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Just How Youthful Should Voters Be? Part II: Defining Electoral Decision-Making Competence

Posted By [Vivian Hamilton](#) On January 7, 2013 @ 7:23 am In [Civil Rights, Election Law, Uncategorized](#) | [2 Comments](#)

[1] This is the second of three (or so) posts on the youth vote and the voting age. In a [post](#) [2] last week, I suggested that the United States should join other democracies reevaluating their ages of electoral majority.

In this post, I argue that deciding whether a group of individuals is competent to vote first requires a conception of what constitutes electoral competence, and I offer such a conception. My next post will examine whether such competence is reliably achieved earlier than age 18.



Basic Voting Criteria: Connection/Interest and Competence.

Basic voting criteria have remained essentially unchanged across the centuries and generally require for electoral inclusion (1) a significant and ongoing interest in and connection to the community; and (2) vote decision-making competence. (Few democracy theorists, though, have sought to justify these intuitively-correct criteria. I attempt to do so [here](#) [3], pp. 1484-90.) But while the basic criteria have remained unchanged, notions of reliable indicia of them—reflected in specific voter qualification rules—have changed significantly.

Historically, property ownership was a voter qualification rule believed necessary to ensure a potential voter's ongoing community connection and interest. Today, citizenship, residence, and law-abidingness qualifications all seek to ensure the same criteria (ongoing connection and interest). And historically, the intellectual independence required for electoral decision-making competence was deemed impossible in the absence of economic independence, since dependent voters might be unwilling to vote in a way that displeased those to whom they were economically beholden. Today, different voter qualification rules aim to ensure that voters possess electoral decision-making competence. State rules allow, for example, the disfranchisement of adults deemed mentally incompetent. The primary voter qualification rule aimed at ensuring that voters have developed the requisite competence, however, is the voting age.

Indicia of Competence: Political/Civics Knowledge? Rousseau believed that a well-informed citizenry was necessary to determine and implement the public good, and many modern theorists agree that informed and watchful citizens help ensure a responsive, accountable government. Yet the typical citizen, it is safe to say, is far removed from the ideal citizen of classic democratic theory.

Studies consistently find that [public ignorance](#) [4] is widespread and extends to knowledge of basic civics and government. [Mark Blumenthal](#) [5], senior polling editor of the Huffington Post and founder of Pollster.com glumly [wrote](#) [6], “[one] can almost never underestimate the level of information about politics and government possessed by the voters who typically decide the outcome of elections.”

Incorporating even basic levels of civics or political knowledge into a conception of electoral competence theoretically justifies voter qualification rules that would operate to disfranchise a significant proportion of the current electorate. Moreover, rates of disfranchisement would be [unequally distributed](#) [7] across the population based on differences in knowledge among

various groups that have held steady over time: more women would be disfranchised than men; more African Americans than whites; more low-income earners than high-income earners; and more people under 30 than those 65 and older. Formal requirements aimed at ensuring well-informed voting would likely result in a better-informed electorate, but also a less representative and democratic one.

The Ill-Informed–Yet Competent–Enough–Voter. In lieu of incurring the costs of educating themselves, voters generally rely on more readily available information shortcuts (or *heuristics*), which substitute for more complete information. These can include party affiliation, group endorsements, or person stereotypes such as gender, race, or age. Heuristics allow voters (indeed, decision makers in innumerable contexts) to make decisions reasonably consistent with their preferences while expending relatively little effort. Empirical political scientists [Richard Lau and David Redlawsk](#) ^[8] have extensively researched voter decision making and the effectiveness of heuristic use and found that their “limited information decision strategies not only may perform as well as, but in many instances may perform better than, traditional rational . . . decision strategies.” (For a detailed explanation of their findings, see the previous link at pp. 212-26; See also [here](#) ^[9], reporting studies finding that greater amounts of preexisting knowledge can in some instances hinder rational analysis of new facts.)

Lau and Redlawsk have found that the typical voter generally reaches a rational and “correct” voting decision (defined as one that is the *same as the choice that the voter would have made under conditions of full information, given the voter’s subjective beliefs and values*) by acquiring and processing smaller, readily available bits of meaningful information that function as serviceable substitutes for full information. Thus, not only does incorporating factual knowledge into a normative standard of electoral competence risk disfranchising much of the current electorate; it is also unnecessary to ensure generally correct vote decisions.

Even without requiring specific knowledge, it is possible to identify [cognitive processes](#) ^[10], or mental operations, involved in—and required for—“correct” (as defined above) voting: In general, a decision maker must (1) acquire and retrieve some relevant, even if limited, information (a typical voter might learn from the election ballot itself, for example, only the names and party affiliations of candidates seeking a local office); (2) “encode,” or form a mental representation, of the information (the voter may recall/retrieve from her long-term memory that Republicans generally favor lower taxes); and (3) engage in the goal-directed application and coordination of inferences (in technical parlance, “thinking”). But when thinkers deliberately constrain their inferences so as to conform to what they believe are appropriate inferential norms, they engage in *reasoning*—which supplies individuals with *justifiability*, or reasons for their beliefs and actions. Our typical voter may thus make the inference that the Republican candidate is more likely to favor lower taxes than the Democratic candidate, etc. As a result that and other inferences, she votes for the Republican candidate. Although the voter has not made a particularly well-informed decision, she has arguably made a minimally competent one, and one likely to be correct (i.e., consistent with the decision she would have made had she possessed full information).

I thus begin by arguing that a minimally competent voting decision involves the appropriate application and coordination of various reasoning processes to make a choice that could be justified by a good-enough reason.

Indicia of Electoral Decision-Making Competence: Maturity? One possible refinement to the above conception of competent vote decision making would require that instead of employing merely “appropriate” reasoning processes, competent voting must employ “mature” reasoning processes. But like a factual-knowledge requirement, this risks going too far. While the level of thinking of many individuals continues to develop through and beyond adolescence, developmental psychologists have determined that there is no universal [state of maturity](#) ^[10] attained by all—or even most—adults. Instead, the development of thinking in and beyond adolescence is highly variable. “Maturity” or a “mature” cognitive-processing requirement for electoral competence, then, even as these elude definition, may exceed the capacities of—and thus disfranchise—many current voters.

A more pragmatic standard for electoral competence could require “adultlike” cognitive-processing capacities—i.e., the minimum levels of thinking and processing attained by developmentally normal adults.

A Proposed Definition of Electoral Decision-Making Competence. I thus offer the following standard of electoral competence: *The ability to reach a voting decision through the adultlike application and coordination of various reasoning processes to make a voting choice that could be justified by a good-enough reason.*

For an elaboration of this argument, see [here](#) ^[3], (pp. 1495-1506).

In my next post, I survey recent research in adolescent development and conclude that adolescents reliably attain the relevant cognitive-processing abilities by age 15 or 16 and argue that this, in conjunction with foundational democratic principles and policy considerations, justifies lowering the age of electoral majority.

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[1] Image: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/just-how-youthful-should-voters-be-part-ii-defining-electoral-decision-making-competence.html/youth-vote-3>

[2] post: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2013/01/the-youth-vote...ters-be-part-i.html>

[3] here: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2086875

[4] public ignorance: http://www.amazon.com/Age-American-Unreason-Vintage/dp/1400096383/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1357410796&sr=1-1&keywords=susan+jacoby+the+age+of+american+unreason

[5] Mark Blumenthal: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-blumenthal/>

[6] wrote: http://www.amazon.com/Electoral-Challenge-Theory-Meets-Practice/dp/1604266368/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1357411250&sr=1-1&keywords=the+electoral+challenge+theory+meets+practice

[7] unequally distributed: <http://people-press.org/report/319/public-knowledge-of-curent-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions>

[8] Richard Lau and David Redlawsk: http://www.amazon.com/How-Voters-Decide-Information-Processing/dp/052161306X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1357411762&sr=1-1&keywords=how+voters+decide

[9] here: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=19&sid=40497410-2758-4c29-b9fd-6c89d2de993e%40sessionmgr12>

[10] cognitive processes: http://www.amazon.com/dp/0805848304/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1357413097&sr=1-1&keywords=adolescent+psychological+development

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