My American friends and colleagues are sometimes astonished to hear that voting is compulsory in Australia, at the federal, state, and local government levels. “Like in the Soviet Union?” U.S. friends will occasionally ask. “Well, not quite,” is my usual response. Without a valid reason for not voting, however, failure to cast a ballot in an Australian election attracts a fine. The rationale for compulsory voting is that the duty to participate in the political process is so important that it is regarded as best not left to the discretion of the individual.

Like my American friends, I have been astonished at some differences in the political context between Australia and the United States, most lately the discovery that in the United States there is a whole research industry designed to prove that the American voter, although not required to vote, is often not even competent to exercise this basic right. Perhaps the body of research that Paul Goren describes in his book *On Voter Competence* lies behind or lends support to the attempts that are made to disenfranchise by disqualification large
Research into the supposed incompetence of the average voter has a long history. Eulau (1956) and Remy and Turner (1979) reported skepticism about the competence and motives of the average voter. Lupia (2006), however, has criticized much of the research, finding that many researchers harbor an elitist bias that manifests itself in widely cited but debatable measures of voters’ political knowledge and doubtful claims about what voters should know. As recently as 2012, Professor David Dunning from Cornell University’s Self and Social Insight Laboratory went public speculating that a conclusion to be drawn from his findings on the inability of those who know little about a topic to adequately judge others’ competence is that many voters are too ill-informed to vote intelligently (Daily Mail Online, 2012).

Attempts to disbar large numbers of voters have no parallel in Australia, where everyone 18 years and over MUST vote, except for a very few who have been deemed to be too impaired to do so. These are those who are of “unsound mind” or are in prison serving sentences of more than three years or have been convicted of treason and not pardoned (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010).

In his book Goren examines the research literature to discern whether the U.S. voter deserves the calumny of “incompetent.” Among the many sources quoted or cited by Goren who pass this judgment is one researcher who describes the American voter as “ideologically innocent” (p. 3), by which he means knowing very little of politics, not having a consistent outlook on public policy, and being unable to articulate a coherent understanding of standard ideological positions.

Reading this reminded me of the problems my graduate students have with formulating questions for interviews or questionnaires. They find it hard to let go of the unarticulated assumption that participants in their research will have a little psychologist in their heads who possesses the technical language of psychology and whose understanding of the world is shaped by the same theories and constructs that the students have studied. This leads to formulating questions that make no sense to the lay research participants, who will nonetheless out of politeness attempt to answer them. It would seem possible that political scientists who study voter competence have not so much found that American voters are “innocent” but have revealed that the average citizen does not have a tiny political scientist in his or her head.

Goren is much more optimistic about the competence of U.S. voters and finds evidence that they have coherent sets of political attitudes organized around what he calls core policy principles. These principles are (a) big versus small government, (b) traditional morality versus moral progressivism, and (c) foreign policy built on military might versus diplomacy. The average citizen would have no trouble deciding which end of the pole lines up with a conservative approach and which with a liberal, not to mention which end—and thus which candidate—he or she prefers.
Goren gives the history of the major policy cleavages that he sees underlying the three policy principles and how these came to be dominant organizing ideas in American political discourse. His own empirical studies confirm that the principles are indeed cognitively available to voters, offering them decision-making heuristics as they form judgments. Political and voting decisions, then, are not merely random but are in a real sense principled. Voters may lack knowledge of the finer details of current affairs or the American political system, but they are not in any real sense incompetent. As Goren notes,

Some critics offer telling anecdotes to underscore the political stupidity of the masses. . . . But from findings such as these it does not automatically follow that voters are incompetent, that they lack genuine positions on the policy cleavages that define American politics, or that they cannot judge candidates on grounds that really matter—the direction the national government should take on the major policy domains. (p. 233)

It is alarming that in a country with a long history of democracy, contempt for the demos, the people, is apparently ingrained. There is a possibility that political scientists and Goren himself have made a fundamental error about the appropriate level of analysis for a phenomenon such as voter decision making. Although this intuitively feels like something that individuals do, it is highly likely that one’s political principles and the resulting voting decisions are influenced by what Mary Douglas called the *cultural project* that one subscribes to (Douglas & Ney, 1998).

In his recent book, James Flynn (2012) mused on psychology’s tendency to ignore the social and to build models in which causative arrows always point one way, from the individual to the group. But often it is the group that makes up the minds of its members. Voters belong to social groups who see their interests best served by governments that cleave to certain principles, not others. If this is the case, the individuals who comprise these groups gain nothing from a fine-grained understanding of the minutiae of politics and political structures. Such things interest political scientists, but it is not a sign of stupidity or laziness that they interest other people a good deal less.

Goren’s book will be of interest to a wide range of readers, including political scientists, and undergraduate and graduate students of political science, sociology, and branches of psychology that deal with attitudes, their formation, and their influence on decision making. Laypeople with a wide interest in pressing contemporary issues will also find this defense of the American voter informative and reassuring.

References


