AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Lindsay E. Gumley

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ABSTRACT

How does foreign affairs knowledge in America compare cross-nationally? Are Americans really as ignorant as commentators and scholars suggest? Despite the interest in the topic, there are surprisingly few serious works of scholarship that consider how the American public compares cross-nationally. In an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, this thesis does four things. Firstly, it employs a new method for analyzing foreign affairs knowledge cross-nationally (namely, extracting “don’t know” responses from relevant questions in a global public opinion survey). Secondly, it considers the structure of foreign affairs knowledge and ignorance. Thirdly, in order to understand American knowledge and ignorance in its global context, this thesis considers what Americans know, and how that compares to knowledge levels across 24 other nations. Finally, it explores knowledge and ignorance in reference to theories on what influences the breadth and depth of citizen’s political information, as well as adding two new explanatory variables; economic and social globalization. In so doing, this thesis aims to challenge current assumptions about the nature and level of ignorance within the US and add to the debate on public knowledge about foreign affairs.
This work is substantially my own, and where any part of this work is not my own, I have indicated this by acknowledging the source of that part or those parts of the work.
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1. INTRODUCTION

American knowledge and ignorance is “a little like the discussion of sex in Victorian
times. Everybody is interested in the subject. There are many allusions to it. But they
are all inexplicit and oblique.”¹ Scholars from Almond and Kriesberg to Converse and
Bennett have argued that Americans exhibit ‘surprising’, ‘astonishing’, and
‘remarkable’² levels of political ignorance. But what is most ‘surprising’ is how the
study of the relationship between public knowledge and foreign affairs “has moved
from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of
sustained empirical research.”³

Assumptions about American ignorance are not new, having emerged from the
theories of physical and cultural degeneracy popularized by writers like Comte de
Buffon, Kant, and de Pauw. Through the 19th century, Americans were frequently
portrayed by popular commentators like de Tocqueville, Henry James, and Francis
Trollope as uncouth and lacking in civilization and intelligence⁴. As America emerged as
a nation onto the world stage in the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries,
these tropes latched themselves with particular ferocity to America’s relationship with
the outside world, initially taking the form of European dismay over US economic
success and the dichotomy between US isolationism and “ignorant, naive and
moralistic”⁵ foreign policies.

Since then, articles, commentary and surveys lamenting the woeful ignorance of the
American people have streamed continuously from the pens of scholars and fiction

¹ Neuman, 1986:8-9
² See for example Almond, 1950; Bennett, 1988:29; Converse, 1975:79; Converse, 2000; Neuman, 1986;
Converse, 2000; Kriesberg, 1972 [1949]; Lippmann, 1949
³ Neuman, 1986:8-9
⁴ For further analysis of early works on America see Ceaser, 1997; Hollander, 1992; Judt, 1992;
Markovits, 2007; O’connor and Griffiths, 2007
⁵ O’connor and Griffiths, 2007:16
authors alike. Fiction such as Greene’s *The Quiet American* and Lederer and Burdick’s *The Ugly American* have popularised the notion of the bumbling, naive and culturally insensitive American abroad, while books like Fulbright’s 1966 classic *The Arrogance of Power*, Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* and Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* paint a similarly bleak picture of a thoughtless, incompetent, know-nothing nation. More recently, articles like Newsweek’s ‘How Dumb Are They?’ appear to add weight to these persistent clichés. Similarly, recent events (including September 11 and the resultant War on Terror) threw the notion of American ignorance into sharp relief, as people tried to grapple with how parts of the world seemed to hate the US, and how American foreign policy seemed often to go awry.

At an individual level everyone, it seems, has an anecdote — a story about a ‘stupid’ American on a plane, a ‘loud’ American on a bus or a ‘rude’ American in a restaurant. Social media is filled with an endless stream of blogs, sketches, comedy routines, vox-pops and YouTube clips on the subject. This is a symptom of the fact that American ignorance has become more than a cliché; it has become a dictum, displacing measured opinion with implied consensus. But is there truth to these tropes and clichés? How do levels of knowledge in American compare with the rest of the world?

Given the interest in the topic, it is surprising that few serious works of scholarship can answer these questions. There are numerous excellent studies on how much Americans know and about what, but very few compare the levels of knowledge in the US with what publics know globally. Studies have shown that about one third of the population consists of people amongst whom ignorance is endemic and intractable.

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6 Greene, 2002
7 Burdick and Lederer, 1959
8 Bloom, 1987
9 Trefil, Kett, and Hirsch, 1987
10 Romano, 2011
11 Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947; Kriesberg, 1972 [1949]
Others argue that despite advances in technology and the continued relevance of global news to their lives, Americans are no more informed than they were in the 1940s\textsuperscript{12}. Yet few scholars submit these assertions to cross-national comparisons. Instead, they set arbitrary benchmarks for what Americans should know based on their notion of the ideal citizen or past levels of ignorance rather than how the public’s knowledge compares with their global counterparts. Yet, it is important to put American knowledge in cross-national comparison since, as Lipset argues, in isolation it is possible to conclude that the “American people are tough, soft, informed, confused, decisive, and indecisive”\textsuperscript{13}.

I argue that this constitutes a gap in the literature which is essential to fill. In an effort to do this, this thesis does four things. Firstly, it employs a new method for analyzing foreign affairs knowledge cross-nationally (namely, extracting “don’t know” responses from relevant questions in a global public opinion survey). Secondly, it considers the structure of foreign affairs knowledge and ignorance- do people tend to specialize or accumulate information across different arenas? Thirdly, in order to understand American knowledge and ignorance in its global context, this thesis considers what Americans know, and how that compares to knowledge levels across 24 other nations. Finally, it explores knowledge and ignorance in reference to established theories on what influences the breadth and depth of citizen’s political information, as well as adding two new explanatory variables.

Given the breadth of the field and the multiplicity of avenues of exploration it is important to specify what this thesis is not. It is not an attempt to rebuff every false claim about American ignorance; there are simply too many, and while they frequently and surprisingly disseminate from reputable sources, they are rarely academic and can

\textsuperscript{12} Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996
\textsuperscript{13} Lipset, 1966:23
be blown over like a straw man. Importantly, it is also not an effort to set the record straight on American ignorance. That would require a far broader study, and likely involve an extensive original knowledge survey. Instead, this thesis has three tasks:

1. Implement a systematic study to determine what the global public knows about foreign affairs.
2. Call into question the current consensus on American ignorance relative to other publics.
3. Explore some reasons behind variations in knowledge.

This thesis argues that Americans may know less about matters like global power and the global economic crisis than is preferable, or lack knowledge about prominent global leaders in comparison to an ideal global citizen, but when considered in cross-national perspective American knowledge about foreign affairs appears to be decidedly unremarkable. Rather than the very picture of “woeful”\(^\text{14}\) or “astonishing”\(^\text{15}\) ignorance, public knowledge in the US is seemingly very close to the surveyed average, and commensurate with the nation’s level of education, media environments, economic and social globalization. Moreover, in comparison with other powerful nations like France, Germany or China—which some argue should be held to a higher standard\(^\text{16}\)—the level of information about foreign affairs in America is unexceptional. The findings put forward in this thesis may not overturn the results of towering scholars in the field like Converse, Neuman, Zaller, Bennett or Almond, but do begin to call them into question.

\(^{14}\) Almond, 1950; Bennett, 1988:29
\(^{15}\) Converse, 1975:79
\(^{16}\) Brooks, 2006
2. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on American knowledge and ignorance disseminates from two main sources; firstly, what could best be described as popular commentary and conjecture on American ignorance, and secondly, scholarly literature on public knowledge.

The commentary and conjecture typically repeat many of the tropes and clichés which have been perpetuated through history by early travel writers, popular literature and the media through the 19th and early 20th Century. Like early works which portrayed America as an “isolationist”, “ignorant, naive and moralistic”17 nation, contemporary sources describe the American public as indifferent, uninformed and insular. Sources like Johnson and Caruson’s *The Seven Sins of American Foreign Policy*18 and Johnson’s book by the same title19, Joffe’s *Uberpower*20 and Brooks’ *As Others See Us*21 portray America as a nation that breeds ignorance, particularly about foreign policy. Johnson, for example, argues that Americans have an “embarrassing lack of knowledge about the world’s geography, events and conditions”22. While Joffe takes a more nuanced approach, he too states that “America’s high schools...breed vast illiteracy and ignorane of the world”23. In his 2006 book on how the world came to see America as ignorant, insular and indifferent and what this means for US foreign policy, Brooks

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17 O’connor and Griffiths, 2007:16
18 Johnson and Caruson, 2003
19 Johnson, 2007
20 Joffe, 2006
21 Brooks 2006
22 Johnson and Caruson, 2003:5
23 Joffe, 2006:86
similarly argues that Americans are significantly lacking in knowledge\textsuperscript{24}. Yet the evidence used in these sources is tenuous and lacks systematic analysis.

Hundreds of news articles can be found claiming American ignorance in any number of areas. With the development of global polling the media has been able to find a multitude of quantitative evidence support their claims. Journalists Leslie and Schwartz utilise the National Geographic Survey to show that American’s are “dead last in geographic literacy”\textsuperscript{25} and “failing” at basic geography, even in regions where, historically, the US has been engaged (for example, in Vietnam\textsuperscript{26}). Similarly, a recent Newsweek article titled ‘How Dumb Are They?’ found that of 1000 American respondents asked to take a citizenship test, 290 couldn’t name the Vice President\textsuperscript{27}. It must be said, however, that this data is not treated in a systematic manner or submitted to rigorous analysis.

The scholarly literature which emerged out of a long tradition of studies on American knowledge and ignorance dating back to the 1940’s, which tends to include much more rigorous analysis, still makes similar conclusions. A broad consensus developed out of a collection of studies on American political knowledge that held that, generally speaking, mass publics were poorly informed and largely indifferent to national politics, and even less so with foreign affairs\textsuperscript{28}. In probably the most important work on the topic The American People and Foreign Policy Almond argued that while small “attentive publics” which are reasonably informed may exist, the majority of the population tended to indifferent, apathetic and generally ignorant about the political

\textsuperscript{24} Brooks 2006
\textsuperscript{25} Leslie, 1988: 33 in Johnson and Caruson, 2003
\textsuperscript{26} Schwartz, 1987: 29 in Johnson and Caruson, 2003
\textsuperscript{27} Romano, 2011
\textsuperscript{28} Almond, 1950; Bailey, 1948; Erskine, 1962; Erskine, 1963a; Erskine, 1963b; Erskine, 1963c; Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947; Kriesberg, 1972 [1949]; Lippmann, 1930; Lippmann, 1949
issues, particularly foreign policy issues. Early quantitative studies supported this theory. Most notably, Hyman and Sheatsley argued that a third of the American Public constituted ‘a hard core of chronic know-nothings’. Kriesberg’s study of why information campaigns fail, similarly asserted that “dark areas of ignorance” existed amongst public knowledge. Since these early studies, scholarship has generally mirrored these findings. In his famous early essay, for example Converse concluded that the average American citizen lacked a stable orientation toward politics and exhibited a low level of knowledge. While these early works provide some excellent theoretical discussions their findings are broadly undermined by the fact that they base their claims about American ignorance on data showing fluctuations in public opinion, rather than on research into public knowledge. Both Almond and Converse focus almost exclusively on the fact that public opinion appears volatile, incoherent -fluctuating according to seemingly random moods rather than in response to policy or events- and use this to conclude that publics must be generally ignorant about politics and foreign affairs.

More recent studies tend to test political knowledge more directly, and for the most part find American public’s to be broadly ignorant of the political world. In their extensive studies on political sophistication amongst mass publics Neuman and

31 Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947
32 Kriesberg, 1949
33 Converse, 1964
34 Their conclusions are further undermined by the fact that significant contemporary research has found public opinion stable and responsive. See for example Page and Shapiro, 1992;Key, 1966; Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida, 1989; Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1979
35 See for example, Bartels, 1996; Bennett, 1986; Bennett, 1988; Bennett et al., 1996; Converse, 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1991; Neuman, 1986; Fiske, Smith, and Lau, 1990; Graber, 1994 ; Iyengar, 1986; Zaller, 1992. It should be noted that several important works contradict this trend. In two separate studies Cotrell, Ederhart and Graham find that the American public is actually rather competent, even with complex and relatively remote issues like nuclear disarmament (Cottrell and Ederhart, 1969; Graham, 1988). Page and Shapiro, for example, argue that although individuals might show low levels of knowledge, when aggregated, the public appeared to have “collective wisdom”(Page and Shapiro, 1992).
36 Neuman, 1986
Zaller\textsuperscript{37} paint a particularly bleak picture of American knowledge. In their extensive study on \textit{What American Know about Politics and Why It Matters} Delli Carpini and Keeter argue that “despite changes in political, social, economic and technological environments, Americans are essentially no more or less informed about politics than they were fifty years ago”\textsuperscript{38}. In fact, Neuman and Bennett\textsuperscript{39} “suggest that knowledge is at best no greater than it was 2-4 decades ago and may have even declined on some measures.”\textsuperscript{40} Problematically, contemporary scholars, like those before, tend to base their judgments about the extent of public ignorance on arbitrary benchmarks of what constitutes knowledge and ignorance. In the absence of a “generally accepted measure of the public's level of political information” of public knowledge\textsuperscript{41} most scholars simply compare the American public with an idealized notion of the informed citizen. Not surprisingly they find mass publics wanting.

A better way to explore political knowledge and ignorance in America is to put levels of public knowledge in comparative perspective. Realistic expectations based on what is likely and possible in comparable countries can therefore be used as a benchmark against which the US can be tested. Multination studies are, however, rare. Given interest amongst the public, media and popular press about a uniqueness of American ignorance it is surprising that there are so few serious cross-national studies amongst academia. Instead, how the US compares is generally treated in a cursory manor; a page at the beginning of the book or two lines in the middle of an article to remind the reader of the established wisdom and reiterate long held assumptions. Even comprehensive sources like Delli Carpini and Keeter’s 1996 text barely mention

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Zaller, 1992} Zaller, 1992
\bibitem{Delli Caprini and Keeter, 1996:105-106} Delli Caprini and Keeter, 1996:105-106
\bibitem{Bennett, 1988; Bennett, 1989; Neuman, 1986.} Bennett, 1988; Bennett, 1989; Neuman, 1986.
\bibitem{Delli Caprini and Keeter, 2011:1179} Delli Caprini and Keeter, 2011:1179
\end{thebibliography}
knowledge in other nations. This presents a gaping chasm in the literature and undermines much of the analysis to date.

Of the cross-national political knowledge studies that do exist most concentrate exclusively on Europe and tend to be primarily focused on the determinant of knowledge rather than on comparisons between levels of knowledge and ignorance itself\textsuperscript{42}. Uniquely, Bennett \textit{et al} provide an excellent 1996 study which compares the US with Canada, France, Germany and Britain\textsuperscript{43}, finding that American public’s rank last across the 5 knowledge questions included in the study. Apart from this source, there exists a broad gap in the literature on American knowledge and ignorance.

\textsuperscript{42} Bennett \textit{et al.}, 1996; Gordon and Segura, 1997; Iyengar, Ks, and Bonfadelli, 2009; Milner and Gronuld, 2006; Mondak and Canache, 2004; Norris, 2010

\textsuperscript{43} Bennett \textit{et al.}, 1996
2.2 WHY IGNORANCE MATTERS

For all the commentary and conjecture on the topic of American knowledge and ignorance, surprisingly few commentators directly address the question of why ignorance matters. Most simply assume that knowledge is inherently good in and of itself. Some others articulate this further, arguing that an ignorant public leads to poor foreign policy choices or outcomes. This raises the question, how much can the average American really influence policy? If foreign policy is generally made at the elite level—by appointed officials in the State Department, in diplomatic backrooms and with sensitive information the public is not privy to—does the question of what Americans know about foreign affairs even matter?

I argue that public opinion certainly matters. At the most basic level knowledge is, quite simply, good for democracy. Knowledge improves the nature and quality of peoples’ opinions, and affects the nature and frequency of democratic participation—the lifeblood of the democratic process. There is a direct connection between public knowledge and policy choices via public opinion, expressed through opinion polls, or more directly at the ballot box. What the public knows influences the attitudes and preferences they express through these mechanisms, and in turn affects policy makers.

DEMOCRACY AND THE INFORMED CITIZEN

Public knowledge and ignorance affects the nature and quality of American democracy. Since democracy relies on public participation, it logically follows that it also depends on an active citizenry.44 In fact, scholars such as Delli Carpini and Keeter, as well as Habermas, go so far as to argue that political knowledge is both the basis and the measure of effective democracy.45

44 See Habermas, 1984; Zaller, 1992; Neuman, 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996
45 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:8
Given the Founders’ fear of the passions, excesses\textsuperscript{46} and even ignorance\textsuperscript{47} of mass publics, they designed a system which shields large parts of the governing process from public influence and makes “relatively few civic demands”\textsuperscript{48} of the population. Instead it limits the “excesses of government, primarily through institutional check and balances rather than the civic virtue of leaders or the vigilant, informed citizenry”\textsuperscript{49}. Indirect election of senators\textsuperscript{50} and the president\textsuperscript{51}, “the judicial branch’s insulation from the people, the presidential veto, the bicameral design of Congress and federalism”\textsuperscript{52} are all examples of this. However, as Delli Carpini and Keeter argue, it would be a mistake to think “that because there is little that a citizen is required to do...there is little a citizen is required to know”\textsuperscript{53}. The system still relies on the public’s ability to hold and express opinions which adequately represent their interests. And evidence suggests that knowledge is the single best determinant of the ability to do both.

Informed publics are more likely to formulate opinions, and the more knowledgeable the citizen, the more likely those opinions are to ally with their interests\textsuperscript{54}. Zaller as well as Delli Carpini and Keeter, for example, find that “prior political knowledge helps citizens recognize and reject irrelevant information.”\textsuperscript{55} Knowledgeable citizens, in turn, are “better able to link their interests with their attitudes” and are “more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their own attitudes”\textsuperscript{56}.

\textsuperscript{46} See for example, Hamilton, Madison and Jay 1961 [1787-1788]:384. See also No 49 and 62.
\textsuperscript{47} See for example, Adams, 1788:7
\textsuperscript{48} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:35
\textsuperscript{49} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:35
\textsuperscript{50} Senators were originally indirectly elected via the House of Representatives.
\textsuperscript{51} While the electoral college tends to uphold the state’s popular vote, presidents are still elected indirectly through the college.
\textsuperscript{52} Lowe et al, 2009:59
\textsuperscript{53} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:49
\textsuperscript{54} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:1-22
\textsuperscript{55} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 224
Ignorant populations are also less likely to participate in politics whether it be through voting or other forms of political mobilization. In separate cross-national studies, both Milner and Norris find that populations’ political knowledge a dominant predictor of political participation. Similarly, in their analysis of the 1988 presidential election, Delli Carpini and Keeter found that nearly nine out of ten of the most knowledgeable 10 percent of respondents voted, but only one in ten did so among the least-informed decile. Moreover, “awareness about politics and public affairs is” also “associated with internal political efficacy” which is in turn “one of the strongest predictors of political activism”.

**THE PUBLIC-POLICY NEXUS**

Without a doubt, the most important reason for interest in public knowledge, opinion and foreign affairs is that “in some ways and at least some of the time, public attitudes have an impact, for better or worse, on the conduct of the nation’s external policy.” What the public knows about given events, issues and the policy alternatives available to the nation influences the types of policies they favor which, in turn, influences elite decision making to some extent. Yet scholars fundamentally disagree on the exact nature and effect of the public-policy nexus. The traditional consensus holds that the mass public either does not matter or is pernicious when it does, a view which is broadly supported by elite theory. Contemporary critiques and influential case studies have, however, challenged the primacy of these theories. Scholars such as Holsti, for example, argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between public knowledge, opinion, policy and policy makers. Elites and policy makers influence the public, but

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58 Milner, 2002
59 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 224
60 Norris, 2010:2. See for example
61 Holsti, 2004:36
62 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 218-267
63 See Almond, 1950
64 Bennett et al., 1996;10. See Lippmann, 1949.
They are also constrained by it. This debate speaks directly to the relevance of studies about public knowledge and ignorance. If the public has little to no effect on policy, then debates about foreign affairs knowledge are only interesting in so far as they add to people’s opinions about the public. However, if the public has an impact on the substance and nature of foreign policy, then what the public knows about foreign affairs is of direct importance to the policy process.

In both elite and reciprocal theories, the connection between what the public knows and national foreign policy is funneled through public opinion and voting behavior. Public knowledge affects opinion, and attitudes towards different issues and events. It frames the way they evaluate past performance and assess future policy options. Those attitudes and opinions, in turn, affect the mass public’s tendency to participate in political processes, who they vote for, as well as the policy preferences they express. Those preferences, expressed via public opinion polls and at the ballot box, then confine or compel the choices of the policy maker and the politician.

![Figure 1: The process by which knowledge has the potential to affect policy](image)

In what became known as the ‘Almond-Lippman’ consensus, Almond and Lippman argue that the mass public is too concerned with the immediate to have either the time or the inclination to become informed about the political, much less foreign policy. Consequently, they conclude that public opinion lacks structure and is highly volatile, and therefore incapable of exerting a sustained and coherent influence over policy. Instead, Lippman argues, public influence peaks and troughs with the temporary passions of the masses. Policymaking is therefore better served by the

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65 Almond, 1950:36. See also Bryce 1908, Vol II: 310
impassionate calculations of experts and statesmen\textsuperscript{66}. Generally however, where elites and office holders do interact with the public, it tends to be with the “informed and interested stratum”\textsuperscript{67}, leaving “the ‘masses’ [to] participate in policy making in indirect and primarily passive ways”\textsuperscript{68}.

Realists, elite theorists and proponents of followship models similarly support this notion of the primacy of the elite coupled with a passive and predominantly ignorant or apathetic public. Realists suggest that while the public might be informed and motivated to learn about immediate and local issues, “foreign affairs are far too removed from the public’s experiences...and have little time or inclination to become sufficiently informed about such complex and remote issues.”\textsuperscript{69} In fact, they support the notion of a public removed from the foreign policy process given that “diplomacy usually requires secrecy, flexibility, speed of action”\textsuperscript{70}. Similarly, proponents of elite theory like Lipset, Schumpeter, Mueller and Neuman suggest that “the irony of democracy is that elites, not masses, govern America”\textsuperscript{71}. They argue that, particularly with regards for foreign policy, elites simply have more information than the general public,\textsuperscript{72} while citizens are generally apathetic and ignorant. Consequently, foreign policy is “defined for the average American rather than by the average American”\textsuperscript{73}.

Finally, followship models argue that where correlations between public preferences and policy are apparent, they are a consequence of elites leading opinion rather than the other way around. Proponents of this model\textsuperscript{74} describe the public-policy nexus as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{66}Lippman, 1955; See also Lippmann, 1930
  \item \textsuperscript{67}Almond, 1950:139
  \item \textsuperscript{68}Almond, 1950:139
  \item \textsuperscript{69}Holsti, 2004:7-8
  \item \textsuperscript{70}Holsti, 2004:7-8
  \item \textsuperscript{71}Dye and Zeigler, 1990:3
  \item \textsuperscript{72}Baum and Potter, 2008:42. See also Lipset, 1966:19
  \item \textsuperscript{73}Lipset, 1966:20
  \item \textsuperscript{74}Zaller, 1992:310-332. For an enlightening analogy of the elite and followship models see Zaller, 1992:313-314
\end{itemize}
a process by which elites and ‘specialists’ frame the policy debate and guide the information which the public has access to. The voice of the people is therefore simply an echo\textsuperscript{75} “of the elites who dominate the information environment at any given time”. \textsuperscript{76} Consequently, "the President” and other policy elites, make opinion, “they do not follow it” and any apparent reliance on the polls is simply because they tell him “tell him how good a politician he is”\textsuperscript{77}.

Yet, these theories face great empirical difficulties- they all fail to account for the remarkable levels of congruence between public opinion and policy evidenced in contemporary scholarship\textsuperscript{78}. Page and Shapiro, for example, find that changes in the public’s policy preferences over time were “followed by congruent change in policy about two-thirds of the time.\textsuperscript{79} Similarly, in his review of the public’s role US military action in Vietnam, the Gulf War, Bosnia and US support for the Contras, Sobel found that public opinion did have an impact in most cases and at most times, although to varying degrees\textsuperscript{80}. Likewise, Bartels showed that “public opinion was a powerful force of policy change in the realm of defense spending in the first year of the Reagan administration” \textsuperscript{81}, despite the relatively concentrated executive power at that time and the relative shielding of defense spending as a policy issue from public opinion. Wlezien’s study too\textsuperscript{82} “revealed a strong reciprocal connection between public inputs—preferences for ‘more’ or ‘less’ spending for the Pentagon—and policy

\textsuperscript{75} Key, 1966:2  
\textsuperscript{76} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:46  
\textsuperscript{77} Lipset (1966:20)  
\textsuperscript{78} See for example Bartels, 1991; Hartley and Russett, 1992; Kusnitz, 1984; Monroe, 1979; Monroe, 1998; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Russet, 1990  
\textsuperscript{79} Page and Shapiro, 1983. Monroe comes to a similar conclusion (Monroe, 1979:11).  
\textsuperscript{80} Sobel, 2001. Similarly, in his extensive study of public opinion and US policy towards China over a 30 year period Kusnitz found that the “correspondence between public preferences and US policy was remarkably high”(Kusnitz, 1984:173, 176).  
\textsuperscript{81} Bartels, 1991:467. See also Hartley and Russett, 1992.  
\textsuperscript{82} Wlezien, 1996
outputs. So too in complex issues such as nuclear arms control, Graham finds “that public opinion had at least some impact on decisions at all stages of the policy process including agenda setting, arms control negotiations, the treaty ratification process, and implementation of the agreement.”

On this basis, I argue that the public-policy nexus is not a black and white process, but many shades of grey. Generally speaking, the effect of mass publics on the policy process may be latent, with office holders having relative autonomy amongst a largely permissive public. Particularly, in relation to foreign affairs, much is done behind closed doors, away from the public eye and with a swiftness that is not conducive to a large amount of public participation. Despite this, I argue that the public-policy nexus is more reciprocal than followship models suggest. Policy makers are constrained, if not by current preferences then by future opinion. Electoral retribution theories show that as politicians are “sensitive to public opinion for fear of alienating voters the point of losing office at the next election”, and that they constrain themselves to pursuing policies “within the confines of ‘anticipated future opinion.’” Thus, even when the public is not particularly active on an issue elites remain “sensitive to the preferences of the electorate.” Thus while elites guide the public, they are also constrained by it in making policy choices. Similarly, the public has an impact on foreign policy making, but is also conditioned by media coverage, opinion leaders and elites. The nexus is not, therefore, the one dimensional model proposed by elite theorists, but more akin to the multidimensional mode in Figure 2. Given the reciprocal nature of the public-

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83 Holsti, 2004:61
84 Holsti, 2004: 66
85 Powlick and Katz, 1998
87 Holsti, 2004: 39
88 Powlick and Katz, 1998:52
90 See for example Hughes 1979; Ginsberg 1986; Stimson, 1991; Hinckley and Beal, 1984; Shapiro and Jacobs, 2000; Wittkopf and Mccormick, 1993
policy nexus, if what the public knows affects what the public thinks, and what the public thinks affects policy choices then public knowledge and ignorance certainly matters.

Figure 2: Simplified model of the reciprocal public-policy nexus
3. MEASURING FOREIGN AFFAIRS KNOWLEDGE

This chapter develops the measure of foreign affairs knowledge that will be used throughout the analysis. I begin by outlining and defending the use of ‘don’t know’ (DK) answers as a valid proxy measure for knowledge and ignorance, arguing that while this approach may be novel, it is theoretically valid and fundamentally useful. Secondly, I explore the apparatus that will be used to measure foreign affairs ignorance, before defending the questions used as methodologically valid and internally consistent.

3.1 WHEN DON’T KNOW MEANS DON’T KNOW

Despite significant interest in what citizens know and numerous claims being made about relative American ignorance, there are few valid tools for measuring what citizens in different nations know relative to one another (See Appendix 2). The current methods of measurement of cross-national knowledge are inadequate for our purposes. They tend to either chart highly subjective understandings of abstract concepts like “what is democracy?” as in the case of the IEA studies91, or competency with specific facts which are only tenuously related to knowledge about foreign affairs knowledge, such as the ability to place a nation on the map (as in the Geographic Literacy test)92. As a rule it seems, global surveys tend not to include knowledge questions while political knowledge surveys tend not to be global (See Appendix 2 for discussion). Given this lack of comparable knowledge questions in cross-national surveys I turn out of necessity to a novel approach for testing what people know about foreign affairs. I will use ‘don’t know’ responses from a global public opinion poll as a proxy measure for foreign affairs ignorance.

91 Homana, Greene, and Barber, 2003; Torney-Purta and Lehmann, 2001
92 Roper, 2002
While this may be an unconventional and experimental technique, it is theoretically sound. Contrary to initial assumptions that people provide DK responses in an ad hoc manner and they should therefore be ignored\textsuperscript{93}, scholars have found that DK responses are given systematically by a group of people with particular characteristics. It is therefore not only possible, but *worthwhile* to study these responses\textsuperscript{94} for, as Berinsky argues, “empirical evidence demonstrates that there is a stable cross-issue systematic component to opinionation.”\textsuperscript{95} Put another way, the extent to which someone is likely to develop an opinion versus a DK response is related to their engagement with the political world, and hence knowledge of it\textsuperscript{96}.

In fact, in his extensive dissertation on DK responses, Berinsky argues that far from being random occurrences, DK responses occur systematically throughout opinion surveys. They are a function of respondents either lacking firstly enough information, secondly the capacity to form an opinion with the limited information they have, or thirdly wishing to abstain from answering the question due to fear that their answers aren’t socially acceptable\textsuperscript{97}. For the purposes of this study it can be assumed DK responses are a function of the first two conditions, since the latter will not have a large effect on my data. Social desirability effects are typically a problem where the survey material is socially contentious, normatively charged or where the interviewee might have reason to feel judged by the interviewer. The battery of questions that will be employed in this study does not, however, suffer from these afflictions\textsuperscript{98}.

Similar to Berinsky, Francis and Busch show that the degree to which a respondent is excluded from information and the decision-making process is a good indicator of DK

\textsuperscript{93} For an excellent summary of this debate see Francis and Busch, 1975.
\textsuperscript{94} Berinsky, 2000:92
\textsuperscript{95} Berinsky, 2000:92
\textsuperscript{96} See Berinsky, 2000:92; Converse, 1976; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Francis and Busch, 1975; Krosnick and Milburn, 1990
\textsuperscript{97} Either in relation to society at large, or the interviewer.
\textsuperscript{98} See chapter 3:2 for further discussion.
response. Krosnick and Milburn also find that “the more knowledge an individual has about politics, the more likely he or she is to form[and express] political opinions about political issues.” Krosnick and Milburn, 1990:50-51 Conversely, ignorant respondents will “abstain from survey questions because they ‘don’t know’ how they feel about an issue, policy, or political candidate.” Berinsky, 1998:7. See also Krosnick and Milburn, 1990; Schuman and Presser, 1981. Put another way, people who know about the content of the question will have an opinion and people who don’t know will say they don’t know.

There are a number of other reasons why people might provide a DK response, but a well designed battery of questions can mitigate the effect of other determinants leaving DK responses as a good proxy measure of political knowledge. Firstly, respondents concerned that they might answer incorrectly might abstain from answering a question when they fail to understand that the questions don’t have a correct answer, and wish to avoid giving a wrong one. More commonly, they may think that their true opinion isn’t social acceptable and abstain instead of revealing it to the interviewer. Fortunately, neither problem is a large concern for this study. To begin with simply abstaining from answering a question is coded differently within the survey, so ‘don’t know’ responses are separated from simply abstentions. More importantly, I have largely avoided the problems of social acceptability by only including questions which are not particularly susceptible to a particular bias.

An issue of concern, and one identified throughout the survey literature, is the case wherein a respondent might answer ‘don’t know’ because they have too much information and can’t make up their mind, or they feel the given issue is so conditional

99 Krosnick and Milburn, 1990:50-51
100 Berinsky, 1998:7. See also Krosnick and Milburn, 1990; Schuman and Presser, 1981.
101 Converse, 1974:650
102 For a discussion see Berinsky, 1998:7. This is a particular problem when dealing with politically or socially contentious issues such as race. As you will see below, the question I am using are not susceptible to social acceptably bias in a significant way since they ask about fairly removed, non-normative issues.
103 See Chapter 3:2 for further discussion.
on certain factors that they feel unable to give a meaningful answer. How are respondents who know the intricacies of a given issue meant to simplify and distil it down to two or three multiple choice answers? Regarding this problem’s effect on the ‘don’t knows’, it’s at once hard to avoid and not a particularly large concern. Theory tells us that only a tiny proportion of respondents will say that they “don’t know” if they have too much information—“Individuals who are better politically informed” are in fact less likely “to opt out of answering survey questions”, instead selecting answers from the available options, despite the inadequacy of those options relative to the respondents’ knowledge.

Finally, respondents could say they “don’t know” simply because they are apathetic towards the issue. Again, this is not a big problem for my research question, since apathetic responses can be included as ignorant responses. It is reasonable to assume that if someone doesn’t care enough about an issue to answer a survey question, they are unlikely to care enough to become informed about that issue and can therefore be reasonably assumed to be ignorant (for my purposes) as well. Thus, while there are a number of reasons why people might provide a DK response, the one that has by far the greatest effect on my data will be people who are unfamiliar with the content of a question or don’t possess enough information to navigate through the political choices.

In fact, people are generally much more inclined towards providing an opinion rather than not, meaning that the data is more likely to be impacted by those who don’t know saying they do rather than the other way around, leading to the risk that ignorance levels will be understated. After more than 20 years of survey research,

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104 See for example Bishop, Alfred J. Tuchfarber, and Robert W.Oldendick, 1986
105 Berinsky, 2000:92
106 This does differ across and within nations. See p# for discussion.
Converse reflected that contrary to his expectation that people will tend to opt out of answering survey questions when they don’t know an answer, respondents are in fact likely to offer an opinion either because they are embarrassed to admit that they don’t have an answer, or will simply try and “help the interviewer out” by picking an opinion. Similarly, opinionation theory holds that people will tend to offer an opinion even if they only have minute pieces of information on the issue.

Unfortunately, this is simply an unavoidable problem and accounts for the low ratio of DK responses to opinions within my findings. It does, however, have one upside; since respondents are reluctant to admit they don’t know, the ones who do probably really don’t know.

There is a significant and insurmountable problem with using DK responses in a cross-national study. It is still unclear whether respondents will offer DK responses differently in different countries when confronted with opinion questions. We know that the DK method requires citizens to offer their true opinions or a DK response, but “norms against speaking freely on specific issues may be strong in one social or geographic location, and weak in others.” But the extent to which this happens in global political opinion polls is unclear.

There has been some excellent research into cross-national tendencies for respondents to admit they don’t know, but unfortunately it relates to information questions rather than opinion surveys and is therefore generally not applicable.

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107 In fact, Converse argues that opinion surveys would be served by offering ‘don’t know’ as a multiple choice item rather than a discrete item because otherwise they don’t see it as a legitimate option and are therefore more likely to manufacture opinions.

108 Converse, 1974:650


110 See, for example, Sicinski, 1970

111 For example, Sicinski finds that factual knowledge surveys “Norwegians are clearly much more inclined than the Frenchmen and the Poles, irrespective of the question, to give wrong answers rather than admit ignorance.” (Sicinski, 1970:128), but provides no insight into how publics answer opinion questions.
International business research sheds some light on likely cross-national difference. Studies show that there is significant cross-cultural variation amongst survey responses where people are asked to rank themselves within subjective numbered Likert-type scales. Harzing, for example, argues that Americans are more prone to extreme positive responses in comparison with the Japanese and Korean tendency to provide middle of the road answers\textsuperscript{112}. How these differences transfer to questions with closed and more objective alternative answers, however, remains unclear.

For the purposes of this study I have determined that cross-national variations in response styles is a largely unavoidable problem but the questions chosen for the study have nonetheless been selected with an attempt to mitigate the potential for extreme responses in mind. For example, rather than asking respondents to place themselves on a subjective numerical scale, questions ask respondents about objective states of opinion from a limited number of possible responses. They are not constructed with an implicit positive response available. Apart from that there is not enough conclusive and applicable research to warrant specific adjustments to the data. Instead, these risks will be taken into consideration when analysing the findings.

\textsuperscript{112} See for example, Harzing, 2006
3.2 QUESTIONS

The ideal method for measuring what people know about foreign affairs in different countries would be a contemporary cross-national multi-item knowledge survey. Unfortunately, at present there is no satisfactory survey meeting these criteria. Global surveys typically do not include knowledge questions and knowledge surveys tend not to be global. At present, the most satisfactory data available comes from a small collection of specific opinion polls, which are truly cross-national and ask questions across a range of issues. These allow useful information about what people know to be gleaned.

Following a review of 15 survey organisations and data collection services\(^\text{113}\), the Pew Global Attitudes Project 2009 survey is demonstrably the most suitable for this endeavor (see Table 1)\(^\text{114}\). This survey includes 9 foreign affairs questions and data from 25 nations, of which 24 could be used\(^\text{115}\) across 8 regions\(^\text{116}\), spanning several indicators that include the level of education, level of economic development, media environments, globalisation and cultural openness (sometimes called cultural proximity).

Although an ideal study would involve a larger number of nations and a wider variety of questions, analysis of the data from the Pew study shows that the range and spread of foreign affairs knowledge and its determining variables is sufficient for a fruitful analysis. As the Pew survey is centrally controlled and funded, the methodologies are

\(^{113}\) Including from numerous newspapers and independent organisations, the 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge, Times-Mirror, BBC, National Election Study, CSES, World Values Survey, ISSP, the Global Barometers, Pew Research, Gallup, International Education Association, PISA, Roper Center, GlobeScan, Knowledge Networks and the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs.

\(^{114}\) Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009

\(^{115}\) Excluded the Palestinian Territories because there was data missing on a number of the questions.

\(^{116}\) According to UNDP regional classifications. Including 2 from Central and Eastern Europe, 3 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 2 East Asia, 1 South East Asia and the Pacific, 2 from South Asia, 4 from Arab states and 2 in Africa and 8 industrialised.
consistent, the data is reliable and there are enough cases within each nation to form a representative sample and facilitate analysis at both the micro and macro level.

Table 1: Nine questions used in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
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| 21 | Now I’m going to read a list of political leaders. For each, tell me how much confidence you have in each leader to do the right thing regarding world affairs – a lot of confidence, some confidence, not too much confidence, or no confidence at all. | 1 A lot of confidence
  2 Some confidence
  3 Not too much confidence
  4 No confidence at all
  8 Don’t know (DO NOT READ)
  9 Refused (DO NOT READ) |
| 15 | Today, which ONE of the following do you think is the world’s leading economic power? (READ RESPONSE CATEGORIES) | 1 The United States
  2 China
  3 Japan OR
  4 The countries of the European Union
  5 Other (DO NOT READ)
  97 None / There is no leading economic power (DO NOT READ)
  98 Don’t know (DO NOT READ)
  99 Refused (DO NOT READ) |
| 16 | Which comes closest to your view – China will eventually replace the U.S. as the world’s leading superpower; China has already replaced the U.S. as the world’s leading superpower; or China will never replace the U.S. as the world’s leading superpower? | 1 Will eventually replace US
  2 Has already replaced US
  3 Will never replace US
  8 Don’t know (DO NOT READ)
  9 Refused (DO NOT READ) |
| 32 | Which of the following is taking the best approach to fixing the global economic crisis – the United States, China, or the European Union? | 1 United States
  2 China
  3 European Union
  4 None/No difference (DO NOT READ)
  5 Other (DO NOT READ)
  8 Don’t know (DO NOT READ)
  9 Refused (DO NOT READ) |
| 39 | Now thinking about the situation in Iraq, do you believe that efforts to establish a stable government in Iraq will definitely succeed, probably succeed, probably fail, or definitely fail? | 1 Definitely succeed
  2 Probably succeed
  3 Probably fail
  4 Definitely fail
  8 Don’t know (DO NOT READ)
  9 Refused (DO NOT READ) |

117 Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009
Given the novelty of my approach, the choice of questions is important and contributes to the reliability and validity of the study. Questions selected must comply with six specific conditions that have been developed based on my critique of past studies and the requirements of the current one. To begin with, questions must deal specifically with foreign affairs material. This is necessary since people tend to know a lot more about domestic issues than they do foreign affairs; therefore, having a mix of domestic and international questions would be problematic. Questions should also be politically relevant, consequential and generally answerable. Probably the most common criticism of public knowledge literature is that it deals with the obscure and the trivial. Critics argue that scholars measure only “stray facts” which are not politically topical, which it is unreasonable to expect a person to know or remember, and that would have little effect on the way they understood policy choices if they did\textsuperscript{118}. It is intended that imposing these three conditions will allow this analysis to succeed where others have faltered.

Politically relevant questions relate to content which is topical for contemporary foreign affairs issues. Content should also be consequential, meaning it must relate to the foreign affairs choices nations are faced with. Put another way, if someone doesn’t know it, it matters; it could actually have an effect on the way they perceive the world and understand the choices available to their country. Certainly, questions need not

\textsuperscript{118} See, for example, Bennett, 2003; Converse, 1975:9; Graber, 1994 :341; Graber, 1996; Page and Shapiro, 1992:12
deal with issues which completely dominate electoral politics that year, if only because people vote based on any number of issues. But to chastise people for not knowing something, about which there is absolutely no consequence seems like either a “fool’s errand or an effort to blow over a straw man”.¹¹⁹

For example, a question might ask about the New START treaty. The Treaty is certainly consequential, but was not a relatively big issue during 2009 and probably received little air time in the media. Likewise, a question about the Vietnam War would be well suited to a survey of historical knowledge, but has no place on a survey about how people understand their political environment today. Alternatively, carbon pricing was topical in 2009, but didn’t constitute an important foreign affairs dilemma in most countries.

For a question to be generally answerable, it must rely on material we can expect the average citizen could and should know. It should not rely on information which so specialized that it could not be common knowledge, or be so specific that a politically astute person is unlikely to acquire it or otherwise commit it to memory. There are a great many politically relevant and consequential facts which a citizen would do well to know, but which it would be unreasonable to expect them to remember. The National Geographic-Roper Geographic Literacy survey, for example, asks about respondent’s ability to place politically relevant places on a map, from the Atlantic Ocean and China to Afghanistan and Egypt. Certainly, the ability to find their way around a map tells us something about how much information they have about their world, and it is hard to imagine that someone could be following the protests in Egypt closely without having

¹¹⁹ Of course, what is topical and consequential differs between nations. The questions chosen are, however, of global importance and general consequence. All nations faced the challenges of the Global Economic Crisis, most nations are impacted by changes in the global power structure. For example, Latin American nations, which might be less impacted by the rise of China than, say, Australia or Japan, are certainly influenced by a declining US.
seen a map of the region. But ask yourself, if you were given a map of the Middle East which is covered in numbers, could you match the proper number to Israel, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan? While such facts are politically relevant, they are difficult questions for even the most astute political science major, much less the general public and should not be included in such a survey.

The 9 questions used in this study were politically relevant, possible to know and consequential immediately preceding and during the May 18 to June, 16 survey. The spring of 2009 saw an unusually high number of prominent international negotiations, and the news was awash with all the issues and leaders involved. Early April saw back to back G20 and NATO summits, the Southeast Asian summit, G8 and BRIC meetings in June, as well as numerous smaller meetings. The questions that leaders were asked about in Q21 were splashed throughout global media reports, given their leadership in the negotiations and international affairs generally. For instance, Merkel was active at the G20 and NATO summits, both in early April. At the NATO summit she reaffirmed Germany’s commitment to their role in Afghanistan, while at the G20 both she and Sarkozy attracted significant attention for their critiques of efforts to address the GFC. Sarkozy also made headlines for ruling out more troops for Afghanistan and threatened to walk out on the G20. Dimitri Medvedev was peppered throughout the news given Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and a “fresh start” on nuclear disarmament negotiations in from April 1st. In such a global flurry, Obama obviously featured high on the media’s agenda, with a European tour (dubbed a great success by the media), visits to Iraq and Turkey, as well as efforts to manage the US and global financial crisis- not to mention his famous Cairo speech in June.

In that year it would have been nearly impossible to miss reports about the economic crisis mentioned in Q32. While the survey was being conducted, analysts argue that
the crisis was hitting rock bottom. As leaders scrambled to cooperate, the media relished the power play between them and often discussed who was doing the most to solve it. Similarly, global economic and political power was often featured, if not overtly referred to; it would take only the most cursory of attention to global affairs for respondents to arm themselves with information required to answer Q15 and Q16. Certainly the role of China, the US and EU were front and foremost as the key players in solving global economic and political woes. In fact, it would have been hard to pick up a newspaper without seeing a story about China in the spring of 2009. There was endless discussion about the China’s role in repairing the US and global economy, Chinese confidence in the US dollar and discussions with Obama and Geithner. Meanwhile, China also made the news for its minor skirmish between the US and China in the South China sea mid April, finally budging on support for a Security Council curtailing North Korea, and vying for power at the Southeast Asian summit.

Despite the flurry over the economic crisis, Afghanistan and Iraq (asked about in Q39 and 40) were also topical throughout this period, and not just in the US. The NATO summit in early April marked the 60th anniversary of the organisation, and featured heated debate about Afghanistan as the US called for NATO members to contribute more troops. The Iraqi Prime Minister also visited Europe in early May. Importantly, reports about the region featured substantive discussions about security and stability in both nations. Obama renewed media attention to Iraq with his April 7th stop over and announced US plans to remove combat brigades in 2010.

Not only were these issues topical and politically relevant, they are consequential. It does therefore matter when a citizen is unable to answer them. To begin with, they deal with issues which were front and centre in news about foreign affairs, so a respondent being unable to answer the entire set of questions would show a near
complete lack interest in, and knowledge about, topical and relevant foreign affairs. They are not abstract topics with little bearing on a nation’s foreign policy and domestic situation, but rather questions dealing with key foreign policy concerns about which every nation was making significant decisions and are therefore consequential.

Rather than just measuring one type of knowledge or one area of expertise, questions must also focus on a range of topics, from key political figures to international security and economics. Question 21 allows respondents to show knowledge about specific facts, while Q15, 16 and 32 are more general. Questions 39 and 40 relate to international security, Q32 focuses on international economics and Q15 and 16 about issues of power and global politicking.

Finally, questions must be difficult enough that people will not simply give off-the-cuff responses or be able to repeat commonly held opinions. A simple question on a contentious but complex issue would be a prime risk for this, for instance “Is global warming; a. good or b. bad”? Questions of this type reduce the likelihood of respondents putting forward their true position, or admitting that they don’t know. Similarly, if questions are normatively charged or ideologically driven, there is a tendency for respondents to simply regurgitate socially desirable responses (and DK responses are not socially desirable) or take a knee-jerk ideological response. Take, for example, if a question asked about respondent’s opinion about whether America had a right to intervene in Iraq. Using DK responses relies on the assumption that respondents will engage with the content of the question, and if they are unfamiliar with it, admit they ‘don’t know’. If questions allow respondents to answer without thinking, it would reduce the likelihood that they will engage with the material. That being said, if questions go too far in the opposite direction- that is, they become too difficult- it may harm the requisite conditions of relevance and consequence.
It is this criterion that the battery of questions is most in danger of failing to meet. Since questions 15, 16 and 32 ask for respondents to make a judgment about the relative effectiveness of global powers rather than more abstract concepts, there is some risk that respondents will answer based on either patriotism, or regional or national pride and therefore be less likely to offer a DK response if indeed they don’t know. Similarly, there is a risk that respondents will answer question 39 and 40 (about Iraq and Afghanistan respectively) based on ideological opposition to either war or simply US involvement in the Middle East. Both are a problem which it is worthwhile to be mindful of throughout the analysis. Both American and Chinese respondents were more likely to favor the US and China in questions 15, 16 and 32. In fact, which region respondents were located in had some correlation with the way respondents answered each question, but the relationship (between a respondent’s region and their answer) never exceeded a coefficient of about .100. Moreover, it has little to no effect on the likelihood that a respondent offering a DK response. On balance, the potential benefits of these questions, given that they meet the other criteria outweigh the potential costs.
4. AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

This chapter compares citizens across 24 nations; evaluating relative levels of knowledge within each nation via a vis one another. In so doing it puts American knowledge and ignorance into comparative perspective. I find that Americans are nowhere near as ignorant as scholarship suggests. Certainly there is significant variation in how much Americans know, but when compared with both the global sample and the next five most powerful nations they appear at least average or better. In fact, it seems that Converse’s simple truth— that “the mean is low and the variance high”\textsuperscript{120}— is not so simple after all. Before embarking on this it is necessary, however, to test the structure of foreign affairs knowledge to determine whether citizens are generalists or specialists. While numerous scholars have tested knowledge dimensionality at the local and national level, few have tested it regarding what citizens know about global politics.

4.1 THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE: ARE CITIZENS GENERALISTS OR SPECIALISTS?

There is a longstanding debate within the field about whether citizens tend to be knowledge generalists or specialists. Do people tend to gather information on a range of facts and foreign affairs issues, or do they specialise in certain areas? If someone knows about key foreign policy leaders, will they also know about global events? While some consider this to be a definitional problem, I consider it to be a substantive one. It tells us about how, and in what areas, people tend to accumulate and store knowledge. It is also a methodological issue since it speaks directly to scholars’ ability

\textsuperscript{120} Converse, 1990:372
to test political knowledge using a limited number of questions; if people specialise, meaning “they are well informed about some aspects of politics but not about others”, then “an appropriate measure of political knowledge must reflect the various domains in which citizens specialise”\textsuperscript{121}. On the other hand, if people are generalists, then a single common scale will allow for valid measurement\textsuperscript{122}.

Suppose, for the moment, that you find yourself talking about foreign affairs with three people; Know-it-all, Know-nothing and Know-something. Know-something can hold his own when talking about the environment and nuclear disarmament, but falls silent when you start talking about conflicts in the Middle East and trade with South-East Asia. Know-nothing can follow along with the conversation, but can’t offer any new information or analysis. His opinions tend to be emotional or polemic arguments repeated from somewhere else. Know-it-all is the opposite. She keeps interrupting Know-something adding detailed names and places to his arguments. Not only can she tell you where nuclear negotiations are up to, but also how the SALT and START treaties work, as well as details on most foreign affairs issues. When it comes to international affairs, most people fall somewhere in between Know-it-all and Know-something.

Know-it-all is an exaggerated version of the political generalist. For people like her, if they are well informed about “one aspect of politics” they “are likely to be well informed about others”\textsuperscript{123}. She a concentrated version of the 83% of Germans or 57% of Spanish and 57% of Americans my findings reveal who can provide an opinion on all nine questions. Know-something is a classical knowledge specialist. He knows a lot about one topic, but may not know much about others. He is similar to the 22% of

\textsuperscript{121} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 295
\textsuperscript{122} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 295
\textsuperscript{123} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:136
Argentineans, 17% of South Koreans or 10% of Americans who can answer at least five of the 6 substance questions, but only one of the four questions about key global leaders. Conversely, whether he can answer a question about Merkel can provide a good indication about the likelihood he can answer a question about Sarkozy, but won’t tell us much about whether he knows anything about the situation in Iraq. Know-nothing, on the other hand, is like the 8% of Turkish, 2% of Japanese and 0.4% of American respondents who were only able to answer one question on each scale at best. People like Know-nothing are “uninformed in one area [and] are likely to be uninformed in others”.

Prior research on the dimensionality of political knowledge shows mixed results, with some scholars arguing knowledge is unidimensional while others contend that it is mulitdimensional. In an attempt to solve the debate empirically, Delli Carpini and Keeter performed a factor analysis of knowledge dimensionality using an 18 item battery from their 1989 survey. They found that “individuals knowledgeable about one aspect of politics were apt to be knowledgeable about others”. However, this may only be the case regarding national politics. At the local and state level, they find that citizens appear to be political specialists. Unfortunately, there have been no tests of knowledge dimensionality at the international level.

As a result, the question still stands: are people informational generalists or specialists regarding foreign affairs? Should our knowledge measure be separated into two separate spheres? A factor analysis using the nine questions selected for this study and

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124 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:136
125 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993:1184
126 Lau and Erber, 1986; Neuman, 1986; Smith, 1989; Zaller, 1986
127 Bennett, 1990; Iyengar, 1986; Krosnick, 1990
128 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993:1185
noted below in Table 2, revealed that knowledge tends to be multidimensional regarding international affairs.

Table 2 shows that by using this rotated component matrix, two clearly discernible knowledge components are revealed. Rotated factor analysis (RFA) allows researchers to link ‘like’ data measures (in my case, answers to questions) in order to formulate meaningful dimensions, based on common themes between the measures. In my case, the RFA clearly delineated questions into two blocks, one focusing on issues and the other focusing on leaders. This indicates that knowledge should be tested using two separate scales, which I shall refer to as ‘issue based’ and ‘leaders based’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Leading economic power</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Who will replace the US?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21A. U.S. President Barack Obama&lt;sup&gt;129&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21B. Russian President Dimitry Medvedev</td>
<td>.853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21D. German Chancellor Angela Merkel</td>
<td>.892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21H. French President Nicolas Sarkozy</td>
<td>.867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q32. Economic Financial Crisis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q39. Iraq succeed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q40. Troops in Afghanistan</td>
<td></td>
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Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

This finding is intuitively correct. To begin with, people engage with information about foreign affairs differently and will therefore acquire different types of knowledge. Some might only engage with the news infrequently, picking up only the names of key players which stay relatively stable for a number of years. Others might engage only with news regarding important events, but tend not to commit specific facts, including names, to memory. Moreover, some people are simply bad with names, but can think intelligently about issues.

<sup>129</sup> WHY IS IT LOWER AND SPLIT? Given the high level of knowledge about Obama from those who know about issues and those who know about people the coefficient for Q21A are split between the two spheres and therefore appear lower.
Importantly, the results are also theoretically consistent. While, scholars have proposed numerous ways to classify the different types of knowledge that citizens hold—from Delli Carpini and Keeter’s “people and places, civics and substance of politics” to Norris’s five types of practical information—two types of factual knowledge are consistently thought worth having: knowledge about what the government is and what the government does. On the international stage, this is akin to Neuman’s theory that citizens need to have "knowledge of current events and prominent political figures". Where information about current events can help a citizen understand the challenges facing their nation and the relevant foreign policy choices available, knowing about key political players provides insights about the way they make decisions that may affect foreign policy.

When a factor analysis is applied to each dimension separately (see Table 3 and Table 4) it is clear that it is valid to use a limited number of questions as a measure of knowledge within that sphere, since no further dimensions are revealed. Even questions dealing with issues as varied as stability in Iraq (Q39) and international efforts to solve the global economic crisis (Q32) are strongly correlated, suggesting that if someone knows about one foreign policy issue it is reasonable to assume that they will know about others. Regarding leaders, one might intuitively assume that the same people who know about Merkel will also know about Sarkozy, since Germany and France are physically proximate and, at least when European issues are being discussed, both leaders will make the news in roughly equal amounts. However, the correlations across all four leaders indicates that if someone knows about one foreign affairs leader they are likely to know about others irrespective of regional variations.

130 Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996
131 Norris, 2000
132 Barber, 1969:44
133 Neuman, 1986:196
Table 3: Relationship between questions on foreign affairs issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Leading economic power</td>
<td>.658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Who will replace the US?</td>
<td>.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q32. Economic Financial Crisis</td>
<td>.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q39. Iraq succeed</td>
<td>.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q40. Troops in Afghanistan</td>
<td>.632</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Relationship between questions on foreign policy leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q21A. U.S. President Barack Obama</td>
<td>.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21B. Russian President Dimitry Medvedev</td>
<td>.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21D. German Chancellor Angela Merkel</td>
<td>.892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21H. French President Nicolas Sarkozy</td>
<td>.882</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, knowledge tends to be accumulated within, rather than across each dimension. Whether a person is able to answer a question about a given issue may not be a good indication of the likelihood that they will be able to answer a question about foreign policy leaders. However, whether a person can answer a question about a particular leader or issue is a good indication that they will be able to answer another question on the same dimension (i.e. leaders or issues). As such, it is possible to test foreign affairs knowledge using a limited number of questions within each sphere, since ability to answer a few statistically implies ability to answer many.
4.2 AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE

Broadly speaking, Americans appear to be far less ignorant than the prevailing consensus suggests. Using DK responses as the measure of knowledge and ignorance, only around 34% of the American respondents were unable to answer one or more questions about leaders and 23% unable to answer one or more on issues. A meager 13% were unable to answer one or more questions from either dimension; put another way, 87% of the population is able to answer most questions on issues and foreign leaders. For purposes of comparison, in Germany—which is generally accepted to be one of the world’s most knowledgeable nations and within the top 5 on both the global leader and issue dimensions—about 6% and 15% of respondents struggle with one or more questions respectively. This is at odds with the bleak picture of American knowledge that commentators like Johnson, Almond and Kreisberg and Bennett portray.

Similarly, there appears to be nothing like the depth of ignorance that commentary suggests. Only about 1 in 50 Americans—two percent—have difficulty answering half or more of the questions on the issues scale, and a mere 1 in 500—0.002%—can answer none. Four times as many Chinese respondents had similar difficulties, and seven times as many respondents globally. It is true that Americans are significantly worse at answering questions about leaders than issues, but even these scores don’t point to “astonishingly” widespread levels of ignorance. Approximately 13% were unable to answer half or more of the leader questions, but this is only marginally weaker than

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134 For example, the approximately 40% of the population who are uninformed about basic political facts according to Kriesberg, Almond, and more recent studies by Bennett and Delli Carpini and Keeter (Almond, 1950; Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1991; Kriesberg, 1972 [1949]), or the “hard core of know-nothings” in Hyman and Sheatsley (Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947).

135 See for example, Bennett et al., 1996; Norris, 2000

136 Johnson and Caruson, 2003

137 Almond, 1950

138 Bennett et al., 1996

139 Converse, 1975:79
Great Britain’s 12.7%, and significantly stronger than China’s 18% inability and the global 20% inability. To some, the fact that 1.7% of Americans were unable to formulate an opinion about their own president would be a concerning fact, but not only is it within the margin of error, it appears y average cross-nationally. Germans were was overall significantly better at answering questions about leaders, only—0.7%- couldn’t answer the question about Merkel, while in Russia a full 5.9% of the population were unable to formulate an opinion about Medvedev.

Figure 3: Mean Levels of Ignorance about Foreign Policy Issues and Global Leaders with the US

Having discussed the breadth and depth of knowledge in general terms, the question now becomes, ‘What do Americans know about?’ The data shows two areas of significance. To begin with, Americans appear to know a lot more about foreign policy issues than they do about global leaders as Figure 3 shows. This could be due to a number of factors. Firstly, answers to issue questions could show ‘false knowledge’, due to respondents guessing with small amounts of knowledge or may avoid answers they feel uncomfortable with. For example, respondents might say the US took the best approach in dealing with the global economic crisis in question 32, simply to avoid answering ‘China’ or the ‘EU’. If it were the case I would expect the same ‘false
knowledge’ to be experienced across both scales. This is however, not overwhelmingly likely since, as explored above\textsuperscript{140}, whether a respondent is a member of the nation or region in question doesn’t have a particularly strong impact on the likelihood that they will report DK answers across the issue questions.

The more likely explanation is that respondents simply do not have as much information about the leaders in question then they do about the global issues surveyed. Leaders exist in the background to a great extent. They may be mentioned or quoted when their nations appear in the news, but their names tend to be skimmed over and not committed to memory. More importantly, three of the four leaders in the battery are European. While regional variations appear not to have an effect on issue knowledge, the data suggests that it does effect individuals’ knowledge of global leaders.

Figure 4: Relative Knowledge about Foreign Affairs Leaders within the US

\textsuperscript{140} See page #.
Within the questions about foreign policy leaders, American respondents are obviously much more competent when it comes to Obama in comparison to any other the other three leaders (See Figure 4), which is to be expected. Similarly, within the issues dimension, Americans are much better at answering questions which directly relate to US foreign policy (see Figure 5). Only 4% of respondents have difficulty answering one or more questions relating to Iraq or Afghanistan, while almost 19% are unable to answer one or more of the more general questions on global power and the economic crisis.

Again this is to be expected. Both conflicts are more immediate foreign affairs problems for Americans than global power and the global economy. Accordingly, the media devotes substantial coverage to the issue. As of May 2009 there were 43,180 US troops stationed in Afghanistan, and about 134,000 in Iraq. Many Americans know someone who has served there, or else feel strongly about Americans dying in warfare. While attention to the conflicts have waxed and waned over time, most Americans have at least a base level of knowledge about the conflicts to form an opinion. Only 1%
of the population is unable to answer either of the two questions about stability in Iraq or US troop withdrawal in Afghanistan, corresponding to a mere 10 respondents out of a pool of 1000, or 1%.

These findings do not overturn 40 years of research into what Americans know, and nor is that my intention. They do, however, call into question many of the current assumptions about American ignorance. In a population with as much diversity in motivation and opportunity to learn about foreign affairs as is experienced in the US, it is hardly surprising that 13% will miss at least one question on both scales, or that 3.3% of Americans can’t answer half or more of the questions on both. And nor is it particularly damning or worth the vitriol aimed at the American people.

4.2 GLOBAL COMPARISON

Adding 23 other nations to the analysis reveals many expected, and some surprising, results. To begin with, the range of knowledge across the both scales is not particularly large, although there is a greater spread knowledge about issues than knowledge about global leaders. In the former case, across the 24 nations studied the range of means is only about 2.83, while the global leaders scale reports a larger range of 5.47.

The low range of means is not, however, unexpected. My methodology, analyzing by DK responses alone, was always likely to return a much lower apparent ignorance level than theory suggests. This is driven by the fact that it uses opinion as an indirect indicator of knowledge- individuals can (and frequently do) form opinions on the basis very little information and so it is only knowledge levels below this level that will register as ‘DK’ responses in this study.

Global cross-national knowledge trends regarding foreign affairs issues, appear consistent with those of the USA, in that questions on foreign affairs report significantly higher knowledge levels than do questions on global leaders. A full
93 percent of the respondents were able to answer half or more of the issue questions, while 80 percent were able to answer half or more of the questions about leaders.

As would be expected given previous cross-national analyses of knowledge in Europe, Germany and France are consistently among the most knowledgeable nations while Great Britain, Spain and Poland trail behind. France, in fact, appears to rank first on almost every indicator, with a 99.5% of the population able to answer at least 7 of the 9 questions. Given that 3 out of the 4 world leaders are European it is perhaps unsurprising that every European country charted less frequent DK responses regarding leaders than on issue questions.

In the Middle East and Africa, unexpectedly high levels of foreign affairs knowledge come from Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Nigeria. Jordan and Egypt, for example, outstrip Germany in their levels of issue based knowledge, while Lebanon ranks third on knowledge about foreign affairs leaders. It is hard to say what accounts for this. A possible explanation lies in Jordan and Egypt’s high levels of knowledge relative to other nations like Brazil or China with similar levels of education. 5 Another possibility is that it relates to their common demographics- they are, for instance, all Muslim majority nations. However, religion provides only a tenuous connection with foreign affairs knowledge- Indonesia and Turkey, are also Muslim majority states, with much lower levels of knowledge despite similar indicators across other variables. Given this, there appear to be three likely explanations; firstly, that there are high levels of opinionation in these nations which leads to low levels of DK responses; secondly, that these nations are indeed outliers either due to problems at the sampling, reporting or weighting stage; or thirdly, that respondents are genuinely interested in and knowledgeable about foreign affairs compared with other nations.
Where does the US fit globally? Is there really evidence that America is a surprisingly and exceptionally ignorant nation? The short answer is no. If we use cross-national responses as the benchmark against which we can compare American knowledge, we see evidence that contradicts the vision of an ignorant America. Regarding issues like global power, the global economy, Iraq and Afghanistan, the US ranks 6th most knowledgable in the world and ahead of the global average (see Figure 6), eclipsing Canada, Great Britain and Japan.

On questions about global leaders Americans rank slightly lower at 12th, but still well above the global average. Importantly, the US performs competitively against nations which would be expected to have higher than average knowledge levels such as liberal democracies like Canada or Britain.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Figure 6:Global means on issue questions}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{Global means on issue questions}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{141} Citizens of democratic nations have greatest opportunity to learn foreign affairs given the limited restrictions on the flow of information, and arguably the greatest motivation to become informed, given their capacity to participate in the process of governing.
These statistics suggest that, on average, there is significantly less variance in knowledge levels than commonly supposed. However, given this study’s relatively high threshold for detecting ignorance, it is possible that some of the finer detail is lost in this aggregate analysis. This can be mitigated by excluding from the analysis all respondents who managed to avoid giving DK responses. Thus to identify those less knowledgeable and analyse cross-nationally only the 33% of respondents who reported some level of ignorance on issues and 37% on leaders. There are two chief benefits to analyzing this sub-set of the total sample. Firstly, it limits the focus to individuals who are known to have provided DK responses, and can therefore be assumed not to be trying to mask their ignorance or otherwise influence the data. It is true that the absolute numbers of respondents who report DK is likely to be smaller than the ‘true’ picture (since, as discussed earlier, some individuals will on principle avoid DK responses). However, as long as this variance in this effect’s strength is statistically
insignificant across the different sample nations, the results of such analysis remain valid.

Secondly, this method reports greater cross-national variances on almost all measures than does the aggregate analysis. By comparing the ignorant from one nation with the ignorant from another, we can reveal greater variations in the distribution of ignorance within nations and cross-nationally than would be possible when the ‘smoothing’ effect of knowledgeable respondents is included. Since 67% of respondents globally answered all of the issue questions and 63% all the leader questions, it is likely that this ‘smoothing’ effect would be considerable.

So, focusing solely on these less knowledgeable respondents with one or more DK responses, what does the data show? Firstly, of the 51% of Americans who included one DK, 5% were able to answer less than half of the questions. of the 66% for worldwide respondents 15% were able to answer less than half. For the leaders question, the ratios are still higher-78% for Americans and 73% for the world at large, with 27% and 39% respectively able to answer less than half. In both categories, more than half of Americans were unable to answer one or more questions, although only 5% of Americans were unable to answer more than half of the issue questions. For people questions, over 25% of American respondents were able to answer less than half. Compared to the world average, however, Americans were much more likely to answer more than half the question in both categories.

Amongst respondents who reported at least one DK response to any question, some interesting trends emerge. In the issues category in particular, while some countries that performed strongly as a whole- France, the USA, and Jordan, for example- maintain their above-average knowledge levels in this subgroup, others- notably Germany- slip dramatically (see Figure 8). Across people questions, the USA was on
par with the global average (see Figure 9), though this represented a slip from its above-average position when measuring the complete sample (seen in Figure 7). The implication of these findings would appear to be that not only are Americans on average less ignorant than the rest of the world, but also that Americans who are ignorant are less ignorant than the ignorant respondents of other nations.

Figure 8: Mean issue knowledge of respondents answering with at least 1 DK, by country
Figure 9: Mean people knowledge of respondents answering with at least 1 DK, by country

Overall, the greatest differences between nations occur not at the level where respondents are unable to answer one or two questions, but where they struggle to answer half or more. Only about 3 in 100 American respondents were unable to answer more than half of the issue questions, which not a large number on its own, but appears even smaller considering it is less than half the global average and one-seventh that found in the three nations that I found to have the least issue knowledge, – Russia, Turkey and Pakistan. A similar picture is clear regarding knowledge about global leaders, although the US performs more weakly here. Approximately 4% of American respondents were unable to answer more than half of the questions, but again this is below the global average of 11%. Similarly, if a respondent misses at least one question about issues and leaders, globally up to 7 times more people won’t be able to answer any questions after that than in US. That includes about 5 times more in China and two times more in Russia. Again, and to put it crudely, it appears that in the
US the ignorant are only a little ignorant, but that globally the ignorant are very ignorant.
5.3 THE RICH AND THE POWERFUL

While it is rarely made explicit within the scholarship, there is a common undertone throughout all commentary on American ignorance which holds that Americans should be held to a higher standard of knowledge than the rest of the world, commensurate with their power over it. Proponents of this view argue that since America has a much greater reach and should therefore know more about the world it impacts, and therefore should not be compared to smaller or weaker states. While the normative implications of this argument may be worthy, I disagree with it on the principle that all people should be treated equally. Currently the Greek economy has the power to take down the Euro – do we expect the average Greek to have the most knowledge about the intricacies of the European financial markets? Likewise, China currently holds the majority of US debt and significantly affects global exchange rates-do we expect the average Chinese citizen to be an authority on these issues? Do we apply the same principle to the next tier of powerful countries- France, Germany, Great Britain or Japan? And will we shift this unique responsibility if and when China completes its rise?

Though in my view flawed, this perception it is worth testing if only to answer critics of the US. How does knowledge in the US compare with knowledge in the next 5 most powerful nations in the study? In short, about average. Based on economic and military power—the next most powerful nations in the sample are China, Japan, Germany, France and Great Britain. The mean number of DK responses regarding foreign affairs issues within the US aligns almost exactly with the sample average, as shown in Figure 10. The US performs more weakly however on leader knowledge,

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142 Measured by ranking countries in order of GDP (PPP) (World Bank 2009) and military expenditure (US) (SIPRI, 2009).
ranked 4th of 6 and below average, ahead of only China and Japan and behind all other Western liberal democracies (as shown in Figure 11).

The picture becomes slightly more complicated when we examine the distribution of knowledge within each nation. More American respondents than Japanese or Chinese were able to answer half or more the questions, though Britons and Germans
performed better still than the Americans. Every French respondent was able to answer at least 3 of the 5 questions. Roughly the same percentage of Americans as Japanese or Britons were able to answer more than two of the four questions regarding global leaders, but that is well below the strong performance by Germans.

Figure 12: The percent of respondents who struggle to answer half or more of the issue questions

What then does this mean for American knowledge and ignorance? To put it plainly, Americans may not be as ignorant as we think they are. Of course, many lack enough information to answer some questions, but most will only miss one or two, if any. Only a tiny proportion of respondents will lack so much foreign affairs knowledge to answer ‘DK’ to more than half the questions (see Figures 7 and 8). And only slivers of the population are unable to answer any of the questions. Moreover, if American ignorance is put into global perspective, respondents look decidedly average and hardly the picture of ‘surprising’, ‘woeful’ or ‘exceptional’ ignorance they are claimed to be. Certainly, some countries are more knowledgeable; one could pick and choose amongst comparative nations to tell a story of either US knowledge or ignorance. But overall, these results based on a varied sample call into question the image of an
exceptionally ignorant nation. In fact, the US appears more knowledgeable than the
global average on every indicator. The mean level of ignorance within the US is at least
average or better when compared with other democratic, industrialised nations and
other global powerhouses. These results may not overturn the results of towering
scholars in the field like Converse and Almond, but they certainly call them into
question.
5. FOREIGN AFFAIRS KNOWLEDGE

Where the previous chapter addresses how knowledgeable countries are in relation to one another, this chapter asks why. Why do France and Germany appear especially knowledgeable across most of the foreign affairs questions in which nations such as Pakistan appear to have the greatest amount of ignorance? Why does the US appear more knowledgeable than seemingly similar nations like Britain and Canada? In sum, what accounts for cross-national variations in knowledge?

While most scholars tend to focus on micro-level determinants of political knowledge143—such as gender, level of education, income, access to, and time spent engaging with different forms of media, political interest, political participation and occupation—I focus exclusively on national level variables. This is partly out of necessity, since adequate individual level correlates are simply not available for the measure of foreign affairs knowledge used in this study144. However, it is also because there are significant macro-variables which could add to an effective multilevel analysis of the determinants of foreign affairs knowledge. Specifically, I argue that economic and social globalization have an impact on both a public’s motivation and its opportunities to learn about foreign affairs issues and leaders.

Since Hyman and Sheatsly’s145 classic study of the factors that lead to political learning, scholars have argued that political knowledge rests on a triad of factors comprising ability, motivation and opportunity146. Ability relates to the “possession of adequate

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143 See for example, Bennett, 1986; Bennett et al., 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990; Neuman, 1986; Smith, 1989
144 See Appendix 1 for discussion about knowledge measures.
145 Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947
146 Hyman and Sheatsley, argued that motivation and opportunity were important factors. This was later added to by Converse (1975:96) and Luskin (1990) who argued that ability also plays a large role.
cognitive skills”\textsuperscript{147} to acquire and process complex political information, and can affect the capacity for individuals to capitalize on their opportunities and motivation. Opportunity relates to the availability of information, through the accessibility of schooling opportunities and access to the news media, as well as the quality and quantity that information. The availability of information not only affects the capacity for people to learn, but also what they are able to learn about. Finally, motivation- or what Delli Carpini and Keeter call “the desire to learn”- affects the “extent to which individuals seek out information and how much attention they pay to that which comes their way”\textsuperscript{148}.

Following this theory I will examine cross-national differences in foreign affairs knowledge across 5 variables: the level of education within a nation, media consumption globalization economically, socially and politically. The level of education within a country provides a good macro level indicator of the cognitive skills necessary to make considered political decisions, as well as elementary opportunities to learn the basic building blocks of foreign affairs knowledge. Where education forms the foundation upon which political knowledge rests, media environments dramatically shape opportunities for “lifelong learning”\textsuperscript{149}. Finally, I examine the effect of globalization on foreign affairs knowledge. I argue that the process of globalization causes the global to integrate with the local, making international events and issues more proximate to population’s immediate concerns. This in turn would cause citizens to have greater motivation to learn about foreign affairs. Therefore, I expect the level of economic, social and political globalization to have a significant positive effect on foreign affairs knowledge.

\textsuperscript{147} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:179  
\textsuperscript{148} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:179  
\textsuperscript{149} Norris, 2010
It should be noted that this is by no means an attempt to pin down the precise determinants of foreign affairs knowledge. Rather, this chapter sets out simply to examine cross-national differences in knowledge across 5 possible determinants and in so doing tease out possible explanatory factors for cross-national differences in levels of knowledge and ignorance. Also, while it is certainly valid to examine foreign affairs knowledge at a macro-level it is also not ideal. While knowledge affects policy at the aggregate level\textsuperscript{150}, it is very much an individual level phenomenon and is most strongly affected by individual level variables, for instance education, interest, participation and personal media consumption. Consequently, I do not expect to see very strong coefficients when analyzing the relationship between macro level variables and foreign affairs knowledge.

### 5.1 EDUCATION

Literature has repeatedly demonstrated that education is one of the strongest predictors of political knowledge amongst global populations\textsuperscript{151}. It is “predicted to deepen literacy, numeracy and the reservoir of cognitive, analytic and abstract reasoning skills\textsuperscript{152}; to provide prior contextual knowledge which helps to make sense of additional new information; and to strengthen the existence of social networks which facilitate discussion and deliberative learning.”\textsuperscript{153} At its core, socialization theory holds that education provides citizens with the opportunity to learn about the fundamentals of the political world including the global arena, the ability to deal with complex information, and the capacity to develop enduring social attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors which allow them to learn about the political world.

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\textsuperscript{150} See Page and Shapiro, 1992  
\textsuperscript{151} Norris, 2010:2  
\textsuperscript{152} See for example Sears, 1975  
\textsuperscript{153} Norris, 2010:3
Based on a comparison of political knowledge in America between 1989 and 2007, a Pew study found that “education is the single best predictor of knowledge”; “holding all other factors equal, levels of knowledge rise with each additional year of formal schooling”\textsuperscript{154}. Similarly, of the structural variables like schooling, income, and occupation that influence what people know about the political universe Delli Carpini and Keeter find that “the most powerful predictor of political knowledge is formal education”. Not only does education lead to more knowledge about political processes, civics (the way the government works), and a higher level of political engagement, but it also has indirect impacts on other structural variables like income and occupational status, which scholars have also found to be predictors of political knowledge\textsuperscript{155}. In fact, Delli Carpini and Keeter find that the differences in knowledge between citizens with “no high school diploma” and “college graduates” averaged at up to 43 percentage points\textsuperscript{156} in the 1990-91 NES poll and their 1989 survey.

Ideally education would be measured at the micro level, since it is an individual’s level of education that influences their level of knowledge. However, this can also be analyzed at a national level, given that there should be a positive relationship with aggregate levels of education and mean knowledge. The UNDP provides several measures of education the most appropriate of which (for our purposes) is the mean years of schooling undertaken by population\textsuperscript{157}.

\textsuperscript{154} Pew Center for People and the Press, 2007
\textsuperscript{155} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:188
\textsuperscript{156} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:188-89
\textsuperscript{157} UNDP 2009 Global Human Development Indicators, accessed via Norris, 2009. Mean years of schooling provides measure of both likely enrolment (since no schooling is coded as 0) and mean levels of educational attainment by year. Of course, it does not measure the quality of education undertaken.
Figure 13: Positive correlation between mean years of schooling and knowledge about foreign affairs issues

158 UNDP 2009 Global Human Development Indicators, accessed via Norris, 2009
Mean levels of education in each country does provide some insights into cross-national differences in foreign affairs knowledge. Generally speaking, there is a positive correlation between mean number of years spent in school within each nation and levels of knowledge about global leaders and issues, indicating that education has some positive impact in this area. Lower levels of education in Great Britain in comparison to the US and Canada provide a possible reason for Briton’s lower levels of knowledge in comparison to these two nations. Conversely, relatively high levels of education in Jordan provide a possible explanation for the strength of knowledge indicators relative to the sample.

It is difficult to account for the high levels of knowledge relative to mean levels of education in France, Nigeria and Egypt. France in particular appears to have relatively high levels of knowledge –exceeding countries like Germany and the US- despite mean years of education there being more comparable with Spain and Poland. Likewise Nigeria and Egypt show mean years of education which are more akin to Pakistan and Turkey respectively, but show knowledge scores similar to the US and Germany. These discrepancies could be considered evidence to support scholars who dispute the relationship between education and political knowledge.

Both Luskin and Smith argue that the direct effect of education tends to be exaggerated in most studies. Luskin suggests that “after controlling for and other characteristics that are correlated with schooling, formal education per se makes no measurable contribution to ones level of political sophistication.” Smith similarly disputes the effect of higher education, arguing that people who pursue tertiary

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159 UNDP 2009 Global Human Development Indicators, accessed via Norris, 2009
160 Luskin, 1990
161 Smith, 1989
education tend to be more knowledgeable in the first place\textsuperscript{163}. Education might not have such a direct effect on politics as some scholars suggest, and might carry with it the effect of other variables like prior cognitive ability or engaged social networks, but that does not change the fact that the level of education within a nation should provide a good explanatory variable for the level of political knowledge.

Similarly, Jennings argues that the positive effect of education also tends to diminish over one’s lifetime, being replaced by variables which lead to a continued engagement with political material such as interest, participation, media consumption and political and social environments. In his panel study spanning 17 years and two generations Jennings found that of knowledge developed during adolescence “retention, growth and decay” all occur, but they vary both “by domain and individual characteristics”\textsuperscript{164}. According to this theory education most affects citizens starting position and the initial resources that are available to them. And is therefore only a moderate of predictor of knowledge thereafter.

That being said, I suspect that discrepancies also have a lot to do with the method of extracting information on citizen’s political information in that it requires only a small amount of information to offer an opinion. Thus even in countries where the mean level of schooling is under five years such as India, Pakistan Indonesia and Nigeria populations most of the population is able to answer more than half of the issue based questions. Also education is essentially a micro-level phenomenon. Measuring mean years of schooling might provide an indication of average education, but it doesn’t account for the wide disparities within nations.

\textsuperscript{163} Smith, 1989:216
\textsuperscript{164} Jennings, 1996:250
5.2 MEDIA USAGE

If education develops the capacities and initial opportunities for political learning, the mass media provides opportunities for citizens to acquire political information throughout their lifetime. Whether through newspapers, television or the internet, the news media is the most common way that the public sources information about politics and foreign affairs.

While scholars agree that higher levels of media consumption increase the likelihood of the public keeping informed about politics\textsuperscript{165}, there is still significant debate as to the relative effectiveness of different forms of media in developing political knowledge. Analysts generally find that “people who turn to newspapers as their primary source of news know more than people who turn to broadcast media”\textsuperscript{166}. Delli Carpini and Keeter, for example, argue that while reported time spent watching the television provides a weak (or even negative) predictor of political knowledge, reported attention to the print media has a strong and positive relationship with knowledge\textsuperscript{167}. The information presented in the print media tends to more in depth; “the stories are longer and provide more background”\textsuperscript{168}. Television news, by contrast “has limited time to cover innumerable topics.”\textsuperscript{169} More importantly, people tend to watch television passively rather than engage with the content\textsuperscript{170}. Consequentially, according to Price and Zaller, respondents who rely of television news as their primary source of political information will even struggle to recall information that have appeared

\textsuperscript{165} See for example, Neuman, 1974: 444-445; Mondak, 1995; Chaffee and Frank, 1996:18-32; Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000; Clarke and Fredin, 1978; Eveland and Scheufele, 2000; Eveland, Marton, and Seo, 2004; Fox and Ramos, 2011; Martinelli and Chaffee, 1995; Robinson and Levy., 1986; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1970
\textsuperscript{166} Mondak, 1995:514. See also Robinson and Levy., 1986.
\textsuperscript{167} Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:185. Both Robinson and Levy\textsuperscript{167} and Price and Zaller\textsuperscript{167} find similar results.
\textsuperscript{168} Bennett et al., 1996:12
\textsuperscript{169} Bennett et al., 1996:12
\textsuperscript{170} Neuman, 1986
recently in the news\textsuperscript{171}. That being said, numerous sources, challenge the negative view of television consumption. Chaffee and Fank, for example, argue that it remains an informative medium for news, albeit in different ways than newspapers\textsuperscript{172}. Similarly, Neuman et al contradict the claims that television news is less informative in and of itself. More recently, the role of the internet has also come into question. On one hand, the internet provides a near endless supply of information to the public and importantly, it is much easier to access international content via the web in comparison to paper and television mediums\textsuperscript{173}. That being said, there is currently much debate about whether increased opportunities to access information will actually increase public knowledge, or whether people simply seek out information which already interests them and fits their ideological perspective\textsuperscript{174}. Moreover, just as the internet opens up opportunities to access information, it also opens up a plethora of new avenues for entertainment\textsuperscript{175}.

Generally speaking, however, we can expect higher levels of engagement with the news media lead to greater levels of political knowledge and understanding. In her extensive cross-national analysis of political knowledge in the EU, Norris finds that the “use of internet campaign news, newspapers and national television news was consistently and significantly associated with greater knowledge”\textsuperscript{176}. Even Mondak, who concluded that the exposure to a major local news publication was not as good a predictor of international knowledge than political participation or prior political

\textsuperscript{171} Price and Zaller, 1993
\textsuperscript{172} Chaffee and Frank, 1996
\textsuperscript{173} See for example, Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000; Fox and Ramos, 2011; Graber, 2001; Sunstein, 2001
\textsuperscript{174} Sunstein, 2001. Studies like Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1970) have also argued for some time, that increased media choice actually widens knowledge gaps rather than closing them.
\textsuperscript{175} Prior, 2005
\textsuperscript{176} Norris, 2000:285. See also Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000.
knowledge argues that media does matter overall: “where voters live in a mediapoor environment...knowledge levels decline”.

The Democracy Cross-national Data includes a cumulative media usage index which can be used to test this relationship. The index provides a cumulative score based on mean levels of reported regular usage of television, radio, print and internet media. Given the aforementioned theories of media usage, there should be a positive correlation between media accessibility and foreign affairs knowledge.

![Graph showing positive relationship between media usage and knowledge about foreign affairs issues](image)

*Figure 15: Positive relationship between knowledge about foreign affairs issues and media usage*

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177 Mondak, 1995:514
178 Mondak, 1995:525
179 Based on mean levels of reported “regular use” of different types of media in the 2005 World Values Survey, accessed via Norris, 2009.
180 Several nations had to be excluded from the analysis in this instance given missing data about media use.
Overall the data supports the theory. A positive correlation can be seen, meaning the more media that tends to be consumed within a nation, the more people tend to know. Focusing on issue based knowledge first, the relationship has a relatively strong coefficient ($r^2 = 0.286$) given the limited variance among the sample, supporting the theory that the time spent consuming political information has an impact on how much people know. The US appears to have average levels of knowledge in comparison with the mean levels of media consumption, however, as with education, media consumption does not account for the high levels of knowledge relative to similarly placed nations.

Interestingly, media consumption has a weaker relationship with knowledge about foreign affairs leaders, indicating that time spent interacting with the news may not have a considerable impact on the people’s propensity to learn about more stable

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181 Several nations had to be excluded in from the analysis in this instance given missing data about media use.
types of political information like leaders (who are generally in power for at least four years, rather than changing more frequently as with issues).

In the end, however, media usage provides only part of the story of how the media affects foreign affairs knowledge. It can provide insight to how much people watch the news, but can’t say what is actually on the news. Scholars continually find that the content of the news also had a strong impact on political knowledge\textsuperscript{182}. In particular the amount of international news coverage featured in media reports has been shown to influence knowledge about international affairs\textsuperscript{183}.

\textsuperscript{182} See for example, Norris, 2010:5; Norris and Holtz-Bacha, 2001 and Iyengar, Ks, and Bonfadelli, 2009
\textsuperscript{183} Iyengar et al, 2009
If education, and media consumption provide measures for analyzing the relative abilities and opportunities to learn about foreign affairs for the public in each of the 24 countries sampled, what are the factors that lead to different levels of motivation? Most scholars focus on micro variables such as participation, interest in politics and occupation, but there are also important societal level variables that have an important role in motivating publics to learn about global politics. Specifically, I argue that the extent to which the global interacts with the local and immediate will significantly impact the extent to which citizens are interested in the world beyond their borders. In globalised societies where the local economy, society and politics is heavily impacted by external events, people will be more likely to be interested in foreign affairs issues since it affects them in a more immediate and tangible way.

While few scholars have included this dynamic in their casual models, commentators since de Tocqueville¹⁸⁴ have noted its importance. In his seminal text, ‘American People and Foreign Policy’, Almond likewise argues that Americans appear more ignorant than their European counterparts because they are too focused on the local and intimate to have either time or inclination to learn about the global. Like Bryce¹⁸⁵ and Dickens before him, and Lippman after, he argued that the population is too “deeply and tensely involved with immediate, private concerns”¹⁸⁶ and commercial pursuits to engage with foreign affairs. They “exhaust their emotional and intellectual energies in private pursuits” meaning that the political is only important when “impinges directly on their interest”¹⁸⁷. More recently, scholars like Brooks¹⁸⁸ and

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, De Tocqueville, [1850] 1969:136-38, 141
¹⁸⁵ Bryce, for example argues that “the sense that there is no time to spare haunts an American even when he might find the time, and would do best for himself by finding it”.(Bryce, 1908: 307)
¹⁸⁶ Almond, 1950
¹⁸⁷ Almond, 1950:53
¹⁸⁸ Brooks, 2006
Joffe\textsuperscript{189} similarly, argue that despite the importance of the US to the process of globalization worldwide the American people remain largely isolated from the rest of the world, and this in turn leads to what they argue are surprising levels of ignorance. According to this body of theory one can expect that in nations where the local and immediate concerns of everyday life interact with global politics, people will tend to know more about foreign affairs.

\textbf{ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION}

KOF Index of Globalization provides three measures of the extent to which this process occurs; economic, societal and political globalization which will be used to measure this relationship\textsuperscript{190}. Norris and Inglehart include this measure of globalization in their cosmopolitan communications index discussed above. There they used it as a proxy for the “external barriers to information flows”\textsuperscript{191} which is valid, but as will be discussed below, it provides a direct measure of economic, social and political globalization. In each case, I expect that each will have a positive relationship with foreign affairs knowledge, although possibly to a different extent.

One of the most important ways that society interacts with the outside world is through the economy. It is not necessarily the case, that countries which trade with each other know more about each other, but countries which have a high volume of global trade, capital flows and investment are more likely to be oriented towards the global, since international events are more likely to have local economic consequences. Moreover, since publics tend to care most about that which influences

\textsuperscript{189} Joffe, 2006
\textsuperscript{190} Dreher, 2006; Dreher, 2011. It should be noted that while using the KOF measures of globalization in the study of foreign policy knowledge is novel, the variables themselves are hardly new and have strong theoretical founding.
\textsuperscript{191} Norris, 2010:6
their immediate environment\(^{192}\) the more the economy causes the global to infringe on the local the more citizens are likely to care about foreign issues and events. Indeed, in many ways the economy not only makes what happens overseas relevant to the domestic economy, but also one’s own hip pocket. For example, people are more likely to be interested and attentive when the cost of living depends, to a large extent, on international exchange rates, or the profitability of one’s investments relies on the strength of a foreign economy, or one’s job depends on continued foreign investment.

KOF characterized economic globalization “as long distance flows of goods, capital and services as well as information and perceptions that accompany market exchanges.”\(^{193}\) Their measure is made up of the amalgamation of two indices charting actual economic flows from data on trade, FDI and portfolio investment, and restrictions on trade and capital\(^{194}\). I expect that the higher the level of economic globalisation the more likely populations are to be interested in foreign affairs, and therefore the more likely they are to know about it.

**SOCIAL GLOBALIZATION**

As with my expectations on the effect of economic globalization, I expect social globalization to have a positive impact on population’s foreign affairs knowledge. The more personal interaction citizens have with people, ideas and information from other societies and cultures, the more they are likely to be interested in the world beyond their borders. The presence of established international information pathways would also improve the opportunities for citizens to acquire knowledge.

\(^{192}\) Almond, 1950; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996

\(^{193}\) Dreher, 2011

\(^{194}\) Measured using data on “hidden import barriers, mean tariff rates, taxes on international trade (as a share of current revenue) and an index of capital controls.”
Social globalization is a straightforward notion, covering the “spread of ideas, information, images and people.” However, given the intangibility of these social processes it is one of the more difficult factors to measure in practice. KOF uses the amalgamation of three indices covering cross-national personal contacts, information flows and cultural proximity to address this difficulty. While personal contacts attempts to capture the extent to which there is personal interaction between local and foreign populations, information flows is “meant to measure the potential flow of ideas and images”. Finally, cultural proximity includes attempts to measure the extent to which national cultures are oriented or receptive towards the global, including imported and exported books (relative to GDP), the number of McDonald’s restaurants and Ikea stores per country.

### POLITICAL GLOBALIZATION

Finally, I also expect political globalization to have a positive impact on population’s knowledge about foreign policy. However, I would expect its relationship with foreign affairs knowledge to be significantly weaker than economic or social globalization. The KOF political globalization variable is a straightforward measure of the integration of the government with the outside world, including the number of embassies and high commissions in a country, the number of international organizations to which the country is a member, the number of treaties signed between two or more states since 1945 and the number of UN peace missions a country participated in.

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195 Dreher, 2011
196 Including factors such as telecom traffic, the degree of tourism (incoming and outgoing), government and workers’ transfers received and paid (in percent of GDP), the stock of foreign population, number of international letters sent and received direct interaction.
197 Dreher, 2011. It is measured by proxy indicators for people’s potential for receiving news from other countries such as number of internet users (per 100 people), the share of households with a television set, and international newspapers traded (in percent of GDP).
198 This indicator is not ideal given my particular focus on the US. However, since it makes up at most one sixth of the social globalization variable it is not too much of a problem.
In principal one could expect that greater integration between national governments and global politics will lead to international politics having a greater impact on domestic politics, which would in turn lead to more information about foreign affairs being presented along with domestic political information.

### THE EFFECT OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL GLOBALIZATION

The results shown in Figures 17, 18 and 19 reveal several interesting results. To begin with, there is virtually no correlation between foreign affairs knowledge and political globalisation. Most nations in the sample (except for Israel and Mexico which have uniquely low levels of political globalisation) have a high degree of political integration yet this appears to have no particular trickle down effect to public knowledge. Nations like Pakistan, for example, which has low levels of political knowledge but more foreign affairs knowledge appear to be more politically integrated than nations such as Canada, Japan and South Korea with comparatively high levels of knowledge.

**Figure 17: The relationship between political globalization\(^{199}\) and foreign affairs knowledge**

\(^{199}\) Dreher, 2011
I suspect this has to do with two processes stifling the transmission between political globalization and knowledge. Firstly, since the processes of political globalization tend to remain within the political sphere, additional amounts of international information are most likely to affect people who already interested in politics rather than generate higher levels of interest amongst the general population. Secondly, political globalization is generally an elite level phenomenon and the by-products do not necessarily filter down to the general public. For example, the number of international organizations or treaties a nation is a part of will probably have a large impact on foreign affairs knowledge among elites as they attend relevant conferences and are bound by international agreements. However, they often bear little consequence for the mass public. Conferences go by without domestic publics ever hearing about them and treaties are made and broken without the public paying any attention.

Figure 178: The relationship between economic globalization and foreign affairs knowledge

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200 Dreher, 2011
Turning to Figure 18 and 19, both social globalization and economic globalization appear to have a positive affect on the amount of foreign affairs knowledge within a nation. This is to be expected. The more socially and economically integrated a society is with the outside world the more likely people are to be interested in, or motivated to, learn about global issues, events or leaders since the global is more likely to be interconnected with citizens daily lives. Similarly, the more integrated the local is with the global, the more opportunities people have to interact with foreign affairs information.

Economic globalization provides a possible explanation for high levels of knowledge in nations like Jordan and Nigeria which have correspondingly high levels of economic integration. However, as with the other indicators globalization does not provide a particularly good explanation for comparatively high levels of knowledge in Kenya, Egypt and France. Social globalization shows a slightly more mixed picture. On one hand it accounts for conditions such as the strong levels of knowledge in nations such

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201 Dreher, 2011
as France and Germany and the fact that Japan, South Korea and China have lower levels of knowledge than in the US. On the other, it fails to explain the low levels of issue base knowledge for nations such as Turkey which have relatively high levels of social integration with the outside world.

Overall, much more research is needed to test the relationship between globalization and foreign affairs knowledge. I would expect that all other factors being equal globalization would have a much stronger relationship with knowledge since, as it stands, the correlation is heavily influenced by other opportunity and motivational factors such as news consumption, media environments, education and participation.
6. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to plug a gap in the existing literature, by comparing levels of foreign affairs knowledge amongst the American public cross-nationally. It questioned the existing consensus, that Americans are more ignorant than other nations, seeking solid evidence either for or against this view. Finally, it sought to explain the reasons behind the variations in knowledge depth and breadth across the different nations studied.

A systematic study was implemented, based on the extraction of ‘don’t know’ responses as an indicator of ignorance from a range of foreign affairs questions in the knowledge dimensions of ‘leaders’ and ‘issues’. My argument was that, to date, scholarship had failed to perform a cross-national survey large enough to convincingly determine America’s place, knowledge-wise, in the global public. As such, any lamentation of Americans’ woeful ignorance was premature, and this dictum was more likely based on existing tropes and incomplete evidence than on a thorough and impassionate examination of the facts.

Knowledge was assessed in two dimensions- ‘leaders’, focusing on the presidents of large nations, and ‘issues’, focusing on general topic areas in global affairs. The results revealed that Americans are almost remarkably unremarkable with respect to foreign affairs knowledge. While stronger at issue than leader questions, they performed better than the global average on both measures, suggesting a greater breadth of knowledge than the global public. Furthermore, amongst Americans who did offer DK responses, the average number of DK responses offered was significantly lower than the global average. This indicates that Americans also have a greater depth of knowledge than the global public.
Compared to nations with similar wealth and power, America’s performance is marginally weaker. Against comparative nations—powerful, Western, liberal democracies—the US is fourth of four on both knowledge dimensions, behind Germany, France and Great Britain. It is, however, ahead of Japan, and well ahead of what is arguably the next superpower, China. Given this slightly weaker performance relative to America’s immediate comparators, this result could explain the prevailing consensus on American ignorance to some extent.

In explaining these cross-national variations, this thesis shows that mean levels of education and media consumption within a nation correspond with higher levels of foreign affairs knowledge. However, by themselves these do not provide a particularly strong explanation for differences in political knowledge. More data is needed, charting possible determinants at the micro-level to properly analyze these relationships. A greater amount of data at the micro-level would allow the explanatory effect of one variable to be seen when holding other factors constant, thus permitting relative effect of each determinant to be studied.

It is clear that the field would immensely benefit from a truly cross-national knowledge survey such as is proposed by Milner.202 This thesis was heavily constrained by the absence of appropriate cross-national data on foreign affairs knowledge. As a consequence, it was necessary to extract data on respondent’s level of political knowledge from opinion questions. While this was a largely novel technique which yielded some fruitful results, the method was not without its flaws. Without a doubt, the most important drawback to this method is the fact that it is only a proxy measure for likely levels of political knowledge, rather than a direct assessment of whether respondents actually hold certain types of information.

202 Milner, 2003
Following on from this, the method relies on respondents having relatively similar propensities to offer DK responses cross-nationally, or else the ability of the researcher to make adjustments for differences. Much more evidence is required in order to accurately determine how this propensity differs, and what should be done about it.

Finally, this method yields only small variances across the whole sample, causing cross-national differences to appear small. Since most people in most nations are able to provide an opinion on most of the questions, this could be mitigated to some extent by expanding the knowledge battery to include a significantly larger number of questions. However, I expect that even then the amount of variance would not increase dramatically. That being said, in the absence of suitable cross-national knowledge questions, and with significantly more research into methodological challenges and opportunities, this method could in the future provide an alternative approach to assessing public knowledge.

At the outset I noted that much of the discussion on American knowledge and ignorance “has moved from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of sustained empirical” and, indeed, cross-national research\textsuperscript{203}. This has been to the detriment of the scholarship since, as these results have shown, systematic analysis appears to challenge the prevailing consensus. My results do not overturn the established view, and nor was that their intention. They do, however, call into question the dictum- my findings on American knowledge suggest that while Americans perform more weakly than similar nations, they are only slightly behind, and are well ahead of the global average.

\textsuperscript{203} Neuman, 1986:8-9
When embarking on the challenge of putting American ignorance in comparative perspective I expected to find one good cross-national knowledge survey at the very least or failing that, several sound knowledge questions in and amongst the multitude of current global values and opinion surveys. I expected there to be an updated version of the Times-Mirror for polls, with more countries and a greater range of national variants. Or possibly a study such as Delli Carpini and Keeter’s “Survey of Political Knowledge” including comparable global democracies. Instead all searches resulted in an eventual conclusion that there are no adequate cross-nationally comparative measures of political knowledge, particularly those pertaining to foreign affairs knowledge.

The numerous election studies as well as private and academic polls have produced a wealth of excellent data measuring political knowledge at the local, state and national level. However, there are very few questions which measure international affairs knowledge at all, much less cross-nationally. This appendix reviews available data sources and discusses why I found them to be inadequate for my research.

**NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES**

The most commonly used data sources in the field are the National Election Studies (NES). The American NES, conducted by the University of Michigan Centre for Political Studies have been used by scholars such as Zaller to Delli Carpini and Keeter. They have “a few direct, and several indirect, measures of political information” - notably in the 1986, 1988 and 1991 rounds – and also include a number of excellent...
confounding variables. While these studies provide a useful source of political knowledge information within the US, their noticeable lack of comparable cross-national variants makes them less than ideal.

Given developments in polling techniques an increasing number of countries are holding election studies to chart respondent’s attitudes and opinions about parties, candidates and the issues they deal with. Recently the data from these studies has been collected to assemble The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Using a common module of survey questions in their post-election studies participating countries have made the CSES a comprehensive multi-level data source. Unfortunately, however, the CSES’ common module doesn’t include a universal battery of knowledge questions. Instead, three knowledge questions from studies where political information was tested are selected for the data.

Consequently, results are far from comparable. The questions are found to vary significantly in regard to focus, wording and difficulty. For example, in the US respondents were asked to name the office which Dick Cheney, Tony Blair and William Rehnquist held. While in Brazil they asked about state and mayoral incumbents, and in Germany respondents were asked to identify the foreign minister, how many states were in Germany and how many nations in the EU. The Australian knowledge questions included one rather confusingly worded question on the proportionality of tax. To compound this all were also coded differently with some surveys requiring exact or official titles and others giving survey officials room for interpretation.

NATIONAL OPINION POLLS

The Pew Research Center provides a bountiful supply of survey material on US and global opinions and attitudes. Their Center for People and the Press also conducts regular surveys charting American’s attention to, interest in, and knowledge about
current events. The 2007 Political Knowledge Update Survey\textsuperscript{208} included a number of foreign affairs items such as whether respondents could identify Sunni and Shi’a’s as the “two major branches of Islam seeking political control in Iraq”, and if they could name the Russian president. Unfortunately, while global \textit{public opinion} is frequently charted, since 1994 Pew has only collected data measuring knowledge from respondents residing in the United States.

Conversely, Pew regularly conducts surveys in more than 50 nations on topics ranging from opinion of the US, to concerns about extremism and individuals opinions about their economy. These questions, however, stay within the realm of attitudes, opinions (and occasionally behavior) thus producing a catch-22; their global surveys don’t measure knowledge, but their knowledge surveys aren’t global.

Several private, academic and media affiliated polls also ask knowledge questions but, given the cost of conducting an international survey, these are also rarely cross-national. Those that are capable of such a sample size are often found to chart public knowledge and interest in an ad hoc manner. Here survey questions from the National Opinion Research Center and the American Institute for Public Opinion, or Gallup, are most commonly used.\textsuperscript{209} In his study of public knowledge about nuclear disarmament, Graham collected over 700 relevant questions from over 20 polling organizations ranging from the Opinion Research Corporation to CBS/New York Times. While there are knowledge questions dotted throughout various polls produced by a variety of sources which could be gathered to provide an enlightening picture about knowledge it would provide a perspective of only one nation, not the cross-national data is necessary for my purposes.

\textsuperscript{208} Center for the People and the Press, 2007

\textsuperscript{209} See for example Erskine, 1962; Erskine, 1963a; Erskine, 1963b; Erskine, 1963c; Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947
At the other end of the spectrum are global surveys which chart the public’s values, attitudes and opinions on an array of topics. These range from monoliths like the World Values Survey (WVS) and International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to regional barometers like the Europbarometer and the Afro-barometer.

The WVS is a extensive survey on global attitudes and opinions ranging from emotional factors, to political involvement to confidence in one’s religion and society. This data would provide an excellent source for the study of political involvement and efficacy, and could facilitate a good longitudinal analysis given its exemplary practice of repeating questions. However, once again, the survey fails to include knowledge questions and is therefore of limited use.

Every five to ten years the ISSP - a similarly large survey reaching 48 nations - periodically charts opinions about religion, the role of government, the environment, social inequality, family and work. Again, it provides a wealth of information on citizen’s behaviors and orientations, but fails to ask any direct knowledge questions.

Some regional barometers, on the other hand, ask both opinion and knowledge questions. The Eurobarometer, for example, which Norris uses these studies extensively in her Virtuous Circle, asks several questions about citizens understanding of politics, social issues and the EU. Two particular problems exist with using these barometers. Firstly, the studies tend not to include knowledge questions. Secondly, the barometers tend to be regional so the US is excluded in most surveys.

Given this lack of adequate survey questions, this study has had to turn to a novel technique for collecting data about foreign affairs knowledge; namely, extracting data from public opinion surveys. As explored above (see Chapter 3) 2009 Pew survey used

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210 Norris, 2000
National Geographic-Roper Geographic Literacy Survey\textsuperscript{211} is the survey that is probably most often used, and miss-used, throughout the literature, commentary and conjecture on American knowledge and ignorance. The studies survey young people in America and occasionally globally on their ability to perform tasks like locating counties on a map, recognizing borderer states or naming which country belongs to which region. On one hand, the studies have some validity in providing potential proxy measures for public competence with basic facts in the global sphere. However, the survey only measures geographic aptitude and doesn’t include any questions on foreign affairs issues, events or leaders. Thus in the end, it only measures respondents ability to answer a certain type of question and fulfill a certain type of skill.

Finally, the OECD Program for International School Assessment\textsuperscript{212} and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement\textsuperscript{213} provide possible alternative measure of global knowledge. The former seeks to provide comparative data on the nature and effectiveness of education globally while the latter, focuses specifically on civics teaching and knowledge amongst nationally representative samples of 14-year-old students in 28 countries, 17- to 19-year-old students in 16 countries. Unfortunately, they are both inadequate for my purposes. The Program of International School Assessment assesses comparative knowledge on topics like math and science rather than politics and foreign affairs. The Civic Education Study comes closer to the mark, however in practice it assesses student’s perceptions of government and democracy rather than their knowledge of it. As such the study is highly subjective.

\textsuperscript{211} For the most recent studies see the National Geographic Education Foundation, 2002; National Geographic Education Foundation, 2006
\textsuperscript{212} Oecd, 20112011
\textsuperscript{213} See Homana, Greene, and Barber, 2003
APPENDIX 2: EXTRACTING DK RESPONSES

DK responses were be extracted from opinion questions by creating a binary variable with opinion (0) and DK (1) responses for each respondent on each question. Since there are no incorrect opinions all responses other than DK and refused were coded as 0. In order to create the knowledge scales determined by my analysis of dimensionality, DK responses were added and then turned into a 0 to 10 scale for comparability across the two measures. In order to facilitate conversion into macro data, for each country responses will be aggregated on the mean for each question. In both cases the scales were then reversed so that a score of 10 indicates a respondent was able to answer all the questions on the relevant scale.
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