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Boundless Ignorance versus Self-Government

by James Bovard

Modern democracy is based on faith that the people can control what they do not understand. As government has grown by leaps and bounds, “government by the people” has become one of the great fairy tales of our times. As the Founding Fathers feared, citizen ignorance often brings out the worst in their rulers.

Contemporary Americans may be less politically astute than their ancestors. Lord Bryce, a British ambassador to the United States and the author of the classic *American Commonwealth*, commented on Americans in 1921: “Nobody says, as men so often say in France, Germany, and Italy, ‘I never trouble myself about politics.’” Bryce declared, “Political opinion is better instructed than in Continental Europe because a knowledge of the institutions of the country and their working is more generally diffused here than there through the rank and file of the native population.”

But Bryce’s cheery view may have been out of date by the time his book was published. Millions of Americans were profoundly embittered by the government lies and abuses that permeated the First World War and the Prohibition aftermath. By the mid 1920s, many intellectuals were losing faith in voters. In his 1925 book, *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippman commented that the typical citizen “gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory.” But the political theorists completely ignored this basic limitation. Lippman complained that civics textbooks implied that to be well-informed, citizens “must have the appetite of an encyclopediast and infinite time ahead of him.”

Most Americans have long been political-knowledge lightweights. U.S. government aid to the Nicaraguan Contras was one of the hottest political issues of the 1980s. But polls showed that most citizens — even those who voiced opinions to pollsters — did not know who the Contras were or where Nicaragua was located in relation to the United States. After the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva in 1986, fewer than half of Americans polled could name the leader of the Soviet Union. In 1989, only 25 percent of people knew what the FICA deduction on their payroll

stub meant — even though the Social Security tax is the heaviest federal tax that most wage earners pay.

The depth of voter ignorance

Shortly after the 1994 congressional elections, only 39 percent of the public knew of the Republican “Contract with America,” even though it was the most prominent issue in a congressional election in decades. A 1995 *Washington Post*–Harvard University study revealed, “Four in 10 Americans don’t know that the Republicans control Congress; and half either think the Democratic Party is more conservative politically than the GOP or don’t feel they know enough to offer a guess.” The survey also found that “only 26 percent knew the 6-year term of office of a U.S. senator” and less than half the public knew that a member of the House of Representatives is elected to a two-year term.

Almost half of Americans “believe that the President has the power to suspend the Constitution.” Christopher Shea noted in *Salon*, “On a typical election day, 56% of Americans can’t name a single candidate in their own district, for any office.”

Voter ignorance was a key factor in the 2000 presidential election — and not just in Florida. The 2000 election was determined by the weather, according to an analysis by Princeton political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels. They analyzed climatic readings from 1895 to the present and concluded that “wet or dry conditions in a typical state and year cost the incumbent party seven-tenths of a percentage point, while ‘extreme’ droughts or wet spells cost incumbents about 1.5 percentage points.” Achen and Bartels observed, “Voters responded to climatic distress in 2000 — as they have repeatedly throughout the past century — by punishing the incumbent government at the polls.” Achen and Bartels concluded, “Real voters often have only a vague, more or less primitive understanding of the connections (if any) between incumbent politicians’ actions and their own pain or pleasure.”

During 2000, the University of Michigan’s National Election Survey conducted a comprehensive survey of Americans’ political knowledge. George Mason University law professor Ilya Somin analyzed the results and found that only 55 percent knew that Janet Reno was the attorney general, only 15 percent knew the name of any candidate for the House of Representatives from their congressional district, only 11 percent could identify William Rehnquist as the chief justice of the United States, and only 9 percent knew that Trent Lott was the Senate majority leader.

Surveys of people’s knowledge of names, titles, or job descriptions do not reveal whether they actually comprehend what government is doing. To expect that knowing the length of a Senate term or the names of Supreme Court justices makes voters competent is like expecting that knowing that cars have four wheels is enough to avoid being conned by a car mechanic. Basic knowledge might aid one in knowing where in the phone book to look to contact a government

office, but in an era when government policies and interventions are proliferating like mosquitoes, a few factoids are not enough.

Americans possess far greater knowledge of popular culture than of politics and government. Ten times more Americans knew the name of the host of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* than knew the name of the speaker of the House of Representatives in 2000. In the 1992 election, “Eighty-six per cent of likely voters knew that the Bushes’ dog’s name was Millie; only fifteen per cent knew that Bush and Clinton both favored the death penalty. It’s not that people know nothing. It’s just that politics is not what they know,” Louis Menand noted in the *New Yorker*.

Understanding government

While the size of government is mushrooming, Americans’ understanding of how government works may be shrinking. Michael Delli Carpini, dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that “despite an unprecedented expansion in public education, a communications revolution that has shattered national and international boundaries, and the increasing relevance of national and international events and policies to the daily lives of Americans, citizens appear no more informed about politics today than they were half a century ago.” More years in government schools have done little or nothing to help citizens understand how government operates. It would be naive to expect politically controlled education to enlighten people about the perils of political power. But, because public schools are largely a sacred cow, this conflict of interest is ignored or rarely discussed in polite company.

Many people believed that the soaring popularity of political talk radio would boost voter literacy. However, “exposure to these programs is not significantly related to even elementary tests of political information,” according to a *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* examination of the knowledge of regular talk-show listeners.

The dulling of American minds

Ignorance is thriving in part because Americans are reading less. A National Endowment for the Arts survey estimated that “the number of non-reading adults increased by more than 17 million between 1992 and 2002.” Between 1992 and 2002, the number of adults who read a daily paper declined from six in ten to four in ten. Though reading books and newspapers is no guarantee of political literacy, people are far more likely to be able to follow and remember a complex argument when they read about it than when they see politicians blathering bromides on television.

In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America* that “to persuade people to take an interest in their own affairs is, I know well, an arduous enterprise. It would often be easier

to get them interested in the details of court etiquette than in the repair of their common dwelling.” Unfortunately, insofar as people do pay attention to politics, it is increasingly focused on the day-to-day utterances or behavior of the presidents — the triumph of the “Great Leader Democracy.” But attention is sporadic even when the topic is titillating. For instance, in 1998 and early 1999, there was vastly more attention given to what Clinton did to an intern than to what the federal government was doing to the American people. And even then, “only about a third of the American public followed media accounts of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal ‘very closely.’” The scandal probably convinced many people that simply getting a religion-invoking, happily married man in the Oval Office would restore decency in Washington.

Long-term deterioration of American political rhetoric is also dulling Americans’ minds. Presidential addresses have become little more than “pontification cum anecdotalism.” University of Tulsa political scientist Elvin Lim concluded, “The urge to dumb down has been a rare constant in the two hundred year history of the presidency, persisting in spite of the different personalities and ideologies of the 43 [sic] men who have held the office.” Lim noted that the last century has seen “the intensified de-intellectualization of American presidential rhetoric, which in its modern mode has exhibited an increased tendency to avoid references to cognitive and evaluative processes and states.” Presidents have made themselves far more prominent in their official rhetoric, shifting public attention from the government to the supreme leader. Lim found that “keywords of typical republican rhetoric have become unpopular, with references to the once honored words like republic, citizen, character, duty, and virtuous falling significantly.” Voters may understand government power less because the topic is vanishing from official addresses: “References to legal and judicial terms have taken a sharp fall since around William Howard Taft, as have references to the tools and forms of formal power.” Instead, the message is that the president cares about the voter.

The only way that massive ignorance of public policy will not subvert meaningful democracy is for politicians somehow to know and respect people’s wishes — even if the people themselves are ignorant of their own will. Voter ignorance is irrelevant to democracy only if politicians are automatically all-wise and benevolent. But no such class of politicians has been discovered to exist outside of Washington novels and high-school civics textbooks.

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