CHAPTER TWO

What Americans Know about Politics

If, then, there is a subject concerning which a democracy is particularly liable to commit itself blindly and extravagantly to general ideas, the best possible corrective is to make the citizens pay daily, practical attention to it. That will force them to go into details, and the details will show them the weak points in the theory.—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*

The facts ma'am—nothing but the facts.—JOE FRIDAY, *Dragnet*

Efforts to gauge what Americans know about politics have been made for as long as public opinion surveys have been conducted. Since the 1940s, scholarly studies have consistently found that the public is poorly informed. This conclusion has been reinforced by popular press accounts of public ignorance, such as a 1986 ABC *Washington Post* poll taken shortly after the widely covered Geneva summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev that discovered a majority of Americans could not name the leader of the Soviet Union. A similar, if less scientific, example was given in a 1991 *New York Times* column: "'That's *U.S.* Senator.' Several members of the New York State Senate reported last week that they had received dozens of calls from constituents with urgent advice on how they should vote on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. The trouble was, the nomination was in the hands of the United States Senate."

Such books as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind,* Diane Ravitch's and Chester Finn's *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know,* and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* have also contributed to this negative image of the American public. Indeed, D. Charles Whitney and Ellen Wartella conclude that a "virtual cottage industry has arisen in the past few years in making out the American public as a bunch of ignoramuses" (1988: 9). This characterization is so well established that, according to John Ferejohn, "Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics" (1990: 3). In spite of indications that the public was more interested in "fact-slinging" than "mudslinging," evidence from the 1992 presidential campaign did little to rehabilitate the American voter's image. A 1992 report by the Center for the Study of Communication at the University of Massachusetts found that 86 percent of a random sample of likely voters knew that the Bush's family dog was named Millie and 89 percent knew that Murphy Brown was the television character criticized by Dan Quayle, but only 15 percent knew that both candidates favored the death penalty and only 5 percent knew that both had proposed cuts in the capital gains tax.

In spite of the apparent unanimity with which scholars and other observers characterize the American public's knowledge of politics, there have been relatively few systematic studies of this topic.[1] This inconsistency is noted by Neuman: "The situation is a little like the discussion of sex in Victorian times. Everybody is interested in the subject. There are many allusions to it. But they are all inexplicit and oblique. . . . Ironically, the issue of mass political sophistication has moved from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of sustained empirical research" (1986: 8–9).

Although recent studies have made this criticism somewhat less applicable, the scope of the issue and the gravity of the conclusions continue to outweigh the empirical evidence. In this chapter we will draw on more than fifty years of survey research data and review the evidence more systematically. A careful search of public opinion polls reveals a surprisingly rich and varied set of questions tapping public knowledge. And the public's performance on these items suggests that the answer to the question "what do Americans know about politics" is more complicated than often assumed.

A Closer Look at What Citizens Should Know

The role of the citizen in contemporary American democracy is multifaceted and carries with it the responsibility to be politically informed. Emphasizing the importance of an informed citizenry does not contradict the notion that citizens use shortcuts in making political decisions. Rather it suggests that citizens are better able to make choices and respond to relevant cues if they have a broader range of information to draw on. Within this context several more specific and common sense guidelines can be developed. James David Barber argues that citizens "need to know what the government *is* and *does*" (1973: 44, emphasis added). According to Neuman, knowledge of what the government is includes "the basic structure of government—its basic values, such as citizen participation, majority rule, separation of powers, civil liberties, and its basic elements, such as the two-party system, the two houses of Congress, the role of the judiciary, and the organization of the cabinet" (1986: 196).

Much of what citizens are expected to do requires an understanding of the rules. A citizen may blame the majority party in Congress for what he perceives to be a failure to act, but an understanding of the relative powers of the executive and legislative branches, of the implications of divided government, and of what a veto is and the size of the majority necessary to override it may lead to very different conclusions. A citizen who is concerned about deteriorating public services but who understands the different responsibilities of local and national government may vote differently in both local and national elections than if she were less aware of these relations. A citizen who is reasonably well versed in the logic of the First Amendment might react to government attempts to censor the press differently than someone less familiar with this logic. A citizen concerned about abortion is well served by a familiarity with how the Supreme Court operates and how justices are appointed and confirmed. A citizen trying to determine why the savings and loan industry collapsed is aided by knowledge of who is responsible for government oversight in such cases, and why such oversight failed. And so on. Information of this kind might be used in forming and expressing opinions, in determining who to vote for, in deciding who to contact to register a complaint or offer a suggestion, or for maintaining the kind of informed indifference discussed in chapter 1. Regardless of how it is used, such information is valuable in making sense of the political world.[2]

Relevant knowledge of what the government does, the second half of Barber's definition, is described by Bernard Berelson et al.: "The democratic citizen is expected to be well-informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the consequences are" (1954: 308).

It is not hard to see why information of this kind is useful if citizens are to be engaged meaningfully in politics. A citizen's grasp of contemporary domestic politics is strengthened by knowing, for example, whether the United States has a budget deficit or surplus or what the trends in unemployment and inflation are. An understanding of America's foreign policy is enhanced by the knowledge that the United States is dependent on imported oil or an awareness of what the United Nations is and what it does. As Berelson's definition suggests, citizens should also have some ability to put issues in historical context and to evaluate the success or failure of certain policies and philosophies. Was Russia our ally or our enemy during World War II? Did the Great Society programs increase or decrease poverty among the elderly? Who was helped and hurt by the Reagan economic program? Did the Clean Air Act of 1970 actually improve air quality? The contestable nature of answers to these questions does not lessen the need for citizens to have facts about them. Without such information citizens are unable to follow the debate and are highly vulnerable to manipulation. Knowledge of substantive politics is critical to the formation of reasoned opinions and to effective participation.

To Barber's two categories of "what government is" and "what it does" we add a third—"who government is." Given that one of the central responsibilities of citizens in a representative democracy is to select and periodically reevaluate leaders, citizens also need specific information about these leaders, both as individuals and as members of key political groupings. For example, citizens should be familiar with where parties and leaders stand on the important issues of the day. Does the president support or oppose raising taxes? Did one's senators vote for or against the use of force in the Persian Gulf? Do the Republicans want to increase or decrease defense spending? Do Democrats favor or oppose a voucher system for education? As with knowledge of substantive issues, citizens should be able to put parties and leaders into some historical context. Which party was responsible for the New Deal? The War on Poverty? Was Richard Nixon a Democrat or a Republican? In addition, because nonelected public figures and groups (for example, a religious leader like New York's John Cardinal O'Connor or a public interest group like Greenpeace) also serve as cues for making political evaluations, knowledge about their general philosophies and their particular stands can be valuable.

Taken as a whole, these three broad areas—what we call *the rules of the game, the substance of politics,* and *people and parties*—provide reasonable organizing principles for discussing what citizens should know about politics. The more citizens can draw on knowledge from these areas (breadth) and the more detailed the information within each area (depth), the better able they are to engage in politics.

Assessing Political Knowledge: 1940 to 1994

The analysis in this chapter is based primarily on the percentage of respondents correctly answering factual questions about politics on national surveys.[3] Two issues of validity warrant attention. First, the percentage who answered correctly is, of course, not necessarily the same as the percentage who knew the answer. Because of guessing (discussed in more detail below), these marginal percentages may overstate the extent of knowledge on many items, especially those with only two or three obvious choices. Offsetting this is the possibility that the survey setting (especially in telephone interviews) may cause some respondents to miss items that they actually know.[4] For simplicity's sake we will often refer to the percentage who knew a fact, but it should be kept in mind that the survey process is not perfectly reliable.[5]

A potentially more serious problem of validity is survey nonresponse. In addition to accurate measurement, a valid assessment of what the public knows depends on obtaining a representative sample. Even the very best national surveys, such as the National Election Study, are unable to obtain interviews with one-fourth to one-third of the sample. Many of the surveys we use (both our own and many of those obtained from the Roper Center) employ postsurvey weighting techniques to compensate for nonresponse and sample noncoverage errors (for example, nontelephone households in telephone surveys), but the effectiveness of these techniques is not fully known. One implication of nonresponse bias is that we will overestimate political knowledge levels because, as John Brehm has demonstrated, nonrespondents tend to be less engaged in politics than are respondents. Another implication is that our analyses of the consequences of political knowledge will understate knowledge's impact because the range of variability is attenuated (Brehm, 1993: chap. 5). Where appropriate, we will discuss the implications of nonresponse.

The items discussed below and in chapter 3 were gathered from several sources. The majority were drawn from the Roper Center archives. The Roper Center's collection of public opinion surveys is by far the most comprehensive in existence today. It includes over 200,000 survey questions dating to the 1930s. Of these questions, approximately 5 percent address some aspect of public information. Most of these focus on exposure to information (for example, "Have you read or heard anything about the recent arms negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union?"), self-reports on sources of information (for example, "How often do you watch the national news?"), and self-assessments on how informed respondents are (for example, "Do you feel you have enough information to understand the changes currently taking place in Eastern Europe?"). Less than 2 percent of the questions archived by the Roper Center—and presumably of the questions generally asked on public opinion surveys—directly measure factual knowledge about public affairs, and over a third of these are devoted to knowledge of public health issues. Despite this relative lack of attention, however, this translates into over 3,500 factual questions asked over the last fifty years.[6] In addition, although the percentage of factual items has decreased over time, the explosion in the number of surveys in recent years has meant that the absolute number of such items has generally increased.

We supplemented the items collected by the Roper Center with those from several other sources. The National Election Studies (NES) and our 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge were the most useful of these (Miller, 1992; Miller, 1988; American National Election Study, 1984). We also included items gleaned from the national news media, convention papers, published works, and miscellaneous polls we happened upon. In the end we were able to collect nearly 3,700 individual survey questions that tapped factual knowledge of some kind.

Although there are few systematic patterns to the specific items included on public opinion surveys, overall they address a wide range of public concerns. About a third of the items address issues of public health; of these, nearly 90 percent pertained to AIDS, while the rest dealt with such topics as cancer and smoking or the causes of heart disease. Four percent of the items measure knowledge of geography, and 3 percent tap knowledge of history; 2 percent measure knowledge about organized religion, and 1 percent concern cultural figures and topics. Three percent of the items covered a wide range of miscellaneous information (for example, knowledge of vocabulary or the metric system).

At some level all information has political relevance, and certainly knowledge of such topics as public health, geography, and history aid in understanding, responding to, and influencing the political world. We are especially interested, however, in facts that are more directly tied to the processes, participants, and policies of government. The remaining 56 percent of our items, amounting to over 2,000 questions, measure knowledge of these more clearly political facts. Eleven percent—or 405 of the items—query knowledge about political and economic institutions and processes. Twenty-one percent, or 773, of the questions deal with knowledge about contemporary public figures, political parties, and other public organizations or groups. Nine percent (332 items) address domestic policy and social conditions. And the remaining 15 percent (553 items) address issues of foreign policy, international affairs, and global conditions. All told, the survey questions available through the Roper Center, supplemented by items from the NES, our original survey, and other miscellaneous sources, provide a reasonably varied pool of data from which to construct a picture of how informed the American public is on a wide array of political and politically relevant topics.

An Overview of What Americans Know about Politics

In table 2.1 we sort questions about institutions and processes, public figures and groups, domestic politics, and foreign affairs according to the percentage of the public able to answer them. The more top-heavy the figures, the better able the public is in the aggregate to answer the items in that domain. Of course the items on which these distributions are based do not (and could not) represent a random sample of the universe of facts about politics. But they do represent over a half century of survey research judgment as to what political facts matter. Although conclusions drawn from these distributions should be made cautiously and tentatively, they provide useful information concerning how much Americans collectively know about politics.

Table 2.1 Aggregate Distribution of Political Knowledge by Subject of Question

Percent of Sample Able to Answer	Institutions and Processes	People and Players	Domestic Politics	Foreign Affairs	General Political Knowledge
90–100	***	**	*	***	**
80–89	*****	*****	*****	*****	*****
70–79	************	********	**********	*********	**********
60–69	***********	**********	************	*********	**************
50–59	*******************	************	*********	****************	**************
40–49	*****************	***********	************	**************	*************
30–39	**************	**************	***********	**************	**************
20–29	*********	*************	************	*************	************
10–19	********	************	*********************	**********	************
0–9	*	*************	********	*******	********
	median = 49	median = 38	median = 39	median = 44	median = 41

Source: compilation of political knowledge questions from various sources, including the Roper Center, National Election Studies, 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge, and other miscellaneous surveys. *Note:* each asterisk represents 1 percent of survey questions.

Based on both the overall distribution of answers and the median percent correct, citizens have done best at answering questions about the institutions and processes of politics. This might simply reflect a tendency to ask easier questions about this area than others, but it is consistent with the fact that institutions and processes tend to be fairly stable and thus require less regular monitoring of the political landscape. In addition, this is the one domain of politics consistently taught in the schools.

The distributions of knowledge about political leaders, domestic politics, and foreign affairs are more similar to each other than they are to knowledge of institutions and processes, although of the three domains, citizens have done somewhat better on questions about foreign policy. For all four areas of civic knowledge, the distributions tend to be skewed toward the middle to lower deciles, and in no case does the median score top the 50 percent mark. Clustering at the lower ends of the distribution is most pronounced for knowledge of domestic politics, and least for knowledge of institutions and processes and of foreign affairs. The overall distribution of knowledge, based on all the items included in the more specific domains, is, quite naturally, a composite of the other distributions, neither as bottom-heavy as knowledge of domestic politics nor as diamond-shaped as knowledge of institutions and processes. Taken as a whole, these figures suggest that the American public, while not as politically informed as one might hope, is also not as uninformed as some characterizations have suggested. This general finding is supported by our more detailed examination of specific facts.

Knowledge of Specific Facts: A Portrait of the American Public

Although table 2.1 provides useful information concerning the aggregate distribution and level of political knowledge, it makes no distinction concerning the specific facts involved. What facts are most commonly known by citizens? What facts are more obscure? We now draw on the constructivist approach advocated by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) to provide a detailed, narrative description of what Americans know—and don't know—about politics.[7]

Knowing the Rules of the Game

Whether as a spectator or a player, to be a part of a game one must understand the rules. This is as true for the game of politics as it is for the game of baseball. What do Americans know about political rules? Table 2.2 presents the percentage correctly answering a representative sample from our collection of survey questions about political (and politically relevant) institutions and processes.[8] Items in this and subsequent tables are ordered from most to least known.

Table 2.2 Knowledge of Institutions and Processes (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%
U.S. is a member of the U.N. (1985)	96
Warrants allow police searches (1986)	94
Length of president's term (1952)	93
What is purpose of U.N. (1976)	90
Define presidential veto (1989)	89
United States is a democracy (1948)	88
Define press release (1985)	85
Right to trial by jury guaranteed (1986)	83
States can have a death penalty (1983)	83
No religious test for office seekers (1986)	81
Convicted persons can appeal (1983)	81
Define inflation (1951)	80
Treaties need Senate approval (1986)	79
Define federal deregulation (1984)	78
What Constitution says on religion (1989)	77
Constitution can be amended (1986)	76
Gulf war reports were censored (1991)	76
Define Dow Jones index (1984)	76
How presidential campaign is funded (1979)	76
Small papers depend on wire services (1985)	76
First Amendment protects free press/speech (1985)	75
President employs White House press secretary (1985)	75
Purpose of U.N. (1951)	74
All states have trial courts (1977)	74
Not all cases heard by jury (1983)	74
Name a cabinet position (1960)	72
Define party platform (1952)	71
Define depression (1983)	69
Define a monopoly (1949)	69
Popular votes don't determine president (1986)	69
Define wiretapping (1949)	67
Need warrant to search noncitizens (1986)	66
Define impeachment (1974)	66
Congress can't ban opposition (1964)	65
English not official national language (1986)	64
Define foreign trade deficit (1985)	63
Need Congressional approval for military aid (1986)	62
Effect of dollar's value on import prices (1978)	62
President can't adjourn Congress (1986)	59
Who determines law's constitutionality (1992)	58
Define cold war (1950)	58
How does U.N. veto work (1947)	57
Third in line for presidency (1985)	57
Free speech protected on all media (1984)	56
Convicted felon not assured vote (1986)	55
Substance of *Brown* decision (1986)	55
# of senators from each state (1945)	55
Define newsleak (1986)	55
Define newspaper chain (1985)	55
Who sets monetary policy (1984)	54
Define farm price supports (1953)	54
Purpose of the Constitution (1986)	54
# of women on Supreme Court (1988)	53
Define filibuster (1963)	53
Define federal budget deficit (1987)	52
What does FCC do (1979)	52
Effect of unbalanced budget on prices (1959)	52
What effect do tariffs have (1946)	51
Congress can't require president to believe in God (1964)	51
Accused are presumed innocent (1983)	50
How presidential delegates are selected (1978)	49
Define reciprocal trade agreement (1945)	48
Define certificate of deposit (1987)	48
No right to own handgun (1986)	48
What is Voice of America (1951)	46
Define liberal (1957)	46
Define conservative (1957)	46
What is N.Y. Stock Exchange (1987)	46
States can't legislate silent prayer (1986)	46
TV more regulated than print (1985)	45
Substance of *Miranda* decision (1989)	45
Congress declares war (1987)	45
% vote to override presidential veto (1947)	44
Name a branch of government (1952)	44
Who sets interest rates (1984)	42
Name a U.N. agency (1976)	41
Define Bill of Rights (1986)	41
Purpose of NATO (1988)	40
How are presidential candidates selected (1952)	40
Define free trade (1953)	39
Can't force pledge of allegiance (1986)	39
# of states choosing U.S. representatives (1954)	37
Define primary election (1952)	36

Table 2.2 Knowledge of Institutions and Processes (*continued*)

Survey Item	%	Survey Item	%
Define welfare state (1949)	36	Define fiscal policy (1983)	21
Pool system used in Gulf war (1991)	36	Define collateral damage (1991)	21
Define electoral college (1955)	35	Name two First Amendment rights (1989)	20
Describe economic system in U.S. (1951)	33	What is Food & Drug Administration (1979)	20
Governors don't OK court rulings (1977)	33	Define the Foreign Service (1955)	19
Insider trading is illegal (1987)	33	Define supply side economics (1981)	19
Name a U.N. agency (1975)	35	Name all three branches of government (1952)	19
Substance of *Roe v. Wade* (1986)	30	Define monetary policy (1983)	18
Length of House term (1978)	30	Define sampling error (1987)	16
Substance of *Webster* decision (1989)	29	What is the Common Market (1961)	13
Libel law differs for public figures (1985)	27	Not all federal cases reviewed by Supreme Court (1986)	12
Name two branches of government (1952)	27	Define politically correct (1991)	7
Define bipartisan foreign policy (1950)	26	Name two Fifth Amendment rights (1989)	2
Define prime rate (1985)	26		
Length of senator's term (1991)	25		
No guarantee for high school education (1986)	23		

Simple characterizations cannot do justice to the range of political knowledge and ignorance demonstrated by the public. Some facts about political institutions and processes are known by a substantial portion of Americans: more than one in seven of these survey items was correctly answered by at least three-quarters of those asked. Many are rudimentary—but potentially important—facts about the United States Congress and presidency, such as knowing the definition of a presidential veto or that a president cannot make foreign treaties without Senate approval. Commonly known facts also include information about the bureaucracy, such as what the term *deregulation* means. Some facts about the relation between state and national government are widely known (for example, that the president appoints judges to federal, but not state courts), as are a number of facts about civil liberties and the United States Constitution (for example, knowledge of the constitutional right to a trial by jury; that states have the right to institute a death penalty; that the Constitution can be amended). Awareness of what the United Nations is and that the United States is a member of it is also almost universal. Basic knowledge about the press and its relation to government is quite common: for example, that the White House press secretary is an employee of the president; that during the Persian Gulf war news stories were censored; and that press rights are guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Knowledge of economic institutions and processes appears to be a little less common. Of the nearly eighty questions about economics, less than 5 percent were correctly answered by at least three-quarters of the public (for example, defining the term *inflation*).

There is no obvious pattern to the particular facts citizens are more or less likely to know. Not surprisingly, however, as the amount of detail requested increases and as less visible institutions or processes are asked about, the percentage of the public able to correctly answer questions declines. Still, an additional 34 percent of the items could be correctly answered by at least half of those surveyed. Most Americans are able to define such terms as *party platform* and *filibuster*, know the number of U.S. senators from their state, or can name at least one United States cabinet position. At least a majority of those asked understand that Congress cannot pass a law preventing people who disagree with it from meeting or talking with each other, that the popular vote does not determine who wins a presidential election, and that a president cannot adjourn Congress whenever he chooses. Over half know that the federal courts have the power of judicial review, that (in 1988) one member of the Supreme Court was a woman, and that before the decision in *Roe v. Wade*, the legality of abortions was determined by the states. This level of knowledge is also reached on several questions pertaining to other constitutional rights: for example, identifying at least one right guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment or knowing that the Bill of Rights protects speech regardless of whether it is written, spoken, or broadcast. Questions pertaining to economic institutions and processes that were correctly answered by half to three-quarters of the public include defining such terms as *recession*, *foreign trade deficit*, and *monopoly*.

Although this level of knowledge is encouraging, just over half the questions about institutions and processes could not be answered by a majority of those asked. Included among the questions answered correctly by only a quarter to just under a half of the public (37 percent of all questions) are many items that seem critical to understanding politics in the United States. Significantly, less than half the public can define either *liberal* or *conservative* with any degree of accuracy. Less than half the public can define such terms as *NATO*, *bipartisan foreign policy*, or *primary elections*. Less than a majority can volunteer the percentage required for Congress to override a presidential veto, say how long a House member's term is, or note that all congressional seats are contested at the same time every two years. Similarly small percentages know that (since 1979) presidential elections are publicly financed or how their own state selects delegates to the national conventions. A minority of Americans know that governors do not have to approve the decisions made by their highest state court or that states cannot pass laws requiring silent prayer in school. Only between a quarter and half of those asked could describe the decisions reached in *Roe v. Wade* or *Miranda v. Arizona* or know that television is regulated more than newspapers. Economic terms correctly defined by a quarter to a half of the public include *prime rate* and *welfare state.*

Finally, one in seven of the questions about institutions and processes were correctly answered by less than a quarter of the public. Included among these obscure facts is the ability to name more than one right guaranteed by either the First or Fifth Amendments, knowing that not every lower court decision is automatically reviewed by the Supreme Court, and identifying all three branches of national government. Less than a quarter of those questioned could, in the midst of the Persian Gulf war, define the term *collateral damage.* In the midst of the debate over Reaganomics, less than a quarter of those asked could define *supply side economics.* And fewer than a quarter could define terms like *fiscal policy* or *monetary policy* or describe what is meant by "free trade between nations."

Knowing the Players: Public Information about People, Parties, and Groups

Citizens in a representative democracy need basic information about who their representatives are and where those representatives stand on issues of the day. Public figures and political organizations in general, and political parties and partisans in particular, are among the most common heuristics used by citizens in making political decisions. We collected nearly 800 survey questions testing knowledge about public figures, political parties, and political organizations over the period from 1940 to 1994. Whereas most of these questions involved identification of national political figures, some asked about foreign leaders, as well as about public leaders from business, labor, and the media. In addition, many went beyond simple identification and focused on more in-depth knowledge, such as party identification, issue stands, or public statements. Finally, a small number of questions tested knowledge about independent groups and organizations involved in politics.

How much do Americans know about the individuals, parties, and groups that make or influence public policy? The most accurate answer to this question is "it depends"—on who you are asking about, on when you ask, and on how much detail you ask for. Of the 773 questions, 85 (11 percent) were answered correctly by three-quarters or more of those surveyed over the years (table 2.3). Not surprisingly, the most readily identifiable leaders were the most visible of their day: U.S. presidents and vice presidents, presidential candidates, and, less frequently, important members of

Congress and of the president's administration. The governor of one's own state was the only elected official other than the president and vice president whom 75 percent or more of *constituents* could name. A few members of Congress who were not also running for president were known to over three-quarters of those surveyed (for example, Senators Joe McCarthy and Ted Kennedy). Nonelected government officials, such as General Douglas MacArthur, Secretary of State George Marshall (architect of the European Recovery Program that informally bore his name), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover, and Iran-Contra operative Oliver North were also identified by 75 percent or more of the public. Private citizens (not including the popular culture figures discussed below) who made the top quarter of identifiable public leaders included labor leaders John L. Lewis (of the United Mine Workers) and Dave Beck (of the Teamsters), consumer advocate Ralph Nader, and television journalists Walter Cronkite and Barbara Walters. Among the few foreign leaders about whom three-quarters or more of those surveyed demonstrated some knowledge were Chiang Kai-shek (leader of Nationalist China) in the 1940s and 1950s, and Nelson Mandela, Manuel Noriega, and Saddam Hussein in the 1990s.

Table 2.3 Knowledge of People and Players (Percentage Correct)

Survey Item	%
U.S. president (1986)	99
Douglas MacArthur (1947)	97
Walter Cronkite (1975)	93
John L. Lewis (1957)	93
Know Nelson Mandela is free (1990)	91
Name your governor (1970)	86
Chiang Kai-shek's country (1954)	84
Dean Rusk (1964)	82
Henry Kissinger (1973)	78
Clinton's stand on gays in the military (1993)	77
Joe McCarthy (1954)	77
J. Edgar Hoover (1960)	75
Leader of Iraq (1990)	75
Ralph Nader (1976)	75
Charles de Gaulle (1964)	73
Dean Rusk (1967)	73
Head of China (1943)	72
Margaret Thatcher	72
Bush's stance on SDI (1988)	71
Mikhail Gorbachev (1990)	71
Party control of House (1978)	71
Walter Reuther (1957)	70
Truman's stance on communists in U.S. government (1947)	69
George Wallace (1967)	69
Party supported by most blacks (1985)	69
Know Bush reversed stand on taxes (1990)	68
Progressive party presidential candidate (1948)	67
Orval Faubus (1957)	67
Carter's stand on ERA (1979)	66
Verdict in J. Hazelwood trial (1990)	66
Tip O'Neil (1983)	66
Dukakis stance on abortion (1988)	64
Winner of Nicaraguan election (1990)	63
Who are the freedom riders (1961)	61
What is the NAACP (1985)	59
John Foster Dulles (1953)	59
Is your governor a Democrat or Republican (1985)	59
Franco's nation (1949)	58
Republican party stance, nuclear testing (1988)	58
Nehru's country (1954)	58
Barry Goldwater (1963)	58
Republican party more conservative (1988)	57
Truman's stand on taxes (1947)	57

Table 2.3 Knowledge of People and Players (*continued*)

Survey Item	%
Secretary of state (1958)	57
How representative voted on Gulf war (1991)	57
Cyrus Vance (1977)	54
Warren Burger (1984)	51
CIO stance on FDR (1944)	51
President of Russia (1994)	47
Andrew Young (1977)	48
Gorbachev stance on multiparty system (1990)	47
Harold Stassen (1952)	46
Moral Majority's general stances (1981)	46
Incumbent House candidate (1966)	46
J. Birch Society stance: ERA (1979)	45
Ed Meese (1984)	42
U Thant (1964)	42
Dukakis vetoed pledge bill (1988)	41
Marshal Tito (1951)	40
Jim Wright's party (1990)	39
Reagan stance on balanced budget in '82 (1981)	39
Kurt Waldheim (1980)	39
Anthony Eden (1952)	38
Truman's stance on war criminals (1947)	37
Gamal Nasser (1958)	37
Name both your senators (1985)	35
Harold Washington (1984)	34
President of France (1986)	34
President of CIO (1944)	34
Carter's stance on defense spending (1979)	32
Superintendant of local schools (1987)	32
Elizabeth Dole (1983)	32
RFK-LBJ differences on Vietnam (1967)	31
Anthony Eden (1954)	31
Ted Kennedy stance on wage and price controls (1980)	30
Jesse Helms (1984)	29
How one senator voted on Panama Canal (1978)	29
County clerk (1965)	28
State senator (1965)	28
Who said "thousand points of light" (1988)	27
Secretary of defense (1959)	27
Name one of "Keating Five" (1991)	27
Who are the Black Muslims (1963)	27
Reagan's stand on ERA (1979)	27
Ivan Boesky (1987)	26
A person critical of Gulf war (1991)	25
Attorney general (1970)	24
Gerald Ford's party (1974)	22
Socialist party presidential candidate (1948)	21
Republican party stance: pro-life amendment (1980)	21
Louis Farrakhan (1990)	20
Eugene McCarthy (1967)	19
Country Pollard spying for (1990)	19
Julius Rosenberg (1950)	18
Zbigniew Brzezinski (1977)	17
Robert McNeil (1980)	16
Robert Bork (1987)	15
Sukarno (1964)	15
Ross Perot (1971)	14
Prime minister of Canada (1989)	11
U.S.'s U.N. representative (1947)	11
Vaclav Havel (1990)	10
Secretary general of U.N. (1953)	10
Charles Percy's party (1974)	9
Mark Hatfield (1963)	7
Prime minister of Italy (1986)	6
Elmo Roper (1960)	5
Head of HUD (1977)	5
Lane Kirkland (1980)	5
President of Mexico (1991)	3
Hodding Carter (1979)	3
Prime minister of Norway (1986)	1

Questions asking for more detailed information about public leaders and organizations were generally less likely to be answered correctly. Nonetheless, fully 90 percent of those asked knew that once the fighting started (in January of 1991), both political parties supported the use of force in the Persian Gulf. More than three-quarters of the public knew that Exxon was the company responsible for the massive oil spill in Alaskan waters in 1989. Over the fifty years of survey items we examined only two issue stands of public officials could be identified by more than three-quarters of those surveyed. One was Bill Clinton's "don't ask . . . don't tell" proposal for ending the ban on gays in the military. Tellingly, the other "issue stand" was George Bush's 1989 disclosure that he hates broccoli!

An additional 201 questions, or 26 percent of the total, were answered correctly by between half and just under three-quarters of those surveyed. Included among these are many of the same public figures found in the top quartile discussed above, usually just before or just after their fifteen minutes of fame. Also found here are most vice presidential candidates, as well as many senators and House members who sought but failed to attain their party's presidential nomination. Other members of Congress who achieved this level of public notoriety included Senator John Bricker (author of "the Bricker Amendment," a controversial proposal for amending the Constitution to curb the president's treaty-making powers) during the 1940s and Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill during the 1980s. So, too, did several administration officials throughout the years: for example, Harold Stassen (U.S. delegate to the founding convention of the United Nations) during the Truman administration; Secretary of State Dean Rusk during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations; Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz (better known for his politically incorrect jokes than his farm policies) during the Nixon-Ford years; and former national security advisor, Navy admiral, and Contragate principal John Poindexter during the Reagan-Bush years.

Other political figures identified by between 50 percent and 74 percent of those asked were Chief Justice Earl Warren, Governor Orval Faubus (the segregationist who defied Eisenhower's executive order in Little Rock, Arkansas), and Mayor Richard Daley (of Chicago). Over half of those surveyed could also usually identify their own mayor, name at least one of their U.S. senators, and say which party controlled the U.S. House and Senate. Private figures like pollster George Gallup, corporate executive Lee Iacocca, and labor leader Harry Bridges (whose conviction for perjury in the McCarthy-era witch hunts was overturned by the Supreme Court) were known to over half of those polled. So, too, were foreign figures, such as Vidkun Quisling (the Norwegian fascist, executed for aiding Germany's invasion of his country and for serving as premier during its occupation), Francisco Franco (the long-lived fascist dictator of Spain), Charles de Gaulle (World War II hero and president of France in 1945–46 and again from 1959 to 1969), and, more recently, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and Rumanian dictator Nicolae Ceauçsescu (who reached this level of recognition posthumously).

In most years, at least half of the public knew that the Republican party was the more conservative of the two parties—a key piece of information for being at least a minimally competent voter. A substantial range of general issue stands taken by the national parties, presidential candidates; or sitting presidents was also known by 50 percent or more of those asked. For example, Truman's stands on relations with the Soviet Union and on tax increases were known by over half those polled in the 1940s, as were the views of Jimmy Carter, Ted Kennedy, and Eleanor Smeal regarding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the mid-1970s. During the 1988 presidential campaign, party or candidate stands on such issues as the Strategic Defense Initiative, relations with the Soviets, and abortion rights were known by half or more of those asked. And over half those surveyed during the 1992 presidential campaign knew the relative stands of the parties or candidates on such issues as federal jobs programs and defense spending. In addition, more than half those polled could provide some biographical information about presidential candidates, such as Ronald Reagan's age, that George Bush once headed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or that Michael Dukakis speaks three languages. More than half those surveyed could also say, when pushed, how their two U.S. senators voted on the 1991 Persian Gulf resolution. And fully 70 percent of those asked knew that President Clinton's health care proposal required businesses to provide insurance for all their workers. Finally, half to three-quarters of those surveyed demonstrated some knowledge of political groups and organizations: for example, identifying (in the 1960s) who the Freedom Riders were or knowing (in the 1970s) the stand taken on the ERA by several political and social organizations.

Although, as with knowledge of institutions and processes, these patterns of information holding provide some cause for optimism, fully 62 percent of the questions about people and parties asked from 1940 to 1994 were answered correctly by fewer than half of those surveyed. Of these, 239 questions (or 31 percent of the total) were correctly answered by a quarter to just under half of those asked. As before, some of these officials were people who achieved (or would achieve) greater notoriety at other times (for example, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Baines Johnson before his initial bid for the presidency in 1960). Less than half the public could name vice presidential candidates early in most presidential campaigns. Presidential candidates from third parties who achieved this level of recognition were doing better than most (for example, Socialist party nominee Norman Thomas).[9] Members of Congress known by less than half but at least a quarter of those surveyed included the conservative Senator (and brother of polar explorer Richard Byrd) Harry Flood Byrd during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations; Senator William Fulbright (an early, vocal opponent to the war in Vietnam) during the Kennedy-Johnson era; and House Speakers Carl Albert during the Nixon-Ford years and Tom Foley during the Bush and Clinton years. In the midst of the savings and loan scandal of the late 1980s and early 1990s, only about a quarter of those asked could name one or more of the senators known collectively as the "Keating Five." State and local officials known by a quarter to a half of those interviewed included Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne during the 1970s and New York Governor Mario Cuomo during the 1980s and 1990s. More generally, less than half those asked could name their U.S. representative, both of their U.S. senators, or such local officials as county clerk, state legislator, or school board superintendent.

Appointed officials identified by 25 to 49 percent of those asked included infamous communist-hunter Roy Cohn during the Eisenhower years and born again Secretary of the Interior James Watt during the Reagan era. Less than half of those asked could identify Sandra Day O'Connor as a member of the Supreme Court during the Reagan years, recall the name of a single member of the Supreme Court beyond the chief justice during the Bush administration, or identify newly appointed Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg during the Clinton administration.

Between a quarter and a half of those surveyed had some knowledge of such foreign officials as Josip Tito (president-for-life of Yugoslavia), Anthony Eden (British foreign minister who resigned rather than accept what he saw as Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy toward Germany and who later became prime minister), Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, French President François Mitterand, United Nations Secretary General U Thant, or the scandalized British cabinet member John Profumo.

Knowledge about many of the specific issue stands taken by candidates, parties, and officeholders also fall in this range. For example, between 25 and 49 percent of those asked knew Truman's stand on the Taft-Hartley Act. A similar percentage could articulate the differences between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson concerning the Vietnam war, summarize Jimmy Carter's views on defense spending, or say how one of their U.S. Senators voted on the Panama Canal treaty. Only a little more than a third of those asked knew that before the start of the bombing in January 1991, the Democrats were less supportive of the use of force in the Persian Gulf than were the Republicans. And only this percentage of citizens could identify Gorbachev's stand on multiple parties in the Soviet Union, the Moral Majority's basic political philosophy, or several key differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, or between the presidential candidates, in 1988 and 1992.

The remaining 31 percent, or 240 questions, were correctly answered by fewer than one-quarter of the public. Included here are most presidential and vice presidential candidates for third and fourth parties, for example, the Socialist, Progressive, and States Rights parties. Such senators and House members as Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Eugene McCarthy (before his 1968 presidential bid), and Jack Kemp could be identified by fewer than 25 percent of those asked. Similarly small numbers could identify such appointed officials as trustbuster Thurman Arnold in Franklin Roosevelt's tenure; Secretary of State Christian Herter in the Eisenhower era; cabinet member William Simon in the Nixon-Ford years; Commerce Secretary Juanita Kreps during the Carter administration; and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger during Reagan's tenure as president. Before the Persian Gulf war, fewer than 15 percent could identify either General Colin Powell or Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Indeed, when asked to name the person (for example, "who is the current attorney general") rather than the position (for example, "who is Ed Meese—what does he do"), fewer than a quarter of those asked were able to identify the holders of any but the most visible and prestigious cabinet posts, especially early in a presidential term. In the midst of public hearings on the Reagan administration's mismanagement of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, fewer than one in ten people could identify Samuel Pierce, who headed that department during the years in question. Among private citizens, union leader Lane Kirkland, businessman Ross Perot (before his 1992 independent presidential bid), Church of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, journalist Walter Lippmann, and pollster Lou Harris were all identified by fewer than a quarter of those asked. Finally, foreign officials such as Sukarno (Indonesia's first president), Vaclav Havel (Czechoslovakia's first freely elected leader since before World War II), the prime ministers of Japan, Canada, and Sweden, the president of the European Economic Community, and the French and British delegates to the United Nations could all be identified by fewer than one in four Americans.

The Substance of Politics: Knowledge about Domestic Politics

Knowledge of public figures and of the institutions and processes of government serves little purpose if citizens are not also informed about the substance of politics itself. We identified more than 300 survey items that tested the public's knowledge of domestic issues, policies, and conditions (see table 2.4).[10] Of these, 36 (11 percent) were known by three-quarters or more of those asked. These well-known facts included awareness that Medicare legislation was passed in 1965 and that Social Security taxes are not saved for the specific contributors' own retirement. Seventy-five per-