

Social Context and Local Political Knowledge

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Abstract

In this article, we adopt a social contextual approach to examine how knowledge about local politics varies both across and within cities, arguing that certain spatial and demographic features of neighborhoods will be associated with patterns of knowledge. To test these claims, we draw on a novel dataset of roughly 3,000 Americans, with two features making it particularly appropriate for studying local political knowledge. First, the survey presents respondents with a battery of political knowledge questions tailored to the individual's city. Second, the survey samples individuals from 20 cities which are collectively representative of the universe of medium-size and large American cities. Using these data, we analyze both individual and contextual explanations for local political knowledge — and compare those findings to patterns of national political knowledge. We find that social context influences local knowledge — but not national knowledge — most prominently through the age of neighborhood housing stock.

Keywords

political knowledge, social context, neighborhoods, local politics, urban politics

Research on political knowledge often focuses on the extent to which citizens are able to profess knowledge about their national government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) with little attention to local or state government. Such

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research is motivated, in part, by understanding the extent to which the public can fulfill the burden of an informed citizenry, holding the government accountable and promoting desired change. These burdens, however, do not solely apply to national politics. In fact, in a federal system, citizens are not only expected to understand and act at the state and local levels but may have an even greater burden to monitor politics closer to home (Chou 2019). While some work has focused on knowledge about governors (Lyons, Jaeger and Wolak 2012; Wolak 2009) and other state-level political actors (Fortunato and Stevenson 2021; Miller 2019; Rogers 2023), we know much less about knowledge at the local level (see e.g., Shaker 2009, 2012), despite the importance and ubiquity of outcomes in local politics (Trounstein 2009).

One reason for the dearth of research in this area lies with the challenges inherent to measuring local knowledge. Adapting the most common types of questionnaire design (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) to ask questions about local government and politics requires content tailored to every respondent's location, a practice which is hardly feasible in nationally representative samples with respondents from thousands of different communities. To highlight the depth of this challenge, consider one of the few studies (Hayes and Lawless 2021) that address local political knowledge in a national sample using questions akin to Delli Carpini and Keeter's approach. In their book, the authors ask respondents to identify local political figures (mayor and school superintendent) and treat *any name* provided as a correct answer.

In this article, we seek to innovate in this area by drawing on a novel, multicity survey with political knowledge questions specific to the respondent's city. Focusing on a small number of cities, we design questions that are both comparable across cities and similar to questions traditionally used to study national political knowledge. By sampling 20 cities which are collectively representative of the universe of medium-sized and large American cities, our survey cannot comment on local knowledge for all Americans (and especially not those in suburban and rural places) but does allow us to paint a reasonably representative portrait of metropolitan America. Just as innovative studies of local politics have shed new light on voting behavior (Hajnal and Trounstein 2014; Sances 2018), participation (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019a, Einstein, Palmer and Glick 2019b; Lappie and Marschall 2018), and political attitudes (Jensen et al. 2021; Marble and Nall 2021), similar strides in the study of political knowledge can provide another window into another crucial input for local political behavior.

From a substantive standpoint, we explore how social context influences variation in local knowledge within cities. Building on scholarship that examines the ways in which social context shapes knowledge about the preferences (Baybeck and McClurg 2005), demographics (Newman and Velez 2014), or

economics (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2020) of one's community, we expect that social context will also influence general factual knowledge about local politics. More specifically, we argue that certain features of neighborhoods — including traits related to the built environment and neighborhood design — are relevant to the development of local political knowledge. These features, which have already been linked to political participation and voting behavior (Hopkins and Williamson 2012; Williamson 2008) — will also be instructive in examining patterns of political knowledge because of the way they influence patterns of social interaction and information transmission.

Finally, we explore how patterns of local political knowledge vary across specific questions and how they depart from patterns of knowledge about national politics. We find that levels of local knowledge vary substantially across cities, both overall and in terms of specific questions. Most crucially, we find that social context influences local knowledge — but not national knowledge — most prominently through the age of neighborhood housing stock.

Explaining Political Knowledge

By this point, patterns of political knowledge are well known among political behavioralists. Most Americans are not that knowledgeable about their government and struggle to answer basic factual questions about the national political system (Converse 1964; Luskin 1987; Neuman 1986). In seeking to explain such patterns, Downs (1957) argues that most individuals lack the incentive to invest the time necessary to acquire information about the American political system. Absent a sense of civic duty, most individuals cannot influence the direction of policy and thus have little reason to follow developments within America's large and complicated political system.

While low in the aggregate, the public's knowledge does appear to vary along with different socioeconomic attributes. For instance, more educated and higher income individuals are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of knowledge (Althaus 1998; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; but see Weinschenk and Dawes 2019). Both appear to correspond with more refined cognitive capabilities for information processing, reducing the costs involved in developing political knowledge, and greater interest in the political process. Early work identified gaps in knowledge based on race and gender (Neuman 1986, Bennett 1988), although subsequent work has cataloged several ways in which these and other gaps can depend on questionnaire design (Miller 2019; Mondak and Anderson 2004) or the substance of questions (Dolan 2011; Pérez 2015). Recent work has also challenged scholars to

consider other features of the measurement of factual knowledge, such as the distinction between static and surveillance knowledge (Barabas et al. 2014), the benefits of open-ended and closed-ended questions (Robison 2015), and the possibility that respondents possess information not captured by standard question formats (Prior 2014).

Other contemporary work goes further, moving beyond questions of optimal measurement and challenging the premise that political knowledge can be captured solely through factual questions. Such scholarship has called for increased attention to knowledge rooted in lived experience (Cramer and Toff 2017; Weaver, Prowse and Piston 2019), about social rights (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2023), and about topics of practical relevance such as government services (Stolle and Gidengil 2010) or the carceral state (Cohen and Luttig 2020).

Most of the research on political knowledge in the United States focuses on the national government, but the public appears to know even less about state politics than national politics (Patterson, Ripley and Quinlan 1992), likely due in part to lower levels of interest in the former (Jennings and Zeigler 1970). From the literature that does exist, we know that knowledge about state politics is influenced by both political and institutional differences such as party competition (Lyons, Jaeger and Wolak 2012), the presence of direct democracy (Tolbert, McNeal and Smith 2003), as well as by short-term forces such as state economic performance (Lyons, Jaeger and Wolak 2012).

Even less research has been conducted on what individuals know about local politics seen through the lens of Delli Carpini and Keeter's sense of general political knowledge. One prominent exception is Shaker's (2009, 2012) studies of Philadelphia politics, which indicate that the public does not fare much better on surveys about local knowledge than at the state or national levels. He also finds that some individual-level correlates (but not age, income, and education) of local knowledge are somewhat different than at the national level, a result that echoes work regarding racial and gender gaps (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Miller 2019). Moreover, he finds that access to local media improves knowledge at that level (Shaker 2009), a finding consistent with earlier work by Scheufele, Shanahan and Kim (2002). Beyond these few studies, however, our knowledge about local political knowledge is scant, and lacking in comparisons across cities or across neighborhoods within cities.

On the other hand, a healthy literature has looked at a different type of localized knowledge: perceptual knowledge about the places in which people live. In this literature, different dimensions of social context, including diversity and information richness, influence citizens' perceptual knowledge about several traits of the places they live. Some have focused on traits of persons, such as partisan preferences (Baybeck and McClurg 2005), political

engagement (Makse, Minkoff and Sokhey 2019), racial composition (Wong 2007), or the presence of immigrants (Newman and Velez 2014). Others have focused on perceptions of locally relevant conditions and policy outcomes, including unemployment (Newman et al. 2015) and crime and school quality (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2020).

Social Context and Political Engagement

While previous work on the link between context and knowledge¹ has focused on how people perceive their communities, we argue that there is ample reason to believe that social context would also influence factual political knowledge. While much more attention has been given to the relationship between social context and *participation*, knowledge is a key precursor of participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

Much of the work linking social context with political participation has focused on outcomes related to national politics, especially turnout in presidential elections. For example, Gimpel, Dyck and Shaw (2004) and Dyck, Gaines and Shaw (2009) find that turnout is reduced by the presence of out-party neighbors in one's context, especially among Republicans, while Cho, Gimpel and Dyck (2006) find a relationship between ethnic concentration and turnout. Among the few studies that have looked at contextual effects on political knowledge, Gimpel and Lay (2005) find that a neighborhood's political homogeneity and turnout rate are associated with knowledge acquisition. These findings are largely consistent with the aforementioned studies in which turnout is the dependent variable. They define knowledge, however, in terms of national political institutions. Taken together, these findings tell a story in which knowledge and participation are two facets of engagement in national politics and social context operates by encouraging or discouraging engagement via a mechanism of belonging.

While we don't disagree with this narrative, the connection between social context and *local* political engagement — and more specifically local political knowledge — may be even greater due to the nature of local politics. Engagement at lower levels of government is often rooted in factors specific to those levels of government and local politics in particular produces more material motivations (McAtee and Wolak 2011), including those related to home ownership (Fischel 2002), and preserving property values in neighborhoods (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019a). Moreover, the increasing appeal of localism, a normative preference for local governance, might focus the attention of some individuals on the actions of local government (Deslatte 2023; Manville and Monkkonen 2024). Indeed, some evidence suggests that individuals increasingly develop localist attitudes when they believe the state and federal governments are failing to deliver results (Vey and Storrington

2022), a perception that may have been reinforced by shortcomings of centralized governance during the pandemic (Chou 2024; Cresswell 2021).

Because many aspects of local politics have explicitly spatial dimensions (e.g., Nuamah and Ogorzelek 2021) or address problems that cluster spatially (e.g., Minkoff 2016), engagement resulting from such policy decisions or problems is also likely to vary spatially. In a study covering myriad neighborhoods in multiple cities, it may not be possible to measure every factor that produces more engaged or less engaged neighborhoods. We can, however, look for spatial variation by making broader generalizations about the types of places that enhance or diminish engagement.

To do so, we draw inspiration from a different strand of the social context literature, one that conceives of neighborhoods not just in terms of their people, but in terms of their physical features and their place in the panorama of metropolitan geography. For example, Hopkins and Williamson (2012) consider factors at the intersection of demographics and space to argue that sprawling neighborhoods reduce participation, finding that certain forms of behavior are reduced by correlates of sprawl. Focusing even more explicitly on the built environment, LeVan (2020) finds that neighborhoods with “natural gathering places” promote turnout. Coulton, Zane Jennings and Chan (2013) also suggest that factors such as these influence how people think about their neighborhood, which matters because persons who identify with their neighborhood are also more likely to be engaged with local politics (McLeod et al. 1996). In contrast to the belonging mechanism described above, here the mechanism is rooted in information and social capital: neighborhoods can be distinguished based on the degree to which they exhibit features such as frequent contact between neighbors and longstanding political networks (Hopkins and Williamson 2012).

Another way that the social structure of a neighborhood might relate to political knowledge is through the production of weak ties, which are thought to enhance the transmission of information across different social circles (Granovetter 1973). In this instance, the important social interactions induced by the physical features of a neighborhood might be casual contacts which can spread political information and engagement (Raychaudhuri, Davidson and Jones-Correa 2025).

Drawing on these ideas, and specifically Hopkins and Williamson’s measures of neighborhood sprawl, we look at three traits of neighborhoods: age of housing stock, rates of solo commuting by car, and population density, each of which can serve as a proxy for some aspect of neighborhood design.² Each of these traits has the potential to influence political knowledge through subtly different mechanisms. Neighborhoods with older housing stock tend to have design features conducive to “neighborly exchanges” (LeVan 2020) and are more likely to have mixed-use zoning that promote walkability

(Lee, Koschinsky and Talen 2018) and discourage the use of cars, leading to greater degrees of organization and enduring ties (Guest et al. 2006). In other words, people living in older neighborhoods are more likely to encounter one another and to discuss local matters.

In contrast, neighborhoods with more solo commuting tend to have the opposite features: single-use residential zoning and more reliance on cars (Hopkins and Williamson 2012). Such neighborhoods exhibit lower levels of political interest (Newman, Johnson and Lown 2014) as commuting is associated at the individual level with fewer social ties with neighbors (Viry, Kaufmann and Widmer 2016), an effect that can compound in the aggregate.

Finally, higher density can cut in both directions, creating more interactions but also more anonymity; density thus has often complex effects, enhancing political interest but decreasing social capital (Nguyen 2010), and possibly influencing high- and low-income places differently (Smith 2018). While we do not test these specific mechanisms directly, we expect that political knowledge will be more robust in neighborhoods that are the antithesis of sprawl: those that have higher population density, older homes, and fewer individuals who commute alone by car. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals in neighborhoods with greater population density, older homes, and less solo commuting will possess more knowledge regarding local politics than otherwise similar individuals.

In addition, we argue that local political knowledge should be more closely linked to these dimensions of social context than knowledge about national politics. While other aspects of the social context (e.g., presence of in-party voters, racial, and economic diversity) might influence engagement at all levels of politics, we contend that local political knowledge should be especially sensitive to differences in the character of a neighborhood. That is, if the mechanism connecting the built environment and political knowledge relates to information flow, we expect that the information shared in neighborhoods is more likely to be local in nature, and therefore traits of the built environment that enhance information flow will have a greater effect on local knowledge than on national knowledge. This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Spatial contextual factors will be more closely linked to individuals' local political knowledge than to individuals' national political knowledge.

Data and Methods

To test the above hypotheses, we rely on data from an original survey conducted in two rounds using the online platform Lucid: respondents in nine

cities were surveyed in April 2022 and another 11 cities were sampled in June 2023. Tailoring knowledge questions to individuals necessitated both the selection of a relatively small number of cities and the ability to target our survey only to individuals in those cities, an attribute which made Lucid an appealing vendor (see Coppock and McClellan 2019 for a discussion of Lucid data quality).

Respondents were recruited through the Lucid Marketplace,³ with recruitment limited to individuals whose zip code fell within one of the 20 cities in our sample. To account for the fact that Lucid employs opt-in surveys rather than random sampling, we pay special attention to the representativeness of each city's sample relative to the city's demographics (see Supplemental Appendix Figure A-1). We also employ survey weights⁴ in the descriptive analyses and test the robustness of regression models to survey-weighted versions.

Our choice of cities (see Map 1) was motivated by our interest in metropolitan geography, as described in the previous section. Cities vary substantially in the expansiveness of the central city's boundaries: some cities proper (e.g., Miami, Washington, D.C.) cover a small proportion of the metropolitan area, and as such are almost exclusively urban, while in others, the boundaries of the city proper expand thoroughly into suburban areas. Moreover, although persons living in the greater metropolitan area are likely to have some knowledge of the city's politics and government, we are most interested in the persons governed by that city. For these reasons, we selected cities whose boundaries cover 25 percent or more of its Census Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).⁵ We also limited the sample to cities of at least 250,000 people to ensure we'd be able to recruit enough respondents (based on Lucid's feasibility tools). From that list, these cities were chosen to produce variation in size, region, and key institutional traits (e.g., having partisan or nonpartisan elections). Supplemental Appendix Table A-1 illustrates how this sample of cities compares to the population of all cities with populations greater than 250,000.⁶

Respondent zip codes (or more precisely, ZCTAs⁷) were used to identify individuals eligible for the survey and provide the basis for identifying the respondent's social context. Although the choice of a level of context is fraught with potential problems (e.g., Makse, Minkoff and Sokhey 2014; Moore and Reeves 2020), zip codes are frequently used in contextual studies (e.g., Gimpel and Lay 2005; Newman et al. 2015). In part, this is because zip codes have pragmatic advantages as a level of context, as they are both (a) easy and reliable to query respondents about (in contrast to Census tracts or neighborhoods) and (b) easy to match to Census data. Our sample includes respondents from 510 ZCTAs. While we use the word "neighborhood" as shorthand in this article, we acknowledge some

imprecision in this usage insofar as Census tracts more closely correspond to the scale of neighborhoods than ZCTAs (Hopkins and Williamson 2012). Empirically, however, the correlations between tract-level and ZCTA-level values of the home age ($r = 0.80$), solo driving ($r = 0.84$), and density ($r = 0.66$) variables are high, so while some citizens may live in tracts that are unrepresentative of their ZCTA, these disparities are unlikely to be common enough to skew results.

Our two dependent variables, *local political knowledge* and *national political knowledge* are derived from two political knowledge batteries consisting of four multiple-choice questions each. In keeping with common practices in the literature (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), we asked a mix of two types of questions: questions identifying political figures and questions about institutional rules and responsibilities. The two batteries were designed to mirror one another such that each battery contained two identification questions (one where the name was provided and one where the office was provided), one question that asked respondents to match an institution to a responsibility, and one question which asked about a specific institutional rule. The questions were also designed to vary in level of difficulty.⁸

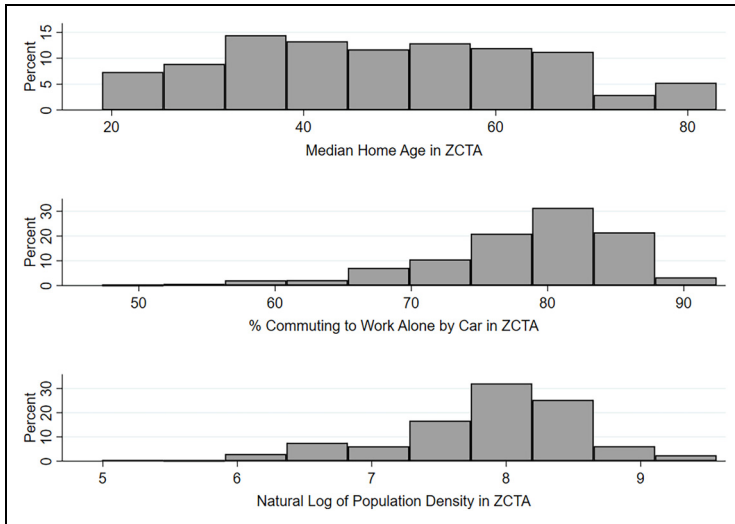
We opted for multiple-choice questions for all questions in both batteries. While scholars continue to debate the merits of close-ended versus open-ended questions (see e.g., Bullock and Rader 2022; Mondak 1999), we made this decision primarily due to survey length considerations and the desire to avoid respondent fatigue (Jeong et al. 2023) in answering open-ended questions. To avoid the problems of inattentive respondents (Ternovski and Orr 2022), we included an attention check prior to the knowledge batteries and terminated inattentive respondents from the survey. In addition, we employed a catch question⁹ to identify respondents who likely used internet searches to answer knowledge questions (Clifford and Jerit 2016; Motta, Callaghan and Smith 2016). Table 1 summarizes the four questions and provides the proportion of respondents who correctly answered each one. Exact wording for all questions can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.

Like Shaker (2012), our batteries produced similar knowledge scores at both levels (2.46 for national politics, 2.43 for local politics), although we do not necessarily infer from this that people are equally knowledgeable about national and local politics. Rather, this simply indicates that our *batteries* were of similar difficulty at both levels. Table A-2 in the Supplemental Appendix gives the average scores on the local and national knowledge batteries for each city.

To measure our key independent variables regarding social context, we follow Hopkins and Williamson (2012) and attach Census data to the zip code (ZCTA) provided by each respondent for three traits of metropolitan geography: average home age in the ZCTA, the ZCTA's population

Table 1. Components of Political Knowledge Batteries.

Question	Percent Correct
Local knowledge	
Identify current mayor of city	78
Identify the position held by [police chief of city provided]	52
What local office determines value of properties for tax purposes?	67
What are the term lengths and limitations for the city's mayor?	39
National knowledge	
Identify the current Speaker of the House	68
Identify role held by Antony Blinken	46
What percentage of vote required to override a presidential veto?	64
Who decides whether a law is constitutional?	67

**Figure 1.** Distribution of spatial contextual variables.

density, and the percentage of ZCTA residents who commute alone to work by car. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of these variables.

In addition to our measures of metropolitan geography, we also consider other possible measures of social context as controls¹⁰. Three strike us as most relevant in light of past work on social context and political engagement. First, a neighborhood's partisanship has been linked with political knowledge (Baybeck and McClurg 2005) as well as other aspects of participation and

Table 2. Correlations Among All Contextual Variables.

	HA	D	SC	I	BV	RD
HA						
D	0.50					
SC	-0.39	-0.63				
I	-0.53	-0.19	0.17			
BV	0.51	0.48	-0.59	-0.42		
RD	0.11	-0.04	-0.02	0.04	0.07	

Note: BV = Biden vote; D = density; HA = housing age; I = income; RD = racial diversity; SC = solo commuting.

engagement (Dyck, Gaines and Shaw 2009; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). Second, racial and ethnic diversity is a predictor of engagement in Hopkins and Williamson (2012) and other work on knowledge (DeSante and Perry 2016), and more broadly serves as an important contextual predictor of participation (Cho, Gimpel and Dyck 2006). Third, socioeconomic contextual variables have been associated with both perceptual knowledge (e.g., Minkoff and Lyons 2019) and participation (e.g., Bramlett, Gimpel and Lee 2011). We also measure these three characteristics at the ZCTA level. Partisanship is measured as the estimated ZCTA-level share of the vote won by Biden in 2020 (using estimates from Warshaw and Tausanovitch 2022).¹¹

Following Hopkins and Williamson (2012), racial diversity is measured using a Herfindahl index of the proportion of the four largest racial and ethnic categories from Census data (more specifically, 5-year American Community Study estimates from 2020). To account for the socioeconomic status of a ZCTA, we include a measure of median income; results using the percentage of ZCTA residents with a Bachelor’s degree instead show similar results.¹² Table 2 shows the correlations among all contextual variables.

Finally, we account for individual-level traits that may be associated with political knowledge. Among demographic traits, we include factors that are often associated with disparities in political knowledge, including gender, race and ethnicity, age, income, and education, even if several of these factors’ effects depend on the content or format of the questions being asked (e.g., Kraft and Dolan 2023; Pérez 2015) or the political context (Hutchings 2001; Marinova and Anduiza 2020; Wolak and Juenke 2021). We also include controls for how long the person has lived in the city, whether they are a homeowner, and consumption of local media.¹³ The Supplemental Appendix provides summary statistics for all variables (Table A-3) as well as exact question wording.

Results

To test the article's hypotheses, we produce a series of multiple regression models that predict an individual's scores on the local and national political knowledge batteries.¹⁴ We utilize multilevel models with survey respondents nested within cities, a decision supported by likelihood ratio tests that multilevel models outperform pooled models.¹⁵

Local Political Knowledge

Beginning with the models of local political knowledge, we find some support for hypothesis 1's assertion that spatial contextual factors will influence local political knowledge. As can be observed in the first column of Table 3, we find that even after controlling for individual-level traits, respondents in neighborhoods with older homes possess more local political knowledge.¹⁶ On the other hand, population density and solo commuting have no relationship with local knowledge. In terms of substantive impact, the coefficient for home age implies that an increase from the 5th to 95th percentile of neighborhood home age (from 21 to 82 years) is associated with an additional 0.39 questions correct on the four-question battery.

Among the control variables, education, income, and age are all positively associated with local knowledge, while independents have less knowledge, all findings that we would expect from most work on political knowledge. Several individual-level traits that capture community attachment are also predictive of greater local knowledge: homeowners, individuals who have lived longer in the community, and persons who consume more local media scored higher on the local knowledge battery. The other contextual variables (partisanship, diversity, and income) provide no explanatory power.

National Political Knowledge

Turning to the model of national knowledge (second column of Table 3), none of the three spatial contextual factors predicts national knowledge. This is consistent with hypothesis 2, which expects these contextual factors to have more relevance in explaining local political knowledge. Even though only one of these three factors (neighborhood age) mattered for local knowledge, it did have a substantively powerful effect; here, we find no contextual effects.

Our findings echo Shaker (2012) in illustrating that different individual-level factors explain local and national political knowledge. Some individual-level predictors of local knowledge are consistent across both sets of models (education, income, age, and independent identification), but

Table 3. Multilevel Linear Regression Models of Political Knowledge.

	Local Knowledge	National Knowledge
Contextual variables		
ZCTA average home age	0.006 (0.002)**	-0.00 (0.002)
ZCTA population density	-0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
ZCTA % commute alone by car	0.44 (0.27)	0.09 (0.27)
ZCTA Biden vote	-0.00 (0.20)	-0.02 (0.20)
ZCTA racial diversity	0.11 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.15)
ZCTA median income	0.12 (0.08)	0.08 (0.08)
Individual variables		
Local media consumption	0.014 (0.005)**	-0.003 (0.005)
Homeowner	0.09 (0.05)*	0.06 (0.05)
Length of residence in city	0.19 (0.02)**	0.05 (0.02)*
Partisanship		
Republican	0.01 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Independent	-0.16 (0.05)**	-0.13 (0.05)**
Race/ethnicity		
Asian-American	-0.00 (0.10)	0.01 (0.11)
Black or African-American	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.30 (0.06)**
Hispanic or Latino	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.10 (0.08)
Other or multiracial	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.08)#
Level of education	0.15 (0.02)**	0.26 (0.02)**
Income	0.12 (0.02)**	0.11 (0.02)**
Age	0.02 (0.001)**	0.01 (0.001)**
Female	0.06 (0.04)	-0.18 (0.04)**
Constant		
σ (Intercept)	-1.01 (1.00)	0.44 (1.01)
σ (Residual)	0.05 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)
	1.03 (0.03)	1.13 (0.03)
Log Likelihood	-4226.93	-4345.84
N	2,929	2,929

Note: # $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

other demographic traits (being Black or female) are associated with lower levels of knowledge *only* at the national level. Second, many of the measures associated with local-level conditions matter for local knowledge, but not for national knowledge. Most notably, owning a home and consuming more local media are both associated with greater local knowledge, but not with national knowledge. The effect of length of residency, although significant in both models, is substantially more powerful in predicting local knowledge.

Assessing Responses to Individual Questions

To further explore the patterns in local political knowledge, Figure 2 presents a summary of a series of logistic regression models that analyze the four individual questions that make up the local knowledge index. (Full model results can be found in Supplemental Appendix Tables A-4 and A-5.) Here again, we see that the average home age in one’s neighborhood is the key predictor of local knowledge, having a statistically significant relationship with three of the four questions. (It does not predict the ability to identify an individual as the chief of police.) Among the other two contextual factors, solo commuting is related to only one of the four questions (the police chief question — and the finding is in the opposite direction from our expectation) and density does not predict knowledge of any of the four questions.

Some interesting patterns emerge among the control variables too. Age, education, income, and length of residence have positive effects on all the propensity to get each of the questions correct. Individuals who consume more local media are more likely to get the two public figure identification questions correct, but not the other two questions. Home ownership predicts knowledge about the two questions pertaining to mayors, but not, as we might expect, knowledge about the office handling property assessment.

Individual and Contextual Traits: Independent or Interactive Effects?

One important trait of the data is that traits of neighborhoods and traits of individuals are not independent of one another. As seen in Table 4, some of the

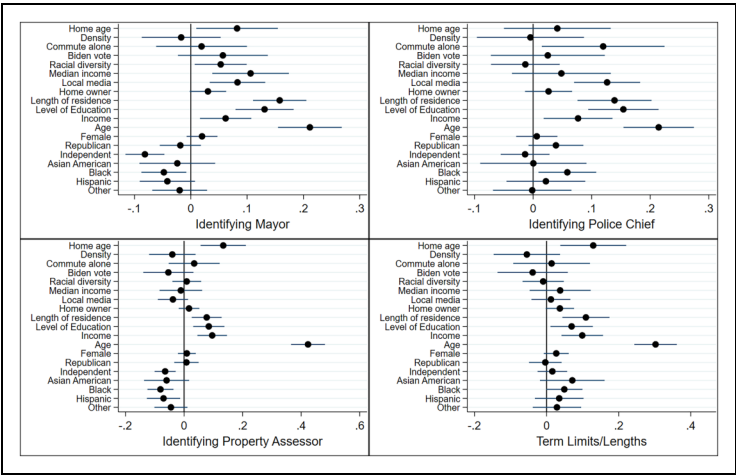


Figure 2. Predictors of local political knowledge, by question.

Table 4. Patterns of Individual Traits and Contextual Traits.

Quartile	Education	Income	Home Ownership	Local Media Consumption	Lived in City
Home age					
Top (oldest)	1.06	1.01	0.30	1.53	2.58
Second	1.14	1.15	0.41	1.62	2.54
Third	1.21	1.22	0.40	1.22	2.56
Bottom	1.36	1.58	0.52	0.75	2.40
Density					
Top (highest)	1.16	1.13	0.29	1.28	2.51
Second	1.17	1.19	0.37	1.32	2.52
Third	1.31	1.31	0.48	1.25	2.57
Bottom	1.14	1.35	0.50	1.25	2.48
Commute alone					
Top (most)	1.28	1.39	0.51	1.48	2.58
Second	1.19	1.17	0.47	1.21	2.53
Third	1.12	1.27	0.38	1.34	2.53
Bottom	1.20	1.14	0.28	1.07	2.45

Note: Cell quantities represent averages of column variables across quartiles of contextual variables (home age, density, and commuting alone). Education, income, and lived in city are measured with 4-point scales; home ownership is binary; local media consumption has range of [−14, 14]. See Appendix for further details on coding and question wording.

relationships are quite stark: the mean values of important individual variables vary substantially according to the neighborhood persons live in. For example, individuals in neighborhoods with older housing stock have lower incomes and educational attainment, less home ownership, and higher local media consumption. Individuals in high density neighborhoods have lower income and home ownership rates, and individuals in neighborhoods where many persons commute alone by car have higher home ownership rates.

While the models in Table 3 demonstrate that the contextual effects exist even after controlling for these and other individual traits, those models do not consider the possibility of interactive relationships between individual and contextual traits. For example, the effect we observe regarding age of housing stock may be concentrated among certain subsets of the population rather than extending across all types of citizens. Conversely, the null results for density and commuting patterns might be observed because their effects are limited to certain subsets of respondents; interactive models might reveal that these contextual effects do exist but are conditional.

To consider this possibility, we focus on an important subset of the individual level traits that measure resources or socioeconomic status: education and income. If contextual traits are differently impactful for high-resource and low-resource citizens, we might observe contextual effects that are conditional in model that interact individual resource traits and the three contextual effects of interest (housing age, density, and commuting patterns). A summary of these models can be found in Table A-7 of the Supplemental Appendix. In short, we find little evidence of such conditional effects; none of the six interactions¹⁷ tested regarding local knowledge is statistically significant and only one of the six interactions regarding national knowledge is marginally significant ($p = 0.08$). The individual and contextual traits, then, appear to have independent effects on political knowledge despite the overlap between the places where the traits are present.¹⁸

Addressing Possible Selection Effects

Finally, we consider a common concern in studies of social context: the possibility that relationships between place characteristics and outcomes are contaminated by selection effects because people choose to live in places that match their predispositions (Gimpel and Reeves 2022). To do so, we rely on a question from a place identity battery earlier in the survey. Forty-four percent of the individuals in our sample agreed with the statement that “given the opportunity, I would like to move out of [city].” While this question speaks to residence in the city and not one’s neighborhood, it stands to reason that persons agreeing with this prompt are less likely to have selected into their neighborhood. If selection rather than contextual effects is responsible for the relationship between neighborhood traits and knowledge, we should see a stronger relationship among those who wish to stay. We, in fact, we observe the opposite: the relationship is slightly stronger among respondents who agree they’d like to leave. (See Supplemental Table A-8 for full model results.)

In addition, we look at a second subset of individuals based on two questions about length of residency: people who have lived in the city for more than ten years but at their current residence for less than 10 years (42 percent of respondents). These are persons who have, at some level, made a choice about location within the city (although this choice may be constrained; see e.g., Mummolo and Nall 2017), so if selection effects are responsible for the relationship between home age and political knowledge, the relationship should be strongest among this group of individuals. Once again, this is not the case: the relationship in this group is slightly weaker than in the entire sample. These results can also be found in Supplemental Table A-8.

Conclusion

In this article, we contribute to the literature on political knowledge in two ways. First, we provide what we believe to be the first multicity study of local political knowledge in the United States, showcasing the similarities and differences in patterns of knowledge across cities while simultaneously contrasting patterns of local knowledge with more well-understood patterns in national political knowledge. While our sample focused on medium-sized and large cities, and thus cannot generalize to the entire American electorate, our study finds, consistent with prior research (Shaker 2012), that some predictors of political knowledge (e.g., race and gender) vary across the local and national levels.

Second, we combine insights from several branches of the literature on social context to explore how political knowledge varies not only across cities, but whether and how it varies across neighborhoods and spaces within cities. While previous work has shown that general patterns of political behavior vary according to neighborhood traits often subsumed under the label of “sprawl,” we identify a similar but more specific pattern: that individuals in communities with older housing stock are more knowledgeable about politics, above and beyond the effects of individual traits. Importantly, this pattern does *not* extend to knowledge about national politics, illustrating that contextual factors can likewise have different effects depending on the level of government being studied.

The emergence of average neighborhood home age as the key contextual predictor of local political knowledge is not entirely surprising given previous findings in this literature. While home age is one of the factors Hopkins and Williamson (2012) associate with suburban sprawl, older neighborhoods also have different architectures (see also LeVan 2020) and are more likely to feature mixed-use zoning, such that even within more urban neighborhoods, we’d expect to see these traits facilitate higher political engagement.

Future work can build on these findings by uncovering the unique aspects of the local information environment that might prompt greater levels of information at this level. Some of those aspects may also promote knowledge at the national level, while others may have greater importance just at the local level. For instance, the relative salience of different issue domains, together with an understanding of which level of government holds jurisdiction over those domains, may shape the extent to which individuals focus on local versus national politics. Due to barriers involved in gathering this data, relatively few efforts have examined these possibilities.

This article also demonstrates the potential importance for the physical environment in which one lives and how that might shape political behavior. Our research finds some support for that expectation with one contextual

variable (housing age) having a relationship with local knowledge, but not with national knowledge. Additional efforts are needed to tease out both the reasons and the implications for these findings. We theorize that space-related variables moderate the flow of information within a community, but the question remains *how* and *why*. Is it that where one lives can reduce the costs of acquiring information by placing people closer to the locus of decision-making power or that the incentives may be enhanced when one is better positioned to benefit from the decisions of local government? Similarly, what are the implications of these findings for the ways in which power is distributed and exercised in local government? Does one's location within a community favor certain groups by providing disproportionate access or incentive to acquire information? Future efforts may be able to better explore those possibilities.

This article's findings also have implications for the broader research on political knowledge. Given that different conditions shape knowledge at the local and national levels, more efforts are needed to investigate local-level knowledge. In general, such efforts are needed to better understand the full extent to which individuals choose to behave as citizens in a democracy. Much of the research on knowledge focuses on national knowledge, debating the implications for democracy that so few people appear knowledgeable about national politics. However, if one conceives of democracy as a multi-level system that requires democratic citizenry at every level, then one can easily imagine a scenario in which different individuals acquire knowledge and fulfill their civic duty at different levels, engaging in a sort of implicit burden-sharing. To the extent that the same types of individuals operate as knowledgeable citizens at each level, then the existing nationally focused research may yield some insights into patterns of democratic behavior at the local level. However, that is clearly not the case. The individuals who are knowledgeable about local politics have a different profile. The existing research may then not be offering an accurate portrayal of the public. In demonstrating these differences, this article indicates the need for further exploration of the knowledgeable local citizen to better understand the implications for local governance and the overall functioning of our democratic government.

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IRB Approval

The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Office of Research Integrity at Florida International University (Study Reference #111124).

Data Availability Statement

Replication data can be found on the Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/M8O1TW>.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In making this argument, we specifically mean social context in the sense of the social and spatial environment (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993). Others have made connections between knowledge and various aspects of the *political* context (e.g., Fortunato and Stevenson 2021), which we consider a separate type of argument not addressed in this article.
2. Hopkins and Williamson (2012) also consider average commute time but find no significant relationships with participation. Given their null results, and since our sample consists only of central cities (eliminating most variance in commute times), we focus on the other three traits.
3. Respondents were recruited for a bid price of \$2.00 for completing a 10min survey.
4. Survey weights constructed using the *ipfw* package in STATA 16.1. Weights are based on race (5 categories), gender (2 categories), age (4 categories), and education (4 categories). CVAP (Citizen Voting Age Population) estimates from the American Community Survey (2016–2020 vintage), used to compare each

individual city's sample to the ACS estimates for the population characteristics of that city.

5. For example, Columbus (in sample) and Cleveland (out-of-sample), Ohio have MSAs of similar size, but Columbus proper is 42% of its MSA, while Cleveland proper constitutes only 19% of its MSA. As a result, there are smaller differences in Columbus between city proper and MSA in terms of our three contextual traits: home age (1.8 years in Columbus vs. 21.6 years in Cleveland), solo commuting rate (6.1% vs. 15.0%), and density (2610 vs. 3309).
6. Broadly speaking, our sample of cities is quite representative. There are no statistically significant differences aside from racial composition (the sample of cities is more White and Black, and less Hispanic and Asian than the population of all cities).
7. Zip codes themselves do not have defined geographic areas, while ZCTAs have boundaries created by the Census Bureau, not the post office. Since Lucid respondents provide zip codes during recruitment, we use a crosswalk from the UDS Mapper Project to identify the matching ZCTA for each.
8. We find no evidence of multidimensionality in patterns of knowledge. Factor analysis of the four national-level questions, the four local-level questions, and the eight questions combined each retrieve a single factor.
9. Following work by Motta et al. (2016), the national knowledge battery included an open-ended question (in contrast to the other multiple-choice questions) so difficult that respondents were highly unlikely to know the answer: "In what year did Congress pass the Steel Trade Liberalization Program Implementation Act?" Respondents who answered "1989," "1990," "1989–1990" or something equivalent (roughly 5% of the individuals who started the survey and passed the prior attention check) were removed from the survey.
10. Traits of city politics may also influence levels of political knowledge. For example, cities with more political competition may produce more attentiveness to local politics. Since our focus is on contextual factors at the neighborhood scale, we leave these questions for future work.
11. Warshaw and Tausanovitch (2022) create these estimates using multilevel regression and post-stratification ("MRP") based on 18 large-scale national surveys comprising over a million respondents, generating estimates at several levels of aggregation, including cities.
12. Because the income and education-based measures are very highly correlated ($r = 0.75$), a model that includes both mistakenly implies that neither factor matters. A more accurate interpretation is that each matters, but the collinearity between the two prevents us from simultaneously estimating each factor's effect precisely. Whether we include one Socioeconomic status measure or both, it does not affect our conclusions regarding our estimates of interest.
13. Local media consumption is measured with a battery of questions asking respondents how many days a week that they consume local TV news, local newspapers, cable news, and national newspapers. Our measure is the difference between days consuming the two local and two national sources, ranging from -14 to 14 , with positive values indicating more local media use.

14. For our models of local political knowledge, we also considered treating national political knowledge as a control, such that we might interpret the model as capturing local political knowledge above a baseline of general knowledge. The results from this model do not change any of our conclusions. The only major difference is that gender differences are more apparent in this model, a conclusion consistent with findings that women are more attuned to local politics.
15. As discussed above, we also test models using the survey weights described in the descriptive analyses. The key results are very similar. See Supplemental Appendix Table A-6 for details.
16. If we view the three contextual traits in Hypothesis 1 as constituting multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction would indicate that a significance threshold of $p = 0.017$ would be appropriate. The finding regarding housing age meets this more conservative threshold in the model in Table 4 and in all robustness checks.
17. That is, individual-level education and income each interacted with neighborhood-level housing age, density, and commuting patterns.
18. We also considered another possibility: that the effects of neighborhood traits were more powerful for individuals who lived in neighborhoods with a larger share of members of their in-group. To test this possibility, we focused on partisanship and race/ethnicity as two highly salient identities that might produce such conditional effects. We calculated two new variables: the share of in-party residents in one's ZCTA and the share of in-group members in terms of race/ethnicity in one's ZCTA, and then interacted each of these variables with the three contextual variables. None of the interactions was statistically significant, although one is nearly significant (at $p = .103$): as density increases, the positive association between neighborhood prevalence of one's racial/ethnic in-group and knowledge appears to increase.

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