

# Book Reading and Americans' Political Attentiveness

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**Abstract:** Polls conducted for the *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center between 1994 and 2006 reveal that less than two-fifths of adults reported reading a book for pleasure the day before being interviewed. Young people are less likely than their elders to say they read a book "yesterday," and exposure to higher education does not make much difference. Reading books has salubrious effects on political attentiveness; reading's impact is statistically significant even when other key predictors of how closely people follow news of politics are taken into account.

**Keywords:** Book reading, political attentiveness, democratic citizenship, political participation, age-and-book-reading.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars need to pay more attention to the relationships between patterns of everyday life and political attitudes and behavior (Peterson, 1990, p. 7). Researchers have fruitfully analyzed the associations between demographic and socio-economic status factors---such as race, gender, education, and income---and political behavior, but have given short-shrift to the political consequences of everyday life experiences---such as reading books. The simple habit of reading books has been shown to sharpen and reinforce the mental skills democratic citizens need (Bauerlein, 2008; Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2000; Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter, 1999).

It is worrisome, therefore, if only half of American adults report doing some kind of literary reading in the year before they were interviewed (NEA, 2009). The National Endowment for the Arts' latest report on literary reading among American adults showed an increase from 47% in 2002 to 50% in 2008. At that, however, 2008's figure is still down by almost seven percentage points from 1982.

The National Endowment for the Arts' November, 2007 report included reading all kinds of books for pleasure; the result was the same as the 2004 report (NEA, 2007). Declining book reading had been especially pronounced among those between 18 and 24 (NEA, 2007). Other polls show the same results (Bauerlein, 2008, chap. 2). The Harry Potter phenomenon does not appear to have increased young people's book reading (Bauerlein, 2008; Benson, 2007; however, also see NEA, 2009).

This is a study of Americans' book reading between 1994 and 2006 and its impact on political attentiveness, which is a key facet of democratic citizenship (Galston, 2001).<sup>1</sup> People who read books for pleasure are more attentive to political news than non-readers. We look closely at persons aged 18-29, for the young may be harbingers of the future. If the NEA's report of reading among contemporary teenagers is any indication (2007, pp. 27-32), the future may be worrisome indeed (see also Bauerlein, 2008).

Most of the data come from "Media Consumption" polls conducted for the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press in April-May, 2002 (Pew Research Center, 2002), April-May, 2004 (Pew Research Center, 2004), and April-May, 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2006).<sup>2</sup> (The book reading query was asked of half the sample in 2002 and 2004, and two-thirds in 2006. The question about book reading for pleasure was not asked on the 2008 "Media Consumption" poll.) Some use will be made of polls probing "Technology in the American Household" in February, 1994 and June, 1995 (*Times Mirror* Center, 1994, 1995), as well as polls conducted in November, 1997 (Pew Research Center, 1998) and late September, 1999 (Pew Research Center, 1999). The *Times Mirror*/Pew Research Center's question asks people if they read a book the day before being interviewed. Data between 1994 and 2006 show that the day people are interviewed does not make a difference in the percentage claiming to have read a book "yesterday."

If one hopes that exposure to more formal schooling, particularly among the young, will enhance reading for pleasure, the "Technology in the Household" polls of 1994 and 1995, and the 2002-2006 "Media Consumption" polls cast a pall on that notion. For at least the last dozen years, young college educated Americans were not much more likely to claim to read books for pleasure than were their non-college educated age-peers. In 2006, for example, 37% of non-college educated young people (18-29) reported reading a book "yesterday," compared to 44% of their peers with at least some higher education experience. In every year for which data are available, less than half---sometimes well under half---of young Americans with at least some higher education reported reading a book for pleasure "yesterday" (see also AIR, 2006; Pryor *et al.*, 2007).

Formal schooling had a smaller impact on reports of book reading between 1994 and 2006, than it did prior to the 1980s (Bauerlein, 2008). Damon-Moore and Kaestle reported that, in 1949, just over half the college graduates said they were book readers, compared to 23% of high school graduate and only 10% of grade schoolers. As recently as 1971, college graduates were more than twice as likely as high school graduates to say they were book readers (50% vs. 23%; Damon-Moore & Kaestle, 1991, p. 194). Even in 1984, college graduates were 17 percentage points

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more likely to claim they were book readers than were those with high school diplomas (Damon-Moore & Kaestle, 1991, p. 194).

### BOOK READING FOR PLEASURE AMONG THE PUBLIC, 1994 - 2006

Table 1 depicts patterns of book reading “yesterday” in 1994, 1995, 2002, 2004, and 2006. People who replied “yes” were asked if the book was fiction or non-fiction; however, since we cannot establish the veracity of reports of reading fiction and non-fiction, we report only the percentage replying “yes.”

There was virtually no change in the frequency of reading books for pleasure between 1994 and 2006. Between three-fifths and two-thirds of American adults admitted they had not read a book for pleasure the day before being interviewed (see also Associated Press, 2007). Sixty-five percent of the public admitted they had not read a book for pleasure “yesterday” in November, 1997 and September, 1999 (Pew Research Center, 1998, 1999).

These are generous estimates. Any time respondents are asked about socially desirable activities, such as book reading, the temptation to “misreport” is probably too great for some to resist. In addition, polls and surveys miss approximately a quarter of adults (Brehm, 1993; Smith, 1983), and those unlikely to be respondents are also unlikely to read books.

A recent report of reading in the U.S. indicates that 80% of American families did not buy or read a book “last year,” and 70% of American adults have not been in a bookstore in the last five years (Candalmo, 2007). An AP-Ipsos poll conducted August 6-8, 2007 showed that 27% of adults admitted they had not read a book “last year” (Fram, 2007).

Polls between 1994 and 2006 also show that people aged 18-29 were less likely to report reading a book for pleasure “yesterday” than were their elders, although the differences are small on occasion. In 2006, however, not only were those aged 18-29 slightly more likely to report reading a book for pleasure “yesterday” than those between 30 and 44 years of age (40% vs. 36%), young people were just as likely as those over 45 to report reading a book.

When we looked at the simultaneous impact of formal schooling and age on book reading, we found that higher education made less difference among the youngest age grouping than among those aged 30 or older. In 2006, the gap between the best educated young and their age-peers who had never attended an institution of higher education

was 19 percentage points. Among those 65 or older, the difference was 36 percentage points. The spread among those aged 45 to 64 was 25 percentage points. Finally, the difference among those aged 30 to 44 was 24 percentage points.

The Pew Research Center’s question asks about books read “yesterday” that were not connected to schooling or work. Perhaps young people who attend college or university are so preoccupied with reading as part of their courses that they do not have time to read for pleasure. In addition, since reading books for pleasure inversely correlates with performance in college/university (Astin, 1997, pp. 190-191), students seeking better grades may prefer to “hit the textbooks.”

Before exculpating young people attending institutions of higher learning, however, consider Bauerlein’s observation that the average college student watches TV for 3 hours and 41 minutes per day (2006, p. B6). Given low levels of knowledge of history, literature and the arts, politics, and geography among young people with higher education exposure (Bauerlein, 2006, pp. B7-B8; ISI, 2006, 2007, 2008), we are hard-pressed to believe that college students spend much time reading to acquire information on these subjects.

The Pew Research Center’s data from 2002-2006 dovetail with findings from the National Center for Education Statistics’ analysis of literacy among American adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NCES, 2006). For our purposes, the NCES’s most important finding was that every type of literacy declined among higher education graduates between 1992 and 2003 (NCES, 2006, p. 15).

As Bauerlein noted, young college educated people have imbibed deeply of popular culture, and there is a powerful and growing disconnect between that culture and reading. It would also appear that Austin’s (2003) claim that today’s higher education students have shorter attention spans, for whatever the reason (see Jackson, 2008), may have some merit (see also Carlson, 2005; Carr, 2008; Sacks, 1996).

Would a longer span of time alter significantly the message in Table 1? Between February, 1937, and May, 2005, the Gallup Organization asked the same question 13 times: “Do you happen to be reading any books or novels at this time?” Between 1937 and the early 1950s, the percentage responding “yes” fell from 32 to 18. Gallup data indicate that since the early 1950s, percentages of respondents reporting reading a book have increased. In mid-December, 1990, 37% of the public said “yes,” and in late May, 2005, approximately half the public (47%) replied

**Table 1. Americans’ Book Reading in 1994, 1995, 2002, 2004, and 2006 Question: “Not including school or work related books, did you spend any time reading a book yesterday?”**

	1994	1995	2002	2004	2006
<b>Yes</b>	34.3%	32.1%	36.4%	37.0%	38.0%
<b>No</b>	65.7	67.9	63.6	63.0	62.0
<b>(N = )</b>	(2,411)	(2,447)	(1,551)	(1,491)	(2,009)

Sources: The *Times Mirror* Center’s 1994 and 1995 “Technology in the American Household” polls and the Pew Research Center’s “Media Consumption” polls of April-May 2002, April-May 2004, and April-May 2006.

affirmatively (Moore, 2005). In short, the latest Gallup Poll indicates higher levels of book reading than (Table 1) suggests, probably because the Gallup query does not exclude required reading for business or school (NEA, 2007).

Based on a poll conducted in late Spring, 1945, Link and Hopf (1946, 57) classified the public into (a) "active readers"—the 50% of the sample who reported reading a book "yesterday" or "within the past month;" (b) "inactive readers"—the 21% of the sample who claimed to have read a book "within the past year"; and (c) "nonreaders"—the 29% of the sample who said they had not read a book within the past five years.

Not surprisingly, college graduates were much more likely to be active readers than were those whose formal schooling ended in high school or grade school (71% vs. 41%; p. 60). Women were slightly more likely to be active readers than were men (53% vs. 46%; p. 66). Finally, and perhaps most interesting, young people—i.e., those under 30—were more likely to be active readers than were those 60 and older (66% vs. 39%; p. 63).

It is interesting to note that the Gallup Poll's latest survey of book reading among the American public found the same pattern, with one important exception (Moore, 2005). Women were eleven percentage points more likely than men to report reading a book or novel "at present" (53% vs. 42%), and persons with postgraduate college experience were far more likely to be book/novel readers than those whose formal schooling ended in high school or before (74% vs. 33%). However, the relationship between age and book/novel reading had been reversed. Those under 30 were much less likely than their "elders" to be book readers (40% vs. at least 47%).

## READING AND POLITICAL ATTENTIVENESS

Declining book reading is especially important if it can be shown that Americans who do not read books are different citizens than those who do. Gallup's 2005 poll suggests they may be. According to Moore, "[p]eople following current events are also more likely to read books" (2005). The 2002-2006 data permit a more detailed assessment of this question.

Respondents were also asked how closely they were following stories in the media about 13-14 subjects, including political figures and events in Washington, DC, international affairs, and local government (see Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2004). The options were "not at all closely" (coded 1), "not very closely" (2), "somewhat closely" (3), and "very closely" (4).

For each year, the three news stories were combined to form an Attentiveness to Political News Scale which could range from 3, indicating very low attentiveness to 12, designating very high attentiveness. The scale had a coefficient *alpha* of .74 in 2002 and 2004, and .73 in 2006 (see Zeller & Carmines, 1980, pp. 56-58). In 2002, the scale's mean score was 8.3, and the standard deviation was 2.3; in 2004, the scale's mean score was 8.4, and the standard deviation was 2.4; the mean score was 8.1 in 2006, and the standard deviation was 2.3.

The 2002-2006 data tell the same story. People who read books for pleasure are more likely than non-readers to pay greater attention to news stories about national, international, and local politics. In short, it makes a difference to an important facet of democratic citizenship if people read books for pleasure (see also Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2000; Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter, 1999).

## BOOK READING AND POLITICAL ATTENTIVENESS IN A MULTIVARIATE CONTEXT

The relationship between reading books for pleasure and heed paid to political affairs becomes moot if it were found to be insignificant once other the effects of other predictors of political attentiveness were taken into account. To ascertain that, a multivariate statistical technique is needed.

We have chosen to rely on ordinary least squares regression, a technique which makes stringent demands on the data, but has been found to be a robust procedure, well-suited to the type of data used here (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2002). In the interests of simplicity, we have chosen to model the process as additive rather than multiplicative. The data come from the Pew Research Center's "Media Consumption" polls of 2002, 2004, and 2006, which have the same variables. The dependent variable is the Attentiveness to Political News Scale, which was described in the previous section.

In addition to the question plumbing whether or not the respondent read a book for pleasure "yesterday," we selected eleven predictors known to affect how much attention people pay to political affairs (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, & Brady, 1995): age, education, family income, gender, race, how often the respondent watches the news on national network TV, how often he or she watches the news on cable television, how often he or she reads a daily newspaper, how often he or she gets the news while online, and the strength of one's party identification and of her or his ideology.<sup>3</sup> (The last two variables are used as partial surrogates for political interest. Strong ideologues and party identifiers are more politically interested than moderates or independents.) The data are depicted in Table 2.

The table depicts each predictor's unstandardized regression coefficient (*b*) and its standard error (*s.e.b*), a T-test for each predictor and its level of statistical significance ( $\beta$ ), and two indicators of model fit: the adjusted  $R^2$  and the standard error of the estimate (S.E.E.).

There are basically three facets of these data that should be considered. First, someone familiar with the factors that resonate with attentiveness to public affairs will find these models familiar. Statistically significant predictors of heed paid to politics, such as education, age, gender, on so on, are "the usual suspects" rounded up when scholars seek the variables that enhance or reduce the level of Americans' attention to public affairs.

The first finding lends credence to the second message in Table 2. In each year, reading a book for pleasure was a statistically significant predictor of attentiveness to political news, even when other important predictors of political attentiveness are controlled. This is basic: *reading a book, whether it is a work of fiction or non-fiction, enhances the*

**Table 2. OLS Regression of the Attentiveness to Political News Scale on a Dozen Predictors, 2002, 2004, and 2006**

Predictor Year = 2002	<i>b</i>	S.E. <i>b</i>	T =	<i>p</i> =
Age	.020	.004	5.309	.000
Race	.035	.177	0.200	.841
Gender	.436	.118	3.704	.000
Education	.152	.025	5.981	.000
Family Income (“Last Year”)	.050	.033	1.516	.130
Strength of Partisanship	.151	.058	2.592	.010
Strength of Ideology	.097	.050	1.926	.054
Frequency of Watching Network TV News	.402	.053	7.582	.000
Frequency of Watching Cable TV News	.339	.055	6.197	.000
Frequency of Reading a Newspaper	.416	.074	5.643	.000
Frequency of Getting News Online	.104	.035	2.977	.003
Read a Book “Yesterday”	.417	.125	3.349	.001
Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = .294 S.E.E. = 2.861				
Predictor Year = 2004	<i>b</i>	S.E. <i>b</i>	T =	<i>p</i> =
Age	.027	.004	7.140	.000
Race	.201	.175	1.148	.251
Gender	.280	.119	2.345	.019
Education	.081	.026	3.139	.002
Family Income (“Last Year”)	.079	.031	2.513	.012
Strength of Partisanship	.118	.071	1.647	.100
Strength of Ideology	.143	.081	1.760	.079
Frequency of Watching Network TV News	.372	.054	6.932	.000
Frequency of Watching Cable TV News	.412	.055	7.538	.000
Frequency of Reading a Newspaper	.365	.060	6.039	.000
Frequency of Getting News Online	.156	.034	4.563	.000
Read a Book “Yesterday”	.294	.125	2.354	.019
Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = .284 S.E.E. = 2.607				
Predictor Year = 2006	<i>b</i>	S.E. <i>b</i>	T =	<i>p</i> =
Age	.028	.006	4.734	.000
Race	-.543	.282	-1.923	.055
Gender	.629	.165	3.811	.019
Education	.133	.040	3.313	.001
Family Income (“Last Year”)	.101	.043	2.369	.018
Strength of Partisanship	.297	.110	2.695	.007
Strength of Ideology	.485	.112	4.312	.000
Frequency of Watching Network TV News	.167	.075	2.216	.027
Frequency of Watching Cable TV News	.109	.077	1.429	.154
Frequency of Reading a Newspaper	.603	.081	7.450	.000
Frequency of Getting News Online	.337	.096	3.526	.000
Read a Book “Yesterday”	.470	.169	2.775	.006
Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = .299 S.E.E. = 2.728				

Sources: The Pew Research Center’s “Media Consumption” polls of April-May 2002, April-May 2004, and April-May 2006.

amount of attention Americans pay to news about national, international, and local politics.

Third, what are we to make of these models' quality? Although the indicators of model fit are modest, they are generally comparable to what secondary analysts of survey data are used to seeing. It is likely that explanatory capacity is sapped by measurement error. We would also expect to see an increase in explanatory capacity if a clear-cut indicator of psychological involvement in public affairs had been available on these polls.

Before leaving this section, it is important to note that book reading is not related to a two-item Attention to Economic News Scale. (The scale, which ranges from 2 to 8, is constructed by adding how closely respondents follow news about business and finance and how closely they pay heed to consumer news. The scale's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .624 in 2002, .584 in 2004, and .593 in 2006) When the scale is regressed on the same twelve predictors as the models depicted in Table 2, book reading was never a statistically significant predictor.

We also need to know if book reading were a statistically significant predictor of how closely people follow other types of news stories, particularly "soft" news topics such as sports, entertainment, and crime (Baum, 2003, p. 6). To answer that question, a separate set of OLS regression equations was estimated in which the same twelve predictors were used as before. (The data are not shown to save space.)

The dependent variable is the Attentiveness to Soft News Scale, which was constructed by adding how closely people said they followed news stories about sports, entertainment, and crime. The scale ranged from 3 to 12; average scores were just under 8 in each year. The scales' reliability was adequate, but considerably lower than that for the Attentiveness to Political News scales.

The key question, for present purposes, is whether book reading was a statistically significant predictor of attentiveness to soft news. In two of the three years (2004 and 2006), it was not. The only occasion when book reading was a significant predictor (2002), its sign was negative. In other words, in 2002, book readers were less attentive to soft news than non-readers.

Basically, the Pew Research Center's three "Media Consumption" polls indicate that, although reading a book for pleasure has salubrious consequences for attentiveness to political news, which is an important component of democratic citizenship, book reading is mostly orthogonal to heed paid to soft news stories such as sports, entertainment, and crime.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is worrisome that over three-fifths of adult Americans said they had not read a book for pleasure the day before being interviewed between 1994 and 2006. Birkerts (2006) may have overstated the case, but we share his pessimistic assessment about the future.

Moreover, reading books for pleasure continues to resonate with political attentiveness. (Recall that book reading was not significantly related to heed paid to economic news or to soft news.) More research, tapping a

wider variety of activities and orientations alleged to be connected to democratic citizenship, is needed before firm conclusions can be reached.

We are especially concerned by patterns of book reading among today's higher education students. Faculty have bemoaned the difficulty in getting students to do assigned readings for a long time, but such lamentations in recent years seem louder than ever.

Someone focusing on the education gap in book reading among young people can lose sight of the fact that *Times Mirror/Pew* Research Center data consistently show that, at best, two-fifths of young people with at least some higher education experience claimed they read a book for pleasure "yesterday." If book reading enhances attentiveness to news about politics, this is a disturbing trend, one meriting continued monitoring. Democracy's supporters need to keep a wary eye on the American public's patterns of book reading.

## NOTES

- 1) Although voting is another important facet of democratic citizenship, two problems are encountered with self-reports of turnout on election day. First, when asked if they engaged in a socially approved act such as going to the polls on election day, many people "mis-report," thereby inflating poll/survey figures (see Asher, 2007). Second, most of the polls utilized here were conducted several months after a national election, which means forgetfulness could introduce even more error in self-reports.
- 2) These polls were conducted for the *Times Mirror/Pew* Research Center for The People & The Press. They are conducted by telephone, and intended to represent the voting-age population of the US. The data were made available to us by the Center. We wish to thank Andrew Kohut and Scott Keeter. We are responsible for all analyses and interpretations.
- 3) The question about book reading is dichotomous, coded 0 and 1. Age is the respondent's actual age, and ranges from 18 to 97. Education is the last year of school completed by the respondent, and has seven categories, ranging from 4 (for none through the eighth grade) to 18 (for advanced college experience). Family income ("last year") has nine categories, ranging from less than \$10,000 to \$150,000 or more. Gender and race are dichotomous, coded 0 (for women and African Americans) and 1 (for men and whites). Frequency of watching network TV news, cable news, reading a daily newspaper, or getting the news while online have four categories: never, hardly ever, sometimes, and regularly. Strength of partisanship has five categories: DK/refused, no preference or other party, independent, partisan leaner, and partisan identifier. Strength of ideology has four categories: DK/refused, moderate, ideologue, and extreme ideologue.

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