

Information and Opinions on the Canada-U.S. Relationship

Cameron D. Anderson

Laura B. Stephenson

Department of Political Science

The University of Western Ontario

Canadians often feel that Americans know little about them. By comparison, Canadians tend to think that they are very well-informed about their southern neighbours. Reflecting this sentiment, a popular Canadian television program segment hosted by comedian Rick Mercer, entitled “Talking to Americans,” encouraged the stereotype by humorously documenting just how easy it was to fool Americans with false (and often outrageous) claims about Canada. While a comedy program is far from a scientific study, there is a kernel of truth to the situation: existing academic literature notes that Americans are not very knowledgeable about Canada.¹

More recently (and more seriously!), the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) produced a paper based on recent polling data of Canadians and Americans regarding views of the other country and their bilateral relationship.² The ACS paper suggests that views about Canadians held by Americans (and vice versa) are influenced by knowledge about the other country. Even the *Globe and Mail* picked up on this theme, with a recent editorial citing the importance of information about the other country (especially among Americans) for perceptions of the Canada-U.S. relationship (at least from the Canadian perspective).³

Given the media interest in the relationship between information and opinions regarding the Canada-U.S. relationship, we seek to explore this presumption in a systematic manner. The central question motivating our analysis is whether and to what extent there

are political implications of having differential levels of information. Do Americans have different views of the Canada-U.S. relationship because they tend to hold less information about Canada? Does having more or less information make a difference to public opinion on the overall tone and direction of the bilateral Canada-U.S. relationship?

In the big picture, it certainly seems that information is thought by the Canadian government to be important for strengthening ties. Significant government time and advertising money is spent to showcase Canada to our southern neighbour, making American investors aware of what Canada has to offer. Consider the resources behind the “Invest in Canada” website or the 2011 Focus on Canada event series (an initiative of the *Financial Times* in partnership with the Government of Canada). This initiative hosts discussions in different U.S. cities about, among other things, “key incentives and programs in place and everything else that you need to know to make Canada your next investment destination.”⁴ The Canadian Tourism Commission, too, makes a concerted effort to attract American visits, even providing support for American media to travel in Canada and profile their experiences.⁵ The logic behind such a strategy is clearly that awareness and information about Canada are keys to developing interest, engagement and viewing the country as a potential location for business.

But does the same logic of information hold true in the court of public opinion more generally? Does the acquisition of more information about the other country or the bilateral relationship qualitatively alter opinions about the other country and the relationship between Canada and the United States? To answer these questions we need to know whether information affects judgments about government relations with the other country.

Existing research in the field of political science suggests that information can have an important influence on public opinion. Previous research shows that opinions held by people with different levels of political information can be significantly different,⁶ and biases that emerge due to low information can have considerable effects on opinions⁷ and electoral outcomes.⁸ Beyond these sorts of effects of information on the nature of public opinion, recent work also demonstrates the responsiveness of government policy-making to public opinion.⁹ As a result, public opinion bias based upon information levels should be seen as important for understanding opinion more generally about the Canada-U.S. relationship.

Given the preceding discussion, the core question of this research note is: what are the implications of varying levels of information for the nature of public opinion on the Canada-U.S. relationship? We

consider this question both for Americans, given their collective levels of knowledge about Canada, as well as for Canadians.

Two issues must be considered. First, different types of information can affect opinions in different ways. General political information (i.e., held by someone who is relatively informed about politics and current events) and specific information (i.e., information that is specific to the issue or opinion at hand) can be very different, and are not necessarily held by the same people. Those likely to hold specific information are those who are motivated or have an incentive, such as individuals who work or live near a border, or are directly affected by cross-border trade. A recent study released by the Pew Center attests to this, finding that 71% of Americans who live in a state that borders Canada are interested in news involving Canada, compared to 51% in the rest of the country. Those with closer personal ties to the other country are also more likely to be interested and become more informed. Thus, we need to consider who holds which type of information when considering their opinions.

The second issue is *how* each type of information affects public opinion about the Canada-U.S. relationship. What kind of bias, if any, does having more information create? In studies of voting preferences in the U.S., political scientist Larry M. Bartels finds that more information creates an environment that is less supportive of Democrats and incumbents. Accordingly, we need to consider what kind of information effects exist within public opinion on the policy issue of Canada-U.S. relations.

We are fortunate to have access to survey data collected in the summer of 2010 that probes these very issues. Harris/Decima surveyed 1106 Americans and 1009 Canadians online. The survey questions probed domestic, “other” (Canadian or American) and international knowledge, as well as opinions about the nature and substance of the Canada-U.S. relationship.¹⁰

LEVELS OF INFORMATION

We first assess the relative levels of knowledge that our Canadian and American samples have of the other country. We measure general information by the number of correct answers to questions about domestic and international politics. Specific information, on the other hand, is measured by answers to questions specifically about the other country – that is, knowledge of Canadian politics and society by Americans, and knowledge of the U.S. in Canada.¹¹

Among Canadian respondents, the average number of correct answers out of eight questions for the general (Canadian-international) information index is 4.3 (standard deviation=2.5). By contrast, out of 8 general information questions (domestic and international) American respondents were able, on average, to correctly answer 4.5 (standard deviation=2.2). This suggests that a comparable level of general political information is held by Canadians and Americans.¹²

When we consider specific information about the other country, a different pattern emerges. Indeed, there is a clear difference between the two countries in that the average level of U.S. respondents’ specific information of Canadian political facts is well below that of their Canadian counterparts. The American average is 0.19 correct answers (standard deviation=0.5) out of 4 questions, whereas amongst Canadians the average level of specific information about the United States is 1.7 (standard deviation=1.3). While this result does not suggest that Canadians should be angling for a *Jeopardy* round on American politics, they do tend to hold a greater level of information about politics in the United States than Americans hold about politics in Canada.

WHO IS INFORMED?

As a backdrop to understanding the effect on public opinion, we consider who, on both sides of the border, tends to hold general information and specific information about the other country. We ran statistical models to predict holding general and specific information with both of our samples to determine this. For holding more specific information about Canada or the U.S., we also consider whether markers of familiarity – having friends that live in the other country, having travelled there often or thinking that one’s income depends upon that country – make a difference for how much people know about the other country.

Among our sample of Americans, we find being generally informed is more common among men, the more educated, those with higher incomes, and those who pay more attention to American media. Holding specific information about Canada is related to some of the same characteristics (education, attention to media), but also having friends or family who live in Canada. Despite logical expectations, believing that your income security is dependent on the other country or having spent time in the other country is surprisingly not related to knowing more about Canada.

TABLE 1

What characteristics are related to being informed?

| | United States | | Canada | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------|---------|----------|
| | General | Specific | General | Specific |
| Female | ↓ | | ↓ | ↓ |
| Age | | | ↑ | |
| Income | ↑ | | ↑ | ↑ |
| Racial Majority/Francophone | | | ↓ | ↓ |
| University | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ |
| Media Attention | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ |
| Family/Friends | | ↑ | | |
| Time Spent | | | | ↑ |
| Income Dependence | | | | |

Note: Arrows indicate direction of effects that are statistically significant.

Among our Canadian respondents, similar patterns emerge. Being more informed, in general, is positively related to being male, English-speaking, older, more educated, having a higher income and paying more attention to the Canadian media. With the exception of age, these same factors also positively predict holding more specific knowledge about the United States, which is also higher for respondents who report having spent time in the U.S.

These findings are simultaneously both evident and surprising. For instance, it is not unexpected that respondents with more education, income and attention to the media are more informed about domestic and international matters in both countries. What is perhaps confounding is the relative lack of effect of personal ties to the other country on holding specific information about the other country. We expected that beliefs about income dependence (particularly among Canadian respondents) might have influenced the acquisition of knowledge about the other country – but these effects fail to materialize.

HOW DOES INFORMATION MATTER?

We next consider the more central question of this research note – how and to what extent do different types of political information influence opinion on key aspects of the Canadian-American relationship? To get a comprehensive picture of influence we consider views on two different aspects of the relationship: 1) the most important issues facing the relationship (among respondents in both countries, the economy, free trade and border security were listed as the three ‘most important issues’ and we consider each) and 2) the quality and character of the relationship, both in the past and future. For each, we performed statistical tests to determine the influence of holding greater levels of general and specific information on opinions about the relationship.

Consider our American respondents first (results are presented in Table 2). Only general information has an influence on which issues are selected as ‘most important’ to the U.S.-Canada relationship. More informed people are more likely to view the free trade issue as most important to the relationship, while they are less likely than less informed individuals to see border security as most important. By contrast, for these same three issues those who hold greater levels of specific information about Canada are not more likely to view these issues as most important. Specific information had no significant effect on differentiating the likelihood of indicating these issue areas as most important. Surprisingly, neither measure of information influenced the likelihood of choosing the economy as the most important issue even though amongst the entire sample of American respondents it was deemed to be the most important.

TABLE 2
Information Effects on U.S. Opinion about
Canada-U.S. Relations

| | General Information | Specific Information about Canada |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economy Issue | | |
| Free Trade Issue | ↑ | |
| Border Security Issue | ↓ | |
| Past Relations | ↓ | |
| Future Relations | | |
| Influence | | |

Note: Arrows indicate direction of effects that are statistically significant. All analyses control for the effects of gender, age, education, income and race on opinion regarding the relationship.

If these are the effects of information levels amongst our American respondents regarding the most important issues facing the Canada-U.S. relationship, how does information influence the distribution of opinion amongst Canadians? In short, the effects are small and statistically not different from nil (see Table 3). The likelihood of selecting any of these three issues as being ‘most important’ to the relationship is not positively or negatively influenced by the differential levels of either general or specific levels of information. The complete absence of effect is surprising and we provide an interpretation of this non-finding in the discussion and conclusion to the research note.

TABLE 3
Information Effects on Canadian Opinion about
Canada-U.S. Relations

| | General Knowledge | Specific Information about the US |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economy Issue | | |
| Free Trade Issue | | |
| Border Security Issue | | |
| Past Relations | | |
| Future Relations | ↑ | |
| Influence | | |

Note: Arrows indicate direction of effects that are statistically significant. All analyses control for the effects of gender, age, education, income and French language on opinion regarding the relationship.

Moving to opinion regarding the quality and character of the bilateral Canada-U.S. relationship, we first consider the American respondents. American respondents who had greater levels of general information were more likely than those with less information to think that Canada-U.S. relations had worsened over the previous five years. Beyond this result, both general and specific information had little effect on our American respondents’ views regarding the future of the relationship and the relative influence of the two countries on each other.

The one effect of information amongst our Canadian respondents emerges when reviewing the effects of information on opinion regarding the relationship. Canadian respondents with higher levels of general knowledge were more likely to view the future of the relationship between the two countries as improving. This effect might be interpreted as general optimism regarding the relationship under President Barack Obama and in contrast to that under his predecessor. But, stubbornly, both general and specific knowledge had no further effect on differentiating Canadian opinions regarding the relationship.

In sum, these results are interesting and yet puzzling. Specific knowledge of Canada or the U.S., i.e., being in the best position to judge the relationship, does not affect the attitudes held by citizens on both sides of the border. Familiarity does not breed favour, nor does it breed contempt – it simply has no effect. These results indicate that the effect of political information on attitudes about the Canada-U.S. relationship is not entirely as expected. General information, not specific information, seems to have the most effect on attitudes toward Canada-U.S. relations, even though it is logical to expect that someone who has more information about the other country may see bilateral relations with that country differently than one who does not.

DISCUSSION

We close by summarizing and situating the main findings of this paper. While both American and Canadian respondents display similar levels of general knowledge (of domestic and international politics), our samples confirm the widely held suspicion that Canadians have greater levels of specific information about the United States than Americans have about Canada. Although the results indicate that a range of socio-demographic factors influence the acquisition of general and specific knowledge amongst both samples, they surprisingly suggest that personal experience with the other country (through family or friends, visits and perceptions of income dependence) have some but largely minimal effects on knowledge of the other country. Beyond these findings, we surprisingly find that levels of both general and specific information have far less of an effect on opinions regarding the relationship than might have been expected. Amongst respondents

from the U.S., those with greater levels of general information were more likely to think free trade is an important issue facing the relationship, less likely to think border security is one, and are more likely to evaluate the past relationship negatively. Their Canadian counterparts are more likely to see the future of the relationship in a positive light, but they are not otherwise distinguishable from other citizens. Additionally and perhaps most surprisingly, specific information about the other country had no influence on opinions of the relationship in either sample of respondents.

These findings bring us to a key conclusion: contrary to the earlier cited assertions of the Association for Canadian Studies and the *Globe and Mail* among others, differences in the level of specific information that Americans have about Canada and vice versa are not particularly consequential to overall views of the relationship. Stated differently, Americans are likely to view the relationship with Canada as strong and healthy regardless of whether they have an intimate knowledge of Canadian politics and culture or not. Knowledge of Canada simply has no effect. We believe there are two implications of this finding.

First, it should serve to provide caution to those who might contend that Americans' opinion of Canada is a function of their collective low levels of information. It is not. Beyond this, the finding suggests that efforts to try and ameliorate this information deficit (for example, through government or business-sponsored advertising) are not likely to engender the kinds of effects in American opinion that such sponsors might desire.

The second implication of this core finding addresses a plausible reason for the lack of information influence. As noted, Canada and the United States share a lengthy history as military and political allies, a massive trade relationship as well as shared security and environmental concerns. The degree of this closeness and intense interaction may well result in a collective character of normality, stability and habit to the relationship – almost as though the relationship is taken for granted. To the extent that the relationship is viewed in this light by both elites and the public, the motivation or incentive to become informed about the other may be lessened. As a result, it may be that the importance of information to perceptions of the relationship is lessened.

END NOTES

- 1 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide* (New York: Routledge, 1990); John H. Sigler and Dennis Goresky, "Public Opinion on United States-Canadian Relations," *International Organization*, 28:4 (1974): 637-668.
- 2 Jack Jedwab, "Canada and the United States: The Distance Between US." www.acs-aec.ca/en/social-research
- 3 "Canada, The Invisible, Likeable Beaver," *Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2011.
- 4 See the Invest in Canada website: investincanada.gc.ca/eng/investment-media/international-events.aspx.
- 5 For more information about the Visiting Journalist Program, see "Media" at en-corporate.canada.travel/Corporate/MarketDetail.page?id=360.
- 6 John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Scott L. Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Adam Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 7 James H. Kuklinski and Paul J. Quirk, "Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion," in *Elements of Reason*, eds. Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins and Samuel L. Popkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 153-182.
- 8 Larry M. Bartels, "Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 40:1 (1996): 194-230.
- 9 Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen and James Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); James Stimson, *Tides of Consent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 10 The study was restricted to those over 18 years of age and a citizen of their country and was in the field between June 23 and July 8. All analyses are weighted using demographic weights to be nationally representative of age, gender, region, education and race.
- 11 In the United States survey, the domestic information questions included naming one's state governor, the Speaker of the House of Representatives (Nancy Pelosi), which party controls the House of Representatives (Democrats), naming the year the Declaration of Independence was signed (1776) and who nominates U.S. Supreme Court Justices (the President). In the same survey, Canadian information questions included naming the official opposition party in the Canadian House of Commons (Liberals), the Canadian Prime Minister (Stephen Harper), indicating how many provinces there are in Canada (10) and when the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was signed in Canada (1982). In the Canadian survey, domestic information questions included naming one's provincial premier, the federal minister of finance (Jim Flaherty), the official opposition party in the Canadian House of Commons (Liberals), who nominates Senators in Canada (the Prime Minister) and when the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was signed in Canada (1982). The U.S. information questions in the survey of Canadians included naming which party controls the House of Representatives, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, how many states there are in the U.S. (50) and when the Declaration of Independence was signed. In both surveys, three international information questions were asked: who is the British Prime Minister (David Cameron), where was the recent United Nations Conference on Climate Change held (Copenhagen) and which international body regulates trade (WTO).
- 12 Should readers desire a more detailed presentation of statistical results discussed in this paper, please contact the study's authors.