

Democracy's Pin Factory: Issue Specialization, the Division of Cognitive Labor, and Epistemic Performance

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Abstract: This article describes how issue specialization through deliberative institutions called “issue publics” can improve the quality of democratic decision making. Issue specialization improves decisions by instantiating a cognitive division of labor among the mass public, which creates efficiencies in decision making and grants large groups of average citizens a scalable advantage over small groups of even the smartest and most capable individuals. Issue specialization further improves decisions by capturing issue-specific information, concentrating it within the specialized deliberative enclaves of issue publics, and refining citizens’ issue preferences. These advantages are brought to bear in wider democratic politics and policy through information shortcuts and through the specialized electoral incentives of representatives. The article responds to concerns about political ignorance, polarization/partisanship, rent seeking, and socioeconomic bias and argues that issue specialization can provide a valuable brake to polarization yet needs institutional supplementation to engage marginalized citizens and combat bias.

In *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016) marshal a vast body of empirical evidence to show that democracy lacks the kind of informed citizens needed for it to govern rationally. Though this view is familiar to scholars of American politics and public opinion, political theorists have only recently begun to consider what this evidence means for democratic theory, with some agreeing with Achen and Bartels that the evidence is devastating (Brennan 2016; Somin 2013). These critiques are strengthened by the recent development of epistemic democracy, one of the most active areas of research in democratic theory (Schwartzberg 2015). At its heart is an instrumental theory of legitimacy by which a system of government is said to be legitimate on the basis of the quality of its decisions or outcomes (Estlund 2008; Landmore 2013). David Estlund, for instance, argues that democracy must derive at least some legitimacy from the quality of its decisions, opening the door for bad decisions to undermine democratic legitimacy. The

combination of epistemic theory and the empirical findings fuel what I call the *epistemic challenge*: that democracy may not be justified because the ignorant citizens composing it will reliably steer policy toward disaster.

This challenge is broadly familiar in the history of political thought, yet two mutually reinforcing features mark out this newest iteration as especially worrisome. First, theorists’ endorsement of instrumentalism makes it seem that even democracy’s champions might abandon it in the face of the right evidence. Second, invoking social scientific evidence lends the challenge a veneer of scientific validity, supplying for some precisely the evidence needed to confirm epistemic doubts and, in contrast to earlier iterations, making it seem like more than just elitist prejudice.

In this article, I present an underappreciated mechanism of collective wisdom—by which cognitively average individuals can, taken as a group, make better decisions than even the smartest and most informed citizens,

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individually or in small groups¹—based on issue specialization through deliberative enclaves called “issue publics.” Though this epistemic mechanism does not entirely answer the epistemic challenge, it responds to it in the same instrumental terms in which it is put and avoids appeals to democracy’s intrinsic worth, which critics might view as evading the question. I hope that issue specialization enters the debate over the wisdom of democracy alongside promising epistemic mechanisms like diversity. I also aim to show that issue specialization is a promising subject for renewed empirical investigation since topics discussed here, such as the specialization of citizens’ political knowledge, need more study.²

It must be emphasized, however, that this mechanism is broadly Hayekian in its operation, rather than Condorcetian; it does not promise right answers but rather helps inform decisions by gathering information widely dispersed in society. My modest claim is therefore that issue specialization makes democratic choices more informed, not that it makes democracy “truth tracking” or leads to optimal decisions. At best, it may eliminate some of the worst options by defining a broad top set among which informed citizens disagree. Like diversity, issue specialization does not render bad policy impossible but merely less likely.

Because this article engages deeply with empirical evidence, I must clarify the status of the claims I make. One might wonder, for instance, whether I use the evidence to contend that issue specialization through issue publics is something that *currently* happens in democracies or whether it is an aspiration that *could* improve democratic performance after reform. My response is both. It is generally agreed that issue publics (which instantiate issue specialization) exist at least to some degree, but not necessarily to the extent required to generate the epistemic performance I suggest. This makes issue specialization both something that can potentially explain the excellent performance of many democracies today, as well as a realistic ideal toward which we might aspire. I therefore highlight how existing evidence is consistent with or

positively supports issue publics, with the main purpose of illustrating the conditional claim that *if* we made issue specialization more central to our expectations of citizenship and democracy, the potential exists for it to do good epistemic work.

The Cognitive Division of Labor in Democracy

In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith claims that the specialization of tasks in an economic division of labor allows for great advances in productivity and the alleviation of scarcity (Smith 2008). In this section, I analogize Smith’s claims to issue specialization in a division of the cognitive labor involved in making democratic decisions and argue that issue specialization generates an epistemic advantage for large groups over smaller ones, even if the latter are made up of the smartest or most competent individuals.

Consider the task facing citizens trying to make democratic decisions—that is, decisions about what policies to enact or who should have political power. This is conventionally understood to require citizens to consider and learn about every possible issue, figure out what the best policy is regarding each issue, and then trade off those policies against each other to construct an optimal political program (Beerbohm 2012). Then, in representative democracies, citizens must further consider which party or candidate most closely matches that program, bearing in mind that further trade-offs are often necessary since none are likely to be a perfect match.

This presents citizens with an immensely complex task, akin to an individual manufacturing, say, a modern car. But, like making a car, the difficulty of the task can be alleviated by breaking it up into smaller pieces, just as in Smith’s pin factory. Democracy’s pin factory, I argue, is found in breaking up and specializing the task of democratic choice through issue specialization and, to a lesser extent, by functional differentiation.

Issue specialization is the first and most powerful element of this division of labor (Beerbohm 2012, 180–81; Elkins 1993).³ If we use a spatial metaphor and think of all the potential issues on the political agenda as occupying space on a landscape, then issue specialization operates

¹Epistemic democrats argue that mechanisms like the Condorcet Jury Theorem, the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem, and inclusive deliberation help democracy deliver good policy (Estlund 1994; Hong and Page 2004; Landemore 2013).

²The idea of an issue-based division of labor is hardly new as an empirical hypothesis. Philip Converse (1964) coined the term *issue publics* to refer to the idea. The subsequent literature is often thought to offer mixed empirical support for them and is fragmented (Gershkoff 2006, 24; Hutchings and Piston 2011, 581). Although the only two book-length discussions of the idea substantially advance empirical understanding of the phenomenon, neither sufficiently engages democratic theory (Elkins 1993; Hutchings 2003).

³Eric Beerbohm and Thomas Christiano discuss the possibility of a cognitive division of labor in democracy (Beerbohm 2012; Christiano 2015). However, both emphasize functional differentiation and, despite suggestive comments, leave the other dimension of divided labor undeveloped. Mark Warren offers an account resembling that elaborated here, yet his sketch is also not well developed, nor is it offered as a response to the epistemic challenge (Warren 2002).

by dividing that space into limited parcels corresponding to specific issues and having particular groups attend to each area. This vastly simplifies the task of coming to informed decisions (Lupia 2006, 227). Instead of becoming informed about every possible issue and trading off between them, members of each specialized group need only become informed about a single area and make their decisions on the merits of that issue.

This specialization also allows members of these groups to develop a kind of *issue expertise* through surveillance of news and familiarity with the facts, organizations, and coalitions surrounding it.⁴ This is analogous to the dexterity Smith argues workers develop through the economic division of labor. In particular, specialized citizens are likely to have identified trustworthy groups or individuals from whom to take informational cues, reducing the costs of staying informed (Lupia 1994). This expertise enables them to do a better job than others at judging the performance or promises of candidates on that issue.

Likewise, by concentrating on limited issue areas, citizens gain *issue focus*, which eliminates the costs of following every twist and turn of political events and learning about entirely new issues every few weeks. This is analogous to the elimination of changeover costs from one task to another highlighted by Smith. Issue focus also alleviates worries of activist fatigue arising from being pulled in several directions at once by a fragmented political agenda. Finally, by specializing and focusing, citizens are able to make maximally efficient use of the limited time, attention, and resources they can devote to politics, improving the “productivity” of their “citizenship time.”

The complexity of the task is further simplified by another division of cognitive labor: functional differentiation. This is familiar in democratic theory and consists in dividing labor between individuals with different but complementary roles in a democratic system, in the way that the functions of representatives, activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens mutually complement each other (Christiano 2015; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). In this way, the task facing ordinary citizens is made even more tractable. Not only do they focus their attention on a limited share of the overall issue space, but they also share the burdens of surveilling and making decisions about that space with others fulfilling different roles.

The two dimensions of divided labor work together, yet issue specialization is primary. We can see this by imagining the functional division of labor replicating itself within each of the specialized issue areas, as activists,

journalists, and citizens specialize by issue, along with civil society. It may seem that functional differentiation is doing the work, but it must be remembered that it only comes into play on a field that has *already* been differentiated by issue. Issue specialization easily falls out of notice because it defines the ground over which first-order political contestation occurs. It tends to disappear into the background because we take it for granted in any particular political debate. Though both kinds of division of labor are at work, the main source of epistemic merit is the topical division of labor that divides the decision task into limited parcels of issues.

One question arising from the analogy between the economic and democratic division of labor is this: What mechanism aggregates the specialized work of these groups? In factories, aggregation happens spontaneously because the output of each specialized worker serves as input for the next step in production. But there is no obvious analogue among groups attending to different issues. In this account, the main agents of aggregation are representatives and political parties. As discussed below, in seeking election and building coalitions, these actors look to issue-specialized groups for electoral support and for information about the sorts of policies they should advocate. Thus, aggregation mainly occurs through governing and competing to do so (e.g., constructing electoral platforms).

If this account is correct, it creates a scalable advantage for mass publics over individuals and small groups because they cannot specialize in an analogous way. Individuals must decide using only the scarce attention and limited ability they individually possess. Small groups can, of course, specialize—there are, after all, Secretaries of Defense, Commerce, Education, and so on—but this specialization is severely limited by numbers and the broad diversity of issues. No matter how informed or sophisticated an individual or small group is, they will be importantly blinkered by their inherent cognitive limits. They can only admit a finite number of issues as important enough to command their direct attention. As a result, they will neglect many other important issues. A democratic public specialized by issue faces no such limits. Mass publics can be endlessly subdivided such that every issue has its specialists. Within this group of relative specialists, moreover, there is a further division of labor along the axis of functional complementarity, between ordinary citizens, activists, experts, and so forth. Democracy thereby reaps epistemic gains from specialization at a scale no individual or small group can match.

One might ask what is specifically democratic about this mechanism since it might seem to be primarily about expertise and interest groups. The answer is that ordinary

⁴Alex Guerrero mentions that his issue-specific, lottery-selected legislatures have this advantage, but he does not connect it to specialization or to a division of labor in the mass public (2014, 158, 170–71).

citizens—not just elites—are cultivating issue expertise and that it is the *openness* of democratic processes of aggregation and deliberation that mobilizes this distributed expertise, whereas nondemocratic or epistocratic institutions more closed to popular input cannot.

The epistemic potential highlighted in this section makes issue specialization's relative neglect in both theoretical and empirical research lamentable, and it is one aim of this article to (re)ignite interest in it. Yet the discussion heretofore has been quite abstract, and some readers may wonder how issue specialization could be realized—or studied—empirically. The answer lies in a phenomenon from the study of public opinion called issue publics.

Issue Publics as Deliberative Enclaves

The abstract idea of issue specialization is instantiated empirically in specialized deliberative enclaves called *issue publics*. In this section, I discuss issue publics and highlight two ways they bolster the epistemic performance of democracy in addition to the gains of specialization.

An issue public consists of all the individuals and civil society organizations especially interested in a particular political issue (Converse 1964).⁵ Because they include everyone interested in an issue, issue publics span the spectrum of opinion about it and contain substantial disagreement. This is not to say that issue publics will necessarily represent all *possible* views about an issue, but rather those prevailing at a particular time. They are thus not univocal, but instead constitute deliberative arenas where an issue in all of its complexity is the subject of shared scrutiny and debate.⁶ Disagreement is important because it differentiates issue publics from pluralist interest groups (Neuman 1986, 30–39). Whereas interest groups are united by the pursuit of a particular agenda or material interest, issue publics are united solely by taking an interest in an issue in the sense of thinking it important. Members may disagree about the issue in all of its particulars—about what policies should be adopted,

⁵Converse does not conceive of civil society groups as constitutive parts of issue publics, nor does subsequent empirical work. I include them because what is distinctive about issue publics from the epistemic perspective is their specialization, which they share with civil society groups. Also, such groups are woven into the fabric of issue publics through their participation in the issue-specific flows of information occurring within issue publics.

⁶Though issue publics are in an important sense deliberative institutions, they should not be confused with deliberative mini-publics. Whereas mini-publics are small and deliberately organized so as to be representative, issue publics might consist of millions of people and are self-selected, being emergent structures in the mass public.

who has the better position, or even what the issue itself encompasses—and so cannot normally organize collective action like lobbying, though *parts* of issue publics may do so.

Because issue publics are constituted by people who see a particular issue as especially important, they constitute sites of *enclave deliberation*. Viewing them this way reveals two further epistemic advantages.⁷ Enclave deliberation occurs among likeminded individuals, or individuals who share some deliberation-relevant locus of identity or interest. Issue publics are enclaves in that members share a belief that a particular issue is important, yet they need not agree to anything further.⁸ They can be said to deliberate in the sense that some members speak in the public sphere about the issue, whereas others notice, uptake, and consider it substantively—that is, they deliberate internally about it—and may also discuss it with others.

The first advantage that viewing issue publics as deliberative enclaves reveals is that they function as *issue-specific information sieves* that concentrate all socially available information about an issue in the enclave. This follows from Zaller's theory of the survey response with respect to citizen learning. The Reception Axiom of the Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model states that “the greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue” (Zaller 1992, 42). The more interested we are in an issue, the more likely we are to hear and understand information about it. This means that members of issue publics are likely to be relatively well informed about their issue compared to others due to the tendency of those interested in an issue to uniquely uptake information from the wider environment about it.

At the level of issue publics as a whole, this reveals them as *networks* of individuals who uptake socially available information in precisely this way. As a unit, an issue public functions as an issue-specific information sieve constantly running through the social information

⁷Viewing issue publics deliberatively answers concerns about how issues are to be defined and thus whether issue publics are incoherent due to indeterminate boundaries between issues (Somin 2013, 106). The scope of issues are determined deliberatively, in ways that are always provisional and open to contestation. This means, for instance, that the issue of religiously-affiliated charities or hospitals might be framed either in terms of religious liberty or as a public good, depending on which makes sense in the circumstances.

⁸Discussions of enclave deliberation are often concerned with group polarization, whereby deliberation among like-minded individuals leads them to adopt extreme views (Sunstein 2009). Disagreement within issue publics makes this unlikely because there is no shared opinion toward which to polarize.

environment. Like a fisherman's net, an issue public sifts through the sea of information flowing through society and captures all the bits relevant to the issue. This information is shared and stored among the issue public's members, constituting it as a specialized, enriched information environment capable of deepening the factual basis of the wider deliberative system.

The concentration of information within issue publics gives rise to a further epistemic advantage by improving the preferences of issue public members. One of the most important functions of deliberation is as a way to launder and improve preferences, making them more worth inputting into a decision procedure. Seen as deliberative enclaves, issue publics work as spaces for the clarification and improvement of issue-specific preferences through critical encounters with the facts. Thus, issue publics allow for the preferences of those interested in the issue to be developed, refined, and crystallized in informed ways, subsequently enabling them to enrich wider public opinion, as discussed below (Karpowitz, Raphael, and Hammond 2009, 582; Sunstein 2009, 152).

In sum, much of the epistemic power of issue publics comes from being sites of enclave deliberation. Due to deliberative processes, these enclaves constitute enriched information environments by sopping up and concentrating socially available information and help to improve the quality of members' preferences. But how does this improve democratic decision making?

Information Shortcuts, Issue Publics, and Public Opinion

How can the epistemic advantages of issue specialization be brought to bear in democratic decision making? What is the connection to actual policy? This can be a stumbling block for deliberative forums because they often deliberate without affecting policy or the wider political world (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). We need to know, therefore, how issue publics affect wider politics and policy, or how the information and informed preferences concentrated within issue publics are taken up by the wider democratic system. In the next two sections, I argue that two key mechanisms connecting issue publics to improved democratic decision making are *information shortcuts* and *specialized electoral incentives*. In this section, I argue that information shortcuts implicitly depend on issue publics to do their epistemic work.

Thomas Christiano (2017) sketches a response to the epistemic challenge focusing on shortcuts that illustrates the linkage between issue publics and the wider polity.

Little in Christiano's sketch is original, yet he arranges familiar arguments in a perspicacious way. Christiano foregrounds two mechanisms: information shortcuts and "alarm bells." Christiano argues that though ordinary citizens may not possess the information needed for informed decision making, they can instead take cues from those who have information so as to mimic the behavior of more informed individuals. This means that citizens "act on the basis of other people's beliefs about [political] matters while not knowing or even understanding the bases of these beliefs" (2017).

The first key to Christiano's response to the epistemic challenge is therefore that ordinary citizens take informational cues from more informed peers and opinion leaders (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1994). Yet these shortcuts sometimes fail (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). In these moments, Christiano argues we rely on others to act as "alarm bells"—alluding to McCubbins and Schwartz's (1984) fire alarm approach to legislative oversight—alerting us to problems that ordinary shortcuts miss.

Assuming the empirical plausibility of Christiano's story,⁹ issue publics play a crucial role in making both information shortcuts and alarm bells possible by serving as the clearinghouse through which they propagate through society. This means that insofar as answers to the epistemic challenge rely upon shortcuts and alarm bells, they also implicitly rely upon issue publics.

So how do information shortcuts and alarm bells depend upon issue publics? Strictly speaking, alarm bells are also information shortcuts, but I discuss them separately because alarm bells add something further. Let us first clarify what a shortcut is. The term *information shortcut* has been used somewhat loosely to refer to a wide variety of phenomena and even interchangeably with that of *heuristics*. Common shortcuts include party affiliation, ideology, and endorsements from interest groups and opinion leaders. I focus on shortcuts necessitating dependence on the relative expertise of others, like endorsements.

These shortcuts operate when ordinary citizens hear a piece of information from others whom they trust to be knowledgeable about an issue. These trusted others might be academics, politicians, journalists, or authors—in other words, credentialed experts of one sort or another—whom we generally encounter through the media. They could also be peers whom we know to be especially interested in a particular issue, such as a friend devoted to net neutrality. When such trusted others speak about their

⁹Though the limitations of Christiano's approach are familiar in public opinion research (Althaus 2003; Bartels 1996), his story is ordinarily plausible since shortcuts fail mainly in unusual situations (Lau and Redlawsk 2001).

issue of expertise, we tend to listen and form our own views by reference to theirs. This is a standard account of how information shortcuts propagate through the social environment.

Obscured in this account, however, is the role of issue publics. Both the credentialed and peer experts in this account *are members of the relevant issue public*. The reason they have issue-specific information is because they pay special attention to this issue and spend significant effort thinking about it. They may even participate in formal or informal discussion networks about it, such as academic groups or online discussion communities. These habits of attention, cognition, and discussion make their opinions on the issue worth listening to *and also make them members of the issue public*.

Alarm bells depend on issue publics similarly. Just as we choose specially informed people from whom to take information cues, so too do we choose specially informed, motivated, and vigilant others to monitor developments and alert us if action is required. Such watchdogs are often the same people we take information cues from. But in this role, they also take affirmative steps—as activists—to raise the profile of the issue in the public sphere, further propagating their specialized information about it. What makes them alarm bells is that they take on this active role when the stakes are high, raising the alarm.

A serious concern about this argument is that one part of an issue public may, in William Minozzi's (2011) terminology, "jam" epistemically valuable communications from other parts of it by propagating false or misleading messages to confuse audiences. This presents a challenge since it could allow groups that reject, for example, the scientific consensus on climate change to persuade the less knowledgeable mass public of their flawed views or, at least, to generate unfounded skepticism. However, functional differentiation can ameliorate this problem via the gatekeeping function of the media. Though ordinary citizens cannot tell reliable from unreliable sources, the media can. They should therefore adopt practices that prevent jamming, as by eschewing conflict-driven coverage of substantive issues in favor of consensus-seeking formats, such as town halls or multi-expert panels. One might reply that social media has weakened gatekeepers' ability to serve this kind of function. I address this objection in the next section.

Through enabling the circulation of shortcuts and acting as alarm bells, issue publics shape public opinion. Whenever their issue becomes salient, members of the issue public are called upon to inform the rest of the polity. The information and informed preferences found in the issue public thereby spread and help mold what the rest of the public thinks about the issue. It is perhaps not

too much to say that the preferences and opinions of the public—of public opinion writ large—are a function of the issue publics. This constitutes a large macro-political effect of issue publics, yet it is easily missed. Moreover, by shaping public opinion, it has further effects via representatives' electoral incentives.

Specialized Electoral Incentives

Representatives want to win election, or reelection if they are incumbents (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 2004). It is often assumed that this electoral incentive motivates representatives to respond to majority opinion. Yet representatives know that most people care only about a few issues. Consider the following statement made by a member of the U.S. Congress:

[Most] of my constituents don't care [about the Adam Clayton Powell vote] But there is one group that will notice—the black community. They'll take account of what you do, and hold it against you if you go wrong. This is often the way it is. Take the compulsory arbitration matter last year. Most of the people don't have the vaguest notion about this, but the labor groups will notice and take account of it. (Kingdon 1989, 32)

Representatives appear to understand intuitively what other studies have shown empirically: that individuals only care about a few issues and that these issues are the ones that guide their political behavior, including voting (Fournier et al. 2003; Kim 2009; Krosnick 1988). Because representatives know that the interest of the public is segmented by issue in this way, the electoral incentive operates differently than usually thought.

Instead of making policy on a particular issue responsive to majority opinion, representatives respond to the opinions of the issue public. This is because the *votes* of the intensely interested issue public members are at stake, whereas those of the more indifferent wider electorate are not. Since representatives know this, their electoral incentive is *specialized* and moves them to tailor policy to the opinion of the relevant issue public. This causes policy to reflect the relatively informed views of the issue public.

Put differently, candidates and parties court an issue public's electoral support through taking public positions on their issue responsive to their views and seeking endorsements from its activists and leaders. Parties and candidates piece together policy programs whose various planks speak to the concerns of different issue publics.

Most importantly for our purposes, we would expect this process of coalition building to lead to more informed policy proposals on each issue, as parties/candidates construct them in consultation with leaders of issue publics and with focus group and survey data about their members' views. Since the members of issue publics are more informed about the issue than others, we would expect the policies appealing to them to be better epistemically.

Representatives' specialized electoral incentives help further separate issue specialization from pluralism. Where pluralism assumes that intermediary interest groups *indirectly* represent the interests of different social groups, this account points to specialization *in the mass public* and links it to the *direct* incentive representatives have in election. Specialized interest or civil society groups no doubt play an important role in information aggregation and circulation, but they are not the primary agents of influence here.

It is partly through specialized electoral incentives and partly through the influence on public opinion as a whole that the relatively informed views of issue publics improve the quality of democratic decision making. On the basis of their greater knowledge, issue publics dismiss (or encourage dismissal of) many policy options as not worth serious consideration, even if less informed citizens initially think such options are worthwhile (Elkins 1993, 23). For example, U.S. foreign policy buffs across the political spectrum endorsed the containment of international communism during the Cold War (Wittkopf and McCormick 1990). Though there were always hawks and doves within this broad consensus, almost no one thought a policy of first strike to be a good one. Issue publics can be expected to encourage support or punishment of representatives on the basis of whether their policies meet this kind of standard.

One might think this account contradicts the characterization of issue publics as containing disagreement since it seems to assume the existence of a consensus within issue publics regarding what constitutes good policy. This is not the case, but to understand why, we must reference the game-theoretic concept of the top set. A top set is a set of alternatives that defeat all alternatives outside the set but over which an aggregation rule is intransitive (McCarty and Meirowitz 2007, 78–79). Choices within a top set are effectively indeterminate because no alternative is systematically preferred to any other. The policy alternatives acceptable to an entire issue public are analogous to a top set in that members of the issue public agree (on the basis of their specialized knowledge) that they are better than other alternatives, even if the group cannot endorse any single alternative.

This explains why issue publics are not a Condorcetian epistemic mechanism. Though there is a sense in which the top set constitutes “the right answer” regarding policy on an issue, issue publics cannot identify a single optimal decision in the unequivocal way that the Condorcet jury theorem describes because they always contain disagreement. Issue publics nonetheless contribute to democracies' making better policy by mobilizing dispersed information and using it to cull the worst ideas. Issue publics are thus best considered a Hayekian epistemic mechanism since they make dispersed information useful for decision makers, as in Hayek's (1945) claims about markets and prices.

Some might worry that disagreement within issue publics would render it impossible to remove even the most lunatic proposal from consideration. It is no doubt true that every epistemic community has its lunatic fringe. Healthy epistemic communities, however, employ “quality control” strategies and gatekeepers to regulate them. Though today such mechanisms appear to be buckling due to the emergence of new information technologies such as social media, it is important to take a historically informed view of such destabilization. Previous information innovations also sparked concerns about declining journalistic standards and the debasement of public discourse (Wu 2016); such pearl clutching seems inevitable in the face of novel ways for information to circulate. Yet what is needed is not Luddite sabotage, but rather the catch-up growth of norms and complementary institutions and technologies to combat emergent pathologies. In sum, though there are signs of failure today in democracy's epistemic safeguards, history suggests it is folly to see this as inevitable.

For now, it must be emphasized that helping decisions to be more informed and removing the worst ideas are the *least* that can be said for the epistemic merit of issue publics. It may often be the case that issue publics do more insofar as representatives actively consult members of issue publics for information, as in public hearings or other consultation. Likewise, representatives can use tools of public opinion research like polling and focus groups to gauge the views of issue public members. Representatives' electoral incentive moves them to gain information in these more direct ways to identify the policy that appeals to the greatest portion of (or median voter within)¹⁰ the issue public. Yet in doing so, they may—perhaps inadvertently—put the information

¹⁰One might worry that on divisive issues like abortion, representatives will simply choose a side within the issue public and disavow opposing views. Though this is possible, representatives have incentives to avoid extreme policies that infuriate and mobilize opposing parts of the issue public.

to use in crafting affirmatively good policy, not just avoiding bad.

Polarization and Epistemic Quality

Though issue specialization through issue publics presents a powerful epistemic mechanism, the idea raises serious concerns. In the following sections, I consider some important objections and argue that some can be allayed, even revealing further advantages, whereas others present serious problems requiring institutional supplementation.

Especially salient today is the worry that hyperpartisanship brought on by political polarization might short-circuit issue publics. This could occur in at least two ways. First, strong partisanship may subordinate questions of issue quality to the imperative to toe the party line. Brennan's notion of "hooliganism" alludes to this worry. He thinks most politically active citizens are hooligans and that hooligans only care about their side winning, not about good policy or the common good (Brennan 2016). Hooligans care about issues solely as partisan battlegrounds, so issue publics dominated by them cannot serve any epistemic function. Partisanship might also bias issue publics if their members listen to and take informational cues *solely* from copartisan experts *because* they are copartisans. This too would sideline the epistemic dimension of the issue and undercut issue publics' epistemic claims.

It cannot be denied that polarization creates problems for issue specialization—if we take polarization as unchangeable. Yet it is a mistake to think polarization affects issue specialization and would not be affected by it. Issue specialization could help arrest the progress of hyperpartisanship and break the cycle of polarization. If citizens increasingly specialize their political concern by issue, polarization would likely abate.

The basic reason for this is straightforward—emphasizing *issues* in political cognition and behavior deemphasizes partisanship. A fuller understanding requires considering the reciprocal relationship between partisanship and opinions, which is revealed in the phenomenon of partisan sorting. Sorting occurs when individuals change *either* their partisanship *or* their issue positions to make them more consistent with each other. But which changes makes an enormous difference. If we adopt certain issue positions just because copartisans do, we behave like hooligans; if we change our partisanship when our considered issue positions are contradicted by our party, we behave like epistemically concerned members of issue publics.

So what does the empirical evidence say? In his influential study of sorting, Matthew Levendusky finds that hooliganism predominates, in that 53% of cases involved changes of issue positions to match partisanship, whereas only 28% involved the opposite, changes in party to match issue positions (2009, 113). Yet far from undercutting the present argument, this is decisive evidence in its favor.

This is because, first, my claim is *not* that issue specialization in fact obtains to the degree the argument requires, but rather that achieving such a degree is *plausible* given our knowledge of how the world works. Here, we see ample evidence that specialization as a brake to polarization is plausible because more than a fourth of all incidents of sorting are cases in which substantive opinion overpowers partisanship. Second, Levendusky himself identifies issue public membership as a case in which it is "quite plausible" that one's issue position could alter one's partisan identification (2009, 112). Yet Levendusky does not test this possibility, raising the third reason his findings support the argument—they are observationally equivalent to widespread issue specialization. We would *expect* to observe more partisan sorting than issue-based sorting under specialization because specialization implies that we are substantively indifferent to most issues and so open to partisan influence *on those issues*, generating apparent partisan sorting. Yet this may not be substantively problematic because those issues do not determine political behavior—the issues citizens care about do. On those issues, citizens will not accept copartisans' views uncritically.

If people truly care about an issue, they attend to its merits and become concerned with the *quality* of policy quite apart from its partisan valence. If they think, for instance, immigration policy is especially important, they will not happily toe the party line if it seems ill-advised on the merits. This might sound naïve until we consider that even hard-nosed political science models of legislator behavior assume that elected representatives in fact care about the quality of policy in issue areas important to them and do what they can to improve it by their lights—at least insofar as it does not undermine the overriding goal of reelection (Fenno 1978, 137). Ordinary citizens lack this incentive to sideline their own strongly held positions, allowing citizens to be guided by them. So although sorting has helped drive polarization in the United States, it also suggests that issue preferences can serve as a mechanism to *check* polarization.

By specializing citizens' interest in politics by issue, we therefore open the possibility of breaking with one's party when it fails to take what seems to us a(n epistemically) sensible view of that issue. If everyone did this, the

independent power of partisanship that leads to hooliganism would wane and polarization would subside since everyone would have something they care about more than party and on behalf of which they would be willing to challenge their copartisans and even reject their party. This would systematically limit the degree to which issues could be treated by parties solely as political footballs and would necessitate engagement with them on the merits. Issue specialization therefore provides a way to reinvigorate the epistemic dimension of democratic politics by raising the political importance of the quality of policy at the same time that it checks polarization.

Accountability, Knowledge, and Specialization

The account of representation above assumes that citizens know enough about the issues they care about to hold representatives accountable when they perform badly. Yet it is often thought that ordinary citizens are too uninformed about politics to hold representatives accountable (Achen and Bartels 2016). Is the assumption that citizens have the knowledge needed for specialized electoral incentives untenable in light of the evidence?

The challenge requires clarification. We are interested in the empirical question of whether political knowledge is specialized to the issues individuals find important (the specialization hypothesis) or instead hierarchically distributed such that people with greater general interest in politics simply know more. The hierarchical view is widely affirmed among scholars and grounds skepticism about issue-specialized accountability. Yet we shall see that the evidence is puzzling if we persist in framing the question as a binary: that knowledge is *either* specialized *or* hierarchical. I suggest that a dual pathways model—in which *both* specialized interest in an issue *and* generalized political interest can motivate knowledge gains—makes better sense of the existing evidence and suggests citizens can have the knowledge needed for issue-specific accountability.

The main evidence supporting the hierarchical view consists of surveys of factual information about politics. These surveys probe for information in the way of a pop quiz and include questions such as “Will you tell me what the term *veto* means to you? . . . Can you tell me who Ralph Nader is or what he does?” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 184); “under the budget proposed by Paul Ryan, federal spending on everything *other* than Medicare and Social Security would decline over the next 20 years [by what percentage of GDP]?” (Bartels 2012). By

such measures, many ordinary citizens surely lack factual information. But does this evidence also demonstrate that they cannot be information specialists?

The problem with existing surveys is that they yield results that are observationally equivalent to specialization. Knowledge surveys are generally short, consisting of 10 items or fewer. Yet the universe of potentially useful political information is astronomically huge since it includes facts about every conceivable political issue, about the parties and candidates and where they stand on each issue, and about the formal and informal rules of politics at the local, state, national, and international levels. Because of the extraordinarily large pool of potentially relevant information, we should expect the facts assessed on any particular survey to fail, by sheer chance, to ask about the particular issues many respondents care—and therefore know—about. Existing surveys therefore give the *impression* that respondents know little about politics, but this could be an artifact of many issues not being asked about.

It is, however, argued that ignorance of the items on a general knowledge survey is “symptomatic of a lack of knowledge about a broad range of political phenomena” (Bennett 2003, 316). Yet without a truly comprehensive battery of knowledge questions, we are not entitled to this presumption. Poor performance can strictly speaking only demonstrate ignorance of the facts assessed, so it is consistent with information being specialized but undetected by the limited survey instrument.

In their landmark study, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter present their lengthy knowledge survey as one with enough scope to address this problem. “[The survey] included fifty-one questions intended to tap knowledge about [seven specific domains]: institutions and processes, civil rights and liberties, public figures, party politics, *domestic affairs*, foreign affairs, and political history” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 141–42). The added emphasis underscores, however, that only one-seventh of a survey consisting of 51 items is supposed to detect knowledge about *every facet* of domestic policy—including tax policy, education, Medicare, Social Security, the environment, health care, immigration, farm policy, intellectual property rights, gun control, energy policy, drug policy, and abortion—in about eight questions. It is not reasonable to conclude that a respondent is ignorant about every facet of domestic policy based on so few questions. If information is specialized, we would expect political knowledge to cluster around issues individuals care about, and so to be excluded by chance in a survey designed this way. Detecting specialized knowledge would require an instrument designed to allow respondents to choose the issues they care about most and answer

specialized questions about them. Such surveys have not so far been attempted.

It turns out then that existing survey instruments thought to yield evidence of political ignorance are not well designed to detect specialized information. Because of the vast field of information potentially relevant to political decisions, the existing evidence is observationally equivalent to either specialized or hierarchical knowledge.

There is, moreover, positive evidence that knowledge is specialized. Using issue-focused surveys, Shanto Iyengar (1990) found substantial domain specificity in political knowledge. Others find that citizens have more accurate information of candidates' positions on issues they care about (Kim 2009; Krosnick 1990). One case study by Michael Henderson (2014) found clear evidence that the senior citizen issue public learned more about Social Security than the rest of the public and retained that information over time.

Even studies cited to show that information is hierarchical find significant evidence of specialization. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 147, 151) find evidence of specialized knowledge in several areas, despite their survey being poorly designed to discover it. In his influential analysis of the knowledge items on the 1985 National Election Study pilot, John Zaller (1986, 2, 15) concludes that "the effects of political information on public opinion are, to some extent, domain specific" and in fact concedes that domain-specific surveys are modestly *superior* as measures of what citizens know. In their study of who receives political news, Price and Zaller (1993) find evidence of specialization in half of their cases, though in a classic case of "glass half full or half empty," they take the null findings in the other half to disconfirm the specialization hypothesis. Moreover, Vincent Hutchings (2001) discovered evidence that belonging to multiple, cross-cutting issue publics can explain such null findings.

Another important piece of evidence for the hierarchical view and against the specialization hypothesis is the high correlation some find between knowledge items about different issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; cf. Iyengar 1990). This suggests that those who correctly answer questions about one issue are, other things equal, also better at answering questions about another. Yet these correlations remain far from perfect and vary by issue, sometimes substantially. The best explanation for these findings, and those above, is that political information can be gained *both* due to a particular interest in a specific issue *and* general interest in politics. Either can lead to informedness. This dual pathways model finds support in Gilens's (2001, 391) conclusion that policy-specific knowledge has a distinct and powerful impact on preferences compared to general political knowledge.

This model requires direct testing but seems to make the best sense of the existing evidence.

Because many individuals seem to possess specialized knowledge today, it is not only possible but *likely* that individuals can be issue specialists. This suggests individuals are indeed able to learn about specific issues in the way required to make issue-specific accountability plausible and so that worries about political ignorance are not fatal to issue specialization.

Special Interests and Myopic Rent Seeking

Another worry is that issue publics could promote or even embody special interest capture of policy (Somin 2013, 107). This is because issue publics might be disproportionately composed of those with an intense material interest in the issue, collapsing the difference between issue publics and pluralist interests. Issue publics may in this case seek to myopically impose externalities or other diffuse costs on society in order to secure concentrated benefits for themselves through rent seeking.

The worry, then, is that issue publics will increase bias in favor of special interests, leading to myopic outcomes that are uncontroversially bad. This is a serious concern. Yet even if issue publics were *identical* with special interests, they can operate systemically to better inform decision makers. Kevin Esterling (2004) describes how the lobbying of purely self-interested groups can, as a whole, improve democratic decisions. Interest groups develop expertise and technical knowledge about the effects of different policies in order to understand how they would impact their interests. When that information favors them, they share it with policy makers; when it does not, they appeal to considerations like equity. Yet because of competition for influence, interests' information will nonetheless find its way to policy makers because at least some groups will benefit by sharing it. This is an unexpected benefit of the proliferation of interest groups. Their growing numbers increasingly guarantee that at least some will have incentives to share costly information with policy makers. Esterling illustrates concretely how this process generated informed policy processes regarding acid rain mitigation, school choice, and health maintenance organizations.

This is precisely the sort of process one would expect to emerge from issue publics; information captured by the specialized group is passed to representatives through political participation (i.e., lobbying). Here, we see that these gains accrue even when we relax the assumptions about self-interest made earlier. Even if issue publics are

nothing more than rent-seeking special interests, they can still gather and concentrate information and then spread this information to policy makers. Other things equal, this improves decisions by helping them be more informed. This is, however, different from saying that decisions would be ideal and free of aberrations like rent seeking. Decisions would be more informed—and better to that extent—but no more. Other precautions to prevent rent seeking are generally good practice, and democracies making use of them could reap the information gains of specialization while also stymying rent seeking.

Bias in Issue Specialization

Perhaps the biggest problem with this hopeful vision of specialization's epistemic power is that not every issue will receive the attention of an issue public (Somin 2013, 106). This is because issue publics are an emergent phenomenon in the mass public and are thus constituted through self-selection. This could bias their composition due to inequalities in civic skills and motivation (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Self-selection is exacerbated by the inclusion of associations and civil society groups within the issue public matrix, since such groups have a well-known socioeconomic bias (Schattschneider 1960). Moreover, issue publics are endogenous to *issue salience*, or the public attention paid to an issue, since media coverage often plays a decisive role in directing public attention to certain issues. Media coverage can also be biased toward conflictual stories and insubstantial soft news (Shapiro 1998). This means not only that abstruse or technical issues may receive less attention in favor of the trivial yet telegenic, but also that those issues affecting marginalized groups might attract smaller issue publics than their objective importance¹¹ demands. These biases create a serious problem for an *epistemic* account of issue specialization since it suggests there are pathologies of attention that can prevent issue publics from bringing their powers to bear on important issues.

These biases necessitate focused, institutional efforts to cultivate an interest in politics among disadvantaged citizens so they can help constitute new or less biased issue publics. For instance, Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa Michelson (2012) argue that campaigns' efforts to bolster

turnout among marginalized groups cause these groups to become durably politicized beyond a specific election, suggesting lasting prodemocratic changes in their cognitive and motivational orientation to politics. Such efforts should be systematically encouraged.

A more ambitious approach can be found in the online deliberative forums piloted by Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer (2018) involving elected representatives and randomly invited constituents. Three features of these forums make them well suited to addressing bias in issue publics. First, they reverse the usual direction of participatory bias, disproportionately engaging poorer and politically disconnected citizens (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018, 65). Second, by focusing on single issues, they concentrate citizen attention on issues that may not receive media coverage and offer disengaged citizens a manageable—because issue limited—entry point into politics. Lastly, unlike most blue-sky reforms cooked up by political scientists, these forums incentivize their own adoption because representatives who participate enjoy a several-point electoral advantage from satisfied constituents (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018, 109). Due to their electoral incentives, representatives *want* to participate and so need not be motivated by any special prodemocratic reform attitudes. Thus, there are ways to build complementary institutions to stem the biases inherent in issue publics.

Two considerations further lessen concerns about bias. First, issue specialization highlights the importance of the *less* organized part of issue publics—reversing the pluralist's error of emphasizing organized groups in the mistaken belief they are approximately representative—by emphasizing electoral incentives and information shortcuts, which operate in the mass public. Second, issue publics largely *reflect* inequalities in the political system rather than originate them. To the extent biases in issue salience and attention are corrected, biases in issue publics will also subside. This is important because it illustrates the neutrality of specialization; whatever issues attract public attention gain epistemically via this mechanism. In conditions of participatory inequality, this may lead to important pathologies. Yet examples like the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter suggest that injustice can often attract as much attention as the latest shiny bit of political ephemera.

Conclusion

The age of Trump and Brexit is an inauspicious time to argue for the quality of democratic decision making. These phenomena, though immediately generated by democratically peculiar or irregular institutions, are taken by many

¹¹The importance of an issue is not simply a function of whether people think it is important. For reasons analogous to those offered by Estlund (2008) regarding truth, there are probably independent standards of *importance* that our impressions of importance should be thought of as tracking. A suggestive list includes timeliness, graveness or seriousness, scope of impact, and depth of impact, all of which are contestable.

as proof that there is something to the epistemic challenge to democracy. Yet I have argued that issue specialization through issue publics has great promise as a response to that challenge. Issue specialization improves epistemic performance because (1) it divides the decision task facing democratic citizens in ways that advantage the mass public by allowing it to reap the gains of a cognitive division of labor; (2) it concentrates socially dispersed information and makes it usable and salient for policymaking; and (3) it improves the quality of the issue-specific preferences of issue public members by making them more informed. The epistemic powers of issue specialization are brought to bear in actual democratic decision making through information shortcuts and representatives' specialized electoral incentives, since they decisively shape public opinion and policy.

All this serves to make democratic decisions more informed—and better epistemically to that extent—but not optimal. It promises no millenarian deliverance from bad decisions. Moreover, the self-selected nature of issue publics and their integration of civil society groups recommend supplementary institutions and practices that can engage marginalized citizens. Additional research is also needed to clarify what other supporting institutions are needed to deliver on issue specialization's epistemic promise. This means that the bare mechanism of issue specialization through issue publics provides but one part of an answer to the epistemic challenge, and one that does not promise anything as implausible as always getting the right answer.

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