

## **Just the Facts Ma'am (and a Few Stories): What We Need in Civic Education**

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*This paper does four things. First, I will argue that democracy requires an educated public, and that particularly among young people, the extent of civic ignorance is troubling. Second, I will summarize an admittedly unsystematic and preliminary survey of opinions from former policy-makers gauging what they wish the public knew. Third, I will suggest that educators are to blame for the state of public knowledge, or lack thereof. Finally, I will suggest that the American Political Science Association (APSA) begin a dialogue with policy-makers to determine what the public needs to know for our democracy to work, and study how to make that civic education a key part of what we do. I must stress that this is a polemic, with at least as much opinion as analysis. That said, I believe that the arguments which follow will prove difficult to refute, and have no small importance to our democracy, and the role of political scientists within that democracy.*

### **An Ignorant Public**

“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).<sup>1</sup> If Jefferson is right, then American freedoms are endangered by civic ignorance. There is widespread agreement, backed by considerable empirical support, that the American people do not know what they need to know to make rational decisions about what policies to support and which candidates to choose. So long as this is the case politicians will have to run relatively simplistic campaigns, doing their best to gain support from the voters that we educators provide (Popkin 1994; Galston 2003). Recently much attention has focused on the fifth of Americans who believe that their president is Muslim (e.g., Brummett, 2010). This is small beer. Past survey work has found that roughly half of U.S. citizens think that their government is hiding space aliens. Indeed whole organizations and networks gather to exchange information about seemingly virtuous aliens and the insipid government bureaucrats who keep their existence a well-guarded secret (Dean 1998). As someone who has served in government, I find it depressing that so many

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell 1981, 5.

Americans think that their government is sufficiently malicious as to imprison aliens, and oddly thrilling that they believe their bureaucracy competent enough to do so. Similarly, a 2006 survey found 36% of respondents agreeing that it is “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that federal officials either participated in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon or took no action to stop them “because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East.” 16% thought that the twin towers were toppled by explosives planted by government agents (Hargrove 2006). A series of *New York Times* and CBS polls showed that in the October 2005 to November 2007 period, a remarkably consistent 31-33% of Americans believed that “Saddam was personally involved in 9-11.”<sup>2</sup> (For the record, neither Bush nor Saddam had a role in the attacks.) Seemingly, slightly more Americans blame their own government than the murderous regime of Saddam Hussein for 9-11. This may comfort supporters of the late Osama Bin Laden, but should not cheer anyone else.

Public ignorance doesn't end with foreign threats. Surveys from the 1980s suggested that pluralities of African Americans thought that our government invented the AIDS virus to foster genocide (Turner 1993). White voters have only limited understanding of the long term impacts of Jim Crow laws, while African American voters, at least until the election of President Obama, had little understanding of the degree to which white racism had faded over time, leading many to forgo opportunities (Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). Given the depth of African American suspicion toward whites generally and the government in particular, it is not surprising that the first African American president had a foreign father. The same could be said for Colin Powell, who likely would have become the first African American president had he chosen to run (Gresham and Maranto 2002).

Arguably, no area is more central to government than the distribution of financial resources, public budgeting. As a wide range of political leaders on the left, right, and center lament, Democratic and Republican voters have contrary and equally fantastic beliefs about where public money goes, making it politically unwise to discuss serious means of closing our enormous structural budget deficits. For example, voters would like to cut foreign aid to 10% of the U.S. budget, seemingly unaware that it is already well under 1% (Kettl and Fesler, 2005, 32). As John Pitney develops in a textbook with Joseph Bessette:

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<sup>2</sup> Data compiled by James Shuls.

Voters in general, and Republican-leaning voters in particular, tend to overestimate -- greatly -- the amount of federal spending that goes to foreign aid (textbook, 610).

Democratic-leaning voters tend to underestimate federal spending for the poor (535), as well as total government spending on education. In the past 30 years, real per capita education spending has doubled (552). Conversely, Republican-leaning voters tend to overestimate federal spending in both areas.

Libertarian-leaning voters sometimes worry about the NAFTA Superhighway System -- which does not even exist (403).

Democratic-leaning voters think that the income-tax system favors the rich over the poor. In fact (567), the wealthy bear most of the tax burden and pay higher effective rates than other groups.<sup>3</sup>

It is understandable why Japanese voters did not know how their government spent money, since it used to be easier to find information in English, rather than in Japanese, about the Japanese state's very large off-budget expenditures from postal savings and the Fiscal Investment and Loan Program.<sup>4</sup> American citizens have no such excuse since our budget is not published in Japanese.

Further, Americans feel subjective unease in the face of objective progress on such matters as pollution, crime prevention, and health. Americans (and humans generally) live longer than ever, with more access to more luxury goods, in significantly cleaner environments. Yet voters do not comprehend their good fortune, and politicians, for understandable reasons, cannot educate them (Easterbrook 2003). Even crime has declined substantially since the 1980s, though surveys show that most Americans believe that crime is *increasing* (Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). As my colleague Jay Greene (2005), himself no defender of the public education status quo finds, public schools are not in decline, and may well be improving. Contrary to public opinion, test scores have not fallen in recent years. At the same time, even as the public fears that public schools struggle to get by on declining resources, school spending steadily rose until 2010, and is *roughly five times* the median voter estimate. It is difficult to have sensible discussions

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<sup>3</sup> John Pitney, personal communication, September 14, 2010. See also Bessette and Pitney 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Toyoda, personal communication, October 5, 2010.

about school funding given such widespread ignorance (Greene 2005; West 2010, 281–82).

In an outstanding summary of ignorance among the young, *The Dumbest Generation*, Emory English Professor Mark Bauerlein (2008) points out that young Americans now have more schooling, more disposable income, more leisure time, and more news and information than ever before. Further, they have relatively high self-esteem—they think they are doing well academically (2008, 192–98). Yet young people have enormous knowledge deficits. Citing a range of studies, Bauerlein (2008, 17–25) points out that:

- More high school seniors identified Germany, Japan or Italy as U.S. allies in World War II than identified the Soviet Union.
- Two-thirds of seniors could not identify the historical significance of a COLORED ENTRANCE sign over a movie theater.
- Just 29% knew what “Reconstruction” refers to.
- One-third recognized the American general at Yorktown.
- Only 41% of teenagers could name the three branches of government (though 59% could identify the Three Stooges by name).
- Only 10% of 15–26 year olds could identify the Speaker of the U.S. House and only 40% knew which party controlled the body.
- In 2004 only one-quarter of 18–24 year olds could identify Dick Cheney as vice president.
- Less than a tenth of American freshman plan to study the highly demanding fields of physics, math, chemistry, and engineering, and American students fare poorly in international comparisons of science and math knowledge.
- Less than one in four 18–24 year olds has visited a museum or gallery in the past year.
- 31% of college seniors never attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance, or theater performance.

I could go on. In summary, in matters of artistic, scientific, and most importantly for our purposes, civic knowledge, too many Americans know too little to make well-reasoned judgments in elections. In matters great and small, public ignorance about what government is, what it does, and how it functions is legion. This makes it impossible for politicians to hold rational dialogues about public policy alternatives. In the short run public ignorance causes alienation and leads to a political discourse among elites which is ever more removed from the facts (Mann 2009). In the long run that ignorance seems sure to spawn more unibombers and jihadists (Pipes 1997). Aside from increasing trust in institutions, political and civic knowledge makes citizens more likely to vote, and more likely to understand and act in favor of their interests and those of others. It also makes public opinion more consistent, giving political elites a more predictable field on which to play (Popkin 1994; Galston 2003; Milner 2010).

Public ignorance makes it near impossible for politicians to either raise taxes to support our public sector commitments, or scale down those commitments in a realistic manner, as politicians from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Barack Obama no doubt lament. Related to this, citizens cannot understand the language used by policy-makers unless they have the basic core knowledge which policy-makers share, particularly regarding recent U.S. history (Hirsch 2009).

Civic education typically focuses on the structures of American government, matters such as the separation of powers and the Bill of Rights. These are very important, and there is evidence that colleges do a very poor job imparting this basic knowledge. Surveys indicate that at many elite colleges, first year students have greater civic knowledge than seniors (Intercollegiate Studies Association 2010). Yet I argue that basic knowledge about such matters as where public resources come from and go to, and what government can and cannot do, are even more important.

Before continuing, I must point out that nothing here suggests that the public is irrational. As a long line of voting behavior literature shows, when presented with simple choices on Election Day, the voters, who are generally more sophisticated than the mass public, tend to make reasonably rational judgments. Further, it is in fact rational for the public to know relatively little about politics. Learning about politics requires effort that is perhaps best spent elsewhere, as in family life or earning a living (Popkin 1994; Willingham 2009). Yet this is cold comfort. In the recent past political elites were relatively independent of public opinion and the public was relatively deferential to political elites, but those times are long gone (Lowi 1985). In an

age when the political class often uses polling and individual election outcomes for cues about which topics can be tackled safely, a more informed public would likely lead to more optimal public outcomes. In other words, it may be individually rational to be ignorant, but it is not publicly so.

Further, if educational institutions gave future voters a more thorough grounding in politics and policy, then voters might well need less cognitive effort to understand the world faced by policy-makers, and indeed to change their views as that world changes (Zaller 1992). As Willingham (2009) and Hirsch (1996) show, learning new knowledge is relatively easy once individuals have sufficient “scaffolding.” Because schools and colleges do not provide that, the public finds it excessively difficult (and unpleasant) to learn new facts about policy and politics.

### **Views from Policy-Makers**

As part of this project, I surveyed a convenience sample of 12 former policy-makers, asking by phone and e-mail two open-ended questions about public misconceptions:

1. In your view, what are the most important misconceptions that many or most Democratic voters hold about government processes or programs? Please list up to three.
2. In your view, what are the most important misconceptions that many or most Republican voters hold about government processes or programs? (These could be the same as for Democrats.) Please list up to three.

Seven responded, including two former White House officials (one Democrat, one Republican), a Republican political appointee, an independent think tank official, and three former government executives. One former White House official complained that the public had no knowledge of where public money goes. Another felt that the public had no sense of the incredibly broad range of interest groups involved in policy-making: “democracy is hard!” Perhaps most typically, a former U.S. executive argued that Democrats and Republicans were too quick to attribute bad faith to the other and too quick to seek news only from friendly sources: “There is little doubt in my mind that the 24/7 news cycle of instant news, cable networks, the Internet and more have all contributed to the disgraceful state of affairs in politics today.”

Four respondents made similar remarks, with two using almost exactly the same words to complain that politics is not, or at least should not be a “football game.” Interestingly, three respondents in part blamed the state of education. One complained that “the [poor] level of education plus lack of exposure to different people, cultures and philosophies of our voting populace contributes to the irrationality and chauvinism we as a people display.” Another blamed the lack of basic facts about government. A third long time U.S. executive who had served in both political and career posts from the 1960s to the 1990s mused at length about how one might fix the problem by changing education to make it easier to understand the problems policy-makers and bureaucrats face. The former official argued that at one time policy-makers educated the public through more deliberate rhetoric and hearings expressing the tradeoffs inherent to public policy. The respondent felt that since politicians no longer play this role, educators need to do a better job:

If I were teaching civics today I would encourage participation through classroom role-playing. Select any current topic – perhaps whether a promising but still unproven cancer drug should go onto the market, who should have a voice and how to decide. Or perhaps coal mining and energy policy. Following a mine disaster, whether to halt underground mining to protect the miners but cripple the state economy, or permit only mountaintop mining, which is safer for humans but a disaster for the environment, or push ahead with alternative forms of energy from wind or ethanol that may favor other states altogether. Role-playing in mock hearings has endless possibilities. I think attending – and possibly participating in – local city and county board meetings, on issues like roads and schools and zoning and water supply, can teach volumes about how government works – and how easily every citizen can participate in it.

The role-playing I’ve suggested might – in another generation – begin to counteract the corrosive partisanship that has seized government at nearly every level. Certainly some of your Political Science colleagues have studied the onset of this malaise more precisely than I, but I mark it roughly when we began to equate politics and sports, somewhere during the Johnson Administration. The Great Depression was our last long, divisive period, but WWII brought us together nationally – and politically – out of shared threat and burden. And our national mood of commonwealth and compromise continued through the Eisenhower years; Taft-Hartley never could have been enacted without it.

Gradually, but steadily, compromise became a badge of shame it is today and a sure ticket to losing the next election. Today, the verb that every candidate for office must use is “I will fight for you.” Playing out the parts of the dying cancer patient desperate for the new drug, and the doctors running the tests, and the NIH officials in charge of public safety, and the shareholders of the drug company, just might be instructive about the need for compromise in society and in government. I sure think it would beat memorizing the dates of constitutional amendments. Not all that many years ago compromise was a cherished virtue. So was civility in public discourse. So in this project you’re addressing a vital concern. Tomorrow’s voters are learning from today’s examples, which teach that government is the trophy of superior force. So you can’t just fall back on Jeffersonian principles. You’ve got to reach higher and find ways to answer the legacy of the sainted Vince Lombardi. Government is not football, and winning is not the only thing.

Such role playing is very different than traditional service learning, which fails to build in an appreciation for the tradeoffs inherent to much public policy (Milner 2010). In short, the very limited sample largely agreed that the public needs more factual knowledge, but also saw a need for citizens to understand the processes of how government works, the very human *stories* behind the facts.

Valuing a public understanding of the processes of government, a deeper understanding than that of traditional, legalistic constitutional literacy, is an approach advocated by many political scientists. For example, using surveys and focus groups Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) find that most high school graduates revere the constitution, and *in theory* understand and approve of the notion that divided government limits government action, and thus protects freedom. Yet those same respondents despise the disagreement, conflict, and eventual negotiation and compromise which are so inherent to a Madisonian constitution. Accordingly, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse advocate that educators go beyond mere formal understanding of the separation of powers, and attempt to build an appreciation for how Madisonian democracy works in practice. Thus enlightened, the public can either embrace our politics, warts and all (as do the authors), or else push for constitutional reform moving in the direction of a responsible government (British) model.



### **Failures of Schooling**

More than anything, public ignorance must be considered a failure of public schooling. After all, it is the job of politicians to win elections with the voters we educators have taught, not to educate those voters themselves. What we fail to do in 13 years we cannot expect busy political elites to manage in 13 second sound bites. Similarly, media outlets are charged with making profits by attracting an audience, not with building democracy by informing that audience. K-12 schooling and colleges, on the other hand, are in fact charged with educating rather than seducing voters and future voters. As noted above, Americans spend more time than ever before in educational institutions, but are not being educated for democracy; indeed traditional educators who dominate colleges of education do not seem to see this as important (e.g., Glass 2008; Wagner 2008; for a critique see Hirsch 1996).

Traditional educators complain that demographic changes have made an essentially uneducable public. As the most popular education researcher, at least among school administrators, puts it, educators can hardly be blamed for an ignorant public which is beyond schooling (Glass 2008). Seemingly, schools can only educate those who are already educated. (Then why have schools?) Gene Glass and others state such views with great authority, but they do not withstand empirical scrutiny, which should, after all, be the test of ideas put forth by social scientists. As it happens, blaming demography does not work empirically. As Jay Greene (2005) documents in great detail, objective indicators from the education and wealth of parents to family size to environmental indicators like child poverty and the very heavy metals in children's bloodstreams show that, if anything, today's young people should be somewhat more educable than in the past. Families are smaller, family per capita incomes (at least until the current unpleasantness) have risen, mental retardation (or whatever the currently correct term is) has declined (largely through regulations reducing lead in the environment), parents have more formal education, and at least since the 1980s, crime and illegal drug use have declined. Family breakdown has more or less stabilized. Further, public schools have far more resources than ever before, including class sizes roughly 40% smaller than in the 1960s.

So why doesn't the public in general and young people in particular know more? In part we can blame more ignorance on less experience. From World War II to the 1960s most American males had direct experience in government through their military service. They thus had more of a feeling of ownership in government than today's citizens, who merely sign tax checks or cash entitlement checks. Perhaps more importantly, experience in

large government institutions gives citizens a more realistic feel for how institutions work. I doubt that many of those who are convinced that the government is hiding aliens have actual experience in large government bureaucracies.

In addition we must acknowledge that despite ever greater resources, traditional public educators do not seem to see their role as teaching young people either the facts or the processes of government. As Mitchell (1981), Hirsch (1996; 2009), and Finn (2008), among others, point out, progressive educators who have long dominated leading schools of education focus on the process of education rather than its outcomes. They thus oppose school standards, eschew content knowledge for teachers and students, and resist efforts to measure student knowledge or lack thereof. As Farkas and Duffett (2010) find in their national survey “[t]eaching facts is the lowest priority for social studies teachers when it comes to instruction in citizenship.” Moreover, only 45% of public high school social studies teachers agree that Social Studies is considered absolutely essential in their public schools, compared to 68% of their private (mainly Catholic) school counterparts. This may explain why private schools do better at teaching the basic facts of government, and also at promoting tolerance (Wolf 2005).

Such blind spots regarding civic literacy reflect the preferences of the intellectuals influential in schools of education and in such venues as the American Education Research Association. For example, in a recent best seller popular among education school faculty, Tony Wagner (2008) argues that schools should teach children such “skills” as “entrepreneurship,” which seems inchoate, and the use of information technology, which young people seem to already have. Save for six lines on page 261 (followed by two pages of caveats), Wagner dismisses the importance of what Hirsch calls “core knowledge” – essential facts and concepts everyone needs to know to understand how the world works, or at times does not work, how to understand political leaders, and how to communicate with others in the polity. Yet as I have said repeatedly above, without emphasizing such basic knowledge we educators will saddle the political class with a public which simultaneously demands more tax cuts, more spending, and balanced budgets. Further, as Hirsch (1996) and Willingham (2009) show, it is not terribly difficult to make the basic facts of American history and government interesting through stories about conflict, rather than boring through rote memorization or missing in action as the likes of Wagner would have it. Traditionally, teachers themselves have often eschewed progressive educational practices and instead required a certain level of academic rigor, at least to the degree their communities would stand it. Unfortunately, as

other professions have opened up to women and as lower class sizes have necessitated the hiring of ever more teachers, the teaching profession has been “de-skilled,” and less likely to compensate for weak curricula. Further, the personnel systems in traditional public schools assure that teachers will not be fired or disciplined if their students learn less, nor rewarded if they learn more.

And if K-12 education is to blame, so too are professors of political science. As Gerald Pomper (2009, 83) argues, a very limited view of the public justifies the power of educated elites. Further, our esoteric modeling may “create distance between the academy and popular understanding” (see also Pitney 1990).<sup>8</sup> As numerous authors have suggested, both within Political Science and within academia generally incentives reward publication, not undergraduate teaching, much less measuring and copying effective teaching (e.g., Jacoby 1987; Cross and Goldenberg 2009; Taylor 2010). In short, we have ignored our very important traditional role of supporting democracy since it does not further our status and material ambitions (Ricci 1984). It is perhaps notable that Bill Galston (2003), who is a rare exception, has served in government and in numerous campaigns and thus has seen firsthand the difficulties leaders face when the public knows little about what they do.

### **So What Should We Do About it?**

As with any issue, the first step is to acknowledge the problem. Unfortunately, the APSA does not even have a task force on undergraduate education. The APSA does host the *Journal of Political Science Education*. JPSE does important work on teaching methods, but has not yet tackled the issues of what the public needs to know for democracy and how Political Science as a field can contribute. More promising is the APSA web site on civic education ([http://www.apsanet.org/content\\_8186.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/content_8186.cfm)), which posts reports and studies of civic knowledge. The site laments that young people seem somewhat less engaged politically than in the recent past, and that civic knowledge seems somewhat lower. Yet the civic knowledge that APSA explores is more simple and institutional (e.g., when elections are held) than one might desire, and does not reflect an ongoing dialogue with policy-

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<sup>8</sup> For Pomper, “there is self-interest involved. If the voters are dumb, then the pundits are relatively smart. If voters are clueless, then they need the guidance of their betters...A low estimate of voters also provides an easy excuse for losing candidates. Their defeats can be explained away as due to the voters’ dense or misguided minds, not their own lacks of character, achievement, or program” (2009, 83).

makers. I propose that we immediately remedy this by setting up an APSA task force on what facts and processes citizens need to know, and how Political Science as a field can propagate those. The task force must include former policy-makers to divine what knowledge they feel American voters need. In the absence of such data, I propose that citizens need three broad sets of knowledge about how government officials operate:

1. Where public resources go (chiefly to middle class entitlement spending), and the attendant difficult choices facing policy-makers.
2. How government actors make decisions in highly constrained, limited information environments, and accordingly why with the best of intentions, they often make mistakes (e.g., Maranto and Redding 2009; Jervis 2010).
3. How elite and popular interpretations of past historical periods and events (the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam) guide the language and thought of policy-makers (e.g., Jervis 1976).

All these can be and should be taught in the form of stories and conflicts so as to make them interesting to and memorable for students (Willingham, 2009). Without this background knowledge, citizens cannot understand how their government (mostly) works. Political Science is well positioned to teach undergraduates this basic knowledge they need to make rational decisions about public life, for the simple reason that political scientists like and know something about politics and policy; else we would have gone into a different line or work. Accordingly, our field should begin to shape our teaching to assure that introductory Political Science courses effectively teach such facts and processes as are necessary to support our democracy. Second, we should lobby for more required Political Science courses, again to assure that citizens have the knowledge they need to support our democracy. Finally, our field should play a larger role in the development of civic literacy standards, and in training future K-12 teachers. Along these lines we might pursue an alliance with NCATE, the organization which now accredits teacher training programs. All this would serve the self-interest of political scientists, by increasing the demand for our services. In this case, our own self-interest is the interest of the nation rightly understood. We have no reason to be coy about pointing that out. Democracy is too important to give up on, and when we accept current levels of public ignorance of civic affairs, we are doing just that.

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