



Why Benchmarks Matters

Americans love their country, but when it comes to understanding how their democracy works, many are not so certain. A 2014 survey of 1,416 adults by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) found that:

- 35 percent could not name a single branch of government.
- Only 27 percent know it takes a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto.
- 21 percent incorrectly think that a 5-4 Supreme Court decision is sent back to Congress for reconsideration.

When citizens lack knowledge about how government works, democracy suffers. Uninformed citizens are less likely to vote; they are less likely, too, to support the court system, which is a vastly different political creature from the executive and legislative branches.

“For as long as we have had elected officials in this country, we have had interest groups who try to influence the outcome of elections,” Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (Ret.) said in 2008. “That’s part of the process. It goes hand in hand with democracy and elections. But judges are not ordinary politicians. Their job is not to interpret the will of the people.”

For the decisions of judges to be accepted by the public, they must be made free from the influence of political party or campaign contributions or threats to jobs. The framers of the Constitution provided for the independence of the judiciary as a remedy for abuses suffered at the hands of an unchecked monarchy. They believed a system of checks and balances between three distinct and co-equal branches of government would prevent any one branch from abusing its power. They created a government in which the legislative branch makes law; the executive branch enforces the laws; and the judicial branch interprets those laws in individual cases.

The Florida Bar’s Constitutional Judiciary Committee created [Benchmarks: Raising the Bar on Civics Education](#) to teach adults about their government and the courts. Lawyers are duty-bound to protect and preserve the independence of the judiciary and are well-positioned by training to be Benchmarks ambassadors. It’s important work educating the public about the judiciary’s role in government and why fair and impartial courts are central to American democracy. The Florida Bar proudly takes on this job with Benchmarks.