

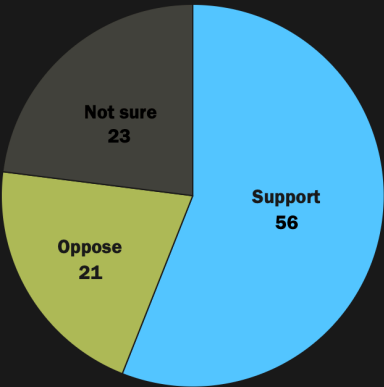
Social media ban



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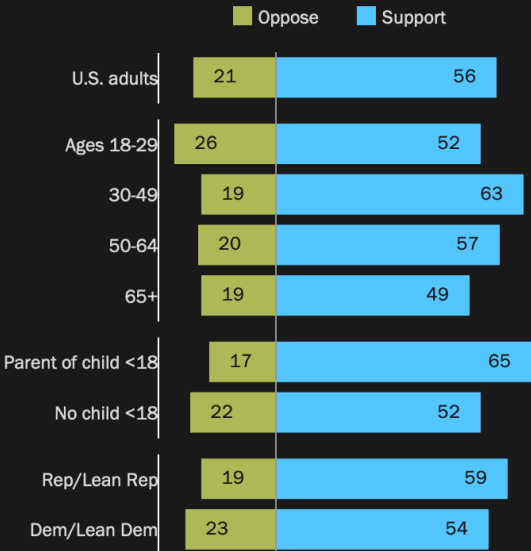
Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 26-June 1, 2026.

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Across demographic and partisan groups, support for an under-16 social media ban exceeds opposition

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Note: Those who said they are not sure or did not answer are not shown.
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Let them Scroll,
The Economist, February 12th 2026.

People don't agree on much these days. But one thing brings them together, whatever their politics: the idea that, because social media harm children and teenagers, they should be banned from using them. In December Australia stopped under-16s from having accounts on platforms including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. A dozen countries, including Britain and Spain, are now toying with the idea; so are legislators in many American states. More than 70% of Britons support kicking under-16s off such sites, as do two-thirds of Americans. The problem is, bans will do more harm than good.

The proposals arise from an understandable desire to keep youngsters safe and healthy. Parents have been shaken by tragedies in which social media have played a role, of children being tricked into sharing explicit pictures of themselves, or taking their own lives after algorithms shovelled them content about self-harm. Along with those shocking cases comes a second, more general worry: that social media might be damaging children as a group, making them reserved, lonely and anxious. People are desperate to understand why today's youngsters seem unhappier than the generations that came before.

Even parents who are confident they can keep their children from serious harm fret that their offspring are wasting hours scrolling through mindless memes. They would like to stop them, but fear that their kids will suffer if they are the only members of their class not on the apps. Blanket bans appear to offer an easy answer—and politicians are only too happy to seize on a measure that, for once, pleases voters from all parties.

Yet policymakers should reconsider. The question of whether social media are causing mass harm is far from settled. Growing evidence suggests they are bad for at least some children. But, as we explain this week, the claim that social media cause great damage to the mental health of young people as a whole has only limited evidence. And even if you wanted to ban social media as a precaution pending conclusive findings, such measures threaten to be counterproductive.

One problem is that enforcing bans is hard; teenagers in Australia are finding ingenious ways to get round them, by scrunching up their faces to look older. Defining social media is hard, too. Australia has not banned young teenagers from messaging apps such as WhatsApp, or from multiplayer online games, because that would have seemed too draconian; scourges such as cyberbullying will doubtless continue on these. Kids barred from mainstream sites could flock to obscure ones, and fall victim to predators there. Children who evade the blocks may be less likely to tell adults if they find something horrid, for fear of being told off.

Higher age limits may just delay problems until youngsters are 16, when they will suddenly gain full access to social sites that they do not have much experience of using. And all the while, higher age limits for social media may provide a false sense of security. It is for all these reasons that bans are often opposed by child-protection groups.

Moreover, the proponents of bans ignore how they would deprive children of the benefits of social media. They are a blessing to children who feel isolated: perhaps because of their location, their sexuality, or because their brains work differently from those of others. Social media can broaden young minds, giving children from all backgrounds a window onto fresh places and people. Like it or not, social sites are now one of the main ways children obtain information (as well as

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misinformation) about current affairs. It used to be easy for youngsters to pick up their parents' printed newspapers. They sat through news bulletins aired before or after their favourite shows. Those days are no more.

Teenagers who are turfed off TikTok will not instantly begin climbing trees or poring over books. Many will slump for longer in front of games consoles and streaming services. One reason they spend so many hours online is that parents long ago stopped letting them hang around outside with friends. Having chased them indoors, adults should now think twice about placing further prohibitions on their free time.

What to do? Rather than raise age limits, regulators should redouble efforts to make social sites more suitable for teens. Ideally they would force web firms to cough up more data on how teenagers use their products—the better to help researchers measure harms, and come up with ways to prevent them. They should tell tech giants to rethink features that are keeping kids online longer than is healthy, such as interfaces that permit endless scrolling and videos that play without prompting. They should demand sterner moderation of the content being served up to young users. This may require greater efforts to verify the age of social-media users, in order to work out which ones must surf with guardrails and which are adults who may go without.

Some observers find these ideas laughable. One reason people demand higher age limits is that they believe social apps cannot be made safer. That ignores the direction of travel. America is gearing up for a series of blockbuster trials—years in the making—that will finally give people who say they were harmed by sites as children a chance to make their case in court. The European Union has just issued a preliminary ruling that features of TikTok's design are “addictive” and threatened fines if it doesn't change. Lately, many of the big social apps have been cajoled into creating “teen” accounts that come with additional safeguards. These things will not solve every single worry. But all of them are progress of a sort.

Politicians say their social-media bans are the only responsible option. In fact, they look like a way of ducking the care children deserve. If regulators cannot find ways to tame social media—now over two decades old—what hope is there to let children use novel tools such as artificial intelligence? Youngsters have a right to share in new technologies. Adults must seek to make their time online as safe and as rewarding as possible.

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1. Summarize this article as you would do for an English tutorial.
 2. To what extent should social networks be regulated? (Answer this essay question in about 200 words)