

The Comfortable Extremes and the Reluctant Center:

Political Ideology and Discussing Controversial Topics on Campus

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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 and open inquiry since 2019.

Learn more about the CES on [our website](#).

In this research brief, we look at how students' political ideology relates to their willingness or reluctance to discuss controversial issues in the classroom.



Left-Leaning Students Are More Comfortable Discussing Controversial Topics Than Right-Leaning Students

Left-leaning respondents are, on average across all ten controversial topics the CES surveyed respondents on, 6.2% more comfortable engaging in discussions on controversial topics. This difference remained statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) after controlling for gender, personality, and reluctance to discuss typical course-related topics; the direction was consistent for all but one controversial topic. The topics which were significantly different between the two groups were trans identity ($\beta = 0.163$), abortion ($\beta = 0.198$), religion ($\beta = -0.082$), gender roles ($\beta = 0.114$), and COVID ($\beta = 0.113$).

The only topic that right-leaning students were more comfortable than left-leaning students discussing was religion.

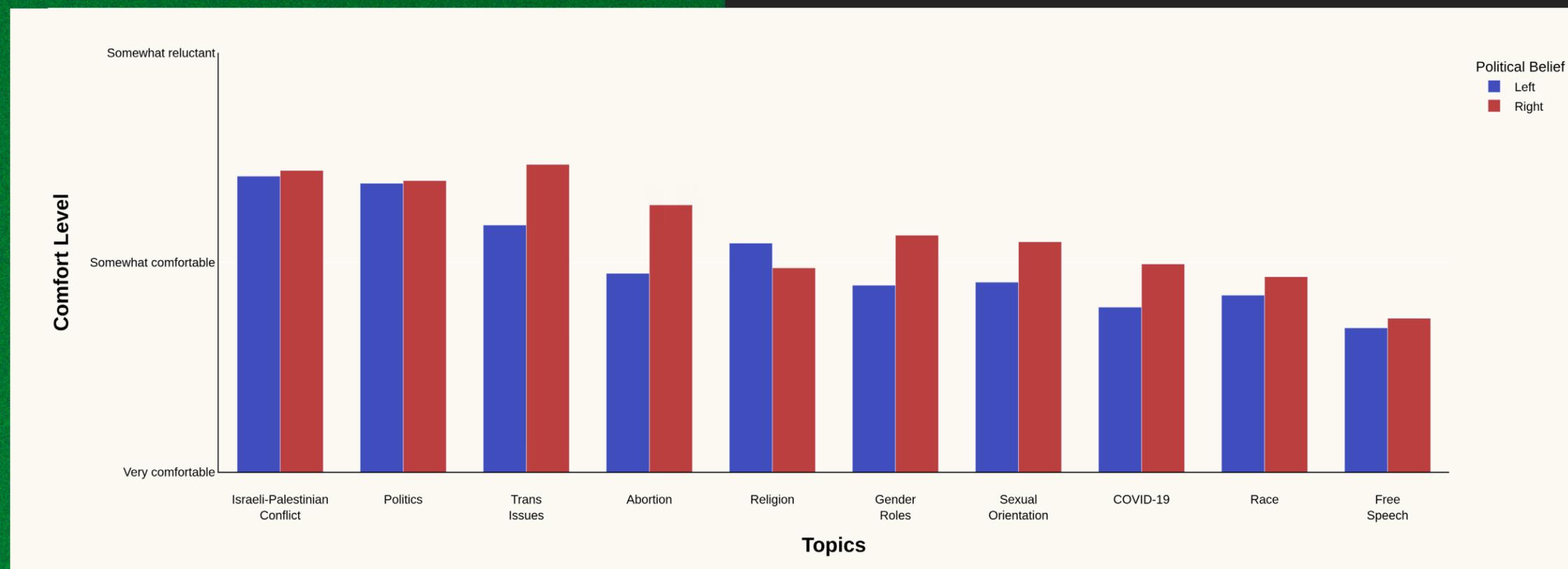


Figure 1. Average student reluctance by self-reported political belief across 10 contentious topics; $N = 4,730$.

Students Who Lean More Strongly to the Right or Left are More Comfortable Discussing Controversial Topics than are Students in the Center

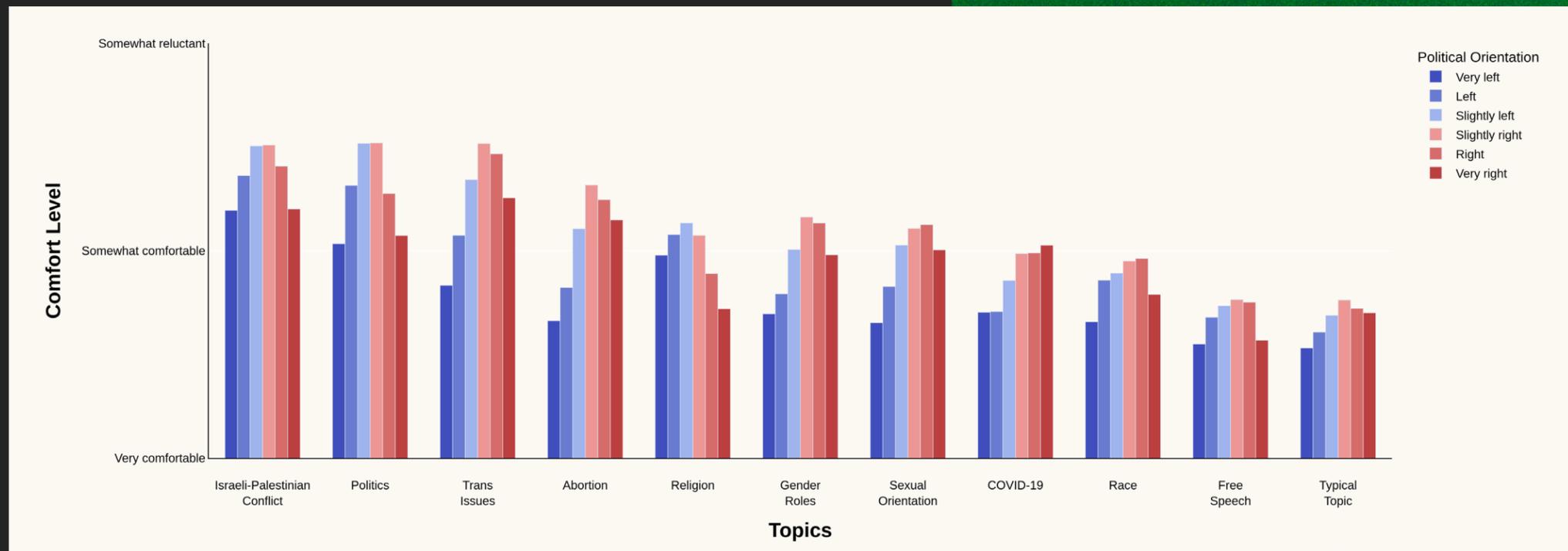


Figure 2. Average student reluctance by self-reported political orientation across 10 contentious topics; N = 4,730.

While left-leaning students in our sample seem to be slightly more comfortable discussing controversial topics, the CES data also reveal a further interesting trend about the relationship between political orientation and reluctance to discuss controversial topics. After controlling for gender, personality, reluctance to talk about a typical course topic, and the linear effect of political orientation, we found that **the more strongly respondents described themselves as left or right-wing, the more comfortable they seem to be discussing controversial topics**. In technical terms, there is a quadratic relationship between the extremity of one's ideological affiliation and the degree of reluctance to discuss a given controversial issue.

Respondents who described themselves as “very left” or “very right” were most comfortable discussing controversial topics (even though those describing themselves as “very left” were slightly more comfortable than those describing themselves as “very right” on the political spectrum). Respondents describing their political orientation in less extreme terms displayed more reluctance.

If this quadratic relationship between the intensity of students' ideological affiliation and students' comfort or reluctance holds for the general population of college undergraduates, then there is reason for concern. Recent research in political and social psychology suggests that **extreme political partisanship is related to cognitive inflexibility, absolute certainty, ideological prejudice, and distorted confidence in one's own opinions**. If only the most ideologically extreme students are willing to discuss controversial topics on campus, then the quality of discussion is likely to suffer. Extreme partisans may be more prone to confirmation bias, less open to considering alternative viewpoints, and more likely to engage in motivated reasoning, leading discussions to degenerate into echo chambers rather than genuine exchanges of ideas. To foster a healthy campus climate, it may be necessary to find ways to dampen the negative effects that extreme ideological commitment has on discussion, and encourage the sharing of questions, ideas, and perspectives from more moderate students.

About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy (HxA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization consisting of over 7,300 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

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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

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