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THE CASE AGAINST DEMOCRACY

If most voters are uninformed, who should make decisions about the public's welfare?

By Caleb Crain
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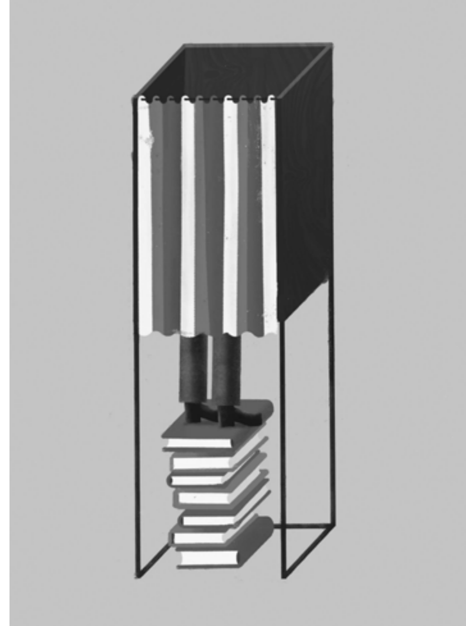
Roughly a third of American voters think that the Marxist slogan "From each according to his ability to each according to his need" appears in the Constitution. About as many are incapable of naming even one of the three branches of the United States government. Fewer than a quarter know who their senators are, and only half are aware that their state has two of them.

Democracy is other people, and the ignorance of the many has long galled the few, especially the few who consider themselves intellectuals. Plato, one of the earliest to see democracy as a problem, saw its typical citizen as shiftless and flighty:

> Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he's idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy.



Voter ignorance has worried political philosophers since Plato. Illustration by Yarek Waszul

It would be much safer, Plato thought, to entrust power to carefully educated guardians. To keep their minds pure of distractions—such as family, money, and the inherent pleasures of naughtiness—he proposed housing them in a eugenically supervised free-love compound where they could be taught to fear the touch of gold and prevented from reading any literature in which the characters have speaking parts, which might lead them to forget themselves. The scheme was so byzantine and cockamamie that many suspect Plato couldn't have been serious; Hobbes, for one, called the idea "useless."

A more practical suggestion came from J. S. Mill, in the nineteenth century: give extra votes to citizens with university degrees or intellectually demanding jobs. (In fact, in Mill's day, select universities had had their own constituencies for centuries, allowing someone with a degree from, say, Oxford to vote both in his university constituency and wherever he lived. The system wasn't abolished until 1950.) Mill's larger project—at a time when no more than nine per cent of British adults could vote—was for the franchise to expand and to include women. But he worried that new voters would lack knowledge and judgment, and fixed on supplementary votes as a defense against ignorance.

In the United States, élites who feared the ignorance of poor immigrants tried to restrict ballots. In 1855, Connecticut introduced the first literacy test for American voters. Although a New York Democrat protested, in 1868, that "if a man is ignorant, he needs the ballot for his protection all the more," in the next half century the tests spread to almost all parts of the country. They helped racists in the South circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment and disenfranchise blacks, and even in immigrant-rich New York a 1921 law required new voters to take a test if they couldn't prove that they had an eighth-grade education. About fifteen per cent flunked. Voter literacy tests weren't permanently outlawed by Congress until 1975, years after the civil-rights movement had discredited them.

Worry about voters' intelligence lingers, however. Mill's proposal, in particular, remains "actually fairly formidable," according to David Estlund, a political philosopher at Brown. His 2008 book, "Democratic Authority," tried to construct a philosophical justification for democracy, a feat that he thought could be achieved only by balancing two propositions: democratic procedures tend to make correct policy decisions, and democratic procedures are fair in the eyes of reasonable observers. Fairness alone didn't seem to be enough. If it were, Estlund wrote, "why not flip a coin?" It must be that we value democracy for tending to get things right more often than not, which democracy seems to do by making use of the information in our votes. Indeed, although this year we seem to be living through a rough patch, democracy does have a fairly good track record. The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has made the case that democracies never have famines, and other scholars believe that they almost never go

to war with one another, rarely murder their own populations, nearly always have peaceful transitions of government, and respect human rights more consistently than other regimes do.

Still, democracy is far from perfect—"the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time," as Churchill famously said. So, if we value its power to make good decisions, why not try a system that's a little less fair but makes good decisions even more often? Jamming the stub of the Greek word for "knowledge" into the Greek word for "rule," Estlund coined the word "epistocracy," meaning "government by the knowledgeable." It's an idea that "advocates of democracy, and other enemies of despotism, will want to resist," he wrote, and he counted himself among the resisters. As a purely philosophical matter, however, he saw only three valid objections.

First, one could deny that truth was a suitable standard for measuring political judgment. This sounds extreme, but it's a fairly common move in political philosophy. After all, in debates over contentious issues, such as when human life begins or whether human activity is warming the planet, appeals to the truth tend to be incendiary. Truth "peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate," Hannah Arendt pointed out in this magazine, in 1967, "and debate constitutes the very essence of political life." Estlund wasn't a relativist, however; he agreed that politicians should refrain from appealing to absolute truth, but he didn't think a political theorist could avoid doing so.

The second argument against epistocracy would be to deny that some citizens know more about good government than others. Estlund simply didn't find this plausible (maybe a political philosopher is professionally disinclined to). The third and final option: deny that knowing more imparts political authority. As Estlund put it, "You might be right, but who made you boss?"

It's a very good question, and Estlund rested his defense of democracy on it, but he felt obliged to look for holes in his argument. He had a sneaking suspicion that a polity ruled by educated voters probably *would* perform better than a democracy, and he thought that some of the resulting inequities could be remedied. If historically disadvantaged groups, such as African-Americans or women, turned out to be underrepresented in an epistocratic system, those who made the grade could be given additional votes, in compensation.

By the end of Estlund's analysis, there were only two practical arguments against epistocracy left standing. The first was the possibility that an epistocracy's method of screening voters might be biased in a way that couldn't readily be identified and therefore couldn't be corrected for. The second was that universal suffrage is so established in our minds as a default that giving the knowledgeable power over the ignorant will always feel more unjust than giving those in the majority power over those in the minority. As defenses of democracy go, these are even less rousing than Churchill's shruggie.

In a new book, "Against Democracy" (Princeton), Jason Brennan, a political philosopher at Georgetown, has turned Estlund's hedging inside out to create an uninhibited argument *for* epistocracy. Against Estlund's claim that universal suffrage is the default, Brennan argues that it's entirely justifiable to limit the political power that the irrational, the ignorant, and the incompetent have over others. To counter Estlund's concern for fairness, Brennan asserts that the public's welfare is more important than anyone's hurt feelings; after all, he writes, few would consider it unfair to disqualify jurors who are morally or cognitively incompetent. As for Estlund's worry about demographic bias, Brennan waves it off. Empirical research shows that people rarely vote for their narrow self-interest; seniors favor Social Security no more strongly than the young do. Brennan suggests that since voters in an epistocracy would be more enlightened about crime and policing, "excluding the bottom 80 percent of white voters from voting might be just what poor blacks need."

Brennan has a bright, pugilistic style, and he takes a sportsman's pleasure in upsetting pieties and demolishing weak logic. Voting rights may happen to signify human dignity to us, he writes, but corpse-eating once signified respect for the dead among the Fore tribe of Papua New Guinea. To him, our faith in the ennobling power of political debate is no more well grounded than the supposition that college fraternities build character.

Brennan draws ample evidence of the average American voter's cluelessness from the legal scholar Ilya Somin's "Democracy and Political Ignorance" (2013), which shows that American voters have remained ignorant despite decades of rising education levels. Some economists have argued that ill-informed voters, far from being lazy or self-sabotaging, should be seen as rational actors. If the odds that your vote will be decisive are minuscule—Brennan writes that "you are more likely to win Powerball a few times in a row"—then learning about politics isn't worth even a few minutes of your time. In "The Myth of the Rational Voter" (2007), the economist Bryan Caplan suggested that ignorance may even be gratifying to voters. "Some beliefs are more emotionally appealing," Caplan observed, so if your vote isn't likely to do anything why not indulge yourself in what you want to believe, whether or not it's true? Caplan argues that it's only because of the worthlessness of an individual vote that so many voters look beyond their narrow self-interest: in the polling booth, the warm, fuzzy feeling of altruism can be had cheap.

Viewed that way, voting might seem like a form of pure self-expression. Not even, says Brennan: it's multiple choice, so hardly expressive. "If you're upset, write a poem," Brennan counselled in an earlier book, "The Ethics of Voting" (2011). He was equally unimpressed by the argument that it's one's duty to vote. "It would be bad if no one farmed," he wrote, "but that does not imply that everyone should farm." In fact, he suspected, the imperative to vote might be even weaker than the imperative to farm. After all, by not voting you do your neighbor a good turn. "If I do not vote, your vote counts more," Brennan wrote.

Brennan calls people who don't bother to learn about politics hobbits, and he thinks it for the best if they stay home on Election Day. A second group of people enjoy political news as a recreation, following it with the partisan devotion of sports fans, and Brennan calls them hooligans. Third in his bestiary are vulcans, who investigate politics with scientific objectivity, respect opposing points of view, and carefully adjust their opinions to the facts, which they seek out diligently. It's vulcans, presumably, who Brennan hopes will someday rule over us, but he doesn't present compelling evidence that they really exist. In fact, one study he cites shows that even people with excellent math skills tend not to draw on them if doing so risks undermining a cherished political belief. This shouldn't come as a surprise. In recent memory, sophisticated experts have been confident about many proposals that turned out to be disastrous—invading Iraq, having a single European currency, grinding subprime mortgages into the sausage known as collateralized debt obligations, and so on.

How would an epistocracy actually work? Brennan is reluctant to get specific, which is understandable. It was the details of utopia that gave Plato so much trouble, and by not going into them Brennan avoids stepping on the rake that thwacked Plato between the eyes. He sketches some options—extra votes for degree holders, a council of epistocrats with veto power, a qualifying exam for voters—but he doesn't spend much time considering what could go wrong. The idea of a voter exam, for example, was dismissed by Brennan himself in "The Ethics of Voting" as "ripe for abuse and institutional capture." There's no mention in his new book of any measures that he would put in place to prevent such dangers.

Without more details, it's difficult to assess Brennan's proposal. Suppose I claim that pixies always make selfless, enlightened political decisions and that therefore we should entrust our government to pixies. If I can't really say how we'll identify the pixies or harness their sagacity, and if I also disclose evidence that pixies may be just as error-prone as hobbits and hooligans, you'd be justified in having doubts.

While we're on the subject of vulcans and pixies, we might as well mention that there's an elephant in the room. Knowledge about politics, Brennan reports, is higher in people who have more education and higher income, live in the West, belong to the Republican Party, and are middle-aged; it's lower among blacks and women. "Most poor black women, as of right now at least, would fail even a mild voter qualification exam," he admits, but he's undeterred, insisting that their disenfranchisement would be merely *incidental* to his epistocratic plan—a completely different matter, he maintains, from the literacy tests of America's past, which were administered with the *intention* of disenfranchising blacks and ethnic whites.

That's an awfully fine distinction. Bear in mind that, during the current Presidential race, it looks as though the votes of blacks and women will serve as a bulwark against the most reckless demagogue in living memory, whom white men with a college degree have been favoring by a margin of forty-seven per cent to thirty-five per cent. Moreover, though political scientists mostly agree that voters are altruistic, something doesn't tally: Brennan concedes that historically disadvantaged groups such as blacks and women seem to gain political leverage once they get the franchise.

Like many people I know, I've spent recent months staying up late, reading polls in terror. The flawed and faulty nature of democracy has become a vivid companion. But is democracy really failing, or is it just trying to say something?

Political scientists have long hoped to find an "invisible hand" in politics comparable to the one that Adam Smith described in economics. Voter ignorance wouldn't matter much if a democracy were able to weave individual votes into collective political wisdom, the way a market weaves the self-interested buy-and-sell decisions of individual actors into a prudent collective allocation of resources. But, as Brennan reports, the mathematical models that have been proposed work only if voter ignorance has no shape of its own—if, for example, voters err on the side of liberalism as often as they err on the side of conservatism, leaving decisions in the hands of a politically knowledgeable minority in the center. Unfortunately, voter ignorance *does* seem to have a shape. The political scientist Scott Althaus has calculated that a voter with more knowledge of politics will, on balance, be less eager to go to war, less punitive about crime, more tolerant on social issues, less accepting of government control of the economy, and more willing to accept taxes in order to reduce the federal deficit. And Caplan calculates that a voter ignorant of economics will tend to be more pessimistic, more suspicious of market competition and of rises in productivity, and more wary of foreign trade and immigration.

It's possible, though, that democracy works even though political scientists have failed to find a tidy equation to explain it. It could be that voters take a cognitive shortcut, letting broad-brush markers like party affiliation stand in for a close study of candidates' qualifications and policy stances. Brennan doubts that voters understand party stereotypes well enough to do even this, but surely a shortcut needn't be perfect to be helpful. Voters may also rely on the simple heuristic of throwing out incumbents who have made them unhappy, a technique that in political science goes by the polite name of "retrospective voting." Brennan argues that voters don't know enough to do this, either. To impose full accountability, he writes, voters would need to know "who the incumbent bastards are, what they did, what they could have done, what happened when the bastards did what they did, and whether the challengers are likely to be any better than the incumbent bastards." Most don't know all this, of course. Somin points out that voters have punished incumbents for droughts and shark attacks and rewarded them for recent sports victories. Caplan dismisses retrospective voting, quoting a pair of scholars who call it "no more rational than killing the pharaoh when the Nile does not flood."

But even if retrospective voting is sloppy, and works to the chagrin of the occasional pharaoh, that doesn't necessarily make it valueless. It might, for instance, tend to improve elected officials' policy decisions. Maybe all it takes is for a politician to worry that she could be the unlucky chump who gets punished for something she actually did. Caplan notes that a politician clever enough to worry about his constituents' future happiness as well as

their present gratification might be motivated to give them better policies than they know to ask for. In such a case, he predicts, voters will feel a perennial dissatisfaction, stemming from the tendency of their canniest and most long-lasting politicians to be cavalier about campaign promises. Sound familiar?

When the Founding Fathers designed the federal system, not paying too much attention to voters was a feature, not a bug. “There are particular moments in public affairs,” Madison warned, “when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn.” Brennan, for all his cleverness, sometimes seems to be struggling to reinvent the “representative” part of “representative democracy,” writing as if voters need to know enough about policy to be able to make intelligent decisions themselves, when, in most modern democracies, voters usually delegate that task. It’s when they don’t, as in California’s ballot initiatives or the recent British referendum on whether to leave the European Union, that disaster is especially likely to strike. The economist Joseph Schumpeter didn’t think democracy could even function if voters paid too much attention to what their representatives did between elections. “Electorates normally do not control their political leaders in any way except by refusing to reelect them,” he wrote, in “Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy” (1942). The rest of the time, he thought, they should refrain from “political back-seat driving.”

Why do we vote, and is there a reason to do it or a duty to do it well? It’s been said that voting enables one to take an equal part in the building of one’s political habitat. Brennan thinks that such participation is worthless if what you value about participation is the chance to influence an election’s outcome; odds are, you won’t. Yet he has previously written that participation can be meaningful even when its practical effect is nil, as when a parent whose spouse willingly handles all child care still feels compelled to help out. Brennan claims that no comparable duty to take part exists with voting, because other kinds of good actions can take voting’s place. He believes, in other words, that voting is part of a larger market in civic virtue, the way that farming is part of a larger market in food, and he goes so far as to suggest that a businessman who sells food and clothing to Martin Luther King, Jr., is making a genuine contribution to civic virtue, even though he makes it indirectly. This doesn’t seem persuasive, in part because it dilutes the meaning of civic virtue too much, and in part because it implies that a businessman who sells a cheeseburger to J. Edgar Hoover is committing civic evil.

More than once, Brennan compares uninformed voting to air pollution. It’s a compelling analogy: in both cases, the conscientiousness of the enlightened few is no match for the negligence of the many, and the cost of shirking duty is spread too widely to keep any one malefactor in line. Your commute by bicycle probably isn’t going to make the city’s air any cleaner, and even if you read up on candidates for civil-court judge on Patch.com, it may still be the crook who gets elected. But though the incentive for duty may be weakened, it’s not clear that the duty itself is lightened. The whole point of democracy is that the number of people who participate in an election is proportional to the number of people who will have to live intimately with an election’s outcome. It’s worth noting, too, that if judicious voting is like clean air then it can’t also be like farming. Clean air is a commons, an instance of market failure, dependent on government protection for its existence; farming is part of a market.

But maybe voting is neither commons nor market. Perhaps, instead, it’s combat. Relatively gentle, of course. Rather than rifles and bayonets, essentially there’s just a show of hands. But the nature of the duty may be similar, because what Brennan’s model omits is that sometimes, in an election, democracy itself is in danger. If a soldier were to calculate his personal value to the campaign that his army is engaged in, he could easily conclude that the cost of showing up at the front isn’t worth it, even if he factors in the chance of being caught and punished for desertion. The trouble is that it’s impossible to know in advance of a battle which side will prevail, let alone by how great a margin, especially if morale itself is a variable. The lack of certainty about the future makes a hash of merely prudential calculation. It’s said that most soldiers worry more about letting down the fellow-soldiers in their unit than about allegiance to an entity as abstract as the nation, and maybe voters, too, feel their duty most acutely toward friends and family who share their idea of where the country needs to go. ♦

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