CHAPTER FOUR

The Shortcomings of Shortcuts

> [D]emocratic theory . . . was forced by lack of the instruments of knowledge for reporting its environment, to fall back upon the wisdom and experience which happened to have accumulated in the voter. . . . The community could take its supply of information for granted.
>
> —WALTER LIPPMAN, *PUBLIC OPINION*[1]

WE RARELY HAVE PERFECT INFORMATION about anything in life. Much of the time, we cope with our ignorance by using information shortcuts. You may not know much about particular TVs. But if you know that Sony products generally have a good reputation, that can help you decide which TV to buy. Perhaps voters with generally low knowledge levels can make up for it by using similar shortcuts. At least until recently, this was the dominant view among political scientists and economists.[2] If it is correct, political ignorance need not be a major concern for democratic theory. As it turns out, some shortcuts are genuinely useful. Unfortunately, however, most are not nearly as effective as their more enthusiastic advocates believe.

Many shortcuts to informed voting have been proposed in the literature on the subject: information from daily life, political parties, cues from opinion leaders, retrospective voting, and the so-called "miracle of aggregation" are among the most important.[3] Although several of these shortcuts have genuine merit, they fall short of offsetting the dangers of political ignorance. Some of them might even lead to worse decision-making by poorly informed voters who possess little preexisting information.[4]

Shortcut theories also implicitly assume that the person using the shortcut chooses it because of its likelihood of increasing his or her chances of

getting at the truth. If, however, information shortcuts are chosen for other reasons unrelated to their truth value, voters could systematically rely on biased shortcuts that make their perceptions of political reality less accurate than before. Unfortunately, the "rational irrationality" discussed in Chapter 3 makes it perfectly logical for individual voters to choose shortcuts on the basis of their entertainment value, conformity with preexisting views, or other psychological gratification, rather than truth value.

Questioning the effectiveness of information shortcuts used by ordinary citizens can be criticized as "elitist."[5] However, there is nothing inherently elitist about a critique that holds that voters are engaging in perfectly rational behavior, given the insignificance of individual votes. The problem is not that voters who use inadequate shortcuts are necessarily dumber or less virtuous than more knowledgeable "elites." Rather, it is that citizens lack sufficient incentive to acquire adequate knowledge or evaluate the information they do learn in an unbiased way.

INFORMATION FROM DAILY LIFE

Some scholars[6] argue that rational voters will make use of information acquired through ordinary daily-life interactions.[7] Such information is virtually "free" since the activities that produce it would, by definition, be undertaken even in the absence of any political purpose. Some advocates of this shortcut argue not only that it will be utilized, but that it goes a long way toward meeting voters' informational needs.[8] For example, voters allegedly can obtain "a good deal of information" about the economy from personal financial transactions such as managing a checking account or seeking employment.[9]

Personal Experience and Rational Ignorance

While it would be foolish to deny that *some* helpful information can be derived from ordinary life, its usefulness to otherwise ill-informed voters is often greatly overestimated. Three major limitations of such information are particularly important. First, by definition, this approach is of no help in dealing with the many political issues that the vast majority of voters do not encounter in daily life. For example, information from daily life isn't relevant to most foreign policy issues.

Second, even if the voter has carefully calculated the changes in his welfare and developed a judgment about an incumbent's policies, he cannot readily determine whether his welfare will be improved by electing the opposing candidate. Even if things have gotten worse under President X, perhaps the opposing Candidate Y's program is even more harmful. This possibility cannot be ruled out without substantive issue knowledge going beyond personal experience.

Most important of all, substantive knowledge is required to determine whether or not a particular personal experience really is the result of public policy and, if so, which political actors are responsible. Ill-informed voters attempting to make political judgments on the basis of personal experience may fall into egregious errors.

Even with respect to unemployment and inflation, basic economic issues with which most people have substantial personal experience, ill-informed voters tend to make spectacular mistakes. In a survey taken during the 1992 election, during which economic issues were a particular focus of publicity, the vast majority of respondents could not estimate the inflation or unemployment rate within 5 percentage points of the actual level.[10] The electorate's mean estimates of both rates were approximately twice as high as the real level.[11] Such misperception apparently played a major role in swinging the 1992 election against incumbent president George H. W. Bush.[12] Poorly informed voters are more likely than well-informed ones to make sweeping generalizations from personal experience with unemployment, yet less likely to make *accurate* connections between experience and policy.[13]

If errors of this magnitude occur in the cases of inflation and unemployment, even more serious mistakes can be expected with other, more remote, issues. And even a correct estimate of unemployment and inflation is only a minimal prerequisite to determining which side's policy on these issues will better serve the voter's interests. One still needs to know to what extent incumbents are responsible for current rates and whether or not their opponents are likely to do better. Information from daily life is unlikely to be of more than minimal help in making such decisions.

Personal Experience and Rational Irrationality

So far, we have assumed that voters drawing political inferences from personal experience do so for the sole purpose of using them as an information shortcut to understand public policy better. However, the phenomenon of rational irrationality suggests that political inferences drawn from personal experience might instead serve other psychological objectives, including some that may be in conflict with the search for truth. For example, psychological literature shows that people often prefer to blame others for their own mistakes.[14]

The same tendency may well affect their evaluation of the political significance of their experiences. Survey respondents have a strong "anti-foreign bias" that leads them to blame immigrants and foreign competitors for economic problems suffered by their own country.[15] If one loses a job or has to take a pay cut, it will be psychologically easier to blame malevolent foreigners than one's fellow Americans, and easier to blame the policies of the government than to blame yourself.

Obviously, such irrationality is far from unique to *political* interpretations of personal experience. But it is likely to be especially prevalent there, because the incentives to evaluate one's experience more objectively are so weak. If I mistakenly blame a co-worker for my own failures on the job, the result could be loss of the opportunity to get a promotion or even getting fired. If, on the other hand, I mistakenly blame Congress or the president for inflation, I suffer little if any penalty for my error.

POLITICAL PARTIES

The idea that political parties can help voters economize on information costs has a long and venerable lineage, dating back to Democratic Party leader and later president Martin Van Buren, founder of the first modern mass-based party.[16] The basic argument is that voters can infer candidates' policy stances from their partisan affiliations rather than undertaking the much more difficult task of inquiring into the views of each individual aspirant to office.[17]

This claim has considerable merit. Voters are often able to tell where one major party stands relative to the other.[18] For example, in 2004, 92

percent of voters knew that John Kerry was to the left of George Bush on government aid to blacks, 66 percent on gun control, and 64 percent on environmental policy.[19] At the same time, voters are sometimes ignorant even of these kinds of basic differences between the parties. Just four years earlier, in 2000, only 46 percent of American National Election Studies respondents knew that Bush was less supportive of abortion rights than Al Gore, and only 40 percent knew that Gore supported higher levels of government assistance for blacks.[20]

Appealing as it is, the political party shortcut often obscures almost as much as it reveals. At best, a candidate's party affiliation is a clue to his or her policy stances, but it tells the voter little about the likely *effects* of those policies. In principle, the notion of a "running tally" may help a voter to determine the merits as well as the content of a party's policies. But it is difficult to do so without significant substantive knowledge.[21]

If conditions are good under the rule of Party X, how does the voter know that this is due to the success of the party's policies rather than to factors beyond the government's control, preexisting favorable trends resulting from decisions made by the party's predecessors in power, personal characteristics of the party's officeholders that are not representative of the party as a whole (and thus might be misleading as predictors of future behavior), or crafty manipulation of public policy by the party's leadership as a result of which temporary success is achieved at the price of long-term harm?

The voter cannot get around this dilemma simply by aggregating large amounts of experience, since it is unlikely that a given voter has been following politics long enough to experience more than two or three governments headed by any one party.[22]

The party identification shortcut can be actively misleading in situations when parties at the state or local level differ from their national counterparts. For example, many local elections in the United States are highly noncompetitive in part because voters vote for local offices based on their perceptions of the national party—perceptions that are often misleading if the local party differs substantially from the national organization, as is often the case.[23] As a result, local governments often

can get away with poor performance so long as the incumbents' national party remains the preferred choice of most voters in the area.[24]

Party shortcuts might also be more difficult to use when there are more than two parties, and voters have to do more than make a simple binary choice. For example, voters found it far more difficult to figure out which presidential candidate most closely matched their policy preferences in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, when there were three major candidates rather than the usual two.[25] This problem is of only limited relevance to the United States, which has long had a stable two-party system in which competitive third-party candidates are rare. But it matters more in some other democracies where there are multiple parties.[26] Even in the United States, it matters greatly in primary elections, when voters choosing between multiple presidential candidates of the same parties succeed in "correctly" picking the one with the policy views closest to their own only about 31 percent of the time.[27]

It is also important to recognize that political ignorance might itself reduce the value of the party identification shortcut by weakening the ideological constraints on parties themselves. A party faced with a well-informed electorate may have to hew closely to the voters' preferences or face defeat. With a relatively ignorant electorate, however, party leaders can exploit the electorate's "blind spot" and exercise a great deal of discretion in adjusting their positions on issues in order to pursue objectives of their own or win the support of narrow interest groups.[28] This makes it more difficult to predict a candidate's policy views on the basis of his or her partisan affiliation, even for relatively well-informed voters.

While real, the informational benefits of parties are likely exaggerated by conventional wisdom. Party affiliation often gives voters useful insight on the likely policy positions of candidates. But that type of knowledge is often insufficient for informed voting.

Parties and Rational Irrationality

As with personal experience shortcuts, the effectiveness of party identification shortcuts is also undercut by rational irrationality. Ideally, voters should evaluate what they know about each party's record in an

unbiased way, seeking only to determine how well it measures up to its rivals. In reality, however, voters with a strong sense of identification with one party tend to discount any evidence that it is performing poorly and overvalue evidence indicating that it is doing well.[29] They even fall prey to factual errors that make their preferred party's record look better and the opposition's worse.[30] For example, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to know the correct answer to questions about whether the federal budget deficit has increased since President Barack Obama took office, because the correct answer reflects poorly on his record.[31]

This makes little sense from the standpoint of casting an informed ballot. But it is perfectly rational if one recognizes that voters might form an emotional attachment to their preferred party and its ideology, and prefer to avoid the psychological discomfort of seeing their cherished beliefs undermined. As in other cases, the low probability of casting a decisive ballot undercuts the incentive to make any effort to combat this bias.

The biases of committed partisans might be insignificant if independent swing voters could evaluate party records' effectively. However, as discussed further on,[32] swing voters with no strong commitment to either party tend to have the lowest levels of political knowledge and therefore the least likelihood of being able to assess the incumbent party's performance accurately.

The Binary Choice Fallacy

An implicit assumption of the party identification shortcut literature is that voters need only have sufficient political knowledge to choose between the two options available to them in an election: the Democratic and Republican candidates, for example. If the voter knows enough to determine which of the two available parties is more likely to achieve his or her policy objectives, that is enough.

This binary choice model does not take account of primary campaigns, in which all the candidates are from the same party; "nonpartisan" elections in which candidates are not identified by party to the voter;[33] and elections in multiparty systems, when voters must consider numerous different party options, not just two.

But even on its own terms, the binary choice model is incomplete. Political knowledge does not merely affect the outcome of elections with the parties' candidates and platforms taken as given. It can also influence the selection of those candidates and platforms themselves. Especially since the advent of modern public opinion polling made it easier to measure it, parties and candidates have often sought to match their issue positions to majority public preferences.[34] Over time, majority opinion heavily influences the content of government policy.[35]

Even after controlling for a wide range of demographic variables, including race, gender, income, occupation, and others, knowledgeable voters have vastly different policy preferences from less-informed ones.[36] They tend to be more socially liberal, more fiscally conservative, and more supportive of higher taxes, among other examples.[37] They are also less likely to fall for gross political misinformation, and more likely to be able to effectively monitor the performance of government officials.[38] Faced with a much more knowledgeable electorate, politicians and parties would have strong incentives to change their policy platforms, as well as stronger incentives to avoid poor performance in office. The magnitude of the change is likely to depend on the magnitude of the increase in political knowledge.

If the electorate as a whole were significantly more knowledgeable than it is, the result would not only be a greater chance of making the "right" choice among the existing political options. Rather, the options themselves would be very different.

CUES FROM OPINION LEADERS

If the vast bulk of the electorate is generally ignorant, perhaps it can follow the lead of the knowledgeable minority of political activists—"opinion leaders." This line of argument is one of the most common in the literature on shortcuts.[39] Instead of keeping close track of issues themselves, voters can respond to "cues" issued by political activists of value orientations similar to their own:

> What is important is that there are perhaps five percent [of voters] who are activists and news junkies who do play close attention. If they see that something is seriously wrong in the country, they sound the alarm and then ordinary people start paying attention.[40]

Voters can also rely on cues from endorsements by trusted organizations and well-liked celebrities.[41]

Opinion Leaders and Rational Ignorance

Unfortunately, the strategy of following cues from opinion leaders often creates at least as many difficulties for ignorant voters as it solves. Because of the immense asymmetry of information between leaders and followers and the low incentive of the latter to monitor the leaders' performance effectively, serious principal-agent problems surely will arise. Principal-agent problems occur in situations where the person who delegates authority—the "principal"—has difficulty monitoring the performance of the person he delegates to—the "agent." From the perspective of the principal it is difficult to conceive of a more difficult principal-agent relationship than that between ignorant voters and highly knowledgeable, well-organized political activists.

When voter interests and activist interests coincide closely, the difficulties of monitoring need not be so acute. But this state of affairs is far from being common. Political activists differ greatly from the general population on a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics;[42] they also tend to be more extreme in their views.[43]

Most important of all, opinion leaders acquire interests that diverge sharply from those of voters *simply by virtue of becoming opinion leaders*. As political activists, their power, prestige, social status, and opportunities for pecuniary gain will tend to rise with the perceived importance of their issue positions to the public; they thus have strong incentives to exaggerate the importance of political problems and to push for political solutions (or at least solutions with a prominent role for activists) in preference to private sector ones. Even when voters are aware of these incentives for exaggeration and attempt to discount activist claims as a result, they have no way of knowing how *much* discounting is required.

Even if there exists a subset of opinion leaders whose interests do coincide with those of a given voter, that voter still faces an extraordinarily difficult problem in determining which ones they are. Since the whole point of relying on opinion leaders is to economize on information costs, the voter is unlikely to invest heavily in researching the leaders'

qualifications. And unlike in the case of most private sector specialist professionals, the voter cannot simply judge the quality of activists' performance by the results of the policies they advocate, since it is not usually possible to determine which social outcomes are the result of public policy without considerable substantive knowledge of the issues.

A successful strategy of following cues from opinion leaders requires voters to first decide *which* leaders' cues to follow and then monitor these leaders in order to avoid a variety of principal-agent problems that are likely to arise.[44] Neither of these is possible without considerable substantive voter knowledge of the issues. Without such knowledge, opinion leaders are as likely to be misleading as they are to be informative.

Opinion Leaders and Rational Irrationality

Rational irrationality further complicates the search for good opinion leaders. Advocates of the opinion leader theory argue that voters choose opinion leaders on the basis of their perceived knowledge and trustworthiness.[45] However, opinion leaders might instead be chosen in large part because of their entertainment value or ability to reinforce citizens' preexisting prejudices. For example, Arthur Lupia and Matthew McCubbins show that experimental test subjects tended to trust statements about the desirability of new prison construction made by talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh and Phil Donahue if they perceived them as knowledgeable and say that they "agree" with their views on other issues.[46]

In reality, however, there is little reason to believe that Limbaugh and Donahue have any significant knowledge about the costs and benefits of prison construction. Survey respondents who perceived them as knowledgeable about the issue were probably wrong to do so.[47] Their willingness to defer to Limbaugh and Donahue's views on a technical policy issue that the talk show hosts likely had little expertise on may well have been driven by a general sense that these opinion leaders' views conformed to their own preexisting opinions; thus the importance of perceived "agreement" between the talk show host and the respondent on other issues.

Such decision-making is probably not conducive to rational electoral choices. But it is perfectly understandable in a situation where most voters

have little incentive to maximize the quality of their electoral decisions and instead form political opinions in large part for other reasons.

RETROSPECTIVE VOTING

The retrospective voting shortcut hypothesis holds that voters judge politicians by past performance rather than current promises. A high percentage of voters seem to do just that.[48] Politicians who know that voters will engage in retrospective voting are likely to anticipate the public's future reactions and try to cater to them in advance.[49] Such "auditing" of past performance might well be easier than predicting the future effects of candidates' policies. "[R]etrospective voting," it is said, "requires far less of the voter than prospective voting."[50] But does it?

To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to differentiate the use of *retrospective voting* as a term denoting a particular information shortcut from its use as a normative theory of democratic participation, discussed in Chapter 2.[51] Unfortunately, both theories often go by the same name.

There are several reasons to doubt that the retrospective voting shortcut is as effective as often claimed. In some cases, voters are not even aware of the very existence of major policies. As noted in Chapter 1, some 70 percent of Americans were unaware of the enactment of President George W. Bush's prescription drug benefit plan in 2003, the largest new government program in decades.[52] Similarly, many are routinely unaware of the existence of major government programs structured as tax deductions and payments for services.[53]

Even when voters are aware of the existence of a relevant government policy, ignorance remains an obstacle to effective retrospective voting. As noted earlier, it is often difficult for relatively ignorant voters to determine which social outcomes are the result of public policy and which ones aren't. To take a prominent example in the literature, many models of electoral retrospection are based on "sociotropic" voting, in which voters make their decision on the basis of the condition of the national economy rather than that of their own personal finances.[54] Yet a person ignorant of economics often cannot tell whether economic conditions are the result of (1) the policy of the current government,

(2) delayed effects of its predecessors' policies, or (3) factors completely independent of any government action.

Studies of retrospective voting show that voters often blame and reward incumbents for conditions beyond their control. Incumbents derive great electoral benefit and suffer comparably severe harm as a result of changes in economic conditions that arise from swings in the world economy that national governments cannot influence.[55] At the state level, voters in oil-producing states reward governors for increases in oil prices caused by world market conditions and for improvements in the economy caused by national economic trends.[56] They also punish governors for deterioration in national economic conditions.[57]

Voters also punish incumbents for the impacts of such uncontrollable events as droughts and shark attacks.[58] Even more dubiously, incumbent governors and senators benefit when popular local sports teams win crucial victories close to election day.[59] The record of a city's sports teams has a substantial impact on mayors' prospects for reelection.[60]

When a given condition really is the result of current government policy, the voter may not be able to determine whether current conditions are positive or negative; for example, if temporary economic sacrifice might be a necessary precondition for future progress.

Even in focusing on major issues, such as the state of the economy, retrospective voters generally consider only changes in income and economic growth that occurred in the last few months of an incumbent president's term, ignoring the administration's entire previous record.[61] This myopia prevents voters from accurately assessing incumbents' economic policy performance.

Recent experimental data also confirm that voters tend to overweight the most recent events in making retrospective evaluations of incumbents, and that they are easily distracted by irrelevant events.[62] Overall, modern evidence substantiates nineteenth-century French economist Frederic Bastiat's complaint that the public tends to focus on immediate short-term "effects" of economic policy that are easily "seen," while ignoring more indirect, long-term effects that usually remain "unseen."[63]

Occasionally, voters may assign responsibility for a important policy to the wrong party because they are confused about when that policy was enacted. In 2010, only 34 percent of Americans realized that the massive and controversial $700 billion TARP bailout of the banks was enacted under Republican president George W. Bush, while 47 percent wrongly believed that it had been enacted under the Democratic incumbent Barack Obama.[64]

Finally, ignorance of the structure of government makes it difficult for voters to decide which elected officials deserve the credit or blame.[65] This defect is of particular importance for retrospective voting theory, which emphasizes that the electorate "passes judgment on leaders, not policies"[66] and thus implicitly assumes that voters know which leaders are responsible for what. As mentioned, voters often reward and punish state politicians for national trends. They also systematically underestimate politicians' responsibility for some issues, while overestimating their impact on others.

Compared to a sample of political scientists specializing in American politics, the public substantially underestimates the ability of the president and Congress to control the composition of the federal budget, the influence of the Federal Reserve on the state of the economy, and the impact of state and local governments on public schools.[67] The Federal Reserve Board, of course, is not an elected agency. But its members are selected by the president and confirmed by the Senate, so the board members' performance should be an element in voter assessment of senatorial and presidential performance. On the other hand, the public assigns the president and Congress excessive blame for a wide range of other trends, including crime rates, education, and short-term economic conditions.[68]

Both excessive and insufficient attribution of responsibility are dangerous. If voters assign too little responsibility, officials can more easily get away with poor performance. If they assign too much, the results of an election are more likely to be determined by irrelevant issues and less likely to be controlled by those issues that the leaders in question *do* have the power to affect. Thus a state governor who does an excellent job on issues within her control might be defeated because voters hold her responsible for a national recession that she had no control over.

To sum up, voters seem to lack the knowledge they need to engage in effective retrospective voting on most issues.[69] As political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels put it:

> Voters operating on the basis of a valid, detailed understanding of cause and effect in the realm of public policy could reward good performance while ridding themselves of leaders who are malevolent or incompetent. But real voters often have only a vague, more or less primitive understanding of the connections (if any) between incumbent politicians' actions and their own pain or pleasure. As a result, rational retrospective voting is harder than it seems, and blind retrospection sometimes produces consistently misguided patterns of electoral rewards and punishments.[70]

When Retrospective Voting Works

The retrospective voting argument does, however, possess an important kernel of truth. It can impose a kind of "rough justice" on political leaders who have failed badly.[71] If a policy failure is large, highly visible, and easily attributable to a particular set of incumbents, it is certainly likely that they will be voted out of office, as the elections of 1932, 1980, and 2006 suggest. Moreover, the bigger the failure, the less likely it is that the opposing party's performance will be even worse.

The ability of voters to punish large and obvious policy failures by incumbents is one of the major advantages of democracy over dictatorship. It probably helps explain the remarkable fact that no mass famine has ever occurred in a modern democracy, no matter how poor.[72] By contrast, famines deliberately engineered by the government have often occurred in dictatorships.[73]

Even generally ignorant and irrational voters can recognize a mass famine when they see one, and are likely to hold political incumbents responsible for it. Similar factors may explain the fact that democratic governments rarely if ever engage in mass murder against their own citizens, while many authoritarian and totalitarian dictatorships do so routinely.[74]

As with a mass famine, even a generally ignorant public is likely to become aware of mass murder carried out by their leaders and punish

them at the polls accordingly. For similar reasons, democracies also tend to do better than dictatorships at limiting the damage caused by massive natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes.[75] Even relatively ignorant voters are unlikely to overlook the presence of massive devastation. On the other hand, voters tend to reward disaster relief spending far more than disaster prevention spending, though the latter is much more effective in limiting the loss of life and property.[76] Relief spending is far more visible to poorly informed voters than is prevention spending, especially since the latter must be undertaken *before* a disaster actually happens, at a time when few voters are focused on the issue.

Unfortunately, the preconditions of magnitude, visibility, and easily traceable accountability rarely obtain in real life. And even in the case of a very large policy failure, leaders may escape blame if the full impact of the failure is not felt until after they are out of office.

Retrospective voting may in some ways be easier in democracies that have fewer different levels and branches of government than the United States. For example, New Zealand is a unitary state that has neither federalism nor the tripartite separation of powers present in American government. Most political power is concentrated in the hands of a single national parliament.[77] In such countries, it is easier for voters to know which policymakers are responsible for which decisions. However, neither the United States nor most other democracies are likely to adopt unicameral, nonfederal systems of government similar to New Zealand's in the near future. Separation of powers and federalism often have important advantages of their own.[78] Even when they do not, it is often difficult to radically restructure a long-established political system.

Retrospective Voting and Rational Irrationality

The effectiveness of retrospective voting is also undercut by rational irrationality. Rather than evaluating incumbents' performance in an unbiased way, partisans tend to negatively evaluate the record of their political opponents and to be biased toward a favorable evaluation of their own preferred party.[79] Republican partisans tend to assign credit to Republican office-holders for any positive events that occur, while being reluctant to blame them for negative ones. Democratic partisans, of course, have the

opposite bias.[80] Indeed, partisanship affects not only the assignment of praise and blame for current conditions, but even voters' perceptions of the conditions themselves. Democratic partisans claim that unemployment and inflation rates worsen when a Republican president is in office and improve when the incumbent is a Democrat—even if the reality is the exact opposite of these perceptions; Republicans are similarly biased in favor of Republican presidents and against Democratic ones.[81]

In principle, the bias of partisans could be offset by the efforts of independent voters, who might be more objective in their evaluation of incumbents. However, as noted further on, independents without strong ideological and partisan commitments tend to have the lowest levels of political knowledge, and thus are unlikely to be able to accurately assess incumbents' records.[82]

ISSUE PUBLICS

If voters cannot keep track of all the important issues, perhaps they can at least focus on a few that are of particular concern to themselves.[83] For instance, blacks are more likely than whites to be familiar with civil rights issues.[84] In theory, such "issue publics" can make up for ignorance of more general policy issues within the electorate as a whole.

Attempts to confirm the issue public hypothesis empirically show that it has only limited validity. As a general rule, knowledge of different aspects of public policy is highly correlated.[85] Still, some studies do show that voters with a particular interest in a given issue know more about it than their general level of political knowledge would predict.[86] Even when significant differences in knowledge between groups do exist, they do not necessarily demonstrate that the knowledge of the better-informed group is adequate for informed voting, only that members of that group know *more* about an issue than does the rest of the electorate. The difference is crucial, because most studies showing that issue publics are better informed about a particular issue than the rest of the electorate rely on surveys tapping only very basic knowledge. For example, survey respondents with an unusually high level of interest in abortion, labor policy, and defense spending were more likely to be aware that these issues had been raised in a Senate campaign.[87] This, however, does not

prove that these voters actually understood the likely effects of opposing policies on these issues.

Even if the voter does have an adequate knowledge of the narrow issue of particular concern to him, informed voting with respect to that issue might still be inhibited by ignorance of the "rules of the game" of government policy. Using political scientist Shanto Iyengar's example,[88] a black voter may have sufficient *specific* knowledge to conclude that current civil rights policy should be changed, but not enough *general* knowledge of the structure of government to determine which elected officials have to be voted out to do it. Even in the land of the blind, the one-eyed person cannot be a true king if kingship requires seeing things that can only be discerned with two eyes.

Voter ignorance also undercuts the utility of issue publics in two further, less obvious ways. First, the rationally ignorant voter cannot readily tell which aspects of public policy really are part of the issue of interest. One of the neglected aspects of issue-public research is the question of how the scope of the relevant "issue" is defined in the first place.

If the connection between two or more matters of public policy is not obvious or is ignored by politicians and the media for their own reasons, voters may fail to pick it up. Social Security reform, for instance, is almost never defined as a racial issue, yet the lower life expectancy of blacks combined with the fact that they pay Social Security payroll taxes at the same rate as whites turned Social Security into a major hidden redistribution from black workers to white retirees.[89] The subtlety of the connection leads the relevant black issue public to ignore it. Such problems might often prevent an issue public from ever forming to begin with. Thanks in part to political ignorance, some potential issue publics are likely to be numbered among Mancur Olson's "forgotten groups who suffer in silence."[90]

Most fundamentally, voter ignorance of general issues may vitiate the benefits of issue publics even in situations where the issue publics have fully adequate information about their more specific concerns. If each specific issue area is controlled by a subset of the electorate with a special interest, while these same subsets remain ignorant of generally applicable issues, the outcome may well be a process of mutually

destructive plundering that leaves each group worse off than it would have been had there been no issue publics to begin with.

Within its particular bailiwick, each issue public pushes for its preferred policies without regard to the potential negative effects on other issues. A classic "tragedy of the commons" ensues in which the general interest is routinely neglected in favor of the particular. For these reasons, it is by no means clear that an electorate divided up into issue publics is in a better position to pursue its policy objectives than one that is uniformly ignorant across the board.

As with other information shortcuts, the issue public shortcut may also be weakened by the possibility of rational irrationality. If voters choose which issues to focus on not on the basis of their objective importance to societal well-being but on the basis of their entertainment value or other personal psychological benefits, the resulting issue publics are unlikely to improve voting decisions.

"ONLINE" INFORMATION PROCESSING

In some cases, measures of political knowledge that focus on consciously known information might understate true knowledge levels because we take account of a great deal of information subconsciously. Such "online" information processing might lead to incorrect survey answers about knowledge items that respondents previously "processed" and incorporated into their decision-making.[91] For example, I may have heard at Time A that a politician had a major ethics scandal. By Time B, when I respond to a survey question on the subject, I could have forgotten all about the scandal. But I also may have incorporated the relevant information from the scandal into my judgment of the politician, and ratcheted down my estimate of his trustworthiness. Online processing could, in theory, be an ideal shortcut for rationally ignorant voters because it requires very little time and effort.

Online Processing as a Substitute for Conscious Knowledge

There is little doubt that voters acquire at least some useful political knowledge through online processing. For example, it can sometimes help voters make better judgments of candidates than they could with

their consciously known knowledge alone.[92] At the same time, however, online processing has significant limitations, and the available evidence suggests that it does not come close to fully offsetting the impact of political ignorance.

If online processing could fully replace basic political knowledge or come close to it, we would not observe large differences in issue views between survey respondents with high and low levels of knowledge, after controlling for other variables. The low-knowledge respondents could simply use online processing to offset their relative lack of conscious knowledge. Yet differences between high- and low-knowledge respondents are very large on a wide range of issues in both domestic and foreign policy.[93]

Similarly, it is striking that retrospective judgments of incumbents seem to be heavily influenced by knowledge levels, with most survey respondents' opinions only being influenced by the most recent state of the economy, discounting the evidence of the rest of the incumbents' term.[94] If online processing were a generally effective substitute for conscious knowledge, one would expect it to be especially useful with respect to an issue—the state of the economy—that is almost always one of the most important concerns of voters. Even if voters can't remember what the growth rate or the unemployment rate was a year or two before an election, online processing might enable them to subconsciously incorporate that information in their overall assessment of the incumbent leadership. Yet, at least with respect to many voters, online processing fails to do this.

It is also difficult to see how online processing can offset ignorance of basic information about the structure of the political system, such as knowing which officials are responsible for what issues. If a voter does not know that Officeholder X is responsible for Issue Y, she cannot incorporate new information about that issue into her evaluation of X's performance, whether consciously or by online processing. It is hard to imagine how X's responsibility for Y could itself be known only subconsciously and thereby be able to affect the processing of new information about it. But such a possibility cannot be definitively ruled out.

On balance, online processing surely makes political ignorance a less severe problem than it would be without it. But much of the most worrisome evidence of ignorance is unlikely to be overturned by it. In particular, it does not seem to offset the flaws of retrospective voting, make up for lack of very basic structural knowledge, or account for the ways in which the views of the knowledgeable differ from otherwise similar voters who are comparatively ignorant.

Online Processing and Rational Irrationality

If online processing falls short of fully solving the problem of ignorance, it may actually exacerbate the dangers of political irrationality. Evaluating new information rationally and objectively often requires conscious effort.[95] When we do not exert such effort, we are more likely to fall prey to various cognitive biases, including overvaluing information that reinforces our preexisting views and discounting that which cuts against them.[96] Rational irrationality, therefore, is likely to be a more serious danger in situations where we impulsively react to new political information than if we carefully consider it over time.

Almost by definition, online processing involves quick, often almost instantaneous judgments about the significance of new information. Since the individual then forgets or discards the relevant data, he or she has little if any opportunity to reconsider it later. As a result, judgments made on the basis of online processing may be even more susceptible to rational irrationality than are evaluations of consciously remembered information. Initial reactions to new information presented to survey respondents are often heavily influenced by partisan, ideological, and other biases.[97] But if the information is remembered, we at least have the opportunity to reflect on it later and perhaps reduce the impact of our biases. With online processing, that opportunity is largely absent.

Voters with lower levels of preexisting knowledge may be even more likely to make biased snap judgments when engaged in online processing than those with higher levels. This problem may be part of the reason why less-informed voters are more likely to alter their evaluation of candidates on the basis of superficial traits, such as physical appearance.[98]

Overall, online processing certainly helps voters make decisions and can sometimes substitute for conscious knowledge. But it only seems to close a modest part of the knowledge deficit, and in some cases could even make things worse by increasing the impact of irrationality.

THE "MIRACLE OF AGGREGATION"[99]

If the rationally ignorant portion of the electorate commits its errors randomly, the power of aggregation might result in these errors canceling each other out. When mistakes are truly random and the electorate is sufficiently large, every "erroneous" vote for Candidate X should be offset by a similarly errant one for opposing Candidate Y. Only the nonrandomly distributed votes of the relatively informed voters will have a real impact on the outcome; that outcome will thereby be decided "as if" the electorate as a whole were informed.[100]

It is ironic that this line of argument should be put forward by writers committed to developing a defense of majoritarian democracy against charges of voter incapacity.[101] Taken seriously, it implies that the votes of the vast majority of the electorate are just "noise" obscuring the "signals" sent by the informed few, as one advocate puts it.[102] If the argument is correct, elections would have the same outcome if the ballots of the well-informed minority were the only ones counted.

Regardless, the magic of aggregation can only work if (1) the errors largely are random, and (2) the informed minority that decides electoral outcomes are representative of the interests of the rest of the population. The evidence suggests that neither precondition holds true.

Nonrandom Distribution of Errors

If the miracle of aggregation works, the best-informed voters might have a distribution of preferences on major political issues that differs little from that of the least informed, whose errors should randomly cancel each other out. However, extensive evidence shows that an increase in political knowledge leads to different views on nearly all issues tested. Scott Althaus' major 2003 study found that increased political information leads voters to become much more socially liberal and economically

conservative across a wide range of issues, when controlling for background variables such as race, gender, and income.[103] It also leads to greater support for an interventionist foreign policy, but slightly lesser support for the use of military force.[104] Earlier studies also found major effects on issue opinion resulting from increasing knowledge.[105]

Moreover, increased policy-specific knowledge can lead to major changes in opinion even among survey respondents who already have high general levels of political knowledge, a result that suggests that even the most knowledgeable fraction of the electorate that supposedly determines the true electoral outcome might still lack sufficient information to deal with all the crucial issues on the public agenda.[106]

The impact of knowledge on opinion is not inconsistent with the evidence of rational irrationality that shows people resisting new information that goes against their preexisting views.[107] People can be biased in their evaluation of evidence without being completely impervious to new data. Moreover, the bias is likely to be less among those who don't have strong preexisting commitments.[108]

The existence of such effects partly mitigates the negative impact of rational irrationality. Rationally irrational voters do still sometimes change their minds in the face of new evidence, even if not as often as they would if they were less biased in their assessments of what they learn. But such information effects also suggest that rational ignorance may be even worse than it initially seems to be. What the voters don't know often turns out to be a crucial factor influencing their decisions.

Some studies do find that an increase in information does not change voting decisions on particular issues. For example, poorly informed voters who used simple information shortcuts voted the same way as much better-informed ones on a complex California auto insurance initiative.[109] Overall, however, information seems to have a major impact on opinion across many important issues.

The miracle of aggregation hypothesis might also hold true if poorly informed voters simply choose their views at random or have no views at all. In that scenario, the poorly informed would split 50-50 on each issue, and public opinion would be determined by the views of the well-informed

TABLE 4.1 *Political knowledge by strength of party identification: 2000 American National Election Studies survey*

Self-Described Party Alignment	Average Political Knowledge Score (Mean number of correct answers on 30-point scale)
"Strong Republican"	18.5
"Independent-Republican"	15.6
"Strong Democrat"	15.3
"Independent-Democrat	14.1
"Weak Republican"	14.0
"Weak Democrat"	13.2
"Independent-Independent"	9.5

NOTE: This 30-point knowledge scale is based on the questions used in Table 1.4.

minority. Obviously, however, that scenario is equally implausible, in light of the obvious fact that many of the poorly informed do have views on political issues and do not choose them randomly.

These conclusions should not be surprising. One of the main reasons why errors are nonrandomly distributed is that voters really *do* try to use several of the other information shortcuts discussed earlier. As a result, ill-informed voters often draw misleading inferences about economic conditions and other issues.[110]

Under some conditions, the miracle of aggregation might work even if the distribution of errors is not random.[111] But for this result to hold, the quality of each individual voter's judgment must improve significantly the higher the correlation there is between errors.[112]

The miracle of aggregation could also be salvaged by evidence showing that the members of the well-informed minority are likely to be the swing voters who change electoral results. In reality, as Table 4.1 shows, the most knowledgeable voters tend to be committed partisans, while independent swing voters are the most ignorant. This result is in line with other research showing that independent voters with weak ideological commitments and party identification tend to have the lowest levels of political information.[113]

Representativeness of the Informed Minority

The random distribution hypothesis fares little better in meeting the second precondition, that of representativeness of the informed. The small minority of well-informed voters differ systematically from the rest in gender, income, race, age, religion, ideology, and a host of other politically relevant attributes.[114] It would be remarkable if the interests of this small, unrepresentative subset of the population coincided more than very roughly with those of the population at large.

The problem of lack of representativeness is partly mitigated by the fact that voters tend not to vote on the basis of personal material self-interest but rather "sociotropically," on the basis of their view of the welfare of society as a whole.[115] This fact would probably mitigate the control of electoral outcomes by the knowledgeable minority in a world in which the miracle of aggregation holds true.[116] The knowledgeable would be trustworthy guardians of their fellow citizens' welfare.

To some extent, this conclusion is valid. However, it is important to recognize two key caveats. First, self-interest does influence opinion on at least some issues, including policy toward smoking[117] and gun control.[118] Self-interest might also affect the priority that people place on one issue relative to others.

Second, non-self-interested voting does *not* necessarily mean that the voter weights the interests of all members of society equally. For example, racial prejudice might lead voters to undervalue the welfare of groups they dislike, or even actively value the infliction of harm on them. Although such prejudice has declined, it still sometimes influences public opinion on key issues.[119] A major recent study finds that "ethnocentrism"—the tendency to value one's own racial or ethnic group above others—influences American public opinion on a wide range of issues in both domestic and foreign policy.[120]

In any event, speculation about a world in which well-informed minorities determine the outcome of elections is of limited interest, given the reality that poorly informed voters neither choose their opinions at random nor abstain from voting or having views altogether.

Aggregation and Diversity

Some scholars argue that aggregation can work especially well if participants have diverse views and abilities.[121] When a large and diverse group seeks a solution to a problem, it can often make better decisions than a smaller, more expert group because it can pool its diverse collective knowledge which, in the aggregate, is greater than that of the smaller group.

There is little doubt that diversity can sometimes improve the quality of group decision-making. To take a highly simplified example, a group of one hundred people that each has one unit of relevant knowledge might outperform a group of ten each of whom has five units. Even though the average member of the second group has five times more knowledge than the average member of the larger one, the total knowledge of the larger group is twice as great as that of the smaller one (one hundred versus fifty).

Voting, however, is a poor way to take advantage of such diversity. Much of the evidence supporting the idea that diversity leads to better decisions involves experiments or simulations in which diverse participants work together and learn from each other's mistakes by building on each other's work.[122] For example, Lu Hong and Scott Page developed a model in which each of numerous diverse agents seeks a solution to a problem, and then the next participant is able to take advantage of the information produced by the searches of those who came before.[123]

Hélène Landemore, another leading academic advocate of the diversity theory of aggregation, analogizes the benefits of diversity for voting decisions in the classic movie *Twelve Angry Men*, in which a group of diverse jurors, all but one of whom are initially persuaded that a murder defendant is guilty, deliberate until they reach the correct conclusion that there is reasonable doubt.[124]

There is, however, a crucial difference between voting in elections and the jury deliberations in *Twelve Angry Men*. The jurors spent a great deal of time and effort "collectively brainstorming the available information and arguments and putting them through the many filters and lenses of the group."[125] They listened carefully to opposing points of view, and most tried hard to consider them objectively. By contrast, most voters either spend little or no time collecting political knowledge, or

focus primarily on conversation partners and media that reinforce their preexisting biases.[126] Few make much effort to seek out opposing views or to evaluate them in an unbiased way. Had the jurors in the movie cast their final votes after briefly considering their own preexisting biases, paying little or no attention to alternative views, all but one of them (the original dissenter famously played by Henry Fonda), would have voted to convict. Yet that is precisely how most voters in elections tend to act.

Jurors deliberate carefully and take their responsibilities seriously in part because they realize that their votes are likely to have a major impact on the outcome. It usually takes all twelve jurors to convict in a criminal case, so even one dissenter can change the result. By contrast, voters in an election have only an infinitesimally small chance of having a decisive effect,[127] with the result that they have little incentive to seek out information or deliberate carefully. If we apply this point to the electorate of one hundred voters with one hundred total units of knowledge, this group is less likely to outperform the smaller, more expert group if each of the one hundred voters simply makes a decision based on his or her own stock of knowledge, without accessing that of the others. In that event, each member of the large group is still utilizing only his or her original one unit of knowledge rather than the one hundred possessed by the group as a whole.

Even if members of a diverse group vote without careful thought and deliberation, they might still outperform a smaller, more expert group if their biases are more likely to randomly cancel each other out. In a diverse group, one subgroup's views are likely to be "negatively correlated" with those of other groups.[128] When one group makes a mistake in one direction, the other makes a mistake in the other.

Unfortunately, however, this dynamic is not enough to counter ignorance-induced errors that affect a majority of the total group. And, as we have seen, increasing knowledge has major aggregate effects on collective opinion.[129] If diversity within the electorate were enough to offset the effects of ignorance or make them random, the effects of knowledge should be random as well. As Landemore recognizes, diversity is only likely to "trump" individual knowledge if the participants in the diverse group are "relatively smart (or not too dumb)."[130] An electorate where

most voters often lack very basic political knowledge and regularly do a poor job of evaluating what they do know, is likely to fall short of that ideal in many cases.

Even when a mistake is not common enough to effect the majority of the group, a diverse but ignorant group can still easily make mistakes. Consider an electorate of 1,000,000 voters each with one unit of knowledge, similar to the electorate of 100 voters described earlier. We will also assume that they are voting in an election between Candidate A and Candidate B, and that A is likely to be the better choice, given the group's objectives. Assume, further, that 990,000 of them vote essentially randomly, with the result that any errors they make cancel each other out. If, among, the remaining 10,000, 6,000 are on average more prone to making an error in favor of B, then the group as a whole will almost certainly reach a wrong decision, even though the net bias in favor of B is very small. In a large group that makes decisions by majority voting, if the prevalence of ignorance-induced error in one direction is only slightly more common than error in another, then diversity will not be able to offset the effects of ignorance.[131]

The Condorcet Jury Theorem

Closely related to the idea of the "miracle of aggregation" is the use of the Condorcet Jury Theorem as a defense of democratic competence. First described by the Marquis de Condorcet in the eighteenth century, the Condorcet Jury Theorem shows that the probability of a majority vote reaching the "correct" outcome increases statistically as the number of voters increases, so long as each individual is at least slightly more likely to vote the "right" way than the "wrong" way.[132] If the group is large enough, it is more likely to choose the correct option than a small group in which each individual has a much greater chance of being right than each individual within the large group.

For example, it turns out that a majority vote in an electorate with one million voters each of whom has only a 51 percent chance of voting for the best of two available options is more likely to reach a correct decision than an electorate with one hundred voters each of whom chooses the right option 90 percent of the time.[133] This result suggests a possible

defense of democratic decision-making in a large electorate where most voters are only moderately informed. The large size of the electorate could make up for the lower knowledge levels of each individual voter.[134]

Unfortunately, this argument has several serious weaknesses. One is that it usually works only if voters are, on average, more likely to choose the correct option than the "wrong" one. If instead of being 51 percent likely to choose the right answer, each voter is actually 51 percent likely to choose the wrong one, the Jury Theorem shows that a large electorate will choose the wrong option with virtual certainty, indeed with slightly greater certainty than a small electorate in which each individual voter has a 90 percent chance of being wrong. Given the fact that a majority of voters are systematically misinformed on many issues, there is probably a large number of cases in which the average voter is likely to err in this way.

The theorem also assumes that voters make their decisions independently of each other. If they do not, the mistakes of one can affect others, making a correct decision less likely.[135] In real life, of course, voter decisions are usually not independent, and voters are often greatly influenced by the views of others.[136]

Moreover, the traditional version of the Condorcet Jury Theorem implicitly assumes that voters will not reduce their efforts at information acquisition as the size of the electorate grows and the chance of casting a decisive vote declines. Once rational ignorance is introduced into the equation, it turns out that increasing the size of the electorate often *reduces* the chance of getting a correct answer, because voters acquire less information than they would in a smaller group.[137] For this reason, it would be undesirable to have juries with hundreds or thousands of members render verdicts on trials by majority vote, as was the practice in ancient Athenian courts.[138] Individual jurors would pay less attention to the evidence and consider it less carefully because they would realize that their votes had little chance of affecting the outcome. Large-scale democratic electorates face similar perverse incentives.

SHORTCUTS FALLING SHORT

Overall, the shortcuts to informed voting discussed in the literature are far less helpful to voters than their advocates suggest. In many instances,

they may be actively misleading. No currently known shortcut fully substitutes for basic political knowledge, or comes close to doing so.

This is not to say that shortcuts are completely useless. Far from it. Some of them are helpful in particular instances, especially in dealing with relatively simple political issues. Most notably, retrospective voting enables voters to punish incumbents who are responsible for large and visible disasters, such as mass famines. This is a great advantage of democracy over rival political systems, and we owe it at least in part to the availability of information shortcuts. The problem is that shortcuts are far less effective in dealing with the less visible and more complicated issues that constitute the vast bulk of modern government policy.

If shortcuts fall short, what can be done to manage the problem of political ignorance? Chapter 5 begins the task of answering this question by arguing that the dangers of ignorance can be reduced by limiting and decentralizing government power.