior that misses a key part of the way people actually use political information. Citizens are not meticulous processors of facts; nor perhaps should we expect them to be. What we observe is that factual knowledge about politics is consistently interpreted through the lens of personal experiences. When people do reference concrete facts, they do so with reference to their own lives and with attention to their immediate social context. People involved in the political conversations we observe appear to give preferential treatment to personal experience and expect that if people do offer up facts, they do so in relation to their own life experiences or those of people they know. Importantly, we observe this happening even among elected officials and political experts.

This reliance on experiential knowledge may have negative consequences such as greater skepticism of expert opinion or other biases in information processing. If people only rely on experiential knowledge and disregard factual information available only through routes other than direct experience, the preferences they form about politics will be based on a closed and incomplete view of the world. Also, if people privilege experiential knowledge over other forms of knowledge, it reduces the rationale for developing knowledge in particular issue domains. However, by offering an expanded view of political knowledge, we seek to characterize the concept as it actually exists in the world—the knowledge that people draw on when making political decisions and conversing about civic affairs rather than the facts scholars sometimes wish they would use. Understanding the expanded range of information people actually use is critical if we are to have a more accurate understanding of political behavior, and therefore better equip ourselves to strengthen ailing democratic institutions.

We also offer this expanded view of political knowledge in the hopes of broadening our conception of civic competence. We are concerned that a narrow definition of competence that does not account for citizens' lived experiences privileges forms of political engagement accessible mainly to those with the most resources and education. We suggest that the facts of experience—whether experiences with government or with other citizens

and noncitizens—structure people’s political opinions across levels of resources and sophistication.

We chose to examine political knowledge by looking at political conversation because it is a widespread²⁹ manner in which we believe people gain factual political knowledge.³⁰ But we have many reasons to think that alongside the transmission of information, something more is going on. Informal talk appears to increase the ability to rehearse reasons for opposing points of view.³¹ When describing what people get out of informal political conversations, they report that they use it to pass the time and have an engaging conversation, in addition to trying to learn and form opinions.³² Also, when people have a chance to talk with others, elite-driven messages have less of an effect.³³ In other words, people are teaching each other something in the course of casual political talk. And what they are teaching may be something other than the transmission of political facts as conventionally conceived. The information they are transmitting may be co-creating their identities and ideologies as well.³⁴

We argue that the existing Information-Based Model of Civic Competence neglects a key component of political knowledge—namely, information obtained through personal experiences—and below we detail the inductive process that led us to this conclusion. But we also wish to highlight previous work that grapples with the importance of experiential knowledge both in and out of the field of political science. In education research, for example, in which a primary objective is to better understand how to help people gain knowledge, it is widely agreed that people learn through the lenses of their direct personal experience, and that it is counterproductive to expect people to learn otherwise.³⁵ In other words, it is broadly understood that experiential knowledge is so central to the way people learn that we cannot fully understand knowledge without considering experiential knowledge as one subset of it.

Political science research has on occasion explored this realm of (albeit subjective) factual political information and shown how it at times plays a highly significant role in influencing how people think about and make sense of politics. For example, while earlier studies had suggested that voters’ own economic and pocketbook experiences had only weak effects on vote choices,³⁶ more recent research more precisely isolating the effect of personal experience suggests substantial effects.³⁷ Research on political knowledge acquisition also points to the importance of personal experience. For example, the fact that men and women

experience politics differently in the United States means that they acquire different political information.³⁸ Likewise, the policy feedback literature has also taught us that the knowledge people obtain through experience plays a significant role in the way people think and act politically. That research has examined how interaction with specific government policies such as welfare,³⁹ the G.I. Bill,⁴⁰ and Social Security⁴¹ in turn influences attitudes about government programs and willingness to participate in political advocacy. Indeed, this work has shown that when people do not recognize that they are having experience with a government policy that can in turn influence their willingness to support government programs.⁴²

The long tradition of political socialization scholarship is also a reminder that political scientists have recognized for some time that experience in the world influences one's subsequent political behaviors, including the formation of political views. The information people encounter at home and through other important socializing agents like the school has some effect on the most salient political attitudes and also on attachments to partisan identity, for example.⁴³ Also, work on symbolic racism suggests a strong and persistent effect of racial prejudice learned early in life on political attitudes across individuals' lives.⁴⁴

By factual political knowledge, we mean what is probably best labeled "information."⁴⁵ That is, we refer here to specific information about policies, political actors and organizations, and institutions and procedures of government. These are bits of objective information used in our traditional measures of political knowledge.⁴⁶ By experiential knowledge, we mean stories about one's own experience with a policy, a political actor, or interactions with government or other individuals and groups. In our attention to experiential knowledge we emphasize the role of social identity because we have found that individuals often communicate their experiences through identity-based perspectives.⁴⁷ Thus, one of the distinctions we wish to make is that although experiential knowledge consists of factual (sometimes subjective) information, it also functions like a lens through which objective factual information is interpreted.

While the facts of personal experience are difficult to define—the same sequence of events may be experienced differently by different individuals—this form of knowledge ought to be an integral part of our conceptualization of citizen competence for both empirical and normative reasons. We find empirically that people—including political

experts—make sense of political facts through the lens of personal experience, but also that the collective act of making sense of politics requires attention to personal experience. Political scientists need to pay attention to the role of personal experience *in addition to* factual knowledge because a failure to do so results in a misunderstanding of the origins of the public’s political beliefs and a misattribution of the importance of factual information to the debate itself.

Normatively, if we are concerned that people do not make good use of the information available to them to make choices that are in line with their interests, then we need to not only worry about levels of factual knowledge, but also the manner in which people interpret those facts through the lens of their personal experience. If our concern with the health of democracy is not only that people are making choices that are not reflective of their interests, but are making choices that are not sufficiently attuned to the common good, then, too, we need to know about the role that personal experience plays in order to suggest changes with regards to the communication environment and civic education that might enable people to learn about others’ experiences and therefore gain respect and understanding of their points of view. We argue that political observers and scholars ought to pay attention to the role of personal experience because normatively democracy requires the ability to recognize others’ experiences as well as the ways in which one’s own experiences influence how we interpret and use facts.

When we are assessing the competence of citizens, we need to do more than look at the quantity or even quality of political information they possess. In the divisiveness of the contemporary era, if the central task of politics is governing each other in a just fashion as much if not more so than arriving at the “right answer,” we need to attend to how capable citizens are of understanding one another. We need to assess whether people acknowledge the biases of their own perspectives and whether they have the capacity to consider the perspectives of others.

This is a different argument than a call for listening to other’s opinions and arguments.⁴⁸ We are not suggesting that hearing the other side is important simply because citizens should be familiar with counter-arguments.⁴⁹ Instead listening to others is critical in order to understand why those counter-arguments make sense to others, why political perspectives different from one’s own provide a different lens through which the facts of politics are understood.

In sum, we propose an Expanded Model of Civic Competence that presents an alternative interpretation for what it means to be an informed citizen in a democracy. In this model, the competence of listening to and understanding the different lived experiences of others cannot be considered separately from levels of factual knowledge. Rather than placing knowledge of objective facts alone at the center, this view of democracy also values the ability of citizens to interact with one another and share experiences as a necessary condition for collectively governing each other and shaping each others' futures in a just manner.

To see how an Expanded Model of Civic Competence would deepen our understanding of political behavior, take for example, rural perceptions of big government.⁵⁰ Many people in rural American look around at their communities and conclude that people like them are not getting their fair share. Much of their resentment is directed toward cities and city people. It may not be the case that on a per capita basis their communities are getting proportionately fewer tax dollars than they are contributing in taxes compared to people living in cities. Nevertheless they may have concluded otherwise from their lived experience. For example, people living in rural tourist communities watch as urbanites visit their towns and show visible signs of wealth through their cars and their spending, and also in the manner in which they purchase and build expensive vacation homes, driving up local property taxes. We might judge the locals' civic competence low when they vote for small government politicians who oppose government programs that might extend services such as job training to their community. Many urbanites are quick to judge rural voters as ill-informed accordingly. But this assessment fails to recognize that in the eyes of many rural residents existing government programs have largely failed to improve their economic wellbeing, and they therefore distrust politicians who promise otherwise. Are urbanites who may be well-versed in tax policy debates and programs for economic development demonstrating high levels of civic competence when they fail to understand the perspectives of rural people? We contend no. Civic competence requires an openness to understanding the lived experiences of others, not just knowledge of facts.

Below we briefly explain the data and methods we draw upon in this study: observation of conversations and elite interviews. We then explain what we learned from our analysis of what people regarded as knowledge in their conversations and how they used it. In the latter part of this empirical section we focus on conversations among individuals one would presume to be more expert about public affairs, elected officials and government

agency directors, and find that even those experts use facts through the lens of their social experience. In the final section of the paper we discuss our findings and articulate the expanded model of civic competence.

Studying Political Knowledge by Examining its Use in Practice

We used transcripts and fieldnotes primarily from two ethnographies of political talk conducted by one of us, and in-depth interviews conducted by the other, to examine what forms of knowledge people relied on as they made sense of politics with other people. The first ethnography was participant observation of community dialogue programs on race relations in Wisconsin and northern Illinois in 6 groups in 4 communities, conducted in fall of 2000 and spring of 2005.⁵¹ The other was observation of repeated conversations over a 5-year span (2007-2012) among 39 groups of regulars in places such as gas stations and diners in 27 communities sampled throughout Wisconsin.⁵² The third set of interviews were conducted in the fall and spring of 2014-2015 with 41 political journalists and public opinion researchers as part of a larger study of how the news media represents public opinion data in coverage of American politics.⁵³

Detailed information on the methods used in both studies is available in the works just cited, but here are the brief outlines of the studies. For both ethnographies, the people gathering together were not convened by the researcher, but met of their own volition. In the third study, subjects were recruited for their particular expertise as journalists or practitioners and interviewed in person. In all three studies, conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and participants were aware that the researcher was recording and studying their interactions and how they made sense of political affairs.

In the race dialogue study, local governments and non-profit organizations convened the conversations in order to help their communities improve race relations. The participants were volunteers from the community who were placed into racially diverse groups and led in conversation by a facilitator. Those groups met once a week for 5-10 weeks, with most meeting for 6 weeks. Participants tended to be middle-aged, currently employed, white residents, although the participants did vary in terms of age, type of employment, gender and race and ethnicity. The researcher participated in the conversations mainly as a listener.

In the Wisconsin communities study, the researcher sampled the 27 communities and then asked local newspaper editors and UW-Wisconsin Extension Educators to identify

groups of people who met regularly in a public place in the sampled communities. She then invited herself into those groups, introducing herself as a public opinion scholar from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and asking if she could join them to hear their thoughts on current events of the day. In this study, the researcher did ask questions, but let the conversation unfold in the manner the participants wished. She revisited most of the groups at least 2 times, and as many as 6 between May 2007 and May 2016.

Evidence from Observing Conversations

Our motivation for re-examining our fieldwork was to investigate the role of factual knowledge in political understanding, so our first step was to examine what was happening in conversations when people asserted that they were relying on factual information. To examine the use of knowledge, we first cut into these data by doing an automated search for knowledge-related terms in the transcripts from the Wisconsin communities study⁵⁴ in order to focus on those parts of the conversations that dealt with the assertion of knowledge. We searched for the following terms: Know, knowledge, I think, I believe, that's true, that is true, knowing, certain, and fact. We coded those excerpts for 1) verifiable facts that were clearly pulled from direct observation, personal experience or personal interaction and 2) verifiable facts that might have come from the news.

Instead of exchanges of facts, these conversations were much more often storytelling⁵⁵ or the relaying of personal experience. When people declared that something was true, personal experience played as central of a role as facts learned through news media.

For example, in a recent visit to one of these sites during the 2016 presidential primary, in March 2016, a group of retired and currently employed men debated the state of the Wisconsin economy since Scott Walker became governor in 2010. The group called themselves a mix of Republicans and Democrats, noting that there were many public school teachers in the group who leaned Democratic.

John: Has [Walker] helped straighten the state out?

Matt: I don't know. Has he really? You know what, they just said ...

Fred: We aren't going down.

John: They just had a report the other day of jobs since Scott Walker's taken office
and I think we're 38th in United States in job creation—

Fred: —That's a bunch of hogwash, too.

John: I'm telling you what the survey says.

Fred: No matter what you do across this country, there aren't going to be near the jobs that there used to be.

John: I understand that. I understand that because technology has taken so many—

Fred: —For one, technology has taken so many; for two, because of other costs that we talked about earlier, you can't afford to hire anybody. All the restrictions that government puts on you, you can't afford to... it's just like I always said, a government wants you to spend your money like they do: stupid, not intelligently. For me, if I make money in a year, want to spend some, I can go buy a sports car for my wife, write them off, whatever. If I buy \$20 worth of [inventory for my business]... that's it. It comes that you still got to pay taxes. You can buy a car and do that, which is simple.

In this conversation, the men were referring to economic facts—whether or not the economy had improved—but Fred interprets the “factual” information from a jobs report through the lens of his experience as a small business owner. Job reports are not credible to this man, who perceives that government regulation, not Walker, is the enemy. Some of the men in this group pay attention to the news, but reported facts do not carry as much weight in these conversations as their personal interpretations of them.

We observed that style of making sense of the news across a variety of groups. The group above was made up of working class men who perceived that most people in their community were living at or below the poverty line. In groups of professionals, the sharing of facts was more prevalent—possibly for reasons of social norms. Nevertheless, personal experience mattered a great deal for how they made sense of the news, too.

In the following conversation, a group of professionals on their way to work (or recently retired) are meeting up in the morning in a café in a medium sized city in the western part of Wisconsin in June 2007. When asked, “What are the big issues with respect to taxes in [this city]? What do you think the big issues are here?” the group responds as follows:

Lewis: Well you know I figure our whole tax system here is somewhat regressive because I see people—and I can state from experience as a CPA. I look at other state income taxes and they are nowhere near what ours seem to be in relationship and it always amazes me that you know, our schools aren't any

better than any other place, quite frankly, especially Iowa or Minnesota, but yet it seems like our income taxes seem to keep creeping up, keep on instating new taxes.... just be honest and raise the taxes and be honest about it instead of bullshitting us. I think government has a tendency to do that.

Donna [With sarcasm]: Bullshit? You're kidding.

Lewis: Imagine that!

[...]⁵⁶

Bobby: The politicians ought to be talking about some honesty in government and actually governing rather than maneuvering and ah gesturing—that the level of governance is shitty. And it's practically from the town government on up, but especially when you get to the capitol in Madison, and even it's exacerbated of course in Washington D.C., but we're not—we're seeing people who are more interested in power and money and reelection and not in doing what's right for the state.

[...]

Lewis: —But you know if any other state in the union, that's just normal, routine.

Will: It is, I mean seriously, that's just absolutely normal anyplace else but Wisconsin. Maybe Minnesota.

Lewis: But that doesn't mean we have to accept it.

Will: No, I'm not saying we should accept it, but I mean—relatively I think we've got clean government for the most part, you know. We don't have—I think we get off track, I think we get tied up and you know issues with gays, gun control and things that really aren't—the general public really doesn't care that much about, but it gets a big stink somewhere.

[...]

KJC: Do you all feel like if you contact your local politicians—are any of you in elected government at the moment? Have any of you run for elected office?

Lewis: Well Brian did, but they wouldn't put him in. [Joking] Voters had better sense.

Several aspects of this conversation are notable. First, the person who responds to the question about taxes offers up his personal profession as part of the knowledge he conveys—he is a CPA. Secondly, the regulars make claims that they have inside information about how clean local and state government is. And indeed, one of them has actually run for

office. While there are references to events and facts in the news even these relatively more privileged people are using their personal experience to sort through the facts related to public issues they deem most important.

Note that the people talking were aware that their visitor was a political science professor from the flagship state university. One might expect they would feel some pressure to “sound smart” and rely on hard facts. If anything, these conversations probably underestimate the extent to which people use personal experience in the course of ordinary conversations about current events.

The conversations just referenced were among people who knew each other well. What does it look like when people are talking with relative strangers about difficult topics? One such example comes from conversations in a different study, this time of community dialogue groups on race relations.⁵⁷ Sometimes the participants knew each other, but often their only previous connection was that they lived in the same geographic community.

In these conversations, personal experience was again central. In fact, the facilitators tended to encourage people to draw on their own experiences rather than avoid difficult conversations by relying on facts. When people did assert factual information, it was often in a hostile manner that dampened conversation rather than fostered it.

For example, one group that met in Aurora, Illinois, in the spring of 2005, was led by a facilitator (whom we call Liza) who often played the role of expert participant rather than facilitator. The group, which met at a community college for five consecutive weeks, was somewhat racially diverse, with one Puerto Rican, one Iraqi-American, and 2 African-Americans, in addition to 6 white participants. Liza, the facilitator, was one of the African-American participants and on certain days the only person of color present. She often told the others about history with which they had little personal experience. She was reluctant to discuss racial or ethnic groups besides African-Americans, and frequently inserted her own opinion into the discussion while shutting down other people in the group.

During the group’s second session, the participants got into a conversation about culture after Christine, a white woman in her 50s, asked, “Why is culture important?” Lucy, a 20-something Puerto Rican woman, responded,

Um, mine is important because it defines who I am, where I come from, helps me to understand how I got to be here and understanding other people’s cultures is important. It will help me to understand what makes them come to the decisions

they come to, especially living in this country when there are people from other cultures that come to this county, important for me to understand so I can understand why some people are—there are certain cultural traditions about how you conduct yourself in public, how you conduct yourself with another person, or someone of the opposite gender in a professional setting.

But Christine said, “I just think it is divisive. You know, I don’t think we’re ever going to get rid of racism until we stop having such emphasis on being the ethnic part or—I guess because I don’t have any [culture].”

Christine laughed at her own comment, and the conversation went on for a bit as Liza became visibly agitated, until, finally, she interjected:

If I may respond to your question—history teaches us that for over 200 years that Africans and the American Indians, particularly the Seminole nation lived very peaceably *as a matter of fact*, unless they have stopped, in Oklahoma where there is a settlement of Seminoles, they still share a peace pipe. The races—*rac-ES* in case anybody misinterprets what I said—who were here when Columbus landed were Africans and American Indians, there was some intermarriage there, when the first boat loads of slaves landed here, the children were already biracial because slave traders used those women as belly warmers, [a] practice [that] was promoted and promoted and promoted—how we interpret that history is something a little different—but that would probably account for, you know, the overlappings if you will or interminglings—suppose that is a more sophisticated word—and the beautiful pattern that may develop.

Then Liza, who was in her 50s, brought up the question of the history children are taught in public schools and raised doubts about whether youth these days adequately learn that there were already people living in North America when Columbus arrived. She then considered aloud whether learning that history affects “how we see ourselves, and other people take that and put that label on a whole group of people.”

Then a white middle-aged woman added, “Stereotyping, you’re talking about stereotyping.” Others tried to enter the conversation, too, but Liza kept going.

Labeling. Not stereotyping, because stereotyping in my environment, would become actions as well. But labeling is just simply labeling and how do we get them? Just let me give you an example, *I can speak up with a bit of information that in fact I know to be true*

because I have lived it [emphasis added]. Because those people who are experts write the textbooks who have taught it for 1000 [students] say this is what is. But I can speak up for that with a certain confidence and certain assurity because it may not be acceptable at that time, or because there is a different interpretation, I am labeled an angry woman, and then I can walk around with that label. I can share certain things with a person or in a group of people, and they can always be “Oh! Oh! Oh! I didn’t know that. Oh, is that true? Oh, where did you find that?” And in my own interpretation, I am saying, “Oh, this is really limited. How do they get across the street? They don’t know anything.” And I can ascribe that label. My whole point is do you see how we bear labels that other people put on us? It doesn’t have to be so. Notice how Liza tried to control the conversation by asserting first her understanding of factual information, and then as time went on, asserted that her personal, lived experience was an even more legitimate form of knowledge. Note also, though, that at the same time that she is asserting the validity and facts of her own personal experience, she perceives that she has to validate this with a reference to the experts who write the textbooks.

This conversation demonstrates the manner in which social identity affects what people consider relevant and legitimate knowledge. Liza’s identity as an African-American is part of her assertion of knowledge. She deems her personal experience relevant and legitimate for this conversation because of her lived experience as an African-American.

Looking back over this conversation, one can see that although the people in this group mentioned some hard facts, some of what is asserted is outlandish. It would be hard to argue that these hard facts are obtained from news media, but these are as close to assertions independent of personal experience as the participants get that evening.

Is racial justice an issue for which personal experience is particularly relevant? These community members, struggling with this topic, seemed to think so. To them, the relevant “facts” are so much more about understanding other peoples’ experiences—what it is like to go through life as an African-American, for instance, rather than statistical or other objective facts, which tend not to convey the entirety of people’s experiences. Getting outside of one’s own experiences is extremely difficult. It seems the push that is often necessary is listening to others’ stories.

But what political issue is not at least in part about considering an issue from others' perspectives? From health care, to unemployment, to matters of war and international trade, understanding differences in people's experiences lies at the root of understanding different approaches to addressing problems both local and global. More broadly, democratic political structures depend on citizens governing each other, which makes the ability to consider issues from the perspective of others besides oneself fundamental to what it means to be a good, competent citizen.

The degree to which citizens are informed about objective political facts is important. This type of information, which political scientists typically focus on when we talk about political knowledge, is useful for making sense of political affairs and disagreements over policy. But familiarity with these types of facts represents only one aspect of using that knowledge. Personal experiential knowledge—one's own experiences, as well as others'—seems to be essential to the process of *interpreting* facts. If we attend only to levels of "factual knowledge," we miss that facts rarely speak for themselves. The manner in which people use facts and the meanings they ascribe to them are based on people's own political orientations and experiences.

Local Public Officials Relaying Knowledge

The conversations above suggest that "ordinary citizens" interpret political facts through the lens of their personal experience when making sense of politics. But is it the case that people who are politically involved and informed do so as well? In our fieldwork involving public officials—local elected officials and nonelected public employees, we observed a similar dynamic occurring, where facts were often interpreted and evaluated in relation to people's lived experiences.

One of the groups in the study about community racial dialogue included city council members, city employees including librarians, firemen, and city agency directors, as well as several African-American and Hmong community members.⁵⁸ This group met in a police station in a central Wisconsin city, and was facilitated by a Latina.

In the following excerpt, this group is in their 4th of 5 sessions together. They have started off that session by looking at the discussion guide, which asks, "What kinds of public policies will help us deal with race relations?" Several alternatives are offered in the guide, and the first is affirmative action. In the conversation that follows, the public officials do

bring in facts, such as the number of city employees. But they share these facts through the context of their personal experiences.

John [a white city council person, reading an example policy approach from the discussion handbook]: “Policies like affirmative action, which strive for equal results rather than equal opportunity have gone too far.” Now some government folks saying you have to hire minorities, problem with that is that—pub[lic] safety—they have to go through some real stringent tests—physical, mental, the whole thing—you have to pick the best guy—gotta be competent to save people—if you hire people that are not ready, that is where it is wrong.

Maria [Latina facilitator]: So we have to assume that based on those conditions, everybody has to meet the criteria—

John: Whatever race they are—but feds are saying that in some cases you’ve gotta put a minority there.

Samuel [African American man, city resident]: Uhhhhh....

Adaline [African-American woman, city resident]: Is that how you're interpreting....?

John: [That is the] law in some places.

Samuel: I still don’t understand the question of qualified. How can somebody apply for a job that is not qualified? There have been a lot of jobs that I have been qualified for—look at the application, and take the process on from there—so I don’t understand the word qualified.

John: Ok “qualified”—final testing process—the one that is going to come out the highest—he is going to be more likely to be smarter than with those two guys—

Samuel: But—

Maria: Now, we’re moving into debate.

Samuel: Not going to debate—I *worked there and I was well-qualified, more qualified than the person they hired* [emphasis added]—I checked and that person had no degree, no nothing.

[...]

Adaline: I just wanted to make a comment about affirmative action. There are times when it could have a negative connotation, but more than—just being

involved in the whole process at a corporation—more times there were people that were qualified. There is a myth out there that they hire people that aren't qualified...

Maria: And that's the myth.

Adaline: The myth is that they hired less qualified people.

Maria: And that myth is overshadowing—

Adaline: Yes—overshadowing affirmative action.

Stan [white man, city agency head]: I would agree with that. If you have a minority that meets the standards, you can give preference to that person. If this is the minimum, then you can.

[...]

Ginger [African-American woman, city resident]: It's—as Samuel said—the first level of concern is whether qualified—should not even be an issue. I think the reason why that is brought up so much is because I think people are still looking for a way out, not come to the table in terms of what they are supposed to do. A lot of times people of color think that that question of being qualified always comes up when it is related to something about us. But when you're talking about everybody else, it is never an issue.

[...]

Samuel: If we didn't have affirmative action, would they actually give us jobs? I mean good jobs? *We can't even get jobs in [this city], good jobs* [emphasis added].

Maria: So what I am hearing is, from one point of view is—everyone has the opportunity to apply. Don, you are saying you don't like mandates.

Don [white man, city council member]: To me affirmative action is—let me go back to something else. This qualification thing—anybody that is qualified, reaches the standards, and applies, has every right in the world to address that employer and ask what part of my qualifications were not adequate. And if they are not able to give you a good answer, we are in big trouble if our laws do not protect people from discrimination because of race.

Adaline: It is hard to prove though, Don. They tell me, "Well, they were not *this*."

Don: Couldn't you have pursued it further?

Adaline: But don't have the info on all the other candidates, so it would be very difficult for me to prove. Nothing I can do about it, unless I have solid info.

Later on in the conversation, Samuel says:

I would like to add something—white people being preferenced—that is the problem we have—social, economic, political power. You all are everywhere. In every position [chuckles]. All we want is an opportunity to go in with everybody else. Not asking you all to give us anything. If we were given anything, you all strip us—*I am just bringing facts to the table* [emphasis added]. But we gotta get to where we say, hey, all we want is to be equal—don't make excuses, let us have fair opportunity for us to grow, reach our potential, be a part of the team and made to feel acceptable.

We include this last excerpt to draw attention to the possibility that what people treat as “facts” that they “bring to the table” are not hard data, but their perceptions of the way the world works based on their experiences as people of a given cultural background. Here, Samuel's experiential knowledge serves as a valuable source of political information as the group deliberates about affirmative action policy.

Even when public officials bring in objective facts they have acquired from experts, we observe that they often do so through the lens of their personal experience. The following excerpt is an example of this dynamic among two white public officials, Al, the head of the planning department, and John, a member of the city council.

Maria: Here's an example—and Al you can help me with this, you're an urban planner. One of the things that happened to communities and was maybe creating that inner city problem was the building of highways, huge highways someone decided that they would take communities out of the city—consequently dollars and funding, talent, resources left the area with it, all because of some decisions in which the way was developed. Did I get that right?

Al: Yes, that's pretty good, that's a point of view, and there's a lot of truth to it. It's a little more complicated than that.

Maria: Yes.

Al: And there are whole seminars taught on that. I don't mean to be condescending—awfully big topic—and yet I don't think it is

institutionalized racism. There are a lot of other interests that caused this to happen. It certainly affects our lives throughout this country—a lot of resources allocated to the automobiles.

Maria: Took funding away from cities.

Al: Certainly had—and it took the middle- and upper-class away from cities—now you are seeing more mixing, but that is still a big issue. I thought you were going to talk about um redevelopment politics of the 60s where they tore out whole slots of neighborhoods—another whole issue. One [of the] things about government intervention—not always a good thing because a lot of our federal policies—not all of them—some have really worked, but there are some that have been resounding failures. And um, you know, slum clearance policies, they didn't work. The highway policies, they worked, for some goals but not for others. Sorry I got started there.

Maria: No that's ok, it helps to explain the conditions, how they arise.

John: [*What*] you are saying happened to me [emphasis added]. When I was working in Milwaukee in the 60s, the only way to get downtown was [a certain avenue]. Nobody goes down [that avenue] anymore. Go over to the expressway—businesses down there, none existed.

Samuel: In Ohio, in the 60s had a very prominent black neighborhood—brought the highway in and eliminated all them guys.

Al: Happened in Milwaukee too—and then they never built the highway...30 years ago. That is where a choice might have been racist—it was easier to go though an African American neighborhood. To make it worse, [they] never built the highway, realized they didn't need to.

In these conversations, public officials and residents of the community both mix facts and personal experience together. What is striking here, though, is that people treat personal experience as *more* credible. Those experiences are the data and the lenses that people use to make sense of larger “facts” offered by experts. In the following conversation, the group moves on to discussing the next policy alternative in the discussion guide: focusing on policies and taking out policies that institutionalize racism. As the group members talk, an African-American woman bluntly claims that in order to *understand*, in

other words, in order to really *know*, people have to hear the stories or personal experiences of others.

The facilitator asks the researcher observing the conversation to read the alternative that suggests we need to examine policies and revise those that exacerbate racial discrimination and injustice, then says, “Pretty powerful huh?”

John: I think that whites and Hispanics receive much tougher sentencing than blacks.

I can’t believe that judges—judges can tell by law what type of sentences to hand out. So some of these things, I don’t agree with some of the things they are saying here. I think they are overestimating some things.

Maria: Do you feel that there is not a disproportionate number of people of color—

John: I guess it comes down to population. In [this town], the whites are 30,000 and the blacks are, what, 5,000? And committing crimes—then I guess that would be perceived as—but I think that’s a population issue—what if it was reversed—I was a white guy in a community of 30,000 Blacks, would that be the same?

Maria: Same as what, John?

John: As the other way around—what do you guys think we have in the Black population—a couple hundred, maybe 3,000?

Maria: Um, less than a thousand.

Samuel: Less than a thousand, yeah.

John: And so—we have a pop[ulation] of 42,000, so it means that 41,000 are whites or Hispanics, or some other, something else—

Samuel: Well what I would say to that, John—you don’t have to worry about the police, flagging you down and mistreating you and all that there. We do have compassion in our community, we do have white people that come and move in our neighborhood and they are accepted. But when we think of a Black moving into a white neighborhood, we are not accepted—fight with the police. Police don’t show up—these things go on in the city, but you have it right here. Like the police chief, sick the dog on the guy in Oconomowoc, you know—Black guy. That’s crazy. How do we deal with issues like that?

Jim: I think this whole viewpoint is based on larger cities. I don't see this happening in [this town]. I see judges being fair—some of the judges we have in [this town] right now will put you on probation before they put you in jail.

Maria: Ok. Well, there you have a viewpoint. Elihue?

[laughter]

Elihue [African-American man, city resident]: It happens. It happens a lot, you know. It just—there are ways of—especially with [this town's] judges, ways of going around it, so it won't make it seem so racist. I mean, you can tell—you can tell the differences. *Thinking about myself, in Oshkosh. I felt more comfortable in that courtroom in Oshkosh than I do over here* [emphasis added]. Here, you are—you get the feeling that no matter what you say, you have already been judged. That's what I feel. I might be wrong.

Maria: That's what you've experienced.

Elihue: Yeah.

[...]

Ginger: The viewpoint in [policy alternative] number 5 [in the discussion handbook]—we just review our policies, take the racism out, that hit the nail on the head—these sessions here—a lot of times, *I think, um, if you have not been in the midst of certain situations, the way minorities have, it is hard for you to get an understanding*—because I have heard around the table that even from the most simplest thing like living in a community but you've gotta go out of the community to get your hair done. I mean the most simplest thing. And I think these [dialogue] circles help individuals who don't come in contact with these types of situations to get more of an understanding and a grasp. That viewpoint is right on the money.... it would be hard for people of color to understand that some of these things do take place also, but we have been through it. And we know it is there.

Don: How do you do it? I'm sitting here thinking I must be the most naïve 69-year-old man in the world. I can't imagine—I—

Maria: I see a—I think it is important for me as the facilitator to point something out, and that is this. And what you just said sums it up. [To Ginger] We have to honor your feelings, not write them off, make sure we're honoring feelings

here—I see what you are saying [to Don] you do not understand this. It is not connecting here.

Don: Nope.

Maria: But you are keeping your ears open and you're listening. But the diversity circle is the arena or the vehicle for helping us to open yourself. And while, Don, you may walk away still not quite understanding, you've been exposed to feelings, right?

Don: Yes, I have. [Very serious—this whole exchange is quite serious.]

Maria: And thoughts of other people who have—they are pretty powerful—and have experienced such things.

Al: And you can't help but walk away knowing more than—for at least those of us who were you know—*we live in this town, Wisconsin, we are not exposed to a lot of minorities, and we certainly haven't necessarily, at least I haven't, looked at things from the minority point-of-view.* So it is very valuable to hear the things we're hearing.

Maria: Thank you, Al.

Al: And if sometimes some of us find it hard to believe, you know, we were all laughing last time about driving to Brandon—and then I get home and I read in the paper that it just happened in Oconomowoc. You know? So, I gotta believe you. I gotta believe you.

Maria: Validating, isn't it?

Al: I would have believed you anyway, but then it was right there in the paper.

[laughter]

In this dialogue group on race relations, we hear public officials and community members struggling with difficult public issues by relaying personal experience, and eventually listening to each others' experiences. Al remarks just how valuable this information is. These excerpts are from their fourth discussion together. The city officials could have chosen to not return to each subsequent discussion, but something about the information conveyed was valuable to them.

Notice also, though, that Al's final statement acknowledges that mass mediated news is convincing evidence. They are not necessarily privileging personal experience as the only input to discussions about public affairs. But they are treating personal experience as

valuable information for the task of making sense of difficult community issues, such as issues related to racial justice.

Political Knowledge Among Experts and Public Opinion Practitioners

In interviews conducted as part of a study of how public opinion data gets used in news coverage of American politics, even trained experts and self-proclaimed political junkies frequently made use of similar types of personal experiences to inform their understanding and interpretation of political matters. While many made reference to facts and data and media reporting, they typically cross-checked these sources of information against experiential knowledge, even among those trained to be skeptical of such information as anecdotal and non-representative.

Take, for example, one of the survey research practitioners interviewed (Pollster 1), whose opinion research firm conducts representative surveys for major political figures. He described testing out some of the “likely voter” screener questions in the Gallup survey on his own staff as an important source of information in a debate concerning methods:

I thought they were flawed in the screener questions. Gallup’s been using the same screener questions forever, right? We sat around the lunchroom one day—nobody can eat lunch at their desks—we sat around the lunch room and I said, how many of you know where your polling place is? First I said, how many of you are going to vote? It’s a political firm, we do some amount of corporate work, but everybody’s going to vote. How many of you know where your polling place is? Only two people had their hands go up. And there were about 14 people in the lunch area. I said well how are you going to find out where to vote? [He points at his cell phone.]

He went on to describe more systematic efforts his firm took to test the theory that the screener questions were outdated, but he frequently returned to the role played by gut check reactions and experiential knowledge in making sense of public opinion data itself: “You have to push yourself. If there’s something dissonant in the data, you have to answer that question.” He elaborated:

We provide logical explanations for phenomena. Right? And phenomena could be that the numbers change or the numbers stay the same. But either way, that’s going to be what we do... is explain why hasn’t it changed or why is it the same. And if you

think of your data as *phenomena*, and then your job is to explain it, not just report it blandly, then you're thinking like a pollster.

In another example, a public opinion survey researcher (Polling Analyst 4) illustrated a point about the complex sampling and coverage issues facing the public opinion research industry by drawing on personal details about his own family members' experiences:

My mother, who's 78, no longer answers—well, she tells me she doesn't answer her land line phone, unless she thinks it's the hospital or something. She uses caller ID and screens calls. You can't reach her. She does not answer her cell phone from strangers. Have we covered her? Maybe, if we send an advance letter and she knows it's legit and she sees it coming, she'll do it, but I'd argue most surveys aren't really covering my mother. I don't know how many others there are like that, that just will not [take a survey].

Although Analyst 4 was perfectly aware that his own mother's experience may or may not be typical, this type of personal experiential knowledge informed his own thinking on the subject.

Journalists tasked with covering matters related to public opinion described the difficulties associated with balancing anecdotal experiences they encountered with assessing representativeness and generalizability. Reporter 3:

You'd be surprised to this day how many reporters will say, "Everyone's for or against" that thing "because everyone I know is for or against it." That's not really good reporting, particularly if you're in the Washington area. If you were actually in a state capitol or even just a city out in the country that might be a little more representative because you're talking to people at the grocery. But here, it's in Washington. They're all cynics and jaded people, political operatives.

Another journalist at a national newspaper (Reporter 2) described covering the political implications of the Ebola quarantines in New York and New Jersey. Staff for one of the governors told him, "Listen, you need to get out of your New York bubble and ask people outside."

So on like Day 2 or Day 3 of the story, I called my parents in [redacted], you know cause my parents are very conservative, they're both very Repub—they're never going to vote for a Democrat, they're very Republican, whatever. I ask them, "So what do you think about these quarantine measures?" Loved them. Thought Christie

was protecting the people of New Jersey, blah blah blah. I said, “are people talking about them?” They say, “Oh yeah, it’s on Fox News every night, people love it.” Blah blah blah. I said “Are people in [redacted] afraid of Ebola?” And they said, I mean, “Yeah, people don’t know what’s going to happen next.” I said, huh, cause living in New York, I go to the restaurant where the Ebola doctor went to. I know what’s going on. I didn’t have any fear and everyone I talked to, nobody had any actual fear of Ebola. Outside [on the other hand], people are afraid.

Public opinion polling would later underscore that what Reporter 2 was hearing from his parents was in fact broadly similar to many other Republican voters. But personal experiential knowledge was just as valuable in many ways as the “facts” in the survey data. As another political reporter (Reporter 5) emphasized:

Hearing people talk about candidates and issues gives you another dimension that polling cannot. I’ve never done door-knocking or voter interviews in which I haven’t come back—you know, if I’m able to do enough of it—come back with some insight, some deeper understanding, something more than the polling gives you.

Experiences talking with voters also informed the way many of the journalists interviewed made sense of public opinion polling and its limitations in capturing the nuances of public opinion. A political columnist interviewed who said she remained skeptical of the value of polls to measure attitudes and preferences (Commentator 1) recalled an experience she had from graduate school that influenced her thinking. It is an anecdote that both illustrates how elites rely on experiential knowledge to make sense of political phenomena but also an anecdote that references the challenges in applying academic theories about public opinion given class-based differences in how groups engage politically.

I hadn’t thought about this since I was in graduate school. I, we did survey research. It was like a new thing to do. And our job was to test the concept that certain classes of people are more “public-regarding” and certain classes are more “private-regarding.” And the exact theory was that poor people were more private regarding (i.e., they wanted government that would do things that would help them) and wealthier people were more public regarding (they wanted government to take care of everything). And they sent us down to [redacted], with this long list of questions. You go into people’s houses and you’d sit there. Very patient. And you’re asking all these questions. And you’re asking questions of these poor women on welfare. Like,

you know who is [redacted] and they'd say, "Oh my god I don't know, who is he?" And you'd say, "Who is the mayor?" And "Oh my god, I don't even know who the mayor is. I'm so stupid." And they'd feel terrible. And then you ask them what the city should do, and they always would say things like "They should do better schools." And why? "Well because my kid is in school and the school isn't very good." And that would go on. And they'd come out as totally not involved in politics and totally private regarding. And then you would go to the rich person's house and you would say, "Who is the mayor?" And they would say, "Fred! He lives down the street." And you would say, "What do you think [the state capitol] should do?" "They should make a better business climate." And why is that? "Because it would be good for the city as a whole." And so it suddenly, it proved conclusively! That wealthy people were public regarding and poor people were private regarding and that poor people were ignorant and wealthy people were smart. And it was just... you could see it all happening in front of you. But we had no way of explaining all that.

The comments of this political columnist, like those of other political experts above, suggest that an important aspect of civic competence is the ability to pay attention to the manner in which one's own personal experience affects how facts are processed. At times our perceptual lenses, developed in part through experience, bias how we interpret facts. At other times, as just above, personal experience is a valuable source of evidence that can help people judge the validity of information that others are treating as fact.

An Expanded Model of Citizen Competence

Empirically, we have observed a substantial role for political experience in the communication of political facts. We briefly summarize that evidence here and then use it to make a normative case for an Expanded Model of Citizen Competence.

In our various studies in which we have listened to the way people talk about political issues, we have observed people interpreting facts through the lens of personal experience. Even when they are discussing facts, they do so with reference to and often filtered through the perspectives developed through their own lived experiences. This is even the case with the political experts in our studies, from local level politicians and policy makers to national-level political journalists and pollsters.

In our evidence from group conversations in particular, we also observed strong norms around making references to personal experience when talking politics with others. When people offer up personal experience as they make sense of public issues, they are using this information to connect to others in the conversation. They are not only making sense of issues, they are sharing themselves. In other words, in the course of everyday life, we see people using political facts for relational purposes. We observe them acting as though it is not appropriate to simply convey hard facts to one another. They expect people to offer up information in ways that communicate its relevance to the lives of the people they are talking with and to the nature of their relationships. We observe that when people do not do this, when they state facts in ways that are disconnected from the lives of the people in the conversation, it is treated as socially awkward and inappropriate.

It is worthwhile to remember that among those of us who do talk frequently with others about what we have heard, read, or watched in the news, part of what we are doing is performing certain socially recognized forms of behavior as a signal to others of our social status as well-educated, politically interested individuals. A sketch on the television show *Portlandia* illustrates this dynamic in the extreme: two characters in a coffee shop compete with each other over who has read the most, and most recent, news from increasingly obscure sources. The characters' conversation descends into an absurdist exercise in barking ridiculous citations at one another until ultimately they start eating phone books.⁵⁹ What this exaggerated game of fact-sharing dramatizes is how in certain circles the content—the facts—is often secondary to the social function of demonstrating superior knowledge and familiarity with news and information, and how the game itself can eventually undermine any hopes of a reasonable conversation. Even the way people answer political knowledge questions on surveys conforms to this behavior of using facts to signal identity. When strong partisans answer knowledge questions incorrectly, they are often motivated by a desire to portray their party in a positive light, rather than by a desire to give an accurate response.⁶⁰ The “Did You Read It?” game is alive and well among political experts not only because we know a lot of political facts, but because it is important to us to be perceived as political experts.

Our data come from conversations and interviews. Some might wonder whether what people say in conversations with their acquaintances or in interviews with us has any relevance to their actual opinions or the votes they cast on election day. Our response is that

individuals do not hold one true opinion, but instead offer up opinions based on considerations that are relevant and salient to the context at hand.⁶¹ If a person votes one way, offers a different choice when asked by a pollster, and yet another in conversation with friends, which is her true opinion? We suggest each of these opinions is a manifestation of the various forms of knowledge she holds. Our desire to focus on the expression of political knowledge in conversations is motivated by a recognition that students of political behavior all too often examine the manifestations of opinion revealed in surveys, but too rarely those that occur in the course of interactions during everyday life.⁶²

Our examination of how people use political facts when they talk about politics has not erased the mounds of evidence that most people are simply wrong about many aspects of politics. But we wish to turn that recurring critique on its head. Complaints that ill-informed people are poorly equipped to make judgments on national and international policy overlook the fact that highly informed and engaged people are not actually that adept at processing and using factual information either.⁶³ In our fieldwork, we see politically informed people using personal experiences to make sense of and interpret facts. True, they may use this experiential knowledge in a somewhat sophisticated way, cross-checking it against other objective information, but we also know from extensive research on ideology and information processing that highly-informed citizens engage in selective processing of information that aligns with their partisan preferences. For them, being “informed” is quite often about knowing with greater and greater certainty why the other side is wrong.⁶⁴ It does not necessarily make them better, more thoughtful citizens. As Zaller points out, strong partisans’ higher levels of political awareness may simply be evidence of greater reflexivity in attitudes, an “uncritical mass acceptance of elite-packaged systems of opinion.”⁶⁵ There is growing evidence⁶⁶ that quite often the policy preferences that people adopt flow from their partisan and other group identities, rather than the other way around. In effect, the typical expectation that political judgments are the product of factual information seems incommensurate with the available empirical evidence.

We have argued that personal experience is empirically an important part of the act of making sense of politics, and we therefore ought to study it as an integral part of civic competence. But we seek to make an even stronger statement – that we ought to focus on personal experience because normatively democracy requires it. In order for people to make choices that govern each other in a just and compassionate manner, they *need* to pay

attention to others' personal experiences.⁶⁷ In addition, our observation of the way even political experts make sense of public issues suggests that even those of us who are politically knowledgeable need to pay attention to the way our own personal experience influences how we make sense of facts. Several education scholars have argued that ignoring experiential knowledge fosters a “deficit perspective,” or a perspective that predisposes us to view the learner as lacking in knowledge, rather than recognizing what assets the learner brings to the learning task.⁶⁸ In other words, holding up an objectively defined standard of knowledge removed from reality predisposes us to conclude that people who experience a reality different from those who create the standard are less competent. Have we done the same in the study of political knowledge?

If we continue to examine the ways in which people fall short of the informed citizen ideal, have we not only judged people unfairly, but have we deterred them from participating? The stereotype threat literature warns that reminding people of a stereotype about a social group to which they belong that emphasizes the incompetence of that group, causes them to underperform on tasks such as a taking a verbal or math test.⁶⁹ If we continually remind people of the ignorance of the average American, what does that do to the participation of the average American? With political scientists' and journalists' focus on knowledge of national and international issues, do we in turn perpetuate a news environment in which local and even state news is deemed unimportant, preventing people from gathering the factual knowledge we have asserted is so important for realms of politics that account for “47 cents of each dollar spent by governments in the U.S.”?⁷⁰ Evidence that our legislatures are comprised almost exclusively of people from white-collar backgrounds begs the question of what deters members of the working class from running.⁷¹ Could it be that prevailing conceptions of competence convey that only people from a well-educated background are appropriate representatives, despite evidence that such backgrounds are not associated with better performance in office?⁷²

To be clear, our Expanded Model of Civic Competence calls for greater attention to the way ordinary citizens make sense of politics—to the information they actually use and the perspectives they draw upon—but we are not arguing that good citizenship can rely on personal experience as a substitute for facts. The effectiveness of ethnocentric neo-populist appeals by candidates such as Donald Trump is a reminder that intensely held political preferences can be formed on the basis of resentments, undermining civil liberties and the

compassionate democracy we are advocating here. In other words, we are not arguing that the requirements of good citizenship can be met through reliance on personal experiential knowledge alone, but instead, that good citizenship requires acknowledging the lenses of experience through which political facts are understood. Even experts need to recognize this tendency in themselves. Competent citizenship entails recognizing the perspectives of others, not simply memorization of objective information.

An Expanded Model of Civic Competence that includes attention to personal experience has implications for civic education. As Lupia argues, effective educators must consider what knowledge prospective learners will be motivated to pay attention to, whether it will resonate, and how they will use it.⁷³ We see great promise in civic education that makes room for political dialogue that requires students not only to base their arguments on facts, but also trains them to be better listeners to others' points of view. Such a curriculum would connect political discourse to the direct personal experiences of students in the communities in which they live while opening their minds to the experiences of others they have never personally met.⁷⁴

Facts matter, but *whose* facts matter and *which* facts matter cannot be taken for granted. In evaluating citizens' competency as users of political information, experiential knowledge deserves to be treated as valuable not only because citizens themselves regularly draw on this type of knowledge, but also because democracy demands that citizens grapple with each other's experiences and perspectives. Democracy is more than isolated individuals aggregating their preferences to govern themselves. Democracy is about people interacting together to collectively shape the communities in which they aspire to live in the future. Ultimately, awareness of and appreciation for others' experiences may be as important as knowledge of candidate platforms and the latest policy debates—matters which are typically held up by the informed citizen ideal as hallmarks of good citizenship. By idealizing this particularly elite form of knowledge about political and public affairs and failing to acknowledge the way marginalized populations engage with the political world, political scientists may be complicit in delegitimizing these alternative sources of information, which remain highly relevant to public life. Experiential knowledge is not only essential to how all citizens across classes make sense of political phenomena, in a pluralistic democratic society sharing and conversing about those experiences remains at the very core of what it means to be an informed, attentive citizen.

Notes

¹ Mutz 2006, 143.

² Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996.

³ But see Lupia 2016.

⁴ Hochschild and Einstein 2015; see also Funk and Rainie 2015.

⁵ Bartels 1996.

⁶ Althaus 1998.

⁷ Schudson 1998, 295.

⁸ Lupia 2016.

⁹ Lupia 2016, 183.

¹⁰ Bartels 2005. See also Bartels 2008, ch. 6-7; Bartels 2016, ch. 5-6.

¹¹ Lupia, Levine, Menning, and Sin 2007.

¹² Achen and Bartels 2016.

¹³ Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, and Rainey 2014, 851.

¹⁴ Previous studies have shown that knowledge levels may be impacted by the availability of information in the environment in which people live and work. Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer 1994 showed how knowledge of state civic affairs increased for people who simply lived closer to their statehouse as a consequence of greater media attention. A more recent study, Hayes and Lawless 2015, found that people in areas with diminished local news coverage were less able to evaluate their members of Congress and also less likely to vote.

¹⁵ Abrajano 2015.

¹⁶ Dolan 2011; Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, and Rainey 2014.

¹⁷ Mondak Anderson 2004.

¹⁸ Prior 2014.

¹⁹ Prior and Lupia 2008.

²⁰ Clifford and Jerit 2016; Motta, Callaghan, and Smith 2016.

²¹ Jerit and Barabas 2012.

²² Nyhan and Reifler 2010; but see Redlawsk et al. 2010.

²³ Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2014.

²⁴ Bartels 2008, ch. 6; Lenz 2012; Achen and Bartels 2016, ch. 10.

²⁵ Brady and Sniderman 1985, 1076; as quoted in Achen and Bartels 2016, 275.

²⁶ Bartels 2002, 123-7.

²⁷ Gaines et al. 2007.

²⁸ Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2015.

²⁹ 68% of the U.S. public engage in informal political talk at least a few times a month according to one survey from 2003 cited in Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini 2009, 37. Our study investigates both structured (i.e., race dialogues) and nonformal talk, but in all cases the discussions are not about arriving at a decision and are therefore more akin to conversation than to formal deliberation. See Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000.

³⁰ Eveland, 2004; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002.

³¹ Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000.

³² Eveland, Morey and Hutchens 2011, Fig 1.

³³ Druckman and Nelson 2003. See also Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller 1980.

³⁴ Cramer Walsh 2004, Harris-Lacewell 2004.

³⁵ Van Driel et al. 2001.

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- ³⁶ Kinder 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981.
- ³⁷ Egan and Mullin 2012.
- ³⁸ Dolan 2011.
- ³⁹ Soss 2000; Soss et al. 2011.
- ⁴⁰ Mettler 2005.
- ⁴¹ Campbell 2003.
- ⁴² Mettler 2011.
- ⁴³ Niemi and Jennings 1991.
- ⁴⁴ Kinder and Sears 1981.
- ⁴⁵ See Lupia 2016, ch. 12.
- ⁴⁶ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996.
- ⁴⁷ Cramer Walsh 2004; Cramer Walsh 2007; Cramer 2016.
- ⁴⁸ e.g. Mutz 2006.
- ⁴⁹ e.g. Price, Cappella and Nir 2002.
- ⁵⁰ The examples in this paragraph are drawn from Cramer 2016.
- ⁵¹ Cramer Walsh 2007.
- ⁵² Cramer 2016.
- ⁵³ Toff 2016.
- ⁵⁴ Cramer 2016.
- ⁵⁵ See Cramer Walsh 2007, ch. 7, for a longer discussion of storytelling as the “act of providing a narrative about experience from one’s own life, either a specific event or reference to a pattern of events” (p. 142).
- ⁵⁶ Denotes comments omitted for the sake of brevity.
- ⁵⁷ Cramer Walsh 2007.
- ⁵⁸ Cramer Walsh 2007.
- ⁵⁹ See that portion of the episode here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JLWQEuz2gA>.
- ⁶⁰ Prior, Sood and Khanna 2015.
- ⁶¹ Zaller 1992.
- ⁶² Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 13-14.
- ⁶³ e.g. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2015; Bartels 2008, ch. 6, Achen and Bartels 2016, ch. 10.
- ⁶⁴ Bartels 2002, 123-7; Gaines et al. 2007.
- ⁶⁵ Zaller 2012, 575.
- ⁶⁶ e.g., Lenz 2012; Achen and Bartels 2016.
- ⁶⁷ Young 2000.
- ⁶⁸ e.g. Fisher 2007.
- ⁶⁹ Steele and Aronson 1995; Spencer et al. 1999.
- ⁷⁰ Hopkins 2014.
- ⁷¹ Carnes 2013.
- ⁷² Carnes and Lupu 2015.
- ⁷³ Lupia 2016.
- ⁷⁴ Hess and McAvoy 2015.

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