



An Idiot's Guide To Excluding Idiots From Voting by James Seidler

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In many ways, the history of the United States has been one of democratic progress. Over time, the restrictions determining which groups of people have the right to vote have been steadily lifted, so that the group of rich, white landowners that composed the electorate in our Founding Fathers' time has evolved into the diverse, veritable Babel of an electorate we have today. We have abandoned such restrictions on the right to vote as the Poll Tax and the Property Requirement, and have soundly rejected prejudiced provisions against women and minorities. These are all good things; our country is undoubtedly stronger and more representative because of it.

Still, at the risk of sounding like a Thurmonesque, reactionary throwback, I've begun to wonder if this liberalization has gone too far. What's brought about these doubts is a popular segment on the Tonight Show called "Jaywalking." In this segment, Jay Leno, accompanied by a small camera crew, takes to pedestrian areas to ask passerby basic questions about American culture. For example, Jay will ask something like, "The Presidency comprises which branch of government?" and the poor, trapped pedestrians will offer answers like "Ficus," or "Maple," and everyone watching at home will have a good laugh over what better people we are for having paid attention that day in eleventh grade history. Typically the show will continue on in this manner, and the general effect of watching "Jaywalking" is to chuckle at all the people who think F.D.R. freed the slaves or that George W. Bush was the Governor of Houston before becoming President.

It is only later that a thought hits that chills you to your very bones: these people can vote. These idiots have been entrusted with the sacred duty of making an informed decision on which candidate will do the better job protecting us from Al Qaeda and getting our economy back on track, and most of them can do a better job identifying the host of the New Family Feud than tell you who their Congressman is.

Of course, this is far from a new complaint. Many of the provisions of our Constitution, such as the much-maligned electoral college and the original provisions against the direct election of Senators, stem from fears about the idiocy of the masses. Still, it's disheartening to see some of the statistics on the subject. As a recent *New Yorker* article shows, "Seventy percent of Americans cannot name their senators or their Congressman," and "Forty-nine percent believe that the President has the power to suspend the Constitution." It adds:

Voters apparently do punish politicians for acts of God. In a paper written in 2004, the Princeton political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels estimated that "2.8 million people voted against Al Gore in 2000 because their states were too dry or too wet" as a consequence of that year's weather patterns. Achen and Bartels think that these voters cost Gore seven states, any one of which would have given him the election.

By any standard, this is not the makings of an informed electorate.

It appears obvious that things can't be left like this. But, what can be done? One alternative is a revised poll test, designed to avoid the unfair legalese of previous versions (i.e. black voters having to recite entire sections of the Constitution verbatim), but instead providing a more basic gauge of voter competence. A sample quiz could be as follows.

1. The primary role of the President is to:
 - A. Not have sex in the Oval Office
 - B. Bring God back into the White House
 - C. Oversee the execution of government.
(Hint: execution does not mean murder in this context.)
2. The Senate has:
 - A. Killer margarita nights on Fridays
 - B. One hundred members
 - C. A boxing ring to settle policy disputes
3. The guiding document of the Supreme Court is:
 - A. The Constitution
 - B. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus
 - C. The Idiot's Guide to Law and Lawyers
4. (Administered verbally): Quick, how many letters are in your first name?

A quiz of this sort would help to establish the sort of minimum threshold that should be required in order to select the most powerful office on earth. After all, if the dead aren't allowed to vote, why should the brain dead be?