

# Patterns and Determinants of Political Knowledge

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## Abstract

Political knowledge is considered to be a central concept in understanding political attitude and behavior of people. In democratic society appropriate levels of political knowledge is thought to be important as it allows the people to participate more effectively in politics. This paper examines the level of political knowledge among the voters of Nagaland. It looks at whether socio-economic factors and political dispositions have a bearing on voter's political knowledge. The findings show that there is a gender gap in political knowledge with majority of women having less knowledge of politics. Moreover voter's level of political knowledge is determined by their level of education, interest in politics, media exposure and frequency of political discussion.

**Keywords:** Political Knowledge, Participation, Political Interest, Media Exposure.

## Introduction

Political knowledge is considered to be a central concept in understanding the political attitude and behavior of people. The concept of political knowledge is a broad term in political science literature. It has been discussed using different terminologies like political sophistication, political information, political awareness and political expertise. Delli Carpini and Keeter define political knowledge as "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory".<sup>1</sup> Appropriate levels of political knowledge are thought to be important to allowing individuals and groups to effectively participate in politics. It also allows them to put forward their needs before the system and develop attitudes that are based on more than emotion.<sup>2</sup> Political knowledge has not only important impacts on political participation and political trust but also spurs support for democratic values.<sup>3</sup> Russell J. Dalton argues that political knowledge is one of the most important prerequisites for full democratic citizenship. To him "any discussion of citizen political behavior is ultimately grounded on basic assumptions about the electorate's political abilities-the public's level of knowledge, understanding and interest in political matters".<sup>4</sup> Similarly Delli Carpini and Keeter point out that "better informed citizens are significantly more likely to participate in politics.... are more likely to demonstrate other requisites of good citizenship, such as political tolerance".<sup>5</sup> They conceive political knowledge as the "currency of citizenship".<sup>6</sup> Knowledgeable citizens are also more likely to hold incumbents to account for their performance while in office.<sup>7</sup> Democratic people should have a minimum understanding of the political system where interests are expressed and representatives are elected<sup>8</sup> implying that operation of representative democracy is dependent on political knowledge.

## Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to assess the level of political awareness among voters of Nagaland. More specifically, this study investigates (a) whether socio-economic factors have a bearing on voter's political knowledge (b) whether political dispositions like media exposure, political interest and political discussion accounts for voter's political knowledge.

## Review of Literature

The concept of political knowledge came into prominence with the work of Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996). According to them, political knowledge refers to how much factual information voters have about politics. It has also been defined as the interlocking set of knowledge, interest and participation (Fiske et al. 1983). Political knowledge is perhaps one of the most valuable assets that citizens possess in carrying out their civic responsibilities.

## Moamenla Amer

Professor,  
Dept. of Political Science,  
Nagaland University, Lumami,  
Nagaland, India

## Moayanger Ao

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of Political Science,  
Nagaland University, Lumami,  
Nagaland, India

Lau and Redlawsk (2006) say that in a democracy voters can use political knowledge to relate their preferences to the politicians on the ballot. More so this according to Basingger and Lavine (2005) ultimately influences the criteria voters use to choose their preferred candidate. With regard to political knowledge and skill, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) posit that those with more political expertise exhibit more consistency and stability in their attitudes. Huckfeldt (2001) also say that when it comes to politics, people seek out those who have knowledge and skill. This political sophistication according to Pokin and Dimock (1999), aids in the translation of political views into action. It is also generally assumed that higher the level of political knowledge, higher would be the level of participation in electoral activities. Study by Niemi and Junn (1998) has shown that political knowledge plays a significant role in explaining variation in political participation. In addition Melchor Dioso (2019) study also found that political knowledge and political participation are positively related. His findings show that awareness about political leaders and political issues were significantly related with voting and participation in public forums and political discussions.

From the above literature it can be said that political knowledge influences the level of citizens participation in the political process. It is essential that voters should have a certain degree of political knowledge about politics as it will make them more aware and ultimately lead to informed judgments.

**Data and Methods**

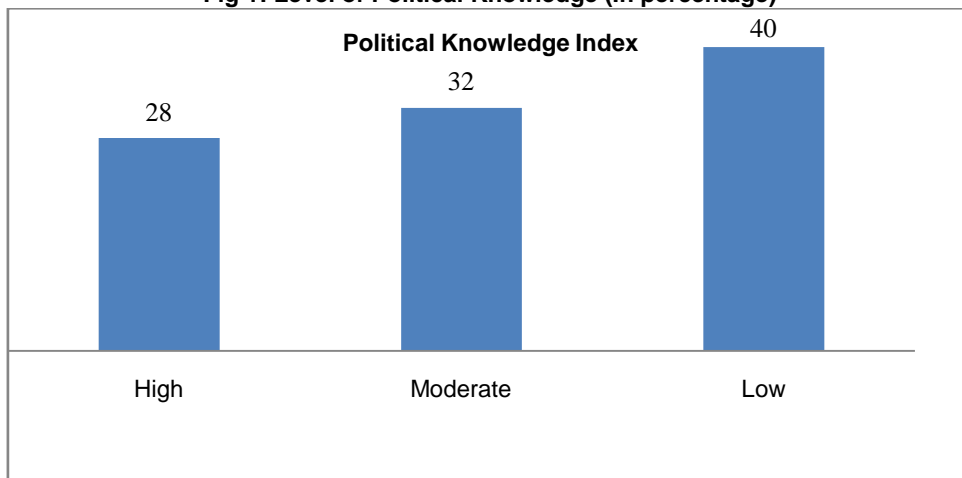
The data used in this paper is based on an Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)-Impactful Policy Research in Social Science (IMPRESS) project titled ‘Political Participation in Nagaland: The Gender Debate’, 2019. The sampling design adopted was Multi stage random sampling.

Out of 60 Assembly constituencies in the state, 10 assembly segments were selected using the Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) sampling method. From each of the sampled Assembly segment three polling stations were selected using the Systematic Random Sampling (SRS) technique. Finally using the same method (SRS) 702 respondents from the latest electoral rolls of the sampled polling stations were selected and data was obtained through face-to-face personal interview.

**Results and Discussion**

Many different measures of political knowledge have been employed as both independent and dependent variables; however no consensus measure of political knowledge exists.<sup>9</sup> Since political knowledge covers such a wide range of topics, identifying which questions should form a political awareness index is key. In the present study political knowledge has been measured by constituting a Political Knowledge Index comprising a battery of nine questions that tap knowledge about politics and related issues. The questions utilised in the construction of the index include: name of the present Chief Minister of the state, name of the present Governor of the state, the minimum age of voting etc. The index is the sum of the correct responses across the nine questions, with possible values on the index ranging from 0-9. The study chose to count a “don’t know” response as an incorrect answer and code it as a 0 in the index construction. The political knowledge levels were indexed into three categories: low, moderate and high. Those respondents who scored between 0-3 points were placed in low political knowledge category, those who scored between 4-6 were placed in moderate political knowledge category and those securing 7-9 points were placed in high political knowledge category.

**Fig 1: Level of Political Knowledge (In percentage)**



Source: Field work, 2019

Fig 1 shows that majority of the voters fall in the low awareness category followed by moderate and high. The findings suggest that most voters are poorly educated about politics and related issues. Significantly, the growth in educational attainment by the people in Nagaland (79.55 per cent)<sup>10</sup> over the past decades does not seem to lead to a commensurate gain in political consciousness.

In analysing the major differences in the level of political knowledge among the voters socio-economic factors like gender, education, occupation and political dispositions like interest in politics, media exposure and political discussions become critical areas to consider. Many researchers argue that motivation, ability and opportunity explain why certain people know more about politics than others.<sup>11</sup> Political knowledge relies on motivation first and foremost. People would not pay attention to politics without political interest, nor would they maintain any political knowledge. Political interest is also considered to be a consequence, as well as a cause of political activity.<sup>12</sup> Those who are interested in politics will try to acquire and retain political

information that will ultimately lead, in turn, to higher levels of political information and participation. The degree of expertise in politics is also rooted in ability. Those with more education should be better able to learn about politics and retain knowledge. Political knowledge is also affected by opportunity. There are several potential tools that can boost the level of knowledge of one. Some of these include financial, social, situational and experiential resources.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, the study of political knowledge has become important to scholars of gender politics. Studies confirm the general pattern of men exhibiting higher levels of political knowledge than women. Women tend to provide fewer correct answers than men to a wide variety of political knowledge questions.<sup>14</sup> In addition gender socialisation gaps in the degree of motivation provide the basis for a permanent gender gap in political knowledge. It is contended that boys and girls are not only socialised into different participative role but also learn that politics is basically a man's game.<sup>15</sup> As a result, women are less involved and have a greater sense of inefficacy in politics.

**Table 2: Sources of Political knowledge (In percentage)**

Factors	Political Knowledge Index		
	High	Moderate	Low
<b>Gender</b>			
Men	36	37	27
Women	19	27	54
<b>Education</b>			
Under matric	13	23	64
Matriculate	23	38	39
Higher secondary	44	43	13
Graduate	53	40	7
Post graduate & above	76	12	12
<b>Occupation</b>			
Government employee	55	28	17
Self employed	22	50	28
Cultivators	19	27	54
Unemployed	25	30	45
<b>Interest in politics</b>			
Great interest	52	33	15
Some interest	37	32	31
No interest	16	32	52

Source: Field work, 2019

Table 1 shows that majority of men fall in the category of moderate political knowledge (37 per cent) followed by those with high political knowledge (36 per cent) and low political knowledge respectively (27 per cent). On the other hand, majority of women come in the category of low political knowledge category (54 per cent) followed by those with

moderate (27 per cent) and high political knowledge (19 per cent). The findings suggest that most women are poorly educated about political issues. It is widely recognised that those who are better educated and employed are more likely to have higher political knowledge. This observation is supported (see Table 1) as voters who are salaried employee have higher

political knowledge (55 per cent) than who are not employed (25 per cent). Political knowledge is directly proportional to the level of educational qualification of the respondents. An increase in education is associated with an increase in political knowledge of the respondents. As expected, each rise or fall in the level of education is accompanied by a corresponding rise or fall in the level of political knowledge of the voters. Therefore, the study establishes a strong association between education and levels of political knowledge (see Table 1). The interest of voter also emerges as the key factor determining their knowledge level. Those with higher interest in politics have higher political knowledge (52 per cent) as compared with those who were not interested in politics (16 per cent). These findings are consistent with earlier research with similar outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

In a democratic society, one of the primary roles of the news media is to educate the people. During election campaigns, this role becomes even more important as voters need to know about the political issues and agendas of the political parties and candidates. The relation between mass media exposure and awareness of political events has been examined in several studies. For instance some scholars found positive effects of newspaper reading on political knowledge<sup>17</sup> while others demonstrated

television news' superiority in terms of audience learning.<sup>18</sup> Another study found that broadcast news, such as television and radio, is more closely related to overall political knowledge than printed news.<sup>19</sup> Internet penetration, social media production and usage have significantly increased all over the world in recent years. For politicians to carry out their election campaigns and for activists to raise awareness of political issues and organise demonstrations, social media has become a weapon. Today, the role of social media is being debated in almost all social movements in countries with high internet access rates. Social networking has become an affordable and highly productive method to target mass audiences for political purposes.

With the purpose to examine the effects of media exposure on political knowledge a Media Exposure Index was therefore created which include a combination of variables on newspaper reading habits, listening to radio news, watching news on television and using internet/social networking. Media exposure was indexed into three categories: low for those who were sometimes exposed to any one medium only and never others, medium for those who were sometimes exposed to two or three media and high for those who were mostly exposed to three or more media.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 2: Media Exposure and Political Knowledge (In percentage)**

Media Exposure	Political Knowledge Index		
	High	Moderate	Low
High	36	30	34
Medium	32	43	25
Low	19	20	61

Source: Field work, 2019

From Table 2 it is quite evident that voters with high media exposure have high political knowledge. Majority of voters with moderate media exposure has moderate political knowledge. And as expected majority of voters with low media exposure has low political knowledge. Thus, voters with greater access and exposure to media have greater knowledge about politics.

Political scientists tend to presume that citizens' participation in spontaneous political discussion is somehow beneficial for the democratic process.<sup>21</sup> Informal political discussions that allow participants to learn more about issues are

considered pillars of healthy democratic societies through active knowledge exchanges with others. Discussion with others may help an individual gain a wider perspective on political issues and raise awareness of the relevance of politics to the life of people. This heightened awareness that politics matters probably comes in conjunction with increased personal interest in politics. Those who engage in political discussions with others usually show an interest in politics and some level of knowledge. The experience of discussing politics with others may also stimulate a sense of political engagement.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 3: Political Discussion and Political Knowledge (In percentage)**

Frequency of Political Discussion	Political Knowledge Index		
	High	Moderate	Low
Never	12	29	59
Sometimes	29	34	37
Frequently	56	33	11

Source: Field work, 2019

As elaborated in Table 3, a high degree of political knowledge is most extensive, as expected, among voters who discuss politics frequently. Those who engaged in political discussion sometimes and

those who never engaged in political discussion have low political knowledge. Thus it can be said that frequency of political discussion is important in

assisting individuals in gathering political information and increasing political knowledge.

## Conclusion

The overall objectives of this paper were to investigate (a) the level of political knowledge (b) whether socio-economic factors and political dispositions like interest in politics, media exposure and political discussion accounts for political knowledge. In summarizing the major findings of the study major points are emphasized. Firstly majority of the voters fall in the low awareness category followed by moderate and high. Secondly there exists a gender gap in political knowledge with majority of women having less knowledge of politics. This paper is only limited in its explanation of the causes of political knowledge among voters and as such it is unable to explain the gender differences in political knowledge. Education and occupation also were found to be important predictors of political knowledge. Exposure to media for political information plays an influencing role in creating political knowledge among voters. Finally participation in face to face political discussions with others has a positive effect on political knowledge.

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