

**Campus
Expression
Survey**

NOVEMBER
2024



The State of Open Inquiry in Canadian Colleges and Universities

2024 Canadian Campus Expression Survey

authors: ERIN SHAW, NATE TENHUNDFELD, AND ALEX ARNOLD

heterodox academy

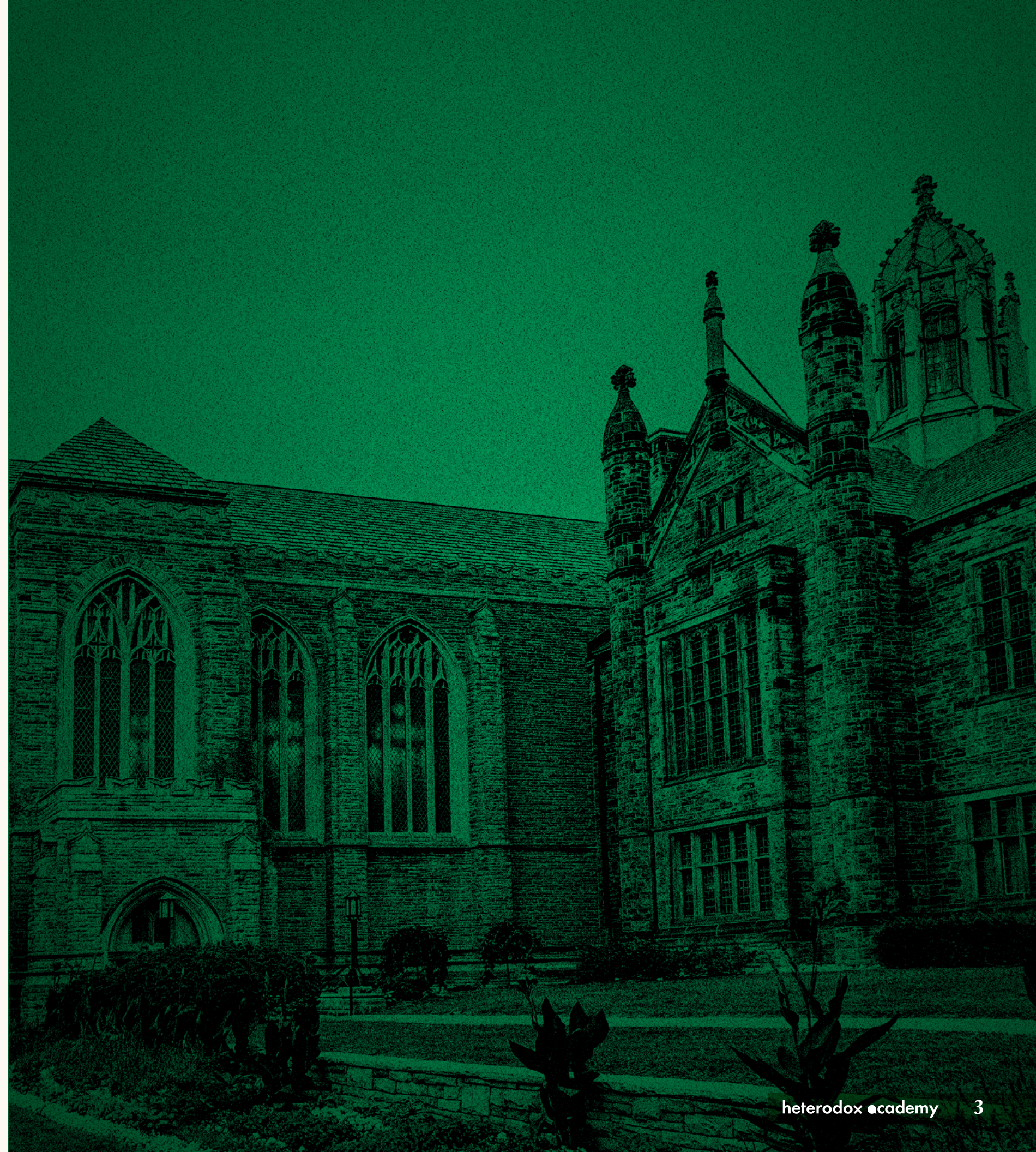


COLLEGE PULSE

What is the Campus Expression Survey?

The Campus Expression Survey (CES) asks college and university students about different facets of their experience relevant to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. **Heterodox Academy** (HxA) has been surveying students on topics of free expression since 2019. For 2024, HxA partnered with **College Pulse** to adapt the CES for administration to a sample of 1,548 Canadian students for the first time.

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



Canadian Students Shy Away from Israel-Palestine, Trans Issues, and Politics in Class

The Canadian CES surveyed students about how reluctant or comfortable they were discussing a battery of controversial topics when those topics are relevant to a classroom discussion. The topic eliciting the most reluctance was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with nearly 54% of respondents reporting that they were at least somewhat reluctant to discuss that topic in class. This mirrors findings from the [2023 Campus Expression Survey](#), where the topic of Israeli-Palestinian conflict had the most respondents express at least some reluctance. A large number of students reported being at least somewhat reluctant to discuss transgender issues (51.2%) and politics (45.0%).

Climate change along with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) were the topics that respondents felt most comfortable discussing, with 70.4% and 72% of students feeling comfortable discussing these topics, respectively.

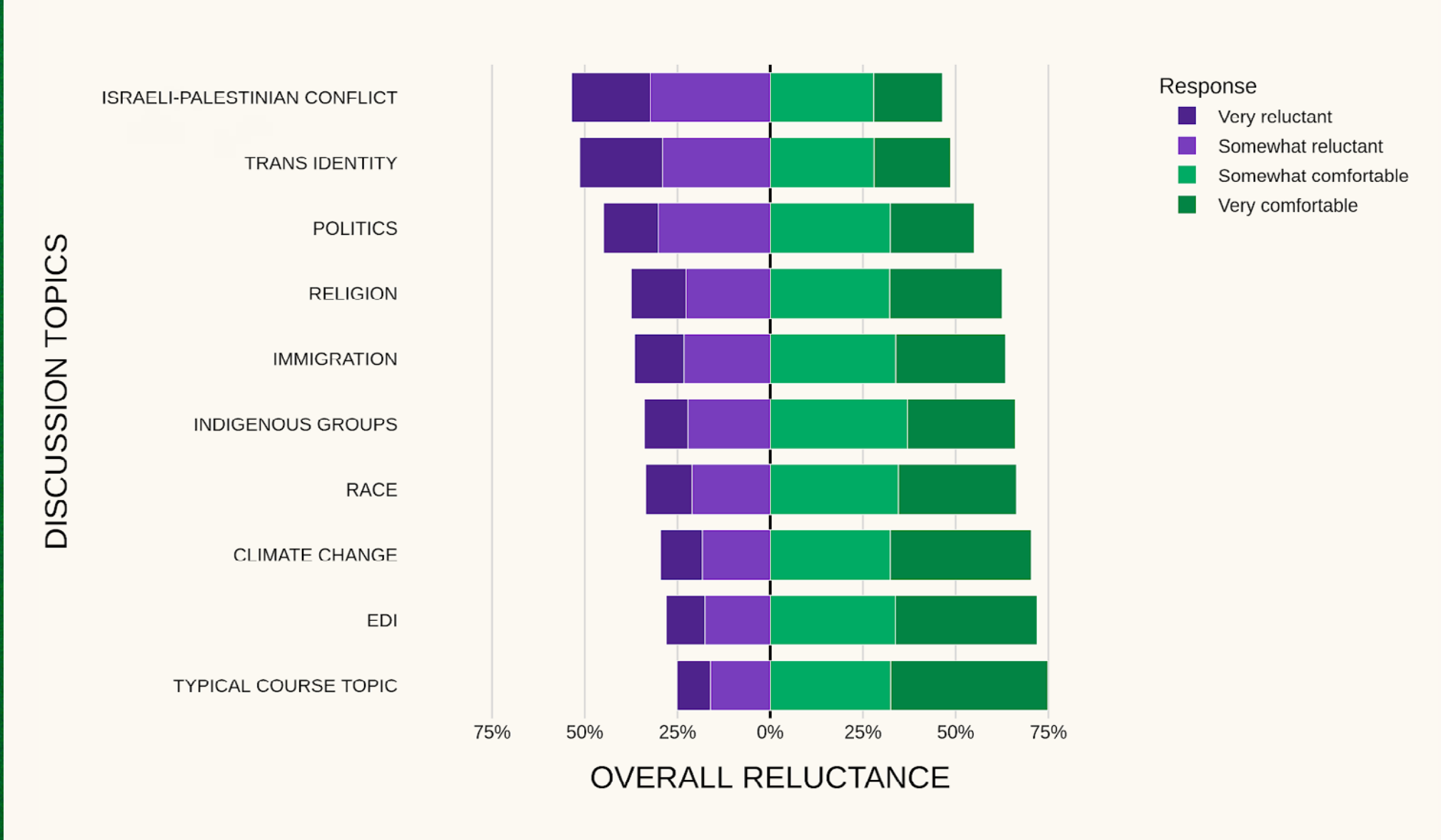


Figure 1. Students' self-reported reluctance to discuss 10 topics. N = 1,548.

Respondents with Stronger Political Orientations are More Willing to Share Their Thoughts on Controversial Topics Than Moderates

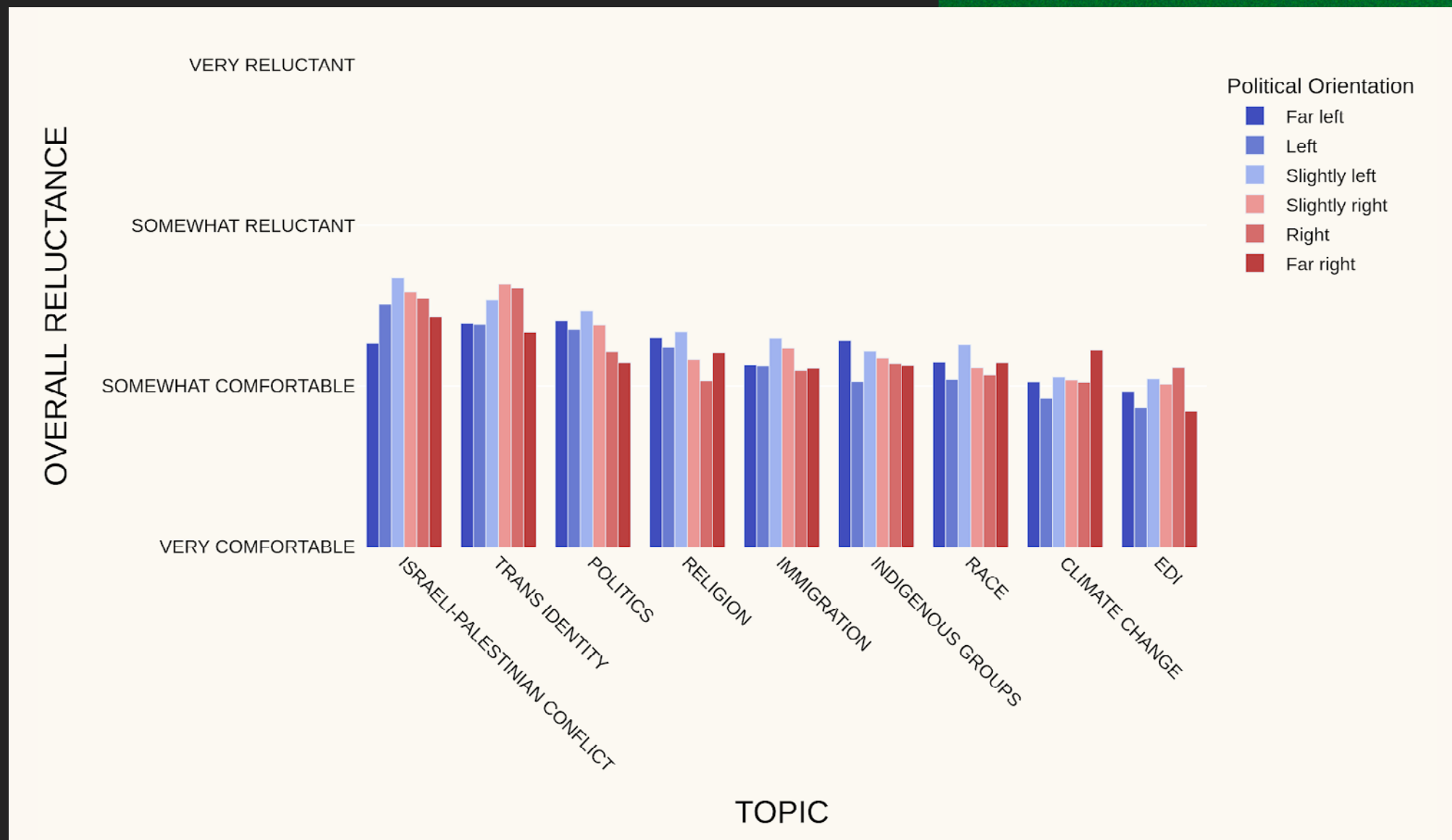


Figure 2. Students' reluctance to discuss controversial topics by self-reported political orientation. N = 1,548.

Students who say that they are either "very left" or "very right" on the political spectrum tend to feel more comfortable discussing controversial issues while more politically moderate students feel more reluctant ($p = .006$). The size of this 'reluctant center' effect is small ($\eta^2 = 0.001$), but it does replicate a key finding of the 2023 Campus Expression Survey report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Research in political and social psychology links extreme political orientation to **cognitive inflexibility**, **overconfidence**, and **ideological bias**. When only the most ideologically extreme students engage in campus discussions on controversial topics, the quality of discourse may suffer. Those on the political extremes are more likely to **exhibit confirmation bias**, **closed-mindedness**, and **motivated reasoning**, turning discussions into echo chambers rather than productive exchanges aimed at deeper understanding.

To improve campus climate, it may be necessary to mitigate the negative impact of extreme political identities on discussions. Encouraging participation from moderate students and promoting the sharing of diverse perspectives may help create a more balanced and constructive dialogue on contentious issues.

Fear of Backlash Silences Many Canadian Students in Class

Students were asked about potential consequences from other students and instructors if they shared their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions during a class discussion. Students could select multiple potential consequences, including those with more formal career implications such as an instructor refusing to write a letter of recommendation, to consequences with social implications, such as a classmate taking to social media to make negative comments about the student's character.

Overall, 63% of respondents reported that they feared at least one formal consequence if they expressed their honest thoughts and opinions during class. Among responses, students feared retribution from professors more than they were concerned about formal complaints from other students.

This did not differ significantly by class standing or political leaning, suggesting that students tend to share the same concerns regardless of their year in school or political identity.

However, it is more than formal sanctions that students are worried about. Respondents worry about informal consequences coming from both professors and students. While this is undoubtedly concerning, it provides a clear roadmap for promoting open inquiry; professors can take care to ensure students that they won't retaliate or castigate a student for any honestly held thought, idea, or question.

Students tend to have a slightly less negative view of how they would handle encountering different opinions. Most commonly (41.2%) students reported that if one of their classmates were to say something that they believe is deeply wrong, they would ask questions of their classmate to better understand their classmate's point of view. On the other hand, 26.9% of students said that they would avoid being friends with a classmate that they believed said something deeply wrong, and 13.3% of students said that they would file a complaint with the university about their fellow students, suggesting a non-trivial inclination towards censoriousness on campus.

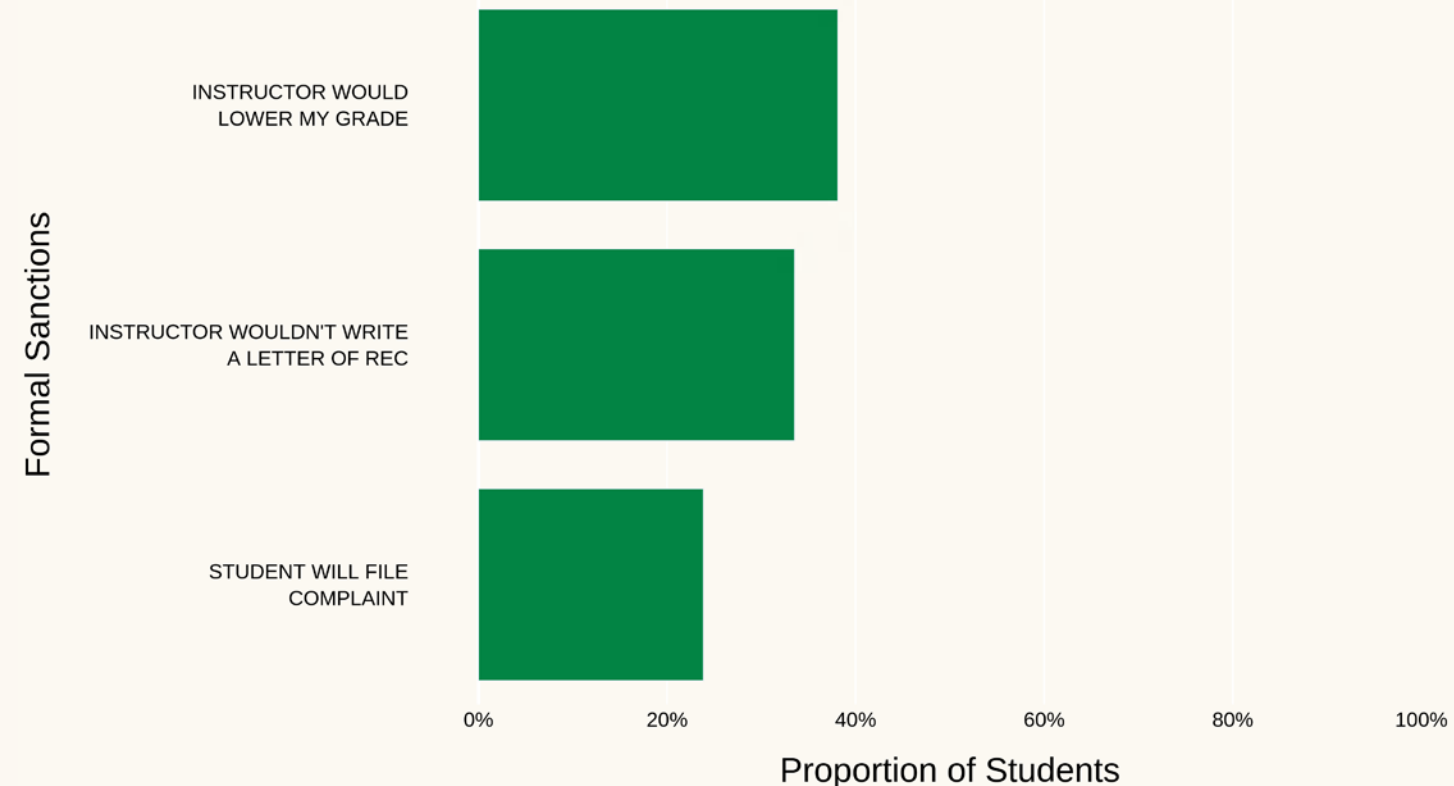


Figure 3. Proportion of students who report expecting formal sanctions if they were to express their honest views in the classroom. N = 1,548.

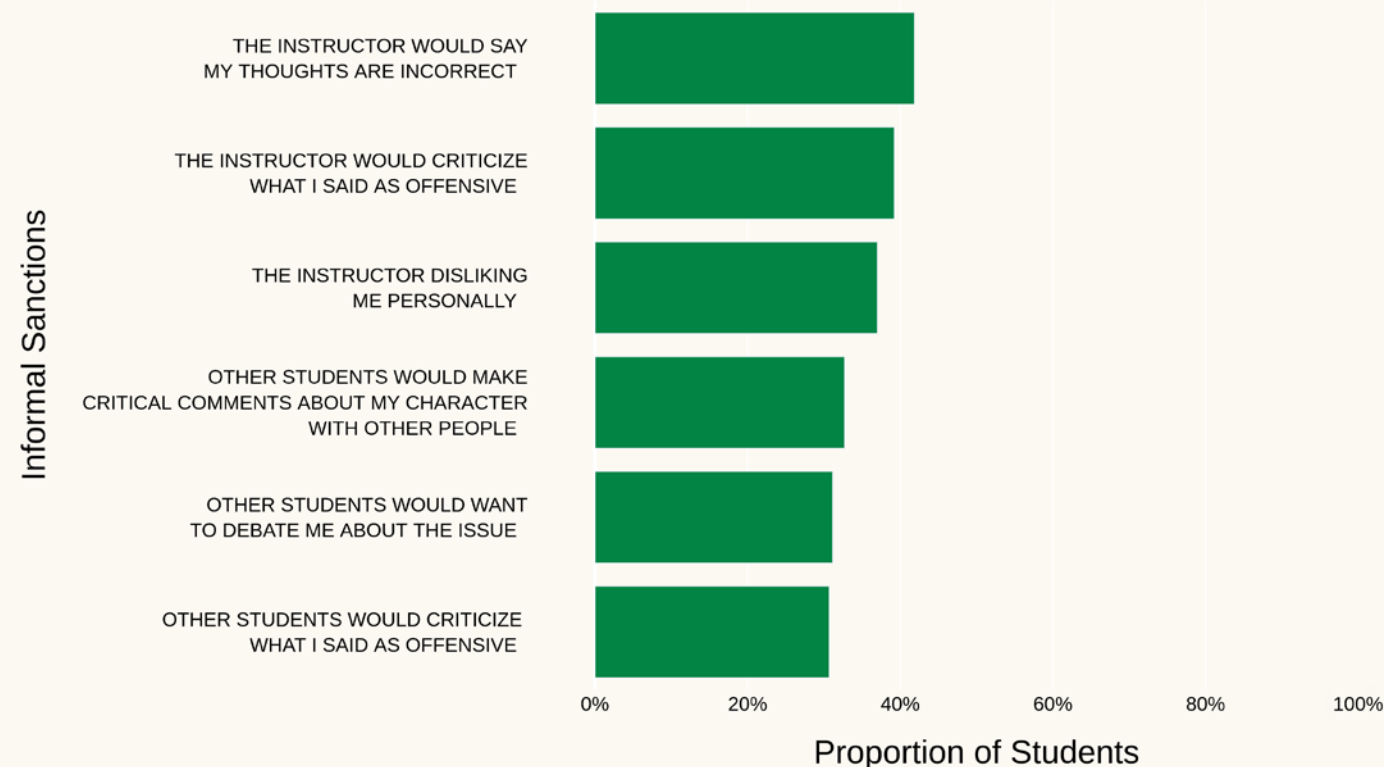


Figure 4. Proportion of students who report expecting informal sanctions if they were to express their honest views in the classroom. N = 1,548.

Speaking Up in Class Has Come at a Cost for Many Canadian Students

Our survey shows that 40% of respondents say that they have experienced negative consequences after discussing their thoughts and questions on controversial topics, e.g., “faculty or university staff have reprimanded them, others have filed formal complaints against them, or faculty or other students have denounced them on social media, etc.”

Moreover, 49.3% of respondents reported that they had personally witnessed another student experience negative consequences.

These data suggest that both students’ reluctance to discuss controversial issues and their fear of consequences from peers and faculty may be well-founded.

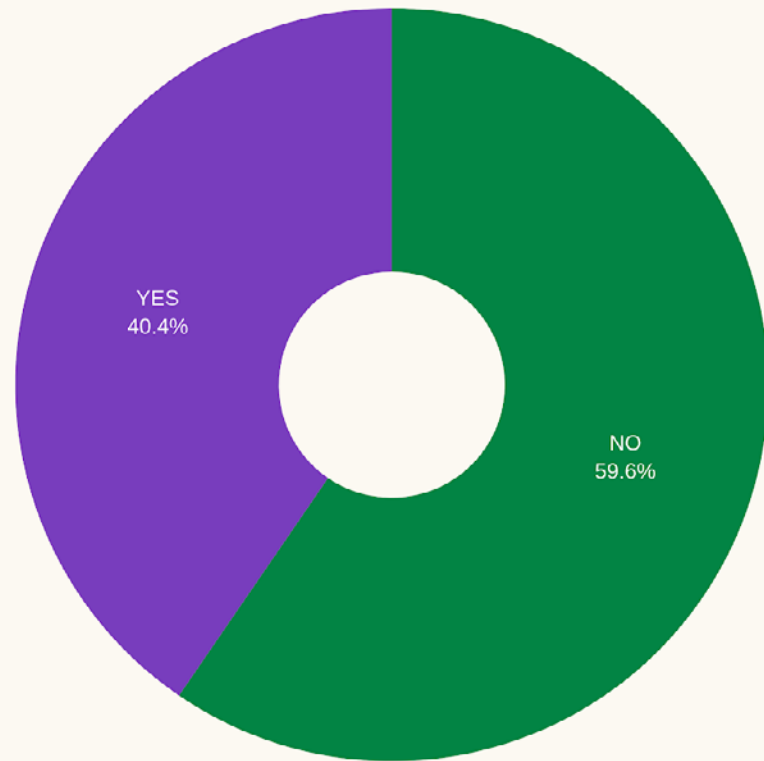


Figure 5. Percentages of students answering Yes or No that they have experienced negative sanctions for discussing their thoughts and questions on controversial topics.

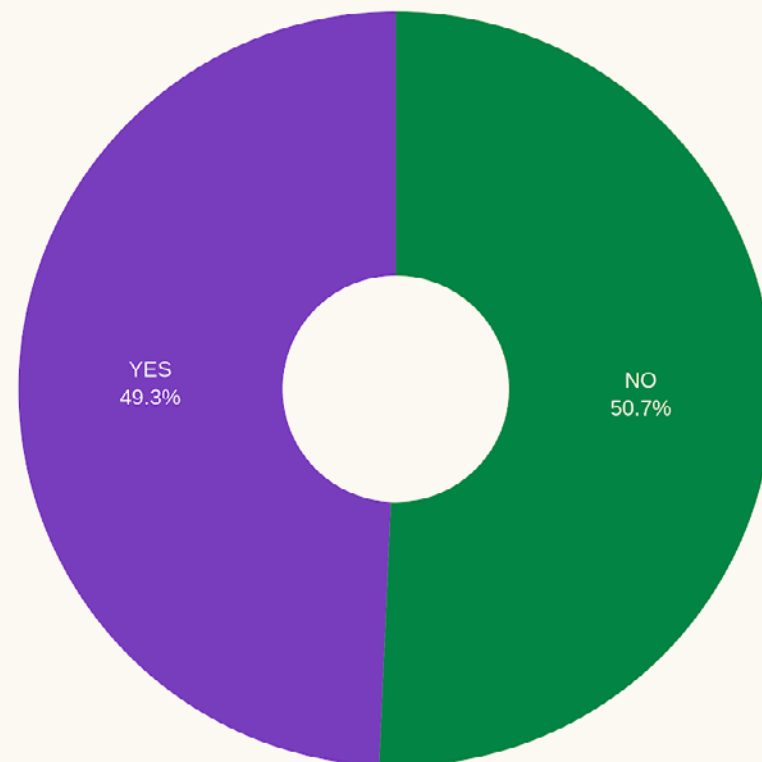


Figure 6. Percentages of students answering Yes or No that they have seen another student experience negative sanctions for discussing controversial topics.

Majority of Survey Respondents Favor Limits on Free Expression

The Canadian Campus Expression Survey utilizes the **Left-Wing Authoritarian Scale** to assess student attitudes toward free expression. Students were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as “classroom discussions should be safe places that protect students from disturbing ideas” and “universities are right to ban hateful speech from campus.”

For all questions in this section, at least half of respondents agreed at least somewhat with various restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. This ranged from 49.7% of all respondents at least somewhat agreeing with the statement “getting rid of inequality is more important than protecting the so-called ‘right’ to free speech”, to about 57.9% of respondents at least somewhat agreeing that “to succeed, a workplace must ensure that its employees feel safe from criticism.”

Surprisingly, there did not appear to be a “left-wing” bias to these attitudes. For example, 52.8% of self-identified “very left” students and 61.9% of self-identified “very right” students at least somewhat agree that “classroom discussions should be safe places that protect students from disturbing ideas.” Nearly every group along the political spectrum saw over 50% at least somewhat agreeing with that belief.

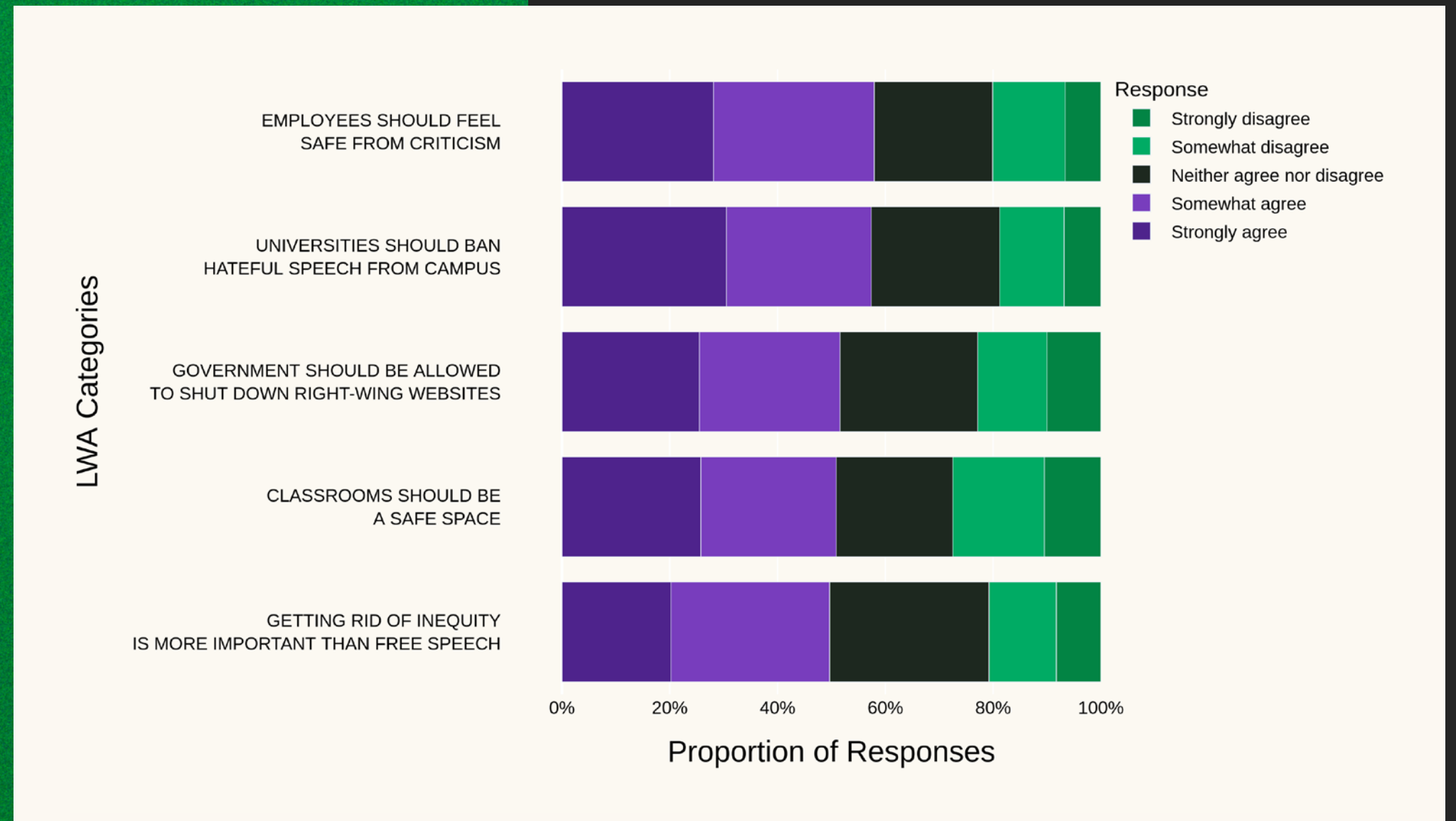


Figure 7. Extent to which students agree or disagree with various limits on free expression. N = 1,548.



The Big Picture

Reluctance to discuss Israeli-Palestinian conflict, trans identity, and politics is widespread in our sample, as are concerns about consequences from peers and instructors for expressing their honest thoughts and opinions in class. We also see in our sample that many students have either suffered or seen peers suffer adverse consequences for discussing controversial topics in the classroom. These results echo findings from the **2023 Campus Expression Survey**, indicating widespread problems of free expression and inquiry in the academy.

A closer look reveals important trends across political identities. Political extremity seems to be closely associated with comfort in engaging with controversial topics. We also find a considerable willingness to limit freedom of speech and expression on campus across all political leanings. More politically moderate students are, on average, less comfortable sharing their thoughts on controversial topics and less in favor of limiting free speech on campus.

The results from the 2024 Canadian Campus Expression Survey raise important questions about how the climate of higher education institutions can foster environments that promote open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement for all students across Canada.

Data and Methods

The 2024 Canadian CES was administered to a non-representative sample of 1,548 Canadian students from August 23, 2024 - September 9, 2024. Undergraduate students (54%) and graduate students (46%) were surveyed. The average age and median age of the sample is 25. Men are 46.3% and women 52.4% of the sample, while the remaining 1.4% identified as non-binary/non-conforming, or self-identified otherwise.

Respondents hailed from over 250 higher education institutions in Canada, ranging from large universities to small colleges.

The 2024 Canadian CES sample, being non-representative and non-probabilistic, may contain biases that limit its generalizability. Despite these limitations, we believe the Canadian CES can provide valuable insights into the state of open inquiry on Canadian college and university campuses. Moreover, the results of the 2024 CES are consistent with HxA's **previous findings** that reluctance to discuss controversial topics when relevant in the classroom are widespread across different types of institutions.

Caution is also advisable in inferring claims about the extent to which 2024 CES respondents—or students more generally—actually do refrain from discussing their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions about controversial topics. People can be reluctant—even very reluctant—to do something, and still nonetheless do it. Thus, 2024 CES respondents may report being somewhat or very reluctant to, for example, discuss their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions about the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict and, nonetheless, set aside their reluctance and do so. However, one would expect that feeling some degree of reluctance will, at the margin, inhibit discussion of controversial topics.

The results of 2024 Canadian Campus Expression Survey complement those of the **2023 Campus Expression Survey**, but caution is warranted when comparing their results directly due to changes in survey items and sampling methodology.

Availability of Data and Analysis Code

We welcome discussion of the 2024 CES data and results. To make this easy, HxA makes the survey response data (suitably cleaned and anonymized) and the analysis code used to write this report about the 2024 CES publicly available on **our website**.

Acknowledgments

This data collection project and report were made possible in part by the support of the **Templeton Religion Trust** and other donors. The opinions expressed in this report are those of HxA alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Templeton Religion Trust.

College Pulse recruited the sample and administered the survey questionnaire.

We would like to thank several HxA faculty members in Canada for their helpful feedback during survey development, and for their help interpreting some of its results.

About Us

Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy (HxA) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization of thousands of faculty, staff, and students advocating for policy and culture changes that ensure our universities are truth-seeking, knowledge-generating institutions grounded in open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. Founded in 2015 by Jonathan Haidt, Chris Martin, and Nicholas Rosenkranz, HxA has been working for nearly a decade to educate academics about the value of viewpoint diversity in research and teaching, and create campus cultures in which open inquiry thrives. With 74 HxA campus chapters, and members at more than 1,800 institutions, HxA advances its mission through policy, member organizing, and a belief in the potential of our institutions of higher education.

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**.

College Pulse

College Pulse is the leading survey research and analytics company focused on capturing the voices of today's college students. Through our exclusive University Student Panel™, which includes over 925,000 students and recent graduates from more than 1,500 two- and four-year institutions across the US, Canada, and beyond, we provide data-driven insights that power custom marketing and research solutions. Our innovative approach helps organizations understand the unique preferences, attitudes, and behaviors of the college demographic.

For more information, visit **collegepulse.com** or College Pulse's official Twitter account **@CollegeInsights**.

Report Citation

Shaw, E., Tenhundfeld, N., and Arnold, A. (2024). *The State of Open Inquiry in Canadian Colleges and Universities*. Heterodox Academy.