



School of Law

# DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE IN ANCIENT ATHENS

Ilya Somin,  
George Mason University School of Law

*Ethics*, Vol. 119, No. 3, pp. 585-590, April 2009

George Mason University Law and Economics  
Research Paper Series

09-31

This paper can be downloaded without charge from the Social Science  
Research Network at [http://ssrn.com/abstract\\_id=1428612](http://ssrn.com/abstract_id=1428612)

as supported by that reason—a conclusion in the case of theoretical reasoning, an action or decision in the practical case. So reasons seem to be things that form the subject of the judgments that are the starting point of reasoning, not its product.

That is too quick, though. Millgram is evidently classifying reasoning to conclusions about our reasons for action as practical, not theoretical, reasoning. Contesting that claim would be a merely verbal disagreement, so let us grant it. The more significant objection is this. It still seems incorrect to think that reasons themselves are the product of such reasoning. Its product is judgments about reasons, and these can be wrong, even when we have reasoned well. There may be a problem with the information available to me, rather than with my reasoning about it. So it still seems wrong to hold that what there really is reason for me to do could be fixed by the reasoning I do about that question.

This makes me doubt that it is by reference to theories of practical reasoning (where this is understood in either of the ways just described) that we will generate a satisfactory theory of morality. However, I think that is a reason for Millgram to redescribe the aims of his project, not to abandon it. Correct reasoning about practical reasons may not fix the content of morality itself, but it will contain the most important part of the epistemology of morality.

A second distinction may help to explain that claim. Talk of “justification” in connection with morality can mean different things. One of the things it can be used to talk about is what makes something have the moral status it has; another is what warrants me in judging that it has a certain moral status. Call the first of these “determinative justification” and the second “epistemic justification.” These are different since I can be warranted in making mistaken moral judgments, just as I can be with judgments of other kinds. This distinction helps, I think, to describe what Millgram should and shouldn’t be claiming to do. A moral theory tries to give a general description of the patterns of determinative justification that support attributions of moral status. The forms of practical reasoning advocated by Millgram do not themselves constrain the content of the correct moral theory. However, they do offer to tell us when our judgments about moral status are well reasoned. They address the epistemic justification of moral judgments, not the determinative justification of the contents of those judgments.

That is still an important task. So even if these critical remarks are correct, the task Millgram is taking on still deserves close attention. From his sustained application to that task, there is a wealth of things to learn.

GARRETT CULLITY  
*University of Adelaide*

Ober, Josiah. *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. 342. \$29.95 (cloth).

In this excellent recent book, Josiah Ober argues that ancient Athenian democracy surmounted the dangers of political ignorance and made effective use of dispersed citizen knowledge to forge good public policy. Ober skillfully dem-

onstrates that Athenian democracy was more successful than the oligarchic and tyrannical governments of rival Greek city-states. He also explains how Athenian institutions worked to reduce the dangers of political ignorance. On the other hand, he is less successful in showing that the relatively impressive performance of Athenian democracy should lead us to be optimistic about the competence of today's democratic state (267–68).

#### THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL IGNORANCE

Modern democracy is weakened by widespread political ignorance. Decades of survey data show that most citizens have little or no knowledge of politics and public policy (see, e.g., Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996]; Scott Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003]). A 2003 survey showed that 70 percent of Americans were unaware of the recent enactment of the Bush administration's massive prescription drug plan, the largest new government program in some forty years (Ilya Somin, "When Ignorance Isn't Bliss: How Political Ignorance Threatens Democracy," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* no. 525, 2004, 6). The evidence also suggests that voters make poor use of the information they do know, overvaluing evidence that seems to confirm their preexisting views and irrationally ignoring that which goes against them (e.g., Ilya Somin, "Knowledge about Ignorance: New Directions in the Study of Political Information," *Critical Review* 18 [2006]: 255–78, esp. 260–64). Voter ignorance and irrationality weaken democratic control of government and could also lead to harmful, irrational policy decisions (e.g., Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Make Bad Decisions* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007]).

Political ignorance and irrationality are actually rational behavior. An individual voter has virtually no chance of influencing the outcome of the election—on average about 1 in 60 million in the case of a modern U.S. presidential election (Andrew Gelman, Nate Silver, and Aaron Edlin, "What Is the Probability Your Vote Will Make a Difference?" unpublished paper, October 27, 2008, 1). 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.

Paradoxically, illogical use of the information voters do possess also turns out to be rational. Rationally ignorant voters may limit not only the amount of information they acquire but also "how rationally they process the information they do have" (Bryan Caplan, "Rational Irrationality," *Kyklos* 54 [2001]: 3–22, 5). Since there is little incentive to acquire knowledge for the purpose of casting a more informed vote, most of those who do pay attention to politics will do so for other reasons, many of which conflict with the requirements of rational evaluation of evidence.

Citizens with a strong interest in politics often function like "political fans" cheering on their side rather than as rational assessors of information (Somin, "Knowledge about Ignorance," 260–61). They evaluate data in a highly biased manner that tends to confirm rather than objectively test their preexisting views. The "fans" mode of processing information is perfectly rational for purposes of psychic gratification even though it disserves the objective of improving the

quality of their votes. The latter goal, however, is one that they have very little incentive to pursue.

#### ASSESSING THE ATHENIAN RECORD

Concern over the dangers of political ignorance dates all the way back to the origins of democracy in ancient Greece. Ancient critics of Athenian democracy, such as Plato and Thucydides, claimed that it functioned poorly because the people were ignorant of public affairs and argued that ignorance led to disastrous policy decisions (Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994], 48–92). These ancient criticisms of democracy influenced later political theorists, including many of the American Founding Fathers (*ibid.*).

Ober does an excellent job of showing that Athenian democracy functioned far better than the ancient critics believed. He shows that during the 185-year period when Athens was a democracy, it consistently outperformed all other Greek city-states in economic growth, cultural achievement, and other criteria (39–69). Particularly impressive is the magnitude of Athens's advantage over even the most successful competitors, such as Sparta and Syracuse. For example, Athens's aggregate score on "material flourishing" (a combination of various economic performance and influence measures) is nearly 50 percent higher than that of any other polis in Ober's 164-state database.

Ober also demonstrates that Athenian success was closely correlated with the rise and fall of democracy, since Athenian government performed best when it was most democratic and relatively poorly before the rise of democracy and after its fall (70–75). These results are consistent with modern social science research showing that democracies generally outperform authoritarian states on a variety of metrics (Morton Halperin, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracy Promotes Prosperity and Peace* [New York: Routledge, 2004]).

In the latter half of the book, Ober shows how Athenian political institutions harnessed dispersed knowledge, while reducing the dangers posed by political ignorance. In chapter 4, he shows how the organization of Athens into demes and participatory institutions such as the Council of 500 and the Popular Assembly enabled Athens to aggregate the dispersed information held by citizens with different backgrounds and areas of expertise. Later chapters show how the Athenians created incentives for citizens to engage in mutually beneficial collective action (chap. 5) and how codification of Athenian law reduced information costs and created a credible commitment to respect the rights and property of the people (chap. 6). As Ober points out, Athens's ability to minimize the problem of political ignorance is all the more impressive in light of the fact that the polis was a participatory, rather than a representative, democracy. Key policy decisions were made by the Popular Assembly in which all citizens (native-born free adult males) could vote (161–62). Many key public offices were held by ordinary citizens chosen by lot (156–57). Nonetheless, public business was conducted with reasonable competence and generally with greater success than that achieved by Athens's nondemocratic rivals.

Ober is not completely successful in rebutting the traditional critique of Athens's performance. He admits that the Athenians occasionally made serious

errors but suggests that “popular ignorance is a poor explanation for Athens’ failures” (26). Unfortunately, he does not substantiate this claim by examining any of the notorious episodes that Thucydides and others hold up as examples of disaster caused by Athenian public ignorance. For example, Thucydides blamed popular ignorance for the decision to undertake the invasion of Sicily during the Peloponnesian War (415–13 BC)—a choice that led to the worst defeat in Athenian history and caused the loss of most of its armed forces and eventually its empire. According to Thucydides, the citizen-voters undertook the Sicilian expedition because they were “ignorant of the size of the island” and the power of Syracuse and its allies (*Peloponnesian War* 6.1.1).

Since Athens’s defeat in the Peloponnesian War led to the loss of a large percentage of the city’s population, the end of its empire, and the temporary abolition of democracy itself, a defense of Athenian democracy’s use of political knowledge should include at least some examination of this disaster. Historian Donald Kagan has argued that Thucydides was wrong to blame public ignorance of Sicily for the decision to attack Syracuse (*The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981], 164–91). But even Kagan ultimately concludes that the voters courted disaster by risking an unnecessarily large force on the island as a result of being taken in by a specious suggestion advanced by the politician Nicias in the course of a rhetorical ploy intended to persuade the citizens to oppose the expedition, but misunderstood by them as an argument in its favor (187–91). Ancient writers critical of democracy also claimed that public ignorance was partially responsible for several other major Athenian policy failures (e.g., Roberts, *Athens on Trial*, 55–58).

Perhaps Ober could argue that these catastrophes were just aberrations in a generally impressive record. But even a generally successful system must be considered problematic if its occasional flaws lead to massive system failures as great as that which Athens endured in the Peloponnesian War.

A second problem is that Ober’s data demonstrating superior Athenian performance relative to nondemocratic rivals also show that there was no general performance advantage for democratic city-states taken as a group, although oligarchic and democratic states systematically outperformed tyrannies characterized by one-man rule (76–77). Thus, it is difficult to rule out the possibility that Athens’s success was an unusual fluke rather than proof of the general advantages of participatory democracy.

Most important of all, Ober’s analysis is a measure of relative success, not absolute. He shows that the democratic Athenian state generally performed better than its nondemocratic rivals. But that could be as much the result of the flaws of oligarchy and tyranny as it is of democracy’s strengths. Ober’s analysis says little about the desirability of democratic decision making in situations where the alternative is not authoritarian or oligarchic government but rather the free market or civil society.

Despite these caveats, Ober’s book provides a compelling defense of Athenian democracy against claims that it was rendered ineffective by popular ignorance. Its implications for today are nonetheless debatable.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN POLITICAL THEORY

Assuming that Ober's defense of Athenian democracy is generally sound, its implications for the state of our democracy in our own time are not as positive as he suggests (267–68). Two key differences between the Athenian polity and our own helped ensure that political ignorance would be much less of a danger for the former: the limited nature of Athenian government and the small size of the Athenian electorate.

By today's standards, Athenian government had relatively few functions, such as waging war, building certain types of infrastructure, and organizing public festivals. This greatly reduced the knowledge burden of Athenian citizens voting in the Assembly. They needed to understand only a few issues in order to cast informed votes. Ober notes that Athenian law was much simpler and clearer than "modern legislation" (219), a simplicity that surely stemmed in part from its more limited functions. By contrast, today's American government spends some 37 percent of the national GDP and also regulates nearly every aspect of society, thereby making it virtually impossible for voters to acquire adequate knowledge of more than a fraction of its functions (Ilya Somin, "Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal," *Critical Review* 12 [1998]: 413–58, esp. 431–35).

The limited range of the Athenian state's functions ensured that a high percentage of the electorate actually had extensive personal experience with them. War was by far the most important activity of the Athenian state, and most adult male citizens (the only ones who had the right to vote) had personally served in the army or the navy at a time when military strategy was simpler than today and could more easily be understood by rank-and-file soldiers. Athenian voters also had personal experience with many of the state's other functions, such as the holding of festivals that they personally attended on a regular basis (194–97). Some modern scholars claim that voters can overcome political ignorance by using information gained from everyday life (e.g., Samuel Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 23–24). This is a dubious claim in the context of today's large and complicated state (Somin, "Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal," 420–21). But it may well have been valid for classical Athens.

The danger of political ignorance was also mitigated by the small size of the Athenian electorate. At its height, Athens had only about 40,000 citizens eligible to participate in the Assembly (74), and only about 6,000 to 8,000 actually participated in any given meeting (161–62). Athens's citizen body was far closer in size to a small New England town meeting than to a modern democratic nation-state. With such a small pool of voters, each individual citizen had a far greater chance of casting a decisive ballot than any modern voter. Thus, there was a far greater incentive to become informed.

The small size of the Athenian electorate also greatly increased the likelihood that any given individual could have a decisive impact through political participation that goes beyond voting. Ober notes that, each year, 500 Athenian citizens were chosen by lot to serve in the Council of 500, a powerful body that played a key role in setting the Athenian political agenda (156). Seven hundred others were picked to serve one-year terms in other political positions, most by

lot and a few top officials by election (156). In any given year, therefore, some twelve hundred Athenian citizens held public office, many in quite influential positions. This figure is equal to at least 6 percent of the total citizen body and 30 percent of the number who participated in the Assembly. Since most offices were selected by lot, there was a great deal of turnover from year to year. The widespread opportunity to influence policy by holding public office provided additional incentives for Athenian citizens to acquire political knowledge; and the experience of officeholding was probably a valuable political learning experience in itself (151–57). By contrast, only a small percentage of modern democratic citizens ever hold public office of any kind, and fewer still ever hold an office powerful enough to give them significant influence.

Ober himself notes the advantages of a small electorate (88) and suggests that it may have contributed to Athenian success. Modern research similarly shows that voters are better informed and more politically active in small-electorate settings than in a larger democracy (e.g., Frank Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003]; J. Eric Oliver, *Democracy in Suburbia* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 42–52).

Despite his acknowledgment of the importance of size, Ober concludes that “the difference in scale between city-states and nation-states does not vitiate the potential value of the Athenian case for thinking about modernity” (268). Unfortunately, there is reason for skepticism here. The scale of Athenian democracy was in fact more akin to that of a small New England town than to a large modern city, much less a modern nation-state. Even more to the point, it seems likely that Athenian voters were better informed than modern voters in part precisely because their electorate was so much smaller.

Today, as in ancient Greece, democratic governments generally outperform authoritarian ones. However, the ability of democracy to produce good policy has been greatly undermined by widespread political ignorance and irrationality, both exacerbated by the extensive size and scope of the modern state. Democracy may still be superior to oligarchy and tyranny. But it might function better if the size and complexity of modern government were reduced. Political ignorance might also be mitigated by transferring more governmental authority to the local level, where the electorate is of smaller size. Such may be the lessons of ancient Athens for today’s inheritors of the democratic tradition it began.

ILYA SOMIN  
*George Mason University*

Pettit, Philip. *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. 192. \$29.95 (cloth).

Birds do it, bees do it. Why can’t humans live together peacefully outside a coercive political order? Thomas Hobbes offers as one part of the explanation that such creatures “want that art of words by which some men can represent to others that which is good in the likeness of evil; and evil in the likeness of good . . . discontenting men, and troubling their peace at their pleasure”