

# Time for the School Choice Movement to Embrace the Culture War

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

For too long, education reformers have avoided promoting school choice to help parents frustrated with critical race theory or gender ideology in the classroom.

But new Heritage data shows that many Americans not only oppose the woke agenda in schools, but they are also the same people more likely to support school choice.

The school choice movement can gain significantly more supporters by wading into the current cultural battles to promote school choice as a solution.

Critical race theory (CRT) and the high-profile projects pushing the radical ideology's discriminatory ideas, such as *The New York Times Magazine's* 1619 Project, are trying to divide Americans by skin color and pit them against each other.<sup>1</sup> The cultural fissures are manifesting in education, with heated arguments about curricula and classroom activism. Some observers expected that tensions would subside with the election of President Joe Biden, but debates—about CRT, restrictive coronavirus measures, and the general culture—appear more heated with each passing month. Prolonged school closures,<sup>2</sup> mask mandates,<sup>3</sup> pornographic books in school libraries,<sup>4</sup> the FBI designating parents as “domestic terrorists,”<sup>5</sup> and racial essentialism for third graders<sup>6</sup> have elevated education policy to the forefront of America's culture war.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3683>

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Rather than seeing these cultural divides as an opportunity to highlight a problem that expanded school choice might help to solve, education reform organizations have responded by either endorsing social justice ideology or ignoring the controversies. Many foundations are comfortable declaring that “Black Lives Matter”<sup>7</sup> and drafting canned press releases about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).<sup>8</sup> Very few education reform advocacy groups have been willing to emphasize the ever-increasing cultural division in public schools as part of a strategy for advancing school choice.

The inclination of the education reform movement to embrace woke perspectives, or simply to avoid cultural controversy, is counterproductive. In a separate paper, we argued that recent school choice gains will stall—or unravel—if the movement commits to policy designs that alienate politicians who traditionally vote for school choice bills.<sup>9</sup> The Republican Party provides an overwhelming majority of legislative support for private school choice, and votes from Democrats are inconsequential to the passage of most choice programs. Accordingly, crafting bills to court elected Democrats—the long-standing strategy adopted by leading education reform foundations and nonprofits—has been ineffective.

The school choice movement should adopt new tactics not only on policy design but also with respect to messaging. On policy, this means developing universal programs with large scholarship amounts and few regulatory constraints. On messaging, this means promoting choice to parents who are concerned about political activism and other so-called social justice trends in neighborhood schools.

It is time for the school choice movement to embrace the culture war. Education reform organizations have traditionally preferred to stay above the cultural fray, which is partly driven by the fear that engaging in cultural debates would inflame tensions and make school choice seem less appealing to potential allies.

Such concerns are overblown. To the contrary, school choice offers a sensible resolution to cultural debates. School choice gives parents what they want, regardless of which side they are on—more control over their children’s education. And, it acknowledges that parents have pluralistic views about which values to instill in their children. Of course, nearly all parents tend to share some essential beliefs—for example, that schools should teach the “success sequence.”<sup>10</sup> Advocacy groups would be foolish *not* to promote choice as a solution that can connect large majorities of parents with schools that align with their values—especially when public schools are not meeting their needs.

Moreover, it is hard to imagine how espousing a positive vision of education freedom can be decoupled from cultural issues. The culture wars are not going away. The forces driving these conflicts will continue even if education reform organizations continue to put their heads in the sand and pretend those issues do not exist. Rather than embracing the woke agenda or ignoring the subject, the best arrow in their quiver is one they have so far been unwilling to deploy: a ready-made policy solution that can bring peace to cultural conflicts, namely, parent choice in education, school choice.

## Overview

This *Backgrounders* estimates how engaging in cultural issues facing this country could produce important gains for school choice advocates. It analyzes results of a nationally representative survey that asks a variety of questions about both cultural issues and school choice. Overall, respondents are supportive of school choice and strongly oppose social justice ideology. These findings are consistent with other surveys.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, respondents who are skeptical about the woke agenda tend to be most supportive of school choice.

Notably, a meaningful percentage of respondents indicate that they are “not sure” about controversial cultural issues, such as whether CRT should be used to train teachers, whether the 1619 Project should be taught in traditional public schools, and whether America is the best country for racial minorities to thrive.

Part of the reason why some respondents are undecided about CRT and the 1619 Project is because foundations and nonprofits have made a conscious decision to ignore these issues. A better approach for education reform groups would be to provide information about these debates, emphasizing the fact that CRT is trying to divide parents and that school choice is a solution. Respondents who have not made up their minds about cultural debates are an important constituency and potential school choice allies. If the education reform movement could make them more aware of cultural controversies so that they understand the nature of the problem, they would almost certainly be more open to school choice as an attractive solution.

**The Survey.** The bulk of this *Backgrounders* focuses on analyzing the answers of undecided respondents in the nationally representative survey. It estimates the potential yield that choice supporters could earn if they made a cultural argument for choice and convinced “not sure” respondents that radical cultural indoctrination is, or certainly will soon be, a problem

for them. Under a series of assumptions, our analysis finds that average levels of support for three school choice questions could increase from 49.5 percent to 53.8 percent if respondents who were not sure about CRT, the 1619 Project, and other critiques of American values were provided with more information.

Survey participants responded to three hypothetical questions about school choice. Respondents were asked (1) whether they support school vouchers for parents seeking other educational options; (2) whether parents who are interested in extracurricular activities in a nearby private school should have access to vouchers; and (3) whether school choice should be made available to parents in a district that has been struggling economically and educationally. Overall, respondents were supportive of school choice. And, overall, they were very skeptical about CRT, the 1619 Project, and social justice ideology.

Support for school choice varies based on respondents' answers to the cultural questions. Those who reject radical critiques of America were most supportive of school choice, and respondents who are not sure about culture war issues tend to oppose choice.

Finally, under a series of assumptions, the last section of this *Backgrounder* shows by how much support for school choice could increase if the “not sure” survey respondents learned more about cultural issues. Average support for school choice on the three questions listed above would cross the 50 percent threshold if the “not sure” respondents became engaged on these topics.

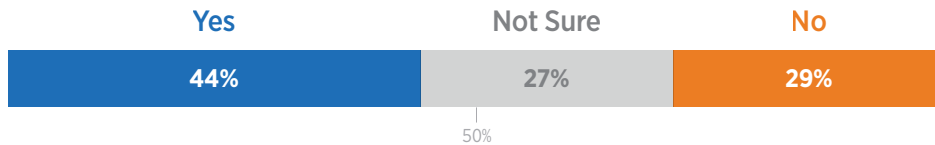
## Survey Design

The survey-research firm Ipsos administered a nationally representative survey to 1,632 adults ages 18 and above during two weeks in summer 2021. The survey was conducted on KnowledgePanel, a probability-based panel of online respondents. The median completion time was 10.8 minutes. The survey oversampled K–12 teachers (n=611) to provide additional statistical power, allowing inferences about this population. Responses from the general population sample (n=1021) had a margin of error of  $\pm 3.2$  percent, and responses from the K–12 teacher sample had a margin of error of  $\pm 5.3$  percent. Weights were used to ensure that the combined sample was representative of the U.S. population. Respondents were asked to give their opinions on school choice as well as on controversial topics like CRT, the 1619 Project, and DEI issues.

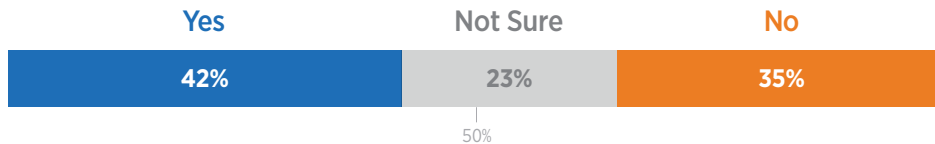
CHART 1

## Survey Questions on School Choice

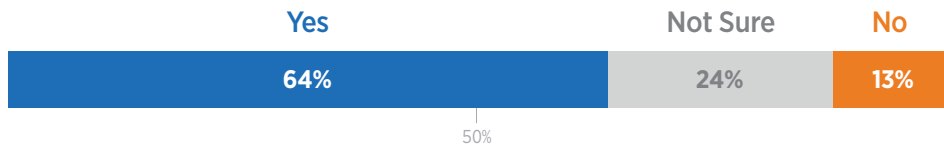
**Q:** Jessica is a mother of two who lives in Baltimore. Should Jessica be allowed to use a publicly funded school voucher to send her children to a nearby private school rather than the neighborhood public school?



**Q:** Cheryl is a single mother who lives in suburban Texas. Her son attends the district high school, but she would prefer to use a publicly funded voucher to enroll him at a local private school, as he is a talented quarterback, and the private school has a better football team. Should she be allowed to use a voucher to enroll her son in the private school, even if that school has lower average test scores?



**Q:** The public school district in a nearby city has been struggling to graduate more of its students despite significant increases in spending over the last two decades. The city has been losing jobs as employers move their businesses to other cities with more skilled workforces. Should families in this city be allowed to choose charter schools or publicly funded private schools in the hopes of finding something better for their children?



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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## Respondents Are Generally Supportive of School Choice

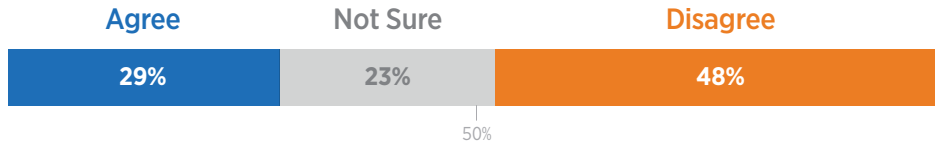
The survey asks a series of straightforward questions about school choice (Chart 1). For example, one asks if a mother of two should be allowed to use a publicly funded school voucher to send her children to a nearby private school. By a 44-to-29 margin, respondents agreed that the mother should have access to school vouchers, with 27 percent not sure.

Another question asks if a single mother in suburban Texas should be permitted to use a voucher to enroll her son in a nearby private school.

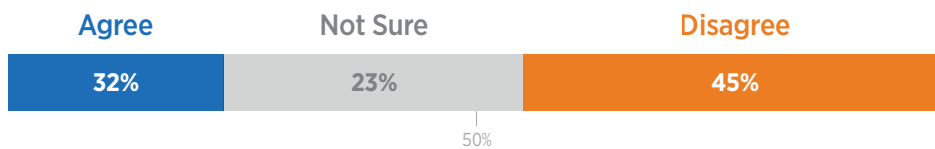
CHART 2

## Survey Questions on Cultural Issues

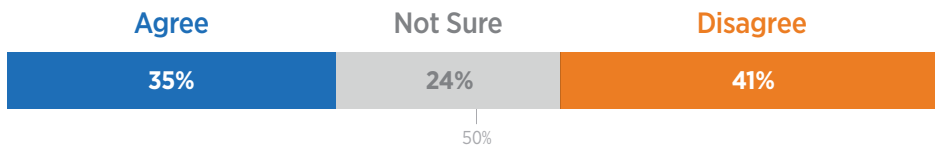
**Q:** Do you agree that critical race theory should be taught to children in your local public school?



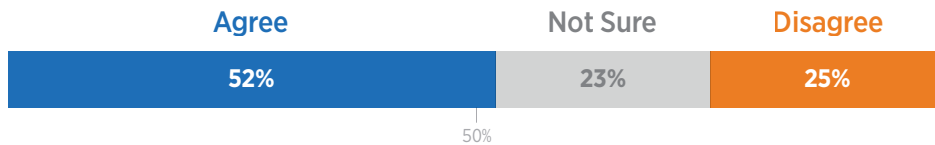
**Q:** Do you agree that critical race theory should be used to train public school teachers?



**Q:** Do you agree that the 1619 Project should be taught in your local public school?



**Q:** To what extent do you agree with the following: There is no better country in the world for minorities to thrive than America.



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

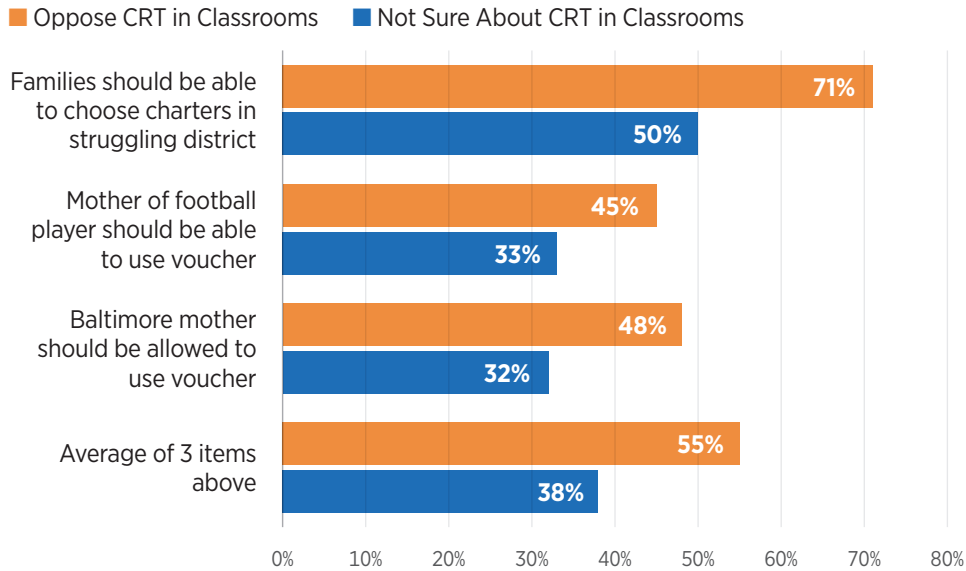
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Although the hypothetical private school has lower average test scores than the family’s current public school, the private school has more enticing extracurricular activities: 42 percent of respondents indicated that the mother should be able to use a voucher, 35 percent opposed providing the voucher, and 23 percent were not sure.

In a third school choice question, respondents are told that a public school district is failing to graduate many of its students despite large spending increases over time. The survey asks if families in the district should be allowed to choose charter schools or publicly funded private

CHART 3

## Comparing Support for Critical Race Theory in the Classroom with Support for School Choice



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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schools. A clear majority of respondents—64 percent—agreed that families should have access to school choice, with 24 percent not sure.

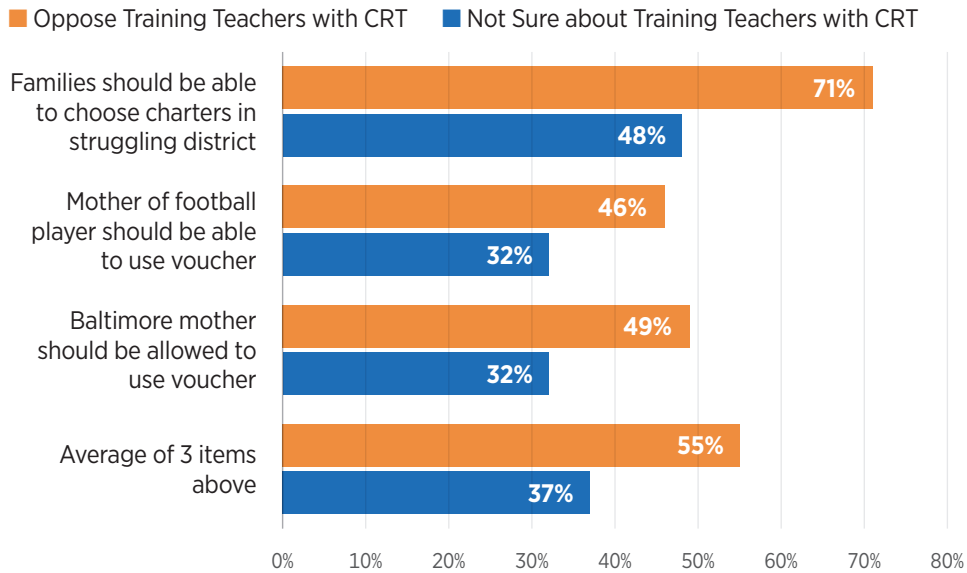
## Respondents Are Strongly Opposed to Classroom Activism

Having learned that respondents are generally supportive of school choice, the survey also explores views on controversial cultural topics (Chart 2). Respondents generally indicated opposition to radical cultural critiques of America, and there was a consistently large subset of respondents who had not made up their minds. For example, by a 48-to-29 margin, respondents disagreed with teaching CRT to children in public schools. More than one-fifth of respondents, however, said they were not sure about whether CRT should be taught.

Similarly, by a 45-to-32 margin, respondents disagreed that CRT concepts should be used to train public school teachers; 23 percent of respondents were not sure.

CHART 4

## Comparing Support for Training Teachers in Critical Race Theory with Support for School Choice



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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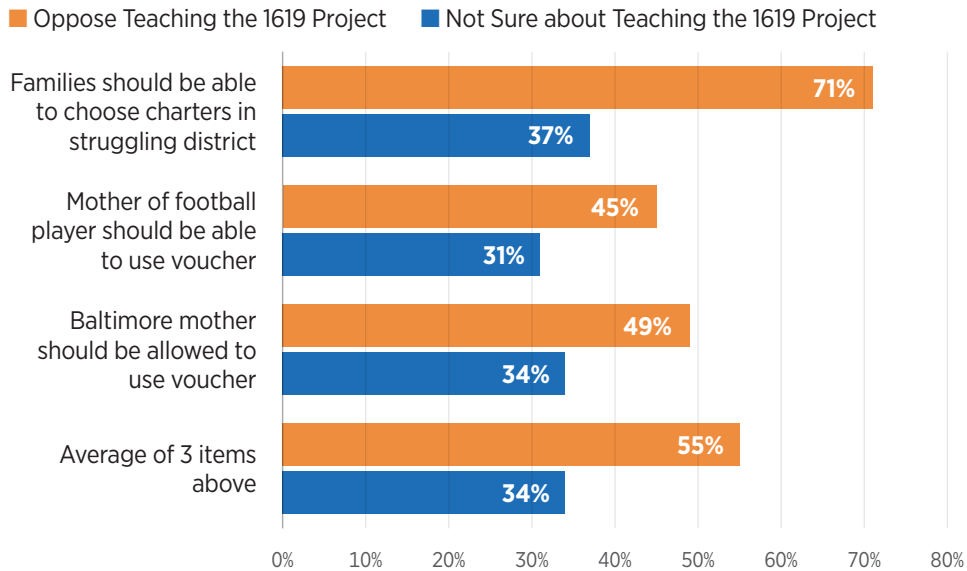
Only 35 percent of respondents agreed that the 1619 Project should be taught in their local public school; 41 percent disagreed, and 24 percent were not sure.

Finally, the survey asked whether respondents agreed that there is no better country for minorities to thrive than America: 52 percent agreed with this sentiment, while 25 percent disagreed, and 23 percent were not sure.

Overall, most of those surveyed opposed CRT and the 1619 Project being used in public schools, and most respondents indicated that America is the best country in the world for racial minorities to thrive. On each of these four culture-related items, there was a bloc of more than 20 percent of respondents who indicated they were “not sure.” The following sections take a closer look at undecided respondents.

CHART 5

## Comparing Support for Teaching the 1619 Project with Support for School Choice



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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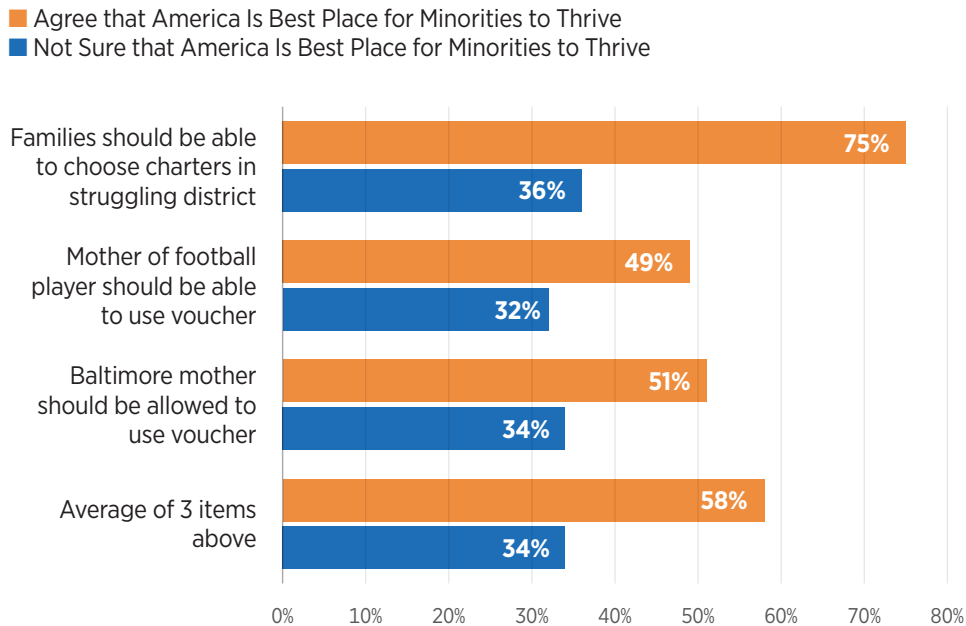
## School Choice Support Varies Based on Responses to Culture Questions

How does support for school choice vary based on responses to the cultural questions? A pattern emerges in which people who reject radical critiques of America are most supportive of choice. Respondents who are not sure about cultural issues comprise over 20 percent in each of the four culture questions, and they tend to oppose school choice.

Charts 3 to 6 show how support for school choice varies among respondents who disagree with social justice ideology compared to those who are not sure about social justice ideology. For example, on average, 55 percent of those who oppose CRT in the classroom also support school choice. (See Chart 3.) Among those who are not sure about CRT in the classroom, support for school choice averages only 38 percent.

CHART 6

## Comparing Belief that America Is Best for Minorities with Support for School Choice



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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Similarly, 55 percent of those who oppose teaching the 1619 Project also support school choice. (See Chart 5.) Among those who are not sure about teaching the 1619 Project, support for school choice averages only 34 percent.

## Estimating the Yield of Converting the “Not Sure”

Under a series of assumptions, it is possible to estimate how much support school choice advocates could earn if “not sure” respondents came to reject radical cultural positions. Engaging on cultural issues could define a problem for which expanding school choice would be a desirable solution.

A regression framework is used to model the factors that predict whether a respondent will give affirmative answers to the school choice questions. Table 1 uses the likelihood that a respondent supports school vouchers in Baltimore as the outcome variable. The model controls for gender, race, education levels, and political affiliation. There are binary

TABLE 1

## Factors that Predict an Affirmative Answer to Whether the Baltimore Mom Should Be Allowed to Use a School Voucher

	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	p-Value
Not Sure re: CRT	-0.18 ***	0.05	0
Oppose CRT	-0.03	0.04	0.44
Female	0	0.03	0.92
Hispanic	-0.02	0.05	0.64
Black	0.08	0.06	0.17
Other Race	0.05	0.08	0.55
Two Races	0.05	0.09	0.55
< High School	0.02	0.06	0.77
High School	0.03	0.04	0.47
Some College	0.05	0.04	0.20
Republican	0.13 ***	0.05	0.01
Independent	0.12 ***	0.04	0
Other Party	0.07	0.06	0.25
Constant	0.38 ***	0.05	0

\*\*\* p<0.01

**NOTES:** The reference group for female is male. The reference group for the racial categories is white. The reference group for the educational categories is bachelors degree or higher. The reference group for political affiliation is Democrat.

**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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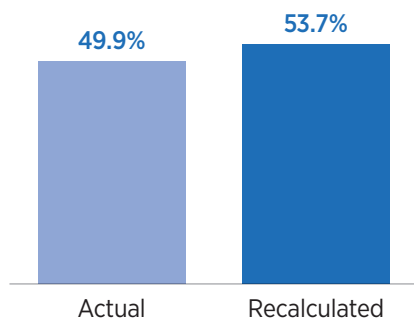
variables for those who indicate that they are not sure about teaching CRT in the classroom as well as those who oppose CRT. The difference in the estimated coefficients between these two variables is the potential percentage-point increase in school choice support that could be earned by shifting “not sure” respondents to, in this example, opposing teaching CRT.

Table 1 shows that the difference between the first two coefficients is approximately 0.15, or 15 percentage points. The group of people who are not sure about CRT are more strongly opposed to school choice than the people who oppose CRT. It is this difference on which our analysis focuses to estimate the potential gain in support for school choice that could be achieved by emphasizing social issues like CRT.

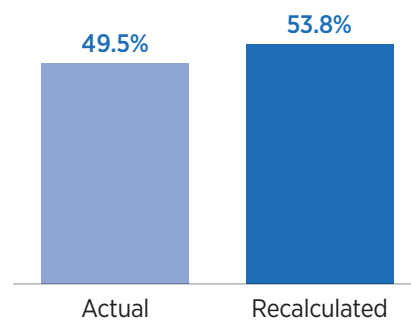
CHART 7

## Support for School Choice Increases When Parents Disagree with Radical Education Ideology

**CRITICAL RACE THEORY:** If those responding “not sure” about teaching CRT in public schools shifted to “oppose” CRT, support for school choice would increase by an average of about 4 percentage points.



**CULTURE ISSUES:** If those responding “not sure” on all four culture questions shifted to rejecting radical political views, support for school choice would increase by an average of about 4 percentage points.



**SOURCE:** Ipsos nationally representative survey of 1,632 adults ages 18 and older conducted over a two-week period during summer 2021. For more information, see “Survey Design” in the text.

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For each culture question, two additional regressions are run with the same control variables to predict whether respondents would give affirmative answers to the other two school choice questions. For the question on teaching CRT in school, the average difference of the coefficients on these three total regressions is 0.17, or 17 percentage points. With this statistic in hand, it is possible to recalculate overall levels of school choice support that would be realized if the “not sures” were better informed and came to understand these cultural issues as problematic.

Under our assumptions, if the “not sure” respondents on teaching CRT in public schools shifted to disagreeing, average school choice support would increase by about four percentage points.

Overall, if the “not sures” on all four culture questions came to reject radical political views, average school choice support would increase from 49.5 percent to 53.8 percent (Chart 7). In other words, engaging on cultural issues could produce a yield that is large enough to boost support for school choice into a clear majority position.

## Conclusion

This *Backgrounders* presents three important findings. First, that support for school choice is moderately high. Second, that radical cultural critiques of American values are extremely unpopular. And third, that respondents who are unsure about cultural issues are a potentially valuable source of support for school choice advocates. If people who do not have opinions about social justice ideology could be informed about the issues and come to see them as problematic, there are reasons to believe that school choice support would grow meaningfully.

One reason why some people are unsure about cultural controversies is because they have not been informed about them by the education reform movement itself. For highly engaged political observers, it is easy to forget that not everyone knows about critical race theory or *The New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project. Even fewer people may know that public school libraries stock soft-porn books and that some elementary schools have forced children to plot themselves on matrixes of oppression.

If education reform groups emphasized cultural problems in public schools and promote school choice as a solution—one that could benefit people on all sides of the cultural debate—the constituency for choice would likely increase. Leading nonprofits and foundations have, however, steered clear of hot-button issues. Or, worse, they have adopted these widely unpopular radical critiques of American society and endorsed social justice ideology in public schools.

Conventional wisdom says that the culture war is bad for school choice advocates. But, as this survey shows, it could be extremely helpful for promoting policies like education scholarship accounts, tax credit scholarships, and vouchers. Whether education reform organizations embrace cultural debates or not, the culture war is here to stay. School choice advocates are armed with an obvious solution. They should not squander the opportunity to use it.

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## Endnotes

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