



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

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## **The Greatest Ignorance of the Greatest Number** **by James Bovard**

The specter of an ignorant or indifferent populace has long haunted democracy. Montesquieu wrote in 1748,

The tyranny of a principal in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy.

James Madison warned,

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.

President John F. Kennedy declared in 1963, “The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.”

Despite numerous eloquent warnings, however, political ignorance has mushroomed as government power has increased.

If citizen comprehension of government and public affairs is the currency of democracy, America is long since bankrupt. Philip Converse observed in 1975 in his *Handbook of Political Science*,

The most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observers, astonishingly low.

A May 1997 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that only 8 percent of the public could identify the name of Louis Freeh, the FBI director who presided over the most scandal-racked period of the nation’s premier law-enforcement agency.

A January 1995 ABC News–*Washington Post* poll found that two months after the midterm congressional elections, only 39 percent of the public were aware of the “Contract with America,” even though it had been the hottest ideological issue in congressional elections in recent decades.

A 1996 *Washington Post*-Harvard survey found that “only 26 percent knew the 6-year term of office of a U.S. senator” and less than half the public knows that a member of the House of Representative is elected to a two-year term.

Prof. Stephen Earl Bennett, in a 1988 article entitled “‘Know-Nothings’ Revisited: The Meaning of Political Ignorance Today,” observed,

Very few Americans do well on tests of political knowledge; beyond recognizing presidential figures, the public is just as hazy about things political as it was five decades ago ... 74 percent did not know the name and party of even one local congressional candidate.

Political scientist Michael Delli Carpini, after analyzing thousands of voter surveys, told the *Washington Post* that there was “virtually no relationship” between the political issues that low-knowledge voters said “matter most to them and the positions of the candidates they voted for on those issues. It was as if their vote was random.”

The *Post* estimated that roughly 36 percent of voters were “low knowledge” — a far larger percentage than the deciding margins in almost all contested congressional and presidential elections. Thirty percent were classified as “high knowledge.”

Overall, the *Post*-Harvard survey found that more than half of all Americans agreed with the following statement: “Politics and government are so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”

If someone declared that traffic laws are so complicated that he couldn’t figure out which side of the road to drive on, most people would support yanking that person’s driver’s license. Yet no amount of ignorance can disqualify a voter from a role in choosing representatives and presidents.

Many Americans are also profoundly ignorant of their legal rights. 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 poll commissioned by the American Bar Association 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.

Most Americans do not understand the doctrine of the separation of powers; a 1977 poll found that only 33 percent of respondents knew that governors did not have the power to veto state court rulings.

Citizens' ignorance of their own tax burdens also vivifies their failure to understand their relation to government.

A 1995 survey by Grassroots Research, an independent polling firm, found that 83 percent of the respondents underestimated the tax burden faced by the average family. The survey showed that the tax burden on a family earning \$35,000 is actually 54 percent higher than most people think.

A 1998 report by Congress's Joint Tax Committee concluded that "hidden taxes force more than 33 million Americans into higher tax brackets" than they are aware of. The same year, House Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill Archer of Texas declared that such covert tax increases are "akin to false advertising by the government."

If people do not even notice how much government confiscates from them every paycheck, how likely are they to pay attention to political events that have less immediate impact on their lives?

Citizens' ignorance may be increasing as fast as politicians' spending. Assume that the average citizen devotes the same amount of time studying politics and current affairs today that voters did in 1947. (This may be optimistic: newspaper readership has plummeted in recent decades, though average years of education have risen.) In 1947, 77 percent of high-school graduates knew which political party controlled the House of Representatives; in 1996, only 54 percent could answer that question.

Total government spending has increased from \$61.9 billion in 1950, or \$410 per person, to \$2,257 billion in 1994, or \$8,681 per person. In inflation-adjusted terms, this is an increase in spending of more than 700 percent.

The annual *Federal Register* has gone from 7,417 pages in 1947 to 69,364 in 1996. The Code of Federal Regulations is now 14 times larger than it was in 1950. The Republican Party platform was 14 times longer in 1996 than it was in 1948.

While the amount of citizens' knowledge about government and politics appears stagnant, the amount of government spending, laws, and regulations has soared.

Thus, even if citizens understood government policies a half century ago, they and their progeny most likely comprehend only a small fraction of those policies now.

The growth of government is like the spread of a dense jungle, and the average citizen is able to mentally hack his way through less and less of that jungle every year.

The larger the government, the more the average citizen and average voter is at the intellectual mercy of his rulers. And the more ignorant the voters, the easier it becomes for

politicians to treat people like Pavlovian dogs, simply throwing out some phrase after which the citizen, reflexively, runs to vote more power to the politicians.

The only way to presume that citizens' ignorance of government is irrelevant to democracy is for the government to be so inherently benevolent that people do not even need to know what it is doing. That is, people can ignore the details of government policies — since they are essentially making a choice between two competing political caregivers — in the same way that an infirm person might choose between two nurses competing for hire, with no understanding of the drugs the nurses plan to inject him with.

The issue of citizen ignorance is rarely raised in discussions over whether citizens consented to some expansion of government power.

However, citizen ignorance is the rallying cry of the political establishment and judges determined to nullify limitations on how long politicians can hold power over other people. When he was serving in Congress in 1995, Rep. Pat Williams of Montana concluded, regarding popular support for congressional term limits, “Sometimes the American people are just wrong.”

The anemic reasoning of many citizens on political issues is not a function of a lack of intelligence; rather, citizens lack a strong, pressing incentive to do the mental heavy lifting necessary to grasp political issues.

Also, considering how many people fail to concentrate on their own affairs (such as financial planning or balancing their checkbooks), how likely are they to function at a higher level in considering government taxation or budget controversies?

The issue is not whether a viable democracy can survive an unlimited level of government complexity. Obviously, at some point, there will be so much on the public-agenda plate that even conscientious citizens are overwhelmed.

The question is, has America reached that point yet? Or, perhaps more important, has America already reached the point at which elections are mere contests of demagoguery and bathos?

Some people believe that a nation can still enjoy a type of democracy even if many or most people know little or nothing of government policy. One commentator in 1934 offered a vision of

ennobled democracy ... in which the people gives a few men the right to command, but on the other hand reserves the right to criticize these few men on general lines. This right is exercised in the elections.

Regardless of whether this definition captures the reality for many voters, it would be distasteful for most Americans to accept their concept of democracy from people similar to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

James Bovard is author of **Lost Rights** (1994) and the forthcoming **Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom** (St. Martin's Press, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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