

Partisan Polarization & K-12 Education

Results of a National Survey

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The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in *Education Week* and *EdWeek Market Brief*. The center also conducts independent research studies for external clients including for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

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Executive Summary

Political polarization is on the rise in the United States. K-12 education has not been immune to this trend. In the summer of 2025, the EdWeek Research Center took stock of the dimensions and impacts of polarization with a survey of more than 500 teachers, school leaders, and district leaders.

Survey results indicate that teachers and administrators disagree on multiple aspects of two hot button topics relevant to K-12: immigration and the role of the federal government in education. Relative to those who indicated they had voted for current President Donald Trump in 2024, teachers and administrators who said they voted for Kamala Harris were more likely to say school districts should advocate for the release of students detained for civil immigration offenses. Trump voters were more likely than their peers who voted for Harris to say they believed the federal government's role in education was too large. Even when it came to civics education—which is sometimes viewed as a salve for polarization, educators split along partisan lines, with Trump voters more likely to say its objectives should include patriotism and Harris voters more likely to embrace other objectives, including engaging in reasoned debate with those with different perspectives and collaborating to resolve conflict.

Despite these divisions, substantial areas of agreement remain: Trump and Harris voters were united in their opposition to federal involvement in private school choice/homeschooling and curriculum mandates. There were no significant differences in the share of Trump and Harris voters who said their decision to personally advocate for a student detained by immigration authorities would depend upon the particulars of the situation. Regardless of who they voted for in 2024, educators were most likely to identify the goals of civics education as explaining how government works and teaching students to understand their rights.

These results suggest that, while K-12 educators are not immune to the nation's partisan divides, many shared priorities remain.

Even when it came to civics education—which is sometimes viewed as a salve for polarization, **educators split along partisan lines**, with Trump voters more likely to say its objectives should include patriotism and Harris voters more likely to embrace other objectives.

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Introduction

Three decades ago, Americans were [more likely](#) to define themselves as moderate than as either liberal or conservative. That has changed.

Americans are now most likely to say they are conservative or very conservative (37 %-up from 36 % in 1992). A quarter of Americans identify as liberal or very liberal, up from 17% in 1992. Between 1992 and 2024, the share of Americans identifying as moderate declined from 43% to 34%.

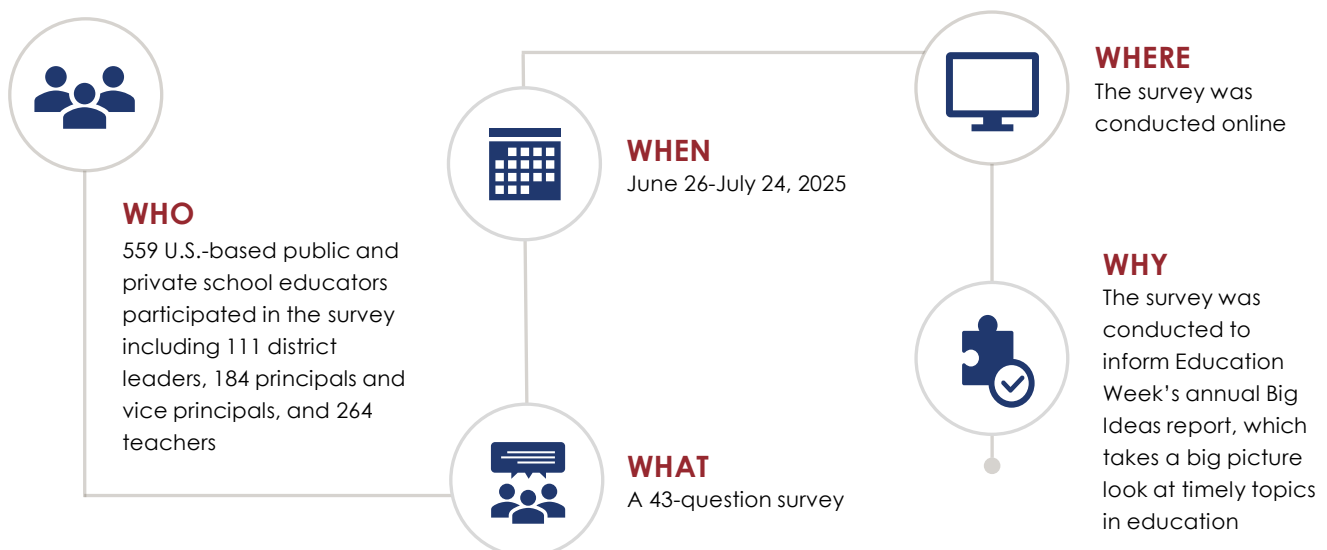
As the share of moderates has declined, political views have grown more extreme. According to a [2024 YouGov/Johns Hopkins poll](#), nearly half of the electorate says that members of the party they don't belong to are "downright evil." A March Pew Research Center poll found that 8 in 10 Americans say that Democrats and Republicans "not only disagree on plans and policies, but also cannot agree on basic facts."

K-12 education has not been immune to this polarization. Although the majority of school board meetings are civil, an analysis that spanned 2010 to 2023 found that conflict rose in 2020. A 2024 [UCLA study](#)

estimated that dealing with political conflict cost K-12 education \$3.2 billion during the 2023-24 school year due to expenses such as lawsuits, public relations, and employee time. Although just 28% of districts experienced high levels of conflict, an additional 38% reported a moderate amount.

In the summer of 2025, the EdWeek Research Center fielded a survey to explore the degree to which teachers and administrators are themselves polarized when it comes to two topics that have historically sparked partisan disagreement: immigration and the role of the federal government in K-12 education. The survey also explored beliefs and practices related to civics education, which is often [viewed](#) as a potential solution to political conflict and polarization. In order to better understand the degree to which partisan beliefs might be influencing the findings, survey respondents were asked which candidate they voted for in the 2024 Presidential elections—Kamala Harris, Donald Trump—or a third party. Throughout this report, the results of this question are used as a proxy for partisan beliefs, with the goal of shedding light on areas of agreement and disagreement.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

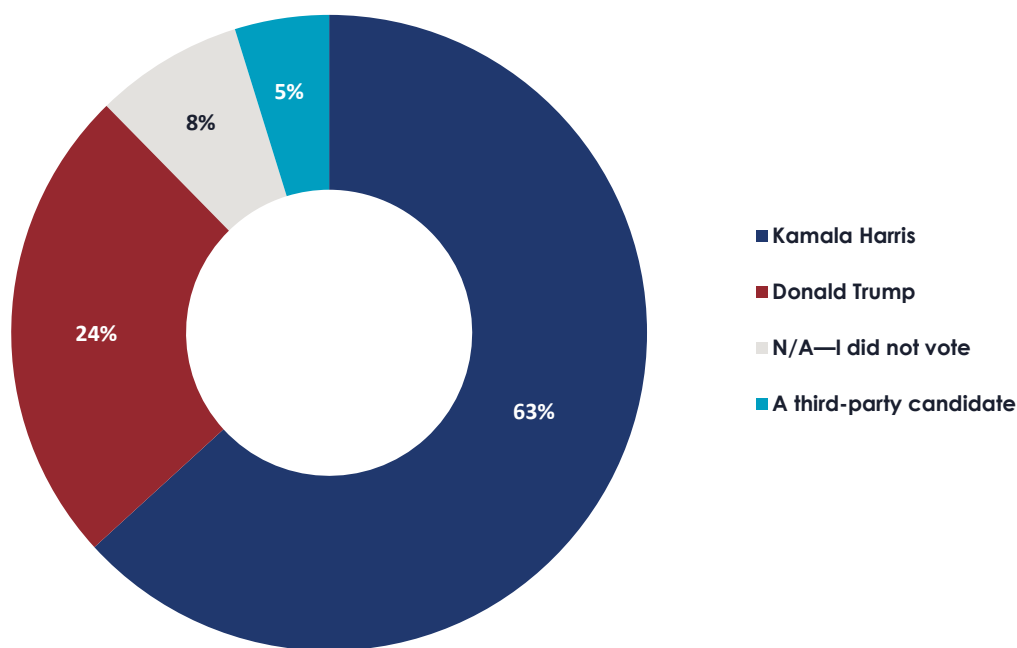


Partisan Beliefs of Survey Respondents

A total of 63% of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders surveyed reported voting for Kamala Harris in the 2024 Presidential election. Twenty-four percent said they voted for Donald Trump. Because partisan similarities and differences are the topic of this report, the analysis focuses on those who voted for the Democratic or Republican Party candidates and does not analyze results for third-party voters (5%) or for those who said they did not vote (8%).

Figure 1

In the last presidential election, I voted for:



The chart on pages 6 and 7 shows demographic breakdowns for Trump voters who responded to the survey, Harris voters who responded to the survey, and for the sample as a whole. Throughout this report, the totals reported include all respondents (Trump voters, Harris voters, third-party voters, and non-voters).

Figure 2

Survey Demographics*	Voted For Trump	Voted For Harris	All Survey Respondents
GENDER:			
Female**	51%	66%	61%
Male**	49%	34%	39%
ETHNICITY/RACE:			
Asian	1%	1%	1%
Black	4%	9%	7%
Hispanic	6%	6%	6%
White	82%	80%	81%
Prefer to self-identify	6%	4%	4%
AGE:			
Generation Z (1997-2012)	0%	1%	1%
Millennials (1981-1996)	16%	17%	17%
Generation X (1965-1980)	66%	61%	64%
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	18%	20%	18%
Silent Generation (1928-1945)	1%	1%	1%
ROLE:			
District leaders	23%	20%	21%
School leaders	33%	35%	34%
Teachers	44%	45%	44%
GRADE SPAN:			
Elementary school teachers and school leaders	58%	51%	52%
Middle school teachers and school leaders	25%	32%	31%
High school teachers and school leaders	17%	17%	17%
STUDENT SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS:			
Works in a district where the majority of students are from low-income families	63%	54%	56%

Figure 2 (Continued)

Survey Demographics*	Voted For Trump	Voted For Harris	All Survey Respondents
SECTOR:			
Public school or district	92%	92%	92%
Private school or network	8%	8%	8%
DISTRICT SIZE:			
District enrollment is less than 2,500*	51%	36%	40%
District enrollment is 2,500-9,999	26%	32%	30%
District enrollment is 10,000 or more	24%	33%	30%
LOCALE:			
Rural or town*	57%	32%	38%
Suburban*	27%	42%	38%
Urban	17%	26%	23%
REGION:			
Northeast	10%	20%	18%
Midwest	33%	25%	27%
South	33%	32%	31%
West	24%	24%	24%

*Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Indicates that differences between Trump and Harris voters are statistically significant for this category ($p < .10$).

The chart reflects the fact that the Trump and Harris voters who responded to the survey are similar in many ways. There are no significant differences between the two groups when it comes to ethnicity/race, age, role, grade span, the socioeconomic status of the district's students, sector (public vs. private), or region.

Differences did emerge, however, when it came to gender: Males were significantly more likely than females to say they voted for Trump. Females were significantly more likely than males to say they voted for Harris. Respondents who indicated they had voted for Trump were also significantly more likely than Harris voters to work in small, rural, and suburban school districts.

Immigration

Immigration enforcement has long been a hot button topic associated with intense partisan divides. The government's approach changed substantially when Trump took office: The [average number](#) of deportations per month was 36,000 between February and June of 2025, up from 12,660 during that same period the year before when Joe Biden was President. Between late January and late June of 2025, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested nearly [112,000](#) people, more than double the 51,000 arrested during that same period the year before.

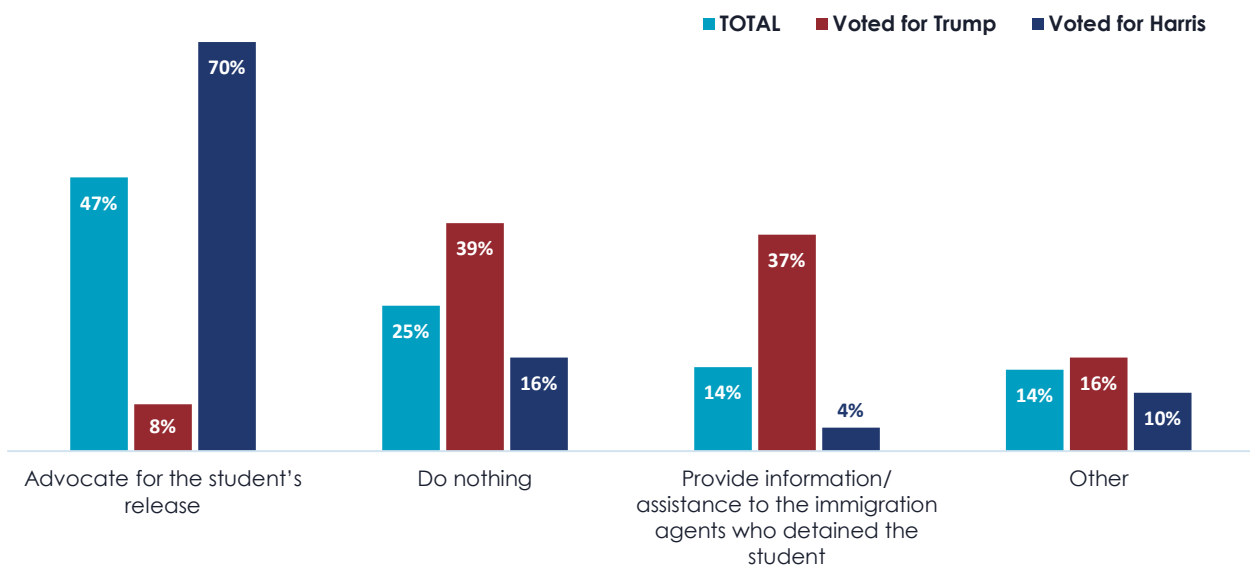
Almost all of the arrestees have been adults—not children. However, when parents are detained—or in fear of detainment—this can lead to higher rates of

student absenteeism as families hunker down together at home. And, immigration agents have detained about [50 children](#) since Trump took office in January

Asked how they think school districts and schools should respond if one of their students is apprehended by immigration agents off campus for reasons related to immigration violations that are civil (not criminal), educators split starkly along partisan lines. A majority of Harris voters (70%) said the district or school should advocate for the student's release. By contrast, more than 3 out of 4 Trump voters said the district should either do nothing (39%) or provide assistance to the immigration agents who detained the student (37%).

Figure 3

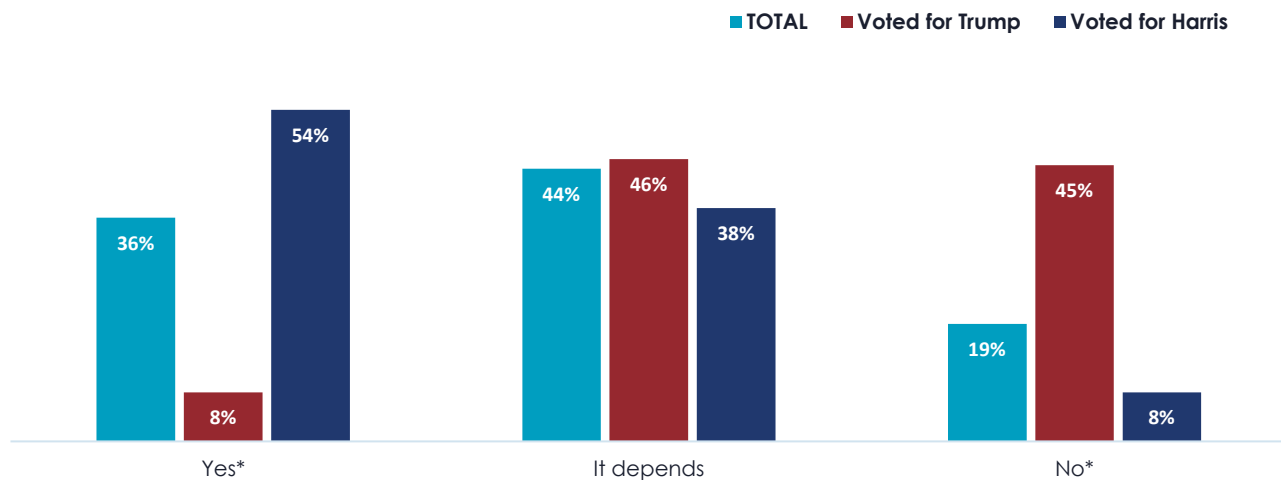
If an immigrant student from my district or school is apprehended by immigration agents off campus for reasons related to immigration violations that are civil (not criminal), I believe my district should:*



*Differences between Trump and Harris voters were statistically significant ($p < .10$).

Figure 4

If an immigrant student from my district or school is apprehended by immigration agents off campus for reasons related to immigration violations that are civil (not criminal), would you, personally, advocate for the student's release?



*Indicates the differences between Trump and Harris voters were statistically significant for this category of response ($p < .10$)

When the question hit even closer to home, the results grew more nuanced. Asked whether they would personally advocate for an immigrant student apprehended for civil immigration violations, the share of respondents who said either “yes” or “no” split sharply along partisan lines—with 8% of Trump voters saying they would assist and the same share of Harris voters saying they would not. However, nearly half of Trump voters (46%) responded “it depends.” A smaller but similar share of Harris voters (38%) said the same.

Respondents who said their decision to advocate for an immigrant student detained by immigration agents would “depend” were also asked a follow-up question about the factors that would influence their decision. Again, partisan differences were limited. Trump and Harris voters’ most common responses were the same: Their decision would depend upon “the particulars of the student’s situation” (67% of both groups) and/or “whether or not [they] felt

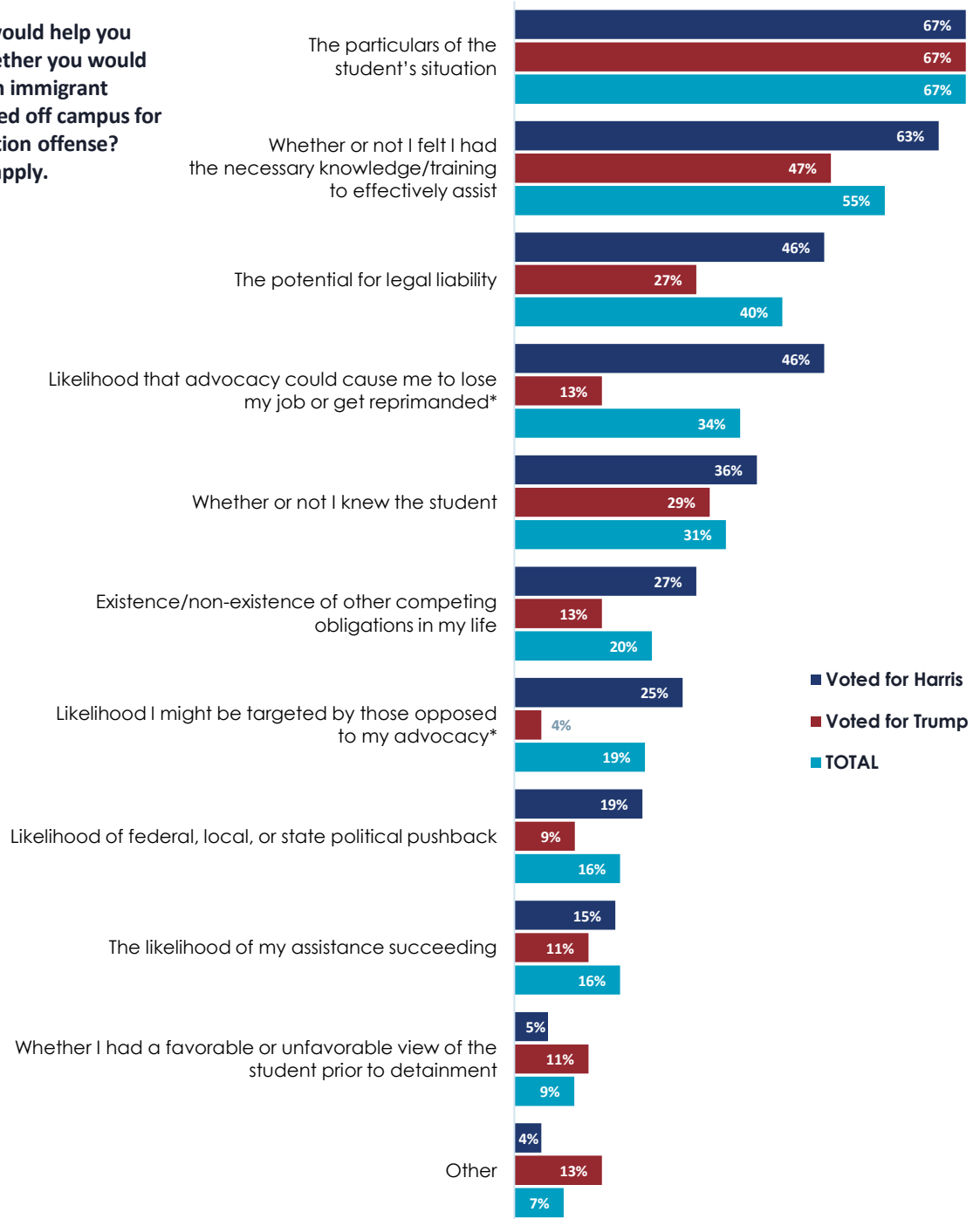
[they] had the necessary knowledge/training to effectively assist” (47% of Trump voters and 63% of Harris voters). The only significant difference between the two groups was that Harris voters were significantly more likely than Trump voters to say their decision would depend upon the likelihood that such assistance make them a target or get them in trouble at work.

“All of our teachers would fight not to have a student removed/deported/sent away, but are worried about legal aspects, such as losing out retirement from the state and/or being targeted ourselves,” wrote a Florida elementary school teacher and Harris voter who expressed this concern.

Among respondents who said they would not advocate for a student detained by immigration agents (as opposed to “it depends”), the most common reason was: “It’s not my job as an educator” (59%). “Concerns about legal liability” (33%) was number two.

Figure 5

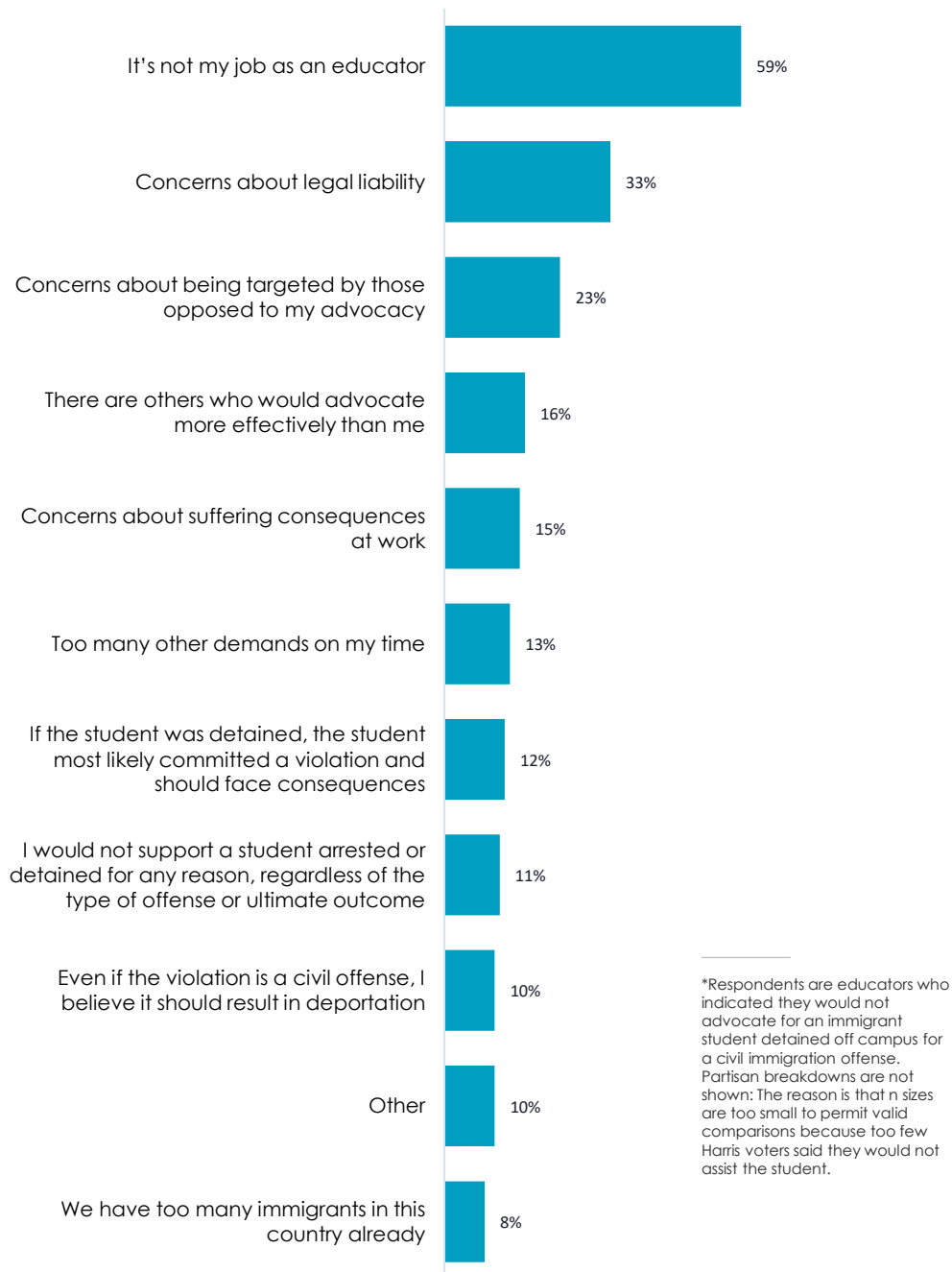
What factors would help you determine whether you would advocate for an immigrant student detained off campus for a civil immigration offense? Select all that apply.



*Indicates the differences between Trump and Harris voters were statistically significant for this category of response ($p < .10$)

Figure 6

Why wouldn't you advocate for an immigrant student detained off campus for a civil immigration offense? Select all that apply



The Role of the Federal Government in Education

Like immigration, the role of the federal government in education has long been a topic of partisan debate. The federal government has been engaged in education-related functions since the 1800s. But the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the main federal law related to K-12 education—was not signed into law until 1965, under Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson. It wasn't until 14 years later that the U.S. Department of Education was founded under Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Acting on longstanding concerns about federal overreach, Republicans almost immediately launched efforts to abolish it: Within a [year](#), its elimination was a goal of Republican President Ronald Reagan's successful 1980 campaign. Since that time, the Department has survived multiple attempts at elimination, which must, under law, be approved by Congress.

In 2002, Republican George W. Bush signed the 2002 reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known as "No Child Left Behind"). The

reauthorization, which passed with bipartisan support, expanded the federal government's role in education by implementing school accountability measures associated with timelines, penalties, and rewards. This expansion soon attracted [opposition](#) both from the left—which raised concerns about the law's consequences and focus on standardized testing—and from the right—which continued to complain of federal overreach. The current version of the Act—which was signed into law in 2015 under Democratic President Barack Obama—dialed back the federal role. But emergency relief legislation passed during the coronavirus pandemic increased that role once again by providing \$190 billion—an unprecedented amount of federal funding for K-12 education. Even with this infusion, federal funds [comprised](#) just 13.7% percent of public school funding in 2021-22—up from a more typical percentage of 7.6% in 2019-20. The fact that state and local governments have always provided the lion's share of K-12 funding has historically limited the ability of the federal government to shape education policy.

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Educator Views of the Size of the Federal Role in K-12 Education

Given the longstanding history of political debate around the appropriate size of the federal role in K-12 education, it is unsurprising that teacher and administrator views on this subject break down along partisan lines. Nearly 3 out of 4 Trump voters say the federal government has played too big of a role in education since 1965, when the main law governing federal involvement in K-12 education was approved.

“They should have o role in education,” a high school teacher and Trump voter in North Carolina

wrote in response to a survey question. “Since the inception of the department of education we have fallen tremendously in our results.”

By contrast, most Harris voters (59%) say that the size of the federal government has been just right since that time. Harris voters are nearly twice as likely to say the federal role has been too small as to say it has been too large. Trump voters are more than eight times more likely to say the role has been too large as to say it has been too small.

Figure 7

Since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965, the role of the federal government in education has:

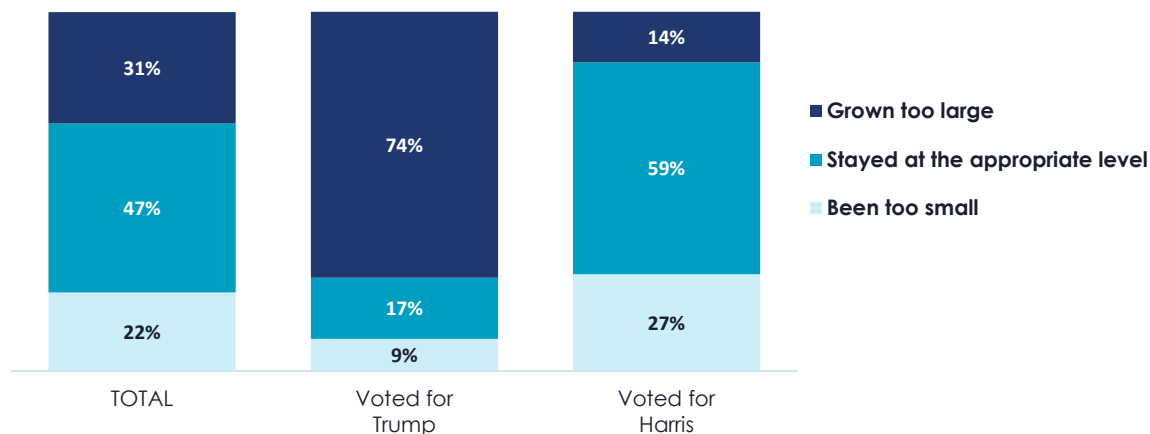


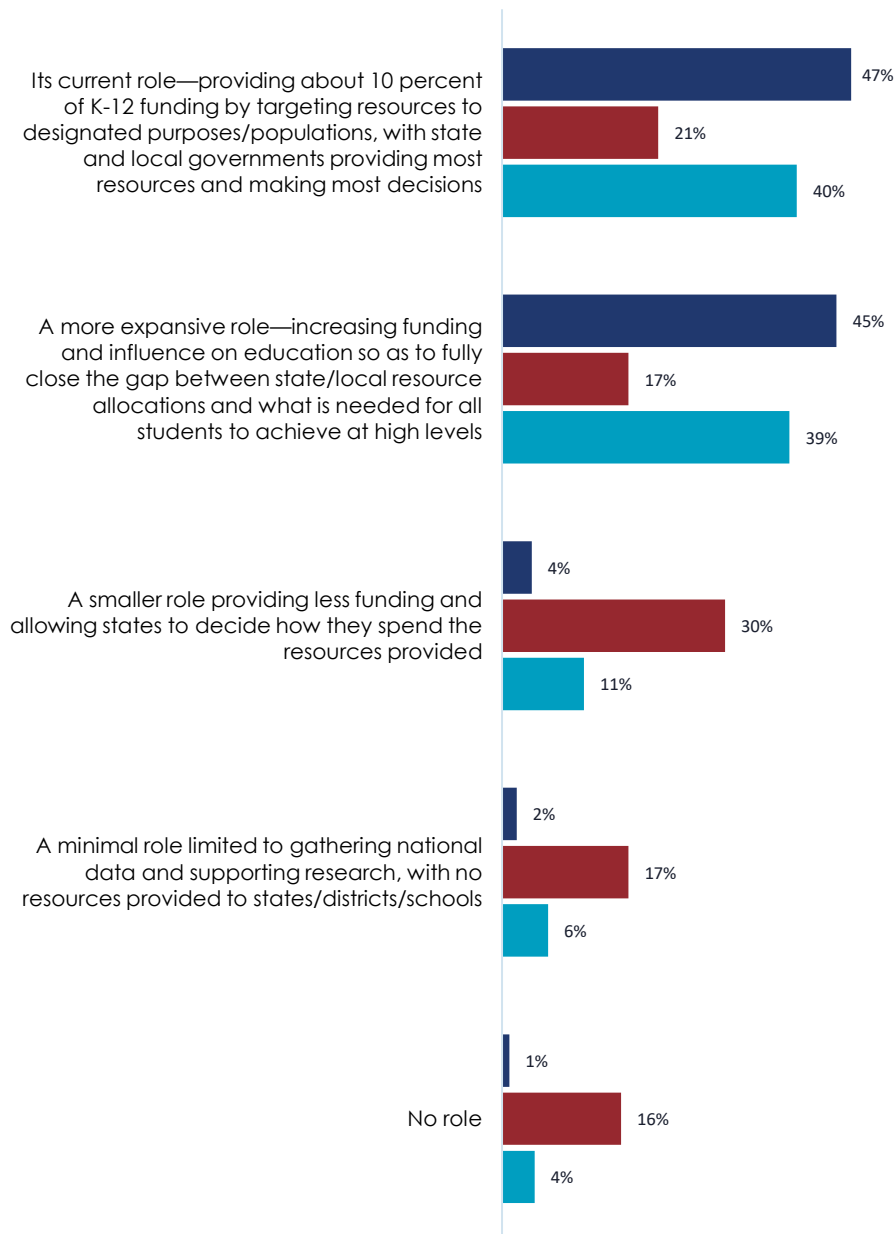
Figure 8

Which of the following best describes your view of the role the federal government should play in K-12 education?

■ Voted for Harris

■ Voted for Trump

■ TOTAL



Asked how big of a role the federal government should play in K-12 education, more than 90% of Harris voters wanted the level of influence to stay the same size or grow.

"I believe we should get rid of state departments of education and have only ONE national Dept of Education" wrote a Harris voter and school leader in Michigan. "My beliefs about a highly centralized education department stem from the fact that most other high achieving nations have centralized structures (Europe in general) and from witnessing the foolishness that states have done to education standards. Some states have stronger standards for promotion or advancement, while others have lower requirements. And this is all to meet their own needs to support a political agenda. If centralized in Washington, it does equalize it to everyone and the standards should be high and those who struggle should be given the assistance needed for their school/districts."

Harris voters' wish list of new roles they would like the federal government to take on includes creating "a

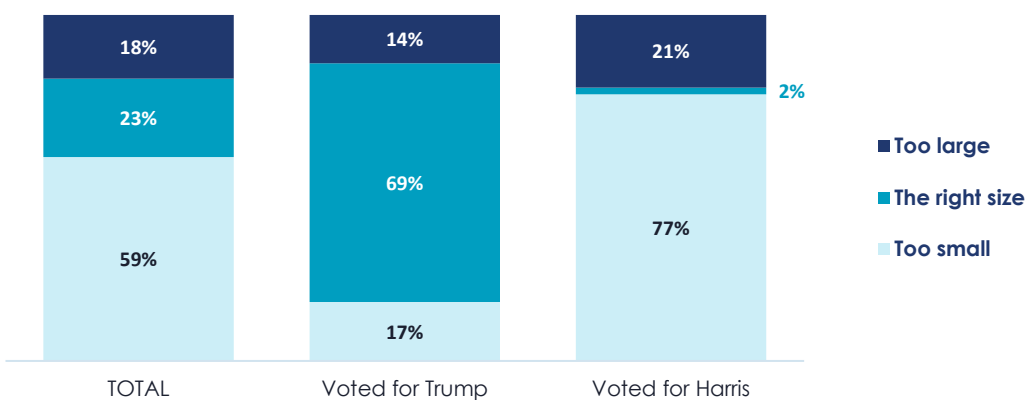
"Teacher Bill of Rights: similar to GI Bill;" "construction and building updates for safety" and holding students and parents "responsible for the choices of students."

Prior to current President's second term, the U.S. Department of Education was already the [smallest](#) Cabinet agency. Further shrinking the federal role in education by eliminating the U.S. Department of Education entirely has been a prominent goal of his second term. Since taking office, the President has further reduced the Department's staff by [close to 50%](#) to about 2,200.

As he reduces the headcount of the Department itself, Trump has also worked to [expand](#) the federal role in education. The administration's tactics have included [withholding](#) and threatening to withhold federal education funding and launching legal investigations to encourage states, districts, and schools to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion-related initiatives and practices that aim to protect students who are transgender.

Figure 9

Under the current Trump administration, the role of the federal government in education is or will be:



More than 3 out of 4 Harris voters who responded to the survey expressed concerns about the current administration's approach to federal education policy—saying it is too small. Their perceptions of Trump, Vice President JD Vance, and U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon are also aligned, with upwards of 90% expressing unfavorable views of all three.

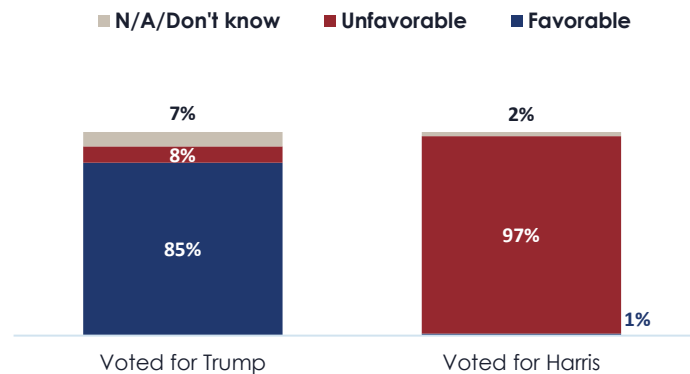
Evidence is more mixed when it comes to Trump supporters' views. On the one hand, more than 2 out of 3 predict that the federal role in education will be the right size under the current administration.

Among educators who voted for Trump, support for the President himself also remained high halfway through the first year of his second term, with 85% expressing favorable views. Vice President JD Vance also earned an 85% favorability rating from educators who voted for Trump.

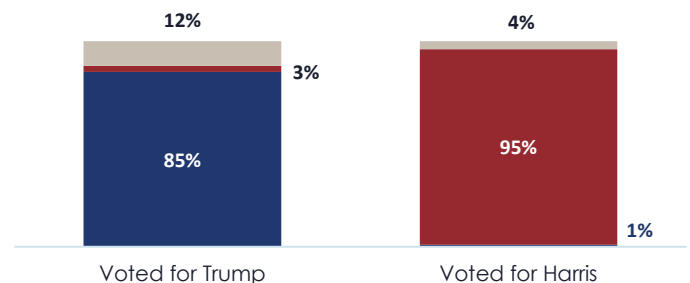
However, support among Trump voters is lukewarm when it comes to the person charged with carrying out the President's education-related plans: U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon. Only a minority (36%) expressed favorable views. A larger share (45%) selected the "not applicable/don't know" category. Nearly 1 in 5 said their view of McMahon was unfavorable. This tepid support for the Secretary of Education is not unprecedented among educators who have voted for Trump. A 2017 EdWeek Research Center survey found that 30% of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders who voted for the current President the first time he ran in 2016 had a favorable view of his then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. (Two percent of K-12 educators who voted for Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton expressed favorable views of DeVos).

Figures 10-12

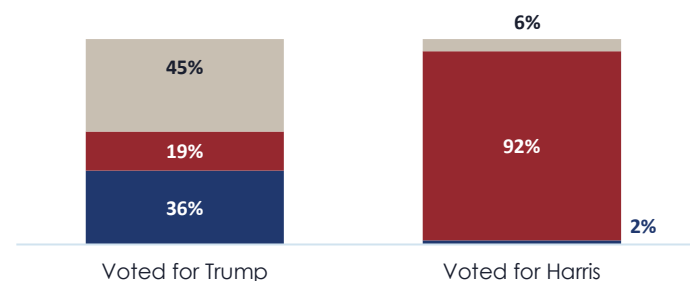
Is your opinion of President Donald Trump currently favorable or unfavorable?



Is your opinion of Vice President JD Vance currently favorable or unfavorable?



Is your opinion of Linda McMahon currently favorable or unfavorable?

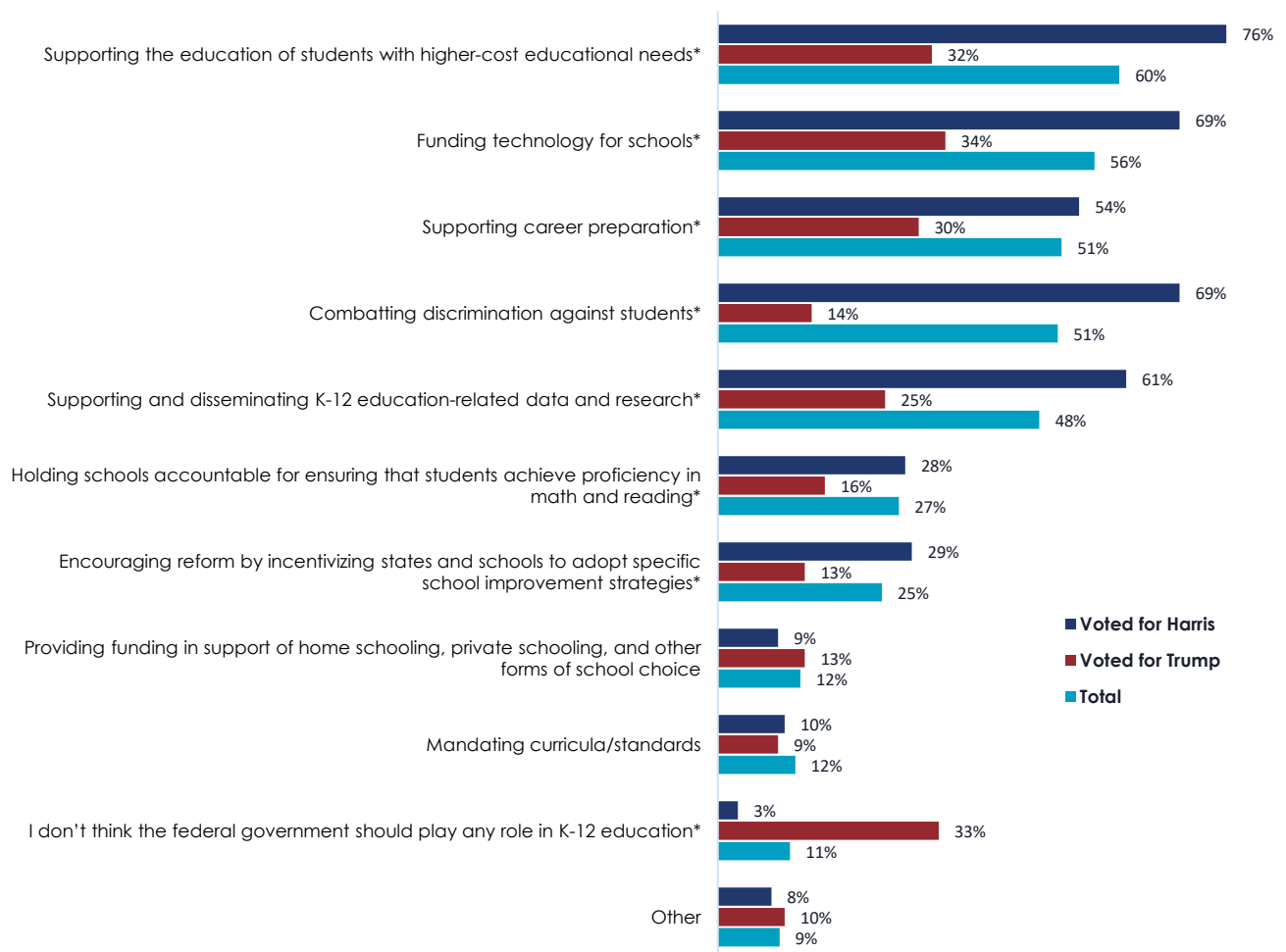


Educator Views of the Roles the Federal Government Should Play in K-12 Education

Despite the lengthy history of partisan debate over the appropriate role of the federal government in schools, Trump and Harris voters are on the same page when it comes to two of the three roles they are most likely to say the federal government should play when it comes to education: Supporting the education of students with higher-cost educational needs and funding technology for schools.

Figure 13

In your view, what role(s) should the federal government play in K-12 education? Select all that apply.



*Indicates the differences between Trump and Harris voters were statistically significant for this category of response ($p < .10$).

Trump and Harris voters are also united in their lack of support for one centerpiece of the current administration's education agenda, which has already included launching the first nationwide, federally-funded school voucher initiative: Just 13% of Trump voters and 9% of Harris voters say the federal government should provide funding to support homeschooling, private schooling, and other forms of school choice. The difference is not statistically significant. Trump and Harris voters are also in agreement when it comes to their views of curriculum mandates from the federal government, with roughly 90% of those who voted for each candidate opposing this function. The federal government has typically steered clear of playing this role in the past, although it has been accused of attempting to do so by critics on both sides of the aisle.

Despite their agreement on school choice funding and curriculum mandates, Trump and Harris voters do diverge significantly when it comes to most of the functions currently carried out by the U.S. Department of Education.

Although it's one of roles they are most likely to support, Trump voters are significantly less likely than Harris voters to say the federal government's role should include supporting the education of students with higher-cost educational needs (32% vs. 76%). The same is true of funding school technology—which is supported by 34% of Trump voters and 69% of Harris voters. Compared to Trump voters, Harris voters are significantly more likely to say the federal government should support career education; combat discrimination against students; support and disseminate data and research; hold schools accountable for ensuring students attain proficiency in English/language arts and math; and encourage reform by incentivizing states and schools to adopt specific school improvement strategies.

Despite their agreement on school choice funding and curriculum mandates, **Trump and Harris voters do diverge significantly** when it comes to most of the functions currently carried out by the U.S. Department of Education.

Civics Education

Civics education is [often viewed](#) as a way to reduce partisan polarization. But its definition can vary widely. Sometimes, this variation breaks down along partisan lines.

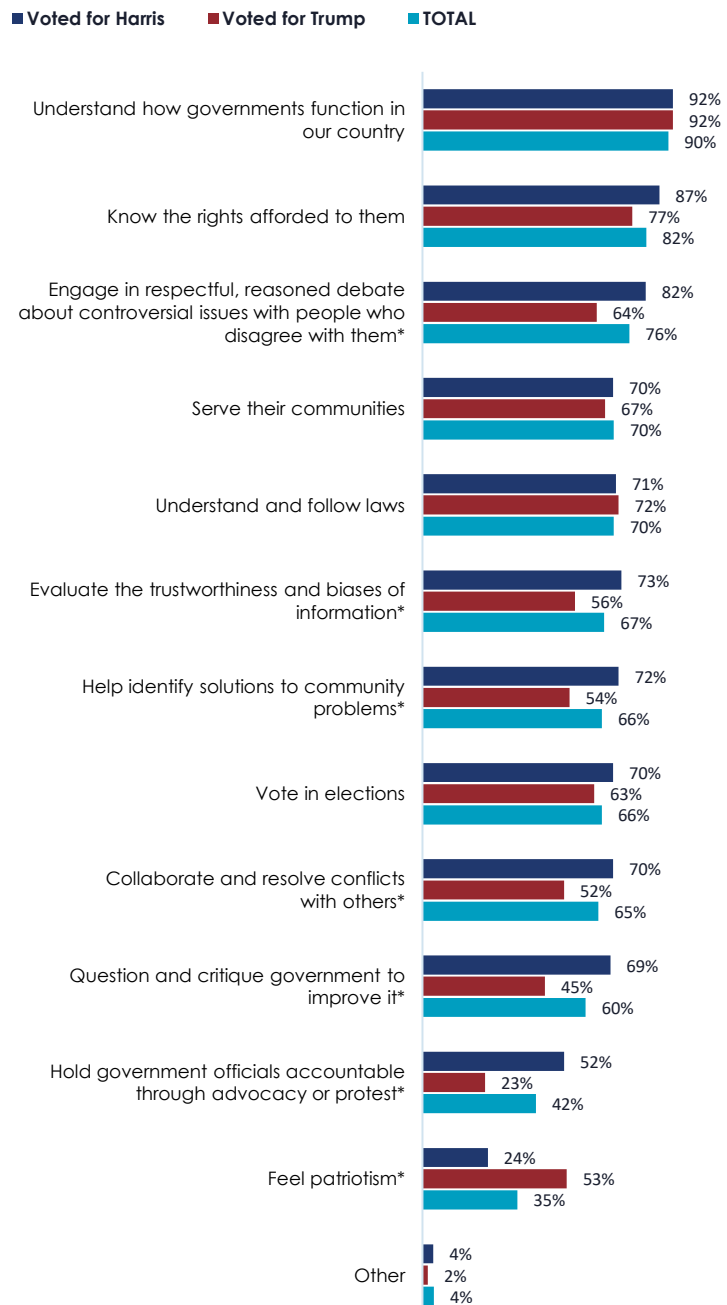
Asked how they characterize the purpose of civics education, Trump and Harris voters who work in K-12 education diverged significantly on several objectives. Harris voters were significantly more likely than Trump voters to say that civics education should prepare students to evaluate the trustworthiness and biases of information; help identify solutions to community problems; collaborate and resolve conflicts with others; question and critique government to improve it; and hold government officials accountable through advocacy or protest. Compared to Harris voters, Trump voters were significantly more likely to say civics should prepare students to feel patriotism.

At the same time that they disagree on some issues, supporters of both candidates are on the same page when it comes to the two goals they are most likely to identify as objectives of civics education: teaching students to understand how government functions and know the rights afforded to them.

There are also no significant differences in the share of Trump and Harris voters who say civics education should help students know how to understand and follow laws; serve their communities; or vote in elections.

Figure 14

Select all that apply. In my opinion, the purpose of K-12 civics instruction is to prepare students to:



*Indicates that differences between Trump and Harris voters are statistically significant for this category ($p < .10$).

Trump and Harris voters also disagreed on an aspect of civics education that has become particularly relevant as the current administration faces high-profile [legal challenges](#) asserting that it has violated constitutional law.

Trump voters were nearly three times more likely than Harris voters to say social studies teachers in their district should not discuss current events with students if they raise questions about whether elected officials are violating constitutional law. Their most common response was “only in high school.” By contrast, more than half of Harris voters said teachers should discuss

this topic—regardless of grade level or whether or not students themselves raise the issue.

Trump and Harris voters also disagree about how hard it is to discuss current events with students who raise questions about whether elected officials are violating constitutional law. Eighty-six percent of Harris voters say it is harder to discuss this topic now than it was a year ago. Most Trump voters say they haven’t experienced a change. It is worth noting that less than 10% of Trump and Harris voters say it has gotten easier to address elected officials’ constitutional law violations with students.

Figure 15

Compared to one year ago, how challenging is it for teachers in your district to discuss current events with students that raise questions about whether elected officials are violating constitutional law?

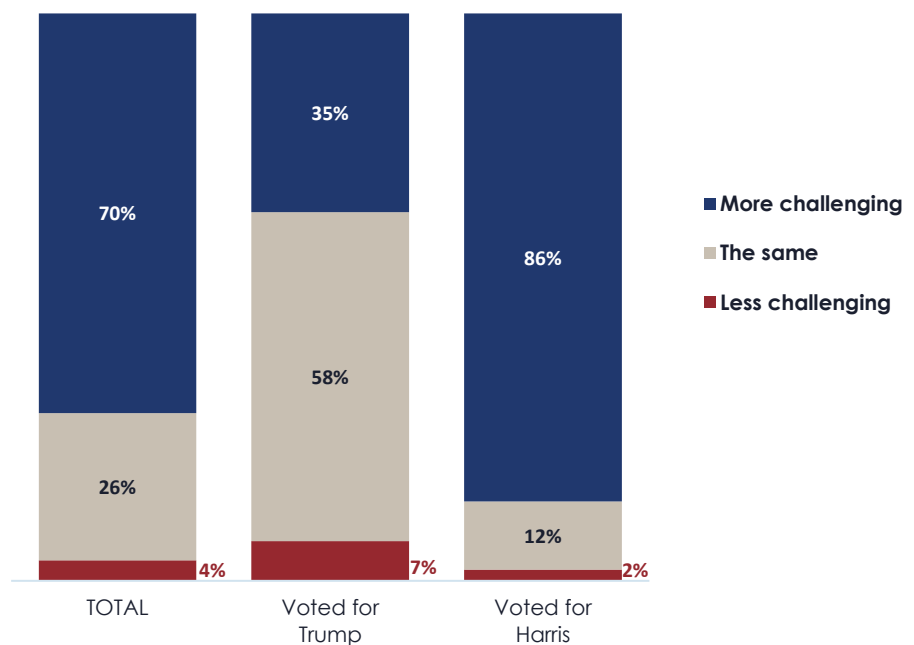
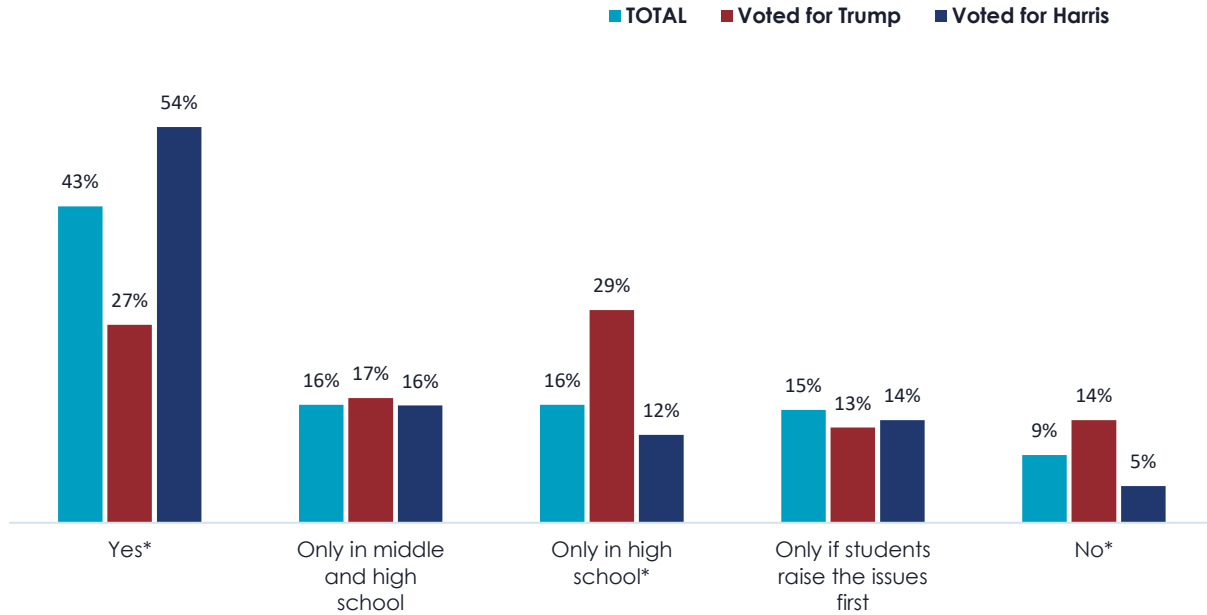


Figure 16

In your opinion, should social studies teachers in your district discuss current events with students if they raise questions about whether elected officials are violating constitutional law?



*Indicates that differences between Trump and Harris voters are statistically significant for this category ($p < .10$).

Conclusion



Educators are not immune to the political polarization that has swept the nation. As is the case for non-educators, their views often diverge along predictable partisan lines: Harris voters are significantly more likely than Trump voters to say they would advocate for a student detained for a civil immigration violation. Trump voters are significantly more likely than Harris voters to say the federal government's role in education has grown too large. These internal divisions can add an additional level of complexity as educators navigate partisan polarization among parents, communities, and students while at the same time focusing on their core mission of teaching and learning.

At the same time that they diverge on some issues, teachers and administrators with different political views agree on others. Regardless of their personal partisan perspectives, educators are most likely to say that the purpose of civics education—often proposed as a salve to heal partisan divides—is to understand how governments function in our country and to teach students about the rights afforded to them. Trump and Harris supporters who work in K-12 education are also about equally likely to believe that the federal government should not mandate curriculum or fund

Regardless of their personal partisan perspectives, educators are most likely to say that **the purpose of civics education ... is to understand how governments function** in our country and to teach students about the rights afforded to them.

private or homeschooling; to perceive that it has gotten easier to address students' questions about the violation of constitutional law by elected officials; and to say their decisions about whether or not to support immigrant students detained for immigration violations would depend upon the particulars of the situation. This means that multiple, key areas of agreement persist among educators, even in an increasingly divided nation.

Key Contributors



Holly Kurtz directs the EdWeek Research Center, which produces standalone studies as well as analyses for Education Week and special reports. Holly began working at Education Week in 2014 after earning a Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Colorado at Denver's School of Public Affairs. Prior to attending graduate school, she spent 11 years covering education and other topics for newspapers in Florida, Alabama, and Colorado.



Sterling Lloyd is the assistant director of the EdWeek Research Center. In this capacity, he manages data analyses and the development of surveys for data-driven journalism. Since joining the research center in 2005, he has authored articles on college- and work-readiness, school finance, student achievement, and other prominent topics in K-12 education.



Alex Harwin is a quantitative research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. They work on a wide variety of projects, from marquee annual reports to data-driven reporting in collaboration with the Education Week newsroom. Alex received an education at Stanford and UT, earning degrees in Sociology and policy analysis.