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# THE COVID STATES PROJECT: A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY REPORT #72: SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

USA, December 2021

Alauna C. Safarpour, Harvard University  
Kristin Lunz Trujillo, Northeastern University  
Ata Uslu, Northeastern University  
Alyssa Smith, Northeastern University  
David Lazer, Northeastern University  
Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University  
Jennifer Lin, Northwestern University  
Katherine Ognyanova, Rutgers University

Roy H. Perlis, Harvard Medical School  
James Druckman, Northwestern University  
Mauricio Santillana, Harvard Medical School  
Alexi Quintana, Northeastern University  
Jon Green, Northeastern University  
Hong Qu, Northeastern University  
Caroline Pippert, Northwestern University  
Anjali Shere, Harvard University



Northeastern University  
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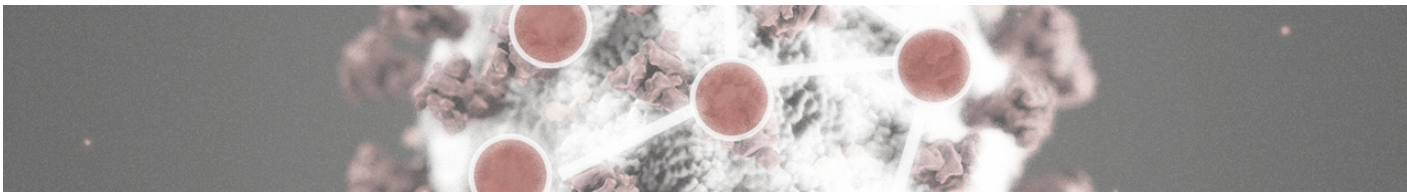
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**Report of December 17, 2021, v.1**

***The COVID States Project***

**From:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

***A joint project of:***

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

**Authors:** Alauna C. Safarpour (Harvard University); Kristin Lunz Trujillo (Northeastern University); Ata Uslu (Northeastern University); Alyssa Smith (Northeastern University); David Lazer (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); Hong Qu (Northeastern University); Caroline Pippert (Northwestern University), and Anjali Shere (Harvard University)

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Northeastern University  
Network Science Institute



# COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — December 17, 2021

## *The COVID States Project*

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From April 2020 through September 2021, we conducted multiple waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at [covidstates.org](https://www.covidstates.org).

### **Note on methods:**

Between November 3 and December 2, 2021, we surveyed 22,277 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, including 5,325 people who reported that they voted in a school board election in the past year and 980 who said they attended a school board meeting in the past 6 months. The survey was conducted by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on the other waves, see [covidstates.org](https://www.covidstates.org)). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the latest in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

### **Contact information:**

For additional information and press requests contact:

- David Lazer at [d.lazer@neu.edu](mailto:d.lazer@neu.edu)
- Matthew A. Baum at [matthew\\_baum@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:matthew_baum@hks.harvard.edu)
- Katherine Ognyanova at [katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu](mailto:katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu)
- Roy H. Perlis at [rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu](mailto:rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu)
- James Druckman at [druckman@northwestern.edu](mailto:druckman@northwestern.edu)
- Mauricio Santillana at [msantill@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:msantill@fas.harvard.edu)

Or visit us at [www.covidstates.org](https://www.covidstates.org).

## **December 2021 Report on School Board Elections**

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the backlash against Critical Race Theory have led to increased attention to school board elections. To better understand who votes in these elections and who attends school board meetings, this report examines the demographic characteristics of individuals who say they attended a school board meeting in the past 6 months and those who say they voted for school board at some point in the past year.

Turnout in school board elections has historically been [very low](#). Although comprehensive sources of turnout in school board elections are lacking, prior research has estimated turnout in select races to be between [3%](#) and [12%](#), with even highly salient special elections unable to top [30%](#) turnout. Between high rates of uncontested seats and a lack of salience for these hyper-local positions, school board elections have rarely garnered much attention in the history of American politics. This has [changed in recent years](#), with controversial [issues](#) of virtual schooling, mask and vaccine mandates, rules for transgender students, and concerns about how history is taught propelling school board elections to the forefront of numerous news cycles in recent months. The increased attention and salience in school board elections are demonstrated by the [spike](#) in the number of school board members facing recall efforts in the 2021 election cycle: According to [Ballotpedia](#), there were 90 recall efforts in 2021, the highest number observed in the 12 years they analyzed. Local news have reported spikes in school board turnout in the 2021 election cycle, with [Southlake Texas](#), [Centerville Ohio](#), [Virginia's Shenandoah valley](#), and numerous other locales, reporting higher than usual participation.

In the run up to the November 2021 elections, rancorous school board meetings garnered national attention and prompted U.S. [Attorney General Merrick Garland](#) to marshal the resources of federal authorities to address the growing threats directed at school board members nationwide. Federal involvement in the issue was sparked by a [request](#) for help from the National School Board Association sent to the Biden administration in late September 2021.

Given these recent events, in this report we examine participation in school board elections and school board meetings – providing survey estimates of who participates in school board elections and meetings, and what issues motivate these individuals.

## Key Findings

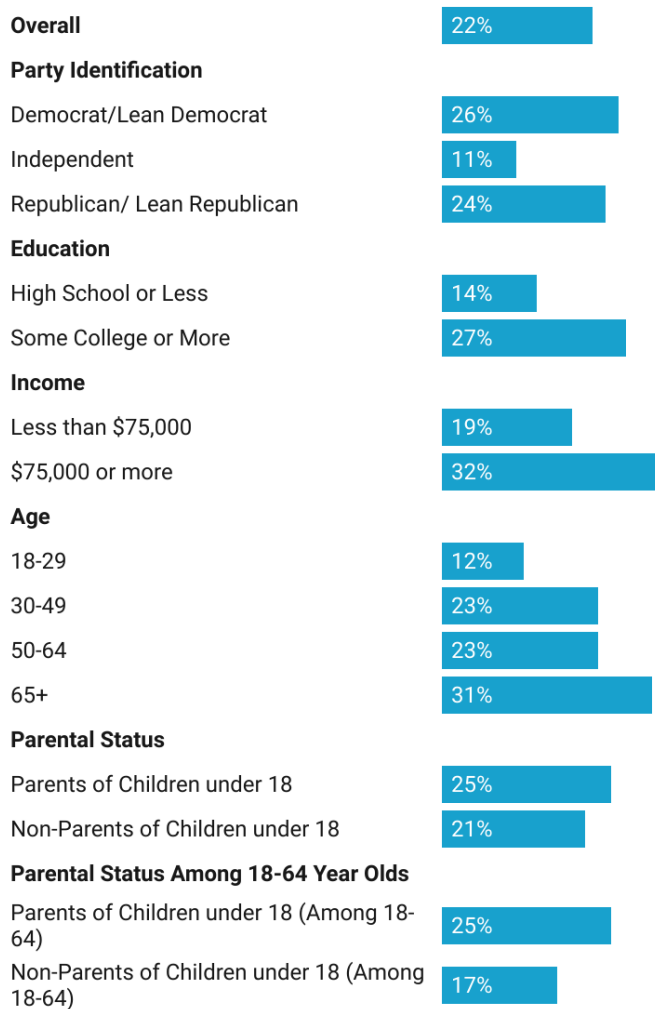
- Overall, roughly 1 in 5 (22%) say they voted in a school board election in the past year and 4% said they attended a school board meeting in the past 6 months.
- Partisans were more likely than independents to say they voted in a school board election, as were wealthier respondents, those with higher education, and older Americans. Similar shares of parents and non-parents report voting for school boards.
- Majorities of school board meeting attendees were parents of minor children, Democrats, college educated, and below age 50.
- Overall, the most frequently cited issues motivating school board voters were school safety and requiring COVID-19 vaccines. Together, pandemic-related concerns (vaccines, masks, and mode of instruction) motivate 3 in 10 voters while school safety and mental health combined are the top concern of 1 in 5 voters.
- The top issue concerning school board voters varies by partisanship, race, vaccination status, and age. Democrats, those vaccinated for COVID-19, and older Americans were more likely to cite COVID-19 vaccine requirements as their top issue for school boards. Younger and Hispanic voters were more likely to prioritize mental health than older and non-Hispanic voters. Black voters and Republican voters were more likely to rank teaching about race/racism as their top issue compared to White voters and Democratic voters.

# 1. School Board Election Voters and Meeting Attendees

Overall, roughly 1 in 5 (22%) of those surveyed in the most recent wave of the Covid States Project say they voted in a school board election in the past year. Similar shares of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (26%) say they voted in a school board election as did Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (24%).

## Larger Shares Of Partisans, College-Educated, Higher Income, And Older Respondents Say They Voted In A School Board Election In The Past Year

Share of respondents who say they voted in a school board election in the past year:



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size=22,277.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

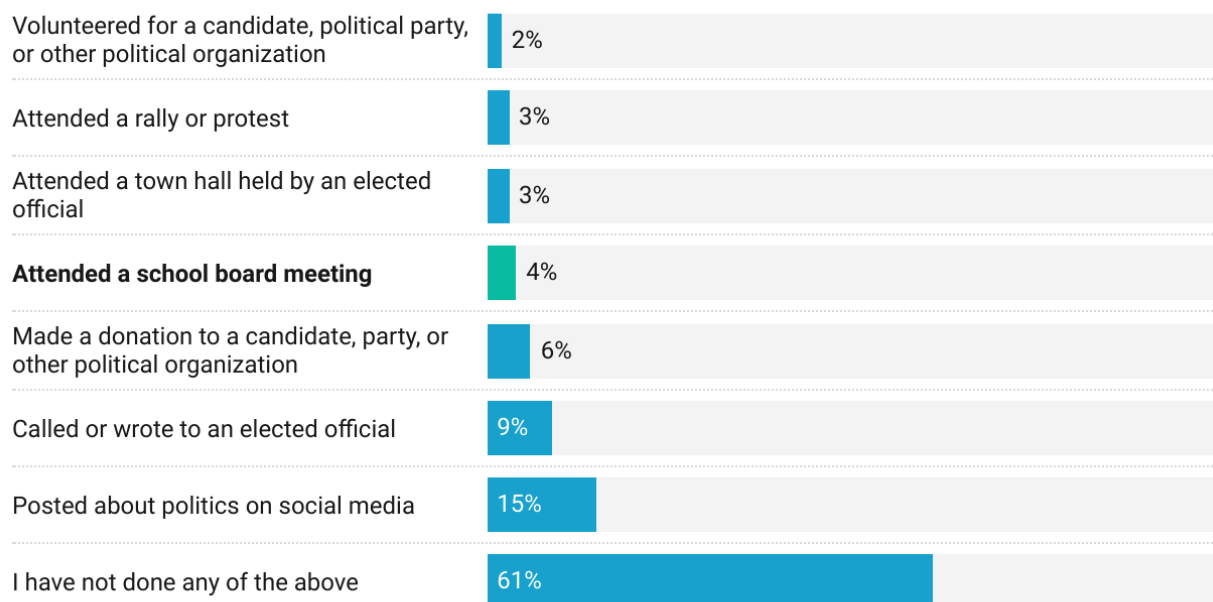
**Figure 1. Demographics of respondents who say they voted in a school board election in the past year.**

A smaller share of independents – roughly 1 in 10 (11%) – also report voting. Consistent with much of the research on who votes generally, those with greater wealth and education were more likely to say they voted in a school board election. Wealthier respondents (those earning more than \$75,000) are 13 percentage points more likely to report voting than those with lower incomes (below \$75,000 annually). A 13 percentage point gap also separates those with at least some college education and those who hold a high school degree or less, with more educated respondents reporting higher turnout than their less educated counterparts. Similarly, younger Americans (ages 18-29) are less likely to report voting in school board elections than older Americans (age 30 or older).

Despite the expectation that parents would be more likely to vote in school board elections, given their increased stake in the work these officials perform, parental status alone does not impact whether respondents say they cast a ballot: One quarter (25%) of parents of children under 18 and about 1 in 5 (21%) of non-parents report voting for school board. However, when we restrict our analysis to the parental status of individuals under age 65, parents of minor children are 8 percentage points more likely to say they cast a ballot for school board than non-parents of minor children (25% vs 17%).

## Four Percent Of Respondents Say They Attended A School Board Meeting In The Past 6 Months

Which of the following, if any, have you done in the last 6 months? (Please select all that apply)



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 2. Attendance at school board meetings**

We also estimated an even less common form of political participation – attending a school board meeting in the past 6 months. Across our full national sample, 4% of individuals say they attended a school board meeting in the past 6 months. This figure highlights the fact that while rancorous school board meetings may have been the subject of numerous news stories in recent months, the vast majority of Americans have not participated in these meetings, nor have they voted in school board elections over the prior year.

Before discussing the demographics of school board meeting attendees, it is important to note that our survey methodology may overestimate the share of Americans overall who vote in school board elections or attend school board meetings. This is because online, non-probability polls such as ours tend to over-represent individuals with higher socio-economic status, for whom prior research has shown a tendency to participate in politics more than individuals with lower socio-economic status. In addition, [prior research](#) indicates that survey respondents tend to overreport voting in general, and thus estimates of voting may be inflated due to this overreporting, regardless of the specific polling methodology used.

That said, there is little reason to believe that the demographic characteristics of those who say they vote or attend meetings differ significantly from the results of a probability poll. Our methodology also has a distinct advantage over most probability polls, in that we were able to obtain a large enough national sample of school board voters to investigate what issues motivated these individuals. That topic is the subject of Section 2 of this report.

## Majority of School Board Meeting Attendees Are Democrats or Democratic-leaning Independents

Partisanship of school board meeting attendees:



*Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size of school board attendees=980.*

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

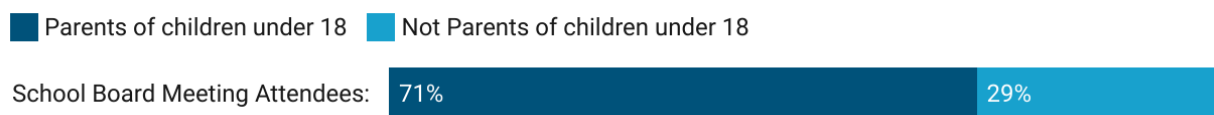
**Figure 3. Partisanship of school board meeting attendees**



Most school board meeting attendees are Democrats, parents of minor children, and have at least some college education. As shown in Figure 3, a 56% majority of the 980 school board meeting attendees surveyed in November identify as Democrats or as Democratic-leaning independents. Roughly 7 in 10 (71%) of school board meeting attendees are parents of minor children. About 8 in 10 (79%) have attended some college or more, while about 2 in 10 (21%) hold a high school degree or less. A 55% of meeting attendees are between the ages of 30 and 49, about one-quarter (24%) are 18 to 29, while the remaining 2 in 10 (21%) are 50 and older.

## 7 In 10 School Board Meeting Attendees Are Parents Of Children Under 18

Parental status of school board meeting attendees:



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size of school board attendees=980.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 4. Parental Status of School Board Meeting Attendees.**

## Vast Majority of School Board Meeting Attendees Are Younger Than 50

Age of school board meeting attendees:



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size of school board attendees=980.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

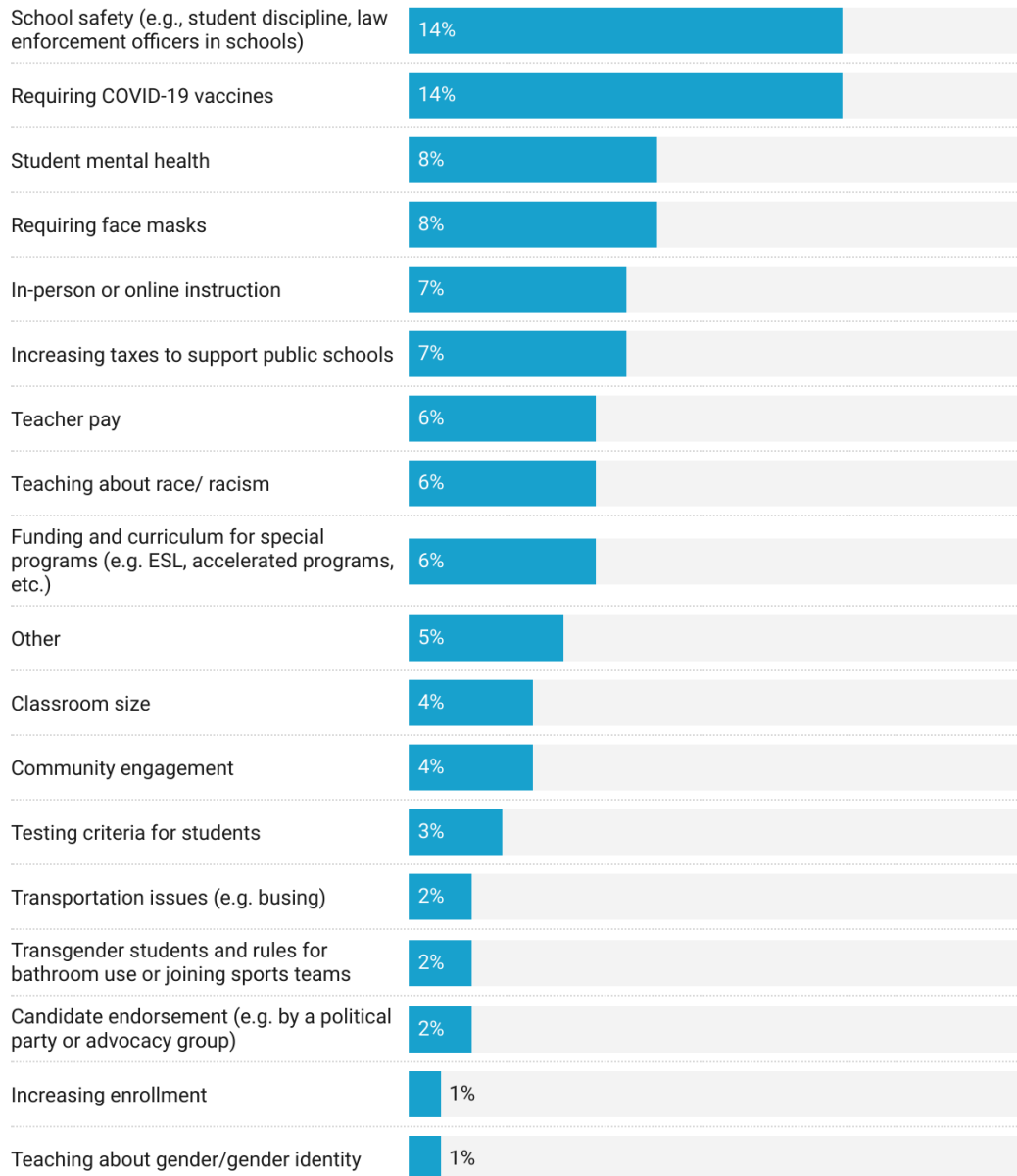
**Figure 5. Age of School Board Meeting Attendees.**

## 2. Issues That School Board Voters Care About

School board voters were motivated by a variety of issues, however, top concerns in their choice for school board candidates include issues of school safety (14%), requiring COVID-19 vaccines (14%), student mental health (8%), and face mask requirements (8%).

### Top Issues For School Board Voters

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board?



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size of school board voters=5,325.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 5. Top Issues For School Board Voters**

Voters also expressed concerns about in-person versus online instruction (7%), whether to increase taxes to fund schools (7%), teacher pay (6%), race/racism education (6%), and special education issues (6%). Altogether, roughly 3 in 10 school board voters cited a pandemic-related issue as the top concern motivating their choice for school board (masks, vaccines, or mode of instruction). Combined, school safety and mental health of students are priorities for more than 1 in 5 (22%) school board voters, likely stemming from the fears brought about by both pandemic-related challenges and upticks in school shootings in recent years.

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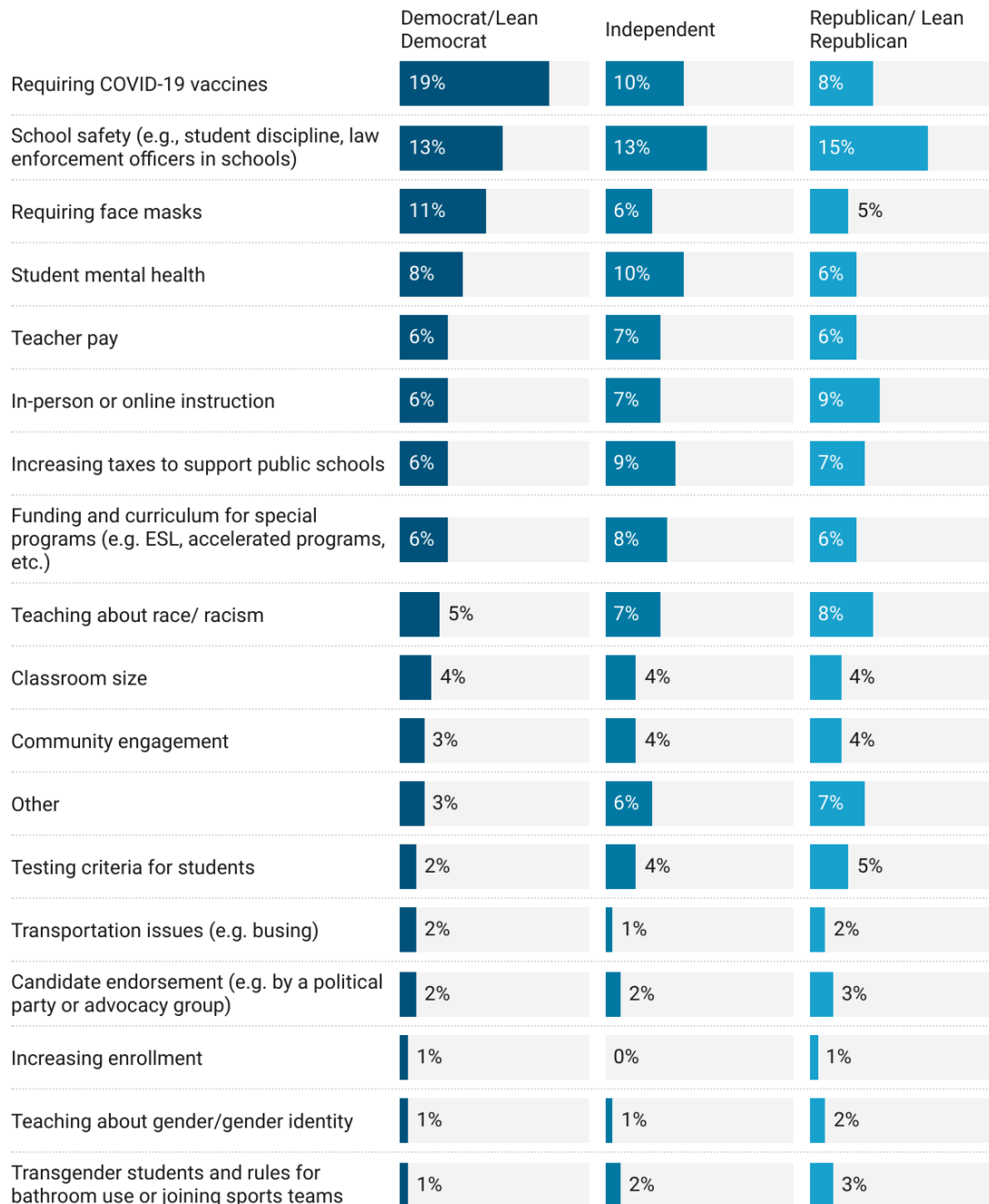
Partisanship shapes the issues cited as most important by school board voters. As shown in Figure 6, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents were more likely to select COVID-19 issues as most important in their choice for school board, with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of these voters citing COVID-19 vaccines compared to 10% or less among independents and Republicans. Similarly, Democrats are about twice as likely as independents and Republicans to cite face mask requirements as their top issue. Republicans are also more likely to select concerns with teaching about race/racism than are Democrats, with 8% of Republicans citing race as their top issue compared to 5% of Democrats.

Voter priorities in school board elections also significantly vary by race. As shown in Figure 7, school board voters who identify as Black are more than twice as likely as school board voters identifying as White to say that “teaching about race/ racism” was their top issue in voting for school board. Hispanic voters were also more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to cite concern for student mental health as their top issue.

Vaccinated school board voters, who are more likely to say they voted in a school board election than unvaccinated people, are also more likely than unvaccinated voters to cite COVID-19 vaccine requirements as their top issue. As shown in Figure 8, 16% of vaccinated school board voters cite COVID-19 vaccines as their top issue compared to 7% of unvaccinated voters. Unvaccinated school board voters on the other hand are more likely to choose in-person versus on-line modes of instruction as their top issue (10% versus 7%).

## More Democrats Name COVID-19 Vaccine and Mask Requirements Top Issue In Choice For School Board Than Independents and Republicans

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board?



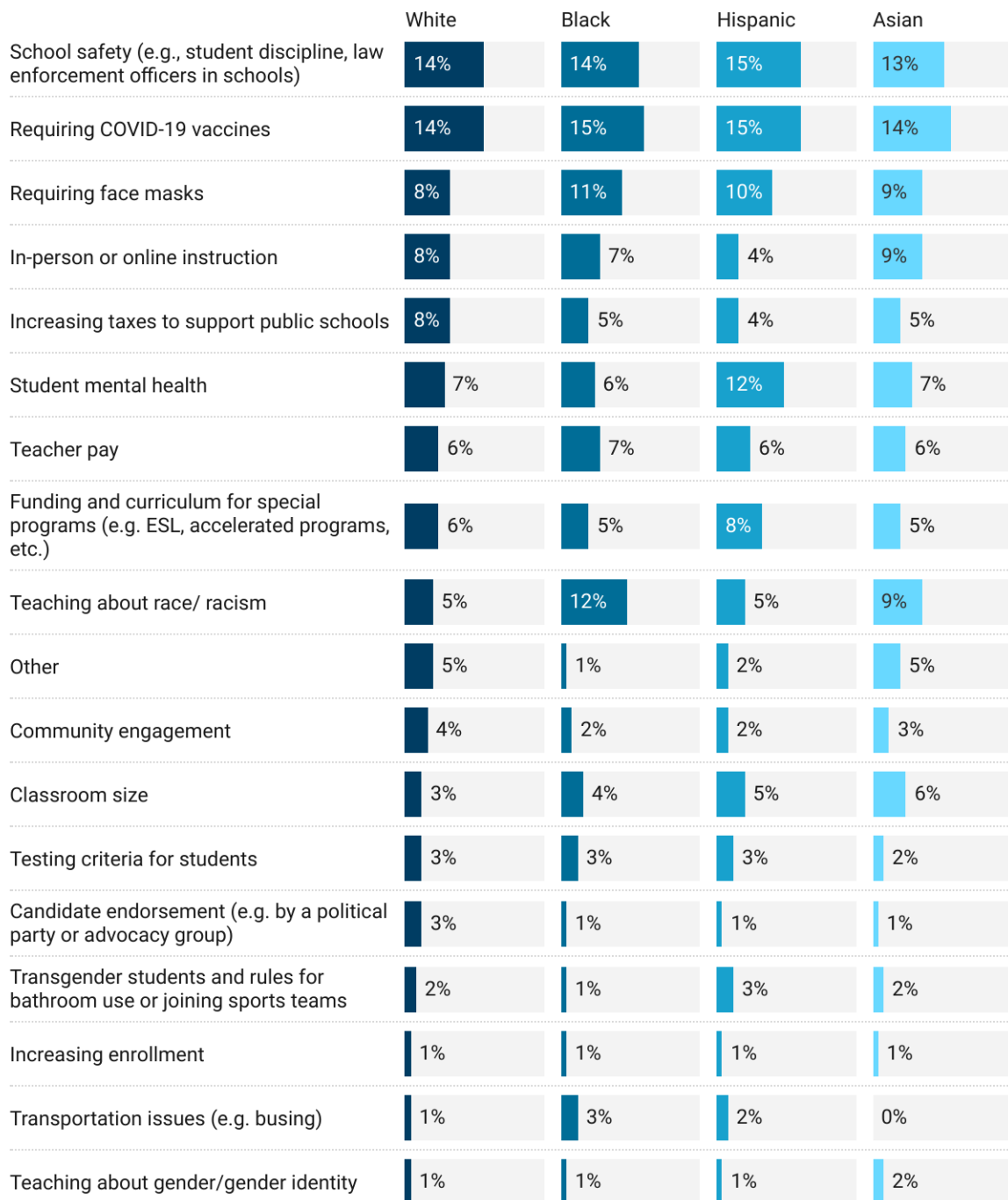
Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size for school board voters= 5,325 which included 2,975 Democrats/ lean Democrats, 564 independents, and 1,762 Republicans/lean Republicans.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 6. Top Issues for School Board Voters by Partisanship**

# Racial Gaps Among Voters Citing Race/Racism And Student Mental Health As Top Issues In Choice For School Board

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board?



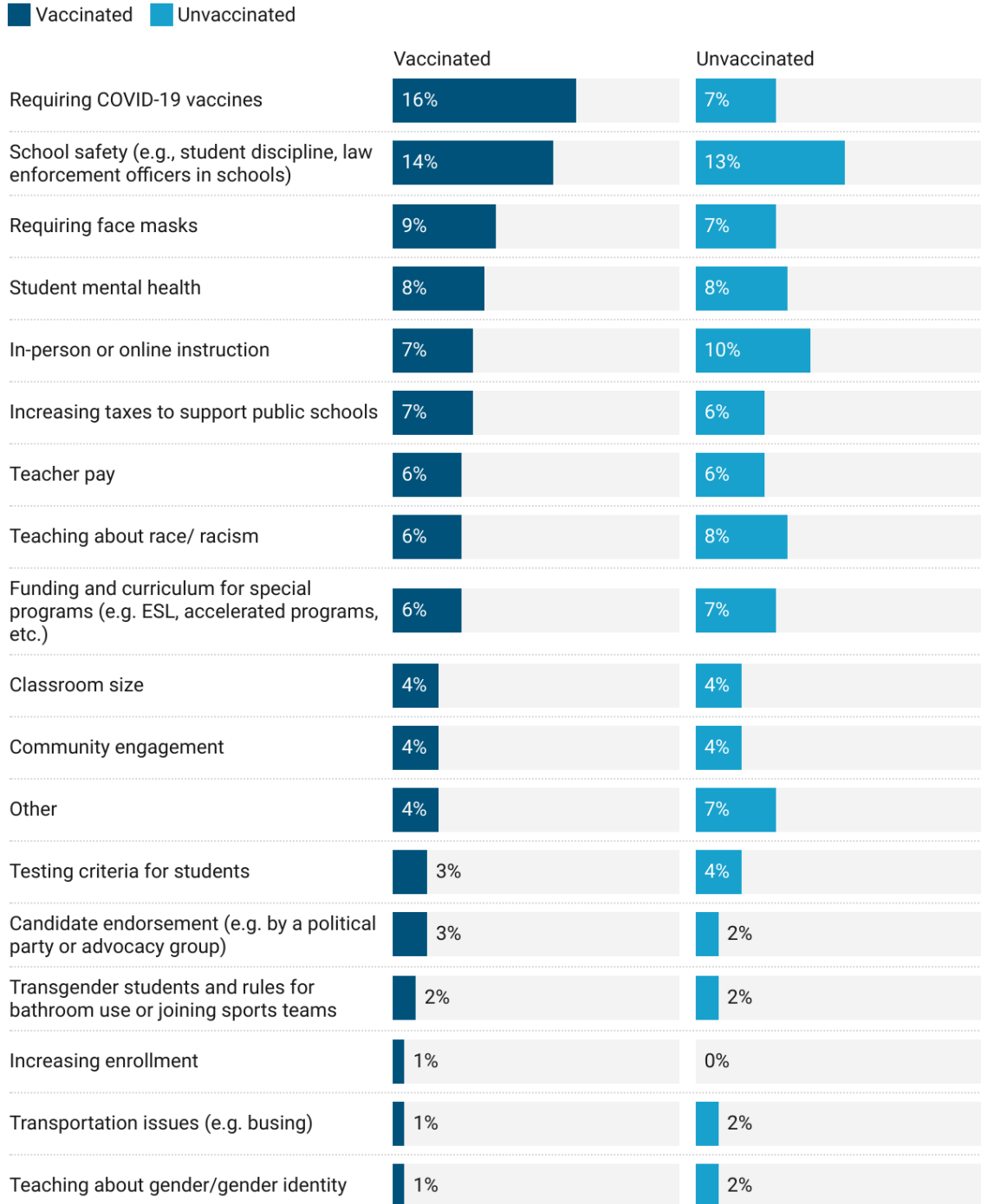
Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size for school board voters= 5,325 which included 4,009 Whites, 589 Blacks, 372 Hispanics, and 215 Asians. Other race not shown.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 7. Top Issues for School Board Voters by Race.**

# Vaccinated School Board Voters Prioritize COVID-19 Vaccines As Top Issue In Vote For School Board

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board?



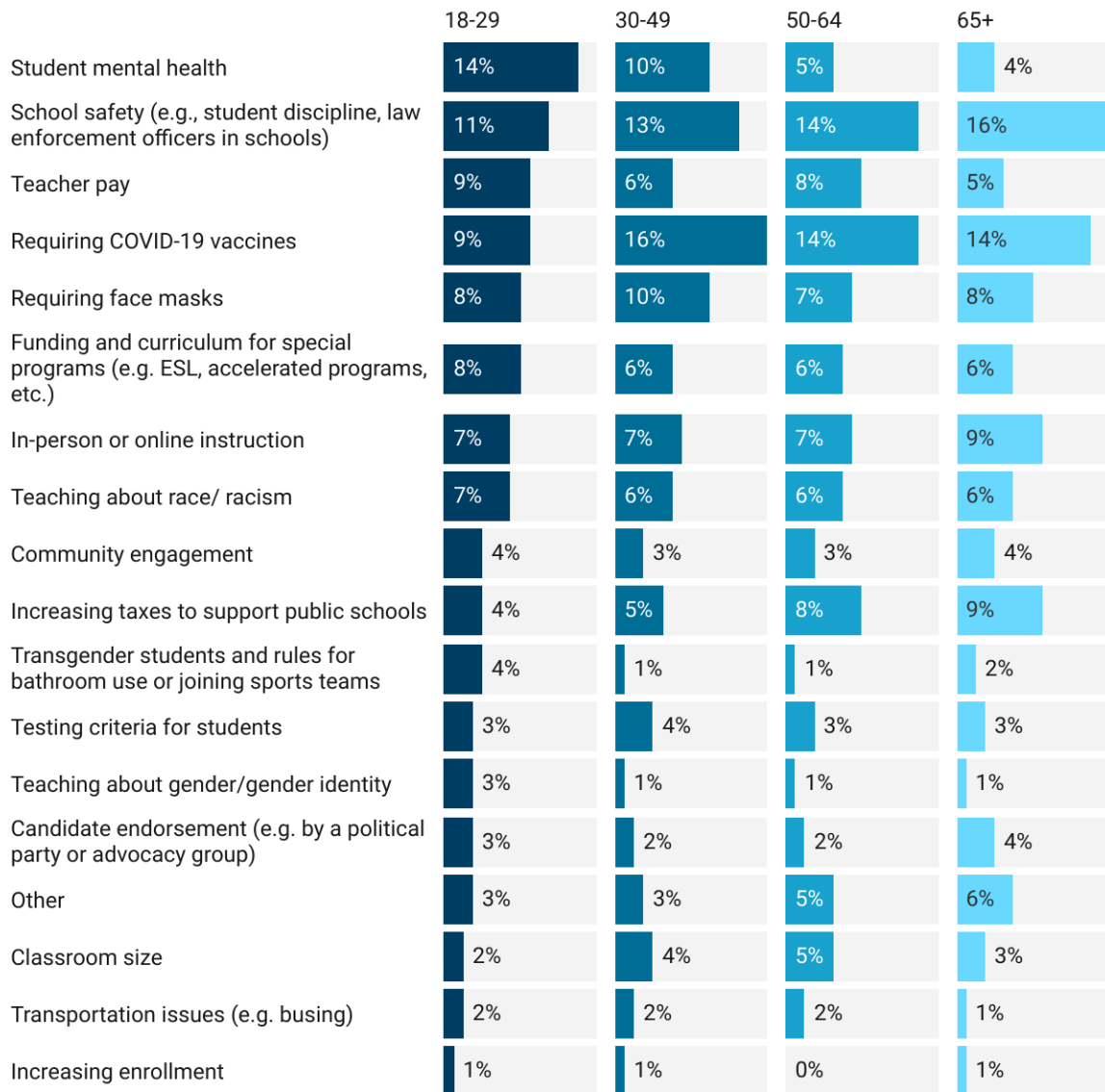
Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size for school board voters= 5,325 which included 928 unvaccinated and 4,375 vaccinated voters.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 8. Top Issues for School Board Voters by COVID-19 Vaccination Status.**

## Younger School Board Voters More Concerned With Mental Health, Older Voters Prioritize COVID-19 Vaccines

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board?



Based on November 2021 data. Survey conducted 11/03/21-12/02/21. Unweighted sample size for school board voters= 5,325 which included 500 ages 18-29, 2,144 ages 30-49, 1,235 ages 50-64, and 1,446 ages 65+.

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org) • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 9. Top Issues for School Board Voters by Age.**

The issues cited as most important also varied by the age of school board voters. Respondents from younger age groups (18 to 49) are twice as likely or more to name student mental health as their most important issue for school boards relative to older age groups (50 and above). In fact, student mental health was the top issue for school board voters between 18 and 29, with 1 in 7 (14%) of this group selecting the issue. Possibly reflecting the lower vaccine enthusiasm among younger Americans, 18 to 29 year olds were also significantly less likely than older age groups to cite COVID-19 vaccine mandates as their top issue: 16% of those age 30-49 and 14% age 50+, compared to 9% of 18-29-year-olds named mandates as their top issue. The share of each age group citing each issue as most important in their vote for school board is displayed in Figure 9.



## Appendix

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### Question Wording:

Which of the following, if any, have you done in the last 6 months?

(Please select all that apply)

- Volunteered for a candidate, political party, or other political organization
- Attended a rally or protest
- Called or wrote to an elected official
- Attended a town hall held by an elected official
- Posted about politics on social media
- Made a donation to a candidate, party, or other political organization
- Attended a school board meeting
- I have not done any of the above

Are you registered to vote?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

In what state are you registered to vote?

(Drop-down menu of all states)

Did you vote in a school board election in the past year?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

What was the most important issue in your choice for school board? [Asked among School Board voters, order of issues randomized with "Other" fixed as last option.]

- o School safety (e.g., student discipline, law enforcement officers in schools)
- o Teacher pay
- o Classroom size
- o Increasing enrollment
- o Community engagement
- o Student mental health
- o Testing criteria for students
- o Requiring face masks
- o Requiring COVID-19 vaccines
- o In-person or online instruction
- o Increasing taxes to support public schools
- o Transportation issues (e.g. busing)
- o Teaching about race/ racism
- o Teaching about gender/gender identity
- o Transgender students and rules for bathroom use or joining sports teams
- o Funding and curriculum for special programs (e.g. ESL, accelerated programs, etc.)
- o Candidate endorsement (e.g. by a political party or advocacy group)
- o Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Sizes and Error Intervals

	<b>Unweighted Sample Size</b>	<b>Maximum Error Interval</b>
Voting in School Board Elections: Overall	22,277	1
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Overall	5,325	1
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Democrats	2,975	2
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Independents	564	3
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Republicans	1,762	2
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Whites	4,009	1
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Blacks	589	4
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Hispanics	372	4
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Asians	215	5
Top Issue for School Board Voters: 18-29	500	4
Top Issue for School Board Voters: 30-49	2,144	2
Top Issue for School Board Voters: 50-64	1,235	2
Top Issue for School Board Voters: 65+	1,446	2
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Vaccinated	4,375	1
Top Issue for School Board Voters: Unvaccinated	928	3