



# *Knowing About Courts*

- **James L. Gibson**

- **Gregory A. Caldeira**

- *The Journal of Politics*, forthcoming



**Citizens, Courts, and Confirmations:**

**Positivity Theory and the  
Judgments of the American People**

**Princeton University Press, 2009**

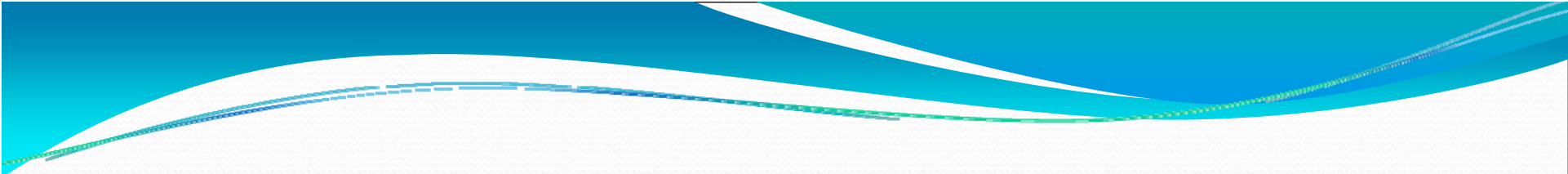
- 
- Knows at least 2 of 7 of Snow White's Dwarfs

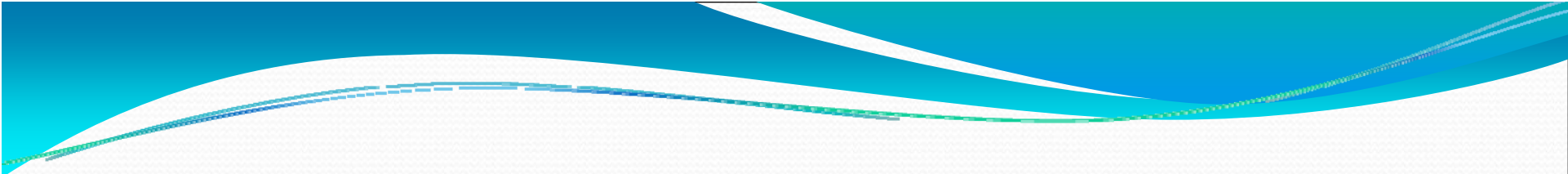
— 77 %

- Knows at least 2 Supreme Court Justices

— 24 %



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- "Now we have a set of questions concerning various public figures. We want to see how much information about them gets out to the public from television, newspapers and the like." What about "William Rehnquist — What job or political office does he NOW hold?"

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- "We are strict regarding acceptable answers: We will accept ONLY 'Chief Justice' – 'Justice' alone is definitely \*NOT\* acceptable. (The court must be 'the Supreme Court' – 'Chief Justice of the Court' won't do. Note: applies only if R would specifically say 'the Court,' a rare phrasing, rather than 'the Supreme Court'). If unsure whether correct, code as best you can and record R's response as a remark."

# Which is Correct?

- Chief Justice of the United States  
Supreme Court
- Chief Justice of the United States





# ANES Evidence of Knowledge

Can identify the Vice President 85 %

Can identify Tony Blair 62 %

Can identify William Rehnquist 28 %

Can Identify Dennis Hastert  
(Speaker of the House) 9 %



## “Incorrect” Identifications of Rehnquist

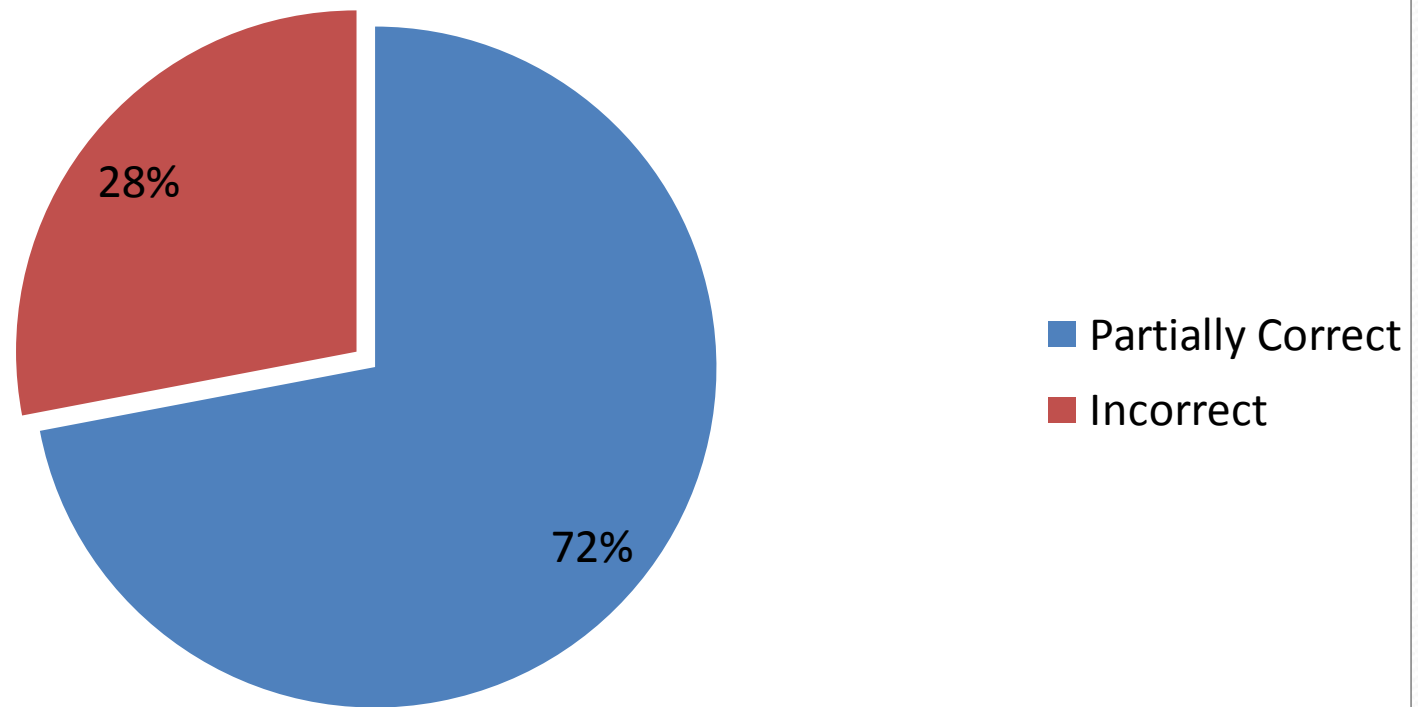
- Head honcho
- Main guy
- Main one
- Supreme Court Judge
- Ran the Clinton impeachment hearings
- Governor of West Virginia



# President Nixon got it wrong too!

- As he was about to nominate him to the Supreme Court, Nixon had difficulty remembering the Assistant Attorney General's name, referring to him instead as "Renchburg."

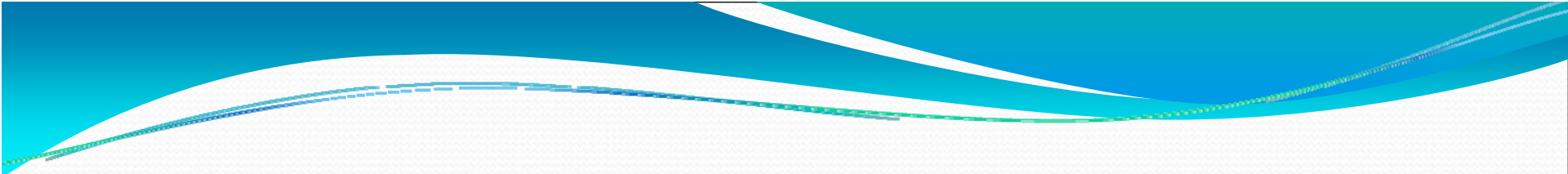
# Correcting ANES “Wrong Answers”



# 349 “Incorrect” Responses

- 91 identified Rehnquist as a Supreme Court justice
- 54 as a Supreme Court judge
- 61 the only recorded reply was “Supreme Court”



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- MAIN JUDGE
  - PARTY TO IMPEACH THE PRESIDENT CLINTON
  - POLIDTICALLY, HE WAS AN INTERESTEING CHOICE FOR THE SUPREME COURT
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE HEAD HONCHO
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE THE MAIN ONE
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE, A SENIOR MEMBER.
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE, HE MAY RETIRE DURING THIS TERM. ACTUALLY HE MAY DIE DURING THIS TERM
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE, HEAD
  - SUPREME COURT JUSTICE, THE HEAD GUY
  - UM, I THINK HE HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THAT WHOLE CLINTON INVESTIGATION, THE NAME IS FAMILIAR/BG/DK

# The Problem of “Don’t Know”

- "DK KEY IS NOT ALLOWED FOR THIS QUESTION"
- But in fact large numbers of respondents are recorded as making "no attempt to guess,"
- And virtually every respondent has successfully claimed a de facto "don't know" reply prior to hearing the Rehnquist question.
- Serious question order problems here



# Court Knowledge

% Correct

- Justices are appointed

2001

74 %

2005

65 %

2008

64 %

- Serve a life term

2001

66 %

2005

61 %

2008

54 %

- Has “last say” on the constitution

2001

61 %

2005

57 %

2008

54 %



# Guessing?

Expected correct, guessing,  
3 questions

8.25 %

Observed correct  
3 questions

44.4 %

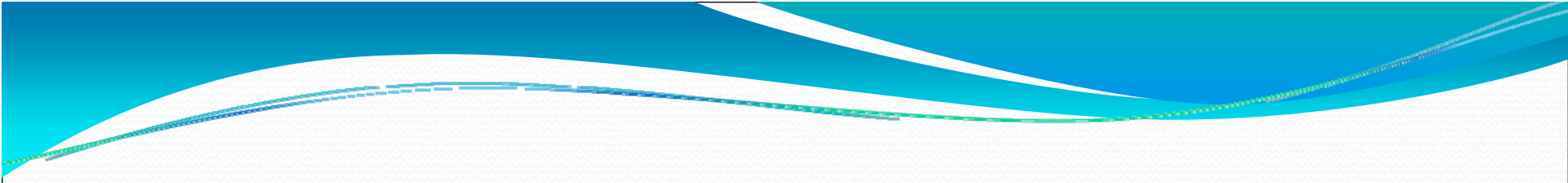
# Knowledge of Chief Justices – % Correct

	Open-Ended	Closed-Ended
Roberts	15 %	46 %
Rehnquist	42 %	71 %

# Conclusions & Points of Discussion

- Perhaps should never use survey items to do point estimates
  - But people do and it has important substantive implications
- Should re-think conceptualization of political knowledge
  - Are most likely doing so
  - Are personalities the most important component?



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- Consistency in coding practices may be as important as consistency in question wording
  - Must have much greater concern with reliability
  - Purpose of this conference
  - Research on whether those who get the answers precisely correct differ from those who get the answers generally correct