Edited by Sofia Magdalena Olofsson

We have long known that Americans pay local elections less attention than they do elections for the Presidency and Congress. A recent Portland State University study showed that voter turnout in ten of America’s 30 largest cities sits on average at less than 15% of eligible voters. Just pause and think about this. The 55% of voting age citizens who cast a ballot in last year’s presidential election – already a two-decade low and a significant drop from the longer-term average of 65-80% – still eclipses by far the voter turnout at recent mayoral elections in Dallas (6%), Fort Worth (6%), and Las Vegas (9%). What is more, data tells us that local voter turnout is only getting worse. Look at America’s
largest city: New York. Since the 1953 New York election, when 93% of residents voted, the city’s mayoral contests saw a steady decline, with a mere 14% of the city’s residents voting in the last election.

Though few might want to admit it, these trends suggest that an unspoken hierarchy exists when it comes to elections. Atop this electoral hierarchy are national elections, elections that are widely considered the most politically, economically, and culturally significant. Extensively covered by the media, they are viewed as high-stakes moral contests that naturally attract the greatest public interest. Next, come state elections: though still important compared to national elections, their political prominence, media coverage, and voter turnout is already waning. At the bottom of this electoral hierarchy are local elections that, as data tells us, a vast majority of Americans now choose not to vote in.

The costs associated with America’s neglect of local elections have been the subject of extensive study. For example, research definitively shows that minorities and public welfare spending take a hit when only a minority of citizens vote. Specifically, the small minority who vote tend to be white, middle-class homeowners who are against the type of welfare programs favored by minorities. But hidden in this byproduct of contemporary federalism lies a deeper irony striking at the heart of electoral politics that few analysts are talking about.

Many democracies today prioritize national elections over local elections. Citizens discuss and participate in national elections with much more intensity than they do in local elections. Media coverage also favors national electoral contests. In doing so, democracies like America have not only undercut voter turnout at many local and municipal elections but also incentivized citizens to pay more attention to elections that contest issues they are likely to know relatively little about at the expense of following electoral races where their local knowledge and lived experience could actually lead to informed decision-making. Just think about it: how many of us can say with certainty that we have the expertise and experience to make informed decisions on issues such as the economy, the environment, immigration, and foreign policy that national elections frequently tackle? By comparison, citizens often have a good sense of what is being done well and what could be done differently when they walk or drive through their neighborhoods, use the local amenities, and deal with local government. They can be abreast of their area’s political problems and potential in a way they simply cannot on national political issues. This is why the nation’s fascination with big, flashy elections at the expense of small, local elections is laden with irony. If nothing else, it is also a missed opportunity.
Political ignorance and scale

The urgency of this electoral paradox was evident in recent events like last year’s presidential election and Brexit referendum, when a number of prominent scholars and commentators argued that the large swathes of voters ignorant of the issues at stake should have been disqualified from taking part in democratic decisions, decisions that could now alter the political landscape for generations to come. Shortly after Britons voted in the 2016 referendum on whether to leave the European Union, for example, David Van Reybrouck asked the question: where was ‘the reasoned voice of the people’ during the entire episode? Where, he wondered, did ‘citizens get the chance to obtain the best possible information, engage with each other and decide collectively upon their future?’ For him, the process that turns ‘individual gut feelings into shared priorities’ is no longer the answer. Indeed, when it was revealed that many Britons googled ‘what is the EU?’ only after the vote had been cast, commentators were left asking whether a generational political decision such as Brexit was best left in the hands of a largely uninformed public?

In the U.S., Jason Brennan, a Georgetown political philosopher and author of Against Democracy, brashly contended, days after November’s election, that ‘Trump owes his victory to the uninformed.’ On issues of trade and immigration, for example, Brennan argued that Trump’s agenda not only ‘flies against the consensus of economists on the left, right, and center,’ but that it was also ‘the platform informed voters reject – regardless of their backgrounds.’ Ilya Somin, a cross-town colleague of Brennan’s, agreed, noting that voter ignorance certainly played a determining role in Trump’s electoral victory. But unlike Brennan, Somin noted that public ignorance was not the only factor behind Trump’s appeal; many voted for him because ‘they hoped he would bring “change”.’ Unfortunately, Somin added, voting for change without having properly understood and considered its ramifications can prove disastrous.

In Democracy for Realists, political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels demonstrate that in lieu of rational thinking and informed decision-making, citizens have largely come to rely on cognitive cues or information shortcuts when voting in national elections. Even those who seem to exhibit ‘well-organized “ideological” thinking’ often rely on ‘a rather mechanical reflection of what their favorite group and party leaders have instructed them to think.’ What this means, Achen and Bartels argue, is that the ‘folk theory of democracy,’ in which informed citizens elect responsive representatives, no longer aligns with what actually occurs. Fewer citizens now care about or pay attention to politics; most are consumed by schools and jobs, homes and bills – issues that, ironically, often relate more to local than national politics. Elections are not so much democratic contestations of
ideas backed by rational decision-making in polling booths as spectacles where citizens ‘are swayed by how they feel about “the nature of the times,” especially the current state of the economy, and by political loyalties typically acquired in childhood.’ The primary determinant of political preference and decision-making, especially in the polling booth, is social identity.

However, there is a silver lining when it comes to political knowledge, and it is closer to home than we might think. It is the age-old idea, which goes back as far as Aristotle, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, that self-governance occurs best in smaller communities where citizens are likely to have more intimate knowledge of the issues at stake and where they are familiar with those who lead them. For such thinkers, small communities or city-states were most conducive to participatory democracy because they were diverse enough to guard against the rule of one while being sufficiently small and homogenous enough to enable citizens to know each other and the affairs of the community. What flows from this intimate political setting is the basis of a system where self-governance can take place.

Taking his inspiration from these proposals, prominent twentieth-century political scientist Robert Dahl argued that the optimal size of a polity conducive to engaged and informed civic participation is between 50,000 and 200,000 people. His point was that it is in cities of this size where we find citizens who are educated and most well-equipped to participate in political affairs. Though it is true that the American experiment in representative democracy proved that vibrant democracies need not be restricted to small city-states, it is also true that representative politics in large nation-states have left fewer citizens adequately qualified to engage in complex governmental affairs and, consequently, complex bureaucracies. For Dahl, it is within a ‘political unit of more truly human proportions’ that the ‘citizen can acquire confidence and mastery of the arts of politics – that is, of the arts required for shaping a good life in common with fellow citizens.’ Echoing the words Pericles used to describe Athens, Dahl surmised that cities of moderate size could be ‘a marvelous school’ for its citizens.

Dahl’s implicit thesis is: the larger the political community, the fewer citizens tend to know about politics. This is not simply some fanciful theory. One study, which surveyed close to 1000 Philadelphians shortly after a 2007 mayoral election, found that citizens tend to come out looking more politically knowledgeable when their local and national political knowledge are assessed in tandem rather than when national political knowledge is assessed in isolation. Nonetheless, the study concluded that previous studies have not ‘missed a vein of high competence by disregarding local affairs.’ In other words, Philadelphians are not significantly more knowledgeable about city affairs than they are about national affairs. This finding may appear to undermine Dahl’s thesis that political knowledge is strongest in small
communities. However, it does not. Philadelphia, with a population of over one million, far exceeds Dahl’s ideal maximum of 200,000 residents. If anything, as Somin argues, it is something of a marvel that there was rough parity between local and national political knowledge in this study given how much of our media landscape is dominated by national electoral coverage. Citizens continue to be transfixed on national politics even in the middle of a local election.

In his book *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*, Eric Oliver argues that there are good reasons why ‘local voters are much more likely to embody the classical notions of an informed and rational polis than are national voters.’ For one, local elections tend to be dominated by long-term residents who have both vested interests in an extensive firsthand familiarity about the issues being decided. Moreover, local elections tend to be intimate affairs not frequently fought along ideological lines. At local levels, an individual vote also has a statistically higher chance of making an impact, unlike in large federal contests, a factor that arguably put off ‘rationally ignorant’ voters at national elections. This all leads to the possibility of better informed, issues-based decision-making. Even where citizens do not yet possess the knowledge, other studies have shown that ‘the proximity of local governments and their relatively small size’ means it is ‘easier for citizens to acquire crucial democratic skills and become familiar with the public realm,’ compared to national politics.

**Different solutions for different levels of government**

If all of this is correct, we should ask ourselves: what can be done to redress this electoral paradox? How can we ensure more citizens pay attention to the elections in which their local knowledge and lived experience might actually lead to informed decision-making while increasing their political knowledge on issues that might result in wiser choices at national elections?

There are many possible policy reforms out there, though many – from sortition, restricted suffrage, to greater epistocratic checks and balances – are riddled with the type of ideological and constitutional hurdles that would make their implementation unrealistic. Here is one that aims for limited and pragmatic reform based on democratic innovations already in use. What is innovative here is the realization that citizens possess different levels of political knowledge at different levels of government, and thus may require different electoral aids – a point oddly missed in many electoral democracies, though not in non-democratic systems such as China.

*Local Level:* the first step entails correcting our collective priorities when it comes to local
politics and elections. There may be no easy solutions, but research tells us that implementing relatively simple reforms such as changing the dates of local elections to coincide with state and federal elections can increase local voter turnout by as much as 30%. Studies also show that where citizens live can have an impact on their likelihood to vote. Residents of larger metropolitan communities tend to be more disinterested in and uninformed about local politics and elections; a trend that does not plague smaller suburban or rural communities. In these settings, as Dahl had intimated, residents know people and issues on a more personal level. The scale of things makes it easier for citizens to engage, invest, and see the consequences of policies implemented. Of course, much depends on individual-level factors, such as home ownership, period of residence, education, and race, all of which affect interest in and knowledge of local politics.

Cities and municipalities attuned to the particularities of their local electorates can use these insights to tailor strategies most appropriate to building community and boosting voter turnout. For example, vote-by-mail may be unnecessary and even counter-productive in regional and suburban areas where a stronger sense of community already exists. On the other hand, in metropolitan areas where community is often less tightly-knit and where residents tend to be younger, single, and non-homeowners, it may make sense to employ postal ballots in conjunction with democratic innovations such as Voter Advice Applications (VAA) designed to nurture a virtual sense of community – an imperfect substitute where the real thing is lacking.

VAAs such as SeeClickFix empower citizens by connecting them to their local governments, allowing local residents to report issues affecting them, suggest courses of action, and track responses from government. Brigade is another example of a VAA that uses individual social media networks to identify like-minded citizens in one’s own district or electorate – a tool that both voters and candidates can use. The primary objective of these democratic innovations is not so much to educate voters on local issues as much as encourage local citizens to make use of the local knowledge they already possess in ways that both benefit their communities and increase their interest in local politics and elections.

Would changing election dates or employing VAAs really alter the way the majority of Americans see local elections? Probably not. Short of some unlikely electoral or constitutional overhaul, perhaps an interim solution can be found just outside the polling station. According to Somin, a champion of foot voting, local governments should do more to compete with each other to attract citizens who can best reflect their values, benefit from their governance practices, and make the most of their professional opportunities.

For this to happen, Somin argues that state and local governments must be empowered to
make more decisions, something that would only be possible if the federal government becomes more decentralized and limited in scope. What he wants is for citizens to be able to more easily inform themselves about state affairs while (having increased dominion over their lives,) a proposition motivated by his federalist and libertarian political ideology. With more limited government, people will realize that they are more personally responsible for the consequences of their decisions. They will naturally begin to take a greater interest in larger affairs, informing themselves before making any life-altering decisions. These are the very traits of those who vote with their feet. In deciding whether another city or state elsewhere offers them better opportunities, citizens who vote with their feet will take it upon themselves to seek out information and undergo careful contemplation about local government policies and laws.

One does not need to agree with the ideological premise of Somin’s proposal to see that an uptick in foot voting can potentially create positive flow-on effects for ballot-box voting. After all, citizens who have uprooted their lives by moving to jurisdictions more reflective of their values and beneficial to their professional pursuits will have greater incentives to remain informed about local politics and vote in local elections in order to maintain the conditions they have benefitted from. Even if self-interest is the primary motivation, this is an entirely likely scenario that would see more citizens interested and invested in local politics, to the point where they begin to see local-election voting as just as essential as voting in a presidential election.

National Level: At the national level, the problem is the inverse of what occurs locally. There is never a shortage of citizens transfixed by presidential and congressional races despite their relative ignorance of the political issues contested. What, then, is the answer here?

One school of thought advocates for doing nothing. As Amartya Sen and others have argued, even if we accept the fact that citizens are largely uninformed about national political issues, no one can deny that democracies remain more prosperous, egalitarian, free, and peaceful than their nondemocratic counterparts. Sean Trende, an election analyst at RealClearPolitics, puts it eloquently when he writes:

In the end, a relatively low-information electorate has helped produce one of the most prosperous, most free societies in world history. This country has adopted many policies that economists seem to deem beneficial: tax rates have fallen, deductions have been reduced, and global trade has grown. We’ve become more tolerant with regard to racial, gender, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

What does it matter, then, that the median voter is ignorant of basic political facts if, on
average, they seem to be getting the big things right? There is also the contention that the ‘primary purpose of democracy’ is not to ‘arrive at “correct” outcomes’; its only objective is to encourage ‘debate, competition and compromise.’ This is the argument that what matters in a democracy are the procedures, not the substance. Yet another qualifier is that though individual voters often express that they would have changed their vote had they been better informed, in no recorded instances would these swings have altered overall electoral outcomes in U.S. presidential contests.

Not everyone agrees with this “do nothing” approach. After all, it is clear that democracies have always taken to the education of their citizenry. The whole objective of civic education in our schools is to ensure that today’s youth possess the political know-how to become tomorrow’s citizens. Nonetheless, there is a raft of literature that shows how civic education often misses the mark.

Given these realities, Brennan argues that an alternative to democracy is now needed. For him, that alternative is epistocracy, a political system ruled by the wise. He sets out the various ways an epistocracy might be implemented. For instance, initiatives like voter qualification examinations could potentially ‘screen out citizens who are badly informed or ignorant about the election, or who lack basic social scientific knowledge.’ However, he concedes that it would ‘probably be impossible to design an exam that would precisely test the knowledge needed for any particular election.’

Brennan also discusses the idea of a lottery, where a small representative sample of citizens vote on behalf of all citizens after engaging in deliberative forums to inform them of the issues at stake. The only thing, he notes, is that good voting requires more than ‘a couple of days of deliberation’; ‘after a semester’s worth of study,’ Brennan argues, ‘most undergraduates still don’t understand, say, basic microeconomics.’

This leads him to add nuance to his proposal: we can implement epistocracy through a ‘simulated oracle’. In search of Pythia the Oracle, the idea is that contemporary citizens can vote for policy preferences through public polls that, at the same time, collect their demographic information and test their basic political knowledge. With this information on hand, neutral statisticians can calculate the public’s ‘enlightened preferences,’ or what political agendas they would support if they were properly informed.

If the median voter knows little about national politics, can we nonetheless inform them without the anti-democratic heavy-handedness of Brennan’s proposals? A third school of thought – which occupies the place between the “do nothing” approach and the push towards epistocracy – argues that we can. All we need is not so much a push as a “nudge.”
Accordingly, in order to redress voter ignorance during national elections, one possible avenue would be to finesse Brennan’s simulated oracle with an in-polling booth “nudge” that inform voters and compel them to confront their latent political biases where they matter most. Such a nudge takes what is offered by many VAAs into the polling booth, while still leaving citizens room to ultimately vote as they wish. The only difference is that the in-polling booth would make them critically reflect on their own position and whether they should be voting for certain candidates and parties.

John and Annette Hasnas provide an illustration of how such a nudge might be implemented. ‘Imagine the following scenario’, they write:

A bipartisan good-government group creates a list of the most significant contemporary policy issues. It then invites all candidates to state their positions on the issues. In the current [presidential] campaign, candidates could be invited to state where they stand on gay marriage, immigration, intervention in Syria, climate change, tax reform, the minimum wage, gun control, income inequality, etc. This information would be collected and fed into the relevant election commission computer. When voters enter the voting booth, they would have the option of electronically recording their policy preferences on the same form that the candidates completed. The computer would display a ranking of the candidates on the basis of how closely their positions aligned with the voters’. After receiving this information, voters would cast their ballots.

The advantage of this nudge is that it would be explicit without being forceful. It would also increase the likelihood of an informed vote without citizens having to self-educate on all political issues: a time-consuming, overwhelming, and confusing affair. Yet, as critics have noted, such a nudge could easily be manipulated (a charge that also applies to VAAs) and could further exacerbate the already prevalent problems of wait-time and outdated technology at polling stations. There are also more general questions about the effectiveness of governance by stealth, specifically whether nudging can actually alter political behavior in a meaningful way. These are real problems that no in-polling booth solution to voter ignorance can avoid.

Of course, it is true that what has been proposed here with respect to VAAs and the in-polling booth nudge is neither forceful enough to fundamentally increase voter knowledge
nor guard against irrational voting. To do this, this proposal would have to be applied in conjunction with other electoral reforms ranging from experiments with foot voting and sortition to perhaps more promising options such as compulsory voting and proportional representation. Nothing proposed here prevents such reforms or discussions. This article merely offers pragmatic and incremental suggestions, eliminating the need for drawn-out and complex reforms. However limited the proposals this article raises are, they represent a possible stopgap solution that can be immediately rolled out while the bigger issues, challenges, and reforms are debated and tested.

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