

The citizenship test is pass/fail; there's no blue ribbon for acing it

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The civics portion of the United States citizenship test is an oral exam wherein you must correctly answer six out of ten questions. One of my friends studiously prepared for his examination, going so far as listening to a CD with the questions and answers every day during his commute to and from work.

At last, the day arrived, and my friend went in to take his citizenship examination. The examiner led him to an office, and the two of them sat down for the test.

“Who was President during World War II?”

— Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“Correct. How many justices are there on the Supreme Court?”

— Nine.

“Correct.”

And so on. Question 3, correct.

Question 4, correct.

Question 5, correct.

Question 6, correct.

And at that point, the examiner said, “Congratulations. You passed. There is a naturalization ceremony in two hours. Can you make it?”

My friend was kind of surprised. Wasn't this a ten-question test? What about the other four questions?

And then he realized: You only have to get six right. He got six right. How well he does on the remaining four questions is immaterial.

My friend was hoping to get a perfect score of 10/10 on the test, or at least to find out whether he could get all ten right, just as a point of personal satisfaction, but of course the examiner doesn't care whether this guy can get all ten right. There's no blue ribbon for acing your citizenship test. It's pass/fail.

Bonus chatter: My friend hung around for two hours and was naturalized that same day. He said that for something that could have been purely perfunctory (seeing as the people who work there have done this hundreds if not thousands of times), the ceremony was quite well-done and was an emotionally touching experience.

In case you hadn't noticed, today is Constitution Day, also known as Citizenship Day. One of the odd clauses in the legislation establishing the day of observance is that all schools which receive federal funding must "hold an educational program" on the United States Constitution on that day. This is why students at massage therapy schools and beauty schools have to watch a video of two Supreme Court justices.

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