

By the People

— Becoming Informed

Citizens are not just required to participate or to exercise choice, they must also do so in an informed way. How can they be responsible citizens if they do not know the issues, if they do not know the differences between the candidates? Is it irresponsible to vote based on personality without any consideration for what candidates will do? This point of view sees making an informed choice about issues, policy positions and their consequences, as a necessary part of citizenship. Citizens have an obligation to become informed before they vote or participate. Only then will democracy produce a meaningful expression of the “will of the people.”

Americans currently score pretty low on levels of political knowledge, as demonstrated by many studies. In a 2007 study by the Pew Research Center, for example, only 49% could correctly identify Nancy Pelosi as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and only 37% knew that the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is a conservative. 45% were unable to correctly identify the approximate number of American military personnel killed so far in Iraq.

The media are often blamed for the lack of political knowledge among American citizens. American television news programs – especially local TV news, which is watched by

more people than watch the network newscasts – tend to focus on stories that are dramatic or sensational in order to appeal to a wider audience. Political stories are considered boring and garner little media attention. During major political campaigns, when it is harder to ignore politics completely, the media tend to focus on superficial topics such as the horse race (who’s ahead, who’s behind) and candidates’ personal lives (will a candidate’s husband or wife hurt or help their chances?). There is very little in-depth coverage of issues or candidates’ positions on them. Other countries place stricter public interest demands on television networks that use the public airwaves, and consequently have higher levels of political coverage. Some argue that one way to increase levels of political



information among citizens is to increase the public interest obligations of broadcasters. For example, many countries require their broadcasters to devote a minimum percentage of their airtime to public affairs programming, or to provide coverage of minority as well as majority viewpoints on political issues.

Because American campaigns are conducted almost entirely through the media, candidates are also very dependent on TV commercials to

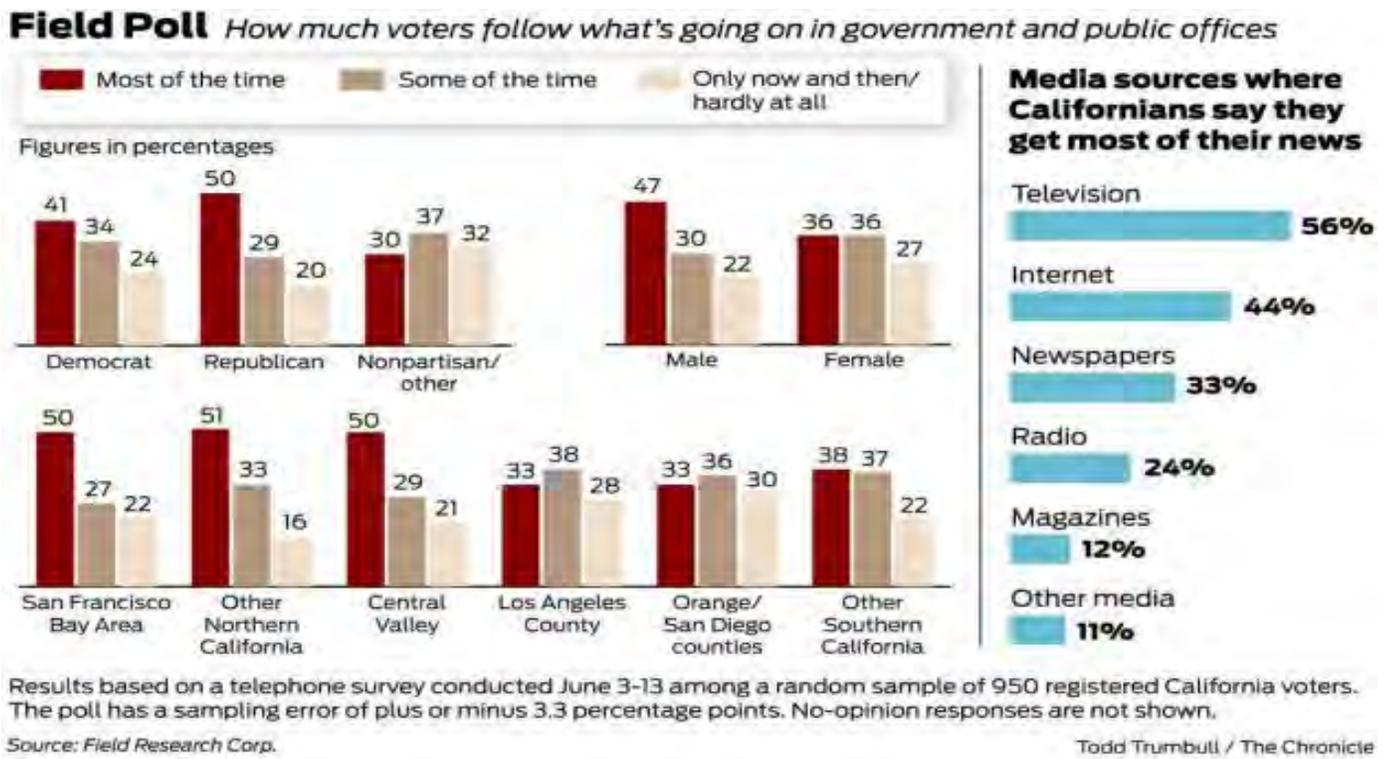
attract voters. Some argue that a 30-second TV spot is hardly an ideal format for candidates to share information about their policy positions. Instead, candidates aim to come up with ads that either attract voters through basic appeals (creating an image as a “family man,” for example) or that try to turn off an opponent’s supporters through the use of negative tactics (“my opponent is untrustworthy”). While these ads may provide some information, they fail to address the policy issues at hand. In many other democracies, candidates are given blocks of free airtime on television. This allows for presentations that focus on the issues than can be crammed into a 30-second slot, proponents say. It allows candidates to cover serious topics that are regarded as too boring by the news media.

Other people argue that the reason for low levels of political knowledge might not be the supply of information, but rather with unequal opportunities for citizens to take advantage of it.

These people note that there are differences between citizens with high levels of knowledge and those with low levels of knowledge. For example, wealthier people tend to be considerably more informed than poor people. One contributing factor to this might be that poor people are less likely to have internet access; 76% of people with an income over \$75,000 have a broadband connection at home,

while only 30% of those with an income under \$30,000 have one. There is now a huge quantity of political information available on the web (candidate websites listing issue positions and providing text of speeches, for example), but this is of no use to people who do not have internet access. One way to reduce the inequality of information between wealthy and poor people would be to provide all citizens with easy access to the internet.

Reformers have suggested that we need to find new ways of engaging all citizens and helping them learn about politics. One proposal is to



provide public funding for **non-partisan** voter information groups who aim to help voters become informed. There are, for example, organizations that gather information about candidates' issue positions, voting records, campaign financing, interest group support, and/or public statements. This information is in many cases made available on the web. Some organizations even offer a toll free phone number that citizens can call to get information about the candidates in their area. Providing public funding for these and other civic education initiatives would allow such efforts to become more widespread and to come up with

Non-Partisan: not associated with any political party

novel ways to share information with citizens.

There are others who argue that Americans' low levels of political knowledge don't matter and that voters can still make good decisions without having to learn in-depth about the candidates and their issue positions. These people argue that citizens can successfully approximate their "correct" voting decisions (i.e., the decisions they would take if they were fully informed) by using shortcuts; voters can rely on a candidate's party identification and on endorsements by public officials they trust, for example. In this view, citizens have plenty of information to make the correct voting decisions without ever needing to know who the Speaker of the House is.

Discussion Questions

- What sources do you use to get news about current events? How reliable do you think they are?
- What do you think about political advertisements? Do you think they help people make informed political decisions?
- Do you think it is necessary to know a politician's view on every issue in order to make an informed vote, or could you decide based on other factors? What would they be?

Some Proposals:

The chart below has some arguments for and against the following proposals. Have students research on their own or in groups to fill out their own charts.

	Approaches: Becoming Informed	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Increase opportunities for citizens to become informed by increasing public interest requirements of broadcasters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As television is a main source of political information for most citizens, increasing the amount of political coverage on television would thus be likely to increase political knowledge. Networks get to use the public airwaves and it is reasonable to expect them to contribute to the public good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Even if television networks increased their public interest programming, that would not guarantee that citizens would watch it. There is also no way to be sure that more coverage would be better coverage; more sensationalist coverage would not make citizens more informed on the issues.
Increase the opportunities for citizens to become informed by providing free air time to candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing free air time would enhance candidates' abilities to address substantive issues, since candidates cannot afford to buy big blocks and the 30-second spots that they are able to buy do not give enough time for them to address substantive topics. Free air time would erase some of the advantage enjoyed by candidates with more money. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no guarantee that candidates would use free airtime to cover more substantive topics; they could still choose to make superficial appeals or just to attack their opponents. There is also no guarantee that voters would watch longer political campaign ads/programs even if they were on TV.
Decrease the gap in political knowledge between wealthy and poor people by using public funding to make sure that all citizens have access to the internet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The internet provides an unparalleled opportunity for citizens to inform themselves about political issues from a wide variety of sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We cannot be sure that people use their publicly funded internet access to learn about politics.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More and more candidates and elected officials make information and services available online. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even if they do, the internet is full of unreliable sources and can make citizens more misinformed than informed.
<p>Provide public funding for non-partisan civic education groups that gather relevant political information and make it available to the citizens who need it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average citizens do not have time to dig for all the information they might need to make an informed choice between candidates. • Dedicated civic education groups can sift through multiple sources to come up with a comprehensive and balanced guide for citizens. • Citizens are much more likely to make use of this information if they can find it all in one place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would be difficult to guarantee that these groups were really non-partisan. • There is no guarantee that citizens would take advantage of it and public funding of such efforts would be a waste of taxpayer dollars.
<p>It is not necessary to increase opportunities for citizens to become informed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens learn as much about politics as they feel they need to know to make the right decisions for them. • There are many shortcuts that citizens can take to make effective decisions without studying the issues in-depth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are numerous examples of cases in which people seem to have voted against their own interests or against positions that they seem to hold. • Lack of information leaves voters vulnerable to manipulation by candidates who know how to use advertising techniques.



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