The problem with democracy [1]

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The public is ignorant about politics and lacks even the basic facts that it would need to make sound judgments about political issues. A new poll by Ipsos-MORI [3] shows just how deep this ignorance is. Among other things, the poll found that:

- 29% of people think we spend more on JSA than pensions, when in fact we spend 15 times more on pensions (£4.9bn vs £74.2bn)
- 26% of people think foreign aid is one of the top 2-3 items government spends most money on, when it actually made up 1.1% of expenditure (£7.9bn) in the 2011/12 financial year. More people select this as a top item of expenditure than pensions (which cost nearly ten times as much, £74bn) and education in the UK (£51.5bn)
- the public think that 31% of the population are immigrants, when the official figures are 13%. we greatly overestimate the proportion of the population who are Muslims: on average we say 24%, compared with 5% in England and Wales.
- people are most likely to think that capping benefits at £26,000 per household will save most money from a list provided (33% pick this option), over twice the level that select raising the pension age to 66 for both men and women or stopping child benefit when someone in the household earns £50k+. In fact, capping household benefits is estimated to save £290m, compared with £5bn for raising the pension age and £1.7bn for stopping child benefit for wealthier households.

These are not just little mistakes, they?re absolute howlers.

This ignorance is perfectly rational and understandable. The problem is that these are the people who decide who runs the country. How can you choose the best set of welfare policies ? ?the best? being what you would choose if you had all the information available ? when you know absolutely nothing about welfare? How can you choose which of the two main parties is offering the best immigration policy if you haven?t got a clue about immigration?

Obviously, you can?t. And giving more power to well-informed elites seems even more foolish. Political psychology suggests [4] that that the more information you have about something, the more resistant to new, contradictory information you are ? or, in other words, the more dogmatically ideological you are.

That ideology is often dressed up in terminology that sounds neutral but makes significant assumptions about the role of the state and its ability to effectively solve society?s problems. Anyone for some ?evidence-based policy??

This is a problem not just for elections, but for any kind of administration of the state that gives experts decision-making power. If they are inherently dogmatic then giving them power may be even worse than putting every policy issue up to a referendum may be the lesser of two evils (while still being very unappealing).

The choice we have in a democracy appears to be between open-minded ignoramuses or well-informed ideologues. There is no reason to think that either will choose anything like the ?right? policy for any given

problem. And, as Jeffrey Friedman has argued [5], unlike when you buy the ?wrong? flavour of ice-cream and can immediately buy a different kind next time, the feedback mechanism in politics is weak and difficult to discern.

The answer may be to recognise these crippling limitations of democracy and, wherever possible, prefer decentralized market mechanisms. We cannot solve the problem of ignorant voters or dogmatic elites in democracy, but we can at least try to take as much power out of their hands as possible.

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