

**THE TROUBLE WITH VOTERS AND THOSE WHO TRY TO FIX
THEM:
RETHINKING THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION IN MASS
POLITICS**

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Book Abstract

Many citizens seem not to know very much about politics and government. When asked basic questions on these topics in surveys, few citizens give correct answers. Many political observers are alarmed by this fact. They worry that citizens' ignorance undermines the quality of government.

Some people are so concerned about citizens' inabilities to answer these questions that they want to do something about it. They want to "fix" ignorant citizens. "Fixing" means providing information to citizens that increases their competence at political, governmental, and policy-related tasks.

"Fixers" come from many walks of life. They include advocates for specific causes, moral and spiritual leaders, experts on science and medicine, and scholars who study civic competence. All of them want to help citizens make better decisions. This book is about how to help fixers better achieve their educational ambitions.

But fixers also lack information. Some are misinformed about how citizens think and learn. Others are mistaken about the kinds of information affect competence. These errors prevent many fixers from achieving their goals and undermine potentially valuable attempts to help the public better understand important consequences of many political, governmental, and policy-related actions.

This book seeks to explain fixers provide greater value to the communities that they wish to educate. In it, I integrate lessons from science and practice to explain how to convert an educational endeavor that does little to improve critical civic skills to one that provides great value to citizens and the politics in which they live. These lessons can help fixers provide information that makes a real difference in people's lives and the quality of government.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

1. Questioning Our Competence

2. Three Essential Definitions

3. The Logic of Competence

4. The Politics of Competence

5. Managing Diverse Values

6. Issue Complexity and a Complex of Issues

7. Social Position (or *Who* Needs to Know What?)

8. Learning Costs and Who Pays Them

9. All in Good Measure (or How to Improve Political Knowledge)

10. The Value of Conveying Complex Ideas to Diverse Audiences

References

Preface

There are thousands of things that millions of citizens do not know about politics and government. This fact is well-documented. It is “the trouble with voters.”

That citizens appear to know so little about politics is a matter of great concern. Many people believe that civic ignorance causes citizens’ to make bad choices in voting booths and other political domains. Voter ignorance is blamed for many modern problems.

People respond to the trouble with voters in different ways. Some assume the role of “critic” and castigate the public for its ignorance. Others seek more constructive roles. I call these people “fixers.” Fixers seek to improve civic competence by educating citizens.

“The trouble with fixers” is that they too lack important information. Some fixers are mistaken about what citizens know. Others are mistaken about the kinds of information and knowledge that can increase important civic competences. One consequence of this trouble is that well-intentioned fixers spend significant time and energy conveying information that has little or no value to targeted audiences. We can do better.

This book begins with the premise that political ignorance can be consequential and that there are fixers (e.g., experts, scholars, and advocates) who have the potential to help citizens make better choices for themselves and the societies in which they live. In *The Trouble With Voters and Those Who Try to Fix Them*, I seek to help fixers achieve more of their potential effectiveness by clarifying how to more accurately diagnose and treat problems that ignorance can cause. I do so by drawing from a broad scientific and practical knowledge base. I use this base to show fixers how to differentiate information that can help societies achieve important civic, political, governmental, and policy-related goals from information that has no such value.

In other words, I show that providing better remedies to “the trouble with voters” often requires acknowledging and correcting “the trouble with fixers.”

If you accept the idea that citizens sometimes lack the knowledge that they need to make competent political choices, that greater knowledge can improve decision making, that many critics and fixers are mistaken about how the public thinks and learns, and that these mistakes make undermine efforts to increase civic competence, then a prescription for the trouble with voters becomes clear. *We need to fix the fixers.* This book is intended to help fixers of all kinds better understand the kinds of information that citizens need to make important civic decisions with greater competence.

Questioning Our Competence

The trouble with voters is that they appear to know very little about many aspects of civics, government, politics and policy. When pollsters seek to evaluate citizens' knowledge on any of these topics, many citizens fail to give correct answers to the questions that they ask. This is true even for simple questions.

While nearly every adult American can name the President of the United States, many can't recall the names of their U.S. Senators. Millions cannot recall from memory which political party holds a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Many Americans give incorrect answers when asked to identify the Chief Justice of the United States by name. They do the same when asked about basic aspects of the U.S. Constitution. Many provide incorrect answers to questions about who leads our nation's closest international allies, such as the United Kingdom and Japan, and as well as basic facts about our major trading partners, such as Canada and China. Citizens provide incorrect answers, or no answers at all, to survey questions about all kinds of policies and all varieties of politics. Yet most of them know who Elvis Presley was. Most can identify Tiger Woods. Many Americans cannot just identify race car drivers and talk show hosts -- they can also go into significant detail about these celebrities' personal lives. Some can name more than one of Snow White's seven dwarfs. Many people know about celebrities and cultural icons that have inspired them and touched their lives. But they are less able to remember answers to the political questions that pollsters, scholars, and the press often ask. In *The Star Spangled Banner*, America is "the land of the free and the home of the brave," but when asked to answer fact-based questions about policy and politics, Americans appear to be, as filmmaker Michael Moore (2010) put it, "a society of ignorant and illiterate people."

Concerns about civic ignorance and its political consequences are regular features of modern political life. Many critics are appalled by citizens' inabilities to answer the kinds of questions described above. Some believe that political ignorance is a threat to democracy. These critics ask how we can expect ignorant citizens to choose qualified candidates for office and offer defensible views on important social topics. Gary Ackerman, for example, served as a member of the United States Congress for over 29 years. When asked about the decline in Congressional cooperation during his time in office, he blamed civic ignorance: "Society has changed. The public is to blame as well. I think the people have gotten dumber."¹

With such concerns in mind, there are calls to "fix" citizens. By fixing, I mean giving citizens information that can help them make more competent political decisions. Calls for "fixing" come from all over the political spectrum. These calls come from the political right, center, and left. They come from people who are well informed about science. They come from people who are devoutly religious. They come from people who are both scientific and devout. They come from people who are neither of these things.

Some people try to answer these calls. I call these people *fixers*. Fixers believe that providing information to others is a path to greater civic competence and a better future.

Fixers are diverse in their desires. Some fixers want to educate just a few neighbors or a particular family member. Others want to educate a specific audience (e.g., young adults, farmers, inhabitants of particular neighborhoods) about a specific policy. Other fixers have grander ambitions: they want to change the ideological or spiritual perspective of entire societies.

¹ <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-06-21/a-congressional-exit-interview#p1>.

In addition to having diverse desires, fixers think of themselves in different ways. Some think of themselves as advocates. These advocate-fixers (e.g., the Sierra Club) are motivated by a desire for a particular outcome (e.g., “a safe and healthy community in which to live”).² Some advocate-fixers seek to preserve what already exists. Other advocate-fixers seek to be agents of change.

Other fixers think of themselves as experts on a topic rather than as outcome-oriented advocates. These expert-fixers are motivated by ideas they have gleaned from fields such as science, medicine or theology. These fixers seek to educate audiences about how things work, and do not make explicit appeals for or against specific candidates or policies. Many academics who study policy and politics, including those who study what citizens do and do not know about politics, think of themselves in this manner.

Of course, other fixers see themselves as both advocates and experts. They not only want to educate audiences about how things work, but also want to enlighten them about how things could work if certain options were chosen. These fixers try to help others by engaging in educational endeavors that can bring policy outcomes in line with what they believe their own expertise to recommend.

Whether fixers see themselves as advocates, experts, neither, or both, and whether their target audience is large or small, fixers tend to view themselves as having *knowledge that can help others*. A common motivating factor for fixers is their belief that important audiences are not paying enough attention to information that the fixer sees as vital. As opposed to a salesman whose objective is to get rich quickly, fixers believe that greater citizen attention towards, and memory of, certain kinds of information will bring substantial benefits to the societies in which

² <http://www.sierraclub.org/welcome/>

they live. Highly visible national-level issues for which fixers are active include world hunger, climate change, arms control, maintenance of traditional values, the definition of marriage, and all manner of causes related to health. Millions of other fixers focus on thousands of more local causes such as the policies of local schools and whether specific pieces of land and other natural resources should be used for commerce, recreation, or preserved.

Many people, including most people who see themselves as being interested in politics or in particular policies, are fixers of one kind or another. The fact that you are reading this book suggests that you are interested in understanding why citizens appear to know so little about politics and what can be done about that. If so, you may have a future as a fixer, if you are not a fixer already.

If you are a fixer, want to help a fixer, or if you think you may attempt to become a fixer in the future, the point of this book is to encourage your desire to help others and to help you act on this desire more effectively. Decision makers from the smallest school boards to the largest democratic nations depend on people like you being able to provide the right kinds of information to people who need it. Similarly, if you are a scholar on topics such as political information or civic competence, the point of this book is to help such scholarship be more accurate, relevant to practitioners, and valuable to society. Understanding what citizens do or do not know, and what changes in their knowledge can affect their competence, is essential to answering larger questions about the current and potential effectiveness of many democratic institutions.

For all such fixers, the point of this book is to help you ask, and more effectively answer, a few important questions that about fixers' abilities to improve citizens' decisions. These questions include,

- If citizens lack information about politics and policy, can anything be done about that?
- If so, are you the kind of fixer that can solve this problem? (Or are you the kind of scholar who can provide effective advice about how to improve matters?)
- If not, are there things you and other fixers can learn about how citizens think that can help you be more effective at increasing civic competence?

This book is meant to give you insights and skills that can help you and groups with whom you and other fixers are – or can be -- involved, answer “yes” to one or more of these questions.

The title of this book is “The Trouble with Voters and Those Who Try to Fix Them.” Voters are named in the title because decades of surveys, newspaper editorials, and academic books have made the trouble with voters easy to see: they appear not to know very much. But fixers are the book’s main focus. While fixers have the potential to reduce the damage that the trouble with voters can cause, many attempts to “fix” voters fail to achieve fixers’ goals. This lack of success motivates our core theme: *fixing voters (i.e., improving citizens’ competence at a wide range of important civic tasks) often requires fixing fixers.*

The Trouble with Fixers

Despite their good intentions, despite their passion for their causes, and despite their topical expertise, many fixers are ineffective at increasing civic competence. A common problem is that fixers believe that their passion for, or expertise in, a given political or policy area is enough to sway an audience. They believe that their intuitions about what other people know and how such knowledge relates to a variety of important civic competences are sufficient for understanding what kinds of information are most valuable for others to know.

The trouble with many fixers is that, like voters, they also lack important information. They lack information about how people think. They lack information about how people learn and make decisions. Their misunderstanding of such phenomena is often so frequent and so deep, that many fixers misinterpret evidence of their own failures as evidence of success. Over the last twenty years, I have met numerous fixers who choose not to examine the assumption that their target audiences need or value the information that they are presenting. In most cases, even small amounts of evidence or logic would reveal the opposite. Many well-intentioned fixers channel their great passion and/or substantial expertise into educational efforts that have little or no effect on important civic competences. Moreover, those who come to realize the errors in their intuitions do so only after they have spent large amounts of time and energy providing information to of low value to audiences that cannot use it. *We need to fix the fixers.*

This book is devoted to helping fixers make better use of their passion, their expertise, and, in some case, their ability to get other people to contribute time and money to potentially valuable educational endeavors. To help fixers achieve more of this potential, I integrate and apply findings from a broad knowledge base. This knowledge base clarifies important aspects of the relationship between the information to which people are exposed, the knowledge that such information does (or does not) produce, and how different types of information and knowledge corresponds to competence at a wide range of important civic tasks. The sources will include biological studies of how the brain works, social scientific studies of topics such as strategic communication, and research on what distinguishes successful from failing social marketing efforts. While this knowledge base may appear complex, my method is to derive from it lessons that are simple to understand and ready for many different kinds of fixers to implement.

Throughout the book, I show how learning these lessons can help fixers better recognize common errors that fixers make and better emulate what successful fixers do.

The book's central proposition is that many fixers can fix themselves – as long as they are open to basing their understanding of how citizens think and learn on knowable attributes of human cognition and behavior and of how common attributes of political conflicts affect how people think. To this end, a key to fixing fixers is helping them to recognize a common error.

The error pertains to intuitions that many people have about how information relates to competence in political and policy-related settings. Many critics, for example, simply assume that if a citizen cannot correctly answer commonly asked survey questions about such topics, then he or she must also be incompetent when it comes to casting votes or formulating policy opinions. Granderson's (2011) critique expresses this perspective energetically:

“[W]e all know people who gleefully admit they know nothing about politics, don't have time to find out what the current issues are or even know how the government works, but go out and vote. Want to know why it seems Washington is run by a bunch of idiots?... What's a solution? Weed out some of the ignorant by making people who want to vote first pass a test.”

The trouble with many critiques of this kind is that are not consistent with what we observe when we examine how what citizens know relates to how they vote. We will discover that many questions that critics would put on tests are not the types of information that benefit citizens or affect important civic competences – such casting the same vote that one would have cast if they knew a great deal more about a large number of societally-relevant issues.

This book provides an opportunity for fixers to replace these questionable conjectures with a more constructive way to understand the relationship between information and

competence. Understanding this relationship fixers can help fixers more accurately diagnose when a citizen's ignorance of a particular fact does (and does not) reduce their competence at important tasks. Fixers who make accurate diagnoses, in turn, can develop more education strategies that are more effective at increasing key competences. Fixers who understand the relationship between information and competence can also develop better measures of the effectiveness and value of their educational endeavors.

Today, many fixers who do not understand this relationship describe their educational endeavors' effectiveness in terms of how many e-mail messages they sent, how many advertisements they bought, and how much work they put into their presentations. These measures can say a lot about input. But for many fixers, it's output that matters. With outputs in mind, this book is meant to help fixers better understand how, and learn how to evaluate whether, their educational efforts correspond to the knowledge and competence outcomes they desire.

One important thing to understand about attempt to educate others is that people ignore most of the information that is presented to them. This outcome is a matter of biology. It is not a character flaw. Human brains have evolved to direct attention to a select set of environmental stimuli and to block out just about everything else (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). Similar biological processes cause people to forget almost everything to which they have paid attention (Shanks 2010). Yet other processes cause them to change their minds about almost all topics to which they devote conscious thought. These facts of human cognition are the result of basic biological forces. They are not changeable.

However, many fixers believe that because their motives are so benevolent, or their expertise so great, that these laws of nature that govern human attention and memory will make an exception for them. They believe that audiences will "hang on my every word." In most cases,

this outcome is both a pleasurable aspiration and a physical impossibility. For all presentations that are longer than a few seconds, even the most committed listener can attend to only a fraction of the content. Even the most committed listener can remember only a fraction of any content to which they attend. No fixer gets a pass from the fact that people ignore almost everything in their environments and forget almost everything that they have ever made an effort to see or hear.

Despite this fact, many fixers cling to “hang on my every word” theories of learning not because they have acquired hard evidence that their persuasive efforts are effective, but because these fictional accounts reinforce what fixers want to believe about themselves. For many fixers, it is easier to blame educational failures on an audience’s apathy and stupidity, or a political opposition’s fecklessness, than it is to realize that the fixer’s own misunderstandings of how different types of information correspond to competence at a range of socially-relevant tasks are part of the problem. These fictional accounts protect fixers’ self-esteem when an educational attempt fails to improve civic competence, but limit many fixers’ abilities to solve communication problems of their own making.

There is a better way forward. Understanding and integrating basic principles of how information relates to competence, *in ways that are appropriate for the unique challenges of political and policy domains*, can help fixers become more effective. A point of emphasis in this book is that politics can present unusual communicative challenges. Words and images used in politicized environments are scrutinized, interpreted, and attacked in ways that rarely occur in more common educational settings.

Experts and advocates who are used to communicating in non-political environments often find these challenges surprising. Fixers from academic backgrounds surprised to learn that educational strategies that work well in classrooms or at conferences are disastrous when

attempted in more emotionally charged and politicized environments. They find their conclusions ignored and their words twisted. They don't know why political learning is different.

Throughout this book, we will discover that the requirements for educational and persuasive success in political environments is very different than in traditional classrooms, than in congregations of people who share common values, or than when selling consumer products. This book offers ways for fixers to both survive and thrive in politicized contexts. It clarifies how words are used and interpreted in a variety of political environments and describes strategies for communicating more effectively in these environments. Fixers who understand how learning occurs in politicized environments can develop more effective communication strategies for a broader range of audiences.

Learning how to manage the challenges described above can help fixers in different ways. This book can help some fixers replace failing strategies with alternatives that are more effective competence increasers. Other fixers can discover more cost-efficient ways to achieve their goals. And in some cases, this book will reveal that a particular audience's mind can't be changed on a given topic— and that a fixer's resources are better directed to different endeavors. In all such cases, we can help fixers use their competence-oriented energy and resources more effectively.

So, another way of stating this book's objective is as follows: there are lessons from science and practice that, if properly understood, can help fixers not shoot themselves in the foot before they start to walk down potentially effective paths. These lessons do not guarantee victories in the often rough-and-tumble worlds of politics and policy, but they can improve the odds of success. This book is designed to help expert-fixers, advocate-fixers, and scholars better understand, measure, and deliver information that improves valuable civic competences.