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***WHAT VOTERS HAVE AND WHAT VOTERS NEED:
THE RELATION BETWEEN PUBLIC OPINION AND
POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE***

Robert Johns*

This article is directly concerned with political knowledge and public opinion, the key question being whether and which voters have the types and levels of opinion and knowledge for voting according to standard theories of representative democracy. This work's bearing on representation and democracy is indirect, and so the few assertions and many implications about these themes are necessarily vaguer and more debatable. However, it is hoped that some of the evidence offered here will help to drag the attention of researchers in such fields back to the problems with many of their fundamental assumptions (even if this does involve some jarring cognitive dissonance). The empirical testing uses data from the Belgian Election Study from 1991,¹ and particular attention is paid to the difference between the two principal communities in the country: French-speaking Wallonia and Dutch-speaking Flanders.² The statistical technique of analysis used is loglinear modelling with latent variables, which is discussed briefly in an Appendix.

The basic premise of the article is that representative democracy in Western polities is usually held in academic discussion to be most closely approximated by the 'responsible party' theory of representation,³ which

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¹ ISPO/PIOP, *1991 General Election Study Belgium: Codebook and Questionnaire*, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve: ISPO/PIOP, 1995.

² Strictly, the linguistic and political boundaries are different, because voters in Brussels are neither Flemish nor Walloon. Here they are assigned to Wallonia or Flanders according to the language of the questionnaire that they completed.

³ P. CONVERSE and R. PIERCE, *Political Representation in France*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; R. PIERCE, "Mass-elite Linkages and the Responsible Party Model of Representation", in W. MILLER *et al.*, *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

requires voters to match their preferences with those of the competing elites in order to select which to support.⁴ So voters need to know what they want, and who's going to give it to them.⁵ They must have their own preferences, and knowledge of elite preferences. They need public opinion, and political knowledge.⁶

The fact that political knowledge is important for voting is neither new nor startling. Even better documented is the fact that political knowledge in Western democracies is neither deep nor broad.⁷ One might then expect that the literature on voting (and representation) would highlight the need to allow for scanty knowledge when modelling. At least until recently, this was not the case at all. Much voting research makes implausible assumptions about some voters' political knowledge,⁸ and remarkably little research has suggested that electorates with huge differentials in knowledge might require a variety of models of voting.⁹ As Sniderman *et al.* observe, too much of the debate over political sophistication has consisted of waves of assertions of uniform and startling

⁴ D. BUTLER, H. PENNIMAN, A. RANNEY, *Democracy at the Polls*, Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1981; D. FUCHS, *A Metatheory of the Democratic Process*, Berlin: Science Center Manuscript, 1993; H.-D. KLINGEMANN, R. HOFFERBERT, I. BUDGE, *Parties, Policies and Democracy*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994; B. MANIN, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; A. BRETON, *Competitive Governments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; W. MILLER *et al.*, 1999.

⁵ The key is that the theory sees voters as the engineers of political representation, since elites have neither the pure altruism, the pure office-seeking motives nor the information to respond to every fluctuation in public opinion.

⁶ More precisely, voters need their 'share' of public opinion. This paper uses the term 'public opinion' in a strict sense as the aggregation of individual preferences. Hence, a voter requires personal preferences and knowledge of elite preferences. The electorate as a whole requires public opinion and political knowledge.

⁷ W. NEUMAN, *The Paradox of Mass Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; K. WITTERBROOD, "The Level of Political Knowledge of the Dutch Citizen", *Acta Politica*, 22, 1992; M. DELLI CARPINI, S. KEETER, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996; I. McALLISTER, "Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 33, 1998.

⁸ *E.g.* R. DALTON, S. FLANAGAN, P. BECK, *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984; H. HIMMELWEIT, P. HUMPHREYS, M. JAEGER, *How Voters Decide*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press *et al.*, 1985; G. BRENNAN, L. LOMASKY, *Democracy and Decision*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; S. MERRILL, B. GROFMAN, *A Unified Theory of Voting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁹ An exception is J. BARTLE, "Political Awareness and Heterogeneity in Models of Voting: some Evidence from the British Election Studies", *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 7, 1997.

political ignorance, followed by knee-jerk reactions against such waves,¹⁰ reactions which owe more to a panicked desire to protect the titanic craft of existing political science than to a genuine feeling that the craft is sound. A cursory glance at everyday political life reveals the heterogeneity in political knowledge: this chapter explores the extent of and patterns of this heterogeneity. As suggested above, the last decade has seen increasing willingness to take theoretical account of limits on voters' knowledge. (However, even some of the more recent research on uncertainty and electoral choice has retained unreasonable assumptions about political knowledge. For example, Hinich and Munger's¹¹ investigation of voter uncertainty over likely candidate behaviour focuses on voter assessment of the candidate's credibility and commitment to the policy stance in question. The prior assumption that the voter knows the candidate's stance remains largely unquestioned. Similarly, Lupia and McCubbins¹² focus on whether sources of political information are knowledgeable and trustworthy, again presuming voters to have sought and found the information.) This chapter later discusses a key strand of research concerning the use of shortcuts in political reasoning known as 'heuristics'.¹³

Heterogeneity in political knowledge is still more relevant when the wider aim is recalled. This work is not preoccupied with absolute levels of knowledge of elite preferences. Rather it is concerned with relative levels. The question is not 'are voters knowledgeable?' but 'which voters are knowledgeable enough to behave as the responsible party model of representation requires?'. This question is far harder to answer, but it is a more germane and interesting question. Note that it is different from the simple question of 'which voters are knowledgeable enough?'. As is discussed in more detail later, this chapter does not set out yardsticks of knowledge below which voters are incapable of rational choice between parties and candidates. Rather, it sets out yardsticks of knowledge assumed by many standard models of voting. Voters failing to reach these yardsticks are not assumed to be misusing or wasting their votes, and there is no implication that they cannot be voting rationally. There is, though, an

¹⁰ P. SNIDERMAN, R. BRODY, P. TETLOCK, *Reasoning and Choice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, ch. 1.

¹¹ M. HINICH, M. MUNGER, *Analytical Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹² A. LUPIA, M. McCUBBINS, *The Democratic Dilemma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹³ Note, though, that while such research has dominated political psychology in recent years, it remains somewhat detached from the mainstream of political science. Its implications for voting behaviour and representation remain therefore far from clear.

implication that their vote choice is different from that envisaged by modellers, especially those seeking one single model of vote choice that ignores the vast inequalities in political knowledge.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE – KNOWLEDGE OF ELITE PREFERENCES

In this article, therefore, political knowledge is defined as knowledge of elite preferences. Ignorance of constitutional technicalities, or of particular politicians' ministerial roles, does not erect a major barrier against voting and representation.¹⁴ Ignorance of a major party's stand on the central issue of the campaign may well do.¹⁵ The knowledge involved is that which falls under the heading of 'people and players' in Delli Carpini and Keeter's¹⁶ classification. Narrowing the definition thus does not alter the conclusions of the 'minimalist' school of thought on political knowledge. Delli Carpini and Keeter¹⁷ find knowledge as unevenly distributed in this sphere as in the others, and evidence from elsewhere backs this up.¹⁸ This provides support for the increasingly dominant viewpoint that political knowledge is seldom domain-dependent.¹⁹ (The standard simile is with intelligence, in whose distinct domains the same individuals tend to attain similar standards.) Here that contention will be tested for two related reasons: first, because specialisation is at least theoretically possible; this may be important in connection with the second reason, the context of the empirical testing. This is discussed more fully having listed the three domains of political knowledge investigated here: party affiliations of important politicians, party left-right locations and party positions on issue dimensions.

¹⁴ Yet many measures seek exactly this type of knowledge, or – a bit better – simply the ability to match politicians to their current jobs. See, for example, various British, Dutch, French and pan-European Election Studies.

¹⁵ See M. GILENS, "Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences", *American Political Science Review*, 95, 2001.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R. LUSKIN, "Measuring Political Sophistication", *American Journal of Political Science*, 31, 1987; E. SMITH, *The Unchanging American Voter*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

¹⁹ W. NEUMAN, *op. cit.*; R. LUSKIN, *op. cit.*; J. ZALLER, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Knowledge of only one such area could easily be sufficient for voting. For example, use of the left-right or other ideological schema can obviate the need to obtain and retain details on party's issue positions.²⁰ This becomes more significant in the light of the differences between Belgium's French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities in terms of the character of political debate. Evidence on this is somewhat anecdotal, and the lack of previous research leaves expectations at most tentative, but there is at least some basis for investigating whether knowledge of left-right positions is proportionally greater in Wallonia within the context of generally weaker knowledge than in Flanders.²¹ Political competition in Wallonia is based proportionally more on socio-economic conflict than in Flanders (where religious and moral issues tend to take greater precedence). Public opinion theorists (such as Zaller)²² would expect everyday political debate to shape opinion and knowledge, and the importance of styles and structures of political competition has been demonstrated.²³

With knowledge in just one domain considered adequate, the next question is: how much knowledge is enough? This is the most difficult question to answer. Generosity was the guiding principle, such that respondents were required to place only the major parties on the major issues, and to match only the most visible political figures to their parties. (This is particularly important concerning Belgium, where the relative proliferation of parties makes it very difficult to maintain an encyclopaedic knowledge of party stances.) Moreover, wide margins of error were allowed in placing parties. Then, within this already greatly restricted scope of knowledge, respondents were permitted several gaps without being considered to have too little knowledge. 75% was the 'pass-mark'. (More details follow in the main empirical section.)

PUBLIC OPINION – PERSONAL PREFERENCES

Having thus hypothesised these 'adequate' levels of knowledge of elite preferences, we turn now to doing the same for personal preferences. A similar approach is deployed. This is because the key to representation as

²⁰ A. DOWNS, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957; G. SARTORI, *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

²¹ P.-H. CLAEYS, P. DESMAREZ, "L'électorat français et l'axe gauche-droite", in A. P. FROGNIER, A.-M. AISH-Van VAERENBERGH, *Elections : la Fêture ?* Bruxelles: De Boeck, 1994; see also ISPO/PIOP, *op. cit.*

²² *Op. cit.*

²³ Notably in D. GRANBERG, S. HOLMBERG, *The Political System Matters*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

theorised here is congruence: voters must match elite preferences with their own. Once again, three domains of preferences are considered: policy preferences, more abstract values (such as authoritarianism and individualism) and self-location on the same issue dimensions on which respondents were asked to place the parties. Again, an adequate stock of preferences in just one domain was deemed adequate overall: a respondent who knows her position on broad issue dimensions is potentially representable, and would be equipped to vote according to standard theories if aware of the parties' positions on the same dimensions. (Such specialisation might be expected to be rare, though the inter-community differences may again be visible.)

Once more, the extent of preferences stipulated within each domain was not exacting. Only questions on basic political values and on the most significant issues and policy areas were included. Further, gaps were permitted. Again, 75% of the most basic preferences in just one domain was the 'pass-mark'.

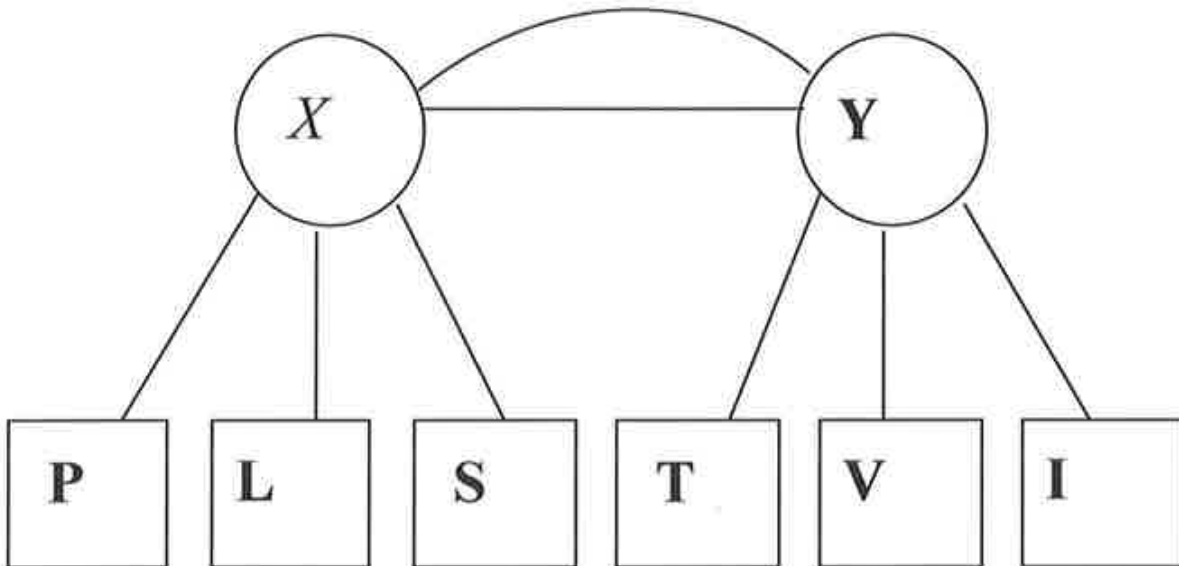
The term 'preferences' is deliberately vague, and could apply to all manners of political objects: issue positions, policy preferences, ideological locations, leadership styles and so on. Constraints on our empirical definition due to limited data should not obscure the potential breadth of the conceptual definition. This is important because the arguments here are intended to refer not only to spatial models of policy voting and representation. Many important accounts of electoral choice rest on variables other than the tessellation of a voter and a party's position on issues or ideological dimensions. The implications of this chapter's results for some of these alternative approaches are discussed later in the article.

TESTING THE EXTENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL PREFERENCES

In each community the same two latent variable model was tested. This model is illustrated in Figure 1, and the basic model fit statistics are set out in Table 1.

Figures and Tables

Figure 1 – the basic model



P = Matching six politicians to their parties

L = Placing five major parties correctly²⁴ on the left-right ideological scale

S = Placing three major parties correctly on five broad issue dimensions, and two more single-issue parties correctly on their respective issues²⁵

T = Placing oneself on the five issue dimensions

V = Answering something (other than 'don't know', 'never thought about it' or 'neither agree nor disagree') on 20 Likert items about political values

I = Offering support or opposition (rather than 'don't know' or 'neither agree nor disagree') to 15 policy propositions

All variables are scored such that 1 indicates failure to meet the yardstick, while 2 indicates success.

²⁴ The ideological and issue dimensions were operationalised as eleven-point scales. To respond 'correctly' did not entail matching the party to an exact point; rather, it simply entailed locating the party on the appropriate side of the scale's midpoint. For example, on the question of government intervention *versus* free enterprise, the socialist parties were correctly placed if located at any of the five points on the government intervention side of the midpoint. In some cases, responses either side of the midpoint were 'correct', with only extreme values designated as incorrect: an example of this is the left-right location of the PSC and the CVP. My thanks go to staff of the ISPO and PIOP, who were able to help me to designate those few areas on the scales which could fairly objectively be deemed incorrect.

²⁵ The two 'single-issue' parties were, in each community, the 'green' and the extreme right parties. To be correct, in the first case respondents had to designate the green party as prioritising environmental protection over jobs, and in the second, to designate the extreme right party as willing to grant immigrants fewer rights than the Belgians. Although these parties tend to be somewhat smaller, especially the Walloon *Front National*, these preferences are more or less the parties' *raison d'être*, and so it is not the case that detailed knowledge of minor parties' stances is being unreasonably demanded.

Figure 1 highlights the important hypothesis that specialisation is negligible. The latent variables are knowledge of elite preferences (X) and reported personal preferences (Y). Each indicator variable – each measure of knowledge or opinion – is related only to its latent variable. This local independence is particularly noteworthy because specialisation would for example imply connections between T and S with ‘issue specialists’ are disproportionately likely both to have personal preferences and knowledge of elite preferences in their field.

Table 1 – Basic model fit statistics for the Figure 1 model²⁶

	df	X ²	p	L ²	p
Dutch-speaking (N=2536)	48	55.7	0.21	59.4	0.13
French-speaking (N=1667)	48	43.1	0.67	45.6	0.57

The good fit of the model in each community – with p-values comfortably over 0.05 in every case – reinforces the message that specialisation is insignificant here. Controlling for general political knowledge, those who know the issue stands of various parties are *not* disproportionately likely to have their own preferences on the same issues. The point is that it is the general political knowledge and the general preference reporting that are related. Knowing elite preferences and having one’s own preferences could be seen as traits, cohesive, and conceptually distinct although empirically related.

The latent class structures in the two communities are shown in Table 2. In each community there are four classes, labelled in the table. The ‘highs’ are relatively likely to have their own preferences and to know the elite preferences. The ‘lows’ are the opposite. The tiny class of ‘reticents’ is relatively strong on political knowledge, but do not have or do not report many personal preferences. Here, the fourth (and in both cases the largest) class of ‘forthcomings’ is of most interest. These are the respondents weak on political knowledge (X=1), but relatively likely to report preferences (Y=2). This group of voters is the focus of attention for most of the rest of the chapter.

²⁶ Two things are worth noting here. First, the model fits better in the French-speaking community. This enduring result could be due largely to the smaller sample size. In fact the model fits are very impressive given the enormous samples (see HAGENAARS 1993, *op. cit.*). Second, in each case the latent variables are dichotomies. This was not conceptually decided *a priori*; as the most parsimonious result, it was tested first, and it worked.

Table 2 – Latent class structures of the Figure 1 models

French-speakers					Dutch-speakers				
Size	Low X1, Y1 0.218	Forthcoming X1, Y2 0.476	Reticent X2, Y1 0.025	High X2, Y2 0.281	Size	Low X1, Y1 0.185	Forthcoming X1, Y2 0.413	Reticent X2, Y1 0.037	High X2, Y2 0.365
P1	0.954	0.954	0.547	0.547	P1	0.892	0.892	0.275	0.275
P2	0.046	0.046	0.453	0.453	P2	0.108	0.108	0.725	0.725
L1	0.696	0.696	0.142	0.142	L1	0.860	0.860	0.260	0.260
L2	0.304	0.304	0.858	0.858	L2	0.140	0.140	0.740	0.740
S1	0.956	0.956	0.547	0.547	S1	0.714	0.714	0.098	0.098
S2	0.044	0.044	0.453	0.453	S2	0.286	0.286	0.902	0.902
T1	0.744	0.523	0.744	0.523	T1	0.748	0.476	0.748	0.476
T2	0.256	0.477	0.256	0.477	T2	0.252	0.524	0.252	0.524
V1	0.593	0.127	0.593	0.127	V1	0.818	0.176	0.818	0.176
V2	0.407	0.873	0.407	0.873	V2	0.183	0.824	0.183	0.824
I1	0.910	0.144	0.910	0.144	I1	0.952	0.240	0.952	0.240
I2	0.090	0.856	0.090	0.856	I2	0.048	0.760	0.048	0.760

Note the extent to which voters fall short of the knowledge yardsticks set. In Flanders, 60% of respondents are in class X=1. Among French-speakers, the proportion is 69%. This would matter less if the conditional probabilities showed the indicators to be unreliable, but for the most part this is not the case.²⁷ The two exceptions are interesting because they highlight the difference between the communities. Political knowledge is indeed lower on the whole in Wallonia, yet even among the less knowledgeable there is a 30% probability of being able to place most parties more or less correctly on the left-right dimension. Among Dutch-speakers a similar story can be told with reference to the issue dimensions. The different culture of political competition in the communities does seem to have an impact, and can help some voters to specialise in a particular facet of knowledge. However, this specialisation applies to only 30% of those in the politically less knowledgeable class X=1. In Flanders, that leaves an estimated 43% in class X=1 and without the basic issue knowledge hypothesised as adequate for issue voting. In Wallonia, an estimated 48% are in class X=1 and lack the basic left-right knowledge.²⁸ There is in both communities a large group of voters unlikely to possess enough such knowledge in either domain, and the overall coherence of a political knowledge latent variable remains intact.

²⁷ Unreliable here means that the conditional probabilities are a long way from 0 and 1, such that knowing the latent variable score would not permit good prediction of the manifest variable score (see J. HAGENNAARS, *Categorical Longitudinal Data*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990, ch. 3, footnote 8).

²⁸ These percentages are calculated by adding the 'lows' and 'forthcomings' probabilities to give P(X=1), and then multiplying by P(S=1/X=1) in Flanders, and by P(L=1/X=1) in Wallonia: Flanders: $(0.185+0.413)*0.714 = 0.427$

Wallonia: $(0.218+0.476)*0.696 = 0.483$

A strict interpretation of the responsible party model of representation might lead one to characterise these voters as the 'unrepresented': without knowledge of elite positions, congruence between their own preferences and those of the elites will come about only through the agency of the latter, or by chance. As discussed later, this is too extreme a standpoint. But it is no more extreme than assuming that voters with such limited knowledge are fully equipped for voting according to the responsible party model. The voters may not be 'unrepresented', but we need to relax the requirements of our models of voting in order to understand how.²⁹ Consider the simple Downsian perspective referred to above. While knowledge of party left-right positions may indeed eliminate the need for knowledge of issue stances, the evidence is that many voters have no access even to the simplifying device. The implication is that the voting decision may need to be simplified further and/or differently for some voters, and that evidence of limits on voters' knowledge cannot be dismissed with a peremptory reference to Downs.

Those who report too few personal preferences for adequacy in representative democracy are much fewer and further between: the proportions are 22% in Flanders and 24% in Wallonia. This suggests that, although some voters may be unrepresented, they are at least not 'unrepresentable'. Of course it would have been very surprising had there been as many gaps in reported preferences as in knowledge of elite preferences. This is so for two broad reasons, the relative importance of which is our primary concern.

THE 'REAL' GAP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND PREFERENCES

The first reason is the simple point that there is no logical or theoretical inconsistency involved in holding political preferences yet being ignorant of elite preferences. For example, one's position in the labour market might be expected to lead to the development of opinions on many economic issues. Self-placement on the Catholic/Non-Catholic scale used here is perfectly feasible without knowledge of party positions on the dimension. And many theories of the origins of human values are more or less independent of learning via elite preferences.³⁰

²⁹ Along these lines, there is evidence that issue voting in European elections is pretty minimal unless the responsible party model is interpreted in a far looser sense. See C. van der EIJK, M. FRANKLIN, W. van der BRUG, "Policy Preferences and Party Choice", in H. SCHMITT, J. THOMASSEN (eds), *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

³⁰ T. ADORNO *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1950; M. ROKEACH, *The Nature of Human Values*, New York: Free Press, 1973; R. INGLEHART, *The Silent Revolution*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Moreover, coverage of potentially political issues in the media is not always politicised, at least not always along overt party or candidate lines. This means that a reasonably attentive consumer could hear and learn plenty about an issue, certainly enough to form an opinion, without necessarily learning with which political elites she shares that opinion. Such a sketch might be particularly applicable in Belgium, with its comparatively high levels of disaffection with politics.³¹ Those who switch off – either mentally or physically – when politicians take over on the news seem more likely to develop personal preferences without the possibility of matching them accurately to elite preferences. Similarly, development of political opinions through discussion with others needs no knowledge of elite preferences.

This can be linked to the discussion of heuristics.³² These authors argue that voters can work out their own preferences even from a rather impoverished informational environment; in other words, without much knowledge. Huckfeldt *et al.* provide the example of a voter deciding on his attitude toward government arts spending based on immediate affective response to government or to the arts.³³ There is not much political knowledge, and certainly no information on the specifics of the current debate, needed here. All that is required is a very basic evaluative attitude. Arguably, positions on many highly complex issues can be calculated thus. This is more evidence that voters can formulate and express political preferences without apparently related political knowledge. (Note that a significant part of the heuristics literature deals with shortcuts from partisan orientations,³⁴ whereby voters simply adopt their preferred party's positions as their own. This makes knowledge a prerequisite. The claim here is therefore that heuristics are not invariably a substitute for political knowledge. This becomes very important later on.)

³¹ L. de WINTER, B. RIHOUX, "From Segmented Loyalty and Distrust, to Voice and Exit", *ECPR News*, 10, 1998.

³² S. POPKIN, *The Reasoning Voter*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; P. SNIDERMAN *et al.*, *op. cit.*; P. SNIDERMAN, "The new look in public opinion research", in A. FINIFTER (ed.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, Washington: American Political Science Association, 1993; A. LUPIA, M. McCUBBINS, *op. cit.*; R. HUCKFELDT *et al.*, "Accessibility and the political utility of partisan and ideological orientations", *American Journal of Political Science*, 43, 1999; A. LUPIA, S. POPKIN, M. McCUBBINS (eds), *Elements of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

³³ *Op. cit.*; see also J. LODGE, C. TABOR, "Three steps toward a theory of motivated political reasoning", in A. LUPIA *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*

³⁴ A. DOWNS, *op. cit.*; A. CAMPBELL *et al.*, *The American Voter*, New York: Wiley, 1960; R. HUCKFELDT *et al.*, *op. cit.*

THE 'ILLUSORY' GAP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND PREFERENCES

The preceding discussion then indicates the first reason why reported preferences might be fuller and more widespread than knowledge of elite preferences. If this is taken to be the most important reason, then the respondents reporting enough preferences are indeed 'representable', even though they cannot guarantee to be represented without acquiring the knowledge of elite preferences. In this sense, the gap is real. The second reason focuses on the 'reported' aspect of reported preferences, and leads to a suggestion that the gap might be illusory. The key is the difference for survey researchers between asking respondents for their own preferences and for their knowledge of elite preferences. In the latter case there is a right and a wrong answer, and, for a respondent who does not know the answer, the cost to the respondent of admitting their ignorance may be lower than the cost of guessing incorrectly (and therefore revealing both ignorance and reluctance to admit it).³⁵ In the former case there is (arguably) no wrong answer and therefore no sanction against guessing 'incorrectly' and much less reason to incur the costs of item non-response.³⁶

Plainly, there is a fundamental difference between knowledge of elite preferences and 'knowledge' of one's own preferences. The latter is not really the realm of 'correct' answers, guesswork, 'don't know' or even knowledge as it is generally defined. However, the principle underlying survey research is that survey questions are passive measures of public opinion, which simply prompt respondents to report their pre-existing attitudes on a subject.³⁷ For many respondents on many topics these pre-packaged viewpoints are simply not available. As discussed already, heuristics provide a plausible means for respondents to think on their feet to apply other related attitudes and preferences in answering survey questions. In this sense respondents can calculate *their* position. But there are clearly preconditions for such devices to be usable: the respondents must possess

³⁵ In this rational choice context the 'cost' is in terms of intangibles such as the respect of the interviewer. Given the social setting of the survey interview such factors are very likely to be relevant. See S. SUDMAN, N. BRADBURN, *Asking Questions*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982; A. OPPENHEIM, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*, London: Pinter Publishers, 1992.

³⁶ Other factors which a more complete such cost-benefit analysis should take into account are the number of response alternatives in knowledge questions (which influence the probability of guessing correctly) and the respondent's estimate of the potential for the interviewer to identify inconsistencies in personal preferences (which would increase the costs of 'guessing').

³⁷ J. ZALLER, S. FELDMAN, "A Simple Model of the Survey Response", *American Journal of Political Science*, 36, 1992.

these related attitudes, and they must be able to identify that they are related.³⁸ If they cannot, respondents have no basis for calculating a position of their own, and they can only supply *a* position to the interviewer.

Such satisficing is very well documented in public opinion research, most momentously in Converse's study.³⁹ He used the term 'non attitude' to describe a reported position which was in fact supplied more or less at random. Since then a lengthy debate has raged as to whether such apparent randomness derives more from the vagueness of question wording than from the vagueness of respondents' preferences.⁴⁰ There is, however, a range of reasons why the 'errors-in-the-questions' thesis is far less compelling than an 'errors-in-the-respondents' perspective. First, political elites and the highly sophisticated and interested can often show no such instability.⁴¹ The questions evidently pose no problems for them. Second, respondents are happy to proffer opinions about invented issues, groups and candidates.⁴² Some respondents evidently need no basis for reporting preferences. (These reasons are drawn from Kinder⁴³ and Luskin⁴⁴, who provide several others.)

This leads to the important conclusion for present purposes. Clearly there are some respondents who do not show any random response, but there will be some who are genuinely responding more or less at

³⁸ P. SNIDERMAN *et al.*, *op. cit.*; A. LUPIA, M. McCUBBINS, *op. cit.*

³⁹ P. CONVERSE, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics", in D. APTER (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*, New York: Free Press, 1964.

⁴⁰ See, among many others, C. ACHEN, "Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response", *American Political Science Review*, 69, 1975; G. BISHOP, R. OLDENDICK, A. TUCHFARBER, "Effects of Question Wording and Format on Political Attitude Consistency", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 42, 1978; R. ERIKSON, "The SRC Panel Data and Mass Political Attitudes", *British Journal of Political Science*, 9, 1979; D. KINDER, "Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion", in A. FINIFTER (ed.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, Washington: American Political Science Association, 1983; R. INGLEHART, "Aggregate Stability and Individual-level Flux in Mass Belief systems", *American Political Science Review*, 79, 1985; R. LUSKIN, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ R. PUTNAM, R. LEONARDI, R. NANETTI, "Attitude Stability among Italian Elites", *American Journal of Political Science*, 23, 1979; D. GRANBERG, S. HOLMBERG, "Attitude Constraint and Stability among Elite and Mass in Sweden", *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 1996.

⁴² H. SCHUMAN, S. PRESSER, *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys*, New York: Academic Press, 1981.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*

random. Of course, the heterogeneity is unlikely to be dichotomous thus.⁴⁵ The principal message from Zaller's model of the survey response was that, at higher levels of political awareness, respondents are surer of their positions and less susceptible to the vagaries of survey questions.⁴⁶ For well-informed respondents, the question-answering process is not particularly difficult: even if they have not already thought about the issue in question – which they are more likely to have done – they are well capable of identifying which of their well-established predispositions is applicable in this situation. However, respondents lower on political awareness are not only less likely to have ready-made opinions, but also less likely to have related predispositions that might be called into action as shortcuts, and less likely to be able to identify such shortcuts even if the potential is there. They have no alternative but to answer 'off the top of their head'.⁴⁷ This does not mean purely random response, but it does mean that very short-term considerations dominate. These might be political in nature, such as the morning's news or cueing effects of previous sections in the questionnaire. They may however simply be non-political factors, often related to apparently trivial aspects of questionnaire design.⁴⁸

There is also reason to suppose, given that theories of political values are increasingly based on a political brand of social learning,⁴⁹ that political awareness will be related not only to the consistency of attitude reports, but also to the consistency and strength of the attitudes supposed to underlie these reports. Both political awareness and political attitudes might reasonably be expected to be inherited from parents (or friends, workplace and so on) through socialisation. Those from backgrounds wherein politics remain peripheral would be expected not only to be less politically aware, but also to be holding fewer and weaker political attitudes.

⁴⁵ We do not need to defend the Convisian 'black and white' model, whose stark division of the electorate has seemed so unrealistic to many researchers (see R. INGLEHART, 1985, *op. cit.*).

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.* Zaller refers to political awareness as "...the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered..." (1992, 21, emphasis in original). At least in this paper, political awareness and knowledge can be regarded as synonymous.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ H. SCHUMAN, S. PRESSER, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ A. BANDURA, *Social Learning Theory*, Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1976; R. ALTMAYER, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1981; D. CHONG, H. McCLOSKEY, J. ZALLER, "Social Learning and the Acquisition of Political Norms", in H. McCLOSKEY, J. ZALLER (eds), *The American Ethos*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; A. HEATH *et al.*, "The Measurement of Core beliefs and values", *CREST Working Paper*, 2, London: SCPR, 1991.

If reported attitudes are little more than a satisficing device in some cases, they cannot be a basis for voting in representative democracy. They change too often. Policies change much less often. Elections are still more infrequent.⁵⁰ There is strong circumstantial evidence that voters reporting attitudes on the basis of little knowledge are less likely to have well-defined true attitudes and values. Furthermore, they are unlikely to be adept in identifying when and how to apply the true attitudes that they do have. Random response is not simply a methodological problem.

WHICH REASON IS MORE IMPORTANT? – SOME TENTATIVE EVIDENCE

This debate is (necessarily) rather hypothetical. Interviewers cannot ask respondents whether they are answering at random, or from a well-defined stock of consistent opinions. More work is clearly necessary in order to identify the source of reported opinions, given that a very large proportion of the Belgian electorate is reporting such preferences despite weak political knowledge. Here, at least some light can be shed on this question, however. The alternative explanations for the behaviour of the 'forthcomings' paint very different portraits of these voters. Assuming the gap between the extent of preferences and knowledge to be illusory implies the portrait of voters that has been sketched above. Taking the gap to be real paints a very different portrait of voters: they are comfortable with the substance of political questions, even if they don't know where the politicians stand. They have formulated their own opinions, or at least can get to them quickly via heuristics. They can find the connections between what they do know and what they are asked about. Rarely do questions about their political preferences require an admission that they don't really have a perspective. An investigation of other characteristics of the 'forthcomings' is instructive as to the portrait that they match most closely.

First, consider reported political interest, reading about politics in the newspapers and discussion of politics with friends. Theories of public opinion formation suggest that such avenues are obvious origins of political preferences.⁵¹ If the gap is real, there should be a (fairly strong) positive relationship between such activities and reporting of preferences. This was tested through the null hypothesis:

⁵⁰ And inconsistency across policy areas is also a problem; insofar as representation operates via aggregative dimensions, inconsistent voters cannot easily be represented.

⁵¹ J. ZALLER, S. FELDMAN, *op. cit.*

H1: That there is no significant relationship between Y (extent of reported preferences) and D (a composite dichotomous variable constructed from recoding summed scores on the three variables listed above⁵²).

Table 3 – Testing H1, on the relationship between reporting preferences and interest/discussion

	Model A - Y related to D	Model B - Y unrelated to D
Fit indices		
X ² (p-value)	116.2 (0.299)	117.7 (0.291)
L ² (p-value)	122.4 (0.180)	123.2 (0.184)
Degrees of freedom	109	110
Bayes' Information Criterion	-686.0	-692.6
Akaike Information Criterion	-95.6	-96.8
Parameter estimates		
XY (p-value of Wald test)	0.247 (0.000)	0.270 (0.000)
XD (p-value of Wald test)	0.391 (0.000)	0.404 (0.000)
YD (p-value of Wald test)	0.038 (0.357)	--

The results from testing this hypothesis are shown in Table 3. The variable D was added to the Figure 1 model, generating Model A. D was unrelated to the observed variables, but – unsurprisingly – it was strongly related to political knowledge (X). A model selection procedure was then followed in order to eliminate insignificant relationships.⁵³ Model B differs from A only in the absence of the YD parameter, and comparing the two sets of results indicates that the null hypothesis H1 could not be rejected. The λ parameter for YD is tiny (0.04) and the Wald test indicates that we can have no confidence that the parameter is non-zero in the population. The additions to χ^2 and L^2 resulting from dropping the parameter are minimal, and the extra degree of freedom actually improves the model fit where L^2 is concerned.⁵⁴ This result can only provide support for the ‘illusory’ theory: the ‘forthcomings’ are clearly very willing to report preferences, but, at a given level of political knowledge, they are no more interested in reading about or discussing politics than the ‘lows’ who offer

⁵² Such a mini-scale still achieved an alpha coefficient of 0.71.

⁵³ J. HAGENAARS, 1990, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ And the other parameter estimates – left out of the tables for reasons of space – are virtually unchanged when YD is left out, which provides further support for doing so. See B. WHEATON, “Assessment of fit in overidentified models with latent variables”, *Sociological Methods and Research*, 16, 1987, pp. 123-5.

very few opinions of their own. (The output shown comes from Wallonia, but the Dutch-speakers data yielded very similar results and an identical conclusion.)

An exactly parallel argument can be made concerning understanding of the questions involved in the survey. If the 'forthcomings' are supplying genuine preferences, it is at least to be supposed that they understand the questions, and are presumably more likely to comprehend them than are those who supply many more 'don't knows' and 'no opinions'. This leads to a second null hypothesis:

H2: That there is no significant relationship between *Y* (extent of reported preferences) and *U* (an interviewer evaluation of the extent to which the respondent understood the questions asked⁵⁵).

Table 4 – Testing H2, on the relationship between reporting preferences and understanding

	Model C - Y related to U	Model D - Y unrelated to U
Fit indices		
X ² (p-value)	138.5 (0.030)	138.9 (0.032)
L ² (p-value)	141.5 (0.020)	141.9 (0.022)
Degrees of freedom	109	110
Bayes' Information Criterion	-664.3	-671.2
Akaike Information Criterion	-76.5	-78.1
Parameter estimates		
XY (p-value of Wald test)	0.356 (0.000)	0.384 (0.000)
XU (p-value of Wald test)	0.573 (0.000)	0.585 (0.000)
YU (p-value of Wald test)	0.034 (0.490)	--

Again the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, as Table 4 indicates. U was unrelated to Y, with an even smaller λ . Once again the model fit was slightly improved by dropping this parameter. (Again, just the French-speakers results are shown, but testing in Flanders changed nothing.) At a given level of knowledge, those answering most questions are no more likely to (appear to) understand the questions to which they are ready to respond.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Admittedly there are problems with such a measure, but it is defended and used by ZALLER, 1992, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ It is particularly noteworthy that neither H1 nor H2 could be rejected, as this defends the tests against the charge that social desirability response set is in some way influencing the results. While D could be thus contaminated, U cannot be.

This has to be construed as a strong suggestion that the differences in response behaviour are just that. Political knowledge and this response behaviour are related, of course; XY is substantively and statistically significant in all cases. But for the large group in each community whose knowledge appears to be inadequate for voting in representative democracy, there seems to be no justification for assuming that those reporting many preferences are crucially different in political terms. On this evidence, one might be forgiven for thinking that explaining the preferences reported by the less knowledgeable is the territory of survey methodology rather than political science.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Returning to the basic premise of the research, the conclusion from the latent class analysis is that only around one-third or two-fifths of the electorate in either community is plainly equipped for voting according to homogenising models of representative democracy. Only this group (X=1,Y=1) have enough of their own preferences plus enough knowledge of elite preferences. From one perspective, the extent of expected preferences and political knowledge specified as adequate does not seem hugely demanding. Clearly those that are interested and involved are well capable of holding this (and no doubt much more) political information. It will of course have been noticed that very rough approximations of adequacy were employed, and clearer theoretical thinking about 'how much knowledge is enough?' would be necessary. Obviously the current method will not generate an incontrovertible estimate of the proportion of the Belgian electorate which is equipped. What these results suggest strongly is that, even with more leeway given to the respondents, a large proportion – if not the majority – would fall short of the requirements.

Moreover, any underestimation of the proportion of respondents who are suitably equipped is likely to be at least partly balanced, and quite possibly outweighed, by the fact that we seek conclusions about the electorate rather than the respondents. Non-response among the French-speakers was over 40%, and among Dutch-speakers was over 30%. More or less every result from political survey research would suggest that these non-respondents would be disproportionately weak on political knowledge,⁵⁷ and by definition they are reporting no preferences.

⁵⁷ A. KOCH, R. PAST (eds), *Nonresponse in Survey Research*, Mannheim: ZUMA, 1998.

The proportion of the *electorate* unequipped for voting and representation is probably significantly greater than the corresponding proportion of our *respondents*.

These conclusions are, of course, constrained because the empirical definition of elite preferences was confined largely to ideological and policy stances. As noted earlier, many theories of voting focus on different variables. One key strand of such research emphasises the salience of different issues, in the minds both of voters and elites.⁵⁸ Another strand emphasises voters' estimates or evaluations of parties' economic competence and performance.⁵⁹ Insofar as these and other alternative theories are truer accounts of electoral choice, the results of this chapter are far less significant. On the other hand, had we been able to extend the models and to include variables relevant for these differing theories, our conclusions may have been unchanged. Having suggested that political knowledge is seldom domain-dependent, it seems reasonable to assume that a voter unaware of a party's issue positions would not be much more likely to be aware of the relative salience of different issues to that party, or of that party's economic record.⁶⁰ (Such an assumption makes sense given that these different pieces of information are likely to have the same origin, be it the voter's newspaper, television or discussions with friends.) If political knowledge – and the lack of it – is not domain-dependent, our conclusions may be similarly independent on the domain of preferences analysed here.

In addition to domain-independence, another feature of the political knowledge measured here was its relatively dichotomous distribution. On the whole, respondents were likely to possess most of the knowledge measured, or very little of this knowledge. This has implications for the likely generalisability of the results. As noted above, Belgian politics involves more and smaller parties than in many other systems.

⁵⁸ H.-D. KLINGEMANN *et al.*, *op. cit.*; H. SCHMITT, J. THOMASSEN, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ R. KIEWIET, *Macroeconomics and Micropolitics*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983; M. LEWIS-BECK, *Economics and Elections*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988.

⁶⁰ M. MACKUEN, R. ERIKSON, J. STIMSON, "Macropartisanship", *American Political Science Review*, 83, 1989; P. CONVERSE, "Popular Representation and the Distribution of Information", in J. FERREJOHN, J. KUKLINSKI, (eds), *Information and Democratic Processes*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990; J. GRANATO, G. KRAUSE, "Information Diffusion within the Electorate: the Asymmetric Transmission of Political-economic Information", *Electoral Studies*, 19, 2000.

It might be argued that, in other simpler systems such as the UK or US, voters are more likely to know 'enough'; in other words, conclusions drawn from so complicated a system as in Belgium are excessively pessimistic about voting and representation more generally. While such an objection may well carry some weight, it carries less given the clear evidence that the politically knowledgeable are able to retain a large amount of information, while many retain very little. It is probably the incentive to gather and retain political information, rather than the cognitive capacity to do so, that is so unequally distributed. Put most baldly, political knowledge is limited because – in the simplest as in the most complicated polities – political interest is limited.

The heuristics literature concedes readily that the type of voter who can benefit from them is typically the more politically aware and interested. Lupia and McCubbins' list of heuristics includes opinion leaders, party identification, campaign events and information, history, polls, interest group endorsements and the media.⁶¹ Yet none of these can be used without basic prior information as to who has said or done what. Downs⁶² referred to ideology as such a heuristic, but this study has shown that the ability to match parties to their left-right position belongs to a minority, and several studies have revealed that understanding and use of ideological terms is similarly far from universal.⁶³ Sniderman *et al.*⁶⁴ assert that heuristics are of use primarily for the most sophisticated quarter or third of the electorate. Paradoxically, our results suggest that these voters are already knowledgeable enough not to require heuristics to any great extent. Alternatively, they may already be deriving their own preferences, or their wider knowledge of elite preferences, from such shortcuts.⁶⁵ Either way, heuristics seem a broken reed on which the less knowledgeable might lean. It seems a bit difficult to believe that the 'forthcomings' are relying on heuristics to set them apart from those reporting few preferences, given that they are no different from the 'lows' in terms of political discussion and apparent understanding of these questions. Of course, it may be that the

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶² *Op. cit.*

⁶³ H.-D. KLINGEMANN, "The Background of Ideological Conceptualization", and "Measuring Ideological Conceptualizations", in S. BARNES, M. KAASE (eds), *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979. See also E. SMITH, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ This point mirrors a paradox resulting from Downs' theory (*op. cit.*). Ideology is theorised as a shortcut that eliminates the need to accumulate extensive knowledge. Yet the overwhelming weight of evidence suggests that it is those with such knowledge, and the cognitive ability to handle it, who are familiar with and appear to use ideologies.

'forthcomings' truly are using shortcuts in the question-answering process, and indeed in the voting decision. But the arguments in the heuristics literature cited above, and the results of this study, make it plain that the shortcuts available to them are rather different from, probably simpler than, and almost certainly more varied than those supposed to be in common currency.⁶⁶

To finish, it should be made absolutely clear that the argument is not that most voters have no idea why they answer as they do, and no idea why they vote as they do. Rather the argument is that there are many voters for whom many theories of voting are plainly inadequate, given their lack of knowledge. Heterogeneity should be in the forefront of modellers' minds. Ignoring inadequacies in political knowledge, on the grounds that these voters report a fairly complete menu of political preferences, is plainly dubious, given the unsteady foundations on which these preferences, or indeed these reports, seem to rest. The major recent attempt to explain political behaviour and preferences despite low information, courtesy of heuristics, is plainly a crucial development. However, there remains the paradox that those most in need of such shortcuts are least easily able to use them. Finally, it should be re-emphasised that these points are not a criticism of the behaviour of voters. Some might argue that the results here demonstrate the failure of political elites, and perhaps also the media, to educate and not to alienate the citizenry. That debate will, rightly, rage on. Here, though, the points raised should be taken primarily as a criticism of political science, which continues to have enormous trouble empathising with the disinterested and uninformed. Every political scientist knows that it is not rational for voters to obtain and retain much political information. It is no more rational to expect them to do so.

⁶⁶ For example, those with little political knowledge might apply a particularly simple heuristic such as voting for a party not currently involved in government. Surveys asking for explanations of voting decisions (see ISPO/PIOP, *op. cit.*, for an example) often elicit responses like "the others had been in a long time", and "it was time to give somebody else a chance". (It is not in fact difficult to imagine how such a simple guideline could be justified).

APPENDIX – LOGLINEAR MODELLING WITH LATENT VARIABLES

The empirical sections of this paper are based on latent class analysis and loglinear modelling.⁶⁷ These techniques were chosen for two principal reasons, the first relating to the observed variables used, the second relating to the hypothesised latent variables central to the theoretical basis of the paper.

Concerning the observed variables, the research involves explicit prior hypotheses as to the minima of knowledge and opinion in each domain below which the respondents are unequipped for voting and representation. This amounts to a conceptual dichotomization of the variables, each with an 'OK' and a 'not OK' category. In many circumstances, the need to collapse manifest variables into a handful of categories is a disadvantage. Here, though, the theoretical approach actually suggests it.

Concerning the latent variables to be estimated, latent class analysis was chosen in particular because it offers the potential to estimate the division of the respondents into several subgroups (the latent classes). Given our basic aim of evaluating the extent to which voters are equipped for voting in representative democracy, a key advantage of a modelling technique is to estimate the proportions of respondents who are thus equipped or otherwise. Latent class analysis enables this, while it also can of course warn us should such simple classifications constitute too gross an oversimplification. (Structural equation modelling is – at least – equally informative with respect to the latent structures within the data. But it does not produce the classification.)

⁶⁷ A. McCUTCHEON, *Latent Class Analysis*, Sage University Papers in *Quantitative Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Beverley Hills, CA: Sage, 1987; J. HAGENAARS, 1990, *op. cit.*; 1993, *op. cit.*