

set the separation of powers and reduced the potency of the House of Representatives." This all undermined, in Mason's eyes, the rationale of the Virginia Plan that had been presented to the convention. That plan had called for a strengthened government, but the popularly elected lower house of the legislature was to be dominant.

Mason was "well read, intelligent, [and] discerning," Tarter says, but he also was "very much a loner [and] temperamentally unsuited to the hurly-burly and compromises of the political arena." After he did not get his way in Philadelphia, "he took his quill and went home, angrily kick-

ing up dust as he went Mason's disappointment was bitter, and because of the rigidity of his views and the belligerence of his personality, it had staying power."

Even after Madison introduced the Bill of Rights in the new U.S. House of Representatives in July 1789, Mason was not appeased. He called Madison's action a "Farce," and said, "Perhaps some Milk & Water Propositions may be made by Congress to the State Legislatures . . . but of important & substantial Amendments, I have not the least Hope." This father of the Bill of Rights went to his grave three years later without ever having given the Constitution his blessing.

Voting Booth Blues

"Voter Turnout" by Raymond E. Wolfinger and "Electoral Participation: Summing Up a Decade" by Carole Jean Uhlener, in *Society* (July-Aug. 1991), Rutgers—The State University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

When Americans go to the polls in 1992, the nation's political pulse-takers are sure to search voter-turnout data for clues to the health of the body politic. And chances are they will again warn that Americans have alarming cases of political apathy and cynicism. Turnout in presidential contests has been falling for decades, dropping from 62.8 percent in 1960 to 50.15 percent in 1988.

But Wolfinger, a political scientist at Berkeley, dismisses such diagnoses as quackery. Opinion polls show that American voters, though supposedly alienated, are among the most optimistic in the world about their own "political efficacy." Eighty-five percent express pride in their political system. In Italy, meanwhile, voter turnout is an impressive 94 percent, yet only three percent of Italians profess enthusiasm for government Italian-style.

Part of the confusion about the meaning of voter turnout, Wolfinger explains, is caused by the fact that the U.S. statistic is computed differently—as the proportion of the total adult population that casts ballots. Calculated instead as a proportion of only those registered to vote, as it is in Europe, the percentage improves to a respectable 84 to 87 percent.

This country's real problem, Wolfinger says, is that only two-thirds of Americans are registered. This disappointing figure results largely from the fact that the burden of registration is left on the individual voter—a burden compounded by the fact that Americans are frequent movers. (In 1980, one-third of all American voters had not lived at the same address for two years.) In Europe, by contrast, registration is usually automatic. In England, canvassers even go door-to-door to compile the electoral register. Make registration automatic here, Wolfinger suggests, and all the chatter about apathy and a voter turnout "crisis" will cease.

Uhlener, who teaches at the University of California at Irvine, is not so optimistic. She points out that the decline in political participation during the 1980s was uneven. Among the poorest 16 percent of Americans, for example, turnout fell from 46 to 40 percent between 1980 and '88, but among the wealthiest five percent it rose from 69 to 77 percent. Among blacks, turnout fell from 50 to 39 percent. Why? Uhlener believes that the poor and disadvantaged were excluded from the nation's political dialogue during the 1980s. They had nothing (and nobody) to vote for.

But this argument is partly contradicted by Uhlaner's own report of a dramatic increase in registration (from 39 to 59 percent) and voter turnout (from 28 to 59 percent) among Mexican-Americans. Uhlaner

credits aggressive registration drives. By these measures, Mexican-Americans now participate in politics more actively than blacks do. More than ever, blacks seem a constituency in search of a party.

Keeping Secrets

"The Fight to Know" by Peter Montgomery and Peter Overby, in *Common Cause Magazine* (July-Aug. 1991), 2030 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson and strengthened after the Watergate scandal, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) turned 25 this summer. In recent years, however, contend Montgomery, associate editor of *Common Cause Magazine*, and Overby, a staff writer, the executive branch and federal courts have expanded the law's exemptions and given "the bureaucratic impulse for secrecy . . . freer rein."

In 1987, for example, the Reagan administration asked Congress to exempt the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) from the law, claiming that Japanese scientists were using it to obtain valuable information about U.S. space shuttle technology. That simply was not true, the authors say, and a NASA official later admitted as much. The administration "concocted the story," they assert, to keep the public from learning about decisions that led to the 1986 *Challenger* explosion. Requests made under FOIA later helped "demolish NASA's deceptions."

The FOIA exempts certain kinds of information from public scrutiny, including national-security and law-enforcement secrets, sensitive financial and business data, information protected by individuals' pri-

vacy rights, and some internal government documents. The Reagan administration extended the cloak of "national security" to cover information on trade and virtually all aspects of international activity, Montgomery and Overby say. A 1982 executive order told officials to classify documents whenever in doubt. The courts have not been much help. A federal court, for example, ruled FBI criminal history records "categorically" exempt.

Surprisingly, most FOIA requests do not come from journalists. They accounted for only six percent of the 40,500 requests at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) last year. Most of the rest, the authors note, came from FDA-regulated firms seeking "to untangle the sometimes Byzantine regulatory process—and to dig up information . . . on their competitors."

In an effort to find out how well the law is working, *Common Cause Magazine* last spring filed FOIA requests with 21 federal agencies, asking for recent logs of FOIA requests and the agency responses. The full answer is still a mystery: Only four of the agencies met the statutory 10-day deadline for replying, and two months after the requests were filed, seven agencies still had not responded.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

America First?

"What is the National Interest?" by Alan Tonelson, in *The Atlantic* (July 1991), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

America's victories in the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War—and its international foreign policy in general—are largely

irrelevant to the lives of most Americans, asserts Tonelson, research director of the Economic Strategy Institute. Far from go-