AGAINST DEMOCRACY

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WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Princeton and Oxford

should presumptively prefer epistocracy to democracy, or elections don't quality as high stakes. In that latter case, the competence principle by itself would leave us *indifferent* between epistocracy and democracy. But given that there are no good proceduralist arguments for democracy, we should still just prefer whatever system works better.

In chapter 8, "The Rule of the Knowers," I outline various ways we might instantiate epistocracy. I discuss some of the potential benefits and risks of different forms of epistocracy, and respond to some remaining objections to it.

Chapter 9, "Civic Enemies," is a short postscript. I conclude by saying that what's regrettable about politics is that it makes us enemies with one another. The problem isn't merely that we're biased and tribalistic, that we tend to hate people who disagree with us just because they disagree. Rather, the problem is, first, that politics puts us in genuinely adversarial relationships, and second, that because most of our fellow citizens make political decisions in incompetent ways, we have reason to resent the way they treat us. I argue that for this reason, all things considered, we should want to expand the scope of civil society and reduce the sphere of politics. The reason we should try to realize Adams's hope is not merely because, ideally, we would have no further need of politics. Instead, a major reason we should try to realize it is that politics gives us genuine grounds to hate one another.

CHAPTER 2

IGNORANT, IRRATIONAL, MISINFORMED NATIONALISTS

The typical person crosses the street only when they believe it's clear. They have every incentive to look both ways. They also have every incentive to form beliefs in a rational way about whether the street is clear. When they see what looks like a Mack truck crashing toward them, they don't dare indulge the idea that it's an optical illusion. After all, if they're wrong, they die.

Now suppose this same person is about to vote. What happens if they indulge, say, a conspiracy theory, or make an honest mistake? Alas, not much. The chances that an individual's vote will make any sort of difference are vanishingly small. An individual vote for the worst-possible candidate produces the same results as a vote for the best-possible candidate. Abstaining from voting produces the same results as voting. A well-informed vote produces the same results as a badly informed, misinformed, or irrational vote. An individual vote after careful deliberation produces the same results as voting after flipping a coin or dropping acid.

The problem is that this goes for *each* of us. People are generally well informed and rational about street traffic—and as a former insurance liability adjustor, I can assure you they're not perfect at

that—because irrationality is punished.[1] But as we'll soon see, they tend to be ignorant and irrational about politics. Perhaps this is because when it comes to voting, knowledge and rationality do not pay, while ignorance and irrationality go unpunished.

If *we*, the electorate, are bad at politics, if we indulge fantasies and delusions, or ignore evidence, then people die. We fight unnecessary wars. We implement bad policies that perpetuate poverty. We overregulate drugs or underregulate carbon pollution. But the problem is that we, the electorate as a whole, don't make choices about whether to be informed or rational about politics. Individuals decide for themselves in light of their individual incentives.

This chapter begins by discussing the phenomenon of political ignorance. We'll see how little most Americans, including most voters, tend to know, and then I'll explore why they don't know much. Next, I'll provide a quick overview of the field of political psychology. Political psychology studies how people process political information. It turns out most people process political information in deeply biased and irrational ways.

In chapter 1, I claimed that many Americans are hobbits, while the others are mostly hooligans. Ignorance and apathy are the marks of the hobbit; bias and zealotry are the marks of the hooligan. At the end of this chapter, I'll explain why it's fair to estimate that Americans are about divided, roughly in half, between hobbits and hooligans.

WHAT CITIZENS DON'T KNOW

When it comes to politics, some people know a lot, most people know nothing, and many people know *less* than nothing.

You might already believe—based on anecdotes and personal experiences—that voters don't know much. But if you're not familiar with the statistics, there's a good chance you give them too much credit and that your personal experiences are misleading. When asked to think about uninformed voters, you probably picture your most ignorant acquaintances and relatives. Yet since you're reading this book, I can assume that you have or soon will have at least a bachelor's degree. Even if you attended a lower-tier university, your classmates were still the intellectual *elite* of your country. You, your friends, your relatives, and your acquaintances are probably at least among the top 10 percent most informed people in your country.

In the 1940s and 1950s, researchers at Columbia University and the University of Michigan began cataloging what typical citizens know and don't know about politics. The results were depressing.

As political scientist Philip Converse summarizes, "The two simplest truths I know about the distribution of political information in modern electorates are that the mean is low and the variance is high."[2] Somin, author of *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, says, "The sheer depth of most individual voters' ignorance is shocking to many observers not familiar with the research."[3] In his extensive review of the empirical literature on voter knowledge, Somin concludes that at least 35 percent of *voters* are "know-nothings."[4] (I stress voters because not everyone votes, and people who choose not to vote tend to know less than people who choose to vote.) Political scientist Larry Bartels observes that "the political ignorance of the American voter is one the best-documented features of contemporary politics."[5] Political theorist Jeffrey Friedman adds, "The public is far more ignorant than academic and journalistic observers of the public realize."[6] Political scientist John Ferejohn agrees: "Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics."[7]

I could write an entire book just documenting how little voters know. But since many others have already done that, I'll only offer a few examples:

- During election years, most citizens cannot identify any congressional candidates in their district.[8]
- Citizens generally don't know which party controls Congress.[9]
- Immediately before the 2004 presidential election, almost 70 percent of US citizens were unaware that Congress had added a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, though this was a giant increase to the federal budget and the largest new entitlement program since President Lyndon Johnson began the War on Poverty.[10]
- In the 2010 midterm presidential election, only 34 percent of voters knew that the Troubled Asset Relief Program was enacted under George W. Bush rather than Barack Obama. Only 39 percent knew

that defense was the largest category of discretionary spending in the federal budget.[11]

- Americans vastly overestimate how much money is spent on foreign aid, and so many of them mistakenly believe we can significantly reduce the budget deficit by cutting foreign aid.[12]
- In 1964, only a minority of citizens knew that the Soviet Union was *not* a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Yes, that's right: NATO, the alliance created to oppose the Soviet Union.)[13] Keep in mind this is just a short time after the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which the United States almost went to (nuclear) war with the USSR.
- Seventy-three percent of Americans do not understand what the Cold War was about.[14]
- Most Americans do not know even roughly how much is spent on social security or how much of the federal budget it takes up.[15]
- Forty percent of Americans do not know whom the United States fought in World War II.[16]
- During the 2000 US presidential election, while slightly more than half of all Americans knew Al Gore was more liberal than Bush, they did not seem to understand what the word *liberal* means. Fifty-seven percent of them knew Gore favored a higher level of spending than Bush did, but significantly less than half knew that Gore was more supportive of abortion rights, more supportive of welfare state programs, favored a higher degree of aid to blacks, or was more supportive of environmental regulation.[17] Only 37 percent knew that federal spending on the poor had increased or that crime had decreased in the 1990s.[18] On these questions, Americans did worse than a coin flip. Similar results hold for other election years.[19]

This is sampling. I could go on for hundreds of pages documenting such ignorance, yet others have already done so at great length, as I mentioned above. In short, though, voters generally know who the current president is, but they don't know much more beyond that.

However ignorant voters tend to be, nonvoters—adult citizens who are eligible to vote but choose to abstain—tend to be worse. As the Pew Research Center summarizes, "On average, people who are

not registered to vote answer 4.9 out of 12 questions correctly compared with 7.2 among voters. Just 22% of non-voters know that Republicans control the House of Representatives."[20] Less than a third of nonvoters knew in 2008 that Mitt Romney is pro-life. Only 41 percent knew that Romney opposed gay marriage. On each of the Pew Research Center's political "News IQ" quiz questions, voters scored between 10 and 25 percentage points higher than nonvoters.

Things are worse than these numbers indicate. Simple surveys of voter knowledge—such as Pew Research Center polls or the American National Election Studies (ANES)—tend to *overstate* how much Americans know.

One reason these surveys overstate voter knowledge is that they usually take the form of a multiple-choice test. When many citizens do not know the answer to a question, they guess. Some of them get lucky, and the surveys mark them as knowledgeable. Imagine I administer a twelve-question test to ten thousand voters, and each question has three choices for an answer. Now suppose the average American gets four out of twelve questions correct. It might be that the average American knows the answer to four questions, but this is indistinguishable from them guessing at random.

Yet another reason most surveys and studies overstate knowledge is that they usually don't ask citizens to identify particulars or degrees. They count a citizen as knowledgeable if they know that we spend more on social security than defense, but they typically don't check if they know *how much* more we spend. They count a citizen as knowledgeable if they know that the economy grew in 2013, but they don't check if they know roughly how much it grew.

So, for instance, even though in AD 2000, most Americans knew that the federal deficit had decreased under Bill Clinton (in fact, there was a surplus), most were not aware how much it had decreased.[21] Or while most Americans knew in 2000 that Gore was more liberal than Bush, they did not know how much more liberal he was. (Indeed, as we saw above, they appear not to know what the political label *liberal* even means.) Or even though many Americans in 1992 knew that unemployment had risen under George H. W. Bush, the majority of Americans were unable to estimate the unemployment rate within 5 percentage points of the actual figure. When asked to guess what

the unemployment rate was, the majority of voters guessed it was twice as high as the actual rate.[22] When voters don't know degrees, they're likely to misallocate resources and have the wrong priorities.

Finally, the most profound reason that these studies and surveys overstate voter knowledge is that they ask *easy questions*. They investigate whether citizens know easily verifiable facts. They ask citizens to pick the current president off a list, identify which party controls the House of Representatives, or identify whether the unemployment rate has been rising or falling. These are the kinds of questions one might find on a fifth-grade civics exam. You could Google the answer to all these questions in a few minutes. While most voting Americans cannot answer such questions, these questions do not require specialized social scientific knowledge.

Knowing the answers to the easy questions is not enough to be well informed about politics. To be well informed, citizens also need to know the candidates' policy platforms, how candidates are likely to vote in Congress, what policies the candidates are likely to support, whether these votes are likely to matter or not, and how much influence the candidates are likely to have if they win.

Yet even this is not enough. To know whom to vote for, one needs to know more than what candidates stand for, what the candidates have done in the past, or what they intend to do in the future. A well-informed voter needs to be able to assess whether the candidates' preferred policies would tend to promote or impede the voter's favored outcomes. So, for example, suppose I know candidates Smith and Colbert both want to improve the economy, but Smith favors free trade, and Colbert favors protectionism. I can't make a reasonable choice between them unless I know whether free trade or protectionism is more likely to improve the economy; to know that, I need to know economics.

Or suppose candidates Friedman and Wilson both want to reduce inner-city crime, but Friedman argues we should end the war on drugs, while Wilson says we need to double down. Again, to know whom to vote for, I'd need to know about criminology, the economics and sociology of black markets, and the history of Prohibition.

Few voters have any significant social scientific knowledge. For this reason, economist Bryan Caplan begins his book *The Myth of the Rational Voter* with, "What voters don't know would fill a university library."[23] Caplan intends his remark to be taken literally. Go to the nearest university library. Point to the history books. Voters basically don't know anything in those books. In fact, over a quarter of Americans don't even know which country the United States fought in the Revolutionary War.[24] Now turn to the economics books. Americans don't know much of anything in them. In 1776, Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, which among other things, refuted a widespread economic ideology Smith called "mercantilism." But now, 240 years later, the typical American voter more or less accepts mercantilism.[25]

Now point to the political science books. Americans don't know what's in them either. For instance, most Americans don't know what the three branches of government are, or what these branches have the power to do.[26] As Somin says,

> Compared to a sample of political scientists specializing in American politics, the public substantially underestimates the ability of the president and Congress to control the composition of the federal budget, the influence of the Federal Reserve on the state of the economy, and the impact of state and local governments on public schools.[27]

Citizens don't know who controls what, and so they're often voting on irrelevant policy differences.

Next, pull out a copy of the US Constitution. Americans revere the Constitution, but they don't know what it says. Less than 30 percent of Americans can name two or more of the rights listed in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Less than a third know that Karl Marx's communist slogan "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" is *not* in the Constitution.[28]

You might object, "Voters don't need to be experts in politics. They just need to know enough to throw the incumbent bastards out when the bastards are doing a bad job." But knowing whether the bastards are doing a bad job requires a tremendous amount of social scientific knowledge. Voters need to know who the incumbent bastards are, what they did, what they could have done, what happened

when the bastards did what they did, and whether the challengers are likely to be any better than the incumbent bastards.

In fact, voters usually lack all this knowledge. They generally have little to no sense of who was in power, or what those people had the power to do.[29] They do not know what influence incumbents had, or how to attribute responsibility to different incumbents.[30] They frequently do not even know whether things got better or worse. For example, as mentioned above, crime—one of the biggest problems in the United States throughout the 1970s and 1980s—fell dramatically under Clinton, but most Americans did not know this. During the 2012 election, most Americans did not know that the economy grew rather than shrank the year before.[31]

What's most surprising about all this is how *stable* political ignorance is. Today, political information is cheap and easily available. But as the joke goes, "I have a device in my pocket capable of accessing all information known to man. I use it to look at pictures of cats and argue with strangers." In 1940, less than 30 percent of white people over age twenty-five had a high school diploma; now, more than 80 percent do. Although Americans are, at least on paper, better educated than ever before, and even though political information has never been cheaper or easier to acquire, people nonetheless remain roughly as ignorant about politics as they were forty years ago.[32]

MOST VOTERS AREN'T STUPID; THEY JUST DON'T CARE

Economists think it's no great mystery why voters are so ignorant. It's explained by basic microeconomics.

Acquiring information has a cost. It takes time and effort—time and effort that could be spent promoting people's other goals. When the expected costs of acquiring information of a particular sort exceed the expected benefits of possessing that sort of information, people will usually not bother to acquire the information. Economists call this phenomenon *rational ignorance*.

To illustrate this point, consider the following. Suppose there's $1 million buried somewhere in your city, there for the taking. Now suppose you know that the instructions for finding the money are inserted into the text of Leo Tolstoy's twelve-hundred-page *War and Peace*. You'd probably be willing to read *War and Peace* to find that $1 million.

But suppose instead I just tell you the instructions are hidden, randomly, in the text of one of the books in Harvard University's seventeen-million-books library system.[33] Though it's worth $1 million to find the text, it's no longer worth your time to search for it. You might get lucky and find the instructions right away, but you're more likely to spend a lifetime reading and never find them.

Becoming an informed voter is a bit like trying to read the entire contents of Harvard's library in order to find the $1 million. You'll learn a lot along the way, but acquiring that information is not likely to pay off.

Or to put it another way, suppose a billionaire offers you $1 billion if you can ace introductory microeconomics. You'd probably be willing to do it. But suppose instead the billionaire says, "If you ace introductory microeconomics *and* introductory American government *and* US history *and* first-year constitutional law *and* can score twenty-eight or higher on the ANES civics exam, I'll then give you a one-in-sixty-million chance of winning $1 billion." If you are the typical American, you probably wouldn't bother. You'd remain rationally ignorant of those subjects.

A vote makes a difference only if there is a tie; otherwise, it usually does not matter how someone votes or whether they vote at all.[34] Yet the probability a person will break a tie is vanishingly small.[35] Some economists and political scientists estimate that you are more likely to win Powerball a few times in a row than to cast a tie-breaking vote.[36] The most optimistic estimates suggest a voter can have as high as a one-in-a-million chance of breaking a tie in a presidential election, but only if that voter lives in a swing state, and only if that voter votes for a major political party.[37] Otherwise, even on the most optimistic estimates, individual votes count for nothing. Few citizens know how to calculate the exact probability that their votes will be decisive, but they do know intuitively that their votes are unlikely to make a difference.

Individual citizens have almost no power over government, and individual votes have almost zero expected value. Citizens don't invest in acquiring political knowledge because the knowledge doesn't pay.

Regardless of whether citizens have altruistic or selfish political preferences, it is not worth their time to be well informed about politics.

SOME CITIZENS KNOW MUCH MORE THAN OTHERS

Ignorance is not uniform. As Converse says, while the mean level of knowledge is low, variance is high. Most voters are ignorant, but some are highly informed, and some are *worse* than ignorant.

The ANES surveys eligible voters on basic political information, such as who the candidates are or what these candidates stand for. There is tremendous variance in what eligible voters know. Political scientist Scott Althaus summarizes some of the results:

> Just how high [the variance is] is made clear when we add up the number of correct answers to these questions and divide respondents into knowledge quartiles. While people in the highest knowledge quartile averaged 15.6 correct answers out of 18 possible, people in the lowest averaged only 2.5 correct answers.[38]

On this test of political knowledge, the top 25 percent of voters are well informed, the next 25 percent are badly informed, the next 25 percent are know-nothings, and the bottom 25 percent are systematically misinformed.

The ANES in effect gives citizens a multiple-choice exam on basic political knowledge. As we saw above, the voting public as a whole does worse than chance on many of these questions. In the 2000 US presidential election, significantly less than half of all Americans knew that Gore was more supportive of abortion rights, more supportive of welfare state programs, favored a higher degree of aid to blacks, or was more supportive of environmental regulation than Bush. Think of what that means. Imagine you are on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. The host asks you the million-dollar question, "Who was more supportive of abortion rights in 2000, Al Gore or George Bush?" Suppose you don't know, but the host gives you the option of either flipping a coin or phoning a random US voter from the year 2000. You should flip the coin; it's more reliable.

But while the public as a whole is systematically misinformed about some things, the lowest knowledge quartile is extremely misinformed.

For example, in the 1992 ANES, voters were asked to identify which party, the Democratic or Republican, was more conservative on average. Only 12 percent of people in the lowest knowledge quartile could do so. They were also asked to identify the relative ideological position of the two major party candidates, (sitting president) Bush or Clinton. Only 17.9 percent of the people in the lowest knowledge quartile could do so. Only 17.1 percent of them could identify which candidate, Bush or Clinton, was more pro-choice. Only 9.7 percent of them could identify which candidate, Bush or Clinton, wanted to expand government services or the welfare state more.[39] These answers are significantly worse than chance. In contrast, over 90 percent of voters in the top knowledge quartile get these questions right.[40]

Political knowledge and economic literacy are not evenly spread among all demographic groups. Political knowledge is strongly positively correlated with having a college degree, but negatively correlated with having a high school diploma or less. It is positively correlated with being in the top half of income earners, but negatively correlated with being in the bottom half. It is strongly positively correlated with being in the top quarter of income earners, and strongly negatively correlated with being in the bottom quarter. It is positively correlated with living in the western United States, and negatively correlated with living in the South. Political knowledge is positively correlated with being or leaning Republican, but negatively correlated with being a Democrat or leaning independent. It is positively correlated with being between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four, but negatively correlated with other ages. It is negatively correlated with being black, and strongly negatively correlated with being female.[41] As I'll explore in chapter 8, the basis of one of the major objections to epistocracy is the fact that political knowledge is spread unevenly among demographic groups.

INFORMATION CHANGES POLICY PREFERENCES

If political ignorance had no effect on our policy preferences, if well- and badly informed people had the same political opinions, then ignorance and misinformation wouldn't matter. Yet it turns out that information does matter. What policies people advocate depends on what they know.

Political scientist Martin Gilens notes that high-information Democrats have systematically different policy preferences than low-information Democrats. High-income Democrats tend to have high degrees of political knowledge, while poor Democrats tend to be ignorant or misinformed. Poor Democrats more strongly approved of invading Iraq in 2003. They more strongly favored the Patriot Act, invasions of civil liberty, torture, protectionism, and restricting abortion rights and access to birth control. They are less tolerant of homosexuals and more opposed to gay rights.[42] High-information Democrats have the opposite preferences. They tend to have opposed the Iraq invasion and torture, and support free trade, civil liberties, gay rights, abortion rights, and access to birth control.

Using the ANES data, Althaus also finds that well- and badly informed citizens have systematically different policy preferences.[43] Althaus shows that poorly informed people have systematically different preferences from well-informed ones, even after correcting for the influence of demographic factors such as race, income, and gender. As people (regardless of their race, income, gender, or other demographic factors) become more informed, they favor overall less government intervention and control of the economy. (That's not to say they become libertarians.) They are more in favor of free trade and less in favor of protectionism. They are more pro-choice. They favor using tax increases to offset the deficit and debt. They favor less punitive and harsh measures on crime, and are less hawkish on military policy, although they favor other forms of intervention. They are more accepting of affirmative action. They are less supportive of prayer in public schools. They are more supportive of market solutions to health care problems. They are less moralistic in law; they don't want government to impose morality on the population. And so on. In contrast, as people become less informed, they become more hawkish about intervention as well as in favor of protectionism, abortion restrictions, harsh penalties for crime, doing nothing to fix the debt, and so forth.

WHY ISN'T EVERYONE IGNORANT?

Once we understand the theory of rational ignorance, political ignorance no longer seems strange. Of course people are ignorant. The democratic system incentivizes them to be ignorant (or more precisely, fails to incentivize them to be informed). What now cries out for explanation is why some people are so well informed.

The rational ignorance theory says that most people remain ignorant about politics because the expected cost of learning political information exceeds the expected benefits of possessing that information. The flip side of this is that a person will learn about politics if the benefits exceed the costs. Yet an individual informed vote is just as useless as an uninformed one. So, to explain why some people acquire political information, we have to look to different sets of incentives. The theory of rational ignorance does not imply that people will never acquire political information; rather, it suggests that most of them will not acquire it for the purpose of voting.

Hearing more and forgetting less: Educated people know more than uneducated people. Though most people forget most of what they learn in school, the more schooling one has, the more knowledge one retains. If people remember only 25 percent of what they learn in school, someone with a bachelor's degree will still know more than someone with only a high school diploma.

A belief in a moral duty to be informed: Most people believe that they have a moral duty to vote, or at least they claim to have this belief when surveyed.[44] Some of them believe that they not only must vote but also should cast an *informed* vote. Some people actually become informed for this reason, though it's difficult to say just how many.

Belonging and social class: Few people want to be the odd person out. Most want to belong to and be respected by some group. People sometimes acquire knowledge to fit in. To fit in with a various group, one might need to know a lot about football, cars, celebrities, or fashion. This also applies to political knowledge. It just depends on who the relevant peer group is.

Educated people tend to live around, associate with, befriend, and marry other educated people, while they tend to avoid uneducated people.[45] Educated people expect certain things of each other. In light of peer pressure, a typical university-educated person would be ashamed to admit they had never read William Shakespeare's work, had never attended a symphony, or preferred NASCAR to soccer. One persistent trend is that educated people expect other educated people to keep up with politics.

People sometimes start to acquire knowledge in order to fit in, but then learn to *enjoy* that knowledge. Just as a college student might start drinking beer to fit in, but over time acquire a taste for it, or another might start learning about fashion to fit in, and over time acquire a real taste for fashion, so might some people acquire a taste for political knowledge.

Political geeks: On that point, some people acquire knowledge just because they find it *interesting*. They enjoy having knowledge, understanding how the world works, and acquiring new knowledge. They take pleasure in coming to understand things they did not know.

I sometimes read encyclopedia articles about obscure topics in mathematics, physics, or physical geography—information that is unlikely to serve any greater purpose—just because I find them fascinating. I am a nerd, a geek, an infovore.

Many people are political nerds. Indeed, finding politics interesting is one the strongest predictors that a person is highly informed about politics; they just enjoy consuming political information.[46] In the test of political knowledge in the 2000 ANES, people who have a high level of interest in politics get about eleven more questions right than people who have a low level of interest in politics. In contrast, people with graduate degrees tend to get about eight more questions right than people who dropped out in middle school. Being interested in politics has a stronger effect on basic political knowledge than having a master's degree.

The problem with these three kinds of motivations, though, is that they only weakly discipline us to get our facts right. Some people have an incentive to be informed in order to fit in with their peers. But they also have an incentive to believe whatever their peers and friends believe about politics. Some people acquire political information because they find it interesting. Yet the problem here is that they might find a mistaken theory more interesting or fascinating than a true one.

POLITICAL IRRATIONALITY

Imagine how a vulcan would form beliefs about politics. Vulcans are perfectly rational. An ignorant vulcan would know they are ignorant, and thus would be almost entirely agnostic about political

issues. If they decided to learn more, they would seek out information from credible sources. They would conform their beliefs to the best-available evidence. A vulcan would look not merely at evidence in favor of different views but also evidence against these views. They would change their minds whenever the evidence called for it. They would consult peers and take disagreement seriously, and would gladly accept criticism, since they want to avoid error. "Thanks for correcting me and pointing out my mistakes!" They would hold beliefs only as strongly as the evidence allows.

True vulcans are free of *cognitive bias*. A cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from rational thought. Biases are like software bugs in our brains. They prevent us from believing, thinking, or doing what we ought to believe, think, or do, given the information and evidence we have.

The overwhelming consensus in political psychology, based on a huge and diverse range of studies, is that most citizens process political information in deeply biased, partisan, motivated ways rather than in dispassionate, rational ways. Most people are much more like hooligans than like vulcans. Even the hobbits—who lack strong ideologies—are more like potential hooligans or hooligans in waiting than they are potential vulcans. (They don't care enough about politics to form opinions, but if they started to care, they'd form opinions in biased ways.)

Political psychologists Milton Lodge and Charles Taber summarize the body of extant work: "The evidence is reliable [and] strong . . . in showing that people find it very difficult to escape the pull of their prior attitudes and beliefs, which guide the processing of new information in predictable and sometimes insidious ways."[47] Political psychologists Leonie Huddy, David Sears, and Jack Levy summarize: "Political decision-making is often beset with biases that privilege habitual thought and consistency over careful consideration of new information."[48]

People tend to have bad epistemic behavior when participating in politics. They display high levels of bias when discussing or participating in politics. This may be because the human brain was designed more for winning arguments and forming coalitions than seeking truth. As psychologist Jonathan Haidt observes,

> Reasoning was not designed to pursue the truth. Reasoning was designed by evolution to help us win arguments. That's why [psychologists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber] call [their theory of why reasoning developed] The Argumentative Theory of Reasoning. So, as they put it . . . "The evidence reviewed here shows not only that reasoning falls quite short of reliably delivering rational beliefs and rational decisions. It may even be, in a variety of cases, detrimental to rationality. Reasoning can lead to poor outcomes, not because humans are bad at it, but because they systematically strive for arguments that justify their beliefs or their actions."[49]

For a vulcan, reasoning about evidence makes them more likely to acquire true beliefs and reject false ones. But for real people, reasoning can be epistemically dangerous. We engage in *motivated reasoning*—we try to arrive at beliefs that maximize good feelings and minimize bad feelings. We prefer to believe some things as opposed to others, and our brains tend to converge on the beliefs we prefer to have.

Psychologist Drew Westen conducted one of the most famous recent experiments on motivated reasoning.[50] Westen's subjects were loyal Republicans and Democrats. The subjects were shown a celebrity's statement, followed by information potentially making the celebrity seem hypocritical. Then, the subjects were presented with an "exculpatory statement." (A test run had a quote by Walter Cronkite saying he would never do television work again after retiring, followed by footage showing he did work again after retiring, followed by an explanation saying it was a special favor.) In the experiment, the celebrities were identifiable as Republicans or Democrats. Republican subjects strongly agreed that the famous Democrats contradicted themselves, but only weakly agreed that the Republicans did so. Democratic subjects likewise readily accepted exculpatory statements from their favored party, but not the other one. Functional magnetic resonance imaging showed that subject's pleasure centers were activated when condemning members of the other party, and activated again when subjects denied evidence against members of their own party.

POLITICAL TRIBALISM

In politics (and elsewhere), we suffer from "in-group/out-group" or "intergroup bias." In-group/out-group bias means we are *tribalistic*, in the most negative connotation of that term. We are biased to form groups, and then identify ourselves strongly with that group. We tend to develop animosity toward other groups, even when there is no basis for this animosity. We are biased to assume our group is good and just, and that members of other groups are bad, stupid, and unjust. We are biased to forgive most transgressions from our own group and damn minor errors from other ones. Our commitment to our team can override our commitment to truth or morality.[51]

As an illustration, psychologist Henry Tajfel conducted experiments in which he randomly assigned subjects to groups. He would then lie to subjects by telling them that group members shared some frivolous trait. Next, he conducted experiments to see how people treated members of their own group and other groups. He repeatedly found that subjects would then show strong favoritism toward members of their own group and distrust toward members of other ones.[52]

You might have seen videos on YouTube or late-night television showing how intergroup bias and motivated reasoning work. For instance, an interviewer will ask someone if they are a Democrat or Republican. If the person answers that they are a Democrat, the interviewer will then ask them questions like, "What do you think about policy X that Obama implemented? What do you think of policy Y that Bush implemented?" The typical Democrat will then talk at great length about how great X is and how bad Y was. But then the interviewer will reveal it was a trick; in fact, Obama implemented Y, and Bush implemented X. The interviewed subject will get angry, deny everything, and stomp away.

Political psychologist Geoffrey Cohen did a number of scientific studies using this trick in order to determine how partisanship affects people's judgments about policies. As fellow political psychologist Dennis Chong sums up Cohen's work,

> The experiment presented participants with two contrasting versions—generous or stringent—of a social welfare policy. Judging

> each policy on its merits, respondents preferred the version that was consistent with their ideological values. But when the policies were attributed to either the Democratic or Republican Party, liberal respondents favored the Democratic-labeled policy regardless of whether it was generous or stringent, and conservatives favored the Republican-labeled policy regardless of details.[53]

Taken in isolation, this kind of study doesn't necessarily demonstrate that people are irrational. After all, if I think that, say, the Harvard economics department is smart, and I then learn that it supports a particular policy, I might rationally defer to its opinion. If I hear that, for example, economist Andrei Schleifer disagrees with me about something in behavioral finance, I take that as strong presumptive evidence that I am wrong. Nevertheless, in the context of all the various studies on partisan biases in how we process information, it appears more likely that people are trying to be faithful to the team versus processing information in the most rational way.[54]

As I discussed above, many people acquire political information because they have a taste for politics. Somin has a good analogy: some people are political *fans*.[55] Sports fans enjoy rooting for a team. They learn player histories, stats, odds, and sports facts, not because this information will help their team win, but because doing so increases their enjoyment of the game. Sports fans, however, also tend to evaluate information in a biased way. They tend to "play up evidence that makes their team look good and their rivals look bad, while downplaying evidence that cuts the other way."[56]

This is what tends to happen in politics. People tend to see themselves as being on team Democrat or team Republican, team Labor or team Conservative, and so on. They acquire information because it helps them root for their team and against their hated rivals. If the rivalry between Democratic and Republican voters sometimes seems like the rivalry between Red Sox and Yankees fans, that's because from a psychological point of view, it very much is.

One might object that many voters claim to be independent. But in fact, study after study shows that almost all self-described independent voters are closet partisans; they belong to a team and always vote for the same party.[57]

Political scientist Diana Mutz finds striking evidence that political "fandom" is what motivates people to get to the polls. The people who are most active in politics tend to have strong hooligan characteristics. Politically active citizens are usually people who have strong opinions, but who rarely talk to people who have different opinions, and who are unable to explain the rationale behind contrary viewpoints.[58] Being exposed to contrary perspectives tends to lessen one's enthusiasm for one's own political views. Deliberation with others who hold contrary views tends to make one ambivalent and apathetic about politics, and less likely to participate.[59] What Mutz calls "cross-cutting political exposure"—exposure to contrary points of view, or talking to people who disagree—strongly decreases the likelihood that a person will vote, reduces the number of political activities a person engages in, and makes people take longer to decide how to vote.[60] In contrast, actively participating citizens tend not to engage in much deliberation and tend not to have much cross-cutting political discussion.[61] The people who participate the most are those who spend the most time in echo chambers.

If you want to see one effect of tribalism, consider how beliefs about certain political issues tend to be clustered together, even though these issues have nothing to do with each other. Consider the following topics: gun control, global warming, how to handle the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, mandatory paid maternity leave for women, the minimum wage, gay marriage, the Common Core curriculum, and flag burning. If I know your stance on any one of these issues, I can predict with a high degree of reliability what your stance is on all the others.

If you think about that, it's rather strange. The issues are logically unrelated. The arguments for and against abortion rights have almost nothing to do with gun control. Yet if you're pro-choice, you're almost certainly pro-gun control, and if you're pro-life, you're almost certainly anti-gun control. If you want to raise the minimum wage, you probably believe global warming is a major threat, and that government needs to intervene to stop it. If you oppose raising the minimum wage, you probably believe global warming isn't real, isn't produced by humans, or isn't a big deal, and that government should do little or nothing about it. One political party and its adherents

have picked one set of beliefs about these issues, while the other political party and its adherents have picked the opposite beliefs. There's rationally no reason why this should be so, since these beliefs are independent. So a good part of the explanation seems to be tribalism: the tribes have settled on answers, and people express fidelity to their tribe by adopting its beliefs.

One could imagine, say, a Democrat objecting that there is a reason why their beliefs tend to cluster together. Democrats' beliefs are all *true*, even if logically unrelated. Democrats are just people who are unusually good at getting at the truth, and so that's why Democrats tend to share a particular set of beliefs.

But even if that were so, why then would Republicans hold the opposite set of beliefs? If Democrats were just unusually good at discovering the truth, that would explain why Democrats converge on one set of logically unrelated beliefs, but it wouldn't explain why Republicans (or non-Democrats in general) converge on the opposite beliefs. We'd instead expect that Republicans would tend to have randomly distributed and disparate beliefs about most of these topics. We'd expect Democrats' beliefs to be positively correlated with one another, but Republicans' beliefs would have few or no positive correlations. We'd expect Democrats' beliefs to form a cluster, but not Republicans' beliefs. I suppose the Democrat objector might respond it's not just that Democrats are unusually good at discovering the truth, but that Republicans are unusually inclined to form false beliefs. (Some of my academic colleagues, who are unrepentant hooligans, will laugh here and say, yes, that's precisely it.)

It's *possible* that this is true. But the evidence speaks against it. If we knew that one party had high-information voters while the other had low-information ones, that fact would tend to support the hypothetical Democrat's argument. Yet while the average Republican is slightly better informed than the average Democrat, the differences in knowledge are not staggering.

On this point, consider the studies I mentioned above about how information affects our policy preferences. Althaus and others have shown that, even once we correct for whatever influence demographic factors have on our political preferences, low- and high-information voters have systematically different political preferences. We can use

these studies to test the hypothesis that the reason Democrats accept one cluster of (logically unrelated) beliefs while Republican accept the opposite cluster is that one party is unusually good at tracking the truth even as the other is amazingly good at avoiding it. But Althaus doesn't find that information tends to make one converge on Democrats' or Republicans' beliefs. Rather, the enlightened US public agrees with Democrats on some issues, Republicans on some others, and rejects both Democratic and Republican stances on yet other concerns.[62]

OTHER EXAMPLES OF COGNITIVE BIAS IN POLITICS

We suffer from an impressive range of other cognitive biases, each of which impedes our ability to reason clearly about politics.

Confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias: We tend to accept evidence that supports our preexisting views. We tend to reject or ignore evidence that disconfirms our preexisting views.[63] We tend to search for and uncritically accept evidence that favors our current opinions, and ignore, reject, or are bored by or suspicious of evidence that undermines our current opinions. We give every benefit of the doubt to arguments and people supporting our views, yet we dismiss arguments and people critical of our views. We care not about the truth but instead about defending our turf. In fact, many political partisans are so biased that when they are presented with evidence that they are mistaken, they double down—they come to believe even more strongly that they were right.[64]

Confirmation bias explains how we consume news and information. Most people only read news that supports their preexisting opinions. Left-liberals read the *New York Times*. Conservatives flock to Fox News.

Law professor Dan Kahan recently did an ingenious experiment that shows just how corrupting politics can be.[65] He wanted to answer the question, When laypeople come to mistaken conclusions about social scientific matters, is it because they aren't smart enough to understand the evidence, or because they are too biased to process the evidence properly?

To test this, Kahan recruited a thousand subjects, gave them a basic mathematics aptitude test, and then surveyed their political

views. He then asked them to reason through some scientific problems. The first problem was politically neutral. In it, he described a hypothetical study testing the effect of a skin cream on rashes. The subjects understood it was a hypothetical study and that they were being asked what conclusion the data would tend to support if true. Kahan purposefully made the mathematics tricky. Not surprisingly, only subjects with high mathematical aptitude scores figured out the right answer. Liberals and conservatives did equally well.

This gave Kahan a baseline by which to judge how people's political loyalties affect their ability to reason about evidence. Kahan reworded the math problem; he made it about gun control as opposed to skin cream. In one version, the hypothetical data would support the conclusion that bans on concealed handguns failed to decrease crime. In another, the data would support the conclusion that bans succeeded in decreasing crime. The math was exactly the same as with skin cream. So presumably people who got the answer right in the first case should get it right in the second.

On the contrary, people overwhelmingly concluded that the hypothetical data supported their preexisting beliefs about handguns and crime. Conservatives tended to believe that the math showed that allowing people to carry concealed handguns decreases crime. Liberals tended to believe the math proved that allowing people to carry concealed handguns fails to decrease crime. Kahan gave half the liberals the version that supported their belief, and half the version that undermined it. In both cases, the liberals concluded the hypothetical data supported their preexisting belief. Even when the data implied that concealed handguns decreased crime, liberals concluded overwhelmingly that the data said that concealed handguns failed to decrease crime. Kahan similarly gave half the conservatives the version that supported their preexisting belief, and half the version that undermined it. Again, in both cases the conservatives concluded that the data just supported their preexisting belief. Even when the data implied that concealed handguns failed to decrease crime, conservatives overwhelmingly concluded that the data said that concealed handguns succeeded in decreasing crime. Worse, the better people were at math—the higher they scored on the aptitude test—the more *biased* they were.

Availability bias: A few years ago, the news media realized Americans love stories about kidnapping. Soon, the national media started covering every child kidnapping in the United States. Because there was near-constant television coverage of kidnappings, most Americans believed that there was a kidnapping epidemic. The soft rock band Train sang that it was "calling all angels" because "children need to play inside so they don't disappear."[66] But in fact, kidnappings had been going down, not up; only about a hundred children a year are kidnapped by strangers in the United States. Kids are actually safer now than they were in the 1960s, and not just because their parents have recently become too paranoid to let them play outside.

The problem here is that we are terrible at estimating probabilities. When we are asked, "How frequently does X occur?" we use a cognitive shortcut: if we find it easy to think of examples of X, then we assume X must be common. If we find it difficult to think of examples, we assume X must be uncommon.

Psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman call this phenomenon "availability bias" or the "availability heuristic."[67] Vivid things—plane crashes, shark attacks, terrorist attacks, and Ebola—come to mind easily, so we assume these things are much more common than they are. Things that aren't vivid—deaths from the flu or pneumonia—do not come to mind easily, and so we wrongly conclude these things are uncommon.

Availability bias is dangerous in politics. It causes us to focus our attention and money on the wrong things.

Consider that in the past fifty years, there have been only about thirty-five hundred deaths from terrorism in the United States. The 9/11 attacks cost $30 billion in cleanup, property damage, and lost income to businesses. We might compare these lost lives and financial losses to the War on Terror itself. So far, fighting this war has killed over six thousand US soldiers, over two thousand US contractors, and over a hundred thousand (or maybe over two hundred thousand) innocent civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. The Watson Institute at Brown University estimates the total real monetary costs of the wars on terror at $3 to $4 trillion.[68] Political scientist John Mueller and civil engineer Mark Stewart say that to justify the expense of the Homeland Security Administration, the agency would need to

prevent nearly seventeen hundred major terrorists events per year, which of course it doesn't.[69] The US War on Terror doesn't survive cost-benefit analysis. But Americans are bad at estimating probabilities, and so few wish to abolish Homeland Security.

Affective contagion and prior attitude effect: I characterize vulcans as dispassionate. Some political theorists might rebel against this; they might think that passion is a good thing in politics, and might complain that Western political philosophy has long had a bias against emotion.[70] But the psychological evidence indeed shows that passion corrupts our thinking. When people feel strongly about an issue, they are more likely to evaluate arguments about it in a polarized, biased way. Moreover, when people are feeling emotional (sad, angry, joyful, etc.), this corrupts their ability to think about politics.[71] How you evaluate political information, what conclusions you draw, depends on your mood. Experiments show that emotion causes us to ignore and evade evidence, or rationalize political beliefs. It leads to biased and motivated thinking.

Framing effects: How people evaluate information depends heavily on how the information is presented. Psychologists call this a framing effect.

Consider the following two questions.[72]

1. There is a disease that is expected to kill six hundred people. There are two possible programs that authorities can use to fight it. Program A will save exactly two hundred people. Program B has a one-third chance of saving all six hundred people, but a two-thirds chance that no one will be saved. Which program is better, A or B?
2. There is a disease that is expected to kill six hundred people. There are two possible programs that authorities can use to fight it. If program alpha is adopted, exactly four hundred people will die. If program beta is adopted, there is a one-third chance that nobody will die, but a two-thirds chance that everyone will die. Which program is better, alpha or beta?

If you look closely, you'll realize that questions 1 and 2 are the same. They describe exactly the same scenario and probabilities, but use different wording. Question 1 asks about saving people, and question 2 asks about letting them die. A perfectly rational person, a vulcan, would recognize this and give the same answer to both questions. But Americans aren't vulcans. When we ask them question 1, they prefer option A. When we ask them question 2, they prefer option beta. But option beta in question 2 is simply option B in question 1, worded differently.

In fact, such framing effects are persistent and expansive.[73] *How* questions are posed has a major effect on what opinions people form. A psychologically savvy person—a pollster, newscaster, pundit, politician, moderator in a deliberative forum, or person writing up a referendum question on a ballot—can use framing effects to get voters to pick one choice over another.

Peer pressure and authority: Other people's testimony matters. I believed Australia existed long before I ever set foot on Australian soil. I was justified in believing Australia existed because I had good, reliable testimony from others that it existed. So it often makes sense for us to listen to each other. Vulcans listen to others.

That said, we are biased to conform our opinion to that of the majority (or that of whatever group we want to be part of), even when it is irrational to do so. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Asch experiment. In Solomon Asch's experiment, eight to ten students were shown sets of lines in which two lines were obviously the same length, and the others were obviously of different length. They were then asked to identify which lines matched. In the experiment, only one member of the group is an actual subject; the rest are collaborators. As the experiment proceeds, the collaborators begin unanimously to select the wrong line.

Asch wanted to know how the experimental subjects would react. If nine other students are all saying that lines A and B, which are obviously different, are the same length, would subjects stick to their guns or instead agree with the group? Asch found that about 25 percent of the subjects stuck to their own judgment and never conformed, about 37 percent of them caved in, coming to agree completely with the group, and the rest would sometimes conform and sometimes not.[74] Control groups responding privately in writing were only one-fifth as likely to be in error. These results have been well replicated.

For a long time, researchers wondered whether the conformists were lying or not. Were they just pretending to agree with the group, or did they actually believe that the nonidentical lines were identical because the group said so. Researchers recently repeated a version of the experiment using functional magnetic resonance imaging.[75] By monitoring the brain, they might be able to tell whether subjects were making an "executive decision" to conform to the group, or whether their perceptions actually changed.[76] The results suggest that many subjects actually come to see the world differently in order to conform to the group. Peer pressure might distort their eyesight, not just their will.[77]

These findings are frightening. People can be made to deny simple evidence right in front of their faces (or perhaps even come to actually see the world differently) just because of peer pressure. The effect should be even stronger when it comes to forming political beliefs.

WHY POLITICAL IRRATIONALITY IS RATIONAL

Political psychology shows that we are not disposed to be vulcans. But we can overcome our cognitive biases with effort. The problem, though, is that we have weak incentives to surmount our cognitive biases when thinking about politics. Just as it is instrumentally rational for most people to remain ignorant about politics, it is instrumentally rational for most of them to indulge their biases. They are, in Caplan's terms, *rationally irrational*.[78]

A person is rationally irrational when it is *instrumentally rational* for that person to be *epistemically irrational*. Instrumental rationality is about taking courses of action that serve one's ends. Epistemic rationality is about forming beliefs with the goal of seeking truth and avoiding error, using a scientific evaluation of the best-available evidence. It can sometimes be useful—instrumentally rational—for us to form our beliefs in an epistemically irrational way. So, for instance, suppose one lived in a fundamentalist theocratic monarchy or something close to it, such as most of Europe in the Middle Ages or Saudi Arabia right now. In those cases, it would be in your best interest to conform your beliefs to whatever the theocracy wanted, even if the evidence didn't support these beliefs.

In our day-to-day lives, we tend to get punished for being epistemically irrational. If you think looks are all that matters in a mate, you'll have a string of bad relationships. A person who indulges the belief that buying penny stocks is key to financial success will lose money. The Christian Scientist who indulges the belief that pneumonia can be cured by prayer might watch their children die. And so on. So reality tends to discipline us into thinking more rationally about these things.

Unfortunately, in politics, our individual political influence is so low that we can afford to indulge biases and irrational political beliefs. It takes time and effort to overcome our biases. Yet most citizens don't invest the effort to be rational about politics because rationality doesn't pay.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Marxist economic theory is false. Imagine that electing a Marxist candidate would be an absolute disaster—it would destroy the economy, and lead to widespread death and suffering. But now suppose Mark believes Marxism on epistemically irrational grounds—he has no evidence for it, but it caters to his preexisting biases and dispositions. Suppose Mark slightly *enjoys* being Marxist; he values being Marxist at, say, five dollars. Mark would be willing to overcome his biases and change his mind, but only if being Marxist started to cost him more than five dollars. Now suppose that Mark gets an opportunity to vote for the disastrous Marxist candidate or a decent run-of-the-mill Democrat. While it's a disaster for Mark if the Marxist wins, it's not a disaster for him to vote Marxist. Since Mark's vote counts for so little, the expected negative results of voting for the Marxist are infinitesimal, just as the expected value of voting Democrat is infinitesimal. Mark might as well continue to be and vote Marxist.

The problem, again, is that what goes for Mark goes for us all. Few of us have any incentive to process political information in a rational way.

AT LEAST VOTERS MEAN WELL, SORT OF

Political scientists have conducted numerous empirical studies of voter behavior, using a wide variety of methods. They overwhelmingly conclude that voters do *not* vote selfishly.[79] Instead, voters

tend to be nationalist and sociotropic. That is, they tend to vote for what they *perceive* to be in the national interest rather than in their self-interest.

This may seem surprising. After all, most people are predominantly selfish in their daily lives. So if they are altruistic as voters, this cries out for explanation. Fortunately, we have the explanation in front of us. As I just discussed, individual votes don't matter. Rational, selfish people would not vote selfishly. They wouldn't vote at all, because the costs of casting a selfish vote exceed the expected benefits of voting. To illustrate this, suppose one presidential candidate promises to give me $10 million if elected. While it's worth $10 million to me for them to win, it's not even worth a penny for me to vote for them. I better promote my interests by staying home to drink Laphroaig than by voting.

So it goes with other citizens. If citizens do bother to vote, it will be out of a sense of duty or belonging, to express their ideologies, or to demonstrate their commitment to their political tribe. Since none of our votes matter, it doesn't cost us anything *extra* to cast an altruistic vote as opposed to a selfish one.

Voters generally want to promote the common good instead of their own narrow self-interest, but that doesn't mean they in fact succeed in doing so. When voters vote, they have both what we might call policy preferences and outcome preferences:

Policy preferences: The set of policies and laws they want candidates to support, such as increasing the estate tax, cutting spending, increasing tariffs, or escalating the war in Afghanistan.

Outcome preferences: The consequences they want candidates to produce, such as improving the economy for everyone, reducing the amount of criminal violence, increasing economic equality, or reducing the danger of terrorism.

To say that voters are nationalist and sociotropic is to make a claim about their outcome preferences. It tells us they want their elected officials to serve the common good of their country rather than their narrow self-interest or the common good of the entire world. But that doesn't mean that voters know enough to have good policy preferences. We sometimes mistakenly believe a policy will promote our favored outcomes, when that policy will in fact undermine those outcomes. So, for example, in 2008, Republicans sincerely believed cutting taxes and government spending would stimulate economic growth. Democrats sincerely believed increasing taxes and spending would stimulate economic growth. They can't both be right.

HOBBITS AND HOOLIGANS

In chapter 1, I argued that the public is split between hobbits and hooligans. To review, hobbits generally have low information and typically don't care much about politics. Hooligans generally have higher information and have strong opinions about politics, but they are biased in how they evaluate and process political information.

In this chapter, I've reviewed a number of findings from political science and political psychology. I showed:

- The overwhelming majority of people lack even an elementary knowledge of politics, and many of them are misinformed.
- Some people tend to have more knowledge than others. Knowledge is strongly tied to interest. That is, people acquire political knowledge primarily because they find it interesting.
- Most people process political information in a biased way—a way that reinforces their current ideology.
- The most active people in politics tend to be true believers who rarely talk to people who have contrary points of view and cannot articulate why someone might disagree with them.

These facts alone come close to dividing American almost in half along hobbit and hooligan lines. Pretty much everyone is disposed to be biased and irrational. Somewhat more than half of Americans, however, know nothing or less than nothing about politics, while the rest know a moderate amount about politics. All we need now to complete the picture is information about the *strength* of people's ideological preferences.

In one of the most famous studies of political opinion, Converse found

> that on any particular issue of broad political importance, the public could be partitioned into one of two groups: the first made up of citizens who possess genuine opinions and hold onto them tenaciously; the second and much larger group composed of citizens who are quite indifferent to the issue in question and who, when pressed, either confess their ignorance outright or, out of embarrassment or misplaced civic obligation, invent an attitude on the spot—not a real attitude, but a "nonattitude." Converse concluded that sizable fractions of the public "do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time."[80]

That's not to say that literally only a minority of people have any opinions. Rather, it's that there is a continuum. High-information citizens tend to have many strong opinions. Low-information citizens tend to have fewer and weaker opinions. The average citizen is somewhere in between. Subsequent studies have tended to confirm this.[81]

Today, fewer and fewer Americans regard themselves as political partisans. In a recent Gallup Poll, a record 42 percent of Americans identify as politically independent rather than Republican or Democrat.[82] Over the past forty years, the trend is that an increasing percentage of citizens identify themselves as independent. Yet further research shows that almost all these people who now classify themselves as independent are weak partisans versus true independents.[83] Weak partisans think of themselves as independent, but they almost always vote for the same political party. Weak partisans are halfway between hobbit and hooligan. Weak partisans, people who lean independent, and genuine independents participate less in politics, and are less likely to vote than strong partisans, but they also know less.[84]

CONCLUSION

Democracy empowers each person with an equal basic share of political power. But this is a small share indeed. Because the share is so small, citizens have little incentive to use their power responsibly.

Voting and air pollution have a lot in common. Consider that right now, Washington, DC, where I work, is one of the smoggiest cities in

the United States. There is little heavy industry in the area, so almost all the smog comes from tailpipe emissions. DC's rush hour traffic is infamous. While drivers collectively cause the pollution, no single driver makes any significant difference. If I were the only driver, I could drive my turbocharged sports sedan to my heart's content and never cause any noticeable pollution. And the same goes for every other driver. How much *we* pollute makes a huge difference, but for each person, how much *they* pollute make no real difference. So each individual person has little incentive to stop polluting.

Democracy is much like that. Voters remain ignorant and irrational because democracy incentivizes them to remain ignorant and irrational. So we have to ask, What should we do about it?

Some political theorists and political scientists think we need to get people to talk. If people talk, they could overcome their ignorance and irrationality. In chapter 3, I'll argue that such talk tends to make things worse, not better. Others say we needn't worry, because democracy as a whole behaves as if people were vulcans, even though most voters are hobbits and hooligans. In chapter 7, I'll contend they're largely wrong about that.

If they are mistaken, then we need to ask, Just as we regulate emissions in order to control air pollution, should we regulate voting in order to control voting pollution?