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## **Constitutional Illiteracy & Attention Deficit Democracy** **by James Bovard**

Another poll has confirmed that most Americans are constitutionally without a clue. Americans' political illiteracy is good news for Washington politicians hungry to seize more power. But this ignorance is one of the most perilous elements of attention deficit democracy.

The McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum poll, released last month, found that barely a quarter of Americans could name more than one of the fundamental freedoms recognized in the First Amendment. Far more Americans could name the characters on *The Simpsons* than could recall the provisions of the First Amendment. Three-fourths of Americans recognized two of the product brands connected to five popular ad slogans, while only 28 percent could name two or more freedoms cited in the First Amendment.

Delusions on the First Amendment were more appalling than the raw ignorance. Almost one-fourth of Americans believe that “the First Amendment granted them the right to own and raise pets.” Thirty-six percent believed the First Amendment gave women the right to vote — which would have been a surprise to the suffragettes of the early 20th century.

Many Americans have long been constitutional Know Nothings. A 1979 Gallup poll found that 70 percent of respondents did not know what the First Amendment was or what it dealt with. A 1991 American Bar Association poll found that only 33 percent of Americans surveyed knew what the Bill of Rights was. A 1987 survey found that 45 percent of adult respondents believed that Karl Marx's communist principle “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” was in the U.S. Constitution.

The recent poll found that 36 percent of Americans believe the right to a public education is guaranteed by the First Amendment. This widespread notion vivifies the failure of public schools. More years in government schools have done little or nothing to help citizens understand the limits on government power codified by the Founding Fathers. Politically controlled education cannot be trusted to enlighten people on the perils of political power.

The McCormick Foundation warned, “The less Americans know about freedoms, the more they are likely to erode without our notice.” But it is not a question of freedoms’ eroding: it is a question of their being plowed under at a high rate of speed.

From the proliferation of free speech zones (quarantining anyone who protests against the president’s policies), to the assertion by Justice Department lawyers that the president is above the law (regarding interrogation methods), to the nullification of limits on government searches (the warrantless National Security Agency wiretaps), individual rights are becoming an endangered species. But few Americans recognize the rising danger.

The conventional wisdom is that, though Americans may not know the Constitution or the laws, they still imbibe sufficient political wisdom merely from living in the United States. But there is no reason to assume that most Americans know enough to prevent politicians from trampling their rights. If a citizen is unaware of his rights, then, for all practical purposes, in disputes with government officials he does not have them.

America is becoming an attention deficit democracy. The government is still nominally democratic — elections are boisterous events accompanied by torrents of dubious ads and mass rallies. But after the election, the president returns to his pedestal, congressmen return to their free lunches, and most people ignore political life.

Because so many people are so ignorant, it becomes easier each decade for politicians to seize new power and decimate established rights. But the fact that most people are politically negligent does not entitle government to trample their rights.

A 1937 Senate report declared that “the Constitution ... is the people’s charter of the powers granted those who govern them.” The Bill of Rights recognized the pre-existing rights of American citizens — it did not bestow those rights on a conquered populace. Americans of the Revolutionary Era permitted a national government to come into existence only after the leaders of that government solemnly pledged to limit its power in perpetuity. Politicians cannot violate the Bill of Rights without destroying the legitimacy of their power.

Attention deficit democracy lacks the most important check on the abuse of power: an informed citizenry resolutely defending their rights. But no amount of popular ignorance can legitimize political absolutism. The government must respect the Bill of Rights regardless of how few Americans understand the highest law of the land.

*James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*