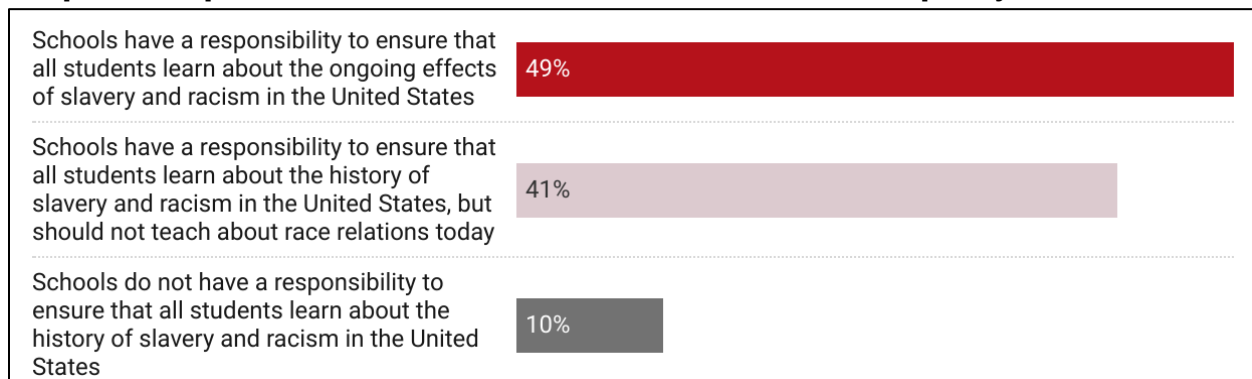


Mood of the Nation Poll: How Americans think schools should teach the topics of slavery & race, evolution, and sexual education

Feb. 7, 2022

The public is split on whether schools should teach about contemporary racism



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

Summary and key findings

The December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll seeks to gain insight on Americans' views of how three controversial topics are taught in the schools: slavery and race, evolution, and sexual education. Overall, this poll finds that:

- **The public is split on whether schools should teach about contemporary racism.**
 - Ninety percent believe that schools have a responsibility to teach about slavery, including 49% who indicate that all students should learn about “the ongoing effects of slavery and racism.”
 - Especially large proportions of Black Americans and Democrats believe that students should learn about the ongoing impacts of slavery and racism (79% and 77%, respectively).
 - A plurality of several groups believes that schools should teach about historical slavery, but not contemporary race relations, including 66% of Republicans, 48% of White Americans, and 48% of born-again Christians.
 - Ten percent believe that “schools do not have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the history of slavery and racism in the United States.”
- **Ninety percent of Americans say schools should teach scientific evolution.**
 - Half of those who support schools' teaching scientific evolution think this should be combined with teaching biblical perspectives about creation.
 - Ten percent of Americans think schools should teach biblical perspectives about creation, but not scientific evolution.
 - Twenty-five percent of born-again Christians think that schools should only teach biblical perspectives on creationism, as do 22% of Black Americans.
 - Sixty-six percent of Democrats think that schools should only teach scientific evolution, while 62% of Republicans think scientific evolution and biblical creationism should be taught in schools.
- **Three-fourths of the public believes that sexual education should include contraception as well as the dangers of STDs.**
 - Nearly half of born-again Christians think sex education for teens should only teach abstinence and the dangers of STDs. This is also the case among 37% of Republicans, including independents who lean Republican.

- When asked who should shape the way slavery and racism, evolution, and sexual education are taught in schools:
 - Parents of children attending public schools consistently get the most support, with 38% to 51% indicating they should have “a great deal of influence.”
 - Parents receive most support among born-again Christians and Republicans (57% to 72% indicating parents should have “a great deal of influence”).
 - Teachers of the respective subjects (social studies, science, health) get the next most support, with 33% to 40% indicating they should have “a great deal of influence” depending on the issue.
 - Teachers receive especially high levels of support among Democrats, with 49% to 58% of the public indicating that teachers should have a great deal of influence on how controversial topics are taught in schools.
 - Roughly 1 in 4 think that state departments of education and local school boards should have “a great deal of influence.”
 - Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools, should have “a great deal of influence” according to between 16% and 20% of the public, depending on the issue.
 - State legislatures and governors receive the least support, with 9% to 13% of poll respondents indicating that they should exercise “a great deal of influence” on how the three topics are taught.

Introduction

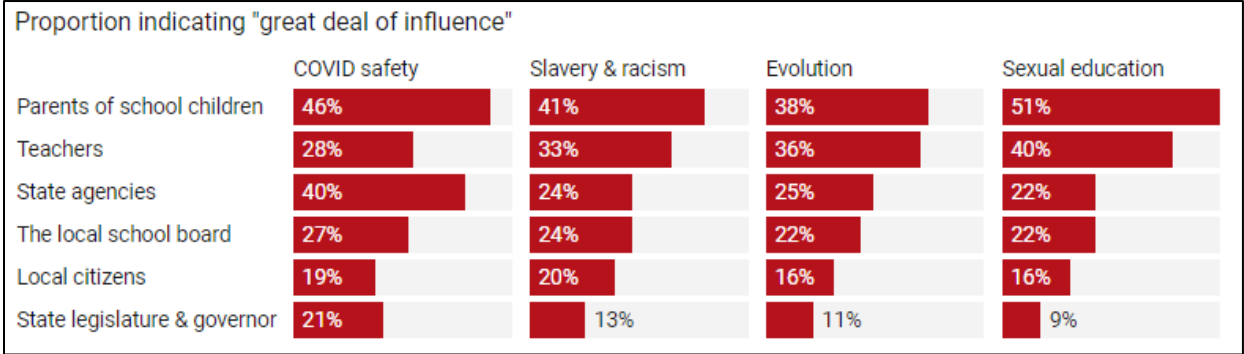
U.S. public schools are the focus of much partisan debate and local political action. In the midst of the on-going coronavirus pandemic the pros and cons of remote instruction and mask mandates in schools have become one flashpoint. In the midst of the nation’s recent racial reckoning the teaching of so-called “critical race theory” is another.

Thus, school policy is a focus of the December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll. Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.¹

Overall, this poll finds highest levels of support for parents of children in public schools in terms of who should influence school policy decisions ranging from the recently controversial issues of COVID safety protocols and teaching about racism to the longer-term educational debates relating to how evolution and sexual education should be taught. In contrast, the public consistently ranked state elected officials near the bottom.

Across the four different issues, 38% to 51% percent of Americans say that parents of school-age children should have “a great deal of influence” over COVID safety policies (46%), the teaching of slavery and racism (41%), human evolution (38%) and sex education (51%).

The public is most supportive of parents and teachers influencing school policies



Question: “If we see another spike in Covid-19 cases in your community, how much influence should... have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?” and “How much influence should... have in deciding how to teach [about slavery and race/ evolution/ sex education]?” Graph shows proportion indicating “great deal of influence.”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

¹ See the appendix for additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll and the specific survey questions featured in this report. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>. For additional findings related to this survey’s findings related to schools’ COVID-19 policies, see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-school-covid-policy>.

The public gave state departments of health second most support for influencing COVID safety policies, with 40% of Americans indicating health departments should have “a great deal of influence” over COVID safety-related decisions.

When it comes to teaching about race, evolution, and sexual education, Americans feel teachers should have considerable influence: one-third support social studies teachers having a great deal of influence over how slavery and race are taught, slightly more support science teachers influence over the teaching of evolution, and 2 in 5 support health teachers having a great deal of influence over sexual education.

Fewer, about one-quarter, support the teachers having a great deal of influence over COVID health policy in the case of a local spike in COVID cases. The public thinks state agencies should have more influence over COVID policies than over teaching controversial issues: about one-quarter strongly support state departments of education in having a great deal of influence over the teaching of slavery and race, evolution, and sex education.

The public is also somewhat supportive of having local school boards influence these school policies; about one-quarter support their local school board in being highly influential in creating COVID policy as well as in determining how race, evolution and sexual education are approached in the classroom.

One in five, or fewer, think that local citizens, including those without children attending public schools, should exercise a great deal of influence in school policies, and fewer still support the influence of the “state legislature and governor” on school policy decisions.

Polarization in local education policy making

As discussed in greater detail below in the sections on each respective school policy, the greatest dividing lines in terms of who the public thinks should wield influence over school policies have to do with religion and political affiliation. Specifically, a much higher proportion of born-again Christians indicate support for the influence of parents on school policies than is the case among those who are not born-again.²

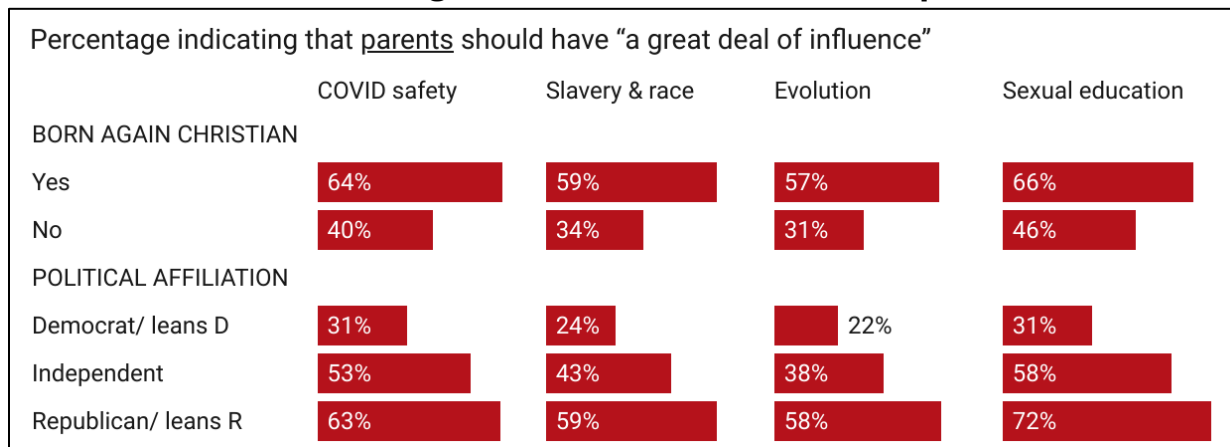
Similarly, Republicans are much more supportive than Democrats of the influence of parents, with twice the proportion indicating that parents of school children should have a great deal of influence on COVID safety protocols as well as how race, evolution and sexual education are taught.

Born-again Christians and Republicans are less likely to voice support for the influence of teachers and especially the influence of state agencies on school policies. The difference is especially clear in decisions regarding subject-matter teaching. Born-again Christians are just as

² This survey included a variety of questions about religion, including frequency of church attendance, importance of religion, and specific affiliation. The difference in response patterns to the questions of school policies between those identifying as born-again or evangelicals Christians (26%) and others (74%) is larger than differences based on the other questions of religiosity, at least among groups with adequate sample size for this type of analysis.

likely as others to support teachers in having a role to play in developing a response to local COVID outbreaks.

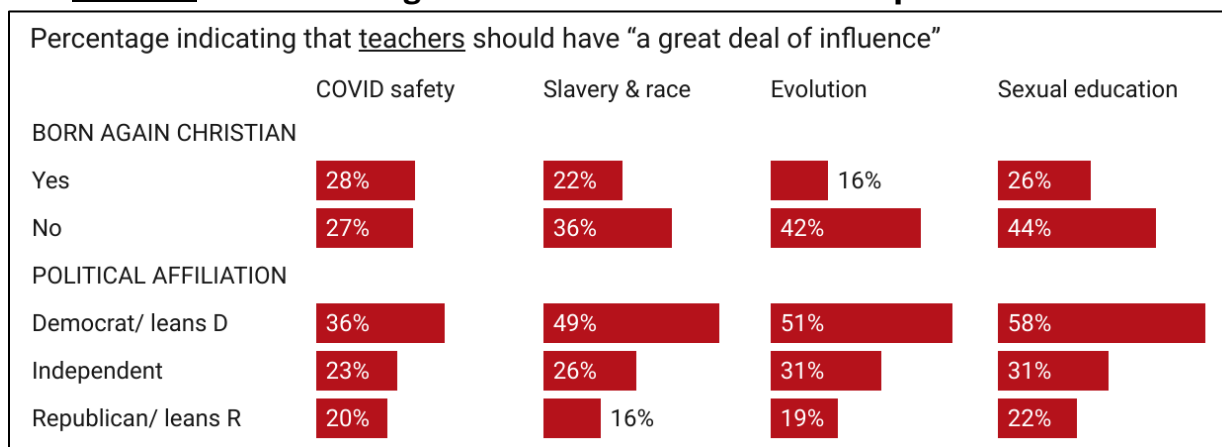
Strong majorities of born-again Christians and Republicans indicate that parents of school children should have a great deal of influence over school policies



Questions: “If we see another spike in Covid-19 cases in your community, how much influence should parents of children attending public schools have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?” and “How much influence should parents of children attending public schools have in deciding how to teach [about slavery and race/ evolution/ sex education]?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

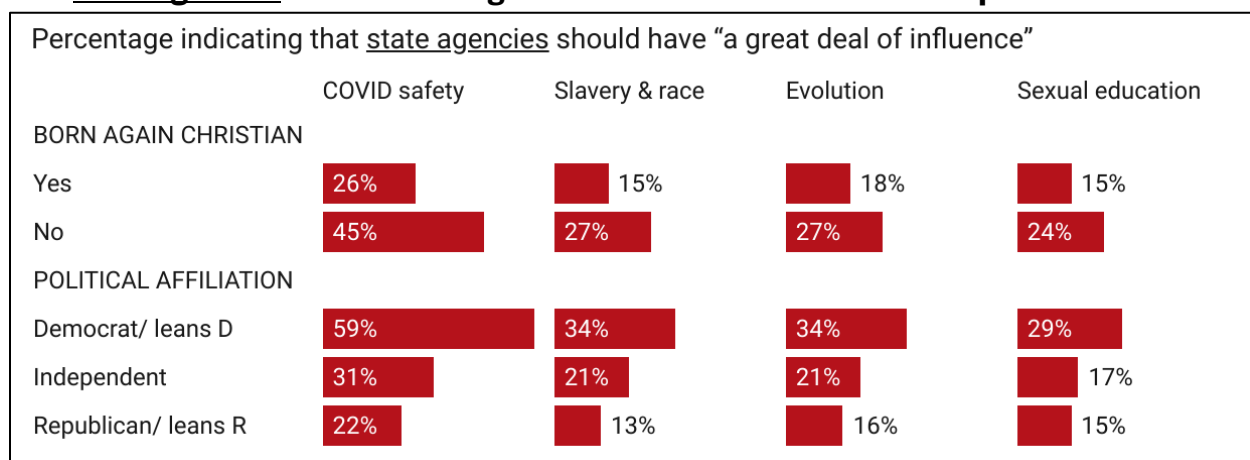
Higher proportions of Democrats and those who are not born-again Christians indicate that teachers should have a great deal of influence over school policies



Questions: “If we see another spike in Covid-19 cases in your community, how much influence should teachers have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?” and “How much influence should [social studies teachers/science teachers/health teachers] have in deciding how to teach [about slavery and race/ evolution/ sex education]?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

Higher proportions of Democrats and those who are not born-again Christians indicate that state agencies should have a great deal of influence over school policies



Questions: “If we see another spike in Covid-19 cases in your community, how much influence should the state government’s public health agencies have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?” and “How much influence should the state government’s department of education have in deciding how to teach [about slavery and race/ evolution/ sex education]?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

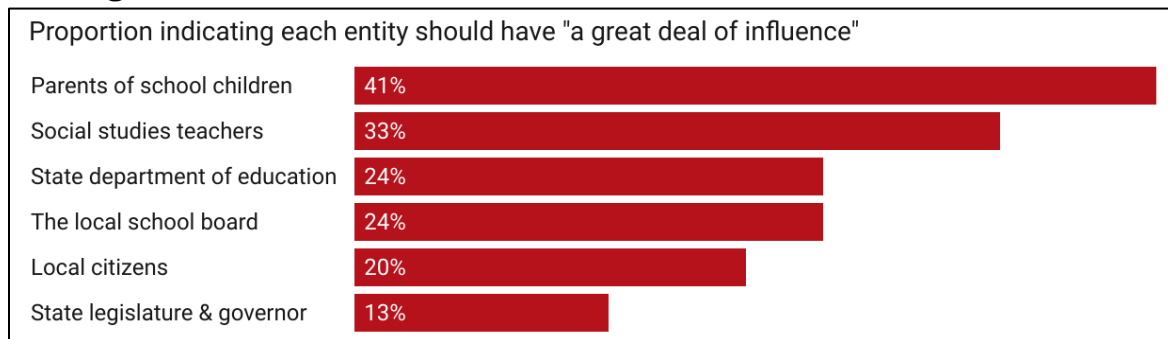
The remainder of this report focuses on the public’s thoughts regarding how schools should teach about slavery and race, evolution, and sexual education. For greater detail about the poll’s findings relating to COVID-19 in the schools, please see our earlier report, available at <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-school-covid-policy>.

Opinions on how slavery and race should be taught

Survey participants were presented with the question: “Public schools everywhere are trying to determine how to teach about the history of race and racial discrimination in the United States. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race in your local public schools?”

The responses indicate that Americans most highly support the influence of parents of children in public schools, followed by social studies teachers, local school boards and the state department of education, their fellow local citizens and, lastly, the state legislature and governor.

The public is most supportive of parents and teachers influencing how slavery and race are taught in the schools



Question: “Public schools everywhere are trying to determine how to teach about the history of race and racial discrimination in the United States. How much influence should... have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

Forty-one percent of Americans indicate that **parents of school children** should have “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of slavery and race in local schools, including a majority of:

- Born-again Christians (59%).
- Republicans, including political independents who lean Republican (59%).
 - In comparison, only 24% of Democrats indicate that parents should have a great deal of influence over how issues related to slavery and race are taught in local schools.
- Those age 65 or older (54%)

One-third of Americans indicate that social studies teachers should have “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of slavery and race in local schools, including notably larger proportions of:

- Democrats, including political independents who lean Democrat (49%).
 - In comparison, only 16% of Republicans indicate that social studies teachers should have a great deal of influence over how issues related to slavery and race are taught in local schools.
- Black Americans (45%).

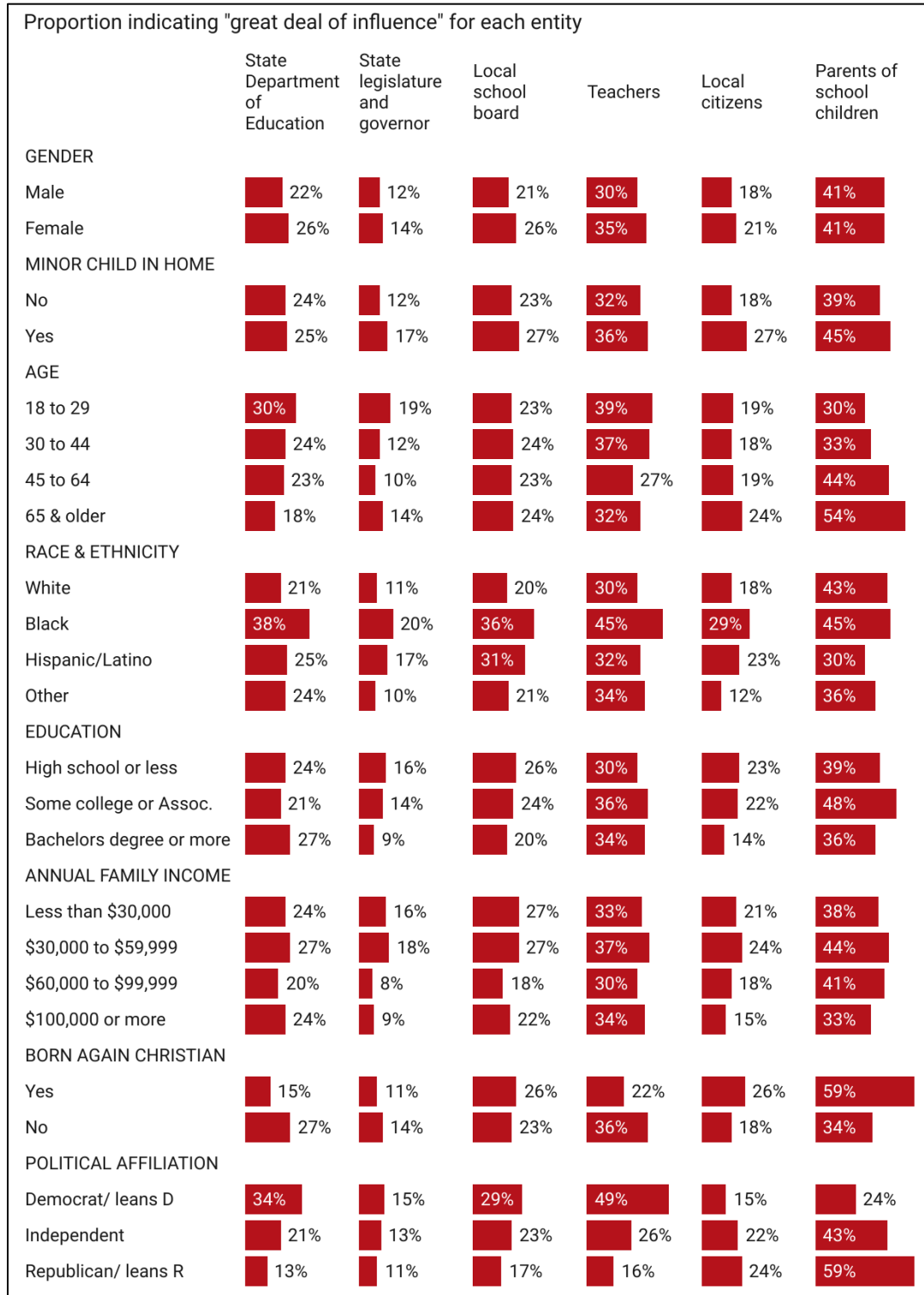
About one-quarter of Americans believe that **state departments of education** and **local school boards** should have “a great deal of influence” over how slavery and race are taught in the public schools.

- Over one-third of Black Americans strongly support state departments of education and local school boards having influence on how slavery and racism are taught.
- More than one-third of Democrats think state departments of education should wield a great deal of influence, compared with only 13% of Republicans.

One in five American adults think that **local citizens** should have “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of slavery and race, including somewhat higher proportions of those with children younger than 18 living in their homes and Black Americans.

Only about 1 in 8 American adults believes that their **state legislature and governor** should have a great deal of influence over how slavery and racism are taught in the local public schools. Elected state officials receive somewhat more support among Black Americans, 20% of whom indicate that the state legislature and governor should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of slavery and race.

Who should influence how to teach about slavery and race in your local school?



Question: "How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race in your local public schools?" Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

In their own words: Opinions on who should influence how public schools teach about slavery and race

The poll included an open-ended question asking respondents to provide their reasons for designating some entities as having “a great deal of influence” while indicating that other entities should not have that high level of influence. Here are some examples of the verbatim responses (note that the poll did not explicitly use the terms “critical race theory” or “CRT”):

The state department of education and social studies teachers should have a great deal of influence:

“Because they are the ones setting the curriculum. There is a need to instruct everyone in actual facts. Parents and local citizens, politicians don't always appreciate fact.” – 55-year-old Native American male Democrat from Oregon who did not identify as a born-again Christian.

The state department of education should exercise a great deal of influence:

“The state acts only for the local people and the federal government acts [for] all of America.” – 55-year-old Black male Republican from Texas who did not identify as a born-again Christian.

Social studies teachers and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“The experience has knowledge that no book can tell.” – 41-year-old Black female Democrat from Ohio who did not identify as a born-again Christian.

Social studies teachers should have a great deal of influence:

“Because most governments are leaning toward critical race theory which basically says all white people are racist it doesn't take into account where you're from. Because people aren't born racist they are taught it.” – 53-year-old White male Independent from Idaho who did not identify as a born-again Christian.

Parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Parents are more likely not to want CRT [critical race theory] taught.” – 44-year-old White female Republican from Missouri who identifies as a born-again Christian.

Local citizens and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Because CRT [critical race theory] tells white kids that they are, and their race is, evil and blames them for discrimination.” – 36-year-old White female Independent from California who did not identify as a born-again Christian.

The state department of education, the state legislature and governor, the local school board, and social studies teachers all should have a great deal of influence:

“They should have more influence than local citizens and parents of children attending public schools because there should be consistency and objectivity when it comes to teaching about race.” – *21-year-old Asian male Democrat from California who did not identify as a born-again Christian.*

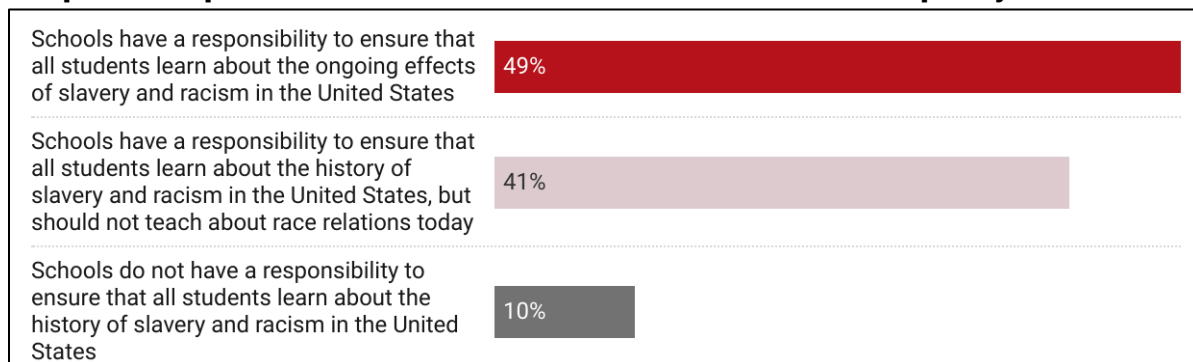
Preferences about how schools approach teaching about slavery and racism

In addition to the question of who the public thinks should influence how schools teach about slavery and race, the survey asked about each respondent’s underlying priorities in regarding how the subject is taught—including whether it should be taught at all.

Poll results show that **while 90% believe that schools have a responsibility to teach about slavery, the public is evenly split on whether contemporary racial issues should be taught.**

Forty-nine percent favor a position stating that the schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism. Fifty-one percent favor statements that absolve the schools from the responsibility of teaching about contemporary racial issues, including the 41% who think schools should teach about historical slavery and 10% who favor a position where schools would not be required to teach about “the history of slavery and racism in the United States.”

The public is split on whether schools should teach about contemporary racism



Question: “Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

As noted in the following graph, there is a fair amount of variation among demographic groups in terms of what they think schools should be teaching regarding slavery and racism. While half of all Americans believe that schools have a responsibility to teach about the on-going effects of slavery and racism, including particularly strong majorities of:

- Black Americans (79%).
- Democrats, including political Independents who lean Democrat (77%).
- Younger adults (65% of those age 18 to 29).
- Lower-income Americans (57% of those with annual family incomes below \$30,000).

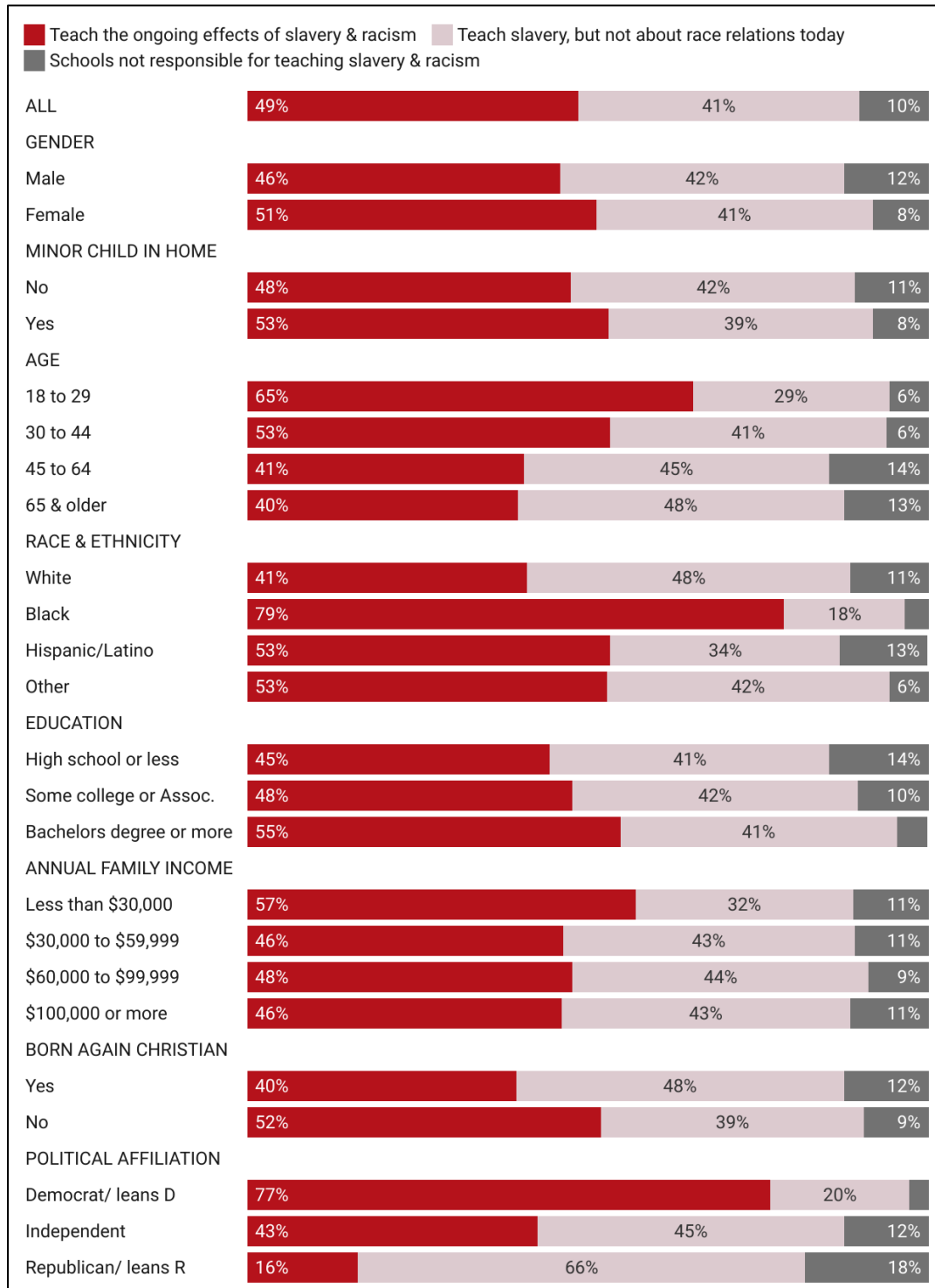
Notably, while at least 2 in 5 from most groups believe that schools should be teaching the on-going effects of slavery and racism, fewer than 1 in 5 Republicans—only 16%—indicate that schools have this responsibility.

Forty-one percent of Americans endorse a position which would have schools teach about the history of slavery, but not contemporary racism. However, this is the preferred position of a plurality of several groups, including:

- Republicans, including Independents who lean Republican (66%).
- Political Independents (45%; excluding those who lean either Democrat or Republican).
- White Americans (48%).
- Born-again Christians (48%).
- Those age 45 and older (including 45% of those ages 45 to 64 and 48% of those age 65 or older).

One in 10 Americans thinks that the schools should not have a responsibility to teach about slavery and racism, including 18% of Republicans and 15% of those with a high school diploma or less education. Only 3% of Black Americans and Democrats hold this position.

Strong majorities of Black Americans, Democrats, and young adults think schools should teach about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism



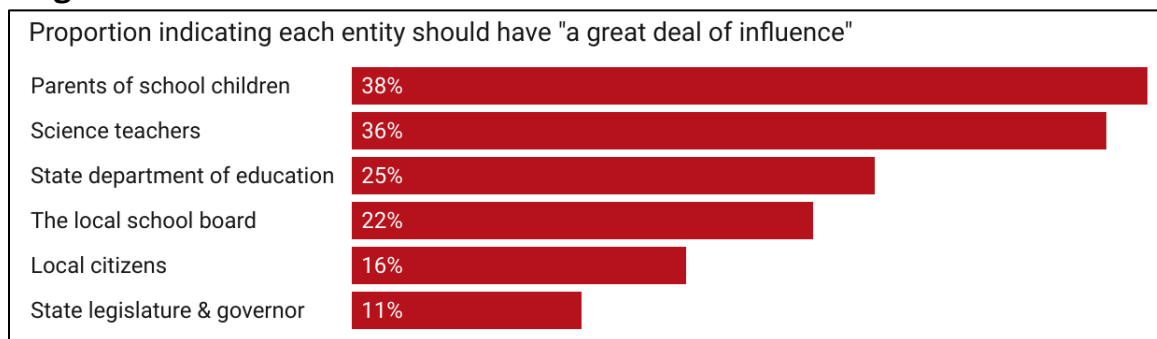
Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

Opinions on how schools should approach teaching about evolution

Over one-third of U.S. adults indicate that parents of school children and science teachers should have “a great deal of influence” regarding how evolution is taught in schools. About one-quarter think that each state government’s department of education and local school boards should have “a great deal of influence” on the teaching of evolution. Fewer, about 1 in 6 and 1 in 10 respectively, think that local citizens and state legislators and governors should have a large influence on the teaching of evolution.

The public is most supportive of parents and teachers influencing how evolution is taught in schools



Question: “For many years, there have been debates about the teaching of human evolution in public schools. Some argue that schools should convey scientific evidence concerning human evolution while others have argued that Biblical perspectives about creation should also be taught. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about evolution?”

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the maximum overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points.

Nearly 2 in 5 adults indicate that **parents of children attending public schools** should exercise “a great deal of influence” over how evolution is taught. Born-again Christians and Republicans are particularly supportive of parents’ influence over how evolution is taught: nearly 3 in 5 of each of these groups indicates that parents should wield “a great deal” of influence. In contrast, only 31% of those who do not identify as born-again Christians, and only 22% of Democrats think parents should be highly influential in determining how evolution is taught.

There is also somewhat of a generational split in terms of support for parents’ influence, with a notably higher proportion of those age 45 and older supporting the influence of parents.

Overall, a statistically similar proportion of Americans support **science teachers** having “a great deal of influence” over how evolution is taught. The groups that support the strong influence of science teachers are different, however:

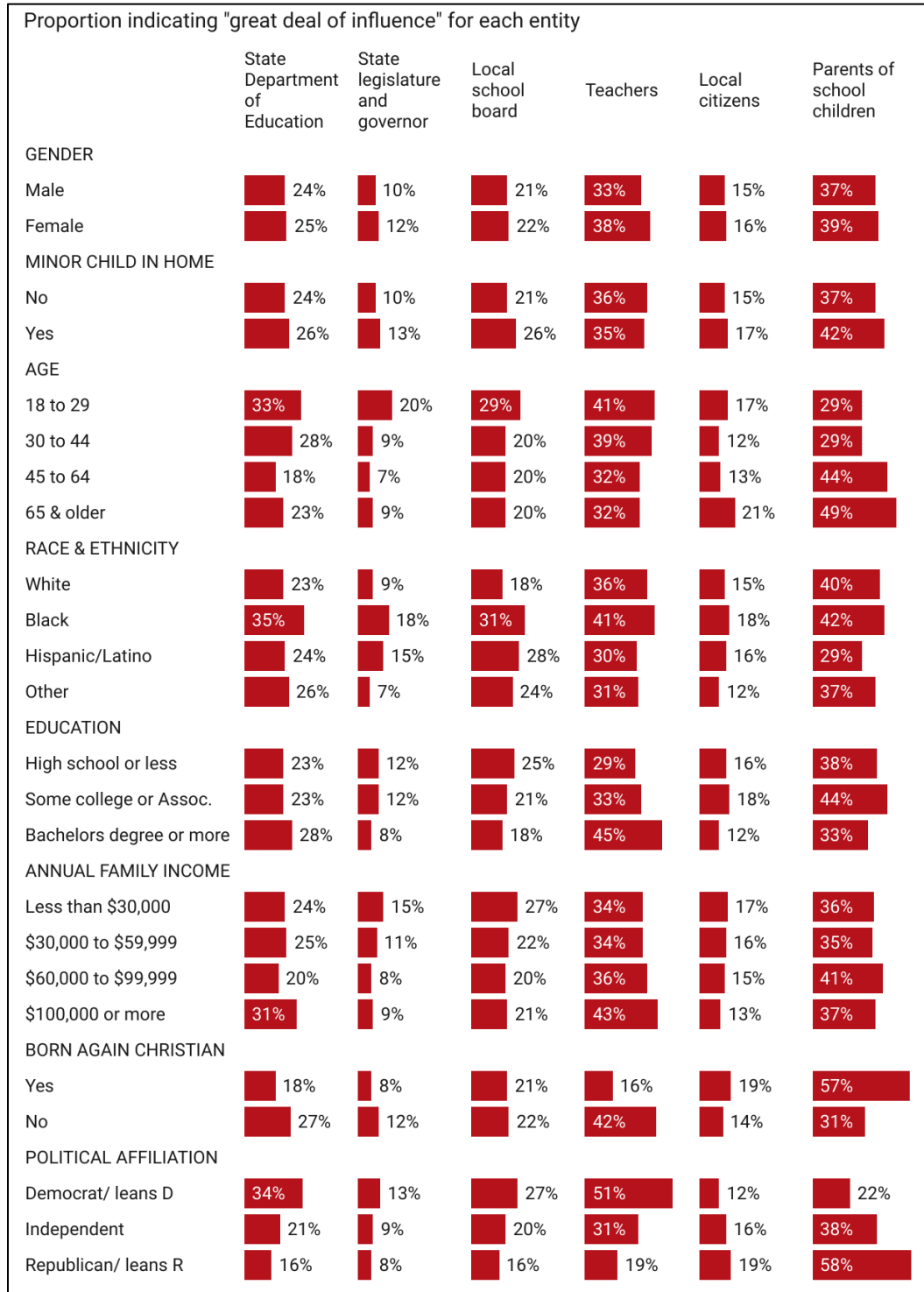
- Over twice the proportion of Democrats indicate that science teachers should have “a great deal of influence” than is the case among Republicans (51% compared to 19%).
- Only 16% of born-again Christians think science teachers should have “a great deal of influence” on how evolution is taught, compared with 42% of those who do not identify as born-again Christian.
- Forty-five percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or more education think science teachers should play a strong role in determining how evolution is taught, compared with less than one-third of those who have not attained a bachelor’s degree.

About one-quarter of the public thinks that **state departments of education** and **local school boards** should have “a great deal of influence” on how evolution is taught, including:

- About one-third of Black Americans, compared to roughly one-fifth of White Americans.
- Thirty-four percent of Democrats, including Independents who lean Democrat indicate that state departments of education should have a “great deal of influence” over how evolution is taught, compared with 16% of Republicans and Independents who lean Republican.

Relatively fewer Americans support **local citizens, including those without children attending public schools** and **state legislatures and governors** having “a great deal of influence” on how evolution is taught (16% and 11%, respectively). State legislatures and governors receive somewhat more support among younger adults, 1 in 5 of whom support these elected officials having high levels of influence on how evolution is taught.

Who should influence how to teach about evolution?



Question: "How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about evolution?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

In their own words: Opinions on who should influence how public schools teach about evolution

The poll included an open-ended question asking respondents to provide their reasons for designating some entities as having “a great deal of influence” while indicating that other entities should not have that high level of influence. Here are some examples of the verbatim responses:

Social studies teachers, local citizens, and parents of children attending public schools all should have a great deal of influence:

“They are the ones teaching and more aware of how it should be presented. Parents should always have a say in what their children are being taught.” – *82-year-old Black female Democrat from Arizona who did not identify as a born-again Christian.*

The local school board, local citizens, and parents of children attending public schools all should have a great deal of influence:

“Parents decide what is taught to their children. The more input/control parents have, the more likely to keep their children in public school.” – *58-year-old White male Republican from the state of Washington who identifies as a born-again Christian.*

Science teachers should have a great deal of influence:

“Experts are, by definition, authorities on a given subject. I am a person of faith, and I still believe in science and evidence. Therefore, if someone needs to learn about science, they should be taught science.” – *42-year-old White male Democrat from Florida who did not identify as a born-again Christian.*

Local citizens and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Evolution is theory. It is not proven science so the question is skewed.” – *59-year-old White male Republican from Tennessee who identifies as a born-again Christian.*

Parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“It depends on a person's religious belief. If they believe, as I do, that man was created by God, then I think they should decide what and how their children should be taught concerning evolution.” – *61-year-old Black female Democrat from Florida who identifies as a born-again Christian.*

State departments of education and the local school board should have a great deal of influence:

“This is an area in which there isn't room for debate. There are scientific facts that are irrefutable and to teach otherwise is irresponsible.” – *39-year-old Asian male Democrat from North Carolina who did not identify as a born-again Christian.*

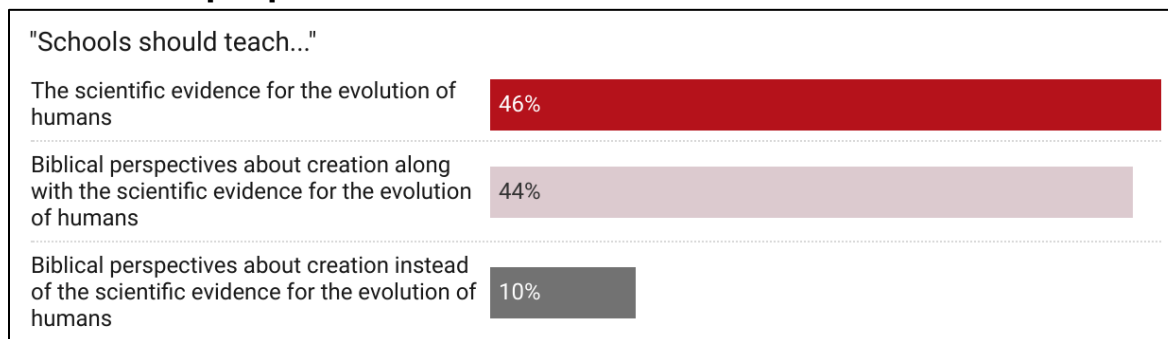
Preferences about how schools approach teaching about evolution

In addition to the question of who the public thinks should *influence* how schools teach about evolution, the survey asked about each respondent's own views regarding how the subject is taught—including whether it should be taught at all.

Poll results show:

- Ninety percent of adults believe that schools should teach about the scientific evidence for the evolution of human beings, half of whom favor teaching only the scientific perspective and half of whom favor also teaching biblical perspectives on creation.
- Fifty-four percent believe that schools should teach biblical perspectives on creation, including 10% of all adults who believe that schools should *only* teach biblical perspectives.

90% of Americans say schools should teach scientific evolution; 54% say schools should teach biblical perspectives about creation



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

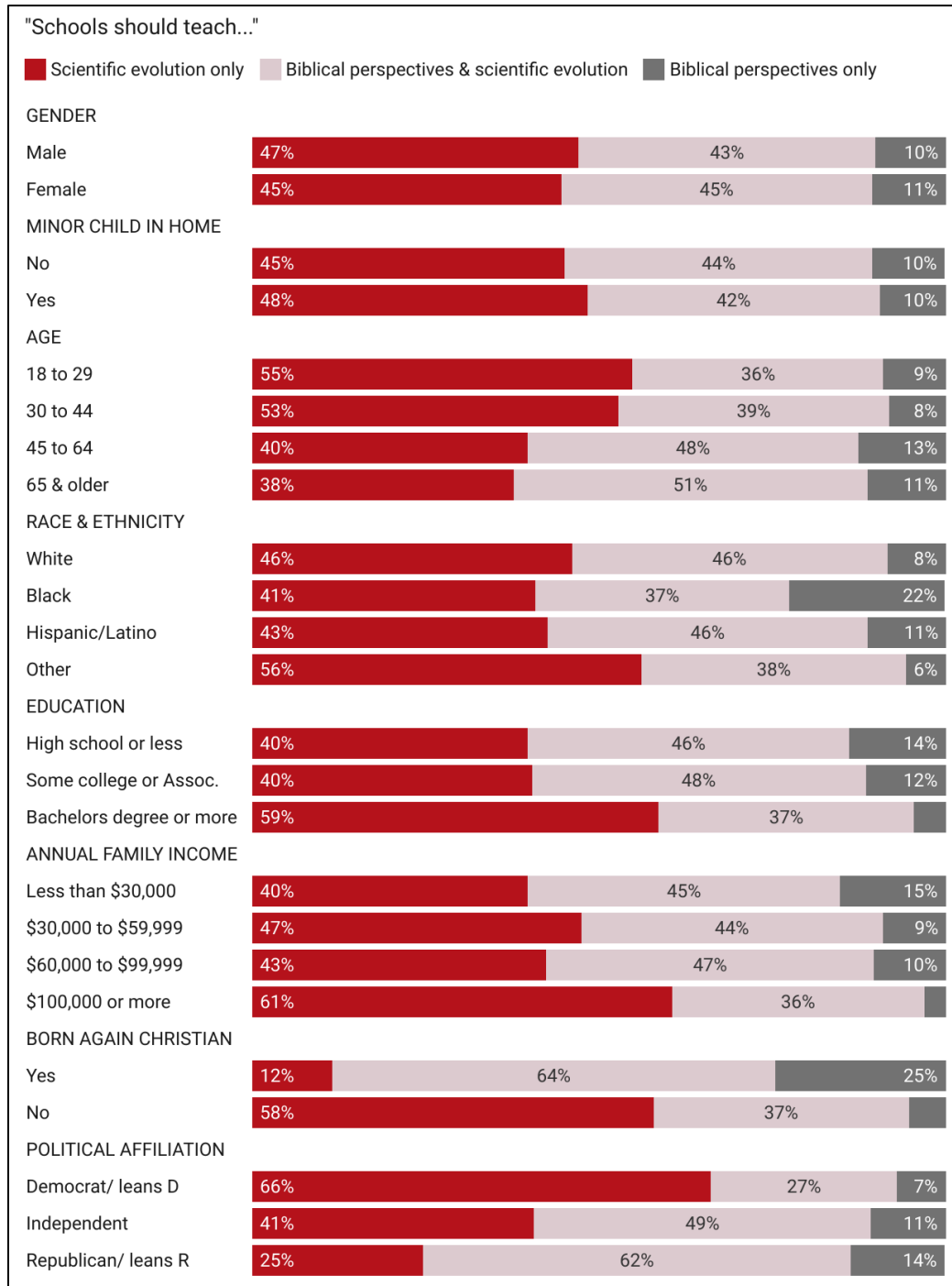
While overall the percentage of Americans who favor schools teaching scientific evidence for the evolution of humans not including biblical perspectives on creationism (46%) is statistically tied with the proportion favoring the teaching of both the scientific and biblical perspectives (44%), a majority of several groups favor each of these two dominant positions.

- A majority of those younger than 45 favor a "scientific evolution only" position, including 55% of those age 18 to 29 and 53% of those age 30 to 44.
- A majority of those in the "other" racial category—which includes Asian, American Indian and Alaskan Natives, Pacific Islander, and multiracial Americans—favor a "scientific evolution only" position.

- Fifty-nine percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or more education favor a “science only” approach to teaching evolution, significantly higher than is the case among those with less education.
- Sixty-one percent of those with an annual family income of \$100,000 or more favor the “scientific evolution only” position; notably higher than is the case among those with less income.
- A 66% majority of those who identify as born-again Christians prefer that the schools teach biblical perspectives on creationism and scientific evolution. Among those who do not identify as born-again Christian a 58% majority favor a “science only” approach.
- Sixty-six percent of Democrats favor the “scientific evolution only” position, while 62% of Republicans favor the “science plus biblical perspectives” approach.

Only 1 in 10 Americans believes that schools should be teaching biblical creationism and avoiding scientific evolution altogether. The proportion of those holding this position is notably higher among born-again Christians (25%) and Black Americans (22%).

Strong majorities of those with 4-year degrees, higher incomes, not identifying as born-again Christian, and Democrats favor schools teaching scientific evolution and not biblical creationism



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

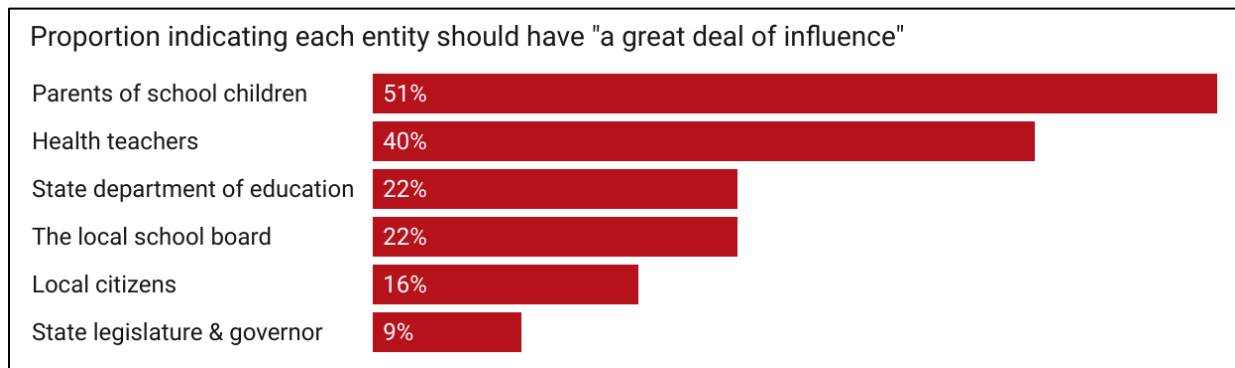
Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

Opinions about how schools should approach teaching sex education

Overall, Americans are very supportive of parents shaping how schools approach their sexual education curriculum, with half indicating that parents of school children should have “a great deal of influence.” Health teachers receive the next most support, with 40% indicating that they should have “a great deal of influence” over how the subject is taught.

Just over 1 in 5 indicate that state departments of education and local school boards should exercise “a great deal of influence” on how sex education is taught to teens. Only 16% believe that “local citizens, including those without children attending public schools” should have a lot of influence on how sexual education is taught, and even fewer, only 9%, believe that state legislatures and the governor should have “a great deal of influence.”

The public is most supportive of parents influencing how sexual education is taught in schools



Question: "In some schools, sex education for teenagers discusses the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and recommends that young people have no sexual interactions until marriage. Other schools also teach teenagers about how to avoid pregnancy by explaining how birth control and contraceptives work. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach sex education?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

Just over half of American adults believe that **parents of school children** should have “a great deal of influence” on how sex education is taught, including over 60% of:

- Republicans, including Independents who lean Republican (72%).
- Born-again Christians (66%).
- Those age 65 or older (63%).

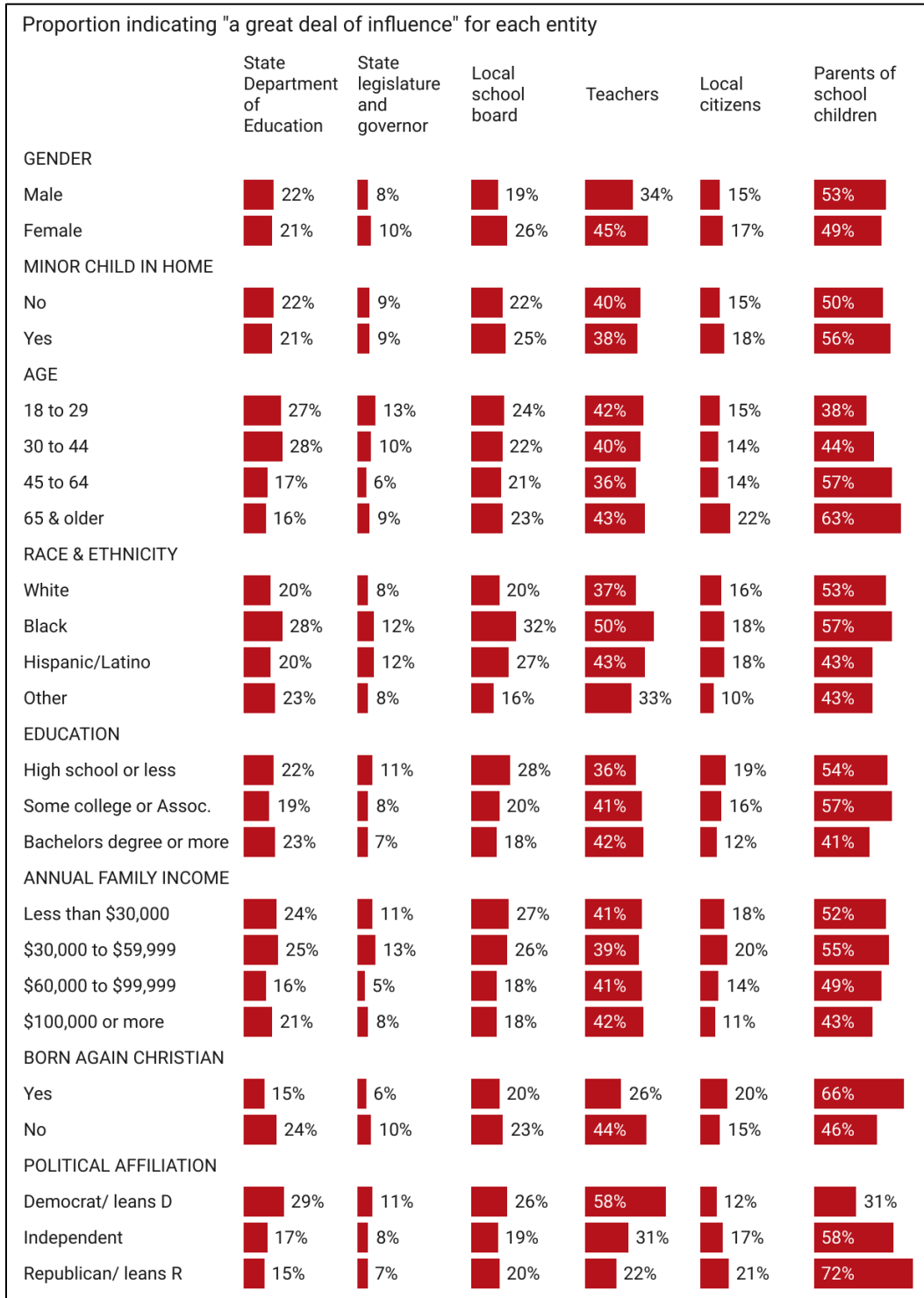
Forty percent of the public believes that **health teachers** should have “a great deal of influence” over how sexual education is taught in schools, including 50% of Black Americans and 58% of Democrats, including Independents who lean Democrat.

Twenty-two percent of Americans believe that **local school boards** and **state departments of education** should have “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of sexual education, including somewhat higher proportions of both Black Americans and Democrats.

Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools should have “a great deal of influence” over the teaching of sexual education according to 16% of the public, including somewhat higher proportions of those age 65 or older and Republicans.

Just under 1 in 10 Americans think that governors and state legislatures should exercise “a great deal of influence” over how sexual education is taught. This proportion is fairly consistent across different groups of Americans.

Who should influence how schools teach sexual education?



Question: "How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach sex education?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

In their own words: Opinions on who should influence how public schools teach sexual education

The poll included an open-ended question asking respondents to provide their reasons for designating some entities as having “a great deal of influence” while indicating that other entities should not have that high level of influence. Here are some examples:

Parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Because they are the parents of the children, and therefore most responsible for what they are taught.” –68-year-old Native American female Republican from Arizona who does not identify as a born-again Christian.

The local school board and health teachers should have a great deal of influence:

“Local teachers have a rapport with students and can build a trust with them. That is key to sex education.” – 63-year-old White female Republican from Georgia who does not identify as a born-again Christian.

State departments of education, health teachers, and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Health teachers are trusted to be listened to, parents of children are closer to them than anyone else and state government’s department of education solely decides what’s taught to these children in schools.” –22-year-old Black male Independent from Nevada who identifies as a born-again Christian.

Health teachers and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

“Because government departments of education don’t care about students. Parents should be teaching them about safety along with health teachers and professionals.” – 28-year-old Hispanic male Democrat from the state of New York who does not identify as a born-again Christian.

The state government’s department of education and health teachers should have “a great deal of influence” on how sexual education is taught.

“Tendency for more bias and wanting to restrict proper sex education to students the more localized the group of deciders get.” – 23-year-old Asian female Democrat from the state of New York who does not identify as a born-again Christian.

The local school board, health teachers, and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence:

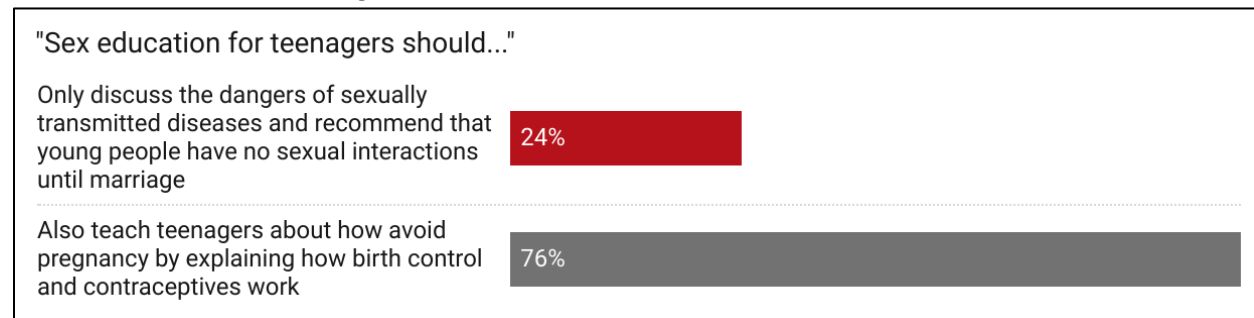
“This has always been a touchy topic for schools in certain areas of the country. However, I think it should be left up to the local citizens and parents in some instances and the state government department of education, the state legislature, and governor in other situations.” – 69-year-old Black female Democrat from Arkansas who identifies as a born-again Christian.

Preferences about what teens should learn in sexual education classes

In addition to the question of who the public thinks should influence how schools teach sexual education, the survey asked about each respondent's own views regarding how the subject is taught.

Poll results show that three quarters of Americans feel that sexual education should go beyond teaching the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and recommending abstinence to "also teach teenagers about how to avoid pregnancy by explaining how birth control and contraceptives work." One-quarter, however, believe sexual education should only focus on the dangers of STDs and recommending abstinence before marriage.

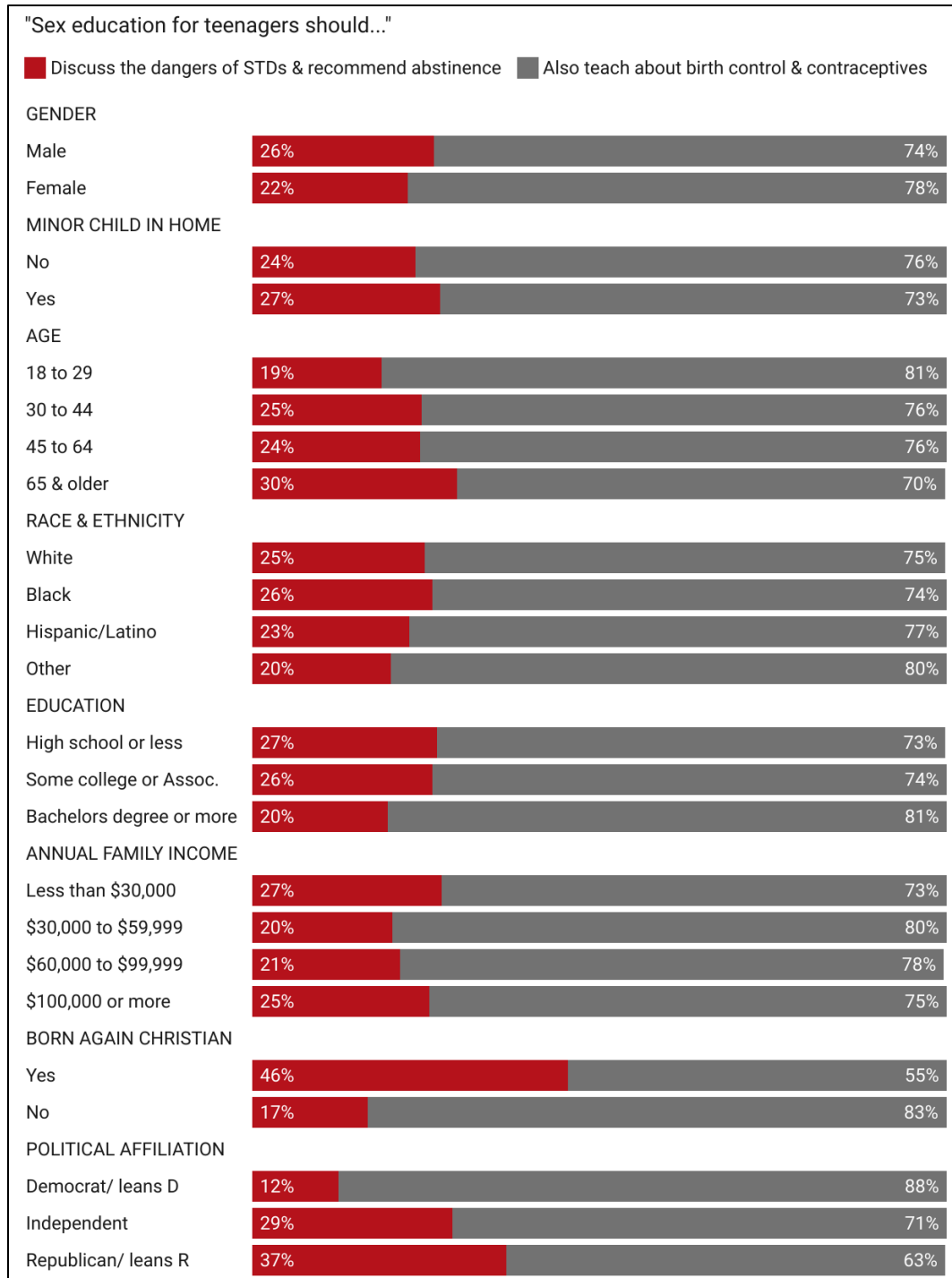
Three-fourths of the public believes that sexual education should include the dangers of STDs as well as contraception



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?" Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.7 percentage points.

Roughly 3 in 4 of all groups prefer that schools go beyond only teaching the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases to also teach about contraception. This is true of both men and women, those with and without children living in their homes, and among White, Black, and Hispanic Americans alike. Two notable exceptions: nearly half of born-again Christians think sex education for teens should stop at teaching the dangers of STDs and abstinence. This is also the case among 37% of Republicans, including independents who lean Republican.

Roughly one-quarter of most groups of Americans think that schools should avoid teaching contraception; higher proportions among born-again Christians and Republicans



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

Appendix: Survey questions

The December Mood of the Nation Poll included several questions aimed at better understanding the nation’s opinions regarding school policies related to COVID-19, teaching about racism, teaching about evolution, and sexual education.

The first set of questions on each of these domains asked respondents to rate each of 6 entities on the degree of influence they should have on each of the four topics. Note that the ordering of the topics was randomized to minimize possible question order effects on the final data:

1. At every school in the country, educators have tried to balance the risk of spreading COVID-19 against the costs of having students learn remotely. If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?

	A great deal of influence	A fair amount of influence	A little influence	None at all
State government’s public health agencies				
The state legislature and governor				
The local school board				
Teachers				
Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools.				
Parents of children attending public schools				

2. Public schools everywhere are trying to determine how to teach about the history of race and racial discrimination in the United States. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race in your local public schools?

	A great deal of influence	A fair amount of influence	A little influence	None at all
State government’s Department of Education				
The state legislature and governor				
The local school board				
Social studies teachers				
Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools.				
Parents of children attending public schools				

3. For many years, there have been debates about the teaching of human evolution in public schools. Some argue that schools should convey scientific evidence concerning human evolution while others have argued that Biblical perspectives about Creation should also be taught. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach about evolution?

	A great deal of influence	A fair amount of influence	A little influence	None at all
State government's Department of Education				
The state legislature and governor				
The local school board				
Science teachers				
Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools.				
Parents of children attending public schools				

4. In some schools, sex education for teenagers discusses the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and recommends that young people have no sexual interactions until marriage. Other schools also teach teenagers about how to avoid pregnancy by explaining how birth control and contraceptives work. How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to teach sex education?

	A great deal of influence	A fair amount of influence	A little influence	None at all
State government's Department of Education				
The state legislature and governor				
The local school board				
Health teachers				
Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools.				
Parents of children attending public schools				

One-fourth of the respondents were asked an open-ended question about their responses to each of the topics above:

5. You said that with respect to [school safety / teaching about race / teaching about evolution / teaching about sex education], [fill in those entities respondent prefers to have a great deal of influence] should have a great deal of influence. Can you tell me why they should have more influence than [entities that the respondent prefers to have less influence]?

The second set of questions asked respondents to specify their own opinions on each of the four topics.

6. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?
 - If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should take steps to limit the spread of disease such as remote instruction and masking, even if these steps interfere with student's learning.
 - If there is another spike in Co-19 cases in my community, the schools should continue to offer in-person instruction without masking, even if some students might get sick.
 - If there is another spike in Covid-19 cases in my community, the schools should continue to offer in-person instruction, but with mandatory masking, even if some students might get sick.

7. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?
 - Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in the United States.
 - Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the history of slavery and racism in the United States but should not teach about race relations today.
 - Schools do not have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the history of slavery and racism in the United States.

8. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?
 - Schools should teach the scientific evidence for the evolution of humans.
 - Schools should teach Biblical perspectives about Creation along with the scientific evidence for the evolution of humans.
 - Schools should teach Biblical perspectives about Creation instead of the scientific evidence for the evolution of humans.

9. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?

- Sex education for teenagers should only discuss the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and recommend that young people have no sexual interactions until marriage.
- Sex education for teenagers should also teach teenagers about how avoid pregnancy by explaining how birth control and contraceptives work.

To see whether Americans’ opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic or Latino; Other), educational attainment and political affiliation (Republican, Independent, Democrat). The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.³

In addition, we also cross-tabulated the answers to the school policy questions with a number of variables related to the respondents’ religious affiliation and importance of religion to their lives. The variable that best differentiated response patterns to the school policy questions was that which allowed respondents to self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christian, short-handed as “born-again” throughout the report:

Would you describe yourself as a “born-again”, or evangelical Christian, or not?

Twenty-six percent indicated they were born again or evangelical and 76% indicated they were not.⁴ Note that there may be even more significant differences between other religious groups, but the sample size of this survey is not adequate to safely represent the opinions of many smaller religious groups.

³ See <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/teaching-race-evolution-sex>.

⁴ These percentages are virtually identical to the those reported by Pew Research. See their latest report on religious affiliation, which goes into far greater detail, here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within American Public Media that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

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About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

Contact: democracyinst@psu.edu | democracy.psu.edu

About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,200 individuals who completed the April Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to the joint distribution from the Census's American Community Survey in terms of age, sex, race and ethnicity, and years of education. The frame was augmented by matching to the November 2010 Current Population Survey and the Pew Religious Life Survey in order to include voter registration, political interest and party identification in the selection model.

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab and Eric Plutzer of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy, with input from Benjamin Clary of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute.

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