Classical democratic theory operates on a series of fundamental assumptions about the political being: Citizens are assumed to each have a set of coherent policy preferences, each are interested in the affairs of state, each has information about the affairs of state, and lastly, each will act rationally to further their interests. Unfortunately, each of these assumptions has been called into question in recent years.

Policy Preferences

In a famous work the political scientist Philip Converse tried to assess the policy preferences of Americans. Do people have coherent sets of principles or ideas—ideologies—that guide their actions, or do they make political decisions off the top of their heads? Through a series of interviews and surveys he concluded that only about 10% of the public has what could generously be called a consistent and coherent ideology that motivated their electoral behavior. 42% were self-interested voters—meaning that they voted each issue based on how it would impact them or groups they belonged to. So whereas an ideologue opposed to more government spending might oppose a new highway, even though it would reduce their commute time to work, the self-interested voter would welcome it. 25% of the public appeared to be voting based on the “nature of the times.” If Democrats were in charge and the economy was thriving, then they supported Democrats; if Democrats led them into a costly war on the Korean peninsula, then they opposed Democrats. In other words, they read the larger issues of the day onto the political party they perceived to be in charge. Lastly, Converse found the remaining 22% of the population appeared to be basing their political choices on reasons that had “no shred of policy significance whatever.” Some voted on the personal qualities of the candidates—one was more handsome or kind or articulate than the other—while others were casting votes that made no sense to the researchers—as if they were flipping a coin to determine their vote.¹

Interest

The United States has one of the lowest turn-out rates among all industrialized counties (only about 48% of the U.S. population votes in national elections compared to 76% in the United Kingdom or 92% in Austria). But is turnout indicative of interest? While there are a number of factors influencing turn-out, decades of election surveys confirm a distressing lack of interest among American voters. Between 22% and 44% of people indicate that they really don’t care who is elected president, with nearly 5% of voters admitting that they only made up their mind on the day of the election itself. Why aren’t more people interested in politics? Some may feel powerless to influence the process, and so lose interest; others may find it distasteful or even confusing.

Knowledge

Understandably, lack of interest translates into low knowledge about politics—after all, why bother learning if one isn’t interested in voting? But at what point does ignorance begin to hamper the functioning of a democratic government? 70% of Americans...
Based on as we’ve just seen, knowledge is at best uneven, and personal preferences suspect. At least we are rational, right? Unfortunately, no. Recent years have brought a number of insights into how the human brain works, and while it is a remarkable organ, it is not without weaknesses. Perhaps most notable is how emotion—or affect—can influence the way we think. Dramatic, horrific events can worry us more and loom larger in our decision-making than those things that seem ordinary, regardless of their actual danger. For example, after 9-11 we found that a significant number of people decided to drive to their destinations rather than risk the chance of flying. Yet if one were to coolly calculate the odds of dying in a car accident versus the risk of dying in a terrorist act on a plane, they were placing themselves in far greater danger by driving.²

Nor are emotions the only problem. Nobel Prize winners Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman have shown that humans have problems calculating probabilities, weighing evidence, understanding cause-and-effect, and ignoring bias.³ In experiments where people were allowed to consider a variety of information that either confirmed or disconfirmed their own opinions, people uncritically accepted confirming evidence (confirmation bias) and were overly critical and dismissive of evidence they disagreed with (disconfirmation bias). Most distressing of all, these biases were most pronounced among the most politically knowledgeable with the most sophisticated ideologies. In short, those who best fit our idealized model of the democratic citizen were the worst at objectively weighing information.⁴

**Whither Democracy?**

Does voting make any sense in light of these problems? Four theories have been debated over the years to try and resolve this: the first is the unsatisfying conclusion that elections are essentially random events that makes little sense. It is very hard to justify having a democracy if this is true.

The second, theory holds that while there is a gradation of sophistication and information among voters, democracy doesn’t demand that everyone be informed or that everyone be an ideologue. Indeed, some political scientists have argued that there is a kind of political division of labor reflected in these

---

### What do Americans Know?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The United States is a democracy</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English not official language</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of women on the Supreme Court</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance of <em>Roe v. Wade</em></td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name all three branches of government</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name two Fifth Amendment rights</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on answers to the American National Election Study—these were year specific answers, not aggregated over time. Chart adapted from Carpini and Keeter, pp. 70-71.
differences. Extreme partisanship, they argue, “might culminate in rigid fanaticism.” But by having a certain portion of the electorate uninformed and malleable, there is an opportunity for persuasion:

Low affect [emotional attachment] toward the election—not caring much—underlies the resolution of many political problems...Low interest provides maneuvering room for the political shifts necessary for a complex society in a period of rapid change. Compromise might be based upon sophisticated awareness of costs and returns—perhaps impossible to demand of mass society—but it is more often induced by indifference. Some people are and should be highly interested in politics, but not everyone is or needs to be. Only the doctrinaire would deprecate the moderate indifference that facilitates compromise. 8

A third theory counters that though most of the electorate is uninformed about politics, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are wasting their votes. Rather, the average voter looks to those informed ideologues for cues on how they should vote. Thus people rely on experts, political parties, or even celebrities to inform policy positions and voting.

Lastly, the fourth and most recently proposed theory is that humans rely on a series of cognitive short-cuts—or heuristics—to inform their choices. One example of a heuristic might be using a candidate’s party affiliation as a short-cut to their opinions. Another might be those very emotions that seem so problematic. Many people appear to vote for the candidate that makes them feel “good,” yet there is evidence that those feelings actually reflect some shadow of rational cognition and are not just a response to the candidate’s attractiveness or charisma.

But these heuristics can “break” or “go bad” when used out of context or pushed beyond their capacity. One study found that the more an individual relied on party identification as a short-cut to candidate preferences, the worse they were at correctly indicating their senator’s roll-call vote when that senator deviated from the party position. As politically interested individuals tended to rely more heavily on heuristics than did the uninterested individuals, they, ironically, became the most misinformed when behaviors deviated from what was expected. 9

While this “low-information rationality” spares citizens the costs of fully informed rationality, and thus is less reliable, it still lends some consistency to their votes. Such an explanation for decision-making isn’t what classical democratic theory demands, but it is a rational approach to the relatively small rewards most people see themselves receiving from political participation. 10

---

4 Carpini and Keeter, p.126.
7 Taber and Lodge, p.765-767.