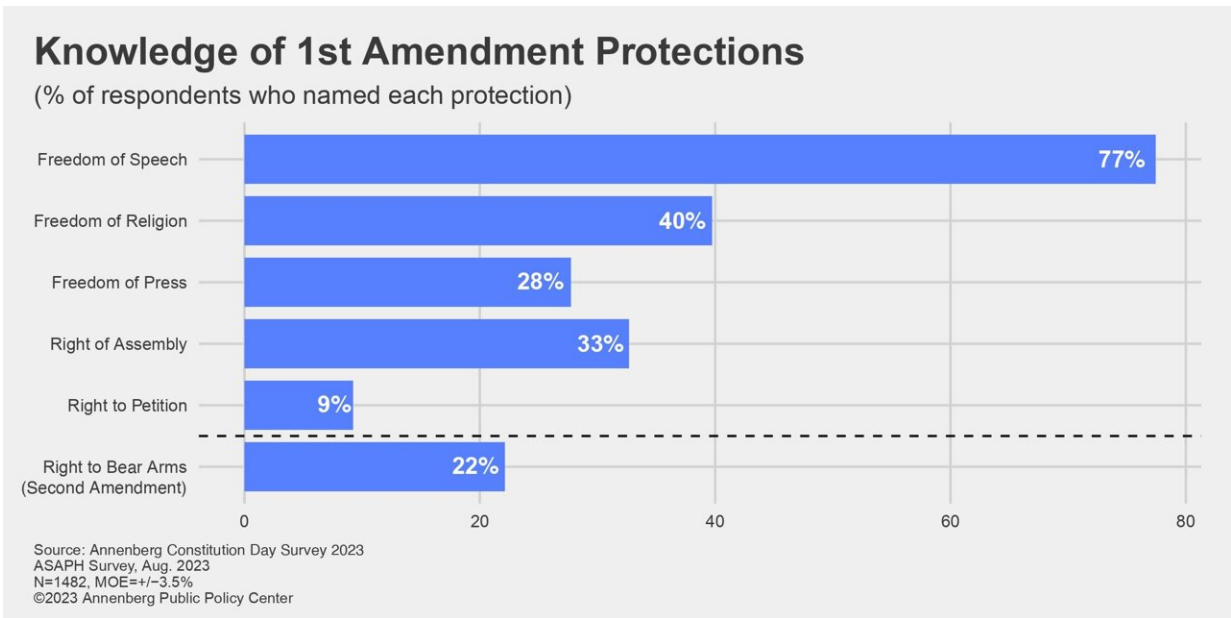


Many don't know key facts about US Constitution, study finds

September 14 2023



Knowledge of the First Amendment. From the Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey 2023 of 1,482 U.S. adults, August 9-15, 2023. Credit: Annenberg Public Policy Center

Many Americans do not know what rights are protected under the First Amendment and a substantial number cannot name all three branches of government, according to the 2023 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey.

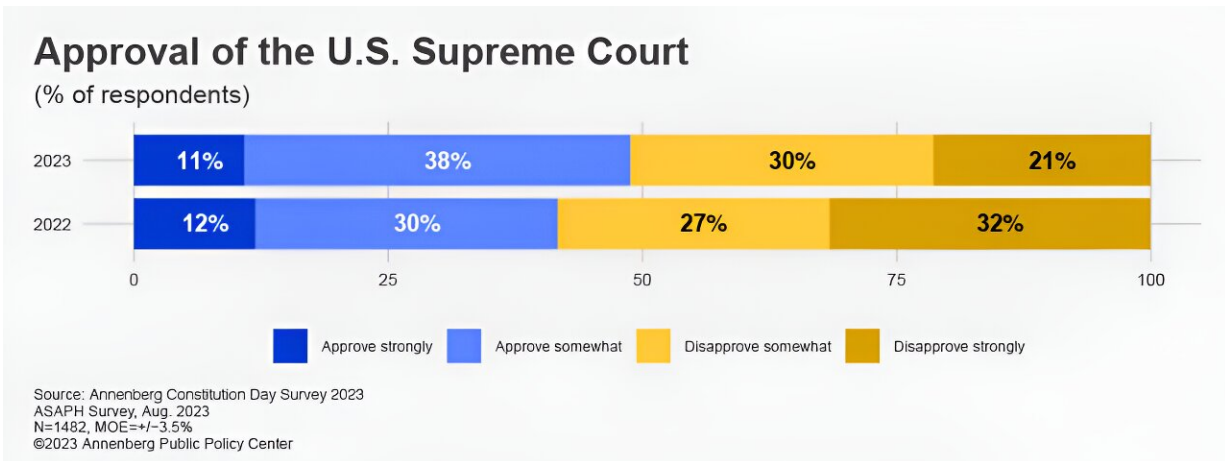
The Annenberg Public Policy Center's annual, nationally [representative survey](#) finds that when U.S. adults are asked to name the specific rights guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, only one right is recalled by most of the respondents: Freedom of speech, which 77% named.

The civics knowledge survey, released annually to celebrate Constitution Day (Sept. 17), also finds that although two-thirds of Americans (66%) can name all three branches of government, 10% can name two, 7% can name only one, and 17% cannot name any.

The Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey was fielded in a year of high-profile events that propelled the workings of government into the daily news cycle, which included four criminal indictments of former President Donald Trump; trials for those charged in the 2021 assault on the Capitol; Supreme Court rulings that sidelined race-conscious college admissions programs and a Biden Administration student-loan forgiveness plan; several justices being dogged by allegations of unethical conduct; the collapse of a plea deal to resolve a gun charge and tax offenses by President Joe Biden's son Hunter; and discussions by House Republicans whether to open impeachment proceedings against Biden.

"It is worrisome that one in six U.S. adults cannot name any of the branches of government and that only 1 in 20 can name all five freedoms protected by the First Amendment," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and director of the survey.

"One is unlikely to cherish or work to protect freedoms one does not know one has and will have trouble holding elected and unelected leaders accountable if one does not understand the nature and prerogatives of each branch and the ways in which the power of each is kept in check."



Public approval of the Supreme Court. From the Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey 2023 of 1,482 U.S. adults, August 9-15, 2023. Credit: Annenberg Public Policy Center

How the survey is conducted—and what is different this year

The [Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey](#) is a nationally representative survey conducted annually in advance of Constitution Day by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania. This year's survey of 1,482 U.S. adults was conducted for APPC by independent research company SSRS from August 9-15, 2023. It has a margin of error of ± 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For the first time, the annual civics survey presented this year was conducted online rather than by telephone. The [online survey](#), conducted as part of a wave of our Annenberg Science and Public Health (ASAPH) knowledge study, was self-administered, meaning that respondents completed it without an interviewer's assistance. In 2022, we conducted

two versions of our survey: one over the phone and one online.

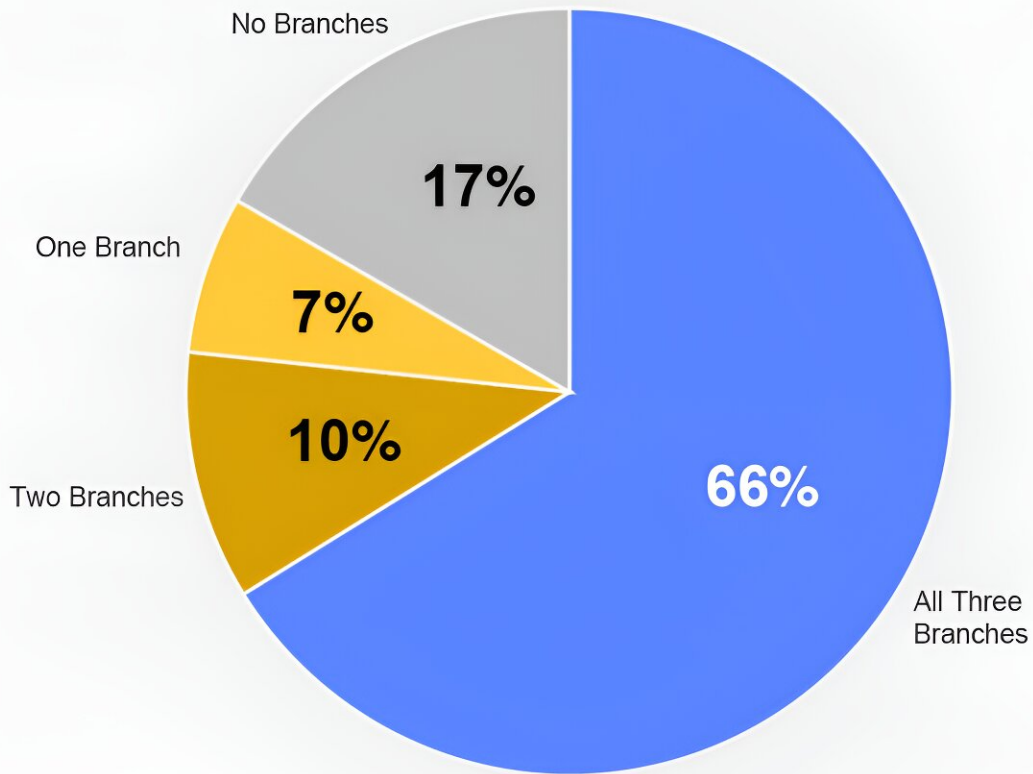
There, we found—as have similar studies from the Pew Research Center—that there were differences in some responses between online and telephone respondents. In our survey, online respondents generally had higher knowledge levels than phone respondents. Beginning with this year's survey, we will be conducting the Constitution Day survey online only, and therefore we cannot fairly compare knowledge levels from this year to those gathered by phone in prior years.

Because of this change in methodology, this year's knowledge findings will not be presented as part of a historical trend.

We shifted from telephone to online surveys because phone surveys have become increasingly difficult to conduct reliably, with very low response rates. Accordingly, APPC, like other public opinion researchers and news organizations such as Gallup, Pew, NORC, and CNN, has decided to add or transition to online panels of nationally representative individuals.

Knowledge of Three Branches

(% of respondents who named number of branches)



Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Survey 2023
ASAPH Survey, Aug. 2023
N=1482, MOE=+/-3.5%
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Knowledge of the three branches of government. From the Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey 2023 of 1,482 U.S. adults, August 9-15, 2023. Credit: Annenberg Public Policy Center

In an accompanying [white paper](#), written by APPC research analyst Shawn Patterson Jr. and edited by our survey research team, we explain

the interventions that we have tested and implemented to maximize the likelihood that responses reflect what respondents actually know.

These interventions aim to discourage those who might otherwise consider looking up answers to unfamiliar questions in the online survey, a move less likely when being asked knowledge questions by phone.

"Whether giving people a chance to reread a question and search their memory for an accurate response is a better way to assess civic knowledge than asking top-of-mind recall over the phone is an open question," Jamieson observed. "But whether one prefers online to phone questions or not, the bottom line across our surveys remains the same—a concerning number cannot muster the knowledge needed to exercise their [constitutional rights](#) or make sense of the workings of our system of government."

The survey was conducted under the supervision of Ken Winneg, Ph.D., APPC's managing director of survey research, and the analysis and graphics were prepared by APPC research analyst Shawn Patterson Jr., Ph.D.

For the [survey](#) questions and data, read [the topline](#). For more on the mode effects, see the [white paper](#).

Provided by Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania

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