

## *The Know Nothing Vote*

“Intelligent Design” by George Bishop, in *Public Perspective* (May–June 2003), The Roper Center, 341 Mansfield Rd., Unit 1164, Storrs, Conn. 06269–1164; “Informed Public Opinion about Foreign Policy” by Henry E. Brady, James S. Fishkin, and Robert C. Luskin, in *Brookings Review* (Summer 2003), 1775 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Whatever the controversial subject of the day, from the war in Iraq to the creation of the universe, the American public is seldom at a loss for an opinion (or two or three). When pollsters come calling, only a stubborn few Americans end up taking the “don’t know” cop-out. But the fact is that, in many cases, the public simply doesn’t know what it’s talking about.

Take the question of whether so-called intelligent design—the idea that life is too complex to have developed by chance—should be taught in public schools along with Darwin’s theory of evolution. This was a hot issue in Ohio last year, notes Bishop, a political scientist at the University of Cincinnati. A poll conducted by Zogby International for the Discovery Institute, an intelligent-design advocacy group, found that nearly two-thirds of Ohioans supported teaching both Darwin’s theory and the scientific evidence against it. Another spring 2002 poll, conducted for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* by Mason-Dixon, a Washington-based polling organization, produced a similar result.

But in a September 2002 survey by the University of Cincinnati’s Institute for Policy Research, 84 percent of Ohioans said they knew little or nothing about the concept of intelligent design. Why did Ohioans, apparently so ignorant of the subject, seem so well informed about it in the earlier polls? “Leading questions” in the case of the Zogby survey, says Bishop. The *Plain Dealer* poll, though free of

advocacy, “educated” respondents about the idea of intelligent design before asking their judgment about “equal time.” “Unsurprisingly, given the fairness framing of the issue,” says Bishop, most respondents chose the “teach both” option.

Filtering out the “less well-informed” is apparently not a realistic option for pollsters, notes Bishop, since “it would probably not make good copy to report, again and again, that large numbers of citizens, and in some cases majorities, have no opinions” on the hot issues of the day.

What’s needed is more extensive education of survey respondents, contend Brady, a political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, and Fishkin and Luskin, director and research director, respectively, of the Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas at Austin. In so-called deliberative polling, individuals are surveyed, then invited to spend a few days exploring the issues with the aid of balanced briefing materials and panels of experts, then finally surveyed again.

The result, argue Brady and his colleagues, is a “distribution of opinion [that] represents the conclusions the public would reach if people knew and thought more about the issues.” Such conclusions, they suggest, should count for more with the media than the opinions of the untutored public. But Bishop maintains that in cases in which the public is ignorant, as in the Ohio controversy, the illusion of an informed public can “seriously mislead the policymaking powers that be.”

## *The Cult of the Founders*

“Founders Chic” by H. W. Brands, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 2003), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

The Founding Fathers, recently scorned as “dead white males,” are suddenly way cool. And Brands, a historian at

Texas A&M University who has contributed to the revival with a recent biography of Benjamin Franklin, warns of ven-