

cent or more of the public also knew (during the Truman administration) what the steel dispute was about, and what the stands of both industry and the unions were in that dispute. Similar percentages were usually aware whether the federal government had a budget deficit (though sometimes less than half knew this) and that taxpayers were going to bear the brunt of paying for the savings and loan crises of the late 1980s and early 1990s. And at least 75 percent of those asked demonstrated knowledge of facts relevant to understanding domestic politics, such as that oil was in short supply in the mid-1970s or that pesticides and fertilizers could pollute areas some distance from where they were used.

Table 2.4 Knowledge of Domestic Politics (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
What is the steel dispute about (1952)	96	Voting rights legislation passed (1965)	67
Social Security doesn't provide job training (1974)	89	Effect of tax law on mortgage deductions (1987)	63
Minimum wage (1984)	86	Government doesn't require religious broadcasting (1945)	61
Budget deficit increased since 1981 (1985)	83	Public school curricula vary by state (1989)	61
Oil is in short supply (1974)	81	Who is eligible for draft pardon (1975)	61
Aware of recent coal strikes (1944)	81	Causes of acid rain (1981)	60
Industry's position in steel dispute (1952)	80	Excise tax legislation passed (1965)	60
Who will pay for S&L bailout (1990)	79	# of points Dow Jones index fell (10/20/87)	59
Union's position in steel dispute (1952)	78	Birth control pill-health problem link (1978)	57
Pesticides can pollute away from source (1979)	78	Road beautification bill passed (1965)	55
Social Security revenue spent, not saved (1978)	78	What is Watergate about (1973)	54
There is a federal budget deficit (1984)	77	Why nuclear plants built by water (1980)	52
Medicare legislation passed (1965)	76	Why Hubbel telescope in news (1990)	51
What is national health insurance (1978)	76	Government regulates radio (1945)	51
Medicare part of social security system (1974)	75	Major cause of childhood death (1989)	51
What happened at Three Mile Island (1980)	74	Illiteracy rate in U.S. (1990)	51
Medicare doesn't cover all medical costs (1987)	72	Bush vetoed plant closing bill (1990)	50
Size of oil spill off Alaska (1989)	72	What is greenhouse effect (1988)	50
Farmers having economic problems (1979)	71	Size of federal budget (1989)	49
There is a federal budget deficit (1983)	70	Leading cause of death in U.S. (1952)	48
Food preservatives linked to health problem (1978)	69	Current unemployment rate (1984)	48
Fresh water not unlimited (1979)	69	Likely effect of Taft-Hartley (1946)	45
Military personnel tested for AIDS (1987)	68	Major cause of air pollution (1980)	45
Electricity in short supply (1974)	68	Population of U.S. (1988)	43
Describe Nixon economic plan (1971)	68	Current inflation rate (1985)	42
		Food stamps not part of Social Security (1979)	41
		Steel is in short supply (1974)	41
		Government doesn't set # of radio ads (1945)	41

Table 2.4 Knowledge of Domestic Politics (*continued*)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
College education bill passed (1965)	41	Government considering suit against AT&T (1975)	18
Primary education bill passed (1965)	40	% of federal budget to health care (1978)	17
Value of dollar compared to 1939 (1951)	39	% of gross taxes paid by top 25% (1978)	17
Government doesn't set radio profits (1945)	38	Effect of tax law on capital gains (1987)	16
Not all federal employees pay social security (1979)	37	How are stock profits taxed (1989)	16
# of Americans unemployed (1984)	37	% of poor that are black (1985)	15
What are synthetic fuels (1980)	37	% of U.S. power from nuclear (1979)	14
Black and white blood the same (1944)	36	Urban affairs bill passed (1965)	14
Immigration legislation passed (1965)	35	Costs or wages rising faster (1958)	14
Average net industry profit (1969)	35	Required car mpg by 1985 (1979)	13
Westmoreland suing CBS (1985)	33	Corporate income tax rate (1945)	13
What is affirmative action (1985)	31	What is Dixon-Yates proposal (1954)	12
Black relative unemployment rate (1977)	31	Average cost per school child (1979)	12
What is the Hoover Commission (1950)	31	How is Superfund funded (1986)	12
% U.S. citizens who are millionaires (1979)	28	% of population that is Hispanic (1990)	12
Social Security one of top two federal budget expenses (1989)	27	Meese porno report conclusion (1986)	12
Average coal miner's salary (1944)	26	What are right-to-work laws (1955)	11
What is acid rain (1980)	26	% of workers employed by government (1976)	11
What does FICA deduction mean (1989)	25	% of poor who are kids (1985)	11
What is Social Security tax rate (1979)	25	What is thalidomide (1979)	10
Amount of current gasoline taxes (1984)	23	% gas cost go to oil company profits (1984)	10
% U.S. workers in unions (1944)	23	% poor who are women (1985)	9
What is Watergate about (1972)	22	Average yearly dollars to treat AIDS patient (1987)	9
Define no-fault insurance (1969)	22	% population that is Jewish (1990)	8
What happened at Love Canal (1979)	22	% population that is black (1990)	8
% of federal budget to military (1984)	21	% federal budget to Social Security (1984)	8
Helms trying to buy CBS (1985)	21	Effect of tax law on scholarships (1987)	8
Income tax on \$25,000 (1944)	19	% federal spending increased since 1980 (1988)	6
Government regulates radio ownership (1945)	18	Size of federal budget (1951)	6
% of population below poverty line (1989)	18		

An additional 26 percent (86 items) of the survey questions could be correctly answered by one-half to three-quarters of those asked. These included knowledge of public policy: that the government does not establish specific quotas for the time devoted to religious and educational broadcasting; that voting rights and excise tax legislation was passed in 1965; the general thrust of Nixon's economic program; that President Bush vetoed the plant-closing bill passed by Congress in 1990; that school curricula and graduation requirements vary by state; and so forth. More than half of those asked could describe the basic facts surrounding Watergate in 1973 or Three Mile Island in 1980. The day after the 1987 stock market

crash, more than half of those asked could say how many points the Dow Jones index lost. Other facts about the domestic scene known by one-half to just under three-quarters of those asked included awareness that farmers were in economic distress in the mid 1970s, that food preservatives and birth control pills had been linked to health problems, the general causes of acid rain, the definition of "the greenhouse effect," and some details of the Social Security system.

More than 60 percent of the items tapping knowledge of domestic politics could not be answered by as many as half of those asked. Of these, a little under half (89 items, or 27 percent of the total) were known by over a quarter of the public. These included awareness of the likely effects of the Taft-Hartley legislation, the purpose of the Hoover Commission (set up by Truman to recommend changes in the structure of the federal bureaucracy), and that immigration legislation was passed by Congress in 1965. Several details of the Social Security system (for example, that the Social Security program was paying more than it collected in 1984 but was collecting more than it paid by 1989) were known by less than half those asked. Less than half (but at least a quarter) of those asked knew that taxes in the United States are generally lower than in Western Europe, what the minimum wage is, and that black unemployment is higher than white unemployment in the United States.¹¹ Similar numbers knew that the blood of blacks and whites is the same (asked during the 1940s).

The remaining 35 percent of our questions could be correctly answered by fewer than a quarter of those asked. These little-known facts included being able to describe the Wagner Labor Act, knowing what percent of the federal budget went to health care or Social Security, knowing the size of the federal budget deficit, or knowing what the Superfund is. Less than a quarter of the public also knew what Watergate was about in 1972 or about the environmental disaster that occurred at Love Canal. General facts relevant to domestic politics that were largely unknown included the corporate income tax rate, the percentage of U.S. workers that are in unions, the percentage of energy used in the United States that comes from nuclear power, the percentage of gross income tax revenue provided by the top 25 percent of wage earners, or the percent of the poor in the United States who are black or children.

The Substance of Politics: Knowledge about Foreign Affairs

Of the more than 500 questions asked about foreign affairs (see table 2.5), 14 percent were answered correctly by at least three-quarters of survey respondents. These facts included knowing that the Soviet Union

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(until recently), Cuba, and China are communist nations. Most citizens were also aware of some of the more dramatic or publicized issues of the day: for example, three-quarters or more of the public could name at least one of the nations occupying Germany during the Truman administration, knew that Khrushchev was going to visit the United States during Eisenhower's administration, knew Nixon's reaction to the Mai Lai-related conviction of Lieutenant William Calley, and knew that the United States had a trade deficit in the 1980s and 1990s. As public attention turned to the increasing U.S. dependence on foreign goods during and after the Carter administration, most citizens were aware of whether many large corporations were domestic or foreign and what goods the United States did or did not import.

Table 2.5 Knowledge of Foreign Affairs (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
Ozone damage affects whole world (1988)	94	Japan not known for oil reserves (1988)	72
Name one country with nuclear weapons (1988)	93	Who does U.S. government support in Nicaragua (1988)	69
Americans held hostage in Middle East (1989)	91	North Korea is communist (1978)	66
U.S. has trade deficit with Japan (1988)	88	Did rebellion in Romania succeed (1990)	66
Volkswagen is a foreign company (1978)	87	Can Soviets make A-bomb (1949)	63
U.S. has military base in Philippines (1985)	85	What is Marshall Plan (1950)	63
U.S. provides economic aid to South Korea (1985)	83	Countries signing Camp David accord (1979)	62
Cuba is communist (1988)	82	U.S. is a member of NATO (1964)	61
Name a country occupying Germany (1950)	82	What is the Kremlin (1957)	61
Who brought Berlin dispute to U.N. (1948)	81	Where are Contras and Sandinistas (1988)	60
Nixon reaction to Calley decision (1971)	80	Mineral used in A-bomb (1952)	59
Soviet Union is communist (1948)	78	Most Western European countries are democracies (1948)	59
U.S. imports oil (1984)	78	% South Africans who are black (1985)	59
Mainland China is communist (1985)	77	Size of Japan GNP relative to U.S. (1986)	59
Describe Soviet pressure on Lithuania (1990)	77	Describe unrest in Middle East (1967)	58
Reagan administration to deploy MX missile (1985)	76	Describe goals of SALT treaty (1979)	58
Iran demand for return of U.S. hostages (1980)	74	Where is Persian Gulf (1987)	58
Way fallout from Chernobyl was spread (1988)	73	Describe current problem in Iran (1951)	57
Not all Indians are Hindus (1978)	72	Japan has free elections (1982)	57
England deployed troops in Saudi Arabia (1990)	72	Apartheid is policy in South Africa (1988)	55
		Palestine not independent country (1946)	55
		East Germany is communist (1954)	55
		U.S. will still defend Panama Canal (1978)	54
		Taxes higher in Western Europe than U.S. (1989)	53

Table 2.5 Knowledge of Foreign Affairs (*continued*)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
Spain not a democracy (1948)	52	Where are most immigrants coming from (1993)	35
What is hydrogen bomb (1950)	52	Does Japan have a military draft (1986)	34
Describe situation in Poland (1981)	52	Japan imports U.S. agricultural products (1986)	33
Relation of England to India (1942)	51	Women can vote in India (1978)	33
Black South Africans can't vote (1985)	51	Poland is in Warsaw Pact (1988)	32
Relation of England to Canada (1942)	50	Serbians conquered much of Bosnia (1994)	27
Israel gained ground since 1948 (1973)	50	Two countries in SALT Treaty (1979)	30
West Germany a member of NATO (1989)	50	Argentina ruled by a dictator (1948)	29
Cease-fire in Middle East (1948)	49	# of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam (1967)	29
Only nation to use nuclear weapons (1986)	49	% of oil in U.S. that's imported (1977)	29
What is foreign aid spent on (1958)	48	Country attacking USS <i>Stark</i> (1987)	29
No Jordan troops in Saudi Arabia (1990)	48	Describe Panama's government (1988)	28
Not all Soviets in Communist party (1986)	48	% world population: malnourished (1979)	28
Has U.S. recognized Lithuania (1990)	47	Reebok a foreign company (1987)	28
Sweden is a democracy (1948)	46	East Germany in Warsaw Pact (1988)	27
U.S. supports El Salvador government (1983)	46	Describe Saudi Arabia's government (1990)	25
Has U.S. approved SALT treaty (1984)	45	Describe neutron bomb (1977)	24
England rules Palestine (1946)	45	% world population: underdeveloped nations (1972)	22
% U.S. oil from Arab nations (1973)	42	% aliens in U.S. (1940)	20
Who struck first in Arab-Israel war (1973)	42	Shell Oil a foreign company (1986)	19
Kuwait not a democracy (1991)	42	Israel gets largest % U.S. aid (1986)	18
Who controls Formosa (1954)	41	Describe government of El Salvador (1988)	17
Soviets not in NATO (1964)	41	% world population that controls most of money (1979)	17
U.S. has no "no first strike" policy (1988)	40	# of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam (1965)	17
Yugoslavia is communist (1948)	39	Size of U.S. trade deficit (1984)	16
France is a member of NATO (1988)	39	Describe the Baruch Plan (1948)	15
No collective bargaining in Russia (1945)	38	Describe the McCarran Act (1955)	14
U.S. in International Court of Justice (1946)	37	What is the Bricker amendment (1954)	13
U.S. has military base on Cuba (1977)	37	Describe Glasnost (1987)	11
Soviets are in Warsaw Pact (1988)	37	U.S.'s largest trading partner (1991)	8
Allies took land from Germany (1944)	36	# of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam (1967)	6
When will Panama control the canal (1990)	36	% U.S. real estate foreign owned (1989)	4
England has nuclear weapons (1988)	35	Is U.S. a member of UNESCO (1947)	1
Issues in Israel withdrawal from Egypt (1957)	35		
Describe aspect of U.S. immigration policy (1965)	35		

The largest range and number of questions on foreign affairs were asked during the Reagan and Bush administrations (almost 60 percent of the total), and these items reveal a reasonably rich range of public knowledge. For example, three-quarters or more of the public knew that damage to the ozone layer would affect the whole earth; that Americans were being held hostage in the Middle East; that the United States had a trade deficit with Japan; that there was a pro-Soviet government in Central America; that defense spending was one of the two largest pieces of the federal budget; and that President Reagan planned to deploy the MX missile.

An additional 28 percent of the items were correctly answered by between half and three-quarters of those asked. These items include some issues—such as the trade deficit, U.S.-Soviet relations, and tensions in the Middle East—that were not as prominent as they had been or would become or that asked for more detail than some of the questions discussed above. They also include questions about nations that are neither as prominent in the media nor as central to U.S. policy and politics as such countries as the Soviet Union, China, Israel, or Japan. Nonetheless, the scope of information known by at least half the public is fairly impressive. During the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, half or more of the public could describe the Marshall Plan and the unrest in Iran or could explain the political relations between England, Canada, and India. During the Eisenhower administration over half those surveyed could explain what the Kremlin was and knew that East Germany was allied with the Soviets. During the Kennedy and Johnson years over half those surveyed knew that the United States was a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and were aware of the rising unrest in the Middle East, and during the Nixon-Ford years similar percentages knew that Israel had gained, rather than lost, territory since its creation. During the Carter administration, between 50 and 74 percent of the public could, among other things, name the two countries that signed the Camp David Accords, knew that the United States would retain the right to defend the Panama Canal even after it shifted to Panamanian control, and could identify North Korea as communist and South Korea as noncommunist. And during the Reagan and Bush administrations, more than half the public knew, for example, that England sent troops to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf war or whom the U.S. government supported in Nicaragua.

As with the other areas of politics examined, however, more than half of the 553 foreign affairs items could be answered by less than half the

general public. Thirty-six percent of the questions were known by only one-quarter to one-half of those asked. In the 1940s, this included knowledge about the forms of government in Sweden and Yugoslavia, that there was a short-lived cease-fire between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, and that the United States was sending military aid to Greece. In the 1950s, similar numbers were aware that Formosa was controlled by the Nationalist Chinese and could describe some of the things U.S. foreign aid was spent on. In the 1960s, a quarter to half of the public knew about how many U.S. soldiers were stationed in Vietnam or that the Soviet Union was not a member of NATO, and in the 1970s these percentages knew who launched the first attack in the Arab-Israeli war, about what percent of U.S. oil comes from the Middle East, and that the United States has a military base on Cuba. And in the 1980s and 1990s, a quarter to a half of the population knew that adults in the Soviet Union did not have to join the Communist party, about how many nations had nuclear weapons, that Japan is a democracy, that Jordan did not send troops to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf crisis, and that Serbians were the ethnic group that had conquered much of Bosnia.

Finally, nearly a quarter of the items could be answered by fewer than one-fourth of those asked. These little-known facts included knowing that the United States was sharing information about the atomic bomb with England and Canada in the 1940s, being able to describe the McCarran Act or the Bricker Amendment in the 1950s, knowing about how many U.S. soldiers had been killed in Vietnam in the 1960s, knowing how much of the federal budget goes to defense or to foreign aid in the 1970s, knowing that Czechoslovakia was in the Warsaw Pact and Canada was in NATO in the 1980s, and knowing that Canada was the United States' largest trading partner in the 1990s.

Politically Relevant Knowledge: Geography and History

In addition to the rules, people, and substance of politics, other kinds of information can aid a citizen in thinking about and acting in the political world. Two such areas for which we were able to find survey items are geography (147 items) and history (111 items). Ten percent of the geography questions were answered correctly by three-quarters or more of those asked, including the ability to locate the United States, the Soviet Union, or Texas on a map (see table 2.6). An additional 31 percent of the items were known by half or more of those asked. These included the ability to locate Italy, Brazil, or Pennsylvania on a map, as well as knowing that Japan is an island or that California is the most populous state in the

United States. Only a quarter to a half of those questioned could correctly answer 31 percent of the items, including the location of Iran, South Africa, or Missouri or knowing what percent of the world's population lives in Europe, South America, or Africa. The 29 percent of questions known by fewer than a quarter of those asked included locating Hungary or El Salvador on a map and estimating the population of China, Japan, or the United States.

Table 2.6 Knowledge of Geography (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
Locate Texas on a map (1988)	91	Locate Chile on a map (1988)	45
Ocean between U.S. and England (1952)	90	Locate Missouri on a map (1988)	45
Locate California on a map (1988)	89	Locate New Jersey on a map (1988)	42
Locate Canada on a map (1988)	86	Locate Massachusetts on a map (1988)	39
Locate U.S. on a map (1988)	86	% of world population in Latin America (1979)	37
Locate Mexico on a map (1988)	81	Where is Panama (1988)	36
Locate Pacific Ocean on a map (1988)	80	% of world population in Africa (1979)	33
Locate Soviet Union on a map (1988)	76	Where is Nicaragua (1988)	36
Locate Italy on a map (1988)	74	Locate Vietnam on a map (1988)	32
Where is Grenada (1983)	63	Locate West Germany on a map (1988)	29
Locate Pennsylvania on a map (1988)	62	Locate Egypt on a map (1988)	28
Locate Peru on a map (1988)	61	% of world population in Asia (1979)	28
Oceans in order west from Hawaii (1988)	59	Locate Poland on a map (1988)	28
State with largest population (1988)	59	Locate Persian Gulf on a map (1988)	25
Japan is an island (1982)	57	Locate Sweden on a map (1988)	23
Where is Nicaragua (1986)	56	Locate Peru on a map (1988)	23
Locate N.Y. on a map (1988)	55	Where is El Salvador (1988)	20
Locate Central America on a map (1988)	55	Locate Colombia on a map (1988)	19
Name one Central American country (1988)	55	Locate Czechoslovakia on a map (1988)	19
Locate France on a map (1988)	54	Locate Bolivia on a map (1988)	17
Locate Illinois on a map (1988)	52	Where is Costa Rica (1988)	15
Locate Ohio on a map (1988)	50	Locate Yugoslavia on a map (1988)	14
Locate Spain on a map (1988)	50	Where is Guatemala (1988)	14
Locate South Africa on a map (1988)	49	Locate Hungary on a map (1988)	14
% of world population in Europe (1979)	47	Locate Paraguay on a map (1988)	13
Locate England on a map (1988)	47	Locate Romania on a map (1988)	11
Locate Argentina on a map (1988)	47	% of world population in U.S. and Canada (1979)	6
Locate Japan on a map (1988)	46	Where is Belize (1988)	4

Table 2.7 Knowledge of Social and Political History (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
First president of U.S. (1989)	93	Women could not always vote in U.S. (1989)	90
Reagan never vice president (1987)	92	What happened in 1776 (1989)	88
Who was Christopher Columbus (1975)	92	Lincoln was assassinated (1965)	88
U.S. used A-bomb against Japan (1990)	91		

Table 2.7 Knowledge of Social and Political History (Percentage Correct)
(continued)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
Why Pearl Harbor is important (1981)	84	Only nation to use nuclear bomb (1986)	49
Who became president after JFK killed (1987)	83	Where was Columbus going (1988)	48
Who is Lee Harvey Oswald (1983)	81	Two nations in SALT talks (1986)	47
Who is Martin Luther King (1985)	81	Two nations at Camp David (1982)	45
What happened in 1492 (1975)	81	More Soviets or U.S. died in World War II (1985)	42
Who was Andrew Jackson (1955)	81	Who was Karl Marx (1975)	41
Who "discovered" America (1990)	78	U.S. war costing most U.S. lives (1990)	38
Nixon's party ID (1989)	78	"The only thing we have to fear . . ." (1958)	37
Who gave U.S. the Statue of Liberty (1986)	74	McKinley was assassinated (1965)	37
What was the Holocaust (1985)	69	War Waterloo fought in (1957)	36
Origin of most early twentieth-century immigrants (1988)	69	What is Mt. Vernon (1957)	35
U.S. and Soviets were allies in World War II (1986)	67	Plato (1953)	34
Which side did U.S. support in Vietnam (1990)	67	"Speak softly and carry a big stick" (1958)	33
FDR's party ID (1989)	63	"With malice toward none . . ." (1958)	32
Truman's party ID (1989)	58	# of times Nixon ran for president (1987)	30
Who was Napoléon Bonaparte (1975)	58	Garfield was assassinated (1965)	29
Who was Eli Whitney (1957)	58	Date of New Deal (1989)	29
Were Philippines ever a U.S. colony (1985)	56	What was the Parthenon (1957)	26
Who was Sigmund Freud (1976)	55	Who was Johannes Guttenberg (1975)	24
War Battle of Bulge fought in (1957)	54	Who was Benjamin Disraeli (1976)	23
Author of Declaration of Independence (1989)	53	Bosnia and Serbia were in Yugoslavia (1992)	21
U.S. occupied Japan after World War II (1985)	50	Name a memorable political slogan (1987)	20
		"I came, I saw, I conquered" (1958)	19
		What was New Deal (1989)	15
		"I have not begun to fight" (1958)	14
		"World must be made safe for . . ." (1958)	14
		What happened in 1066 (1975)	10

The history questions asked on national surveys were often rather eclectic, but they nonetheless offer a glimpse of levels of knowledge in this area (see table 2.7). Of the 111 questions, 28 (25 percent) were correctly answered by three-quarters or more of those asked. These included the ability to identify several historical figures (for example, Christopher Columbus or Andrew Jackson) and historical dates (Columbus's "discovery" of America in 1492 and the American Revolution in 1776). They also included historical facts, such as knowing that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated or that the United States used an atomic bomb against Japan. Another 31 percent of the items were answered by half to three-quarters of those asked, including identifying Napoleon Bonaparte or Sigmund Freud, knowing the party affiliation of Franklin Roosevelt, knowing the war in

which the Battle of the Bulge was fought, knowing what the Holocaust was, and knowing which side the United States supported in the Vietnam conflict.

Another 32 percent of the items were correctly answered by only a quarter to a half of those asked. These included identifying Aristotle or Karl Marx, knowing the war in which the battle of Bunker Hill was fought, and that the United States occupied Japan after World War II. It also included the ability to identify the two countries involved in the Camp David Accords four to five years after those accords were signed. Finally, 12 percent of the questions were answered correctly by less than a quarter of the public. These included identifying who said "the world must be made safe for democracy" and knowing what happened in 1066, where the Soviets stood on the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, and when the New Deal occurred and what it was about.

Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective

How do levels of political knowledge in America compare to those found in other countries? Good comparative data are relatively sparse, especially for knowledge of domestic politics, and existing evidence provides an ambiguous picture. Recent evidence suggests that Americans lag behind residents of many Western nations in their awareness of key political actors and events in foreign affairs (Dimock and Popkin, 1995). Data from surveys in eight nations conducted by the Times Mirror Center in 1994 show that in terms of the percentage able to answer the current events questions correctly, Americans placed third on one item, sixth on two, and came in seventh and eighth on two others (see table 2.8). Of seven nations for which summary tabulations were made, Americans had the second-lowest mean number correct (only Spain fell behind; Mexico was not tabulated). Thirty-seven percent of Americans missed all of the questions, the highest percentage among the seven nations.

Research by Baker et al. (1994) that compared knowledge of national legislatures in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain also suggests that Americans are less informed than citizens of other nations. U.S. citizens averaged less than three correct answers on a ten-item scale measuring knowledge of the U.S. Congress, compared to Great Britains, who averaged over six correct out of ten questions about their parliament, and Canadians, who averaged a remarkable 9.8 correct out eleven questions about their parliament.¹²

Table 2.8 Knowledge of Foreign Affairs in Comparative Perspective (Percentage Correct)

	Canada	France	Germany	Italy	Mexico	Spain	United Kingdom	United States
President of Russia?	59	61	94	76	42	65	63	50
Country threatening to withdraw from nonproliferation treaty	12	7	45	26	6	5	11	22
Who is Boutros Boutros Ghali	26	32	58	43	14	15	22	13
Ethnic group that has conquered much of Bosnia	42	55	77	51	12	24	46	28
Name of group with whom Israelis recently reached peace accord	51	60	79	56	21	29	59	40
Answered four or five correctly	19	25	58	34	—	10	18	15
Answered none correctly	27	23	3	18	—	32	22	37
Mean number correct	1.92	2.13	3.55	2.49	—	1.35	2.01	1.53

A somewhat less grim picture emerges from a 1986 cross-national survey that asked about world leaders (see table 2.9). Americans equalled or exceeded respondents from the other four nations in their ability to name their own head of state (99 percent for Americans, 99 percent for the French, 96 percent for the British, 95 percent for West Germans, and 89 percent for the Italians). Americans were about as likely as the others to know the prime minister of Japan, but they were considerably less able to identify the heads of state of Western European nations. And the five-nation survey that formed the basis for Gabriel Almond's and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture* found a considerably higher percentage of Americans and Germans able to name four or more party leaders when compared with the English, Italians, or Mexicans. Americans were behind the Germans, but comparable to the British, in the ability to name four or more cabinet offices.

Table 2.9 Knowledge of Political Leaders in Comparative Perspective
(Percentage Correct)

	West Germans	French	British	Italians	Americans
President of U.S.	94	94	93	95	99
Prime Minister of United Kingdom	80	89	96	77	74
President of France	64	99	55	76	34
Chancellor of West Germany	95	59	17	37	16
Prime Minister of Italy	39	18	2	89	6
Prime Minister of Japan	19	17	4	23	19

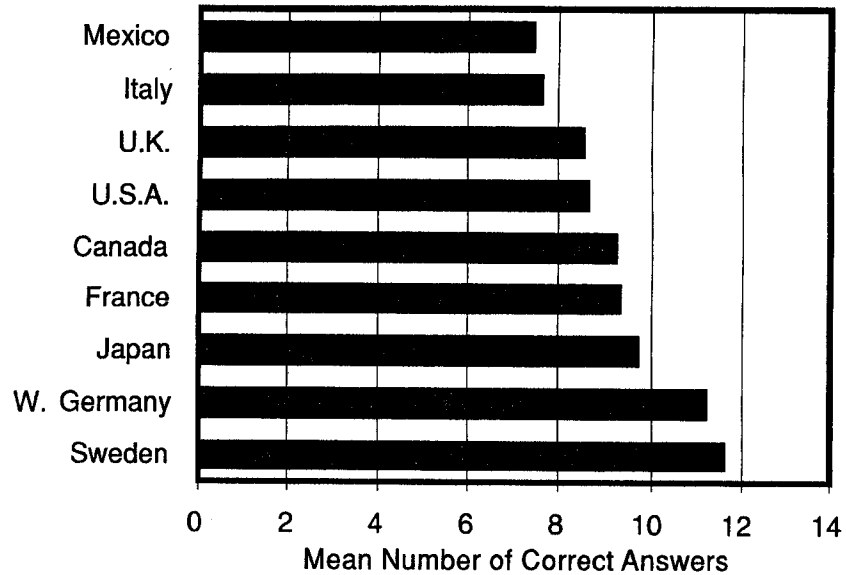
Finally, a 1988 National Geographic survey asked representative samples of adult citizens from nine countries to locate sixteen places on a map of the world (fourteen countries and two bodies of water). Overall Americans correctly located an average of 8.6 places, putting them sixth (see figure 2.1). Opportunity and motivation clearly play a role in explaining this pattern. Americans are above average in locating places relatively close to them (Canada, Mexico, Central America, the Pacific Ocean, and the United States itself), but they are below average in identifying geographically distant areas (the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, Sweden, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf).

Exploring the Depth of Political Knowledge and Ignorance

Thus far we have treated factual knowledge as a simple matter of right or wrong. This works for some facts (for example, naming the vice president), but for most facts of import there are degrees of knowledge. And the value of even simple information, such as the name of an officeholder, is seldom in the fact itself, but rather in its ability to lead to (or indicate) other, more substantively useful information. How deep is the public's knowledge of politics? Our review of the aggregate survey data provides circumstantial evidence that as the standards for correct answers become stricter or as the details requested increase, the percentage correct declines. But there are limits to the conclusions we can draw from these marginal percentages.

Sixteen questions on our Survey of Political Knowledge allow us to distinguish degrees of correctness. The responses to them confirm the notion that political knowledge often does not run very deep (see table

Figure 2.1 Knowledge of Geography in Comparative Perspective



Note: Data were gathered when Germany was still divided.

2.10). For example, 35 percent of our sample could correctly identify a right guaranteed by the First Amendment, but only 20 percent could identify two such rights, and only 9 percent could identify three. More dramatically, 50 percent could identify one right guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment (almost always the right against self-incrimination), but only 2 percent could identify a second. Seventy-one percent of the sample knew that the Reagan administration had supported the rebels in Nicaragua, but only 44 percent knew this while also knowing that the Contras were the rebels and the Sandinistas were in control of the government. When the answers were coded for levels of knowledge, the average percent correct for "surface knowledge" was 41, but for "deep knowledge," it plummeted to 16 percent.

Table 2.10 Levels of Knowledge within Selected Variables

Subject	%	Subject	%
Fifth Amendment		Senators	
Know one or two	50	Know one or two	55
Know two	2	Know both	25
First Amendment		Representative	
Know one, two, or three	35	Claims to know	45
Know two or three	20	Correct or close	34
Know three	9	Correct	29

Table 2.10 Levels of Knowledge within Selected Variables (*continued*)

Subject	%	Subject	%
Rhenquist's ideology		Federal budget: Social Security	
Conservative or moderate	39	Within 10%	30
Conservative	30	Within 5%	14
Arms control agreement		Within 2%	5
Claims has heard of	61	Federal budget: Defense	
Nuclear weapons involved	48	Within 10%	30
Nuclear missiles involved	34	Within 5%	18
Medium-range missiles involved	18	Within 2%	8
In Europe only	4	Percent Poor	
Nicaraguan policy		Within 10%	37
Knows U.S. supports rebels	71	Within 5%	22
Knows U.S. supports Contras	66	Within 2%	18
Also knows Contras = rebels	54	Percent unemployed	
Also knows Sandinistas =		Within 3%	40
government	44	Within 2%	34
Superfund		Within 1%	27
Claims heard of	23	Percent no health insurance	
General knowledge	14	Within 10%	21
Cleans up toxic sites	11	Within 5%	10
New Deal		Within 2%	4
Claims to know	53	Percent black	
Sophisticated, adequate, or vague	30	Within 10%	27
Sophisticated or adequate	15	Within 5%	15
Sophisticated only	4	Within 2%	13
Federal budget: Education			
Within 10%	41		
Within 5%	24		
Within 2%	19		

Patterns of Political Ignorance

The pattern of political ignorance is as revealing as the pattern of political knowledge (see table 2.11). The responses to a range of factual questions on our 1989 national survey indicate that in most cases, people willingly admitted if they did not know the answer to one of our questions (we call these responses *uninformed*).¹³ Just under a third of the responses to the questions on our survey were "don't knows" (the median "don't know" response was 26 percent).¹⁴ The percentage of these uninformed answers varied greatly by question format and topic, from the 2 percent who said they didn't know who declared war to the 96 percent who acknowledged they could not name three rights protected by the First Amendment.

Table 2.11 Levels of Knowledge and Ignorance

Subject	Know (%)	Said Don't Know (%)	Gave Wrong Answer (%)	Specific Wrong Answer (%)	Subject	Know (%)	Said Don't Know (%)	Gave Wrong Answer (%)	Specific Wrong Answer (%)
Length of presidential term (o)	96	3	1	*	Size of federal budget (3)	49	7	44	22
Right to counsel (2)	91	4	5	5	Sandinistas govern (2)	48	32	20	20
Women's suffrage (2)	90	6	5	5	Arms treaty (o)	48	49	4	*
Define veto (o)	89	6	5	*	Bill of Rights (o)	46	49	5	*
Can override veto (2)	82	10	8	8	U.S. aids El Salvador's government (2)	43	38	19	19
U.S. has trade deficit (3)	82	8	11	6	First Amendment right (o)	35	58	7	*
U.S. has budget deficit (3)	78	8	14	9	% veto override (o)	35	47	18	6
Nixon's party ID (2)	78	8	14	14	Who declares war (3)	34	2	64	59
Can't require pledge (2)	75	6	18	18	Rhenquist ideology (3)	30	50	20	11
Vice president (o)	74	24	2	*	Both senators (o)	30	63	7	*
Governor (o)	73	21	5	*	House member (o)	29	55	16	*
State can't prohibit abortion (2)	72	13	15	15	Date of New Deal (o)	29	59	12	10
Party control: House (2)	68	15	17	16	% Unemployed (o)	27	19	54	8
U.S. supports Contras (2)	66	25	9	8	Date: women's vote (o)	21	40	39	10
Decides constitutionality (3)	66	10	24	17	Two First Amendment rights (o)	20	79	2	*
FDR's party ID (2)	63	26	11	11	Federal budget: education (o)	19	29	52	15
Truman's party ID (2)	58	26	16	16	% poor (o)	18	27	55	9
Law before <i>Roe v. Wade</i> (2)	58	27	15	15	What is New Deal (o)	15	65	20	*
Appoints federal judges (3)	58	13	29	17	% blacks (o)	13	17	70	13
Define recession (o)	57	22	25	*	Superfund (o)	11	86	2	*
Party control: Senate (2)	55	27	18	17	Three First Amendment rights (o)	9	89	2	*
Name one of two senators (o)	55	43	7	*	Federal budget: defense (o)	8	23	69	9
Tariff's effect (o)	52	29	19	*	Federal budget: Social Security (o)	5	26	69	11
Communist can run for president (2)	50	5	45	45	% no health insurance (o)	4	25	55	10
Fifth Amendment right (o)	50	44	6	6	Two Fifth Amendment rights (o)	2	96	2	*

Note: (o) = open-ended; (2) = two choices; (3) = three choices; * = not ascertained.

On average, fewer citizens gave wrong answers (mean = 21 percent, median = 15 percent) than said outright that they did not know the answer. As with both correct and uninformed responses, these *misinformed* answers varied significantly by question format and topic: only 1 percent of our participants gave a wrong answer for the length of a presidential term, but fully 70 percent gave a wrong answer for the percentage of the U.S. population that is black.¹⁵ For just under half (47 percent) of the questions, a *specific* wrong answer was given by at least 10 percent of those asked.¹⁶ And for just over 10 percent of the questions, the percentage misinformed actually exceeded the percentage giving the correct answer.¹⁷ Some of this misinformation undoubtedly reflects guessing, a conclusion bolstered by the fact that the percentage giving a wrong answer was generally higher on the multiple choice than on open-ended questions.¹⁸ Nonetheless the substantive patterns of misinformation, especially for fairly common mistakes, are revealing. There were two broad categories of incorrect answers—found in both the Roper Center data and our Survey of Political Knowledge—that appear to go beyond random guessing or pure ignorance. The first suggests that in some instances citizens are closer to the truth than the simple, static patterns of right or wrong indicate. The second suggests that misinformation can result from the projection of values or from biases in the information provided to citizens.

The Silver Lining: Contested Truths, Close Calls, and Lagged Attention

Just as there are degrees of correctness that distinguish surface knowledge from more deep-seated understanding, so too there are degrees of error. Many of the wrong answers suggest that, for some topics at least, a portion of the uninformed public is more in the shadows than in the dark. Some answers, which we call *contested truths*, are arguably less a matter of misinformation than of interpretation. Even in the realm of facts, “right” and “wrong” is sometimes open to negotiation. This is especially true for questions that deal with complex issues or that are worded ambiguously. Whereas Mexico was democratic in 1948, its hegemonic party system makes answering a question about the nature of this nation’s political system less than straightforward. Argentina was officially neutral during World War II, but there is ample evidence that it unofficially aided the Nazis in a variety of ways. Answering the question, “Is India a strong military power?” depends in part on whether one means regionally or internationally and how one factors in the country’s nuclear capability. Whether one claims that states or the federal government determine voter

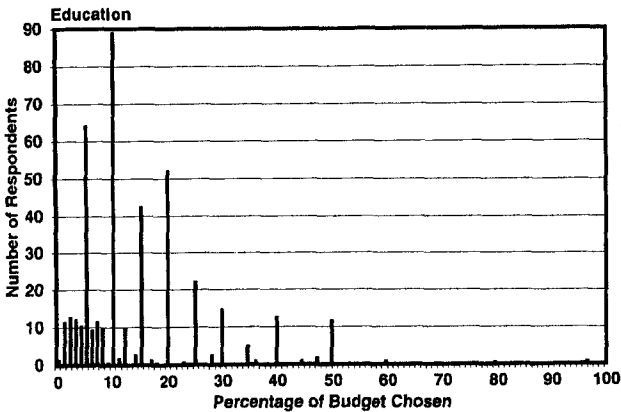
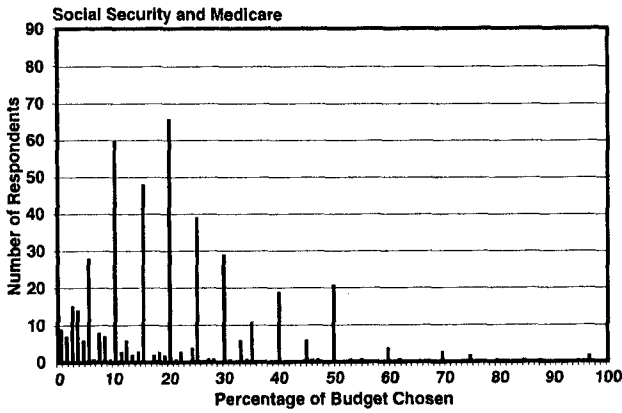
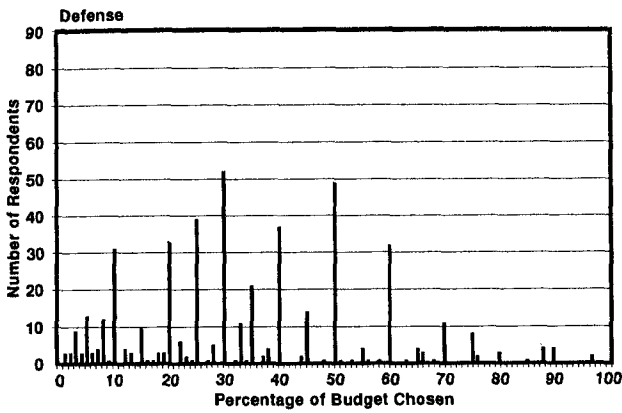
eligibility depends on whether one means the broad parameters set by the amended U.S. Constitution or the more specific regulations found within those parameters.

Another variation on this theme is the *close call*. Many of the survey items required establishing cut-off points as to when an answer was too far from the preferred answer to accept. For example, at what point has a citizen demonstrated she knows what a tariff is? Or at what point does a person's estimate of the inflation rate become unacceptably high or low? These, of course, are judgments on which reasonable people might disagree, and they introduce a fair amount of imprecision for estimating knowledge levels. A perusal of the answers to questions that introduce degrees of correctness (table 2.10) suggests that citizens often approach the correct answer even if they do not demonstrate full command of it. Consider, for example, the distribution of responses to three open-ended questions asking respondents what percent of the federal budget was devoted to defense, Social Security, or education (see figure 2.2). There is a very wide spread to the answers, suggesting a disturbing amount of ignorance. Nonetheless, the distributions are hardly random. In each case the answers cluster—even if not always very tightly—around the correct answer.¹⁹

Many political facts require that citizens be reasonably vigilant surveyors of the changing political landscape: party control of Congress changes, elected and appointed officials are replaced, political alliances form and disintegrate, and so forth. The patterns of knowledge and ignorance about these types of facts suggest that many citizens neither ignore nor fully grasp these changes. For example, in 1980, 71 percent of those surveyed said that the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives before the election (the highest percentage correct in the nine presidential election years in which NES asked this question). But a majority of those surveyed after the election mistakenly thought the Republicans took control of the House. Public awareness before the election may have been a by-product of the highly charged political climate, which led to Reagan's victory and the Republican control of the Senate. Publicity surrounding the latter no doubt confused some citizens regarding what had happened in the House.

On several occasions, survey questions were asked close enough to changes in the political environment to reveal differences in the degree to which citizens are attentive to such occurrences. Many of the wrong answers reflected ignorance less than *lagged attention*. For example, in 1944, 46 percent of those asked thought that John L. Lewis was president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), when in fact Philip

Figure 2.2 Distribution of Responses: Allocation of Federal Budget



Note: The correct percentages in 1989 were as follows: percent of the budget devoted to defense (26%); Social Security and Medicare (30%); education (3%).

Murray was. However, Lewis had been president of the CIO until 1940. After a power struggle with Murray in 1942, Lewis pulled the United Mine Workers (UMW) out of the CIO; he became president of the UMW in 1944. Similarly, in late January and early February of 1949, only 36 percent of those asked could name the newly appointed secretary of state, Dean Acheson. Another 24 percent, however, were aware that a change had been made, although they could not name the new secretary. And in 1986, although only 43 percent of the public knew that William Rehnquist was the chief justice of the Supreme Court, an additional 29 percent said Warren Burger, who had recently stepped down from that position.

The timing of the 1990 NES survey provided a fortuitous opportunity to examine the notion of lagged attention. One of the factual questions on that survey was to identify the job or office held by Margaret Thatcher. On November 22, while the survey was in the field, Thatcher announced her resignation as prime minister. Just under half the interviews (49 percent) were completed after this announcement, with most of those (38 percent) taking place after Thatcher left office on November 29. Before Thatcher's announcement 47 percent of those asked could identify her as the prime minister of Great Britain. In the week between her announcement and her actual resignation, 49 percent of those asked still identified her as the prime minister, but 43 percent of those people (21 percent overall) noted that she was stepping down. And in the interviews conducted after she actually left office, 12 percent still identified her as prime minister, while 41 percent called her the former prime minister.²⁰

The Dark Cloud: Projection and Manipulation

Contested truths, close calls, and lagged attention suggest that although citizens are not fully informed, they are not fully ignorant. Another broad category of misinformation is more ominous. A number of answers took a form that we call *projection*. Some of these involved assuming the best of the U.S. system, if not of the individuals operating it. These answers were most common for questions on institutions and processes, and especially for questions dealing with rights and liberties. For example, large percentages of Americans believe that the Constitution guarantees a job (29 percent), health care (42 percent), and a high school education (75 percent); that all state court cases can be appealed to the Supreme Court (85 percent); and that all journalists are professionally trained (50 percent). Forty-five percent of those polled thought the communist tenet "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," was found in the Constitution.

Not all the examples of projection involved an expansion of rights and liberties. To the contrary, many believe that a person can be tried twice for the same crime (29 percent), that a member of the Communist party cannot run for president (45 percent), that revolutionary speech is not protected by the Constitution (51 percent), and that an accused person must prove his innocence (50 percent). There is also a willingness to extend powers to the president, even if they are contrary to the basic principles of checks and balances. Besides the example of war powers discussed below, many Americans believe the president has the power to adjourn Congress at his will (35 percent), to suspend the Constitution (49 percent), and to appoint judges to the federal courts without the approval of the Senate (60 percent). Citizens often appeared confused about the relation of the Bill of Rights to the states. Many often assumed that states had powers that they knew were denied the national government: for example, establishing a state prayer (45 percent), giving public money to religious schools (46 percent), and allowing silent prayer in schools (50 percent); on this topic, see Brigham (1990).

Equally disconcerting were answers indicating that citizens came to wrong conclusions based on information—often provided by government officials and the media—that was misleading. For example, more people answered that the president had the power to declare war (59 percent) than that Congress did (34 percent). Although this answer is technically wrong, one can see—given presidential actions over the past forty years—why citizens would think this was the president's responsibility. Similarly, during the Watergate revelations most Americans knew that being impeached by the House was only the first of two steps in a president's removal from office, but about a third of those questioned equated impeachment with removal—a conclusion easily reached given the non-specific way the term was used in the media. In 1985, when the Cold War was still part of the political vocabulary, a quarter of Americans believed that the United States and the Soviet Union fought on opposite sides during World War II. And in 1989, between 21 and 38 percent of Americans (amounting to a plurality in one survey) wrongly believed that U.S. citizens were taxed more than the inhabitants of most West European countries, a conclusion consistent with the dominant political rhetoric and commentary of the 1980s.

Evidence of a *manipulated* public was found by the University of Massachusetts's Center for the Study of Communication (Jhally, Lewis, and Morgan, 1991; Lewis and Morgan, 1992). In a survey about public opinion and political knowledge regarding the then-ongoing Persian Gulf war, the center discovered that knowledge about the politics and history

of the region was skewed in a way that benefited the administration's policy of intervention. For example, only 13 percent of those interviewed knew that, shortly before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the State Department had indicated to Saddam Hussein that it would take no action if Iraq used force in its territorial dispute with Kuwait, and fully 65 percent said the administration had threatened *at that point* to use force to defend Kuwait. And whereas 53 percent of those interviewed supported the use of U.S. military force to restore the sovereignty of any illegally occupied country, only 31 percent knew that Israel was occupying land in the Middle East and only 3 percent were aware of Syria's occupation of Lebanon. Eighty percent of those interviewed knew Hussein had used chemical weapons against some of his own people, but only 2 percent knew of Kuwait's insistence on lowering oil prices and of the strain this decision was putting on the Iraqi economy. Significantly, the study found that the more accurately informed people were, the less supportive they were of the war. The center concluded: "In short, people knew those facts that fit well with the Administration's war policy, and did not know those facts that might be seen to undermine it. One interesting feature of this selective perception involved those questions where most people gave the incorrect answer. In these instances, a majority would usually choose responses that endorsed the Administration's moral position, even when those responses directly contradicted the facts themselves. In other words, faced with a choice between truth or propaganda, most people chose propaganda" (1992: 2).

The center found similar evidence for a manipulated public during the 1992 presidential election, and again the administration seemed to benefit. For example, respondents were asked, "Of the 4 candidates for president and vice president, who has been accused of using family influence to avoid being sent to Vietnam?" Although both Dan Quayle and Bill Clinton fit this description, 41 percent named only Clinton, 15 percent named only Quayle, and 23 percent named both. Similarly, 73 percent of those asked thought that the Democrat-controlled Congress had passed a budget that was larger than the one proposed by President Bush, while in fact it was smaller.

Our own research also suggests misinformation disproportionately benefits those in political and economic power, but there are more than a few counterexamples. Americans grossly overestimate the average profit made by American corporations, the percentage of the U.S. population that is poor or homeless, and the percentage of the world population that is malnourished. And, despite twelve years of antiabortion administra-

tions, Americans substantially underestimate the number of abortions performed every year.

In the Introduction we argued for the importance of political information as a resource. How resourceful is the American public, as gauged by survey items asked over the past fifty years? Any assessment of the degree to which the citizenry is adequately informed requires a point of comparison. In subsequent chapters we will compare levels of knowledge over time and across groups within the population, but here we will review the evidence mainly from the perspective of Converse's "informed observer."

The popular and scholarly literature on civic knowledge might lead one to conclude, along with Neuman, that "even the most vivid concepts of political life . . . are recognized by only a little over half the electorate" (1986: 16). The survey data examined in this chapter reinforce this conclusion. The most commonly known fact about George Bush's opinions while he was president was that he hated broccoli. During the 1992 presidential campaign 89 percent of the public knew that Vice President Quayle was feuding with the television character Murphy Brown, but only 19 percent could characterize Bill Clinton's record on the environment. Also during that campaign, 86 percent of the public knew that the Bushes' dog was named Millie, yet only 15 percent knew that both presidential candidates supported the death penalty. Judge Wapner (host of the television series "The People's Court") was identified by more people than were Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist. More people know John Lennon than Karl Marx, or know Bill Cosby than either of their U.S. senators. More people know who said "What's up Doc," "Hi yo Silver," or "Come up and see me sometime" than "Give me liberty or give me death," "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," or "Speak softly and carry a big stick." More people knew that Pete Rose was accused of gambling than could name any of the five U.S. senators accused of unethical conduct in the savings and loan scandal. And so on.

Less anecdotal evidence provides equally disturbing patterns. Only 13 percent of the more than 2,000 political questions examined could be answered correctly by 75 percent or more of those asked, and only 41 percent could be answered correctly by more than half the public. Many of the facts known by relatively small percentages of the public seem critical to understanding—let alone effectively acting in—the political world: fundamental rules of the game; classic civil liberties; key concepts of political economy; the names of key political representatives; many

important policy positions of presidential candidates or the political parties; basic social indicators and significant public policies. And for at least some measure of political knowledge, Americans appear significantly less informed than citizens of most other comparably developed nations. Hardly the stuff of informed consent, let alone of a working representative democracy.

The picture presented in this chapter is more subtle and complex than these simple characterizations suggest, however. In spite of tendencies to look longingly at the level of civic involvement found in many Western European nations, evidence that Americans are less informed is mixed.²¹ And for all the insidious comparisons between knowledge of popular and political culture, the former is also filled with facts that are known by remarkably small numbers of people (see table 2.12). Furthermore, there is a wide range of facts about which substantial percentages of the public are aware: institutions and processes, such as the meaning of a veto or party platform; civil liberties, such as the right to counsel and to a trial by jury; political economy terms like *recession* and *foreign trade deficit*; political leaders, such as the president, vice president, governor, and Speaker of the House; policy positions of officeholders, candidates and parties, such as where Truman stood on domestic communism or Michael Dukakis's stand on abortion; social indicators, such as the minimum wage or the U.S. dependence on foreign oil; and public policies, such as Clinton's health care proposal or whether the United States has a budget deficit or surplus. Furthermore, the patterns of partially correct and incorrect answers suggest that many uninformed citizens are struggling at the edge of knowledge, trying at some level to make sense of the political world. Even the *New York Times* article cited at the beginning of this chapter suggests that many uninformed citizens are attempting to act as engaged citizens at the same time their limited knowledge makes effective participation less likely.

Table 2.12 Knowledge of Nonpolitical Facts (Percentage Correct)

Knowledge of popular culture	%		%
Who is Bill Cosby (1988)	93	Who is Floyd Patterson (1957)	44
Who is Chris Evert Lloyd (1984)	83	Name group played at Woodstock (1989)	30
"Hi yo Silver, away" (1958)	71	Slogan "His master's voice" (1977)	28
"Come up and see me sometime" (1958)	61	Woman caught with Gary Hart (1989)	19
Judge on "People's Court" (1989)	54	N.Y. Giants won Superbowl in 1980s (1989)	16

Table 2.12 Knowledge of Nonpolitical Facts (*continued*)

Knowledge of high culture	%		%
Who is Shakespeare (1975)	89	Who wrote <i>Huck Finn</i> (1990)	51
Who is Beethoven (1975)	84	Describe Dali's style (1982)	23
Da Vinci was a painter (1982)	70	Name Nobel Prize winner in 1980s (1989)	20
Who is Robert Frost (1964)	69	Who wrote <i>Great Expectations</i> (1957)	9
Who is Pavarotti (1984)	57	Jackson Pollock was a painter (1982)	6
Knowledge of religion	%		%
Mother of Jesus (1954)	95	Holy Trinity (1954)	40
Name one Commandment (1977)	88	Founder of non-Christian religion (1954)	30
Name one of first four books of Bible (1990)	87	What Jesus said to Nicodemus (1977)	29
Day of week Jews go to service (1964)	56	Old Testament prophet (1954)	19
Name five of Ten Commandments (1977)	42	What HIS stands for (1954)	1
Miscellaneous knowledge	%		%
How many inches in a yard (1951)	91	What is saccharin (1979)	46
How many 3-cent stamps for 75 cents (1951)	79	What is metric system (1974)	29
Name an effect of marijuana (1969)	72	What is subscription TV (1955)	22
Air conditioners vary in energy use (1978)	54	% of Americans who smoke (1980)	11
What is a prefab house (1946)	54	How many liters in a gallon (1977)	2

Consider some of the information citizens have at their disposal in a single presidential campaign. In 1992, the names of the two presidential candidates were almost universally known. In addition, however, majorities of the public could place the candidates relative to one another regarding their positions on abortion (61 percent), jobs programs (57 percent), defense (56 percent), general government spending (54 percent), and overall ideology (64 percent).²² Similar percentages could place the two parties relative to each other (53 percent for jobs programs; 57 percent for defense; 59 percent for general government spending; and 59 percent for overall ideology). In addition, 52 percent knew which party controlled the Senate, and 60 percent knew which party controlled the House. True, substantial minorities could not correctly identify where the candidates and parties stood on these issues, and there were other important issues about which the electorate was even less informed, but the picture that emerges is not as black or white as is often assumed.

In the end, what people know is driven not only by what is most important, but also by what is most readily available. For example, one would be hard pressed to argue that the right to counsel is more important than the right of free speech or freedom of the press—and yet knowledge

of the former far outstrips the latter. We can not say with certainty why this is the case, but we suspect it is a reflection of the common reference to the right to counsel found on television crime dramas. Similarly, the vice president is arguably a less important official than the secretary of state or one's senators or representative, yet the vice president is far better known to the public. Again, this is a simple matter of opportunity—the vice president is found more often on the news or in the papers. Based on public exposure, it is hardly surprising that more people know who Judge Wapner is than William Rehnquist. Indeed, the only political figures able to compete for air time with the likes of Bill Cosby, Madonna, and other popular entertainers—the president, vice president, and governors—are known by comparable percentages of the American public. None of this relieves citizens of their individual responsibility to be informed, but it suggests that an informed citizenry requires not only will, but also opportunity.