



# COLLEGE STUDENT VIEWS ON FREE EXPRESSION AND CAMPUS SPEECH 2024

A Look at Key Trends in Student  
Speech Views Since 2016

A Knight Foundation-Ipsos study from the  
Knight Free Expression Research Series

July 2024





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech 2024” continues Knight Foundation’s research series tracking college student views on the First Amendment and free expression, which began in 2016. This work seeks to elevate the voices of students and understand their complex attitudes on free expression, especially within the college setting. This latest report is particularly timely as the 2024 election nears and as the war in Gaza has sparked contentious protests on campuses across the country, bringing the specific complexities of free speech to the center of the national debate.

This research was conducted before the spring 2024 campus protests, thus not capturing students’ responses to these events.<sup>1</sup>

This Knight Foundation-Ipsos report continues the investigation into the complexities of free expression on campus and highlights the evolving views of students. This survey shows that the story of free speech on campus continues to be nuanced and characterized by lived experiences, good-faith efforts, and genuine student interest to build a constructive learning environment.

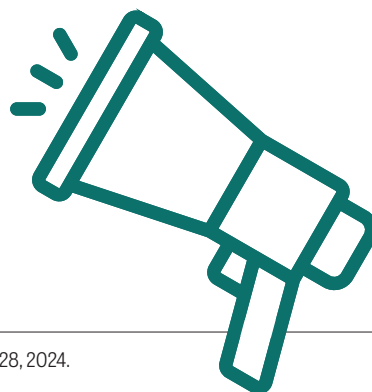
During this tumultuous time, it’s more important than ever that university leaders are equipped with data that elevates the views of students to guide their campus decision-making. The findings described in this report cover many of the rich insights contained in this expansive dataset. Higher education administrators, the public, and researchers are welcome to continue exploring this publicly available survey database.

### Key Findings

**Students believe free speech is essential to American democracy, but confidence in the security of this right has plummeted since 2016.**

While 9 in 10 college students continue to feel that citizens’ free speech rights are very important to them, fewer students believe their freedom of speech is secure in 2024, down 30 percentage points from 2016. Notably, since 2021 the increased concern about security of free speech is driven by Democratic students.

**Discomfort with the speech environment on campus is rising, and 7 in 10 students say speech can be as damaging as physical violence.** The percentage of students who felt uncomfortable due to speech about race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation on campus has almost doubled, from 25% to 44%, since 2017. More than half (55%) report feeling uncomfortable due to political speech. However, there has been little change in reported rates of students feeling physically unsafe (15%) due to speech on campus.



<sup>1</sup> The 2024 Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey was conducted March 7-28, 2024.

**Students want to be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints, though tension persists between promoting free expression and protecting students from hateful or threatening speech.**

Most students continue to support allowing all types of speech, even offensive speech. Few students are in favor of restrictive speech measures on campus such as speech codes. However, students do draw lines, with a majority saying that both hate and threatening speech should be restricted from campus.<sup>2</sup>

**Few students report they would take part in disruptive actions toward invited speakers they oppose.** Eight percent of students report they would engage in disruptive actions – either trying to stop a speech ahead of time or disrupt it during – to halt a speaker they oppose. The large majority of students report they would take no action (51%), boycott the event (23%), or other non-disruptive actions.

**Compared with white students, Black, Asian, and multiracial students report challenging experiences and diverging opinions of campus speech.** Half or more of these students report feeling uncomfortable on campus due to something someone else said about race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. A decisive majority of

Black students (85%) also agree that hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses, in line with Asian, Hispanic, and multiracial students.

**Students feel self-censorship hampers educational value.** Two in 3 students say self-censorship limits educationally valuable conversations on campus, and 2 in 3 report self-censoring on some topics during classroom discussions. This is particularly true when it comes to discussing topics of gender or LGBTQ+ issues, racial issues, or religion.

**Students crave opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue.** Most students are unaware of programs at their institution to promote constructive dialogues. Among those who definitively report that their schools do not have such programs, a clear majority favor creating programs to help foster healthy debate.

**Students are increasingly skeptical of social media’s role in productive conversations.** Only 1 in 4 students feel the dialogue that occurs on social media is usually civil, down from 40% in 2016. Only half feel comfortable sharing opinions online, with many believing social media stifles free expression due to fear of attacks or shaming.



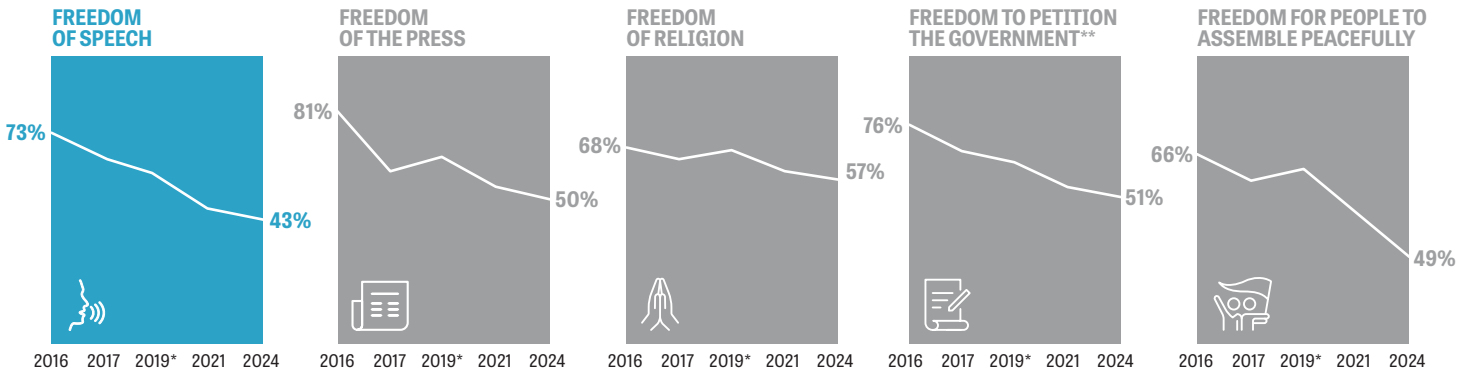
<sup>2</sup> In the survey hate speech was defined as an attack based on someone’s race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation. This definition was used in order to maintain trend with previous surveys. It should be noted that this could be interpreted to cover abstractly hateful speech or unprotected conducts such as harassment.

## KEY CHARTS

A selection of key student views on free expression and campus speech. Full findings are in the body of the report.

### The number of students who think free speech rights are secure continues to decline

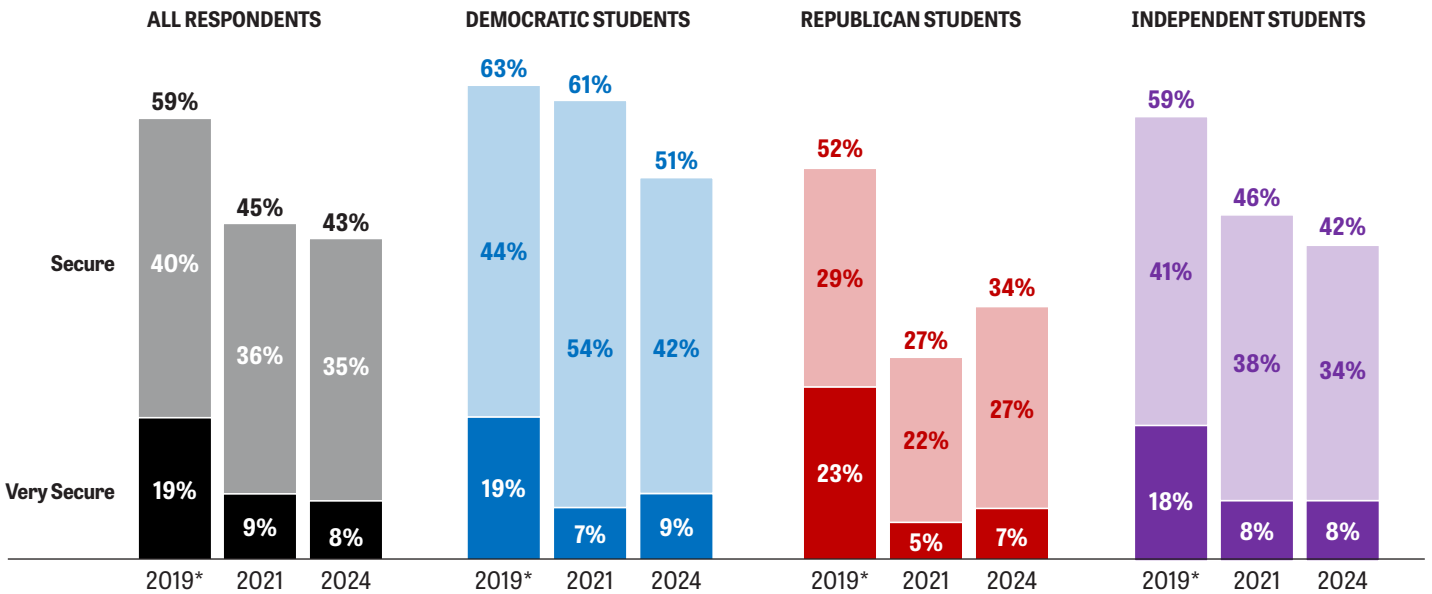
% of students who feel the following freedoms are very secure or secure today



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents.  
 \*In 2019, the question was "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"  
 \*\*In 2019 and prior, statement read "Freedom to petition the government, meaning presenting requests to the government without fear of punishment."

### Compared with 2021, fewer Democratic students and more Republican students believe freedom of speech is secure

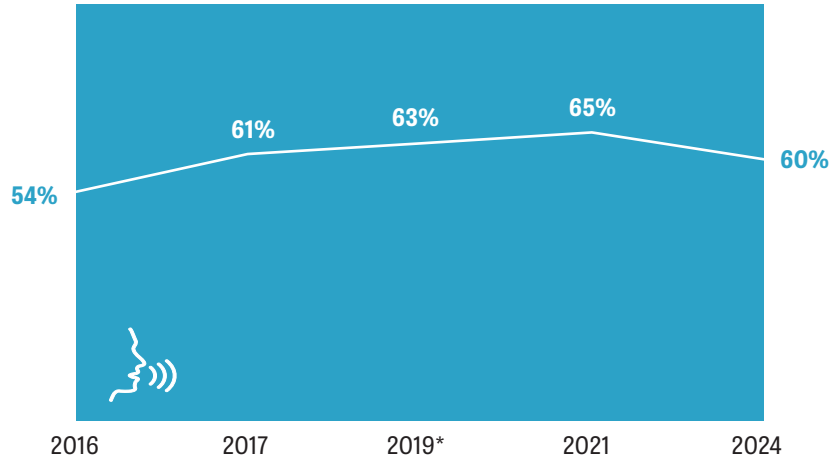
% of students who feel freedom of speech is very secure or secure today



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents.  
 \*In 2019, the question was "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"

### Most continue to feel the climate at their school stifles some speech

% who strongly or somewhat agree with, "The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe, because others might find it offensive."



Q7. For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe, because others might find it offensive.

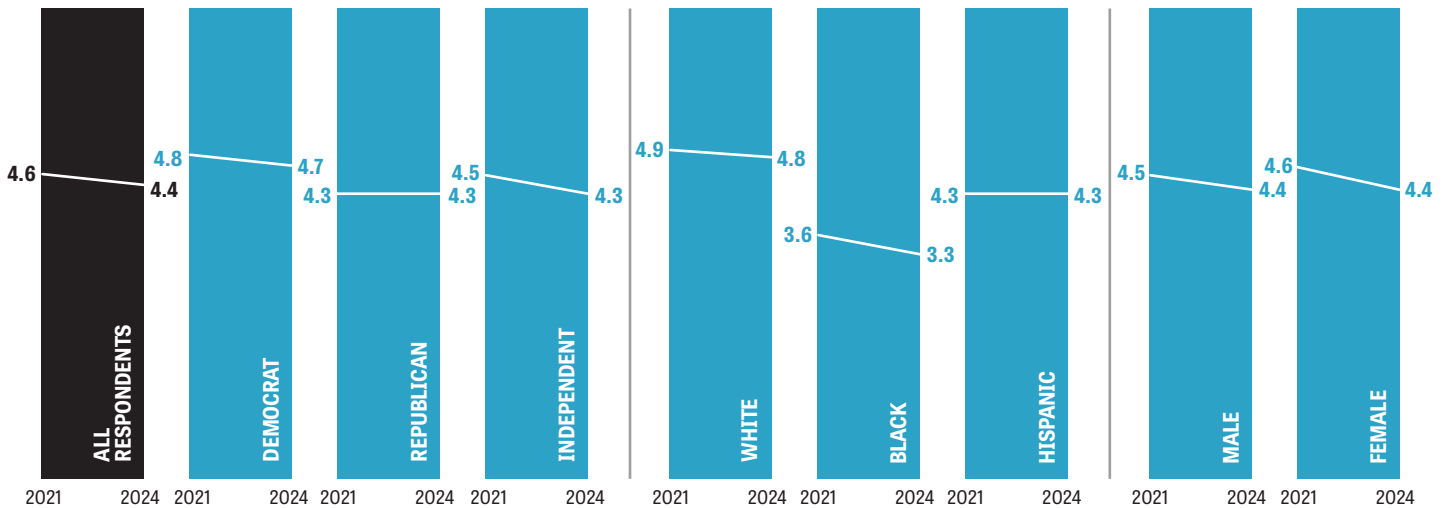
Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents.

\*In 2019 and prior: question for this item was "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

### Students feel it is becoming harder to express themselves, especially Black students

How easy or difficult is it for people like you to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today?

Scale of 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy)

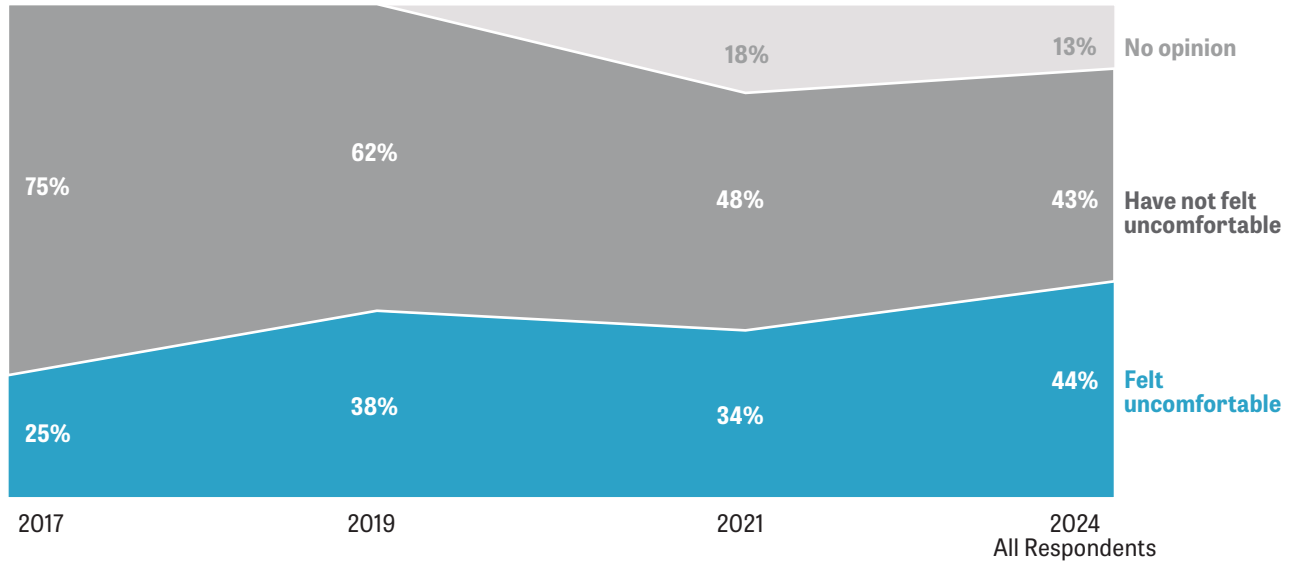


Q4. How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today? On a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being very difficult and 7 being very easy.

Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. Sample size is not large enough to report on for non-binary students.

### Students are feeling increasingly uncomfortable about speech on campus

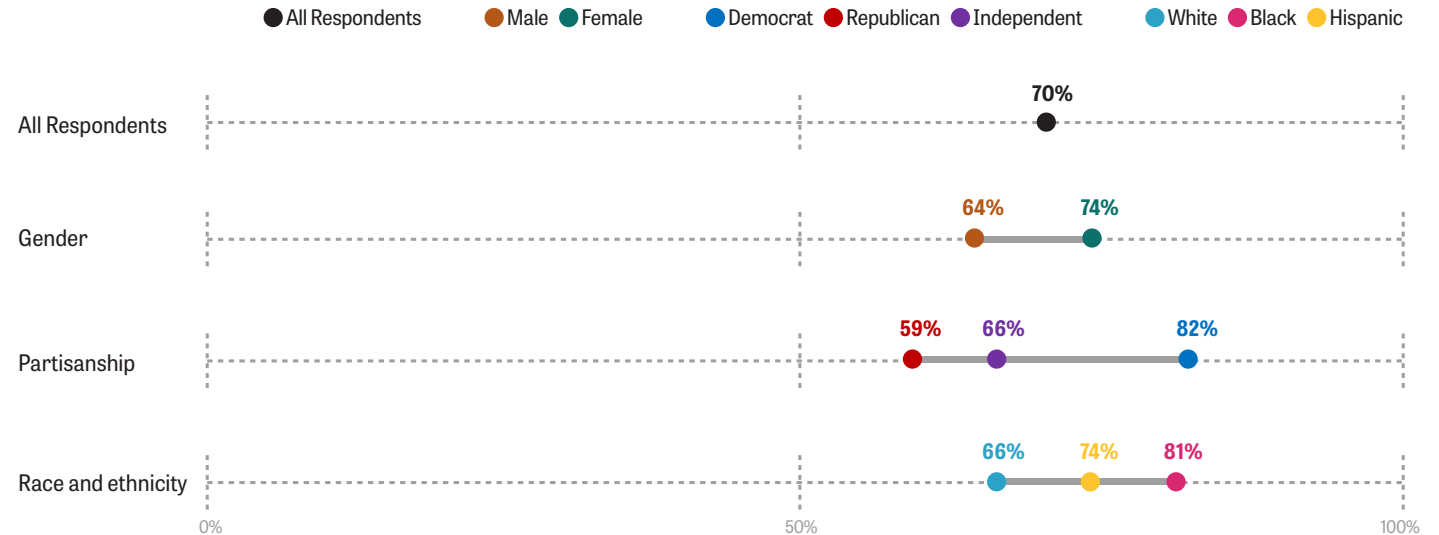
Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space, or other part of campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation – whether or not it was directed at you?



Q28. Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space, or other part of campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation – whether or not it was directed at you?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents.

### Democratic students are most likely to believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence

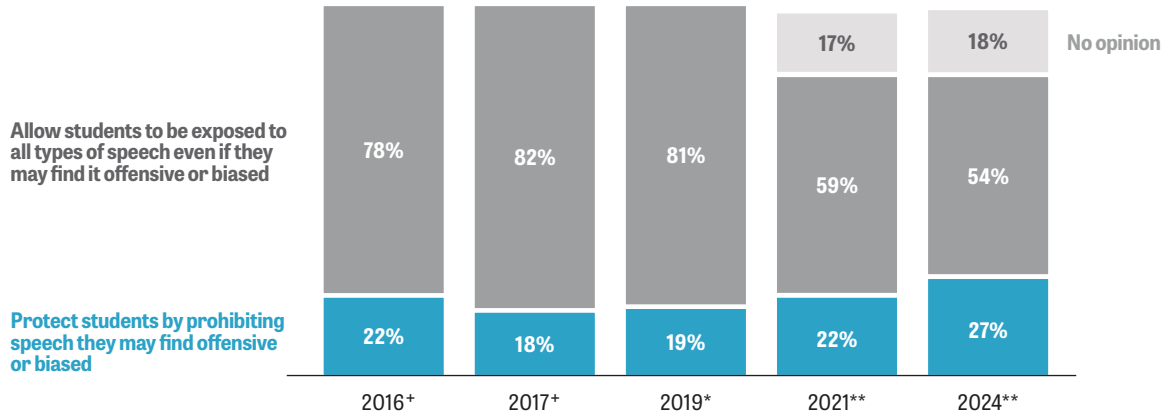
% of students who believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence



Q6. Do you believe that some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence to the recipient?  
 Base: All respondents.

### Students increasingly think colleges should protect students from offensive speech

If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to:  
 Allow or protect students from being exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased?



Q13. If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to: allow students to be exposed to all types of speech or protect students by prohibiting offensive speech.  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents

\*2019 and prior did not include "No opinion."

\*\*2021 and 2024: "Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.

\*In 2016 and 2017, the question was: "If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to create a positive learning environment for all students by prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people, or to create an open learning environment where students are exposed to all types of speech and viewpoints, even if it means allowing speech that is offensive or biased against certain groups of people?"

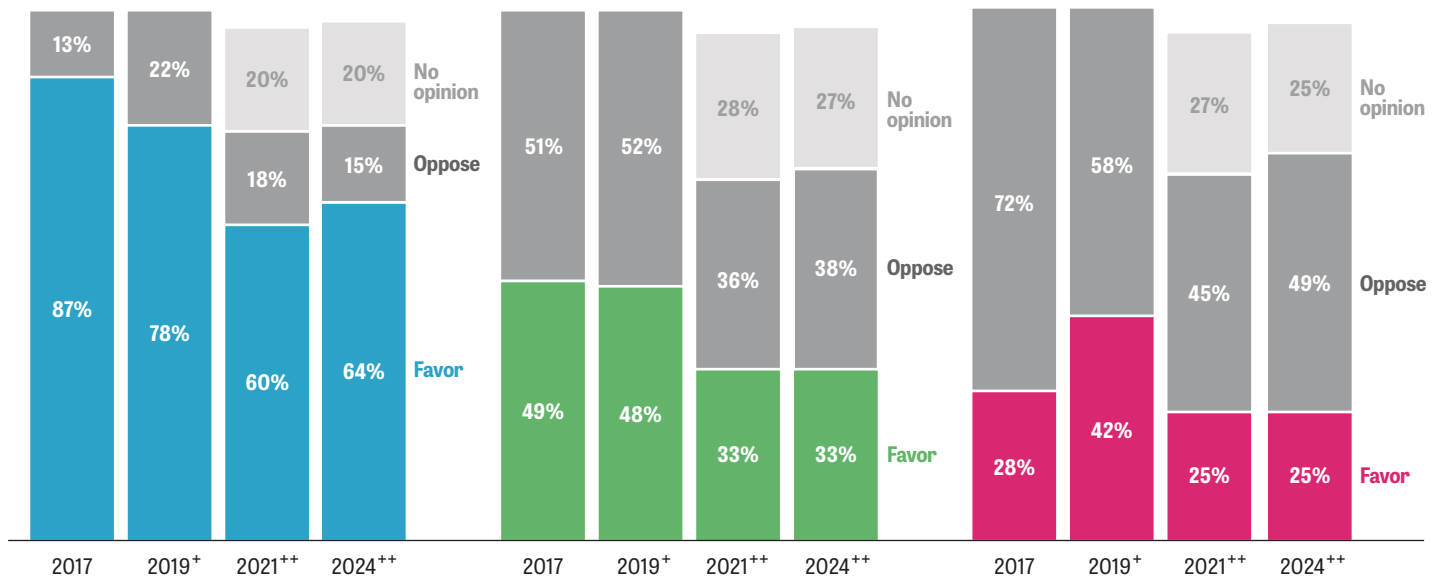
### Opinions on safe spaces, speech codes, and disinverting speakers remain relatively the same since 2021

% who favor or oppose the following

**Providing safe spaces**, or areas of campus designed to be free from threatening actions, ideas, or conversations\*

**Instituting speech codes**, or codes of conduct that restrict potentially offensive or biased speech on campus that would be permitted in other public places\*\*

**Disinverting speakers** because some students perceive their message as offensive or biased against certain groups of people\*\*\*



Q8. Do you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges?

Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. \*2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents.

\*In 2017, this was "Providing safe spaces, or areas of campus students can go for support if they feel upset or threatened by things they see or hear."

\*\*In 2017, this was "Instituting speech codes, or codes of conduct that restrict offensive or biased speech on campus that would be permitted in society more generally."

\*\*\*In 2017, this was "Disinverting speakers because some students are opposed to the invitation."

\*2019 and prior did not include "No opinion."

\*\*2021 and 2024: "Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.



## KEY POPULATIONS

Experience with and attitudes toward speech vary widely among different student groups. The greatest differences exist among partisanship and race, and less so by gender or other demographic groupings. The following is a brief summary of the major findings and how opinion has changed over time, including the degree to which students have a formed opinion at all.

### Democratic students

Half of Democratic students believe that freedom of speech is secure in America today, down from about 3 in 5 Democratic students who felt that way in 2021. Since 2021, Democratic students have been driving the increased concern about the security of free speech. Democratic students are split on whether to allow all types of speech on campus, even speech that is offensive. Similar to 2021, more Democratic than Republican or independent students are in favor of protecting students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive, something that was also true in prior Knight-Gallup research.<sup>3</sup> Since 2019, a large majority of Democratic students have believed that colleges should be able to restrict the use of racial slurs on campus. When it comes to other speech policies, about 3 in 4 support the creation of safe spaces on campus, close to half support the creation of speech codes that could limit offensive or biased speech, and about 2 in 5 favor schools disinviting a speaker because of their views. These views are consistent with previous surveys. A majority of Democrats and independents feel that their campus climate prevents people from saying what they believe for fear of offending others, although they are less likely to feel this way than Republicans.

### Independent students

Independent students express growing concerns about the fundamental security of free speech in America today while indicating their wariness of colleges limiting speech on campus. Just about 2 in 5 independent students feel that free speech is secure today, down from under half of independents in 2021, and down even more from the 3 in 4 who felt this way in 2016. Yet a large majority feel that the First Amendment protects people like them, a view that has held steady since 2019. A majority believe that colleges should allow students to be exposed to all forms of speech. Opinion is split among the remaining minority with equal numbers either believing that colleges should foster a protective environment or having no opinion on the matter. Much as in previous surveys, few support colleges disinviting controversial speakers or instituting speech codes. A majority feel that their campus climate limits free expression, a view that has remained roughly the same since 2019.

### Republican students

Few Republican students feel that freedom of speech is secure today, with about 1 in 3 feeling this right is secure. However, that has increased since 2021, when only about 1 in 4 felt that freedom of speech was secure. Still, that is down substantially from the 2 in 3 Republicans who felt free speech was secure in 2016. About 2 in 3 Republican students feel that their campus prevents people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive, roughly in line with where Republican students stood in 2021 on this question. A strong majority (7 in 10)

3 Knight-Gallup Free Expression Research, 2016, 2017, 2019

say it is more important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech, even if they find it offensive or biased, than to prohibit offensive or biased speech. This is consistent with 2021, but down from 2019. A majority (53%) – albeit a smaller share than either Democratic or independent students – believe that colleges should be allowed to prohibit the use of racial slurs on campus, in line with attitudes from 2021. Republicans are more divided around whether safe spaces should be allowed on campus – half favor this – but come down firmly against schools disinviting controversial speakers, something that was also true in 2019 and 2021. Half oppose schools instituting speech codes that could restrict offensive or biased speech.

### **White students**

White students tend to favor allowing all types of speech on campus, over protecting students by prohibiting certain speech. They are least likely to report having felt unsafe or uncomfortable on campus because of comments about their identity, as compared with Black and Hispanic students. This has not changed substantially since 2021. Overall, over half of white college students believe that freedom of speech is under threat in America today. Yet a large majority feel that the First Amendment protects people like them, a view that has held steady since 2019. When it comes to free expression on college campuses, white students are more likely than their Black or Hispanic counterparts to agree that schools should favor exposing students to all forms of speech, rather than protecting them from speech they may find offensive or biased. This was also true in 2019 and 2021. A majority agree that their campus climate prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive, in line with attitudes among Black and Hispanic students.

### **Black students**

A growing number of Black students favor a more protective campus environment. In 2021, 36% of Black students favored a campus environment that protects students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased, up from the 28% who favored this in 2019. Now, 43% favor this more protective speech environment over allowing students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased. Black students, in particular, are among the most supportive of speech restrictions, including being the most likely to say hate speech should not be legally protected (71%), and the most likely to report that “people like them” have a harder time exercising their free speech rights, a sentiment that has grown since 2021. A decisive majority of Black students (85%) also agree that hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses, in line with Asian, Hispanic, and multiracial students. In both in 2019 and 2021, a majority of Black students felt that colleges should restrict the use of offensive racial slurs on campus. This year, around half of these students report feeling uncomfortable on campus due to something someone else said about race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Notably, 1 in 5 Black students also report feeling unsafe on campus because of something someone said about their race, ethnicity, or religion, statistically the same as Hispanic students. Only 1 in 10 white students report the same.

## Hispanic students

Hispanic students' views of campus speech, and personal experiences, fall somewhere between the differing views of Black and white students. Half of Hispanic students say colleges should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased over having a more protective speech environment that limits speech students may find offensive or biased. Hispanic students fall between white and Black students on their view about allowing students to be exposed to all types of speech over protecting students by having a more prohibitive policy. Hispanic students align closely with white students on perceptions that free speech is under threat; just under half agree. A majority of Hispanic students also feel that colleges should be able to restrict offensive racial slurs, in line with attitudes among white students, with 2 in 3 supporting this, even as more Black students support colleges being able to restrict racial slurs. A plurality of Hispanic students oppose disinviting controversial speakers, though after that, Hispanic students are split between having no opinion on the subject and favoring disinviting a controversial speaker. Like Black students, a plurality (43%) favor instituting speech codes to restrict potentially offensive or biased speech on campus, while far fewer white students (25%) agree. Likewise, close to 7 in 10 Hispanic students favor the creation of safe spaces on campus, less than the share of white students who do but statistically no different from Black students. Sixteen percent of Hispanic students report feeling unsafe on campus because of something someone said about their race, ethnicity, or religion, statistically the same as Black students. Only 1 in 10 white students report the same.

## Male and female students

For the most part, male and female students are aligned in their attitudes and experiences of free speech, with a few key differences. Overall, a majority of both male and female students say that free speech rights are important to American democracy. Now, male students are more likely than female students to strongly agree that free speech is an important part of American democracy. Nearly twice as many female students (19%) as male students (10%) report that they have felt personally unsafe on campus because of something someone said in reference to their race, ethnicity, or religion. Additionally, far more female students (51%) than male students (35%) report feeling uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space, or other part of campus because of something someone said about their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, something that was also true in 2021 and 2019.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

We are social investors who support democracy by funding free expression and journalism, arts and culture in community, research in areas of media and democracy, and in the success of American cities and towns where the Knight brothers once had newspapers.

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### Advisory Team

Thank you to the advisory team that helped steer this research program.

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## DETAILED FINDINGS

### Introduction

2024 marks a crisis for free speech on college campuses as international conflicts, like the war in Gaza, and domestic strife come to a head, bringing urgent political and personal issues to center stage. With campuses cracking down on protests, political leaders casting a questioning eye on the decisions of university administrators, and emerging technology making disinformation easier and faster to produce, the position of higher education as a forum for open discussion has never been more crucial or imperiled.

“College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech 2024” updates Knight Foundation’s long-running research series on free expression on campus, finding that while a decisive majority of students continue to see free speech as an essential right, increasing numbers of students believe free speech is under threat as they continue to grapple with the boundaries of speech on campus. Notably, data cited in this report was collected before the wave of campus protests in the spring of 2024, so results do not reflect students’ experiences around these events.<sup>4</sup>

Free speech is fundamental to college students – a consensus that respondents have arrived at each year since Knight Foundation first began surveying college students on this question in 2019. Moreover, students want to be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints, even if offensive. However, this latest study finds that more students report feeling uncomfortable due to the speech of others. In

addition, a large majority of students believe speech can do the same harm as physical violence. Many students report self-censoring in the classroom, despite feeling that self-censorship is hampering the educational value of college.

Of course, college students are not all the same. Identities, like partisanship, race, and ethnicity, influence how students experience the world, driving significant differences in where each group of students stands on debates around free speech. Gender, albeit to a lesser extent, also plays a role. Understanding how college students’ identities inform their experiences around speech on campus is crucial for college leaders as they foster their campus environments.

American society continues to be at a crossroads over how to apply First Amendment rights in the 21st century, particularly on college campuses. That is why it is essential that thought leaders, administrators, professors, and the public listen to the voices of college students as they grapple with issues of free speech in America and on campus. This report outlines college students’ views on speech and free expression, interpretations of the First Amendment, the climate surrounding campus speech, campus speech policies, student activism, self-censorship, and social media, with the goal to elevate student voices as critical inputs into the decision-making of campus leaders and the national dialogue overall.

4 The 2024 Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey was conducted March 7-28, 2024.

## VIEWS ON SPEECH AND FREE EXPRESSION

Most college students continue to view freedom of speech as one of the most important pillars of American democracy. But increasingly, many students believe that free speech rights in the U.S. are less secure, hitting the lowest point recorded since the inception of this report. Likewise, many students feel it is becoming harder for people like them to express themselves.

### Students believe free speech is a pillar of American democracy

Since 2021, this research series has monitored how important students perceive the First Amendment

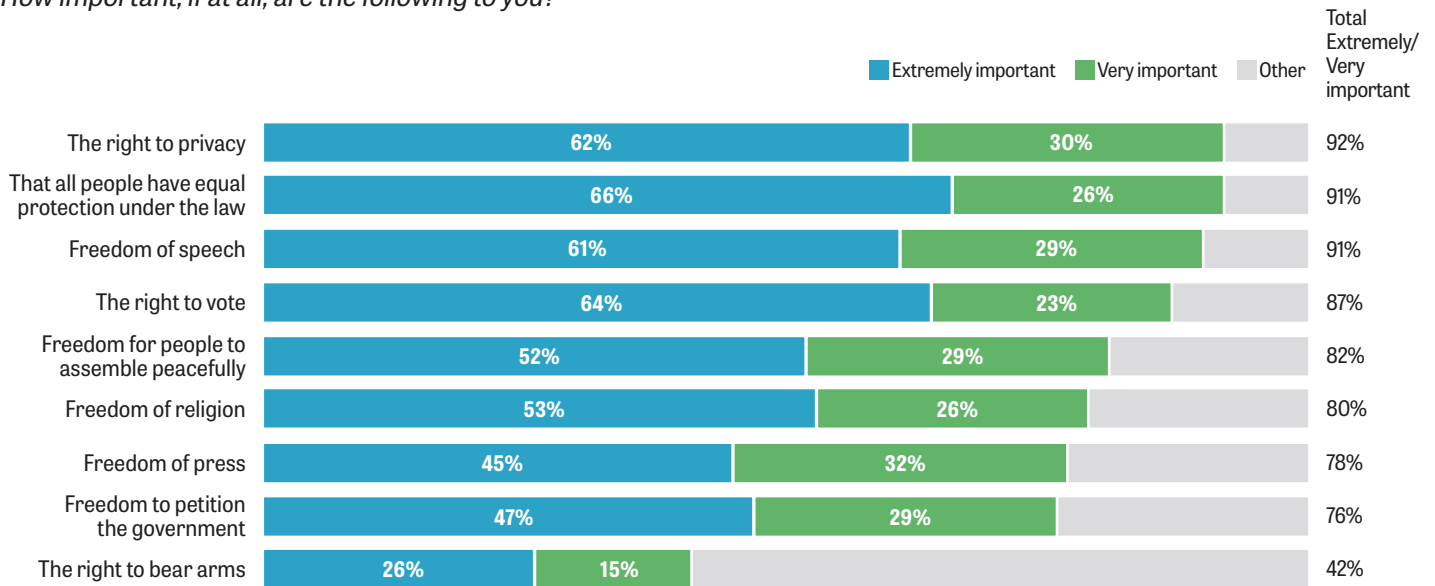
to be for American democracy and for themselves personally, along with the degree to which they consider it essential to protect this right.

Free speech rights are important to students, even more now than in the past. Out of a list of American rights and freedoms, freedom of speech ranks at the top in importance to students personally, along with the right to privacy and equal protection under the law.

This sentiment has increased over time, from 87% in 2021 to 91% in 2024.

### Nearly all students say free speech is important to them

How important, if at all, are the following to you?



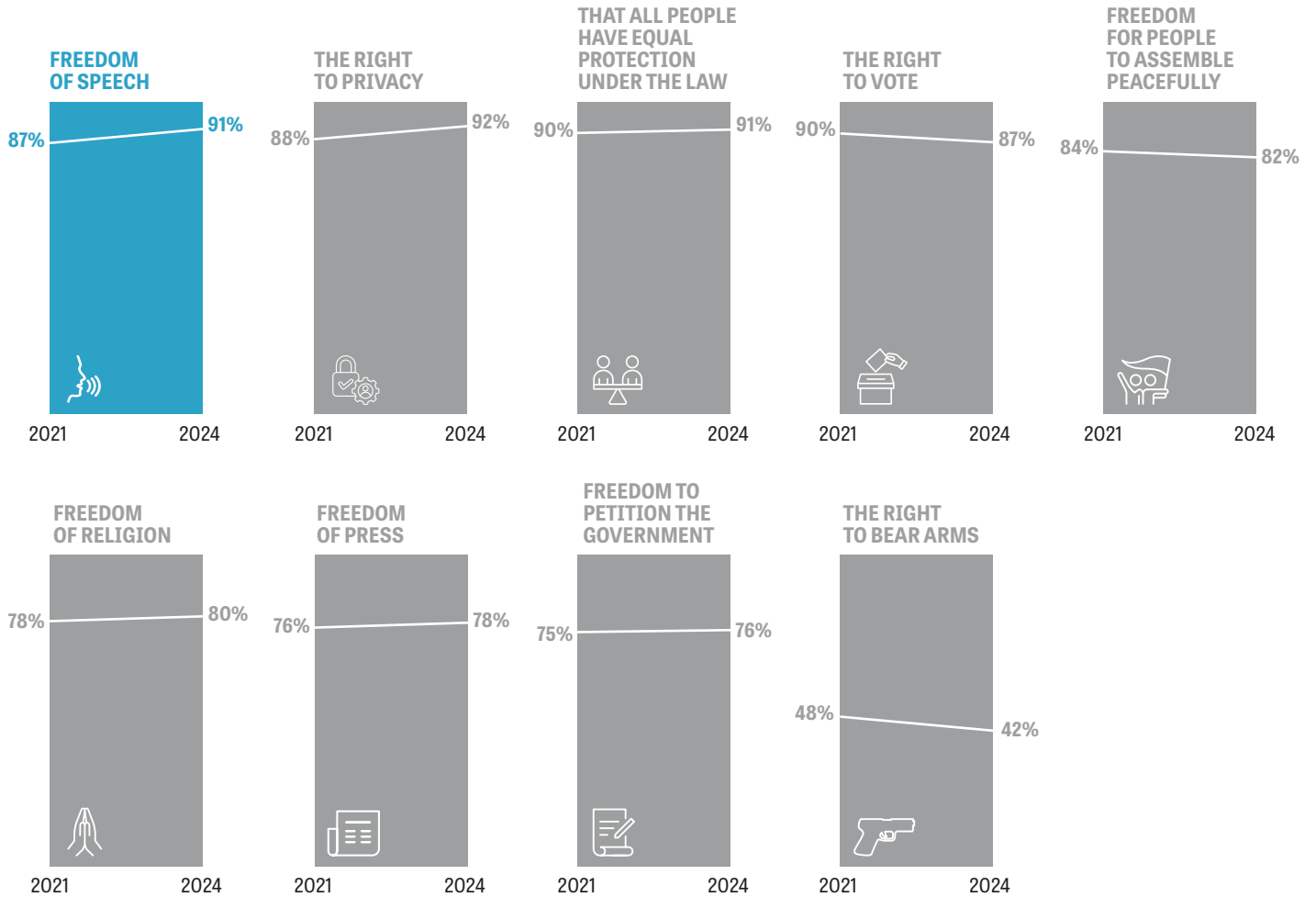
Q1. How important, if at all, are the following to you?

Base: All respondents

Percentage points are rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a "total" column may be slightly higher or lower than the summation of each part.

## A strong majority continues to believe in the importance of free speech

How important, if at all, are the following to you?  
(Extremely or very important)



Q1. How important, if at all, are the following to you?  
Base: All respondents. 2021: Three-quarters of respondents.

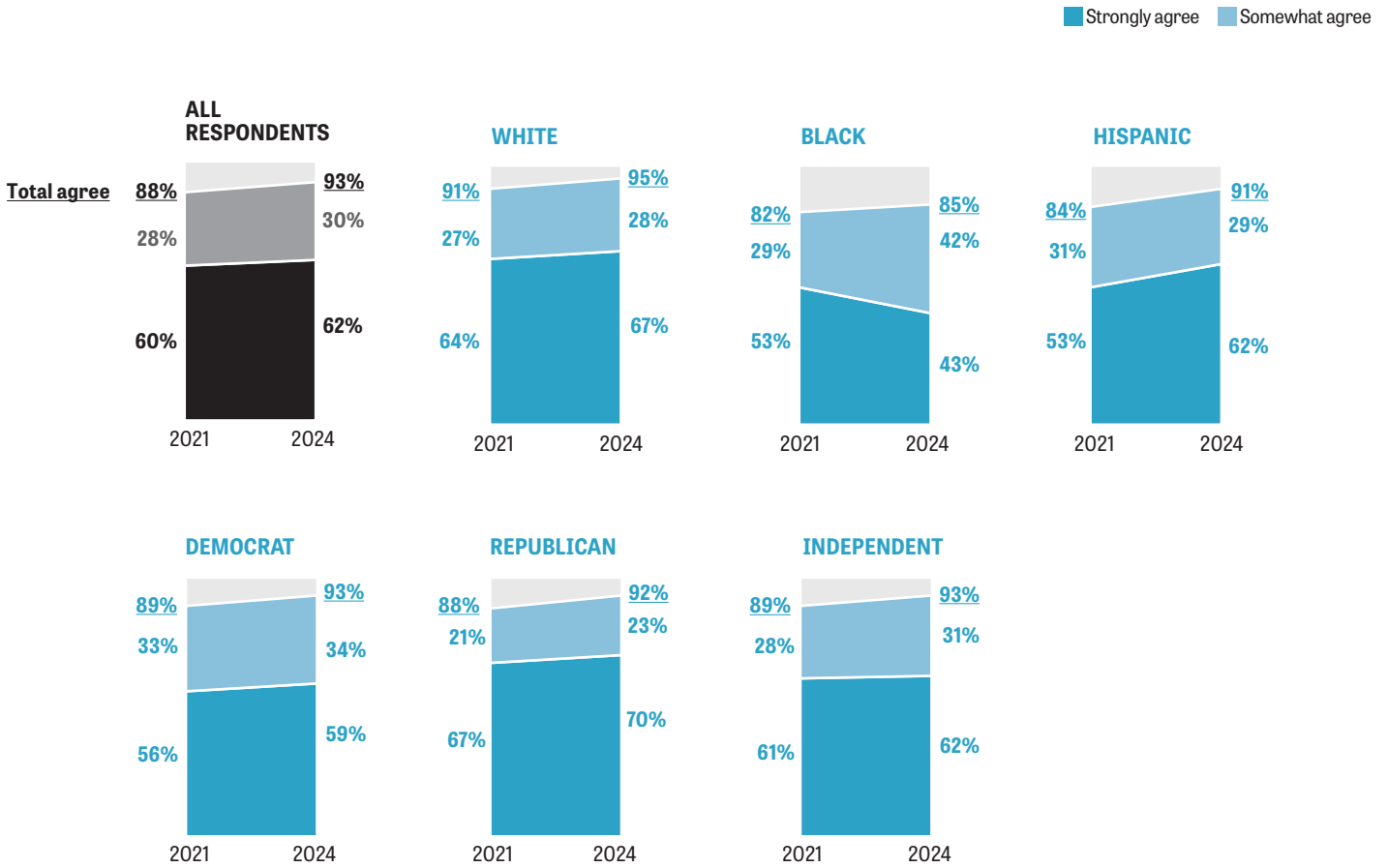
Moreover, over 9 in 10 of students also agree with the statement that “protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy” (93%). These levels have increased slightly from 2021 (88%).

Regardless of political affiliation, most students believe in the importance of free speech rights to American democracy. Nearly all Republicans (92%),

Democrats (93%), and independents (93%) agree that protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy. Across race and ethnicity, most students agree with this sentiment too, though Black students are slightly less likely to agree (85%) than white (95%) or Hispanic (91%) students.

### Fewer Black college students strongly agree that protecting free speech is important to democracy

% who agree that "Protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy"



Q7. For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: Protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy.  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents.  
 Percentage points are rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a "total" column may be slightly higher or lower than the summation of each part.

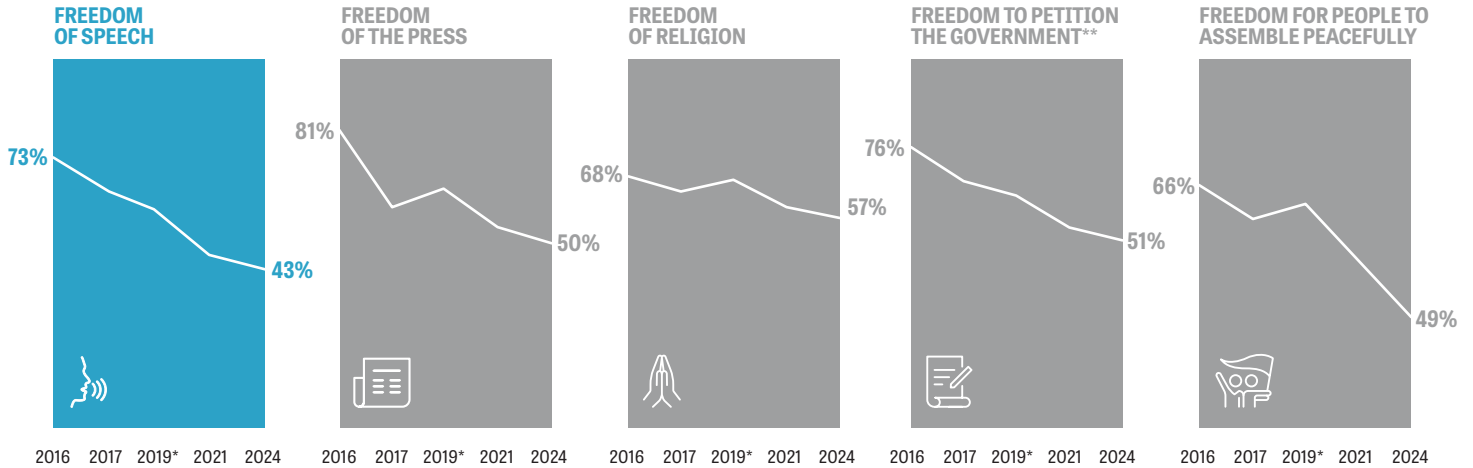
To that end, most students also feel that free speech should be protected, even when it is unpopular or offensive. Most students agree that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions (92%), that musicians should be allowed to sing songs with

lyrics that others might find offensive (73%), and that online news providers should be allowed to publish any story without the government having the ability to block or censor them (71%).



**The number of students who think free speech rights are secure continues to decline**

*% of students who feel the following freedoms are very secure or secure today*



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents.  
 \*In 2019, question was "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"  
 \*\*In 2019 and prior statement read "Freedom to petition the government, meaning presenting requests to the government without fear of punishment"

**Students' feeling that First Amendment rights are secure has plummeted**

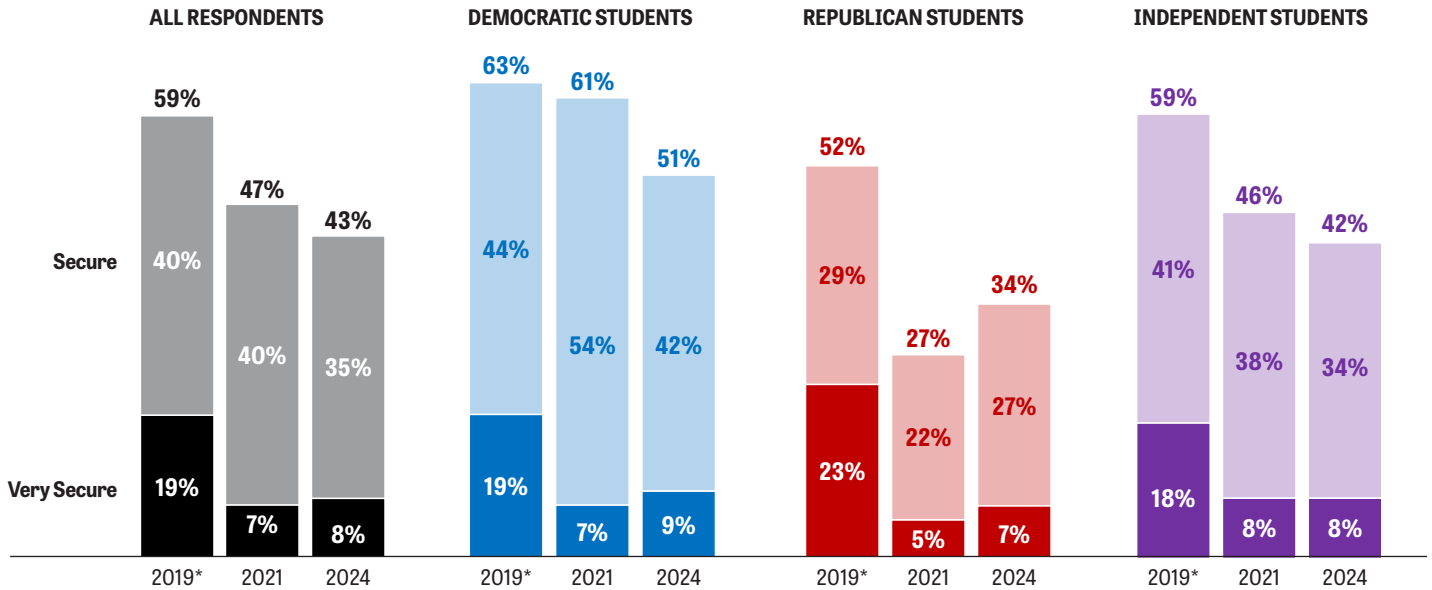
Since this survey's inception in 2016, students have never felt less secure in the right to freedom of speech. In 2016, 73% thought freedom of speech rights were secure in the country; today, under half of college students (43%) feel this way.

Interestingly, the gap between Democratic and Republican students who believe free speech is secure is getting smaller, driven by changing sentiments of Democratic students. In 2021, there

was a 34-point difference between Republican and Democratic students on the security of free speech (61% of Democrats felt speech was secure vs. 27% of Republicans). More Republicans (34%) now say free speech is secure, while fewer Democrats do (51%), narrowing the gap by partisanship on this question to just 17 points. On the other hand, this sentiment has remained stable among independents (42% in 2024 vs. 46% in 2021). There are minimal differences by gender, race or type of institution students are attending.

## Compared with 2021, fewer Democratic students and more Republican students believe freedom of speech is secure

% of students who feel freedom of speech is very secure or secure today



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents.  
 \*In 2019, the question was "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"

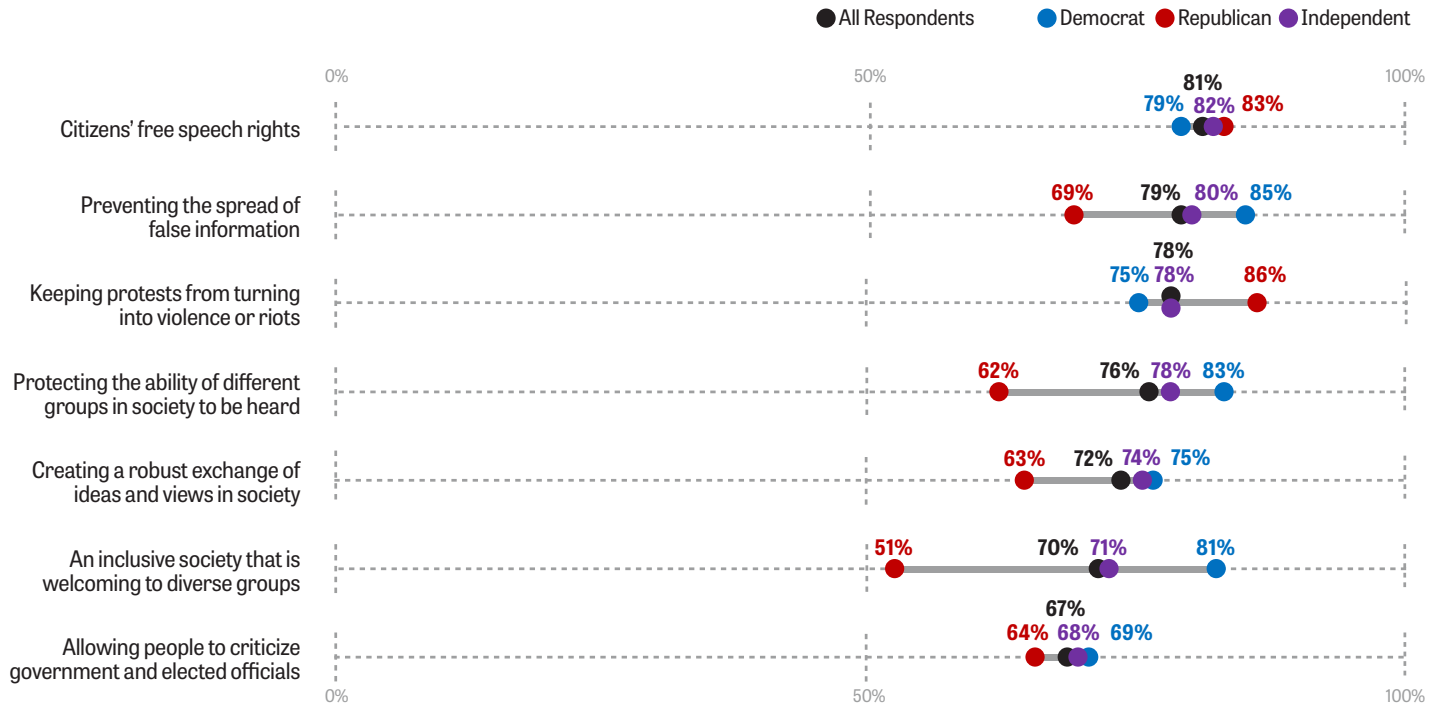
It is important to know that belief in the security of other components of the First Amendment has also dropped significantly over the past few years. Belief that freedom of the press is secure fell from 81% in 2016 to 50% in 2024; belief that freedom to assemble peacefully is secure is down from 66% in 2016 to 49% in 2024; and belief that freedom to petition the government is secure declined from 76% in 2016 to 51% in 2024.

### Where politics divides students on free speech

Across political affiliation, students agree that freedom of expression is an important aspect of U.S. democracy. Eight in 10 college students feel that citizens' free speech rights are very or extremely important in American democracy broadly, including 45% who believe they are extremely important and 37% who consider them very important. These levels have not changed much since 2021 (84%). This includes Republican (83%), Democratic (79%), and independent (82%) students, who all value free speech rights roughly equally.

## Republican students consider an inclusive society, stopping the spread of false information less important in our Democracy compared to Democrats

How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?  
 % who consider each of the following to be extremely or very important



Q1. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?  
 Base: All respondents

However, there are several key differences in attitudes toward free speech by partisanship. For example, Democratic and independent students are more likely than Republicans to feel that protecting the ability of different groups in society to be heard (83% Democrat, 78% independent, 62% Republican) and having an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups (81% Democrat, 71% independent, 51% Republican) are important aspects of American democracy.

Conversely, Republicans (86%) are slightly more likely to believe that keeping protests from turning into violence or riots is an important aspect of U.S. democracy, compared with Democrats (75%) and independents (78%).

Furthermore, while a majority of students say that preventing the spread of false information (79%) is a key pillar of our democracy, Democrats (85%) and

independents (80%) are more likely to feel this way than Republicans (69%).

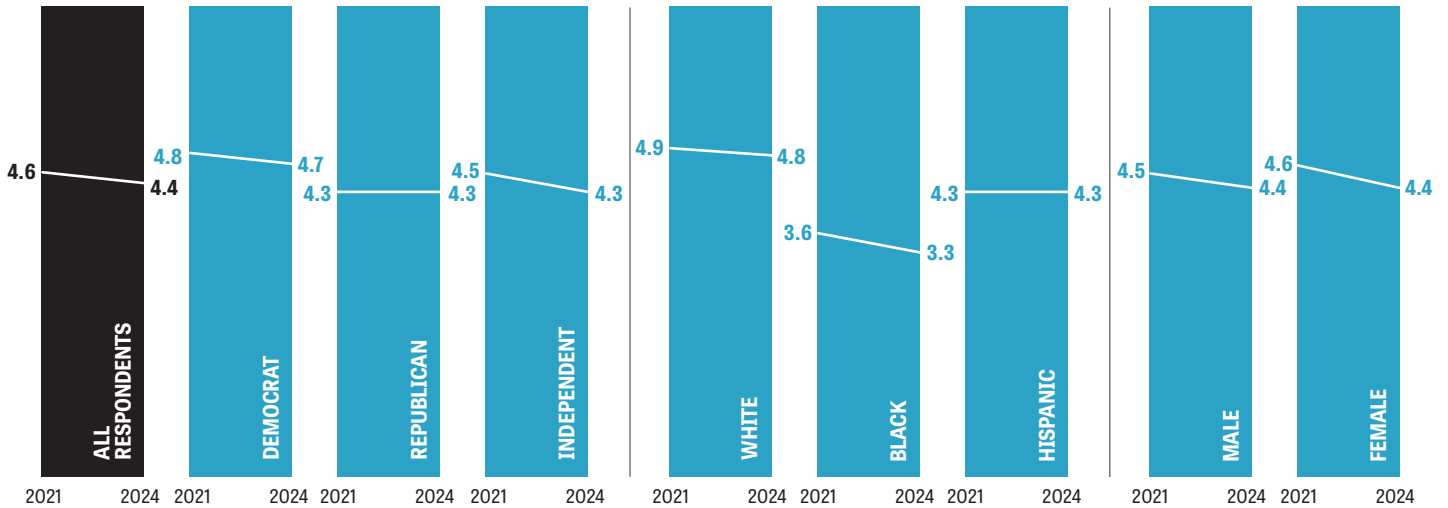
### Students feel it is becoming harder to express themselves freely

When conducting this survey, Knight Foundation and Ipsos sought to understand the relative ease or difficulty that different groups are perceived to have when exercising free speech. Students in the survey are asked to rate how difficult it is for various groups to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is very difficult and 7 is very easy.

When it comes to how easy it is for “people like me” to use free speech rights, students on average rate it a 4.4, a slight decline from 2021 (4.6), showing that students feel that it is becoming more difficult to express themselves.

### Students feel it is becoming harder to express themselves, especially Black students

How easy or difficult is it for people like you to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today?  
Scale of 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy)



Q4. How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today? On a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being very difficult and 7 being very easy.  
Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. Sample size is not large enough to report on for non-binary students.

Further, when rating how easy or difficult it is for “people like me,” Black students are significantly more likely to say it is harder for people like them to express themselves (3.3), compared with students of other racial or ethnic backgrounds (ranging from 4.2 to 4.8). More Black students now than in 2021 (3.6) feel this way. The perceived difference between white and Black students on how easy it is for “people like me” to express themselves is the biggest gap that exists across all demographic groups (4.8 vs. 3.3, respectively).

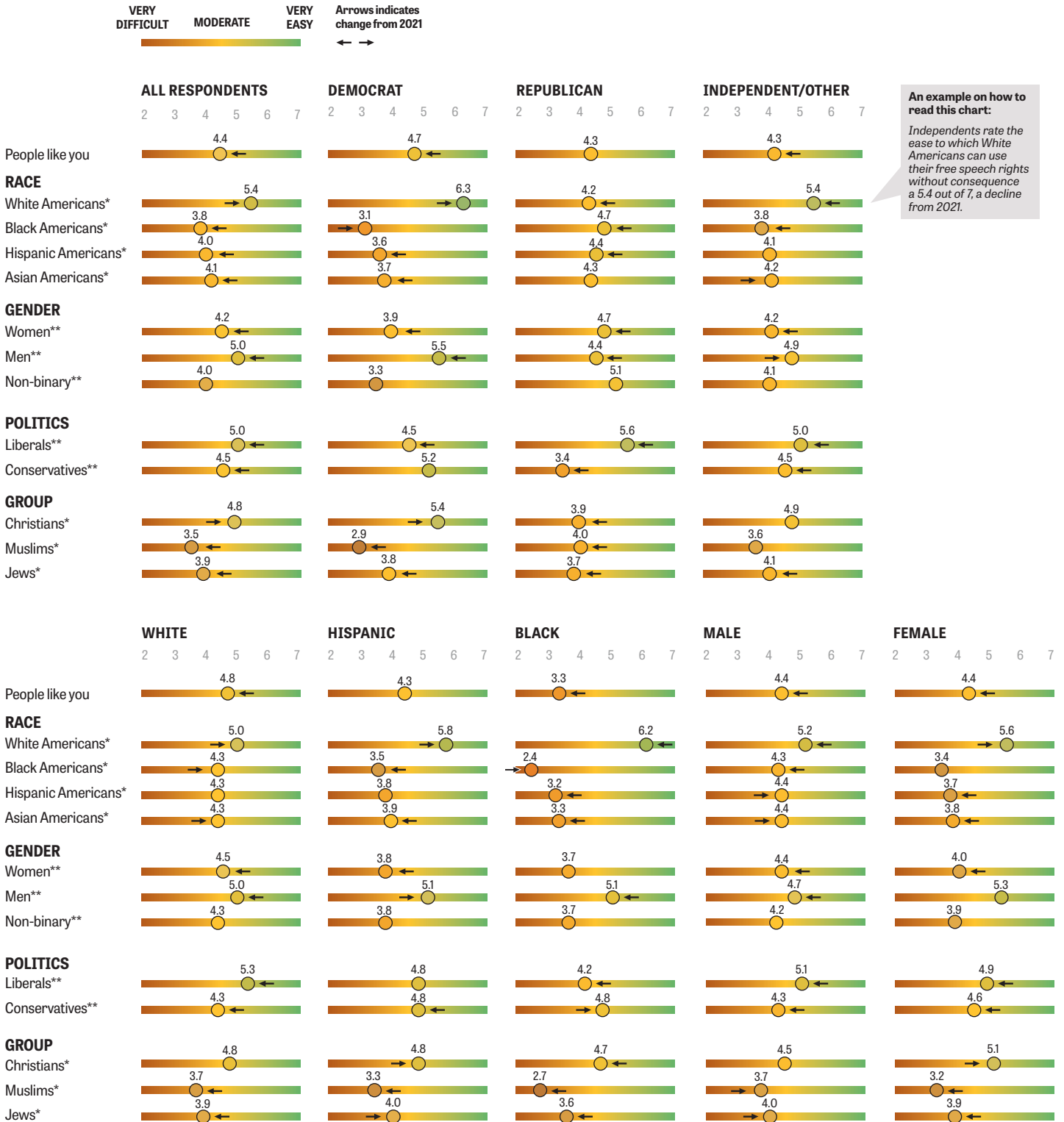
When considering the ease with which different groups can use free speech rights without consequence, students say that Muslims, Native Americans, Middle Easterners, Black Americans, and Jewish Americans have the most difficult time expressing themselves freely, while white Americans, men, liberals, Christians, and college administrators are viewed as having the easiest time expressing themselves.

Females (4.2 in 2024, 4.5 in 2021) and LGBTQ+ people (4.1 vs. 4.5) show the biggest declines in how easy students believe these groups can express themselves compared with 2021. Also, while white students generally see a smaller difference between racial groups when it comes to expressing themselves, Black students see most racial groups – except white Americans – as having a harder time expressing themselves without consequence.

Republicans and Democrats continue to perceive each other as having an easier time expressing themselves than they do. Independents see conservatives as having a slightly harder time expressing themselves (4.5) than liberals (5.0).

# Students perceive Black Americans, Muslim Americans, and Jewish Americans to have the hardest time expressing themselves without consequence

How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today?



**An example on how to read this chart:**  
Independents rate the ease to which White Americans can use their free speech rights without consequence a 5.4 out of 7, a decline from 2021.

Q4. How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today? On a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being very difficult and 7 being very easy.  
Base: "People like you" was asked to all respondents; items marked with one star (\*) were asked to split sample A; items marked with two stars (\*\*) were asked to split sample B.  
Note: for split-sampled items, the base sizes for Black college students and Other/2+ races are below n=100; exercise caution in interpreting results. Sample size is not large enough to report on for non-binary students.

## ATTITUDES ON THE FIRST AMENDMENT’S GUARANTEED RIGHTS AND PROTECTION OF HATE SPEECH

Students increasingly feel that their free speech rights are not as secure and that it is harder for them to express themselves. When it comes to the protections of the First Amendment, while the majority of students believe that the First Amendment does not go too far in the rights it guarantees, students are split on the legal protection of hate speech. There are significant divisions on the First Amendment’s protections and limitations by political affiliation and racial or ethnic identity.

### College students increasingly disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees

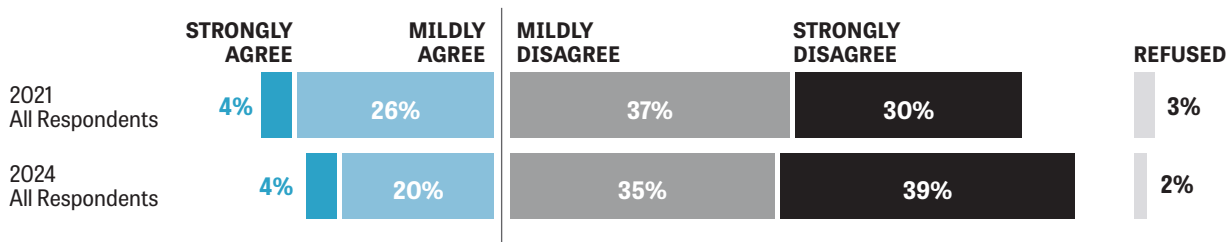
College students have a range of perspectives about the First Amendment and its implications for free speech. This Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey asks students whether they agree or disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Compared with 2021, the share of students who feel that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees decreased slightly

from 30% to 24%. Furthermore, more students now *strongly disagree* with this sentiment, moving nine percentage points up from 2021 to 2024. In other words, college students now feel more strongly that the First Amendment does not go too far in the rights it guarantees. This changing sentiment is driven by Democrats, 70% of whom disagree with this statement compared with 60% in 2021.

As to be expected, there are some differences by partisanship. Overall, most Republican students *disagree* that the First Amendment goes too far in guaranteeing rights (81%). Conversely, Democrats are more likely to agree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees (29%). Relatedly, Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to think the First Amendment’s protections are limited. Conversely, Democrats are more likely to agree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees (29%). Independents’ opinion on the matter tends to fall between Republicans and Democrats.

### Students increasingly disagree that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees

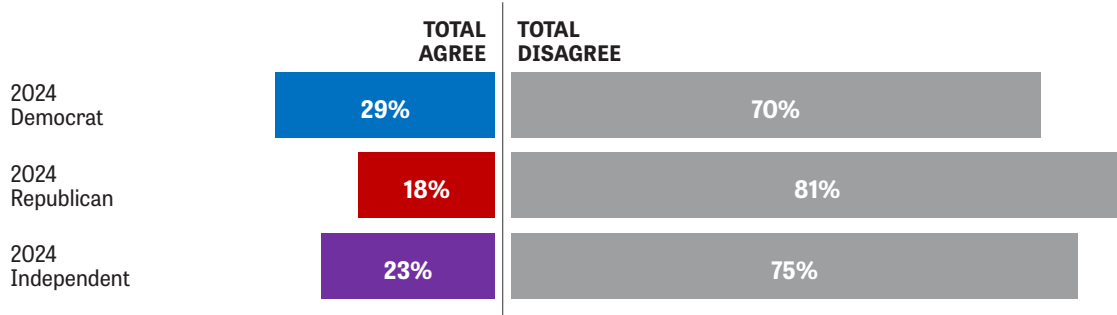
Agreement with “The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees”



Q5. Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, how do you feel about the following statement: The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Base: All respondents. 2021: Half of respondents. Previously asked among high school students. Trend data can be viewed here: <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/KF-Student-Views-Report-FINAL.pdf>

## Democratic students more likely than Republicans, independents to say the First Amendment goes too far

Agreement with “The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees”



Q5. Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, how do you feel about the following statement: The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Base: All respondents. 2021: Half of respondents. Previously asked among high school students. Trend data can be viewed here: <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/KF-Student-Views-Report-FINAL.pdf>

## Former education may affect students’ opinions on the First Amendment’s protections

Previous civics education on the First Amendment may influence students’ opinions on whether the rights the First Amendment guarantees go too far. The Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey asks students whether they had ever taken classes in high school or college that dealt with the First Amendment. Students who have taken a civics class are slightly more likely to believe that the First Amendment’s protections do not go too far. Students’ opinions on

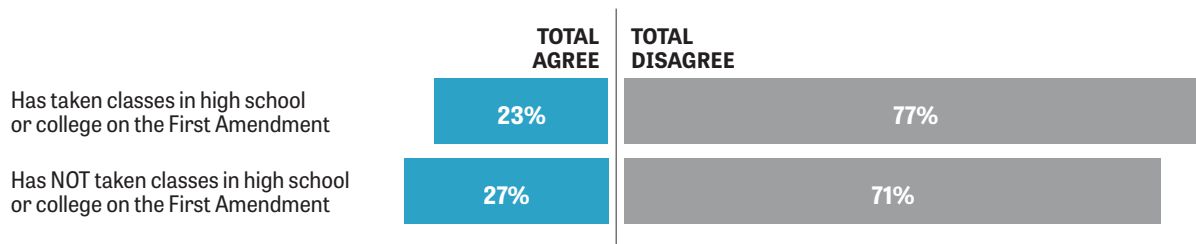
the First Amendment’s protections are more likely to be influenced by their political party affiliation than their past education.

## Students are split on the legal protection of hate speech, but more and more disapprove

The First Amendment protects hate speech, which the survey defined as an attack based on someone’s race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup> This complex and personal issue sparks significant division among students.

## Former education on the First Amendment has limited impact on opinions of the First Amendment’s rights

Agreement with “The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees”



Q5. Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, how do you feel about the following statement: The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Base: All respondents.  
 Q30. Have you ever taken classes in high school or college that dealt with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? Base: All respondents.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that the question, which originated in 2021, could be interpreted to cover abstractly hateful speech or unprotected conduct such as harassment. The core finding of this report remains clear: Students have concerns about hateful conduct on their campuses and value protecting speech.

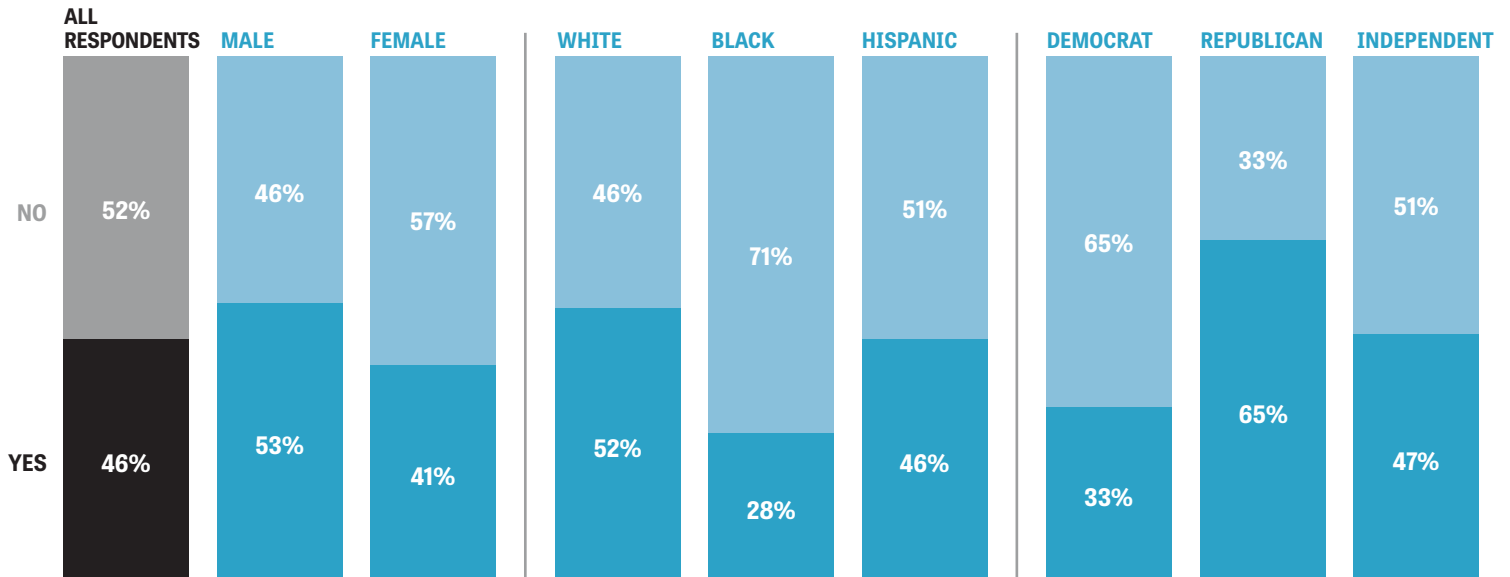
While a slight majority of students (52%) believe hate speech shouldn't be legally protected, a notable number of students (46%) support its continued protection. Identity plays a major role in opinions surrounding the legality of hate speech, with clear divisions emerging by gender, race, and political affiliation. Women and Democrats predominantly favor removing legal protection of hate speech, while men and Republicans are more likely to lean toward maintaining its protection. Notably, Black students

diverge significantly from other racial groups, with a majority (71%) feeling that hate speech should not be legally protected. Independents are evenly split, with a small majority agreeing that hate speech should not be protected.

While legal protections for hate speech split students, looking at the trend, students are slightly more likely this year than in the recent past to oppose protecting hate speech.

### Should hate speech be legally protected?

The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that hate speech – which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation – is legally protected free speech. Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?



Q13. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that hate speech – which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation – is legally protected free speech. Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?

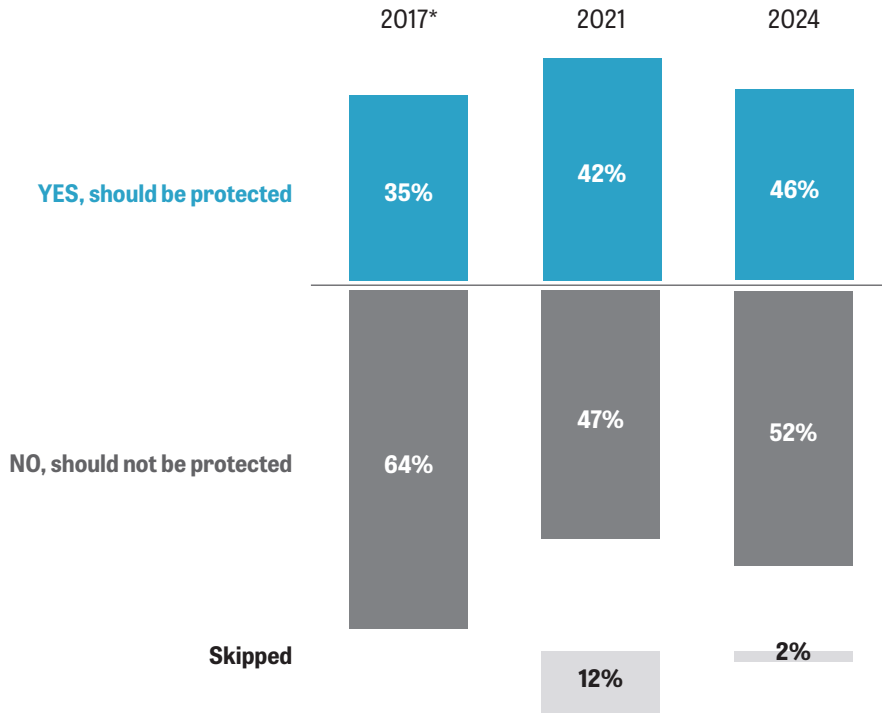
Base: All respondents

"Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.



### Opinions on hate speech have changed over time

The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that hate speech – which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation – is legally protected free speech. Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?

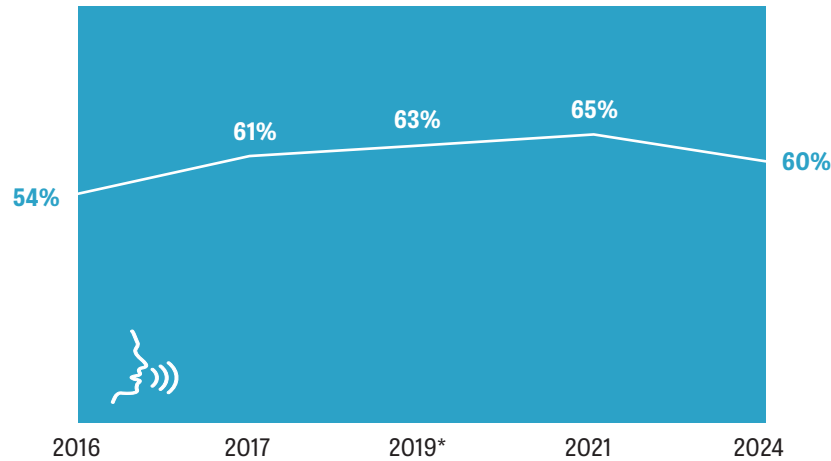


Q13. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that hate speech – which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation – is legally protected free speech. Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?  
 Base: All respondents; 2021: All respondents; 2017: All respondents  
 \*In 2017, this was “Do you think hate speech is a form of expression that should or should not be protected by the First Amendment?”

## VIEWS ON CAMPUS SPEECH CLIMATE

### Most continue to feel the climate at their school stifles some speech

*% who strongly or somewhat agree with, "The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe, because others might find it offensive."*



Q7. For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe, because others might find it offensive.

Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents.

\*In 2019 and prior, question for this item was "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

Turning to attitudes toward campus speech, students – particularly minority students – report being more uncomfortable with speech on campus. Students also often report self-censoring on a variety of topics, a phenomenon they say limits educationally valuable conversations. But despite a rise in feelings of discomfort, there’s a desire among students for coursework that enables constructive conversations among people who disagree.

#### Most feel their school’s climate stifles speech

When it comes to speech on campus, it’s important to know that a school’s climate may be making free speech harder. A majority of students continue to report that the climate at their schools may prevent some people from saying things they believe because others people might find it offensive (60%). This sentiment has seen little change over the past several years. The share of students with this view tends to be higher among Republican students (66%) than

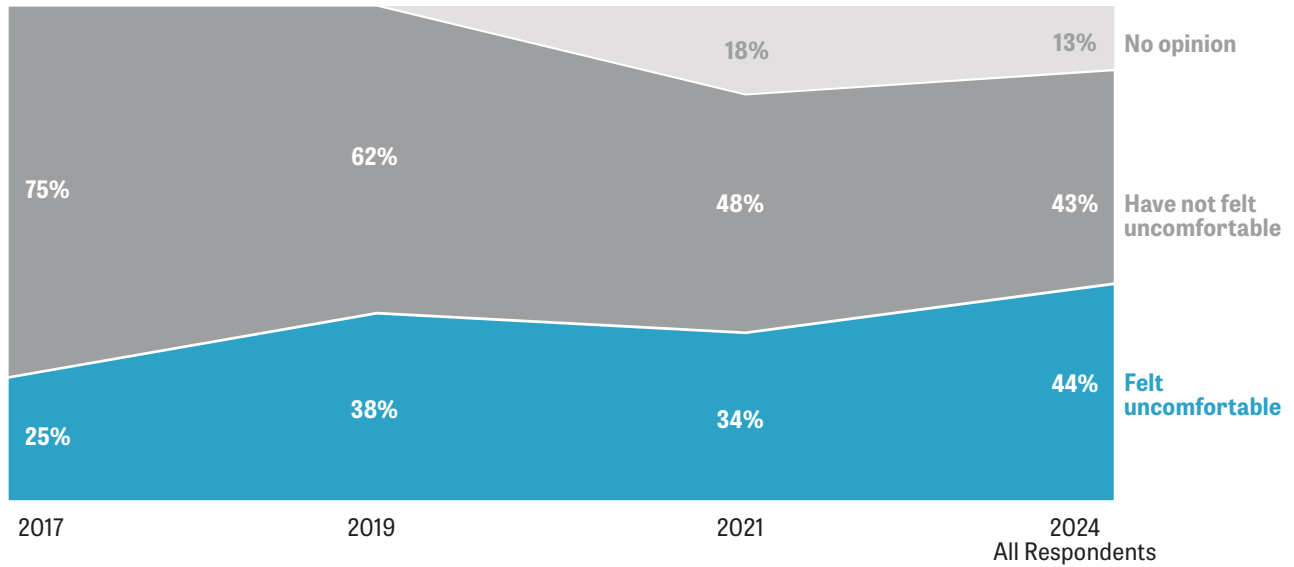
among Democrats (56%) and independents (61%). It is also higher among students who attend school in person (62%) as opposed to students attending school remotely (53%).

#### Speech on campus is making students more uncomfortable

More students this year than in 2021 report feeling uncomfortable because of conversations around beliefs, political positions, and race or religion. Regardless of whether it was directed at the student directly, a majority of students (55%) report feeling uncomfortable because of something someone said in reference to a belief or political position that they hold, up from 45% in 2021. Similarly, 44% report feeling uncomfortable on campus because of something said in reference to their race or religion, also up from 34% in 2021.

### Students are feeling increasingly uncomfortable about speech on campus

Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space or other part of campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation – whether or not it was directed at you?



Q28. Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space or other part of campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation – whether or not it was directed at you?  
 Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents.

Democratic (64%), female (61%), white (59%), and affluent (62%) students tend to report being more uncomfortable with things people have said about beliefs or political positions, while Asian American and Pacific Islander (56%), multiracial (54%), female (51%), and Democratic (49%) students tend to be more uncomfortable about things people have said in reference to their race or religion. Interestingly, Black students (48%) are not statistically more likely to express discomfort about things people have said about their race or religion compared with white (42%) or Hispanic (40%) students.

While students may report feeling more uncomfortable, there is little change in feelings of safety on campus. Fewer than 1 in 5 students say they have felt unsafe on campus due to something

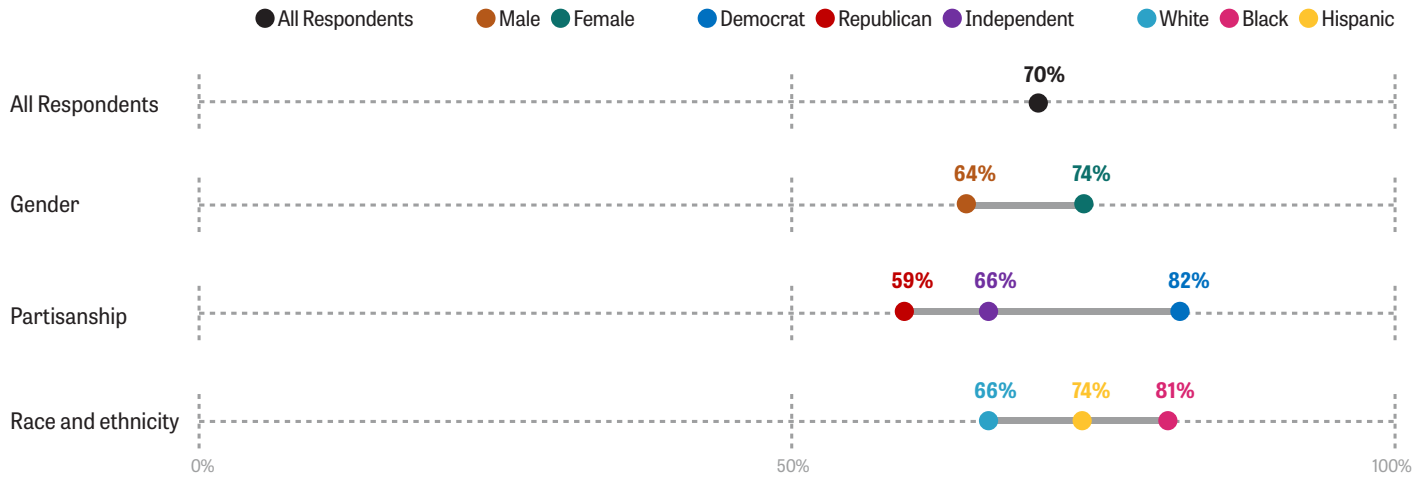
someone said about their race, ethnicity, or religion (15%), statistically unchanged from 2021 (17%).

Compared with white students (10%), racial and ethnic minority groups (16% Hispanic, 20% Black, 25% multiracial, 29% Asian) are more likely to say they have felt unsafe because of things they have heard about their race, ethnicity, or religion. Democrats (19%), female (19%), and less affluent students from households making under \$50,000 (18%), are also more likely to express feeling unsafe.

Perhaps related, a majority of college students (70%) believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence. Again, female (74%), Black (81%), Hispanic (74%), and Democratic (82%) students are the most likely to say this.

## Democratic students are most likely to believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence

% of students who believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence



Q6. Do you believe that some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence to the recipient?  
Base: All respondents.

### Students feel that self-censorship takes away from educational experiences, yet some still self-censor

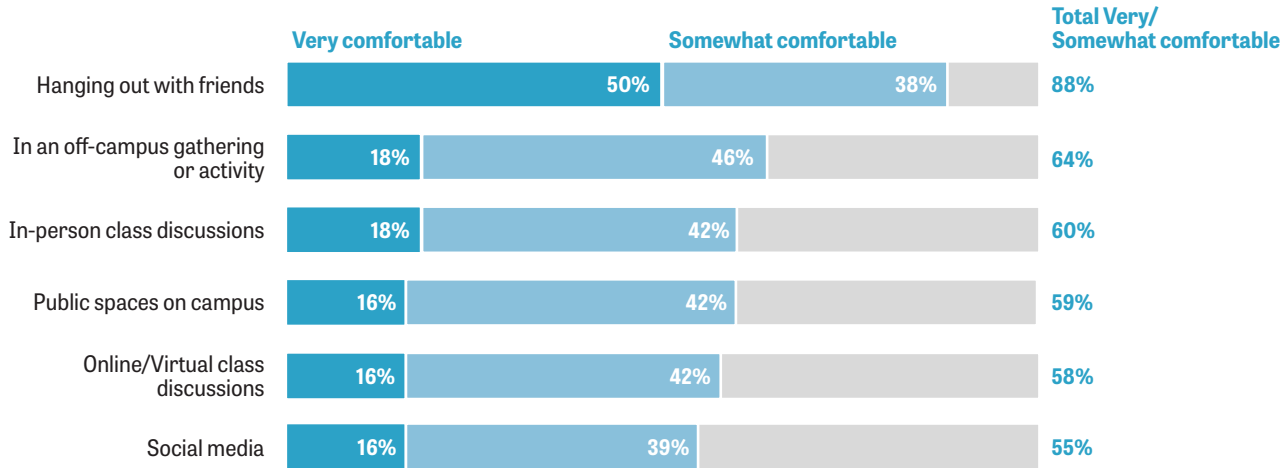
Self-censoring appears to be a complicated subject among students. While most believe self-censorship limits educationally valuable conversations, a majority also reports self-censoring on at least one topic on campus. Two in 3 students (66%) say self-censorship limits educationally valuable conversations on campus often or sometimes, levels that are higher among Republican (71%) and independent (68%) students than among Democratic students (59%).

Many students don't feel comfortable sharing their opinions in many campus settings. While a majority of students say they feel comfortable sharing their opinions when hanging out with friends (88%), significantly fewer feel safe doing so in off-campus gatherings (64%), in-person class discussions (60%), and even public spaces on campus (59%).

Notably, students also feel less comfortable sharing their opinions in virtual settings, such as in online/virtual class discussions (58%) and on social media (55%), the latter topic explored later in this report.

### Students are less comfortable sharing their opinions in the classroom

How comfortable, if at all, are you sharing your opinions in the following settings, even on topics others may not agree with?



Q20. How comfortable, if at all, are you sharing your opinions in the following settings, even on topics others may not agree with?

Base: All respondents

Percentage points are rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a “total” column may be slightly higher or lower than the summation of each part.

Two in 3 students (69%) also report self-censoring on at least one frequent topic of conversation on college campuses; the topics Knight-Ipsos tested range from gender and identity to religion and politics. Out of the options shown, students most often report self-censoring on gender or LGBTQ+ issues (42%), racial issues (36%) or religion (35%).

Republicans tend to be self-censoring across more topics: 49% of Republicans report self-censoring on three or more topics, compared with 38% of Democrats and 40% of independents. Republicans also tend to be more likely to report self-censoring on gender or LGBTQ+ issues (55%), racial issues (44%), and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues (33%) than Democrats (32%, 30%, 15%) or independents (41%, 37%, 26%). Interestingly, students who are less trusting of faculty or administrators are more likely to report self-censoring on DEI issues than students with higher levels of trust in campus figures.

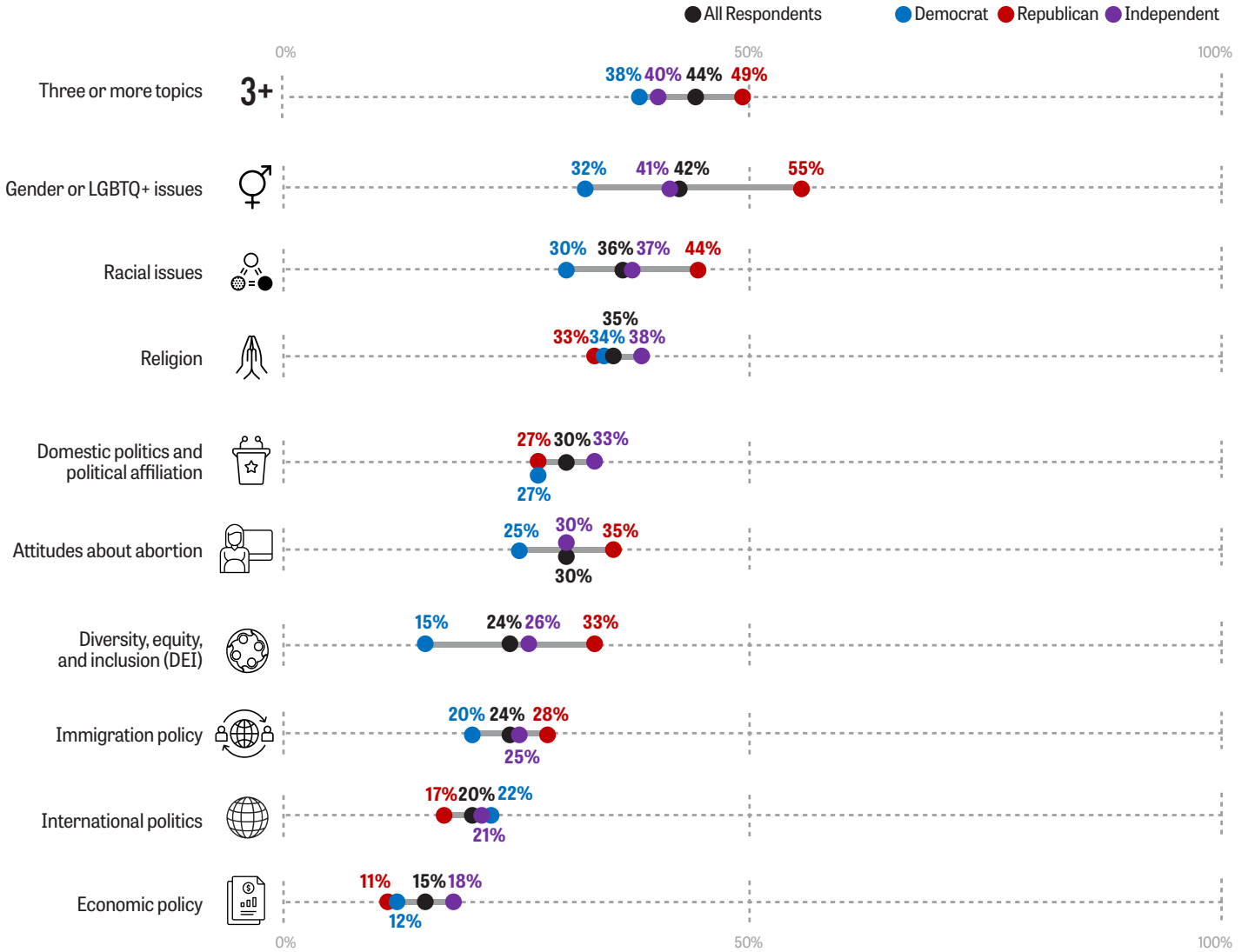
### Most students want programs that encourage constructive dialogue, though few report having these programs at their institutions

Just 1 in 3 students (32%) say their college has programs specifically designed to promote constructive conversations among people who disagree. Students attending four-year colleges (34%) are slightly more likely to say their college has such classes, compared with students attending two-year colleges (27%).

While students have been reporting increasing levels of discomfort due to speech and self-censorship, there is interest among many students for programs that encourage constructive dialogue. Among students who say their university does not offer these classes, about half say they want their college to create such programs (56%).

### Republicans tend to self-censor on gender, racial issues more often

Which of the following topics, if any, do you self-censor on the most during class discussions? Please select all that apply.



Q22. Which of the following topics, if any, do you self-censor on the most during class discussions? Please select all that apply.  
 Base: All respondents.  
 32% of respondents selected None/Other/Did not respond to this question.

## STUDENT ACTIVISM ON CAMPUS

College campuses are experiencing a shift in student activism and expression. While they were once central locations for activism, recent times have seen a decline, even though students are becoming more vocal on political issues. Notably, this data was collected before the college encampment protests of the spring of 2024, so data captured here does not reflect the experiences students had during that time.

### Some students report participating in activism on campus, though they differ in the form of activism

Overall, reported activism on campus has decreased from 2021.<sup>6</sup> The one exception is attendance at public meetings, which has increased to 23% from 17% in 2021. Fewer students have contacted an elected official (12% in 2024 vs 16% in 2021).

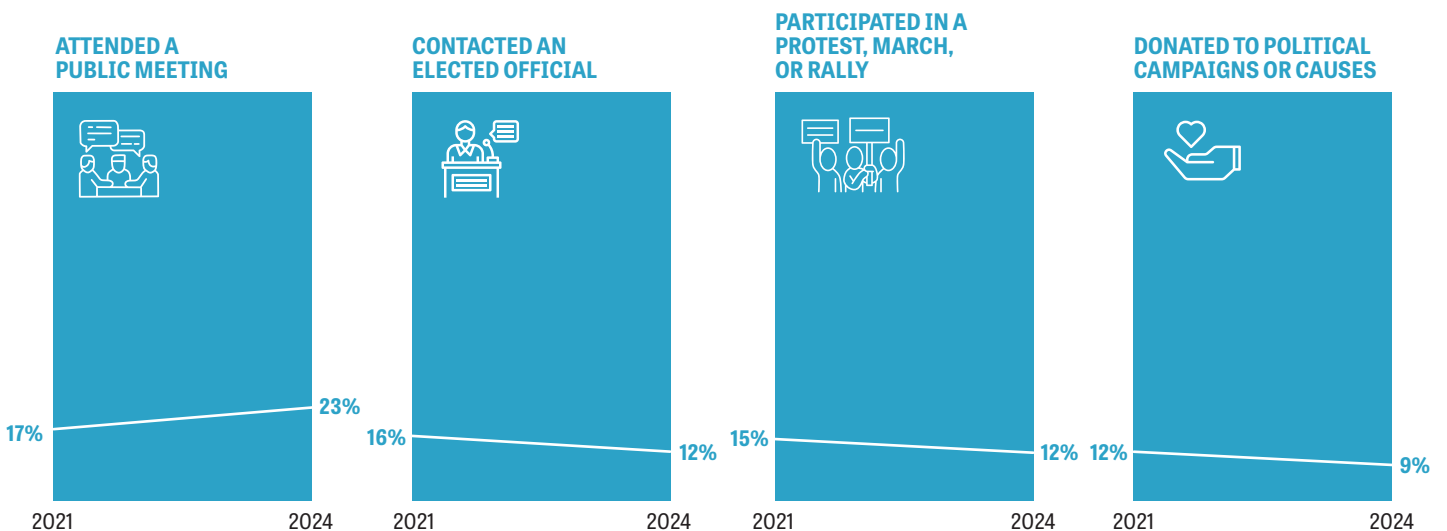
About 1 in 10 students (12%) say they have participated in a protest, march, or rally. However,

Black, multiracial, and Asian American and Pacific Islander students are more likely than white students to say they've attended a protest, march, or rally. Only 9% of students have donated to political campaigns or causes. Democratic and independent students are more likely to participate in these forms of activism than Republican students.

Students are divided on what to do if a speaker who holds views they disagree with comes to campus to speak, and few would take disruptive action. About half of students (51%) would take no action. Students who say they would take action differed in their approaches. About 1 in 4 students (23%) would boycott the speech, and 22% of students would attend the speech to hear what the speaker had to say. Sixteen percent of students would attend a counter-protest or similar event, 5% of students would try to stop the speech from happening ahead of time, and 3% would attend the speech to stop or disrupt it.

### Compared to 2021, slightly more students report attending public meetings; other forms of activism have slightly decreased

Have you done the following in the last year?



Q26. Have you done the following in the last year?  
 Base: All respondents  
 2021 Base: All respondents

6 The 2024 Knight Foundation-Ipsos survey was conducted March 7-28, 2024, before the college encampment protests of the spring of 2024, so data captured here does not reflect the experiences students had during that time.

## TRUST IN COLLEGE FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION

This study tested whether trust in leaders of college institutions influenced student attitudes toward free speech on campus. Trust in college administration and faculty is not necessarily a given, and such trust affects speech in the classroom. Students with greater trust in their administrators and faculty tend to be more comfortable and willing to participate in classroom discussions.

### How trust in college administrators and faculty may affect students

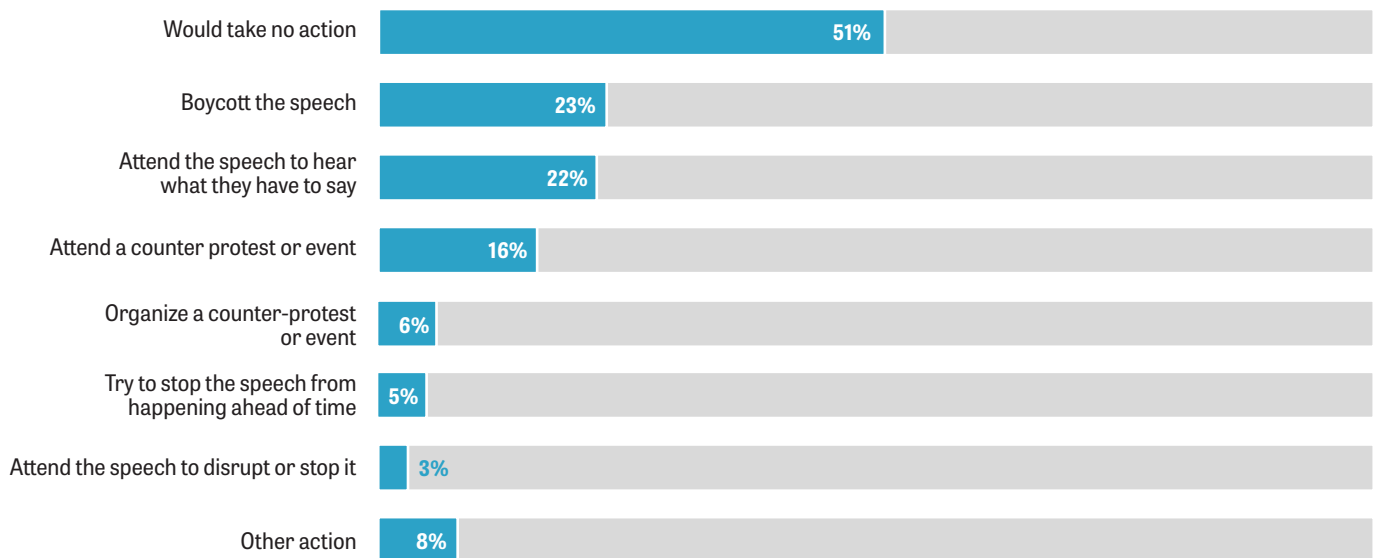
Overall, a majority of students trust college and university faculty (68%) and administration (57%). In comparison, far fewer trust the government (29%) or social media companies (12%).

Trust in faculty and administrators and faculty is partly correlated with political affiliation. Democratic students are more likely to trust the faculty (79%) and administration (65%) compared with Republican students (61% and 57%, respectively). Regardless of type of institution students attend – public, private, and private religious colleges – students all trust administrators and faculty at roughly the same levels. Similarly, Republicans (59%) and independents (53%) are more likely to believe their professors edit the content of their coursework to only show their personal point of view than Democrats (45%).

Ultimately, trust in faculty and administrators is correlated with expression in the classroom. Students who don't trust administrators or faculty are less likely to feel comfortable sharing their opinions in in-person class discussions or online/virtual class discussions.

### Students are split on whether to take action against certain campus speakers

Suppose there is a speaker coming to your campus who holds views you are opposed to. Which of the following are you most likely to do?

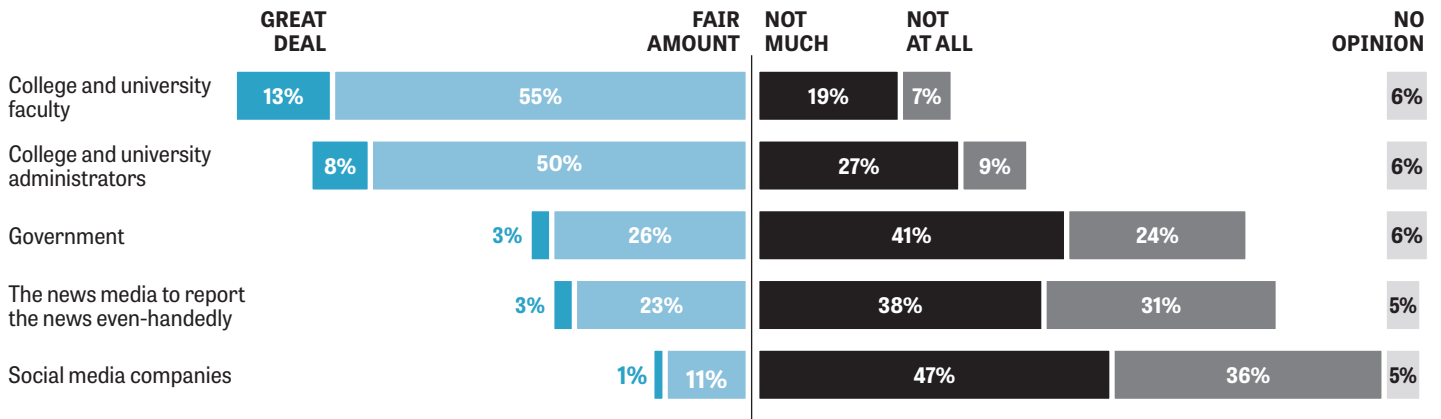


Q18. Suppose there is a speaker coming to your campus who holds views you are opposed to. Which of the following are you most likely to do? Please select up to 3 options. Base: All respondents; "Would take no action" is an exclusive response.



## Students trust college faculty and administrators more than the government, yet few trust them a great deal

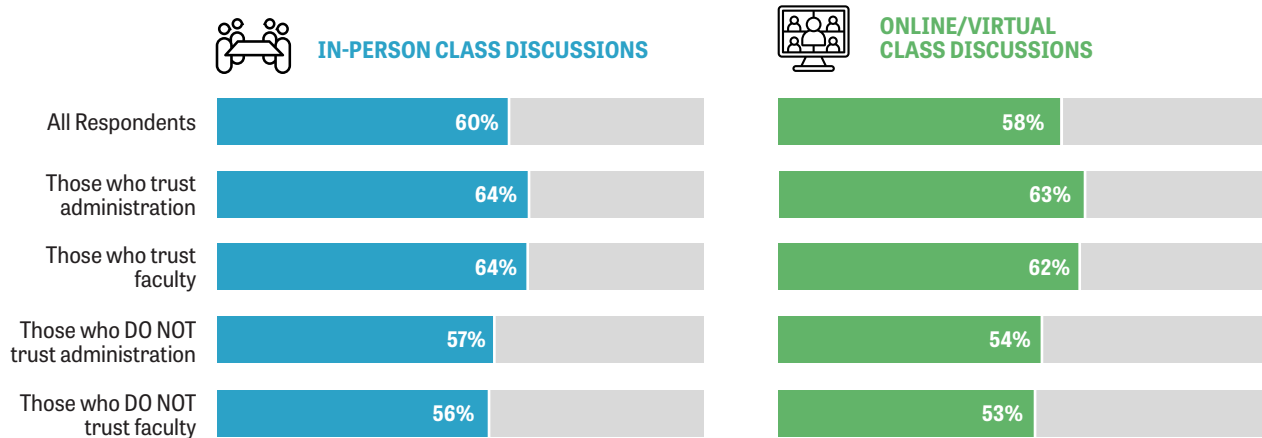
How much do you trust the following?



Q31. How much do you trust the following?  
Base: All respondents.

## Students that trust college faculty and administrators are more likely to feel safe sharing their opinions in the classroom

How comfortable, if at all, are you sharing your opinions in the following settings, even on topics others may not agree with? % Very/Somewhat comfortable



Q31. How comfortable, if at all, are you sharing your opinions in the following settings, even on topics others may not agree with?  
Base: All respondents

## VIEWS ON CAMPUS SPEECH POLICIES

As campus administrators contend with questions about speech policies and protests in real time, it is essential to understand how students approach speech policies and the ways their support of them shifts when the context and type of speech change.

Overall, students generally desire exposure to diverse viewpoints, even those they find offensive. This year, students report being more open to speech restrictions than in the past, with a notable uptick in support for restrictions from women, Black students, and Democratic students.

Perspectives on what speech should be restricted shifts depending on the student population. For example, Democratic and Republican students differ on when it is appropriate for colleges to restrict speech.

However, student attitudes show a clear distinction between offensive speech and hate speech. As noted above, students want to be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints, even if offensive. In line with this sentiment, most students oppose campus policies that restrict speech. However, most are supportive of policies to restrict hate speech.

### **Most students favor exposure to all types of speech, but an increasing number of students favor speech restrictions**

To understand where students stand on campus speech protections, Knight-Ipsos asks students to choose whether it is more important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech

even if they may find it offensive or biased, or to protect students by prohibiting speech, they may find offensive or biased. In response, most students prefer a campus environment that exposes them to a range of speech over one that protects them from potentially offensive viewpoints.

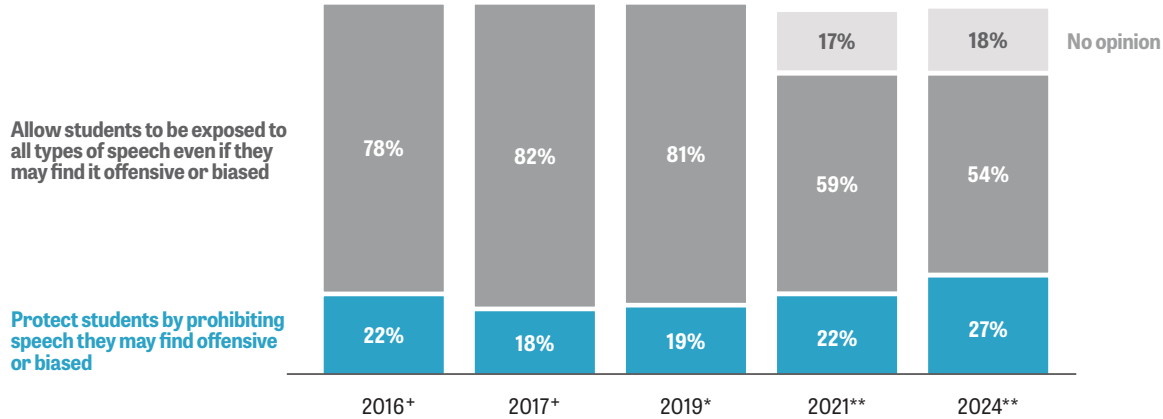
The preference for exposure to all types of speech is consistent with all former iterations of this survey. In surveys conducted in 2017 and 2019, about 8 in 10 students opted for exposure rather than protection from all forms of speech. In the 2021 survey, this number dropped to 59%, driven by a new option of “no opinion” given, which 17% of students chose.

However, results for 2024 indicate that there may be shifting feelings regarding exposure to vs. protection from offensive speech. Currently, 54% of students believe that colleges should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech, even if they may find it offensive or biased, down five points from 2021. However, 27% of students believe colleges should protect students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased, the largest share of students to select this option since the first iteration of this survey in 2016, with an additional 18% giving no opinion. While “no opinion” was first included as an explicit option in 2021, perturbing the trend, this data suggests that levels of ambivalence stayed relatively flat from 2021 to 2024, and that more students are supporting speech restrictions.

## Students increasingly think colleges should protect students from offensive speech

*If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to:*

*Allow or protect students from being exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased?*



Q13. If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to: allow students to be exposed to all types of speech or protect students by prohibiting offensive speech. Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. 2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents. 2016: All respondents

<sup>+</sup>2019 and prior did not include "No opinion."

<sup>\*\*</sup>2021 and 2024: "Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.

<sup>\*</sup>In 2016 and 2017, the question was: "If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to create a positive learning environment for all students by prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people, or to create an open learning environment where students are exposed to all types of speech and viewpoints, even if it means allowing speech that is offensive or biased against certain groups of people?"

### There are divisions across identity regarding exposure or protection for potentially offensive speech on campus

There are notable differences by identity regarding whether colleges should expose or protect students from all forms of speech. Men, Republicans, independents, white and Hispanic students are more likely to say it is important to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech, even if they may find it offensive or biased. In contrast, women, Democrats, and Black students are more likely to say it is important to protect students from potentially offensive speech.

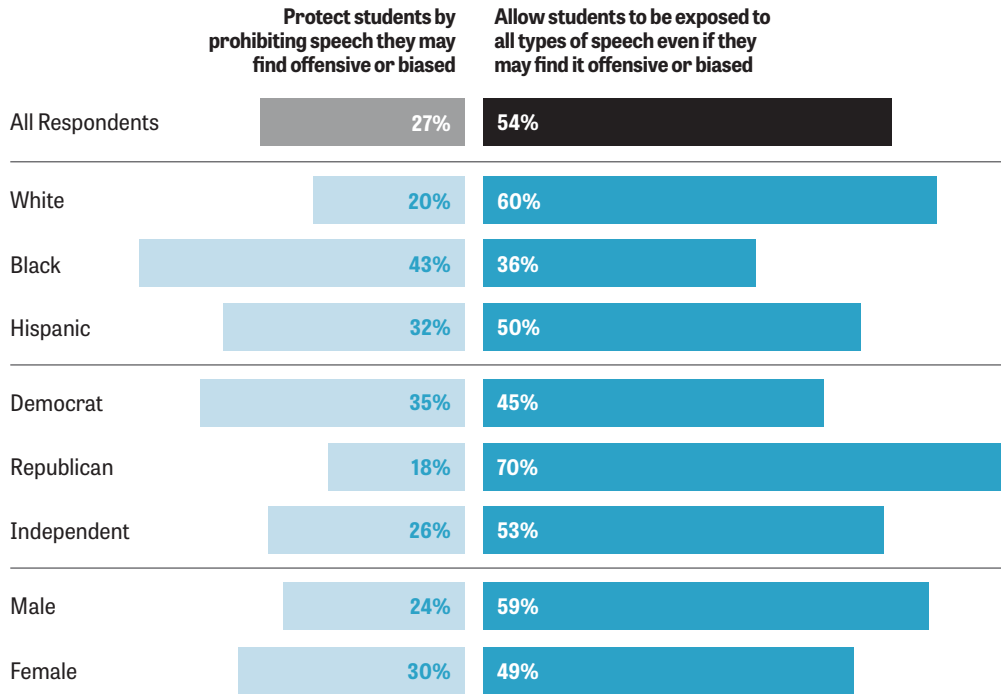
A majority of white students (60%) and half of Hispanic students (50%) believe that students should be exposed to all types of speech. However, only 36% of Black students agree with this sentiment, an 11-percentage point drop (47%) since the last time this question was asked in 2021. Instead, many Black students (43%) have shifted their opinion to support prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased. This is the only demographic to have a plurality in the "protect" camp.

While at least a plurality of political parties are proponents of allowing all types of speech on campus, Republicans (70%) and independents (53%) are more likely than Democrats (45%) to be in favor. Instead, similar to 2021, Democrats (35%) choose speech protections at higher rates than Republicans (18%) and independents (26%). Interestingly, both Democrats and independents have many students selecting "no opinion" – both responding 20%. This perhaps indicates that campus speech restrictions remain a gray area for some Democratic and independent students.

Regarding gender, men are significantly more likely to be proponents of allowing all types of speech, with 59% of men and 49% of women opting for this choice. In turn, women are significantly more likely to select preference for protecting students than men (30% vs. 24% of men). These differences contrast with results from 2021 which showed no difference by gender on this question.

## Opinions on allowing offensive speech differs by demographic groups and political affiliation

*If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to: allow or protect students from being exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased?*



Q13. If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to: allow or protect students from being exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased?  
Base: All respondents

### The majority of students favor some specific speech restrictions on college campuses in defined instances

While college students generally desire exposure to all types of speech, there are several behaviors the majority of students think colleges should be able to restrict. In the survey, students received 15 examples of activities or behaviors they might witness on campus and were asked to respond whether colleges should be able to restrict the activity or behavior. For four of these 15 scenarios, a majority of students responded that colleges should be allowed to restrict this behavior: drawing a swastika or antisemitic slurs on school property (80%), using an offensive racial slur to refer to people of color (69%), protests that disrupt classes or school activities (61%), and using words or phrases that deny the existence of certain groups of people (52%). As discussed above, it should be noted that this data was collected March

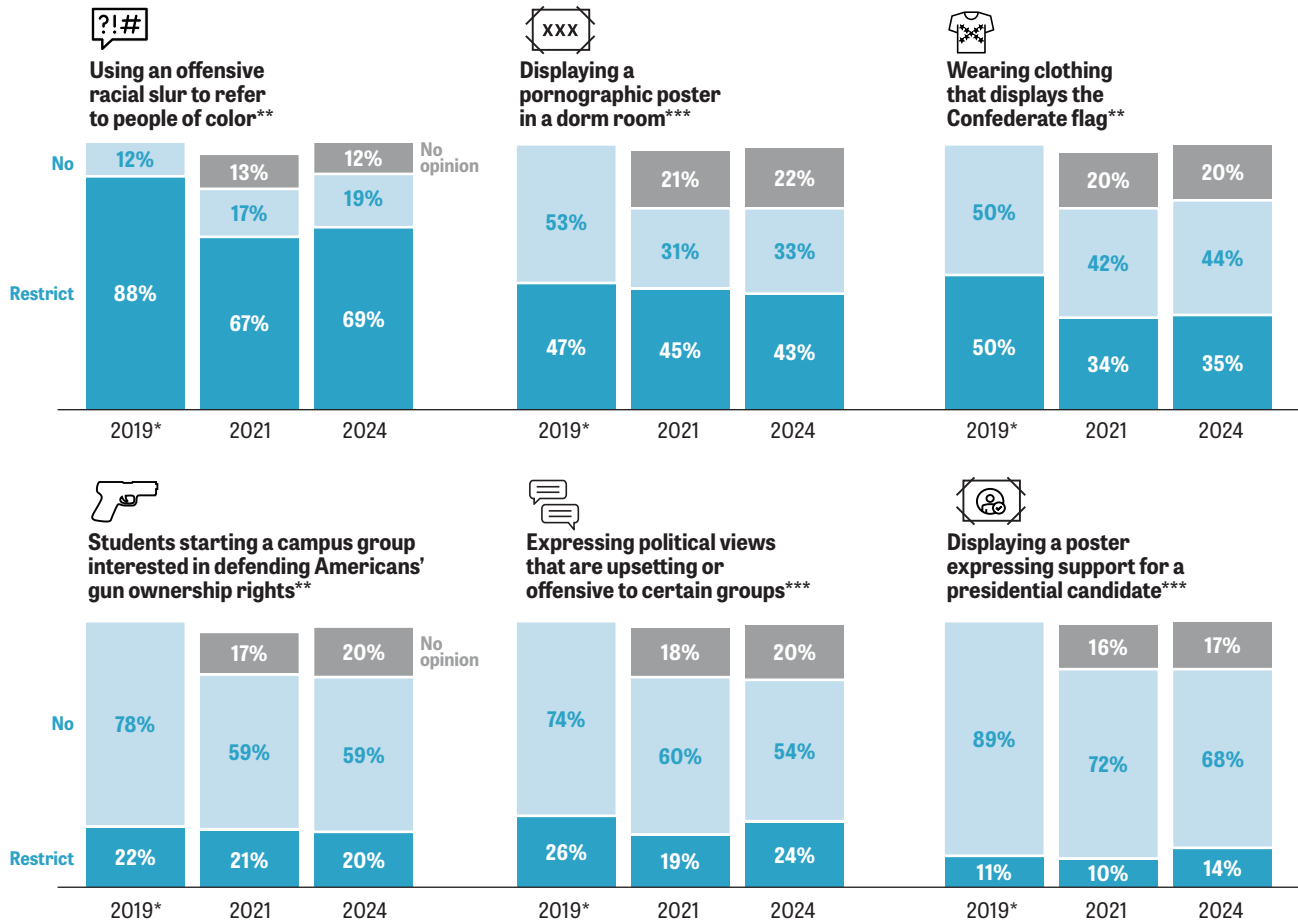
7-28, 2024, before a wave of campus protests and encampments began in April 2024.

### Political party affiliation drives opinions on where speech restrictions should be applied

Students' political affiliation influences which scenarios and behaviors students feel should be restricted. Republicans are more likely to favor restrictions on disruptive behavior and protests. For example, the majority of Republicans are more likely to favor restrictions on protests that disrupt classes or school activities (71%) and students disrupting controversial speakers (56%). Moreover, though a smaller percentage of students, Republicans are also more likely than other students to favor restrictions against Black Lives Matter protests (25%) and Free Palestine protests (21%). Republicans are also more likely to favor restrictions on passing out pamphlets with a pro-choice message (21%).

## Opinions on colleges restricting certain behaviors is relatively unchanged since 2021

Agreement with Yes, should be able to restrict



Q15. Below are a few specific examples of some things you might see students do on a college campus. Do you think colleges should or should not be able to restrict each of the following on campus?

Base: Items marked with two stars (\*\*) were asked to split sample A; items marked with 3 stars (\*\*\*) were asked to split sample B

2021: Base varies for each item; 2019: All respondents

\*2019 did not include "No opinion." "Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.

By contrast, Democrats are more likely to be proponents of restricting offensive language and behaviors or language that supports conservative ideologies. For instance, a notable share of Democrats are proponents of restricting the use of an offensive racial slur to refer to people of color (84%), using words or phrases that deny the existence of certain groups of people (65%), and wearing clothing that displays the Confederate flag (50%). Additionally, while fewer students support restrictions, Democrats are more likely than other students to support restrictions on the expression of political views that are upsetting or offensive to certain groups (30%), students starting a campus

group interested in defending Americans' gun ownership rights (25%) and passing out pamphlets with a pro-life message (16%).

Generally, independents show a similar response pattern to Democrats. However, the only time independents differ notably from Democrats is with regard to students disrupting controversial speakers. Just under half of independent students (45%) favor restrictions around students disrupting controversial speakers, while only 34% of Democratic students favor restrictions, a significant difference.

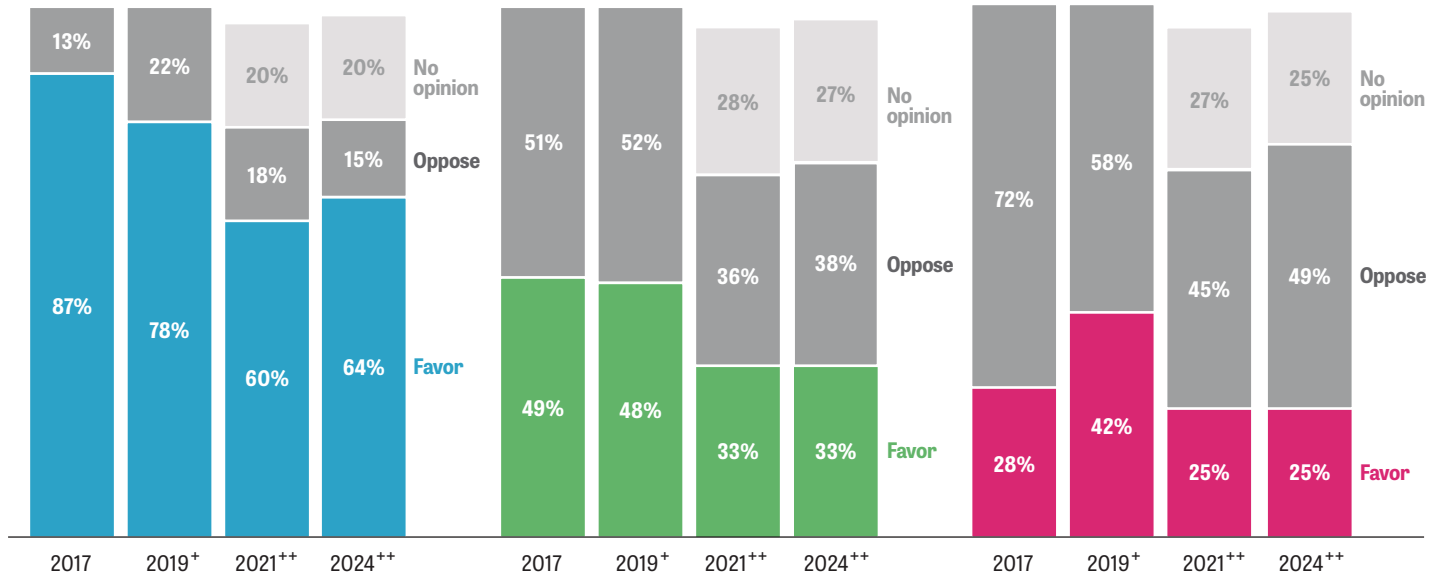
## Opinions on safe spaces, speech codes, and disinviting speakers remain relatively the same since 2021

% who favor the following

**Providing safe spaces**, or areas of campus designed to be free from threatening actions, ideas, or conversations\*

**Instituting speech codes**, or codes of conduct that restrict potentially offensive or biased speech on campus that would be permitted in other public places\*\*

**Disinviting speakers** because some students perceive their message as offensive or biased against certain groups of people\*\*\*



Q8. Do you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges?

Base: All respondents. 2021: All respondents. +2019: All respondents. 2017: All respondents.

\*In 2017, this was "Providing safe spaces, or areas of campus students can go for support if they feel upset or threatened by things they see or hear."

\*\*In 2017, this was "Instituting speech codes, or codes of conduct that restrict offensive or biased speech on campus that would be permitted in society more generally."

\*\*\*In 2017, this was "Disinviting speakers because some students are opposed to the invitation."

+2019 and prior did not include "No opinion."

\*\*2021 and 2024: "Skipped" option not shown; numbers may not sum to 100%.

Interestingly, in data collected in March 2024 before widespread campus protests later that spring, opinions on restricting pro-Israel protests were split by political affiliation, with none showing a significant majority in favor of such limitations. It is notable that few students favor restrictions on pro-Israel protests (17%). On the other hand, a majority of students (80%) support restrictions on the use of swastikas or antisemitic slurs on school property. The support for these restrictions is also politically diverse; no single party emerges as a dominant supporter of restrictions on either issue.

### Restricting racial slurs continues to be an important speech restriction for students

While Knight Foundation has over the years tailored the 15 scenarios to current events, six scenarios have been presented since 2019. Although the numbers are relatively stable, trends show that the restriction of racial slurs continues to be particularly important

to students. The majority of students have supported restrictions around racial slurs since 2019. It is notable, however, that in 2021 students were offered "no opinion" as an option, resulting in a decrease from 88% in favor of restricting racial slurs to 67% in 2021.

### Few students favor instituting speech codes, disinviting speakers, or limiting the formation of student groups based on their views but most favor disciplinary actions and safe spaces

Even though the majority of students agree that at least some speech restrictions should be in place, many students oppose colleges taking action to implement such restrictions. For example, only 33% of students favor instituting speech codes, 25% favor disinviting speakers because their message is perceived as offensive, and 13% favor limiting the formation of student groups based on their views.

Instead, the majority of students favor disciplining students for using threatening speech toward a person or group (71%) and providing safe spaces, or areas on campus designed to be free from threatening actions, ideas, or conversations (64%). Generally, those in favor of taking any action are more likely to be women; students who are Black, Hispanic, Asian American and Pacific Islander, or 2+ races; and Democrats.

Attitudes on how colleges should promote free speech on campus have shifted since 2017. Support for certain campus speech policies, like safe spaces and instituting speech codes, has decreased among students since 2017. However, this is perhaps due to adding a “no opinion” option in 2021. Since 2021,

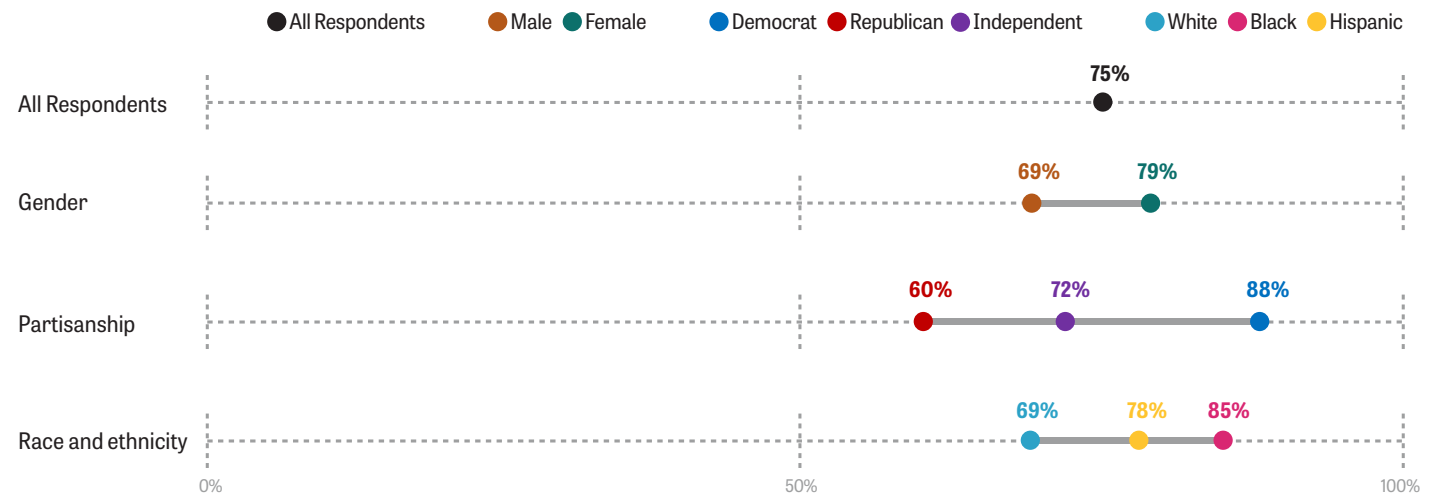
opinions on such speech policies remain relatively unchanged.

**Most students think hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses**

Much like in other places in this report, attitudes change when it comes to hate speech. Hate speech is defined as speech that attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation.<sup>7</sup> When asked if hate speech is a form of expression that should be allowed on college campuses, the majority (75%) of students say that it should not be allowed. Women, students of color, and Democrats are more likely to say that hate speech should not be allowed, while men, white people, and Republicans are more likely to respond that it should be allowed.

**The majority of students think hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses**

*Those who answered No, hate speech should not be allowed*

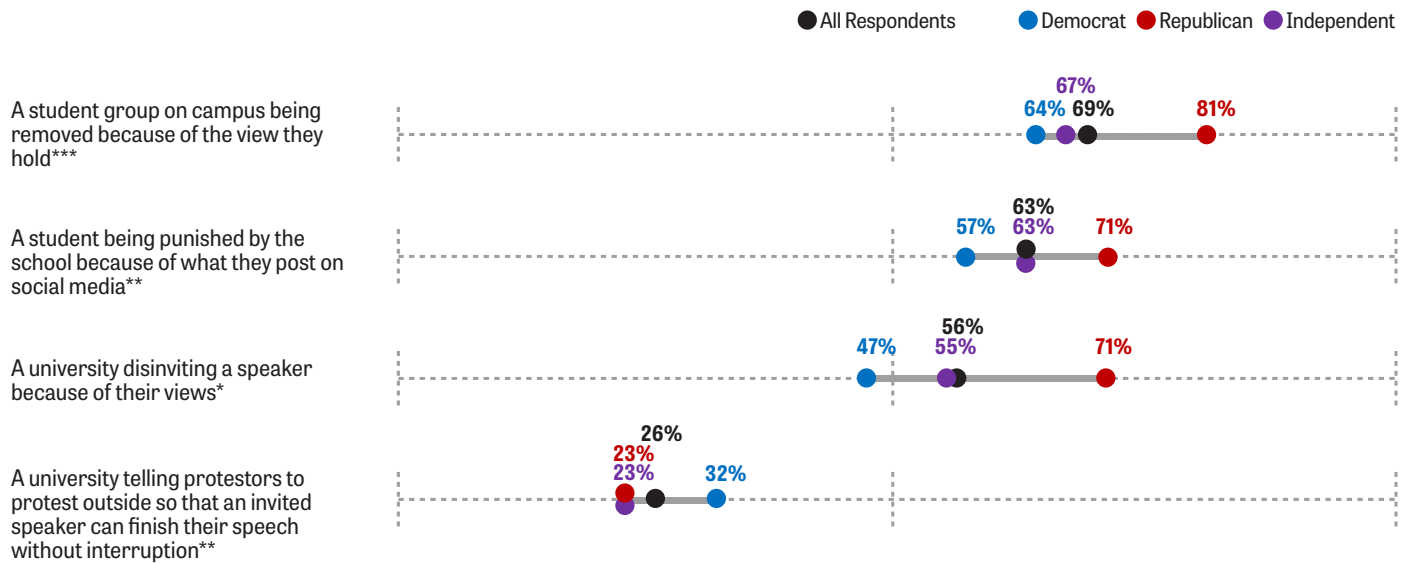


Q10. Do you think hate speech – meaning, speech which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation – is a form of expression that should be allowed on college campuses?  
Base: All respondents

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the question, which originated in 2021, could be interpreted to cover abstractly hateful speech or unprotected conduct such as harassment. The core finding of this report remain clear: students have concerns about hateful conduct on their campuses and value protecting speech.

## Political affiliation impacts opinions on what actions are depriving a person of their rights

Agreement with Yes, it is depriving the person of their free expression rights



Q17. Are the following actions depriving people of their rights to free expression or not?

Base: Items marked with one star (\*) were asked to all respondents; items marked with two stars (\*\*) were asked to split sample A; items marked with 3 stars (\*\*\*) were asked to split sample B

### There is a consensus among students that certain actions by college campuses can deprive people of their rights to free expression

Even as most students believe that colleges should have at least some speech restrictions in place for threatening or hate speech, most students also clearly feel that certain actions can go too far and deprive people of their right to free expression.

There are a few actions that students feel crosses a line on campus. To start with, most students (69%) believe a student group being removed because of the views they hold deprives people of their right to free expression. Most students (63%) also feel that a student being punished by their school because of what they post on social media is an infringement on their right to free expression.

From there, in the context of the broader world outside of campus, a majority of students also feel that certain restrictions on social media deprive individuals of their free speech rights. For example, 67% of students believe a social media company censoring or banning a major candidate for office deprives people of their right to free expression, and

55% of students hold a similar view about a social media company removing a person for posting views that are offensive to some people.

### There is a partisan divide regarding whether certain actions taken by college campuses infringe on free expression

Republicans are more likely to believe the actions Knight-Ipsos tested in the survey infringe on free expression compared with Democrats and independents. Interestingly, the question of protests is the only scenario in which Democrats are more likely than Republicans or independents to view speech restrictions as a deprivation of free expression rights. As previously discussed, Republicans are more likely to be open to using speech restrictions around protests.

Regarding campus speakers, a slight majority (56%) views a university disinviting a speaker because of their views as depriving the speaker of their free expression rights. However, only a quarter (26%) of students believe a university telling protestors to go outside to allow an invited speaker to finish deprives the protestors of their free expression rights.



## VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms, originally praised for connecting people and fostering communication, have faced growing criticism, and increasingly negative attitudes from students. This shift in perception perhaps stems from concerns about social media's spread of misinformation, its potential to stifle free speech through censorship and the suppression of dissenting voices, and the increasingly uncivil dialogue on social media.

### **Students have a less optimistic view of social media as the public square**

Students are largely skeptical of social media's ability to act as a conduit for productive conversations. To that end, few students (23%) agree that dialogue on social media is usually civil, down from 32% in 2021 and 40% in 2016, with no differences across age, race, or political affiliation.

Most students (78%) agree that it is too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media, up from 72% in 2021, with Democratic students being most likely to agree with this. Relatedly, 79% of students believe that preventing the spread of false information online is extremely or very important to our democracy, up from 69% in 2021.

In addition, most students (56%) believe that social

media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who don't agree with them, up from 50% in 2021. Only half of students (54%) feel comfortable sharing their opinion online.

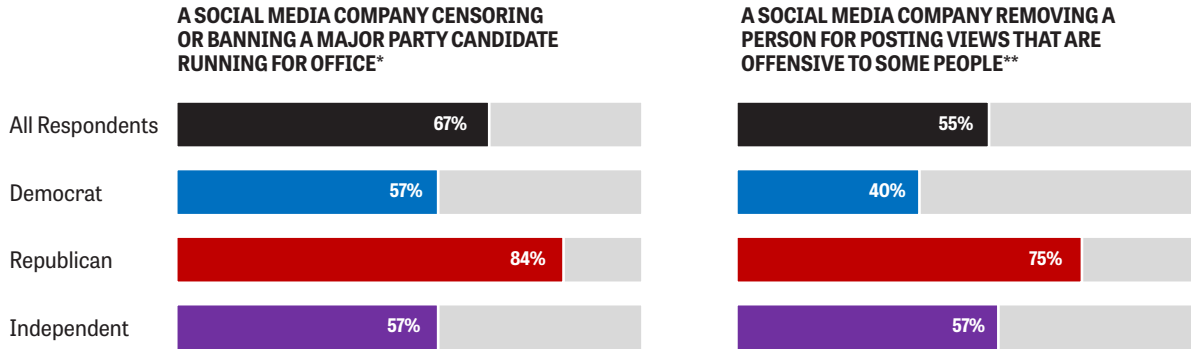
Republican students are more likely to agree that actions taken by social media companies censoring, banning, or removing people, deprives them of their free expression rights, when compared with Democratic or independent students.

Many students also acknowledge that social media can act as a media bubble. Just under half of students (48%) believe too many people block views they disagree with, a slight increase from 44% in 2021. Republicans are more likely to agree with this sentiment.

Few students trust social media companies, with trust dropping further this year. Only 12% of students trust social media companies, down from 20% in 2021. Black students have a higher trust in social media companies at 24% than students overall (12%). Interestingly, political affiliation does not drive differences in trust for social media companies.

### Political affiliation impacts opinions on restrictions surrounding social media usage

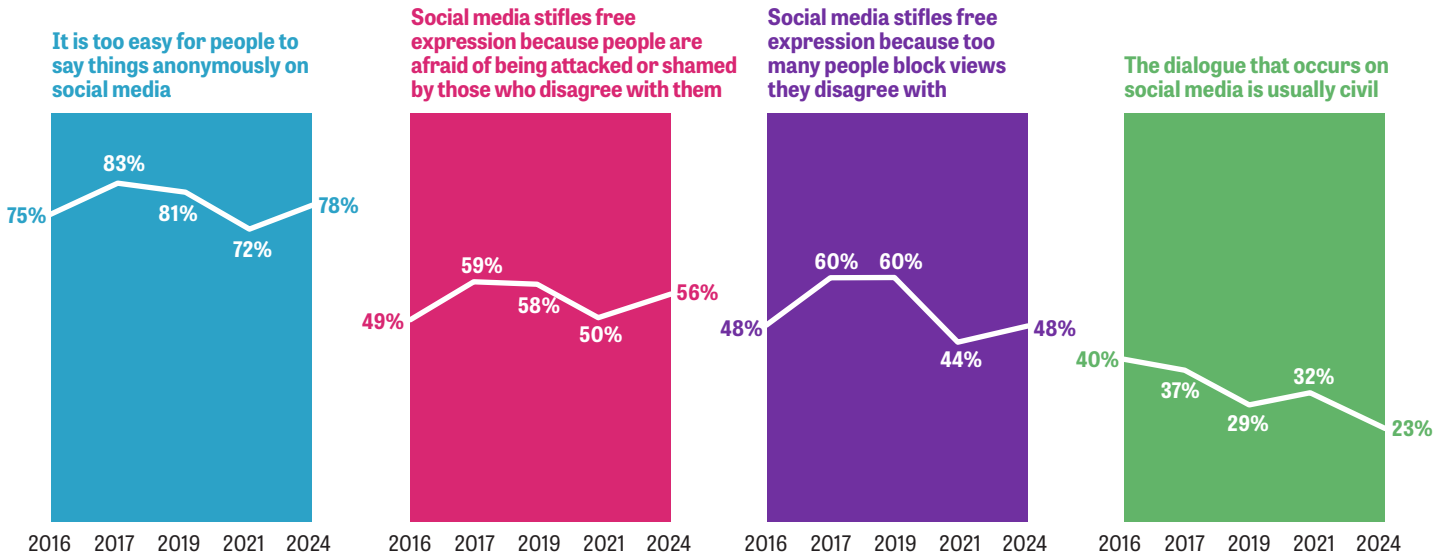
Agreement with Yes, it is depriving the person of their free expression rights



Q17. Are the following actions depriving people of their rights to free expression or not?  
 Base: Items marked with one star (\*) were asked to half of respondents; items marked with 2 stars (\*\*) were asked to all respondents.

### The number of students who agree the dialogue on social media is usually civil has declined

% who strongly/somewhat agree with the following statements



Q16. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 Base: All respondents; 2021: Base varies by statement; 2019: Half of respondents; 2017: All respondents, 2016: All respondents

## CONCLUSION

Knight Foundation's extensive research gives voice to college students' complicated and nuanced opinions and experiences around freedom of expression, and the ways that these views change over time. With a robust sample, this research offers in-depth findings on how partisanship, race/ethnicity, gender, and other personal factors affect how students experience these issues.

Overall, college students in 2024 overwhelmingly believe that free speech is a cornerstone of American democracy, but confidence in the security of this right has dropped significantly since 2016. Between this latest survey and the last one in 2021, these concerns about free speech are being driven by Democratic students in particular.

Despite these concerns, students are not in favor of broad restrictions on speech. Most students believe in exposure to diverse viewpoints, even if they find them offensive. However, there's a growing minority, particularly among Black students, who support restrictive measures for speech deemed offensive. This shift suggests a potential change in how some students perceive the balance between free expression and inclusivity, potentially influenced by experiences of discrimination and hate speech. Indeed, students in general do feel strongly that hate speech doesn't belong on college campuses.

With the tension between free speech and its boundaries in a collegiate setting, students struggle to navigate expressing themselves. However, despite the challenges and anxieties surrounding free speech, the report reveals a desire from students for constructive dialogue and engagement with diverse perspectives. Students express interest in programs that promote civil discourse and facilitate conversations across differences. This suggests that while students are grappling with the complexities of free speech in the digital age, they are also seeking ways to bridge divides and engage in meaningful conversations.

The report also underscores students' skepticism about the role that social media can play in productive conversations. Students express concern about the ease of anonymity online, the potential for stifling free expression through attacks and shaming, and the spread of misinformation. Trust in social media companies is low, and there's a clear desire for measures to combat false information online.

The findings of this report raise both challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions. For any administrator, hearing from students on their experiences and attitudes on free speech is a critical first step in understanding and making informed decisions when cultivating the campus environment.

## METHODOLOGY

Ipsos conducted this poll March 7-28, 2024, using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel® and the YouthPulse Panel, on behalf of Knight Foundation. This poll is based on a representative sample of 1,678 currently enrolled college students between the ages of 18 and 24. The sample includes 418 students who attend two-year colleges and 1,246 students at four-year colleges.

|                   | Data collection 2024 | Data collection 2021 |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| All Respondents   | 1,678                | 1023                 |
| Male              | 692                  | 461                  |
| Female            | 984                  | 562                  |
| White             | 928                  | 542                  |
| Black             | 147                  | 104                  |
| Hispanic          | 391                  | 245                  |
| Other/2+ races    | 212                  | 51                   |
| APII              | 88                   | 53                   |
| Republican        | 382                  | 225                  |
| Democrat          | 527                  | 382                  |
| Independent/Other | 763                  | 409                  |

In previous years, the samples were as follows:

- 2021: 18- to 24-year-olds who are current college students or enrolled in some post-high school education (n=1,023)
- 2019 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,319)
- 2017 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,014)
- 2016 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,072)

The survey was conducted using KnowledgePanel, the largest and most well-established online probability-based panel that is representative of the adult U.S. population. Our recruitment process employs a scientifically developed address-based sampling methodology using the latest Delivery Sequence File of the U.S. Postal Service – a database with full coverage of all delivery points in the United States. Households invited to join the panel are randomly selected from all available households in the U.S. Those selected who do not have internet access are provided a tablet and internet connection at no cost to the panel member. Those who join the panel and who are selected to participate in a survey are sent a unique password-protected log-in used to complete surveys online. As a result of our recruitment and sampling methodologies, samples from KnowledgePanel cover all households regardless of their phone or internet status, and findings can be reported with a margin of sampling error and projected to the general population.

Within the KnowledgePanel, two sets of samples were selected:

- A direct route which involved sampling all the panelists aged 18 to 24 years.
- An indirect route which included sampling panel members who were 25 years or older and living with at least one household member aged 17 to 24 years.

The 17-24 age range was included to account for those who had just turned 18. Participants selected through this indirect route were terminated and did not complete the study if there were no age-eligible college students in their household. Additionally, in the direct route, an additional interview was permitted with another eligible respondent from the same household.

Regarding the YouthPulse Panel, all selected members were 18 to 24 years old.

The study was conducted in both English and Spanish. The data for the total sample of college students were weighted to adjust for age by gender, race/ethnicity, household income and Census region. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2022 American Community Survey (ACS). The weighting categories were as follows:

- Age (18-21, 22-24) by Gender (Male, Female, Other)
- Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other or 2+ Races Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$149,999, \$150,000+)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on the entire sample of 18- to 24-year-olds. The margin of error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.29 for all 18- to 24-year-olds. For those attending two-year colleges, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 5.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, and the design effect was 1.32. For those attending four-year colleges, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, and the design effect was 1.27. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total substantially more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent.