

On the complex relationship between political ignorance and democracy

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Political ignorance is one of the most important features of the British – or any other – public. As the general election approaches, we may be moved to ask how competent the average voter really is. But, as [Simon Kaye](#) explains in this article, the relationship between democracy and ignorance is extremely complicated, and calls for sophisticated political analysis.



In the run-up to a general election, it is a grand tradition for us to experience a collective crisis of confidence over the weak political knowledge of would-be voters. The *Independent's* buzzfeed-imitating *i100* site recently [set out some evidence](#) of this sort, reporting that 46 per cent of the respondents to a survey were unaware that a general election is taking place this year, 57 per cent were unaware of what a general election is, and 59 per cent could not name the current British Prime Minister.

How trustworthy is this evidence? Methodologically speaking, not very trustworthy at all. As *i100* noted, the 1900-odd responses that produced these statistics were an unweighted sample, quizzed via email by a voucher codes website. It's likely, then, that all we are learning about here is the political ignorance of particularly savings-savvy people with a bit of time on their hands. We should be wary of extrapolating such information into a generalised indictment of the state of public political knowledge.

But are these statistics outliers? Do they fail to correspond with existing (more sound) empirics on similar questions? Would an expert on public opinion be *surprised* by these findings? Not really. While most research around public ignorance arises from surveys conducted in the USA, there's a growing body of work concerned with the UK context as well, and the majority of such evidence confirms the realism of the statistics set out above.

Recently, [a survey for the Royal Statistical Society and KCL](#) gave a powerful impression of the extent of public ignorance over social affairs and politics, finding, among other things, that:

- British people thought under-age pregnancies to be 25 times more common than they actually are
- They also thought that the severity of benefit fraud is 24 times worse than in reality
- 29 per cent of those surveyed thought that Jobseekers' Allowance is more expensive to the taxpayer than pensions, when the latter costs about 15 times more
- In general, people thought that crime and violent crime rates were rising, when in fact they have been falling for decades
- British people systematically over-estimated immigration rates.

These findings are particularly interesting in that they seem to indicate a kind of pessimistic bias in British political ignorance. Is it possible that in many of these areas we imagine things to be 'worse' than they actually are because of the media and cultural landscape in which we find ourselves? In a more balanced informational environment, would we cease to be wrong, or simply cease to be wrong in a systematically pessimistic way?

But objective and depoliticised ignorance is just as persistent as that which may be explained away by the cognitive biases of political partiality. Scientific knowledge levels are a good indicator if we are interested in measuring the epistemic 'competence' of voters while controlling for the effects of systematic political misinformation, and the scientific ignorance of the general public is measured quite frequently by polling in the UK. The evidence here is just as worrying: a [1999 Gallup poll](#), for example, found that 33 per cent of British people gave the wrong answer or claimed to have 'no opinion' when asked whether the Earth revolves around the sun, trailing behind people in the US

(21 per cent ignorant) and Germany (26 per cent).

It is clear, then, that there's no need to turn to *i100*'s problematic sources if we want to get a sense of the 'knowledge problems' at work in British democracy – but we needn't dismiss those findings as unrealistic, either.

Why is this important? Concerns raised by a drastically politically ignorant public extend beyond the simple possibility that it will make bad choices when voting. Ignorant voters may also be more easily misled or manipulated by rhetorically impressive but factually unsound claims. They may fall back upon [sources of democratic advice](#) that don't quite measure up to more detailed understanding. They might be [more prone to accept conspiracy theories](#), or fall into patterns where they accept overly dichotomous or extremely simplified versions of reality. Why should fundamental decisions – say, over the best political party for the management of immigration – be entrusted to a public that is generally mistaken about the fundamental facts of immigration and demography in the UK?

[This \(plentifully controversial\) book](#) by Ilya Somin, among a variety of recent interventions in US political science intended to discuss the scale and implications of political ignorance in voting publics, also explains some of the limitations of the kinds of policies we imagine might be useful to combat ignorance. Somin suggests that education may theoretically promote greater levels of political knowledge, but could also establish centrally-determined biases in the way that the public perceives political problems (a problem that could, at worst, amount to 'brainwashing'). [Jason Brennan](#) and [Bryan Caplan](#) have argued, in different ways, for franchise limitation, suggesting that those who vote should be those who are confident of voting *well*. But establishing an objective benchmark for determining qualified voters from unqualified would be an exercise in elitism and absolutism, especially since so many political questions do not have readily apparent 'right' and 'wrong' answers.

Deliberative and participatory democrats argue that mass democracy is an implicitly valuable practice, and one that will necessarily result in the pooling and sharing of information. This response may be right in another way, too: by increasing the participatory efficacy of voters, we could also incentivise them to take on more of the opportunity costs that are accrued by the effort to become politically educated. This might add up to an argument for more direct democracy and a more proportional electoral system, but even innovations such as these will not greatly increase the actual importance of individual voters within a mass democracy, leaving incentive structures much as they stand today.

The fact of public ignorance may interact in some surprising ways with the other features of political behaviour. Within the British context, the extent of such ignorance may help us to make peace with the various systemic and electoral features of our political establishment that make the public far less influential and more prone to apathy than they might imagine or prefer themselves to be. After all, what's the value of a more responsive, proportional, direct electoral system – of *more democracy* – if the wider citizenry is still not strongly incentivised to vote knowledgably?

Meanwhile, it seems plausible that the probability of limited information and tight epistemic constraints are factored-in to the version of democracy practiced in the UK, where we defer to representatives for choice-making, [effectively 'outsourcing' the costly business of political expertise](#) to a specialised group. The ignorance and manipulations of the political class therefore rightly become the primary subjects of our scrutiny.

Political analysis, if it is to have meaning, should take the ignorance of democratic citizens seriously – but it should also probably take it as a non-negotiable feature of the way that democracies work in the era of mass voting publics.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the General Election blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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