The Case of the Silent Voter

By now you may have heard of the silent voter.

The silent voter is nothing new. *The New York Times* identified this phenomenon way back in November of 1886, describing it as "the vote which helps make what are called tidal waves in politics."

In more recent years, the silent voter seems to reside in the domain of the Trump campaign. President Donald Trump himself is counting on the silent voter to help him overcome his poll deficit, while Rasmussen Reports is even polling to find out just how many silent Trump voters there are. Of those who strongly approve of Trump's job performance, the Rasmussen poll explains, 17 percent of them "are less likely to let others know how they intend to vote in the upcoming election." Because of this, it is thought that this year's election night could be another surprise.

Leaving aside the outcome for now, what intrigues me is the fact that many people won't say which candidate they are voting for, particularly to pollsters. Such hesitancy implies a fear of retaliation for unpopular views; a cowardice, if you will, from those disinterested in standing up and speaking out.

However, such impressions may change after reading Neil Postman's opinions on the subject. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman addresses the issue of the continuous news cycle and the role political opinion plays in it:

Voting, we might even say, is the next to last refuge of the politically impotent. The last refuge is, of course, giving your opinion to a pollster, who will get a version of it through a desiccated question, and then will submerge it in a Niagara of similar opinions, and convert them into—what

else?—another piece of news. Thus, we have here a great loop of impotence: The news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.

Looking at it this way, breaking this vicious news cycle by refusing to give one's opinion to a pollster actually seems an exemplary thing to do.

Postman wasn't the only one who expressed concern over the vicious news cycle which has overtaken our lives. Richard Weaver recognized it as well, noting that "modern publication wishes to minimize discussion."

"Despite many artful pretensions to the contrary," Weaver wrote about the press, "it does not want an exchange of views, save perhaps on academic matters. Instead, it encourages men to read in the hope that they will absorb." Because of this, the news does "more of the average man's thinking for him than he suspects."

We've suspected this truth for years, and perhaps that's one reason why many "silent voters" are no longer answering polls. The more individuals who refuse to play the game, the sooner the charade will end.

But what do we do in the meantime? How do we remain the mature, well-informed citizens that we should be even while withdrawing from the continual "Niagara" of information that cycles through the news?

Weaver offers a helpful clue. Thomas Jefferson, he notes, while a fan of newspapers in his younger years, became disenchanted by them as he grew older. "[W]e find him in his seventieth year writing to John Adams: 'I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid, and I find myself much the happier.'" In essence, Jefferson exchanged the news media of his time for the thoughts of historians, mathematicians, scientists, and

theologians.

What if we did the same and exchanged much of our obsessive news consumption for the works of past thinkers, not only the ones Jefferson mentions, but other authors of Western civilization's great works?

Some might say we'd become hopelessly out of touch, but I question that. These thinkers, after all, provide us with a glimpse into the past. History repeats itself, and by becoming familiar with history, we grow to recognize patterns reoccurring in our own time, and (perhaps unfortunately) can make fairly educated guesses about what's coming next.

Furthermore, many of these past thinkers had a deeper sense of morality than we do these days. By immersing ourselves in their writings, we would not only get a better grasp on our situation in the broader historical sense, but we might also better understand the ethics, heart attitudes, and posture of the soul needed to weather these difficult times.

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