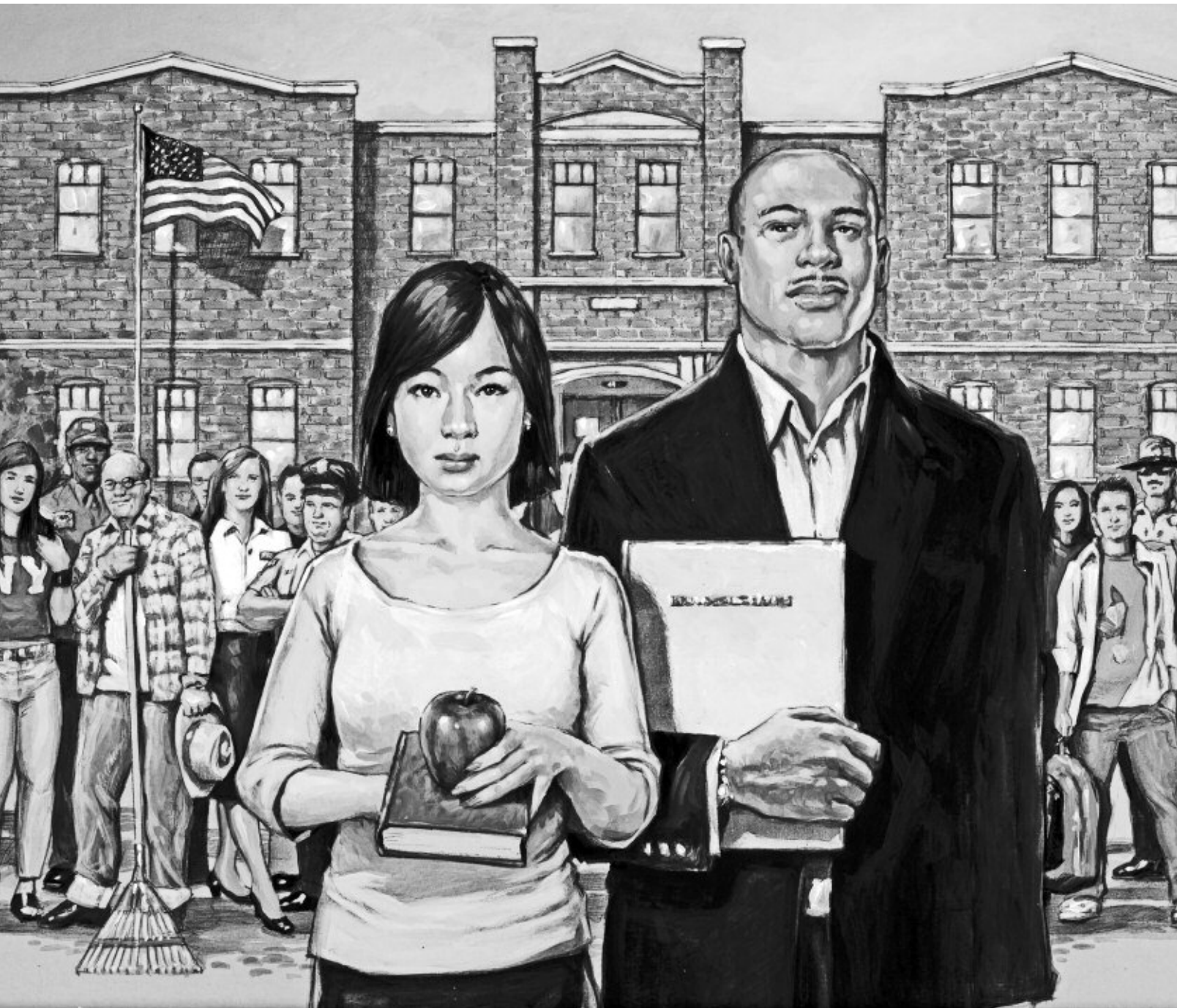


What Americans **Think** about



Their Schools



ILLUSTRATION / BILL GARLAND

Americans both care about their schools and want them to improve. Though adults give the nation's public schools only mediocre grades—a plurality confer a “C”—they are willing to invest more money in public education and they are reasonably confident that doing so will improve student learning. They are also open to a host of school reforms ranging from high-stakes student accountability to merit pay for teachers to school vouchers and tax credits that would give low-income families greater access to private schools. By sizable margins, they back reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal law that mandates school accountability.

The public, however, also appears selective in its desire for change. Americans balk at some market-based reforms, such as paying more for teachers who work in fields like math and science, where quality teachers are in scarce supply. And substantial percentages remain unde-

The 2007 Education Next-PEPG Survey

cided about charter schools and other reform initiatives, suggesting that the current national debate over school policy has the potential to sway public opinion in one direction or another.

All this—and more—is indicated by a new national survey of U.S. adults conducted under the auspices of *Education Next* and the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) at Harvard University. (For survey methodology, see sidebar on page 26.) Here we report the opinions of both the public at large and three ethnic subgroups (whites, African Americans, and Hispanics). We also distinguish the views of those who have worked for the public schools from those who have not. Except for opinions on school choice issues, differences across ethnic groups are generally smaller than those between public school employees and those who have never been employed by the schools. Responses to survey questions are provided at the bottom of the ensuing pages.

BY WILLIAM G. HOWELL, MARTIN R. WEST,
AND
PAUL E. PETERSON

Accountability

Perhaps the most popular school reforms are those that hold students and schools to account for their performance. Accountability policies take many forms, but the public generally supports the concept in all its guises, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

No Child Left Behind

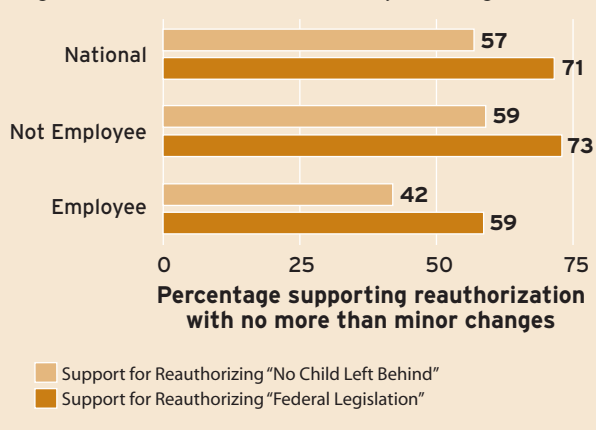
On the most high-profile issue of the day—the debate over extending the life of NCLB—a majority of those polled indicate that they support the law’s reauthorization with no more than minor changes (see Figure 1). NCLB requires states to establish performance standards in math and reading; to test students against those standards annually in grades 3 to 8 and again when students are in high school; and to intervene in schools that fail to make adequate annual progress toward the goal of near-universal student proficiency by 2014. The 2002 law is scheduled for reauthorization this year.

Despite NCLB’s bipartisan origins, controversy has beset the statute ever since its passage. The law places unprecedented demands on the states, several of which have passed resolutions critical of it. Reporting on recent grass-roots efforts to overturn the law, *Time* magazine noted that “more than 30,000 educators and concerned citizens have signed an online petition calling for the repeal of the 1,100 page statute.”

It is perhaps surprising, then, that the American public holds NCLB in reasonably high regard. When asked for their view on the matter, 57 percent of respondents prefer that Congress renew the act either as is or with minimal changes. Still, the intense debate over NCLB appears to be eroding public support for the law as a symbol. When NCLB is described as

NCLB (Figure 1)

Fifty-seven percent of American adults support the renewal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with only minor changes, but only 42 percent of current or former public school employees do. Support for reauthorization is markedly higher when the law is described as federal legislation.



“federal legislation” rather than mentioned by name, as was the case for a randomly selected half of our survey respondents, support for extending its accountability provisions rises to 71 percent (Q. 1a, 1b).

Similar levels of support are observed across ethnic lines, with never less than one-half of African Americans, Hispanics, or whites recommending that Congress renew the act as is or with minor changes, regardless of how the question is asked. Current and former public school employees, however, consistently register lower levels of support for NCLB.

No Child Left Behind

1a. As you may know, the No Child Left Behind Act requires states to set standards in math and reading and to test students each year to determine whether the standards are being met. This year, Congress is deciding whether to renew the No Child Left Behind Act. What do you think Congress should do? Should they...

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee? (Past or Present)	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Renew the Act as is	31%	28%	43%	42%	33%	20%
Renew with minimal changes	26	29	19	18	26	22
Renew with major changes	25	23	31	23	23	32
Not renew at all	18	20	6	17	17	25

1b. As you may know, federal legislation requires states to set standards in math and reading and to test students each year to determine whether the standards are being met. This year, Congress is deciding whether to renew this federal legislation. What do you think Congress should do? Should they...

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Renew the Act as is	37%	36%	50%	31%	39%	30%
Renew with minimal changes	34	37	21	32	34	29
Renew with major changes	18	16	20	21	16	26
Not renew at all	11	11	9	16	11	16

National Standards

Just because the public favors reauthorization of NCLB does not mean that it opposes efforts to amend the act by establishing a single national standard. Currently, NCLB asks each state to set its own standards, design and administer its own tests, and establish its own definition of student proficiency. A number of prominent Washington think tanks, including the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Center for American Progress, have argued that proficiency standards vary so widely that they should be replaced by a single national definition. But other groups, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, oppose any single standard as unnecessary federal intrusion into local matters. Given the controversy surrounding all proposals to establish a uniform national standard, it is noteworthy that nearly three-quarters of the American public support the concept (Q. 2).

Student Accountability

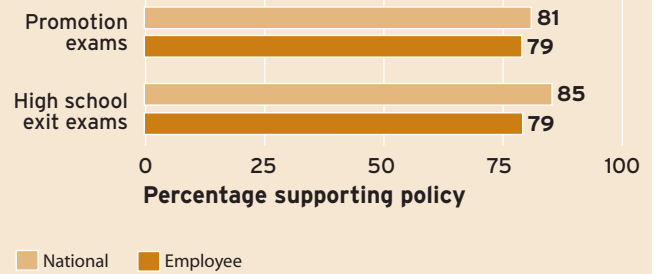
Separate and apart from NCLB, which focuses on the performance of schools and districts, the public strongly supports reforms designed to hold individual students accountable for their performance on state tests. Currently, only a few states (e.g., Florida) and cities (e.g., Chicago and New York) require students to pass a test in order to move from one grade to the next, thereby modifying the practice of “social promotion,” which keeps youngsters with their peers by passing them to the next grade regardless of academic performance. Twenty-three states currently require students to pass an examination in order to graduate from high school, but the rest, a group that includes Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, do not.

Despite the fact that holding students accountable for their performance is far from a universal practice in American education, student accountability commands widespread public support (see Figure 2). No less than 81 percent of all respondents support requiring students in certain grades to pass an exam before they proceed to the next grade, and 85 percent support requiring students to pass an exam before graduating from high school. Only 10 percent of respondents oppose either policy. African Americans, Hispanics, and current and former school employees are all modestly less likely to support graduation exams than other respondents, but in no case does more than 16 percent of a subgroup oppose the policy (Q. 3, 4).

Although Americans appear quite willing to use test results to determine the pace of students’ progress through school, they are less enthusiastic about using them to open

High-Stakes Testing (Figure 2)

Both the public at large and public school employees support student accountability measures ending social promotion and establishing high school graduation exams.



National Standards

2. Under No Child Left Behind, should there be a single national standard and a single national test for all students in the United States? Or do you think that there should be different standards and tests in different states?

	National	Racial/Ethnic Identity			Public School Employee? (Past or Present)	
		White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
One test and standard for all students	73%	74%	68%	73%	74%	63%
Different tests and standards in different states	27	26	32	27	26	37

Student Accountability

3. In some states, students in certain grades must pass an exam before they are eligible to move on to the next grade. Do you support or oppose this requirement?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	52%	54%	49%	43%	52%	53%
Somewhat support	29	28	33	36	30	26
Neither support nor oppose	9	9	5	9	9	7
Somewhat oppose	6	6	8	5	6	9
Completely oppose	3	3	5	6	3	6

up alternative routes into higher education. Only 45 percent of respondents support allowing students who pass an exam at the 10th-grade level to transfer immediately to a community college, as recently proposed by the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. Rather, 55 percent of all respondents, and roughly the same share of each subgroup, support requiring students to complete four years of high school (Q. 5).

School Accountability under NCLB

High-stakes student accountability is more popular than the simple practice of publishing the average test performance of each school's students. Only 60 percent of those surveyed support the latter policy, which is less stringent than the NCLB requirement that states publish the percentage of students in each school, and of various subgroups within it,

that are proficient in math and reading. Just 20 percent of the public oppose publishing average test scores at the school level, with another 20 percent expressing neither support nor opposition (Q. 6).

NCLB also requires that schools be reconstituted if they fail to meet state-mandated performance benchmarks for five years in a row. Currently, states and districts are granted a great deal of flexibility in deciding how to reconstitute schools. Options range from minimal reorganization to replacing teachers and administrators to conversion into charter schools. When asked about these options, Americans express greater support for replacing teachers and principals than for converting failed district schools into charter schools. Roughly two-thirds of the adult population support replacing teachers and/or principals at persistently failing schools, and only one in ten opposes such options. Just 29 percent support converting the schools into charter schools.

Student Accountability continued

4. In some states, students must pass an exam before they are eligible to receive a high school diploma. Do you support or oppose this requirement?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	60%	61%	53%	53%	61%	53%
Somewhat support	25	23	30	29	24	26
Neither support nor oppose	6	7	4	4	6	6
Somewhat oppose	6	5	6	7	5	9
Completely oppose	4	3	8	6	4	7

5. Do you think students who pass an examination at the tenth-grade level should be given the opportunity to transfer immediately to a community college, or do you think all students should be required to complete four years of high school before going on to further education?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Give opportunity to transfer to community college	45%	45%	42%	43%	46%	44%
Require four years of high school	55	55	58	57	54	56

School Accountability under NCLB

6. Do you support or oppose making available to the general public the average test scores of students at each public school?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	38%	39%	33%	40%	38%	40%
Somewhat support	22	22	18	20	21	23
Neither support nor oppose	20	20	24	21	21	16
Somewhat oppose	9	9	12	9	9	8
Completely oppose	11	10	13	10	10	12

7. Suppose a public school does not meet state-determined standards for five years in a row. Do you support or oppose the following measures?

7.1 replacing teachers

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	33%	34%	27%	36%	34%	32%
Somewhat support	34	33	44	28	34	32
Neither support nor oppose	22	23	18	25	24	14
Somewhat oppose	6	7	5	6	6	12
Completely oppose	4	3	6	6	3	9

Still, that doesn't signal widespread opposition to charter schools, a topic we return to below. Only 25 percent of the population actually opposed charter-school conversion, while fully 46 percent take no position one way or the other (Q. 7).

School Choice

Many accountability initiatives have long enjoyed the support of policymakers and the general public. More controversial in state and national policy discussions have been proposals to enable parents, especially low-income par-

American public, though many adults have yet to be persuaded one way or the other.

Vouchers

Few education reforms inspire as much debate as do proposals to provide low-income families with vouchers that would allow them to send their children to private schools. Apart from programs serving disabled students, only Wisconsin, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., have publicly funded voucher programs in operation. Elsewhere, state legislatures, referenda, and/or state courts have defeated proposed voucher initiatives.

Opponents of most forms of school choice constitute a fairly small segment of the American public.

ents, to exercise greater choice over their children's education through school vouchers, tax credits, charter schools, or home schooling. Despite that controversy, a plurality of the general public supports choice initiatives. African Americans and Hispanics express more support for school choice than do white Americans. Opponents of most forms of choice, meanwhile, constitute a fairly small segment of the

Despite the legislative and legal disputes, a plurality of the public supports the voucher idea (see Figure 3). Forty-five percent of those surveyed favor offering vouchers to low-income families, 34 percent oppose the idea, and 20 percent neither favor nor oppose it. Both African Americans and Hispanics are markedly more likely to support vouchers than are whites. Indeed, 68 percent of African Americans and

School Accountability under NCLB continued

7.2 replacing the principal

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	38%	37%	39%	40%	38%	40%
Somewhat support	30	32	28	23	30	29
Neither support nor oppose	23	23	19	28	25	14
Somewhat oppose	6	5	7	5	5	11
Completely oppose	3	2	6	5	3	5

7.3 turning the school into a charter school

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	12%	12%	14%	12%	11%	19%
Somewhat support	17	17	20	14	17	20
Neither support nor oppose	46	46	38	51	48	28
Somewhat oppose	11	11	12	10	10	15
Completely oppose	14	13	16	13	13	19

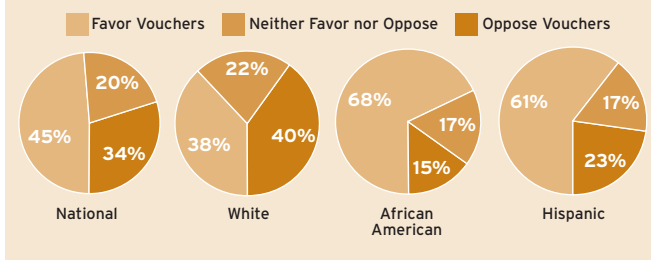
Vouchers

8. A proposal has been made that would use government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	21%	14%	41%	35%	21%	18%
Somewhat favor	24	24	27	26	25	22
Neither favor nor oppose	20	22	17	17	21	18
Somewhat oppose	15	17	8	12	15	17
Completely oppose	19	23	7	11	19	25

School Vouchers (Figure 3)

Support for school vouchers is strongest among African Americans and Hispanics. Yet only a little more than one-third of all Americans oppose one of the most controversial reform proposals.



61 percent of Hispanics favor vouchers, compared to 38 percent of whites. Only 15 percent of African Americans and 23 percent of Hispanics oppose vouchers, compared to 40 percent of whites (Q. 8).

When asked about the design of a school voucher program, 85 percent of Americans support allowing parents using vouchers to choose both religious and nonreligious private schools, a practice the U.S. Supreme Court upheld in

2002. Though African Americans appear slightly more likely to support the option of sending a child to a religious school, subgroup differences on this matter are small (Q. 9).

Tax Credits

Tax credit programs that help defray the cost of a private education are a less publicized, but more widely available, form of school choice than vouchers. Such programs exist in one form or another in several states, including Pennsylvania, Arizona, Minnesota, Illinois, and Florida. The greater incidence of tax credit programs could be due to the broader public support for this approach than for vouchers. Nationwide, 53 percent of adults favor tax credits, while only 25 percent oppose them, with another 23 percent neither favoring nor opposing the idea. As with vouchers, African Americans and Hispanics express the highest levels of support for tax credits (Q. 10).

Charter Schools

Compared to school vouchers and tuition tax credits, state legislatures have generally found charter schools to be more politically palatable. Charter schools are public schools of

Vouchers continued

9. Some people say low-income students participating in these programs should be allowed to attend either religious or non-religious private schools. Other people say low-income students participating in these programs should be allowed to attend only non-religious private schools. Which comes closer to your view?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Choose both religious and non-religious schools	85%	84%	91%	82%	85%	81%
Choose only non-religious schools	15	16	9	18	15	19

10. A proposal has been made to offer a tax credit to low-income parents who send their child to a private school. Would you favor or oppose such a proposal?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	27%	22%	42%	37%	27%	25%
Somewhat favor	26	26	25	23	26	25
Neither favor nor oppose	23	22	21	24	23	22
Somewhat oppose	10	12	6	7	10	13
Completely oppose	15	17	6	8	15	15

Charter Schools

11. Many states allow for the formation of charter schools, which are privately managed under a renewable performance contract that exempts them from many of the regulations of other public schools. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	19%	18%	25%	19%	19%	22%
Somewhat support	25	24	22	29	25	25
Neither support nor oppose	42	44	41	35	43	33
Somewhat oppose	8	8	5	10	8	8
Completely oppose	6	6	7	7	5	13

choice that are privately managed under a renewable performance contract that exempts them from many of the regulations that apply to other public schools. The first of these schools opened its doors in Minnesota in 1992, and their numbers have grown steadily since. In the 2006–07 school year,

asked whether charter schools are free to teach religion (they are not), or whether they can charge tuition (they cannot), almost two-thirds of the public confesses to not knowing the answer and another quarter offers the wrong answer. Indeed, only 13 percent of adults nationwide correctly note

Support for charter schools appears especially high among those adults who reveal higher levels of knowledge about them.

roughly 4,000 charter schools served 1.15 million students across 40 states and Washington, D.C.

For the most part, Americans either express support for charter schools or opt not to take a position one way or the other (see Figure 4). Forty-four percent of respondents support their formation, and another 42 percent neither support nor oppose them. Only 14 percent of Americans oppose charter schools. Differences across subgroups are reasonably small, with slightly higher proportions of African Americans supporting charter schools and school employees opposing them (Q. 11).

Three-quarters of Americans also believe that charter schools should be given at least the same amount of funding per child as district-operated public schools, in contrast to the widespread state practice of awarding charter schools less funding. Even 68 percent of present or past school employees endorse funding charter schools at levels equivalent to (or better than) those of traditional public schools (Q. 12).

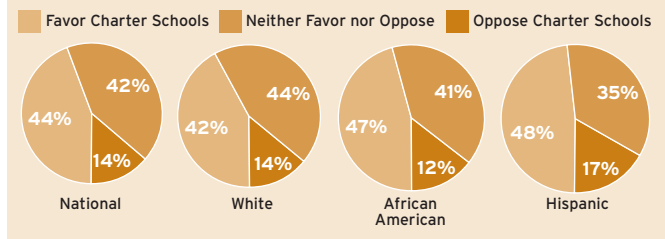
Though Americans appear cautiously supportive of charter schools, most are confused about them. For example, when

that charter schools cannot teach religion and 16 percent correctly observe that charter schools may not charge tuition (Q. 13).

Importantly, support for charter schools appears especially high among those adults who reveal higher levels of knowledge about them. Fully 66 percent of those adults who correctly answer both of the knowledge-based questions

Charter Schools (Figure 4)

Few Americans have strong opinions about charter schools. Only a small minority of Americans oppose them, but nearly half take no stance at all.



Charter Schools continued

12. Do you think charter schools should be given more, less, or the same amount of government funding for each child as other public schools?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
More	7%	4%	14%	9%	7%	9%
Less	25	27	16	22	24	32
Same	68	68	70	69	70	59

13. Based on what you have heard about charter schools, are the following statements true or false?

13.1 Charter schools are free to teach religion

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
True	24%	24%	22%	25%	24%	28%
False	13	13	9	15	12	19
Don't know	63	63	69	60	64	54

13.2 Charter schools may not charge tuition

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
True	16%	15%	18%	16%	14%	27%
False	24	22	21	28	23	28
Don't know	60	62	61	56	63	45

support charter schools, as compared to 38 percent of those who answer both incorrectly. Similarly, 81 and 68 percent of the two respective groups claim that funding for students in charter and other public schools should be equalized. Opposition to charter schools, to the extent that it exists, appears to be highest among those who know less about them.

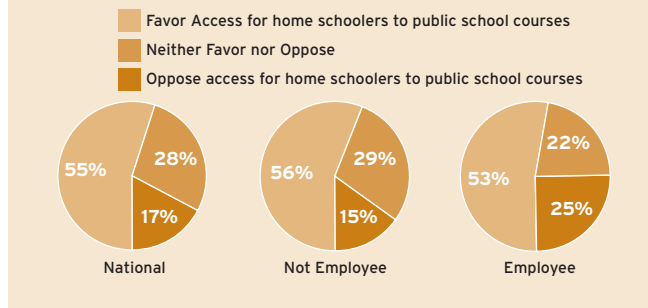
School Choice under NCLB

Under NCLB, if a school has failed to meet the law’s accountability provisions two years in a row, parents have the option of sending their child to a higher-performing public school within the same district. But only about 1 percent of those eligible to move to a different school under NCLB have taken advantage of this option. As a result, choice advocates have proposed revisions in the legislation that would expand the range of options available to parents.

A clear plurality of the public at large supports revisions in NCLB to increase the number of choice options available to parents whose children attend low-performing schools. Sixty percent support allowing them to select a school in another district, a step that would vastly expand the range of options, yet has not received serious consideration in Congress. Only 14 percent oppose it. Meanwhile, 47 percent

Home Schooling (Figure 5)

Giving home schoolers access to selected public-school courses is opposed by only a small minority of those surveyed. Most current and former public school employees also tend to support the idea.



support giving parents the option of sending their child to a private school, and only 23 percent oppose it (Q. 14).

Americans reveal low levels of support for the option of sending children to a failing school within the same district. Only 25 percent express support, probably because the public sees scant benefit from moving a child from one failing school to another.

School Choice under NCLB

14. Students attending a public school that fails to meet state-determined standards for two years in a row currently have the option of using government funds to attend another public school in their district, provided that school meets state-determined standards for student learning. Do you support or oppose also allowing these students to attend any of the following schools?

14.1 public schools in another district

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	31%	30%	32%	33%	31%	35%
Somewhat support	29	28	35	30	29	26
Neither support nor oppose	26	27	20	23	27	16
Somewhat oppose	8	8	7	10	7	13
Completely oppose	6	7	5	5	6	10

14.2 a private school

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	22%	22%	23%	24%	22%	25%
Somewhat support	25	24	29	30	25	26
Neither support nor oppose	29	29	31	30	31	20
Somewhat oppose	10	11	9	7	10	11
Completely oppose	13	15	8	9	13	18

14.3 public schools in their district that failed to meet state standards

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely support	11%	11%	14%	11%	11%	17%
Somewhat support	14	13	20	14	14	16
Neither support nor oppose	30	31	24	32	32	22
Somewhat oppose	19	18	19	23	19	20
Completely oppose	25	27	24	20	25	25

Home Schooling

The number of American families opting to teach their children at home has increased dramatically in recent years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 1.1 million students were being home schooled in the United States in 2003, the most recent year for which official data are available, up from roughly 850,000 students in 1999.

Forty percent of the public say they know a family that currently home schools its children. And most Americans support allowing home-schooled children to take advantage of public school resources (see Figure 5), including attendance in selected classes and participation in sports and other extracurricular activities. Americans who know a home-schooling family are especially likely to support a more expansive array of schooling options for them. Fully 68 percent of adults who themselves know a home-schooled child believe that such children should have the option of taking selected classes at local public schools, and another 61 percent support allowing them to participate in sports and extracurricular programs, as compared with 48 percent and 51 percent, respectively, of adults who do not know a home-schooled child (Q.15, 16, 17).

Teacher Pay and Licensure

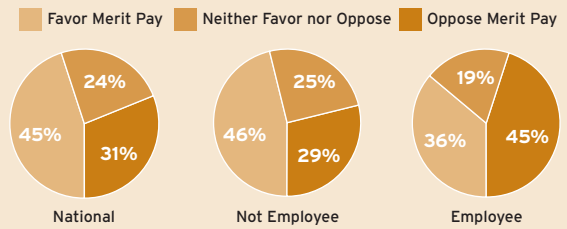
Just as lively (and divisive) as the controversy over school choice and home schooling has been the debate over teacher pay and licensure. On these issues, pluralities of the public support some, but not all, reform proposals.

Differential Pay

Although most scholars agree that teachers represent the single most important school contributor to a student's academic progress, consensus breaks down as soon as the question turns to how best to design compensation systems to enhance teacher quality. On one side, the National Education Association defends the current practice of paying all teachers the same amount, except for differences based on past experience and graduate coursework. On the other side, groups such as the Teaching Commission, and the Progressive Policy Institute have proposed that we

Merit Pay (Figure 6)

Americans are more likely to favor than oppose merit pay for teachers whose students are making academic progress. However, current or former school employees are more likely to oppose than to support the idea.



Home Schooling

15. Rather than send them to a school, some parents prefer to educate their children at home. Do you favor or oppose allowing home-schooled children to attend selected classes at local public schools?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	30%	31%	17%	24%	30%	31%
Somewhat favor	25	24	25	30	26	22
Neither favor nor oppose	28	28	36	27	29	22
Somewhat oppose	9	9	13	12	9	9
Completely oppose	8	8	10	6	6	16

16. Do you favor or oppose allowing home-schooled children to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities at local public schools?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	34%	32%	24%	37%	34%	33%
Somewhat favor	22	22	22	24	23	18
Neither favor nor oppose	26	27	30	25	26	24
Somewhat oppose	8	8	12	7	8	12
Completely oppose	10	11	12	7	10	14

17. Do you know any family that currently home schools their child?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Yes	40%	46%	24%	24%	38%	56%
No	60	54	76	76	62	44

pay teachers according to how much students are learning in their classrooms (often as measured by test results), the difficulty of the teachers' classroom environment or how hard it is to recruit quality teachers knowledgeable in a particular subject.

State Licensure

To be fully certified, public school teachers in nearly every state must complete a requisite number of courses in education and the subject matter appropriate to their chosen area of instruction. In recent years, however, some states have modified this

Forty-eight percent say that principals should be allowed to hire college graduates who lack formal teaching credentials, while 33 percent oppose the idea.

Though willing to entertain some reforms, the public is in no rush to abandon the traditional compensation system. Forty-five percent agree that a teacher's salary should depend in part upon students' academic progress while 31 percent disagree, and the remaining 24 percent choose not to express an opinion (see Figure 6). (Opinions about merit pay do not differ notably if Americans are asked about basing a teacher's pay on "students' academic progress" or on "students' academic progress on state tests.") A bare majority of Americans support increasing the salaries of those teaching in challenging school environments instead of using the same funds to offer all teachers a smaller pay increase. By a two-to-one margin, however, respondents would prefer to see new funds for teacher pay distributed equally across all teachers rather than targeted toward those in high-demand subject areas, such as math and science (Q.18, 19, 20).

practice by allowing principals to hire college-educated individuals who have not completed the coursework ordinarily required for certification. The innovation remains controversial, as many education schools and teacher organizations believe that a teacher is only qualified after completing appropriate pedagogical training.

A plurality of the public, however, supports a more permissive teacher-recruitment policy. Forty-eight percent of those surveyed say that principals should be allowed to hire college graduates who lack formal teaching credentials, while only 33 percent oppose the idea, and 20 percent express no opinion. A larger share, 41 percent, of current and former school employees oppose the idea (Q. 21).

School Spending

The average amount of money spent per pupil by U.S. public schools has more than doubled in real terms since 1970,

Differential Pay

18. Do you favor or oppose basing a teacher's salary, in part, on students' academic progress [on state tests]?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	14%	14%	11%	16%	14%	13%
Somewhat favor	31	33	22	29	32	23
Neither favor nor oppose	24	22	32	24	25	19
Somewhat oppose	16	16	19	14	16	17
Completely oppose	15	15	16	16	13	28

19. Do you think it is more important to give a larger salary increase to teachers who work in challenging schools, such as schools in central cities? Or is it better to give a smaller salary increase to all teachers?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Larger increase to teachers in challenging schools	53%	52%	61%	45%	52%	56%
Smaller salary increase to all teachers	47	48	39	55	48	44

20. Some states are considering increasing teacher salaries. Do you think it is more important to give a larger salary increase to teachers in subject areas where there are shortages, such as math and science? Or is it better to give a smaller salary increase to all teachers?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Larger salary increase to teachers in math and science	33%	32%	38%	33%	33%	31%
Smaller salary increase to all teachers	67	68	62	67	67	69

and the number of pupils per employed teacher has declined from 22 to 15. Teacher salaries have only barely kept pace with average wages nationwide, and the gap between teacher salaries and those of other college-educated workers has actually widened. Given these facts, some policy analysts claim

Given the stagnation of teacher salaries in the last three decades and the concomitant decline in class sizes, it is somewhat surprising that the public continues to prefer further cuts in class size over increases in teacher salaries. When asked whether education dollars are better spent

Most Americans express confidence that spending more on public education in their local school district would result in increased student learning.

that current spending levels are more than adequate and that further cuts in class size are unnecessary, while others say much more needs to be done, especially on the teacher salary front.

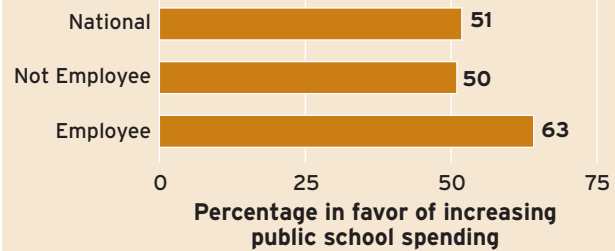
The public is closely divided on this issue (see Figure 7). Specifically, 51 percent say that spending on public education should increase, while 38 percent think it should remain the same and 10 percent favor spending cuts. Support for additional spending is highest among African Americans, Hispanics, and current and former public school employees, with more than 60 percent of each of those groups calling for increases in public school budgets (Q. 22).

Most Americans also express confidence that spending more on public education in their local school district would result in increased student learning. Fifty-nine percent of the public is at least somewhat confident that spending would increase student learning, as are 80 percent of African Americans, 70 percent of Hispanics, and 64 percent of school employees (Q. 23).

increasing teacher salaries or decreasing class size, fully 77 percent prefer the latter option. Though scholars continue to debate the benefits of class-size reductions, the general public would appear convinced (Q. 24).

School Spending (Figure 7)

A bare majority of Americans—but nearly two-thirds of those who work (or once worked) for the schools—believe spending on public education should increase.



State Licensure

21. Do you favor or oppose allowing principals to hire college graduates who they believe will be effective in the classroom even if they do not have formal teaching credentials?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Completely favor	16%	15%	17%	15%	15%	18%
Somewhat favor	32	31	29	39	32	30
Neither favor nor oppose	20	20	19	16	21	11
Somewhat oppose	18	18	16	19	18	17
Completely oppose	15	16	19	12	13	24

School Spending

22. Keeping in mind that the money for public education has to be paid by taxes, do you think that government funding for public schools in your district should increase, decrease, or stay about the same?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Greatly increase	13%	12%	22%	16%	12%	22%
Increase	38	35	43	44	38	41
Stay about the same	38	42	28	34	39	29
Decrease	8	9	3	5	8	5
Greatly decrease	2	3	4	1	2	3

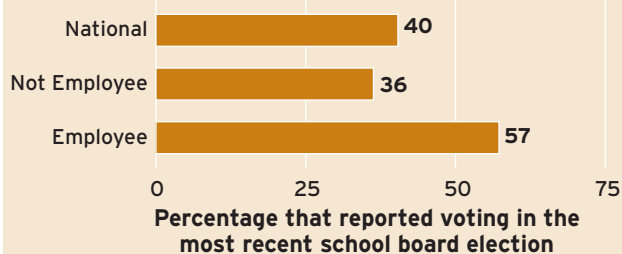
Voting in School Board Elections

The expanding reach of federal and state policies notwithstanding, responsibility for the day-to-day management of the nation's 14,000-plus school districts still lies primarily with locally elected school boards. Yet turnout for school board elections, which are often held at dates different from those of general elections, is notoriously low, often lingering in the single digits. Such dismal figures may make it possible for a motivated group, such as the local teachers union or advocates of a particular curricular innovation, to disproportionately influence election outcomes. One wonders, then, whether the relatively small number of voters who show up on election day share the general views of other district residents.

When using poll data to examine turnout, it is important to keep in mind that Americans consistently overstate their propensity to vote in U.S. elections. As a result, the precise proportion of Americans who claim to vote in school board elections—40 percent, in our survey—is less informative than differences in reported turnout across the various subgroups. Whites and

Who Votes? (Figure 8)

Fully 57 percent of current and former public school employees claim to have voted in the last school board elections, compared to just 36 percent of the general public.



likely to claim that they voted in their last school board election than is everyone else (see Figure 8).

Support for school choice in all its forms and for NCLB appears to be somewhat weaker among voters in school board

Current and former public school employees are 21 percentage points more likely to claim that they voted in their last school board election than is everyone else.

African Americans appear slightly more likely than Hispanics to have voted in their last school board election (Q. 25). Important differences, meanwhile, are observed among public school employees and the rest of the population. Indeed, current and former public school employees are 21 percentage points more

likely to claim that they voted in their last school board election than is everyone else (see Figure 8). Compared to the rest of the population, those who claim to have voted in the last election are 8 percentage points more likely to oppose school vouchers, 7 percentage points more likely to oppose charter schools, and 9 percentage points more likely

School Spending continued

23. If more money were spent on public schools in your district, how confident are you that students would learn more?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Very confident	16%	13%	34%	18%	16%	20%
Somewhat confident	43	40	46	52	43	44
Not very confident	29	33	17	22	30	25
Not confident at all	12	14	4	8	12	12

24. Which do you think is a better use of our educational dollars, increasing teacher salaries or decreasing class size?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Increasing teacher salaries	23%	21%	25%	27%	23%	19%
Decreasing class size	77	79	75	73	77	81

Voting in School Board Elections

25. Many school board elections are held at a time different from other elections. As a result, many people are unable to vote in them. Do you remember for sure whether you voted in the last school board election?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
Voted	40%	40%	42%	34%	36%	57%
Did not vote	36	36	35	34	38	25
Ineligible	4	4	2	9	4	3
Don't know, can't remember	21	20	21	23	22	15

to oppose tax credits. Voters are also 10 percentage points more likely to oppose the renewal of NCLB when the law is mentioned by name, than is the rest of the population; but when the law is described but not named, nonvoters are actually 2 percentage points more likely to oppose its renewal.

For the most part, how Americans evaluate the public schools in their own communities does not strongly correlate with their support for the reform proposals included in this survey. One exception, though, bears mentioning. Though respondents who give their schools a C, D, or F are just as likely as respondents who

Just 22 percent of Americans give public schools in general an A or B, 55 percent a C, and 24 percent a D or F.

Overall Assessment

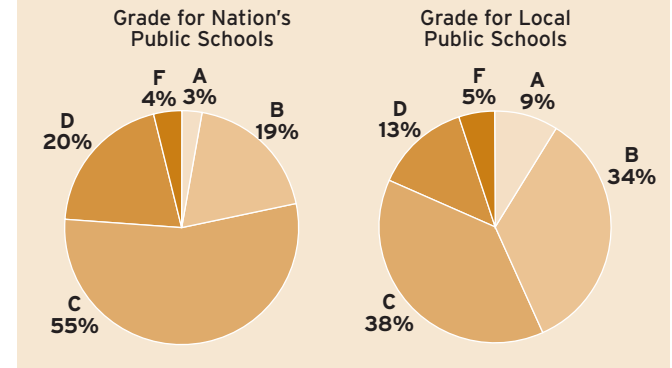
When asked to grade the public schools, respondents in this survey offer assessments that look much like those observed in other national surveys of education attitudes (see Figure 9). Forty-three percent give the schools in their own community an A or a B, 38 percent assign a C, and 18 percent give a D or F. When asked about public schools around the nation, these grades drop. Just 22 percent of Americans give public schools in general an A or B, 55 percent a C, and 24 percent a D or F.

Among the various subgroups, some interesting differences emerge. When asked about the schools around the nation, whites, Hispanics, and African Americans offer similar assessments, as do public school employees and the remaining population. When asked about the schools in their own district, however, African Americans and Hispanics give notably lower marks than whites. Fully 48 percent of whites award the schools in their community an A or B grade, as compared to 40 percent of Hispanics and 27 percent of African Americans. The responses of public school employees and everyone else do not differ significantly (Q. 26, 27).

give their schools an A or B to support increases in school spending, the former group is twice as likely to express no confidence that more spending will improve student learning.

Grading American Schools (Figure 9)

Only 22 percent of those surveyed gave American schools an A or a B, but 43 percent gave one of those grades to the schools in their own community.



Overall Assessment

26. Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here?

	Racial/Ethnic Identity				Public School Employee?	
	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
A	9%	10%	7%	8%	9%	12%
B	34	38	20	32	34	34
C	38	36	48	41	39	37
D	13	13	18	11	13	11
Fail	5	4	7	9	5	7

27. How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally?

	National	White	African American	Hispanic	Not Employee	Employee
A	3%	1%	7%	8%	2%	5%
B	19	18	20	17	19	16
C	55	56	52	58	55	54
D	20	22	14	14	20	19
Fail	4	3	6	2	4	6

This survey reveals a U.S. public that wants its schools to become more effective and is willing to endorse a wide variety of reforms.

Conclusions

This survey reveals a U.S. public that continues to support its public schools, but also one that wants these schools to become more effective and is willing to endorse a wide variety of reforms it thinks will bring that about. Americans, for the most part, are pragmatists. They are searching for something that works. It could be accountability, it might be choice, it could be class-size reduction, and it may be changes in teacher recruitment and pay. Reform proposals in each of these areas have pluralities in support of them. In some instances, though, sizable portions of the public remain unpersuaded by advocates on either side.

Clearly, the debate over American education is far from over.

William G. Howell is associate professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. Martin R. West is assistant professor of education at Brown University and an executive editor of Education Next. Paul E. Peterson is professor of government at Harvard University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. He serves as editor-in-chief of Education Next.

Survey Methods

This survey, sponsored by Education Next and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN) between February 16 and March 15, 2007. KN maintains a nationally representative panel of adults, obtained via list-assisted random digit dialing sampling techniques, who agree to participate in a limited number of online surveys. Because KN offers members of its panel free Internet access and a WebTV device that connects to a telephone and television, the sample is not limited to current computer owners or users with Internet access. When recruiting for the panel, KN sends out an advance mailing and follows up with at least 15 dial attempts. The panel, then, is updated quarterly. Detailed information about the maintenance of the KN panel, the protocols used to administer surveys, and the comparability of online and telephone surveys is available online (www.knowledgenetworks.com/quality/).

The main findings from the Education Next–PEPG survey reported in this

essay are based on a nationally representative stratified sample of 2,000 adults (age 18 years and older). The sample consists of 1,482 non-Hispanic whites, 233 non-Hispanic blacks, and 171 Hispanics. Within the sample, 309 individuals either currently work or previously worked for the public schools, and 1,691 individuals have had no employment in public schools. We oversampled parents of school-age children, who constitute 811 of the total sample. Because differences in the responses of parents and nonparents are negligible, we do not present the findings for these two subgroups. We use poststratification population weights to adjust for survey nonresponse as well as for the oversampling of parents. These weights ensure that the observed demographic characteristics of the final sample match the known characteristics of the national adult population.

In general, survey responses based on larger numbers of observations are more precise, that is, less prone to sampling variance, than those made across groups with fewer numbers of observations. As a consequence,

answers attributed to the national population are more precisely estimated than are those attributed to subgroups. With 2,000 respondents, the margin of error for responses given by the full sample in the Education Next–PEPG survey is roughly 2 percentage points.

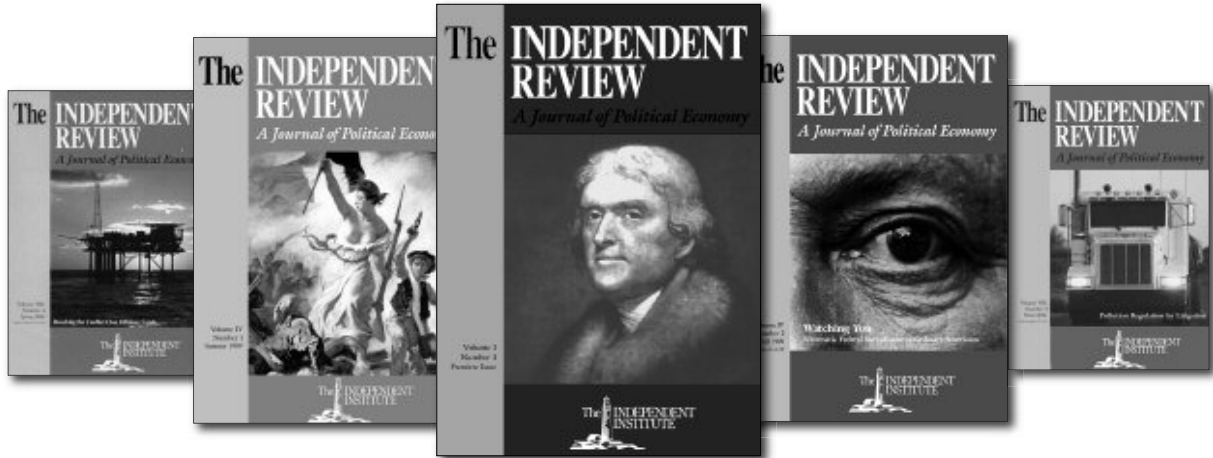
On two items, questions 1 and 18, we conducted experiments to examine the effect of variations in the way questions are posed. On question 1, the wording did appear to influence responses, so we present the results of both versions. Answers did not differ materially on question 18, so we report the average results across the two versions of that question. Additionally, to investigate the effects of question ordering, half the sample answered questions 26 and 27 at the beginning of the survey, and half did so at the end. We did not find any evidence of question order effects; hence, we present only the pooled responses in this report.

Percentages do not always add precisely to 100 as a result of rounding to the nearest percentage point.

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