

# Different Levels of Government, Different Levels of Political Competence?

Mark Chou, *Australian Catholic University*

## ABSTRACT

In federal political systems such as the United States, there has long existed a view that citizens should be more politically competent at the local level than at the federal level of government. Recent studies have challenged this view. This article argues that these findings may reflect only one part of the broader picture. Through a review of two recent studies, I contend that research in this realm must consider more than only the level of government. Odd as this sounds, assumptions about varying levels of political competence at different levels of government have always been premised on the notion that local-level politics is smaller and less complex than federal-level politics. However, when local politics takes place today against the backdrop of small villages and towns as well as in large cities, these are assumptions that must be reevaluated.

In federal political systems such as the United States, there has long existed a view that citizens should have a better overall sense of politics at the local level of government than at the federal level (Bell 2015; D'Amato 2016; Downs 1957; Lupia 2016; Somin 2013). What underpins this belief is a simple yet important assumption about the nature of government in federalist systems: politics at the local level is smaller in scale and thus simpler in substance than its larger and more complex federal counterpart (Dahl and Tufte 1973). Stated differently, the size and proximity of government determines the scale and complexity of the issues it oversees.


Because of these assumptions, citizens often are thought to be more politically competent about matters taking place in their own backyard than those stirring through Washington's corridors of power. The thinking is that citizens likely will be intimately acquainted with local political issues simply by driving through their neighborhoods, participating in community events, talking to neighbors, using local amenities, or dealing with local government (Cramer and Toff 2017). Not only that, but local level politics and elections also are frequently the domain of longer-term residents who have vested interests in the issues at stake (Dietz and Haurin 2003). The more intimate setting means that a strict interest in politics is not always a necessary precursor for having politically relevant insights. Not often fought along ideological or party-political lines, local political debates can resemble the "in-my-backyard" types of affairs that rarely animate federal-level politics and elections (Lewis 2011, 108). In this regard, local citizens, officials, and government are frequently said to possess a "deep contextual and political knowledge" of their own immediate environment (Conlan 2010, 813). This is why, for Oliver (2012, 8),

"local voters are much more likely to embody the classical notions of an informed and rational polis than are national voters." In short, when the "size and complexity of government" is curtailed, as it is at the local level of government, we also "alleviate the problems of political ignorance by reducing the knowledge burden imposed on voters" (Somin 2013, 119).

At the federal level, where both the size and complexity of government are at their greatest, the reverse is considered to be true. Think about it: How many citizens can say with certainty that they have sufficient knowledge, experience, or access to follow—let alone make informed decisions on—developments and policies relating to the nation's economy, the environment, immigration, taxation, and foreign policy, among others, that federal politics frequently tackles? Not many, as numerous prominent scholars and surveys have pointed out (Achen and Bartels 2016; American Council of Trustees and Alumni 2016; Annenberg Poll 2014; Bartels 2008; Berelson, Lazarfeld, and McPhee 1954; Brennan 2016; Campbell et al. 1960; Caplan 2008; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Nichols 2017; PublicMind 2015; Somin 2013).

Against this backdrop, however, a series of recent studies painted a very different picture about citizens' political competence and the level of government. These studies do show that Americans tend to be less than knowledgeable concerning federal politics. However, the surprising finding is that citizens are even less politically engaged and knowledgeable at the local level than at the federal level.

Not only do far fewer citizens vote at smaller, less prominent "second-order elections" (Schleicher 2017), they also know relatively little about who their representatives are, what policies they advocate, and how they have performed (Binder et al. 2016; Shaker 2012). Indeed, studies that compare political competence at the local and federal levels showed that citizens tend to know less about the politics and offices closer to home than the more

Mark Chou  is associate professor of politics at the National School of Arts, Australian Catholic University. He can be reached at mark.chou@acu.edu.au.

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prominent federal counterparts, where they can at least make broad assessments according to party differences (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013). For a scholar such as Schleicher (2012), the “paradoxical truth” in America is that “voters do not actually know more about elections and issues in their backyards. They know less.”

Cato Institute study on public attitudes toward American federalism, for instance, found that nearly twice as many Americans held favorable views about their local government compared to the federal government. This was, in part, because local politics offered them greater “voice and impact” on political questions and policy issues (Samples and Ekins 2014, 28).

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This article argues that this “paradoxical truth” may reflect only one part of the picture concerning the issue of citizens’ political competence at different levels of government. I review two recent empirical-survey studies that compared local and federal voter knowledge (Binder et al. 2016; Shaker 2012) to illustrate what citizens actually know and do not know about politics at different levels of government. Selecting Shaker’s and Binder et al.’s studies makes sense because they provide the only systematic comparison of citizens’ political competence at the local and federal levels. I then make the case that these studies, although important, must consider more than only the level of government. This may sound odd, but assumptions about varying levels of political competence at different levels of government have always been premised on the notion that politics at the local level is smaller, more personalized, and less complex than politics at the federal level. It is these conditions that are thought to foster higher levels of citizens’ political competence locally. However, because local politics takes place against the backdrop of small villages and towns as well as large metropolitan environments, assumptions about size and simplicity must be carefully reexamined. Important as Shaker’s and Binder et al.’s contributions are, their analyses take place only in the context of two large American cities. Therefore, any findings relating to citizens’ political competence should be interpreted accordingly. Understanding the implications of this opens avenues for future research to explore the dynamics between local and federal political competence in settings that might be more conducive to traditional notions of informed and engaged local citizens.

#### **COMPARING CITIZENS’ POLITICAL COMPETENCE AT THE LOCAL AND FEDERAL LEVELS**

On the face of it, the notion that citizens would be more politically competent about matters closer to home than those that animate federal politics makes good sense. Traditionally speaking, local politics has tended to be more immediate, smaller in scale, and far less complex than the large-scale technocratic issues addressed at the national level. Not only that, but local-level politics and elections also have frequently been the domain of longer-term residents who have both vested interests in and extensive first-hand familiarity with the issues at stake. Given the nature of the politics in these more intimate settings, it is also the case that a strict interest in politics is not always a necessary precursor for having politically relevant insights. Moreover, in smaller local jurisdictions, individual votes can have statistically higher chances of making an impact than is the case in larger jurisdictions. A 2014

Numerous studies about political competence and the nature of contemporary federalism claim or suppose citizens to be more politically competent at the bottom of the federal hierarchy than at the top; however, only a few studies systematically tested these assumptions empirically. Two recent studies are of particular note in this regard.

The first study, conducted by Shaker (2012, 528), assessed citizens’ “current events awareness” and their “knowledge of political fundamentals” with respect to local and federal politics. Shaker’s research drew on survey responses from 993 Philadelphians who were interviewed shortly after the city’s 2007 mayoral election. The second study, by Binder et al. (2016), compared voter knowledge of local and federal politics in Jacksonville, Florida. This study examined the responses of 660 likely voters in Duval County during the city’s 2015 mayoral election. The aim of both studies was to test the long-standing assumption that citizens should be more politically competent at the local level than at the federal level. To do so, Shaker’s approach asked Philadelphia residents slightly different questions from the local to federal level, whereas Binder et al. produced a question battery for Jacksonville residents that ensured broad commensurability between the two levels of government.

Although Shaker’s study did not neatly point to one definitive answer with respect to citizens’ political competence, his most important conclusion was that Philadelphians appear to be the most politically competent when their local *and* national political knowledge is assessed in tandem rather than when the latter is assessed in isolation. Given that the established threshold for a “know-nothing” is an individual who correctly answers less than one third of items in a political-knowledge battery, Shaker’s study found 39% of Philadelphians to be know-nothings about local politics and 38% about national politics (Shaker 2012, 532). These percentages decreased to 26%, he noted, when both local and national domains were considered simultaneously.

This finding confirmed several assumptions for him. The first was that the average citizen is “not omnipotent or highly sophisticated” regarding politics at either the local or federal level (Shaker 2012, 535). In most cases, survey respondents knew only about half of the answers for both the local and federal political-knowledge items. This led to a second realization: previous studies have not “missed a vein of high competence by disregarding local affairs” (Shaker 2012, 534). This is perhaps the most damning conclusion for arguments about citizens’ political competence at the local level. Although Philadelphians were more knowledgeable about local politics, the difference was essentially negligible. Perhaps the most important finding, however, was how assessing local

and federal politics together positively affects political knowledge. Given this, he argued that “scholars may have overlooked evidence that the public as a whole is generally more competent than believed by not including citizens’ local political knowledge in their work” (Shaker 2012, 534).

Whereas Shaker’s findings were mixed, Binder et al.’s (2016) study unequivocally showed that citizens, on average, know less about local government and political issues than about federal government and political issues. As they noted, this was surprising not only because of the long-standing notion about citizens’

most politically competent when their local and federal political knowledge is assessed in tandem. Despite this, Binder et al. conclusively demonstrated that, overall, the long-standing view about citizens’ political competence at the local level may no longer hold.

#### PEERING BEHIND THE LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT

In reaching these conclusions, these two studies thus appear to implicitly affirm the existence of a federal hierarchy (Kip 2016; Zimmerman 2008), whereby the lower the level of government,

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political competence at the local level. It was also surprising because the study targeted residents who “regularly vote in both national and local elections” during a period when a major city-wide local election was in full swing (i.e., more than 3,000 television advertisements had been aired about the election) (Binder et al. 2016, 11–12).

Adopting a question battery that tested survey respondents’ knowledge of the “basic structure of national and local government, as well as political leaders’ positions on issues being discussed nationally and in the local campaign” (Binder et al. 2016, 10), they found the following. Whereas a “majority of Jacksonville’s likely voters correctly answered between four and six of the nine questions about national politics...approximately sixty percent of them were only able to correctly answer between zero and two of the ten local questions” (Binder et al. 2016, 13–14). Concerning issue-specific questions, their study showed an even more marked disparity, demonstrated by a 34% differentiation between local and federal political knowledge (Binder et al. 2016, 15). Indeed, compared to the 41.74% of correctly answered federal-issue questions, only 7.88% were correctly answered on local issues (Binder et al. 2016, 26). All survey respondents were much more knowledgeable about federal political structures and issues than they were about their local counterparts. That there was no parity between local and federal political knowledge during a time when local politics was at its most prominent, they argued, provides clear evidence that local political knowledge trails significantly behind federal political knowledge, which is already low. The fact that this was an odd-year election, without other state or national elections to distract voters, did not “lead to a more enlightened pool of local voters” (Binder et al. 2016, 17).

Several tentative conclusions can be drawn. Despite the methodological variation between Shaker’s and Binder et al.’s surveys—not to mention their different locations—the broad consensus seems to be that citizens are less, not more, politically competent at the local level than at the federal level. Of course, in both instances, citizens exhibited good local knowledge on specific issues. Shaker (2012, 535–36) provided a good example, revealing that slightly more Philadelphians knew which position John Timoney, the city’s police chief, held than Dick Cheney, the US vice president at the time. Shaker also found that citizens are

the less significant politics is thought to be (Bullock 1990; Morlan 1984; Verba and Nie 1972). This predicament is merely one example of how the so-called compound republic of America has given way to a more centralized form of federalism during the last century (Zavadnyik 2011). Of course, matters are not helped by the relative lack of campaigning and media coverage at the local level, a factor that exacerbates the dearth of partisan cues and information available to citizens (Becker and Dunwoody 1982; Dreier 2005; Graber and Dunaway 2018; Hayes and Lawless 2015; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Oliver and Ha 2007; Patterson 1980). It therefore is no great surprise to find that the majority of Americans today ignore the politics taking place in their own backyard for the color and intrigue of federal politics (Jurjevich et al. 2016). For Somin (2013), these are important factors why citizens can appear less politically competent at the local level than they actually are.

There may be another important if neglected explanation for why citizens may appear less politically competent at the local level than in fact they may be. Until recently, most arguments about citizens being more politically competent at the local level rested on assumptions about federalist dynamics between different levels of government. The thinking was that local politics is synonymous with small-scale, community-driven, and relatively simple political landscapes, whereas federal politics occurs against a vastly bigger, more depersonalized, and more complex national canvas. These are the factors that should see citizens more politically competent at the local than the federal level. However, in complex federal systems such as the United States, it is important to question whether the assumption aligns with reality: Is all local politics today necessarily small-scale, community-driven, and simple or can it be, in larger cities such as Philadelphia and Jacksonville, as big, depersonalized, and complex as the political issues at state and federal levels? Shaker’s and Binder et al.’s studies demonstrated that citizens in large metropolitan cities know relatively little about their local politics and political structures. However, would their findings translate to the residents of smaller, more tightly knit communities—in the many suburbs, towns, and villages across the country—more evocative of the informed and engaged polis traditionally associated with the local idyll?

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It is not at all clear, as a number of studies suggest. For instance, a study of 1,400 voters in 30 different suburban communities across the United States found that “a 9-percentage-point increase in political interest, a 10-point increase in candidate-name recognition, and a 20-point increase in personal acquaintance with a city council candidate” exists among residents of suburbs with populations less than 15,000 compared to

Although this distinction may have once correlated neatly with federal dynamics, it is no longer the case. Local governments now oversee villages of a few hundred residents to cities the size of Philadelphia and Jacksonville and, larger yet, New York and Los Angeles. Politics in these settings often tackles national—even transnational—challenges. The mayoral races that Shaker and Binder et al. studied took place against the backdrop of such cities,

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those with populations of more than 30,000 (Oliver and Ha 2007, 398). Although individual-level variables such as homeownership, period of residency, education, and race were significant, this study clearly confirmed that the size of the community affects residents’ competence about local politics. Stated differently, even when the level of government is controlled, political competence is still higher among residents of smaller communities. Although studies sometimes dispute the importance of community size as a determinant of voter turnout (Kelleher and Lowery 2004; Stein and Dillingham 2004), the issue of political competence may turn out to be another matter in complex federal systems.

Studies have also long confirmed that residents of rural or more isolated communities vote more, on average, because of stronger local social norms and communal cohesion, and they possess more local knowledge when they vote compared to their counterparts in large metropolitan environments (Campbell 2006; Lappie and Marschall 2018). In other words, location matters when assessing political competence. A recent study of voters’ knowledge during local judicial elections illustrated this well (McKenzie et al. 2017). It reached important conclusions that are instructive here. First, significant variation in voter knowledge exists from one locality and from one state to the next. Whereas Texan voters were largely ignorant about their judges and courts, voters in Oregon and Washington demonstrated good judicial knowledge. Second, the rural–urban divide is a key factor affecting the level of voters’ judicial knowledge. As the study found, population stability, social networks, familiarity with local issues, smaller media environment, and simpler electoral and ballot structures of rural communities made voters better equipped to identify with local judicial candidates and the issues on which they campaigned. As for urban voters, their lack of connection to their community, the vastly more crowded media environment, and the long lists of judicial candidates had negative impacts on their capacity to engage in informed decision making at the ballot box.

These variables, which are by no means exhaustive, explain why Dahl (1967, 965) famously proposed that the optimum-sized polity for informed civic participation should be no larger than 200,000 residents. Communities “of more truly human proportions” are best equipped to socialize us in “the arts required for shaping a good life in common with fellow citizens” (Dahl 1967). His implicit thesis was that the larger the political unit, the less citizens tend to be informed about the goings-on in their society. This is because in larger communities, politics can become highly technical, multifaceted, and bureaucratic. The reverse is true of smaller political communities.

both of which are much larger and more complex than the polities Dahl (1967) believed could be “a marvelous school” for its citizens.

These insights potentially can inform future research in two ways. First, studies comparing citizens’ political competence between different levels of government should go beyond merely examining political competence at the local, state, and federal levels. They also should explore the actual and varied political conditions that exist within each level of government to better understand which types of polity are most conducive to increased political competence today. Second—and particularly in the age of Trump, when state and local governments are increasingly engaged in ideological battles that were once predominantly federal in scope (Kelleher 2010)—it is timely for research to revisit questions of citizens’ political competence against the backdrop of debates about the accumulation of power at the federal level and what the states and localities can do to curb the centralization of power (Somin 2016). The question of what Americans know about politics at different levels of government potentially offers normative guidance about where the country’s political power should be vested.

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