

The American Public and “Difficult Histories”: What World Historians Can Learn from a National History Survey

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If you ask, “Who’s the most likely to take this republic down?” It would be the teacher’s unions, and the filth that they’re teaching our kids.¹

– Mike Pompeo, former U.S. Secretary of State, November 2022

As Pompeo’s statement suggests, one need not look especially hard to find stories about the divisiveness of history education in the United States. Whether it is inflammatory political candidate platforms, raucous school board meetings, provocative revisionist histories, or fed-up teachers heading for the exits, the problem is seemingly everywhere. The American Historical Association (AHA), the largest professional historical society in the world, has worked overtime to rebut disinformation about such lightning rod issues as critical race theory in the classroom, to push back against legislative efforts to regulate history curricula, and to advocate for more inclusive teaching of the past at all educational levels.²

Although there is an objective reality to the discord swirling around these matters, the headlines and popular press stories covering them often shed more heat than light. Fortunately, a recent national poll of U.S. adults’ understandings of, and experiences with, history reveals more sober findings away from all the rancor. A formal report of the survey was published in 2021 as *History, the Past, and Public Culture* (hereafter HPPC).³ To be sure, the study shows that real divisions exist when it comes to teaching and understanding the past. But the same study exposes some surprising areas of commonality, indicating that Americans are often not as divided on historical matters as the sensationalized twenty-four-hour news cycles imply.

The goal here is to provide world historians with solid data from the aforesaid survey about where people stand on so-called “difficult histories” or “divisive issues.” This is done with the aim of assisting practitioners in formulating their educational and research approaches to ostensibly controversial materials, and of informing readers on where points of commonality and discord lie. Although many public disagreements about history pertain to the American past, the field of world

¹ David Weigel and Shelby Talcott, “Mike Pompeo: ‘The most dangerous person in the world is Randi Weingarten,’” *Semafor* (November 21, 2022): <https://www.semafor.com/article/11/21/2022/mike-pompeo-2024-trump>.

² All these issues are fast developing. A good way to stay abreast is to follow the “AHA Advocacy” web page: <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy>, as well as the AHA’s “Teaching with Integrity” project and the news sources listed there: <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/teaching-history-with-integrity>.

³ Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2021). The full report is available on the AHA’s website in both web form and as a PDF; see <https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>.

history is not without its hazards. From colonialism to climate change, from gender to genocide, from revolutions to racism, world historians regularly tread ground that is fraught with controversy. In this moment, adroitly navigating these minefields can be as important as the subject matter itself.

In the interest of avoiding redundancy and of economizing on space, this article includes charts only when illustrating survey information that was not represented graphically in the 2021 HPPC study. Charts that were previously published in the HPPC report are referred to by their figure numbers in parentheses (e.g., HPPC, Fig. 12).

Background on the Survey

The present survey data were collected in fall 2020 through a collaboration between the AHA and Fairleigh Dickinson University (hereafter, the AHA/FDU survey). The study was made possible with generous funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The impetus for the survey was the valuable though aging work of historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (hereafter R&T), whose 1998 book *The Presence of the Past* was the product of a phone-based national survey (N = 1,453) conducted in 1994. R&T had wondered why a gulf seemed to divide professional historians from the general public on views and uses of the past. Given that separation, they wanted to ascertain how the public actually utilizes and understands history, as opposed to exposing what people do not know about it.⁴

The 2020 survey initially conceived of rerunning R&T's poll questions to see how things had changed over the past twenty-plus years. But as the investigators consulted with dozens of history practitioners both within and outside of education and academia, it became apparent that a new survey instrument was needed to account for myriad developments since the mid-1990s. That said, some overlap between the two polls allows for glimpses of continuity and lack thereof on a variety of issues.

Conducting the AHA/FDU survey in the midst of the Covid pandemic meant adjusting some of the questions slightly; moreover, it is impossible to say whether or to what extent the pandemic and its resultant lockdowns affected respondents' answers. Nevertheless, the administration of the survey by Ipsos as an online probability panel (as opposed to R&T's phone interviews) suffered no obvious ill effects. Ultimately, 1,816 adults living in the U.S. generously shared their views on a broad array of history topics by answering over three dozen questions in English or Spanish. The survey instrument, the Ipsos methodology report, and all the raw poll data are freely available online for consultation.⁵

Public Views on “Uncomfortable History”

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Rosenzweig had since died, but Thelen served as an advisory committee member for the survey detailed in the present article.

⁵ See footnote 3 above.

Human beings are prone to believing they live in interesting times. It is thus enticing to think that current disagreements over history and the teaching thereof are somehow unique to this moment, but a longer perspective proves otherwise. Sam Wineburg begins his classic text *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* with results from a study done over a hundred years ago purporting to show how utterly ignorant Americans are of the past. He then fast-forwards to the mid-1990s, when Congress butted heads with historians over national history standards.⁶ Books from the latter era with provocative titles such as *History on Trial* and *The Killing of History* stand testimony to how combative the field was well before the present menu of contentious topics made its debut.⁷

The monitoring of teachers for infusing their classrooms with supposedly “divisive concepts,” as a New Hampshire right-wing organization did in 2021, is likewise not without precedent.⁸ Jonathan Zimmerman’s history of college teaching reminds us how government agents openly surveilled professors in the early years of the Cold War. Some faculty were fired for things said in the classroom, but the broader result was the stifling of any subject matter deemed off limits.⁹ The state of Florida’s recent attempt to curtail discussion of racism or privilege on college campuses, rather than being a historical aberration, is thus an unfortunate extension of past intrusions on basic academic freedoms.¹⁰

One of the most divisive subjects of late has been the alleged teaching of “critical race theory” or CRT at the K-12 level. In fact, calls to put a halt to such curricula are solutions in search of problems, as CRT is a complex topic typically encountered only at the graduate level or in law schools.¹¹ Nonetheless, the issue has been effectively harnessed by various groups as a powerful wedge issue pitting constituencies against each other.

Although CRT is over forty years old, it first appeared as a public issue of division only in the context of a bitter presidential election in the fall of 2020 – that is, around the same time the

⁶ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), vii-viii, 3-4.

⁷ Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000 [1997]); Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996).

⁸ Jenna Romaine, “Moms Group Puts \$500 ‘Bounty’ on Teachers Who Teach ‘Divisive Concepts,’” *The Hill* (November 16, 2021): <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/education/581722-moms-group-puts-500-bounty-on-teachers-who-teach/>.

⁹ Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 107, 121-26.

¹⁰ Fortunately, Gov. Ron DeSantis’s “Stop W.O.K.E. Act” has been blocked in court, though it will likely be appealed; see Andrew Atterbury, “DeSantis’ Anti-Woke Law Remains Blocked in Florida Colleges,” *Politico* (March 16, 2023): <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/16/desantis-anti-woke-law-00087483>.

¹¹ On the substance and divisiveness of CRT, see Stephen Sawchuck, “What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It under Attack?” *EducationWeek* (May 18, 2021): <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>; and Jacqueline Jones, “Abstract and Ill Informed: Adding Facts to the Critical Race Theory Debates,” *Perspectives on History* 59, no. 6 (August 12, 2021): <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2021/abstract-and-ill-informed-adding-facts-to-the-critical-race-theory-debates>. The unfortunate effects on teachers are seen in Scott Neuman, “The Culture Wars Are Pushing Some Teachers to Leave the Classroom,” *NPR* (November 13, 2022): <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/13/1131872280/teacher-shortage-culture-wars-critical-race-theory>.

AHA/FDU poll was running.¹² Although the survey team had no way of knowing CRT would soon become a dominant topic in public and political discourse, poll questions effectively measured respondents' views on such divisive matters. Given all the drama in subsequent popular press stories, the survey results are nothing short of astonishing.

Overall, a supermajority of respondents (77%) felt it was acceptable to teach the history of harm done to others, even if that subject matter caused discomfort to learners (HPPC, Fig. 129). Perhaps even more surprising, that majority held for every demographic subgroup. Whether it was by age bracket (HPPC, Fig. 130), college degree or lack thereof (HPPC, Fig. 131), gender (HPPC, Fig. 132), or region of the country (HPPC, Fig. 133), at least 71% of respondents agreed with the aforementioned statement. Even when broken down by political affiliation, solid majorities of Democrats (78%) and Republicans (74%) were on board with uncomfortable histories having a place in the classroom (HPPC, Fig. 134). The one outlier group on this issue was Hispanics, of whom only 58% – still a solid majority – advocated unsettling history pedagogy (HPPC, Fig. 135).

The results of a related follow-up question were equally unexpected, given the vitriol in public discourse. Asked what they do when confronted with uncomfortable historical information, only a small minority of respondents (10%) said they avoided more investigation into the matter, whereas 90% reported delving further into such unsettling issues (HPPC, Fig. 136). Crosstabulations were even starker here than for the previous question: no less than 86% of any demographic subgroup voiced a need to dig more deeply into discomfiting episodes of the past.¹³ That trend held even for party identification, where the differences between groups ranged from trivial to non-existent (**Figure 1**).

¹² See the background and context of CRT in Olivia Waxman's insightful cover story, "Past Tense: Critical Race Theory Is the New Front in a Long-Running Fight over How to Teach America's Story to the Next Generation," *TIME* (July 2021), 76-84. Waxman made use of preliminary findings from the AHA/FDU survey for her piece.

¹³ "Crosstabulations" are statistical tools used to examine the relationship between two or more categorical variables. Crosstabs might drill down into topline results to consider the effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, etc. Crosstabs can also examine the relationship between two or more different survey items, e.g., the effect of peoples' understanding of "history" on their expectations for how history courses should be taught.

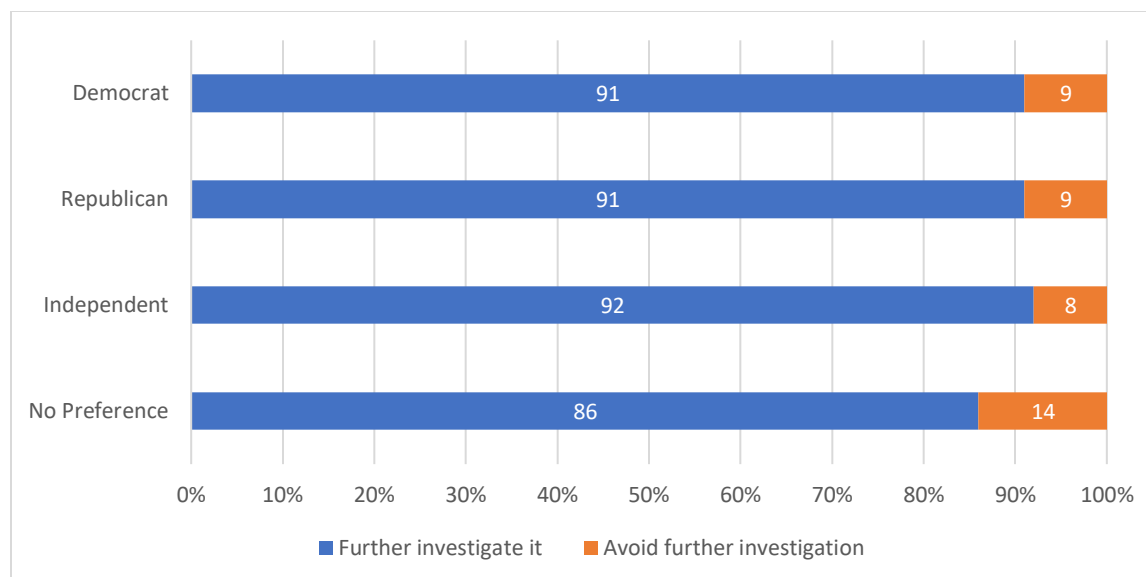


Figure 1: By political party: Respondents’ reported action taken when encountering uncomfortable history.

The takeaways from these statistics seem obvious: the American public has not only the stomach for “difficult history” but a genuine appetite for it. This calls into question the constant stream of reports showing intolerance or even hostility toward others about these matters amidst a putative culture war. Moreover, it suggests that sensationalist press coverage is at least partly to blame for ginning up the controversy.¹⁴ At the same time, it cannot be disputed that disagreements over history education and other cultural touchstones have been ably exploited by some groups to gain advantage over others.

There are a number of ways to square that circle. First, it is possible that at least some of the AHA/FDU survey respondents answered these two questions untruthfully because they felt such answers would reflect better on themselves. This is known in polling circles as “social desirability bias,” and it can skew results.¹⁵ If such bias is at work here, then Americans may not actually be as tolerant of, or interested in, uncomfortable histories as their survey responses indicate. Moreover, we cannot be sure that respondents actually conduct further research on matters they find disturbing, nor can we know how impartial any such research is. This is because the survey responses here are *indirect* measures of people’s actions. Only *direct* measures (i.e., observing individuals’ behaviors in a specific situation) could tell us whether people act according to what they say.¹⁶

¹⁴ Burkholder, “Closer Together: Across Party Lines, Americans Actually Agree on Teaching ‘Divisive Concepts,’” *Slate* (October 15, 2021): <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/10/opinions-on-history-education-survey-of-americans-finds-most-agree-on-teaching-divisive-concepts.html>. Kappan Online’s “The Grade” regularly checks the quality of reporting on controversial education matters; see <https://kappanonline.org/category/the-grade/>.

¹⁵ Mario Callegaro, “Social Desirability,” in Paul Lavrakas, ed., *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 2: 825-26.

¹⁶ On this important though too often unappreciated point, see Donald Bacon, “Reporting Actual and Perceived Student Learning in Education Research,” *Journal of Marketing Education* 38, no. 1 (2016), 3-6.

A second approach to interpretation is to turn to revealed preference methodology. This tactic, like the direct measures alluded to above, is based on people's actions telling us more about their beliefs than what they may say about themselves.¹⁷ Election results are one such measure. Glenn Younkin narrowly won the Virginia governorship in 2021, a race in which education and cultural issues loomed large and were credited for the results.¹⁸ Exit polls, which tend to be fairly accurate, showed that Republicans and Democrats were decidedly split on such matters as parental input on what schools teach (77% of Rs said parents should have “a lot” of input, whereas only 22% of Ds agreed) and whether Confederate monuments should be left in place (82% of Rs said yes vs. only 18% of likeminded Ds).¹⁹ Even well into 2022, Virginia remained at the center of controversies surrounding the teaching of history.²⁰

Thus, despite the AHA/FDU poll showing broad agreement on the necessity for teaching distressing historical matters, Virginia exit polls and the ballot box reveal strong polarity. That said, the same cultural issues that Younkin had so ably harnessed in 2021 unexpectedly failed to propel many candidates to victory in the 2022 midterm elections.²¹ A straightforward explanation is that such divisions mattered less to many voters nationwide in the latter contests, thereby reflecting the more tolerant national views seen in the AHA/FDU survey results. Overall, it is probably safe to say that people are largely open to “difficult history” in the abstract, but can part ways when it comes to specific subject matter.

Public Views on Revisionist History

The assumed machinations of revisionist history are yet another way of slinging mud at the historian's craft. In reality, far from being a sinister plot, reinterpreting the past in light of new evidence and perspectives is at the heart of what historians do. This is encapsulated in the title and content of James Banner's recent book *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History Is Revisionist History*.²² Although recreating the past in a Rankean sense is impossible, historians are nonetheless often able to produce better, more sophisticated explanations for former people and events through

¹⁷ See Kevin Boyle, “Introduction to Revealed Preference Methods,” in Patricia Champ et al., eds., *A Primer on Nonmarket Valuation* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 259-67.

¹⁸ Jeff Greenfield, “One Lesson of Virginia? The Culture War Still Works,” *Politico* (November 3, 2021): <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/11/03/virginia-election-culture-wars-518701>.

¹⁹ “Virginia Exit Polls,” *CNN* (2021): <https://www.cnn.com/election/2021/november/exit-polls/virginia/governor/> (accessed November 17, 2022). On the reliability of exit polls, see Lavrakas, “Exit Polls,” in Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, 1:249-52.

²⁰ “AHA on Virginia Social Studies Standards Revisions Process (November 2022),” *American Historical Association*: [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-on-virginia-social-studies-standards-revisions-process-\(november-2022\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-on-virginia-social-studies-standards-revisions-process-(november-2022)).

²¹ Laura Meckler and Anne Branigin, “School Culture War Campaigns Fall Flat in Some Tight Races,” *The Washington Post* (November 10, 2022): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/11/10/education-candidates-election-crt-indoctrination/>.

²² James Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History Is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). Also see Banner's essay, “All History Is Revisionist History,” *Humanities* (Summer 2022): <https://www.neh.gov/article/all-history-revisionist-history>.

an iterative process of engaging and modifying earlier work.²³ And this really is a good thing, in history and other fields as well. As a senior historian quipped to me years back, “Would you want to be operated on by a surgeon who *doesn't* practice revisionist medicine?”

Still, the term “revisionist history” can be tainted by negativity, under the belief that historians are somehow tinkering with the past with nefarious intent. Some of the impetus for recent debates over the “rewriting” of history stems from the 1619 Project. Debuting as long-form journalism in the fall of 2019, this project seeks to tell American history from the decentered perspective of slavery and Black Americans.²⁴ A number of conservatives, sensing their privileged position in the nation’s history as being marginalized, responded vociferously to this revisionist narrative. Official reaction came in late 2020 in the form of President Trump’s 1776 Commission, which sought to reify mainstream historical conventions. Significantly, the Commission’s subsequent report listed no authors and was riddled with factual errors. Although it was quickly disbanded by the incoming Biden administration, the 1776 Commission’s response to revisionism stands testament to how threatening new interpretations of the past can be to some groups.²⁵

The AHA/FDU poll aimed to measure this impulse, though employing the term “revisionism” or “revisionist history” in a public survey question was deemed impractical. As a proxy, the survey asked whether our knowledge of past people and events should ever change. When phrased in these more neutral terms, a solid majority overall (62%) voiced approval (HPPC, Fig. 112), though one does see fissures in the crosstabulations. College graduates were more sympathetic to a changing story of the past by twenty-three points, relative to people without a degree (HPPC, Fig. 116). The greater part of whites, Blacks, two-plus races and others were comfortable with historical reinterpretation, but only 48% of Hispanics felt likewise (HPPC, Fig. 117). Differences were especially stark as a function of political affiliation: nearly three-quarters of Democrats voiced comfort with revisionism, whereas just 48% of Republicans agreed (HPPC, Fig. 118). Given these discrepancies, it is not hard to see how revisionist history, however packaged, can be an effective wedge issue.

These findings give rise to a conundrum. A clear majority in the AHA/FDU survey accepted that historical reinterpretation happens. At the same time, two-thirds of those respondents viewed “history” as a collection of facts which, in theory, should be immutable (HPPC, Fig. 1). If a change in understanding occurs, what is the driving force? Most respondents (61%) were able to accommodate this contradiction by indicating that new facts coming to light result in new knowledge (HPPC, Fig. 113), thereby preserving the history-as-facts mindset even in the face of

²³ A naysayer here is philosopher Alex Rosenberg’s *How History Gets Things Wrong* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2019). The present author does not find Rosenberg’s arguments compelling.

²⁴ “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine* (August 2019): <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>. For a recent set of reviews of the project by nineteen historians and a response from the *New York Times Magazine*, see “The 1619 Project Forum,” *American Historical Review* 127, no. 4 (2023), 1793-1873.

²⁵ For a brief but cogent overview of this episode, see Harvey Graff, “The Nondebate about Critical Race Theory and Our American Movement,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 13 (2022), 1-13 at 3-4. The AHA’s January 2021 condemnation of the 1776 Commission and its report are at [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-\(january-2021\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-(january-2021)). The AHA was joined by forty-seven other professional organizations as signatories to this document.

change. That said, a set of crosstabulations is particularly interesting here. Whereas 58% of respondents who saw history mostly as factual material thought that revisionism was justified, a far higher 73% of those viewing history as explanation felt the same (HPPC, Fig. 114). The inescapable conclusion is that a more sophisticated perception of the past is conducive to accepting history's mutability.

History teachers should certainly keep these results in mind if they seek to foster more complex understandings of the past in their students. With the possible exception of "big history," world history encompasses more material than any other subject in the discipline. It is thus easy to get bogged down in teaching content in a vain attempt to cover as much of the world's past as possible, thinking that "more" is synonymous with "better."²⁶ This becomes an even greater temptation, considering that "coverage" is the signature pedagogy of the discipline, and bearing in mind that students are already acculturated to learning history as a matter of absorbing facts, then replicating them on command.²⁷

One sees this in results from the AHA/FDU survey, where respondents said their high school history courses emphasized knowing basic facts over everything else (HPPC, Figs. 3, 59-61). Things were a bit better at the college level (HPPC, Figs. 63-66). But even there, factual information could dominate, as seen in a plurality of responses to an open-ended question about the nature of college history classes (HPPC, Fig. 68). The irony is that absorbing and replicating facts is not authentic to what historians actually do, nor is it conducive to making learners more sympathetic to revisionism.²⁸ The AHA/FDU survey results underscore these important points.

Public Views on Distant and Unfamiliar Histories

How broad of a view does the American public take of the past? Does it value things long ago, far away, and foreign – the mainstay of world history curricula and research? Wineburg, whose "historical thinking" school of thought now casts a long shadow over history education, is skeptical. Although he strongly advocates for the challenges involved in understanding people and events far removed from the present, he admits that it is the familiar and more recent past that garners most of the public's interest.²⁹ The medievalist Thomas Madden largely agrees. In his comparative study of ancient Rome and the United States, Madden posits that useful history to most Americans is developments post-1776. Even within that limited scope, he argues, it is events

²⁶ See Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), ch. 5: "The Function of Content"; and Burkholder, "A Content Means to a Critical Thinking End: Group Quizzing in History Surveys," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (2014), 551-78 at 552-55.

²⁷ Joel Sipress and David Voelker, "From Learning History to Doing History: Beyond the Coverage Model," in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies*, in Regan Gurung, Nancy Chick, and Aeron Haynie, eds. (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009), 19-35; Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006), 1358-70.

²⁸ On the disconnect between what historians do vs. how they teach, Burkholder, "*Quia Difficilia Sunt*: The Pedagogical Benefits of a Challenging Middle Ages," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 28, no. 1 (2021), 61-88.

²⁹ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 5-7.

since World War II that dominate the public's understandings of, and interest in, history.³⁰ R&T's survey from the 1990s anticipated these views, showing that Americans gravitate toward histories with which they have a personal connection, and thus do not reach far back in time.³¹

As a pre-modernist, the current author has personally seen plenty of evidence to support those observations. Nevertheless, the AHA/FDU survey sought to measure whether the American public sees distant or unfamiliar histories as important. This was done through a series of "forced choice" questions, where respondents had to make a binary selection, even if it did not fully represent their view.³²

The possibility of social desirability bias, discussed earlier, lurks in their answers. Still, the results paint a picture of an American society that recognizes the importance of the more remote and foreign past. Only 20% overall felt that events over one hundred years ago were somehow less significant than more recent ones. Interestingly, the highest dissenting demographic was those in the 18-29 age band, 25% of whom (still a small minority) prioritized recent history over more distant, while only 17% of those 65+ felt the same (HPPC, Fig. 76). In those results, one might reasonably postulate a broader historical awareness as a function of increasing age, though that correlation did not hold for views toward premodern history (see below). Respondents were similarly openminded when it came to preferences for learning the histories of their own racial or ethnic group as opposed to others' (HPPC, Figs. 71-75), though here the notable outlier was Blacks, 27% of whom privileged their own community, whereas other groups registered 11% or lower (HPPC, Fig. 73). In theory, the American public seems to be fertile ground for the substance of world history courses and scholarship.

But things are more mixed when considering how survey respondents ranked their interests in learning about various historical themes via Likert-scale answers (HPPC, Fig. 78).³³ Out of seven possible topics, the one that most respondents were drawn to, with 80% showing "a great deal" or "some" interest in it, was the history of their own family, thus repeating what R&T had found back in the 1990s.³⁴ This is understandable, but such mindsets necessarily limit the scope of historical curiosity, since recoverable family history for most people does not reach very far back into the past.

That 80% figure contrasts with the much lower, though still majority, 64% expressing interest in foreign peoples and places (HPPC, Fig. 78), which subject matter constitutes a cornerstone of world history. If there is an upside here, it is that concern for this topic is higher among younger demographics: 28% of those in the 18-29 bracket voiced strong interest, compared with only 19% of respondents 65+ (HPPC, Fig. 79). A similar trend attaches to a related issue, namely respondents' desire to learn more about the histories of people who are different from themselves:

³⁰ Thomas Madden, *Empires of Trust* (New York: Penguin, 2008), ix-x.

³¹ R&T, *Presence of the Past*, 16, 22.

³² See Jonathan Wivagg, "Forced Choice," in Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, 1:289-90.

³³ On Likert-scale questions, Jonathan Brill, "Likert Scale," in Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, 1:427-29.

³⁴ The topics, in descending order of garnering "a great deal" or "some" interest, were: my own family (80% combined), my country (77%), people different from me (65%), foreign people and places (64%), my state or local community (62%), events more than 500 years ago (60%), my ethnic group (57%).

the younger cohort was ten points higher than the oldest two brackets in registering strong interest in such material (**Figure 2**).

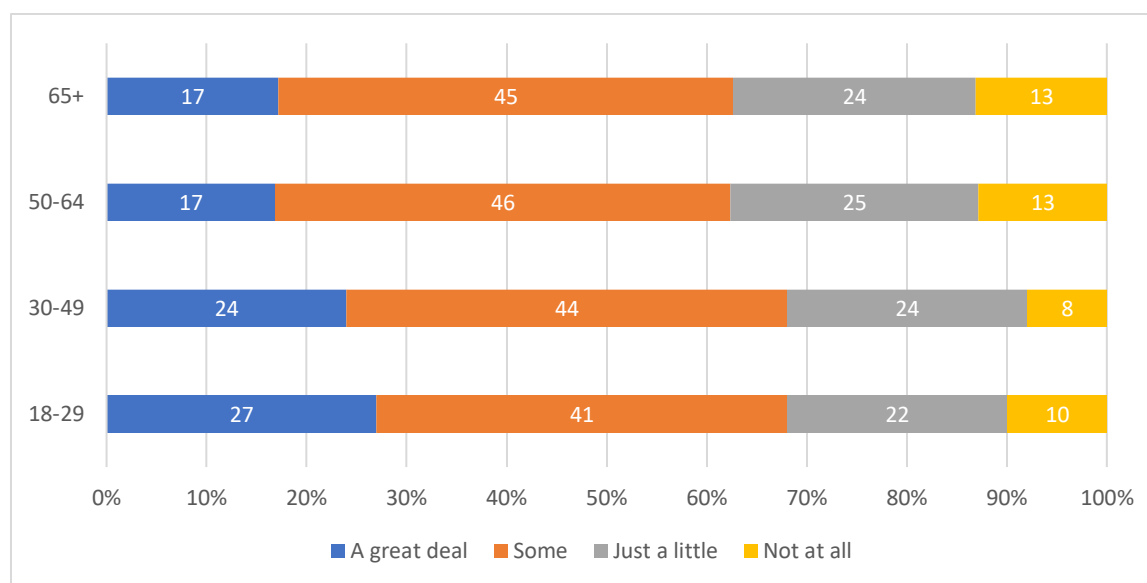


Figure 2: By age group: Respondents’ interest in learning more about the histories of people who are different from themselves.

While encouraging, the relatively higher curiosities of younger respondents could be a “life-cycle effect,” where people change as a result of major events that come with age. If so, one would expect the younger group’s attitudes to fluctuate as they move up the age ladder, perhaps ultimately looking much like the elder demographics in the current sample. Conversely, the differences may be lasting, in which case the “cohort effect” is in play, and wholesale societal values may change.³⁵ Only time will tell.

Yet, on this same issue, one detects contemporary politics exerting an influence. The spread between Democrats and Republicans exhibiting keen interest was twenty points, with the former group showing greater curiosity than the latter in people considered different from themselves (HPPC, Fig. 83). That finding is reinforced by another survey question where Republicans privileged the importance of U.S. over foreign history by nineteen points, relative to Democrats (HPPC, Fig. 85). Considering how polarizing the related issue of immigration has become, these partisan results may not be unexpected.³⁶

Because most human history predates the modern era, the AHA/FDU survey was especially interested in respondents’ views on events from over five hundred years ago. Only 60% overall showed curiosity in that subject matter, broken into 22% registering a great deal of interest, and

³⁵ On these effects, Bobby Duffy, *The Generation Myth: Why When You’re Born Matters Less than You Think* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 8-9.

³⁶ Baxter Oliphant and Andy Cerda, “Republicans and Democrats Have Different Top Priorities for U.S. Immigration Policy,” *Pew Research Center* (September 8, 2022): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/08/republicans-and-democrats-have-different-top-priorities-for-u-s-immigration-policy/>.

38% some (HPPC, Fig. 78). Differences between age brackets were trivial (**Figure 3**), though here it is the younger cohort showing modestly stronger curiosity about distant history.

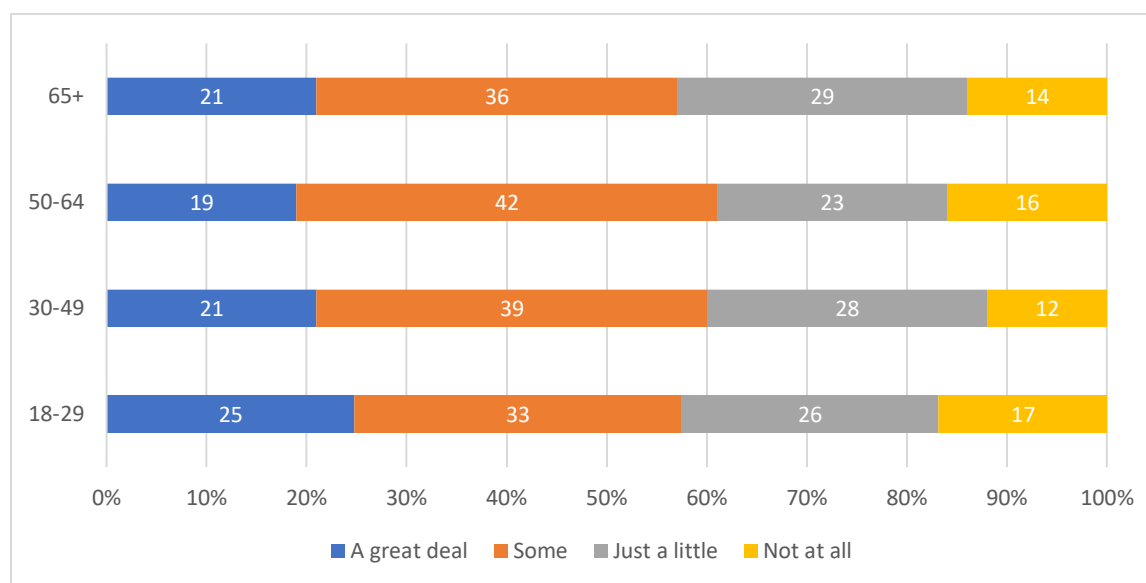


Figure 3: By age group: Respondents' interest in learning more about what happened over five hundred years ago.

Thus, although most respondents showed at least some interest in premodern history, that interest ranked near the bottom of the seven topical choices on the survey (only curiosity in people's own ethnic groups ranked lower). Such results reinforce Wineburg's, Madden's, and R&T's stances that the American public's views on a worthwhile past are tethered to the relative brevity of U.S. history. This is even more apparent in the fact that the history of respondents' own country ranked second out of the seven options (HPPC, Fig. 78), with interest increasing as a function of age (HPPC, Fig. 80). The upshot for world historians is that the American public seems at least sympathetic to people and events long ago and far away, even if those sympathies are at times superseded by more personal interests closer to home.

Polarizing Issues

Race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender are current hotbeds of controversy. Whether the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, the suppression of ethnic minorities in China, the mandatory veiling of women in Iran, or the criminalization of homosexuality in many countries around the world (to offer but a few examples), there has been no shortage of issues seeming to pull American and foreign societies apart. Because these matters transcend the U.S. and our present moment in history, world historians can benefit from understanding how people responded to related items on the AHA/FDU survey.

The findings here derive from a question asking about perceived attention paid to nine topics by historians – in particular, whether historians appear to give too much, adequate, or not

enough treatment to them (HPPC, Fig. 93).³⁷ The perception component is critical: there is no assertion that respondents' opinions correspond to the actual work historians do. Nevertheless, the data serve as valuable indicators of public sentiment on divisive subject matter and historians' responses to it.

Gender was one such polarizing issue. Overall, respondents felt women were by far the most neglected topic out of the nine choices, whereas men were correspondingly the most over-served by historians. Unsurprisingly, male and female respondents were as divided as were the topline answers. Women felt inadequately served by historians while registering dissatisfaction with men's privileged treatment, whereas men were considerably less sympathetic to those views (HPPC, Figs. 94 and 95).

Historians' perceived treatment of race and ethnicity likewise broke down along respondents' racial and ethnic identity lines. Whites were nearly three times more likely than Hispanics to believe that historians overtreat this issue, and that disparity grows to over threefold when whites are compared with Blacks. Conversely, Hispanic respondents were eight points higher in perceiving race and ethnicity as understudied historical topics than were whites; that gap grows to twenty-three points when African Americans are compared against whites (HPPC, Fig. 96). These are but two obvious instances demonstrating that historians do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they are scrutinized by, or implicated in the controversies of, the public they serve.

One of the most divisive topics concerned the extent to which historians pay attention to the LGBTQ community. This is seen in the fact that a full 62% of respondents were concentrated at the poles, where 22% believed the topic receives too much attention, while 40% thought historians pay too little. As one might expect, younger respondents were noticeably more inclined to voice that historians are negligent of LGBTQ history than were their elders (HPPC, Fig. 103). Political effects in the crosstabulations are unambiguous: 41% of Republicans registered that historians are overly concerned with the LGBTQ population, compared with just 9% of Democrats who felt the same. Those numbers flipped to 14% Republican, 62% Democrat who expressed a perception of historians' disinterest in the topic (HPPC, Fig. 99).

Whether these strong polarities are causes or effects of public disagreements over LGBTQ rights is not certain, though the matter need not be strictly binary. But it is easy to see how this, too, has become a potent wedge issue. Although the matter of same-sex marriage now enjoys majority support and even Federal protection in the U.S., it still pits groups against each other in ways that reflect the data in the AHA/FDU survey.³⁸

World historians need to be aware that, no matter what their take is on LGBTQ history, they may be prone to simultaneously endearing and alienating large swaths of the American public

³⁷ The nine topics, arranged by ascending order of receiving too much attention, were: women, racial/ethnic minorities, the Founding Fathers, the military, business leaders, religious groups, the LGBTQ community, politics and government, and men.

³⁸ See the demographic breakdowns in Gabriel Borelli, "About Six-in-Ten Americans Say Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage Is Good for Society," *Pew Research Center* (November 15, 2022): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/11/15/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-legalization-of-same-sex-marriage-is-good-for-society/>. President Biden signed the bipartisan Respect for Marriage Act into law on December 13, 2022, protecting same-sex and interracial unions.

if they wade into this issue.³⁹ That said, this could be a case much like we saw in the “uncomfortable history” section above, where people’s actions can differ from their expressed views. Broadly speaking, the survey showed the public’s unambiguous tolerance for unsettling history and a keen desire to delve further into topics that upset them, so there is reason to believe that teaching or publishing about LGBTQ history is a viable path toward reconciliation.

Professors as the Problem?

College campuses are frequently associated with the propagation of liberal values. This is on vivid display in results from a FiveThirtyEight poll from August 2022, in which wide gulfs separate Democrats and Republicans. Whereas only 17% of Democrats felt colleges teach liberal propaganda, 83% of Republicans believed they do. (Even wider disagreement attached to high schools, where the spread on this same issue was 16% vs. 85%, respectively.⁴⁰) Moreover, that partisan divide on colleges and their professors has only deepened since a Pew Research Center survey from 2019.⁴¹ Fair or not, world history instructors at any level in the U.S. operate in a climate of growing suspicion about their supposed agendas.

The AHA/FDU survey came at this issue obliquely. Rather than posing questions about perceived ideologies of history teachers and professors, the poll modified a query that originally appeared in the R&T study about the trustworthiness of various sources of the past. In the older study, out of a range of seven sources, history professors ranked fourth, high school teachers fifth (HPPC, Fig. 27). Both groups fared better in the more recent survey, where professors were fourth out of twenty sources, and high school teachers eighth (HPPC, Fig. 26). Thus, as far as trust goes, high school and college faculty have improved their status in the public’s eye since the 1990s.

The partisan spread on this question was markedly narrower than the FiveThirtyEight and Pew Research survey results would seem to predict. Republicans were thirteen points less likely than Democrats to trust high school teachers a great deal (HPPC, Fig. 37). This is a sizeable spread, but it pales in comparison with the figures referenced above. The differences were more pronounced when it came to college professors, where the partisan gulf was twenty-six points (HPPC, Fig. 38). Yet, Republicans were not as distrustful of history professors as one might think: a combined majority of 63% registered “a great deal” or “some” confidence in higher ed faculty to convey truthful information.

Other crosstabulations on this issue yielded only minor variations. Race and gender subgroups showed trivial or no differences at all. By age cohorts, there was virtually no discrepancy

³⁹ See the recent results of a Morning Consult survey, which found that the teaching of gender diversity and LGBTQ rights generated more opposition than any other topic; Claire Cain Miller and Francesca Paris, “Channeling the Mama Bear’: How Covid Closures Became Today’s Curriculum Wars,” *The New York Times* (November 7, 2022): <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/07/upshot/school-curriculums-survey-lgbtq.html>.

⁴⁰ Monica Potts, “Is College Worth It? Voters Are Split,” *FiveThirtyEight* (October 24, 2022): <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/invisible-divides-college/>.

⁴¹ Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” *Pew Research Center* (August 19, 2019): <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/>.

in views on high school teachers, though younger respondents were a bit more trusting of college professors than were their elders (**Figure 4**).

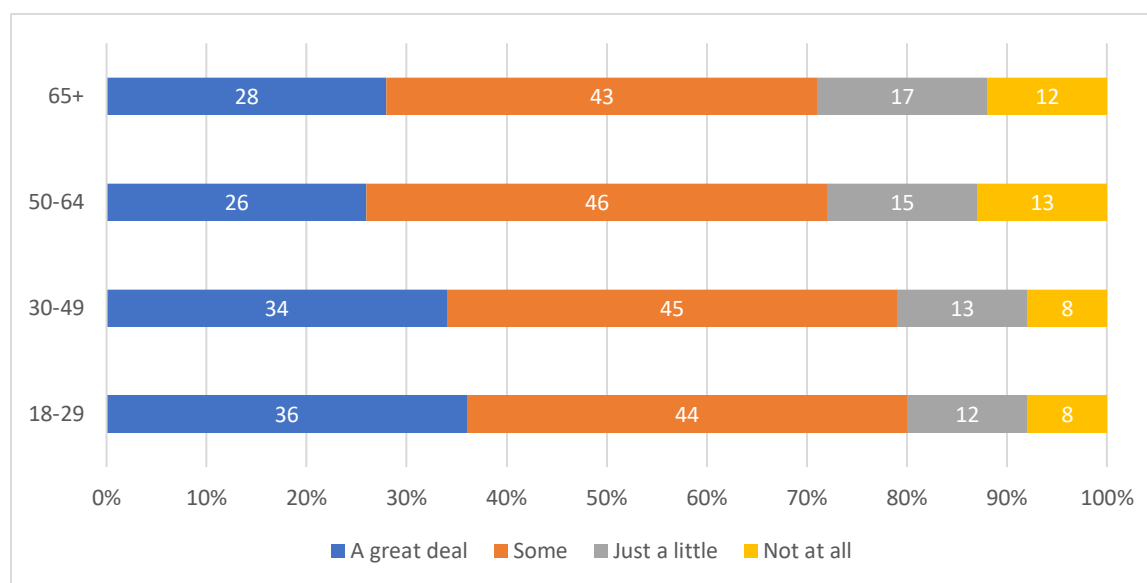


Figure 4: By age group: Respondents’ trust placed in college and university professors to provide an accurate account of history.

The matter of direct vs. indirect measures is important in this instance. All the surveys mentioned here register perceptions of educators, which may or may not correspond with educators’ actions. In fact, there have been studies of college professors’ political leanings and their partisan conduct, and they paint a somewhat different picture.

First, one must acknowledge that there is evidence that college faculty skew more liberal than conservative. Research from 2016 found that, based on voter registration information, Democratic history faculty were more prevalent than Republican by a factor of 34-to-1, even if other disciplines were more balanced.⁴² In a *New York Times* opinion piece that same year, Samuel Abrams, a politics professor at Sarah Lawrence College, detailed his findings that liberal faculty in the New England area outnumbered conservatives by a 28-to-1 margin.⁴³

Whether those political leanings translate to brainwashing in the classroom is another matter, per a 2022 study by Scott Liebertz. When over eight hundred students were asked whether their professors share political views in class, and the extent to which learners thought this was inappropriate, the results largely exonerated faculty from indoctrinating their charges. Seventy percent of respondents said their instructors “almost never” or “occasionally, but not often” engage in such activities. As a check on those figures, Liebertz then scoured the reviews of 770 political

⁴² Mitchell Langbert, Anthony Quain, and Daniel Klein, “Faculty Voter Registration in Economics, History, Journalism, Law, and Psychology,” *Econ Journal Watch* 13, no. 3 (2016), 422-51 at 425.

⁴³ Samuel Abrams, “There Are Conservative Professors. Just Not in These States,” *The New York Times* (July 1, 2016): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/sunday/there-are-conservative-professors-just-not-in-these-states.html>. As Abrams concedes, other areas of the country were marked by much lower ratios.

science faculty on the admittedly unscientific Rate My Professors website, where he found that only a miniscule though non-trivial number (just under 6%) registered politics-related complaints. Even then, a mere four of those faculty members accounted for 30% of the grievances.⁴⁴ The stereotype of college classrooms as breeding grounds for liberal persuasion falls apart in light of such findings.

Conclusion

In December 2022, Pennridge School District in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, drew strong criticism from parents, administrators, students, and school board members for a proposal to reduce high school social studies requirements. World history, in particular, stood to lose, becoming a mere elective, even though American history requirements would remain intact. The injustice was not lost on sixteen-year-old student Keira Ruch, who expressed that she was “kind of appalled by the fact that...we are taking two years to learn about American history and not anything else,” and that “America is not the only place in the world.” A follow-up essay by columnist Will Bunch warned about not only Pennridge, but other districts across the country pushing patriotic narratives of American history while sidelining or eliminating instruction about contentious issues like “slavery or the fight for LGBTQ rights.” Despite a petition to maintain Pennridge’s social studies requirements, the school board voted 5-4 for the reduction.⁴⁵

And so it continues in school districts, on college campuses, in state legislatures, and in hashtags splashed across social media. Yet, viewing these struggles as novel, as a problem unique to this moment, is disingenuous, because “history wars” have been with us for quite a while – and are unlikely to disappear any time soon.

Away from all the news cycle tumult, one catches glimpses of harmony between Americans on so-called “divisive issues” in the AHA/FDU survey. Among every demographic, even across partisan lines, the great majority of respondents felt it imperative that learners be exposed to difficult episodes of the past. And, far from turning away from discomfiting history, those same respondents reported a desire to delve further into such material. Even revisionist history was not so acrimonious when considered in neutral terms. Although sometimes the targets of society’s ire, history practitioners at both the high school and college levels rated fairly high as trustworthy sources of information.

Adults in the U.S. are still more prone to favor history that is near to them in time and space, a preference that has not changed since R&T’s work of the 1990s. This could be a concern for world historians. Still, survey respondents reported that events long ago and far away are

⁴⁴ Scott Liebertz, “Student Perceptions of Political Advocacy in the Classroom,” *College Teaching* 71, no. 2 (2023), 92-102.

⁴⁵ Maddie Hanna, “A Proposal to Cut Social Studies Requirements in Pennridge Is Drawing Backlash,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (December 5, 2022): <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennridge-social-studies-requirement-petition-world-history-20221205.html>; Will Bunch, “Flunking Social Studies Is How America Got the Big Lie and QAnon. Don’t Make It Worse,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (December 8, 2022): <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/social-studies-civics-curriculum-government-education-20221208.html>.

eminently worth knowing about, as the Pennridge dispute emphasizes. If there are stark disagreements, they involve such historical topics as gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity. Because those are issues roiling contemporary society, it is likely that present-day conflicts are being projected upon the past.

Such disagreements in the public and political spheres demonstrate the truism that historical work is never done in isolation. Even if they could, it would probably be unwise for world historians to shut out the rancor over teaching the past and the stories they choose to write about it. But it would surely suit practitioners well to understand public sentiment away from the sensationalized headlines. The AHA/FDU history survey is a ready means to that end.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Although focusing on U.S. history, readers might take interest in the recent survey report by More in Common, *Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's National Story* (New York: More in Common, 2022). Many of its results dovetail well with the findings of the AHA/FDU survey. A column by Burkholder and Schaffer also proposes a modest solution to these problems; see "The Split in How Americans Think About Our Collective Past Is Real – But There's a Way Out of the 'History Wars'," *TIME* (April 29, 2021): <https://time.com/5972867/history-wars-survey/>.