

CHAPTER TWO

What Americans Know about Politics

If, then, there is a subject concerning which a democracy is particularly liable to commit itself blindly and extravagantly to general ideas, the best possible corrective is to make the citizens pay daily, practical attention to it. That will force them to go into details, and the details will show them the weak points in the theory.—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*

The facts ma'am—nothing but the facts.—JOE FRIDAY, *Dagnet*

Efforts to gauge what Americans know about politics have been made for as long as public opinion surveys have been conducted. Since the 1940s, scholarly studies have consistently found that the public is poorly informed. This conclusion has been reinforced by popular press accounts of public ignorance, such as a 1986 *American Washington Post* poll taken shortly after the widely covered Geneva summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev that discovered a majority of Americans could not name the leader of the Soviet Union. A similar, if less scientific, example was given in a 1991 *New York Times* column: "'That's U.S. Senator.' Several members of the New York State Senate reported last week that they had received dozens of calls from constituents with urgent advice on how they should vote on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. The trouble was, the nomination was in the hands of the United States Senate."

Such books as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Diane Ravitch's and Chester Finn's *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know*, and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* have also contributed to this negative image of the American public. Indeed, D. Charles Whitney and Ellen Wartella conclude that a "virtual cottage industry has arisen in the past few years in making out the American public as a bunch of ignoramuses" (1988: 9). This characterization is so well established that, according to John Ferejohn, "Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics" (1990: 3). In spite of indications that the public was more interested in "fact-slinging" than "mudslinging," evidence from the 1992

presidential campaign did little to rehabilitate the American voter's image. A 1992 report by the Center for the Study of Communication at the University of Massachusetts found that 86 percent of a random sample of likely voters knew that the Bush's family dog was named Millie and 89 percent knew that Murphy Brown was the television character criticized by Dan Quayle, but only 15 percent knew that both candidates favored the death penalty and only 5 percent knew that both had proposed cuts in the capital gains tax.

In spite of the apparent unanimity with which scholars and other observers characterize the American public's knowledge of politics, there have been relatively few systematic studies of this topic.¹ This inconsistency is noted by Neuman: "The situation is a little like the discussion of sex in Victorian times. Everybody is interested in the subject. There are many allusions to it. But they are all inexplicit and oblique. . . . Ironically, the issue of mass political sophistication has moved from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of sustained empirical research" (1986: 8-9).

Although recent studies have made this criticism somewhat less applicable, the scope of the issue and the gravity of the conclusions continue to outweigh the empirical evidence. In this chapter we will draw on more than fifty years of survey research data and review the evidence more systematically. A careful search of public opinion polls reveals a surprisingly rich and varied set of questions tapping public knowledge. And the public's performance on these items suggests that the answer to the question "what do Americans know about politics" is more complicated than often assumed.

A Closer Look at What Citizens Should Know

The role of the citizen in contemporary American democracy is multifaceted and carries with it the responsibility to be politically informed. Emphasizing the importance of an informed citizenry does not contradict the notion that citizens use shortcuts in making political decisions. Rather it suggests that citizens are better able to make choices and respond to relevant cues if they have a broader range of information to draw on. Within this context several more specific and common sense guidelines can be developed. James David Barber argues that citizens "need to know what the government *is* and *does*" (1973: 44, emphasis added). According to Neuman, knowledge of what the government is includes "the basic structure of government—its basic values, such as citizen participation, majority rule, separation of powers, civil liberties,

and its basic elements, such as the two-party system, the two houses of Congress, the role of the judiciary, and the organization of the cabinet" (1986: 196).

Much of what citizens are expected to do requires an understanding of the rules. A citizen may blame the majority party in Congress for what he perceives to be a failure to act, but an understanding of the relative powers of the executive and legislative branches, of the implications of divided government, and of what a veto is and the size of the majority necessary to override it may lead to very different conclusions. A citizen who is concerned about deteriorating public services but who understands the different responsibilities of local and national government may vote differently in both local and national elections than if she were less aware of these relations. A citizen who is reasonably well versed in the logic of the First Amendment might react to government attempts to censor the press differently than someone less familiar with this logic. A citizen concerned about abortion is well served by a familiarity with how the Supreme Court operates and how justices are appointed and confirmed. A citizen trying to determine why the savings and loan industry collapsed is aided by knowledge of who is responsible for government oversight in such cases, and why such oversight failed. And so on. Information of this kind might be used in forming and expressing opinions, in determining who to vote for, in deciding who to contact to register a complaint or offer a suggestion, or for maintaining the kind of informed indifference discussed in chapter 1. Regardless of how it is used, such information is valuable in making sense of the political world.²

Relevant knowledge of what the government does, the second half of Barber's definition, is described by Bernard Berelson et al.: "The democratic citizen is expected to be well-informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the consequences are" (1954: 306).

It is not hard to see why information of this kind is useful if citizens are to be engaged meaningfully in politics. A citizen's grasp of contemporary domestic politics is strengthened by knowing, for example, whether the United States has a budget deficit or surplus or what the trends in unemployment and inflation are. An understanding of America's foreign policy is enhanced by the knowledge that the United States is dependent on imported oil or an awareness of what the United Nations is and what it does. As Berelson's definition suggests, citizens should also have some ability to put issues in historical context and to evaluate the success or failure of certain policies and philosophies. Was Russia our ally or our

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