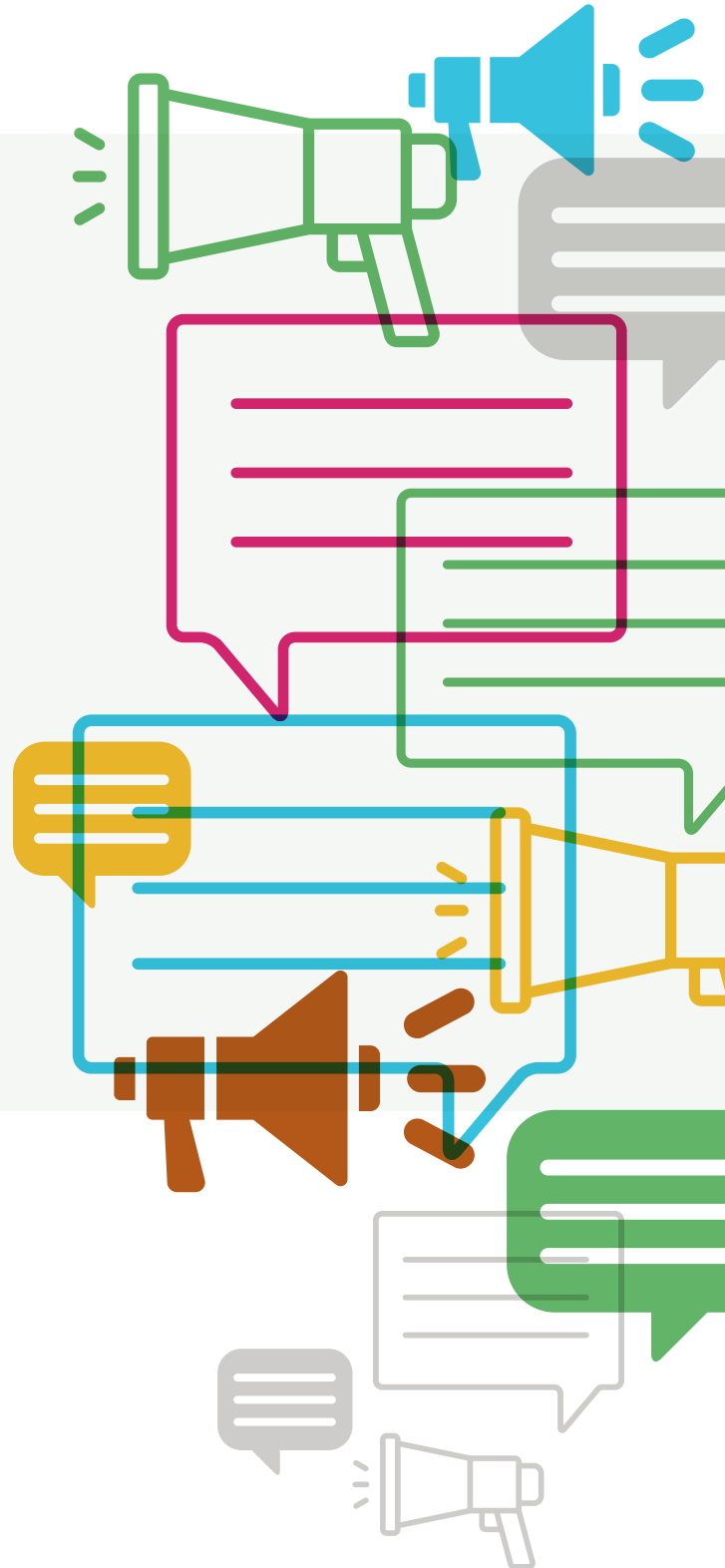


# COLLEGE STUDENT VIEWS ON FREE EXPRESSION AND CAMPUS SPEECH 2022

A Look at Key Trends in  
Student Speech Views  
Since 2016

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

**JANUARY 2022**





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College campuses have long been places where the limits of free expression are debated and tested. In recent years, this dialogue has [grown more fraught](#) as some schools have sought to create a more protective speech environment for students. Moreover, key events shaping the past two years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice movement and the 2020 election, have only added deeper dimensions to the dialogue around free speech playing out on campus and in society at large.

The [“Knight-Ipsos College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech” report](#) is the fourth in a [series of Knight Foundation reports](#) measuring college student attitudes toward speech and the First Amendment since 2016. For this report, Knight Foundation commissioned Ipsos to conduct a survey with a nationally representative sample of over 1,000 college students ages 18-24 enrolled in all types of higher education institutions, along with 4,000 American adults, offering insight into how college students’ views on free speech compare with those of the general public. In addition to the past Knight-Gallup campus speech surveys (2016, 2017, 2019), Knight has studied free speech views among high school students since 2004. Trends in college student attitudes are included throughout this report.

For findings on how the adult population views free speech and expression, please see [“Free Expression in America Post-2020,”](#) published earlier in January 2022.

This Knight Foundation-Ipsos report offers nuanced insight into how college students perceive campus speech and First Amendment protections today, including how views are evolving within different factions of the student body. This survey reinforces that students are not a monolithic group when it comes to speech, finding that partisanship, race, and ethnicity drive meaningful differences in how college students view speech. Understanding where different groups stand is vitally important for higher education leaders as they seek to foster free expression on college campuses and create a campus environment that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

The findings described in this report cover many, but not all, of the rich insights possible from this complex dataset. We invite the public and researchers to explore this publicly available resource in further detail.



## KEY FINDINGS

- **Students view speech rights as important, yet less secure than in years past:** Students continue to believe First Amendment rights and concepts of free speech are important to democracy. However, the percentage of students saying speech rights are secure has fallen every year since this question was first asked in 2016. This includes a 12-point decrease from 2019 as an increasing number of students—particularly Republicans—say they believe speech rights are threatened.
- **Students of color believe their speech is less protected:** While a majority of college students express confidence that the First Amendment protects “people like them,” Black students in particular feel much less protected, with a sharp decline from 2019 to 2021.
- **Students believe exposure to a wide spectrum of speech at college is important:** Most students continue to say colleges should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech, including political speech that is offensive or biased, rather than prohibiting speech they may find offensive.
- **Students favor college policies that limit racist speech, but support for other speech interventions remains low:** Most students favor colleges instituting policies that restrict the use of racial slurs on campus, suggesting that, for them, this particular category of speech does not merit mandated exposure on campus. Just 1 in 4 students favor schools disinviting controversial speakers, down from more than 2 in 5 in 2019. Similarly, the number of students who support colleges providing safe spaces or speech codes has fallen over the past two years.
- **Students say the campus climate stifles free expression, yet speech on campus is making nearly 1 in 5 feel unsafe:** More students now say the climate at school prevents some from saying things others might find offensive, and fewer feel comfortable disagreeing in class. Yet slightly more now report feeling unsafe because of comments made on campus than in 2019. This is particularly true for female students and students of color.

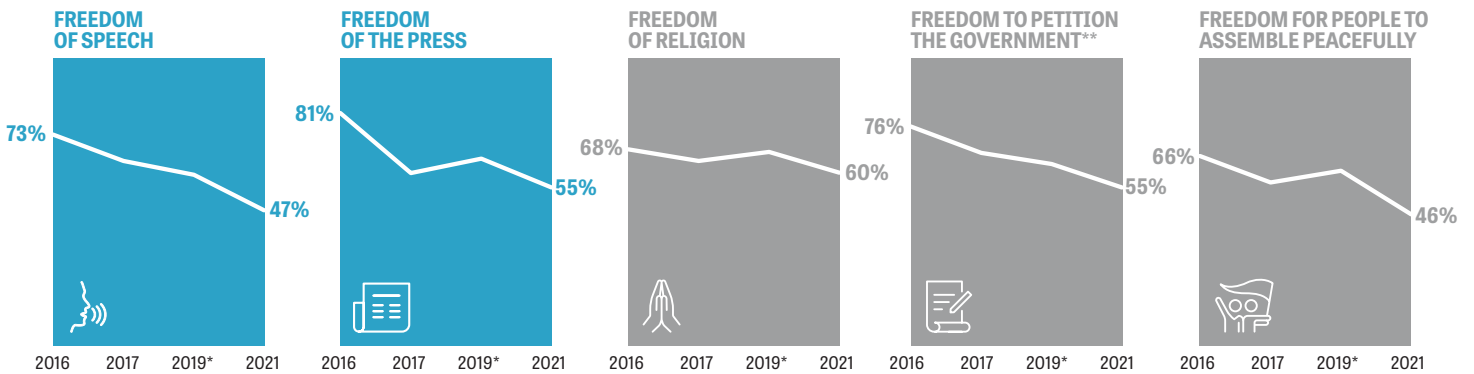


## KEY CHARTS

A selection of key trends among students over the years. Full findings are in the body of the report.

### A steadily declining share of students think free speech rights are secure

Percent who think the following rights are very secure/secure in the country today



Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

\*In 2019, question read "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"

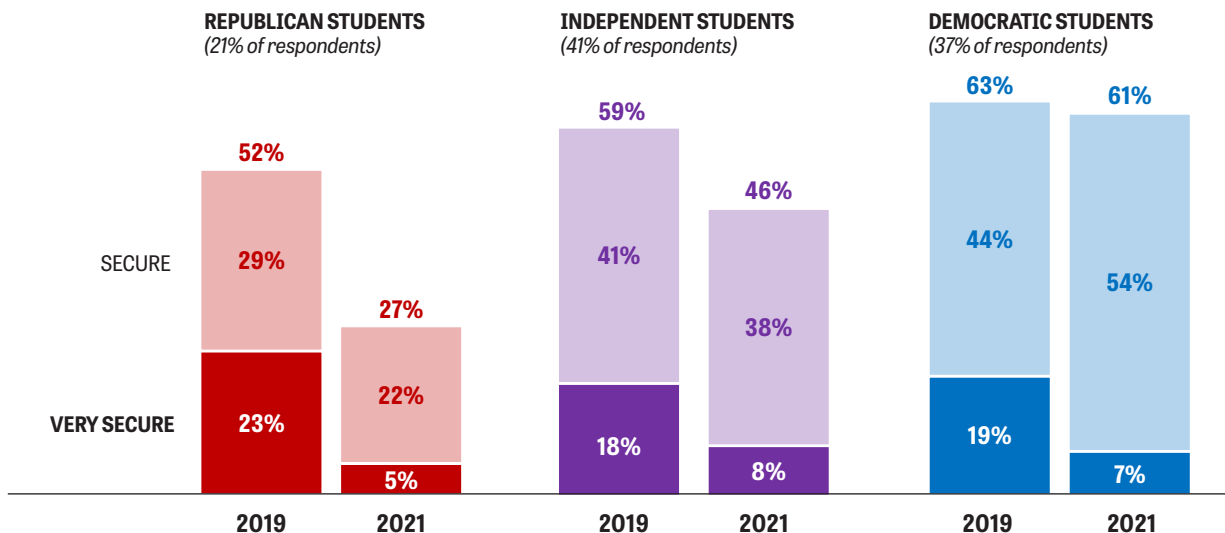
\*\*In 2019 and prior, the statement read "Freedom to petition the government, meaning presenting requests to the government without fear of punishment"

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2016, 2017, 2019

### Partisan divide is widening over whether students see freedom of speech as secure, driven by a decline among Republicans

Percent who think freedom of speech is very secure/secure in the country today



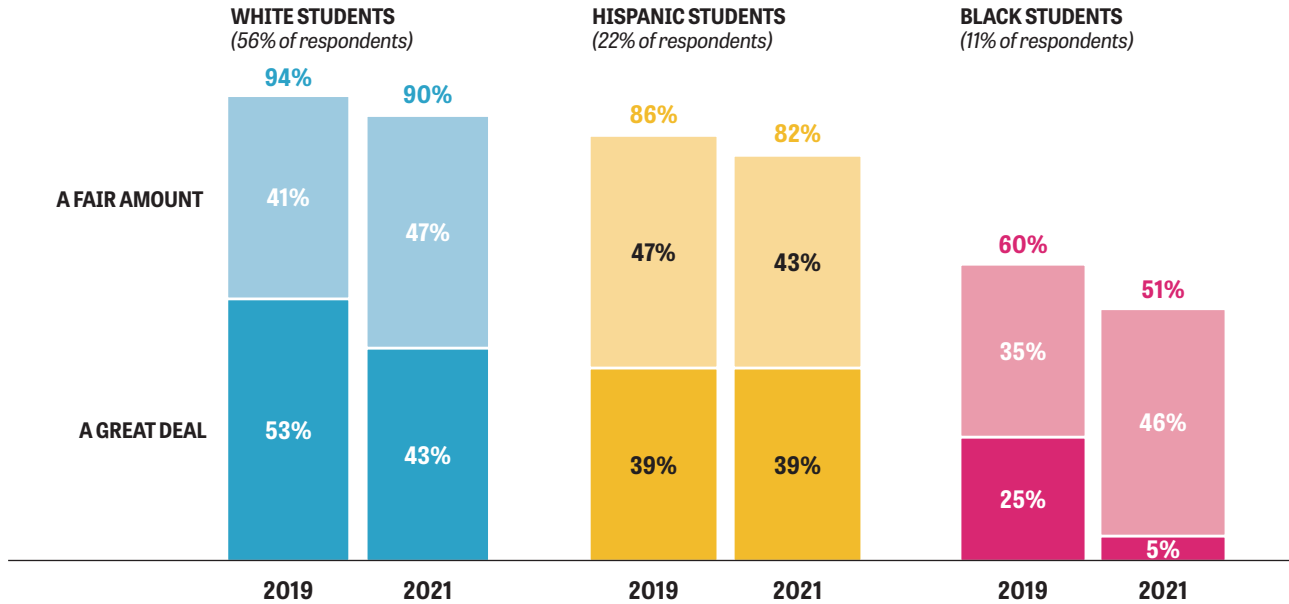
Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2019

## A deep and growing gap exists between Black college students and other students on whether they feel the First Amendment protects them

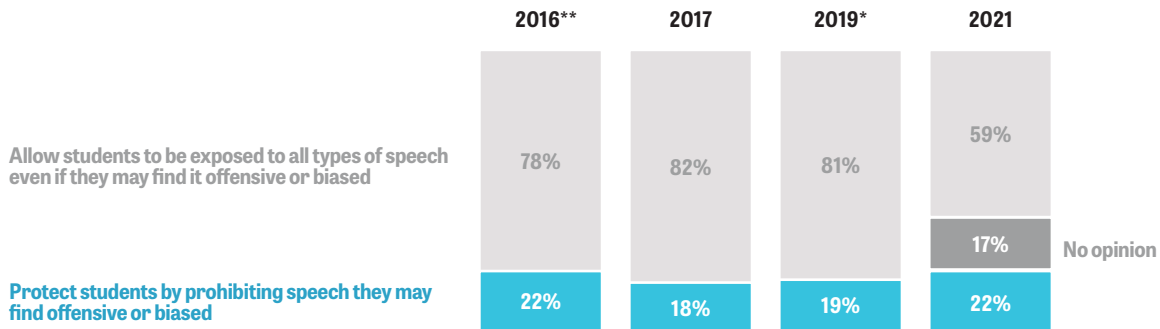
Percent who feel the First Amendment protects people like them



Q3. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you/the typical American?  
2021 base: Three-quarters of students were shown "people like you" n=784  
Knight-Gallup, 2019

## A majority believe it is more important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech

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



Q22. 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 even if they may find it offensive or biased" "Protect students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased" "No opinion"]

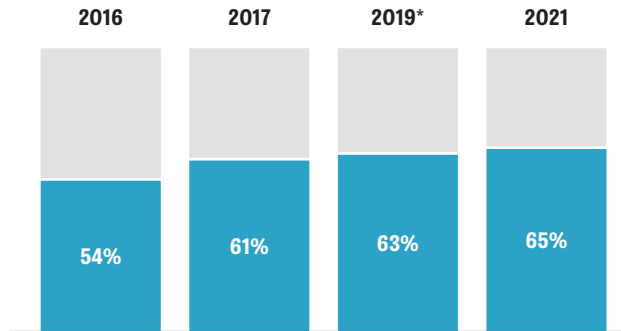
\*Prior to 2021, respondents were not shown "No opinion" but could volunteer it as a response.

\*\*In 2016, 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]?"

2021 base: All students n=1,023  
Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017, 2016

### A growing majority believe that their school's climate stifles free expression

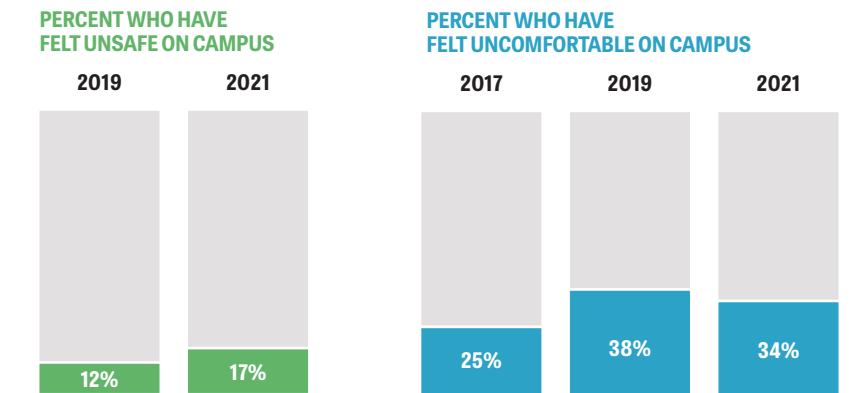
Percent who strongly/somewhat agree that the climate at their school or on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive



Q16\_5. For each of the following statements, please indicate if 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."  
 \*In 2019, 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."  
 2021 base: All students n=1,023  
 Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017, 2016

### Around 1 in 5 students report feeling unsafe on campus due to speech

Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe 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?



Q39. Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe 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?  
 Q40. Have you, personally, ever felt unsafe on campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity or religion, whether or not it was directed at you?  
 2021 base: All students n=1,023  
 Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017

## KEY POPULATIONS

Experience with and attitudes toward speech vary widely among different student groups. The greatest differences exist among race and partisanship, 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 formed an opinion at all.

### Democratic students

A majority of Democratic students believe that freedom of speech is secure in America today, a view that has held constant since 2019. When it comes to free expression broadly on campus, just over half of Democratic students favor schools fostering an environment in which all forms of speech are allowed, a view that's softened since the last time Knight asked these questions two years ago.

Democrats are most likely to favor colleges implementing restrictions on certain forms of speech on campus, particularly around speech that is offensive to minority groups, something that was also true in prior [Knight-Gallup research](#). Both now and in 2019, a large majority of Democratic students believe that colleges should be able to restrict the use of racial slurs on campus. When it comes to other speech policies, 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 2 in 5 favor schools disinviting potentially controversial speakers. These views are consistent with previous surveys.

A majority of Democrats 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 and independents. Compared with two years ago, Democratic students now feel less comfortable voicing disagreements in class.

### 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 under half of all independents feel that free speech is secure today, down from 3 in 4 who felt this way in 2016. At the same time, a strong majority (8 in 10) believe that they are protected under the First Amendment. This puts them on about equal footing with Democrats, but slightly behind Republicans.

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 (around 1 in 5 each) either believing that colleges should foster a protective environment or having no opinion on the matter. Much like two years ago, 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 the same since 2019.

Independents were more likely than other groups of students to respond with the newly prompted "No opinion" option this year, indicating that many of them do not have strong views on these issues at all.



## Republican students

Republican students are increasingly likely to feel that freedom of speech is under threat—just over a quarter believe it is secure today, down from two-thirds in 2016. More now also believe that their school's climate stifles free expression.

A strong majority (7 in 10, down from 90% in 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. A majority (56%)—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. Moreover, for Republican students, this represents a more than 20-point drop from 2019 in the percentage who feel that colleges should restrict the use of racial slurs on campus.

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 two years ago. A slim majority oppose schools instituting speech codes that could restrict offensive or biased speech. Unlike their Democratic counterparts, there has been no change over time in their already low level of comfort voicing disagreements with professors or other students; less than half remain comfortable.

## 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 2019.

Overall, 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 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 two years ago. They are slightly more likely than Black or Hispanic students to believe that the campus environment stifles free expression.

## Black students

Fewer Black students express confidence that the First Amendment protects people like them. At the same time, a growing number of Black students favor a more protective campus environment.

The share of Black students who feel the First Amendment protects them a great deal has fallen by 20 percentage points over the past two years. Black students also express less confidence than the broader Black adult population about how effectively the First Amendment protects either them or the average American.

When it comes to campus free speech, the number of Black students who favor a campus environment that protects students by prohibiting speech that they might find offensive or biased has grown from 28% in 2019 to 36% in 2021. Both in 2019 and 2021, a majority of Black students feel that colleges should restrict the use of offensive racial slurs on campus.

Black students are more likely than white or Hispanic students to say that they have been made to feel uncomfortable due to statements that others have made in their presence about their identity or political beliefs, both in daily life and on campus. This has remained constant since 2019.

## Hispanic students

Hispanic students' views of campus speech, and personal experiences, fall somewhere between the differing views of Black and white students.

A strong majority of Hispanic students believe that the First Amendment protects people like them, something that was also true two years ago. The number of Hispanic students saying this is nearly equal to the number of white students. Similarly, Hispanic students align closely with white students on perceptions that free speech is under threat; half agree.

However, with regard to colleges restricting offensive racial slurs, Hispanic students fall closer to Black students, with 7 in 10 supporting such an action.

Hispanic students (along with independents) are among the most likely to say they have no opinion about whether colleges should foster a more protective speech environment or allow all types of speech on campus. A plurality oppose disinviting controversial speakers, but they are split around instituting speech codes. Like white students, close to 6 in 10 favor the creation of safe spaces on campus, less than the share of Black students who do.

## 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, although fewer feel this way than in 2019. Now, female students are more likely than male students to say that free speech rights are extremely important, a change from 2019 when more men said free speech rights were extremely important.

Nearly 1 in 5 male and female students alike report having felt unsafe due to comments on campus, whereas larger gender differences were observed in prior years. A more meaningful difference appears when male and female students are asked if they have felt uncomfortable on campus. Female students remain significantly more likely to have felt uncomfortable due to speech on campus, as they did in 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.

Learn more at [kf.org](https://kf.org) and follow @knightfdn on social media.

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### Advisory Team

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

**Katherine Glenn Bass**, research director, Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University

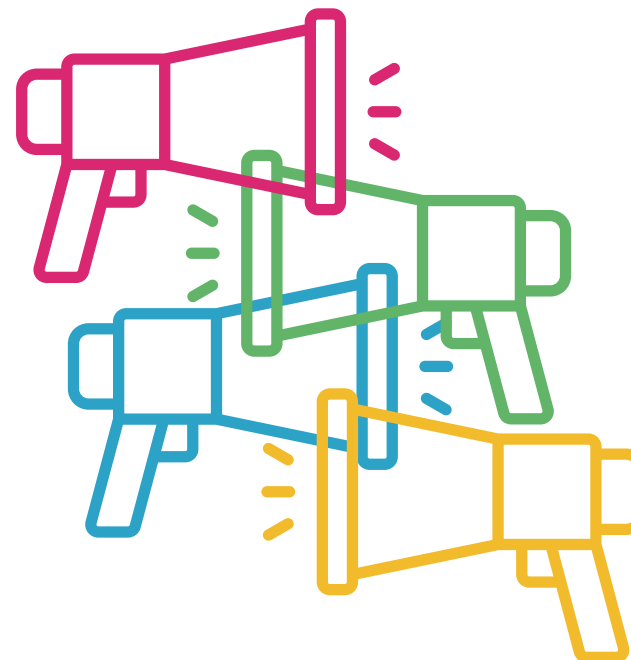
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We also thank a wider group of contributors who provided thoughts and feedback on the "[Free Expression in America Post-2020](#)" report, which has helped shape this research.



## DETAILED FINDINGS

### Introduction

Free speech on college campuses has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as a number of [high-profile incidents](#) have given rise to fears by some that institutions may be fostering a less open free speech environment, while others remain more concerned with cultivating a safe and inclusive learning environment for students. However, this report underlines that contrary to fears about rising anti-free expression sentiment on college campuses, a majority of students attending two- and four-year institutions strongly value freedom of speech and see it as vitally important to American democracy. When given the choice, a majority of students say they would prefer colleges to allow all types of speech on campus rather than limiting speech in order to protect people from hearing biased or offensive speech.

These central findings have held true [since at least 2016](#), when Knight Foundation first began surveying college students on free speech. Yet even as free expression remains a cherished value among the student body, fewer believe their free speech rights are secure in America today. In addition, growing numbers say that their campus climate prevents some people from saying things they believe because others may find it offensive, even as the number who favor colleges enacting certain restrictions like disinviting controversial campus speakers or creating safe spaces shrinks.

Yet college students are not monolithic. Partisanship, race, and ethnicity primarily influence how college students experience the world, with implications for where they stand on the free speech debate. Gender, albeit to a lesser extent, also plays a role. Understanding where different groups stand is vitally important for college leaders as they seek to foster free expression on campuses and create a campus environment that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

The [“College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech”](#) report was released in conjunction with a report on the broader public, [“Free Expression in America Post-2020,”](#) allowing for a direct comparison between the college student and general adult population for the first time [since 2016](#). Society is at a crossroads over how to apply First Amendment rights in the 21st century. That is why it is essential that thought leaders, professors and the public work to understand how the next generation of Americans understand themselves, the country they are inheriting, and the questions of speech at the heart of it.

This report outlines college students views on speech and free expression; the climate surrounding campus speech; campus speech policies; interpretations of the First Amendment; social media; student activism; and how college students compare with the general public.

## VIEWS ON SPEECH AND FREE EXPRESSION

Most students continue to agree that freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of American democracy. In spite of emphasizing the relative importance of free speech, fewer students now believe that this fundamental right is secure in America today. There are also widening racial gaps when it comes to which students feel personally protected by the First Amendment.

### Students are increasingly unlikely to believe that freedom of speech is secure

Students increasingly feel that some of the central rights the First Amendment guarantees are not as secure as they once were. Under half of students (47%) now feel that freedom of speech is secure, down 26 percentage points from 2016.

Similarly, fewer students now feel that the freedom of the press—one of the rights protected by the First Amendment—is secure too. Five years ago, 81% felt this right was secure; now only 55% do.

Students demonstrate a growing concern about other fundamental rights, such as peaceful assembly, freedom to petition the government, and freedom of religion.

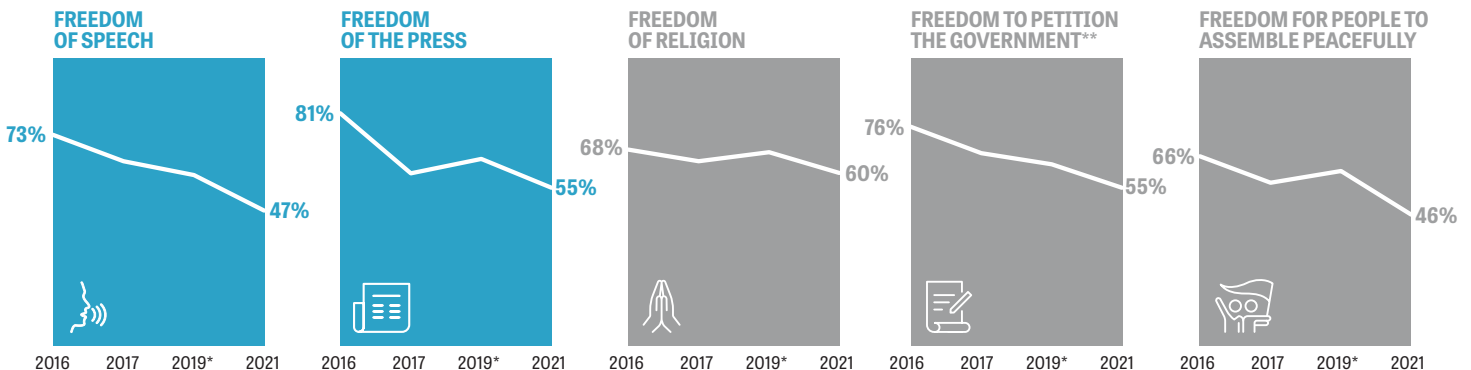
The gap between the parties has grown significantly on the question of whether free speech rights are secure. Two years ago, a majority of Republican students (52%), Democratic students (63%), and independent students (59%) felt that free speech was a secure right in the country. Now, in 2021, only 27% of Republicans and 61% of Democrats feel this way, with independents falling in the middle at 46%. Notably, though, few Republicans (5%), Democrats (7%), or independents (8%) feel that free speech is very secure in the country today.

Additionally, the perception that freedom of speech is under threat is particularly pronounced among younger college students (those 18 to 21) compared with older college students (those 22 to 24), with 53% of younger students versus 45% of older students feeling this way.

Notably, there are no significant differences by race in the latest wave of the survey, which stands in contrast with findings from past reports. In 2016, 73% of Black students and 82% of white students felt that freedom of speech was secure. Tracking with the overall decline among all students, only 48% of white students and 44% of Black students now feel this right is secure.

### A steadily declining share of students think free speech rights are secure

Percent who think the following rights are very secure/secure in the country today



Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

\*In 2019, question read "Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?"

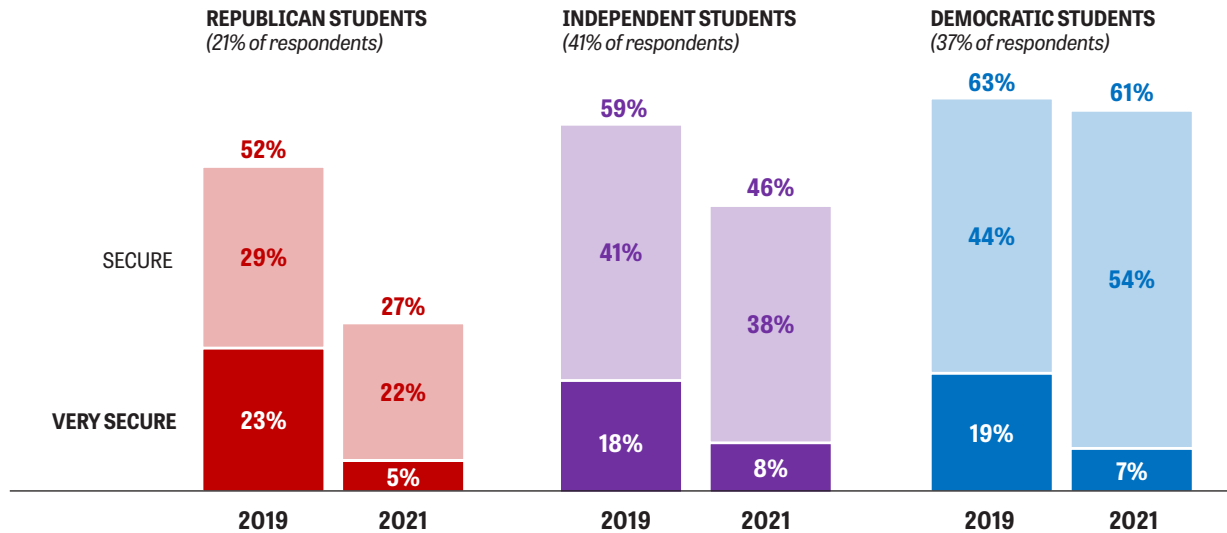
\*\*In 2019 and prior, the statement read "Freedom to petition the government, meaning presenting requests to the government without fear of punishment"

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2016, 2017, 2019

## Partisan divide is widening over whether students see freedom of speech as secure, driven by a decline among Republicans

Percent who think freedom of speech is very secure/secure in the country today



Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?  
2021 base: All students n=1,023  
Knight-Gallup, 2019

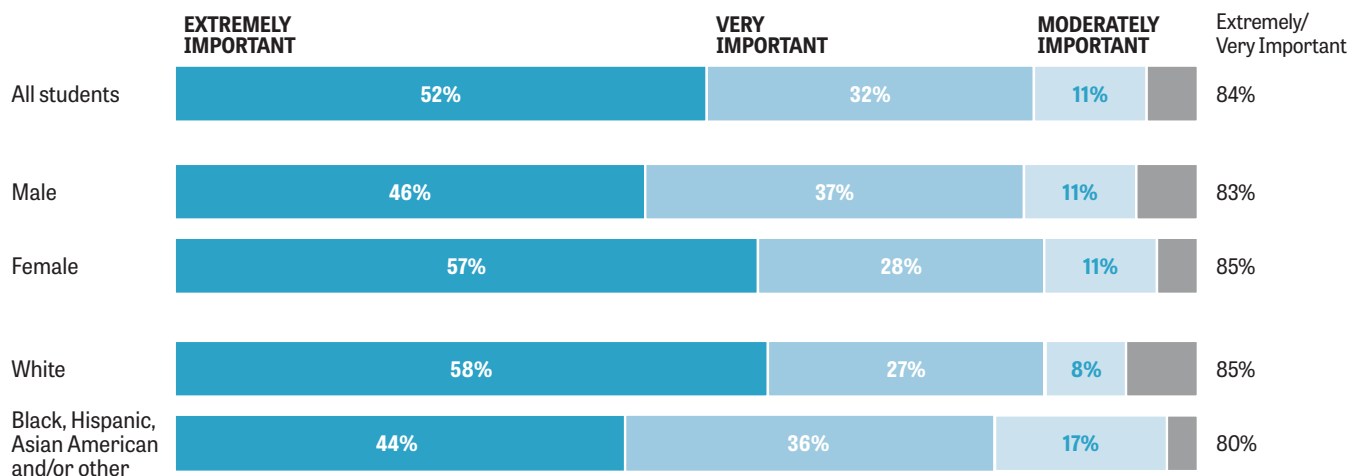
## College students believe free speech rights are extremely important to U.S. democracy

A majority of college students (84%) say that free speech rights are critical in our democracy. Views about the broader importance of free speech rights are roughly even among different groups of

students, irrespective of their gender and racial or ethnic identity, although certain groups are more likely to say that free speech rights are extremely important.

### A majority believe that citizens' free speech rights are important in our democracy

How important do you consider citizens' free speech rights to be in our democracy?



Q20. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?  
Base: One-third were shown "Citizens' free speech rights" n=333



## Most college students believe that the First Amendment protects people like them, but Black students' confidence has fallen significantly

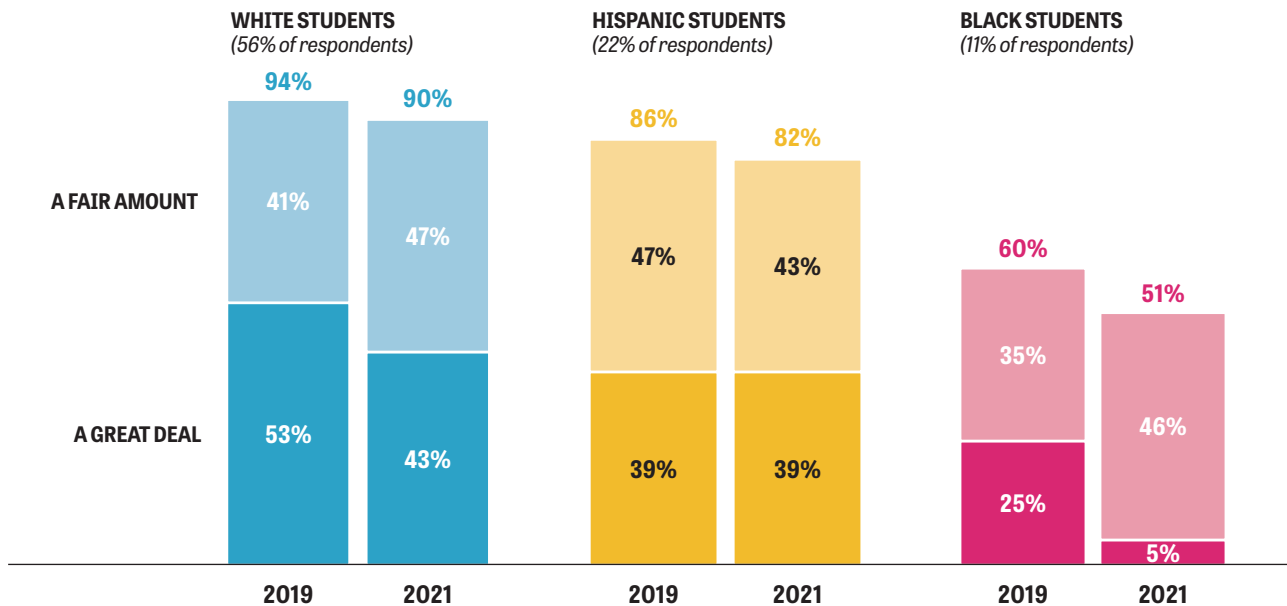
A decisive majority of students (83%) feel that the First Amendment protects people like them. Yet there are significant differences in how students of different races and ethnicities feel about First Amendment protections, with significant changes over time for Black students. White (90%) and Hispanic (82%) students largely agree that the First Amendment protects people like them.

Currently, 51% of Black students feel the First Amendment protects people like them. Not only is this number lower than for white and Hispanic students, but it is also a decline from 2019, when 60% said they felt protected.

Over this period, the number of Black students who feel the First Amendment protects people like them a great deal fell considerably (25% in 2019 vs. 5% in 2021) while those who say it protects them a fair amount rose (35% in 2019 vs. 46% in 2021). Notably, though, while these differences are statistically significant, the base size for Black students is fewer than 100 respondents.

## A deep and growing gap exists between Black college students and other students on whether they feel the First Amendment protects them

Percent who feel the First Amendment protects people like them



Q3. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you/the typical American?  
2021 base: Three-quarters of students were shown "people like you" n=784  
Knight-Gallup, 2019

## Although a majority of students say they value free speech rights and an inclusive society, importance has softened for both

Three in 4 students believe an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups is extremely or very important for democracy. Yet views have shifted slightly among students, across all demographic groups, over the years on the importance of this and other central values.

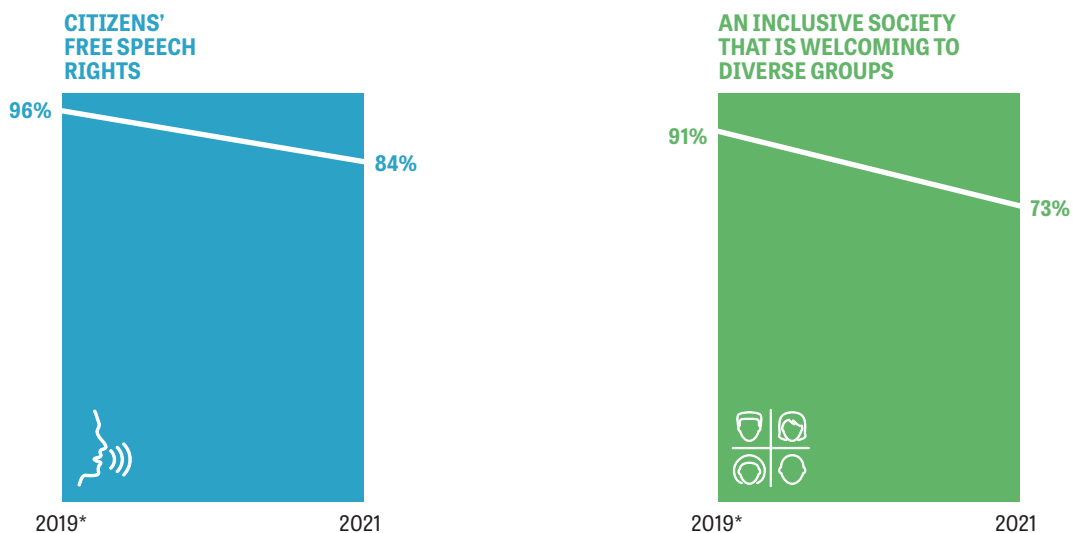
While a strong majority of students emphasize the importance of an inclusive society, fewer now say this is extremely important (41% now vs. 69% in 2019).

Importance of an inclusive society has softened more among Republican and independent students than Democratic students. And, while most students (84%) agree that citizens' free speech rights are important, fewer now also see free speech rights as extremely important (52% now vs. 68% in 2019).

As students' emphasis on the importance of an inclusive society has evolved, fewer now perceive these two ideals—free speech and diversity and inclusion—to be in direct conflict. The sense that diversity and inclusion frequently or occasionally conflicts with free speech (66%) is down 10 percentage points from 2019.<sup>1</sup>

## While a majority agree speech rights and inclusion are important in our democracy, support falls for both

*Percent who consider the following to be important to democracy*



Q20. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?

\*In 2019, scale did not include a "Not at all important" option.

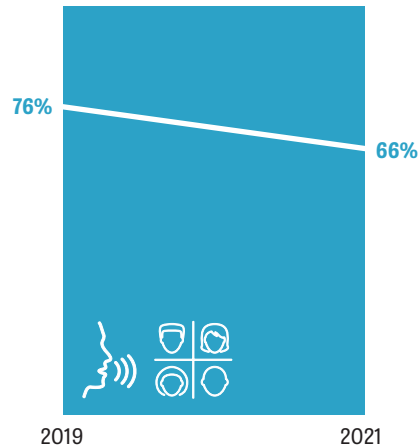
2021 base: One-third of students were shown "citizens' free speech rights," n=333; one-third were shown "an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups," n=333 Knight-Gallup, 2019

<sup>1</sup> Just 333 students were shown these questions, meaning that the sample is too small to analyze across racial and ethnic groups, or by partisan affiliation.



## Fewer believe that diversity and inclusion is in conflict with free speech rights

Percent who think that diversity and inclusion frequently/occasionally conflicts with free speech rights



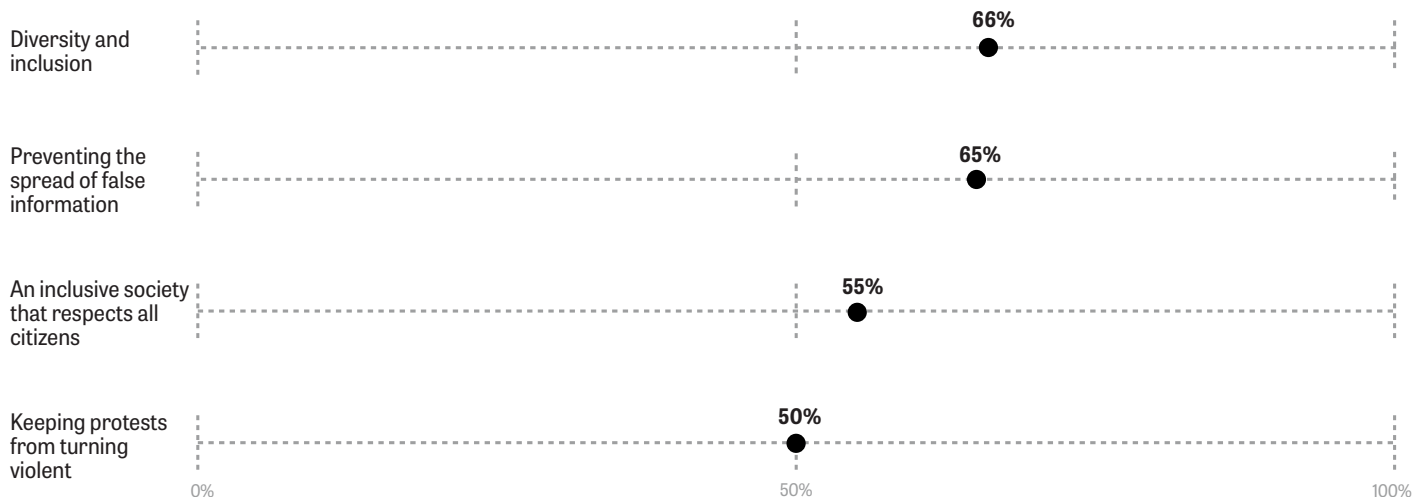
Q21. In your view, how often do you think [diversity and inclusion] conflicts with free speech rights?  
2021 base: One quarter of students were shown "diversity and inclusion," n=276  
Knight-Gallup, 2019

Diversity and inclusion is not the only value that students believe at least occasionally conflicts with free speech rights. A similar number (65%) believe that preventing the spread of false information is also at least occasionally in conflict, reflecting broader societal concerns about the spread of

misinformation about the 2020 election and the coronavirus pandemic, among other salient issues. In keeping with broader societal condemnation around violent conflict, students are split around the question of whether preventing protests from turning violent occasionally conflicts with free speech; 50% agree.

## Diversity and inclusion, limiting the spread of misinformation are perceived to conflict with free speech rights

Percent who believe that the following frequently/occasionally conflict with free speech rights



Q21. In your view, how often do you think ... conflicts with free speech rights?  
Base: One-quarter were shown "diversity and inclusion" n=276; "Preventing the spread of false information" n=268; "An inclusive society that respects all citizens" n=241  
"Keeping protests from turning violent" n=238.

## VIEWS ON CAMPUS SPEECH CLIMATE

An interesting aspect of students' views around free expression involves their experience on campus, and the interplay between feeling safe due to others' speech yet having the ability to express themselves freely. Currently, a significant—and growing—minority of students report experiencing feeling either unsafe or uncomfortable on campus due to others' speech. This is particularly true for Black students, underscoring the sense of inequality these students feel around free expression and First Amendment protections.

Though speech has not made a majority of students feel unsafe or uncomfortable, most are increasingly likely to feel that their campus environment deters people from saying what they believe for fear of offending others. They are also split on their

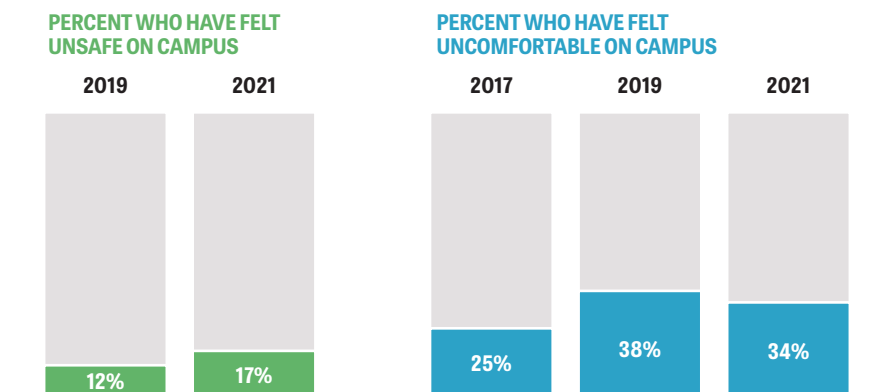
comfort around expressing disagreement in the classroom with other students or their instructor, demonstrating a lack of ease in the day-to-day practice of free expression.

### A notable proportion of students continue to feel unsafe and uncomfortable on campus

The number of students who say they have felt unsafe on campus because of people's comments about their identity has grown slightly to 17% in 2021, from 12% in 2019. A growing number of students also report feeling uncomfortable on campus because of speech.

### Around 1 in 5 students report feeling unsafe on campus due to speech

*Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe 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?*



Q39. Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe 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?

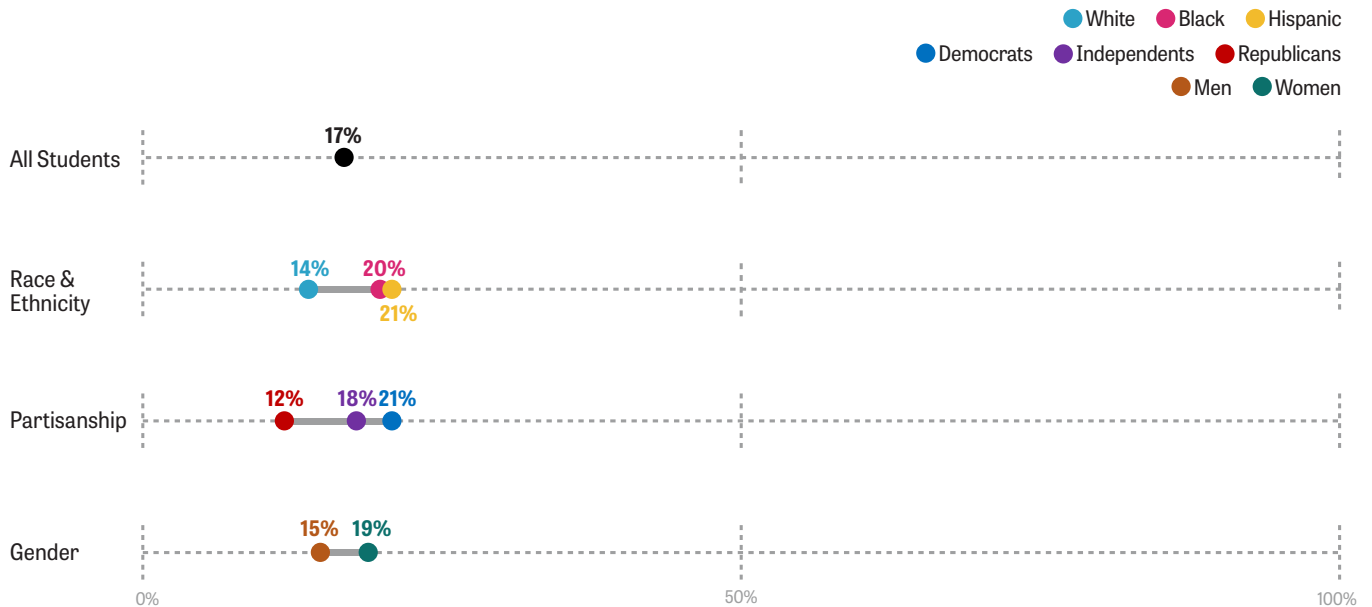
Q40. Have you, personally, ever felt unsafe on campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity or religion, whether or not it was directed at you?

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2021

## Democrats, students of color more likely to report having felt unsafe on campus

Percent who have ever felt personally unsafe on campus because of something someone said in reference to their race, ethnicity or religion, whether or not it was directed at them.



Q40. Have you, personally, ever felt unsafe on campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity or religion, whether or not it was directed at you?  
Base: All students, n=1,023

At 40%, Black students are more likely than their white (34%) or Hispanic (31%) counterparts to say they have felt uncomfortable on campus. Similar numbers of Black students reported feeling uncomfortable in 2019 (41%) and 2017 (43%), indicating that sentiment has not changed significantly over the past four years.

Black and Hispanic students are about equally likely to have felt unsafe on campus due to something someone said about their identity (20% and 21%, respectively). Just 14% of white students say the same.

Democrats are more likely than independents or Republicans to report feeling both unsafe and uncomfortable on campus. At 42%, Democrats are most likely to report having felt uncomfortable on campus, almost twice as many as the 23% of Republican students who have felt this way; independents fall in the middle at 33%. Fewer Democratic students report having felt unsafe on campus (21%), but again close to twice as many Democrats as Republican students (12%) have felt this way. Independents land closer to Democrats, at 18%.

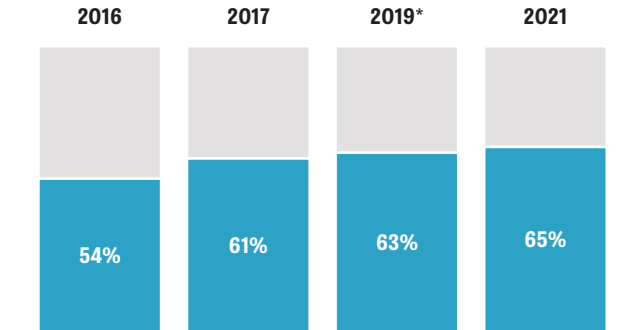
Female and male students report slightly differing campus experiences. Around 1 in 5 each report having felt unsafe on campus, although female students are not significantly more likely to report this than male students (19% of female students vs. 15% of male students), unlike in 2019. Now, the gender gap widens among those who have felt uncomfortable on campus due to speech. At 39%, female students are 10 percentage points more likely than male students (29%) to say they have felt uncomfortable on campus due to comments made about their identity.

## Most believe that their campus climate is a deterrent to free expression

When it comes to the general climate, students are generally aligned with minimal differences by race and partisanship. It is important to note that this survey was fielded during the pandemic when many students were engaging in virtual or online learning, so the concept of “a college campus” may have been taken in either the traditional or virtual sense.

### A growing majority believe that their school's climate stifles free expression

Percent who strongly/somewhat agree that the climate at their school or on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive



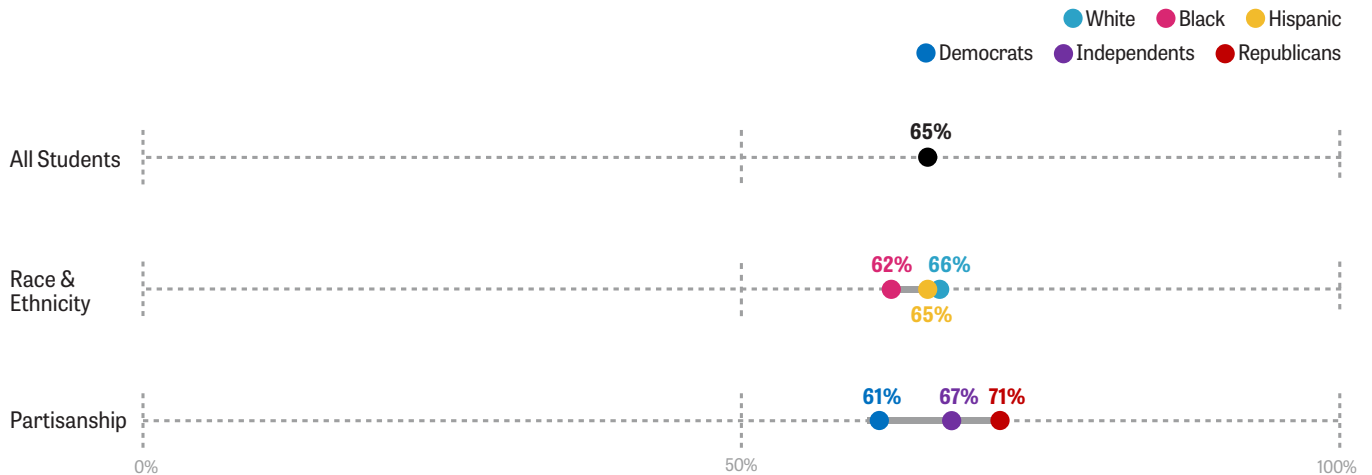
Q16\_5. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:  
 "The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive."  
 \*In 2019, question for this item was "Do you strongly agree, somewhat 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."  
 2021 base: All students n=1,023  
 Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017, 2016

That being said, more students feel that their campus climate stifles free expression than in 2016. A majority of students (65%) said that campus climate prevents people from saying what they believe for fear of offending someone, up from 54% in 2016.

Republican students (71%) are 10 percentage points more likely to feel that the campus environment dampens free speech than Democratic students (61%), although a majority across parties (plus 67% of independents) believe this is the case. There is little difference across racial and ethnic groups on this question.

### Republicans are most likely to feel that their school's campus prevents people from saying things they believe

Percent who strongly/somewhat agree that the climate at their school or on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive



Q16\_5. For each of the following statements, please indicate if 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 students n=1,023

## Half of students say they personally feel comfortable expressing dissenting opinions in the classroom

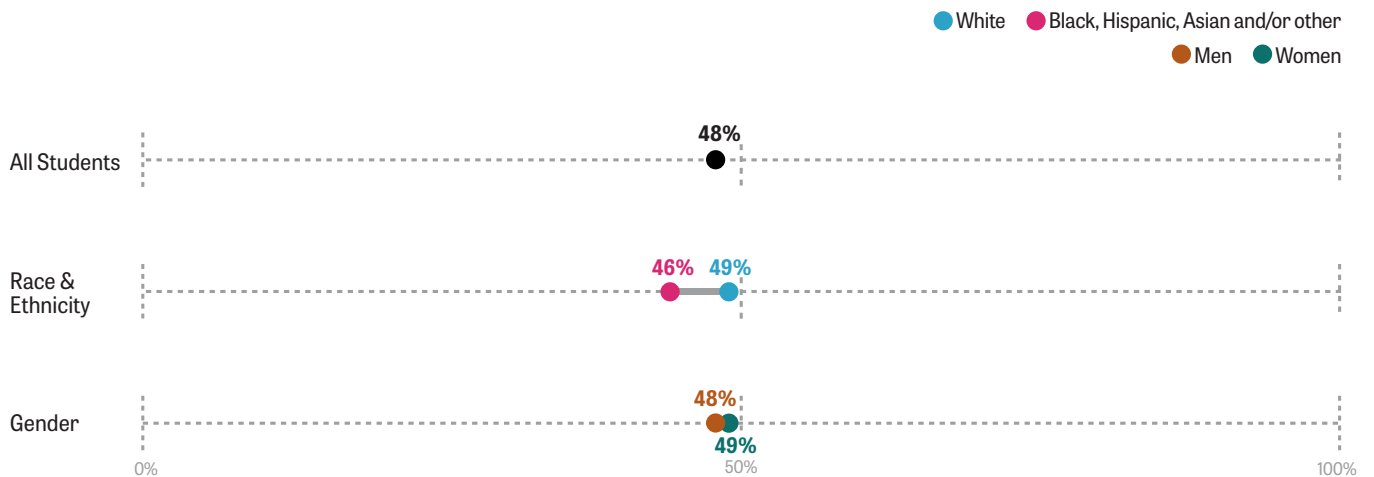
Beyond speech issues on campus generally, many students also report feeling uneasy disagreeing with other opinions in the classroom. Just half of all college students say they are comfortable offering dissenting opinions to ideas shared by other students or the instructor in the classroom. While this represents a decline from the 61% who said they

were comfortable expressing dissent in 2019, this change is likely attributable to the greater numbers of students who declined to answer the question.

Similar numbers feel comfortable voicing dissent to other students (52%) as they do to the instructor (49%). There is little difference across subgroups in comfort with expressing dissenting opinions, although white students are slightly more likely to say they are comfortable voicing disagreement with the class instructor or other students (49%) compared with students of color (46%).

## Just under half say they feel comfortable expressing disagreement with their class instructor or other students

Percent who feel comfortable voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students in the class



Q19a. Thinking about discussions that take place in your classes, how comfortable do you feel voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students?  
Base: One third of students n=329

## VIEWS ON CAMPUS SPEECH POLICIES

As in 2017 and 2019, a majority of college students continue to believe it is more important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all forms of speech even if they find it offensive or biased, rather than for schools to protect students by prohibiting speech they might perceive to be offensive or biased. The one notable exception centers on the use of racial slurs: A clear majority, across party and racial or ethnic lines, believe that campuses should restrict such speech.

When it comes to support for enacting campus policies around speech, a majority support the creation of “safe spaces” on campus, while student opinion is more split on schools disinviting public speakers or enacting speech codes. However, support for all three policies has fallen from 2019.

### College students want a campus environment that exposes them to a range of speech

To test where students really stand on the question of favoring speech protections on campus, Knight-Ipsos provided them with a direct choice between colleges exposing students to all forms of speech and schools protecting them by restricting speech they might find offensive or biased. When presented with this trade-off, a majority of students opt for a campus environment that exposes them to a range of speech over one that protects them.

This echoes a similar trend found throughout prior [Knight-Gallup college student data](#). Currently, 59% feel that college campuses should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased. Previous iterations of this particular question found that about 8 in 10 college students believe campuses should expose students to all types of speech (81% in 2019, 82% in 2017 and 78% in 2016).<sup>2</sup>

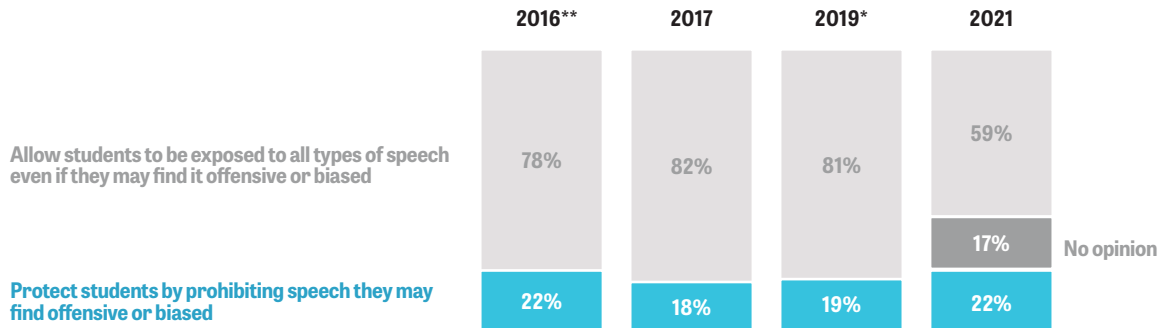
This year’s decline in support was likely driven by students directly being given an option to respond with “No opinion”—as compared with years past when these responses were recorded only if volunteered by the student. That 17% of students responded with “No opinion” indicates that this is a gray area for some students.

Notably, even though a significant number of students have no opinion about the matter, a consistent number believe that campuses should protect students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased, year over year. About 1 in 5 students (22%) feel it is more important for college campuses to protect rather than expose students to different types of speech, similar to the share of students seen in previous years.

<sup>2</sup> The 2016 version of this question was worded differently: “If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to [ROTATED: 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]?”

## A majority believe it is more important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech

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



Q22. 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 even if they may find it offensive or biased" "Protect students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased" "No opinion"]

\*Prior to 2021, respondents were not shown "No opinion" but could volunteer it as a response.

\*\*In 2016, 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]?"

2021 base: All students n=1,023  
Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017, 2016

The issue of campus speech elicits some differences of opinion across racial, ethnic, and partisan lines. A majority of white students (65%) support campuses allowing a full range of speech, compared with less than half of Black (47%) and Hispanic (45%) students.

Instead, Black (36%) and Hispanic (32%) students are twice as likely to want to protect students from speech they may find offensive or biased than white students (16%). This sentiment is intensifying over time. In 2019, 28% of Black students and 19% of Hispanic students said they wanted colleges to put more of an emphasis on protecting students. Views among white students have held steadier—15% favored a more protective environment in 2019.

Some of this breakdown in opinion may be a reflection of the challenges that students face as they navigate the world. As noted earlier, Black and Hispanic students are slightly more likely than white students to report having felt unsafe on campus due to comments made about their identity.

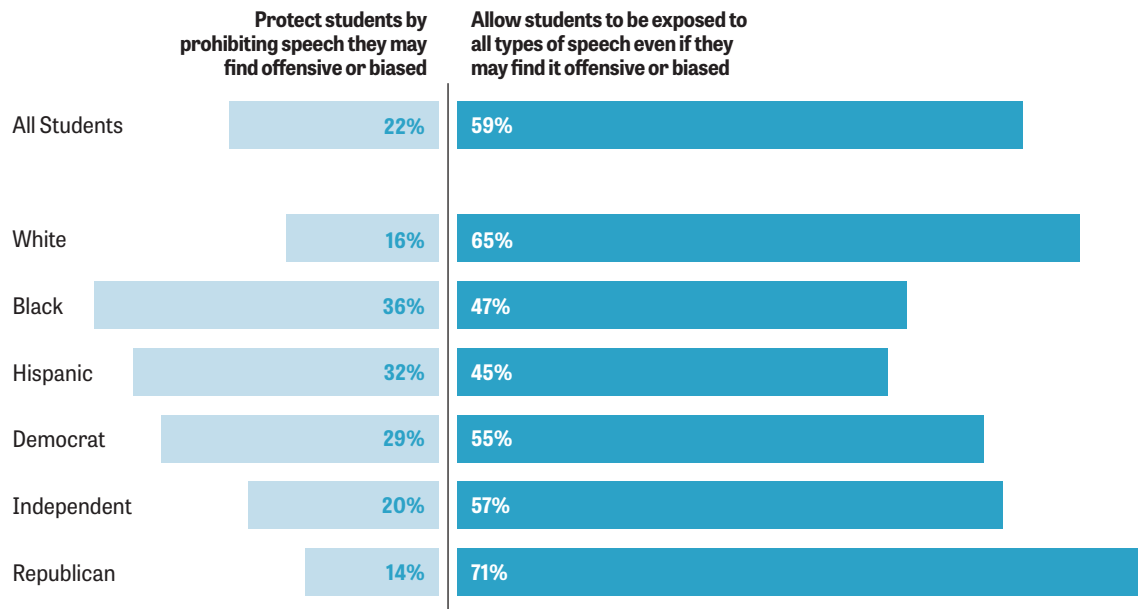
Although majorities of Democratic, Republican, and independent students feel it is important for colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech, Republicans (71%) are more likely than Democrats (55%) or independents (57%) to feel this way.

And, while previous iterations of this survey found different views by gender on this question, there are no statistically significant differences in this wave. Around 1 in 5 students, male or female, believe that schools should protect students from offensive or biased speech, while just shy of 6 in 10 believe students should be exposed to all types of speech.

Previously, male students were more likely to support a campus environment where students can be exposed to all forms of speech, and female students more likely to support a more protective environment.

## Most want colleges to allow students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased

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



Q22. If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to...  
Base: All students n=1,023

## A smaller majority believe colleges should restrict the use of racial slurs on campus, with many now opting for “No opinion”

College students generally prefer allowing all types of speech on campus, but they **take exception** to colleges permitting the use of racial slurs on campus. Two in 3 students favor colleges restricting people from using racial slurs to refer to people of color.

To test the limits of students’ views on free expression as applied to the campus environment, Knight-Ipsos surveyed students on 15 different examples of speech

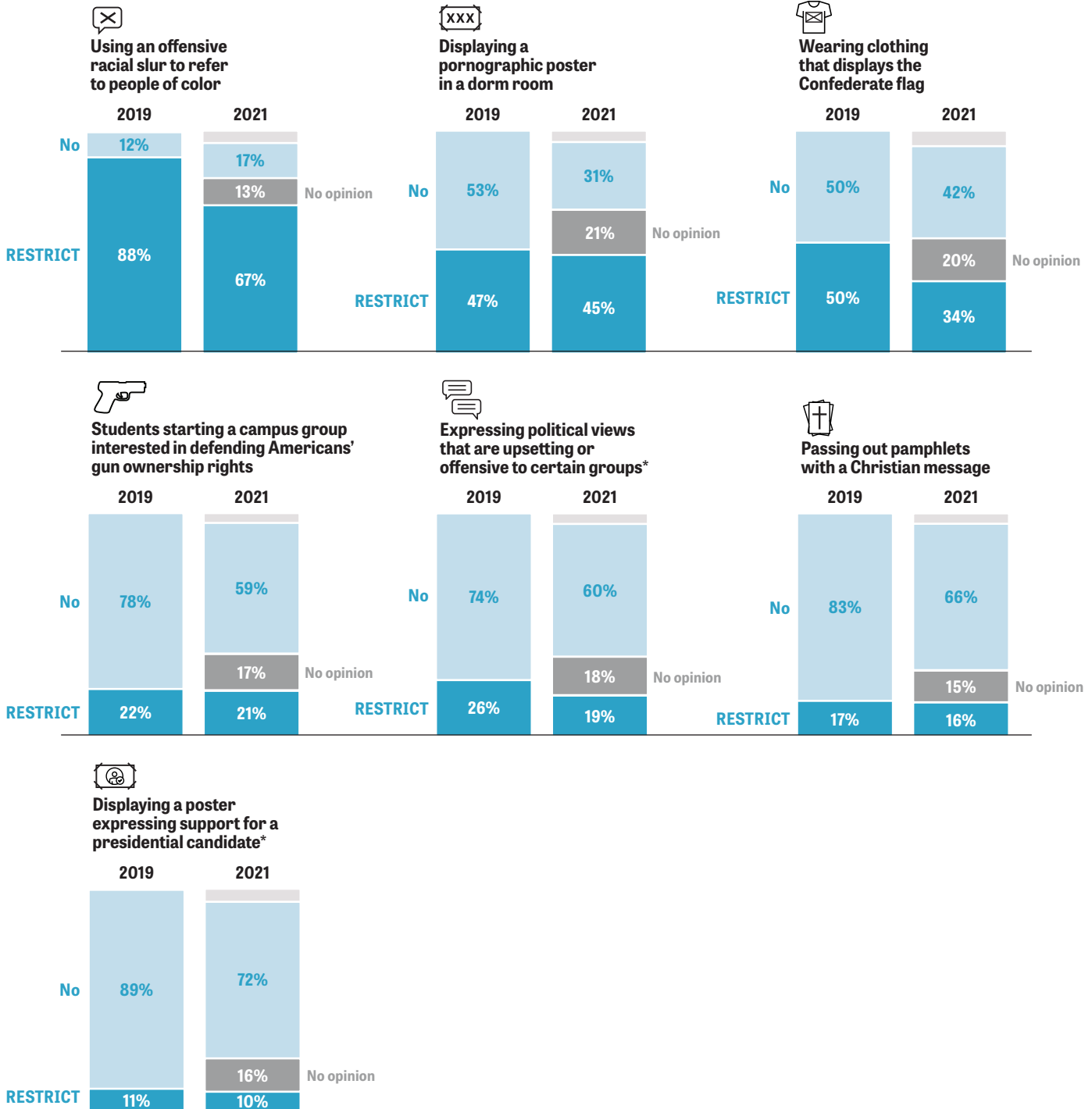
on college campuses. Most students are not opposed to speech or forms of expression that are merely politically controversial or potentially offensive, but a decisive majority (67%) believe that racial slurs should be prohibited.

However, support for this type of prohibition has dropped from 88% in 2019 to 67% in 2021, when students were offered an option of “No opinion.” Just under 1 in 5 (17%) say that racial slurs should be allowed, up from 12% in 2019, while 13% said they had no opinion.



## Students generally support colleges restricting racial slurs but are less supportive of restrictions on political speech

Percent who think colleges should be able to restrict each of the following on campus



Q23. 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?

In 2019, respondents were not shown "no opinion" but could volunteer it as a response.

In 2019 question was: "Do you think colleges should or should not be able to establish policies that restrict each of the following types of speech or expression on campus?"

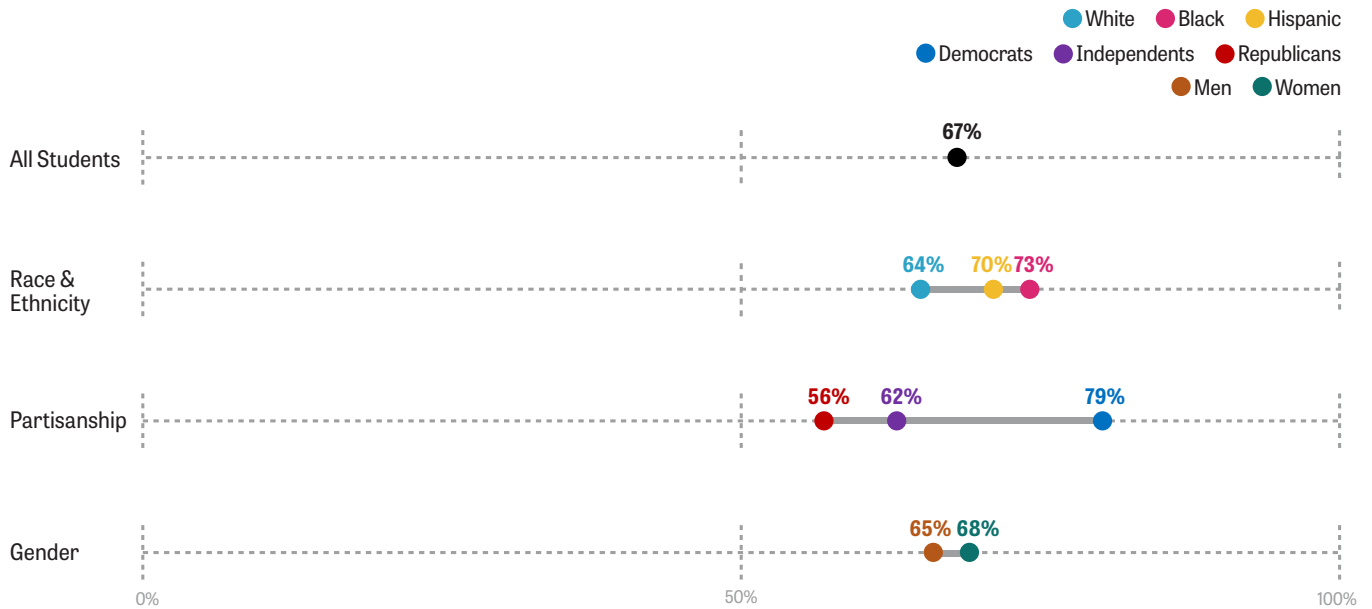
\*In 2019, statement read: "Displaying a poster expressing support for a presidential candidate in a dorm room window."

2021 base: All students n=1,023.

Knight-Gallup, 2019

## Black, Hispanic and Democratic students are most supportive of colleges restricting the use of offensive racial slurs

Percent who think that colleges should be able to restrict the use of offensive racial slurs to refer to people of color on campus



Q23\_1. 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?: Using an offensive racial slur to refer to people of color.  
Base: All students n=1,023

Decisive majorities of Black (73%), Hispanic (70%), and Democratic (79%) students overwhelmingly back colleges restricting the use of racial slurs on campus. Fewer white (64%) and Republican (56%) students favor this, but the number who do is still over half.

The same groups who favor restrictions on racial slurs on campus are also more likely to favor colleges restricting certain types of political speech. Black (31%), Hispanic (26%), and Democratic (27%) students are more likely to favor colleges limiting the expression of political views that are offensive or upsetting to certain groups than white (13%) or Republican (14%) students.

## Few students favor disinviting controversial speakers or speech codes, but a majority support safe spaces

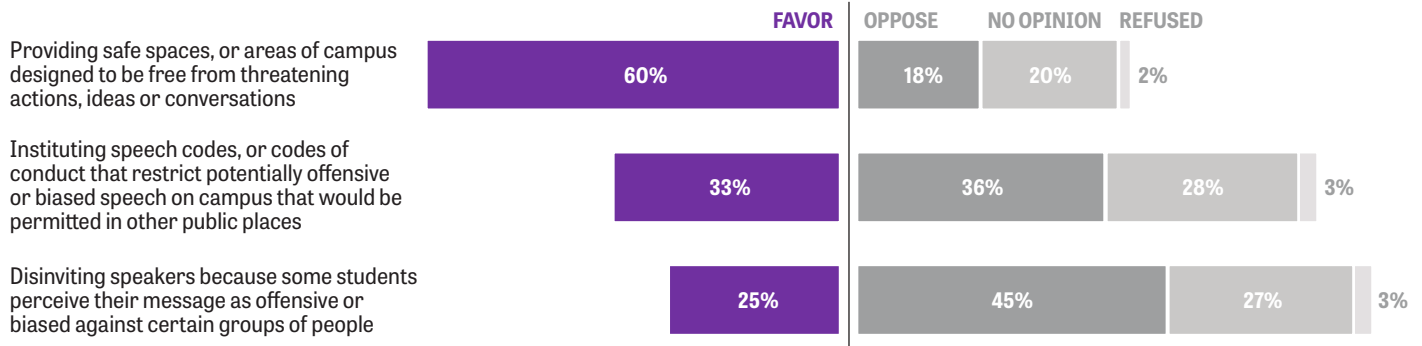
A majority of students (60%) favor the creation of “safe spaces” on campus (zones designed to be free of threatening speech, concepts or actions). Opinion is less crystallized around other measures, such as campuses instituting speech codes or disinviting speakers with a message that is perceived to be offensive or biased.

Close to equal numbers of students favor or oppose the creation of free speech codes (33% support and 36% oppose), while 28% express “no opinion.”

Just 25% support disinviting speakers whose message is perceived to be offensive or biased, while a plurality (45%) oppose this. A similar number (27%) also opted to say they have no opinion on whether schools should disinvite speakers. Campus visits from controversial speakers were a common cultural flashpoint before the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the regular flow of college life.

## Students support providing safe spaces on campus, but are split about instituting speech codes that restrict offensive speech

Percent who favor or oppose the following



Q17. Do you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges?  
Base: All students n=1,023

College students' views on what steps schools should take to foster a free speech environment have evolved somewhat since 2017, when Knight Foundation began surveying students on these issues. A majority support safe spaces on campus, but the number who do so has fallen by 27 points from 2017.

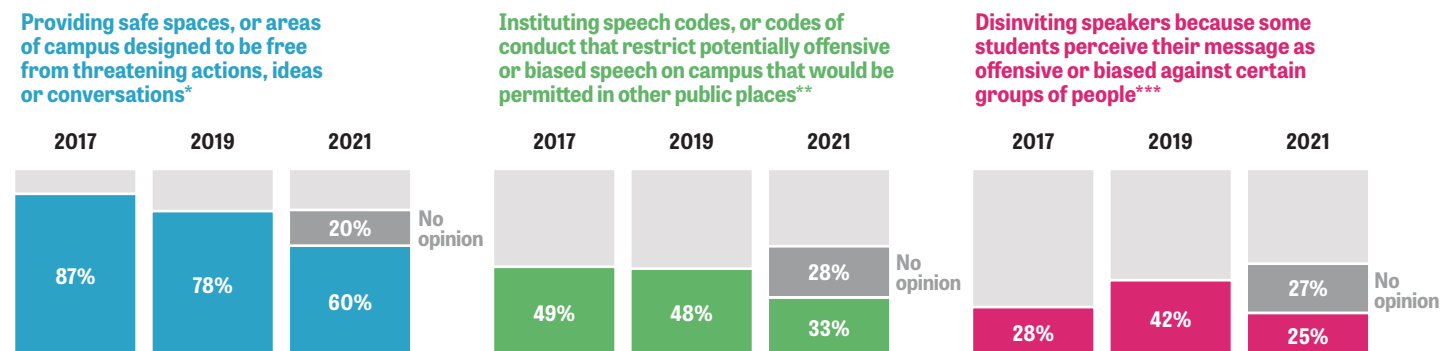
Similarly, fewer students today favor schools creating speech codes that restrict potentially offensive or biased speech on campus. Now, 1 in 3 support

colleges taking this action, compared with just under half in 2017. As noted above, however, when we specified colleges prohibiting racial slurs, not just "potentially offensive or biased speech," most students favor taking that action.

Just 1 in 4 believe schools should disinvite speakers because some students find their message to be offensive or biased. This brings students' views back to where they were in 2017, after rising to 42% support for speaker disinventions in 2019.

## Support for safe spaces and speech codes declines

Percent who favor the following



Q17. Do you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges?

Prior to 2021, respondents were not shown "No opinion" but could volunteer it as a response.

\*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 "Disinventing speakers because some students are opposed to the invitation."

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017

In contrast with prior iterations of this question, the Knight-Ipsos survey included a “No opinion” option for these three items. When presented with this alternative, a meaningful number of students opted out of coming down in favor or opposed. As a consequence, any notable shifts in opinion year-over-year must take this context into account.

### Desire for colleges to act on free speech varies by partisanship, race

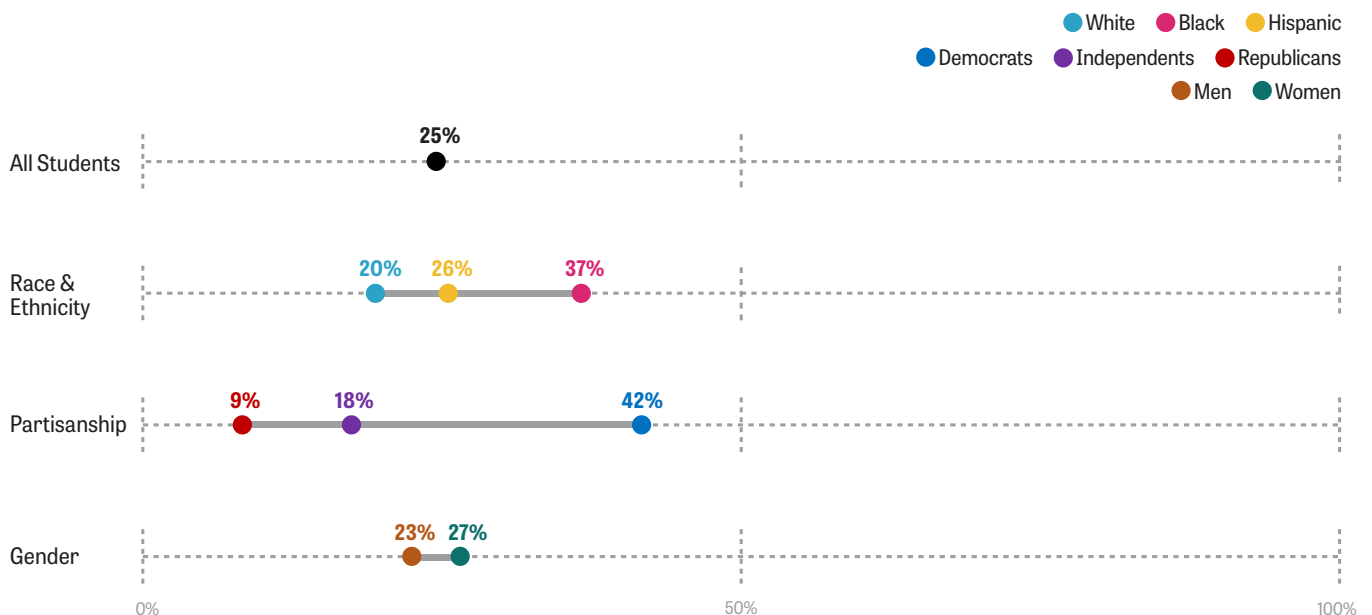
The current Knight-Ipsos survey finds certain patterns among the students who are most likely to say they have no opinion about what colleges choose to do regarding free speech. Overall, they tend to identify as an independent or “other” politically. Hispanic students are also most likely to opt out of choosing a side, compared with white

or Black students. Approximately 1 in 3 Hispanic and independent students have no opinion about instituting speech codes on campus or disinviting speakers, while around a quarter of these two groups say they have no opinion about the creation of safe spaces on campus.

Across subgroups, Democratic students are most likely to support colleges doing all three items. There is a 26-point gap in support between Democratic and Republican students on creating safe spaces on campus; independent students lie closer to Republicans on this matter. However, the greatest variance in opinion exists around support for colleges disinviting speakers for their perceived offensive or biased message: 42% of Democratic-identifying students support this, as opposed to 9% of college Republicans and 18% of independent students.

### Just 1 in 4 favor disinviting speakers who are perceived to have an offensive or biased message

Percent who favor colleges disinviting speakers because some students perceive their message as offensive or biased against certain groups of people



Q17. Do you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges? - Disinviting speakers because some students perceive their message as offensive or biased against certain groups of people.  
Base: All students n=1,023

While differences appear to exist across racial and ethnic lines, particularly among Black and white students, the true distinguishing factor is partisanship. When white students are split into Democratic and Republican camps, their views mirror those of the party they identify with.

Overall, students are split as to whether a university disinviting a speaker because of their views qualifies as depriving someone of their rights to free expression. In all, 53% agree that it is depriving them of their rights, while 42% say it is not. Again, the greatest gulf in opinion exists among Democrats (53% believe it does not) as opposed to Republicans (65% believe that it does).

Across racial and ethnic lines, Hispanic students are closely aligned with white students on this matter; 58% of Hispanic students and 55% of white students agree that disinviting speakers deprives them of

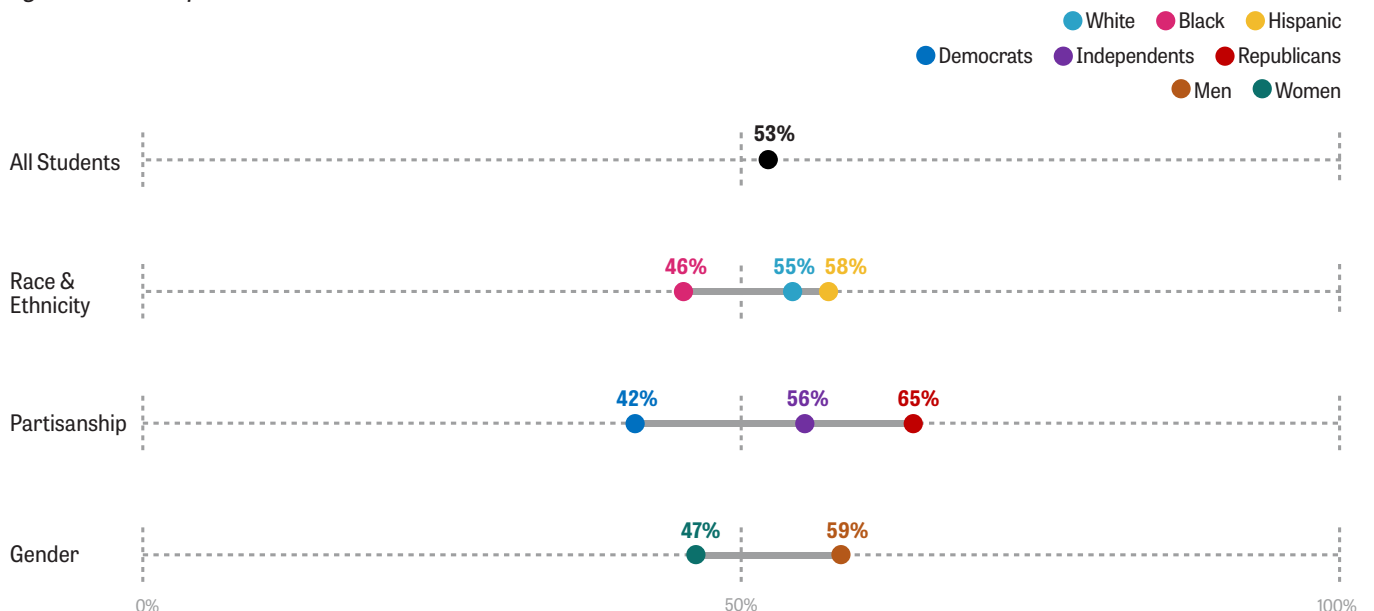
their right to free expression. However, partisanship is once again a confounding variable among white students—69% of white Republican students agree this is depriving people of their free expression rights, as opposed to 40% of white Democratic students who hold the same opinion.

### Social media policies on campus

Most students are unaware of whether their school has a policy on what students can say on social media (57% say they don't know). The remaining students are split; 19% say that their school does have a policy limiting social media speech, while 21% say it does not. There is little difference across partisanship or race or ethnicity on this, but four-year college students are slightly more likely to say that their school has a social media speech policy than two-year college students (20% vs. 15%).

## Over half believe that disinviting a speaker because of their views deprives people of their rights to free expression

Percent who believe a university disinviting a speaker to speak on campus because of their views is depriving people of their rights to free expression



Q30\_4. Are the following actions depriving people of their rights to free expression or not? - A university dis-inviting a speaker to speak on campus because of their views.  
Base: Half of students n=593

## CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT

College students hold freedom of speech in high regard but demonstrate an imperfect understanding of what speech is actually protected under the First Amendment. When it comes to interpretation of the First Amendment on certain events or social trends over the past year, views diverge along party lines. For instance, Democratic and Republican students strenuously disagree on whether the riot at the U.S. Capitol was a legitimate expression of people's free speech rights. Partisan opinion is similarly far apart around other politicized issues, such as whether former President Donald Trump being removed from his social media accounts deprived him of his free speech rights.

### College students' understanding of First Amendment protections varies

To further evaluate college students' understanding of the First Amendment, the Knight-Ipsos survey includes a series of true-false statements around specific protections encompassed by the First Amendment, to assess whether students are able to correctly identify each one as true or false. This analysis reveals that understanding of First

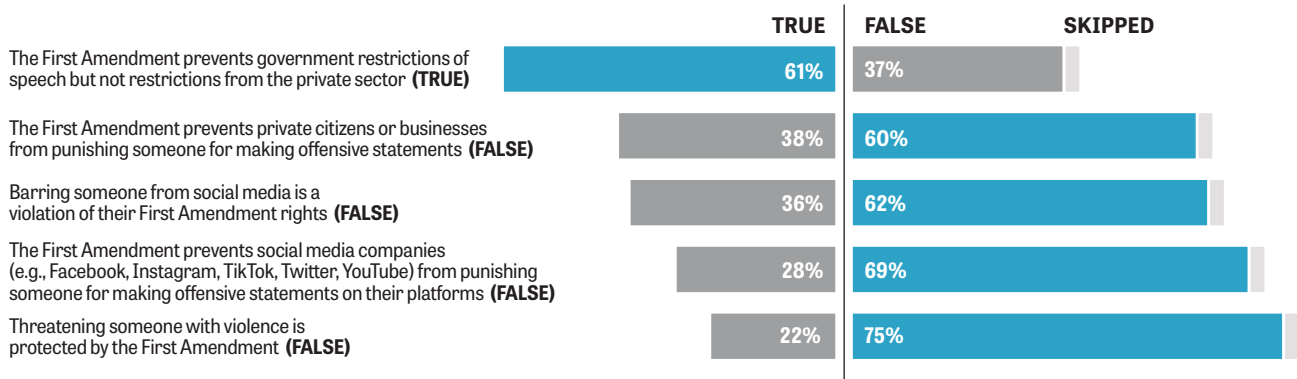
Amendment protections is imperfect and varies among college students depending on the issue. Even as this survey seeks to establish students' base understanding of these protections, the actual application of each of these scenarios, from a legal standpoint, can vary based on the specifics of the situation.

While a majority of students can correctly identify each true or false statement as such, relatively few students possess a full, comprehensive understanding of free speech protections. Across all items asked in the Knight-Ipsos survey, just 14% of all college students identified every statement correctly. However, the majority (62%) correctly answered at least four items.

College students are most likely to correctly identify that the First Amendment does not protect threats of violence (75% identify the statement "threatening someone with violence is protected by the First Amendment" as false). Fewer, 6 in 10, are aware that the First Amendment prevents government restrictions of speech but not private sector restrictions.

### College students demonstrate mixed understanding of First Amendment protections

To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?  
(Correct answer shaded in blue)



Q4. To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?  
Base: All students=1,023

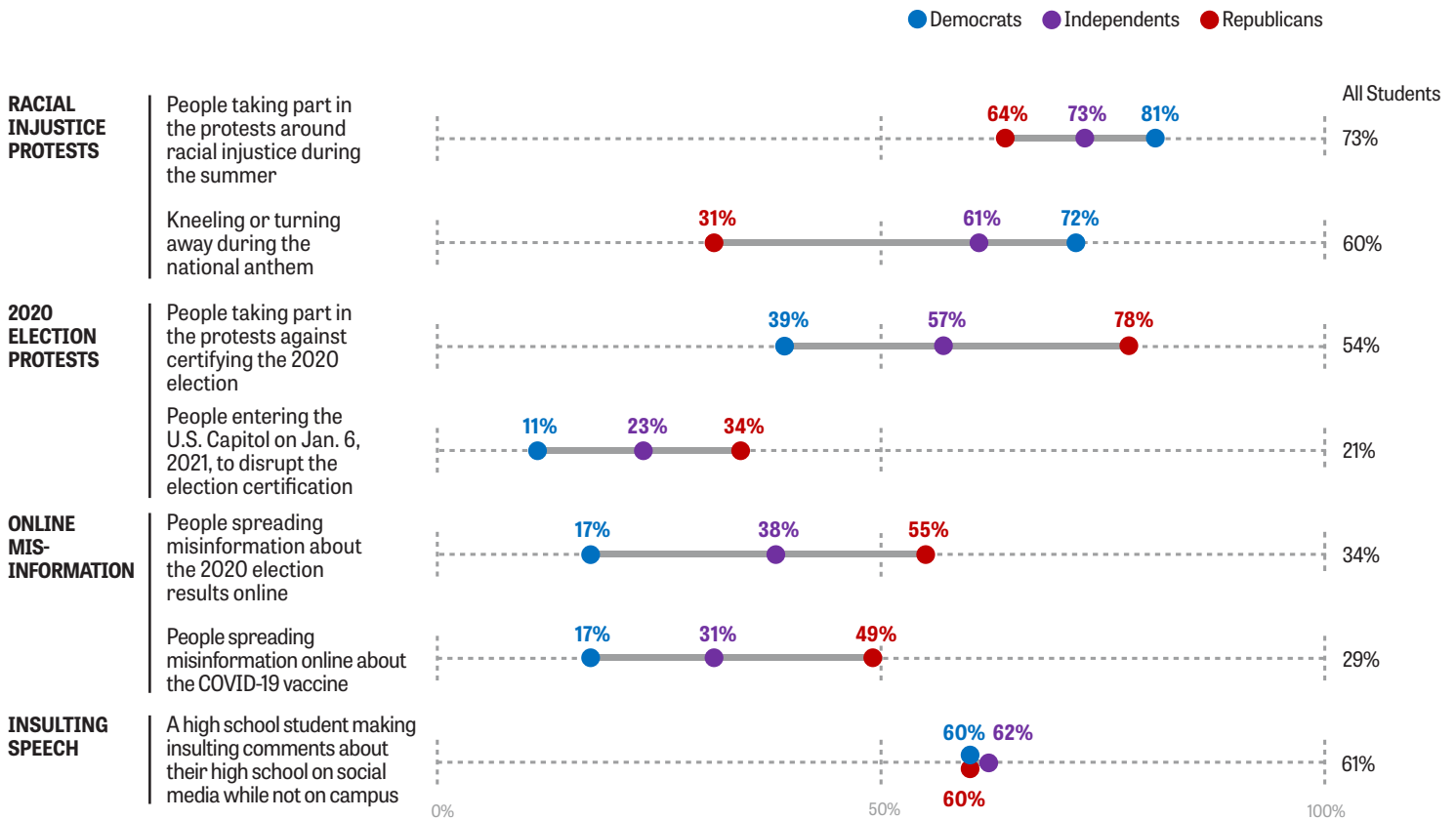
## On recent, politicized events, partisanship drives college students' views on what constitutes a legitimate exercise of First Amendment rights and right to free expression

The past few years saw the nation divided around the 2020 racial injustice protests, the coronavirus

pandemic, and the 2020 election. Partisanship is a significant driver of whether college students believe corollary events—such as the crowd entering the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, or the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 online—are legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights.

## Partisanship drives what college students believe constitutes a legitimate example of someone expressing their First Amendment rights

Percent who believe the following are legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights



Q29. Do you feel like the following are legitimate or not legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights? Base: "People taking part in the protests around racial injustice during the summer of 2020" n=605; "A high school student making insulting comments about their high school on social media while not on campus" n=627; "Kneeling or turning away during the national anthem" n=567; "People taking part in the protests against certifying the 2020 election" n=585; "People spreading misinformation about the 2020 election results online" n=567; "People spreading misinformation online about the COVID-19 vaccine" n=574; "People entering the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to disrupt the election certification" n=567



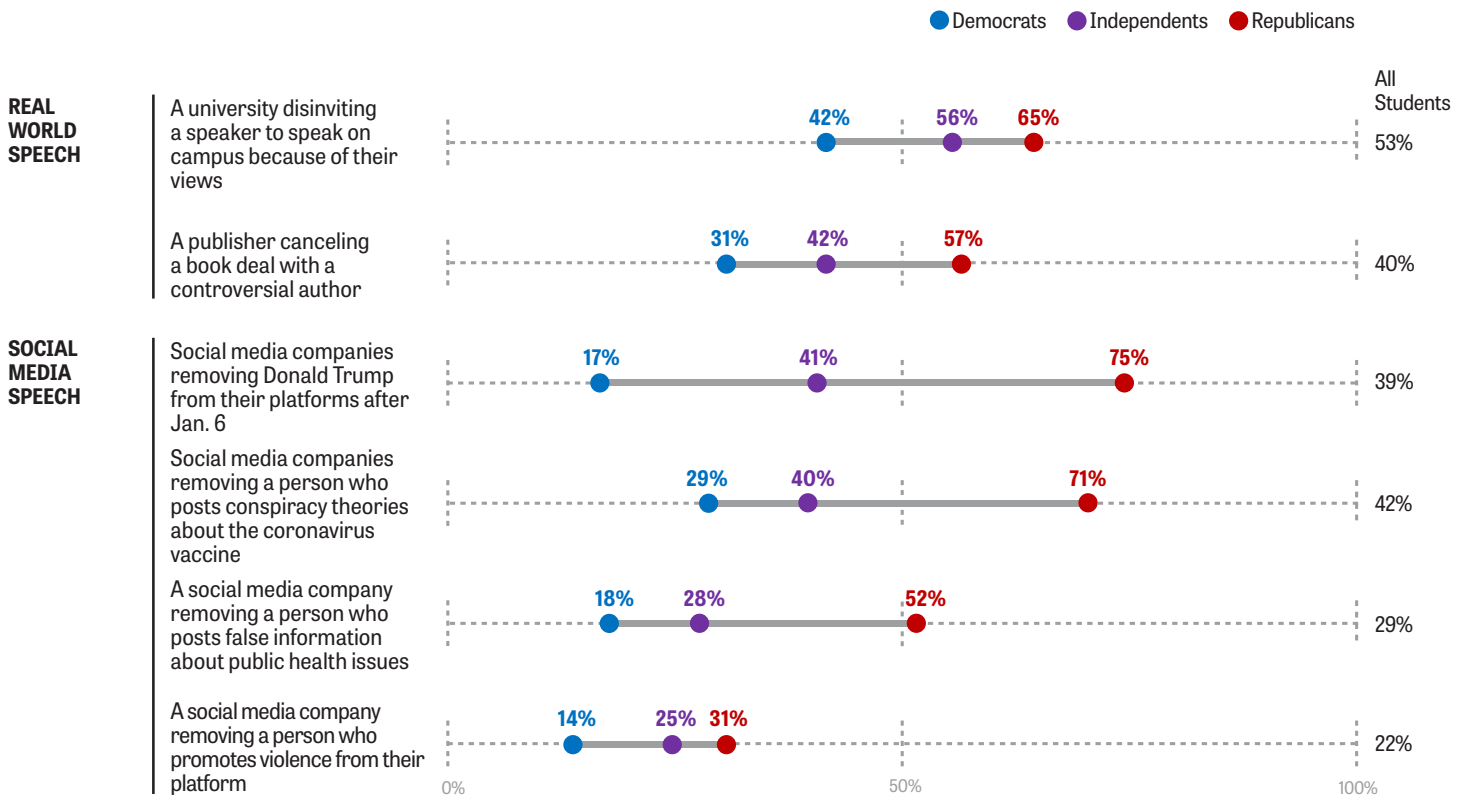
Partisan opinion coalesces around non-politicized events, underlining the extent to which political polarization influences perceptions of reality in America today. For instance, a majority across parties believe that a more neutral example of free speech, a high school student making insulting comments about their school on social media, is a legitimate expression of First Amendment rights.

Conversely, other more concrete examples concerning free expression evoke more politicized

responses among students. Partisans don't agree on whether Donald Trump's removal from social media platforms following the Jan. 6 attack at the Capitol was an infringement of free expression. This question produces a 58-point gap between Republicans and Democrats. Three in 4 Republicans feel this example deprives people of their right to free expression, while 17% of Democrats and 41% of independents agree.

### Partisanship divides students about what represents an infringement on individuals' free expression rights

Percent who believe the following are depriving people of their rights to free expression



Q30. Are the following actions depriving people of their rights to free expression or not? Base: "A university dis-inviting a speaker to speak on campus because of their views" n=593; "A publisher canceling a book deal with a controversial author" n=611; "Social media companies removing a person who posts conspiracy theories about the coronavirus vaccine" n=597; "Social media companies removing Donald Trump from their platforms after January 6" n=1,023; "A social media company removing a person who posts false information about public health issues" n=618; "A social media company removing a person who promotes violence from their platform" n=650



## VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Few students continue to feel that dialogue on social media is usually civil, and many agree that it is too easy for people to say things anonymously, a view that has held largely constant since these questions were first asked in 2016. Exploring attitudes on social media further, some groups of students are more concerned than others with how their speech on social media may harm them offline. Black and Hispanic students, along with Republicans and independents, are all more likely than white students and Democrats to worry about how their speech on social media may lead to government prosecution, impact their job prospects, or lead to their school disciplining them.

Yet, even as this is true, students disagree on whether speech on social media should err on the side of total

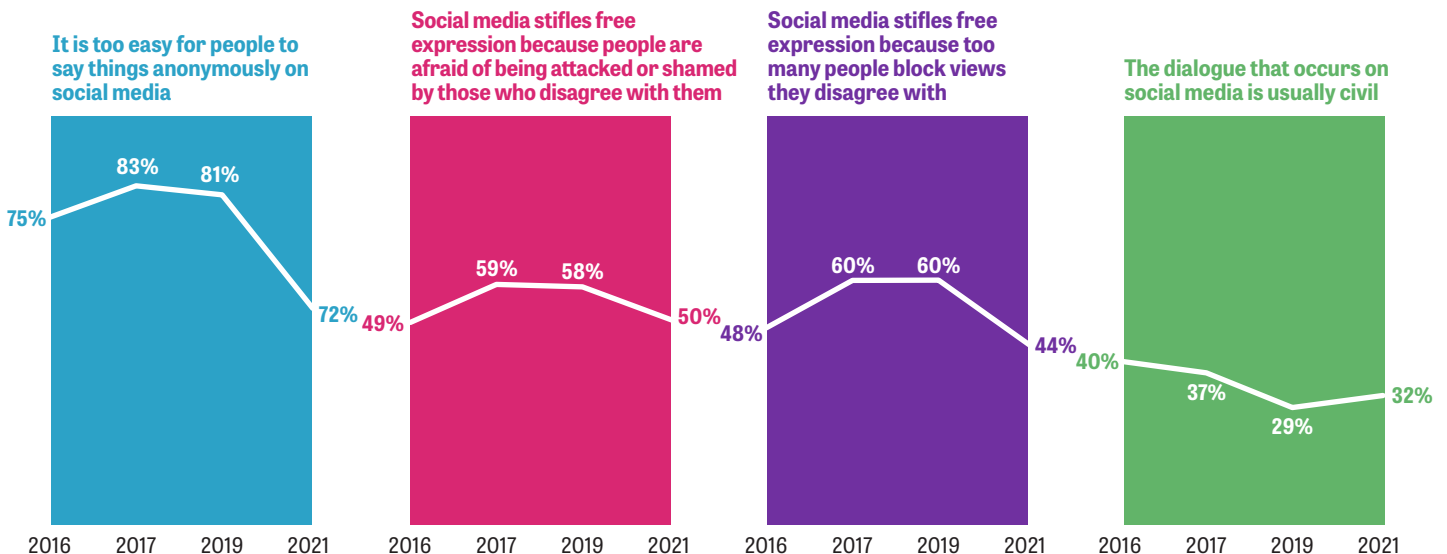
freedom or be guided by social norms or standards. Republicans and white students are more likely to feel people on social media should be able to freely express their views, even offensive ones, over having speech on social media be bounded by social norms or standards, which Democrats and Black students favor.

### Social media discourse is seen as uncivil; a slightly smaller share of students feel stifled

Few students feel that the dialogue on social media is usually civil, a view that has held constant since the last iteration of this survey. There's no difference by party affiliation or race on this question.

### While the dialogue on social media is seen as uncivil, a slightly smaller share of students feel stifled

Percent who strongly/somewhat agree with the following statements



Q26. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 Prior to 2021, respondents were not shown "No opinion" but could volunteer it as a response.  
 2021 base: One half of students were shown "It is too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media" n=521; "The dialogue that occurs on social media is usually civil" n=510; "Social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them" n=485; "Social media stifles free expression because too many people block views they disagree with" n=533  
 Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017, 2016

A majority of students (72%) also feel that it is too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media. Democrats (82%) are more likely than independents (64%) to feel this way, while views from Republicans (73%) are not significantly different from either group. There are no differences by race on this question.

Slightly fewer students report feeling stifled on social media than in years past. Half of students feel that social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them, down from 58% in 2019. Republicans (71%) are much more likely to feel this is the case than Democrats (46%) or independents (43%).

Additionally, a plurality (44%) believe that social media stifles free expression because too many people block views they disagree with. On this item, Republicans (59%) are also more likely to feel this is the case than Democrats (39%) or independents (42%). While more white students (46%) than

non-white students (38%) believe this as well, the difference is not statistically significant.

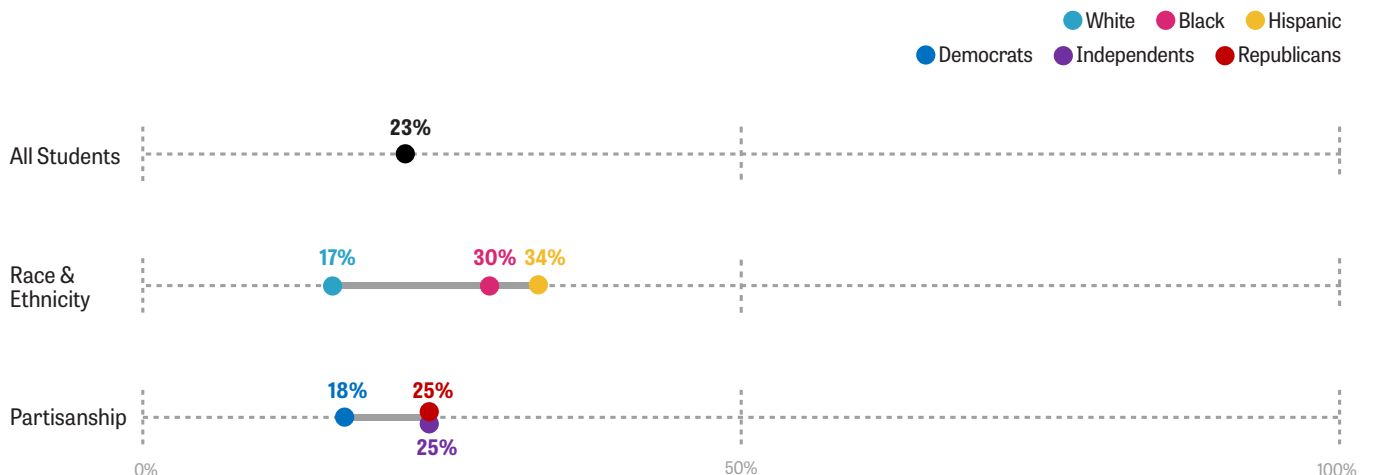
Any notable shifts in opinion from 2019 to 2021 must be contextualized with the inclusion of “No opinion” in the 2021 survey. The “No opinion” option appears to have had more of an impact on certain questions than others, most notably affecting affirmative responses to the statements “Social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them,” “Social media stifles free expression because too many people block views they disagree with,” and “It is too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media.”

### Certain groups are more concerned about the offline ramifications of speech on social media

Few students are concerned that what they say would lead to attacks or harassment, impact their

### Few worry about government prosecution from social media, though Black and Hispanic students feel this more acutely

Percent who are very/somewhat concerned that what they say or post on social media would result in government prosecution of them



Q42\_1. How concerned, if at all, are you that what you say or post on social media [would result in government prosecution of you]?  
Base: All students n=1,023

job prospects, or result in government prosecution. However, when breaking down opinion, race and partisanship play an important role in framing views on these questions.

Black and Hispanic students are much more concerned about how what they say on social media may lead to real-world harm for them. For white students, 17% are concerned that what they say on social media may result in government prosecution. Twice as many Black and Hispanic students have the same fear, with 34% of Hispanic students and 30% of Black students worrying about the same thing. When it comes to partisanship, independents and Republicans are more likely than Democrats to fear that social media activity will lead to government prosecution of them.

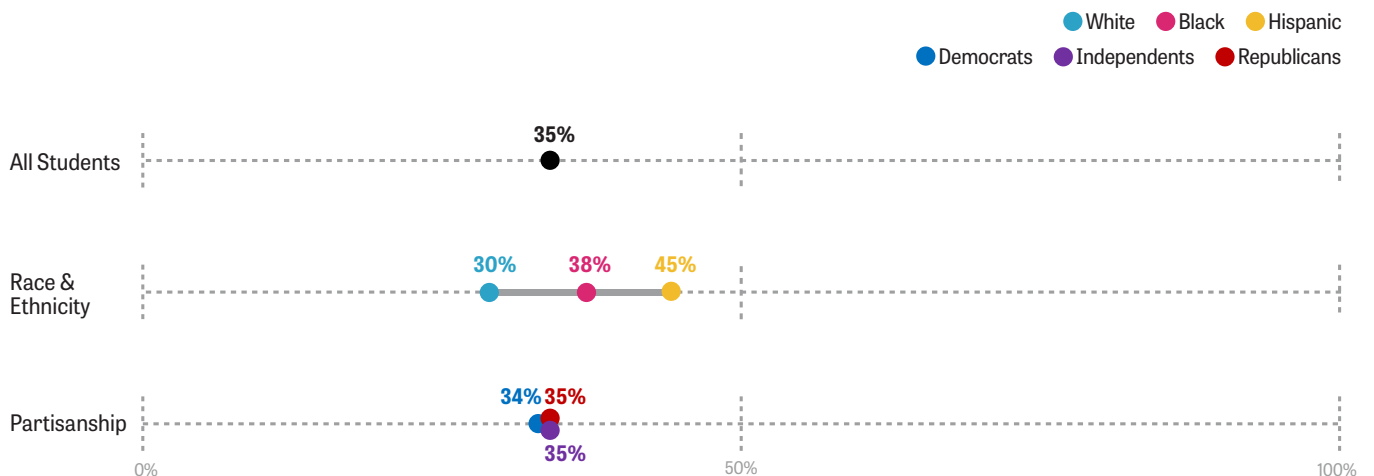
Beyond concerns about repercussions from the government, Black and Hispanic respondents are

also more likely to feel that what they say on social media could impact their job prospects or result in school administrators disciplining them, far ahead of white students on these questions. Similarly, Republicans (32%) and independents (31%) are more likely than Democrats (22%) to feel that their social media activity would result in school administrators disciplining them.

Few also feel that their social media activity would lead to attacks or harassment offline, with the notable exception of Hispanic students, close to half of whom are concerned that what they say on social media could result in attacks or harassment (45%). This puts them 15 points ahead of white students (who are least likely to be concerned about this) on this item. While there are notable differences by race on this question, there is no significant difference by party affiliation.

### Just 1 in 3 students are worried that their social media activity would lead to attacks or harassment

Percent who are very/somewhat concerned that what they say or post on social media would lead to attacks or harassment



Q42\_3. How concerned, if at all, are you that what you say or post on social media [would lead to attacks or harassment]?  
Base: All students n=1,023

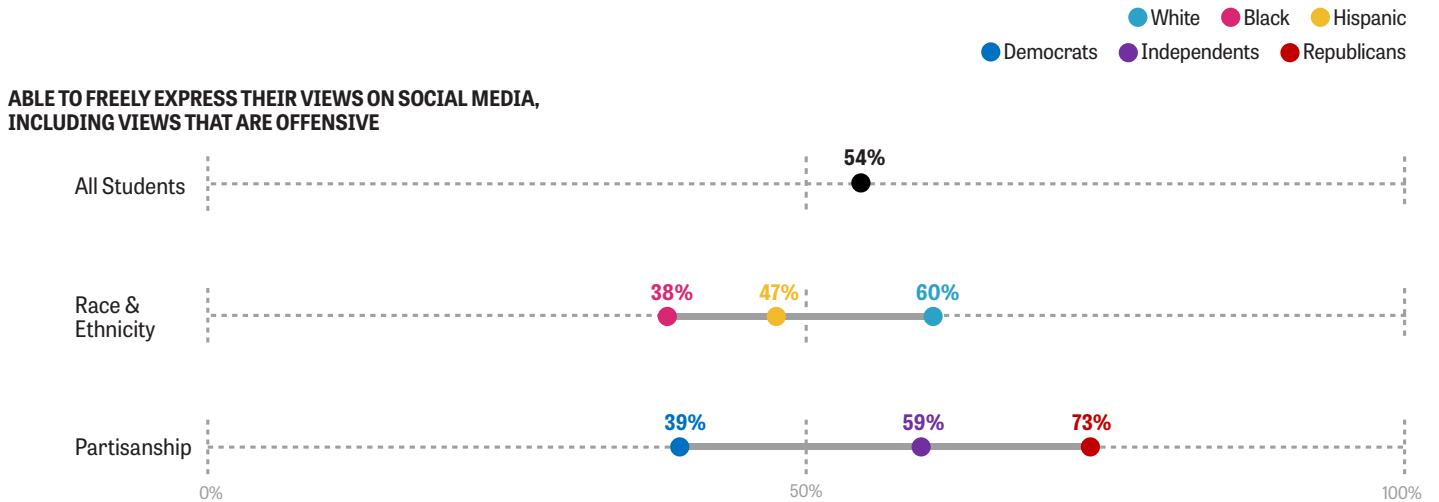
## Students split on question of free speech on social media

When given the choice, students are more likely (54%) to feel that people should be able to freely express their views on social media, including offensive views. Fewer students (43%) believe that people should be restricted in what they can say on social media by societal norms or standards of what is fair or appropriate.

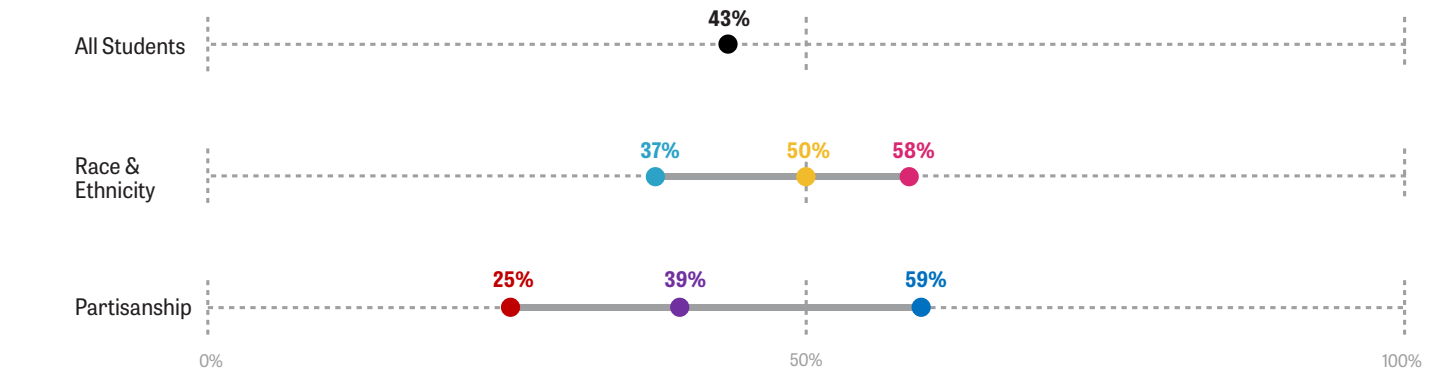
Majorities of white (60%), Republican (73%), and independent (59%) students are more likely to believe that people should be able to freely express their views on social media, including ones that are offensive. Conversely, most Black (58%) and Democratic (59%) students feel that speech on social media should be restricted by norms or standards of what is fair or appropriate. Hispanic students are evenly split on this trade-off.

## A majority of students feel people should be able to freely express their views on social media, even if they are offensive

Percent who feel that the following statements come closer to their views on social media that people should be:



### RESTRICTED IN WHAT THEY CAN SAY ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY SOCIETAL NORMS OR STANDARDS OF WHAT IS FAIR OR APPROPRIATE



Q24. Which statement comes closer to your view about social media?  
Base: All n= 1,023

Among the 43% who feel that social media should be restricted by societal norms, students favor the private sector moderating content on social media. A majority of this subgroup supports social media companies (55%) acting in that role. Other private entities, like the social media user community, moderators of groups or forums, independent fact-checking organizations, or an independent oversight board win much less support from students, with none gaining majority support. Even fewer students feel the government is best suited to take on this role, with just 1 in 5 (18%) feeling this way.

### Students agree that social media companies should be active in monitoring speech on their platforms

Perhaps because students feel that social media companies are best positioned to moderate content on social media, many agree that these companies should take an active role in monitoring speech on their platforms.

Three in 5 agree that social media companies should be doing this. More Democrats (79%) than Republicans (43%) or independents (57%) feel that

social media companies should take an active role in monitoring speech on their platforms, with no difference by race. As shown below, Democrats are also the ones more likely to favor restricting views on social media by societal norms, rather than people being able to freely express their views, including those that may be offensive.

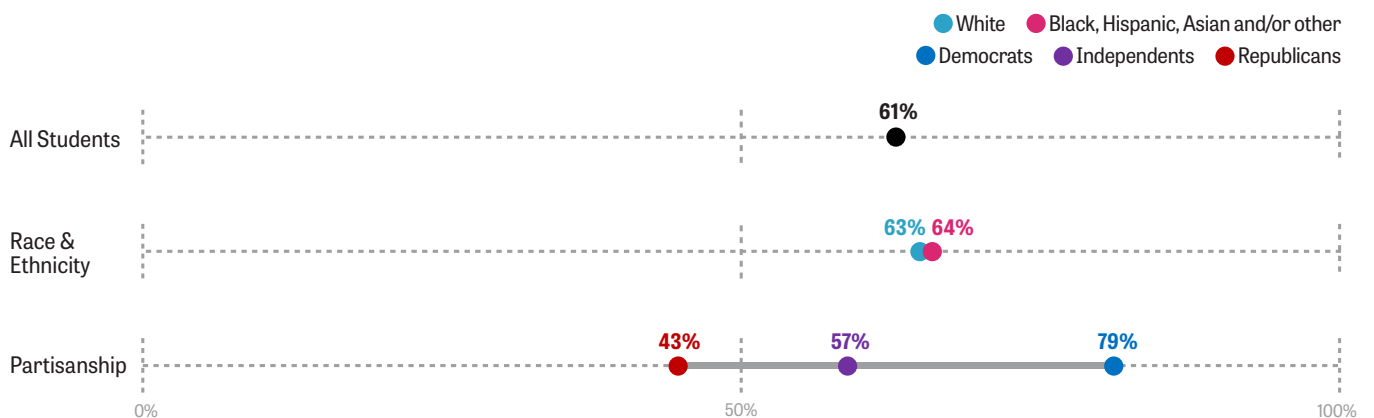
### A plurality feel that the government should not allow people to sue social media companies over harmful content

A plurality of students (41%) oppose the government allowing people to directly sue social media companies for content they believe causes them harm, down from 64% in 2019. Just 27% support this, down from 36% in 2019. There is no difference by party affiliation on this question, but there is by race/ethnicity. White students (49%) are more likely to oppose the government allowing people to sue social media companies than Black (32%) or Hispanic (34%) students.

The change among both groups may be attributable to the “No opinion” option given to respondents in the most recent wave of the survey, something that was not provided in earlier iterations.

### Democrats are more supportive of social media companies taking an active role in monitoring speech on platforms

Percent who agree social media companies should take an active role in monitoring speech on their platforms



Q26\_5. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Social media companies should take an active role in monitoring speech on their platforms.  
Base: Half of students n=499

## STUDENT EXPRESSION AND ACTIVISM

2020 was marked by a presidential election and a groundswell of protests against racial injustice. Many Americans took to the streets or digital forums to make their voices heard. Approximately 1 in 3 students report taking part in some form of activism over the past year, while fewer report sharing or discussing news online.

### One in 3 students called to activism in the past year

One in 3 students (32%) report having engaged in some form of activism over the past year, whether that be participating in a protest, march or rally; contacting an elected official; attending a public meeting; or donating to political campaigns or causes. More specifically, 17% said they attended a public meeting, 16% contacted an elected official, 15% took part in a protest and 12% donated to political campaigns or causes. This comes as fewer students express confidence that the right to protest—understood as both the right to assembly and the right to petition the government—is secure.

### Fewer students are sharing and discussing news online

As previously discussed, given the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the traditionally in-person classroom went digital during the pandemic. How students navigate online spaces, speech, and their virtual college experience is now more important to understand than ever.

Interestingly, the number of students who turn to social media to share and discuss news is declining, in keeping with broader social media use trends seen in the Knight-Ipsos survey and other research. According to a [Pew Research Center analysis](#), YouTube and Reddit were the only platforms whose user bases grew in a statistically meaningful sense from 2019 to 2020. People under 30, meanwhile, are most likely to be on photo- and video-sharing apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which lack a strong news-sharing emphasis.

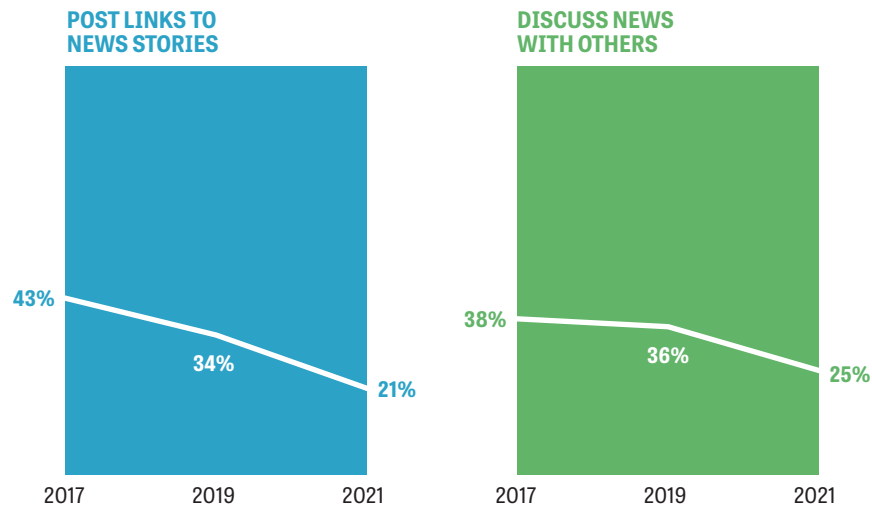
The Knight-Ipsos report finds 1 in 5 students say they often or sometimes post news links on social media, down from 1 in 3 in 2019 and 2 in 5 (43%) in 2017. Also, in keeping with broader trends uncovered by Pew, Democratic-leaning student groups report being more active online. According to the Knight-Ipsos survey, Black students (23%) and Democrats (15%) are more likely to post links at least sometimes to social media than white (15%), Republican (10%), or independent (15%) students.

Following a similar trend, fewer college students discuss the news with other users on social media. Only 1 in 4 do so now, while 36% did so in 2019 and 38% of college students reported doing so four years ago. Black students are slightly more likely to often or sometimes discuss news with others

on social media than white students (29% vs. 24%). There are no meaningful differences among partisans on this question. Around 1 in 4 Democrats (27%) and independents (25%), and more than 1 in 5 Republicans (21%), report discussing news with others.

### Fewer students use social media for sharing, discussing news

Percent who report doing the below often or sometimes on social media\*



Q34. How often do you do each of the following on social media?

\*In 2019 question was: "How often do you do each of the following on social media, including Facebook® and Twitter®—often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?"

2021 base: All students n=1,023

Knight-Gallup, 2019, 2017



## COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

As a group, college student views do not diverge substantially from those of the general public. Like students, the general adult population holds free expression as a central value, but less than half of the public believes free speech rights are secure in America today. Distinctive views emerge among the broader population when divided by partisanship, race, and ethnicity, reflecting similar splits in perspectives across these groups in the college student population.

As the chart below shows, a majority of students and the general population alike agree that free speech rights are central to our democracy.

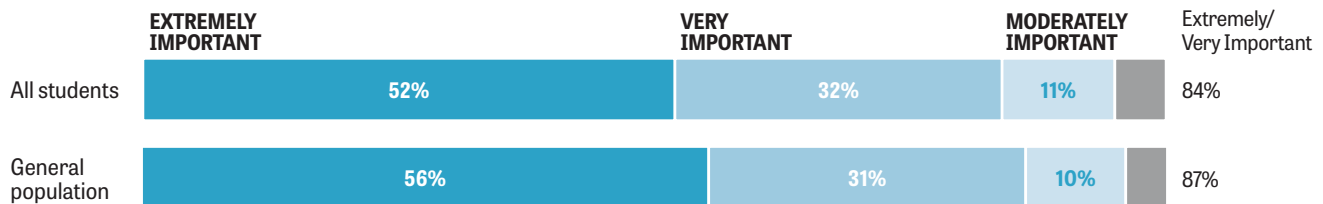
Although students and the general public agree on the intrinsic value of the First Amendment, not everyone feels equally protected by it. Much like students, a strong majority of the broader population (87%, compared with 84% of students) feel the First Amendment protects people like them, but there are important differences by race and ethnicity.

Black Americans (61%) are less likely to feel the First Amendment protects people like them than white (89%) or Hispanic Americans (81%). Strikingly, Black students (51%) are even less likely to feel protected than the overall Black population, or than their white (89%) or Hispanic student counterparts (83%). Despite the small sample size of Black student respondents for this question (fewer than 100), the differences are significant and meaningful.

Although many Americans feel individually protected by the First Amendment, less than half of the general public (45%) and students (47%) feel that freedom of speech is secure today. There are no significant differences by race on this question. Differences are pronounced when examining views by party affiliation, but student partisans closely mirror views held by their general population counterparts. For example, more Democrats (61% of students, 61% of general population) feel that these rights are secure, while fewer Republicans (27% of students, 28% among broader public) and independents feel the same (46% of students, 43% of general population).

### A majority of students and adults agree that free speech rights are important in our democracy

*How important do you consider citizens' free speech rights to be in our democracy?*



Q20. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?  
2021 base: One-third of students and adults were shown "Citizens' free speech rights," Students n=333; Adults n= 1,465

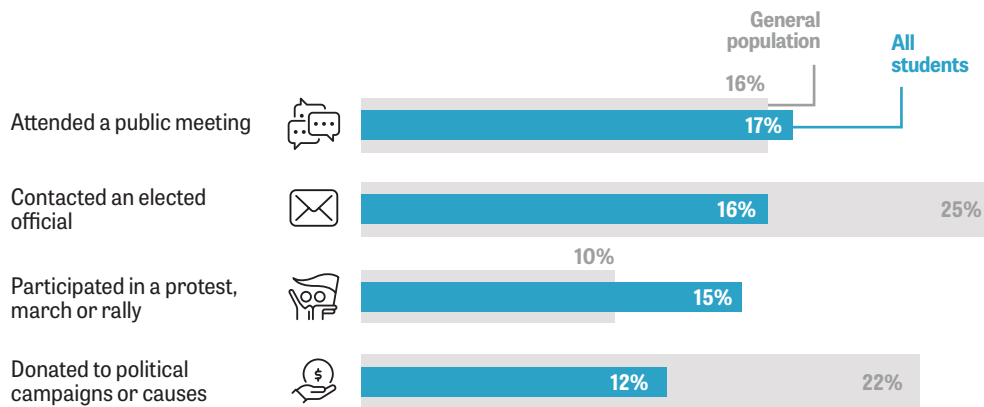


When it comes to political involvement, current levels of student activism put them nearly in line with the broader population: 38% of all adults and 32% of students say they have done at least one activity listed in the survey, like attending a protest, donating to a political campaign or calling an elected official.

However, student activism looks slightly different from that of the general public. The latter are more likely to have donated to a campaign or to have contacted an elected official. Students are slightly more likely to have participated in a protest, march or rally.

### Levels of activism are similar across adult population and college students

Percent who have done the following in the past year



Q33. Have you done the following in the last year?  
Base: All students n=1,023; All adults n=4,366

## CONCLUSION

As centers of learning and inquiry, college and university campuses have always been at the forefront of societal debates around free speech and freedom of expression. Yet free speech has taken on heightened significance in our post-2020 landscape as the nation continues to wrestle with misinformation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic and the 2020 election. Earlier examinations of college free speech often centered on campus-specific issues, like controversial speaker visits or the creation of safe spaces. In today's context, it is essential to take a whole-of-society view.

As the latest Knight-Ipsos report finds, college students are increasingly uneasy about the state of free expression today, both on and off campus. Fewer students believe that free speech is secure in America today, while more say that their school's climate limits people from saying what they truly believe, as compared with 2016. Crucially, when college student views are set in context with those of the general adult population, it is evident that as a group, college students have the same values and priorities as all Americans. The cleavages dividing America writ large—principally partisanship and race—are also what divide college students.

This suggests that campus disagreements about what forms of speech should be permitted, what should be prohibited, and what constitutes a true threat are really a microcosm of other arguments playing out across American society. On campus, these debates map to the unique contours of college life, manifesting in protests around public visits to campus from speakers who bear a message that is considered racist or biased, or in moves to create safe spaces on campus free of threatening language or ideas.

While there have been many instances of conflict around free expression on college campuses today, free speech advocates should take note that many students continue to oppose direct limits to speech, such as speech codes regulating what can be said on campus. Additionally, a majority still believe students should be exposed to all forms of ideas and expression, even those they may find objectionable.

Like many Americans, a large majority of students continue to recognize the importance of free speech as a central value in American society, albeit one that is seen to be increasingly imperiled.

## METHODOLOGY

This Ipsos poll was conducted July 30-August 16, 2021, by Ipsos using the KnowledgePanel® on behalf of Knight Foundation. This poll is based on a representative sample of 4,366 U.S. adults, age 18 or older, with oversamples among Non-Hispanic Black/African Americans, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islanders, Non-Hispanic Other/2 plus races, and Hispanics.

A supplemental sample of 942 additional current college students age 18-24, enrolled in all types of higher education institutions, was collected at the same time; this resulted in a total of 1,023 college students age 18-24 altogether, from the augment and main sample of adults 18+. To collect additional completed interviews among 18- to 24-year-olds, an additional sample of 18- to 24-year-old KnowledgePanel members were selected for this study. KnowledgePanelists were also asked if another member of their household was 18 to 24 years old and, where eligible, a second member of the household completed the survey.

The study was conducted in both English and Spanish. The data for the main adult sample were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, census region, metropolitan status, language proficiency, gender by age by race/ethnicity, education by race/ethnicity, and census region by race/ethnicity. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) from the U.S. Census Bureau except for metropolitan status, which came from the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS). The weighting categories were as follows:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+)
- Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School Grad, Some College, Bachelor or Higher)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$149,999, \$150,000 and over)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Language Proficiency (English Proficient Hispanic, Bilingual Hispanic, Spanish Proficient Hispanic, Non-Hispanic)
- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-44, 45+) by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic,)
- Education (Some College or Less, Bachelor or Higher) by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)

Because benchmarks for current college students (including recent graduates and rising first-year students) are not available from the ACS or the CPS, benchmarks for this augment sample were derived from the KnowledgePanel sample. All 18- to 24-year-old KnowledgePanelists were weighted to ACS and CPS benchmarks to secure benchmarks for the qualified subset. The weighting categories for college students were as follows:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-21, 22-24)
- Education (Some College or Less, Bachelor or Higher)
- Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Household Income (Under \$50,000, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000 and over)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West)

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on current college students age 18-24. Margin of error is greater among subgroups. The margin of error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.14 for students. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded off 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.

[Prior data](#) cited from Knight-Gallup surveys from 2016, 2017, and 2019 represent college students enrolled in four-year institutions only, including oversamples among certain historically Black colleges and universities, and were conducted using a different sampling methodology.