

The Illusion of Knowing and Possible Consequences for Democracies

Studies have shown that news exposure via social media elicits an illusion of knowing, i.e. that the users feel better informed about current affairs (subjective knowledge) than they actually are (objective knowledge) (e.g., Lee et al., 2021; Yamamoto & Yang, 2021). This phenomenon could be problematic for democracies, which require informed citizens who can make rational political decisions. The present study therefore tests associations between the illusion of knowing and three democratic key variables: issue opinions, voting intentions, and willingness to engage in political discussions.

Individuals derive their attitudes from subjective knowledge. If the subjective knowledge is not backed with equivalent levels of objective knowledge, however, this could increase the probability that individuals embrace simplistic solutions, because they are less likely to understand the multiple facets of political issues but think they do so. On the other hand, people without an illusion of knowing would have either sufficient objective knowledge to take differentiated views on political issues, or they would have low subjective knowledge, indicating that they are aware of their limited understanding. Both circumstances should decrease the likelihood of strong support for radical political solutions. Therefore, we assume that the illusion of knowing is associated with stronger support for extreme political opinions (H1).

In addition to attitudinal effects, the illusion of knowing could also have behavioral consequences. Since political attitudes are the major foundation of voting decisions, it can be assumed that opinions originating from illusions of knowing are associated with preferences for parties that offer corresponding radical solutions. In line with that, van Prooijen and Krouwel (2020) found that illusions of knowing predicted anti-establishment voting in a Dutch referendum and that this tendency was particularly pronounced among far-right individuals. For the context of Germany, where the present study was conducted, this could mean that the far-right, populist party AfD has a stronger appeal to citizens who overestimate their political knowledge. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the illusion of knowing is associated with a higher probability of voting for the AfD (H2).

Finally, illusions of knowing could also make people confident enough to participate in political discussions and try to persuade others. This conforms with previous findings that the illusion of knowing mediates the relationship between news exposure via messaging apps and political participation (Yamamoto et al., 2018). Consequently, we expect that the illusion of knowing is associated with a higher probability of participation in political discussions (H3).

We fielded an online survey in July 2023 with quotas to represent German internet users in terms of age, gender, and education (n=682). Both subjective and objective knowledge were measured for three topics: climate change, public service broadcasting, and migration. We measured respondents' subjective knowledge by asking them how much they think they know about these topics. To measure objective knowledge, respondents rated eight factual statements per topic as true or false. The statements were selected after a pre-test with the goal to cover different levels of difficulty. Correct answers were summed to index variables. To compute illusory knowledge, subjective and objective knowledge variables were standardized and subtracted so that positive values indicate an overestimation of knowledge. As the dependent variables, we measured respondents' extreme opinions as their agreement to two contrary radical positions on each topic, their willingness to discuss the topics, and their voting intention. As control variables, we assessed the respondents'

issue involvement, ideological self-placement, news exposure via different channels, and demographics.

Regression models lend some support for all hypotheses: The greater the difference between subjective and objective knowledge, the higher the approval of extreme opinions, although this finding holds almost exclusively for opinions associated with the political far right (H1). The intention to vote for the AfD is linked to the illusion of knowing only for the topic of migration (H2). However, for all three topics, a larger illusion of knowing is associated with a greater willingness to discuss them with others (H3).

In summary, the illusion of knowing is more likely to occur among people with far-right attitudes who are also more likely to engage in persuasion. This suggests that these people are not only susceptible to under-complex solutions like they are propagated by populist parties, but also prone to spread these views even further. Thus, illusions of knowing could facilitate uninformed democratic decisions.

References

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