

Facts About Civic & Political Literacy In America

How Informed Are American Citizens? -- What The Research Says --

Over the last ten years or so, numerous research studies and polls have produced very similar data about what Americans know about how government works, about the big issues of our time and the policies that address them, about where politicians stand on those issues and policies, and the historical knowledge needed to make wise judgments about these things. The results serve as indelible testimony to the depth of the civic and political literacy problem America faces.

In 2005, the Knight Foundation commissioned one of the largest studies -- a two year, million dollar research project. Summing up the results, then president Hodding Carter III said: "These results are not only disturbing; they are dangerous."

"Americans Fail The Test Of Civic Literacy" screamed the headline of a 2008 report from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. "It can truly be said we are suffering from an epidemic of civic ignorance," sums up Lt. General Josiah Bunting III, chairman of the group's National Civic Literacy Board. ISI is a conservative-leaning organization, but their study is comprehensive and objective. Regardless, the results are the same whether the source leans left, right, or otherwise.

Here are some bullet points from various studies in recent years. Links to the full reports are below.

- 64% of Americans can't name the three branches of government, or describe what they do.
- most of us don't know which party controls Congress at any given time.
- half can't describe the difference between liberals and conservatives
- most can't name their own members of Congress or their US Senators
- nearly half don't know that states have 2 Senators
- 54% cannot name a single Supreme Court Justice
- 41% cannot identify the Speaker of the House -- even in a multiple-choice question.
- only a bare majority can name even one basic purpose of the Constitution
- more citizens can name "American Idol" judges than can name the 1st Amendment rights
- 39% of us cannot name any of the freedoms in the 1st Amendment
- only one in 1000 can name all five rights in the 1st Amendment
- 35% feel the First Amendment goes too far. An additional 21% are unsure
- almost half think the president has the authority to suspend the U.S. Constitution
- 60% believe he can appoint judges to the federal courts without the approval of the Senate
- 50% feel newspapers should not be allowed to publish stories without government approval
- only 34% know that it's Congress that declares war
- only 35% know that Congress can override a presidential veto
- for those under age 40, the number rises to 54%

Report cards like these are just incredible in a nation that claims to value education so highly. And these are just civics-101 questions. It only gets worse when measuring knowledge levels about actual issues and public policies that affect not only the nation, but the quality of our own individual lives, and the lives of our families.

Here are just a few more tip of the iceberg tidbits regarding our grasp of issues, current events, and relevant history:

- 40% of us cannot name a single fossil fuel
- nearly half can't name a renewable energy source
- 55% believe that the Constitution establishes a Christian nation
- 30% cannot identify the Holocaust
- only one in seven young people can find Iraq on a map
- as late as 2007, 41% still believed Saddam Hussein was directly involved in 9/11
- 62% believe that the making up of stories is a widespread problem in the news media

And in foreign affairs, our knowledge levels drop even further through the floor. The Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad found that "America's ignorance of the world is a national liability." Others consider it an outright national security threat.

The bottom line is the stark reality that the vast majority of Americans are willfully ignorant about the issues, policies, politicians, history, and structure of government needed for informed participation in democracy. And this is a problem that is even more critical today, when American democracy needs all the wisdom we can get.

The good news is that, for most of us, our ignorance is by choice -- we have chosen not to stay informed. Meaning that, in theory, there's a simple remedy -- make a different choice.

This point can't be emphasized enough. We are not a stupid people. Far from it. We're actually more educated than any generation in history. But we simply haven't been paying attention as citizens. And that's true no matter our party identification, or age, or race, or gender, or economic status. In an era when nearly every major newspaper and newsmagazine and political website is available online for free – it's hard to argue there's any excuse anymore. We all lead busy lives, but life's about setting priorities. Let's hope more of us re-set our civic priorities in the years ahead.

"Song Of A Citizen" will be making that case over the next few years. We need your help to ensure that America is listening.

For more info about the state of the American political mind, check out the following:

Political Knowledge Research Studies and Polls -- 1997 to 2011

(in descending chronological order)

[Department of Education](#) - May 2011 “What young Americans know about Civics “
[How Dumb Are We?](#) - March 2011 - Newsweek – “The Country's Future Is Imperiled By Our Ignorance”
[Political Knowledge Update](#) - March, 2011 – “Pew Research Center for the People & The Press”
[Enlightened Citizenship](#) – 2011 – “Intercollegiate Studies Institute”
[Pew Research Center](#) -- January 2010 – “Political News IQ Update”
[The Shaping of the American Mind](#) – 2010 – “Intercollegiate Studies Institute”
[First Amendment Center](#) – 2009 – “State of the First Amendment “
[Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs](#) -- Sept. 2009 – “75% of Oklahoma High School Students Can't Name the First President of the U.S.”
[Public Agenda](#) -- Aug. '09 – “What The Public Knows About Energy”
[Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates](#) -- June 2009 – “C-SPAN Supreme Court Survey about citizen knowledge of the Supreme Court”
[Intercollegiate Studies Institute](#) -- American Civic Literacy Program – 2008 – “Americans Fail The Test Of Civic Literacy”
[National Endowment for the Arts](#) -- Nov. 2007 – “Study links declines in reading with poorer academic and social outcomes”
[Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) -- Oct. 2007 – “Study on Judicial Elections reveal facts about low public knowledge of Supreme Court”
[Newsweek](#) -- Sept. 2007 – Dunce-Cap Nation survey called "What Do We Know?"
[Pew Research Center for the People & The Press](#) -- April 2007 – “Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News & Information Revolutions”
[Knight Foundation -- Future Of The First Amendment](#) “Survey Finds First Amendment Is Being Left Behind in U.S. High Schools”
[First Amendment Center](#) – 2007 – “Americans' Views Mixed on Basic Freedoms”
[Drum Major Institute](#) -- Sept. 2006 – “How Civic Education Died -- and why we need it back”
[Zogby International](#) -- Aug. 2006 – “More Americans Know Snow White's Dwarfs Than Supreme Court Judges”
[McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum](#) -- March 2006 – “Americans' Awareness of First Amendment Freedoms”
[National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) – 2006 – “Reports on what students know about civics”
[The Nation's Civic Report Card](#) – 2006 –
[Program on International Policy Attitudes \(PIPA\)](#) -- Oct. 2003 – “Misperceptions, The Media, and the Iraq War”
[Columbia University Law School study](#) -- May, 2002 – “What Americans Don't Know About Our Constitution--and Why It Matters”
[National Constitution Center](#) – 1997 – “Startling Lack of Constitutional Knowledge”