

CLUES TO CRITICAL THINKING

"How Much Do Voters Know?"

By Alexander Burns, *Politico*,
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This article shows the American voter's intelligence in a less-than-flattering light. Should we be insulted?

Voters are appalled at President Barack Obama's handling of gas prices, even though virtually every policy expert in both parties says there's little a president can do to affect the day-to-day price of fuel in a global market.

Americans are disgusted at Washington's bailout culture, and especially the 2008 rescue of the financial services industry. They're so fed up with bailouts, in fact, that a majority of them now think federal intervention in the auto industry was a good idea that helped the country.

They're aghast at the trajectory of the war in Afghanistan, which Obama helped escalate and extend, and they don't think the war was worth it in the first place. And many also think Obama is handling the conflict acceptably well.

That's presumably a different set of voters than the ones who routinely tell pollsters that they still believe the president is a Muslim, despite all public evidence to the contrary.

Add up that litany of contradictory, irrational or simply silly opinions, and it's enough to make a political professional suspect the electorate is, well, not entirely sophisticated about the choices it's facing in 2012.

"The first lesson you learn as a pollster is that people are stupid," said Tom Jensen of Public Policy Polling, a Democratic polling firm. "I tell a client trying to make sense of numbers on a poll that are inherently contradictory that at least once a week."

Jensen, a Democrat, pointed to surveys showing that voters embraced individual elements of the Affordable Care Act, while rejecting the overall law, as an example of the political schizophrenia or simple ignorance that pollsters and politicians must contend with.

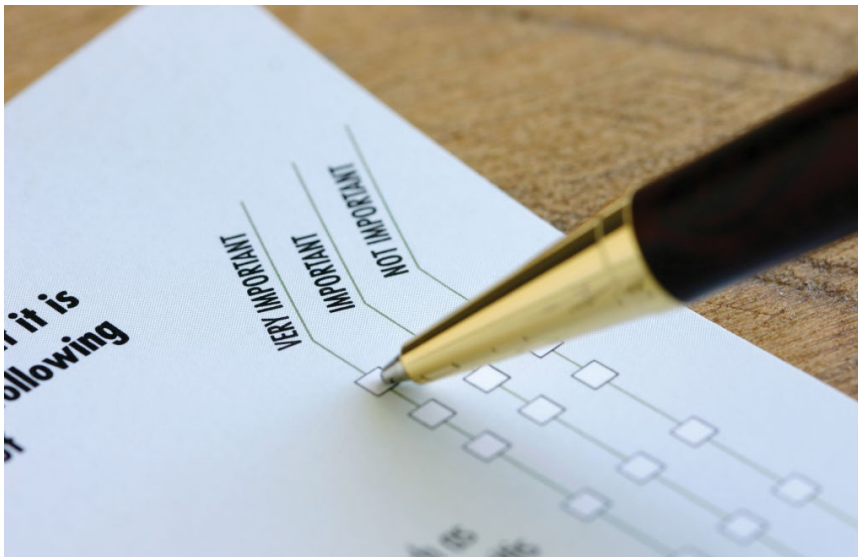
"We're seeing that kind of thing more and more. I think it's a function of increased political polarization and voters just digging in their heels and refusing to consider the opposing facts once they've formed an opinion about something," said Jensen, who has generated eye-catching data showing many GOP primary voters still question the president's religion and nationality. "I also think voters are showing a tendency to turn issues that should be factual or non-factual into opinions. If you show a Tennessee birther Obama's birth certificate, they're just going to say 'well in my opinion he's not a real American.' It's not about the birth certificate; it's about expressing hatred for Obama in any form they can."

But irrationality on policy issues transcends party lines and cuts across groups that feel differently about the president. Taken all together, the issue polling compiled so far in the 2012 cycle presents a sharp corrective to the candidates' description of the race as a great debate placing two starkly different philosophies of government before an informed electorate.

In reality, the contest has been more like a game of Marco Polo, as a hapless gang of Republican candidates and a damaged, frantic incumbent try to connect with a historically fickle and frustrated electorate.

And "fickle" is a nice way of describing the voters of 2012, who appear to be wandering, confused and Forrest Gump-like through the experience of a presidential campaign. It isn't just unclear which party's vision they'd rather embrace; it's entirely questionable whether the great mass of voters has even the most basic grasp of the details—or for that matter, the most elementary factual components—of the national political debate.

The present furor over gas prices is a case in point: Obama's job approval dropped 9 points over the last month, according to a CBS/New York Times poll,



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