

# Campus Expression Survey

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## Understanding the Campus Expression Climate: Fall 2021

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Please direct media queries to  
[press@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:press@heterodoxacademy.org)

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# Executive Summary

- 1 Overall, 60% of college students expressed reluctance to discuss at least one controversial topic (i.e., politics, religion, race, sexual orientation, and gender), similar to last year's numbers.
- 2 Students who reported having low interaction quality with classmates (i.e., not much opportunity to get to know other students) also reported greater reluctance to discuss all five of the core controversial topics. This finding suggests that, in the future, professors may facilitate more critical conversations if they also facilitate students getting to know one another.
- 3 Students' political party and race/ethnicity seem to play a role in how reluctant they are to discuss a number of controversial topics, with Republican and Independent students and white and Asian students being most reluctant.
- 4 There are a number of feared consequences (e.g., being criticized as offensive) that seem to prevent some students from discussing controversial topics in class. However, when students were asked what they would do if a classmate expressed an opinion with which they strongly disagreed, the overwhelming response was to ask questions to understand the other student's opinion better.
- 5 Eighty percent of the student sample reported being vaccinated. Unvaccinated students were more reluctant to discuss COVID-19 than vaccinated students.

## About the Data and Methods of the CES

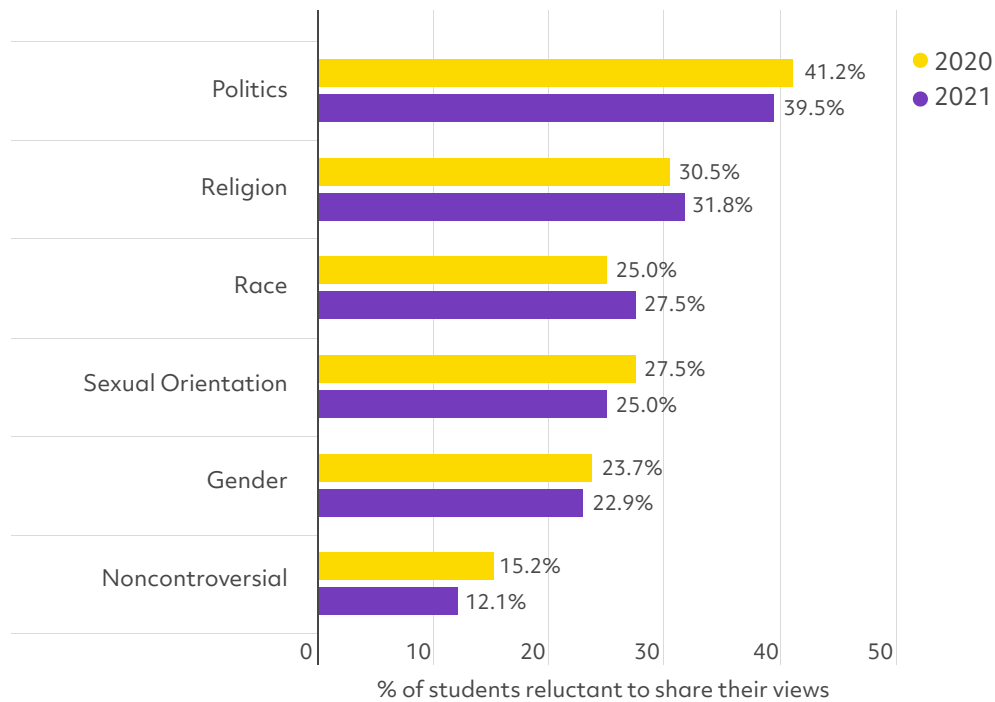
The Campus Expression Survey (CES) measures the extent to which students feel comfortable or reluctant discussing various topics on their campuses. Data was collected from 1,495 full-time college students (ages 18 to 24) across the United States. The sample was stratified by region, race, and gender based on proportions reported by the National Center for Education Statistics and previous [Gallup-Knight data collections](#).

Students were asked how comfortable or reluctant they were to speak their views in the classroom on five core controversial topics (politics, race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender) as well as one specific controversial topic (the COVID-19 pandemic). Students also reported their comfort or reluctance to speak their views about noncontroversial topics for comparison. If students endorsed any reluctance to discuss one or more of the five core topics (except noncontroversial), they were subsequently asked to report which possible consequences they were concerned about. Students were also asked what they would do if another student expressed an opinion about a controversial topic with which they strongly disagreed. Finally, Fisher's exact tests were used to identify interactions between demographic groups (e.g., gender, race, political party, religion, sexual orientation, and family socioeconomic status) and reluctance to discuss controversial topics.

For full information regarding the sample and methods, data, and data analysis, please see supporting documentation, available at [heterodoxacademy.org](https://heterodoxacademy.org). For the 2019 and 2020 reports, please visit [heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey](https://heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey).

# Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics Remains High

Similar to 2020, students in 2021 were most reluctant to discuss politics (**39.5%**), followed by religion (**31.8%**), then race (**27.5%**). Overall, **60%** of students were reluctant to discuss at least one of the five controversial topics.



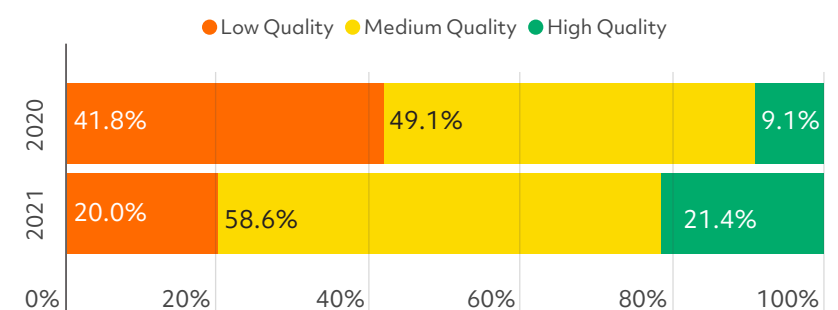
Students seem to **desire constructive disagreement** yet do not feel their campus supports this environment.

**88%** of students agreed that colleges should encourage students and professors to interact respectfully with people whose beliefs differ from their own.

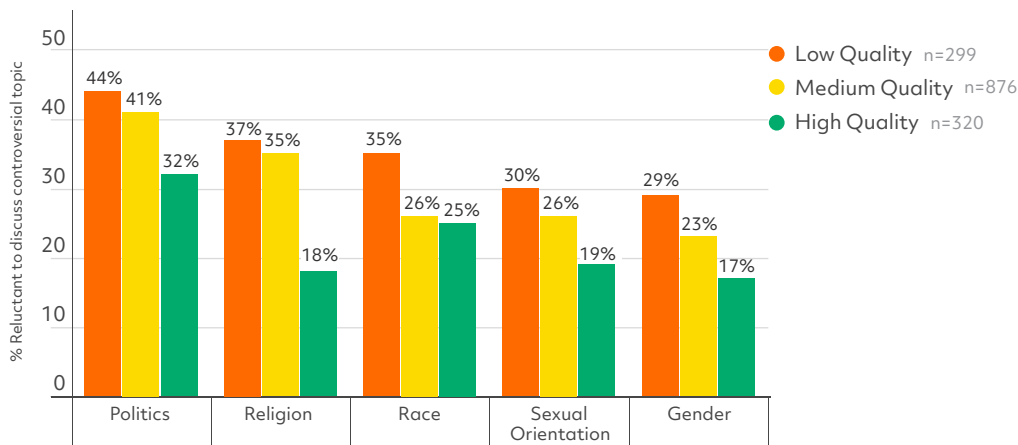
However, **63%** of students agreed that the climate on their campus prevents people from saying things that they believe.

# Context Matters: Fewer Opportunities to Get to Know Classmates Means More Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics

School is back in person: **63%** of students were attending fully or primarily in-person classes in 2021, compared with only **11%** of the sample in 2020. Students also reported **higher-quality interactions** with classmates in 2021.\*



Students who reported having lower-quality interactions\* with other students were **more reluctant** to discuss controversial topics.

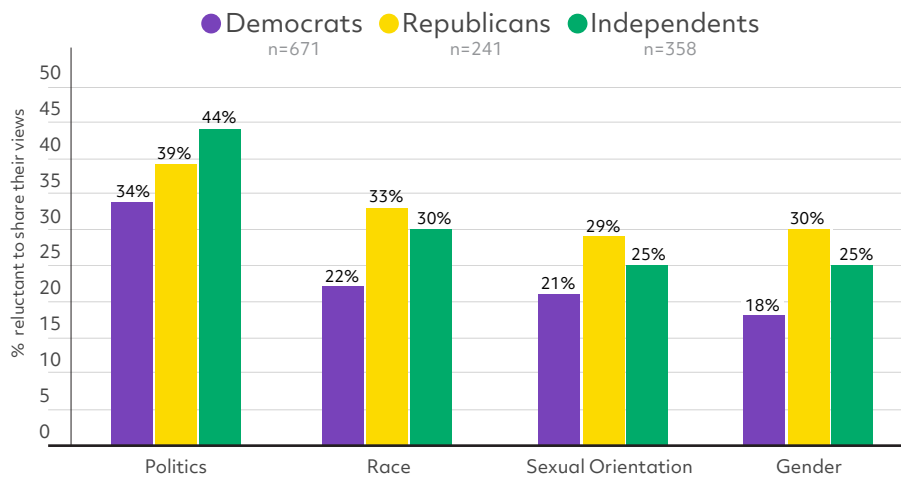


**Further research could explore interventions** that foster quality conversations among students to determine if such interventions improve the campus expression climate. Quality social interactions could also address the feelings of loneliness and isolation that students are reporting.

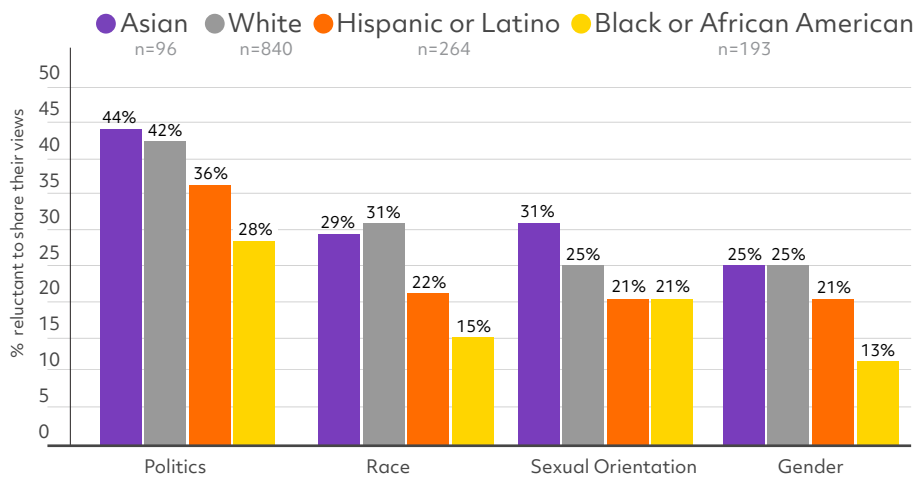
\*"Interaction quality" refers to students' "opportunity to discuss with or to get to know other students" in their classes.

# Who Was More Reluctant to Talk About What? Political Party and Race Play The Largest Role.

**Republican and Independent students** were more reluctant to discuss controversial topics compared with Democrat students.



**Asian and white students** were more reluctant to discuss controversial topics compared with all other races/ethnicities.



There were **no significant differences** between political parties or racial-ethnic groups in discussing religion.

# What Did Not Impact Students' Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics?

**None of the following demographic characteristics** made a difference in how reluctant students were to discuss the controversial topics measured:



**Where** the student attends school (Northeast, Midwest, South, or West)



What **academic area** the student focuses on (e.g., arts versus sciences)



How much the student's **family income** is (family socioeconomic status)



**Which year** the student is in (e.g., freshmen versus seniors)

When it came to gender, religion, and sexual orientation, there were **no significant differences** in reluctance to discuss topics depending on whether students were part of the majority demographic for the topic under discussion.

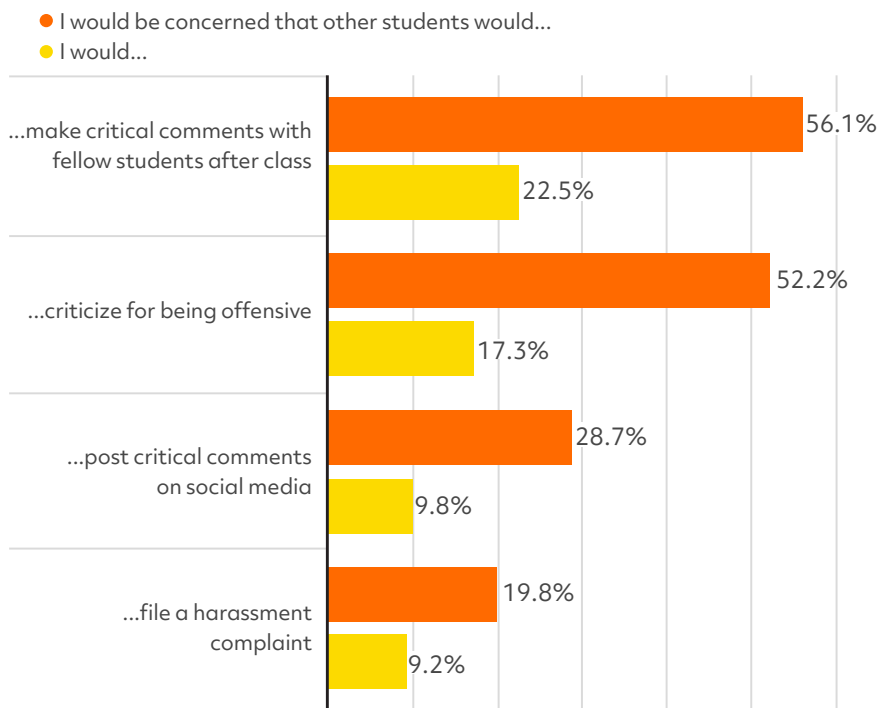
- **Men** were about as reluctant to discuss gender (**24%**) as women (**23%**).
- **Students from most religions** were about equal in their reluctance to discuss religion (**around 30%**).
- **Straight students** were about as reluctant to discuss sexual orientation (**26%**) as students of all other sexual orientations (**30%**).



These insights offer hope that efforts to equally engage students from all backgrounds and demographics in discussing controversial topics could help improve campus climates.

# Why Are Some Students Reluctant? Feared Consequences From Peers

The most common reason (**56%**) for students' reluctance to discuss controversial topics in class was **concern that peers would make critical comments to others after class.**\* However, most students reported that they would not engage in such critical actions.\*\*



In fact, **64%** of students said, **"I would ask questions about their opinion** so I can understand it better," in response to an opinion with which they disagreed.

However, **31%** of students said, "I would not say or do anything about it, **but I would think badly of that student.**"

Negative consequences for speaking out about controversial topics might be **more imagined than real.**



This finding may aid professors in establishing a classroom climate that encourages constructive disagreement and viewpoint diversity. **Most students are open to learning from different opinions.**

\* Students who reported reluctance to discuss at least one of the five core controversial topics (politics, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender) were asked these questions (n = 895).

\*\* All 1,495 students in the sample were asked these questions.

# Special Topic: COVID-19 and College Life

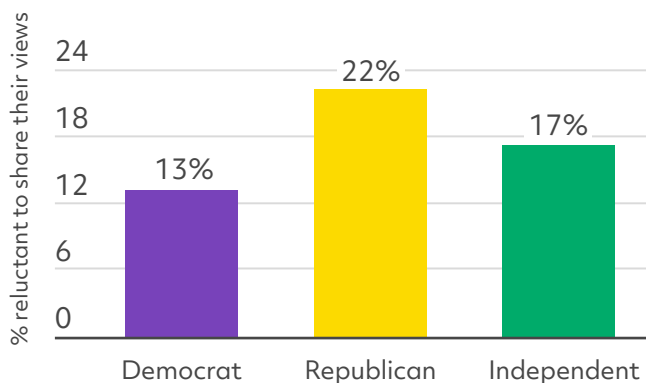
**80%** of students reported having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

**46%** of students reported that their college/university was requiring the COVID-19 vaccination, while **78%** of students reported a mask requirement.

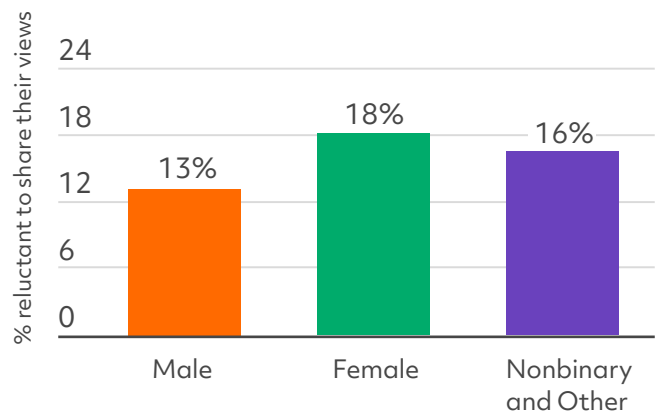
**60%** of students supported measures to restrict the movement and interaction of people in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

**Discussing COVID-19 is easier for some than for others:** **24%** of students who were unvaccinated were reluctant to discuss COVID-19, compared with just **13%** of students who were vaccinated.

**Republican students** were more reluctant to discuss COVID-19, compared with students of other political parties.



**Female students** were more reluctant to discuss COVID-19, compared with students of other genders.





# What Can You Do to Improve Campus Expression?

We hope the contents of this year's CES report will provide readers with recent data and information around campus expression. Although there are many opinion-based news articles regarding the state of expression in the classroom, we hope to equip these conversations with the facts and figures from a representative sample of American college students.

At Heterodox Academy, we champion the values of open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning. Some of the data in this report indicates that these values are at risk in some classroom environments. For the health and vitality of universities across the country, this is a concerning trend.

To help improve the state of campus expression in higher learning, please take advantage of HxA's [list of resources](#).

## About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works to improve the quality of research and education by promoting open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning. Our community is made up of more than 5,400 professors, educators, administrators, and students who come from a range of institutions — from large research universities to community colleges, K-12 schools, and higher education organizations. They represent nearly every discipline and are distributed throughout 49 states and the world.

## Acknowledgments

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