

ISSUE BRIEF

“Information to Action”

Topic: Representative Governance

Title: *KNOWLEDGE: THE BURDEN OF A CONSTITUTIONAL REPUBLIC* by Joshua Charles

The Founding Fathers were among the best-read generations in history. Everywhere you look in their writings—both public and private—you’ll find an endless series of biblical, literary, historical, and philosophical references. The Founders knew that the business of creating a new nation was a serious one, and therefore imposed a uniquely heavy burden on them: the duty of acquiring extensive knowledge of human nature and experience.

In the midst of the dark days of the Revolutionary War, John Adams poignantly wrote from Paris to his wife Abigail back home in Massachusetts:

The science of government it is my duty to study more than all other sciences: the art of legislation and administration and negotiation ought to take place indeed to exclude in a manner all other arts. I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.

Adams understood that his burden was knowledge. Without it, he and his generation of Founders could never create something worth creating. And without it, their posterity could never preserve something worth preserving.

Nor was this a mystery even to foreign observers and admirers of the United States. Indeed, the very structure of the Constitution—particularly its federalism and division of powers between the central and state governments—was so “complicated” in the words of Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, that it required the citizenry to be informed in order to preserve it:

The federal system rests, therefore, whatever one does, upon a complicated theory which, in application, demands a daily exercise of rationality from its citizens...However, on scrutinizing the Constitution of the United States, the most complete of all known federal constitutions, it is frightening to note how many differences of knowledge and discernment it assumes in those governed.

Can we honestly say that “knowledge and discernment” is a characteristic trait of the American electorate today? Whether we would say it or not, the facts speak for themselves. [More than 70% of Americans fail a basic civic literacy test](#), and in roughly equal proportions regardless of their political party. Less than half can even name all three branches of government.

If the Republic is to survive, it is absolutely necessary (though itself not sufficient) that this ignorance be rectified. We, like the Founders, must assume our burden of knowledge for maintaining the American system, lest we fall prey to Thomas Jefferson’s warning: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”