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Rapeli, Lauri

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Accuracy of self-assessments of political sophistication

Lauri Rapeli, Åbo Akademi University (lauri.rapeli@abo.fi)

Abstract

Political knowledge is the primary indicator of political sophistication, which refers to expertise in the realm of politics. Sophisticated individuals hold more accurate, stable and consistent political opinions and display many behaviors that are widely considered conducive for democracy. Political knowledge is also largely synonymous with political awareness. For methodological and pragmatic reasons, it would often be convenient to assess individuals' knowledge about politics through survey self-assessments. Surveys are increasingly conducted online without supervision by a professional interviewer, which makes it impossible to reliably ask knowledge questions due to googling. Self-assessments offer a potential way around the problem, but their reliability has not yet been ascertained. The scarce evidence about the accuracy of such evaluations and research on cognitive biases suggests that they are likely to be inaccurate. This article offers evidence of the accuracy of self-assessments of political sophistication among various sociodemographic groups. The analysis makes use of a recently gathered data focusing on political sophistication in Finland among a representative sample of the voting age population. The findings offer some optimism regarding self-assessments as a proxy for more extensive measures of political awareness. However, age and gender-related differences in accuracy are cause for some concern.

Introduction

Political sophistication refers to expertise in the domain of politics (Luskin, Robert 1990:332). It is the ability of the individual to make sense of politics. It is widely held among democracy scholars that a well-informed citizenry is as a key prerequisite for the functioning of representative democracy, which makes political sophistication an important area of study in the broader field of political behavior.

To understand politics, a person should be familiar with at least the most basic facts pertaining to politics. Consequently, the range of factual knowledge a person holds about politics has been commonly used as the primary empirical indicator of political sophistication in survey research. In order to get reliable results, surveys that include factual knowledge items are usually conducted as face-to-face interviews. Other survey methods, such as online, telephone or mail-in surveys run an obvious risk of respondents checking the correct responses, resulting in heavily inflated sophistication levels. However, relying on face-to-face-interviews for solid measurement of sophistication presents significant hurdles for scholars. Conducting such interviews is both time-consuming and very expensive.

To make matters worse, survey response rates continue to decline, as they have for several decades both in the US and elsewhere, due to problems with both reaching potential respondents and refusals (Koen Beullens 2018; Leeper 2019). To circumvent these difficulties in respondent recruitment, it would be useful for survey researchers to employ several different methods of data gathering in order to maximize the number of responses. In fact, there are indications that mail-in surveys might be making a slow comeback as a reliable method of reaching at least the American population, and response rates in mail-in surveys are showing some encouraging signs too (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014:12).

It is, however, difficult to see how the reliability problems regarding unsupervised factual knowledge measurement could be avoided through other survey methods besides face-to-face-interviews. Recent findings suggest that given the opportunity, survey respondents regularly look up answers when responding to political knowledge questions in online surveys (Clifford and Jerit 2016). In an attempt to explore a possible solution, in this study I analyze the suitability of self-assessed political sophistication as a potential proxy for political knowledge questions. Although Solhaug et al. offer a different account of the measurement of political awareness elsewhere in this book, political knowledge is a conventional indicator for political awareness. As will be argued in more detail below, measuring political awareness through political knowledge is nevertheless likely to capture the same basic attitudes towards politics, as well as behaviors, as the more extensive measurement scheme proposed Solhaug et al. Consequently, whereas Solhaug et al. offer a theory-based, all-encompassing approach to the measurement of political awareness, the aim of this Chapter is to evaluate the minimalistic possibility of asking only one question to measure political awareness indirectly, yet reliably. The objective is therefore to offer some guidance to students of political awareness regarding options for empirical measurement. Together with Solhaug et al. this Chapter provides two different contributions to the discussions about how political awareness can be measured.

Self-assessments are commonplace in surveys. Asking respondents to place themselves on various scales, such as the left-right ideological continuum is among the most widely used questions in surveys of political attitudes. Self-assessed interest in politics is another example. In public health, self-assessed health is considered as a robust, albeit not entirely unproblematic, measure of a person's overall health status (Jylhä 2009). If a self-assessment of one's own level of political sophistication would prove out to be strongly correlated with factual knowledge, both at the level of individuals and across various sociodemographic groups, it could be safely used in online, telephone and mail-in surveys without supervision by an interviewer.

To evaluate the reliability of self-assessed sophistication as a proxy measure, I use survey data gathered in Finland in 2020. The survey includes a self-assessment of sophistication and a 12-item battery of political knowledge items. I find that overall there is a fairly strong association between political knowledge and self-assessment. In direct support of the assumed Dunning-Kruger effect, individuals whose political knowledge scores are low are most prone to overestimation. In terms of age and education, the accuracy of self-assessment does not vary dramatically. However, women display a stronger tendency to both overestimate and underestimate than men. Overall, the findings provide support for the idea that self-assessed sophistication could be best used as a proxy for factual knowledge items in situations where accurate measurement of individual differences in sophistication is not necessary.

The problem of asking knowledge questions

Factual knowledge questions are best asked in face-to-face-interviews, but problems in respondent recruitment have prompted scholars to examine alternatives. Researchers have so far focused on studying the extent to which external information searches, in other words cheating, affect the measurement of political knowledge in self-administered web-surveys. The findings are not encouraging. Several studies have concluded that the readily available access to information sources on the internet severely damages the possibilities for a reliable use of factual knowledge questions in web surveys. There is always a high risk of the respondents checking the correct answers online (Clifford and Jerit 2016; Smith, Clifford, and Jerit 2020). It is perhaps understandable that given the opportunity, many respondents cheat, but for survey researchers it presents a serious problem.

In an experimental setup, Clifford and Jerit (2016) found that asking respondents to commit to not using external information sources when answering factual knowledge questions reduced cheating but it did not eliminate it. The finding offers some hope by showing that appealing to respondents' honesty has at least some effect. However, simply asking people not to cheat did not do the trick. What was needed, was a specific question asking for the respondent's explicit promise not to cheat. In the same study, the authors also reported that cheating was particularly prevalent among a student sample, suggesting that a need to self-enhance performance in such a knowledge test further increases dishonesty. Also using experimental designs, Gummer and Kunz (2019) found that people with a high education are more likely to seek external information in order to answer factual questions correctly. People with a high education are

usually high-performers in any case, which suggests that if they also have a stronger tendency to cheat, they would like stand out as even more knowledgeable in relation to others in web-based surveys. To be sure, the most pressing concern is how external information sources distort the factual knowledge data produced in unsupervised surveys. Because some respondent groups are more active cheaters than others, the data from such surveys is not valid and it ‘does not replicate canonical findings from the public opinion literature’ (Smith et al. 2020:151).

Existing research makes it clear that unsupervised factual knowledge items are an unreliable method for measuring political sophistication in surveys. They not only result in untrustworthy data in terms of sophistication, but also make it difficult to know what is exactly is being measured; political knowledge, the ability to quickly search for the right answer or the motivation to do so? Or perhaps a combination of all of these? The forthcoming analysis examines another possible way forward, namely the use of an indirect, self-assessment measure. Its usefulness depends primarily on how accurately it can predict actual levels of political knowledge. The analysis is guided by the Dunning-Kruger framework, which is probably the most well-known approach to (erroneous) self-assessment.

The difficulty of objective self-assessment

As already mentioned, surveys routinely ask respondents to self-assess various matters, which relate to their personal relationship and attachment to politics – interest, strength of partisanship, political ideology and other fundamental political beliefs. In some sense, the entire survey method relies on the notion that respondents are able to produce meaningful responses to questions, many of which require personal evaluations.

Self-assessing political sophistication might not be quite as easy as attitudinal questions, because it involves an evaluation of competence and personal ability, not just of a belief. As demonstrated most notably by Kruger and Dunning (1999; see also Dunning 2011), accuracy of self-evaluations is particularly low in domains where people have low competence; people are often bad at recognizing their own incompetence. The tendency of an average performer to think that (s)he is in fact above average, was a well-documented and a fairly uncontested phenomenon already before the work by Kruger and Dunning, with numerous examples from different domains (Kruger and Dunning 1999). However, Kruger and Dunning made two important additions to the scholarly understanding of inflated self-evaluations. Firstly, they showed that the evaluations were most flawed among low-performers, and secondly that the

underlying mechanism could be attributed to metacognition, or lack of ‘self-monitoring skills’ (Chi et al.1982). By this, the researchers meant that the lack of the very same skills, which people were asked to self-assess, was also the root cause of why they gave an inflated evaluation. This tragedy has become known as the ‘Dunning-Kruger effect’: ‘those with limited knowledge in a domain suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it’ (Kruger and Dunning 1999).

Self-assessing political sophistication

In the specific case of political sophistication, the Dunning-Kruger effect could potentially have significant consequences for democratic governance. A strong normative case has been made for the idea that in order to flourish, representative democracy needs an informed citizenry (e.g. Rapeli 2014). Without some degree of political sophistication, the will of a democratic public cannot guide public policy. If citizens are overconfident about the extent to which they understand what goes on in politics, informed democratic debate becomes difficult and the citizenry may become vulnerable to the processes of motivated reasoning (see also Anson 2018).

Despite this, political scientists have only rarely empirically examined self-assessment of political sophistication. However, two previous studies are particularly worth a mention. Graham (2020) analyzed how self-assessed accuracy of a person’s response to various knowledge items was related to the ability to actually get the answer right. The analysis relied on a nationally representative sample (n=1,729) of US adults, who were asked 24 knowledge questions and after each one they were asked to rate the certainty of their response on a 5-step scale. According to Graham, the American respondents had a pretty good grasp of what they knew and what they did not know. On the whole, certainty predicted a correct response. The significance of Graham’s analysis is that it demonstrates how certainty evaluations can give researchers a lot of information about how misperceptions, beliefs and factual knowledge are connected and how they affect behavior. The conventional way of only asking factual knowledge questions does not allow researchers to analyze, for example, the impact of false beliefs, because certainty assessments are not included.

Instead of response certainty, Anson (2018) examined the Dunning-Kruger effect in what is, to the best of my knowledge, the only recent empirical study from the field of political

sophistication to do so. Through two separate experiments, Anson found a clear Dunning-Kruger effect, as low-performers tended to overestimate their own performance in a standard political knowledge survey test. Additionally, he found that Republican identifiers were more reliant on partisan stereotypes than Democrat identifiers in assessing the sophistication of hypothetical others, and that partisanship caused respondents to also give higher assessments about themselves. The findings suggest that there is also a partisan component that affects how people perceive of political sophistication. However, Anson's analysis used a convenience sample available through Qualtrics and another non-probabilistic sample provided by MTurk, causing some concerns about the generalizability of the results.

The analysis in this study has a slightly different focus. Instead of looking at response certainty or the influence of partisan thinking on self-assessment, the emphasis is more strictly on evaluating how well suited self-assessment is as a survey measure of sophistication. As the analysis will show, self-assessments provide an easy survey solution, whenever rough estimates of political awareness are sufficient.

Identifying low-performers in political sophistication

Previous research on political sophistication has rather unequivocally identified who the likely 'low-performers' are, and who might therefore be most susceptible to the Dunning-Kruger effect in self-evaluations of political sophistication. Women, young people and the low educated have been pretty consistently found to have lower levels of sophistication than their counterparts (for overview, see Rapeli 2014:45ff). Moreover, gender, age and education are among the most important sociodemographic determinants in terms of representativeness in survey samples, which makes including these variables particularly important even in the context of this study, because the analysis seeks to determine whether and how using self-evaluations would affect overall survey reliability.

Among the most widely debated topics in the field is the persistent gender gap in political knowledge, which portrays men as more knowledgeable than women (e.g. Ferrín, Fraile, and García-Albacete 2019). It has partly been attributed to the stronger tendency among men to guess, even when they do not know the right answer (Mondak and Anderson 2004). Especially in multiple choice and right/wrong questions, the chances of guessing the right answer are very good, which seems to lead to higher knowledge levels in surveys for men compared with women. Although guessing and overestimating are not the same thing, it seems plausible to

think that the two could be related. A propensity to guess could indicate a very self-assured style of reasoning, which could lead the individual to provide an answer to a knowledge question even when (s)he has no idea about the correct answer. This might suggest that some degree of over-confidence could be at play. If so, we should expect men to show a tendency to provide overly optimistic assessments of their own level of sophistication, and, perhaps, be less accurate than women. On the other hand, the tendency among women not to guess answers might be indicative of excessive pessimism regarding their own sophistication. Consequently, women might be equally inaccurate as men, but perhaps by underestimating their level of sophistication.

Although it is not clear exactly which age groups are more/less knowledgeable than others, the positive linkage between age and sophistication is well documented (e.g. Fraile and Fortin-Rittberger 2020). It is likely that the impact of age is to a great extent attributable to life-cycle effects: political knowledge accumulates with age through experience as politics becomes more relevant to the individual. When people enter the workforce, buy a home and maybe start a family, the societal stakes become higher and incentivize a closer following of politics. During youth, life focus is typically on other things. It is therefore understandable that young age usually predicts low political knowledge. Following the logic of Dunning and Kruger, younger age groups should therefore be less accurate in their self-evaluations and prone to overestimation. However, if the lower levels of sophistication among the young are due to them being indifferent to politics, it might reduce their tendency to over-estimate. If politics does not feel like something particularly salient, the individual might not feel the need to portray oneself as very knowledgeable about it, and probably will not have any unrealistic ideas about the personal level of political sophistication. Consequently, expectations regarding the relationship between age and self-assessments are unclear.

Along with gender, formal education is probably the strongest predictor of political sophistication. The likely explanation for the well-documented positive impact of education on sophistication (e.g. Elo and Rapeli 2010; Fraile 2011) is that a high educational degree is often a marker of family background, growth environment, and more generally, of social position. The logic of the Dunning-Kruger effect suggests that people with low education, who typically are low-performers in political knowledge items, would be most prone to overconfidence in self-evaluations of political sophistication. However, people with a high education often come from a background where political sophistication is somewhat of a social norm, might want to

portray themselves as more politically knowledgeable than they actually are. Consequently, high education might be related to overestimation due to a social desirability effect.

Data and variables

The survey data used in the analysis (n = 1,097) was gathered in Finland during 2020 through personal interviews by trained interviewers of a major survey research company. The respondents were recruited through personalized invitations, based on a random sample of the voting age population (VAP). To correct for imbalances in the data, the analysis uses weights to make the sample representative of the VAP in terms of age, gender and education.

The focus of the survey was to measure political sophistication, primarily through several political knowledge items. The survey included ten knowledge items, which were combined into a knowledge index for the forthcoming analyses. The items and the percentages of correct responses are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. The knowledge measure (n = 1,097)

Question¹	% correct responses
<i>The basis of our country's political system is the constitution. Where are the Powers of the State vested in Finland according to the Constitution?</i>	48
<i>Who is currently the Prime Minister of Finland and what party does this person represent?²</i>	80
<i>Out of the following, please select the parties that currently form the government.³</i>	42
<i>How often, at minimum, must parliamentary elections be held in Finland?</i>	91
<i>Who currently acts as the Speaker of the Parliament and what party does this person represent?²</i>	31
<i>The cooperation of which two parties has been termed 'red earth/clay'?</i>	79
<i>Finland follows the so-called principle of parliamentarism. Which of the following best describes this principle?</i>	48
<i>How much is Finland's annual government spending?</i>	29
<i>Which party has been a particularly active supporter of the so-called regional reform in Finland?</i>	76
<i>In Finland, employees' earned income is subject to income tax. Let's assume that Virtanen earns 2,000 euros and Herranen 5,000 euros</i>	89

<i>per month. Which of the following statements about Finnish income taxation do you think is closest to the truth?</i>	
<i>What political issue is the so-called activity model associated with?</i>	93
<i>Which of the following areas does the budget of the Finnish government allocate most funds in 2019?</i>	27

¹ Translations from Finnish by the author. Contact the author for response alternatives and details about the survey.

² Both the name and the party were required for a correct answer.

³ For a correct answer, the respondent had to identify all government parties from a list, without naming any other parties.

To form a knowledge scale, each correct answer was awarded one point, resulting in a scale ranging between 0 and 12. On average, the respondents answered seven questions correctly. Every respondent answered at least one question right and 15 respondents (1.4 %) answered all 12 questions correctly. The distribution is slightly negatively skewed, meaning that there is a concentration of values higher than the arithmetic mean.

For self-assessment, the analysis relies on the item ‘In your own assessment, how familiar are you with politics and societal matters?’ The English translation does not perhaps quite do justice to the original formulation. The Finnish-speaking respondents will have understood the question as pertaining to how well informed they are about politics, rather than ‘being familiar’ in a more general sense. The responses were recorded on a 5-step Likert-scale: ‘Very familiar’; ‘Familiar’; ‘Pretty familiar’; ‘Not very familiar’; ‘Not at all familiar’. The responses were recoded into a positive scale ranging from 0 to 1. One respondent responded ‘Cannot say’ and was excluded from the analysis.

With these variables, the analysis follows the conceptualization of political awareness by John Zaller (1992), which emphasizes the informational component of awareness and its significance for voting behavior. As argued in the Chapter by Solhaug et al. in this book, it can be useful to adopt a broader view of political awareness and also consider it in terms of other forms of participation and political orientations. Calling it a ‘mental model’, Solhaug et al. emphasize patterns of political thought, willingness to engage politically and, more generally, openness in approaching and encountering politics in daily life. Accordingly, Solhaug et al. propose a multidimensional measure of political awareness, which distinguishes between the formal and informal aspects of politics, without only focusing on voting and elections.

While the two approaches diverge conceptually, for empirical analysis the differences are perhaps less dramatic. Scholars have, for example, established that high political knowledge is

associated with political interest, which is the primary indicator of motivation to pay attention to politics (e.g. Prior 2005; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010), suggesting that political knowledge is likely connected to those cognitive models and behaviors Solhaug et al. theorize about. Additionally, there is not always a particularly sharp difference between voting and other ways of engaging with politics. In fact, voting also predicts unconventional forms of political participation (Stockemer 2014). This further suggests that although the analysis in this Chapter relies only on a measure of political knowledge, and a Zallerian approach to political awareness, the empirical findings would unlikely be drastically different if the analysis had used an indicator based on the logic of Solhaug et al. While the conceptual differences between Zaller and Solhaug et al. provide important and meaningful insights into the essence of the concept of political awareness, the empirical reality remains largely the same: individuals who are cognitively engaged in political affairs typically also know more about (conventional) politics.

Analysis

As a first step, let us first look at how political knowledge and self-assessment correlate among the relevant subgroups of respondents (Table 2). The correlation analysis provides a general understanding of how the two indicators are connected and if that connection varies significantly across the studied groups. To measure correlation between the two ordinal level variables, Kendall's tau is preferable to Spearman, because the number of respondents in the data is not very high.

Table 2. Correlation between political knowledge and self-assessment (Kendall's tau-b)

All (n=1,096)	.370***
Gender	
Female (545)	.267***
Male (551)	.389***
Age	
18-24 (79)	.323***
25-34 (181)	.445***
35-49 (262)	.435***

50-64 (277)	.327***
65-79 (236)	.246***
80- (61)	.423***
Education	
Comprehensive (110)	.380***
Vocational (259)	.340***
High School (113)	.340***
Polytechnic (338)	.335***
University (268)	.339***

Overall, the Kendall's tau coefficients suggest a robust association between objectively measured knowledge and self-evaluations. All associations are statistically significant at the .001-level. The association is remarkably similar across all educational levels, but there seems to be more variation across age groups and gender. Men have a larger coefficient, suggesting a stronger correlation between knowledge and self-assessment than among women. As regards age, the pattern is not straightforward. The strongest associations can be found between the ages 25 to 49 and then again in the oldest age group, 80+. The lowest associations are in the youngest age group and particularly among 65 to 79 year olds. Given that knowledge levels are often a bit lower among the youngest and the oldest age groups, these findings seem to suggest that it is also in these age groups where self-assessments are least reliable as proxies for objectively measurable knowledge. Consequently, the bivariate analysis in Table 2 provides initial backing for the patterns predicted by the Dunning-Kruger effect.

However, correlations can only reveal if two variables are linked, but not precisely how. As a second step, let us see how gender, age and education interact with self-assessments to predict political knowledge. This allows us to see whether there are differences in the linkages between self-assessment and actual knowledge among different types of individuals (Figures 1-3).

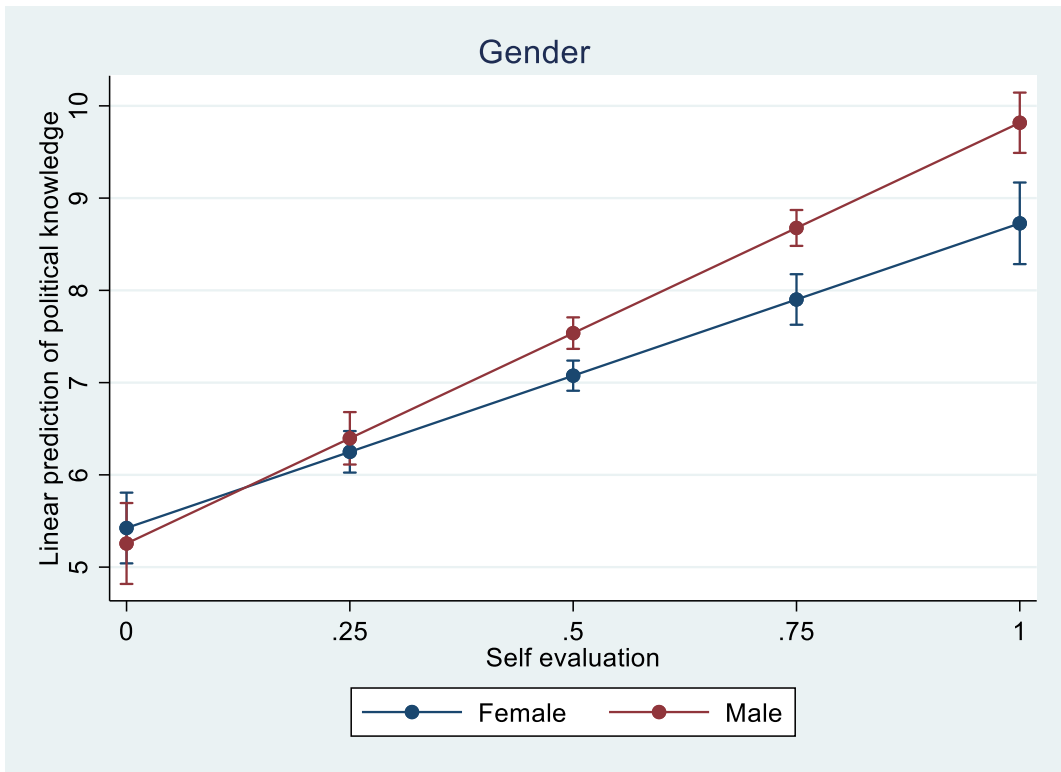


Figure 1. Self-assessment as a predictor of political knowledge by gender

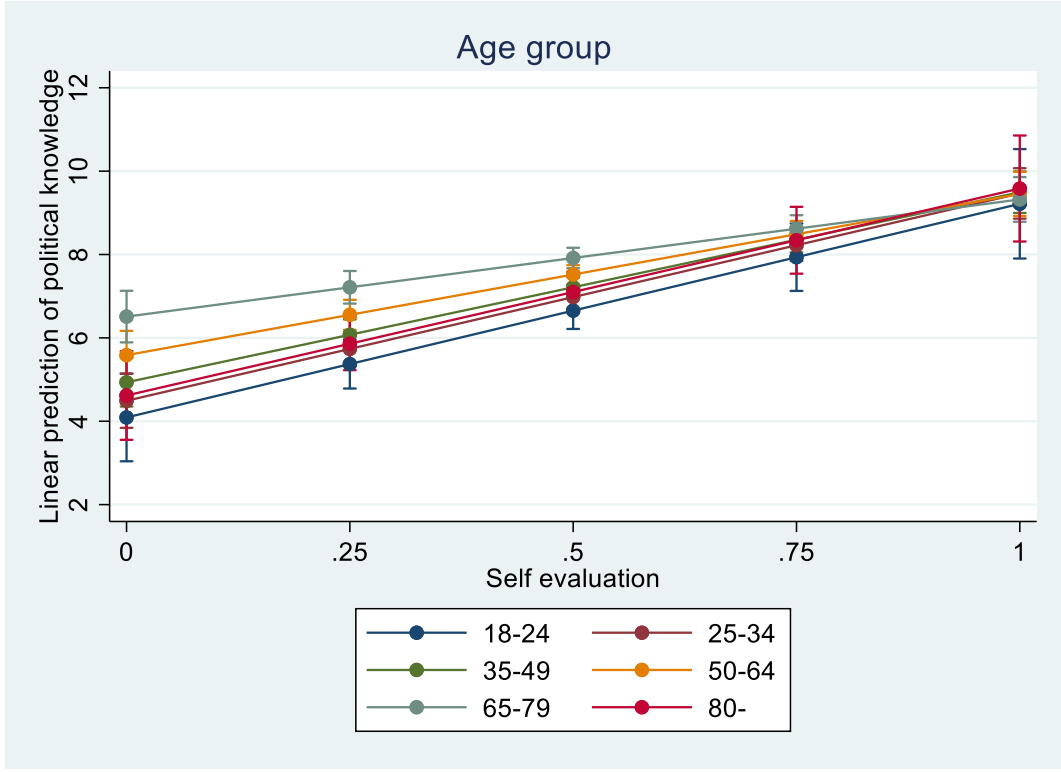


Figure 2. Self-assessment as a predictor of political knowledge by age group

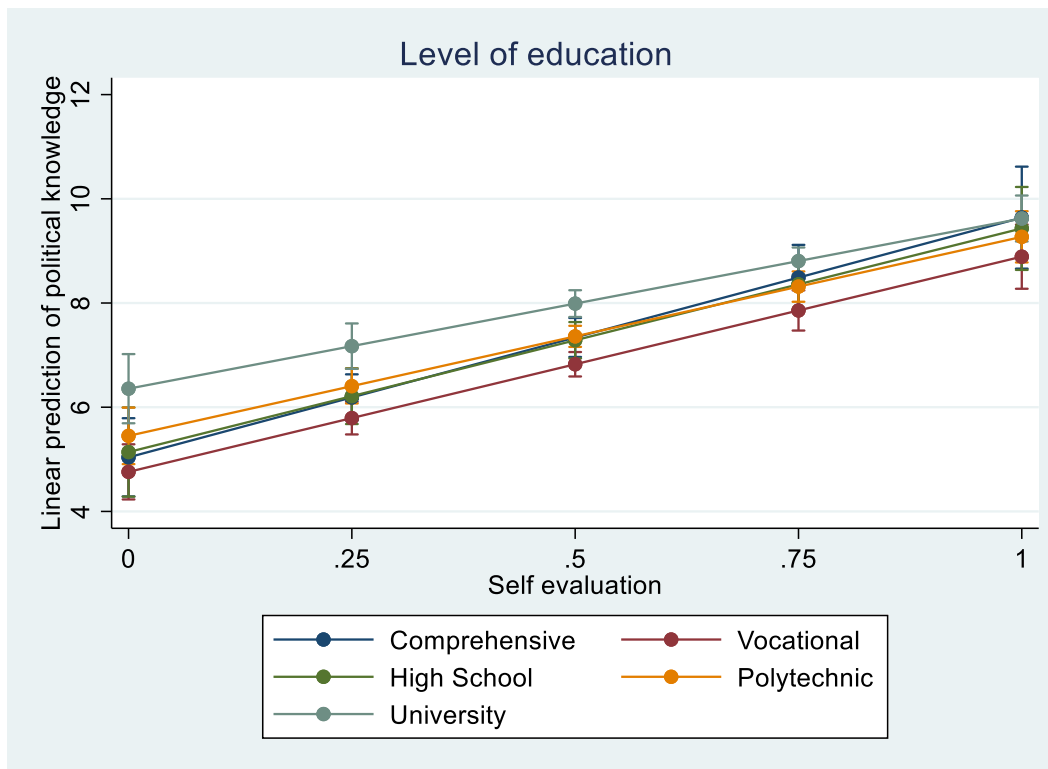


Figure 3. Self-assessment as a predictor of political knowledge by education

Figures 1-3 are based on linear regression analyses with interactions between self-assessment and gender, age and education. For more convenient reading, the findings are reported here only using the above figures, which show the linear predictions of political knowledge as a function of self-assessment, separately for each respondent group. The detailed results are available from the author upon request.

Figure 1 shows that self-assessment predicts political knowledge differently for men and women. A comparison of the coefficients suggests that for men, self-assessment is a stronger predictor of knowledge, which could mean that men make more accurate evaluations of their personal level of political sophistication. This gender difference is also statistically significant. For age and education, there are no statistically significant differences between the groups. In other words, self-assessment is an equally good (or bad) predictor of political knowledge regardless of age or education level. This is good news for survey research, because it seems that on the whole, self-assessments are a pretty reliable way to measure political knowledge across the spectrum of key individual-level determinants.

Although there are very few significant differences in terms of how closely self-assessments and observable levels of sophistication are connected, we still do not know whether there are systematic differences in underestimation or overestimation of political sophistication. Investigating this allows us to see the directionality of inaccuracies in self-assessments in terms of gender, age and education, and also at the population-level. Since the indicators for political knowledge and self-assessments are not perfectly commensurable, measuring under- and overestimation is not a straightforward task. The following analyses are therefore based on a middle-of-the-road measurement strategy.

To categorize the respondents in terms of the accuracy of their self-assessment, they were first split into two groups according to the measure of political knowledge: those below the average of the population mean for knowledge, and those at average or higher of the population mean. Second, they were divided into three groups according to self-assessment: 1) those who said they felt they understood politics and societal matters ‘very well’ or ‘well’ were coded as giving a ‘high self-assessment’; 2) those who said ‘somewhat’ were coded as giving an ‘intermediate self-assessment’ and 3) those who said ‘not very well’ or ‘poorly’ were coded as giving a ‘low self-assessment’. In a third step, these categorizations of the knowledge variable and the self-assessment variable were combined into an ‘accuracy of self-evaluation’ variable (Table 3). Those coded ‘accurate’, are either 1) respondents whose knowledge score was below average and who gave a low self-assessment; or 2) respondents whose knowledge score was above average and who gave a high self-assessment. Those coded as making an ‘underestimation’ were respondents whose knowledge score was above average, but who gave either an intermediate or low self-assessment. Those coded as making an ‘overestimation’ were respondents whose knowledge score was below average, but who gave either an intermediate or high self-assessment. Admittedly, there are other thinkable ways of categorizing. Without guidance from previous literature, this categorization was chosen because the resulting group sizes are roughly comparable, which is an advantage when making group comparisons.

Table 3. Accuracy of self-evaluations in the sample (n=1,097)

Accurate	41 % (n=450)
Underestimation	30 % (326)
Overestimation	29 % (320)

Based on the broadly defined categories, the operationalization in Table 3 provides an overall picture of how accurately people are able to assess their political sophistication. The picture gives cause for at least some optimism. About 40 % of the respondents could be categorized as giving an accurate estimation of their personal level of sophistication. The share of respondents that under- or overestimate is in both cases approximately one-third, which means that about 60 percent of the respondents provide a self-assessment that is at least somewhat inaccurate. It is, of course, purely a matter of taste whether one thinks this means the glass is half-full or half empty.

Although direct comparisons cannot be made, the findings here seem to roughly align with Anson (2018), who also found clear support for the Dunning-Kruger effect in political sophistication. However, the Dunning-Kruger effect can also be examined in terms of degree. In Table 4, we compare the bottom 20 percent of the respondents on the political knowledge scale with respondents on higher levels of political knowledge by cross-tabulating knowledge groups with self-assessed political sophistication. This allows us to see, in a very straightforward manner, how self-assessment and actual performance in knowledge questions interact. Moreover, it allows us to address the Dunning-Kruger effect by demonstrating how the bottom 20 percent performers evaluate themselves.

Table 4. Self-evaluations at different levels of political knowledge (n=1,096)

<i>In your own assessment, how familiar are you with politics and societal matters?</i>					
	Very familiar	Familiar	Pretty familiar	Not very familiar	Not at all familiar
Top 20 %	21 % (41)	38 % (73)	37 % (72)	4 % (8)	-
Middle 60 %	5 % (34)	23 % (161)	48 % (333)	21 % (143)	2 % (16)
Bottom 20 %	1 % (3)	8 % (18)	42 % (91)	40 % (85)	8 % (18)

Note: 'Cannot say' responses excluded.

Only 9 percent among low-performers in the political knowledge scale make a serious overestimation. These 21 individuals make up 2 percent of the entire survey population, strongly suggesting that extreme cases of the type identified by Dunning and Kruger, are quite

few. About half of the bottom 20 percent have said they felt not at all or not very familiar with politics and societal matters, which can be considered an accurate assessment. A further 42 percent said they were pretty familiar, which might be a slight overestimation, but not very far from the truth. Consequently, compared with Table 3 above, the tougher test of the Dunning-Kruger-effect in Table 4 suggests that it only has a rather marginal impact overall.

Table 4 also suggests that self-assessments are, overall, somewhat realistic. Almost 60 percent of the top 20 percent felt very familiar or familiar with politics. Among these high performers, not a single respondent said they were not at all familiar with politics. In the large middle category, over 90 percent place themselves in the middle categories in terms of self-assessment, suggesting that a vast majority of them have a good understanding of how familiar they are with politics. Although Table 4 does not provide a detailed view into the interaction between knowledge and self-assessment, it unequivocally demonstrates a high degree of overlap, in a bivariate cross-tabulation.

The bottom 20 percent, who are here dubbed ‘low-performers’, are nevertheless worth a closer look, because according to the Dunning-Kruger effect, it is this group that is most prone to overestimation. Using the same variables as before, Figure 4 below displays the extent to which the chosen background variables predict overestimation of self-assessed sophistication. The point estimates are the odds ratios from a logistic regression analysis, which predicts the likelihood of a person overestimating their sophistication level. Figure 4 shows the odds ratios of the chosen explanatory variables for predicting an overestimation of a person’s own level of sophistication. In this analysis, ‘low-performers’ are the bottom 20 percent on the political knowledge measure, as in Table 4 above.

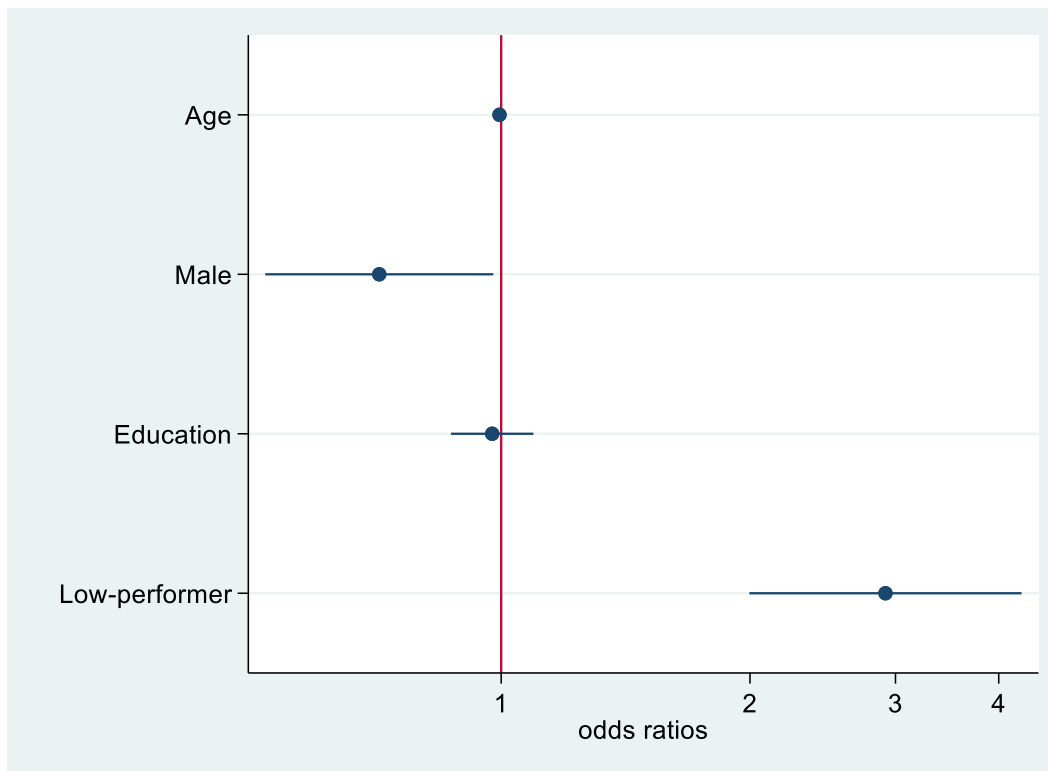


Figure 4. Predictors of overestimation

The figure demonstrates a pattern that is consistent with the Dunning-Kruger effect. Individuals who perform poorly in the political knowledge items, are three times more likely than all others to overestimate their personal level of political sophistication. Being a male is associated with a lower tendency to overestimate, which, given the previous findings concerning men’s tendency to guess in surveys, is maybe a bit surprising. Education and age are not statistically significant predictors of overestimation. However, if low-performance is dropped from the model, young age, the female gender and low education all become statistically significant predictors of overestimation (analysis available from the author). Therefore, the findings largely confirm the original findings by Dunning and Kruger, as they show that low-performers are much more likely to overestimate and that the typical sociodemographic determinants of low performance are also determinants of overestimation.

Finally, Figure 5 turns this constellation around and looks at the predictors of underestimation, which was previously found to be just as prevalent in the survey, as overestimation (see Table 3). Instead of low-performers, the analysis now includes ‘high-performers’. This group (n=194) consists of those respondents who scored 10 or more on the knowledge scale. They represent

the top 18 percent of the survey population, which is comparable to the bottom 20 percent analyzed previously.

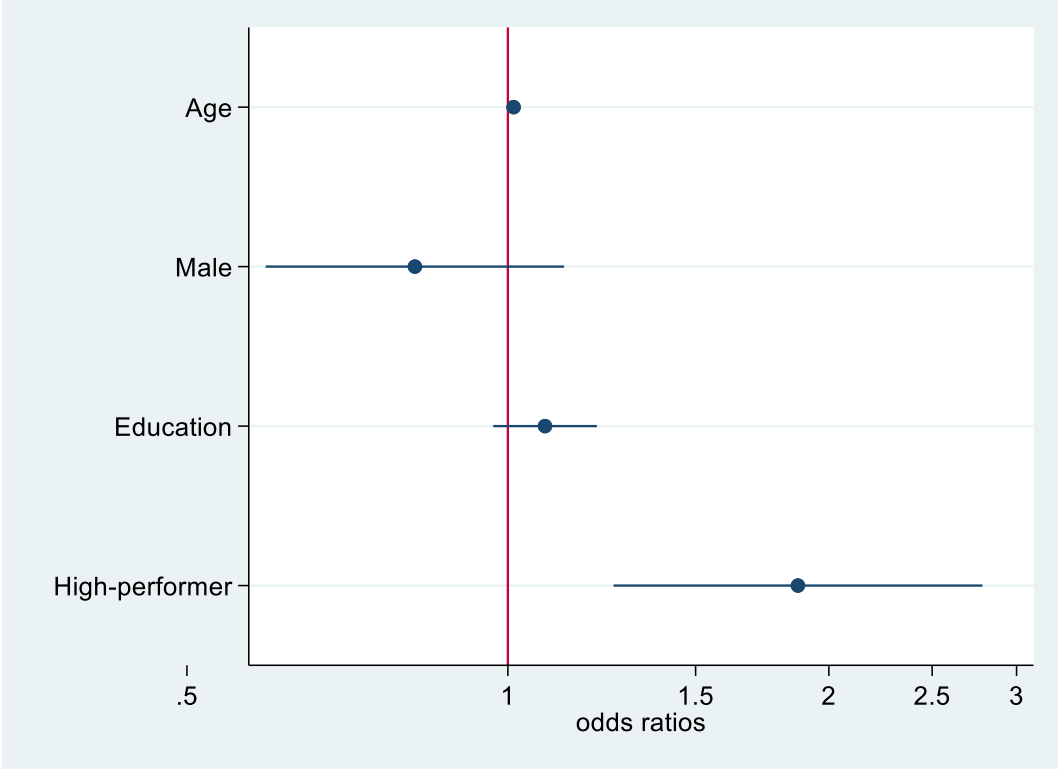


Figure 5. Predictors of underestimation

Interestingly, women are more likely than men also to underestimate their personal level of sophistication, although here the gender difference falls short of statistical significance. Age has a positive and statistically significant ($p=.007$) effect and every year in age increases the likelihood of underestimation by about 1 percent. High-performers, on the other hand, are almost twice as likely to underestimate than people who are not high-performers. This suggests a kind of reversed Dunning-Kruger effect, where people who are very knowledgeable about politics are also unable to realistically assess their ability – but by underestimating it.

Summary and discussion

Measuring political sophistication among democratic publics has been an important part of surveys of citizen political behavior. To fight the trend of declining response rates, survey

researchers have examined various methods for conducting survey interviews, but many of the available methods leave the respondents unsupervised, which is a problem for the measurement of sophistication. Answering questions that tap into the respondents' factual knowledge about politics is very difficult to do reliably without the presence of an interviewer. According to research, respondents regularly look up correct answers, if it is possible.

Comprehensive measures of political awareness, such as those proposed by Solhaug et al. in this book, surely remain the preferred method for situations where there is a possibility to conduct extensive surveys. Especially in situations, where the focus of the research is political awareness, it is surely preferable to adopt the more detailed, multidimensional approach suggested by Solhaug et al. It allows for much more nuanced analysis of political awareness than what can be accomplished with a one-item proxy measure. However, for situations where the available resources limit the possibilities to conduct detailed measurement of political awareness, self-assessments could provide a solution. If political awareness is only used, for example, as a control variable, a heavy-duty question battery might be unnecessary, or even detrimental to respondent motivation. Self-assessments do not require monitoring and they could offer survey researchers with a simple, respondent-friendly substitute measure for factual knowledge questions in surveys.

This study provides empirical evidence regarding the suitability of self-assessed sophistication as a proxy for political awareness, using a survey conducted in Finland in 2020. The survey included a large number of factual knowledge questions and a self-assessment of how familiar the respondent is with politics. The findings offer at least some encouragement. Perhaps most notably, 70 percent of the survey respondents did not overestimate their political sophistication levels and among those that did, only a very small percentage provided a gross overestimation. Although about 30 percent did overestimate to some degree, overestimation does not seem like a huge problem. Underestimation had a similar impact, with approximately 30 percent giving at least a slightly pessimistic self-evaluation.

Some of the findings are aligned with previous research regarding the Dunning-Kruger effect. Individuals, whose factual knowledge about politics is low, are more likely than others to overestimate, as was expected based on the Dunning-Kruger effect. While self-assessments seem to be about equally accurate on all educational levels and to some degree even across age groups, there is a substantial gender difference. Women are more likely than men to both overestimate and to underestimate, clearly suggesting that for some reason, women are in general less able to accurately assess their personal level of political sophistication. This is

arguably the biggest concern when it comes to using self-assessment instead of factual knowledge items in surveys. The gender gap in political knowledge continues to be a key issue in the field and if the difference between men and women is not reliably captured in surveys, one of the most pressing questions for sophistication scholars cannot be meaningfully addressed.

So what should be concluded? If we follow the Zallerian scholarly tradition, which has relied on political knowledge as an indicator of political awareness, can we substitute political knowledge for a self-assessment? The findings offer a mixed bag of results, which makes it difficult to offer conclusive advice. Overall, it seems that self-assessment can be used to get a reasonably accurate picture of political awareness among a democratic public. Whenever rough estimations are sufficient, self-assessment could offer a convenient alternative to the much more demanding task of asking factual questions. Most importantly, the findings demonstrated that serious overestimation is not widespread. However, if the aim is to analyze individual-level differences in political awareness, relying only on self-assessment is not optimal. It seems that women are more likely to both overestimate and underestimate more often than men and this presents a double hurdle. Not only does it seem as if women are less accurate than men in their self-assessments, their assessments could be erroneous in either direction. Self-assessments therefore seem particularly unsuitable for analyses of the gender gap in political awareness.

It is worth noting that the findings presented in this Chapter are based on an understanding of political awareness, according to which it primarily manifests itself through political knowledge. Moreover, following in the footsteps of John Zaller and mainstream research in the field of political behavior, the analysis relies on an indicator of knowledge, which measures knowledge about the structure and the key actors of electoral democracy. However, as Solhaug et al. argue elsewhere in this book, there is an alternative way of conceptualizing and measuring political awareness. While the two are not strongly at odds empirically, they represent different approaches to democratic citizenship. The current analysis does not take a normative position regarding which of the two approaches should be given precedence. It simply offers an empirical test of whether self-assessment can be a feasible way of measuring political awareness in surveys, when political awareness is approached in the Zallerian tradition. However, it is possible that some other one-item proxy might be better at capturing the kind of political awareness suggested by Solhaug et al., than self-assessed sophistication.

Since the data only comes from a single country, a final word on the generalizability of the findings is unavoidable. In terms of the individual-level determinants of political knowledge,

Finland demonstrates the same patterns as any other Western democracy (see e.g. Elo and Rapeli 2010). Whether Finnish respondents are more or less likely than someone else to give a realistic – and truthful – self-assessment about their political sophistication is mainly speculation. According to a common understanding, not least among Finnish people themselves, Finns are an honest bunch. Even if that were true, having the ability to make accurate self-assessments is yet another question. According to Milner (2002), Finland is a high civic literacy nation, suggesting that there should be less low-performers among the Finnish public compared to many other countries. This should, in turn, mean that there is probably less overestimating involved in the Finnish context, due to a relatively mild Dunning-Kruger effect. The findings presented in this study could therefore serve as an example, or work even as a benchmark, of a country where self-assessments of political sophistication are likely to be relatively accurate. Based on this, future research could use the findings from this study as a point of comparison to test the assumption that self-assessed political sophistication performs less reliably as a proxy measure for political knowledge in countries that are not as civic literate and education-intensive as Finland.

Future research should also test whether and how the accuracy of self-assessment could be manipulated through, for example, encouraging respondents to be as realistic and honest as possible. As the experimental work by Clifford and Jerit (2016) has demonstrated, such manipulations may be effective in curbing cheating and they might also decrease the desire to self-enhance. Another, similar strategy to be explored further could be to address the social desirability effect with a manipulation that is aimed specifically at reducing the need to demonstrate a high level of political sophistication. Even the placement of the self-assessment item in a survey could affect accuracy. Respondents might, for instance, become less prone to overestimation towards the end of a survey when they have had time to reflect on their relationship with politics and the opinions they hold.

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Author presentation

Lauri Rapeli is the research director of the Social Science Research Institute at Åbo Akademi University (Finland). He is also the vice leader of The Finnish Research Infrastructure for Public Opinion and is currently one of the principal investigator of the Finnish National Election Study. His research focuses on various aspects of political behavior, both among citizens and political elites.