

## Publisher's Note

### Politics, Policies, and Student Perspectives – The Impact of State Social Policies on College Choice

Shifting political landscapes, particularly at the state level, have been catching the eyes of many across American higher education of late. Some have complained that conservative voices are routinely squashed, and others have protested legislation restricting liberal priorities from abortion and reproductive rights to racial equity. Such issues, of course, are all over the media and part of wider public discourse.

All of this set us wondering, are such developments having an impact on students as they evaluate colleges and universities of interest to them? This edition of *student**POLL*** probes the question of whether or not students are ruling out specific institutions they had considered, due solely to the “politics, policies, or legal situations” prevailing in states where those schools are located; we then analyzed this data in light of our respondents’ political leanings.

What did we find? In our national survey this winter, a substantial fraction of high school seniors bound for four-year colleges as full-time students reported passing over a school they had initially considered, based exclusively on state-level political considerations. This was true across the spectrum of political ideologies (among students who identified with some level of liberal, moderate, or conservative-leaning), and across some other interesting dimensions.

We’ve been hearing from clients about everything from broad rumbles to scattered calls and emails that a student will not be coming, or coming back, because of the political climate. It appears that this is not just a squeaky-wheel phenomenon. In our increasingly polarized environment, it’s real.

In this issue of *studentPOLL* we will answer **three** main questions...

1. Who is ruling out schools based on social policies in that state?
2. Which states were excluded by students?
3. Which state social policies facilitated student decisions to rule out schools they were considering?

## Key Findings



**1 in 4 students ruled out institutions solely due to the politics, policies, or legal situation in the state where the school was located**



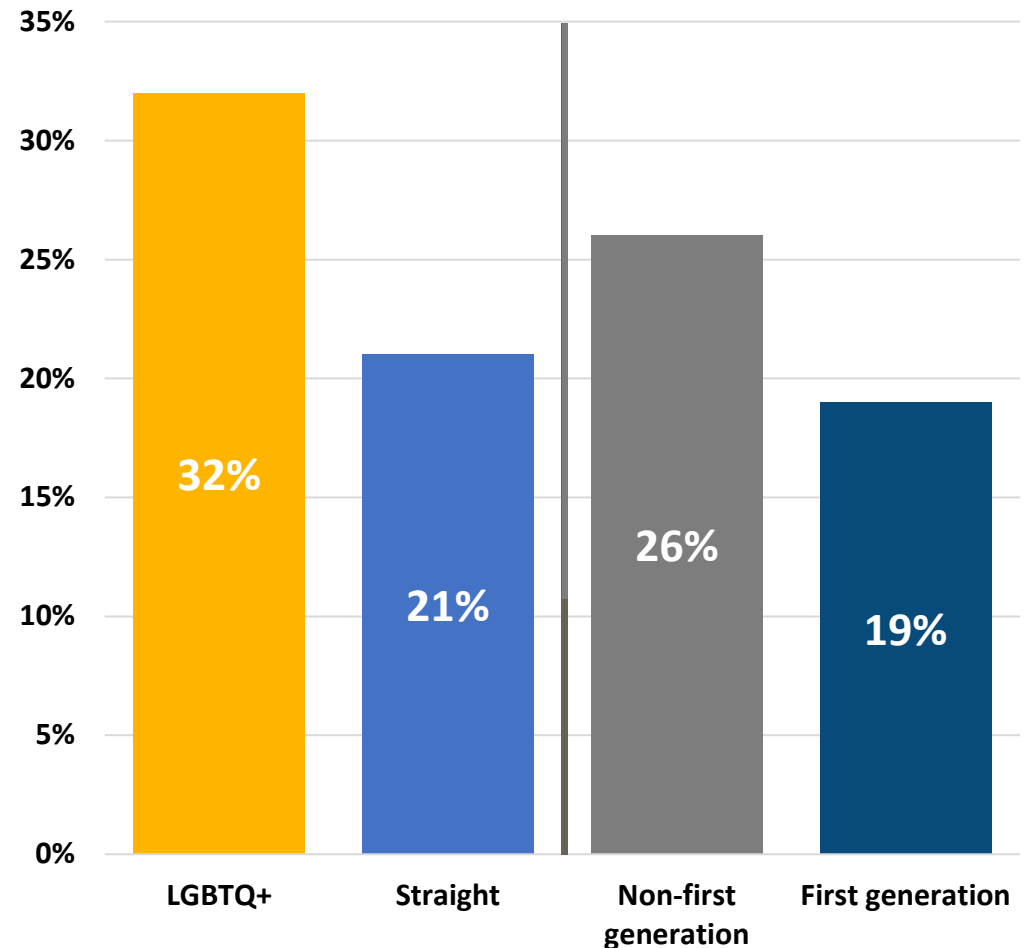
This behavior was **statistically true across liberals, moderates, and conservatives**

# Who is ruling out schools based on social policies in that state?

It is striking to us that 1 in 4 college-bound students are eliminating schools they'd been considering exclusively because of their perceptions of the political climate in the schools' states – especially since the study was fielded before legislative moves in Florida, Texas, Ohio, and other states prompted some of the most notable headlines.

Perhaps reflecting the drift toward broad political polarization in the U.S. (and elsewhere), we found that students' gender, race, household income, or region of residence did not arise as statistically significant predictors marking student comfort levels around attending a school in a state they perceive as having an undesirable political landscape. In fact, few indicators of material difference arose to provide significant distinctions regarding which subgroups of students might be likely to eliminate a school based on political considerations. The major exceptions: Students identifying as LGBTQ+ reported rejecting institutions on such grounds at substantially higher rates than students who identified as straight, and those who are non-First Gen were somewhat more likely to do so than First-Gen respondents.

**Chart 1: Notable subgroup differences in likelihood of ruling out schools in states due to social policies**



## Who is ruling out schools based on social policies in that state? (cont).

Chart 2: Political leanings of students ruling out schools due to state social policies

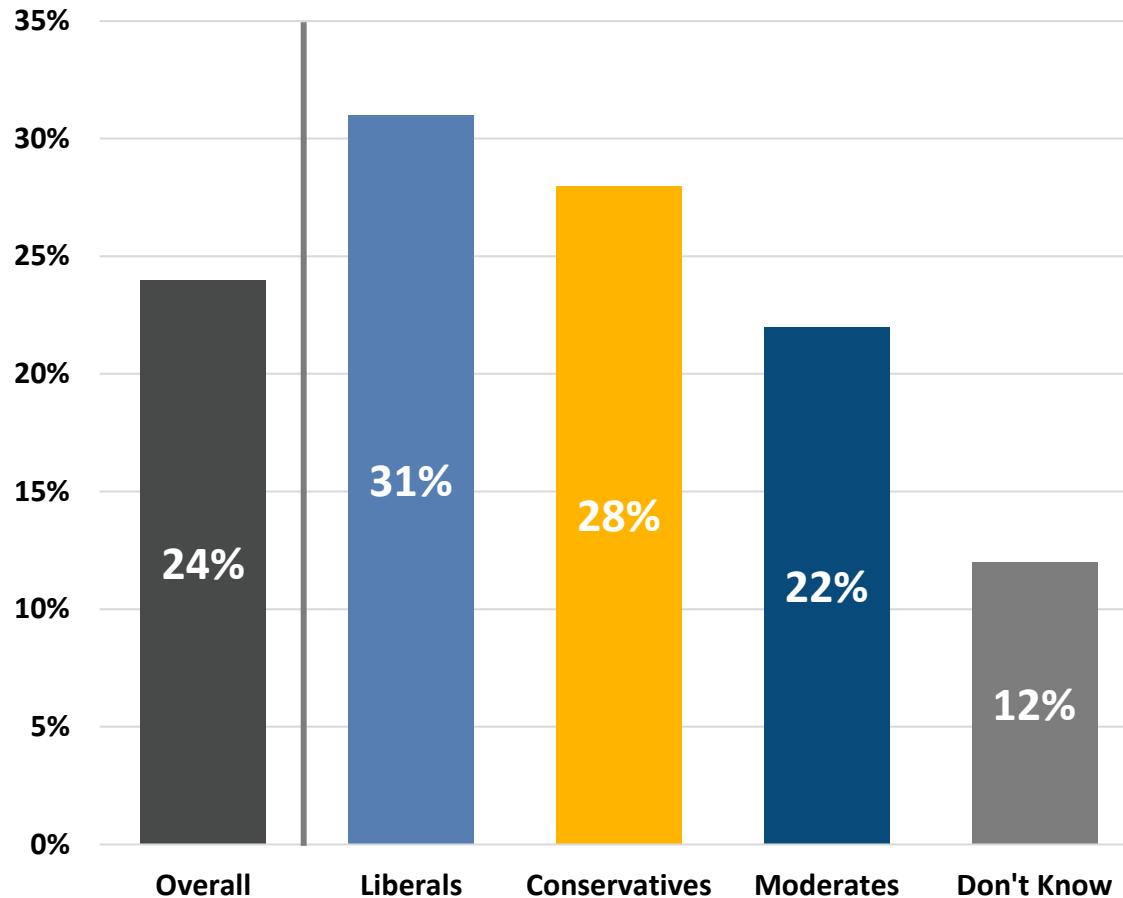
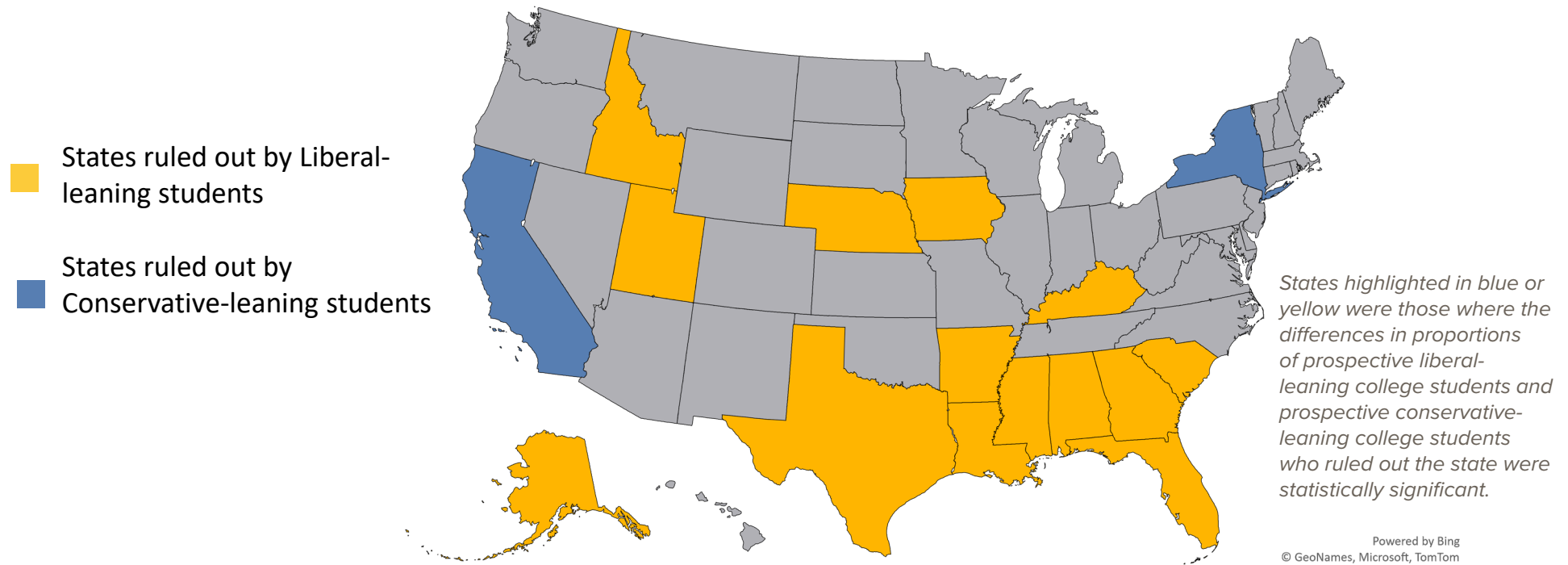


Chart 2 Note: Liberals, conservatives, and moderates are not statistically significantly different from one another; however, they are different from those who Don't Know their political affiliation.

Possibly the most interesting subgroup difference is the lack of a difference: In our research, students who identify as conservatives are about as likely to reject an institution on politically charged grounds overall as are students who classify themselves as liberals. Indeed, for those intent on generationally derived behavioral explanations, our study suggests that “snowflake” students may exist on both the conservative and liberal sides of the aisle, with the phenomenon of ruling out an institution being cited by around 30% of both liberals and conservatives. Interestingly, while perhaps trending a little lower, a statistically similar proportion of politically moderate students also bypassed a college or university given their perceptions of political developments in the state the institution calls home.

## Which states were excluded by students?



Overall, the states most likely to be marked off student lists? No surprise here: **Alabama, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida**. While liberal-leaning students more often mentioned excluding a school located in the **South or Midwest**, conservative-leaning students were likely to strike either **California or New York** off their college lists.

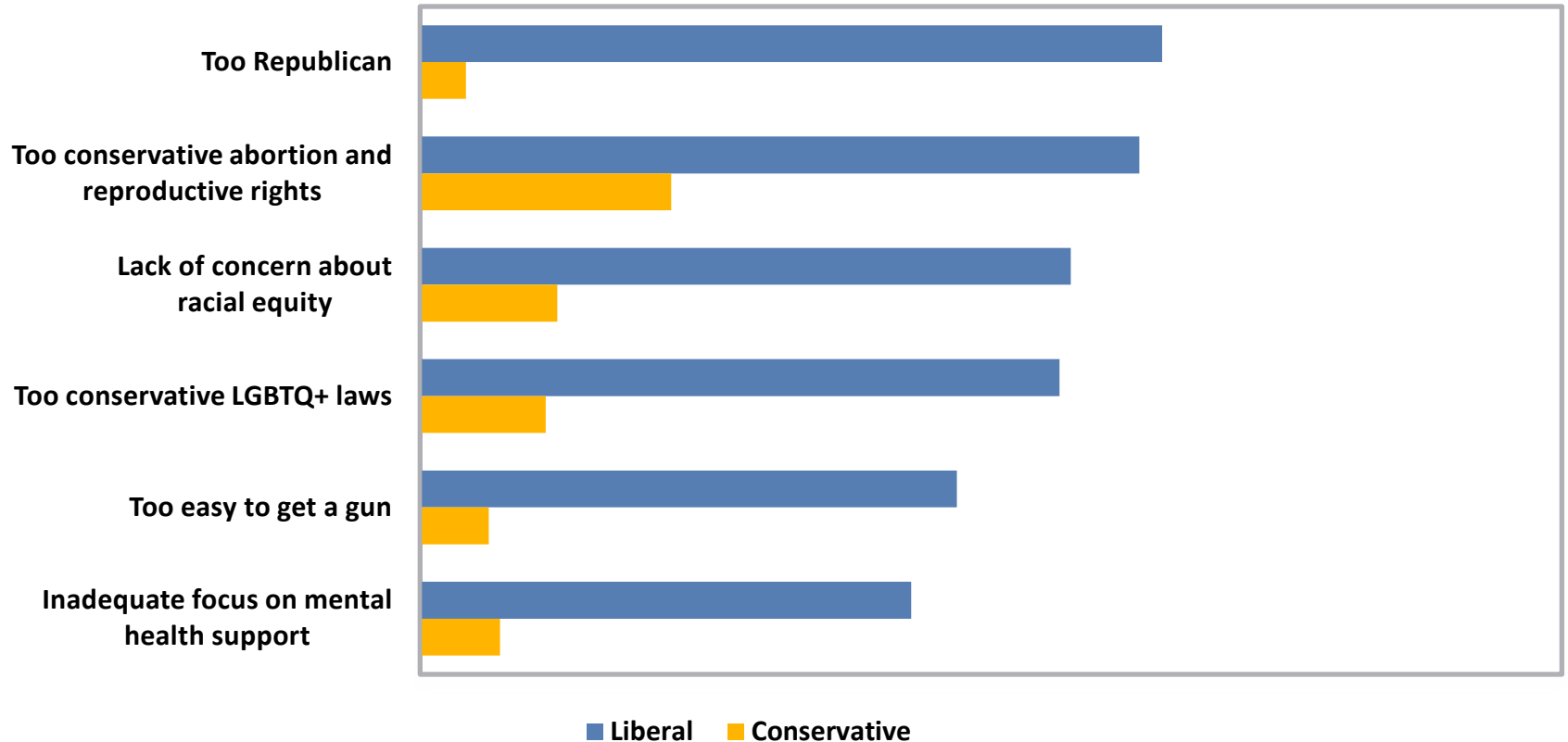
Given that the majority of college-bound students in the U.S. attend a school within their home state, we wanted to further investigate the effect that state-level politics might be having on prospective student markets closest to hand.

Among the quarter of students who ruled out a school in our survey, about a third (32%) passed over schools in their home state on the basis of a political or legal situation they found unacceptable. Interestingly, students who identified as Republican were significantly more likely to make that decision than were self-identified Democrats. While we don't know for sure, this might make the most sense if many Republican students live in politically-blue states, which tend to be heavily populated.

# Which state social policies helped student rule out schools they were considering?

Overall, the most commonly mentioned reasons cited among liberal-leaning students who ruled out schools in those states include those listed in the below chart:

Chart 3: Reasons most often cited by liberal-leaning students for ruling out a school in a state



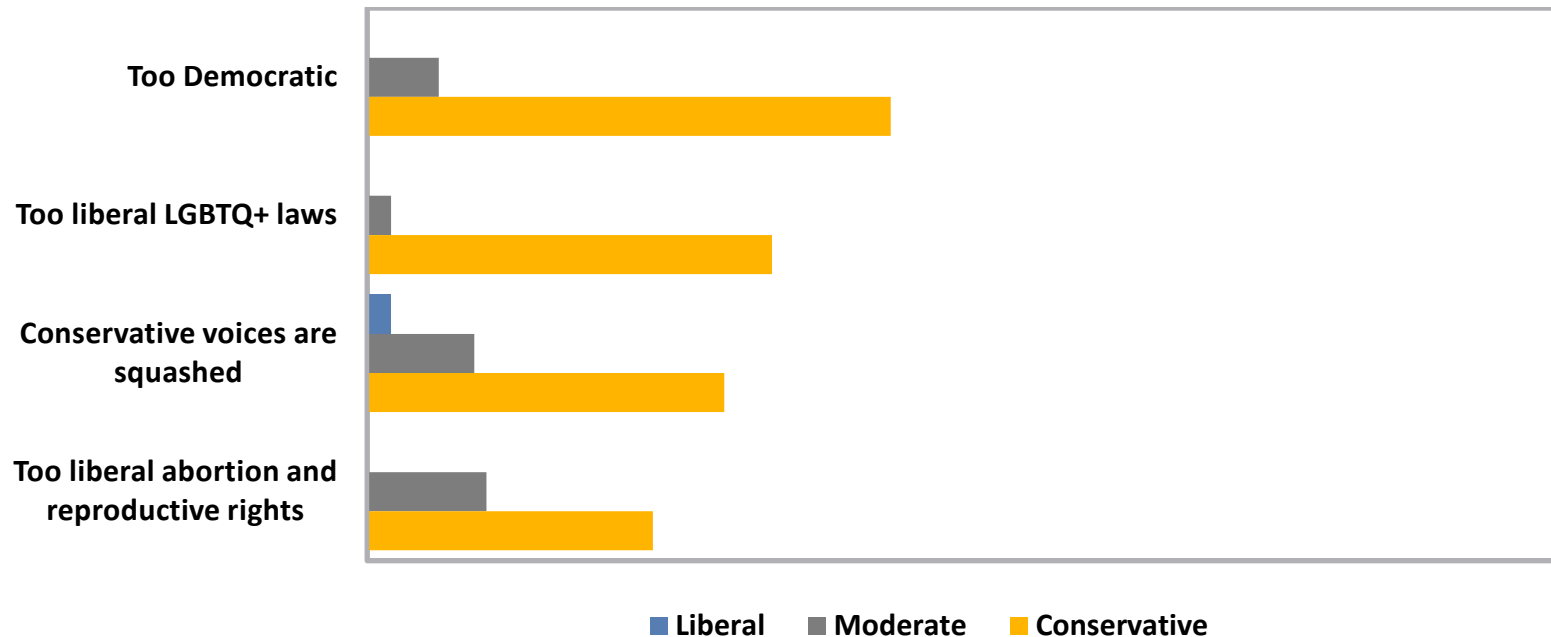
There are, however, intriguing distinctions to be drawn where students of one or another political persuasion identify and conceptualize the issues that factor most highly into their decision-making in this arena. Overall, we found that liberal-leaning students were more likely to be specific and consistently motivated by particular issues when ruling out schools.

While most included a broad sense that a state was “too Republican,” more than half of liberal students ruling out schools also cited abortion access and reproductive rights, racial equity concerns, and inclusive lawmaking of LGBTQ+ people. Two further issues were raised by nearly half: perceptions that a state made it “too easy to get a gun”; or identifying a state as having an “inadequate focus on mental health support.”

## Which state social policies helped student rule out schools they were considering? (cont).

This leads us to conjecture that liberal-leaning students ruling out schools in our study tend to be animated largely by specific issues that affect individuals on a personal level, while their conservative peers tend to identify areas of significant, but more generalized, concern. When it came to eliminating a college or university located in a politically contentious state environment, smaller proportions (a quarter to less than half) of conservatives doing so cited the reasons listed in the below chart:

Chart 4: Reasons most often cited by conservative students for ruling out a school in a state



Intriguingly, on this final issue, a significant portion of conservative-leaning students also reacted negatively to “too conservative abortion and reproductive rights,” apparently mirroring national polling results indicating general affirmation of reproductive rights.

Likewise capturing a different kind of concurrence across the political spectrum: about one-third of both liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning students registered apprehension around the practice of free speech on campus, assuming that voices like theirs politically might be squashed at colleges or universities located in certain states.



## Conclusion

All this leads us to conclude that many prospective students are paying attention to political issues, be they general, longstanding perceptions and/or new and particular initiatives, and that is manifesting in the decisions of about a quarter of them to eliminate specific colleges and universities from their consideration sets. Liberal-leaning students are more likely to see an array of specific priorities playing out alarmingly in many states throughout the South and Midwest. Conservatives seem focused on a broader context and a more limited number of particular political issues.

With political polarization on the rise, and all regions set to see declines in the number of high school graduates in coming years, lawmakers and campus administrators would do well to take student convictions into account as political change-making continues to infiltrate campus life. And importantly, as the regional student markets shift, institutions will likely need to pay particular attention to their individual and distinctive positioning in order to attract students in their market despite challenges posed by state social policies.

## Study Methodology

The findings in this issue of *studentPOLL* are based on survey research fielded January and February 2023. Interviews were completed with 1,865 domestic high school seniors, 778 of whom intended at that point to attend a four-year institution as a full-time student next fall.

Respondents were 62% female and 62% white. The average reported household income was around \$93,000. Responses are weighted by income, race, region, and gender so that findings represent the larger domestic college-going population. The margin of error for this population of students is plus or minus 3.5%.

## About *student***POLL**

The publication by Art & Science Group, LLC, *student**POLL***, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *student**POLL*** seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *student**POLL*** has become a trusted and widely cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. *student**POLL*** findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

## About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group offers market-informed strategy to higher education, independent schools and the non-profit sector. Since our founding in 1994, we have provided our clients with strategic market research and recommendations, built on a foundation of both creative thinking and empirical rigor — art and science. We work in a variety of arenas, leveraging a foundation of market data, analysis and inventive ideas, to guide and advance our institution's strategic interests and critical investments. Our firm is dedicated to helping each institution position itself in ways that positively affect the decisions of its key constituents — whether to apply, matriculate, give and so on — in an institution's favor. We provide a customized and collaborative approach for each client, with recommendations rooted in sophisticated research and thorough analysis. Our experienced consultants and researchers produce the highest quality findings and recommendations on the market.