

LETTERS

VOTING FOR DUMMIES

LARRY M. BARTELS'S ARTICLE provides a timely, comprehensive, and surprisingly entertaining summary of the immense political science literature on voting behavior ["The Irrational Electorate," Autumn '08]. As Bartels explains, the average American voter isn't particularly well informed; this isn't necessarily a problem, but there are reasons for concern.

Now that the election is over, it's time to start thinking about governing. And while political science has developed an arsenal of excellent research on citizens as voters, research on interest groups and civic associations that give voice to motivated citizens beyond the voting booth has become stale. Arguably the most impressive aspect of the 2008 presidential election was not the final vote tally, but the 13 million citizens who signed up online to support Barack Obama's campaign. What's next for this audience, this potential community? Should we give everyday citizens greater opportunities for input than the biennial march to their polling places?

America has never had, and never will have, a perfectly informed electorate. But the same technologies that enabled Obama's breathtaking electoral mobilization can multiply the venues available for citizen input. In her 2003 book *Diminished Democracy*,

Theda Skocpol points out that today's Washington interest groups replaced the civic associations of old in response to a government that stopped seeking input from any save the professional class of lobbyists. New communications technologies can lower the costs of engagement and make the political elite into a more porous, responsive network. And while this may not improve voters' information, it could result in a better-informed dialogue between the government and its citizens.

Dave Karpf

Research Fellow

Miller Center for Public Affairs

University of Virginia

Charlottesville, Va.

RICK SHENKMAN'S RECENT BOOK *Just How Stupid Are We?* reminds us how "grossly ignorant" voters are about many issues. Six in 10 young people are unable to find Iraq on a map, and people overestimate by a factor of 50 the percentage of the federal budget that is spent on foreign aid. According to Shenkman, politically involved Americans (for example, those who watch Bill O'Reilly or Jon Stewart, or listen to Rush Limbaugh) have more political knowledge than the average American, but still are more ignorant about many issues than we might hope.

This is all well known to political sci-

entists, and Shenkman does us all a service by presenting these findings so vividly to a broader audience.

But we have to be careful about studying trends in political knowledge without looking at broader trends in politics. In particular, the Democratic and Republican parties are further apart than they were 30 years ago on issues including abortion, the role of government in the economy, and war and peace. As Larry Bartels points out, partisanship is a shortcut that we use in our voting decisions, but many voters misperceive what the parties represent.

Voters, even if individually ignorant, can still vote somewhat coherently. People have clear enough ideologies that they will vote for the party that better represents their goals. Remember, we're voting for people to run the government and make these choices for us. All we need to do as voters is choose between candidates in the primary and general elections.

Bartels makes the case that it is reasonable for voters to make their decisions based on partial information, delegating the actual policy decisions to the politicians they elect. But at the same time, elections can be determined by short-term economic conditions, which influence the voters in the middle to go one way or another. In the end, it's not really clear in what ways outcomes would be better if voters were better informed. As many people have pointed out over the years, politicians are more politically informed than (most) voters, but they don't always make good

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decisions. Voting provides a feedback mechanism, but it's pretty crude.

Andrew Gelman

*Professor, Statistics and Political Science
Columbia University
New York, N.Y.*

PUNDITS COMPLAIN THAT VOTING behavior is "irrational," but it's possible that the decisions of voters simply don't conform to their critics' view of the world. In the 2004 election, exit pollsters handed voters a list of reasons for their votes and asked them to pick one. The fifth of the electorate who picked the vague reason "moral values" overwhelmingly supported Bush, a statistic later used by pundits to support their preconceived image of mindless religious believers doing what their churches tell them. The real reasons for their votes might not have been on that list and were therefore invisible to pollsters.

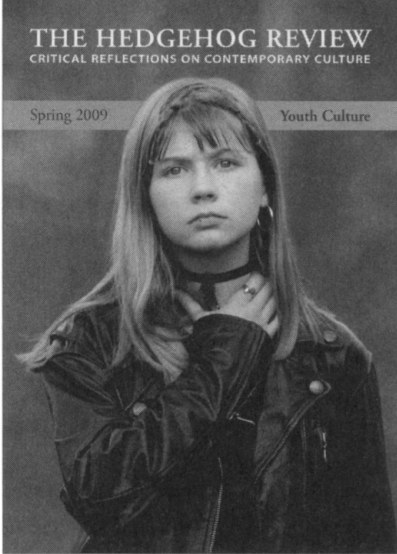
Charles Brown

Atlanta, Ga.

SURVEY SAYS . . .

SCOTT KEETER IS RIGHT TO DEFEND polling from its too numerous detractors ["Poll Power," Autumn '08]. New trends such as the refusal of some people to participate pose challenges to pollsters, but for the time being, polling provides a unique window into public opinion for political decision makers, who, despite their best efforts—and contrary to their own perceptions—are often insulated from the views of those they are elected to serve.

This lesson was seared into my consciousness years ago after I helped conduct the first political poll in a Latin American country that had recently emerged from decades of military rule. As part of the project, [Continued on page 9]



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