

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-