

# The Volokh Conspiracy

## *Public Ignorance About Paul Ryan*

Ilya Somin • August 11, 2012 3:05 pm

Political scientists John Sides and Lynn Vavreck have a [helpful post](#) summarizing survey data showing that most of the public knows little or nothing about newly selected GOP vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan:

A series of polls done by YouGov for the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project suggests that most people have never heard of Paul Ryan before today. In several polls since April 28, YouGov has asked a representative sample of 1,000 people if they have heard of Ryan and to rate him in terms of favorability. This gives us a large sample on which to base this analysis.

Over the last several months, roughly 43% of Americans report that they have never heard of Paul Ryan. In mid-July, 52% could not even make a guess as to whether Ryan was a member of the House, the Senate, was Secretary of State, or was a Governor (32% got it right). Republicans are more likely to know that Ryan was a member of the House—42% of Republicans knew this, compared to 29% of Democrats and 34% of independents.

The above polls may actually understate the true degree of ignorance about Ryan. Studies show that some people don't like to admit to pollsters that they don't know something; if presented with a multiple choice question like the one about Ryan's office, some ignorant respondents will guess rather than choose "don't know." In this case, random guessers had a 25% chance of getting the question right.

The degree of ignorance about Ryan is striking. Unlike Sarah Palin in 2008, Ryan is not a relative unknown catapulted onto the national scene for the first time by getting a VP nomination. He's been a major figure in national politics for several years now, and is the GOP's leading spokesman on budgetary and economic issues. That said, extensive public ignorance about Ryan is not surprising in light of [other data showing widespread ignorance](#) about a wide range of political leaders and policy issues. As I have pointed out many times, such [ignorance about politics is actually rational behavior for most voters](#), because there is so little chance that any one vote will actually affect the outcome of an election.

Obviously, Ryan's name recognition is going to rapidly increase now that he is the VP nominee. On the other hand, it is much less likely that a majority of voters will come to understand his budget and entitlement reform proposals – the ideas for which he is most famous. These are much more complicated than merely learning a name and job title.

Public ignorance about federal spending is [widespread](#). One of the challenges that Ryan faces in selling his entitlement reform proposals is that most Americans [don't realize how large a proportion of federal spending is devoted to these programs](#), and therefore don't understand that it is impossible to get the budget crisis under control without cutting back in this area.

UPDATE: For those interested, here is a recent [video on political ignorance and its implications for democracy](#) that I did for the Cato Institute in June.