

Book Review: On Voter Competence

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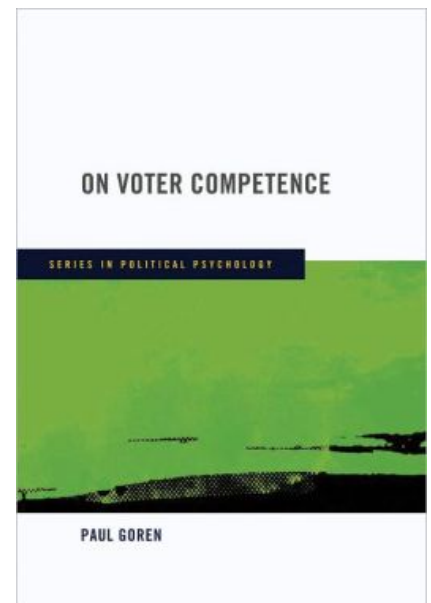
*A half century of research shows that most citizens are shockingly uninformed about public affairs, liberal-conservative ideologies, and the issues of the day. This has led most scholars to condemn typical voters and to conclude that policy voting lies beyond their reach. **On Voter Competence** breaks sharply from this view, with author **Paul Goren** providing analysis of opinion data from the past six presidential elections. **Lorna Walker** writes that this book challenges some aspects of the negative view of American voters, it by no means exonerates them on the charge of incompetence.*



On Voter Competence. Paul Goren. Oxford University Press. October 2012.

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The majority of American voters are not politically competent. Such has been the central assumption of most voting behaviour literature over the last half century. From seminal work *The American Voter* onwards, the prevailing view is that the majority of American citizens are insufficiently engaged in politics to be able to make rational voting decisions based on an understanding of policy issues. Rather, the argument goes, their voting is driven by blind partisanship, ideological preferences, or a knee-jerk assessment of how the president did last time around. Most voters are assumed to have a very limited understanding of policy issues and hence are not equipped to take policy into account when voting. If this depressing view of voter competence is correct then it has alarming implications for the democratic process, so it is perhaps surprising that more work has not been done challenging this view. In *On Voter Competence* Paul Goren addresses this gap.



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Goren is Associate Professor of Political Studies at the [University of Minnesota](#) and has published widely in the field of voter behaviour, political psychology, and public opinion. He brings this experience to bear in *On Voter Competence*, in which he presents a comprehensive argument in support of a somewhat more positive view of the American voter.

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The American Voter argued that very few voters use ideological thinking to guide their vote choice, suggesting this as evidence of an impoverishment of political thought. Goren agrees that voters are in general politically unsophisticated. They tend to lack both factual political knowledge – for example being able to identify the vice president or understanding how the processes of government work – and associational knowledge – the ability to store and easily retrieve relevant political information. Most voters perform badly on any test of political sophistication, knowing little about politics even to the extent of struggling to know whether the Republican Party is ideologically conservative or liberal. Generally voters' lack of political sophistication is cited as evidence that they are not capable of making coherent policy-based voting decisions, however here Goren takes a different view. In a challenge to the bulk of voting literature he argues that in fact all voters are capable of some form of policy-based voting, regardless of their level of political sophistication.

Goren's central argument is that almost everyone, regardless of their level of political sophistication, holds a position on what he sees as the three core policy issues at the heart of American politics. These are: firstly, a debate about the role of government; secondly, differing views on the norms of morality; and thirdly, an argument about the role of military might. All three have been central themes in American political discourse for many years and are at the heart of the US policy agenda. These core principles can be matched to candidate positions by anyone, meaning that even the politically unsophisticated can base their voting on opinions about policy.

In order for policy voting to take place, Goren considers that three things need to happen. Firstly, voters must have pre-existing political attitudes which they can use to guide their vote choice. Previous research has tended to ask voters about very specific policy issues and, on finding that most people lack such views, concluded that policy voting does not take place. However rather than delving into the minutiae of specific policies Goren focuses on the three overarching policy principles outlined above and finds that almost everyone holds opinions on each of these. The second condition of policy voting is the ability to apply one's pre-existing policy attitudes to new issues as they are presented and, through a painstaking analysis of opinion data, Goren shows that both politically sophisticated and unsophisticated voters are able to arrive at consistent issue preferences based on abstract policy principles. The third condition of policy voting is the ability of voters to select the candidate that is closest to them on a given policy continuum and then select that candidate and again Goren uses detailed data analysis to show that this is indeed the case.

In summary, Goren presents a compelling case for American voters being better able to make policy-based voting decisions than is generally assumed. Does this necessarily mean that American voters are politically competent? Here Goren's view is still in line with most thinking. Policy voting is only one aspect of political competence and there are many other measures of this – political participation, discussion, deliberation and so on – on which American voters continue to fall short. Whilst this book challenges one aspect of the negative view of American voters, it by no means exonerates them on the charge of incompetence.

This is a book of great depth rather than breadth and its focus is completely on American voters, so readers looking for a wider discussion of voter behaviour or some consideration of how voters in other types of political systems might make their decisions will be disappointed. However, Goren presents a useful overview of voter decision making literature and examines in detail the limitations of traditional approaches to this topic. As such, this book is likely to be of interest to scholars of voting behaviour and of political science more broadly. The statistical basis for Goren's argument is presented in a very high level of detail and some of the chapters relating to this require a significant level of statistical knowledge from the reader. That said, Goren does clearly signpost how each chapter fits into the overall argument and the book as a whole is clear and persuasive.

Lorna Walker is a senior marketing lecturer at Regent's College, London where she runs the College's MA Business Management in International Travel and Tourism, and teaches political marketing, marketing communications, copywriting, and research methods. She's currently working towards her PhD at Cranfield School of Management, researching negative campaigning in political marketing. Other research interests include marketing pedagogy and uses of social media in academia. A former marketing practitioner, Lorna has worked in the travel, publishing and IT industries, specialising in direct marketing. She's on Twitter [@lornajwalker](https://twitter.com/lornajwalker). [Read more reviews by Lorna](#).