THE NEW YORKER

BOOKS

FRACTURED FRANCHISE

Are the wrong people voting?

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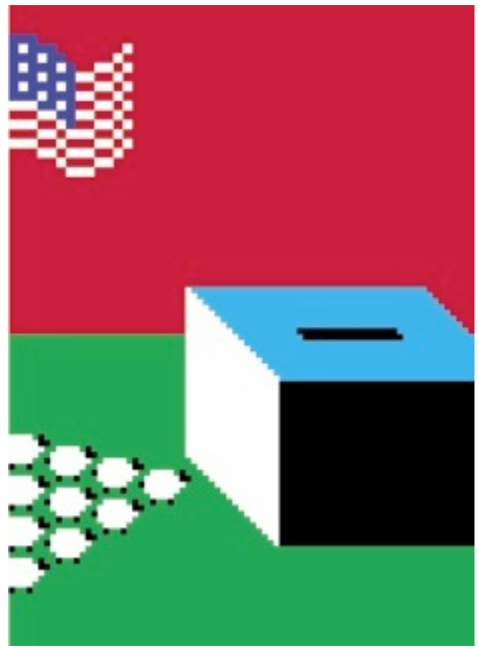
JULY 9, 2007



Why should anyone bother to vote? The chance that one vote will change the outcome of an election is virtually nil, and going to the polls involves a significant cost in time and opportunity. Presidential elections, in which more than a hundred million people vote, never turn on a single ballot. The lesson of the 2000 Presidential election was not "Your vote can make the difference"; it was more like "If you're taking the trouble to vote, at least fill in the ballot correctly." Yet many people do bother to vote. We praise these people, and we encourage non-voting citizens to follow their example. We tend to feel that political participation is an unmixed good, a symptom of civic health and virtue.

Bryan Caplan, an economist who teaches at George Mason University, thinks that increasing voter participation is a bad thing. He thinks, in fact, that the present level of voter participation—about fifty per cent of the electorate votes in Presidential elections, a much lower percentage than in most democracies, as Americans are frequently reminded—is a bad thing. Caplan is the sort of economist (are there other sorts? there must be) who engages with the views of non-economists in the way a bulldozer would engage with a picket fence if a bulldozer could express glee. The cover illustration of his new book, "The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Politics" (Princeton; $29.95), shows a flock of sheep. This is meant to symbolize the voting public. It looks like a flock of cloned sheep, too.

The average voter is not held in much esteem by economists and political scientists, and Caplan rehearses some of the reasons for this. The argument of his book, though, is that economists and political scientists have misunderstood the problem. They think that most voters are ignorant about political issues; Caplan thinks that most voters are *wrong* about the issues, which is a different matter, and that their wrong ideas lead to policies that make society as a whole worse off. We tend to assume that if the government enacts bad policies, it's because the system isn't working properly—and it isn't working properly because voters are poorly informed, or they're subject to demagoguery, or special interests thwart the public's interest. Caplan thinks that these conditions are endemic to democracy. They are not distortions of the process; they are what you would expect to find in a system designed to serve the wishes of the people. "Democracy fails," he says, "*because* it does what voters want." It is sometimes said that the best cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. Caplan thinks that the best cure is less democracy. He doesn't quite say that the world ought to be run by economists, but he comes pretty close.

The political knowledge of the average voter has been tested repeatedly, and the scores are impressively low. In polls taken since 1945, a majority of Americans have been unable to name a single branch of government, define the terms "liberal" and "conservative," and explain what the Bill of Rights is. More than two-thirds have reported that they do not know the substance of Roe v. Wade and what the Food and Drug Administration does. Nearly half do not know that states have two senators and three-quarters do not know the length of a Senate term. More than fifty per cent of Americans cannot name their congressman; forty per cent cannot name either of their senators. Voters' notions of government spending are wildly distorted: the public believes that foreign aid consumes twenty-four per cent of the federal budget, for example, though it actually consumes about one per cent.

Even apart from ignorance of the basic facts, most people simply do not think politically. They cannot see, for example, that the opinion that taxes should be lower is incompatible with the opinion that there should be more government programs. Their grasp of terms such as "affirmative action" and "welfare" is perilously uncertain: if you ask people whether they favor spending more on welfare, most say no; if you ask whether they favor spending more on assistance to the poor, most say yes. And, over time, individuals give different answers to the same questions about their political opinions. People simply do not spend much time learning about political issues or thinking through their own positions. They may have opinions—if asked whether they are in favor of capital punishment or free-trade agreements, most people will give an answer—but the opinions are not based on information or derived from a coherent political philosophy. They are largely attitudinal and ad hoc.

For fifty years, it has been standard to explain voter ignorance in economic terms. Caplan cites Anthony Downs's "An Economic Theory of Democracy" (1957): "It is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other resources." In other words, it isn't worth my while to spend time and energy acquiring information about candidates and issues, because my vote can't change the outcome. I would not buy a car or a house without doing due diligence, because I pay a price if I make the wrong choice. But if I had voted for the candidate I did not prefer in every Presidential election since I began voting, it would have made no difference to me (or to anyone else). It would have made no difference if I had not voted at all. This doesn't mean that I won't vote, or that, when I do vote, I won't care about the outcome. It only means that I have no incentive to learn more about the candidates or the issues, because the price of my ignorance is essentially zero. According to this economic model, people aren't ignorant about politics because they're stupid; they're ignorant because they're rational. If everyone doesn't vote, then the system doesn't work. But if *I* don't vote, the system works just fine. So I find more productive ways to spend my time.

Political scientists have proposed various theories aimed at salvaging some dignity for the democratic process. One is that elections are decided by the ten per cent or so of the electorate who are informed and have coherent political views. In this theory, the votes of the uninformed cancel each other out, since their choices are effectively random: they are flipping a coin. So candidates pitch their appeals to the informed voters, who decide on the merits, and this makes the outcome of an election politically meaningful. Another argument is that the average voter uses "shortcuts" to reach a decision about which candidate to vote for. The political party is an obvious shortcut: if you have decided that you prefer Democrats, you don't really need more information to cast your ballot. Shortcuts can take other forms as well: the comments of a co-worker or a relative with a reputation for political wisdom, or a news item or photograph (John Kerry windsurfing) that can be used to make a quick-and-dirty calculation about whether the candidate is someone you should support. (People argue about how valid these shortcuts are as substitutes for fuller information, of course.)

There is also the theory of what Caplan calls the Miracle of Aggregation. As James Surowiecki illustrates in "The Wisdom of Crowds" (2004), a large number of people with partial information and varying degrees of intelligence and expertise will collectively reach better or more accurate results than will a small number of like-minded, highly intelligent experts. Stock prices work this way, but so can many other things, such as determining the odds in sports gambling, guessing the number of jelly beans in a jar, and analyzing intelligence. An individual voter has limited amounts of information and political sense, but a hundred million voters, each with a different amount of information and political sense, will produce the "right" result. Then, there is the theory that people vote the same way that they act in the marketplace: they pursue their self-interest. In the market, selfish behavior conduces to the general good, and the same should be true for elections.

Caplan thinks that democracy as it is now practiced cannot be salvaged, and his position is based on a simple observation: "Democracy is a commons, not a market." A commons is an unregulated public resource—in the classic example, in Garrett Hardin's essay "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), it is literally a commons, a public pasture on which anyone may graze his cattle. It is in the interest of each herdsman to graze as many of his own cattle as he can, since the resource is free, but too many cattle will result in overgrazing and the destruction of the pasture. So the pursuit of individual self-interest leads to a loss for everyone. (The subject Hardin was addressing was population growth: someone may be concerned about overpopulation but still decide to have another child, since the cost to the individual of adding one more person to the planet is much less than the benefit of having the child.)

Caplan rejects the assumption that voters pay no attention to politics and have no real views. He thinks that voters do have views, and that they are, basically, prejudices. He calls these views "irrational," because, once they are translated into policy, they make everyone worse off. People not only hold irrational views, he thinks; they *like* their irrational views. In the language of economics, they have "demand for irrationality" curves: they will give up *y* amount of wealth in order to consume *x* amount of irrationality. Since voting carries no cost, people are free to be as irrational as they like. They can ignore the consequences, just as the herdsman can ignore the consequences of putting one more cow on the public pasture. "Voting is not a slight variation on shopping," as Caplan puts it. "Shoppers have incentives to be rational. Voters do not."

Caplan suspects that voters cherish irrational views on many issues, but he discusses only views relevant to economic policy. The average person, he says, has four biases about economics—four main areas in which he or she differs from the economic expert. The typical noneconomist does not understand or appreciate the way markets work (and thus favors regulation and is suspicious of the profit motive), dislikes foreigners (and thus tends to be protectionist), equates prosperity with employment rather than with production (and thus overvalues the preservation of existing jobs), and usually thinks that economic conditions are getting worse (and thus favors government intervention in the economy). Economists know that these positions are irrational, because the average person actually benefits from market competition, which provides the best product at the lowest price; from free trade with other countries, which (for American consumers) usually lowers the cost of labor and thus the price of goods; and from technological change, which redistributes labor from less productive to more productive enterprises.

The economic biases of the non-economist form a secular world view that people cling to dogmatically, the way they once clung to their religious faith, Caplan thinks. People do not, he proposes, vote their self-interest: they are much more altruistic than the standard model, in which voters behave like shoppers, predicts. (This explains the phenomenon, puzzling to many social critics, of the auto worker who supports the elimination of the inheritance tax and the Hollywood producer who favors its retention.) "Precisely because people put personal interests aside when they enter the political arena," Caplan says, "intellectual errors readily blossom into foolish policies." People really believe that the country would be better off if profits were regulated, if foreign goods were taxed, and if companies were prevented from downsizing. Politicians who pander to these beliefs are more likely to be elected, and the special interests that lobby for protectionism and anticompetitive legislation are the beneficiaries—not the public. The result, over time, is a decline in the standard of living.

Caplan insists that he is not a market fundamentalist, but he does think that most economists peg the optimal level of government involvement in the economy too high, because they overestimate the virtues of democracy. He offers some suggestions for fixing the evils of universal democratic participation (though he does not spend much time elaborating on them, for reasons that may suggest themselves to you when you read them): require voters to pass a test for economic competence; give extra votes to people with greater economic literacy; reduce or eliminate efforts to increase voter turnout; require more economics courses in school, even if this means eliminating courses in other subjects, such as classics; teach people introductory economics without making the usual qualifications about the limits of market solutions. His general feeling is that if the country were run according to the beliefs of professional economists everyone would be better off. Short of that consummation, he favors whatever means are necessary to get everyone who votes to think like a professional economist. He wants to raise the price of voting.

It is not clear whether "The Myth of the Rational Voter" is intended merely to be provocative (a motive that has been known to get other economists in big trouble) or whether its recommendations for changing the rules for political participation are to be taken seriously (and by whom?). The book is, in part, a challenge to some of the assumptions made about voting behavior in the academic field known as public choice theory. Caplan has assembled a lot of data that reveal significant disparities between the average person's views on economic questions and the views of professional economists: the public thinks that the price of gasoline is too high, for instance, but most economists think it is about right or too low; the public thinks that most new jobs being created in the United States are low-paying, but economists disagree; the public thinks that top executives are overpaid, and economists do not. Caplan's point is that voters' views on the economy are not random, the result of "rational ignorance"; they reflect systematic biases caused by an erroneous understanding of the way economies work.

But, as Caplan certainly knows, though he does not give sufficient weight to it, the problem, if it is a problem, is more deeply rooted. It's not a matter of information, or the lack of it; it's a matter of psychology. Most people do not think politically, and they do not think like economists, either. People exaggerate the risk of loss; they like the status quo and tend to regard it as a norm; they overreact to sensational but unrepresentative information (the shark-attack phenomenon); they will pay extravagantly to punish cheaters, even when there is no benefit to themselves; and they often rank fairness and reciprocity ahead of self-interest. Most people, even if you explained to them what the economically rational choice was, would be reluctant to make it, because they value other things—in particular, they want to protect themselves from the downside of change. They would rather feel good about themselves than maximize (even legitimately) their profit, and they would rather not have more of something than run the risk, even if the risk is small by actuarial standards, of having significantly less.

People are less modern than the times in which they live, in other words, and the failure to comprehend this is what can make economists seem like happy bulldozers. "After technology throws people out of work, they have an incentive to find a new use for their talents," Caplan says, discussing the bias that non-economists have in favor of employment over productivity. "Downsizing superfluous workers leads them to search for more socially productive ways to apply their abilities." This process, he explains, is known as "churn." (Donald Trump: "You're churned!" Doesn't sound the same.) It's not hard to understand why the average person might contemplate job loss with less equanimity.

Negotiating the tension between "rational" policy choices and "irrational" preferences and anxieties—between the desirability of more productivity and the desire to preserve a way of life—is what democratic politics is all about. It is a messy negotiation. Having the franchise be universal makes it even messier. If all policy decisions were straightforward economic calculations, it might be simpler and better for everyone if only people who had a grasp of economics participated in the political process. But many policy decisions don't have an optimal answer. They involve values that are deeply contested: when life begins, whether liberty is more important than equality, how racial integration is best achieved (and what would count as genuine integration).

In the end, the group that loses these contests must abide by the outcome, must regard the wishes of the majority as legitimate. The only way it can be expected to do so is if it has been made to feel that it had a voice in the process, even if that voice is, in practical terms, symbolic. A great virtue of democratic polities is stability. The toleration of silly opinions is (to speak like an economist) a small price to pay for it. ♦

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