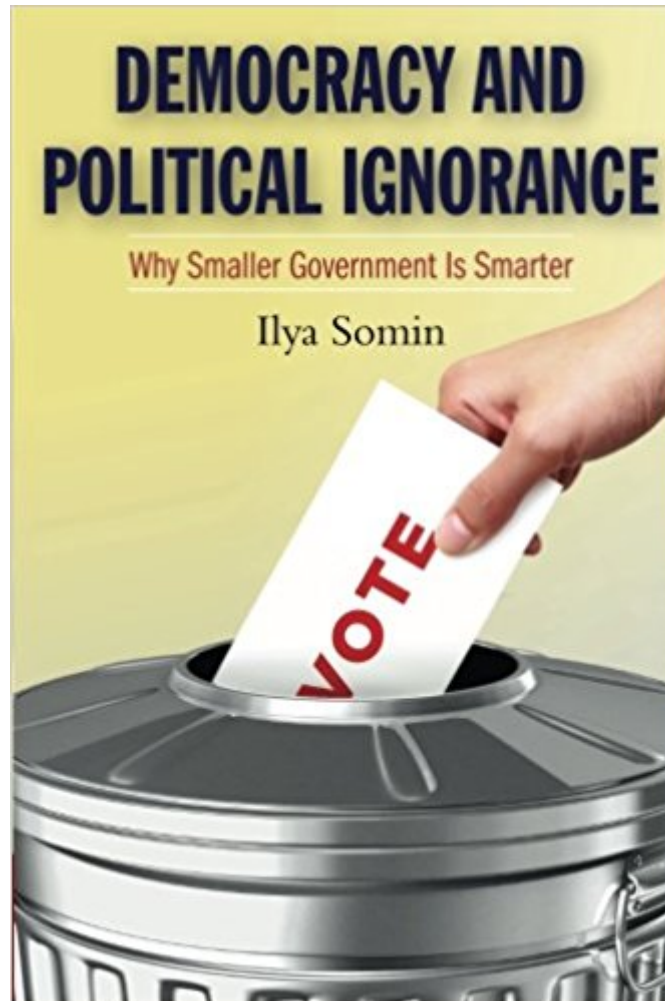


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Democracy And Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter



Synopsis

One of the biggest problems with modern democracy is that most of the public is usually ignorant of politics and government. Often, many people understand that their votes are unlikely to change the outcome of an election and don't see the point in learning much about politics. This may be rational, but it creates a nation of people with little political knowledge and little ability to objectively evaluate what they do know. In *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, Ilya Somin mines the depths of ignorance in America and reveals the extent to which it is a major problem for democracy. Somin weighs various options for solving this problem, arguing that political ignorance is best mitigated and its effects lessened by decentralizing and limiting government. Somin provocatively argues that people make better decisions when they choose what to purchase in the market or which state or local government to live under, than when they vote at the ballot box, because they have stronger incentives to acquire relevant information and to use it wisely.

Book Information

Paperback: 280 pages

Publisher: Stanford University Press (October 2, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0804786615

ISBN-13: 978-0804786614

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #240,397 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #17 in Â Books > Law >

Administrative Law > Urban, State & Local Government #317 in Â Books > Politics & Social

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Customer Reviews

Ilya Somin, one of the principle authors of the *Volokh Conspiracy*, is a libertarian whom progressives can respect. His opinions are original rather than stylized, and he is a passionate defender of socially progressive causes. Some of his fans are Josh Marshall and Andrew Sullivan. Ilya is a skillful writer, and in *Democracy and Political Ignorance* he uses his considerable skills to advance an argument that a progressive (like myself) is set up to dislike. Boiled down, his case begins with the well known argument that voters are politically ignorant for rational reasons:

that the marginal value of a single vote is so microscopic it would be a poor use of time to spend much of it deeply educating oneself on political issues. He spends considerable energy proving both arms of this argument, using examples that are not painful for a progressive to read: He is quite willing to show that negative beliefs about Obama can be wrong, and in fact tends to stress this type of example more than those in which negative beliefs about conservatives held by progressives are demonstrated to be wrong. This is strategically clever in that it is progressives he wants to win over to his case (because conservatives are already there). In other words, using these palatable examples is a good rhetorical strategy. He then proceeds to demolish a number of well known and less well known arguments claiming that political ignorance is more apparent than real; that there are shortcuts or knowledge multipliers that reduce or eliminate the harm. I found this part of the book educational, a brief course in a branch of political science.

In *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, law professor Ilya Somin looks down into the apparently fathomless depth of voter ignorance and concludes that dividing and decentralizing the power of the federal government can alleviate many of the ills attending such ignorance. Somin begins by asking whether we ought to care about political ignorance – indeed, whether we are justified in caring. He acknowledges early on that, for the vast majority of us, disregarding practical politics and its questions is actually a kind of “rational ignorance,” a condition in which the costs of acquiring political knowledge far outweigh the meager, even negligible, significance of any one vote. It simply makes sense to sit Election Day out entirely. Ordinary citizens just lack the incentives to pay close attention to the issues. But Somin argues that, rational or not, all of this pervasive ignorance about politics is something that ought to concern us as citizens of an ostensibly democratic polity. In support of his claim that we are justified in “worry[ing] about political ignorance and advocat[ing] measures to reduce its impact,” Somin observes the “public goods” problems associated with voter ignorance, scenarios where “rational individual behavior” leads to potentially dangerous collective outcomes. Analogizing environmental pollution to contamination of the political atmosphere, Somin points out that serious incentive problems may justify some active intervention into the mechanisms of voting. Given those concerns, Somin argues, tweaking of the political system is not just an instance of unlibertarian paternalism, but is instead a means of shielding legitimate individual prerogatives.

How do you plan to vote in the next election? Republican, Democratic, Conservative, Libertarian, Green Party, Workers’ Party, or maybe, not at all? It’s democracy after all, so you can do what you

want to do. Right? If you do vote, do you think you have enough information to make a "good" choice - be it based on candidates or issues or both? Or is the whole thing such a big mess and the likelihood of your single vote counting for much just a waste of your time? Maybe you'll look at the ballot a few minutes before pulling the lever like at a racetrack window just before the bell rings to end betting. This is really the starting point of Ilya Somin's journey through a labyrinthine examination of where the American voting public is headed in his 2013 book, "Democracy and Political Ignorance". In seven chapters, the author, a Professor of Law at George Mason University School of Law, presents very interesting information about the level of political awareness and knowledge of American voters as well as possible directions for raising awareness and informed participation in elections. The first four chapters establish key political science concepts and underlying causes for the levels of political awareness and participation in the electoral process. The last three chapters explore specific concepts for raising public engagement in future elections and decision-making. In short, despite increasing levels of completed education during the last 50 years or more, general public awareness of basic and current political knowledge are persistently (or selectively) low. For example, which branch of government has the power to declare war?

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