

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-

eration's perils: "In making giants of the Founders, we make pygmies of ourselves," and perhaps shrink from the bold actions the times require.

The bookstores and best-seller lists have been clogged with mostly adoring biographies of the Founders, notably David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning *John Adams*, Joseph J. Ellis's *Founding Brothers*, and Brands's own *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, one of three recent Franklin biographies. It was not always thus.

In their own time, the Founders often faced withering criticism. *The Philadelphia Aurora* attacked President George Washington as "the source of all the misfortunes of our country." John Adams was derided as obese and tyrannical, Thomas Jefferson as godless and immoral.

In the early 19th century, the Founders' reputation was tarnished by their failure to resolve two great issues then facing the nation: slavery and the question of whether sovereignty lay with the states or the national government. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison burned his copy of the Constitution and denounced the Founders' creation as "a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell."

The end of the Civil War brought a surprising upswing in veneration of the Founders. Defeated Southerners felt a natural kinship with them because so many had been plantation owners, like themselves. Northerners viewed this shared respect as a point of reconciliation with the South. As they would in our time, books on the Founders began to emerge. James Schouler's 1880 seven-volume *History of the United States under the Constitution*



Images like this 19th-century engraving, The Apotheosis of Washington, have formed Americans' impressions of the Founders, but even Washington was criticized and vilified in his own time.

presented Washington as a "paragon," and was no less deferential toward the rest.

By the 1960s, the Founders' reputation was again in decline. "The sharpest insult was not criticism but neglect," says Brands. Antiliberal reaction has since helped bring them back into vogue.

Brands worries that the current excessive veneration of the Founders "inhibits action on important public issues." Why do both sides in the gun control debate, for example, argue endlessly over what the Founders intended in the Second Amendment? Why not just rewrite the amendment? he asks. Why should an untouchable First Amendment stymie campaign finance reform? The Founders weren't any smarter, wiser, or more altruistic than 21st-century Americans, Brands argues, but they were bolder. That's a quality worth admiring—and emulating.