

In Praise of Passivity

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Abstract:

Political actors, including voters, activists, and leaders, are often ignorant of basic facts relevant to policy choices. Even experts have little understanding of the working of society and little ability to predict future outcomes. Only the most simple and uncontroversial political claims can be counted on. This is partly because political knowledge is very difficult to attain, and partly because individuals are not sufficiently motivated to attain it. As a result, the best advice for political actors is very often to simply stop trying to solve social problems, since interventions not based on precise understanding are likely to do more harm than good.

1. Introduction

In 1799, America's first President, George Washington, fell ill with what is now thought to have been an infection of the epiglottis in his throat, a rare but serious condition that can lead to blockage of the airway and eventual suffocation.¹ His good friend and personal physician attended him, along with two consulting physicians. Medicines and poultices were tried, along with five separate episodes of bloodletting that together removed over half of Washington's blood. As one contemporaneous account explained, "The proper remedies were administered, but without producing their healing effects." [10] The former President died shortly thereafter. Needless to say, his treatment either had no effect or actually hastened the end.

Washington's doctors were respected experts, and they applied standard medical procedures. Why were they unable to help him? Put simply, they could not help because they had no idea what they were doing. The human body is an extremely complex mechanism. To repair it generally requires a detailed and precise understanding of that mechanism and of the nature of the disorder afflicting it—knowledge that no one at the time possessed. Without such understanding, almost any significant intervention in the body will be harmful.

Voters, activists, and political leaders of the present day are in the position of medieval doctors. They hold simple, prescientific theories about the workings of society and the causes of social problems, from which they derive a variety of remedies—almost all of which prove either ineffectual or harmful. Society is a complex mechanism whose repair, if possible at all, would require a precise and detailed understanding of a kind that no one today possesses. Unsatisfying as it may seem, the wisest course for political agents is often simply to stop trying to solve society's problems.

My goal in what follows is to explain and defend this point of view. In the following sections, I discuss the extent of our political ignorance, the reasons for our ignorance, and the practical

recommendations that flow from a recognition of deep and pervasive human ignorance about social issues.

2. What Don't We Know?

2.1. Public Ignorance of the Political System

Many observers have found citizens in modern democracies woefully ignorant of the political situations in their own societies. In the United States, for which the most plentiful data are available, most citizens cannot so much as name their Congressman, let alone describe his voting record. Many are ignorant of basic institutional facts, such as the lengths of legislators' terms.[6, p. 8] Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter give the flavor of public political knowledge in America:

The most commonly known fact about George [H.W.] Bush's opinions while he was president was that he hated broccoli. During the 1992 presidential campaign 89 percent of the public knew that Vice President Quayle was feuding with the television character Murphy Brown, but only 19 percent could characterize Bill Clinton's record on the environment. Also during that campaign, 86 percent of the public knew that the Bushes' dog was named Millie, yet only 15 percent knew that both presidential candidates supported the death penalty. Judge Wapner (host of the television series "The People's Court") was identified by more people than were Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist.[12, p. 101]

International data indicate that Americans' political knowledge is no more than moderately below average.[12, p. 89 – 2]

Voters often harbor absurd misperceptions of current and recent policies. In one survey, Americans were asked to pick the two largest items in the federal budget, from the following list: Social Security, welfare, health care, interest on the debt, the military, and foreign aid. Foreign aid (by far the smallest of the categories listed) was the most commonly selected.[6, p. 79 – 80] On average, Americans estimate foreign aid spending at one quarter of the federal budget; the correct figure is less than one percent.[25]

In America, it used to be common to hear remarks either of praise or of criticism directed at the drastic cuts that President Reagan made to government social welfare programs in the 1980's. This was among Reagan's most famous policies—despite the fact that publicly available statistics show federal welfare spending *increasing* by 40% during the Reagan years.[7] In a similar vein, the George W. Bush administration has often been derided for its supposed drastic deregulation, despite large increases in total spending, regulatory budgets, regulatory staff, and the sheer volume of regulations during the Bush years.[11]

2.2. Descriptive Social Theory: The Neglect of Expert Knowledge

Fortunately, in some areas of social theory, one can find a clear, policy-relevant consensus among the experts. Unfortunately, this consensus is often boldly defied by both political leaders and the general public. I mention two examples here. The first is protectionism. This is a policy whereby governments attempt to protect domestic industries by erecting barriers to foreign trade, typically in the form either of tariffs or of quotas on foreign goods. These kinds of measures are often popular among political leaders and the general public—not just among members of protected industries, but even among consumers who are harmed by the import barriers. We cannot discuss the arguments

surrounding free trade and protectionism here; here I will simply rest with an appeal to authority. The vast majority of economists—the people whose profession is to study these kinds of things—oppose protectionism and believe that it harms the domestic economy.² As Paul Krugman, the Nobel-prize-winning economist and *New York Times* columnist, puts it, “If there were an Economist’s Creed, it would surely contain the affirmations, ‘I understand the Principle of Comparative Advantage’ and ‘I advocate free trade.’”³

In my experience, observations of this kind often call forth derision from extremely confident anti-free-trade ideologues, who with no sense of irony dub the supporters of free trade “market fundamentalists”, essentially ascribing the expert consensus to a right-wing ideology into which economists are inducted.[22, p. 220 – 21] This makes it hard to understand why even left-wing economists such as Paul Krugman, famous for advocating government management of the economy,[21] have signed on to this consensus. When experts from opposite sides of the political spectrum converge on a given position, in contradiction to conventional opinion, who is the more likely victim of a cognitive bias: the community of experts, or the uneducated masses?

A second example is provided by the issue of terrorism, which has loomed large in American political discourse over the past eleven years. Of particular interest is one simple factual question: what motivates most terrorists? Experts whose careers center on the study of terrorism generally agree that terrorism functions as retaliation for specific government policies, especially for foreign military occupation of territories that the terrorists prize.[27, p. 9 – 10, 1, pp. 53 – 4, 55 – 6, 114 – 15, 290] Thus, in his fatwa against the United States, Osama bin Laden wrote:

The people of Islam awakened and realised that they are the main target for the aggression of the Zionist-Crusaders alliance. [...] The latest and the greatest of these aggressions [...] is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places [Saudi Arabia] [...] by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.[2]

Political leaders in countries subject to terrorist attacks, however, typically blame the attacks on fundamental and irreconcilable clashes of values, on the moral virtue of their own country and the sheer evil of the terrorists. Thus, shortly after the infamous 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush explained the event as follows:

They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. [...] These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. [...] This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.[5]

The next American President, Barack Obama, would blame the attacks on a dearth of emotions and values:

Nor do I pretend to understand the stark nihilism that drove the terrorists that day and that drives their brethren still. My powers of empathy [...] cannot penetrate the blank stares of those who would murder innocents with abstract, serene satisfaction.[26]

Thus, the preferred explanation for why one’s own country should come under attack is that the enemy either has no values or has fundamentally evil values. The self-serving nature of these explanations is as evident as are the unfortunate implications of this attitude for the prospects of

resolving international conflicts peacefully.

The cases of protectionism and terrorism are simply two illustrations of a general problem. Even when experts know the answer to a political question, that knowledge will not help society if—as is often the case—lay people and political leaders stubbornly ignore what the experts know.

2.3. *Descriptive Social Theory: The Limits of Expertise*

In light of the ignorance of typical political leaders and members of the general public, we might be tempted by the idea of *rule by experts*, as in Plato's Republic.[28] [4] Unfortunately, when it comes to descriptive social theory, even the experts' knowledge is unimpressive, as demonstrated recently by the social psychologist Phillip Tetlock. Tetlock conducted a fifteen-year study in which he collected tens of thousands of predictions from hundreds of political experts concerning matters within their areas of expertise (for example, would the economy slide into recession, would the Soviet Union survive, who would win the next Presidential election, and so on). Tetlock's finding, in brief, was that the best experts did only slightly better than chance at predicting outcomes. When asked to assign probabilities to their predictions, experts proved systematically overconfident; for example, events predicted with 100% confidence happened less than 80% of the time.[34, p. 49 – 55]

What the experts *were* good at was rationalizing their failures. Tetlock lists a number of belief-system defenses commonly offered by experts to insulate their core beliefs from disconfirmation by failed predictions. Experts would often claim that their underlying beliefs were not disconfirmed, because their prediction *almost* came true, because the prediction failed due to sheer bad luck, because they were only off on the timing (the predicted event was still going to occur in the future), because a policy failed to produce the anticipated effects only because it was poorly implemented, and so on. Tetlock noted that no one ever explained away their *successful* predictions in analogous ways. No one ever said that a successful prediction failed to support their underlying beliefs because the prediction almost failed, because it came true due to sheer luck, or because a policy produced the expected effects only due to poor implementation.

Tetlock could only study the accuracy of certain kinds of beliefs—predictions that would, within a fixed time frame, be definitively settled. For instance, one can objectively test experts' reliability in predicting the outcomes of elections. There are many other beliefs that could not be tested. We cannot test predictions with indefinite or extremely long time frames, such as “the world will one day run out of oil” or “the European Union will collapse in 200 years”. We cannot test vague or subjective predictions, such as “the next President will be worse than the current one”. We cannot test claims that refer to unobservable events, as in “the economic stimulus will make the recession longer *than it would otherwise be*”. And other claims are very difficult to resolve for a variety of reasons, such as “World War II was chiefly caused by resentment over the Treaty of Versailles” or “an anarcho-syndicalist society would be superior to any governmental society”.

Might it be that experts have highly reliable beliefs about these untestable matters? There is no reason to think so. Typically, if a person proves unreliable whenever you actually test that person's claims, it is reasonable to assume that that person is also unreliable with regard to the claims you did not test. If anything, the untestable claims would seem *harder* to get right, due to large elements of subjectivity and the difficulty of learning to calibrate one's judgments over time. Thus, experts are probably even less reliable when it comes to these untestable matters.

2.4. *Evaluative Knowledge*

The final type of knowledge we need for political decisionmaking falls under the purview of philosophers: evaluative knowledge. This type of knowledge, too, is difficult to test; indeed, it may be impossible in principle to test. (I of course do not refer to testing whether some policy has desired outcomes, but testing whether an outcome counts as good, just, or the like.) How reliable are we with regard to these questions?

There is no generally accepted theory—either among ordinary people or among experts—for any of the central evaluative categories of moral or political philosophy. There is no generally accepted theory of the good, the right, justice, authority, human rights, equality, or liberty. Thus, while philosophers generally agree that there is *some* sense in which equality is an important political value, they cannot agree upon what this means. Does it mean a social system should strive to equalize wealth or opportunities? Does it mean merely that a social system should give equal consideration to each person's interests? Or that a social system should recognize the same rights for everyone? Likewise, while everyone agrees that society must pursue justice, we cannot agree upon such basic questions as whether justice requires retribution for wrongdoing and whether it requires giving priority to the least-advantaged members of society. Most philosophers endorse the notion of human rights, though the most prominent systematic moral theory, utilitarianism, rejects the idea. Among those who believe in rights, there are fundamental disagreements over what rights there are and who has them. The sheer prevalence of disagreement in political philosophy establishes that human beings—even the most educated, intelligent, and epistemically well-positioned experts—are highly unreliable about political philosophy.

We may be tempted to argue that while *other* people are unreliable about evaluative questions, we ourselves have the correct values. We could bolster this contention with philosophical arguments—exactly the sort of philosophical arguments that philosophers present in books and articles in the ethics and political philosophy journals. Of course, I cannot refute this sort of contention, since to do so would require a series of philosophical articles refuting almost every argument in the ethics and political philosophy literature. Nevertheless, I would suggest that we ought to be very suspicious of any attempt to treat ourselves as special, solely on the grounds of the sort of arguments that regularly appear in the philosophical literature and that convince only a minority of experts. One could say, for instance, that one's own political views are unusually reliable, because they would be endorsed by parties deliberating behind the “veil of ignorance” (to invoke a Rawlsian methodology).[29] This would be to appeal to a form of argument that only some experts find convincing, and other experts could appeal to other forms of argument leading to varying conclusions. If we have no independent reason to expect our own philosophical judgment to be superior to that of other experts (for instance, we are not evidently more intelligent, informed, or rational than others), then we should assume that we ourselves are subject to the same factors, whatever they may be, that render others unreliable in the realm of political philosophy.

2.5. *What We Know*

I do not deny that we have important political knowledge. I think we know that slavery is unjust, that democracy is superior to dictatorship, that torture is almost always wrong, that free markets work better than communist planning. Each of these is an extremely important piece of knowledge; each has rendered human beings vastly better off today than they were in the past. My point has simply been that our political knowledge is very limited. There are a great many things we do not know that people often act as though they knew. People often vociferously defend a policy while having no

awareness of the literature on the subject. We often boldly predict the future, or vote on the basis of our predictions, in areas where the future is really unpredictable. We defend ideological positions on the basis of vague and controversial evaluative assertions. Experts, leaders, and lay people know something about politics, but not nearly as much as they think they do.

How can we recognize genuine political knowledge? I cannot offer a precise or complete answer to this question. Nevertheless, we can identify some general tendencies. Genuine political knowledge tends to be:

1. *Simple*. For example, “Demand curves slope downward.” The more complicated a theory is, the more ways there are for it to go wrong.
2. *Accepted by experts*. For example, there is a broad consensus in economics that protectionism is undesirable. If a theory is well-justified, then the great majority of reasonable and intelligent people will usually come to accept the theory, once they understand the arguments for it.
3. *Non-ideological*. Theories that have an ideological flavor and that call forth strong emotions tend to be pseudo-knowledge—for example, the theory that behavioral differences between men and women are entirely due to socialization. Reality is unlikely to conform to ideology.
4. *Weak*. For instance, we do not know that free markets are always perfectly efficient. We can say only that free markets are *usually approximately* efficient.
5. *Specific and concrete*. We can be much more confident in a concrete claim such as “Ted Bundy’s murders were wrong” than in an abstract theory such as “It is always wrong to initiate violence against another person.”
6. *Supported by appropriate evidence*. For example, the claim “violent entertainment increases violent crime” cannot be known without empirical evidence. In this case, a study based on a large, random sample would be appropriate, rather than, say, a few anecdotes.
7. *Undefeated by counter-evidence*. If there is a large quantity of evidence against P, or if one does not know whether there is such counter-evidence, then one does not know that P. For example, if one has read several studies supporting gun control while having read none of the literature on the other side, then one cannot claim to know whether gun control is desirable.

Consider now the claim that democracy is better than dictatorship. This claim fares reasonably well with respect to the above list. It is a reasonably simple idea. Virtually all experts in political theory accept it. It is supported by a good deal of experience with democracies and dictatorships.[31, ch. 6.] And there is little or no counter-evidence. Admittedly, the claim fares poorly on some items: it is a fairly ideological, strong, general claim. As this case illustrates, genuine knowledge does not always exhibit all of the above characteristics; nevertheless, there is some tendency to find each of those characteristics in a genuine item of knowledge.

3. Why Don’t We Know?

3.1. Rational Ignorance and Irrationality

Most of the time, people are instrumentally rational. That is, they make only those choices for which the benefits exceed the costs (according to their own values and assessments of the probabilities). Therefore, we should expect people to be politically knowledgeable only if the benefits of political knowledge exceed the costs.

The benefits of political knowledge are dubious. For the overwhelming majority of individuals, political knowledge makes no practical difference to how their lives go, since the probability of their causing a change in public policy is approximately zero. Only if one places intrinsic value on

knowledge can one anticipate any non-negligible reward from pursuing political knowledge.

The costs of political knowledge, however, can be enormous, beginning with the costs in sheer time and effort. One must look up government officials, read about their voting records, read about the bills they voted on, and read background facts and arguments about numerous individual political issues. In most cases, becoming informed about individual issues requires difficult and tedious reading in the academic literature. If one spent every waking moment on such research, one might then be well-informed about most of the prominent issues.

There is a second, less tangible cost. Acquisition of the most important items of political knowledge—such as knowledge of whether gun control laws are good, whether capital punishment is just, or whether fiscal stimulus helps the economy—requires careful cultivation of habits of epistemic *rationality*. One must work at identifying and overcoming one's biases. One must seek out information and arguments that run contrary to one's existing opinions, and strive to listen to these arguments with an open mind. Often, rationality demands that one admit that one's former opinions were wrong, or that one simply does not know the answers to important questions. If one is committed to rationality, one's desires will often be frustrated, as one cannot simply believe what one wants to believe.

All of this leads to the following rough reasoning:

1. People act only when the benefits exceed the costs.
2. The benefits of acquiring political knowledge are minimal.
3. The costs of acquiring political knowledge are substantial.
4. Therefore, people will not acquire political knowledge.

Of course, this greatly simplifies matters. Sometimes people are instrumentally irrational; some people may attach high intrinsic value to political knowledge; and a few (such as prominent politicians and wealthy campaign donors) have a serious chance of altering public policy. Despite these exceptions, I think the above reasoning provides a basic insight into the low levels of political knowledge found among the public.⁴

What about the political leaders and campaign donors who, as I have suggested, really can influence public policy—do they have strong incentives to acquire political knowledge? Yes and no. They have strong incentives to find out which policies are *in their interests* to promote. A politician may have strong motives to discover which positions are popular among voters and campaign contributors. But this is quite a different matter from discovering which policies are truly best. Suppose, for example, that immigration restrictions are unjust and harm the domestic economy, but that most voters support them.⁵ A politician who endeavors to repeal immigration restrictions can, if successful, look forward to slightly increased prosperity for his country, as well as a more just world—but perhaps at the price of losing his job. A vote to repeal immigration restrictions is very unlikely to pay off in self-interested terms. Knowing this, a politician has little incentive to find out whether immigration restrictions are unjust or harmful in the first place.

3.2. *Who Cares about the Good of Society?*

Those with strong political opinions, including voters, activists, pundits, and political leaders, typically think of themselves as working for admirable causes—social justice, the welfare of society, moral virtue, and so on. Most see the promotion of their own ideologies as part of a noble and selfless pursuit. This is true of people in all corners of the political world, whether conservative or liberal, socialist or anarchist. I suspect, however, that this is mostly a self-serving delusion. Very few people

care very much about social justice, the good of society, and the like. Nearly everyone cares about these things a little bit, and a few people care about them a great deal. But most of those who think of themselves as deeply moved by high ideals are not in fact so moved.

This may seem a surprising claim. How can one explain those who devote their lives to public service? Or the activists who spend most of their free time sending out messages promoting a cause, organizing protests, and so on? I suggest that these individuals are chiefly moved, not by a desire for some noble ideal, but by a desire *to perceive themselves as working for* the noble ideal—not, for example, by a desire for justice, but by a desire to see themselves as promoting justice. These two potential desires are closely related, and at first glance one might think them practically indistinguishable: if I want to see myself as working for justice, what I have to do is work for justice; but this is the same thing I will do if I simply want justice.

But there is at least one way of distinguishing the desire for X from the desire to perceive oneself as promoting X. This is to observe the subject's efforts at finding out what promotes X. The basic insight here is that the desire [to perceive oneself as promoting X] is satisfied as long as one does something that *one believes* will promote X, whereas the desire for X will be satisfied only if one successfully promotes X. Thus, only the person seeking X itself needs accurate beliefs about what promotes X; one who merely desires the sense of promoting X needs *strong* beliefs (so that she will have a strong sense of promoting X) but not necessarily *true* beliefs on this score.

So, on the assumption that people are instrumentally rational, we can make the following theoretical predictions. If people are seeking high ideals such as justice or the good of society, then they will work hard at figuring out what in fact promotes those ideals and will seek out information to correct any errors in their assumptions about what promotes their ideals, since mistaken beliefs on this score could lead to all of their efforts being wasted. If, on the other hand, people seek the mere *sense* of promoting high ideals, then they will exercise little care in adopting beliefs about what promotes their ideals, and they will avoid gathering information that might undermine those beliefs. They will adopt habits that lead to their having strong beliefs that are very difficult to overturn.

Which hypothesis better matches our observations? It seems to me that most people who expend a great deal of effort promoting political causes expend very *little* effort attempting to make sure their beliefs are correct. They tend to hold very strong beliefs that they are very reluctant to reconsider. When presented with new information conflicting with their existing beliefs, these individuals are much more likely to react with anger, as one under attack, than with gratitude. Admittedly, these impressions are anecdotal. But I frankly think that my experience here is so common that very few will dispute these observations. The evidence thus suggests that politically committed people are motivated more by a desire for a sense of promoting political ideals than by a desire for those ideals themselves.

3.3. *Social Theory Is Harder than You Think*

There is another reason why human beings are terrible at figuring out political issues: it is a lot harder to figure things out than it appears. This is true of nearly all fields of inquiry, though some fields (not including politics) have developed disciplines for thinking in reliable ways.

Let me give a few examples. From ancient Greece through the middle ages, the received view in (what then passed for) science was that the physical world was composed of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The received medical theory was that diseases were caused by imbalances among the four bodily fluids, namely, black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. For instance, a fever was caused by an excess of blood, which therefore needed to be treated by draining the patient's blood. The

ancient and medieval theory of the cosmos located the Earth at the center with the sun and planets orbiting the Earth. The fixed stars were points of light on a large spherical shell encompassing the sun, Earth, and planets.

We now know that all of these theories are utterly wrong, not even close to the truth. Yet all were widely accepted by the experts for centuries. These are just a few examples; the student of the history of ideas will find many more. Over human history, the overwhelming majority of theories that we have come up with to explain our world have later been proven false.⁶

This might seem puzzling at first glance. It is no surprise that we are *sometimes* wrong; we could not expect infallibility. But unless we were actively *trying* to get things wrong, how could we manage so systematically to avoid hitting on the truth?

There is a basic philosophical explanation, which begins with the fact that the number of possible theories of any given phenomenon is enormous, if not infinite. Of these, all but one are false. So given just the information that T is a theory, the probability that T is correct is approximately zero. However, naive thinkers have often failed to realize this, because the theories that a typical human being can think of to explain a given phenomenon (and that will seem plausible to that person) are typically very few in number. It is not that we consider the truth and reject it; in the overwhelming majority of cases, when we first start thinking about how to explain some phenomenon, the truth is not even among the options considered. The ancient Greeks, for example, did not reject quantum mechanics; they just did not and could not have considered it.

That is one basic reason for human unreliability. Another factor is the widespread phenomenon of *confirmation bias*: when we think about a hypothesis, our natural tendency is to look for evidence supporting the hypothesis, not to look for ways of *falsifying* it.⁷ A theory that starts out seeming somewhat plausible can come to seem more and more incontrovertible, as we collect supporting evidence and overlook disconfirmations. When we add the fact that in most theoretical questions, people are motivated more by the desire to find some belief to cling to than by a desire for the truth, the chances of winding up with erroneous beliefs are all that much higher.

Fortunately, modern science has evolved techniques for greatly improving our reliability. We now test hypotheses experimentally, making serious and explicit efforts at falsification. But when it comes to political ideology, no such techniques have been developed. The political realm often seems impervious to scientific reasoning, with the result that our political theorizing is about as reliable as all theorizing was before the advent of modern science.

Why can't we apply the methods that have been so successful in natural science to political questions? Some of the questions to which we need answers just seem in principle non-empirical. For instance, by what experiment can we test whether justice demands that society redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor? Other questions are difficult to investigate because of the unavailability of controlled experiments. If we want to test whether fiscal stimulus cures recessions, we cannot prepare two identical societies, with identical recessions, and then apply fiscal stimulus in one society but not the other. Nor can we take a large collection of societies with recessions and randomly assign half to receive fiscal stimulus and half to receive no fiscal stimulus. Social scientists do not have the power to experiment with societies as natural scientists can experiment with inanimate objects in their laboratories. Finally, social phenomena are *vastly* more complex than the phenomena studied by physicists and chemists. Societies contain thousands or millions of individual human beings interacting with each other in myriad complex ways. And each of these human beings is himself an extremely complex entity, much more complex than the typical inanimate object.

As an example of the relative tractability of inanimate behavior, in the seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler, by examining data on the observed positions of planets in the night sky, was able to

induce three simple mathematical laws regarding the orbits of the planets:

1. The orbit of every planet is an ellipse with the Sun at one focus.
2. A line joining a planet and the Sun sweeps out equal areas during equal intervals of time.
3. The square of the orbital period of a planet is proportional to the cube of the semi-major axis of its orbit.

Why have we not, similarly, discovered the simple mathematical laws of human behavior? Probably because there *are no* such laws. Generalizations about human behavior almost always contain “*ceteris paribus*” clauses. Almost any factor influencing our behavior can be amplified or moderated by numerous other factors. When we move to the behavior of an entire society, matters are only that much more complicated. If there are laws of social evolution, they are no doubt incredibly complex.

We might hope that social theorists who make mistaken predictions will be suitably chastened by reality and will thus correct their underlying theories. But as Tetlock found, this rarely happens; most experts prefer to explain away their errors in ways that preserve the experts’ theoretical beliefs. We might be tempted to dismiss these explanations as mere rationalizations. The problem is that we usually cannot *prove*, in any given case, that the explanation is not actually correct. It might in fact be *true* that a prediction almost came true, and that the expert’s underlying theory is still basically correct despite a failed prediction. A policy’s failure to produce expected results might really be due to poor implementation, or sheer bad luck. In the social world, nothing that happens ever provides an ideal test of anyone’s theory. Thus, it is hard to prove that a given ideologue is actually being irrational in refusing to revise his beliefs; most often, it is a judgment call.

4. Practical Lessons

If, as I have suggested, political knowledge is very limited and political actors are seldom motivated chiefly by political ideals, what ought we to do? It might seem that no specific political recommendations can be derived, because for any policy we might recommend as a response to political ignorance, we ourselves will be ignorant as to the value of that policy. This would be true if my thesis were a radical, “philosophical” skepticism, according to which no one possesses any politically relevant knowledge whatsoever. Fortunately, however, we are not *completely* ignorant, and we can derive some plausible recommendations for political agents.

4.1. Don’t Vote

In modern democracies, election seasons are often accompanied by public-service campaigns designed to encourage citizens to turn up at the polls and vote; regardless of one’s political leanings, it seems, it is important that one votes for *something*. In some countries, governments go so far as to legally require voting.

These campaigns are a terrible idea. Most voters have no idea what is going on—they may not even know who their leaders are, and certainly do not know who is the best candidate. Imagine that someone asks you for directions to a local restaurant. If you have no idea where the restaurant is, you should not make it up. You should not tell the person some guess that seems sort of plausible to you. You should tell them you don’t know and let them get directions from someone more knowledgeable.

Ignorant voting is even worse than ignorant giving of directions, because voting is an exercise of political power (albeit a very small one)—to vote for a policy is not only to make a recommendation, but to request that the policy be *imposed on others by force*. Collectively, the majority imposes policies

or personnel choices on the rest of society. To be justified in participating in any such imposition, one must have some strong justification for thinking that the policy or personnel choice is beneficial. This justification is almost always lacking for the great majority of voters. In the great majority of cases, therefore, voting not only fails to qualify as a civic duty; it is positively immoral.

One might suggest that citizens have an obligation to become informed, and *then* vote. But becoming sufficiently informed to know who is the best candidate in a given election is typically extremely difficult. Indeed, it is not implausible to think that for most people and most elections, the task is actually impossible—no matter how much they study, most voters still will not *know* who the best candidate is, and may not even attain a reasonably high-probability guess. Even if it is not impossible, discovering who is the best candidate is clearly very onerous. It is therefore unreasonable to demand that an individual undertake the enormous costs of acquiring this knowledge, merely to secure a probability of, say, one in ten million of producing a modest benefit for society.

In short, it is most plausible to say that individuals have no obligation to vote, and that if they are ill-informed (as nearly all citizens are), they are obligated *not* to vote.⁸

4.2. Neglect Social Problems

Society suffers from innumerable problems which the government is regularly called upon to solve. In light of widespread political ignorance, however, in most cases the government is better advised to do nothing than to attempt to solve the problem. Consider for example the problem of recreational drug use, which leads to health problems, addiction, and general deterioration of the lives of drug users and their families. Perhaps there is something government could do to solve the problem. But given the ignorance of political leaders, activists, and the public, a government *attempt* to solve the problem is unlikely to succeed.

Now, one might think that, if we were *completely* ignorant, our policies would be as likely to increase as to reduce the problem; but as long as we have *some* relevant knowledge and understanding, and we are aiming at a reduction in the problem, we should be at least slightly more likely to alleviate the problem than to exacerbate it. Thus, even if the government does not *know* what will solve or alleviate the problem, the government can and should at least make an educated guess, and then implement that guess.

There are at least four reasons why this is wrong. First, any government policy that imposes requirements or prohibitions on citizens automatically has certain costs. One cost is the reduction of citizens' freedom. Another is the suffering on the part of those who violate the law and are subsequently punished by the legal system. A third is the monetary cost involved in implementing the policy. Thus, in the case of laws against recreational drug use, individuals are denied the freedom to do as they wish with their own bodies; those who violate the laws and are caught suffer for months or years in prison; and all taxpayers suffer the costs of enforcing the drug laws.

Second, there is a kind of moral presumption against coercive interventions. Laws are commands backed up by threats of coercive imposition of harm on those who disobey them. Harmful coercion against an individual generally requires some clear justification. One is not justified in coercively harming a person on the grounds that the person has violated a command that one merely *guesses* has some social benefit. If it is not reasonably clear that the expected benefits of a policy significantly outweigh the expected costs, then one cannot justly use force to impose that policy on the rest of society.

A third, related point is that when the state *actively intervenes* in society—for example, by issuing commands and coercively harming those who disobey its commands—the state then becomes

responsible for any resulting harms, in a way that the state would not be responsible for harms that it merely (through lack of knowledge) fails to prevent. Imagine that I see a woman at a bus stop opening a bottle of pills, obviously about to take one. Before I decide to snatch the pills away from her and throw them into the sewer drain, I had better be very certain that the pills are actually something harmful. If it turns out that I have taken away a medication that the woman needed to forestall a heart attack, I will be responsible for the results. On the other hand, if, due to uncertainty as to the nature of the drugs, I decide to leave the woman alone, and it later turns out that she was swallowing poison, I will *not* thereby be responsible for her death. For this reason, intervention faces a higher burden of proof than nonintervention. Similarly, if, due to uncertainty as to the effects of anti-drug laws, the government were to simply leave drug users alone, the government would not thereby be responsible for the harms that drug users inflict upon themselves. But if the government maintains anti-drug laws, and these laws impose enormous cost on society, the government is morally responsible for those costs.

Fourth and finally, a policy made under conditions of extreme ignorance is not equally likely to be beneficial as harmful; it is much more likely to be harmful. The famous economist Ronald Coase, who edited the *Journal of Law and Economics* for eighteen years, was interviewed in 1997. Among other things, he reported that his journal had published a series of studies of the effects of regulations in various areas. When asked about which regulations were bad, Coase replied:

I can't remember one that's good. Regulation of transport, regulation of agriculture—agriculture is a, zoning is z. You know, you go from a to z, they are all bad. There were so many studies, and the result was quite universal: The effects were bad.[16]

How can this be? Even if we don't know much, shouldn't we at least create *some* net benefit *most* of the time?

It is here that we must recall the case of George Washington. Washington's doctors, ignorant of the germ theory of disease and lacking in antibiotics, had no chance of curing Washington's infection. The human body is a complex mechanism with parts that work together in specific ways. Nearly all things one might add to or take away from the body, and nearly all ways in which one might rearrange the parts of the body, will interfere with that mechanism. Indeed, almost all *large* changes in the body are *fatal*. Thus, given their state of ignorance, almost any treatment the former President's doctors prescribed could be expected to be harmful.

Society can be viewed as a vast mechanism, whose parts (individual human beings), like the parts of an organism, work together in extremely complex ways.⁹ Perhaps, therefore, most possible interventions in society disrupt the functioning of that mechanism and thus are socially harmful. If the government does not know what it is doing, it is more likely to worsen than to improve matters.

Of course, I am not arguing that states should never intervene in society. Some interventions are clearly justified. For instance, prohibitions on murder, theft, and assault are justified. What differentiates these from, say, a prohibition on recreational drug use? A number of differences might be cited,¹⁰ but what is most relevant to this paper is the difference in the state of our knowledge with respect to these prohibitions. We know that prohibitions on murder are beneficial—there are no real counter-arguments to the claim, and all experts agree. But one simply cannot claim to know that drug prohibition is beneficial; indeed, that claim is hotly disputed. Rather than recommending universal non-intervention, I am advocating a strong burden of proof for those who advocate legal demands or prohibitions. If the experts are divided on whether a government intervention is beneficial, it should generally be rejected.

The same lesson applies to many other controversial issues, such as gun control, fiscal stimulus,

the minimum wage, immigration, and so on. In each of these cases, the benefits of government intervention are at best controversial among the experts; in some cases, expert opinion opposes intervention. Thus, the government ought not to restrict gun ownership, attempt to stimulate the economy, mandate a minimum wage, or restrict immigration, any more than it ought to prohibit recreational drugs.

4.3. Weaken Democracy

Democracy works well for issues whose answers are obvious—for instance, I would be entirely comfortable with putting the prohibition on murder up to a popular vote. Democracy is superior to dictatorship mainly because dictatorships have a tendency to do things that are obviously, uncontroversially bad—such as murdering millions of people. But for issues that are controversial or require careful reasoning or specialized knowledge, democracy is about the equivalent of drawing policies out of a hat. The ignorance and irrationality of the electorate frequently delivers harmful and unjust policies.

When an issue is controversial, the best solution is not to simply take a vote; the best solution is to remove the issue from the political arena—that is, to prohibit the state from intervening. The reason for this is simply the recommendation of section 4.2, that there should be a high burden of proof for all state interventions in society. For instance, if the benefits of gun control are controversial, we should not therefore vote on whether to restrict private gun ownership; we should rather prohibit the government from restricting private gun ownership.¹¹ This is just what the U.S. Constitution intended to do in its second amendment. Many provisions of that Constitution are designed, wisely, as restrictions on democracy—for example, the government cannot prohibit the practice of Islam *even if* the majority of voters want the government to do so.

It is perhaps infeasible for a Constitution to include prohibitions on all the policies that would be controversial or whose effects would be unknown. A reasonable proxy would be to require large supermajority votes for the passage of any law. For example, a state could be designed in which a 70% vote of the legislature would be required to pass any new law, while a 30% vote would suffice to repeal any existing law. This sort of rule would not be perfect, but it might well eliminate most of the state's harmful laws, while still allowing those laws that are clearly needed. We need not fear, for example, that 30% of any legislature would vote to make murder legal.

4.4. Don't Fight for What You Believe In

When it comes to political issues, we usually should not fight for what we believe in. Fighting for something, as I understand the term, involves fighting *against someone*. If one's goal faces no (human) opposition, then one might be described as *working* for a cause (for instance, working to reduce tuberculosis, working to feed the poor) but not *fighting* for it. Thus, one normally fights for a cause only when what one is promoting is controversial. And most of the time, those who promote controversial causes do not actually know whether what they are promoting is correct, however much they may think they know. As suggested in section 3.2, they are fighting in order to have the experience of fighting for a noble cause, rather than truly seeking the ideals they believe themselves to be seeking.

Fighting for a cause has significant costs. Typically, one expends a great deal of time and energy, while simultaneously imposing costs on others, particularly those who oppose one's own political position. This time and energy is very likely to be wasted, since neither side knows the answer to the issue over which they contend. In many cases, the effort is expended in bringing about a policy

that turns out to be harmful or unjust. It would be better to spend one's time and energy on aims that one *knows* to be good.

Thus, suppose you are deciding between donating time or money to Moveon.org (a left-wing political advocacy group), and donating time or money to the Against Malaria Foundation (a charity that fights malaria in the developing world). For those concerned about human welfare, the choice should be clear. Donations to Moveon.org may or may not affect public policy, and if they do, the effect may be either good or bad—that is a matter for debate. But donations to Against Malaria *definitely* save lives. No one disputes that.¹²

There are exceptions to the rule that one should not fight for causes. Sometimes, people find it necessary to fight for a cause, despite that the cause is obviously and uncontroversially good—as in the case of fighting to end human rights violations in a dictatorial regime. In this case, one's opponents are simply corrupt or evil. Occasionally, a person knows some cause to be correct, even though it is controversial among the general public. This may occur because the individual possesses expertise that the public lacks, and the public has chosen to ignore the expert consensus. But these are a minority of the cases. Most individuals fighting for causes do not in fact know what they are doing.

5. Conclusion

Popular wisdom often praises those who get involved in politics, who vote in democratic elections, fight for a cause they believe in, and try to make the world a better place. We tend to assume that such individuals are moved by high ideals and that, when they change the world, it is usually for the better.

The clear evidence of human ignorance and irrationality in the political arena poses a challenge to the popular wisdom. Lacking awareness of basic facts of their political systems, to say nothing of the more sophisticated knowledge that would be needed to reliably resolve controversial political issues, most citizens can do no more than guess when they enter the voting booth. Far from being a civic duty, the attempt to influence public policy through such arbitrary guesses is unjust and socially irresponsible. Nor have we any good reason to think political activists or political leaders to be any more reliable in arriving at correct positions on controversial issues; those who are most politically active are often the most ideologically biased, and may therefore be even less reliable than the average person at identifying political truths. In most cases, therefore, political activists and leaders act irresponsibly and unjustly when they attempt to impose their solutions to social problems on the rest of society.

Perhaps the most dramatic example is that of Karl Marx, who famously commented that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.”[24, p. 145] Marx's greatest legacy is the practical demonstration, through twentieth-century history, of the consequences of changing a world that one does not understand. This is not the place to detail his misunderstandings, which have been discussed at great length by others. Let it suffice to say that despite the seriousness with which generations of intellectuals around the world have studied his works, Karl Marx's understanding of human beings and of society was minimal.¹³ His influence on the twentieth century world, however, was unparalleled—and, as most observers now recognize, almost unbelievably malignant.¹⁴ This is no mere accident. When one lacks a precise and detailed understanding of a complex system, any attempt to radically improve that system is more likely to disrupt the things that are working well than it is to repair the system's imperfections. Marx's failure to improve society should have been about as surprising as the failure of George Washington's doctors to cure his infection by draining his blood.

Perhaps, one may hope, human beings will one day attain a scientific understanding of society comparable to the modern scientific understanding of most aspects of the natural world. On that day, we may find ways of restructuring society to the benefit of all. But we cannot now predict what that understanding will look like, nor should we attempt to implement the policies that we guess will one day be proven to be beneficial. In the meantime, we can anticipate many pretenders to scientific accounts of society, after the style of Marxism. These will be theories resting on dubious premises that only certain political ideologues find convincing. These ideologues may, as in the case of the Marxists, adopt the quintessentially unscientific attitude of regarding those who question the ideology as enemies to be suppressed.

Political leaders, voters, and activists are well-advised to follow the dictum, often applied to medicine, to “first, do no harm.” A plausible rule of thumb, to guard us against doing harm as a result of overconfident ideological beliefs, is that one should not forcibly impose requirements or restrictions on others unless the value of those requirements or restrictions is essentially uncontroversial among the community of experts in conditions of free and open debate. Of course, even an expert consensus may be wrong, but this rule of thumb may be the best that such fallible beings as ourselves can devise.

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Notes

1. The account in the text derives from Vadakan 2005.
2. See Caplan 2007, pp. 50-1, on the popularity of protectionism among the public and its unpopularity among economists.
3. Krugman 1987, p. 131. Krugman goes on to criticize standard free trade arguments, but nevertheless concludes that free trade is probably desirable overall.
4. For further defense of this kind of theory, see Downs (1957 , pp. 244-5) and Caplan (2007).
5. See my 2010; Simon 1999.
6. See Lindberg's (1992) history of ancient and medieval science.
7. This tendency is well-documented in psychology; see Gilovich 1991, chs. 3-4.
8. See Brennan 2011a, ch. 3, for a more thorough defense of these points.
9. This point is brought out most vividly by Read (2008); cf. Hayek 1945.
10. For discussion of the injustice of drug prohibition, see my 2009.
11. For fuller discussion of this issue, see my 2003.
12. See www.againstmalaria.com. As of this writing, GiveWell (a well-known charity review organization) rates this as the most cost-effective charity (see givewell.org/international/top-charities/AMF, accessed March 28, 2012).
13. See von Mises 1981 for an extended critique of Marxism and socialism.
14. Courtois et al. (1999) document the staggering atrocities of Marxist regimes in the twentieth century.