



2025

Intellectual Freedom Survey Report

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Purpose

The Intellectual Freedom Committee is responsible for safeguarding and promoting intellectual freedom within the Wisconsin Library Association (WLA) and the Wisconsin library community. The committee's charge includes collecting annual data via annual surveys. The 2025 Intellectual Freedom Survey was a collaboration between the WLA Intellectual Freedom Committee and Wisconsin Educational Media & Technology Association's (WEMTA). The goal of the collaboration is to reach more school library professionals and increase communication between our organizations for better staff support and advocacy.

The 2025 survey was open for 2 weeks, from October 6 to October 20, 2025. It was promoted through multiple channels to maximize participation from across the library spectrum. The channels included: Wisconsin Library Association (WLA), Wisconsin Educational Media & Technology Association's (WEMTA) Intellectual Freedom group, and the Wisconsin Public Library email list.

The purpose of this data collection is to assess the state of intellectual freedom in Wisconsin as reported by library staff. In addition to challenge data, the survey assessed the mental and emotional burden on library staff due to the rise in and the inflammatory nature of current censorship challenges statewide. Based on feedback from the 2024 survey participants, the committee changed or omitted several questions to gather more relevant data.

Lastly, the committee views the survey as an opportunity to hear what support library staff members are looking for and provide an opportunity to share resources with one another. Collected responses include both quantitative data and qualitative, as well as open-ended responses from library staff of all positions. Responses were collected anonymously, with library types and regions included for demographic purposes.

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Total Respondents

343 Total Participants

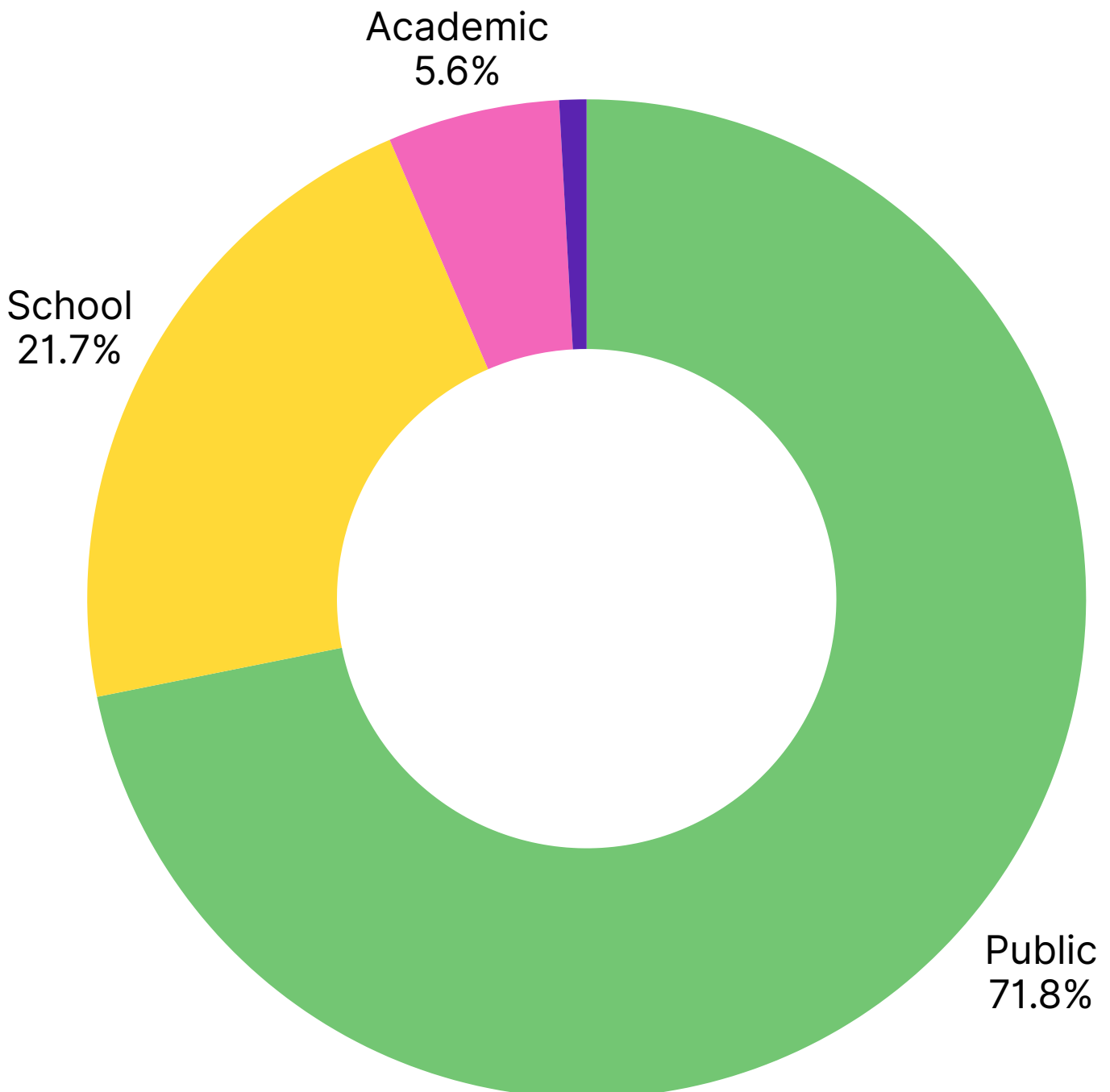
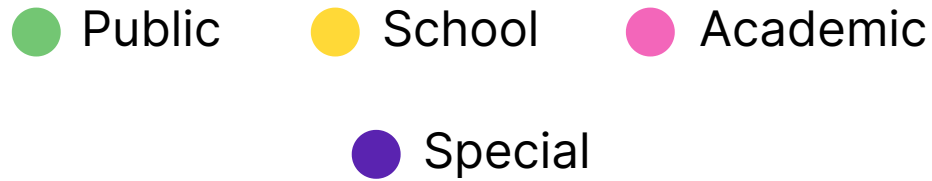
The 2025 survey saw an increase of 69 participants compared to 2024, and an increase of 73 compared to 2023.

This increase was notable when looking at the total number of public library staff, which increased from 60% of respondents in 2024 to 72% of respondents in 2025 (79 additional participants).

There was a continued increase in participation from school library staff, which jumped from 9 respondents in 2023 (3% of total responses), to 67 respondents in 2024 (25% of total responses). In 2025, there were 74 responses from school library staff. We attribute this increase in school library participation to our collaboration with WEMTA and the ability to directly reach more of their members.

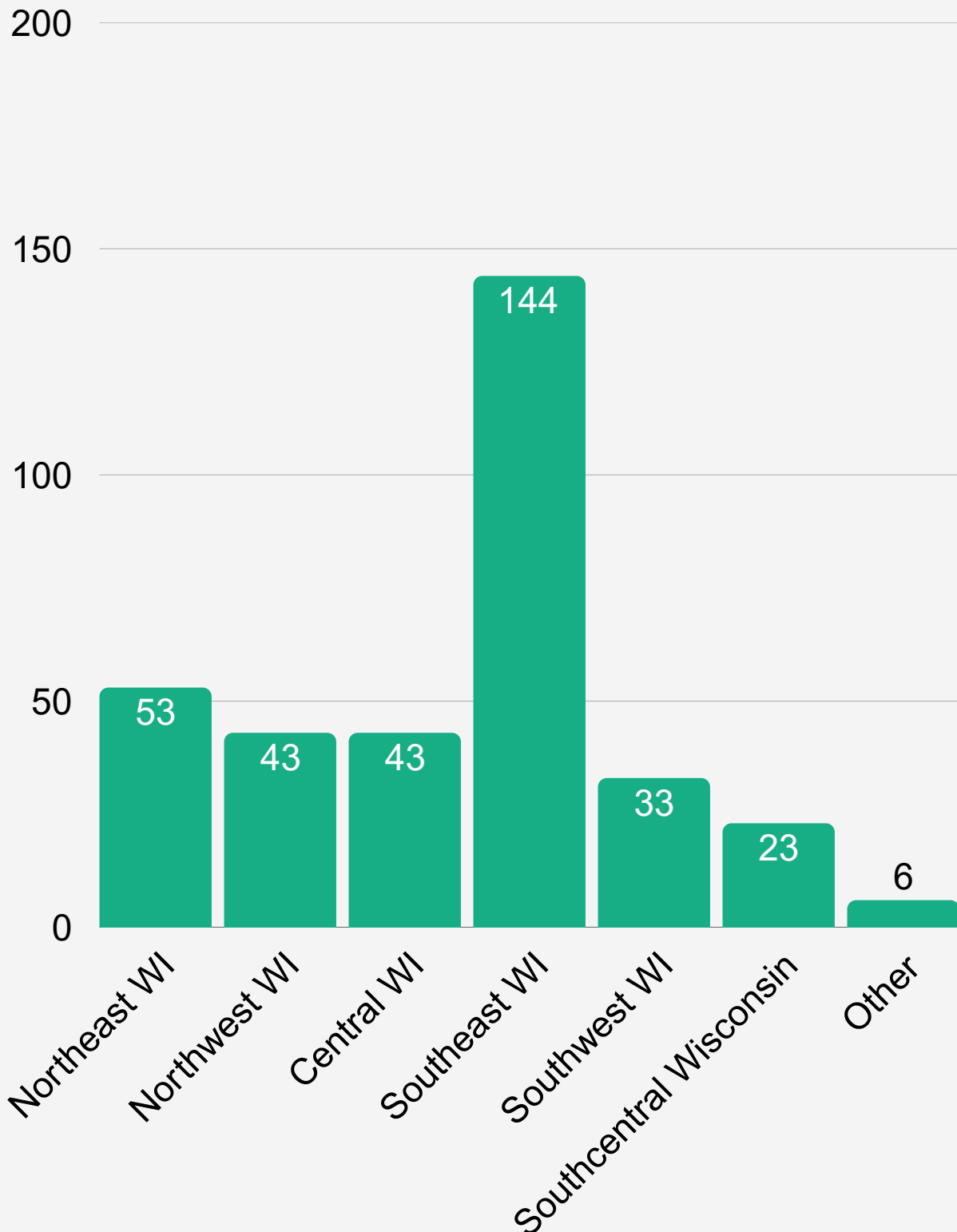
Library Types

Question 1: Library Type



Locations

Question 2: Where is your library?



Staff Types

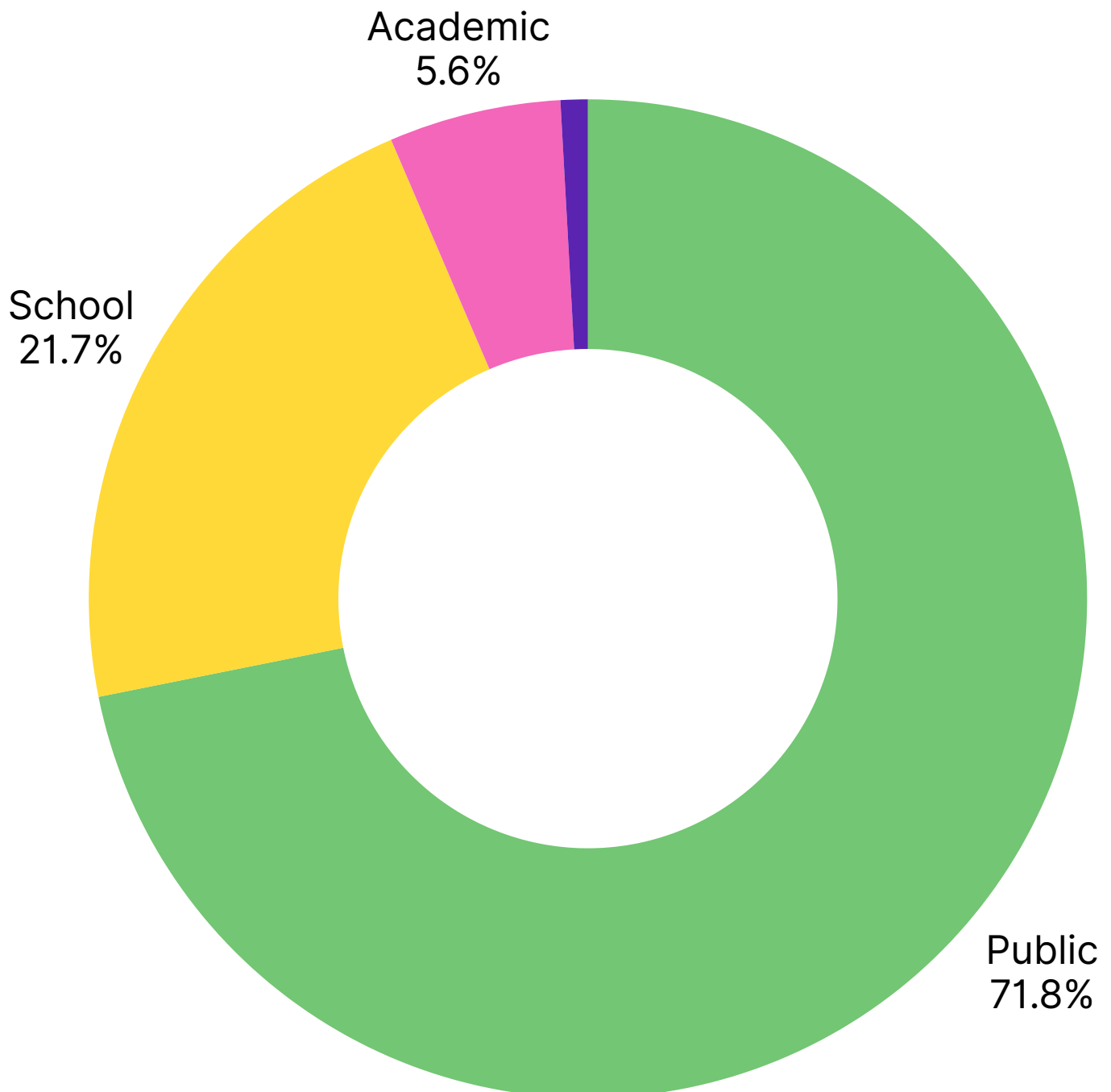
Question 3: Which best describes your position?

● Public

● School

● Academic

● Special



Library Support

85.4%

Question 05. My library has strong support from my community.

Over 85 percent of participants (293 total) responded that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that their library has strong support from their community. This was an increase of about 5 percent from 2024.

Less than 1.5 percent (5 total) of participants answered “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.”

85.4%

Question 06. I feel my library has the support of my organization's administration.

Over 85 percent of participants (293 total) responded that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that their library has strong support from their administration. This was a slight decrease of about 1 percent compared to 2024.

About 5 percent (13 total) of participants answered “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.”

82.5%

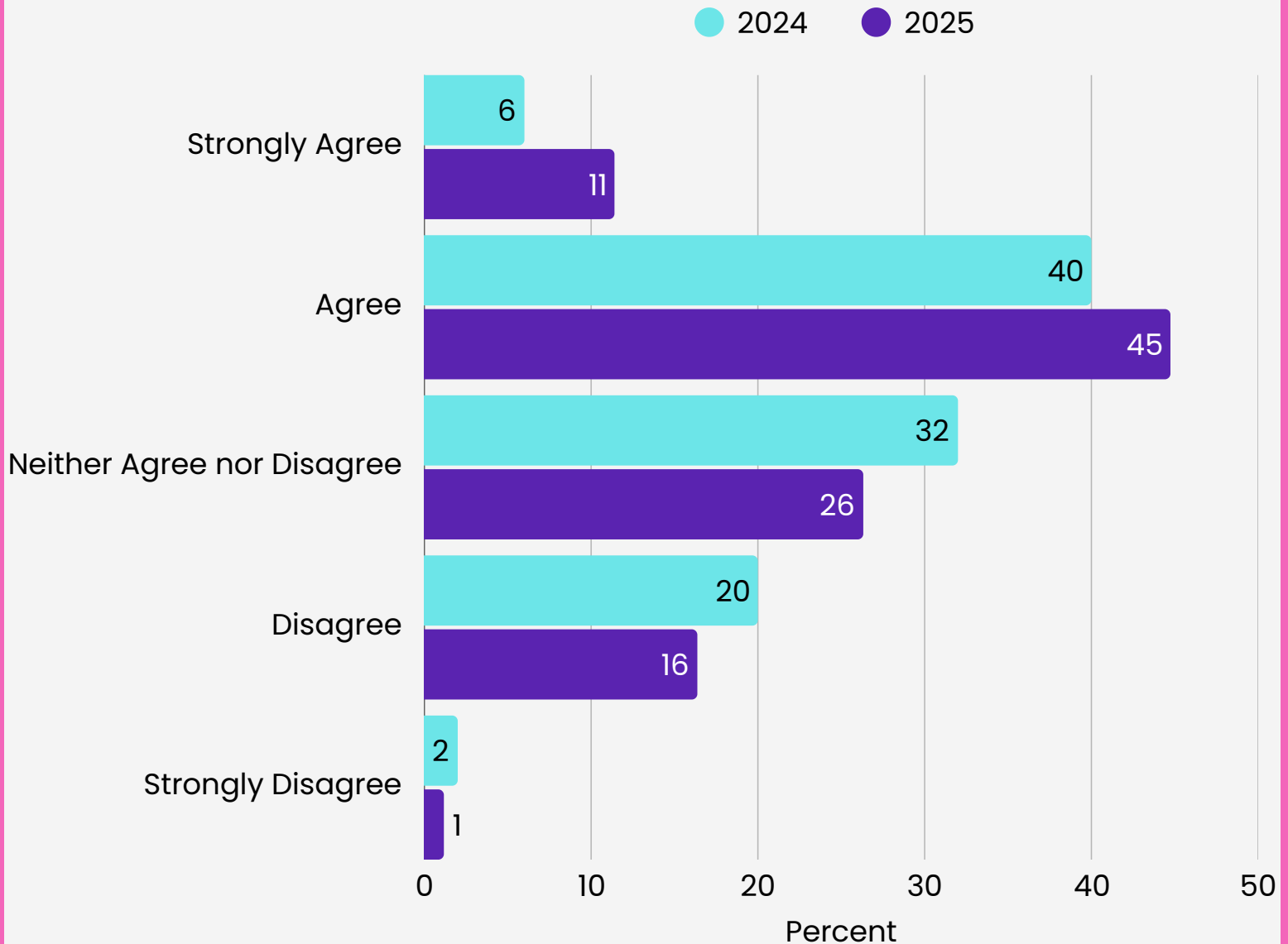
Question 07. I feel my library has the support of my organization's board.

Over 82 percent of participants (283 total) responded that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that their library has strong support from their board. This was an increase of about 2.5 percent from 2024.

About 5 percent (16 total) of participants answered “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree,” roughly the same as 2024.

Library Support

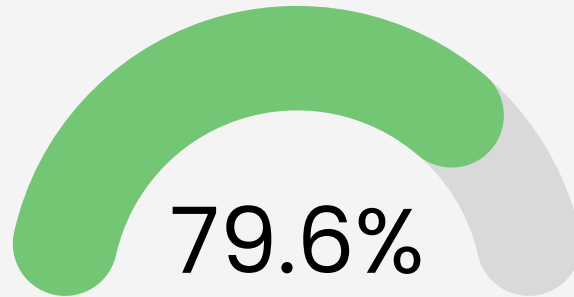
Q8: I feel optimistic that intellectual freedom will be supported in Wisconsin's libraries in the future.



Overall, optimism in the future of statewide intellectual freedom rose in 2025. 56% of participants responded that they are optimistic, an increase of 10% compared with the previous year. However, many participants expressed significant concern with the current political leadership in the state and federal government, and how this will impact funding, censorship, library governance, and community support.

Political Climate

Q9. The current political climate has affected how I feel about my job.



“Strongly Agree” or “Agree”

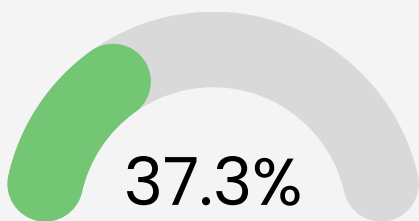
The survey overwhelmingly shows that the current political climate affected the feelings of library workers across the state. This year, the majority of respondents stated that the political climate affected how they feel about their job, a similar rate to 2024 (73.4%). Only 32 participants responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Comments mentioned several ways the political climate affects their feelings about their job:

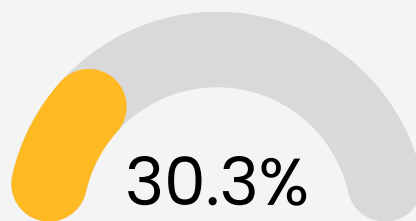
- Fear of harassment or personal targeting, including legal scrutiny, verbal attacks, or physical violence.
- Chilling effects on speech, leading to self-censorship.
- Anxieties about job security, funding cuts.
- Fear of politicized library governance, including Board.
- Burnout and mental health impacts.

Political Climate

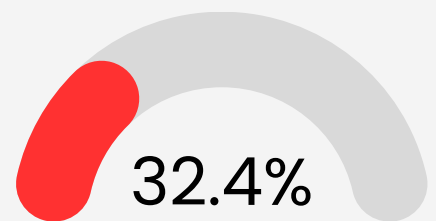
Q10. The current political climate has affected my ability to do my job.



"Strongly Agree"
or "Agree"



"Neither Agree nor
Disagree"



"Disagree" or
"Strongly Disagree"

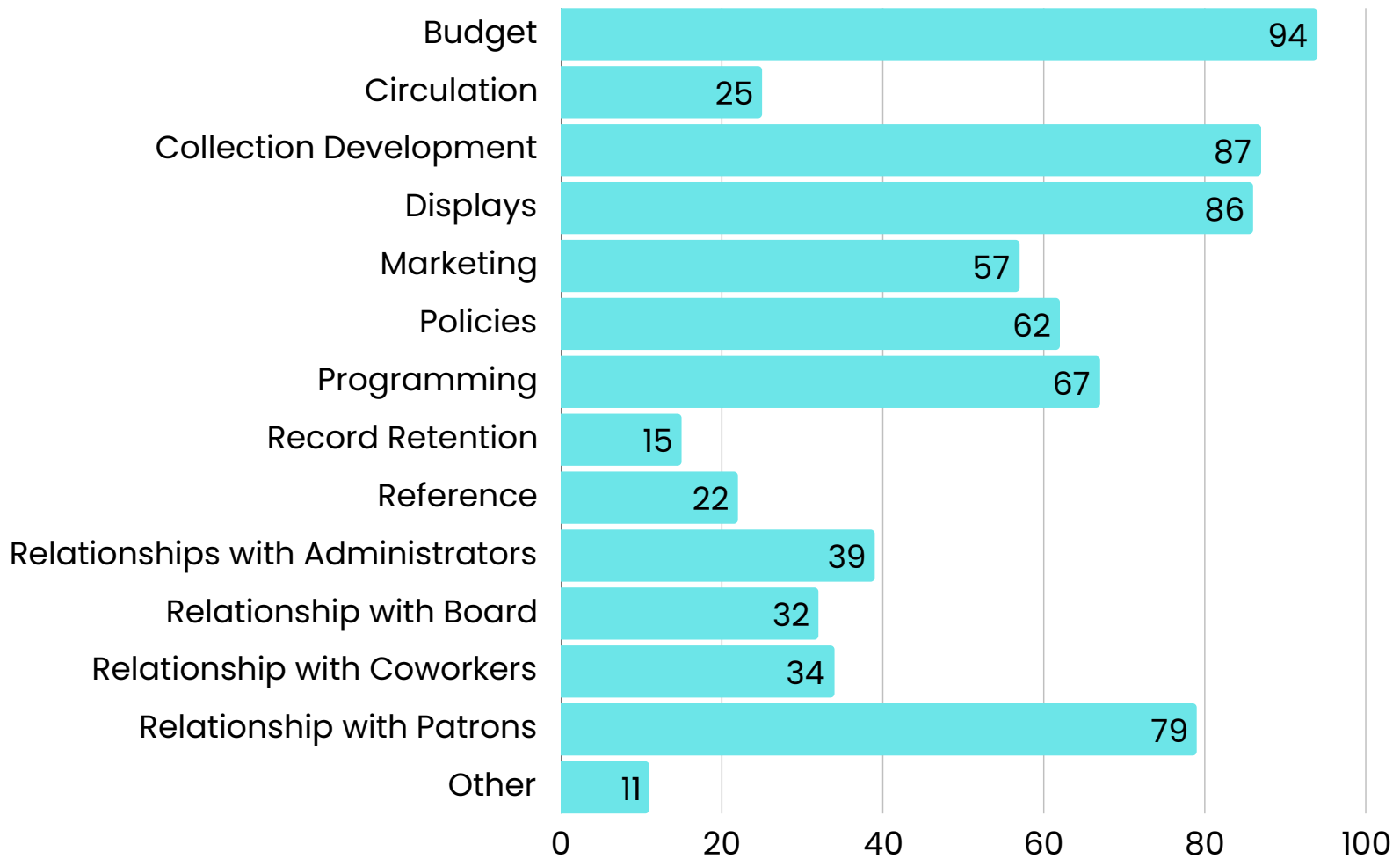
Responses to whether the current political climate affects daily work is varied. In 2024, responses were roughly the same. 35 percent responded "Strongly Agree" or "Agree," 32.5 percent responded "Neither Agree nor disagree," and 32.5 percent responded "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree."

Comments mention several ways their daily work is affected:

- Chilling effect and self-censorship impacting collection development, displays, programming, and patron interactions
- Emotional and mental tolls, hypervigilance and anxiety
- Funding cuts, reduction in services, program cancellations
- Termination of DEI programs or initiatives

Impact Areas

Question 11: Please check the areas where you see/feel the impacts of the current political climate:



Greatest impact is seen with
Budget, Collection Development, Displays, and Relationships with Patrons.

Challenges

Question 13: My library has experienced the following formal challenge/s this year.



1.7%

Display Challenge

6 respondents encountered a display challenge in 2025.



8.2%

Material Challenge

28 respondents encountered a material challenge in 2025.



0.9%

Program Challenge

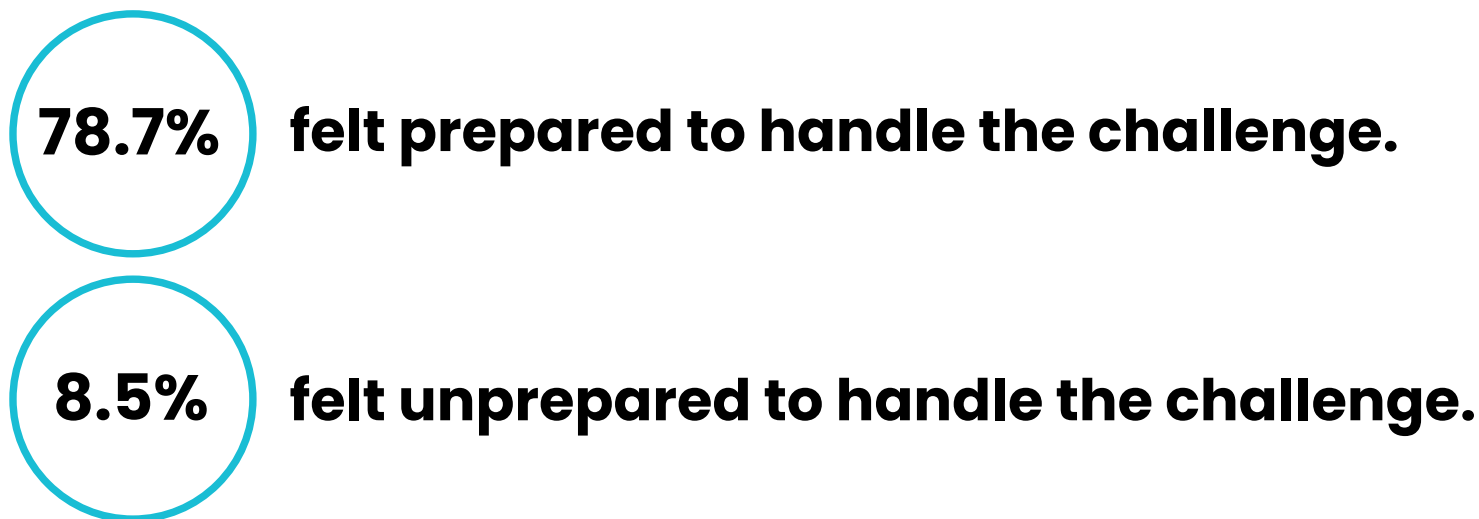
3 respondents encountered a program challenge in 2025.

36 participants reported that they experienced at least one formal local challenge in 2025. This is a decrease compared to 2024, where 41 participants reported experiencing a formal challenge.

Challenges

Question 14: My library was well prepared to handle the challenge.

Question 15: What made your library prepared? What resources did you utilize for help and support?



Responses cited several resources or factors which influenced their preparedness to respond to the challenge. These included:

- Strong Policies and Procedures
- Board Support
- Leadership by Administration or Director
- External Resources (ALA, CCBC, WLA, attorneys)
- Staff Training
- Previous experience handling challenges

Challenges

Question 16: What could have helped your library be more prepared to respond to the challenge?

Out of the 23 responses, there were several prevalent themes and areas for improvement:

- Training and clear expectations for front-line staff (8)
- Strengthening or revising policies (4)
- Administrative or Board support (3)
- Public support and awareness (2)
- Increased resources, including budget, staffing, or time (1)

Confidence

Question 18. I feel confident that my library is prepared to handle a formal challenge.



Question 19. I feel confident that my library is prepared to handle concerns or complaints from community members.



While the majority of responses cited high confidence levels, comments expressed several improvement areas:

- Lack of training or utilization of challenge policies or procedures, leading to low confidence
- Challenge forms that haven't been used or updated in years
- Lack of trust that leadership, administration, or boards will follow policies that support intellectual freedom
- Difficult to manage challenges with limited staffing
- Political climate fuels an increase in attacks and pressure

Overall Library Preparedness

Question 20: What makes you feel prepared to handle a formal challenge or community pushback (i.e. strong policy, a supportive Board, effective training)?

Library staff cited multiple factors that lead to feeling prepared to handle a formal challenge or pushback from the community. These included:

- Policies & procedures that are strong, formalized, accessible, and clearly written
- Supportive administration and board which backs staff decisions, enforces policies, and is committed to intellectual freedom
- Staff training and experience
- External resources and professional support
- Support from community stakeholders, including Friends of the Library, partners, and residents
- Proactive planning from leadership

Improvement Areas

Question 21: What makes you feel unprepared to handle a formal challenge or community pushback? What resources would help you feel more prepared?

Training gaps for frontline staff

- Not all staff are trained on responding to challenges
- Lack of prior experiencing handling challenges
- Additional review of policies and procedures is needed, along with de-escalation training

Emotional impact

- Comments expressed stress, anxiety, burnout, pressure, and uncertainty
- Fear of confrontation, and difficulty not taking attacks personally in the moment

Lack of support from Administration or Board

- Fear that leadership will give into pressure, unwilling to take a stance
- Politicized Boards that do not uphold intellectual freedom
- Training and resources not provided to front-line staff

Political Climate

- Fear of organized, coordinated attacks by bad-faith actors
- Politicization of library materials, including LGBTQIA+ content
- Fear of pressure from local, state, or federal elected officials

WLA Toolkit

On Question 23, 37 participants chose to share resources they would like to see included in the WLA Freedom Toolkit and the WEMTA Intellectual Freedom Forum. These included:

- Sample/Example challenge forms and policies
- Checklist for if a challenge occurs
- Legal resources
- Contact information for elected officials
- CCBC materials
- Banned book shelf-talkers
- Data showing literacy achievement rates tied to strong library programs
- Support for the aftermath of a challenge
- Video presentations on case studies

Comments

The survey concluded by asking participants if there is anything they'd like to share anonymously with your statewide colleagues regarding the topic of intellectual freedom or challenges (Questions 24 and 25). Through this question, Survey Subcommittee members wanted to highlight and publicize words of advice from colleagues across the state.

- *"Do what you can. It might not seem like a lot, but you have no idea the impact you are making in your community."*
- *"Keep pushing back and fighting the good fight! Only when we link arms in community can we hold strong in our values. I know we can each personally feel the burnout and frustration that our most marginalized patrons are battling, but creating safe spaces for education and rejuvenation is a crucial step in human care. Libraries promote growth and save lives!"*
- *"WLA and WEMTA have created incredible resources with the 'WLA Intellectual Freedom Toolkit' and the 'WEMTA Intellectual Freedom Forum.' I just wish it wasn't a necessary resource. It saddens me that we have to spend so much of our time defending and not helping others."*
- *"We need to keep our chins up and motivation strong! Continue to highlight the support we are getting instead of the negatives!"*
- *"I feel that we are in for a more difficult time than we have experienced in recent history regarding intellectual freedom and challenges, but I also feel that upholding intellectual freedom and addressing challenges is more important than ever. We need to support each other, share resources, and speak up for ourselves and our communities' right to intellectual freedom."*
- *"In our little community, I have never seen more love and outpouring of support for the Library. Our position is strong and we have lots of allies; we know we have plenty of conservative people in our community but they do not feel emboldened to attack us (yet-- maybe that will change someday). I would like my statewide colleagues to keep their hope up, don't be afraid, be kind to everyone, and keep working on your network of community relationships. Be a useful hub for resources and people will treasure you."*