

ALABAMA

# Public Opinion Survey

2019



# **Alabama Public Opinion Survey: 2019 Edition**

Survey and analysis conducted by:

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**Public Affairs  
Research Council  
of Alabama**



**Public Affairs  
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of Alabama**

**Alabamians want similar things...**good schools, safe neighborhoods, a strong economy, freedom, equality, and opportunity, but we often disagree about the best way to achieve these goals. We resolve these disagreements through healthy debate and negotiation, which requires accurate and unbiased information. **PARCA provides this information.**

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- Alabama can do better.
- Sound public policy is essential.
- Sound public policy requires open, transparent and responsive government.
- Sound public policy is based on fact, pursues a clear goal, and is assessed honestly.

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...to inform and improve the decision making of state and local leaders in Alabama through objective research and analysis.

**PARCA researches...**

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...data analysis, policy research, performance evaluation, and technical assistance.

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PARCA is governed by an independent board of directors composed of up to 45 business, civic, and education leaders from across Alabama.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alabamians express high levels of agreement on critical issues facing the state.

### Corrections

- 86% support expanded rehabilitation and re-entry programs for people in prison. See page 10.
- 83% support moving people with nonviolent convictions back to the community. See page 10.
- 58% oppose building new prisons to address overcrowding. See page 11.
- 54% believe only violent offenders should go to prison. See page 11.

### Education

- 74% believe the state spends too little on education. See page 13.
- 69% support increasing taxes to support education, but no single option garners majority support. See page 15.

### Taxes

- 45% say they pay the right amount of taxes. See page 8.
- 45% say lower-income earners pay too much. See page 8.
- 52% say upper-income earners pay too little. See page 8.

Despite expressed willingness to raise revenue for specific purposes, Alabamians mistrust state government.

### Relationship with State Government

- 82% support keeping the General Fund and Education Trust Fund separate. See page 12.
- 69% believe state government officials do not care about their opinions. See page 21.
- 57% believe they have no say in state government. See page 22.

These are key findings from PARCA's 2019 public opinion survey of 410 randomly selected Alabamians. The survey, conducted between January 28 and March 3, 2019, yields a margin of error of +/-4.8 percent.

Survey findings are discussed below. Survey topline, which include exact question wording, are included in the appendix.

- White respondents are evenly divided over building prisons as a step to reduce overcrowding.
- Substantial majorities of nonwhite respondents disagree or strongly disagree with building prisons as a step to reduce overcrowding.
- Supermajorities of every partisan stripe agree or strongly agree with “find[ing] safe ways to move more nonviolent inmates back to the community” and “invest[ing] in programs to rehabilitate inmates so they don’t return to prison.”

## PUBLIC EDUCATION

As part of PARCA’s commitment to understanding public education and in partnership with the Alabama Association of School Boards, we ask several questions addressing important themes in public education.

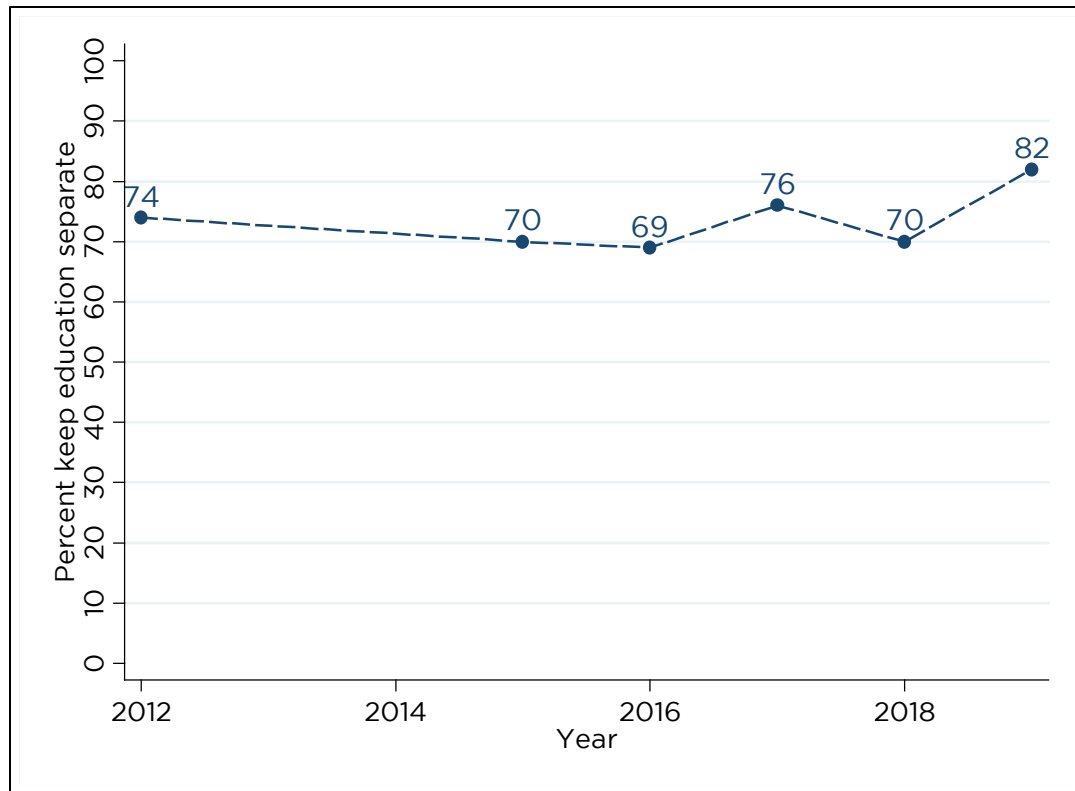
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### ALABAMIANS SUPPORT THE STATE’S TWO-BUDGET SYSTEM

Alabama divides its budget into two parts: the Education Trust Fund and the General Fund, for all non-education obligations. There are perennial calls to restructure the state budget process by combining the two budgets. We ask respondents if they support combining the two budgets into one.

As Figure 7 shows, large majorities say the education budget should be kept separate from the General Fund. At 82 percent, the percent of 2019 respondents saying the education budget should be kept separate represents a substantial increase from the typical figure in the low 70s. Supermajorities of all subpopulations agree that the education budget should not be combined with the General Fund.

Figure 7. Should the education budget be kept separate from the General Fund, 2012–2019



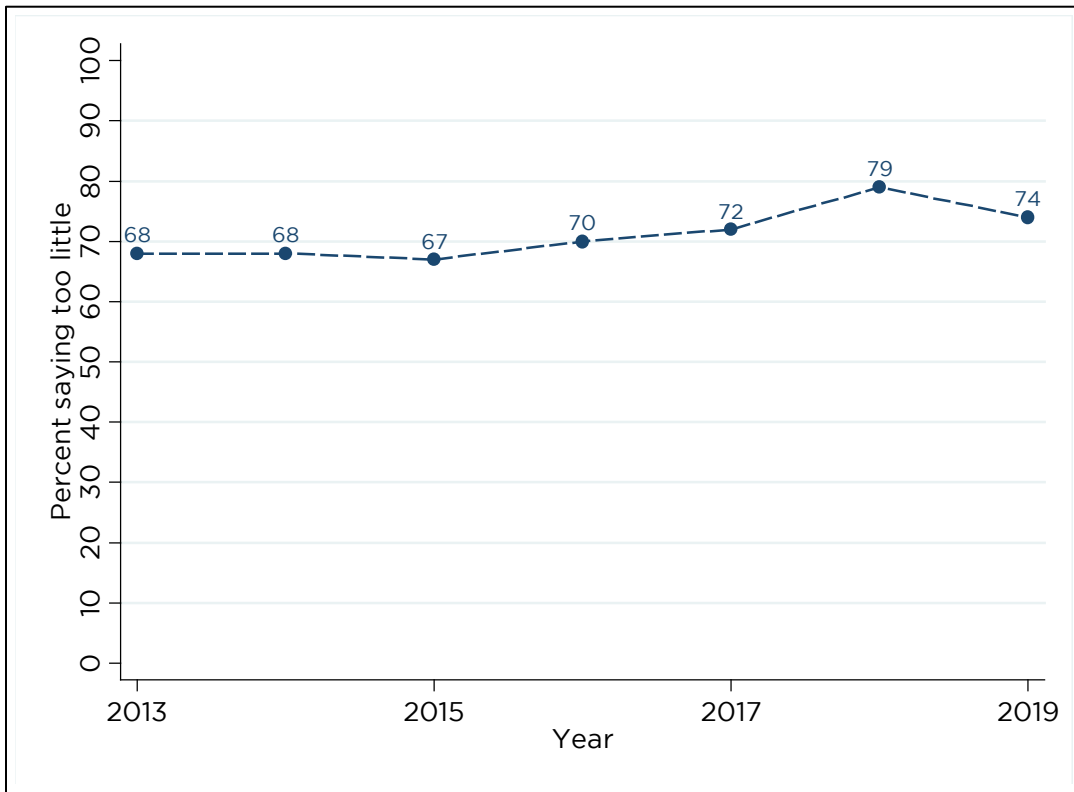
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### ALABAMIANS BELIEVE TOO LITTLE IS SPENT ON EDUCATION

For several years we have asked if “too much, too little, or enough money is spent on education.” For many years, large majorities of Alabamians have said that too little is spent on education. The results from several recent years’ surveys are presented in Figure 8. Over the last seven years, there appears to be a gradual increase in the proportion of respondents holding this view, moving up from the upper 60s into the lower 70s. As is typically the case with a majority this large, majorities of every subpopulation say too little is spent on education.



Figure 8. Too much/too little spent on education in Alabama



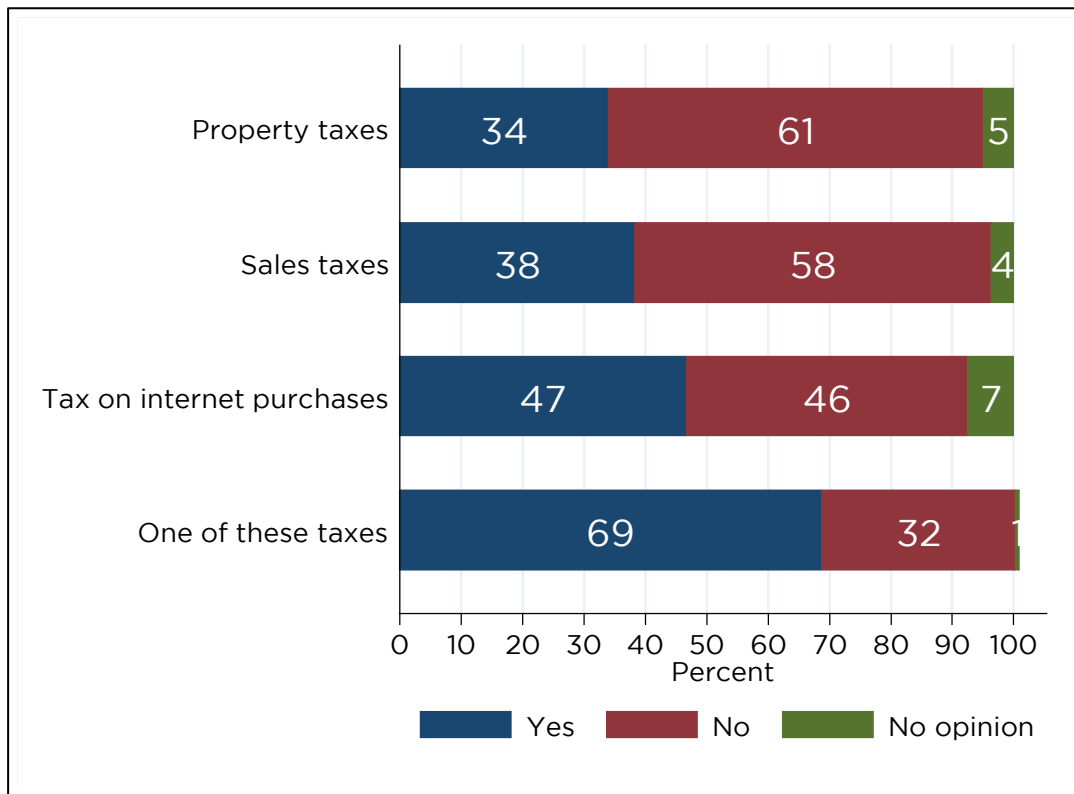
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### ALABAMIANS SUPPORT HIGHER TAXES FOR EDUCATION BUT OPPOSE SPECIFIC TAX INCREASES

We asked respondents if they would be willing to increase education funding by paying higher amounts of three common taxes: property taxes, sales taxes, and taxes on internet purchases. The order in which the options were presented was randomized.

The results, presented in Figure 9, do not show great enthusiasm for higher taxes. About three-fifths oppose paying higher property or sales taxes. Respondents are evenly divided on their willingness to pay higher taxes on internet purchases, with about 47 percent saying yes to the proposition and about 46 percent saying no.

Figure 9. Willing to increase education funding by paying more



While none of these particular revenue options garners majority support, more than two-thirds (69 percent) express a willingness to pay more of at least one of these taxes, and about half of that number support two or more.

The challenge for policymakers wishing to address funding is to explain to the public why a particular funding proposal is the best way to address the problem.

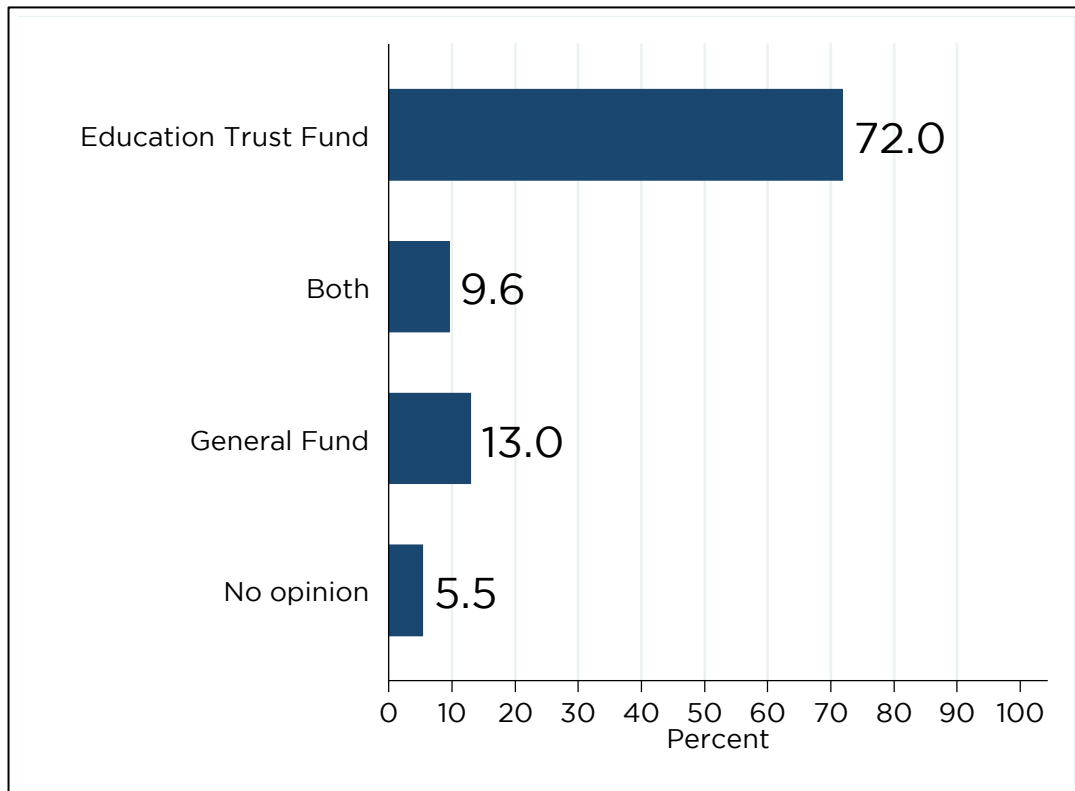
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## ALABAMIANS SUPPORT EARMARKING LOTTERY REVENUE FOR EDUCATION.

Media reports indicate some renewed attention to a state lottery by leaders of both parties. We did not ask if respondents support a state lottery, but we did ask how potential lottery revenue should be spent.

More than two-thirds of Alabamians say the proceeds should go into the Education Trust Fund. There were no significant differences across demographic, political, or regional subpopulations.

Figure 10. Lottery proceeds should go to



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## ALABAMIANS BELIEVE TEACHER COMPENSATION IS TOP PRIORITY FOR NEW EDUCATION SPENDING

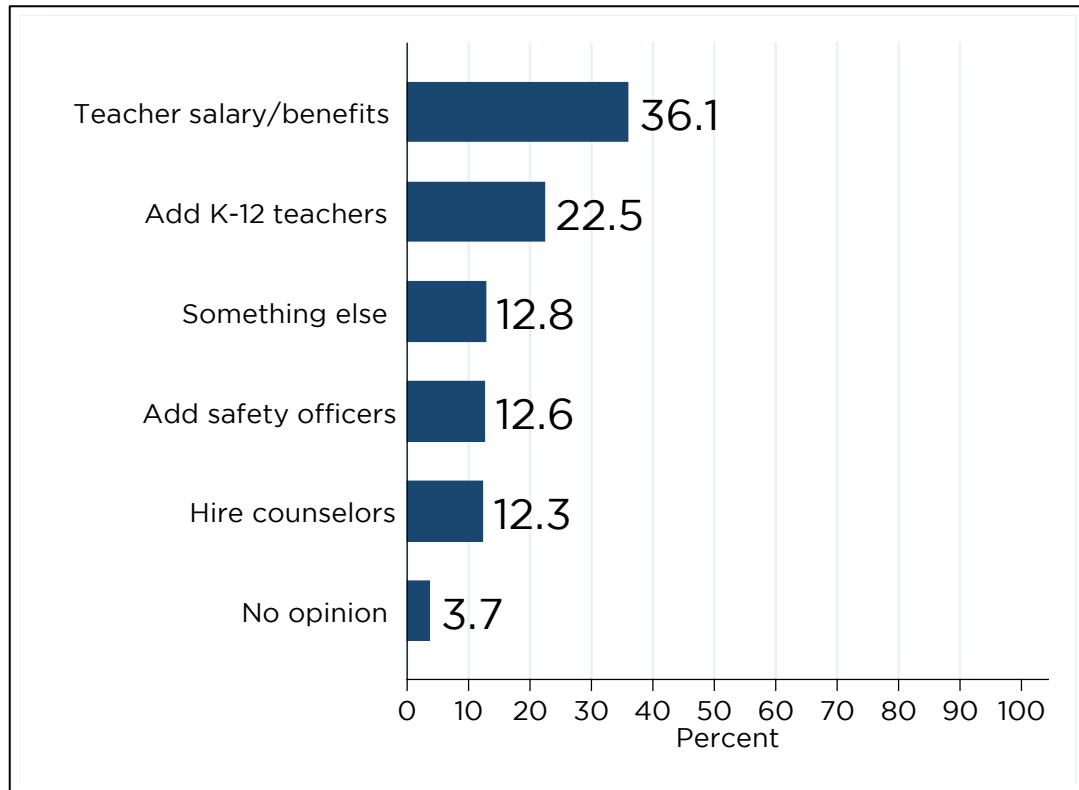
We asked what the top priority for spending new education dollars would be and read a list of four randomly ordered items and then a fifth item, “or something else.” The four randomized responses are 1) hiring additional K–12 teachers, 2) increasing teacher salary and benefits, 3) hiring school counselors and providing mental health support, and 4) hiring additional school safety officers.

More than a third (36 percent) of respondents selected increasing teacher salary and benefits, and just over a fifth (23 percent) selected hiring additional teachers.

Taken together, more than half of respondents selected options directly related to classroom instruction. The remaining responses are fairly evenly divided between hiring more safety officers, hiring more counselors, or something else. Those with

higher levels of education were more likely to support increasing teacher salary and benefits than those with less education. Higher-income respondents were more likely to support hiring additional teachers than others.

Figure 11. Top priority for new education funding



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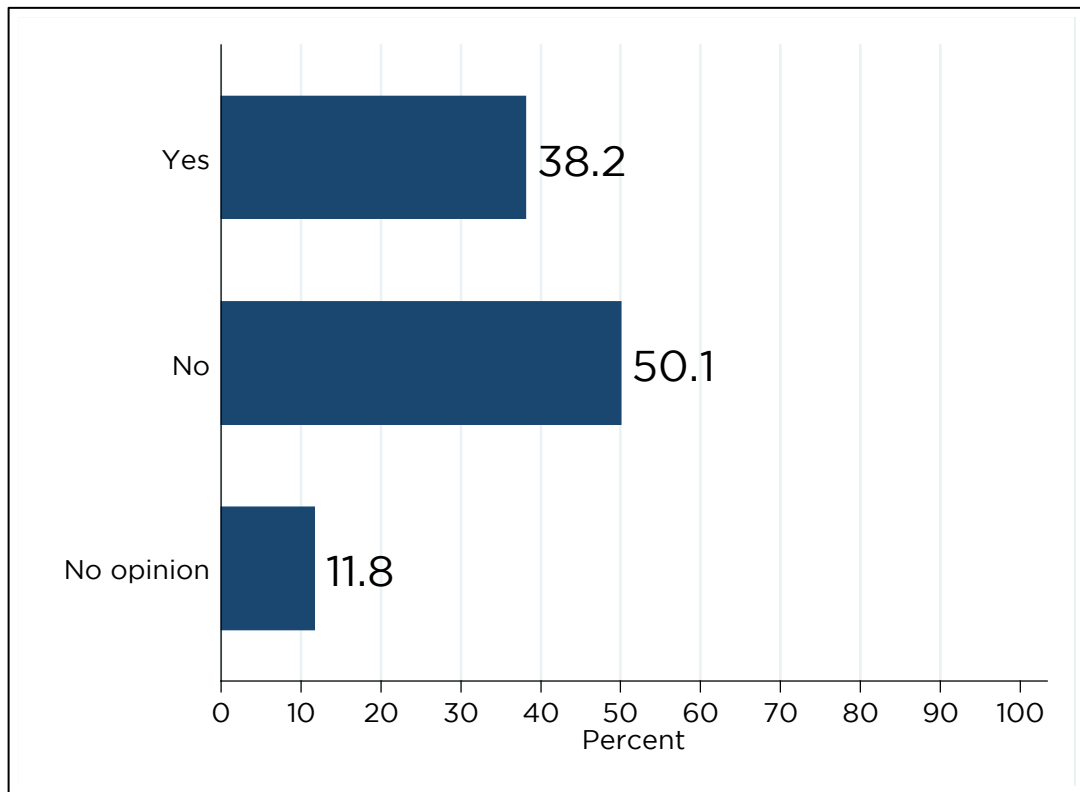
## ALABAMIANS BELIEVE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL

We asked if high school graduates who have not attended college or post-secondary school are prepared to enter the workforce. See Figure 12.

About half of respondents said high school graduates without post-secondary education are not prepared for the workforce. Just over a third (38 percent) said high school graduates are prepared for work.

Respondents aged 45 and up were more likely to say high school graduates were not prepared to enter the workforce, while those younger than 45 were more likely to say they were prepared.

Figure 12. Are Alabama high school graduates prepared to enter the workforce?



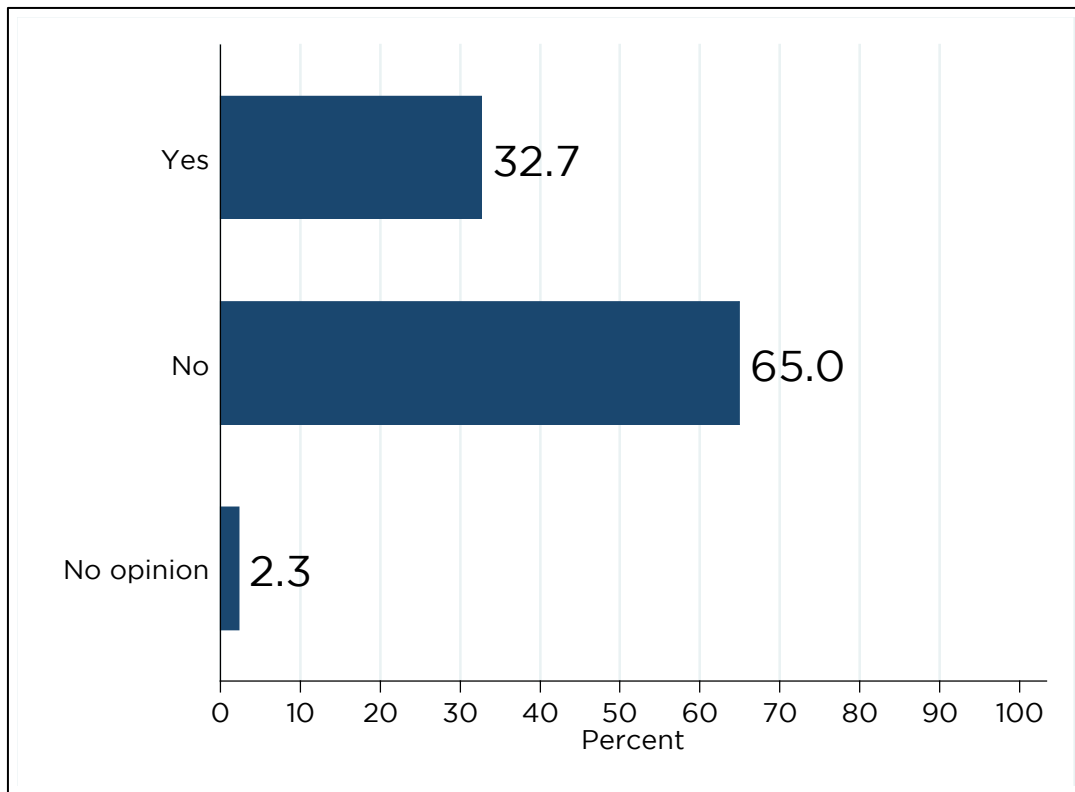
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### ALABAMIANS DO NOT BELIEVE A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE DEGREE IS ESSENTIAL

We asked if every child should plan to complete a four-year college degree. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) said no.

Interestingly, the percentage giving a negative response increased with the respondent's level of education. One might think that responses to this question would be related to the respondent's assessment of the adequacy of the high school preparation discussed in the previous paragraph, but there is not a statistically significant relationship between the two questions.

Figure 13. Should every child plan to complete a four-year degree



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## ALABAMIANS BELIEVE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS ARE BEST EQUIPPED TO MAKE SPENDING DECISIONS

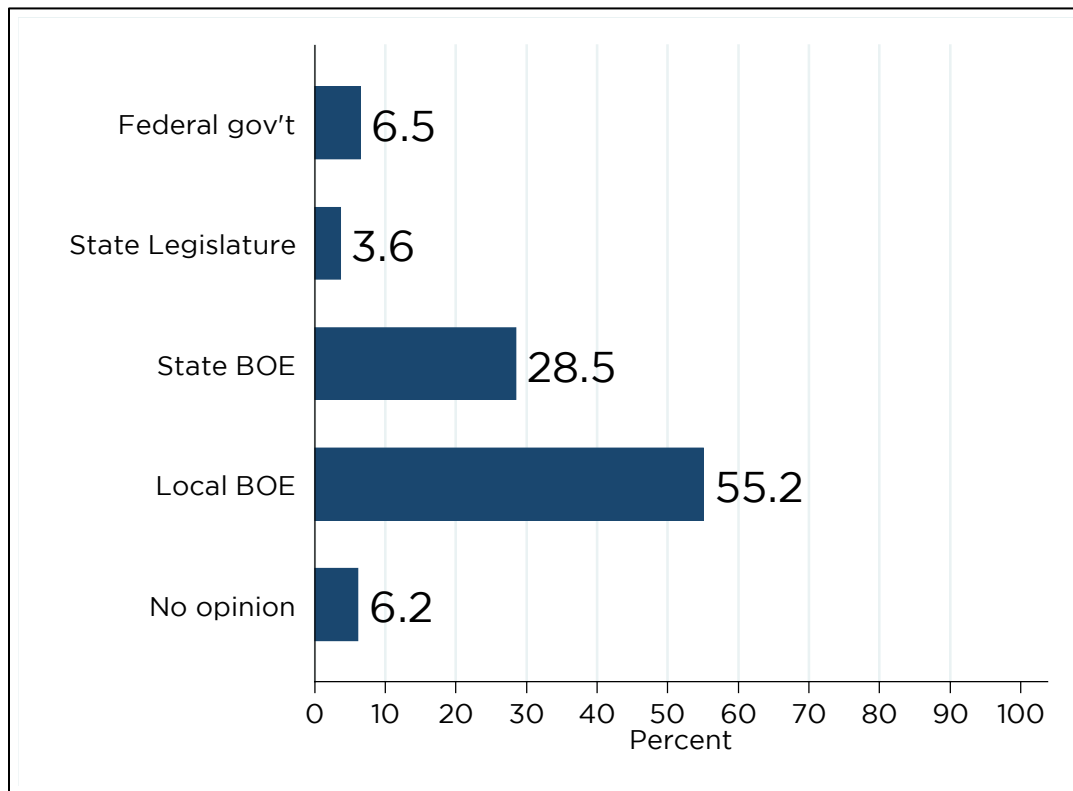
We asked, “Which level of government is best equipped to make decisions about spending for public schools in your area?” respondents were given options ranging from the federal government to the local board of education.

Figure 14 shows that a majority (55 percent) say the local school board is best equipped to make spending decisions. Just over a quarter (28.5 percent) say the state board of education is best equipped to make spending decisions.

At first glance, it might seem that the pattern of responses reflects a preference for decisions made at the lowest level of government. While a majority do indicate that the local school board should make spending decisions, there are some exceptions.

The state legislature is seen as less capable than the federal government. Second, the state board of education is also a state-level institution and is not a lower level of government than the legislature. There appears to be a clear preference for local decision-making on spending followed by a preference for expertise, or least specialization on the part of the state board of education. Majorities or pluralities of every partisan stripe support local spending decisions, although Republicans are more supportive of the local school boards than others.

Figure 14. Best level of government to decide school spending



## RELATIONSHIP WITH STATE GOVERNMENT

Every year since 2007, we have asked about Alabamians' relationship with state government by asking respondents if they agree or disagree with two statements, both of which measure how responsive they believe state government to be.



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