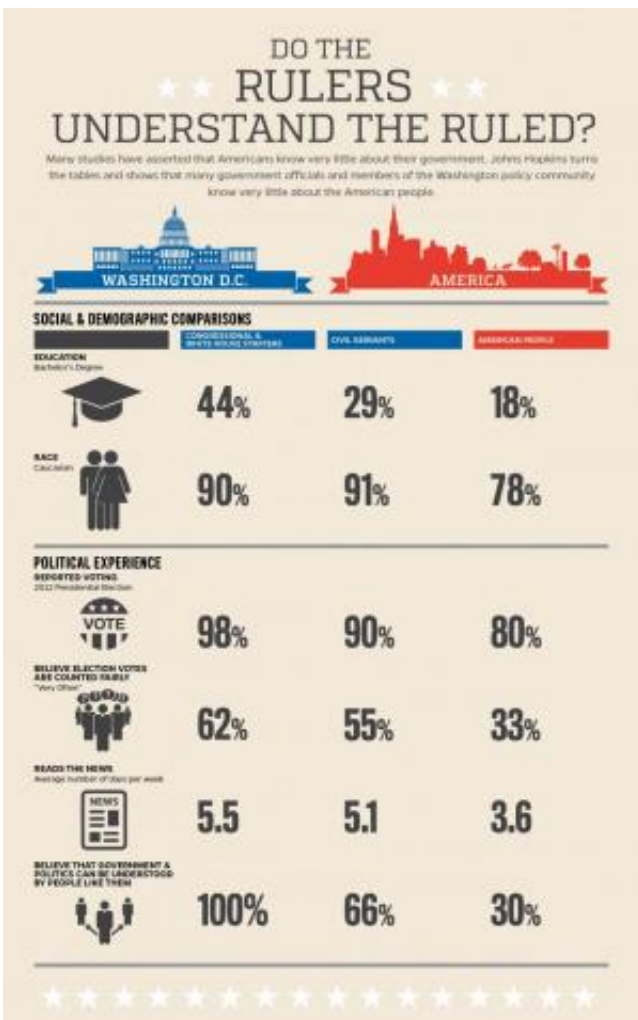


# When rulers can't understand the ruled

September 15 2014



This is a summary of some of the findings of a comparison of Washington insiders and the American people as a whole. Credit: Jennifer Bachner and Benjamin Ginsberg/JHU

Johns Hopkins University political scientists wanted to know if America's unelected officials have enough in common with the people they govern to understand them.

The answer: Not really.

Surveying 850 people who either work in the [federal government](#) or directly with it, researchers found that the inside-the-Beltway crowd has very little in common with America at large. Washington insiders are more likely to be white. They are more educated. Their salaries are higher, they vote more often and they have more faith in the fairness of elections. They are probably Democrat and liberal. They more diligently follow the news. And they think the mechanics of government couldn't be easier to comprehend.

"The elements of difference we have identified between the rulers and the ruled—demographic, experiential, partisan and ideological—give us some reason to suspect that the two groups may not perceive the political world in the same way," the researchers write. "Taken together, these elements could well create a substantial cognitive and perceptual gulf between official and quasi-official Washington on the one hand and the American public on the other."

The researchers, Jennifer Bachner and Benjamin Ginsberg, asked hundreds of questions in 2013 of those who work in [federal agencies](#), on Capitol Hill and in other Washington policy jobs. They presented some of their findings recently at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in a talk called The Civic Distance Between the Rulers and Ruled. Complete results of their research will be featured in their forthcoming book What the Government Thinks of the People.

Americans and federal workers couldn't be more different, they found:

Ninety-one percent of those who work for federal agencies are white, versus 78 percent of the public.

In 2012, federal worker compensation averaged \$81,704, or 48 percent more than the private sector average of \$54,995, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. That puts federal workers in the top 10 percent of American earners.

Sixty percent of those who work on the Hill are Democrats versus 35 percent of Americans at large.

In the 2012 presidential election, 97 percent of congressional and White House staffers voted versus 80 percent of other Americans. Sixty-two percent of those Hill staffers believe election votes are counted fairly "very often" compared with 33 percent of other Americans.

Washingtonians read the news at least five days a week compared with about three days a week for the rest of the country.

And while 100 percent of congressional and White House staffers believe government and politics can be understood by people like them, only 30 percent of regular Americans feel that way.

The data on "average Americans" is largely drawn from the 2012 American National Election Study.

All told, Bachner and Ginsberg found, if random Americans were dropped into the offices of a Washington administrative agency or into a lunch at a Washington power restaurant, it would feel and sound to them like another planet. These crucial differences, the researchers say, lead to entirely divergent philosophies on policies, priorities and government's ultimate purpose.

"Official Washington views the public through jaundiced eyes, believing that ordinary Americans are uninformed and misguided and that policymakers should ignore them," Ginsberg says. "The government's lack of trust in the people reflects the civic distance between the American people and their government as much as any political reality. Nevertheless, what the government thinks of the people affects how it governs, especially the chance that policy will be influenced by citizen preferences."

"Some say American democracy would be strengthened if the people received better civic education," Ginsberg continues. "We argue that it is America's governing elite that needs civic education, focusing on the responsibilities of officials in a democracy."

Bachner is director of the Master of Science in Government Analytics program at Johns Hopkins. She teaches courses in statistical analysis, survey research, public opinion, elections and American political behavior. Her research examines coalition building in Congress, [government](#) responsiveness and the growth of online education.

Ginsberg is a professor of political science and director of the university's Washington Center for the Study of American Government. His research interests include American politics, Jewish history, higher education policy, and the societal impact of war and violence. He is the author of 24 books, most recently *The Worth of War*.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

Citation: When rulers can't understand the ruled (2014, September 15) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-rulers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.