

Stockton Research: New Jersey Needs Refresher Course on U.S. Constitution, Supreme Court

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Galloway Township, NJ - Many adults in New Jersey do not know basic facts about the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. Constitution, according to research by two Stockton University professors.

In a statewide poll assessing

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called landline and cell phones. The poll's margin of error is +/- 3.5 percentage points.

The researchers' study builds upon earlier research that found similar gaps in public knowledge. A 1989 survey found that 71 percent could not name a single justice on the Court, while 54 percent could identify Judge Wapner as the judge on "The People's Court" TV show. A 1998 National Constitution Center survey found more respondents could name the Three Stooges than could name the three branches of government.

Such findings led Congress in 2004 to establish Constitution Day – a day of civic education – on Sept. 17 each year.

Wharton has led Stockton's Constitution Day for 10 years. She also serves as the coordinator of the Political Science program and teaches courses in Constitutional Law, Women and the Law, Civil Liberties, Advanced Constitutional Litigation and Gender and Political Action.

"The report points to the need for more than one day for the Constitution. Knowledge of the Constitution and the Supreme Court should be a key component of civic education," said Wharton.

Other findings of the poll include:

- x 44 percent did not know that Supreme Court decisions cannot be appealed to the president of the United States for review and reversal;
- x Only 52 percent identified the Judiciary as the branch of government with the power to declare laws unconstitutional;
- x 40 percent did not know that the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights;
- x 10 percent of New Jersey adults could not name any of the freedoms (of speech,

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x Respondents were divided on which branch of government best serves the public interest: 24 percent cited the Legislative branch; 26 percent cited the Executive branch and 28 percent cited the Judiciary;

x Most respondents disagreed with the current practice of having Supreme Court justices serve lifetime appointments. Nearly half (47 percent) believe justices should be appointed for only a specific number of years, and 30 percent believe there should be a mandatory retirement age;

x A plurality (39 percent) of those polled believes that the justices are influenced by their own personal or political views. Others (22 percent) believe they decide based on legal analysis, while 20 percent believe the justices are influenced by political pressure and 12 percent cited public opinion as the main influence.

Methodology

The survey was conducted by the Stockton Polling Institute of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter).