Chapter 7
The Relationship between Political Knowledge and Sense of Community

Thus far we have explored the extent to which sense of community influences various types of political behaviors such as trust, efficacy, participation, and discussion. The evidence from the preceding chapters indicates that sense of community has much to offer in terms of adding to the discussion of what factors influence political behavior. Aside from individual level factors such as age, gender, income, education, partisanship, and personality, which are often fixed or slow changing (i.e., income and education), we know that other factors are also important to consider. As we have discussed throughout this book, over the last decade or so, political scientists have returned to the Columbia idea that social environments influence behaviors and attitudes and as such also warrant attention. Research on political behavior has long implied that attachment to the community should be a consideration but measuring it has been somewhat obscure, often taking the form of proxy variables such as home ownership and length of residence to account for community connectedness. However, as has been discussed previously, these provide at best a rather coarse measure of connectedness. Rather, sense of community as defined by community psychologists offers us a more nuanced measure of community attachment and has been shown throughout this book to be an important factor for all sorts of political behaviors. Along with trust, efficacy, participation, and discussion, another factor that may also be influenced by sense of community is political knowledge, particularly local political knowledge.

Over the past 20 years, much attention has been paid to political knowledge. In fact a quick search in JSTOR reveals over 200 articles since 1989 in which “political knowledge” appears in the abstract.
Research on the topic has represented defining, measuring, and explaining differences in political knowledge. Studies have taken the form of examining political knowledge as an intervening variable to explain different sorts of political behaviors such as participation (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). It has also been widely studied in terms of its construct and measurement (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996, Mondak 2000, 2001, Mondak and Davis 2001). Research has also explored what factors contribute to explaining political knowledge in its own right, considering for example why gaps exist between men and women and between those with greater socio-economic status compared to lesser (Dow 2009, Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006, Mondak and Anderson 2004, Verba, Burns, and Scholzman 1997). Collectively, the research has demonstrated that political knowledge plays a critical role in explaining behavior and thus warrants further study to better understand what accounts for differences in levels of political knowledge. In other words, greater attention ought to be paid to political knowledge as a dependent variable. We know from previous research that individual level factors particularly education and age are important determinants of political knowledge. But what we also know is that these are slow changing variables. Recent research has therefore begun to consider the information environment as a source for accounting for differences in political knowledge. Attention recently has been paid to the influence of the mass media on political knowledge. Jerit et al. (2006) for example demonstrate that variation in media coverage has important consequences for political knowledge particularly for those who are the least educated. Beyond the media, however, other outlets could serve to increase political knowledge; I contend that one such outlet is the community. First, we will examine the effect of sense of community on national political knowledge and then we will turn to local political knowledge.

Although research on political knowledge abounds, relatively little is known about the manner in which social contexts may come to influence knowledge; and even less is known about what citizens know (or do not know) about local political knowledge. The lack of research on local political knowledge is not at all surprising because unlike general political knowledge it is locale-specific and typically does not lend itself to items that can be asked on large national surveys such as the General Social Survey or American National Election Study, thus it is subject to small community based surveys such as the one used in this study. While there have been few studies that have examined social networks Scheufele, Shanahan, and Kim (2002) is