

1395 Exercise Course “Comparative Political Institutions – Direct Democracy”, Wednesday 16h-17.30h  
Lecturer: Christina Isabel Zuber

## “As if They Were Model Citizens”

### Direct Democracy and Voter Competence

This exercise course accompanying Professor Kaiser's lecture on direct democracy allows students to explore in more detail one of the most pertinent questions of direct democracy: whether ordinary citizens can in fact be competent decision-makers. Schumpeter's famous critique that “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field” (Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, [1942] 2008, p. 262) is often proven right when political knowledge questions are asked in public opinion polls. By contrast, research drawing on formal modeling, quantitative survey analysis, and experimental design shows that even though citizens might not be knowledgeable regarding detailed technicalities involved in a given ballot proposition, they effectively use information shortcuts to decide competently on the matter nonetheless. Thanks to information shortcuts, ordinary citizens decide as if they were “model citizens” (Lupia 1994a).

The course intends to provide students with a firm grounding in the literature on direct democratic choice and voter competence. Students learn to critically assess theoretical arguments, research design and empirical results of key texts and to identify open questions for subsequent research. In the first half of the exercise course, we will focus on the writings of Lupia (1994a,b) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998), who model and experimentally assess how voters use information shortcuts, cues and heuristics to make competent choices. In the second half, we will focus on Nicholson's (2005) theory of agenda voting that shows how ballot measures can themselves serve as information shortcuts for voters when choosing candidates in elections for *representative* democratic institutions.

### Requirements

Students should be familiar with the **readings** assigned for each week. A week-by-week list of required readings will be handed out in the first session. At each session, students will be expected to be able to provide a short synthesis of the core reading and participate actively in class. Additionally, each student should write a **review** of around 1000 words on one of the core readings. If you follow the discussions in class actively, this should not be a difficult task and will help you to remember key arguments later on. Deadline for reviews is the last session of the course. Later papers will not be accepted. Reviews provide a summary of the key theoretical arguments and empirical findings and try to identify shortcomings and avenues for future research. Reviews should be saved in PDF -format under the student's full name and should be sent to [zuberc@uni-koeln.de](mailto:zuberc@uni-koeln.de).

### Access to course readings

We will provide a number of copies of the two books in the institute's library, so students do not need to buy them unless they wish to. (Lupia & McCubbins 1998 is around Euro 22,-; Nicholson 2005 is around 11,- used or 39,- for a new copy). Arthur Lupia's articles can be downloaded from <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lupia/civic%20competence.html>.

### References

- Lupia, A. 1994a. Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: information and voting behavior in California insurance reform elections. *American Political Science Review* 88: 63-76.
- Arthur Lupia. 1994b. The Effect of Information on Voting Behavior and Electoral Outcomes: An Experimental Study of Direct Legislation. *Public Choice* 78: 65-86.
- Lupia, A. and McCubbins, M.D. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nicholson, S. P. 2005. *Voting the Agenda: Candidates, Elections and Ballot Propositions*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.