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Americans know surprisingly little about their government, survey finds

PHILADELPHIA – Americans show great uncertainty when it comes to answering basic questions about how their government works, a national survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania has found.

The survey of 1,416 adults, released for Constitution Day (Sept. 17) in conjunction with the launch of the [Civics Renewal Network](#), found that:

- While little more than a third of respondents (36 percent) could name all three branches of the U.S. government, just as many (35 percent) could not name a single one.
- Just over a quarter of Americans (27 percent) know that it takes a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto.
- One in five Americans (21 percent) incorrectly thinks that a 5-4 Supreme Court decision is sent back to Congress for reconsideration.

“Although surveys reflect disapproval of the way Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court are conducting their affairs, the Annenberg survey demonstrates that many know surprisingly little about these branches of government,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC). “This survey offers dramatic evidence of the need for more and better civics education.”

The Civics Renewal Network

To address the problem, APPC and 25 other nonpartisan organizations, including the [Library of Congress](#), the [National Constitution Center](#), the [U.S. Courts](#), the [National Archives](#), and the [Newseum](#), announced the launch of the [Civics Renewal Network](#), a unique partnership among some of the nation’s leaders in civics education. The network offers free, high-quality resources for teachers through the one-stop website www.civicsrenewalnetwork.org.

The Civics Renewal Network is celebrating Constitution Day with coast-to-coast activities and running public service ads in some major television markets encouraging viewers to learn about the Constitution. The ads also can be seen on YouTube [here](#) and [here](#).

In a first, the U.S. Courts are holding [27 naturalization ceremonies](#) at iconic sites from Maine to Alaska. Students at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia and more than 600 schools around the country will take the [“Preamble Challenge.”](#) reciting the 52-word Preamble to the Constitution. An American Academy of Arts & Sciences symposium at the [Newseum’s](#) Knight

Conference Center in Washington, D.C., will examine the role of civics in American life, followed by a keynote address from new National Endowment for the Humanities chairman William “Bro” Adams. Those events will be video-streamed by the academy [here](#). The full day’s schedule can be found on the Annenberg Public Policy Center site [here](#). A 10:30 a.m. news conference by the Civics Renewal Network also will be video-streamed [on its site](#).

Most Americans do not know which parties control the House and Senate

The study also found that more than half of Americans do not know which party controls the House and Senate:

- Asked which party has the most members in the House of Representatives, 38 percent said they knew the Republicans are the majority, but 17 percent responded the Democrats, and 44 percent reported that they did not know (up from 27 percent who said they did not know in 2011).
- Asked which party controls the Senate, 38 percent correctly said the Democrats, 20 percent said the Republicans, and 42 percent said they did not know (also up from 27 percent who said they did not know in 2011).

The national survey of 1,416 U.S. adults was conducted July 8-14 as part of the ongoing 2014 Annenberg Institutions of Democracy project. Some of the results closely track APPC studies in 2011 and 2012. The margin of error on the current survey is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Further information on methodology and additional data is in an [appendix](#) on the APPC site.

APPC’s managing director of survey research Ken Winnege said that, unsurprisingly, people who are politically engaged and better educated proved to be better-informed. “If you’re excited about politics, if you discuss politics with family and friends, you tend to be more knowledgeable,” he said. “The key is involvement.”

There was somewhat better news in the survey for champions of the First Amendment. Americans also were asked their opinions on “prior restraint,” or legally preventing the media from publishing information, which is outlawed in the First Amendment. Asked whether they would favor or oppose a law by Congress forbidding the news media from reporting on any issue of national security without getting government approval, 54 percent of the respondents said they would oppose it.

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 and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.

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