

The Dimwits are Always with us

✘ I don't recall ever hearing the term "low-information voter" before this year, but I have been familiar with the concept for more than a half-century. Low-information voters are those who know nothing about politics and politicians, but who insist on voting anyway.

Both Republicans and Democrats are using the term to describe the bulk of the people who voted for the other party's candidate in the 2012 presidential election. And it is true that they can be found on both sides of the political spectrum.

Some observers found it impossible to understand how there could still be voters who hadn't yet decided between the polar opposites Barack Obama and Mitt Romney as the campaign reached its final days. However, to me it was easy enough to understand if one is familiar with low-information voters.

The low-information voters have always been with us, but you may have known them by other names. While taking a presidential poll in Philadelphia during the 1960 election campaign, I encountered many such voters, and coined the term "dimwit fringe" to describe them when I wrote a magazine article about the experience.

I'm not so sure that they represent only a fringe in today's political environment. It appears that they have captured some of the middle ground as well, although I can't speak with authority, because that opinion poll I conducted 52 years ago was my last.

I hope I don't have to remind you that John F. Kennedy ran against, and beat, Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 presidential election. It was one of the more interesting match-ups of my

lifetime, and I decided to poll the citizens of Philadelphia for a local newspaper where I worked.

I correctly predicted that Kennedy would beat Nixon in that city by an unprecedented margin, but to me that was not the most interesting part of the story. What was more interesting was how horribly uninformed many of the prospective voters seemed.

Because the Kennedy-Nixon race was so close nationwide – decided by a margin of two-tenths of one percent of the electorate – and because so many voters were so obviously confused about the candidates, I came up with the hypothesis that the election may actually have been decided by accident.

For example, I interviewed one voter who said that he was voting for Kennedy because the Communists helped Nixon to become vice president. You could say that this was true, but only in a twisted sense. Nixon moved up from congressman to senator largely because of his attacks on Communism, and as a senator from California, a large state, he attracted Dwight Eisenhower's attention when the general was picking a running-mate.

Another voter said that she was voting for Kennedy because he was born in England, and therefore an authority on foreign affairs. Kennedy's father had been the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, but Kennedy, like all presidential candidates before 2008 (and maybe even after), was born in this country.

The fact that Kennedy had chosen Lyndon Johnson as his running mate seemed a trifle risky at the time, because Johnson, a southerner, might alienate black voters. But half the blacks I interviewed had either never heard of Johnson, or had no opinion about him. One black man said: "Oh, Jackson (sic) is a nice guy."

One retired gentleman told me that he looked askance at Kennedy, because "his wife isn't cultured enough to sit in the

White House.” I don’t know how well you remember Jackie Kennedy as First Lady, but she oozed culture from every pore – annoyingly so.

A production-line worker told me he was wary of Nixon because, in watching the TV debates, he discovered that “Nixon ain’t got no smile on his face.”

As to the religious question – the fact that Kennedy was a Roman Catholic – a taxi driver told me: “Bring the Pope over. Who cares?”

An office clerk, sizing up Nixon’s running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, who was Eisenhower’s UN ambassador, scornfully observed: “He only knows one thing: the United Nations.”

I ran into an elderly white man with black neighbors who didn’t know what the term “civil rights” meant, and a housewife who hadn’t the slightest idea what either Kennedy or Nixon had said about foreign policy.

I came away thanking heaven for the two-party system. If the voters weren’t pretty much forced to limit themselves to a choice between two candidates, if there were multiple candidates with a chance to win, who knows who we might have gotten as our leader.

On second thought, what are we to make of the last two presidential elections?