POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Ignorant Voter

"Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal" by Ilya Somin, in *Critical Review* (Fall 1998), P.O. Box 380015, Cambridge, Mass. 02238.

American voters' abysmal ignorance about politics and government is a well-established, albeit frequently overlooked, fact. Most voters do not know which branch of government has the power to declare war, or who controls monetary policy; some 70 percent cannot name either of their state's senators; almost a third have virtually no relevant political knowledge at all.

Despite widespread increases in formal education and an explosion of available information, the general level of political knowledge has not changed much, if at all, since the late 1930s, when mass survey research began. "This striking failure" throws cold water on the expectation of John Stuart Mill and later political analysts that the spread of formal education would "create the informed electorate that the democratic ideal requires," observes Somin, a graduate student in political science at Harvard University.

Some theorists have argued that despite their ignorance, voters can pick up cues from political parties, opinion leaders, or even their own daily lives, that enable them to cast informed votes. Not so, says Somin. "The theories show, at best, that voters can discern the existence of issues and the opposing stances of candidates; but they do not demonstrate that voters can meaningfully relate this knowledge to the achievement of their preferred policy objectives." A candidate's party affiliation, for instance, may offer a clue to his policy positions, but it tells little about the effects of the policies.

Other theorists have claimed that the "erroneous" votes randomly cast by ignorant voters cancel one another out, so that the outcome is decided by the relatively informed voters. However, ignorant voters do not cast their votes randomly, Somin points out, but instead often act on the basis of mistaken inferences. Misperceptions about the economy, for example, badly hurt President George Bush's 1992 reelection effort.

"Perhaps the most fundamental cause of ignorance" in the electorate, Somin writes, results from the insignificance of any individual vote in determining the outcome of an election. "Since one vote is almost certain not to be decisive, even a voter who cares greatly about the outcome has almost no incentive to invest heavily in acquiring sufficient knowledge to make an informed choice." Today, Somin says, the vast size and scope of government increases the likelihood of voter ignorance, and even calls into question the electoral competence of relatively well-informed voters. (This holds true even for professional social scientists, he says, noting that he himself "had never heard of 25 of the 61 non-Cabinet level agencies listed in the *Government Manual*" before looking them up for his article.) More limited government, Somin concludes, might mean a less ignorant electorate—and a more truly democratic government.

Surfing Past the President

"Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" by Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, in *American Political Science Review* (Mar. 1999), 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Ever since JFK, presidents have used prime-time TV to appeal directly to the public. For decades, the airwaves of the broadcast networks were the president's to command, and the American public watched and listened en masse. Today, the White House has to compete with sitcoms and cop shows. It doesn't fare well, report