



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

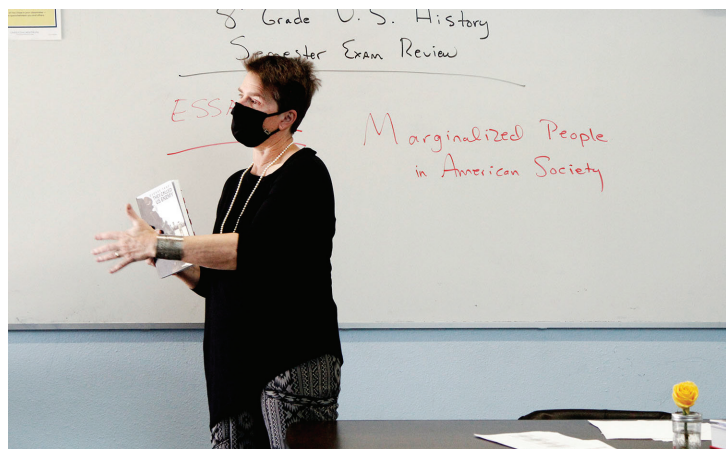
# NO PUBLIC CONSENSUS ON HOW SCHOOLS SHOULD DISCUSS SEXUALITY AND RACISM

Americans are largely divided about the role of public schools in teaching children about issues related to sexuality and racism, according to a new poll from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

While several state and local governments consider bills that prohibit teaching about sexual identity, 23% of Americans share that view and think their local public school is focusing too much on issues related to sex and sexuality. But about a third of the public (31%) feels it is focusing too little on such issues.

When it comes to discussion of racism in the United States, 37% feel their public schools are focusing on it the right amount. Again, the rest of the public is split with 27% who feel their local schools are focusing on racism too much and 34% who feel there is not enough focus.

There are also differing opinions among Americans about who should have influence over school curriculum. Half of Americans believe parents (50%) and teachers (51%) have too little influence on the curriculum in public schools. Republicans are more likely to think parents have too little influence and Democrats are more likely to think teachers have too little influence. However, there are no significant differences in attitudes about the role of parents on curriculum between parents of children attending K-12 schools and non-parents.



© 2022 AP Photo/Cedar Attanasio

## Three Things You Should Know

About the UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll Among American Adults:

- 1) About a quarter think teachers in their local public school are focusing on racism and sex and sexuality too much, while about a third think they are focusing too little on these issues.
- 2) About half believe both parents and teachers have too little influence on public school curriculum.
- 3) Just 14%, including 26% of parents of K-12 children, pay close attention to information about their local school board.

The survey finds majorities of both Democrats and Republicans do not support policies that prohibit books about divisive topics or prevent teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality. Yet, there are sharp partisan divides when it comes to views on allowing transgender students to use bathrooms that match their preferred gender identity or renaming schools named after historical figures that supported slavery or segregation.

Regarding COVID-19 precautions in public schools, 43% favor vaccine mandates and 37% favor mask mandates for students attending school in-person. However, parents of K-12 students are less likely to support these precautions than those without school-age children.

While many people disagree with policies surrounding the teaching of race and sexuality or the administration of COVID-19 guidelines, the study shows few Americans pay close attention to their local school boards or engaged with them beyond following news or voting in school board elections.

The nationwide poll was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research from March 17 to March 21, 2022, using AmeriSpeak®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,030 adults. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points.

### **OTHER KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY INCLUDE:**

- Republicans are more likely than independents and Democrats to think schools are focusing too much on racism in the United States (47% vs. 30% vs. 9%) and discussing issues related to sex and sexuality too much (42% vs. 25% vs. 8%).
- 65% of Republicans believe parents have too little influence on curriculum in public schools, and 62% of Democrats believe teachers have too little influence.
- 58% of Americans oppose policies that prohibit books about divisive topics from being taught in schools and 53% oppose policies that prohibit teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality in schools.
- Parents of children attending K-12 schools are less likely than the rest of the public to favor vaccine (33% vs. 46%) and mask mandates (29% vs. 39%) for students attending schools in-person.
- Over the last five years, few have engaged with their local school board beyond following news or voting in school board elections, with just 12% of Americans reporting that they attended a local school board meeting and 15% saying that they communicated with a school board member.

## AMERICANS ARE DIVIDED ON HOW SCHOOLS SHOULD HANDLE ISSUES RELATED TO SEXUALITY AND RACISM

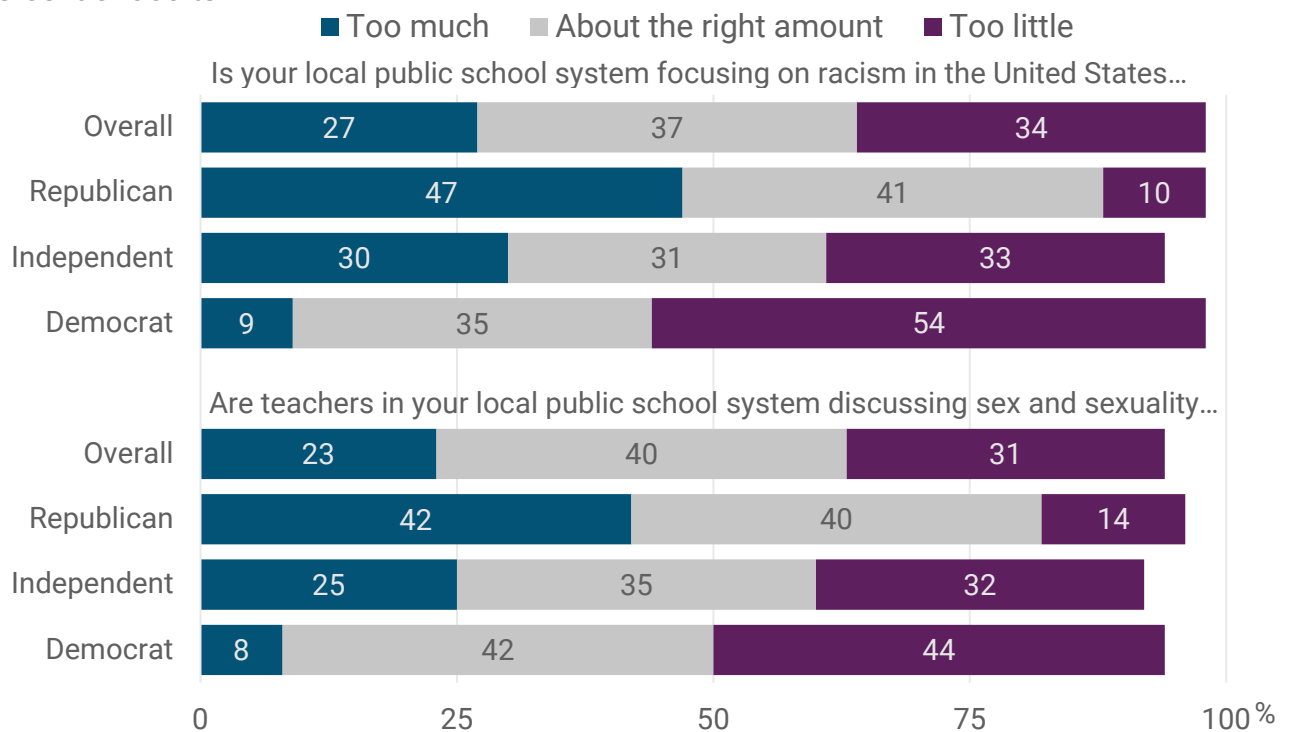
There is little consensus among Americans about how local public schools should teach about racism in the United States or discuss sexuality. For each of the issues, less than half of the public believes schools are focusing on them the right amount, while about a quarter believe they focus too much on the issues and a third feel they focus too little on the issues.

Views about both issues are largely related to people’s political party. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe schools are focusing too much on racism and discussing sexuality too much, whereas Democrats are more likely to say schools are not focusing on them enough.

While there are stark partisan divides on how schools should teach about racism and sexuality, there are no significant differences between parents of children attending K-12 schools and those without school- age children, holding other demographic factors constant.<sup>1</sup>

### Americans are divided about how schools should discuss racism and sexuality

Percent of adults



**Questions:** Do you think your local public school system is focusing too much or too little on racism in the U.S., or is the focus about right? Do you think teachers in your local public school system are discussing issues related to sex and sexuality too much, too little, or about the right amount?

**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older



APNORC.org

<sup>1</sup> Parents include both those with children in public schools (n=212) and those with children in private or parochial schools (n=36), but the results are consistent when the analysis is limited to only parents of children in public schools.

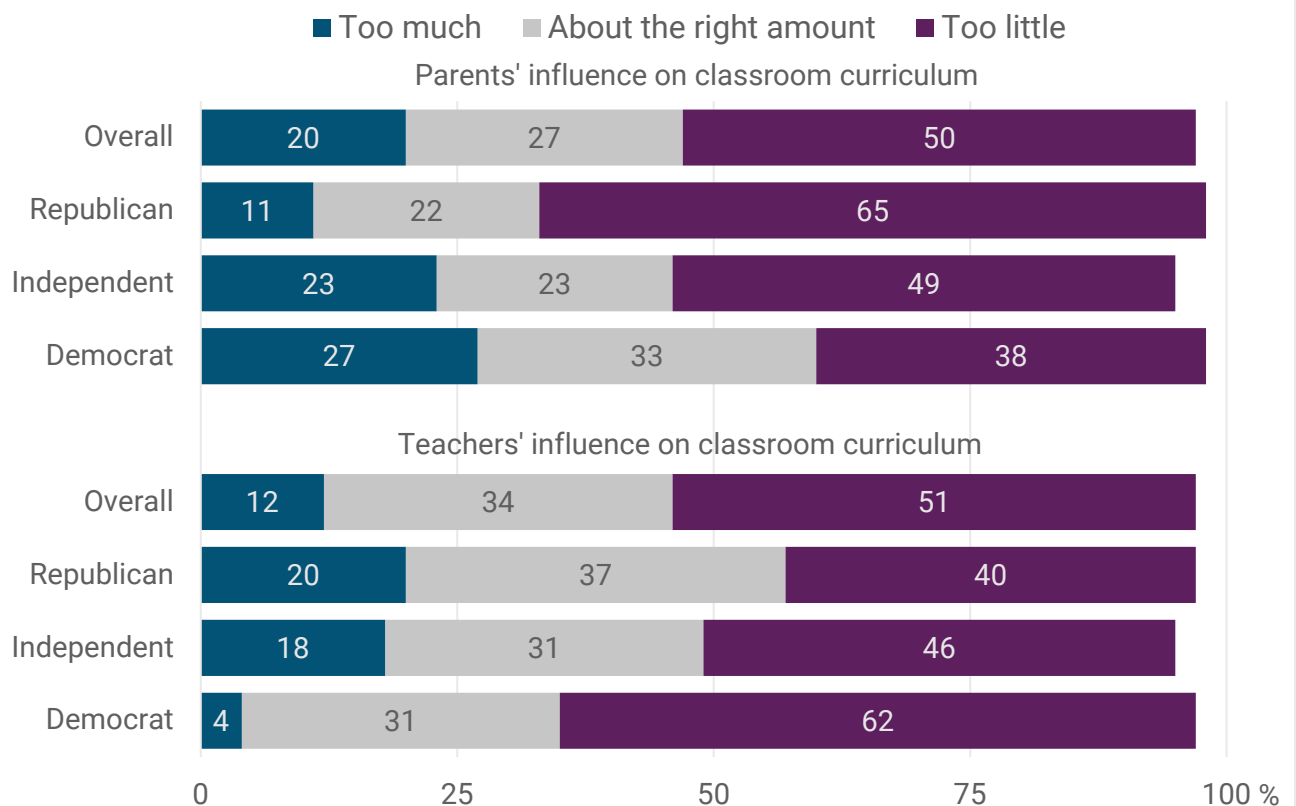
## HALF OF AMERICANS BELIEVE PARENTS AND TEACHERS DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH INFLUENCE ON CLASSROOM CURRICULUM.

When it comes to who has a say in classroom instruction, 50% of Americans believe parents have too little influence on curriculum in public schools and 51% believe teachers have too little influence.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to think parents do not have enough influence on school curriculum, whereas Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say teachers do not have enough influence. However, parents of children attending K-12 schools do not differ from the rest of the public in terms of their views on parental influence on curriculum.

### Half of Americans believe parents and teachers do not have enough influence on classroom curriculum

Percent of adults



**Questions:** Do each of the following have too much, too little, or about the right amount of influence on the curriculum in public schools?

**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



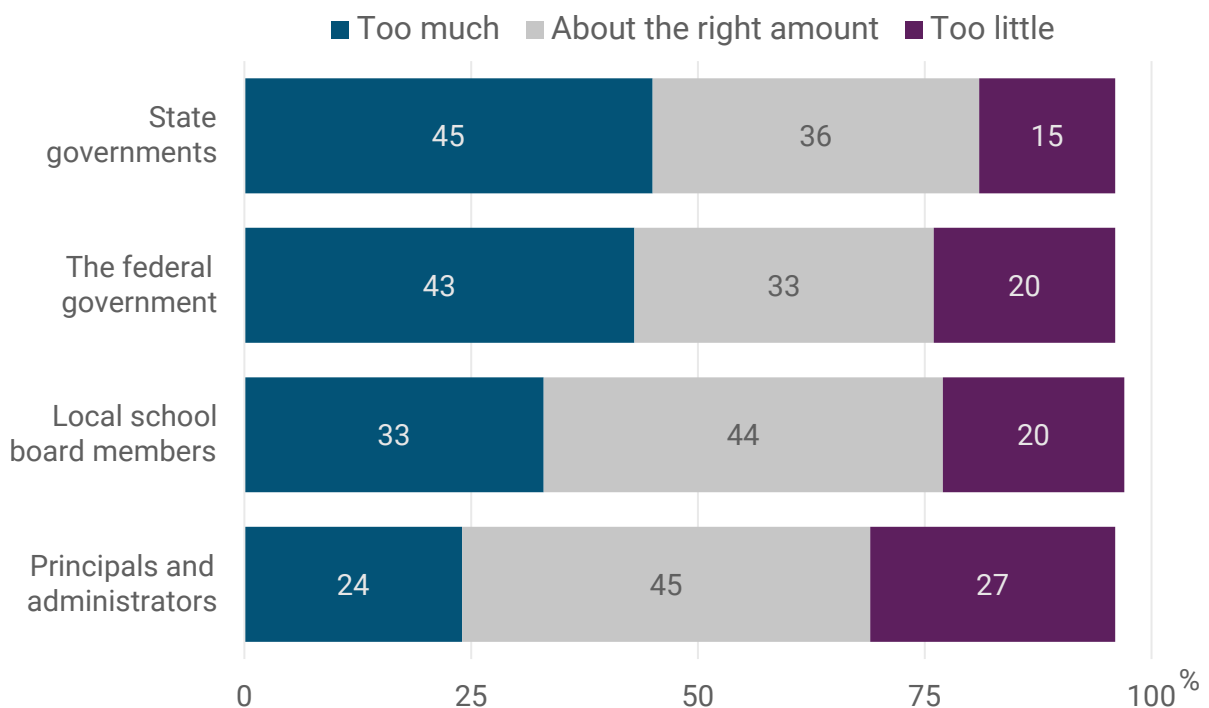
APNORC.org

When it comes to the influence on public school curriculum of local and federal governments, a third of the public believes local school board members have too much influence. Suburban residents (39%) are more likely than urban (29%) and rural residents (28%) to think school boards have too much influence on curriculum.

About a third of Americans (36%) believe state governments have about the right amount of influence on public school curriculum, as 45% feel they have too much influence and few (15%) report they have too little influence. Americans are more likely to say the federal government has too much influence on classroom instruction rather than too little influence.

### One-third of Americans believe local school boards have too much influence on public school curriculum

Percent of adults



**Questions:** Do each of the following have too much, too little, or about the right amount of influence on the curriculum in public schools?

**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

## **MOST AMERICANS OPPOSE POLICIES THAT PROHIBIT TEACHERS FROM TEACHING SEX AND SEXUALITY OR THAT BAN BOOKS ABOUT DIVISIVE TOPICS IN SCHOOLS, THOUGH LARGE PARTISAN DIFFERENCES EMERGE.**

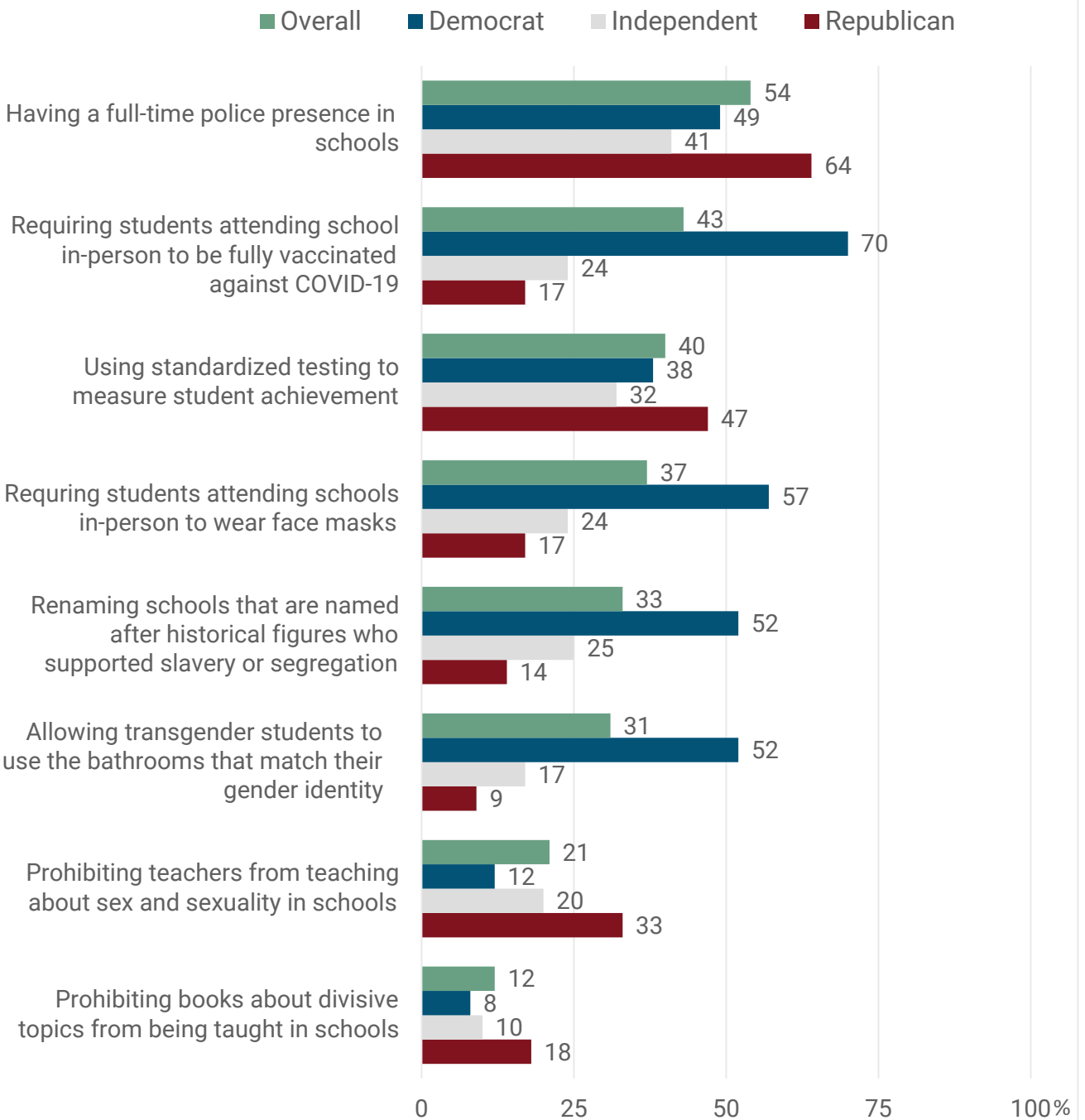
A majority of Americans (58%) oppose policies that prohibit books about divisive topics from being taught in schools and 53% oppose policies that prohibit teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality in schools. When it comes to allowing transgender students to use bathrooms that match their gender identity, the public is more divided – 30% favor and 41% oppose. The public is also divided about renaming schools that are named after historical figures who supported slavery or segregation, with 33% favoring and 39% opposing.

Opinions on each of these issues are related to partisanship. While few support prohibiting books about divisive topics in schools, Republicans are more likely to favor the policy. Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to favor prohibiting schools from teaching about sex and sexuality. In contrast, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to favor allowing transgender students to use their preferred bathrooms and renaming schools named after historical figures who supported slavery or segregation.

When it comes to COVID-19 precautions in public schools, 43% favor vaccine mandates and 37% favor mask mandates for students attending school in-person. Partisan differences emerge with COVID-19 policy, but differences also emerge between parents of children attending K-12 schools and those who are not parents of school-age children. Parents of children attending K-12 schools are less likely than the rest of the public to favor both vaccine mandates (33% vs. 46%) and mask mandates (29% vs. 39%) for children attending school in-person.

## There are significant partisan differences toward policies in K-12 schools

Percent of adults who strongly or somewhat favor



**Question:** Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose each of the following as it relates to K-12 public schools?

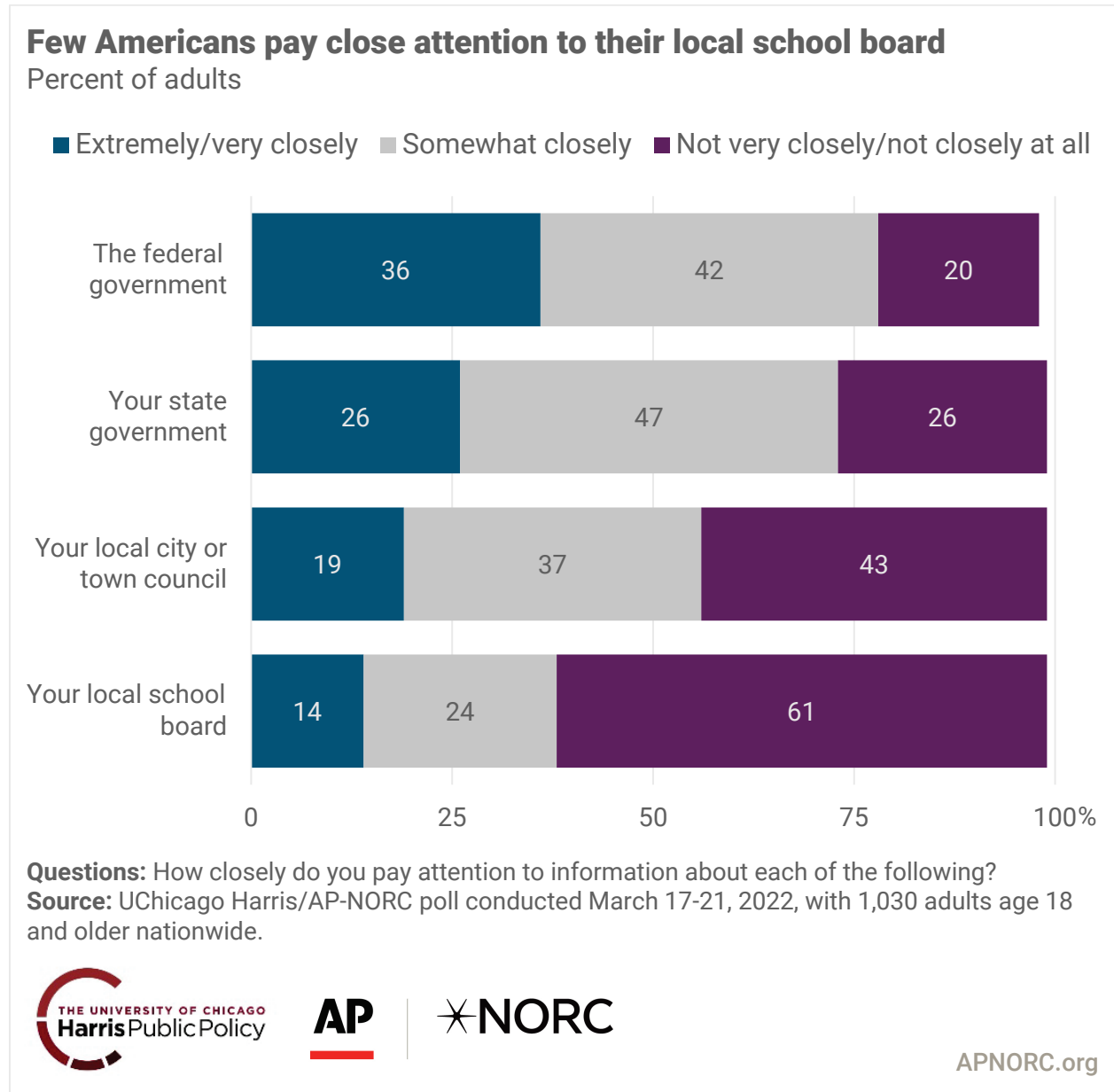
**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

## FEW PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THEIR LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD OR HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE INSTITUTION.

Americans tend to not pay as close attention to their local school board as they do state and federal governments. Most Americans report that they pay attention to information about their local school board not very closely or not closely at all, and just 14% pay attention extremely or very closely. Parents of children attending K-12 schools are more likely than the rest of the public to pay attention to their local school board extremely or very closely (26% vs. 10%).

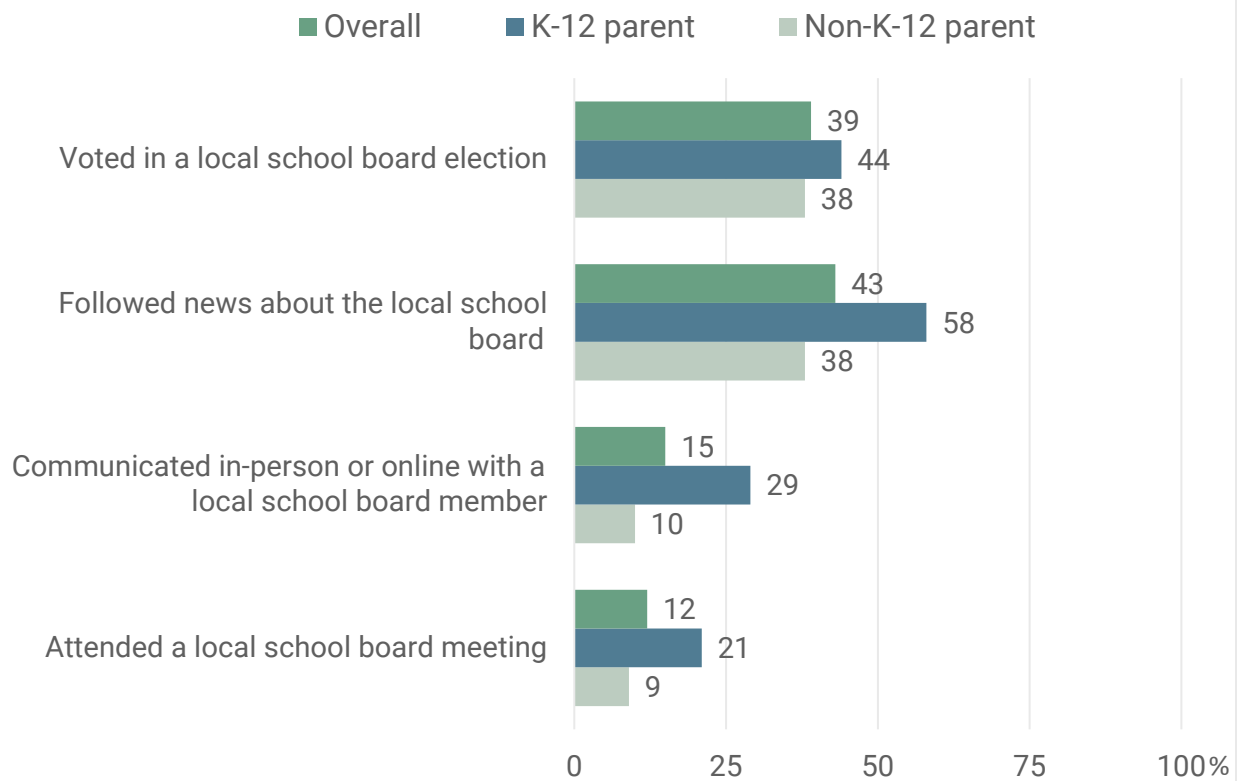


When it comes to engagement with their local school board, few Americans have interacted with the institution in the last five years beyond following news or voting in school board elections. Parents of children attending K-12 schools are more likely than others to have attended a local school board meeting, communicated with a local school board member, or followed news about the local school board in the last five years.



## Few have engaged with their local school board beyond following news and voting in school board elections

Percent of adults who did any of the following in the last five years



**Question:** Have you done any of the following in the last 5 years?

**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



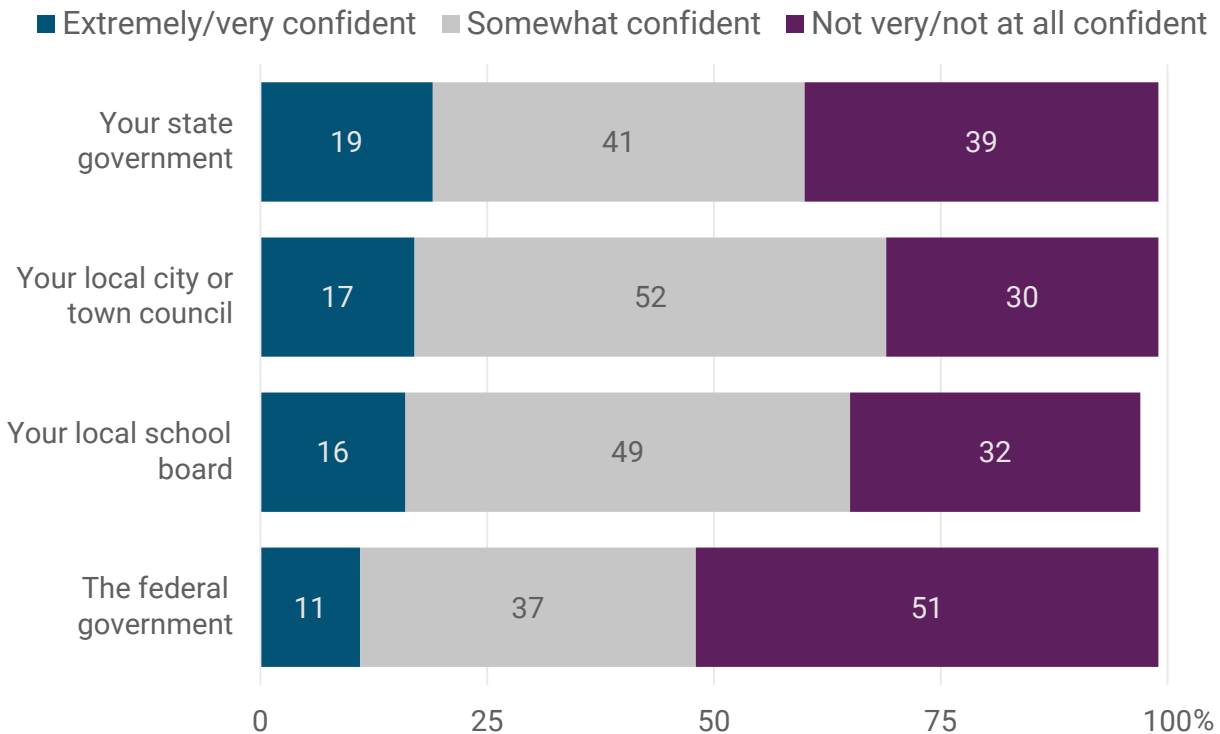
APNORC.org

Rural residents are more likely than suburban residents to have communicated with a local school board member (20% vs. 12%) or to have followed news about their local school board (51% vs. 39%).

Public confidence in school boards is similar to the sentiment toward other local governments with two-thirds of Americans being at least somewhat confident in their local school board. Although few are very confident in their state or local governments, confidence is higher than it is for the federal government.

### Few Americans are very confident in their local school board

Percent of adults



**Questions:** How confident are you in each of the following?

**Source:** UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll conducted March 17-21, 2022, with 1,030 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Staff from Harris Public Policy and The AP-NORC Center collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between March 17 and 21, 2022, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,030 completed the survey – 965 via the web and 65 via telephone. Panel members were invited by email or by phone from an NORC telephone interviewer. Interviews were conducted in English. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. The final stage completion rate is 21.7 percent, the weighted household panel recruitment rate is 17.1 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 75.6 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 2.8 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error for parents of children attending K-12 schools is +/- 8.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error may be higher for other subgroups.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error and there may be other unmeasured error in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 38 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under and oversampling resulting from the study specific sample design.

Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2021 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

Complete questions and results are available at: [apnorc.org](https://apnorc.org)

Additional information on the AmeriSpeak Panel methodology is available at: <https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx>.

For more information, email [info@apnorc.org](mailto:info@apnorc.org).

## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO HARRIS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

One of the largest graduate professional schools at the University of Chicago, Harris Public Policy has been driven by the belief that evidence-based research, not ideology or intuition, is the best guide for public policy. For more than three decades, our exceptional community of scholars, students, and alumni have applied this exacting perspective to the world's most pressing problems using the latest tools of social science. Through our undergraduate and graduate programs, we empower a new generation of data-driven leaders to create a positive social impact throughout our global society. For more information visit <https://harris.uchicago.edu/>

## ABOUT THE ASSOCIATED PRESS-NORC CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

- The Associated Press (AP) is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day. [www.ap.org](http://www.ap.org)
- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest objective and nonpartisan research institutions in the world. [www.norc.org](http://www.norc.org)

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals. In its 10 years, The AP-NORC Center has conducted more than 250 studies exploring the critical issues facing the public, covering topics like health care, the economy, COVID-19, trust in media, and more. Learn more at [www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org)