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FOREIGN
RELATIONS



What College-Aged Students Know About the World

A Survey on Global Literacy

September 2016

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Foreword

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the National Geographic Society have long pursued the mission of making international affairs and geographic education accessible to students and the broader public. CFR focuses on the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries; National Geographic works to explore the world and educate a global audience to make balanced, sustainable decisions for the future of our planet. Both organizations operate on the premise that global literacy and geographic understanding are essential for the strength of American democracy and the stability of the planet.

Earlier this year, CFR and National Geographic commissioned a survey to gauge what young people educated in American colleges and universities know about geography, the environment, demographics, U.S. foreign policy, recent international events, and economics. The survey was conducted by ARC Research among 1,203 people aged eighteen to twenty-six who currently attend or have recently attended a college or university in the United States, whether a two-year or four-year institution.

The survey, whose complete findings appear in this report, revealed significant gaps between what young people understand about today's world and what they need to know to successfully navigate and compete in it. On the knowledge questions asked, the average score was only 55 percent correct. Just 29 percent of respondents earned a minimal pass—66 percent correct or better. Just over 1 percent—17 of 1,203—earned an A, 91 percent or higher.

Respondents exhibited limited knowledge of issues critical to the United States. Only 28 percent of respondents knew that the United States is bound by treaty to protect Japan if it is attacked. Just 34 percent knew this about South Korea. Meanwhile, only 30 percent knew that the constitutional authority to declare war rests in the legislative branch of the U.S. government.

Basic conditions and realities about the world are also relatively poorly understood. Over the past five years, the number of Mexicans leaving the United States and returning to Mexico has been greater than the number of Mexicans entering the United States. However, only 34 percent of respondents recognized this fact; 49 percent said it was false. Just 49 percent correctly selected Mandarin Chinese as being spoken by the most people as their primary language. And an even smaller minority, 29 percent, identified the Muslim-majority country (Indonesia) among South Africa, Armenia, India, and Indonesia.

Some of the survey results are more heartening. A majority of respondents indicated that they believed it important to be knowledgeable about geography, world history, foreign cultures, world events, and other such topics. Nearly three quarters (72 percent) said these topics are becoming more important to them. Moreover, respondents demonstrated knowledge of certain issues, including the environment. Seventy-eight percent knew that fossil fuels are a nonrenewable resource. Eighty-four percent knew that the increase in greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere caused by the use of fossil fuels is considered by climate scientists to be one of the causes of climate change.

These survey results come in an era of globalization, when the world is characterized by enormous cross-border flows of everything from people and ideas to weapons and pollutants. American citizens are affected in fundamental ways—in legislative bodies, boardrooms, and the environment—by what happens in the world. At the same time, the United States has considerable influence over international events. It remains the world's foremost military power. Even with robust growth in some developing countries, the U.S. economy retains enormous heft, and the U.S. dollar continues to play a central role in international finance (a subject poorly grasped by our survey respondents).

All of this makes an educated public essential for American economic competitiveness, national security, and democracy. To contend for jobs, assume leadership positions in government and other sectors, and hold elected officials accountable, young people must understand the global context in which they operate as citizens and professionals. Yet our survey shows that many individuals educated in this country do not. This constitutes a major national challenge.

The good news is that the survey also reflects an opportunity. As already noted, young people recognize the importance of international knowledge. They seek information about national and international issues from a wide range of online and other platforms. Our organizations are working to harness their interest and offer compelling resources on topics critical to their future.

CFR is addressing this challenge through a new initiative called CFR Campus, creating original educational content designed to build the essential knowledge, skills, and perspective that form the backbone of global literacy. CFR released Model Diplomacy, a simulation program for higher education and high school classrooms, in January 2016. It will be followed by a set of multimedia curricular materials on the fundamentals of international relations and foreign policy. All this comes in addition to existing CFR resources available to students and instructors, from backgrounders to interactives to conference calls with CFR experts.

For more than 128 years, National Geographic has been investing in bold people working on transformative discoveries and solutions for the planet's greatest challenges. But National Geographic also focuses on the next generation of explorers. Recently, NGS piloted a teacher certification for educators who want to empower their students. The certification focuses on interconnectedness, including geography, culture, and a global world view. The yearly National Geographic Bee, National Geographic's flagship geography competition, engages millions of students across the United States every year. National Geographic's other educational initiatives include teacher fellowships, classroom resources and materials like *Explorer* magazine, and the National Geographic Education Foundation, which has awarded more than \$90 million in grants for geography education initiatives since its founding.

We believe that the future of U.S. competitiveness and influence in the world depends on a population with adequate knowledge of how this world works. Our survey results are evidence that most young people educated in the United States are not where they need to be. Both CFR and NGS look forward to continuing efforts to address this urgent need.

Richard N. Haass

President

Council on Foreign Relations

Gary E. Knell

President and CEO

National Geographic Society

Highlights From the Survey

Overall results out of 75 possible answers:

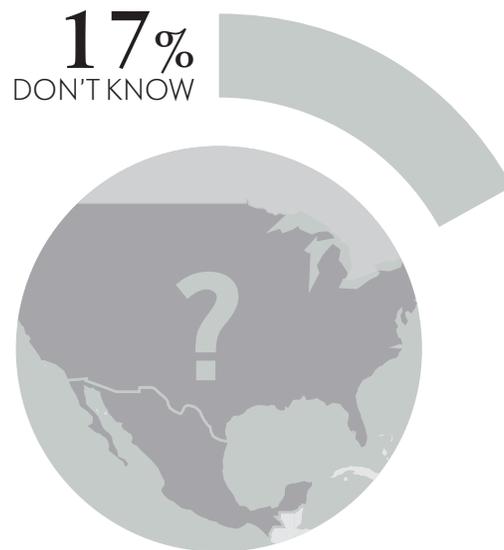
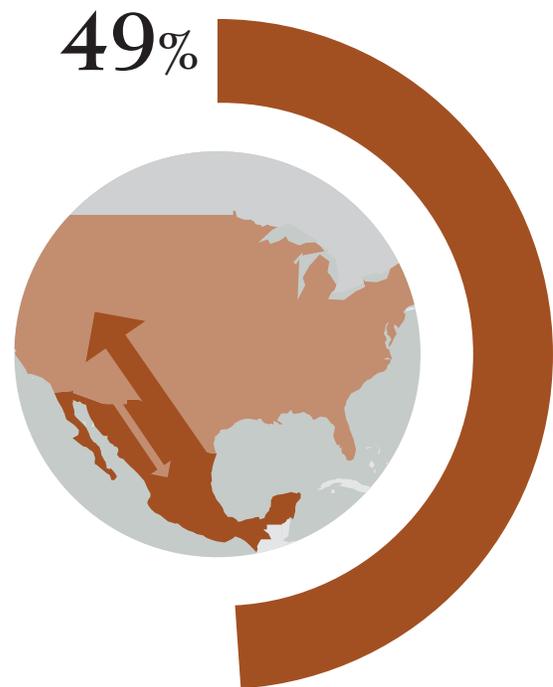
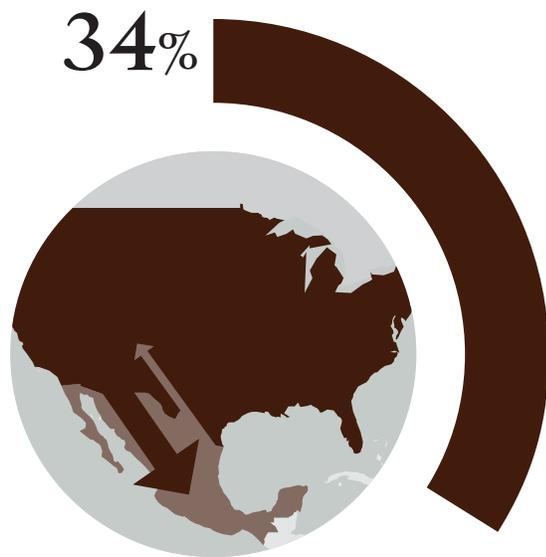
✓
55%
CORRECT



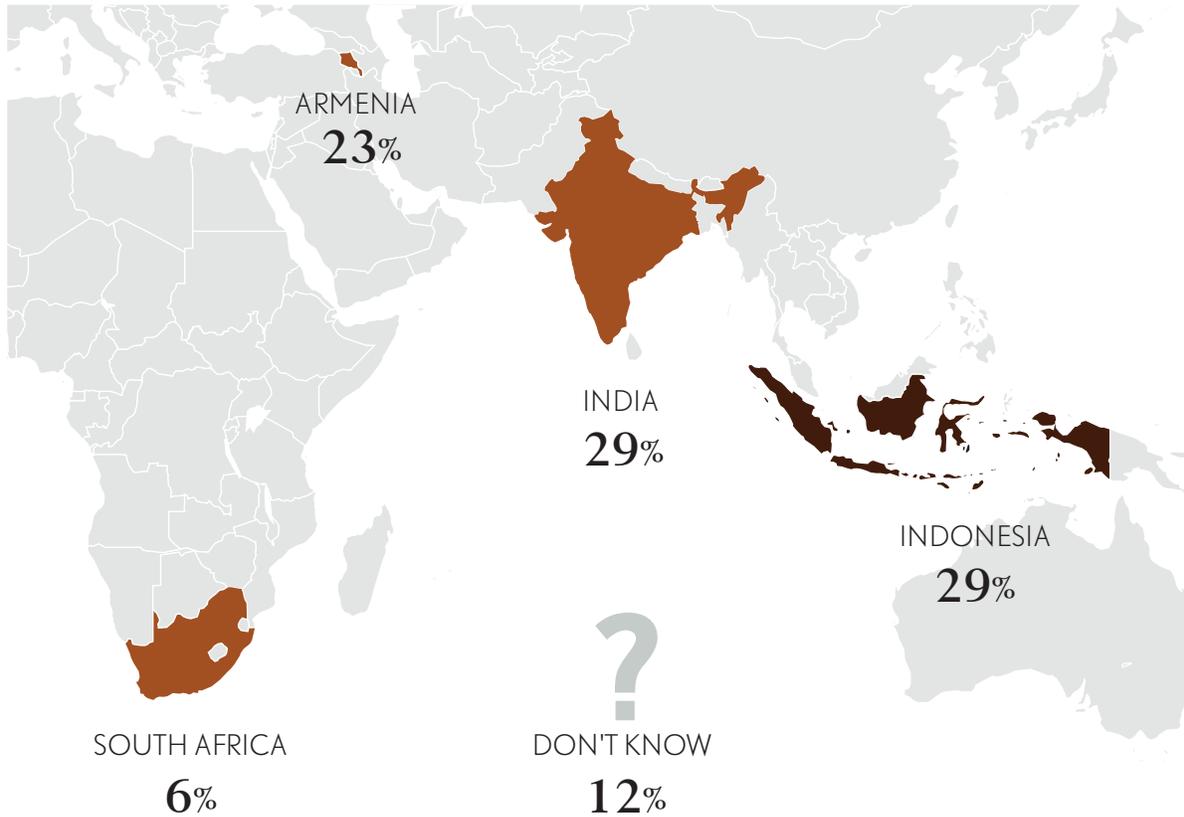
X
31%
INCORRECT

?
13%
DON'T KNOW

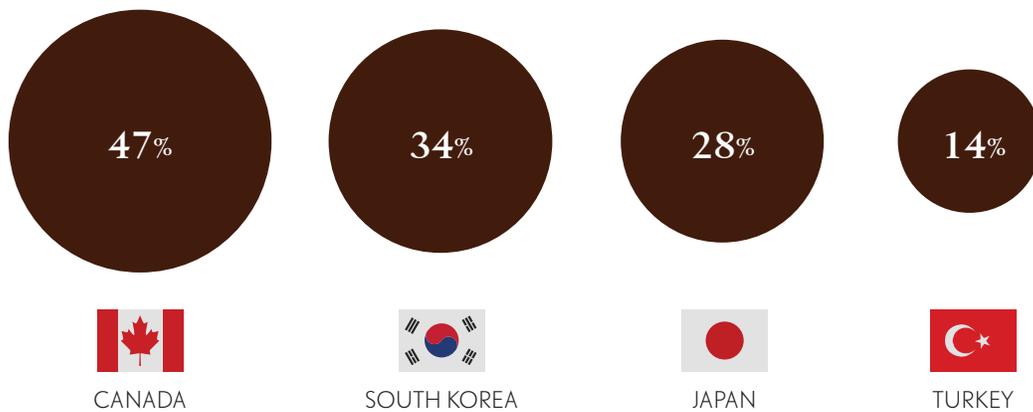
Asked whether more Mexicans have left the United States than entered over the past five years, 34 percent answered correctly, i.e., that more have left.



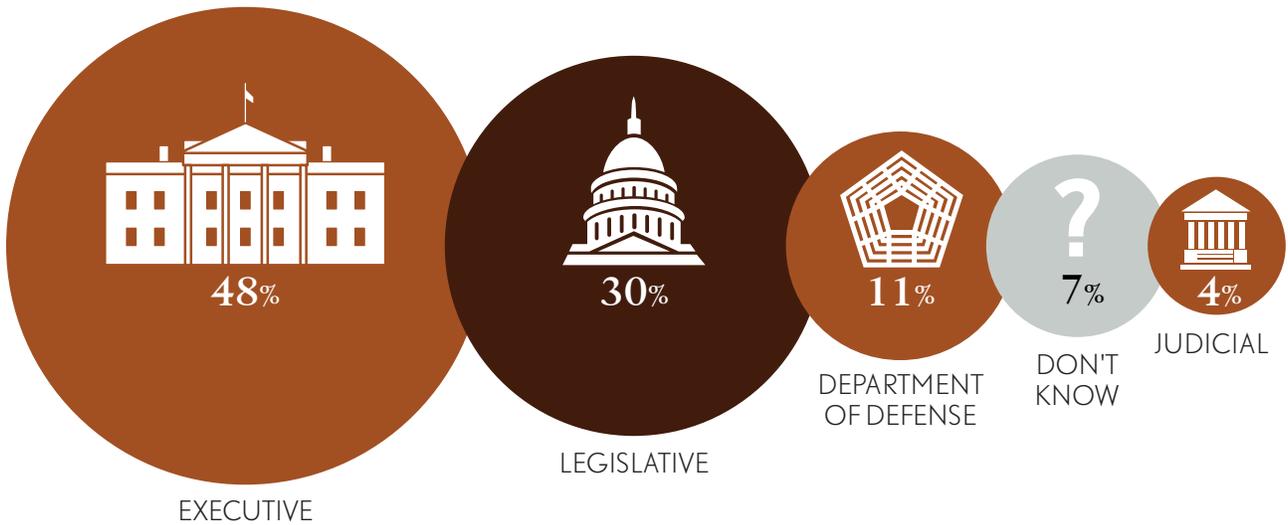
29 percent correctly identified Indonesia, among the countries highlighted below, as the one with the majority Muslim population.



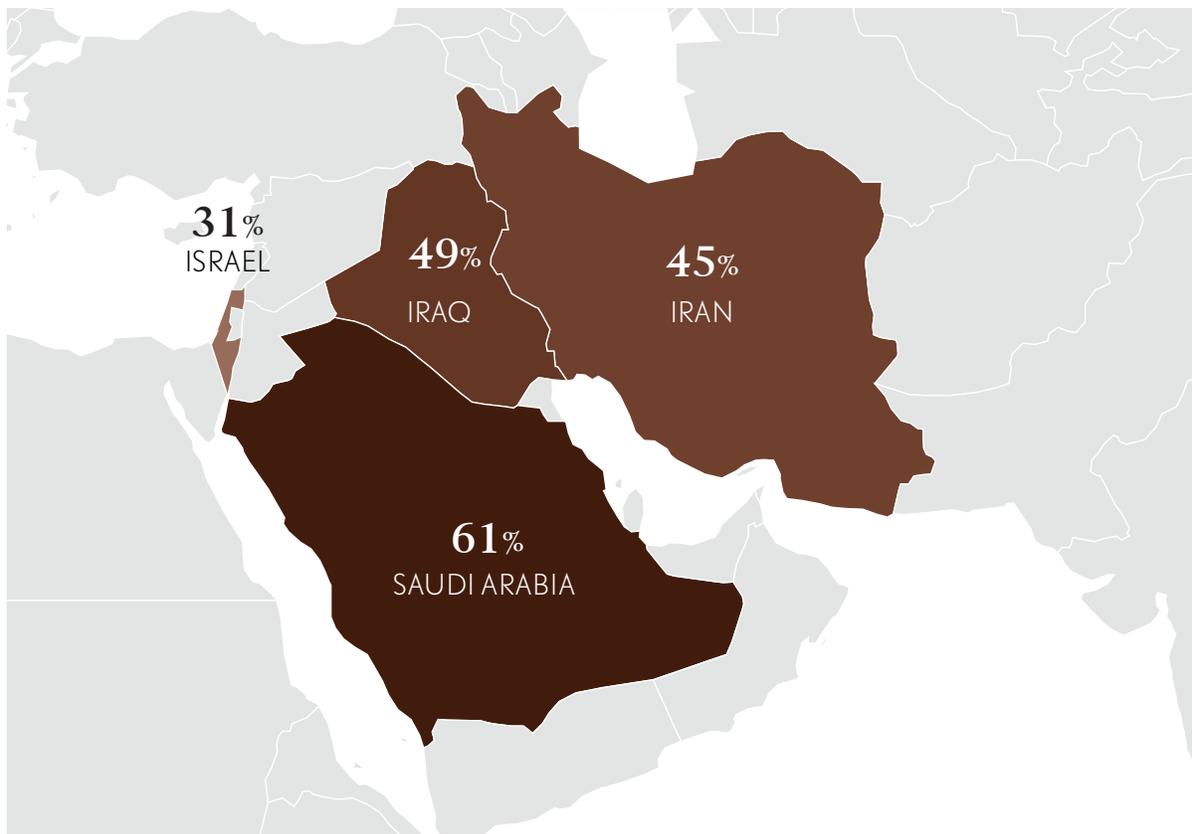
Percentage who correctly said the United States is bound by treaty to protect the following countries if they are attacked:



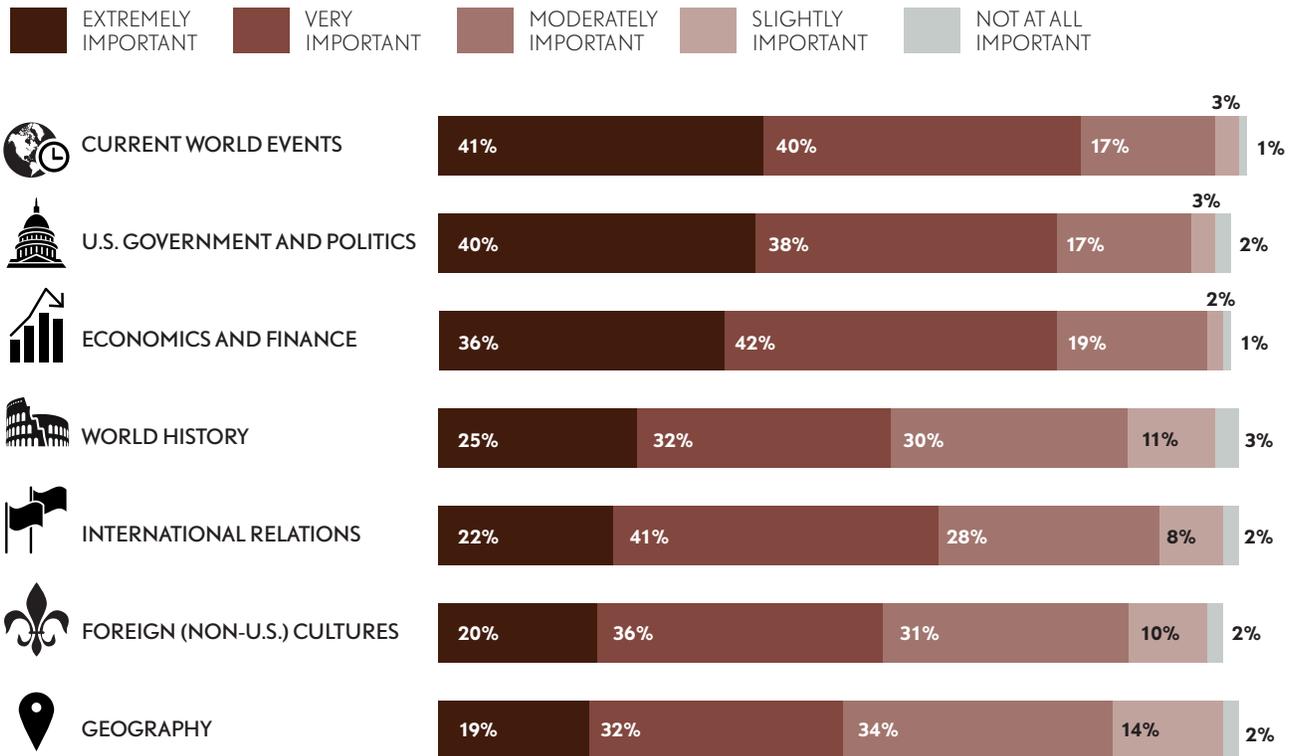
30 percent correctly identified which branch of the U.S. government (legislative) has constitutional authority to declare war.



Percentages who correctly identified the countries highlighted below:



Respondents ranked importance of knowledge on the topics below.



Full Survey Data

Objective

To assess current levels of global literacy among young people who have previously attended or are currently attending a U.S. college or university.

Methodology

National online survey of 1,203 adults age 18–26 who currently attend or have recently attended a 2-year or 4-year college in the United States. All respondents reported living in the United States at the time of the survey.

Respondents were drawn from the Survey Sampling, Inc. (SSI) online research panel, a national opt-in panel consisting of several million individuals residing in the United States who have been recruited to join, and who are offered incentives in exchange for participating in online surveys. This panel uses industry-standard techniques to verify the identities of their panel members and to ensure that their demographic characteristics are valid and up-to-date.

Respondents were screened to be between 18 and 26 years of age. Respondents were also screened either to be currently attending a U.S. college or university, or to have attended a U.S. college or university in the past. No quotas were set within these screening parameters.

A pure probability sample of 1,203 observations would have an estimated margin of error of $\pm 2.9\%$ at the 95% confidence level, and the margin of error would be greater for sub-groupings of the sample. As in all survey research, there are other possible sources of error—such as coverage, nonresponse, and measurement error—that could affect the results.

The survey was self-administered by respondents on a website. Fielding was conducted from May 18 to May 28, 2016. Results are unweighted.

Overall Results

Knowledge Questions

<i>Percent Correct</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent of Respondents</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent of Respondents</i>	
0–5	3	0	0	
6–10	4	0	1	
11–15	7	1	1	
16–20	16	1	2	
21–25	22	2	4	
26–30	31	3	7	
31–35	57	5	12	
36–40	85	7	19	
41–45	96	8	27	
46–50	133	11	38	
51–55	162	13	51	<i>(median and mode)</i>
56–60	144	12	63	
61–65	96	8	71	
66–70	116	10	81	
71–75	68	6	86	
76–80	70	6	92	
81–85	38	3	95	
86–90	38	3	99	
91–95	16	1	100	
96–100	1	0	100	

Total Responses to Knowledge Questions by All Respondents

<i>Percent Correct</i>	<i>Percent Incorrect</i>	<i>Percent Don't Know</i>
55	31	13

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Percent of Correct Answers

Gender

Male	58
Female	53

Birth Year

1990–92	55
1993–94	54
1995–97	56

Race or Ethnicity

White.	57
African-American	48
Hispanic	52
Asian	56

Education

Have four-year degree or higher	58
Currently enrolled in four-year program.	57
All others	49

College Experience with Global Literacy Topics

Learned about some of these topics in a college course	58
Did not learn about any of these topics in a college course.	48

Perceived Knowledge of Global Literacy Issues vs. Peers

Much or somewhat more knowledgeable	61
About average	52
Somewhat or much less knowledgeable	44

Political Orientation

Conservative.	54
Moderate	54
Liberal	57

Student Loan

Have taken out student loans	56
Have not taken out student loans.	54

Times Traveled Outside United States in Past Three Years

None	54
One or more	57

Parents' College Graduate Status

Both	58
One	55
Neither	53

SECTION 1

Screening and Quota Questions

Q1.1 What is your gender?

Male	45%
Female	55%

Q1.2 In what state do you currently reside? (region roll up)

Northeast	18%
Midwest.	21%
South.	37%
West	24%

Q1.3 What year were you born?

1990	10%
1991	12%
1992	12%
1993	16%
1994	16%
1995	14%
1996	12%
1997	9%

Q1.4 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Some College	54%
2-year College Degree	13%
4-year College Degree	30%
Masters Degree.	2%
Doctoral Degree	0%
Professional Degree (JD, MD).	0%

Q1.5 Are you currently attending a 2-year college degree program or a 4-year college degree program in the United States? (among respondents with some college or 2-year college degree)

Yes, a 2-year college degree program	21%
Yes, a 4-year college degree program	61%
No, I'm not currently attending a 2-year or 4-year college program.	18%

Q1.6 What is your major or area of concentration? (among respondents in a 2-year or 4-year college degree program)

Undecided.	4%
English	4%
Foreign Language or Literature	1%
History or Art History	2%
Visual or Performing Arts	5%
Psychology	5%
Education	4%
Communications or Journalism	4%
Economics.	1%
Political Science	2%
Law Enforcement or Criminal Justice.	2%
Business, Finance or Accounting.	14%

answers continue next page

Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology or other Social Sciences . . . . .	. 4%
Engineering . . . . .	. 7%
Computer Science or Information Sciences . . . . .	. 9%
Nursing or Other Health Professions . . . . .	. 12%
Math, Statistics or Sciences (e.g., Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Geology) . . . . .	. 11%
Other . . . . .	. 9%

Q1.7 What was your major or area of concentration in college? (among respondents not currently in a 2-year or 4-year college degree program or those with a 4-year degree or more)

English . . . . .	. 7%
Foreign Language or Literature . . . . .	. 2%
History or Art History . . . . .	. 2%
Visual or Performing Arts . . . . .	. 6%
Psychology . . . . .	. 6%
Education . . . . .	. 4%
Communications or Journalism . . . . .	. 4%
Economics. . . . .	. 2%
Political Science . . . . .	. 3%
Law Enforcement or Criminal Justice. . . . .	. 3%
Business, Finance or Accounting. . . . .	. 13%
Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology or other Social Sciences . . . . .	. 6%
Engineering . . . . .	. 6%
Computer Science or Information Sciences . . . . .	. 7%
Nursing or Other Health Professions . . . . .	. 7%
Math, Statistics or Sciences (e.g., Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Geology) . . . . .	. 10%
Other . . . . .	. 14%

SECTION 2

Importance Measures

When thinking about your role as a citizen (e.g., as a voter, a taxpayer, an employee or business owner, a community member), how important do you feel it will be for you to be knowledgeable about each of the following topics?

	<i>Extremely Important</i>	<i>Very Important</i>	<i>Moderately Important</i>	<i>Slightly Important</i>	<i>Not at All Important</i>
Q2.1 International relations	22%	41%	28%	8%	2%
Q2.2 Economics and finance	36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
Q2.3 World history	25%	32%	30%	11%	3%
Q2.4 U.S. government and politics	40%	38%	17%	3%	2%
Q2.5 Geography	19%	32%	34%	14%	2%
Q2.6 Current world events	41%	40%	17%	3%	1%
Q2.7 Foreign (non-U.S.) cultures	20%	36%	31%	10%	2%

Q2.8 Are these kinds of global topics and domestic issues becoming more important to you, less important to you, or is their level of importance not changing?

More important	72%
Less important	6%
Not changing.	23%

SECTION 3

Knowledge Questions

The next questions are designed to help us learn which subjects are familiar to young Americans today and which are unfamiliar. We are interested in “top of mind” knowledge, so we would prefer you to answer the questions as best you can without getting any hints from other sources. Work fast—have fun! If you don’t know an answer, please check the “don’t know” option. There are no grades or scores, but if you are interested, the answers will be made available to you after you complete the survey.

Let’s start with some definition questions:

Q3.1 What is the definition of “civil war?”

- Any war fought by two or more opposing groups within a single country 89%**
- A war that is fought according to civilized rules of combat . . . 6%
- Any war that affects civilians 5%
- Don’t Know 2%

Q3.2 What does “sub-Saharan Africa” mean?

- The part of Africa that is covered by the Sahara Desert . . . 20%
- Africa in prehistoric times, before the Sahara Desert existed . . 6%
- The part of Africa that is to the South of the Sahara Desert 64%**
- Don’t Know 10%

Correct answers appear in bold.

Q3.3 Which of the following is meant by the word “nationalism?”

- The principle that laws must be made and enforced by individual nations only, not by a world government9%
- A sense of pride in and loyalty to a national identity, often based on common traits such as ethnicity or language 75%**
- The idealistic goal of bringing all of the people of the world together into a single nation of mankind 12%
- Don't Know4%

Q3.4 Which of the following is meant by the phrase “nuclear deterrence?”

- Launching nuclear weapons against an enemy6%
- Preventing a country from acquiring nuclear weapons capability 37%
- Using the threat of a potential nuclear attack to discourage an enemy attack. 49%**
- Don't Know9%

Q3.5 Which one of the following resources is “non-renewable?”

- Solar Power5%
- Salmon 11%
- Fossil Fuels 78%**
- Plants.2%
- Don't Know4%

Now let's go to some geography questions:

Q3.6 Which canal connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean?

- Panama Canal. 81%**
- Suez Canal3%
- Erie Canal3%
- Guadalcanal1%
- Don't Know 12%

Q3.7 Match each place in the left column to the continent where it is located in the right column. Note: two or more may be on the same continent. (not one-to-one mapping; percentage correct)

Colombia: South America	83%
Nigeria: Africa	90%
Pakistan: Asia	71%
Rwanda: Africa.	79%
Sri Lanka: Asia	68%
Sudan: Africa	57%
The Amazon Rainforest: South America	83%
The Alps: Europe	63%
The Sahara: Africa	93%

Q3.8 In which of these countries is a majority of the population Muslim?

South Africa . . . . .	.6%
Armenia	23%
India	29%
Indonesia	29%
Don't Know	12%

Q3.9 Which of the following environments is home to the greatest number of plant and animal species?

The Amazon Basin.	89%
The Kalahari Desert. . . . .	.4%
New York City . . . . .	.1%
Antarctica . . . . .	.1%
Don't Know . . . . .	.5%

Q3.10 Which language is spoken by the most people in the world as their primary language?

Russian . . . . .	.0%
Mandarin Chinese	49%
English	44%
Arabic	4%
Don't Know	4%

Q3.11 Which city would be LEAST likely to be threatened by a tsunami?

Honolulu, United States	4%
Manila, Philippines	7%
Tokyo, Japan	7%
Mexico City, Mexico	75%
Don't Know	8%

Q3.12 Looking at the map, which number matches each of the following countries? (percentage correct)

Israel	31%
Iraq	49%
Saudi Arabia	61%
Iran	45%

Q3.13 Which of these are among the ten most populated countries in the world? (select all that apply; percentage selected)

South Korea	24%
Brazil	51%
United States	77%
France	18%
Indonesia	35%
Pakistan	24%
Nigeria	19%
South Africa	15%
Don't Know	8%

And now for some questions about current events and recent history:

Q3.14 Match each country in the left column with the relevant current issue in the right column. (one to one mapping; percentage correct)

Brazil: Epidemic outbreak of the Zika virus	63%
Cuba: Normalizing relations with the USA	67%
Germany: Settlement of refugees and other migrants	38%
Japan: Aging and shrinking population	56%
South Sudan: Ongoing civil war	59%
United Kingdom: Holding a popular vote on whether to exit the European Union	52%

Q3.15 Which branch of the U.S. government has the Constitutional authority to declare war?

Executive	48%
Legislative	30%
Judicial	4%
Department of Defense	11%
Don't Know	7%

Q3.16 Which of the following is considered by climate scientists to be one of the causes of climate change?

- The increase in “greenhouse gases” in earth’s atmosphere caused by the use of fossil fuels 84%**
- An increase in the intensity of solar radiation from the sun . . . 7%
- Extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and typhoons . . . 6%
- Don’t Know 3%

Q3.17 Which countries is the United States bound by treaty to protect if they are attacked? (select all that apply)

- Canada 47%**
- China. 9%
- Japan 28%**
- Mexico 23%
- North Korea 5%
- Russia 8%
- South Korea 34%**
- Turkey 14%**
- Don’t Know 4%

Q3.18 True or False: Over the past five years, the number of Mexicans leaving the United States and returning to Mexico has been greater than the number of Mexicans entering the United States.

- True 34%**
- False 49%
- Don’t Know 17%

Q3.19 Currently there is a surge of refugees seeking to enter Europe. Which of these countries accounts for the greatest number of these refugees?

Mexico . . . . .	. 3%
Syria	72%
South Sudan . . . . .	. 7%
Ukraine . . . . .	. 9%
Don't Know . . . . .	. 9%

Q3.20 Rank the following diseases in terms of how many people they have killed throughout the world in the past five years, from most to fewest: Ebola, AIDS, malaria. (percentage selected)

AIDS: 1	49%
Ebola: 3	43%
Malaria: 2	65%
Don't Know . . . . .	. 5%
Correct ranking	35%

Q3.21 Which of the following countries have 3,000 or more U.S. troops stationed in them? (select all that apply)

Germany	25%
Iraq	67%
Japan	27%
Libya	23%
Mexico . . . . .	. 8%
South Korea	36%
Syria	35%
Don't Know	14%

Q3.22 Which of the following countries have veto power over United Nations Security Council resolutions due to their status as permanent members of the Security Council? (select all that apply)

Brazil	4%
China	25%
France	34%
Germany	20%
India	4%
Israel	5%
Japan	12%
Russia	29%
United Kingdom	43%
United States	51%
Don't Know	35%

Finally, here are some questions about economics, trade, budgets and finance:

Q3.23 Which of the following statements about trade are true? (select all that apply)

The U.S. exports more than it imports	15%
The U.S. imports more from China than any other country	79%
The U.S. exports more to Mexico than any other country	10%
Don't Know	0%

Q3.24 Which country has a larger economy (i.e., total value of goods and services produced), the United States or China?

The United States	29%
China.	67%
Don't Know	5%

Q3.25 Which country is the largest trading (i.e., import/export) partner of the United States, based on total dollar value of goods and services?

- Canada **10%**
- China. 71%
- Mexico 6%
- Saudi Arabia 5%
- Don't Know 9%

Q3.26 Approximately what percentage of the world's population lives in the United States?

- Between 1% and 2%. 8%
- Between 4% and 5% 44%**
- Between 10% and 12%. 28%
- Between 25% and 28%. 9%
- Don't Know 11%

Q3.27 Approximately what percentage of the U.S. federal budget is spent on foreign aid?

- 1%. 12%**
- 5% 19%
- 12% 27%
- 30% 13%
- 40% 4%
- Don't Know 25%

Q3.28 Which of the following best describes the role and status of the U.S. dollar?

- The U.S. dollar is a uniquely important currency in global trade and finance 29%**
- The U.S. dollar is one of ten or so equally important currencies in global trade and finance 40%
- The U.S. dollar is the currency of the United States, but it has no special role for other countries 20%
- Don't Know 11%

Section 4

Education and Awareness Measures

Q4.1 Did you learn about any of the following topics in a college course? If Yes, please indicate which topics.

- No, I didn't learn about any of these topics in a college course . 27%
- Yes, I did learn about some of these topics in a college course. . 74%

Specifically:

- Sovereignty 19%
- Nationalism 39%
- American foreign policy 19%
- Cyber conflict 9%
- Climate change 36%
- Nuclear proliferation 9%
- Migration 26%
- Alliances 17%
- Human rights 43%
- International trade 21%
- Diplomacy. 21%
- Deterrence 9%
- Development. 16%
- International governmental organizations 16%
- World religions 34%

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International aid	9%
Intra- and inter-state conflict	13%
Current world events	32%
Arms control.	11%
Terrorism	28%
Global health.	19%
Physical geography	29%
Human geography	22%
None of the above.	1%

Q4.2 In comparison to your peers (i.e., friends, classmates, co-workers), would you say you are much more knowledgeable, somewhat more knowledgeable, about average, somewhat less knowledgeable, or much less knowledgeable about these kinds of global topics and issues?

I am much more knowledgeable	13%
I am somewhat more knowledgeable	32%
I am about average	42%
I am somewhat less knowledgeable	10%
I am much less knowledgeable	4%

Q4.3 How much of your knowledge about these kinds of global topics and issues comes from the college courses you have taken?

A great deal	11%
A lot	17%
A moderate amount	34%
A little	26%
None at all	12%

Q4.4 How much of your knowledge about these kinds of global topics and issues comes from the high school courses you have taken?

A great deal	13%
A lot	20%
A moderate amount	34%
A little	27%
None at all	7%

Q4.5 Which of the following types of media do you primarily use to learn about national and international issues? (select all that apply)

Television	44%
Internet	84%
Newspapers or Magazines	25%
Radio	14%
None of the above	3%

Q4.6 Through which of the following media platforms and news sources do you access information about national and inter-national issues? (select all that apply)

ABC News.	33%
Apple News	5%
BBC	22%
Buzzfeed	25%
CBS News.	16%
CNN	40%
Comedy/News Programs (e.g., <i>Daily Show</i> , John Oliver)	21%
Facebook	43%
<i>Foreign Affairs</i>	2%
Fox News	23%
Google News	21%

answers continue next page

<i>Guardian</i> . . . . .	. 6%
Huffington Post.	26%
MSNBC	11%
<i>National Geographic</i>	12%
NBC News	16%
<i>New York Times</i>	24%
NPR	11%
Reddit	11%
Snapchat	10%
Twitter	24%
<i>USA Today</i>	18%
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	15%
<i>Washington Post</i>	18%
Yahoo!	20%
None of the above . . . . .	. 6%

SECTION 5

Additional Demographic and Classification Questions

Q5.1 Have you taken out any student loans?

Yes	50%
No	50%

Q5.2 Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity? (select all that apply)

White or Caucasian	61%
Black or African-American	17%
Hispanic or Latino/a.	18%
Asian	12%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Native American or other Pacific Islander	1%
Other	1%
Prefer not to say.	0%

Q5.3 To the best of your knowledge, which of the following best describes the educational background of your parents?

- Both of my parents are college graduates 35%
- One of my parents is a college graduate, but the other is not . . . 29%
- One or both of my parents attended college, but neither graduated 14%
- Neither of my parents attended college 20%
- Don't Know 2%

Q5.4 How would you characterize your political orientation?

- Conservative. 19%
- Moderate 40%
- Liberal 42%

Q5.5 Are you currently registered to vote?

- Yes 81%
- No 16%
- Don't Know/Not Sure 2%

Q5.6 Have you ever voted in a national, state or local election?

- Yes 62%
- No 38%
- Don't Know/Not Sure 1%

Q5.7 In the past three years, approximately how many times have you traveled outside the United States?

- None 53%
- One 24%
- Two 12%
- Three or more 10%
- Don't Know/Not Sure 1%

About the Council on Foreign Relations and National Geographic

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