

Noah Webster Saw the Danger

An Electorate Too Ignorant to Govern Itself

By Lisa Bennett

In the early years of the American republic, Noah Webster—lexicographer, educator, and fierce advocate for national identity—issued a blunt warning about democracy’s weakest link: an uninformed people. In his essay “On the Education of Youth in America” (1788), later included in *A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings on Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects* (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1790), Webster wrote:

“I have known instructions from the inhabitants of a county, two thirds of whom could not write their names. How competent must such men be to decide an important point in legislation!”

In the early years of the American republic, Noah Webster—lexicographer, educator, and fierce advocate for national identity—didn’t

mince words and issued a blunt warning about democracy’s weakest link: an uninformed people. In 1788, the man who would later give America its dictionary looked at the new republic and saw a serious flaw. He had watched entire counties send formal instructions to their legislators even though two-thirds of the men signing those papers could not write their own names. “How competent must such men be to decide an important point in legislation!” he asked, the sarcasm unmistakable.

Webster’s larger argument was straightforward. Several states had adopted republican constitutions that gave ordinary citizens the right to vote and to guide their representatives. Yet those same states made little provision for teaching the poorer ranks of people to read and write, let alone understand the principles of government. The constitutions were republican, he said, while the education laws remained

monarchical. In a system where government rests in the hands of the people, knowledge must be widely diffused through schools and newspapers. Without it, voters would mistake their own interests and push lawmakers toward blunders.

He was not calling for the vote to be taken away. He was insisting that a free people who lack the knowledge to govern themselves well will not remain free for long.

That warning lands with fresh force today. The basic literacy problem Webster described has largely been solved. Almost every American adult can write a signature. Yet large numbers of voters still lack a working grasp of how their government actually functions.

Annual surveys from the Annenberg Public Policy Center show persistent gaps. In recent years, the share of U.S. adults able to name all three branches of the federal government has fluctuated between roughly half and 70 percent. Significant minorities cannot name even one. Other polls routinely find that many citizens struggle to identify basic constitutional provisions, the length of senatorial terms, or the difference between the House and Senate. Voter knowledge of candidates’ actual policy positions is often weaker still, especially when mediated through short-form social media, partisan cable news, and algorithmically amplified outrage.

Today the barriers include information overload, selective media diets, and declining trust in institutions. More fundamentally, critics from conservative and critical perspectives—such as the Heritage Foundation, the Pacific Research Institute, the Educational Freedom Institute, and analyses highlighted by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression—point to a pronounced left-leaning or progressive skew in public education and academia. Studies of political contributions and ideological self-identification among educators show that a significant majority of politically active faculty and higher-education donors lean progressive or Democratic, with university faculty ratios often reaching 8:1 or higher and donation ratios far more extreme. In K-12 settings, teachers also lean left of the general population, though less monolithically than professors. These organizations contend that certain curricula, library materials, and social studies frameworks omit traditional patriotic values, downplay key historical contexts, or present history through a biased lens that prioritizes ideological conditioning over neutral civic education. The result is that many students emerge without solid grounding in civics or balanced history—or with versions of history that critics say depart from the truth—leaving large numbers of future voters to form firm opinions, and sometimes issue emphatic “instructions” via social media, primaries, or referendums, on matters they understand only partially.

Webster worried that unlettered constituents would push legislators toward short-sighted or self-defeating measures. Contemporary examples are not hard to find on either side of the political spectrum: support for policies whose fiscal or constitutional consequences are poorly grasped; susceptibility to conspiracy narratives; or the elevation of symbolic fights over durable institutional reforms. As in Webster’s time, ignorance is rarely pure malice. It is more often the predictable outcome of systems that demand participation without ensuring the knowledge required for competent participation.

Webster understood that self-government is demanding. It requires more than the right to vote. It requires citizens who know enough to judge the laws they help create and the people they send to write them. Schools and a free press, he believed, were the essential instruments for spreading that knowledge.

The tools have changed. The danger has not. When large numbers of voters lack the information or the historical grounding to evaluate the decisions placed before them, the quality of self-government inevitably suffers. Webster saw the risk clearly more than two centuries ago. The question is whether we still do. 🗳️

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Hosea 4:6

Table 1. Campaign Contributions in Republican Dominated States (Professors)

	Partisan Split of Contributions		
	From Professors		Republican Share of State
	Democrat	Republican	
ND	99%	1%	87%
WI	98%	2%	65%
PA	98%	2%	50%
AR	98%	2%	82%
NH	97%	3%	51%
MO	96%	4%	69%
OH	96%	4%	68%
IN	96%	4%	70%
IA	95%	5%	64%
KY	95%	5%	80%
GA	94%	6%	57%
AZ	94%	6%	53%
NE	93%	7%	67%
OK	92%	8%	80%
WV	92%	8%	89%
NC	90%	10%	60%
AL	90%	10%	73%
SD	90%	10%	90%
FL	89%	11%	70%
ID	87%	13%	84%
TX	86%	14%	57%
TN	85%	15%	76%
AK	83%	17%	63%
WY	82%	18%	92%
UT	80%	20%	81%
KS	78%	22%	68%
SC	77%	23%	71%
MT	73%	27%	68%
LA	72%	28%	70%
MS	22%	78%	66%

Table 2. Campaign Contributions in Republican Dominated States (K-12 Teachers)

	Partisan Split of Contributions		
	From K-12 Teachers		Republican Share of State
	Democrat	Republican	
WI	87%	13%	65%
AZ	79%	21%	53%
NC	77%	23%	60%
NE	73%	27%	67%
AK	72%	28%	63%
IN	70%	30%	70%
IA	68%	32%	64%
WY	66%	34%	92%
KY	63%	37%	80%
WV	63%	37%	89%
OH	62%	38%	68%
KS	61%	39%	68%
SC	61%	39%	71%
LA	59%	41%	70%
MS	56%	44%	66%
TX	53%	47%	57%
AR	51%	49%	82%
TN	51%	49%	76%
MT	50%	50%	68%
NH	49%	51%	51%
SD	46%	54%	90%
FL	43%	57%	70%
GA	41%	59%	57%
ID	38%	62%	84%
PA	33%	67%	50%
OK	31%	69%	80%
AL	28%	72%	73%
ND	26%	74%	87%
UT	26%	74%	81%
MO	23%	77%	69%