Young Americans' Indifference to Media Coverage of Public Affairs
Author(s): Stephen Earl Bennett
Source: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp. 535-541
Published by: American Political Science Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/420613
Accessed: 12/10/2011 02:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

American Political Science Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PS: Political Science and Politics.*

http://www.jstor.org

Young Americans' Indifference to Media Coverage of Public Affairs

Stephen Earl Bennett, *University of Cincinnati*

Although young Americans are normally less engaged in politics than their elders (Converse with Niemi 1971), today's youth are more withdrawn from public affairs than earlier birth cohorts were when they were young (Bennett 1997). One indicator of youthful disregard for politics is their avoidance of exposure to mass media coverage of public affairs (Pew Center 1996, 1997; *Times Mirror* Center 1990). Polls conducted during the 1990s indicate that adults under 30 are considerably less likely than those over 30 to read newspapers and to watch TV newscasts, and slightly less inclined to listen to the news on radio. The Pew Research Center's April 1996 poll, for example, found that 31% of persons under 30 claimed to have read a newspaper the day before they were interviewed (compared with 76% of individuals over 30), 45% of young people said they had watched a TV news show yesterday (as did 86% of persons over 30), and 37% of the young had listened to the news on radio yesterday (versus 56% of people over 30).[1]

Stephen Earl Bennett *is a Fellow of the Center for the Study of Democratic Citizenship at the University of Cincinnati. He studies American political behavior, particularly public opinion and political communication. He is the author of* Apathy in America, 1960-1984 *(1986) and, with Linda L. Bennett, the coauthor of* Living with Leviathan: Americans Coming to Terms with Big Government *(1990). With Stephen C. Craig, Bennett recently coedited* After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X *(1997). Bennett is currently working on the impact of Americans' exposure to mass media on democratic citizenship, and is analyzing Americans' attitudes about government and politicians between 1945 and 1965.*

The young are also less likely than older persons to have dispositions that motivate them to use the news media. The Pew Center's February 1997 poll shows, for example, that individuals under 30 are less likely than those over 30 to say they look forward to reading a daily newspaper (12% vs. 32%) and to report enjoying TV newscasts (14% vs. 30%).

This is a study of young adults' disconnection from mass media coverage of public affairs. ("Young adults" are aged 18 to 29.[2]) This article describes two facets of youthful avoidance of the media's political coverage: (1) level of exposure to print and electronic news and entertainment media, and (2) amount of attention to different kinds of media stories. After a brief analysis of the factors affecting youthful avoidance of political media, the article explores a significant consequence of youthful disconnection from media coverage of public affairs: ignorance of contemporary American politics. The data come from polls conducted for the Pew Research Center for The People and The Press in April 1996 and February 1997, and the 1996 National Election Study.[3]

Evidence that many Americans under 30 eschew media coverage of public affairs and are inattentive to political news should worry democracy's supporters. Although scholars are at loggerheads over what citizens should know about public affairs, few disagree that democratic citizens need information to make informed judgments (e.g., Converse 1990; Cassel and Lo 1997; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; cf. Page and Shapiro 1992). Since the overwhelming majority of Americans acquire public affairs information from the media, one consequence of avoiding media coverage of politics is ignorance (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Although he was writing about uninformed young Californians in the 1980s, Benjamin Stein's assessment of their seemingly blissful innocence of historical and political facts remains true. "[I]n a state of . . . astonishing ignorance, young Americans may well not be prepared for even the most basic national responsibility—understanding what the society is about and why it must be preserved." Stein believed that ignorant young people "are not prepared to continue the society because they basically do not understand the society enough to value it" (1983, 19). If young adults' disconnection from media coverage of public affairs is symptomatic of general political apathy and ignorance, then American democracy's future is worrisome indeed.[4]

Exposure to News and Entertainment Media

Table 1 depicts Americans' exposure to several electronic and print news and entertainment media in 1996 and 1997, broken down by four age categories: 18–29 years old, 30–44 years old, 45–64 years old, and 65 years old and older. (These categories denote important phases of the life-cycle for most people.) Most of the data come from the Pew Center's April 1996 poll. The remainder come from the Center's February 1997 poll. (Not all the media outlets plumbed in these polls are included in Table 1.) The data enable us to determine if there are substantial, age-based differences in

TABLE 1
Media Exposure by Age, 1996–97

	18–29 Years Old	30–44 Years Old	45–64 Years Old	65+ Years Old
How Often Watch National TV Newscasts[a]				
Never	18%	15%	11%	11%
Hardly Ever	20	16	12	7
Sometimes	40	36	23	18
Regularly	22	33	54	64
How Often Watch Local TV Newscasts[a]				
Never	7%	5%	6%	4%
Hardly Ever	8	9	5	3
Sometimes	34	24	18	16
Regularly	51	62	71	77
How Often Watch Cable News Network[a]				
Never	28%	24%	26%	29%
Hardly Ever	16	15	12	9
Sometimes	36	36	31	29
Regularly	20	25	31	33
How Often Watch C-span[a]				
Never	53%	51%	52%	60%
Hardly Ever	22	20	16	13
Sometimes	21	23	24	20
Regularly	4	5	8	7
How Often Watch TV Magazine Shows Like *60 Minutes*[a]				
Never	14%	11%	7%	9%
Hardly Ever	18	17	12	10
Sometimes	48	38	36	27
Regularly	20	33	45	54
How Often Watch *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*[a]				
Never	83%	76%	69%	66%
Hardly Ever	11	13	10	10
Sometimes	5	8	14	15
Regularly	1	3	6	9
How Often Watch MTV[a]				
Never	43%	63%	76%	74%
Hardly Ever	21	21	12	10
Sometimes	23	11	9	10
Regularly	13	5	3	6
How Often Watch TV Shows Like *A Current Affair*[a]				
Never	24%	27%	24%	33%
Hardly Ever	24	23	21	17
Sometimes	38	34	33	27
Regularly	14	16	22	23
How Often Watch Daytime TV Talk Shows[a]				
Never	44%	60%	67%	70%
Hardly Ever	22	18	14	14
Sometimes	19	15	12	10
Regularly	15	7	7	6
How Often Read a Daily Newspaper[b]				
Never	6%	9%	9%	12%
Hardly Ever	12	11	8	4
Sometimes	41	23	16	9
Regularly	41	56	67	75
How Often Read News Magazine[a]				
Never	25%	24%	28%	42%
Hardly Ever	18	22	19	15
Sometimes	42	41	36	22
Regularly	14	13	18	21

Source: [a] Pew Center (1996)
[b] Pew Center (1997)

exposure to print and electronic news media outlets.

There are basically three patterns in the data. First, when it comes to electronic and print news media, Americans under 30 are less likely to watch, listen, or read than are those over 30. Age differences are particularly pronounced for the news media that have traditionally been most heavily relied upon for information about government and public affairs: daily newspapers and (local and national) TV newscasts, and TV "magazine" shows such as *60 Minutes*. (Since the Pew Center's February 1997 poll shows that 80% of the public perceive shows like *60 Minutes* to be news programming, that is how they are treated here.) Age differences in exposure are smaller for newer media outlets such as C-Span and less popular outlets such as the *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* or CNN.

An even clearer indication of age-related differences in news media exposure comes when eight news media exposure variables–national and local TV newscasts, CNN, C-Span, *The News Hour*, news magazines, TV magazines such as *60 Minutes*, and a daily newspaper[5]–are combined into an index of exposure to electronic and print news media. (Although one might argue that listening to NPR would expose people to substantial political content, the Center's question did not focus on news programming *per se*.) The data come from the Pew Center's April 1996 poll. The index ranges from 8 (exposure to none) to 32 (regular exposure to all). The mean score on the News Media Exposure Index for persons aged 18 to 29 was 19.5 ($s = 4.4$ [$N = 405$]), compared with an average of 21.4 for those over 30 ($s = 4.5$ [$N = 1{,}325$]). A one-tailed difference of means test showed that the difference in exposure to news media for those under and over 30 was statistically significant at $p = <.001$ ($t = -7.45$ [$df = 1{,}728$]). When it comes to news media, young Americans are less likely to watch, listen, or read than are those over 30 years of age.

The second pattern in Table 1 occurs for several media outlets: talk radio shows, *The Rush Limbaugh*

TABLE 2
Attention to Types of News Stories by Age, 1996

	18–29 Years Old	34–44 Years Old	45–64 Years Old	65+ Years Old
How Closely Follow News about Political Figures and Events in Washington				
Not at All Closely	14%	11%	10%	13%
Not Too Closely	34	27	25	21
Somewhat Closely	41	49	47	43
Very Closely	11	13	18	23
How Closely Follow News about International Affairs				
Not at All Closely	15%	12%	9%	11%
Not Too Closely	31	27	23	20
Somewhat Closely	42	49	50	44
Very Closely	12	12	18	25
How Closely Follow News about Local Government				
Not at All Closely	19%	10%	8%	8%
Not Too Closely	29	21	16	16
Somewhat Closely	38	47	47	41
Very Closely	14	22	29	34
How Closely Follow News about People and Events in Your Own Community				
Not at All Closely	8%	3%	7%	8%
Not Too Closely	16	14	11	12
Somewhat Closely	49	47	46	37
Very Closely	27	35	36	43
How Closely Follow News about Religion				
Not at All Closely	26%	21%	23%	17%
Not Too Closely	35	33	25	23
Somewhat Closely	27	34	30	34
Very Closely	12	12	22	26
How Closely Follow News about Health				
Not at All Closely	10%	6%	6%	9%
Not Too Closely	16	14	12	9
Somewhat Closely	45	51	42	39
Very Closely	??	??	??	??
How Closely Follow Sports News				
Not at All Closely	19%	24%	26%	30%
Not Too Closely	21	22	21	16
Somewhat Closely	29	28	29	30
Very Closely	31	26	24	24
How Closely Follow News about Entertainment				
Not at All Closely	10%	12%	14%	19%
Not Too Closely	21	30	32	33
Somewhat Closely	44	46	41	37
Very Closely	25	12	12	11

Source: Pew Center (1996)

Show, National Public Radio programs, TV shows such as *A Current Affair*, business magazines such as *Forbes* or *Fortune*, and the grocery store tabloids. (The data are not shown to save space.) There are no significant or consistent age differences for these media.

The third pattern in Table 1 occurs for only two entertainment media: MTV and daytime TV talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. When it comes to these entertainment outlets, young adults are more likely to watch than are persons over 30. Although about two-fifths of adults under 30 say they never watch MTV, for example, the proportion rises to nearly two-thirds for those aged 30 to 44, and to three-quarters for citizens 45 years old and older.

When the two items were combined into an Entertainment Media Exposure Index that ranges from 2 (very low exposure) to 8 (very high exposure), the average score for those under 30 was 4.1 (s = 1.7 [N = 405]), compared to 3.1 for persons over 30 (s = 1.4 [N = 1,325]). A one-tailed difference of means test finds the difference between young adults and Americans over 30 is significant at $p = <.001$ (t = 10.68 [df = 575.6]).

As the Pew Center notes (1996, 4–5), the fact that young Americans are more likely than their elders to report watching entertainment TV outlets belies their claim that they are too busy to expose themselves to mass media in general, which they allege explains why they seldom rely on news outlets. Something other than lack of spare time is behind young people's tendency to avoid exposure to news media.

Attention to Types of Media Stories by Age

Another indicator of youthful disconnection from politics and public affairs comes from Americans' reports of how much attention they pay to different types of media stories. In April 1996, the Pew Center's poll asked respondents "how closely they follow" different types of "news either in the newspaper, on television, or on radio . . . very closely, somewhat closely, not very closely, or not at all closely." Table 2 depicts Americans' reports of how closely they follow media coverage of different types of news, broken down by the same age categories depicted in Table 1. (Once again, not all the types of news stories plumbed in the poll are shown in the table.)

As before, the data reveal three patterns in the relationship between age and how closely people follow different types of media stories. For our purposes, the most important is the clear relation between age and attention paid to news about government and public affairs. Whether the question asked about news about

"figures and events in Washington," "international affairs," or "local government," young people report paying less attention than do those over 30.

Even clearer indication of young adults' lack of attention to media stories about politics can be had when the items asking how closely respondents follow media stories about national, international, and local politics are combined into an Attention to Political News Index.[6] The Index ranges from 3 (very little attention to public affairs news) to 12 (very high attention). Young people's mean score on the index was 7.5 (s = 2.1 [N = 405]), compared to an average score of 8.3 for persons over 30 (s = 2.1 [N = 1,325]). A one-tailed t-test shows the differences in young Americans' mean score and that of persons over 30 is statistically significant at $p = <.001$ (t = 6.96 [1,728]).

Young people are also less likely to follow media stories about religion, "people and events in your own community," and, especially, health. Heightened attention to stories about health among older age categories makes sense, as does greater heed to news about one's local community, since older persons usually have resided in the same area for a longer time. Less attention to media coverage of religion may reflect the growing secularization of American society at the time young people were growing up. Americans' reports of how they spend time reflect greater interest in religion among the elderly (Robinson and Godbey 1997), and the data in Table 2 mirror that pattern. Nonetheless, the age gap in how closely Americans follow accounts of these topics is less important for our purposes than that for media coverage of government and public affairs.

The second pattern evidenced in Table 2 occurs for a wide range of media stories, including "business and finance," "consumer news," "science and technology," "culture and the arts," and "famous people." For these, there is no relationship between age and how closely people say they follow media coverage. (Again, the data are not shown to save space.)

The third pattern occurs only for two types of news: sports and entertainment. Here young adults are *more* likely than those over 30 to report paying very close attention to media coverage. The "reverse" age gap in heed paid to stories about "news about entertainment" is particularly noteworthy. Young people are twice as likely as those over 30 to report following media coverage of entertainment news very closely. When the two items were combined into an Attention to Entertainment and Sports News Index, which ranges from 2 (very low) to 8 (very high), the mean score for young adults was 5.6 (s = 1.6 [N = 405]), compared to an average of 5.1 (s = 1.6 [N = 1,325]) for persons over 30. A one-tailed t-test showed the difference was significant at $p = <.001$ (t = 5.79 [df = 1,728]). Reports of how much attention people pay to news about sports and entertainment dovetail nicely with relationships between age and reports of how people spend time (Robinson and Godbey 1997).

The Pew Center's April 1996 poll shows a clear-cut pattern of youthful indifference to news about national, international, and local public affairs. Even though Americans over 30 are hardly paragons of virtue, they are more likely to report following media stories about public affairs "very closely" than are young people. On the other hand, adults under 30 are more likely than those over 30 to report following very closely media accounts of sports and, especially, entertainment news. As do citizens over 30, young Americans pay closer attention to some types of media coverage than to others. They are especially attentive to the media's entertainment coverage, and particularly disinclined to pay attention to news about local, national, and international public affairs.

> The 1996 NES found, for example, that only 13% of young adults said they followed what goes on in government and public affairs "most of the time," while half admitted they paid only limited heed to events in the public sector.

A Brief Explanation of Young People's Detachment from Media Coverage of Politics

The reasons for young Americans' tendency to remain aloof from media coverage of public affairs are not hard to find. One cluster of factors, which has been understood for some time (Converse with Niemi 1971), constitutes the "start-up" problem that confronts young people who are still completing formal schooling, seeking a life-mate, and coping with residential mobility. Attending school, being single, and moving frequently probably detract somewhat from exposure to media coverage of public affairs. The 1996 NES shows, however, that the correlations between each and the amount of attention paid to political media are rather weak.

One factor that does contribute to eschewing exposure to political media among young adults is lack of firm attachment to a political party. Young adults are less likely than their elders to be strong adherents of a political party. The 1996 NES found that only 21% of respondents who were under 30 said they were strong partisans, while 46% claimed to be Independents. On the other hand, 34% of individuals 30 and older reported being strong partisans, and 31% asserted they were Independents. Just as one would predict, strong partisans among adults under 30 are more likely to read a newspaper and watch network TV coverage of politics than are po-

litical independents and those who are weakly attached to one of the major parties.

Without question, the most important reason for young Americans' lack of exposure to political reporting in the media is indifference to political affairs. The 1996 NES found, for example, that only 13% of young adults said they followed what goes on in government and public affairs "most of the time," while half admitted they paid only limited heed to events in the public sector. By contrast, a quarter of Americans 30 and older said they followed political affairs most of the time, and only a third reported being largely inattentive to politics. The 1996 NES reveals a robust relation between young adults' general interest in public affairs and an index tapping exposure to newspapers and TV newscasts (r = .38).

Apathy among the young is not new, of course, and it also stems from some of the same start-up problems that inhibit youthful exposure to political media. Nevertheless, multivariate OLS regression equations estimated on the April 1996 Pew Center poll and the 1996 NES show that psychological involvement in public affairs carries the bulk of the predictive freight in accounting for young people's tendency to expose themselves to political media, and to pay much attention to political news when they do.[7] In short, until ways are found to overcome political apathy among the young, it is bootless to expect them to expose themselves to the media's public affairs coverage.

A Consequence of Young Americans' Avoidance of Exposure to Political Media

Young people's abstention from exposure to the media's political coverage may be interesting in and of itself, but unless the tendency has some practical consequences, it falls into the "So what?" category. Sadly, from the perspective of democratic theory and practice, evidence that avoiding media coverage of politics contributes to political ignorance can be readily found. Data from the Pew Center's April 1996 poll and the 1996 NES show that the less young people rely on political media and the less attention they pay to media stories about public affairs, the more politically ignorant they are.[8]

The procedures used to assess the data were the same for the April 1996 Pew Center poll and the 1996 NES. Looking first at the former, both the Exposure to Political Media Index and the Attention to Political News Index were recoded in to three categories (low, medium, and high). The same procedure was employed with a TV News and Newspaper Exposure Index created for the 1996 NES.[9] First, drawing on the 1996 Pew Center poll and looking at just respondents aged 18 to 29, mean scores on a four-item Knowledge of Current Events Index[10] were obtained for respondents with low, medium, and high political media exposure and low, medium, and high attention to media coverage of public affairs. For the 1996 NES, a twenty-item Knowledge of Public Affairs was constructed, following procedures very similar to those developed with the 1988 and 1992 NES's (Bennett 1995).[11] Then, again looking at just those aged 18 to 29, mean scores on the Knowledge of Public Affairs Index were obtained for persons with low, medium, and high political media exposure.

Regardless of which poll one uses or whether one includes measures of news exposure or attention, the results are the same: Young adults who are less likely to rely on political media or pay attention to news of public affairs are less knowledgeable than those who are more likely to watch, listen to, or read political stories and pay close attention to media coverage of public affairs. The pattern occurs for the Pew Center's April 1996 poll and the 1996 NES. For brevity's sake, consider just the Pew Center's data. Youthful respondents who were low in exposure to political media had a mean Knowledge of Current Events Index score of 1.2 (s = 1.0 [N = 77]), compared with a mean of 1.7 (s = 1.1 [N = 277]) for those who were medium on the Political Media Exposure Index, and an average of 2.3 (s = 1.2 [N = 51]) for those who were high on the Political Media Exposure Index. Similarly, young people who paid little attention to media coverage of public affairs had a mean Knowledge of Public Affairs Index score of 1.0 (s = 0.9 [N = 65]), compared with a mean knowledge score of 1.7 (s = 1.1 [N = 275]) for those who paid medium attention, and an average of 2.5 (s = 1.0 [N = 65]) for those who paid high attention to political news.

Lest it be thought that these results are artifactual, OLS regressions on the April 1996 Pew Center poll and the 1996 NES found that, along with education, gender, race, and either marital status or family income, exposure to political media and attention paid to media coverage of public affairs were statistically significant predictors of political information levels among those aged 18 to 29.[12] Given previous research showing that scholars obtain different results depending on the use of media "attention" and "exposure" indicators (Price and Zaller 1993), the discovery that both types of measures had the same impact on young people's political information levels is noteworthy.

In short, there is a price for young people's avoidance of exposure and attention to mass media coverage of politics: ignorance of public affairs. If it is true that, as Cassel and Lo put it, "political [knowledge] is central to empirical theories of democracy [because] the electorate must be informed to maintain popular control" of political elites (1997, 317), the data presented here raise doubts about many young Americans' capabilities as democratic citizens.

It is wrong to equate youth and political ignorance. As the *Times Mirror* Center's report on "The Age of Indifference" (1990) shows, adults under 30 were at least as well informed about public affairs as their "elders" from the early 1940s through the 1970s. It is equally mistaken to put all the blame for their ignorance on young Americans. Parents, schools, the media, and public officials share responsibility with the young for what has been described here.

Conclusions

Polls conducted for the Pew Research Center in April 1996 and February 1997 and the 1996 National Election Study show that individuals between 18 and 29 years of age are less likely than those over 30 to read, listen to, or watch political news stories, and less likely to pay close attention to media coverage of public affairs. On the other hand, young adults are more likely to expose themselves to and pay close attention to media coverage of sports and entertainment. This finding casts a pall on young people's claim that they don't follow politics in the media because their lives are too full to leave time for exposure to the media in general. Finally, the Pew Center's 1996 poll and the 1996 NES show that one consequence of young people's avoidance of media coverage of public affairs is lack of political knowledge. The less persons under 30 pay attention to political media, the less they know about government and public affairs.

Should we be concerned if sizable portions of young Americans eschew exposure and attention to media coverage of politics and, as a result, are mostly innocent of basic facts about political life? We should if we believe that democracy depends upon an informed citizenry and that being knowledgeable about public affairs is a key ingredient of democratic citizenship.

Although democratic philosophers once expected that increased educational opportunities would produce a better informed, more competent public (Thompson 1970), the vast expansion of educational attainment that occurred in the U.S. after World War II has not resulted in a more knowledgeable public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This is true despite survey data over several decades showing that education resonates with many salubrious political qualities, including political information (Converse 1972; Hyman, Wright, and Reed 1975; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

When a society substantially increases educational opportunities, it is natural for younger birth cohorts' exposure to formal schooling to increase much more than that of older persons. Even though the rate of increased exposure to higher education has slowed, the 1996 NES shows that individuals under 30 report higher educational attainment than the same age group did in 1972, the first year 18–20 year-olds throughout the country were eligible to vote in a presidential election. In 1972, 19% of those aged 18 to 29 had not completed high school, 41% were high school graduates, 25% had begun but not completed college, 13% had received a baccalaureate degree, and 2% had attained an advanced university degree. In 1996, 12% of young respondents had not finished secondary school, 36% were high school graduates, 37% had some college experience, 15% had a baccalaureate degree, and 9% had advanced degrees.

Nevertheless, greater exposure to higher education among today's young has not produced a birth cohort very interested in public affairs or inclined to expose themselves to political media. As a result, today's youth are poorly informed about political affairs at home and abroad. We return, therefore, to the concern raised by Ben Stein in the early 1980s: Are young Americans so "turned off and tuned out"–to borrow a phrase from another time–that they do not appreciate why their society is worth keeping?

Reports of college students who claim they cannot condemn the Nazis for the Holocaust chill one's blood. Are we seeing in these reports another part of the same "iceberg" revealed here? If so, we would be well advised to take immediate steps to rectify the situation. A good place to begin is with civics education in the schools (Dry 1996; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996; Mann 1996; Merelman 1996). Still, enhancing civics education must be part of a multifaceted effort (Bennett 1997). The APSA's Task Force on Civics Education (Carter and Elshtain 1997; "Task Force" 1997) is a step in the right direction, but if we are to reach today's young citizens, the mass media, political parties, and public officials must help in the effort.

Notes

1. Lest one think this pattern has always been so, a Gallup poll taken in 1965 found that 67% of those aged 21–34 reported reading a newspaper "yesterday," compared with 30% of the same age grouping in 1990 (*Times Mirror* Center 1990, 20). The 1965 Gallup poll found that 52% of Americans aged 21–34 reported watching the news on TV "yesterday," compared with 41% in a 1990 *Times Mirror* poll. On the other hand, listening to the news on radio "yesterday" did not change between 1965 and 1990, with 58% of the 21–34 year olds saying they had heard a radio newscast the day before being interviewed in 1965, and 57% saying so in 1990.

2. Are the patterns we see in this study a function of the life-cycle phase where individuals between 18 and 29 are today, or are we seeing a birth cohort tendency? Unfortunately, as demographers have shown (see, for example, Glenn 1977), it is impossible to separate life-cycle from cohort effects with cross-sectional surveys such as those used here.

3. The Pew Center's polls are conducted by telephone and are intended to represent voting-age Americans. Those interested in technical details of Pew Center polls should consult the press release associated with each monthly poll. For April 1996, see Pew Center (1996). For the February 1997 poll, see Pew Center (1997). The Center recommends weighting for both data sets. To obtain these reports, contact the Pew Center at (202) 293-3126. The National Election Studies are conducted partly by telephone and partly in-person, and are designed to represent voting-age Americans living in the continental 48 states. Every NES publishes a detailed analysis of its methodological superstructure. The 1996 NES was particularly complex, and also requires weighting. The Pew Center data were released directly to me. I am indebted to Center Director Andrew Kohut and Mark Cottrell, formerly with the Center. The National Election Studies are conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies, and released by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Mark Carrozza helped me obtain the 1996 NES data. I am responsible for all analyses and interpretations.

4. According to an anonymous reviewer, ignorance is not *ipso facto* deleterious for democracy. As the reviewer puts it, "[t]he fact that the average young person is politically ignorant is of no consequence as long as enough young people are politically motivated." The 1996 NES found that not only were young adults considerably less likely than those over 30 to report they had voted, even those who did were less knowledgeable about public affairs than were voters over 30. If those young adults who did vote had been as politically knowledgeable as voters over 30,

concern about apathy and ignorance among the young might lose much of its sting. Sadly, evidence of both greater apathy and ignorance among the young reinforces concern for democracy's future.

5. In the April 1996 poll, the question about frequently reading a daily newspaper had only two categories: "yes" (coded 4) and "no" (coded 1). The other seven items were coded 1 for "never," 2 for "hardly ever," 3 for "sometimes," and 4 for "regularly." Cronbach's coefficient *alpha* for the eight-item News Media Exposure Index was .66.

6. The Index has a Cronbach's coefficient *alpha* of .70.

7. Detailed analysis of three OLS regression equations estimated on the April 1996 Pew Center poll (one each for the two indices described above) and the 1996 NES are beyond this article's scope. Essentially the same predictor variables were included in each OLS equation: education, family income, gender, race, and measures of partisan strength and political interest. The results were the same: political interest was the primary determinant of exposure to political media, far outstripping all other predictors. Although indicators of model fit were far from perfect, all-in-all, the equations were quite satisfactory by the standards of secondary analysis of poll and survey data.

8. Here we may run afoul of the "cart-and-horse" conundrum. Is knowledge logically and empirically prior to media exposure, or is it the other way around? Zaller (1992), for example, includes political information as an indicator of *political attentiveness*, which he believes to be causally prior to media exposure. On the other hand, a quarter-century long tradition of communications scholarship treats media exposure as exogenous and public affairs knowledge as endogenous (see Viswanath and Finnegan 1996). I accept Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) treatment of media exposure as a predictor of knowledge, and will let the matter rest until further research can sort things out.

9. The 1996 NES asked respondents how many days last week they read a newspaper and how many days they watched the early evening TV network newscasts. Each variable ranged from 0 to 7. The two variables were combined to form an index that ranged from 0 to 14.

10. The four items asked for knowledge that Bill Clinton had recently visited China, Korea, and Russia, knowledge that the current minimum wage rate was $4.25 per hour, knowledge that the GOP controlled the House of Representatives, and knowledge that Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the House of Representatives. Hence, scores on the Index ranged from 0 to 4. It is reasonable to ask if such a delimited set of items constitutes a satisfactory test of political information. Very likely the question will never be finally answered, but Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) make a good case that an index with approximately the same number of items can be a reliable and valid indicator of political knowledge.

11. The Knowledge of Public Affairs Index includes items tapping knowledge of political personalities, events, issues, and parties' and candidates' stances on key political issues. It ranges from 0 to 24.

12. Two separate regression equations were estimated with the Pew Center data. They were identical in all respects save one: in the first, the Exposure to Political Media Index was included among the predictors, while in the second, the Attention to Media Stories about Public Affairs Index was substituted for the exposure index.

References

Bennett, Stephen E. 1995. "Comparing Americans' Political Information in 1988 and 1992." *Journal of Politics* 57(2): 521–32.

——. 1997. "Why Young Americans Hate Politics, and What We Should Do about It." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(1): 47–53.

Carter, Lief H., and Jean Bethke Elshtain. 1997. "Task Force on Civic Education Statement of Purpose." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(4): 745.

Cassel, Carol A., and Celia C. Lo. 1997. "Theories of Political Literacy." *Political Behavior* 19(4): 317–35.

Converse, Philip E. 1972. "Change in the American Electorate." In *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, ed. Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse. New York: Russell Sage.

——. 1990. "Popular Representation and the Distribution of Information." In *Information and Democratic Processes,* ed. John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

——, with Richard G. Niemi. 1971. "Non-voting among Young Adults in the United States." In *Political Parties and Political Behavior*, 2nd ed., ed. William J. Crotty, Donald M. Freeman, and Douglas S. Gatlin. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1993. "Measuring Political Knowledge: Putting First Things First." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(4): 1179-1206.

——. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dry, Murray. 1996. "Review of National Standards for Civics and Government." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29(1): 49–53.

Glenn, Norval D. 1977. *Cohort Analysis.* Sage University Paper Series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, series no. 07–005. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Hibbing, John R., and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1996. "Civics Is Not Enough: Teaching 'Barbarics' in K-12." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29(1): 57–62.

Hyman, Herbert H., Charles R. Wright, and John Shelton Reed. 1975. *The Enduring Effects of Education.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mann, Sheilah. 1996. "Political Scientists Examine Civics Standards." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29(1): 47–49.

Merelman, Richard M. 1996. "Symbols as Substance in National Civics Standards." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29(1): 53–57.

Nie, Norman H., Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry. 1996. *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pew Center. 1996. "TV News Viewership Declines: Fall Off Greater for Young Adults and Computer Users." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for The People and The Press. May 13.

——. 1997. "Fewer Favor Media Scrutiny of Political Leaders: Press 'Unfair, Inaccurate, and Pushy.'" Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for The People and The Press. March 21.

Price, Vincent, and John Zaller. 1993. "Who Gets the News? Alternative Measures of News Reception and Their Implications for Research." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57(1): 133–64.

Robinson, John P., and Geoffrey Godbey. 1997. *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Stein, Benjamin J. 1983. "Valley Girls View the World." *Public Opinion* 6(4): 18–19.

"Task Force to Set Agenda for Civic Education." 1997. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(4): 744.

Thompson, Dennis F. 1970. *The Democratic Citizen: Social Science and Democratic Theory in the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Times Mirror Center. 1990. "The Age of Indifference: A Study of Young Americans and How They View the News." Washington, DC: *Times Mirror* Center for The People and The Press. June 28.

Viswanath, K., and John R. Finnegan Jr. 1996. "The Knowledge Gap Hypothesis: Twenty-Five Years Later." In *Communication Yearbook 19*, ed. Brant R. Burleson. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.