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## We must weed out ignorant voters

by David Harsanyi

Never have so many people with so little knowledge made so many consequential decisions for the rest of us.

A person need only survey the inanity of the ongoing presidential race to comprehend that the most pressing problem facing the nation isn't Big Business, Big Labor, Big Media or even Big Money in politics.

It's you, the American voter. And by weeding out millions of irresponsible voters who can't be bothered to learn the rudimentary workings of the Constitution, or their preferred candidate's proposals or even their history, we may be able to mitigate the recklessness of the electorate.

No, we shouldn't erect physical barriers to ballot access. Let's purchase more voting machines, hire additional poll workers, streamline the registration process, mail out more ballots for seniors and produce more "Rock the Vote" ads imploring apathetic millennials to embrace their civic duty.

At the same time, let's also remember that checking a box for the candidate whose campaign ads you like best is one of the most overrated obligations of the self-governed. If you have no clue what the hell is going on, you also have a civic duty to avoid subjecting the rest of us to your ignorance.

Unfortunately, we can't trust you.

Now, if voting is a consecrated rite of democracy, as liberals often argue, surely society can have certain minimal expectations for those participating. And if citizenship itself is as hallowed as Republicans argue, then surely the prospective voter can be asked to know just as much as the prospective citizen. Let's give voters a test. The citizenship civics test will do just fine.

How many screeching proponents of the two major candidates would pass this quiz? Here are some of the questions, which run from [easy to preposterously easy](#):

"If both the President and the Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President?"

“There were 13 original states. Name three.”

“What is one right or freedom from the First Amendment?”

“What is freedom of religion?”

I have tempered confidence that at least a majority of the voting public could pass such a test — though I couldn't say the same for a majority of presidential candidates. Certainly, this should be a breeze for citizens so intensely involved in the process that they feel compelled to plaster bumper stickers on their cars and attend the rallies of their favorite candidates.

Or am I being too optimistic? When [Newsweek](#) asked a thousand voters to take the official citizenship test a few years back, nearly 30 percent couldn't name the vice president. More than 60 percent did not know the length of U.S. senators' terms in office. And 43 percent couldn't say that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights.

Only 30 percent knew that the U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the land.

In another study, by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#), we learned that only 36 percent could name all three branches of the U.S. government. Only 62 percent knew that the U.S. Supreme Court was tasked with determining the constitutionality of legislation. Fewer than half of Americans knew that split decisions in the Supreme Court have the same effect as 9 to 0 decisions.

These are the people who pick the people who define the basic fabric of the legal system — and often our lives.

To be fair, the contemporary electorate is probably no less ignorant today than it was 50 or 100 years ago. The difference is that now we have unlimited access to information. [As James Madison wrote](#), “A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.”

And it literally takes seconds to learn about the fundamentals of our republic and the positions of candidates. If you forsake the power of information, you have no standing to tell the rest of us how to live our lives. Don't vote.

Now, some of you will accuse me of peddling crass elitism. But I say the opposite is true. Unlike the many who depend on ignorant voters to wield and secure their power, I refuse to believe that working-class or underprivileged citizens are any less capable of understanding the meaning of the Constitution or the contours of governance than the supercilious 1-percenters. I believe this despite the widespread failure of public schools to teach children basic civics. It's still our responsibility as voters.

Of course, we also must remember the ugly history of poll taxes and other prejudicial methods that Americans used to deny black citizens their equal right to vote. Any effort to improve the quality of the voting public should ensure that all races, creeds, genders and sexual orientations

and people of every socioeconomic background are similarly inhibited from voting when ignorant. For the good of our democratic institutions.

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