Title: Voter Ignorance and the Limits of Reform

Author 1: Adam F. Gibbons

Affiliation: Department of Philosophy, Lingnan University

Email: adamgibbons@ln.edu.hk

Author 2: Brian Kogelmann (corresponding author)

Affiliation: Departments of Philosophy and Political Science, Purdue University

Email: bkogel89@gmail.com

Many believe that voter ignorance threatens democracy. Consequently, ambitious institutional remedies have been proposed—epistocratic suffrage exams, foot voting, devolution of decisions to the local level, new bureaucratic agencies to inform voters, and more. There are reasons to doubt such proposals will actually improve democratic governance, however. The mistake these proposals share is a failure to recognize that voter ignorance comes in many forms, and that existing remedies may target the wrong kinds of ignorance. We develop a new typology of voter ignorance and show that every existing proposal leaves certain types of ignorance unaddressed. If it is these neglected forms of ignorance that drive bad democratic outcomes, then the entire portfolio of remedies that philosophers have proposed is superfluous—they literally make no progress towards better governance. We end by briefly sketching how to think about the problem of voter ignorance going forward.

Keywords: political epistemology; voter ignorance; voter competence; epistocracy; democratic theory; public choice theory.

Acknowledgements: Adam Gibbons received funding from the Early Career Scheme of the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong for the project “Why not Epistocracy?” (ECS Project Number 23607124). The authors used AI tools for copyediting. The substance of the article—its thesis, arguments, examples, and so on—was developed solely and entirely by the authors.

Voter Ignorance and the Limits of Reform

1. Introduction

In modern democracies, many voters lack basic political knowledge—from the names, credentials, and policy platforms of candidates to which party controls the government and even the fundamental structure of their own political system. Such ignorance plausibly explains many of the bad decisions democracies make, prompting a range of proposals to mitigate its harmful effects. These include simple measures to make it easier for voters to acquire political information to more radical calls to remove ignorant voters from the electorate (§2). Such proposals are expensive, contentious, and in some cases morally dubious. They are worth pursuing only if they would actually improve democratic governance. We argue in this paper that there are compelling reasons to doubt they will.

The problem is that voter ignorance comes in many forms, and existing remedies may target the wrong ones. The literature identifies three kinds of politically relevant ignorance: ignorance about candidates and their platforms, about the economics and social science needed to evaluate policy, and about the basic structure of government (§3). Various proposals aim to ameliorate one or more of these. But there is a fourth kind of ignorance—one that public choice economists have long recognized, but that philosophers have overlooked—which may do more to explain bad democratic outcomes than the other three. We call it *deep legislative ignorance*. It is ignorance of the intricate details of the bills, regulations, and administrative rules actually implemented by governments (§4).

Which kinds of ignorance do existing remedies actually address? To answer this, we introduce a new conceptual framework (§5). Political knowledge, we argue, varies along two dimensions: how difficult it is to acquire and how transient it is. Mapping different kinds of political knowledge onto this framework reveals a striking result: though existing proposals can remedy other forms of voter ignorance, they do nothing to combat deep legislative ignorance specifically (§6).

A troubling implication follows. If deep legislative ignorance is the primary driver of bad democratic policy—as public choice theory gives us reason to suspect—then the entire portfolio of remedies political philosophers have proposed is superfluous (§7). That is, existing proposals may literally make no progress toward better democratic governance. Political philosophers who are concerned with voter ignorance may, in short, be looking in the wrong direction entirely. We end the paper by offering some rough thoughts on how to think about the problem of voter ignorance going forward.

2. Three Solutions to Voter Ignorance

Voters in modern democracies are ignorant. Ilya Somin (2013: 17) summarizes the empirical literature: "the reality that most voters are often ignorant of even very basic political information is one of the better-established findings of social science. Decades of accumulated evidence reinforces this conclusion." For example, only 19 percent of Americans can name the three branches of government, only 25 percent know the length of a Senator's term, and only 30 percent know the substance of the Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 70-71). Social scientists explain this ignorance by arguing that it is

rational (Downs 1957). Being informed is costly and the chances of changing the outcome of an election through voting are miniscule. Informing yourself so you can vote well fails to pass a cost-benefit test; it is rational to be ignorant.[1]

Democracy means that the people rule, but the empirical literature on voter ignorance suggests they might not be up to the task. What to do? There are a few different responses. One says voter ignorance actually isn't a problem. Through a variety of different mechanisms—the Condorcet jury theorem, the Hong-Page theorem, deliberation, and so on—democracies transform ignorant votes into good policies (Schwartzberg 2015). While much is compelling in this literature, we set it to the side and focus on those who believe voter ignorance is a serious problem to be addressed.

Responses fall into three camps. First is what we call the *epistocratic voting strategy*, which addresses the problem of voter ignorance by either removing ignorant voters from the electorate or by keeping them in the electorate but attenuating the impact of their votes in some way. There are several ways to do this.

The simplest is *restricted suffrage* (Brennan 2016: 211-212; Jones 2020: 106). According to this proposal, all individuals are required to pass a suffrage exam or acquire some relevant education credential before they can vote. Another example is *plural voting* (Mill 2015: 292-293; Brennan 2016: 213). Everyone gets to vote, but more votes are given to those who possess political knowledge, demonstrated by passing an exam or achieving some relevant education credential. The most complicated epistocratic voting strategy is *enlightened preference voting*

[1] Some deny the standard rational ignorance explanation and propose alternatives. See Gibbons for relevant discussion (2023).

(Brennan 2016: 220-222; Ahlstrom-Vij 2022). Using complex statistical techniques, this voting method aims to simulate how an electorate would vote were everyone fully informed. This simulation, not the actual votes cast, decides the election.[2]

We call the second camp the *voter empowerment strategy*. The idea here is that we incentivize voters to inform themselves by increasing the benefits of being informed. Recall the standard explanation for voter ignorance: the costs of being informed are high, but the benefits are low. If the benefits of being informed increase, then acquiring political information may become rational.

The most straightforward approach to voter empowerment involves providing monetary incentives to voters to pass a civics exam (Lupia 2016: 174-177; Somin 2023: 299-300). Other proposals are more involved. For instance, one prominent strategy makes it easier for people to "vote with their feet"—that is, to leave one political jurisdiction and enter another (Somin 2013: 122; Friedman 2019: 317). The standard rational choice explanation for voter ignorance is that a single vote is unlikely to be decisive. But an individual's decision to move jurisdictions is inherently decisive: it directly changes her circumstances. This ability to take decisive action increases the incentive to acquire political information, since voters can actually act on what they learn. Opportunities for foot voting can be expanded through institutional structures such as federalism and polycentricity (Somin 2020: 45-66) as well as economic redistribution to make relocation more affordable (Friedman 2019: 334).

A final voter empowerment strategy devolves power to the local level. Fewer voters make up the electorate in local elections, which means the probability that a single vote decides

[2] For a detailed overview of epistocracy, see Kogelmann (2025).

the election increases. Given the increased value of a single vote, the hope is that voters will be more willing to acquire political information to ensure they vote well. Though many of the Confucian meritocrats are skeptical of democracy, they are more sanguine about its prospects at lower levels of government (Bell 2015: 168-175; Bai 2020: 70-71). This is due (in part) to the fact that voters are more likely to be informed in local elections (Bai 2020: 70).

The third and final camp we call the *voter education strategy*. Instead of increasing the benefits of being informed—as the voter empowerment strategy does—this approach reduces the costs. If being informed is cheap enough, voters will inform themselves, even if the benefits to doing so aren't substantial.

Marie Collins Swabey (1931) was an early advocate of this. She recommended "the development of a great national bureau of publicity," whose job is "the collection of information on all socially important subjects and its dissemination to the country at large by means of the various scientific and artistic devices of the day" (Swabey 1931: 106). The agency's job would be to publicize important political information in easily digestible formats. In a similar vein, Michele Giavazzi and Zsolt Kapelner (2024: 728) argue that the state should do things like offer "informative classes on issues relevant to voting and public decision-making or upcoming ballots."[3] Others advocate we pursue voter education not through a new bureaucracy or state-run classes, but with more palatable journalism (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 275; Dewey 2016: 204; Lupia 2016: 63).

3. The Varieties of Voter Ignorance

[3] See also Giavazzi (2024: 159)

Voter ignorance, many worry, threatens democracy. But ignorance of *what*, exactly? Most voters don't know all the elements of the periodic table or the details of Kant's epistemology, but it's hard to see how ignorance of these matters threatens democracy. Other forms of ignorance plausibly do cause problems, however. We need a precise account of *what exactly* voters need to know for democracy to function well.

Jason Brennan describes one kind of knowledge that he and others (e.g., Somin 2013: 18; Gibbons 2021: 196) think crucial for democracy to function well:

> Knowing the answers to the easy questions is not enough to be well informed about politics. To be well informed, citizens also need to know the candidates' policy platforms, how candidates are likely to vote in Congress, what policies the candidates are likely to support, whether these votes are likely to matter or not, and how much influence the candidates are likely to have if they win (Brennan 2016: 28).

Call this *electoral knowledge*. It is knowledge of the basic facts of an upcoming election: who's running for office, their credentials, what policies they support, what party currently controls the government, and so on. *Electoral ignorance* can lead to bad outcomes. If voters don't know what the candidates stand for, they may accidentally vote for someone who promises to prosecute an unjust war or encroach on civil liberties.

Brennan highlights another kind of knowledge he and others (e.g., Somin 2013: 51; Gibbons 2021: 192) think important:

> To know whom to vote for, one needs to know more than what candidates stand for, what the candidates have done in the past, or what they intend to do in the future. A well-informed voter needs to be able to assess whether the candidates' preferred policies

> would tend to promote or impede the voter's favored outcomes. So, for example, suppose I know candidates Smith and Colbert both want to improve the economy, but Smith favors free trade, and Colbert favors protectionism. I can't make a reasonable choice between them unless I know whether free trade or protectionism is more likely to improve the economy; to know that, I need to know economics (Brennan 2016: 28).

Call this *social scientific knowledge*. It is knowledge of the social sciences needed to assess candidates' policy platforms: the economic impact of immigration, free trade, price floors and ceilings, and more. Voters' *social scientific ignorance* can lead to bad outcomes. For example, if voters don't know free trade is good for economic growth, then they might mistakenly vote for a protectionist.

Somin highlights a third type of political knowledge he and others (e.g., Galston 2001) think is essential for democracy to function well:

> … many voters are ignorant not just about specific policy issues but about the basic structure of government and how it operates. Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy. A 2006 Zogby poll found that only 42 percent of Americans could even name the three branches of the federal government: executive, legislative, and judicial (Somin 2013: 19).

Call this *civic knowledge*. For voters in the U.S., this includes knowledge of the three branches of government, how officials are selected to these branches, and more. If *civic ignorance* is widespread, voters "cannot easily assign credit and blame for policy *outcomes* to the right office-

holders" (Somin 2013: 19). A civically ignorant voter might blame their governor for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, for example.

Do these three types exhaust the kinds of voter ignorance that threaten democracy? No. In the next section we introduce a fourth kind—one the philosophical literature has largely ignored—that warrants concern.

4. Deep Legislative Ignorance

Philosophers concerned with voter ignorance worry about electoral, civic, and social scientific ignorance, arguing they explain many democratic failures. Many social scientists offer a different account, however. While voter ignorance still plays an important role in explaining why democracies adopt bad policies, it is a different *kind* of ignorance than philosophers typically emphasize.

Public choice theory is a branch of economics that applies the tools and methods of economics to the study of politics (Buchanan 1999b: 48). Before the public choice revolution, economists focused their attention on *market failures*, or cases where markets fail to deliver efficient outcomes. After the public choice revolution, economists began also focusing on *government failures*, or cases where governments fail to deliver efficient outcomes (Buchanan 1999a). Public choice theorists rarely emphasize electoral, social scientific, and civic ignorance among voters as significant causes of government failure. They blame *rent seeking* (Tullock 2005; Lindsey and Teles 2019). Rent seeking is behavior aimed at capturing economic benefits by influencing government rather than engaging in productive activities in the market. For example, a firm seeks rents when it asks for regulations that it can more easily comply with than

its competitors, effectively limiting its competition. An association of business owners, such as corn farmers, seek rents when they lobby for corn subsidies.

Individuals and organizations seek rents in many ways. Sometimes they do so by contributing to political candidates' electoral campaigns (Munger and Denzau 1986; Morton and Cameron 1992). This is essentially a *quid pro quo*: we help you get elected, you give us favorable legislation. Interest groups engage in organized grassroots lobbying by alerting and informing their members to pressure legislators (Olson 1971; Lohman 1998). Coordinated by an interest group, all the corn farmers call their representatives and say: "if you don't vote for the corn subsidy, we'll vote for your challenger in the next election." There is also regulatory capture (Stigler 1971; Dal Bó 2006). Regulators know the firms they regulate are potential future employers and so regulate these firms with this in mind. Finally, think tanks and interest groups often help understaffed legislators write policy (Hall and Deardorff 2006). The aid they provide is biased, of course.

Most policies that result from rent seeking are unpopular. Few think firms should face less competition and that corn farmers should receive lavish subsidies. So, why are they passed? The answer is that voters are ignorant, but a different kind of ignorance than electoral, social scientific, or civic. In particular, voters are ignorant of the specific details of the policies passed by legislatures and the regulations issued by administrative agencies. Many bills passed by Congress are over 1,000 pages. The pandemic relief bill passed in December 2020 was close to 6,000 pages (Broadwater et al. 2020). It's easy to hide special legislative favors in these bills. The average voter will never read them (indeed, legislators who vote for them don't read them). Moreover, executive agencies issue several thousand new regulatory rules each year (Carey 2019: Figure 1). The average voter cannot apprise themselves of even a handful, thus allowing

for regulations that hand out special favors. Call knowledge of the intricate details of the policies and regulations passed by governments *deep legislative knowledge*. To succeed, rent seeking depends on *deep legislative ignorance*.

Deep legislative ignorance can lead to bad policies. For example, voters suffer from sugar tariffs that raise the price of a household staple and cause other market distortions because they simply do not know the tariff exists; sugar tariffs are typically amended to farm bills in the eleventh hour at the behest of lobbyists (Grier et al. 2023). As another example, housing affordability is becoming a pressing issue in the United States (Kogelmann 2026a). Housing continually grows more expensive because strict zoning policy makes the supply of housing inelastic. Land use policy is made at local community meetings that few people even know are happening. Those who participate and shape housing policy are thus a vastly unrepresentative sample of the population (Einstein et al. 2020).

Like electoral, social scientific, and civic ignorance, deep legislative ignorance among voters is rational. While each special interest policy and regulation might cost a voter less than $100 per year in higher prices or taxes, learning about even a single policy or regulation would take hours of research. To learn about every single policy or regulation would be an extraordinarily difficult task even for somebody with no other responsibilities. Since the cost of becoming informed exceeds the benefit, voters rationally choose to remain uninformed about most policies and regulations that harm them in small ways. This rational ignorance, combined with the strong incentives of the beneficiaries to lobby for these special favors, explain why democracies often implement bad policies.

5. Political Knowledge: A New Conceptual Framework

The union of electoral, social scientific, civic, and deep legislative knowledge constitutes a diverse set. We now introduce a novel way to carve it up. This new conceptual scheme for classifying political knowledge reveals the strengths and limits of the epistocratic voting, voter empowerment, and voter education strategies.

Political knowledge can vary across two dimensions that have received insufficient attention. First, political knowledge varies in terms of how difficult it is to acquire. Some political facts—like the three branches of government or a candidate's core policy positions—require minimal time investment and cognitive effort. They can be grasped quickly, with little mental strain. Acquiring other forms of political knowledge is more difficult. Social scientific facts are an example. Anyone who has taught introductory economics to undergraduate students knows just how much repetition it takes for them to understand comparative advantage. Comparative advantage is a relatively elementary concept; think of how much work it would take for the average voter to learn the concepts, theories, and facts taught in graduate-level economics courses.

Second, political knowledge can vary in terms of how transient it is. Here we refer to how long the information is useful to the voter. Information that is very transient may be useful to her only for the next few weeks; durable information will help her vote for the rest of her life. Information about the basic structure of government (i.e., civic knowledge) is extremely durable because it changes infrequently. Much social scientific knowledge, such as supply and demand, is also very stable. On the flipside, examples of political information that are highly transient

include electoral knowledge (which changes with every cycle) and deep legislative knowledge (which changes with the implementation of every new bill or regulation).

These distinctions are visualized in Figure 1. Each point on the plane represents a piece of political knowledge. The y-axis represents the difficulty of acquiring political information, with positions further north indicating greater difficulty of acquisition and positions further south indicating greater ease. The x-axis represents the temporal persistence of political information, with points further east indicating more transient knowledge and points further west indicating more durable knowledge.

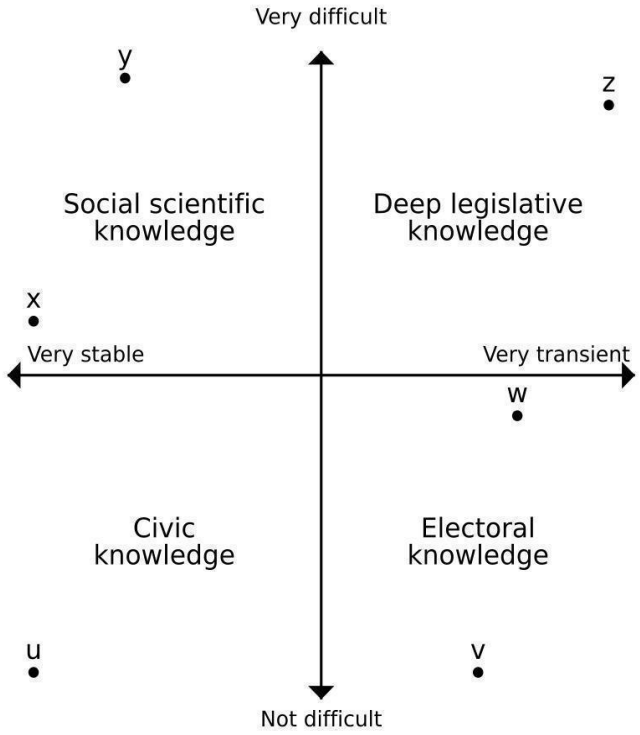

Figure 1

Different categories of political knowledge tend to (but do not always) cluster in distinct regions of the plane. Civic knowledge predominantly occupies the south-west quadrant, characterized by its stability and accessibility. Point *u*, for instance, represents knowledge of the three branches of government—a fundamental concept taught in high school civics that has remained constant throughout American history. Electoral knowledge, by contrast, typically clusters in the south-east quadrant, being similarly accessible but highly transient. An example is point *v*, which represents knowledge of the party affiliations of who is running in the next election.

Social scientific knowledge is often more difficult to acquire than civic and electoral knowledge, yet much of it is considerably durable. This positions it primarily in the north-west quadrant. Point *x*, which represents the basic theory of supply and demand, is an example. It is tricky to learn but stands the test of time. Deep legislative knowledge, occupying the north-east quadrant, presents both maximal difficulty and transience. The complexity of following Congressional proceedings, parsing thousand-page bills, and tracking continuous legislative developments makes this knowledge particularly challenging to acquire. Moreover, the information changes fast: once a spending bill is passed, legislators start on the next one. An example is point *z*, which is all the details of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020.

While this conceptual framework groups different types of political knowledge into general regions, variation exists within each category. Not all civic knowledge shares the same level of durability and accessibility, not all electoral knowledge is equally transient or readily acquired, and so on. Point *y*, the Modigliani-Miller theorem, demonstrates this variation. Though it falls within the social scientific category like point *x*, it occupies a distinct position. Its location

further north reflects its greater complexity—most readers will probably need to Google the theorem and will probably find its meaning and implications obscure. Its slight eastward shift from *x* acknowledges that while it remains an important theoretical contribution, it lacks the foundational status of supply and demand.

When we describe these tendencies—civic knowledge clustering in the south-west, deep legislative knowledge in the north-east, and so on—we are not suggesting rigid boundaries or absolute classifications. Exceptions defy these patterns. Point *w*, representing NYC's 2024 crime rate, illustrates this. Though it constitutes social scientific knowledge, it diverges from the typical north-west positioning. While interpreting these statistics requires more sophistication than understanding basic civic facts or electoral information—placing it north of points *u* and *v*—it is less demanding than mastering theoretical principles like supply and demand. Its transient nature, reflected in its eastern position, stems from the fact that its relevance diminishes as newer statistics emerge.

6. The Scope of Existing Solutions

Whether a proposal to mitigate the harms of voter ignorance is ultimately effective depends on (*i*) what kinds of ignorance it can remedy and (*ii*) which kinds actually cause the various problems we face in modern democracies. We now explore these issues in greater detail. We begin in the current section by asking: what kinds of voter ignorance do our three strategies successfully mitigate?

6.1 *Epistocratic voting*.

Epistocratic voting strategies either remove from the electorate or limit the influence of ignorant voters. Suffrage exams are the preferred method. We imagine something like this: whenever someone registers to vote, they must take an exam. How they score determines whether they can vote or how their vote is weighted (depending on which version of epistocratic voting we adopt), like how individuals must take and pass a driving test before they are issued a driver's license. Like a driving test, we don't imagine this happening frequently. Perhaps it happens once every ten years.

With infrequent exams, it's only reasonable to test political knowledge on the western side of the plane (mostly civic and social scientific knowledge), which represents relatively stable information. If we give out licenses to vote for the next ten years, then we should ensure voters have the information they need to vote well for that time period, not only for the next six months. Driving tests ask about stable traffic laws, not which roads are currently closed. Furthermore, exams will be most effective when they focus on the south-west quadrant specifically—civic knowledge—although some very basic social scientific knowledge can be included as well (e.g., supply and demand). This is because problems arise as we move north and test information that is increasingly difficult.

When exams test difficult knowledge, the number of people who do well on the exam decreases, and the electorate shrinks. Small electorates, though, negatively impact voters' incentives. Most tend to vote for what they think is in the national interest (Brennan 2016: 227). The explanation for why is that the instrumental value of voting selfishly is negligible in large electorates due to low decisiveness, so expressive preferences are incentivized (Brennan and Lomasky 1997). But in small electorates, the higher probability of decisiveness increases the

expected payoff of selfish voting, outweighing expressive motives. This is supported by experimental evidence (Feddersen et al. 2009). To prevent selfish voting, suffrage exams cannot test political knowledge that is too far north.

We thus have an argument for why epistocratic voting is most effective at targeting political knowledge in the south-west quadrant: infrequent testing means testing knowledge too far east is pointless, while concerns about small electorates means testing knowledge too far north is dangerous. We think the point about small electorates and selfish voting is difficult to contest, but there is a simple reply to our other point: increase the frequency of exams! If they occur more frequently, then we can test political knowledge further east, expanding the scope of voter ignorance that epistocratic voting can successfully address. For example, we could have a suffrage exam every election.

There are problems with this proposal. First, it would be difficult to implement in many electoral systems. While frequent suffrage exams might be feasible in systems with fixed election dates (like the U.S., where a November 3, 2026, election allows extensive planning for October testing), they pose serious implementation challenges in parliamentary systems. In these systems, elections can be triggered suddenly when governments lose confidence votes, sometimes occurring just weeks after being called. This uncertainty makes it difficult to develop, organize, and administer suffrage exams, given the significant time needed to determine exam content and handle logistics.

Second, frequent testing is costly. Developing rigorous exams, training administrators, securing testing facilities, and managing scoring systems all require resources (Kogelmann and

Carroll 2024: 10-11).[4] While a test every ten years is manageable, conducting exams every two years or annually would multiply expenses.

Third, frequent exams may distort the political process. Determining the content of suffrage exams will inevitably spark intense political conflict, with politicians striving to craft tests that advantage their own voters and disadvantage others. Defenders of epistocratic voting recognize this (Brennan 2016: 223).[5] Such battles over test content would be far less destructive if fought once in a generation rather than every two years. The problem becomes even more acute when considering whether to test electoral knowledge. Questions probing civic and social scientific knowledge—identifying the three branches of government or explaining supply and demand—may generate modest controversy. But including questions about an upcoming election—such as the precise nature of Trump's proposed immigration policy or the performance of the Biden administration—can trigger political warfare.

Frequent exams, for these reasons, are a nonstarter. But if exams are infrequent, then they cannot test much of the eastern part of the plane. And because we don't want to shrink the size of the electorate too much, they cannot test much of the northern part, either. Consequently, epistocratic voting can only remedy civic ignorance and some relatively low-level social scientific ignorance.

6.2 *Voter empowerment*.

[4] For further analysis of the expense of epistocratic voting, see Andersson (2026).

[5] For deeper analysis of these issues, see Gibbons (2025).

Voter empowerment strategies attempt to remedy voter ignorance by increasing the benefits of acquiring political knowledge. However, with all three voter empowerment strategies—paying voters to pass exams, devolving issues to the local level, and increased opportunities for foot voting—there are limits to how rewarding we can make the acquisition of political information. As a result, voter empowerment strategies will only be able to remedy some types of voter ignorance.

Consider first proposals to offer voters monetary incentives to score highly on political knowledge exams. These exams are typically envisioned by their proponents as applying to civic knowledge (i.e., the south-west quadrant). We grant that offering each voter a modest sum of money—say, $1,000—could incentivize some of them to acquire information in the south-west quadrant. Yet the scope of this approach remains inherently constrained. Note first that it would make little sense to test knowledge on the eastern side of the plane unless tests were frequent. But as we noted in our analysis of epistocratic voting strategies, frequent suffrage exams come with many downsides. These arguments apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to frequent incentivized knowledge tests as well.

In response, we can offer exams testing knowledge in the north-west part of the plane (i.e., social scientific knowledge). This knowledge is difficult to acquire, however, so the benefits given to voters must be substantial to incentivize them. At some point, as we move sufficiently north, "only infeasibly large amounts of money" could prompt voters to acquire such knowledge (Gibbons 2023: 15). How much would you need to pay a typical voter to learn the kind of material found in an advanced undergraduate-level economics course? Significantly more than $1,000, is our guess. Incentivizing voters to acquire moderate to advanced social scientific knowledge likely fails to pass a cost-benefit analysis. For these reasons, this voter

empowerment strategy works best to incentivize knowledge acquisition in the south-west quadrant (i.e., civic knowledge), and perhaps some southern parts of the north-west quadrant (i.e., low-level social scientific knowledge).

Now consider the proposal to devolve more issues to the local level. Fewer people vote in local elections, so the probability that a single vote is decisive increases. The hope is that increased decisiveness incentivizes voters to cast their ballots with greater care than they do in national elections, leading them to acquire political information. The logic of the argument is directionally correct—all else equal, increased decisiveness should result in more informed voters—but it is an empirical question just *how decisive* a vote must be to incentivize knowledge acquisition. Empirically, research shows that U.S. voters demonstrate similar levels of voter ignorance in both local and national elections (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 208; Shaker 2012: 532). Under current conditions, increased decisiveness in local elections fails to encourage information acquisition.

The proposal, though, is to devolve more issues to local elections to increase their importance. Perhaps the problem isn't insufficient decisiveness at the local level, but rather that local issues aren't high stakes enough to motivate voters to acquire information. Even if a vote had a 100% chance of being decisive, the person casting the vote might remain uninformed about issues they consider trivial—for instance, what biology textbook to adopt for an eighth-grade science class.

This response faces two challenges. First, whether the current problem with ignorance in local elections stems from low decisiveness or low stakes remains unclear; it could be that adding more important issues to the local level won't matter if the level of decisiveness remains

insufficient. This is an empirical question we cannot address. Second, even supposing the issue is low stakes, there are limits to what issues can be devolved to the local level. Many issues—like monetary policy, national defense, etc.—have significant spillover effects that make local control impractical. Indeed, it is unclear to us which (if any) high-stakes issues could be devolved to lower levels of government without creating significant negative externalities. For these reasons, we are skeptical this voter empowerment strategy can incentivize *any* political knowledge acquisition at all.

Turn now to foot voting. This strategy says that if we increase individuals' opportunities to exit political jurisdictions and enter new ones, voters will search for and acquire information that may be relevant to their decision to move to another jurisdiction. Exactly what knowledge individual voters acquire depends on what motivates their search for a new jurisdiction. In some cases, they will be motivated for non-political reasons, such as warmer weather, proximity to family, etc. In these cases, we should not expect foot voting to lead to the acquisition of any political knowledge.

In other cases, political considerations will motivate a voter to exit one jurisdiction for another. A voter might be unhappy with the quality of public schools in her district. Before she moves, she will spend a great deal of time researching schools in nearby jurisdictions that are feasible for her to move to, given her other constraints. Because her decision to move, unlike voting, will have a definite impact on her life, the benefits of acquiring information about rival school districts are immense. She will not be deterred from acquiring information in the northern area of the plane. If she needs to read some technical social science comparing school performance, she will. If she needs to look up a few provisions in an education bill, she will. We

also see no reason for her to focus only on durable information. If transient information on the eastern part of the plane is relevant to her decision, she will acquire it.

From what we've said so far, one might think that foot voting incentivizes knowledge acquisition of the whole plane. This is incorrect. In principle, it can incentivize knowledge acquisition *anywhere* on the plane, but in practice it will incentivize knowledge acquisition only in the *narrow domain* relevant to the voter's decision of whether to exit her current jurisdiction. The voter's motive to find better schools can lead her to acquire very narrow bits of highly technical social scientific and deep legislative knowledge, and it may motivate her to acquire narrow bits of electoral knowledge as well. But this approach will not lead her to acquire any other political knowledge. If her decision to exit is based on school quality, she has no reason to learn about trade policy or foreign affairs.

What does this mean for the problem of voter ignorance more generally? Our voter will be able to vote well when it comes to issues of education policy, but not on much else. If confronted with two candidates, perhaps she can reliably pick the one with a better education policy, but she may still pick someone with disastrous foreign or trade policy. Foot voting thus encourages the acquisition of *narrow pockets* of political information all over the plane, but not much beyond that.

6.3 *Voter education*.

Voter education strategies remedy voter ignorance by lowering the costs of acquiring political knowledge. In principle, such measures could focus on all four kinds of political knowledge. They are most promising for information in the southern part of the plane, where the

information is already relatively accessible and could be made even more so with the right presentation. For example, social media accounts can create infographics that explain the three branches of government or introduce political candidates. Voter education strategies, however, are likely to be ineffective for the northern regions of the plane. Specifically, we argue that the necessary simplification that educational strategies entail come with serious costs for these kinds of political information.

First, there are limits to how much we can simplify complex information. Consider comparative advantage. While a bureau or journalist could state that most economists believe that free trade benefits all parties, explaining *why* it does requires understanding opportunity costs, the effects of the division of labor, the importance of extensive markets, and more. Our students struggle with these concepts after weeks of study. They cannot be reduced to soundbites without loss of meaning.

Second, simplification of complex information is more prone to distortion by political bias. Decisions about what details to omit and how to present information can be driven by partisan motives rather than educational goals. These partisan motives can be conscious or latent. For example, when explaining trade policy, a politically motivated bureau or journalist might emphasize job losses in specific industries while omitting data about overall consumer benefits from lower prices. These kinds of misleading presentations depend on these issues' inherent complexity. It is more difficult to explain the three branches of government or the powers of Congress in a biased manner.

Third, there are limits to how much we can simplify large *volumes* of information. This is especially relevant for deep legislative knowledge. A social media summary of a 1,000-page bill must necessarily omit most of the bill's content. And as with complex information, summaries of

large amounts of information can be misleading, whether deliberately or not. An infographic summary of a 1,000-page healthcare reform bill, for instance, might highlight insurance subsidies for one demographic while omitting increased costs for others, or it could emphasize the reduced price of healthcare without mentioning that the bill would also shrink a patient's network of available doctors.

Voter education strategies may have some positive impact on the southern part of the plane, increasing voters' civic and electoral knowledge. However, we are skeptical it can remedy voter ignorance in the northern part, failing to increase voters' social scientific and deep legislative knowledge.

7. Remedying Voter Ignorance: A Reassessment

The prior section examined the kinds of voter ignorance that our three strategies can mitigate. The results are summarized in Table 1. The first thing to note is that some of our strategies are *substitutes*. For example, limiting the influence of ignorant voters and paying voters to pass knowledge exams address the same kinds of ignorance. A second implication is that some of our strategies are *complements*. For example, paying voters to pass knowledge exams and repackaging political information jointly address a wider swath of voter ignorance than either strategy addresses on its own. But the key takeaway is that some forms of voter ignorance—most notably moderate to advanced social scientific ignorance and deep legislative ignorance—are not addressed by any existing strategy. Even if all strategies were implemented simultaneously, substantial voter ignorance would remain, which could result in significant policy failures.

Strategy		Political Knowledge Acquired
Epistocratic voting	Suffrage exams	Civic and low-level social scientific knowledge
Voter Empowerment	Pay voters to pass knowledge exams	Civic and low-level social scientific knowledge
	Devolve issues to local level	Possibly none
	Increase opportunities for exit	Very narrow pockets on specific topics across all four types
Voter Education	Repackage information	Civic and electoral knowledge

Table 1

But wouldn't eliminating civic, electoral, and low-level social scientific ignorance yield substantial benefits? It's hard to say, for we do not know which forms of voter ignorance are responsible for which policy failures. Almost any bad policy, after all, admits multiple causal explanations. Consider an example. Many who worry about voter ignorance also embrace free trade, decrying protectionism (Somin 2013: 59; Brennan 2016: 145, 156, 193). For the sake of argument, we grant this is the correct normative position. Many democracies do indeed place restrictions on free trade, however. Why?

Electoral ignorance might explain it. Voters might not know the details of candidates' trade policies. They might not know which parties tend to support free trade and which parties are protectionist. As a recent example of this, if you search "Trump tariff" using Google trends, you find a spike in people searching for this term immediately *after* Trump won the 2024 Presidential Election on November 5, 2024, suggesting that many voters did not know the details of Trump's trade policies *before* the election. Social scientific ignorance can also explain it.

Voters might have false beliefs about free trade. They might believe free trade is bad for growth, but the opposite is true.

Or maybe deep legislative ignorance explains it. Domestic industry seeks protection from international competition. In exchange for campaign contributions, politicians implement protectionist policies. Voters don't know about this, because the tariff is buried in a 1,000-page bill that they never read. Moreover, when they pay higher prices on the protected goods, it's not clear to them why this is happening; they are ignorant that a tariff on those goods exists. Finally, civic ignorance might explain it. Voters might not understand how trade policy is made. As a result, they vote for a presidential candidate who says he will impose tariffs, believing he lacks the authority to do so. In fact, the chief executive has significant unilateral powers over trade, delegated by Congress.

Which forms of voter ignorance are responsible for which policy failures is therefore often unclear. Nor is it clear how to empirically resolve this ambiguity. This is a different task from simply measuring voter ignorance, since ignorance can be present without being causally efficacious. Voters may be ignorant of the economics of free trade, for example, but in a counterfactual world in which they possess that knowledge, they might still support protectionist politicians for entirely different reasons (e.g., due to their deep legislative ignorance). To establish that a particular form of ignorance causes a particular policy failure, we would need to show not merely that the ignorance exists, but that mitigating it would change political outcomes. We are unaware of any empirical work that accomplishes this, and we struggle to see what empirical strategy could reliably do so.

Thus, we simply do not know how much good would result from implementing existing strategies to mitigate civic, electoral, and low-level social scientific ignorance. It is possible these

reforms would eliminate many bad democratic policies. It is possible they would have a small effect. Indeed, it is possible that even if all existing solutions were implemented simultaneously, they would literally make no progress toward good policy.

This uncertainty should make us hesitant to pursue the proposed reforms to mitigate voter ignorance because they are not costless. Many proposals—such as suffrage exams, paying voters to acquire information, or creating new bureaucratic institutions—would be expensive to implement. Others, such as increased federalism or devolving policy decisions to lower levels of government, may generate undesirable side effects. Excessive interjurisdictional competition, for example, could trigger a "race to the bottom." Finally, some proposals—particularly those that exclude certain individuals from the electorate—carry significant moral costs (Kogelmann and Carroll 2024: 12–13). Bearing these costs (and others) to secure what may be little to no benefit seems difficult to justify.

What, then, should we do? We see three options. The first is to develop policies that ensure voters acquire moderate to advanced social scientific knowledge as well as deep legislative knowledge. If such policies could be devised and implemented alongside existing strategies, then all major forms of voter ignorance would be mitigated. In that case, we would no longer need to worry that existing strategies fail because they target the wrong forms of ignorance. By eliminating *all* forms of voter ignorance, we would eliminate the uncertainty surrounding which forms of ignorance are causally responsible for bad policy. The difficulty here is that this strategy requires that we identify policies that are actually capable of remedying moderate to advanced social scientific ignorance and deep legislative ignorance. At present, we have no plausible proposals for accomplishing this.

The other two paths forward begin from a different premise: that we should abandon the project of trying to mitigate voter ignorance. Given that we do not know how to mitigate some forms of voter ignorance—moderate to advanced social scientific ignorance and deep legislative ignorance—perhaps the better approach is to design political institutions that do not depend on informed voters to function well.

One way to do this is to eliminate voters. This is the approach taken by Confucian meritocrats, who argue that political leaders should be selected through nondemocratic mechanisms such as examinations (Bai 2020: 75), records of public service (Bell 2015: 104), or peer selection (Chan 2014: 108). Lottocrats adopt a different selection mechanism but arrive at a similar conclusion. They argue that political leaders should be selected by lot rather than through elections (Guerrero 2014; 2024; Landemore 2026). These approaches are not without their own difficulties. A variety of objections have been raised against both Confucian meritocracy (e.g., Bagg 2018; He and Warren 2020; Mang 2020) and lottocracy (e.g., Lafont and Urbinati 2024; Landa and Pevnick 2025; Kogelmann 2026b). At the very least, though, because political leaders are not chosen by voters, the quality of voter beliefs is irrelevant to the functioning of the system. This is the *voter elimination strategy*.

A second approach retains elections but seeks to design institutions—particularly at the constitutional level—that encourage political actors to behave in broadly desirable ways, or at least prevent them from behaving in especially harmful ways. This is the approach favored by many public choice economists who, recall from §4, motivated our interest in deep legislative ignorance (Brennan and Buchanan 2000). Because voters cannot be relied upon to possess the knowledge necessary to reward good and punish bad behavior, public choice theorists argue that

constitutional rules should be designed so that political actors have incentives to behave appropriately regardless of how voters cast their ballots. Some examples:[6]

- Constitutionally ban the state from passing legislation that targets specific industries, allowing only economy-wide regulation (Buchanan and Congleton 2003). For example, tariffs for specific industries—such as sugar—are impermissible; the state can only legislate a general tariff rate.
- Constitutionally limit the size and scope of government through devices such as balanced-budget requirements or caps on government spending as a percentage of GDP (Buchanan 1995).
- Constitutionally require politicians to rely only on public services—such as public schools and public hospitals—whenever they are available (López-Guerra 2017).
- Constitutionally tie politicians' compensation to certain country-wide performance indexes, such as GDP growth, literacy rates, the Gini coefficient, or others (Juarez-Garcia and Schaefer 2023).
- To limit the undue influence of donors and special interest groups, constitutionally require legislators to vote by secret ballot when they vote on legislation (Kogelmann 2021: ch. 2).

This is only a small sample of the many ways constitutions can be designed to encourage desirable political behavior in the face of ignorant voters. Like the voter elimination strategy, this approach sidesteps the problem of voter ignorance by reducing the extent to which political

[6] For more proposals, specifically from those working in the public choice tradition, see Kogelmann (2022: §4).

outcomes depend on the quality of voter beliefs. Rather than attempting to create informed voters, it seeks to render voter ignorance less consequential. This is the *constitutional insulation* strategy.

Given the failure of the epistocratic voting, voter empowerment, and voter education strategies to address the varieties of voter ignorance, we believe that the two alternatives just described—the voter elimination and constitutional insulation strategies—deserve the bulk of political philosophers' attention. Both approaches abandon the attempt to create a sufficiently informed electorate and instead seek to design political institutions that can function well despite widespread political ignorance among the population. The only other option, one we do not think is especially promising, is to identify ways to mitigate the forms of ignorance that currently resist existing remedies: namely, moderate to advanced social scientific ignorance and deep legislative ignorance.

Works Cited

Ahlstrom-Vij, Kristoffer. 2022. "The Case for Modelled Democracy." *Episteme* 19: 89-110.

Andersson, Alexander. 2026. "In Defense of the Jury Argument." *Inquiry* (Online First).

Bagg, Samuel. 2018. "The Power of the Multitude: Answering Epistemic Challenges to Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 112: 891-904.

Bai, Tongdong. 2020. *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Daniel A. 2015. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brennan, Geoffrey and James M. Buchanan. 2000. *The Reason of Rules: Constitutional Political Economy*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Brennan, Geoffrey and Loren Lomasky. 1997. *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Broadwater, Luke, Jesse Drucker, and Rebecca R. Ruiz. 2020. "Buried in the Pandemic Aid Bill: Billions to Soothe the Richest." *The New York Times* (22 December 2020). URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/22/us/politics/whats-in-the-covid-relief-bill.html.

Buchanan, James M. 1995. "Clarifying Confusion about the Balanced Budget Amendment: How and Why We Got Here." *National Tax Journal* 48: 347-355.

Buchanan, James M. 1999a. "Politics, Policy, and the Pigovian Margins." In *The Collected Works of James M. Buchanan, Vol. 1*: 60-74. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Buchanan, James M. 1999b. "Politics without Romance: A Sketch of Positive Public Choice Theory and Its Normative Implications." In *The Collected Works of James M. Buchanan, Vol. 1*: 45-59. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Buchanan, James M. and Roger D. Congleton. 2003. *Politics by Principle, Not by Interest: Towards Nondiscriminatory Democracy*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Carey, Maeve P. 2019. "Counting Regulations: An Overview of Rulemaking, Types of Federal Regulations, and Pages in the *Federal Register*." *Congressional Research Service Report* R43056.

Chan, Joseph. 2014. *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dal Bó, Ernesto. 2006. "Regulatory Capture: A Review." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 22: 203-225.

Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dewey, John. 2016. *The Public and its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2020. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feddersen, Timothy, Sean Gailmard, and Alvaro Sandroni. 2009. "Moral Bias in Large Elections: Theory and Experimental Evidence." *American Political Science Review* 103: 175-192.

Friedman, Jeffrey. 2019. *Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galston, William A. 2001. “Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 217-234.

Giavazzi, Michele. 2024. “Political Equality and Epistemic Constraints on Voting.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 52: 103-250.

Giavazzi, Michele and Zsolt Kapelner. 2024. “The State’s Duty to Foster Voter Competence.” *Episteme* 21: 719-732.

Gibbons, Adam. 2021. “Political Disagreement and Minimal Epistocracy.” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 19: 192-201.

Gibbons, Adam. 2023. “Political Ignorance is Both Rational and Radical.” *Synthese* 202: 61.

Gibbons, Adam. 2025. “Epistocracy and the Problem of Political Capture.” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 39: 19-42.

Grier, Kevin, Robin Grier, and Gor Mkrtchian. 2023. “Campaign Contributions and Roll-Call Voting in the U.S. House of Representatives: The Case of the Sugar Industry.” *American Political Science Review* 117: 340-346.

Guerrero, Alexander. 2014. “Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42: 135-178.

Guerrero, Alexander. 2024. *Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, Richard C. and Alan V. Deardorff. 2006. “Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy.” *American Political Science Review* 100: 69-84.

He, Baogang and Mark E. Warren. 2020. “Can Meritocracy Replace Democracy? A Conceptual Framework.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46: 1093-1112.

Jones, Garrett. 2020. *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Juarez-Garcia, Mario I. and Alexander Schaefer. 2023. “Public Servants.” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 20: 79-110.

Kogelmann, Brian. 2021. *Secret Government: The Pathologies of Publicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kogelmann, Brian. 2022. “Public Choice and Political Equality.” In *Wealth and Power: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Michael Bennett, Huub Brouwer, and Rutger Claasen: 67-84. New York: Routledge.

Kogelmann, Brian. 2025. *Political Meritocracy in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kogelmann, Brian. 2026a. “Autonomy, Zoning, and Gentrification.” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 25: 109-132.

Kogelmann, Brian. 2026b. “Sortition and Cognitive Ability.” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* (Online First).

Kogelmann, Brian and Jeffrey Carroll. 2024. “There Is No Right to a Competent Electorate.” *Inquiry* (Online First).

Lafont, Cristina and Nadia Urbinati. 2024. *The Lottocratic Mentality: Defending Democracy against Lottocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Landa, Dimitri and Ryan Pevnick. 2025. “Should We Be Lottocrats?” *Free & Equal* 1: 424-444.

Landemore, Hélène. 2026. *Politics Without Politicians: The Case for Citizen Rule*. New York: Thesis.

Lindsey, Brink and Steven M. Teles. 2019. *The Captured Economy: How the Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lohmann, Susanne. 1998. “An Information Rationale for the Power of Special Interests.” *American Political Science Review* 92: 809-827.

López-Guerra, Claudio. 2017. “Equal Subjects.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 45: 321-355.

Lupia, Arthur. 2016. *Uninformed: Why People Seem to Know So Little about Politics and What We Can Do About It.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mang, Franz. 2020. “Political Meritocracy and its Betrayal.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46: 1113-1126.

Mill, John Stuart. 2015. *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, edited by Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morton, Rebecca and Charles Cameron. 1992. “Elections and the Theory of Campaign Contributions.” *Economics and Politics* 4: 79-108.

Munger, Michael C. and Arthur T. Denzau. 1986. “Legislators and Interest Groups: How Unorganized Interests Get Represented.” *American Political Science Review* 80: 89-106.

Olson, Mancur. 1971. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shaker, Lee. 2012. “Local Political Knowledge and Assessments of Citizen Competence.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76: 525-537.

Somin, Ilya. 2013. *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Somin, Ilya. 2020. *Free to Move: Foot Voting, Migration, and Political Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Somin, Ilya. 2023. “Top-down and Bottom-up Solutions to the Problem of Political Ignorance.” In *The Epistemology of Democracy*, edited by Hana Samaržija and Quassim Cassam: 287-315. Routledge.

Stigler, George J. 1971. “The Theory of Economic Regulation.” *The Bell Journal of Economic and Management Science* 2: 3-21.

Swabey, Marie Collins. 1931. “Publicity and Measurement.” *Ethics* 41: 96-114.

Tullock, Gordon. 2005. *The Rent-Seeking Society*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.