



How Political Ignorance Threatens Democracy

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One of the pillars of a democratic society is that all members get an equal say in political decisions and policy. When it comes to public elections, you don't have to be a policy expert or have a Ph.D. in economics to have your voice heard.

In fact, elections may be one of the few times in America where everyone, no matter how wealthy, successful or educated, gets an equal say.

Unfortunately, too many Americans take for granted the tremendous responsibility of choosing the leaders of the most powerful country in the world.

Back in 2004, the CATO Institute's Ilya Somin wrote about the threat that ignorant voters pose to the U.S. democracy.

"An informed electorate is a prerequisite for democracy," Somin wrote. "If voters do not know what is going on in politics, they cannot rationally exercise control over government policy."

According to Somin, many American voters' understanding of critical issues is surface-level at best. This ignorance hurts the democracy in two ways.

First, lack of voter knowledge prevents the government from enacting the true will of the people in a meaningful way, which counters one of the major arguments for democratic government in the first place.

Second, voter ignorance opens the door for public manipulation and major policy mistakes resulting from politicians' need to appeal to a potentially irrational voting majority.

In other words, like it or not, the politicians and the policy in Washington is a direct reflection of the American voters. Ironically, American voters like to complain about Congress' incompetence, but it's American votes that keep Congress in office.

Somin points to recent National Election Survey (NES) results that show a large number of voters know very little about the candidates and their political positions. The NES is a series of 31 "quite basic" questions about political knowledge, such as which party controls the House of Representatives.

"The already low average knowledge scores on the 2000 NES conceal the existence of a large political knowledge underclass of 'know-nothings' who possess very little if any basic political knowledge," Somin wrote. He added that these political "know-nothings" represent up to 35 percent of American voters.

Somin concludes that ignorant voters don't seem to realize that they are the ultimate victims of their misinformed votes. If voters don't understand the true nature of political issues, they have no hope of controlling public policy and will continue to be manipulated by the political system.

In a very real sense, knowledge is power. In the internet age, there is no excuse for going to the polls in November without a clear understanding of the candidates and the issues. This November, make sure you don't fall into Somin's group of American "know-nothing" voters. Watch the debates. Read about the issues. Critically ask questions. And above all, carefully consider which candidates will act with your best interests in mind.