



JONAH GOLDBERG

What does the public know?

Huge numbers of Americans don't know jack about their government or politics. According to a Pew Research Center survey released last week, 31 percent of Americans don't know who the vice president is, fewer than half are aware that Nancy Pelosi is the speaker of the House, a mere 29 percent can identify "Scooter" Libby as the convicted former chief of staff of the vice president, and only 15 percent can name Harry Reid when asked who is the Senate majority leader.

And yet, last week, a Washington Post-ABC News poll found that two-thirds of Americans believe that Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales' firing of eight U.S. attorneys was "politically motivated."

So, we are supposed to believe that two-thirds of Americans have studied the details of the U.S. attorney firings and come to an informed conclusion that they were politically motivated — even when Senate Democrats agree that there is no actual evidence that Gonzales did anything improper. Are these the same people who couldn't pick Pelosi out of a lineup? Or the 85 percent who couldn't name the Senate majority leader? Are we to imagine that the 31 percent of the electorate who still — after seven years of headlines and demonization — can't identify the vice president of the United States nonetheless have a studied opinion on the firing of New Mexico U.S. Attorney David Iglesias?

Oh, before we proceed, let me make clear: This isn't a column defending Gonzales. This administration should have long ago sent him out of the bunker for a coffee-and-doughnut run and then changed the locks. No, this is a column about how confused and at times idiotic the United States is about polls, public opinion and, well, democracy itself. We all love to tout the glories of democracy and denounce politicians who just follow the polls. Well, guess which politicians follow the polls? The popular ones, that's who. And guess why: Because the popular ones get elected. Bucking public opinion is the quickest way for a politician to expedite his or her transition to the private sector.

More to the point, Americans — God bless 'em — are often quite ignorant about the stuff politicians and pundits think matters most. They may know piles about their own professions, hobbies and personal interests, but when it comes to basic civics, they get their clocks cleaned on Fox's "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?"

Though examples are depressingly unnecessary, here are two of my favorites over the years. In 1987, 45 percent of adult respondents to one survey answered that the phrase "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" was in the Constitution (in fact, it's a quote from Karl Marx). Then, in 1991, an American Bar Association study reported that a third of Americans did not know what the Bill of Rights was.

That the public mood is a poor compass for guiding the ship of state is an old lament. Here are two reasons why.

The first has to do with the laziness, spinelessness and vanity of political elites. Citing polls as proof you're on the right side of an argument is often a symptom of intellectual cowardice. If the crowd says two plus two equals seven, that's no reason to invoke the authority of the crowd. But pundits and pols know that if they align themselves with the latest Gallup findings, they don't have to defend their position on the merits because "the people" are always right. Such is the seductiveness of populism. It means never being wrong. "The people of Nebraska are for free silver, and I am for free silver," proclaimed William Jennings Bryan. "I will look up the arguments later."

Which brings us to ideology. The days when politicians would actually defend small-r republicanism are gone. The answer to every problem in our democracy seems to be more democracy, as if any alternative spells more tyranny. Indeed, once more the "forces of progress" are trying to destroy the Electoral College in the name of democracy. Their beachhead is Maryland, which was the first to approve an interstate compact promising its electors to whichever presidential candidate wins the national popular vote.

If these progressives have their way, we'll soon see candidates ignoring small states and rural areas entirely because democracy means going where the votes are. The old notion that this is a republic in which minority communities have a say will suffer perhaps the final, fatal blow.

But that's OK, because 70 percent of Americans say they're for getting rid of the Electoral College. And Lord knows, they must be right.

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Star Editorial Board Report: Truancy



CHARLIE NYE / The Star

SIGNS OF PROGRESS: Superior Court Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry (center) discusses truancy problems with three brothers who go to school in Wayne Township, telling them she is pleased that they have improved their school attendance.

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Audio: Listen to a short audio clip of Marion County Superior Court Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry speaking on the wide range of children who come through her truancy court. Click on IndyStar.com/opinion.

Databases: Want to know how your child's school fared on this year's ISTEP? Did schools in your district make Adequate Yearly Progress? Check out The Star's databases on the Data Central page of IndyStar.com

Many cases, many causes

Motives for skipping class vary

After two years as head of the Marion County Superior Court's truancy program, Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry will tell you that not every truant is a slacker.

Their reasons may vary, but the results are the same, as the following examples show.

Thirteen-year-old Oscar, a seventh-grader at Wayne Township's Chapel Hill 7th and 8th Grade Center, and his two younger sisters together have racked up 50 days of unexcused absences this school year. Like many children, they come from a single-parent home where Mom struggles to balance parenting with earning a living.

Last in a series

Thirteen-year-old Sierra has skipped 25 days at North Wayne Elementary this school year. Her mother blames the system, saying she's not adequately challenged at school.

Some students simply give up on themselves and their schools after unsuccessful struggles to learn, while others avoid school because they are bullied and teased, like 13-year-old Sarah, a student at the Chapel Hill center.

And others suffer from depression or struggle with dysfunctional home lives.

"To me, every case that comes in

VOICES

"We see kids who are bullied . . . We see a lot of kids who suffered academically along the way. We see kids with special needs. We see a lot of kids really just in need, kids and families in need of counseling."

Marion County Superior Court Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry, on the truant students coming through her court.

here is so individual," says Rota-Autry. "There's no formula that works across the board."

Those individual needs complicate the truancy issue because no single answer addresses all cases.

Two sobering numbers underscore the cost of chronic truancy:

- ◆ 345,000 — the number of students who likely dropped out of Indiana's high schools between 1986 and 2006. Truancy is one of the warning signs of a future dropout.

- ◆ 26,300 — the number of adults and juveniles in the state prison system, most of whom did not graduate from high school.

Behind both numbers is long-established research showing chronic truancy's link to poor academic performance, delinquency and criminal behavior.

Chronic truancy runs in families. Students are affected by poverty, family dysfunction and untreated mental illness.

Thirty-six percent of children in anti-truancy programs funded by the federal Department of Justice come from single-parent homes, and 20 percent live in households with no working adult, according to a 2006 study by Krystina Finlay, a National Center for School Engagement researcher.

Yet blaming the family alone, says Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Bal-fanz, glosses over the systemic problem of why children miss school.

Several of the school-related factors contributing to truancy are similar to those generating high dropout rates.

Civic leaders such as Bill Gates, whose foundation has funded school reform efforts in Indianapolis and elsewhere, long ago indicated that high schools are in need of serious reform. The same is true of middle schools, where many students' performance begins to seriously erode.

Part of the problem lies in a dearth of rigorous and relevant curriculum, along with programs such as music that can challenge at-risk students.

"Getting kids on the margins engaged is the problem" in many schools, says Heather MacGillivray, a researcher with the National Center for School Engagement.

Large schools also can contribute to truancy, with many students feeling lost in a throng of thousands of teens.

School safety is a factor as well, notes Jay Smink of the National Dropout Prevention Center. Bullying and fear for their safety prompt some students to avoid school.

Chronic truants often wind up in juvenile court, a system that in Marion County historically has been overwhelmed by the volume of cases. A

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We can stem truancy with community effort

Gaylon Nettles, the state Department of Education's chief attendance officer, is right in noting that neither parents nor schools can stem truancy on their own. It will take a strong community effort to keep children on the path to improving their educational and economic destinies. Here are nine recommendations to help reduce the number of chronic truants:

What the state must do

Revise school attendance data: Accurate data and clear attendance policies are the first steps needed to stem truancy. An official truancy rate, along with a revised attendance rate that better reflects levels of chronic truancy and out-of-school suspensions, is a must.

Improve community mental health care: Given the strong connection between mental health and school achievement, it's crucial to improve access to mental health treatment to help students stay in school.

What parents must do

Emphasize the value of education: Turning around Indiana's culture of low educational expectations begins at home. Parents must constantly set the example that education is fundamental for success in life.

Know where your children are: It's tough for chil-



CHARLIE NYE / The Star

FULL DOCKET: A folder holds Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry's papers before the start of truancy court at Wayne Township's Lynhurst 7th and 8th Grade Center.

dren to skip school if parents are checking on their whereabouts. Taking them to school on your way to work, checking their homework, even an unexpected visit to their classroom will help keep them in line.

What schools must do

Expand the variety of school curricula: Boredom with classroom learning is a sign that students aren't engaged in learning. A wider array of more

challenging curriculum, including Advanced Placement courses, will help lure some students back to school and keep them there.

End the overuse of harsh school discipline:

Administrators and teachers clearly have to maintain order in classrooms, but research indicates that out-of-school suspensions are used disproportionately in Indiana schools. Finding alternatives that keep students in school will improve their learning and their behavior in the long run.

Deal with bullying and school safety: Children shouldn't ever have to fear for their security within the confines of a school, especially when it comes to harassment from other students. Schools must figure out new ways to stem bullying and create an environment where students are safe and free of harm.

What the community must do

Mentor a child: As Heather MacGillivray of the National Center for School Engagement points out, relationships with caring adults are key to keeping children from straying down the path of truancy. Joining groups such as the Starfish Initiative and the Center for Leadership Development is among the ways adults can help support at-risk students.

Be a nosy neighbor: Why are those children hanging out in your neighborhood during the school day? Help out by checking with their parents or notifying school authorities.