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New Annenberg Survey Asks: “How Well Do Americans Understand the Constitution?”

At a press conference at the National Constitution Center on Friday, September 16, former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Sandra Day O’Connor will release an Annenberg Public Policy Center sponsored report titled “The Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools,” recommending actions that the federal, state, and local governments, as well as families and civic organizations, ought to take to increase students’ knowledge of and participation in our democratic system. For a copy of the report, please visit: <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/NewsDetails.aspx?myId=456>.

As America commemorates the 224th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution (September 17, 1787), a national survey of 1,230 adults (margin of error for the full sample is +/- 3.3%) conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania confirms the need for the kind of national effort outlined in the report. Specifically:

- Just 38% could name all three branches of the U.S. government: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. A third (33%) are unable to correctly name any of the branches.
 - Among those who felt they understood the purpose and role of the three branches of government either very or somewhat well, only 50% could name all three.
- On presidential veto powers, barely half of Americans (51%) know that a two-thirds majority vote by Congress is needed to overturn a presidential veto.
- 91% of Americans know that the U.S. Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. However:

- Only 37% know that a citizen cannot appeal a Supreme Court decision to the Federal Court of Appeals;
- 62% of Americans know that the U.S. Supreme Court carries the responsibility for determining the constitutionality of a law.
- Over the years there have been many 5-4 Supreme Court decisions, but fewer than half of Americans (48%) know that such decisions have the same effect as 9-0 ones.
- 54% are aware that Supreme Court justices usually announce their decisions in writing.
- Even after taking the effects of level of education into account, our analysis shows that taking a civics or government course in high school or college predicts civics knowledge.

“Since knowing how democracy works predicts civic participation and support for protecting our system of government, these results are worrisome,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC). “The nation should be troubled by the extent to which civic education is downplayed in its schools.”

Americans are not as knowledgeable as one might assume about control of the House and Senate, and about the identity of the Chief Justice of the United States:

- More Americans know that the Republicans hold the majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (55%) than know that the Democrats hold the majority of seats in the U.S. Senate (42%).
- 15% correctly named John Roberts as Chief Justice, while almost twice as many (27%) correctly named Randy Jackson as a judge on *American Idol*.

How well did citizens perform on questions the government includes in its official U.S. citizenship test? We put several of those questions on our survey and found mixed results:

- 78% know that the first ten amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights.
- 76% know that the Declaration of Independence established our independence from Great Britain.
- 42% of Americans know that serving on a jury is a duty exclusively for United States citizens.
- Only 13% of Americans know that the Constitution was signed in 1787. The majority (55%) said it was signed in 1776, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed.

“Constitution Day celebrates the signing of the U.S. Constitution on September 17, 1787 in Philadelphia. It is an appropriate day to highlight the commitment not only to strengthen civics education in schools, but to emphasize the importance of becoming engaged in one’s community and participating in our democracy,” added Ken Winneg, Managing Director of Survey Research at APPC.

Methodology

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2011 Civics Knowledge Survey was conducted by telephone between September 6 and September 13 2011. In total, 1,230 interviews were completed, of which 828 were completed with respondents on landline telephones and 402 by cell phone. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Data were weighted to correct for known differences in the probability of selection of respondents, account for survey nonresponse, and increase the representativeness of the sample. The data were weighted to known population parameters based on the March 2011 Supplement of the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS). In addition, the data were weighted to represent the distribution of the adults population by phone status (cell phone only, landline only or dual-user), based on the CDC's 2010 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). Adjusting for the effect of weighting, the maximum margin of error for the full sample is +/-3.3% at the 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted by SSRS/Social Science Research Solutions in Media, PA (www.ssrs.com).

Appendix

Do you happen to know any of the three branches of government?

| | |
|------------|----|
| Yes | 73 |
| No | 22 |
| Don't know | 6 |
| Refused | * |

Would you mind naming any of them (the three branches of government)?

Based on total sample

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| They know all three branches | 38 |
| They know two branches | 13 |
| They know one branch | 16 |
| They do not know any branches | 33 |
| Refused | * |

How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and the House of Representatives to override a presidential veto? 51 percent, two-thirds, three-quarters, 90 percent, or are you not sure?

| | |
|---------------------|----|
| Two-thirds | 51 |
| 51 percent | 18 |
| Three-quarters | 4 |
| 90 percent | 2 |
| Other | * |
| Not sure/Don't know | 25 |
| Refused | * |

Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the United States House of Representatives?

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Democratic Party | 17 |
| Republican Party | 55 |
| Don't Know | 27 |
| Refused | * |

Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the United States Senate?

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Democratic Party | 42 |
| Republican Party | 31 |
| Don't Know | 27 |
| Refused | * |

What is the highest court in the United States?

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| United States Supreme Court | 91 |
| International Court of Justice | 1 |
| Federal District Court | * |
| United States Court of Appeals | 3 |
| Don't know | 4 |
| Refused | * |

If a person disagrees with a ruling by the Supreme Court can he or she appeal the ruling to the Federal Court of Appeals or not, or are you not sure?

| | |
|---|----|
| No, cannot appeal to the Federal Court of Appeals/Supreme Court ruling is final | 37 |
| Yes, can appeal | 21 |
| Not sure/Don't know | 42 |
| Refused | * |

Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional? The president, Congress, or the Supreme Court, or are you not sure?

| | |
|---------------------|----|
| Supreme Court | 62 |
| President | 5 |
| Congress | 16 |
| Not sure/Don't know | 17 |
| Refused | * |

Do you happen to know who the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court is?

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Justice John Roberts | 15 |
| Justice Samuel Alito | * |
| Justice Stephen Breyer | * |
| Justice Ruth Ginsburg | * |
| Justice Anthony Kennedy | * |
| Justice Sandra Day O'Connor | * |
| Justice Antonin Scalia | 1 |
| Justice Sonia Sotomayor | * |
| Justice David Souter | * |
| Justice Clarence Thomas | 1 |
| Someone else | 2 |
| Don't Know | 78 |
| Refused | * |

Do you happen to know any of the judges on the show American Idol? (Multiple responses accepted.)

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Randy Jackson | 27 |
| Ryan Seacrest | * |
| Jennifer Lopez | 25 |
| Steven Tyler | 20 |
| Simon Cowell | 14 |
| Paula Abdul | 11 |
| Someone else | 3 |
| Don't Know | 53 |
| Refused | 1 |

If the Supreme Court rules on a case 5 to 4, does this mean...?

| | |
|---|----|
| The decision is the law and needs to be followed | 48 |
| The decision is sent back to Congress for reconsideration | 13 |
| The decision is sent back to the lower courts to be decided there | 10 |
| Don't Know | 29 |
| Refused | * |

To the best of your knowledge, do Supreme Court justices usually give written reasons behind their rulings or do they NOT usually give written reasons, or are you not sure?

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Give written reasons | 54 |
| Do not give written reasons | 10 |
| Not sure/Don't know | 36 |
| Refused | * |

What do we call the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution?

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Bill of Rights | 78 |
| Magna Carta | 3 |
| Preamble | 7 |
| Contract with America | 1 |
| Don't know | 11 |
| Refused | * |

What did the Declaration of Independence do?

| | |
|---|----|
| Declare our Independence from Great Britain | 76 |
| Free the slaves | 6 |
| Give women the right to vote | 5 |
| Declare our independence from Canada | 1 |
| Don't know | 12 |
| Refused | 1 |

Which one of the following duties is required only for United States citizens?

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Serve on a jury | 42 |
| Obey the law | 18 |
| Pay taxes | 24 |
| Be respectful of others | 8 |
| Don't Know | 7 |
| Refused | 1 |

When was the United States Constitution originally written?

| | |
|------------|----|
| 1787 | 13 |
| 1776 | 55 |
| 1789 | 7 |
| 1791 | 4 |
| Don't know | 21 |
| Refused | * |