SYMPOSIUM

Implicit Political Knowledge

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Political knowledge today is studied primarily at the explicit level. Measures of political knowledge often rely on testing whether voters are aware of various "facts" about political life, such as the names and offices of prominent political actors, the institutional structures of the political system, and the ideological or policy differences between the major political parties (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). These various kinds of political information are considered to be important by political scientists and other social scientists because they facilitate the informed voting decisions that are needed to hold elected leaders accountable (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Pande 2011).

In this article, the term political knowledge is synonymous with knowledge of the ideological or policy differences between the major political parties and with knowledge of which groups typically support those parties.[1] One way to conceptualize the structure of this type of political knowledge is as a network linking social groups, parties, ideological concepts, and policy positions to each other in declarative memory (Prior and Lupia 2008). This network approach has a long history in political science research, going back to the work of Converse (2006 [1964]; see also Luskin 1987).

Possessing such a network of political knowledge—sometimes called a schema—facilitates the efficient processing of political information (Lodge and Hamill 1986). By knowing the parties' positions on various issues, schematic voters can quickly arrive at the positions that an individual is likely to advocate based solely on his or her party label. Similarly, a schematic voter who hears a political statement and is aware of the parties' positions on that issue can quickly determine which party the individual making the statement is more likely to support. A schematic individual can also quickly identify when a statement deviates from the party line. In these ways, possessing a political schema allows an individual to draw rapid and usually accurate inferences from limited political information.

When viewed from this schematic perspective, knowledge about political parties' ideological and policy positions can be understood as a series of stereotypes about the beliefs, attitudes, and traits of supporters of each party (Rahn 1993; Rahn and Cramer 1996). Each of these stereotypes is represented in the network by a connection between the party and some other concept. Although the term stereotype is usually perceived to carry a negative connotation, these types of associations give meaning to party labels and make them useful heuristics in voter decision making. However, having a well-developed political schema also can have normatively detrimental effects, such as facilitating biased, motivated reasoning about political information (Taber and Lodge 2006).

Conceptualizing political knowledge as a schema allows political knowledge to fit naturally into a dual-process framework. With the view that explicit political knowledge is a type of explicit partisan stereotype, a dual-process model asks whether individuals possess implicit political knowledge in the form of implicit partisan stereotypes.[2] Whereas the explicit stereotypes of parties that an individual has are learned through deliberative, propositional processes, he or she may also have acquired partisan stereotypes through automatic, associative processes and encoded them in a network of implicit associations (e.g., Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006; see Ksiazkiewicz and Hedrick 2013, this issue, for a more detailed discussion of the associative-propositional evaluation model).

The likely existence and importance of implicit partisan stereotypes are bolstered by existing research on implicit racial stereotypes and implicit gender stereotypes. One important characteristic of implicit stereotypes is that individuals can possess implicit group stereotypes even when they do not consciously endorse them. For example, individuals can hold implicit associations between African Americans and crime, even if they do not endorse this racial stereotype and would be sincerely alarmed to learn that they hold this implicit association (e.g., Eberhardt et al. 2004; see also work on implicit stereotypes of women's abilities in mathematics, e.g., Nosek et al. 2002). Moreover, individuals can possess an implicit group stereotype without the conscious awareness that a particular stereotype exists (e.g., the association of apeness with African Americans is found even among individuals who are unfamiliar with this stereotype when asked, Goff et al. 2008).

The existence of implicit group stereotypes is usually considered problematic because these stereotypes have wide-ranging behavioral consequences. One example is shooter bias (Correll et al. 2002), which occurs when individuals are asked to make a rapid "shoot" response when a pictured individual is holding a weapon and a rapid "don't shoot" response when a pictured individual is not holding a weapon. Participants react more quickly to black individuals holding weapons than to white individuals holding weapons. Participants also make more errors (i.e., choosing shoot instead of don't shoot) when a black individual is holding a nonweapon, compared to a white individual holding a nonweapon. Performance on these shooter bias tasks is predicted, in part, by how strongly the participant implicitly associates black and weapons (e.g., Glaser and Knowles 2008; for a review of other implicit bias research, see Jost et al. 2009).

In light of the research on the implicit stereotyping of other groups, political scientists need to determine what implicit partisan stereotypes exist and what role implicit partisan stereotypes play in politics. Research that examines the implicit associations between parties and other groups or traits has the potential to shed light on these questions. Next, three such streams of research are discussed: implicit party-trait

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associations, implicit party-spatial associations, and implicit party-policy associations.

IMPLICIT PARTY-TRAIT ASSOCIATIONS

Understanding the role of gender in the political process has been a long-standing topic of study in political science. Recent work has looked at how party "trait ownership" interacts with gender to affect candidate perceptions (Hayes 2005; Hayes 2011). While most of this research has focused on the explicit level of analysis, some research suggests that voters in the United States associate the Democratic Party with femininity and the Republican Party with masculinity not only at the explicit level, but also at the implicit level (Winter 2010). Winter (2010) argues that the implicit association between gender and the parties arises from the gender gap in support for the major parties and long-standing policy differences between the parties on women's rights. Implicitly associating gender with parties, therefore, may be a type of implicit political knowledge that reflects group support for a party or a party's traditional policy positions.

Implicit gender stereotypes can also affect the perception of candidate traits. Possessing implicit associations between women and subordinate social positions predicts opposition to having women in leadership positions (Rudman and Kilianski 2000), including political leadership positions (Beaman et al. 2009). While these implicit associations may accurately reflect the underrepresentation of women in political office, thereby qualifying as a type of implicit political knowledge, the behavioral effect of these associations presents an additional barrier to women's participation in political leadership. Future research should build on this work to determine what other implicit party-trait and party-group associations exist and how these associations affect political cognition.

IMPLICIT PARTY-SPATIAL ASSOCIATIONS

A second stream of research relevant to understanding implicit political knowledge examines whether voters implicitly associate a party with its location in ideological space (i.e., party-spatial associations). One set of studies found that Dutch voters automatically activate spatial (left-right) associations in memory when they are exposed to the acronyms of Dutch political parties (van Elk, van Schie, and Bekkering 2010).[3] Other studies have shown that one's spatial situation (e.g., being physically slanted to the left or right) can subtly bias political survey responses to favor the political left or right (Oppenheimer and Trail 2010), even if the physical slant is outside conscious awareness (Dijkstra et al. 2012). Together, these three studies support the conclusion that spatial knowledge about politics is encoded implicitly. What effect these implicit party-spatial associations have on the ability of voters to process political information or voter decision-making remains to be determined.

IMPLICIT PARTY-POLICY ASSOCIATIONS

A third line of research into implicit political knowledge considers the relationship between parties and their issue positions (i.e., party-policy associations). Some research at the explicit level suggests that politically engaged individuals are much more likely to be aware of party-policy linkages than individuals who are not political engaged (Claassen and Highton 2009). However, in a dual-process model, it is possible that the politically disengaged nonetheless encode party-policy associations at the implicit level because of mere exposure to political information, even if they do not encode party-policy associations at the explicit level because of a lack of interest or motivation. Research in this area has yielded preliminary results that suggest that the major parties in the United States are implicitly associated with their policy positions across levels of explicit political knowledge, even among many voters who have mistaken beliefs about the parties' positions on a survey (Ksiazkiewicz 2012). Future research should also consider the possibility of party-issue associations, which would be an implicit analog to issue ownership (Petrocik 1996).

WHY STUDY IMPLICIT POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE?

These three streams of research suggest that some of what voters "know" about politics exists at the implicit level and can be activated without their awareness. The potential significance of implicit political knowledge is threefold. First, voters who lack explicit political knowledge (i.e., nonsophisticates) may use implicit political knowledge to facilitate their political cognition. This hypothesis is supported by research that shows that individuals without explicit party preferences (i.e., independents) nonetheless may be influenced by their implicit party preferences in their processing of political information (Hawkins and Nosek 2012). Future research should explore the possibility that voters who lack explicit political knowledge use their implicit political knowledge to aid in political cognition.

Second, the strength of implicit partisan stereotypes (whether party-trait, party-group, party-ideology, party-policy, party-issue, party-symbol, party-color, party-region, or otherwise) may have an incremental effect on the behaviors of voters who do possess explicit political knowledge. This hypothesis is grounded in research on implicit attitudes in the political domain that suggests that there is incremental validity in predicting vote choice with implicit political attitudes, controlling for explicit attitudes (Friese et al. 2012).

Third, although the effects of explicit political knowledge have been well-documented in existing research, implicit political knowledge may be a predictor of different types of behavior than what can be predicted from explicit knowledge. This hypothesis stems from research on racial attitudes that has found that different behaviors are predicted by explicit racial attitudes and implicit racial attitudes (e.g., Greenwald et al. 2009; see Ksiazkiewicz and Hedrick 2013, this issue for a discussion). Future research may find, for example, that spontaneous reactions to a political argument are better predicted by the implicit association of that policy position with a particular party than by explicit knowledge about that policy area.

CONCLUSION

In sum, although few studies have addressed the implicit political knowledge phenomenon, there is reason to be optimistic

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about the initial findings and about the potential of this field. There is no reason to believe that political parties are somehow immune to the same implicit processes that affect social cognition about other types of groups. It remains to be seen to what extent and under what circumstances these processes facilitate or bias political cognition. What is particularly exciting about the study of implicit partisan stereotypes is that, unlike in the case of implicit racial and gender stereotypes, political scientists may have an opportunity to explore a case in which the existence of implicit bias produces some normatively desirable outcomes. ■

NOTES

1. Knowledge of party positions is the focus of this paper because it fits most readily with research on implicit group stereotypes that associates some trait or object with a group. It is possible that knowledge of institutions and of political actors is also encoded implicitly; future research will need to determine if this is the case.
2. For the purpose of this discussion, I focus on the notion of implicit knowledge as a type of implicit group stereotype which can exist with or without the conscious awareness of that group stereotype (e.g., Goff et al. 2008).
3. It is worth mentioning that these researchers found that implicit spatial associations are not absolute with regard to some universal left-right dimension, but rather relative to the respondent's personal ideological location.

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