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**Title:** Asked and Answered: Knowledge Levels When We Won't Take 'Don't Know' for an Answer

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## **Abstract**

A pivotal claim in research on American political behavior is that the typical citizen knows very little about politics. Public opinion surveys provide a considerable body of evidence in support of this position. However, survey protocols with respect to factual questions about politics violate established norms in educational testing in that “don’t know” answers are encouraged rather than discouraged. Because encouraging “don’t know” responses potentially confounds efforts to identify substantive understanding, this practice may lead to the systematic understatement of political knowledge. We explore this possibility with data drawn from two split-ballot tests: one conducted as part of a survey in the Tallahassee, Florida metropolitan area and one conducted as part of the 1998 NES Pilot. Results reveal that the mean level of political knowledge increases by approximately 15 percent when knowledge questions are asked in accordance with accepted practices in educational testing.