

## Topic: Prayer in schools

### Background

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” Known as the establishment clause, this statement broadly means that the United States government can’t name any one religion as the official religion of the country.

Courts have wrestled over the years with how to interpret this clause. Some people would like to see this separation of church and state be loosened, and others think it should be absolute.

Christians make up almost two-thirds of all U.S. adults, and in recent years there have been spirited debates over whether Christian practices or symbols should be permitted in public spaces. One example of this focuses on public schools and whether teachers should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers.

### Public opinion polling says ...

Pew Research Center asked about this issue in 2021 alongside other questions about the separation of church and state.

This is what American adults said when they were asked which of two options came closer to their own views, even if neither was exactly right:

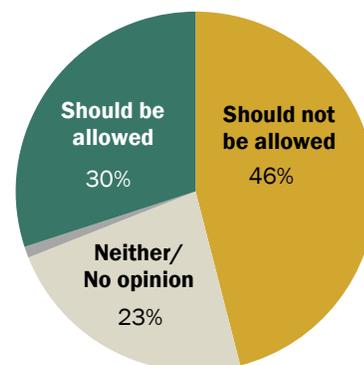
- **46%** said teachers in public schools *should not* be allowed to lead students in any kind of prayers.
- **30%** said teachers *should* be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers.
- **23%** said neither or that they had no opinion.

### Views on teachers leading Christian prayers in public schools

*Which of these statements comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right? (%)*

*Teachers in public schools **should** be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers, OR*

*Teachers in public schools **should not** be allowed to lead students in any kind of prayers*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer is shown but not labeled.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 1-7, 2021.

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### How views differ by party and age

Republicans were much more likely than Democrats to say that teachers in public schools should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers.

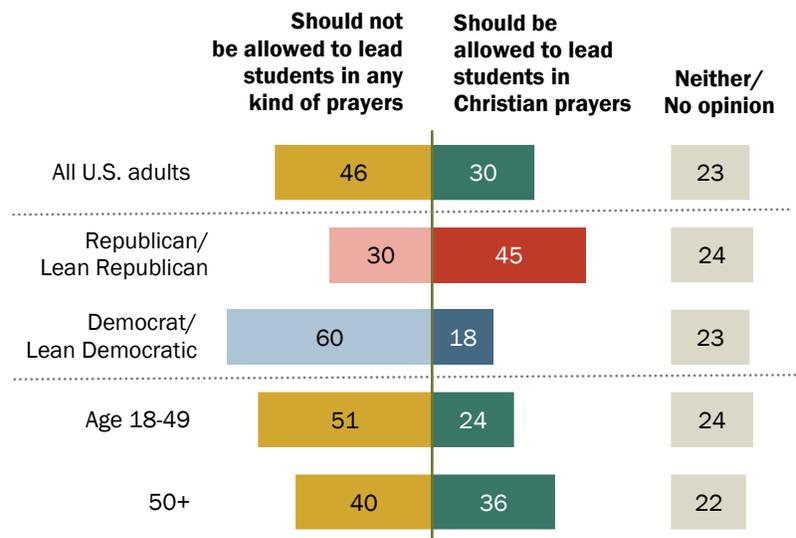
- **45%** of Republicans and independents who lean to the Republican Party said public school teachers should be allowed to do this.
- **18%** of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents said the same.

Views also differed by age. Older adults were more likely than younger adults to say teachers in public schools should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers.

### Views on teachers leading Christian prayers in public school by party ID and age

% saying each statement comes closer to their views:

Teachers in public schools ...



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 1-7, 2021.

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- **36%** of adults ages 50 and older said public school teachers should be allowed to do this.
- **24%** of adults ages 18 to 49 said public school teachers should be allowed to do this.

### What does the public say about some other church and state issues?

- **Religious symbols on public property:** In the 2021 survey, 39% of U.S. adults said cities and towns should be allowed to put religious symbols on public property. About a third (35%) said cities and towns should keep religious symbols off public property, and 26% said neither/no opinion or did not answer the question.
- **Separation of church and state:** In a 2024 survey, 55% of American adults said the federal government should enforce separation of church and state. Far fewer (16%) said the government should stop enforcing separation of church and state, while 28% said neither/no opinion.

- **Christianity as the official religion of the U.S.:** The 2024 survey also found that 13% of American adults said the federal government should declare Christianity the official religion of the U.S. An additional 44% of adults said the government should not officially declare this, but that it should promote Christian moral values. And 39% said the government should not do either of these things.

*What does polling say about related topics?*

- In a 2019 survey of American teens, 8% said they had experienced a teacher leading a class in prayer.
- In a 2022 survey of U.S. adults, 35% said the Supreme Court is friendly toward religion, while 11% said it is unfriendly and about half (51%) said it is neutral.

### Discussion questions

- Did anything about this data surprise you?
- Why do you think views on prayer in school differ by age groups?
- Do you think public opinion should influence the way courts decide issues on separation of church and state?

### Additional resources

Use this QR code to view a web version of this brief and to visit the publications below:



Findings from the [2021 survey on views on the separation of church and state](#)

More from our [2024 survey on how Americans view the strength of religion's influence in public life](#)

Views on [what people expect from the government](#), including whether they think religion and government policy should be kept separate

Read about our [2019 survey of teens and their experiences with religion at school](#)