*Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making*

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**Starting point:** How a public that is uninterested in politics can provide control over public policy? Lack of knowledge about simple political matters. This goes against a classical democratic theory informed public is necessary for democracy to function properly.

**RQ:** What are the individual and contextual determinants of heuristic use? Does the use of heuristics affect the quality of decision making?

**Summary:** Despite the ignorance Lau and Redlawsk predicted that 75% of the electorate voted correctly. Not only that but aggregate opinion looks far more stable.

These contradictory expectations and findings are reconciled in two ways. The aggregate opinion are stable as error is random among individuals so in totality it doesn’t change. The second, and the idea the authors work on, bases itself on the psychological research on cognitive heuristics. Limited information processors or cognitive misers, who apply information shortcuts within reasonable amount to make everyday decisions. It is compelling because it rests upon the assumption that people use the same information shortcuts in political decision-making as in any other sphere of life.

This argument underlines two assumptions – that everyone uses cognitive heuristics in making political decisions. Second is that heuristics help and compensate for the lack of knowledge and attention to politics.

It is far easier to assume that cognitive heuristics allow voters to make great decisions without actually demonstrating that they do. Bartels points us towards a serious issue, the fact that cognitive heuristics can introduce a serious bias into decision making. The focus of the paper will be on how heuristics provide cognitive saving and how this might results in biased decision making. Strategy of problem solving that keeps the information processing demand within limits (heuristics).

**Five Common Cognitive Heuristics:** *Party affiliation, ideology*. Most widely used and shared in American politics. If salient characterizes of a Republican candidate are consistent with the ideal image of a Republican, that voters might just infer his/her policy stance on issues such as defense, taxes, abortion etc. Cognitive saving is utilized by assuming the content rather than learning policy stances of each individual candidate. On the other hand, ideological heuristics may lead to biased decision making as the potential for mis categorization of candidates is higher.

*Endorsements* are the second type of cognitive heuristics. Instead of learning each candidate’s stances on all policies that affect women, voter can learn interest group endorsement of specific policy and infer from there. Here we defer to trusted others. Potential reason for cognitive bias is when the endorsement is made out of different reasons than what the voter expects.

*Election polls,* the electorate informs the voter who are viable candidates, especially early in the election campaign.

*Candidate appearance,* it is not restricted to political realm but isnot limited to political realm. Instead, one picture may contain an incredible amount of information about gender, race, age, likability etc. even though we don’t know much about politics we know about judging people and have preconceived opinions that come into play.

**Hypotheses:** We expect most of the voters to employ at least some sort of cognitive heuristics to make sense of the political campaign.

Political sophistication and knowledge moderate usage of specific heuristics, particularly *ideology* and *endorsement* heuristics.

Situational and contextual factor should influence heuristic use. They should be used in more complex decision-making circumstances. When the choice is easy there is less need to use cognitive shortcuts. They should be associated with higher quality decisions – if they didn’t work they wouldn’t have been developed. Not only that the experts will employ them more but will know how?

**Method:** *Dynamic process tracing methodology. (adapted information boards).*

Simulating political campaign environment. 4 experiments.

Watched, gathered info, voted in primaries, evaluated on thermometer, informed about two candidates, voted again, and evaluated on the thermometer again (procedure lasted for 1:45 minutes).

**Results:** If a heuristic is valuable for a decision - that that heuristic should be used as early as possible. Almost everyone used heuristics, and they use specific heuristics at a prevalent rate (44%). Also they access much of the unique information about the specific heuristic employed.

**Political sophistication and heuristic use:** More sophisticated and informed people use ideology and endorsement heuristics, while appearance and party is used by less sophisticated voters.

**Situational factors of heuristic use:** Our hypotheses clearly predict greater use of cognitive heuristics with the dynamic rather than with static procedure. Heuristics were more likely to be employed when a more realistic and more cognitively demanding format was used. Moreover, when asked about the difficulty of decision making dynamic environments scored more.

**More candidates –** 2vs4. Party (trivial differnces), Endorsement and Viability in 2. Ideology and Appearance in 4. Sophistication does not explain any of these findings.

**Is Information Acquisition the same thing as Heuristic Use?**

Even with a simple information acquisition how do we know that information is being processed and used in a heuristic manner? Memory – recall that information is at least processed. Further, whether they can place candidates on issue positions. The use of Endorsement information and Ideology was related to more precise positioning of candidates.

**Effect of Political Heuristic on Correct Voting**

Normative evaluation of whether we made a right decision or not. Based on pretest questionnaire, we know the position of respondents and we know the position of candidates on issues. Further, we weight the salience of issues for respondents and match them with candidates. A correct vote is vote for a candidate with the highest normative evaluation. Respondents were less likely to vote correctly in a more difficult environment (4vs2 candidates). Sophisticated voters are helped by the usage of heuristics but non-sophisticated voters are more likely to make a biased decision. Political sophistication absent heuristic use contributed little to better decision making.

**Disadvantages of Heuristic Use**

However heuristic use can result in biased decision making if the world is not structured in expected manner. Experimental manipulation here ware extreme issue positions on some and moderate on other issues for the out-party candidate. The average was the same but the range was much larger on the non-stereotypical candidate (party, sophistication and experimental manipulation).

The focus here is on party heuristic as the candidate violates the party assumption. When we have a non-stereotypical candidate heuristics usage decreases the probability of a correct vote among sophisticated voters. The effects are in the opposite direction for non-sophisticated in small in magnitude.

**Discussion**

Even though they are used by everyone they do not substituted for political sophistication. Actually heavy reliance on heuristics might decrease the likelihood of a correct vote for non-sophisticated. On the other hand, politically knowledgeable people who understand the political environment may use heuristics to their advantage.

Many took the task seriously, and with the spread of information technologies the platform resembles normal information environment more closely.

Information processing – running tally. Information is often forgotten but is evaluated and updates the evaluations of candidates. From this perspective, voters know much more than what we attribute them to know.

What is the difference between how these authors and attitude theorists use heurists? Redlawsk and Lau believe in politics we are more inclined to decide when to use heuristics and attitude theorists regard this process as much more automatic.

The cognitive revolution will not allow us to get away from the importance of civic engagement and attention to politics in the mind of successful citizen.