

## **Good Thing We Citizens Aren't Tested**

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### **Body**

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They were lucky devils, the bunch that came over on the Mayflower in 1620. The immigration laws were a **good** deal laxer back then. Nobody made those people take a citizenship **test** before they could join the club.

These days, we are more selective about whom we let in. You can't simply be some guy in a funny hat with a buckle in front. To be one of us, you need to pass an exam. It has been that way for quite a while. But now, for the first time in 20 years, the government is tweaking the questions it will ask of immigrants who want to become **citizens**.

A new **test** will be given a dry run starting next month, with volunteers quizzed in 10 cities across the country. Surprisingly, New York City is not among the 10. Who has more immigrants than we do?

Nothing personal, said Chris Rhatigan, a spokeswoman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency in charge of the exam. A computer picked the cities, she said yesterday, and besides, "there are a lot of other areas in this country that have rich diversity."

That they do. We self-centered New Yorkers will have to content ourselves with Albany's standing in for us.

In the new exam, the emphasis will shift somewhat from raw facts to broad concepts. People will be asked, for example, not only what the three branches of government are but also why we have three branches. The idea is to see whether budding Americans understand underlying principles of our democracy.

In other words, we expect them to be **better** than the rest of us.

**Better** than we who prove our love of democracy by not voting in vast numbers. Preliminary figures for last month's elections, which only charted the country's possible direction in wartime, showed a national voter turnout of about 40 percent.

**Better** than we who are far more able to name the Three Stooges than to identify the three branches of government.

That's not a joke. A Zogby International poll several months ago showed that 74 percent of Americans (and 62 percent of New Yorkers) knew Larry, Curly and Moe, but only 42 percent (39 percent in New York) could list the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

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How about this: A mere 24 percent of Americans could name two United States Supreme Court justices, while 77 percent could name two of Snow White's seven dwarfs. That might be worth bearing in mind for a question on the new **test** about who the chief justice is.

In fairness, "you don't sit and talk about the nine Supreme Court justices every day at lunch," said Fritz Wenzel, a spokesman for Zogby. You're more likely to talk about new movies. "In that respect, the results were somewhat predictable," Mr. Wenzel said. He paused before adding, "but alarming nonetheless."

As we said, perhaps the new Americans will be **better** than the rest of us. Still, some of the revised **test's** 144 questions, ultimately pared to 100, could give them problems.

Question No. 125 on the citizenship agency's Web site ([www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)) seems off the mark. What is the longest river in the United States? The Web site's suggested answer is the Mississippi. But by some reckonings, the Missouri River is longer.

Question No. 61 could prove tricky. It asks which political party -- as of next month, remember -- holds the Senate majority. The approved answer is the Democrats. That is correct -- that is, unless the Senate's new independent member, Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, pivots to his right and waves the Democrats goodbye.

On a more philosophical note, Question No. 71 asks, "What is self-government?" Two possible answers are provided: "Powers come from the people" and "government responds to the people." Hmm. Under those definitions, would you say that Iraq truly has self-governance?

Question No. 82 calls on would-be **citizens** to "name two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy." Ten possibilities are offered, among them voting, joining a political party and running for office. Ignored is one of the most fruitful ways used by some Americans: call the likes of Jack Abramoff.

Plenty of time remains, though, to work out the kinks.

By the way, you **test** takers in Albany, make all of us in New York proud. If asked next month for the three branches of government, remember that this is a national exam. Don't tell them an essential New York truth, that the three branches of government are Spitzer, Bruno and Silver.

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