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Voter Ignorance and Deliberative Democracy

Ethics in Politics: The Rights and Obligations of Individual Political Agents
Chapter 7, 15 Pages

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Abstract

American voters are shockingly ignorant about politics. Not only do they not know basic facts about the structure of American government (what the three branches are, etc.) or the views of the major political parties, they do not really know in many cases even what they believe about politics, because what they believe can be manipulated depending on how pollsters ask the questions. People may oppose welfare, for instance, but favor increasing money transfers to the poor—which is pretty much what welfare is.² Even worse, when voters are motivated to seek out more information, and do seek out that information, they tend to do so in a biased way by gathering information from those sources which tend to confirm their existing opinions.³ So even intelligent voters tend to be ignorant about what the other side thinks. Now, one would think that such massive and pervasive ignorance would matter not just to the effective running of our democracy, but also matter to the normative desirability of democracy itself. And one would think philosophers who defend democracy would spend a lot of time worrying and obsessing about the problem of voter ignorance, and how to fix it.

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