

Cristiano Vezzoni

**Brian Caplan, The Myth of Rational Voter. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 280 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/33649)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2010

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Brian Caplan, *The Myth of Rational Voter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 280 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/33649

How does it happen that democratic regimes produce bad (that is, harmful for the most) policies, when citizens are the ones selecting the government? Brian Caplan's book, *The myth of the rational voter*, gives a new, alternative account of this well-known paradox of democracy. Caplan's central idea is that democracy fails not because voters are ignorant and have no incentives to change their state of ignorance, but because "voters are worse than ignorant; they are, in a word, *irrational* – and vote accordingly" [p. 2].

The author only discusses economic policies, where a quantifiable economic criterion of evaluation is applicable: a good policy should increase the global wealth of a country, a bad policy would do the opposite. This evaluation seems to be very difficult or even impossible, but this is not what the author thinks: in his view, defining what is good and right for common welfare is a trivial matter, practically self evident as long as a person has been enlightened by the exposure to the basic principles of economics. The evidence that there is disagreement about this matter also among economists will not touch Caplan, as he holds that the disagreement is only on the margins, while the main foundations of the economic discipline are unanimously shared and undiscussed within the profession.

If we accept the definition of good and bad policies in terms of increase or decrease of global wealth, we can follow the first step of argument presented in the book: differently from economist, normal citizens generally have preferences that are systematically biased in the direction of bad policies. Four examples of systematically biased beliefs are brought in the book and supported with convincing empirical evidence [chapter 3]: the antimarket bias ["a tendency to underestimate the economic benefits of the market mechanism," p. 25]; the antiforeign bias ["a tendency to underestimate the economic benefits of interaction with foreigners," p. 36]; the make-work bias [a tendency to underestimate the economic benefits of downscaling labor while increasing productivity, p. 40]; the pessimistic bias ["a tendency to overestimate the severity of economic problems," p. 44]. In all these situations, the opinion of the general public on policies differs from the one of economists, that is taken as the right, rational answer, so that the author can say that "we [as public] turn off our intellectual faculties on subjects where we don't care about the truth." Thus, instead of supporting policies that maximize global welfare, and therefore the welfare of the majority, electors express support for policies that will harm the majority. In this way democracy fails to deliver good policies.

In front of such a result, we are facing a challenging question: why do normal citizens hold, and maintain, this systematic biased beliefs when policies preferences are concerned?

The fact of maintaining this beliefs is easy to explain: whatever their preferences are, citizens have no material incentives to change them in the electoral process, given that their vote will not change the outcome of an election; the cost for a voter to maintain foolish beliefs about policies is therefore nil.

The fact that, when free to choose, citizens systematically opt for foolish beliefs about (economic) policies is more difficult to explain. Why should normal, non-economist citizens be always biased in the direction of folly? The question is not broadly considered in the book, as in the view of the author, the biases are practically self evident, cross-cultural and have always existed. Therefore it is not so crucial to answer why it is so [chapter 2]. Nonetheless, there is in the book an attempt to account for these systematic biases, claiming that these biased preferences are emotionally more appealing than their rational opposites [chapter 5]. This conclusion is reached on the basis of introspection, introducing the vague ideas of “preferences over beliefs” [p. 115-116] and “rational irrationality” [p. 122]. Following the introspective argument, irrationality results more rewarding than rationality and, in the absence of material incentive to move away from the wrong path, foolish beliefs are chosen and hold. But again, why should a person find emotionally more rewarding a trivially wrong belief, when its erroneousness can be spotted so easily and corrected by means of a simple enlightening course of basic economics? This is not explained in the book, but in public opinion studies good accounts of the formation of biased beliefs have been given and a more thorough consideration of these contributions could reinforce Caplan’s argument.

The assumption that in politics laymen are “naturally” fool also brings the author to underestimate another important aspect: political opinions, beliefs and preferences are not independent from political supply and partisanship can be a powerful heuristic to address voters’ preferences on issues (this was already convincingly shown in 1979 by Markus and Converse). In fact, laymen often do not have strong (and wrong) personal opinions on several issues, and they use politics to get cues about those issues. Moreover, considering the link that exists between candidates and voters, the signals do not only go from the latter to the former, as Caplan assumes: it is reasonable to think that about certain issues the electorate adjusts to the positions of the party. This point can be synthesized in the simple statement “Politics matters,” so well illustrated in the Thomassen’s book *The European voter*.

If, in spite of these criticisms, we eventually accept the argument of the book on irrational citizens and the consequent failure of democracy to select good policies, we are left with a final question that stems from the author’s pessimistic view about democracy: why does democracy actually perform not as bad as Caplan’s theory would suggest? This is not a trivial question, given that it underlines a potential paradox of the theory. The author addresses it explicitly in chapter 6 (“From Irrationality to Policy”), where he deals with the problem of policy formation in the political arena. Two mechanisms can be evoked to explain why foolish, populist policies are not extensively embraced by democratically elected governments.

A first mechanism concerns the slack that exists between platforms of candidates and actual implementation of policies, partly exploited by politicians to implement more reasonable policies than the ones promised in their populist electoral programs. Following the author, the politicians have an incentive to move away from their populist promises because on the long run it is convenient for their re-election to reduce the damages deriving from the implementation of the policies that voters asked for.

A second mechanism explaining the acceptable working of democracies has to do with selective participation to elections; in fact, the proportion of educated, econo-

mist-like people in the electorate that actually cast the ballot is higher than in the population as such. This moves the preference of median voter closer to the one of the enlightened economist. Following this point, the author comes to his main policy suggestion in order to reduce the potential damages of voters' irrationality: "a *moderate* reform suggested by [the author's] analysis is to reduce or eliminate efforts to increase voter turnout" (italics added). The fewer people who take part in elections, the highest the probability that the majority of these people will be enlightened voters, sensible enough to chose for good policies and therefore reducing the potential democratic damages.

In the line of thought of the author this provocative conclusion flows smoothly. But it forgets the lesson of a massive corpus of literature about the connection between social capital and institutional performance. Following the results of this literature, it is easy to understand how participation rates in elections is a good indicator of social capital that, in its turn, is a precondition of institutional performance. This point illustrates well how the whole argument of the author is limited by the fact of assuming as terms of comparison between policies only the maximization of public economic welfare, assuming that this maximization will leave untouched other components of society (e.g. civic participation). This assumption can fall quite short though, and at the end of the day, what could seem an enlightened way of promoting public welfare on the short period, could turn out to be, on the long run, a rather myopic approach to policy making, jeopardizing the societal basis not only of democracy but also of economic performance.

*Cristiano Vezzoni*  
University of Milan