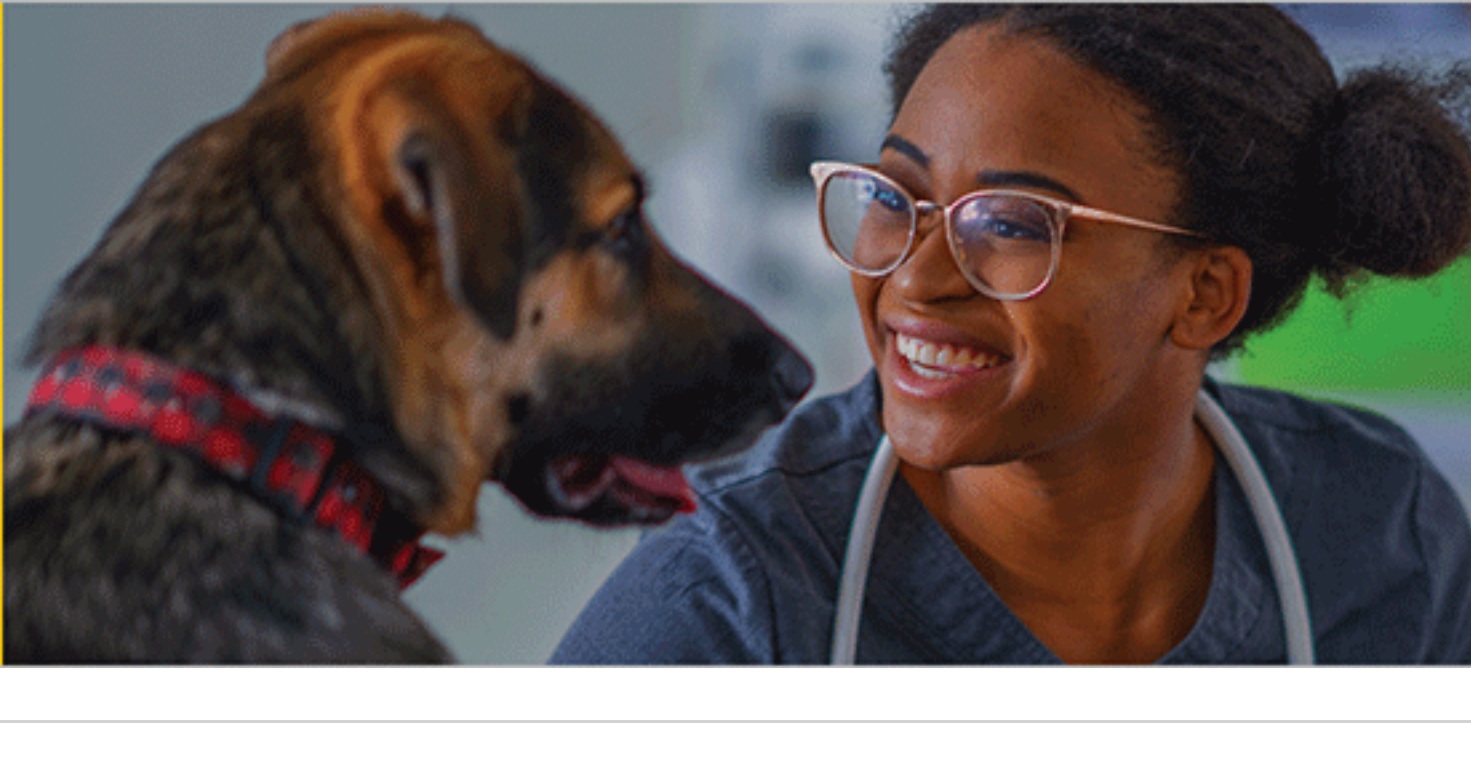


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WEIGHING OPTIONS



Abortion and Gun Laws Matter in College Choice, a New Study Finds

By [Karin Fischer](#) | MARCH 14, 2024



ERIN CLARK, THE BOSTON GLOBE, GETTY IMAGES

Demonstrators rally in defense of abortion rights at Harvard University in 2022.

What's New

State laws on abortion and guns may affect students' choice of where to go to college, a new poll suggests.

Eighty-one percent of current and prospective students said campus gun policies could influence their college decisions, according to the [Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2023 State of Higher Education survey](#). Seven in 10 students said state laws on reproductive health could be a factor in their enrollment decisions, with 38 percent calling access to such care highly important — an increase from the previous year.

The saliency of these social issues crossed partisan lines. A majority of Democrats and Republicans said gun policies were at least somewhat important in their college choices. Likewise, for students for whom reproductive health care was a factor in their decision-making, Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike would prefer to attend college in a state with greater access to such services.

The Details

The share of students who said they consider laws governing reproductive health — including abortion, emergency contraception, and other related health-care issues — when deciding where to study has ticked up over the past year. When Gallup and Lumina first surveyed students, in late 2022, about two-thirds of those polled called the issue at least somewhat relevant.

Strikingly, in the latest findings, released on Thursday, the biggest jump was among those students who saw access to abortion and contraception as highly important to college choices. The share of such students increased by eight percent, from 30 to 38 percent.

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Students who indicated that reproductive health mattered in their choice of college overwhelmingly said, by a four-to-one margin, that they preferred institutions in states with greater access to reproductive health-care services to states with more restrictive policies. Both men and women shared this perspective, although female students were more likely to prefer greater access than their male classmates.

The findings were also lopsided when it came to gun laws. Solid majorities of students — regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, partisanship, or age — said campus gun policies were at least somewhat important in their enrollment decisions. One-third called such policies extremely important.

More than 85 percent of those polled who said they would consider the issue of firearms in college choice preferred institutions with “tough restrictions that banned or made it hard for people to have guns on campus” to those with “few restrictions on gun ownership that allowed people to have guns on campus.” Democrats were more likely than Republicans to favor more restrictive policies.

One in three students told pollsters that they worried at least a fair amount about gun violence on their campus. Students who worried a great deal about gun violence were actually slightly less likely than their peers to prefer restrictive policies, suggesting some students with deep concerns may favor allowing people on campus to carry firearms.

The 2023 survey, conducted between October 9 and November 16, was the first to poll respondents on gun issues. The online survey included more than 14,000 current and prospective students. (Opt-in web surveys can raise concerns about self selection, but Gallup says it compensated for potential bias by ensuring that the sample was representative of the broader population and by not telling respondents that they'd be asked about guns or reproductive health.)

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The Backdrop

The issues of reproductive health and gun violence have both been in the news.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June 2022 to [overturn](#) a longstanding case, *Roe v. Wade*, that defined abortion as a constitutional right, giving states latitude to set their own laws on reproductive rights.

Roe was a “floor,” guaranteeing students certain access to abortion no matter where they studied, said Brandon Crawford, an assistant professor of applied health sciences at Indiana University at Bloomington who researches Americans' attitudes toward abortion. Now, that floor is gone and abortion laws can differ greatly between states, which may increase its pertinence in college-enrollment decisions.

Today's college students “have grown up when contraception was readily available and abortion was, more or less,” Crawford said. The court ruling “was a most dramatic shift.”

According to the [Guttmacher Institute](#), a research and policy group that supports reproductive rights, 31 states have abortion restrictions or bans in place, with 15 characterized as the most restrictive, including Texas, which has the second-highest college enrollments of any state in the country.

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Melissa Deckman is chief executive of the Public Religion Research Institute, which has studied public opinion on abortion. Historically, age has not had a significant effect on Americans' attitudes about abortion's legality, but today, younger Americans are more likely to be supportive of abortion rights. In a 2022 [survey](#), 68 percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 said that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, compared to 64 percent of those ages 30 to 49, 63 percent of those ages 50 to 64, and 62 percent of those age 65 and over.

Young women are more likely than young men to support abortion access, 71 to 65 percent, the institute found. That gender divide is particularly relevant to discussions about college choice because about six in 10 current college students are [women](#).

Deckman, a former academic who is writing a book about Gen Z women and American politics, said she was unsurprised by the findings. The effect of the 2022 Supreme Court decision has “really been profound,” she said. “It's shaken up young people and made young women in particular more aware of the stakes.”

Kristen N. Jozkowski, a professor of public health at Indiana who works on abortion research with Crawford, said the issue could be salient for college students because they are of reproductive age. Past research suggests that women who are denied abortions tend to have and raise their children, and Jozkowski wondered if abortion restrictions could affect not just enrollment patterns, but college-dropout rates.

Courtney Brown, vice president of impact and planning for the Lumina Foundation, said the polling partners decided to add questions, first about reproductive rights, and then about gun restrictions, to their survey because students themselves were bringing them up as factors in their decisions of whether to enroll or re-enroll. “These are issues that students pay attention to,” she said.

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In the past year and a half, there have been a number of mass shootings on college campuses, including at [Michigan State University](#), the [University of Virginia](#), and the [University of Nevada at Las Vegas](#). At the same time, about a dozen states permit people to carry [concealed firearms](#) on campus, while more than 20 allow colleges to set their own gun policies. Last year, Georgia's Supreme Court upheld a policy by the University of Georgia Board of Regents to allow guns on campus.

What's Next

Still, while students say they are considering laws on guns and abortion in their college decisions, it's not clear how much such issues affect actual enrollments, at least in the past. A [2019 Politifact analysis](#) found that the impact of campus-carry laws has been inconsistent, with college enrollments declining in some states after passage and increasing in others.

John V. Winters, a professor of economics at Iowa State University who has studied [college-student migration](#), said that while students may say such social issues matter, enrollment is often driven by more practical concerns, such as cost and proximity. Most students attend college within 100 miles of their homes, and states are likely to have similar laws on abortions and guns as their neighbors.

Students who do go out of state for college may be able to afford to cross state lines for an abortion. And policies on abortion and guns often reflect the broader political and cultural environment in a state, Winters said, meaning that students who feel passionately about such issues often would not choose colleges in those states in the first place.

“Will they have a major effect? I'm somewhat skeptical,” Winters said. “These are important issues, and I'm not trying to dismiss that, but there are a lot of factors at play in college enrollments. If there's a difference, it will be most pronounced at the margins.”

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Brown, of Lumina, said that, in the polling, larger shares of students did select other factors as critical to their decision-making. For example, 92 percent of respondents said college cost was at least somewhat important in choosing where to study, while 94 percent said they took into account the opportunity to get a good-paying job. (Gallup and Lumina did not ask those polled to rank the factors by importance.)

Still, Brown said it was notable that broad swaths of students would take social policies into account when deciding whether to enroll, or stay in, college. Such factors may be even more important as American institutions must deal with declines in the number of college-aged students. In states where policies may run counter to student preferences, colleges may need to do more to reassure students of safety and institutional support, she said.

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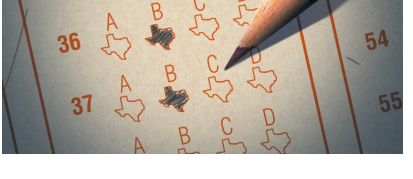
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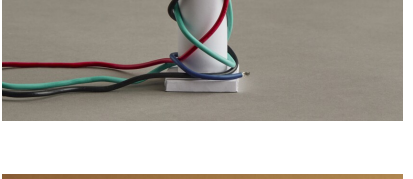
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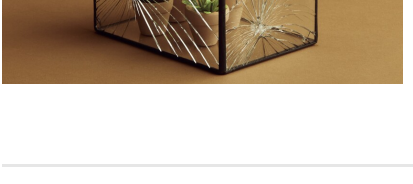
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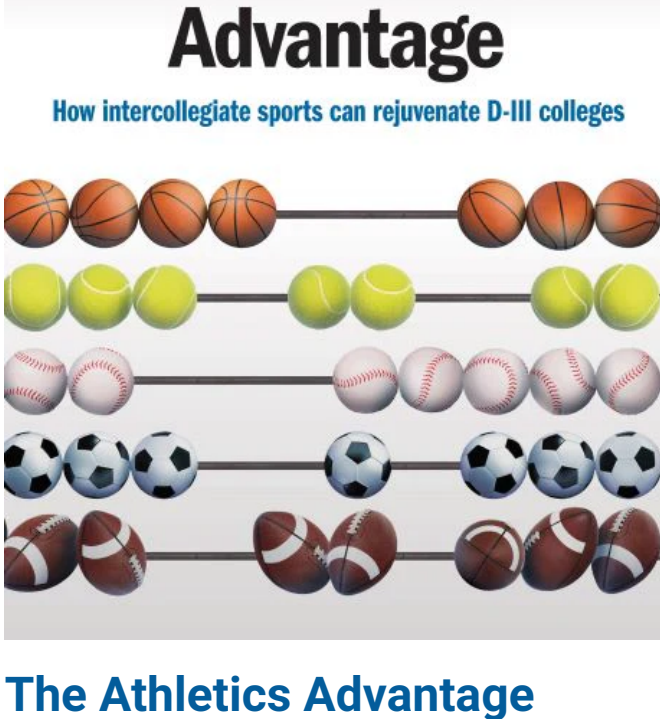


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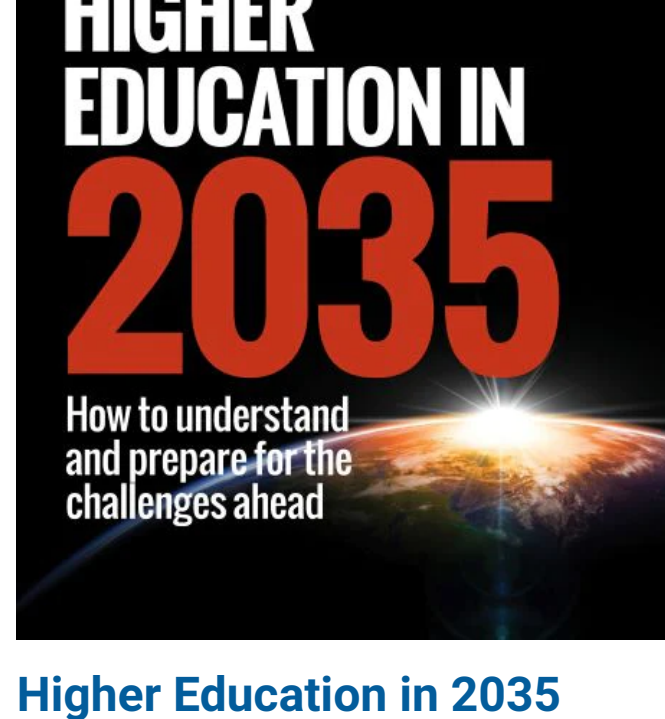


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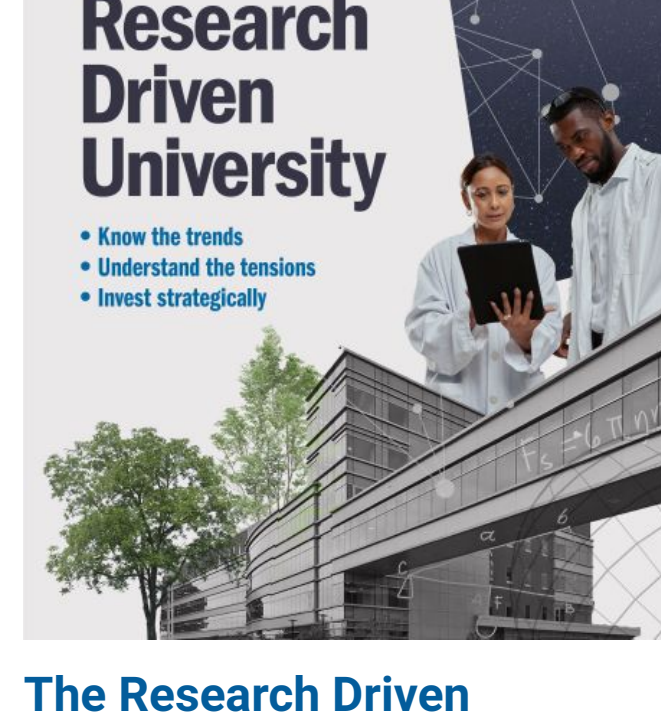
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