



APPLICATION FORM FOR PROSPECTIVE WORKSHOP DIRECTORS

If you wish to apply to direct a workshop at the Joint Sessions in Münster, Germany during 22-27 March 2010, please first see the explanatory notes, then complete this form, which will serve as the **cover sheet** for your workshop proposal. This form should be sent with your **workshop proposal** to the ECPR Central Services. You can do this by emailing both documents as an attached file (in word format .doc or rich text format .rtf) to the ECPR Central Services at ecpr@essex.ac.uk. Alternatively, you can print up the information and send it as a fax to the Central Services, fax: +44 1206 872500. **The deadline for applications is Sunday, 01 February 2009.**

Title of proposed workshop:

The Dilemma of Political Sophistication and Political Equality

Subject area:

Democracy, Comparative Politics, Political Behaviour, Political Information, Social and Political Equality

Abstract of proposed workshop. Maximum of 250 words (suitable for publication in the academic programme leaflet and on the ECPR web site):

If democratic government is "Government for the people, by the people, through the people" then the prospects for its full realization seem bleak: One of the most thoroughly and repeatedly documented fact about mass publics in existing democracies is that of a widespread ignorance about political matters, of a wide gulf in sophistication between the governing and the governed and high variance among the governed. Since political sophistication and efficacy is strongly correlated with education and social status, especially citizens with lower status are disadvantaged in terms of political sophistication and efficacy, to the consequence that their voices are less heard by government. Consequently, government policy may become skewed in favour of the better-off. This raises several questions, such as whether genuine political equality is possible at all, how the political disadvantage of citizens from lower strata can be ameliorated, and whether changes in the media system have made it easier or more difficult to come to limitations of political sophistication. Such questions cannot safely ignored, if political science is expected to matter for the effectiveness of democracy. The workshop therefore aims to create the opportunity for a dialogue between all sub-fields of political science, a dialogue that includes normative political theory, comparative politics, political psychology and political sociology. It is open to all scholars with an interest in the question of political sophistication and political equality from any theoretical, empirical and practical point of view.

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Please note that the information above is VERY important, as it will be used in all future correspondence and, if the proposal is successful, printed in the academic programme.

The proposal should be typed with 1.5 line spacing on three/four A4 pages using this sheet as the first page, and should cover the points outlined in the explanatory notes/guidelines available on the ECPR website at www.ecprnet.org.

For further information, please contact:

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The Dilemma of Political Sophistication and Political Equality

Statement of the Workshop's Topic

If democratic government is “Government for the people, by the people, through the people” then the prospects for its full realization seem bleak: One of the most thoroughly and repeatedly documented fact about mass publics in existing democracies is that of a widespread ignorance about political matters, of a wide gulf in sophistication between the governing and the governed, and a high variance among the governed (Converse 2000, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Neuman 1986). Readers of Downs' *Economic Theory of Democracy* may not have been surprised by such findings: The impact of individuals' opinions and political choices on the overall direction that the political process takes is minimal and the costs of gathering and processing political information are large relative to the gain that individuals may achieve by making informed political choices (Downs 1957). Proponents of representative democracy and professionalisation of government may argue that the informational gulf between the governing and the governed is unproblematic as long as citizens can vote ineffective or unfaithful governments out of office.

Yet even the apparently most simple way of assessing the effectiveness or faithfulness of government – the way living conditions have changed during a governments' term (Downs 1957) – are not applicable as straightforwardly as it seems. The extend to which and the way how government policy and outcomes are related, is often subject to debate even among political scientists and economists. Further, the absence of scholarly consensus about the link between government decisions and their outcomes leaves room for making the interpretation of any change or any stagnation in citizens' living conditions a politically contested matter. Even worse, the way people react to changes in their living conditions may suffer from a distorted perspective and a considerable degree of myopia (Bartels 2005, 2008). Also, an accurate perception of the social and political status-quo cannot be taken for granted, rather its perception is strongly coloured by one's policy preferences to a degree that leads to misinformation (Kuklinski et al. 2000). In the end, as it seems, the extend one holds government responsible depends on one's prior political allegiances.

Political heuristics have been discussed for a while as a potential way by which citizens' can overcome their cognitive limitations (Popkin 1991). Yet early on in this debate it was shown that the availability of heuristics and the adequacy of their application varies with citizens' political sophistication (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lau and Redlawsk 2008) and was argued that their availability and adequacy also depends on citizens' environment (Krassa 1990; Kuklinski et al. 2001, Jerit et al 2006). Neither is the delegation of information-selection and -processing (Downs 1957; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), that is, the reliance on opinion-leaders (Berelson et al. 1954) a panacea. While one may theoretically identify conditions that motivate opinion-leaders to be knowledgeable and trustworthy or make sure that only knowledgeable and trustworthy individuals become opinion-leaders (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), it takes a certain level of sophistication to find out whether such conditions apply in a specific instance. Political “novices” may thus end up in a “Catch-22” situation: In order cope by finding appropriate opinion-leaders they may need an amount of political sophistication they lack to begin with. Even worse, for some citizens there will not even be any such potential opinion leaders available.

Political Sophistication does matter for political opinion and choice. Given the impossibility of perfect knowledge, a political “expert” will at least be much better able to make connections between her or his general values and her or his assessment of government decisions and changes in living-conditions than a political “novice” (Althaus 2003, Bartels 1996, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Gilens 2001, Lau and Redlawsk 1997, Zaller 1992). But political sophistication is unevenly distributed – not only between the governing and the governed, but also among the governed. The high correlation between political sophistication and education is well documented and education itself is strongly related to social status and material advantage. Consequently, citizens with lower status or in material disadvantage are also disadvantaged in terms of political sophistication. Historically, conservatives that

opposed the expansion of the suffrage putting forward worries about negative consequences for the quality of governance if the “uneducated masses” would become involved in politics. In a contemporary perspective, however, the concerns should be different: A lower political sophistication and involvement of people from the lower social strata means that their voices are less heard by government and government policy may be skewed in favour of the better-off (Bartels 2008, Verba 2003), in contrast to the goal of political equality (Dahl 2006).

The well documented ignorance of mass publics has two types of consequences, which are each a problem for a complete democracy. The first problem is that of potential agency drift on the part of governing elites: Politics and government policy has become complex to a degree that popular control of government may become elusive. The second problem is that the unequal distribution of cognitive resources may lead to a virtual political exclusion of especially those groups that may most in need of government intervention.

Against this backdrop a plethora of questions arises: Is genuine political equality possible at all? How can the political disadvantage of the socially or economically disadvantaged be ameliorated? What institutions and social mechanisms make it easier to cope with the lack of sophistication (Grönlund and Milner 2006, Kuklinki et al. 2001, Jerit et al. 2006)? When do what political heuristics lead to reasonable choices and when do they lead astray (Lau and Redlawsk 2008)? How do citizens choose opinion-leaders and how can they find knowledgeable and trustworthy ones? What kind of communicating government policy can counteract the lure of demagogues? Have the changes in the media system – privatization, fragmentation, and the rise of the internet – made it easier or more difficult to come to reasonable political judgements and choices (Grönlund 2007, Prior 2007)?

Intention of the Workshop and Type of Papers Invited

The questions that arise from this dilemma cannot safely be ignored if political science shall matter for the working of democracy. The workshop therefore aims to create the opportunity for a dialogue between all sub-fields of political science, a dialogue that includes normative political theory, comparative politics, political psychology and political sociology. It is open to all scholars with an interest in these questions from any theoretical, empirical or practical point of view, from post-graduates to experts of the respective sub-fields, from established or from relatively young democracies in Europe. There are no restrictions as to theoretical perspectives or empirical methods, whether they involve formal modelling, mass survey analysis, experimental studies, case studies or participant observation. It is crucial however, that participants address the central questions: on the consequences of political ignorance and misinformation for mass politics and how they impinge on political equality, and ideally, what policies or institutional arrangements can ameliorate, if not overcome these consequences, whether in established or in new democracies. Papers may tackle specific aspects of the overarching problem, yet should be framed in a way to be accessible across sub-disciplinary boundaries, such that they contribute to a comprehensive dialogue.

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Biographical Note:

Martin Elff teaches Comparative Politics and Political Sociology as a Lecturer at the University of Mannheim. His research interests are Comparative Politics, Political Sociology, and Political Methodology, with a focus on the impact of institutions and party competition on patterns of political attitudes and behaviour. In 2007 he published an article in *Perspectives on Politics* on social patterns in party choice in Western Europe and in 2008 an article in *Political Analysis* on uncertainty in ecological inference.