

heterodox academy

# Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

Fall 2020

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Citation:  
Stiksma, M. (2021). *Understanding the Campus Expression Climate:  
Fall 2020*. Heterodox Academy.



campus  
expression  
survey

# Executive Summary

- 1 **Reluctance to discuss controversial topics increased** in college classrooms from 2019 to 2020 (page 3).
- 2 **Consistent with 2019, Republican students remained more reluctant** to speak about controversial issues than Democrat and Independent students. Nearly half (44-48%) of Republicans were reluctant to discuss politics, the 2020 Presidential Election, or Black Lives Matter in a classroom setting (page 5).
- 3 **Students were most reluctant to discuss controversial topics when** they were the majority demographic for the issue under discussion (e.g., white students were most reluctant to discuss race; page 6).
- 4 **Students were reluctant to speak up in class because** they were concerned other students would criticize their views for being offensive (page 7).

## About the Data and Methods

We surveyed 1,311 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 Educational Statistics and previous Gallup-Knight data collections. We asked each student how comfortable or reluctant they were to speak their views in the classroom on a controversial issue about the core general topics of politics, race, religion, sexuality, and gender as well as the two specific topics of the 2020 Presidential Election and the Black Lives Matter movement. We also asked students 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 asked to report which possible consequences they were concerned about. Stated group differences are statistically meaningful as determined by chi-squared tests with appropriately powered groups. For full information regarding our sample and methods, data, and data analysis, as well as for our 2019 report, please visit [heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey](https://heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey).

## About Heterodox Academy

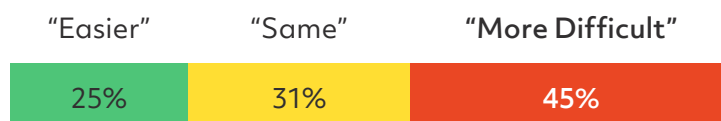
Heterodox Academy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to improving research and education in colleges and universities by advancing open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. We advance this mission by increasing public awareness to elevate the importance of these issues on campus; developing tools that professors, administrators, and others can deploy to assess and then improve their campus and disciplinary cultures; publicly recognizing model institutions, groups, and individuals; as well as cultivating communities of practice among teachers, researchers, and administrators.

# Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics Increased Between 2019 and 2020

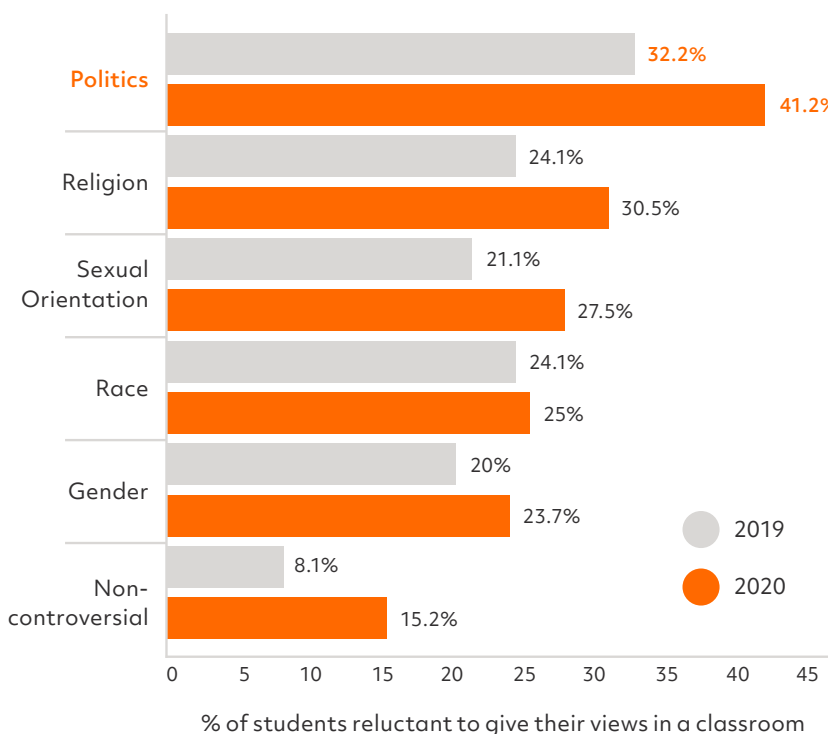
In 2020, **62%** of sampled college students agreed the climate on their campus prevents students from saying things they believe, **up from 55%** in 2019.

## When asked to compare Fall 2020 to previous semesters...

Almost half of non-freshman students reported that “sharing ideas and asking questions without fear of retaliation, even when those ideas are offensive to some people” was **more difficult** in Fall 2020.



## Which topics were students most reluctant to discuss?



Average reluctance to speak about all controversial topics increased from 24% in 2019 to 30% in 2020. **Discussing politics showed the greatest increase.** Reluctance to discuss noncontroversial topics also increased 7.1%.

# What Was So Different About 2020?

## 2020 Presidential Election

34.5% of students were reluctant to discuss the 2020 Presidential Election; women (37%) were more reluctant than men (31%).



## Racial Justice Movement

24.5% of students were reluctant to discuss the Black Lives Matter movement.

White, Asian, & Hispanic/Latinx students (23-30%) were more reluctant to discuss Black Lives Matter than Black or Multiracial students (12-17%).

Men (28%) were more reluctant to discuss Black Lives Matter than women (23%).



## Fall 2020 Learning Environment

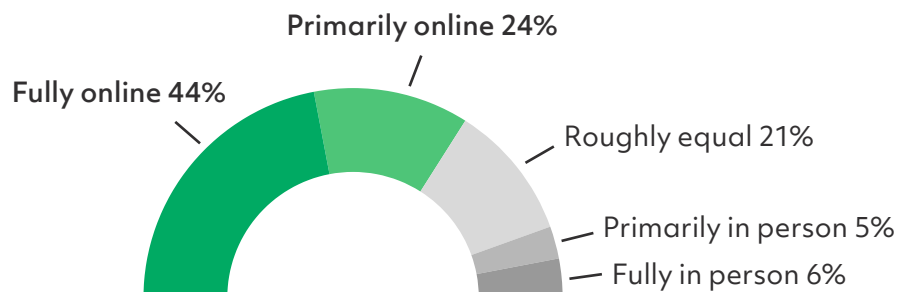
### In their own words

We asked students to describe the Fall 2020 semester in 5 adjectives. The more frequently a word was used, the larger it is.

1/3 of students reported feeling psychologically isolated “often.”

## Online Classes

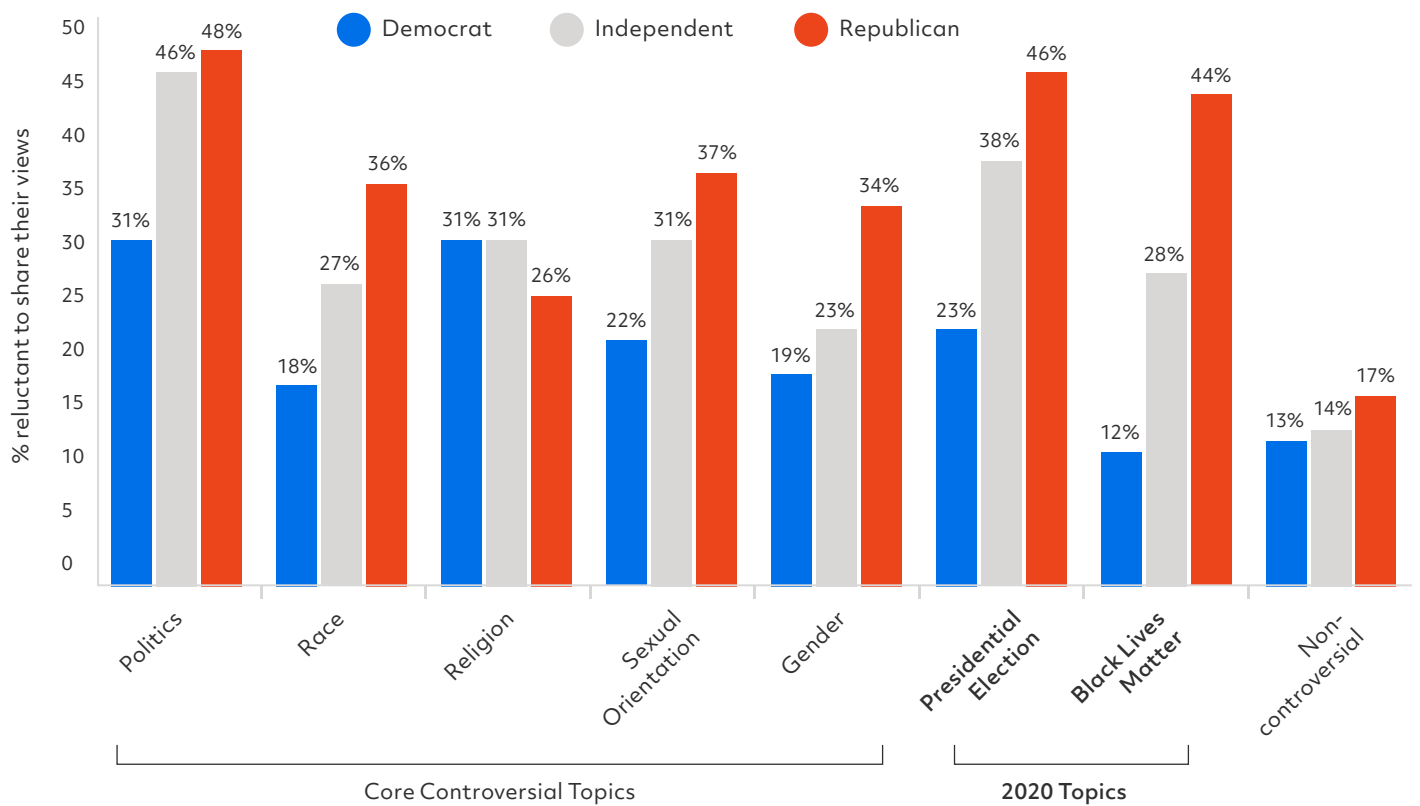
The majority of students (68%) were mostly taking classes online.



# Who Was Reluctant to Talk About What?

**60% of the total sample** was reluctant to discuss at least one of the 5 core controversial topics.

Republicans were more reluctant than Democrats to discuss all topics except religion.



Note: Of the sample that identified as one of these three political parties, 53% (592 students) were Democrat, 24% (270) were Independent, and 23% (259) were Republican.

Most notably, **nearly half of Republican students** were reluctant to discuss politics (48%), the 2020 Presidential Election (46%), or Black Lives Matter (44%) in a college classroom setting.

# Who Was Reluctant to Talk About What? (Continued)

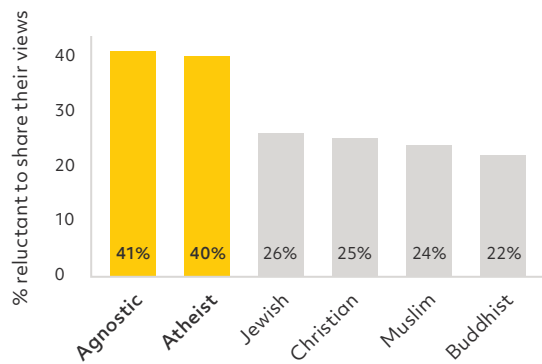
In general, students were **most reluctant** to discuss controversial topics when they were the majority demographic for the issue under discussion.

“My views are not as relevant as those of students who are more affected by discrimination in that area.”

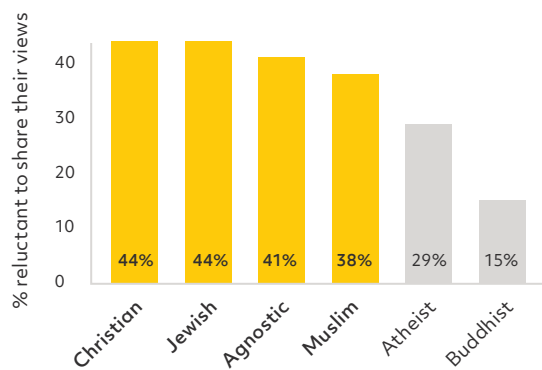
— SURVEY RESPONDENT

## Based on religion...

Agnostic and atheist students were more reluctant to discuss religion than students of all other religions.

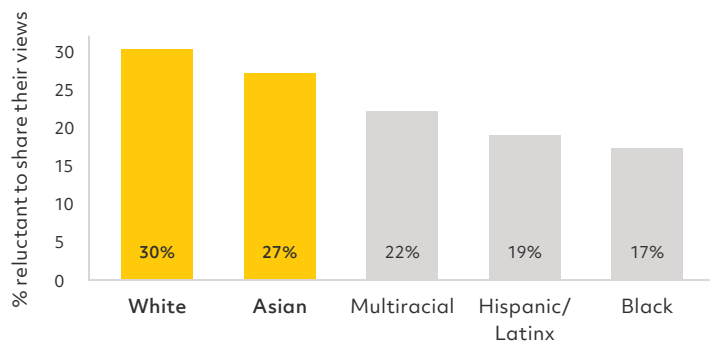


Students of all other religions were more reluctant to discuss politics than atheist or Buddhist students.



## Based on race...

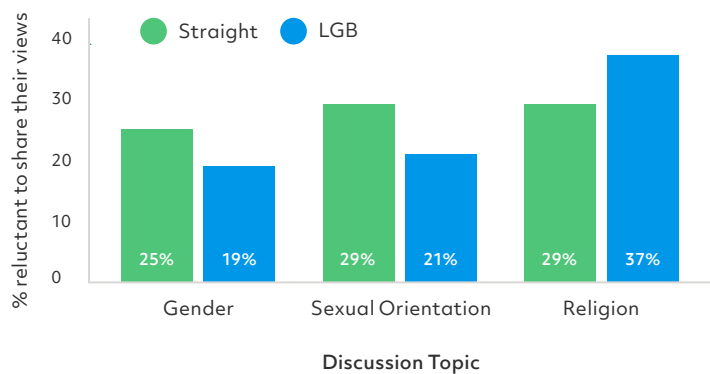
White and Asian students were more reluctant to discuss race than students of other races.



## Based on sexual orientation...

Straight students were more reluctant to discuss gender or sexual orientation than lesbian, gay, or bisexual\* students.

LGB students were more reluctant to discuss religion than straight students.



\*lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students were grouped as one category to avoid low group sample sizes.

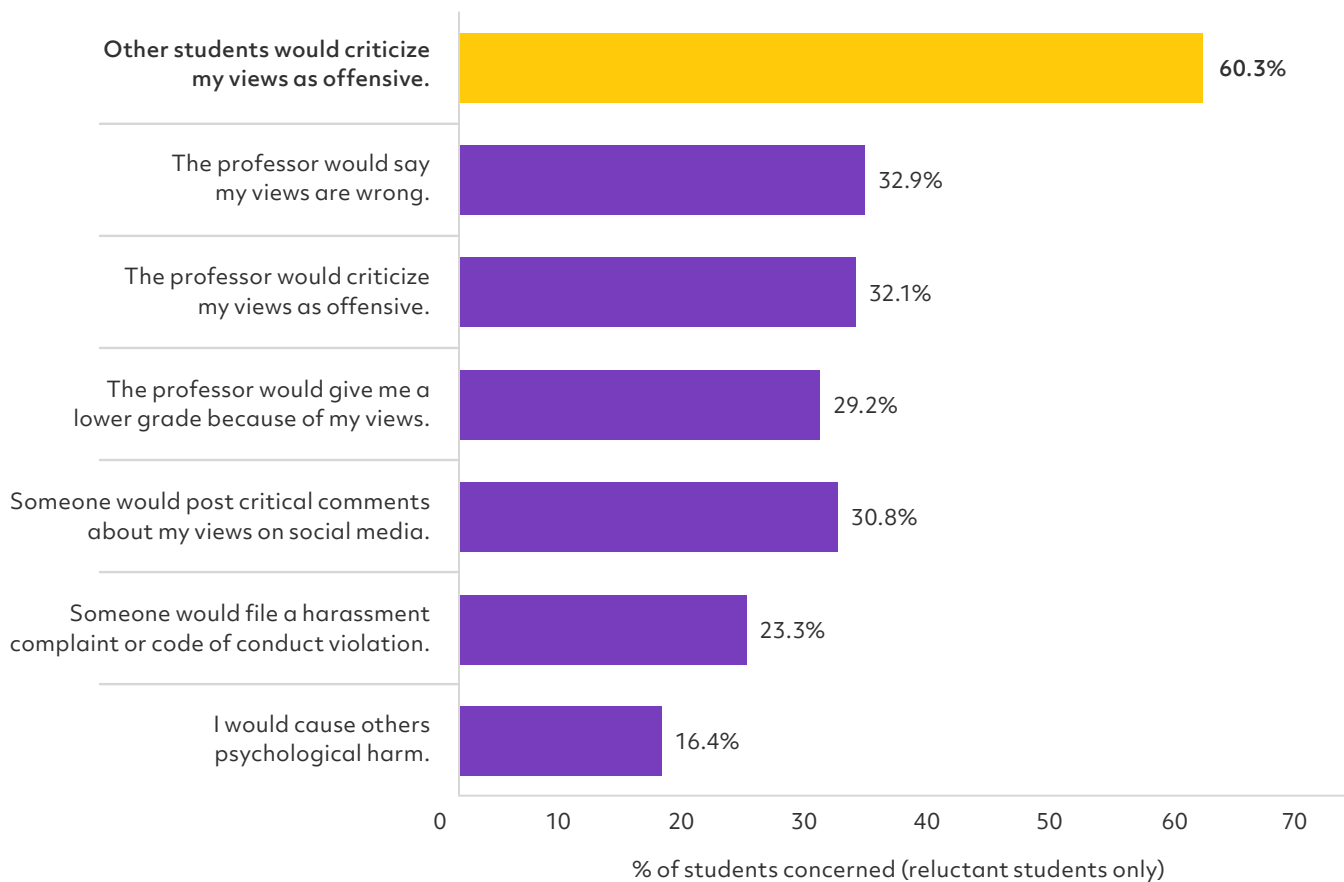
Students' reluctance to discuss any of the topics did not differ based on the degree to which their courses were online, their academic area (e.g., Arts, Business), nor the region of their university (e.g., Northeast).

# Why Are Students Reluctant?

We asked reluctant students\* whether they were concerned about each of the following consequences in speaking their opinion in college classrooms.

\*Reluctant students are a subset of the sample that endorsed reluctance to discuss at least one of the five general controversial topics: politics, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender.

Perceived consequences of giving views on a controversial topic.



Students were most fearful that other students would criticize their views as offensive. This was also the most feared consequence in 2019.



# What Can You Do to Improve Campus Expression?

Heterodox Academy is committed to improving research and education in colleges and universities by advancing open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. We offer many [tools](#) on our website for campus administrators, professors, and students who wish to create positive change on their home campus. The following are specific ways to address the concerning findings provided in this report.

## Campus Administrators



**Administer the [Campus Expression Survey at your college](#).** We have an Administration Manual and scoring instructions on our website for anyone to use. Discover what conversations are not taking place on your college campus and then plan events or create taskforces to increase open discussion on this topic.



**Include language in faculty job ads** that explicitly mentions your campus's appreciation for scholars who approach problems and questions from various vantage points. We provide sample language [here](#).



**Encourage respectful debate** by bringing disagreeing speaker pairs to your campus through the [Village Square's Respect + Rebellion project](#).

## Professors



**Become a member of Heterodox Academy.** Then, join an [HxCommunity group](#) based on your discipline or geographic region to find other heterodox scholars and educators; members can apply to have their [collaborations funded!](#)



**Include in your syllabi language** that clarifies you want students to share their views. We provide sample syllabus language on our [website](#).



**Assign *All Minus One*** in your classes, an accessible edition of Chapter 2 of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. The book is available as a free PDF along with teaching resources, related assignments, and [discussion guides](#).



**Hang the *HxA Way in your classroom***, and use it to help shape the modes of engagement in classroom [discussion](#).



**Look for institutional service opportunities** that provide a vehicle for advancing open inquiry on your [campus](#).



## Students



**Join HxA as a student affiliate** and attend the monthly student meetings and [events](#).



**Share the HxA Way** with your campus organizations and professors, and encourage them to use [this tool](#) to govern the modes of engagement.



**Join or start** a chapter of [BridgeUSA](#).

## Acknowledgments

This data collection project and associated report were made possible in full through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation. Thank you to Dr. Debra Mashek and Dr. Shelly Zhou for their perspectives and suggestions on earlier drafts.

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