

# SP The uninformed



**Most Atlantans we've talked with can't name any of the candidates in the mayor's race. But some of them are voting anyway**

By Stephanie Ramage

It is late October when two interns and I set out to learn how much Atlantans know about their city's mayoral candidates. Having just seen the 39th candidate forum so far this year, I feel sure the city boasts an informed citizenry, that

Some of our respondents (left to right): Martha Nuckles, David Roberson and Rashid Ward, Thomas O'Neill, Eric Swymer, Donny Shaw and Sidney Walker, and Bob Brooks.  
STEPHANIE RAMAGE

## HOW TO GET INFORMED

Visit Campaign for Atlanta  
[www.campaignforatlanta.org](http://www.campaignforatlanta.org)

Lisa Borders  
[www.bordersforatlanta.com](http://www.bordersforatlanta.com)

Mary Norwood  
[www.marynorwoodformayor.com](http://www.marynorwoodformayor.com)

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must-have for every democratic society.

But I am wrong, as it turns out.

The Borders Books and Music store at Brookwood Place is busy with readers, shoppers and coffee drinkers as I look around for a likely respondent to The Sunday Paper's entirely informal survey of mayoral-race knowledge. In the aisle where books like "Java for Dummies" are located, Martha Nuckles is perched in a chair, with Clear wireless Internet literature peeking out of the pages she's reading like a bookmark.

She is a Clear representative, she tells me. She's white, 44 years old, and has lived in Atlanta since 1997.

She cannot name anyone in the mayor's race.

"I do not know what their names are, but I know what they stand for," she says. "The election's in January, right?"

In fact, it is on Nov. 3. She's interested in voting, so I ask if she feels she will recognize the candidates' names when she sees them on the ballot. She says she will.

"I'll just look them up online," she says.

She can think of two candidates, a man and a woman, who are always bickering.

"He keeps trying to drag crime into it," she says. "And he's going to hire all these people."

But she doesn't know their names.

Nuckles is far from an exception. I encounter the same blanks regarding the mayoral candidates over and over again. But many respondents say they're going to vote anyway. Of the 11 people I interview, only a couple can name any candidates at all. More than one, like Nuckles, plans to do some last-minute reading up on the candidates via Google before going to vote.

Is this really what we all hoped for when we thought the Internet would make us a better-informed, more engaged country? Are we more or less engaged now than we were 10 years ago, when the Web promised so much possibility for a more hands-on democracy?

James S. Fishkin, chairman of the Department of Communications at Stanford University, has just written a book about the problem that America in general—and Atlanta, in our case—is facing. In "When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation," Fishkin poses the idea that our problem is not so much any sort of inability to vote, or to voice what we think, it is actually our lack of thought.

Deliberation—a term that most Americans associate with jury duty—is discussing, arguing, and thinking. While the Internet is a quick and easy way to find information, it also muddies our democratic process, says Fishkin, in a way that was not as much the case before it became a household presence. There had been some of that with the advent of television, of course, but the Internet does something that TV doesn't, and other seemingly innocuous technologies like digital video recording pile on the consequences.

## “RATIONAL IGNORANCE”

“We'd like citizens to be informed,” Fishkin says in a phone interview with *The Sunday Paper*. “But individually we all have other things to do, even if it's shopping at Borders. We have jobs and families.”

He points to something social scientists call “rational ignorance,” a phenomenon that is compounded in larger populations. Consciously or not, people tend to think that one vote among millions is not even worth thinking about. In a city the size of Atlanta, which has about half a million residents, of the 200,000 registered to vote in the 2001 mayoral race—the last contested mayoral race—fewer than 83,000 voted. And that was not a bad turnout, about 45 percent.

It's not the turnout that's the problem, says Fishkin; there are voter drives for that. But they don't solve the dilemma he considers a bigger threat to democracy.

“Ironically, we have given the people the power to vote, but we have not found out how to get the people to really think about the power they have,” he says. “We have gone from James Madison's deliberative democracy to Madison Avenue's hype, the thing that sells soap and cigarettes.”

But Fishkin has what he thinks is a solution. He has found that when people are brought together in small groups where what they say is heard and matters—rather than approached by a journalist at Borders and put on the spot about a mayor's race—they tend to deliberate. They discuss, and they do argue, but the key to these gatherings, he says, is to make sure that people feel safe in saying what they think. Personal attacks and accusations should be discouraged (a caveat that pretty much rules out the comment boards of most blogs as places of democratic deliberation). He wants more institutions devoted to that kind of discourse.

As I talk with random Atlantans, if they know anything about the candidates, they often mix up platforms or have only vague notions of some image-related aspects of the mayor's race.

Bob Brooks, 57, who is also reading at Borders, can name two candidates, Councilwoman Mary Norwood and former state Sen. Kasim Reed, but he doesn't know that Reed plans to finance the hiring of 750 police officers with a three-millage-point tax increase the City Council passed in June. Although Reed has hammered on that tax increase in debate after debate, Brooks is under the impression that Reed plans to raise taxes to pay for the officers.

Brooks, a Realtor, lives in Virginia Highland, and he expresses disgust when he relates how it's possible to “buy a \$400,000 house and think you've gotten a pretty good deal, and then when the tax assessment comes you see that you're going to have to pay taxes on a house valued at \$600,000.”

Brooks has lived in Atlanta since the '70s, but he takes little interest in the city's politics. He feels shut out from them. Outside, David Roberson, 60, and Rashid Ward, 30, massage therapists at a nearby spa who both lived in Atlanta until recently, can come up with one name between them: “Kasim.”

If Reed is frustrated to learn how little impact his public appearances have had, he won't be alone. There are misconceptions about all the candidates. City Council President Lisa Borders, for the record, does not live in Buckhead. And Norwood is not merely cruising aimlessly around town in her '98 Buick Century, as one resident seemed to think when he said “There's this older lady who goes around to all the neighborhoods just talking to people.”

Downstairs at Borders, Jane Otomiri, 27, doesn't know any of the candidates' names, although she has lived in Buckhead for eight years.

At Ansley Mall, Donny Shaw, a 35 year-old hairdresser, who is enjoying a game of spades in the courtyard, says, “Oh, I know one. It's Shirley...Shirley?” He looks around for help, but his companions don't chime in.

“Franklin?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

Across the table, Sidney Walker comes to his aid: “She's not running,” says Walker. “She's the mayor now.”

Walker, 41, is a Realtor who lives in Brookhaven. He can name three of the candidates: Norwood, Borders and Reed. When I ask him what he thinks the major issues in the campaigns are, he answers “Crime is always an issue, and taxes.”

At the next table, Eric Swymer, a recent transplant from Massachusetts, can name the three front-runners. But native Atlantan Thomas O'Neill, 44, can't name any candidates at all, though he can cite issues: “I've dialed 911 and been put on hold. That's

outrageous. 'Please hold,' while people are being killed and assaulted and raped. I just read that we are spending \$3 million on a trolley! A trolley! We should be spending that on the police officers! And the city just spent \$30 million on covers for the water drains—it was actually on covers for the water meters, but I don't interrupt him—"and they don't fit and they had to spend more money on getting new covers. There is so much mismanagement."

Why doesn't he know who the candidates are? Maybe one of them could change all that.

"Because I do not care," he says. "I am moving to Ashville, North Carolina. I've had it with Atlanta."

Atlanta will not lose a population unit with O'Neill's departure, because nearby is a new Atlantan to replace him. His name is Scott Sheffield, he tells me, and he is panhandling. He just came into town from Tifton, Ga., the previous night. As he quietly but persistently begs for change, the spades-players pack up and leave. I ask him what he did in Tifton.

"Mostly, I stayed in trouble with the police," he says. He knows nothing about any mayor's race.

## **"THE ONLY DIVERSITY WE GET IS WHAT WE SEE IN THE MIRROR"**

Inside the Ansley Starbucks, two well-dressed men who do not want to be named in this story—one says he's a well-known author and the other is a prestigious academic—are meeting for coffee before attending a screening of the Campaign for Atlanta's videotaped mayoral forums. The CFA describes itself as a nonpartisan grassroots group formed early this year with the mission of helping to inform the citizenry about the mayoral candidates and issues.

The author is a member of another group called the Inquirer's Club that has looked into things and deliberated over them since it was founded in the 1930s. The author, who has lived in Atlanta for more than 70 years, can name all four mayoral race front-runners: Norwood, Borders, Reed, and Jesse Spikes. He also knows the issues, and he simply cannot believe that most people I have talked with are any less informed than he.

CFA co-founder Lynn L. Irvin says her organization hopes to combat the very lack of information our informal survey has found. The CFA has held mayoral forums, and its Web site offers more than two hours of videotaped interviews with each mayoral candidate—the footage the two men were heading off to view.

"I wanted to put information on the Internet so that people, if they were snacking or watching the kids, or whatever, could go to Web site and learn about the candidates," she says. "They don't have to get dressed and go anywhere."

She's troubled by our respondents.

"I tell people, 'Don't cast a vote if you don't know about the candidates,'" she says. "The most dangerous vote is the uninformed one."

Across town at Little Five Points, Sunday Paper intern Muriel Vega is walking her dog on the Freedom Parkway path when she bumps into small-business owner Ian Davis, 47, who has lived in Atlanta for 20 years. She asks him how many mayoral candidates he can name.

"You got me," he says. "I didn't even know the election was coming up."

He adds that he's not into politics.

"I don't feel like I need to get involved," he says. "All the candidates are always the same."

Another dog-walker, Linda Robertson, who has lived in Atlanta for five years and works as a bartender in Buckhead, can name one candidate.

"The only name I've heard is Mary Norwood, but I have no idea who she is or what she looks like," she says. She's heard the name because her customers mention it.

At the Starbucks down the street, while Vega is waiting in line, she strikes up a conversation with 21-year-old Emory University student Emily Jean, who has lived here four years.

"I think I've heard of a guy named Reed and some lady who looks like the current mayor, but I can't really think of their names," she says.

Over at Georgia State University, Sunday Paper intern Sarah Bakhtiari hands out a print version of the survey to her journalism class. Nearly all 16 respondents know at least three candidates, although one thinks Rudolph Giuliani is running for mayor.

The journalism class offers exactly the kind of deliberative environment Fishkin cites as being critical to maintaining an informed democracy. The students have discussed the race in a respectful environment.

The non-students could have used the Web, though, couldn't they? Not in the same way, says Fishkin. The Web actually creates a

peculiar problem. People tend to gravitate toward sources that agree with their pre-existing point of view, and because the Web allows us to pick and choose, we seldom choose to see the other side of issues, or the candidates who represent them.

“The only diversity we get is what we see in the mirror,” says Fishkin.

When there were fewer television stations, they might have made some effort to give opposing views, but today television channels are so numerous that they—like CNN and Fox—can simply stake out which viewpoint they want to represent and assume that viewers will find the other side elsewhere. With TiVo, viewers don’t even have to see campaign commercials.

At the public library on Ponce de Leon Avenue, Vega is interviewing 25 year-old Michael Duncan, one of her six respondents. He’s in the MBA program at GSU, and has lived in Atlanta all his life. He can name all four front-runners and, although he can’t think of his name, he also describes candidate Kyle Keyser. Duncan has even attended some of the mayoral forums.

Why?

“This is my city,” he says. “And if I don’t care, who’s going to?” **SP**