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Americans' knowledge of the branches of government is declining

PHILADELPHIA – (Sept. 13, 2016) – Only a quarter of Americans can name all three branches of government, the poorest showing on that question in a half-dozen years, a new survey on civic knowledge has found. Nearly a third of Americans cannot name any of the three branches of government, according to the survey conducted by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania.

Americans' lack of knowledge about their government isn't limited to civics. In August, just weeks after the political conventions, only 84 percent of those surveyed could name the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump. Most could not name either major-party vice presidential candidate.

The survey, released for Constitution Day (Sept. 17), found that 26 percent of people can name the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial), a statistically significant decline since 2011, when 38 percent could name all three. In the current survey, 31 percent of respondents could not name any of three branches, about the same as last year.

Despite the vast amount of news coverage that the political conventions generated in July, a survey of more than a thousand U.S. adults conducted August 11-15, 2016 found that:

- 87 percent could name the Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton;
- 84 percent could name the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump;
- 37 percent could name the Republican candidate for vice president, Mike Pence;
- 22 percent could name the Democratic candidate for vice president, Tim Kaine.

“Those unfamiliar with our three branches of government can't understand the importance of checks and balances and an independent judiciary,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. “Lack of basic civics knowledge is worrisome and an argument for an increased focus on civics education in the schools.”

Of war, taxes and religion

In a series of multiple-choice questions, Americans were divided over what the U.S. Constitution says about which branch of government has the power to declare war, but clearer on what it says about taxes and religion:

- Nearly 4 in 10 (39 percent) incorrectly said that the Constitution gives the president the power to declare war. Over half (54 percent) knew that the Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war.

- A vast majority (83 percent) correctly said that the Constitution gives Congress the power to raise taxes.
- A majority (77 percent) know that the Constitution says that Congress cannot establish an official religion – though almost 1 in 10 agreed with the statement that the Constitution says, “Congress can outlaw atheism because the United States is one country under God.”

The Supreme Court and a free press

Americans were divided about what happens if the Supreme Court ties 4-4 on a case, which is more likely to happen under the current eight-member court with one seat unfilled. A third of people (33 percent) correctly said the decision of the lower court stands, a third (32 percent) said the case is sent to the “Federal Court of Appeals” for resolution, and 21 percent said the justices must vote until the tie is broken.

The First Amendment prohibits the making of any law “infringing on the freedom of the press.” But 40 percent of those questioned favored the idea that Congress could forbid the news media from “reporting on any issue of national security without first getting government approval.” More than half (55 percent) opposed such restraints.

The Annenberg Constitution Day Civics phone survey, conducted for APPC by the research firm [SSRS](#), includes questions asked July 14-18 among 1,021 adults and Aug. 11-15 among 1,475 adults. The interviews about the candidates were conducted in August and the other questions were asked in July. The margin of error is +/- 3.6 percent. For the methodology and questions, click [here for the Appendix](#).

Better education and the Civics Renewal Network

The Annenberg Public Policy Center, through its [Annenberg Classroom](#) project, has joined with 28 other nonpartisan organizations to create the [Civics Renewal Network](#) (CRN), which provides free, high-quality educational materials online at <http://civicsrenewalnetwork.org/>. Among the CRN partners are the [Library of Congress](#), the [National Archives](#), the [National Constitution Center](#), the [U.S. Courts](#), the NEH’s [EDSITEment](#) Project and [iCivics](#). For the full list visit: <http://civicsrenewalnetwork.org/partners>.

For Constitution Day, the U.S. Courts are conducting naturalization ceremonies at courthouses, iconic landmarks, and National Park Service throughout September, with most ceremonies on Sept. 16, when Constitution Day will be observed nationally. On Sept. 16, led by the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, teachers and classes will participate in the “[Preamble Challenge](#),” reciting, performing and celebrating the Preamble to the Constitution.

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political, health and science issues at the local, state and federal levels. Follow APPC on Twitter [@APPCPenn](#) and on [Facebook](#). Follow the Civics Renewal Network on Twitter: [@CivicsRenewal](#).