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Americans' civics knowledge increases but still has a long way to go

*There are clashes involving the three branches of government –
and this year more Americans can say what those branches are*

PHILADELPHIA – The past few years have seen contention between Congress and the president over budgets and immigration, disputes over the limits of executive power, contested confirmation hearings for two Supreme Court justices, and lawsuits involving members of Congress and the president.

The good news is that amid all this, the American public knows more about the Constitution and the separation of powers than in the recent past.

On various topics, the 2019 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey finds more U.S. adults responding correctly to questions about civics and constitutional rights. Although many still show a surprising lack of knowledge about the Constitution, there are signs of improvement.

The survey, conducted in August by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#), finds that 2 in 5 American adults (39%) correctly named the three branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial. That is the highest in five years, statistically the same as the prior high of 38% in 2013 and 2011 and a substantial increase over last year, when 32% could do the same.

The value of high school civics – and news consumption

The survey found a link between high school civics classes and civics knowledge. A regression analysis showed that people who said they took high school civics were more likely to know the answers to six survey “knowledge” questions, including naming the branches of government. The same held true for people who said they were greater consumers of the news, whether print, television, or online.

“While this marks an improvement, the overall results remain dismal,” said [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#), director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. “A quarter of U.S. adults can name only one of the three branches of government and more than a fifth can’t name any. The resilience of our system of government is best protected by an informed citizenry. And civics education and attention to news increase that likelihood.”

Congress is considering a measure to enhance civics education by appropriating \$30 million to “prioritize innovative civics learning and teaching” in elementary, middle, and high schools. The [Civics Learning Act of 2019](#), sponsored by Rep. Alcee L. Hastings (D., Fl.) and 62 cosponsors,

cites the Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey and notes that a “lack of knowledge on the basics of the structure of our democratic republic creates an increasingly ill-prepared electorate which overtime [*sic*] has, and will continue to, contribute to a weakened democracy.”

The survey, released for Constitution Day (Sept. 17), was conducted August 16 to 27, 2019, for the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania by [SSRS](#), an independent research company. Interviews were conducted with 1,104 U.S. adults, ages 18 and older, including 770 via cell phone and 38 in Spanish. The margin of error was ± 3.6 percentage points. For the questions and more details, download the [Appendix](#).

The Supreme Court, immigration, and overriding a veto

Evidence of growing civics knowledge isn't seen only in the three branches question. Correct responses to other knowledge questions are at or near highs for this survey, which has been conducted 10 times since 2006. For example:

- What a divided Supreme Court decision means: When asked what it means if the U.S. Supreme Court rules 5-4 on a case, 59% of respondents correctly agreed with the statement “The decision is the law and needs to be followed” – the highest response in seven APPC surveys that asked this question since 2007. (Over that time, the wording of the question has changed slightly.)
- The rights of people in the United States illegally: 55% correctly said it's inaccurate to state that people who are in the U.S. illegally do not have any rights under the U.S. Constitution. In other words, most respondents know that people who are in the U.S. illegally have some rights under the Constitution.* Forty percent incorrectly thought it was accurate. That's the reverse of the response in 2017, when most got it wrong and thought that people in the U.S. illegally did not have any rights under the Constitution.
- Overriding a presidential veto: 53% correctly said it takes a two-thirds majority of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto, statistically unchanged from prior years.

The Second Amendment and more

Most respondents correctly answered questions about a Second Amendment right, protection against self-incrimination, and the way the Constitution resolves a conflict between the Supreme Court and the president:

- 83% correctly said it was accurate to say that the U.S. Supreme Court has held that a citizen has a constitutional right to own a handgun;
- 63% correctly said it was inaccurate to say that the Constitution allows a judge to insist that a defendant testify at their own trial;
- 61% correctly said if the Supreme Court and the president disagree on whether an action by the president is constitutional, the responsibility for deciding constitutionality resides with the court;
- 55% correctly said that Democrats control the House of Representatives and 61% correctly said that Republicans control the Senate (in each case, a quarter of respondents did not know or were unsure).

Constitution Day and civics

The [Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey](#) is released by APPC for Constitution Day, which celebrates the signing of the Constitution in 1787. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's activities to enhance civics education include [Annenberg Classroom](#), which offers free classroom resources for teaching the Constitution, and the [Civics Renewal Network](#) (CRN), a coalition of over 30 nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations seeking to raise the visibility of civics education by providing free, high-quality resources for teachers of all grade levels.

CRN offers a [Constitution Day Teacher Toolkit](#) for classrooms. [Annenberg Classroom](#) recently released the video "[The 19th Amendment: A Woman's Right to Vote](#)," chronicling the struggle for equal rights, one year before the centennial celebration of the 19th Amendment.

The U.S. Courts, another CRN partner, are [celebrating Constitution Day](#) with a dozen naturalization ceremonies at major league and minor league baseball stadiums. Major league teams hosting ceremonies over the coming days include the Philadelphia Phillies, Minnesota Twins, and St. Louis Cardinals.

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1993 to educate the public and policy makers about communication's role in advancing public understanding of political, health, and science issues at the local, state and federal levels. Follow us on Twitter at [@APPCPenn](#), [@AnnenbergCivics](#), and [@CivicsRenewal](#).

* For example, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that a Texas law denying state funding to educate undocumented children violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court noted that "Aliens, even aliens whose presence in this country is unlawful, have long been recognized as 'persons' guaranteed due process of law by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments."