

Are Smarter Voters Better Voters?

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Abstract

It is widely believed that democracies require knowledgeable citizens to function well. But the most politically knowledgeable individuals also tend to be the most partisan, and the strength of partisan identity tends to corrupt political thinking. This creates a conundrum. On one hand, an informed citizenry is allegedly necessary for a democracy to flourish. On the other hand, the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are also the most likely to think in corrupted, biased ways. What to do? This paper examines this tension and draws out several lessons. First, it is not obvious that more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. Second, worries about voter ignorance may be misguided because partisans tend to become more dogmatic when they acquire more information. Third, 'epistocratic' solutions that emphasize voter knowledge are troubling, in part, because they increase the political power of the most dogmatic and biased individuals. Fourth, I suggest that solutions to citizen incompetence should focus less on voter knowledge and more on the intellectual virtue of objectivity. Unfortunately, a likely way to foster political objectivity is by encouraging political apathy.

Keywords: political knowledge; political ignorance; motivated reasoning; democracy; epistocracy

Word count: 5938 (without footnotes); 7523 (with footnotes)

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“A learned blockhead is a greater blockhead than an ignorant one.”

— Benjamin Franklin

A widely held belief is that democracies require knowledgeable citizens to function well. In *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, the most authoritative study on voter knowledge, the authors declare, “democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 1).

If informed voters are needed for democracy to flourish, then a well-known threat to democracy is *political ignorance* (Caplan 2007; Somin 2016; Brennan 2016). In a democracy, each voter has just as much political power as the next because we all get one vote. But when voters make poor decisions out of ignorance, they harm the common good. For example, false beliefs about covid-19 may prevent action that would save lives. By adopting policies based on the views of ignorant citizens, we impose unjustified risks on innocent others.

On these grounds, Plato concluded that democracy is defective. Despite its initial attraction in offering freedom and equality to all, a fundamental problem with democracy is that it assigns “a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike” (Republic, 558c5). That is, democracy fails to distinguish between the wise, who are well qualified to govern, and those uninformed masses who are guided by ignorance and desire.

This has led some scholars to question the value of democracy. In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan argues that ignorant voters tend to harm their fellow citizens by exercising political power in incompetent ways. Instead of providing equal political power to each citizen, Brennan says we should

restrict political power to the more knowledgeable.¹ While this might sound ominous and conjure up images of philosopher kings, a knowledge-based restriction need not involve authoritarian rulers. We need only to limit the extent to which uninformed citizens can risk harming others. This could be done through voter competence exams, by giving extra votes to the better educated, or by some other means of establishing competence.

These are radical, epistocratic proposals. I do not endorse them. But whatever you might think about restricting political power to those with more knowledge, it is widely accepted that political ignorance is a significant threat to democracy. The ideal of an informed citizen still holds a cherished place in our system of values.

But are knowledgeable voters better for democracy?

1. Partisanship, Knowledge, and Bias

Consider the following fact: the most politically knowledgeable people also tend to be extremely partisan (Converse 1964; Federico 2004; Feldman and Price 2008; Hetherington 2009; Kalmoe forthcoming). For example, the strongest supporters of the Republican party tend to know more about politics than individuals with weak political ties. Likewise for Democrats. Now, this fact alone is not very surprising. The more we care about something, the more inclined we are to learn about it. Coffee lovers tend to know more about coffee; motorbike enthusiasts know more about motorbikes; and the

¹ What type of 'political knowledge' is required, exactly? I adopt the conception of what Zaller (1992: 221) calls "neutral, factual public-affairs knowledge". This is similar to the conception used by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and many other political scientists who treat 'political knowledge' as civic-style knowledge of the kind that is measured by traditional knowledge items in established political surveys (e.g. the American National Election Studies). It is this type of knowledge that scholars typically have in mind when lamenting the level of public ignorance. Moreover, this type of knowledge often correlates with policy preferences (Althaus 2003). In particular, it positively correlates with policy preferences that match what economists and social scientists tend to think. Brennan (2016) assumes that economists and social scientists are more likely than laypeople to be right on matters of public policy, so knowledge of political trivia is treated as a good proxy for a more general competence. Gunn (2019) contests this claim.

biggest sports fans often acquire extensive knowledge of their favorite teams. Politics is no different. The biggest political “fans” tend to consume the most information about politics (Somin 2016: 93). This explains why those with strong partisan allegiances tend to be the most politically knowledgeable. Partisanship is not an intrinsically bad thing. It plays an important role in motivating people to be more active citizens, it increases voter turnout, and it encourages citizens to protest injustice. The antithesis of partisanship is political apathy, which gives way to corruption, lack of accountability, and the loss of democracy.²

The problem, however, is that the most politically partisan individuals (who are also the most knowledgeable, remember) are *also* the most likely to have their thinking corrupted by politics. Party identification operates as a kind of “perceptual screen” through which we filter information (Campbell et al. 1960: 133). This leads citizens to reason in corrupted, biased ways.³

A vast amount of work in cognitive psychology indicates that we all frequently interpret and filter evidence in ways that fit with our antecedent worldview. For example, we tend to seek out, uncritically accept, and better remember evidence that is favorable to our view; whereas we tend to avoid, forget, and be more critical of counterevidence (Taber and Lodge 2006). This general human tendency is known as *motivated reasoning*. Broadly speaking, motivated reasoning is the tendency to seek out, interpret, evaluate, and weigh evidence and arguments in ways that are systematically biased toward conclusions that we ‘want’ to reach. When this occurs, two people can look at the exact

² Guerrero (2014) develops a notion of 'meaningful accountability'. He says that voters must be sufficiently well-informed to hold leaders meaningfully accountable. Without such accountability, special interests are able to corrupt the legislative process because voters are unaware this is happening.

³ Two clarifications are in order. First, the notion of ‘bias’ here does not imply that one is necessarily less likely to be correct. In some cases, a bias may lead partisan individuals closer to truth. But this does not mean there is nothing epistemically (or politically) problematic with such a bias. Second, I leave aside whether members of some political groups are more likely to exhibit bias or irrationality than others. On that issue, see McKenna (forthcoming).

same body of evidence and yet walk away with opposite conclusions about what the evidence shows, thereby drawing undue support for their initial positions.

We all succumb to motivated reasoning. But our reasoning is especially prone to error or bias when it comes to beliefs that *matter to us*. I will call these ‘identity-constitutive beliefs’ because such beliefs partly constitute our identity. Identity-constitutive beliefs include any belief that reflects one’s conception of “who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Abrams and Hogg 1988: 2). For politically partisan individuals, this will include their political beliefs. When we strongly identify with a political team, our political beliefs become partly constitutive of our identity. As a result, we are motivated to protect these beliefs from threats. This claim is backed up by decades of research in social identity theory (e.g. Kelly 1988; Green et al. 2002; Huddy 2001; Mason 2018) and cognitive psychology (Lord et al. 1979; Kunda 1990; Tavris and Aronson 2008; Ditto et al. 2009; Lodge and Taber 2013). When information threatens our values or identity, we mobilize our intellectual artillery to destroy it.

This is how knowledge, like power, tends to corrupt partisan minds. The more you know about a topic, the more ‘ammunition’ you have at your disposal to find reasons to reject facts, figures, and arguments that conflict with your preferred views. To illustrate, Charles Taber and Milton Lodge (2006) investigated attitudes to affirmative action and gun control policies, comparing people who were more knowledgeable about these topics to people who were less knowledgeable about them. They found an *attitude strength effect*, such that those citizens voicing the strongest policy attitudes were the most prone to motivated reasoning, as well as a *sophistication effect*, such that the politically knowledgeable were more susceptible to motivated bias because they possessed greater ammunition with which to counterargue incongruent information (Taber and Lodge 2006: 757). While the participants in the ‘low knowledge’ group listed twice as many thoughts supporting their side of the

issue than thoughts going the other way, the ‘high knowledge’ participants found so many arguments in favor of their position that they often gave *none* going the other way.

Along similar lines, John Zaller (2004: 166) found that more knowledgeable voters were less responsive to the content of individual elections, tending to “resist short-term forces”. In contrast, it was the *less-informed* voters who were “more apt to reward incumbents who preside over strong national economies and punish those who do not,” “more reactive to changes in the ideological location of the candidates,” and “at least as likely . . . to respond to presidential success or failure in foreign affairs.” In short, the *more knowledgeable* voters tended to ignore or downplay the very considerations that are typically viewed as an appropriate basis for electoral choice (see also Achen and Bartels 2016: 294).⁴

Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber (2017) vividly illustrate this worry about using our knowledge to reach the conclusions we want through the historical example of Sir Edward Coke. Coke was an English jurist of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and “possibly the most learned common lawyer of all time” (Caenegem 1987: 14). He was able to base his opinions “on innumerable medieval texts, most of them manuscript rolls, which he had perused with indefatigable zeal.” The problem, however, is that Coke “was clearly hoping to find precedents that would suit his legal and political convictions,” and he “misinterpreted precedents to support his case.” According to Mercier and Sperber, “it may have been Coke that Sir William Blackstone had in mind when he warned, in his hugely influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England of 1766*, that a judge’s knowledge and intelligence are no guarantee of fair opinion” (2019: 271). Blackstone writes:

⁴ For more evidence that knowledge exacerbates motivated reasoning, see Lau and Redlawsk (2001), Redlawsk (2002), Achen and Bartels (2006), Meffert et al. (2006), Shani (2006), Bartels (2008), Lodge and Taber (2013), Bolsen et al. (2015), Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (2016), Bolsen and Druckman (2018), Erisen et al. (2018), and Patkós and Szántó (2020). These studies show that knowledge does not correct or mitigate partisan bias in perception of objective conditions. Instead, it enhances politically motivated reasoning.

in settling and adjusting a question of fact, when entrusted to any single magistrate, partiality and injustice have an ample field to range in; either by boldly asserting that to be proved which is not so, or more artfully by suppressing some circumstances, stretching and warping others, and distinguishing away the remainder. (1768: 380)

Above I mentioned that highly partisan individuals may know more because they are simply more interested in politics, and knowing more tends to increase their enjoyment of politics. (Recall the analogy with sports: fans will acquire knowledge of various teams because it increases the enjoyment they get from watching the game and rooting for their team.) However, the example of Sir Edward Coke highlights another reason that partisans tend to be more informed: they gather information to weaponize it. By acquiring more knowledge, we are more equipped to reject information that disagrees with our beliefs. This ability to effectively refute counterattitudinal information diminishes the psychological threat posed by such information.⁵

In summary, it is knowledgeable individuals who are the most partisan, who hold the strongest attitudes with the most confidence, and who are the most likely to use their information to conform their assessments of fact, figures, and arguments to their own political convictions.

This is not to say that political knowledge will, *by itself*, corrupt political thinking. It may be that increasing political knowledge is counterproductive only when it occurs in partisan individuals.⁶ Thus, to be clear, I am not claiming that acquiring political knowledge is the *cause* of motivated reasoning or

⁵ We do not 'weaponize' knowledge *whenever* we use it to reject information that conflicts with our beliefs. For example, I might use my knowledge that the holocaust took place (given to me by various reliable sources of information) to refute the claims made by holocaust deniers. This is perfectly rational. We 'weaponize' knowledge when we acquire or utilize information for non-epistemic reasons, such as identity confirmation.

⁶ On these grounds, one might argue it is possible to have politically knowledgeable but unbiased thinkers. I have two replies. First, while this is logically possible, it is highly unlikely because in practice only people with strongly partisan identities tend to seek out such knowledge systematically. This is why empirical tests always find a strong positive correlation between political knowledge and motivated reasoning. Second, even if there are such unbiased yet highly knowledgeable thinkers, it is unlikely that such people will care much about politics. This is because, in practice, those with partisan allegiances are far more likely to vote and be politically engaged. In contrast, non-partisans tend not to vote or be politically active.

partisanship. Instead, it is likely that partisanship is the common cause of both acquiring political knowledge and motivated reasoning. (The more one cares about politics, the more one learns about it and the greater the incentive to think in biased ways.) That said, it is also possible that an increase in political knowledge may cause a corresponding increase in strength of partisan identity. This, in turn, would increase politically motivated cognition. For example, Redlawsk (2002) argues that voters develop affect toward political candidates as they learn more information about them, which results in motivated cognition. I will leave this issue to the side. The main point I am trying to make is that, regardless of the direction of causation, there is a strong positive correlation between political knowledge, partisanship, and motivated reasoning. Thus, we cannot simply assume that more knowledgeable voters are better for democracy. Indeed, they may be worse for democracy if their stockpile of information is used to repel challenges to theories and policies that are incorrect or harmful.

2. Weaponizing Knowledge

This goes against a simple, intuitive, widely held theory about politics, which we might call the *Ignorance Hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, democracy is dysfunctional, in part, because citizens are relatively *uninformed* about political issues (Somin 2016; Brennan 2016). The cause of bad policies and bitter political battles, according to this view, is *too little information*. But the Ignorance Hypothesis is not just false; it's backwards. Psychological research shows that the more information partisans get, the more dogmatic they become and the deeper their disagreements grow. An alternative hypothesis, which I will call the *Weaponized Knowledge Hypothesis*, says that the more knowledgeable a partisan is about politics, the more stubborn they tend to be about politically charged topics. If this alternative hypothesis is true, then a smarter, better educated citizenry would

not necessarily diminish polarization, lead to better policy decisions, or improve democracy. Indeed, it may just exacerbate political problems.⁷

The idea that “more knowledge is better” is misguided for another reason: it misconceives the basis of political allegiance. The typical voter’s political views have little to do with knowledge and much to do with *identity* or tribal loyalty (Kelly 1988; Green et al. 2002; Huddy 2001; Achen and Bartels 2016; Brennan 2016; Mason 2018). This contradicts the “folk theory of democracy” (Achen and Bartels 2016). According to the folk theory, the average voter is assumed to be highly cognitive and rational: they gather evidence, formulate policy preferences, assess where the candidates stand on those issues, and then choose to support the candidate or party that best embodies the voter’s own preferences, policy views, and values (ibid: 299). This is a *knowledge-driven conception of political loyalty*.

In reality, however, political affiliation is psychologically akin to sports team loyalty (Somin 2016; Brennan 2016). Just as one’s loyalty to a particular basketball team is not a reflection of one’s pre-existing ideological commitments about basketball, one’s political affiliation is not a reflection of one’s political, moral, or otherwise ideological commitments. Rather, the typical voter becomes attached to a political team largely due to accidental historical circumstances. They are often born into their political identities, just as children typically inherit the religious affiliations of their parents. Partisans identify with a political team because of where they live, where they used to live, who they work with, their race, socio-economic status, and so forth. We become fans — in sports and politics — through socialization. This is an *identity-driven conception of political loyalty*.

When politics is a matter of identity rather than epistemology, we can expect people who strongly adhere to political ideologies to have the following two traits: they are *knowledgeable* about politics,

⁷ Ezra Klein (2014) makes a similar observation.

but they are also relatively *impervious to evidence and arguments* that go in the opposite direction. It is for this reason that deliberative conceptions of democracy afford little hope that partisans will be persuaded by the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1998: 37). The typical person tends to avoid disagreement and obstinately defend their initial views, or they are persuaded to change their view by non-cognitive or irrational reasons.⁸ Moreover, these effects tend to occur *more frequently and stubbornly among citizens who are relatively well informed* than among those who are not (Gunn 2019: 42).⁹

This creates a conundrum. It is widely thought that knowledgeable citizens are necessary for a democracy to function well. Yet the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are also the most ideological and therefore most likely to think in corrupted, biased ways. The majority of the public may be shockingly ignorant of basic political facts, but it is *knowledgeable partisans* who are *the most closed-minded and dogmatic*. This leaves us with an uncomfortable tradeoff: do we want ignorant voters or informed dogmatists?¹⁰

Whatever we decide, the point is that knowledgeable citizens are not obviously better for democracy.¹¹ While they are less ignorant, they tend to be more biased and ‘irrational’. We trade one incompetence for another, but both harm democracy.

3. How Ideology Short-circuits Intelligence

⁸ In some cases, it may not be epistemically bad to be closed-minded or resistant to evidence (see Fantl 2018 and Battaly 2018).

⁹ Hamilton (2011) finds that concern about climate change increase with education and knowledge among Democrats, but *decrease* with education and knowledge among Republicans. See Malka et al. (2011) for a similar finding.

¹⁰ As Jeffrey Friedman (2006) points out, this dilemma is one of the main lessons of Converse (1964).

¹¹ This is not to say that political knowledge is *never* a good thing, even for highly partisan individuals. My aim is simply to demonstrate that the relationship between political knowledge and voter competence is more complex than is often assumed by normative political theorists.

It is not just knowledge that gives partisans more ‘ammunition’ to reject unfavorable facts and arguments. Our *intelligence* or *critical reasoning* is often hijacked to protect our identity-constitutive beliefs. As Tali Sharot (2017) writes: “If you perceive yourself as highly analytic—someone who has a strong ability to make use of quantitative data and a good reasoning capacity—brace yourself. People with stronger analytic abilities are more likely to twist data at will than people with low reasoning ability.” Michael Huemer (2016) makes a similar point:

Normally, intelligence and education are aides to acquiring true beliefs. But when an individual has non-epistemic belief preferences, this need not be the case; high intelligence and extensive knowledge of a subject may even worsen an individual’s prospects for obtaining a true belief. . . . The reason is that a biased person uses his intelligence and education as tools for rationalizing beliefs. Highly intelligent people can think of rationalizations for their beliefs in situations in which the less intelligent would be forced to give up and concede error, and highly educated people have larger stores of information from which to selectively search for information supporting a desired belief.

These claims are not just speculation. In “Everyday Reasoning and the Roots of Intelligence”, David Perkins and his colleagues (1991) investigated the relationship between education, IQ, and the ability to come up with reasons. They found that IQ was the most significant predictor of how well people argued, but it predicted *only the number of my-side arguments*. In other words, smart people make good lawyers and press secretaries, but they are no better at finding reasons for contrary views. Likewise, Mark Joslyn and Donald Haider-Markel (2014: 919) found that “the most educated partisans

are furthest apart in their factual understanding.” Instead of providing “a real safeguard to democracy”, as Franklin Roosevelt thought, education seem to intensify powerful partisan motives.¹²

Relatedly, Dan Kahan (2011a; 2012; 2013; 2017) shows that people who score highest in ‘cognitive reflection’ are the most likely to display motivated reasoning.¹³ To illustrate, consider the following experiment (Kahan et al. 2017). People were presented with numerical data about the effectiveness of a skin cream for treating a rash. To arrive at the correct answer about the skin cream’s effectiveness required some mathematical ability. Predictably, people who were better at math were more likely to get the answer correct. This is not surprising. What *is* surprising, however, is what happened when people were presented with a politicized version of the same problem. When the exact same numbers were presented as being about the effectiveness of gun control laws in decreasing crime, people’s general math aptitude was no longer the best predictor of whether they would answer correctly. Instead, liberals tended to solve the problem correctly when the numbers indicated that gun laws were effective (a common view amongst liberals), but they tended to answer incorrectly when the numbers showed the opposite. The performance of conservatives was a mirror image: they did well when the numbers supported their prior beliefs and badly when the numbers didn’t. Most disturbingly, however, is that the *better* people were at math, the *worse* they did when the numbers didn’t support their prior convictions. This provides evidence that people with sophisticated reasoning skills will use them to wriggle their way out of evidence that disconfirms their political convictions. Other experiments found similar results (Kahan et al. 2011a, 2012; Kahan 2013; Nurse and Grant 2020).¹⁴

¹² This is because education provides partisans with more information with which to counter incongruent facts. Moreover, the most educated citizens are often among the most invested in politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992).

¹³ For additional evidence that cognitively sophisticated individuals are the most politically polarized, see Hamilton (2011), Malka et al (2009), Kahan et al. (2012, 2017), Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2014), and Drummond and Fischhoff (2017). For a critique of the idea that greater analytic thinking magnifies political bias, see Tappin et al. (2019).

¹⁴ Kahan et al. (2012) tested levels of scientific literacy alongside ideology and asked people about the risks posed by climate change. He found that among the people who were already skeptical of climate change, scientific literacy made

These experiments illustrate the epistemically corrupting effects of politics. If knowledge is what gives partisans more ‘ammunition’ to destroy threatening information, then intelligence is the ‘weapon’.

The more cognitive firepower at one’s disposal, the more one is able to twist data and arguments to fit the conclusions one wants.¹⁵ This debunks the idea that motivated reasoning is a trait of less intelligent people.¹⁶ It also supports Hume’s claim that reason is a slave to the passions.

4. Epistocracy and Objectivity

Democratic theory includes a great deal of concern about the possibility that voters know too little (see Somin 2016). An underlying assumption is that smarter, more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. But, as I’ve argued, this assumption may be misguided. A sizable amount of evidence indicates that political knowledge, cognitive reflection, numeracy, reasoning skills, education, and knowledge of basic scientific facts can all *magnify* partisan bias and political polarization. This is true on facts relating to gun control, climate change, fracking, vaccinations, and other contested issues. In many cases, political knowledge may cause more harm than good. Thus, we should perhaps worry less about political ignorance and more about the ways in which knowledge may exacerbate bias and polarization.

That said, these considerations do suggest an interesting possibility for how to ameliorate political ignorance. Recall that the strength of partisan identity predicts political knowledge: the more partisan we are, the more we tend to gather information about politics. If this is true, then a way to diminish

them *more* skeptical. Thus, the problem is not that people need to know more about science to appreciate the dangers of global warming. If that were true, their concern should have risen alongside their knowledge.

¹⁵ Motivated reasoning is also a common explanation for the spread of fake news. People are driven to accept fake news stories that cohere with their political ideology (Beck 2017; Calvert 2017; Kahan 2017; Singal 2017). However, Pennycook and Rand (2019) found that the susceptibility to fake news is driven more by lazy thinking than by partisan bias. Thus, analytical thinking may play an important role in discerning real news from fake news.

¹⁶ According to Aldrich et al. (1989: 132), “rationalization is probably greater for less-informed citizens”. Likewise, Evans (2003) and Stanovich (2005) argue for the classical view that reflection or analytic thinking supports sound judgment.

citizen ignorance would be to increase the strength of partisan identities. The stronger one's loyalty to a political group, the more incentive one has to learn about politics. However, it is well known that stronger partisan identities often lead to political polarization: the more strongly we identify with our political 'team', the more our perceived self-worth is heightened by discriminating against opposing teams. We grow to dislike, even loathe, our political rivals.¹⁷ We therefore face another tradeoff: we can ameliorate political ignorance but at the risk of increasing polarization.

If my argument is correct, it also casts doubt on 'epistocratic' solutions to voter ignorance. In an epistocracy, political power would be restricted to the more knowledgeable. Brennan (2016) says we should seriously consider epistocracy because it would limit the damage caused by ignorant voters. However, this model would give political power to the people who are mostly likely biased, dogmatic, and polarized. This is because there is a strong link between political knowledge and ideological dogmatism. Indeed, epistocracy gives power to the very people Brennan calls 'hooligans' (2016: 5). In contrast, citizens who know the *least* about politics are also the least likely to participate in politics (they are 'hobbits'); as a result, these people are less likely to impose risks on innocent others. Thus, it's not obvious that individuals with more knowledge are sufficiently equipped to avoid making errors as damaging as those with less knowledge (see Gunn 2019 for a similar point).¹⁸

If more knowledgeable voters will not necessarily make better political decisions, who will? Perhaps we should focus less on voter knowledge and more on the epistemic virtue of *objectivity*.

¹⁷ Consider the following story recounted by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels in *Democracy for Realists*:

About 15 years ago, one of us attended with his wife a football game in Ann Arbor in which the town's two principal high schools played each other. Both schools were similar in racial and social class composition. His children attended the school with green football uniforms; the bitter cross-town rivals wore purple. The fans of each school sat on opposite sides of the stadium. About halfway through the game, his soft-spoken wife said under her breath, "I know that if we had bought the first house we considered, we'd be sitting on the other side of this field. But I just can't stand those purple people."

¹⁸ In reply, an epistocrat could argue that epistocracy with dogmatic but knowledgeable citizens is instrumentally better than democracy with non-dogmatic but ignorant citizens. Unfortunately, we currently have no way of knowing whether or not that is true.

Objectivity, like truth and justice, is a heavyweight philosophical notion that has been analyzed and contested in countless ways. I hope to stay above the fray of these disputes. Below I will describe what I mean by ‘objectivity’ and explain its political and epistemic value.

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

A good definition of objectivity is from Michael Bugeja, who teaches journalism at Iowa State. Bugeja says, “Objectivity is seeing the world as it is, not how you wish it were.” This nicely captures Lippmann’s own idea of objectivity. In his *New York Times* article, Lippmann encouraged journalists “to remain clear and free of irrational, unexamined, unacknowledged prejudgments in observing, understanding, and presenting the news.” Lippmann’s focus was on finding ways to help journalists defeat the distortions created by their own biases (see Jones 2009: 87). Following Lippmann, I will define ‘objectivity’ as “free of cognitive bias”.¹⁹

¹⁹ There are two other senses of ‘objectivity’ that diverge from how I use this term. First, the word is commonly used to demarcate judgements that concern matters of empirical and mathematical fact, in contrast to more ‘subjective’ judgements concerning matters of value or preferences (e.g., “coffee without sugar is gross”). Second, ‘objectivity’ sometimes means *neutral* in the sense of having no opinion on the matter. I do not use the term in either of these ways.

A lack of objectivity distorts judgment. It leads us to process political information in biased, partisan, and motivated ways rather than in dispassionate, rational ways. The more objective one is, the less one's pre-existing beliefs will color one's interpretation of the facts. The less objective one is, the more difficult is it to properly evaluate the evidence. Bias, or a lack of objectivity, motivates us to overlook, downplay, and misinterpret the evidence, arguments, and reasons against our preferred views. As psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated, we are often caught in a tug-of-war between accuracy and directional motivations. Objectivity, then, is the tendency to follow accuracy rather than directional motivations. It enables us to believe, think, and do what we epistemically *ought* to believe, think, or do, given the information and evidence we have.

Some people are skeptical of the very possibility of objective inquiry. It has been argued, for example, that scientific inquiry is a value-laden process and thus no 'purely objective' method of inquiry is possible (Feyerabend 1975). Inquiry will always involve a choice of questions, methods, and interpretation, which is where values inevitably creep in. I have a lot of sympathy with this view; however, I do not use 'objectivity' to mean *value-free*. I use it to mean "free of cognitive bias", and it is certainly possible to let values guide us (e.g., the value of truth) without being cognitively biased.

Others may be skeptical that we can ever be *unbiased*. They will say: *all* reasoning is motivated reasoning. I also have sympathy with this view. Indeed, this skeptical attitude may explain the popular idea that we are living in a "post-truth" world. As Simon Blackburn (2019) writes, "Perhaps our era is distinguished by a slightly different malaise. It is not so much the idea that there exists a *truth* about things that comes under attack, as the notion that there can be *any such thing as objective inquiry* into it." But whatever we might think of the possibility of *complete* objectivity (i.e. a lack of *any* bias whatsoever), it is certainly true that we can be biased to a greater and lesser extent. After all, there is abundant research in psychology (some of it discussed above) indicating that people engage in politically motivated reasoning to varying degrees. Insofar as this makes any sense, which it clearly

does, it immediately follows that some individuals are capable of being more objective (free of bias) than others. Thus, even if *total* objectivity is an unrealizable ideal, it is an ideal that can be approximated to varying degrees.²⁰

Objectivity has a crucial role to play in our new age of partisanship and polarization. While many political theorists have worried about the extent and depth of political ignorance, recent work in political psychology indicates that knowledge without objectivity may be unhelpful—indeed, it may be harmful to democracy. Politics is in desperate need of the type of citizens that Brennan calls *Vulcans*. A Vulcan, unlike a hooligan, is someone who thinks “scientifically and rationally about politics” (Brennan 2016: 5). They are open-minded, sensitive to the evidence, intellectually humble, and capable of explaining contrary points of view in a way that the people holding those views would find satisfactory.²¹ Vulcans are dispassionate, relatively unbiased, and lack the irrational tendencies of political hooligans, the “rabid sports fans of politics” (ibid).

Do Vulcans exist? If such creatures must be *perfectly* rational or *completely* free of cognitive bias, we are unlikely to find any. Such people are as fictional as the Vulcans in Star Trek. Nevertheless, a large body of literature is dedicated to techniques for debiasing (Soll et al 2015). This suggests that we are at least capable of diminishing our tendency to engage in motivated reasoning, thereby increasing our objectivity.

Precisely how to foster objectivity is an issue for psychology and applied epistemology. I will not say much about it here. My aim is to emphasize the role and value of political objectivity, as well as to

²⁰ To doubt the very idea of objective inquiry is to claim that investigations that are careful, patient, open-minded, and thorough are just as biased as investigations that exhibit the reverse of all these things. That seems deeply implausible.

²¹ A Vulcan is capable of passing what Bryan Caplan (2011) calls the “ideological turing test”. It works like this: a partisan individual is invited to answer questions (or write an essay) posing as his or her ideological opponent. If a neutral judge (or perhaps even a political adversary) cannot tell the difference between the partisan’s answers and the answers of his or her political opponent, the candidate is judged to correctly understand the opposing perspective. Thus, a Democrat who says that Republicans voted for Donald Trump “because they are stupid” would obviously fail the test. Likewise, a Republican who claims that Democrats voted for Hillary Clinton “because they’re elitist” would also fail.

illustrate why worries about voter ignorance may be misguided. However, I will discuss one possible strategy to promote objectivity, namely, reducing the strength of partisan identity. According to the research discussed above, the most highly partisan individuals are also the most likely to engage in politically motivated reasoning. Thus, a way to foster political objectivity may be to reduce the strength of partisan identity. Below I will discuss a dilemma for this view.

I do not pretend it will be easy to cultivate objectivity. In some studies, despite efforts to promote the evenhanded treatment of policy arguments, we still find evidence of politically motivated reasoning, with substantial polarization as a result (Taber and Lodge 2006). It is incredibly difficult for people to put aside their prior feelings and prejudices when evaluating evidence, even when they are instructed repeatedly to “set their feelings aside,” to “rate the arguments fairly,” and to be as “objective as possible” (ibid: 760). Even more worrying is the fact that individuals often mistakenly *think* they have succeeded in being objective. This is called the *illusion of objectivity* (Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987; Kunda 1990). It often *seems* to us that we are being impartial and unbiased, when in fact we are twisting the evidence to support the conclusions we want to reach.²²

5. The Dilemma of Political Objectivity

All this has an ironic and unfortunate upshot: the people who are the most capable of political objectivity are also the least likely to participate in politics. Thus, the very people we need to improve democracy are those who lack the motivation to be politically engaged.²³

²² Another worry: the more intelligent one is and the better one’s skills at presenting and defending arguments, the more powerful the illusion of objectivity will be. This is yet another way in which more reasoning or intelligence can lead to worse epistemic outcomes. We will convince ourselves that we are forming beliefs in ways that are appropriately responsive to the evidence (Kornblith 1999).

²³ This is closely related to work by Diana Mutz (2006). One of her central findings is that participatory democracy is at odds with deliberative democracy. More specifically, her research shows that exposure to diverse perspectives and deliberating with people who hold contrary views tends to make citizens ambivalent and apathetic about politics. As a result, they are less likely to participate in politics (Mutz 2006: 120). In contrast, the most politically active citizens rarely

The reason for this, as outlined above, is that partisanship, political engagement, and ideological dogmatism are intimately connected. The more politically partisan one is, the more likely one is to participate in politics. But, as Brennan says, “political participation tends to corrupt rather than improve our intellectual and moral character” (2016: 18). We exhibit especially bad epistemic behavior when we participate in politics. We display high levels of bias, are unable to control our preconceptions, and are least motivated to be objective. This is because open-mindedness and objectivity are incredibly difficult when self-interest, social identity, and strong emotions make us want to reach certain conclusions. The more politically partisan we become, the more elusive is objectivity.

In contrast, those with weak and uninformed political attitudes show less bias in processing political information. Thus, it seems that objectivity may reside more in ignorance and apathy than in knowledge and democratic citizenship. If this is true, then we have been looking for rational citizenship in the wrong place. The theory of motivated reasoning predicts less bias (more objectivity) for uninformed and politically apathetic individuals because they lack the motivation and ability to engage in identity protective cognition. Admittedly, this may be a sort of “dysfunctional objectivity” (Taber and Lodge 2006: 768). But it may be the only sort of objectivity that we humans, crafted from crooked timber, can achieve.

Recall the experiment by Kahan (2017) above. In this case, participants were able to address the task rationally and competently *when they did not care* if the new skin treatment was working or not. It was their lack of personal investment in the issue that allowed them to use their mathematical abilities to carefully analyze the data. Their thinking was corrupted when their passions about gun control interfered with their ability to analyze the data objectively. We find similar results in Mercier and Sperber’s *The Enigma of Reason*. Despite this book’s optimistic line about our ability to arrive at

talk to people who have different opinions and they tend to be worse at explaining the rationale behind contrary viewpoints.

accurate conclusions when we reason with others (as opposed to solitarily), the epistemic benefits of group interaction arise most clearly in scenarios where individuals have no stake in the outcome. For instance, humans are capable of reasoning well in groups when it comes to solving logical puzzles, such as the Wason selection task; but our ability to reason well – even with the help of others – is far less likely on issues *that matter to us*, particularly morality and politics.

We therefore face what might be an inescapable dilemma. The more *motivated* one is to play the role of a democratic citizen, the less *cognitively* capable one is of meeting the epistemic requirements of rational behavior for democracy. In contrast, the more *cognitively* able the typical citizen is at fulfilling the epistemic requirements of responsible citizenship, the less *motivationally* capable they are to fulfill this role.²⁴

In addition, objectivity is typically valuable only when one is relatively knowledgeable. There is little point in being unbiased if one is simply uninformed. (For example, I am completely ignorant about Venezuelan food, so I can be objective about it; but what good is that?) Thus, objectivity without knowledge may not be a type of objectivity worth wanting.

The ideal citizen thus seems to reside in an elusive space. To be objective, they must be apathetic enough about politics to circumvent ideologically motivated reasoning; yet they must also be sufficiently knowledgeable about politics and willing to participate (or at least vote). And yet by engaging in politics, they run the risk of letting it corrupt them. To cite Brennan once more, “Most common forms of political engagement are more likely to corrupt and stultify than to ennoble and educate people. Political engagement is more likely to turn a hobbit into a hooligan than into a Vulcan.

²⁴ We are also unlikely to foster objectivity in politics if Bryan Caplan is correct that a lack of political objectivity is instrumentally rational. Caplan (2007) calls this ‘rational irrationality’.

It is more likely to make hooligans into even worse hooligans than to transform them into Vulcans”
(2016: 55)

We are therefore left with yet another uncomfortable tradeoff: the most promising way to promote objectivity is by reducing the strength of partisan identity; but by reducing the strength of partisan identity, people lose the motivation to learn about politics and be active democratic citizens.²⁵

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

It might be true that relatively informed partisans tend to use their knowledge in biased ways that lead to polarization; however, it is possible that the *very well informed* are more capable of objective thought. Achen and Bartels (2006) provide some evidence for this idea. They find that the views of Republicans and Democrats increasingly diverge as levels of political information increase from the bottom to the middle of the distribution of political information. However, they also find that “the pull of objective reality only begins to become apparent among respondents near the top of the distribution of political information. . . . among the best-informed 10 or 20% of the public” (2006: 16).

In other words, while increasing levels of political knowledge tends to widen the gap between Republicans and Democrats, there is a point at the very top end of the information scale when partisanship no longer dominates our thinking. Individuals who are *very highly* informed about politics may therefore be capable of resisting what Bertrand Russell called “a law of our being”, that is, “whenever it is in any way possible, we adopt beliefs as will preserve our self-respect” (1928/2004: 51). As Achen and Bartels show, highly informed Republicans were more likely to acknowledge counterattitudinal truths, and highly knowledgeable Democrats were untroubled by any contradictions between the facts and their partisan expectations.²⁶ In contrast, reality seems to have had “virtually no

²⁵ This may not be entirely bad. According to Talisse (2019), we are currently “overdoing democracy” and need to lessen the extent to which politics contaminates our daily interactions with others.

²⁶ That said, Kahan et al. (2017) found that political polarization did not abate at the highest levels of cognitive sophistication.

effect on the responses of people in the bottom two-thirds of the information scale”, and the influence of partisanship on perceptions peaked among the moderately well-informed respondents (Achen and Bartels 2006: 21).

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

This may provide us with some hope for the ideal of an enlightened citizen,²⁷ but it comes with two significant risks. First, increases in knowledge will still foster polarization and dogmatism in partisans *unless they reach the level of the informational elite*. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that most citizens will achieve this level of competence, as the literature on political ignorance makes clear. Second, the claim that objectivity can be found in a small group of ‘informationally elite’ citizens may make a *very restrictive* form of epistocracy *that much more attractive* (setting aside other concerns we might have with such a proposal). If so, this threatens our hope for an informed *democratic* citizenry. Whether or not we are willing to accept this tradeoff is a topic for another occasion.

²⁷ It can also be seen as a vindication of expertise. While some people delight in pointing out that experts themselves nourish all kinds of biases, we can interpret the above data as evidence that experts are more objective (see Kahan et al. 2016).

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