**Looking But Not Seeing: The (Ir)Relevance of Incentives to Political Ignorance[[1]](#footnote-2)**

*ABSTRACT: Ilya Somin’s* Democracy and Political Ignorance *represents a missed opportunity to fully examine the implications of public ignorance in modern democracies. Somin persuasively argues that existing levels of public ignorance undermine the main normative accounts of democratic legitimacy, and he demonstrates that neither cognitive shortcuts nor heuristics can provide a quick fix for democracy. However, Somin seeks to find a simple explanation for public ignorance in the conscious, rational choices of voters. He thus commits to the position that voters choose to be ignorant and irrational, and the simplistic implication that given the right incentives they would choose otherwise. This position is empirically problematic, methodologically flawed, and theoretically redundant. On the more plausible view that ignorance is the inadvertent result of social complexity, it is clear that simply focusing on incentives tells us little about what voters would or would not know under different institutional circumstances.*

Keywords: *Ilya Somin, political ignorance, public ignorance, radical ignorance, rational ignorance, rational irrationality*

In *Democracy and Political Ignorance* (Stanford University Press, 2013), Ilya Somin asserts that the principal problem facing modern democracies is their citizens’ thoroughgoing ignorance regarding the polities in which they live. Despite the unprecedented availability of information across various (increasingly accessible) media and the high levels of education routinely received in many democracies, voters show little understanding of either the significance or the substance of major political issues. The consequences of this ignorance are profound, both for our theories of democracy (most of which arguably require a level of knowledge far beyond that found in the real world)[[2]](#endnote-2) and for the practice of democracy. Under conditions of political ignorance, the electoral mechanisms we rely upon to aggregate our judgments in a mutually beneficial fashion are likely to realize collectively irrational, and potentially harmful, results.

Somin’s purpose in setting out this argument is to lay the ground for his preferred alternative to the centralized election of democratic representatives: foot voting. Supposing that political power could be sufficiently decentralized, foot voting would allow individuals to acquire knowledge of significant differences among regions, states, or cities, and to base their decisions concerning where to live and conduct business on this knowledge. According to Somin, foot voting can correct the epistemic problems experienced in large-scale modern democracies. For instance, foot voters do not need to undertake complex counterfactual reasoning concerning the social effects of various policy options (124), nor do they need to act collectively to effect change (121). Instead, much like consumers in a market, foot voters need only consider their own individual payoffs from the choices they face. Consequently, they escape the requirement to invest costly time and energy in a primarily social activity, the individual benefit of which is negligible. Foot voting, in short, offers a more robust form of decision-making than epistemically fragile mass elections.

This comparative argument for foot voting is intuitively appealing, but it rests upon a number of empirically questionable assumptions. This is perhaps surprising, given the extent of engagement with foot voting and its corollary, the right to “exit” social associations, in the literature.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, despite a number of references, Somin does not seek to engage with or build upon this literature.[[4]](#endnote-4) In particular, he pays no attention to the opportunities to “vote” by way of exit that already exist within decentralised polities such as the United States and (albeit in a more complex fashion) the European Union.[[5]](#endnote-5) Instead, he relies on a general and non-situated conception of agency, which consists simply of responding to incentives. Somin therefore provides a thoroughly decontextualized rationale for his alternative to democratic engagement and a decontextualized understanding of democratic engagement itself.

The trouble with this general approach is that it cannot support the normative conclusions Somin seeks to draw from it. As I argue below, Somin’s rational-choice approach to political knowledge would be valid if he had offered it as an ideal type. This would require a set of clearly specified conditions in which the ideal type can be expected to apply, preferably with an account of where and when such conditions pertain. The normative applicability of Somin’s theory would consequently be contingent on these conditions, such that further research would be necessary to decide the extent of its relevance in the real world. Somin seems to miss this conditionality because he treats rational-choice theory as though it describesthe real world. Noconceptual boundaries are drawn between the individuals (informally) modeled in his theory and those inhabiting real democracies. Readers are therefore left with the possibility that Somin’s argument is valid for all really existing citizens, or none at all, and all possibilities in between.

This essay does not attempt to resolve this ambiguity. Instead, it examines the source of the confusion in Somin’s argument, namely his assumption that one’s political beliefs are shaped by incentives, rather than by interpretations. The principal claim is that this assumption leads him to adopt a peculiarly unhelpful understanding of political ignorance. Rather than treating ignorance as an indication that voters fail to recognize that they need to have knowledge of certain facts or ideas, ignorance of which may lead them to make political choices which work against their own political ideals, Somin’s rational-choice theory of ignorance implies that individuals could possess this knowledge if they wished, but that they simply lack sufficient incentives to do so. As shown in the first section, the problem facing democracy is thus subtly shifted from the ignorance of the citizenry to the decisionof the citizenry *to be* ignorant. This relocation of the problem has the virtue of rendering the challenge of ignorance tractable to Somin’s solution, but it does so only by assuming away all that is *a*rational (and thus potentially incorrigible) about our ignorance. This approach, I maintain, is empirically flawed, methodologically suspect, and theoretically redundant. By opting to explain away rather than confront the fact that voters in developed democracies such as the United States *do* seem to care about politics, such that they *do* (in their opinions) have an incentive to inform themselves about it, Somin ultimately fails, I argue, to confront the problems that would arise for fallible real-world citizens as a result of his proposed constitutional reforms.

*Political Ignorance, Rationality, and Incentives*

Somin’s account of political ignorance is thoroughly enmeshed in a loosely economic conception of rationality. Drawing on work by Anthony Downs (1957), William Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968) and Andrew Gelman et al. (2012), Somin’s principal contention is that “political ignorance is rational because an individual has virtually no chance of influencing the outcome of an election” (63). This argument is presented as a universally applicable description of human behavior in mass democracies, rather than a description of the behavior of, say, economists or rational-choice theorists. According to Somin, then, wherever there is a large electorate, we should expect rational political ignorance. As he succinctly puts it, “the incentive to accumulate political knowledge is vanishingly small, so long as the only reason to do so is to cast a ‘better’ vote” (64).

What does a “better” vote mean here? In his discussion of the empirical extent of political ignorance, Somin considers a variety of different theories of real-world voting. His arguments here reveal a particularly *factual* understanding of a good vote: a good vote is one that is correctly informed by all those facts relevant to what the voter wants to achieve. For instance, in polling conducted soon after the 2008 U.S. presidential election (an election dominated by the financial crisis and questions of economic growth, employment, and debt), Somin notes that at least half of all voters seemed to be unaware of which officials are responsible for different economic policies, and almost half showed little knowledge of how the federal budget is constituted (23). Thus, against Morris Fiorina’s (1981) argument that voters can and do vote retrospectively to punish or reward incumbents, Somin argues that voters may on the whole simply be too uninformed to know who to credit or blame (40-43). Similarly, evidence that voters are often ignorant of the names of their representatives and of even the broadest implications of different legislative and judicial decisions undermines the idea that voters are sufficiently informed to police their “Burkean trustees” (43-35) or to assess governmental performance simply by monitoring prevailing issues and concerns (47-49). Tellingly, the evidence of voter ignorance amassed by Somin also undermines deliberative democracy, which relies upon citizens arriving at shared, reasoned agreements rather than the mere aggregation of votes. If citizens are not aware of the empirical issues they face or the relevant facts, even deliberative agreements reached on the basis of an exchange of viewpoints would be fundamentally unreliable (51-52). It is important to note that Somin is not accusing voters here of being insufficiently “sociotropic” or public spirited (57). Rather, he is saying that they recognize that they lack the facts needed to cast *well-informed* sociotropic votes.

This account raises a number of interesting questions. For instance, what level of knowledge wouldvoters need to possess to realize the sociotropic ends they seek? And what problems do or are likely to arise because they *don’t* possess this knowledge? To the extent that they lack it, what remains of the case for democracy?

Rather than engage with these or other such questions, however, Somin concentrates on trying to explain why, despite appearances, the political ignorance he sets out is specifically *rational*. Against the fact that voters actually do vote, despite their minuscule chances of affecting the outcome—a fact that has embarrassed rational-choice theorists since Anthony Downs’s (1957) original argument—he argues that voting is rational as long as voters’ “very rough, intuitive estimate[s]” of the expected utility of voting outweigh the costs of voting (68). This point, while true enough in principle, leads Somin to suggest that in practice voters intuitively base their voting decision on the following formula: “D\*(300 million/1000) / (100 million) – CV = UV.” The fact that explaining this formula takes two pages of his book (67-68), which would require a considerable expenditure of attention from putatively indifferent voters, does not give Somin pause. Indeed he argues that somehow or other, voters possess an intuitive grasp of this topic that has so perplexed generations of rational-choice theorists. But this is not the last surprising twist in his reasoning. For he must also account for the fact that rationally ignorant voters are nevertheless shown by opinion surveys to possess political beliefs and quantities of political information (however inadequate) that, according to rational-ignorance theory, they should lack (for there is no rational point in having beliefs about what is politically desirable when these beliefs cannot contribute to desirable outcomes). Somin explains these paradoxes by asserting that less-than-completely ignorant voters are not “truth-seekers,” but are instead members of political groups akin to sports fans. Like baseball fans collecting batting averages, these voters collect information about politics in order to argue playfully—but, they realize, pointlessly—in favor of the superiority of their irrationally selected group, e.g., the Boston Red Sox (78-82).

By drafting in these claims about voters’ motivations, Somin’s account of rational voters moves from a “thin” to a “thick” conception of rationality. Thin conceptions lack any reference to actors’ specific goals or motivations (Ferejohn 1991, 282). Somin’s initial claim about the irrationality of possessing political knowledge as a means to the end of casting a better vote is thin in this way because the content of “better” is left unspecified. In contrast, as his argument against epistemic democracy shows, his claim that voters are motivated by group identification is noticeably thicker. Hélène Landemore (2012; and Landemore and Page 2014) argues that a group of even relatively ignorant individuals is likely to make epistemically good decisions if the diversity of contributions can fill the gaps in any given individual’s knowledge. For Somin, this is hopelessly idealistic. But rather than emphasize the immediate question of how ignorant individuals would *know* howto fill the gaps in their knowledge (Gunn 2014), he focuses on the absence of any *motivation* to do so. Democratic voters, he claims, are “rationally irrational”; unlike, say, the members of a jury (one of Landemore’s examples), voters have little reason to “deliberate carefully,” so the ways in which they respond to new information are likely to be biased by pre-existing convictions and prejudices rather than the desire for accuracy (115-116).

On the face of it, the claim that voters are not only likely to be uninterested in the minutiae of politics (as a thin conception of rationality would suggest of the members of a mass electorate), but are likely to be uninterested in solving political problems at all (the thicker conception), is puzzling. For if voters are “fans” rather than earnest participants, their political preferences must accordingly be egoistic rather than sociotropic. This contrast can be clearly seen in the source of the two sets of motivations. Whereas sociotropic voters must assume that there is some kind of common good external to their own preferences which ought to be pursued over and above their self-interest, sports fans are by definition driven by their internal preferences (whether tribal or aesthetic). They are fans precisely because they *enjoy* one or more aspects of the performers or teams in question. Indeed, it is precisely this fact that explains why in Somin’s view voters would be careless in their deliberations, since, like a child, the voter *qua* sports fan simply wants to enjoy herself. By holding this conception of voters, however, Somin directly contradicts his earlier acceptance of voters’ (empirically demonstrable) sociotropic concerns. What is the root of this contradiction?

Much is explained by Somin’s positioning of his argument relative to Bryan Caplan’s theory of rational irrationality. On Caplan’s view, voters are even less admirable than the sketch above suggests. For they are driven by self-indulgent yet *knowingly* erroneous biases rather than the search for truth (Caplan 2007, 123).[[6]](#endnote-6) In contrast, Somin’s conception of rational irrationality ascribes less perversity to political participants, since it attributes to them the pursuit of “private happiness” and “psychic benefits” *à la* sports fans. Somin’s thick conception of rationality thus trades nihilism for childishness in the traits it attributes—entirely a priori—to voters. However, in so doing it radically narrows the range of politics to which Somin’s conception of voters applies, and undermines his intention to provide a general account of and response to sociotropic voters’ ignorance.

To see why, consider again that the displays of brute strength and agility exemplified by team sports provide a purely aesthetic and individualistic form of pleasure to the fans. The significant point here is that despite this personal appeal, sport is a highly social activity, consumed and presented largely through the media of controversy, narrative, and sometimes debate. These social activities are comprehensible only to the extent that they facilitate the intrinsic pleasures of proudly identifying as fans of this or that team and, consequently, of sharing vicariously the aesthetic value of their achievements. Now, to the extent that democratic debates are consumed in the proud manner of sporting discussions, Somin’s analogy of voters to sports fans holds. However, research on the general tendency of citizens to *avoid* political discussions and debates with party and ideological opponents suggests that few real-world individuals fall into this category (Mutz 2006). For Somin (81), this research is simply proof that voters, being fanatics, are not interested in dialogue with the other political team, but a far more plausible interpretation is that they perceive more or less accurately the material import of political questions and are, accordingly, much more emotional in their evaluations of their opponents. After all, on significant political questions, we imbue our own opinions with great moral and intellectual significance. Holding contrary opinions thus seems to signal something about an opponent’s intellect or character (or both) in a way that being “wrong” about the “best” football team does not. Seen in this light, Jonathan Haidt’s (2012, 79-82) finding that individuals reason more carefully with opponents (as opposed to allies) is not evidence of the “laziness” with which voters approach politics, as Somin (81) seems to think (a claim that begs the question of why voters who are uninterested in politics would care about the impressions they make on or the reactions they would evince from opponents). Rather, it is evidence that, unlike sports fans, voters treat political disputes very seriously (Haidt 2012, *passim*).

Of course, Somin may simply provide his thick conception of rationality to explain how egoistic voters who possess more knowledge than rational-choice theory predicts fit into his account. On this view, sociotropy may be the dominant motivation, but we must recognize that it doesn’t characterize all voters. In either case, however, voters’ rational epistemic choices pose a challenge to democracy, such that a systemic overhaul of the epistemic incentives facing voters appears to be the only answer. This is precisely what Somin’s account of foot voting does; insofar as foot voters face the full costs and benefits of their decisions, they would be motivated to seek out information regarding those costs and benefits and reason through that information rationally and without prejudice (125). More formally:

1. Individuals in large-scale, centralized democracies:
   1. know the (rough) payoffs they face at the ballot box, and respond *thin*-rationally by underconsuming politically relevant information; and
   2. know the value of the information they hold, and respond *thick*-rationally by analyzing and utilizing this information *ir*rationally.
2. Foot-voting entails a systemic change that would address the perverse payoffs responsible for this irrationality by giving each individual full control over which of the (available) set of outcomes she chooses.
3. *Supposing that the changes implied by (2) fully resolve the problems implied by (1)*, then the citizenry should be expected to be more informed about facts relevant to its choices and more rational in its evaluation of these facts. It should be straightforwardly “smart” rather than “smart but ignorant” (88).

If, however, the thick conception of rationality supposes an attitude to politics that applies to few (if any) voters, as the analysis above suggests, then it is difficult to see how it can sit as a simple extension of Somin’s thinner conception. For, rather than a specification or resolution of an obvious lacuna left open by the thin account of public ignorance, the thick account instead appears to be a full-fledged *alternative*, which requires that we read the seeming indifference of the rationally ignorant voter as an egoistic (and somewhat rarefied) choice to be ignorant, not a sociotropic decision.

Absent a theory explaining how we are to tell these two forms of ignorance apart, Somin’s decision to draft in egoism looks, at best, to be an ad hoc extension of rational ignorance theory to cover cases that don’t logically fit the theory’s hypotheses. In any case, if voters prove their egoism just as soon as they start engaging in politics (as the thick conception suggests), then it is difficult to see how they can be conceived as anything but latently egoistic in their non-engaged state. Thus arises the contradiction between the sociotropic interpretation of voting behaviour and Somin’s particular understanding of rationality.

Given this apparent confusion between hypotheses 1A and 1B, it follows that Somin’s foot-voting alternative faces a much stiffer test than he envisages. In particular, it must answer the question of to what extent the motivational effects of foot voting actually address the causes of political ignorance among voters. This requires a thorough examination of Somin’s account of rationality and its application to democratic voters.

*Why Rational-Choice Theory?*

It is somewhat surprising that Somin’s argument for foot voting rests so heavily on a rational-choice framework given the critical attention rational-choice theory has received over the past twenty years. For instance, Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro’s (1994) well-known critique brought to the fore the question of what, precisely, political analysis gains from rational-choice postulates (Hampsher-Monk and Hindmoor 2010). Indeed, Green and Shapiro’s argument was the subject of a sustained examination in these very pages (see Friedman 1995).

Somin is not unaware of this critique. In a footnote to a 2006 article (also in these pages)—an early version of his book’s chapter on “The Rationality of Political Ignorance” (62-89)—he noted, citing Green and Shapiro, that “there is a large literature attacking rational-choice theory on the ground that it fails to explain the prevalence of voting” (Somin 2006, 277n2). However, Somin also asserted that “the decision to vote is rational so long as the voter perceives a significant difference between candidates and cares even slightly about the welfare of fellow citizens, as well as his own” (ibid., 258). Intriguingly, on this account it is clearly voters’ *evaluations* of candidates’ effects on the common good that do all the explanatory work, which raises the question of what, if anything, is accomplished by a reduction of the problem to voters’ *incentives*: if voting is explained by voters’ beliefs about the beneficial effects of voting (that is, if the incentive to vote is provided by the beneficial effects one anticipates one’s vote to generate), then voters cannot be open to incentives pertaining separately to the value of information, since they must logically believe that they already possess sufficient information to make an evaluation relevant to their votes.

To address this issue, and the corollary question of what Somin’s account achieves by shunting aside evidence of what voters actually believe about their democratic choices, it is worth going back to the broader challenges to rational choice to see why Somin’s rather cursory response is inadequate. Three types of critique are discernible in the literature: empirical, methodological, and theoretical. These challenges will be considered in relation to Somin's argument in turn.

*Rationality and the Empirical Evidence*

The aspiration of rational-choice theorists is to provide a uniform and universal account of political action (Ferejohn and Satz 1995, 74). Somin clearly shares this aspiration; as hypothesis 1A shows, his argument rests on the simple assumption that as a member of a large electorate, a citizen will drastically underconsume political information. Putting aside the more complex question of what voters want to achieve (hypothesis 1B, discussed below), this assumption suggests that regardless of their goals and motivations, voters will avoid seriously engaging with political debate unless the payoffs of such engagements differ radically from those that prevail in large electorates. That is, rationally ignorant voters should show *no* systematic engagement with political issues, and therefore no political beliefs

Evidence marshalled by Leif Lewin casts doubt on this hypothesis. For instance, he finds that American voters consistently vote on the basis of their beliefs about the economic well-being of the public as a whole (e.g., Lewin 1991, 37-38). Lewin finds the same state of affairs in Western Europe, where ideology and assessments of the general state of the economy have repeatedly proven stronger determinants of voting behavior than self-interest (ibid., 48-51). Lewin’s intention here is to discredit the thick-rational account of pocketbook voting. Whether one is unemployed or not, for instance, evidently matters less than whether or not one perceives employment to be a social problem. Somin may agree of course, with the *motivational* implications of such findings because (as we have seen) he does acknowledge that voters are or may be sociotropic (even if he leaves unanswered the question of how just many voters are sociotropic). But it is difficult to see why his thinly rational voters would possess any beliefs about social problems in the first place: however much they care about their fellow citizens, they know that it is pointless to hold such beliefs, because it is astronomically unlikely that such beliefs will “count” in the form of a vote. Insofar as voters *are* informed, as Somin has it, they must be so because they are egoistic, rather than sociotropic. In other words, voters who possess any pertinent opinions concerning the well-being of their fellow citizens automatically exclude themselves from the only explanation Somin can offer for their *having* political opinions: their dogmatic support for their “team.” Lewin’s evidence thus clearly demonstrates the contradiction identified in Somin’s treatment of sociotropic and knowledgeable voters.

Somin might reply here that his argument from rationality does not preclude acquiring *any* political information, and thus holding *any* political opinions. “Most citizens,” he writes, “have a rough general sense that devoting more than the minimal effort to acquiring political information is rarely worth the trouble” (63). There are at least three ways of understanding the “minimal effort” to which Somin refers here. First, it may contradict his central thesis, according to which *no* effort should be put into acquiring political information. Second, however, it may mean that voters passively accumulate information rather than seek actively to become informed, as they might about, say, a television they wish to buy (121). This would suggest that the information standing behind voting is essentially random, but the findings of sociotropic and impressionistic voting (see, for instance, Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, and Gomez and Wilson 2006) demonstrate that voters in fact non-randomly respond to, and thus appear to be actively attuned to, information regarding the general state of the economy. Third and more plausibly, Somin’s “minimal effort” might mean that voters inform themselves only as much as they think necessary given the negligible import of a single vote. On Michael Munger’s (2011) view, this point defeats Lewin’s affirmation of sociotropic-voting theory. As Munger (2011, 349) puts it, “the rationally ignorant public-interest voter is essentially indistinguishable from the rationally ignorant self-interested voter.” He continues:

Rationality need not imply self-interest, but clearly it does, as an

empirical matter, imply that voters have very little idea of how

policy works and what candidates will do once they are in office. . . .

The fact that voters have public-interest intentions at the *first stage*,

the motivation stage, is essentially irrelevant, since they have private-

interest reasons to free ride and can thus be influenced by operatives

whom Downs called “persuaders,” who have their own reasons to

distort information. (Ibid., 349-350, original emphasis)

Put differently, because even sociotropic voters know that they lack the incentive to inform themselves, they have a clear incentive to free ride on the information-gathering efforts of others. As Munger (2011, 349) puts it, “motivational assumptions are nearly inconsequential for the public [*qua* rational] choice theorist.” Regardless of their value orientation, rational voters are ignorant voters.

The difficulty with this argument is that there is nothing obviously *rational* about the ignorance it posits. For voters cannot logically free ride on Downsian persuaders without first possessing beliefs about these persuaders and the value of their information. Accordingly, it is the *incentives* faced by voters—not the ends they seek—that fail to do any work in explaining what they believe and how they consequently behave. To rely on Twitter for one’s political beliefs, for instance, is to believe at least implicitly that what one reads on Twitter is both (at least partly) true and (at least partly) sufficient to shape reliable beliefs. More generally, one’s reliance on *any* source of information implies that one believes the source to be reliable. Insofar as people remain ignorant, then, it cannot be because they have intentionally *chosen* ignorance due to their rational calculation of its costs and benefits. Rather, it must be the case that they are simply unawarethat their information choices are rendering them ignorant, which is to say that they are *radically* ignorant: they do not know what it is that they do not know, and they do not know that they “should” learn it. The import of a single vote is irrelevant to explaining this kind of inadvertent ignorance (Evans and Friedman 2011, 72), because errors, not incentives, are its source.

Somin thinks that the evidence of voter ignorance defeats this view of inadvertently ignorant voters. After all, he says, information about politics is readily available and easy to acquire, yet most of us remain ignorant of even the kind of information that “simple intuition” suggests is necessary to make good decisions—even as we manage to make ourselves well informed about private consumption decisions (76). Notwithstanding the argument above, rational ignorance *could* explain this contrast. But so could the hypothesis that voters don’t think they needto know the facts public-ignorance researchers poll them on; or the hypothesis that they are simply unaware of the kinds of facts that are relevant to, and are often generated by, policy debates. With respect to hypothesis 1A, in short, Somin offers no reason to reject the pertinent null hypothesis, that voters *think* they are as informed about public decisions as about private ones, which is to say that they believe themselves to be adequately enough informed to make good decisions.

*Rationality and Methodology*

Another way of defending Somin’s argument here is to retreat fully into the thick conception of rationality he offers (hypothesis 1B), according to which individuals pursue esoteric psychological benefits over and above the sociotropic benefits of voting. In this view, voters should be expected to hold political beliefs and to be sensitive to new information relevant to democratic politics. But rather than processing this information in order to “improve the quality of their votes,” they would instead seek to reinforce their own partisan, self-satisfying beliefs about the sociotropic effects of their team’s actions (81). Against critics who claim that rational irrationality entails the nonsensical position of holding a belief that one knows to be wrong (see, for instance, Bennett and Friedman 2008), Somin claims that “rational irrationality does not require an actual belief that one is endorsing incorrect views, merely a decision not to make an effort to carefully evaluate one’s views in an unbiased way” (82). We must therefore consider whether voters’ sociotropic preferences reflect an irrational bias. If so, then errors are to be expected regardless of voters’ level of engagement and knowledge.

This position demonstrates the basic flaw in Somin’s approach to the question of rational ignorance—his methodological inability to reject the incentives postulate even when the evidence seems clearly to disprove it. Green and Shapiro similarly criticize attempts to rescue rational choice theory from ubiquitously non-negligible voter turnout using precisely the kinds of reasoning Somin uses (60-71). Claims that voters engage in elaborate (yet intuitive) calculations that would in fact make voting rational while making information gathering irrational are little more than “imagin[ing] data consistent with a conceivable rational choice account” (Green and Shapiro 1994, 55). This is not to say that voters are irrational, but that they probably never even consider the question of the odds that a single vote will turn the outcome. If so, they cannot have chosen to be ignorant of political matters on the basis of their weak incentive to know the truth, because they do not know that they have this weak incentive—as demonstrated by the facts that they vote and that they do (often) acquire some political information.

More pertinently, Somin’s addition of rational irrationality to the traditional Downsian account of “rational ignorance” serves as a prime example of what Green and Shapiro (1994, 34) call “post hoc theory development.” Rather than treat rational ignorance as an unproven or disproven hypothesis, Somin joins the ranks of those rational-choice theorists for whom the theory *must* betrue, such that seemingly falsifying evidence is in fact a sign that the theory needs to be expanded. Thus, while all but committing to the proposition that the public’s ignorance is proof that it rationally avoids the acquisition of costly political knowledge (66), Somin faces up to the fact that a substantial minority of the public does acquire costly political knowledge by ascribing this acquisition to team-fanatic purposes, not the purpose of grounding sociotropically accurate votes (71-72). Rational ignorance is thus unfalsifiable. When voters are ignorant, it is because they know that their (sociotropic) votes do not matter, such that it is pointless to gather information about which candidate is sociotropically superior; when they hold sociotropic beliefs and gather information, it is because they care about something *other than* sociotropic voting (for the purposes of which, they remain rationally ignorant)—namely, the charge they get out of rooting for their political team

This ad-hoc reasoning helps Somin gloss over Stephen E. Bennett and Jeffrey Friedman’s empirical critique of Caplan’s claim that voters are rationally irrational (Bennett and Friedman 2008). Bennett and Friedman do not simply contend that rational irrationality entails the logically absurd position of knowingly holding false beliefs (although this is a significant part of their argument; see Bennett and Friedman 2008, 211). They also offer a range of empirical evidence demonstrating that (American) voters largely lack the information that would enable them to form the “irrational biases” attributed to them by Caplan (ibid*.*,211-12); that voters’ attitudes towards economic risks correlate with media coverage rather than ineluctable fears and prejudices (ibid.,221-22); and that voters (on the whole) lack the consistent beliefs and ideological constraint implied by the idea of a rationally biased public (ibid., 234-35). Indeed, those who *do* show ideological constraint tend to be political actors with disproportionate political influence, to whom the one-vote-doesn’t-matter argument does not apply (ibid*.*,235-36).

Somin does not engage with these claims at all, and neither does he consider recent survey evidence mirroring that offered by Bennett and Friedman.[[7]](#endnote-7) Instead, he offers the rather odd argument that were voters genuinely interested in holding true beliefs, they would seek out people who disagree with them, as John Stuart Mill advised (81). This extremely high bar for voters—one that few political activists, politicians, donors, or even scholars could meet—is admirable as an ideal, but Somin is using it empirically, not normatively. He is not offering it as a standard for the ethics of voting (cf. Beerbohm 2012), but as an absurdly demanding baseline against which to judge people’s commitment to the truth, such that anyone who does not meet Mill’s ideal must be uninterested in the truth of their opinions. It does not occur to Somin that voters who have not read Mill might never have thought of adhering to his standard, nor that it is a standard that does not apply to uncontroversial opinions—which voters might well think includes their own political opinions. This would especially apply to their own opinions if they are not aware of policy debates that suggest that most “self-evident truths” of modern politics are far more complex than they seem. By ignoring such possibilities, Somin is able to accept the conclusion that voters are rationally irrational regardless of the empirical evidence. Rather than consider whether or not voters actually *know* that there are many plausible perspectives (other than their own) on what are in fact complex social problems, Somin simply assumes that they *must* know this. Yet given his own recitations of voter ignorance, this is deeply implausible. Voters who do not know about the existence of important public policies are unlikely to be aware of the various credible arguments for and against these policies, and by the same token are unlikely to know about the existence of credible arguments against the policies they do know about and support.

Overall, then, Somin provides nothing to rescue “rational irrationality” from the argument offered by Bennett and Friedman. Hypothesis 1B provides an untenable description of voter behavior.

*Somin’s Theory as Predictive*

Iain Hampsher-Monk and Andrew Hindmoor (2010, 52-53) identify three purposes for which rational-choice postulates might be used. First, they may be intended to provide a “realist” description of the “conscious mental states” explaining agents’ decisions. Second, they might be used “instrumental[ly],” to generate predictions of agents’ real-world choices. Third, they can be used to form theories of the ways in which “structural properties” generate patterned social outcomes *regardless* of agents’ preferences or beliefs. These different approaches have different evidentiary requirements and generate different kinds of hypotheses, so it is important that their advocates clearly state which approach they are taking. Somin manifestly fails to make this distinction, with the result that his theory generates unreliable predictions.

If Somin intended to provide a straightforwardly structuralaccount of democratic behavior, then the assumption that individual agents are rational would not be problematic. As Ferejohn and Debra Satz (1995, 78-79) note, rationality is a germane basis for studying macro-level social outcomes because the intentionality at the center of rational-choice models is universal to intelligible human behaviour. Somin exemplifies the strengths of this approach in his insightful critique of the heuristics and shortcuts on which democratic theorists often fall back when faced with evidence of voter ignorance (90-118). And against Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro’s (1992) argument for the “miracle of aggregation,” which suggests that random voter errors should cancel one another out so that only informed opinions remain, Somin astutely notes that voters seeking to be well informed will not make errors randomly (110-112). Driven by the same ideas (or, as Somin has it, biases), voters will tend to imbibe information systematically, such that systematic errors can shape collective outcomes.

This structural approach should not be confused with descriptive explanations of political behavior, however (Lane 1995, 123-124). For, as Friedman (1995, 14) notes, it is not possible to infer identical motivations from similar choices. If, for instance, a wealthy individual votes Republican, she *might* be thinking the GOP would, by lowering taxes, make her wealthier. But she might also believe the Republican presidential candidate to be more macroeconomically savvy, or to have a better chance of solving international problems, or any number of other things. We are socially, culturally, and geographically situated, so any given behavior is just as likely to be driven by particular idiosyncratic (yet not random) factors as by universally applicable mechanisms such as a single set of biases across all voters. When it comes to making predictions, then, rational choice is at best an “ideal type” that can provide an examination of what *could* happen under specified historically contingent circumstances *if* individuals acted as maximizers (Hay 2004, 45; see also Friedman 1995, 18).

Somin, however, overlooks the next step, which would be to compare empirical evidence to the prediction of the theory in order to see if the theory actually applies to the case at hand. Rather than treating the fact that voters care about politics enough to hold political beliefs as evidence that they do *not* see their beliefs as irrelevant (due to their small chance of affecting the outcome)—contrary to his theory’s prediction—Somin uses the same theory to explain this anomalous behavior, conjuring into existence “rationally irrational” voters whose beliefs must be akin to those of sports fans simply because this would save the applicability of the theory by explaining away the anomalous behavior. In the same vein, but even more problematically, Somin adduces his theory to explain not just the fact that voters vote, and that they have political opinions, but that they become more ideologically constrained as they become more knowledgeable (80), that they avoid political conversation with those with whom they disagree (81), and that they are both open to conspiracy theories consistent with prior beliefs and closed to disconfirming evidence (87): all of this and more (134) is presented as proof that voters are deliberately choosing not to hold accurate beliefs because they recognize that their beliefs do not matter in a large electorate. Other possible explanations of these phenomena are not considered, making it impossible to judge whether the conditions that might have promoted these behaviors will or will not continue to prompt similar behavior after the expansion of foot voting. Somin’s predictions regarding foot voting (hypothesis 3) are therefore little more than tenuous extrapolations from a contentious systemic comparison (hypothesis 2), which is itself based purely on ungrounded behavioral hypotheses (1A and 1B).

Somin may object here that my argument does not prove that the account of voting, of voter ignorance, and of voter dogmatism presented by these hypotheses is false. But this objection would presume that I have the burden of proof that actually rests on Somin’s shoulders. Somin’s accounts of rational ignorance and rational irrationality are *merely* hypothetical because he does nothing to discharge this burden. No more than Caplan does he prove that voters are intentionallyignorant; as we saw above, it is just as plausible (if not more so) that voters believe themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable. This is not a question that can be answered by way of “simple intuition” or the conflation of theory-driven hypotheses with self-evident truths (Friedman 1995, 15). Attempts to explain precisely *why* individuals act in the way they do—and thus attempts to operationalize such an explanation across hypothetical democratic systems—require “interpretive evidence showing that the individuals did indeed reason in the way ascribed to them” (Hampsher-Monk and Hindmoor 2010, 60). Thus, if we seek to offer realistic explanations of and solutions to political ignorance, we have no choice but to engage in the difficult empirical and theoretical work of finding out what people actually believe, where these beliefs come from, and how they shape political decision making.

*Foot Voting and the Problem of Interpretation*

Upon examination, it is clear that the mere assumption that foot voting can solve or even ameliorate the problems of political ignorance is inherently suspect. Since we cannot simply assume that ignorance is rationally chosen, we must confront the possibility that it results from the *unnoticed complexity* of political choices rather than the absence of sufficient incentives to become informed. In this view, voters think they are well informed because they think that political problems are simple ones, requiring little information to solve (Friedman forthcoming, ch. 6). The value of foot voting as an alternative to the ballot box depends accordingly on the extent to which it can either dispel the illusion of simplicity or reduce complexity without introducing new and unintended challenges for voters.

Regardless of his aprioristic commitment to the rational-ignorance hypothesis, Somin’s argument is not irrelevant to this question. For his conception of foot voting, based on the epistemic effects of constitutional reform, departs somewhat from the question of incentives. According to Somin, a

government ofstrictly limited powers might reduce the problem of

public ignorance by reducing the number of issues to be decided by

government to a level which voters would find more manageable. *Even*

*if the total stock of voter knowledge does not increase*, it is spread over

fewer issues and therefore more likely to be adequate in each given case.

(141, emphasis added)

Put differently, one’s decision about who to vote for should be epistemically easier when the central government is limited in its powers and local governments and businesses have more responsibility for public goods and policies.[[8]](#endnote-8) Furthermore, assuming that different localities would enact different policies, the results of different policy decisions should be more readily apparent as each jurisdictional locale could be easily compared with its neighbors. Voters would need to know only “that conditions are better in one state than another, and then be able to act on this knowledge by moving” (124; Somin 2010, 211).

This emphasis on individual perception renders Somin’s argument more empirically tractable. In particular, the claim that voters should be able to perceive the benefits of exiting from problematic arrangements by observing competing alternatives gains considerable support from the analogous functioning of competitive markets, in which individuals can readily improve their situations by switching to seemingly cheaper or better-quality goods and services. On this view, competition acts as a “discovery procedure” to identify new and more efficient social arrangements (Hayek 1967). The market analogy might also be supposed to explain the epistemic gains Somin suggests would arise from even “incremental reductions” in the size of government (141), as the interpersonal metrics used by individuals to understand the potential benefits of different market transactions (prices and profits) require decidedly less expertise to interpret than do centralized, non-marketized public policy decisions. Somin’s foot voters would not only have fewer straightforwardly *political* decisions to make, but they could interpret those decisions by simply comparing taxation rates and relative incomes.

This analogy is not implausible. The United States Census Bureau (2015) reports, for instance, that approximately 7.3 million Americans (between 2 and 2.5 percent of the population, given estimation errors) moved from state to state in 2014, broadly the same number as in previous years. Meanwhile, in 2013, an estimated 1.2 million EU citizens migrated between member states, while a further 800,000 or so migrated *within* their member states, which are, of course, more or less centralized (Eurostat 2015). It is distinctly possible that these individuals all moved on the basis of national comparisons intended (rationally) to improve their conditions.

However, we have reason to be cautious in inferring that these individuals *were* thereby able to straightforwardly improve their lives. Certainly, interstate competition may be an important motivating factor for migrants. An influential explanation for American interstate migration, for instance, focuses on the pull-effect exerted when local (state) economic development leads to differences in the returns to workers’ skills (Borjas et al. 1992). However, as Somin’s argument extends beyond the relative efficiency of wage differentiation in allocating scarce skills, this evidence provides only limited support for his market analogy. Additionally, we need evidence that migration *simpliciter* provides benefits to the individual. Here the picture is a little murkier. In the EU, for instance, both internal and external migrants fare badly in terms of labor-force participation and wages relative to “native” citizens (Dustmann and Frattini 2011; see also de la Rica, Glitz, and Ortega 2014). Moreover, both internal and (especially) external migrants appear to face very different rates of inclusion in their new nations’ welfare systems, leaving migrants in many cases to fend for themselves (Zimmerman et al. 2012). Indicatively, perhaps, research by the European Union suggests that internal migration is associated with a rise of homelessness within member states (CSES 2010).

The evidence from comparable research is more mixed in the United States (and tends to focus on external rather than internal migrants). Nonetheless, in a set of studies paralleling those in the EU, both low- and high-skilled external migrants have been found to underperform in the labor market relative to American citizens (Meisenheimer 1992; Borjas 1995; for a more recent view see Batalova et al. 2008 and Orrenius and Zavodny 2009). This may be changing; alongside the long-standing tendency in the United States for the wage gaps between external migrants and Americans to narrow over time, developments in both the labor market (such as plummeting wages for high-school dropouts) and migration law (such as the requirement to match migrants with jobs) seem to have improved migrants’ relative fates in the 2000s (Borjas and Freidberg 2009). However, it is clear that in both the United States and Europe (in their current forms) the ready comparisons migrants may use to motivate their foot-voting decisions may present a misleading view of the potential benefits of moving.

These findings may all be telling evidence of the “informational complexities” that, Somin cautions, would face real-world foot voters (123-124). The individual will often find it difficult to know why a given jurisdiction is richer or more appealing, or may simply be misled by outward appearances, and so may in fact damage her prospects by moving. Yet the appeal of interjurisdictional competition (and thus the market analogy), Somin implies, is that it provides *comparatively* simpler comparisons for individuals than does the political competition for ballot-box votes (124). Foot voters should thus be expected to improve their lives over time at a faster rate than even sociotropic ballot-box voters, even if they do suffer setbacks. Moreover, the competition for these voters should also bring *collective* benefits, as politicians improve local services for all in a bid to attract foot voters (127).

While the first of these two claims suggests a potentially valuable amendment to the formalized hypotheses identified in Somin’s account above—specifically, by focusing on the epistemic complexity of decisions pertaining to collective well-being and identifying individual foot voting as a mechanism that can provide more consistent marginal welfare improvements—the latter claim (regarding collective benefits) shifts the argument back to the dubious premises of Somin’s view of “information” as something that improves one’s decision as long as one has the incentive to “acquire” it. If they are to lead to improvements in policy (either locally or nationally), foot-voting decisions would need to be *interpreted* by policy makers, just as must ballot-box decisions, in order to identify what they “say” about past policy choices. Otherwise policy makers may change the very policies that bring foot voters from one jurisdiction to another. Foot voters, in other words, are less like market consumers than shareholders: they can exert pressure only by shifting the balance of power between different *theories* of how to deliver the public good. The difficulty facing policy-makers here is exemplified by attempts to look beyond aggregate labor-market indicators to study the sociology of interstate migration. Research on interstate migration in the United States, for instance, shows that the propensity to move between states varies significantly by age, gender, marital and employment status, and family characteristics (Hernández-Murillo et al 2011). Strikingly, one finding is that those who do move often move to areas with *lower* wages and *more* socioeconomic problems. At least for the individual subjects of this research, policy-makers would apparently be wrong to infer that the relevant foot-voting decisions necessarily or straightforwardly reflect the quality of local services or wages.[[9]](#endnote-9) As the continuing divergence in policies between jurisdictions within the European Union and the United States demonstrates, it is possible to interpret exit decisions in numerous, often contradictory ways. The high level of European migration to the United Kingdom may seem to lend support to Britain’s liberalism and relatively low taxes, for instance, but the equally high numbers migrating to or between more interventionist economies (not to mention the large numbers who choose not to migrate at all) may suggest precisely the opposite. Indeed, it is significant that those pressures to liberalize that do exist within the EU arose not because of opaque material pressures exerted by foot voters, but rather because of the spread of the *idea* of “hyperglobalization,” an idea which has become the dominant lens through which policy makers and elites interpret social change (Hay and Rosamond 2002).

This problem is easily missed if one assumes that we can accurately interpret trends around us if only we are motivated to do so. If, for instance, ballot-box voters are little more than self-interested sports fans in disguise, then disagreement among voters is explained away by the assumption that when the incentives are strong enough, voters *will* deign to provide clear guidance. However, if we take seriously the fact that voters are already sociotropically *qua* rationally motivated, then we must also accept that voters’ conflicting messages may reflect the contradictory ideas that shape their views of politics. Even though individuals may be able to identify the benefits to themselves of relocating, the lack of clarity in electoral and migratory signals demonstrates that at least some (if not all) voters do not know which electoral candidates or jurisdictions possess accurate solutions to social problems. Consequently, unless we have a reason to expect foot voting to push either ballot-box voters or policy makers to both question and *improve* their theories of the causes of and solutions to social problems—a reason Somin fails to provide—it is difficult to see why, after driving foot voters apart, conflicting interpretations would not simply ossify into unquestioned biases, as they seem to do among ballot-box voters. Again, we can already see this process at work; the mass migration of socially liberal Americans to the coasts (or even to Canada!), for instance, seems to have done very little to promote introspection amongst or Southern conservatives. By all accounts, too, the exodus of voters from high-tax Massachusetts to low-tax New Hampshire has not coincided with a shift in these voters’ political views, so they are turning New Hampshire into a much more liberal state than it used to be.

The general problem here—missing from Somin’s analysis because of his focus on incentives—is the sheer difficulty of accurately and holistically interpreting the complex social world. Complexity arises because different agents act on incomplete, often erroneous, and largely incompatible interpretations of the social world (Little 2008, 72-73; see also Zolo 1992). As a result of these interpretations, agents tend to form mutually inconsistent ideas upon which they base their actions, which can give rise to unexpected and unstable outcomes, outcomes that are seen as “emergent” because lacking a clear causal basis in underlying, seemingly stable social structures (Cilliers 1998). Instead of reacting automatically to the contexts they find themselves in, or the incentives they appear to face, agents may seek instead to “refashion [those contexts] and hence any regularities [they] may have previously given rise to” (Hay 2004, 51). Accordingly, for the voters, policy makers, and political theorists trying to make sense of them, the epiphenomena of society can seem to “lack fixity” (Little 2008, 73). By neglecting this complexity, and the ideas and behaviors it would give rise to in response to greater decentralization, Somin ultimately fails to explain why the epistemic effects of foot voting would be salutary.

This is not to say that the constitutional reforms necessary to enhance foot voting would not provide any improvements over ballot-box voting. It does suggest, however, that such improvements must be subject to empirical inquiry. Certainly, there are no a priori grounds to predict that foot voting presents a clear solution to the problems of democratic ignorance. If voters are *radically* ignorant—if they do not know precisely what it is they would benefit by knowing—then their ignorance will persist even if they have every incentive to know what they need to know. If so, then the radical complexity of political behavior—the very complexity Somin seeks to assume away by recourse to specious assumptions regarding incentives—is liable to cause problems for foot voters, just as it causes problems for ballot-box voters.

NOTES

1. Paul Gunn, p.gunn@gold.ac.uk, Department of Politics, Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. . For reasons of space, this claim will have to remain unsubstantiated for now. Suffice it to say that while theorists advocating a largely or fully procedural account of democracy might claim that their conceptions of democracy confer legitimate authority regardless of how informed citizens are, such accounts beg the question of how the procedural process of democracy can be insulated from the technocratic functions of the state without robbing the citizenry of everything but symbolic significance. If citizens actually care about changing the conditions in their societies, as would plausibly seem to be the case, then epistemic issues apply regardless of which democratic standard we use to judge their actions and institutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Most famously associated with Charles Tiebout’s 1956 formal model of competitive federalism and Albert Hirschman’s 1970 account of economic decision making, variations of foot voting/exit rights have been embraced in philosophical treatments of individual liberty (Nozick 1974, pt. III; Kukathas 2003), as a key mechanism within various normative theories of democracy (Okin 2002; Hirst 1994; Cohen and Rogers 1995), and even as a central mechanism within *existing* social democracies (Dowding and John 2008; Warren 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Somin provides a possible explanation for this on page 119, on which, alongside citations to Tiebout 1956 and Warren 2011, he suggests that the informational effects of foot voting have been all but ignored. His own approach, based as it is on the theory of rational ignorance, is thus a significant departure from the existing foot-voting literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . There are two near-exceptions to this point. The first is Somin’s elaboration of the concept of foot voting in his brief discussion of “private planned communities” (137-39). Compared with “traditional interjurisdictional competition between regional and local governments,” he contends, small private communities have stronger incentives to be responsive to citizens’ demands (because they have no other sources of funding), are able to emulate the structure and operation of private firms in the market, and run a much lower risk of citizens forming “irrational” attachments (138). Put simply, foot voters living in such communities should be more like straightforward consumers, evaluating their possible options in terms of their affordability and value rather than irrelevant or specious political considerations. Yet this conception of foot voting makes too strong a distinction between jurisdictional competition and markets. After all, the competition Somin seeks to realize in practice would be precisely between different conceptions of political community; to the extent that irrationality is likely to overwhelm anything more than a particularly *private* attachment to one’s neighbors, it is difficult to see how foot voting could ever work *within* politics. In fact, it is more plausible to argue in the other direction, that really-existing competition between political communities (and even between nation-states) already promotes rational movement between jurisdictions on the basis of precisely that kind of reasoning set out in Somin’s example. On this view, the pertinent question is therefore not how to incite morecompetition (unless one wishes to assume, come what may, that morecompetition is always the answer), but rather why *existing* competition has not realized the benefits Somin hypothesises.

   Somin’s second illustration of foot voting concerns the migration of black Americans to Northern states to escape Jim Crow laws. Specifically, Southern blacks sought to move not only to take advantage of the better economic opportunities available in the North, but also to escape the racist persecution they were subject to in the South (129). Despite being in many cases extremely poorly educated, and with access to far less information than modern voters, individual migrants were able to learn of the better conditions and possibilities by way of the media and word of mouth (130). As a result, Southern state governments came under pressure to improve conditions for remaining blacks, who were a significant part of the labor force (131-132). This example clearly demonstrates the value of the principle of the freedom of movement, and of the importance of exit as a fail-safe against illiberal government power. However, the example of migration away from the Jim Crow laws does not take us very far in considering how the ability to exit would moderate or improve government performance today. The issue here is what led racist Southern governments to accede to the belief that racism is morally abhorrent. As Somin readily accepts (132), migration *as such* did not do much to dent racism against remaining blacks (though it did clearly help those who migrated). Rather, it was the concerted political pressure exerted first on, and then by, the federal government as a result of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Black migration very plausibly contributed to this pressure (as blacks in Northern states had greater political freedom), but the mechanism in question was clearly the newly dominant belief that abhorrent racist practices had no place in American politics. If this example is to tell us anything about *contemporary* politics, we therefore need to address the question of how decisions to exit in the face of much less morally clear-cut problems (such as the questions of how to address poverty or joblessness, neither of which have obvious answers to be found in the Declaration of Independence), would generate the necessary beliefs either in central or local government to *solve* those problems. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . See Bennett and Friedman 2008 for a detailed inquiry into whether Caplan’s theory can function without the attribution to voters of *knowingly* false opinions. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Though published after *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, The Pew Research Center’s 2014 survey *From ISIS to Unemployment: What Do Americans Know?* repeats the findings of both the 2007 study cited by Bennett and Friedman and intervening studies: “On nine of the 12 questions included in the survey, only half or fewer get the answers correct” (Pew Research Center 2014, 2). In complementary evidence from the United Kingdom, the Hansard Society found that self-reported interest in politics among British voters varied from between a high-water mark of merely 42 percent of voters self-reporting as not very or not at all interested politics in 2011 to 58 percent self-reporting in the same way in 2012 and 2013, before falling to 50 percent (within 1 percent of the long-run mean of 49 percent) in 2014 (Hansard Society 2014, 34). Across the same years, 56 percent, 58 percent, and 50 percent of respondents, respectively, reported knowing either nothing at all or “[n]ot very much” about politics (ibid., 36). To paraphrase Bennett and Friedman 2008, 12, it is implausible that individuals keen on getting political information for personal gratification would either be as ignorant about politics as the Pew research suggests or as uninterested as the Hansard research finds. Again, Somin might ask in reply: What about those voters who *are* knowledgeable and interested in politics? Perhaps *these* are the rationally irrational voters; the former may simply be rationally ignorant. Putting aside the ad-hoc nature of this (hypothetical) claim (discussed above), it is once again belied by the evidence. Building on Larry Bartels’s 1996 finding that voters are underinformed relative to their value preferences (a finding that reinforces the points made above), research in Britain at the turn of the century shows that not only do voters more accurately identify the party matching their values the more knowledge they possess (Heath et al.2002), but that the actual content of these values is changed by the level of knowledge voters possess (Andersen et al.2001; Heath and Tilley 2003). Put differently, whereas the theory of rational irrationality predicts that values should guide knowledge acquisition, the evidence suggests that knowledge guides values. This by no means provides a settled understanding of just how voters understand their choices (Heath and Tilley 2003, 23-24), but it does demonstrate the importance of engaging with the empirical research in this area, and it suggests the unreliability of accounts, such as Somin’s, which assert psychological causalities without such engagement. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Somin does not elaborate on whether the form of decentralized state he advocates would be one approximating the night-watchman state or whether it would simply entail more comprehensive federalism. In practice, however, it makes little difference. Whether public goods are provided through public or private organizations, individuals face the same task of identifying who has the better understanding of how to provide public goods in the most effective and least costly way possible.8. This claim is supported by an overview of the causes and individual effects of internal migration (Greenwood 1997), which demonstrates that employment has a complicated, and only partially understood, relationship with other variables affecting migration rates.

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9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)