

What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

What should Americans know about their government? Should they know how liberals and conservatives differ, the number of politicians in the Senate and House of Representatives, or that it takes 290 Representatives and 67 Senators to overrule a presidential veto? The bitter truth is that a miniscule number of Americans know these facts. Only 1 in 3 Americans could name the three branches of government according to a 2009 Annenberg Foundation survey. A survey conducted by Newsweek with 1000 Americans showed that about 38% of citizens are undeserving of their status due to lack of knowledge needed to pass the citizenship exam. This is frightening as lack of knowledge could lead to poor political decision making by the general public. To properly participate in the American political system, one has to be able to comprehend it first.

Learning about the United State's complex governmental system can seem a daunting task; but a little knowledge goes a long way. I learned about our government through literature; by reading sections of the Federalist Papers. At around 1100 pages, reading the entire manuscript would extract a groan from even the most avid of readers. Though it wasn't designed for the Federal constitutional Republic that America is today, the information is quite accurate. Reading is a splendid way of learning about government, if not the fastest, and learning through media is another great method. Watching TV, reading the newspaper and going online to learn new things about our government are sure fire ways to broaden one's horizons. Although reading and media are sound ways of acquiring knowledge about the United States' bureaucracy, the most enjoyable method is by asking an adult who you respect; it is surprising how much they know. Having political discussions with friends and family can also

help to enhance your political views. Yet it is important to keep your thoughts independent from those of others. Information acquired should be used to create your own political standing, not brainwash you.

As a citizen of the United States, it is critical to take advantage of your rights and exercise your political opinion by voting. No matter if it's voting for president, state representative or state governor, the choices made at the voting booth change the positions of leadership in our nation, for better or worse. It is astonishing how many people don't utilize their power in the political machine yet blame others when the country is heading down an unfavorable course. According to CNN, 126.5-128.5 million voters submitted ballots in the 2008 Presidential Election; the highest turnout of voters for an American election in history. But that was only 126 million out of approximately 242 million eligible voters. That means 48% of eligible voters didn't vote. If all eligible voters had voted, the outcome of the election could have differed. Although voting makes vast political and social differences for our country, there are many other ways to be a part of this process. Going to political meetings, peacefully protesting and just being informed about the state of our union are but a few ways to stay engaged in government proceedings.

Communicating with public officials not only provides a vehicle for your voice and opinions to be heard but also keeps you in the political loop. Your influence can bring about changes sought in the course your community or even the country takes. You can contact your national and local representatives through email, phone calls or other means, but writing letters is probably the most direct way to reach them. Emails can be overlooked and phone calls can be forgotten and have little impact. On the other hand, letters are usually read by

politicians, especially local ones. Letters also tend to have a greater emotional impact. The best way to get hold of a political leader through the writing of a letter is by sending it not only to him or her, but also to their close associates. This increases the chances that the letter is read and hopefully receives a response. The voices and suggestions of the public will be considered for a better tomorrow only if they are conveyed to the politicians.

By arming themselves with a cache of knowledge, participating in the political process and making their voices heard, Americans can make a significant difference in America's future. If everyone was to fulfill their patriotic duty and be politically active, the goals and values of the American populace would more accurately be reflected in the administration and the direction in which the government was heading. Ideally, everyone would be satisfied and the conflict between government and citizen would abate, but that will take hard work and commitment from both politicians and the people of this great nation.

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