

The EU's Information Deficit: Comparing Political Knowledge across Levels of Governance

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ABSTRACT *Over the last 20 years, several scholars have argued that the legitimacy of the European Union (EU) suffers from an alarming level of public apathy toward EU affairs. Such critiques often assume that the public is largely ignorant about EU politics. However, we have yet to empirically determine the extent to which Europeans understand the EU or to identify the conditions that lead the public to become better informed about European politics. Given the higher salience of national issues and the greater media attention devoted to national politics, I theorize that most individuals indeed know more about their national government than the EU. Using data from Eurobarometer 61.0 and the 2009 European Election Study, I find individuals indeed perform worse on knowledge batteries at the European level. To better explain the public's understanding of EU affairs, I then model a number of micro- and macro-level predictors of knowledge and find that some of the usual suspects (such as education and the media) influence EU knowledge. Implications are drawn for the study of political behaviour in multilevel political systems.*

KEY WORDS: political knowledge, EU politics, democracy deficit

Critics of the European Union (EU) often focus on the perceived weakness of the EU's connection with the European public (Schmitter, 2000; Siedentop, 2000). Such accounts depict the public as apathetic and largely ignorant about European affairs, arguing that the EU will not achieve democratic legitimacy without the explicit consent of a more informed European public. As apathy and ignorance have not inspired such crises at the national level, these critiques implicitly assume that individuals know even less about the EU than their national governments and/or that any information shortfall has a greater effect on legitimacy at the European level. The problem with assessing such claims is that there have been no efforts to empirically verify how much Europeans know about the EU or to identify the conditions explaining knowledge at the European level.

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There are a number of reasons that individuals may not be well-informed about EU affairs. Both the decision-making processes and the issues under consideration within the EU are more complex than found in most national systems, such that individuals may need to invest additional time in order to develop informed positions. Moreover, the broader information environment may not offer the same quality of information shortcuts as found at the national level. European media outlets devote far less coverage to European politics than local and national politics (Anderson, 2004; de Vreese, 2002) and neither left/right ideology nor party affiliation are likely to offer the same guidance on the unique set of considerations that structure EU politics. Given these obstacles, even otherwise politically-engaged individuals may forego any effort to learn more about the EU. Indeed, comparisons of EU and national knowledge reveal that individuals know less about the EU than their national political system.

To better explain the public's awareness (or lack thereof) of the EU, this paper models a number of micro- and macro-level predictors of knowledge. I expect that a different combination of predictors than previously identified in national-level studies may influence EU knowledge. An individual's level of education has been demonstrated as the strongest correlate of political knowledge at the national level (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), but may not have as robust a relationship with EU knowledge if European schools do not deliver the same level of factual content or civic-mindedness about national and European affairs. Similarly, while political elites and the media shape knowledge about national politics (Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006; Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000), these sources of information may not address EU affairs enough to have an effect at the European level.

Instead, wealth and skill levels may best explain knowledge at the European level. Seeking to identify new opportunities for cross-border investments, wealthier individuals with investment capital may have greater incentive to monitor political and economic developments brought about by European integration. Additionally, those individuals working in industries and professions that are subject to greater EU regulation – such as agriculture or finance – may be obligated to follow decision-making at the European level and/or maintain some form of contact with relevant EU officials to fulfil their workplace responsibilities. Those working in areas only marginally affected by European integration – such as service-based industries – may not need to be as familiar with EU politics.

This paper makes two contributions to the behavioural literature. First, it moves political knowledge to the left-hand side of behavioural models at the European level. Most of the knowledge-based research on Europe focuses on explaining how knowledge influences voting behaviour (de Vries *et al.*, 2011; Hobolt, 2007) or public opinion (Anderson, 1998; Clark & Hellwig, 2012; Elenbaas *et al.*, 2012; Karp, Banducci & Bowler, 2003), without touching on the conditions that explain knowledge itself. Such efforts to examine the causes of EU knowledge are necessary to allow us to better assess the quality of European democracy and to better understand the effects of knowledge. As Althaus (2003) argues, systematic biases in the types of individuals who hold knowledge may distort public opinion and voting. If the better-informed are largely comprised of older, white males, then public opinion may be tilted in favour of the interests of those groups. To consider whether such biases exist at the European level, we need to first identify the individual-level predictors of EU knowledge.

This article also builds on the research into the determinants of political knowledge by comparing knowledge across countries and at different levels of governance. The existing literature largely focuses on identifying the individual-level correlates of political

knowledge in the United States, although some more recent contributions seek to uncover contextual predictors of knowledge using cross-sectional data from a small number of advanced industrial democracies (Berggren, 2001; Gordon & Segura, 1997; Gronlund & Milner, 2006; Hellwig, 2011). There have been few efforts to determine whether the same individual-level correlates explain political knowledge outside of the United States. The strength of these correlates may well vary across political and economic environments, particularly when there is more or less widespread access to education. Moreover, the predictors of knowledge likely differ across levels of government. Here again, the usual suspects – education, political interest, a sense of civic duty – may not carry the same weight at the national and regional levels. And in parts of the world where decision-making competencies have been transferred to regional political bodies, it is particularly important to determine how well individuals understand this added layer of governance.

This paper proceeds by first reviewing the literature on political knowledge and then assessing the state of knowledge at both the national and European levels. Following this review, a number of micro- and macro-level predictors are modelled to determine if the same conditions explain knowledge at both levels. Analyses of survey data from Eurobarometer 61.0 and the 2009 European Election Study (EES) find that knowledge is lower at the European level, but that (in contrast with some of the national-based research) income and skill levels have nearly as strong an effect on knowledge as education. Even more surprising, political elites do not appear to have as strong an effect on knowledge as has been found in other contexts.

Explaining Political Knowledge

The clearest result from decades of research on political knowledge is that most individuals know very little about politics and governance. Many Americans are unable to recall basic facts about their political system (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987; Neuman, 1986) and tangential evidence suggests that similar problems arise with the mass publics of Western Europe (Arnold, 2012; Hobolt, 2007).² Seeking to explain such ignorance, Downs (1957) theorizes that the marginal payoff to casting an informed vote does not justify the time and resources necessary to gather and process political information. An informed voter must, minimally, identify their own preferences on a range of issues, find a reliable source of information about the political system, and evaluate the extent to which different political actors align with their own preferences. These are potentially time-consuming tasks, especially given the improbability that the voter will have any effect on the outcome of an election or decision-making within the political system.

Further research suggests that the costs of acquiring information are moderated by socio-economic status. Caucasians, men and older individuals consistently demonstrate higher levels of political knowledge than African-Americans, women and younger individuals (Bennett, 1988; Neuman, 1986). These are not random patterns: the better-informed demographics in America have had better access to education and professions tied to the political process (Althaus, 1998; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), both of which serve to improve cognitive information-processing capabilities and provide opportunities to observe and interact with political actors and institutions.

Of course, the less knowledgeable segments of society may be able to rely on cognitive shortcuts to develop and promote rational positions on political issues. Some scholars

argue, for instance, that ill-informed individuals need only follow the cues of trusted sources – such as political elites or the media – to make informed choices (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). Political environments that provide objective, plentiful and relevant information may even serve to diminish the knowledge gap between the better and less educated (Kuklinski *et al.*, 2001). Others contend that elites and the media cannot be trusted to provide reliable information. Elites may take advantage of the public's ignorance to promote policy agendas that may not be in their constituents' best interests (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Zaller, 1992). And media sources have clear incentives to present sensationalized news items with low factual content (Iyengar, 1991), ultimately promoting cynicism and disengagement from the political process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Schulz, 1998).

Applying this body of research to the European context, there are a number of reasons to suspect that the European public may be ill informed about EU affairs. Foremost amongst these reasons, it is relatively easy to confuse the responsibilities and roles of different decision-making actors at the European level. EU politics involves more actors than found in most national political systems. The founding Treaties disperse power between the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Court of Justice and ascribe a formal role in the decision-making process to local, regional and national actors as well as business and social interests from the private sector. Adding an additional layer of complexity, EU decision-making is governed by a complex and ever-changing body of rules and procedures. Different policy areas are subject to a variety of institutional arrangements and fall under the authority of shifting combinations of political actors. The European Parliament, for instance, shares authority with other EU institutions over agricultural and environmental policies, but has limited influence over international trade or foreign policy. This complexity has prompted some scholars to declare EU decision-making as unintelligible to EU experts, much less the general public (Christiansen, 2001; Craig & de Burca, 2003; Schmitter, 2003). Confronted with these obstacles, many Europeans may choose to simply avoid the subject of EU politics.

Additionally, to have a firm grasp on EU politics, individuals may need to adjust their frame of reference and consider questions not typically found at the national level. Much of domestic politics focuses on the distribution of resources across socio-economic constituencies and the power of the state vis-à-vis the people. EU politics entails conflicts over the distribution of resources between states and the authority of the EU institutions vis-à-vis the state governments. While similar in nature, the latter set of considerations requires a broader view of the political process. For instance, to make sense of outcomes at the European level, individuals must take into account the preferences and bargaining power of different states within the EU – a demand not present in the domestic arena. Such differences may hinder efforts to become knowledgeable in EU affairs.

This potential knowledge deficit may be further exacerbated by the absence of reliable sources of information. By many accounts, the media and political elites do not provide as much or as reliable information at the European level. Although elite dissent over the EU is increasing (Gabel & Scheve, 2006a), mainstream political parties have tended not to compete over EU issues. The largest right- and left-of-centre parties adopt similar positions in support of European integration (Marks, Wilson & Ray, 2002; Marks *et al.*, 2006). The consequence of such conformity is that, in the past, the public has not heard as much about the EU as other issues from their political leaders (Gabel & Scheve, 2006b). Additionally,

elites tend to diverge from their constituents' views on European integration more than with traditional left/right issues (Hooghe, 2003; Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000) and many individuals are aware that elites do not represent their views at the EU level (Ferrara & Weishaupt, 2004; Tillman, 2004). As a result, the public may discount elite cues as a source of information about the EU.

The media does not appear to be any more dependable at providing information than political elites. The only Europe-wide outlets are websites such as www.euobserver.com, which may not be known or accessible to many people. Most individuals receive news about the EU through local and national newspapers and television programmes, which tend to discount the time spent on European affairs in order to focus on local and national issues (Anderson & McLeod, 2004; de Vreese *et al.*, 2006; Meyer, 1999). When these media outlets do focus on the EU, they often present one-sided, Eurosceptic accounts that provide minimal information about European integration (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Weymouth, 1999; de Vreese, 2002; Maier & Rittberger, 2008; Norris, 2000). The media does have the potential to raise the public's awareness of European affairs; the only effort to examine media effects on knowledge finds that exposure to information-rich stories improves an individual's understanding of EU politics (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).³ However, as de Vreese and Boomgaarden acknowledge, information-rich content is relatively rare. Due to the limited coverage of EU politics, the public does not have access to the same cognitive shortcuts to find information and interpret events at the European level. Levels of EU knowledge may, therefore, be lower than at the national level, where the media provides more frequent and detailed political coverage.

Identifying the Better-Informed

Given the unique environment in which EU governance takes place, there may be a different set of conditions that explain knowledge at the European level. In the national-based studies, education emerges as the strongest correlate of knowledge. The extent of an individual's schooling affects both the costs and incentives of acquiring knowledge (Luskin, 1990). Educational institutions serve as arenas for political learning, delivering factual content about the political system. Perhaps more importantly, these institutions may lower information costs by teaching and refining cognitive skills for processing information, making it easier to interpret and integrate new facts into an individual's existing store of knowledge. At the same time, schools engaged in civic education may inspire a sense of duty or a broader interest in political affairs and, in so doing, create incentives for their students to engage in and learn more about the political process. It is thus not surprising that education has a strong effect on national knowledge and accounts for some of the variation that appears to be explained by other structural variables such as income and occupation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

However, there is reason to doubt that education has the same effect on EU knowledge. As education policy is largely controlled by national authorities, curricular standards likely focus more on the history and politics of the individual member-states than the EU. That is not to say that European schools never teach about the EU, but, rather, that there is likely less content focused on European integration. It is also unlikely that schools devote the same resources to fostering a sense of European citizenship, particularly when such an objective could be perceived as undermining students' connection with the national political system. Of course, learning cognitive skills for processing information should benefit

knowledge at both levels. Taking these possible differences into account, education may influence EU knowledge, but not to the same extent as at the national level.

Similarly, the media and political elites are unlikely to have the same effects on national and European knowledge. As both have proven unreliable in offering information about EU affairs, individuals may simply disregard information when it is offered by these sources. What factors might then compensate for a weaker education-driven boost in political knowledge at the European level? This paper theorizes that income and skill levels have a stronger effect on EU knowledge than found in the research on national knowledge. Higher incomes and skill-sets may create unique incentives for individuals to become informed about EU affairs.

Beginning with income, the EU offers a bevy of opportunities for wealthy individuals with investment capital. The EU began as a project to create a single European market and maintaining that market remains the core objective of the EU Treaties. Once initiated, the single-market project allowed individuals to obtain greater profits by selling goods and investing capital in the new and expanding markets in other parts of Europe. A substantial body of research demonstrates that support for the EU is conditioned by one's economic resources and market position (Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Duch & Taylor, 1997; Gabel, 1998; Gabel & Palmer, 1995). In particular, those individuals holding capital assets and invested in inter-state trade prefer the monetary stability and market opportunities created by European integration (Gabel, 2001; Scheve, 2000). These individuals may also have greater incentives to monitor developments at the European level because some sectors of the economy are only partially integrated and ongoing efforts to integrate these sectors may affect the relative risks involved in different types of investments. Beyond regulating the single market, the EU may affect investment risk through the structural and cohesion funds – regional aid targeted at building infrastructure and greater capabilities in the poorer EU members – and agricultural subsidies. Investors may want to know how and where those funds are used in order to better identify areas of high return.

The wealthy may have relatively higher incentives to seek out information at the European level for at least two reasons. First, the EU offers less obvious rewards to other constituencies. Agricultural subsidies and cohesion funds are the only significant forms of wealth redistribution, leaving (or allowing) national governments to provide for the economic welfare of most disadvantaged groups in society. Further, taking into account the presumably weaker sense of civic duty at the European level, most individuals are less likely to experience some sort of social gratification through being informed about EU affairs. Thus, even if the wealthy have similar incentives at the two levels, the actual information gap may be higher at the European level. Second, the partially-integrated status of the single European market may create slightly more uncertainty than at the national level and compel investors to increase their time spent following the political decision-making. These possibilities lead to the expectation that income (as an indicator of wealth) has a stronger relationship with knowledge than in the American research, where education accounts for much of income's effect.

Skill level is another potential predictor of EU knowledge, as some jobs may produce greater interest in European integration and reduce the costs of learning about the EU. High-skilled workers generally have an easier time finding work and are able to take advantage of expanded markets, while low-skilled workers suffer from greater competition in open markets (Rodrik, 1997). As such, Hooghe, Jing and Marks (2007) find that low-skilled workers exhibit higher levels of Euroscepticism across Europe. This

research suggests that both constituencies have reason to follow EU politics, as both high- and low-skilled workers are affected by European integration. However, while the incentives may be similar, the costs of learning likely differ across skill levels. High-skilled individuals are more likely to be exposed to EU politics while performing their duties. The EU's activities have the most visible effect on professionals such as lawyers, bankers and public administrators. Beyond these professions, the task of changing workplace practices in response to EU rules largely falls on managers and supervisors. As an example, agri-business executives and farm managers likely have to be aware of European agricultural rules, while farm hands only need to listen to instructions from their supervisor.

To summarize the arguments advanced thus far, the public likely knows less about the EU than their national government. There is greater decision-making complexity at the European level and fewer reliable sources to deliver and assist in interpreting factual information. Moreover, the conditions explaining knowledge may be slightly different in the EU than suggested by existing behavioural research. Whereas education has predominantly explained much of the variance in national knowledge, income and skill levels may have a much stronger effect on EU knowledge. Moreover, the media and political elites likely have a weaker effect on EU knowledge. These expectations lead to the following primary hypotheses of this article:

H1: Individuals know more about their national government than the EU.

H2: Media coverage and elite messages have a weak effect on EU knowledge.

H3: Greater wealth is associated with higher levels of EU knowledge.

H4: Professionals, managers and skilled workers demonstrate greater knowledge of the EU than unskilled workers.

Comparing National and European Knowledge

This paper makes use of three sources of data: Eurobarometer 61.0 (Papacostas, 2004), the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2004.1 (European Commission, 2004) and the 2009 European Election Study (EES) (EES, 2009). The first two sources are merged into a single dataset, hereafter referred to simply as Eurobarometer 61.0, with observations on political knowledge and other attitudinal variables from across the EU-25.⁴ Eurobarometer 61.0 includes the largest amount of factual questions about the EU within a single survey and, thus, allows a broader examination of how much the public knows about European integration. The EES is included in this analysis as it is the only source that includes factual questions about both national and European politics, thus permitting a comparison of knowledge at the two levels.

Eurobarometer 61.0 and the EES both measure knowledge with close-ended factual questions about political institutions at the national and European levels. Survey respondents are asked to evaluate a number of statements as true or false. One such statement from Eurobarometer 61.0 falsely posits: 'The President of Commission is directly elected by the citizens of the European Union.' There are 10 such statements in Eurobarometer 61.0, while the EES includes four statements about the EU and three about national politics. All of these measures are listed in Appendix A.

Prior research suggests that measures of domain-specific knowledge may be preferable to those of general knowledge.⁵ Some scholars argue that individuals benefit more from knowing about current issues than being able to recite general facts about their political system; that to act rationally and to carry out their civic duty, it is more important for individuals to understand existing proposals for economic reform (as one example) than to be aware of the specific protections afforded by the Bill of Rights (Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Zaller, 2003). Moreover, domain-specific measures may better illustrate the effects of political ignorance. Even individuals who demonstrate high levels of general knowledge perform poorly on some domain-specific measures. Indeed, the distortions introduced by low levels of domain-specific information are greater for the generally better-informed (Barabas & Jerit, 2009; Gilens, 2001). Of course, general measures are more widely available in public opinion surveys (Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006). Also, while domain-specific questions offer a more finely-grained measure of knowledge, there is a clear link between the two types: those who perform better on general measures are also more likely to know about specific issues (Althaus, 1998; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

For the purpose of this article, measures of general facts about the EU institutions and European elections are all that are available. Fortunately, the EU-based data offers distinct advantages over alternative measures of national knowledge. Perhaps the largest hurdle to comparative studies of political knowledge is question variability. The format (open- vs. close-ended) and the type (domain-specific vs. general) of questions varies across countries (Elff, 2009). In contrast, the Eurobarometer and the EES include the same or roughly similar questions in each European country. This consistency allows for clearer cross-sectional comparisons.

Figure 1 summarizes aggregate levels of EU knowledge within the EU-25, using data from Eurobarometer 61.0. Only 5 per cent of respondents fail to correctly answer any of the 10 true/false EU questions. In contrast, over 43 per cent of respondents correctly answer five or more of the 10 questions.⁶ While these are basic questions about the EU's history and institutions, the results suggest that the public knows at least some of the basic facts about European integration. However, these results do not compare favourably with prior estimates of national knowledge. Using data from the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES), Lewis-Beck *et al.* (2008) classify 31 per cent of respondents as having low knowledge, 37 per cent in the medium range, and roughly 32 per cent as highly knowledgeable.⁷ Applying their typology to Eurobarometer 61.0, 25 per cent of Europeans have low EU knowledge, 47 per cent fall in the middle category, and 28 per cent exhibit high knowledge. The differences are not substantial, but the ANES questions are open-ended and thus far more difficult than the Eurobarometer questions.

Utilizing data from the 2009 EES, Figure 2 offers an even clearer comparison of knowledge at the two levels. As with the Eurobarometer and ANES data, Europeans appear to know less about the EU than their national political system. The percentage of respondents unable to correctly answer any EU question is 5 per cent greater than those unable to answer any question about their national political system. The difference between national and EU knowledge in the other three categories is around 2 per cent. The results of a paired t-test of the two measures, as displayed in Table 1, confirm that EU knowledge is lower than national knowledge with a substantive difference of .10 on the four-point knowledge scale. Note also the easier questions about the EU than about national politics. In Great Britain, for example, respondents need only know that the EU has 27 member-states and

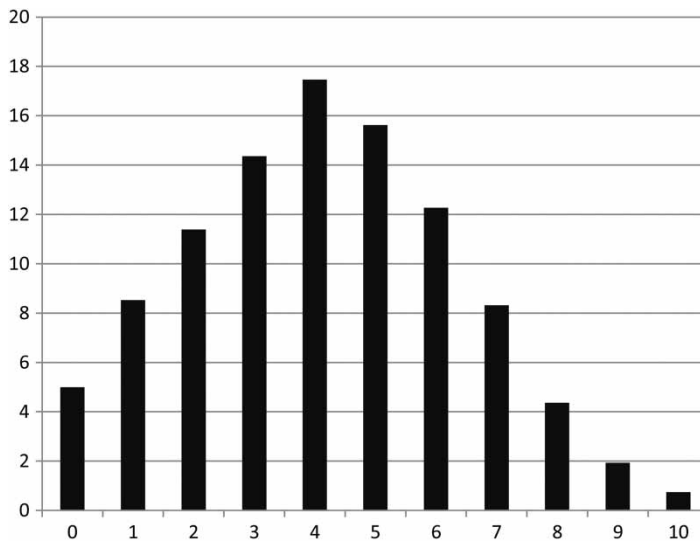


Figure 1. EU knowledge across the EU-25

Notes: The vertical axis is the percentage of respondents who fall into each category. The horizontal axis is the number of true/false factual questions answered correctly.

Sources: Eurobarometer 61.0 and Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2004.1.

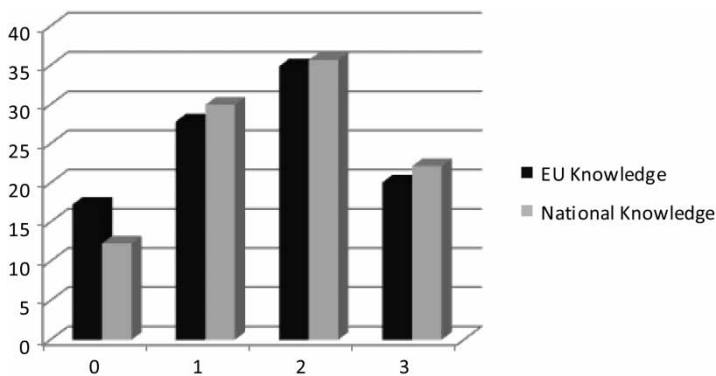


Figure 2. Differences in national and EU knowledge

Notes: The graph compares the performance of respondents on different knowledge scales, the first about European politics and the second about national politics. The vertical axis is the percentage of respondents who fall into each category. The horizontal axis is the number of true/false factual questions answered correctly.

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

that Switzerland is not a member. In contrast, the national questions require knowing the individual serving as Secretary of Schools and the exact number of members in the House of Commons.⁸ As such, the gap in national and European knowledge is likely even higher than suggested by these numbers.

Table 1. Paired T-Tests of national and European knowledge

	Mean
National knowledge	1.68 (.01)
European knowledge	1.58 (.01)
N observations	27,069
Pr(National knowledge > European knowledge) = 0.0000	

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

Next, I test for the predictors of knowledge at the European level. Education is measured (in both the Eurobarometer and the EES) by asking respondents their age when they stopped full-time education. With both surveys, I construct a four-part measure: (1) those individuals who stopped their education at or before 17 years; (2) stopped between the ages of 17 and 22; (3) stopped between the ages of 22 and 25; and (4) continued education after the age of 25. To measure income, the Eurobarometer asks respondents to estimate their total monthly earnings and place themselves on a scale of pre-designated income categories. The categories are adjusted for each country to control for levels of economic development. The Eurobarometer then harmonizes the income categories of all the EU countries and creates a single variable that places each respondent in one of four quartiles. The EES measures income with a question that asks respondents to place their family's standard of living on a scale ranging from 1 (poor) to 7 (rich). The occupation measures and the measure of skill level are all drawn from questions asking respondents their current job. Additionally, both analyses include controls for location, sex, age, political ideology and sense of political efficacy.

Given the likelihood of country-level effects, multilevel modelling is the most appropriate technique for analysing this data; however, country-level variations should not be taken for granted (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). Using the Eurobarometer 61.0 data, I estimate an ANOVA model that tests for variation in EU knowledge at the individual and country levels. Table 2 presents these results. Nearly 23 per cent of the variance in EU knowledge is explained at the country level, a larger proportion than that attributed to country factors in explaining attitudes toward the EU (Anderson & Singer, 2008). This finding confirms that knowledge is affected by country-specific factors and that multilevel modelling is best-suited for analysing this data.

Table 2. ANOVA of EU knowledge at the national and European levels

	EU knowledge	SE
Constant	4.21**	.13
Individual-level variance	2.14**	
Country-level variance	.64**	
N individual-level observations	25,321	
N country-level observations	25	

Notes: ** denotes significance > .01.

Sources: Eurobarometer 61.0 and Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2004.1. The merged EB 61/CCEB file has 28,340 cases prior to any changes made to the data.

Table 3 presents the results of a multilevel linear regression using Eurobarometer 61.0 data. Consistent with prior research on national knowledge, education has a pronounced effect on EU knowledge. Moving up one level on the education scale improves performance on the 10-point knowledge battery by well over a third of a point. However, whereas prior research suggests that education accounts for much of income's relationship with knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), Table 3 indicates that income has nearly as strong an effect as education on EU knowledge. Moving up one quartile on the harmonized income scale leads to an improvement of .22 on the 10-point knowledge battery. The standardized Beta coefficients are also similar: .15 for education and .12 for income.

The occupation of an individual does not appear to affect their knowledge. None of the coefficients associated with working in agriculture, business or a service-related industry achieve statistical significance. There is, however, evidence that skill level affects knowledge. Working as a trained professional (such as a lawyer or accountant) is correlated with

Table 3. Individual-level predictors of EU knowledge

	EU Knowledge
Level of education	.39** (.02)
Income quartile	.24** (.02)
Farmer/fisher	.04 (.15)
Business	.02 (.08)
Services-related industry	.08 (.05)
Professional	.41** (.05)
Unskilled labourer	-.32** (.05)
Sense of efficacy at EU level	.33** (.02)
Location (lives in city)	.23** (.04)
Sex	-.62** (.03)
Age	-.004** (.0009)
Ideological polarization	-.12** (.01)
Variance components	
Random intercept between countries	.54 (.08)
Wald chi(2) statistic	2567.89
N individual observations	17,150
N contextual observations	25

Notes: ** denotes significance > .01, *denotes significance > .05.

Sources: Eurobarometer 61.0 and Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2004.1. The merged EB 61/CCEB file has 28,340 cases prior to any changes made to the data.

greater knowledge, while working as an unskilled manual labourer is associated with lower knowledge. All of the control variables achieve significance, suggesting that EU knowledge is higher amongst younger men living in large cities, who are more ideologically polarized and have a greater sense of efficacy within the EU.

Moving on to the EES analysis, the first two models in Table 4 summarize the results of analyses comparing the predictors of knowledge at the national and European levels. As the EES only includes three questions about national politics and four questions about the EU, each of the following models is analysed using multilevel ordered logistic regression. The

Table 4. Comparing knowledge at the national and European levels

	Model 1 National knowledge	Model 2 EU knowledge	Model 3 EU knowledge
Level of education	.02** (.002)	.03** (.002)	.03** (.002)
Income	.07** (.01)	.06** (.01)	.05** (.01)
Farm owner/manager	-.03 (.11)	-.05 (.10)	-.01 (.11)
Business	.46** (.05)	.45** (.05)	.41** (.06)
Services-related industry	-.07 (.04)	-.09* (.04)	-.08 (.05)
Professional	.39** (.03)	.39** (.03)	.36** (.04)
Unskilled labourer	-.37** (.05)	-.57** (.05)	-.67** (.06)
Sense of efficacy	-.02 (.01)	-.0004 (.01)	-.02 (.01)
Location (lives in city)	-.01 (.03)	.19** (.03)	.2** (.03)
Sex	-.58** (.02)	-.68** (.02)	-.65** (.03)
Age	.01** (.0007)	.01** (.0007)	.01** (.0008)
Ideological polarization	-.003 (.002)	-.01* (.002)	-.01* (.002)
Party manifesto EU mentions			.01 (.04)
EU media coverage			.98* (.49)
Variance components			
Random intercept between countries	.32 (.08)	.22 (.03)	.34 (.05)
Condition number	336.67	288.09	981.04
N individual obs.	22,920	22,920	17,296
N contextual obs.	27	27	20

Notes: ** denotes significance > .01, *denotes significance > .05.

Sources: 2009 European Election Study, Comparative Manifesto Project, and EES Longitudinal Media Study. The EES file has 27,069 cases prior to any changes made to the data. The CMP data was not available for Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and the Netherlands.

reported coefficients represent the effects of a one unit increase in the predictor variable on the ordered log-odds of falling in a higher knowledge category.

This analysis offers mixed support for the arguments concerning education and income. Income does indeed have a larger effect on EU knowledge than education, but this is also true at the national level (in fact, income has an even stronger effect than education at the national level). While slightly different from past research, these results do not reveal substantial differences between the two levels. [Table 4](#) affirms the earlier findings on skill levels from the Eurobarometer 61.0 analysis. Trained professionals tend to demonstrate higher EU knowledge, while unskilled labourers tend to exhibit lower EU knowledge. As with income and education, these results are largely the same at the national and European levels.

That pattern holds for many of the control variables. Older individuals and men tend to demonstrate greater knowledge of both national politics and the EU, while greater media exposure promotes knowledge at both levels and a sense of political efficacy has no effect at either level. There are also some differences between the two levels. The coefficient for working in a services-related industry does not reach statistical significance at the national level. City-dwellers appear to know more about the EU, while location does not have an effect on national knowledge. Greater ideological polarization is associated with higher EU knowledge, but does not have an effect on national knowledge. While notable, these differences do not significantly alter the overall story that similar conditions explain knowledge at the two levels.

The existing research suggests that political elites and the media do not provide information about EU affairs as frequently or as reliably as information about national politics. The public may consequently discount these sources when looking for information about the EU. To investigate this possibility, I rely on data from the European Election Study Longitudinal Media Study (Banducci *et al.*, 2010) and the Comparative Manifestoes Project (CMP) (Volkens *et al.*, 2011). The EESLMP analyses media content using a sample of 48,983 national television news programmes and newspaper stories from each EU member-state, published or aired in the three weeks prior to the June 2009 European Parliamentary elections. Each story in the EESLMP dataset is coded according to whether it mentions the EU at all and whether it provides a positive, balanced or negative account of the EU. Across Europe, the EU was mentioned or evaluated in nearly 58 per cent of stories printed or aired in the period immediately prior to the 2009 EP elections.

The CMP analyses the manifestoes of political parties to identify the number of references to specific topics. For example, coders note each instance (sentence or quasi-sentence) in which a manifesto makes a favourable or unfavourable reference to the EU. The CMP then reports the percentage of positive and negative EU messages (out of the total number of sentences and quasi-sentences) in each party's manifesto. This paper utilizes CMP scores published in association with elections between 2004 and 2009. The CMP sample includes 133 party manifestoes from 20 of the 27 EU member-states. Each party's EU score is weighted by that party's vote share in the national election prior to publication of its manifesto. The scores for all of a country's political parties are then tallied to develop a country score. There is little variation in the CMP scores. The space devoted to the EU in party manifestoes ranges from 1.07 per cent on average in Slovenia to 5.86 per cent in Luxembourg, with a mean score of 2.81 per cent.

The third model in [Table 4](#) analyses the individual-level predictors of EU knowledge together with these country-level measures of media coverage and elite cues. Greater

media coverage appears to improve knowledge at the European level. However, the coefficient for the CMP indicator does not achieve statistical significance, confirming the expectations that elite rhetoric has little effect on knowledge at the European level. Most of the individual-level predictors are unaffected by the inclusion of the two country-level measures. The one exception is that the coefficient for working in a services-related industry loses significance in the third model. While these results are largely consistent with earlier research on the effects of the information environment (Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006; Kuklinski *et al.*, 2001), it is notable that elites do not influence knowledge even when discussing the EU with greater frequency. As theorized, the public may simply disregard elite cues when they are clearly unreliable as sources of political information.

Conclusions

Meaningful participation in the political process requires knowledge. To act as a competent citizen in a multilevel political system, one must be able to recognize the basic roles of the different political institutions at each level. The long-standing wisdom within behavioural research is that many Americans are unable or unwilling to perform these basic cognitive functions (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987; Neuman, 1986). Critics of the EU often assume that Europeans are similarly uninformed about EU affairs (Lord & Harris, 2006; Siedentop, 2000). This is not an unreasonable assumption – the EU is a large, complex and distant collection of political bodies and information about EU politics may not be as easily accessible as at the national level. However, there is no prior effort, of which I am aware, to verify or explain the public's ignorance about the EU.

As it turns out, the public does not appear to understand the EU as well as their national political systems. Even with easier factual questions, survey respondents perform worse on EU knowledge batteries than on their national counterparts. These findings suggest that federal or multilevel political systems may create additional complications for developing an informed citizenry. As local, regional and/or supranational governments assume greater policy-making responsibilities, citizens must observe and understand a larger number of political institutions in order to ensure democratic accountability. Particularly in a political system as complex as the EU, that additional knowledge burden may be more than can be managed by most individuals.

Moreover, the structural conditions that promote greater knowledge about national politics may not offer as much support at other levels of governance. This paper theorized that financial resources and/or skill-sets (both of which allow individuals to benefit from European integration) may supplant education as the strongest predictors of knowledge at the European level. An individual's income is, indeed, one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of EU knowledge, even controlling for level of education. Further, an individual's skill level appears to be strongly related to their understanding of European integration. Professionals, managers and supervisors tend to know more about the EU than unskilled labourers such as farm hands. That income and skill level influence EU knowledge may not be that surprising as the EU is first and foremost an economic entity, but these predictors have not been attributed as much importance in national studies of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

That said, these results do not suggest many differences in the predictors of national and European knowledge. An individual's level of education still has the strongest effect of all the micro-level predictors and most of the factors identified in past research appear to influence EU knowledge. There is thus reason to believe that theories from American-based

research can be applied to Europe, if not other contexts. In seeking to identify the potential biases in survey data, we might then focus on the same structural factors that correspond with distortions in national survey data (Althaus, 2003). From the point of view of European leaders, the most effective strategy for improving aggregate levels of European knowledge may well be for the EU to focus on mechanisms of political learning that have worked at the national level, such as the media and public schools and universities.

This paper suggests a number of potential lines of future research. Foremost amongst these, there are several contextual variables that may be responsible for country-level variations. Nearly all of the efforts to examine contextual-based knowledge variations have focused on electoral institutions (Berggren, 2001; Gordon & Segura, 1997; Hellwig, 2011). There are a number of other potential variables to be explored, including the quality of political institutions, socio-economic development and broader cultural conditions. Additionally, the study of both the causes and effects of knowledge would benefit from more refined measures. As already noted, domain-specific measures offer advantages over the general knowledge indicators currently available in European mass surveys. Moreover, open-ended questions would offer a more valid indicator of political knowledge than the close-ended format used in the Eurobarometer and EES (Elff, 2009). Such improvements to survey instruments might offer a better idea of how much Europeans actually know about the EU.

Notes

- ¹ The author thanks Robert Rohrschneider, Edward Carmines, Tim Hellwig, Beate Sissenich and Janice Duchene for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
- ² Scholars occasionally refer to political knowledge as political information or even political sophistication (though the latter is more often used in reference to the consistency of ideological constraints). While the terminology varies, there does appear to be some consensus on the basic concept: knowledge is comprised of the facts about a political system within an individual's long-term memory that can easily be recalled to interpret and understand events within that political system (Price, 1998; Price & Zaller, 1993).
- ³ Note that this study is based on panel data from Denmark and the Netherlands. The amount of time that media outlets devote to European integration varies across Europe (Anderson, 2004; de Vreese, 2002), suggesting that a larger cross-sectional study may reveal different patterns.
- ⁴ Identical questions were used in Eurobarometer 61.0 and the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2004.1, but were fielded in separate surveys as the candidate countries did not become EU members until May of that year. Together, the two surveys cover all of the member states that would eventually comprise the EU-25.
- ⁵ Scholars have identified two types of knowledge: general knowledge about the fundamental structures, institutions and roles of a political system and domain-specific knowledge about the programmes, policies and issues of the day within that system (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992).
- ⁶ The United Kingdom and Lithuania perform the worst with aggregated mean scores of 2.87 and 3.34 (out of 10), respectively; Sweden and Luxembourg perform the best with mean scores of 5.3 and 5.65, respectively.
- ⁷ Placement is determined by the number of questions answered correctly: 0–2 questions in the low, 3–5 in the middle and 6–10 in the high category.
- ⁸ The designers of the EES experimented with increasingly easier questions about the EU until they arrived at a relatively similar distribution of knowledge at the national and European levels.

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Appendix A

The true/false items from Eurobarometer 61.0:

- The EU currently consists of 12 member-states.
- The European Community was created just after World War I, in the early 1920s.
- The European flag is blue with yellow stars.
- On the European flag, there is one star for each member country.
- The headquarters of the European Commission are in Strasbourg.

- The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of the EU.
- The President of the European Commission is directly elected by the citizens of the EU.
- The EU has its own anthem.
- Each year, there is a Europe Day in all of the countries of the EU.
- The next elections to the European Parliament will take place in June 2006.

The true/false items about the EU from the 2009 European Election Study:

- Switzerland is a member of the EU.
- The EU has 25 member-states.
- Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament.
- Every six months, a different member-state becomes president of the Council of the EU.

The true/false items about national politics (example taken from Great Britain) from the 2009 European Election Study:

- The British Secretary of State for Children, Schools, and Families is Ed Balls.
- Individuals must be 25 or older to stand as candidates in British general elections.
- There are 969 members of the British House of Commons.