

Americans' Memories of the Civil Rights Movement

American Identity Research Project

August 2022

INTRODUCTION

The civil rights movement is one of the most lauded historical events and political movements across the US and around the world; yet, almost 60 years after the historical March on Washington on August 28, 1963, we are still reeling with “the jangling discords of our nation” and feel so far away from turning it into “a beautiful symphony of brotherhood” – a transformation Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had hoped for in his “I Have a Dream” speech. We see divisions spreading to debates on our common identity, intensified by increasingly vitriolic exchanges among politicians and pundits on which stories of America deserve to be told.

Our data finds another story. Despite our many disagreements, most Americans share a deep appreciation for the civil rights movement and the values of freedom and equality the movement epitomizes. Beneath the news headlines on debates around the teaching of American history, Americans share a common desire to have our students learn more about the Civil Rights Movement – not only the progress, but also the struggles and obstacles that activists faced.

The anniversary of the March on Washington is an opportunity to revisit one of the most famous events of the movement, but also to highlight our shared recognition of the importance of learning more and honoring the era. It is our hope that this report provides another angle of how we can commemorate the past, and that amidst the “jangling discords” of our times, we find more lasting choruses of commonality and respite.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Most Americans highly value and celebrate the civil rights movement and see it as advancing freedom and equality for the country.

The movement is also widely seen as an **important example of Americans exercising their right to protest** (80%).

When asked to select a historical period whose values Americans should embrace nowadays, around **one-third of Americans want the country to embody the civil rights era.**

When asked about personal impacts, there is some variation across racial groups. 77% of Black Americans agree that the civil rights movement **advanced equality for people like them**, compared to around 67% of Asian Americans, 57% of Hispanic Americans and 37% of white Americans.

2. Americans appear to lack robust knowledge and shared memories of the era.

When asked to list important events from the civil rights movement, many Americans can only identify around three events or individuals. The most commonly cited events or figures include Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, *Brown v Board of Education*, Montgomery March, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the March on Washington.

Americans are less likely to recall other activists or campaigns, or events where efforts of the movement encountered pushback or violence.

Overall, most Americans associate the civil rights movement with non-violent protests (68%) and sit-ins (68%) and are less likely to associate with riots and violence.

3. There is a broad agreement on the importance of teaching more about the history of the civil rights movement.

Most Americans say it is important for students to **learn more about the civil rights movement beyond the stories of Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks** (77%). This consensus extends across the political spectrum

Meanwhile, there is appetite for teaching the history of the era in its fullness. Most agree that “it’s important that every American student **learn about the progress** made by civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, **as well as their struggles and the obstacles** they faced.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative National Surveys

Results are shown as “US Average”.

American Identity Survey 1

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with N=2,500 adult US citizens from May 17 to June 3, 2022. 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 +/- 1.96 for the US average and is higher for subgroups.

Civil Rights Movement Survey

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with N=1,000 adult US citizens and an additional oversample of n=50 Asian Americans from August 2 to August 8, 2022. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 for the US average and is higher for subgroups.

The survey also included open-ended survey questions. Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged in the presentation. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent, since survey respondents provided multiple answers to each question.

Qualitative Research

Americans in Conversation

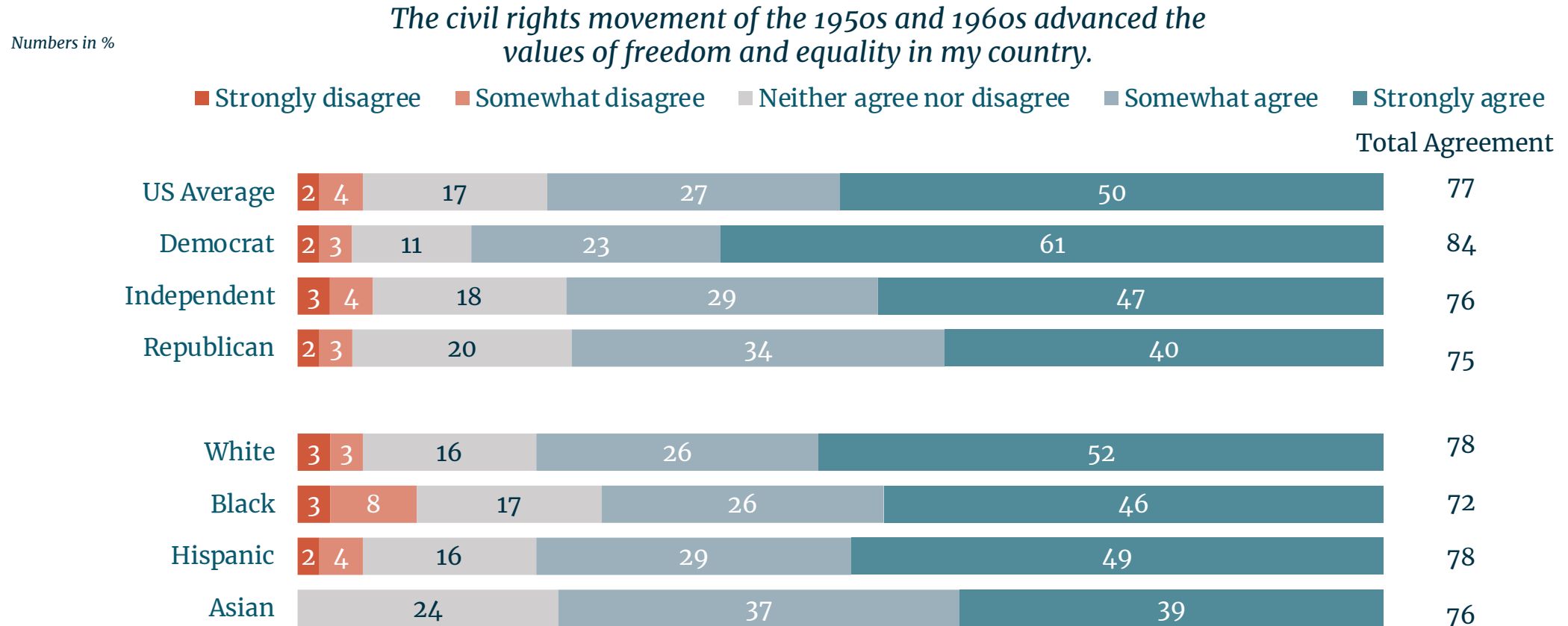
In 2022, More in Common stood up an online community representative of the American general population. From March 11 to March 21, we engaged these respondents in an activity similar to a focus group about their views on American history. A total of N=257 American respondents completed the activity. Quotes from the respondents are included in this report.

Where provided, names have been changed to protect the privacy of the respondent.

Significance

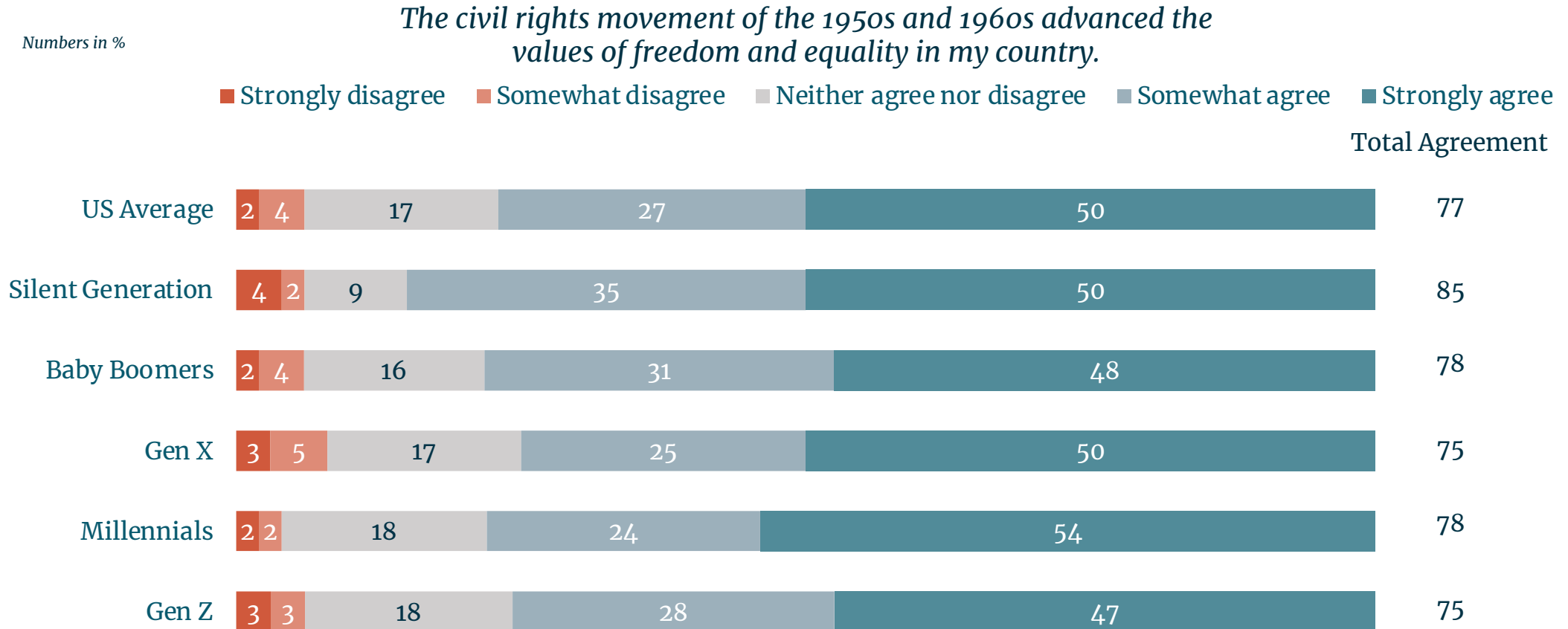
For most Americans, the civil rights movement advanced the values of freedom and equality in the US and was an important example of Americans exercising their right to protest.

Around 8 in 10 Americans, regardless of political affiliation and racial background, believe that the civil rights movement advanced the values of freedom and equality.



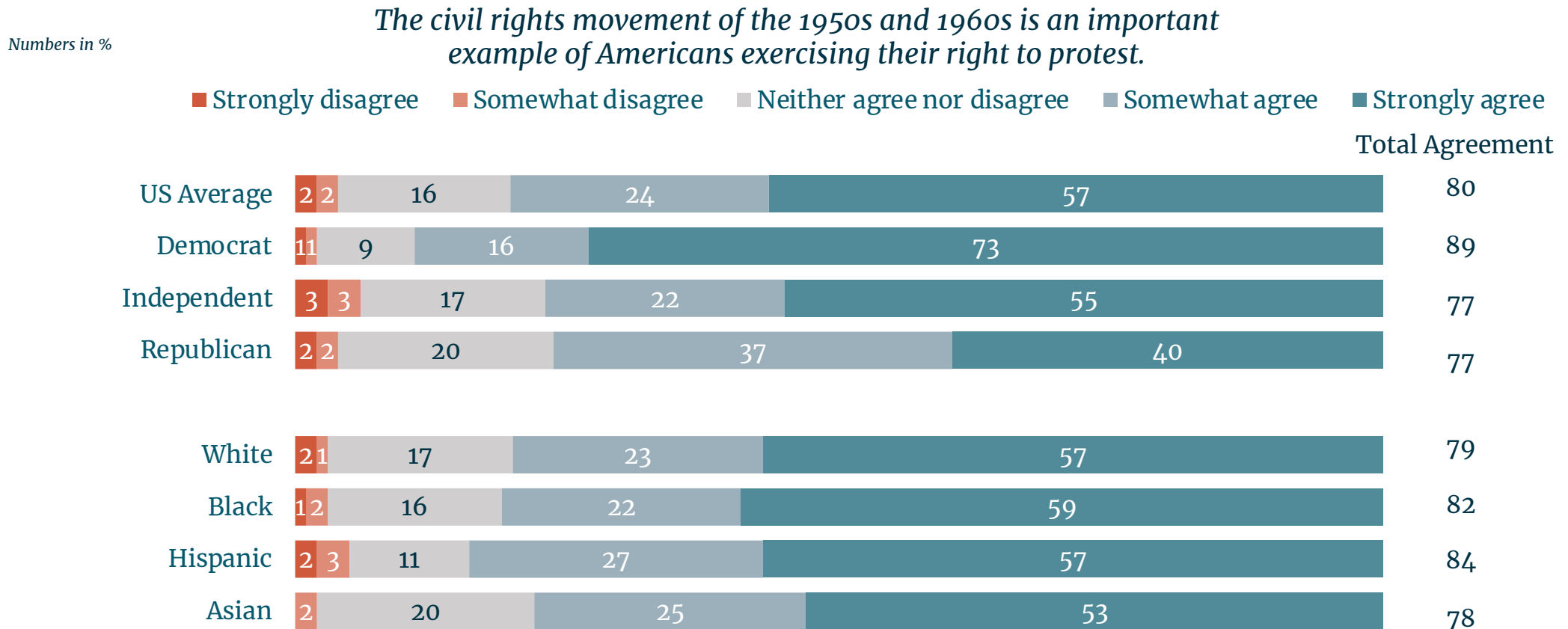
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

There is broad agreement across generations that the Civil Rights Movement advanced freedom and equality.



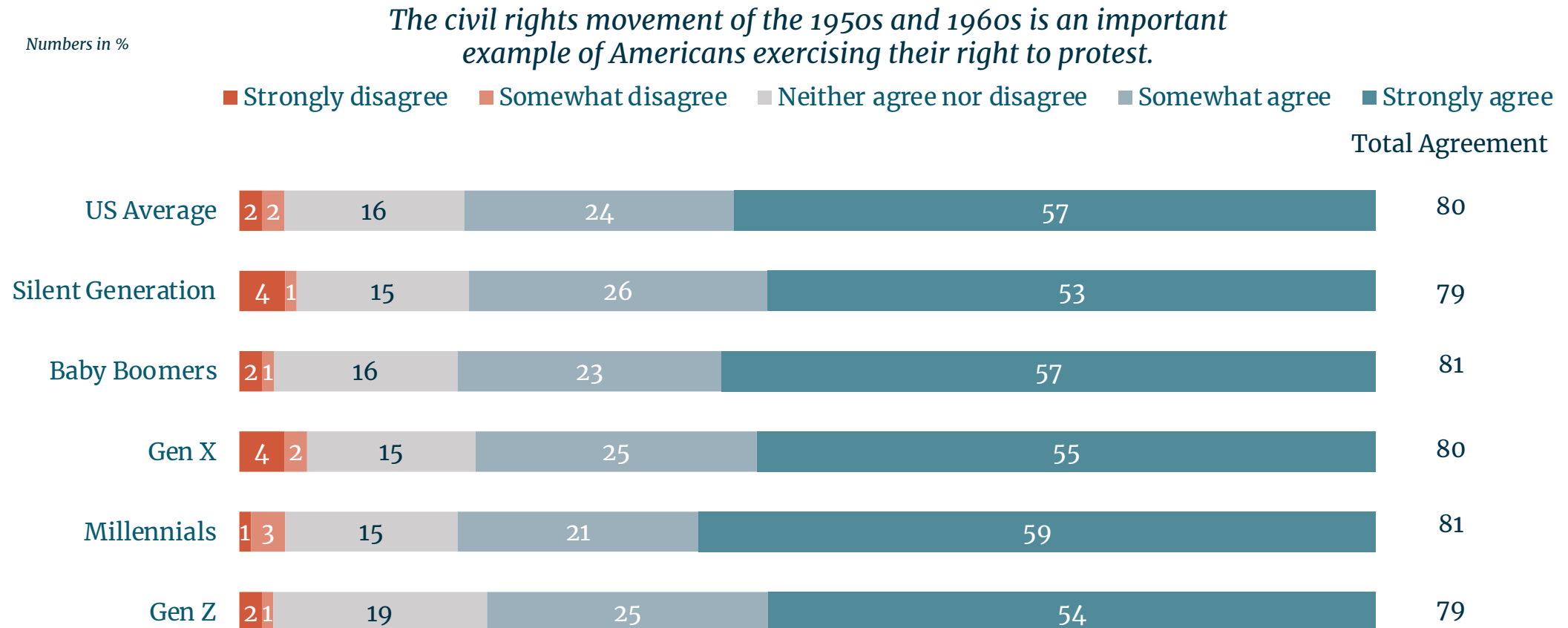
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

8 in 10 Americans believe that the civil rights movement is an important example of Americans exercising their right to protest. Democrats are much more likely to strongly agree.



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

There is little variation across generations that the civil rights movement is an important example of Americans exercising their right to protest.



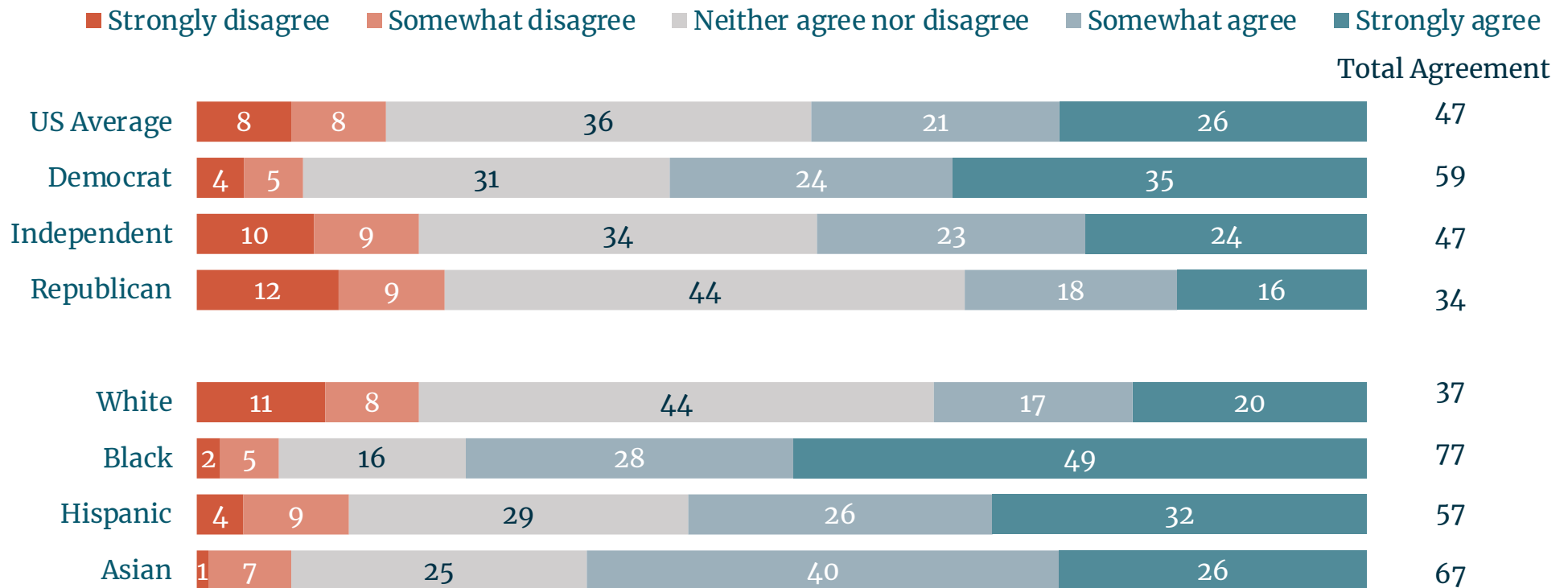
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Black Americans are most likely to say that the civil rights movement advanced equality for people similar to them.

Almost 8 in 10 Black Americans agree that the civil rights movement advanced equality for people similar to them.

Numbers in %

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s advanced equality for people like me.



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

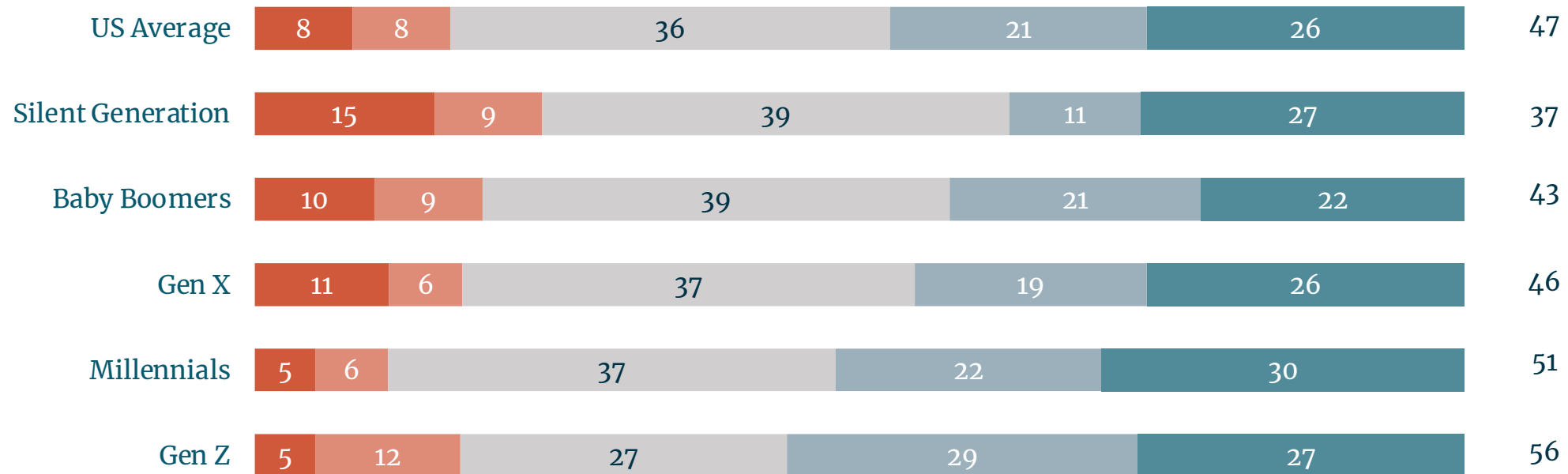
Americans from younger generation are more likely to say that the civil rights movement advanced equality for people like them.

Numbers in %

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s advanced equality for people like me.

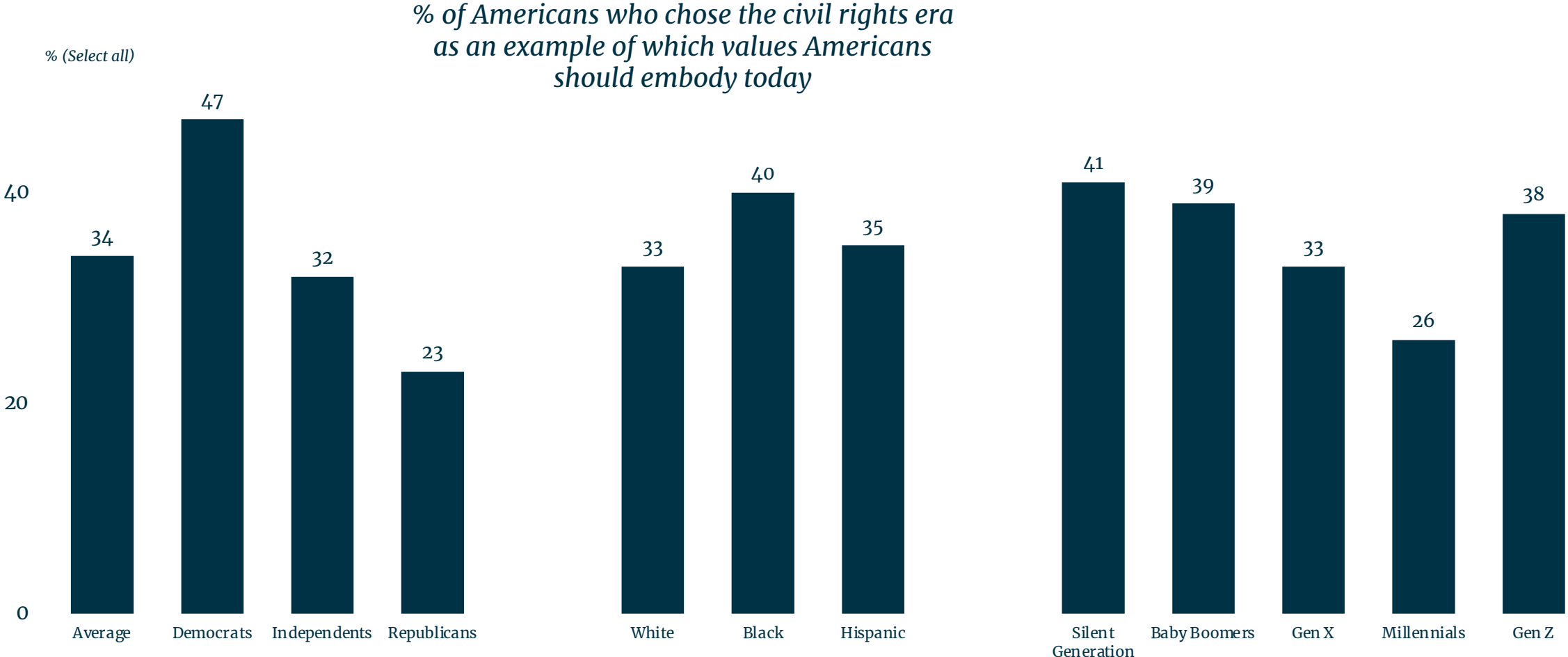
■ Strongly disagree
 ■ Somewhat disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Somewhat agree
 ■ Strongly agree

Total Agreement



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

One-third of Americans feel that Americans today should embody the values from the civil rights era. Almost half of Democrats and 2 in 5 Black Americans, Baby Boomers, and Gen Z feel the same way.



Survey question: Which of the following eras provides an example of which values Americans should embody today, if any?

For some Americans, the Civil Rights Movement represented the values of equality and justice that they wish to see in the country nowadays. Others highlighted that they hoped the country would adopt the era's emphasis on peace and nonviolence.

A lot of the injustices of the Civil Rights era remain. It would be a great thing if Americans could continue to advocate for equality and peace and not be afraid to confront and educate.

– Kermit, age 35–44 Black male, Progressive Activist, Pennsylvania

I think I would like to see more Americans embodying values of equity, equality, and justice to address issues of discrimination (on different issues like race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, gender, sex, income, age, genetic information, etc.) that have either yet to be addressed or are lacking in how they're addressed in practice.

– Carmela, age 25–34 Asian female, Traditional Liberal, Washington

The Civil Rights era has taught people how to love and how to be equal and righteous in whatever we do. I think it is a lesson for everyone to have, hold, and keep.

– Wilma, age 55–64 Black female, Traditional Conservative, New Jersey

The Civil Rights era because people were protesting without violence.

– Delores, age 45–54 White female, Moderate, Arizona

I wish that as a nation we would embrace the desire for equal rights for all people as was felt during the Civil Rights era.

– Dale, age 65+ White male, Moderate, Missouri

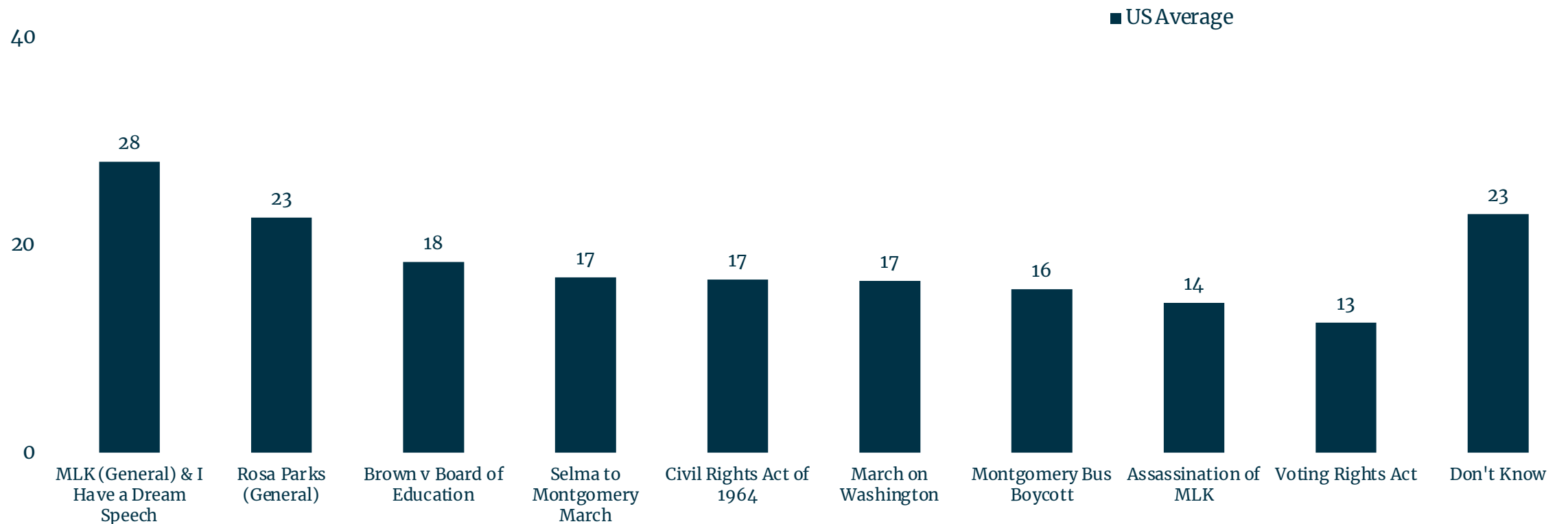
Survey question: Which of the following eras provides an example of which values Americans should embody today, if any? Please explain your answer below.

Memories of the Civil Rights Movement

When prompted to think about the civil rights movement, Americans recall Dr. King and the “I Have A Dream” speech, Rosa Parks, the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, and famous marches. Many Americans cannot name five important events.

Numbers in %

In the spaces provided below, please list the FIVE most important events of the Civil Rights Movement, in your opinion. You may list them as they come to mind, in any order [Open-ended].

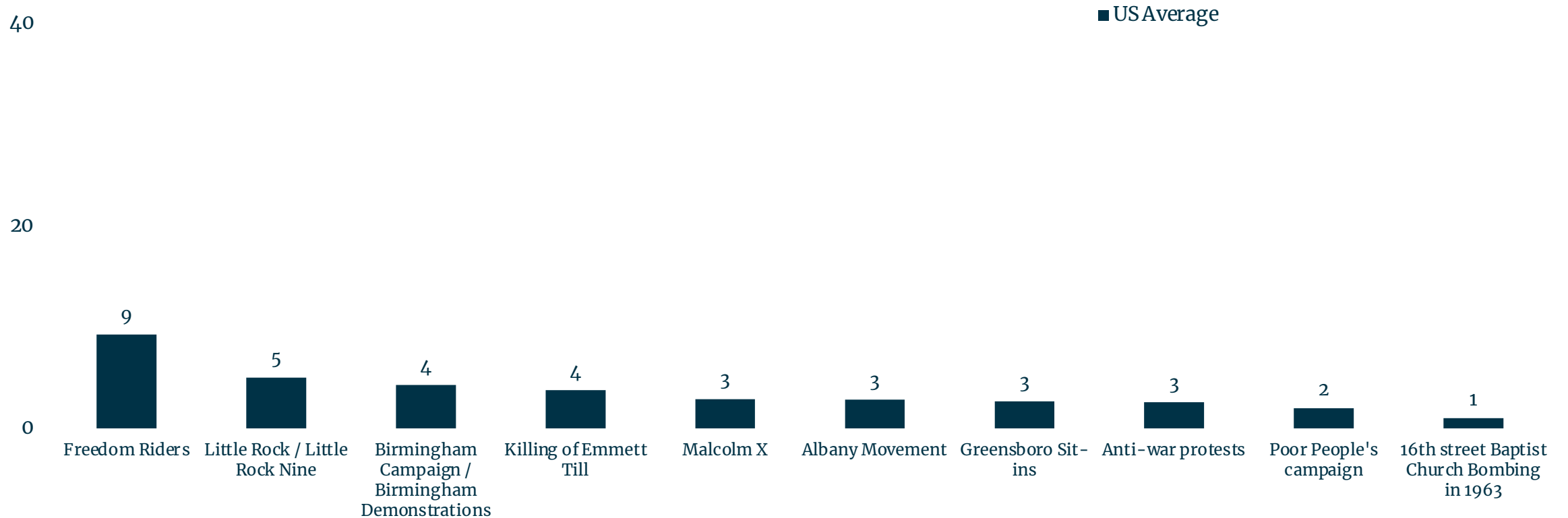


Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: “Other” responses: 47%.

Many fewer Americans mention other marches organized by Dr. King, such as the Birmingham Campaign and Poor People’s campaign, or events where efforts of the movement encountered pushback or violence, such as the Little Rock Crisis or the 16th street Baptist Church Bombing.

Numbers in %

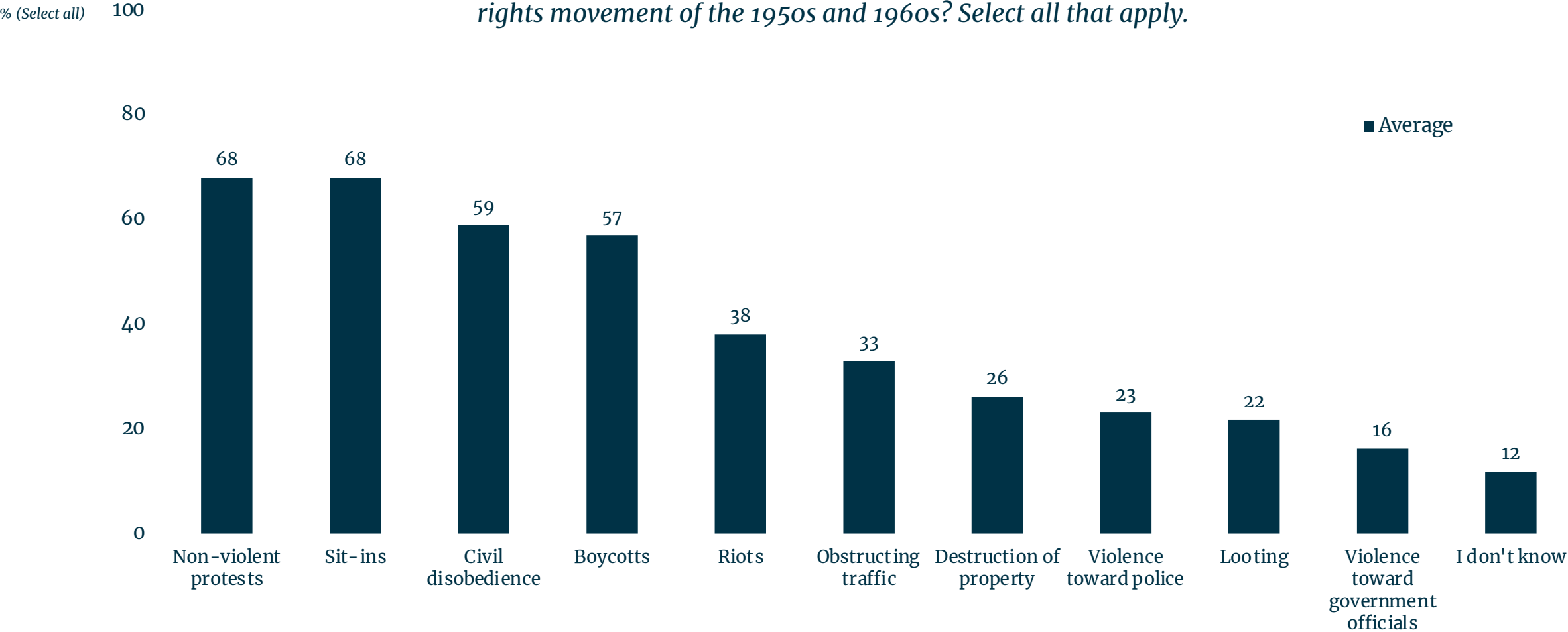
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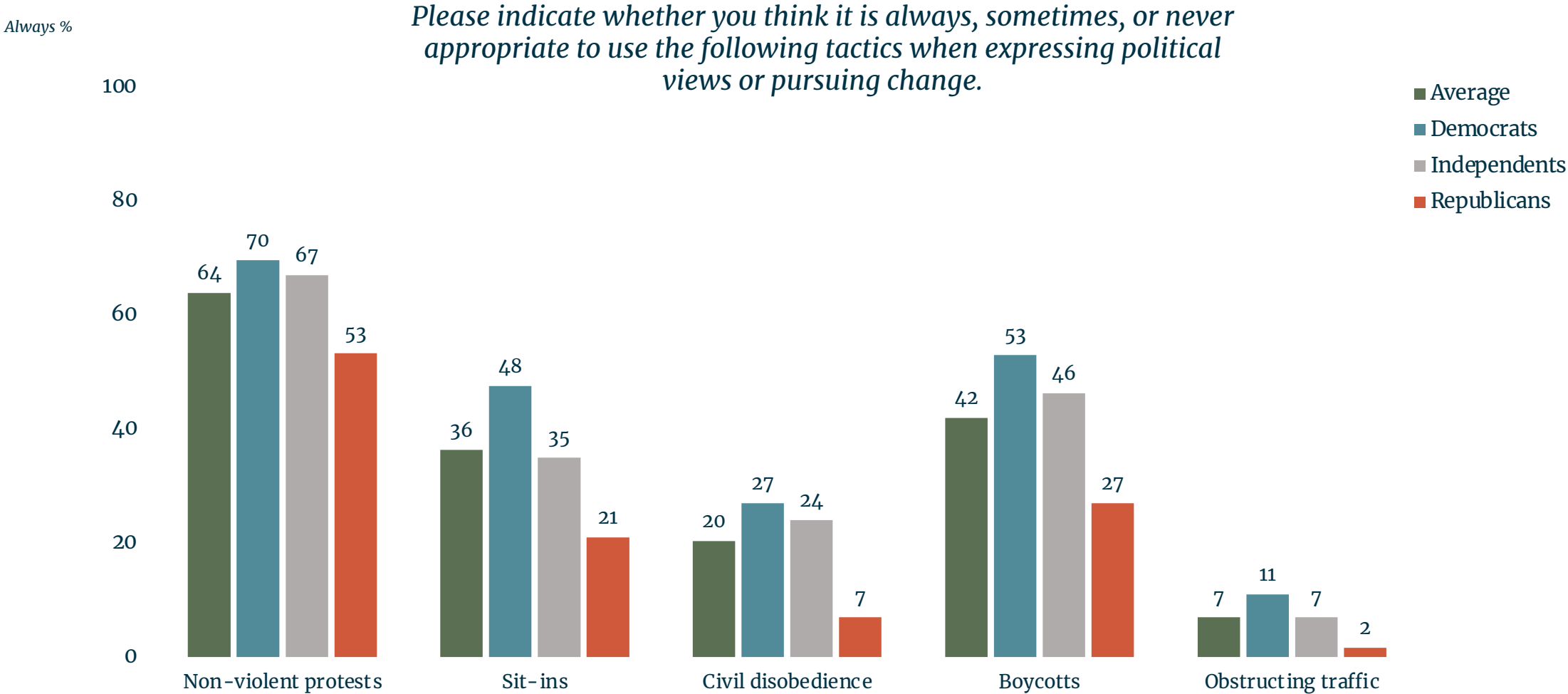
The majority of Americans associate the civil rights movement with non-violent protests, sit-ins, civil disobedience and boycotts; less so with riots, obstructing traffic, and violence.

Which of the following tactics or actions are associated with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Select all that apply.



Attitudes towards Protests

Most Americans believe that non-violent protests are *always* appropriate for expressing political views or pursuing change. Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to see other non-violent measures, such as boycotts and sit-ins, as always appropriate.

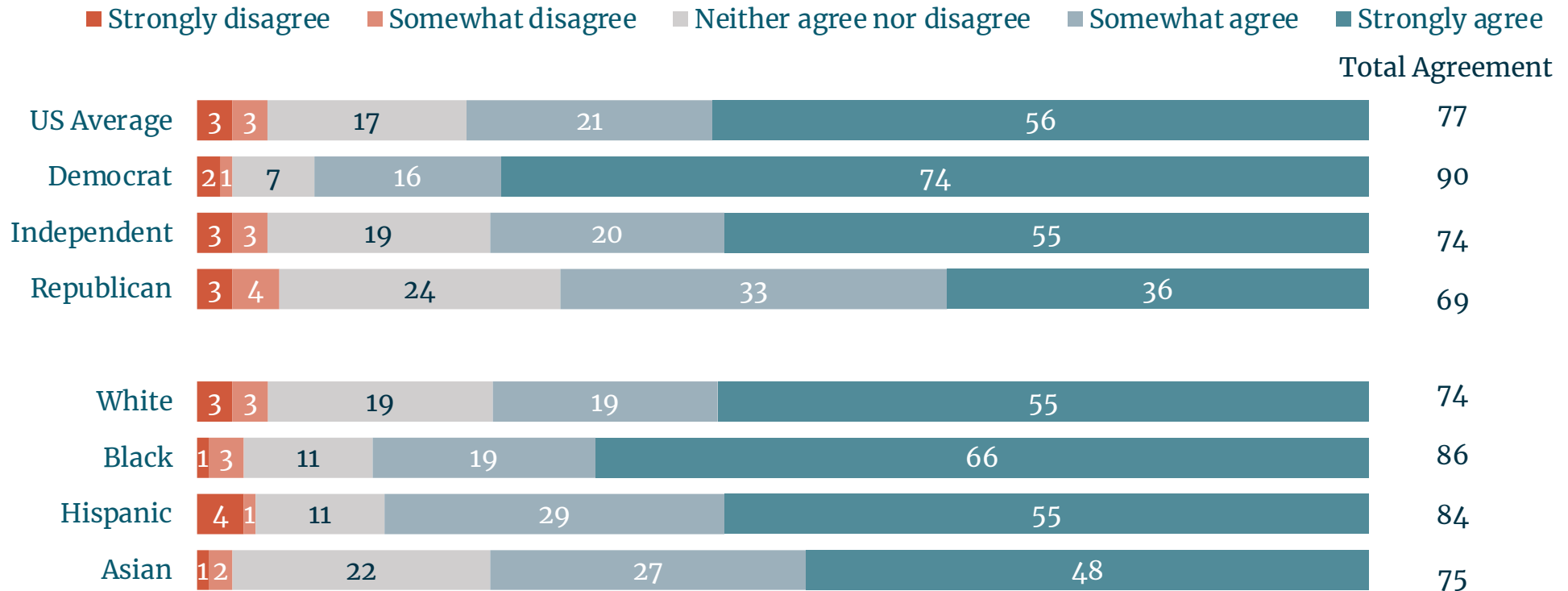


Teaching the History of the Civil Rights Movement

The majority of Americans agree that students should learn more about the civil rights movement beyond the stories of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Democrats are most likely to strongly agree.

It's important that every American student learn more about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s beyond the stories of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.

Numbers in %

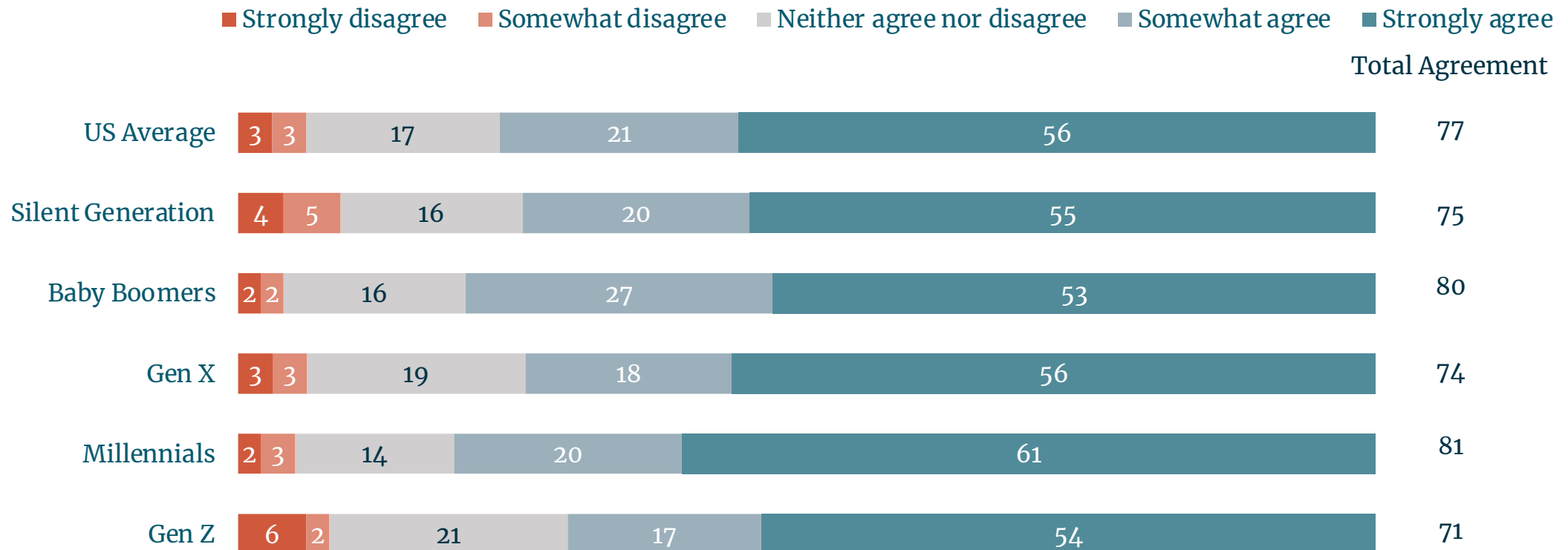


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Americans across generations share broad support for students learning more about the civil rights movement.

It's important that every American student learn more about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s beyond the stories of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.

Numbers in %

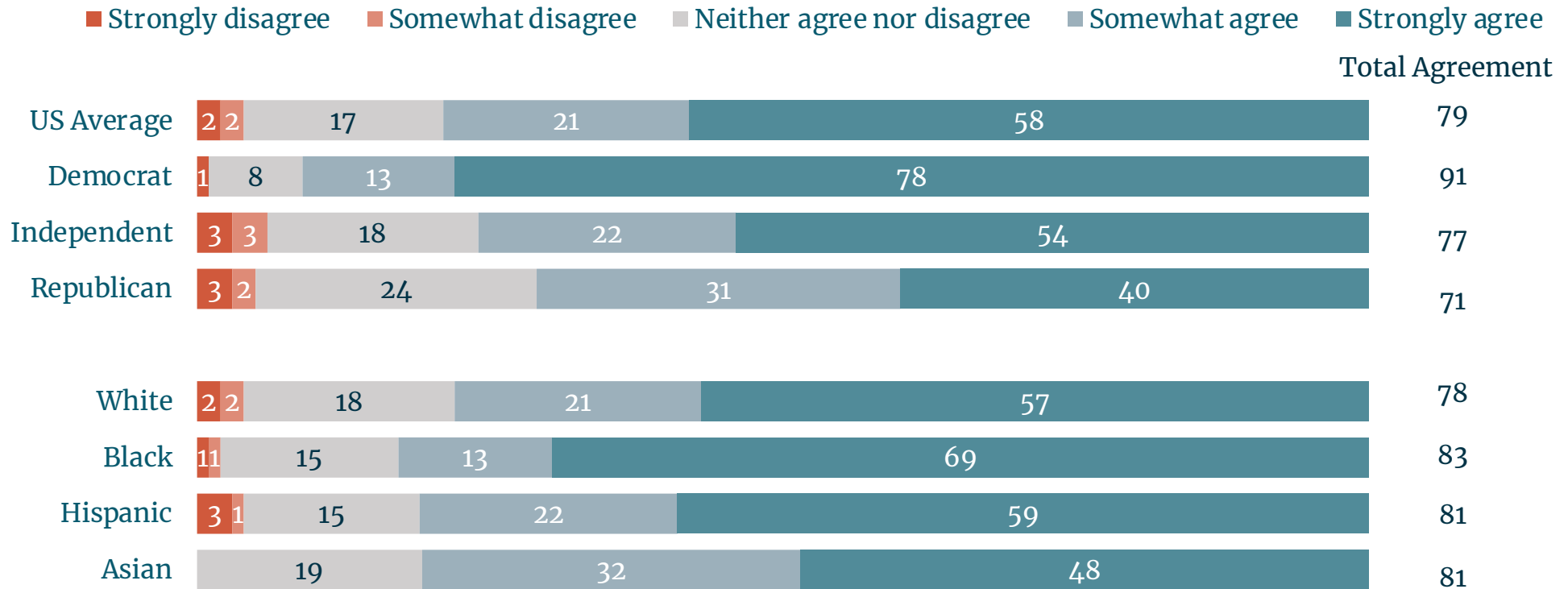


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Most Americans also think that students should learn about both the progress and the obstacles that civil rights activists encountered. Almost 8 in 10 Democrats and 7 in 10 Black Americans strongly agree.

It's important that every American student learn about the progress made by civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as their struggles and the obstacles they faced.

Numbers in %

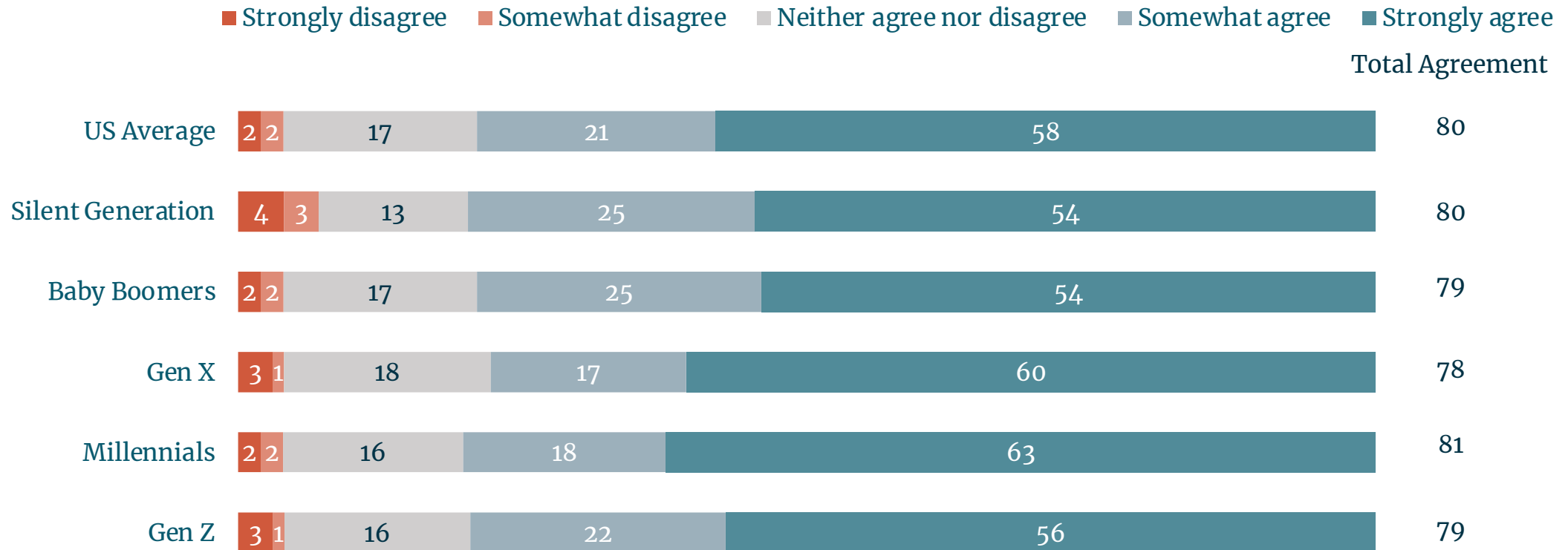


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

There is little variation across generation.

It's important that every American student learn about the progress made by civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as their struggles and the obstacles they faced.

Numbers in %



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Thank you

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