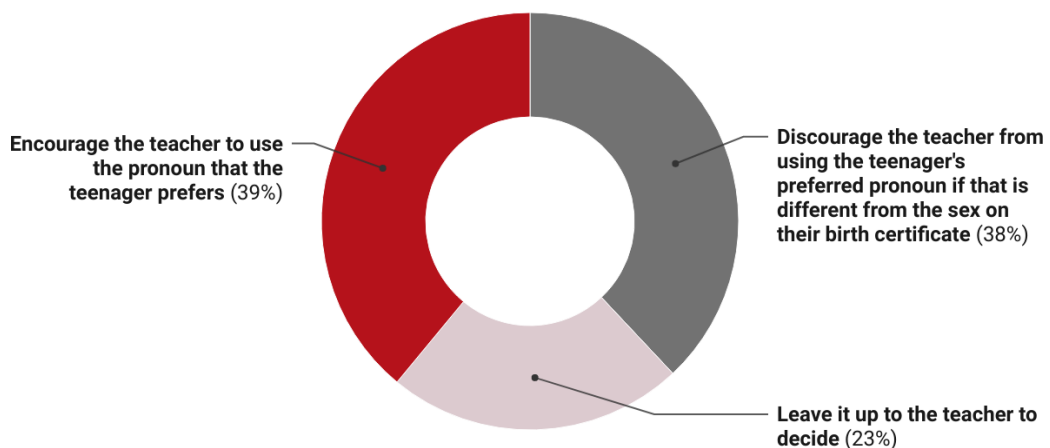


Mood of the Nation: What Americans think about LGBTQ-related policies at school

EMBARGOED UNTIL June 8, 2023, 12:01 A.M. Easter Standard Time

American adults are evenly split on whether teachers should be allowed to use teen students' preferred pronouns

"If a teenager asks a teacher to use a particular pronoun – he, she or they – which do you think is the best policy? School policy should..."



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.
N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points.

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Summary and key findings

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy's latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults May 12 through 18, 2023, included questions aimed at better understanding the opinions that American adults have about school policies related to several lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues.¹ Key findings include:

- **A majority of American adults (56%) think teachers should be allowed to display pictures of their spouse in the classroom, even if the teacher is in a same-sex marriage.**
 - Eighteen percent think teachers should only be allowed to display a picture of their spouse if they are in a heterosexual marriage.
 - Twenty-six percent think teachers should not be permitted to display a picture of their spouse at all.
- **Americans are evenly split on whether teachers should be encouraged to use teen students' preferred pronouns.**
 - Two-in-five think teachers should be encouraged to use teens' preferred pronouns, including 61% of Democrats and sizable minorities of born-again Christians (24%) and Republicans (18%).
 - Two-in-five think that teachers should be encouraged to only use the pronouns associated with students' sex assigned at birth, including a majority of Republicans (59%) and born-again Christians (54%).
 - The remaining one-in-five think that teachers should decide whether to use preferred pronouns.
- **Americans are also divided on if our how middle school teachers to discuss lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the classroom.**
 - Only one-in-three Americans (31%) feel middle school teachers should avoid all discussions of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the classroom.
 - But openness to general classroom discussion (30%) and assignment of books with adult LGB characters (10%) does not extend to assigning literature with young adult LGB characters, which only received support from 29% of those surveyed.
- **By a substantial margin, Americans think that parents of school children should have the most say in setting policies on these issues and that the state legislature and the governor should have the least influence.**

¹ While some questions are more narrowly tailored to "LGB people" and "LGBQ people" (a less common alternate for LGBQ) we refer to the entire series of questions as LGBTQ related.

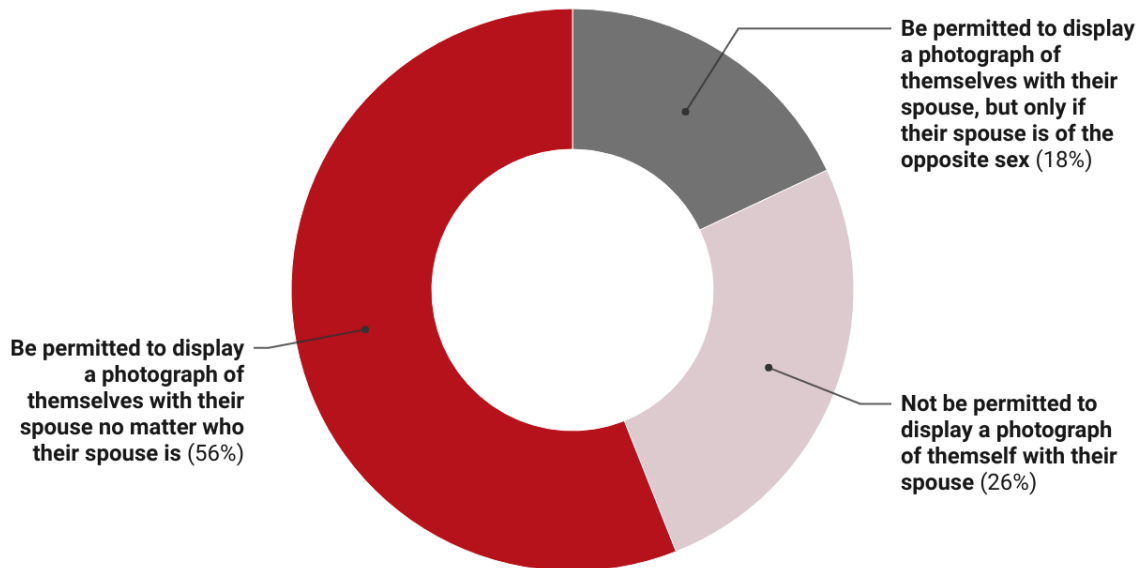
Over half of American adults believe teachers should be allowed to display photos of their spouse, no matter who it is, in the classroom

A majority of American adults support the right of elementary school teachers to display a photo of their spouse on their desk at school—even if the teacher’s spouse happens to be of the same gender as the teacher.

One-quarter think school policy should effectively side-step this issue by denying all elementary teachers the right to display photos of their spouses. One in five think that elementary teachers should only be allowed to display pictures of their spouse if the teacher is in a heterosexual marriage.

A majority think that a teacher should be allowed to display pictures of their spouse, including same-sex spouse

"Many elementary school teachers like to display a family photograph on their desk at school. Which of the following policies would you support for elementary schools in your community? Teachers should..."



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points.

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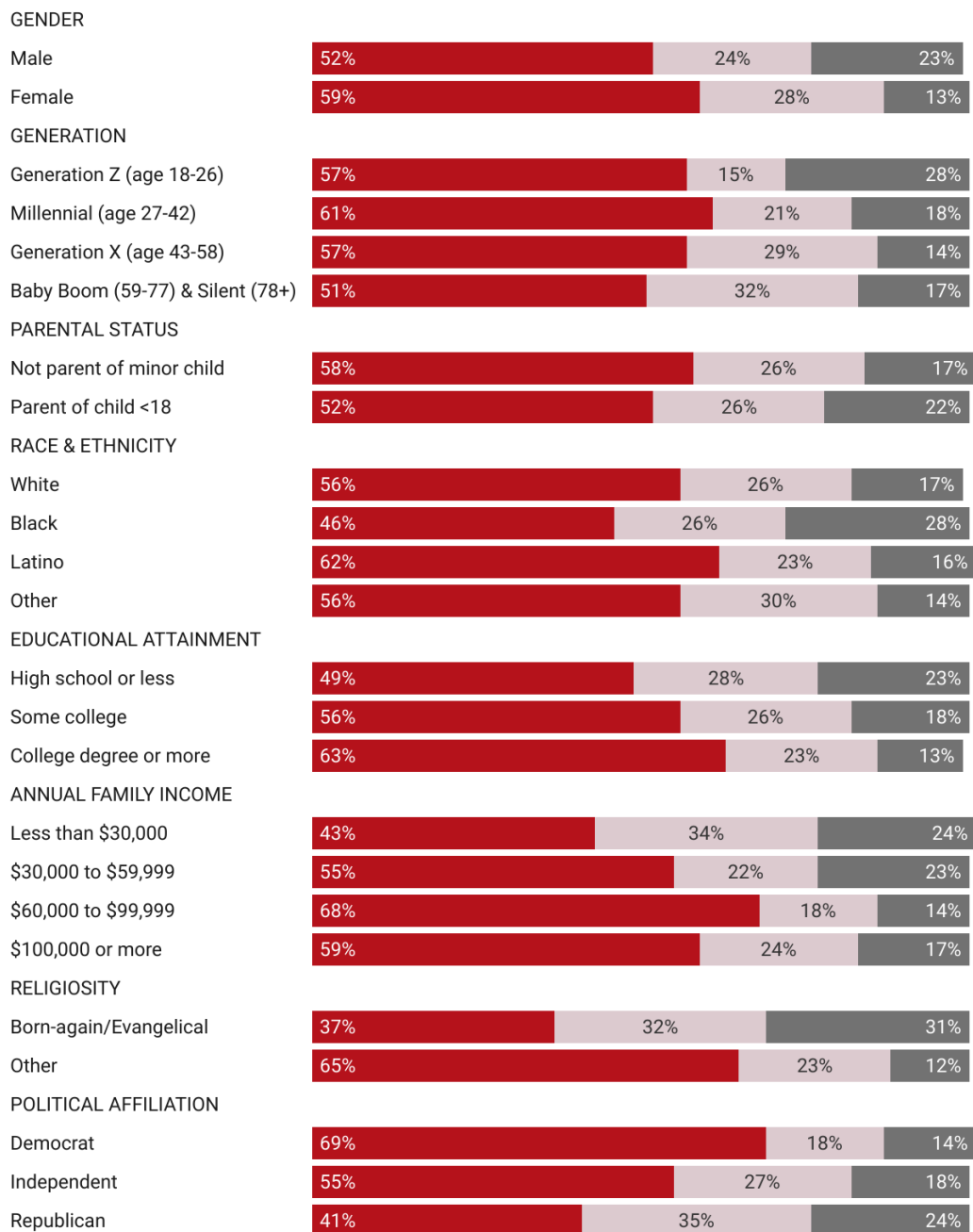
Majorities of most groups of American adults think schools should allow elementary teachers to display pictures of their spouse, even in the case of same-sex marriages.

Even among groups where less than half support this right—including Black Americans, those with less than a high school degree, those with annual family incomes below \$30,000, born-again or evangelical Christians, and Republicans—a plurality support the right of elementary teachers in same-sex marriages to display photos of their spouse in the classroom.

Majorities most groups of American adults think schools should allow elementary teachers to display pictures of their spouse, even in the case of same-sex marriages

"Many elementary school teachers like to display a family photograph on their desk at school. Which of the following policies would you support for elementary schools in your community?"

■ Allowed to display photo
 ■ Not allowed to display photo
 ■ Only display photo if spouse is opposite sex



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

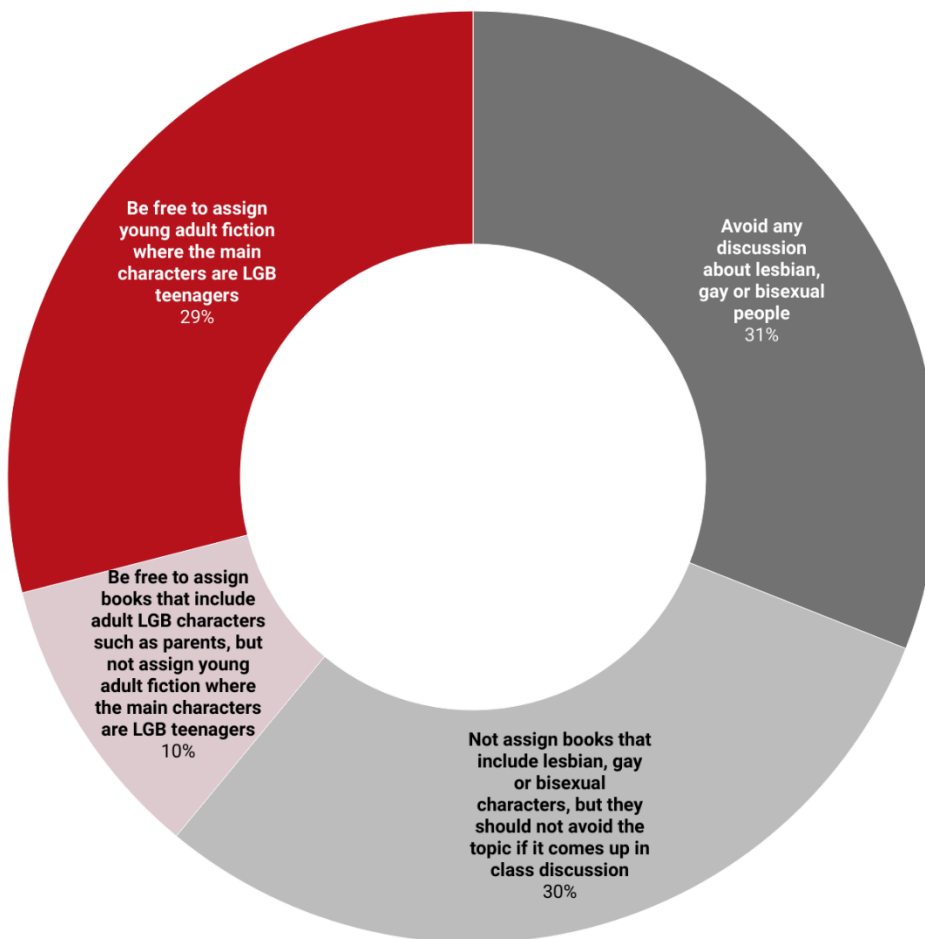
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A majority think it is acceptable for teachers to talk about lesbian, gay and bisexual people – but not to assign books featuring LGB characters

Seven in ten adults think it is acceptable for middle school teachers to have classroom discussions about lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people, but only four in ten think that teachers should assign books with LGB characters. Even fewer, three in ten, think it is acceptable for teachers to assign books with an LGB teen as a main character.

A minority think it is acceptable to assign middle schoolers books with lesbian, gay or bisexual characters

"This question concerns instruction in English or language arts in the middle school grades (6-8). Which of the following statements comes closest to your views, even if none is exactly right? Teachers should..."



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points.

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Most large groups of Americans follow the same general pattern observable in the adult U.S. population of as a whole: a majority favor allowing classroom discussion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, but a minority favor allowing teachers to assign books with lesbian, gay or bisexual characters.

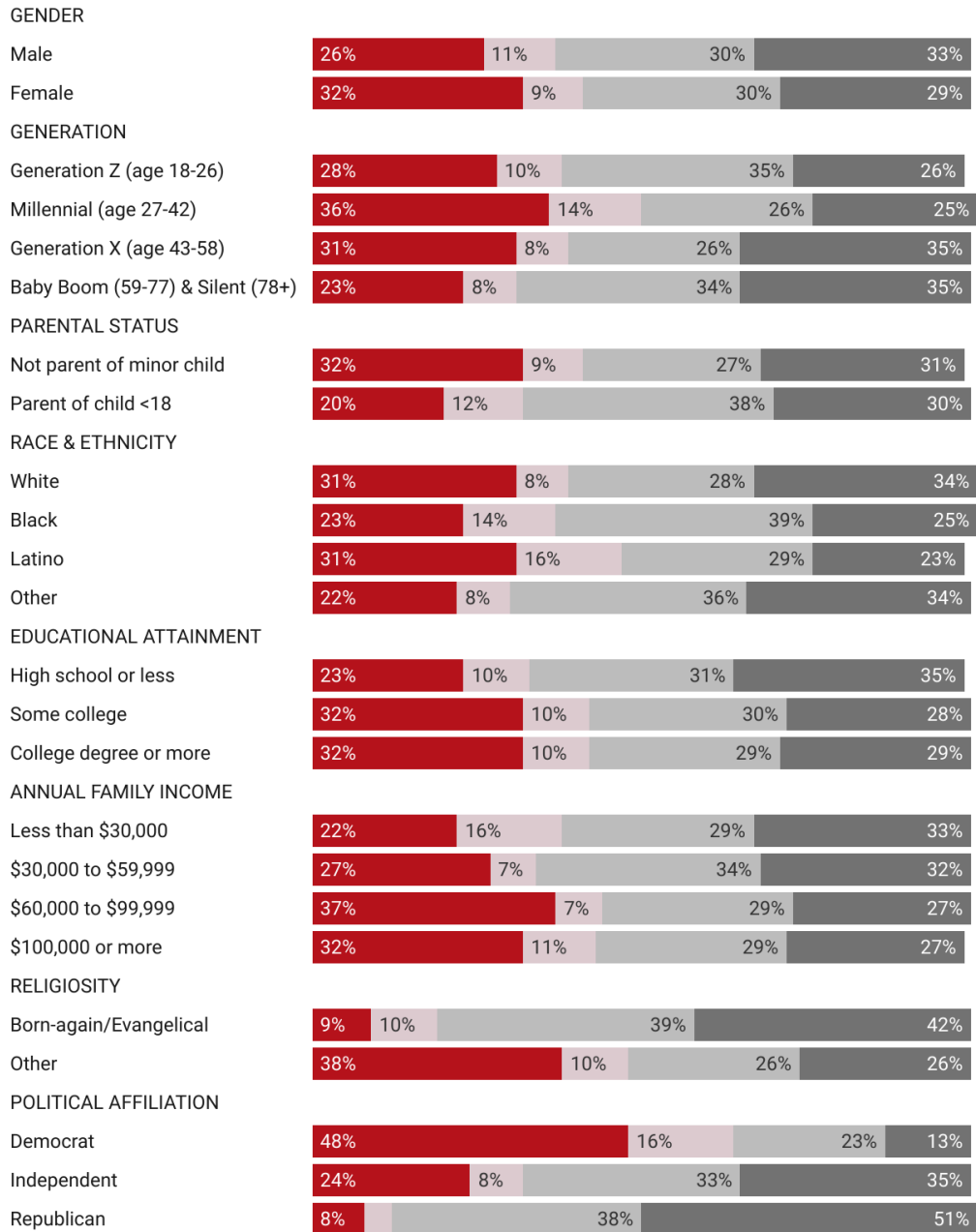
That pattern is especially pronounced among born-again or evangelical Christians. Only 19% in that group think that teachers should be allowed to assign books with LGB characters, and 42% think that teachers should avoid addressing the topic if it comes up in class. Similarly, half of all Republicans (including independents who lean Republican) think middle school teachers should avoid discussing lesbian, gay or bisexual people in the classroom.

Millennials and Democrats (including independents who lean Democrat) are the only groups in our analysis that included half or more supporting teachers' ability to assign books with lesbian, gay or bisexual characters. Forty-eight percent of Democrats indicate that middle school English teachers should be allowed to assign books that feature teen-age lesbian, gay or bisexual characters as main characters.

A majority of most large groups of Americans think teachers should avoid assigning books with lesbian, gay or bisexual characters

"This question concerns instruction in English or language arts in the middle school grades (6-8). Which of the following statements comes closest to your views, even if none is exactly right?"

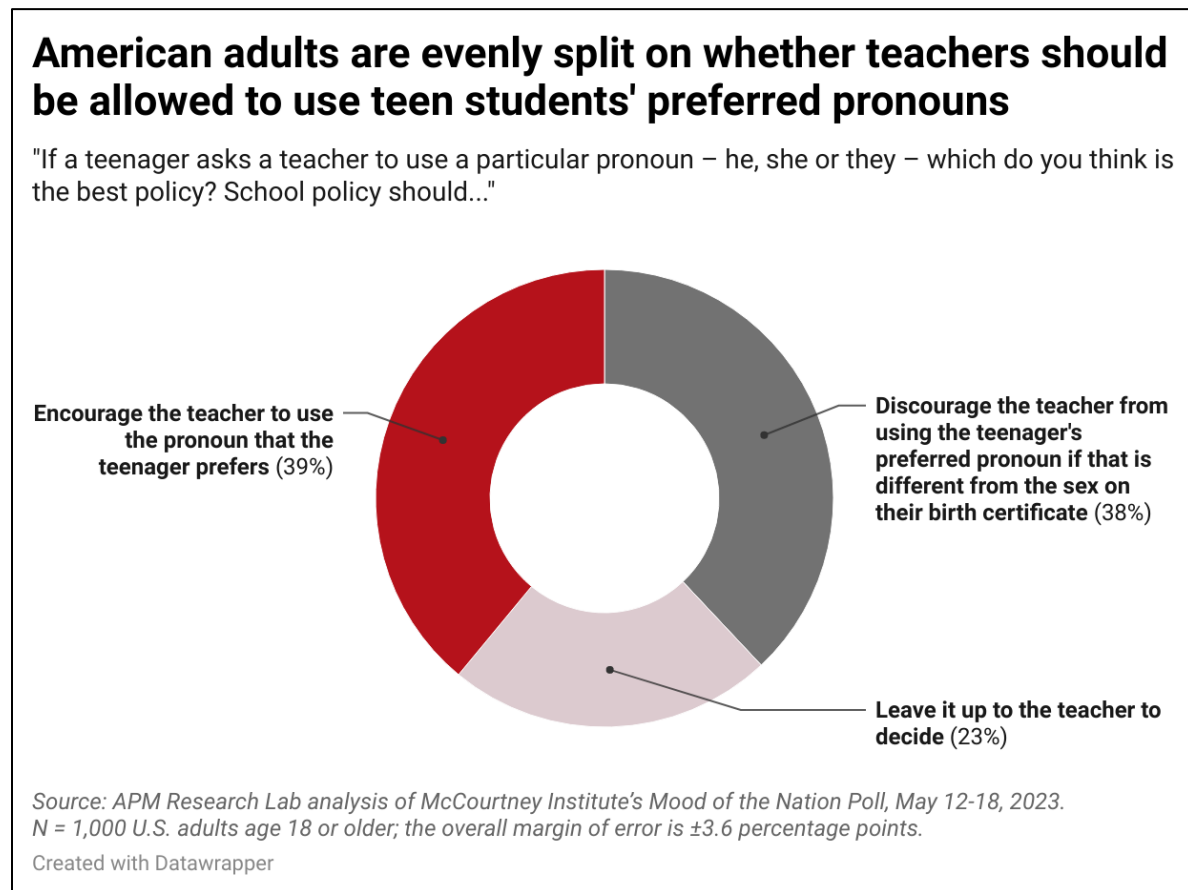
■ OK to assign books featuring LGB teens
 ■ OK to assign books with adult LGB characters
 ■ Do not assign books with LGB characters, but do not avoid discussion of LGB people
 ■ Avoid discussion about LGB people



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups. Created with Datawrapper

American adults are evenly split on whether teachers should be allowed to use teen students' preferred pronouns

Overall, nearly two in five adults think that school policy should encourage teachers to use preferred pronouns with teen students. A virtually identical proportion think that teachers should be discouraged from using pronouns other than those associated with a student's sex assigned at birth. The remainder of adults, 23%, think school policy should leave such decisions up to the teacher.



Most large groups of Americans are similarly split on the question of school policy regarding use of preferred pronouns. For example, when taking into account the survey's margin of error, equivalent proportions of male and female respondents indicate that teachers should be encouraged to adopt the pronouns preferred by teen students.² Similarly, about two in five of both parents of children under age

² As a nationally-representative sample with no oversamples this survey is unable to adequately represent the experiences and opinions of smaller groups such as those identifying as nonbinary.

18 and those who do not have children under age 18 think teachers should be encouraged to use teens' preferred pronouns.

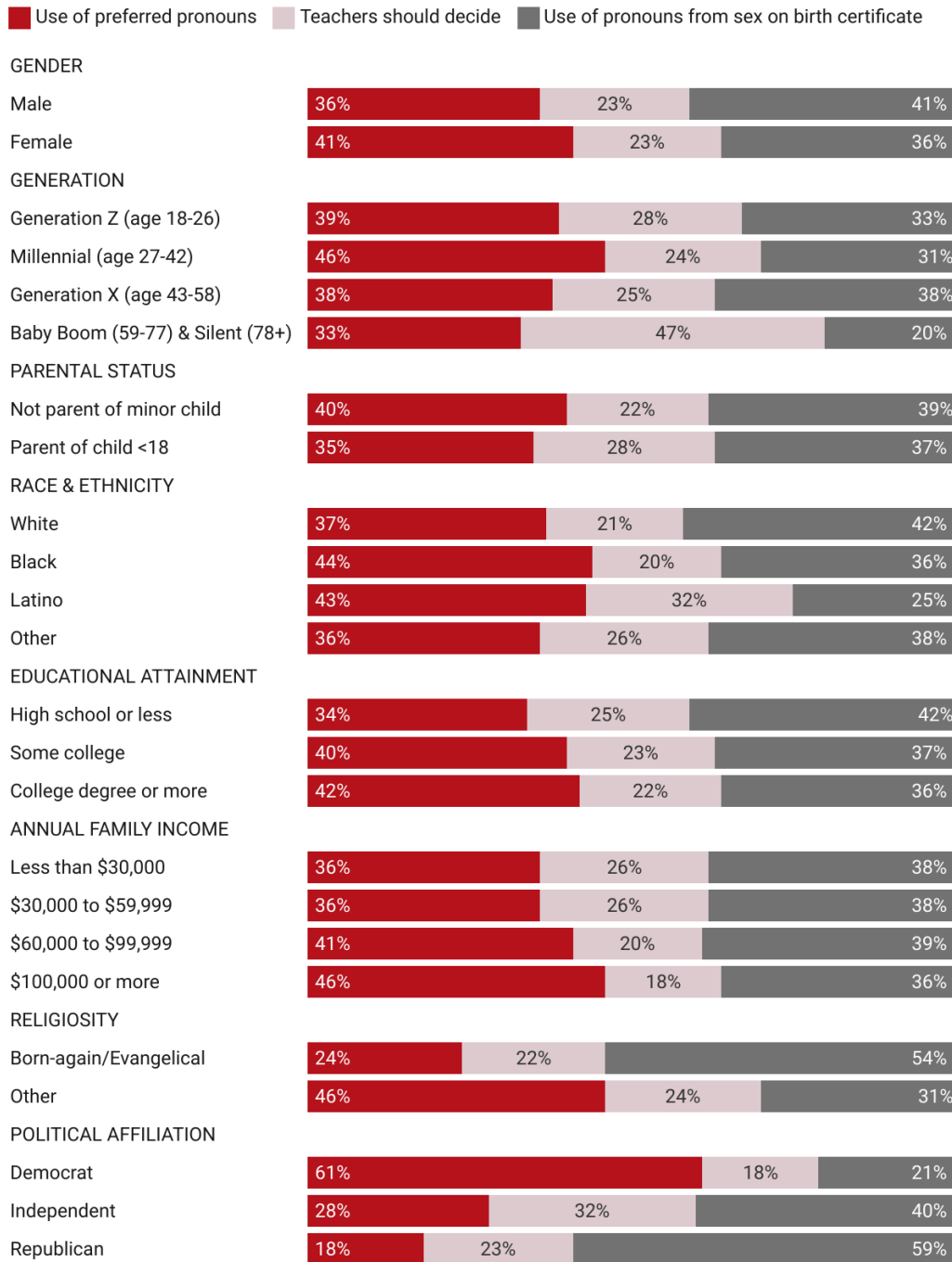
The major demarcations of differences in opinion regarding use of preferred pronouns in the classroom are religiosity and political affiliation. Over half of those who identify as either born-again or evangelical Christian think that school policy should discourage teachers from using preferred pronouns with teen students. An even larger percentage of Republicans, 59%, think teachers should be encouraged to use the pronouns associated with a student's sex assigned at birth.

Sizeable minorities of both born-again Christians (24%) and Republicans (18%), however, think that teacher should be encouraged to use preferred pronouns.

A majority of Democrats think that school policies should encourage teachers to use the pronouns that teen students prefer for themselves.

Majorities of born-again Christians and Republicans believe that teachers should be discouraged from using pronouns that differ from sex assigned at birth

"If a teenager asks a teacher to use a particular pronoun – he, she or they – which do you think is the best policy? School policy should encourage..."



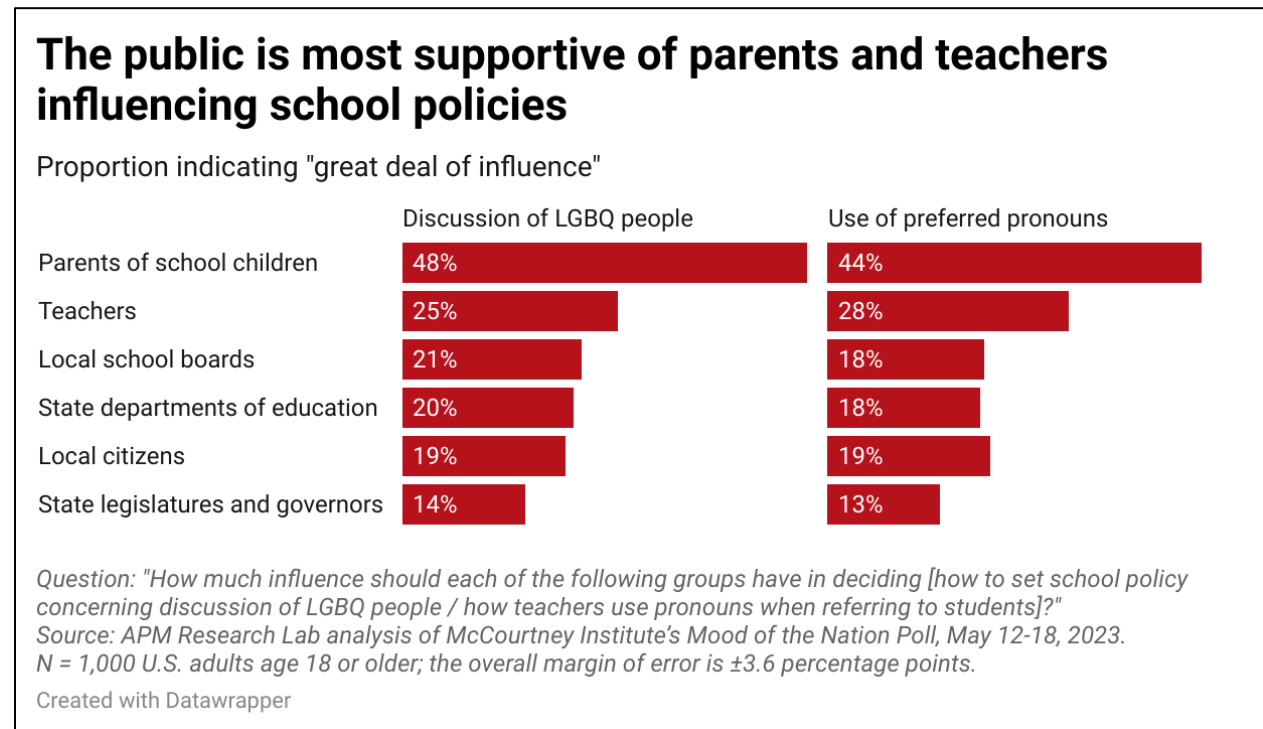
Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

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Who should influence LGBTQ-related school policies?

The May Mood of the Nation Poll included two questions aimed at understanding who the American public thinks should have the most influence in determining LGBTQ-related school policy. The first policy question has to do with whether and when schools should encourage discussion of same-sex attraction and LGBQ people. The second policy question relates to use of preferred pronouns—including he, she and they—in the schools.³

In response to both, “parents of children attending public schools” was the group supported by the largest proportion of survey respondents. Approaching half of all respondents felt that parents should have a great deal of influence in shaping school policies related to discussions of LGBQ people as well as how teachers approach the use of pronouns with children in their classrooms.



Teachers were the group that received the next most support from the general public in terms of influencing the two policies. The next tier of support went to local school boards, state departments of education, and local citizens “including those without children attending public schools”. About one in five adults think that each of these three groups should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the two school LGBTQ-related policies.

³ While the first question explicitly refers to “LGBQ people,” we refer to the set of questions as “LGBTQ-related” since the second question asks about preferred pronouns.

The public appears to have least confidence in those elected to state legislatures and governor’s offices, with only about one in seven indicating that those elected officials should have “a great deal of influence” over school policies related to discussion of LGBTQ people and use of preferred pronouns.

This general pattern holds for most of the large groups of Americans that we were able to analyze. Especially high proportions of older generations, Black Americans, born-again or evangelical Christians and Republicans think parents should exercise a great deal of influence on school policy related to both discussion of LGBTQ people and use of preferred pronouns.

Teachers received especially high support among younger generations, parents, Black and Latino Americans, those with annual family incomes of \$100,000 or more and Democrats. (See graphs on the following pages.)

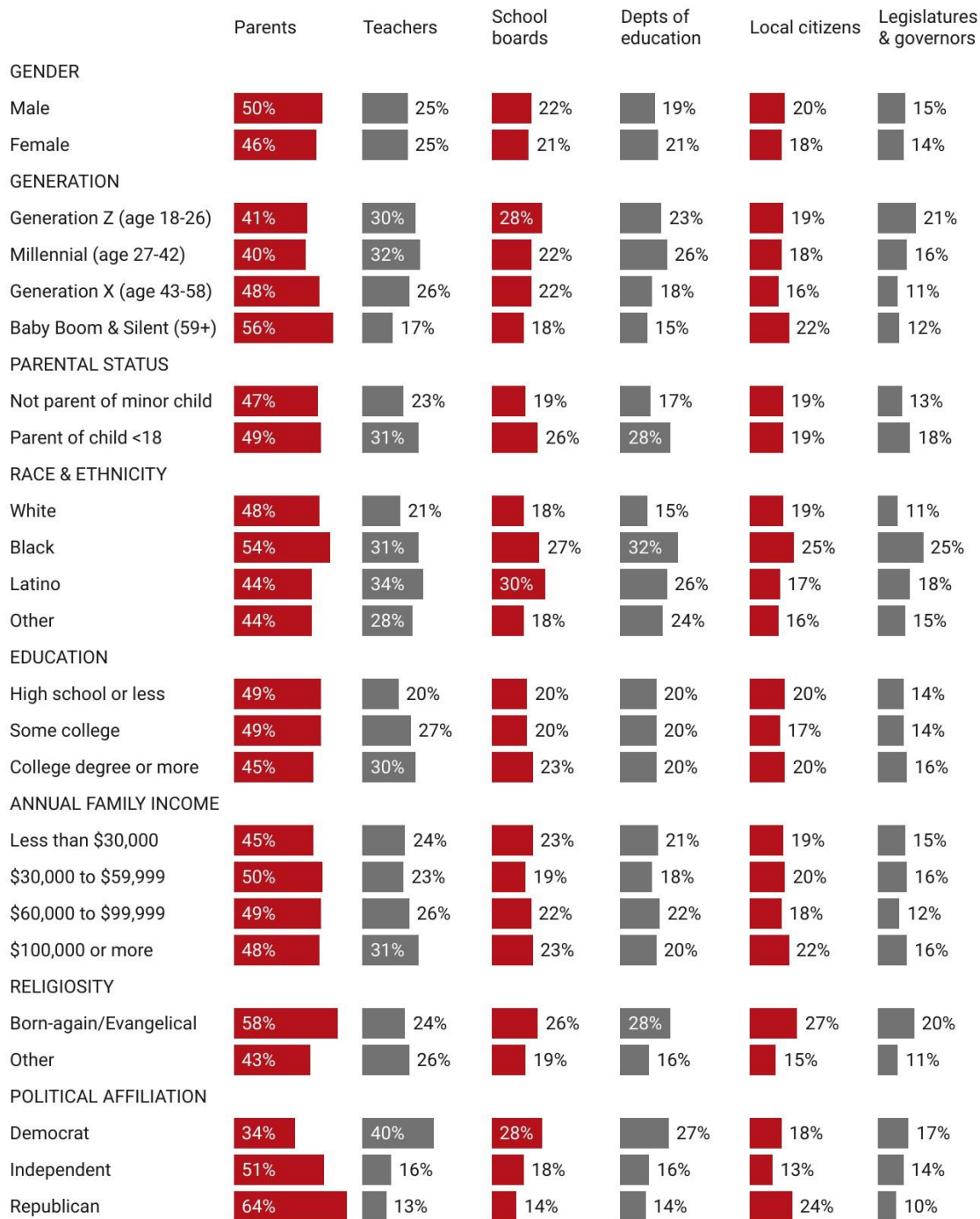
Notably, these results do not appear unique to school policies related to sexual preference and gender identity. The December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll found very similar results when asking a sample of American adults about how much influence the same list of groups should exercise over how schools should approach teaching about (a) slavery and race, (b) evolution, and (c) sexual education.⁴ In each case parents of school children receive the highest support for influencing school policy, followed by Teachers, with state legislatures and governors receiving the least support.

“What stands out is that the American people are telling governors and state legislators to butt out of these school controversies, and let things be hashed out by teachers, school boards and parents.”

⁴ See: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/teaching-race-evolution-sex>.

Most groups of Americans indicate highest support for parents over teachers, officials and other citizens as shapers of school policy related to discussion of LGBTQ people

Proportion indicating that each entity should have a "great deal of influence"

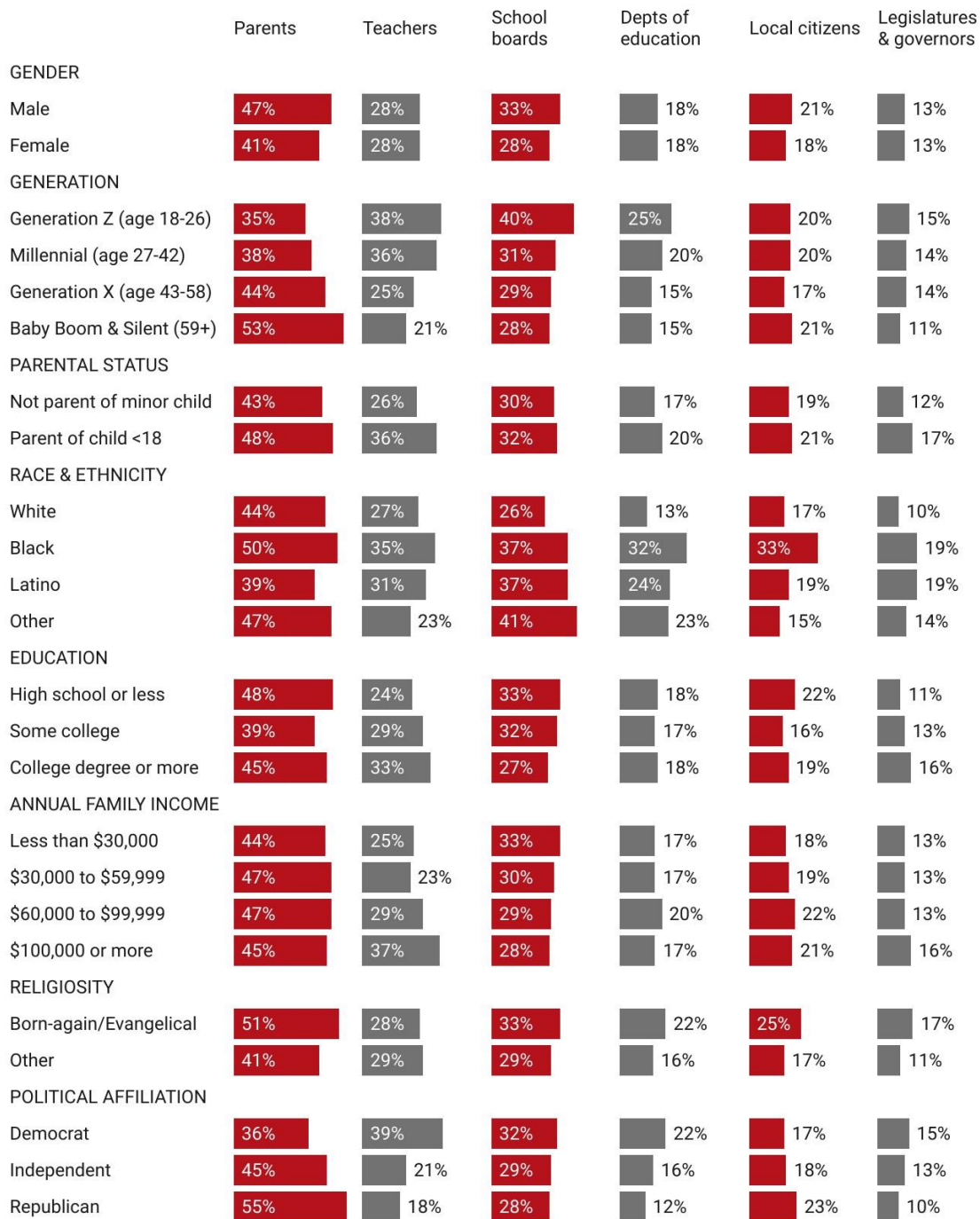


Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

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Most groups of Americans indicate highest support for parents over teachers, officials and other citizens as shapers of school policy related to use of preferred pronouns

Proportion indicating that each entity should have a "great deal of influence"



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

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Survey questions used in this report

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.⁵

To assess American adults’ opinions about school policies related to several lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. School systems throughout the United States are considering the appropriate grade level – if at all – to allow teachers to acknowledge that some people are sexually attracted to those of the same sex. If this discussion arose in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school policy concerning discussion of LBGQ people? A great deal of influence, a fair amount of influence, a little influence, or none at all?⁶
 - a. State government's Department of Education
 - b. The state legislature and governor
 - c. The local school board
 - d. Teachers
 - e. Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools
 - f. Parents of children attending public schools

2. School systems throughout the United States are setting policies concerning the use of students’ preferred pronouns. For example, a student may ask to be referred to as he, she, or they. If this discussion arose in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how teachers use pronouns when referring to students? A great deal of influence, a fair amount of influence, a little influence, or none at all?
 - a. State government's Department of Education
 - b. The state legislature and governor
 - c. The local school board
 - d. Teachers
 - e. Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools
 - f. Parents of children attending public schools

⁵ For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/mood-of-the-nation-poll-motn>

⁶ Note that while the questionnaire used the less common acronym LBGQ instead of LGBTQ, as far as we can tell respondents understood the intent of the question. Also note that the question did not include “T” for transgender since the main intent of this particular question was to understand opinions related to same-sex relationships.

3. This question concerns instruction in English or language arts in the middle school grades (grades 6-8). Which of the following statements comes closest to your views, even if none is exactly right?
 - a. Teachers should avoid any discussion about lesbian, gay or bisexual people.
 - b. Teachers should not assign books that include lesbian, gay or bisexual characters, but they should not avoid the topic if it comes up in class discussion.
 - c. Teachers should be free to assign books that include adult lesbian, gay or bisexual characters such as parents, but not assign young adult fiction where the main characters are LGB teenagers.⁷
 - d. Teachers should be free to assign young adult fiction where the main characters are LGB teenagers.

4. Many elementary school teachers like to display a family photograph on their desk at school. Which of the following policies would you support for elementary schools in your community?
 - a. Teachers should not be permitted to display a photograph of themselves with their spouse.
 - b. Teachers should be permitted to display a photograph of themselves with their spouse, but only if their spouse is of the opposite sex.
 - c. Teachers should be permitted to display a photograph of themselves with their spouse no matter who their spouse is.

5. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views? If a teenager asks a teacher to use a particular pronoun – he, she or they – which do you think is the best policy?
 - a. School policy should encourage the teacher to use the pronoun that the teenager prefers.
 - b. School policy should discourage the teacher from using the teenager's preferred pronoun if that is different from the sex on their birth certificate.
 - c. School policy should leave it up to the teacher to decide.

Note that the order in which the answer options were presented was rotated to avoid possible order effects. Also note that the survey included other questions, some of which will be reported separately, but this is the order in which these questions were asked.

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), generation (Silent or Boomer; X; Millennial; Z), parental status (parent or guardian of a child

⁷ The text of this answer category actually included an extra word ("if"): "Teachers should be free to assign books that include adult lesbian, gay or bisexual characters such as parents, but not *if* assign young adult fiction where the main characters are LGB teenagers." As far as we can tell, respondents were not distracted and understood the intent of the question.

under the age of 18 or not), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment (three categories), family income (four categories), religiosity (born-again, not born-again) and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican”).⁸

The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

⁸ As a nationally representative sample with no oversamples this survey is unable to adequately represent the experiences and opinions of smaller groups such as those identifying as LGBTQ, Indigenous Americans, or those affiliating with smaller political parties. The opinions of people from these and other small groups are represented in the findings, but we generally do not separate out the responses from groups with fewer than 100 respondents since the margin of error associated with small samples is so large as to render the associated findings (point estimates) potentially misleading.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group 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. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

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/>.

Contact: info@apmresearchlab.org | apmresearchlab.org

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 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2023 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, please see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute, particularly Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer who also provided input on the reporting.

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