



HAL
open science

Do less informed voters make mistake? Political knowledge and electoral choice

Anthony Heath, Robert Andersen, Richard Sinnott

► **To cite this version:**

Anthony Heath, Robert Andersen, Richard Sinnott. Do less informed voters make mistake? Political knowledge and electoral choice. *Revue de la Maison Française d'Oxford*, 2003, Political attitudes and voting behaviour in Europe, 1 (1), pp.69-83. <hal-02531013>

HAL Id: hal-02531013

<https://hal.science/hal-02531013v1>

Submitted on 20 Apr 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

DO LESS INFORMED VOTERS MAKE MISTAKE? POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ELECTORAL CHOICE

Anthony Heath, Robert Andersen* and Richard Sinnott**

There has been growing interest in the concept of political knowledge. As Rob Johns makes clear in his paper in this issue, the electorate is stratified by its knowledge of political institutions and issues and the knowledgeable tend to differ from the less knowledgeable in the structure, consistency and stability of their political attitudes and ideologies.¹ However, a key question on which there is much less agreement is whether political knowledge affects the political choices that the voter makes. Are knowledgeable voters more effective in translating their policy preferences into appropriate choices? Do less knowledgeable voters make 'mistakes' in the sense that they vote for parties which follow policies at odds with the voter's own policy preferences? Our research questions therefore are whether political knowledge leads people to make different choices from those that they would otherwise have done, and whether this knowledge leads to a closer accord between voters' preferences and party positions.

Whether political knowledge does lead to fewer mistakes of this kind is the subject of some considerable dispute. Some writers in fact have suggested that voters with low levels of political knowledge are capable of acting 'as if' they were well informed. Popkin, for example, suggests that voters may use 'heuristics' or information shortcuts, such as following the position taken by a group or leader that the citizen believes has their

* Respectively Head of Department and Senior Research Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford (anthony.heath@sociology.ox.ac.uk).

** University College, Dublin.

¹ See M. DELLI CARPINI, S. KEETER, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996; J. BARTLE, "Political Awareness and Heterogeneity in Models of Voting: some Evidence from the British Election Studies", *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 7, 1997.

interests at heart.² Lupia has reported similar results for the outcome of Californian referendums.³ Meanwhile some writers suggest that while it may be the case that individual voters make uninformed choices, the public as a whole does still make the same aggregate choice that it would have made if everyone were fully informed. While some voters may make the 'wrong' choice in one direction, other voters will do so in the opposite direction. As a result their errors cancel out, with the consequence that the collective decision of society as a whole is the 'right' one.⁴

But these attempts to rescue the voter from his or her apparent ignorance have been hotly disputed. Bartels argues that voters with low levels of political knowledge do make different choices from those with higher levels of knowledge with important implications for the overall outcome of US presidential elections.⁵ (However, owing to the limitations of the American National Election Study, Bartels' work on electoral choice uses interviewers' assessment of respondents' levels of political knowledge rather than any direct measures such as we propose.) In their work on 'deliberative polls', Fishkin and his colleagues have shown that giving people information can indeed change their views.⁶

Virtually all of this work has been conducted in the US. Britain, however, with its three party system (four in Wales and Scotland) and its multidimensional cleavage structure provides a potentially valuable arena in which to test the impact of political knowledge. The task of selecting the party whose policies best accord with one's own issue preferences is not entirely straightforward in Britain, and if political knowledge is important, then its impact should be clearly detectable in Britain.

² S. POPKIN, *The Reasoning Voter*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. See also A. LUPIA, S. POPKIN, M. McCUBBINS (eds), *Elements of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; W. NEUMAN, *The Paradox of Mass Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; P. SNIDERMAN, R. BRODY, P. TETLOCK, *Reasoning and Choice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, ch. 1.

³ A. LUPIA, "Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting-Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections", *American Political Science Review*, 88, 1994, pp. 63-76 and A. LUPIA, M. McCUBBINS, *The Democratic Dilemma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁴ B. PAGE and R. SHAPIRO, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; R. SHAPIRO and B. PAGE "Foreign Policy and the Rational Public", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32, 1988, pp. 211-247.

⁵ L. BARTELS, "Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections", *American Journal of Political Science*, 40, 1996, pp. 194-230.

⁶ J. FISHKIN, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

A simple stereotype of party competition in Britain suggests that it is organised along the left-right continuum, with the Labour Party situated on the left of centre, the Liberal Democrats close to the centre, and the Conservatives on the right. Analysis of party manifestos suggests that for much of the post-war period this was indeed an appropriate way to characterise political debate in Britain particularly on issues such as nationalisation and privatisation of industry and the control of inflation and unemployment, which are central to the left-right continuum. Since party positions have exhibited a fair degree of continuity over time on these issues, the use of shortcuts would seem to be appropriate and we would expect the less knowledgeable voters to have been as effective as the more knowledgeable in translating their own preferences into appropriate party choices.

However, important though this simple picture is, it has not been the whole story at recent elections. Firstly, after Tony Blair's election as leader of the Labour Party in 1994 there was the widely publicised move of the party towards the centre of the political spectrum, thus closing the gap with the Liberal Democrats. This might be expected to increase the propensity of informed voters to vote tactically (or strategically in the American terminology) for whichever of these two parties had the greater chance of defeating the Conservatives in their particular constituency.

Secondly, the simple story that the Liberal Democrats lay in between Labour and Conservatives was no longer equally true on all the left-right issues. In particular, the Labour Party promised in 1997 to keep within the Conservatives' spending plans and not to change the basic rate of income tax. In contrast the Liberal Democrats promised to raise income tax by one penny in order to spend more on public services such as health and education. This thus placed the Liberal Democrats, on this particular issue, to the left of the Labour Party. Less knowledgeable voters, if they continued to use out-dated rules of thumb, might thus have been more likely to come to incorrect decisions on taxation and government spending.

Thirdly, the 1990s saw the rising salience of Europe as an issue. Europe is a particularly difficult issue for the voter who wishes to use shortcuts. Policies on Europe cross-cut the left-right dimension to some considerable extent so that one cannot simply extrapolate from one's knowledge of positions on the left-right dimension. Furthermore, Labour and the Conservatives have both made major changes in their policy positions in recent decades, with Labour being the Eurosceptic party in

1983 but adopting a somewhat more Europhile position under Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair. In contrast, from being more Europhile than Labour in 1983 (when Mrs Thatcher said that it would be folly to think of leaving Europe), the Conservatives gradually became more Eurosceptic, particularly after the Maastricht Treaty of 1991.⁷ In contrast, the Liberal Democrats had maintained a fairly positive, although not very publicised, approach to Europe throughout, and in 1997 their manifesto was considerably more positive about Europe than that of either of the other two parties. We thus expect less knowledgeable voters to be more likely to make mistakes in translating their own preferences on Europe into appropriate voting choices.

Voters will thus have been unable to rely upon past impressions in order to ascertain which party is closest to them on this issue. If political knowledge does affect people's ability to process new political information, we might expect to find that those with higher knowledge were better able to distinguish the new positions of the parties on Europe than were those with lower levels of knowledge, with perhaps important implications for the degree to which the issue had an impact on the outcome.

These arguments all assume that knowledgeable voters follow, at least in part, an issue-based procedure for deciding how to vote. This too is of course hotly contested. While public discourse centres on the issues advocated by the parties (and, as Rob Johns points out in his paper, this is what to a considerable extent gives the parties normative legitimacy to implement their manifestos when in office), it is quite possible that some or all voters base their decisions, wholly or in part, on other criteria, such as the personality of the party leaders, the record of the incumbent government, the state of their own pocket book, and so on. It is by no means clear that political knowledge will be all that relevant to these other criteria. We remain agnostic on this issue, and in the present paper we simply focus on testing the issue-based theory.

MEASURING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

We have two ways of measuring respondents' political knowledge. First, we have a measure of what is often termed 'civics' knowledge. This took the form of a short quiz. Respondents to the British Election Study were given a series of statements and asked to say whether each was true or false.

⁷ For a more detailed account of the changing Conservative position on Europe see A. HEATH, R. JOWELL and J. CURTICE, *The Rise of New Labour*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, ch. 4.

The statements were:

Margaret Thatcher was a Conservative Prime Minister (98.8% gave the correct answer to this question).

The number of members of parliament is about 100 (71.8% correct).

The longest time allowed between general elections is four years (61.5% correct).

Britain's electoral system is based on proportional representation (54.7% correct).

MPs from different political parties are on parliamentary committees (68.3% correct).

Britain has separate elections for the European Parliament and the British Parliament (74.9% correct).

No-one may stand for parliament unless they pay a deposit (71.1% correct).

The question on Mrs Thatcher was included solely as an easy introduction to give the respondents familiarity with the task. Correct answers to the other six questions were then summed to give an overall measure of civics knowledge. Table 1 shows the distribution of correct answers.

Table 1. Percentage of correct answers on the quiz

| | |
|-----------|------|
| 0 correct | 2.2 |
| 1 | 7.4 |
| 2 | 10.9 |
| 3 | 13.7 |
| 4 | 18.4 |
| 5 | 19.2 |
| 6 correct | 28.3 |

Source: BES 1997, N=2561.

As Johns points out in his paper, civics knowledge is not necessarily needed if one is to make decisions about which party to vote for. More relevant is the voter's knowledge about where the parties stand on the relevant issues. A simple way to measure this policy knowledge is to see whether respondents can correctly place the parties' positions on the main issues. We can do this using some questions included in the 1997 BES, since respondents were asked to place the parties on a number of major policy dimensions. We focus on three of these dimensions in this paper:

Europe, privatisation and nationalisation, and taxes and spending. Respondents were presented with eleven-point scales with contrasting statements marking the poles of each scale. The statements were:

Taxation and Spending

“Some people feel that the government should put up taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services. These people would put themselves in Box A. Other people feel that the government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services. These people would put themselves in Box K. In the first row of boxes, please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about taxes and government spending.”

Nationalisation and Privatisation

“Some people feel that the government should nationalise many more private companies. These people would put themselves in Box A. Other people feel that the government should sell off many more nationalised industries. These people would put themselves in Box K. In the first row of boxes, please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about nationalisation and privatisation.”

European Union

“Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. These people would put themselves in Box A. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. These people would put themselves in Box K. In the first row of boxes, please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about the European Union.”

Rather than use a single measure of political knowledge, we construct separate measures of knowledge of party platforms on each of these three issues. In the case of Europe, respondents who correctly placed the Conservatives to the right of the other two parties, the Liberal Democrats to the left, and Labour in between, were defined as having high policy knowledge on this area.⁸ We also defined a second category of medium political knowledge: this covered those respondents who correctly placed the Conservatives to the right of Labour but were either unaware of the position of the Liberal Democrats or placed the Liberal Democrats in the

⁸ Empirical information about the relative positions of the parties was gathered from the 1997 party manifestos.

wrong position. We can think of these respondents as ones who were less sophisticated in their political knowledge but who nonetheless had enough practical knowledge (based perhaps on various shortcuts) to distinguish the two major parties. The third category of low political knowledge covered the remaining respondents who were unable to place even the two major parties in the correct positions.

We carried out similar exercises for our other two policy dimensions. In the case of taxes and spending, we took the correct placements to be once again Liberal Democrats on the left, the Conservatives on the right and Labour in between. However, on nationalisation and privatisation the more traditional order appears to be correct, with Labour on the left and the Liberal Democrats in between them and the Conservatives.

While our measures of civics knowledge and of policy knowledge are conceptually distinct, we might expect the two to be associated.⁹ Indeed, if they were not associated, we would tend to have some doubts about the validity of both measures. Table 2 shows that, for all three issues, those with higher levels of civics knowledge were substantially more likely to place the three parties in the correct relative positions on the policy scales. The table suggests, therefore, that our measures of civics knowledge and of policy knowledge are quite highly correlated. This suggests that the positional measures are genuinely capturing knowledge and are not simply methodological artefacts.

Table 2. Percentages correctly placing the three main parties on Europe, privatisation, and taxes.

| Civics knowledge | Europe | Privatisation | Taxes |
|---------------------------------|--------|---------------|-------|
| High civics knowledge (N=749) | 21.4 | 37.1 | 21.5 |
| Medium civics knowledge (N=996) | 7.7 | 32.7 | 18.4 |
| Low civics knowledge (N=905) | 3.1 | 23.3 | 9.4 |

Source: BES 1997. Respondents who scored 6 on the civics scale (i.e. who answered all the questions correctly) are defined as having high civics knowledge. Respondents who scored 4 or 5 are defined as having medium civics knowledge, and the remainder, with scores of 3 or lower, are defined as having low civics knowledge.

⁹ See DELLI CARPINI and ZEETER, *op. cit.*

TACTICAL VOTING

Before we turn to the question of whether less knowledgeable voters make mistakes in their choice of parties, we need to exclude tactical voters. Almost by definition tactical voters will be voting for the 'wrong' party in purely positional terms; they are defined as people who vote for their second-preference, rather than their first-preference, party in order to reduce the electoral chances of a disliked party.¹⁰

The general theory of tactical voting, and previous empirical research, suggests that there are two elements that need to be distinguished. First, tactical voting is more likely the greater the distance from contention of one's preferred party. The idea is that voters switch from a party that is not in contention to one that is. Second, tactical voting is more likely the smaller is one's 'party differential' between one's first and second choice party. Hence someone who can see little difference between first and second choice parties, and who believes that their first choice is effectively out of contention, is more likely to switch tactically to the second choice.

As we have already seen, knowledgeable respondents are more likely to identify the correct placements of the Liberal Democrats and Labour and to see that on the two issues of Europe and spending the Liberal Democrats are to the 'left' of Labour whereas on nationalisation and privatisation they are to the right. This suggests that in general knowledgeable respondents will see less overall difference between these two parties. Furthermore, we expect more knowledgeable voters to have a better grasp of the tactical situation in their own constituency.

Table 3. Tactical voting by civics knowledge

| | % casting a tactical vote | N |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| High civics knowledge | 13.3 | 682 |
| Medium civics knowledge | 9.6 | 842 |
| Low civics knowledge | 6.4 | 656 |

Source: BES 1997, non-voters excluded.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of tactical voting see Stephen FISHER, *Tactical voting in England: 1987 to 1997*, D. Phil, University of Oxford, 2000.

Table 3 shows a modest but clear relationship between civics knowledge and tactical voting. Knowledgeable voters were twice as likely as the less knowledgeable voters to cast a tactical vote.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND VOTE CHOICE

We now turn to the respondents who did not vote tactically and to our central question of whether less knowledgeable voters were more likely to make mistakes and choose the wrong party. A simple way of approaching this question is to consider people who placed themselves at one or other end of the issue dimension. On the standard rational choice account of voting behaviour, people who are on the left politically will be expected to vote for the most left-wing of the parties, since this is the one that will be closest to them. In the case of nationalisation and privatisation this suggests that they should vote Labour. However, in the case of Europe or taxes and government spending, people who are left-wing on these issues should rationally select the Liberal Democrats, not Labour, since as we have already argued the Liberal Democrats are the most left-wing party on these two issues. What we expect to find, therefore, is that knowledgeable people who hold left-wing policy preferences on Europe or taxation will be more likely to vote correctly for the Liberal Democrats than will less knowledgeable people, who will be more likely to make mistakes and vote for the wrong party.

Table 4. % voting for the 'correct' party on Europe by policy knowledge

| | Voters with Europhile attitudes | Voters with Eurosceptic attitudes |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| High policy knowledge | 38.6 (88) | 60.8 (79) |
| Medium policy knowledge | 11.3 (319) | 58.7 (351) |
| Low policy knowledge | 16.0 (188) | 22.0 (422) |

Source: BES 1997, non-voters and tactical voters excluded. Figures in brackets give the base Ns. For voters with Europhile attitudes the Liberal Democrats are defined as the correct party; for voters with Eurosceptic attitudes the Conservatives are defined as the correct party.

Table 4 shows the results on Europe and shows a dramatic picture. In the first column of this table we consider voters with relatively Europhile attitudes.¹¹ 38.6% of knowledgeable Europhiles voted correctly for the Liberal Democrats. As we can see, much lower proportions of the less knowledgeable Europhiles voted for the most Europhile party.

A somewhat similar pattern is evident at the other end of the European dimension. In the second column of table 4 we show the voting patterns of the Eurosceptic voters.¹² Among knowledgeable Eurosceptics 60.8% voted correctly for the Conservatives. Among Eurosceptics with medium knowledge, a rather similar percentage, 58.7%, also voted correctly. This is not surprising since these voters correctly identified the Conservatives as the most Eurosceptic party. However, very few of the least knowledgeable Eurosceptics correctly voted Conservative.

Table 5. % voting for the 'correct' party on nationalisation and privatisation by policy knowledge

| | Voters favourable to nationalisation | Voters favourable to privatisation |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| High policy knowledge | 77.2 (237) | 77.9 (122) |
| Medium policy knowledge | 64.0 (267) | 51.2 (121) |
| Low policy knowledge | 41.9 (210) | 22.2 (108) |

Source: BES 1997, non-voters and tactical voters excluded. Figures in brackets give the base Ns. For voters with attitudes favourable to nationalisation the Labour Party is defined as the correct party; for voters with attitudes favourable to privatisation the Conservatives are defined as the correct party.

Table 5 shows the analogous picture for nationalisation and privatisation. Again in the first column we show how voters with left-wing attitudes on this issue cast their votes, and in the second column we show how people with right-wing attitudes voted.¹³ Even though nationalisation is what we would regard as a relatively easy issue, we find once again a steep

¹¹ We define a Europhile as someone who placed himself or herself to the left of the mean perceived scores of all three parties on the European issue. This in practice meant that the respondent scored 4 or less on the scale.

¹² We define a Eurosceptic as someone who placed himself or herself to the right of the mean perceived score of all three parties on the European issue. This in practice meant that the respondent scored 7 or more on the scale.

¹³ We define someone as having left-wing attitudes towards nationalisation if their score was 4 or less on the scale, and as having right-wing attitudes if their score was 8 or more.

gradient according to levels of policy knowledge. Knowledgeable left-wingers were much more likely to vote for the correct party, in this case Labour, than were the left-wingers with little knowledge of party positions on nationalisation and privatisation.

Finally, in table 6 we show the patterns for taxes and government spending.¹⁴ Once again, knowledgeable voters are much more likely to vote for the party whose policy position corresponds with the voter's own policy preference.

Table 6. % voting for the 'correct' party on taxes and spending by policy knowledge

| | Voters favourable to greater spending | Voters favourable to cutting taxes |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| High policy knowledge | 29.3 (208) | 90.5 (21) |
| Medium policy knowledge | 11.7 (573) | 71.4 (63) |
| Low policy knowledge | 15.7 (223) | 22.8 (57) |

Source: BES 1997, non-voters and tactical voters excluded. Figures in brackets give the base Ns. For voters with attitudes favourable to greater spending the Liberal Democrats are defined as the correct party; for voters with attitudes favourable to cutting taxes the Conservatives are defined as the correct party.

So far we have been considering only one issue at a time. It is possible that this kind of analysis overstates the impact of knowledge: people who lack knowledge about a particular issue may well be casting their votes on the basis of other issues. For example, if people felt that nationalisation and privatisation was not an important issue in the 1997 election, they would have been quite rational not to collect any information about the parties' positions on this issue and there would be no reason to expect their preferences on this issue to bear any relationship with their actual votes.

¹⁴ We define someone as having left-wing attitudes towards taxation and government spending if their score was 3 or less on the scale, and as having right-wing attitudes if their score was 7 or more.

We need therefore to conduct a multivariate analysis which takes account of the main issues simultaneously.¹⁵ This is done in table 7.

Table 7. Parameter estimates of multinomial logistic regression (Liberal Democrats are the reference category)

| | Labour vs Lib Dem | Conservative vs Lib Dem |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Europe | | |
| Europhile attitudes | 0.32 (.21) | 0.10 (.25) |
| centrist | 0 | 0 |
| Eurosceptic attitudes | -0.35 (.19) | 0.39 (.21) |
| Knowledgeable | 0.04 (.47) | 0.98 (.44) |
| Knowledgeable and Europhile | -0.24 (.52) | -1.04 (.72) |
| Knowledgeable and Eurosceptic | 0.82 (.64) | 1.88 (.69) |
| Privatisation | | |
| Left-wing attitudes | -0.04 (.18) | -0.14 (.21) |
| centrist | 0 | 0 |
| right-wing attitudes | 0.18 (.25) | 0.42 (.26) |
| Knowledgeable | -0.43 (.51) | 1.61 (.46) |
| Knowledgeable and left-wing | 1.49 (.37) | -0.03 (.44) |
| Knowledgeable and right-wing | -0.34 (.55) | 1.53 (.52) |
| Taxes and spending | | |
| Left-wing attitudes | 0.47 (.21) | -0.26 (.22) |
| centrist | 0 | 0 |
| right-wing attitudes | 0.26 (.26) | 0.57 (.27) |
| Knowledgeable | -0.13 (.44) | 0.16 (.44) |
| Knowledgeable and left-wing | -0.48 (.35) | -0.43 (.44) |
| Knowledgeable and right-wing | 0.24 (.52) | 1.11 (.54) |

N=1746, Chi²=463.7 (30 df).

Source: BES 1997; sample excludes non-voters and tactical voters.

¹⁵ Ideally we would also weight the issues by the importance that the voter attached to each one but unfortunately the 1997 BES did not contain questions on importance of issues.

In table 7 we employ a multinomial logistic regression. In essence this means that, in the first column, we look at the contrast between Labour and Liberal Democrat voting, and in the second column we look at the contrast between Conservative and Liberal Democrat vote choices. In this regression we include the main effects of knowledge about the issues and attitudes towards the issues along with interactions between knowledge and attitude.¹⁶ The interactions allow us to test whether knowledgeable voters differ from less knowledgeable ones with respect to the relationship between attitudes and vote.

Looking at the results we can see that very few of the parameter estimates associated with attitudes towards Europe, nationalisation and privatisation, or taxation and government spending are statistically significant. Since we have included interaction terms in the model, these parameter estimates in essence tell us about the behaviour of less knowledgeable voters. They tell us that, among these less knowledgeable voters, policy preferences are very weakly related to vote choices.

Many of the interaction terms, on the other hand, are significant and all of them are in the expected direction. (A positive sign indicates that the variable in question increases support for Labour or the Conservatives and, vice versa, a negative sign indicates that the variable increases support for the Liberal Democrats). Moreover there is an interesting pattern to these interactions. Thus in the case of the Labour/Liberal Democrat contrast the only significant interaction is between policy knowledge and left-wing attitudes on nationalisation. But in the case of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat contrast the interactions between knowledge and Eurosceptic attitudes, between knowledge and right-wing attitudes towards privatisation, and between knowledge and right-wing attitudes toward taxation are all significant. In other words, there is an asymmetry: there is an interaction between knowledge and support for the Conservatives only in the case of right-wing voters; there is an interaction between knowledge and support for the Labour party only in the case of left-wing voters.

¹⁶ In order to simplify the model we have treated knowledge as a dichotomous variable, voters who could correctly locate all three parties being scored 1, and other voters being scored 0. We initially found that there were too few respondents with right-wing attitudes towards taxation for the model to converge. We therefore broadened the definition of right-wing to include respondents who scored 6 or higher on the spending/taxation scale.

This asymmetry makes good theoretical sense. If you hold right-wing attitudes, then increased knowledge would be expected to increase your likelihood of voting for the correct (most right-wing) party but is unlikely to affect your choice between the two incorrect (left-wing) parties. Conversely, if you hold left-wing attitudes, increased knowledge would be expected to increase your likelihood of voting for the most left-wing party.

CONCLUSIONS

The multivariate analysis thus supports the bivariate analysis. For both Europe and privatisation there are highly significant interactions between policy knowledge and policy preferences with the knowledgeable voters being more likely to support the 'correct' party. However, in some ways these results are almost too good. In particular, we had not expected to find such strong interactions between policy knowledge and policy preferences in the case of the 'easy' issue of privatisation. One possible interpretation of this finding is that less knowledgeable voters simply do not follow issue-voting principles at all in deciding how to cast their vote but perhaps vote on the basis of the government's record or the character of the parties' leaders.

Another possible interpretation, however, is that perhaps knowledgeable voters are simply better at rationalising their choices. That is to say, knowledgeable voters, since they understand where the parties are located, may be more skilled at placing themselves in the 'correct' places on the various issue dimensions. This brings us back to the classic problem of the direction of causation that bedevils research on the determinants of voting behaviour. Is it policy knowledge and preferences that lead to vote choice or is it knowledge and vote choice that lead to reported policy preferences? We cannot resolve this issue from a study such as the present one which is based on a single cross-section survey. To get some leverage on the causal question we need to examine a panel study in the course of which a political party changed its policy position.¹⁷ From a panel study we could check whether voters' policy preferences changed in response to their party's policy shift (as predicted by the theory of party identification) or whether voters' policy preferences remained constant over time with knowledgeable voters being more likely to act on the basis of their new information about the position of the parties.

¹⁷ That is precisely the logic of the article by Geoffrey Evans and Robert Andersen (later in this issue): they use panel data to answer a causal question about economic perceptions and political preferences and their influence on vote choice.

In the absence of such an investigation, we cannot offer any definitive answers to our research question. The present paper is more akin to committal proceedings in a magistrate's court than to the trial by jury in the Crown Court. Our results certainly show that there is a case to be answered. On the initial evidence, there are grounds for thinking that knowledgeable voters differ in important ways from less knowledgeable voters and that their reported policy preferences show a greater consistency with the parties' positions and their vote choices than is the case among less knowledgeable voters. We cannot therefore at present rule out the possibility that less knowledgeable voters are making mistakes.