

A background image of the Statue of Liberty on the left, standing on its pedestal in the water. In the background, the New York City skyline is visible, including the Freedom Tower. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The title text is overlaid in the center.

Democracy, Ignorance, and Power Over Others

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Today's Plan

1. Stakes of Voting

2. Voter Ignorance

3. The Competence Objection

4. Epistocracy

5. Sortition

Stakes of Voting

Small-Group Discussion

Q: Think about the last election you voted in or that you paid close attention to.

What were the most important issues at stake? Which groups stood to be most affected by them?



Stakes of Voting

Stakes can be high. Examples:

- War
- Immigration
- Healthcare
- Criminal justice
- Pandemic response

Who's affected by the results? Not only voters for the winning party, but also

- Other voters
- Abstainers
- Resident aliens and children
- Foreigners
- Future generations
- Subgroups, in unequal ways



A man with a beard and a backpack is looking at his smartphone on a city street at night. The background is blurred with city lights.

Voter Ignorance

Small-Group Discussion

Q: How informed do you think you were about the issue(s) you felt were at stake in the election?

Voter Ignorance

“That most voters are often ignorant of even very basic political information is one of the better-established findings of social science” (Somin 2013)



Voter Ignorance

Examples from the U.S.

- Less than half of citizens can name the three branches of federal government
- Citizens vastly overestimate how much money is spent on foreign aid and underestimate how much is spent on Social Security and Medicare
- In the early 2010s, one of the most contentious issues was the Affordable Care Act. Most voters are ignorant of the main aspects of this problem, and as of late 2013, 44% of voters didn't know the ACA was still the law.

(Somin 2013)

Voter Ignorance

Example from abroad: Brexit

- A third of “Leave” voters, which won by a slim margin, reported that their main reason for voting “Leave” was that it “offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders.”
- These voters, as a group, believed that EU immigrants comprise 20% of the UK population (in fact, it is only 5%).

(Somin 2016)



Voter Ignorance

- *Individual* actions have next to no impact.
- *Group* actions can have massive impact.
- Compare: the negative impact of GHG emissions from flying or driving






Recap

- Voting can be highly consequential, in ways that affect not only the voters but various sets of stakeholders.
 - But voters tend to be ignorant of basic political and policy information.
 - Decision-making by many ignorant voters can have massive impact.
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The Competence Objection

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- A close-up photograph of a person's hands gripping vertical, rusty metal bars, likely from a prison cell. The hands are positioned on either side of a central bar, with fingers wrapped around it. The bars are dark and show signs of rust and wear. The background is dark and out of focus.
- Suppose that a defendant is on trial for murder.
 - Suppose that the jury is *incompetent* in various respects. Some of the members don't understand the details of the case. Others pay attention to the prosecution but not the defense. Others don't listen at all.
 - If the jury were to find the defendant guilty, most philosophers would think the defendant was unjustly convicted.

The Competence Objection

- The jury holds significant *power* over the defendant.
- For the exercise of that power to be just, it must be exercised competently.
- **The incompetent exercise of power over other people is unjust.**



The Competence Objection

The Competence Principle:

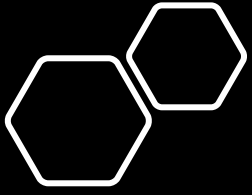
“It is presumed to be **unjust** to forcibly deprive a citizen of life, liberty, or property, or to significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an **incompetent** deliberative body, or decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith.” (Brennan 2016)





The Competence Objection

- (Brennan thinks): Given the extent of political ignorance, voters are not a competent deliberative body.
- Moreover: Bad electoral decisions do significantly harm the life prospects of some individuals (both of citizens and non-citizens).
- So: Democratic decision-making is not just. Just as an incompetent jury should not hold power over a defendant, so, too, incompetent voters should not hold power over other individuals.



Epistocracy

Where Brennan thinks the Competence Objection leads:

- **Epistocracy:** restricted suffrage based on political knowledge
- The right to vote should be conditional on passing some ideologically neutral political knowledge test.





Political Equality

Most philosophers reject epistocracy because they endorse:

- **Political Equality**: Everyone has an equal right to political participation (including the rights to vote and run for office).

At the same time, many philosophers do worry about **political ignorance**, and the challenges it poses for democratic decision-making.

- *Compare*: driving licenses
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Activity: Universal Suffrage

The UK is considering adding fluoride to its entire public water supply in the country “to prevent tooth decay.” This has proven contentious. It puts a vote to the people (you!)

Link: tinyurl.com/bdd4dp66



Activity: Epistocracy

The UK puts a vote to the people, but only those informed on the issue. It checks for competence using the following screening test. Only those who pass may vote.

Link: tinyurl.com/6urc77cz



Epistocracy

- Reflections on ...
 - The experience?
 - The screening test questions?
- Is epistocracy a more just way to make this decision?
Distinguish 2 kinds of problems:
 - Not practically feasible
 - Unjust, even if feasible



Sortition

Because of

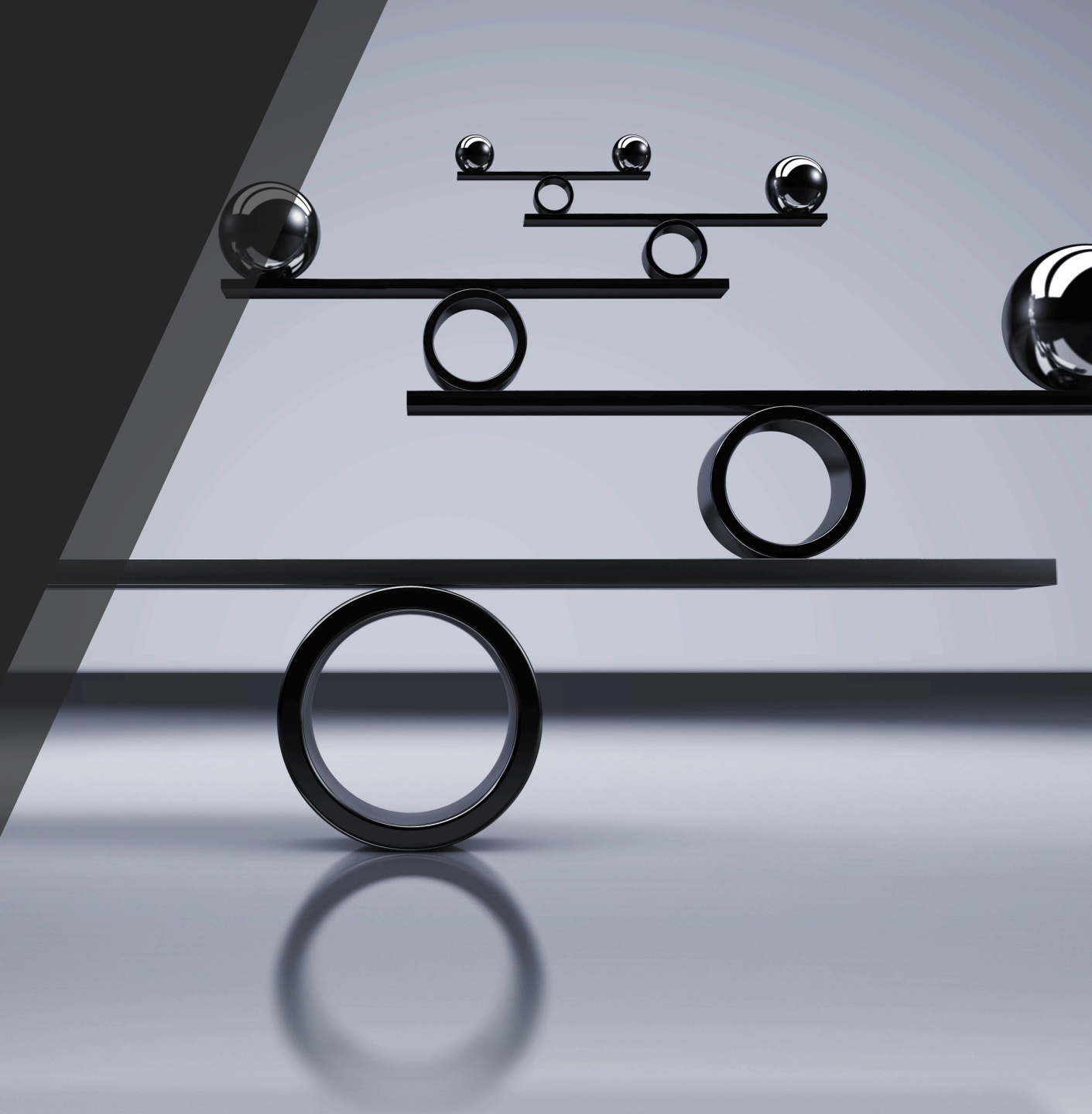
(1) commitment to political equality

+

(2) worries of voter ignorance ...

... philosophers such as Guerrero have endorsed **sortition**.

The basic rationale for sortition:
Address the problem of political ignorance without abandoning the ideal of political equality.

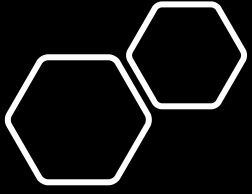




Guerrero's Sortition Model



- (1) **Single issue:** Rather than a single generalist legislature, there would be, e.g., 20-25 standing, single-issue legislative bodies.
- (2) **Lottery selection:** The 300 members of each single-issue legislature are chosen by lottery from the relevant political jurisdiction, selected to serve 3-year terms.
- (3) **Learning phases:** Members of the single-issue legislatures hear from a variety of experts, advocates, and stakeholders on the relevant topic.
- (4) **Community consultation:** Beyond the learning phases, the members of the single-issue legislature spend some structured time interacting with members of the public.
- (5) **Direct enactment:** The members of the single-issue legislature have the capacity to enact policy.



Sortition

- The **learning phase** is meant to ensure that, when citizens choose policies – and thereby exercise power over others – they vote with **knowledge of the relevant issues**.
- The **random selection process** is meant to ensure that each citizen has an **equal right to political participation**.



Activity: Sortition

You all were randomly selected from the UK electorate to form a single-issue legislature on public fluoridation (congrats!). You will undergo a brief learning phase before voting on whether to enact this policy, binding all UK residents.

Activity: Sortition

- Read **Learning Phase** handout, discuss, and vote at tinyurl.com/25yzp965
 - Be prepared to share: your reasoning, reflections, dilemmas or uncertainties,
- Remember: You're exercising power over millions who aren't present but will be affected!



Activity: Sortition

Discussion:

- Decisions, rationales, dilemmas, uncertainties?
- Influence of learning period?
 - Compared to universal suffrage?
 - Compared to epistocracy?
- Worries if used in real life?
- Overall: Was this a just way to make the decision?
 - Compared to universal suffrage?
 - Compared to epistocracy?

Dr. Strangelove Clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J67wKhddWu4>





Summary

- We examined the phenomenon of voter ignorance.
- We discussed a competence-based objection to democracy.
- We considered two other models - epistocracy and sortition – and saw how measures to promote competent decision-making may be in tension with the value of political equality.



One final request: Feedback?

<https://tinyurl.com/CS238S22>

Sources:

Alexander Guerrero, "The Lottocracy," *Aeon* (January 23, 2014).

Ilya Somin, "Brexit and Political Ignorance," *Washington Post* (June 14, 2016).

Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter* (2013).

Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (2016).

Jason Brennan, "The Right to Vote Should be Restricted to Those with Knowledge," *Aeon* (September 29, 2016).

