

Defusing the History Wars: Common Ground & Division on American History

– A Black History Month Report



About

More in Common

For more information please visit
www.moreincommon.com
or contact us at us@moreincommon.com



The report was conducted by More in Common US, part of a non-partisan, international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division.

We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media and government in order to connect people across lines of division.



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Foreword

This report explores polarization in the national conversation over American history in the context of Black History Month.

In December 2022, More in Common released [*Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's National Story*](#). Our research found both real common ground and substantive disagreement on how Americans think US history should be taught to future generations. A clear majority of Americans wants American history to be taught in ways that include both the inspiring and the shameful; that highlight the histories of minority groups alongside history that elevates a shared American identity. At the same time, Americans are divided on how to draw connections between past injustices and present-day America as well as over the degree of emphasis currently given to the histories of minority groups.

In this report, we examine how some of these points of convergence and divergence are at play in conversations around Black History Month. Again, we found ample common ground: Americans overwhelmingly believe that the experiences of minority groups are integral to the story of America and should be taught. And again, we found disagreement: some Americans think Black History Month is being prioritized over history that emphasizes a common American identity, and others think that Black History Month is not given enough attention.

By uncovering areas of agreement and conflict, our report provides recommendations on communication strategies that engage with divergent points of view. It is our hope that by defusing tensions around the topic of US history, we can elevate efforts that seek to deepen our understanding of the diverse experiences of Americans that make up the remarkable story of our country.



Executive Summary

1. Common Ground: Americans overwhelmingly believe that the history of minority groups is integral to American history and important for students to learn.

Most Americans (81%) regardless of demographics and political affiliation believe that the history of minority groups is an integral part of American history.

8 in 10 Americans (84%), including Democrats (91%) and Republicans (77%), believe that it is important for students to learn the history of different racial groups.

7 in 10 Americans (71%) believe critically examining our history is an act of patriotism.

2. Divergence: While most Americans believe it is important to observe Black History Month, Americans' views diverge along political, racial, and generational lines on the amount of attention devoted to the heritage month and the history of minority groups.

7 in 10 Americans agree on the importance of observing Black History Month, yet with significant differences by political party and demographics:

- Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to say it is important to observe Black History Month (91% vs 46%)
- 93% of Black Americans think it is important to observe Black History Month, compared to 66% of White Americans
- 86% of Gen Z agree on the importance of Black History Month, compared to 64% of Baby Boomers.

At the same time, 4 in 10 Americans feel that there is too much attention currently devoted to Black History Month (41%).

Almost half of Americans (46%) feel that the history of minority groups is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity, including almost 7 in 10 Republicans, compared to 3 in 10 Democrats (69% vs 30%).



Executive Summary

3. Challenge: Around half of Americans say they do not feel knowledgeable about the history of Black Americans, yet increasing Americans' knowledge of Black History remains a challenging goal.

49% of Americans say that they are somewhat or very knowledgeable when it comes to Black history, while 51% of Americans who say they are just a little or not at all knowledgeable. 7 in 10 Black Americans, compared to 4 in 10 White and Hispanic Americans, feel knowledgeable on Black history.

Moreover, most Americans rely on TV and movies as their most common sources of knowledge on Black history, highlighting the need to increase Americans' historical knowledge both within and outside the settings of schools.

However, disagreement on whether the history of minority groups is given greater priority and polarization in the education system poses challenges in finding consensus on how to increase Americans' knowledge of Black history:

- Americans who believe that the history of minority groups is given greater priority are less likely to support incorporating Black history into their local school's curriculum.
- Less than half of Americans think public schools are doing their best to teach American history accurately without agenda or bias (41%).



Methodology

Quantitative Research

Results are shown as “US Average”

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with N=1,000 adult US citizens from December 22, 2022, to January 5, 2023. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 Presidential vote choice, with a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 3.1 for the US average and is higher for subgroups.

Note: Numbers in data visualizations are rounded to the nearest whole number. Figures may total to larger or smaller than one-hundred percent due to rounding.

Qualitative Research

Americans in Conversation

More in Common formed an online community representative of the American general population and engaged them in conversations similar to focus groups from January to July, 2022. From February 18 to 21, 2022 we spoke to respondents about their views on Black History Month and other cultural heritage months. A total of N=325 American respondents completed the activity. Quotations from those conversations with respondents are included in this report. Where provided, names have been changed to protect their privacy. Grammar and punctuation have been lightly edited for clarity



Common Ground: Views on American History

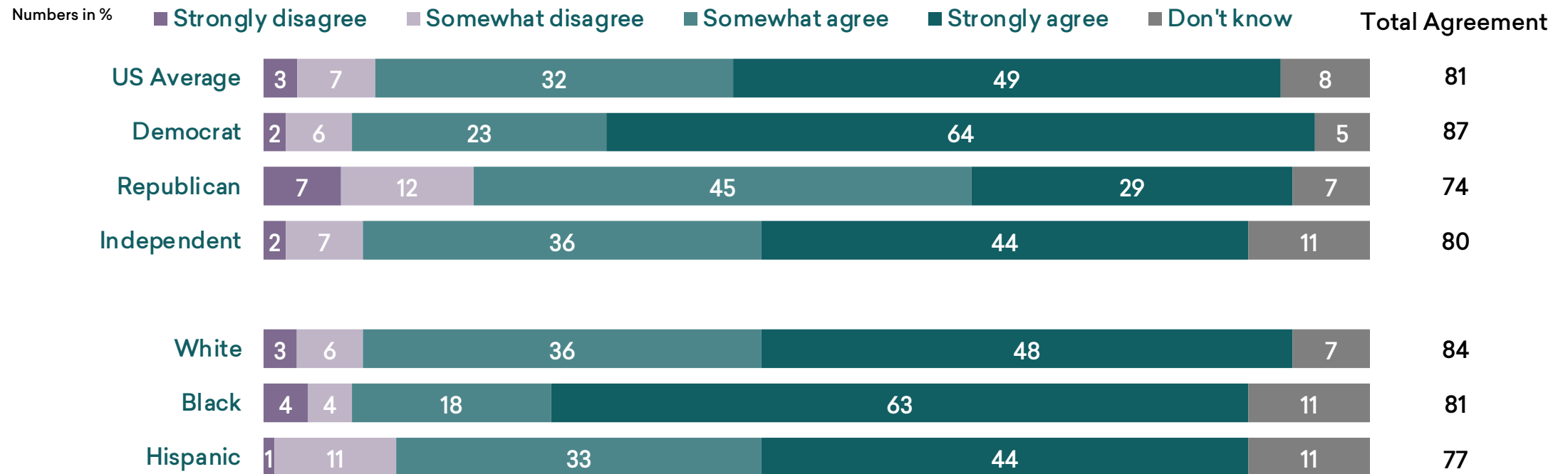


Most Americans believe that the history of different racial groups is crucial to the story of America and important for students to learn in school.



Americans across political ideology and race overwhelmingly believe that the history of minority groups is an integral part of American history.

The history of minority groups is an integral part of American history.

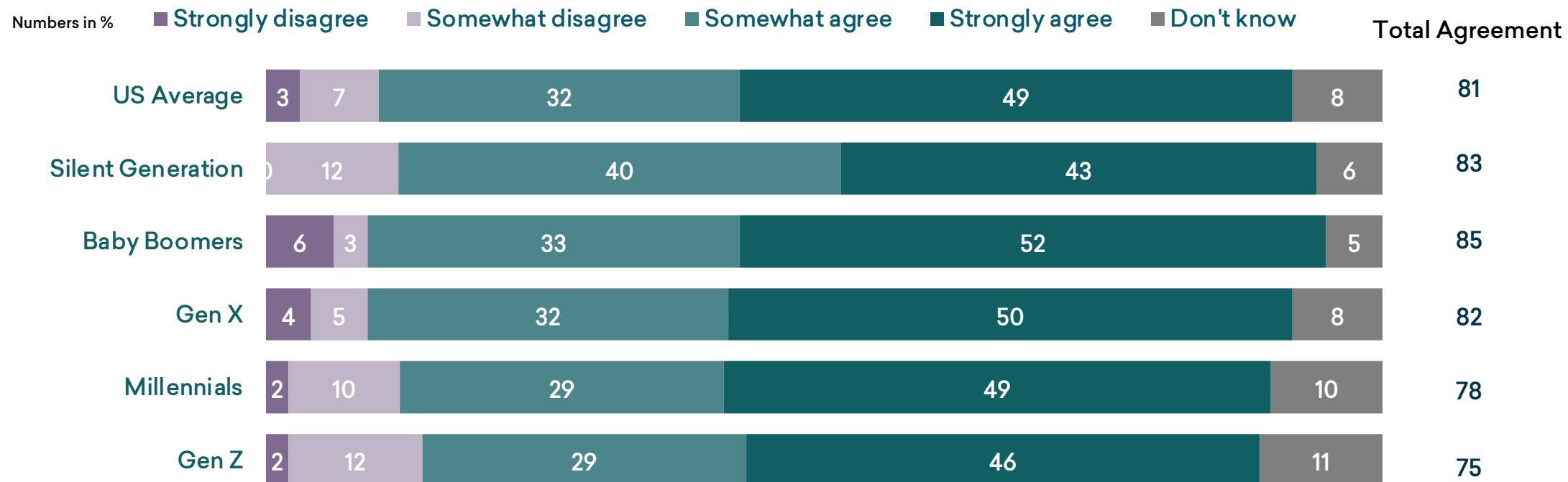


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



The belief that the history of minority groups is an integral part of American history also extends across generations.

The history of minority groups is an integral part of American history.

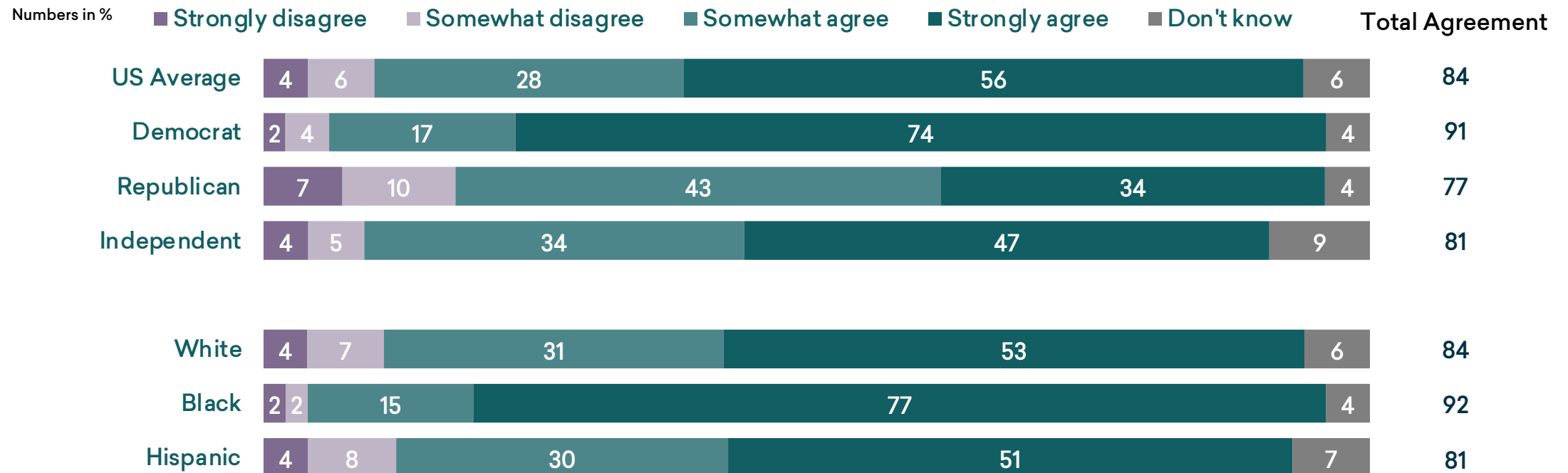


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Most Americans, regardless of political affiliation and racial identity, believe that it is important for students to learn the history of racial groups different from their own.

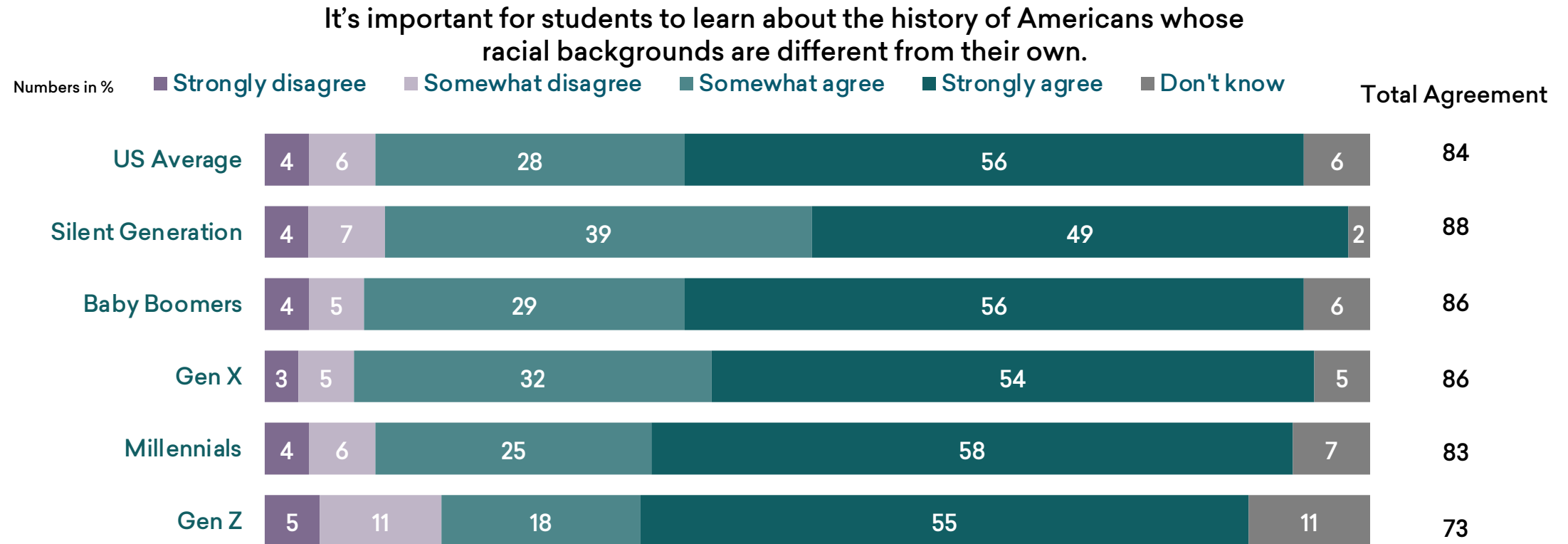
It's important for students to learn about the history of Americans whose racial backgrounds are different from their own.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



The broad support for students to learn about the history of different racial groups holds true across generations.

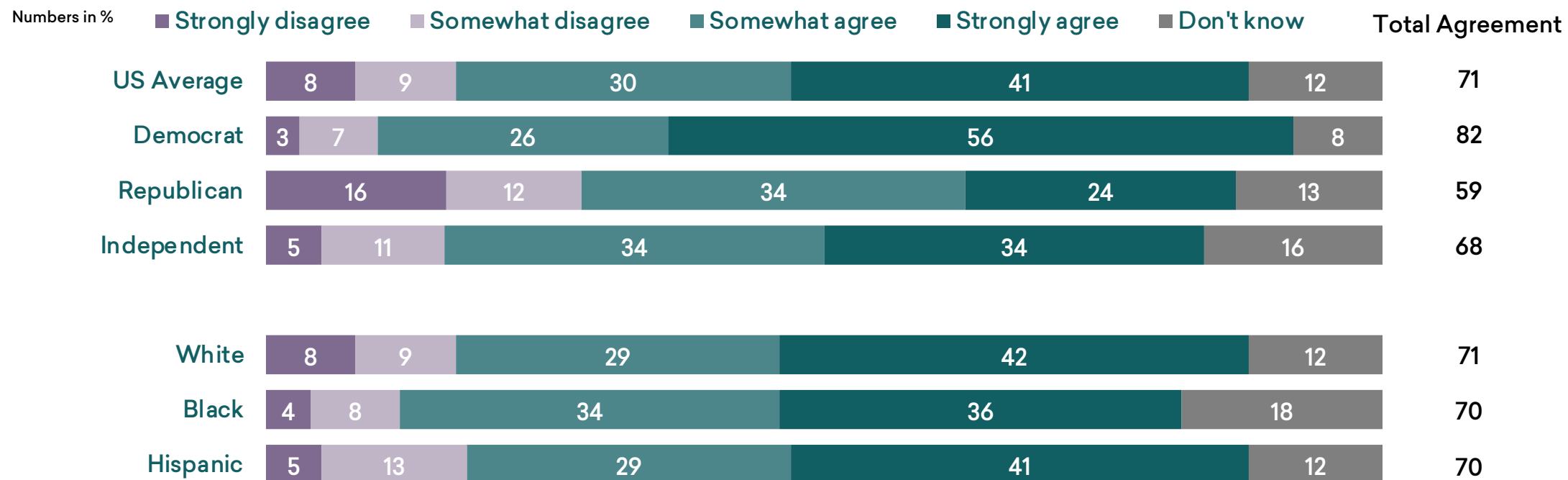


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



The majority of Americans across race and political ideology also believe that critically examining our history is an act of patriotism.

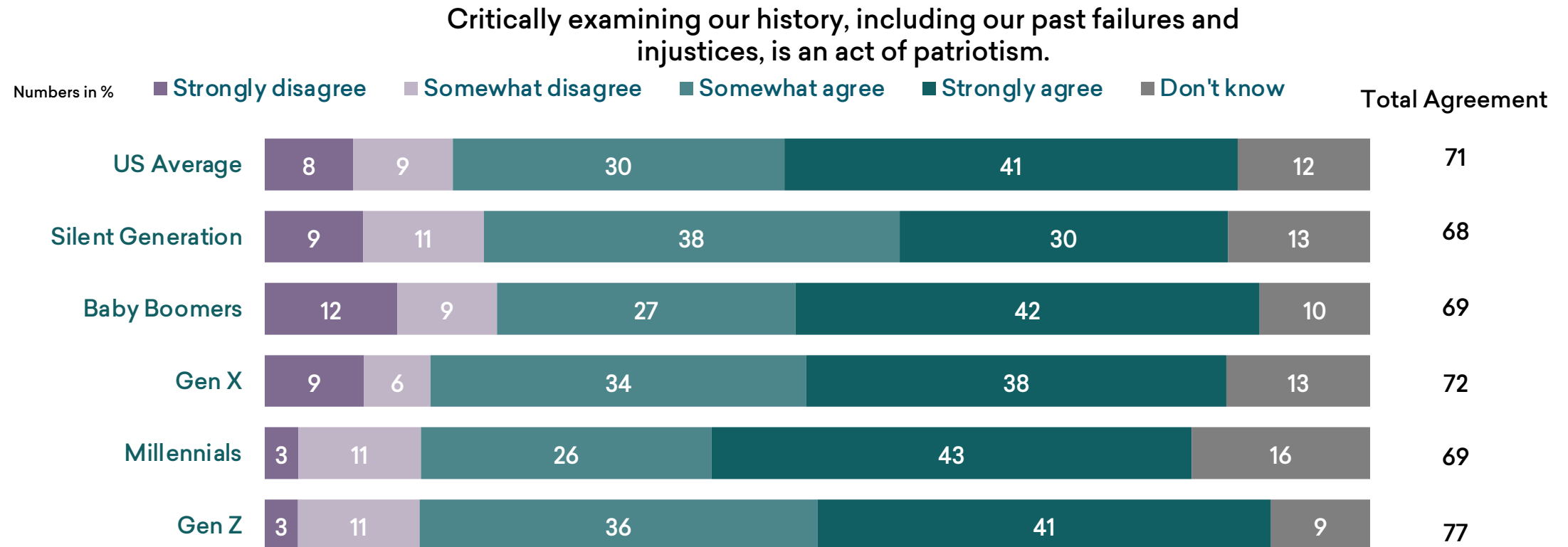
Critically examining our history, including our past failures and injustices, is an act of patriotism.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



There is strong support across generations that critically examining our history is an act of patriotism.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common

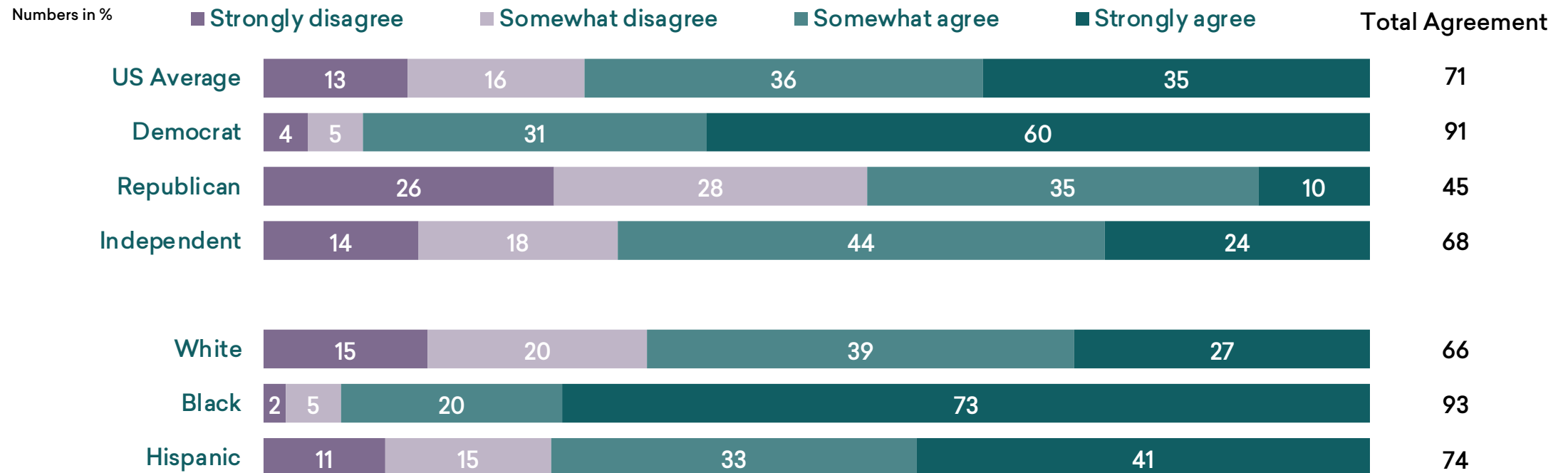


Divergence: Views on Black History Month & the History of Minority Groups



Most Americans feel that it is important to observe Black History Month. Over 9 in 10 Democrats and Black Americans agree, compared to around half of Republicans and two thirds of white Americans.

It is important for Americans to observe Black History Month.

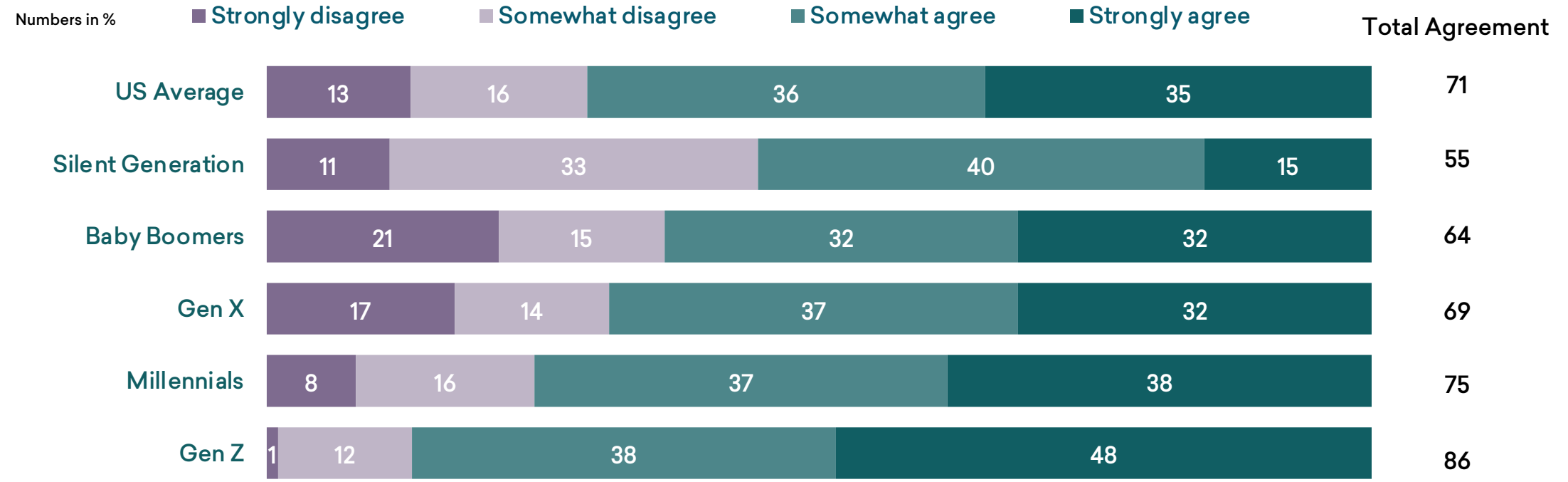


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Younger Americans are more likely than older generations to say it is important to observe Black History Month.

It is important for Americans to observe Black History Month.

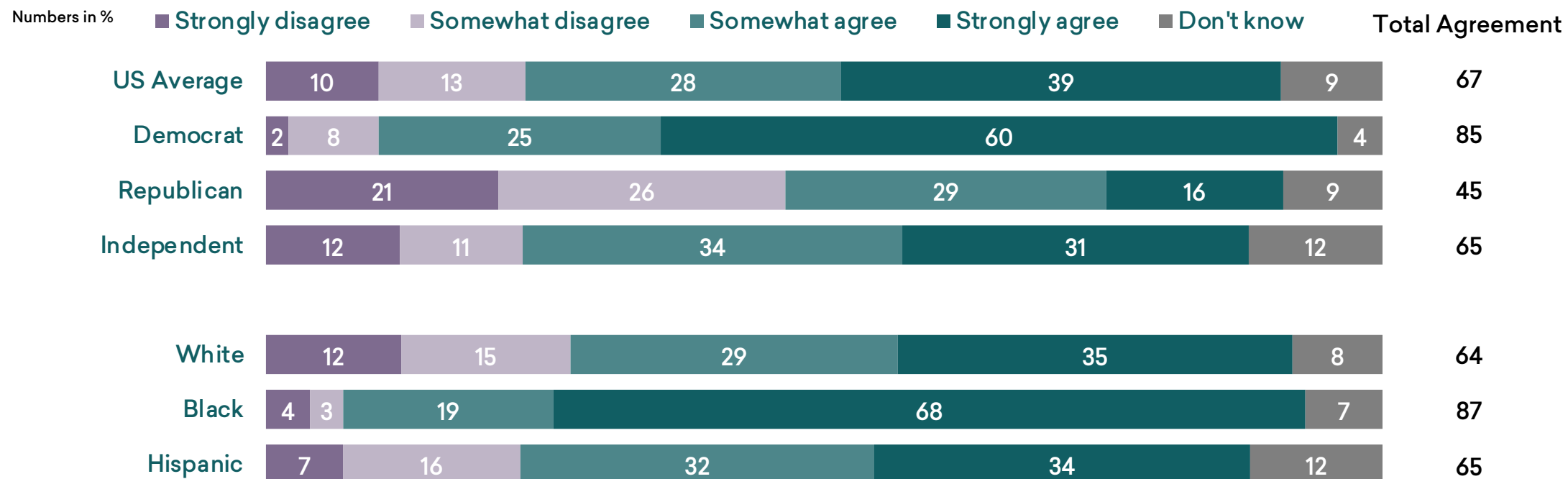


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Two thirds of Americans support incorporating Black history into their local school's curriculum, although Democrats and Black Americans are more likely to do so.

I support having Black history as a dedicated part of my local school's history curriculum.

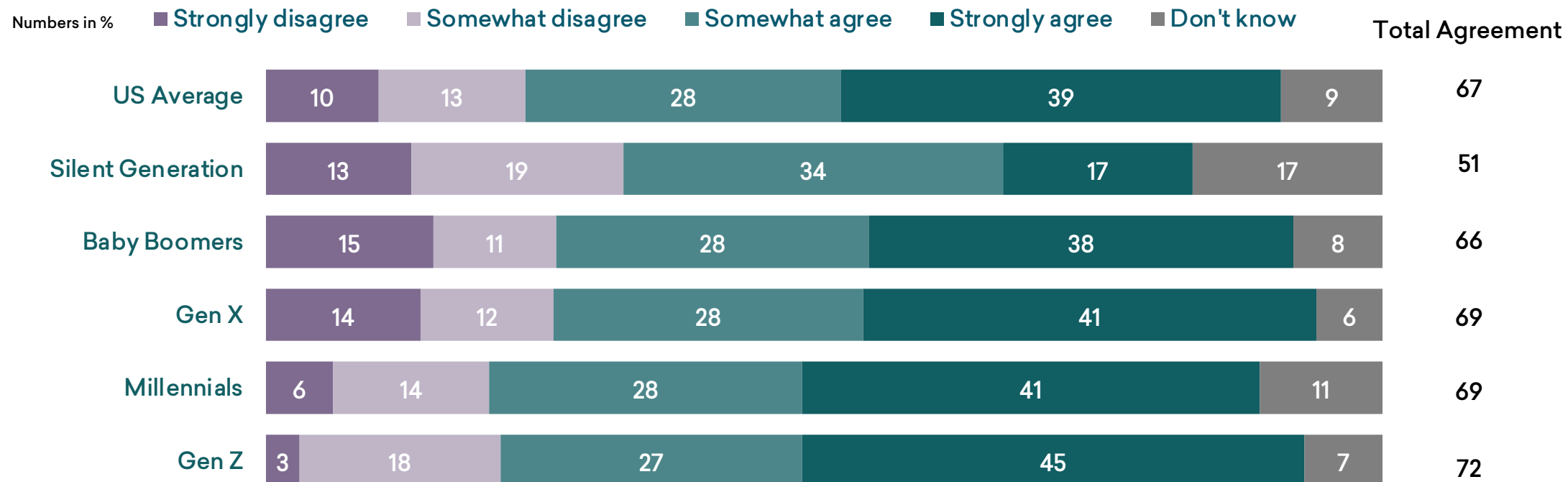


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Most Americans across generations support including Black history as a dedicated part of their local school's history curriculum, although there is slightly more support among younger generations.

I support having Black history as a dedicated part of my local school's history curriculum.

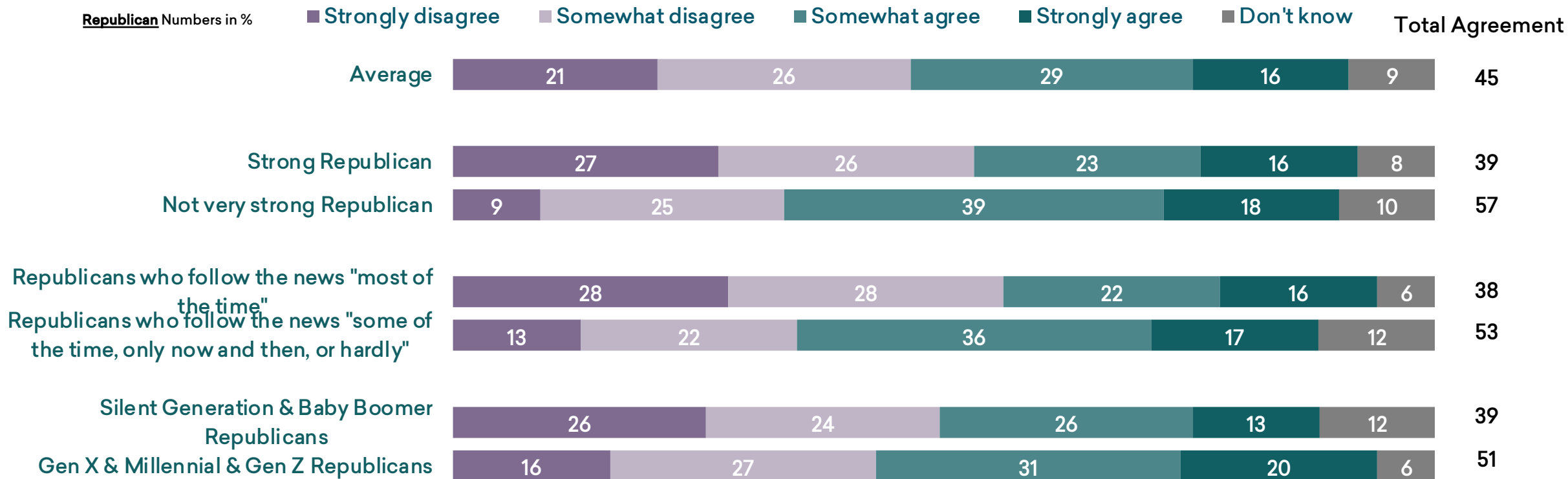


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Republicans who are more moderate, less politically engaged, or younger appear more likely than politically engaged or older Republicans to support incorporating Black history into their local school's history curriculum.

I support having Black history as a dedicated part of my local school's history curriculum.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Source: More in Common

Note: Survey respondents were asked to identify their political affiliation on a 7-point political party identification scale [Strong Democrat, Not very strong Democrat, Lean Democrat, Independent, Lean Republican, Not very strong Republican, Strong Republican]



Many Americans feel that observing Black History Month is a way of recognizing and celebrating America's cultural diversity.



*"The foundation of this country is **celebrating the beautiful diversity** that it is made of."*

– Anita, age 35-44 white woman, Democrat, Minnesota

*"I think Black History Month encourages people to **learn, acknowledge, and celebrate Black achievements**. To me remembering one's heritage is important. **It shows who we are and what we can accomplish together as fellow Americans from different backgrounds.**"*

– Emma, age 35-44 Asian woman, Democrat, California



*"It's a reminder to be mindful and respectful of different cultures and be **thankful for their contributions that helped shape this country.**"*

– Curtis, age 35-44 Black man, Democrat, California

*"It is important that we remember **different heritages that helped build this country.**"*

– Leonard, age 65+ white man, Republican, Utah





Many believe that Black History Month and other cultural heritage months allow Americans from different backgrounds to feel proud and celebrated. Others also see it as an opportunity to explore connections between different cultures.



*"It helps everyone feel **proud and celebrated.**"*

– Jennifer, age 35-44 Black woman, Democrat, Maryland

*"Because it's good for people to be **proud of their heritage** and also for children to learn."*

– Regina, age 55-64 Hispanic woman, Independent, North Carolina



*"**The celebration of a culture allows for a deeper discussion of its foundations** and make connections to what is happening today. In the United States not only can individual cultures find pride in exploring their past, but **everyone can find out more about how distinct cultures are all connected throughout American history.**"*

– Melvin, age 35-44 multiracial man, Independent, Illinois





Some feel that cultural heritage months based on race and ethnicity accentuate differences and cause divisions in the country.



*"I don't think there should be a month based on race or ethnicity. **History should be inclusive of all races, ethnicity, gender, etc.** I think things like this **create more division.**"*

– Stella, age 25-34 white woman, Republican, Indiana



*"I just don't like it. I don't care if you're black, white, brown, purple. **I don't celebrate what color skin you have.** I want to celebrate who you are as a person."*

– Lorene, age 35-44 white woman, Independent, Kansas



*"It causes **division** and superiority over others."*

– Dexter, age 55-64 Hispanic man, Independent, Georgia



*"America is a melting pot of races and cultures. **If we all want to be recognized by our differences, we cannot unite as a country.** What we all should be is American and be united in that. Every day is American day. All races should be recognized and looked at as equals. **We should be color blind to differences.**"*

–Martha, age 55-64 white woman, Republican, Maine



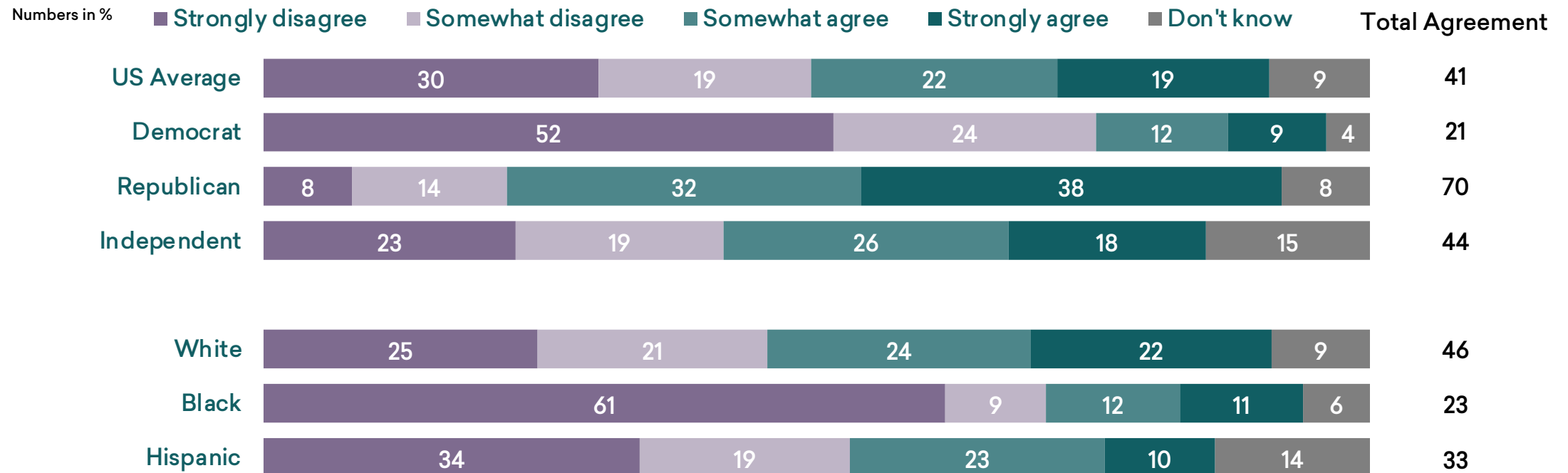
At the same time, Americans are divided in their perception of public attention devoted to Black History Month.





7 in 10 Republicans feel that there is too much focus devoted to Black History Month. Only 2 in 10 Democrats and Black Americans feel the same way.

There is too much attention and focus devoted to Black History Month.

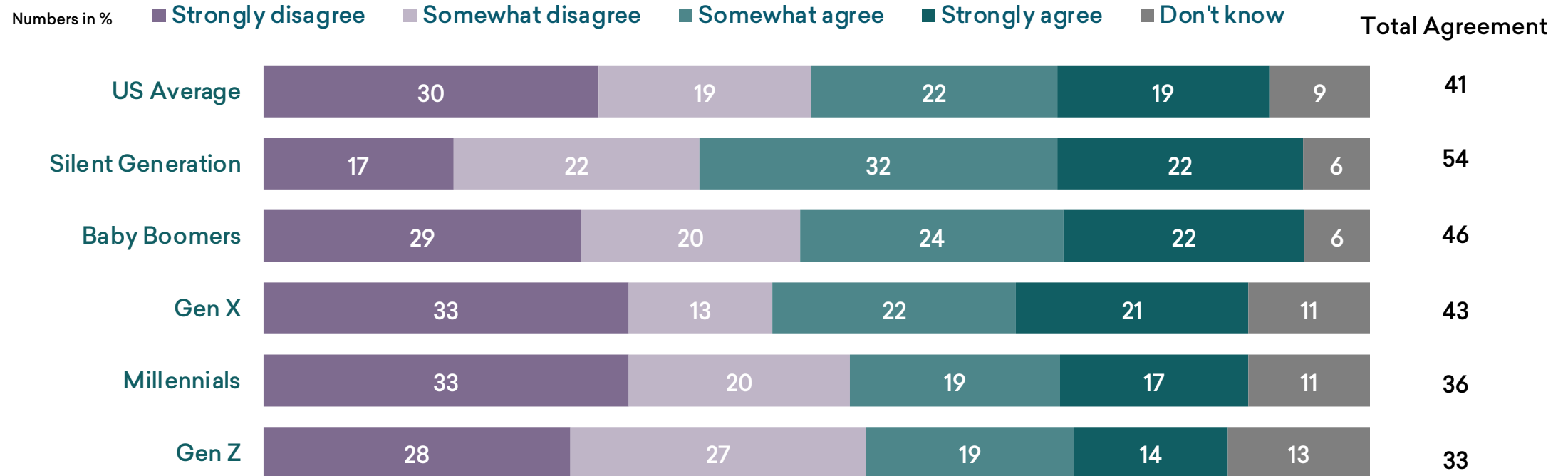


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Older Americans, compared to Gen Z and Millennials, are more likely to feel that there is too much attention on Black History Month.

There is too much attention and focus devoted to Black History Month.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Some feel that American history has traditionally been written from the perspectives of the country's majority groups, and thus focusing on Black History Month and history of minority groups helps familiarize people with histories that are often overlooked in our education and public discussion.



"It raises awareness of groups and histories that weren't previous told from the countries past. We need a way to educate people."

– Tamara, age 35-44 white woman, Independent, Oregon



"I am a white man, 54 years old. History has been taught and disseminated, implicitly and explicitly as nearly entirely white achievements. A celebration of diversity is a rich bound of knowledge to be learned and enjoyed; but such celebration should never be reactionary, with a mind to minimize or marginalize."

– Bob, age 45-54 white man, Independent, North Carolina

"Certain things in history were not taught in school and Black History Month helps make others aware of different cultures. Students are still not being taught the accomplishments of many Black Americans, except the well-known ones."

– Bettie, age 65+ Black woman, Democrat, Georgia





Others feel that while it is important to learn more about the often-overlooked history of Black Americans, in practice Black History Month serves to divide Americans and advance a specific political perspective.



*"I do think **many important Black people have been overlooked by America** and while they do need to be talked about more and taught about in schools, I just don't think we need a month to celebrate them. I think **it creates separatism rather than bringing people together.**"*

– Mildred, age 45-54 white woman, Independent, Illinois



*"I find accomplishments and contributions of Blacks (and all races for that matter) to be American pride. It is **an opportunity to learn about and understand each other.** Unfortunately, like too many things in American society currently, **there seems to be a growing political agenda as opposed to celebration.**"*

– Tobias, age 55-64 white man, Independent, New York



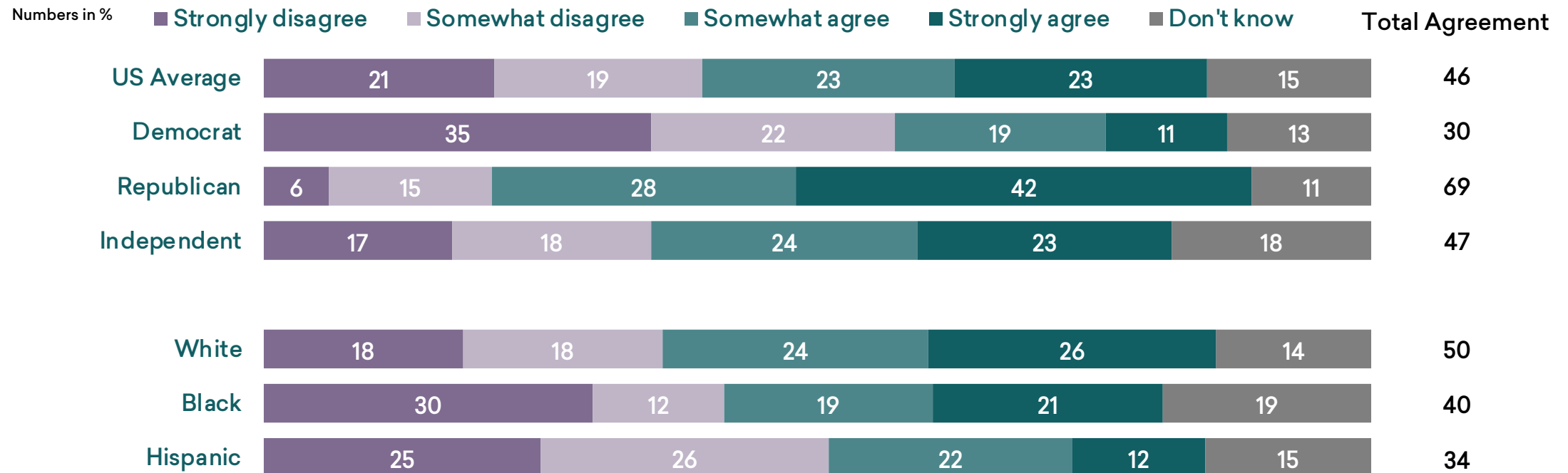
Beneath Americans' divergent views on Black History Month is a deeper disagreement on whether the history of minority groups is given greater priority over a common American history.

While there are significant differences across racial groups, polarization on this topic is most defined by political ideology.



Around half of Americans believe that the history of minority groups is treated as more important than a history of America that emphasizes a common identity. Almost 7 in 10 Republicans feel the same way, compared to 3 in 10 Democrats.

The history of minority groups in America is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity.

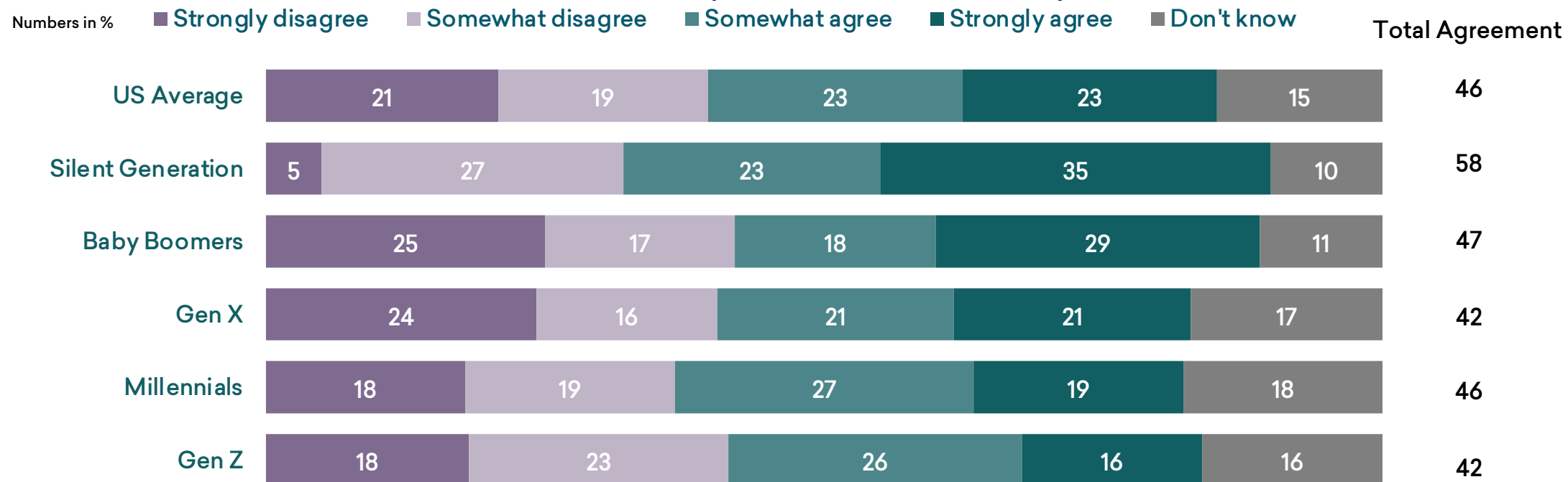


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Americans from each generation are divided on their perceptions of whether the history of minority groups is given priority.

The history of minority groups in America is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common

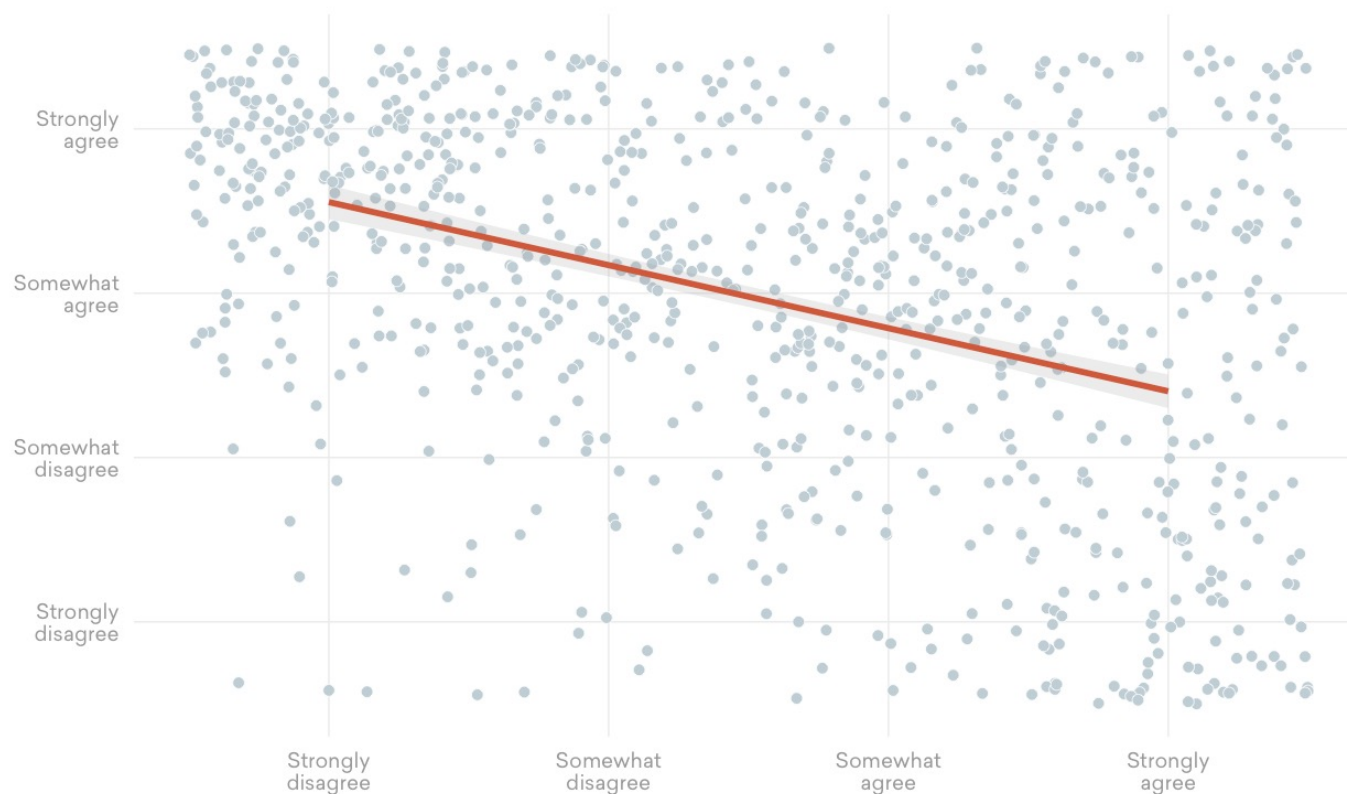


Perceptions of whether the history of minority groups is given greater priority strongly correlates with attitudes towards Black History Month.



Americans who believe that the history of minority groups is given greater priority are **less likely** to agree that it is important to observe Black History Month.

It is important for Americans to observe Black History Month.

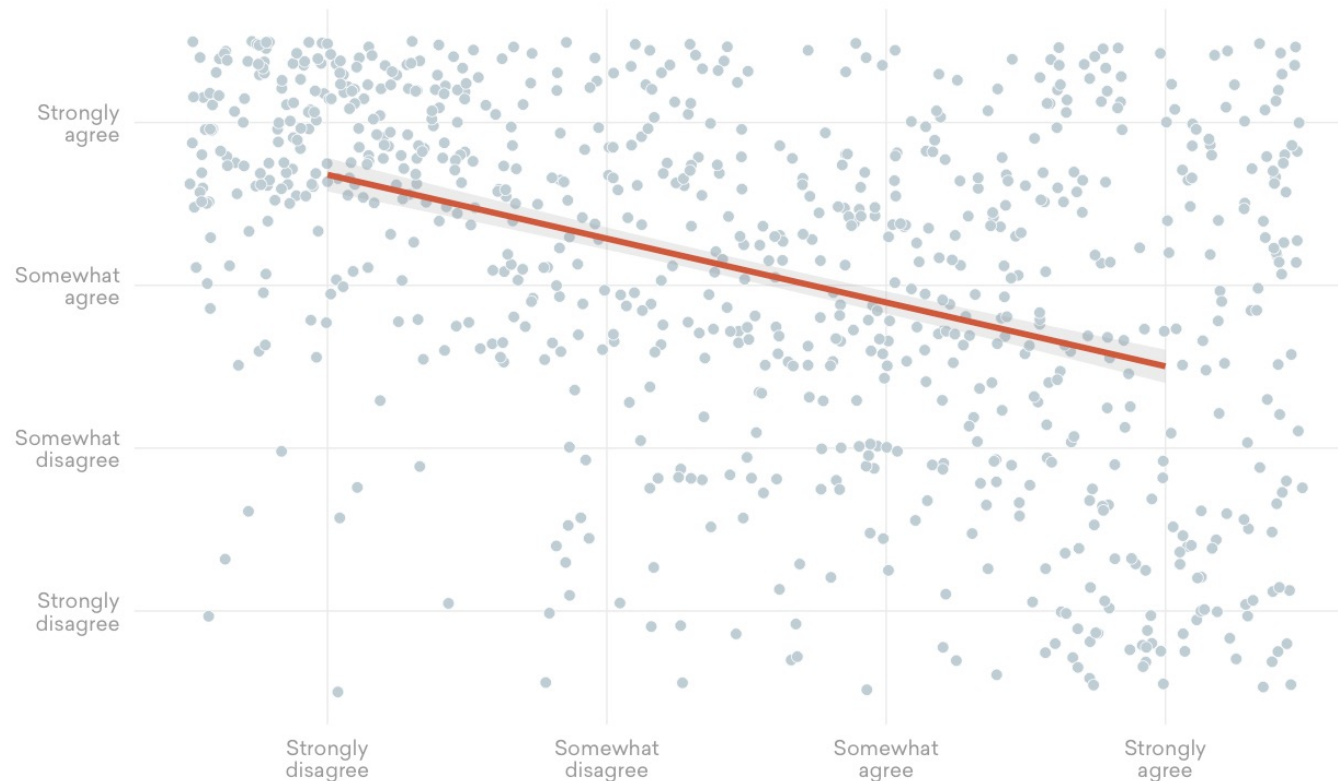


The history of minority groups in America is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity



Americans who believe that the history of minority groups is given greater priority are **less likely** to support incorporating Black history into their local school's curriculum.

I support having Black history as a dedicated part of my local school's history curriculum.



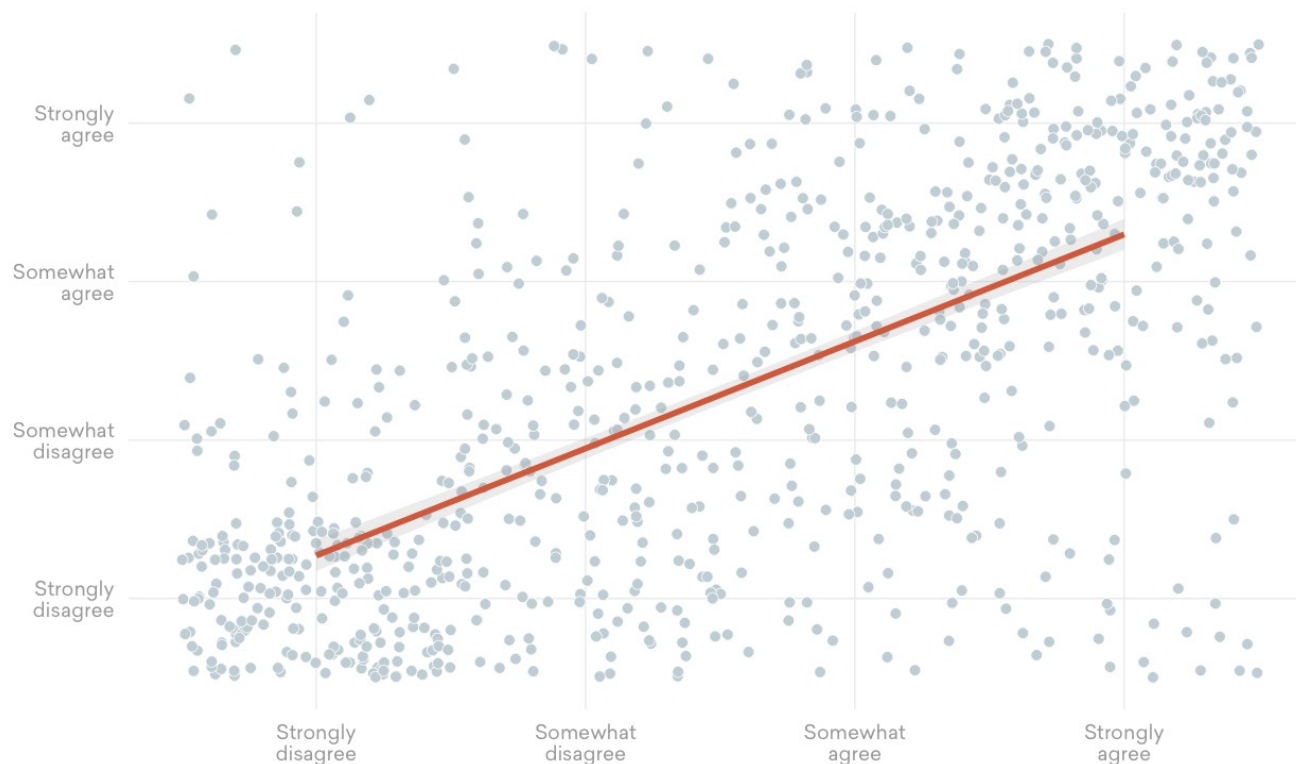
The history of minority groups in America is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity.

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Americans who believe that the history of minority groups is given greater priority are **more likely** to say there is too much attention devoted to Black History Month.

There is too much attention and focus devoted to Black History Month.



The history of minority groups in America is treated as more important than the history of America that emphasizes a common identity.

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common

Some feel excluded by the efforts that focus on the history of Black Americans and other minority groups. Others think that cultural heritage months only focus on the history of oppression and racism.



*"I believe that the **promoting of one group over others** is what contributes to the divisiveness of our country."*

– Dale, age 65+ white man,
Independent, Missouri

*"I **would feel unwelcome** to a black history celebration in my city."*

– Dolores, age 45-54 white woman,
Republican, Delaware



*"Calling a race of people oppressed or marginalized ingrains in those people's minds that they are **incapable of being successful.**"*

– Joshua, age 18-24 white man,
Republican, Michigan



*"**Cultural heritage months only focus on negative history.**"*

– Amelia, age 35-44 white woman,
Independent, California



At the same time, some Americans believe that Black History Month precisely helps complicate the narratives of Black history and elevate stories that capture the diversity of Black experiences in America, beyond the history of slavery or the civil rights era.



*"I think we should start learning more about the **unsung heroes**. Not just MLK and Malcolm X every year."*

– Jennifer, age 35-44 Black woman, Democrat, Maryland



*"I ultimately want to see a little **more versus the traditional teaching** of people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks."*

– Delbert, age 18-24 Black man, Democrat, Pennsylvania

*"**There are many stories that are not known** that tell a different story about Black culture in America other than that of a victim."*

– Melvin, age 35-44 multiracial man, Independent, Illinois



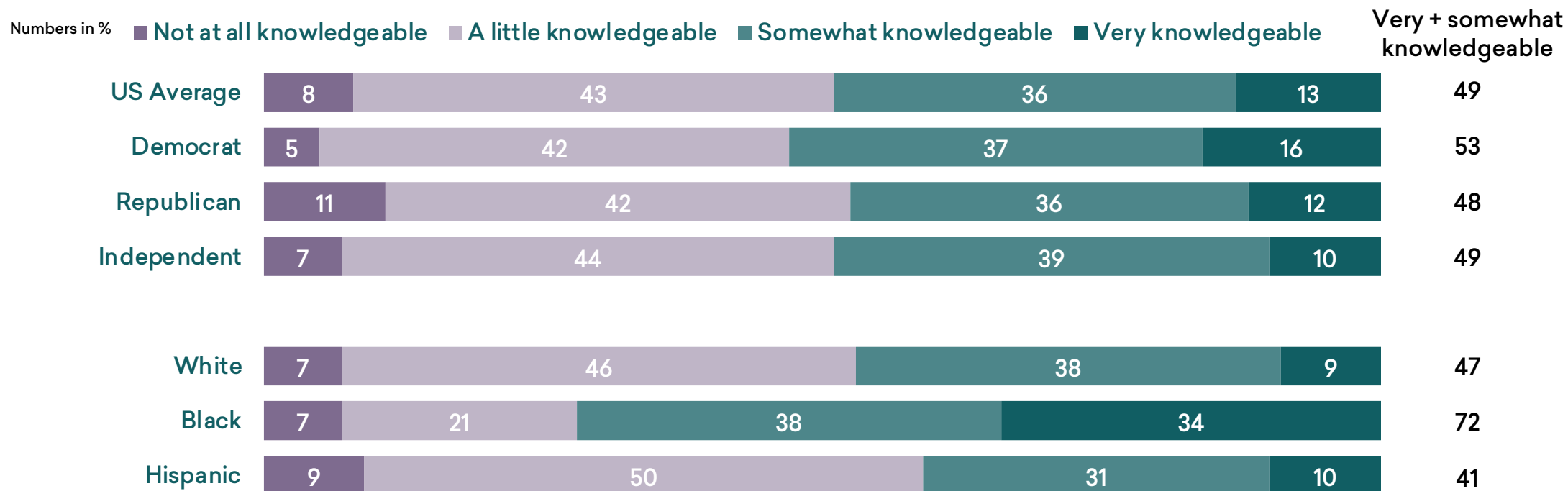


Challenge: Increasing Americans' Knowledge on Black History



Only around half of Americans say that they are at least somewhat knowledgeable when it comes to Black history. Black Americans are more confident in their knowledge of Black history.

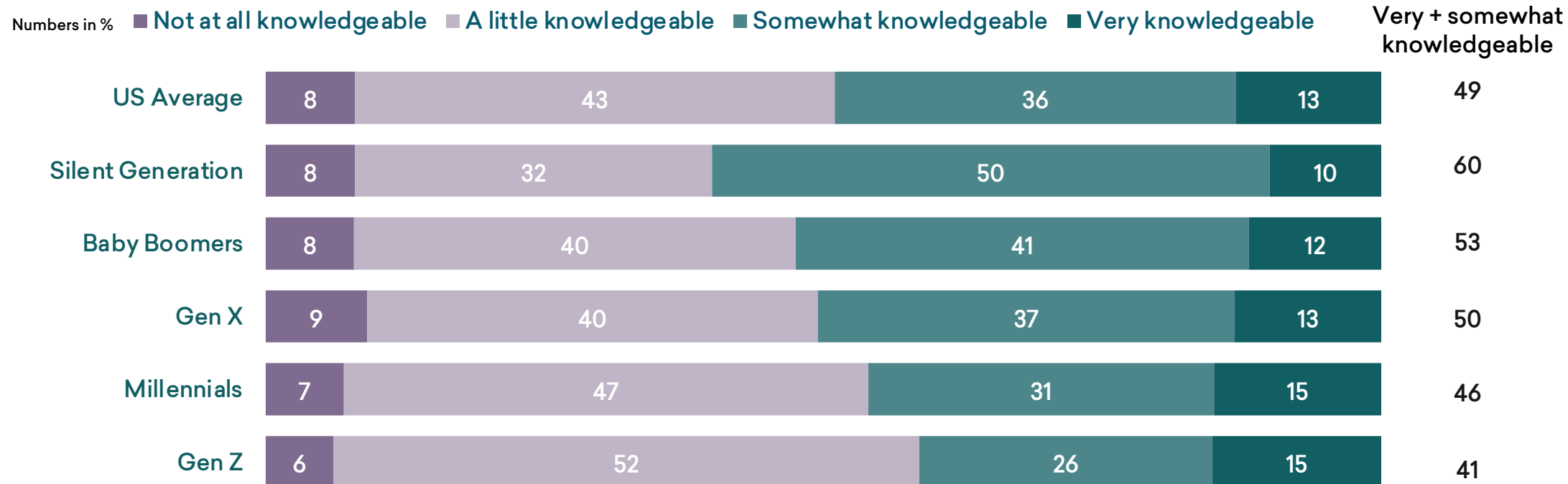
When it comes to the history of Black Americans in the US, do you consider yourself...?





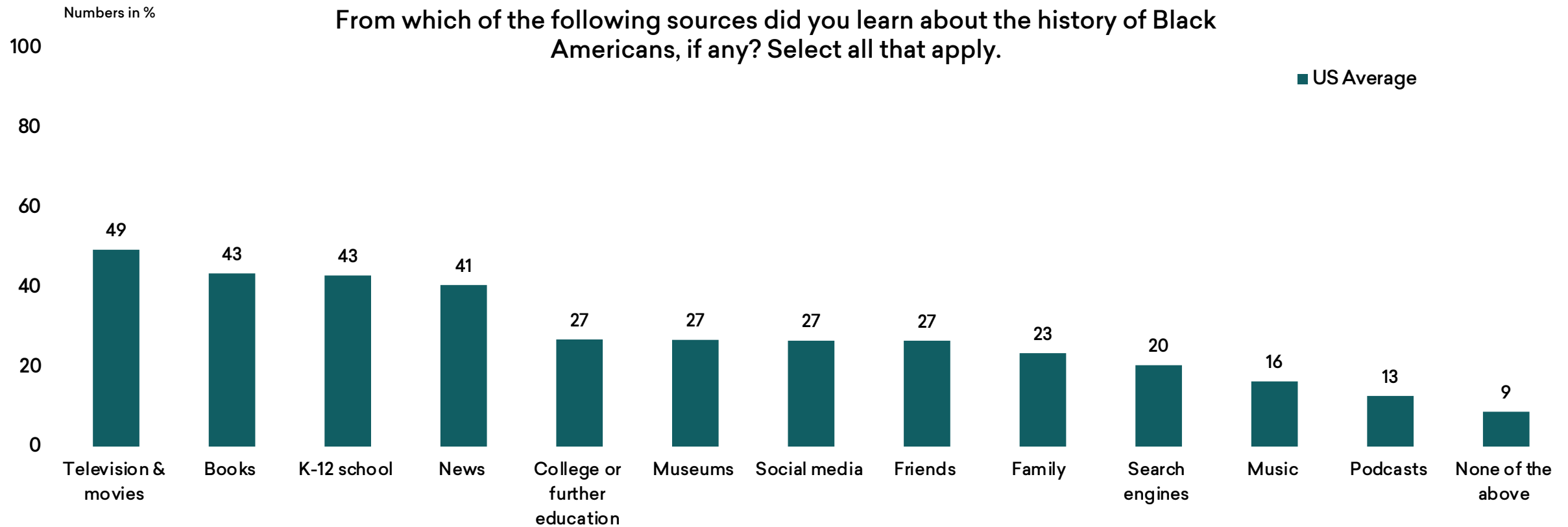
Americans across generation do not feel confident in their knowledge of the history of Black Americans.

When it comes to the history of Black Americans in the US, do you consider yourself...?



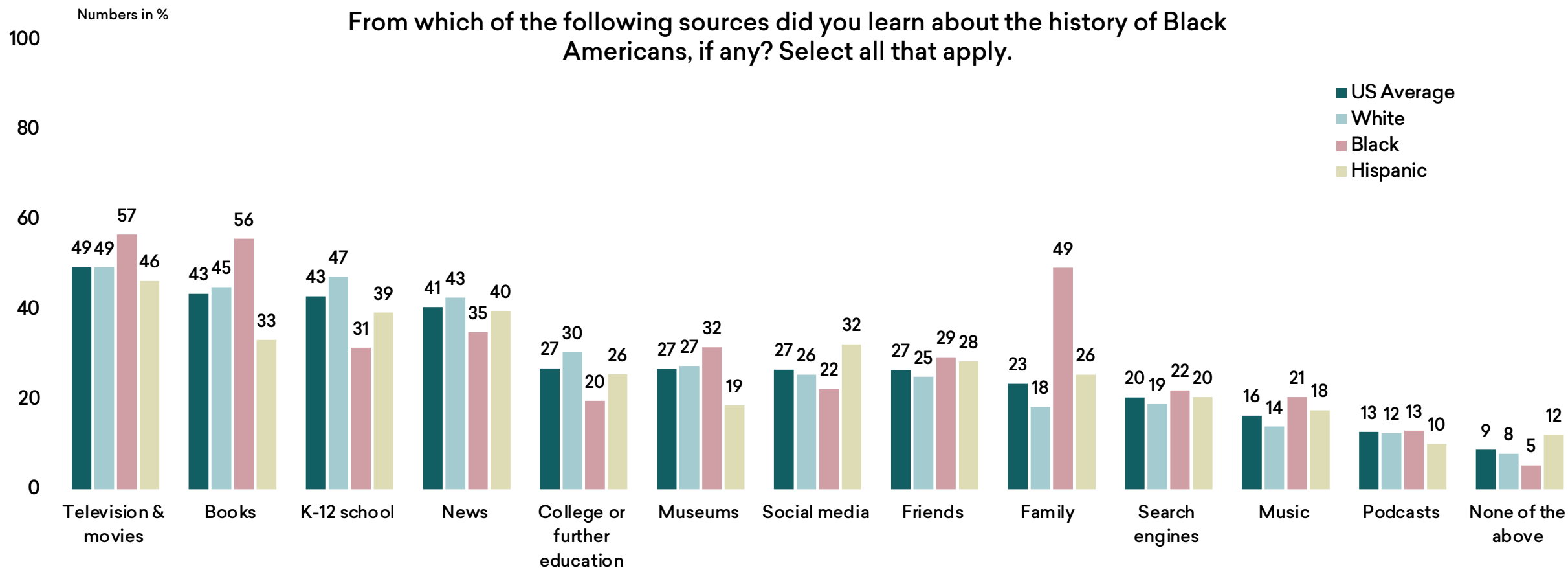


Americans are most likely to say that they learned Black history from TV and movies, followed by books and K-12 school.





Black Americans are much more likely than other groups to cite family as a common source for learning about Black history.





Americans' lack of familiarity with Black history suggests an opportunity for schools to bolster their history education.

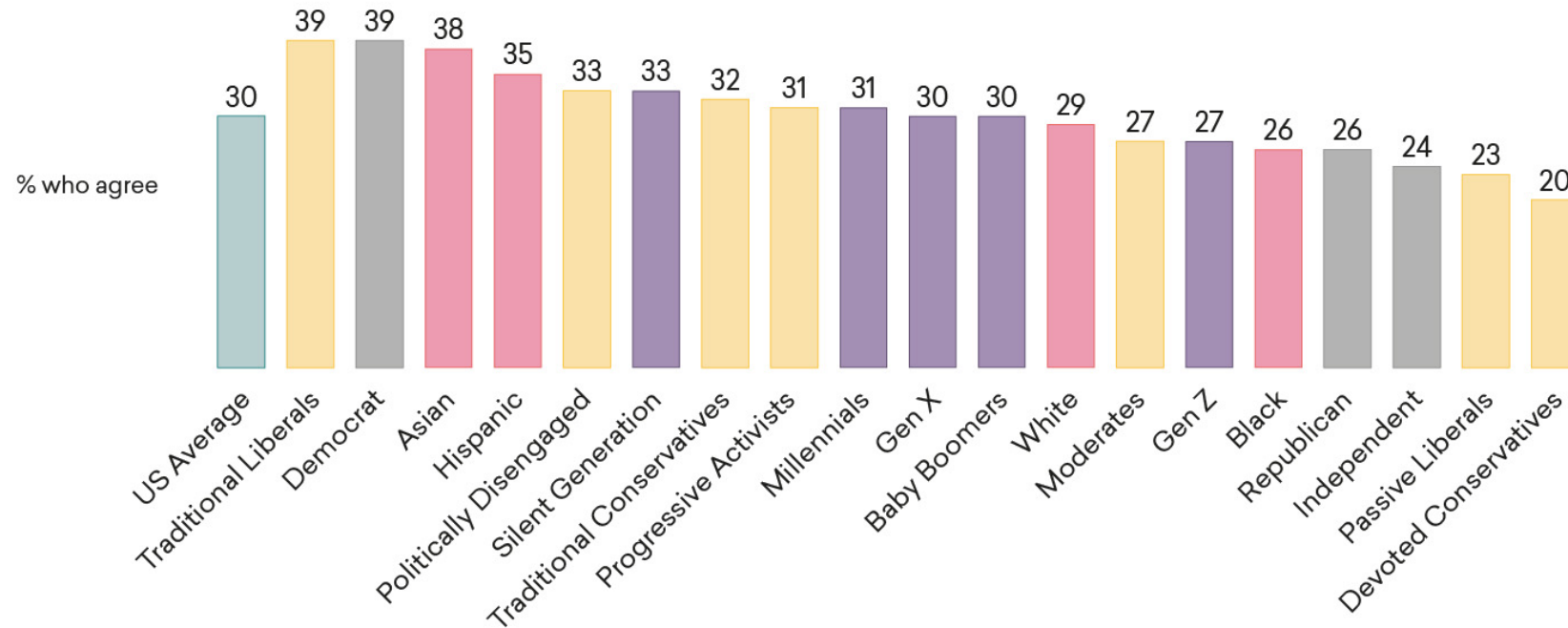
However, our *Defusing the History Wars* study found that most Americans do not trust education officials to design a politically-neutral history curriculum. Most also have little confidence in schools to teach American history without bias.



Only 30% of Americans trust their education officials to be politically neutral when designing a curriculum.

I trust education officials in my state to be politically neutral in how they design the curriculum.

- US average
- Hidden Tribe
- Generation
- Race
- Political party



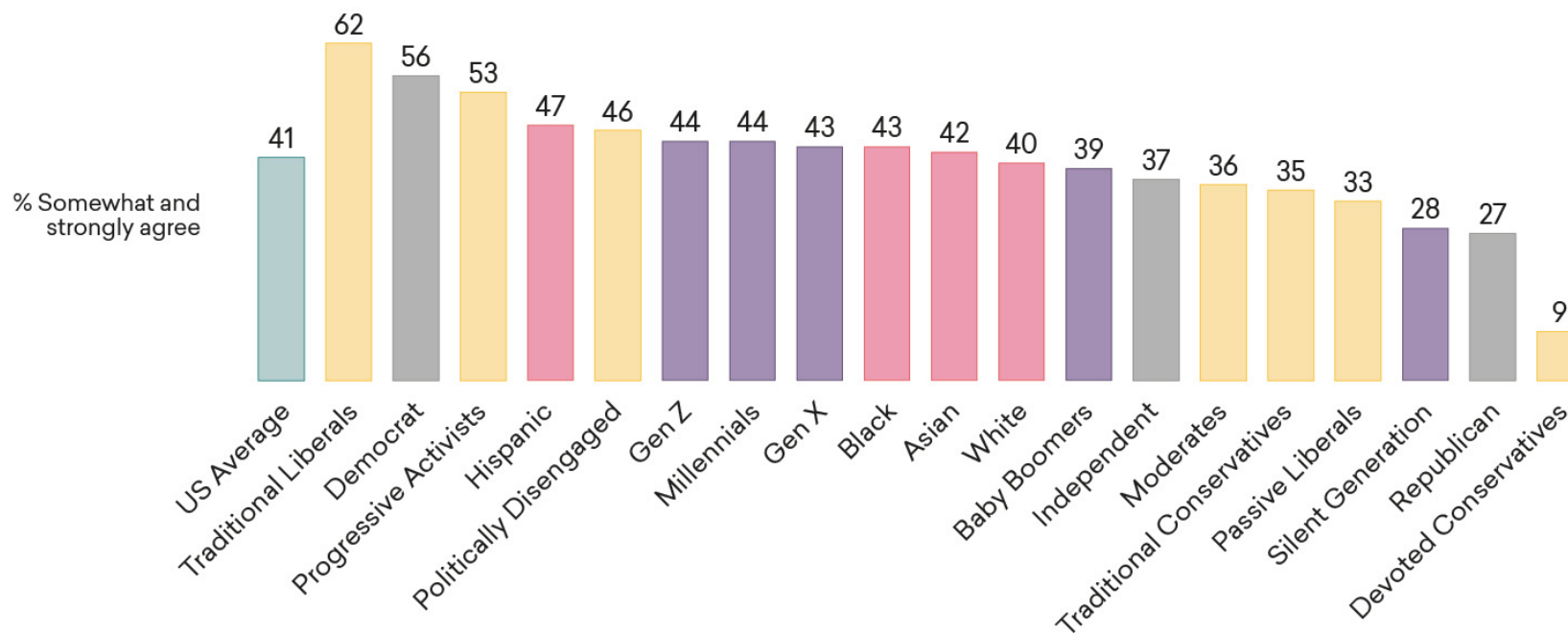
Question: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?
Source: More in Common



Only 41% of Americans believe that public schools are teaching an accurate and unbiased account of American history.

Most public schools in America are doing their best to teach American history accurately, without an agenda or bias.

- US average
- Hidden Tribe
- Generation
- Race
- Political party



Question: Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.
Source: More in Common



Increasing Americans' knowledge on the history of Black Americans presents a significant challenge given how Americans are divided on the degree of emphasis currently given to the history of minority groups and the widespread concerns about efforts to politicize education.

Addressing this situation requires new ways of communicating and engaging across lines of difference.



Recommendations





The broad support for critically examining the past and learning the history of different racial groups suggests that there are opportunities to deepen Americans' knowledge of the country's shared history while also incorporating the diversity and distinct nature of specific groups' experiences.



The tension over which histories are given priority underscores the urgent need for effective communication and engagement that:

1. Challenges a binary, zero-sum mindset where a focus on the history of minority group comes at the expense of the history of a shared identity.
2. Builds cross cutting coalitions to support events that celebrate or observe Black History Month within but also outside of the settings of schools and higher education.
3. Emphasizes engagement with our history and observing cultural heritage as an act of patriotism and source of pride.
4. Highlights the efforts of cultural heritage months that elevate stories of resilience, progress, success, and humanity, as well as stories of oppression and harm



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