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WHY POLITICAL IGNORANCE UNDERMINES THE WISDOM OF THE MANY

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ABSTRACT: *Hélène Landemore's Democratic Reason effectively demonstrates how cognitive diversity may potentially improve the quality of democratic decisions. But in setting out the preconditions that democracy must meet in order for the many to make collectively well-informed decisions, Landemore undermines the case for voter competence more than she strengthens it. The conditions she specifies are highly unlikely to be achieved by any real-world democracy. Widespread voter ignorance and the size and complexity of modern government are severe obstacles to any effort to implement Landemore's vision. Better-informed decision making is more likely to be achieved by allowing a wider range of issues to be decided by "voting with your feet" instead of at the ballot box.*

Hélène Landemore's *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton University Press, 2013) is a valuable contribution to the literature on democratic competence and the "miracle of aggregation." Unlike most previous scholarship, it analyzes the potential benefits of diversity of knowledge and perspective in the electorate. It also effectively sets forth many of the conditions that must be established before a large group of laypeople can aggregate information more effectively than a small group of experts.

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But there is a deep tension at the heart of Landemore's project. On the surface, it seems to be an argument for the epistemic virtue of democracy. As Landemore puts it, she seeks to establish that "democracy is a smart collective decision-making procedure that taps into the collective intelligence of the people as a group in ways that can even, under the right conditions, make it smarter than alternative regimes such as the rule of one or the rule of the few" (1-2). The key phrase in this passage is "the right conditions." As Landemore defines them, those conditions are so improbable that her work ends up doing more to discredit than support the "wisdom of crowds" rationale for democratic decision making.

This is particularly true once we recognize that the rule of the one and the rule of the many do not exhaust the possible alternatives to democratic decision-making processes. "Voting with your feet" in a federal system or in the market and civil society is an additional alternative that can also tap the wisdom of the many, while avoiding both the epistemic pitfalls of democracy and the dangerous concentration of power inherent in oligarchy or dictatorship.

These problems don't necessarily diminish the value of Landemore's project or even show that it fails to meet her own objectives in writing the book. As she indicates, her main interest in this work is to develop an "ideal of democratic decision making" that could work well "provided the theoretical assumptions are shown to have a real life equivalent" (9). But in order for the argument to provide support for democratic decision making in ways relevant to real-world debates about the desirability of alternative political institutions, there should be a realistically feasible way to meet those assumptions. Unfortunately, the stringent nature of the assumptions also makes them extraordinarily difficult to achieve in the real world.

In Part I of this review, I briefly outline Landemore's argument and the contribution it makes to democratic theory. Part II explains why the ideal conditions necessary for the wisdom of the many to work are unlikely to be met in any real-world democratic political system.¹ Finally, Part III explains the epistemic superiority of foot voting over democratic decision making under Landemore's own criteria for evaluating the latter. The agenda of this review is limited. I do not claim that democratic decision making always fails, or that we should make all social decisions by means of foot voting. Obviously, the effective use of information is just one of many factors that must be

considered in deciding the appropriate size, scope, and structure of government. But I do suggest that, at least at the margin, wisdom-of-crowds arguments like Landemore's strengthen the case for foot voting over ballot-box voting.

I. LANDEMORE'S THEORY OF DIVERSITY AND COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Decades of survey data suggest that most voters know very little about politics and public policy.² A variety of scholars have argued that this problem can be overcome through the "miracle of aggregation," whereby the effects of ignorance cancel each other out (e.g., Wittman 1995; Converse 1990): Those whose ignorance leads them to vote for one candidate are offset by those whose ignorance leads them to vote for his or her opponent. In this way, the electoral outcome is determined by the knowledgeable minority. More recently, some scholars have argued that large groups of laypeople can often outperform smaller groups of experts because the former have a greater diversity of knowledge, even if each individual layperson knows less than each individual expert (Surowiecki 2004; Page 2007). Landemore's distinctive contribution is to combine these two literatures in a sustained and systematic way. She argues that diversity enables democratic electorates to reach epistemically superior decisions relative to those of a more expert elite (160–66).

A simple example can help illustrate why Landemore's theory might be true. Imagine an electorate of 1 million voters where each possesses one distinct unit of relevant knowledge, but each knows a different unit from the others. Compare that electorate to 100 experts, each of whom possess 100 distinct units of knowledge. Although each expert knows 100 times more information than each member of the lay electorate, the *total* knowledge of the larger group is vastly greater than that of the smaller group of experts: 1 million units of information compared to just 10,000. If the large group of laypeople can effectively harness its greater pool of knowledge, it can make vastly better-informed decisions than the smaller group of experts, even though individual members of the former group know much less than individual members of the latter.

The knowledge distribution of real-world electorates does not, of course, precisely mimic this example. In many cases, the information held by one voter duplicates that of others. Nonetheless, it is at least

highly plausible to suppose that the hundred million or more people who vote in American national elections, for example, collectively know more politically relevant information than any small group of experts.

The question is whether majority voting or other similar democratic decision-making structures can in fact effectively harness the diverse knowledge of the many, or whether ignorance, irrationality, and poor incentives undercut the prospects for such a happy outcome. As Landemore recognizes (chs. 5, 7), we cannot assume that majority rule automatically makes effective use of diverse knowledge. It can do so only if certain essential preconditions are met. The question is whether any actually existing democracy can meet them, or is likely to do so in the foreseeable future.

II. DEMOCRACY AND THE PRECONDITIONS OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Landemore's optimistic account of collective intelligence under democracy is correct as far as it goes—but only if the polity in question meets stringent preconditions. Among the most important of these is lack of correlated errors and a serious effort on the part of most voters to engage with opposing views. In addition, voters need to have at least some basic preliminary knowledge on which to base their deliberations and their decisions to seek out additional information. Unfortunately, actual electorates routinely fall short on all of these counts. And the reasons for their failure are deeply rooted in the basic structure of the modern democratic state.

Diversity and Uncorrelated Errors

As Landemore recognizes (162–63), a large but diverse electorate is likely to make good decisions only if it does not suffer from correlated errors. If their mistakes are “negatively correlated” with each other, then they will tend to “cancel each other out,” thereby allowing the collective wisdom of the group to overcome individual ignorance (163). Thus, Landemore's conclusions “rely on the assumption that there is a symmetrical distribution (random or otherwise) of errors around the right answer (Miracle of Aggregation) or that errors are negatively correlated” (195). If this assumption is false, so too is the theory's optimistic

conclusion about democracy. The collective benefits of cognitive diversity are unlikely to have much effect if the electorate suffers from systematic errors that afflict a majority of the voters, or sometimes even just a large minority. For example, if there is a widespread error that leads 60 percent of the voters in an electorate of 1 million people to greatly overestimate the benefits of Policy A relative to those of Policy B, then it is highly likely that the voters will make a wrong decision on this issue regardless of how cognitively diverse they otherwise are, and regardless of much collective knowledge they otherwise have. Indeed, the majority in this scenario is likely to reach worse outcomes than random chance or even a randomly chosen individual layperson selected from among their number. After all, 40 percent of the time, the latter will be chosen from among the minority that does not share the majority's error, and thus might make a correct decision. Under majority rule, this erroneous policy will be enacted nearly 100 percent of the time.

Thus, Landemore's argument that diversity-based collective wisdom can result in well-informed decisions holds true only if that wisdom is not overridden by widespread, correlated error. This is a limitation that it shares with conventional miracle-of-aggregation theories (Somin 1998; Caplan 2007; Somin 2013, 110–12, 114–15). Unfortunately, an enormous amount of evidence suggests that correlated errors caused by ignorance and irrationality are extremely common.

One line of evidence shows that voters who know basic facts about politics and policy issues have systematically different views from those who do not, even after controlling for such demographic variables as income, race, gender, and partisan identification (Althaus 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Another body of research finds that ordinary citizens have vastly different views from policy experts, again controlling for a variety of possible confounding variables (e.g., Caplan 2007). None of this literature is absolutely definitive. One can certainly construct theories claiming that knowledge actually leads to greater error than ignorance, or that expertise reduces rather than improves the quality of decision making. In some rare cases, increased political knowledge probably really does cause more harm than good: for example, when it enables voters to more effectively implement perverse values, or when ignorance about one area offsets the potential negative effects of ignorance about another (Somin 2013, 53–60). But such theories cannot explain away the reality that the knowledgeable systematically differ from the ignorant, and experts from laypeople, on a wide range of issues.

In some cases, the ignorant may actually be reaching better conclusions than the knowledgeable. But it seems unlikely that this is systematically the case. Moreover, if it *is* the case, this suggests that Landmore is wrong to stress the potential benefits of diverse knowledge. For if increased knowledge actually leads to worse decision making (or at least has no effect on the quality of decisions either way), there would seem to be little benefit to increasing the total amount of information available to the electorate through cognitive diversity.

Landmore is aware of these two bodies of research and attempts to diminish their significance. But her responses are unconvincing. In answer to the point that voters with greater factual knowledge have systematically different views from those with less, she claims that “information is distinct from competence, and the causal link between the holding of a certain type of information measured by surveys and the competence to make political choices is not easy to establish” (199). It is indeed true that information is distinct from competence. But it would be remarkable if basic political information of the sort measured in surveys in the first line of research were *not* relevant to political competence.

For example, without knowledge of which officials are responsible for which policy outcomes, it becomes difficult or impossible for the electorate to avoid rewarding and punishing incumbents for events they did not cause, while letting them off the hook for those they *were* responsible for. The data suggest that electoral outcomes are routinely determined by factors for which incumbents bear little or no responsibility, most notably short-term economic trends (Leigh 2009), but also such events as droughts, shark attacks, and even victories by local sports teams (Somin 2013, 101–02). Basic political knowledge may sometimes be insufficient for competence, depending on the degree of competence we seek to achieve. But it is highly likely that those who possess it are, on average, more competent than those who do not.³

If political knowledge does turn out to be irrelevant to competence, however, it becomes difficult to understand why Landmore insists on the importance of cognitive diversity to political decision making. Cognitive diversity is valuable to good decision making only inasmuch as diverse individuals bring different bodies of knowledge to bear on the question at hand. As Landmore explains (161–62), the members of a diverse group of voters might each know different aspects of a candidate’s record. But if basic political information is irrelevant to competence, we

cannot assume that some other type of dispersed knowledge *is* relevant. Her analysis assumes that it is, in my view plausibly. But that assumption is in tension with her dismissal of the value of factual knowledge more generally.

Landemore's rebuttal to the evidence of systematic disagreement between experts and laypeople is similar (202–4). She argues that we cannot assume that experts' knowledge is necessarily superior to that of the laity. Even if it is, she claims, voters might recognize their incompetence and decide to delegate relevant decisions to experts, or to be guided by their views (203). If all else fails, she suggests that voter competence could be increased through "education and public debates" (204).

None of these three arguments is particularly compelling, at least not without substantial supporting evidence. It is true that sometimes experts err while the laity is right. But it seems highly unlikely that this is systematically true across a wide range of issues—especially if the disagreement persists after controlling for likely sources of bias on the part of the experts, such as ideology, partisanship, and economic self-interest (Caplan 2007). In most complex domains, we assume that experts know more than laypeople do, unless there is strong countervailing evidence. Landemore does not provide evidence suggesting that complex political issues are an exception.

Voters could potentially recognize their incompetence and therefore decide to delegate to experts. Notice that if they do so, they would lose the benefits of cognitive diversity trumpeted by Landemore as a major advantage of democratic decision making. In such cases, small groups of experts, not voters, would end up making the ultimate policy decisions. However, this scenario presumes that otherwise ignorant voters will do a good job of recognizing when to call in the experts and determining who really is an expert and whether they are trustworthy. This seems unlikely in the many cases where voters are ignorant of basic information about the issues addressed in an election, or even of the very existence of that issue.⁴

Finally, claims that deficiencies in voter knowledge can be eliminated through education or public discussion run up against the reality that such efforts have been extremely unsuccessful in the past, that real-world governments have little incentive to adopt education policies that increase political knowledge as opposed to indoctrinating people in their own preferred views, and that even a significant improvement in education is unlikely to give voters adequate knowledge of more than

a fraction of the many complex issues addressed by the modern state (Somin 2013, 171–77).

Perhaps the most powerful evidence against Landemore’s optimistic position on the possibility of systematic error is the remarkable persistence of severe error over a period of many decades. For example, a majority of voters have for decades rejected the view that free trade is beneficial to the economy, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary advanced by economists across the political spectrum and understood by the more knowledgeable minority among the electorate (Caplan 2007). Landemore (123) cites the gradual erosion of support for racial segregation in the United States as an example of successful democratic deliberation. But it is worth noting that the majority of white voters persisted in supporting racial oppression for many decades, despite strong evidence (pointed out by economists as early as the eighteenth century)⁵ that slavery and racial segregation were highly inefficient and harmed the interests of the majority, to say nothing of the interests of blacks. Twentieth-century survey data show that Americans with higher levels of education (which is correlated with higher levels of political knowledge) turned against racial segregation long before those with low levels did (Schuman et al. 1997, ch. 2). Similar stories can be told about the long-term persistence of public support for such highly dubious positions as persecution of gays and lesbians and official discrimination against women. Obviously, ignorance was not the only cause of that persistence. But it was often an important contributor. If the electorate had been more knowledgeable, these horrible injustices would likely have been eliminated a great deal sooner.

Genuine Consideration of Opposing Views

Unlike most other miracle-of-aggregation theorists, Landemore assigns a crucial role to deliberation. She argues that, in order to exploit the benefits of cognitive diversity, voters need to deliberate about the issues and seriously consider opposition views (chs. 4–5). As she puts it, effective deliberation should “create a feedback loop” based on interactions between “at least two points of view” where the opposing sides change and improve their reasoning in response to each other’s arguments (127). The opposing sides need not be completely unbiased in their evaluation of each other’s arguments, but Landemore’s model of deliberation “must involve a genuine consideration of arguments for and against something”

(138). Unfortunately, this is exactly what most real-world voters usually fail to do.

Much of the public is largely ignorant of many political issues and has little knowledge of the arguments for *either* side.⁶ The minority who know more and follow politics more closely tend to overvalue any arguments that support their pre-existing views and undervalue or completely ignore countervailing evidence (Somin 2013, 78–82). Even worse, those most interested in politics tend to discuss political issues only with others who share their ideology and to follow political issues only in like-minded media (*ibid.*; Mutz 2006, 29–41). This powerful tendency suggests that most voters fall far short of the requirements of Landemorean deliberation, because they either ignore relevant arguments or engage with them in a highly biased way.

At several points in her book (e.g., 97–98, 121–22), Landmore analogizes proper deliberation to the efforts of jurors in the classic 1957 movie “Twelve Angry Men,” in which a jury pools its diverse knowledge to reach a correct verdict that all but one of the jurors were initially inclined to reject. It is worth emphasizing how different the behavior of voters is from that of the jurors portrayed in the movie. Landmore (2012, 3) notes elsewhere that the jurors spent a great deal of time “collectively brainstorming the available information and arguments and putting them through the many filters and lenses of the group.” By contrast, most voters are either largely ignorant of relevant arguments or only consider those that support their preexisting views. They also tend to engage in political discussions only with those who already agree with them.

Some scholars argue that voters’ tendency towards closed-mindedness can be overcome by requiring or incentivizing citizens to engage in structured deliberation, where they are led to confront opposing views (e.g., Ackerman and Fishkin 2004). Elsewhere, I have criticized such proposals as unfeasible (Somin 2010 and 2013, 177–80). In particular, I doubt that real-world governments are likely to implement them in an unbiased way, and that they can effectively cover more than a fraction of the issues addressed by modern government. Be that as it may, finding a way to get millions of voters to come close to meeting Landmore’s requirement of giving “genuine consideration” to opposing views is a formidable challenge. Landmore herself does not explain how this requirement can be met, which is perhaps understandable in light of her focus on ideal theory. But the severe nature of the problem should, at

the very least, incline us towards pessimism about the epistemic benefits of democracy in the real world.

The Need for Preexisting Knowledge

While deliberators in a large, diverse group need not be as knowledgeable as experts, they do need preliminary knowledge of the issues they are considering in order to make epistemically sound decisions. As Landmore (102) puts it, they need to be “relatively smart (not too dumb).” Landmore gives few specific details of the kind of “smarts” voters might need. But it is reasonable to assume that they at least need a basic understanding of the problem they are addressing. For example, in deciding whether to replace an incumbent political leader with his or her opponent, they need to know which issues the former had an impact on. As we have seen, the electorate often lacks precisely this type of basic knowledge, and therefore ends up making decisions based on the wrong issues. Another prerequisite to effective deliberation is knowledge of the very existence of major issues and policy initiatives. Voters who don’t know that the government recently adopted a given policy can hardly be expected to effectively evaluate it. For example, a 2004 poll found that some 70 percent of Americans were unaware of the recent enactment of President George W. Bush’s prescription drug plan, the largest new government program in decades (Somin 2013, 29). During the 2010 election, some 66 percent of the public did not realize that the hugely controversial TARP bailout of major banks had been enacted under Bush, not his successor, Barack Obama (ibid., 22). That misperception prevented them from properly allocating responsibility for this crucial policy between the two parties.

These examples only scratch the surface of the types of basic knowledge that may be essential preconditions for effective deliberation in a diverse group. How much knowledge is necessary depends in part on how demanding is one’s normative theory of democratic participation. More demanding theories, such as deliberative democracy (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996), require greater knowledge than less onerous ones such as Schumpeterian retrospective voting (Schumpeter 1950; Posner 2003).⁷ But, with the exception of “pure proceduralist” theories of a kind that Landmore herself chooses not to rely on (46–47), virtually all normative theories of democratic participation have

significant knowledge prerequisites that a majority of voters often fail to meet (Somin 2013, ch. 2).⁸

Some scholars argue that lack of basic political knowledge can be overcome through a variety of information shortcuts that allow voters to substitute small bits of knowledge for larger bodies of information of which they are ignorant. For example, retrospective voting might enable voters to evaluate incumbents based on a few simple measures of policy outcomes, without knowing much, if anything, about the details of policies they have adopted (e.g., Fiorina 1981). Landemore conspicuously avoids reliance on shortcut arguments, so I will not pursue the issue in detail.⁹ But given the enormous extent of voter ignorance of very basic information, information shortcuts at the very least have their work cut out for them. Moreover, the higher the epistemic standards we expect the electorate to achieve, the more effective shortcuts will have to be to make up for voters' initial ignorance.

The Deep Roots of Political Ignorance and Irrationality

The failures of real-world democratic electorates do not automatically prove that the preconditions required by Landemore's theory cannot be met. As she notes, these shortcomings could be "due to the fact that American democracy is not a real democracy in the sense used in this book, lacking too many of the features I have insisted on" (196). But in order for her ideal theory to have real-world relevance, it is important to be able to demonstrate that reality can be made to approach the ideal.

Otherwise, Landemore's defense of the epistemic virtues of democracy would begin to resemble defenses of ideal types of other political institutions that are unlikely to exist in the real world. For example, the poor performance of real-world dictatorship can be explained away by claiming that they lack "too many of the features" of ideal benevolent despotism, such as a wise and highly competent ruler whose only goal in life is to benefit the people. Similarly, Marxists have tried to explain away the failures of real-world communist regimes by claiming that they deviated from socialist ideals in one or more crucial respects. Such defenses may have merit—but only insofar as the deviations were contingent events that could have been avoided.

Unfortunately, the epistemic shortcomings of the electorate are to a large extent *not* contingent. They are rooted in two extremely persistent

realities: the rationality of voter ignorance and the immense size and scope of the modern state.

In light of the fact that widespread political ignorance has persisted despite major increases in education levels, the availability of information, and even IQ scores (Somin 2013, ch. 1), it seems likely that the main cause of political ignorance is not lack of education, lack of available information, or lack of intelligence. Rather, political ignorance turns out to be rational behavior for most voters, because the chance that their vote will affect electoral outcomes is infinitesimally small.¹⁰ For this reason, making good choices at the ballot box does not provide an adequate incentive to acquire more than minimal amounts of political knowledge: The cost of doing so is too high relative to the benefit.

It is worth emphasizing that this result holds true even if we assume, as Landemore does, “that people are voting for what they think is right for the common good, no matter how unpleasant it is for them” (196–97). Even a perfectly altruistic voter completely devoted to the common good must still decide how much time and effort to allocate to studying political information, as opposed to other activities—including other activities that might benefit society. The rational answer for most such altruists would be “very little.”¹¹

In addition to having little incentive to acquire political information, voters also have little reason to objectively evaluate the information they do learn, as opposed to indulging ideological blinders or other biases. When there is little payoff—either self-interested or altruistic—to doing the hard work of analyzing new evidence and arguments objectively, people are likely to do less of this work (Caplan 2001 and 2007). This is one reason most voters are highly biased in their evaluation of new political information and in their choice of information sources. While they may be genuinely trying to seek the truth, just as Landemore hopes, they are not devoting much effort to doing so fairly. This too is perfectly rational and understandable behavior even for altruistic citizens genuinely committed to promoting the common good. Like time and effort devoted to seeking out new information, careful reasoning is a limited resource that is usually better devoted to activities that are likely to actually make a difference.

Many people, of course, acquire political knowledge for reasons other than improving the quality of voting decisions and political deliberation. Just as sports fans study information about their favorite teams for reasons other than influencing the outcome of games, “political fans” learn about

politics for reasons other than influencing the outcome of elections. They learn about political issues and campaigns because they find them interesting, because they enjoy having their preexisting views reinforced, or because they like being part of a community of fellow fans of the same party or ideology. But learning about politics for the sake of enhancing the fan experience is often inimical to the objective of learning for the sake of getting at the truth (Somin 2013, 78–79).

Fan-like objectives help account for the otherwise seemingly illogical behavior of political partisans, such as discussing political issues only with those who agree with them and following politics only in like-minded media. These patterns make little sense from the standpoint of truth-seeking (Somin 2013, 79–81), but are perfectly rational if truth-seeking is secondary to other goals. Bryan Caplan (2001 and 2007) calls this sort of behavior “rational irrationality.” When the goal of acquiring information is something other than seeking truth, it is rational to be illogical and biased in our evaluation of the information we learn.

If widespread political ignorance and irrationality are rooted in the basic structure of democracy, this is bad news for hopes of implementing Landmore’s theory. It suggests that the informational failures of actually existing democracy are inherent rather than contingent.

Landmore is aware of the problems of rational ignorance and rational irrationality. But her efforts to dismiss their significance are not very reassuring. For example, she endorses Gerry Mackie’s (2012) theory that voters might acquire political information in order to contribute to the size of the winner’s mandate (194). But an individual is even less likely to make a decisive contribution to the size of a winner’s mandate than to the determination of who wins in the first place (Somin 2013, 73–74). Landmore (194) also endorses Richard Tuck’s argument that the idea of “free riding” on the efforts of others is an invention of modern social science, unknown to previous generations and most ordinary people today (Tuck 2008). But while the formal social-scientific theory of free riding is indeed a modern invention, voters need only grasp the perfectly intuitive idea that it makes little sense to devote large amounts of time and effort to activities that are unlikely to make any difference to outcomes they care about.

In that sense, rational ignorance and other types of free riding long predate the formal modern analysis of the concept. Indeed, ancient Athenian political leaders recognized the need to create elaborate institutional structures to incentivize individuals to contribute to various

public goods, including the production of knowledge necessary for good political decisions (Ober 2008). Collective-action problems also help explain why only a small percentage of slaves in the ancient world participated in revolts or tried to run away, even though the system of slavery would likely have broken down if all of them tried to do so at once, thereby making them all much better off.¹²

Rational ignorance is not the only possible explanation for today's persistently low levels of political knowledge. But it is highly plausible and supported by a wider range of evidence than competing explanations (Somin 2013, ch. 3). To the extent that it is a problem, it poses a serious challenge for Landemore's theory.

The size and complexity of government is a related and at least equally difficult issue. In the United States, government spending at all levels accounts for some 40 percent of GDP, and there are many other government activities that are not fully accounted for in that figure, such as regulatory policies whose costs are largely borne by the private sector. This comparable vast array of expenditures and regulations is not focused on a few discrete tasks, but is spread over a vast range of issue areas. For example, the federal government regulates matters as varied as toilet flow standards, light bulbs, air pollution, and sexual harassment in elementary schools. The vast range of issue areas is matched by a vast array of different elected officials and bureaucrats responsible for them, such that voters often have difficulty figuring out who is responsible for what (Caplan et al. 2013). In many other democracies, the size, scope, and complexity of government is even greater than in the United States. Thus, even if voters paid much greater attention to politics than they do at present, and made a more determined effort to evaluate the issues objectively, it is still unlikely that the electorate would achieve the standards of knowledge and deliberation required by Landemore's theory for more than a small fraction of the relevant political issues.

This problem might be alleviated if we could significantly reduce the scope and complexity of issues addressed by government. Landemore's theory is potentially compatible with having a very limited public sector, such that voters have a better chance of being able to understand its activities. But solving the problem in this way preserves the epistemic defense of democracy only at the cost of reducing democracy's role relative to other decision-making institutions, such as the market or civil society. The same goes for efforts to reduce the role of democracy relative to decision making by bureaucratic experts insulated from

political pressure from the voters.¹³ This solution is, of course, more inimical to the thrust of Landemore’s book, which seeks to prove that mass democracy is epistemically superior to decision making by a smaller but more expert group.

III. INFORMATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF FOOT VOTING

Although Landemore’s goal is to defend the epistemic virtues of democracy, it turns out that the criteria she sets out are often more likely to be met by decisions made through “voting with your feet” than voting at the ballot box. Broadly speaking, people can vote with their feet within a single polity in two ways: by choosing which local or regional government to live under in a federal system, or by choosing service providers in the market and civil society. Both types of foot voting differ from ballot-box voting in that each foot voter makes an individually decisive choice, as opposed to one that has only an infinitesimal chance of affecting the outcome.

Elsewhere I have outlined the informational advantages of foot voting over ballot box voting in detail, noting both theoretical considerations and empirical evidence (Somin 2013, ch. 5; Somin forthcoming). Here, I emphasize only a few key points that are especially relevant to Landemore’s theory.

The main epistemic advantage of foot voting over ballot-box voting is that foot voters have much less incentive to be rationally ignorant or rationally irrational. Most people probably devote more time and effort to acquiring relevant information when they decide what car or television to buy than when they decide whom to support for president. This is not because they believe that their TV is more important or more complicated than the issues faced by the president, but because they know that the former decision is likely to make a real difference, while the latter probably will not.

For much the same reason, foot voters have stronger incentives to objectively evaluate the information they do learn. Consider that social norms counsel strongly against arguing about politics in “mixed company,” and many people react with anger and resentment if their political views are criticized—even, or perhaps especially, if the critic presents powerful arguments and evidence of which they were previously unaware. By contrast, they are usually much more open to

new information relevant to foot-voting decisions. While people are far from perfectly rational in making these decisions, they usually try harder to reason well than when they vote at the ballot box. Foot voters also have access to information shortcuts that are more useful than those available to ballot-box voters. The political system does not offer any shortcuts as effective as the price system, which conveys to market participants a vast array of relevant information about the relative costs and benefits of different goods (Hayek 1945).

These points are relevant to Landemore's theory in several significant ways. Because foot voters have greater incentive to acquire relevant information and use it wisely than ballot-box voters do, they are less likely to fall into systematic errors, and more likely to correct them quickly if they do. It is difficult to think of foot-voting errors that persisted for as long in the face of strong counterevidence as the decades and centuries in which ballot-box voters were consistently wrong about such issues as protectionism and racial segregation. Foot voters are also more likely than ballot-box voters to engage with opposing views in a relatively unbiased way. Finally, foot voters are more likely to acquire minimally necessary information needed to consider the issue at hand in the first place. People deciding which city to live in or which car to buy are unlikely to be as ignorant of the basic aspects of the competing cities and products as voters often are about competing political candidates.

For these reasons, foot-voting mechanisms are, on average, more likely to make effective use of the cognitive diversity of large groups of people than ballot-box voting does. While each individual decision in a foot-voting system is usually made by a single person or by a small group, these individuals and groups have access to the evidence produced by thousands or millions of similar decisions made by others, including others with very different skills and cognitive styles. The relevant data is conveyed to them by market prices, social norms, and by a wide range of other information sources.

This suggests that the epistemic virtues Landemore attributes to "ideal" democracy are, in real-world settings, more likely to be achieved by limiting and decentralizing government power than by assigning decisions to democratic political processes. Decentralization enables more decisions to be made by foot voters choosing between different local or regional governments. Taking issues out of the political process altogether creates greater scope for foot voting in the private sector.

None of this necessarily proves that we should strive for the maximum possible degree of decentralization or privatization. Effective use of information is far from the only consideration relevant to deciding the proper role of government in society. Some issues may be best addressed by a centralized government even in spite of its informational deficiencies. But to the extent that we value the epistemic qualities that are the focus of Landemore's book, we should support greater decentralization and limitation of government power than we might otherwise.

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Landemore has made a valuable contribution to democratic theory by laying out the epistemic advantages of cognitive diversity, and carefully outlining the preconditions that a democratic political system would have to meet in order to make effective use of them. But her analysis raises serious questions about whether those preconditions can ever be met in any real-world political system. To the extent that they can, it is more likely to happen in a system that places tighter limits on the size and centralization of government than currently exist.

NOTES

1. Part of the argument of this section is based on my earlier critique of Landemore's theory in Somin 2013, 114–16. When I wrote that book, I was primarily focusing on Landemore's earlier work (e.g., Landemore 2012), as *Democratic Reason* did not come into print until just before my own manuscript was completed.
2. For overviews of the data, see, e.g., Somin 2013, ch. 1; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; and Althaus 2003.
3. For a detailed discussion of the knowledge prerequisites of different normative theories of political participation, see Somin 2013, ch. 2.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the problems faced by ignorant voters who seek to defer to expert "opinion leaders," see Somin 2013, 97–100.
5. Economics was first labeled the "dismal science" by nineteenth-century critics because early economists were opponents of slavery. See Levy 2002.
6. See the survey of relevant evidence in Somin 2013, chs. 1–2.
7. For a discussion of the knowledge prerequisites of these and other normative theories of participation, see Somin 2013, ch. 2.
8. For a different classification of the informational prerequisites of various versions of normative democratic theory, see Kelly 2012, ch. 4.
9. I have, however, given an extensive critical evaluation of the leading shortcut theories in Somin 2013, ch. 4.

10. The theory of rational political ignorance was first introduced by Downs 1957, ch. 13.
11. For a more detailed discussion of this point see Somin 2013, 65–66.
12. For a good discussion of the incentives facing individual slaves see Bradley 1987.
13. For advocates of this idea, see, e.g., Breyer 1993 and Sunstein 2002.

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