

To Vote Wisely

Saad Haider

Michigan Islamic Academy

Abstract

The issue of not all Americans voting is noteworthy, but further pressing is that many people who do vote are actually doing so without truly knowing about who they are electing. This can more easily give candidates who are not up to the task or should not be handling the responsibility a chance to be given power, which can deconstruct democracy or lead to backward changes, and it blinds voters on some aspects and situations in politics. My paper seeks to dig into the roots of this issue and address it, proving in the first place that the problem exists and why, while also explaining how this disrupts the democracy that the United States is shaped. It provides ideas on how to spread the word and help reconcile the situation as well. Not many know that uninformed voting is even a concern and tend to participate in the behavior. That is why I am trying to bring awareness to it in hopes to warn others if this situation and convince them to take a more active part in choosing who they vote for in the elections.

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No one has to go to great lengths to recognize that not everyone in America votes. In 2016, four out of ten people did not go to the elections, and six out of ten did not in the 2010 and 2014 elections (Khalid, Gonyea, & Fadel 2018). Still, this problem is the lesser of dilemmas when it comes to elections, be it as localized as one for mayor to that of the Presidency. A further perplexing development happens to be a case that only a minority might recognize: those who do vote are not necessarily informed voters. Humans are naturally bound to not know much, for no human can learn everything and nor would their interests always align towards such knowledge, but what makes this a problem is when it is applied to important situations like those of elections and the people running for them. Uninformed voting can skew the outcomes of elections and occasionally allow not-so-idealistic people to take positions of power and impact the nation in various ways. There were presidents in the past that had their share of overlooked flaws -- Richard Nixon, despite his accomplishments, is currently the only president to resign due to the infamous and well-known Watergate scandal (The White House, n.d). Nor can any of the governors, city councils, and other local and state officials elected by Americans be neglected in this regard. The famous philosopher Aristotle had reason to be afraid of the effects of democracy and rule by the people, as Jennifer L. Hochschild (2010) discusses in her paper:

Aristotle sought to avoid democracy, largely on the grounds of popular ignorance: ‘What are the matters over which... the general body of citizens... should properly exercise sovereignty? It... is dangerous for men of this sort to share in the highest offices, as injustice may lead them into wrongdoing, and thoughtlessness into error.’

And despite advancements in technology, this remains unchanged. For such a change to transpire, it is imperative that before casting their votes, people look into the candidates running for political positions in their locality, their state, and their country, so that they will know who they really want to be elected. In doing so, knowledge on politics will rise and less corrupt and/or unfit people can take office, for without informed voting, those who are elected may come into power by people who are ignorant of their pros and cons and chose them due to popularity and bandwagoning, partisan bonds, and a lack of knowledge on politics and laws.

An eventuality is that in order to explain this problem of uninformed voting, one must simultaneously prove that it exists. One such supporting evidence is how misdirection and popularity sway the minds of voters. This can occur when candidates do not explain everything about their goals for when they are elected, and when they attempt to dodge or avoid directly answering questions. The American Democracy Project and The Democracy Commitment (or ADP and TDC) discuss this in a guide to informed voting (n.d.), in which they discuss the following, but not limited to, items: political rhetoric (persuasive strategies tailored to win the votes of an audience when the candidate speaks to them and when in debates), talking points (a larger theme they will repeatedly refer to and use accordingly to respond to questions without giving direct answers, which in turn saves them from explaining anything that could repel any voters), and buzzwords (used for emphatic effect towards people, appearing as broad, agreeable terms such as liberty, freedom, middle-class, and American people). This culminates to the self-beautification of these candidates based upon wit and charisma and not so much on what they will really offer when in office, easily winning the hearts of the unskeptical. This ideal image is supplemented when the work of campaigning pays off to give a popularity boost,

particularly when it comes to the bandwagon effect. When opinion polls show a particular person to be leading an election, that person gains an extra advantage by people who start taking their side not because of their competence but due to the simple fact that the political figure appears to be likeliest to win out of the competitors. As said by Romeo Vitelli, from *Psychology Today* (2015), “opinion polls can have a powerful influence on undecided voters who are not following the election issues that closely.” Who would want to be on the losing side, anyway? Those who do not engage in learning about the elections and its participants are prime suspects for this, backing the most popular candidates and ignoring the others. The possibility of an underdog taking over fails to strike them, especially with the notion in mind that votes do not seem to matter in large-scale elections -- a separate issue that must be addressed at a later juncture. A more relevant discussion would be about news outlets, who also have a sway over elections. This is a serious problem when it comes to “fake news”, or news that is untrue and misleading. Bente Kalsnes (2018) explains this in detail, finding that the rise of social media has especially spread the propagation of such news. Their existence does not just skew opinions about candidates but also creates a difficulty in distinguishing between correct and false news. This comes with the polarization of some news outlets, which leads to another matter: how bias can control the masses.

As everyone has distinct opinions on how to solve political issues and who would be the right person to be in charge, bias is bound to impact the electoral process. This is not about the bias that comes with the liberty of independent reasoning and mindsets that help fuel unique ideas and beliefs -- the problem arises when such bias leads to disapprovable or plainly intolerable prejudices. Prejudice concerning gender, race, religion, and so on are examples of this, and these

are commonly spoken of and acknowledged, regardless of whether one chooses to embrace or reject them. However, the bias in question is one that is overlooked and has been integrated into the American way of life: partisan bias. In other words, Democrats against Republicans; liberals versus conservatives. As pointed out by Ilya Somin (2016), who dedicates a sizable portion of his article on political ignorance to this topic, this unique kind of division is widely accepted, with the seemingly tribalist war between both sides producing groups of uninformed people who simply vote for their party without question out of blind loyalty. Due to how seriously each party takes its sides, their members embrace any information that stacks up with their preexisting views, which normally line up with their party's, and frown upon opposing information that goes against them. Therefore, according to Somin, they end up supporting their side's candidate all the way and look down upon the other's, to a point where they may view the other party as horrendously ignorant. What they rarely do is consider the same to be possibly true of their side, and their disinterest in properly digging into matters only worsens it. It can go the other way too, as discussed by Richard Jankowski (2015, p.41), "Since partisans are committed to vote for their candidate, they have little or no incentive to acquire costly political information." The existence of political parties is not wrong, but the way they lash out at each other is unhealthy for the politically uninformed. Nor is it of any benefit that the media fans these flames too. News outlets themselves show polarization as well when they appeal to particular groups and parties. This rallies their partisan supporters while pushing away their rivals, creating the issue of one-sided views. Such divisions in news outlets can lead to those who use them to see issues entirely in one perspective and become unable to accept the other. Somin finds that these splits help foster

political ignorance that could be exercised intentionally, and even if this group was to be curbed of such ignorance, it can mean nothing since party ties are firmer and heavier.

But speaking of those who willingly remain uneducated about our elections, there are some people who just have no interest in learning about them because they do not want to care about politics and laws and government. Somin (2016) mentions this using a statement from British Prime Minister Tony Blair :

“...most people, most of the time, do not give politics a first thought all day long. Or if they do, it is with a sigh..., before going back to worrying about the kids, the parents, the mortgage, the boss, their friends, their weight, their health... For most normal people, politics is a distant, occasionally irritating fog.”

The issue is not that of people being unable to learn, but the notion that there is no need to learn. For as Somin highlights, if someone were to look into politics just to learn how to cast votes more carefully, why bother doing it? After all, so many people participate in elections that a single vote only goes so far. Plus, modern government is vast and complicated. One who looks into it will reel under the intensive gleaning of information and yet only understand by the end of it all a small fraction of how government acts (Meyer 2016). Obviously, people would rather not take so much time to learn about these issues. Unfortunately, this causes them to lean against the other extreme: being absolutely naive. Americans who do not learn much about the government are, as Somin says in an interview with Jared Meyer, easy to manipulate by officials even if said officials give promises and plan policies that anyone versed in politics would see through as flawed or unbeneficial. That, and they may end up pursuing contradictory policies too -- over or underestimating the effects of previously established laws or how the budget works is one such

example as this can lead to them finding a misguided solution to go with their misguided beliefs on what is wrong with said law or to solve any deficiencies in said budget (Meyer 2016). And if these people know less than the bare-bones minimum for politics, overwhelming probabilities point to them being just as knowledgeable when it comes to whoever they are voting for. This allows for bandwagoning and bias to have greater say in their choices, and thus the roots of political ignorance interlink.

Now, there are skeptics who will have reservations on the seriousness of uninformed voting. One highlighted point they may gravitate towards is that voting, again, has little effect. Knowing nothing can prove destructive, but some people who are informed will still not see the purpose since one miniscule vote will not change who is elected in any case. Everyone else is probably misguided too, so where is the point? The gaping hole in this logic is that, true as it is, it starts a chain. When one person raises that concern and stops caring about the effect of his vote, others can follow suit. Eventually a select few will see a purpose then, and thus voting reaches a point where the elected official gains his or her position arbitrarily. As pointed out by Ilya Somin (2016), it is a fact that one vote alone has a miniscule impact, but millions of votes altogether do have a huge impact, and one too many uninformed ones will undermine the democratic process of elections. There is also the counterargument that in reality, Americans actually know plenty about the government and do cast their votes with a degree of understanding, so the whole problem with uninformed voting is an exaggeration. Whatever news people hear on and off will suffice. However, this argument forgets that news can be skewed, and that one often needs the whole picture before he or she can be said to have understood that piece of news. Bits and pieces can otherwise be taken out of context. And to further press how naive Americans can get when it

comes to government, Hochschild (2010) has a large quote on the subject in which she cites multiple other sources, all of which express with statistics that there are multiple subjects which a startling portion of Americans know not enough about. They range from when the Civil War occurred, to who the vice president is and where the federal budget goes, and even if a rumor that Communists had rewritten the Bill of Rights within or before the 1950s was true (many people said yes to this in that decade). These may be increasingly outdated truths, but it is still a powerful testament to the history of how little people may know. Finally, some may cite that political information is difficult to gather, anyway, and not the best use of one's time. This is true, but learning about it is still important. When it comes to elections, the effects can impact many lives, even to an international extent, and so the knowledge will be supplementary for a well-cast vote. Besides, learning will not simply conclude with said vote. What one learns can prepare him or her for whoever does get elected since he or she will have some prior knowledge to what the politician will be like and how he or she will affect the common people. Not knowing enough can blindside people from when politics creates for them a dilemma or becomes a grace that they are unaware of. Thus, knowledge acts as a forewarner.

On that note, there is wisdom in addressing a few of the particular consequences that arise from uninformed voting. Primarily deriving from what the ADP and TDC (n.d), Ilya Somin (2016), and Romeo Viteli (2015) have said on the topic of uninformed voting, people who refrain from learning to properly scrutinize who their votes go to need something to guide their choices, and so ignorance will take its place. These kind of people will fall for bandwagoning, political rhetoric, and other strategies used by politicians to rake in a following, and their alignments with parties and groups have a say in their decisions too. Not only that, but these

people may base their choices upon simple, possibly trivial points. President John F. Kennedy was seen in a negative light during his campaign due to being a Catholic, in an era where prejudice against them was still widespread in America. The only Catholic that ever tried to run for the presidency before him, New York's governor Alfred E. Smith, was overwhelmingly defeated in the 1928 election, and Kennedy's own victory was by a slim margin of 118,000 votes (JFK Library n.d.) Because such insubstantial details can sway the public mind, the political races can bend in favor of or against a candidate on those very details. To sum it up, the winners produced in elections may gain their position not through inherent integrity, honesty, and viability but rather from popularity and charisma -- their victories come not from being the best choice but from propaganda used in their favor. These victories can be pulled off easily as long as there are politically uninformed people for them to appeal to and to gain a loyal base, which opens the elections up to those who may be unfit or not suitable to take office. There is also the possibility that if a politician causes an effect or a change or performs an action that can have important repercussions, uninformed people may not be fully aware of it or how great of an impact it could have. Looking into who is running and how they can change their lives if they were to be elected would save them from learning the hard way. Moreover, then they would know beforehand which of those officials really support their ideals and act accordingly.

Seeing this topic from an Islamic perspective further bolsters the urge to counter uninformed voting. For, as oft-repeated in the Holy Quran, notably in verse 269 of the chapter Al-Baqarah, "Only the men of understanding observe the advice." The Quran has multiple verses praising knowledge and showing a dislike towards ignorance, stating the divide between as thus in Al-Fatir, verses 18-20: "The blind and the sighted are not equal, nor are darkness and light, nor

shade and the heat of the sun.” There are plenty on hadith on the manner too. In particular, there is one descriptive one from the Book of Knowledge, a chapter from the book *Riyad-As-Saliheen* (1998), compiled by Imam An-Nawawi and republished on the site *Sunnah.com*. Narrated by Abu Dawood and At-Tirmidhi, it emphasises that those who seek knowledge have their path to Paradise made easy, are pleased with the angels, have all that lie within the heavens and earths seeking forgiveness for him, are much higher in status than devoted worshippers, and are the heirs of the prophets. While these all naturally pertain to the creed and faith of Islam, it must be noted that Islam is also a lifestyle. It does not only teach one to enjoin the worship of one God, Allah, but also to work for the community and to advance it (Maged 2005). In light of that, learning the knowledge needed to vote adequately for the sake of Allah and righteousness is a way to benefit the community and a serious way to hold tight to the tenets of Islam. The question is, what measures could be taken to counteract uninformed voting?

This can be a complicated issue to resolve, but there are some ways. Somin (2016) lists multiple ideas that the government could do, such as encouraging foot voting (“voting” through one’s daily actions, from private sector choices to choosing where to live), voter education initiatives, sortition (filling in government positions arbitrarily so anyone, including the otherwise silent people, have a serious say in politics instead of only those who actively pursue politics), and so on. Of course, these often require reform from the government’s end; on the individual’s part, the solution could start with educating him or herself and implementing strategies to stay well-informed on politics. The ADP/TDC (n.d) recommends learning how to detect when candidates uses political rhetoric, buzzwords, and other tactics to garner votes and recognize how and why they are being used. Reliable news will immensely help too. As long as

the individual doesn't overwhelm him or herself and avoids being cynical, he/she will do fine as an informed citizen. From there, the individual could spread the word by talking with others, using social media, show people facts and articles on the matter, and so on. No simple solution does exist, but every little change is bound to add up.

Many American citizens have yet to realize that popularity, misdirection, bias, and ignorance take the wheel when they cast their votes. They consider themselves to be well-informed when they may understand very little about their preferred candidate, and politics too. This can allow more candidates not up to the task of their position to win elections and blindsides Americans to politics, which can hurt them later on. Unless they start to seriously take a small part of their time to look into the people running for offices in the local, state, and federal government, this will not change. But if the task of taking a good look at what goes on in the elections is performed, the individual benefits will creep in. And the more people that follow suit, the better the situation is for everyone. Over time, it can correlate to an improvement in leadership and understanding what happens in local towns, cities, and beyond, and therefore pave a better future. The matter is if people will decide to use their vote wisely.

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