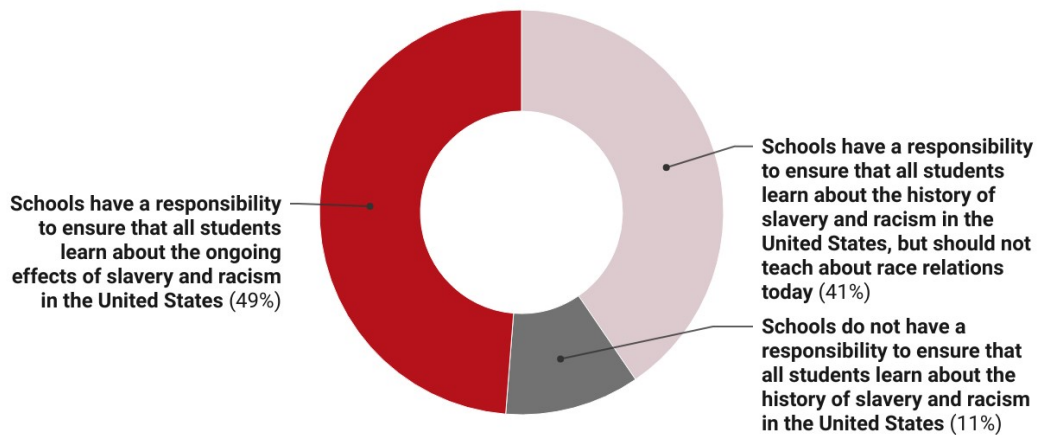


# Mood of the Nation: What Americans think schools should teach about slavery and racism, and who should influence that curriculum

June 16, 2023

## Half of Americans think that schools should teach about contemporary racism

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



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  $\pm 3.6$  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 understanding the opinions that American adults have related to what children should learn in school about the history of slavery and contemporary racial issues, as well as who they think should influence that curriculum.

## How should America's racial history be taught?

- Americans are split on whether schools should teach about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism.
  - Half of American adults (49%) indicate that schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism.
  - Forty-one percent indicate that schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the history of slavery and racism, but should not teach about race relations today.
  - Eleven percent indicate that schools do not have a responsibility to ensure that all students learn about the history of slavery and racism.

## Parents and non-parents hold similar opinions, but partisan polarization is substantial.

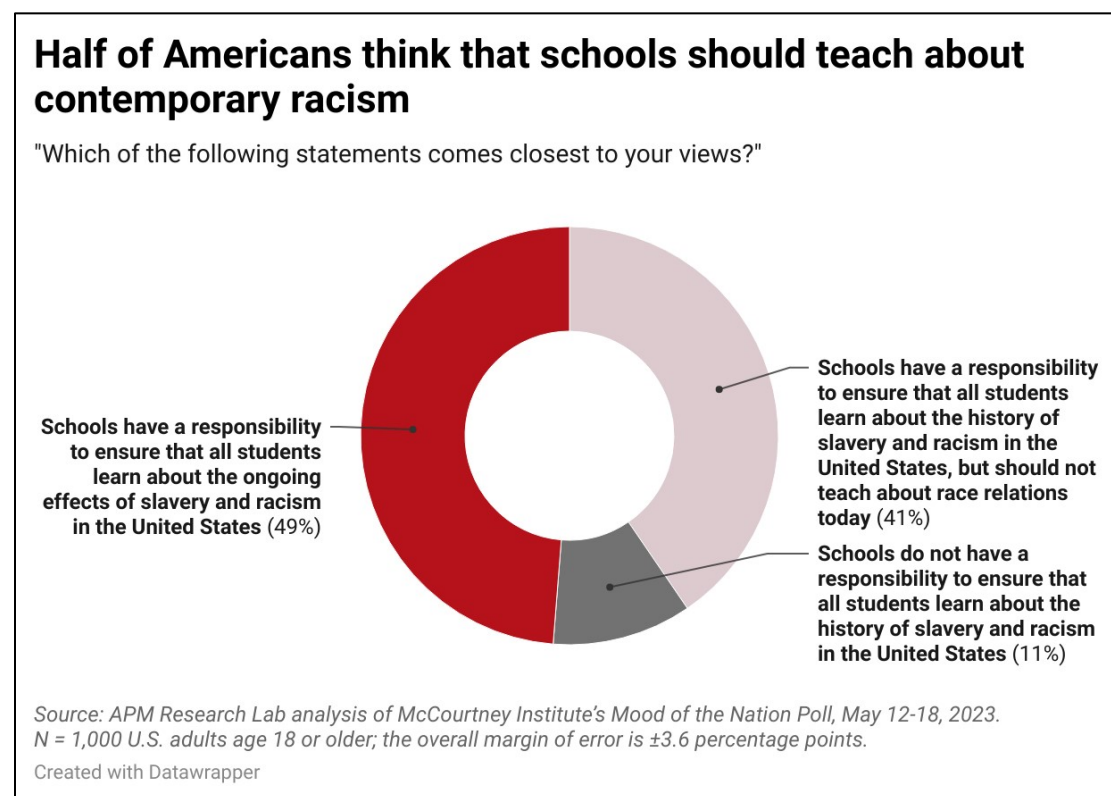
- Three-quarters of Democrats support teaching about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism, compared to one-quarter of Republicans.
- Parents of school-age children hold opinions nearly identical to those of the general public.

## Who should influence how local schools teach about race in America?

- Americans are most supportive of parents having influence over how slavery and race are taught in their local schools, followed by teachers themselves.
- In contrast, a majority of Americans say that governors and state legislatures should have little or no influence in how these topics are taught in local schools.

# Americans are split on whether schools should teach about the on-going effects of slavery and racism

Nine in ten American adults think that schools have a responsibility to teach children about slavery, but only half think those lessons should extend to “the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in the United States.” These results are virtually identical to the results when the same question was included in the December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll.<sup>1</sup>



Like the overall opinions, group-by-group opinions in response to this question do not appear to have shifted much since late 2021. Now as then, somewhat higher proportions of younger generations, Black Americans, adults with at least a college education, and especially Democrats favor having the schools teach about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in the U.S.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/teaching-race-evolution-sex>

As in 2021, a slim majority of parents of school age children support a more expansive treatment race than includes the ongoing effects of slavery and racism, whereas just under half of those without children at home endorse that position. The difference is not statistically significant, however, suggesting little difference between the opinions of parents and others on this question.

There are some differences, however. Most notably, since the 2021 survey the proportion of Black Americans indicating that schools should teach about the ongoing effects of slavery fell from 79% to 62%. These surveys included only 111 and 115 Black Americans, in 2021 and 2023 respectively, but the change is beyond the margin of error associated with the group, potentially signaling a real change in opinion in that population. In both surveys, however, only a small minority of Black Americans preferred that schools avoid teaching about slavery altogether.

On the flip side, the proportion of both Latinos and higher-income Americans believing that schools should teach about the ongoing-effects of slavery and racism grew by 5 and 8 percentage points, respectively. These changes are not statistically significant, but help explain why the overall result is virtually unchanged since 2021.

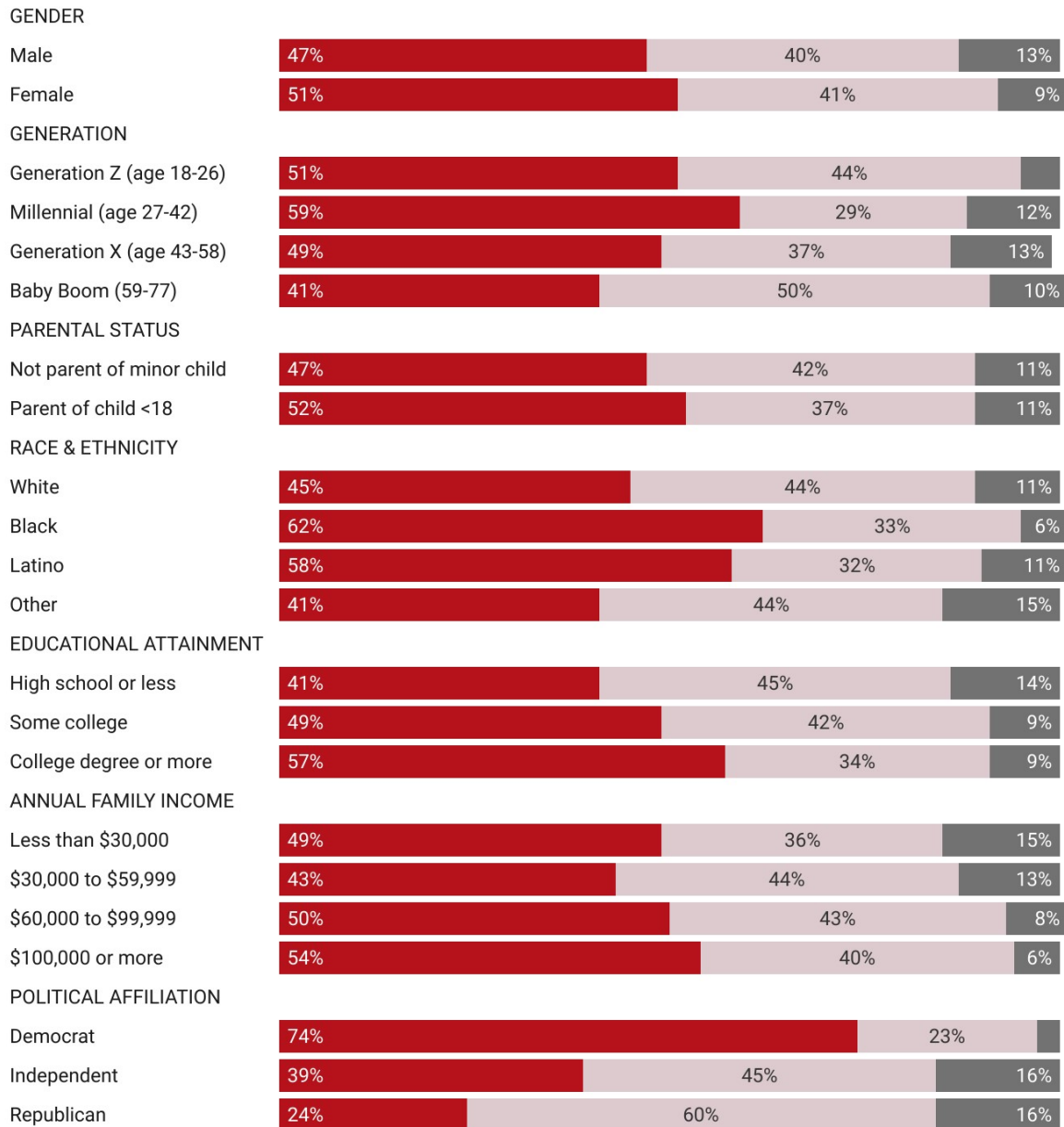
Additionally, there may have been a shift in opinion among higher income Americans. In the 2021 survey 46% of those with annual family incomes of \$100,000 or more supported teaching about the on-going effects of slavery and racism, while in the 2023 survey that percentage has grown to 54%.

As in 2021, the biggest difference among groups we included in the analysis followed political affiliations. In both surveys about three-quarters of Democrats support teaching about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism. In 2021 16% of Republicans supported that position compared to 24% in the recent poll.

# Strong majorities of Millennials, Black and Latino Americans, college graduates, and Democrats think schools should teach about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism

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

■ Teach the ongoing effects of slavery & racism
 ■ Teach slavery, but not about race relations today
 ■ Schools not responsible for teaching about slavery & racism

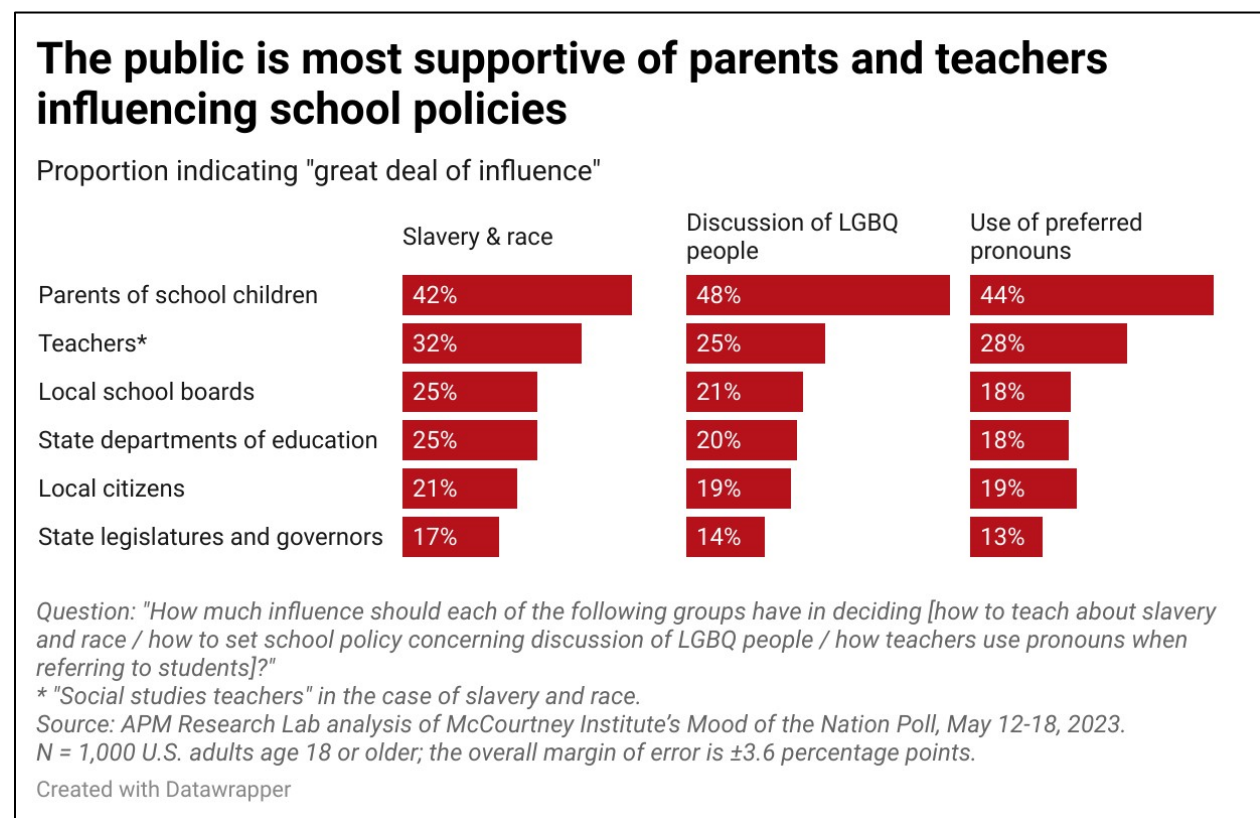


Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

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# Americans are most supportive of parents having influence over how slavery and race are taught in their local schools

When asked how much influence six different groups, from parents to elected officials, should have on how slavery and race are taught in their local schools, American adults express most support for parents. Forty-two percent indicated that parents of school children should have a “great deal of influence,” followed by 32% indicating the same for social studies teachers, 25% for both local school boards and state departments of education, 21% for local citizens and only 17% for state legislatures and governors.



This pattern of support was very similar in response to parallel questions asking how much influence each of the listed entities should have on school policies related to discussion of

lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer people as well as policies related to use of preferred pronouns in school settings.<sup>2</sup>

The results were also virtually identical to results from the December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll, which first posed the question of who should influence how schools teach slavery and race. That survey also asked how much influence the same set of entities should have over how schools teach evolution, sexual education, and how schools approach COVID policies. In each case parents of school children received the most support and the state legislature and governor received the least support.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look at support for the two groups that Americans think should have the most influence on how schools teach about slavery and race – parents and social studies teachers – reveals some interesting differences:

By generation:

- Nearly half of Generation X and Baby Boomers think parents should have a great deal of influence over how slavery and racism are taught, compared to one-third of both Generation Z and Millennials.
- Over 40% of Millennials think social studies teachers should have a great deal of influence over how slavery and racism are taught, compared to one-quarter of Generation X and Baby Boomers.

By political affiliation:

- Half of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents think parents should have a great deal of influence over how slavery and racism are taught, compared to one-third of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents.
- Half of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents think social studies teachers should have a great deal of influence over how slavery and racism are taught, compared to one-in-five Republicans and Republican-leaning independents.

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<sup>2</sup> For complete reporting on the survey's findings on LGBTQ-related school policies, see:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-lgbtq-issues-in-schools>.

<sup>3</sup> See "How Americans think schools should teach about race, evolution and sex,"

(<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/teaching-race-evolution-sex>).



# Support for parental influence on how schools teach about slavery and race is particularly strong among older generations and Republicans

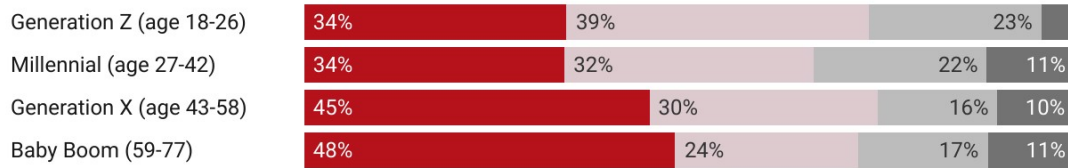
"Public schools everywhere are trying to determine how to teach about the history of race and racial discrimination in the United States. How much influence should parents of children attending public schools have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race in your local public schools?"

■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ A little ■ None at all

## GENDER



## GENERATION



## PARENTAL STATUS



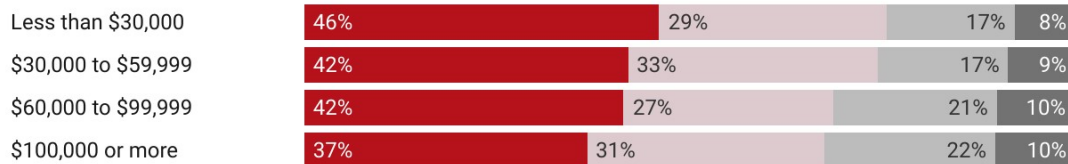
## RACE & ETHNICITY



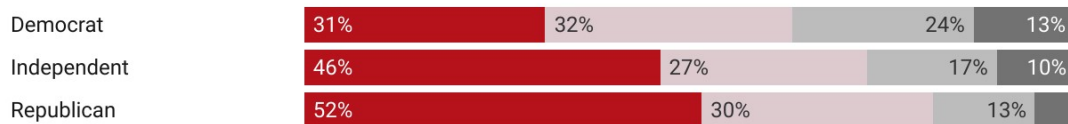
## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



## ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME



## POLITICAL AFFILIATION



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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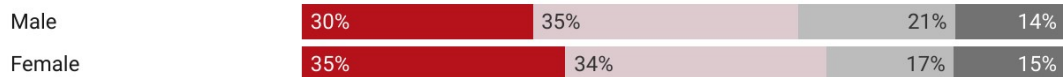


## Support for social studies teachers influence on how schools teach about slavery and race is particularly strong among millennials, Black and Latino Americans, and Democrats

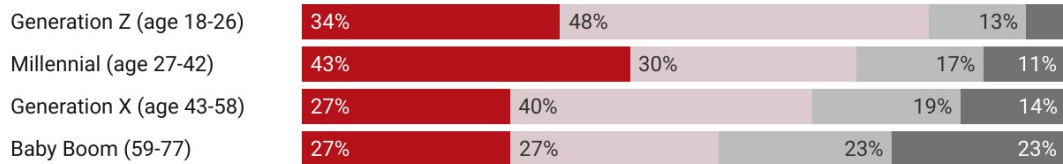
"Public schools everywhere are trying to determine how to teach about the history of race and racial discrimination in the United States. How much influence should social studies teachers have in deciding how to teach about slavery and race in your local public schools?"

■ A great deal
 ■ A fair amount
 ■ A little
 ■ None at all

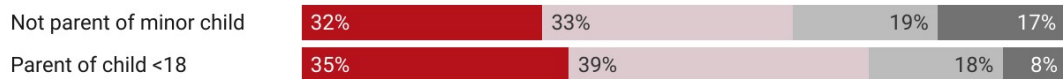
### GENDER



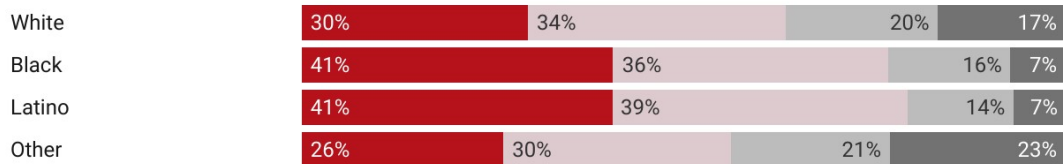
### GENERATION



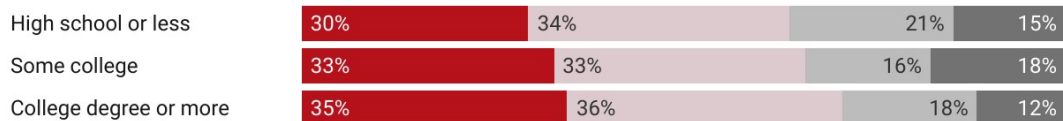
### PARENTAL STATUS



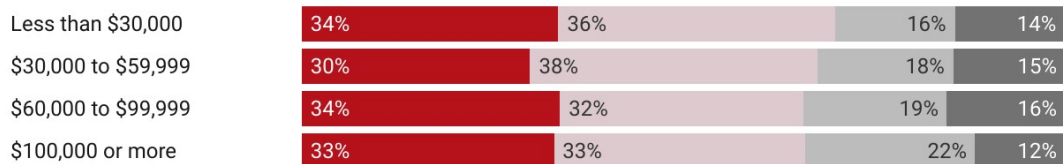
### RACE & ETHNICITY



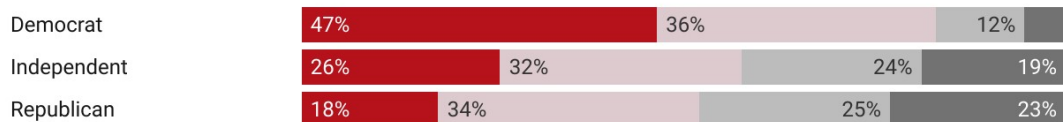
### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



### ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME



### POLITICAL AFFILIATION



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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# 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, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

## 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.<sup>4</sup>

To assess American adults’ opinions about what children should learn in school about the history of slavery and contemporary racial issues, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions in May 2023:

- 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, or 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
- 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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>

- 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.

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), 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), 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").<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> 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](mailto:info@apmresearchlab.org) | [apmresearchlab.org](http://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](mailto:democracyinst@psu.edu) | [democracy.psu.edu](http://democracy.psu.edu)

## Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab. Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer designed the questions and consulted on reporting.

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