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Abstract

Review of *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter* by Ilya Somin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Keywords

Political Theory, Voting-United States, Democracy-United States, Ignorance (Theory of Knowledge)

The central argument of Ilya Somin's *Democracy and Political Ignorance* is that a widespread lack of basic political knowledge undermines several representative and deliberative standards commonly invoked in normative defenses of democracy as a majoritarian and participatory ideal. The book serves as a highly-readable and accessible introduction to public choice theories of voter behavior and democratic political institutions. Deploying ignorance as an argument against the democratic organization of political and social institutions has a long history, many attempts of which are not nearly as thorough, engaging, and fair-minded as Somin's book.

The book is divided into 7 chapters. In Chapter 1, Somin assembles at length a number of empirical studies showing high levels of political ignorance. Most individuals lack knowledge of even the most basic structure of government and the respective functions of its parts (including "basic matters" about political figures, current political events, and issues relevant to domestic and foreign policy), as well as fail to exhibit the kind of 'ideological consistency' that political elites demonstrate (suggesting a "comparative inability of non-ideological voters to spot *interconnections* among issues" (p. 20) and an increased susceptibility to manipulation by a more informed and motivated few). The book also points to several studies showing that the level of political knowledge among citizens (in the U.S.) remains quite low despite dramatic increases in educational attainment over the last 80 years. While many readers will be familiar with some of this data, Somin puts the findings together to suggest that political ignorance among most citizens is deep, illogical, and persistent.

Chapter 2 considers various ways in which low levels of political knowledge among citizens defeat the aspirations of many (if not most) normative theories of democratic participation. Somin argues how four different participatory theories of democracy require a level of political knowledge that is not only belied by the fact of political ignorance, but that will likely be difficult-to-impossible to correct because it is a rational response to the circumstances of mass democracy. Whether a normative theory of democracy asks citizens to analyze the qualifications and personal virtues of elected representatives, to hold office-holders accountable for the policies they choose once in office, to gauge whether a party's decisions represent one's interests, or to engage in any kind of sophisticated deliberation with fellow citizens about preferences and policy, the level of knowledge and reasoning ability sufficient to carry out these tasks effectively "often falls short of the requirements of the least demanding theory" (p. 38).

Chapter 3 pursues a line of argument recognizable to those acquainted with the public choice school of economics. In short, rather than interpreting voter ignorance about politics in not the result of stupidity, selfishness, or disaffectedness, public choice theory interprets such behavior as a form of 'rational ignorance.' That is, since the possibility of one's vote impacting the result of an election is vanishingly small, the incentive for taking actions to become better informed about politics is equally diminished.

In Chapters 4 and 7, Somin criticizes a pair of ways that participatory and

deliberative theorists have analyzed to deal with widespread limitations in political knowledge, namely, the utilization of heuristics and other cognitive shortcuts in individual decision-making and various strategies for creating better-informed citizens.

The book also sets out to innovate two positive theses about how ‘smaller’ government leads to ‘smarter’ politics. In Chapter 6, Somin argues how the fact of political ignorance can defuse a long-standing legitimation problem in constitutional theory and political philosophy known as the ‘counter-majoritarian difficulty.’ The difficulty can be roughly stated as follows: if majoritarianism grounds the legitimacy of a political decision-making body, then how can it also be legitimate for an unelected judicial body to overturn the decisions of citizens or elected legislators? Given the circumstances of widespread political ignorance, Somin reasons that judicial power can actually be ‘representation-reinforcing’ to the extent that injunctive relief may correct for informational barriers. This works in a pair of ways. First, the “judicial invalidation of laws may actually increase the majoritarianism of the political system by reducing the knowledge burden on voters” (157). Second, judicial review ‘corrects’ for distortions to majoritarianism by counteracting the anti-majoritarian influences that voter ignorance exerts over the political process.

Another novel component of the book is Somin’s vigorous defense in Chapter 5 of ‘foot voting’ over ‘ballot box voting.’ Foot voting is defined as “choosing the state or locality in which to live” based on “information about superior economic conditions, public policies, or other advantages in another jurisdiction” (p. 121). The power of voting with one’s feet increases under background conditions of a constitutional federalism, which curtails government power (thereby shrinking the knowledge burden) and decentralizes policy-making to smaller units. Maximizing subsidiarity creates competition between jurisdictions and thereby increases the likelihood that government will be more representative of the interests and ideas of its members. As foot-voting restores the “causal efficacy” of individual decision-making that is diminished at the ballot box, the grip of rational ignorance on voters is loosened by the increased incentives to acquire information (presumably because the costs of a miscalculated choice to move with one’s family from one jurisdiction to another could be devastating).

Deliberatively-inclined theorists may find the way Somin frames his analysis as a choice between ballot voting and foot voting unpersuasive, and I suspect others may balk at some highly contentious claims in the book, such that democracy could be both smaller and smarter were the U.S. Supreme Court to take up Richard Epstein’s position that most post-New Deal legislation is constitutionally illegitimate. The book also tends to treat deliberation as a practice in which participants come ‘ready-made’ to engage effectively, a picture of deliberative processes that may be unrecognizable to researchers and practitioners of civic engagement who emphasize the formative effects of deliberation in terms of both individual learning and community empowerment. Yet at least a couple of problems emerge even when addressing the book on its own terms. For one, assume the absence of a clear, bright line that separates political ignorance from

political knowledge. What, then, is the general threshold of political knowledge that must be surpassed before the kind of worries motivating the central claims of the book is ameliorated? Since the author notes, “that even the smartest and best-educated people have the time, energy, and mental capacity to assimilate only a tiny fraction of all of the information available to them” (p. 63), I suspect the answer would be ‘none.’ Yet this changes the epistemic lynchpin of the argument in an important (and problematic) way. For even if an entire society were composed of well-educated, well-informed, fully rational, and motivationally sincere individuals, the problem of political ignorance persists. Therefore, it seems that the problem is not so much that individuals lack sufficient knowledge to vote in an informed way, but that they can *never* possess sufficient knowledge to vote in an informed way. The latter knowledge problem resembles more a ‘constitutive’ or ‘structural’ problem, rather than an ignorance problem. This is not to say that both points cannot be argued concurrently, but instead that a reader unconvinced already by, say, the supposed implications of Arrow’s impossibility theorem for actually existing democracies, is unlikely to be moved.

Somin does acknowledge some strategies for increasing political knowledge and enhancing civic participation (such as small-scale deliberative polling and improvements in educational technology and pedagogy), but is mostly pessimistic that these interventions will lead to a better-informed electorate. It is hard to dispute Somin’s point if political knowledge is conceived of as some kind of individual cognitive achievement. Yet it is also possible to construe knowledge ‘socially,’ as a kind of group intelligence or collective wisdom. The work of theorists and philosophers such as H  l  ne Landemore, Elinor Ostrom, and Elizabeth Anderson stand out in this respect.¹ Thinking of political knowledge as a collective intelligence also makes for some interesting parallels between Somin’s two positive theses and some recent trends in deliberative democratic theories and work on civic engagement. A recent edited collection on ‘systemic approaches’ to deliberative democracy builds on a shift of focus from ‘individual sites’ of deliberation toward the ‘interdependence’ of sites within a larger system. As “political judgments involve so many factual contingencies and competing normative requirements, and because politics involves alignments of the will, both in concert and in opposition, among large numbers of citizens, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a political system that does not divide the labors of judgment and then recombine them in various ways.”² On this interpretation, the democratic value of judicial review here would be based not on ‘decentralization’ or ‘constitutional limiting’ as in Somin’s theory, but rather as part of a polycentric ‘cognitive division of labor’ that seeks to create conditions that maximize the flow of information, specialization, and perspectives from both citizens and experts.

An unexpected virtue of this book is that it makes a persuasive case for

¹ Elizabeth Anderson, ‘The Epistemology of Democracy,’ *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3(1), 2006, 8-22; H  l  ne Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Elinor Ostrom, *Understanding Institutional Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Jane Mansbridge and John Parkinson (eds), *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

untethering the justification of collective governance from the capacities of citizens *qua* individual. Somin's answer to the question 'Who, exactly, decides where and how government should be 'smaller' in order to be smarter?' is well-reasoned and challenging, but for that reason is equally likely to provoke well-reasoned disagreements. And this is how it should be. There is no 'final word' in a democracy, and no matter how reasonable a point of view one puts forth, it is always one among a multitude of perspectives and reasons.