



campus expression survey

Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Issues on Campus: Raw Numbers from the 2023 Campus Expression Survey

Authors: Payton Jones and Alexander Arnold



April 2024

heterodox  academy

What is the Campus Expression Survey?

The 2023 Campus Expression Survey (CES) asks undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities in the US about different facets of their experience relevant to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. Heterodox Academy has been surveying students on topics of free expression since 2019. Learn more [on our website](#).

In this research brief, we describe what the 2023 CES data tell us about the number of

college students in the US who might be reluctant to discuss controversial topics in the classroom.



A Core Mission of Higher Education is Fostering Open Discussion – Especially of Controversial Topics



University and college missions statements are replete with claims that they aim to

embrace “freedom of ideas, inquiry, and expression” (University of Rochester), “guarantee the freedom of inquiry required by rigorous thinking and the quest for truth” (Fordham University), affirm a “historical commitment to academic freedom and open inquiry” (Southern Methodist University), and “include a commitment to...free inquiry” (Princeton University). However, if high proportions of students feel reluctant to discuss controversial issues, universities and colleges should be concerned about how well they are pursuing their missions.

But, Data Show That Many Students Are Reluctant to Discuss Controversial Topics

Many students are at least somewhat reluctant to discuss numerous controversial topics, with 47% of CES respondents being reluctant to discuss Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 45% being reluctant to discuss politics, 42% being reluctant to discuss trans identity; 33% being reluctant to discuss abortion in classroom contexts, and 30% being reluctant to discuss religion, in courses where such topics are relevant. For the sake of comparison, just over 15% of respondents reported reluctance to discuss a *typical* topic for

college courses being taken; this means that **the number of students who reported at least some reluctance to discuss a topic was up to 200% higher in the case of the most controversial topics, relative to a typical course topic.**

Just over 79% of our survey respondents reported being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss, ask questions about, or share their ideas on at least one of the controversial topics asked about on the CES.

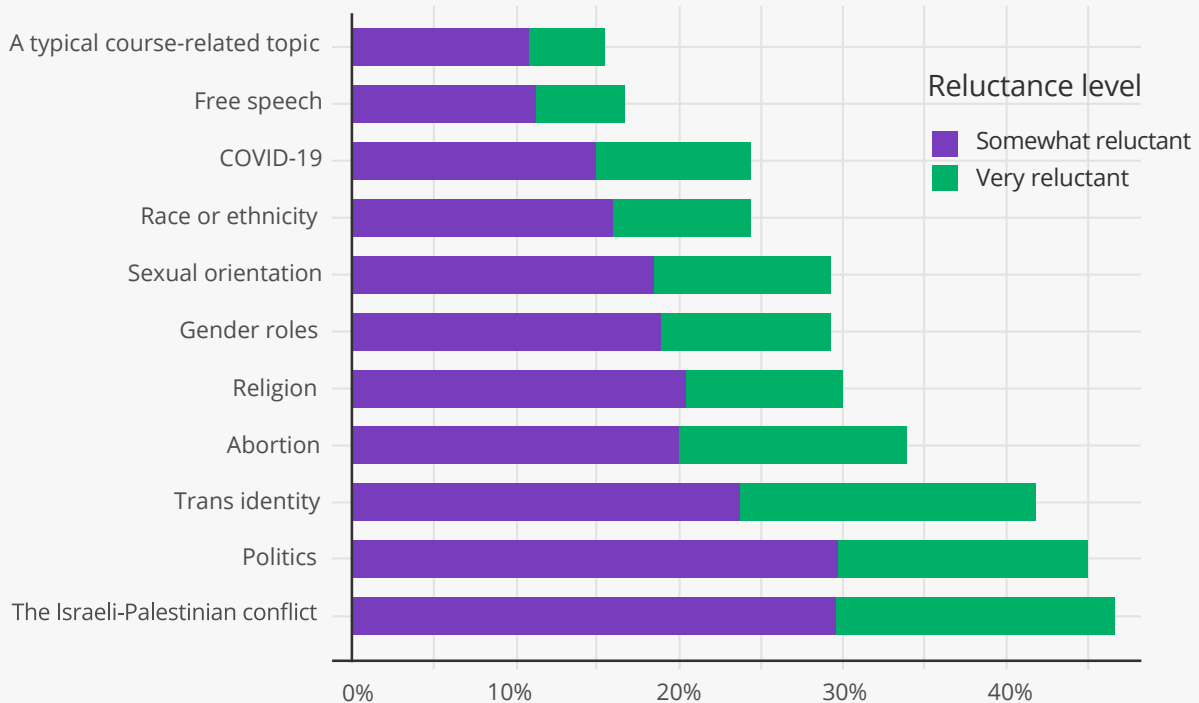


Figure 1. Percent of students who selected “somewhat reluctant” or “very reluctant” when asked, “How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about discussing YOUR HONEST THOUGHTS, IDEAS, AND QUESTIONS on each topic?”; N = 4,730

Students' Reluctance Doesn't Vary by Class Standing

Does how long respondents have been in school make them more comfortable discussing controversial topics, perhaps because college teaches them how to have difficult discussions? The 2023 CES data suggest this isn't the case. We compared first-year students to students who've been

in college longer and saw that the proportion of students reporting reluctance to engage in inquiry about complex and controversial issues remains more or less steady—there were no statistically significant differences relative to years a respondent has been in college.

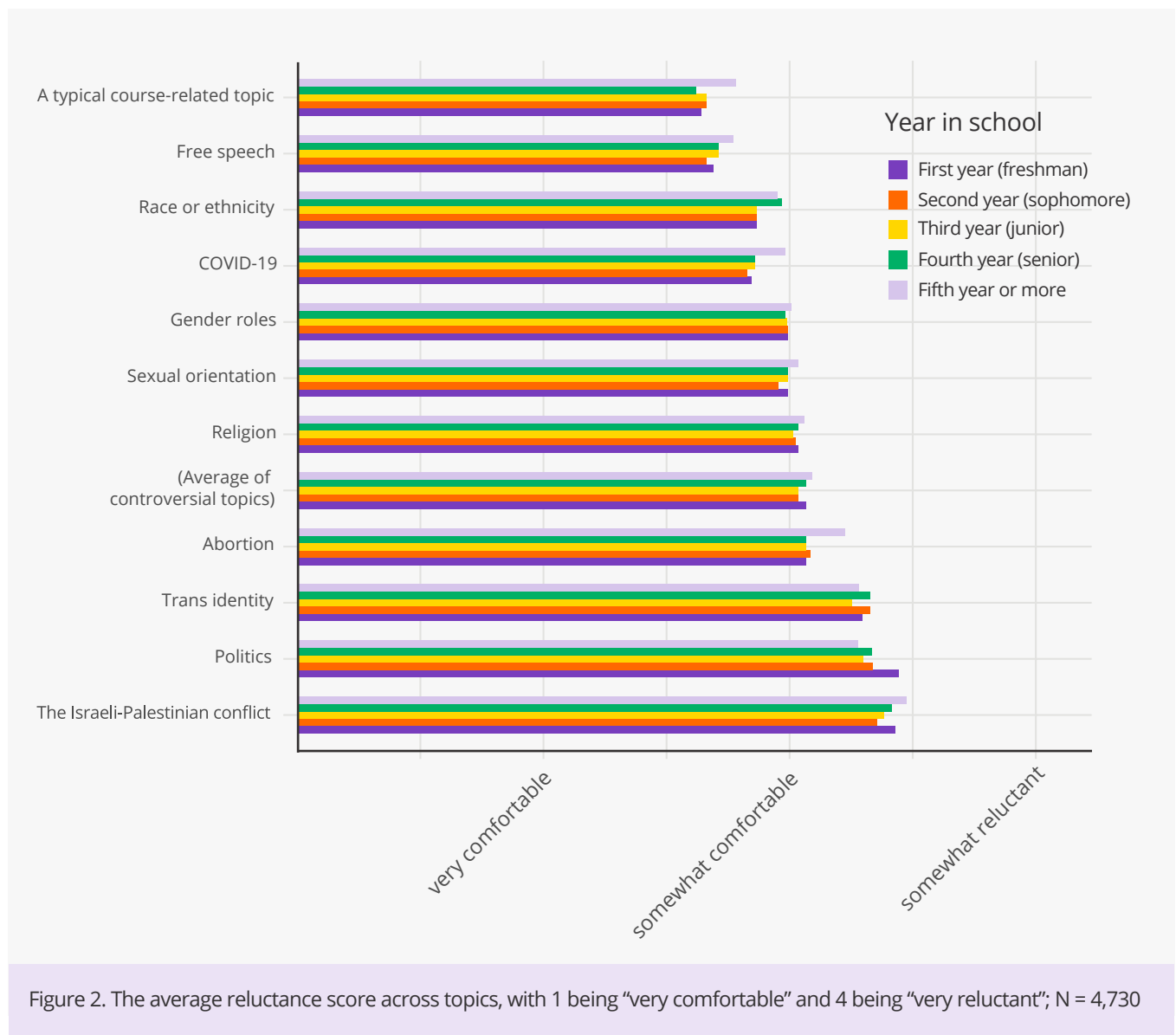


Figure 2. The average reluctance score across topics, with 1 being "very comfortable" and 4 being "very reluctant"; N = 4,730

Institutions of Higher Education Need to Improve Campus Climate on Controversial Topics

The CES data about the proportion of students who report reluctance to discuss controversial issues represents both a challenge and opportunity for leaders in higher education. The challenge is to create an environment where students feel comfortable engaging with difficult topics, while the opportunity lies in equipping them with the skills to navigate complex discussions and come to reasoned convictions. By fostering a culture of open inquiry and respectful dialogue, institutions can help students develop knowledge and habits of

thought to prepare them for the diverse perspectives they will encounter in their personal and professional lives.



About the Sample

The 2023 CES surveyed a nationally representative convenience sample of full-time college undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities within the US from November 14, 2023 through December 30, 2023. Survey respondents were recruited online using stratified sampling via CloudResearch.

At the close of the survey period, we received responses from 5,009 survey takers. After removing incomplete or potentially suspicious

responses, we restricted our analyses to data from 4,730 respondents. This more than triples the responses of past CES administrations, which may improve the statistical power of our analysis's inferences, especially in examining subgroups in our sample. Research reports derived from the CES are exploratory and descriptive in nature.

For full details about the 2023 CES sample, [see our detailed appendix on our website.](#)



About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy (HxA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization consisting of over 6,800 members of faculty, staff, and students from around the world who advocate for preserving and promoting the values of open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher education and research. If you are interested in supporting our mission, [become a member](#) or [make a donation](#) to support our work. If you want to stay up-to-date on HxA news, the latest HxA content, or upcoming HxA events, [subscribe to our](#) emails.

Acknowledgments

This data collection project and associated report were made possible in part by the support of a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this report are those of Heterodox Academy alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Templeton Religion Trust, its officers, or its staff.

Availability of Data and Analysis Code

We welcome discussion of the CES data and results. To make this easy, HxA makes the direct survey response data and the analysis code used to write reports about the 2023 CES publicly available on its website. For further details about the 2023 CES, [please see our writeup of its data and methods](#).

Report Citation

Jones, P. and Arnold, A. (2024). *Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Issues on Campus: Raw Numbers from the 2023 Campus Expression Survey*. Heterodox Academy.