



BRILL

JOURNAL OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY (2020) 1-24

JOURNAL OF  
MORAL  
PHILOSOPHY



brill.com/jmp

# Democratic Autonomy and the Shortcomings of Citizens

*Adam Lovett*

Department of Philosophy, New York University, New York City, United States

*adam.lovett@nyu.edu*

## Abstract

A widely held picture in political science emphasizes the cognitive shortcomings of us citizens. We're ignorant. We don't know much about politics. We're irrational. We bend the evidence to show our side in the best possible light. And we're malleable. We let political elites determine our political opinions. This paper is about why these shortcomings matter to democratic values. Some think that democracy's value consists entirely in its connection to equality. But the import of these shortcomings, I argue, cannot be explained in purely egalitarian terms. To explain it, we must instead think of democracy's value partly in terms of collective autonomy. Our ignorance and irrationality undermine the epistemic conditions for realizing this kind of autonomy. They stop us knowing the outcomes of our political choices. Our irrationality and malleability undermine the independence conditions for realizing such autonomy. They mean our political choices are subject to problematic kinds of interpersonal influence. Thus, at root, the import of the widely held picture is that, if accurate, it closes off this critical aspect of democracy's value.

## Keywords

democratic autonomy – democratic equality – elite cue theory – motivated reasoning – political ignorance

## 1 Introduction

Walter Lippmann once claimed that “the citizen gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in fact and but a poor appetite for

theory.”<sup>1</sup> A little later, Joseph Schumpeter asserted that “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again.”<sup>2</sup> These claims were initial sketches of what we’ll call the pessimistic picture of ordinary citizens. The picture has it that ordinary citizens are, cognitively speaking, poorly equipped for active participation in democratic politics. They don’t know much. They don’t reason rationally. They often take their opinions from elites. They neither live up to what Lippmann called “the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omnicompetent citizen”<sup>3</sup> nor meet the demands of Schumpeter’s “classical doctrine of democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Their cognitive shortcomings, somehow, make a certain vision of democracy unachievable.

Lippmann’s and Schumpeter’s evidence for this picture came from reading history, talking to people, keeping up on current affairs. Yet, as they were writing, the scientific basis of political science was being transformed. Survey methods were coming to the discipline. These surveys provided much stronger support for the pessimistic picture. On the back of such surveys, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues concluded that most citizens were “unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists.”<sup>5</sup> Citizens’ problems, again, were cognitive: their lack of political knowledge and rationality.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Angus Campbell and his collaborators ran some of the first representative national surveys. They became convinced that the characterizing features of American politics were the “low emotional involvement of the electorate in politics; its slight awareness of public affairs; its failure to think in structured, ideological terms; and its pervasive sense of attachment to one or the other of the two major parties.”<sup>7</sup> Thus a downcast picture of citizens’ cognitive capacities was painted. Now, this picture was often disputed over the years.<sup>8</sup> But, in many

1 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, [1925]1993), pp.14–15.

2 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), p.262.

3 Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, p.11.

4 Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p.250.

5 Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p.312.

6 Berelson, Lazarfeld and McPhee, *Voting*, pp.306–310.

7 Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1960]1964), pp.280–81.

8 For example, see Samuel Popkins, *The Reasoning Voter* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991) and Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

respects, it is still widely accepted. Most people perhaps find Schumpeter a little untactful. But many think that the pessimistic picture of ordinary citizens is at least roughly correct.<sup>9</sup>

This paper is about why this picture is important. Early authors were somewhat coy on the issue. Lippmann, for example, kept quiet about who exactly accepted his ideal of the sovereign and omniscient citizen and what omniscience was meant to achieve. Schumpeter did not say who had held the classical doctrine of democracy nor what, according to this doctrine, made democracy valuable.<sup>10</sup> Lazarsfeld and his colleagues left unspoken just which political theorist had laid down the requirements for a democratic system and what satisfying them would get us. And contemporary authors are also often vague on the matter. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels are perhaps the most important contemporary defenders of the pessimistic picture. They explain its import via reference to the consent of the governed, to elite domination, to human dignity, and to simple good government.<sup>11</sup> Exactly what these consist in, or how voters' characteristics impair them, they do not say. Some writers do clearly identify the picture's import. They usually identify it as an instrumental import. Bryan Caplan, for example, claims that "irrational beliefs lead to foolish policy."<sup>12</sup> Jason Brennan insists that the picture provides "good grounds to presume that [rule by the knowledgeable] would in fact outperform democracy."<sup>13</sup> Both think that the cognitive shortcomings of ordinary citizens are instrumentally bad. They have bad causal consequences.

Perhaps that is true, perhaps not. But, regardless, it does not fully explain why citizens' cognitive shortcomings are important. The root problem is that democracy is more than merely instrumentally valuable. It is valuable for more than just its causal consequences. The evidence for this is well-known. Imagine being ruled by a competent, benevolent dictator. Such rule might have much better consequences than democratic rule. The dictator might bring your

---

9 Most prominently, see Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). For other prominent defenders of the picture, see Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

10 For this point, see Carol Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.17.

11 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, p.1, 88, 297, 297.

12 Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, p.162.

13 Brennan, *Against Democracy*, p.16.

country from “third world to first” in a single generation.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, such a system fails to realize some value or values that a democracy could realize. Yet it is, instrumentally speaking, at least as good as democracy. So, democracy must have more than mere instrumental value. Accordingly, citizens’ cognitive shortcomings shouldn’t be expected to matter merely instrumentally. If the pessimistic picture is right, such shortcomings are widespread, pervasive, and affect the very stuff out of which democracies are made: citizens’ judgments. We should expect them to matter for reasons beyond their causal consequences.

And, intuitively, they do just that. Imagine a democracy for which the pessimistic picture was exactly right: citizens knew nothing about politics, were entirely irrational, and were completely under the thumb of elites. Yet suppose that the relevant elites consisted of competent, benevolent technocrats. Elections swap which elites are in office at any one time. But whoever wins election stalwartly implements the policies that are best for society. Such a system might have very good consequences. Yet it seems that something would be missing from it. This society doesn’t seem that different from the benevolent dictatorship. In both cases, whatever makes democracy noninstrumentally valuable is lacking. To put the point differently, it would be better were citizens more informed, more rational, and more independent than in this case. That would help realize noninstrumental democratic values. Thus, citizens’ cognitive shortcomings matter more than just instrumentally. They matter to noninstrumental democratic values.

This paper is about how these shortcomings are important to such values. I’ll focus on three of the shortcomings depicted by the pessimistic picture: ignorance, irrationality, and malleability. Citizens are ignorant, according to the picture, in that they don’t know much about politics. They’re irrational in that they bend the evidence to show their side in the best possible light. They’re malleable in that they let political elites determine their opinions. My aim is to explore how these shortcomings would impair noninstrumental democratic values. My aim is not to defend this pessimistic picture. I myself do think that it is at least close to true, that most citizens are at least somewhat like how it depicts them to be. But I’ll only provide evidence for it in order to better illustrate its most plausible versions. I won’t provide the full case for or against it. My aim is, instead, to explore its consequences for noninstrumental values.

---

<sup>14</sup> As Lee Kuan Yew claimed, plausibly, to have done for Singapore. See Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000). Of course, he also (less plausibly) claimed to be ruling democratically.

Such an exploration is largely absent from contemporary democratic theory. Now, that isn't to say that democratic theorists will be surprised that the pessimistic picture has import for noninstrumental values. Quite the contrary: I think many people believe that the pessimistic picture has such import.<sup>15</sup> But contemporary democratic theory lacks an in-depth explanation of how the pessimistic picture impacts noninstrumental democratic values. It lacks a thorough examination of how citizen ignorance, irrationality, and malleability connect to democracy's noninstrumental value. The contribution of this paper is to provide such an explanation.

In the next section I'll lay out the relevant parts of the pessimistic picture in more detail. In section 3 we will explore whether our disquiet about this picture can be understood wholly in terms of democratic equality. I will argue that it cannot. In section 4, we'll turn to what I think is the correct account of that disquiet. This hinges on spelling out a distinctive democratic value: democratic autonomy. The key thing about such autonomy is that, as with any sort of autonomy, to achieve it one must satisfy certain conditions. In section 5 we'll see that one must be sufficiently aware of the consequences of one's actions. In section 6 we'll see that one's actions must be in some sense independent of outside influence. The satisfaction of these conditions would be undermined by the truth of the pessimistic picture. This is why the picture matters. If we citizens really are in the parlous cognitive shape it depicts, then we have little hope of achieving democratic autonomy. We'll end by noting why this itself is important. As I've indicated, it has theoretical import: it reveals the weakness of purely egalitarian accounts of democracy's value. It also has practical import: it imperils the legitimacy of actual democratic states. And finally it has institutional import: it weakens the case for democratic institutions.

## 2 The Pessimistic Picture

Let's start by painting the pessimistic picture in a bit more detail. We begin with citizen ignorance. Most Americans, according to the picture, don't know much about politics. They don't know about the institutional setup of the

---

15 Although Brennan's main focus is on the instrumental import of this picture, he is one of these people. In Brennan, *Against Democracy*, pp. 82–85 he considers the view that voting counts as consent to government. He argues that it cannot do so in any morally important ways because it is not informed consent: voters are ignorant. Thus, we shouldn't think of real democracies as governments by consent of the governed. This would be noninstrumental import of political ignorance.

United States. They don't know who important political actors are. They don't know what policies different politicians support. The authors of the most comprehensive contemporary assessment of the evidence conclude, *inter alia*, that "large numbers of American citizens are woefully underinformed and the overall levels of knowledge are modest at best."<sup>16</sup> Philip Converse sums up the state of scholarly consensus when he says that "[w]e hardly need to argue about low information levels any more."<sup>17</sup> Americans, and probably citizens in many countries, just don't know much about politics.

The evidence for these claims consists in how well people do on tests of their factual knowledge.<sup>18</sup> When you ask people questions about politics, they get them wrong. Or they just admit they don't know. To take some examples, in 1954 fewer than half of Americans could name even one branch of their government. In 1979 fewer than a third of Americans could correctly say that Carter wanted to cut defense spending. In 1971, at least two fifths of Americans couldn't accurately say what Nixon had planned for the economy.<sup>19</sup> One can multiply examples like this indefinitely. Americans, often, don't have knowledge about the basic facts that bear on their political judgments. They don't know about the parties' policies or about how, institutionally speaking, American politics work. They are, at least on the pessimistic picture, missing much of the knowledge that is critical in deciding how they should participate politically.

Second, we turn to citizen irrationality. When Americans reason about politics, they often do so irrationally. In particular, they often engage in motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is reasoning driven by non-accuracy goals. An accuracy goal is the goal of having accurate beliefs. You are driven by accuracy goals when you reason with the aim of getting such beliefs. There are a couple important non-accuracy goals. The first is the defense of pre-existing beliefs, especially pre-existing political beliefs. We seek out evidence and interpret new evidence so that it supports what we already believe. A second goal is a group-serving goal. In the United States, party is a very important political

---

16 Michael Delli-Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.270.

17 Philip Converse, 'Assessing the Capacity of Mass Electorates,' *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000), pp.331–53, p.331.

18 For summaries of this evidence, Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter* and Somin, *Political Ignorance*. For a valuable recent attack on this literature, see Arthur Lupia, *Uninformed: Why People Seem to Know So Little about Politics and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

19 These figures are from Delli-Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, pp.135–77.

group. Citizens will bend the evidence, and their exposure to the evidence, so that it shows their party in the best possible light. I assume that reasoning driven by non-accuracy goals is epistemically irrational. Good reasoning is, at least usually, driven by accuracy goals. Thus, citizen irrationality consists in their penchant to engage in motivated reasoning.

What does motivated reasoning look like in practice? Consider one of the experiments which Milton Lodge and Charles Taber conducted.<sup>20</sup> These researchers got participants to sit down in front of a computer, at which they could reveal either arguments for or arguments against gun control. The participants got to pick which arguments they saw. Those who were already against gun control chose, mainly, to look at arguments against gun control. Those who were already for gun control chose, mainly, to look at arguments for gun control. They were then asked to rate the strength of the arguments. People rated the arguments they looked at – those supporting their existing position – as much stronger than did people who didn't already have the position the argument supported. And people came out of this with more extreme attitudes. Those who had initially opposed gun control were now even more opposed to gun control. Those who had initially supported gun control were now even more supportive of gun control. This kind of thing is common. People often gather, and interpret, the evidence in order to back up their pre-existing beliefs or to make their party look good. That, I'll assume, gives them rationally suspect beliefs.

Third, we turn to citizen malleability. This concerns the origins of citizens' policy preferences. Often, those preferences come from political elites. Indeed, typically, we just toe the party line. Democrats adopt the policy positions which Democratic politicians espouse. Republicans adopt the policy positions which Republican politicians espouse. Our preferences are molded by political elites. We're malleable. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this comes from the panel studies looked at by Gabriel Lenz.<sup>21</sup> A panel study is a survey in which the same participants are interviewed at multiple times. Lenz found nine panel studies in which a political issue became important between survey waves. His flagship example concerns Social Security contributions. This issue became prominent in the 2000 election, on October 3rd. That was the date

---

20 Charles Taber and Milton Lodge, 'Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,' *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006), pp.755–69.

21 See Gabriel Lenz, *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). The contemporary development of this view itself, though, owes most to John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

of the first televised debate. Bush and Gore sparred over it. Bush wanted to let people invest their social security contributions in the stock market. Gore did not. Before the debates about 70% of the public supported investing. After the debate, Gore supporters changed their positions radically. Almost all the strongest Gore supporters who learnt of his position adopted it. But those Bush supporters who had antecedently opposed investment became much more likely to favor it. In this case, the candidates' positions were unambiguously driving citizens' opinions. And this is not the only case he investigates. He looks at nine further cases. In seven of these he finds unambiguous evidence that elites were molding public opinion.<sup>22</sup>

How do elites mold our political attitudes? There are two schools of thought on the matter. The first comes out of the political science literature on heuristics and shortcuts. The idea here is that citizens are looking for cognitive shortcuts.<sup>23</sup> They're looking for ways to come to accurate beliefs without wasting too much time thinking about politics. Party cues provide an excellent shortcut. The citizen might think that their party is usually right. So simply adopting that position is a good way to get an accurate belief for low cognitive effort. Toeing the party line is, on this view, a good accuracy-goal driven heuristic. The second school is more pessimistic. It comes out of the motivated reasoning literature. We've already seen how this works. The idea is that citizens are motivated to have attitudes which align with their partisan side. When they find out that political elites on their side have a certain policy position, they do their best to convince themselves of that policy position. They *inter alia* twist the evidence to back up their side's stance. On this view, they're driven by less epistemically wholesome goals than accuracy. They just want to make their side look good, even if only to themselves.

No doubt elites exert influence via each mechanism sometimes. But when these ideas have been squared off against one another it has been the latter which wins out. The crucial test has been a test of how much mental effort party cues induce. The first idea – the heuristics and shortcuts hypothesis – suggests that party labels should make it easier for citizens to come to a policy position. It should cut down the time they have to take to work out their stance on an issue. But the second idea – the motivated reasoning hypothesis –

22 This is not the only evidence. For some experimental evidence, see Geoffrey Cohen, 'Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (2003), pp.808–22. For more observational evidence, see Adam Berinsky, *In Times of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

23 For this view, see e.g., Popkins, *The Reasoning Voter*; Lupia and McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma*, and Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody, and Philip Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).



suggests that it should take longer. This is especially so when they initially disagree with the party line. They then have to go through the laborious task of convincing themselves that their party has it right after all. Several studies have found that, in the lab, the second thing is what happens.<sup>24</sup> People take longer to come to a policy position when faced with party cues than when not faced with such cues. So no doubt elites work their influence by each mechanism sometimes. But this is some evidence that motivated reasoning is the more common mechanism of elite influence.

That sums up the salient features of the pessimistic picture of citizen cognition. We're ignorant, irrational, and malleable. I think that, if correct, this is deeply disquieting. And this disquiet is not based entirely on instrumental worries. True, it's plausible that a democracy with ignorant, irrational, and malleable citizens will usually have worse policies. But these shortcomings also seem to matter noninstrumentally. It would be bad for democratic values were the pessimistic picture true, even were it not instrumentally bad. We now turn to why that is the case.

### 3 Democratic Equality

What makes democracy noninstrumentally valuable? A currently popular answer points to equality alone. The idea is that democracy is a distinctively egalitarian system of government and this wholly accounts for its noninstrumental value. The leading contemporary versions of this view point to the relationships which such equality impacts.<sup>25</sup> Niko Kolodny, for example, thinks that relationships of social hierarchy are intrinsically objectionable.<sup>26</sup> It is intrinsically objectionable for a slave to be the inferior of a master or a lord the superior of a peasant. These relationships, he thinks, are in part constituted by inequalities of power. He defines democracy as a political system in which political power is equally distributed. So, as a constitutive matter, democracy helps prevent an intrinsically objectionable type of relationship: those of hierarchy. There are other versions of this sort of view. Daniel Viehoff thinks that

24 See Michael Petersen, Martin Skov, Søren Serritzlew, and Thomas Ramsøy, 'Motivated Reasoning and Political Parties: Evidence for Increased Processing in the Face of Party Cues,' *Political Behavior* 35, no. 4 (2013), pp.831–54; Toby Bolsen, James N. Druckman, and Fay Lomax Cook, 'The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion,' *Political Behavior* 36, no. 2 (2014), pp.235–62.

25 An alternative view stresses the expressive import of equality. See Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*.

26 Niko Kolodny, 'Rule Over None I'; 'Rule Over None II.'

egalitarian relationships, such as friendships, are intrinsically valuable.<sup>27</sup> And he thinks that such relationships are part constituted by equality of power. Thus, he thinks that democracy may constitutively contribute to an intrinsically valuable type of relationship: friendship on a civic scale. Both views, then, locate the noninstrumental value of democracy in egalitarian relationships.

Can such views fully explain why the pessimistic picture is disquieting? The main claim in this section is that they cannot. They partially, but not fully, explain our disquiet. Let's first see this with knowledge. Political knowledge is very unequally distributed. And its distribution tends to match that of other sources of advantage. For example, on average, on political matters, men know 1.35 times more than women. Rich citizens know 1.59 times more than poor citizens. White citizens know twice that of Black citizens.<sup>28</sup> Now it seems tenable to think of knowledge as a kind of power. One is in a better position to get what one wants when one knows more. So, this distribution poses a problem for democratic equality.<sup>29</sup> Yet that does not explain the entirety of the problem with political knowledge. Imagine that everyone was equally ignorant. Imagine that nobody, or almost nobody, knew anything about candidates' policies or political dispositions. Here, political ignorance poses no obvious egalitarian problem: everyone has the same (minimal) knowledge. But it still poses a problem for the noninstrumental value of democracy. There is, intuitively speaking, something noninstrumentally bad about a democracy where all citizens know very little about politics. Thus, the problem posed by political ignorance is not just one for equality.

The same points hold for irrationality. The inclination to engage in motivated reasoning is unequally distributed. At a stretch, one could see this too as constituting an inequality in power. Yet an equal but high inclination to engage in motivated reasoning would not resolve the problem with political irrationality. If all citizens were very irrational, but none more irrational than others, that does not put democracy in good shape. So the problem posed by political irrationality is not solely an egalitarian problem. Indeed, the actual distribution of political irrationality raises another issue for trying to account for the problem which these phenomena pose entirely in terms of

27 Daniel Viehoff 'Power and Equality,' in D. Sobel, P. Vallentyne, and S. Wall (eds), *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.3–37.

28 See Michael Delli-Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It*, pp.157–161.

29 This point originally comes from Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Boston: Harper and Row, 1957), ch.12.

equality. Those who are the most inclined to engage in motivated reasoning are the most knowledgeable.<sup>30</sup> This is likely because motivated reasoning is helped by knowledge. Knowing things makes it clear when you need to engage in motivated reasoning to, for example, make your party look good. If you don't know that a high deficit is bad, for instance, you have no reason to convince yourself that your party runs low deficits. This complicates any attempt to appeal to equality to explain the problem with both ignorance and irrationality. The latter, if it is a problem, will partly counteract the former. So, it doesn't seem like mere appeal to equality can explain why widespread ignorance and irrationality are problematic.

Let's turn to malleability. Here appeal to equality perhaps has more bite. Citizens' malleability gives political elites the power to mold public opinion. This, one might think, exacerbates the inequalities of power between elites and non-elites. It thus impairs democratic equality. One might propose that this explains the entirety of the problem with citizen malleability. But I doubt that that is true. The issue is that the relevant political elites are already extremely powerful. They are elected officials with government office. They make the laws, command the bureaucracy, send out armies. On the face of it, these types of power dwarf their influence over public opinion. They wield the coercive power of the state. This creates a dilemma for the proposal under discussion. On the one horn, perhaps these types of power impair democratic equality. The coercive power of elected officials sunders egalitarian relationships. But then their influence over public opinion seems relatively unimportant. Its import is dwarfed by more obvious types of elite power. On the other horn, perhaps something about elected officials means that this coercive power doesn't impair equality. Perhaps it is just because they are elected, and thus in some sense agents of ordinary citizens.<sup>31</sup> But if election disables the worry about their having coercive power, it seems like it should disable the *prima facie* lesser worry about their having influence over public opinion. So citizen malleability should pose no problem for equality after all. Thus, at worst, malleability poses a relatively minor threat to political equality. But this minor threat, I think, does not capture our full disquiet

<sup>30</sup> See Milton Lodge and Charles Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.167–68.

<sup>31</sup> For this view, see Kolodny, 'Rule over None II,' pp.317–320. I explore this issue more thoroughly in my Adam Lovett, 'Must egalitarians condemn representative democracy?,' *Social Theory and Practice*, forthcoming.

about malleability. Our malleability is deeply disquieting: its import does not pale in comparison to that of other issues.

The upshot of this is that egalitarian accounts of democracy's value don't fully explain the import of the pessimistic picture. They shed some light on it. Equality can be impaired by citizens' cognitive shortcoming. But, to fully explain this import, we need to look to a different noninstrumental democratic value.

#### 4 Democratic Autonomy

We need not assume that equality is the only source of democracy's noninstrumental value. There is value not just in citizens having equal power, but also in their determining what their government does. This is the value of self-determination, self-rule, self-government. It is natural to talk about this value in terms of autonomy. Democracy gives citizens the ability to autonomously manage their collective affairs. This is valuable in a way analogous to the value of an individual autonomously managing their personal affairs. This democratic value is, in my view, the value which the pessimistic picture imperils. If we are as cognitively ill-equipped as the picture suggests, then we are in a poor position to realize what I'll call democratic autonomy. In the rest of the paper, we'll see why that is. But we'll start by saying more about what democratic autonomy consists in.

We can make the value vivid through a couple cases. Imagine that we got rid of government by human beings. We replaced it with government by algorithm. The algorithm we replaced it with, let's stipulate, spits out perfect legislation. It institutes far superior legislation than any human government could. In this situation, citizens have no influence over the laws which govern them.<sup>32</sup> Yet it seems intuitively compelling that, if we did this, we would be sacrificing something important about democracy. But that is not a sacrifice of equality. In this case everyone has equal power: none. Rather, it is a sacrifice associated with lack of influence over the laws to which you are subject, a sacrifice associated with a lack of self-determination, self-rule, self-government.

Consider another case. Imagine that some brilliant founder wrote an unchangeable, detailed, constitution. The brilliance of the founder is so blinding that we do better following the dictates of this constitution than making decisions for ourselves. And the constitution is so detailed that it leaves us

---

<sup>32</sup> For this case, see Jake Zuehl, *Collective Self-Determination* (Doctoral Dissertation: Princeton University, 2016), pp. 18–19.

very little freedom to make any decisions anyway. Again, this gives rise to no concern about political equality. In the areas which the constitution covers, everyone has equal power: none. But such government by ‘the dead hand of the past’ sacrifices something important about democracy.<sup>33</sup> It sacrifices our having a positive influence over what the government does. The value in this is what I mean to identify as democratic autonomy.

I propose that we understand this value in terms of self-authorship. We can get a grip on this value by considering the individual case. It is valuable to be the author of your own life. This means that it is valuable for the important events in your life to manifest your intentions. Consider your romantic partner, your career, where you live. It is valuable to be with someone you chose to be with, rather than to have your partner chosen for you. It is valuable to have the career you want to have, rather than have it decided by the state. It is valuable to live where you choose to live, rather than be tossed around by the waves of fate. These things aren’t just instrumentally valuable. It’s not just that you’re likely to make better decisions about your partner or career than anyone else is. They’re intrinsically valuable. You live a better life when you are a self-author. Your life is better when the things that really matter to you are the products of your own intentions, rather than chance events or the products of someone else’s will. In other words, being the author of your own life is a valuable thing.<sup>34</sup>

Democratic autonomy is the collective form of this authorship value. Now, one might doubt that there is such a form of the value. Certainly, you don’t stand in the same relationships to democratic decisions as you do to, for example, your personal career decisions. The latter you determine; the former you have a small share of the influence over. Yet you stand in an *analogous* relationship in the two cases. The idea here is simple. We can distinguish the notions of individual and joint authorship. You are individual author of something when it manifests your individual intentions. But you are joint author of something when it manifests your joint intentions. A joint intention is just an intention which one shares with others.<sup>35</sup> When we together intend to sing a duet, paint a house, or raise a child we share a joint intention. Moreover, joint authorship

33 The term, and the point, comes from Thomas Jefferson, ‘Letter to Madison. 6 Sept. 1789,’ in J. Boyd (ed), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 15 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

34 The most important contemporary discussion of this conception of autonomy is perhaps Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). As he puts it, “[t]he autonomous person is part author of their life” (p.370).

35 See Michael Bratman ‘Shared Cooperative Activity,’ *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 2 (1992), pp.327–41. For arguments that joint intentions can be held by large groups of people

is valuable in a way which is analogous to the value of single authorship. It's not just instrumentally valuable. It's also intrinsically valuable. Your life goes better when the things which really matter to you are the product of intentions you share, just as it goes better when they are the product of intentions you have *qua* individual.

Partly, the evaluative import of joint authorship seems apparent from cases. Consider co-authoring a book, building a business with a partner, or developing a romantic relationship. In none of these cases are you the individual author of the relevant thing. You are not an individual author of the paper, business, or relationship. You are a joint author. The book's content manifests the intentions which you share with your co-writer. The business's structure manifests the intentions which you share with your business partners. The relationship's norms manifest the intentions which you share with your partner. In all these cases, this seems valuable. It seems valuable, in other words, for you to be joint author of the things which matter in your life, just as it is valuable for you to be individually the author of such things. It is valuable to be joint author of these things even when you have but a small share of the influence over their final form.

I'll take this view for granted in the rest of the paper. Its details are controversial. But the idea that democracy realizes a distinctive kind of autonomy is not particularly radical. It is the view that Rousseau advanced when he said that "[t]he people, subjected to law, ought to be its author"<sup>36</sup> and, much more recently, it is the view that Anna Stilz expresses when she says that "[o]nly if a state facilitates its subjects' collective self-determination can its enforcement powers be reconciled with their *autonomy*."<sup>37</sup> It is easy to find the view in the stuff of real-world political discourse. It is, I believe, behind Brexit campaigners' yearning to 'take back control,' behind Progressive support for direct democracy, behind Nixonian appeals to the Silent Majority. All rest on the idea that democracy's value goes beyond just a realization of equality. It involves the value of having positive influence over what government does. This value should, I'm supposing, be understood in terms of autonomy. I've given a concrete version of this idea in this section. But the general idea is all we'll need in the rest of the paper.

To proceed, what we need to notice is that no kind of autonomy is trivial to achieve. In particular, one does not enjoy autonomy, or at least not much

---

– electorates, for example – see Anna Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.120–24.

36 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1762] 1968), 2.6.10.

37 Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty*, p.90.

autonomy, purely by dint of making choices. One needs those choices to be made under certain conditions. Two such conditions will be important to us. The first is epistemic. One must know what the relevant consequences of one's choices are. If one chooses in complete ignorance, one does not choose autonomously. The second is interpersonal. One's choices, and the reasoning that leads up to those choices, must have a certain independence from the influence of others. If, for example, one does what one does due to manipulation or deception, then one's autonomy is impaired. We should understand these conditions in scalar terms. It's not that one can only be autonomous when one achieves some particular level of knowledge and independence. Rather, it's that a lack of knowledge and a lack of independence impair one's autonomy. When one's knowledge or independence is meager, one cannot enjoy much autonomy. We now spell out these points in more depth. This will reveal how they illuminate the import of citizens' cognitive shortcomings.

## 5 Knowledge and Autonomy

We begin with the epistemic condition. The basic claim here is that one is better able to make an autonomous choice when one knows more about the outcome of one's choices. Or, to put it another way, ignorance impairs autonomy. This claim seems apparent in cases.<sup>38</sup> Let's start with a personal case. Suppose that you've just graduated from college. You're deciding whether to become a banker or a philosopher. But imagine that you know very little about what either career involves. Perhaps you know that banking has something to do with money. Perhaps you know that philosophy has something to do with books. But that's it. You don't know the day-to-day of either career, nor the sorts of hours you'd work nor the type of people you'd work with. Then your capacity to choose autonomously seems diminished. In this case, you will less enjoy the value of authoring your choice than had you known more. Your ignorance impairs your autonomy.

Such cases seem equally powerful when it comes to political choices. Suppose, for example, that you're deciding who to vote for. But you don't know anything about the different candidates. You don't know what policies they support. You don't know their history. You don't know what groups they're associated with. You're severely ignorant. Then it seems to me that this impairs your ability to make an autonomous voting decision. If you had more relevant

---

<sup>38</sup> I take it also to be contained in Raz's claim that "an autonomous person is aware of their options" in Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, p.382.

knowledge, then you would be better able to choose autonomously. This again supports the idea that knowledge matters to autonomy. When you lack knowledge relevant to a choice, your autonomy is diminished.

What kind of knowledge is relevant to a given choice? There are many possible views here. But the most attractive view seems to me one that says that relevant knowledge is that which bears on which of one's options align with one's core values. Thus, few people need to know the candidates' hair colors in order to know whether to vote for them. Few people are at root committed to only electing redheads. But one needs to know some things about the candidates. Suppose that one's core values implicate policy. Then one needs to know the candidates' policy positions. If one is at root opposed to military interventionism, one needs to know their foreign policy stance. If one is at root pro-choice, one needs to know their stance on abortion. Or suppose that one's core value just concerns performance issues. One only really cares about how the economy is doing. Then, it helps to know each candidate's track record, or how competent an economic manager they have been in the past. In both cases, certain facts will help determine what vote choice best aligns with one's core values. Knowledge of these facts will help put you in a position to vote autonomously.

It is now straightforward to see how political ignorance bears on democratic autonomy. The findings underpinning the political ignorance part of the pessimistic picture are that people often get it wrong when you ask them about seemingly relevant facts. They misstate candidates' policy positions. They mischaracterize candidates' pasts. They fail to understand exactly how their political institutions work. This is clearly incompatible with their knowing these facts. To know a fact, one must at least have a true belief about it. This lack of knowledge impairs their ability to make autonomous voting choices. It doesn't eradicate it: they surely know some things relevant to their voting choice. After all, maybe how good looking each candidate is does matter a little bit to who they should vote for. But they can make a less autonomous choice than had they known more. And the more that their ignorance encompasses relevant knowledge, the less able they are to make an autonomous decision. But if they cannot make a very autonomous voting decision, then they cannot much enjoy the value of democratic autonomy.

This also explains one of the ways that voter rationality matters. Voter irrationality does not matter directly. It's not that voter rationality immediately impairs autonomy. But irrationality undermines knowledge. Even if one has a true belief, if it was arrived at irrationally then one lacks knowledge. This is not a controversial claim. It is simply the claim that justification is necessary to knowledge. To see it illustrated, reconsider the career decision case. Imagine



that you come to believe that you're best off being a banker. But you don't have any evidence for this. What you did was call up an astrologer and have them compare the positions of the celestial orbs to your date of birth. The result: you should go and work for Goldman Sachs. Now suppose that serendipity struck. For you, banking would be the more satisfactory career. Nonetheless, you clearly don't know that banking is the more satisfactory career. The fact that your belief is not supported by the evidence, that it was formed irrationally, means that it does not amount to knowledge.

Moreover, in this case, you don't seem to be in any better position to make an autonomous choice than were you to suspend judgment on what career would be best for you. Forming true beliefs through astrology doesn't put you in a better position to be autonomous. Thus, true belief is not sufficient for making autonomous choices. It really is knowledge that matters. You have to *know* about the outcomes of your choices. It is now clear why citizen irrationality impairs autonomy. Irrationality means that, very often, political beliefs are rationally suspect. They've been arrived at via motivated reasoning. This means that, true or not, such beliefs don't amount to knowledge. But it is knowledge that puts one in a position to make autonomous choices. Thus, such beliefs will not put citizens in a position to make autonomous choices. Citizens' cognitive shortcomings, then, undermine democratic autonomy in part by undermining citizens' knowledge.

Let us look at some challenges to this position. The first challenge concerns the concrete import of citizens' lack of knowledge. One might claim that "[t]he last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making ... [they] would much prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits."<sup>39</sup> If this is true, then one might think that, even if ordinary citizens knew much more about politics, they wouldn't spend their time using this knowledge. It wouldn't affect how they voted or otherwise participated politically. Yet unused knowledge would presumably not aid citizen autonomy. So, on this view, citizens' ignorance is not so important after all. Their lack of knowledge does prevent them from enjoying much democratic autonomy. But such enjoyment is already prevented by their apathy. The failure of democratic autonomy is, on this view, overdetermined; even were citizens to become well-informed, they wouldn't make autonomous choices about politics.

I believe that this challenge fails on empirical grounds. Knowledge does affect how citizens participate politically. We can see this in their vote choice.

---

39 The quote is from John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.1–2.

Consider, for example, Larry Bartels' study of how knowledge affects vote choice in American presidential elections. He uses statistical simulation to estimate the probability that each voter would have voted for each candidate, in the presidential elections between 1972 and 1996, were they fully informed.<sup>40</sup> He found that voters deviate from this probability by, on average, about ten percentage points. This is a large deviation: were they to vote entirely randomly, then they would deviate from it by just twenty percentage points. Thus, more knowledgeable voters vote differently from less knowledgeable ones. This is good evidence that voters do make use of their knowledge: it affects how they vote.<sup>41</sup> Thus, I doubt that the failure of democratic autonomy is overdetermined in quite the way this challenge suggests. Political ignorance, I think, impairs democratic autonomy despite voter apathy.

The second challenge strikes closer to the heart of my position. It rests on the claim that autonomously chosen ignorance is not autonomy destroying. Suppose that the ignorant graduate could have learnt about their relevant career options. But they choose not to do so. Then, the objection goes, their ignorance doesn't diminish their ability to make an autonomous choice. Yet this is surely the position that citizens are in. Citizens can learn about political affairs. They have every opportunity to become well-informed. And nothing forces them to reason irrationally about politics. Their reasoning could be driven by accuracy goals rather than, for example, group-serving goals. So, insofar as they are ignorant, this ignorance is autonomously chosen. And the objection claims that such ignorance doesn't impair their autonomy at all.

This claim seems to me simply false. It just isn't plausible that autonomously chosen ignorance has no effect on one's autonomy. Consider, for example, the following case. Suppose that you've deliberated long and hard about your future career. You know all about banking and all about philosophy. But the deadline approaches. It's April 15th: you have to choose whether to go to graduate school. Yet now suppose that someone offers you an amnesia pill. This pill will erase all your knowledge about both careers. You'll still have to choose careers; you just won't have any of the knowledge relevant to the choice. If you take the pill, your ability to make an autonomous choice seems diminished. You'd be in a better position to choose autonomously were you not to take the pill. So, intuitively, even autonomously chosen ignorance seems to impair the autonomy of choices.

<sup>40</sup> See Larry Bartels, 'Uninformed votes: Information effects in presidential elections,' *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no.1 (1996), pp.194–230.

<sup>41</sup> For a more recent survey of the evidence for this, see Lauri Rapeli, 'Does Sophistication Affect Electoral Outcomes?,' *Government and Opposition* 53, no.2 (2016), pp.1–24.

Yet, often, it does seem to matter that ignorance was voluntary. Can this be explained? It seems to me that it can. We first distinguish between the autonomy of a choice and the autonomy of a whole life. An autonomous life is made up of autonomous choices. But different choices contribute to the autonomy of a life to different extents. For example, autonomously choosing who to marry matters more than autonomously choosing your brand of toothpaste. Now here's the crucial point. Plausibly, how much the non-autonomy of a choice detracts from your lifetime autonomy depends, in part, on how much that non-autonomy was itself autonomously chosen. So, suppose that you've chosen to suffer an autonomy-impeding condition, like ignorance. Then, the fact that a later choice isn't very autonomous detracts less from your lifetime autonomy than it otherwise would. But that doesn't rescue the autonomy of those later choices. They remain of diminished autonomy. And that means that citizens, even if autonomously ignorant, are in a poor position to make autonomous political choices. So, the truth in this objection doesn't threaten the view that citizens' ignorance impairs their ability to choose autonomously.

Let's sum up. Knowledge requires true, rationally-based beliefs. Citizens often lack these when it comes to political matters. But, so I've claimed, a diminution of knowledge means a diminution of autonomy. Thus, we can see why these parts of the pessimistic picture matter to democratic values. They mean that citizens do not satisfy the epistemic conditions on democratic autonomy well.

## 6 Independence and Autonomy

We now turn to the independence condition. The basic claim here is that you're in a better position to make an autonomous choice when your choice is, in some sense, independent of the influence of others. As Anna Stilz puts the point, "[o]ne way of interfering with an agent's autonomy is to interfere with the authenticity of that agent's reasoning processes, through methods like manipulation, deception, brainwashing, or mind control."<sup>42</sup> The point is that certain kinds of interpersonal influence impair autonomy. You must be free of such kinds of influence in order to be able to make an autonomous choice.

Let's illustrate this with, again, the career choice case. Imagine that you've just finished your interview for Goldman Sachs. You decide to celebrate. Mid-celebration, you run into a stranger at the bar. You tell them about the difficult

---

<sup>42</sup> Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty*, p.105. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, pp.377–78 also endorses this point.

decision you have to make: is it going to be banking or is it going to be the academy? Unbeknownst to you, the stranger is your competitor. They see their chance. They ask you why you're willing to dispense with your academic dreams so easily. "Don't you have any faith in yourself?" they ask. You are drawn in. They continue to play on your pride, and sting your ego, until they convince you to go all in on the academic path. You call up the bank and say that you want to withdraw from the process. They've successfully got what they wanted (they get the job). In this case, you've been manipulated. Your choice is thus not fully autonomous. The influence of your competitor has contravened your independence.

What kinds of interpersonal influence impair autonomy? This is a key question for evaluating whether the influence which elites have over public opinion affects autonomy. Not all such influence is malign. Suppose that elites influenced public opinion through argumentative persuasion. They gave good arguments for their positions and we adopted them on the basis of these arguments. We judged and weighed the reasons which elites presented to us and reliably adopted the beliefs supported by the good reasons. This would do nothing to impair our autonomy. But that is probably not how elite influence usually works. Broockman and Butler provide some interesting evidence for this.<sup>43</sup> They convinced U.S. state legislators to send letters to constituents with whom they disagreed on a policy issue. They found that legislators, just by stating their own position, moved their constituents' opinion on the issue. They didn't need to give any argument at all. Indeed, more argument for the legislator's position didn't add anything to the persuasive effect of the letters. This is not argumentative persuasion at work. Constituents weren't being convinced of the reasons in support of their legislator's position. They were simply adopting it.

In section 2, I pointed to two ways in which elites influence citizens. On the one hand, they might just adopt elite positions as a cognitive shortcut. On the other, citizens might adopt it via motivated reasoning. I suggested that both happen, but that the latter is likely more common. Influence that goes via motivating reasoning is, I think, one of the kinds of influence that impair autonomy. This follows from a general principle: when you influence someone's attitudes via such an irrational mechanism, then that impairs their autonomy. Playing

---

43 David Broockman and Daniel M. Butler, 'The Causal Effects of Elite Position-Taking on Voter Attitudes: Field Experiments with Elite Communication,' *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (2017), pp.208–21. Cohen, 'Party over Policy' also provides evidence. He finds that elite endorsements of a policy have a huge influence on people's policy preferences, even when those endorsements don't come along with any arguments.

on someone's irrationality is sufficient to impair their autonomy. Many cases support this thought. Consider poor Othello. Iago plays on Othello's irrational jealousy and thereby induces him to murder Desdemona. Here Iago is exploiting Othello's lack of reason. This exploitation impairs Othello's autonomy.<sup>44</sup> Or consider a skillful demagogue. Imagine that the demagogue exploits the irrational fears of his audience. The audience irrationally fears some social group. The demagogue stokes this fear and justifies his grab for power by the need to resist this group. Here the demagogue is manipulating the audience. He is thereby impairing their autonomy. The general point, to re-iterate, is that when you get someone to want or believe something by exploiting their irrationality, then you impair their autonomy. But motivated reasoning is not a rational way to form beliefs. So when elites' influence exploits people's inclination to engage in such reasoning, this amounts to exploiting their irrationality. Thus, it impairs their autonomy.

Now let me emphasize the sense in which motivated reasoning is irrational. Here we must distinguish between epistemic and practical rationality. Epistemic rationality concerns how you should go about forming beliefs. Practical rationality concerns how you should go about acting, given that you have certain beliefs. Motivated reasoning needn't be practically irrational. It is, after all, usually rather nice to believe that one is on the side of the angels. If motivated reasoning helps you maintain that belief without impairing your ability to realize concrete ends, then perhaps it can be practically rational. But it is epistemically irrational. Our belief forming processes should be aimed at accuracy.<sup>45</sup> We should, epistemically speaking, be trying to gain true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. Certainly, bending the evidence in order to see our partisan side in the best light is an epistemically irrational way of dealing with that evidence. Thus, when elites influence us via exploiting our inclination to do this, they are working through our epistemic irrationality. And that impairs our autonomy no less than exploiting our irrational fears and jealousies does. Thus, a core mechanism of elite influence is autonomy-destroying.

Let's turn to influence that proceeds via cognitive shortcuts. The status of this is less clear. But I'm inclined to think that it also raises a worry. Let's bring out the worry with an example. Suppose that you meet a master rhetorician. They're eloquent and charismatic and clever. They can convince you of anything they want. They decide, on this occasion, to convince you that you

---

44 For a good discussion of this case, see Robert Noggle, 'Manipulative Actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, no.1 (1996), pp.43–55.

45 For a recent defense of this view, see Richard Pettigrew, *Accuracy and the Laws of Credence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

should eat your greens. They do this by pointing to your reasons to eat your greens. They don't deceive or misdirect you: they work through your rational capacities. You do end up thinking that you ought to eat your greens (as you should). There seems to me something unsettling about this case. After all, you're putty in the hands of this rhetorician. They decided on this occasion to work through your rational capacities. But they could have easily decided otherwise. The method by which they've influenced you does not reliably track your reasons. It seems to me that this impairs your autonomy. More generally, let's say that a mechanism of interpersonal influence reliably gives you a correct, reason-based attitude when it couldn't easily have failed to give you such an attitude. When a mechanism of interpersonal influence is not reliable in this sense, it seems plausible that that influence impairs your autonomy.<sup>46</sup>

Now here's the worry. When you believe whatever party elites tell you, because you trust those elites, you're in a similar position as when subject to the master rhetorician. You could easily have ended up with a false belief or one based on bad reasons. After all, from your perspective, this is what happens to the rank-and-file on the other side of the party line. When they trust the elites of their party, they've been led astray. Yet there but for the grace of God go you: you could easily be subject to such misguiding elites. Indeed often you are. Your same-party elites are surely not always right. Often, if you just believe what they tell you, you will form false beliefs. So, availing yourself of shortcuts looks suspect from the point of view of autonomy. It is not a reliable way to form a reasonable attitude. Even when it gives you correct attitudes based on good reasons, it could easily have failed to do so. As I've said, I'm inclined to think that this means that such reliance imperils your autonomy. If that is right, then following elite cues is not a way to preserve your independence. It is not a reliable enough method for doing as you have reason to do.

So we can now see why elite domination matters to democratic values. When elites influence citizens via exploiting motivated reasoning, this amounts to exploiting their irrationality. When elites influence citizens by giving them cognitive shortcuts, citizens' beliefs aren't reliably correct and reason-based. Both impair citizens' ability to make autonomous choices, and thus both impair their ability to realize democratic autonomy. They mean that citizens cannot be the autonomous joint authors of political affairs.

---

46 For this type of view about manipulation, see Moti Gorin, 'Towards a Theory of Interpersonal Manipulation,' in C. Coons and M. Weber (eds), *Manipulation: Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch.4.

## 7 Conclusion

Let me sum up. On my view, if the pessimistic picture is true, then this impairs democratic autonomy. Our false beliefs about political matters, and our irrational ways of forming beliefs, impair our political knowledge. This violates an epistemic condition on autonomy. Elite influence over our political beliefs and preferences impairs our independence. Thus, insofar as the pessimistic picture is true, insofar as we citizens are ignorant, irrational and malleable, that puts the achievement of democratic autonomy out of reach. It closes off one important aspect of democracy's value. Now, as I've said, I haven't defended the pessimistic picture. But I'm inclined to think that the evidence for it is fairly good. So I myself am inclined to think that our cognitive shortcomings seriously impair our ability to rule ourselves.

Now, why does all this matter? First, it has theoretical import. As I've said, some think that democracy only has value due to its connection to equality.<sup>47</sup> I've argued that this view cannot fully explain the problem with citizens' cognitive shortcomings. We need to invoke some notion of democratic autonomy. This gives us reason to reject the idea that democracy's value has its source in equality alone. Second, it has practical import. Many link the achievement of democratic autonomy to the legitimacy of the state. They think that coercion is on the face of it impermissible. It destroys freedom. How then can coercion by the state be made permissible? The idea is that if you're coerced into following your own autonomous will, then the coercion is less problematic. Thus, if the laws manifest the autonomous will of the people, coercive enforcement of those laws is less objectionable. It is more likely to be permissible.<sup>48</sup> If that is right, then citizens' cognitive shortcomings undermine the legitimacy of their states. State coercion cannot manifest their autonomous wills, because these citizens are not in a position to have an autonomous will about political matters. And that undermines their state's ability to permissibly coerce its citizens. It imperils the state's legitimacy.

Let us end with a final point about the import of this for institutional design. Some might think that one could address the deficiencies that the pessimistic picture generates by giving more power to unelected experts. One way to do this would be to let independent bodies make the decisions in some domains. Many countries, for example, let central banks decide on interest rates.<sup>49</sup> Alternatively,

47 Kolodny, 'Rule Over None I'; 'Rule Over None II.'

48 This view is defended in Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty*. I take it that it was also Rousseau's view in *The Social Contract*.

49 For a discussion of this, see Philip Pettit, 'Depoliticizing Democracy,' *Ratio Juris* 17, no.1 (2004), pp.52–65.

one could incorporate experts more deeply into the decision-making process across domains. Here the United Kingdom's House of Lords provides a model: insofar as the Lords are experts, this involves incorporating their expertise into the process of legislating.<sup>50</sup> The general idea is that one might deal with the problems generated by citizens' cognitive shortcomings by replacing electoral judgments with expert judgments.

I have two things to say about this idea. First, such reforms might help with some instrumental problems created by citizens' shortcomings. They might, for example, help with Caplan's worry: that irrational citizens make foolish policies.<sup>51</sup> But they would seem not to facilitate democratic autonomy. One doesn't give citizens autonomous control over interest rates by handing such control over to the Federal Reserve. Doing this means that the interest rate expresses the Reserve's will, not the popular will. Thus, these reforms would not seem to help with the noninstrumental problem that the pessimistic picture generates. Yet, second, the truth of that picture does matter to our evaluation of such reforms. Specifically, one weighty reason to not give more power to experts is that doing so is undemocratic. In particular, it impairs democratic autonomy. Yet if democratic autonomy is already frustrated by citizens' shortcomings, then this reason is undermined. So we have less reason to avoid ceding power to expert bodies. Now, we shouldn't overstate this point. Equality is, I think, a democratic value, and one might have egalitarian reasons to avoid granting expert bodies more power.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, this identifies a sense in which citizens' shortcomings weaken the noninstrumental case for democratic institutions. It undermines the defense of them based on the value of democratic autonomy.

### Acknowledgements

For helpful discussions of the content of this paper, I would like to thank Daniel Viehoff, Samuel Scheffler, Anthony Appiah, Jake Zuehl, Arden Koehler, Christopher Scambler, Robert Long, and Jake Nebel. For helpful written comments on the manuscript, I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for this journal.

<sup>50</sup> This alternative is a version of Thom Brooks' 'moderate democracy.' See Thom Brooks, 'Plato, Hegel and Democracy,' *Hegel Bulletin* 27, no.1 (2006), pp.24–50.

<sup>51</sup> Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, p.162.

<sup>52</sup> I take this to be Waldron's argument against judicial review. See Jeremy Waldron, 'The Core of the Case Against Judicial Review,' *Yale Law Journal* 115, no.6 (2006), pp.1346–1406.