

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution
Survey Results: 2009 National Finalists' Knowledge and
Support of American Democratic Institutions and Processes

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I. Executive Summary

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is a civics curriculum developed by the Center for Civic Education (Center). The program, utilized in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms, is intended to foster civic competence and responsibility among America's youth. While educating youth about the principles of American constitutional democracy, the program stresses the contemporary relevance of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and deepens students' understanding of democratic institutions in the United States. The program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Once the curriculum is completed, students prepare to participate in the culminating activity: a simulated congressional hearing. The hearing tests students' knowledge of the history and contemporary relevance of American democratic institutions and the Constitution. While preparing for the simulated hearing, students hone public speaking and analytical skills, and demonstrate their ability to support their opinions with facts and to cooperate in small groups. High school students are given the opportunity to participate competitively, starting at the congressional district level and advancing to a state competition. The winning class from each state competes at the national finals in Washington, D.C.

In the spring of 2009, a sample of those classes with the most intense exposure to the We the People program—the high school national finalists—was surveyed to evaluate the impact of the program. The survey instrument was designed by the Center to assess students' civic knowledge and engagement and ascertain their perceptions of the program. The report compares the percentage of correct responses from the We the People survey with the corresponding national survey. Due to the diligence and study efforts of the We the People national finalists, they are more likely to perform better on civic knowledge surveys than the average civics students. Because of this, the following results cannot be generalized to all We the People students.

Major findings of the 2009 survey include the following facts:

- National finalists of the We the People program possess significantly greater knowledge of American democratic institutions and processes than the average American
- National finalists scored better in every category and on every question of civic knowledge compared to the national sample tested by the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment
- The average proportion of correct responses from We the People students was 85%, whereas the correct responses from the NAEP assessment averaged 52%.
- We the People finalists were more likely to register to vote and work on a political campaign than a national sample of high school seniors
- Male and female students benefit equally from participation in the We the People program

II. Introduction and Purpose of Survey

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is an instructional program developed by the Center for Civic Education (Center) on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy for elementary, middle, and high school students. The program fosters civic competence, teaches the principles of American constitutional democracy, and stresses the contemporary relevance of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights while deepening students' understanding of the democratic institutions of the United States. We the People is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Once the curriculum is completed, students prepare to participate in a simulated congressional hearing. To prepare for the hearing, students develop their public speaking and analytical skills. For high school-level students, a formal competition is conducted for the opportunity to participate in a series of formal hearings, starting at the congressional district level and advancing to a state competition. The winning class from each state competes at the national finals in Washington, D.C. More than 30 million students have participated in the We the People program.

A multitude of studies have been conducted to examine the effects of the We the People curriculum on students. It was found that, on every topic, those who participated in the curriculum "significantly outperformed comparison students" who did not participate on every topic studied (Educational Testing Service 1988, 1990, 1991). In a 2007 report from RMC Research Corporation, it was found that when compared to college sophomores from a major university, We the People high school students demonstrated greater political knowledge, better civic skills, and higher levels of civic

responsibility (Turnbull, et al. 2007). In another study, We the People students were found to be more politically aware and hold stronger beliefs and values essential for a successful democracy (Brody 1994). A study from the *California Survey of Civic Education* discovered that the We the People program helps “students develop the skills and knowledge they need for effective citizenship.”

In the spring of 2009, a sample of We the People classes participating in the national finals competition were surveyed evaluating the impact of the program on those classes with the most intense exposure: the high school national finalists.

III. Sampling and Methodology

The Center’s *We the People: The Citizen & the Constitution* curriculum prepares the students for their performances in the simulated congressional hearings. The winning class from each state proceeds to the national finals competition in Washington, D.C,

Of the classes that attended the 2009 national finals, 14 state teams (N = 272 students) completed the survey administered between February and June.

Survey Instrument

A number of national surveys and tests served as the framework for the instrument designed by the Center to measure the impact of We the People in the areas of civic literacy and competence of its students, as well as to gain a better understanding of how students view the program in general. The knowledge responses of the We the People students were compared to those in the corresponding national survey. Besides

comparing the civic knowledge of We the People students to the national sample, two open-ended questions ask students about their experience with the program. Due to the hard work and diligence of We the People national finalists, they are likely to have greater civic knowledge and skills than the average high school student. Therefore, the reported results cannot be generalized to a larger population.

IV. We the People versus NAEP

To participate in the political process and be civically engaged, a certain amount of political knowledge is required to lay the foundation for the formation of opinions and beliefs (Milner 2008; Galston 2001). It has been found that young adults lack the political knowledge of more mature adults (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 159), yet older adults do not retain a firm grasp on many aspects of American government (Niemi and Junn 1998, 9). The results of this survey, however, demonstrate that We the People national finalists are on the path to being engaged, knowledgeable, and active citizens.

The first 21 questions of the survey measure political knowledge based on publically available items from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is federally mandated and administered by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. The project measures the educational achievements of American students in a multitude of fields such as civics, reading, math, and science.

The 2006 NAEP civics assessment was given at 590 schools in the U.S. to 9,100 twelfth-graders, which constitutes a statistically representative sample of the entire nation. The following five content areas were tested:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of the American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purpose, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?

Within these content areas, three types of questions were asked: identify and describe; explain and analyze; and evaluate, take, and defend a position.

The 2006 NAEP civics assessment of twelfth-grade students was compared with the responses from the We the People national finalists. While the NAEP assessment can be generalized to the American population as a whole, the We the People sample cannot. For the remainder of this section, the NAEP sample will simply be referred to as the “national sample.”

A. What Are Civic Life, Politics, and Government?

The most significant differences between the We the People national finalists and the national sample occurred on the section topic of civic life, politics, and government.

Survey Ques.	Civic Life, Politics, and Government (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
1.	The division of policymaking power among national, state, and local governments supports James MacGregor Burns’s statement that our constitutional system makes “effective, long-run leadership” impossible.	86%	57%	29%
2.	Parliamentary systems might now show the same fragmentation that Burns finds in the American system because in parliamentary systems power is not divided among three branches of government.	90%	53%	37%
3.	Federalism is reflected in American government by the fact that citizens in the United States are subject to both state and federal laws.	92%	43%	49%

B. What Are the Foundations of the American Political System?

The questions in this category tested the knowledge of students on the foundations of the American political system. A higher percentage of We the People students answered correctly than the national sample on every item in this section.

Survey Ques.	Foundations of the American Political System (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
5.	The events at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, showed that the Supreme Court decision by itself did not do away with segregation.	93%	60%	33%
14.	Many congressional Republicans might object to Governor Engler’s plan for welfare reform because it involves increased government spending for transportation and child care.	75%	49%	26%
15.	The graph entitled “Welfare Benefits vs. the Poverty Line” shows that since about 1980, the average annual benefit of a family receiving AFDC has declined relative to the poverty line.	68%	37%	31%
17.	The excerpt from Horace Mann’s 1848 report implies that poor people will improve their lives through studying and learning.	93%	72%	21%
18a.	Mann suggests that universal public education can prevent the formation of a rigid and permanent class system.	76%	45%	31%

C. How the Government Established by the Constitution Embodies the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy

Once again, the We the People national finalists scored significantly higher than the nation sample. Especially of note, Question 4 generated a 41% difference.

Survey Ques.	Government and American Democracy (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
4.	In the United States, when state and national laws come into conflict, the national law is enforced.	91%	50%	41%
6.	President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 because he was required by the Constitution to enforce the rule of law.	87%	51%	36%
7.	Attempts at school integration led to a power struggle between state governments and the federal government.	88%	55%	33%
12.	A <i>New York Times</i> article entitled “Michigan Welfare Plan Draws Unlikely Support” shows that political parties are not ideologically unified and people within parties may differ over issues like welfare reform.	86%	56%	30%
13.	The <i>Times</i> article shows that a strength of federalism is that the states may serve as sites for experimentation with new public policies.	80%	62%	18%

D. What Is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and World Affairs?

This category measured student knowledge on the role of the U.S. in world affairs and their relationship to other nations. Question 20 generated a 44% difference, the largest such discrepancy found in the results.

Survey Ques.	The United States, Other Nations, and World Affairs (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
9.	In the area of United States foreign policy, Congress shares power with the president.	95%	50%	45%
11.	In recent years, a United States president and a Japanese prime minister would most likely have argued over America’s desire for greater access to Japanese markets.	49%	29%	20%
16.	One important way the central political principles of the United States have had a major effect on its foreign policy is that the United States has supported the growth of Western-style democracy in countries that were once Communist dictatorships.	79%	40%	39%
19.	From the U.S. World War II poster, you can tell that the government wanted Americans to be part of the war effort.	91%	70%	21%
20.	We can infer from the poster that our enemies in the war threatened the rights Americans believed were most important.	94%	50%	44%

E. Roles of Citizens in American Democracy

The We the People national finalists scored significantly better on each question in this section, with each discrepancy being above 30%.

Survey Ques.	Roles of Citizens in American Democracy (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
8.	Two quotes by Martin Luther King Jr. indicate that citizens have political and legal rights, as well as economic rights and opportunities.	85%	51%	34%
10.	An example of the type of volunteer work referred to in the above statement is a youth group holding a food drive to help poor people.	80%	47%	33%
18b.	The freedom that is the subject of the World War II political poster is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution.	98%	62%	36%

F. Overall Summary

In each individual question item and category tested by the NAEP, the We the People national finalists scored better than the national sample. The average percentage of correct responses from the We the People students was 85%, whereas the national sample's average percentage of correct responses was 52%. The stellar performance of We the People national finalists reflects the depth and detail of the topics addressed in the curriculum.

V. We the People versus Adults: More Knowledge Questions

The 2004 American National Election Studies (ANES), a series of annual national surveys funded by the National Science Foundation (see National Election Studies, 2004), provided three open-ended survey questions (21a–c) used by the Center. Voting habits, political participation, and public opinion were probed to better understand the effects of the We the People curriculum. ANES interviews focused on adults ranging

from ages 18 to over 80 and included a representative sample, generalizable to the national population.

The responses of the 2005 ANES survey and those of the We the People national finalists were compared. Once again, We the People students responded correctly more often than the national sample of adults. Question 21c produced the greatest difference in correct responses (38%), with 99% of the We the People national finalists answering correctly.

Survey Ques.	Three-Item Knowledge Index (percentage correct)	WTP	2005 NES (ages 18–80+)	Difference
21a.	The job or political office held by Dick Cheney	97%	76%	21%
21b.	Party control of the House	82%	49%	33%
21c.	Party ideological location	99%	61%	38%

VI. We the People and Monitoring the Future: Political Attitudes

A series of questions (28a-g) queried students on whether they would participate in various political activities (i.e., voting, writing to public officials). These questions were derived from Johnston, Bachman, and O’Malley’s 1997 study, *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth* (MTF), in which more than 16,000 high school seniors were tested. Surveying high school seniors since 1975 to measure their behaviors and values, MTF is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institutes of Health.

The white, college-bound respondents of the MTF survey (N=917) were compared with the We the People national finalists because 74% of We the People respondents identified themselves as white and almost all planned on attending college. We the People finalists were more likely to be involved in every facet of political affairs

referenced in the survey. These results demonstrate that the *We the People* curriculum not only increases civic knowledge and skills, but also encourages political and civic participation.

Survey Ques.	Question	WTP	MTF	Difference
28a.	Will register or have already registered to vote	99%	96%	3%
28b.	Will vote or have already voted in a public election	99%	Not asked	----
28c.	Will write or have already written to a public official	69%	44%	25%
28d.	Will research or have already researched a political issue you care about	90%	19%	71%
28e.	Will work or have already worked on a political campaign	72%	15%	57%
28f.	Will participate or have already participated in a lawful demonstration	55%	26%	29%
28g.	Will boycott or have already boycotted certain products or stores	49%	34%	15%

VII. We the People versus American College Freshmen

Questions 27a–f were taken from *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2006* in which respondents were asked to prioritize the importance of certain life objectives (Pryor et al. 2006). The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, publishes *American Freshman: National Norms* annually and documents the responses of college and university freshmen. In 2006, for example, 241,441 students from 393 four-year colleges and universities were sampled. The survey asked a series of questions concerning the objectives they considered essential or very important. For each question, We the People national finalists were more likely to find the stated objective essential or very important, except one: the importance of being “very

well-off financially.” Perhaps We the People students do not consider financial wealth important, or they read the question carefully and decided that it was not *very* important.

Survey Ques.	Objectives Considered Essential or Very Important	WTP	Freshmen 2006	Difference
27a.	Keep up to date with political affairs	84%	37%	47%
27b.	Influence the political structure	65%	23%	42%
27c.	Be very well-off financially	62%	73%	-11%
27d.	Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	88%	46%	42%
27e.	Become a community leader	55%	35%	20%
27f.	Help others who are in difficulty	88%	67%	21%

VIII. Future of the First Amendment

The *Future of the First Amendment* high school student survey (FFA) provided the content for questions 22, 23, and 25. The survey of more than 100,000 high school students, asked if they agreed with specific items in the First Amendment, such as whether people should be able to express unpopular opinions. The FFA is sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s High School Initiative (Yalof and Dautrich 2006). The survey, given in 2005, tests the first amendment knowledge and attitudes of high school students, teachers, and administrators to determine if there is a correlation between the beliefs of students and of those in power. .

On two of the three questions asked, We the People national finalists were more likely to strongly or mildly agree. However, when asked if the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees, they were much more likely to strongly or mildly disagree. In other words, We the People national finalists are more likely to take a broad view of the First Amendment protections. (Note: In two of the categories of the FFA survey, the results do not add up to 100% because some participants refrained from answering).

Survey Ques.	Question	WTP	FFA
22.	People should be able to express unpopular opinions.	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 98% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 2%	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 83% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 7%
23.	Newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story.	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 92% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 8%	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 51% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 36%
25.	The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 4% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 96%	Strongly or Mildly Agree: 35% Strongly or Mildly Disagree: 44%

IX. Gender Differences among We the People National Finalists

The difference in academic achievement between male and female students has long been an alarming issue in American education. In response to this, answers to a variety of questions in the NAEP and American Freshman surveys compared responses from male and female students. Using a chi-square test, the results were found to be statistically insignificant, which suggests that boys and girls benefited equally from the *We the People* curriculum.

Other studies have given similar results. For example, a 2001 study from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) surveyed 14-year-olds in 28 countries. It was found that “gender differences are minimal with regard to civic knowledge but substantial in some attitudes” (Torney-Purta 2001). More recently, the *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution Evaluation Report* (2007) found that the curriculum “did not exacerbate differences in civic development traditionally associated with gender.”

Although the gender difference was insignificant, there were categories which seemed to suit one gender better than the other. For example, girls answered more questions correctly regarding the foundations of the American political system.

Conversely, boys excelled when asked about the relationship between the United States to other nations and world affairs in general. Possible theories for this difference may be that boys are more interested in politics than girls or are more likely to catch the news on television as opposed to radio broadcasts and newspapers (Torney-Purta 2001). It is plausible that broadcast news and self-selecting bias for news websites could skew the importance that one places on a particular news story. Overall, research on these gender differences is inconclusive.

When comparing male and female attitudes towards civic engagement, males were more likely to rate being well-off financially as being essential or important. This may be because of the traditional societal role in which men are supposed to take care of women financially. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to find being a community leader and helping others as essential or very important, which perpetuates the stereotype that women are meant to be nurturing. Although these suggestive findings are interesting, more research is needed to determine the causes of these gender differences.

X. Student Feedback on the We the People Program

We the People national finalists were asked two short-answer questions to gain a better understanding of their perspective on the effects of the curriculum. One question asked whether they believed that participation in the We the People program provided skills that they could use in their future endeavors, and the other probed students' professional and academic interests.

Students reported increasing their abilities in a broad variety of skills they felt would assist in the workplace as well as in their role as citizens. The most frequently reported skills included public speaking, leadership skills, and research skills. Some students commented that the program gave them more confidence to excel in the future. This response from an anonymous student encompasses the sentiments of many respondents, “I learned how to speak in public and argue in a logical, persuasive and potent manner. I learned how to lead my unit. I also learned how to think critically on my feet and respond to the judges' questions.” Critical thinking and analytical skills were also acquired, as this student notes, “I have learned how to voice my ideas and political opinions. I have knowledge to back my opinions. I've really learned how to think deeper than the basic question being asked and find sources relating to a topic.”

We the People students reported an interest in a variety of career endeavors. Professional fields included law, mathematics, art, medicine, engineering, acting, and public relations. Political science was the most frequently cited academic field of interest. One noteworthy response was a student who wanted “to become a United States ambassador to a European country.” The national finals competition seemed particularly significant for this student, who said, “My future career is going to be determined by whether or not my team wins at the finals; if we do, I'm going to pursue politics.”

XI. Conclusion

This report is meant to test the political knowledge and engagement of We the People national finalists and thus measure the impact that the We the People curriculum has on students. Considering that the national finalists received the most extensive and

intensive exposure to the program's materials, they represent the most accurate sample of the program's effectiveness.

We the People national finalists performed better than both adults and their peers on surveys testing civic and political knowledge. Because American democracy relies on at least a minimally informed public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), the We the People curriculum ensures the stability of the fabric from which this nation has been built: its young people. National finalists said they were more likely to engage in political activities and have broad views towards the First Amendment's protections. National finalists have a more positive view towards democratic institutions than their peers and adults. They are less cynical towards American politics, while both males and females benefit equally from the program. Based on student feedback to the We the People program, it can be inferred that the skills acquired will help students with public speaking, research, and leadership abilities that will benefit them in any chosen field, not just civically. However, the number of students who expressed interest in politics as a possible career choice is a testament to the program's effectiveness.

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