

DEMOCRACY
AND POLITICAL
IGNORANCE

WHY SMALLER GOVERNMENT IS
SMARTER, SECOND EDITION

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The Extent of Political Ignorance

Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics.

*Political scientist John Ferejohn*¹

THE REALITY THAT MOST VOTERS are often ignorant of even very basic political information is one of the better-established findings of social science. Decades of accumulated evidence reinforce this conclusion.² Unfortunately, the situation has not improved much over time.

THE Pervasiveness of Ignorance

The sheer depth of most individual voters' ignorance may be shocking to readers not familiar with the research. Rarely if ever is any one piece of knowledge absolutely essential to voters. It may not matter much if most Americans are ignorant of one or another particular fact about politics. But the pervasiveness of ignorance about a wide range of political issues and leaders is far more troubling.

Many examples help illustrate the point. A survey conducted not long before the 2014 election, which determined control of Congress, found that only 38 percent of Americans knew that the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives at the time, and the same number knew that the Democrats had a majority in the Senate.³ Not knowing which party controls these institutions makes it difficult for voters to assign credit or blame for their performance.

One of the most contentious issues in recent American politics has been the Affordable Care Act of 2010—President Barack Obama's health care reform law, often known as Obamacare. Yet much of the public remains ignorant about many aspects of this program. As late as August

2013 a survey found that 44 percent did not even realize that the ACA was still the law.⁴

For years, there has been an ongoing debate over the future of federal spending in the United States, with sharp partisan divisions over how to deal with increasingly serious budget deficits that are likely to get worse in the long run. Yet a September 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that only 20 percent of Americans realize that the federal government spends more money on Social Security than on foreign aid, transportation, and interest on the government debt.⁵ Some 33 percent believe that foreign aid is the biggest item on this list, even though it is actually the smallest, amounting to about one percent of the federal budget, compared with 17 percent for Social Security.⁶

This result is consistent with numerous previous surveys showing that most Americans greatly underestimate the percentage of federal spending devoted to Social Security and other entitlement programs, while vastly overestimating the amount devoted to foreign aid and other minor programs such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.⁷ It is difficult for voters to evaluate competing approaches to reforming tax and spending policy if they don't have even a basic understanding of how federal funds are currently spent.

A series of polls conducted just before the Republican Party chose Representative Paul Ryan to be their vice presidential nominee in August 2012 found that 43 percent of Americans had never heard of Ryan and only 32 percent knew that he was a member of the House of Representatives.⁸ Unlike Governor Sarah Palin in 2008, Ryan was not a relative unknown catapulted onto the national stage by a vice presidential nomination. As his party's leading spokesman on budgetary and fiscal issues, he had been a prominent figure in American politics for several years.

One of the key policy positions staked out by President Obama in his successful 2012 reelection campaign was his plan to raise income taxes for persons earning more than \$250,000 per year, an idea much discussed during the campaign and supported by a large majority of the public—69 percent in a December 2012 poll.⁹ A February 2012 survey conducted for the political newspaper *The Hill* actually asked respondents what tax rates people with different income levels should pay. It found that 75 percent of

likely voters wanted a 30 percent increase in the tax rate on income of high earners because of the inconsistency suggested by the survey.

Even before the 2012 election, the issue of high earners' taxes was a major political issue for voters. Yet surveys of voters' views on other democratic issues such as income inequality or the federal budget deficit found that only 20 percent of Americans can roughly estimate the federal budget deficit when given a pie chart. A survey of voters' views on the federal budget deficit found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer. A survey of voters' views on the federal budget deficit found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer.

Equally striking is the fact that only 20 percent of Americans did not know that the federal government had made a substantial contribution to the federal deficit. A survey of voters' views on the federal deficit found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer. A survey of voters' views on the federal deficit found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer.

Despite years of debate, the issue of American relations with Iraq remains a major focus of voters' views. A 2007 survey of voters' views on Iraq found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer. A survey of voters' views on Iraq found that 30 percent of voters gave a wrong answer.

Such widespread confusion about the federal deficit in 1994, a month after the end of the Persian Gulf War, then led by soon-

likely voters wanted the highest-income earners to pay taxes lower than 30 percent of income, the top rate at the time of the 2012 election.¹⁰ This inconsistency suggests that many people supported increasing the tax rates of high earners because they did not realize how high taxes were already.

Even before the 2012 election, economic inequality had been a major political issue for years, in both the United States and many European nations. Yet surveys consistently show that most Americans and citizens of other democracies have little or no understanding of either the extent of inequality or whether it has been increasing or decreasing.¹¹ A 2009 survey found that only somewhere between 12 and 29 percent of Americans can roughly place the shape of the income distribution in the United States when given a choice of five different simple diagrams with accompanying explanations.¹² Even the higher figure is only slightly better than what we would expect from random guessing.¹³

Equally striking is the fact that in late 2003, more than 60 percent of Americans did not realize that a massive increase in domestic spending had made a substantial contribution to the then-recent explosion in the federal deficit.¹⁴ Most of the public is unaware of a wide range of important government programs structured as tax deductions and payments for services.¹⁵ As a result, they are also unaware of the massive extent to which many of these programs transfer benefits primarily to the relatively affluent.¹⁶

Despite years of controversy over the War on Terror, the Iraq War, and American relations with the Muslim world, only 32 percent of Americans in a 2007 survey could name “Sunni” or “Sunnis” as one of “the two major branches of Islam” whose adherents “are seeking political control in Iraq,” even though the question prompted them with the name of the other major branch (the Shiites).¹⁷ Such basic knowledge may not be absolutely essential to evaluation of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. But it is certainly useful for understanding a region that has long been a central focus of American foreign policy, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

Such widespread ignorance is not of recent origin. As of December 1994, a month after the takeover of Congress by the Republican Party, then led by soon-to-be Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, 57 percent

of Americans had never even heard of Gingrich, whose campaign strategy and policy stances had received massive publicity in the immediately preceding weeks.¹⁸ In 1964, in the midst of the Cold War, only 38 percent were aware that the Soviet Union was *not* a member of the U.S.-led NATO alliance.¹⁹ Later, in 1986, the majority could not identify Mikhail Gorbachev, the controversial new leader of the Soviet Union, by name.²⁰ Much of the time, only a bare majority know which party has control of the Senate, some 70 percent cannot name both of their state's senators, and the majority cannot name *any* congressional candidate in their district at the height of a campaign.²¹

Three aspects of voter ignorance deserve particular attention. First, many voters are ignorant not just about specific policy issues but about the basic structure of government and how it operates.²² Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy.²³ Admittedly, presidents sometimes manage to initiate war without congressional approval, as in the case of recent military interventions in Libya and against the ISIS terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria. But even under modern conditions, presidents usually seek congressional authorization for major conflicts, and generally keep interventions that lack such authorization carefully limited, usually to air strikes alone.²⁴ A 2014 Annenberg Public Policy Center study found that only 36 percent of Americans could even name the three branches of the federal government: executive, legislative, and judicial. Some 35 percent could not name even one.²⁵ The 36 percent result was an even lower figure than the 42 percent who could name all three branches in a similar 2006 poll.²⁶

Another 2006 survey found that only 28 percent could name two or more of the five rights guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.²⁷ A 2002 Columbia University study indicated that 35 percent believed that Karl Marx's dictum "From each according to his ability to each according to his need" is in the Constitution (34 percent said they did not know if it was or not), and only one-third understood that a Supreme Court decision overruling *Roe v. Wade* would not make abortion illegal throughout the country.²⁸

Ignorance of the not only cannot change also cannot easily change officeholders. Ignorance of the Constitution may prevent elected officials' performance.

The second source of "ideological" views into a single analytical ordinary voters rarely issue stances that appears emphasize the the likely policies equally important cal voters to spot of well-informed cal information a informed mass public.

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For the most part television and the edge.³⁴ The rise of increased political segments of the population television and the groups away from traditional sources of entertainment seem to have been by those who were the expectations of

Ignorance of the structure of government suggests that voters often not only cannot choose between specific competing policy *programs* but also cannot easily assign credit and blame for policy *outcomes* to the right officeholders. Ignorance of the constraints imposed on government by the Constitution may also give voters an inaccurate picture of the scope of elected officials' powers.

The second salient aspect of ignorance is that voters often lack an "ideological" view of politics capable of integrating multiple issues into a single analytical framework derived from a few basic principles; ordinary voters rarely exhibit the kind of ideological consistency in issue stances that are evident in surveys of political elites.²⁹ Some scholars emphasize the usefulness of ideology as a "shortcut" to predicting the likely policies of opposing parties competing for office.³⁰ At least equally important is the comparatively weaker ability of nonideological voters to spot *interconnections* among issues. The small minority of well-informed voters are much better able to process new political information and more resistant to manipulation than is the less-informed mass public.³¹

Finally, it is notable that the level of political knowledge in the American electorate has increased only modestly, if at all, since the beginning of mass survey research in the late 1930s.³² A relatively stable level of ignorance has persisted even in the face of massive increases in educational attainment and an unprecedented expansion in the quantity and quality of information available to the general public at little cost.³³

For the most part, the spread of new information technology, such as television and the Internet, seems not to have increased political knowledge.³⁴ The rise of broadcast television in the 1950s and 1960s somewhat increased political knowledge among the poorest and least-informed segments of the population.³⁵ But more recent advances, such as cable television and the Internet, have actually diverted the attention of these groups away from political information by providing attractive alternative sources of entertainment.³⁶ For the most part, new information technologies seem to have been utilized to acquire political knowledge primarily by those who were already well informed.³⁷ This record casts doubt on the expectations of political theorists from John Stuart Mill onward that

an increased availability of information and formal education can create the informed electorate that democracy requires.³⁸

RECENT EVIDENCE OF POLITICAL IGNORANCE

Data from the time of the recent 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 elections reaffirm the existence of widespread political ignorance, as does more extensive data from the time of the 2000 election derived from the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES).³⁹

As this book goes to press, it is too early to make any definitive conclusions about what role political ignorance might have in the ongoing 2016 presidential election. But it is likely that ignorance has been a major factor in the most dramatic development of the campaign's early stages: the unexpected rise of controversial real estate mogul Donald Trump to the status of front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination.

Early survey data consistently show that the variable most strongly associated with support for Trump among potential Republican primary voters is low education.⁴⁰ Trump himself famously stated that he "love[s] the poorly educated."⁴¹ And well he should, since his success is heavily dependent on their massively disproportionate support. By contrast, his support varies very little by political ideology, as he does about equally well among moderate and conservative Republicans.⁴²

Education and political knowledge are distinct; there are many highly educated people with low levels of political knowledge and some high-knowledge voters with little formal education. But the two are very closely correlated.⁴³ So it is likely that Trump's disproportionate support from the less educated also represents disproportionate support from those with low levels of political knowledge.

The most obvious alternative explanation for his pattern of support is that he has won the backing of relatively low-income voters who also tend to be less educated, perhaps because he effectively represents their economic interests. But unlike education, household income has only a weak correlation with support for Trump among Republicans.⁴⁴

Political ignorance may also help explain why Trump draws strong support from the generally conservative pool of Republican primary voters, despite the fact that he has a long history of taking left of center posi-

tions on many issues about those positions deciding to support

Trump's status as a relatively ignorant voter compared to other candidates, name they at least in terms of candidate s

Immigration is a major theme of Trump's campaign. Political ignorance suggests that it is a reflection of immigration judgments about general xenophobia. Data show that there is a correlation between education and exposure

Political ignorance is a much less tractable variable. It is still unclear. But perhaps it will become more successful candidates. And, whatever the political cycle, there is more during previous el

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The 2014 election with the GOP gained seats from 45 to 54 of Representatives from a number of states shortly before and

The results are a reflection of the control of the cent of the public k

tions on many issues.⁴⁵ Relatively ignorant voters are less likely to know about those positions, or to check a candidate's record carefully before deciding to support him.

Trump's status as a famous celebrity is also likely helping him with relatively ignorant voters. Such voters are less likely to know much about the other candidates, and thereby more likely to gravitate toward one whose name they at least recognize. Name recognition is an important predictor of candidate support, especially among relatively ignorant voters.⁴⁶

Immigration restriction—the issue that has become the central theme of Trump's campaign—is one that has long-standing associations with political ignorance. In both the United States and Europe, survey data suggest that it is strongly correlated with overestimation of the proportion of immigrants in the population, lack of sophistication in making judgments about the economic costs and benefits of immigration, and general xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners.⁴⁷ By contrast, studies show that there is very little correlation between opposition to immigration and exposure to labor market competition from recent immigrants.⁴⁸

Political ignorance may not enable Trump to win the Republican nomination much less the presidency. At this time, his ultimate electoral fate is still unclear. But public ignorance has at least helped Trump become a far more successful candidate than he probably would have been otherwise. And, whatever might be said about the currently ongoing 2016 election cycle, there is more extensive evidence of widespread political ignorance during previous elections.

Political Ignorance and the 2014 Election

The 2014 election saw a major midterm victory for the Republican Party, with the GOP gaining control of the Senate by expanding its number of seats from 45 to 54, and significantly expanding its majority in the House of Representatives from 234 of 435 seats to 247. Table 1.1 compiles data from a number of polling questions on political knowledge conducted shortly before and after the election.

The results are sobering. Although the main political stake in the election was control of the Senate and House of Representatives, only 38 percent of the public knew that the Democrats controlled the Senate before

TABLE 1.1 *Political Ignorance and the 2014 Election*^a

Question (date of survey)	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know ^b
Knew federal minimum wage is \$7.25/hour ^c	73	18	9
Knew ISIS terrorist group controls territory in Syria	67	18	16
Knew "Common Core" refers to education standards	49	15	37
Knew Republicans controlled House of Representatives before election ^d	38	17	44
Knew Democrats controlled Senate before election ^e	38	20	42
Identified prime minister of Israel ^f	38	19	43
Knew that unemployment rate is closer to 6 percent (rather than 3, 9, or 12)	33	49 (45 answered 9% or higher)	18
Knew Obama administration deported more undocumented immigrants than were deported 10 years ago ^g	29	53	18
Knew federal government spends more on Social Security than on transportation, interest on debt, or foreign aid ^h	20	63	18
Knew poverty rate is closer to 15 percent (rather than 5, 25, or 35)	20	55 (50 answered 25% or higher)	25
Knew that percentage of federal budget spent on foreign aid is less than 5 percent ⁱ	17	61 (48 overestimated the percentage at least tenfold)	22

^aIn some cases, the figures do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

^bIn some cases, this figure includes some respondents who refused to answer. Research suggests that it is very rare for respondents who know the correct answer to a question to refuse to give it.

^cPew Research Center survey, September 25-28, 2014.

^dAnnenberg Public Policy Center survey, July 8-14, 2014.

^eAnnenberg Public Policy Center survey, July 8-14, 2014.

^fPew Research Center survey, September 25-28, 2014.

^gBloomberg Poll survey, December 3-5, 2014.

^hPew Research Center survey, September 25-28, 2014.

ⁱKaiser Health Tracking poll, December 2-9, 2014.

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the election, and the same percentage knew the Republicans controlled the House. A different survey found that 49 percent knew who controlled the Senate and 51 percent could correctly identify control of the House.⁴⁹ But it still found that only 36 percent could correctly identify control of both houses of Congress.⁵⁰ None of these figures are impressive, especially when we consider that they are likely inflated by guessing, and a random guess would have a 50 percent chance of getting each question right.⁵¹ Obviously, it is difficult for citizens to assess the performance of the parties controlling each house of Congress if they do not know which ones they are.

As in most elections, economic concerns were important in 2014. But, nonetheless, only 33 percent of the public knew that the unemployment rate was closer to 6 percent than much lower or higher figures, while 45 percent believed that it was 9 percent or higher. Similarly, about half the public vastly overestimated the poverty rate. This excessive pessimism may well have contributed to the Democrats' massive defeat.

Although the future of the federal budget was a hotly contested issue between the two parties in 2014, as in previous recent elections, the public remained ignorant about the distribution of federal spending, with most greatly underestimating the percentage of federal funds spent on Social Security, and massively overestimating the share that goes to foreign aid. A whopping 48 percent believed that the percentage spent on foreign aid was 11 percent of the federal budget or greater, even though it is actually about 1 percent.⁵²

The fate of undocumented immigrants emerged as a major partisan issue in both the 2012 and 2014 elections, with Republicans accusing the Obama administration of being insufficiently aggressive in its efforts to deport them. Some 53 percent of the public wrongly believed that the administration was deporting fewer undocumented migrants than ten years before. The Obama administration had, in fact, deported a record number of undocumented immigrants in 2013, the latest year for which figures were available, though there are some ambiguities in the data.⁵³ Misperceptions on this point may have unduly increased both restrictionist anger against, and immigration supporters' satisfaction with Obama's policies in this field. In fairness, because this survey was conducted in early December 2014, some respondents may have been confused by President Obama's

on^a

Wrong answer	% Admit Don't Know ^b
18	9
18	16
15	37
17	44
20	42
9	43
9	18
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3	18
	18
vered higher)	25
re-estimated at fold)	22

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November 20, 2014 announcement of a new executive policy deferring deportation for several categories of illegal aliens.⁵⁴ But the people covered by the policy—parents of U.S. citizens and permanent residents who had lived in the United States for at least five years—were in categories that were rarely deported in recent years in any case. The vast majority of deportations under the Obama administration occurred either from border areas or among illegal immigrants charged with some sort of criminal offense.⁵⁵

The new “Common Core” federal education standards for public schools have been another high-profile political issue—attacked by conservatives and defended by many liberals. Even so, only 49 percent of Americans even realized that the term “Common Core” refers to education standards as opposed to something else.

Inability to identify controversial Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu probably had little direct significance for the 2014 election. But it is likely a sign of inattention to the increasingly controversial issues at stake in Israel’s relationship with the United States. These questions had become a major bone of contention between the two parties in the Obama years, with Republicans accusing the administration of taking too hard a line against the Israelis, and doing too little to cooperate with them in preventing the radical Islamist regime in Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

On a few issues, the public’s knowledge was substantial. For example, 73 percent correctly chose \$7.25 per hour as the current federal minimum wage. Liberal Democrats aggressively pushed for an increase during the 2014 campaign. A solid 67 percent could identify Syria as a nation where the ISIS terrorist group (against which the Obama administration was waging an undeclared war) had seized control of territory. But, overall, it is difficult to deny that there was widespread ignorance about many of the key issues at stake in the campaign.

All the questions above were posed as multiple-choice items. As a result, they likely understate the true degree of ignorance, because some survey respondents prefer to guess on questions when they don’t know the right answer rather than admit that they don’t know it.⁵⁶ Even purely random guessing has a substantial probability of arriving at the right answer on a survey question with only three or four choices.

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Political Ignorance and the 2012 Election

The 2012 election resulted in the reelection of President Barack Obama—one of the most important and controversial presidents in recent history, and substantial gains for the Democratic Party in Congress. Table 1.2 presents a sampling of political knowledge data from surveys conducted during the course of the campaign.

In this election, the voters actually did fairly well in identifying some key differences between the parties and candidates, possibly a reflection of the increasing polarization between the two major parties in recent years, which has made them more distinct from each other. For example, large majorities knew which party opposed the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which candidate supported increasing taxes on the affluent, and that President Obama supported same-sex marriage, an issue on which he had made a high-profile switch a few months before the election. These and other similar results are significant.⁵⁷

It is also notable that small majorities knew that the Supreme Court had upheld “most” parts of the Affordable Care Act in its high-profile June 2012 decision in *NFIB v. Sebelius*, and that the unemployment rate was closer to 8 percent than 5, 15, or 21 percent.

But while the public often knew where the parties stood relative to each other on the issues, it was in many cases much less well informed about the issues themselves. Most strikingly, 64 percent believed the president’s deceptive claim that, under the ACA, “if you like your current health plan you will be able to keep it.”⁵⁸ Majorities were also ill informed about several other key issues in the campaign. For example, the Democrats and Republicans had long clashed on what steps, if any, should be taken to address global warming. Yet only 45 percent of the public realized that most scientists generally agree “human activity” is causing the earth to get warmer.

Although campaign finance had been a major issue since at least the Supreme Court’s controversial 2010 decision in the *Citizens United* case,⁵⁹ only 40 percent could correctly identify a “super PAC” as “a group permitted to accept unlimited political donations.” Super PACs are among the most prominent of the types of organizations permitted to engage in unlimited spending on campaign speech under *Citizens United*.

TABLE 1.2 Political Ignorance and the 2012 Election^a

Question (date of survey)	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know ^b
Know Obama favors same-sex marriage (June 19–24, 2012) ^c	72	12	16
Know which party opposes the 2010 health reform law (April 5–8, 2012) ^d	67	11	22
Know Romney supports raising taxes on higher-income people more than Obama (May 9–June 3, 2012) ^e	67	13	20
Know Supreme Court upheld “most” of 2010 health law (June 28, July 1, 2012) ^f	55	15	30
Know unemployment rate is closer to 8 percent (rather than 5, 15, or 21) (May 9–June 3, 2012) ^g	52	27	21
Know Obama was born in the United States (August 30–September 11, 2012) ^h	49	39	12
Know scientists generally agree earth is getting warmer because of human activity (October 4–7, 2012) ⁱ	45	43	12
Know a “super PAC” is a group able to accept unlimited political donations (July 26–29, 2012) ^j	40	14	46
Know John Roberts is chief justice of Supreme Court (July 26–29, 2012) ^k	34	16	51
Know it is not true that “if you like your current health plan you will be able to keep it” under Affordable Care Act (March 11–14, 2012) ^l	27	64	9
Know bottom 50 percent of households pay less than 20 percent of federal income tax revenue (September 13–17, 2012) ^m	32	52	16
Know top 5 percent of households pay between 40 and 80 percent of federal income tax revenue (September 13–17, 2012) ⁿ	26	59	15
Know Angela Merkel is leader of Germany ^o	22	13	65

^aIn some cases, the figures do not sum up to 100 percent because of rounding.

^bIn some cases, this figure includes some respondents who refused to answer. Research suggests that it is very rare for respondents who know the correct answer to a question to refuse to give it.

^cPublic Policy Research Institute poll, June 19–24, 2012.

^dPew Research Center survey, April 5–8, 2012.

^ePew Research Center survey, May 9–June 3, 2012.

^fPew Research Center survey, June 28–July 1, 2012.

^gPew Research Center survey, May 9–June 3, 2012.

^hAP/Gfk Knowledge poll, August 30–September 11, 2012.

ⁱPew Research Center survey, October 4–7, 2012.

^jPew Research Center survey, July 26–29, 2012.

^kPew Research Center survey, July 26–29, 2012.

^lYG Network Health Care Reform survey, March 11–14, 2014.

^mReason-Rupe poll, September 13–17, 2012.

ⁿReason-Rupe poll, September 13–17, 2012.

^oPew Research Center survey, May 9–June 3, 2012.

As in many presidential campaigns, the 2012 election was the stake in many presidential campaigns, whose members of the Senate. The two parties' philosophies and the selection of candidates could correctly identify as chief justice of the United States in such cases as *Citizen United* in the debate over being able to recognize a lack of knowledge of

Given the centrality of the two parties, it is notable that the bottom 50 percent of households come tax revenue in 2012. 26 percent realized that the correct answer was paid by the wealthy fallacy if one factors in payroll taxes. Taxpayers still provide tax revenue counting both types of income. More than 20 percent of the households paying the highest rates of tax rates under President Obama's proposal. They did not realize that the majority of the public

A different kind of conspiracy theory in “birtherist” claims that Obama was not born in the United States, and therefore not eligible for the presidency. Despite extensive debunking, so many people still believe he was not born in the United States. The majority of the public believed conspiracy theories.

Finally, widespread ignorance about Angela Merkel, leader of Germany, was also evident.

As in many presidential elections, one of the most important issues at stake in 2012 was the future of the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary, whose members are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The two parties offered very different approaches to judicial philosophy and the selection of nominees. Yet only 34 percent of the public could correctly identify John Roberts on a list of multiple choice options as chief justice of the United States. Roberts's controversial performance in such cases as *Citizens United* and *NFIB* was a central bone of contention in the debate over judicial review at the time. More generally, not being able to recognize the name of the court's leading member is a sign of lack of knowledge of issues surrounding judicial power more generally.

Given the centrality of income tax policy in the campaign between the two parties, it is notable that only 32 percent of the public realized that the bottom 50 percent of taxpayers paid less than 20 percent of total income tax revenue in 2011 (the actual figure was about 3 percent), and only 26 percent realized that the top 5 percent paid between 40 and 80 percent of revenue (the correct figure was about 56.5 percent).⁶⁰ The percentage paid by the wealthy falls and that paid by the bottom 50 percent increases if one factors in payroll taxes, as well as income taxes. But high-income taxpayers still provide the overwhelming majority of revenue even when counting both types of taxes, and the bottom 50 percent still pay far less than 20 percent of the total.⁶¹ As already noted, public misunderstanding of tax rates under current law may have led many people to support President Obama's proposal to increase tax rates for the affluent, because they did not realize that the latter were already paying higher rates than the majority of the public believed to be proper.

A different kind of ignorance is evident in the persistence of belief in "birtherist" claims that President Obama was not born in the United States, and therefore not constitutionally eligible to be president. Despite extensive debunking, some 39 percent of the public still believed he was not born in the United States in 2012, and only a 49 percent plurality stated that he was. The significance of birtherism and similar widely believed conspiracy theories will be covered more fully in Chapter 3.

Finally, widespread ignorance about the identity of German chancellor Angela Merkel, leader of America's most powerful European ally,

% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know ^b
12	16
11	22
13	20
15	30
27	21
39	12
43	12
14	46
16	51
54	9
12	16
9	15
3	65

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may not have had direct relevance to the campaign. But it does bespeak some degree inattention to the major economic and other foreign policy issues on which the United States was cooperating with European leaders at the time.

Political Ignorance and the 2010 Election

The 2010 election was arguably one of the more important midterm elections in recent American history. The issues at stake included the federal government's handling of the worst recession and financial crisis in decades, the enactment of the Obama administration's historic 2010 health reform bill, and the conduct of ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Republican Party gained sixty-two seats in the House of Representatives—the largest swing in the House since 1948, and six in the Senate. In view of the importance of the issues at stake, one might expect voters to have paid closer attention to politics than usual. Nonetheless, survey data show extensive ignorance and confusion even about basic issues.

Table 1.3 compiles data on political knowledge from a variety of surveys conducted during 2010, while the election campaign was ongoing or immediately afterward. The data show that the majority of the public were well informed about a few very basic points. For example, 77 percent knew that the federal budget deficit was larger in 2010 than in the 1990s, and 73 percent knew that Congress had enacted a health care reform bill in 2010. A bare majority of 53 percent knew that the unemployment rate was around 10 percent, rather than 5 percent, 15, or 20.

On many other basic questions related to key issues in the election, the majority of Americans were strikingly uninformed. Perhaps the biggest issue in the election was the state of the economy, which was beginning to come out of the deepest recession in decades. A CNN poll taken just before the election found that 52 percent of Americans identified “the economy” as the most important issue facing the nation.⁶² Yet an October 2010 survey showed that 67 percent of Americans were unaware that the economy had grown during the previous year, with 61 percent wrongly believing that it had shrunk. It is certainly true that the economy was in relatively poor shape in 2010. But knowing whether it was growing or shrinking was surely a relevant consideration for voters seeking to evaluate

TABLE 1.3 *Pol*

Question (date of survey)

Knew that the deficit was larger in the 1990s (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that Congress had enacted a health care reform bill in 2010 (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that the unemployment rate was around 10 percent (rather than 5 percent, 15, or 20) (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that Republican Party gained seats in the House of Representatives in the 2010 election (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that U.S. forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan (January 14–17, 2010)^a

Knew that the Obama administration had raised at least “some” tax cuts (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that defense spending in the federal budget had increased in 2010^b

Knew that Harry Reid was elected to the Senate (January 14–17, 2010)^a

Knew that John Boehner was elected Speaker of the House (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew the TARP bailout was for the Bush administration rather than Obama (November 11–14, 2010)^a

Knew that the economy had grown during the previous year (October 24–26, 2010)^a

Knew that John Roberts was appointed to the Supreme Court (June 14–17, 2010)^a

Knew that David Cameron was elected Prime Minister of Great Britain (November 11–14, 2010)^a

SOURCES: Data from World Public Opinion (WPO) surveys.

^aThe options given on the survey were “The economy,” “The debt,” “The war in Afghanistan,” and “The war in Iraq.”

^bBloomberg National Intelligence Poll.

incumbent politicians to be the single most important issue could have been

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THE EXTENT OF POLITICAL IGNORANCE

TABLE 1.3 *Political Ignorance and the 2010 Election*

<i>Question (date of survey)</i>	<i>% Correct Answer</i>	<i>% Wrong Answer</i>	<i>% Admit Don't Know</i>
Knew that the deficit in 2010 was larger than in the 1990s (November 11–14, 2010)	77	12	11
Knew that Congress had passed a health care reform bill in 2010 (July 1–5, 2010)	73	14	13
Knew that the unemployment rate was 10 percent (rather than 5, 15, or 20) (November 11–14, 2010)	53	30	17
Knew that Republicans won control of the House of Representatives but not the Senate in the 2010 election (November 11–14, 2010)	46	27	27
Knew that U.S. forces suffered more combat deaths in Afghanistan than in Iraq in 2009 (January 14–17, 2010)	43	32	25
Knew that the Obama stimulus bill included at least “some” tax cuts (November 6–15, 2010) ^a	43	54	3
Knew that defense is the largest category of spending in the federal budget (November 11–14, 2010) ^b	39	42	19
Knew that Harry Reid is the majority leader of the Senate (January 14–17, 2010)	38	18	44
Knew that John Boehner would be the new Speaker of the House of Representatives (November 11–14, 2010)	38	24	38
Knew the TARP bailout bill was enacted under Bush rather than Obama (July 1–5, 2010)	34	47	19
Knew that the economy grew during 2010 (October 24–26, 2010) ^c	33	61	6
Knew that John Roberts is the chief justice of the Supreme Court (July 1–5, 2010)	28	18	53
Knew that David Cameron is the prime minister of Great Britain (November 11–14, 2010)	15	25	60

SOURCES: Data from Pew Research Center surveys, date as indicated, unless otherwise noted.

^aWorld Public Opinion/Knowledge Networks poll, November 6–15, 2010.

^bThe options given on this question were “national defense,” “education,” “Medicare,” and “interest on the debt.”

^cBloomberg National News survey, October 24–26, 2010.

incumbent political leaders’ performance on what most of them believed to be the single most important issue. It was not the only information that could have been useful to voters, but it was clearly important nonetheless.

Perhaps the most significant measure that the federal government adopted to try to end the recession that began in 2008 was President

Obama's 2009 stimulus bill. Yet 57 percent of the public did not realize that the bill included tax cuts, even though tax cuts in fact accounted for some \$275 billion of the total \$819 billion in stimulus spending in the bill.⁶³ Similarly, only 34 percent of the public realized that the Troubled Assets Relief Program bank bailout bill had been enacted under President George W. Bush, with 47 percent wrongly believing that it was enacted under President Obama. Controversy over the effectiveness or lack thereof of the TARP was one of the biggest points at issue between the parties in the 2010 election, with many Republicans criticizing the bill and blaming the Democrats for it.

The Republicans also focused heavily on federal spending as a crucial issue in the campaign. But a November poll taken just after the election found that only 39 percent of the public was aware of the basic fact that defense spending was a larger proportion of the federal budget than education, the Medicare health care program, and interest on the national debt. There was also extensive public ignorance about noneconomic issues at stake in the campaign. The majority of the public did not know that the United States suffered more combat casualties in Afghanistan than in Iraq during 2009, which perhaps indicates a failure to fully understand the Obama administration's strategy of shifting U.S. military efforts away from Iraq to Afghanistan. Knowing the relative numbers of casualties might also be useful information for voters seeking to weigh the potential benefits of these wars against their costs.

The 2010 campaign also saw extensive controversy over the role of the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, especially the court's much-debated decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*,⁶⁴ which struck down legislation limiting the use of corporate and union funds for election advertising.

President Obama and other Democrats repeatedly attacked the court during the campaign. The role of the court was also extensively discussed during the summer 2010 confirmation hearings for Elena Kagan, the president's second nominee to the Supreme Court. But a July survey found that only 28 percent of Americans could identify John Roberts—leader of the conservative majority on the court—as the chief justice of the United States. It is theoretically possible for voters to have a good knowledge of

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the court's decisions without knowing the names of any of the justices, and some probably do have such knowledge. However, a citizen who paid more than minimal attention to the extensive press coverage of the court would be likely to run across the chief justice's name multiple times. Moreover, as later in 2012, the performance of the conservative majority led by Roberts was one of the key points at issue in the political debate over the court's role.

More than 60 percent of the public was unable to identify Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a key player in the enactment of the stimulus and health care bills that had been at the heart of the Democrats' legislative agenda in 2009 and 2010.⁶⁵ Great Britain continued to be the United States' most important ally in the escalating fighting in Afghanistan, as well as a crucial partner on other foreign policy issues and on coordinating economic policy in the midst of a global recession. But only 15 percent of Americans could identify David Cameron as the prime minister of Great Britain. Knowing the names of Reid and Cameron is not essential for informed voting. In theory, a voter can be highly knowledgeable about policy issues but ignorant of the names of individual political leaders. However, citizens who paid more than minimal attention to domestic policy issues were likely to run across Reid's name on numerous occasions, and those who pay attention to foreign policy could hardly avoid Cameron's.

In the aftermath of the election, only 46 percent of the public realized that the Republicans had won control of the House of Representatives but not the Senate, and only 38 percent could identify John Boehner as the new Speaker of the House of Representatives.

All of these questions were multiple-choice items, and thus likely overestimate the extent of public knowledge to some degree.

Political Ignorance and the 2008 Election

Perhaps to an even greater extent than the 2010 midterm election, the 2008 election was an unusually important one. The issues at stake included the conduct of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the future of the health care system, a mortgage default crisis, and the government's developing response to the financial crisis that hit in September 2008—in the middle of the campaign.

As in 2010 and 2012, a majority of the public did display impressive knowledge about some of the basic issues at stake in the campaign. For example, by the summer of 2008, some 76 percent of Americans recognized that Democratic nominee Barack Obama supported a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and 62 percent knew that Republican candidate John McCain opposed it (Table 1.4). By October, some 66 percent knew that Nancy Pelosi was the Speaker of the House

TABLE 1.4 *Political Ignorance and the 2008 Election*

<i>Question (date of survey)</i>	<i>% Correct Answer</i>	<i>% Wrong Answer</i>	<i>% Admit Don't Know</i>
Knew Obama supported a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq (June 18–29, 2008) ^a	76	6	19
Knew Nancy Pelosi was the Speaker of the House of Representatives (October 3–6, 2008) ^{b*}	66	34	
Knew John McCain opposed a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq (June 18–29, 2008) ^a	62	20	18
Knew the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives before the election (October 29–31, 2008) ^c	61	22	18
Knew Saddam Hussein was not “directly involved” in the September 11 attacks (June 18–19, 2008) ^d	56	34	10
Knew that at least one presidential candidate had proposed a health care plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance (February 14–24, 2008) ^e	48	23	28
Knew that Hillary Clinton had proposed a plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance (February 14–24, 2008) ^{e**}	42	31	27
Knew that Condoleezza Rice was the secretary of state (April 30–June 1, 2008) ^{a*}	42	3	55
Knew that Nancy Pelosi was the Speaker of the House of Representatives (June 18–19, 2008) ^{f*}	39	3	58
Knew that Ben Bernanke was chairman of the Federal Reserve Board (June 18–19, 2008) ^f	36	29	35
Knew that Henry (Hank) Paulson was secretary of the treasury (October 3–6, 2008) ^{g*}	36	64	
Knew that Gordon Brown was the prime minister of Great Britain (April 30–June 1, 2008)	28	14	58
Knew that the Sunnis are the largest “group of Muslims worldwide” (June 18–19, 2008) ^f	20	41	39

TABLE 1.4

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TABLE I.4 (continued)

Question (date of survey)	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know
Knew that John Roberts is the chief justice of the Supreme Court (June 18-19, 2008) ^{f*}	15	7	78
Knew Obama did not propose the plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance (February 14-24, 2008) ^{g***}	35	24	41
Knew that U.S. defense spending is between \$400 billion and \$599 billion per year (June 17-26, 2008) ^h	7	48	45

NOTES: In a few cases, this table counts some respondents who refused to answer in the same category as those who said that they did not know. Research suggests that it is very rare for respondents who know the correct answer to a question to refuse to give it.

*Indicates not a multiple-choice question.

**The figures in the table count as giving "wrong" answers those who said they did not believe any candidate had proposed such a plan. In the Kaiser survey, only those respondents who said they thought at least one candidate had proposed it were asked specific questions about individual candidates' positions.

***The figures in the table count as correct answers for Obama the 23 percent of respondents who stated that no presidential candidate had proposed such a plan, as well as the 12 percent who correctly recognized that at least one candidate had, but also knew that Obama had not.

^aPew Research Center survey.

^bTime survey, October 3-6, 2008.

^cCBS News poll, October 29-31, 2008.

^dNewsweek/Princeton Survey Research Associates poll, June 18-19, 2008.

^eHenry Kaiser Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health poll.

^fNewsweek/Princeton Survey Research Associates poll.

^gTime survey, October 3-6, 2008. Both "Henry" and "Hank" Paulson were counted as correct answers.

^hPublic Interest Project/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll, June 17-26, 2008.

of Representatives, an increase from several months earlier and an indication that the public was paying some attention to congressional races. Similarly, 61 percent knew that the Democratic Party controlled the House of Representatives before the election.

Public knowledge of even slightly less basic matters was much worse. During the Democratic primaries, health care was a major point of contention in the close race between Barack Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama forcefully criticized Clinton for proposing a plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance.⁶⁶ But only 48 percent of survey respondents realized that *any* presidential candidate had proposed such a plan, and only 42 percent knew that Clinton had done so. Only 35 percent realized that Barack Obama had *not* proposed a plan of this type,

while 24 percent wrongly believed that he did. Ironically, Obama later incorporated this aspect of Clinton's plan into his health care bill after he became president. But at the time of the 2008 primaries, this was a major issue of contention between the two candidates.

The Iraq War, the War on Terror, and U.S. relations with the Muslim world were a major focus of debate between the parties. But only 20 percent could identify Sunni Muslims as the largest "group of Muslims worldwide." Conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites had complicated U.S. policy in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole.

When the financial crisis hit in September 2008, the TARP bill and other elements of the federal response were headed by Secretary of the Treasury Henry "Hank" Paulson. A September 29 *Newsweek* cover even dubbed Paulson "King Henry" because of his dominant role in the crisis.⁶⁷ But an October poll found that only 36 percent of the public knew that Paulson was secretary of the treasury. Paulson, the financial crisis, and the TARP bill became major campaign issues.

A June survey found that only 36 percent could identify Ben Bernanke as the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Admittedly, this was before the financial crisis hit and before Bernanke emerged as a key policymaker in forging the federal government's response to it. However, the Federal Reserve's policies were already controversial as possible causes of the ongoing mortgage default crisis and for supposedly failing to stem America's slide into recession.

In view of the ongoing debate over the economy, spending, and the federal budget deficit, it is perhaps noteworthy that only 7 percent could correctly place federal defense spending—the largest single item in the federal budget—within the correct \$200 billion range (\$400 to \$599 billion). While few would argue that voters need to know the precise amount of defense spending, approximate knowledge could still be useful. Only an additional 11 percent could place the level of defense spending within the two closest \$200 billion ranges (\$200 to \$399 billion or \$600 to \$799 billion).⁶⁸ Thus only 18 percent could place defense spending within the correct \$600 billion range in a survey where three of the six available options would count as correct by that standard.

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Political Ignorance and the 2004 Election

The 2004 election campaign was a crucial contest involving important issues including terrorism, the Iraq War, and the future of key questions in economic and social policy. However, Table 1.5 presents evidence from a number of surveys that showed evidence of extensive political ignorance on major issues in the current campaign.

The data cover a number of basic questions related to widely discussed issues that were prominent in both press coverage and political debate. Perhaps the most disturbing result was that large majorities were unaware of the passage of some of the most important and controversial items on the Bush administration's domestic policy agenda: almost 70 percent did not know of the passage of the massive Medicare prescription drug benefit, and nearly 65 percent did not know of the recent passage of a ban on "partial birth" abortion. Similarly, 58 percent admitted they had heard "very little" or "nothing" about the USA PATRIOT Act, the much-debated 2001 legislation that increased law enforcement powers for the claimed purpose of fighting terrorism. This result probably actually understated the number of respondents who knew little or nothing about the act.⁶⁹

The survey evidence also indicates considerable ignorance about various hot-button domestic and foreign policy issues. Despite widespread press coverage of large job gains in the months prior to the election,⁷⁰ the majority of respondents in a June 2004 poll mistakenly believed that there had been a net loss of jobs in 2004. With regard to the most important foreign policy issue in the campaign, a majority mistakenly believed that the Bush administration claimed a link between Saddam Hussein and the September 11 attacks (despite the administration's own repeated disclaimers of any such connection), and most did not know approximately how many American lives had been lost in the Iraq War. Similarly, despite the ongoing debate over America's troubled relationship with Europe in the wake of the Iraq War, 77 percent admitted that they knew "little" or "nothing" about the European Union. Knowing the number of Americans killed in Iraq was not absolutely essential to developing an informed opinion on the war; neither was knowledge of the America's strained relationship with its European allies. But it was

TABLE 1.5 *Political Ignorance and the 2004 Election*

Question (date of survey)	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Don't Know
Knew that defense spending is one of the two largest expenditure areas in the federal budget (March 15–May 11, 2004) ^a	51	43	6
Knew the approximate number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq (April 23–25, 2004) ^b	40 (within 200)	34	26
Knew that increased spending on domestic programs has contributed at least “some” to the current federal budget deficit (February 11–16, 2004) ^c	39	57	4
Claimed to have heard or read at least “some” information about the USA PATRIOT Act (April 28, 2004) ^b	39 (“some” [27] or “a lot” [12])	58 (“not much” [28] or “nothing” [30])	3
Knew that there had been a net increase in jobs during 2004 (June 7–9) ^d	36	61	3
Knew that Congress had recently passed a bill banning “partial birth” abortions (December 7–9, 2003) ^a	36	17	48
Knew that Congress had recently passed a Medicare prescription drug benefit (April 15, 2004) ^a	31	16	54
Knew that Social Security spending is one of the two largest expenditure areas in the federal budget (March 15–May 11, 2004) ^a	32	62	6
Knew that the Bush administration did not believe that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks (December 14–15, 2003) ^b	25	58	17
Knew that the current unemployment rate was lower than the average rate for the past thirty years (March 23, 2004) ^e	22	63	15
Claimed to know at least a “fair amount” about the European Union (May 21–23, 2004) ^f	22 (“great deal” [3] or “fair amount” [19])	77 (“very little” [37] or “nothing” [40])	1

^aPrinceton Survey Research Associates survey.

^b*New York Times*/CBS survey.

^cPew Research Center survey, February 11–16, 2004.

^dAP/IPSOS Public Affairs poll, June 7–9, 2004.

^eFox News/Opinion Dynamics survey, March 23–24, 2004.

^fGallup survey, May 21–23, 2004.

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On many issues actively misinformed. It has been a net loss of knowledge. I saw a link between that increases in the current federal budget deficit.

The data in this survey are universally ignorant of policy. *were* well informed about the federal budget deficit during the previous administration. The table does show some of the most common misconceptions. The election. The close and control of coverage many people have.

Undertaken during the Election Study is a survey of the U.S. public. Thirty political-kingdom ANES survey.⁷⁴ respondents give us a picture of their knowledge.

The vast majority of relatively basic political knowledge discussed during the government spending questions related to the administration, the Democratic Party model.

certainly relevant information for voters seeking to balance the war's possible benefits against its costs.

On many issues, the majority were not only ignorant of the truth but actively misinformed. For example, 61 percent believed that there had been a net loss of jobs in 2004, 58 percent believed that the administration saw a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, and 57 percent believed that increases in domestic spending had *not* contributed significantly to the current federal budget deficit.

The data in Table 1.5 should not be taken as proof that the public was universally ignorant on every issue. Some basic facts about current public policy *were* well known. For example, 82 percent knew that there was a federal budget deficit,⁷¹ and 79 percent knew that the deficit had increased during the previous four years.⁷² Nonetheless the evidence compiled in the table does show that majorities were ignorant of numerous basic facts on some of the most important and most widely debated issues at stake in the election. This result is particularly striking in view of the extremely close and controversial nature of the contest, and the high level of press coverage many of these issues received.

*Political Ignorance Evidence from the
2000 American National Election Study*

Undertaken during every election year since 1948, American National Election Study is often considered the most thorough social scientific survey of the U.S. electorate. The 2000 ANES survey contained a total of thirty political-knowledge-relevant questions,⁷³ more than any other recent ANES survey.⁷⁴ These are listed in Table 1.6 along with the percentage of respondents giving correct answers.

The vast majority of the thirty survey items identified in Table 1.6 are relatively basic in nature and would have been well known to political elites and activists at the time.⁷⁵ Many addressed issues that were widely discussed during the 2000 campaign, including environmental policy, government spending on public services, abortion, and others. Several questions related to factual matters relevant to the record of the Clinton administration, for which presidential candidate Al Gore and the Democratic Party more generally attempted to claim credit.⁷⁶

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TABLE I.6 *Political Knowledge Questions from the 2000 American National Election Study Survey*

<i>Item</i>	<i>% Giving Correct Answer</i>
Could identify Texas as the home state of George W. Bush*	90
Knew Bill Clinton was moderate or liberal	81
Knew Al Gore favored a higher level of government spending on services than George W. Bush	73
Knew Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman is Jewish	70
Could identify Tennessee as the home state of Al Gore*	68
Knew the federal budget deficit decreased, 1992-2000	58
Knew Gore is more liberal than Bush	57
Knew Democrats favored a higher level of government spending on services than Republicans	57
Could identify the post held by Attorney General Janet Reno*	55
Knew Republicans controlled the House of Representatives before the election	55
Knew Gore was more supportive of gun control than Bush	51
Knew Republicans controlled the Senate before the election	50
Knew Democrats were more supportive of government guarantee of jobs and standard of living than Republicans	49
Knew George W. Bush was conservative	47 (30 chose moderate)
Knew Gore was more supportive of abortion rights than Bush	46
Knew Gore was more supportive of government guarantee of jobs and standard of living than Bush	46
Knew Democrats favored a higher level of government aid to blacks than Republicans	45
Knew Gore was more supportive of environmental regulation than Bush	44
Knew Bush was more likely to favor jobs over the environment than Gore	41
Knew presidential candidate Pat Buchanan was conservative	40
Knew Gore favored a higher level of government aid to blacks than Bush	40
Knew Al Gore was liberal	38 (36 chose moderate)
Knew federal spending on the poor increased, 1992-2000	37
Knew the crime rate decreased, 1992-2000	37
Could identify the post held by British prime minister Tony Blair*	35

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TABLE 1.6 (continued)

Item	% Giving Correct Answer
Could identify Connecticut as the home state of Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman*	30
Could identify Wyoming as the home state of Republican vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney*	19
Could correctly name at least one candidate for the House of Representatives in the respondent's district*	15
Could identify the post held by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott*	9
Could correctly name a second candidate for the House of Representatives in the respondent's district*	4

NOTES: All percentages are rounded to whole numbers. $N = 1,545$ respondents. The exact wording of questions is available from the author or can be found in the 2000 ANES codebook available for downloading at the ICPSR website: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/index-medium.html>. A list of coding changes is available from the author upon request.

*Not a multiple-choice question.

While the thirty questions do not cover all possible relevant issues and facts, they do include a wide range of topics and therefore are a good representative sampling of Americans' political knowledge. Moreover, previous studies have found that political knowledge in one area is usually highly correlated with knowledge in others.⁷⁷ Thus we can be reasonably confident that individuals who scored well on the thirty items in the 2000 ANES survey on average possessed greater political knowledge on other matters than those who scored low. Ignorance of one or a few factual details on this or other surveys may not indicate much about the respondent's overall level of political knowledge. But broad ignorance across a wide range of survey items is more telling.

A Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full: How Low Is the Knowledge Level Revealed in the ANES Data?

The average knowledge level in the 2000 ANES survey was generally low. On average, respondents answered only 14.3 questions correctly out of 30.⁷⁸ The data seem to confirm Stephen Bennett's earlier findings that about one-third of respondents are "know-nothings" possessing little or no politically relevant knowledge.⁷⁹ About 25 percent of respondents got 8.5 correct answers or fewer.⁸⁰ Since seventeen of the thirty questions had only three possible answers,⁸¹ two had only two possible answers,⁸² one

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38 (36 chose moderate)
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more had two correct answers out of a possible three,⁸³ and several others could also potentially be guessed with lower probabilities of success,⁸⁴ a score of 8.5⁸⁵ is roughly equal to the score that could be expected as the result of random guessing.⁸⁶ My finding of 25 percent “know-nothings” is similar to Bennett’s finding of 29 percent.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that the average knowledge level revealed in the 2000 ANES study is not too low because the average respondent did achieve correct answers on almost half the questions (48 percent). This claim is flawed for two reasons. First, with a few exceptions, the items in the survey represent very basic political knowledge. Knowledgeable political activists and even citizens who follow politics reasonably closely would probably be able to answer all but a tiny handful of the questions correctly. Some more optimistic analysts argue that the knowledge items in the ANES do not truly represent basic political knowledge because they were not selected on that basis, and because it has not been proven that knowing this information is essential to making political decisions.⁸⁸ But, for reasons discussed in this chapter and Chapter 2, many of the ANES questions do in fact represent basic knowledge, regardless of the motives of the survey researchers in including them. The same is true of many similar questions asked in other surveys. Such knowledge is also often important from the standpoint of leading normative theories of political participation.⁸⁹

The second reason for pessimism regarding the 2000 ANES results is that they may actually overestimate political knowledge levels. This overestimation is the result of two factors. First, as already noted, multiple choice surveys in general somewhat overestimate the amount of political information possessed by the public because of the possibility of guessing by respondents and because more knowledgeable citizens may be overrepresented among those surveyed.⁹⁰ The average respondent in the 2000 ANES study got only about six more correct answers out of thirty than would be expected as a result of random guessing.⁹¹ Although ANES respondents had the option of giving “don’t know” answers to questions, past research shows that survey respondents often express opinions about issues they know nothing about to avoid seeming ignorant.⁹² Thus it seems

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knowledge at all. Depending on which scale is used, this group constitutes from 25 percent to 35 percent of the American public.

Overall, considering the very basic nature of the questions asked, the possibility of guessing, and the high percentage of "know-nothing" respondents, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 2000 ANES survey, like most research using earlier evidence, reveals a low level of political knowledge.

Open-Ended Questions Versus Multiple-Choice Questions

Some scholars claim that open-ended questions severely underestimate the true level of public knowledge because multiple-choice questions often produce better results. For example, a much higher percentage of respondents can identify the chief justice of the Supreme Court in a multiple-choice survey than in an open-ended one.⁹⁷ An important study by political scientists Robert Luskin and John Bullock provides evidence suggesting that many of the criticisms of open-ended questions are overstated.⁹⁸ In addition, multiple-choice surveys have their own flaws. They overestimate political knowledge because respondents can get the right answer by guessing, and many will do so rather than admit that they don't know the correct answer to a survey question.⁹⁹ Moreover, a person who can give the right answer to an open-ended question is likely to know more about the subject in question than one who can only do so if prompted by a multiple-choice format.

The reasonable solution is to make use of both kinds of questions, while keeping in mind their limitations. The vast majority of the questions cited in this chapter are multiple choice, thereby ensuring that they tend to overestimate knowledge levels rather than underestimate them. I have clearly marked the few questions in the tables that are not multiple choice. In my analysis of the 2000 ANES survey, I have chosen not to include an open-ended question about the identity of the chief justice of the Supreme Court that has been the object of particularly severe criticism.¹⁰⁰

Finally, we should keep in mind that the vast majority of survey questions posed to the general public by pollsters are fairly simple compared with the full universe of available information on politics and public pol-

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ity.¹⁰¹ The questions analyzed in this chapter are overwhelmingly both multiple choice and addressed to comparatively simple factual issues.

Voters and Nonvoters

It is probable that the true knowledge level of the electorate is higher than surveys of the general public suggest, because relatively ignorant people who are eligible to vote are less likely to vote than those who are more knowledgeable. Surveys suggest that the least knowledgeable citizens are less likely to vote and engage in other forms of political participation.¹⁰² However, the differences in voting rates between the knowledgeable and the ignorant are smaller than most surveys suggest, because more knowledgeable citizens are far more likely to falsely report voting than less knowledgeable ones.¹⁰³ Age, income, interest in politics, and degree of ideological commitment are strongly correlated with misreporting voting,¹⁰⁴ and also with political knowledge.¹⁰⁵ People who are knowledgeable and interested in politics but still choose not to vote are more likely to feel guilty for doing so, and therefore less willing to admit their nonvoting to pollsters. As a result, the voting population is probably significantly closer in knowledge level to the general public than might be supposed.

Moreover, even if nonvoters are disproportionately ignorant, their lack of political knowledge may not be completely harmless. If they knew more, they could potentially cast better-informed ballots, thereby improving the knowledge level of the electorate.

IMPLICATIONS

Extensive evidence suggests that most Americans have little political knowledge. That ignorance covers knowledge of specific issues, knowledge of political leaders and parties, and knowledge of political institutions. The evidence extends to many of the crucial issues at stake in recent elections from 2000 to 2014. Moreover, much of the survey data revealing widespread ignorance relate to fairly basic issues about the politicians, parties, issues, and the structure of politics.

These results do not by themselves prove that voter knowledge levels are inadequate. Perhaps a little knowledge goes a long way. Nonetheless,

CHAPTER I

the extent of public ignorance is great enough to suggest that voter knowledge optimists at least have their work cut out for them.

Still, we cannot really know whether current levels of political knowledge are adequate until we have a standard to measure them by. Chapter 2 explains how public knowledge levels fall short of the standards required by several prominent theories of democratic participation.

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