

Utahns get a D on Civic Knowledge

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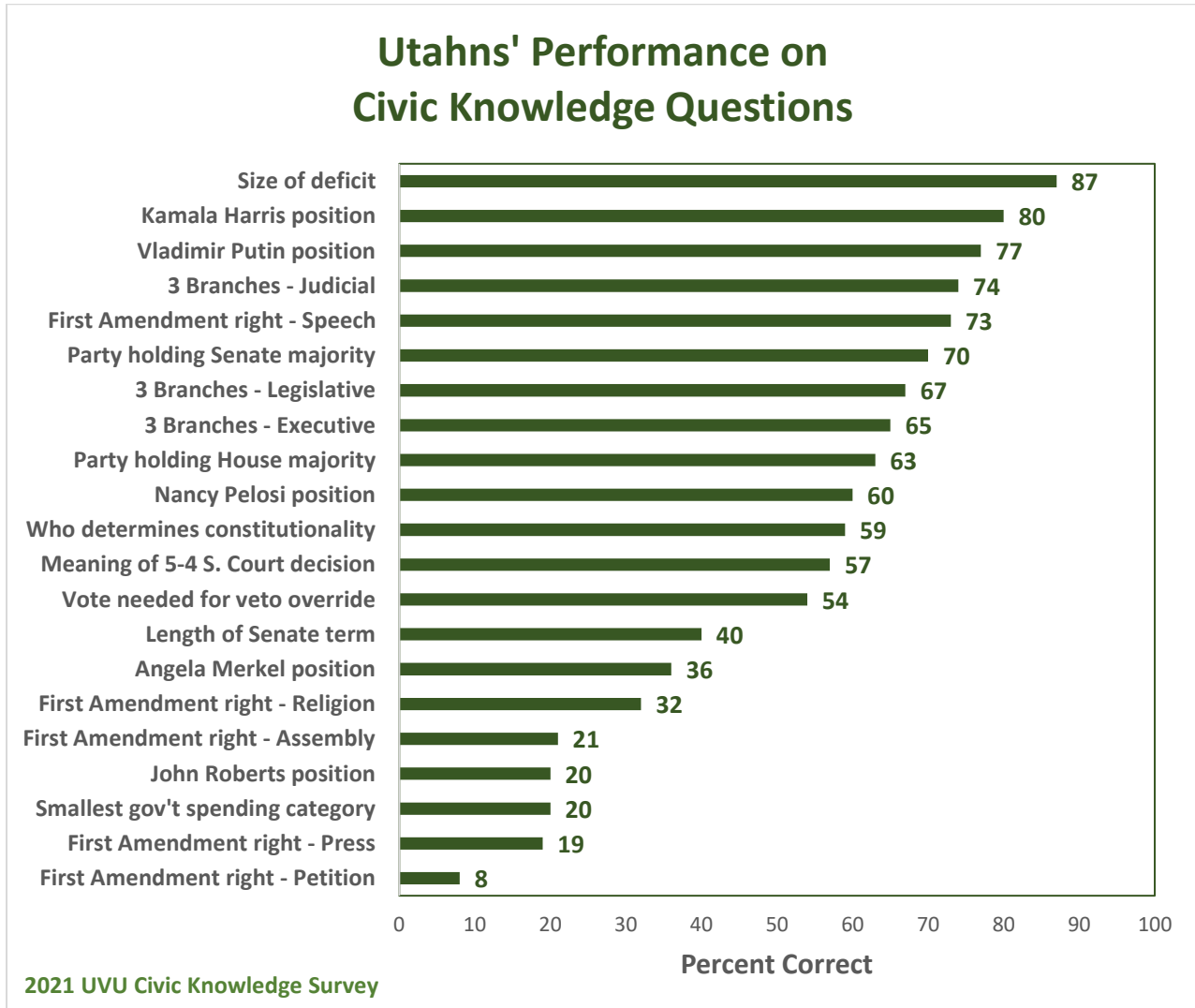
In a statewide survey conducted by Utah Valley University [UVU] along with the polling firm YouGov, Utahns generally did not fare very well when it came to demonstrating their level of civic knowledge. On a series of civic knowledge questions, the average Utahn only got slightly better than 50% correct. That suggests that, as a whole, they would perhaps earn a D at best on the “test.”

The survey, which was conducted online as a part of UVU’s Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative, asked a representative sample of 942 Utahns a number of factual questions about the U.S. Constitution and political system, public policy, and assorted national and world political leaders. The questions were selected from surveys that have been administered to national samples by other major polling organizations to allow for comparison between Utahns and the rest of the country. Overall, respondents in the Utah sample fared no better or worse than those in the national samples.

There were 21 questions on the survey assessing the amount of information respondents had about various topics. Questions ranged from being able to identify the three branches of the US Government (Legislative, Executive, and Judicial) and the rights guaranteed in the First Amendment (Religion, Speech, Press, Assembly, and Petition), to those identifying the office held by various leaders both in the U.S., like Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of the House) and Kamala Harris (Vice President), and foreign countries like Angela Merkel (German Chancellor) and Vladimir Putin (Russian President).

The easiest question for Utahns to answer asked about the U.S. budget deficit and whether it is larger or smaller than it was in the 1990s, the last time the U.S. Government ran a budget surplus. 87% of Utahns correctly indicated that the deficit was larger. The most difficult question was when respondents were asked to name the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. While 73% could name the freedom of speech, the most frequently mentioned right, only 8% could identify the right to petition government for redress of grievances (protest). Figure 1 below shows each question and its distribution of correct responses.

Figure 1



Exact question wording and distributions for each question can be found in the accompanying topline report.

The level of political information, or lack thereof, spanned ideological lines. Overall, there were no significant differences in the level of knowledge between liberals and conservatives. For the most part, the distributions of these responses are comparable to those found in national samples indicating that Utahns, on average, are no more or less politically informed than the rest of the country. However, there were some significant differences on specific questions within the battery. The side-by-side comparisons of the responses in the Utah sample versus those in national samples can be found in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Comparison of Utah’s Civic Knowledge to that of the Nation



Each national sample source is indicated by the superscript number:

1 – 2020 American National Election Study

2 – 2021 Annenberg Public Policy Center Civic Knowledge Survey

3 – 2018 UVU Midterm Election Survey

You can see that the distributions of Utahns' responses are similar to that of national samples on most questions. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. On the one hand, Utahns were much more likely than their national counterparts to correctly indicate that the U.S. Budget deficit is larger now than it was in the 1990s. The comparable national sample for this question is a national survey that UVU conducted in 2018. Utahns were 20 percent more likely to correctly respond to that question than those in the national sample did in 2018.

There's obviously been a lot of reporting in the past two years since the COVID-19 pandemic started on how costly the government's response to it has been. Consequently, there has been renewed public discussion of the U.S. budget deficit especially in the past year. So, one possible explanation for the difference between the Utah sample and the national sample from 3 years ago may very well be that such knowledge is time driven. At the very least, this shows that civic knowledge as we've measured it here is likely driven by the political context in addition to what students are learning in the classroom.

On the other hand, Utahns were significantly *less* likely than those in a national sample to be able to correctly recall the specific rights granted in the First Amendment. The most significant gaps were for the freedoms of religion and press. Utahns were 24 percent less likely to mention the freedom of religion and 31 percent less likely to mention the freedom of the press. There was also a smaller, but significant gap in Utahns' ability to recall the freedoms of assembly and petition. Utahns were 9 percent and 12 percent less likely to name those rights, respectively, compared to the national sample.

The relative inability for Utahns to recall the freedom of religion is perhaps another indication of how context, in this case the *cultural* context, can drive civic knowledge. Utah is unique in how significant a role one specific religion plays in the state's culture. Given that, concerns about protecting the right to freely exercise that religion may not be at the top of citizens' minds. As a result, it's less likely to be recalled here compared to other parts of the country when asked a general question about the rights contained in the First Amendment.

Another potential explanation for why we observe the differences between the Utah and national samples might be due to the fact that Utah's population also leans significantly more to the right than most other states. While there was no significant difference between liberals and conservatives in the *overall* levels of political knowledge, there were some notable differences between ideological groups on a handful of *specific questions* in the battery.

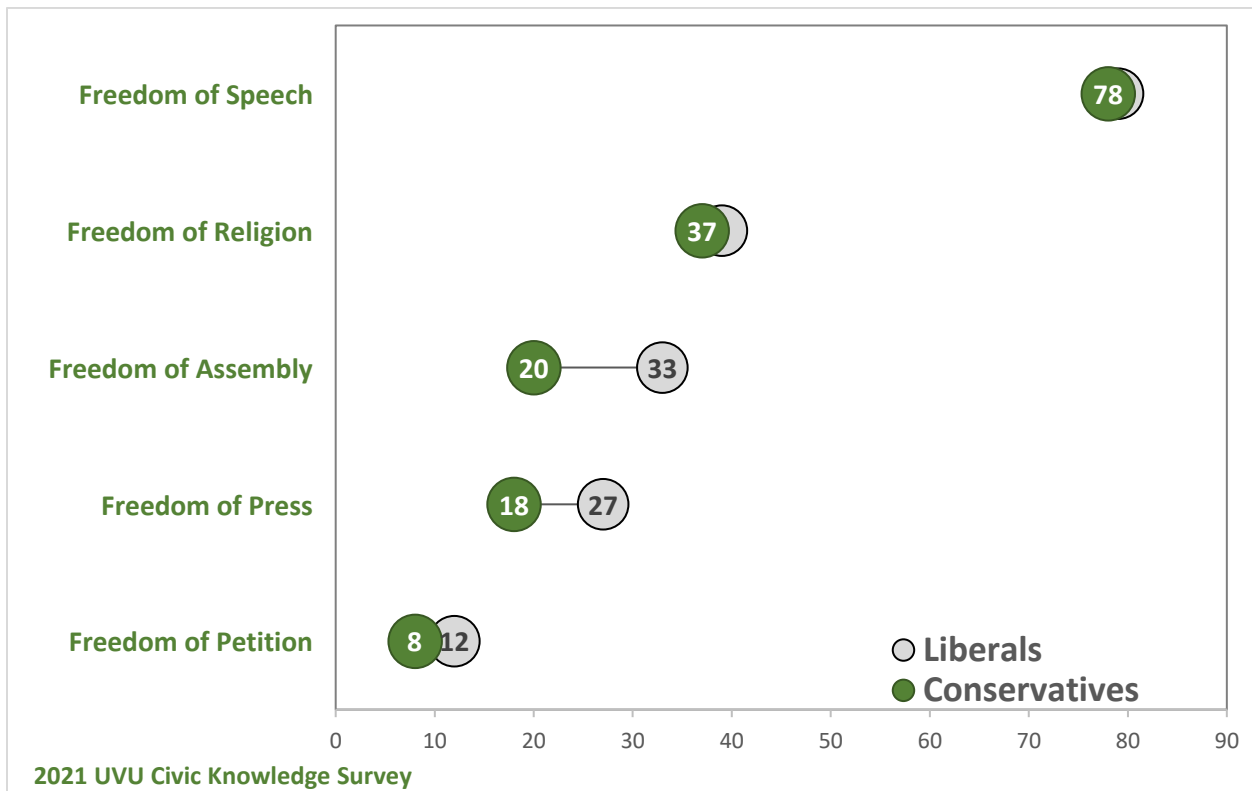
Notably, most of those questions where we see the biggest divergence between the Utah and national samples are those where we see the biggest differences between liberals and conservatives in their likelihood of giving a correct response. The comparative distributions for

Utahns’ ability to recall the rights in the First Amendment, broken out by ideology, are given in Figure 3 below.

Self-identified liberals were somewhat more likely than self-identified conservatives to mention the freedom of the press and the freedom of assembly when asked to name the rights protected in the First Amendment. There were negligible differences, however, on the likelihood of either group to mention the freedoms of speech or religion. This adds further evidence in support of the cultural explanation for the Utahns’ relative inability to recall the freedom of religion. It’s not ideologically driven, but culturally driven.

While it is true that these questions are intended to measure a person’s *level of civic knowledge*, it is well-documented in the public opinion literature that even simple recall of facts can be tinged by the hue of our predispositions. Given that, the propensity of these respondents to recall some facts over others may be just as much a function of the *salience* of those facts to them as it is a function of their actual *knowledge* of them.

Figure 3: Differences between Liberals and Conservatives on Recall of First Amendment Rights



This also serves as an alternative, yet entirely plausible, explanation for why the Utah sample demonstrates a greater likelihood to answer the question about the deficit correctly. Conservatives were significantly more likely than liberals to respond to that question correctly, and there's significantly more conservatives in Utah than in other states across the country.

Why is *that particular* fact about the deficit more likely to be “known” by conservatives, but others aren't? Probably for the same reason that liberals are more likely to recall the freedom of the press and assembly when asked to think about the First Amendment. It's *important* to them for some reason.

In this sense, civic knowledge is in large part likely driven by the rhetoric they hear from political elites. Political learning doesn't just come in a classroom, although that's a big part of it. It also comes from what people hear in the news, and from people they know, respect, and support. To foster a growth in civic knowledge and thought, and to improve citizens' performance on civic knowledge surveys such as this, we need to consider not just about how to give students information about government and politics in the classroom. That just provides the necessary foundation.

An important, and just as necessary component to improving civic knowledge and thought among the population involves our political leaders. Elected officials need to take on more responsibility to raise the tone and quality of their public rhetoric. That will do just as much, if not more, to raise the level of civic knowledge and thought among the citizenry.

If you have any questions about this poll, the methodology used in drawing or weighting the sample, or the questions used in it, you can refer to the attached topline report. Any other questions can be directed to the survey's principal investigator, Dr. Jay DeSart, Chair of the Utah Valley University Department of History and Political Science, and member of the UVU Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative Task Force.