

Episode 6. Our problem isn't voter fraud, it's voter ignorance and incompetence.

Welcome to philosophy for the real world. I'm Professor Thomas White.

This is the first episode in which we're going to venture into the practical side of *social and political philosophy*. So first, a bit of theory.

A fundamental question that comes with living in a community is "*Who's in charge?*" The challenge is to balance the need for *some kind of legitimate authority*, on the one hand, with *respecting human rights—especially personal freedom*, on the other. Modern democracies, having rejected dictatorships and royal monarchies, handle this challenge by what's called "social contract theory."

### Social contract theory

The basic idea of social contract theory is that we all *formally agree* to the conditions under which we live. We specify our *rights*. We describe our *responsibilities*. We say what a government *can* and *cannot* do. Members of a community thus enter into *a contract* with each other.

Documents like the Mayflower Compact and the U. S. Constitution are two examples of such formal agreements. (For now, we'll skip over the fact that in both of those cases, those documents were drafted only by White men and reflected seriously unethical prejudices.)

When we're talking about societies being made up of millions of people, it's obvious that there are all sorts of practical problems connected with getting everyone's consent to the terms of an agreement. Contemporary social contract theory handles this is by saying that one way we register our agreement is by *voting*. That is, when we vote, each of *us agrees to the terms of the contract* and *to accept the will of the majority*.

### Free and fully informed

Now, for any contract to be valid, certain conditions need to be met. First, we must *freely choose* to enter into the agreement. We can't be coerced or manipulated. Second, we must *understand the terms of the agreement*. We must be fully informed about what we're agreeing to. We also must be *competent* to make such an agreement. For example, we don't allow children or people who are cognitively impaired to enter into contracts.

So, agreements must be *free*, and we need to be *fully informed*. If those conditions aren't met, *it's not a valid agreement*.

That's all the theoretical background we need for now, so let's get to the practical side of things.

### Social contract theory and voter ignorance

Every culture seems to have a variety of myths or fictions that persist despite the fact they're clearly *not true*. Most are probably harmless—like the idea of the tooth fairy. However, one *harmful* fiction hangs on in American society despite the complete absence of evidence—the idea that there is a significant amount of *voter fraud*. We're told that people who aren't entitled to vote are doing so, they're affecting the outcome of elections, and we need mechanisms to prevent this. Like most conspiracy theories, however, there's no evidence for this.

The idea that voters should present a particular type of *identification* is the latest restriction on voting being advanced. But it's important to remember that this is only the most recent attempt to limit who can vote. In the past, we've seen voting limited to men, property owners, Whites, and people who can read. Such restrictions have historically been used to preserve an unfair

distribution of power. Because there is no evidence that voter fraud is in fact a problem, it's hard not to conclude that the goal of Voter ID requirements is to make voting more difficult for the groups most likely to be affected—Americans who are Black, Native, or elderly, and students. That is, it would make minority rule easier.

However, there *is* one *genuine* threat to our elections—*voter ignorance*. I believe that there are millions of Americans casting ballots who, given the requirements of social contract theory, have no business voting. And they have no business voting because *they don't understand the terms of the agreement*. That is, the problem with our elections isn't voter *fraud*, it's voter *ignorance*. If you're ignorant about what you're voting on, you're clearly not *competent* to be casting a ballot.

If we were to draw up a simple version of the agreement that we accept by voting for candidates in a national election, it might be something like this.

- “I understand that I am voting in a process that determines who will hold specific federal offices with clearly identifiable rights and responsibilities that are delineated by the Constitution.
- I am casting my vote freely.
- I understand the policy implications of my vote. The winning candidates will likely enact laws or policies that will have an important impact on millions of people. I understand those issues well enough to cast an informed vote *for* or *against* those laws or policies.
- I agree to respect the will of the majority.”

Now, remember that for a contract to be valid, people involved must *understand* it. They must be fully informed and understand the terms of the agreement. I maintain that is not the case, which makes these individuals not *competent* to vote.

### Voter ignorance

Let's just look at the tip of the iceberg.

- First, most voters don't even understand *the kind of government* they're voting for. That is, they don't understand the rights and responsibilities of the offices the candidates are seeking. Only 25 to 30% of Americans can pass the *citizenship* test.<sup>1</sup> Little more than a *third* can name even *one* right protected by the First Amendment. Only about a *third* can name even *one* branch of government. Only a *quarter* can name all *three* branches of government.
- Second, most voters don't know enough about *science and technology* to cast an informed vote about policies related to these areas.<sup>2</sup> Americans' knowledge of general science is embarrassing. A quarter of us think the Sun goes around the Earth. Little more than half accept evolution. Slightly more than that think the Big Bang did *not* happen. Underscoring the social and political implications of such ignorance is what NASA calls "civic scientific literacy"—that is, "the ability of a citizen to find, make sense of, and use information about science or technology to engage in a public discussion of policy choices involving science or technology." As NASA points out that, "this is a skill that is especially

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<sup>1</sup> <https://citizensandscholars.org/resource/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/03/28/what-americans-know-about-science/>

important in democratic societies.” Sadly, not even *a third* of Americans possess this.<sup>3</sup>

- Specifically as it relates to the issue of *global climate change*, while three-quarters of Americans finally accept it’s happening, 40% still doubt that it’s caused by humans. And despite record temperatures and extreme weather events, 15% deny it’s happening altogether. However, research by climate scientists settled the issue in 1990, and 97% of climate scientists agree that global climate change is real and human caused. (In the 1970s, even scientists for the petroleum industry accurately predicted this.)<sup>4</sup>
- Next, Americans’ abilities in *math, reading, and critical thinking* are poor. The most recent results from an international assessment of the intellectual abilities of adults—the OECD Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies—show that when it comes to literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, most Americans have, at best, the skills of elementary school students. Almost 90% are unable to solve an 8<sup>th</sup> grade *math* problem. Worse still, in the last 10 to 15 years, we’ve gotten *worse*.<sup>5</sup>
- Finally, even if we look just at how well-informed Americans are about events they witnessed, millions of Americans get things wrong. As many as *a third* believe that the 2020

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<sup>3</sup> [https://science.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NASACSLin2016Report\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://science.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/NASACSLin2016Report_0_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/>

election was stolen—even though there is *no* evidence to support the idea.<sup>6</sup> And this is particularly striking because perhaps the best backing for the idea that the 2020 election was *fair* comes from the Fox News Decision Desk. Yes, the *Fox* Decision Desk.

What it means.

The polite and diplomatic way of describing our situation is that the American electorate is “low information.” The most blunt way of putting it is that we’re “dumb as ...” Well, you can fill in the blank.

We live in a society with a specifically designed government. We live in complex times. In modern elections, voters are asked to decide on issues that have important implications regarding science, technology, the economy, the power of the government, the preservation of democracy, the welfare of future generations, and the protection of individual rights. But it’s fair to say that millions of voters lack the necessary information or cognitive skills to make an informed judgment. And in the absence of knowledge, that means they’re easily manipulated—and that’s a dangerous situation.

In fact, the dangers associated with voter ignorance are so considerable they raise the question of whether citizenship should be enough to entitle someone to vote. Some might argue that if we require a license to drive a car, for example, we should do the same with voting.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/tablet/2024/01/01/dec-14-18-2023-washington-post-university-maryland-poll/>

The point of this episode is simply to point out the problem of voter ignorance. I'm not recommending any solution. However, it seems obvious to me that it should be a point of pride to every voter that, at the very least, they should be able to pass the citizenship test—which, by the way, you can easily find online to test yourself.

So, what am I leaving you as the *practical* insight we get from looking at our current situation through the lens of social contract theory? It's a *question*. Are you OK with the fact that our elections—especially the close ones—are decided by people with the education and intellectual skill set of third graders?

One final point. You might have been surprised that I pointed to the work of the *Fox* decision desk as one of the best reasons to accept the 2020 election. I meant it. I'll explain this in another episode. But you might find it an interesting challenge to figure this out on your own.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White. This has been philosophy for the real world.