



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 18, 2019

Survey Demonstrates Political Ignorance of Much of the Public

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At the beginning of the 20th century, the progressive movement rejected the notion that government was something to be feared. Rather, they contended that government could, simply through the passing of laws, bring improvements to society. In this, they cast aside the fears of the Founding Generation that government was something to be feared — George Washington referred to government as a dangerous servant and a fearful master, while Thomas Jefferson argued that we cannot trust government, but should bind it with the chains of the Constitution.

In contrast to the Founders, the progressives assured the public that the ballot box would check any efforts for government to become tyrannical. They said that if more people could vote, and they could determine more things at the ballot box, government could be held in check.

A new survey indicates, however, that much of the general public is unaware of even who some of their key government officials are. And if they do not even know who their governor is, or who their congressman is, it is highly unlikely they know how politicians are governing, or how they are voting.

A StudyFinds survey of 346 adults nationally found that only 42 percent could identify their member of Congress. A larger number — 71 percent — were able to correctly name their governor, although less than half could recognize him or her if they saw the governor in person.

Californians surveyed were more likely to correctly identify a photo of *Seinfeld* creator Larry David or Kiefer Sutherland (who plays the president in a TV show) than who could identify Governor Gavin Newsom. One-third knew who Newsom was when they saw his photograph, while 40 percent knew Sutherland from a picture, with 35 percent correctly identifying David's photograph.

The age of the respondents produced significantly different levels of knowledge, with those 18-29 knowing the least. Only 56 percent of that age group could properly identify the name of their governor, while 68 percent of the 30-45 age group could, and 78 percent of those 45 or older could name their governor. Men were more likely to be able to name their governor (76 percent) as compared to women (66 percent).



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One mild surprise from the survey was that Democrats were slightly more likely to be able to identify the name of their state's governor (77 percent) than Republicans (74 percent). A mere 56 percent of self-identified Independents could successfully identify their governor, which confirms that if a person does not feel strongly enough about public matters to identify with a political party, they are less likely to be knowledgeable about the political scene. It can also be assumed that a self-identified "moderate" is less likely to have as much knowledge about what is going on in the political world than a person who identifies as a liberal or a conservative.

As more proposals are put forth to lower the voting age (usually to 16, but some advocate for an even lower voting age than that), it should be taken into consideration that this would only increase the number of ignorant persons eligible to vote. Fortunately, the less a person is informed about public affairs, the less likely he is to vote. But, again, those who would like to see the power and scope of government expanded tend to favor what the progressives favored a century ago — increasing the size of the electorate. This is why we hear inane "go vote" campaign efforts every election cycle.

Proposals to put more things up to the whims of the majority, such as our rights to free speech, our religious liberty, and our right to keep and bear arms, means the favoring of democracy over liberty. But as was expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the purpose of government is to make rights such as life, liberty, and property more secure, not to make sure the will of the majority prevails.

Choosing a governor or a member of Congress via the ballot box makes sense, just so long as a few principles are understood: One, we do not need generic "get out the vote" efforts, all designed to drive the apathetic and the ignorant to the polls. Second, it is imperative that it is well established that our property should not be left to a "vote" of the majority. After all, one definition of "democracy" could be two wolves and a sheep deciding what is for supper. If a majority votes to take wealth or rights away from a minority that does not make it morally acceptable.

Third, it is incumbent upon those of us who understand the proper role of government to do our best to educate those who do not understand the proper role of government. One organization that is dedicated to such an effort is The John Birch Society, the parent organization of this magazine.

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Steve Byas is a university professor of history and government, and author of four books, including History's Greatest Libels, an effort to defend certain historical figures, such as Thomas Jefferson, Joe McCarthy, Christopher Columbus, and Marie Antoinette from what he considers historical libel. He may be contacted at byassteve@yahoo.com



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