Improving the political judgement of citizens

Leruth, Benjamin; Stoker, Gerry

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Improving the political judgment of citizens: why the task environment matters

Benjamin Leruth (University of Groningen)

Gerry Stoker (University of Southampton and Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra)

Abstract:

Internal political efficacy (i.e. beliefs about one's ability to process and participate effectively in politics) is known to be shaped by factors such as levels of interest in politics, trust in institutions and awareness of political developments and debates. In this article we show that the task environment also has an impact on internal political efficacy, and that little research has been done on this issue. We draw on data from focus groups in Australia where citizens were asked to make political judgments in contrasting task environments - state elections and the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite. We examine four features of task environments: framing choice; issue content; the nature of available cues; and whether the task environment stimulates cognitive effort. We conclude that concerns about the internal political efficacy of voters should be addressed by exploring how the task environment created for political choice might be made more amenable to improve the political judgment of citizens.

Key words:

Introduction

Having confidence in your political judgment matters. The seminal work of Sidney Verba and colleagues (see Brady et al, 1995; Verba et al, 1995; Schlozman et al, 2012) remains 'almost universally' supported in research (Dalton, 2017, 9) and shows that three main factors influence the decision of citizens to participate. These are: politically relevant skills and resources, connection to groups that encourage their participation and political attitudes that encourage participation. The concept of political efficacy, i.e. the idea that 'political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change' (Campbell et al, 1954) captures core attitudinal elements connected to political participation. It consists of two factors. External efficacy refers to a having a sense that one's own engagement will make a difference, while internal efficacy explores 'beliefs regarding one's own competence to understand, judge and express one's political choices effectively' and a 'lack of internal political efficacy can lead to political alienation and apathy' (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Halperin, 2013, 299). Supporting internal efficacy is thus a substantial building block for democratic practice.

Are citizens up to their role and can they be helped to undertake the task of choosing options confidently? There are three main responses to these questions. The first is dismissive of the capacity of citizens when it comes to political engagement. The second argues that citizens with very limited effort can use cues from elites to make their judgements. The third suggests that citizens are flexible thinkers and will engage in more extended reflection if given the right stimuli.

Building on this third line of argument and drawing on existing studies demonstrating that internal efficacy has an impact on the citizens' decision to participate (e.g. Niemi et al, 1991; Moeller et al, 2014, 695) this article demonstrates that there is value in looking beyond the

cognitive capacities of citizens to consider how their internal efficacy can be boosted by shaping the task environment offered to them. Herbert Simon, a foundational thinker for so much work in this area argues that human behaviour is 'shaped by a scissors whose two blades are the structure of task environments and the computational capabilities of the actor' (Simon, 1990, 7). What characteristics of the task environments facilitate or inhibit political efficacy? In order to answer this question empirically, we organised twelve focus groups in South Australia and Queensland between late 2017 and early 2018, when two different task environments took place: a plebiscite on same-sex marriage, and State elections. We hypothesise that four characteristics of the task environment would have an impact on internal efficacy: the way choice is framed, the nature of the issue, the nature of available cues, and whether the task encourages cognitive effort. Our findings demonstrate that while the first three characteristics do matter, a task that stimulates cognitive effort (e.g. through compulsion or appealing to a sense of civic duty) does not appear to have an impact on citizens' confidence in their political judgment.

The challenge of political judgment

Making a political judgment can be a demanding and complex task. For citizens that task is mediated through the lens of opaque political institutions and decision-making processes that are not easy to understand (Offe, 1999; Mettler, 2011). It is undertaken in a context where they have limited access to and capacity to process knowledge and information. Lupia (2016, 54) expresses the issue in robust terms: 'every one of us is almost completely ignorant of almost every question about almost every political topic on which we could possibly be quizzed. Even on issues where we think of ourselves as expert, most of us know only a tiny fraction of all that is knowable'. The task of coming to a judgment is made harder still by high levels of uncertainty about the integrity of the main actors. As Hardin (2006) argues convincingly a

questioning attitude towards political actors is a solid and understandable position for citizens to take in any complex democratic society.

In this light for citizens to be confident in their judgement does not always require a fully mapped out position but rather that they that they are comfortable with their choice and that the 'choice is the product of reason, where reason is the human process of seeking, processing and drawing inferences from information' (Lupia *et al*, 2000: 1). People match their inferences against some ideas about what would satisfy their interests, desires (selfish or unselfish) or values and in doing so are able to decide in a way that they would regard as reasonable and could have confidence in.

How good are citizens at reasoned judgement in the modest sense identified above? The literature offers three sets of responses to this question. One stream of analysis suggests that when it comes to politics citizens are under-performers. Schumpeter expresses the argument in colourful terms: 'The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes primitive again' (Schumpeter, 1942, 262). Caplan (2007) develops this line of argument by explaining how it might be rational for someone to indulge themselves when engaging in politics by pursuing their beliefs and values because that path carries few costs, compared to decision-making in other parts of their lives, where not taking into account confounding evidence or the value of trade-offs can be costly. Voting is a trivial act because the probability of any one vote influencing an election outcome is low and the costs for an election outcome are not obviously apparent. Brennan (2016) adds to this line of reasoning by arguing that within democracies many unengaged citizens are 'hobbits' (apathetic and ignorant), and that those that are more engaged tend to be 'hooligans' (highly partisan and with fixed world views). Drawing on a

range of experimental work Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) conclude that on many occasions political decision-making of citizens suffers from significant flaws. These negative perspectives are supported by the empirical analysis of Achen and Bartels (2016, 15) who make a particular point about how American citizens lack the capacity for retrospective judgment regarding government performance: '[w]e find that voters punish incumbent politicians for changes in their welfare that are clearly acts of God or nature. That suggests that their ability (or their inclination) to make sensible judgments regarding credit and blame is highly circumscribed'. Taken together these perspectives might suggest that there is no basis for confidence in judgement by citizens and that their greatest failing is likely to be over-confidence, a concern that might be met by allowing more knowledgeable or expert people have greater sway over decision-making according to Brennan (2016).

A second stream of analysis takes a more positive line and holds that with only modest cognitive effort citizens can use cues from political elites to make reasoned choices that are a reliable guide to what they might choose if they had more information or put more cognitive effort into making the judgment (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al, 1993). In Zaller's seminal work (1992) on the formation of public opinion, elite messages driven through the media once accepted then become the foundation for the political judgements of citizens. Elite actors provide the public with enough clues to make up their minds. Voters use endorsements from sources they trust to help them to decide what to choose (Lupia, 1994). Political parties that capture the broad views and loyalty of voters can provide a cue to a voter that is enough for them to decide. If the party is backing a policy option, then the voter can feel comfortable with backing it. Equally, if a lobby group or association of which they are a supporter or member is campaigning on an issue (even backing an option in a referendum) then the supporter or member will take that as a cue about how to decide. Lupia et al (2000) suggest that citizens

need relatively modest amounts of knowledge to make reasoned choices and that elite cues can provide a substitute for more detailed information.

There are counter views to this line of argument. Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) contend that it is a mistake to see citizens as able to choose their cues or heuristics but rather they adopt them more automatically and intuitively, without a great deal of concern for their accuracy. In short, people may well use cues or heuristics but that is different to the claim that they use them well or appropriately. Some argue that there it may be that only a minority of citizens access endorsements and some of those cannot remember doing so (Burnett, 2019). The impact of elite cues therefore might not be as great as suggested. Others contend that the elite-cue model fails because it perceives citizens largely as passive receivers (Kam, 2012). Nevertheless, there is more hope that citizens could have confidence in their judgement in the light of these arguments. They need only a little information backed by appropriate cues.

The third line of reasoning on political judgement explores how citizens can be moved to make more cognitive effort. They are not just passive recipients of elite messages (Kam, 2012). Affective or emotional experiences may focus people's attention on an issue or provide them with the appropriate cues to decide and therefore could be a functional asset to them in low information contexts with modest cognitive effort (Marcus et al, 2000; Rahn, 2000). Kam shows that simply reminding citizens of their duty to reflect during campaigns can encourage citizens to think more about candidates and search more openly about issues: '[h]ow citizens think about politics is flexible, rather than fixed, and can be shaped in consequential ways by the nature of elite appeals during election campaigns' (Kam, 2007, 17). This perspective provides the greatest hope that citizens might be moved to become more confident in their capacity for reasoned choices.

This article argues that more attention needs to be paid to the citizens' internal efficacy in order to boost confidence in their political judgment. But to support the internal efficacy of citizens further the core argument of this article is that it is necessary to introduce and recognize the impact of the task environment. Even those who are most negative about the capacity of citizens for reasoned choice recognise that in other settings they may well be effective decision-makers. Caplan (2007), whose model of rational irrationality suggests that citizens are irrational due to the institutional environment of politics could accept that the environment can be reshaped in order to help citizens becoming more rational. Those who argue that good cues are all the citizens need may find that a consideration of the task environment supplements their position. Those who view citizens as flexible thinkers can also recognise the importance of context so they too could embrace the idea of the task environment.

Ecological rationality and task environment

Gigerenzer (2000; 2007; 2008; 2015) with a range of colleagues has developed the concept of ecological rationality which can be summarized as the idea that human reasoning is *adaptive* rather than *logical* in its motivation. Humans think to adapt, act, and survive in complex environments. The best type of reasoning is the one that is most suited to the environment or task with which we are faced. Complexities in the environment and shortage of time have led to the human capacity for using fast and frugal heuristics that rarely follow the rules of formal logic, but which are nevertheless relatively successful. Moreover, the use of heuristics is not a second-best strategy – as assumed in the discussion in the previous section of the article – it is most often the best solution. Humans are not hopelessly prone to flaws in their decision-making or reliant on cues from others, but rather adaptable thinkers and the success of their strategies revolves around matching heuristics to the task environment. Given a concern with understanding human political judgment the concept of ecological rationality opens a second

sphere for analysis but also for intervention. The 'ecological view actually extends the possibilities to improve judgment' and it could be conjectured that 'changing environments can in fact be easier than changing minds' (Gigerenzer, 2008: 16-18).

Table 1: Features of task environments and their impact on citizen judgement

Feature	Facilitating	Inhibiting
Framing choice	Binary	Non-binary
Issue Content	Symbolic	Technical
Nature of Available Cues	Horizontal	Vertical
Stimulating Cognitive Effort	Mobilised	Not mobilised

Table 1 explores which task environment characteristics facilitate citizens' internal efficacy and contrasts it with features that tend to have a more inhibiting effect. The first step is to follow Lupia (2016) in looking at *how the political choice is framed*. A key distinction is whether the choice is binary or non-binary with the former creating generally a more doable political task. For example, for the citizen 'the typical referendum restricts each person to vote 'Yes' or 'No'. So, even if the referendum is very technical, competence requires only that she know whether it is better or worse than the current law' (Lupia, 2016, 46). Yet, the wording of the question asked (which is often widely debated or even contested by interest groups) and the options offered can alter the level of complexity of such binary task. On the other hand, if the choice involves making a variety of selections and preference rankings it is likely to be more challenging. For example, in most elections in Australia citizens are asked to rank the candidates on the ballot paper and those preferences often matter to the final outcome of the election, leading candidates to indicate to 'their' voters what would be their best options for ranking; parties often produce 'how-to vote' cards. Both referendums and voting are framed by a complex environment and (in most cases) limited time and cognitive capacity for the

citizens, but the structure of such tasks may facilitate the citizen's confidence in making her or his political judgment.

The second step involves exploring *whether issue content matters*. There are significant differences between being asked to decide over a bond or tax issue and being asked to decide over, for example, same-sex marriage. Some issues provide an easier task to the voter than others, which in turn is expected to have an impact on the citizens' internal efficacy. Carmines and Stimson (1980) were among the first to distinguish between 'easy' and 'hard' issues. Easy issues are characterised by tending to be symbolic or value-based rather than technical, more about ends rather than the detail of means. Symbolic or value issues can be communicated more readily to the public while technical issues are harder to debate. Issues that are about ends require a simpler focus on perceived goals rather than the inherently more complicated conversation about how to get there. Finally, issues are easier to deal with if they have been around for a while, been well-aired in public debate and people have already had a chance to develop a position on them. Elections, however, involve a wide range of issues in contrast to referendums that focus on one specific policy or issue. Policy priorities and how these matter to citizens can vary significantly from one individual to another; the assumption is that the voter would have to engage in sophisticated calculus to work out which candidate or party most effectively met their preferences. That is true of some issues, but not all especially those involving a strong symbolic or normative focus. Deciding on social or moral issues can present an easier task to voters and improve their internal efficacy (Biggers 2011).

The relative ease of moral or social issues for the voter is confirmed in a study of a range of ballot measures in the United States comparing referendums on same-sex marriage with referendums on other issues (Burnett, 2019). Voters displayed greater knowledge of the relevant issues at stake and a greater awareness of which groups were backing which side of

the argument, which in turn had a positive impact on turnout. Some issues are easier to address than others and there is evidence to suggest that moral or social issues are most likely to be on the easier side of the line.

A third step is to distinguish between when *cues* or heuristics come primarily vertically to citizens from elites and when citizens are more able to use and access horizontal cues. Such horizontal heuristics traditionally come from family, friends and their own lived experience; in recent years, these have been complemented by the rise of social media platforms (although these too can be elite-influenced; Kam, 2012). The heuristics or shortcuts available to citizens are not all top-down, driven by elites. A range of horizontal, fast and frugal heuristics are used by humans (Gigerenzer, 2007) that are drawn from their everyday ways of calculating and resolving choices. One of such well-established heuristics is 'recognition' (Gigerenzer, 2015) where the key is to have recalled a known, trusted piece of information that enables comparisons to be made around that piece of information. Laboratory-based experiments of this heuristic often test people's capacity to judge the longitude position or size of different cities and indicate that where the relevant information is available in one case, comparison with other unknown cases can lead to successful choices about other cases. In a political context the suggestion therefore could be that the recognition cue will help best when a reliable decision anchor – a trusted starting point for judgment – is available to the citizen.

The final step is to note some task environments can *stimulate greater cognitive effort* than others. The commitment to additional effort may reflect factors connected to the individual, such as their level of interest in the issue or their disposition to learn and explore issues in depth, but it can also reflect contextual factors. If the task environment is accompanied by a strong sense of civic duty, of obligation and accountability to fellow citizens then there is evidence that this can encourage greater cognitive effort. Experimental data suggests that a

simple appeal to civic duty can make a difference in the cognitive effort of citizens (Kam, 2007). Another option is to make engagement compulsory (see the work of Lijphart, 1997). Australia is one of the thirteen countries in the world with enforced compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is framed by the Australian Commonwealth Electoral Act as a problem of democratic responsibility: '[I]t shall be the duty of every elector to record his vote at each election. Just as citizens have a duty to pay taxes and to serve on juries, so they have a duty to help to decide how the country should be governed' (cited in in Hill, 2002, 88). Though many studies have focused on the effects of compulsory voting on turnout (Panagopoulos, 2008), partisanship (Miller and Dassonneville, 2016) and social policy directions (Fowler, 2013), little empirical work has been done on whether compulsory voting effectively contributes to a greater sense of civic duty.

Research Design, data and contextualisation

In order to explore how the task environment can impact citizens' confidence in their own political judgments we undertook a total of twelve focus groups in two Australian States (Queensland and South Australia) ahead of state elections (held on 25 November 2017 and 17 March 2018 respectively). During that period, the issue of same-sex marriage was also a focus of attention as the Australian Government organised a postal survey on the matter, held between 12 September and 7 November 2017. The fact that such drastically different task environments took place over a short period of time offered a rare window of opportunity to compare how confident citizens felt in participating in both settings. Participants were asked to reflect on both task environments. In line with previous research (see e.g. Arcuri et al, 2008), a total of 75 participants took part to our study, with two-hours long focus groups being held in urban (Brisbane and Adelaide) and regional (Townsville and Murray Bridge) areas. Participants were selected based on their socio-economic characteristics to (age group, gender,

household income and professional status). They were all undecided voters ahead of the above-mentioned state elections order to avoid any political bias. They were grouped based on their occupational status (retired versus active). They received an incentive of AUD100 for their participation. All groups were convened independently and most of them were observed by the researchers, who did not interfere in the process to allow for greater transparency in the discussion. In order to mitigate against the effects of group dynamics, participants were first asked to write down their thoughts before the beginning of the conversation.

Focus groups provide a relevant choice because they have become the established method for enabling a sample of respondents to explore and share their reasoning and reflections on the topics of discussion (see e.g. Barbour and Morgan, 2017). Indeed, the pioneering work of Gamson (1992) explored how citizens in a working-class area of Boston thought about politics and used focus groups to show that citizens can reason about their choices and preferences with considerable depth. As he notes survey-based research has many advantages but to understand the formation of public opinion it is worth recognizing that it can be complemented by other methods. As Kam (2012, 561-2) argues that when exploring public opinion openness to a variety of methods matters and claims that focus groups can 'provide an alternative evidentiary basis for examining mental processes and sources of influence on public opinion, where public opinion need not be defined simply as a temporary construction uttered within the confines of the survey interview'. Hence, this method helps us answer our main research question, as we are interested in exploring whether the task environment has an impact on citizens' internal efficacy. Our analysis focuses on the individual and group levels, in order to analyse and compare the reasons why participants felt more or less confident about their political judgement in two different settings (Cyr, 2014).

The format of State elections varies depending on the location in Australia (Goot, 1995). A full preferential voting system is used in federal elections, Victoria, Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia and, since 2016, Queensland state elections that obliges voters to rank all participants by order of preference; failing to do so results in the voting ballot being deemed informal and uncounted. This task requirement increases the complexity of the task as voters cannot simply discard candidates they simply do not support. As a result, we would argue that such full preferential voting system is likely to hinder citizens' confidence in their own judgments.

The same-sex marriage issue had been on the agenda of public debate and political choice for about a decade in Australia with the underlying issue at stake focused on the legal treatment of same-sex and heterosexual relationships (Neilsen, 2012). The issue was viewed as controversial precisely because of its moral and social character. There were divisions within the main Labor and Liberal parties over the matter. In the election of 2016 Malcolm Turnbull promised to put the issue to a plebiscite. After a narrow election victory though the legislation to establish the plebiscite was rejected by the Australian Senate in November 2016. As a response the government conducted a voluntary postal survey to ascertain the views of Australians on legislating for same-sex marriage during 2017. The non-binding survey did not require parliamentary approval; the government pledged to facilitate the passage of a private member's bill legalizing same-sex marriage in the Parliament if a majority of respondents voted 'Yes' in the survey. The results of the survey were announced on 15 November 2017; 61.6 per cent of respondents voted in favour of same-sex marriage, with a turnout of 79.5 per cent (for an in-depth analysis of the survey see McAllister and Snagovsky, 2018).

In order to analyse how participants made up their minds and whether they felt they had confidence in their choice, in these two different task environments, they were asked questions

about their voting preferences and the rationale behind their decisions. Where needed, follow-up questions were asked by the moderator to give the opportunity to participants to develop on their reasoning.

Distinguishing supportive and non-supportive task environments: evidence from the focus groups

Framing choice

Despite its non-compulsory and non-binding nature, most focus groups participants did vote in the same-sex marriage survey, reflective of an overall turnout of 79.5 per cent in the national vote. In fact, the uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of the plebiscite did not have an impact on participation. Even though some focus group participants criticised the government for avoiding making a decision on the issue ("*How are they in touch with the people when they're unable to make a clear call?*"), they emphasised they had confidence in their own political judgments and had found it relatively straightforward to place themselves either in to the 'Yes' or 'No' camps. This is best illustrated by the following statement:

> "With voting for a politician you're really not quite sure what you're going to get. There are so many grey areas, where with [the same-sex marriage plebiscite] you knew exactly what the situation was and you made your decision based on that. It's quite clear cut whereas with [state elections], there's just too many grey areas" (Murray Bridge, retired participant)

Only one focus group participant believed that the binary choice constrained their vote, potentially affecting their internal efficacy and arguing:

> "I don't think it's just that easy, yes or no. You know, I think there's a lot of things to be discussed and that's quite a serious issue really" (Brisbane, retired)

In contrast, the full preferential voting system used in Queensland and South Australia (where all focus groups were conducted) is particularly complex and requires voters to find out more information about different candidates to rank them. Most participants also argued that non-binary task environments create further confusion due to the nature of the electoral system, which also has some repercussions on trust in the political institutions:

> "I feel like the sort of whole voting system seems to be so complex […] it seems to be that there's just more complication for a voting system that should just be black and white. This is who you vote for, this is what you're going to get instead of all this nonsense of parties splitting up […] It just seems to be a never-ending saga with politics. Yeah, I don't feel that we have as much of a say of your vote counts" (Brisbane, active)

Nature of the issue

The issue content for the same-sex marriage plebiscite fulfils most of the criteria for a designation as an easier or symbolic choice. It was a social or moral choice; not a complex technical one. Most of the debate was about the broad principle of whether to make the legislative change or not rather than the detail of implementation. This positively impacted voters' confidence in their decision to vote 'yes' or 'no' in contrast to technical, more complex issues that can be raised in the context of state elections, as reflected in the focus groups participants' reasoning:

> "With the same-sex marriage, you have a yes/no, black and white sort of question put to you, but when you look at the politicians, we'll take the example of Nick Xenophon, he was no pokies, then he was pro-pokies, then he was some pokies. Who's got time to try to understand the distinctions with all of this stuff, it's not a yes, no, tick a box sort of proposition" (Adelaide, active)

Focus group participants further argued that making decision on who to vote for in state elections is a very difficult task, not only because the Australian system of preferential

voting requires them to rank candidates, but also because a wide range of (sometimes

conflicting) issues are put forward by each party:

> "Essentially you have what three main [parties] you can vote for, it doesn't give
> you a lot of specifics. You know, you can say, well, I'm a Labor or Liberal, Green
> or whatever and you go with that, it doesn't mean you agree with everything they
> stand for. I feel like the sort of whole voting system seems to be so complex"
> (Brisbane, active)

> "Politicians are just everywhere now, they're bashing each other out, they're not
> talking about anything positive, they're not coming up with any positive ideas. I
> honestly don't know what any policies from any party are at the moment because
> there are none" (Adelaide, active)

Nature of available cues

The state level elections and the plebiscite over sex marriage were both accompanied by plenty

of elite messages, but data from our focus groups suggest that it is only in the latter case that a

greater role for horizontal communication from social movements, family, friends, social

media and lived experience would match or even dominate over vertical messaging:

> "I voted no because basically on religious grounds. To me, you know, it should be
> a man and a woman that are married and that's just how I feel personally. But I
> didn't like all the campaigning that went on, on the TV and you know, really, it's
> just a personal thing, you don't need to be influenced how you vote yourself and it
> just went on and on forever" (Brisbane, retired)

> "I voted yes because I have friends and family who are gay, homosexual and
> lesbian and it's my way of supporting them" (Brisbane, active)

Elections tend to be media driven, elite events. Clarke et al (2019) note that in the early twenty-

first century, citizens encounter politicians at election time most prominently in media coverage

of 'stage-managed' debates, photo opportunities, and sound bites plus associated opinion polls

and expert analysis. Horizontal cues such as recognition also exist in the context of elections

(and the role of social media in shaping voting behaviour is becoming increasingly studied by

psephologists), yet vertical cues remain dominant. Citizens find it difficult to make judgments about politicians in this context of professionalised, mediatised political campaigning, as illustrated by these statements from focus group participants:

> "I try to switch off during campaign time because - you know, if they could stand up and say this is what I truly believe in, this is what I really want to work for because I think it's good on a bigger picture but it's like we're going to fix the transport system because Labor stuffed it, we're going to fix this because they stuffed that. I mean it's just all finger pointing and putting each other down and looking for dirt and I don't want to hear that" (Brisbane, active)

> "You can't trust [parties] to follow through with what they're telling you that they're going to provide, because half the time they don't. It's just to get them in" (Murray Bridge, retired)

Drivers of cognitive effort

In our comparison of task environments, the area where the state elections would appear to support citizens' confidence in their own judgement is that compulsory voting drives a sense of civic duty. This was discussed in most focus groups. At first, several participants argued that compulsory voting *forces* citizens to make an informed decision and effectively contributes towards a greater sense of civic responsibility:

> "I think it enforces you to have a look at what's going on and then you have some responsibility for how you're voting and you can't turn around and whinge about anything and everybody if you didn't take part in the process of voting" (Adelaide, retired)

> "I think it makes community members more interested in issues around and in the community, makes them more community minded and pay attention to what's going on. Because then they have to make choices about it" (Adelaide, active)

> "We're not given that much knowledge about [the government's performance], unless you're fully into politics. It's very hard to grasp. If I didn't have to vote, I probably wouldn't. Because I wouldn't take any note of it" (Adelaide, active)

> "I think we need to have some responsibility for who's in power. Unfortunately, I don't think we really get it in this way, but to some extent we do. If we don't vote, it's very easy. We're all complaining about politicians, anyway. But at least we have to go and have a say, even if we vote informally" (Adelaide, retired)

Only a couple of participants opposed compulsory voting. When that was the case, the reasons advocated were that (in the participants' views) many voters who feel 'forced' to vote tend to make an ill-informed decision, thus having an impact on attitudes towards internal efficacy but also on their perception of others' internal efficacy:

> "People […] being forced to vote go in there and then their vote really doesn't count because they're just going for the prettiest poster or I saw the lady down the shop or whatever. So at least then people that are passionate about it or want to make a difference, then they'll vote. And I'm not sure what percentage actually just tick the box, maybe it's 20" (Brisbane, active)

Several participants further highlighted the 'sense of duty' to make an informed decision and vote for the party that will defend their interests best but felt that is was a tough ask:

> "I think that it is my responsibility as an adult, whether I do or not, to make an informed decision. Because it will affect me, whether I see it or not. And it will affect the people that I care about, which is, and I wrote down a big input into my voting is how it affects my family. And even if it doesn't affect me and it affects my parents and their ability to manage their business, and my partner's ability to get a job, I care about that. So I think it's my responsibility to my country and my family to educate myself a little bit" (Townsville, active)

> "My personal opinion on that is there's not enough education. We have all these young people and they're suddenly 18 and we say, okay, now you need to vote for what you want to happen in your suburb, country, whatever, but we don't actually tell them how politics works or what they're voting for or how - it's like there's no explanation of what they're doing other than knowing you have to go in and put a name on a paper. " (Brisbane, active)

Unlike in the context of Commonwealth and state elections as well as formal referendums, voting in the Australian same-sex marriage survey was not compulsory and the outcome of the vote was not legally binding. Yet, turnout was high, and participants who voted suggested that it was mostly horizontal cues that drove their decision to cast their votes as illustrated above. Only two participants explained they voted in favour of same-sex marriage as it is an issue of

importance to many citizens ("*I think everyone has the right to be happy and if that's, you know, getting married to the person you love, then whether it's a man or a female then you should have that right*" – Brisbane, active). The majority of those who decided not to vote did so because they believed it was not their responsibility ("*they're our politicians. We pay them to do the job and they're not doing it*" – Murray Bridge, active).

Conclusion

What drives political participation and how citizens construct their own political judgment are complex issues. The existing literature demonstrates that citizens can be moved to make more cognitive effort (Kam, 2012). Internal efficacy, in turn, is an essential component of political participation (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Halperin, 2012). Building on the concept of ecological rationality, our addition to this debate is to argue that a focus on internal efficacy needs to be joined by a better understanding of the characteristics of the task environment. Indeed, until now, the literature seemed to focus on other factors that have an impact on internal efficacy, such as trust in institutions, interest in politics, or media readership (see e.g. Moeller et al., 2014). How tasks are constructed also matters, as demonstrated in our empirical analysis: contrasting task environments held in the same country at the same time produce different effects on internal efficacy.

Table 2 summarises our empirical findings and compares them in two different settings. Cues work better in some contexts for decision-making than others. For those concerned to aid political judgment, it might be attractive to focus as much on changing the task environment rather than paternalistic attempts to improve cognitive skills through education and training. Our core argument is that the citizens' internal efficacy increases when faced by a binary choice on a symbolic issue, *and* when horizontal cues or heuristics (such as recognition) are

available to enable citizens to use some past experience or decision in order to inform their current decision. It is the combination of these three factors together that seems to be vital.

Table 2: Comparing task environments

Feature Facilitative of Political Judgement	State level election	Same Sex Marriage plebiscite
Binary Choice	**No**	**Yes**
Issue content: symbolic	**No**	**Yes**
Horizontal Cues More Dominant	**No**	**Yes**
Stimulating Cognitive Effort	**Yes**	**Limited**

The European Union referendum in the United Kingdom provides an interesting way of exploring this formula in that it passes only one out of our three tests. It would seem according to our argument that the Electoral Commission when designing the question was correct in making the choice a binary one, between Leave or Remain. In addition, we would argue that any second referendum would best be framed as between a Leave deal or Remain. But although for many the choice turned into a symbolic or moral choice about national freedom and taking back control (for evidence of that see Leruth and Taylor-Gooby, 2019) there can be little doubt that there were significant non-symbolic issues at stake, as many voters understood but found difficult to make calculations about; plus there were considerable technical difficulties in the path to Brexit which are still not at the time of writing resolved. In short because of this complex and mixed framing of the task environment the EU referendum was destined to make many citizens rather over-confident in their judgement for either Remain or Leave, or in many cases confused and unclear about what was for the best and for others desperate for issue just to go away (for evidence from a range of polls see Curtice, 2019). Finally the EU referendum fails another of our tests in that it was heavily reliant on elite cues rather than horizontal ones.

So although the EU referendum offered a binary choice the structure of the task environment was not taken as whole suitable for improving the internal efficacy of citizens.

Based on our data, it appears that the sense of civic duty does not necessarily make citizens more confident of their political judgement. Few participants argued their participation in the plebiscite and vote was shaped by such sense of responsibility. As far as the impact of compulsory voting is concerned, our findings demonstrate that compulsion does not lead citizens to have greater confidence in their own judgments, despite Australia's tradition of empowering its citizens. Our findings indicate that other variables, such as the dominance of horizontal cues, play a more important role in shaping voters' confidence in such elections. Further studies could focus on the relations between the voters' sense of responsibility and confidence in their voting decisions (or lack thereof) to determine whether compulsion produces the desired effects identified, inter alia, by Lijphart (1997).

The citizens in our focus groups took their responsibilities seriously and showed a substantial capacity to reason, to connect information to judgment. However, their internal efficacy varied depending on the task environment. For reformers our analysis suggests that a concern about the processes of communication and political education to drive citizens' judgment needs to be joined by a focus on what task they are asked to undertake. Given the right framing of a task then citizens will find a way to come to a judgment that sustains or promotes internal political efficacy. Exploring how to make task environments that boost internal efficacy and, in turn, effective political participation is the proposed research agenda launched by this article. We recognise the need for more and different tests of our initial ideas using other methods such as survey experiments or field based randomised control trials. We also do not argue that referendums should replace elections. But we argue we have presented enough evidence to open up new paths for reformers to consider, by breaking down the characteristics of both task

environments analysed within the framework of our analysis and demonstrating how these can facilitate political efficacy.

Reformers interested in giving citizens more of a direct say in democracies often appear nervous about allowing citizens, as they are, to take on more responsibility and so calls for greater civic engagement are often accompanied by pleas for better civic education, more fact checking in public debates and more scope for citizen deliberation. But our article suggests that there might be another reform path to consider; one that tries not to change citizens (to make them better) but rather puts the onus on those that ask questions of them to do so effectively. Getting the task environment right might be a better route to greater and more confident citizen engagement. Our evidence suggests that carefully presented choices help, as does a focus on choices that are not too technical (more focused on values rather than consequences). Enabling citizens to access horizontal cues from their own experience or chosen contacts and peers provides a sense of efficacy and the creating a feeling of accountability to fellow citizens and a duty to engage can support the undertaking of inevitable cognitive effort involved in making a public choice. Starting where citizens are and assuming (given their hectic and busy lives) that is likely to be where they will stay is our reform mantra. Constructing the task environment- what they are asked to decide- can be done in a way that facilitates the confidence of citizens in their own judgement. This article will have succeeded if it opens this avenue of reform for further investigation.

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