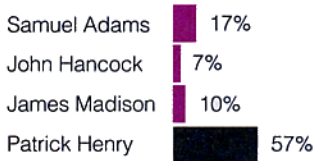


# HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW?

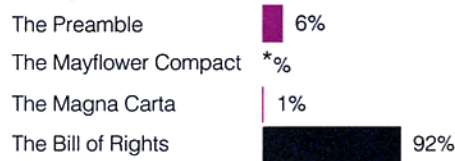
Is the criticism that Americans don't know enough well-founded? In the next six pages, we look at a number of different surveys touching on many topics to try to answer the question. A picture emerges of a knowledge level that seems reasonable for a general public.

## High School Seniors

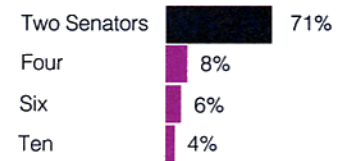
Question: **Who said "Give me liberty or give me death"?**



Question: **The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution are often called...?**



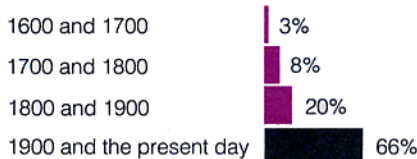
Question: **If New Mexico has two U.S. Senators, how many does California have?**



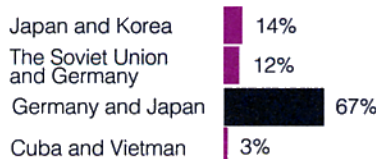
Source: \* = less than 1 percent.

## High School Seniors

Question: **The Great Depression happened between...?**



Question: **During the Second World War, the major enemies of the United States were...?**

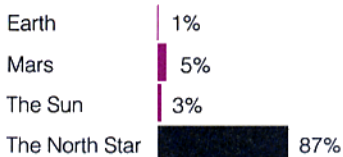


Question: **The civil rights movement of the 1960s focused on...?**

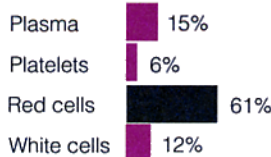


## High School Seniors

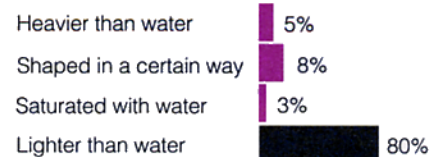
Question: **Our solar system contains all of the following except...?**



Question: **Which part of the blood carries the most oxygen to the body?**



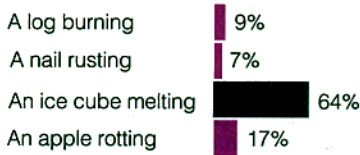
Question: **All things that float in water are...?**



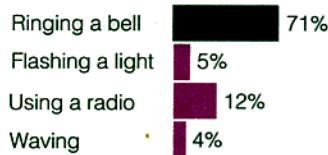
As the data below show, high school seniors score pretty well on basic history, government, and science questions. Seventy-two percent of college seniors identified *The Illiad* with Homer, and 47 percent knew that Martin Luther King wrote "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Only 20 percent correctly matched James Joyce with *Ulysses*.

**High School Seniors**

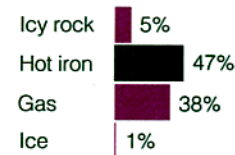
Question: **Which of the following is not an example of a chemical change?**



Question: **Two astronauts on the moon are trying to communicate. Which one of the following ways won't work for them?**

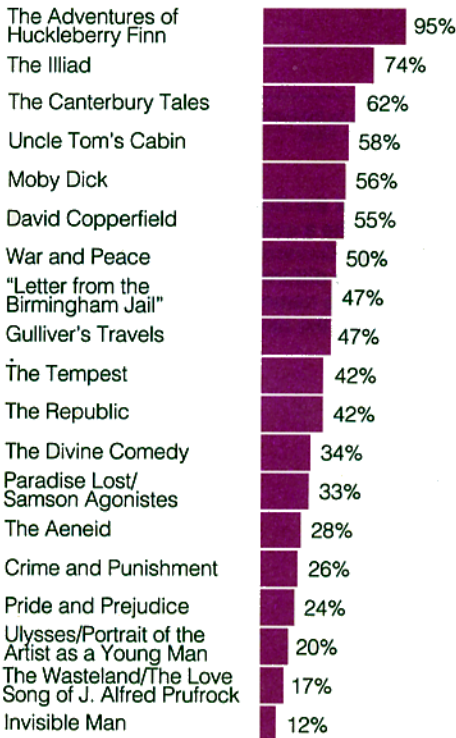


Question: **The inner core of the Earth is made of...?**



Source: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates/Harris Scholastic Research for *Reader's Digest*, April-May, 1994.

**Percentage of college seniors correctly matching the title of the work with the author**



**The controversy surrounding Senator Joseph R. McCarthy focused on...?**

	College seniors	17-year-olds
<i>Investigations of individuals suspected of communist activities</i>	84%	43%
Agitation to secure civil rights for Irish immigrants	3	15
Leadership of the movement protesting the war in Vietnam	10	29
Leadership of the movement to improve veterans' benefits	3	13

**The constitutional amendment that guaranteed women the right to vote was adopted in...?**

	College seniors	17-year-olds
1783	*	3%
1877	10%	18
1920	61	54
1933	29	25

**The Missouri Compromise...**

	College seniors	17-year-olds
Granted statehood to Missouri but denied the admission of any other new states	5%	12%
Settled the boundary dispute between Missouri and Kansas	44	40
Admitted Maine into the Union as a free state and Missouri as a slave state	47	43
Funded the Lewis and Clark expedition on the upper Missouri River	4	5

**The purpose of the *Federalist Papers* was to...**

	College seniors	17-year-olds
Win foreign approval for the Revolutionary War	20%	15%
Establish a strong, free press in the colonies	30	41
Gain ratification of the U.S. Constitution	48	40
Confirm George Washington's election as first President	2	4

Note: \* = less than 1 percent.

Source: Survey of college seniors by the Gallup Organization for the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989. Survey of high school seniors by the National Assessment of Education Progress, 1986 as reported in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know* by Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn.

Roughly the same percentage of Americans knew the length of a president's term in 1989 as answered the question correctly 40 years ago, and more knew which party controlled the House of Representatives. As many people could identify Alben Barkley in 1952 as could identify Al Gore in 1994. Three-quarters could identify their governors.

**Adults**

Question: **For how many years is a president of the United States elected—that is, how many years are there in one term in office?**



Question: **Do you happen to know which party—the Democratic or Republican—has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives? (1947) As a result of the election last year, which party now has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington? (1989)**

**Knew which party controlled the House of Representatives**



Question: **What percentage vote of Congress is needed to override a veto by the President—a bare majority, two-thirds, three-fourths, or 90 percent?**

**Correctly identified the percentage vote of Congress needed to override a presidential veto**



Source: Michael and Dell Carpini and Scott Keeter, "Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics" *Public Opinion Quarterly* No. 55 (1991), 591, 593.

Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, latest that of December 7–14, 1985.

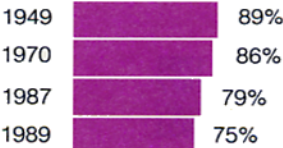
Question: **Will you tell me who the Vice President of the United States is? (1952) (I have some general quiz questions such as are asked on radio and TV shows—except that we can't offer you a new car or a deep freeze unit as a prize, 1955)...Who is the Vice President of the United States? (1978) Now I'd like to ask you about some things that have been in the news recently. Not everyone will have heard about them all. Can you tell me the name of the current Vice President of the United States? (1994)**

**Correctly identified Vice President**



Question: **Will you tell me the name of the Governor of (name of state)? (1949) The next question is like a quiz show on television. Do you happen to know the name of the Governor of this state? (1970) We want to know how well known the different governmental leaders are around here. Could you tell me the name of the Governor of this state? (1987) Do you happen to know the name of the Governor of your state? (1989)**

**Correctly identified the Governor**



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization (1952, 1955), the National Opinion Research Center (1978), and Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, July 12–25, 1994.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization (1949, 1970), by the National Opinion Research Center (1987), and by ABC News/*Washington Post*, May 19–23, 1989.

Over-time comparisons show no deterioration and some improvement in basic knowledge about government. In recent surveys, majorities knew that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights and what party platforms and filibusters are.

**Adults**

Question: **What are the first 10 amendments to the Constitution called?**

**Knew that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution were called the Bill of Rights**



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, latest that of May 23–26, 1991.

Question: **[Here is a list of statements about the courts. Please tell me whether you think each statement is correct or incorrect/True or false] Everyone accused of a serious crime has the right to be represented in court by a lawyer. (1977, 1983) Suppose that you have been accused of a serious crime. True or false. According to the U.S. Constitution you have the following rights...You must be provided a lawyer if you cannot afford to pay for one. (1986)**

**Correctly stated that everyone has a right to be represented in court by a lawyer**



Source: Surveys by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman for the National Center for State Courts, October 1–December 31, 1977, Research & Forecasts for the Hearst Corporation, August 20–25, 1983 and October 20–November 2, 1986.

Question: **Will you tell me what the initials “F.B.I.” stand for? (1949) Can you tell me what the initials “F.B.I.” stand for? (1965)**

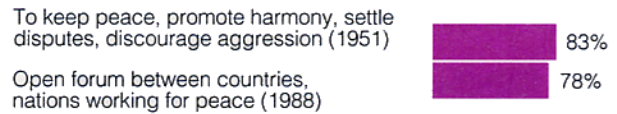
**Correctly identified initials “F.B.I.”**



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, latest that of July 16–21, 1965.

Question: **What would you say is the main purpose of the United Nations? (1951) What is the general purpose of the United Nations? (1988)**

**Correctly identified purpose of the United Nations**

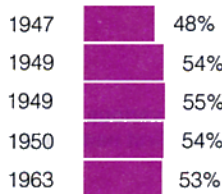


Note: In 1951, question asked of those who had heard or read about the United Nations=89% of th sample.

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, March 1951 and Market Opinion Research for Americans Talk Security, December 10–13, 1988.

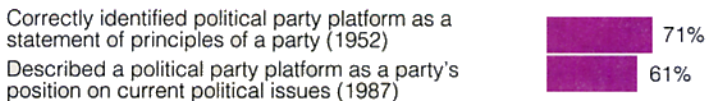
Question: **Will you tell me what the term “filibuster” means (to you)?**

**Correctly identified term “filibuster”**



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of June 21–26, 1963.

Question: **Will you tell me what is meant by a political party platform? (1952) Which of the following best describes a political party platform? (1987)**



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, June 15–20, 1952 and Research & Forecasts for the Hearst Corporation, October 15 – November 1, 1987.

The data below show the responses to a number of questions by age and by education. Education differences are, not surprisingly, sharper than age differences.

**Adults**

Question: **Whose responsibility is it to decide if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the President, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?**

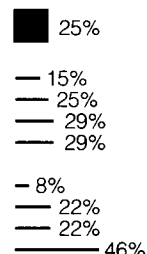
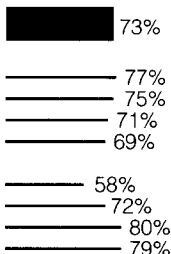
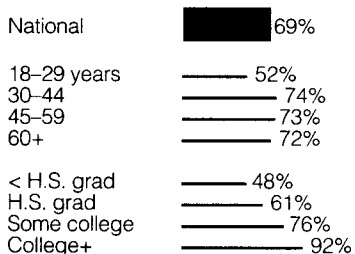
Question: **Do you happen to know how many times an individual can be elected President?**

Question: **How long is the term of office for a United States Senator?**

**Responsibility of the Supreme Court to decide if a law is constitutional**

**Knew how many times an individual could be elected president**

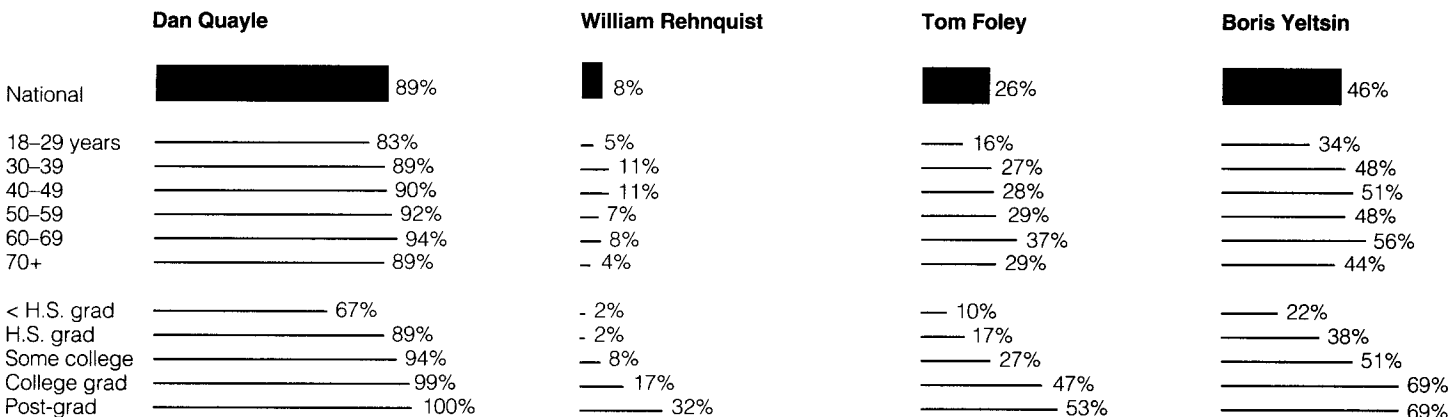
**Knew how long a term was for a U.S. Senator**



Note: Sample=450.  
Source: Survey by the University of Michigan, National Election Study, 1991.

Question: **Now we have a set of questions concerning various public figures. We want to see how much information about this goes out to the public from television, newspapers, and the like. The first name is Dan Quayle. What job or political office does he now hold?**

**Correctly identified**



Source: Survey by the University of Michigan, National Election Study, 1992.

# Trivial Pursuits

For what it's worth, two-thirds of us know how to program our VCRs and to spell "potato." Six in ten know the network broadcasting NFL games has changed. While over 75 percent know the Japanese currency is called "yen," fewer than two in ten could say whose picture is on the \$10 or \$20 bills. Slightly more know who Alan Greenspan is.

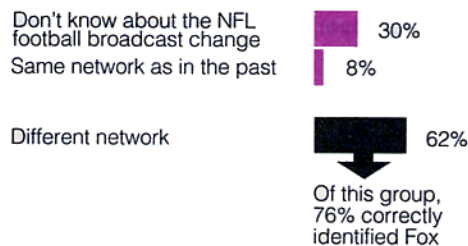
Adults

Question: **Do you, yourself, know how to set the timer on your VCR (video cassette recorder) to automatically record a program that will be televised in the future?**



**Note:** Asked of those with VCR in the household=85%.  
**Source:** Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Center for the People & The Press, January 4-February 17, 1994.

Question: **Do you happen to know...are the NFL games being telecast on the same network as in the past or has there been a change?**



**Source:** Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Center for People & The Press, October 6-9, 1994.

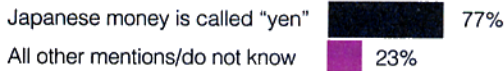
Question: **How do you spell the word "potato"**



**Source:** Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, July 17-19, 1992.

Question: **American money is called dollars. Can you by any chance tell me what Japanese money is called?**

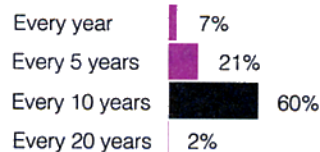
Know that



**Source:** Survey by ABC News for Asahi TV, March 13-15, 1990.

Question: **The U.S. Government conducts a census, or a count of this country's population on a regular basis. Can you tell me if the census is taken...**

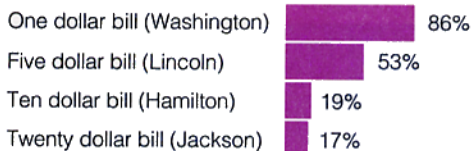
Census is taken...



**Source:** Survey by the Gallup Organization, March 15-18, 1990.

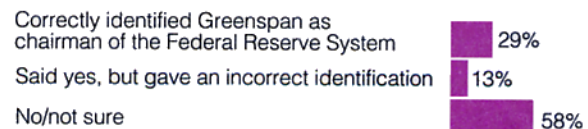
Question: **Can you tell me whose picture appears on...?**

Correctly told pollster whose picture is on the



**Source:** Survey by ICR Survey Research Group for PLUS ATM Network, August 3-7, 1994.

Question: **Do you happen to know who Alan Greenspan is?**



**Note:** In an August 1994 survey by The Luntz Research Companies, 33 percent were able to identify Greenspan, 67 percent were not.

**Source:** Survey by Yankelovich Partners for Time and CNN, April 6-7, 1994.