

A House Divided? What Americans Really Think About Controversial Topics in Schools

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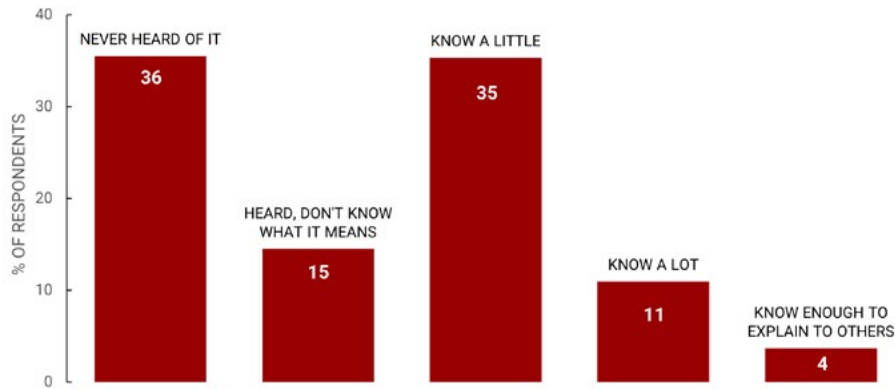
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent years have seen increased attention to curriculum issues in U.S. schools—what should be taught, what students should read, and who should control the curriculum. Policymakers in both blue and red states have proposed prominent legislation to restrict or expand the kinds of controversial content that can be covered in K-12 classrooms.

But what do Americans really think about students in K-12 schools being taught controversial topics related to race, civics, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) issues, and other areas? We sought to understand American adults’ views on these subjects, administering a survey to a nationally representative sample of 3,751 Americans as part of the [Understanding America Study](#) (UAS). The UAS is a longitudinal panel survey study that has tracked Americans’ economic and social conditions for nearly a decade and examined children’s educational experiences since the onset of COVID. (Our methodology, questionnaires, topline, and crosstabs can be found [here](#)). The results showed areas of great agreement—and disagreement—about what U.S. adults think should be taught in America’s schools. Our main findings are as follows:

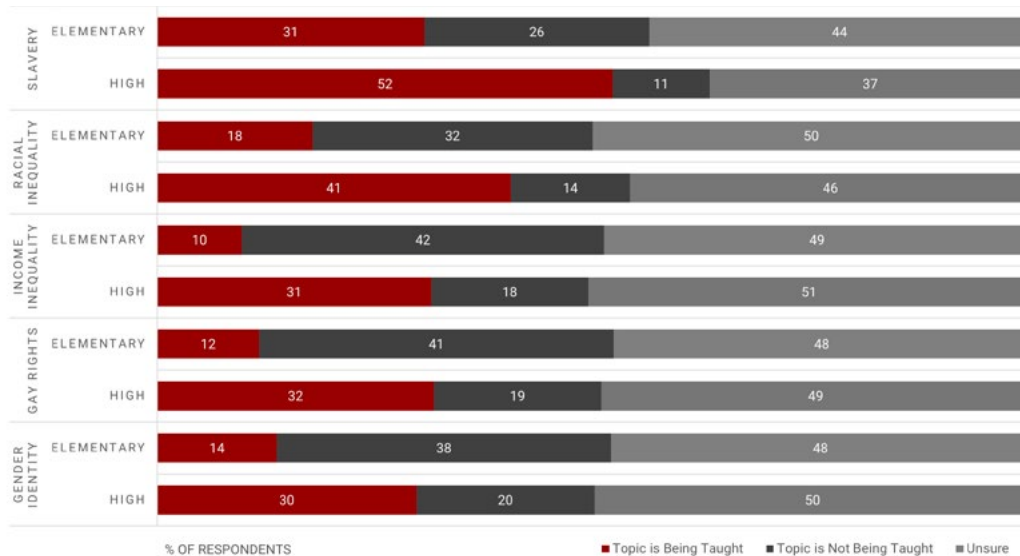
- 1) Americans know very little about critical race theory (CRT). Almost half admit they’ve never heard of it, or they don’t know anything about it. Almost all score poorly on a knowledge quiz about CRT. Americans hold complicated views related to CRT tenets, with some partisan splits on racial beliefs most closely aligned with CRT. But they overwhelmingly support a societal goal of treating all people the same without regard to the color of their skin, and, to a lesser extent, that America is meritocratic—both ideas CRT would contest.

Figure ES1: Most Americans know very little about critical race theory



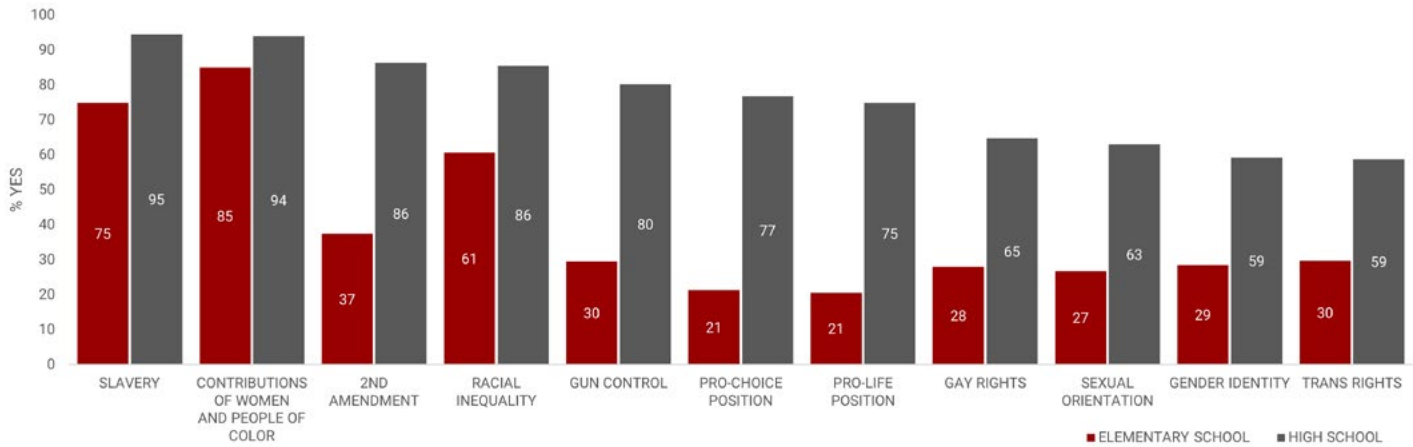
- 2) A plurality of respondents, and sometimes a majority, reported not knowing whether most topics we asked about are currently being taught. This pattern persisted at both the elementary and high school levels (with a few noted exceptions), as well as across most subgroups examined, including whether living in a household with a school-aged child or not.

Figure ES2: Many Americans are unsure about what is being taught in K-12 schools



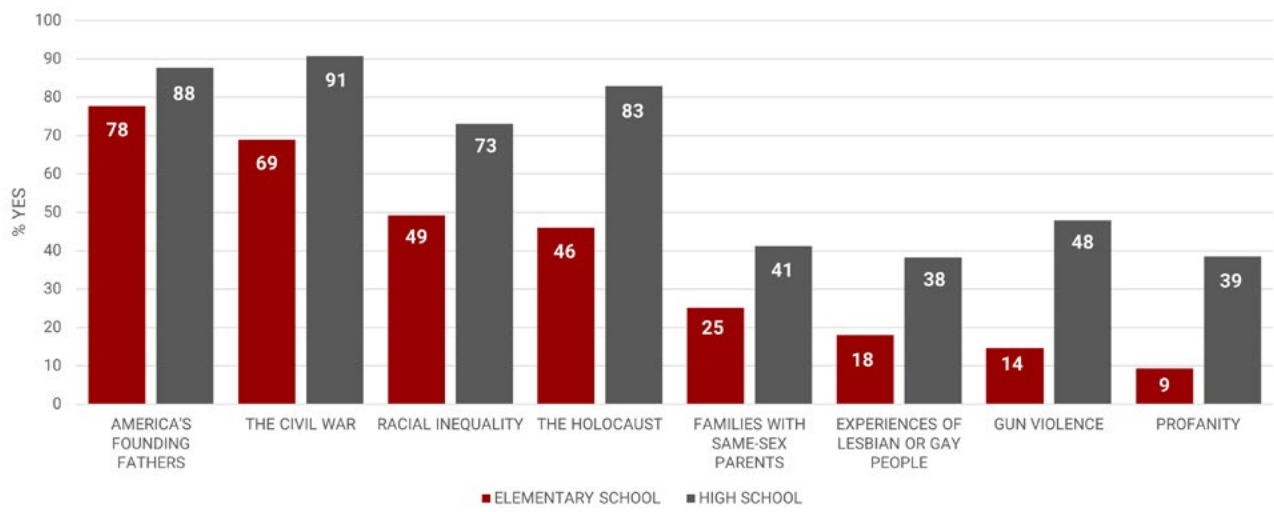
- 3) Americans overwhelmingly want students in high school to learn about controversial topics, including different sides of all the issues we asked about (e.g., pro-life and pro-choice; Second Amendment rights and gun control). Teaching LGBTQ issues to high school students has majority support (approximately 60%), with Democrats supporting and Republicans in opposition—but at the elementary level, views diverge. Adults support elementary students being taught how to think critically and become involved in government/politics, as well as learning about slavery, racial inequality, the contributions of the Founding Fathers and women and people of color, patriotism, the environment, and immigrant and voter rights. They do not think elementary students should learn about complex topics such as income inequality, or about sex education and LGBTQ issues. They generally do not think elementary students *are* learning about the topics they oppose.

Figure ES3: Americans overwhelmingly agree that high school students should learn about controversial topics, though views diverge for elementary



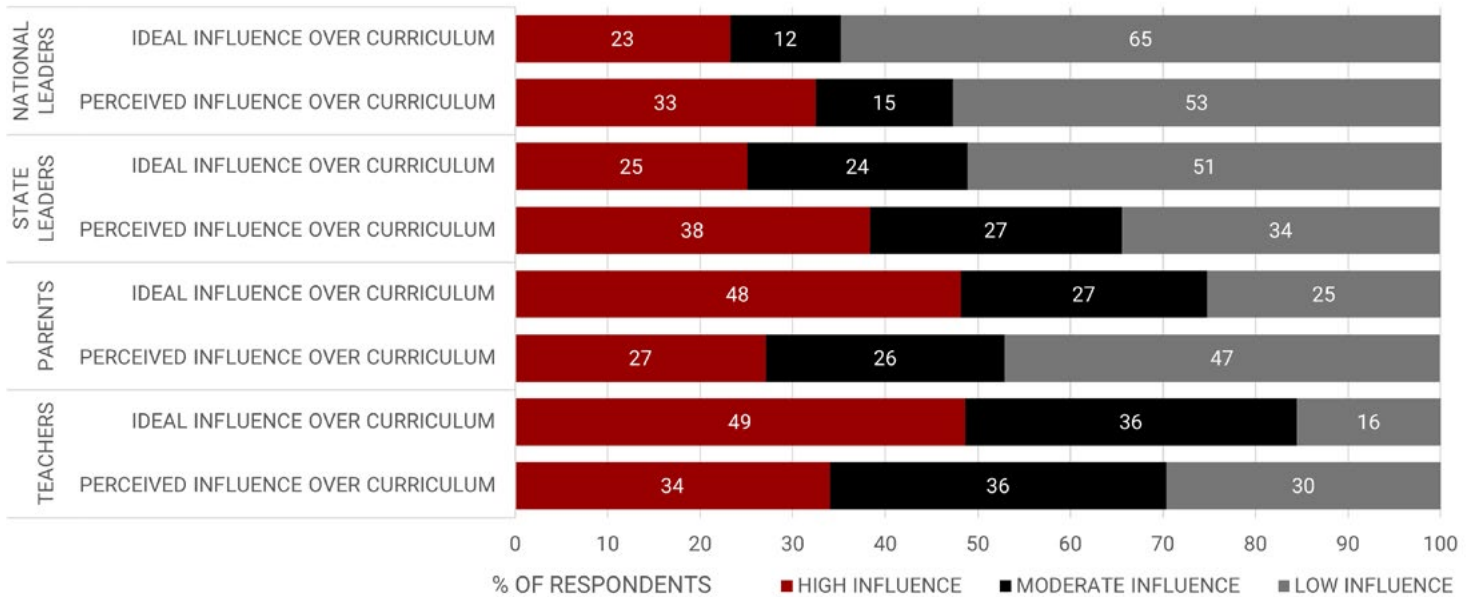
- 4) There are large differences in Americans’ attitudes about which books should be assigned to schoolchildren and which should simply be made available to them. Broadly, respondents support high school students having availability of nearly all book topics asked about, whereas for elementary school, there are several topics with low support. But most Americans oppose students at both school levels being assigned to read books with LGBTQ topics, profanity, and depictions of violence or sex. Also, there are sharp partisan gaps on book availability and assigned reading for topics related to sex, profanity, violence, and LGBTQ issues.

Figure ES4: Adults think high school children should be assigned books on many controversial topics but oppose LGBT-themed books at all grade levels



- 5) There is widespread agreement that parents should have more control over the curriculum than they currently do, and that parents and teachers should decide what school curriculum should contain. Cutting across demographic groups, there also is agreement that parents should be able to opt their children out of content with which they disagree. However, Republicans drive support for this position, with Democrats approximately split.

Figure ES5: Adults think parents should have more control over what children learn via direct influence of curriculum



We conclude our report with thoughts about these main findings and their implications for the future of U.S. education. We believe this is the largest and most comprehensive survey on these topics ever conducted, with the results providing considerable insight into American adults' values and beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, policymakers, parents, and other members of the public have been taking increasingly vocal and divided stances about curriculum and instruction, as seen in calls for censorship of certain books, children opted out of certain lessons, and people advocating that specific content be incorporated into—or removed—from curriculum.

Many of the most vociferous complaints are centered around the teaching of racism including its history in the United States. Since the beginning of 2022, [36 states have introduced 138 bills](#) designed to restrict education about racism, inequity, bias, and structural injustices, with some legislation that would ban educators from teaching anything that causes students “discomfort” or “guilt” due to their race or sex. In Florida, the “[Stop WOKE Act](#)” allows parents to sue schools and recover attorney’s fees if they suspect the school is teaching critical race theory. In Texas, no teacher can assign students—even for extra-credit—to write a persuasive letter or e-mail to any public official. Texas also has [banned](#) teaching of the 1619 Project, a pedagogical effort to emphasize the consequences of slavery as central to the framing of U.S. history. In contrast, [at least 17](#) other states have passed laws expanding curricular mandates about these same topics. As examples, Chicago Public Schools has [adopted](#) the 1619 Project for its high schools; in Massachusetts, every middle and high schooler is [required](#) to complete a policy-oriented civic action project; and California now requires all students to take ethnic studies to graduate.

There also are sharp divides around issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students and their inclusion in the curriculum. [Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” law](#) (sometimes dubbed by its detractors the “Don’t Say Gay” law) states: “Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.” Some school leaders, teachers, and students have [interpreted and experienced](#) this legislation to mean banning discussion of any LGBTQ issues, raising thorny questions about LGBTQ teachers and what they can say and do. On the other hand, California law [requires](#) teachers in grades 1-12 to instruct about the role and contributions of LGBTQ Americans, and for students to receive sex education that is LGBTQ-inclusive.

These divides are clearly partisan. While Republican state leaders are backing public schools away from directly addressing race, gender, and sexual identity—as well as their historical injustices—in the U.S., Democratic state leaders are pushing in the opposite direction, mandating curricula and coursework discussing America’s racist origins and legacies and highlighting the contributions throughout history of women and people of color.

Outspoken parents have been engaging on all sides of these issues. From heated school board meetings to marching in the streets demanding racial justice, parents are responding, in diverse ways evolving over time, to curriculum and instruction related to race, gender, and sexuality. However, it is unclear to what extent these loud voices—and the news coverage amplifying them—represent the actual population of parents and adult voting citizens versus a mobilized and vocal minority.

This is the context for our report. We want to understand what Americans really think about controversial topics in K-12 curriculum, such as their beliefs on what children should be learning, book bans, and who should control education.

To understand these issues, we used the [Understanding America Study](#) (UAS), a nationally representative, longitudinal panel of American households (including those with and without K-12 children living in the household). In the field Aug. 15-Sept. 12, 2022, we used this wave of the UAS to ask questions about several contemporary controversial issues regarding curriculum control in U.S. schools. With a response rate of 86%, our sample included 3,751 adults. When disaggregating results by partisanship, 40% of the sample identified as Democrat (D) and 36% as Republican (R). We note that we asked about partisan affiliation at the survey’s end, after all the substantive questions reported here. Though we focus on party affiliations in our reporting of partisan/bipartisan results, 24% identified as other than one of these two parties (Independents, Libertarians, Green Party, etc.). Unless specifically noted these respondents are not included in party disaggregation. The full questionnaire, methodology, topline results, and crosstabs are available [here](#).

We specifically asked respondents about the following topics:

- Critical Race Theory (CRT), including respondents' self-reported awareness and knowledge of CRT, their actual knowledge as measured by a quiz, and their beliefs about racism-related viewpoints that both are and are not elements of CRT.
- Controversial topics in the curriculum, including whether respondents think these topics *are* being taught in elementary and high schools, and whether they think these topics *should* be taught. Controversial topics include a wide array of issues related to race, gender, sexuality, history, civics, science, and rights of various groups.
- Books in schools, including whether respondents think children should be *assigned* books or have books *available* to them. Book topics also address race, gender, sexuality, history, civics, science, and rights of various groups.
- Curriculum control, including who respondents think currently has control and who they think *should* have control, as well as whether respondents think parents should be able to opt their children out of objectionable content.
- We believe this is the largest and most comprehensive survey on these topics ever conducted, with the results providing considerable insight into American adults' values and beliefs.

In the rest of the report, we summarize what we view as the main findings of our analysis. We invite interested readers to draw their own conclusions after examining for themselves the topline and crosstab data, with the full methodology, results, and questionnaires available [here](#).

CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become a key political flashpoint in the United States during the last two years, with Republican legislators in 41 states [introducing](#) nearly 200 bills designed to curtail its purported presence in K-12 and higher education since January 2021, although it is not clear that CRT content is regularly taught in public schools. The bills tend to prohibit instruction about current racial inequality and its historical precedents, as well as LGBTQ topics. Some experts have [suggested](#) that CRT “has morphed into a catch-all term for conservative critics on the right to refer to practices in schools related to race that they oppose.” This view is consistent with the fact that what most “anti-CRT” bills seek to ban has little to do with Critical Race Theory.

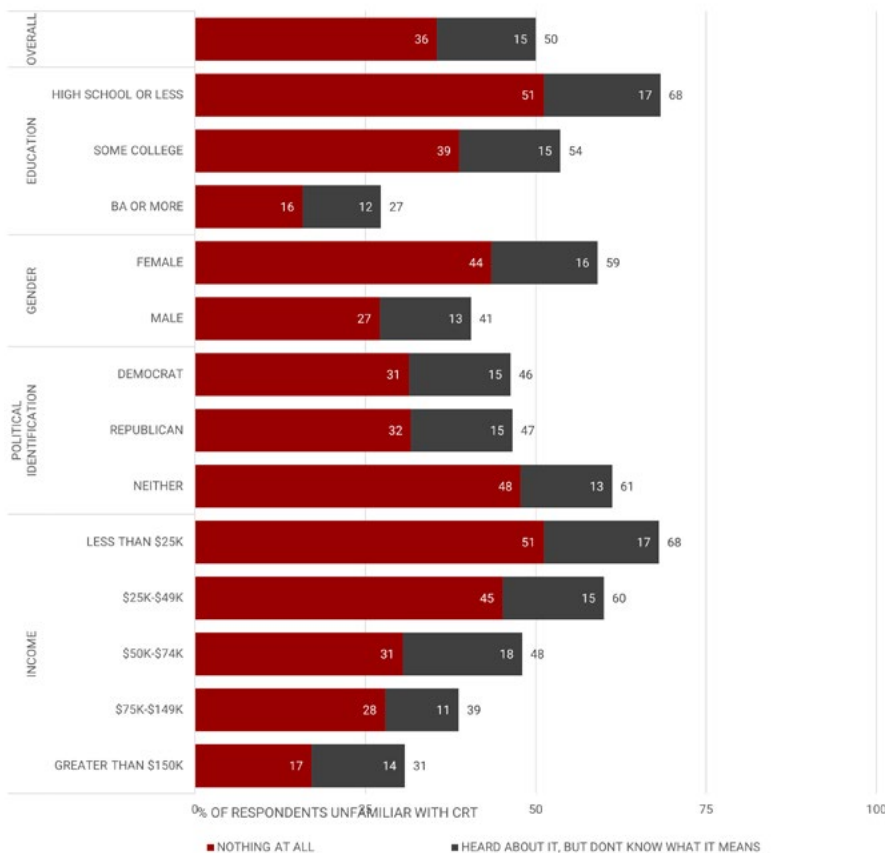
Unsurprisingly, given the deeply politicized nature of the issues, recent [public opinion polls](#) show massive disagreement by race and political affiliation toward CRT, and about how the histories of Black Americans are taught in American public schools.

Many members of the public clearly have strong opinions related to CRT, but less clear is how informed are those opinions. We set out to investigate what Americans really know about CRT, and how that knowledge relates to their opinions about the theory.

Americans Report Knowing Little About CRT

We asked respondents about their familiarity with Critical Race Theory, and more than one-third (36%) said they have never heard of it (Figure 1). Another 15% reported having heard the term but not knowing what it means, while a further 36% reported knowing only a little. That is, fewer than half of Americans claim to have any knowledge at all of what CRT means, with only one in seven saying they have a lot of knowledge (11%) or know enough to explain it to others (4%).

Figure 1: Most Americans do not know what Critical Race Theory is and this is true across party lines



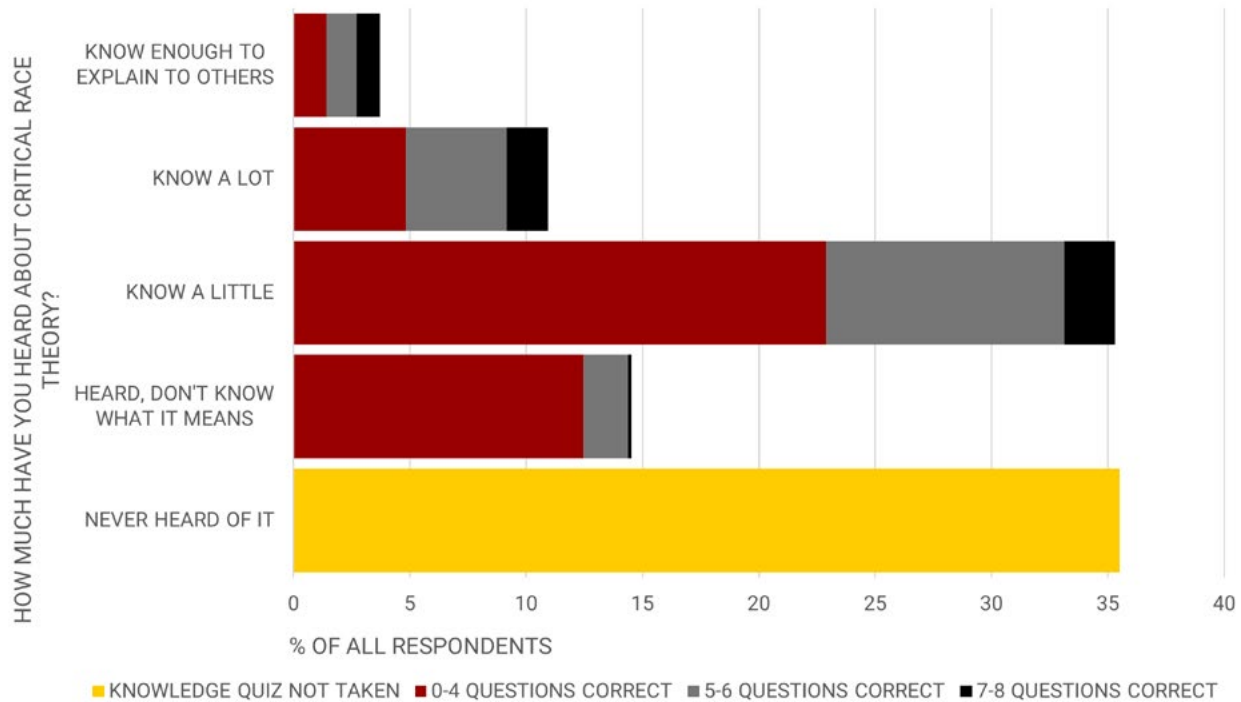
This self-reported lack of knowledge is high across almost all subgroups but varies systematically in several interesting ways. By political affiliation, about half of Republicans and Democrats indicated unfamiliarity with CRT, as compared to 61% of those not affiliated with either political party. By education level, about 68% of those with a high school degree or less indicated unfamiliarity, as compared to 54% of those with some college and 28% of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. By gender, 40% of male respondents reported unfamiliarity, as compared to 60% of female respondents. And by income level, those with the lowest incomes were more than twice as likely to report unfamiliarity compared to those with the highest. These findings suggest a vacuum of knowledge—especially among lower-income individuals and those with lower levels of education—into which partisans on either side may be able to influence people’s understandings and beliefs about what CRT is. Additionally, it calls into question what exactly Americans are reflecting on when they express their beliefs about the role of CRT in public schools.

Americans Actually Know Even Less Than They Report About CRT

We presented those who reported having heard of CRT1 with eight items, then asked whether each aligned with CRT. Respondents could answer “Yes,” “No,” or “I don’t know,” and were encouraged not to guess. Before fielding the survey, we verified the correct answers with CRT experts.

Virtually everyone performed poorly on this knowledge quiz, even among the few who claimed to know CRT so well they could explain it to others. As shown in Figure 2, a clear majority of respondents who reported knowing a little or not much at all about CRT got half or fewer of the items correct. Respondents who said they knew a lot or enough to explain it to others performed better, but still averaged just under 5 out of 8 items correct (58% correct). Just 8% of quiz-takers (5% of all respondents) got at least seven items correct; this fraction of the sample was overwhelmingly (73%) respondents with a college degree or higher.

Figure 2: Most respondents did poorly on the CRT knowledge test, regardless of self-reported knowledge of CRT



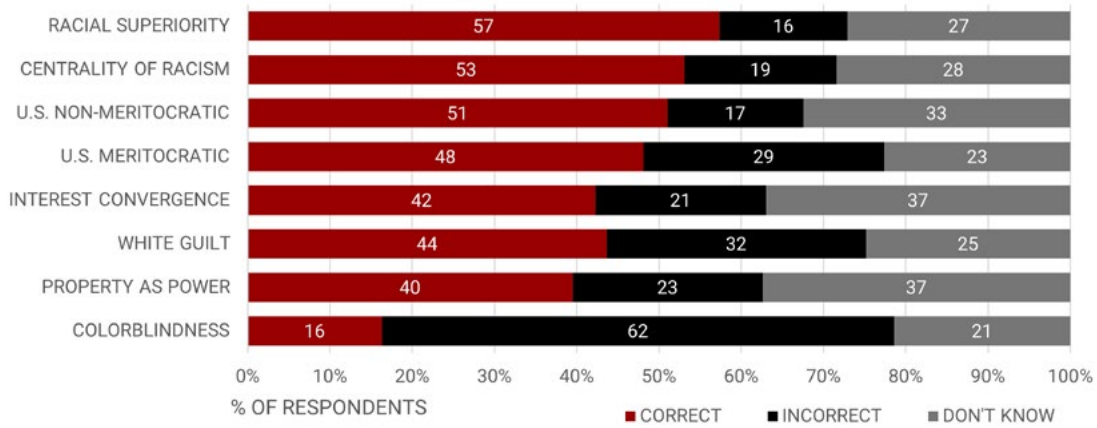
Looked at another way, the average score on every knowledge item was an “F” on a traditional grading scale (Figure 3), with no more than 60% of respondents answering correctly. The item that respondents performed the best on was “Some races are naturally superior to others,” with 57% of respondents correctly identifying it as not aligned with CRT. This item represents a mischaracterization of CRT commonly intimated by the language used in anti-CRT laws. Respondents often chose the “I don’t know” option, with 20%-40% using it on any given item.

The item that was hardest for respondents, with only 16% correctly identifying it as not aligned with CRT, was that society should strive for colorblindness, where everyone is treated “the same without regard to the color of their skin.” CRT [critiques](#) colorblindness, maintaining that awareness of and explicit accounting for race is central to correcting for racism and racial bias in the United States. Despite the explicit opposition of CRT to colorblindness, more than 80% of those in our sample who claimed to have heard of CRT either did not know that colorblindness is not aligned to CRT or were wrong and thought that it was. This was the only item for which most respondents confidently answered but were incorrect (63%),

When interpreting the data in Figure 3, it is important to remember that another 1,146 people in the overall sample did not even answer these questions, as they initially reported never hearing of CRT. As such, the overall performance displayed on these items likely would be even lower had we posed these questions to those additional respondents.

1. Those who said they had never heard of CRT—36% of all respondents—were not presented with the knowledge check items.

Figure 3: On average, American adults fail to answer each of the eight questions correctly



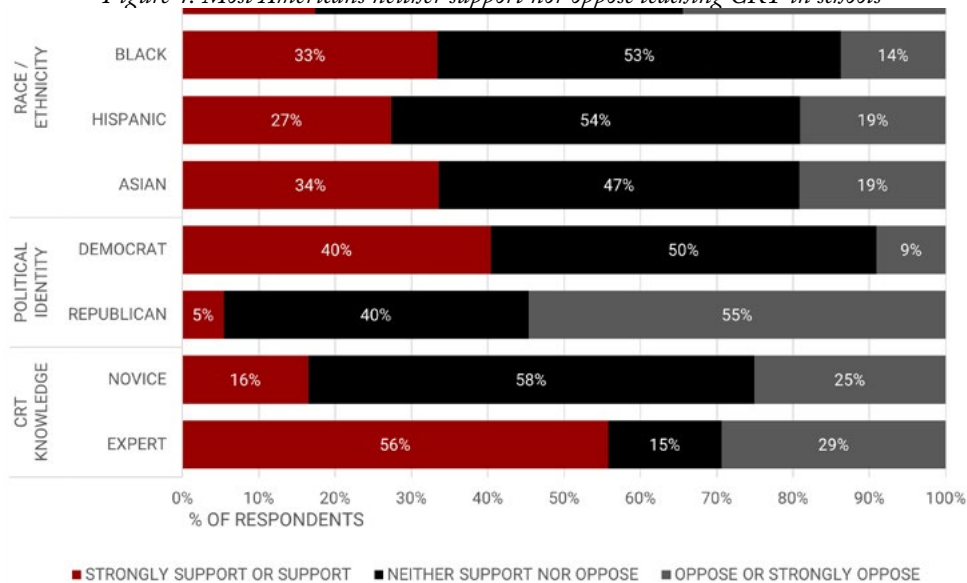
Contrary to Headlines, Americans Are Mostly Unsure About Whether CRT Belongs in Schools

Consistent with our findings of low levels of CRT knowledge, most subgroups showed neither majority support nor majority opposition to teaching CRT in schools. In fact, the most common response across nearly all subgroups was “Neither Support nor Oppose.” Contrary to the headlines characterizing parents as up in arms about the teaching of CRT, in reality, most people don’t know what CRT is and are willing to admit it when given the opportunity.

Despite this uncertainty about the teaching of CRT in schools, subgroup differences still emerged. The starkest difference in support for teaching CRT in schools was by political identity, as 40% of Democrats support teaching CRT compared to 5% of Republicans (Figure 4). But there also were large differences by race/ethnicity, with White respondents the least likely to support teaching CRT, the most likely being Black and Asian respondents, and Hispanic respondents in between.

We found less ambivalence about, and greater support for, teaching CRT in schools among those who performed at an expert level on the knowledge items (defined as those who got 7 or 8 of 8 items correct) relative to novices (defined as those who got 4 or fewer items correct or who had never heard of CRT), with most experts (56%) supporting the teaching of CRT in schools, compared to 16% of novices. We note, however, there were about three times as many Democrats as Republicans in this expert group (62% of experts were Democrats versus 17% Republicans), so this greater support among experts may simply echo familiar partisan divides. Experts were far less likely to use the uncertain response option when asked about CRT’s role in schools, with only 15% neither supporting nor opposing, compared to almost 60% of novices.

Figure 4: Most Americans neither support nor oppose teaching CRT in schools



Despite its media and legislative salience, our results strongly suggest most Americans neither understand what CRT is, nor the ideas it espouses.

Americans Strongly Support Colorblindness but Are Divided on Other Racial Beliefs

In addition to assessing respondents' knowledge of CRT, we also asked the extent to which they personally agreed with each idea. The eight CRT items we developed intentionally included four items aligned with CRT, two items that are common mischaracterizations of CRT from anti-CRT legislation, and two items describing ideas CRT seeks to disrupt (Table 2). This design allowed us to examine personal beliefs and how they align to political ideology. In the discussion below, we refer to each item using the political term to which the item aligns.

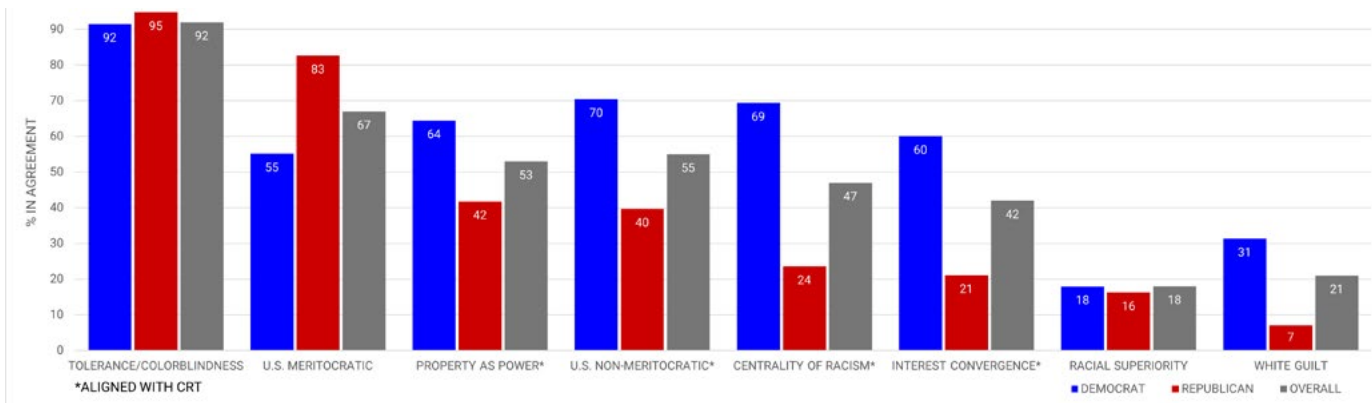
Table 1. Critical Race Theory Items, corresponding political terms, and whether aligned with CRT

Survey Item Wording	Political Term	Aligns with CRT
Some races are naturally superior to others.	Racial superiority	No (mischaracterization of CRT)
Racism is central to U.S. life.	Centrality of racism	Yes
In the U.S., people mostly succeed because of how institutions (e.g., government and corporations) help or hinder their progress.	U.S. non-meritocratic	Yes
In the U.S., people mostly succeed because of how hard they work	U.S. meritocratic	No (CRT seeks to disrupt)
White people support social changes that benefit non-white people only when those changes also benefit them.	Interest convergence	Yes
White people should feel guilty for the historical acts of their ancestors.	White guilt	No (mischaracterization of CRT)
The people who have power in U.S. society are those who own property.	Property as power	Yes
Our goal as a society should be to treat all people the same without regard to the color of their skin.	Colorblindness	No (CRT seeks to disrupt)

The responses of Democrats and Republicans were similar for items not aligned with CRT—but for CRT-aligned items, there were greater differences. More than 90% of both Democrats and Republicans agreed that society should strive for colorblind tolerance, which is not a CRT tenet (Figure 5). The only other item with majority support from both parties (83% for Republicans, 55% for Democrats) was the idea that the U.S. is fundamentally meritocratic, which again is not a CRT tenet.

Respondents from both parties summarily rejected the ideas, lifted from anti-CRT legislation, that some races are superior to others and that White people should feel guilty for the actions of their ancestors (not CRT tenets); fewer than one-third of both parties supported either statement. If the goal of anti-CRT legislation was to paint CRT as a dangerous theory that espouses fringe ideas, the attribution of these two false ideas to CRT was politically shrewd on the part of the bills' architects: Those ideas truly are unpopular with Americans.

Figure 5: Stark partisan differences in agreement with CRT-aligned ideas, broad agreement otherwise



The ideas aligned to CRT were more politically divisive, as shown in Figure 5. Most Democrats (60-70%, depending on the item) agreed with each of the four CRT-aligned ideas—an interesting finding given the low level of knowledge, both self-reported and actual, of what CRT is. Democrats especially were in agreement that people succeed in the U.S. because of how institutions help them, and that racism is central to life in America. Clearly, some core principles of CRT are widely accepted in the Democratic party.

In contrast, the four CRT ideas were each opposed by most Republican respondents, though some were not as universally reviled on the right as one might expect. About 40% of Republicans did agree with two of the CRT-aligned ideas where race was not explicitly mentioned in our item wording (in the U.S., property confers power; the U.S. is fundamentally non-meritocratic).

Taken together, these findings are consistent with the idea that “CRT” has become a partisan political buzzword, and that most Americans have little knowledge of its core tenets. But our results also suggest Americans’ views on racial issues are complicated. Overall, Americans seem to want a society that is colorblind and meritocratic, with some ideas central to CRT are not as fringe or controversial as claimed by Republican legislators and pundits. However, the idea that racism is central and fundamental to the U.S. experience, perhaps the most central tenet of CRT, was highly divisive by political identification, with 69% of Democrats in agreement compared to just 24% of Republicans. Although our findings indicate some areas of common ground, many of CRT’s key ideas are likely to continue to be highly politically contentious.

LEARNING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL

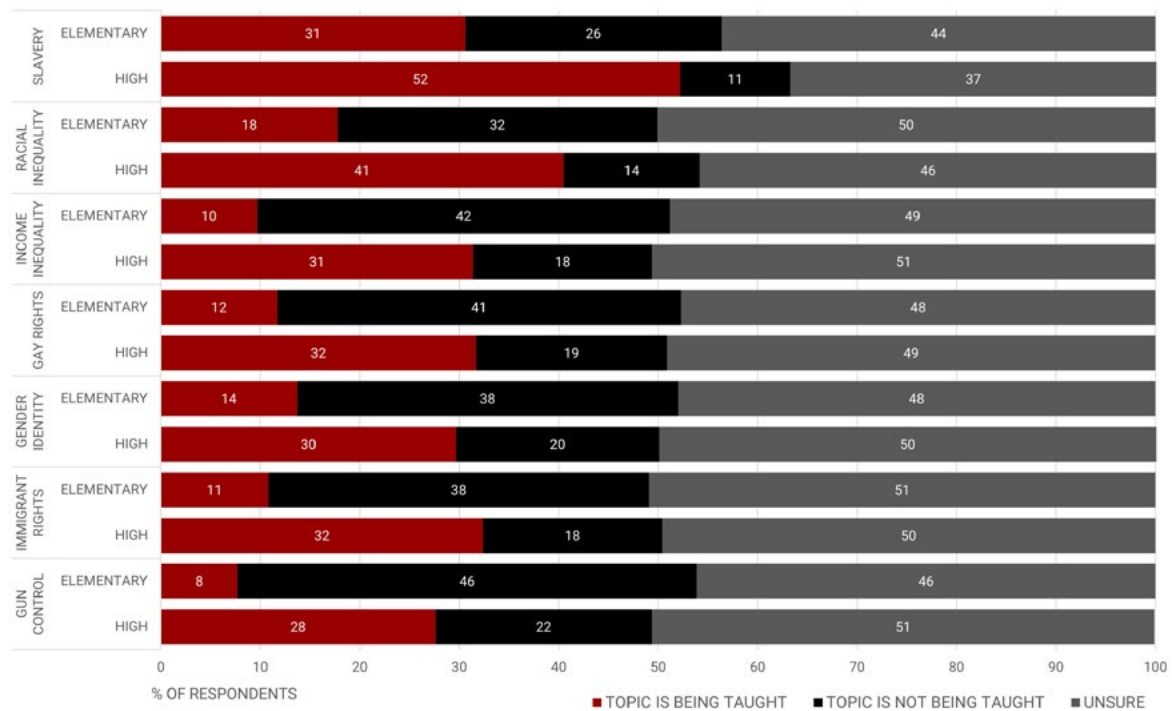
With copious examples of partisan disagreement among individuals and in Congress over topics running the gamut from the environment to immigration to criminal justice, we wondered what adults think children are learning about in school, and what they think they should learn regarding various controversial topics. Should children learn just respondents’ preferred perspectives about these issues, multiple perspectives, or nothing at all? We asked questions on 24 topics, separately about elementary school and high school.

Many Americans Don’t Know What is Currently Being Taught in Schools

When asked whether each of 24 topics were currently being taught in elementary school, a plurality of respondents—47%, on average—answered “I don’t know” to almost all questions, nearing a majority on most. The only items on which more respondents said a topic was being taught than said they did not know was for “Contributions of the Founding Fathers” and “Patriotism.” The percentage of respondents not knowing was comparable regardless of political party, and, perhaps unexpectedly, regardless of whether the household did or did not have school-aged child living in it. There were a few notable exceptions, such as households with school-aged children being more aware of what is being taught related to sex education and environmental topics. Figure 6 shows this pattern across a sample of survey items.

The same broad patterns held at the high school level, again with 46% of respondents on average indicating they did not know whether each topic was taught in high school (see Appendix Table A1 for more detail). For high school, there were just seven topics of the 24 in which more respondents believed these topics are indeed being taught than were unsure.² Again, only slightly higher percentages of households with children reported knowing what is being taught in high school compared to those without.

Figure 6: Many Americans don’t know what is currently being taught in schools

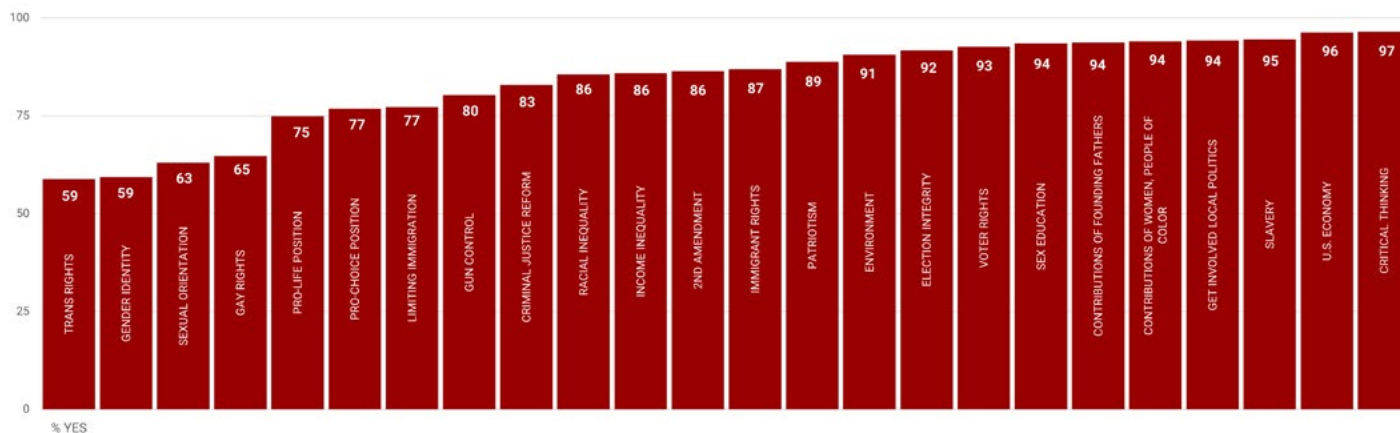


2. The seven topics were the environment, sex education, contributions of the Founding Fathers, patriotism, critical thinking, contributions of women and people of color, and the history and consequences of slavery.

Americans Overwhelmingly Support Teaching Controversial Topics in High School

Regardless of what respondents reported knowing, we also asked what they think should be taught in each school level. Our results show that adults in general, and with bipartisan majority support, believe students should be learning about controversial topics in high school. Figure 7 shows the proportion of respondents who think each topic should be taught at the high school level.

Figure 7: Adults overwhelmingly believe students should be learning about controversial topics in high school.



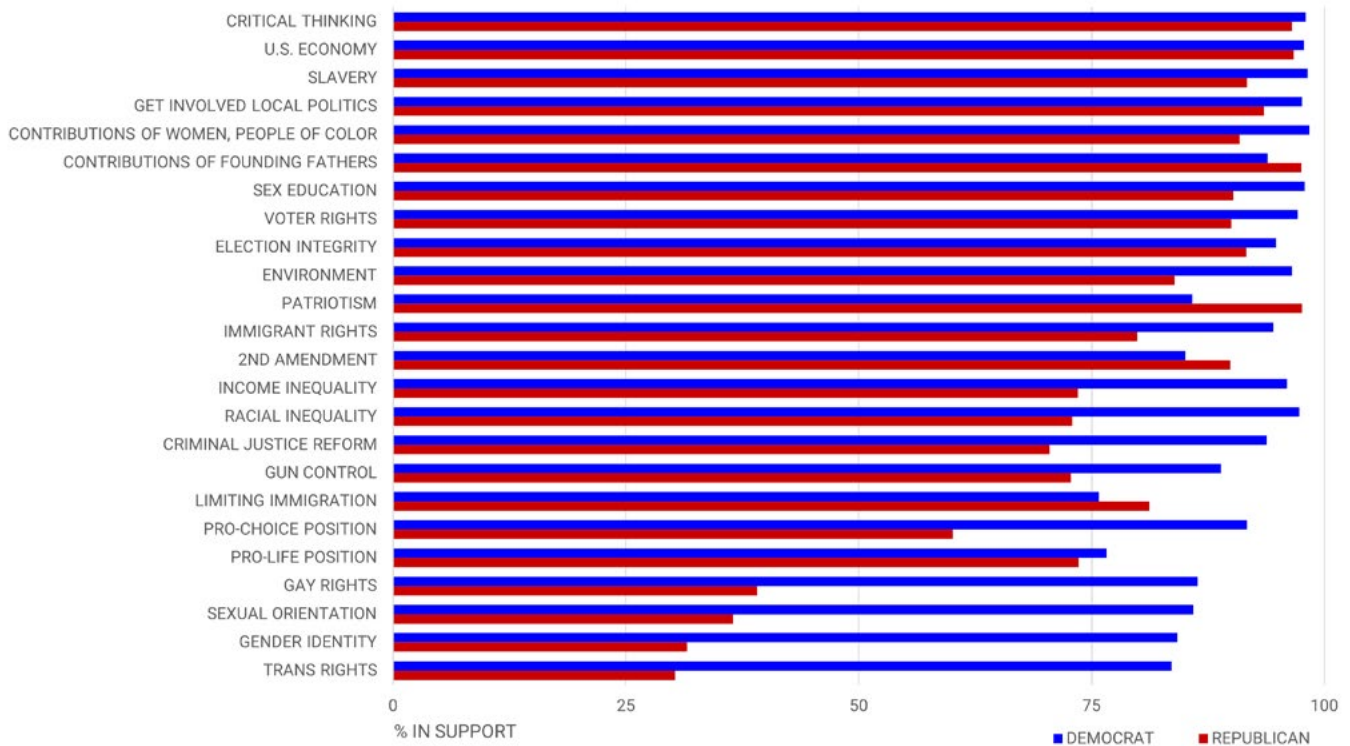
As shown in the figure, there are no topics at the high school level where fewer than 59% of respondents agree that students should learn about it. Notably, the most controversial topics at the high school level all fall under the umbrella of LGBTQ issues—gender identity, trans rights, sexual orientation, and gay rights—with 59–65% of respondents saying students should learn about them.

For some of these controversial topics, we intentionally included items worded to align to different sides of a given debate. For instance, we asked whether students should be taught both the pro-life position on abortion and the pro-choice position. We also asked whether schools should teach about current topics related to gun control as well as Second Amendment rights. And we asked both about immigrant rights and about limiting immigration. We presented items in random order to each participant; it was unlikely that the two sides of a given issue would appear back-to-back, and often not even on the same page. In all cases, Americans supported teaching both sides of the controversial issues at approximately equal rates, all at or over 75%. Americans clearly say they want high school teachers to teach students about differing perspectives on controversial topics.

Partisan Differences on Controversial Topics in the High School Curriculum are Modest, Except for Sex and Gender Issues

Looking across the list of 24 controversial topics, the results just described were almost all bipartisan in nature, as shown in Figure 8. For 20, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats supported high school students learning about them. The exceptions to this bipartisanship were all related to LGBTQ issues: gay rights, sexual orientation, gender identity, and trans rights. For each of these four items, while 84% to 86% of Democrats supported students learning about these topics in high school, less than half as many Republicans (30–39%) were in support (Figure 8). Clearly, on LGBTQ issues there are very sharp partisan divides. In each of these cases, respondents not affiliated with either of the two major political parties (e.g., independents, Green Party, Libertarian) fell in between, with 59–66% support.

Figure 8: Modest partisan differences except on sex and gender issues.

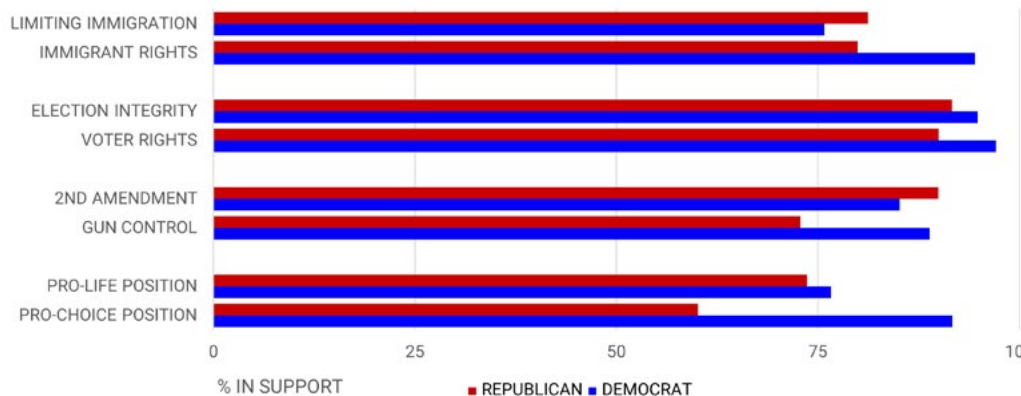


An additional four topics had moderately large partisan gaps (greater than 20 percentage points), though both parties favored these topics being studied in high school:

- The pro-choice position on abortion (92% Democrats, 60% Republicans)
- Causes and effects of racial inequality (97% to 73%)
- The need for criminal justice reform (94% to 71%)
- Causes and effects of income inequality (96% to 74%)

Demonstrative of this bipartisan support at the high school level are results on the four item sets presenting the left-valenced (e.g., pro-choice position on abortion) and right-valenced (e.g., pro-life position) position on a given issue (Figure 9). Greater proportions of Democrats endorsed the four left-valenced positions, while the two groups' answers for the right-valenced positions were quite similar. For example, approximately the same proportion of Democrats and Republicans supported the teaching of the pro-life movement in high school (respectively, 77% and 74%), but a far greater share of Democrats (92%) supported teaching about the pro-choice movement than Republicans (60%). This pattern is present across many of the “paired” items in Figure 9, suggesting Democrats simply are more supportive of controversial issues being taught in high schools, regardless of the issue’s valence. But as stated before, on all items, be they right- or left-valenced, there was majority support from respondents of both parties.”

Figure 9. Agreement for teaching controversial topics in high school, regardless of question framing

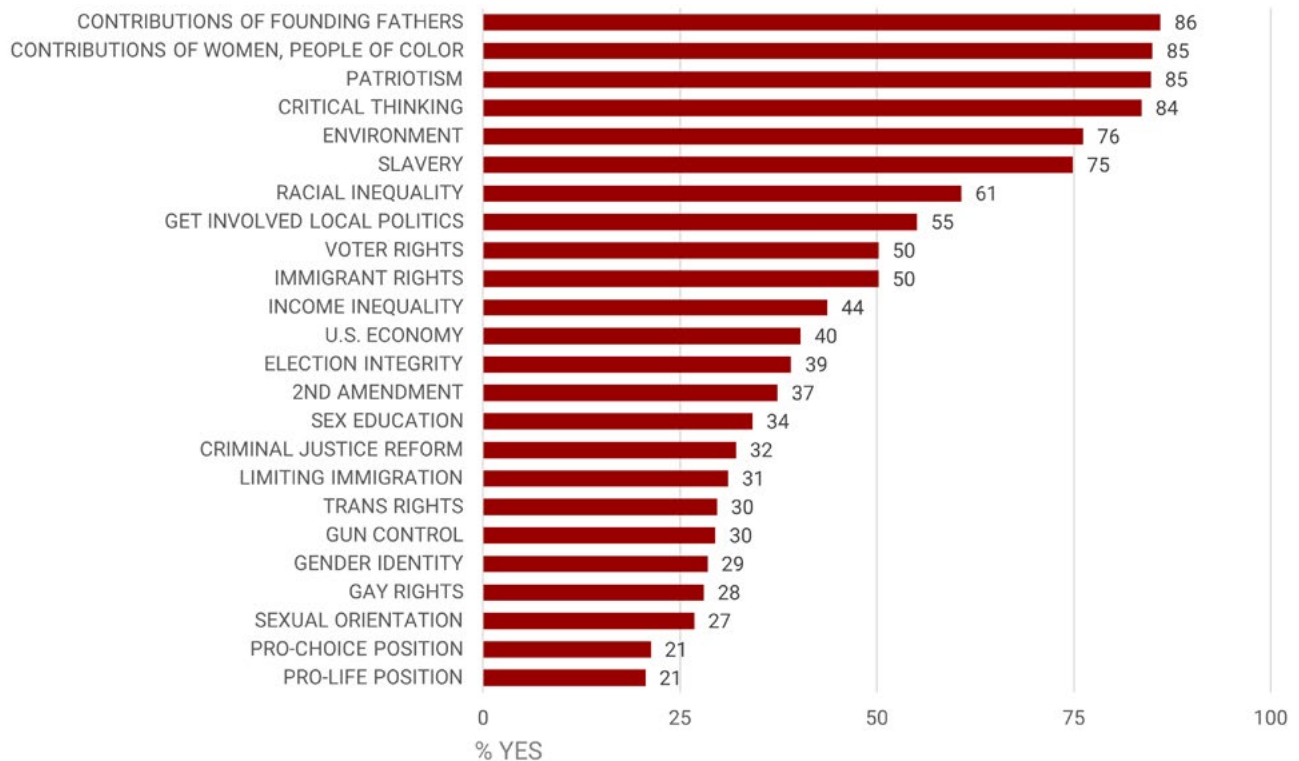


Americans are More Mixed on Teaching Controversial Topics in Elementary School

In sharp contrast to the support for teaching controversial topics in high school, most respondents said elementary school students should not learn about 14 of 24 presented topics (Figure 10). The most controversial topics in elementary school were “pro-choice position on abortion” and “pro-life position on abortion,” with fewer than a quarter (22% and 21% of respondents, respectively) agreeing students should learn these. Also drawing majority opposition from respondents were topics related to LGBTQ issues, guns, and criminal justice. But even less obviously controversial matters, such as “current U.S. economic topics,” saw majority opposition at the elementary school level. These results perhaps imply that Americans think elementary students are not ready to learn these kinds of difficult and/or complex topics.

On the other hand, the majority of adults believe elementary students should learn in school to think critically (84%) and how to get involved in local government/politics (55%). They also support elementary students learning about the contributions of the Founding Fathers (86%) and women and people of color (85%), as well as patriotism (85%), the environment (76%), slavery (75%), racial inequality (61%), and are evenly split on immigrant rights (50%) and voter rights (50%).

Figure 10: Adults support elementary students learning about some complex topics, oppose others



While more Americans think students should learn each topic in high school than in elementary school, there are some topics where that gap is particularly large. The five items with the largest high school/elementary gaps are:

1. Sex education, (94% high school, 34% elementary school)
2. Current U.S. economic concepts (96% high school, 40% elementary school)
3. Pro-choice position on abortion (77% high school, 21% elementary school)
4. Pro-life position on abortion (75% high school, 21% elementary school)
5. Current topics related to election integrity (92% high school, 39% elementary school)

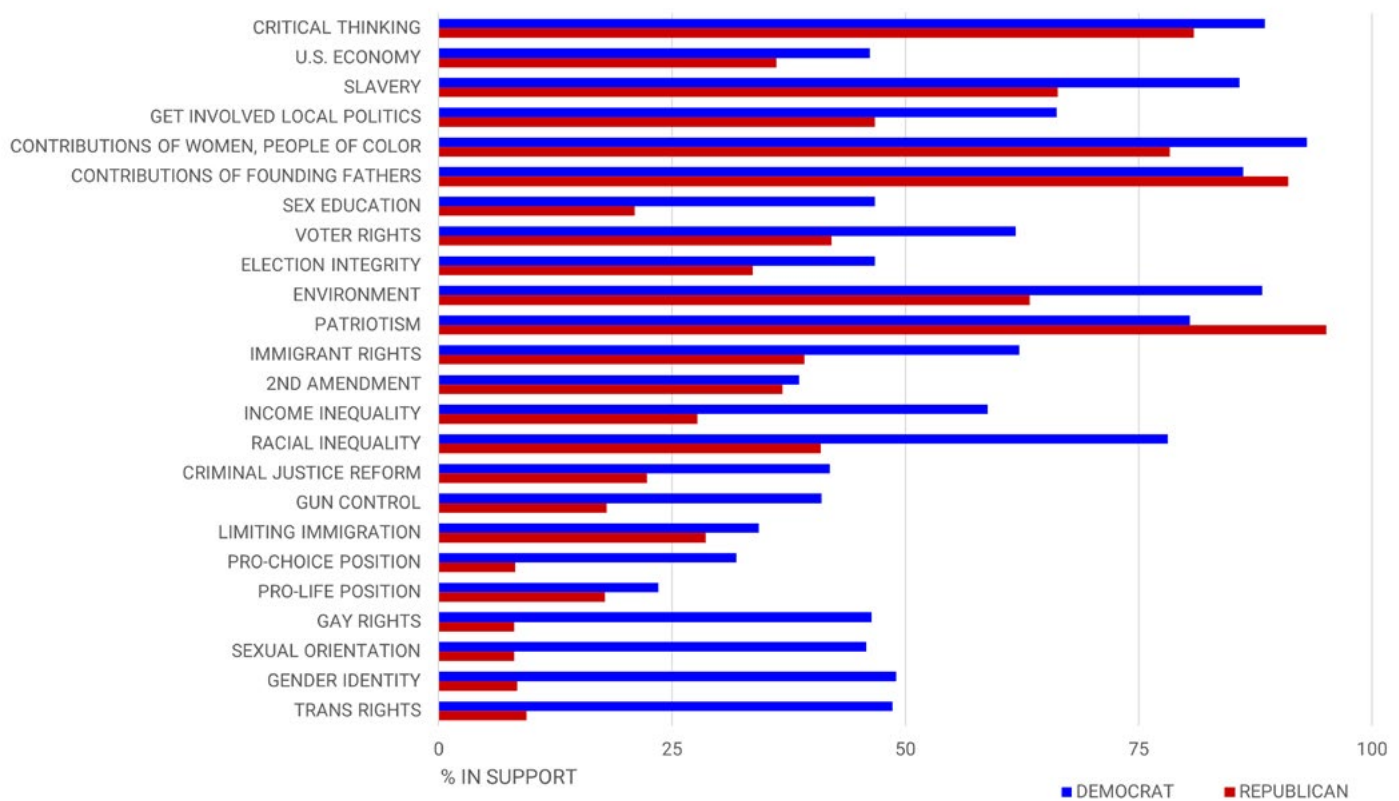
Beliefs About Teaching Controversial Topics in Elementary School are Mostly Bipartisan

The media frames opposition to controversial topics in the curriculum as a Republican position. Indeed, on 22 of the 24 topics, fewer Republicans than Democrats support elementary school students learning them (the exceptions are patriotism and contributions of the Founding Fathers). But there is more bipartisan agreement on these topics than typically mentioned. There are only five topics respondents of one party (always Democrats) say elementary students should learn in school and respondents of the other party (always Republicans) say they should not. Those five topics with a partisan split are (Figure 11):

- Current topics related to immigrant rights (Democrats 62%, Republicans 39%)
- Current topics related to voter rights (Democrats 62%, Republicans 42%)
- Causes and effects of racial inequality (Democrats 78%, Republicans 41%)
- Causes and effects of income inequality (Democrats 59%, Republicans 28%)
- How to get involved in local government/politics (Democrats 66%, Republican 47%)

Just as for high school, Republicans and Democrats largely agree on which topics elementary students should learn. The majority of respondents of both parties agree elementary children should learn about critical thinking, slavery, getting involved in local politics, the contributions of women and people of color, the contributions of the Founding Fathers, the environment, and patriotism. Also, the majority of respondents of both parties agree elementary children should not learn about the U.S. economy, sex education, election integrity, the Second Amendment, criminal justice reform, gun control, lifting immigration, abortion, gay and trans rights, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Figure 11: Bipartisan agreement on the topics to teach and not teach in elementary school



Even in cases where respondents from both parties agree that topics should not be taught, however, sometimes there are large partisan splits. Gaps were again especially pronounced on topics relating to sex and gender, where Republican opposition was close to unanimous. For each of the four LGBT-related issues, fewer than 1 in 10 Republicans supported elementary students learning about these topics in school, while Democratic support approached nearly half (46-49%). Clearly, there are enormous disparities in respondents' views on these issues, with Democrats far more likely to support them than Republicans. But even so, Democrats are split in their support for teaching these topics to elementary children.

Very Few Americans Think Elementary Children Are Learning About Controversial Topics

As mentioned, when asked about what students are learning, almost half of respondents indicated they did not know. If we instead focus on what Americans believe students are learning, very few respondents think elementary school students are indeed taught controversial topics, especially those topics respondents oppose the most.

Consider the 14 topics mentioned above that most respondents said students should not learn in elementary school (Figure 10). There was no topic from these where more than one of every six respondents indicated that elementary students were indeed learning it. Of these 14, the topic most respondents thought elementary students were learning about was sex education, at just 15%. For most of the topics, fewer than 10% of respondents thought elementary students were learning about them.

Despite efforts to persuade voters that elementary schools are rife with controversial curriculum topics, our respondents did not believe that to be the case. Even among only those with a yes/no opinion (dropping out those who said they didn't know), the percentage who think one of these controversial topics is being taught topped out at 26 percent. In other words, Americans do not think elementary schools are teaching children the things they believe shouldn't be taught.

BOOKS IN THE CURRICULUM AND THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

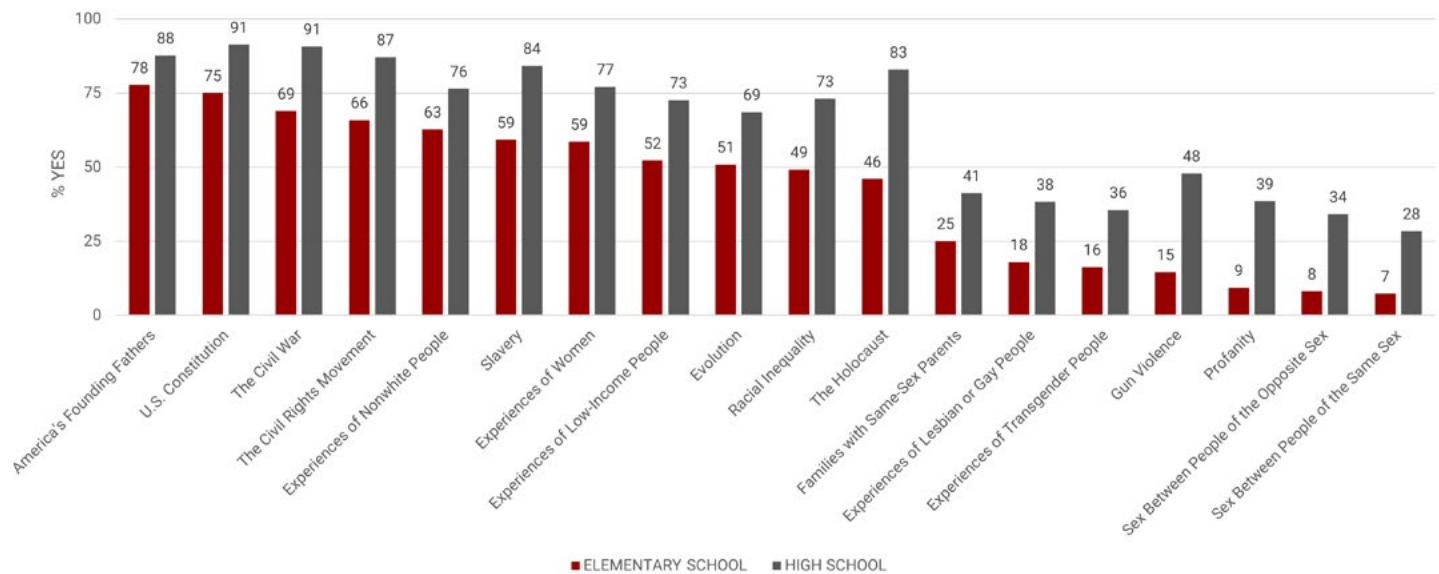
Also central to curriculum debates are what books students should be assigned to read and have available to them in school libraries. States have enacted policies pertaining to both issues: which books teachers include in their curriculum, and which are available on school library shelves. Parents, other advocates, and the media have grouped both policies under the moniker of “book bans,” but they are different—and we wanted to know what Americans thought of each. We asked about books with a range of potentially objectionable content, again asking separately about elementary and high school.

Americans Do Not Approve of Teachers Assigning Students to Read Certain Categories of Books, Especially Those Related to Sex and Gender Issues

- Americans are quite squeamish about assigning students to read books focused on certain controversial issues. Respondents expressed majority opposition to assigning students, in elementary and high school, to read books about the following topics:
- Depictions of sex between people of the same sex (7% elementary, 28% high school)
- Depictions of sex between people of the opposite sex (8% elementary, 34% high school)
- Profanity (9% elementary, 39% high school)
- Gun violence (15% elementary, 48% high school)
- Experiences of transgender people (16% elementary, 36% high school)
- Experiences of lesbian or gay people (18% elementary, 38% high school)
- Depictions of families with same-sex parents (25% elementary, 41% high school)

The most controversial of these items are the last two, with only about 30% of respondents expressing approval of assigning students these books in high school, and less than 10% in elementary school. In general, the level of support for including these books in curriculum is approximately half of what it is for other topics (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Americans are not comfortable with assigning books focused on certain controversial issues, though widely support others.



In contrast, at the elementary and secondary levels, respondents widely support assigning books on civics- and history-related topics like America’s Founding Fathers, the U.S. Constitution, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement—at both grade levels, all received approximately two-thirds support or greater. Topics related to slavery and the experiences of nonwhite people enjoyed majority support, as did books about the experiences of women and low-income people (approximately 60% support in elementary school, approximately 75% support in high school).

There are Some Large Differences Between Elementary School and High School in Terms of Americans' Support for Controversial Topics in Assigned Books

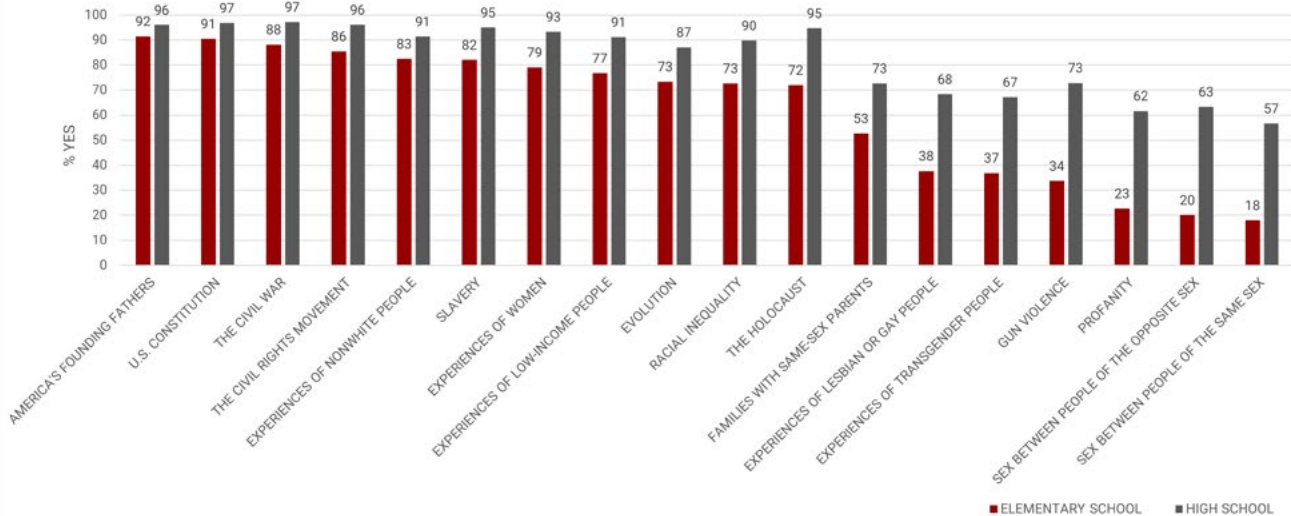
Across all items we asked about, there were disparities between respondents' responses for elementary versus high school students, as can be expected given their beliefs about learning controversial topics. For every topic, greater proportions of respondents felt the book category should be assigned in high schools versus elementary.

The gaps between elementary school and high school were largest for two violence-related items: gun violence (48% high school, 15% elementary school) and the Holocaust (83% high school, 46% elementary school). Books on the Holocaust and racial inequality also were the two topics for which most respondents said high schoolers should be assigned and elementary schoolers should not be assigned. The average difference between the two levels across all topics was 21 percentage points.

Respondents Largely Support Book Availability in Libraries, Though for Some Topics They Do Not Want Elementary Students to Have Any Access

The story shifts when it comes to students having access (e.g., in school libraries) to books, rather than being assigned them (Figure 13). Across the 18 topics asked about, respondents thought high school students should have access to books addressing the issues. In general, the proportions were very high, often 90% or higher, though the majorities were more modest on a few items. For instance, about 60% of respondents thought high schoolers should have access to books containing profanity or depictions of sex between the same or opposite sex.

Figure 13: Adults think high school students should have access to books across controversial topics, with mixed support for elementary school students



On the other hand, respondents opposed, sometimes quite strongly, elementary school students having access to certain kinds of books:

- Depictions of sex between people of the same sex: 82% oppose
- Depictions of sex between people of the opposite sex: 80% oppose
- Profanity: 77% oppose
- Gun violence: 66% oppose
- Experience of transgender people: 63% oppose
- Experiences of lesbian or gay people: 62% oppose

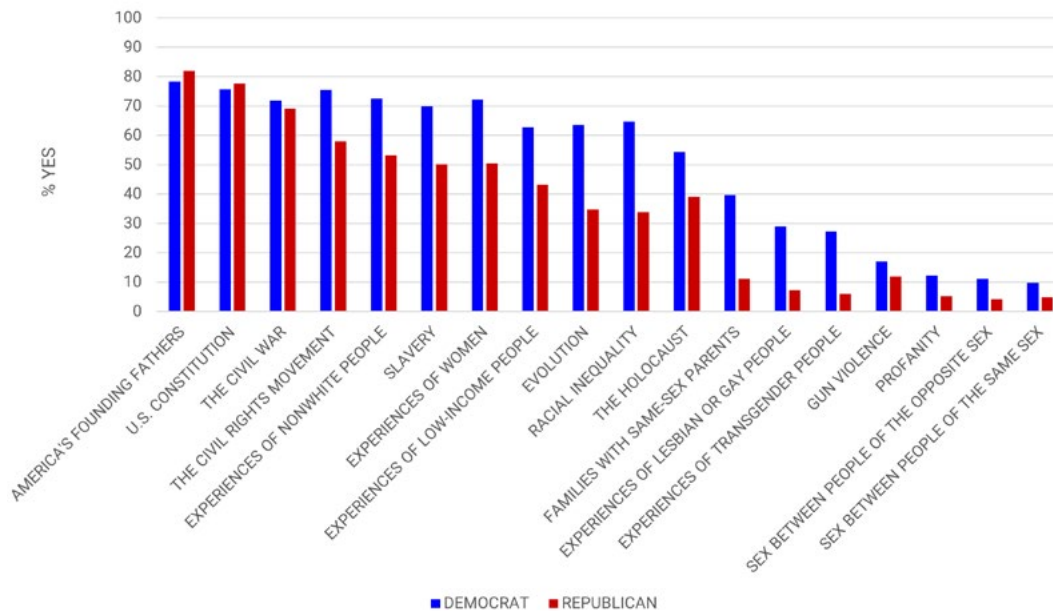
Though controversy over books containing depictions of families with same-sex parents has received [media attention](#), respondents narrowly approved (53% support) elementary students having access to them; for high school students, support for access reached 73%. The difference between this item and “experiences of lesbian or gay people” may imply that Americans are more opposed to elementary students having access to books about LGBTQ people than books merely addressing LGBTQ-related topics.

For other topics, such as the experiences of nonwhite people and women, slavery, evolution, and racial inequality, large majorities (70% and up) supported elementary students having access to books on these issues.

There Are Some Substantial Partisan Gaps in Attitudes Related to Books Assigned and Available

Greater proportions of Democrats versus Republicans support teachers assigning elementary students to read most of the book topics we asked about (Figure 14). For 16 of the 18 topics, more Democrats indicated support, with an average difference of 18 percentage points (49% versus 31%). The only two topics with more Republicans supporting elementary school reading assignments were America's Founding Fathers and the U.S. Constitution.

Figure 14: Greater Democrat support for assigning elementary students to read about controversial topics.



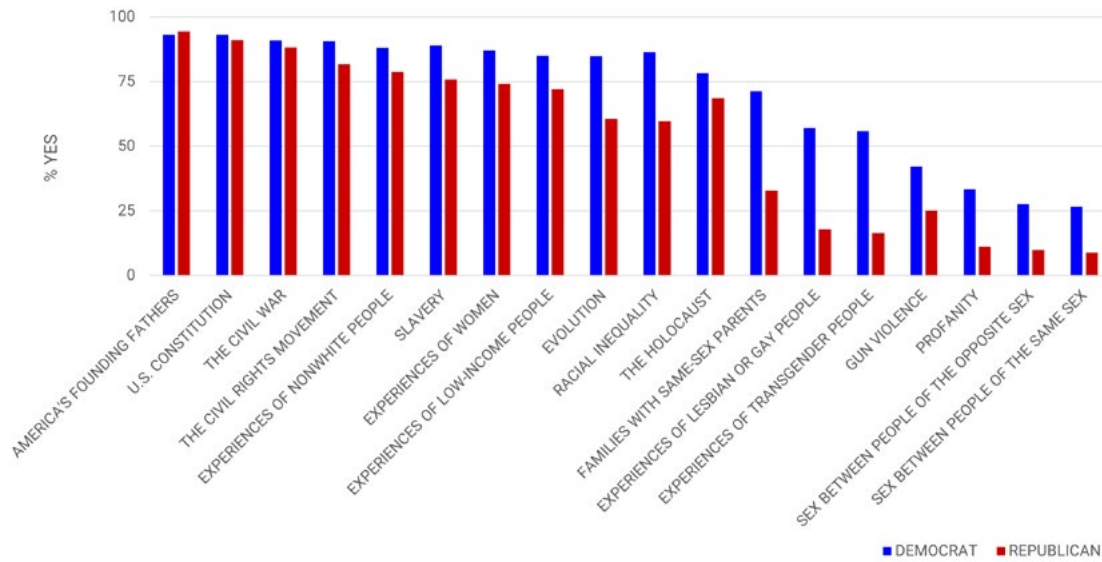
In four cases, most Democrats supported assigning particular book topics to elementary school children that a majority of Republicans opposed. Those four topics were

- Experiences of low-income people (63% support by Democrats, 43% by Republicans)
- Racial inequality (65% to 34%)
- Evolution (64% to 35%)
- The Holocaust (54% to 39%)

The items related to racial inequality and evolution had the largest partisan gaps, with another sizable fissure concerning depictions of families with same-sex parents (40% for Democrats, 11% for Republicans). Despite the magnitude of these four gaps, most people agreed whether elementary students should be assigned to read about most topics.

The gaps in views on book availability for elementary students are of similar magnitude on average (Figure 15). Again, there was mostly consensus, with Democrats and Republicans agreeing on 15 of the 18 topics as to whether books should or should not be available to students. The three exceptions, which are also the topics for which there is the largest gap between parties, are related to LGBTQ issues. For experiences of transgender people, 56% of Democrats believed elementary students should have access versus 16% of Republicans. For experiences of lesbian or gay people, 57% of Democrats supported access versus 18% of Republicans. And for depictions of families with same-sex parents, 71% of Democrats supported access as opposed to 33% of Republicans.

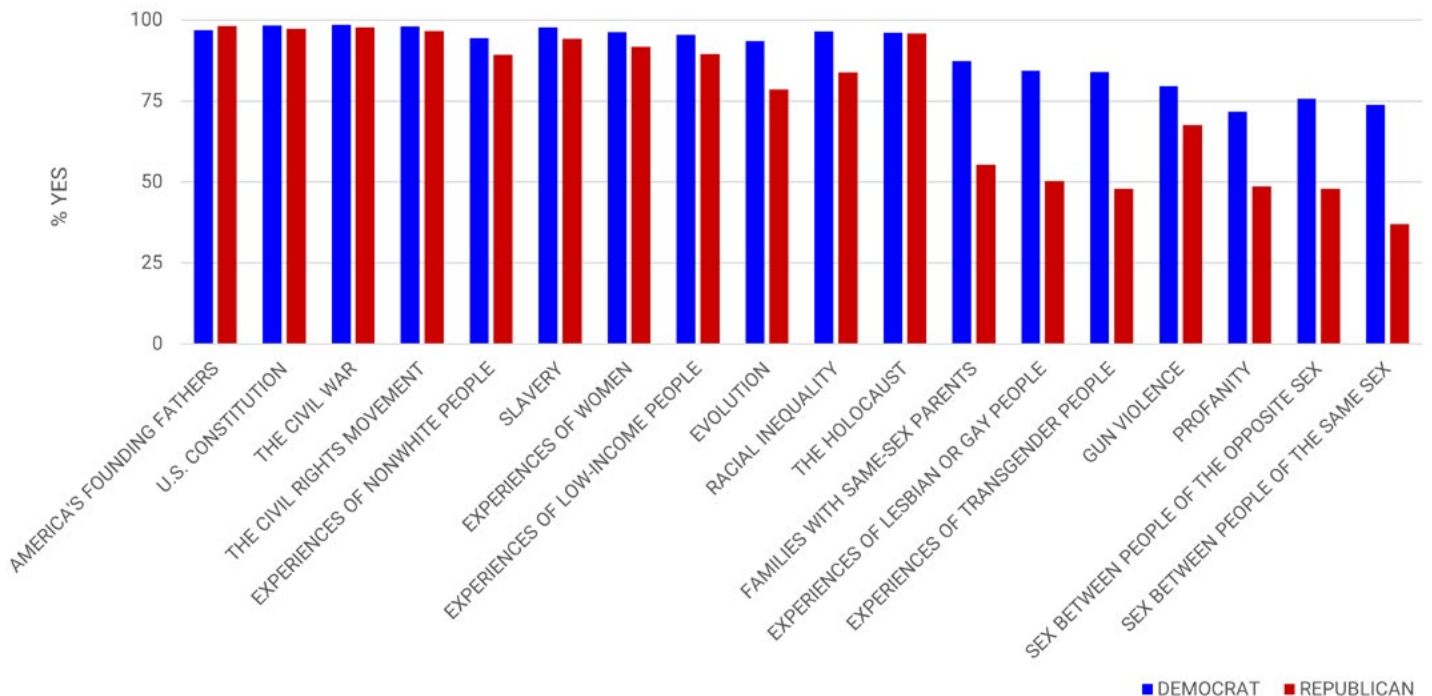
Figure 15: Mostly bipartisan agreement about which book topics elementary school students should have available.



Similar broad patterns emerged for high school (Figure 16). Republicans were approximately split on students being assigned books related to LGBTQ issues, whereas the majority of Democrats were in support. The parties also split on high school students being assigned books containing profanity and gun violence.

Generally, there was bipartisan support for availability of all types of books we asked about, though again there are splits on books related to transgender issues (with 48% of Republicans supporting availability), profanity (49% support from Republicans) and sex between people of the same or opposite sex (48% and 37% support from Republicans, respectively).

Figure 16: Bipartisan support for high school availability of book topics, though with disagreement about transgender issues, profanity, and sex.



WHO SHOULD CONTROL THE CURRICULUM?

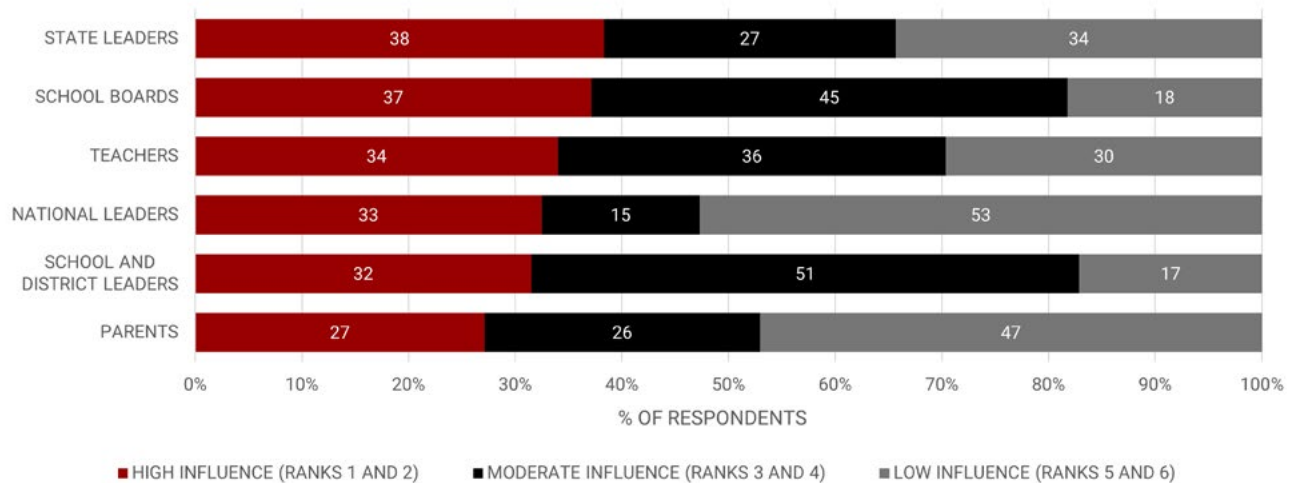
Who decides what content should be included in the school curriculum is an area of longstanding debate. During the last few years, the focus on this issue has intensified. Especially in Republican-led areas, community leaders have removed books from local curricula and/or school libraries for containing content related to [racial](#) or [sexual and gender](#) identities. Some states have even [barred schools from adopting](#) textbooks that contain content related to [social-emotional learning](#), and [introduced blanket bans](#) on discussion of sexual and gender identities in classrooms. A series of [“transparency bills”](#) introduced at the state and federal levels would require teachers to submit any material they use in class, including resources they have created for their specific students, for content review by those looking to, for example, “fight CRT” in schools. And lawmakers in at least one state have introduced legislation, parallel to Texas’s controversial [anti-abortion enforcement law](#), that would allow [individual parents to enforce](#) state-level content bans by bringing private lawsuits against schools they perceive to be allowing teachers to include banned content in their lessons.

The United States, particularly in Republican-controlled areas, is in a time of particularly heavy legislative focus on controlling curriculum as written in textbooks and enacted by teachers, with legislation typically framed as giving parents greater voice over what their children are taught in schools. We set out to better understand support for these ideas by asking survey respondents who they perceived to currently hold curricular power, who should hold that power, and what parents might do if they were unsatisfied with the content their children were learning.

Americans Think Parents Have Relatively Little Control Over What is Taught in K-12 Classrooms

We asked survey respondents to rank six entities in order of their influence over what is currently taught in K-12 classrooms. The pattern of results suggested that respondents didn’t quite know who has the most control, with each group receiving the top rank from approximately 10%-20% of respondents (Figure 17). Though respondents didn’t seem to know who has the most influence, there was some consensus that parents and national leaders are thought to have the least. Combining ranks 1 and 2 into “high influence,” 3 and 4 into “moderate influence,” and 5 and 6 into “low influence,” there still was no single group that more than 40 percent of respondents thought has high influence, while about half agreed that national leaders (53%) and parents (47%) have low influence.

Figure 17: Adults perceive state leaders and local school boards to have the most control over what is taught in K-12 classrooms.



Notably, respondents perceived parents to have little influence over what is taught in classrooms, relative to the other groups, suggesting that framing state and federal curriculum-related policies as giving voice to parents might be a politically popular tactic.

We found very little difference in these perceptions of reality between respondents who have a K-12 student in their household versus those who do not, or by political identity.

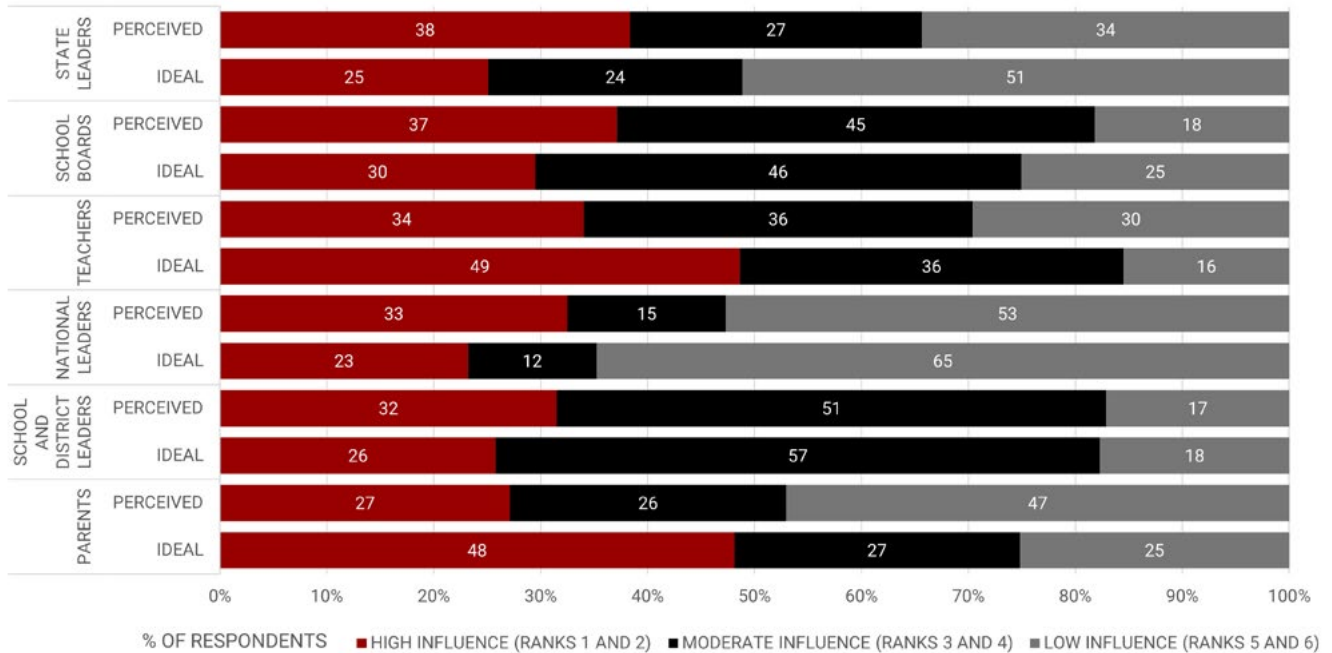
The U.S. Public Believes that Parents and Teachers Should Have the Most Control Over What is Taught

In addition to asking respondents who they perceived to currently control what is taught in K-12 classrooms, we asked them to rank the same six entities in terms of who should ideally control what is taught. Majorities of respondents believed that state (51%) and national (63%) education leaders should have the least influence over what is taught in classrooms, ranking them fifth or sixth out of

the six groups (Figure 18). Respondents thought leaders at these higher levels should have less curriculum control than they perceived them currently to have.

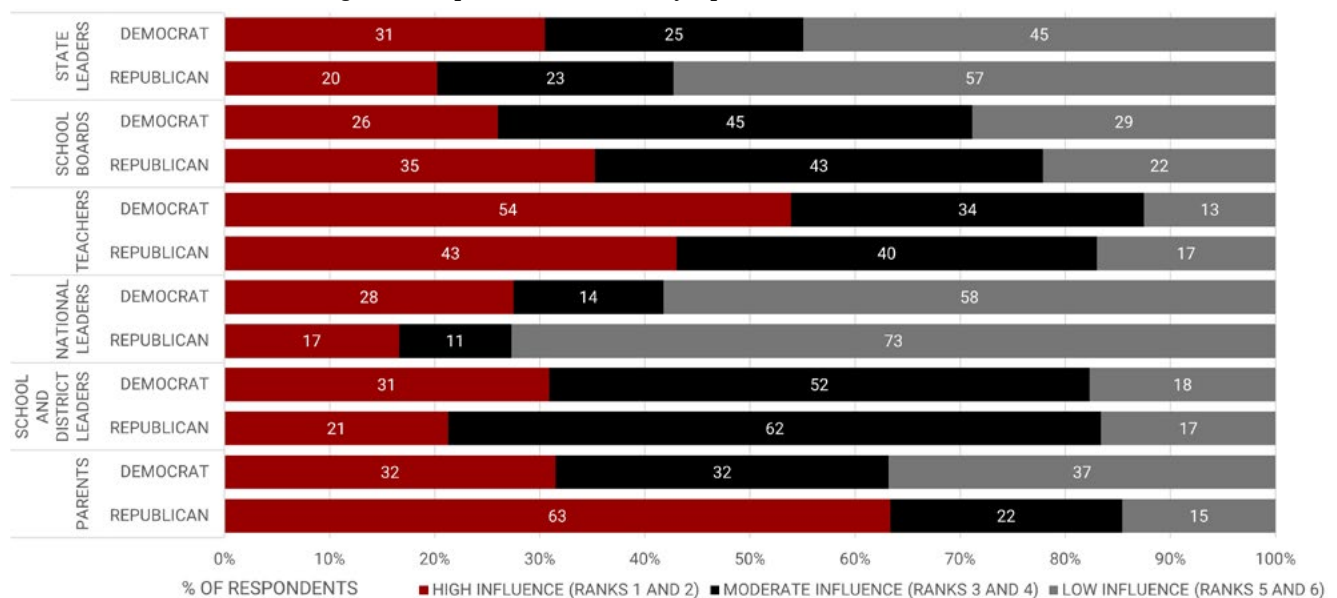
In contrast, nearly half believed parents and teachers ideally should exert the most control over what is taught in classrooms (48% and 49% of respondents ranked those groups first or second out of six, respectively). Given the relative unpopularity of state and national leaders exerting control over what is taught in K-12 classrooms, lawmakers' decisions to frame their curriculum bills as giving voice to parents may be both politically popular and politically necessary to gain requisite votes in legislatures.

Figure 18: American adults perceive too much control for state and national leaders, too little for parents and teachers



Those with and without K-12 students in their households had relatively similar views when it came to perceived versus ideal control over curriculum. However, we found large differences by political party in opinions of who should ideally control what is taught (Figure 19). Republicans tended to drive the desire for parents to exert the most control over what is taught (63% of Republicans ranked parents first or second, while 32% of Democrats did), whereas Democrats tended to be warmer on teacher and school/district control (54% of Democrats ranked teachers first or second, while 43% of Republicans did).

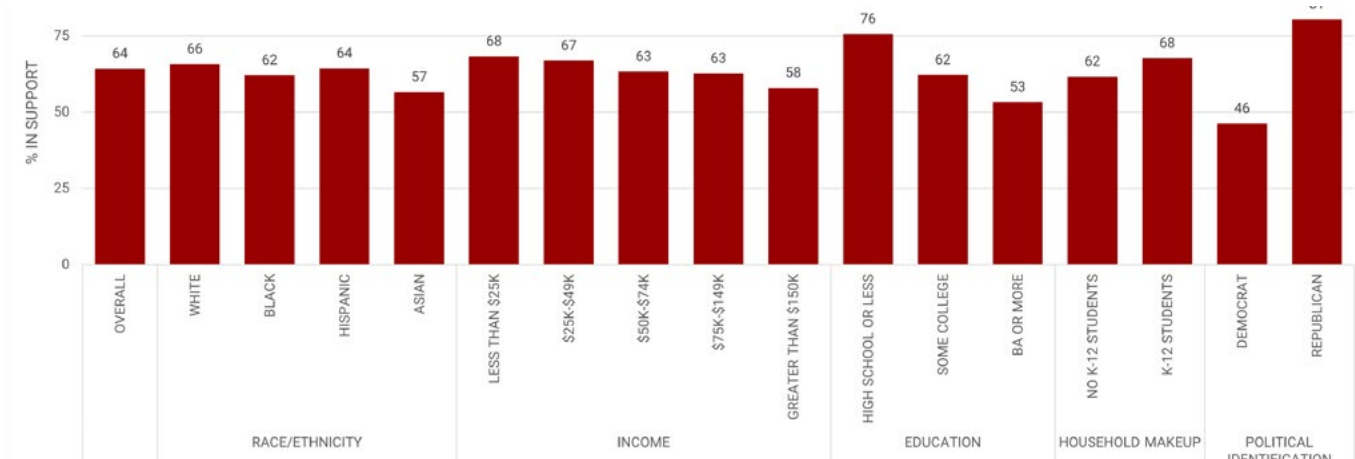
Figure 19: Republicans drive desire for parent control over curriculum



There is Considerable Support for Parents Opting their Child Out of Lessons that Include Content they Disagree With

Public opinion about who ought to control curriculum and classroom content would carry little political bite if no one were willing to act over it. However, our survey results demonstrate that 64% of respondents supported a parent’s choosing to opt their child out of lessons that include content they don’t support (Figure 20). Those with K-12 students in the home supported this opting-out at slightly greater rates, but more than 60% of those without school-age children still were in support. In fact, the practice enjoyed majority support from all racial, income, education, and household makeup subgroups examined.

Figure 20: Widespread support for parents opting children out of lessons they disagree with



A plausible result of the widespread acceptability of opting out over content is that parents might try to “optimize” their child’s classroom learning by blocking views they find objectionable. If the practice were equally popular on the left and right, the result would be further political polarization, as parents would curate educational experiences for their children that they found agreeable. But the practice was much more popular among Republicans (81% in support) than Democrats (46% in support—the only subgroup where we found less-than-majority support). Given this lopsidedness, it is likely that Republican parents will opt their child out of left-valenced content at far greater rates than Democrat parents do the opposite.

Taken together, the survey items on curricular control suggest that current state and federal legislation seeking to limit discussion of racial, sexual, and gender identities in the name of “parental rights” is well framed from a political standpoint, and so may prove to be quite popular. The public perceives parents to have much less control over what their children learn in school than they ideally would, while also supporting a parent’s decision to opt their child out of learning content with which they disagree. These beliefs are especially pronounced among Republicans.

DISCUSSION

In a time of substantial partisan turmoil, politicians are enacting policies that may substantially affect who chooses to teach, what and how they teach, and what role parents have in their children's education. We leveraged a large (n=3,751), nationally representative survey of American households to understand what U.S. adults think about these issues. Our results highlight areas of broad agreement and disagreement, with important implications for education policy and practice.

Despite the noisy debate around CRT in the curriculum, we found most Americans know very little about CRT. This is probably not surprising—it is a highly technical academic theory, after all. But we found broad agreement on certain racial beliefs, especially that our goal as a society should be that all people should be treated the same without regard to the color of their skin (sometimes called “colorblind equality”). We also found that majorities of Democrats support the main tenets of CRT, while most Republicans are opposed.

Regarding controversial topics and books, we saw widespread agreement for students learning about the experiences of people of color, and content related to slavery and civil rights. Still, the two parties have many profound disagreements about racial issues in America, implying that approaches to integrating race-related issues in the curriculum—widely supported as a topic children should learn in elementary and high school—must be sensitive to the diverse views of Republicans and Democrats about race in America.

In terms of which controversial topics Americans want taught and which books they want available, we also found enormous differences between elementary school and high school. Broadly, Americans overwhelmingly want high school to be a place where students learn about multiple sides of controversial topics, and they are free to access books touching on a variety of controversial content. Considering these findings, recent laws stifling the teaching of controversial topics in high school run counter to the overwhelming views of Americans of both parties that these topics should be taught in balanced ways.

For elementary schools, there is widespread support for younger children learning how to think critically and read about topics related to slavery, racial inequality, the contributions of marginalized groups to certain aspects of American history, and the environment. However, with bipartisan agreement, people seem to want the elementary curriculum to stay away from difficult and complicated controversial topics addressing sex and sexuality, profanity, and violence. On most topics, Republicans and Democrats agree about whether students should learn/read about them or not. These findings suggest that efforts by Republicans to target the early-grades curriculum are politically shrewd, given the widespread belief that young children should be sheltered from these issues.

One set of topics standing out from the others in our analysis were LGBTQ-related issues. Americans of both parties are opposed to elementary school students learning about these issues. Even for high-schoolers, Republicans are opposed to students learning about and having access to books about LGBTQ topics. Despite substantial gains in social acceptance and rights for LGBTQ individuals, these results indicate the fragility of those gains and the precarious place in American schools of LGBTQ students and teachers as well as students with LGBTQ parents.

Finally, our results show that Americans claim to want more local versions of curriculum control, and especially for greater control by parents and teachers. Majorities of Americans from all racial/ethnic, income, and education groups support parents opting their children out of lessons with content they disagree with (as do just under half of Democrats). Should this level of opting-out materialize, it would be a logistical nightmare for already overburdened teachers and schools. Widespread opt-outs certainly would drive greater societal divisions; their nature, prevalence, and potential ramifications are an area in need of further attention.

Schools are a political battleground, as they always have been, with teachers and administrators often caught in the middle of warring factions. The results of our survey suggest areas for optimism and concern. There is broad agreement—perhaps even more than expected—about the teaching of controversial topics as well as children's accessibility to controversial books. But there is sharp disagreement as well. We hope our findings point the way toward areas where common ground can be established, and where more work needs to be done to unite us through public education.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1: SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS.

		Overall Sample (N=3751)	No K-12 Children in Household (N=2098)	One or more K-12 Children in Household (N=1653)
		%	%	%
Gender	Female	51	46	58
	Male	49	54	42
Race/Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic White	62	67	55
	NH Black	12	11	14
	NH Asian	5	5	4
	NH Other	4	4	4
	Hispanic	17	13	23
Household Income	Less than \$25,000	22	22	22
	\$25,000-\$49,999	21	21	20
	\$50,000-\$74,999	18	19	16
	\$75,000-\$149,999	27	25	29
	\$150,000 or more	13	13	13
Education	High School or Less	39	37	40
	Some College	26	25	28
	BA or More	35	38	31
Political Identification	Democrat	40	41	39
	Republican	36	38	33
	Neither	24	21	29

TABLE A2. PLURALITY OF RESPONDENTS REPORTED NOT KNOWING WHAT IS TAUGHT AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL ACROSS MOST TOPICS, WITH CONSISTENT PATTERNS BY SUBGROUP

Topic	Grade	% Don't know					
		Overall	Democrat	Republican	Neither	No K-12 Student in Household	K-12 Student in Household
Critical Thinking	Elementary	46	44	48	47	50	42
	High	40	37	41	42	41	38
U.S. Economy	Elementary	46	43	48	47	48	43
	High	44	42	44	47	43	46
Slavery	Elementary	44	41	45	47	47	40
	High	37	35	37	39	39	34
Get Involved in Local Politics	Elementary	48	46	51	48	50	46
	High	44	41	45	48	43	45
Contributions of Women, People of Color	Elementary	45	41	46	49	48	42
	High	41	39	42	43	42	39
Contributions of Founding Fathers	Elementary	40	34	41	46	41	38
	High	36	32	39	39	37	36
Sex Education	Elementary	44	42	45	46	48	39
	High	36	33	36	39	37	33
Voter Rights	Elementary	48	46	52	47	51	45
	High	46	44	47	48	45	48
Election Integrity	Elementary	48	45	51	49	50	45
	High	49	47	49	51	48	50
Environment	Elementary	46	43	47	49	49	42
	High	42	40	41	46	44	40
Patriotism	Elementary	37	34	40	40	39	35
	High	40	37	42	42	41	39
Immigrant Rights	Elementary	51	48	56	49	54	47
	High	50	46	53	51	49	51
Second Amendment	Elementary	48	47	49	49	51	45
	High	46	46	45	48	46	46
Income Inequality	Elementary	49	46	50	52	51	47
	High	51	49	51	54	49	52
Racial Inequality	Elementary	50	49	50	52	51	49
	High	46	46	46	46	46	46
Criminal Justice Reform	Elementary	49	45	54	47	49	47
	High	52	50	54	51	51	53
Gun Control	Elementary	46	43	49	46	49	42
	High	51	48	54	50	51	50
Limiting Immigration	Elementary	48	46	50	50	50	46
	High	52	49	52	55	51	53

Pro-Choice Position	Elementary	47	44	50	47	50	43
	High	49	49	49	50	48	50
Pro-Life Position	Elementary	47	45	49	47	50	43
	High	53	53	52	53	53	52
Gay Rights	Elementary	48	48	49	46	50	45
	High	49	49	49	51	48	50
Sexual Orientation	Elementary	48	47	47	48	50	44
	High	48	49	45	50	48	48
Gender Identity	Elementary	48	48	47	49	50	46
	High	50	50	47	53	49	52
Trans Rights	Elementary	49	47	48	53	52	46
	High	49	49	47	52	49	50

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Marshall Garland is a Research Scientist at CESR where he co-directs CARE. His primary interest lies in the design and execution of evaluations of educational policies and interventions. His work has appeared in *Educational Researcher*, *Educational Evaluation*, and *Policy Analysis and Political Research Quarterly*.