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Research Report

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Policies Restricting Teaching About Race and Gender Spill Over into Other States and Localities

Findings from the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey

Over the past three years, public debates around whether and how teachers should discuss topics related to race and gender in the classroom have turned classrooms into political battlegrounds. Beginning in April 2021 and as of January 2023, 18 states had passed policies focused on restricting the content of teachers' instruction. Many of these state policies restrict teachers' instruction around "divisive concepts" related to race and gender, such as the notion that "one race or sex is inherently superior to another" or that "the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist" (Trump, 2020; see also Schwartz, 2021; Schwartz, 2023). Some state restrictions also explicitly specify other social identities, such as religion or national origin; prohibit instruction about critical race theory, gender identity, and sexual orientation; contain stipulations about how teachers can discuss current events or controversial topics; or limit teachers' ability to engage students in "political activism or advocacy" (Schwartz, 2021a; see also PEN America, undated).

About 36 percent of teachers nationally teach in one of these 18 states and, thus, are subject to such a restriction (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Our prior work found that these policies were already affecting the decisions of teachers in these states: By spring 2022, 28 percent of teachers who taught in a state that had enacted such a restriction said that these restrictions influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to some extent (Woo et al., 2023). Furthermore, many teachers in these states reported feeling hesitant to address topics related to race; gender; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning,

KEY FINDINGS

- Two-thirds of U.S. K–12 public school teachers have decided on their own to limit instruction about political and social issues in the classroom. The state and local policy context and the local political climate were associated with teachers' decisions to do so.
- About one-third of teachers reside in one of the 18 states that have passed restrictions on how teachers can talk about race and gender in the classroom, but roughly one-half of teachers reported that they are subject to state restrictions, local restrictions set by school or district leaders, or both.
- Local restrictions limiting how teachers talk about political and social issues were strongly associated with teachers' decisions about whether to discuss these issues in their classrooms. Regardless of the presence of state restrictions, more than 80 percent of teachers who said that they were subject to local restrictions decided on their own to limit classroom discussions about political and social issues.
- State and local restrictions appear to influence teachers' decisionmaking *even in places where restrictions were not in place*: 55 percent of teachers who were not subject to any state or local restrictions decided to limit instruction about political and social issues.
- The local political climate was also related to teachers' decisions. Teachers who were not subject to any state or local restrictions were more likely to limit classroom discussions of social and political issues if they worked in more–politically conservative communities.
- Regardless of the presence or type of restriction, teachers said that they limited their instruction because they were afraid of upsetting parents and felt uncertain about whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns. Where teachers were not subject to any restrictions, lack of guidance from school or district leaders was another key reason that they limited their instruction. Where teachers were subject to local restrictions, fear of losing their teaching jobs or licenses also drove their decisions.

and other (LGBTQ+) issues in the classroom (Woo et al., 2023). These findings are unsurprising because it is expected that such policies would influence the actions of teachers subject to them.

In the 2023 State of the American Teacher (SoT) survey, 65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class (Doan et al., 2023). This is nearly double the share of teachers in states that have enacted policies that explicitly restrict discussion of certain topics in classrooms. This finding raises the question of why the share of teachers who have decided to limit their instruction exceeds the share of teachers who teach in states where they have been explicitly directed to do so.

As we discuss in detail throughout this report, we interpret this finding as an indication that the impact of these state restrictions is spilling over into places where no such restrictions are in place. That is, we suspect that teachers who are *not* subject to such state-level restrictions are nevertheless experiencing the consequences of these policies and adjusting their instruction accordingly. Drawing on prior research (Pollock et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2023), we hypothesize that this spillover likely happens in one of two ways:

1. *Local school systems pass their own policies that restrict teachers' instruction.* That is, school or school system leaders enact their own policies or issue guidance restricting how teachers can discuss political and social topics in the classroom. These local policies might be enacted in states that do not have state-level restrictions and in states that do. Thus, in states that have not passed state-level restrictions, these local policies might create teaching conditions that are similar to those in states that have enacted restrictions. In states that have passed state-level restrictions, the presence of local restrictions might compound or heighten the effect of state-level restrictions on teachers' instruction.

2. *Teachers decide, on their own, to omit certain topics in their classroom discussions above and beyond what state and local policies require them to do.* For various reasons (e.g., fear of upsetting parents, uncertainty about what they can safely discuss in class, knowledge that teachers elsewhere have been disciplined for engaging in specific discussions), teachers might shy away from discussing political and social topics with their students, even if there are no policies requiring that they do so. Thus, teachers' own decisionmaking might effectively reproduce the effects of such restrictions even absent such restrictions. In addition, when teaching in an environment that is hostile toward classroom discussions of political and social issues, teachers might also interpret restrictions broadly and modify their instruction to exclude additional issues—such as gun safety regulations, climate change, or social and emotional learning—that are not specified in restrictions. (Woo et al., 2023).

We hypothesize that two conditions—the state and local policy context and the local political climate—drive teachers' likelihood of deciding on their own to omit certain discussions and thus contribute to spillover.

First, there is the state and local policy context. States set an initial policy condition, either restricting teachers' instruction of certain topics or not. Local education leaders, such as principals or district administrators, might craft policies at the school or school district level that layer on top of state policies. These locally enacted policies might reinforce (or push against) state policies. Taken together, the state and local policies to which a teacher is subject create a specific teaching environment, which has consequences for whether teachers feel supported to engage in instruction about political and social topics.

Second, prevailing local political views and the extent of local parental support might also be related to how comfortable teachers feel to discuss political and social issues in class. Republicans are far less likely than Democrats to support instruction around an array of political and social topics, including immigration, voting rights, racial and income inequality, and especially issues relating to the LGBTQ+ community (such as gender identity, gay rights, or trans rights[1]) (Polikoff et al., 2022; Turner, 2023), although about half of Republicans also oppose state restrictions on books and instructional content (Turner, 2023). In sum, the local political climate—especially in combination with the state and local policy context—could plausibly be associated with teachers' decisions about whether and how to teach about political and social topics in their classrooms.

In the 2023 State of the American Teacher survey, 65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class.

In this report, we investigate the answers to two research questions, which correspond to our conceptualization of spillover:

1. How many teachers report being subject to locally enacted restrictions, and how many of these teachers live in states that have not enacted state-level restrictions?
2. To what extent are the state and local policy context and local political climate associated with teachers' decisions about whether to engage in classroom discussions about political and social issues?

[1] We use the terms *gay rights* and *trans rights* in alignment with Polikoff et al., 2022. By *gay rights*, we mean rights for people with marginalized sexual orientations, and by *trans rights*, we mean rights for people with marginalized gender identities.

We Surveyed Teachers in January 2023 and Examined Their Responses by Policy Context and Local Political Climate

We use data from the 2023 SoT survey, which is a nationally representative survey of 1,439 K–12 teachers (Doan, Steiner, and Woo, 2023) that was administered from January 11, 2023, to February 10, 2023.

We examined the extent to which teachers' survey responses about their instructional decisions varied by their *policy context* and *local political climate*. To determine teachers' policy contexts and local political climates, we used the location of the school in which the teacher teaches.

We defined two dimensions of *policy context*, one at the state level and one at the local level:

- We defined teachers as *subject to a state restriction* if they resided in a state that had enacted at least one restriction on how teachers could discuss topics related to race or gender by January 2023. These 18 states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. (To learn more about state restrictions, see Schwartz, 2023, and PEN America, undated.)
- We defined teachers as *subject to a local restriction* if they responded "Yes" to the survey question, "Have your school or district leaders ever directed you to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" Teachers were also able to respond "No" or "I don't know." Although we did not specify when teachers experienced these local restrictions, as we explain in more detail later in this report, we interpret teachers' responses as indicating whether they were subject to a local restriction at the time of survey administration.

We used election results data to construct a measure of the *local political climate*. Prior research suggests that beliefs about whether and how teachers should address political and social topics in their classrooms vary widely by political party (Hatfield, 2023; Polikoff et al., 2022). Thus, we use this measure as a proxy for local public support for discussions about political and social topics in the classroom. In our analyses, we used a continuous measure of the share of votes received by President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election in the county where the respondent's school is located.

Unless otherwise noted, we discuss only differences that are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. We test the robustness of significant differences to adjust for observable school-level characteristics (school poverty level, school racial and ethnic composition, school locale, school grade level) and teacher characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience). These regression analyses are useful for understanding drivers of differences, but we do not present regression-adjusted statistics for ease of interpretation. Additionally, it is possible that many other factors unmeasured by this survey, such as teachers' political affiliation or attitudes, could have played roles in the differences across educator subgroups that we observe. Our results are strictly descriptive and do not describe causal relationships. Our findings are intended to highlight differences in reported experiences across groups of teachers and encourage additional research on the sources and causes of these differences.

Our research is subject to several limitations. First, we base teachers' state policy context on the state in which they teach. However, we lack data on whether teachers were aware of their state's restrictions. Prior research shows that about two-thirds of teachers who were subject to state restrictions did not know that they were subject to such restrictions, although very few teachers who were not subject to state restrictions believed they were (Woo et al., 2023). Second, we rely on teachers' reports of their local restrictions, which we are unable to independently verify. To our knowledge, no comprehensive reporting of school systems' restrictions exists (although some data are available in the CRT Forward Tracking Project [CRT Forward, undated]). Third, we do not know the content of any local directives to teachers to limit classroom conversations about political and social issues or when these

local directives were communicated to teachers. Fourth, we do not know specifically what teachers did in their classrooms when they responded that they decided on their own to limit their instruction of political and social issues or when they made those decisions. However, given recent qualitative research demonstrating that teachers *are* limiting their instruction around political and social issues in response to recently enacted state restrictions and direction from their local leaders (Woo et al., 2023), we interpret teachers' responses as indicating that they are referencing recent or current local directives and instructional choices.

More details about our data and analysis can be found in the "How This Analysis Was Conducted" box, and more details about research limitations can be found in the "Research Limitations" section; both are at the end of this report. We provide the full set of SoT survey responses in our technical documentation (Doan, Steiner, and Woo, 2023). This report contains recycled text from the SoT 2023 technical documentation and survey results and other reports in the SoT series; the descriptions of the SoT content, survey administration, and methods are nearly identical to descriptions in Steiner, Woo, and Doan, 2023.

How We Interpreted Our Survey Item About Teachers' Instructional Decisions

To determine whether teachers were limiting discussions about political and social issues, we asked them, "Have you ever decided on your own, without being directed by school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" Teachers were able to respond "No," "Yes," or "I don't know." Although state restrictions have generally focused on race and gender, we asked teachers about limiting discussions of political and social issues because prior research revealed that many teachers have adjusted their instruction around a broader array of political and social topics beyond those mentioned in state legislation (Woo et al., 2023).

We recognize that, when teachers reported that they decided on their own to limit their instruction about political and social issues, the interpretation of teachers' survey responses might differ depending on teachers' policy context:

- **Where teachers were not subject to any state or local restrictions, we interpreted a "Yes" response as an indication that teachers limited their instruction about political and social issues without any guidance from state or local leaders.** In the absence of state or local restrictions, teachers might instead receive signals about whether and how to teach about political and social issues from other aspects of their environment, such as their local political climate.
- **Where teachers were subject to a state or local restriction, we interpreted a "Yes" response as an indication that teachers limited their instruction about political and social issues beyond what was required by such restrictions.** We hypothesized that the presence of state or local restrictions might signal to teachers that their teaching environment is less receptive to instruction about political and social topics. Therefore, teachers might limit their instruction above and beyond the requirements specified in restrictions—perhaps to avoid any pushback from parents and school system leaders, or to avoid the appearance of noncompliance, or even because they were unclear on what topics were covered by restrictions (Woo et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2022).
  - For instance, a restriction might prohibit teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ issues only, but a teacher might then decide on their own to limit discussions of other political or social topics, such as climate change or abortion rights.
  - As another example, a teacher might work in a state that prohibits instruction around "divisive concepts" related to race (Trump, 2020). If the teacher has difficulty determining what instructional content constitutes a violation of the state restriction, they might decide on their own not to discuss historical figures of color or civil rights.

Half of Teachers Nationally Were Subject to a State or Local Restriction; Teachers in States *Without* Restrictions Were Just as Likely as Those in States *With* Them to Report That They Were Subject to Local Restrictions

To examine the intersection between the state and local policy context, we categorized teachers into four policy contexts: (1) teachers not subject to any state or local restrictions, (2) teachers subject to only state restrictions, (3) teachers subject to only local restrictions, and (4) teachers subject to both state and local restrictions. There were also some teachers—15 percent—who were not sure whether they were subject to local restrictions and, therefore, could not be categorized into one of the four groups above.

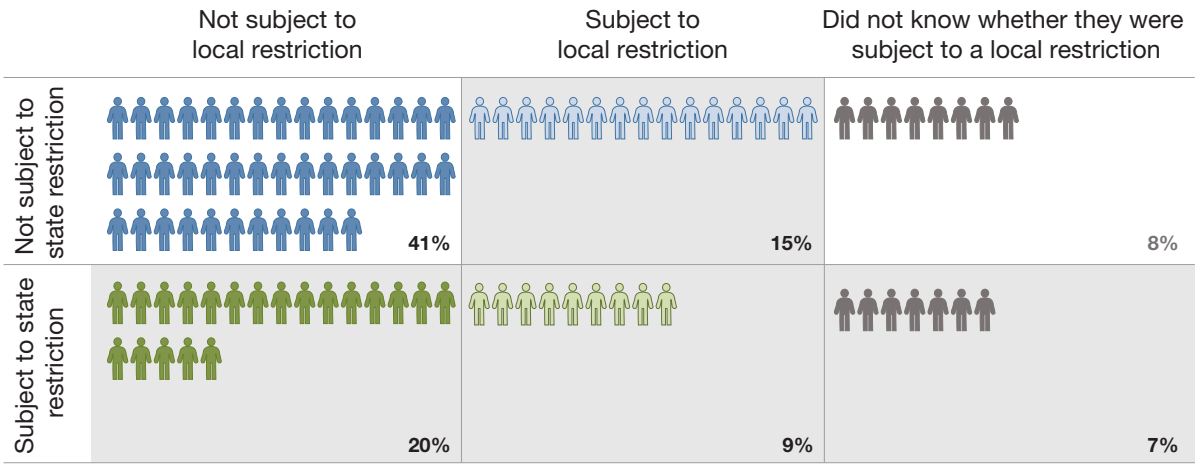
As shown in Figure 1, 51 percent of teachers nationally were subject to a state restriction, local restriction, or both. Twenty percent of all teachers were subject to only state restrictions, 15 percent were subject to only local restrictions, and 9 percent were subject to both; 7 percent of teachers taught in states with restrictions but did not know whether they were subject to local restrictions. We interpret this finding as evidence of spillover because only about one-third of teachers work in a state with a restriction, but one-half of teachers nationally are subject to either a state or a local restriction. Notably, most of these teachers experienced restrictions at just one level rather than at both the state and local levels. The lack of complete overlap between state and local policies might stem from the wide variation in local education leaders' responses to restrictions (for more information, see the box).

The remaining teachers were either free from state and local restrictions (41 percent) or taught in a state free from restrictions but did not know whether they were subject to a local restriction (8 percent).

Teachers' reports suggest that local restrictions were equally common in states with and without restrictions. Twenty-six percent of the teachers in states *with* restrictions reported that they were also subject to a local restriction, as did 24 percent of teachers in states *without* restrictions. We interpret the equivalent reports of local restrictions regardless of the state policy context as more evidence of the spillover of state restrictions into states without restrictions.

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Teachers Subject to State Restrictions, Local Restrictions, or Both



NOTE: This figure displays the percentage of teachers who were subject to state and/or local restrictions. Gray shading indicates teachers who were subject to state restrictions, local restrictions, or both. We defined teachers as *subject to a state restriction* if they taught in one of the following 18 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. We defined teachers as *subject to a local restriction* if they responded "Yes" to the question, "Have your school or district leaders ever directed you to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" If teachers responded "No," we defined them as *not subject to a local restriction*. Teachers were also able to respond, "I don't know," and those percentages are listed in the right column. *N* = 1,392.

Teachers' Experiences with Local Restrictions

According to teachers' accounts, local leaders' responses to recently enacted state restrictions have varied widely (Woo et al., 2023). Some teachers described how school or district leaders told them to avoid instructional materials and classroom discussions involving political and social issues, sometimes as the result of pressure from community and family members. Other teachers described the opposite scenario, in which their school or district leaders resisted state restrictions or provided them with more supports to discuss political and social topics in the classroom. Still other teachers raised concerns that messaging from their local leaders was absent, unclear, or implicit, leaving them to navigate state restrictions on their own (Woo et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2023).

From the perspective of some district leaders, "tuning out" political conflict at the state level was necessary for focusing on district priorities (Jochim et al., 2023), which could also explain why some teachers were not sure whether their local leaders had directed them to limit their instruction. Thus, local restrictions might take different forms—explicit written local policies, verbal directives to teachers from members of school or district leadership (e.g., principals, superintendents, or others), or implicit directives from school or district leaders that teachers might infer from observing how their local leaders interact with upset families.

This variation in local leaders' responses and attitudes toward state restrictions could explain the lack of overlap between state and local policy, as well as why restrictions might exist at just one level and how restrictions at one level might influence teachers' instructional decisions. Teachers subject only to state restrictions might have to determine on their own how to respond to those restrictions in the absence of local guidance. It is also possible that teachers might feel compelled to comply with state restrictions in the absence of local restrictions, especially in states that specify penalties for violating the restriction. Or teachers might be subject only to local restrictions, possibly triggered by the prevailing local political climate. In such cases, teachers might experience pressure from not only their local leaders but also the surrounding school community to limit their instruction.

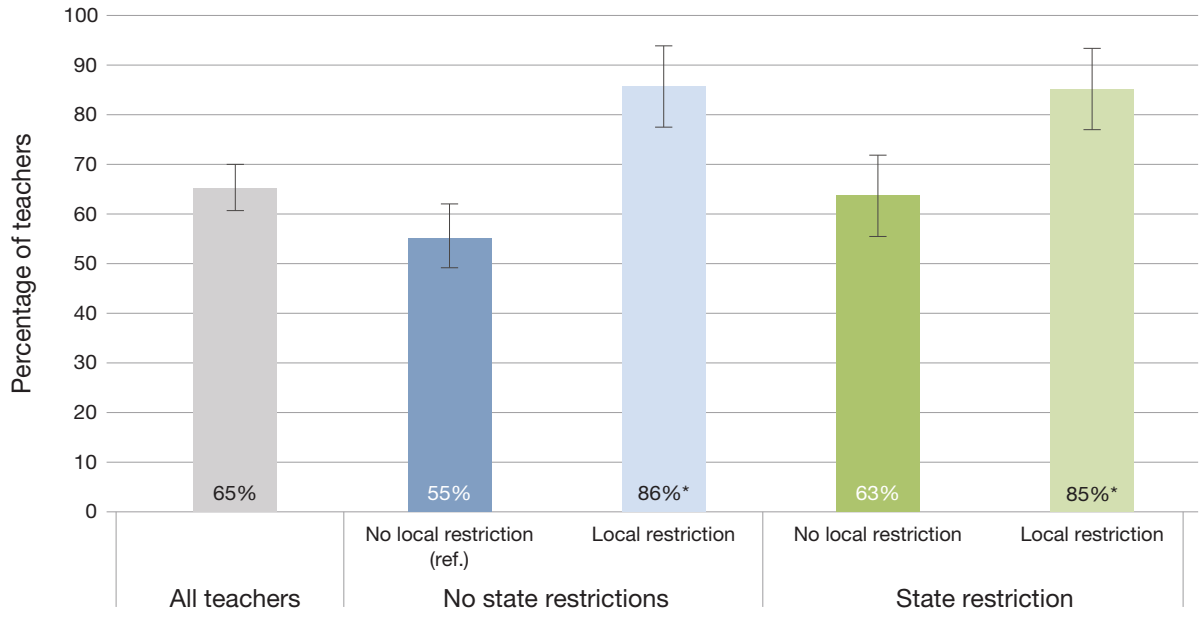
Fifty-Five Percent of Teachers Who Were Not Subject to Any Restrictions Decided to Limit Their Instruction About Political and Social Issues

Sixty-five percent of teachers nationally reported that they decided on their own, without direction from their school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in their classrooms (see Figure 2). This percentage includes teachers who were not subject to any state or local restrictions as well as those who were. When we look at only teachers who were not subject to any restrictions, more than half—55 percent—said they made the decision to limit their discussion of political and social issues. We interpret this finding as further evidence of spillover. It is likely that these teachers who were not subject to any restrictions experienced pressure from sources other than their state or local leaders, such as parents or community members (Doan et al., 2023; Woo et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2023). The influence of

It is likely that teachers who were not subject to any restrictions experienced pressure from sources other than their state or local leaders, such as parents or community members.

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Teachers Reporting That They Decided on Their Own to Limit Their Classroom Discussions of Political and Social Issues, by Whether Teachers Were Subject to State Restrictions, Local Restrictions, or Both



NOTE: This figure displays the percentage of teachers who responded "Yes" to the question, "Have you ever decided on your own, without being directed by school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" We present the responses of all teachers in our sample (N = 1,396), teachers who were not subject to any restrictions (n = 502), teachers who were subject to only local restrictions (n = 186), teachers who were subject to only state restrictions (n = 344), and teachers who were subject to both state and local restrictions (n = 155). We do not display the responses of teachers who did not know whether they were subject to local restrictions. Asterisks (*) indicate that percentages for that subgroup significantly differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from the reference group, which is indicated by (ref.). Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

these other actors within teachers' school communities might at least partially explain why the effects of state or local restrictions have spilled over into places without those restrictions.

Regardless of State Policy Context, More Than 80 Percent of Teachers Subject to Local Restrictions Decided to Limit Classroom Discussions About Political and Social Issues

Teachers who are subject to local restrictions appear to be more likely to limit their instruction than teachers who are not subject to any restrictions. Whether they taught in a state with or without restrictions, more than 80 percent of teachers who were subject to local restrictions said that they decided, on their own, without being directed by school or district leaders, to limit their discussion of political and social issues in class (see Figure 2). Although we do not know the topics or content targeted by local restrictions or the topics that teachers were avoiding in their instruction, it is possible that these teachers received direction from their school or district leaders to restrict their instruction and then made decisions to restrict their instruction beyond what was required by local restrictions. For instance, local education leaders might have restricted instruction around some topics, and teachers might have then decided on their own to restrict their instruction around additional topics beyond those specified in the local restriction.

We interpret these results as indicative of spillover because most teachers who experienced local restrictions also decided on their own to limit their instruction, potentially around a wider away of

topics, perspectives, or materials. We also interpret these results as suggesting a strong association between local restrictions and teachers' decisions about whether to discuss political and social topics in class.

Moreover, our data suggest that local restrictions might have an even stronger connection than state restrictions to teachers' decisions about whether and how to discuss political and social topics in class. Sixty-three percent of teachers subject only to *state* restrictions decided to limit discussions about political and social issues, which was not statistically significantly different from the 55 percent of teachers not subject to any restrictions (see Figure 2). However, teachers who were subject to only *local* restrictions were more likely than teachers subject to only state restrictions to report that they decided to limit discussions (86 percent compared with 63 percent).

We acknowledge that prior research suggests that many teachers in states with restrictions do not realize that they are in a state with a restriction, which might explain why we observe only a nonsignificant difference between teachers subject to only state restrictions and teachers not subject to any restrictions. However, our finding that local restrictions might be more powerful influences on teachers' instruction than state restrictions is bolstered by our prior work, which suggests that teachers who reported the presence of district-level restrictions were more likely than teachers who reported the presence of state-level restrictions to say that restrictions influenced their instruction (Woo et al., 2023).

In the Absence of Any State or Local Restrictions, Teachers Working in Conservative Communities Were More Likely Than Teachers Working in Liberal Communities to Limit Their Instruction

The local political climate might also be related to whether teachers decide to limit discussions about political and social issues. We consider the local political climate as a possible proxy for local support from families and community members for instruction about political and social issues because Democrats are generally more likely than Republicans to support discussion of such issues (Polikoff et al., 2022; Turner, 2023). We also acknowledge it is possible that teachers in conservative and liberal communities have different beliefs about state and local restrictions and whether teachers should teach about political and social issues.

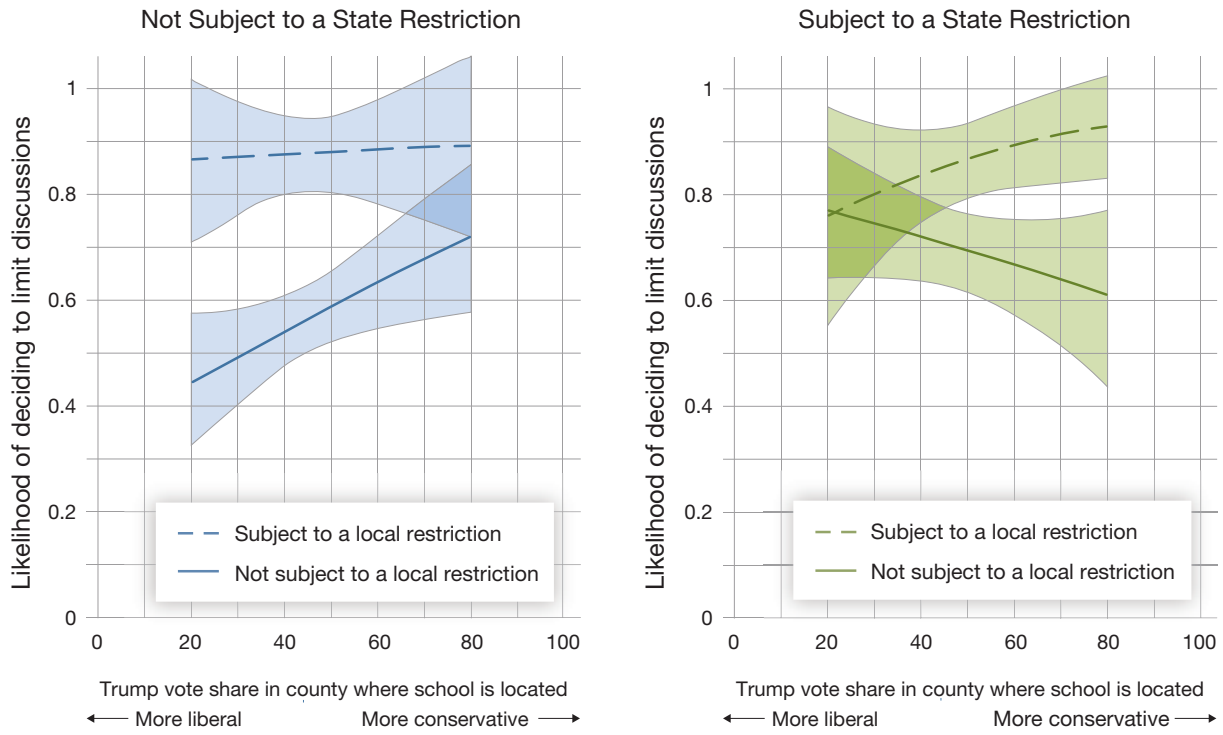
Although we did not ask about teachers' political beliefs in the survey, prior research suggests there are more teachers who are registered Democrats than registered Republicans (Klein, 2017) and that a majority of teachers oppose state restrictions (Woo et al., 2022). Teachers in rural—and potentially more conservative—communities were less likely than teachers in urban communities to oppose state restrictions; however, even in those rural communities, more teachers opposed these restrictions than supported them (Woo et al., 2022). Thus, there are a few different ways in which local political climate might be associated with teachers' instructional choices.

We first examined teachers in states *without* restrictions. Where teachers were not subject to state or local restrictions, their likelihood of deciding to limit discussion of political and social topics increased dramatically as the local political climate became more conservative (the solid blue line on the left side of Figure 3). In the absence of any state or local restrictions, teachers who worked in con-

Local restrictions might have an even stronger connection than state restrictions to teachers' decisions about whether and how to discuss political and social topics in class.

FIGURE 3

Teachers' Likelihood of Deciding to Limit Classroom Discussions About Political and Social Issues, by State and Local Policy Context and the Local Political Climate



NOTE: Results are from a logistic regression model predicting the likelihood of teachers deciding, on their own, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class as a function of whether teachers taught in a school where they were subject to state and/or local restrictions and the local political climate, proxied by the share of the presidential vote that went for President Trump in 2020 in the county where the respondent's school is located. Controls include school demographics (i.e., school grade level, school locale, school poverty status, and student racial/ethnic composition) and teacher demographics (i.e., gender, years of teaching experience, and race/ethnicity). The shaded areas present 95-percent confidence intervals. We exclude respondents who were not sure whether they were subject to local restrictions and/or were not sure whether they had ever decided to limit discussions about political and social issues in class. *n* = 1,106.

servative communities were more likely than those who worked in liberal communities to limit instruction. However, a sizeable proportion of teachers who worked in very liberal communities—roughly 40 percent—still reported limiting their classroom discussions.

In states without restrictions, local restrictions appeared to shape teachers' decisionmaking to a notable degree—perhaps even more so than the local political climate. As shown by the dashed and solid blue lines on the left side of Figure 3, teachers' likelihood of limiting discussion of political and social topics was consistently higher among those who *were* subject to local restrictions than among those who were not. Furthermore, teachers who were subject to only local restrictions were highly likely to report limiting discussions regardless of the local political climate, such that there was little difference between teachers teaching in liberal and conservative communities: More than 80 percent of teachers who were subject to local restrictions decided to limit discussions, regardless of whether they taught in liberal or conservative communities.

In states *with* restrictions, how local policy and political climate interacted to shape teachers' decisions is more complicated. Among teachers who were subject to *both* state and local restrictions, we observed the same pattern of increased likelihood of limiting discussions as the local political climate becomes more conservative (as shown by the dashed green line on the right side of Figure 3). But even in the most-liberal counties, teachers were highly likely to report that they decided to limit discussion of political and social topics. That so many teachers

who were subject to state and local restrictions were deciding to limit their instruction is unsurprising because these are the teachers who likely receive messages from their state and school system about what they should discuss—or not discuss—in their classrooms.

How the local political climate relates to the actions of those who teach in states with restrictions but whose schools or districts have not reinforced this message with a local restriction of their own is more puzzling. As shown by the solid green line on the right side of Figure 3, these teachers' likelihood of limiting discussion about political and social issues *decreased* as their local political climate became more conservative. We offer one hypothesis for what might explain this finding and acknowledge that there might be others. Teachers in more-liberal counties—who might have been teaching political and social topics before states and school systems began enacting restrictions—might be modifying their instruction to limit what they were doing previously to comply with newly enacted state-level restrictions. In contrast, teachers in more-conservative counties—who were potentially less likely to be teaching about political and social issues before any restrictions were enacted—might not report that they limited their teaching because they were not teaching about these topics to begin with. The absence of messages from local school systems to limit discussions might mean that modifications to instruction to comply with new state laws were not a high priority for these teachers.

Teachers Cited Uncertainty About Whether Leaders Would Support Them in the Face of Parental Concerns as a Top Reason for Deciding to Limit Classroom Discussions of Political and Social Issues

As we discussed earlier in this report, about two-thirds of teachers nationally had decided to limit their instruction about political and social issues. We explore their top reasons for doing so in this section.

Teachers' most common reason for deciding to limit their instruction was that they were not sure whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns.

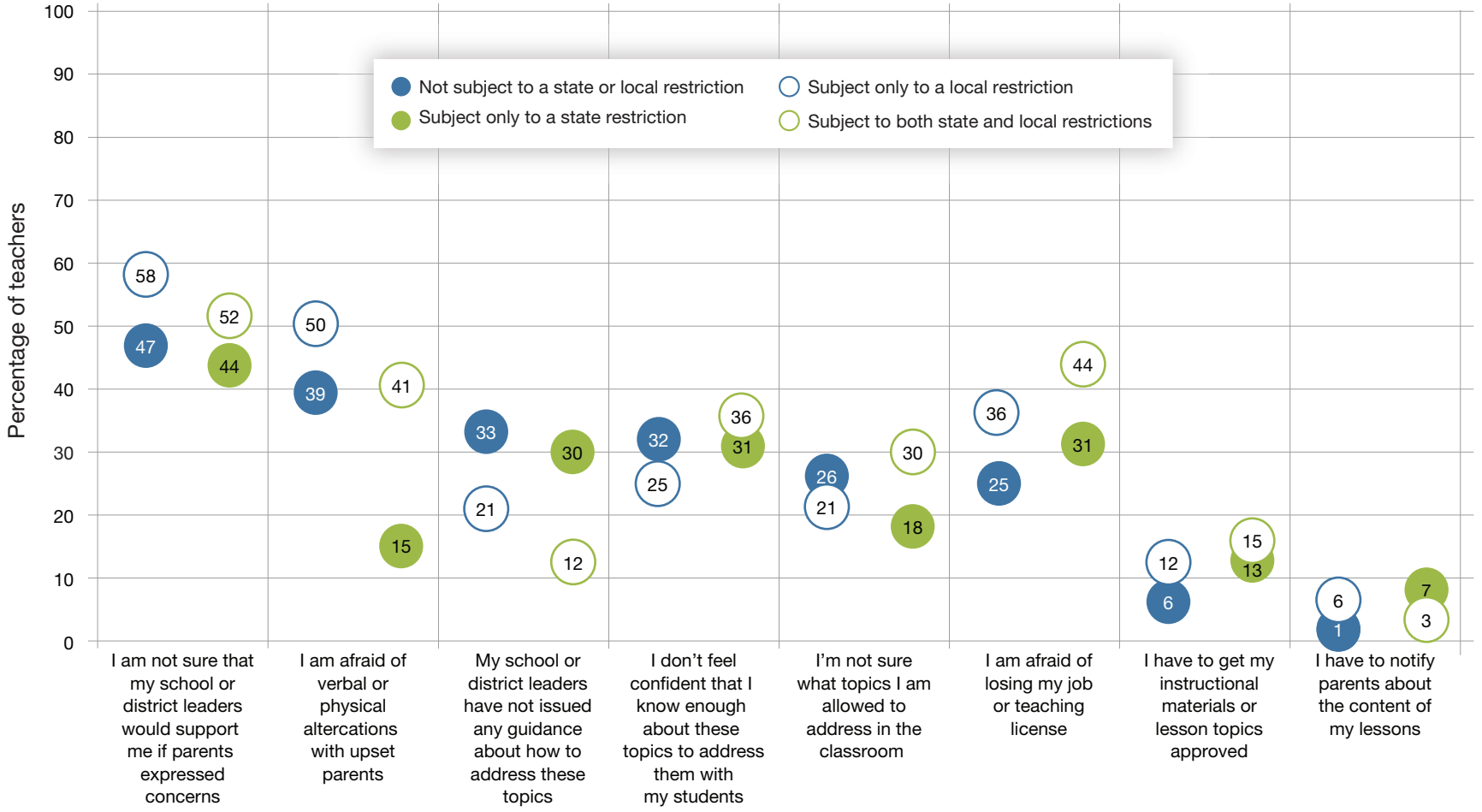
At the national level, teachers' most common reason for deciding to limit their instruction was that they were not sure whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns. Among teachers who decided to limit their instruction, 49 percent said that it was one of their top three reasons (Doan et al., 2023). As shown in Figure 4, teachers across all policy contexts cited this reason most often.

To further understand the drivers of the spillover effect, we examined why teachers who were not subject to any state or local restrictions decided to limit their instruction. After uncertainty about whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns (47 percent), these teachers' next most common reason was that they were afraid of verbal or physical altercations with upset parents (39 percent). These results suggest that teachers' concerns about pushback from families—even in the absence of formal directives from state or local leaders—might be strong drivers of the spillover effect in places without restrictions.

The third most common reason teachers not subject to any restrictions said they decided to limit their instruction was a lack of guidance from their local leaders on how to address political and social

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Teachers Naming Each Reason as One of Their Top Three Reasons for Deciding on Their Own to Limit Classroom Discussions of Political and Social Issues



NOTE: This figure displays teachers' responses to the question, "What are the top three reasons you decided, on your own, to limit discussion of political and social topics in your classroom?" Only teachers who responded that they had ever decided on their own, without being directed by their school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class were presented with this question. The percentages displayed represent the percentage of teachers who selected each reason as one of their top three reasons, by teachers' state and local policy context. We present the responses of teachers who were not subject to either a state or local restriction (n = 261), teachers who were subject to only a local restriction (n = 151), teachers who were subject to only a state restriction (n = 174), and teachers who were subject to both state and local restrictions (n = 116). We do not display the responses of teachers who did not know whether they were subject to local restrictions. To view the percentage of teachers nationally who selected each reason as one of their top three reasons, see Doan et al., 2023.

issues in class (33 percent). Teachers who were not subject to state or local restrictions were nearly three times as likely as teachers subject to both state and local restrictions to name inadequate guidance as a top reason for deciding on their own to limit their instruction.

Teachers' fear of altercations with upset parents and uncertainty about whether their local leaders would support them in the face of parental concerns appeared to be especially salient for teachers who were subject to local restrictions. In states with and without restrictions, more teachers who were subject to local restrictions named these two reasons as their top reasons for deciding to limit instruction than teachers not subject to local restrictions. Fifty percent of teachers subject to only local restrictions and 41 percent of teachers subject to both state and local restrictions named fear of verbal or physical altercations with upset parents as a top reason for limiting their instruction, in comparison with 36 percent of teachers nationally, 39 percent of teachers not subject to state or local restrictions, and 15 percent of teachers subject to only state restrictions. Even though only some of these differences are statistically significant, we think that these patterns suggest that pressure from families and local community members might be even more pressing for teachers who are subject to local restrictions.

Fear of job loss was another top reason cited by teachers subject to local restrictions. For instance, teachers subject to both state and local restrictions were nearly twice as likely as teachers not subject to any restrictions to cite fear of losing their job or teaching license as a reason for limiting their instruction. Forty-four percent of teachers subject to both state and local restrictions selected fear of job loss as one of their top three reasons for limiting their instruction, compared with 32 percent of teachers at the national level and 25 percent of teachers not subject to any restrictions. These results might at least partly explain why local restrictions appear to have such a strong association with teachers' decisions about whether to engage in classroom discussions about political and social issues.

Implications

As of the writing of this report, about one-third of states have passed policies restricting teachers' instruction related to race and gender (Schwartz, 2023). In our prior work (Woo et al., 2023), we found evidence that these state policies have begun to change the way that teachers in these states approach their instruction. We now have further evidence that the effects of these state policies have begun to spill over into states and localities where no such policies are in place.

This spillover has taken two forms. We see evidence of spillover through teachers' reports of local restrictions. Teachers in states *without* restrictions reported the presence of local restrictions at rates similar to teachers in states *with* restrictions. Even though only about one-third of teachers reside in states with restrictions, when we consider the presence of local restrictions, about half of the country's teachers were subject to state restrictions, local restrictions, or both.

We also see evidence of spillover in teachers' reports about their decisions to discuss political and social issues in the classrooms. Nationally, two-thirds of teachers reported that they decided on their own to limit their instruction. Even among teachers who did not experience any state or local restrictions, more than one-half of teachers reported that they decided

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on their own to limit their instruction. Furthermore, even in the environments that we might consider most friendly to such instruction—that is, school communities both politically liberal *and* free of state and local restrictions—our models suggest that about 40 percent of teachers reported that they made the decision to limit their instruction around political and social issues. Fear of parental concerns and altercations with parents appear to be strong drivers of the spillover effect in these communities.

In the environment we might consider the least welcoming to classroom instruction about political and social issues—that is, highly conservative communities with both state and local restrictions—our models predict that about 90 percent of teachers decided to limit their instruction. In addition to concerns about upset parents, fear of losing their teaching job or license was a top reason for why these teachers decided to limit their instruction.

These findings lead to two implications.

Policy Spillover Implies That Teachers Are Limiting Classroom Instruction About Political and Social Issues Even in Schools and Communities Most Likely to Be Supportive of Such Instruction

Our data suggest that two-thirds of teachers are modifying their instruction to reduce students' exposure to discussions about political and social issues. This raises concerns about whether students across the United States are receiving sufficient opportunities to engage in discussions of current or controversial issues in schools—a proven practice necessary for students' civic development (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

The spillover effects that we describe in this report reveal that even more students might be affected by these restrictions than originally suggested by the number of students living in states with restrictions. Large proportions of teachers are deciding on their own to limit their instruction about political and social issues, even in states and districts where they experience no restrictions and in liberal communities. Of course, nearly all communities include populations with diverse political beliefs (Woo et al., 2022), and beliefs within political parties are not homogenous (Polikoff et al., 2022). However, our findings raise the possibility that teachers are shying away from instruction about political and social issues even in places where many parents and community members are likely to support or even desire such instruction.

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Local Restrictions Appear to Send Strong Signals to Teachers About What to Teach, Suggesting a Need to Better Understand the Content and Nature of Local Restrictions

Our findings suggest that local directives—which could take the form of formal policies or informal guidance from school or district leaders—send strong signals to teachers about what to teach. These local policies might influence teachers' decisions about whether to discuss political and social topics to a greater extent than state policies. Regardless of their state policy context, more than 80 percent of teachers who reported that they were subject to local restrictions decided on their own to limit their instruction. This was in comparison with 55 percent of teachers not subject to any restrictions and 63 percent of teachers subject to only state restrictions. This is perhaps unsurprising, because local leaders are in a position to observe teachers' behavior—perhaps more

easily than state leaders—and enforce compliance with local directives. It is also possible that teachers might place more weight on the directives of their local leaders.

We need to know more about the source and content of these local restrictions. Formal policies to restrict instruction about race and gender at the school system level are rare (Woo et al., 2023), and we know little about the source of these restrictions (e.g., school board, superintendent, principals). Very few district leaders have said that they have paused or modified their instructional content in subjects in which students might be likely to encounter political and social topics, such as English language arts, history, health and sex education, and social studies (Jochim et al., 2023). At the same time, many teachers have described instances in which their school or district leaders have discouraged them—implicitly and explicitly—from addressing political and social topics in the classroom (Woo et al., 2023). Thus, local leaders might be sending signals to teachers about what they should teach through other means, such as informal conversations with school staff or in the ways that they interact with families and community members. Although these signals might be difficult to track, our data suggest that they could potentially have an influence on teachers' decisions about what and what not to teach, making this an area ripe for additional research.

Research Limitations

Readers should keep in mind the limitations of our data when interpreting our findings. First, we base teachers' state policy context on the state in which they teach. However, we do not have information on whether these teachers were aware that they were in a state with a restriction. Prior research suggests that about two-thirds of teachers in states with restrictions do not know they are subject to a state restriction (Woo et al., 2023). It is possible that teachers' awareness of the restrictions to which they are subject might also influence their decisions about whether and how to limit classroom discussions of political and social issues.

Second, survey responses consist of self-reported information. We are unable to verify the accuracy of

Many teachers have described instances in which their school or district leaders discouraged them—implicitly and explicitly—from addressing political and social topics in the classroom.

teachers' reports that they are subject to local directives to limit classroom discussions about political and social issues. Moreover, prior research suggests that many teachers who are subject to restrictions do not know about those restrictions (Woo et al., 2023); therefore, the number of teachers who are subject to local restrictions might be larger or smaller than our data suggest. Although we interpret teachers' responses to indicate that they receive messages from their local leaders to limit their instruction, we do not know what those messages consist of, the extent to which they align with any state policies, or when those messages were conveyed to teachers.

Third, when teachers say that they limited their classroom discussion about political and social issues, we do not know specifically how teachers modified their instruction. We also do not know exactly how they interpreted the question. For example, some teachers might have reported they *did* decide on their own to limit discussions of political and social issues because they changed their teaching in response to concerns about the consequences of teaching about these issues. Other teachers might have reported that they *did* decide to limit classroom discussions about political and social issues because they do not view these discussions as relevant to their teaching

practice in the first place. As another example, some teachers might have reported that they *did not* decide on their own to limit their instruction about political and social issues because they continued to engage in such discussions despite the presence of restrictions. Other teachers might have reported that they *did not* limit their instruction on their own if they felt they were complying with state and/or local restrictions and therefore did not make the decision to limit their instruction "on their own." In our data, we are unable to distinguish between different interpretations of teachers' survey responses.

Fourth, because we did not specify a time frame in our survey item, we do not know when teachers decided to limit their instruction about political and social issues. Given prior qualitative research indicating that teachers are responding to state and local restrictions by making the decision to limit their instruction (Woo et al., 2023), we interpret teachers' responses as referencing current or recent instructional choices in their survey responses. Moreover, teachers' open-ended responses detailing other reasons for limiting their instruction about political and social issues beyond those we asked about indicate that teachers are considering their current instruction when responding to this survey item. However, it is possible that they might be referring to instructional choices made prior to 2021, when the first state restrictions on teaching about race and gender were enacted.

Fifth, because of limited space on the survey, we were not able to ask about all the reasons that teachers might decide on their own to limit their classroom discussion of political and social issues. As noted earlier, teachers were able to use an open-ended text box to describe any other reasons—beyond those we asked about—why they limited their classroom discussion of political and social issues. Only 168 teachers, or 12 percent of our sample, provided an interpretable response. Our analyses of teachers' open-ended responses did not reveal any responses that were more common than those included in the structured responses. We interpret this result as reasonable confirmation that the structured responses captured the main reasons that teachers might decide, on their own, to limit discussion of political and social topics in class. However, the patterns we observed among teachers' reasons for deciding on their own to limit their classroom discussions could change if we had asked about a different set of reasons. These are potential areas for future research.

Finally, it is possible that many other factors unmeasured by this survey, such as teachers' own beliefs toward state restrictions or political affiliations or attitudes, could have contributed to the differences that we observe. Thus, our findings should be strictly interpreted as descriptive characterizations of educators' responses. They are not intended to suggest causality.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

Each SoT survey respondent was assigned a weight to ensure that estimates reflected the national population of teachers. Characteristics that factor into this process include descriptors at the individual level (e.g., gender, professional experience) and school level (e.g., school size, level, locale, socioeconomic status). More information about SoT survey sampling and weighting is available in our technical documentation (Doan, Steiner, and Woo, 2023).

All estimates presented in this report are sample-wide or subgroup-specific estimates that are unadjusted for statistical controls, unless otherwise noted. We used linear regression models to test whether estimates for a particular subgroup differ at the $p < 0.05$ level from estimates for the reference subgroup in that category without the use of any statistical controls. Unless noted otherwise, we report subgroup estimates that remain statistically significantly different from reference group estimates after controlling for an array of school- and teacher-level characteristics (e.g., teacher race, gender, and years of experience; school poverty level; student racial composition; school grade level; and urbanicity). Because the intent of this report is to provide exploratory, descriptive information rather than test specific hypotheses, we did not make statistical adjustments for multiple comparisons.

Throughout our analyses, we rely on measures that capture the policy context and the local political climate—factors that have been shown to be related to how educators address political and social topics in the classroom (Jochim et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2022; Polikoff et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2023). To proxy the state policy context, we relied on data from Education Week and PEN America to identify states that have passed state-level restrictions on how teachers can discuss topics related to race and gender in their classrooms (Schwartz, 2023; PEN America, undated). The 18 states that have passed such restrictions are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. Arkansas passed an executive order to "prohibit indoctrination and critical race theory in schools" (PEN America, undated) on January 10, 2023, shortly before administration of the SoT survey began.

To proxy the local political climate, we relied on data from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Election Data + Science Lab (2022). Specifically, we use a continuous measure of the share of votes received by President Trump in the 2020 presidential election in the county where the respondent's school is located. For ease of interpretation, we used the vote share of a single candidate. We chose to focus on President Trump because he was the incumbent candidate in the 2020 presidential election.

We sought input from funders on the wording of survey items and on a final draft of the report, but we maintained final editorial control over the research products.

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About This Report

By January 2023, 18 states had enacted policies to restrict school instruction on topics related to race and gender. The authors of this report explore how the impact of these state policies are spilling over into places where no such restrictions exist such that teachers who are not subject to state-level restrictions are choosing on their own to limit their classroom discussions of political and social issues.

In this report, we draw on surveys of teachers from the American Teacher Panel (ATP), which is a nationally representative sample of more than 25,000 teachers across the United States. The ATP is one of three survey panels that comprise the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading publications using American Educator Panel data, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

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