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Contacts: Dan Cassino 973.896.7072
Peter Woolley 973.670.3239
Krista Jenkins 908.328.8967

What you know depends on what you watch: Current events knowledge across popular news sources

People learn most from NPR, Sunday Morning Shows, 'The Daily Show'

According to a follow-up survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind™, NPR and Sunday morning political talk shows are the most informative news outlets, while exposure to partisan sources, such as Fox News and MSNBC, has a negative impact on people's current events knowledge. This nationwide survey confirms initial findings presented in a New Jersey focused poll (from November of 2011).

In the study, 1,185 respondents nationwide were asked about what news sources they consumed in the past week and then were asked a variety of questions about current political and economic events in the U.S. and abroad. On average, people were able to answer correctly 1.8 of 4 questions about international news, and 1.6 of 5 questions about domestic affairs.

"Of course, knowledge of current events is predicted not just by watching news, but also by factors like ideology, education, age and gender," said Dan Cassino, political scientist and poll analyst. "Based on these results, people who don't watch any news at all are expected to answer correctly on average 1.22 of the questions about domestic politics, just by guessing or relying on existing basic knowledge."

However, the study concludes that media sources have a significant impact on the number of questions that people were able to answer correctly. The largest effect is that of Fox News: all else being equal, someone who watched only Fox News would be expected to answer just 1.04 domestic questions correctly — a figure which is significantly worse than if they had reported watching no media at all. On the other hand, if they listened only to NPR, they would be expected to answer 1.51 questions correctly; viewers of Sunday morning talk shows fare similarly well. And people watching only *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* could answer about 1.42 questions correctly.

"These differences may be small, but even small differences are important when we're talking about millions of people," said Cassino. "We expect that watching the news should help people learn, but the most popular of the national media sources – Fox, CNN, MSNBC – seem to be the least informative."

Results for questions about international current events were similar. People who didn't have any reported exposure to news sources were expected to answer 1.28 questions correctly, a figure which rose to 1.97 for people just listening to NPR, to 1.60 for people just watching *The Daily Show* or listening to talk radio, and 1.52 for

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people watching Sunday morning shows. By contrast, people who reported watching just Fox News were expected to answer just 1.08 questions correctly.

"Most news providers in the United States don't spend much time on international affairs," said Cassino. "It is not surprising that most media have little impact on how much people know about the world," said Cassino. "What is interesting is that when people are exposed to media that cover the world, like NPR, they do pick it up. It's not that people aren't interested, it's that no one is giving them the information in the first place."

The study showed that the effects of ideologically-pitched media, like Fox News, MSNBC and talk radio, depend on who is listening or watching. On the whole, MSNBC, for instance, had no impact on political knowledge one way or the other. However, liberals who watched MSNBC did better on the knowledge questions, answering correctly 1.89 of the domestic questions and 1.64 of the international questions correctly. Similarly, while moderates and liberals who watch Fox News do worse at answering the questions than others, conservatives who watch Fox do no worse than people who watch no news at all. Talk radio also had differential effects depending on the ideology of the listener, but they were much smaller. None of the other news media had effects that depended on ideology.

"Ideological news sources, like Fox and MSNBC, are really just talking to one audience," said Cassino. "This is solid evidence that if you're not in that audience, you're not going to get anything out of watching them."

The domestic political questions covered the Iowa and New Hampshire primary contests, the composition of Congress, the unemployment rate and the Keystone XL pipeline. The easiest question was: "Which party has the greatest number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives?" 65% knew it is the Republican Party. The hardest question was about last December's short-term extension of the payroll tax cut: Only 9% knew it was tied to a deal on the Keystone XL pipeline. The international questions referenced sanctions on Iran, uprisings in Egypt and Syria, and the Greek bailout.

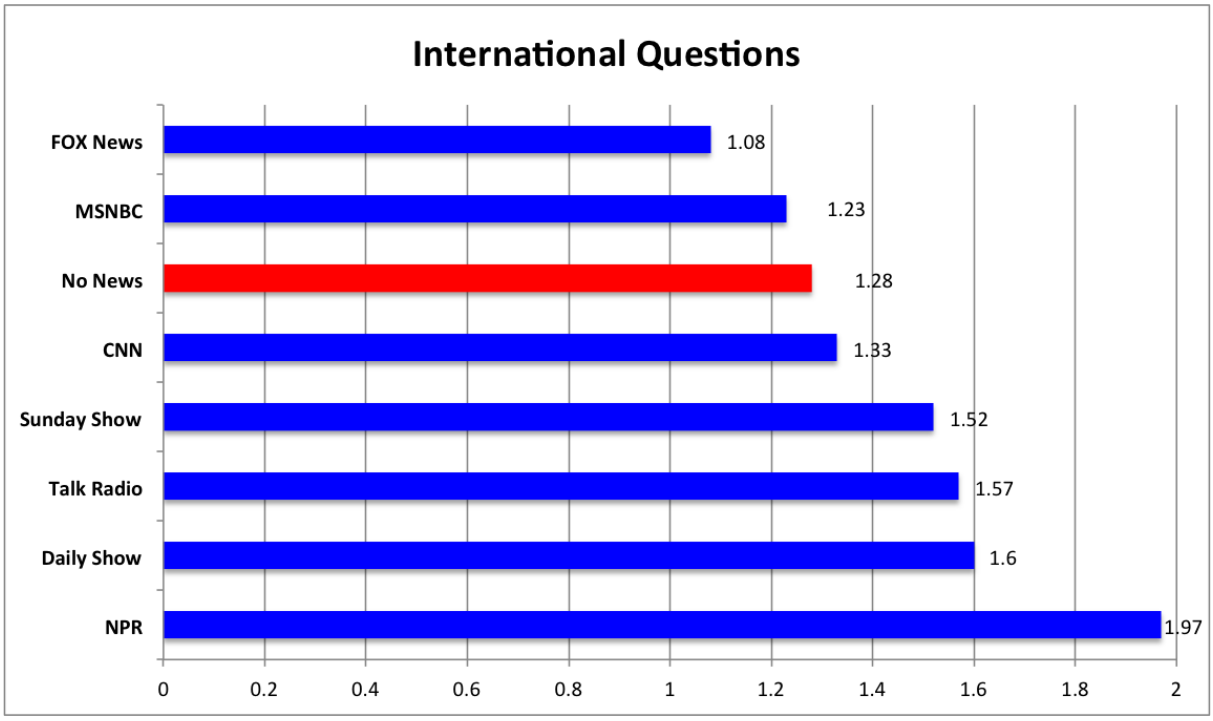
Respondents were also asked about 12 different news sources, and the study sought to measure the relative impact of exposure to each of these news sources on how well respondents were able to answer questions about current events. Despite that most people get news from multiple sources, the aim of researchers was to isolate the effects of each type of news source. The effects were calculated using multinomial logistic regression, a technique that allows researchers to isolate the impact of one variable on an outcome. The results described control for the effects of partisanship, age, education and gender, all factors, which commonly predict vote choice.

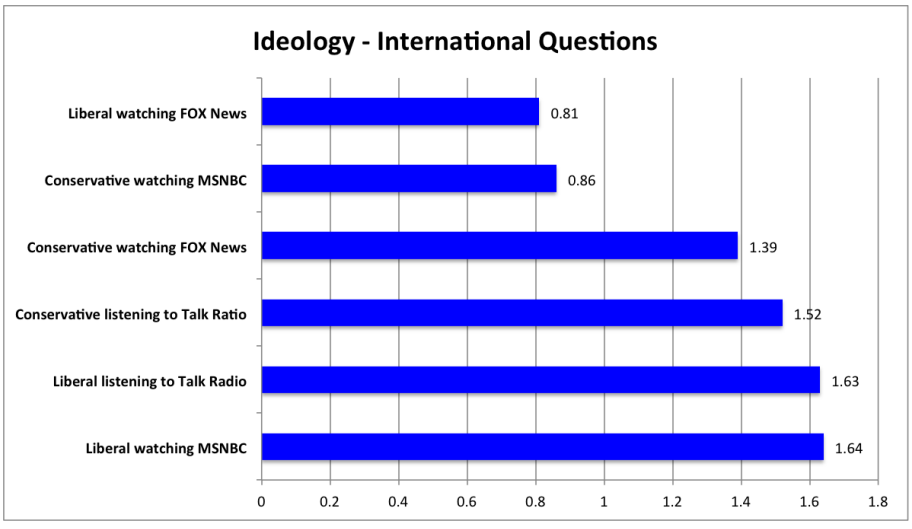
The FDU PublicMind study was based on a poll of 1,185 resident adults nationwide, including an oversample of Republican voters, and was conducted by landlines and cell phones from Feb. 6 through 12, 2012, and has a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

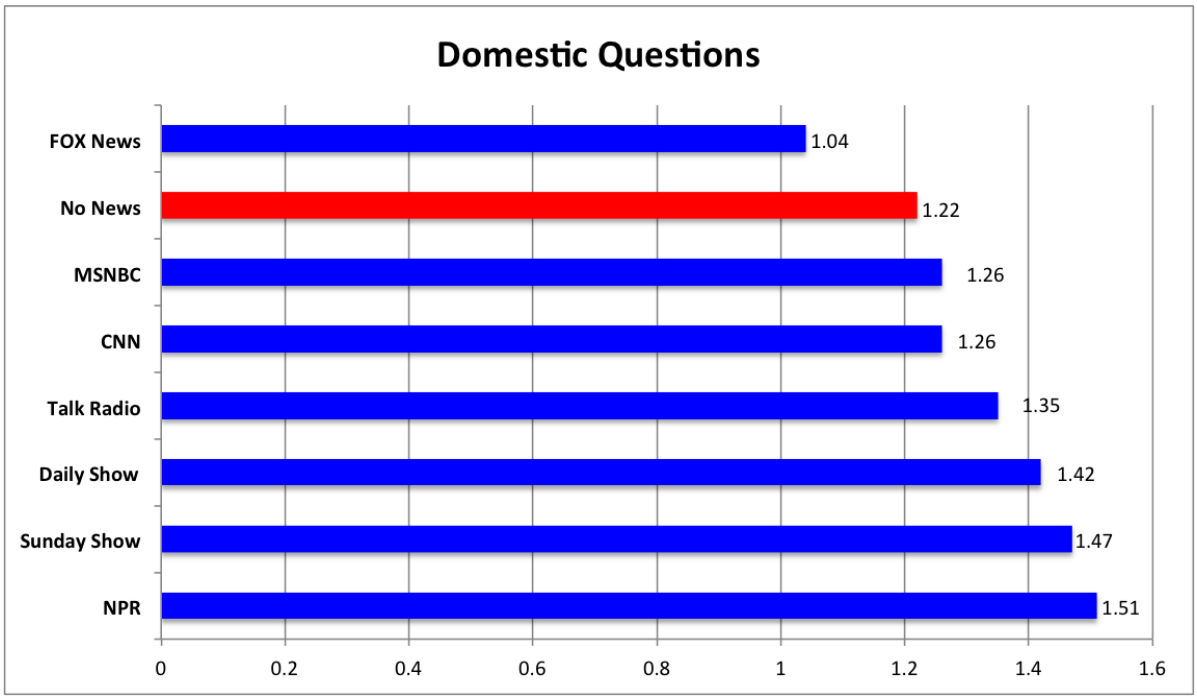
Methodology, questions, and tables always on the web at: http://publicmind.fdu.edu
Radio actualities at 201.692.2846 *For more information, please call 201.692.7032*

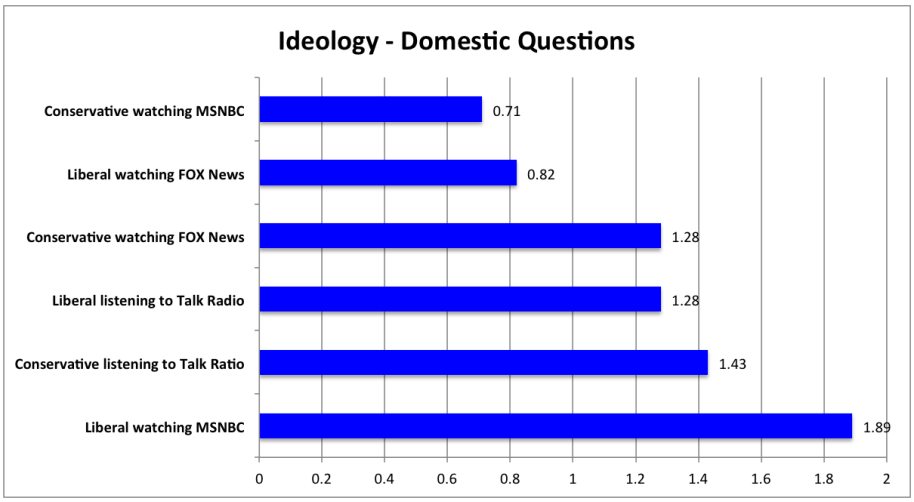
Methodology, Questions, and Tables

The survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind was conducted by telephone from Feb. 6 through Feb. 12, 2012, using a randomly selected sample of 1185 adult residents, including an oversample of Republican voters, used to better estimate the Republican nominating process, nationwide contacted on both landlines and cell phones. The margin of error for a sample of 1185 randomly selected respondents is +/- 3 percentage points. The margin of error for subgroups is larger and varies by the size of that subgroup. Survey results are also subject to non-sampling error. This kind of error, which cannot be measured, arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, non-response (eligible individuals refusing to be interviewed), question wording, the order in which questions are asked, and variations among interviewers. PublicMind interviews are conducted by Opinion America of Cedar Knolls, NJ, with professionally trained interviewers using a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Random selection is achieved by computerized random-digit dialing. This technique gives every person with a land-line phone number (including those with unlisted numbers) an equal chance of being selected. Landline households are supplemented with a separate, randomly selected sample of cell-phones, including cell-phone only and dual cell-phone and land-line households, interviewed in the same time frame. The total combined sample is mathematically weighted to match known demographics of age, race and gender among the voting population.






Domestic Questions
FOX News
No News
MSNBC
CNN
Talk Radio
Daily Show
Sunday Show
NPR
1.04
1.22
1.26
1.26
1.35
1.42
1.47
1.51
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1
1.2
1.4
1.6


Ideology - Domestic Questions
Conservative watching MSNBC
Liberal watching FOX News
Conservative watching FOX News
Liberal listening to Talk Radio
Conservative listening to Talk Ratio
Liberal watching MSNBC
0.71
0.82
1.28
1.28
1.43
1.89
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1
1.2
1.4
1.6
1.8
2

Americans now have more ways than ever before to get their news about politics and world affairs. I'm going to read you a list of news sources. As I read the list, just say "yes" if you got news from that source any time in the past week.

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Local TV News	**76%**	80	78	77	73	73
Local Newspaper	**72%**	76	75	68	69	70
Evening News	**62%**	68	61	65	64	55
Fox News	**55%**	36	31	56	73	75
CNN	**51%**	60	61	46	51	39
MSNBC	**44%**	54	60	44	40	29
Talk Radio	**39%**	33	34	37	46	45
Sunday Morning News	**36%**	34	38	35	40	38
Blog or Political Website	**27%**	27	27	29	26	26
National Newspaper	**25%**	31	33	25	22	18
NPR	**23%**	28	45	19	16	16
Daily Show	**13%**	20	28	15	5	4

Kind of News Exposure	**Correct Domestic Questions**	**Correct International Questions**
No News Exposure	1.22	1.28
Just FOX News	1.04	1.08
Just CNN	1.26	1.33
Just MSNBC	1.26	1.23
Just Talk Radio	1.35	1.57
Just Daily Show	1.42	1.60
Just Sunday Show	1.47	1.52
NPR	1.51	1.97

Unlisted media sources have no statistically significant impact on political knowledge

Effects of Ideological Media		
Liberal watching FOX News	0.82	0.81
Conservative watching FOX News	1.28	1.39
Liberal listening to Talk Radio	1.28	1.63
Conservative listening to Talk Radio	1.43	1.52
Liberal watching MSNBC	1.89	1.64
Conservative watching MSNBC	0.71	0.86

K1. To the best of your knowledge, have the opposition groups protesting in Egypt been successful in removing Hosni Mubarak?

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Yes	**41%**	40	39	42	44	41
No	**22%**	21	33	19	23	21
Don't know	**37%**	40	28	40	33	38

K2. How about the opposition groups in Syria? Have they been successful in removing Bashar al-Assad?

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Yes	**7%**	9	9	8	6	1
No	**55%**	51	66	52	56	56
Don't know	**39%**	40	29	40	39	40

K3. Some countries in Europe are deeply in debt, and have had to be bailed out by other countries. To the best of your knowledge, which country has had to spend the most money to bail out European countries?

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Germany	**27%**	24	29	28	28	28
United States	**21%**	18	21	18	26	23
Greece	**3%**	2	2	6	2	5
Italy	**0%**	-	2	-	-	-
Other European country	**2%**	1	3	1	3	1
Other	**8%**	8	8	10	10	7
Don't know	**39%**	47	34	37	30	36

K4. There have been increasing talks about economic sanctions against Iran. What are these sanctions supposed to do?

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Anything about Nuclear Program or Uranium enrichment or WMD's	**45%**	41	45	44	48	50
Anything else (Specify)	**14%**	12	16	15	19	13
Don't know	**41%**	47	38	41	33	38

K5. Which party has the most seats in the House of Representatives right now?

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Republicans	**65%**	66	73	62	56	69
Democrats	**14%**	11	13	10	30	13
Don't know	**20**	23	13	28	15	18

K6A. In December, House Republicans agreed to a short-term extension of a payroll tax cut, but only if President Obama agreed to do what? (Open-Ended)

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Anything about Keystone XL Pipeline or oil pipeline or Canadian Pipeline	**9%**	11	6	8	6	12
Anything else	**18%**	16	28	13	27	16
Don't know	**72%**	73	66	78	67	73

K6B. It took a long time to get the final results of the Iowa caucuses for Republican candidates. In the end, who was declared the winner? (Open-Ended)

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Gingrich	**5%**	8	4	4	3	5
Huntsman	**-**	-	-	-	-	-
Paul	**-**	1	-	1	-	-
Perry	**-**	-	-	-	-	-
Romney	**23%**	19	22	24	29	23
Santorum	**39%**	32	42	35	46	44
Someone Else	**-**	-	-	1	-	-
Tie	**-**	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	**33%**	40	32	36	22	28

K7. How about the New Hampshire Primary? Which Republican won that race? (Open-Ended)

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Gingrich	**6%**	7	8	8	4	5
Huntsman	**-**	-	-	-	-	-
Paul	**1%**	-	3	1	-	-
Perry	**-**	-	-	-	-	-
Romney	**51%**	43	47	47	62	60
Santorum	**2%**	1	1	1	4	2
Don't know	**40%**	49	41	43	30	31

K8. According to the figures, about what percentage of Americans are currently unemployed? (Open-Ended)

	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
Less than 5%	**-**	-	4	-	-	-
5.1 to 7.0%	**1%**	2	-	-	-	1
7.1 to 8.0%	**3%**	2	-	4	4	5
8.1 to 9.0%	**40%**	34	43	33	48	44
9.1 to 10.0%	**9%**	6	6	10	12	13
10.1 to 11.0%	**4%**	5	3	5	6	3
Greater than 11%	**17%**	17	23	14	15	17
Don't know	**26%**	34	21	35	15	17

Number of overall questions answered correctly						
	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
0	**12%**	11	11	17	9	11
1	**12%**	17	8	15	7	11
2	**15%**	17	8	15	7	16
3	**12%**	11	12	13	18	9
4	**11%**	9	7	10	10	16
5	**10%**	9	7	8	15	11
6	**13%**	11	19	15	10	14
7	**10%**	11	13	9	10	9
8	**3%**	5	7	2	3	2

Number of domestic questions answered correctly						
	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
0	**21%**	22	16	27	16	20
1	**26%**	28	24	27	25	23
2	**26%**	24	26	18	33	27
3	**21%**	18	27	22	19	22
4	**7%**	7	8	6	6	8

Number of international questions answered correctly						
	All	Party Identification				
		Democrat	Lean Dem	Indep	Lean Rep	Republican
0	**23%**	25	22	25	18	24
1	**22%**	23	21	25	23	18
2	**18%**	17	7	12	23	25
3	**18%**	16	20	26	18	16
4	**18%**	20	29	12	18	16

Exact Question Wording and Order

US1-USP1, USP3 released 14 Feb. 2012.

USP2 released 20 Feb. 2012.

USSC1-USSC2b released 20 March 2012.

K0. Americans now have more ways than ever before to get their news about politics and world affairs. I'm going to read you a list of news sources. As I read the list, just say "yes" if you got news from that source any time in the past week.

[ROTATE within categories]

NPR
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart
CNN
Fox News
MSNBC

A National News Broadcast
A Talk Radio Show
A Local TV News Broadcast
A Sunday Morning Political News Show
A Local Newspaper
A National newspaper, like the New York Times or USA Today
A Political Blog or News Website

READ: We're interested in finding out how much Americans know about current events, so we're going to ask some questions about things that have been in the news lately. These are hard questions that most people have trouble with, so if you don't know the answer to some of them, just say so.

K1. To the best of your knowledge, have the opposition groups protesting in Egypt been successful in removing Hosni Mubarak?

Yes
No
dk

K2. How about the opposition groups in Syria? Have they been successful in removing Bashar al-Assad?

Yes
No
dk

K3. Some countries in Europe are deeply in debt, and have had to be bailed out by other countries. To the best of your knowledge, which country has had to spend the most money to bail out European countries?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

Germany
US

Greece
Italy
Other European Country
Other
DK

K4. There have been increasing talks about economic sanctions against Iran. What are these sanctions supposed to do?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

- Anything about Nuclear Program or Uranium enrichment or Weapons of Mass Destruction or WMDs
- Anything else
- DK

K5. Which party has the most seats in the House of Representatives right now?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

Republicans
Democrats
other
DK

K6A. In December, House Republicans agreed to a short-term extension of a payroll tax cut, but only if President Obama agreed to do what?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

- Anything about Keystone XL Pipeline or oil pipeline or Canadian pipeline or State Department Review of Pipeline or Expedited Environmental Review
- Anything Else
- DK

K6B. It took a long time to get the final results of the Iowa caucuses for Republican candidates. In the end, who was declared the winner?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

Santorum
Romney
Gingrich
Cain
Perry
Bachmann
Paul
Huntsman
Someone Else
Tie
DK

K7. How about the New Hampshire Primary? Which Republican won that race?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

Santorum
Romney
Gingrich
Cain
Perry
Paul
Bachmann
Huntsman
Someone Else
Tie
DK

K8. According to official figures, about what percentage of Americans are currently unemployed?

OPEN END: DO NOT READ

Less than 5%
5.1-7.0%
7.1-8.0%
8.1-9.0%
9.1-10.0%
10.1-11.0%
Greater than 11%
DK

Sample Characteristics (%)

Gender	
Male	50
Female	50

Age	
18-29	15
30-44	28
45-59	28
60+	27
Ref.	2

In addition to being American, would you say you are…?	
White	69
Black	13
Hispanic or Latino	11
Asian	3
other	2
ref.	3

Census regions	
Northeast	18
North central	21
South	33
West	28

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