

(a generous assumption in the view of this congressional scholar), and that an average citizen's probability of being right is .51 (a conservative assumption in the view of this neopopulist), the probability that a Senate *majority* makes the wrong decision is greater than the probability that a national referendum of 100 million voters does. Both probabilities are quite small, but the point is simply that large numbers can more than compensate for less information.

In the second place, it is not at all clear that ordinary people *are* more badly informed than activists, for ideology often masquerades as information. The activists on various issues may be more informed about those issues, but their information is typically selective, exaggerated, and biased in various ways. Some recent studies have compared the views of various political "elites" with those of equally expert but not politically active control groups. For example, leaders of environmental groups were asked to rate various environmental cancer risks. Their ratings were then compared with those of a sample of cancer researchers. Unsurprisingly, relative to expert but disinterested opinion, the environmental activists significantly overstated the risks of environmentally caused cancer.⁵⁴ Such findings are not at all surprising, but they seriously undercut arguments that informed minorities make better—as contrasted with "different"—decisions than uninformed majorities.⁵⁵ It is not clear that empowering "informed" extremists and letting them fight it out produces better public policies than a politics in which ordinary uninformed citizens have more influence.

Conclusion

While the far-ranging debate about civic engagement and social capital is full of disagreements, few have questioned the basic premise that civic

54. For all risk factors, environmental activists considered the cancer risk to be greater than the scientists did: e.g., on a scale of 1 to 10, activists rated dioxin 8.1, scientists rated it 4.7; for DDT, activists 6.7 and scientists 3.8; for nuclear power, activists 4.6 and scientists 2.5. Rothman and Lichter (1996, pp. 234–35).

55. One of the Concord activists I spoke with believed that he had acted in the enlightened interest of the larger community. He bemoaned the impossibility of sitting down with uninformed residents who favored the Middlesex plan and explaining how destruction of a vernal pool would harm the reproduction of salamanders. He had no persuasive answer to the question: "What if they were to reply 'I understand all that, but I'll trade the salamanders for soccer fields.'"