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# DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL IGNORANCE

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*ABSTRACT: Advocates of “deliberative democracy” want citizens to actively participate in serious dialogue over political issues, not merely go to the polls every few years. Unfortunately, these ideals don’t take into account widespread political ignorance and irrationality. Most voters neither attain the level of knowledge needed to make deliberative democracy work, nor do they rationally evaluate the political information they do possess. The vast size and complexity of modern government make it unlikely that most citizens can ever reach the levels of knowledge and rationality required by deliberative democracy, even if they were better informed than they are at present.*

Deliberative democracy is one of the most influential ideas in modern political thought. Advocates want citizens to actively participate in the democratic process by seriously deliberating over important issues, not merely voting for or against candidates put forward by political parties. They hope that voters will not only develop a solid factual understanding of political issues, but will also debate the moral principles at stake in a rational and sophisticated fashion. Deliberative democrats expect more of voters than merely acting to “throw the bums out” if things seem to be going badly.

These high aspirations are admirable and appealing. Unfortunately, they run afoul of the reality of widespread voter ignorance and

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irrationality. Moreover, even if voters were significantly better informed and more rational than most are today, the vast size and complexity of modern government would prevent them from acquiring enough knowledge and sophistication to deliberate over more than a small fraction of the full range of issues currently decided by government. Such difficulties become even more acute in light of the fact that many deliberative democrats want the political process to control even more of society than is already the case. Previous scholarship has only tentatively considered the implications of widespread voter ignorance and irrationality for deliberative democracy.<sup>1</sup> This article is intended to close the gap in the literature more fully. My analysis focuses on theories of deliberative democracy that require deliberation by ordinary citizens. I do not consider the distinct question of deliberation by legislators or expert administrators.

Part I briefly summarizes the key principles of deliberative democracy, emphasizing the high degree of voter knowledge and sophistication required for the theory to work. In addition to factual knowledge about public policies and their effects, deliberative democracy also requires a substantial degree of understanding of moral and philosophical arguments. This significantly increases the knowledge burden that would be imposed on voters.

In Part II, I explain why the “rational ignorance” of voters poses a serious obstacle to deliberative democracy.<sup>2</sup> Most voters have relatively little or no knowledge of public policy. Such ignorance is both rational and extremely difficult to alter. The problem of political ignorance is exacerbated by the enormous size and complexity of the modern state. Even a substantial increase in political knowledge would not be enough to give most voters a more than minimal understanding of the various functions of government.

Part III considers the closely related challenge of “rational irrationality” (Caplan 2001 and 2007). Not only do voters have a limited incentive to acquire knowledge about politics, they also have little reason to rationally evaluate the information they do possess. Instead, they tend to evaluate new political information in a highly biased fashion, overvaluing evidence that confirms their pre-existing views and underestimating or ignoring the importance of facts that cut the other way (Somin 2010, ch. 3). This circumstance makes it very unlikely that even relatively well-informed voters can live up to deliberative democratic ideals.

Parts IV–VI consider three proposals to increase political knowledge that have been advanced by deliberative democrats. These include using education to raise the level of political knowledge, increasing knowledge by having voters engage in structured deliberation, and transferring authority to lower levels of government where individual voters might have stronger incentives to acquire information. Finally, I will briefly suggest that deliberative ideals might be more effectively advanced by limiting the role of government in society.

Deliberative democracy is a normative ideal, not an attempt to explain present-day reality. However, an attractive normative ideal must be feasible. The problem of political ignorance casts serious doubt on the feasibility of deliberative democracy. Moreover, some proposals put forward by deliberative democrats, if implemented, may well cause more harm than good.

## I. THE KNOWLEDGE PREREQUISITES OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Deliberative democracy imposes a severe knowledge burden on voters if they are to live up to its ideals. Advocates of the theory emphasize that their approach differs from more limited conceptions of democracy that require only that voters be able to use the ballot to remove leaders they consider unsatisfactory.<sup>3</sup> Deliberative democrats also reject less minimalistic theories of democracy that seek to force politicians to obey voter preferences on particular issues.<sup>4</sup> Deliberation advocates are highly critical of such merely “aggregative” theories of democracy (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 13–17).

Instead, deliberative democrats insist that voters must actively discuss policy issues, and do so in an intellectually rigorous and morally legitimate way. They contend that a truly democratic law must not only be enacted by duly elected representatives of an informed electorate, but must also be adopted for the right “type of reasons” (Bohman 1996, 25). The “naked preferences” of electoral majorities are not enough to justify legislative outcomes (Sunstein 1984 and 1993, 25–29, 133–45). As Joshua Cohen (1997, 74) puts it, “the deliberative conception emphasizes that collective choices *should be made in a deliberative way*, and not only that those choices should have a desirable fit with the preferences of citizens.”

Advocates of deliberative democracy differ among themselves about various issues. But they agree that deliberative democracy demands more of voters than a simple pursuit of their pre-existing preferences, regardless of content. Jürgen Habermas (1990, 75–76, 100), one of the most influential deliberative democrats, urges that the deliberative process only take account of citizen arguments that are based on “impartiality” and incorporate the “mutual recognition of competent subjects.”

In their well-known book *Democracy and Deliberation*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996, 57–58) insist that deliberative arguments must pass tests of reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. Reciprocity, in their view, requires that “citizens . . . appeal to reasons that are recognizably moral in form and mutually acceptable in content” and that they appeal only to such empirical claims as “are consistent with relatively reliable methods of inquiry.”

Most deliberative democrats agree that substantial normative constraints on the types of argument used in deliberation are necessary, although they differ on the details (e.g. Michelman 1988; Habermas 1990; Benhabib 1996; Bohman 1996; Habermas 1996; Cohen 1997; Gaus 1997; Young 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Even the minority who do not wish to impose moral or philosophical limits on the types of arguments that deliberators can employ do seek to ensure that voters deliberate in a rational and informed manner (e.g. Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Leib 2004).

Most theories of deliberative democracy therefore impose at least two types of knowledge requirements on voters. First, citizens must have empirical knowledge of the policy issues before them and the likely results of adopting alternative proposals. For example, voters considering whether or not to adopt free trade or protectionism need to have some knowledge of the economics of comparative advantage and the likely consequences of trade restrictions for different sectors of the economy.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the voters must also have moral and philosophical knowledge that enables them to determine whether various arguments advanced in the deliberative process meet the normative demands of deliberative-democratic theory. For example, Gutmann and Thompson (1996) and Habermas (1990) insist that deliberators should make only arguments that treat all citizens as equals. Thus, supporters and opponents of free trade could not justify their positions merely by arguing that their preferred policy would benefit one group at the expense of another to whose welfare they are indifferent. Some deliberative democrats would exclude

appeals to various religious views and to principles such as “economic liberty” (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 56–57, 67–71).

Applying such criteria of legitimacy and evaluating opposing moral claims in the rational way demanded by deliberative democrats require considerable understanding of moral and political philosophy. It might require substantial knowledge merely to understand the scope of the rule laid down by any given criterion. For example, it is difficult for ordinary citizens (and even for some experts) to understand where the boundary between religious and secular arguments lies, and it will therefore be difficult to understand the scope of Gutmann and Thompson’s proposed rule banning certain types of religious appeals (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 56–57). Deliberative democracy also probably requires at least a minimal understanding of the principles of logic so that the deliberators can tell whether their arguments are rational and consistent and whether they potentially contradict the criteria of legitimacy imposed by deliberative–democratic theory.

Under deliberative democracy, voters must not only have the relevant empirical and philosophical knowledge, but must also evaluate it rationally. Ideally, deliberative democracy “aims to arrive at a *rational*ly motivated consensus” (Cohen 1997, 75, *emph. added*). Deliberative democrats often emphasize that their theory requires not mere discussion of political issues, but rational deliberation over them (e.g. Habermas 1990; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Cohen 1997; Gaus 1997; Young 2000).

These requirements of knowledge and rational evaluation are imposing. They go well beyond the more modest demands of other theories of democratic participation.<sup>6</sup> For example, the theory of retrospective voting advocated by Joseph Schumpeter (1950) requires only that voters be aware of existing policies and vote out incumbent office-holders when their policies seem to be performing poorly (Somin 2010, ch. 2). Some other approaches are more demanding (*ibid.*), but few, if any, are as epistemologically challenging as deliberative democracy. The key question is whether voters can rise to the challenge.

## II. RATIONAL IGNORANCE

Decades of public opinion research show that most voters are very far from meeting the knowledge prerequisites of deliberative democracy. To

the contrary, they are often ignorant even of very basic political information.

In 2009, the Obama administration and congressional Democrats put forward ambitious plans to restructure the U.S. health-care system and impose a “cap and trade” system to restrict carbon emissions and combat global warming. Both plans were widely discussed in the media and elsewhere. Yet a September 2009 survey found that only 37 percent of Americans claimed to “understand” the health care plan, a figure that likely overestimates the true level of understanding.<sup>7</sup> A May 2009 poll showed that only 24 percent of Americans realized that the important “cap and trade” proposal recently passed by the House of Representatives as an effort to combat global warming addressed “environmental issues.” Some 46 percent believed that it was either a “health-care reform” or a “regulatory reform for Wall Street.”<sup>8</sup>

Until the Obama health-care reform passed in March 2010, the largest new federal domestic program enacted in the previous 40 years had been the Bush Administration’s prescription-drug entitlement, enacted in 2003. Yet a December 2003 poll showed that almost 70 percent of Americans did not even know that Congress had passed the law (Somin 2004c, 5–6).

Public ignorance is not limited to information about specific policies. It also extends to knowledge of political parties, ideologies, and the basic structure and institutions of government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 1998 and 2004c). For example, a majority of voters are ignorant of such fundamentals of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 70–71). A 2006 Zogby poll found that only 42 percent of Americans could even name the three branches of the federal government (Somin 2010, ch. 2). Another 2006 survey revealed that only 28 percent could name two or more of the five rights guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution (*ibid.*). A 2002 Columbia University study found that 35 percent believed that Karl Marx’s dictum “From each according to his ability to each according to his need” is enshrined in the Constitution; 34 percent said they did not know if it was, and only 31 percent correctly answered that it was not (Dorf 2002). Similarly, years of survey data show that most of the public has little understanding of the basic differences between liberalism and conservatism (RePass 2008; Somin 2010, ch. 2). They are often also

confused about the differences between the policy positions of the two major parties (e.g., Somin 2004a).

Widespread political ignorance has persisted over time, despite massive increases in education and the availability of information through new technologies such as the internet.<sup>9</sup> It seems unlikely to diminish substantially in the foreseeable future.

We have much less data on the extent of public knowledge of logic and moral reasoning. Thus, it is possible that voter ignorance on these matters is less extreme than with respect to factual knowledge of politics and policy. Still, it seems unlikely that most voters have more than a very limited understanding of philosophy, logic, and moral theory. Studies show that people often make basic logical errors (Gilovich 1991) and that many embrace illogical pseudoscience (Shermer 1998).

Political ignorance is not merely the result of stupidity or irrational apathy, as some claim (e.g. Shenkman 2008). Rather, it represents rational behavior on the part of most voters. An individual voter has virtually no chance of influencing electoral outcomes. In the 2008 U.S. presidential election, for example, the chance of an individual vote having a decisive impact was approximately 1 in 60 million (Gelman et al. forthcoming, 9–10). The incentive to accumulate political knowledge is therefore vanishingly small so long as the only reason for doing so is to cast a better-informed vote.

Since one vote almost certainly will not be decisive, even a voter who cares greatly about the outcome has virtually no incentive to invest heavily in acquiring sufficient knowledge to make an informed choice. An informed electorate is a “public good,” the provision of which is subject to the “collective action” problem that arises when consumers of a good do not have to help pay for its provision in order to enjoy its benefits (Olson 1965). Thus, even highly intelligent and perfectly rational citizens routinely choose to devote little or no effort to the acquisition of political knowledge.

Acquiring extensive political knowledge for the purpose of becoming a more informed voter is, in most situations, simply irrational. The rationality of political ignorance helps explain why ignorance has been so remarkably persistent over time, despite major increases in education levels and the availability of information. Although the supply of political information has increased, the demand has not. This situation undercuts claims that voter knowledge could increase to the levels demanded by deliberative democracy if only the media and other institutions provided

more and better information (e.g. Ackerman and Fishkin 2004, 8; Talisse 2004, 459).

Some political theorists argue that a political system based on deliberative democracy will increase public-spirited behavior and lead citizens to look beyond their narrow self-interest (e.g. Barber 1984; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Even if this were true, it would not overcome the problem of rational ignorance. The logic of collective action applies just as readily to highly altruistic and civic-minded citizens as to narrowly self-interested ones. Even a completely altruistic person who always chooses to prioritize the welfare of others over her own when the two conflict would not rationally devote much of her time to acquiring political information for the sake of casting an informed vote. There is simply too little chance that her action will actually end up benefiting others. The rational altruist would therefore seek to serve others in ways where a marginal individual contribution has a real chance of making a difference to their welfare, such as donating time or money to charitable organizations.<sup>10</sup>

The depth, persistence, and rationality of political ignorance has troubling implications for deliberative democracy. If voters often lack even minimal knowledge of politics and public policy, they are unlikely to acquire the much higher levels needed to make deliberative democracy work.<sup>11</sup>

The challenge that voter ignorance poses to deliberative democracy is further exacerbated by the enormous size and complexity of modern government. As of 2009, government spending accounted for some 45 percent of U.S. GDP. It had reached 37 percent even before the massive new spending engendered by the financial crisis and recession that began in 2008 (Somin 2010, ch. 5). In many other Western democracies, government spending reaches even higher levels (*ibid.*).

In addition to spending, government also regulates almost every aspect of modern society. In the United States, the executive branch of the federal government alone has 15 cabinet-level departments, 56 independent regulatory agencies and government corporations, and four “quasi-official” agencies.<sup>12</sup> It is virtually impossible for even a relatively well-informed voter to acquire even minimal knowledge of more than a fraction of all the activities of these agencies, let alone the many state- and local-level ones. If minimal knowledge of public policy is unlikely, then it is even more unrealistic to expect voters to attain the understanding needed to meet the standards of deliberative democracy.

Some deliberative democrats actually advocate the broadening of government power well beyond its currently extensive levels, so that even more societal decisions could be made by democratic processes. For example, Gutmann and Thompson and (2004, 34–35) argued that democratic control should govern the investment decisions of major corporations. Iris Marion Young (2000) advocated that democratic political processes should control numerous international trade and investment decisions currently made by private firms and consumers. In the European context, Jürgen Habermas (2010) has recently called for a major expansion of the regulatory role of the European Union in order to achieve “European economic governance,” which he claims can be accomplished through a “a public deliberative process leading to the formation of a democratic will.”

Even when these extensions of democracy do not require democratic participation by the entire polity but merely by affected “stakeholders” (such as the shareholders and employees of particular corporations), they would significantly increase the knowledge burden voters have to meet. Those voters who were involved in deliberations over corporate policy would have to acquire knowledge about the corporation’s activities in addition to the information they need to deliberate over the government policies that are considered by the entire electorate. If these expansions of government or others like them were actually adopted, they would make it even more difficult for voters to attain the knowledge levels necessary for deliberative democracy to work. There is therefore a tradeoff between the quantity of decisions made by the democratic process and their deliberative quality.

Some scholars argue that political ignorance is not a major problem because voters who possess very little knowledge can still make good decisions by relying on information shortcuts (e.g. Popkin 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Wittman 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).<sup>13</sup> For example, the shortcut of “retrospective voting” might enable voters who know little about specific policies to make reasonably good voting choices simply by voting against incumbents whenever things seem to be going badly, and re-electing them when times seem to be good (Fiorina 1981). Similarly, the “party ID” shortcut might help voters who know little about individual candidates judge their performance by considering what they know about the performance of a candidate’s political party as a whole (Aldrich 1995).

Elsewhere, I have argued that such shortcuts are not sufficient to offset political ignorance even relative to the demands of fairly modest normative theories of democratic participation (Somin 1998, 1999, 2004c, and 2010, ch. 4). In general, *effective* use of shortcuts requires a pre-existing base of background knowledge that many voters lack. For example, effective retrospective voting requires voters to know which issues are under the control of which policymakers, and whether or not the incumbents' policies on those issues have made things better or worse than they would be otherwise (Murakami 2008; Somin 2010, ch. 4). Otherwise, voters can easily end up rewarding or punishing incumbents for events that are outside their control, such as swings in the world economy (Leigh 2009), while ignoring other matters that the incumbents *can* affect.

Even if shortcuts do sometimes enable voters to achieve a modest degree of knowledge and competence, they fall far short of reaching the standards demanded by deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy requires voters to go beyond making good rule-of-thumb judgments at the ballot box. Rather, it demands that collective choices “should be made in a deliberative way” (Cohen 1997, 74) and “for the right types of reasons” (Bohman 1996, 25). Deliberation is suppose to go beyond mere “aggregation” of voter preferences and instead involve a “dialogue” where citizens make arguments based on strong evidence and “consider their opponents’ positions on the merits” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 16–17, 20). It is difficult to see how such a dialogue could be accomplished through the use of simple shortcuts that require little or no substantive knowledge on the part of participants.

### III. RATIONAL IRRATIONALITY

Widespread political ignorance is combined with equally prevalent political irrationality. Just as rationally ignorant voters economize on the amount of time and effort they are willing to devote to seeking out political knowledge, they also tend to limit “how rationally they process the information they do have” (Caplan 2001, 3). Economist Bryan Caplan calls this “rational irrationality” (*ibid.*; Caplan 2007).

Because there is so little incentive to learn political information merely to become a better voter, most of the political knowledge we do acquire is learned for other reasons. The theory of rational ignorance

does not predict that citizens will make no effort to acquire political information; it merely posits that any such effort is likely to be motivated by considerations other than the desire to become a “better” voter. Some follow politics because they find it entertaining or because, like sports fans, they enjoy “rooting” for their political “team” (Somin 2006). For example, strong supporters of President Obama enjoy cheering on his achievements, while equally dedicated opponents take similar pleasure in emphasizing the president’s failures. Similarly, many people may acquire political information for the purpose of confirming their pre-existing views or indulging a sense of superiority over people with differing opinions.

There is nothing inherently objectionable about people who acquire political information for reasons other than becoming a better voter. It is perfectly understandable if people wish to follow politics for any number of reasons. Problems arise, however, when these motives conflict with the goal of rational evaluation of information for the purpose of making informed political decisions. To take one such case, people who acquire information for the purpose of cheering on their political “team” or confirming their existing views are likely to overvalue information that confirms those views and undervalue or ignore anything that cuts against them. Extensive evidence suggests that this is in fact the way most committed partisans evaluate political information.<sup>14</sup> Experiments show that political partisans not only reject new information casting doubt on their beliefs, but sometimes actually respond by believing in them even more fervently (Bullock 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2009). Thus, a recent study found that conservatives presented with evidence showing that U.S. forces failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were actually strengthened in their pre-existing view that WMDs were present (Nyhan and Reifler 2009, 11–15). Similarly, liberals confronted with evidence that 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry had incorrectly claimed that the Bush Administration had “banned” stem-cell research persisted in their pre-existing view that the charge was accurate (*ibid.*, 23–24). Similarly, most people discuss political issues only with those who agree with them (Mutz 2006, 29–41). This tendency is most pronounced among “those most knowledgeable about and interested in politics” (*ibid.*, 37), which implies that those who seek out political knowledge the most are not motivated primarily by truth-seeking. If they were, it would make sense to sample a wide variety of sources, possibly placing particular emphasis on those with viewpoints

opposed to one's own. The latter are more likely to expose the truth-seeker to facts and analysis that he has not already considered. As John Stuart Mill ([1869] 1975, 35–51) famously emphasized in *On Liberty*, we are more likely to discover the truth if we consider opposing viewpoints, not merely those that we already agree with.

The implications of rational irrationality for deliberative democracy may be even more troubling than those of rational ignorance. As we have seen, deliberate democrats place great emphasis on deliberators' need to consider each other's opinions "on the merits" (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 20). But if actual voters tend to be close-minded and unwilling to accept opposing evidence, it seems unlikely that many of them can engage in the sort of unbiased dialogue deliberative democrats champion. The data suggest that those most interested in politics tend to be the most committed to their ideologies, and therefore the least likely to engage in open-minded deliberation (Mutz 2006). Deliberation between them could simply result in the repetition of talking points. At worst, it might lead to increased polarization as each side digs in on its positions.

A second challenge rational irrationality poses for deliberative democracy is that it reduces the quality of the decisions made by deliberative processes. If individuals engaged in democratic deliberation often subordinate truth-seeking to other considerations, they may well end up making poor policy decisions. To take just one possibility, they could adopt a bad policy because the arguments for it comport with their pre-existing prejudices or are otherwise emotionally satisfying (Pincione and Tesón 2006; Caplan 2007).

For example, voters often suffer from "anti-foreign" and nationalistic biases that lead them to support protectionism, immigration restrictions, and other policies based on blaming foreigners and immigrants for domestic problems (Caplan 2007, 36–39, 58–59). Such policies are often economically ruinous to natives, immigrants, and foreigners alike (*ibid.*). But they are emotionally satisfying to those who prefer to blame foreigners for their economic difficulties. Support for equally irrational racist policies persisted for decades, in part for similar reasons (Somin 2010, ch. 5). Rationally irrational voters have little incentive to re-examine such views objectively and recognize their flaws.

Rational irrationality can and does influence policy even under traditional "aggregative" democracy where most voters engage in little or no deliberation. Deliberation, however, can exacerbate such dangers.

When people enter into a deliberative setting, they have little choice but to spend their time discussing the political issues in question. Given the insignificance of their individual votes to the outcome, however, they also have little incentive to consider them in a rational, unbiased manner. Thus, they will be tempted to derive whatever utility they can from the situation by focusing on those arguments that provide psychic gratification because they are entertaining or conform to their pre-existing prejudices. This may be one reason why they tend to become more committed to their views instead of re-assessing them when presented with opposing evidence in experimental settings (Bullock 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2009).

By forcing voters to spend more time discussing political issues, deliberation might lead them to engage in more irrational “reasoning” than they would otherwise. In this way, increased deliberation might actually make the problem of rational irrationality *worse* than it would be otherwise, and thereby reduce the quality of political decisions.<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, evidence from “deliberative polls” conducted by James Fishkin and his colleagues shows that interpersonal deliberation leads some people to change their minds about the issue in question (Fishkin 1991 and 1997; Sunstein 2003, 163–64). However, those changing their minds were usually people less committed to their views in the first place (*ibid.*). Moreover, “on many particular issues, the effect of deliberation was to create an increase in the intensity with which people held their pre-existing convictions” (Sunstein 2003, 163–64).

In addition to processing information in ways that provide internal psychological gratification, people also often try to express opinions that conform to social expectations and seek to avoid negative reactions from other members of the community (Kuran 1995; Sunstein 2003). For example, people in a socially conservative community may hesitate to express approval of gay marriage for fear of alienating antigay friends, family members, and neighbors. Those in politically liberal settings such as university campuses often hesitate to criticize liberal policies such as affirmative action (Kuran 1995, 310–25). Even in a relatively tolerant liberal democratic society, dissenters often hesitate to openly endorse unpopular views; they instead find it easier to pretend to agree with the majority. Such “preference falsification”<sup>16</sup> can easily lead people to reject powerful arguments against socially approved positions, or even to refrain from voicing them in the first place.

Preference falsification can infect many kinds of political processes. But it is an especially serious danger in a deliberative democracy, where citizens have to engage in open dialogue on political issues and therefore take positions (or refrain from doing so) in a setting where other members of the community can observe them. Under “aggregative” democracy, by contrast, voters usually make decisions and access information in more private settings and therefore may face less pressure to conform.

As with rational ignorance, political irrationality would not necessarily be eliminated even among voters with altruistic motives. Because of the insignificance of an individual vote, the rational altruist would not devote great time and effort to combating her political biases and rationally evaluating the political information she knows.

Finally, rational irrationality reduces the chance that political ignorance might be offset through the use of information shortcuts, thereby enabling voters to approach the knowledge levels required by deliberative–democratic ideals. Shortcut theories implicitly assume that voters choose shortcuts on the basis of their effectiveness in exposing the truth. However, the logic of rational irrationality suggests that voters often actually select shortcuts based on their entertainment value, conformity to pre-existing convictions, or ability to provide other psychological gratification unrelated to truth. This helps explain, for example, why most people get political information primarily from sources they agree with politically rather than looking more broadly (Somin 2010, ch. 4).<sup>17</sup>

In sum, rational irrationality significantly weakens the case for the feasibility of deliberative democracy. In some cases, it suggests that deliberation is likely to make things worse.

#### IV. CAN EDUCATION SAVE DEMOCRACY?

Education is the most intuitively obvious way to increase political knowledge to the levels required by deliberative democracy. As Gutmann and Thompson (2004, 35) put it, “publicly supported and publicly accredited schools should teach future citizens the knowledge and skills needed for democratic deliberation.”

Unfortunately, this solution is not nearly as easy as it may at first seem. As already noted, massive increases in education levels have failed to

augment political knowledge significantly in the United States. This failure occurred despite widespread agreement on the ideal that public schools are supposed to prepare students for political participation. It seems unlikely that the education system can be reformed in such a way as to radically increase voter knowledge in the foreseeable future. Even if schools did a better job of transmitting civic knowledge than they do at present, it is still unlikely that they could impart enough information to teach students to understand the full range of the many complex issues addressed by modern government.<sup>18</sup> This is especially improbable when we recall that deliberative democracy requires considerably deeper understanding than do less ambitious theories of democratic participation. Education has so far failed to meet the informational burdens that would be imposed on citizens by the implementation of even these relatively modest theories.

Furthermore, governments can and often do use public education to indoctrinate students in their own preferred ideologies rather than neutrally convey useful information. Historically, rulers have often used the public education system to promote nationalism and loyalty to the incumbent political regime (see, e.g., Weber 1976). In the United States and Britain, public education emerged in large part because state governments sought to indoctrinate Catholic immigrants in Protestant-dominated public schools (Somin 2010, ch. 7).

The dangers of such indoctrination suggest that public education may often exacerbate the problems of political ignorance and irrationality rather than cure it. Governments can just as easily teach students false and irrational political ideologies as true and logical ones. To be sure, a well-informed public might use its electoral clout to compel public officials to provide high-quality political education that minimizes pernicious indoctrination. However, the very political ignorance and irrationality that education is intended to cure make it very difficult for voters to monitor government's provision of civic education.<sup>19</sup>

Even if education succeeds in teaching students all the factual knowledge they need to take part in a deliberative democracy, the problem of rational irrationality would still remain. Voters would continue to have little incentive to evaluate the information they know in an unbiased way. And they would still be susceptible to the dangers of conformity and preference falsification.

Finally, even if public education succeeds in preparing students to deliberate about the political issues that are prevalent at the time they

complete high school, it is unlikely to cover all the issues likely to arise during the remaining decades of the high-school graduate's lifetime as an eligible voter. Because of rational ignorance, voters would still have little incentive to update and replenish their stock of issue knowledge, which would tend to become obsolete over time.

## V. LEARNING THROUGH STRUCTURED DELIBERATION

Other deliberative democrats argue that information problems can be overcome by incentivizing voters to participate in structured deliberation. For example, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2004) propose that all citizens be given the opportunity to take part in a "deliberation day" each election year. Their plan involves having voters listen to presentations on major policy issues by representatives of major political parties, and then engage in discussion about them.<sup>20</sup> Ethan Leib (2004, 14–17) proposes a system of structured deliberation through a "popular branch" of government that consists of 525 randomly selected eligible voters meeting in groups of 15 to enact laws on various issues. Other scholars have proposed similar ideas (e.g., Zurn 2007, 325–39).

Some of these proposals are not without merit. They could potentially produce useful deliberation over particular issues. However, they have three common weaknesses that make it unlikely that they can overcome the knowledge barriers to deliberative democracy.

First and foremost, it is unlikely that any such system can inform voters about more than a small fraction of the numerous complex issues addressed by modern government. For voters to reach the knowledge levels demanded by deliberative democracy on more than a handful of issues, they would essentially have to become full-time deliberators. Even that might not be sufficient, since even experts who devote their careers to studying a given issue may not have much knowledge of public policy outside that area of professional competence.

Second, structured deliberative procedures offer numerous opportunities for manipulation by political leaders and interest groups. Someone—presumably government officials—would have to set the agenda for the citizen-deliberators, determine which political parties or other activist groups are allowed to make presentations to them, and decide what the voting procedures would be. There will be obvious incentives for political leaders and lobbyists to skew the rules in their own favor.

This is especially likely when, as noted above, deliberative sessions can cover only a small fraction of the full range of possible policy issues and arguments for opposing viewpoints.

Consider, for example, the possibility of structured public deliberation over health-care policy. Which experts, political parties, and interest groups should be allowed to make presentations to the deliberators? Should interest groups representing doctors, nurses, insurance companies, hospital administrators, medical researchers, or many other conceivable parties be among them? What about policy experts such as health-care economists, sociologists, and public-health specialists? Which policy options should the deliberators consider, other than the status quo? Should they include a single-payer system, “managed” care, market-based medical provision, and hybrid systems such as Singapore’s?<sup>21</sup> Other potential models such as Canada, Britain, and France—all of which differ substantially from each other—could also potentially be considered. Indeed, each were brought up during the health care debate in the U.S. in 2009–10.

It is essential to recognize, similarly, that any new deliberation systems would probably have to be enacted by incumbent legislators. They, in turn, will have strong incentives to structure the deliberative programs in ways that benefit their own political parties, ideologies, and interest groups.

Finally, even if structured deliberative forums succeed in greatly increasing citizen knowledge, they are unlikely to overcome the problem of rational irrationality. Even if presented with a wide range of objective information on the policy issues in question, deliberators are still likely to evaluate that information in ways that are biased and often illogical.

It would be wrong to reject structured deliberation proposals entirely. But it is unlikely that they can even come close to overcoming the information barriers to deliberative democracy.

## VI. THE LOCALIST ALTERNATIVE

A third potential solution to the voter knowledge problems of deliberative democracy is to transfer power to relatively small local governments. Each such government would have a much smaller electorate than do state or national governments. Individual voters would therefore have a greater chance of exercising influence over policy

decisions, which would give them stronger incentives both to become informed and to engage in rational analysis of what they know. As Patrick Deneen (2008, 71) suggests, deliberative democracy may be more feasible “on a small scale where we are likely to know and care about our fellow citizens, where personal sacrifice is not too divorced or distant from our experience of public weal. . . . In such a setting, citizens are likely to be deeply invested in the outcome of political discussions; and their influence on the outcomes of those decisions is more evident, and the effects more immediate” (see also Young 2000, 45–46).<sup>22</sup>

There is some evidence that political knowledge and citizen participation in local politics are greater in small communities than in large ones (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Mansbridge 1983; Bryan 2004; Hills forthcoming, 20–22). This suggests that deliberative localism is not simply a pipe dream. There are, however, two serious shortcomings to the localist solution to the problems of deliberative democracy: It falls far short of eliminating incentive for rational ignorance and irrationality, and it fails to consider the procedure for choosing rules governing intercommunity relations.

Rational ignorance and irrationality are likely to be serious problems even in relatively small jurisdictions. In a city of merely 10,000 people, for example, the odds against a single vote being decisive are still thousands to one. This is better than in a national election, but far short of being high enough to incentivize many people to acquire enough knowledge to meet the standards of deliberative democracy.

Even under the “ideal conditions” of town-meeting democracy in small Vermont towns, where there are only a few hundred eligible voters and everyone has the right to speak at meetings, only an average of 20 percent of registered voters attend the annual meetings, and only 7 percent actually speak (Bryan 2004, 280). This is a more impressive degree of participation than we see in some other areas of political life (*ibid.*, 281–84),<sup>23</sup> but it is still quite low. Acquiring substantial political knowledge requires significantly more time and effort than attendance at a meeting once per year.

It is possible that voter incentives to acquire knowledge about and participate in local government would increase if such local governments had more power, thereby making their decisions more consequential (Bryan and McLaughry 1989; Deneen 2008). However, local governments in the United States already have great power over such important issues as education, zoning, crime control, and housing policy. These

policies have a tremendous effect on the life prospects of people's children and the value of their homes, which for most Americans are their most valuable assets (Fischel 2001). Yet this has not proved sufficient to stimulate voters to achieve the levels of knowledge and participation demanded by deliberative democracy on these issues. Even if the power of local government were significantly expanded, it seems unlikely that we would achieve more than a modest increase in political knowledge. From the individual voter's perspective, the increased stakes in local elections would still have to be discounted by the low probability of casting a decisive ballot.

In some respects, the problem of rational irrationality could actually be worse with deliberative democracy in small communities than in larger ones. In a small jurisdiction, deliberation takes place in front of people "we are likely to know and care about" (Deneen 2008, 71). Other things equal, this would make a deliberator more reluctant to express opinions that might cause offense to listeners or damage the speaker's reputation in the community. Thus pressure for conformity and preference falsification greatly diminishes in large, impersonal elections.

The second drawback of the localist approach to deliberative democracy is the problem of managing intercommunity relations. In the modern world, even large cities and regions have extensive economic and environmental contacts with other areas. They generally cannot prosper or even feed their populations without them. Such interdependency is even more prevalent in the case of small communities.

Almost by definition, local deliberative institutions cannot govern large-scale intercommunity relations. But if such issues are left to higher-level authorities such as national governments, many of society's most important political decisions will not be made by the sort of deliberation that localists maintain can best be done in small-scale communities.<sup>24</sup>

There is a particularly painful tradeoff here for localist deliberative democrats. The smaller the community in question, the greater the incentives for voters to become well informed about its policies because they will have a greater chance of influencing political outcomes. In principle, a *very* small community, with only 100 or 200 deliberators, could almost completely avoid the problem of rational ignorance. But it would be so small as to be unable to control most of the really important policy issues affecting its citizens. The smaller a community is, the more

dependent it is likely to be on other communities and the fewer important decisions it can make on its own.

\*                    \*                    \*

Deliberative democracy is in some ways an attractive idea. Unfortunately, it is also almost impossible to realize, given the problems of political ignorance and irrationality. These difficulties are deepened by the immense size and complexity of modern government, which makes it almost impossible to imagine how voter knowledge can be raised to a level sufficient to meet the demands of deliberative democracy.

These problems suggest that those who find the deliberative ideal attractive may wish to consider the potential benefits of reducing the role of government in society and leaving more decisions to private-sector institutions. In his classic 1945 article “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” F. A. Hayek pointed out the advantages of the price system as a tool for assembling and conveying information (Hayek 1945). More recently, scholars such as Mark Pennington (2003) and forthcoming, ch. 3) and Guido Pincione and Fernando Tesón (2006) have underscored other informational advantages of private-sector institutions relative to democratic government.<sup>25</sup> Here, I briefly consider two that are particularly relevant to the informational issues raised by deliberative democracy.

First and most important, private-sector decision makers have much stronger incentives to both acquire information and evaluate it rationally. Unlike voters, private-sector consumers, producers, and civil-society organizations usually make decisions in which their individual choices are likely to be decisive. When private actors choose where to live, whether to buy a product, or whether to contribute to a charity,<sup>26</sup> they know they have a good chance of actually implementing whatever decision they make. That gives them strong incentives to acquire relevant information and reduce the impact of irrational biases on their thinking.

Private-sector actors obviously suffer from both ignorance and irrationality as well. Given that information and rational reasoning are costly in terms of time and effort, no one will ever attain either perfect information or perfectly rational evaluation of the information they acquire. The relevant point here is a comparative one: *Relative to voters*, private-sector actors are likely to be both better informed and more

rational in their use of the knowledge they possess. They are therefore likely to engage in higher-quality deliberation.

Second, transferring more decisions to the private sector reduces the range of issues that each individual citizen must consider. When power is concentrated in public democratic institutions, the same voters must establish rules affecting millions of different people and transactions. For example, if voters decide on a common set of regulatory quality standards for cars, the standards they choose will apply to millions of cars purchased by a wide range of buyers with differing preferences and interests. By contrast, a consumer buying a car in the marketplace need only decide what attributes are important to him or her alone—a much easier decision that requires far less information. Such “unbundling” makes it easier to make decisions in a way that is rational and well-informed.

It is unlikely that either private- or public-sector decision making can fully achieve the high standards demanded by theories of deliberative democracy. But private-sector institutions will often come closer to doing so than democratic government. Moreover, reducing the size and complexity of government may make it easier for rationally ignorant voters to acquire the information they need to monitor those issue areas that remain under government control (Somin 1998, 436–37). In this way, reductions in government power can improve deliberation in the public sector as well as in the private sector.

To some extent, government institutions might be able to exploit the same types of informational advantages as the private sector. Where government power can be decentralized to relatively small jurisdictions, citizens can “vote with their feet” for the jurisdiction they wish to live in, choosing the one with the best policies for their needs. Unlike ballot-box voters, “foot voters” have little reason to be either rationally ignorant or irrational. Their decisions as to which jurisdiction to live in are individually decisive and not dependent on the outcome of a majority vote in which they have little say (Somin forthcoming).

For this reason, advocates of localist deliberative democracy may have a point after all, though not for the reasons they themselves stress. However, political decentralization is only a partial antidote to rational ignorance and irrationality. For example, many are unable to effectively vote with their feet because of excessive moving costs, family roots, and employment immobility. Private-sector institutions are often superior to foot voting in a federal system because the costs of

switching from one service provider to another are usually lower than changing one's locale.

The deliberative advantages of private institutions are far from the only considerations that should be weighed in determining the proper size and scope of government. In many situations, they are also not the most important. For example, it is possible that some public goods, such as national defense, a large-scale legal system, and pollution control over wide geographic areas can be provided only by government. In such cases, the deliberative shortcomings of government might be an acceptable price to pay for the provision of essential services that the private sector is unlikely to produce on its own.

Despite the prevalence of political ignorance, democracy still has important advantages over other forms of government. Even poorly informed voters can punish incumbents for large and obvious abuses and failures, such as losing a war or engaging in mass murder. This feedback mechanism greatly reduces the incidence of such calamities under democratic regimes relative to dictatorships (Somin 2010, ch. 1). Still, a realistic approach to democratic theory must take account of the system's limitations as well as its virtues.

Deliberative democracy is a demanding ideal that we are unlikely to even come close to realizing. The best we can reasonably hope for is to improve the quality of our decisionmaking institutions. In pursuing that objective, we should keep in mind the possibility that the government that governs least may be the one that deliberates best.

#### NOTES

1. For brief or incomplete analyses of these issues, see Pennington 2003, Pincione and Tesón 2006, Pennington 2010 and forthcoming, 50–52. The present article represents a substantial expansion and reworking of arguments I briefly discussed in Somin 1998, 438–42. For a survey of other criticisms of deliberative democracy, see Ryfe 2005.
2. The idea of rational ignorance was first developed by Anthony Downs (1957, ch. 13).
3. For the most famous version of this theory, see Schumpeter 1950; for a recent defense see Posner 2003, reviewed in Somin 2004b.
4. For discussions of such theories see Shapiro 2003 and Somin 2004a.
5. This example draws on Pincione and Tesón 2006, 10–13.
6. For an analysis of the knowledge requirements of the major theories of democratic participation, see Somin 2004a and 2010, ch. 2.

7. Overestimation is likely because some survey respondents are unwilling to admit to ignorance. See Somin 2010, ch. 2.
8. The survey data cited in this paragraph are described in Somin 2010, ch. 2.
9. I survey the relevant data in Somin 2010, ch. 2. See also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991; Nie, et al. 1996; Althaus 2003; and Pew Research Center 2007.
10. Parts of this discussion of rational ignorance and altruism are adapted from Somin 2006.
11. Some might suggest that the same logic would lead rational citizens to abstain from voting in the first place. However, voting is a relatively low-cost activity that takes far less time and energy than acquiring political information. As a result, it is often rational for citizens to vote even if it is not rational for them to make more than a minimal effort to acquire political knowledge (Somin 2006).
12. Data compiled from Department of Commerce 2008, vii–ix.
13. For a survey and critique of the relevant literature see Somin 2010, ch. 4.
14. For a discussion of relevant studies, see Somin 2010, ch. 4; see also Taber and Lodge 2006.
15. This argument is related to, but distinct from, Mark Pennington’s well-taken concern that deliberative democracy might exacerbate social conflict by forcing people to confront each other over disagreements on strongly held values. (Pennington 2010).
16. The term is borrowed from Kuran 1995.
17. I discuss the relationship between rational irrationality and information shortcuts more fully in Somin 2010, ch. 4.
18. See the discussion in Part II.
19. For a more detailed discussion of the limits of education as a tool for increasing political knowledge, see Somin 2010, ch. 7.
20. For more detailed critiques of the “deliberation day” proposal, see Somin 2010 ch. 7, and Pincione and Tesón 2006, 95–97.
21. The Singapore health care system uses a combination of market incentives and carefully targeted government subsidies and public health measures to achieve health outcomes comparable to those of the United States and Western Europe at a small fraction of the cost. See Ghesquiere 2006, 67–70.
22. For a recent discussion and critique of such theories, see Parkinson 2007.
23. More impressive, when we consider that attending these meetings and speaking at them requires considerably more time and effort than do activities such as voting, which many more people engage in (Bryan 2004, 281–84).
24. For a closely related criticism of localist deliberative democracy, see Pennington, forthcoming, 48–49.
25. See also Somin 2010, ch. 5.
26. Some contributions to charity are similar to voting in the sense that any individual’s contribution is unlikely to make any difference to the outcome. In many cases, however, an individual contribution can make a big difference for at least some of the specific beneficiaries of the charity in question. For example, an individual who donates a few hundred dollars to a charity helping the poor in the Third World can make a major difference in the life of a single family. For

this reason, individual charitable donations are often far more likely to have a decisive effect than individual votes.

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