



Perversities in the Ideal of the Informed Citizenry

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One of the most provocative suggestions in Schudson's *Good Citizen* is that the democratic ideal of "the informed citizen" requires modification. The essence of this venerable ideal is that citizens are obligated to keep themselves sufficiently informed about public affairs that they can judge candidates and issues on their substantive merits rather than on the basis of whim or partisanship. Schudson is by no means opposed to an informed citizenry. But he maintains that it is asking too much to expect citizens to follow public affairs in all of their particulars. He therefore wants to find a way for citizens to get the job done with less strain and effort. As he suggests:

We have contracted much of childhood education to public schools and expert teachers rather than to ourselves as parents. Parents still help with the homework, "enrich" their children's education with efforts of their own, and know how to assist or intervene in the school system when necessary. We have divided medical care among hospitals and physicians on the one hand, and households on the other, where our shelves are stocked with diet books, women's magazines, Dr. Spock, and an array of over-the-counter medicines.

We have arrived, in short, at a division of labor between expertise and self-help that gives credit to both. We do this in politics, too, but without having found a place in either popular rhetoric or democratic theory for the use of specialized knowledge. (p. 312)

Schudson's solution to the void in democratic rhetoric and theory is the idea of the "monitorial citizen." Rather than try to follow everything, the monitorial citizen scans the environment for events that require responses. For many purposes, merely scanning the headlines is sufficient. He proposes the following analogy:

Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else. (p. 311)

There are, to be sure, times when citizens should vigilantly gather information about politics. These would be instances when something has gone awry, as when, in the example of parents and children, a child is hurt and needs a parent's full attention to diagnose and deal with the problem. But in normal times, monitoring is enough.

Citizens, like parents, are entitled to multi-dimensional lives. More than most political intellectuals, Schudson acknowledges that there are things citizens might want to do with their time -- virtuous things -- besides study politics. As he observes:

Political theorists are eloquent about public life, the role of public intellectuals, the

necessity of a public sphere, and the virtues of the common good, but there is a time also to think further on the private life ... on the joys of appreciating a sunset, humming a tune, or listening to the quiet breathing of a sleeping child... (p. 312)

In proposing to modify the ideal of the informed citizen, Schudson challenges one of the icons of our political culture. This challenge is much needed. For decades, it has been conventional wisdom within the disciplines of economics, psychology, and decision sciences that the human mind has only limited capacity for fully informed and synoptic decision-making, and that most of the time it must make do with satisficing, heuristics, and similar effort-saving techniques. The argument that citizens have no rational motivation for making large investments in political information is both older and stronger. As one of my colleagues has observed, a voter is more likely to be mugged on the way to the polls than to individually affect the outcome of an election. But these perspectives have made essentially no impression on the ideal of the informed citizen, which continues to expect Americans to routinely ingest large volumes of basic information about subjects that are distant from their own lives and that they have no chance of affecting.

In this essay, I continue work on the project that Schudson has begun, that of reconsidering the ideal of the informed citizen. I undertake neither a comprehensive assault on the ideal nor the development of a full-fledged alternatives. Rather, I offer a series of loosely connected arguments, as follows:

- Highly informed citizens have many good democratic virtues, but they also tend to be rigid, moralistic, and partisan. It is not obvious that democracy would work better if more voters were like the most informed voters in the current system.
- Poorly informed voters are not so disengaged from national politics as many believe. Indeed, at least as regards presidential elections, poorly informed voters are more systematically responsive to the content of political campaigns than their better-informed counterparts. More than others, they reward incumbents who preside over strong national economies and punish those who do not. Poorly informed voters also more responsive to the ideological locations of the candidates. And finally, low information voters are more likely than other voters to have punished the Democratic party for the Korean and Vietnam wars. It is not obvious that democracy would work better if fewer voters were animated by the concerns of the least informed citizens.
- The ideal of the informed citizen, as brandished by generations of political intellectuals intent on creating a style of politics they themselves find congenial, has been a positive-turnoff to vast numbers of citizens. It has led to forms of politics and political communication that are stilted, overly rationalistic, and just plain dull. Under the spur of market competition, workaday journalists have developed a variety of literary devices -- horserace journalism, "feeding frenzies," and soft news --

that enliven coverage of public affairs. Rather than condemn this "infotainment" journalism, as political intellectuals almost universally do, they should recognize and seek to exploit its potential for increasing citizen involvement in politics.

- One approach to citizen monitoring of government is that of the police patrol -- constant, active, comprehensive scrutiny of government and public affairs. Another is that of the fire alarm -- reliance on warning bells and distress signals to direct one's attentions to problems.¹ If the ideal of the monitorial citizen is that people should pay the cost of becoming well-informed about politics only in the occasional situation when politics have gone awry, then politics should be organized on the fire alarm model. Thus, for example, elections should be pro forma affairs in which professional politicians are routinely returned to office unless there is a particular reason to believe they have misbehaved. In fact, this has been the trend of American national politics. Incumbents dominate Congressional politics; presidents generally win re-election as long as the economy is good and the country is at peace; elections for most local offices are dominated by party-insiders in the vast majority of cases. Rather than disparage these outcomes as a violation of the ideal of democracy, as many do, political intellectuals should accept them as consistent with the ideal of the monitorial citizen.

Generally speaking, the styles of politics associated with high levels of political information are not all they are cracked up to be. Politics might work as well or better if political intellectuals gave up the idea that citizens have an obligation to keep abreast of every important aspect of public life. This ideal is not only impossible but damaging in certain ways. Intellectuals should instead turn their capacious minds to finding ways in which the informational obligations of citizenship can be fulfilled with less effort and more pleasure. Recent trends toward "infotainment" news broadcasting and "fire alarm" political institutions are promising possibilities.

I. INFORMATION AND VIRTUE

The ideal of the informed citizen was a conscious reaction against the exuberant partisanship of the late 19th century. Political campaigns, as Schudson argues, were not occasions for considered vote decisions. Rather, in the ideal of citizenship that held sway at the time, campaigns were occasions for affirmation of one's loyalty as a partisan stalwart. To assist in that affirmation, parties conducted campaigns by means of partisan "spectacles" -- torchlight parades of fellow partisans, family picnics for party members, and silly competitive games, such as contests to see which party's picnic could lash together the biggest trees to form the tallest pole. These events were accompanied by speeches, but the speeches were in the spirit of the spectacles -- rabble-rousing spell-binders by professional orators rather

¹ Cite McCubbins and Schwartz

than intellectually serious discussions.

To combat this emotional style of politics, progressive reformers argued that politics ought to be about informed choice rather than partisan emotion... The voter [ought to keep up] with the news read less to bask in the glow of his party's achievements than to peruse reports on the various issues, politicians, and parties of the day ... All told the new model of politics increased the demands on the citizen. Those who would vote needed more information to cast a ballot than the loyal partisan of the nineteenth century. (p. 182, 185)

If, as Schudson writes, the idea of informed choice is to liberate voters from blind partisanship, it is far from obvious that it has succeeded. Indeed, most of the available evidence suggests its effect is just the opposite.

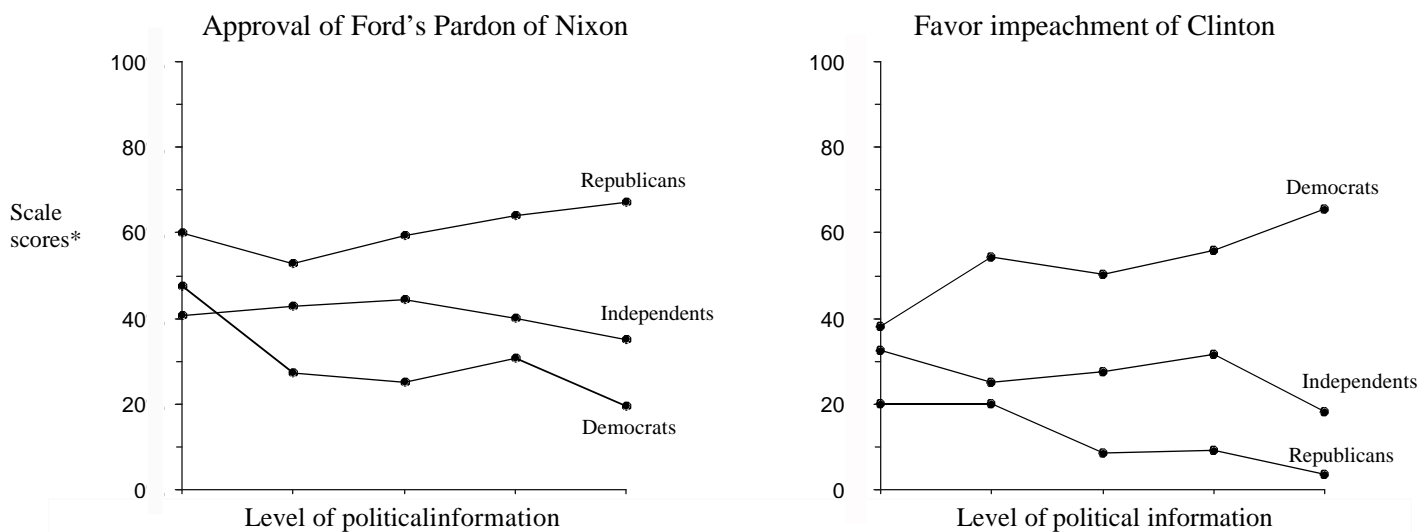
To see this, we need a measure of "blind partisanship." One way to get such a measure is to examine reactions to presidential scandal. If a partisan wishes to extract the last ounce of punishment from presidents of the other party but turns a blind eye toward the shortcomings of his own party's presidents, it can be taken as an indication of blind partisanship. Figure 1 presents evidence of such partisanship from the Watergate and Lewinsky scandals. As can be seen, Democrats and Republicans differ in their responses to the shortcomings of Presidents Nixon and Clinton: Democrats are more inclined to oppose a pardon for Nixon, thereby holding the door open for further punishment, but they oppose impeachment of a Democratic president over his transgressions. Republicans exhibit the reverse inclinations: They want to punish Clinton but not Nixon.

The point of Figure 1 is the effect of political information on these partisan judgments. As can be seen, increases in political information do not induce Democrats and Republicans to become less partisan, or more even-handed, in their reaction to presidential scandal. The effect is all in the other direction. Information is associated with higher levels of blind partisanship -- a greater tendency, that is, to be tough on the other party's president and easy on the president of one's own party.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This is a small indication that information increases rather than decreases partisanship, but it is evidence that is quite typical. The same pattern, for example, turns up when citizens are called upon to vote in presidential elections. Figure 2 provides a way of seeing this. Let us focus first on the left-hand panel. Each line on the graph shows the percent support for the Democratic candidate by level of political information for each of the 13 presidential elections from 1948 to 1996. The lines themselves were generated by means of bivariate regression within each election study. For example, the line labeled 1964 shows that, in that election, about 85 percent of low information voters chose the Democratic candidate in that election, Lyndon Johnson. By contrast, only about 50 percent of high information voters chose Johnson. But now look at the bottom line on this graph, which depicts vote trends in the 1972

Figure 1. *The effect of party and information on reaction to the scandals of Presidents Nixon and Clinton*



* Scores are means on scales that have values of 1 equal to approve/impeach, 0 equal disapprove/oppose impeachment, and .5 equal 'don't know.' The questions are v2166 and v534 in the 1974 and 1998 NES surveys. Information in 1974 is measured by interview rating of respondent's level of political information; information in 1998 is measured by a multi-item information test, re-scaled to the distribution of the 1974 measure. Party is measured by the standard NES question, with independent leaners counted as partisans.

Source: 1974 and 1998 National Election Study

election. Here we see that only about 35 percent of low information voters chose the Democratic candidate, George McGovern, whereas about 40 percent of high information voters did. Now, comparing results for 1964 and 1972, we can see that the swing between elections is far greater for low information voters (who swung from 85 percent Democratic to 35 percent Democratic) than for high information voters (who swung only from about 50 percent to about 40 percent). Generally speaking, this figure shows far more variation in the voting patterns of low information voters than high information voters. In Schudson's language, one could say there is more evidence of blind partisanship in the voting patterns of the highly informed (who do not distinguish much between a Goldwater or a McGovern) than in the voting patterns of the less informed (who see a big difference between such candidates).

The numbers below the left-hand graph show the standard deviation of the inter-election vote swing at each level of a five-point measure of political information. They confirm the visual impression of the graph that there is far more inter-election variability among low information voters than among high information ones.

A difficulty with this approach, however, is that it fails to distinguish secular change from inter-election swings. If, for example, low information voters were migrating steadily from one party to the other over a series of elections, we would be mistaken to describe the movement in terms of "inter-election change." Only if voters swing back and forth would we describe the change in such terms.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

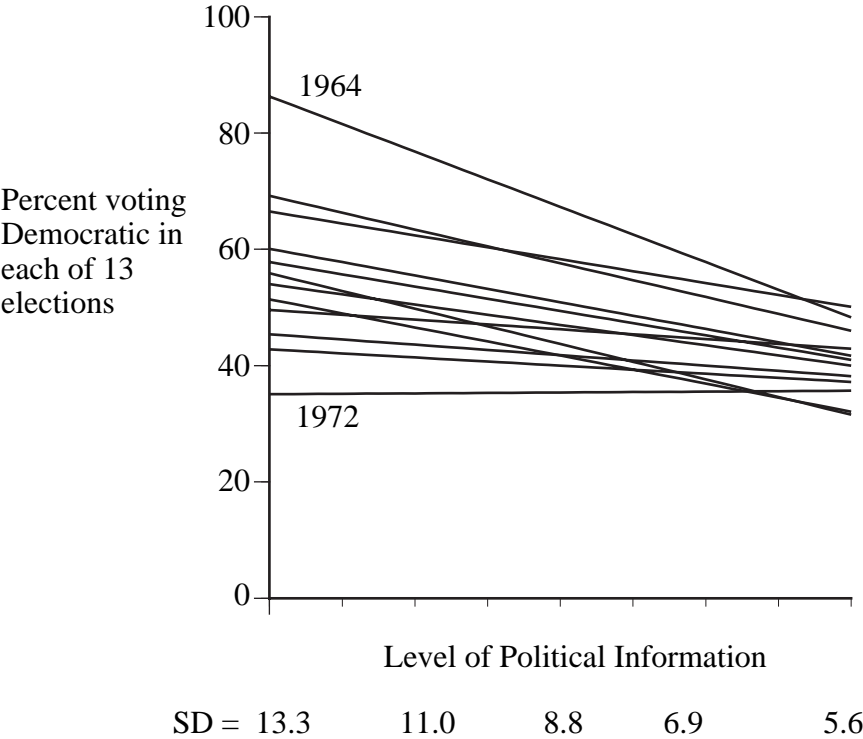
In light of this ambiguity, the graph on the right shows swings between pairs of adjacent elections, with each trend line formed by subtracting Democratic support in one election from Democratic support in the last and taking the absolute value. Although all 13 elections are involved in these calculations, there are only 12 lines, since there was no baseline from which to calculate swings in the earliest election study in 1948. Again, the standard deviations of the inter-election swings are shown at the bottom of the graph and show, as previously, that high information voters are far more stable in their partisan inclinations than low information ones.

There is one final source of spuriousness that needs to be ruled out. Since the data in Figure 2 are aggregate data, it is possible that they mask contrary individual-level trends. There are, however, two pairs of elections for which the same individuals were interviewed in large numbers in each contest. These are the 1956 and 1960 elections and the 1972 and 1976 elections. By calculating vote stability for the same individuals in these two pairs of elections, we can see whether the highly informed are really, as previous evidence suggests, more firmly attached to their preferred party.

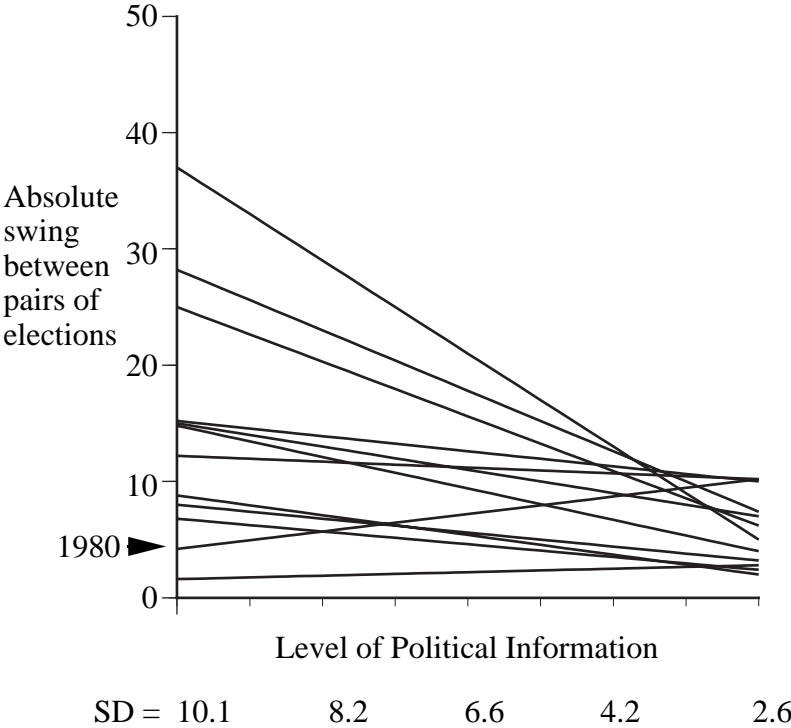
With this question in mind, then, the following table shows levels of inter-election change by level of political information in each of these election pairs:

Figure 2. Information and the Stability of Vote Preference, 1948 -1996

A. Democratic vote by information



B. Inter-election vote swing by information



Source : CPS/NES studies
n=14,295

	Political Information Quintiles				
	1	2	3	4	5
Percent who vote for different parties in each pair of elections:					
1956 and 1960	31% (156)	27 (141)	25 (156)	13 (184)	15 (152)
1972 and 1976	33 (140)	35 (226)	28 (125)	21 (216)	14 (95)

Note: Main cell entries are percent of individuals who vote for different party in each pair of elections. Number of cases in each cell is shown in parentheses. Based on 1956-60 and 1972-76 National Election Study panel surveys.

As can be seen, the results bear out the previous analyses: The most informed voters are notably more loyal to their parties than the least informed. Information does not relax the bonds of partisanship; it seems, rather, to strengthen them.

In sum, the Progressive reformers were not just wrong about the effects of political information. They got the story actually backwards. Which raises the question: As close observers of politics, as the leading political intellectuals of their day, how could they be so wrong?

The answer, I think, is fairly obvious: They themselves were highly informed about politics, and as mugwumps in the late 19th century and Progressive insurgents in the early 20th century, they were personally independent of parties. Like many others, they assumed that what was true of themselves was universally true: More information would induce *everyone* to greater independence from the parties.

Yet if the Progressive reformers could be brought back and given the opportunity to reflect upon the data I have just presented, I doubt they be much daunted. They would simply invent a new story to explain why the more politically informed people, such as themselves, remain more politically virtuous. "Of course the uninformed are more changeable," they would probably assert. "That's because they don't know what they're doing. Instead of standing for principle, they are blown about by campaign hoopla and excitement." Political information, they might then conclude, must be increased, so that the ignorant can have some rational basis for stable participation in politics.

This is a view that would be congenial to the Framers, whose fear of fads and contagions among the democratic masses is well-known. It is also consistent with the views of the mid-20th century political scientists who first turned up the kind of evidence I have presented here and declared low information voters to be "floating voters" (Daudt, 1961). More recently, scholars have argued that poorly informed voters are unable to connect their policy preferences to the correct candidates (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1995) or stand up for their true interests (Bartels, 1997).

But the view of low information voters as "floating voters" incapable of rational political action may also be questioned. For, although low information voters are changeable, their changes are readily

explainable by standard rational choice arguments.

Consider the data in Figure 3. For the 13 presidential elections from 1948 to 1996, it shows the relationship between growth of the national economy -- as measured by percent change in Real Disposable Income -- and vote for the incumbent party. The relationship is shown separately for voters scoring in the bottom, middle, and top thirds of a measure of political information. Each point on each graph represents the pairing of a particular economic performance number with a particular election outcome. For example, the point labeled 64 in the left-hand graph shows results for low information voters in the 1964 election. In that election, change in Real Disposable Income was just above 4 percent and support for the incumbent party was just above 65 percent.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The key point to notice is that the regression lines summarizing the relationship between economic growth and vote for the incumbent are notably steeper -- actually, about three times steeper -- for low information voters than for high information voters. In other words, low information voters are about three times more sensitive to the economic record of the incumbent presidential party than are high income voters.

We saw earlier, in Figure 2, that low information voters are more changeable in their preferences than high information voters. Now, in Figure 3, we begin to see why: When the economy is good, they reward the incumbent party; when it is bad, they switch parties. High information voters, by contrast, tend to ignore economic performance in casting their ballots.

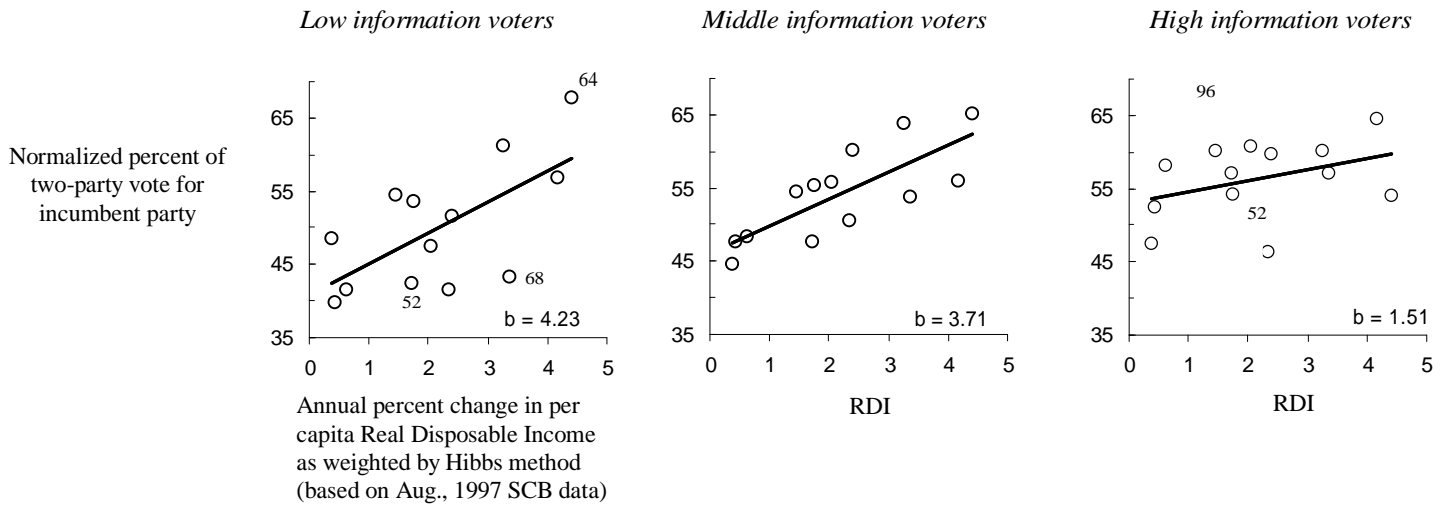
And it is not only economic performance that high information voters tend to downplay. In analyses too bulky to present here, I have shown that high information voters are less reactive to unsuccessful wars (in Korea and Vietnam). As hinted earlier, they are less responsive to the ideological coloration of the candidates. Low information voters, for their part, are quick to desert the incumbent party in cases of war, and highly sensitive to whether one of the candidates is extreme. (Systematic evidence for these propositions can be found in my paper, "Know-Nothing Voters in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1948 to 1996," which is available on my personal webpage.)

The mantra of low information voters is middle-of-the road version of "What have you done for me lately?" The mantra of high information voters is more like: "My party, regardless of how it has performed in office or what kind of ideologue it nominates."

It would be hard, I believe, to argue that either of these stances is especially more enlightened than the other. Each has its potential shortcomings, but each represents a plausible response to national politics. Neither the concerns of the most informed nor of the least informed citizens have an edge up in terms of political virtue.

II. PERNICIOUS EFFECTS OF THE IDEAL OF THE INFORMED CITIZEN

Figure 3. The effect of change in RDI on the incumbent party for different information groups



Note: Graphs constructed after mean partisanship of each information group was subtracted from vote total; this adjustment removes inter-election movement caused by shift in party of incumbent administration.

The ideal of the informed citizen was not taken seriously by the Framers of the Constitution. They claimed, as Schudson argues, to favor "informed popular watchfulness."

But "informed" meant only to be informed about the character of candidates for public office. Citizens were to be democratic clinicians who could spot a rash of tyranny in a candidate. At the polls ... they would turn back the ambitious and self-seeking. (p.72)

Character seems to have meant to the Framers some of the same things that it means today: Honesty, broadmindedness, and intelligence. But there were some additional elements, notably, social position and wealth. The Framers could readily imagine that persons lacking social position and wealth would compete for political office, but they could not easily imagine that such persons would exhibit sterling character traits. Social position and character were, in their minds, too closely linked. Hence, in idealizing character -- and in designing a national government that insulated most offices from direct election so as to insure the good character of those selected -- they were choosing an ideal that privileged themselves and persons of their class.

Few would deny that, whether intended for this purpose or not, the ideals emphasized by the Framers tended to skew politics in ways that favored their social class. Yet the same charge can be leveled against the late 19th century reformers who created the ideal of the informed citizen. By standard historical accounts, these reformers were the well-educated descendants of old American families who had become somewhat marginal in the society of their day. They were not heavily represented among the captains of the new industrial order, and they were generally unable to compete for political power in the rough-and-tumble political parties of the day. Their comparative advantage lay in words, ideas, expertise, and information -- precisely the qualities that, as they argued, ought to be the basis for citizen participation in politics.

Again, I am not disputing the importance of an informed citizenry. But it can be argued that the manner in which the Progressive reformers pursued this goal -- and the manner in which, for the most part, our political culture continues to pursue this goal -- reflects more closely the tastes and perhaps interests of political intellectuals than the tastes of ordinary citizens or the interests of the democracy.

Let us first consider one of the primary thrusts of Progressive reform, namely, its broadside attack on political parties. Parties in the late 19th century were, to be sure, corrupt in many ways. But they performed the valuable service of organizing mass participation in electoral politics, helping, among other things, to socialize tens of millions of immigrants to life in America. Political spectacles were, as noted earlier, an important vehicle by which the parties encouraged political participation.

When reformers sought to clean up party corruption, they did so in blunderbuss fashion, attacking not only corrupt practices but the forms of "spectacular politics" as well. In their place, the reformers urged "educational politics." The parties, they maintained, should not waste their resources on torchlight

parades, fireworks displays and pole-raising; they should instead devote them to pamphlets, mass-mailed position papers, and other written media. At the same time, presidential candidates began taking control of their own campaigns, relying on advertising experts, rather than partisan spectacles, to get their message out to the public.

The replacement of spectacular politics by educational and advertised politics was, according to historian Michael McGerr, a spectacular failure. "The new mix of [candidate] advertising and education failed to stir the people," writes McGerr. Although his evidence is not definitive, McGerr makes a plausible case that the advent of educational politics was an important contributor to the dramatic decline in voter turnout in the early 20th century. Turnout in presidential elections fell from roughly 80 to 85 percent in non-southern states in late 19th century to about 60 to 65 percent in the 1920s.² As Schudson put it, the anti-party reforms of the Progressive "left the public sphere not only cleansed but bleached of the colors that had made people care about it" (p. 155).

Journalism, too, underwent a cleansing. In his 1978 study, *Discovering the News*, Schudson referred to this change as "professionalism." Newspapers of the 19th century were, by all accounts, sensationalistic and partisan. The sensationalism arose from the pressures of competition: In every city of any size, there were a half-dozen or more papers competing on the street for sales, and few antics were beneath their dignity in the drive to boost circulation. At the same time, most papers were openly and brashly partisan. Though lacking a formal affiliation with parties, they functioned as a de facto arm of the parties -- boosting their candidates and lambasting those of the opposition, crowing about victories and wailing over defeats. "Bryan, Tutor of Anarchy" read a typical headline in the Chicago Tribune in the election of 1896. Going into more detail, another headline and story announced:

Hosts Gather At Great Feat
President's Position Correct,
McKinley Was Right
Bryan Denounced As Demagogue.

William J. Bryan, Democratic candidate for President, was denounced as worthy only of contempt, a dangerous man, a teacher of Anarchy, an advocate of the Gospel of Hate ... of wallowing at the feet of the Tammany King and the foe of law and order by the Rev. Robert B. McArthur this evening.³

By the end of the end of the 1920s, the older style of journalism was in sharp decline. To be sure, a tabloid press survived in the biggest cities, but most newspapers had gained respectability in what Walter Lippman, who was a leader in the movement to reform journalism, called a veritable "revolution."

² Vital Statistics on American Politics, Harold and Stanley, 5th edition, p. 78.

Writing in the *Yale Review* in 1931, Lippmann said:

The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism to-day than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type.⁴

The partisan press was likewise in sharp decline. Although a handful of conservative papers resisted, it became notably unfashionable for a newspaper to let its partisan colors show on the news pages. By the 1960s, even the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* had abandoned their traditional Republicanism.

These developments have been surprisingly understudied. Neither the timing of the changes nor their causes have been established. Yet it seems that they occurred somewhat after the changes in the forms of political campaigns described earlier and that, therefore, they may have also roughly coincided with the decline of mass participation in presidential politics noted earlier.

The new culture of professional journalism is, as has been observed, a culture of progressivism (Gans, 1980). It holds that political discourse is supposed to be about facts, issues, and information and that it is the responsibility of journalists to supply these essentials to their audience. As a leading print journalist, David Shaw, has written,

A good newspaper gives its customers -- its readers -- what the editors think they need to make intelligent decisions as citizens and consumers, even if they don't necessarily want it. To be sure, in their scramble to rebuild declining circulation in an increasingly competitive environment, newspapers have catered to perceived customer desires in recent years . . . But the better newspapers continue to feel a civic obligation to provide coverage about corporate corruption, government budgets, environmental regulation and legislative machinations, despite readers' complaints about "too much bad news" and "too many boring stories."⁵

Shaw is unusual among journalists, in that he believes journalists are force-feeding their audience things it does not really want. Most journalists take the opposite view -- that what citizens really want is what journalists wish to provide -- hard, clean information about how politics works so they can use it to

³ From Burgos, 1996.

⁴ Cited in Streckfess, p. 981.

⁵ "Journalism is a very different business -- Here's why; Newspapers routinely bite the hand that feeds them (the advertisers'), and give their customers (the readers) a product they don't want (bad or boring news)," David Shaw, Section V, p. 3, December 20, 1999.

make wise political decisions.

But Shaw is right. In a recent study, I compared the quality of journalism across a series of markets that vary by the level of competition among news providers. My expectation was that, if left to their own professional and Progressive impulses in non-competitive markets, journalists would supply a higher quotient of serious political information than the public wants. But as competition increases, my expectation was that journalists would be forced to meet the public at its level. I therefore hypothesized that competition among news providers would lead to lower quality news. By lower quality news, I meant news more concerned with crime, celebrity, and human interest than hard information about politics and public affairs.

The data supported this hypothesis. For each of ten paired comparisons in which the level of news competition varies between low and high, the quotient of serious political news was always lower when competition was higher. For example, national TV news in Britain, which until recently had a legal monopoly and still gets a large subsidy, is more serious than American network TV news, which competes with itself. But American newspapers, which tend to have monopolies in their local communities, tend to be better than the British national press, which compete with one another in a national market. U.S. network news was higher in quality in the 1960s and 70s, before the rise of competition from local TV news, than since. Local TV news in the U.S., which is by far the most competitive sector of the mainstream news business, is notoriously low in quality.⁶

There is no question but that the overall level of news competition in the U.S. has accelerated greatly in recent decades. In the 1950s, newspapers dominated the news business. In the 1960s, dominance shifted to network TV news, which drove afternoon newspapers out of business but left morning newspapers unscathed. More recently, the continuing growth of TV news -- in the form of local TV news, morning and evening news "magazines," entertainment and crime news shows -- has crowded every segment of the potential market for news, with the result that now even morning newspapers face significant competition from TV.

During this same period, there has been a general decline in news quality. Not only have newer news programs strongly tended to favor "soft" news, such as crime and human interest, over national and international politics; but traditional news outlets, including even the venerable *New York Times*, have been forced to match the competition. "In pursuit of circulation," as Diamond has written in this 1994 book on the *Times*, the paper "was willing to get down and scratch for the same kind of dirt that, in the past, it left to the city's rude tabloids" (p. 9).

⁶ "Market Competition and News Quality," paper delivered at 1999 Annual Meetings of American Political Science Association.

It seems obvious that the two trends -- the rise in news competition and the decline in news quality -- are linked. Yet many of our best journalists and political intellectuals have been reluctant to admit it. They lament the softening of news and the antics journalists use in their desperate attempts to hold onto market share, as if the poor characters and the weak wills of journalists themselves were responsible for the softening of news. Hence, when they propose remedies, they make reform suggestions that are, to my mind, exactly backwards.

Typical is the journalist Paul Taylor's proposal to elevate presidential campaign discourse. The decline of news quality has meant, in the context of presidential campaign coverage, less issue coverage, shorter candidate sound bites, and an increased emphasis on the "political horse-race." To remedy the resulting deficit in quality of campaign discourse, Taylor proposed giving large blocks of free TV time to the presidential candidates for uninterrupted discussion of issues. Taylor believed that the issue segments he proposed would both inform the citizenry and increase their interest in the political process.

The three biggest network news programs implemented Taylor's proposal, but it was nonetheless a bust. One problem that came up immediately was the danger that viewers would simply turn off the issue segments when they came on. To prevent this, reformers wanted the networks to "roadblock" viewers by airing their segments at the same time. It is odd that a reform designed, in part, to reduce popular alienation from politics would feel a need to resort to this kind of tactic. But the networks, which were reluctant to give away free segments to begin with, were even more reluctant to try to force viewers to watch them — no doubt because there was no way to "roadblock" viewers from fleeing to local news or entertainment programming.

As it turned out, the candidates were hardly more enthusiastic about the free time than were the networks or the citizenry. Bob Dole failed to use all of the time allotted him, and Bill Clinton, though long-winded enough to fill up any vacuum in the airways, simply recited campaign boilerplate. Citizens, for their part, mostly failed to notice or care about the experiment, and no one has seriously suggested that it had any effect on the campaign, even as a good example.⁷ This matches the experience in Great Britain, where the parties routinely fail to use all the free time they are allowed by law, and also the experience in Israel, where there is a joke that, when the politicians come on TV to use their free time for issue discussion, water pressure throughout the country falls as citizens rush to take bathroom breaks.

Academics are, as much as anyone, imbued with the Progressive ideal of the informed citizen. Hence, studies of mass communication routinely urge journalists to increase the level of issue coverage and to decrease reliance on reportorial devices, such as horserace coverage and emphasis on controversy, that enliven the news. The closer any news story gets to entertainment, the more likely it is to be

⁷ "Free TV-Time Experiment Wins Support, if Not Viewers," Lawrie Mifflin, *New York Times*, whenever.

criticized.

One story that was highly entertaining -- and also roundly criticized by political intellectuals and media analysts -- was Vice-president Dan Quayle's attack on television character Murphy Brown in the 1992 campaign over the character's decision to have a child out of wedlock. I suggest that this story is exactly the kind of story that is necessary to promote popular engagement in politics. It was not fact-packed and informationally turgid, as envisioned by the ideal of the informed citizen. But the story was nonetheless both serious and informative. Let me explain.

The Murphy Brown story broke in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles as politicians, journalists, and political intellectuals were pondering the significance of the event for national politics. The response of Quayle was to link the disturbances to the breakdown of traditional two-parent families in many black neighborhoods. As Quayle commented:

It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown -- a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman -- mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another lifestyle choice.

The charge provoked a media frenzy. "Quayle to Murphy Brown: You Tramp" proclaimed the New York *Daily News*. "Murphy has a Baby ... Quayle has a Cow," announced the Philadelphia *Daily News*. All three network news programs covered the story for the next two days, and two of the networks offered three-day coverage.

The TV coverage was a blend of many elements -- analysis of the Bush campaign's strategy in raising the issue, the effect of Quayle's remarks on voters, comedian David Letterman's take on the story, and soundbite reactions of everyone from the Rev. Jesse Jackson to Gary Bauer of the Family Values Institute. By the second and third day of the coverage, TV journalists were dissecting the Bush administration's family values programs, and Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was firing back with a program of his own. Two shows presented statistics on trends in out-of-wedlock births, and one did a sequence on Elizabeth Walker, a real-life TV news anchor who, like the fictional TV anchor Murphy Brown, had borne a child out of wedlock. Another program framed a news segment with a white mother who was on welfare and single.

Nor did the story end after three days of media frenzy. Several months later, when the Murphy Brown show won an Emmy at Hollywood ceremonies, Quayle arranged for television cameras to film him watching the award ceremony with a group of welfare mothers. And, when the Murphy Brown show returned to the air following the summer break, it made clear its unflattering opinion of the Vice-president.

The highlight of all this attention to Quayle's comment was, in my opinion, a pair of dueling sound bites from individuals who looked like they had been called up from central casting to symbolically stand for the competing arguments. Said young white housewife standing in the parking lot of a suburban church: "I think God wanted us to be together, as man and wife, so that we could raise children." "My mother raises me fine, you know -- as any -- as good as any married couple could," said a young black girl, as if in reply.⁸

Taken as a whole, the coverage was notable for its scattershot approach. For example, interposed between the sound-bites of the white housewife and the young black girl was a statement by Political Analyst Kevin Philips that "I think family values is clearly being moved out as a new Republican campaign theme." Thus, the coverage did not so much focus on *the* issue of family values, as construct a fast-moving mosaic of themes relating to campaign strategy, political disagreement, human lives and problems, and the national problems of poverty, out-of-wedlock birth and racial inequality.

This is not how the Progressive reformers who created the ideal of the informed citizen believed that political campaigns should be conducted, and it is also not how the heirs of their tradition believe that they should be conducted. Commenting on the Murphy Brown coverage in his important study, *Out of Order*, Thomas Patterson has written:

It is not simply that the press neglects issues in favor of the strategic game; issues, even when covered, are subordinated to the drama of the conflict generated between the opposing sides. In this sense, the press "depoliticizes" issues, treating them more as election ritual than as objects of serious debate. Quayle's claims about the social consequences of the breakdown of the American family were not seriously examined. Murphy Brown was nearly the whole story. (p. 137)

Certainly, Patterson makes at least one strong point here. Much of the coverage resembled a carnival parade of freaks -- not actually so different from a torchlight parade -- more than a college debate. Thus, if Patterson said there was no *systematic* examination of the issue raised by Quayle, he would have been on solid ground. But only by the unrealistic intellectual standards of the Progressive ideal of the informed citizen was media examination of the Murphy Brown story lacking in seriousness. Murphy Brown, as politicized by Quayle's attack, made the family values debate accessible to Americans in a way that traditional political rhetoric did not. Once that happened, reporters took a wholly serious leap into the fray -- prompting partisan comment by various figures, examining the situations of real-life single mothers, reviewing the candidate's programs on family values, and even citing a few statistics. The

⁸ These quotes are from the CBS coverage on the second day of the story, June xx.

juxtaposition of competing symbols, as in the case of the black girl and the white housewife, was, as I have suggested, the highlight of this coverage. It is by no means obvious that the masses of ordinary voters learn less from such symbolic juxtapositions than they do from more formal forms of intellectual exchange.

Other innovations of the new media culture have been, in my opinion, similarly misunderstood by political intellectuals. One is horse-race journalism. Horserace journalism is, first of all, coverage that focuses on the element of organized competition. Millions of Americans find competition per se to be entertaining and, despite the obnoxious frequency of commercial interruption, spend many leisure hours watching an athletic version of it on TV. Given this, horserace coverage may function in the same way that spectacular politics once did — as a magnet to attract the interest of citizens, after which citizens may stay around and learn something, like hearing a speech at the end of a parade.

Moreover, the particular horserace coverage that citizens get from presidential campaigns is laced with substantive political information. Thus, voters routinely hear that as part of a strategy to woo this or that group, a candidate is changing his program on this or adopting a new proposal on that. Or voters may hear that a candidate's misstatement has angered some particular group, thus lessening the candidate's chances in the election. For some critics of the media, this is bad, since it makes politics seem a mere game. Politics, they believe, should be serious and edifying. Evidence for this view, however, is both limited and inconclusive.⁹ What would be worse, in any case, would be if citizens got no news at all of the substance of politics.¹⁰

In a somewhat unusual convergence of research traditions, both political scientists and economists have agreed that citizens do and should pay attention to what political groups and group leaders are saying, using this information as a cue for making up their own minds.¹¹ Thus, horserace stories about what "angry white males," "soccer moms," "generation X," and other momentary distillations of sentiment may not only function as characters in a symbolic debate, as I suggested earlier, but also provide voters with useful cues about reference group opinion.

⁹ Cappella and Jamieson (1997) find that when experimental subjects absorbed news about a mayoral campaign in a city other than their own, they were less interested and more alienated when the news was framed in horserace terms. But this was a case in which, by design, the experimental subjects had no psychological involvement in the issue, as if hearing about a baseball game about two non-descript teams from another place. When, in another study, experimental subjects took in news about President Clinton's health care reform package, an issue that had personal relevance to many citizens, the horserace frame did not diminish citizen interest.

¹⁰ It is sometimes argued that horserace coverage drives citizens away from politics. But why would a news organization drive citizens away from one of its most important products, namely, coverage of politics?

¹¹ On the political science side, see especially Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; on the economics side, see Downs, 1957, p. xx.

Again, horserace coverage may not be anyone's ideal format for conveying information about the substance of elections. But in a variety of poorly appreciated ways, horserace coverage may provide voters with a palatable mix of entertainment, information, debate, and politically useful cues.

The small number of citizens who want sustained political news in the spirit of the ideal of the informed citizen can always tune in to the MacNeil-Lehr Newshour. But the audience of the *Newshour* is one million per night and falling. For the vast bulk of the citizenry, Murphy Brown and horse-race journalism are what good political coverage looks like -- the modern day equivalent of a torchlight parade followed by a speech. The response of political intellectuals should not be to criticize the new journalistic forms, but to look for ways to achieve similar results on a broader scale.

Yet, notwithstanding Schudson's argument with the ideal of the informed citizen, we should not look to intellectuals for innovations aimed at making politics more accessible. Their instincts, even though generally well-intentioned, tend to run in the other direction. Intellectuals, for example, did not create the last great political innovation, the modern political party. Rather, as is well known, the political intellectuals of the late 18th and early 19th centuries opposed parties for all sorts of high-minded reasons, just as they now oppose the newer forms of news broadcasting for the same sorts of reasons. Hence, as in the case of parties, creative impulses are most likely to arise from individuals who are actually dependent on the support of ordinary citizens -- workaday journalists and politicians. In other words, the same sorts of people who brought us Murphy Brown.

Let me restate the set of arguments I have been making:

- The Progressive movement aimed to cleanse and rationalize the political process. One element was the ideal of the informed citizen, which emphasized informed deliberation over party loyalty. Another element was an attack on political parties, including the "spectacular" means by which they sought to mobilize mass support.
- The attack on parties was successful and has been plausibly linked with a decline in mass participation in politics.
- The ideal of the informed citizen achieved some success through inclusion in the culture of journalism, which, as a result, stresses the importance of rational analysis and information in the political sphere. Yet this ideal lacks mass appeal and can survive in high form only in media that are insulated from market competition.
- Owing to their attachment to the ideals of the Progressive movement, political intellectuals have been inappropriately critical of the journalistic devices that have been invented to hold mass audiences.

The decline of spectacular politics and of the party press have perhaps served democratic values in

certain ways. And yet their demise has created a hole in our political culture that the ideal of the informed citizen has failed to fill. The masses of ordinary citizens require more than information and dispassionate analysis to remain deeply involved in politics. They require some of the spirit of the old torchlight parade, which encouraged involvement in politics by making it fun.

Insofar as the ideal of the informed citizen has generally discouraged the idea that politics ought to be fun and inspired attacks on specific forms of politics, from the torchlight parade to *Murphy Brown*, that were fun, it has had a pernicious effect on politics. It is an ideal in need of reformulation.

III. DEMOCRACY FOR THE MONITORIAL CITIZEN

A recent story in the *New York Times* begins with a vignette of a potentially strong Congressional candidate who may sit out the upcoming elections in order to devote more time to his family. It then continues:

In a year like 2000, when the two parties are locked in a furious battle for control of the House, the civics books would suggest that candidates... would be lining up to join the fray. In fact ... [f]or all the talk about the battle for the House, perhaps as few as a tenth of the Congressional districts will have truly competitive races, with a fair contest of ideas and agendas.

In most districts, held by well-financed incumbents, there will probably not be much of a battle at all, many political professionals say.

"I think the dirty little secret is out, that 94 percent of all incumbents win," said Charles Cook, a longtime analyst of Congressional campaigns who publishes a political newsletter.

It is a paradox for what was intended by the framers as "the people's house," so responsive and closely attuned to the voters that it needed the Senate to keep it in check.¹²

In the Progressive ideal of democracy, citizens should take each election as an opportunity to examine the record of their representative in order to decide whether she or he deserves another term. If this fails to occur, it is, as the news story informs us, a surprising violation of civics book notions of democracy, a paradox, and a "dirty little secret."

But from the standpoint of the ideal of the monitorial citizen, a state of affairs in which 90 percent of incumbents do not face serious challenges is an ideal fulfilled. For one thing, most citizens are spared the effort of making of having to check closely into what their representative has been doing. The primary

work is instead done by party financiers and potential candidates, who decide whether it is worth their effort to make a challenge. If they decide that, even after giving their best shot, the incumbent could not be beaten, everyone -- the citizenry, the candidates, and the financial king pins -- is spared the effort.

A second point of normative interest is that 90 percent of representatives are apparently doing a good enough job that they could win re-election even if strongly challenged. Surely there is at least some good news for democracy when, in the sincere opinion of potential adversaries, 90 percent of sitting representatives are doing a sufficiently good job that no one could beat them.

It is possible that incumbent members of Congress have simply become more efficient than ever before at hoodwinking their constituents. But in the previous day's *New York Times*, a long-time political correspondent writes,

Any veteran observer of Congress... would say that the typical member today is better educated and harder-working than whoever held the seat 35 years ago, and at the same time less likely to be a drunk or a womanizer, or to take bribes. Yet consumers of a press that rarely covered those weaknesses before and regularly covers them now have an opposite set of impressions.¹³

If these two sets of newspaper accounts are taken as true, the problem is not with the political system or even with the media. It is with a political ideal that suggests citizens ought to subject every representative to close scrutiny and a potentially tight election every time out of the box. A virtue of Schudson's ideal of the monitorial citizen is that it does not make this wasteful suggestion.

¹² "Willing Contenders at a Premium In Fierce Fight to Rule Congress," Robin Toner, January 3, 2000, p. A1.

¹³ "Testing Politics: Does It Work? Should it Be Fixed?" Adam Clymer, January 2, 2000, p. A1.