

## EXPERTISE AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Expertise has been a topic of fascination among cognitive psychologists for many years now. Numerous studies have explored expertise in chess (Chase & Simon, 1973), bridge (Engle & Bukstel, 1978), taxi driving (Chase, 1983), algebra (Hinsley, Hayes, & Simon, 1977; Paige & Simon, 1966; Simon & Simon, 1978), medicine (Johnson et al., 1981), physics (Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; Larkin, 1983; Larkin, McDermott, Simon, & Simon, 1980), baseball (Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1981), and many other areas. In recent years, social psychologists have shown an increasing interest in expertise as well (e.g., Borgida & DeBono, 1989; Dawson, Zeitz, & Wright, 1989). The many lessons being learned by cognitive psychologists about the correlates and consequences of expertise in nonsocial domains are proving to be very helpful for understanding social cognition.

While all of this has been going on in psychology, political scientists have maintained a long-standing interest in variation of political expertise within mass publics.<sup>1</sup> The term *expertise* has rarely been used in this literature, but that concept is clearly present in a great deal of the most influential political science literature, usually traveling under the name of political involvement. In *The American Voter*, for instance, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) showed that highly politically involved citizens have more ideologically organized views about political affairs than do less involved citizens. A little later, Converse (1964) provided even more compelling evidence of heterogeneity in the American electorate in terms of political involvement and its effects on attitude organization. And during the years since then, many investigators have found that politically involved and uninvolved citizens think differently about political events in numerous other ways as well (e.g., Belknap & Campbell, 1951; Chong, McClosky, & Zaller, 1983; Geddes & Zaller, 1989; McClosky & Brill, 1983; Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1979; Stimson, 1975). However, most of this evidence has been descriptive instead of explanatory. Although various studies have shown that citizens who are involved in political affairs think

differently than uninvolved citizens, no evidence illuminates how and why these differences arise.

One might suspect that answers to the "how" and "why" questions can best be generated by psychologists armed with theory and evidence about expertise in other domains or by political scientists who read the relevant psychological literature. Remarkably, though, there has been relatively little cross-fertilization between psychology and political science along these lines. There is little evidence of political scientists making use of psychologists' findings on expertise, and there is even less evidence of psychologists making use of or trying to explain political scientists' findings on expertise. This latter fact is perhaps not surprising, given a general tendency by psychologists to be ignorant of the work of political scientists.<sup>2</sup> But the fact that political scientists have not yet made use of psychological research on expertise is very surprising indeed, given the long tradition among political scientists of drawing on psychological research to aid in theory construction (see, e.g., Lane, 1963). In recent years, there have been some isolated instances of research on expertise at the interface of the two disciplines (Fiske & Kinder, 1981; Fiske, Kinder, & Larter, 1983; Hamill & Lodge, 1986; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Lau & Erber, 1985; Lusk & Judd, 1988), but such research is rare indeed. Furthermore, there has been little coherence to this work because there is no common set of issues being pursued, and there is no widely shared research agenda among investigators.

As a group, the authors who contributed to this volume have set out to break down the barriers between psychology and political science in research on expertise and to shape the directions of future research in this area. The goals of all of the research studies reported herein are to enhance our understanding both of mass political behavior and of social cognition in general. We hope that by pursuing both goals simultaneously we can enhance the scope and depth of general theories of information processing and that we can enhance the precision of theories of the factors that shape the political acts of ordinary citizens. We hope as well that we can instigate a program of coordinated and coherent studies of political expertise in both psychology and political science.

Studying political expertise is more difficult than studying expertise in the contexts that cognitive psychologists have usually chosen for such work. This is true for three reasons, which constitute the three themes that run through the articles in this volume, each being a general question that the research hopes to help answer. The first

theme involves the theoretical definition and operationalization of political expertise.

For the vast majority of research on expertise in psychology, it has been a straightforward exercise to theoretically and operationally define the construct of most interest. Put simply, an expert is a person who is especially good at performance in some domain (e.g., Johnson, 1988; Posner, 1988). Thus, a chess expert wins lots of games, an expert pianist performs difficult pieces with few mistakes, an expert typist is unusually fast and accurate, and an expert taxi driver gets you to your destination as quickly as possible. In all of these cases, superlative performance is the hallmark of expertise; indeed, it is the single necessary and sufficient attribute.

Given this definition of expertise, cognitive psychologists have set out to understand the reasons for the superior performance of experts, to "explain" expertise by identifying its antecedents. And, as Glaser and Chi's (1988) recent review of this research makes clear, numerous antecedents have been identified. Experts tend to view a set of information in terms of large, meaningful patterns in it, whereas novices tend to view each piece of information in isolation from the rest. Experts tend to represent information at a deeper, more principled level in terms of broad categories, whereas novices tend to represent information at a more superficial level based on surface features. Experts spend a great deal of time analyzing a problem qualitatively before deciding which solution strategy to implement, whereas novices plunge quickly into a problem by applying mechanical strategies with little forethought about their potential for success. Experts have greater self-awareness than do novices, allowing them a better sense of when their decisions are likely to be accurate and when they are likely to require reconsideration. Experts have more domain-relevant knowledge, and they learn new information more quickly and easily than novices do. And experts show a reduced speed-accuracy trade-off as compared to novices; rushing experts has less of a deleterious effect on their performance than it has on that of novices. Because researchers have been able to define expertise as superlative performance in a domain, it has been relatively easy to identify these various correlates of it.

In the study of mass politics, defining expertise requires a different approach. There is no readily obvious domain of political "performance" for average citizens, so there is no clear criterion for assessing excellence. Perhaps the most obvious candidate would be the accuracy of the political predictions or judgments an individual makes. This would amount to examining facility at political "problem solving." So, for example, we could ask people what the most likely effect of increasing

inflation is on the unemployment rate in a country. Or we could ask people what the result of denying a terrorist kidnapper's ransom demand is most likely to be. But these hardly seem to be defensible strategies because experienced politicians and ardent politics-watchers do not even agree among themselves on the correct answers to such questions.

Because a performance criterion is difficult to develop in the domain of political cognition, most researchers have adopted the view that political expertise represents not a single quality (i.e., superior performance) but a constellation of qualities. Specifically, political experts are presumed to be keenly interested in political affairs, to expose themselves to lots of political information (both directly through behavioral participation in political events and indirectly through the mass media), to pay close attention to the political information they encounter, and to reflect on the meaning and implications of that information long after it is acquired. As a result, political experts presumably find themselves thinking often and deeply about politics and knowing a lot about political history and current affairs. Thus, political experts might be called political information "junkies." This definition of political expertise, outlining a series of necessary attributes, is generally shared by the contributors to this issue and by most others who study political expertise.

If political expertise is defined as the confluence of these various attributes, we must next decide how to operationalize it. One approach would be to say that measuring any single attribute will do it: either interest in politics, exposure to political information, frequency of thought about politics, or factual knowledge about political affairs. But this view presumes that these aspects of political involvement are nearly perfectly correlated with one another. In fact, correlations between these dimensions are about .5 after correction for attenuation due to measurement error, which can be viewed as either a half-full or half-empty glass. Thus, one could reasonably argue that these dimensions reflect a single underlying factor or that they reflect multiple, highly correlated underlying factors. Only a great deal of empirical evidence pitting these two assertions against one another can resolve this interpretative ambiguity.

Some have argued that political expertise is best measured simply by factual knowledge about politics because it is the product of interest in political affairs, exposure to political information, and reflection on the meaning and implications of political information. This approach presumes that interest, exposure, and reflection are jointly reflected by amount of knowledge and that any effects these variables have on political cognition are completely mediated by factual knowledge.

Again, this is an empirically testable assertion, disconfirmation of which would indicate that it is insufficient to operationalize expertise only as amount of factual knowledge. In cognitive psychologists' studies, expertise is the result of much more than amount of knowledge, so this limited operationalization will most likely be incomplete in the political domain as well.

Recognizing these unresolved issues involving operationalization of political expertise, the investigators whose work appears in this issue compare a variety of different operationalizations. Thus, one theme that runs through our work is the question of how best to define and operationalize political expertise. Some analyses reported here examine a single measure of political expertise, political information (Kinder & Sanders). Other analyses combine measures of a number of components of expertise into a single factor (Fiske, Lau, & Smith; Judd & Downing; Krosnick & Milburn; McGraw & Pinney). But in many analyses, these various components are kept separate to highlight the differences between them (Fiske, Lau, & Smith; Krosnick & Milburn; Zaller). Using this latter strategy, we are able to more precisely identify the consequences of these components.

Resolving the operationalization question also involves confronting another challenge: the level of generality at which to specify expertise. Work by cognitive psychologists in nonpolitical arenas suggests that expertise is domain-specific: expert taxi drivers are not any more likely than the average person to be expert chess players (see Glaser & Chi, 1988). Therefore, to operationalize political expertise, social scientists must decide what constitutes a domain in politics, at what level of generality it is appropriate to split political affairs into independent segments that can each attract its own experts. Is there only one segment, encompassing all political affairs? Or are political affairs segmented into domestic economic issues, domestic social issues, and international relations? Or are economic affairs segmented into unemployment, inflation, welfare programs, and so on? There are no good a priori answers to these questions, and there are theoretical reasons to expect that expertise measured at different levels of generality will behave differently. But ultimately, only empirical research can identify the consequences of operationalizing expertise at different levels of generality. This is a second theme of our work, and it is especially prominent in McGraw and Pinney's article.

The third and final theme of the work reported here is the question of what *effects* expertise has in the political domain. Our expectations regarding the effects of expertise have been importantly influenced by cognitive psychologists' findings regarding the correlates of expertise in other domains. However, we examine many aspects of cognitive

structure and information processing that cognitive psychologists have not yet related to expertise in those domains. Thus, we hope that our work will broaden the scope of research on expertise generally.

In attempting to identify the effects of expertise, we report a host of empirical findings that contribute to many other growing literatures in psychology and political science. These are issues of substantial interest to many political scientists who have no particular concern with expertise per se. And these issues are of substantial concern among many psychologists who have no particular interest in political cognition or behavior. As a result, we hope that our work will engage these readers as well as those whose interests are focused directly on politics or on expertise.

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## NOTES

1. All of the work reported in this volume focuses on the political cognition and behavior of ordinary citizens. For the most part, we ignore the great deal of relevant past research that has examined information processing and decision making by political elites (see, e.g., Janis, 1972; Jervis, 1976) and that has compared political elites (such as members of the U.S. Congress) to ordinary citizens (e.g., Barton & Parsons, 1977; Converse, 1964). Because elites differ from mass public members in terms of numerous attributes that do not vary at all within mass publics, we suspect that this research may have somewhat limited implications for understanding variation in political expertise in mass publics.

2. Every edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* has included a chapter on political behavior (Kinder & Sears, 1985; Lipset, Lazarsfeld, Barton, & Linz, 1954; Sears, 1969). However, these chapters have been dominated by reviews of evidence collected by political scientists and have rarely included any indications that psychologists' general theories of social interaction and social cognition have been influenced by political scientists' empirical findings.

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## THE EFFECTS OF GENERAL AND DOMAIN-SPECIFIC EXPERTISE ON POLITICAL MEMORY AND JUDGMENT

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In this article we differentiate between general political sophistication and domain-specific expertise, and we develop a theoretical argument specifying how the two levels differ and the nature of their impact on a variety of memory and judgment processes. Subjects, differentiated according to level of political sophistication and expertise in the income tax system, were provided with detailed information about the Tax Reform Act of 1986, and they were required to process this information under different manipulated encoding sets. They were then asked to recall the information and to provide a number of political judgments. The results indicate that the two types of expertise have distinct and theoretically meaningful consequences for political cognition. General political sophistication (but not domain-specific expertise) facilitated evaluative clustering and on-line processing. Domain-specific experts showed enhanced overall recall and larger selective memory effects, with some evidence that these effects were strengthened by general sophistication. Finally, there was evidence of an interactive relationship on attitude stability and the priming of presidential evaluations.

The research reported in this issue attests to the enduring and growing interest in expertise among scholars who work at the intersection of social psychology and political science. However, the existing literature has a haphazard quality. Researchers have used a wide variety of indicators to assess individual differences in political expertise, and the lack of consistency in operationalizing the construct has resulted in some theoretical and empirical confusion.

In this article, we suggest one possible explanation for this confusion. The political domain is not monolithic but multifaceted. As a result, people can gain expertise in specific subdomains independent of attaining expertise status in politics at the global or general level. For example, interest in local politics is not necessarily related to interest in national politics (e.g., the "man on the street" in Chicago can be quite knowledgeable about the local city council and at the