



Research Paper

The New Unlettered: Low-Information Voters and the Fragile Future of Democracy

Helen(Haibei) Gao

Received 08 June., 2026; Revised 16 June, 2026; Accepted 18 June., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.
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The idea that democracy is a safeguard against tyranny emerged more from fears of monarchy than from reasoning. Democracy is only one, problematic form of government, and one that must be reconsidered in the age of demagoguery. How can voters be trusted to steer their democracy in the right direction? The American Founding Fathers rejected pure democracy because they distrusted the people's unchecked capacity to govern themselves. As Alexander Hamilton stated, "Real liberty is neither found in despotism nor the extremes of democracy, but in moderate governments."¹

The Founders opted for a representative democracy and deliberately incorporated elements of oligarchy into it. The operative principle lies in balancing quality, the elite, with quantity², the commoners, to foster a stable and ordered society. Since this check-and-balance logic has since been globally adopted, modern political science reveals that today's democracies are fundamentally suspicious of uninformed majorities. While in the eighteenth century, uninformed majorities comprised the "unlettered," in the twenty-first century, the uninformed are rarely uneducated. Instead, they lack interest in politics and policy, as well as high-quality information. They are low-information voters.

The distinction between the "unlettered" and the "lettered,"³ terms Burke used during the French Revolution, is no longer based on literacy or social class. Today, the unlettered are not illiterate peasants, but cognitively passive citizens who consume trash information, such as infotainment, clickbait, and memes. These individuals are sometimes labeled "hobbits," a term coined by political philosopher Jason Brennan to describe the apolitical crowd. Another category of low-information voters is "ill-informed voters," referred to as "hooligans" for their militant tribalism and partisanship.⁴ In contrast, high-information voters maintain coherent political ideologies and conduct detailed research before voting, and remain on a "diet" in an era of "information obesity."⁵ This essay argues that low-information voters, the twenty-first century's unlettered, are susceptible to misinformation, which misguides them in making poor political choices. In such circumstances, the votes from high-information ("lettered") voters are a corrective force, safeguarding democracy from destructive outcomes.

The Unmotivated and Ignorant Masses

A constant skepticism toward universal suffrage has plagued the modern world. Critics have doubted the masses' capacity to govern themselves, echoing Plato's ancient dismissal of the citizenry as possessing a "shifty and flighty nature."⁶ This critique remains in contemporary American politics. Low-information voters often lack the essential knowledge required to understand complex policies. Their votes are thus based on

¹ The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 4, January 1787–May 1788, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 218–220.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, Bekker 1295a10–20 (trans. Benjamin Jowett; New York: The Modern Library, 1943)

³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁴ Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

⁵ Andrew Whitworth, *Information Obesity* (Chandos Information Professional Series; Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012)

⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 2007), Book 3, 414a

superficial cues rather than informed judgment. One-third of Americans are incapable of naming even one of the three branches of the United States government. Fewer than a quarter know who their senators are.⁷

These disengaged citizens epitomize “hobbits”: apathetic, poorly informed, and focused on self-interest. Though hobbits are not intended to be malicious or harmful, their cognitive disengagement leads to shortsightedness. Their decisions favor immediate gratification over long-term critical thinking.

Yet this apathy is not entirely irrational. Caplan invoked the concept of “rational ignorance”⁸ to explain why many citizens deliberately avoid becoming informed: the cost of learning political knowledge outweighs the negligible impact of a single vote. As Caplan puts it, “One vote has so small a probability of affecting electoral outcomes that a realistic egoist pays no attention to politics.” Indeed, understanding political platforms requires cognitive effort—something that is repellent to human laziness. As a result, low-information voters substitute mental shortcuts for substantive analysis.

Still, Caplan provides a counterintuitive justification for rational ignorance, the miracle of aggregation: because low-information voters choose haphazardly, their errors cancel each other out. This cancellation, theoretically, makes room for a better-informed minority—the high-information voters — to decide elections. In this way, the democratic system, though flawed, is not necessarily corroded by mass ignorance.

The New Threat — Systematic Bias

Yet, this stability exists on a fragile premise: that there is no systematic bias in the public’s information. This condition becomes untenable in the age of social media. The “gut” or human instinct, as the guiding force behind decision-making, is erratic and easily manipulable. When the “hobbit” meets the digital meme that rewards simplicity over substance, he becomes an unwitting accomplice in undermining democracy.

Social media is notorious for extremist posts, hostility, and conspiracy theories. Online campaigns, with AI-generated images and videos, memes, clickbait, and “infotainment,” spread misinformation.⁹ Twitter tags and TikTok trends dictate what voters see, making low-information voters puppets of algorithmic influence, which fosters political orientation. Only high-information voters, who are ideologues seeking out quality (less biased) information, can resist this misinformation.

When minds are manipulated, rationality withers. Low-information voters become increasingly emotional, partisan, aggressive, and tribal. Many evolve into “hooligans,” who are unshakably confident in their opinions—despite the facts. They frantically cheer for their party like sports fans, vilify the opposition, and sometimes form online mobs. These groups operate under entrenched bias. Their votes are not merely uninformed, but systematically distorted. One alarming sign of this is the decline in support for democracy among Gen-Z voters, who grew up steeped in social media.¹⁰

Worse still, Brennan notes that today, most Americans function as “hooligans” in the current highly politicized environment. Our political choices are not grounded in a reasoned evaluation of policy but are shaped by trivial headlines, sensational gossip, and conspiracy-laden clickbait. Psychologist Gurwinder Bhogal coined the term “intellectual obesity”¹¹ to describe our natural susceptibility to junk information. Like fast food, junk information satisfies cognitive cravings without providing real insight. This instinct-driven information intake leads to normative dissociation¹²—a detachment from rational deliberation that gradually assumes falsehoods by exposing us repeatedly to fragmented sub-information. Studies show that voters often respond more to slogans, fire alarms, last-minute scandals, and memes than to substantive arguments.¹³

Journalist James Marriot complained about this redundant information: “I consume vast quantities of trivia and nonsense: gaffes, pseudo-scandals, meaningless PR ‘wins’. I know about [former British Prime Minister Rishi] Sunak’s visit to the Titanic dockyard; I could write a thesis on Sir Keir Starmer’s childhood.”¹⁴

⁷ Caleb Crain, “The Case Against Democracy,” *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/07/the-case-against-democracy>.

⁸ Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

⁹ Steven Lee Myers and Stuart A. Thompson, “A.I. Is Starting to Wear Down Democracy,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2025.

¹⁰ James Marriot, “Why we need a cultural elite more than ever” *The Times*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/ad836d42-a597-49bf-b636-f4a9a6d203f4>.

¹¹ Gurwinder Bhogal. “Stop Feeding Your Brain Junk Food.” *Quillette*, July 26, 2022.

¹² Leslie D Butler. “Normative Dissociation.” *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 29, no. 1 (March 2006): 45–62.

¹³ Chris Bruni-Lowe, “The history of political slogans reveals words are not enough,” *Financial Times*, July 11, 2025

¹⁴ James Marriot, “Apathy in the UK isn’t so bad for democracy,” *The Times*, June 12, 2024.

This illustrates that even politically-engaged citizens are not immune. Some even weaponize their knowledge against opponents, a paradox known as the “sophistication effect,”¹⁵ where more informed citizens are also generally the most partisan. As political scientist Joseph Schumpeter warned, “The very existence of democracy depends on a degree of apathy. Politics cannot be the most important thing in most people’s lives. When absolutely everyone cares about politics, the result is anarchy.”¹⁶

Even the “hobbits” are not immune. They are subtly manipulated by the “ambience of information”¹⁷-that is, a campaign tactic that amplifies a vague impression through volume and repetition, until it is absorbed as truth or common sense. Researcher Pablo Boczkowski observes that modern news consumption is largely incidental: people are “rubbed by the news”¹⁸ rather than actively seeking it. These passive encounters make “hobbits” vulnerable to unchecked bias. Without fact-checking, they internalize stereotypes and half-truths.

In this climate, the irrationality caused by emotional manipulation or ambient misinformation poses a far greater threat to democracy than simple rational ignorance ever could.

The Risks of Uninformed Voting

The 2024 success of Trumpism in the American elections demonstrated how apathetic voters became overwhelmed by ambient information. Online rumors about Democratic candidate Kamala Harris were not grounded in policy critiques or legitimate debate, but instead driven by (vaguely misogynist) “feelings.” This information set a vibe for low-information voters, conveying unspecific yet compelling messages like “immigration is a big problem” or “the Biden administration is corrupt.” These ideas drifted in the information ecosystem and shaped how electorates think, especially those who were politically disengaged.

Pollster Frank Luntz assembled voters who had voted Democratic before but supported Donald Trump in the 2024 election. Their rationales were often based on falsehoods of the “ambience of information”. One man expressed, “The policies there [in California] are so bad I wouldn’t be surprised if the state goes bankrupt.” (California has the largest economy in the U.S.) Another from Indiana said. “Kamala from California is too radical... she’s too far left.” (President Biden’s policies were actually to the left of Harris’s.)¹⁹ These impressions gradually hardened into assumed facts, so much so that even some Democrats agreed that “Kamala is weak on policy.” Although it takes only ten seconds of Googling to determine whether that claim is valid, a “hobbit” rarely spends the time to do so.

The UK’s Brexit referendum similarly exposed the public’s inability to make sound economic decisions and the risks of direct participation through referenda. The idea of exiting the European Union (EU) was rooted in protectionist ideas that inflamed popular sentiment. Anti-immigration and anti-trade sentiment appealed to the public and seemed beneficial in the short term. But these decisions were not based on strategic thinking; they arose from reactionary nationalism, fear, and emotional manipulation by demagogues. One can easily consult economists before voting, but one usually turns off one’s rational faculty and chooses what one wants to believe instead.

According to post-Brexit research conducted, “Leave” voters dramatically overestimated the percentage of EU immigrants in the UK, exaggerated the amount of money Britain sends to the EU, and underestimated the level of EU foreign investment in the UK. Caplan argues that irrationality may even be gratifying to low-information voters, because “[s]ome beliefs are more emotionally appealing.” He continues, “So if your vote isn’t likely to do anything, why not indulge yourself in what you want to believe, whether or not it’s true? In the polling booth, the warm, fuzzy feeling of altruism can be had cheap.” UK voters approved Brexit in this manner, swayed by the roar of the crowd. The day after, “What is the EU?” trended on X, revealing shocking levels of public ignorance.

¹⁵ Philip E Converse. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In *Ideology and Its Discontents*, edited by David E. Apter, 206–61. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.

¹⁶ Joseph A Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942.

¹⁷ Nathan Heller, “Republican Victory and the Ambience of Information,” *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2024.

¹⁸ Pablo J. Boczkowski, Eugenia Mitchelstein, and Mora Matassi, “News comes across when I’m in a moment of leisure”: Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 10 (October 2018): 3523–39

¹⁹ UK in a Changing Europe, Ipsos MORI, and the Policy Institute at King’s College London. *The Public’s Brexit Misperceptions*. London: UK in a Changing Europe, 2018.

The Lettered's Protection

High-information voters demonstrate a knowledgeable state that is hard to attain, because it requires breaking free from logical fallacies and mis/disinformation traps to think deliberately, critically, and independently. High-information voters thus serve as a crucial safeguard for democracy.

Critics may argue that these voters are often traditional elites, which may suppress minority progress. Yet anyone can theoretically attain this knowledgeable state. It is also clear that the policies that care about minority populations would not emerge automatically from the bickering crowd. As Marriott stated, "Liberalism, by nature, is a counterintuitive creed—more aligned with intellectual virtue than emotion." Well-informed elites introduced these strange ideas from above and institutionalized them. As one Canadian politician observed, during referendums, "minorities will always lose out... in which the only possible position for the minority was complete submission."²⁰

When democracy tilts toward the impulsive masses, politicians struggle to filter the public's will into responsible policy. Performative polarization and demagoguery lead to a "morbid disarrangement"²¹ in the public sphere. High-information voters act as anchors, offering politicians space to act rationally and make unpopular but necessary decisions. In other words, these voters create a possibly flawed but functional consensus, more preferable than pure democracy, facism, or authoritarianism. High-information voters support a deliberative elite who can "march at the head of affairs,"²² steering policy thoughtfully rather than reactively. Political scientist James Fishkin once quipped that "if only Athens had had a Senate, they might not have killed Socrates."²³ That's the power of a reasoned minority: they don't always shout the loudest, but they prevent the crowd from doing irreversible damage.

Conclusion

Back to the opening question—how do clashing votes keep democracy on track? The answer isn't in the math, but in the way we argue, listen, and reflect. We need to return to thinking deeply, speaking freely, while preserving the freedoms that make all this possible; we should not remain complacent in the status quo. Can we make more people high-information voters in the age of TikTok, constant online outrage, and algorithms? Maybe. The America in One Room²⁴ experiment shows that when people sit down and genuinely talk with each other, rather than past each other, they have the flexibility to drop their extreme perspectives and meet somewhere in the middle. We clearly need more of that. At the same time, we need to empower more people to become informed with factual, honestly reported, non-partisan information—including ourselves.

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²¹ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, with a new introduction by Wilfred M. McClay (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993)

²² Joseph Ellis, "The Big Man," *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2001, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/10/29/the-big-man-3>

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