

Hi everyone.

As we head into the long weekend, we're all probably in holiday-mode right now, thinking about what we need to buy for the BBQ, fireworks shows, etc.

But I'd like to take a moment and ask, why do we celebrate 4th of July?

Directed at responsible homeschool educators such as yourselves (or responsible soon-to-be homeschool educators), the answer to this question is probably obvious.

But don't take that position with Arizona high school students.

You see, based on an [article](#) by the Goldwater Institute, only 3.5% of them got 6 out of 10 questions correct from a database of questions asked on the U.S. Citizenship test (6 out of 10 is considered passing for U.S. Citizenship).

This is contrasted by the fact that 92.4% of applicants for the U.S. Citizenship test pass on their first attempt.

OK - I want to stop right here because I'm feeling the pangs of public school bashing coming on, and since I have a vested interest in both homeschooling AND public schools (since we homeschool Ryan and send Lauren to public school), let me put on my public school hat on for a change and put some context behind the results of this test - I promise to get to a fair conclusion.

Ready? Let's go.

The Goldwater Institute

First off, what is the Goldwater Institute, the organization that sponsored this test?

In their own words, the Goldwater Institute is a think-tank founded in 1988 "...dedicated to protecting and expanding economic freedom, constitutional liberty and educational opportunity". Similar to the values that Senator Barry Goldwater represents, the organization believes that "...while the legitimate functions of government are conducive to freedom, unrestrained government has proved to be a chief instrument in history for thwarting individual liberty".

Another important note, the Goldwater Institute claims to be independent in its research, as the organization "...does not retain lobbyists or engage in partisan political activity".

Finally, the organization "...neither seeks nor accepts government funds, and no single contributor provides more than five percent of its revenue".

Based on this, my personal take on the Goldwater Institute is that they are an independent organization when it comes to research.

But they are not objective when it comes to their views – I say this because as long as an organization operates under its own beliefs, I don't consider that as being objective. Of course, not being objective basically means that you don't have any views of your own on issues, so unless you're a spineless jellyfish, I think it's safe to say that most of us are not objective (including yours truly).

Now, I'm sure far away, in a place I will call "Dreamland", that there is such an organization that is BOTH independent AND objective.

But down here on good 'ole Earth, I'm afraid that's pretty tough to find. And the reality is, as long as us opinionated humans are running the show, that independent but not objective is the closest you will ever get to reporting near-unbiased results.

Therefore, I believe that these results were delivered fairly by the Goldwater Institute.

Now that we cleared the fairness of the test sponsor, let's get down to the questions.

Test Questions

Here are the 10 questions asked, along with the percentages of correct answers by students:

1. What is the supreme law of the land?

Answer: The Constitution (29.5%)

2. What do we call the first 10 amendments to the Constitution?

Answer: The Bill of Rights (25%)

3. What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress?

Answer: Senate and House (23%)

4. How many Justices are on the Supreme Court?

Answer: Nine (9.4%)

5. Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?

Answer: Jefferson (25.3%)

6. What ocean is on the East Coast of the United States?

Answer: Atlantic (58.8%)

7. What are the two major political parties in the United States?

Answer: Democratic and Republican (49.6%)

8. We elect a U.S. Senator for how many years?

Answer: Six (14.5%)

9. Who was the first President of the United States?

Answer: Washington (26.5%)

10. Who is in charge of the Executive Branch?

Answer: The President (26%)

Let me be the first to admit that I did not get a perfect score, but overall, these questions don't seem too difficult...more like a good mix of easy and medium difficulty questions with a few tricky ones thrown in for good measure. Fair enough.

Let's move on to the students who were tested.

Students

Now, when I first read the article, the first thing that came to mind was the number and demographics of the student population tested.

The sheer number of students tested is important in tests like these because, statistically, it takes at least 30 data points to deliver a test that is "good enough" for a fair representation of results (I thank my statistics professors for that bit – it was one of a handful of things that actually stuck with me!).

Given that 1,140 students were tested, the numbers are sufficient to deliver a fair result.

But how about demographics?

This is a point in which the article remains silent. I'm can't say whether this omission was intentional, but you can see how the demographics of the student population would clearly impact the results of the test. For example, if most of the 1,140 students happened to be taken from the poorest- performing schools, then one would expect results to be in line with historical academic performance.

On the other hand, if the sample of students were taken from the highest-performing schools, these results would be an eye-opener indeed.

But until we know more about the demographics of the student population who took this test, this is the one open point that public schools will have to challenge the test results.

Incentives

Not only does the make up of the student population matter, but the incentives for answering these questions clearly impact test results. For example, as stated earlier, the article states that over 90% of applicants pass the U.S. Citizenship test on their first attempt. Well, if your own U.S. Citizenship were on the line, would there be any question as to whether you will pass?

I mean, yes, we all can complain about the problems we're having in our country today, but let's face it - I rather be dealing with these problems than say, what's going on in [Honduras](#).

Now, what do you think the consequences were for the student population that failed this test? Nada.

And so, with zero consequences on the condition of failure, the students put in a little more effort in taking this test than breathing itself.

The Arizona Factor

Depending on the publication, Arizona is a "bottom half state" when it comes to academic performance (here's an example of just [one publication](#) from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which grades Arizona as a "D" in academic achievement). Not to say that the Goldwater Institute intentionally picked on this state for its test (the organization is also located in Arizona and so it makes sense that it would make the results most relevant to its regional audience), but it's clear that Arizona's education system is not representative of the entire nation and so we should not be extrapolating the test results to all high school students in the U.S.

My Verdict

So after analyzing the factors that went into this test, I still cannot confidently defend the test results. Other than my strongest argument, which is the possibility that demographics of the students may have skewed the test results, my other arguments only seem to raise small doubts at questioning the fairness of these results.

I mean, sure there were a couple of harder questions thrown in. And yes, the students really didn't benefit nor were they penalized for their efforts. But considering that only 40 students out of over 1,000 got 6 out of 10 questions correct...it makes you wonder whether they realize why we're celebrating this long weekend.

One last thing - I wrote the author of this article and asked whether there were any responses from public school representatives regarding the abysmal test results. The only semi-plausible argument that came forth was the fact that civics was crowded out of its minimum state testing requirements for high school graduation (aka - Arizona's Instrument to Measure

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Standards Test (AIMS Test)), which focuses on reading, math, writing, and science – this goes back to my semi-plausible argument about incentives for knowing about civics.

Now reasonable people may disagree on what knowledge is required for high school graduation, but conferring a diploma on someone who doesn't know who the first president of the United States was, especially when that student happens to live in the United States, just feels wrong...and sad.

To those who remember, happy 4th everyone.

- Sun