There is a large, and to many people alarming, body of literature on the erroneous views of the ordinary voter; not only do most voters hold many views that are strikingly at odds with the facts, they resist information that tends to overturn these views, and where they do not, they re-adopt their false views more or less quickly. This poses an obvious problem for democratic politics: if politicians are responsive to the (erroneous) views of the electorate, will they not be forced to pursue irrational and counter-productive policies, both domestically or internationally; they are not responsive to the views of the electorate, do they not lack democratic credibility? Many writers believe that there are structural features of – modern rather than ‘Athenian’ – democracy that dissolve this problem, and the democracy functions ‘in spite of itself.’ The lecture will argue that this is unduly optimistic, and that there is too much room for the interested manufacture of erroneous opinions by elites, whether benign, malign, or simply trying to maintain their economic advantages, to give us many grounds for cheerfulness about contemporary democratic politics.

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