Importance of Voter Competence in Democracy

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Popular democratic theory assumed that democratic citizens were rational voters who elaborate the positions of candidates on most, if not all, political issues and then vote accordingly (Achen and Bartels 2016, 1-3). However, empirically minded political scientists have been studying political behavior of democratic voters for decades, and their findings do not even come close to the popular theory in terms of voter competence. As political scientist Larry Bartels points out, “the political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best documented features of contemporary politics” (1996, 194). Even more than a decade before Bartels, Michael Margolis stated that “political science tells us” that the most American citizens neither know, nor care about their political representatives and the policies of their government, and the most importantly, “these findings are common knowledge among students of politics” (Margolis 1983, 115). If political information is the “central resource for democratic participation,” American citizens have serious shortcomings in terms of political resources (Carpini and Keeter 1996, 50). Rick Shenkman concludes that mass ignorance is “the most obvious cause” behind the “foolishness that marks so much of American politics” (2008, 123). In short, the input, lack of political knowledge of American citizens, mostly determines the output, a desired political system that benefits the lives of all citizens. Thus, “even the most discriminating popular judgement can reflect only ambiguity, uncertainty, or even foolishness if those are the qualities of the input into the echo chamber” (Key 1968, 2-3).

One of the most important reasons behind democratic malfunction today is public ignorance (see, Bartels 1996; Brennan 2016; Somin 2016; Achen and Bartels 2016). Bryan

Caplan points out that most voters are “worse than ignorant,” namely irrational and casting their votes accordingly (2006, 2). They are unable to identify stances of the candidates on important policy issues. For many questions, flipping a coin would produce more reliable answers than asking an average American voter on the street (Brennan 2016, 28). Voter ignorance is a well-documented subject in political science, and we know since the groundbreaking research of Campbell et al. in 1960 that American voters’ political knowledge has not improved (Smith 1989, 3; Achen and Bartels 2016). Another piece of disappointing news from empirically minded political scientists is that this trend of political ignorance does not seem to change in the near future. By looking at all these facts, it is preposterous to claim that democracy does not need voter competence in order to work properly. For the very existence of representative democracy, voter competence is a necessary factor.

Most political theorists, in principle, accept that only competent individuals should have the political rights although they may disagree on what counts as “competence.” For example, Robert Dahl accepts the minimal conception of competence which is knowing your interests and being able to make decisions about your life (1998, 100). Political scientist Corey Brettschneider also suggests a similar account of competence when he argues that if a citizen has political rights, it means we have already assumed that she is the best judge of her interests (2007, 31). In contrast to the minimalist definition, Jason Brennan understands competence as having “tremendous amount of social scientific knowledge” (2016, 29). According to this view, it is vital to deprive political rights of incompetent citizens in order to prevent them to “exercise political authority over” innocent and competent individuals (Brennan 2016, 17). Political philosopher David Estlund conceptualizes competence as an ability of being better than random, and he emphasizes group competence over an individual competence. If a group of people

produces better results than a coin flip, to Estlund, this counts as competence (2008, 228). Carpini and Keeter (1996, 10-11) defines competes as political knowledge, which is "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long term memory," and, as the definition demonstrates, the authors think that it is crucial for citizens to acquire political *facts* regularly.

Critics of contemporary democracy point out to the erosion of rationality, deliberation, and individuality of citizens. They argue that without judgments of independent minds, democracy can hardly be a legitimate system. Making political judgments without being fully informed is the main defect of contemporary democracy that critics want to change. Democratic citizens are supposed to be competent, and democratic procedures should have a tendency of producing good outcomes. By "good outcomes", I mean a democratically accepted decision that produces better outcomes than a coin flip. The critics argue that informed and rational consent is what is missing in contemporary democratic politics. For instance, while Estlund suggests that rational deliberation should aim at decreasing the influence of biased or wrong decisions in order to achieve good outcomes, Pettit proposes that the authority of political representatives should be narrowed "in favor of the jury and a judicial strategy of control" (Urbinati 2014, 93).

It is a well-known republican principle that "price of liberty is eternal vigilance" (Pettit 2002, 250) and obviously, without an interest in politics and necessary knowledge on ongoing political and economic debates in one's country, a citizen would fail to keep an eye on her government. Pettit explains that "eternal vigilance" involves an insistence on the side of citizens that the government "should abide by certain procedures" (2002. 264). Moreover, government officials should be held accountable for "their actions [and inactions] in parliament or in the press," and citizens are supposed to force their government officials that "they should allow access to information on relevant aspect of their

personal lives, and so on" (Pettit 2002, 264). The eternal vigilance clearly requires the political competence from citizens. This requirement is necessary for both to protect the liberty of citizens from state infringement, so that they can enjoy their political rights, and to maintain a legitimate democratic system, which produces intelligent outcomes for the benefits of the whole society.

Reasons Behind Political Incompetence

Why are most people politically incompetent? Being a competent voter is a time-consuming process. Acquiring political information requires basic understanding of political and economic concepts. Therefore, even if an average voter regularly watches news and presidential debates, reads newspapers and political platforms of candidates, it is unlikely that she will completely understand crucial socio-economic and political information. Moreover, studying basic political science and economy, and acquiring relevant information in order to be a knowledgeable voter requires time and effort. In addition, a competent voter has to change her political position on specific issues when she finds out that empirical works prove her beliefs wrong. In other words, a competent voter has to reject dogmatism by regularly accommodating her political position to science and empirical facts.

The problem is that first, most voters do not have basic knowledge on political science and economy; thus, initially they need to learn some fundamental concepts in order to make sense of political information. For example, approximately 20 percent of Americans recognize basic terms such as Bill of Rights, three branches of government, and only 10 percent of American voters could give an acceptable definition to liberalism and conservatism (Neuman 1986, pp. 17, 19). Most voters do not even know with whom their country is at war. According to a 2007 survey, despite the Iraq war since 2003, only one third of Americans knew that "Sunni" or "Sunnis" are

one of the two major Islamic groups that were trying to control Iraq. In other words, two thirds of Americans could not name “Sunni” even though the survey had already mentioned the name of the other branch of Islam, the Shiites, in the question (Somin 2016, 18). After more than two decades, political knowledge of an average American voter has not increased on these basic issues (see Hentoff 2011), and still political ignorance, as Neuman pointed out, “is a cause for profound concern” (1986, 8). As Scott Althaus writes “if ignorance is bliss, then the pursuit of happiness seems alive and well in American society” (2003, 12).

In addition, acquiring factual knowledge about politics is necessary for democratic deliberation. While it is difficult and problematic to decide what constitutes as “a fact” in politics, this difficulty should not lead us to dismiss the notion of “political facts” altogether. For instance, when we discuss poverty, we may reasonably disagree about the causes and consequences of poverty; however, it is important that we all know what the definition of poverty is according to the federal government. For it would allow us to understand one another in deliberations while giving us a chance to disagree on the government’s poverty line on economic grounds (Carpini and Keeter 1996, 11). Many people may oppose to a law because of their untrue or misleading knowledge about facts and details. For instance, 59 percent of Americans believe that the U.S. government spends too much on foreign aid because an average citizen assumes that “the foreign aid budget is 25 percent of the total federal government budget” while, in reality, this number is less than 1 percent (Hurst et al. 2017). More examples can be given to prove my argument that many decisions of citizens would be different if they were fully informed or, at least, if they were aware of political and economic facts of particular issues.

Second, most voters are not willing to spend their time on learning politics because political knowledge does not pay off for an individual. Citizens do not have enough incentive to be

a knowledgeable voters since they know that their individual votes virtually have zero effect on national election results (Brennan 2016, 31; Landsburg 2004). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2016, voting-age population in the United States was more than 240 million (Beureau 2017). It means that there was a 1/240.000.000 chance that a vote by any American would break a tie in the presedential elections. Even if we take into consideration that the turnout was just 54.7 percent, a chance that an individual vote would make a difference is extremely low. When we look at statistical chances of the influence of one vote to the electoral outcomes, Nadia Urbinati's definition of (political) liberty – "in order for me not to be subjected to another's power I should somehow participate in making the decisions I am supposed to obey" – becomes meaningless (2014, 75). In other words, having political rights, such as voting and running for office, will not make any difference in terms of my subordination to someone else's will.

As Brennan states, only in two circumstances one can claim that she is not dominated by others: either incompetent citizens abstain from exercising their political rights by their own choice or, "in some way," they are restrained (2016, 98). Although the latter is some kind of epistocracy, the former is perfectly consistent with a democracy. In addition to statistical insignificance of an individual vote, there is no punishment or a fine for ignorant voters. Incompetent voters, unlike incompetent drivers, have no reason to fear from personal punishment if they impose a risk on their fellow citizens by voting badly and carelessly. In their discussion of the possible effects of deliberation, Dryzek and List underline that "if there are no punishments for being exposed as a liar, then there are no incentives for truthfulness" (2003, 10). Because individual votes have almost no decisive influence on a national election outcome, it is quite rational for a citizen to remain ignorant about political and economic situation of their country. Under these circumstances, it is

rational for voters not to spend their time to study politics unless they believe it is their moral obligation to be informed voters (Brennan 2016, 30).

Third, most voters are “happy” with their dogmatism and are quite reluctant to face with scientific facts that are more likely to shake their beliefs rather than confirming them. In the recent decades, political polarization has been rising in the United States. It seems that nowadays, it is almost impossible to bridge the gap between the Republican and the Democratic parties. In 2010, political polarization in both chambers of the United States Congress “was more acute than it had been since the late nineteenth century in the wake of the American Civil War” (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, 70). An optimistic view on political polarization states that the more people listen to the arguments of their rivals, the more they will understand each other. In other words, listening to the other side will lessen the acuteness of current polarization. However, this view is not supported by empirical findings. For example, it is a known fact that most people prefer to watch and listen to friendly media channels, which confirm, rather than challenge, their preexisting political beliefs. Thus, consuming counterattitudinal news may lead people to understand and tolerate the views of others. Nevertheless, empirical findings suggest that this optimistic assumption does not have enough evidence to support its claim. “Exposure to counterattitudinal news (…) can be just as polarizing as exposure to proattitudinal news” (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, 88). People are more likely to radicalize their political views in order to resist the information of their rival political groups.

Resistance to the counter arguments is not irrational. Indeed, incompetent citizens are instrumentally rational or, in economist Byran Caplan’s words, they are “rationally irrational” (2006, 123). Deliberately, voters avoid scientific facts and statistical data that do not support their already shaped belief systems. Political psychologists conclude that

political judgment of average citizens "are influenced by the valence of initial affect, whether that affect is intrinsic (e.g., prior attitudes) or extrinsic (e.g., smiley faces) to the process" (Erisen et al. 2014, 203). Political psychology explains us that we should not be surprised when, for example, before the 2016 elections, more than half of American voters *believed* that crime rate had been increasing since 2008 while the official data showed that property and violent crimes had decreased 23 percent and 19 percent respectively (Gramlich 2016). And the last presidential election was not an exception. In the previous years, American voters' perception of crime rate was also far away from the reality. Bad news for democracy is that most voters are influenced by emotions rather than rational deliberation.

Noam Chomsky, an American public intellectual, argues that the U.S. elections are run "by the PR industry" and political candidates are promoted in a similar way as "toothpaste, lifestyle drugs, automobiles, and other commodities" because the main "task is to delude the public by carefully constructed images that have only the vaguest resemblance to reality" (2006, 226). If we focus on the reactions of politically ignorant and politically knowledgeable citizens to "PR industry," we can reasonably conclude that knowledgeable citizens, or in Jason Brennan's words, "Vulcans" are less likely to be deluded by political ads while they are more likely to vote based on political agendas of candidates (Brennan 2016, 36-37).

Responses to Possible Criticism

One can object that average voters do not have to know much about politics and economics. If they have enough knowledge on issues that influence their lives, such as agriculture, mining, education etc., they can choose best candidates easily, and their elected representatives will handle all other issues with the help of their staff. It is a minimalist conception of democracy in which citizens can choose their

leaders without broad political knowledge, and if they are not satisfied with the work of their representatives, they can "punish" incumbents by voting for their challengers in the next election. Moreover, theories of issue voting and retrospective voting assume that the voters vote according to positions of political candidates on certain domestic and foreign policy issues. However, as we are going to see, empirically speaking, all these assumptions are simply wrong.

First, "majority of the public do not even meet the requirements of relatively simple theories such as Schumpeterian retrospective voting" (Somin 2016, 73). Even in the minimalist conception of democracy or, in other words, in an electoral democracy, voters need to know who their representatives in the Congress are, and, what these representatives voted for in the House and the Senate. Voters need "a tremendous amount of social scientific knowledge" in order to evaluate the results of the actions of their representatives and to compare incumbents with challengers (Brennan 2016, 29). As Achen and Bartels indicate, "voters' retrospections are blind" (2016, 118). American voters blame the government for natural disasters and calamities such as droughts and shark attacks that are beyond the control of any government. Mainstream objection is that "voters do not blame government for disasters per se. They blame the government for its ineffective intervention." However, this argument also does not depict the reality simply because empirical works do not support this objection (Achen and Bartels 2016, 135-138). In short, voters are irrational, and "when they are in pain they are likely to kick the government, so long as they can justify doing so with whatever plausible cultural constructions are available to them" (Achen and Bartels 2016, 29).

Second, this objection ignores the significant consequences of public ignorance on democratic politics. It is a common knowledge among political scientists that an average citizen does not cast her vote based on certain issues that the

candidates stand for. In other words, empirical works do not reveal an evidence that supports issue voting hypothesis. A classic example for the voting behavior of Americans is the groundbreaking empirical study by Campbell and his colleagues. In *The American Voter*, they analyzed the elections of 1948, 1952, and 1956. Their findings demonstrated that the majority of Americans casted their votes based on personality and character rather than political platforms of presidential candidates. For example, although Adlai Stevenson focused on foreign policy issues more than any candidate, the electorate "was largely unaware of his position" (Campbell et al. 1976 [1960], 61). As empirical evidence suggests, after a half century, almost nothing has changed in terms of political behavior of an average American voter.

In the 2004 presidential elections, only one in tenth of Americans said that political platforms and ideas of John Kerry and George Bush were "a prime reason for their vote" (Chomsky 2006, 223). Moreover, "'style,' 'likability,' 'bonding,' and 'character'" rather than political agendas of presidential candidates were the main focus of media outlets and commentaries (Chomsky 2006, 223). In one experiment on the influence of candidates' photos on electoral behavior, political psychologist Alex Todorov and his colleagues showed the photos of opposing candidates to potential voters for one second. Then, the participants were asked to vote for one of the candidates based on their individual evaluation of the candidates' competence. The results of the experiment "predicted the 2004 House and Senate election outcomes at significantly better than chance levels [namely] 67.7 percent and 68.8 percent, respectively" (Lodge and Taber 2013, 10). Additionally, Lodge and Taber found out that factors such as "attractiveness," "familiarity," "perceived age," and "babyfacedness" all have a significant influence on the voters' perception of political candidates' competence, which "is the strongest predictor of vote choice" (2013, 13). Among these four factors, "babyfacedness" has an indirect influence.

However, the influences of “attractiveness” (70 percent) and “familiarity” (89 percent) are “mediated through competence” while perceived age of a candidate “exert a direct casual influence on vote choice without any indirect effect through competence” (Lodge and Taber 2013, 13-14). These experiments confirm the bad news for democracy that most individuals cast their votes, if they vote at all, based on politically unrelated and irrational factors.

Third, this objection is based on the self-interested voter hypothesis (SIVH) that individuals vote according to their own socio-economic interests. Thus, the SIVH argument goes, voters tend to be knowledgeable about certain issues that affect their voting behavior. Empirical evidence by political scientists, contrary to this view, shows that individuals vote based on what they think is the best for the whole society and voters are more likely to sacrifice their self-interest for their own perception of public good (Conover et al. 1987; Miller 1999; Funk 2000; Feddersen et al. 2009). In short, “the SIVH fails” (Caplan 2006, 123). On the contrary, quite interestingly, majority of voters believe that they vote for the public good instead of for their self-interests. They believe that a candidate that they voted for will be good for their country, not only for them (Brennan and Hill 2014, 41). Despite their benevolent intentions, without an adequate political information “neither passion, nor reason is likely to lead to decisions that reflect the real interests of the publics” (Carpini and Keeter 1996, 5).

Conclusion

Competence is not only important for voting; it is necessary for a democratic participation in general. As Schudson points out, people with a knowledge of basic political concepts, may “vote intelligently … but democratic citizenship means more than voting” (2000, 21). A democratic citizen is supposed to deliberate, discuss, ask questions, and propose alternative courses of action. Without political knowledge, an individual

would not only be incapable to meet these requirements, but she would also fail “to understand even the simple slogans and catchwords of the day” (Schudson 2000, 21). Moreover, political scientists have been warning the public for decades that the low level of voter competence is a threat to constitutional democracy.

A representative democracy, in which the vast majority of citizens actively and regularly participate in politics by voting, knowing, seeing, and checking the actions of their governments and by proposing alternative policies, is only possible when the citizens are politically knowledgeable. Such a genuine democracy requires competent citizens who shape their political views and opinions based on arguments, facts, and consistent values. It demands independent minded citizens who refuse to believe everything that their favorite candidates or government officials say; these citizens independently check the sources of political information and question their reliability. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, a representative government is only possible when the citizens are able to keep it. Otherwise, democracy is open for different forms of disfigurements such as populist and plebiscitarian. Moreover, inactive and incompetent citizenry would make it easy for economically and politically powerful individuals to rule the country with a tacit consent of uninformed citizens. It is highly problematic to accept that a democracy can be legitimate with uninformed consent of its citizens since the latter do not understand what it is that they agree with.

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