

Events Familiarity Assessment of Students in Constitutional Law

Students in my constitutional law class, all first year (second semester) law students at the University of Houston Law Center, were asked this morning to list their familiarity with a list of 20 events. For each event, the students were asked "whether you (a) remember pretty well living through it; (b) studied it in high school or before; (c) studied it since high school; (d) neither remember it particularly well nor studied it to any significant extent; or (e) I have no idea at all what this is." Students were advised they could select more than one response. The following are the responses. The class has about 80 students in it, so 3/4 of the students responded. The survey was not conducted under particularly scientific conditions and so the results should be treated as perhaps interesting or provocative rather than anything "definitive."

#	event	some familiarity	little or no familiarity
1	The resignation of President Nixon	48	12
2	The Vietnam War	58	3
3	The first Gulf War	52	9
4	The original Roe v. Wade decision regarding abortion	53	7
5	The decision of the Supreme Court in Gruter v. Bolinger (affirmative action in law schools)	17	43
6	The end of the Soviet Union	54	8
7	The introduction of the World Wide Web in about 1992	50	10
8	Sanda Day O'Connor becoming the first woman Supreme Court Justice	37	20
9	The impeachment of President Clinton	58	4
10	The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy	31	31
11	The confirmation hearings of Robert Bork	12	49
12	The Bush v. Gore lawsuit in 2000	56	6
13	The federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas	47	14
14	The creation by cloning of Dolly the Sheep	53	9
15	The Chernobyl nuclear accident	40	22
16	The National Guard shootings at Kent State University	29	32
17	The publication of "The Pentagon Papers"	14	47
18	The resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew	8	54
19	Thurgood Marshall becoming the first black Supreme Court justice	31	29
20	Hernandez v. Texas, a 1954 Supreme Court decision	11	51

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#	event	at least a little familiarity	zero familiarity
1	The resignation of President Nixon	60	0
2	The Vietnam War	61	0
3	The first Gulf War	59	2
4	The original Roe v. Wade decision regarding abortion	58	2
5	The decision of the Supreme Court in Gruter v. Bolinger (affirmative action in law schools)	38	22
6	The end of the Soviet Union	62	0
7	The introduction of the World Wide Web in about 1992	60	0
8	Sanda Day O'Connor becoming the first woman Supreme Court Justice	54	3
9	The impeachment of President Clinton	62	0
10	The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy	46	16
11	The conformation hearings of Robert Bork	25	36
12	The Bush v. Gore lawsuit in 2000	61	1
13	The federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas	54	7
14	The creation by cloning of Dolly the Sheep	61	1
15	The Chernobyl nuclear accident	53	9
16	The National Guard shootings at Kent State University	51	10
17	The publication of "The Pentagon Papers"	37	24
18	The resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew	35	27
19	Thurgood Marshall becoming the first black Supreme Court justice	57	3
20	Hernandez v. Texas, a 1954 Supreme Court decision	26	36

#	event	remember living through it	do not remember living through it
1	The resignation of President Nixon	1	61
2	The Vietnam War	1	61
3	The first Gulf War	35	27
4	The original Roe v. Wade decision regarding abortion	1	61
5	The decision of the Supreme Court in Gruter v. Bolinger (affirmative action in law schools)	2	60
6	The end of the Soviet Union	20	42
7	The introduction of the World Wide Web in about 1992	42	20
8	Sanda Day O'Connor becoming the first woman Supreme Court Justice	10	52
9	The impeachment of President Clinton	55	7
10	The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy	22	40
11	The conformation hearings of Robert Bork	5	57
12	The Bush v. Gore lawsuit in 2000	51	11
13	The federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas	41	21
14	The creation by cloning of Dolly the Sheep	48	14
15	The Chernobyl nuclear accident	13	49
16	The National Guard shootings at Kent State University	0	62
17	The publication of "The Pentagon Papers"	4	58
18	The resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew	1	61
19	Thurgood Marshall becoming the first black Supreme Court justice	3	59
20	Hernandez v. Texas, a 1954 Supreme Court decision	0	62

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Out[195]=

#	event	studied in high school	did not study in high school
1	The resignation of President Nixon	36	26
2	The Vietnam War	48	14
3	The first Gulf War	21	41
4	The original Roe v. Wade decision regarding abortion	26	36
5	The decision of the Supreme Court in Gruter v. Bolinger (affirmative action in law schools)	4	58
6	The end of the Soviet Union	29	33
7	The introduction of the World Wide Web in about 1992	8	54
8	Sanda Day O'Connor becoming the first woman Supreme Court Justice	17	45
9	The impeachment of President Clinton	5	57
10	The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy	6	56
11	The conformation hearings of Robert Bork	2	60
12	The Bush v. Gore lawsuit in 2000	9	53
13	The federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas	6	56
14	The creation by cloning of Dolly the Sheep	7	55
15	The Chernobyl nuclear accident	22	40
16	The National Guard shootings at Kent State University	21	41
17	The publication of "The Pentagon Papers"	3	59
18	The resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew	6	56
19	Thurgood Marshall becoming the first black Supreme Court justice	19	43
20	Hernandez v. Texas, a 1954 Supreme Court decision	4	58

#	event	studied since high school	did not study since high school
1	The resignation of President Nixon	20	42
2	The Vietnam War	27	35
3	The first Gulf War	14	48
4	The original Roe v. Wade decision regarding abortion	38	24
5	The decision of the Supreme Court in Gruter v. Bolinger (affirmative action in law schools)	12	50
6	The end of the Soviet Union	18	44
7	The introduction of the World Wide Web in about 1992	7	55
8	Sanda Day O'Connor becoming the first woman Supreme Court Justice	16	46
9	The impeachment of President Clinton	8	54
10	The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy	8	54
11	The conformation hearings of Robert Bork	7	55
12	The Bush v. Gore lawsuit in 2000	10	52
13	The federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas	8	54
14	The creation by cloning of Dolly the Sheep	4	58
15	The Chernobyl nuclear accident	15	47
16	The National Guard shootings at Kent State University	12	50
17	The publication of "The Pentagon Papers"	8	54
18	The resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew	1	61
19	Thurgood Marshall becoming the first black Supreme Court justice	16	46
20	Hernandez v. Texas, a 1954 Supreme Court decision	7	55

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Key Findings

Certain events with which some faculty may assume personal familiarity on the part of students are, in fact, little known to students. *Gruter v. Bollinger*, for example, was said to have been "lived through" by only 2 students, though perhaps the name of the case was unfamiliar to them, although it was identified as involving affirmative action in law school. The events most frequently said to have been lived through were the impeachment of President Clinton and the cloning of Dolly the Sheep. The introduction of the World Wide Web and the federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound were also events that many students remembered.

Certain events are largely unknown to students; references to them, therefore, need to be made with caution and with provision of background information. Half or fewer of the respondents said they had much if any familiarity with *Gruter v. Bollinger*, the Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas controversy, the confirmation hearings of Robert Bork, the National Guard shootings at Kent State University, the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the resignation of Vice President Agnew (only 13% were familiar with that), or *Hernandez v. Texas*, which was thrown in almost as a "control question" but which gave Mexican Americans significant protection under the equal protection clause.

High schools appear to ignore many of the events on my list. Only the resignation of President Nixon and the Vietnam war were studied by more than half of my students in high school. The first Gulf War was studied by only 21 of the 62 respondents and only 29 of the 62 studied the end of the soviet Union. Chernobyl and Kent State were still further down on topics addressed.

The only topic that more than half the students said they had studied since high school was the original *Roe v. Wade* decision regarding abortion. The Vietnam War came in second, with 27 of the 62 respondents (44%) saying they had done studied it since high school.