

How Ignorant Are We?

The Voters Choose but on the Basis of What?

By Rick Shenkman

*“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” –
Thomas Jefferson*

Just how stupid are we? Pretty stupid, it would seem, when we come across headlines like this: “Homer Simpson, Yes – 1st Amendment ‘Doh,’ Survey Finds” (Associated Press 3/1/06).

“About 1 in 4 Americans can name more than one of the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment (freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly and petition for redress of grievances.) But more than half of Americans can name at least two members of the fictional cartoon family, according to a survey.

“The study by the new McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that 22 percent of Americans could

name all five Simpson family members, compared with just 1 in 1,000 people who could name all five First Amendment freedoms.”

But what does it mean exactly to say that American voters are stupid? About this there is unfortunately no consensus. Like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who confessed not knowing how to define pornography, we are apt simply to throw up our hands in frustration and say: We know it when we see it. But unless we attempt a definition of some sort, we risk incoherence, dooming our investigation of stupidity from the outset. Stupidity cannot mean, as Humpty Dumpty would have it, whatever we say it means.

Five defining characteristics of stupidity, it seems to me, are readily apparent. First, is sheer ignorance: Ignorance of critical facts about important events in the news, and ignorance of how our government functions and who's in charge. Second, is negligence: The disinclination to seek reliable sources of information about important news events. Third, is wooden-headedness, as the historian Barbara Tuchman defined it: The inclination to believe what we want to believe regardless of the facts. Fourth, is shortsightedness: The support of public policies that are mutually contradictory, or contrary to the country's long-term interests. Fifth, and finally, is a broad category I call bone-headedness, for want of a better name: The susceptibility to meaningless phrases, stereotypes, irrational biases, and simplistic diagnoses and solutions that play on our hopes and fears.

American Ignorance

Taking up the first of our definitions of stupidity, how ignorant are we? Ask the political scientists and you will be told that there is damning, hard evidence pointing incontrovertibly to the conclusion that millions are embarrassingly ill-informed and that they do not care that they are. There is enough evidence that one could almost conclude – though admittedly this is a stretch – that we are living in an Age of Ignorance.

Surprised? My guess is most people would be. The general impression seems to be that we are living in an age in which people are particularly knowledgeable. Many students tell me that they are the most well-informed generation in history.

Why are we so deluded? The error can be traced to our mistaking unprecedented access to information with the actual consumption of it. Our access is indeed phenomenal. George Washington had to wait two weeks to discover that he had been elected president of the United States. That's how long it took for the news to travel from New York, where the Electoral College votes were counted, to reach him at home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. Americans living in the interior regions had to wait even longer, some up to two months. Now we can watch developments as they occur halfway around the world in real time. It is little wonder then that students boast of their knowledge. Unlike their parents, who were forced to rely mainly on newspapers and the network news shows to find out what was happening in the world, they can flip on CNN and Fox or consult the Internet.

But in fact only a small percentage of people take advantage of the great new resources at hand. In 2005, the Pew Research Center surveyed the news habits of some 3,000 Americans age 18 and older. The researchers found that 59% on a regular basis get at

least some news from local TV, 47% from national TV news shows, and just 23% from the Internet.

Anecdotal evidence suggested for years that Americans were not particularly well-informed. As foreign visitors long ago observed, Americans are vastly inferior in their knowledge of world geography compared with Europeans. (The old joke is that “War is God’s way of teaching Americans geography.”) But it was never clear until the postwar period how ignorant Americans are. For it was only then that social scientists began measuring in a systematic manner what Americans actually know. The results were devastating.

The most comprehensive surveys, the National Election Studies (NES), were carried out by the University of Michigan beginning in the late 1940s. What these studies showed was that Americans fall into three categories with regard to their political knowledge. A tiny percentage know a lot about politics, up to 50%-60% know enough to answer very simple questions, and the rest know next to nothing.

Contrary to expectations, by many measures the surveys showed the level of ignorance remaining constant over time. In the 1990s, political scientists Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter concluded that there was statistically little difference between the knowledge of the parents of the Silent Generation of the 1950s, the parents of the Baby Boomers of the 1960s, and American parents today. (By some measures, Americans are dumber today than their parents of a generation ago.)

Some of the numbers are hard to fathom in a country in which for at least a century all children have been required by law to attend

grade school or be home-schooled. Even if people do not closely follow the news, one would expect them to be able to answer basic civics questions, but only a small minority can.

In 1986, only 30% knew that *Roe v. Wade* was the Supreme Court decision that ruled abortion legal more than a decade earlier. In 1991, Americans were asked how long the term of a United States senator is. Just 25% correctly answered six years. How many senators are there? A poll a few years ago found that only 20% know that there are 100 senators, though the number has remained constant for the last half century (and is easy to remember). Encouragingly, today the number of Americans who can correctly identify and name the three branches of government is up to 40%.

Polls over the past three decades measuring Americans' knowledge of history show similarly dismal results. What happened in 1066? Just 10% know it is the date of the Norman Conquest. Who said the "world must be made safe for democracy"? Just 14% know it was Woodrow Wilson. Which country dropped the nuclear bomb? Only 49% know it was their own country. Who was America's greatest president? According to a Gallup poll in 2005, a majority answer that it was a president from the last half century: 20% said Reagan, 15% Bill Clinton, 12% John Kennedy, 5% George W. Bush. Only 14% picked Lincoln and only 5%, Washington.

And the worst president? For years Americans would include in the list Herbert Hoover. But no more. Most today do not know who Herbert Hoover was, according to the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey in 2004. Just 43% could correctly identify him.

The only history questions a majority of Americans can answer correctly are the most basic ones. What happened at Pearl Harbor? A great majority know: 84%. What was the Holocaust? Nearly 70% know. (Thirty percent don't?) But it comes as something of a shock that, in 1983, just 81% knew who Lee Harvey Oswald was and that, in 1985, only 81% could identify Martin Luther King, Jr.

What Voters Don't Know

Who these poor souls were who didn't know who Martin Luther King was we cannot be sure. Research suggests that they were probably impoverished (the poor tend to know less on the whole about politics and history than others) or simply unschooled, categories which usually overlap. But even Americans in the middle class who attend college exhibit profound ignorance. A report in 2007 published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute found that on average 14,000 randomly selected college students at 50 schools around the country scored under 55 (out of 100) on a test that measured their knowledge of basic American civics. Less than half knew that Yorktown was the last battle of the American Revolution. Surprisingly, seniors often tested lower than freshmen. (The explanation was apparently that many students by their senior year had forgotten what they learned in high school.)

The optimists point to surveys indicating that about half the country can describe some differences between the Republican and Democratic Parties. But if they do not know the difference between liberals and conservatives, as surveys indicate, how can they possibly say in any meaningful way how the parties differ? And if they do not know this, what else do they not know?

Plenty, it turns out. Even though they are awash in news, Americans generally do not seem to absorb what it is that they are reading and hearing and watching. Americans cannot even name the leaders of their own government. Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the United States Supreme Court. Fewer than half of Americans could tell you her name during the length of her entire tenure. William Rehnquist was chief justice of the Supreme Court. Just 40% of Americans ever knew *his* name (and only 30% could tell you that he was a conservative). Going into the First Gulf War, just 15% could identify Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense. In 2007, in the fifth year of the Iraq War, only 21% could name the secretary of defense, Robert Gates. Most Americans cannot name their own member of Congress or their senators.

If the problem were simply that Americans are bad at names, one would not have to worry too much. But they do not understand the mechanics of government either. Only 34% know that it is the Congress that declares war (which may explain why they are not alarmed when presidents take us into wars without explicit declarations of war from the legislature). Only 35% know that Congress can override a presidential veto. Some 49% think the president can suspend the Constitution. Some 60% believe that he can appoint judges to the federal courts without the approval of the Senate. Some 45% believe that revolutionary speech is punishable under the Constitution.

On the basis of their comprehensive approach, Delli Carpini and Keeter concluded that only 5% of Americans could correctly answer three-fourths of the questions asked about economics, only

11% of the questions about domestic issues, 14% of the questions about foreign affairs, and 10% of the questions about geography. The highest score? More Americans knew the correct answers to history questions than any other (which will come as a surprise to many history teachers). Still, only 25% knew the correct answers to three-quarters of the history questions, which were rudimentary.

In 2003, the Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad investigated Americans' knowledge of world affairs. The task force concluded: "America's ignorance of the outside world" is so great as to constitute a threat to national security.

Young and Ignorant – and Voting

At least, you may think to yourself, we are not getting any dumber. But by some measures we are. Young people by many measures know less today than young people forty years ago. And their news habits are worse. Newspaper reading went out in the sixties along with the Hula Hoop. Just 20% of young Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 read a daily paper. And that isn't saying much. There's no way of knowing what part of the paper they're reading. It is likelier to encompass the comics and a quick glance at the front page than dense stories about Somalia or the budget.

They aren't watching the cable news shows either. The average age of CNN's audience is sixty. And they surely are not watching the network news shows, which attract mainly the Depends generation. Nor are they using the Internet in large numbers to surf for news. Only 11% say that they regularly click on news web pages. (Yes, many young people watch Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. A survey in 2007 by the Pew Research Center found that 54% of the viewers of *The Daily Show* score in the "high

knowledge” news category – about the same as the viewers of the *O’Reilly Factor* on Fox News.)

Compared with Americans generally – and this isn’t saying much, given *their* low level of interest in the news – young people are the least informed of any age cohort save possibly for those confined to nursing homes. In fact, the young are so indifferent to newspapers that they single-handedly are responsible for the dismally low newspaper readership rates that are bandied about.

In earlier generations – in the 1950s, for example – young people read newspapers and digested the news at rates similar to those of the general population. Nothing indicates that the current generation of young people will suddenly begin following the news when they turn 35 or 40. Indeed, half a century of studies suggest that most people who do not pick up the news habit in their twenties probably never will.

Young people today find the news irrelevant. Bored by politics, students shun the rituals of civic life, voting in lower numbers than other Americans (though a small up-tick in civic participation showed up in recent surveys). U.S. Census data indicate that voters aged 18 to 24 turn out in low numbers. In 1972, when 18 year olds got the vote, 52% cast a ballot. In subsequent years, far fewer voted: in 1988, 40%; in 1992, 50%; in 1996, 35%; in 2000, 36%. In 2004, despite the most intense get-out-the-vote effort ever focused on young people, just 47% took the time to cast a ballot.

Since young people on the whole scarcely follow politics, one may want to consider whether we even want them to vote. Asked in 2000 to identify the presidential candidate who was the chief sponsor of Campaign Finance Reform – Sen. John McCain – just

4% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 could do so. As the primary season began in February, fewer than half in the same age group knew that George W. Bush was even a candidate. Only 12% knew that McCain was also a candidate even though he was said to be especially appealing to young people.

One news subject in recent history, 9/11, did attract the interest of the young. A poll by Pew at the end of 2001 found that 61% of adult Americans under age 30 said that they were following the story closely. But few found any other subjects in the news that year compelling. Anthrax attacks? Just 32% indicated it was important enough to follow. The economy? Again, just 32%. The capture of Kabul? Just 20%.

It would appear that young people today are doing very little reading of any kind. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts, consulting a vast array of surveys, including the United States Census, found that just 43% of young people ages 18 to 24 read literature. In 1982, the number was 60%. A majority do not read either newspapers, fiction, poetry, or drama. Save for the possibility that they are reading the Bible or works of non-fiction, for which solid statistics are unavailable, it would appear that this generation is less well read than any other since statistics began to be kept.

The studies demonstrating that young people know less today than young people a generation ago do not get much publicity. What one hears about are the pioneer steps the young are taking politically. Headlines from the 2004 presidential election featured numerous stories about young people who were following the campaign on blogs, then a new phenomenon. Other stories focused on the help young Deaniacs gave Howard Dean by arranging to

raise funds through innovative Internet appeals. Still other stories reported that the Deaniacs were networking all over the country through the Internet website meetup.com. One did not hear that we have raised another Silent Generation. But have we not? The statistics about young people today are fairly clear: As a group they do not vote in large numbers, most do not read newspapers, and most do not follow the news. (Barack Obama has recently inspired greater participation, but at this stage it is too early to tell if the effect will be lasting.)

The Issues? Who knows?

Millions every year are now spent on the effort to answer the question: What do the voters want? The honest answer would be that often they themselves do not really know because they do not know enough to say. Few, however, admit this.

In the election of 2004, one of the hot issues was gay marriage. But gauging public opinion on the subject was difficult. Asked in one national poll whether they supported a constitutional amendment allowing only marriages between a man and a woman, a majority said yes. But three questions later a majority also agreed that “defining marriage was not an important enough issue to be worth changing the Constitution.” The *New York Times* wryly summed up the results: Americans clearly favor amending the Constitution but not changing it.

Does it matter if people are ignorant? There are many subjects about which the ordinary voter need know nothing. The conscientious citizen has no obligation to plow through the federal budget, for example. One suspects there are not many politicians themselves who have bothered to do so. Nor do voters have an

obligation to read the laws passed in their name. We do expect members of Congress to read the bills they are asked to vote on, but we know from experience that often they do not, having failed either to take the time to do so or having been denied the opportunity to do so by their leaders, who for one reason or another often rush bills through.

Reading the text of laws in any case is often unhelpful. The chairpersons in charge of drafting them often include provisions only a detective could untangle. The tax code is rife with clauses like this: *The Congress hereby appropriates X dollars for the purchase of 500 widgets that measure 3 inches by 4 inches by 2 inches from any company incorporated on October 20, 1965 in Any City USA situated in block 10 of district 3.*

Of course, only one company fits the description. Upon investigation it turns out to be owned by the chairperson's biggest contributor. That is more than any citizens acting on their own could possibly divine. It is not essential that the voter know every which way in which the tax code is manipulated to benefit special interests. All that is required is that the voter know that rigging of the tax code in favor of certain interests is probably common. The media are perfectly capable of communicating this message. Voters are perfectly capable of absorbing it. Armed with this knowledge, the voter knows to be wary of claims that the tax code treats one and all alike with fairness.

There are however innumerable subjects about which a general knowledge is insufficient. In these cases ignorance of the details is more than a minor problem. An appalling ignorance of Social Security, to take one example, has left Americans unable to see

how their money has been spent, whether the system is viable, and what measures are needed to shore it up.

How many know that the system is running a surplus? And that this surplus – some \$150 billion a year – is actually quite substantial, even by Washington standards? And how many know that the system has been in surplus since 1983?

Few, of course. Ignorance of the facts has led to a fundamentally dishonest debate about Social Security.

During all the years the surpluses were building, the Democrats in Congress pretended the money was theirs to be spent, as if it were the same as all the other tax dollars collected by the government. And spend it they did, whenever they had the chance, with no hint that they were perhaps disbursing funds that actually should be held in reserve for later use. (Social Security taxes had been expressly raised in 1983 in order to build up the system's funds when bankruptcy had loomed.) Not until the rest of the budget was in surplus (in 1999) did it suddenly occur to them that the money should be saved. And it appears that the only reason they felt compelled at this point to acknowledge that the money was needed for Social Security was because they wanted to blunt the Republicans' call for tax cuts. The Social Security surplus could not both be used to pay for the large tax cuts Republicans wanted and for the future retirement benefits of aging Boomers.

The Republicans have been equally unctuous. While they have claimed that they are terribly worried about Social Security, they have been busy irresponsibly spending the system's surplus on tax cuts, one cut after another. First Reagan used the surplus to hide the impact of his tax cuts and then George W. Bush used it to hide

the impact of his cuts. Neither ever acknowledged that it was only the surplus in Social Security's accounts that made it even plausible for them to cut taxes.

Take those Bush tax cuts. Bush claimed the cuts were made possible by several years of past surpluses and the prospect of even more years of surpluses. But subtracting from the federal budget the overflow funds generated by Social Security, the government ran a surplus in just two years during the period the national debt was declining, 1999 and 2000.

In the other years when the government ran a surplus, 1998 and 2001, it was because of Social Security and only because of Social Security. That is, the putative surpluses of 1998 and 2001, which President Bush cited in defense of his tax cuts, were in reality pure fiction. Without Social Security the government would have been in debt those two years. And yet in 2001 President Bush told the country tax cuts were not only needed, they were affordable because of our splendid surplus.

Today, conservatives argue that the Social Security Trust Fund is a fiction. They are correct. The money was spent. They helped spend it.

To this debate about Social Security – which, once one understands what has been happening, is actually quite absorbing – the public has largely been an indifferent spectator. A surprising 2001 Pew study found that just 19% of Americans understand that the United States ever ran a surplus at all, however defined, in the 1990s or 2000's. And only 50% of Americans, according to an Annenberg study in 2004, understand that President Bush favors privatizing Social Security. Polls indicate that people are scared

that the system is going bust, no doubt thanks in part to Bush's gloom-and-doom prognostications. But they haven't the faintest idea what going bust means. And in fact, the system can be kept going without fundamental change simply by raising the cap on taxed income and pushing back the retirement age a few years.

How much ignorance can a country stand? There have to be terrible consequences when it reaches a certain level. But what level? And with what consequences, exactly? The answers to these questions are unknowable. But can we doubt that if we persist on the path we are on that we shall, one day, perhaps not too far into the distant future, find out the answers?