



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on March 22, 2019

Poll: Most Americans Don't Know Bill of Rights

According to a survey of 2,000 adults conducted by market researcher One Poll in October of last year, most Americans lack basic knowledge of what rights are specifically protected in the Bill of Rights, and even how many amendments are included in what we know as the Bill of Rights.

Only 26 percent even knew how many amendments make up the “Bill of Rights” (10). Another astounding finding was that about half of those surveyed believed “liberty” and the “pursuit of happiness” are included in the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment. (That is the Declaration of Independence.)

Twenty percent were not even familiar with the Bill of Rights.

When asked to rank the five freedoms protected in the First Amendment (one presumes those surveyed were told what they were in this question), 84 percent named freedom of speech the most important, followed by freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom to petition the government.

The Samuel Hubbard Shoe Company commissioned the poll, apparently in conjunction with its new shoe line known as the Freedom Collection, in which the shoe wearer can look at the bottom of the shoe where the First Amendment is engraved, in case they forget.

“The online epidemic of misinformation, false news stories and election disinformation campaigns pose significant threats to democratic rights,” said Alan Miller, founder and CEO of the News Literacy Project, which teamed up with Hubbard in promoting knowledge of the Bill of Rights and what is included in it.

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The problem — widespread ignorance of basic American civics — is obvious. The solution is not so obvious. Some might suggest more money from the government for the public schools, but Americans were more knowledgeable about the Bill of Rights in the days *before* the federal government began pouring money into the nation’s schools, and certainly better informed before the creation of the federal Department of Education under President Jimmy Carter.

In a time when Democratic Party presidential hopefuls believe it is “wisdom” to abolish the Electoral College, it should not be surprising that there is such woeful ignorance concerning the Bill of Rights. That such candidates could even be taken seriously for the highest office in the land should cause alarm in and of itself.

First, Americans should know that the Constitution does not grant us any rights in the Bill of Rights. According to the Declaration of Independence, we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable





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rights. The Bill of Rights were not adopted to give anyone rights, but rather to limit the power of the new federal government. They were certainly not adopted to limit the power of the states or the people of the United States.

The Bill of Rights was not included in the document crafted at the Constitutional Convention and sent to the states for ratification on September 17, 1787. James Madison and others believed the inclusion of such a listing of protected rights was unnecessary at best, and dangerous at worst. Madison's contention was that a Bill of Rights was not needed because there was nothing in the Constitution that gave Congress the power to abridge freedom of speech, or to establish a national church, for example. If a listing of rights were added, then some might argue that those were the only rights Americans had.

George Mason, a delegate at the convention, refused to sign the Constitution without a Bill of Rights, however, saying he would rather cut his hand off first. Patrick Henry was another powerful opponent of the Constitution, if it did not include a Bill of Rights. When it became apparent that the Constitution was not going to be ratified without a Bill of Rights, Madison promised he would offer amendments in the first Congress to add such protections to the Constitution.

Madison wrote up 12 articles, of which 10 were ultimately ratified by 1791. The purpose of the Bill of Rights should be clearly understood, per the demands of Mason and Henry. The Bill of Rights were written as a restriction on the newly-created federal government, to protect the people of the United States and the several states from that new central government. The 10th Amendment makes that clear: All powers not delegated to the federal government, nor denied to the states, are reserved to the states, respectively, or to the people themselves.

In a simple reading of the First Amendment, one should be struck by the first word, which is "Congress." The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law, respecting the establishment of religion." In other words, Congress, and only Congress, was restricted by the Bill of Rights. States were free to establish a religion, which some states had for several years after the adoption of the Bill of Rights. (Most states already had some form of a bill of rights in their own state constitutions.)

And Madison addressed the concern that he and others had that some might argue these were the only rights Americans had. The Ninth Amendment essentially said that this listing of rights protected did not mean these were the only rights Americans had. Amendment Nine reads, "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

Of course, if a large number of Americans do not even know what the Bill of Rights is, or what freedoms are specifically protected in the First Amendment, such deeper knowledge as this is even less likely.

In a letter to Charles Yancey, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "[If] a nation expects to be ignorant & free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was & never will be."

Sadly, it appears that we are putting Jefferson's warning to the test.

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