

# Americans want reforms to improve the airline passenger experience

November 2024

## Introduction

As part of a July 2024 survey, the Vanderbilt Policy Accelerator for Political Economy and Regulation (VPA) polled 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older to identify attitudes towards the in-flight passenger experience on commercial airlines and policy proposals to improve it.

Our polling reveals that Americans are deeply dissatisfied with the airline passenger experience and are especially discontented with small seat sizes. We find overwhelming bipartisan support for proposals that would make air travel more comfortable, affordable, and convenient for all flyers. When Americans learn about policy options to improve in-flight conditions, they respond positively. Specifically:

- 76% of Americans think airplane seats are too small.
- 73% of Americans would either strongly or somewhat support a federal proposal to establish a minimum standard airplane seat size.
- 2 in 3 Americans (66%) would support a proposal allowing airline passengers to purchase a ticket for an infant in a child seat for a flat \$50 fee.
- 61% of Americans would support a proposal that requires airlines to include strollers as carry-on luggage, so long as they are the same size as any other carry on.
- Nearly 3 in 4 Americans (73%) would support a proposal requiring airlines to include a few convertible seats per plane to allow wheelchair users to stay in their wheelchairs while flying.
- 65% of Americans reported having flown on a commercial airline in the last three years.

Each of these results indicates the need for new policies to improve flying, such as those proposed in VPA's policy blueprint *Improving the Airline Passenger Experience*. We propose that concerns regarding seat sizes can be addressed by establishing a

minimum seat size for all passengers. Concerns about infant safety can be addressed by requiring airlines to offer affordable infant fares for those who wish to use a carseat, and by ensuring that strollers are accepted as carry-ons. And concerns regarding inadequate protections for wheelchair users can be addressed by enabling wheelchair users to sit in their chairs during flights.

VPA's polling was conducted by SSRS from July 12 to July 15, 2024, with a sample of 1,032 respondents. The margin of error is +/-3.5% at the 95% confidence interval. SSRS is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative.

# 76% of Americans think that seats on airplanes are too small.

■ *Too small* ■ *Not too small*



July 12-15, 2024, survey of 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older

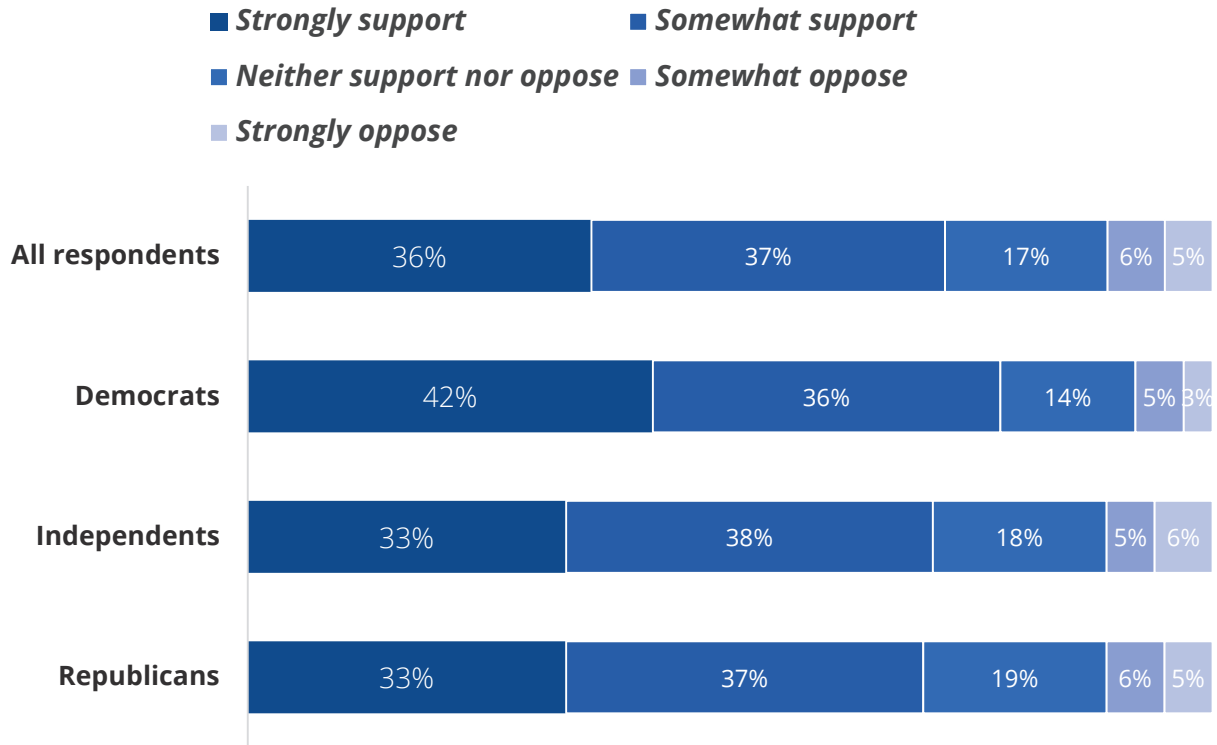
Base: Total Respondents

Table 001

The survey asked respondents:

“Thinking about airplane travel today. Generally, do you think that seats on airplanes are too small, or are they not too small?”

# 73% of Americans support a federally mandated minimum seat size on airplanes.



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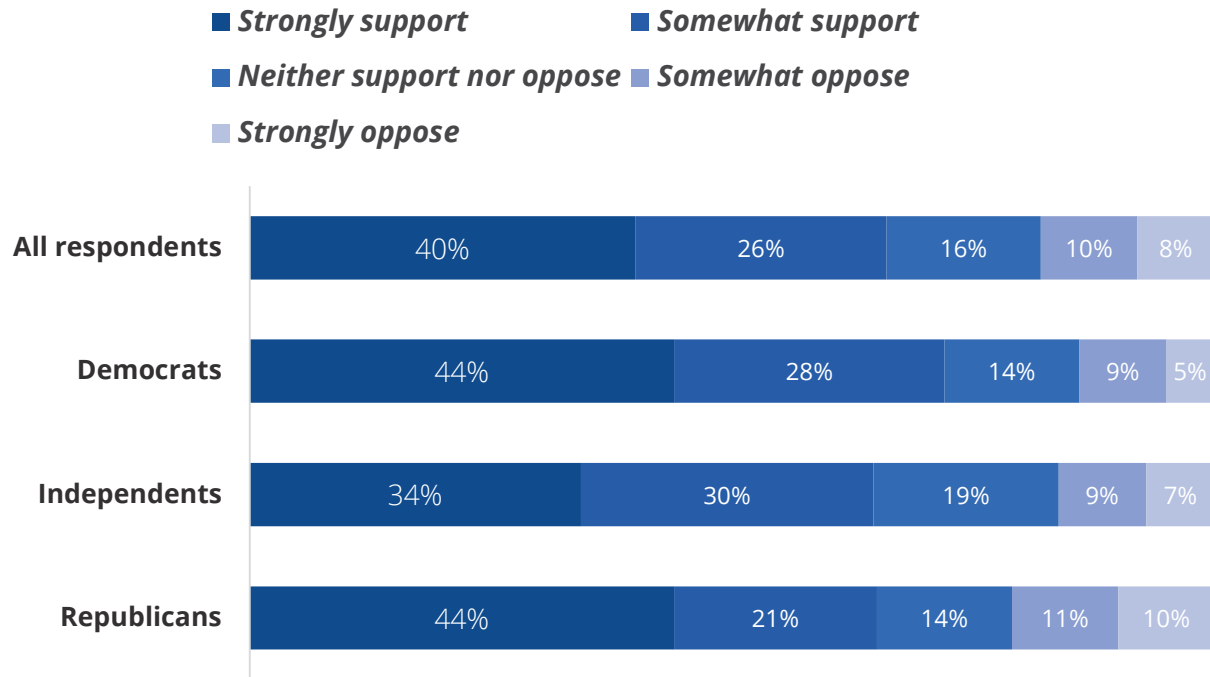
Base: Total Respondents

Table 002

The survey asked respondents:

“Currently, there is no federally mandated minimum seat size on airplanes. Some have proposed that there should be a minimum seat size on all planes. Would you support or oppose a proposal to establish a minimum standard airplane seat size?”

## 66% of Americans would support a proposal allowing airline passengers to purchase an infant seat for a \$50 flat fee.



July 12-15, 2024, survey of 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older

Base: Total Respondents

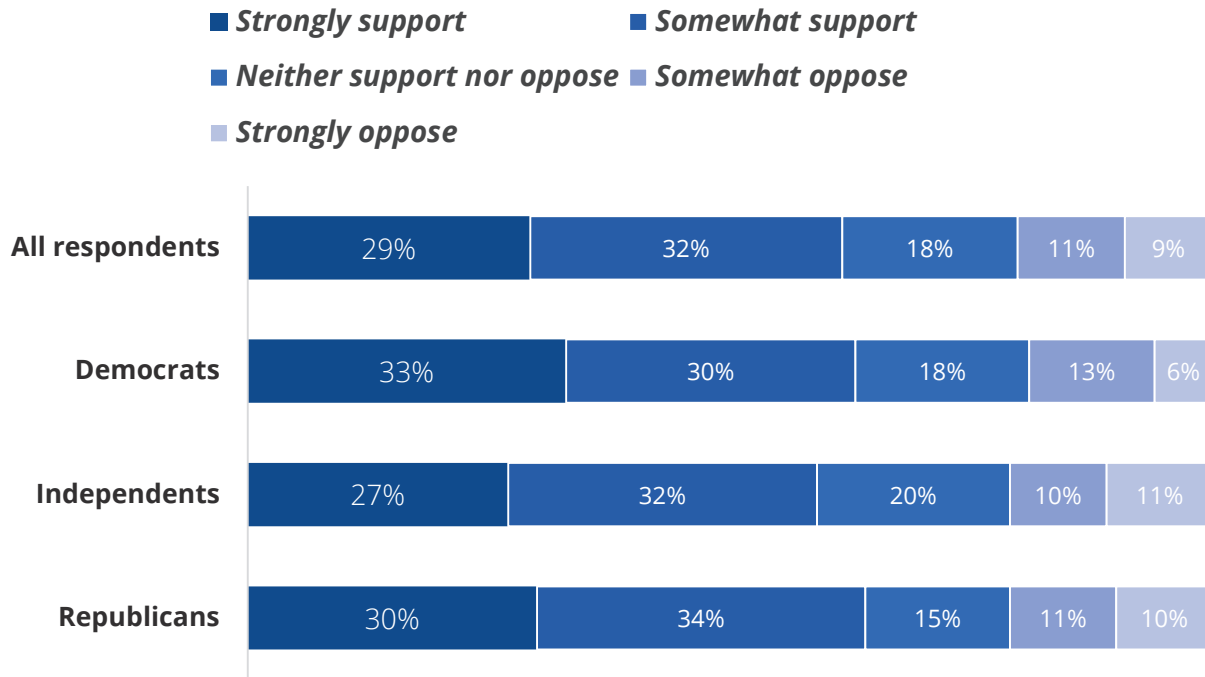
Table 003

The survey provided respondents with this context:

“Airline passengers are allowed to carry infants on their laps for free when flying within the U.S. The American Association of Pediatrics and the Federal Aviation Administration say that the only safe way to travel with infants is in a car seat, but families rarely do this because it requires purchasing another full fare ticket. Some people have proposed that airline passengers should be able to buy a ticket for a flat fee of \$50 for an infant in a car seat, in order to ensure their affordable and safe travel.

Would you support or oppose a proposal that allows airline passengers to purchase a ticket for an infant in a child seat for a flat \$50 fee?”

# 61% of Americans would support a proposal requiring airlines to include strollers as carry-on luggage.



July 12-15, 2024, survey of 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older

Base: Total Respondents

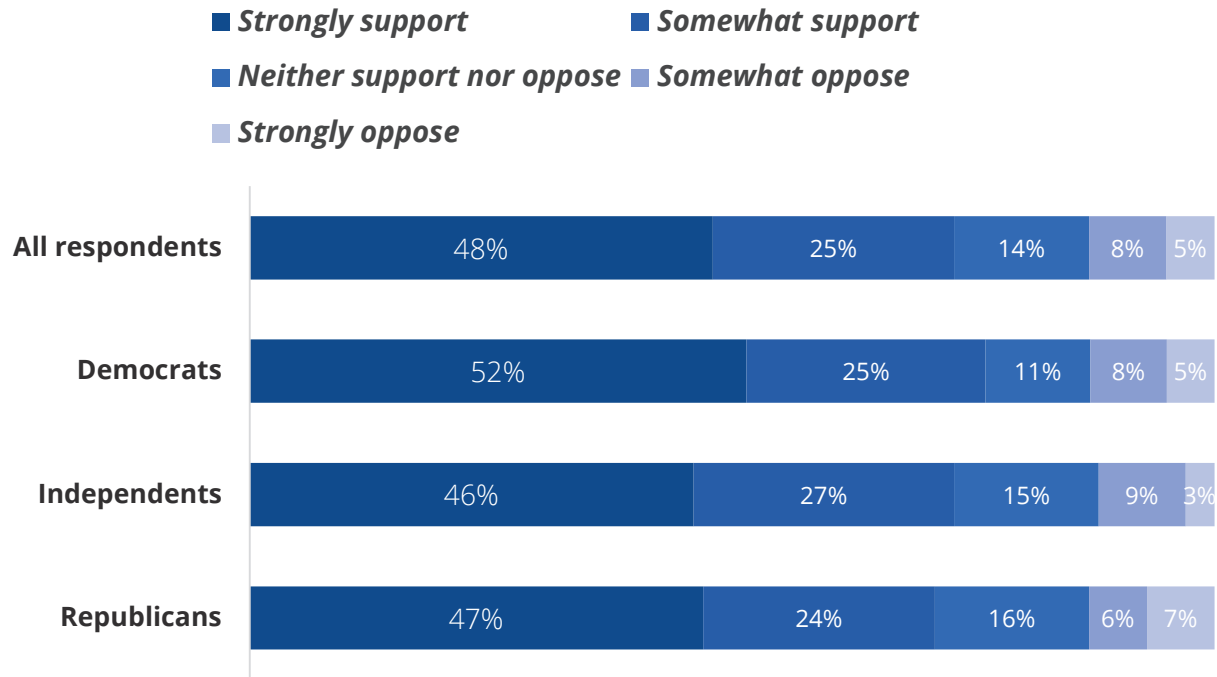
Table 004

The survey provided respondents with this context:

“Airline passengers with children often travel with strollers. Some airlines allow passengers to check strollers at the gate without a fee, but most of them do not allow strollers as carry-on luggage. Some have proposed that airlines should be required to allow strollers as carry-on luggage, so long as the stroller is the same size as any other carry-on.

Would you support or oppose a proposal that requires airlines to include strollers as carry-on luggage, so long as they are the same size as any other carry on?”

## 73% of Americans would support a proposal requiring airlines to allow wheelchair users to stay in their wheelchairs while flying.



July 12-15, 2024, survey of 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older

Base: Total Respondents

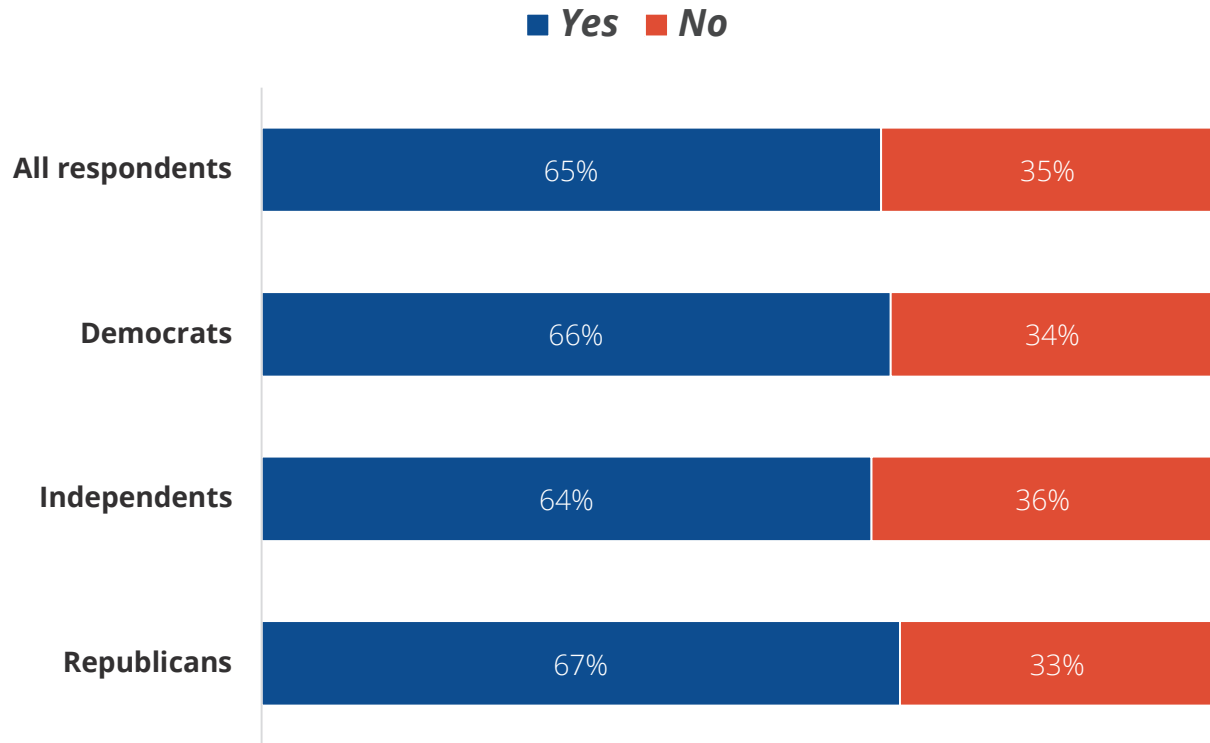
Table 005

The survey provided respondents with the following context and question:

“Airline passengers with wheelchairs are not able to stay in their wheelchairs while flying. Currently, wheelchair users check their wheelchairs at the gate before boarding and retrieve their wheelchair after landing. Some wheelchair users report discomfort on flights and damage to their equipment when checking their wheelchairs. Some have proposed that airlines should be required to include a few convertible seats on each plane to assist wheelchair users and allow them to stay in their own wheelchairs while flying.

Would you support or oppose a proposal to require airlines to include a few convertible seats per plane to allow wheelchair users to stay in their wheelchairs while flying?”

## 65% of Americans reported having flown on a commercial airline in the last three years.



July 12-15, 2024, survey of 1,032 U.S. adults ages 18 or older

Base: Total Respondents

Table 006

The survey asked respondents:

“Have you flown on a commercial airline in the last three years?”



# Survey Questions

TABLE 001 — *Thinking about airplane travel today. Generally, do you think that seats on airplanes are too small, or are they not too small?*

- Too small
- Not too small
- Don't know
- Refused

TABLE 002 — *Currently, there is no federally mandated minimum seat size on airplanes. Some have proposed that there should be a minimum seat size on all planes. Would you support or oppose a proposal to establish a minimum standard airplane seat size?*

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

TABLE 003 — *Airline passengers are allowed to carry infants on their laps for free when flying within the U.S. The American Association of Pediatrics and the Federal Aviation Administration say that the only safe way to travel with infants is in a car seat, but families rarely do this because it requires purchasing another full fare ticket. Some people have proposed that airline passengers should be able to buy a ticket for a flat fee of \$50 for an infant in a car seat, in order to ensure their affordable and safe travel. Would you support or oppose a proposal that allows airline passengers to purchase a ticket for an infant in a child seat for a flat \$50 fee?*

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

**TABLE 004** — *Airline passengers with children often travel with strollers. Some airlines allow passengers to check strollers at the gate without a fee, but most of them do not allow strollers as carry-on luggage. Some have proposed that airlines should be required to allow strollers as carry-on luggage, so long as the stroller is the same size as any other carry-on. Would you support or oppose a proposal that requires airlines to include strollers as carry-on luggage, so long as they are the same size as any other carry on?*

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

**TABLE 005** — *Airline passengers with wheelchairs are not able to stay in their wheelchairs while flying. Currently, wheelchair users check their wheelchairs at the gate before boarding and retrieve their wheelchair after landing. Some wheelchair users report discomfort on flights and damage to their equipment when checking their wheelchairs. Some have proposed that airlines should be required to include a few convertible seats on each plane to assist wheelchair users and allow them to stay in their own wheelchairs while flying. Would you support or oppose a proposal to require airlines to include a few convertible seats per plane to allow wheelchair users to stay in their wheelchairs while flying*

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

**TABLE 006** — *Have you flown on a commercial airline in the last three years?*

- Yes
- No