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Sophistication is studied in relation to political messages and to individuals. As a property of political messages, sophistication indicates the level of complexity of a text, which can refer to the semantic or syntactic dimension and can be defined both objectively and subjectively. As a property of voters, sophistication relates to individuals' complexity of political thinking, which is of difficult empirical translation. Different strands of research have defined voters' political sophistication alternatively as the amount (political knowledge) or as the consistency (opinion constraint) of political information that an individual holds. Several political communication studies stressed that the complexity of the language used by parties do affect voters and their understanding of politics, by making policy alternatives more or less intelligible to the public. Voters' sophistication is indeed not a fixed property and it can be enhanced by external stimuli, which makes it intrinsically connected to sophistication of political messages.

Textual complexity; Political parties; Voters; Opinion consistency; Political knowledge; Learning process

This entry wants to provide insights concerning the concept of sophistication, which refers to the degree of complexity of a certain object. In studies of public opinion and political communication, sophistication is a property of political messages and of individuals and in both cases is described as a multidimensional concept. Although of difficult operationalization especially when studied in relation to individuals, sophistication is a key concept to investigate how political messages are delivered and received and how voters understand politics. In addition, this entry also clarifies that these two aspects of sophistication are intrinsically connected: the complexity of a political message can determine how well voters are able to cognitively process it, thus having effects on the quality of electoral democracy.

Sophistication as property of messages

In studies of public opinion and political communication, sophistication as a property of political messages can be generally defined as the extent to which a political text (i.e. manifestos, political speeches, newspaper articles) is complex and difficult to read and understand. There are at least two categorizations that scholars rely on in order to define and measure the level of sophistication of political messages: semantic vs syntactic complexity and objective vs perceived complexity (Tolochko and Boomgaarden, 2019; Tolochko, Song and Boomgaarden, 2019). The semantic dimension relates to the complexity associated with the meaning of a text; for example, a text becomes more complex when the lexical units contained in it allows for a broader range of interpretations. The syntactic dimension deals with the linguistic structure of the text, which regards for instance the length of sentences, the number of words contained in a text, use of subordinates, etc. Concerning the second categorization, the objective complexity of a message is empirically assessed, while the perceived complexity is subjectively assessed, depending on the expertise, pre-existing skills or knowledge, interest, and so on, of each individual. Political research usually relies on linguistic indices in order to evaluate the objective complexity of a text. Linguistic indices are, of course, of not easy application as they need to be designed and tested for each language, taking into account its characteristics and peculiarities. The main indices usually consider the readability of a text, the use of difficult words and the lexical density and richness (McDonnell and Ondelli, 2022). Instead of relying on automated text analysis, some political studies opt for focusing on the perceived complexity of a political text, using for example human judgments data obtained through crowdsourcing (Benoit, Munger, Spirling

2019; Senninger, 2023), or combine both approaches (Tolochko, Song and Boomgaarden, 2019). From a political communication standpoint, studies have widely investigated the characteristics of populist parties' messages. In its most famous and widely accepted definition, populism is a Manichean division of reality between the good people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). As a communication style, populism is associated with a rhetoric that speaks in defence of the people as a homogenous group and takes anti-establishment stances (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Research suggests that populist parties tend to simplify their language in their manifestos (Bischof and Senninger, 2018). However, it has also been found that populist leaders do not significantly differ from other politicians for the sophistication of their political speeches (McDonnell and Ondelli, 2020). In addition, studies investigating the effects of political messages' sophistication show that the way in which the message is delivered (using more or less difficult words, long sentences, etc.) does have an impact on voters. It seems indeed that less complex messages enhance the factual political knowledge of voters, as well as their capability to place political parties on the ideological continuum (Bischof and Senninger, 2018; Tolochko, Song and Boomgaarden, 2019).

Sophistication as property of individuals

Political sophistication of individuals, contrary to that of political messages, is not a directly observable property: political opinions can be verbalised by an individual, of course, but they are hard to evaluate objectively. Therefore, defining and operationalizing the sophistication of individuals is a challenging task. Generally, it can be referred to as the extent to which a person is able to handle and cognitively process political information. During the sixties, political research proposed to operationalize it as the extent to which people relied on ideological labels when speaking about politics in order to assess their level of sophistication (Converse, 1964). However, by doing so, the researcher imposes a priori certain interpretative categories (e.g. liberal vs conservative) that might differ from those that an individual uses to understand the political world. In other words, a non-ideological voter might have alternative ways of building a sophisticated structure of opinions, that are not less complex or less relevant than those of an ideological voter. In fact, there seems to be no gold standard in the empirical definition of voters' political sophistication. Studies investigating the level of political sophistication of voters have employed alternatively two main strategies for the operationalization of this concept: a quantity-based approach, studying what people know about politics (i.e. the amount of political information that one holds) and a quality-based

approach, focusing on how people think about politics (i.e. the consistency of political information that one holds). The first approach, predominant in the literature since the nineties, mainly operationalizes voters' sophistication as political knowledge, while the second relies on indices of opinion constraint or consistency (Gallina, 2023a). Both approaches, although substantially different in their empirical strategies and variables at stake, share the same interest, that is, studying the extent to which a person has a complex and elaborated rather than simple and shallow political thinking.

The concept of political sophistication became crucial especially in electoral and public opinion studies because it was usually found to be strongly correlated with voters' political behaviour. A long-lasting strand of the literature has demonstrated that political sophisticates take electoral decisions in different ways (Gomez and Wilson, 2001; Rapeli, 2017 Coffé and von Schoultz, 2021) and at different times (Dassonneville, 2012) than poorly sophisticates. It has been found indeed that sophisticated voters use more complicated and motivated heuristics and reasonings, for example relying more often on issue-driven considerations, grounding their economic evaluations in governmental policies and economic performances rather than only in their personal experience and evaluating candidates on the basis of a broad range of characteristics such as competence and issue stances. In addition, political sophisticates are more aware of their attitudes and more likely to cast a 'correct vote', i.e., choosing a party or candidate in line with their own political preferences, enhancing voter-party, or voter-candidate, congruence and the quality of democratic representation. Further, politically sophisticated voters are less persuaded by external messages not coherent with their pre-existing attitudes and more likely to switch their vote, when they do, before the start of the electoral campaign, being less dependent of short-term stimuli such as electoral campaign claims.

Voters' sophistication is a relevant concept also in political communication research. In more recent years, it has been shown that political sophisticates, for instance, are more likely to resist to fake news and conspiracy theories (Vegetti and Mancosu, 2020). In particular, it has been shown that, in the so-called era of misinformation, people tend to fall for inaccurate information that comes from partisan-consistent sources. However, sophisticated voters are generally better able to spot and reject implausible news even when coming from a politician they support, thus being less likely to express partisan-consistent misbeliefs. The resistance to external messages of voters with high level of sophistication has been theorized in the seminal book of Zaller (1992) and in his RAS model, that aims to clarify how voters' sophistication plays a role not only in explaining different styles of political behaviour but

also in how people receive and assimilate external messages. As political sophisticates have higher levels of attention towards politics, they are more likely to encounter and be exposed to political messages. On the other hand, they are also less likely to be persuaded as they are more aware of their basic values (e.g. partisanship) and they will resist especially to messages that are inconsistent with their pre-existing attitudes (Zaller, 1992). However, more recent research has underlined that emotional feelings such as anxiety towards a particular issue can have a mitigating effect of the relationship between sophistication and persuasion and can make political sophisticates more likely to accept new pieces of information that are inconsistent with pre-existing beliefs (Nai, Schmeil and Marie, 2017).

The relationship between sophistication of messages and of individuals

It is important to notice that political sophistication of voters is not a fixed property and it can be enhanced by external messages. Political actors communicating in a more accessible language can indeed affect voters' understanding of politics. It has been found, for example, that people are better able to place parties in the ideological space when campaign messages use a more simple language (Bischof and Senninger, 2018), suggesting a stronger mass/elite linkage. Not only the clarity of the message, but also the content matters. It is widely agreed that when parties have clear issue profiles, meaningfully distinguishing their policy offer from that of other parties in the system, voters develop more consistent attitudes and rely more heavily on issue-based considerations for their vote choice (Levendusky, 2010; Gerber, Nicolet and Sciarini, 2015). Moreover, processes of information acquisition have been also described in connection to media exposure. Research suggests that the exposure to news (both in its intentional and unintentional form) can decrease the political knowledge gap among the population by providing people with information-rich environments at low or no costs. However, not all media sources favour political learning at the same degree. Studies suggest that there are significant variations in the political learning effects between print and broadcast media (Chaffee and Frank, 1996), between traditional and digital media (Wei and Hindman, 2011) and between different types of the same media source, such as public vs commercial TV channels (Fraile and Iyengar, 2014). In addition, the modern high-choice media environment allows for a higher customization of the exposure and, as a consequence, decreases the chances of inadvertent learning as people can self-select themselves to purely entertainment channels.

Sophistication of political messages and sophistication of voters are inextricably connected to one another. Voters can learn from the political messages they receive, both through parties' and media's messages, and parties can decide to adapt the complexity of their language on the basis of the public they aim at appealing. The multidimensional and evolving nature of this concept has made it difficult to find a common ground for its theoretical definition and empirical translation in the past literature. As recent political communication studies (part of which already mentioned above) seem to show, combining both properties of sophistication, that is, studying voters' sophistication in relation to that of political messages and vice versa, might be a winning strategy in this sense (Sniderman, 2017; Gallina, 2023b). Such combination permits indeed to assess the level of voters' sophistication within the (partisan) information environment they are embedded into and the level of messages' sophistication considering not only its issuer, but also its recipients.

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