

**John Locke Institute - Politics Essay Prize 2016**

1. "Democracy is supposed to be rule of the people, by the people, and for the people. But in order to rule effectively, the people need political knowledge. If they know little or nothing about government, it becomes difficult to hold political leaders accountable for their performance. Unfortunately, public knowledge about politics is disturbingly low. In addition, the public also often does a poor job of evaluating the political information they do know. This state of affairs has persisted despite rising education levels, increased availability of information thanks to modern technology, and even rising IQ scores. It is mostly the result of rational behavior, not stupidity. Such widespread and persistent political ignorance and irrationality strengthens the case for limiting and decentralizing the power of government." - Ilya Somin, 2013

*Is political ignorance a problem? What's the solution?*

In answer to this, there is a risk of sounding elitist; dismissing swathes of the population as 'ignorant' risks provoking anger among fellow voters (Hyman and Sheatsley went further – dismissing a third of Americans as 'know-nothings'). However, firstly, after recognizing the very real problem of political ignorance, it would be destructive to let it fester and not try and change circumstances, and secondly, there is nothing elitist about criticizing a rational choice. Here, I shall discuss why people choose to be rationally ignorant about politics, the damaging effects this has and why this is such a problem, and how it is possible to change it.

Some evidence to demonstrate the extent of political ignorance worldwide: before the EU referendum, an IPSOS Mori poll suggested that the British public thought on average that fifteen percent of the UK population were EU immigrants (the reality is just five percent). In the USA, before the 2014 elections, only thirty-six percent could identify control of both houses of Congress and only thirty three percent knew the employment rate was closer to six percent than much lower and higher figures. Italians think fifty percent of their population is over the age of sixty-five (the reality is twenty percent) and the French think that thirty per cent of the population of their country is made up of Muslims (the reality is eight percent). If average US IQ levels have risen fifteen points over the past fifty years, the reasonable explanation as to why levels of political knowledge have stayed stagnant during the same time is that people are ignorant *because they want to be*. Rational ignorance comes about due to a view that many people have that their votes are unlikely to make a tangible difference on the result of an election (1 in 60million in the US), so there is no incentive educate oneself about politics. Evidence for this comes from poll taxes on voting rights in Southern American states until the 1960s, causing the turnout to sharply decrease when a vote no longer became free. Similarly, people do not spend time acquiring political information because they know it will amount to nothing. A comparable analogy often quoted relates to emission-free cars – one electric car will not make a significant difference on the overall pollution levels, so why spend more money buying one? Descartes said that he 'could find more truth in the reasonings that each person makes concerning matters that are important to him' than 'reasonings ... which touch on speculation that produce no effect and are of no other consequence to him...', implying people feel they do not need to obtain knowledge about something so distant and seemingly unimportant as politics.

This however is not airtight; if voters know their vote will make virtually no difference on a result, why would they vote? In North London, recent botched polls for the EU referendum

created widespread anger as people felt they were being denied their right to vote. This is one reason: people feel compelled to vote to exercise their right as a citizen. Less admirably, people vote to exercise their prejudices. Hypothetically, a mechanic who refused to service the cars of immigrants or homosexuals out of prejudice would lose out on business, so cannot afford to do so. On voting day, however, the prejudiced mechanic can easily vote for the politician who promises to deport immigrants or outlaw gay marriage.

The same analogy neatly explains why voting ignorantly can be so destructive. The support for the politician is increased by the vote of the mechanic, so the politician gains influence. The ignorant views of the mechanic would worsen the lives of his fellow voters; we do not vote only for ourselves, but for everybody, in the same way that buying an electric car is a step in the right direction towards a level of air pollution that benefits everybody. There is the possibility that the mechanic bases his views not on any well-evaluated evidence or conclusive research, but rather a desire to fit in with the rest of his 'team' i.e. the party he supports. John Locke stated that the 'surplusage of assurance' one may give to a particular policy 'is owing to some other affection, and not to the love of truth', implying 'political religion' that arises through the belief that if a vote is so insignificant, you can vote for policies that align with your political religion and make you feel good, despite them being damaging in practice.

Political religion can also influence how we perceive the information we receive. Gustave Le Bon theorized: 'the masses...turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them.' This provides evidence as to how politically ignorant voters can digest the information they receive through the media: if it is concordant with the comfortable, prejudiced biases they hold in accordance with their political 'religion' they accept it regardless of its merit, and become hostile to information that conflicts with them. Assuming people often find information to confirm their biases through the media, they can relax and digest a constant flow of information that matches their current views. However, if hypothetically there was no media, it would become very hard for members of a political religion to find evidence for their 'beliefs', and would change them out of laziness. The upshot of this is that people hold very rigid views that are based on a lack of deliberation, and this allows politicians who lead 'political religions' to do as they please – as long as they seem to have policies that please their followers, the execution of these policies is irrelevant due to the rigidity of the views their followers hold. Similarly, there is a risk of corruption as leaders have very little supervision from their followers, can easily blame their subordinates, pursue harmful public policy in areas in which their followers are not interested and wash their hands of mistakes.

A particular argument against the effects of political ignorance is the so-called 'Miracle of Aggregation', but there are numerous reasons as to why this does not pose a strong threat. The 'Miracle of Aggregation' says that within a hypothetical electorate of one hundred people, ninety will be ignorant, and ten will be well informed. These ninety are so ignorant they will vote at random, so for each 'right' vote, there is a 'wrong' vote to balance it out, meaning there is no majority among the ignorant voters. Thus it falls to the remaining ten well-informed to make a decision, thus apparently nullifying the problems of political ignorance. However, according to the Miracle, well-informed voters, who statistically are wealthier than ignorant ones, are representatives for the rest of the population, and although this could not be a problem since many people vote 'sociotropically' (with the state of the electorate as a whole at heart), on certain issues such as gun-control and smoking bans, for example, they would hold personal beliefs. As a result, policies may be introduced that only benefit a tiny proportion of the electorate due to the ignorance of the masses.

A diagnosis without a course of treatment is useless, but the solution to voters not having enough knowledge cannot be to give them more! The demand for knowledge, not the supply, is the issue facing democracies. Almost all types of democracy fail: for example using retrospective voting, often cited as one of the least demanding forms of democracy (as Morris Fiorina states: '[i]n order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens need only calculate changes in their own welfare') yet with an ignorant electorate who do not know about term lengths or branches of a large and sprawling government, blame is often assigned to the wrong people, and it is difficult for voters to calculate 'changes in their own welfare' without major events to significantly alter circumstances. Other models such as 'sortition', involving randomly sampling a group of about a thousand people to represent a larger population demographic and only asking them to vote, or 'liquid democracy', involving delegating votes to somebody better informed have similar problems: they separate classes of society that try and represent a large body, but fail since not everybody votes 'sociotropically'. Simply using very slightly altered forms of the same concept is not effective – a completely different idea is needed.

A theory popularly endorsed by political scientists and economists is the theory of 'foot-voting', instead of conventional 'ballot-box voting'. This involves people supporting certain policies by settling in a jurisdiction that provides them, and moving from jurisdiction to jurisdiction based on the policies each provides. As a result, people are better incentivized to obtain information – without it they might be missing out on opportunities in another area. For example, people spend much more time researching which car they ought to buy than how they should vote because it has a direct and immediate impact on their lives. Similarly, they would spend time researching various jurisdictions to find out which is best for them, and move accordingly. The seemingly obvious argument against foot voting is that moving costs for migrants would be too high and continuous moving unsustainable. However, statistically, poorer people are more likely to move in search of better jobs in jurisdictions that provide them, and if government were decentralized sufficiently, jurisdictions would be close enough for people to move without incurring significant cost. Foot voters are also more receptive to criticism about decisions such as which jurisdiction to live in as they could gain something from this new information and so do not conform to political religion, and foot voters also do not need information that ballot-box voters might do such as the names of politicians, as instead of 'naming and shaming' them they simply move to another jurisdiction, thus removing the burden that ballot-box voters currently bear.

So, we have seen that political ignorance is rational and people vote to exercise their prejudices and conform to their political religions, allowing politicians to do as they please. The wealthy, well-informed classes of society are representatives of a wider majority due to the Miracle of Aggregation, and so policies that benefit only the smallest sections of society arise. Foot voting is useful in alleviating some of these problems, providing better incentives for people to evaluate evidence well and resulting in policies that are the product of widespread and conclusive voter consent. There is the option of not intervening with how everyday democracy functions because it is the right of the people to rule as they wish; H. L. Mencken stated the same when he said "[d]emocracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard", but the problem is that it is not just the voter themselves that will suffer as a result of his misinformed vote, but his or her fellow voters too. The selfishness of this all-too-common scenario is the reason political ignorance needs to be curtailed.

## **Bibliography**

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