

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution
Knowledge of and Support for Democratic Institutions
and Processes by Participating Students
National Finals 2003

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Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary.....	2
II. Introduction and Purpose of Survey	5
III. Sampling and Methodology.....	6
IV. We the People versus NAEP	7
A. Knowledge of the General Rights of Citizens	8
B. Knowledge of State and Local Government	10
C. Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties, and Interest Groups	12
D. Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government .	13
E. Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text	15
F. Overall Summary.....	17
V. We the People versus Adults: More Knowledge Questions	18
VI. We the People and Monitoring the Future: Political Attitudes.....	19
VII. We the People versus American College Freshman	23
VIII. Student Feedback on the We the People Program	24
IX. Conclusion.....	26
X. References.....	28
XI. Attachment A (Survey Instrument)	29

I. Executive Summary

The **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** program, administered by the Center for Civic Education (the Center), is an instructional program on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy for elementary, middle, and high school students. The program is based on curricular materials developed by the Center and acclaimed by leading educators. At the high school level, classes may choose to enter a formal competition, advancing from congressional district and state competitions to national finals. The competition is structured as a simulated congressional hearing where students' knowledge of the U.S. Constitution is tested.

In spring 2003, a survey was given to students participating in the national finals competition of the **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (We the People)** program. The purpose of the Center's survey was to assess the impact of the **We the People** program on student knowledge of and support for democratic institutions and processes. The survey instrument, designed by the Center, incorporated questions previously administered to high school seniors, college freshman, and/or adults in various national surveys. The responses of **We the People** students were then compared to the relevant national sample.

Students who compete in the national finals have received intensive exposure to the **We the People** program. They have participated in all levels of the program and have demonstrated mastery of the curriculum. The Center polled these students to assess the impact of the program.

The findings of this study reveal that, as compared with various representative national samples, students participating in the national finals competition of the **We the**

People program possess more knowledge of American democratic institutions and processes than the average American. Compared to a representative national sample of high school students surveyed by the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment, **We the People** students as a group are more knowledgeable in every category of civic knowledge delineated in the survey. In fact, **We the People** students outperformed nonparticipating students on every survey question. There were specific survey questions where **We the People** students performed remarkably well; several questions were answered correctly by over 90% of **We the People** students. They seem to possess a more well-rounded knowledge of American civics and government. The areas of civic knowledge included in the survey are the general rights of citizens; state and local government; political systems, parties, and interest groups; and the basic structure and functioning of the U.S. government. **We the People** students also demonstrated their superior ability to reason and make inferences from text.

In the knowledge section, the mean test performance for **We the People** students was 18 questions correct out of 23, compared to a mean of 12 correct out of 23 for the national sample. Eighty-nine percent of **We the People** students outperformed students who took the NAEP test. These results show that **We the People** students learn more about civics and government than the average high school student learns in a civics or government class.

In a battery of five open-ended-response questions derived from the American Nation Election Studies, 54.7% of **We the People** students answered all five questions correctly, whereas only 16.5% of a corresponding national sample of adults scored similarly. More than three times as many **We the People** students in comparison with a

nationally representative sample of adults answered all five questions correctly. **We the People** students also answered all questions correctly at a rate more than six times as high as high school students. These results show the positive effects of the **We the People** program on student learning.

Various longitudinal studies have shown that political interest and support is declining among America's youth (Sax, Astin, Korn and Mahoney 1997). The Center's study found that students who participate in the national finals competition of the **We the People** program show less cynicism toward facets of American politics and government than a corresponding national sample of students possessing similar sociodemographic qualities. In addition, compared with a representative national sample of college freshman, **We the People** students assign much more importance to keeping track of political affairs, influencing the political structure, community leadership, helping others in difficulty, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. From these findings, the Center infers that students who participate fully in the **We the People** program are more likely than nonparticipating students to become active, engaged, and compassionate citizens, as well as to develop a greater propensity to show support for democratic institutions and processes. Almost all **We the People** students reported that the program increased their knowledge of democratic institutions, and three-fourths of students remarked that the **We the People** program augmented their support for democratic institutions.

II. Introduction and Purpose of Survey

The **We the People** program, administered by the Center for Civic Education, is an instructional program for elementary, middle, and high school students on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy. The program is based on curricular materials developed by the Center and acclaimed by leading educators. Simulated congressional hearings, excellent for performance assessment, are built into the curriculum. At the high school level, classes may choose to enter a formal competition, advancing from congressional district and state competitions to the national finals. The competition is structured as a simulated congressional hearing where students' knowledge of the U.S. Constitution is tested. During the past 17 years, more than 82,000 teachers have taught the **We the People** curriculum to more than 26,500,000 students. In 2003, two million students participated in the program.

Past studies have shown that students who used the curriculum "significantly outperformed comparison students" on every topic studied (Educational Testing Service 1988, 1990, 1991). For example, a random sample of 900 high school students who studied the **We the People** curriculum outperformed 280 college sophomores and juniors enrolled in political science courses at a major university. The **We the People** students excelled in every topic area on almost every test item (Educational Testing Service 1988, 1990, 1991). Another study found that **We the People** high school students develop a stronger attachment to political beliefs, attitudes, and values essential to a functioning democracy than most other students and adults (Brody 1994).

In 2003, a survey was given to students participating in the national finals competition of the Center's **We the People** program. The survey was designed to assess

the impact of the program on student knowledge of and support for democratic institutions and processes. Students who compete in the national finals have, as a whole, participated in all levels of the program and have shown remarkable mastery of the **We the People** curriculum. Consequently, the Center's survey is designed to measure the impact of the program on these students.

III. Sampling and Methodology

Each spring, the Center for Civic Education conducts a national finals competition for the fifty-one classes that had won their state competition and earned the right to compete in Washington, D.C. The classes, one from each state and the District of Columbia, studied the Center's *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* text to prepare arguments for these simulated congressional hearings. Twenty-one of the 51 classes that competed at the 2003 national finals were randomly selected to participate in the survey (N = 408). Teachers administered the survey in classrooms in a test setting during May and June. Most students, but not all, completed the survey after the national competition.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed by the Center to measure political knowledge and support for democratic institutions and processes, as well as to canvass students for feedback on the program itself. The survey consists of 43 open- and close-ended questions (see Attachment A), culled from previous national surveys. All questions on the Center survey have been used by at least one national survey and administered to

high school seniors, college freshman, and/or adults. For this study, responses of **We the People** students were compared to respondents' answers on the appropriate national survey. This report compares the percentage of correct responses by **We the People** students with those of the relevant national sample. It should be noted however, that **We the People** students represent a select sample. But, for the majority of our analyses, we compare them to the representative national sample. This year, the survey also contained two open-ended response questions where student feedback was sought on their experiences with the program.

IV. We the People versus NAEP

Political knowledge is a prerequisite for engaged citizenship and political participation because citizens must possess enough knowledge to effectively and responsibly participate in the political process. Previous studies have shown that young adults are less knowledgeable politically than older adults (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996:159), but both groups have shown that they are ignorant of many facts relating to American government (Niemi and Junn 1998:9a). However, our survey results from the **We the People** civic education program indicate that program participants are on their way to becoming informed, engaged, and politically active citizens.

Questions 1 through 23 of the **We the People** survey are designed to measure levels of political knowledge. They are taken from public-release questions from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment that evaluated student knowledge and understanding of U.S. government and politics. NAEP is an ongoing, congressionally mandated project sponsored by the National Center for

Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The project works to assess the educational achievements of American students in a variety of fields, including civics. The 1998 NAEP civics assessment surveyed 7,763 twelfth-grade students. The sample is statistically representative of the entire nation.

The percentage of correct responses of **We the People** students were compared to the responses of high school seniors in the nationally representative sample from the 1998 NAEP assessment. As noted earlier, the **We the People** sample represents an elite group of students (those who advanced to the national finals competition) whereas NAEP is a representative sample (hereafter in this section called the national sample).

The questions were broken down into five categories, each of which addresses knowledge of a specific area of civic education: the general rights of citizens; state and local government; political systems, parties, and interest groups; basic structure and functioning of the U.S. government; and the ability to reason and make inferences from text. It must be noted that on every question, **We the People** students outscored the national sample; in several questions the difference was over 30 percentage points.

A. Knowledge of the General Rights of Citizens

In each of the five questions that addresses the general rights of citizens, **We the People** students significantly outperformed the national sample. The least difference in percentage of correct responses between the **We the People** students and the national sample occurred on a question asking about the First Amendment and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both groups performed very well on this question, but the question was simple because the text of the question hinted at the

correct answer. The name of the document (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) identifies the only reasonable answer, which is that both documents “show a concern for individual rights.” On the other questions, the percentage differences between the **We the People** students and the national sample are quite dramatic. In a question requiring students to recognize that the Supreme Court’s power to overturn unconstitutional laws is an example of how the U.S. government attempts to limit the power of majorities, 70% of **We the People** students answered this question correctly and only 30% of the national sample did so. The large difference in the percentage of correct responses occurs because the **We the People** program teaches students about the Supreme Court and its effect on everyday life. The curriculum teaches students that the Supreme Court exists to nullify laws that infringe on the rights of minorities. A majority of **We the People** students, 92%, knew that the Framers of the Constitution wished to limit the power of majorities in order to protect the rights of individuals and minorities, compared to just 72% of the national sample. Both groups performed well on this question. However, nearly all of the **We the People** students answered this question correctly because of their understanding that the underlying philosophy of the Constitution is to prevent majorities from taking advantage of minorities by failing to protect minority rights. This is the first lesson taught in the study of the U.S. Constitution. On a question concerning foreign policy and Article 22 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, **We the People** students outscored the national sample by 32%. This was a difficult question and knowing how the Constitution provides the structure for the government to conduct foreign policy helps to correctly answer this question.

Knowledge of General Rights of Citizens (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
Contrary to the time of the <i>Lochner</i> ruling, it is now generally accepted that the government should take some actions to defend the health and safety of workers.	76%	61%	15%
The Supreme Court's power to overturn unconstitutional laws is an example of the U.S. government's limit on majorities.	70%	30%	40%
The Framers of the Constitution wanted to limit the power of majorities in order to protect the rights of individuals and minorities.	92%	72%	20%
The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Article 22 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, show a common concern for individual rights.	88%	76%	12%
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been opposed by some Americans because of fear that international agreements will force the U.S. to act in ways not consistent with its interest.	80%	48%	32%

B. Knowledge of State and Local Government

Both groups were skilled at inferring from a graph the reason why local governments employ more people than do state or federal governments (94% and 86% respectively). However, the most significant difference in scores resulted from three questions based on a map of the congressional districts of Louisiana. Students were asked to examine the map and infer which governmental body decides the congressional district boundaries, the number of districts that should exist, and what determines the size of a district. Question 21 asked the students to correctly decide who draws the congressional district boundaries in Louisiana (the Louisiana state legislature). Seventy-two percent of **We the People** students answered this question correctly, as opposed to 53% of the

national sample. The authority of the state legislatures to draw the district boundaries came from the Supreme Court decision *Baker v. Carr* and has become a part of the U.S. Constitution. The **We the People** program examines constitutional issues in-depth; therefore, **We the People** students are aware of this provision. In contrast, the average student is unaware of this provision. **We the People** students answered question 22 correctly 82% of the time, while students from the national sample answered the question correctly 59% of the time. **We the People** students performed dramatically better on this question because a correct answer requires knowledge of Article I of the U.S. Constitution. Article I mandates that the House of Representatives be proportionally represented and a census be done every ten years to determine the number of districts and Representatives in each state. Seventy-six percent of **We the People** students answered question 23 correctly as opposed to 47% of the national sample. The question asked students to conclude why such a small district exists in Louisiana. The answer to the previous question indicates that the population of a congressional district determines its size; therefore, the only reasonable answer to question 23 is that the congressional district includes an urban area because urban areas are highly populated.

Knowledge of State and Local Government (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
The graph shows that local governments employ more people than do state or federal governments. This is because local governments meet the direct needs of so many people in so many different places.	94%	83%	11%
A state's legislature determines its congressional district boundaries.	72%	53%	19%
A state's increase in population that is proportionally larger than that of other states is likely to increase the number of its congressional districts.	82%	59%	23%
A congressional district occupying a relatively small area may indicate that it includes a large urban area.	76%	47%	29%

C. Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties, and Interest Groups

In this category, **We the People** students showed their superior knowledge, scoring significantly higher than the national sample in each question except for one, which generated the least difference between the two groups in the entire survey. Ninety-four percent of **We the People** students and 90% of the national sample were able to identify the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) as an interest group that would be concerned about the Social Security program. Almost everyone in both groups answered this question correctly because the answer is implied in the question: the social security program is a program for retired citizens. This fact dictates that the only reasonable answer is the AARP.

In a series of three questions regarding two types of electoral systems—the single-member district and proportional representation—**We the People** students did not score nearly as well, though they still scored significantly higher than the national sample. These three questions were the most difficult in the survey. Rather than basing their answers on simple facts, respondents were required to apply their knowledge of abstract political theory. This gives the **We the People** students the advantage because they learn much more political theory than the average government class. Respectively, 72%, 62%, and 60% of **We the People** students correctly responded to each of the three questions, while only 46%, 39%, and 40%, respectively, of the national sample did so. Additionally, **We the People** students significantly outscored the national sample on a question involving the events of the Constitutional Convention. While 87% of **We the People** students knew that the Connecticut Compromise declared that Congress would have two houses, one in which state representation was based on population and one in which all

states had equal representation, only 55% of the national sample were able to answer this question correctly. The large difference in percentage of correct responses between the two groups occurs because **We the People** students learn the constitutional basis behind proportional and equal representation in the houses of Congress. Article I of the U.S. Constitution outlines the structure of Congress, and the Connecticut Compromise was one of the most important events at the Constitutional Convention. **We the People** students study the Constitution and learn about the major events that occurred at the Constitutional Convention.

Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties and Interest Groups (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
The American Association of Retired Persons would be most concerned about and opposed to severe cutbacks in the Social Security program.	94%	90%	4%
Countries with proportional representation systems tend to have more political parties than those with single-member districts because they do not have to win a majority of the vote.	72%	46%	26%
In proportional representation systems, the legislature is more representative of the popular vote; therefore, it is better than a single-member district system.	62%	39%	23%
The best argument in favor of single-member district systems is that voters should make choices about individual candidates, rather than choose parties.	60%	40%	20%
Congress has two houses, one in which state representation is based on population and one in which all states have equal representation. This was outlined in the Connecticut Compromise.	87%	55%	32%

D. Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government

Three questions tested knowledge of the basic structure and functioning of the U.S. government. Ninety-two percent of **We the People** students correctly responded that the Bill of Rights was primarily designed to limit the power of the federal government,

compared to just 65% of the national sample. Studying the Constitutional Convention helps **We the People** students to answer this question correctly because they learn that the Anti-Federalists' main objections to the Constitution were that it did not adequately protect individual rights and prevent the government from abusing its power. **We the People** students did not perform as well on the other two questions, although they still greatly outscored the national sample. Fifty-six percent of students correctly answered a question about which part of government has the authority in U.S. foreign policy compared to 45% of the national sample. This is a difficult question because many bodies of government have a role in foreign policy. To answer this question, it helps to have a good understanding of the Constitution and U.S. history. In the last fifty years, the executive branch has gained authority over foreign policy in terms of negotiating peace agreements and sending troops overseas. The Constitution stipulates that Congress has authority in foreign policy through the power of the purse and the power to declare war. Additionally, 61% of **We the People** students, versus only 31% of the national sample, knew that most bills introduced in the House of Representatives are never sent by committee to the full House. Many more **We the People** students answered this question correctly because it requires knowledge of the inner workings of the House of Representatives. Many congressmen write bills, but it is very difficult to get the bill to a floor vote unless the bill has some bipartisan support.

Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
While Congress and the courts have some authority over foreign policy, the president and the state department have the greatest authority.	56%	45%	11%
The primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to limit the power of the federal government.	92%	65%	27%
Most of the bills introduced in the House of Representatives are never sent by committees to the full House.	61%	31%	30%

E. Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text

On each question in this section, **We the People** students significantly outscored the national sample. On two questions testing students' understanding of a 1941 quote by Judge Learned Hand, 90% of **We the People** students answered both questions correctly compared to just 69% and 59% of the national sample for differences of 21% and 31%. Both questions were essentially the same, and **We the People** students understand that the protection of rights is not just a duty of the government but that it is also the people's duty to actively participate in the political process. This provides a check against the government's possible infringement of individual rights. Only 58% of the national sample demonstrated understanding of a quotation of John Locke, whereas 82% of **We the People** students recognized its meaning, resulting in a difference of 24%. To answer this question, students need to know the basics of Lockean political philosophy. The **We the People** curriculum teaches students about Locke's philosophies and the Constitutional Convention, which explains the large difference in the percentage of correct responses between the two groups. There were questions that referred to a 1905 Supreme Court Case, *Lochner v. New York*. Three questions asked students to use reason to infer from excerpts of the majority opinion of the Court and Justice Harlan's dissenting

opinion. On all three questions, the national sample failed to score above 35% (30%, 25%, and 35%, respectively), while **We the People** students scored 66%, 58%, and 54%. This resulted in discrepancies of 36%, 33%, and 19%, respectively. These questions were difficult because they required the students to analyze the effect of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Lochner*, as well as to understand the meaning of the majority and dissenting opinions in the case. The last question is difficult because there are two reasonable answers. The question refers to how Justice Peckham’s majority opinion emphasizes judicial activism and how Justice Harlan’s dissenting opinion emphasizes judicial restraint. Both opinions discuss the power of the states and the federal government. Without previous constitutional knowledge, it is very difficult to answer this question.

Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP	Difference
“Individual liberties depend on citizens committed to the protection of those liberties” best summarizes Judge Learned Hand’s argument about the state of the American democracy.	90%	69%	21%
Judge Learned Hand believed it was most important that citizens protect their freedoms through political participation.	90%	59%	31%
Limited government power is a principle articulated by John Locke’s quote about the “ends of society and government.”	82%	58%	24%
The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in <i>Lochner v. New York</i> that the law limiting the numbers of hours people could work was unconstitutional.	66%	30%	36%
The principle that government should play as small a role as possible in civil society and the economy is directly consistent with the reasoning behind the <i>Lochner</i> ruling.	58%	25%	33%
In <i>Lochner</i> , Peckham argues for judicial activism to limit government power while Harlan argues for judicial restraint but a more active role by government.	54%	35%	19%

F. Overall Summary

We the People students scored higher on every question of knowledge than nonparticipants. They have studied the political process, democratic institutions, and the U.S. Constitution in great detail. Therefore, they have superior knowledge of American government, which is the reason for their higher percentage of correct responses to every question. The average percentage of correct responses for the entire section of knowledge questions for **We the People** students is 76%, compared to 53% of the national sample. The mean of correct responses for **We the People** students is 18 out of 23 total questions, while the mean of correct responses for the national sample is 12 out of 23. Eighty-nine percent of participants outperformed nonparticipants as tested by NAEP. On average, **We the People** students outscored nonparticipants by a total of six questions. The largest discrepancies occurred on questions dealing with specific provisions of the U.S. Constitution and its effect on political affairs, such as the power of the Supreme Court and the basis for proportional and equal representation in Congress. Both groups scored the lowest on the most difficult questions about the reasons for having a proportional or single-member district, which asked students to apply abstract political theory. Still, the **We the People** students outscored the national sample dramatically on these questions. The results of the survey show that **We the People** students know more than students in the national sample about civics and government in every aspect of civic education. This shows that the **We the People** curriculum teaches students vastly more material than the average civics or government class.

V. We the People versus Adults: More Knowledge Questions

Five open-ended questions on the **We the People** survey were derived from the American National Election Studies (ANES), a collection of national surveys conducted annually since 1952. Funded by the National Science Foundation, ANES are designed to present data on issues such as Americans' enduring political positions, social and political values, and participation in political life. Each study contains information culled from interviews conducted with 1,000 to 2,000 respondents, aged 18-80+. The samples are representative of the major regions of the contiguous United States as designed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The open-ended questions were chosen because Delli Carpini and Keeter (1989:304-6) suggest that this five-item index has strong construct validity and is an excellent measurement to gauge political knowledge. Responses of **We the People** students were compared to the 1991 NES sample. Students in the **We the People** program outscored the national sample on all five questions.

Five Item Knowledge Index (percentage correct)	WTP	1991 NES (age 18-80+)
The job or political office held by Dick Cheney	94%	74%
Judicial review	97%	66%
Veto override percentage	84%	34%
Party control of the house	79%	68%
Party ideological location	81%	57%

ANES respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 80+ years, while the average **We the People** student is 18 years old.

These same five questions were asked of 9th-12th grade students and their parents in 55,708 randomly selected households for the 1996 National Household Education

Survey (NHES). NHES is a large national study of adults and youth conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The results were reported in Niemi and Dunn’s (1998a) *The Civic Development of 9th through 12th Grade Students in the United States: 1996*.

Comparing the responses of **We the People** students to those of 9th-12th grade students and their parents, **We the People** students easily outperform the other students (some of whom may be younger) but, more impressively, they outperform the adults. In fact, 54.7% of **We the People** students answered all five questions correctly while only 8.1% of the national sample of high school seniors and 16.5% of the national sample of their parents did the same.

Correct answers Range 0 to 5	WTP students (mostly 12th grade)	9th-12th grade students, from the NHES	NHES parents
0 correct	0.7%	24.2%	16%
1 correct	1.2%	24.9%	15.7%
2 correct	2.7%	16.5%	16.2%
3 correct	9.8%	14.8%	16.8%
4 correct	30.9%	11.5%	18.8%
5 correct	54.7%	8.1%	16.5%

VI. We the People and Monitoring the Future: Political Attitudes

Questions 24-28 and 31 of the **We the People** survey were designed to measure students’ attitudes toward American politics. The questions come from Johnston, Bauchman, and O’Malley’s (1997) *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth* (MTF) as part of a survey administered to approximately 16,200 high school seniors. Begun in 1975, the MTF annual surveys explore changes in values, behaviors, and lifestyle orientations of contemporary American youth. MTF is funded by

the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Of the **We the People** students surveyed, 78% identified themselves as being white, and approximately 95% responded that they intended to go to college or college and graduate school. Because of the vast majority of national finalists are white and college-bound, we compared them to white, college-bound respondents on the MTF survey (N = 917).

The questions in the MTF survey measure cynicism by addressing a number of different ways to participate in the political process. Across all five questions, **We the People** students responded with less cynicism than the white, college-bound national sample of students. For example, when asked whether government officials are crooked or dishonest, 62.8% of the national sample thought that all or a majority are crooked or dishonest while only 20.4% of **We the People** students responded similarly. Although both groups were somewhat similarly confident in government leaders' abilities, **We the People** students expressed more confidence than the corresponding national sample. **We the People** students also report higher levels of trust that the federal government is "doing what is right" some or a majority of the time. The largest difference in responses concerned opinions on government spending of tax money. Only 16.5% of **We the People** students, versus 62.2% of the national sample, thought that most or all tax money is wasted.

Question	WTP	MTF
All or most people running the government are crooked or dishonest.	20.4%	62.8%
Very or somewhat confident that people running the government know what they are doing.	71.8%	60.2%
All or most tax money is wasted.	16.5%	62.2%
Can trust government in Washington to do what is right all or a majority of the time.	55.2%	33.3%
Government is mostly run for the benefit of all people.	30.6%	13.1%

Note: Differences between students is highly significant at Pearson Chi-square $p < .001$

When asked whether government is run for a few big interests or for the benefit of all people, more **We the People** students felt that the government is run always or mostly for the benefit of the people, but this was still the area where **We the People** students displayed the most cynicism. Less than 15% of the national sample and 30.6% of **We the People** students agreed with the statement that “government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.” Students in general are less cynical than adults: seventy percent of adults agreed with the statement in annual surveys from 1990-97.

We the People students and students in the national sample were questioned regarding their intent to participate in certain political activities, such as registering to vote, donating to a political candidate or cause, working in a political campaign, participating in a lawful demonstration, and boycotting products or stores. **We the People** students were more likely than students in the national sample to declare that they will participate in any given political activity. In virtually all of the measures questioned, **We the People** students were significantly more likely than white college-bound students in the national sample to declare that they will participate or already have participated.

Question	WTP	MTF
Will or have already registered to vote	97.0%	95.6%
Will or have already written to a public official	62.3%	43.6%
Will or have already donated to a political candidate or cause	44.1%	18.8%
Will or have already worked in a political campaign	37.0%	14.6%
Will or have already participated in a lawful demonstration	54.8%	25.8%
Will or have already boycotted certain products or stores	40.6%	34.1%

While nearly all students in both groups said that they have or will register to vote, differences emerge in other types of political activity. A larger percentage of **We the People** students have contacted or will contact public officials. Also, a significantly higher percentage of **We the People** students (37%) have worked or are willing to work on a political campaign than the national sample (14.6%). The significantly large difference between **We the People** students and the national sample occurs in the question of whether students have or are willing to donate to a political campaign. More than 44% of **We the People** students reported to have donated or would be willing to donate to a political campaign, compared to just 18.8% of that national sample. Additionally, more than half of the **We the People** students have participated or will participate in a lawful demonstration compared to a little more than a quarter of the national sample. These findings indicate that **We the People** students are politically engaged, in contrast to reports of the political disengagement of American youth.

Seventy-four percent of **We the People** students report having “a lot” or “a very great interest” in government and current events, and 62% discuss politics frequently. This shows that the **We the People** program motivates students to become politically informed and active in civic life.

VII. We the People versus American College Freshman

The Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, Los Angeles publishes an annual report entitled, *American Freshman: National Norms* (Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney 1997). These reports are based on surveys of freshman attending colleges and universities. The data shown below are from the **We the People** sample and from the thirty-second *American Freshman: National Norms* report, published in December 1997. The survey encompassed 252,082 students at 464 of the nation's two- and four-year colleges and universities. The data are adjusted by the Higher Education Research Institute to reflect the responses of the 1,610,000 first-time, full-time students entering college in fall 1997. These survey questions have been asked for many years and allow researchers to capture trends among American young adults.

As shown by the *Freshman* surveys, political interest is on a decline in the American young adult population. It is encouraging that, according to the Center survey, participants in the **We the People** program conceived of citizenship as active and engaged.

In 1996, keeping up to date with political affairs was considered very important or an essential aspect of life by 57.8% of students nationwide. Today, that has dropped to an all-time low of 26.7%. Additionally, in 1997, only 16.7% of American college freshmen responded that it was very important or essential to influence the political structure.

In order to be an effective citizen, keeping abreast of political affairs, in conjunction with knowledge of politics, is important. Without these skills, citizens are unable to fully understand the political issues affecting their lives, nor are they able to effectively promote change. Nearly 80% of **We the People** students found it imperative

to keep abreast of political affairs, and 59% thought it very important or essential to influence the political structure.

Objectives Considered Essential or Very Important	WTP	Freshmen
Keep up to date with political affairs	79.7%	26.7%
Influence the political structure	59.0%	16.7%
Be very well off financially	60.4%	71.3%
Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	86.1%	41.4%
Become a community leader	51.1%	30.8%
Help others who are in difficulty	85.4%	62.5%

Compared to American freshmen nationally, **We the People** students place less value on wealth and place more importance on developing a meaningful philosophy of life, becoming a community leader, and helping others in difficulty. **We the People** students have a positive attitude toward political institutions. For instance, 60% think that Congress is doing a good or very good job and 73% think that the Supreme Court is doing a good or very good job.

VIII. Student Feedback on the We the People Program

In our survey, we asked students to provide written feedback on the **We the People** program. Specifically, question 35 asks students to describe whether and how participating in the program increased their knowledge of democratic institutions. Ninety-seven percent of students responding to this question noted that their knowledge of democratic institutions has increased as a result of their participation. Overwhelmingly, students offered very positive feedback, commenting that not only had their knowledge increased, but their desire to learn also grew. For instance, one student from Montana remarked, “Prior to this class I really knew the bare minimum about the government, nor

did I have a desire. Now I not only am knowledgeable about it, I am interested in it, and in knowing more. I realize the importance of it now.” A student from Louisiana said, “I came into this class barely knowing anything about our government. Now I have an opinion on most political issues and I have the knowledge to back them up readily.” Finally, a student from Virginia noted, “After participating in this program, I am able to have meaningful discussions and ask difficult questions to lawyers, professionals, and teachers on the subject of government.”

Question 36 of our survey asked students whether participating in the program increased their support for democratic institutions and to describe their experience. Seventy-five percent of all respondents agreed that the program helped increase their support of democratic institutions. An Arizona student remarked, “After the program I better understand the responsibilities of citizens in the communities, and upholding our representative government as a model for other nations.” A Maryland student said, “By learning about the many ramifications of our government, I have further realized its effects and importance. I value our political system more.” Comments from some students reflected the current situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. They supported democratic institutions in the United States but did not think they could work in foreign nations. A New Jersey student said, “Democracy is key for American government but I do not feel it can be effective everywhere.” A Colorado student remarked, “I believe in democracy, but I believe it works for western society; it is not necessarily universal.” Most students believe that the key to the further existence of democratic institutions in the United States is for citizens to actively participate. A student from South Carolina believes that “democratic institutions will not survive without the people taking an active

interest in government.” Almost all of the **We the People** students remarked that they want to get more involved in the political process as a result of the **We the People** program.

IX. Conclusion

This report was designed to measure political knowledge and support for democratic institutions and processes among students participating in the **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** program administered by the Center for Civic Education. Classes that compete in the program’s national finals have received the most in-depth exposure to the materials. Therefore, these students were surveyed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

Measures included here show that high school seniors who participate in the **We the People** program are better informed across every aspect of political knowledge measured than national samples of high school seniors, college freshmen, and adults. Knowledge and skills gained through program participation both empower students and strengthen American democracy, which relies on at least a minimally informed public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Furthermore, **We the People** students are far less cynical about American politics and government than a corresponding national sample of high school seniors resulting in their higher political participation.

These findings, as well as students’ own written feedback, suggest that participants in the **We the People** program have much more positive attitudes toward democratic institutions in comparison to high school seniors, college students, and adults. Increased knowledge can help young citizens analyze decisions made by government

officials and help them to make informed decisions. Also, the survey showed that knowledge increased their support for American government, which represents a decrease in cynicism toward the U.S. government. Many students noted that their vast new political knowledge increased their political engagement and positive attitudes toward democracy after participating in the **We the People** program. Also, meeting and interacting with government officials, who are willing to sacrifice themselves to serve in the government, helped students to acknowledge the value of being engaged in political affairs and supporting the American government. The survey suggests that participants of the **We the People** program emerge better prepared for citizenship, with knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote full participation in the political process.

X. REFERENCES

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Attachment A (Survey Instrument)