

## Is there a legal or a moral imperative to create informed citizens, to support democracy within the framework on the Constitution?

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[Josh Berdeaux](#) · 19 hours ago 🗨

Neither our social institutions, e.g. the media as an example, nor our present system of government, subscribe to the perception that honesty, accuracy and impartiality are fundamental to the process of building and embedding an informed citizenry for a participatory democracy.

For democracy to work, it is necessary for our social institutions, i.e. whose memberships consist of citizens, and our government to make the effort to understand so as to debating difficult, and maybe complex, issues. To do so in an atmosphere which can lead to agreements, and if not agreement, then workable compromise.

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[Joel Kovarsky](#) · 19 hours ago 🗨

You highlight an ironic situation here. As you expand the vote, you become more democratic. As you expand the vote, you are likely including more and more less educated people in the process: <http://scholar.harvard.edu/jlhochschild/publications/if-democracies-need-informed-voters-how-can-the...>  
. Citation: Hochschild JL. If Democracies Need Informed Voters, How Can They Thrive While Expanding Enfranchisement?. Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy [Internet]. 2010;9(2):111-123. The abstract:

"Three uncontroversial points sum to a paradox: 1) Almost every democratic theorist or democratic political actor sees an informed electorate as essential to good democratic practice. Citizens need to

know who or what they are choosing and why – hence urgent calls for expansive and publicly funded education, and rights to free speech, assembly, press, and movement. 2) In most if not all democratic polities, the proportion of the population granted the suffrage has consistently expanded, and seldom contracted, over the past two centuries. Most observers, and I, agree that expanding enfranchisement makes a state more democratic. 3) Most expansions of the suffrage bring in, on average, people who are less politically informed or less broadly educated than those already eligible to vote.

Putting these three uncontroversial points together leads to the conclusion that as democracies become more democratic, their decision-making processes become of lower quality in terms of cognitive processing of issues and candidate choice. The paradox is both historical – why *have* democracies expanded the franchise to include relatively ignorant voters? – and normative – why *should* democracies expand the franchise to include relatively ignorant voters?

The article addresses both questions. First, I review the historical trajectory of democratization in the United States (although the argument is not specific to that country). I then describe plausible empirical explanations for the paradox: voters are not really that ignorant; the United States is not and never has been really a democracy; and institutions or electoral rules have been developed to substitute for voters' knowledge. I also analyze plausible normative explanations for the paradox: democracy does not, or does not primarily, need cognitively sophisticated citizens; and democracy offers benefits that outweigh the deficits of citizens' lack of knowledge. I offer a few reflections on both sets of explanations, but cannot genuinely dissolve the paradox."

It cannot escape notice that Thomas Jefferson, author of the "Declaration of Independence," often emphasized the importance of education for an informed citizenry: <http://famguardian.org/Subjects/Politics/ThomasJefferson/jeff1350.htm> . But this does not--and likely cannot--always lead to compromise, as can be seen by various ferocious intellectual battles over the centuries.

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[Greg Wilson](#) · 17 hours ago 🔒

Historian Alexander Tyler wrote this in the early 1800's. We seem to be heading the same way:

A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government. A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every

democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.

The average age of the worlds greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, these nations always progressed through the following sequence:

From bondage to spiritual faith;  
From spiritual faith to great courage;  
From courage to liberty;  
From liberty to abundance;  
From abundance to complacency;  
From complacency to apathy;  
From apathy to dependence;  
From dependence back into bondage.

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[+ Comment](#)

Anonymous · 15 hours ago 🔒

Obama's campaign had a very sophisticated operation in place to reach the least informed voters of all, so called [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low\\_information\\_voter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_information_voter) , and convince them to vote for him.

So I would say that the Obama presidency is the prime example of what results when this type of voter is prominent.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 15 hours ago 🔒

Yes, I'm sure that still rankles the your party, Fox News, Crossroads and all the other PACs that spent a boatload of money on misinformation. Blame Obama for reaching the 'low information voter' with a credible and appealing message; had the misinformation on your side worked, you would be crowing about the success of your 'education' efforts.

Perhaps it is time to consider the possibility that Obama was facing a party that had (and still has) no coherent message or program other than 'repeal Obamacare' and 'cut taxes for the well-off'. Demographics are a-changing, and the party in its current form is losing its appeal.

Which is sad in a democracy, because you need at least one viable party in vigorous opposition to compete with the incumbent.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 15 hours ago 🔒

Let's agree that this is an example of low information voter I was talking about

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpAOwJvTOio> .

PS: I am not registered with any political party. I am a "decline to state" as they call us here in California.

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Anonymous · 15 hours ago

With this said, I still think that political leadership transcends low information voters. The reason Obama won is because the alternative -Romney- was pretty unappealing, not even his hard core followers liked him very much.

The 2012 election was one in which micro targeting of low information voters triumphed but I still believe that genuine political leadership triumphs that kind of effort.

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Anonymous · 15 hours ago

I'll agree with you that there are a lot of ill-informed people out there all across the political spectrum. Remember this?



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Greg Wilson · 15 hours ago

I probably shouldn't say this HERE. But I think we would be better off if our next president

were not and Ivy Leaguer. We have had a string of bad luck with them.

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[+ Comment](#)

Joel Kovarsky · 15 hours ago 🔒

As both parties escalate social media use, I am quite certain they will drive us all nuts:

[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2235423](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2235423) . The abstract:

"Is social media a valid indicator of political behavior? We answer this question using a random sample of 537,231,508 tweets from August 1 to November 1, 2010 and data from 406 competitive U.S. congressional elections provided by the Federal Election Commission. Our results show that the percentage of Republican-candidate name mentions correlates with the Republican vote margin in the subsequent election. This finding persists even when controlling for incumbency, district partisanship, media coverage of the race, time, and demographic variables such as the district's racial and gender composition. With over 500 million active users in 2012, Twitter now represents a new frontier for the study of human behavior. This research provides a framework for incorporating this emerging medium into the computational social science toolkit."

It may be hard to make any assessment regarding the nature of "an informed electorate" based on 140 characters. It is quite clear that as this world develops, the noise will be bipartisan. There is not much use in pointing fingers at "early adopters." The other side will, unfortunately, catch up. One question: can you improve the general conversation, or will each tribe just continue talking to its own members?

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Anonymous · 14 hours ago 🔒

BTW,

There are many ways of being "misinformed". Over the weekend I watched this talk by Peter Singer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0SXO5KUZlo> . He is the author of <http://www.amazon.com/Cybersecurity-Cyberwar-Everyone-Needs-Know%C2%AE/dp/0199918112> .

As sad as it is, neither Obama, nor the members of the US Supreme Court nor the members of congress of either party in charge of "oversight" understand the technology that the NSA uses to spy on us. I am not talking about "low level, detailed knowledge" but not even a grasp about the potential for abuse that exists when one stores the amount of information that the NSA is collecting on us (or the fact that the NSA has actively sought to subvert encryption standards).

So "ignorance" takes many shapes and forms.

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[Sourabh Ramakrishna Kurubarahalli](#) · 10 hours ago

Hi,

I just wanted to add that democracy is about the rule of the people. It should always be the intention of the government and the society as a whole to educate the population more about the processes and the consequences of their decisions. However we have agreed to a constitution that mandates that laws should be passed according to the majority will of the people. The only caveat is that it should not be in violation of the rights guaranteed under the constitution itself. Therefore we cannot say exclude the uneducated in the decision making process. Democracy works with a presumption that the people know what is best for themselves and however unappealing it might sound, it is part of the experiment we have embarked upon. No one man or no small group of people can dictate to another what is good for the others. We simply lack the capacity to truly understand the needs of the people in any manner other than a democracy. Democracy might not be a perfect way of deciding the good of the people but it is better than the others. Only the poor will know why he is poor. Only the uneducated will know why he is really uneducated. We can stand on rooftops and scream that the uneducated are so because they are lazy but will we ever know the circumstances that caused them to remain uneducated? So they should be able to take part in the process to at least attempt to change those circumstances. It seems idealistic but it is the best we have at the moment.

I also wanted to ask as to whether each conversation has to descend into a conservative Vs. liberal discussion. Can't we just have an agreement that we will keep our personal beliefs about things aside while attempting to discuss these beautiful concepts. The questions raised here are far above the petty question of whether the liberal agenda or the conservative agenda is better.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

[Anonymous](#) · 10 hours ago

Hard to leave politics aside since they inform our stances on the most controversial issues of constitutional law which are the ones we argue about. For the non controversial stuff, reading any high school level civics textbook is enough.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

[Sourabh Ramakrishna Kurubarahalli](#) · 9 hours ago

Here I will show you an example

"Obama's campaign had a very sophisticated operation in place to reach the least informed voters of all, so called [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low\\_information\\_voter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_information_voter) , and convince them

to vote for him.

So I would say that the Obama presidency is the prime example of what results when this type of voter is prominent. "

If this above commented in the following manner:

"My point of view is that Low information voter is very dangerous to a democratic system. The following link details the research conducted on it:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low\\_information\\_voter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_information_voter)

In my personal opinion Obama won the election this time because of this kind of low information voters and this would fundamentally undermine the democratic processes that this country was established on"

When the said commentator puts it in this manner he is making an argument that is relevant in the constitutional framework and also stating his personal opinion about things separately. I am not saying that we should have only non-controversial arguments. I am only saying let us keep our ideological beliefs separate from the point we are trying to put across.

I also do not know why you undermine high school civics so much. Even high school civics textbooks have a lot of things that we debate here like democracy, right of representation, different forms of governments. We are just having debates that are one step above high school civics like "why democracy?" "Why should all the people in the country have the right to vote?" "which form of government would be better?" etc. I doubt that we can have a rational argument without first knowing the basics of those concepts.

Also the above example is only related to a "conservative" comment. I will also pick a "liberal" comment if you prefer.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 9 hours ago 🔒

Sorry pal,

This is America, we don't have speech codes around here enforced by government. Some universities do have speech codes, including Yale <http://www.thefire.org/speech-code-of-the-month-yale-university/> .

I would hope though that, out of deference to the material being taught here, the class staff doesn't enforce it and decides instead to treat all speech in these forums as the US Supreme Court would. In fact, my above comments are also destined to keeping the first amendment protections alive.

↑ -1 ↓ · flag

Sourabh Ramakrishna Kurubarahalli · 8 hours ago 🔗

I request you to not jump to conclusions about my beliefs on free speech. I am not against it neither do I believe there should be any speech code. Yale and coursera are entities to which I am not aware whether the first amendment applies. In fact I love the extent to which United States of America goes to protect the rights of its citizens even if we don't agree with what the other person is saying. Case in point:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snyder\\_v.\\_Phelps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snyder_v._Phelps)

Now coming back to the reason for my comment, I am not saying that the person should not be allowed to state his beliefs. I am only saying that we should personally endeavor to keep our beliefs and arguments separately. If the person had made the statement in the manner I have stated then I could simply proceed to debate whether low voter information actually effects democratic processes or not. If I did not agree with the fact the Obama won the elections on low voter information then I could debate on that separately. However by mixing it with his own beliefs he makes it impossible to argue the constitutional point without refuting his personal beliefs and then the conversation only descends into liberal vs conservative rather than staying on the point. I am only asking why we cannot arrive an agreement to debate in such a manner as to promote the debate itself and I do not understand how requesting a person to arrive at a personal conclusion to debate in a particular manner is an attack on his free speech.

I will also stop replying on this line of argument because I doubt that it is promoting the question asked in this thread.

Good day

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Anonymous · 8 hours ago 🔗

I think that " I am only saying that we should personally endeavor to keep our beliefs and arguments separately. If the person had made the statement in the manner I have stated then I could simply proceed to debate whether low voter information actually effects democratic processes or not" is to precisely push for a speech code.

You cannot have it. The "low information voter" issue is one that decides elections, thus, it is pertinent within a discussion about the relevance of having an educated citizenry for a democracy to function, just as it is relevant to know which of the two dominant political parties uses the existence of these low information voters more effectively. However effective the GOP might have been in the past using low information voters to their advantage, there is no question that Obama beat them at their game by a huge margin both in 2008 and 2012. In addition to the Obama phone lady video, you have this other one that reflects very well the



reasoning behind the average Obama voter in 2008 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPG25Wf0aa4> .

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Joel Kovarsky · 2 hours ago

Most voters are already committed, at least in terms of presidential elections. The 2012 election was arguably decided by demographics that go beyond social media itself, and some knowledgeable commentators note that college educated voters are skewing towards the democrats: [http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/the-politics-of-going-to-college/?\\_php=true&\\_type=...](http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/the-politics-of-going-to-college/?_php=true&_type=...) . I am sure this will fit some line about the political skew on US college campuses, but it would be a bit hard to assert that the "low information voter" is most represented by college graduates.

One can argue that the idea of the "low information voter" is itself quite politically charged: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/brendanoneill2/100186116/the-sneering-at-americas-low-information-...> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low\\_information\\_voter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_information_voter) . The phrase--now used as a pejorative on both sides of the aisle--first appeared in 1991 and was used by political scientist Samuel Popkin in his book *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. The book had to do with the heuristics used by many voters (and if you want to get into the problems with heuristics that most of us use, maybe see Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*).

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Sourabh Ramakrishna Kurubarahalli · 10 hours ago

I would also like to add that there is should be no moral imperative to support democracy. People if they choose to should support it because they get the benefits they wanted and was envisaged. There is no moral imperative to support a system that does not truly deliver on the needs of the people. If a moral imperative is created then it becomes a self serving system that only operates to save itself rather than to deliver to the needs of the people. Then when it finally fails the only option left would be a violent revolution. If no moral imperative is created to support the system then people can decide for themselves whether they want it or not and if not then we can peacefully change to a system that better caters to our needs. I think most authoritarian systems are created because of a moral imperative that REQUIRES absolute support. "If you do not support this system then you are doomed" kind of an argument only destroys the consent through which people participate in these systems.





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