THE ONGOING DEBATE OVER POLITICAL IGNORANCE: REPLY TO MY CRITICS

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THE ONGOING DEBATE OVER POLITICAL IGNORANCE: REPLY TO MY CRITICS

ABSTRACT: The participants in this symposium raise many insightful criticisms and reservations about my book Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter. But none substantially undermine its main thesis: that rational political ignorance and rational irrationality are major problems for democracy that are best addressed by limiting and decentralizing government power. Part I of this reply addresses criticisms of my analysis of the problem of political ignorance and its causes. Part II assesses challenges to my proposed solution.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; democracy; democratic competence; democratic theory; federalism; foot voting; rational ignorance; rational irrationality; retrospective voting; voting theory.

I would like to start by thanking Critical Review for organizing this symposium about my book, Democracy and Political Ignorance—the culmination of a research project that began with an article published in this journal seventeen years ago (Somin 1998). I would also like to thank the other participants for their thoughtful contributions. It is an honor to have my work analyzed by so many outstanding scholars. Although we disagree on a number of issues, we are at one in recognizing that the problem of political ignorance and its potential significance for democracy deserve careful, serious consideration.

In this response, I will focus on what I consider the most important points raised by my critics. Part I addresses criticisms of my analysis of the problem
created by widespread political ignorance. Some of the critics agree that extensive political ignorance is dangerous, but disagree with my view that it is mostly the result of rational behavior by individual voters. Others contend that it is not much of a problem to begin with. I suggest that the first set of critics misunderstand key aspects of my theory, while the latter is overly optimistic about the role of public opinion in the political process.

In Part II, I take on various criticisms of my proposed solutions to the problem of ignorance: promoting foot voting by limiting and decentralizing the power of government. Some of the points raised by my critics on this issue have merit. Nonetheless, expanding the domain of foot voting will often be an improvement over ballot-box voting—not because the former is ideal or close to it, but because the latter is far worse.

The last section of Part II briefly takes up an issue raised by some of the commentators that I largely did not consider in my book: the implications of my argument for non-epistemic justifications of democracy. Obviously, making effective use of political knowledge is not the only possible rationale for democratic governance. Because I do not call for the complete abolition of the democratic process, but merely its limitation and decentralization, my proposals would not prevent a democratic political system from realizing various non-epistemic benefits. However, there could be cases where there are genuine tradeoffs between epistemic and non-epistemic goals.

Some of the points addressed in this response are analyzed in greater detail in the forthcoming second edition of Democracy and Political Ignorance (Somin forthcoming), which also considers a number of other relevant issues that were not included in the original book.

I. THE PROBLEM OF RATIONAL POLITICAL IGNORANCE

As explained more fully in the book (Somin 2013, ch. 3), the main cause of political ignorance is that paying little or no attention to political issues is rational behavior for most voters. For those who have no reason to follow politics other than to cast a “better” ballot, there is little incentive to acquire political information, because the chance that their knowledge will make a difference to electoral outcomes is infinitesimally small. The vast majority of citizens indeed have only modest interest in politics and end up with low levels of political knowledge (ibid., ch. 1; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Shenkman 2008). The minority who have an unusually high interest in politics and thereby acquire greater knowledge
usually do so for reasons other than seeking out the truth about political issues. Instead, they act as “political fans” who enjoy cheering for their favored ideology or political party, or follow politics for entertainment value. Such objectives often lead to highly biased evaluation of information, with political fans overvaluing anything that supports their preexisting views, and discounting or completely ignoring that which cuts against them (Somin 2013, 78–82). They also tend to seek out information sources that support their preexisting views, and to discuss political issues only with those who share their perspective (ibid., 80–81).

Economist Bryan Caplan calls such behavior “rational irrationality” (Caplan 2001 and 2007). While such biases are highly irrational for a person whose main goal in acquiring information is to seek out the truth, they make perfect sense for those whose main purposes are to achieve other ends, including validating a positive self-image, confirming their preexisting views, and bonding with fellow “fans” of the same “side.” When the principal goal of information-seeking is something other than the truth, biased selection of sources and evaluation of evidence become perfectly rational, in the sense that they help advance the decision maker’s objectives in seeking out information in the first place.

I do not claim that rational ignorance and rational irrationality fully account for all voter behavior or capture all the dimensions of all voters’ decisions. Every model necessarily simplifies reality at least to some degree, and none can fully capture the complexity of real-world behavior. But I do argue that the evidence supports the conclusion that these forces account for the vast bulk of the problem of political ignorance that we observe. Several types of evidence support this conclusion, including the persistence of widespread ignorance over time, the fact that so many voters are ignorant of even very basic political information, the strong correlation between political knowledge and interest in politics, and the fact that ignorance has proven largely impervious to increases in educational attainment and the availability of information through the Internet, the media, and other sources (Somin 2013, 71–84).

Rational ignorance and rational irrationality may not be serious problems if voters still learn enough information to satisfy the requirements of an attractive normative account of democratic participation, and to make good decisions on policy issues. Unfortunately, actual levels of political knowledge fall short of the requirements of even relatively demanding versions of normative democratic theory (ibid., ch. 2), and
various “information shortcuts” generally fail to solve this problem (ibid., ch. 4).

Several of the commentators remain unconvinced by some or all of my analysis of the problem. These criticism can be usefully divided into those that assert that political knowledge simply does not matter much at all, those who believe that information shortcuts perform better than I contend, and those who question my rational-choice account of the causes of ignorance. The first two criticisms are normative, whereas the latter is mainly empirical and conceptual. While advocates of all three positions make insightful points, ultimately none significantly undermines the central thesis defended in *Democracy and Political Ignorance*.

*Why Political Ignorance Matters*

Perhaps the most radical critique of my position is advanced by Simon T. Kaye (2015, 319), who claims that, due to the reality of “value pluralism,” there can be “no such thing as moral expertise.” On issues where this is the case, which Kaye suggests includes most if not all political issues, there is little if any value to voter knowledge, because knowledge cannot really tell us what ends we should be pursuing or what sorts of tradeoffs we should be willing to accept to achieve them.

If this is true, then political knowledge might well be irrelevant. However, this conclusion comes at a great cost. If there is no such thing as moral expertise, then we also have no reason to prefer democracy to any other form of political arrangement, or even to prefer a liberal democratic government to the regimes of Hitler or Stalin. After all, the latter simply achieve a different set of moral ends, which, according to Kaye’s argument, cannot be said to be better or worse than those of liberal democracy. As my book points out (Somin 2013, 11–12), this sort of moral relativism undercuts the political-knowledge critique of democracy only at the cost of undermining any reason for preferring democracy in the first place. Kaye himself argues that democracy is desirable because it “creates a stable, non-revolutionary outlet for political frustrations” (2015, 334). But his version of value pluralism implies that there is no reason to prefer a system that offers such an outlet to one that does not. Perhaps a system where conflict more often results in violence is preferable to democracy because it better promotes the “manly” virtues some associate with warfare. The thoroughgoing value pluralist has no reason to
reject the idea that such values are just as desirable (or undesirable) as peace and stability.

Moreover, the claim that there is no such thing as “moral expertise” is internally inconsistent. Presumably, some kind of logic or evidence is needed to prove the validity of that claim itself. If so, a person with knowledge of that logic or evidence possesses a form of moral expertise, in the sense of knowledge of true facts about how to analyze moral choices. That, of course, suggests that moral expertise is possible, after all. If, on the other hand, no one has the expertise needed to credibly assert that there is no moral expertise, then we have no basis for accepting such a sweeping and counterintuitive claim in the first place.

Kaye does recognize that, even if there is no such thing as “moral expertise,” there might be expertise on “technical” subjects relevant to democratic governance (2015, 319). If so, then it becomes possible to conclude that voters might lack adequate knowledge of how to select those candidates or parties with superior technical solutions to problems that impede the achievement of widely shared goals held by most, if not all, members of the electorate. As I emphasize in the book, most democratic elections do in fact turn on such widely held objectives as economic prosperity, national security, and the like (Somin 2013, 10–11).

The fully consistent moral relativist might conclude that it does not matter whether voters can achieve their widely shared goals or not. After all, there is no “moral expertise” which can tell us whether their achievement is actually desirable. But if one believes, as most of us do, that at least some of these objectives are normatively desirable, then voters’ lack of technical expertise can in fact be a serious problem, at least in many important situations.

Kaye also suggests that voter ignorance is unimportant because “the same powerlessness that may disincentivize the pursuit of political intelligence also renders the resulting political ignorance harmless” (2015, 318–19). If an individual voter has almost no chance of actually influencing electoral outcomes, then it really doesn’t matter how ignorant he or she might be. Kaye further argues that individual voters have no ethical obligation to be well informed, precisely because their knowledge is so unlikely to make a difference.

The problem with this sort of argument is that, even if an individual voter’s ignorance has virtually no effect, the aggregate ignorance of the electorate as a whole does—at least in a society where voters’ decisions influence the selection of leaders and policies. Kaye’s argument is much
like claiming that air pollution is not a problem because each individual
gas-guzzling car, taken in isolation, has virtually no impact on air
quality.

In my view, following Jason Brennan (2011), voters do indeed have an
ethical obligation to be informed if there is even a small chance their votes
might be decisive. But even if ignorant voters have committed no ethical
wrong, their ignorance can cause harm in the aggregate. That harm need
not be the result of morally culpable behavior by individuals.

Kaye could potentially rescue his argument by showing that there is no
way to reliably identify even technical expertise. But that claim flies in the
face of massive evidence that there is technical expertise on a wide range
of public policy issues, even if the expertise is often imperfect.

Admittedly, there are some issues on which we have little or no reliable
evidence to go on. But even here, a better-informed electorate might
make sounder decisions than an ignorant one. The former is more
likely to be able to incentivize political leaders to seek out relevant infor-
mation on these issues, and to assess it reliably. Moreover, it could deter
policymakers from expending enormous resources on “solutions” to pro-
blems whose very existence cannot be proven on the basis of reliable
knowledge. For example, a better-informed electorate might have rea-
ized that there was no reason to believe that segregation was needed to
solve the (actually mostly nonexistent) problem of the supposed threat
posed by African-Americans to the economic interests and physical secur-
ity of whites.4

Even where problems do genuinely exist, a well-informed electorate
would be skeptical of expending extensive resources on “solutions”
unless and until we know that the proposed solution is likely to be effec-
tive. For example, urban “blight” was probably a genuine social problem
in mid-twentieth century America. But there was no reliable reason to
believe that forcibly displacing hundreds of thousands of people—the
policy actually pursued for decades—would “solve” it (Somin 2015b, ch. 3).

It is also worth noting that Kaye’s own claims about the potential
advantages of democracy themselves rely on strong assumptions about rel-
vant “technical knowledge.” For example, the claim that democracy
creates a “nonrevolutionary outlet for political frustrations” implies that
we have relevant knowledge about the causes of revolutions and the
nature and workings of political frustration.
Kaye also argues that ignorance-induced errors are likely to be harmless, because randomly distributed. I rebutted such claims in Chapter 4 of my book (110–17) and will consider them further below.

**Why Current Levels of Ignorance Are Dangerous**

Aside from Kaye, the commentators in the symposium all assume that political knowledge does matter. Several, however, argue that actual levels of political ignorance are not as problematic as I contend.

Thomas Christiano acknowledges that voter ignorance is potentially dangerous, but contends that it need not be problematic if relatively ignorant voters can take advantage of a “division of labor” under which they rely on the knowledge of others rather than their own to make decisions (Christiano 2015; see also Lupia and McCubbins 1998). For example, they can rely on “opinion leaders” with superior knowledge and expertise, or on other external sources of information. When we get sick, we often go to a doctor or nurse to determine how to cure our ailments rather than try to figure it out for ourselves. Similarly, voters might be able to rely on opinion leaders to prescribe cures for the social ills that afflict the body politic.

But this happy scenario depends on voters being willing and able to find opinion leaders who have genuine insight. Otherwise, relying on their guidance is more like going to a witch doctor or a snake-oil salesman than to a genuine expert. Unfortunately, the opinion leaders voters turn to are rarely ones with deep expertise on public policy or a strong track record of accurate predictions. Rather, they tend to be those that are most entertaining and most likely to reinforce the voters’ preexisting views—people like Rush Limbaugh on the right or Jon Stewart on the left, among others (Somin 2013, 99–100).

Some of this tendency is due to rational ignorance; figuring out how to choose good opinion leaders itself requires knowledge that many voters do not have, such as knowledge of how to determine what sort of expertise is most relevant to the issue at hand. But many of the weaknesses of the opinion-leader information shortcut are the result of rational irrationality: voters choose opinion leaders based on criteria other than truth seeking, particularly their tendency to validate the voters’ existing worldview and self-image. For example, it is extremely rare for voters to search out opinion leaders with political perspectives significantly divergent from the voters’ own.
As Christiano notes (2015, 259–60), experts are not the only possible sources of guidance for voters. They can also rely on political parties and interest groups, among others. Parties can indeed provide some useful information to voters. For example, knowing that a candidate is a Democrat or Republican can often provide useful information about his or her positions, even if the voter knows nothing else about the individual in question.

However, as explained more fully in my book (Somin 2013, 93–95), parties are far from an ideal information shortcut for voters with little knowledge of public policy. Familiarity with a party’s platform and ideological orientation can enable a voter to predict the likely policies of its candidates. But it cannot tell her whether those policies are likely to have the promised effects, and whether they will achieve those goals more effectively than the proposals of the opposing party.

Worse, partisan loyalty often becomes a particularly pernicious element of rational irrationality, as loyalists skew and misperceive evidence to make their party look good and the opposition look bad. For example, Democrats tend to overestimate the rate of inflation and unemployment when a Republican president occupies the White House, and vice versa (Somin 2013, 95–96). Some recent studies find that bias against supporters of the rival party is stronger and more widespread than even racial and ethnic bias. Too often, partisanship is an impediment to logical thought about political issues rather than an aid to it.

The case of widespread belief in “birtherism”—the idea that president Obama was not born in the United States and is therefore not constitutionally eligible for the presidency—is a good example of these tendencies. Christiano notes—correctly, in my view—that discerning voters can use partisan conflict to make the accurate inference that birtherist charges are without merit (2015, 263). If they were valid, that fact would likely have been exposed by Obama’s political rivals.

But the hard reality is that a large percentage of Republicans failed to make any such inferences (Somin 2013, 85–86). Instead of carefully considering the evidence, or even relying on effective information shortcuts, they reflexively embraced the position that catered to their partisan biases. As late as the time of the 2012 election, some 39 percent of the public endorsed birtherism (Somin forthcoming, ch. 1). Democratic partisans are similarly prone to believing in dubious conspiracy theories that cater to their own partisan biases, such as the “truther” claim that the Bush administration knew about the 9/11 attacks in advance, but allowed
them to happen anyway in order to gain some sort of political advantage (Somin 2013, 86–87).

Christiano is absolutely right to believe that the opinion leaders, political parties, and other institutions offer a great deal of potentially useful information to voters. We live in an era where such information is more easily and widely available than ever before in human history. The problem is that, all too often, the voters either fail to make use of these resources, or use them in a way that actually causes more harm than good.

Even if information shortcuts do not help voters much, perhaps they do not need them, because survey data underestimates the true level of voter knowledge. Christiano suggests that this might happen because survey respondents “do not care to think hard when being asked a survey question” (2015, 257). Perhaps they don’t. But there is no reason to believe they think any harder when they go to the polls. Moreover, many of the survey questions voters do poorly on are extremely basic ones that a reasonably well-informed voter would not have to think carefully about to get right (Somin 2013, ch. 1).

In some ways, surveys probably actually overestimate voter knowledge. In the multiple-choice format used by most pollsters, respondents can often get correct answers by guessing (ibid. 33–35), a skill many Americans have picked up from experience with standardized tests. Moreover, most people find it easier to recall knowledge when prompted about an issue—as survey questions do—than when trying to recall it “cold,” as they would have to do to make use of information at the polls. It is also the case that people usually think harder and more carefully about an issue when discussing it with a person who might have a divergent point of view (as a pollster could) than when considering it on their own (Haidt 2012).

Christiano also contends that some information asked on surveys may not be all that useful to particular voters (2015, 258–59). For example, he argues that it may not matter if some 67 percent of voters at the time of the 2010 election did not realize that the economy was growing rather than shrinking, because they may have been interested in income and unemployment figures rather than GDP growth. However, growth is an important cause of increases in income and employment. The three variables are closely related, and the latter two are usually lagged effects of the former. Moreover, survey data suggest that voters around the world
routinely overestimate the unemployment rate, as well (Bartels 1996; Ipsos MORI 2014).

Christiano also claims that it does not matter much that most voters do not realize that Congress is the branch of government with the constitutional authority to declare war, because modern presidents often initiate conflicts on their own (2015, 257). Admittedly, presidents do sometimes manage to initiate war without congressional approval, as in the case of recent military interventions in Libya and against the ISIS terrorist movement in Iraq and Syria. But even under modern conditions, presidents usually seek congressional authorization for major conflicts, and generally keep those interventions without such authorization carefully limited, usually to air strikes alone. Congress’ constitutional prerogatives are not fully respected, but they matter greatly nonetheless. In addition, greater public awareness of the constitutional role of Congress in this field might enable voters to impose tighter constraints on presidential overreaching and ensure more careful advance consideration of potential military action.

Perhaps most importantly, while one can explain away voter ignorance on any particular survey item, it is hard to justify the massive extent of ignorance across a wide range of issues. While it may not matter very much if voters are unaware of one or two facts—even very basic ones—the cumulative weight of ignorance across the board is far more significant.

Melissa Lane similarly contends that voters’ factual ignorance may not matter much because, at least “in the digital age,” they can simply look up information, such as the names of their representatives in Congress, whenever they need it (2015, 354). But one often needs basic knowledge about such matters as which officials are responsible for which issues to know what to search for online in the first place. Moreover, voters who do indeed make a practice of checking up on their representatives’ performance in a more than minimal way are likely, thereby, to come to remember their names over time. While it is theoretically possible to check up on Rep. Smith’s performance regularly without ever learning her name, it seems unlikely that this will often occur in real life.

Lane is on stronger ground in suggesting that, with respect to many issues, adequate voter knowledge requires understanding that goes beyond basic facts: “A concern with political knowledge worth the name would be more epistemologically demanding than mere factual recall” (2015, 354). I completely agree, and have myself stressed that, at
least with respect to some issues, basic knowledge is necessary but not sufficient (e.g., Somin 2013, 36, and ch. 2). This, however, suggests that the available data on political ignorance actually underestimate the magnitude of the problem.

Lane misunderstands my account in Chapter 2 of how existing knowledge levels in the American electorate fall below the prerequisites of four major normative theories of democratic participation. She takes me to task for wrongly assuming that these theories purport to describe the actual functioning of real-world democracy (Lane 2015, 357). In reality, however, I treat them (as she does) as normative theories that impose explicit or implicit knowledge burdens on the electorate (Somin 2013, 38–39; see also Kelly 2012). I do not claim that advocates of these positions necessarily assume that the real-world electorate currently meets the standards set by their theories.

Christiano emphasizes, as do some of the other critics, that democracies outperform dictatorships on a variety of measures of individual freedom and economic prosperity (2015, 265). I, too, recognize that democracy is generally preferable to dictatorship (Somin 2013, 9, 103–4). But judging democracies by the standards of authoritarian regimes is judging them by a very low standard indeed. The superiority of democracy to regimes that routinely engage in repression (and sometimes even mass murder) does little to disprove the notion that voter ignorance is a serious problem in the modern democratic state. Democracy as currently practiced might be far superior to authoritarianism, yet still inferior to other potential alternatives, including democracy combined with greater decentralization and tighter limits on government power.

Benjamin Page advances a different reason for believing that voter ignorance is not a serious problem: the so-called “miracle of aggregation,” which holds that voters can make well-informed decisions collectively, even if most are individually ignorant (Page 2015; see also Page and Shapiro 1992; Converse 1990; Wittman 1995; Surowiecki 2004). It is indeed possible that the collective wisdom of the electorate is great enough to overcome any potentially deleterious effects of individual ignorance. For example, it could be that the errors made by ignorant voters are randomly distributed, and therefore mutually offsetting, thereby ensuring that elections are “really” decided by the knowledgeable minority (e.g. Converse 1990).

Unfortunately, however, Page’s defense of this theory, based in part on his own important earlier work on the subject (Page and Shapiro 1992),
fails to consider the detailed criticisms of the “miracle” advanced in my book (Somin 2013, 110–17) and by other scholars (e.g., Althaus 2003 and Caplan 2007). As Page acknowledges, “statistical aggregation can work no miracles if citizens’ errors are non-random—or, more precisely, if they are biased—in such a way that the central tendency of aggregated opinions is itself biased” (2015, 377). But this is exactly what extensive evidence shows. Ignorance-induced errors are not randomly distributed, but systematic. Controlling for other variables, such as partisanship, race, gender, education, and income, the policy views of relatively well-informed voters are very different from those of the less informed (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 2003; Caplan 2007; Somin 2013, 110–12). To the extent that party platforms and government policy are influenced by public opinion, this implies that the political world would look very different if voter ignorance were less extensive.

Page takes refuge in evidence suggesting that voters’ aggregate views are “stable, consistent, coherent, responsive to the best available new information, and reflective of citizens’ underlying values and interests” (2015, 377). His previous work with Robert Shapiro does indeed demonstrate that public opinion is more stable and consistent than many earlier scholars thought (Page and Shapiro 1992). But stability, consistency, and coherence are not virtues if they result in a distribution of opinion that is stably wrong and badly misguided. And that is precisely what is likely to happen if that opinion is heavily influenced by ignorance and irrationality.

It is much better if opinion is indeed responsive to “the best available new information, and reflective of citizens’ underlying values and interests” (Page 2015, 377). But this suggestion flies in the face of the long-standing persistence of ignorance on major policy issues over many decades. My book notes the persistence of racism, homophobia, and opposition to free trade long after more enlightened opinion came to realize that these views were based on unsound logic and were controverted by extensive evidence (Somin 2013, ch. 5). There is also little reason to believe that voters, in the aggregate, do a good job of assessing new evidence. To the contrary, public opinion and election results are often swayed by short-term developments that incumbents have little control over, and that have little relevance to their performance in office (Achen and Bartels 2004a, 2004b, and 2008; Caplan et al. 2013; Leigh 2009; Somin 2013, 101–103).

Another shortcoming of at least some versions of “miracle of aggregation” theory (and some information shortcut theories) is that they rely on
what I call the “binary choice fallacy” (Somin 2013, 96–97). They implicitly assume that voter knowledge is only significant insofar as it enables the electorate to make the “right” decision as between the alternatives presented to it. This ignores the reality that ignorance affects not only voters’ decisions as between the available options, but also helps determine what the options will be in the first place.

Parties and candidates who want to win are likely to offer better platforms if they must appeal to a relatively knowledgeable electorate than a relatively ignorant one (ibid.). This problem also undermines Lane’s claim that democratic decision making is epistemically sound so long as it allows the electorate to make “better than random” choices between the available options put before it (2015, 356–57).

In recent years, some scholars have advanced more sophisticated versions of the miracle-of-aggregation theory, which emphasize the importance of having an electorate with a diversity of knowledge and perspectives. While this work represents a valuable contribution to the literature on democratic deliberation, in my view its defense of the electorate ultimately replicates many of the shortcomings of earlier iterations of aggregation theory.

Matthew Landauer (2015, 347) suggests that voter ignorance might be irrelevant in a situation where we have confidence about the effects of a particular policy under consideration. Imagining a debate over whether to adopt a minimum-wage law, he notes that “if we have confidence in our assessment of the likely outcomes of the proposed minimum-wage law, then questions about voter knowledge and ignorance become irrelevant.” But this simply assumes away the problem that voter ignorance is likely to cause in the real world. If the relevant “we” consists of the voters deciding the question, then there is no good reason for anyone to have confidence in their judgment about the effects of the proposed law if they are ignorant of basic labor economics (and perhaps other relevant considerations). By positing that we have good reason to be confident in the validity of the voters’ judgment on the minimum-wage issue, Landauer’s hypothetical simply assumes away the most important reason why voter ignorance is often dangerous. It is certainly true that ignorance becomes irrelevant in a world where the electorate can make well-informed decisions (deserving our confidence) about the minimum wage and other difficult policy issues without actually knowing much about them. The problem is that it is exceedingly unlikely that a deeply ignorant electorate can pull off such feats on a regular basis.
It is also worth noting that, while I largely agree with Landauer’s implicit assumption that voter ignorance only matters insofar as it affects policy outcomes, some leading normative theories of democratic participation assign intrinsic value to well-informed deliberation.12

Landauer complains that I “seem . . . to assume that few problems need to be solved through democratic decision-making processes” (2015, 347). In fact, however, my argument makes no a priori assumptions about how many problems should be solved either by democratic processes or by other mechanisms. Rather, I contend that in addressing most problems, foot-voting mechanisms have a major epistemic advantage over ballot-box voting. While that advantage may, in some instances, be outweighed by other considerations, it must be given serious consideration in any analysis of the appropriate role of government in society. The range of problems that we can safely rely on democratic processes to solve depends in large part on the epistemic quality of those processes.13

**Explaining Bias in Information-Seeking**

Tom Hoffman and Paul Gunn take issue with my analysis of partisans and ideologues who discuss politics only with those who agree with their views, and seek out information only from ideologically like-minded sources—a practice that violates John Stuart Mill’s famous stricture that real truth-seekers should seek out opposing views (Mill 1859). Hoffman contends that such behavior is not illogical because “it seems more likely that they speak primarily to the politically like-minded precisely because they believe such interlocutors are closer to the truth than those who hold contrary views” (2015, 314). I do not doubt that most such partisans believe their own views to be true, and therefore consider those who agree with them to be closer to the truth than those who do not. The question is whether it is logical for them to come to that conclusion without first having given serious consideration to opposing views.

Gunn, for his part, believes that I am holding the voters to too high a standard: “It does not occur to Somin that voters who have not read Mill might never have thought of adhering to his standard, nor that it is a standard that does not apply to uncontroversial opinions—which voters might well think includes their own political opinions” (2015, 284). But one need not be a sophisticated thinker or a reader of Mill to grasp his point. The same idea is conveyed by folk wisdom about the importance of “hearing both sides of the story” and the many popular books and
movies stressing the importance of allowing both sides to present evidence and arguments in court cases. Yet most of us rarely apply such common-sense notions to political issues—largely because in dealing with those issues we do not try as hard to get at the truth as we do when considering decisions where our choices are likely to make a difference.

It is unlikely that this behavior can be explained by the conjecture that most people consider their political views to be “uncontroversial.” Anyone who follows politics at all closely soon realizes that there is deep disagreement on many important issues. If the explanation for voters’ non-Millian information-seeking were merely ignorance of the existence of opposing views, one would expect such bias to be lower among those who have the greatest interest in politics, who therefore are most likely to know of the existence of opposing views and the experts who defend them. Yet we actually observe the opposite pattern: those with the greatest interest in politics are also the most biased (Mutz 2006, 229–41). This is entirely consistent with the theory of rational irrationality, and utterly at odds with claims that partisans behave the way they do because they are unaware of the existence of opposing arguments, or assume their own views to be uncontroversial.

In considering the non-Millian behavior of voters, Gunn also makes the interesting suggestion that “a far more plausible interpretation is that they perceive more or less accurately the material import of political questions and are, accordingly, much more emotional in their evaluations of their opponents” (2015, 276). That, he suggests, may explain their unwillingness to study the other side’s arguments, or even discuss the issues with supporters of an opposing party or ideology.

This conjecture may well be true. But giving vent to emotions is precisely the opposite of truth-seeking behavior. Outside of politics, it is a commonplace observation that we make better decisions when we remain calm, “keep a clear head,” and approach the issue with an open mind. As these widespread, almost shopworn clichés indicate, you don’t have to be a sophisticated social scientist to recognize that becoming “more emotional” is not what we should do if we are genuinely interested in getting at the truth of an issue with great “material import.” None of us perfectly live up to such advice in any aspect of their lives. But there are few areas where we check basic logic and common sense at the door to the same extent as politics.
Gunn and Hoffman argue that rational ignorance and rational irrationality are flawed explanations for voter behavior. Gunn’s most fundamental criticism of my analysis of rational ignorance is that I have made the theory unfalsifiable: “When voters are ignorant, it is because they know that their (sociotropic) votes do not matter, such that it is pointless to gather information about which candidate is sociotropically superior; when they hold sociotropic beliefs and gather information, it is because they care about something other than sociotropic voting (for the purposes of which, they remain rationally ignorant)—namely, the charge they get out of rooting for their political team” (Gunn 2015, 283). Hoffman makes a similar criticism (2015, 314).

But my theory does in fact make predictions that can readily be falsified: It predicts that most voters will acquire little or no political knowledge, and that the minority who seek out more information will mostly do so for reasons other than truth-seeking for the purpose of becoming a “better” voter (Somin 2013, ch. 3). Both predictions are well-supported by the available evidence.

If ignorance were largely inadvertent, as Gunn and Hoffman suggest, we would expect to see large increases in knowledge as education levels rise, and as the Internet and other modern technology make information more easily available than ever before—even as they make it harder to avoid knowing that there are serious arguments for views opposed to one’s own. Similarly, as already noted, one would expect those who know the most about politics and follow it most closely to be more likely to seek out opposing views. They should find it even harder to remain inadvertently ignorant of their existence and relevance.

Furthermore, a person whose political ignorance is largely inadvertent or caused by the unavoidable complexity of the world should not be biased in the evaluation of new evidence, and at least should not be more biased in the evaluation of new information on political issues than nonpolitical ones. Yet, in reality, those most interested in politics tend to be the most biased, and studies show that people do in fact analyze political information in a more biased way than they analyze otherwise similar data on nonpolitical issues (e.g., Kahan et al. 2013). Finally, inadvertently ignorant voters would choose opinion leaders and
other information shortcuts based on their demonstrated track records, rather than based on ideological affinity and entertainment value.

It is easy to imagine a world where the evidence on some or all of these points cuts the other way. In that happy state of affairs, political knowledge would grow with the spread of education and modern information technology, the most knowledgeable and interested voters would be the most careful and unbiased in their evaluation of evidence, and the most popular opinion leaders would be those with a track record of good predictions. What a wonderful world that would be! Sadly, it is far removed from the one in which we actually live.

The Decision to Vote vs. the Decision to Acquire Political Information

Christiano and Hoffman also criticize my attempt to reconcile rational-ignorance theory with the “paradox of voting”—the fact that many people vote despite the low probability of influencing electoral outcomes (Somin 2013, 70–74). If voters go to the polls despite the low probability of success, perhaps they also inform themselves adequately despite the low probability that their knowledge will affect the outcome of the election. Building on earlier work by Derek Parfit (1984) and Aaron Edlin and his colleagues (2007), however, I point out that voters might go to the polls out of altruism, yet do so without making more than a minimal effort to become informed about the issues.

While the chance of having a decisive impact is low, the payoff of such a vote is potentially very high if voters are at least mildly altruistic and the difference in expected outcomes between the opposing candidates is substantial. This is enough to incentivize voters to pay the very modest cost (in time and money) of going to the polls, but not enough to incentivize them to make the much larger investments necessary to become more than minimally informed (Somin 2013, 66–71).

Hoffman complains that this “sounds suspiciously like a just-so story, a post-hoc modification meant to ensure the model’s applicability but in a way that resists disproof” (2015, 307–308). It might indeed be suspicious if the theory rested on a precise calibration of voter altruism such that it was just enough to incentivize them go to the polls, but just short of the amount needed to incentivize them to acquire extensive political information. But as explained in my book (Somin 2013, 66–71), the gap
between the amount of time and effort needed to become well informed about politics and that needed to go to the polls is very large, quite likely at least ten- or a hundred-fold. Therefore, no precise calibration is needed to make the theory work. We need merely assume that most voters are mildly altruistic towards their fellow citizens, but that few are massively so. This assumption conforms to common-sense intuitions about human behavior and is supported by data indicating that most Americans make contributions to charity, but spend only a small fraction of their income on it (ibid., 220115). It is also supported by evidence showing that turnout is sensitive to relatively small changes in the cost of voting, such as those created by poll taxes in the era when many state governments imposed them (ibid., 68).

Nor is the theory unfalsifiable, as Hoffman fears. It could easily be falsified by data indicating that most Americans demonstrate extreme altruism towards strangers, rather than merely a modest degree of it. Conversely, it could be falsified by evidence indicating that most citizens are narrowly self-interested *Homo economicus* types, who lack even modest altruism. Finally, it could be falsified by evidence showing that voters devote an enormous amount of time and effort to going to the polls and searching for political information.

Christiano suggests that voters might be more altruistic than I give them credit for (2015, 256). He notes, for example, that most Americans are willing to pay a substantial amount in taxes. However, this is a questionable indicator of altruism. Much of the willingness to pay taxes is likely based on the perception that they are needed to provide various public services that the voters themselves benefit from. Even so, most Americans believe that tax rates should be far lower than they actually are, even for the very wealthy.14

Moreover, it is likely that most people pay taxes at least in part out of fear of the Internal Revenue Service and its state equivalents, which can impose heavy fines and create bureaucratic nightmares for those who disobey. A 2014 poll conducted by the IRS Oversight Board found that 59 percent of Americans admit that fear of an audit has “a great deal” or “some” influence on their willingness to pay taxes (IRS Oversight Board 2014, 8). This figure may understate the true influence of fear, since some survey respondents might not be willing to admit this morally questionable motive, especially in a survey conducted by the IRS.15
Hoffman, Gunn, and Lane (2015, 353) all contend that, if voters believe they have enough information to cast a ballot, they cannot simultaneously also be rationally ignorant.16 As Gunn puts it (2015, 279), “if voting is explained by voters’ beliefs about the beneficial effects of voting . . . then voters cannot be open to incentives pertaining separately to the value of information, since they must logically believe that they already possess sufficient information to make an evaluation relevant to their votes.”

This overlooks a key component of my argument: whether we believe we have “sufficient information” to make a decision critically depends on how important that decision is, and how likely it is to have an effect. In many areas of life, the amount of information we consider sufficient to make a decision with very little impact is much smaller than the amount sufficient to make a decision that has a much greater effect (Somin 2013, 81–82). Later in his article, Gunn correctly notes that “Somin’s ‘minimal effort’ might mean that voters inform themselves only as much as they think necessary given the negligible import of a single vote” (2015, 280). That is exactly right. This is why most people devote far greater time and effort to acquiring relevant information when choosing which car or TV set to buy than when deciding who to vote for, in even the most important elections. It is also why jurors generally seek out more information and deliberate far more carefully than voters do (Somin 2014a). Consumers and jurors know that their decisions are likely to make a real difference, while those of voters have only a very small chance of doing so.

Consumers, jurors, and voters are all sensitive to incentives. The former two groups seek out more information and evaluate it more carefully because they know their choices are likely to make a substantial difference. The latter, by contrast, behave very differently because their choices matter far less. To put it another way, the average voter would surely seek out more information and consider it far more carefully if she knew that her vote would be decisive to the outcome.

A recent electoral fluke provides some interesting confirmation for this point. As a result of a botched attempt at gerrymandering by interest groups, college student Jen Henderson became the sole voter eligible to vote on a Columbia, Missouri referendum over whether to raise a local sales tax (Campbell 2015a). Henderson carefully researched this somewhat esoteric policy issue before making her decision, and concluded that the sales-tax increase was not as good an idea as it had seemed at first (ibid.;
Campbell (2015b). She clearly devoted far more time and effort to the issue than she would have had it been an ordinary referendum where her vote was just one of many thousands. While it would be a mistake to generalize too much from this one case, it is at least suggestive.

Hoffman (2015, 308) tries to use a survey indicating that 70 percent of voters believe that their votes “really matter” to show that their ignorance is likely inadvertent, because they clearly believe that their votes actually make a difference. But this survey should not be taken to mean that the survey respondents necessarily believe that their votes are highly likely to affect electoral outcomes. The term “really matter” is somewhat ambiguous, and could merely indicate a belief that voting is a valuable or morally desirable activity even if it only has a very small chance of affecting the outcome.

This survey result could nonetheless mean that voters overestimate the likelihood of casting a decisive ballot, at least to some degree. Voters who lack the time or expertise needed to calculate the odds could well conclude that their chance of influencing the outcome of a presidential election is, say, one in ten million, rather than one in sixty million or one in one hundred million. But it seems highly unlikely that they would conclude that the true probability is a figure high enough to justify a major expenditure of time and effort on seeking out and analyzing political information.

Gunn claims that rational political ignorance is not really rational because “voters cannot logically free ride on . . . persuaders without first possessing beliefs about these persuaders and the value of their information” (2015, 281). It is true that voters making decisions on the basis of minimal information must have some beliefs about the value of that information. But given the low probability of casting a decisive vote, those beliefs themselves are unlikely to be the result of extensive information-seeking and careful evaluation of opposing views. In many aspects of our lives, we routinely form beliefs on the basis of very limited analysis, in part because we know that it is not all that important to get the issue right. The book gives the example of my own belief that Harrison Ford is a great actor, which is based on extremely limited knowledge and analysis (Somin 2013, 82). If the issue were more important to me, I would consider it with far greater rigor. But it is not, and is unlikely to become so in the future. For that reason, I will likely continue to hold this opinion, even though I recognize that careful study might lead me to modify it.
Finally, Gunn understandably takes issue with my analogy between
sports fans and people who acquire political information for reasons that
go beyond being a “better” voter. He complains that “if voters are
‘fans’ rather than earnest participants, their political preferences must
accordingly be egoistic rather than sociotropic” (2015, 275). Sports fans’
motivations, he contends, are essentially “internal” rather than “external,”
which contradicts my assumption that people go to the polls and hold po-
litical views largely out of altruism (ibid.).

The point of the sports-fan analogy (Somin 2013, 78–79), however,
was not to suggest that “political fans” are akin to sports fans in every
way. It merely indicates that both groups seek out information primarily
for reasons other than truth-seeking. It is not my claim that all or even
most voters fit this description—only those who follow politics far
more closely than average because they are the ones most interested in
the subject.

For this group, the motives in question involve reinforcement of
their preexisting views and a sense of camaraderie with fellow fans of
the same political “team,” among other things. Such motives need
not be purely “internal” or “egoistic,” at least not in the narrow
sense of those terms. Many sports fans believe that supporting their
team is an ethical imperative, and value the sense of being part of a
tight-knit, mutually supportive fan community. Similarly, political
fans derive part of their satisfaction from being part of a community
working for what they consider to be a righteous cause. At the same
time, both types of fans make little effort to systematically analyze
whether their “team” really is as admirable as they assume. Doing so
would undermine the psychic gratification that is a big part of their
motivation in the first place.

To put it another way, fans’ motivations need not be narrowly ego-
istic for them to diverge from truth-seeking. Of course, the desire to
think of yourself as a good person and a loyal supporter of an admirable
“team” may be egoistic in a broader sense. If self-interest is defined
broadly enough, almost any behavior can be classified as such, even
that which is seemingly altruistic. Ultimately, the key point is that
the motivation for becoming a sports fan or a political fan is one that
is often at odds with truth-seeking. For present purposes, this matters
far more than whether it is egoistic, altruistic, or some combination
of both.
II. THE INFORMATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF FOOT VOTING

In the second half of the book, I turn from outlining the problem of political ignorance to assessing possible solutions. In chapter 5, I argue that the dangers of political ignorance can be substantially reduced by limiting and decentralizing the power of government. In that way, more of our decisions could be made by “voting with our feet” instead of ballot-box voting. People can vote with their feet by choosing in which jurisdiction to live in a federal system, and also by choosing which products to buy and which organizations to join in the market and civil society.

Both rational ignorance and rational irrationality are far less severe problems for foot voters than for ballot box voters. The most fundamental reason is that foot voters know that their decisions will make a difference, and therefore have much stronger incentives to both acquire relevant information and evaluate it in an unbiased way (Somin 2013, 120–26). This is why most of us routinely spend more time and effort evaluating the potential purchase of a laptop or a smart phone than evaluating candidates for the presidency or any other political office. Considerable empirical evidence also shows that foot voters do better than ballot-box voters in acquiring and assessing information (ibid., 122–37).

In Chapter 6, I explain why political ignorance strengthens the case for judicial review. Chapter 7 evaluates a variety of proposals for increasing voter knowledge. While several of them have some merit, I argue that, at least for the foreseeable future, none are likely to make a major dent in the problem of political ignorance.

Most of my critics devote less space and analysis to this part of the book than to the first half, even though I would have expected the second half to be the most controversial part. Nonetheless, several do give it careful consideration. They are right to conclude that my book does not provide anything like a complete theory of either democracy or the appropriate size and centralization of government. But most of their more specific criticisms of the argument are off base.

Is Expanded Foot Voting Feasible?

Christiano, Kaye, and Josiah Ober suggest that significant expansions of foot voting are probably impossible under modern conditions. For example, Christiano notes that “all of the advanced democracies made
decisive turns away from small government in the early to mid-twentieth century and these changes were confirmed repeatedly in popular elections” (2015, 267). Ober (2015, 369) is less confident than Christiano that modern democratic government performs all that well. But he still suggests that it largely meets the expectations of citizens, such that major change is unlikely barring some kind of dramatic shock or systemic crisis.

As I emphasized in the Conclusion to my book, I agree that major movement in the direction of decentralization and limitation of government power will not be easy to achieve, and will not happen quickly, if at all. However, substantial progress is feasible. Over the last twenty-five years, such mature democracies as Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland have achieved major reductions in the role of government in their society, which at the very least indicates that such change is far from impossible (Somin 2013, 196). While this degree of change is not great enough to solve the problem of political ignorance completely, it can take a major bite out of it by transferring more issues into the domain of foot voting.

Even incremental changes in the right direction can potentially make a big difference. While government would still be too large and complex for voters to monitor effectively, at least some important issues could be taken out of its hands and transferred to the private sector, where they can be handled by foot voting instead of ballot-box voting.

Moreover, it is possible that, over time, distrust in government—which is already widespread in the United States and many other democracies (e.g., Hetherington 2006)—will evolve into a rethinking of the nature of its role in society. For many centuries, most people took it for granted that promoting correct religious beliefs should be one of the major functions of the state. Yet over the last two hundred years, most voters in the Western world have come to realize that governments—including democratic governments—are unlikely to be able to make good decisions in this field. Perhaps a similar consensus against state control might develop with respect to at least some important areas where most people today take government control for granted.

Recent social–science research increasingly finds that private organizations can effectively handle a variety of tasks that the conventional wisdom has long held to be feasible only for governments. It is possible that public and elite opinion will, over time, come to recognize this, at least to some degree. At the very least, privatization might come to be seen as having greater potential than the other often-advanced strategy
for dealing with the combination of voter ignorance and hyper-complex
government: delegation of greater power to bureaucratic experts (Breyer
1993; Sunstein 2002). 

Even if it turns out to be impossible to cut back on the overall role of
government in modern society, there is every reason to believe that it can
at least be further decentralized. As I point out in the book, such small
democracies as Denmark, Luxembourg, and Switzerland are generally
considered to be among the best-governed nations in the world, and
do not seem to suffer unduly from the absence of economies of scale
(Somin 2013, 195–96). This suggests that larger democracies—particularly
the biggest ones, such as the United States—can decentralize power over
numerous issues currently handled by their central governments (ibid.). If
Switzerland is large enough to have its own health-care policy, for
example, the same is likely true of Massachusetts, Oregon, or Virginia.
If Singapore can do so, then so can London or New York City. Decen-
tralization without privatization is, in many cases, not as good a solution to
the problem of political ignorance as is transfer of power to the private
sector (ibid., 137–39). Nonetheless, it is a potentially huge improvement
over the status quo. Recent survey data suggest that the public trusts state
and local governments more than the federal government to handle a
variety of issues, and may be willing to support at least some substantial
devolution of power (Samples and Ekins 2014).

Obviously, any prescription for major change away from a long-domi-
nant status quo is subject to the objection that the conventional wisdom
cannot possibly be as misguided as critics claim. As Christiano puts it, “it is
hard to believe that all of [the modern expansion of government] was a big
mistake on the part of citizens” (2015, 267). But history knows many
examples of widely accepted policies and practices that did indeed
prove to be big mistakes. It is enough to cite the well-known examples
of the longstanding prevalence of slavery, male domination of women,
and homophobia, among others. Both political institutions and majority
public opinion can often settle into harmful equilibria for long periods
of time. Widespread political ignorance and irrationality are, in fact,
two of the mechanisms by which this might happen (cf. Caplan 2003).

**Does Foot Voting Work?**

Even if a major expansion of foot voting is feasible, perhaps it is undesir-
able because it simply would not work. Lane, for example, points out that
foot voters can make mistakes, just as ballot-box voters do (2015, 358). Gunn argues that both foot voters and ballot-box voters must sometimes make difficult decisions in a complex world, and therefore might make mistakes out of “radical ignorance” (2015, 292). It is certainly true that such errors occur. But it is also true that foot voters, because of their very different incentives, are less likely to make mistakes than ballot-box voters, and more likely to correct them if they do (Somin 2013, ch. 5). For similar reasons they are also more likely to seek out useful new knowledge (Somin, forthcoming, ch. 5).

Page claims that foot voting will mainly help only the affluent (who he believes are more mobile) while shortchanging the poor, thereby exacerbating “class biases” (2015, 292). In reality, the very poor make interstate moves more often than the affluent, and have historically been among the biggest gainers from foot voting, a point I document in detail in the book. Among other things, they can often more easily move than the affluent because the latter are far more likely to own fixed assets that they cannot take with them, such as property in land (cf. Somin 2011a).

Gunn argues that evidence that migrants do not do as well as long-term residents of the nations they move to in terms of income and other social indicators suggests that foot voting may not be effective (2015, 288–89). But this is judging foot voters by the wrong standard. It is not surprising that migrants often don’t do as well in a given region as those who have lived there their whole lives, are more familiar with the economy and culture, and have a more extensive social network. The more relevant comparison is between the migrants’ well-being in the new jurisdiction and the conditions they experienced in their previous home. By that criterion, the evidence of the success of international foot voting is overwhelming, with truly enormous gains in income for migrants (e.g., Clemens 2011; Leeson and Gochenour 2015). As I note in the book, there is also a long history of major gains for internal foot voters in the United States and other countries, particularly the poor and oppressed minorities (Somin 2013, ch. 5).

Landauer (2015, 341–42) claims that foot voting is not a genuine alternative to ballot-box voting because it is not a “‘collective decision-making procedure,’” by which he means that it is not carried out through formal collective action that imposes legally binding decisions on all the members of a given society. It is true that foot voting is not a “collectively binding” procedure in the same sense as ballot box voting (ibid., 341). But so what? It is still a mechanism by which individuals
can choose which government policies they wish to live under or—in the case of private-sector foot voting—what goods, services, and associations they wish to patronize and participate in.

Moreover, as I describe in the book, foot voting need not be purely individualistic, but can be engaged in by organized groups as well (Somin 2013, 127–28). Such cases as the migration of the Mormons and the Pilgrims are noteworthy examples. Even when foot voting is primarily undertaken by individuals or small groups, such as families, it can have major collective effects, as numerous different individual choices affect the incentives facing regional and local governments and private-sector producers of goods and services. The former will have incentives to adopt policies that are attractive to potential migrants, and the latter to develop products that appeal to them. These effects are heightened if the federal system in question is structured so as to incentivize interjurisdictional competition (ibid., 126–27). In this sense, foot voting is a mechanism of collective decision making in some of the same ways as the market. Both transmit information and restructure incentives through the confluence of numerous different individual choices.26

Perhaps Landauer means to suggest that ballot-box voting differs from foot voting because its results are legally binding, and thereby provide stronger guarantees to their beneficiaries. But that is far from being a necessary truth. Today’s “collectively binding” political decision can be and often is reversed by a future decision of the same type. Even a law that stays on the books might be undermined by flawed implementation or other shortcomings. Moreover, constitutional constraints on government power, of the sort advocated in my book, can, to some degree, provide protection for foot voters by increasing their options and making it more difficult for the state to override their decisions. Neither foot voting not ballot-box voting offers foolproof protection. But the former enables decision makers to make their choices under conditions that reduce the danger of ignorance and irrationality.

Landauer also criticizes my use of the example of early twentieth-century migration of blacks to the North as a case of effective information use by foot voters under adverse conditions. Although he concedes that black migrants used information effectively and made good decisions, he argues that this was an easy case because Jim Crow was so obviously bad (Landauer 2015, 343). But the real informational achievement here was not figuring out that conditions in the South were bad, but that the situation in the North was better—and by a large enough margin to
justify the significant costs of moving to an unfamiliar region, far away from most of their friends, relatives, and social networks (Somin 2013, 132–33; see also Somin forthcoming, ch. 5). Given the existence of extensive racism in the North, and the fact that most Southern blacks were poor and ill-educated in an era when information was not nearly as easy to acquire as today, figuring this out was a far from trivial challenge. Landauer’s analysis also overlooks the other evidence of the informational advantages of foot voting analyzed in Chapter 5 (e.g., 136–37).

Landauer is similarly unpersuaded by my analysis of how Southern white ballot-box voters made poor choices as a result of ignorance (Landauer 2015, 133–35), and thus performed worse than foot voters. He argues that their longstanding support for segregationist policies was simply a result of their racist values, and that “voters knew what they wanted, and were able to get it from their politicians” (ibid., 345). He tries to use against me my statements that the Southern political system was designed to maintain white supremacy (Somin 2013, 134), and that it was an example of good knowledge enabling voters to implement bad values (ibid., 55).

Landauer’s attempt to catch me in a supposed contradiction is based on a conflation of two different possible motives for promoting white supremacy, a distinction I emphasize in the book (Somin 2013, 55):

What looks to us like bad values is often just another form of factual ignorance. For example, some Jim Crow–era white racists probably hated African Americans without any ulterior purpose and supported segregation for that reason. But many others supported it because of factually mistaken beliefs about the consequences of allowing integration and giving blacks equal legal rights. Many believed that this would result in a massive increase in violent black crime against whites or in a harmful “degeneration” of the white race caused by interracial marriage. Greater public knowledge of the actual effects of segregation and integration might not have eliminated racism entirely. But it would surely have diminished white support for harsh segregationist policies.

Factual ignorance may not have been a major factor for those whites whose primary motive for supporting segregation was intrinsic. But it was enormously important for those whose motive was primarily instrumental. The latter group supported harmful policies because they
wrongly—and usually simplistically—assumed that there was a zero-sum tradeoff between the interests of whites and those of African-Americans. It is difficult to know for certain how big a role such instrumental considerations played in the thinking of Southern whites. But there is no doubt that they were highly prominent in the political discourse of the Jim Crow era, which at least suggests that experienced politicians and activists believed that they mattered greatly to the voters. Similarly crude zero-sum thinking played an important role in other instances of racial and ethnic oppression, such as the Nazi persecution of the Jews (Somin 2013, 8–9).

Ober (2015, 367) and Lane (2015, 357) both suggest that, instead of expanding foot voting, we can better address the problem of political ignorance by relying on “sortition” mechanisms, which randomly select a subset of voters to make policy decisions. The groups in question might be small enough to incentivize more and better information gathering and less biased use of that information. Such proposals have attained a more prominent place in the literature on democratic theory in the two years since my book was published. I offer a detailed critique of this tendency in the forthcoming second edition of Democracy and Political Ignorance (Somin forthcoming, ch. 7; see also Somin 2010). For now, I will say only that these proposals are vulnerable to many of the same criticisms of Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin’s 2004 “Deliberation Day” proposal (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004) that I made in the first edition (2013, 177–80). Among other things, sortition mechanisms are vulnerable to dangerous manipulation by political incumbents, and are unlikely to be effective in the face of the enormous size and complexity of modern government.

I do not contend that an expansion of foot voting is the only solution to the problem of political ignorance that is worth trying. In Chapter 7, I argue that we can make marginal advances through improvements in education policy, and possibly by adopting a system under which voters are paid to learn about political issues (Somin 2013, 176–77, 188–90). But even in the best-case scenario, it is unlikely that such efforts would achieve more than modest results, especially in a world where government is as large and complex as it currently is. Political ignorance will continue to be a serious problem. Thus, there will still be a great need for the sort of improvements that can—at least for some time—be achieved only by the expansion of foot voting.
Foot Voting and Non-Epistemic Justifications for Democracy

Even if foot voting is an effective remedy for the problem of political ignorance, expanding it could potentially undermine other, non-epistemic advantages of the democratic process. This is an important issue that I deliberately chose not to address in my book. Because I sought to focus more narrowly on the problem of political ignorance, I did not attempt to present a more general normative theory of democracy and the role of government in society. As I note in the book, in some cases the epistemic advantages of foot voting might be outweighed by opposing considerations that count in favor of leaving certain issues under the control of a centralized government, or even an international political authority (e.g., Somin 2013, 193). *Democracy and Political Ignorance* is already a fairly ambitious book in attempting to give a wide-ranging analysis of political ignorance and potential solutions to the problem it causes. I thought it would be a mistake to try to explicate and defend a more general normative political theory in the same work.

Still, my critics understandably raise the issue of how my analysis might relate to various non-epistemic considerations. Melissa Lane complains that because I “fail . . . to set out a principled basis on which to value democracy even in the face of the ignorance account, [I] can’t explain ‘why smaller government is smarter’ without being at risk of undermining the basis for any democratic government at all” (2015, 351–52). For his part, as we have seen, Kaye (2015, 334) worries that I neglect the ways in which democracy “creates a stable, non-revolutionary outlet for political frustrations that is quite robust to the impact of selfish or ignorant citizens.”

Contra Lane, while I do not advance any comprehensive theory of democracy, I do note several reasons why it has value, even in a world of widespread political ignorance. Among other things, I emphasize that democracy enables the citizens to punish (and thereby disincentivize) large and obvious abuses and policy errors by political leaders (Somin 2013, 8–9, 103–4), and that it may be necessary to address market failures whose scale is so large that they cannot effectively be dealt with by the private sector alone (ibid., 193). The former characteristic accounts for democracy’s major advantages over dictatorships, where massive abuses are common and routinely go unpunished. These advantages justify maintaining democracy in some form, and maintaining state control over at least some issues. But there is no reason to believe that they justify
maintaining anything approaching the current size, scope, and centralization of government.

The same point applies to Kaye’s focus on the need for an outlet for political frustration. He does not explain why we would be unable to find such an outlet in a political system where the state was significantly smaller and more decentralized than it is at present. Moreover, the failings of large and complex government may themselves lead to frustration, which, in turn, could lead to the election of demagogues who enact harmful policies, and potentially create a vicious circle of bad policies that would be hard to escape (Caplan 2003). As I write, frustration with the performance of large and complex governments has recently led to the election of a neo-fascist government in Hungary, to the rising popularity of racist and xenophobic movements such as the National Front in France, and to Donald Trump’s surprisingly successful presidential campaign in the United States, which also relies on the exploitation of ignorance and xenophobia (Somin forthcoming, ch. 1). It is far from clear that giving free rein to centralized government is likely to diminish dangerous “frustration” rather than exacerbate it.

That said, it is certainly possible that the need to control frustration or achieve some other non-epistemic goal would justify giving greater power to centralized, democratic government than would otherwise be necessary. The proper weighing of such considerations against epistemic ones is an important subject for future work in political theory. In the process of conducting such weighing, it is worth remembering that foot voting also has important non-epistemic advantages over ballot-box voting, such as creating greater scope for meaningful individual choice (Somin 2014a). I cannot hope to do full justice to these difficult issues here.

I will, however, close by noting that the problem of political ignorance is relevant to any justification for democracy that relies on the democratic process to ameliorate social problems whose solutions are not blatantly obvious or to make effective use of information in some other way. The existence of widespread political ignorance in a given democratic society should, at the very least, lower our confidence in the idea that that democratic government can carry out such tasks effectively, and strengthen the case for considering alternative approaches to these issues, including the potential utility of foot voting (Somin 2013, 192–93).

∗∗∗

As this symposium demonstrates, the problem of political ignorance remains an important issue for political theory—one on which we have
nothing resembling a consensus, even after some two thousand years of
debate on the subject. I do not imagine that either my book or this
essay will definitively resolve the longstanding controversy over political
ignorance, or even come close to doing so. But I hope I have at least
achieved the more modest goal of outlining a possible new foundation
for the rational-ignorance approach to political knowledge, and explain-
ing why expanded foot voting deserves serious consideration as a possible
cure for the epistemic shortcomings of ballot-box voting.

Sometimes, the will of the people is best expressed somewhere other than at the polls.

NOTES

1. I have also recently considered some relevant related issues in Somin 2014a and Somin 2014b.
2. The idea of rational political ignorance was first developed in Downs 1957, ch. 13. For a more detailed elaboration of the theory and its implications, see Somin 2015a.
3. This implies that most of those who acquire unusually large amounts of knowl-
dge do so because they value it as a consumption good, rather than because they
are investing in information that would help them become better voters.
4. I briefly examined this case in my book (133–34).
5. I discuss this in greater detail in the book (Somin 2013, 97–100).
6. For a review of several such studies, see Klein and Chang 2015.
9. Page (2015, 377) briefly cites Althaus, but does not engage with his arguments, except to endorse a minor methodological suggestion advanced by Althaus for improving analysis of survey data.
11. For my take on these matters, see Somin 2013, 114–16, and Somin 2014b.
12. For reviews of such theories and their knowledge prerequisites, see Somin 2013, ch. 2, and Kelly 2012.
13. Landauer also suggests that, instead of relying on foot voting, we should work to “improve” democratic processes. However, he does not respond to my extensive
analysis of various proposals for alleviating voter ignorance, which indicates that they are unlikely to generate substantial increases in voter knowledge in the fore-
seeable future (Somin 2013 ch. 7).
14. Much of the widespread public support for increasing taxes on the wealthy
appears to be a result of ignorance about the tax rates they currently pay (Somin 2013, 17–18).
15. The same survey also indicates that large numbers of respondents claim that their
decision to pay taxes is strongly influenced by moral considerations such as “per-
sonal integrity” (ibid). But this still suggests that many would pay less if not for the additional effects of fear. Moreover, it seems likely that some of those who chose
“integrity” and other similar answers did so insincerely because this is a socially acceptable response.

16. For a more extended argument along the same lines, see Bennett and Friedman 2008.
17. I cited the survey myself, to prove a different point. Somin 2013, 74.
18. I made a similar point in ibid., 74.
19. For a classic account, see Hornby 1998.
20. See also Somin forthcoming, ch. 5, which adds some additional evidence.
21. For a recent overview, see Stringham 2015.
22. For my critique of the “rule of experts” solution to the problem of political ignorance, see Somin 2013, 183–85.
24. Despite Gunn’s (2015, 288–90) suggestions otherwise, the evidence also shows that foot voters tend to gravitate towards jurisdictions with greater economic freedom. See Ashby 2007 and Sorens 2013.
25. Here he is quoting Przeworski 2010, 101, a passage I quoted in Somin 2013, 121.
26. Cf. the classic account of the market as a mechanism for collective information transmission in Hayek 1945.
27. Sortition is also sometimes referred to as “lottocracy,” the term Lane uses.
28. The latter also tells against Ober’s efforts to use ancient Athenian democracy, which relied extensively on sortition, as a model for the reform of modern democracy (Ober 2008 and 2015a). Sortition and other similar mechanisms worked relatively well in Athens because its government was far smaller and simpler than ours today, and because the franchise was largely limited to those who had extensive experience in its operations. I discuss these points in greater detail in Somin 2009.
29. Lane (2015, 357) briefly notes this later in her article, but does not consider how it undermines her own earlier criticism of the book.

REFERENCES


