

Citizenship Results from National Assessment

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Our nation's founders, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, recognized the need for an educated citizenry if the "great American experiment" in self-government were to succeed. How well are we doing more than two centuries later? Data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in its two assessments of citizenship provide at least a partial answer to this question.

Citizenship was one of the earliest learning areas to be assessed by National Assessment. Seventeen-year-olds were first assessed in this area in the spring of 1969, 13-year-olds in the fall of 1969, and 9-year-olds in the winter of 1970; all three age groups were assessed for the second time in citizenship at the same time of the year during the 1975-76 school year. Representative samples of approximately 54,000 students participated in each assessment.

To measure changes in performance over time, assessment conditions are replicated as nearly as possible. For example, the items are identical in wording and format; the responses to open-ended (free response) items are either rescored simultaneously for the two assessment years or reliability studies are conducted to ensure scoring consistency.

What cannot be held constant by National Assessment are the societal events that in turn influence both society and the educational system in general. The two citizenship assessments spanned the end of the Vietnam controversy in this country and the Watergate break-in and its aftermath. However, this makes the results of the citizenship assessments even more interesting—though admittedly harder to evaluate.

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In general 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds dropped in political knowledge and attitudes between the first and second assessments. On the bright side, both 13- and 17-year-olds gained in their ability to describe ways to avoid future wars.

In general, declines in performance were found for all three age groups on items dealing with political knowledge and attitudes. Nine-year-olds declined by approximately nine percentage points (from 59.7% to 51.0%), 13-year-olds by approximately three percentage points (from 64.5% to 62.0%), and 17-year-olds by approximately seven percentage points (from 71.1% to 64.4%) between the first and second assessments of citizenship. Because of the limited number of items used to measure change for 9-year-olds (18), no other reliable generalizations can be made about their performance. However, the performance of 13- and 17-year-olds can be investigated in more detail.

Political knowledge and attitudes declined about equally for 13-year-olds (3% and 4% respectively) while for 17-year-olds, the decline in political knowledge was approximately twice that found in political attitudes (8% and 4% respectively). The ability to explain the basic concept of democracy dropped over ten percentage points for both ages. Thirteen-year-olds' performance fell from 53 percent to 42 percent, and 17-year-olds declined from 86 percent to 74 percent.

Students were not required to give complex or sophisticated answers. Responses such as "run by the people," "where the majority rules," and "it's freedom of what you say and do" were considered acceptable. The following responses by 13-year-olds were considered unacceptable, though they were intriguing: "It's where people get ripped off, I think by Congress." "A government of discovery," and "I am sorry, but I do not meddle with political matters."

While nearly all the students in both assessments could name the President of the United States, in the second assessment slightly less than one-half (48%) of the 17-year-olds could name either their congressman or one of their senators, a decline of nine percentage points from 1969. About one-fifth of the 13-year-olds in either assessment could successfully identify one of their representatives from either the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate. In the second assessment, 64 percent of the 13-year-olds and 81 percent of the 17-year-olds knew a senator is elected to office.

While 13-year-olds showed a slight (0.5%) decline in knowledge of constitutional rights, their performance on the items included in this area pro-

vides some interesting points for speculation. For example, there was a 20.4 percentage point increase in understanding that the police may not incarcerate an arrested person indefinitely while they collect evidence against him or her, while there was a 16.6 percentage point decline in providing reasons for either supporting or rejecting the right of assembly in all situations. Similarly, while 13-year-olds' performance declined overall by 2.6 percentage points in the area of respect for others, they exhibited the following performance on two items included in this area. There was an 18.1 percent increase in the ability of 13-year-olds to explain the need for laws, but a 21.6 percent decline in their performance when asked to provide two ways the country would be improved if everyone received a good education.

Although both ages exhibited overall decline in the area of respect for others, results for several of the items were encouraging—particularly at age 17. Seventeen-year-olds improved seven and eight percentage points on two series of questions which asked about their willingness to have persons of other races partici-

participate in activities typically encountered in daily life such as living in their neighborhood, voting in elections, and attending their church.

Societal Changes Between Assessments

Between the first and second assessment of citizenship, the voting age was lowered from age 21 to age 18. Thus, it was anticipated that there would be an increase in the involvement of teenagers in the political process. Yet the reported participation of 17-year-olds in the political process declined from 1969 to 1976. The number who stated that they had signed a petition dropped from 63 percent to 57 percent; those who said that they had written a letter to a government official went down from 22 percent to 15 percent; and those who reported they had participated in a public election campaign declined from 18 percent to 9 percent. Similarly, there was a 21.1 percent decline in performance of 17-year-olds when asked if they felt that they had any influence on local government and to provide an example of how to use their influence (circulating petitions, demonstrating, writing

elected officials, campaigning for an individual or an issue, or joining a political party).

On the bright side, both 13- and 17-year-olds gained in their ability to describe ways to avoid future wars. Thirteen-year-olds' performance went up by 20 percentage points, with 84 percent answering acceptably in 1976, while 17-year-olds improved by eight percentage points, with 86 percent answering acceptably.

The data reported here represent the status of citizenship achievement during the 1975-76 school year. Since that time, society has experienced a gradual restoration of faith in its democratic institutions, but it is also reacting to the Abscam investigation, the energy crisis, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the debate over ratification of SALT II.

The National Assessment staff has prepared the materials necessary to conduct the next assessment of citizenship, but budget constraints may force its cancellation. Because of the importance of citizenship data, National Assessment will actively seek the funds necessary to conduct the third assessment of citizenship in 1981-82.

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