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Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter

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Dedication

To my Grandparents

The late Ber and Pauline Somin

and

Basya and Nathan Firun

Introduction

A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the Power that knowledge gives.

-James Madison.¹

Most of the American public is largely ignorant of politics. Much evidence suggests that political ignorance is often great indeed.

The biggest issue in the 2010 congressional election was the economy. Yet two-thirds of the public did not realize that that the economy had grown rather than shrunk during the previous year.² In the aftermath of that election, the majority of Americans did not realize that the Republican Party had taken control of the House of Representatives, but not the Senate.³ When President Barack Obama took office in January 2009, his Administration and the Democratic Congress pursued an ambitious policy agenda on health care and environmental policy, among other issues. The media has covered both issue areas extensively. Yet a September 2009 survey showed that only 37% of Americans believed they “understand” the health care plan, a figure that likely overestimates the true level of understanding.⁴ A May 2009 poll showed that only 24% of Americans realized that the important “cap and trade” proposal then recently passed by the House of Representatives as an effort to combat global warming realize that this initiative

¹ James Madison, Letter to William T. Barry, Aug. 4, 1822, in James Madison, *Writings*, (New York: Library of America, 1999), 790.

² See Table 1.1 in Chapter 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Siegel-Gale survey, September 18, 2009. The figure probably overstates the true level of knowledge because many survey respondents are reluctant to admit ignorance. See discussion below.

addresses “environmental issues.”⁵ Some 46% believed that it was either a “health care reform” or a “regulatory reform for Wall Street.”⁶ It is difficult to evaluate a major policy proposal if one does not know what issue it addresses. In 2003, some 70% of Americans were unaware of the recent enactment of President George W. Bush’s Medicare prescription drug bill, the biggest new government program in several decades.⁷

The existence of such ignorance does not by itself prove that there is anything wrong with our political system. Perhaps these polls are somehow unrepresentative. In any case, maybe voters do not need much in the way of knowledge. Perhaps they can make good decisions even if they know very little. Still, these examples and others like them are at least cause for concern. If the public really is often ignorant, we might have a serious problem on our hands.

Why Political Ignorance Matters

Democracy is rule by the people. The literal meaning of the original Greek word “democracy” signifies exactly that: rule by the *demos*, the Greek word for the common people. The day to day business of government may be conducted by elected officials. But those leaders are ultimately responsible to the public. If they fail to serve the interests of the voters, they can be replaced at the next election by others who will do better. In this way, the democratic process is supposed to ensure that we get what Abraham Lincoln called “government of the people, by the

⁵Rasmussen Poll, May 7-8, 2009, available at http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/toplines/pt_survey_toplines/may_2009/toplines_cap_trade_i_may_7_8_2009.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ See Chapter 1.

people, for the people.”⁸ The key to the entire scheme is the accountability of elected officials to voters.

Some value democratic control of government for its own sake.⁹ Others do so for primarily instrumental reasons.¹⁰ Either way, accountability is a crucial part of the picture. But effective democratic accountability requires voters to have at least some political knowledge. Voters cannot hold government officials accountable for their actions if they do not know what the government is doing. And they cannot know which candidates’ proposals will serve the public better unless they have at least some understanding of those policies and their likely effects.

Accountability is also difficult to achieve if voters do not know which officials are responsible for which issues. If the public schools perform poorly, should the voter blame the local government, the state government, the federal government, or all three? Which officials, if any, can be blamed for economic recessions? Are mistakes in the conduct of the War on Terror the responsibility of the president alone, or does Congress deserve a share of the blame?

Answering these questions and others like them requires at least some degree of political knowledge. Democratic accountability is unlikely to be effective if voters don’t know what their government is doing, don’t understand its effects, or don’t know which government officials to hold responsible for what issues.

Even if an individual voter does not care about political accountability or does not mind if her government performs poorly, he may still have a responsibility to become informed for the

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” in Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler, (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 734.

⁹ See, e.g., Charles Beitz, *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Richard J. Arneson, “Democracy is Not Intrinsically Just,” in Keith Dowding, Robert E. Goodin, and Carole Pateman, eds., *Justice and Democracy: Essays for Brian Barry*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40-58.

sake of his fellow citizens. After all, the winners of the next election will govern not only him but everyone else who lives in his society. Casting a ballot is not a purely individual choice that affects no one but the voter. In the admittedly highly unlikely event that it influences the outcome of an election, it will also affect the lives of thousands or millions of other people. Even the citizen who is personally uninterested in the quality of public policy may justifiably feel a moral obligation to become informed if he intends to vote.¹¹

Obviously, it is not enough to conclude that voters need to have at least some political knowledge to make democracy work. We also need to know *how much* knowledge is enough. If it turns out that voters know too little, it would be useful to know why. Even more important, we need to know what if anything can be done to alleviate the harm caused by excessive political ignorance.

These questions are the focus of this book. I doubt that I or anyone else can answer them definitively. It would be arrogant to assume that any one book can settle issues that have been debated for over two thousand years. But I hope to make a useful contribution to the discussion.

The first half of the book analyzes the nature and extent of the problem of political ignorance in American democracy. The evidence shows that political ignorance is extensive and poses a very serious challenge to democratic theory. The severity of the problem is exacerbated by the reality that, for most citizens, political ignorance is not the result of stupidity or selfishness. Rather, ignorance turns out to be rational behavior—even for many who are far from stupid and are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the nation as well as their own. The insignificance of any one vote to electoral outcomes makes it rational for most citizens to devote

¹¹ See Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jason Brennan, “The Right to a Competent Electorate,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

little effort to acquiring political knowledge. They also have little incentive to engage in unbiased evaluation of the information they do know.

The last four chapters consider potential solutions. While it may be possible to make voters more knowledgeable at the margin, I conclude that a major increase in political knowledge is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the problem of political ignorance may be more effectively addressed not by increasing knowledge but by trying to reduce the impact of ignorance. This can be at least partially achieved by limiting and decentralizing government power in ways that enable citizens to “vote with their feet” as well as at the ballot box. People choosing between different jurisdictions in a federal system or between different options in the private sector often have better incentives to become informed about their options than ballot box voters do. Unlike ballot box voters, foot voters know that their decisions are likely to make a difference. As a result, they are more likely to seek out relevant information and evaluate it in a reasonable way.

Is Concern About Political Ignorance Paternalistic?

Concern about political ignorance strikes some critics as unduly paternalistic. Perhaps citizens should be free to choose policies and leaders for whatever reasons they wish – even if those reasons are the result of ignorance. A democrat committed to this view might find the issue addressed in this book at best irrelevant, and at worst an unjustified attack on the rights of the people. Even if ignorance leads voters to make poor decisions, we would not be justified in imposing constraints on democracy because the voters have a right to rule as they please. As Robert Bork puts it, “[i]n wide areas of life majorities are entitled to rule, if they wish, simply

because they are majorities.”¹² H.L. Mencken famously satirized the same point when he wrote that “[d]emocracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.”¹³

Unfortunately, however, when voters make poor decisions out of ignorance, everyone “gets it good and hard,” not just those who voted in the wrong candidates and supported their harmful policies. That is what makes voting different from individual decisions that only affect the decision-makers themselves and those who voluntarily choose to interact with them. As John Stuart Mill put it in his 1861 book *Considerations on Representative Government*:

The spirit of vote by ballot- the interpretation likely to be put on it in the mind of an elector- is that the suffrage is given to him for himself; for his particular use and benefit, and not as a trust for the public. . . [D]emocrats think themselves greatly concerned in maintaining that the franchise is what they term a right, not a trust . . . In whatever way we define or understand the idea of a right, *no person can have a right . . . to power over others*: every such power, which he is allowed to possess, is morally, in the fullest force of the term, a trust. But the exercise of any political function, either as an elector or as a representative, is power over others.¹⁴

As Mill emphasized voting decisions involve not simply an individual choice, but the exercise of “power over others.” A majority influenced by ignorance imposes its decisions not only on itself, but on the nation as a whole, including those who disagreed and those who voted for opposing candidates. For this reason, we are justified in urging constraints on the scope of that choice if ignorance or other factors leads voters to make systematic errors. Such constraints, of course, are only defensible if we have reason to believe that alternative arrangements might handle information problems better. This book makes precisely that argument.

¹²Robert H. Bork, *The Tempting of America*, (New York: Free Press, 1990), 139.

¹³ H.L. Mencken, *A Little Book in C Major*, (New York: John Lane, 1916), 19.

¹⁴Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 154-55 (emphasis added). For a modern elaboration of an argument similar to Mill’s, see Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting*, (Princeton University Press, 2011).

There is a second reason why it is not a paternalistic infringement on voter freedom to worry about political ignorance and advocate measures to reduce its impact. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, widespread ignorance about politics is in large part the result of a collective action problem. An individual voter has little incentive to learn about politics because there is only an infinitesimal chance that his or her well-informed vote will actually affect electoral outcomes. Political ignorance is therefore an example of rational individual behavior that leads to potentially dangerous collective outcomes.

Economists have long recognized that outside intervention may be needed to address such “public goods” problems.¹⁵ Such intervention is not necessarily paternalistic because it may actually be giving the people that which they want but lack the incentive to produce for themselves through uncoordinated individual action.

In the same way, it is not necessarily paternalistic to advocate the restriction of air pollution. Individual citizens and firms may produce more air pollution than any of them actually want because they know that there is little to be gained from uncoordinated individual restraint. If I as an individual avoid driving a gas-guzzling car, the impact on the overall level of air pollution will be utterly insignificant. So I have no incentive to take it into account in making my driving decisions even if I care greatly about reducing air pollution. Widespread public ignorance is a type of pollution that infects the political system rather than our physical environment.

Finally, even if voters do have the right to select whatever policies they please regardless of their effect on fellow citizens, ignorance might still be problematic. After all, a person making a choice based on ignorance might well fail to achieve his intended result. If I buy a dilapidated car based on the erroneous belief that it is in good condition, my purposes in purchasing in are

¹⁵See, e.g., Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); James M. Buchanan, *The Demand and Supply of Public Goods* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1999 [1968]); Paul A. Samuelson, “The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 36 (1954): 387-401.

likely to be frustrated if it quickly breaks down.¹⁶ Similarly, voters who support protectionist policies in the erroneous expectation that they will benefit the economy as a whole rather than weaken it will also end up undermining their own goals.¹⁷ Voters may not be able to effectively exercise their right to choose the policies they wish if their choices are based on ignorance.

Political ignorance might be unimportant if public opinion had little or no effect on policy. In that event, voters would not actually be exercising any genuine “power over others” after all. However, a large literature shows that public opinion does have a significant impact on at least the broad outlines of policy.¹⁸ Public opinion is, of course, far from the only influence on policymaking. As will be discussed later in this book,¹⁹ there are often individual issues where public opinion has relatively little impact because the voters are unaware of what is going on. Such other influences as bureaucratic discretion and interest group lobbying also have important effects. However, there is little doubt that voter opinions have considerable influence over many policy decisions.

Even relatively ignorant voters can influence policy in cases where some effect seems easily traceable to a government action or where the government is rewarded or blamed for some highly visible event.²⁰ Ignorant voters can also influence policy by creating opportunities for

¹⁶ See George Akerlof, “The Market for Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (1970), 84: 488-500.

¹⁷ For evidence that voters systematically overestimate the economic benefits of protectionism, see Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 50-52.

¹⁸ See, e.g., James L. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Robert Erikson, et al., *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lawrence R. Jacobs, *The Health of Nations: Public Opinion and the Making of American and British Health Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁹ See chapters 2 and 6.

²⁰ See discussion of retrospective voting in Chapter 4. See also R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 48-51, 72-74.

politicians, activists, and interest groups to manipulate that ignorance.²¹ These effects make voter knowledge a potentially important input into the policymaking process. Politicians who wish to be elected and reelected must enact policies that win voter support. And the distribution of that support may be affected by ignorance.

Even if public opinion did not influence policy in the status quo, most major normative theories of democracy assume that it *should* do so, at least to some substantial extent. As explained in Chapter 2, these theories also imply knowledge prerequisites that voters must meet in order to exercise that influence effectively.

The Historic Debate over Political Ignorance

The problem of political ignorance is not a new one. Political philosophers have debated the implications of voter ignorance for democracy since that system of government first originated in ancient Greece, in the city state of Athens. Early critics of Athenian democracy argued that Athens was doomed to failure because its policies were set by ignorant common citizens.²² In *The Gorgias*, the great philosopher Plato contended that democracy is defective because it adopts policies based on the views of the ignorant masses and neglected the better-informed counsel of philosophers.²³

²¹ See discussion in Chapter 3.

²² See Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 48-92. For an excellent recent argument suggesting that ancient Athenian democracy was able to overcome the problem of ignorance, see Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). I have argued that Athens' relative success in this regard depended on advantages not enjoyed by modern democracies. See Ilya Somin, "Democracy and Political Knowledge in Ancient Athens," *Ethics* 119 (2009), 585-90, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1428612.

²³ Plato, *The Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1971). The great historian Thucydides blamed popular ignorance for the failures of democracy. He believed it was responsible for the decision to undertake the invasion of Sicily during the Peloponnesian War in 415 B.C. – a choice that led to the worst defeat in Athenian history and caused the loss of most of its armed forces and eventually its empire. According to Thucydides, the citizen-voters undertook the Sicilian expedition because they were "ignorant of the size of the island" and the power

Aristotle was more optimistic about political knowledge than Plato. Although he admitted that citizens usually have little knowledge individually, Aristotle argued that they could access far larger amounts of information collectively.²⁴ Nonetheless, Aristotle still argued that women, slaves, manual laborers and others he considered incapable of achieving adequate levels of virtue and political knowledge should be excluded from political participation.²⁵

In more recent centuries, even some thinkers sympathetic to liberal democracy have sought to limit the power of voters for fear of giving free reign to political ignorance. The American Founding Fathers inserted numerous anti-majoritarian elements into the Constitution in order to provide a check on what they saw as ignorant and irrational voters. As James Madison put it in *Federalist 63* checks such as an indirectly elected Senate were needed “as a defense to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions.”²⁶ John Stuart Mill, a liberal political theorist generally sympathetic to democracy, greatly feared political ignorance and argued that it justified giving extra votes to the better-educated and more knowledgeable.²⁷

In the twentieth century, totalitarian leaders on both the left and the right resuscitated Plato’s claim that voter ignorance justifies the abolition of electoral democracy in favor of concentrating power in the hands of a small elite. Vladimir Lenin’s 1902 book *What is To Be Done?* argued that workers cannot be expected to develop sufficient political knowledge to launch a socialist revolution on their own. Left to itself, a “spontaneous” working class cannot get beyond mere “trade union consciousness” and will not recognize the need for a full-blown reordering of society along socialist lines. Therefore, Lenin concluded the transition to

of Syracuse and its allies. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1954) § 6.1.1.

²⁴ Aristotle. *The Politics*. trans. T.A. Saunders, (rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 1981), Bk. III.xi, 202-03.

²⁵ Ibid. Bk. III.iv-v, pp. 181-86.

²⁶ James Madison, *Federalist 63*, *The Federalist*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, (New York: Mentor, 1961), pg. 384.

²⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958 [1861]), 140-42.

communism required firm leadership by a “vanguard” party, whose members better understand the political interests of the working class than the workers themselves.²⁸

Adolf Hitler, too, rejected democracy in part because he believed that voters are ignorant and easily manipulated, a problem that could only be solved by instituting a dictatorship headed by a far-seeing leader. In his view, “[t]he receptivity of the great masses [to information] is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous.”²⁹

On the other side of the fence, many modern scholars – economists and political scientists – have argued that political ignorance is unimportant, or easily surmounted through the use of “information shortcuts.”³⁰ “[G]ive people some significant power,” writes political philosopher Benjamin Barber, “and they will quickly appreciate the need for knowledge.”³¹

Unlike Plato and the totalitarians, I do not argue for a complete rejection of democracy. I accept the evidence that democracy generally functions better than alternative systems of government.³² Democracies tend to be more prosperous and peaceful than dictatorships or oligarchies, and generally provide greater freedom to their citizens.³³ They are also more likely to avoid major policy disasters, and do not commit mass murder against their own citizens.³⁴

As an immigrant from the Soviet Union to the United States – one with relatives who were victims of both communist and Nazi repression – I am acutely conscious of the advantages of democracy over dictatorship. But the superiority of democracy over other forms of government leaves open the possibility that democracy might function better if its powers were more tightly limited.

²⁸Vladimir I. Lenin, *Chto Delat? [What is to be Done?]* (Moscow: Lenin Institute, 1925 [1902]), chs. 2-4.

²⁹Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 180.

³⁰See works discussed in Chapter 4.

³¹Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 234.

³²For a summary, see Morton H. Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle, and Michael M. Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracy Promotes Prosperity and Peace*, (New York: Routledge, rev. ed. 2010), chs. 1-2.

³³Ibid.

³⁴See discussion in Chapter 4.

Defining Political Knowledge

Before analyzing political ignorance, it is important to define what we mean by political knowledge. Throughout this book, I focus primarily on political knowledge defined as knowledge of factual matters related to politics and public policy. These include knowledge of specific policy issues and leaders. As we shall see more fully in Chapter 1, many voters are unaware of the elements of important public policies enacted by the legislature. Factual political knowledge also includes knowledge of broad structural elements of government, such as which public officials are responsible for which issues; and the elements of competing political ideologies, such as liberalism and conservatism. For example, the majority of citizens do not know which branch of government has the power to declare war.³⁵

It is also important to consider the extent to which voters are unable to rationally evaluate the information they do have. By “rationally,” I mean only whether they evaluate the information in a logically consistent, unbiased manner, not whether they reach morally defensible conclusions about public policy. For example, if a voter wants to increase economic growth and she is shown evidence that free trade is likely to promote that goal, her support for protectionism should diminish. However, she could rationally ignore this evidence if she does not value economic growth and instead prefers to maximize the incomes of protected domestic industries, regardless of the impact on the overall economy or the effects on foreigners.

Voting and Values

³⁵Ibid.

This emphasis on factual knowledge and value-neutral rationality is not meant to denigrate the importance of values and moral knowledge. Ideally, we would want to have voters who are not only factually knowledgeable but also to use that knowledge to pursue morally praiseworthy goals. We would not want a highly knowledgeable electorate that values cruelty and oppression for its own sake, and uses its knowledge to elect those leaders whose policies are most effective in implementing such preferences.

But factual knowledge and moral decisions are not completely separate. Many perverse moral judgments made by voters are in part a result of ignorance of factual issues. For example, public hostility towards gays and lesbians is in part the result of ignorance about the likelihood that homosexual orientation is genetically determined, and not freely chosen or determined by environmental factors.³⁶ As will be explained in Chapter 5, many early 20th century white southern voters favored policies oppressing blacks in part because they believed that African-Americans had inherent criminal tendencies and were likely to rape white women unless they could be cowed by the threat of lynching. These false factual beliefs were not the only cause of racism, but they surely contributed.

Disagreements over some issues, such as abortion,³⁷ may be largely determined by conflicting fundamental values, with little role for factual information. On a vast range of major political issues, however, differences between opposing parties and ideologies turn primarily on disagreements over how to achieve widely agreed upon goals, such as economic prosperity, crime reduction, environmental protection, and security against the threat of attack by terrorists

³⁶ A May 2007 Gallup poll found that 35% of Americans believe that homosexuality is caused by “upbringing and environment” with 42% answering (correctly) that it is a condition “a person is born with.” People giving the former answer were far more likely to believe that homosexuality is morally unacceptable and that homosexual sex should be against the law. 78 percent of the latter believe that homosexuality is “an acceptable alternative lifestyle,” compared with only 30% of the former. Gallup Poll, May 10-13, 2007.

³⁷ See Laurence H. Tribe, *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes*, (New York: Norton, 1991).

and foreign powers.³⁸ These objectives are widely shared in American society by people across the political spectrum, and are considered to be the most important goals of public policy by large majorities of the public.³⁹ Even on those issues where political conflict focuses primarily on differences in fundamental values, factual knowledge is often still relevant. For example, a voter whose values lead him to support efforts to ban abortion may still need to know whether the government is actually capable of eliminating most abortions, and at what cost.⁴⁰ The vast majority of the examples of ignorance considered in this book relate to issues where political debate focuses on competing means of achieving shared values, rather than ones where political disagreements are more likely to be purely the product of differences over fundamental values. Factual knowledge is not the only kind of information relevant to political decisions. But it is often among the most important.

A more fundamental values-based rejection of the idea that political ignorance matters is the claim that it is somehow illegitimate to evaluate the moral decisions of democracies by standards external to the values of the voters. For example, political theorist Ian Shapiro rejects the idea of “some ‘birds-eye’ standpoint, existing previously to and independently of democratic procedures, by reference to which we can evaluate the outcomes they produce.”⁴¹

³⁸ For a recent survey of the relevant evidence showing that most major political disagreements turn on disputes over factual issues, see Michael Murakami, “Paradoxes of Democratic Accountability: Polarized Parties, Hard Decisions, and No Despot to Veto,” *Critical Review* 20 (2008): 91-114.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, and Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Longman, 3d ed. 2010).

⁴⁰ According to some estimates, up to one million women per year sought to obtain black market abortions before the Supreme Court forced the nation-wide legalization of abortions in 1973. Tribe, *Abortion*, 140. Many pro-lifers might still support banning abortion even if aware of this problem, though others perhaps might not. But the existence of a massive black market is surely relevant to determinations of what sorts of pro-life policies should be adopted, even from the standpoint of those whose values condemn abortion as immoral.

⁴¹ Ian Shapiro, *Democracy's Place*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 9. He partially qualifies this by adding that democracy must be defended on “consequentialist grounds,” which implies that there might be external standards for evaluating its output after all. But he then undermines the qualification by suggesting that only democratic procedures can determine what policies to adopt in situations where “the desirability of the consequences in question is *debatable*,” which presumably includes virtually all political issues on which people are likely to

Even if it is illegitimate to second-guess the *values* voters bring to the democratic process, it is not clear why it is wrong to point out that inadequate political knowledge might prevent them from realizing those values as fully and effectively as they otherwise might. Such an argument does not challenge the voters' goals, but merely points out that they sometimes lack the means to effectively achieve them through the democratic process. To put it in Shapiro's terms, this approach does not adopt "a 'birds-eye' standpoint" on the democratic process, but rather judges its output by the standards of the voters' own values and goals.

Yet there is no inherent reason to limit criticism of democratic decisions to the choice of means alone. Unless we become complete moral relativists, we must admit the possibility that voters might sometimes base their decisions on flawed or unjust values such as racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism.

If we do choose to be absolute moral relativists, then we indeed lack grounds for criticizing democratic decisions. But we also lack any basis for claiming that democracy is superior to other forms of government, such as monarchy, oligarchy, or a totalitarian state.⁴² If no values are better than others, then there is no reason to believe that the values promoted by liberal democracy are any better than those promoted by the regimes of Hitler or Stalin. We could no more judge autocratic regimes from an external "birds-eye standpoint" than we can democracies.

If, on the other hand, we can legitimately conclude that democracy is superior to authoritarianism or totalitarianism, then the same standards that we use to compare democracy to these alternative regimes can also be used to compare different types of democracies. If democracy is preferable to an authoritarian government because it provides greater freedom,

disagree. Ibid. For similar rejection of the possibility of judging democracy by external standards, see Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 117-18.. For a different criticism of such arguments, see Caplan, *Myth of the Rational Voter*, 187-89.

⁴² Most of those scholars who argue that we cannot evaluate democratic processes by external standards also argue that democracy is superior to alternative regimes. See, e.g., Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1-2; Barber, *Strong Democracy*, ch. 1.

greater happiness, or greater equality, it is also possible that one type of democratic government may be preferable to another for the exact same reasons.

This book does not present a theory of the ideal set of criteria by which political regimes should be judged. But it does assume that some regimes can reasonably be considered better than others.

Plan of the Book

The next four chapters of this book outline the scope and nature of the problem of political ignorance in American democracy. Chapters 5 to 7 consider various possible solutions. Some of these are proposals for increasing voter knowledge, while others are institutional adjustments that would reduce the risks posed by a given level of ignorance. I conclude that the problem of political ignorance is a very serious one, and that there is unlikely to be a quick or easy solution. But its effects can to an important degree be mitigated through limiting the size, complexity, and centralization of government.

Chapter 1 summarizes the evidence of widespread political ignorance in the United States. While much of this data will not surprise experts in the field, it is still important to recognize the full scope of ignorance and its remarkable persistence over time. Chapter 2 compares actual levels of voter knowledge to the requirements of several prominent normative theories of political participation. It is not a great surprise that knowledge levels fall short of the requirements of demanding theories, such as “deliberative democracy.” But they also fall short of the much more minimal requirements of other theories generally considered to be more realistic. The failure of voters to meet the demands of even relatively modest theories of political participation highlights the severity of the challenge of political ignorance for democratic theory.

In Chapter 3, I explain why political ignorance is actually rational behavior for most citizens. The core argument is a familiar one to students of political knowledge. Anthony Downs first showed that political ignorance is generally rational in a famous 1957 book.⁴³ Voters have little incentive to become informed because there is only an infinitesimal chance that any one vote will affect the outcome of an election. This explains why so many remain ignorant about basic political issues even in a world where information is readily available through the media and other sources. The main constraint on political learning is not the availability of information, but the willingness of voters to take the time and effort needed to learn and understand it.

Chapter 3 also considers the connections between rational ignorance and economist Bryan Caplan's theory of "rational irrationality," which holds that voters not only have incentives to be ignorant, but also to engage in highly biased evaluation of the information they do have.⁴⁴ The combination of rational ignorance and rational irrationality is a more serious danger than either taken alone. Among other problems, the combination of the two makes voters far more susceptible to misinformation and deception than they would be otherwise.

In Chapter 4, we review claims that voter ignorance might be offset by the use of "information shortcuts" that enable voters to cast well-informed ballots despite knowing little or no factual information. Some of these shortcuts have genuine value in enabling poorly informed voters to make better choices. Overall, however, they fall far short of fully offsetting the dangers posed by ignorance. Moreover, some shortcuts actually lead to worse decisions, because they may actively mislead rationally ignorant voters.

Chapter 5 compares the informational incentives of "voting with your feet" to those of conventional ballot box voting. Instead of seeking redress through electoral politics, citizens who

⁴³Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), ch. 13.

⁴⁴Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, ch. 5.

dislike the policies they live under can sometimes pursue improvement by moving to another jurisdiction with more favorable policies.

Unlike ballot box voting, such “foot voting” creates much better incentives to both acquire information and use it rationally. The reason is simple: for most foot voters, the choice to leave or stay is individually decisive. The would-be migrant does not have to take a vote in which her ballot has only a miniscule chance of making a difference. Rather, she knows that whatever decision she makes she can then implement, subject perhaps to the agreement of a few family members. This simple point has important implications for institutional design in democratic political systems. It strengthens the case for decentralizing political power. The greater the degree of decentralization, the more political decisions can be made by foot voting, rather than ballot box voting alone.

The informational advantages of foot voting also buttress the case for limiting the scope of government authority relative to the private sector. In markets and civil society, individuals can often vote with their feet even more effectively than in a system of decentralized federalism. Foot voting in the private sector usually doesn’t carry as high moving costs as interjurisdictional migration. In addition, limiting the scope of government could alleviate information problems by reducing the knowledge burden imposed on voters. The smaller and less complex government is, the more likely that even rationally ignorant voters might be able to understand its functions.

Chapter 6 considers the implications of political ignorance for the longstanding debate over the role of judicial review in a democracy. By constraining and (in some cases) decentralizing government power, judicial review can help mitigate the problem of political ignorance. Critics of judicial review have traditionally argued that the power of judges to invalidate laws enacted by democratically elected legislatures must be eliminated or severely

constrained. Otherwise, democracy will be undermined, thus creating a “countermajoritarian difficulty.” Recognition of the importance of political ignorance greatly weakens this longstanding objection to judicial power. Many of the policies enacted by modern states have little or no democratic pedigree because rationally ignorant voters know little about them, and may even be unaware of their very existence. Even some of those policies voters do know have been enacted because they do not understand their true effects. By limiting the size and scope of government and facilitating “foot voting,” judicial review might actually strengthen democratic accountability rather than undermine it.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores some of the best-known proposals for increasing the political knowledge of the electorate. These include limits on the franchise, improved civic education, changing media coverage of politics, delegating greater authority to experts, and proposals for requiring citizens to engage in greater deliberation. Some of these ideas have potential. But many run afoul of the reality that, in a world of rational ignorance, the major constraint on political ignorance is not the supply of information but the demand for it. Even if information is readily available, voters may be unwilling to take the time to learn it.

Proposals to increase political knowledge will also be difficult to implement effectively given real-world political constraints. The very political ignorance and irrationality that necessitates their consideration is a key obstacle to their enactment in a form likely to work. Any reform proposal would have to be enacted by a democratic process that is itself heavily influenced by ignorance. Moreover, it may be almost impossible to increase political knowledge enough to enable voters to cope effectively with more than a fraction of the many complex issues controlled by the modern state.

Given these constraints, we are unlikely to see major increases in political knowledge for some time to come, if ever. We must, therefore, find better ways to live with widespread political ignorance.

This book does not provide a complete analysis of the appropriate, size, scope and organization of government. Political ignorance is far from the only factor that must be taken account of in any such theory. But it deserves a much greater role in the discussion than it has gotten so far.