

# Informing the Debate

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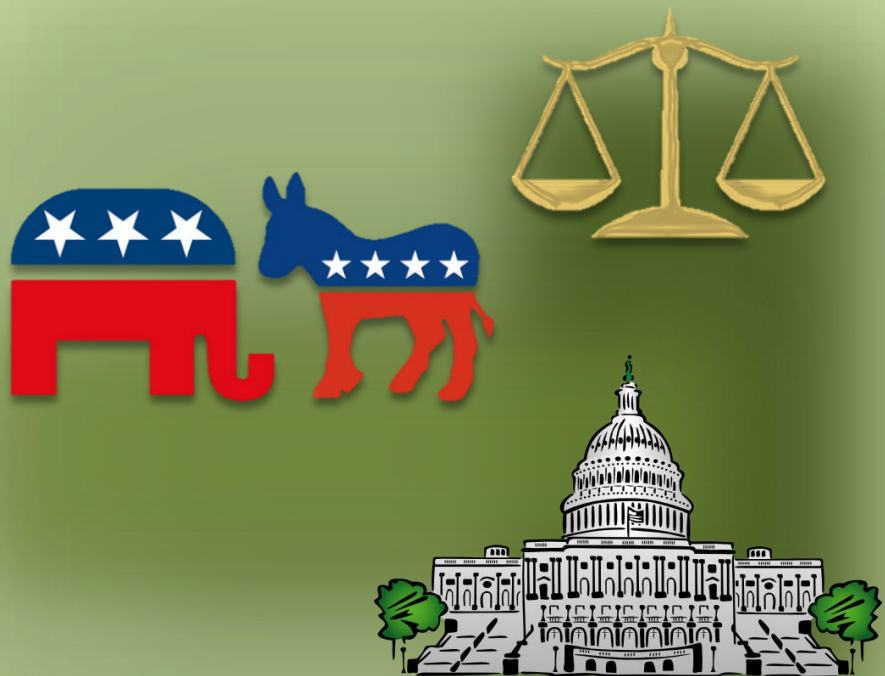
Michigan Applied Public Policy Brief

## The State of Political Knowledge in Michigan

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# About the Michigan Applied Public Policy Briefs

# Informing the Debate

The paper series, *Informing the Debate*, is generated out of grant-funded, policy-relevant research sponsored by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR).

The IPPSR program, Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program or MAPPR, generates research on current issues held in urban communities with special attention to Michigan. Policy researchers author summary briefs of their research outcomes and their implications. The funded research projects and related policy briefs focus on main headings of discussion being held in the policy arena.

When developing the paper series initiative in 1992, the topics of the papers were submitted following a two-day meeting with leaders from the business sector, nonprofit agencies, foundations, and university faculty and staff. That group evolved into the Urban Research Interest Group.

The Urban Research Interest Group recognized the pressure on urban core leaders to make critical decisions that continue to impact people long into the future. A commitment to generating background research to add to the core of debate on possible solutions to complex, urban problems was made.

The expected outcomes of the paper series include discussion that fosters and strengthens multidimensional connections between the policy, academic, and practitioner community. The series continues to cultivate research interest in policy-relevant issues for consideration of decision makers in urban communities.

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# Informing the Debate

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

## The State of Political Knowledge in Michigan

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The tenets of classic democratic theory suggest that, in order for a democracy to flourish, citizens should be able to understand, participate in, and be highly attentive to the politics that govern their lives. These characteristics -- here the catchall "political knowledge" -- should go on to inform rational vote decisions in a healthy democracy. Being politically under-informed precludes one from making prudent political decisions, such as votes in elections or on referenda, and holding politicians accountable.

From a representative democratic theory perspective, if a large proportion of the public is uninformed, a republic is awash with leaders who may not represent the wants of their constituents, resulting in a "democratic deficit." That is, if citizens cannot perform basic democratic functions -- such as selecting the leaders that best suit their political desires, "throwing out the rascals" that do not represent them, or appropriately selecting the policy with which they agree on referenda -- then democracy suffers.

Problematically, political researchers have long noted that most American citizens fail to meet these standards necessary for democratic citizenship. Early work demonstrated that individuals do not express consistent issue attitudes, nor do they structure their political thinking in a manner conducive to developing meaningful attitudes toward new or changing issues (Converse 1964). Even more worrisome, despite increasing levels of education in the United States, political knowledge has *decreased* over the last half-century (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991). More broadly, the average citizen simply does not have a great deal of general knowledge about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997).

These studies, however, focus on an individual's ability to identify national political figures or issues. State level knowledge is equally as -- if not more -- important than a national level political understanding. As then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan noted, these are the "levels of government closer to the people."

Using the Fall 2015 State of the State Survey,<sup>1</sup> we collected original data on Michigan resident's political knowledge. Eight questions (noted in the appendix) were posed to respondents about a variety of important topics: the parties that control the state government, the size of the chambers of Congress and the Supreme Court, the identity of various political leaders, and institutional rules relating to the staffing of government (e.g., term limits). In short, we sought to gain a comprehensive portrait of how much the people of Michigan know regarding the politics of their state. Generally, the residents of Michigan are the most informed about highly visible offices and politicians, such as the party in

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<sup>1</sup>, The State of the State Survey (SOSS), administered by the Institute for Public Policy & Social Research's Office for Survey Research at Michigan State University, is a quarterly statewide survey on a stratified random sample of around 1,000 Michigan adults. A portion of the sample, usually around 30-40%, are individuals who have completed a previous version of the SOSS and agreed to be re-interviewed. This survey employs Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) on both household landlines and cell phones. Due to the split-sampling approach, the survey weights by selection probability. The Fall 2015 SOSS was conducted between 26 October 2015 and 23 December 2015 and a total of 972 interviews were completed.

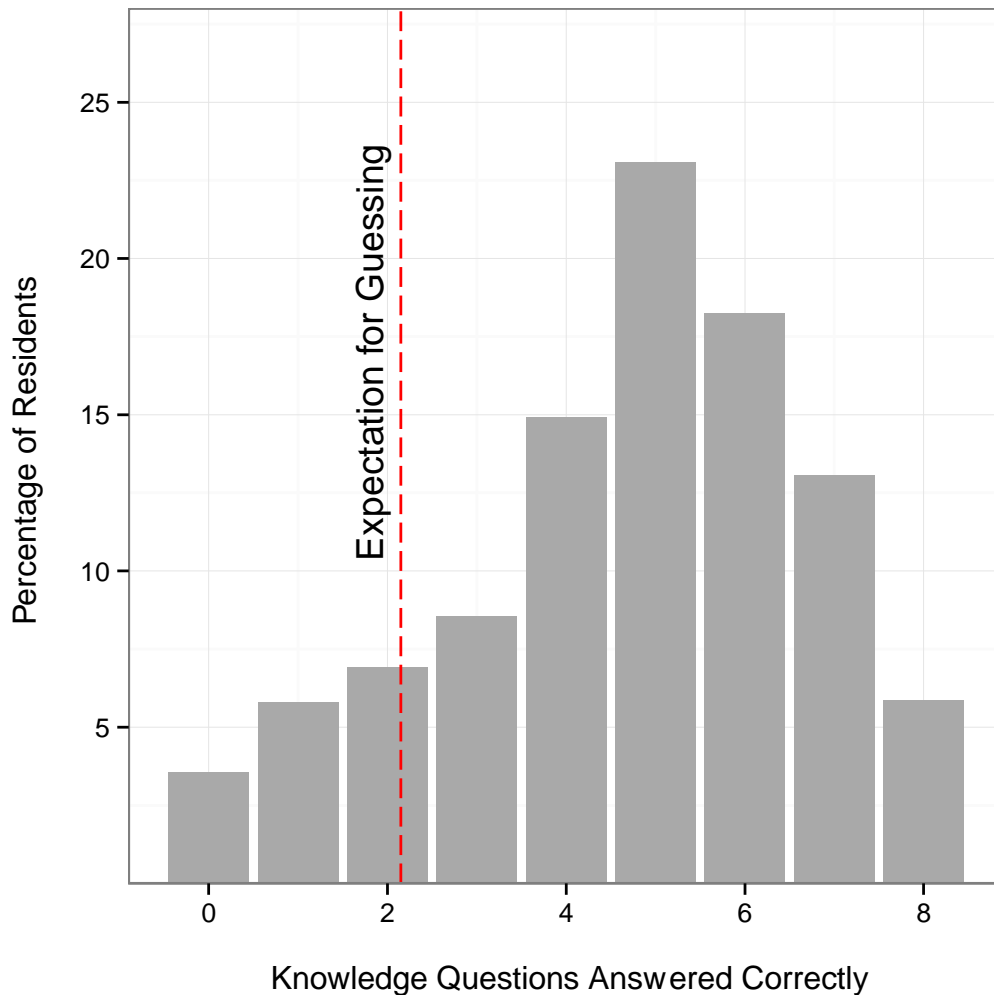
control of the executive branch, but fare less well when it comes to less noteworthy institutions, such as the Michigan Supreme Court. We also find patterns in the levels of political knowledge that are consistent with existing research on the topic. Such factors include educational attainment, partisan self-identification, age, gender, and marital status.

## EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE IN MICHIGAN

How much do Michiganders know about politics? Figure 1 is a histogram that shows the distribution of responses for the eight questions noted in the appendix. Respondents (972) answered, on average, five out of eight questions correctly. Just shy of 6% of respondents scored perfectly, and under 4% failed to answer any questions correctly at all. These results come from how people responded to multiple choice questions.<sup>2</sup> For example, survey participants were asked: What job or political office does Rick Snyder currently hold? Response options were: U.S. representative, state Supreme Court justice, governor, ambassador, or none of the above. We also asked questions where there were a smaller number of choices (e.g., the party of the current governor). If someone was guessing, we would expect them to get a total of 2.15 questions correct by chance alone, which we denote with the red dashed vertical line in the figure. As the figure makes clear, we can conclude that a clear majority are more knowledgeable than guessing alone. Indeed, the average number of correct responses is more than twice the expected guessing rate.

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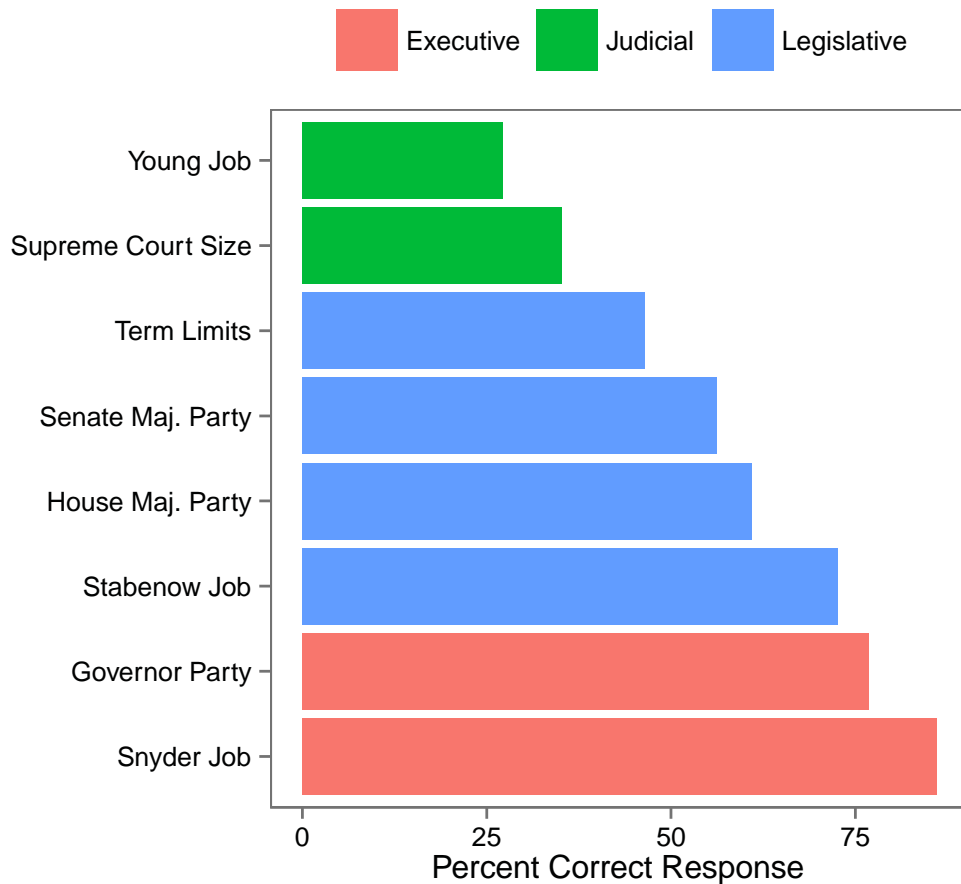
<sup>2</sup> Some respondents received multiple choice questions; others received open ended response questions. Unless otherwise noted, "knowledge" refers to an 8-item additive index of multiple choice items. This index, which ranges from 0-8, is calculated as the total number of questions correctly answered (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct). Specific question wordings and answer options appear in the appendix.



**Figure 1: Histogram of the number of knowledge questions answered correctly. Bar height corresponds to the percentage of survey respondents than answered that number correctly. Dashed red line is the expected number of correct responses by guessing alone. Values include survey weights.**

In addition to seeing significant variation in the levels of knowledge, we also observe clear differences in what aspect of political knowledge respondents had. For example, 86% of Michiganders were able to identify Rick Snyder as the Governor of Michigan. By contrast, few were able to correctly state that the Michigan Senate has 38 members and that the Michigan House of Representatives has 110 members; less than 2% and 1%, respectively, were able to do so. Figure 2 provides a more general view, displaying the percentage of respondents correctly answering the multiple choice and partisan identification knowledge items asked. These 8 items comprise the knowledge scale used repeatedly below. On the less encouraging end, fewer than 30% of residents were able to correctly identify Robert Young as a member of the Michigan Supreme Court, fewer than 35% knew that there are 7 members on that court; similarly, just over 45% knew that state legislators are subject to term limits. More optimistically, greater than half of state residents can appropriately identify the party in control of the Senate (55%), the House of Representatives (60%), and

the governor's office (75%). Similar to the large percentage of people who know that Snyder is the governor, 75% know that Debbie Stabenow is a United States Senator.

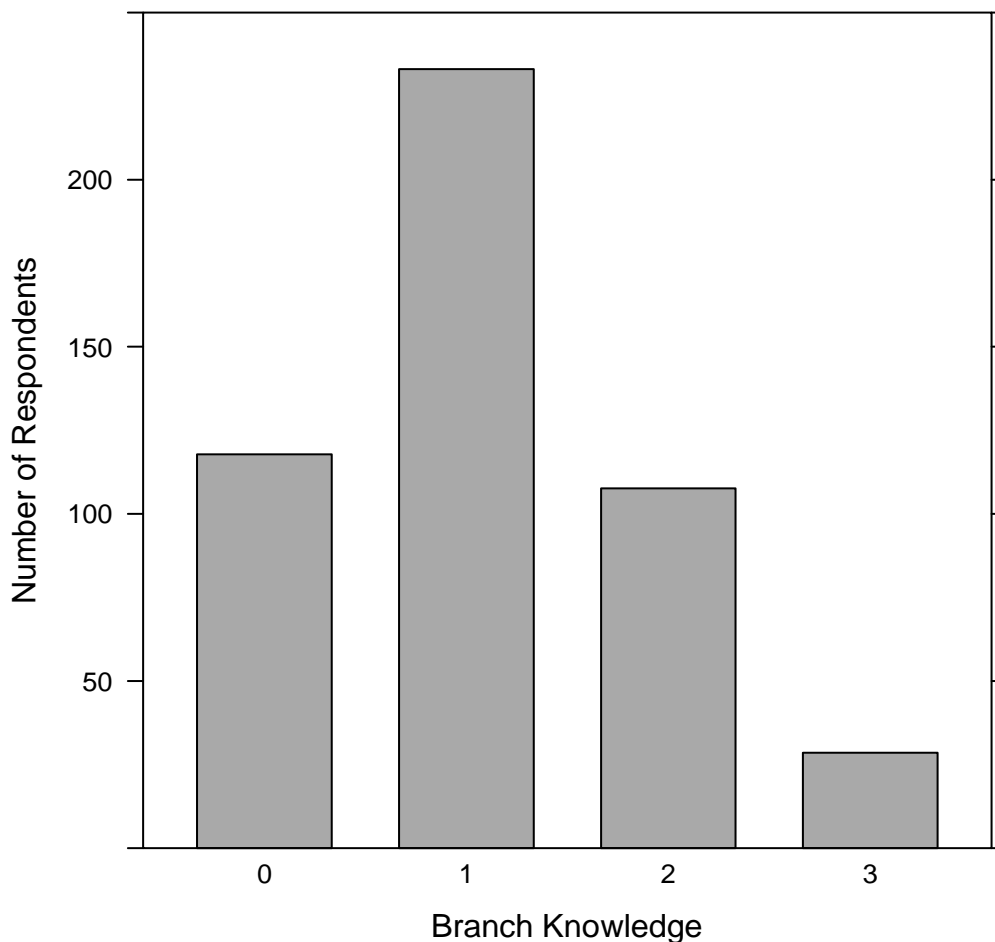


**Figure 2: Percentage of correct responses. Bar length corresponds to the percentage of survey respondents that answered the question correctly. The labels on the y-axis refer to the particular question. Colors denote the particular branch of government about which a question asks.**

Perhaps the most notable feature of Figure 2 is how clearly knowledge appears to group by branch of government. That is, over 75% of respondents can correctly answer questions that ask about the state's executive branch. The three questions about the state legislature and one about a federal legislator from Michigan have the next highest response rates. Finally, questions about the state Supreme Court lag considerably behind the legislature.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Figure 2 shows variation in knowledge about the different branches of state government. Next we consider how many branches people are knowledgeable about. In order to do so, we examined whether an individual correctly answered all questions about each branch of government. If they did, then they received a value of 1 for each branch that they were knowledge "experts" in. For example, if someone was able to answer both the Snyder office identification and executive party control questions correctly, then they would receive a 1 for this branch. The process was repeated for both the legislative and judicial branches. On a scale that ranges between 0 and 3, 0 indicates that one is unable to answer all questions regarding a branch correctly, and 3 indicates one is able to do so for all three branches (i.e., they are able to answer all questions correctly). Figure 3 displays these results.



**Figure 3: Number of branches about which a respondent can answer all questions correctly. Higher bars indicate more respondents answered all questions about the number of branches corresponding to the x-axis correctly.**



Very few Michigan residents are able to properly answer all branch-specific questions for all three branches of government; just under 30 people are able to do so. A greater number of residents cannot identify the correct answers for a single branch than are able to do so for two branches; about 118 and 108 can do so, respectively. The modal category, by over 100 respondents, is correctly answering all questions for a single branch.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Extant research has identified a great number of demographic and symbolic political predispositions that are related to political knowledge. To ascertain the extent to which these relationships hold in Michigan, we briefly describe the characteristics that have been shown to impact knowledge and present the results of a model that estimates the effects of these factors.

First, evidence suggests that marriage status impacts various aspects of political participation and awareness (Stoker and Jennings 1995; Barrett and Zani 2014). To that end, we explore whether there are knowledge differences depending on the marital status of Michigan residents by including a dichotomous variable for marriage. Next, past work has looked at the relationship between age and political cognition, with many studies reporting a decrease in political knowledge as one ages (e.g., Bramlett 2013). Given the high propensity for more aged citizens to participate politically and final vote outcomes to be dependent on age demographics of an area (Gimpel, Morris, and Armstrong 2004), we investigate this relationship in Michigan.<sup>3</sup>

Next, previous work has shown there to be a gender gap in political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1992; Mondak and Anderson 2004). Alternatively, women may be less willing to guess on questions when they are uncertain of the answer (Lizotte and Sidman 2009). Regardless, females tend to score lower on political knowledge questionnaires than their male counterparts. We examine this effect in Michigan.

It is intuitive that education may be related to political knowledge. Indeed, educational attainment has been linked to a host of political attributes, such as political engagement (e.g., Hillygus (2005); although see Highton (2009), who argues that the relationship between education and political engagement may be endogenous). To examine this, we dichotomize a four-category education variable and include indicators for high school, some college, and more than college, with less than high school excluded as the reference category.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the theory suggests diminishing returns as one ages, a model that includes a squared term for age shows that the relationship is not quadratic. We omit the squared term in favor of parsimony and interpret age as a linear effect.

There is both a gender and racial gap in political knowledge. Recent research has revealed discrepancies in political knowledge between racial/ethnic minorities and whites (Abrajano 2015). To see these effects in Michigan, we include a series of racial indicators.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, previous survey findings have demonstrated that there are differences in levels of knowledge across partisan self-identification (Pew 2014). Thus, we examine whether such differences occur in Michigan by including indicators for democrats, independents, and republicans, with identification with all other parties as the reference category.

Table 1 displays the results of a multiple regression of the knowledge battery onto these demographic characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

Table 1: OLS Regression of Knowledge on Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Married	0.516*	0.250
Age	0.016	0.008
Female	-0.513*	0.254
Educational Attainment:		
High School	0.610	0.483
Some College	1.090*	0.443
College+	1.886*	0.441
Race:		
White	-0.120	0.519
Black	0.070	0.645
Hispanic	-0.525	0.530
Other Race	-0.324	0.644
Partisan Self-Identification:		
Democrat	0.730	0.424
Republican	0.531	0.433
Independent	0.223	0.435
Constant	2.346*	0.775

DV: 8 item knowledge battery.

\* denotes  $p < 0.05$  with respect to two-tailed test.

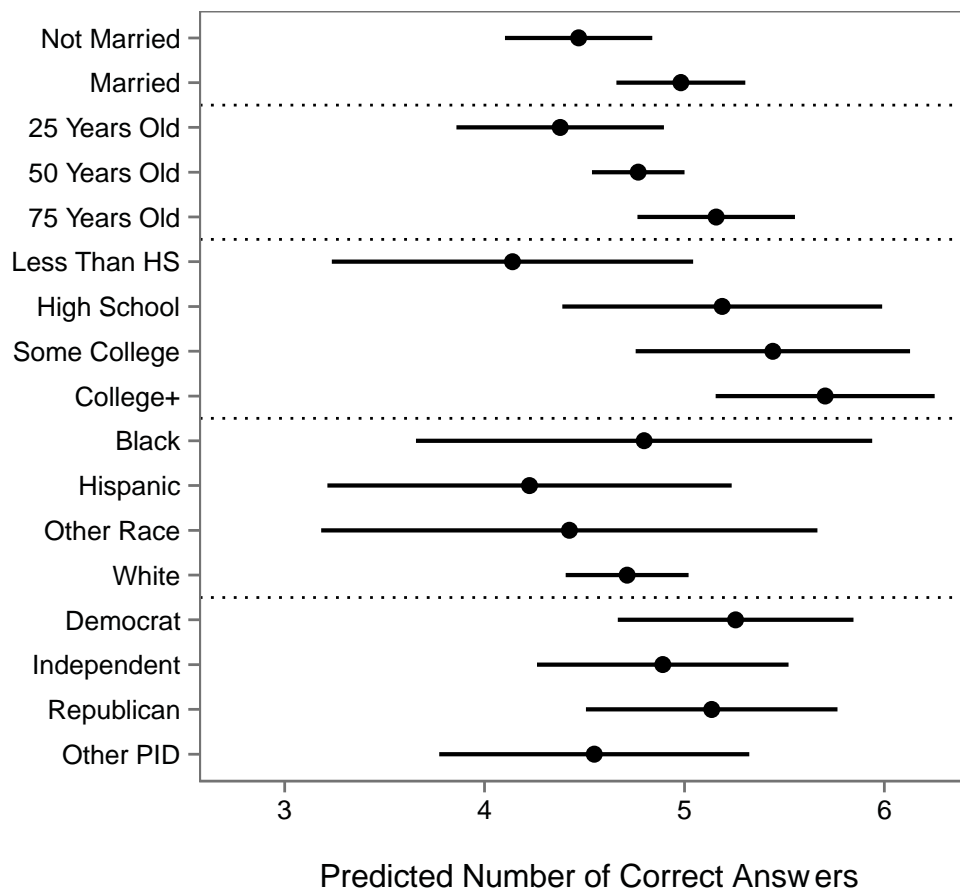
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<sup>4</sup> Because individuals can identify as more than one race, there is no reference category. This makes more difficult interpretation of the race variables. An alternative model using a course end operationalization of race (i.e., white v. non-white) shows there is no statistically significant effect of race on political knowledge in the state of Michigan.

<sup>5</sup> Interactive effects were examined. For instance, we looked at whether there was a particular disadvantage for, say black women compared to either blacks or women individually. There is a synergistic effect for white men, but no other relationships are statistically significant. Given more resources for research, we would like to further examine interactive effects, particularly of gender and race.

Marital status is positively related to political knowledge; married individuals answer, on average, about one half more question correctly than their unwed counterparts. Females tend to answer about one half fewer questions correctly. Finally, in terms of significant variables, college attendance is related to a much higher number of questions answered compared to those who did not complete high school.

When accounting for all other demographic factors, there appear to be no racial differences in the ability to correctly answer these knowledge questions; likewise for party identification. Figure 4 displays the predicted number of correct answers across substantively interesting values of the independent variables.



**Figure 4: Predicted number of correct answers across interesting values of independent variables. Predictions from model displayed in Table 1; values for variables omitted in Table 1 were calculated in subsequent regressions. Closed circle represents prediction; horizontal bars surrounding circle are 95% confidence intervals.**

Consistent with the evidence in Table 1, married individuals answer more questions correctly than bachelors, widows, etc.; the former answered, on average, about 5 questions correctly, and the latter only about 4.5. Although the age variable is shown not to have a significant linear effect, there do appear to be meaningful substantive differences when

examining different age groups. For example, 25 year olds are expected to answer about 4.4 questions correctly, 50 year olds 4.8, and 75 year olds 5.2.

As noted above, college attendance, relative to not completing high school, is associated with greater levels of political knowledge. Figure 4 shows the more education attainment indicated, the more correct answers were provided. Generally, high school graduates achieved 5.2, college attendees achieved 5.4, and college graduates achieved 5.7.

There are slight racial differences in the number of correct answers, but the differences are substantively small and statistically insignificant. Whites are expected to answer around 4.7 correctly, Blacks 4.8, Hispanics 4.2, and all other races 4.4. Finally, the differences among party identification are similarly small and insignificant: democrats are expected to answer 5.3 correctly, republicans 5.1, independents 4.89, and all other party identifiers at 4.5.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although certain aspects of Michiganders' knowledge about their states' politics provides an inauspicious view, the outlook is not altogether bleak. Indeed, the residents of Michigan can identify highly visible politicians and their partisanship well above 50% of the time. It is only when considering lesser known political offices -- such as a Michigan Supreme Court justice -- that residents consistently fail to provide correct answers. And while responses to too many of the questions covered here vary across demographic characteristics like partisan self-identification, disadvantages do not appear to be systemic or institutional. Finally, despite the fact that some individuals -- such as the more highly educated and the more aged -- score more highly on the knowledge battery, it should come as little surprise that those that may be more engaged in politics know more about it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# APPENDIX

## Question Wording and Answer Options

The knowledge scale is an additive index of the 8 questions listed below. Only those who received multiple choice answer options were analyzed unless otherwise noted in the body of the text. The questions that asked whether individuals could identify the party of the chambers of the legislature and the party of the executive are considered multiple choice, as party options are limited. The correct response for questions 1-3 is republicans; an asterisk denotes the correct answer option for questions 4-8.

1. What political party currently controls a majority of the Michigan state House of Representatives?
2. What political party currently controls a majority of the Michigan State Senate?
3. What political party does the current Governor of Michigan belong to?
4. How many justices are there on the Michigan Supreme Court?
  - 5
  - 7\*
  - 9
  - 11
  - Another number
5. Which of the following jobs or political offices does Rick Snyder currently hold? Is he a:
  - U.S. Representative
  - State Supreme Court Justice
  - Governor\*
  - Ambassador
  - None of the above
6. Which of the following jobs or political offices does Debbie Stabenow currently hold? Is she a:
  - U.S. Senator\*
  - State Supreme Court Justice
  - Prime Minister of Germany
  - Governor
  - None of the above
7. Which of the following jobs or political offices does Robert Young currently hold? Is he a:
  - U.S. Senator
  - State Supreme Court Justice\*
  - Governor
  - Prime Minister of Germany
  - None of the above
8. Some state legislatures limit the number of terms that any individual can serve in his or her lifetime, while others don't have any limit. Do you believe that the Michigan legislature has term limits on its House of Representatives, Senate, both, or neither?
  - House of Reps only
  - Senate only
  - Both House and Senate\*
  - Neither

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