

SUMMER 2018

Alabama Public Opinion Survey

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Summer 2018

Survey and analysis conducted by:

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Ryan Hankins, Executive Director



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 exists to provide this information.

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

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- Alabama can do better.
- Alabama's state and local governments play a vital role.
- Sound public policy requires open, transparent and responsive government.
- Sound public policy is based on fact, pursues a clear goal, and is assessed honestly.

PARCA's Areas of Focus

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama collaborated with Samford University to conduct a telephone survey of Alabama citizens between June 4 and July 18, 2018. The survey was directed by Dr. Randolph Horn and was under the field direction of Grace Okoro. The statewide survey utilized a random-digit dial sample of both landlines and cell phones provided by Survey Sampling International. The survey produced 421 completed interviews yielding a margin of error of +/- 4.78%. Responses were weighted by race, gender and age to match state demographics.

The survey addressed topics including the quality of representation in state government, and, in partnership with the Alabama Association of School Boards, questions about public education in Alabama, and, in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, questions about payday loans.

In addition to generous support from Samford University administration and staff, many students participated in the project including Kameron Atkins, Emily Beroth, Josh Chiodo, Drayton Cullen, Jessica Garcia, Jamond Glass, Sophie Goyins, Gabrielle Greene, Jordan Hanigan, Noah Herndon, Lauren Hoaglund, Maddie Hoaglund, Leonard Kawell, James Kirk, Shelby Luna, Ruth Mathews, Brittany Morgan, April Pharo, Morgan Quisenberry, Joseph Sellers, Mary Sharf, Tatianna Turrentine, Nathan Walsh, and Janey Whitney.

Public Education

EDUCATION

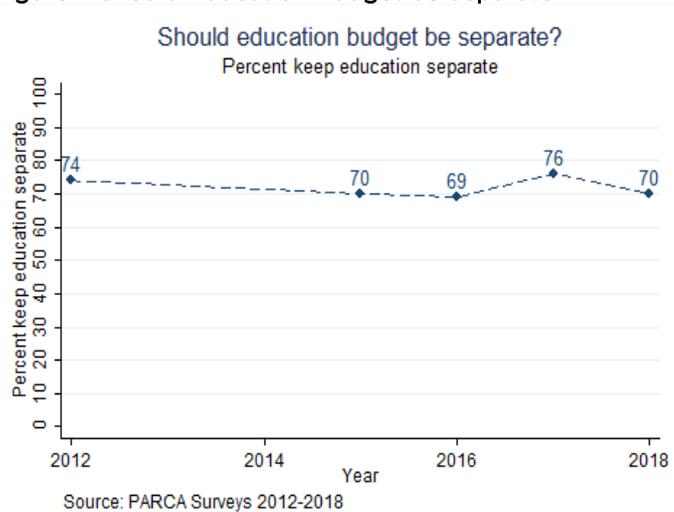
Our first questions regarded the Education Trust Fund, education funding, and school performance.

Education Funding

Combining the Education Trust Fund and General Fund Budget

We asked if the education and general fund budgets should be combined. More than two-thirds (70%) say the education budget should be kept separate. As Figure 1 shows, super majorities (a majority that is much greater than a simple majority) have held this position each time we have asked this question.

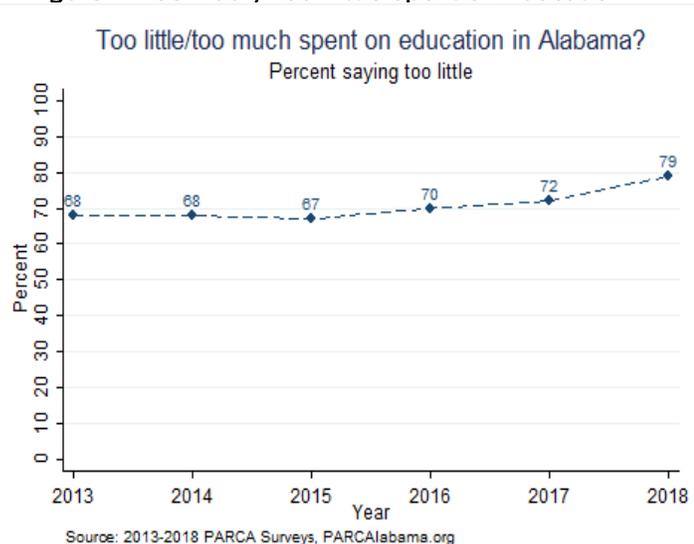
Figure 1: Should Education Budget be Separate



Adequacy of Education Funding

Similarly, when we ask if “too much, too little, or enough money is now being spent on education in Alabama,” more than three-quarters (79%) say too little is being spent. The percentage saying too little is being spent on education has been gradually increasing over the last few years.

Figure 2: Too Much/Too Little Spent on Education



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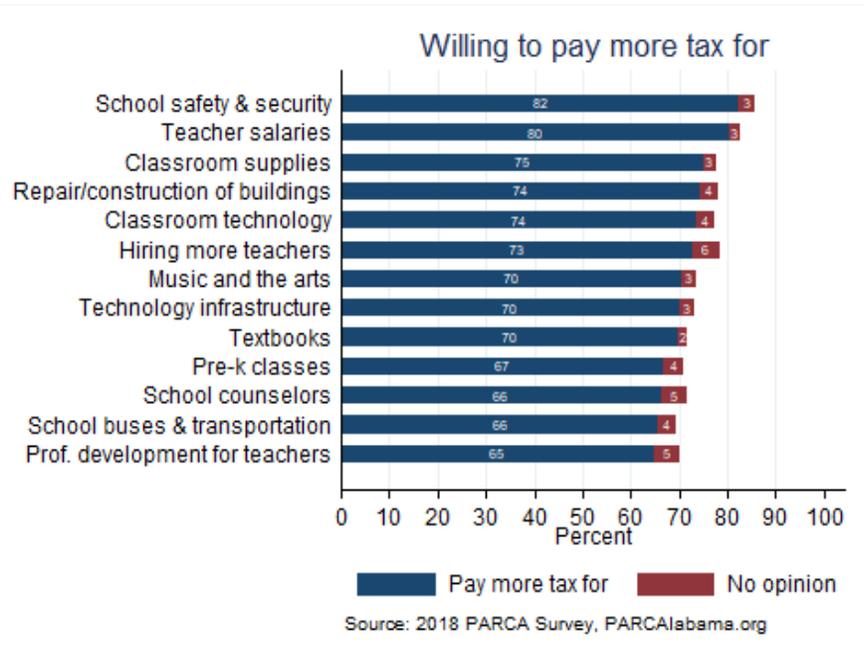
Willingness to Pay More Taxes for Specific Education Expenses

In previous years, we asked if respondents wanted to increase or decrease spending for various education priorities. This year we changed the question by asking if respondents would be

willing to pay more in taxes to increase funding for each item. On its face, this would appear to set the bar higher for respondents. Despite the change in question wording, the results were similar to previous years when majorities opted to increase spending for most items.

Large majorities, ranging from 65% to 82%, indicate a willingness to pay more taxes for these priorities.

Figure 3. Willing to Pay More for Selected Education Items



What Taxes Voters Are Willing to Increase

We then asked if respondents would be willing to pay or impose specific taxes or revenue mechanisms to pay for the education items just discussed. Of eight revenue mechanisms, none garnered a majority (see Figure 4).

There are some differences in support for different revenue mechanisms by subpopulations.

Respondents from central and north Alabama tend to be opposed to sales taxes while slight majorities of respondents in south Alabama support them. The same pattern is apparent for service taxes.

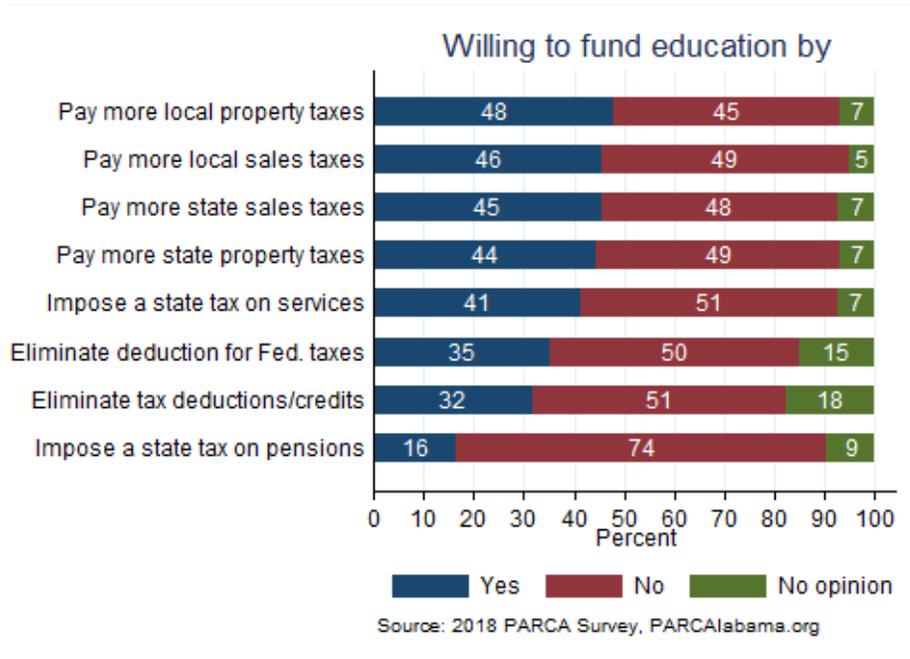
More highly educated respondents tend to be more supportive of property taxes while those with less formal education tend to oppose property tax increases.

Despite there not being majority support for any particular revenue measure,

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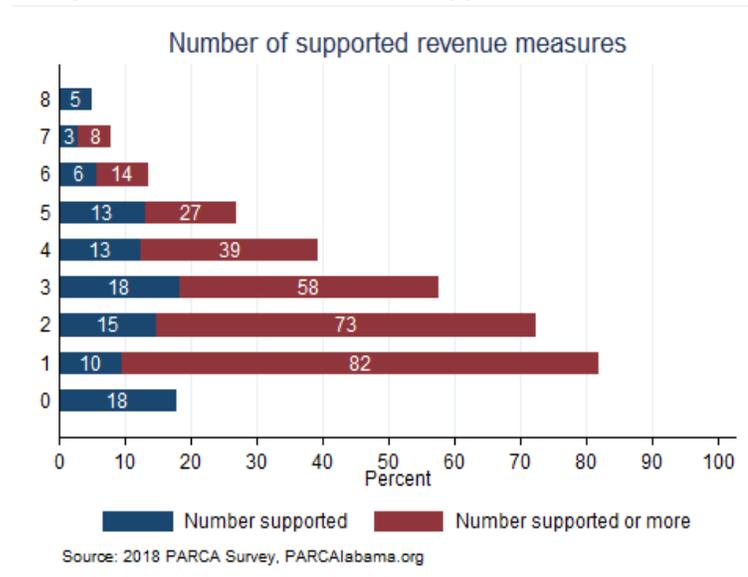
respondents did indicate a willingness to support higher taxes to fund the education items generally.

Figure 4. To Increase School Funding, Willing to...



We counted the number of revenue mechanisms (with a possible range of 0-8) supported by each respondent and tallied those counts. In Figure 5, the percentage of respondents who support each possible number of revenue measures is shown in blue and the cumulative totals are in red.

Figure 5. Revenue Mechanisms Supported



While 18% opposed all of the listed mechanisms, 82% supported one or more. On average, respondents supported three revenue mechanisms and 58% of respondents supported three or more of these measures.

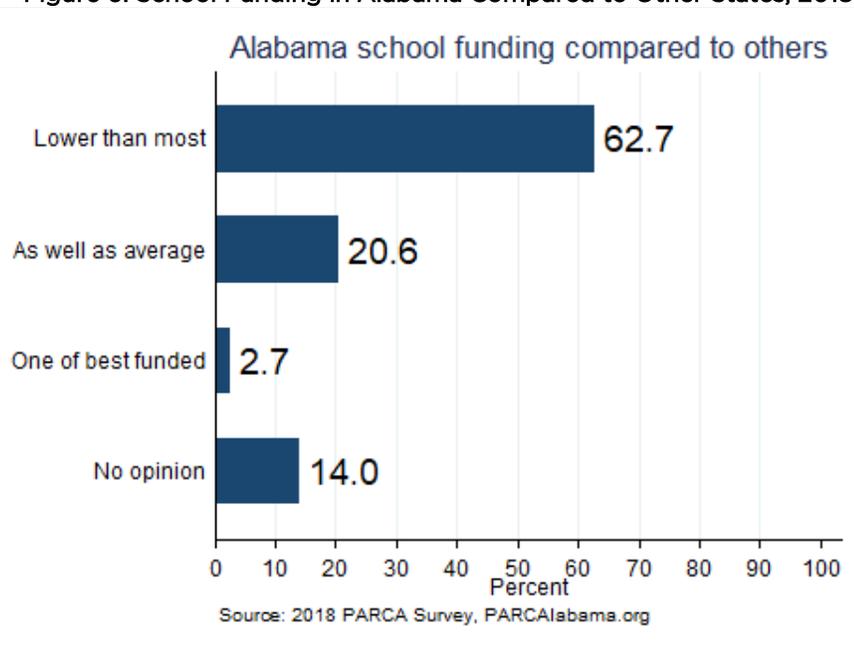
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Alabamians say education is underfunded and are willing to pay more in taxes for a variety of education priorities. A majority support three or more tax mechanisms. Still, none of the revenue mechanisms enjoys majority support. This situation poses a dilemma for state policy makers. The public perceives a problem (education underfunding) and is willing to participate in a solution (increasing revenue), but is unable to identify or agree on a way to do it.

Public School Funding Compared to Other States

We asked, “Would you say public schools in our state are funded at lower levels than schools in most states, funded as well as schools in the average state, or do we have one of the better-funded school systems in the nation?”

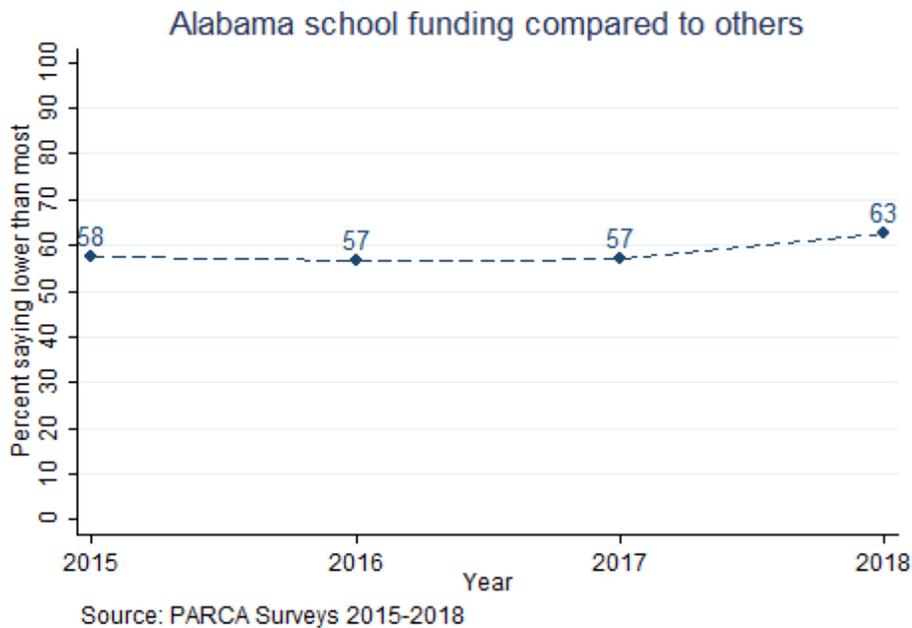
Figure 6. School Funding in Alabama Compared to Other States, 2018



About three-fifths (63%) say Alabama schools are funded at lower levels than schools in most states. Nearly three-fifths of respondents expressed this view over the previous few years (see Figure 7).

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Figure 7. Perception of School Funding in Alabama Compared to Other States, 2015 - 2018



Public School Performance

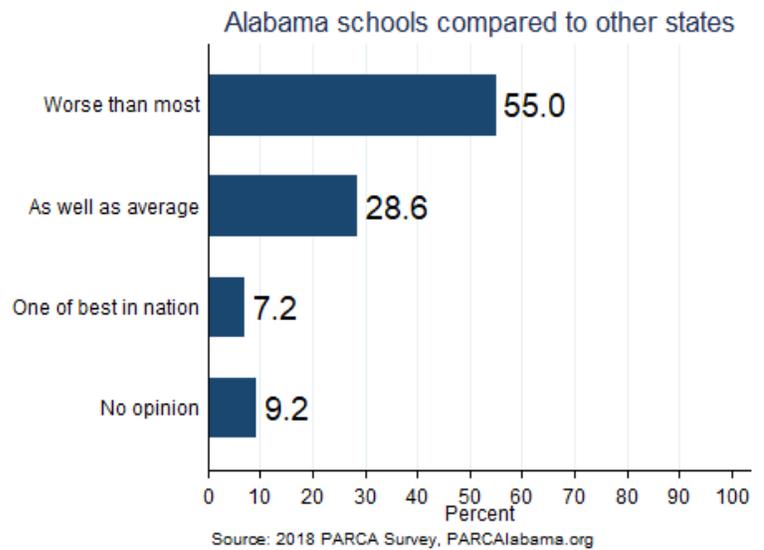
School Performance in Alabama Compared to Other States

Again this year we asked if, “public schools in our state perform worse than schools in most states, perform as well as schools in the average state, or do we have one of the better-performing school systems in the nation?”

A majority (55%) in 2018 say Alabama public schools perform worse than most. More highly educated respondents are more likely

to say Alabama schools do worse than most, as are respondents from central and south Alabama. Figure 9 shows the percentage holding that view for the last few

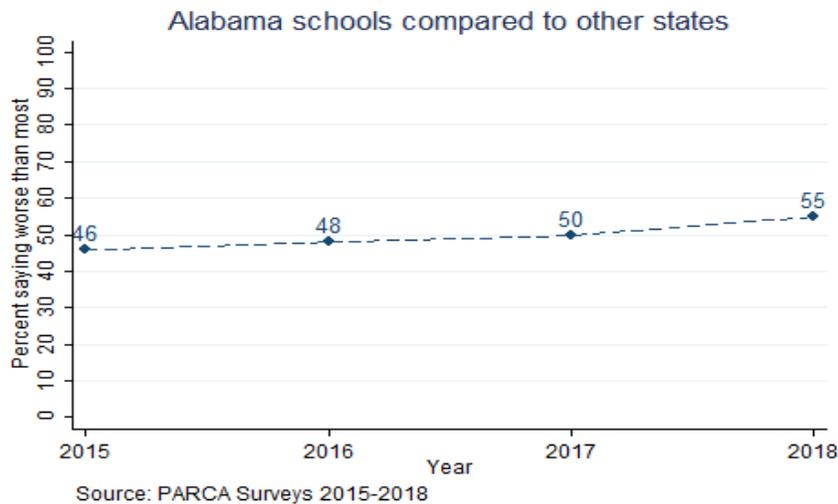
Figure 8. Perception of School Performance Compared to Other States, 2018



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years, growing from 46% in 2015 to 55% this year. It appears that the percentage saying Alabama public schools perform worse than schools in most states has been steadily, if gradually, increasing.

Figure 9. Perception of School Performance Compared to Other States, 2015 - 2018

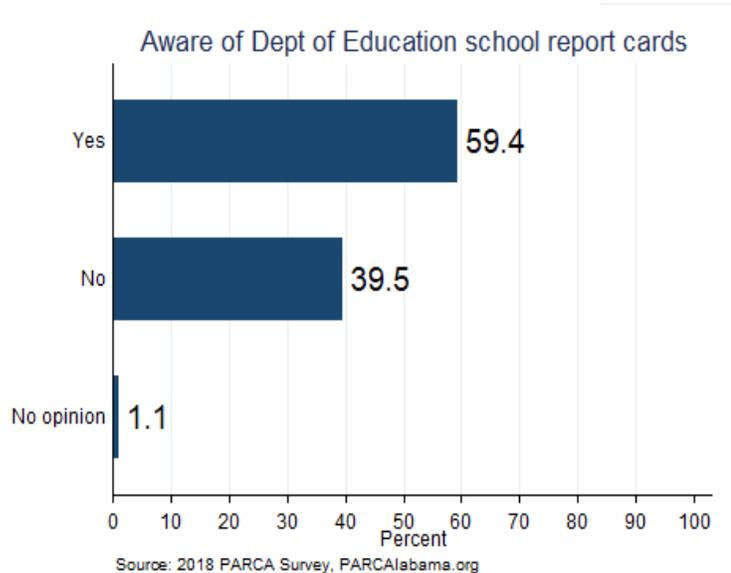


Awareness of the New School Report Cards

Starting this year the Alabama State Department of Education began issuing report cards that rate the performance of every school and every school system. We asked respondents if they were aware that their local schools had been evaluated.

Nearly three-fifths (59.4%) say that they are aware of the report cards. Higher income respondents are more likely to say they are aware, as are respondents who reported using multiple news sources.

Figure 10. Aware of School Report Cards

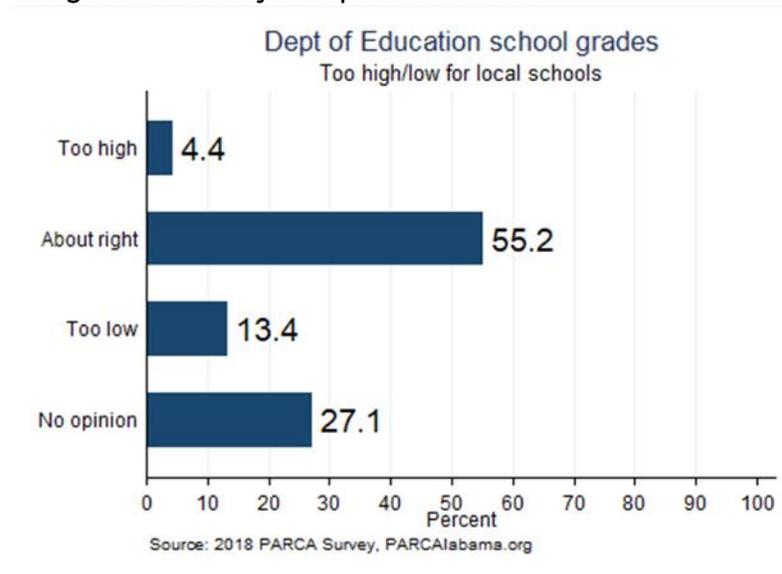


We asked a follow-up question of those who said they were aware, “Do you think the grades that schools in your area received were too high, too low, about right, or do

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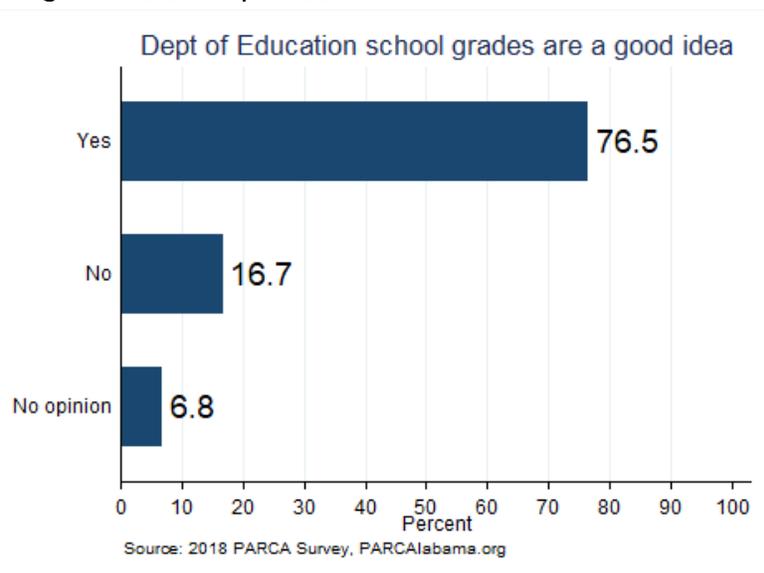
you not remember the grades?” About a quarter of respondents did not remember the grades or had no opinion, while a majority (55%) say the grades are about right.

Figure 11. Accuracy of Report Card Grades



We asked if respondents thought it was a good idea for the State Department of Education to evaluate schools and school systems this way. About three-quarters of respondents (76.5%) say yes, it is a good idea for schools to be evaluated by the state.

Figure 12. State Report Cards a Good Idea



Even though only 59% claimed to be familiar with the specific rating system, Alabamians like the idea of schools and school systems being evaluated by the State Department of Education.

Career Technical Education

Perceptions of Career Technical Education

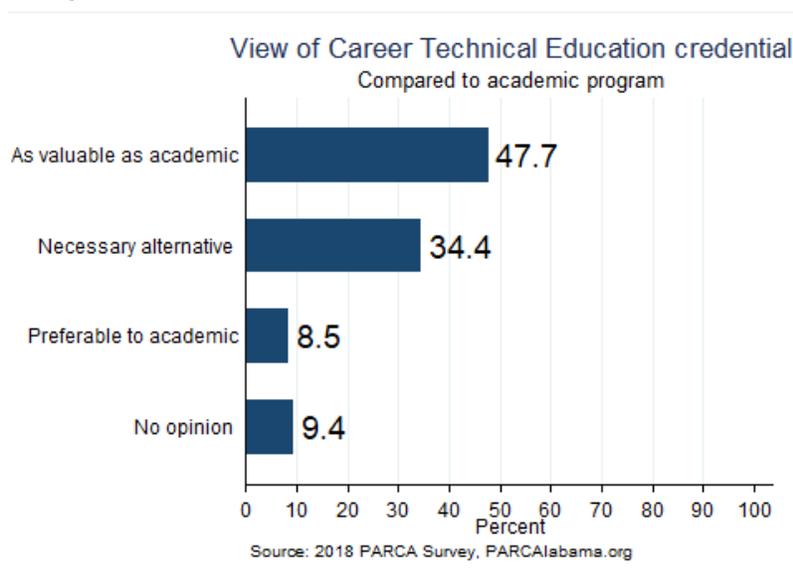
Alabama schools are placing new emphasis on career preparedness through the Career Technical Education (CTE) certification. We described the program to respondents saying, “Alabama high school students may graduate having earned a certification or credential in a Career Technical Education field and enter the workforce upon graduation.”

We then asked which of the following statements came closest to the respondent’s view of the Career Technical Education program.

1. It is just as valuable as the traditional academic program.
2. It is a necessary option for students unable to graduate under the traditional academic program.
3. It is preferable to the traditional academic program.

The order in which the statements were read was randomized for every respondent.

Figure 13. View of Career Technical Education



A substantial plurality (48%) say CTE is as valuable as the traditional academic programs, with higher income respondents being more likely to choose that statement than those with lower incomes. About a third (34%) say it is a necessary alternative to the traditional academic program.

Payday Lending

PAYDAY LENDING

In addition to questions about public education, the 2018 PARCA survey included questions addressing public policy regarding payday lending practices in Alabama.

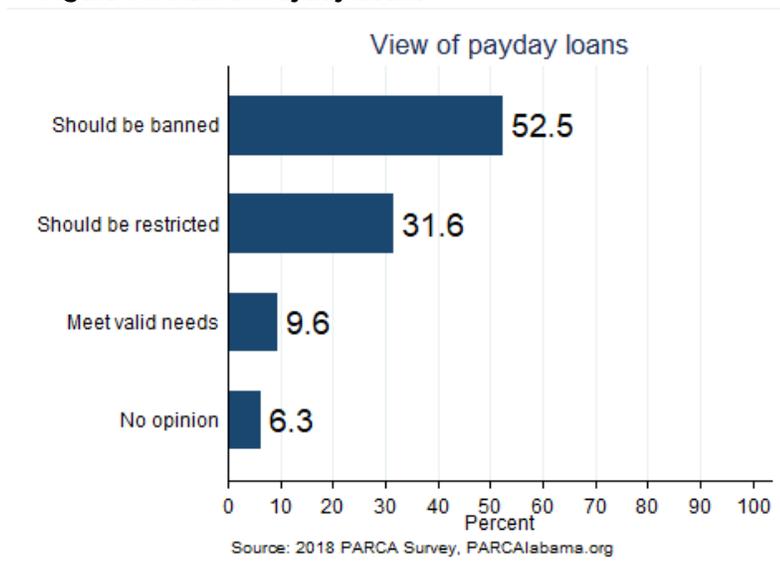
Views About Payday Loans

We read respondents three statements and asked them to select the one that best expressed their view of payday loans. The statements were presented in random order.

1. They are a debt trap for borrowers and should be banned.
2. They meet valid needs but should be restricted to prevent abusive lending practices.
3. They meet valid needs even though the interest rates are high.

Just over half (52.5%) say payday loans should be banned, while another 31.6% say they should be restricted. Majorities of every age group over 25 tended to say payday loans should be banned, while a majority of 18-24 year olds say they should be restricted. In general, the public appears open to regulation of lending practices.

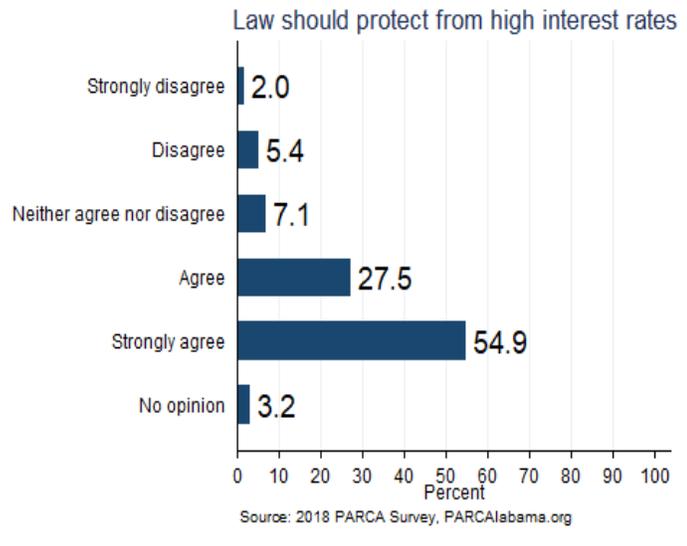
Figure 14. View of Payday Loans



Proposed Payday Lending Reforms

We asked respondents about proposals to reform payday lending, by asking them to agree or disagree with a series of statements. The first statement addresses state regulation of payday lending generally, “State law should be changed to protect Alabamians from high interest rates and runaway debt, even if it reduces the profitability of payday lending businesses.”

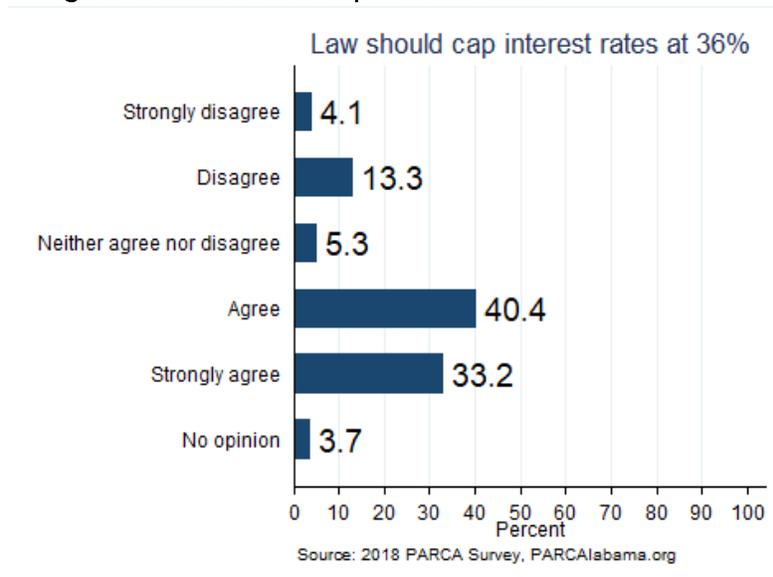
Figure 15. Should State Should Protect Borrowers from High Interest Rates



Over half of respondents strongly agree with another quarter agreeing. Overall, about 80% agree or strongly agree with the statement.

A second statement addresses the interest rates charged by payday lenders, “The Alabama legislature should pass legislation capping the maximum interest rates on payday loans at 36%.”

Figure 16. State Should Cap Interest Rates

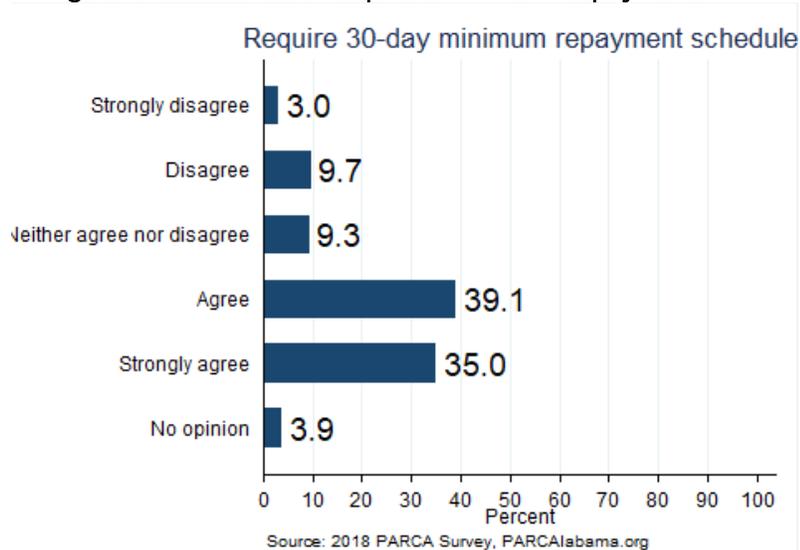


PAYDAY LENDING

About a third strongly agree and another two-fifths agree, indicating that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed support limiting interest rates on short-term loans.

A third statement addresses the repayment term for payday loans, “The Alabama legislature should pass legislation placing payday loans on a minimum 30 day repayment schedule.”

Figure 17. State Should Require a Minimum Repayment



As with the previous statement, about a third strongly agree and about three-quarters agree or strongly agree with the statement.

Correlation of Payday Loan Opinions and Political Action

Substantial majorities indicate support for these proposed reforms of payday lending practices. We wanted to see if support for the policy proposals implied political action on the part of respondents.

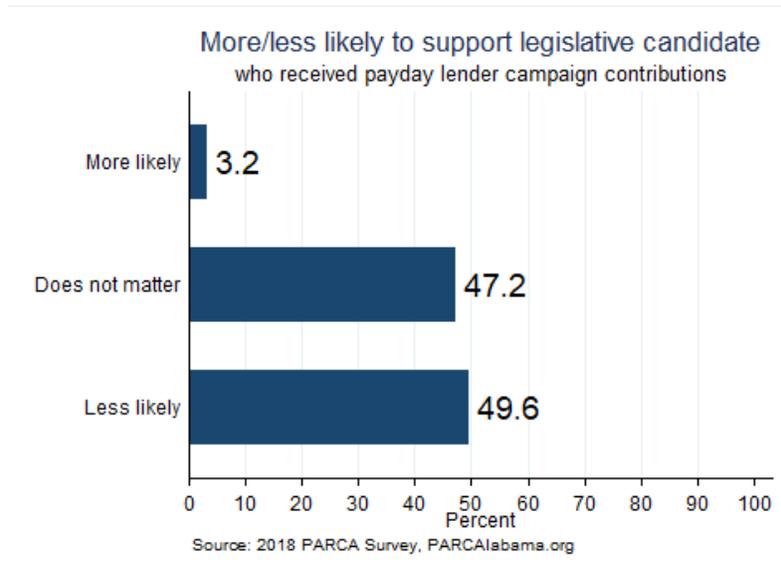
We asked if respondents would “be more or less likely to vote for a state legislative candidate who received campaign contribution from payday lenders or does it not matter to you?”

While only a few respondents (3.2%) say they would be more likely to support a candidate who received campaign contributions from payday lenders, the rest are fairly evenly divided between saying it does not matter and less likely to support such

PAYDAY LENDING

a candidate. More highly educated respondents are less likely to support candidates who receive contributions from payday lenders than those with less education.

Figure 18. Payday Lending and Political Support



News Sources

NEWS SOURCES

Sources of Alabama News

We asked respondents about their sources for Alabama news.

We asked, “Which of the following, if any, have you used in the past week as a source of Alabama news?” We then read a randomized list of potential sources that included television news programs, radio news programs, printed newspaper, websites or apps of news organizations, social media such as Facebook or Twitter, and the option to select none of these.

Figure 19. Sources of Alabama News

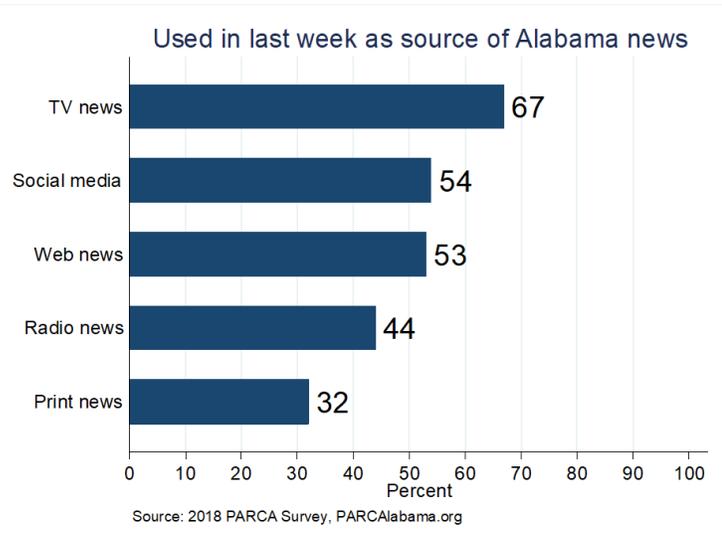
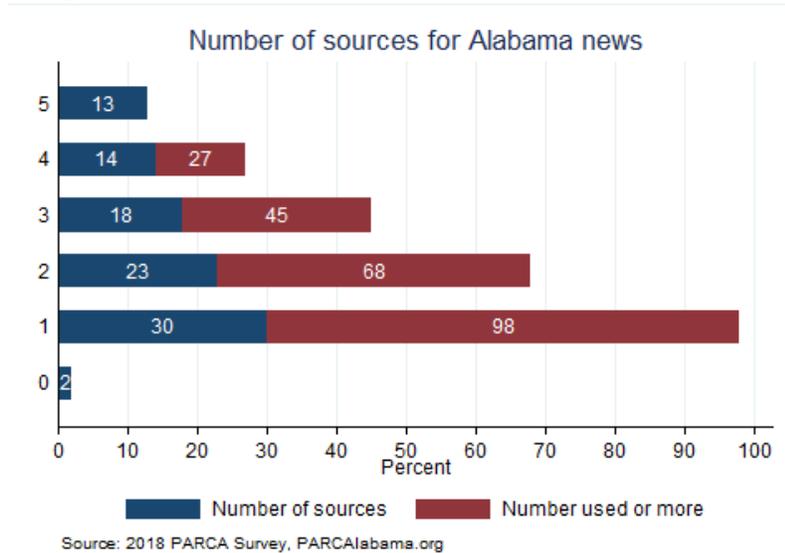


Figure 20. Number of Sources of Alabama News



About two-thirds of respondents (67%) report using television news and about half report getting Alabama news from social media or the web. Just over two-fifths (44%) report getting Alabama news from the radio and about a third report getting news from print sources.

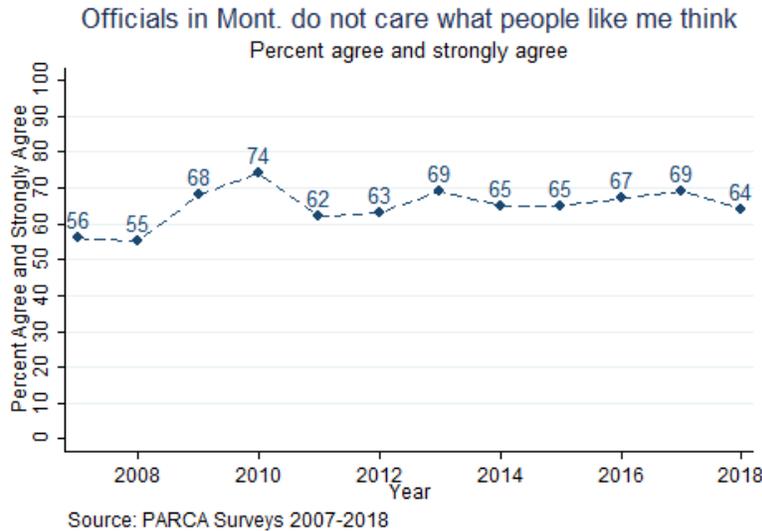
Only about two percent report using no news sources and another 30% use only one source. Sixty-eight percent report using multiple sources for Alabama news.

Public Connection to State Officials

PUBLIC CONNECTION TO STATE OFFICIALS

For each of the last 12 years, we have asked about Alabamians relationship with government officials in Montgomery with two survey questions. In the first, we ask respondents if they agree or disagree with the statement, “Government officials in Montgomery do not especially care what people like me think.” The entire trend is presented in Figure 21 below. The percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement has been in the mid-sixties for most of the last eight years. In 2018, about 64% of Alabamians agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This represents a slight decrease from the previous year, but is largely in line with the recent trend.

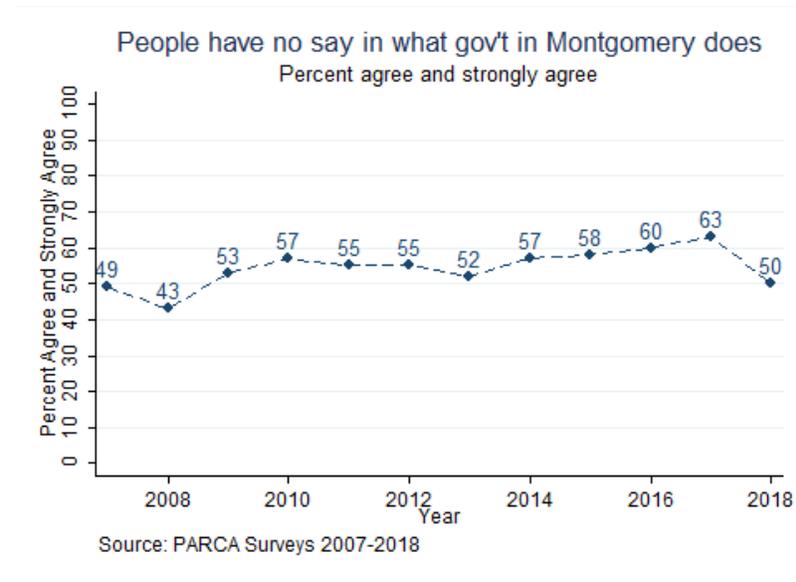
Figure 21. State Officials Do Not Care What People Like Me Think



The second way we assess the relationship between the people and office holders is by asking respondents if they agree or disagree with this statement, “People like me have no say in what the government in Montgomery does.” The trend is presented in Figure 22 below. For the previous five years the percentage saying they agree or strongly agree with the statement has been increasing, from the low fifties in 2013 to the low sixties in 2017. In 2018, the percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that people like them have no say in what the government in Montgomery does dropped sharply to 50%. While it may seem untoward to celebrate half of the state’s residents agreeing they have no say in state government, this does represent a substantial improvement over recent years.

PUBLIC CONNECTION TO STATE OFFICIALS

Figure 22. People Have No Say in What State Government Does



If not a surge in empowerment, the lower figure in 2018 at least represents a decline in disempowerment. This dramatic change begs some questions: 1) is this a true reflection of public opinion; and 2) is it durable. It is unlikely that the result is related to a problem with the poll or sampling technique. Most questions asked in multiple years on PARCA surveys show consistent results over time and when we have asked questions similar to those asked on other reputable polls we have gotten similar results. Indeed, the responses to other questions on the 2018 PARCA survey are consistent with previous years. If there were a methodological or sampling problem we would see a big difference in other questions as well. In all likelihood this is an accurate reflection of public opinion in the summer of 2018.

Whether or not the apparent decline of disempowerment is durable may be a function of its cause. Comparing the percentage who agree that people like me have no say in Montgomery to the previous years' results confirms that the effect is largely generalized across all subpopulations. For example, across every racial group, education level, or partisan stripe, the percentage agreeing with the statement decreased by similar amounts. It is possible that developments in state and national politics over the last couple of years have led to Alabamians feeling more empowered. Another explanation could be the timing of the survey. We typically conduct PARCA surveys in winter months, avoiding the hue and cry of electoral campaigns. The 2018 Survey was in the field between the June primary election and the July runoff, so perhaps the excitement of the elections had a short-term effect on the responses to this question. We will have to wait to see the results of subsequent surveys to determine if the change is a blip or a trend.

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

1. Alabamians value public education, but believe it is underfunded and underperforming. They express a willingness to pay additional taxes to shore up important educational priorities, although they disagree about what revenue mechanisms they might support to achieve those ends.
2. Consistent with tradition and past surveys, a large majority want to keep the education budget separate from the general fund.
3. There remain some signs of strain in the relationship between the public and their officials: Large majorities say that officials do not care what the people think.
4. There is some evidence the public would support increased regulation of the payday loan industry and for a substantial minority, connections to payday lender could influence vote choices in legislative elections.
5. In contrast, there is some evidence of a stronger sense of efficacy in the public's ability to influence what happens in the capitol. Only time will tell if this development is durable and if it is expressed in increased political action.

Under these circumstances, the public cannot be expected to generate policy solutions. Policy makers interested in championing these issues will need to craft policy and build support for it, and engage voters with a sense of empowerment.



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