This study explores fully informed collective policy preferences from the 2004 NES survey data, as compared to the preferences of the electorate in 1992. While many scholars have suggested the minimal effect of political information, by virtue of information shortcuts and the process of statistical aggregation, others have exhibited significant effects of political information. Based on Althaus(1998)’s full-information simulation approach, this study seeks to answer the question of how different collective opinions can be if everyone is fully informed. The results demonstrate that the effects of information in collective opinion were substantial in most of the policy issues and the overall effect leaned to more liberal direction even in 2004 when there was a clear voting cue and the national context was fairly conservative. This result implies that information disparity has crucial bearing on policy decision-making and our democracy.

Key words: U. S. public opinion, information effect, collective policy preference, information disparity, full-information simulation

I. Introduction

Many studies have suggested that the public’s level of political information does not substantially affect preferences, by virtue not only of cues and information shortcuts but also of the process of statistical aggregation, allowing people to
behave as if they were well-informed. While agreeing that most individuals tend to be ill-informed about politics, the scholars asserting the minimal effect of political information on American politics doubt that improved information can alter the aggregate distribution of opinions or votes. Since it is only the aggregate opinion that politicians read in the polls and aggregate vote choice that decides elections,¹) individual disparities in the levels of political information would not matter, if collective opinion reflects the public’s interests.

On the other hand, contrary to those arguments of information’s minimal effects on mass attitudes and behaviors, others have demonstrated significant effects of political information. In particular, Delli Carpini and Keeter,²) Bartels,³) and Althaus⁴) show how the individual variability in political information leads to different collective opinions and votes, by estimating full-information distributions of policy preferences and votes.

In this study, I extend Althaus’s 1998 work, which finds that correcting for information asymmetries produces quite different collective policy preferences from actual ones. He discovers that fully informed preferences on most policy issues are more liberal than the actual preferences found in the national survey. Building on Althaus’s full-information simulation approach, but with 7-point scale policy issues which are more conventionally used in public opinion research than those used in Althaus’s work, this study explores if and how political information has effects on policy preferences under a context fairly different from those of 1988 and 1992 which were analyzed in Althaus’s work.

This study explores fully informed collective policy preferences from the 2004 NES survey data, as compared to the preferences of the electorate in 1992. Given the context of party polarization, the political information were more accessible for