

*Robert B. Talisse*

DOES PUBLIC IGNORANCE  
DEFEAT DELIBERATIVE  
DEMOCRACY?

*ABSTRACT: Richard Posner and Ilya Somin have recently posed forceful versions of a common objection to deliberative democracy, the Public Ignorance Objection. This objection holds that demonstrably high levels of public ignorance render deliberative democracy practically impossible. But the public-ignorance data show that the public is ignorant in a way that does not necessarily defeat deliberative democracy. Posner and Somin have overestimated the force of the Public Ignorance Objection, so the question of deliberative democracy's practical feasibility is still open.*

There is much disagreement among contemporary deliberative democrats over the details of their view; however, the core of the deliberativist program has been captured well by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004, 3):

Most fundamentally deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return.<sup>1</sup>

---

*Critical Review* 16 (2004), no. 4, ISSN 0891-3811, [www.criticalreview.com](http://www.criticalreview.com)

Robert B. Talisse, Department of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37240, (615) 343-8671, [Robert.Talisse@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:Robert.Talisse@vanderbilt.edu), the author of *Democracy after Liberalism* (Routledge, 2005), thanks Scott Aikin, Caleb Clanton, Allen Coates, and Jeffrey Friedman for helpful discussion.

Although there are several competing views among deliberative democrats concerning what is to count as a "reason," there is general agreement that appeals to power or expressions of private interest do *not* count as reasons.

If we follow the deliberativists in understanding democratic politics in terms of processes of justification by means of reasoned exchange, we are led to the view that such processes must be continual and ongoing. Again, Gutmann and Thompson (2004, 6) express the point well:

Although deliberation aims at justifiable decision, it does not presuppose that the decision at hand will in fact be justified, let alone that a justification today will suffice for the indefinite future. It keeps open the possibility of a continuing dialogue, one in which citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead on the basis of that criticism.

Deliberative democracy thus expects a lot from democratic citizens. If political decisions are to reflect the ongoing rational deliberations of democratic citizens, then citizens must be capable of rational deliberation. The kind of rational deliberation envisioned by deliberative democrats requires, at the very least, the ability to draw correct inferences from given premises.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, deliberative democracy requires that citizens' deliberations begin from true, or at least justified, premises. Thus, if citizens prove incapable of drawing correct inferences, or if they prove unable to understand the basic political facts from which inferences are to be drawn, they are unfit for deliberative democracy.

### *The Public Ignorance Objection*

Richard Posner (2002; 2003; and 2004) and Ilya Somin (1998 and 2004) have recently championed an objection to deliberative democracy according to which citizens are demonstrably lacking in the cognitive abilities requisite for rational deliberation. In a searching review of the research concerning public ignorance, Somin (1998, 417) finds that ignorance of even the most basic political facts is so pervasive that "voters not only cannot choose between specific competing policy *programs*, but also cannot accurately assign credit and blame for highly visible policy *outcomes* to the right office-holders." Noting that deliberative democracy "imposes a substantial . . . knowledge burden"

upon citizens, Somin (1998, 440–41) laments that “deliberative democrats have generally overlooked the widespread ignorance that prevents most voters from achieving even . . . modest levels of political knowledge.” Somin concludes that deliberative democracy is a naïvely idealistic impossibility.

Posner (2003, 151–52) agrees with Somin on the fact of public ignorance, and contends that the extent of such ignorance renders deliberative democracy a “pipe dream hardly worth the attention of a serious person” (ibid., 163). However, Posner pushes the argument further than Somin. In Posner’s view, deliberative democracy’s utopian nature renders it potentially dangerous. According to Posner (2003, 135, 166), the deliberativists’ requirement that citizens engage each other on controversial political issues can only bring to the surface, and thus exacerbate, deep moral differences among them, thereby making for an increasingly antagonistic and volatile politics.

Although Somin and Posner differ in nuance, they pose roughly the same objection to deliberative democracy, which I will call the Public Ignorance Objection. Stated roughly, the argument runs as follows: 1. Deliberative democracy, in whatever form, expects citizens to be highly informed about basic political facts and emerging data relating to complex policy questions. 2. Citizens are in fact highly ignorant of even the most basic political facts. 3. Therefore, deliberative democracy is “both unrealistic and, as a result, potentially dangerous” (Somini 2004, 8).

The Public Ignorance Objection admittedly has an intuitive appeal. However, it is not clear that the argument’s premises warrant the conclusion. Therefore, the fact of widespread public ignorance need not necessarily defeat deliberative democracy as a model for democratic politics.

### *Two Concepts of Ignorance*

Despite its straightforward and confident air, the Public Ignorance Objection trades on an ambiguity regarding the term “ignorance.” Suppose there is a policy question, *Q*, facing a given democratic population. Suppose further that a factual proposition, *p*, is true and bears so significantly upon *Q* that unless deliberators hold that *p*, they are unlikely to reach a rationally justifiable response to *Q*. Let us say that a typical citizen, Alfred, holds instead of *p* some instantiation of *not-p*. Now, what

are we to say about Alfred? Surely, Alfred has a false belief, and, *ex hypothesi*, he is unlikely to reach a justifiable position with regard to *Q*.

But is Alfred *ignorant*? In one sense of the term, he is. He holds the false belief that *not-p*, so he is ignorant of the fact that *p*.<sup>3</sup> Ignorance in this sense is equivalent to false belief; hence we shall call it *belief ignorance*.

However, imagine that Alfred's belief that *not-p* was generated by correct inferences from popularly held and socially reinforced—but false—premises. More specifically, let us suppose that *not-p* is the result of a justified inference from premises, *a* and *b*, that are false but nonetheless are promoted by sources of political information that are otherwise justifiably held to be reliable, such as, say, *The New York Times*, "All Things Considered," or Fox News. In that case, Alfred is still guilty of belief ignorance; however, since his false belief follows from other premises he acquired from sources that he was justified in believing to be reliable, the belief is, in a sense, not his fault. In this case, we would be correct to say that Alfred is *misinformed*.

Contrast Alfred with Barbara. Like Alfred, Barbara believes that *not-p*; however, unlike Alfred, Barbara believes this despite the fact that she had regular exposure, from sources that are justifiably thought to be reliable, to the true premises that warrant belief that *p*. That is, Barbara's belief that *not-p* is the result either of an invalid inference or of some type of carelessness with respect to her premises. Like Alfred, Barbara is guilty of belief ignorance; but, unlike Alfred, since she had access to the true premises from which *p* follows, Barbara is *culpable* for her false belief. Thus, in addition to saying that Barbara is ignorant of the fact that *p*, we might say simply that Barbara is ignorant.

To claim that Barbara is ignorant is not only to accuse her of false believing; it is to charge her with a kind of cognitive failure; it is to say that her belief ignorance is her fault. In cases where the cognitive failure is particularly egregious, we might say that Barbara is incompetent. In any case, as it involves an evaluation of the believer in addition to an evaluation of the belief, we shall call ignorance in this sense *agent ignorance*.

With this distinction in place we are better able to evaluate the Public Ignorance Objection to deliberative democracy.

### *Is the Public-Ignorance Argument Valid?*

The public-ignorance literature endorsed by Posner and Somin, among others, aptly demonstrates a disturbingly high degree of belief ignorance

among citizens of the United States (and elsewhere). However, if the Public Ignorance Objection is to succeed, what must be demonstrated is that there is a high degree of agent ignorance. Put otherwise, the public-ignorance literature reveals that the public is significantly misinformed about fundamental political facts, but the Public Ignorance Objection requires the premise that the public is not simply misinformed, but incompetent and hence *unable* to muster the cognitive resources necessary for deliberative democracy. Without such a premise, the argument is formally invalid: the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

To see why, consider that, unless it could be shown that agent ignorance is widespread, the deliberative democrat can respond that a high degree of belief ignorance indicates the extent to which fundamental democratic institutions, such as the media or the education system, are failing. The deliberative democrat could then say that the public-ignorance data show only that the public is in a state much like Alfred's, not Barbara's, and as such, that the proper response is to criticize and attempt to repair the civic institutions that are responsible for enabling deliberation, such as the sources of political information, analysis, and commentary.

In fact, many deliberative democrats make this kind of argument.<sup>1</sup> To take one example, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2004, 5) agree with Somin and Posner that "if six decades of modern public opinion research establish anything, it is that the general public's political ignorance is appalling by any standard." However, they lay the blame for such ignorance upon a failing civic system. They write,

We have a public dialogue that is ever more efficiently segmented in its audiences and morselized in its sound bites. We have an ever more tabloid news agenda dulling the sensitivities of an increasingly inattentive citizenry. And we have mechanisms of feedback from the public, from viewer call ins to self-selected internet polls, that emphasize intense constituencies, unrepresentative of the public at large. (Ibid., 8.)

Ackerman and Fishkin further contend that experiments with deliberative polling and citizen juries demonstrate that "when the public is given good reason to pay attention and focus on the issues, it is more than capable of living up to demanding democratic aspirations" (ibid., 7). Thus, the reform of existing civic institutions is central to the deliberativist program.

Ackerman and Fishkin accept the premises of the argument pre-

sented in the Public Ignorance Objection, but deny the conclusion. Accordingly, the Objection as it stands is invalid.

Of course, showing that the objection fails is not sufficient to vindicate deliberative democracy; it is merely to demonstrate that the Public Ignorance Objection is, by itself, insufficient to defeat the deliberativist program.

### *The Objection Revised: Uninterested Ignorant Citizens*

Perhaps I have moved too quickly. One of the thoughts explicitly driving Posner's criticism of deliberative democracy is that citizens are *ignorant* of politics because they are inclined to *ignore* politics. According to Posner (2003, 164), the United States is a "tenaciously philistine society," and its citizens have "little appetite" for the kind of "abstractions" and arguments that deliberation involves; accordingly, they tend to disengage from politics to the greatest extent possible, preferring to pursue "other, more productive activities" (*ibid.*, 172). Posner takes this tendency to be a good thing, and thus criticizes deliberative democracy on the grounds that it "hopelessly exaggerates" (2003, 144) the degree to which it is reasonable to expect citizens to care about politics. With characteristic frankness, then, Posner (2004, 41) presses the following objection against Ackerman and Fishkin's proposal for a paid holiday, Deliberation Day: "If spending a day talking about the issues were a worthwhile activity, you wouldn't have to pay voters to do it."<sup>5</sup>

We may revise the Public Ignorance Objection in light of this line of reasoning. It would seem now that the objection to deliberative democracy is that widespread belief ignorance indicates the extent to which citizens are *uninterested* in politics. If citizens generally do not care much about political issues, then any participatory theory of democracy, including deliberative democracy, must fail, regardless of the actions of civic institutions. Thus, although public ignorance does not itself constitute an objection to deliberative democracy, it provides evidence that citizens are unfit for deliberative democracy.

### *Are Citizens Uninterested?*

But the claim that citizens are utterly uninterested in politics is difficult to square with the fact that political commentary is now a billion-dollar

business. The prevalence of political talk shows and call-in forums on television, radio, and the Internet, as well as the success of books offering popular political analysis, suggests that citizens are not uninterested in the way Posner suggests.

More importantly, these forums explicitly emphasize the need for rational deliberation and reasoned exchange. Thus, purveyors of political information claim to offer a "no spin zone" in which "fair and balanced" analysis promises to expose "bias," "treason," and "lying liars." Of course, this is for the most part merely an image. The rhetoric of rationality and intellectual fairness is surely part of a marketing strategy designed to maximize revenues for networks, book publishers, and newspapers. Yet given the pressures of the information marketplace, market strategies prevail only if they are effective. This suggests that citizens are not only interested in politics, but are also interested in the kind of engagement that the deliberativists advocate. Deliberative democrats, especially institutionally minded ones such as Ackerman and Fishkin, aim to promote or create forums in which this interest in public deliberation can be channeled into effective political action.

Posner and Somin have overestimated the force of their argument. The Public Ignorance Objection, even in its revised form, is insufficient to defeat deliberative democracy. This does not mean that deliberative democrats have won the day. There are many challenges that the deliberative democrat must confront, and perhaps further work on public ignorance will produce a decisive objection to it. I have suggested that a successful objection to deliberative democracy based in public-ignorance data would have to show that citizens are highly susceptible to agent ignorance. Such findings surely would constitute a serious challenge to deliberative democracy. However, it seems likely that such findings would prove devastating to *every* conception of democracy, not just deliberativist versions.

In any case, the question of deliberative democracy's practical potential remains open.

#### NOTES

1. Although I draw exclusively from Gutmann and Thompson in sketching the basic contours of deliberative democracy, I do not mean to imply that Gutmann and Thompson's view is representative or noncontroversial. I cannot review here the important philosophical differences among deliberative democrats. The main statements thereof can be found in Bohman and Rehg 1997.

- and Elster 1998. More recent work can be found in Macedo 1999 and Fishkin and Laslett 2003. To get a sense of the spectrum of the views in currency, see Fishkin 1991, Dryzek 2000, Misak 2000, Valadez 2001, Smith 2003, Goodin 2003, Leib 2004, James 2004, and Talisse 2005. Review essays by Samuel Freeman (2000) and James Bohman (1998) are also instructive.
2. Public deliberation arguably requires much more of citizens, including the readiness to listen respectfully to opposing views, the willingness to admit one's errors, and the public-spiritedness to set aside one's interests for the sake of a common good.
  3. Here I am excluding the complicating possibilities of self-deception and other forms of irrational belief.
  4. In addition to the work of Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin that is discussed below, see Sunstein 2001 and 2003; Page 1996; the essays collected in Chambers and Costain 2000; and Shane 2004.
  5. Ackerman and Fishkin (2003 and 2004) propose a new national holiday on which citizens would be paid a modest honorarium for voluntary participation in a day-long deliberative polling event they call "Deliberation Day."

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, Bruce, and James Fishkin. 2003. "Deliberation Day." In James S. Fishkin and Peter Laslett, eds. *Debating Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ackerman, Bruce, and James Fishkin. 2004. *Deliberation Day*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bohman, James and William Rehg, eds. 1997. *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Bohman, James. 1998. "The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 6(4): 400-425.
- Chambers, Simone, and Anne Costain, eds. 2000. *Deliberation, Democracy, and the Media*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Dryzek, John. 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, and Contestations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Elster, Jon, ed. 1998. *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishkin, James, and Peter Laslett, eds. 2003. *Debating Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fishkin, James. 1991. *Democracy and Deliberation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Freeman, Samuel. 2000. "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (29)4: 371-418.
- Goodin, Robert. 2003. *Reflective Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- James, Michael Rabinder. 2004. *Deliberative Democracy and the Plural Polity*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.



- Leib, Ethan J. 2004. *Deliberative Democracy in America*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Macedo, Stephen, ed. 1999. *Deliberative Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Misak, Cheryl. 2000. *Truth, Politics, Morality*. New York: Routledge.
- Page, Benjamin. 1996. *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Posner, Richard. 2002. "Dewey and Democracy: A Critique." *Transactional Viewpoints* 1(3): 1-4.
- Posner, Richard. 2003. *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Posner, Richard. 2004. "Smooth Sailing." *Legal Affairs* January-February: 41-42.
- Shane, Peter M., ed. 2004. *Democracy Online*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Graham. 2003. *Deliberative Democracy and the Environment*. New York: Routledge.
- Somin, Ilya. 1998. "Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal." *Critical Review* 12(4): 413-58.
- Somin, Ilya. 2004. "Richard Posner's Democratic Pragmatism and the Problem of Public Ignorance." *Critical Review* 16(1): 1-22.
- Sunstein, Cass. 2001. *Republic.com*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Sunstein, Cass. 2003. *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Talisse, Robert. 2005. *Democracy after Liberalism*. New York: Routledge. Forthcoming.
- Valadez, Jorge M. 2001. *Deliberative Democracy, Political Legitimacy, and Self-Determination in Multicultural Societies*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.