

Are Smarter Voters Better Voters?

Michael Hannon explores the troubling possibility that smarter, better informed voters, might be irrationally partisan

A healthy democracy requires knowledgeable citizens. When voters make poor decisions out of ignorance, they harm the common good. For example, false beliefs about the dangers of Covid-19 may undermine policies that would save lives. For this reason, the ideal of an informed citizen holds a cherished place in our system of values.

But are knowledgeable citizens better for democracy?

Consider the following fact: the most politically knowledgeable people also tend to be extremely partisan. For example, the strongest supporters of the Republican party tend to know more about politics than individuals with weak political ties. Likewise for Democrats. Now, this fact alone is not very surprising. The more we care about something, the more inclined we are to learn about it. Coffee lovers tend to know more about coffee; motorbike enthusiasts know more about motorbikes; and the biggest sports fans often acquire extensive knowledge of their favourite teams. Politics is no different. The biggest political “fans” tend to consume the most information about politics.

The problem, however, is that the most politically partisan people are also the most

likely to have their thinking corrupted by politics. Party loyalty operates as a kind of perceptual screen through which we filter information. This leads citizens to reason in corrupted, biased ways.

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A vast amount of work in psychology indicates that we all frequently interpret and filter evidence in ways that fit with our antecedent worldview. We tend to seek out, uncritically accept, and better remember evidence that is favourable to our view; whereas we tend to avoid, forget, and be more critical of counterevidence. However, our reasoning is especially prone to error or bias when it comes to beliefs that matter to us. For politically partisan individuals, this will include their political beliefs. When we strongly identify with a political team, our political beliefs become partly constitutive

of our identity. As a result, we are motivated to protect ourselves from threats to these beliefs. When information threatens our values or identity, we deploy our intellectual artillery to destroy it.

This is how knowledge, like power, corrupts partisan minds. The more you know about a topic, the more “ammunition” you have at your disposal to find reasons to reject facts, figures, and arguments that conflict with your preferred views. As Benjamin Franklin once said, “A learned blockhead is a greater blockhead than an ignorant one”.

This goes against a simple, intuitive, widely held theory about politics, which we might call the “Ignorance Hypothesis”. According to this hypothesis, democracy is dysfunctional, in part, because citizens are uninformed about political issues. The cause of bad policies and bitter political battles, according to this view, is too little information. But the Ignorance Hypothesis is not just false; it’s backwards. Psychological research shows that the more information partisans get, the more dogmatic they become and the deeper their disagreements grow. An alternative hypothesis, which I call the “Weaponised Knowledge Hypothesis”, says that the more knowledgeable one is about politics, the more stubborn one becomes about politically charged topics. If this alternative hypothesis is true, then a smarter, better educated citizenry would not necessarily diminish polarisation, lead to better policy decisions, or improve democracy. Indeed, it may just exacerbate political problems.

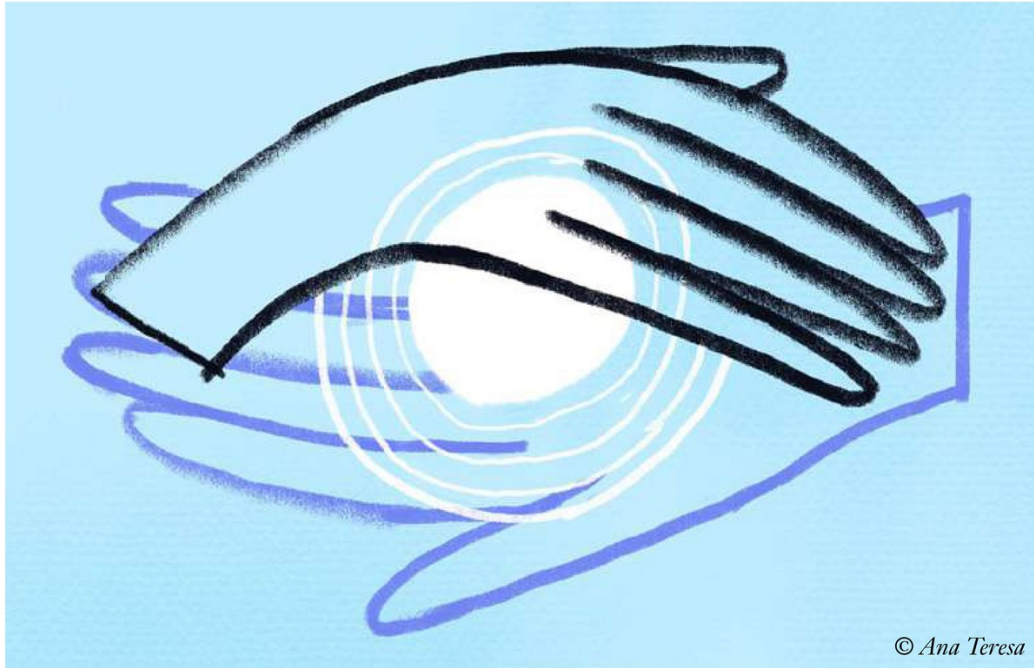
This creates a conundrum. It is widely thought that a robust democracy needs knowledgeable citizens. Yet the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are the

most closed-minded and dogmatic. We thus face an uncomfortable trade-off: do we want ignorant voters or informed dogmatists?

It is not just knowledge that gives partisans more “ammunition” to reject unfavourable facts and arguments. Our critical reasoning abilities are often hijacked in the service of identity-constitutive beliefs. As Tali Sharot writes, “If you perceive yourself as highly analytic—someone who has a strong ability to make use of quantitative data and a good reasoning capacity—brace yourself. People with stronger analytic abilities are more likely to twist data at will than people with low reasoning ability.”

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This is vividly illustrated by an ingenious experiment by Yale law professor Dan Kahneman, which was called the most depressing brain study ever. In this experiment, people were presented with numerical data about the effectiveness of a skin cream for treating a rash. To arrive at the correct answer about the skin cream’s effectiveness required some mathematical ability. Predictably, people who were better at math were more likely to get the answer correct. This is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is what happened when people were presented with a politicised version of the same problem.



When the exact same numbers were presented as being about the effectiveness of gun control laws in decreasing crime, people's general math aptitude was no longer the best predictor of whether they would answer correctly. Instead, Liberals tended to solve the problem correctly when the numbers indicated that gun laws were effective (a common view amongst Liberals), but they tended to answer incorrectly when the numbers showed the opposite. The performance of Conservatives was a mirror image: they did well when the numbers supported their prior beliefs and badly when the numbers didn't.

Most disturbingly, however, is that the better people were at math, the worse they did when the numbers didn't support their prior convictions. This provides evidence that people with sophisticated reasoning skills will use them to wriggle their way out of evidence that disconfirms their po-

litical convictions.

This illustrates how intellectually corrupting politics can be. If knowledge is what gives partisans more 'ammunition' to destroy threatening information, then intelligence is the 'weapon'. The more cognitive firepower at one's disposal, the more one is able to twist data and arguments to fit the conclusions they want. This debunks the idea that motivated reasoning is a trait of less intelligent people. It also supports Hume's claim that reason is a slave to the passions.

If all this is correct, it throws into doubt some "epistocratic" solutions to voter ignorance. In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan argues that ignorant voters tend to harm their fellow citizens by exercising political power in incompetent ways. Instead of providing equal political power to each citizen, Brennan says we should restrict political power to the more knowledgeable. This

could be done through voter competence exams, by giving extra votes to the better educated, or by some other means of establishing competence.

However, we risk enhancing the political power of the very people who are mostly likely to be biased, dogmatic, and polarised if we distribute political power on the basis of knowledge. This is because there is a strong link between political knowledge and ideological dogmatism. Thus, it is not obvious that individuals with more knowledge are sufficiently equipped to avoid making errors as damaging as those with less knowledge. Indeed, an epistocracy may end up empowering to the very people that Brennan calls “hooligans”.

If more knowledgeable voters will not necessarily make better political decisions, who will? I suggest we expand our focus beyond voter knowledge to examine the somewhat neglected epistemic virtue of objectivity.

The term “objectivity” can be traced back to Walter Lippmann, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and influential critic of media and democracy. In the early 1900s, Lippmann criticized the abundance of biased news reportage and called for impartiality in the gathering and reporting of news. In 1919, he co-authored a highly critical account of how the New York Times coverage of the Russian Revolution was distorted by cultural bias. Lippmann wrote, “In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see”. Unfortunately, Lippmann’s call for objectivity has been frequently interpreted as a need for “balanced reporting”, which gives rise to the problem of false equivalencies (where two or more sides are presented as equally reasonable).

While balanced reporting is one way to fend off partisan attacks, it is not what Lippmann meant by “objectivity”.

In his New York Times article, Lippmann encouraged each individual journalist “to remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged prejudgements in observing, understanding, and presenting the news”. Lippmann’s focus was on finding ways to help journalists defeat the distortions of their own biases. Following Lippmann, we can think of “objectivity” as “free of cognitive bias”.

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A lack of objectivity distorts judgement. It leads us to process political information in biased ways, rather than in dispassionate, rational ways. The less objective one is, the more difficult is it to properly evaluate the evidence. The more objective one is, the less one’s pre-existing beliefs will colour one’s interpretation of the facts. Objectivity is what enables us to believe, think, and do what we ought to believe, think, or do, given the information and evidence we have.

Objectivity has a crucial role to play in our new age of partisanship and polarisation. While many political theorists have worried about the extent and depth of po-

litical ignorance, recent work in political psychology indicates that knowledge without objectivity may be unhelpful - indeed, it may be harmful to democracy. Politics is in desperate need of the type of citizens who are open-minded, sensitive to the evidence, intellectually humble, and capable of explaining contrary points of view in a way that the people holding those views would find satisfactory.

I do not pretend it will be easy to cultivate objectivity. In some studies, despite efforts to promote the even-handed treatment of policy arguments, we still find evidence of politically motivated reasoning, with substantial polarisation as a result. It is incredibly difficult for people to put aside their prior feelings and prejudices when evaluating evidence, even when they are instructed repeatedly to “set their feelings aside,” to “rate the arguments fairly,” and to be as “objective as possible”.

All this has an ironic and unfortunate upshot: the people who are the most capable of political objectivity are also the least likely to participate in politics. Thus, the very people we need to improve democracy are those who lack the motivation to be politically engaged.

The reason for this, as discussed above, is that partisanship, political engagement, and ideological dogmatism are intimately connected. The more politically partisan one is, the more likely one is to participate in politics. But, as Brennan says, “political participation tends to corrupt rather than improve our intellectual and moral character”. We exhibit especially bad epistemic behaviour when we participate in politics. We display high levels of bias, are unable to control our preconceptions, and are least

motivated to be objective. This is because open-mindedness and objectivity are incredibly difficult when self-interest, social identity, and strong emotions make us want to reach certain conclusions. Objectivity becomes more elusive the more politically partisan we become.

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It seems that objectivity may reside more in ignorance and apathy than in knowledge and democratic citizenship. If this is true, then we have been looking for rational citizenship in the wrong place. The theory of motivated reasoning predicts less bias (more objectivity) for individuals who are uninformed and politically apathetic, since they lack the motivation and ability to engage in identity protective cognition. Admittedly, this may be a sort of “dysfunctional objectivity”. But it may be the only sort of objectivity that we humans, crafted from crooked timber, can achieve.

We therefore face what might be an inescapable dilemma. The more motivated we are to play the role of a democratic citizen, the less we are cognitively capable of meeting the intellectual requirements of rational behaviour. In contrast, the more cognitively able we are at fulfilling the intellectual requirements of responsible citizenship, the

Thoughts



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less motivationally capable we are at fulfilling this role.

The ideal democratic citizen seems to reside in an elusive space. To be objective, they must be apathetic enough about politics to circumvent ideologically motivated reasoning; yet they must also be sufficiently knowledgeable about politics and willing to participate. And yet by engaging in politics, they run the risk of letting it corrupt them. To cite Brennan once more, “Most common forms of political engagement are more likely to corrupt and stultify than to ennoble and educate people.”

We are therefore left with another uncomfortable trade-off: the most promising way to promote objectivity is by reducing the strength of partisan identity; but by reducing the strength of partisan identity, people will lose the motivation to learn about politics and be active democratic citizens.

This is an utterly depressing thought. Let me try to conclude on a more optimistic note.

It might be true that relatively informed partisans tend to use their knowledge in biased ways that lead to polarisation; however, it is possible that the *very* well informed are more capable of objective thought. Achen and Bartels provide some evidence for this idea. They find that “the pull of objective reality begins to become apparent among respondents near the top of the distribution of political information... among the best-informed 10 or 20% of the public.” In other words, while increasing levels of political knowledge tends to widen the gap between political opponents, there is a point at the very top end of the information scale when partisanship no longer dominates our thinking.

This suggests that increases in political

information do, for the most part, deepen polarisation and promote dogmatism, but only up to a point. Among those at the very top end of the political knowledge scale, the weight of reality breaks through their partisan perceptual screen. As a result, the “informational elite” may be at least somewhat less dogmatic and polarized than the rest of us.

This may provide us with some hope for the ideal of the enlightened citizen, but it comes with two significant risks. First, increases in political knowledge will still foster polarisation and dogmatism in citizens unless they reach the level of the informational elite. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that most citizens will achieve this level of competence, as the literature on political ignorance makes clear. Second, the claim that objectivity can be found in a small group of “informationally elite” citizens may make a very restrictive form of epistocracy more attractive. For example, it suggests that we should be governed by a council of experts or the most knowledgeable citizens. If so, this threatens our hope for an informed democratic citizenry. I doubt many of us are willing to accept this trade-off.

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