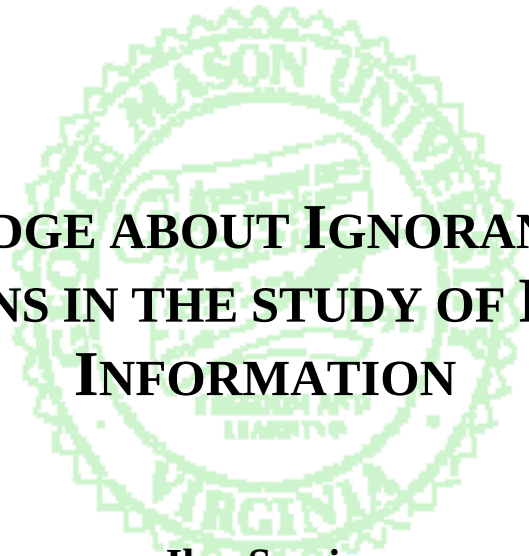

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT IGNORANCE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF POLITICAL INFORMATION

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Critical Review, Vol. 18, Nos. 1-3, 2006, pp. 255-278
(Special Issue: Democratic Competence)
(Symposium on Political Knowledge)

[NOTE: References for all articles in Vol. 18, Nos. 1-3, 2006, can be found on pp. 331-360 therein]

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ABSTRACT: *For decades, scholars have recognized that most citizens have little or no political knowledge, and that it is in fact rational for the average voter to make little or no effort to acquire political information. Rational ignorance is fully compatible with the so-called "paradox of voting" because it will often be rational for citizens to vote, but irrational for them to become well informed. Furthermore, rational ignorance leads not only to inadequate acquisition of political information, but also to ineffective use of the information that citizens do possess. The combination of these two problems has fundamental implications for a variety of issues in public policy and international affairs.*

More than 40 years after the pioneering work of Philip Converse (1964), political ignorance remains as widespread as ever. According to surveys conducted during the closely contested 2004 presidential election, some 70 percent of Americans were unaware of the passage of President George W. Bush's prescription drug bill, the most expensive new government program in 40 years and by far the most important domestic legislation of his administration (Somin 2004a, 5–6). Meanwhile, some 58 percent admitted that they had heard little or nothing about the controversial USA Patriot Act, and 61 percent did not realize

Critical Review 18 (2006), nos. 1–3. ISSN 0891-3811. www.criticalreview.com.

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that there had been increases in domestic spending under the Bush administration that had contributed to the budget deficit (ibid., 6)—even as the Bush administration had presided over spending increases far larger than any that had occurred in decades (Bartlett 2006; Council of Economic Advisers 2006, 376).

Such examples—and many others like them[1]—confirm the continuing validity of Converse's conclusion that there is a large gap in political knowledge and sophistication "between elites and masses," one that amounts to a "continental shelf" separating the two groups ([1964], 2006, 65).

While nearly all public-opinion scholars agree on the existence of deep and widespread political ignorance, there is much less agreement about its causes, significance, and implications. Even after more than four decades of research, some of those implications have only begun to be explored. Part I of this essay considers the degree and causes of ignorance, and the ways in which our understanding of it has been extended by later research. I argue that Converse's findings and those of his successors lend support to the view that ignorance is rational. They also indicate that "information shortcuts," while often useful, cannot fully make up for lack of basic political knowledge. Indeed, some shortcuts may be actively misleading in the absence of necessary contextual knowledge. A further complication—one that was at the heart of Converse's work, but has been ignored by many later scholars—is that we must focus not just on the amount of information voters possess, but also on their motivation to use it effectively. The theory of rational ignorance implies not only that voters will acquire little or no political knowledge, but also that they will make little effort to use the knowledge they do have in a consistent and effective manner. It is not just that they might be apathetic; far worse, they sometimes use their knowledge in a way that increases the danger of making serious errors.

Part II briefly considers some of the normative and institutional implications of the debate over political ignorance. Unfortunately, empirical scholars of political ignorance have mostly worked in isolation from the literature on institutional development and normative democratic theory. The latter literature, in turn, has generally ignored the problem of political knowledge. Bridging this gap should be an important part of our future research agenda. Even a preliminary analysis suggests that political ignorance has important implications for institutional debates over federalism, the size and scope of government, and judicial review, among other subjects. Similarly, widespread ignorance poses a major

challenge to normative theories of democratic participation, especially those such as "deliberative democracy" that require extensive voter knowledge and sophistication.

Finally, Part III addresses some important international implications of political ignorance. We know relatively little about political knowledge in nondemocratic societies, particularly those of the Arab Middle East, whose public opinion the United States seeks to influence as part of the War on Terror. Survey data suggest that political ignorance may play an important role in stimulating anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Ignorance and misconceptions may be even more widespread in closed societies, where the press is under government control, than in democracies.

I. CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL IGNORANCE

Converse and other early students of political ignorance (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960) generally made little effort to explain its causes. This omission led some to conclude that they portrayed voters as simply "stupid." In reality, however, his (and subsequent) findings that most citizens know little about politics, and fail to make good use of the information they do have, is entirely consistent with rational, intelligent behavior.

The Rationality of Political Ignorance

Even before Converse, the economist Anthony Downs had formulated the theory of "rational ignorance" (Downs 1957, ch. 13). An individual voter has virtually no chance of influencing the outcome of a mass election—less than 1 in 100 million in the case of a modern U.S. presidential election (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). As a result, the incentive to accumulate political knowledge is vanishingly small, so long as the only reason for doing so is to cast a "better" vote. Thus, even highly intelligent and perfectly rational citizens could choose to devote little or no effort to the acquisition of political knowledge.

We cannot know for certain that the rational-ignorance hypothesis is correct. But the available evidence strongly supports it. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the fact that political knowledge levels have remained roughly stable at very low levels for decades, despite massive increases in education levels and in the availability of information

through the media and now the Internet (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Smith 1989; Bennett 1989; Althaus 2003).

Some resist the hypothesis of rational ignorance on the ground that it allegedly also predicts that citizens should choose not to vote (e.g., Friedman 1998 and 2005).[2] However, as Derek Parfit (1984, 73-75) has demonstrated theoretically, and Aaron Edlin et al. (2003) have supported with empirical evidence, the decision to vote is rational so long as the voter perceives a significant difference between candidates and cares even slightly about the welfare of fellow citizens, as well as his own. A simple calculation, derived from Parfit's analysis (1984, 74), shows why this is true.

Assume that Uv = the expected utility of voting; Cv = the cost of voting; and D = the expected difference in welfare per person if the voter's preferred candidate defeats her opponent. Let us further assume that this is a presidential election in a nation with 300 million people; that the voter's ballot has only a 1 in 100 million chance of being decisive (Riker and Ordeshook 1968); and that the voter values the welfare of his fellow citizens an average of 1000 times less than his own. Thus, we get the following equation:

Equation 1: The Utility of Voting

$$D^{\star}(300 \text{ million}/1000)/(100 \text{ million}) - Cv = Uv.$$

If we assume that Cv is $10 (a reasonable proxy for the cost of voting) and that D is $5000 (this can incorporate monetary equivalents of noneconomic benefits as well as actual income increases), then Uv equals $5, a small but real positive expected utility.

To be sure, actual voters are unlikely to calculate the costs and benefits of voting this precisely, but they might make an intuitive judgment incorporating very rough estimates of D and C. Furthermore, the fact that voting is a low-cost, low-benefit activity ensures that there is little benefit to engaging in precise calculations such as these, so voters might rationally choose to go with a default option of voting and forego any detailed analysis (Aldrich 1993). The cost of the latter could itself easily outweigh the benefit of saving time and money on voting (Moe 1980, 70–72).

By contrast, the acquisition of political information in any significant quantity is a vastly more difficult and time-consuming enterprise than is voting itself. Assume that Upi = the utility of acquiring sufficient po-

litical information to make a "correct" decision, and Cpi = the cost of acquiring political information. Thus:

Equation 2: The Utility of Acquiring Political Information for Voting Purposes

$$D^{\star}(300 \text{ million}/1000)/(100 \text{ million}) - \text{Cpi} = \text{Upi}.$$

If we conservatively estimate Cpi at $100 by assuming that the voter need only expend 10 hours to acquire and learn the necessary information, while suffering opportunity costs of just $10 per hour, then the magnitude of D would have to be nearly seven times greater—$33,333 per citizen—in order for the voter to choose to make the necessary expenditure on information acquisition. It is unlikely that many otherwise ignorant voters will perceive such an enormous potential difference between the opposing candidates as to invest even the equivalent of $100 in information acquisition. And this theoretical prediction is consistent with the empirical observation that most citizens in fact know very little about politics and public policy, but do vote.

The analysis changes only slightly if the voter does not care about the welfare of the entire nation, but only about that of a subset, such as her racial or ethnic group. Alternatively, she may care about everyone in the nation to at least some extent, but value the utility of some groups more than others. Similarly, it may be that the voter believes that her preferred candidates' policies will benefit some groups more than others. In each case, we can still calculate the utility increase to whatever groups she does care about and discount it by the extent to which she cares about them less than about herself, and by the likelihood of her vote being decisive. As long as the resulting number is greater than the cost of voting, it will still be rational to go to the polls. At the same time, the cost of acquiring information is still likely to make being well informed irrational.

For example, Equation 3 demonstrates the result that obtains if Equation 1 is modified to assume a voter who cares far more about the welfare of a subgroup of the population numbering 50 million than about the rest of the public, valuing members of the group five times as much as the rest.

Equation 3: The Utility of Voting, Assuming Unequal Valuation of Different Groups' Welfare

$$D^{\star}((250 \text{ million}/1000) + 50 \text{ million}/200)/(100 \text{ million}) - \text{Cv} = \text{Uv}.$$

In this example, Uv will turn out to be $8.33, a slightly higher figure than in Equation 1. At the same time, it would still be irrational for the voter to pay the costs of becoming adequately informed. Plugging the new estimates into Equation 2, the per-person difference in welfare would have to be over $20,000 in order to justify a decision to pay the price of becoming informed.

As with the decision to vote itself, we need not assume that individual voters make a detailed and precise calculation about the costs and benefits of information acquisition. They probably instead simply have an intuitive sense that there is little or no benefit to making a major effort to increase their knowledge about politics. Most people similarly assume without precise calculation that there is little benefit to acquiring information about such subjects as theoretical physics or cell biology, though these bodies of knowledge also have great value to society as a whole.

In order to make the sorts of decisions outlined in Equations 1 to 3, voters will have to have some minimal amount of information suggesting to them the magnitude of the difference between the opposing parties or candidates. However, many citizens will acquire small amounts of political information incidentally as a result of their jobs or daily-life activities (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991). While such information may often be misleading (Somin 1998), it can potentially give voters an idea of the degree to which one candidate differs from another.[3]

If political ignorance is rational and most voters choose not to learn much about politics for that reason, widespread ignorance is a phenomenon that democracies will probably have to live with for the foreseeable future. The challenge for democracy is to find a way to minimize the harm that political ignorance can cause.

The Rationality of Illogical Information Use

Contrary to some misunderstandings (e.g., Friedman 2005), however, the theory of rational ignorance does *not* predict that voters will choose not to acquire any information at all. Rather it predicts that they will acquire very little or no information *for purposes of voting* (Somin 2004b). However, some voters will acquire information for other reasons. Obviously, scholars, politicians, political activists, journalists, and others have professional reasons for being informed about political de-

velopments. However, such professional consumers of political information are only a tiny fraction of the population. Far more common are those who acquire political knowledge because they find it interesting (ibid.). There are not enough such people to eliminate widespread political ignorance, but they do nonetheless form by far the largest bloc of relatively well-informed voters.

A useful analogy is to sports fans. Fans who acquire extensive knowledge of their favorite teams and players do not do so because they can thereby influence the outcome of games. They do it because it increases the enjoyment they get from rooting for their favorite teams. But if many of the citizens who acquire significant amounts of political knowledge do so primarily for reasons other than becoming a better voter, it is possible that they will acquire the knowledge that is of little use for voting, or will fail to use the knowledge they do have in the right way.

Here again, a sports analogy may be helpful. Committed Red Sox fans who passionately root against the Yankees are unlikely to evaluate the evidence about these teams objectively. The authors of one recent history of the Red Sox and Yankees note that they chose not to write "a fair and balanced look at the Red Sox-Yankees 'rivalry,'" because "neither author of this book wanted to represent the Yankees [sic] point of view. . . . Neither of us could bring ourselves to say enough complimentary things about [the Yankees] to fill the back of a matchbox, let alone half a book" (Nowlin and Prime 2004, 4). These writers probably differ from other committed fans more in their awareness of their own attitudes than in having such attitudes in the first place. Many Yankees fans no doubt feel the same way about the Red Sox. Similarly, Democratic partisans who hate George W. Bush, and Republicans who reflexively support him against all criticism, might well want to acquire information in order to augment the experience of cheering on their preferred political "team." If this is indeed their goal, neither group is likely to evaluate Bush's performance in office objectively or accurately.

This intuition is confirmed by studies showing that people tend to use new information to reinforce their preexisting views on political issues, while discounting evidence that runs counter to them (e.g., Lord, et al. 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006). Although some scholars view such bias as potentially irrational behavior (Taber and Lodge 2006), it is perfectly rational if the goal is not to get at the "truth" of a given issue in order to be a better voter, but to enjoy the psychic benefits of being a political "fan." Rationally ignorant voters may limit not only the

amount of information they acquire but also "how rationally they process the information they do have" (Caplan 2001, 5). To put it a different way, such citizens' mode of processing information may be rational for purposes of psychic gratification, but irrational for purposes of improving the quality of their votes. The latter will rarely be the main goal of information acquisition, because there is too little chance that achieving it will have any impact on electoral outcomes.

This conjecture is strengthened by a recent study showing that the most knowledgeable voters tend to be more biased in their evaluation of new evidence than those with less prior political information (Taber and Lodge 2006). If those who acquire political knowledge do so in order to cast "better" votes, such a result would be difficult to explain. But if, as the rational ignorance hypothesis implies, the main goal is to enjoy psychic benefits similar to those available to sports fans, the greater bias of the more politically knowledgeable is perfectly rational. The fact that they acquired more knowledge in the past suggests that they value the "fan" experience more than those who acquired less; thus, it is not at all surprising that they tend to be more close-minded in their evaluation of new information, because acknowledging that the other side may have a good argument would diminish their psychic gratification.

The Rationality of Using Inaccurate Shortcuts

The main argument of those scholars who reject the view that political ignorance is a serious problem is that lack of knowledge can be offset by the use of "information shortcuts," or heuristics.[4] For example, the shortcut of party identification enables voters to decide between candidates about whom they know little by relying on the "brand names" of their political parties, which are associated with a more or less standard set of positions (e.g., Aldrich 1995). Alternatively, they can follow voting cues from "opinion leaders" who share their values and are better informed than they are (e.g., Converse 1990; Zaller 1992; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Voters can also economize on information by engaging in "retrospective voting": supporting the incumbents if their performance in office has been good, and opposing them if the results of their policies have been poor (e.g., Schumpeter 1950; Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Posner 2003).

One problem with the various shortcut arguments is that they un-

derestimate the amount of contextual information necessary to use these heuristics effectively. For example, the retrospective voting shortcut is effective only if the voter at least knows (1) which officials are responsible for which policies, (2) what effects those policies had on the issues with which she is concerned, and possibly (3) whether or not there were superior alternatives to those policies (Somin 1998 and 2004b). Similarly, the "opinion leader" shortcut is problematic if voters do not have good enough information to choose the "right" leaders to follow (Somin 1999). In recent years, even some scholars sympathetic to the shortcut argument have begun to acknowledge that voters need to have at least some substantial knowledge in order to use shortcuts accurately (e.g., Popkin and Dimock 1999; Galston 2001).

Here, I want to emphasize a different shortcoming of shortcuts, one that was partly anticipated in Converse's 1964 paper. Both empirical evidence and the theory of rational ignorance suggest that most voters acquire political knowledge not primarily for the purpose of casting a more informed vote, but for entertainment purposes or to satisfy other psychological needs. If this is so, the shortcuts they use might likewise be chosen to serve nonvoting purposes rather than to cast a "better" ballot. Such voters could rationally choose not to evaluate the political information they have in an objective way: a form of "rational irrationality" (Caplan 2001). Again, such a choice need not involve precise, conscious calculations about the costs and benefits of evaluating political information objectively. As with the decision to vote and the decision not to spend much time acquiring political information, the choice not to put much effort into analyzing political information objectively could simply be the result of an intuitive sense that there is little or no benefit to engaging in such analysis. On the other hand, voters can easily recognize that extensive knowledge acquisition imposes substantial potential costs in terms of time and emotional stress. Thus, a decision not to analyze political information rigorously could be an example of "satisficing" behavior (Simon 1987), where individuals make rational decisions but do not necessarily engage in rigorous calculation.

Such dynamics might often lead voters to use shortcuts that mislead rather than inform. For example, the use of party-label and ideological shortcuts led both voters and even many sophisticated political elites to misperceive President Richard Nixon's policies as conservative (Hoff 1994). Nixon presided over an unprecedented expansion of the welfare state, established affirmative action, created the Environmental Protection Agency, proposed a guaranteed annual income and national health

insurance, and established closer relations with communist China and the USSR. But he was still widely perceived as a right-winger. Similarly, liberals rallied around President Bill Clinton, while conservatives rushed to condemn him, despite his endorsement of conservative policies on free trade, welfare reform, crime control, and other important issues. Liberals defended Clinton and conservatives attacked him in large part because of what he represented on a symbolic level as a "draft dodger" and philanderer, rather than on the basis of his substantive policies (Posner 1999). In both the Nixon and Clinton cases, the desire of liberal and conservative "fans" to rally around their leader or condemn a perceived ideological adversary blinded them to important aspects of the president's policies—despite the fact that information about these policies was readily available.

Today, the hostility of partisan liberal Democrats to President George W. Bush, and the desire of partisan conservative Republicans to defend him, have largely blinded many in both groups to his adoption of numerous liberal domestic policies. To take just one example, Bush has presided over the largest expansion of domestic spending since (ironically) the presidency of Richard Nixon (Bartlett 2006). Thus, partisan opinion has to a large extent ignored an important aspect of Bush's policies.

Among ordinary, less partisan voters, such misperception may be explicable on the simple ground that they do not know about the policies in question (as more than 70 percent didn't know about Bush's aforementioned massive prescription-drug benefit).[5] Among more sophisticated and politically active citizens, however, the problem cannot be explained simply by a lack of specific factual knowledge, but probably also involves a failure to make effective use of the knowledge they do possess.

The same point applies to the use of other information shortcuts. For example, the willingness of voters to follow the views of "opinion leaders" who themselves know little about public policy may in part be explicable by the fact that these leaders are chosen not for their expertise in guiding vote choices, but for their ability to provide entertainment and satisfy emotional needs. For example, one experiment found that most conservative voters are willing to follow the views of Rush Limbaugh on issues of crime control, while liberals are willing to defer to liberal talk-show host Phil Donahue (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). It is, however, highly unlikely that Limbaugh and Donahue actually have any expertise on criminal justice or other complex public-policy issues,

and indeed both are known for making factual errors in their presentations on the air. If voters defer to them as opinion leaders, it is not because of their expertise, but because their programs provide entertainment and emotionally satisfying reinforcement of the audience's preexisting biases. Similar considerations probably explain the willingness of many to pay attention to the political views of such celebrities as rock stars, movie actors, religious leaders, and other figures whose fame derives from sources having little connection to any political expertise.

Of Shortcuts and Ideologues

That even the best-informed voters and political activists might make serious errors in the heuristics they choose was anticipated by Converse in "The Nature of Belief Systems." Although many scholars seem to have missed the distinction,[6] Converse ([1964] 2006, 29–38 differentiated between elite "ideologues" and members of the ideologically ignorant "mass public" not only on the basis of the superior knowledge of the former, but also on the ground that they are more "constrained" in their views about political issues. Ideologues, who adhere to a particular viewpoint such as liberalism or conservatism, tend to consistently accept its dogma across a wide range of seemingly disparate issues. Thus, the "elite . . . show a higher level of constraint" across different policy issues "than th[at] shown by their publics" (ibid., 38). A liberal "ideologue" who knows little about the specifics of the minimum wage or the Iraq War might choose to support the former and oppose the latter simply because such choices seem consistent with the general ideological principles of liberalism; a conservative might take the opposite positions for similar reasons.

As numerous defenders of shortcuts have pointed out, using ideology to choose issue positions in this way might allow citizens to reach relatively well-informed positions on numerous issues with little or no knowledge of the specific policies in question (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Popkin 1991). However, they have largely ignored an important downside: if there is a factual or analytical error in the ideology in question, then adhering to it closely might simply replicate that error across numerous issues. This leaves voting vulnerable to both distortion and manipulation. The result would actually be worse than simply choosing issue positions at random (which at least gives the voter a

50 percent chance of being right each time there is a binary choice), and might well be worse than relying on some form of intuitive, non-ideological criterion for decision.

Converse ([1964] 2006, 62–64) uses the example of Nazi ideology in Germany as one of the cases where the evidence suggests that political elites had greater "constraint" among their issue positions than did rank-and-file voters. Many of the latter may have voted for the Nazis without necessarily knowing much about the details of their ideology. Obviously, however, the Nazi elites' greater ideological consistency, as compared with ordinary Germans, did not mean that the former had a superior grasp of political reality. Even setting aside the moral flaws in the Nazi worldview, the Nazis' ideological emphasis on the supposed benefits of racial purity led them to grossly underestimate the power of racially mixed nations such as the United States and the Soviet Union, and thereby encouraged them to declare war on these powers. The consequences of this ideologicial error included catastrophic defeat for the Nazis and the devastation of Germany (Weinberg 1996). Similarly, the Nazis' flawed, ideologically based view of the world economy caused them to believe that only the conquest of new "*Lebensraum*" could fulfill the needs of Germany's growing population, even as they rejected the (correct) position that those needs could be better provided for through economic growth and international trade (Barkai 1990).

The Nazi case is, of course, an extreme example. But it does highlight the danger that using a flawed ideology as a shortcut to knowledge can multiply errors rather than curtail them. This danger is exacerbated by the fact that Conversean "ideologues" have little incentive to select their ideological shortcuts on the basis of truth-value. For example, Nazi ideology gave German nationalists a satisfying sense of pride in the wake of Germany's defeat in World War I, regardless of how accurate the Nazi worldview actually was.

Recent evidence confirms the possibility that even the most knowledgeable ideologues might systematically pick ideological shortcuts that mislead more than they inform. A study of experts in politics and international relations finds that their predictions of political events are usually no more accurate than would be produced by random chance (Tetlock 2005). Of greater interest for present purposes is the finding that the most inaccurate experts are those that tend to make their predictions on the basis of broad generalizations—that is, experts who rely the most on ideological shortcuts (ibid., chs. 3–5).[7] This result could be interpreted as an indication that the experts in question are irrational.

However, most social-science experts are rewarded not for the accuracy of their predictions but on the basis of the originality and apparent sophistication of their scholarship. Similarly, pundits and other public intellectuals are rewarded for their popularity with readers and viewers, not their prescience (Posner 2002). Few, if any, Conversean "ideologues" can increase either their incomes or their professional standing by improving the accuracy of the ideological shortcuts they use. As a result, they, like ordinary voters, often have little incentive to use shortcuts effectively, and considerable incentive to stick with shortcuts that are often inaccurate.

Implications for the "Miracle of Aggregation"

In addition to arguing for the utility of shortcuts, defenders of the view that widespread political ignorance is not a serious problem have maintained that information problems can be overcome by means of the so-called "miracle of aggregation" (Converse 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992; Wittman 1995). According to this theory, if ignorant voters' errors are randomly distributed, then the "incorrect" ballots cast for candidate A will be canceled out by similar mistakes in favor of Candidate B, and the votes of the relatively well informed will determine electoral outcomes.

This argument has a number of flaws, including the fact that the well-informed minority that determines electoral outcomes in this scenario is likely to be highly unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 1998). On the other side of the ledger, the danger that voters may rationally rely on inaccurate and misleading shortcuts suggests a particularly powerful reason why their errors are unlikely to be random. On many issues, ignorance shows systematic patterns of bias in one direction or another (see, e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Caplan 2002; and Althaus 2003). This is to be expected if voters, including even many relatively knowledgeable "ideologues," are relying on opinion leaders, ideologies, and other shortcuts that have been selected for reasons other than accuracy.

Recent research suggests that even the most sophisticated and highly rational voters may rely on shortcuts that have little relevance to political candidates' likely performance in office. For example, a recent study of elections for the presidency of the American Economics Association shows that the relative physical attractiveness of the rival candidates is a

powerful predictor of which candidate prevails in the voting (Hamermesh 2005). The AEA electorate consists of academic economists who are presumably knowledgeable about the functions of the AEA—and presumably more committed to rational, maximizing behavior than is the average voter in ordinary elections. If such voters nonetheless rely on dubious information shortcuts, it is likely that voters in other elections are at least equally likely to do so.[8]

The use of inaccurate information shortcuts is not unique to voting decisions. It also leads large numbers of people to believe in such falsehoods as the existence of extraterrestrial UFOs, witches, and ghosts, and to reject the theory of evolution (Shermer 1997). What these phenomena have in common with political errors is that the average citizen has little or no incentive to strive for accuracy in her opinions about them. A false belief in UFOs or witches will not cause any harm to the average person, and the same goes for most false perceptions about public policy. Unfortunately, however, unlike mistaken beliefs about UFOs, individually rational errors in politics can lead to harmful or even disastrous collective outcomes.

The academic debate about citizen competence and information shortcuts has considerably increased our understanding of the causes, and some of the consequences, of public ignorance. But scholars have still not fully explored the implications of rational ignorance for information shortcuts, voting, and ideology. In particular, much research to date (my own included) has understated the potential importance of the effective *use* of political information, relative to the importance of information acquisition. Rational ignorance implies that most acquisition of political information, *and* most uses thereof, will be motivated by considerations other than improving the quality of voting decisions. This powerful insight has major implications that we have only begun to explore.

II. NORMATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF IGNORANCE

While scholars have paid extensive attention to the causes and consequences of political ignorance, far less research has been devoted to its normative and institutional ramifications. Political ignorance has important implications for normative theories of democratic participation, and also for questions of institutional design. Yet normative research on democracy and institutional development largely seems to proceed in isolation from empirical research on political knowledge, public opin-

ion, and voter behavior. Here, I point out some ways in which the gap could begin to be closed.

Some normative theories of democracy demand vastly more knowledge and political engagement than others. In effect, each theory has what we might call "knowledge prerequisites" (Somin 2004b). Yet discussions of these theories have largely failed to consider the question of whether real-world voters actually possess the necessary knowledge, and if not, whether there is any realistic prospect of changing that fact.

At one end of the knowledge prerequisite spectrum are comparatively minimalist theories of democracy, such as Joseph Schumpeter's (1950). In his view, the value of democratic participation is fully realized so long as voters have regular opportunities to replace one set of political leaders with another, thereby ensuring that the leaders cannot adopt policies radically divergent from public opinion without being subject to punishment at the polls (cf. Posner 2003, 143–50). At the other extreme are theories of "deliberative democracy," which contend that citizens must not only be able to vote, but also should deliberate about public policy at a fairly high level of sophistication (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996 and 2004; Bohannon 1996).[9] In some versions of the theory, citizens are expected to accept complex restrictions on modes of deliberation, of a sort that are normally common only among professional political philosophers.[10] In between the minimalist and deliberative extremes lie intermediate options, such as retrospective voting (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966) and Burkean trusteeship, where voters ignore the details of policy, but instead focus on the past performance of incumbents or the virtue and competence of candidates for office.[11]

As I have detailed elsewhere (Somin 2004b, 1296–1304), each of these theories requires voters to possess different amounts and types of political information. For example, Burkean trusteeship requires voters to know relevant information about the virtue and competence of candidates for political office (ibid., 1300–1302). Some of the more demanding theories, particularly deliberative democracy, require levels of political information that may well be virtually impossible to achieve in the face of rational ignorance (Somin 1998, 438–40).

An important implication of the rational-ignorance hypothesis is that voter knowledge is unlikely to increase very much merely as a result of the greater availability of information. Even if information is readily available at low cost, rationally ignorant voters have little or no incentive to spend time learning it and weighing its implications. This inference is borne out by empirical evidence showing little or no change in political

knowledge levels over the last 50 years, despite greatly increased education levels and a parallel increase in the availability of information through electronic and other media (e.g., Bennett 1988 and 1996; Smith 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; and Althaus 2003). Thus, advocates of ambitious theories of democratic participation cannot expect most voters to reach the knowledge levels their theories require anytime soon.

An additional implication that has received less attention is that even those voters who possess as much knowledge as any given theory of participation demands may lack adequate incentives to use it in the way the theory outlines. After all, as we have seen, rational voters who do choose to acquire significant amounts of political knowledge probably decide to do so for reasons other than improving the quality of their voting decisions. Therefore, having learned the information that interests them, they might use their knowledge in ways that have nothing to do with the demands of normative theories of participation. For example, even those few voters who know as much as is required by the theory of deliberative democracy might choose to use their knowledge for entertainment purposes or to defend their preconceived prejudices. They might well choose not to engage in the kind of objective, open-minded consideration of alternatives that deliberate democrats advocate.

Some of the more demanding theories of democratic participation might thus be completely unrealistic in light of widespread political ignorance. Even the less exacting ones, such as retrospective voting, may still require more knowledge than the majority of citizens currently possesses (Somin 2004b, 1315–16). The acquisition and use of political knowledge is, of course, not the only factor that needs to be considered in developing normative theories of democracy. But students of this field need to give the problem of ignorance far greater consideration than most have so far.[12]

Greater attention to the problem of political ignorance might also transform our thinking about many important issues of institutional design in the modern democratic state. Here, I briefly discuss three: the desirable size and scope of government, federalism, and judicial review. I also note possible implications for the choice of electoral systems.

The Size and Scope of Government

In most modern democracies, government spending accounts for at least a third of GDP, and the regulatory activities of the state extend to

almost all areas of life. In the United States, federal spending accounts for 20.8 percent of GDP, and state and local governments spend an additional 13.7 percent.[13] And the growth of government spending over the last century has been matched by a parallel expansion of regulation (Higgs 1987).

Rationally ignorant voters are unable to keep track of more than a tiny fraction of all this government activity. Indeed, they probably would be unable to do so even with considerably greater knowledge than most of them currently possess. Other things equal, the greater the size and complexity of government, the greater the likelihood that many of its activities will escape meaningful democratic control.[14] This result is troubling both for those scholars who regard democratic control of public policy as an intrinsic good (e.g., Pateman 1970 and Barber 1984), and those who value it for purely instrumental reasons such as the need to curb abuses of power by political elites.

To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to emphasize that political ignorance is far from being the only factor that must be considered in determining the appropriate role of government in society. It should, however, be given greater consideration than it has received so far.

Federalism and "Voting with Your Feet"

In a federal system, citizens dissatisfied with government policy in their state have the choice of either trying to use "voice" (traditional voting) to address their grievances, or opting for "exit": leaving for a jurisdiction with more favorable policies (Hirschman 1970).[15] Those who choose the exit option in effect "vote with their feet." Voice and exit each have their respective strengths and weaknesses (ibid.). But one that is largely ignored by most analysts is the comparative incentives they create for knowledge acquisition.

The effectiveness of voice is significantly constrained by rational ignorance. As we have seen, individual voters have little incentive to acquire and effectively use relevant information about public policy. By contrast, exit has the tremendous comparative advantage of creating strong incentives for individuals to acquire the necessary information to make decisions about where to live.[16] A knowledgeable individual or family can move to a more hospitable jurisdiction even if the neighbors left behind remain ignorant. Thus, individuals are likely to put much more effort into acquiring information about the best jurisdiction in

which to live than into acquiring knowledge about the right candidate to vote for. Moreover, effective "foot voting" may require less detailed information than ballot-box voting, since the former does not entail knowing which officials are responsible for which policies. It also obviates the need to be able to separate out the impact of multiple government policies from each other, and from the effects of background socioeconomic conditions.[17]

Empirical evidence shows that even severely oppressed populations with very low education levels can often acquire remarkably accurate information about differences in conditions between jurisdictions and then make the decision to vote with their feet. For example, in the early twentieth century, millions of poor African-Americans in the Jim Crow-era South were able to determine that conditions were relatively better for them in the North (and sometimes in other parts of the South) and make the necessary moves (Henri 1975; Cohen 1989; Bernstein 1998, 782–85). This achievement stands in sharp contrast to the failure of many of today's much better educated (and certainly less oppressed) voters to acquire basic political knowledge.

In order for foot voting to be effective, however, political power must be at least partly decentralized. In a unitary state in which all or most important policies are set by the central government, there is no exit option other than the very difficult and costly one of leaving the country entirely. Thus, the informational advantages of foot voting over ballot-box voting provide an important argument in favor of political decentralization.

Obviously, foot voting is not a panacea for all the shortcomings of government policy. For example, it cannot protect immobile people and assets, such as property rights in land. And it is far from the only consideration that needs to be taken into account in determining the optimal level of political decentralization.[18] Nonetheless, the informational advantages of foot voting deserve considerably greater attention from students of federalism and institutional development.

Judicial Review and the "Countermajoritarian Difficulty"

For decades, critics of strong judicial review have relied on the so-called "countermajoritarian difficulty" as one of their main arguments. Both liberal and conservative critics of judicial review have repeatedly

emphasized the claim that judges who overrule laws enacted by democratically elected legislatures undercut democracy.[19]

Unfortunately, the vast literature on this subject has almost completely ignored the reality of widespread political ignorance. If most citizens have little or no knowledge of politics and public policy, it is likely that many legislative actions are not actually products of the popular will in any meaningful way (Somin 2004b). In the many cases where this is true, judicial overruling of the law in question is unlikely to be "countermajoritarian" in any meaningful sense. Indeed, judicial review may sometimes actually reinforce democratic control of the state by reducing the scope and complexity of government (thereby diminishing voters' information burden) or by limiting the powers of the central government, thereby facilitating foot voting (ibid.).

The degree to which political ignorance mitigates the countermajoritarian difficulty will vary from case to case. Some prominent and highly visible statutes really do reflect a broad majoritarian consensus. And, of course, the countermajoritarian difficulty is far from the only argument in favor of limiting judicial power. Other important shortcomings of judicial review include judges' limited expertise in matters of public policy, the courts' need to secure a modicum of cooperation from other powerful political actors, and the obvious temptation of judges to impose their own political views on society. On the other hand, some forms of judicial review may be desirable despite their countermajoritarian impact or even precisely because of it (as in cases where judicial power may be used to counter the "tyranny of the majority").

Nonetheless, taking account of political ignorance undercuts the widely accepted traditional version of the countermajoritarian difficulty, under which virtually any judicial invalidation of a legislative measure is considered to be antidemocratic. It also establishes an important research agenda for political scientists and legal scholars: determining the extent to which political ignorance affects the countermajoritarian difficulty in various issue areas.

Electoral Systems

Political ignorance has potentially important implications for the longstanding debate over the relative merits of alternative electoral systems. Scholars and political leaders have long debated the relative merits of

proportional representation (PR) versus "first-past-the-post" district-based electoral systems (e.g., Lijphart 1984 and Cox 2001). The debate involves a wide range of considerations that vary from country to country, as well as across time.

While political ignorance is only one of many considerations that must be weighed in making the choice between PR and first-past-the-post, its potential significance has largely been overlooked in the debate thus far. To the extent that PR systems tend to produce a large number of different political parties while first-past-the-post systems usually produce two dominant parties (Duverger 1954), the latter probably impose a lower information burden on voters. The more parties there are, the more difficult it is for voters to keep track of them and their positions on relevant issues.

Moreover, voters in a PR system must not only determine where the parties stand relative to each other on the issues, but also need to try to predict the coalition government likely to result from any given election. Since PR systems rarely enable any one party to win a majority of seats in the legislature, the real decision about the composition of government is made not by the voters, but by party leaders negotiating among themselves after an election has already occurred. Attempting to predict the outcome of such coalition bargaining places an additional informational burden on voters.

Voters could of course choose to simply ignore such calculations in making their decisions. Yet doing so risks casting one's ballot for a party that has no chance to actually influence government policy because other parties are unwilling to enter into coalition with it.

Experts in comparative politics and electoral systems are far better qualified to trace the implications of political ignorance for the choice between PR and first-past-the-post than I am. Here, I merely suggest that the effort should be undertaken.

III. INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL IGNORANCE: THE WAR ON TERROR

The implications of political ignorance for international relations is an area that has received very little attention. There are numerous potential avenues for research here. In this article, I consider one that is particularly relevant to a major issue in American foreign policy: the impact of political ignorance on anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Table 1. Arab and Muslim Opinion on the Origins of the September 11 Attacks.[20]

"Do you believe groups of Arabs carried out the attacks against the USA on Sept. 11?"

	% Yes	% No	% No Opinion
Indonesia	20	74	6
Iran	15	59	26
Kuwait	11	89	0
Lebanon	42	58	0
Pakistan	4	86	10
Turkey	46	43	11
Total	18	61	21

It is no secret that majority opinion in the Arab world and in many other Muslim countries is largely hostile to the United States. Some analysts attribute this result to specific U.S. policies, such as support for Israel and the Iraq War (e.g., Scheuer 2004), while others cite a "clash of civilizations" between fundamentally opposed Western and Muslim value systems (e.g., Huntington 1998). Either or both of these explanations may be valid. But it is also important to consider the possible contribution of widespread political ignorance.

As the data in Table 1 show, a 2002 Gallup Survey of public opinion in Arab and Muslim nations found large majorities denying that the September 11 attacks were carried out by "groups of Arabs." For example, 89 percent of Kuwaitis, 74 percent of Indonesians, and 86 percent of Pakistanis were apparently ignorant of this basic fact. A 2002 survey conducted by the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram* (2002) found that 39 percent of Egyptian respondents blamed the September 11 attacks on "Israeli intelligence/the Mossad," while only 19 percent said that "Al-Qa'eda or other Islamic militants" were responsible.[21] Both the Gallup and *Al Ahram* polls were conducted well before the start of the Iraq War, so the responses are not the products of anti-Americanism generated by that conflict.

The relevance of such fundamental ignorance to the problem of Arab and Muslim anti-Americanism is clear. Muslims (and others) who do not know that the 9/11 attacks were conducted by Arab terrorists are obviously unlikely to support any American retaliatory measures

aimed at Al Qaeda or its supporters. And this result is likely to hold true even if the people in question do not have any disagreement with Americans on fundamental values, and would not oppose specific U.S. policies if they had accurate information about them.

The origins of the September 11 attacks may be only one of many issues relevant to the War on Terror on which ignorance is widespread in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Other possible examples include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq War.

Widespread ignorance of this type should not be surprising. After all, the logic of rational ignorance applies to Arabs and Muslims no less than to American voters. Furthermore, political ignorance in much of the Arab world is likely to be exacerbated by factors not present in Western democracies.

First, the lack of competitive democratic elections in most Arab states eliminates even the weak incentives for knowledge acquisition present in democratic societies. Second, and perhaps more important, government control of the media in these authoritarian societies makes it more difficult for citizens to gain access to information that goes against the interests of political and religious authorities. And, indeed, reliance on government-controlled media or on *Al Jazeera* (the one nongovernmental news station available in most Arab nations) is correlated with increased anti-Americanism and with the propensity to deny that the September 11 attacks were carried out by Arabs (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004).

Finally, as in other closed societies, the threat of violent retaliation by the government, or by Islamist terrorists, may lead many who might disagree with the anti-American interpretation of events to keep silent.[22] This, in turn, reinforces the perception by others that the governmental and Islamist version is the correct view, and perhaps even the only one possible.

There are no easy solutions to this problem. However, the first step toward any possible solution is to recognize that political ignorance may be an important component of the larger challenge posed by anti-Americanism in the Muslim world. Future research should describe the scope and effects of ignorance in greater detail, and perhaps begin to explore possible ways to mitigate the problem.

* * *

Four decades after Philip Converse's pioneering work, much progress has been made in understanding the extent, causes, and consequences

of widespread political ignorance. But its implications for a wide range of issues in normative political theory, institutional design, and foreign policy have only begun to be probed.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., recent data compiled in Althaus 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 2004a; Somin 2004b; and Bishop 2004.
2. There is a large literature attacking rational-choice theory on the ground that it fails to explain the prevalence of voting. See, e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Uhden 1996.
3. A voter who judges the magnitude of the difference between candidates in this way might easily be mistaken. However, it is not necessarily the case that a rational voter in such a position should assume that the difference between them is zero. His or her initial, poorly-informed estimate of the difference could be wrong, but, other things equal, it is just as likely to underestimate the magnitude of the difference as to overestimate it.
4. See, e.g., Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Converse 1990; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Wittman 1995; Posner 2003; and contributions to this symposium by Lupia and Graber. For more extensive citations, see Somin 1998 and Somin 2004a.
5. See discussion above.
6. For rare exceptions, see Friedman 1998 and 2005; and the major recent study by Philip E. Tetlock (2005).
7. Borrowing from Tolstoy, Tetlock calls the latter "hedgehogs," while experts who are more willing to focus on the specifics of each case are referred to as "foxes."
8. To be sure, economists may be more likely to be aware of the insignificance of an individual vote than other voters are (thereby making them more likely to deliberately vote on the basis of factors unrelated to candidate quality), and this fact could lead to a more optimistic interpretation of the AEA data. Nonetheless, the far greater knowledge and sophistication of the AEA electorate relative to most other voters leads to the inference that the AEA evidence does not bode well for the quality of information shortcuts.
9. For citations to other literature in this area, see Somin 1998, 438–40.
10. For example, Gutmann and Thompson's version of the theory requires that arguments put forward by deliberating citizens pass the tests of reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. Reciprocity mandates 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" (1996, 57–58).
11. For a detailed discussion of these theories and relevant citations, see Somin 2004b, 1296–1304.

12. For rare exceptions, see Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Friedman 1998 and 2005; Hoffman 1998; Posner 2003. For my reservations about Posner's analysis, see Somin 2004c.
13. These figures are calculated from Council of Economic Advisers 2006, 375–76.
14. For a more detailed argument along these lines, see Somin 1998, 433–35, Somin 2004b, 1336–38.
15. For a classic related article, see Tiebout 1956.
16. For an extended version of this argument, see Somin 2004b, 1344–51.
17. These points are explored in more detail in ibid., 1345.
18. For an up-to-date survey of the relevant literature, see Ribstein and Kobayashi, forthcoming.
19. The literature is too vast to cite here. For numerous citations, see Somin 2004b, 1200.
20. Data in the table taken from *USA Today* 2002.
21. The precise numbers in this survey should not be given too much weight, since it covered only 150 respondents, who were "selected randomly" but "not according to exact statistical procedures" (ibid.). Nonetheless, it does provide at least some indication of Egyptian opinion.
22. For a penetrating analysis of such dynamics, see Kuran 1995.