

Take the time to learn about your candidates

Complaining about politicians is a national pastime. We blame them for everything, then whine that the country is “headed in the wrong direction.”

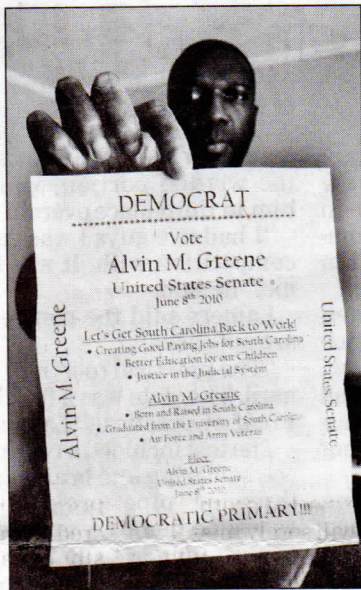
But who puts these people in charge? Who gives them the authority to make and enforce our laws? We do. And we do a pretty lousy job of it. More effort goes into qualifying and selecting a waitress at the local truck stop than we put into selecting people to lead our government. (As a consequence, most truck stops have pretty good waitresses.)

Recently, South Carolina voters hopefully embarrassed themselves by electing Alvin Greene as their Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate. If you don't know who Alvin Greene is, then you really need to brush up on what's happening to our democratic process. But you're not alone, because apparently the 59 percent of voters who elected him didn't know who he was, either.

Alvin Greene was a down-on-his-luck indigent. Unemployed, involuntarily discharged from both the U.S. Air Force and Army, facing felony charges for showing pornography to a female student, barely coherent, Alvin Greene filed campaign papers but didn't run any kind of campaign. Nonetheless, voters elected him as their Democratic candidate for one of the highest political offices in the nation. Some are alleging this must have been a Republican conspiracy. But I think the real explanation is even more frightening.

In the midst of the last presidential primary, I asked college juniors and seniors in my classes to list on paper as many presidential candidates as they could name. Then I collected the papers and compiled the results. Seventy-eight percent of students knew Hillary Clinton was

**DAN
LINSSEN**
Commentary



The South Carolina Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, Alvin Greene, holds his own personal copy of his campaign flier he used in Manning, S.C. Many voted for him in the Democratic primary without knowing about his background. **File/AP**

a candidate. Fifty-five percent identified Barack Obama. From there the numbers plunged fast: Rudy Giuliani — 29 percent; John Edwards — 20 percent; John McCain and Mitt Romney — 12 percent. All others (Mike Huckabee, Joe Biden, et al) had less than 10 percent recognition.

How could upper-level college students not know who the presidential candidates were? The answer: Apathy. So, in like fashion, I think that many South Carolina voters saw a picture of Greene a day or two before the

election (he does look good in a suit) and decided to vote for him.

South Carolina is far away, but last week a poll showed that right here in Wisconsin, 62 percent of voters were paying little or no attention to the gubernatorial race, and two-thirds were following the U.S. Senate race “only a little or not at all.”

You can't rely on the television commercials. Currently, one ad implies Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett created all kinds of jobs during his tenure, while the opposition's ad claims Barrett lost thousands of jobs. A Russ Feingold ad claims his main opponent, Ron Johnson, favors oil drilling in the Great Lakes, while a Johnson ad rebuts this as mud-slinging lies. (Perhaps media outlets should refuse campaign ads that don't present validated, factual information. But I suppose the revenue windfall each election season is too hard to pass up.) If your voting decision is based on little more than campaign advertising, then you place our political fate into the hands of spin doctors.

This fall we elect all our congressmen, one-third of our senators, many governors and thousands of state and local officials. Please start taking the time now to learn about our candidates. Let's try to know as much about who we elect as we do about our first-round NFL draft pick. Read about the candidates in the newspapers, attend town hall meetings or debates, spend a few minutes talking with local candidates who come to your door and find out what they truly believe in.

Then choose based on their qualifications, not on their smile. Maybe then we wouldn't need to complain about politicians. Dan LinsSEN of Green Bay is author of the book “Who's to Blame?” to be released later this year. You can follow his blog at www.whos-to-blame.blogspot.com.