

TRUST IN K-12 SCHOOLS: A POLL OF FLORIDA VOTERS

Ryan Owens & James V. Shuls
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An alarming number of Floridians do not trust K-12 schools. But if schools focus more on civics, they could increase public trust. Those are two of the key takeaways of our recently conducted poll of Floridians. The Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University partnered with Hunt Research to conduct a survey of 1,234 likely Florida voters before the 2024 general election on a host of issues dealing with education. The results showed:

- A worrisome number of Floridians distrust K-12 schools; and
- That distrust stems largely from concerns that schools have become too politicized.

Yet, the survey also shows that there is a consensus on how to restore trust in schools. A plurality of Floridians agree that the purpose of K-12 education should be to prepare students to be responsible citizens. And they believe a greater focus on the Constitution and American civics will enhance their trust in schools. These findings reveal that *a renewed focus on constitutionally grounded education focused on American civics will increase Floridians' confidence in K-12 education. And it will, at the same time, produce a more civically literate population.*

TRUST IN FLORIDA K-12 SCHOOLS IS LOW AND REFLECTS A WORRISOME DIVIDE

We polled 1,234 likely Florida voters before the 2024 presidential election. We asked a series of questions, including:

- In general, how much do you trust K-12 schools?
- How much do you trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education?
- How much do you trust K-12 schools to provide students with an education that is free of political bias?
- In your own words, what is the number one reason why you distrust K-12 schools?
- What do you believe should be the primary purpose of K-12 education?

Additionally, we asked respondents five civics knowledge questions to gain a basic understanding of their civics knowledge.

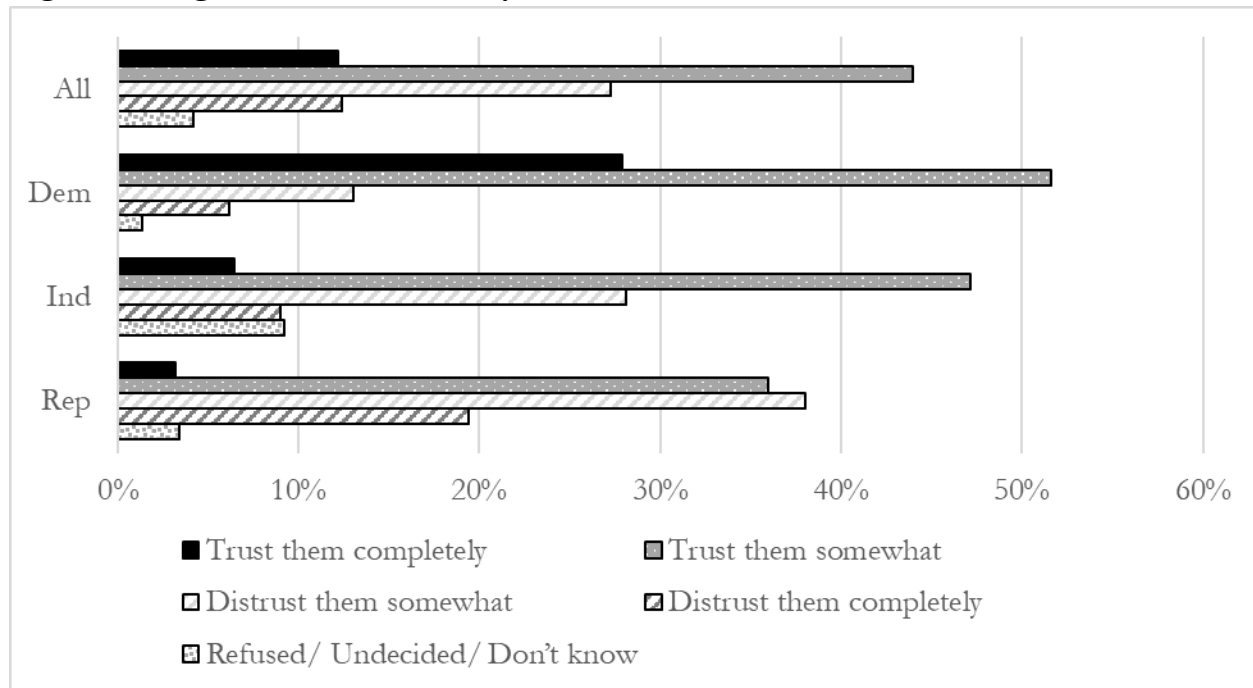
Perhaps not surprisingly, partisanship plays a strong role in how much Floridians trust K-12 schools. Democrats are highly likely to say they trust K-12 schools. In fact, 79.5% of Democrats said they trusted K-12 schools. Of which, 27.9% of them trust schools completely while 51.6% trust them somewhat. Only 19.2% of Democrats distrust schools, with 13% distrusting them somewhat and 6.1% distrusting them completely.

Independents tend to support K-12 schools less than Democrats, with 53.6% of Independents indicating they trust K-12 schools. Six and a half percent of them trust schools completely, while 47.1% trust them somewhat. Among the 37.2% who distrust schools, 28.1% distrust them somewhat and 9% distrust them completely (Figure 1).

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Figure 1: "In general, how much do you trust K-12 Schools?"



Among Republicans, there appears to be a crisis of confidence in K-12 schools. Only 39.1% trust K-12 schools, with 3.2% trusting them completely and 35.9% trusting them somewhat. A majority of Republicans, 57.5%, distrust K-12 schools, 38% distrust them somewhat and 19.4% distrust K-12 schools completely.

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We next asked voters whether they trust schools to perform particular tasks. Our first question focused on whether they trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education. The results here were more positive. Fifty-eight percent of respondents either completely trusted, 10.1%, or somewhat trusted, 47.8%, K-12 schools to provide students with a good education (Figure 2). Still, 38.4% of Floridians distrust schools to accomplish this task, 11.2% completely distrust schools to do so while 27.2% somewhat distrust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education.

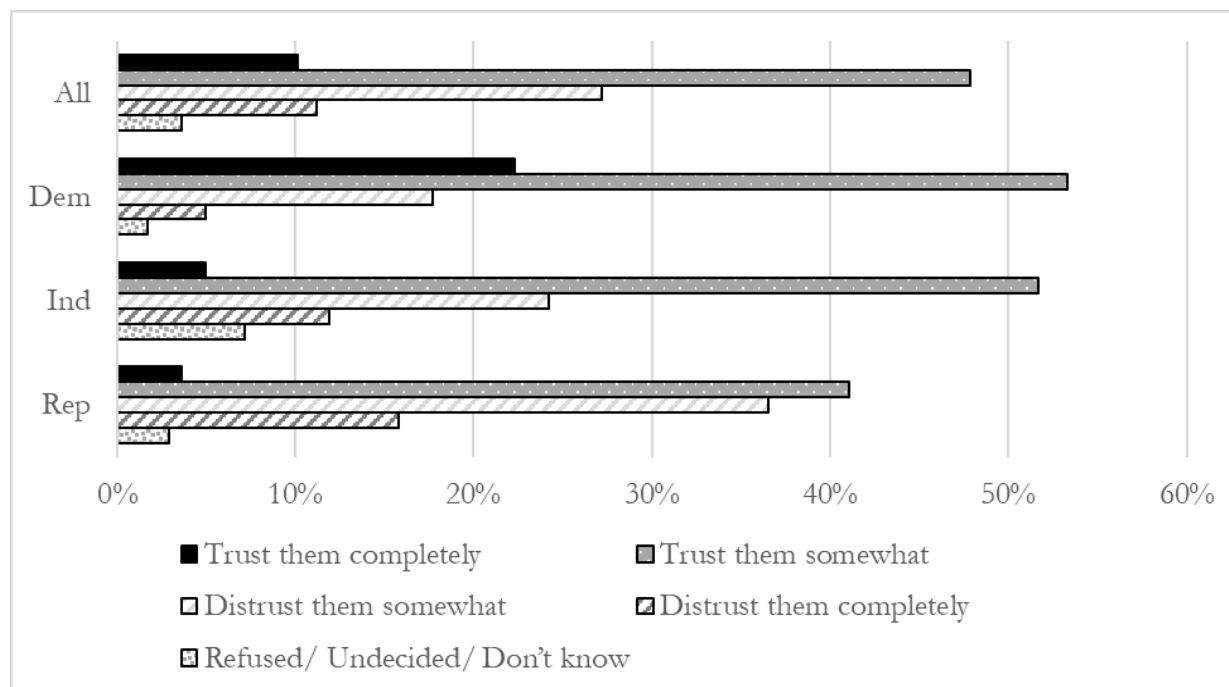
Partisan political preferences have a clear connection to rates of trust among respondents. Democrats are much more likely than Independents or Republicans to trust K-12 schools. A total of 75.6% of Democrats trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education. Among them, 22.3% trust schools completely and 53.3% trust them somewhat. Meanwhile, 17.7% of Democrats distrust schools somewhat and 4.9% distrust them completely.

Fewer Independents, 56.7%, trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education, 5% trust schools completely and 51.7% trust them somewhat. Conversely, 36.1% distrust schools, 24.2% distrust them somewhat while 11.9% distrust them completely.

Only 44.7% of Republicans trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good education, 3.6% trust them completely and 41.1% trust them somewhat. Meanwhile, 36.6% of Republicans distrust schools somewhat and another 15.8% distrust them completely.

Our next set of questions focused on perceived political bias in K-12 schools. We asked Floridians how much they trust K-12

Figure 2: "How much do you trust K-12 schools to provide students with a good Education?"



schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias. The results revealed serious concerns. On the whole, only 41.5% of Floridians trust schools (54.5% distrust schools) to provide students with an education that is free of political bias.

Once again, the political ideology of our respondents reveals serious differences. A majority of Democrats, 66.3%, trust schools to provide students with an education free of political bias. Nearly a quarter, 22.8%, completely trust them to do so, while 43.4% somewhat trust them to do so. Less than one-third, 31.5%, of Democrats distrust schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias, 19.9% somewhat distrust them and 11.6% completely distrust them.

Independents are less trusting of schools than are Democrats. Only 36.6% of Independents trust schools to provide students with an education that is free of political bias. A mere 6.4% trust them completely, while 30.1% trust them somewhat. A majority of Independents, 54.2%, distrust K-12 schools to provide an education free of political bias. In all, 32.5% distrust them somewhat and 21.7% distrust them completely.

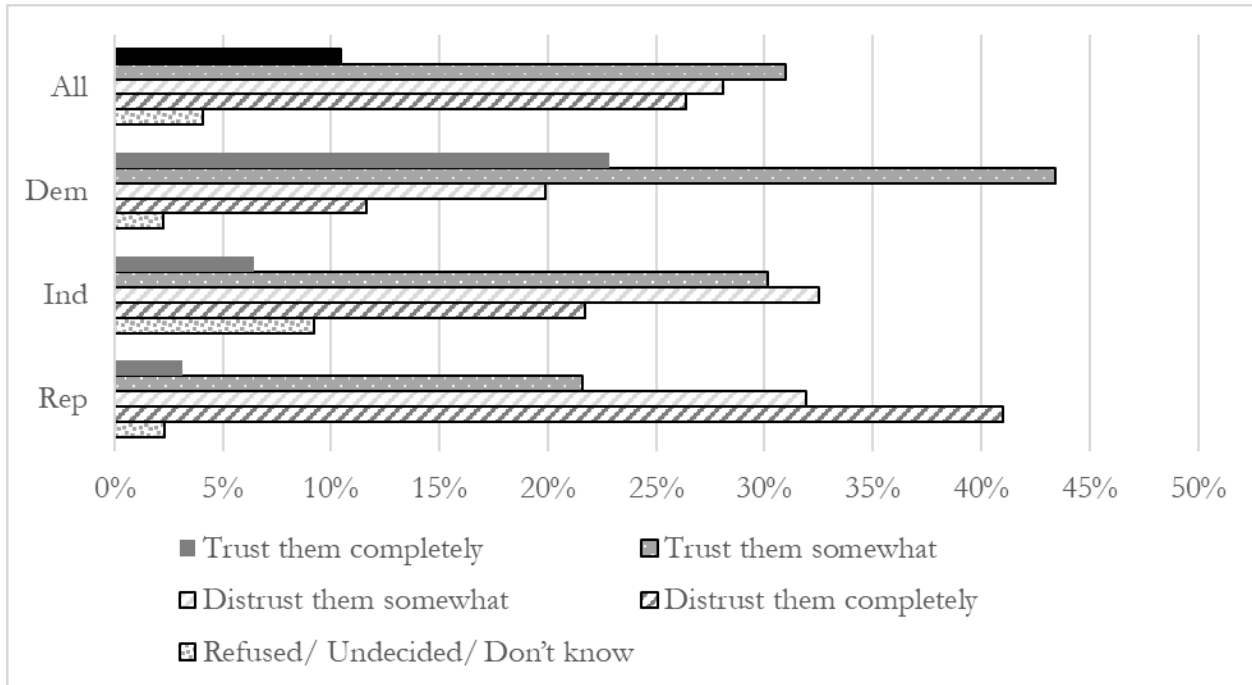
If Independents are skeptical of K-12 schools, Republican's appear downright distrusting. Just 24.8% of Republicans in Florida trust K-12 schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias, 3.1% completely trust them and 21.6% trust them somewhat.

Meanwhile, 73% of Republicans distrust K-12 schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias. Nearly one-third, 31.9%, of Republicans somewhat distrust K-12 schools to provide students with an unbiased education, while 41% distrust them completely (Figure 3).

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Not only are the numbers themselves lower than one should tolerate, the divide between Democrats and Republicans is profound and worrisome. That 66.3% of Democrats trust schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias but only 24.8% of Republicans do so is alarming. A 41.5 point divide over

Figure 3: "How much do you trust K-12 schools to provide their students with an education that is free of political bias?"



trust in schools reveals that something is off.

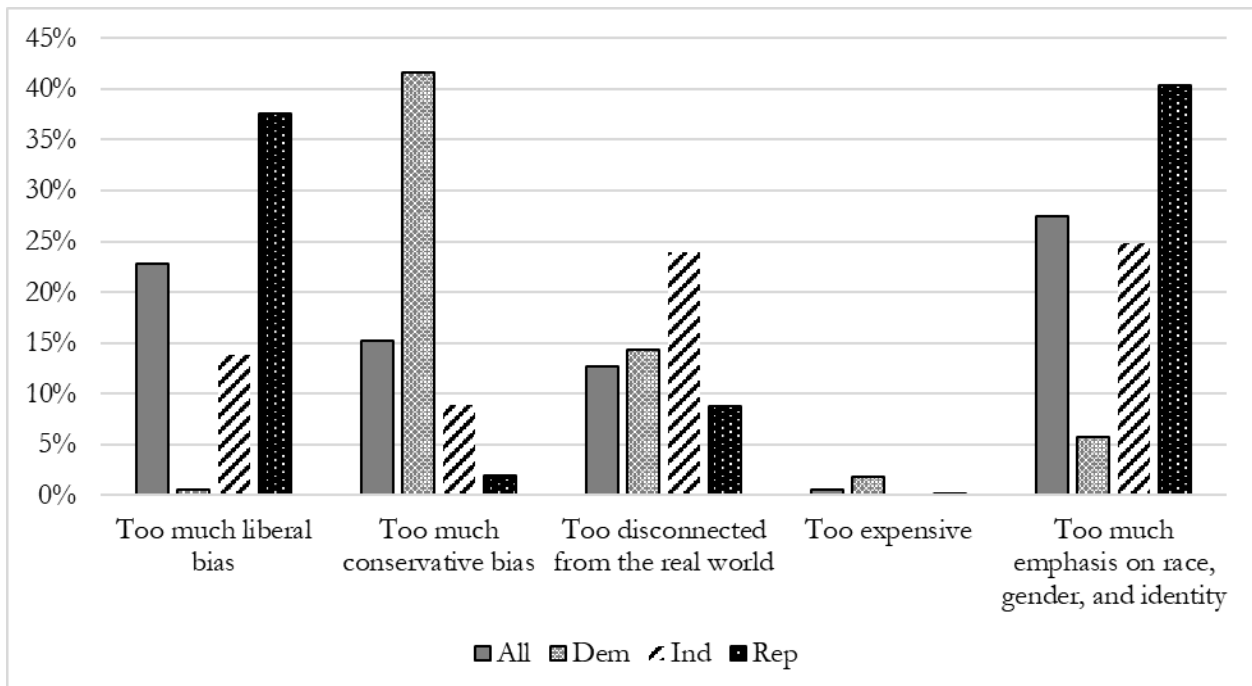
To better understand the causes of distrust, we asked respondents who distrusted K-12 schools *why* they distrusted them. More than a quarter, 27.4%, of our respondents believe K-12 schools place “too much emphasis on race, gender, and identity” (Figure 4).

Another 22.8% believe there is “too much liberal bias” in K-12 schools. Taken together,

fully 50.2% of Floridians point to left-leaning politics as a source of distrust in K-12 schools. From a non-political perspective, 12.7% distrust K-12 schools because they are “too disconnected to the real world.”

Among Democrats who distrust schools, 5% believe they suffer from liberal bias, while 41% believe there is too much conservative bias. Another 14.3% of Democrats believe

Figure 4: "Which if the following comes the closest to the reason why you distrust K-12



schools are too disconnected to the real world and 1.2% say schools are too expensive. Interestingly, 6.7% believe schools focus too much on race, gender, and identity. A remaining 23.6% chose “OTHER” as a reason for their distrust, a topic which we will address shortly.

Among our Independents who distrust schools, 13.5% believe they suffer from liberal bias and 10.2% believe there is too much conservative bias. Meanwhile, 16.9% of Independents distrust schools because they are too disconnected to the real world. Only 0.8% think schools are too expensive, while nearly one-third, 31.9%, of Independents think schools focus too much race, gender, and identity. The remaining 19.8% of Independents chose “OTHER” as a reason for their distrust.

In total, more than three-quarters of Republicans said they distrust K-12 schools due to liberal bias or too much focus on race, gender, and identity.

Among Republicans, liberal bias is the top reason for distrust, with 38.6% of respondents saying schools suffer from liberal bias. Conversely, just 1.8% think schools show too much conservative bias. Just behind liberal bias, the second highest reason for distrust among Republicans, 37.8%, was a belief that schools focus too much on race, gender, and identity. In total, more than three-quarters of Republicans said they distrust K-12 schools due to liberal bias or too much focus on race, gender, and identity. Next, nearly one-tenth, 9.4%, of Republicans distrust schools because they think they are too disconnected to the real world and just 0.1% said their primary reason for distrust was because schools are too expensive. The remaining 9.4% chose “OTHER” as a reason for their distrust.

Taken together, identity politics, 27%, and concerns about left- or right-leaning political bias, 37%, combine to explain nearly two-thirds of all Floridians’ reasons for distrusting K-12 education.

We mentioned above that many Floridians pointed to “Other” as their reason for distrusting K-12 schools. Analyses of verbatim responses among voters who refused to answer the question, or who answered “Other” indicates that many of these voters are also highly concerned about the corruption of educational institutions by political influence. Such concerns are shared by voters all across the partisan spectrum, although they take on a different tenor for voters of different parties. The following quotes are typical of voters who share such concerns:

“Teaching is very biased and leans heavily to the left. Parents should be allowed to have a lot more to say about the kids’ education.”

-70-year-old white Republican male from Panama City

“Biased groups... and biased politicians... have attacked curriculums and are trying to censor educators and make them follow a conservative Christian outlook. This is unconstitutional and infringes on free speech, free thought, and the validity of [the] scientific principle.”

-50-year-old white Democratic female from Palm Beach

“[I]n all levels of education, there is political bias incorporated as “education” (mostly seen in K-12 and less in universities) and [I] believe political biases should NOT be a part of base education, only in clubs/extracurricular where the student can make the choice to join (and K-12 students should NOT be a part of). [T]here is a difference between education and influence.”

-21-year-old Hispanic Republican female from Miami

A deeper and more systematic analysis reveals similar concerns. We can summarize the key distrust themes as follows:

EDUCATION SYSTEM AND INSTITUTIONS

- General Dissatisfaction - Dissatisfaction with how public schools operate, including resource allocation.
- Quality of Teaching - Concerns about the ability of teachers to educate effectively, with mentions of inadequate teaching methods and lack of accountability.
- School Policies - Frustration with policies such as curricular choices, administrative inefficiencies, and, for some, “book banning.”

POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND BIAS

- Partisan Interference - Distrust due to political agendas (on the left and right) influencing education and curriculum design.
- Bias in Education - Concerns over perceived ideological or cultural biases in schools, leading to mistrust of the education system’s intentions.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

- Student Welfare - Worries about whether schools prioritize the needs and well-being of students.
- Misinformation and Indoctrination - Concerns that schools might misinform or overly influence children’s beliefs instead of fostering thinking skills.

These open-ended questions reveal information that is quite similar to the results of our previous questions. Some people are generally dissatisfied and believe schools need more resources and greater attention to particular topics. And many are angry about political bias (from the left and to a slightly lesser degree the right) that they observe.

We moved on to ask these same people, “if there were one reform you would like to see in public K-12 education, what would it be?” (Note that in this question, we specifically asked them to weigh in on *public* education.)

Their reform ideas touched on at least two broad features:

CURRICULUM CHANGES

- Numerous respondents focused on the need to emphasize teaching core academic subjects, including history, math, and reading.
- Others commented on the need for greater discussions around books and materials, including support for allowing diverse viewpoints.

STUDENT SUPPORT

- Respondents discussed the need to focus on improving foundational skills like literacy and numeracy to ensure student readiness and help set students up to succeed.

IF SCHOOLS TEACH MORE AMERICAN CIVICS THEY MAY REBUILD TRUST

The survey also reveals, though, that there is a surprising level of consensus among voters of every partisan and demographic group about what the purpose of K-12 schools ought to be and, more importantly, what reform or change can generate increased public trust.

We asked Floridians what they believe the purpose of K-12 schooling ought to be. We gave them a number of options. A strong plurality of them chose “preparing students to be responsible citizens.” Among all Floridians, 44.7% stated that preparing students to be responsible citizens should be the primary purpose of K-12 schooling. They tended to see workforce preparation (27.4%) as a secondary purpose. In third, 16.5% claimed that K-12 should prepare students to discover their purpose in life, while 11.4% believe it exists “to prepare students to discover the scientific truth about the world” (Figure 5).

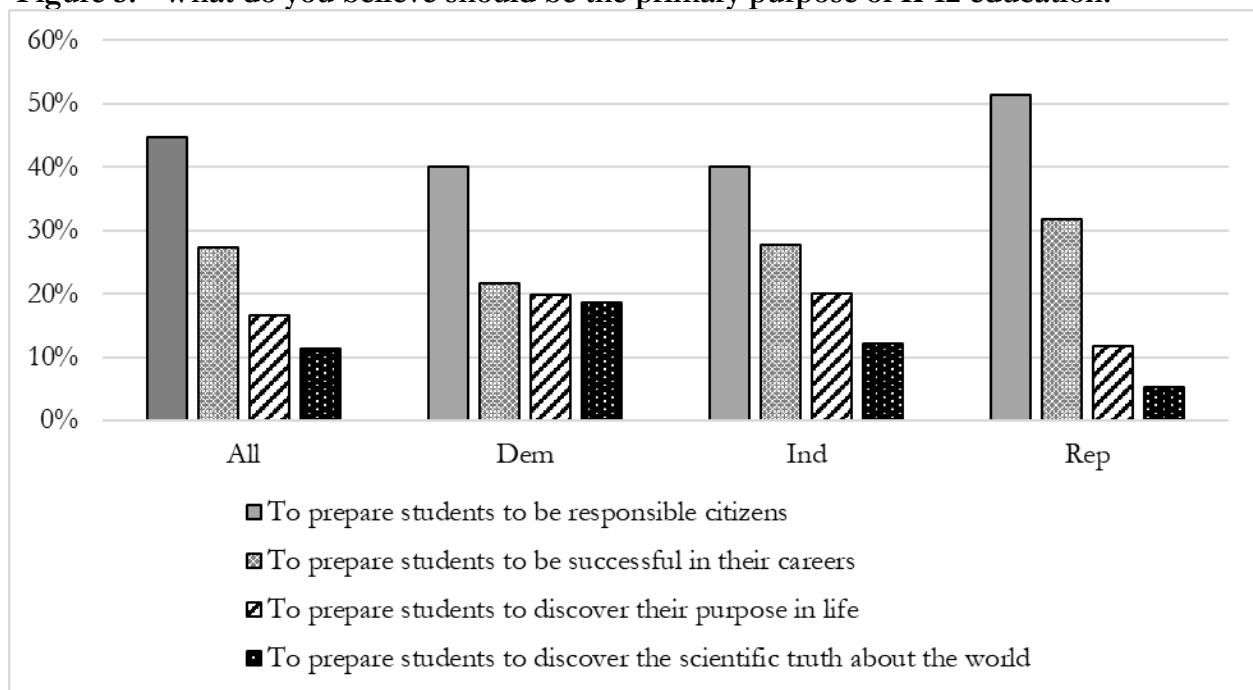
While partisanship does correlate with what Floridians believe the purpose of K-12 schooling ought to be, strong pluralities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans say that the primary purpose of K-12 schools should be to prepare students to become responsible citizens, 40% of Democrats, 40.1% of Independents, and 51.4% of Republicans

believe the primary purpose of K-12 is to prepare students to be responsible citizens. Interestingly, greater civic learning is supported by those who know much about civics *and* those who know less. In fact, a plurality of the voters who answered at least one of five civics knowledge questions wrong still believe that the purpose of K-12 education should be to make students better citizens. This suggests that a push for more civics education would be supported even by voters who have yet to attain a perfect education in civics.

The shared belief that the main purpose of K-12 education is to prepare students for civic life may be the reason why significant majorities of Florida voters approve of civics-focused policies to reform K-12 schools. We next asked Floridians who expressed at least some distrust K-12 schooling to tell us whether a series of proposed reforms would lead them to trust K-12 schools more or less.

We asked whether “requiring civics learning and teaching programs that include participation in student governance and learning

Figure 5: "What do you believe should be the primary purpose of K-12 education?"



about the Constitution” would increase their trust in schools. Voters of all registered parties enthusiastically support such programs. In total, 77% of Democrats, 69% of Independents, and 85% of Republicans support civics education in K-12 schools. In fact, civics education enjoys the support of a supermajority of every major demographic group: voters of every age, race, both sexes, and every level of income and educational attainment support such reform. Support is particularly strong, more than 80%, among voters who already exhibit a degree of civic awareness, but even two-thirds of less civically engaged or aware Floridians favor more civics.

In total, 77% of Democrats, 69% of Independents, and 85% of Republicans support civics education in K-12 schools.

We also asked those who distrust schools if they would become more trusting if schools required that, “as part of the core curriculum, students read the great texts of Western civilization, like Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, Shakespeare, and the political writing of the Founding Fathers.” Here too, we observe interesting results. A plurality of Democrats, 47.3%, stated they would trust schools more if they did

this (Figure 6). Only 9.7% of Democrats said it would make them distrust schools more. A majority of Independents, 51.9%, said the classics would make them trust schools more, while 3.2% said it would decrease trust. Republicans had the strongest support of the classics, with 65.9% indicating the classics would make them trust schools more and 5.3% saying it would decrease trust.

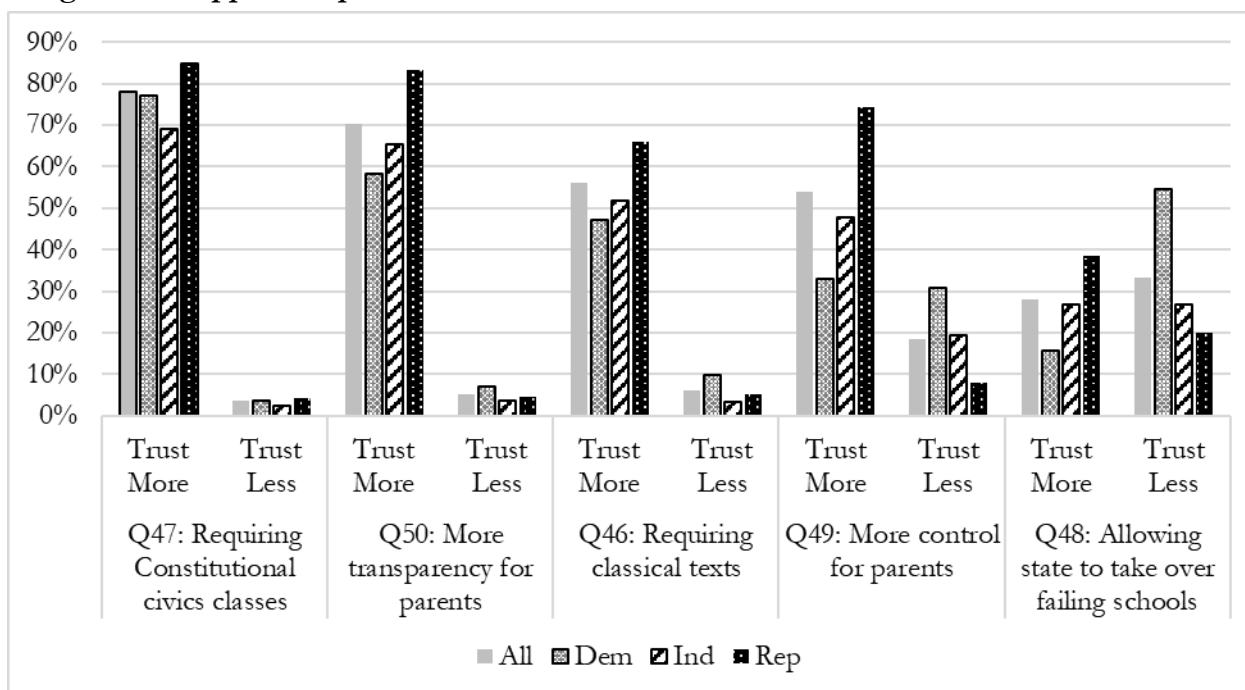
Respondents also were asked whether “provid[ing] parents with more information about what is being taught in their kids’ classes” would enhance trust. A majority of Democrats, 58.4%, say they would trust K-12 schools more if schools provided more information, while 7.0% said they would trust them less. Meanwhile, 65.4% of Independents said information would make them trust schools more and 3.6% would trust them less. Finally, 83.2% of Republicans say more information

would lead to greater trust and 4.5% say it would lessen trust.

When it comes to giving parents “greater control over the schools to which they send their kids,” Democrats are divided. One-third, 33.0%, say they would trust K-12 schools *more* if they allowed parents greater control (school choice, basically), while 30.7% say they would trust K-12 schools *less* if this were the case. For Independents and Republicans, great parental control over where to send their kids is a strong net positive. Among Independents, 47.7% would trust schools more, 19.4% would trust school less. Meanwhile, 74.4% of Republicans would trust schools more and 7.8% would trust schools less.

We also asked respondents about whether they would trust schools more if Florida “allow[ed] state officials to take over leadership of public schools that fail to meet

Figure 6: "Support for potential reforms to K-12 schools"



minimal annual standards.” There is little support for such a proposal. Republicans are the only partisan group of whom a plurality say that allowing the state to take over failing schools would lead them to trust K-12 schools more; independents are divided on state take-over, and Democrats are strongly opposed.

CONCLUSIONS

Like many other Americans, Floridians are divided by partisanship. And their own partisan preferences (Democrat, Republican, or Independent) strongly influence their trust and distrust in K-12 schools. But despite this partisan divide voters across the spectrum share the belief that K-12 education should prepare

students to be responsible citizens. Further, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents believe the Constitution is where we can focus when creating those responsible citizens. In short, our survey results suggest civics education—grounded in the Constitution—transcends political partisanship and can lead to increased trust in K-12 schools.

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It is worth pointing out that a greater focus on civics education could also have the added benefit of improving Floridians' civic literacy.

In our survey, only 48% of respondents correctly answered all five basic civics questions. 26.5% of respondents could not correctly name all three branches of the federal government; 28% did not know that a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling becomes the law of the land; and 28% did not know the name of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives. We need to do more to improve civic awareness

* * *

James Madison once wrote: “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” Our results suggest that Floridians tend to agree—and they will reward schools that do as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ryan Owens is the Director of the Institute for Governance and Civics, and Professor of Political Science at Florida State University. Ryan.Owens@fsu.edu

James V. Shuls is the Head of the K-12 Education Reform branch of the Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University. JShuls@fsu.edu

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