



Government and Politics: How Much Do Alaskans Know?

Results of the Alaska Civic Learning Assessment Project

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Why does it matter, if about one quarter of the people you might run into at the Alaska State Fair don't know who the current governor is? Or that only one in ten knows they don't pay state personal income, sales, or property taxes—because there are no such taxes?

It matters because American economic, political, and social success for more than 230 years have been based on “the participation of citizens.” That’s the opinion of Sandra Day O’Connor, retired associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and Roy Romer, the superintendent of the Los Angeles school system.

They believe schools aren’t doing as good a job as they used to in teaching students about government and politics, and that failing to maintain “the civic tools of democracy” will hurt Americans at school and work and have “economic consequences.”

O’Connor and Romer chair the national advisory council of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, which is working to improve civics education in schools. The campaign also funded the Alaska Civic Learning Assessment Project, a joint study of the Alaska Teaching Justice Network and UAA.

For that study, researchers (1) surveyed staff in school districts, to learn how they teach civics; (2) asked Alaskans at the state fair and at UAA to answer questions about politics and government; and (3) held focus groups to hear Alaskans talk about civics education.

The table shows how superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and others we surveyed rated the importance of civic education. Almost all rate it as “highly important.” But most are only “somewhat satisfied” with the job their districts are doing to create informed citizens.

The back of the page shows the results of some of the questions we asked people at the 2005 state fair and at UAA’s Constitution Day in the fall of 2005.

Democracy needs to be reborn in every generation.

John Dewey, American educator and philosopher,
1859-1952

This was not a random sample—that is, we weren’t able to scientifically choose respondents to represent the entire Alaska population. We asked our questions of whoever was willing to take the quiz. We think the answers provide a good general snapshot of what Alaskans know about civics. But keep in mind that we might have gotten somewhat different responses from a randomly selected group.

Almost all the respondents knew the age requirements for voting, but only about three-quarters could name the current governor. Just two-thirds knew that the federal government is the major landowner in Alaska. Only half knew that state taxes come mostly from oil—but three-quarters knew that “PFD” stands for Permanent Fund Dividend.

Fewer than a third could name any sitting justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, or cite the two kinds of local governments the state constitution establishes.

Very few could name any justice of the Alaska Supreme Court. And more than 90% thought they paid at least one non-existent state tax—income, property, or sales taxes.

Alaska Educators’ Opinions About Importance of Civics Education*

	Highly important	Somewhat important	Not very important
How important do you think it is to educate young people in civics?	87%	13%	0
	Highly satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not very satisfied
How satisfied are you that civics education in your district is creating informed and engaged citizens?	20%	73%	7%

*Researchers received responses from 34 of Alaska’s 53 school districts. More than 80% of public-school students in 2005-06 were enrolled in responding districts.

How Many Respondents Knew the Answer?*

	(Percent answering correctly)	Answer
How old do you have to be to be president?	94%	35 years old
How old do you have to be to vote?	85%	18 years old
Who is Alaska's current governor?	76%	Frank Murkowski
What does "PFD" stand for?	73%	Permanent Fund Dividend
Who owns most of the land in Alaska?	65%	Federal government
Where does the state government get most of its money?	49%	Oil taxes
Name one current justice of U.S. Supreme Court	32%	Any one of nine justices
What two forms of local government are established in Alaska Constitution?	30%	Cities and boroughs
What's the significance of December 18, 1971?	23%	Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act becomes law
How long do you have to live in Alaska to vote?	19%	30 days
What is the name "Molly Hootch" associated with?	12%	Court suit to establish more rural schools
What <i>state</i> taxes do you pay?	8%	Alaskans pay various state taxes (including taxes on alcohol and cigarettes), but no personal income, property, or sales taxes
Name one current justice of Alaska Supreme Court	1.5%	Any one of five justices

*Non-random sample of Alaskans attending the 2005 state fair and a September 2005 event at UAA.