

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution 2010 National Finalists' Knowledge of and Support for American Democratic Institutions and Processes



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Executive Summary

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is a civic education course designed by the Center for Civic Education with the primary goal of promoting civic competence and responsibility among the nation's elementary and secondary students. Through a comprehensive study of foundational democratic institutions and principles, We the People strives to prepare each student to become knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

The simulated hearings serve as the final assessment of the program and provide an excellent opportunity for students to improve their public speaking—as well as their research and analytical skills—through demonstration and practical application of the knowledge learned through the class. For classes at the high school level, participants from each school can advance to district, state, and national stages, where the top-ranking class from each state moves on to compete at the finals in Washington, D.C.

In the spring of 2010, the Center for Civic Education surveyed a sample of students from the national finals to better understand what they are learning and their perceptions of the program. The survey was created from a variety of national assessments, which allows for comparison of We the People students to a national sample. It should be noted that the We the People national finalists surveyed for this report are a nonrepresentative sample of students who achieved the highest levels of academic performance in the We the People program in their respective states. Their results will be compared to various representative national samples. Thus, the analyses of these comparative results are merely suggestive and not generalizable to all We the People students.

KEY FINDINGS

- National finalists received higher scores on every question and category than the national average scores in the NAEP civics assessment.
- In comparison to a national sample of twelfth-graders from the United States, We the People national finalists were more likely to register to vote, write to a public official, investigate compelling political issues, participate in lawful demonstrations, and boycott certain products or stores.
- When compared to their peers nationally, We the People finalists were more likely to agree that keeping up with political affairs, influencing the political structure, developing a meaningful philosophy of life, becoming a community leader, and helping others in need are of strong to absolute importance.
- We the People finalists were more likely than the national average to agree that people should be able to express unpopular opinions and that newspapers should be able to publish freely, without government interaction.

2010 National Finalists

- More than 1,100 high school students representing the fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the Northern Mariana Islands participated in the event.
- The national finals are conducted as simulated congressional hearings, during which the students serve as expert witnesses testifying on constitutional issues.
- Half of the classes were randomly selected to be surveyed. A total of 247 student surveys were returned.

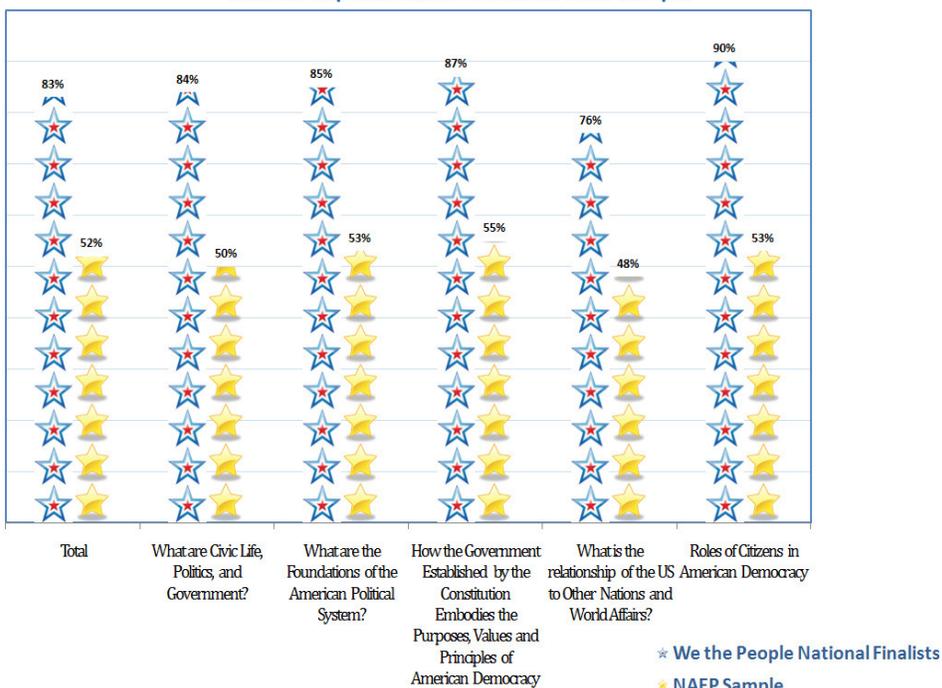
“We had to present our ideas persuasively on complex philosophical ideas, both in writing and orally in class. I learned how to work with a group of strongly opinionated, knowledgeable peers to compromise and form solutions.” – We the People 2010 National Finalist

The Nation's Report Card: Civics

We the People national finalists received a higher percentage of correct answers on every question and category on the test. Overall, national finalists answered 83% of the questions correctly, whereas nationally, the average score was 52% correct.

"The We the People program not only taught me how to be a good citizen, but also how to utilize the knowledge that I've attained to educate others that are uninformed. We the People ignited my passion for politics and government and inspired my dream to become a congresswoman."
—We the People Alum

We the People National Finalists vs. NAEP Sample



NAEP: The Nation's Report Card

In 2006, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered its civics examination to 9,100 twelfth-graders at 590 schools across the United States. Question items are categorized into five areas based upon the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

- What are Civic Life, Politics, and Government? – The national average was barely **50%** correct, whereas the We the People national finalists scored an average of **84%**.
- What are the Foundations of the American Political System? – 2010 We the People national finalists scored an average of **85%**, compared to an average of **53%** scored by their peers.
- How does the Government Established by the Constitution Embodiment the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy? – We the People national finalists scored an average of **87%**, while the national average was **55%** correct.
- What is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and World Affairs? – We the People national finalists scored an average of **76%**, while their peers averaged **48%**.
- Roles of Citizens in American Democracy – We the People 2010 national finalists averaged **90%**, while the average of the NAEP sample was **53%**.



American National Election Study

On average, We the People national finalists scored 31% higher than American adults on a series of political knowledge questions.

Monitoring the Future

More than 77% of the We the People national finalists reported that they already have or are planning to become politically active in every single aspect under review.

“I believe that citizens have a moral responsibility to get involved. Apathy and ignorance is an increasing danger in our society. When the youth are not educated in their government and do not understand its intricacies then they cannot honestly participate in it.” – We the People Alum



We the People and the 2008 American National Election Study

During election years, ANES interviews up to 2,000 adults from ages 18–80 across the U.S. on a variety of political issues important to the American electorate. Surveying Americans in every presidential election since 1948, the ANES time series data allows researchers to view trends over time.

- When asked to identify the political party in control of the House of Representatives, only 41% of adults could correctly identify the party in power, compared to more than 90% of 2010 We the People national finalists.
- Eighty-seven percent of 2010 national finalists answered all the ANES knowledge questions correctly.

We the People and 2009 Monitoring the Future (MTF): Political Attitudes

Funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse and the National Institutes of Health, Monitoring the Future has surveyed high school seniors since 1975 on a variety of attitudes and behaviors.

- 63% of We the People 2010 national finalists confirmed they are planning to or already have contacted an elected official, compared to only 23% of the MTF sample.



American College Freshmen

More than half of the national finalists believe that becoming a community leader is essential or very important.

Future of the First Amendment

Nearly 99% of the national finalists agreed that people should be able to express unpopular opinions.

“Studying We the People was instrumental in guiding me toward a career in public service. The curriculum helped me understand that our government is complex, and it is designed to work with everyone’s participation. If we let cynicism and distrust discourage us from engaging in the process, we just become part of the problem. We the People taught me to be part of the solution.” –We the People Alum



We the People versus 2009 American College Freshmen

Each year the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA surveys approximately 400,000 incoming freshmen from more than 700 American colleges and universities on a variety of student characteristics, including parental income and education; ethnicity; financial aid; secondary school achievement and activities; educational and career plans; and values, attitudes, beliefs, and self-concept.

- 84% of 2010 national finalists believe keeping up to date on political affairs is essential or very important, compared with just 36% of the sample of college freshmen surveyed.
- Just 23% of the freshmen surveyed felt that influencing the political structure is essential or very important. Nearly three times as many national finalists felt the same obligation.

We the People and the Future of the First Amendment

Administered in 2005, the Future of the First Amendment survey aimed to probe the current attitudes and beliefs regarding the rights guaranteed in the first amendment.

- More than 92% of We the People national finalists agreed that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story, compared to 51% in the study.
- Although 35% of the sample reported that they felt the First Amendment went too far in the rights guaranteed under it, nearly 96% of the We the People national finalists disagreed with that statement.



We the People National Finalists Repeatedly Outperform Their Peers and Adults

In the Nation's Report Card on Civics, it was demonstrated that "more than one-third of U.S. high school students do not have a basic understanding of the essential elements of democratic citizenship and government and lack the necessary skills required to competently participate as an informed citizen."

The We the People program encourages students to become more than passive consumers in the current political landscape. The textbook content, the teacher training, and the interactive nature of the program allow students the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to become informed and engaged citizens.

The use of simulations and interactive classroom methods empowers students, allowing each individual to apply the knowledge they have learned to tackle the real-world problems of today.

