

Civic Knowledge in Tennessee

A Report by the Institute of American Civics
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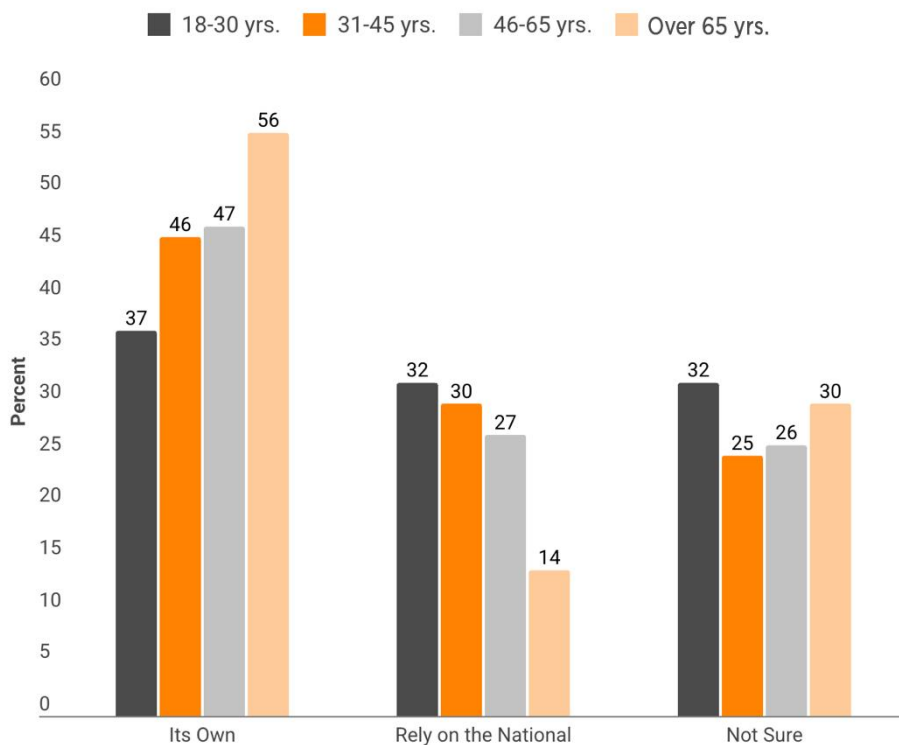


The Institute of American Civics conducted a survey of 1,099 Tennessee adults in November 2025. Respondents were reached through a mixed-methods approach using both telephone and internet surveying. The margin of error is 3%. This is the second survey of this kind conducted by the Institute.

1. Only about half of Tennesseans know that Tennessee has its own state constitution.

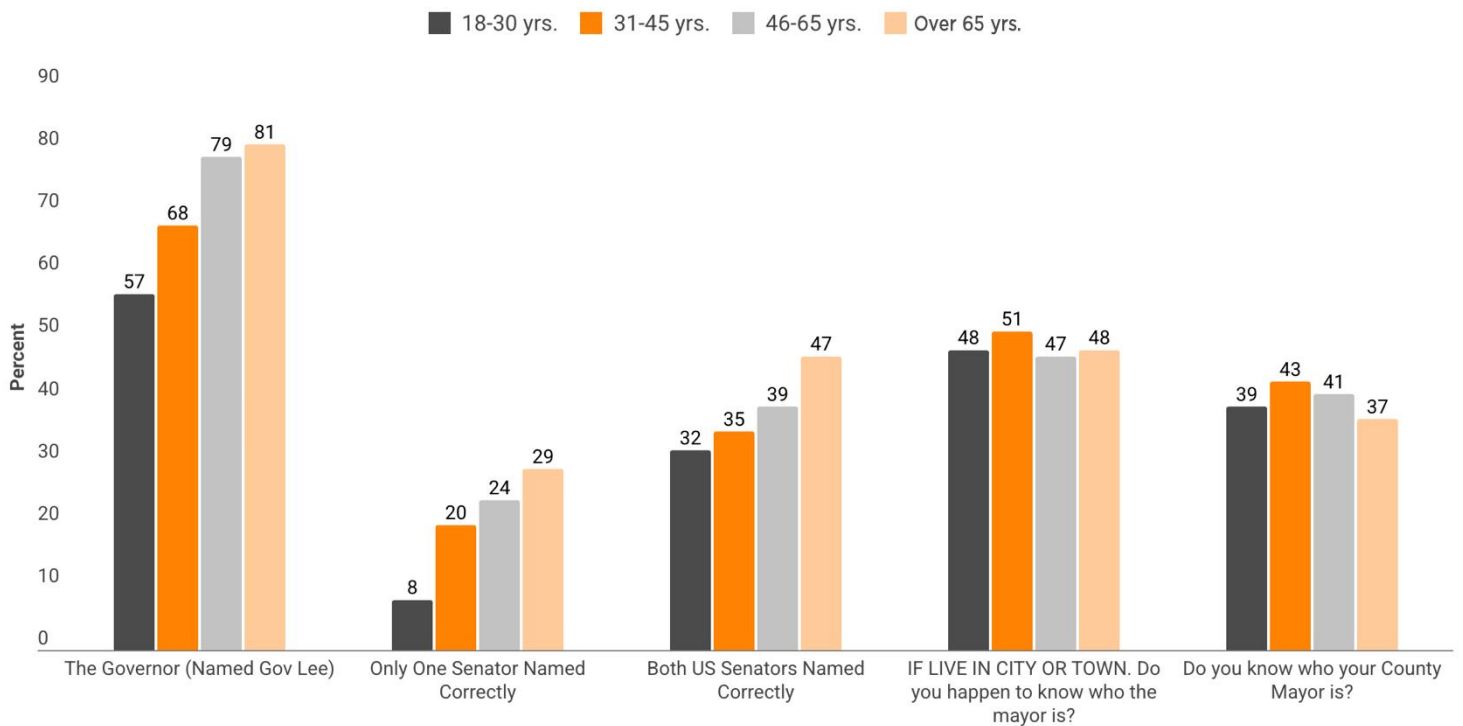
Tennesseans do not have a firm understanding of Tennessee’s sovereignty in the federal system. Fewer than half of survey respondents correctly answered that Tennessee has its own state constitution. About a quarter thought that there was no state constitution and Tennessee relies purely on the national constitution, while the other quarter said they were simply not sure. This is not unlike findings in other states and speaks to a widespread misunderstanding of the federal system. Younger respondents are least likely to give the correct answer while those over 65 are by far the most likely to get it right. The survey results make two things obvious: it is crucial that Tennesseans develop a higher level of civic knowledge, and the process will not be easy.

As far as you know, does Tennessee have its own Constitution or does it just rely on the national one?

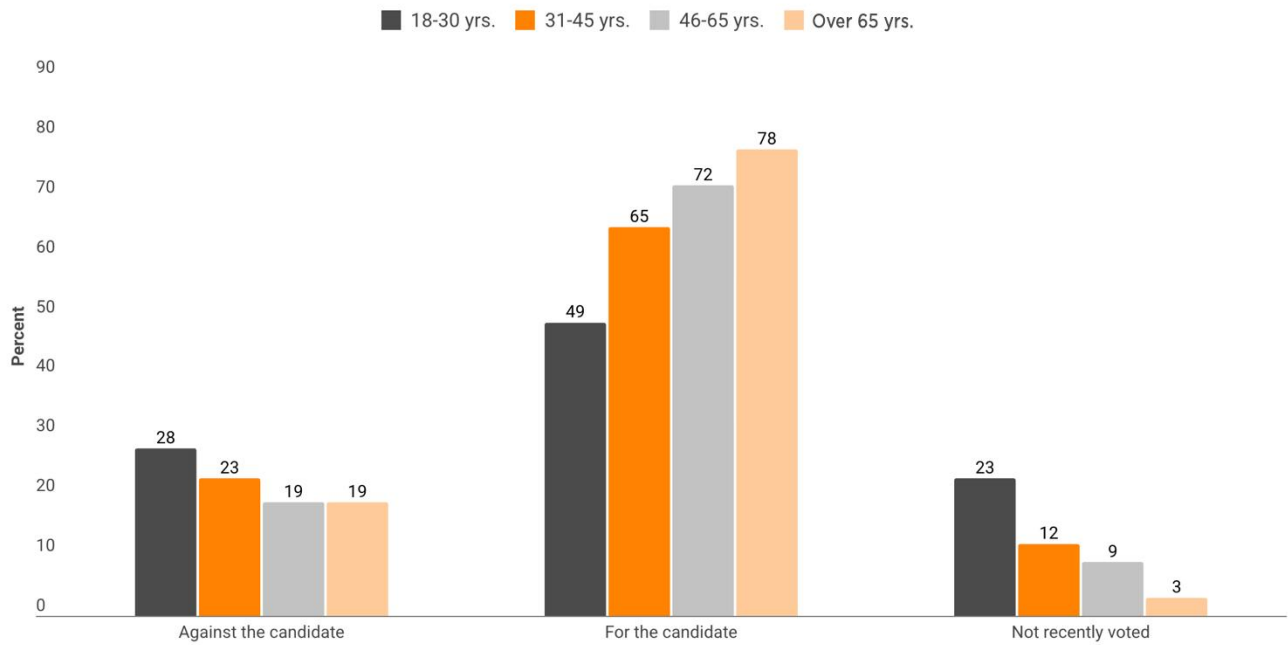


2. Fewer than half say they know their state legislators, and only around one-third say they know their county commissioner or city council member. Respondents ages 18–30 have by far the lowest level of knowledge of the office-holders at all levels, except for the city council. Younger voters are more likely than those in other age groups to cast their votes mainly in opposition to a candidate, and they are also much more likely not to have voted recently. Likewise, respondents under 30 are much less likely to correctly identify the names of the governor and United States senators.

I am going to read you a list of political offices. I'd like you to tell me whether you know who holds each office.

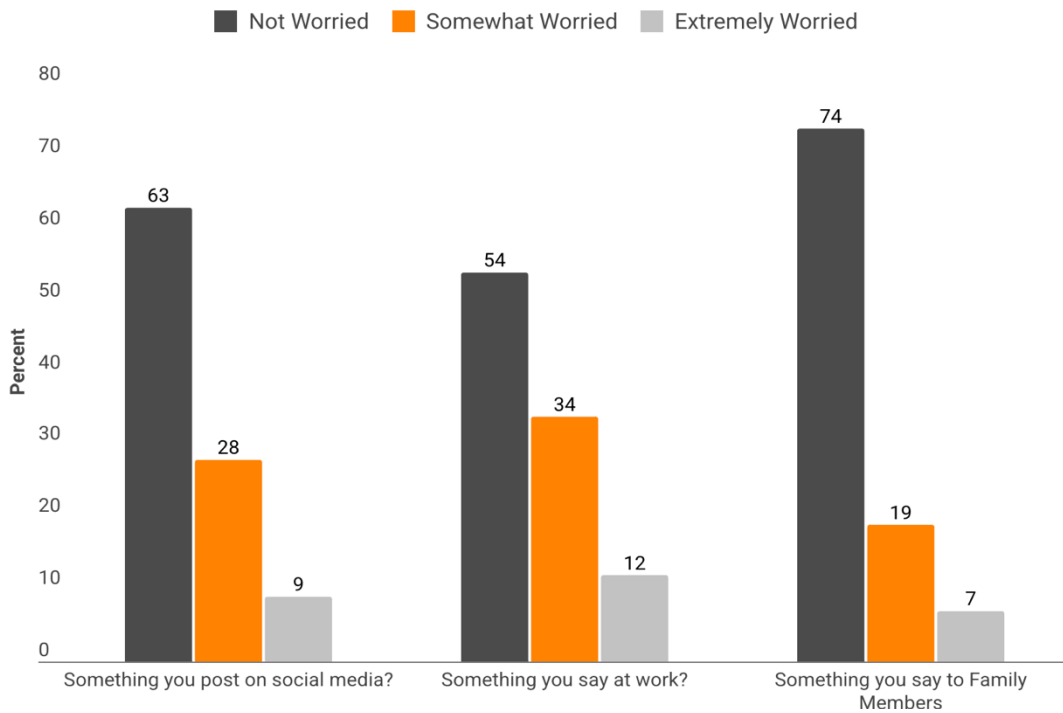


The survey also shows that a substantial proportion of Tennesseans are less willing to express their political views than they were a decade ago, and that nearly half who post on social media have at least some fears of the repercussions of their posts. This is particularly true for younger respondents. There is also no consensus on what “civility” should mean in the political realm, or even what the motivations are of those calling for greater civility.



3. The polarized political atmosphere and rise of “cancel culture” seem to have had a chilling effect on Tennesseans’ willingness to engage in politics in several ways. Rebuilding civility in politics will not be an easy task. While most seem to want it, there is no consensus about what it means.

Q. Would you say you are extremely worried, somewhat worried, or not at all worried about your reputation being damaged by expressing an opinion about politics through:



*Percentages are among those who post.

How often are things expressed at work in reference to political issues that make you feel uncomfortable? (among those reporting working outside the home.)

- 58%** Rarely
- 34%** Occasionally
- 7%** Often

When people speak of the need for “civility,” do you think they want to make things better, or do they want to avoid discussing tough issues?

- 60%** Want to Make Things Better
- 35%** Want to Avoid Discussing Tough Issues
- 5%** Other

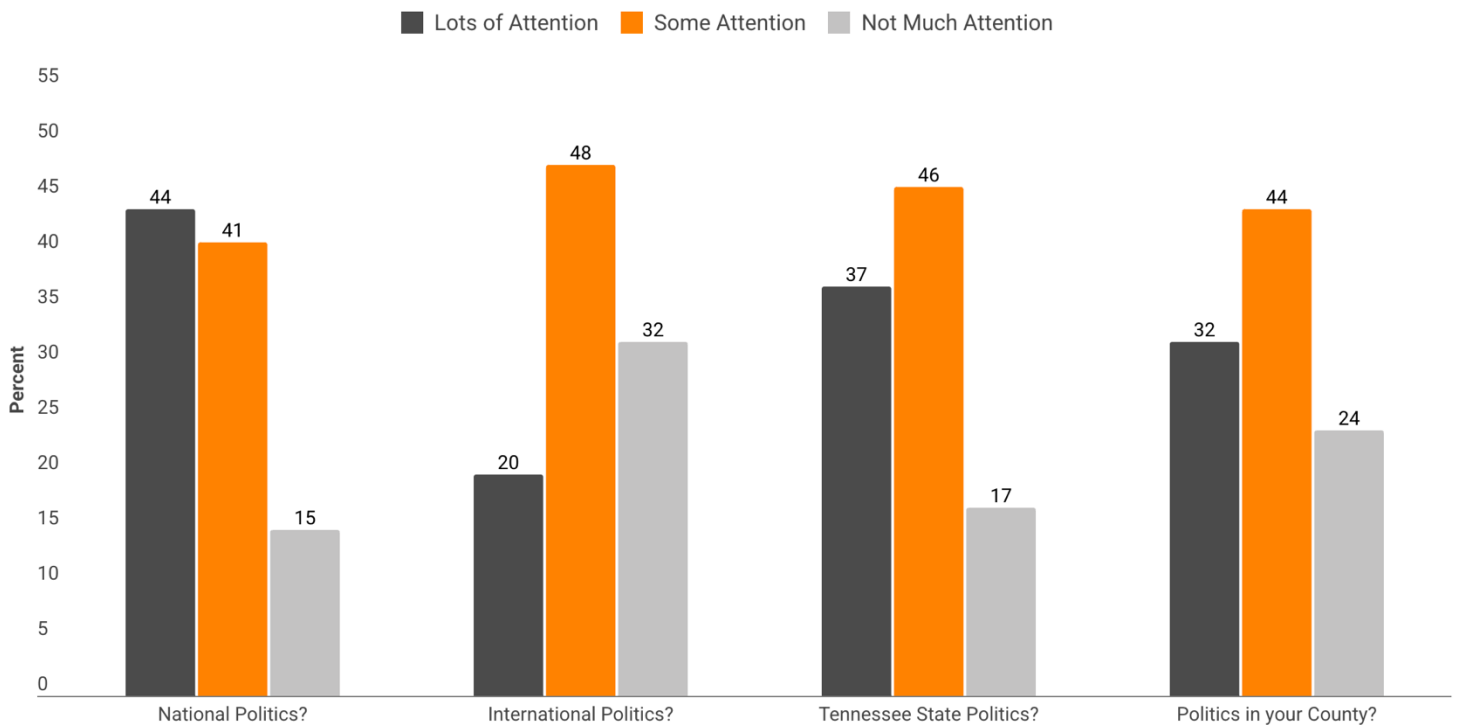
Which of the following do you think of when you hear the word “Civility”?

- 48%** Respect for the positions of those with whom people disagree
- 26%** Being polite and avoiding controversial issues
- 24%** Engaging others constructively
- 3%** Other

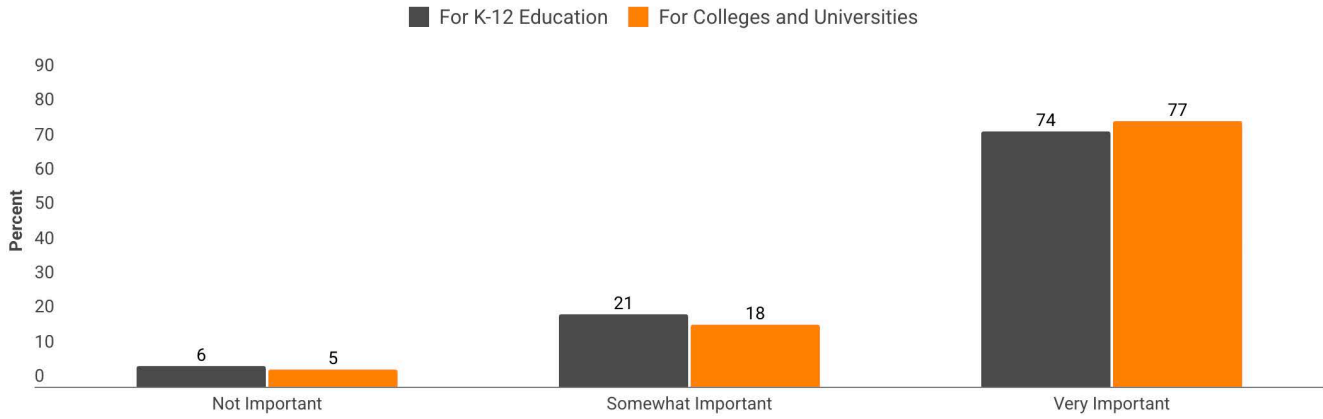
4. Tennesseans pay the most attention to national politics, followed by state, local, and international politics.

5. Respondents believe that it is about as important for K-12 schools and universities to prepare students to be more responsible citizens as well as to prepare for careers, and more important than to prepare students to be personally happy.

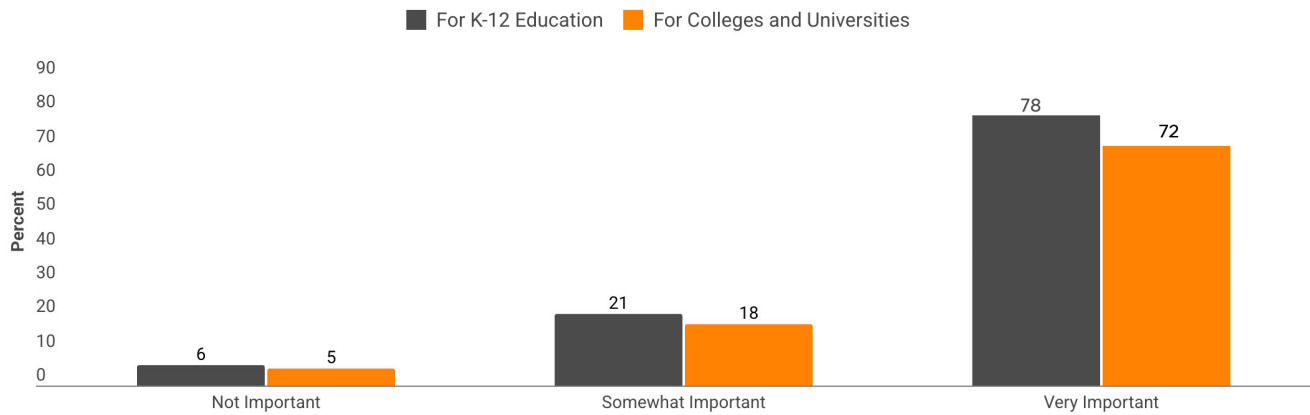
Some people pay attention to politics. Some not so much. Do you pay a lot of attention, some attention, or not much attention at all to politics?



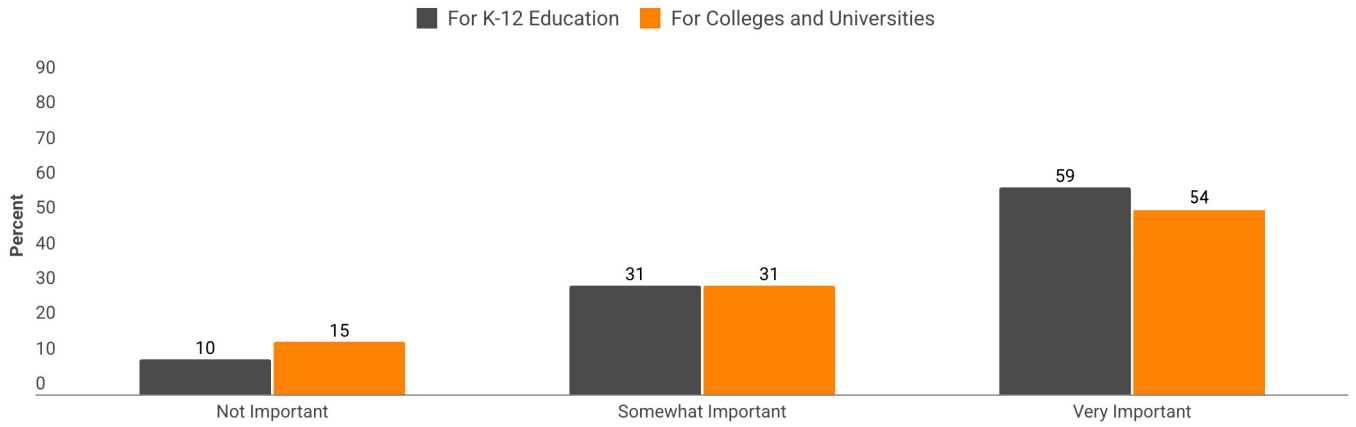
Thinking of K-12 and university education, would you say it is not important, somewhat important, or very important to prepare students to be more responsible citizens?



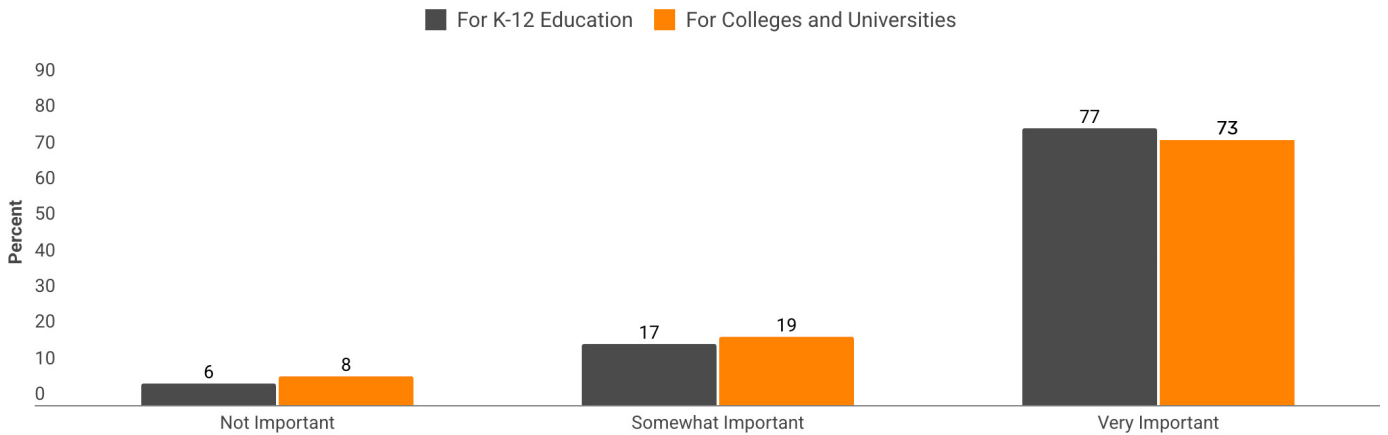
Thinking of K-12 / (University) education, would you say it is not important, somewhat important, or very important to prepare students to be professionally successful in their careers?



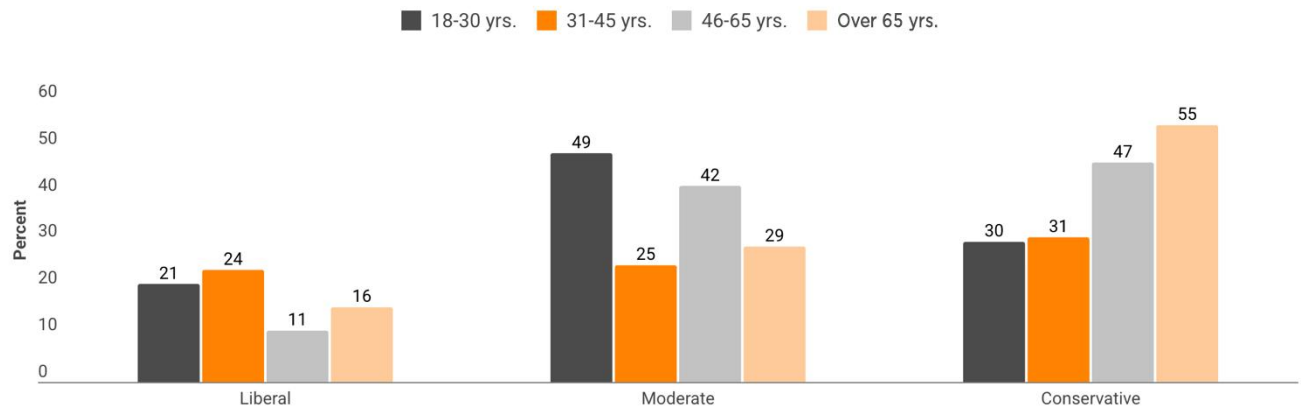
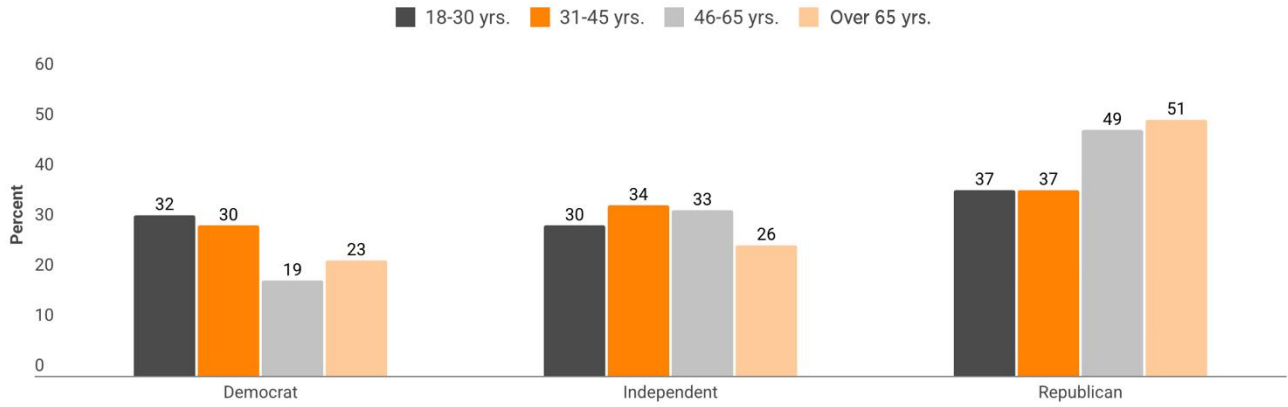
Would you say it is not important, somewhat important, or very important to prepare students to be more personally happy in their private lives?



Would you say it is not important, somewhat important, or very important to prepare students to better understand factual truths about the world?



Finally, Tennesseans age 45 and under, while still more Republican and conservative than not, are more Democratic and liberal than respondents over 45.





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