

Civic Knowledge

by Russell Muirhead

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Good citizens *do* things: they speak out, they vote, they volunteer, they organize. But to do those things well, citizens need to know things. Civic action requires civic knowledge.

This might seem so elemental as to need no defense. After all, an ignorant citizenry is easily manipulated by propaganda and the seductions of flattering and over-promising politicians. Only when citizens are knowledgeable are they empowered to resist the self-serving machinations of ambitious elites and act in their own interests. Only a knowledgeable citizenry can preserve its freedom.

This is why the persistent evidence of citizen ignorance is so hair-raising. Surveys show that almost half of Americans, for instance, think the phrase, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” appears in the United States Constitution. (It is from *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). Speaking of Communists, almost half of Americans believe that Communist Party members cannot run for president. Three-quarters of the population think the Constitution guarantees a high school education.

Before we jump too quickly to the conclusion that citizens are ignorant about basic Constitutional facts, we should consider whether surveys might be crude and ultimately misleading measures of what citizens know. After all, Marx’s pithy definition of justice captures a truth larger than communism. And any “card-carrying member” of the Communist Party would, practically speaking, be ineligible for high office simply because the public would summarily reject such a candidate. As for an education guarantee, in fact all citizens are required (by states) to be educated, and there are firm restrictions on the employment of children. So practically speaking, we have something akin to an education guarantee. Besides, the specific phrases and various articles of the Constitution are not much read outside of law schools and the federal



courts, and it might be understandable if good citizens, in the hurly-burly of daily life, mistake a few specifics.

But when we turn away from the questions that measure citizens' recall of the precise phrasing of the Constitution to questions about current events, the evidence of widespread ignorance is sometimes so plain that it cannot be explained away. To offer just a couple of examples, an astonishing 80 percent of the public cannot name either of their state's senators, for instance. Just after the 2004 presidential election, 58 percent of Americans had heard little or nothing about the USA Patriot Act, which gave the federal government new surveillance powers to fight terrorism and had been the subject of many months of debate and discussion.

Most can name the judge on *The People's Court*, and the judges on *American Idol*—even if they cannot name the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. And many people can name all five members of the animated Simpsons family, even if they cannot name more than one of the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. People are not stupid—only ignorant about politics.

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The sorry state of civic knowledge tells us something about the meaning of citizenship in contemporary America. Knowledge is almost always connected with action: we learn by doing, and we learn for the sake of doing. By contrast, the kind of factual knowledge tested in surveys is memorized propositional knowledge, disconnected from the activities of both citizenship and daily life. In the course of ordinary events, citizens are not called upon to name the three branches of government, or the five liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment.

What citizens are asked to do is (on occasion) to vote. They may, of course, do more—they may petition, organize, demonstrate, or run for office. But these activities are not what most citizens characteristically do. For most, who juggle the demands of jobs and hobbies and friends, the activity of citizenship begins and ends with voting. And voting, important though it is, does not seem important enough or demanding enough to motivate most citizens to become knowledgeable about politics. Many have long hoped that the franchise alone would activate the full powers of citizens and stimulate them to become intimately informed about public issues. But these hopes have never been realized. Voting simply does not seem to be *enough* to motivate citizens in general to become informed. One school of political science called “rational choice” has argued

that it is irrational for citizens to vote, since the individual payoff of voting depends on that person's vote changing the outcome of the election, and the probability of that, in a large electorate, is virtually nil. This theory, of course, overlooks the fact that for many, voting has symbolic and expressive importance—it can be fun, and it is also a duty. But perhaps the theory captures something true about voting at the same time: one individual's vote by itself is not very powerful, and the instrumental importance of voting is slight. So it would make a certain sense if many voters did not bother to become terribly well-informed.

Citizenship can ask for more, and when it does, it teaches more. Take, for instance, the civic education that former Supreme Court Justice David Souter received as a boy while accompanying his parents to the annual town meeting in Weare, New Hampshire. On Souter's telling, the meeting's moderator taught the young would-be justice about the essence of fairness, not with definitions or lectures, but through the fairness with which he conducted the meeting. Souter also learned something about federalism. Watching the adults of the town make decisions about roads and schools and local public buildings, he grasped even before he could explain it the idea that some things were reserved for towns, some for states, and some for the nation. "Because I and other kids my age who went to the town meeting had these experiences simply by sitting there, watching what was done and listening to what was said," Souter says, "by the time we got to the ninth grade and actually took a required formal course in civics, it wasn't all that hard to catch on to what was being taught."

Souter's experience recalls Alexis de Tocqueville's observations during his visit to the United States in the 1830s. Federalism is not merely a doctrine or a constitutional principle, Tocqueville said, it is a practice. By reserving certain functions to small political units (towns and states, but especially towns) federalism engages people in political decision-making. And this engagement instructs—it lifts people out of their private circles, where they are enmeshed in rhythms of work and family, and connects them to larger projects. They learn how to link their own interest to the interests of others, to form an enlightened self-interest that engages the public good without requiring them to renounce their private good.

The experience of seeing the adults in town gather for the sake of governing themselves is a rare one. And although many local governments hold well-attended city council meetings or public hearings, it is not the case that all citizens are expected to attend. Some call contemporary democracy "audience democracy" (citizens watch more than

they act), but even this is an overstatement. At the national level, we can watch Congressional proceedings on CSPAN. But CSPAN does not capture most of the action, if it catches any at all. Members of Congress so rarely deliberate as an assembly that there is no argument, debate, or decision-making for the cameras to capture. Instead they record members giving speeches to an empty chamber, for the benefit of the few constituents back home who tune in, hoping to learn something. It is not easy to be a good citizen when there is not much for citizens to do, and not much for them to see.

If the political realm can be difficult to engage, the everyday activities of work, family, shopping, and playing are so absorbing that it is often a strain to think about public issues. The infrastructure that supports everyday life—the water and sewage treatment plants, the roads, the electric grid, the banking system—is administered invisibly by a web of agencies and regulators and officials that even the most informed citizens probably cannot name or locate. The government services and entitlements that nearly everyone relies on, like national defense or Social Security, are also administered at a distance, also by experts. Citizens may be grateful or resentful, critical or approving—but they are not called upon to act. After the Sept. 11 attacks, when former President George W. Bush asked Americans to “get on with your lives, hug your kids, and go to the mall,” he only made explicit what our civic idealism cannot admit: citizenship has been largely subsumed by private affairs.

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Perhaps, if our citizenship does not ask for very much, then our citizens do not need to know very much. To cast an intelligent vote, all a citizen needs is a common-sense understanding of whether things are getting better or getting worse. As political scientist Morris Fiorina once put it, “Voters typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent’s administration.” With this knowledge, they know enough to punish or to reward incumbent candidates and incumbent parties when they go to the polls. They do not need to have mastered constitutional law or have been captain of the debate team to vote intelligently.

This view of citizenship is right, as far as it goes—but it does not go far enough. One does not need a Ph.D. to decide how to cast a vote, and even without mastering the details of current events, most people can figure out whether things are going well or badly. The problem is that people who know little about knowledge often will not bother to vote: ignorance is disempowering. Those who know little tend not to have

opinions. Without the knowledge and passion that support opinions, they tend to be apathetic, disengaged, and disconnected.

By contrast, having more knowledge than you need is empowering. Knowledge supplies the courage to have opinions, and opinions (which are not merely scientific conjectures because they involve the passions) lead to action. It is the opinionated who vote, for offices big and small, year after year. To have an opinion takes a kind of courage. No one needs to have an opinion about what her email address is; this is a simple matter of fact. Opinion comes into its own when facts are more difficult (or impossible) to fully catalog, when chains of causation are too complex and indeterminate to fully grasp. Should the government target spending, or cut taxes, or do nothing at all in order to counter a recessionary lull? Should the city spend more on roads, on playgrounds, or on assistance to the poor, when it cannot afford to do all three? There are informed and public-spirited arguments on every side, and even Nobel-winning experts will disagree. Opinion is everywhere, and final, full knowledge is not to be found. With most practical questions, there is no science of politics that can generate a proof about the right course of action.

This is why those of uncompromising intellectual integrity might refuse to hold an opinion, to acquire a hypothesis and call it their own. It takes some measure of courage to go from evaluating rival claims to holding an opinion of one's own. It also takes judgment. Judgment is not the logarithmic activity of reason that is engaged in working through a geometric proof. It is less like science and more like dating; it is the ability to discern amid many changing particulars a course of action that is best. One can never know in advance whether an opinion is in fact the best one available—there is always reason to gather more information. But since no amount of information is ever enough, at some point practical people have to make a decision about what to think and what to do. In the best case, our opinions should be provisional and open to change. But we have to hold opinions, at least if we are to do the elemental work of citizenship.

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Knowledge is empowering. But what, more specifically, should good citizens know? As surveys of civic knowledge suggest, the answer to this question easily degenerates into a set of factual propositions that are disconnected from the activities of forming judgments, holding opinions, and voting. For instance, a recent civics exam administered by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute asked the following question:

“What was the source of the following phrase: ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people?’” The multiple-choice exam offered four options: Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech; the Declaration of Independence; the U.S. Constitution; and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

It certainly reveals a familiarity with history to know that the phrase is from Lincoln’s famous speech. And it is fair to expect that many citizens will have a familiarity with each of the four speeches or documents in question, since each is fundamental to American national identity and constitutional government. But at the same time, what difference does it make for one’s ability to form good judgments and to hold opinions responsibly and courageously if one thinks, erroneously, that the phrase comes from the Declaration of Independence? The Declaration, after all, is not exactly opposed to the underlying idea the phrase contains, and it does affirm the related principle that legitimate government rests on consent.

To take a different example from the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress’ civic assessment exam, consider this question: “In the United States, you must be a citizen to a) drive a car; b) own a business; c) vote; d) write a letter to the editor.”

It may come as a relief to know that 75 percent of fourth-graders correctly chose answer c: only citizens can vote. But on reflection, the underlying question about which privileges and responsibilities are reserved exclusively for citizens is a subtle one. Property rights are a complicated subject, and a fourth-grader might be forgiven for supposing that only citizens can own a business. Moreover, the question hides from view those policies—such as recruiting non-citizens to serve in the armed forces, or disenfranchising felons—that might prove both unintuitive and controversial. What we should really want citizens to know is not only the brute fact that only citizens can vote, but the larger meaning of citizenship as it bears on a range of activities, including voting.

The larger meaning of American citizenship points beyond isolated facts to the basic constitutional structure and the reasons that make the structure meaningful. Having an understanding of the principles of constitutional democracy anchors judgments about the issues, crises, and movements that fill the realm of everyday politics. It is the starting point for the instincts we develop about the mission of government; it gives us a fundamental sense of what we’re electing people to do. And it tells us something about the standing dangers that democracies characteristically face.

The kind of constitutional knowledge required to be good citizens might be summarized in four elemental points. First, a good civic education would supply an understanding of the reasons for a separation of powers and what this means for the presidency and the courts. Too often the separation of powers is lumped in with the catch-all “checks and balances,” which are assumed to be ever good. But dividing powers remains controversial, and introduces limitations that parliamentary systems, with their fusion of the legislative and the executive, do not face.

Second, it is fundamental to understand federalism, or the vertical division of power between the national government, the states, and the localities. Only the principle of federalism can make sense of the unequal representation of the Senate, in which citizens of Wyoming are fifty times more powerful than citizens of California. One may or may not approve of this; but approval and disapproval require consulting the reasons and principles that informed the federal design from the start.

Third, it is crucial for citizens to know the difference between representative democracy and direct democracy. Representation is not simply a concession to the difficulty of gathering all the citizens together in a vast and populous country—a difficulty more easily surmounted today by communications technology. The positive case for representation points to the most fundamental pathologies of democracy, including the elemental tendency of individuals to vex and oppress each other rather than to cooperate for their common good. One might say that the entire point of *constitutional* democracy is to insert some kind of distance or deliberative space between the sovereign people and the laws.

The fourth fundamental part of a good constitutional understanding is the most commonly celebrated: individual rights. The nation’s struggle with itself to extend rights equally to blacks, to women, and to citizens generally is what supports American’s civic pride. The story of American inclusion cannot be too familiar, nor is it complete. At the same time, exactly what should count as a “right” is itself always a matter of controversy that no excellent civics education should ignore. (Is there a right to marry? A right to strike?)

These basic elements of civic education are nothing new, and well-developed civics curricula exist that give priority to the principles and fundamentals of constitutional government. The Center for Civic Education has developed a superb example of such a curriculum. The enterprise began as a way to improve civic knowledge in

California, but has over the decades been expanded and now serves as a template for civics courses in schools across the country.

Some might worry that a civics curriculum focused on constitutional essentials presents an idealized version of politics without the passions and conflicts that are always present. Perhaps the triumphal picture of American constitutionalism sets students up for disappointment when they come to see that politics is not simply the people and their representatives deliberating and deciding on the common good, but organized interests strategizing, manipulating, and dissembling for the sake of their own discrete advantage.

To be sure, a civic education focused on the Constitution can never be blind to the realities of politics: if serving the common good were a simple matter, constitutions would not be necessary. Just the same, there is an inescapable distance that separates the ideals of the Constitution from the rough and tumble of politics, and a civics education focused only on the Constitution would understate the way politics is always about a contest.

That is why a great civics education would go beyond constitutional essentials to engage a very basic but important question: what has the government succeeded at, and what has it failed at, in the recent past? Any account of government's successes and failures over the past fifty years will necessarily be controversial—indeed, partisan. For instance, some will point to winning the cold war as one of the indisputable successes of the past generation. The cold war reveals the capacity of the government to sustain a commitment across several generations and many administrations of both major parties. And some, mainly Republicans, will especially credit President Ronald Reagan with securing its final victory.

Others, by contrast, will emphasize securing more effective equal rights for blacks and for women as one of the cardinal achievements of the past half-century. They will single out the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as the legislative achievements responsible for overturning a century of entrenched racial discrimination, and will give special credit to President Lyndon Johnson for risking a durable Democratic majority to pass the legislation.

Failures are just as important to understand as successes, and they include the failure of the national government since the mid 1970s to routinely balance its budget, or its

failure to decisively win wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Civic knowledge includes an ability to identify the great failures of the recent past, and to say something about their cause.

The nation's successes and failures have both largely been bipartisan enterprises. In neither category do we find a simple story of one party having its way against the sustained opposition of the other. Yet the particular successes and failures one identifies, the manner in which one assigns credit and blame, and the lessons for the future that one singles out all involve a partisan dimension.

Political parties can appear to reflect nothing but the ambitions of office-seeking politicians. Yet their energy ultimately comes from a desire to secure (and to extend) what some regard as the great achievements of the past—against the opposition of others. Today's Democratic Party defines itself, for instance, by its commitment to Social Security—perhaps the core of the New Deal—and the collective provision of health care insurance; the Republican Party by contrast defines itself by its commitment to tax cuts, which goes back at least to Ronald Reagan and his criticism of what he regarded as the excesses of “big government” (that began with the New Deal). Parties carry what they take to be the achievements of the past into the future.

No science can provide citizens with the civic knowledge they need in a totally non-partisan way. But by learning about the particular successes and failures of our recent past, citizens can indirectly learn about the partisanship that always divides us. They might even find themselves sympathizing with one view over the other, and becoming partisans of a sort themselves.

Partisan sympathies are what illuminate the path from knowledge to action: they are what make us want to see victory for particular candidates and causes and defeat for others. In David Souter's youth—as in America's youth, at the time of Tocqueville's visit—politics was a craft people learned by doing. For legislators and local officials, it is still a craft. But in the contemporary world, most citizens do not learn by doing; they act because of what they believe. And the political world becomes compelling when one knows enough to venture an opinion.

Civic knowledge is not about storing facts disconnected from political purposes and political struggles. Ultimately, it is about holding responsible opinions—and acting on those opinions. Those opinions will by definition be contestable and controversial: they will be partisan. And that is as it should be. Political parties and partisanship are not a corruption of our best civic ideals but rather a reflection of them.

Sources

Examples of public ignorance were drawn from the following: Scott Althaus, Bryan Caplan, Jeffrey Friedman, Ilya Somin, and Nassim Taleb, "Roundtable 1: Public Ignorance: Rational, Irrational, or Inevitable?," *Critical Review*, 20:4, 423–444; Russell Hardin, "Ignorant Democracy," *Critical Review*, 18:1–3, 179–195; Ilya Somin, "Knowledge about Ignorance: New Directions in the Study of Political Information," *Critical Review*, 18:1–3, 255–78; and finally, Rick Shenkman, *Just How Stupid Are We: Facing the Truth about the American Voter* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

On standards in civic education, the Center for Civic Education has an inspiring, rich, and developed civics curriculum, along with a model set of national standards for every grade level; see www.civiced.org, or their *National Standards for Civics and Government* (ISBN 0-89818-155-0); also see their "We The People" program for students and teachers; judging from my own students who have done this program in high school, it is a stupendous success. Information on the National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exams, administered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, can be found at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/>; the results of the 2010 exam are now available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2010/2011466.asp>. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute has, in conjunction with the University of Connecticut's Department of Public Policy, undertaken numerous surveys of civic knowledge among college students and citizens generally; their alarming findings can be found at <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/>. States are constantly changing their standards for civics education, and it is difficult to find up-to-date information on all fifty states in one location. Although it is about ten years out of date, the National Alliance for Civic Education has some information, available at http://www.cived.net/req_guid.html; Professor Murray Dry's article in *PS: Political Science and Politics* from 1996 also gives a helpful account of the baseline for state requirements as they existed fifteen years ago. Professor William Galston of the Brookings Institution has issued superb overviews on civic education and civic knowledge over the past thirty years; see for instance, his "Civic Knowledge, Civic Education, and Civic Engagement: A Summary of Recent Research," in *International Journal of Public Administration*, 3:623–632 (2007); also see his "Civic Education and Political Participation," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 37, no. 2 (April 2004), pp. 263–66. Finally, David Souter's recollections can be found in, "The Independence of the Judiciary: Autobiographical Reflections," *The American Oxonian*, vol. xcvi, no. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 8–12.

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Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society

The Virtues of a Free Society Task Force examines the evolution of America's core values, how they are threatened, and what can be done to preserve them. The task force's aims are to identify the enduring virtues and values on which liberty depends; chart the changes in how Americans have practiced virtues and values over the course of our nation's history; assess the ability of contemporary associations and institutions—particularly schools, family, and religion—to sustain the necessary virtues; and discuss how society might nurture the virtues and values on which its liberty depends.

The core membership of this task force includes Peter Berkowitz (cochair), David Brady (cochair), Gerard V. Bradley, James W. Ceaser, William Damon, Robert P. George, Tod Lindberg, Harvey C. Mansfield, Russell Muirhead, Clifford Orwin, and Diana Schaub.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Task Force please visit us online at www.hoover.org/taskforces/virtues.

