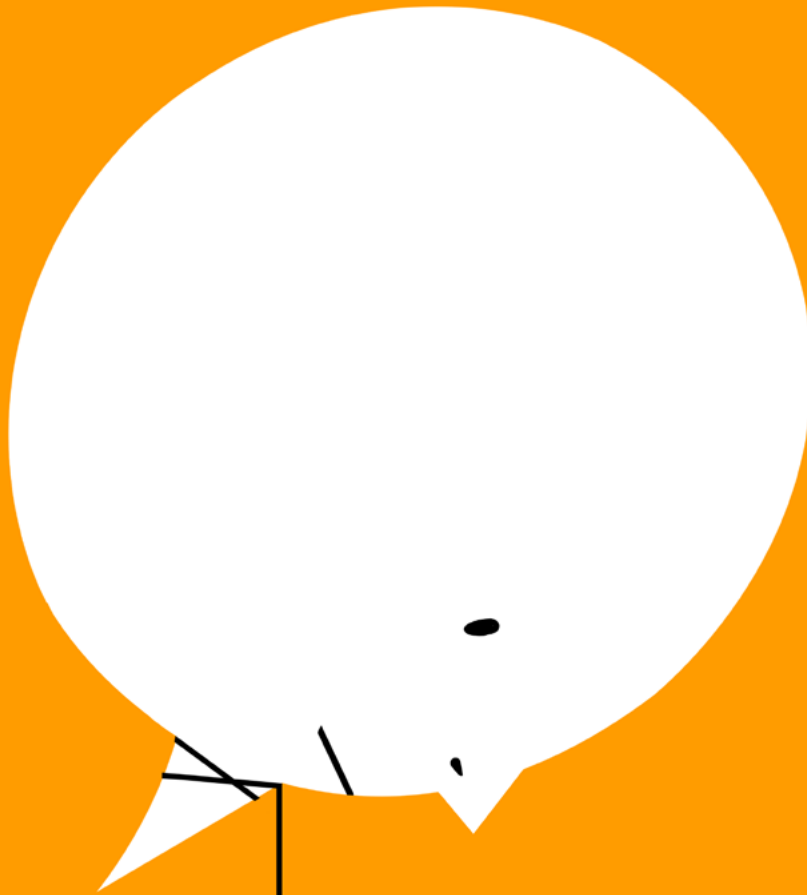




The Future of the
First Amendment:
High School Students
2026

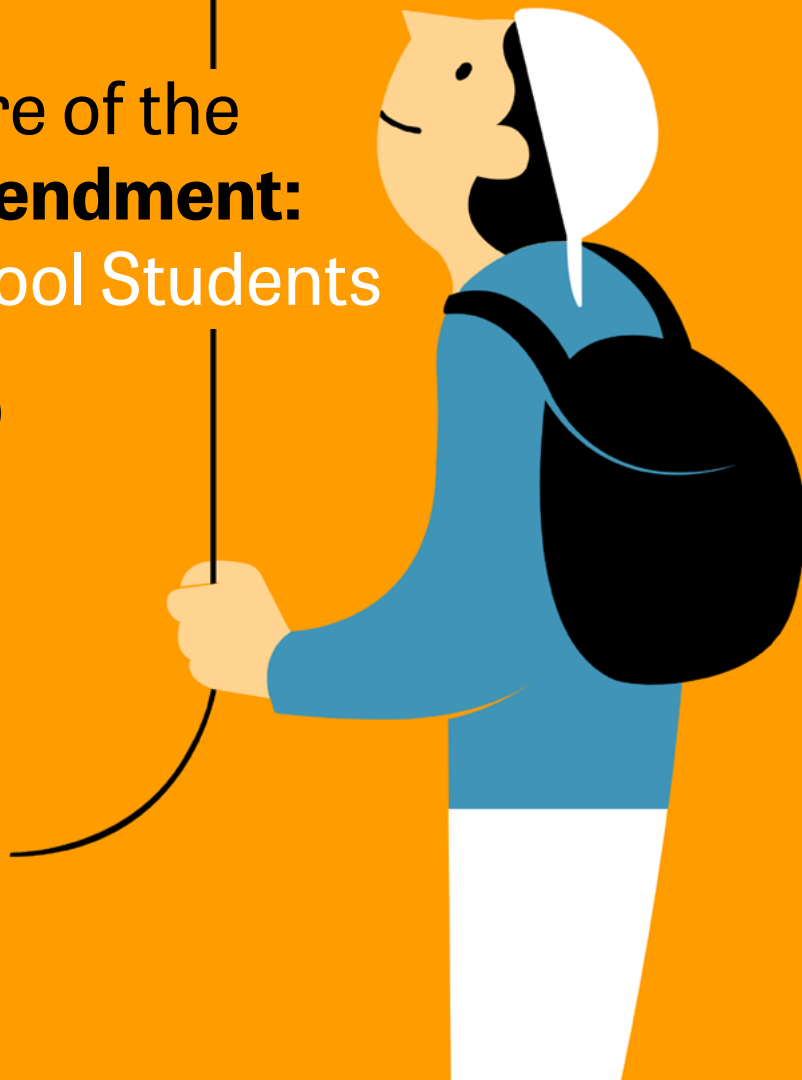


TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

06 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

07 THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

15 THE CLIMATE FOR SPEECH AND
EXPRESSION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

19 CENSORSHIP, SELF-CENSORSHIP
AND THE CONSEQUENCES
OF SPEECH

23 SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS'
ACCESS TO INFORMATION

27 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND
SOCIAL MEDIA

31 AI AND FREE SPEECH

35 CONCLUSION

36 SURVEY METHODOLOGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The latest Knight Foundation-Ipsos Future of the First Amendment study, which builds on more than two decades of research examining high school students' attitudes toward free speech, finds that students continue to place a high value on freedom of expression. Nearly all students believe that protecting free speech is important to democracy, and most believe students should be able to express their opinions in school without fear of punishment from teachers or administrators.

The 2026 survey also provides a detailed look at students' views on freedom of expression and the climate for speech in the country, their schools and their daily lives. These findings reflect a long-standing pattern in the Knight Foundation-Ipsos research. Since the study began in 2004, high school students have consistently expressed strong support for freedom of speech and its role in a democratic society. Equally important, they also believe in the right to freedom of expression in their schools.

Yet this new research finds hesitancy among students about the extent to which they are able to exercise their right to free speech. Reflecting this hesitancy, a majority of students say that holding back opinions often or sometimes makes it harder for students at their school to have valuable discussions during class.

Students are more likely to self-censor because of potential reactions from peers, such as conflict, hurt feelings or social exclusion, than because they worry about getting in trouble with authority figures.

The survey comes as artificial intelligence (AI) is already beginning to reshape American education, the climate for speech in this country and the volume of information that is accessible. High school students hold conflicting views on AI. Although most students support allowing AI chatbots to discuss any topic, including offensive ones, they also believe AI should impose limits on dangerous content.

The 2026 Future of the First Amendment study marks the ninth time since 2004 that Knight Foundation has commissioned a national survey of high school students to explore their attitudes about the First Amendment. The 2026 study was conducted in May among 1,167 current high school students. It repeats several of the core measures to track trends in student opinions over time. The study also asked select questions from other surveys in the [Knight Free Expression Research Series](#) conducted by Ipsos of young adults ages 18 to 29, including college students.

KEY FINDINGS

Here are some of the key findings from the new survey:

High school students express strong support for freedom of speech.

An overwhelming majority (91%) say that protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy, including 65% who strongly agree with that sentiment. Nearly twice as many students believe the First Amendment doesn't go far enough in the rights it guarantees (57%) than say it goes too far (28%).

Students largely oppose government censorship of dissenting views.

A sizable majority (67%) agree that people should be permitted to say what they want on social media, without government restrictions. About as many believe the government should not have the power to regulate speech on social media if that results in limiting some speech.

Most students believe the First Amendment protects people like them.

Seven in 10 say the First Amendment provides a great deal or fair amount of protection for people like them, which is similar to the last survey, in 2022.¹ As was the case then, white students are more likely than Black or Hispanic students to feel personally protected by the First Amendment.

However, students feel the climate in high schools is not conducive to free expression.

Most say their classmates, at least sometimes, hold back their opinions, which limits valuable conversations. Seven in 10 say they hold back *their own* opinions from teachers, while six in 10 say the same about other students. Avoiding conflict is the top reason students refrain from offering their views, but one in three fear negative consequences, such as detention or lower grades.

Most high school students say they and their classmates sometimes hold back their opinions, which limits valuable conversations.

¹ When comparing prior waves to the 2026 survey, please note that this year's survey used a different sampling and survey administration methodology from previous studies. Differences over time may reflect changes in both student attitudes and methodology.

Most students favor no speech restrictions on AI, with a major exception.

Roughly six in 10 students who have used AI agree that AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude) should not restrict or refuse discussions of any topic, even offensive ones. However, nearly seven in 10 say AI chatbots have a responsibility to restrict harmful or dangerous content. Students are skeptical that AI chatbots present all points of view: 62% say they present only certain viewpoints while holding back others.

Compared with 2022,¹ considerably more students believe social media stifles free expression.

Two in three students say people are afraid of being attacked or shamed online, and a comparable percentage (62%) say free expression is stifled because people block others they disagree with.

Students with First Amendment coursework report greater confidence in exercising their free speech rights.

Nearly three in four high school students say they have taken a class on the First Amendment. Students who have taken such a class report a stronger sense that these rights protect people like them and are more comfortable engaging in open classroom dialogue, including expressing views that differ from those of their instructors or peers.

NOTE ON TREND COMPARISONS:

The 2026 study uses a different sampling and data collection approach than prior waves, transitioning from a school-based random sample, administered in schools by administrators, to a nationally representative, probability-based approach. Students were reached through their parents using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel® for a self-administered online survey. As a result, some differences from earlier findings may reflect methodological changes as well as real shifts in student attitudes.

Students who have taken a First Amendment class report that they are more comfortable engaging in open classroom dialogue, including expressing views that differ from those of their instructors or peers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About Knight Foundation

We are social investors who support a more effective democracy by funding free expression and journalism, arts and culture in community, research in areas of media and democracy, and the success of American cities and towns where the Knight brothers once published newspapers.

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Ipsos is one of the largest market research and polling companies globally, operating in 90 markets and employing nearly 20,000 people.

Our passionately curious research professionals, analysts and scientists have built unique multi-specialist capabilities that provide true understanding and powerful insights into the actions, opinions and motivations of citizens, consumers, patients, customers or employees. Our 75 business solutions are based on primary data from our surveys, social media monitoring, and qualitative or observational techniques.

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01

**THE FIRST
AMENDMENT
AND FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION**

THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

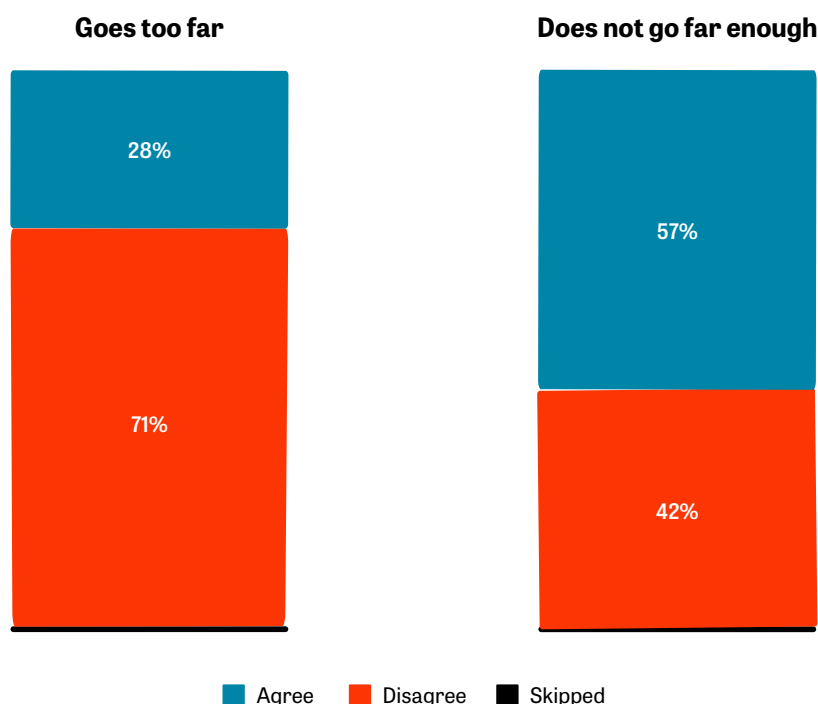
America's high school students continue to hold the First Amendment in high esteem: 91% agree that "protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy," including 65% who strongly agree.

And, as in the most recent previous survey which was fielded in 2022, a sizable majority (79%) say that

citizens' free speech rights are extremely or very important to democracy.²

Most students reject the idea that the First Amendment goes too far: In fact, by about two-to-one, more say the First Amendment doesn't go far enough in the rights it guarantees than say it goes too far.

High schoolers' views on whether the First Amendment goes too far or not far enough



Q2. Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, how do you feel about the following statement:
The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. Base: High school students ages 13-18, Split Sample A (n=597)
The First Amendment does not go far enough in the rights it guarantees. Base: High school students ages 13-18, Split Sample B (n=570)

² See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Support for protecting offensive speech in public continues downward trend

As in past surveys, Black and Hispanic students are more likely than white students to say the First Amendment goes too far.² In the current survey, close to half of Black students (45%) and 39% of Hispanic students say it goes too far, compared with just 18% of white students.

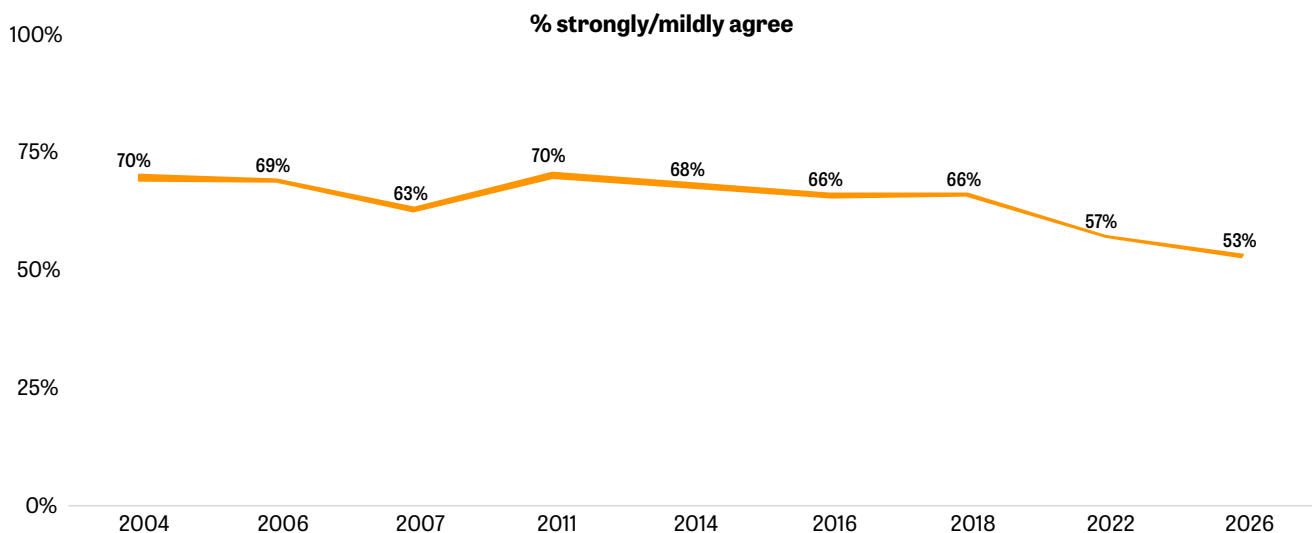
Still, as past student surveys found,² most students do not favor an unrestricted right to speech, regardless of the circumstances. They are closely divided on allowing offensive speech in public. And about six in 10 students say people should not be allowed to say whatever they want in public if it is viewed as threatening to others.

53%

of students believe that people should be allowed to say whatever they want in public, even if it is offensive to others

Notably, in this survey, a slim majority of students (53%) agree with the statement “people should be allowed to say whatever they want in public, even if it is offensive to others.” This represents a 17-percentage-point drop from when this statement was first asked in 2004 (70%) and is the lowest level of agreement to date.

Agreement that people be allowed to say whatever they want in public, even if what they say is offensive to others



Q4. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:
People should be allowed to say whatever they want in public, even if what they say is offensive to others
2026 Base: High school students ages 13-18, Split Sample B (n=570)

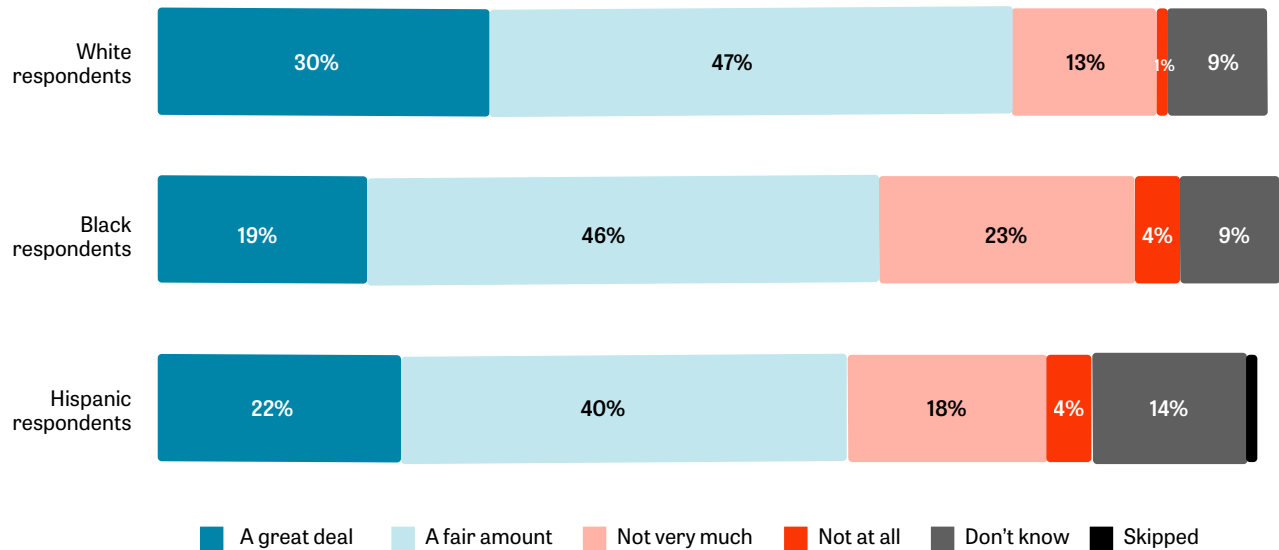
2. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Most students feel protected by the First Amendment

Most high schoolers believe that the First Amendment protects “people like me,” at least to some degree. Seven in 10 agree that the First Amendment protects people like them a great deal or a fair amount; these

views are on par with the 2022 survey.² As was the case four years ago, Black and Hispanic students are less likely than white students to feel at least some protection from the First Amendment.

How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you?

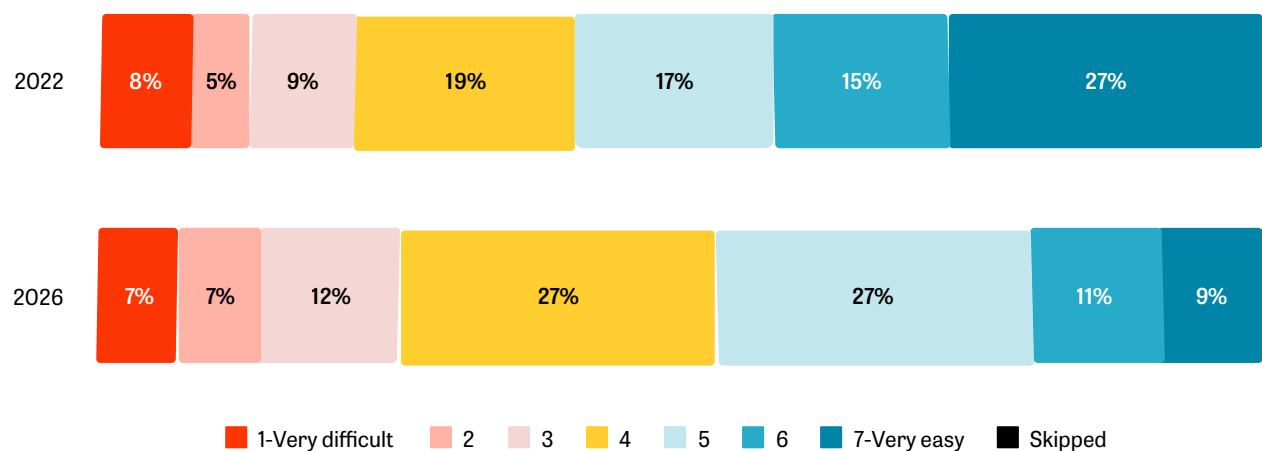


Q8. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you?
Base: White high school students ages 13-18 (n=583); Black high school students ages 13-18 (n=174); Hispanic high school students ages 13-18 (n=249)

2. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

The survey also asks students to rate how easy or difficult it is for people like them to use free speech rights without consequence, using a seven-point scale. Overall, 47% say this is very easy or easy, while 26% rate it as very difficult or difficult. While overall attitudes are fairly similar to those four years ago, a smaller share of students in this survey describe exercising their free speech rights as very easy (9% vs. 27% in 2022).²

Ease of using free speech rights without consequences in America



Q11. How easy or difficult is it for people like you to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today, on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being very difficult and 7 being very easy?

2026 Base: All respondents (n=1,167); 2022 Base: All respondents, high school students (n=10,098)

2. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Students continue to place a high value on free speech and other democratic principles

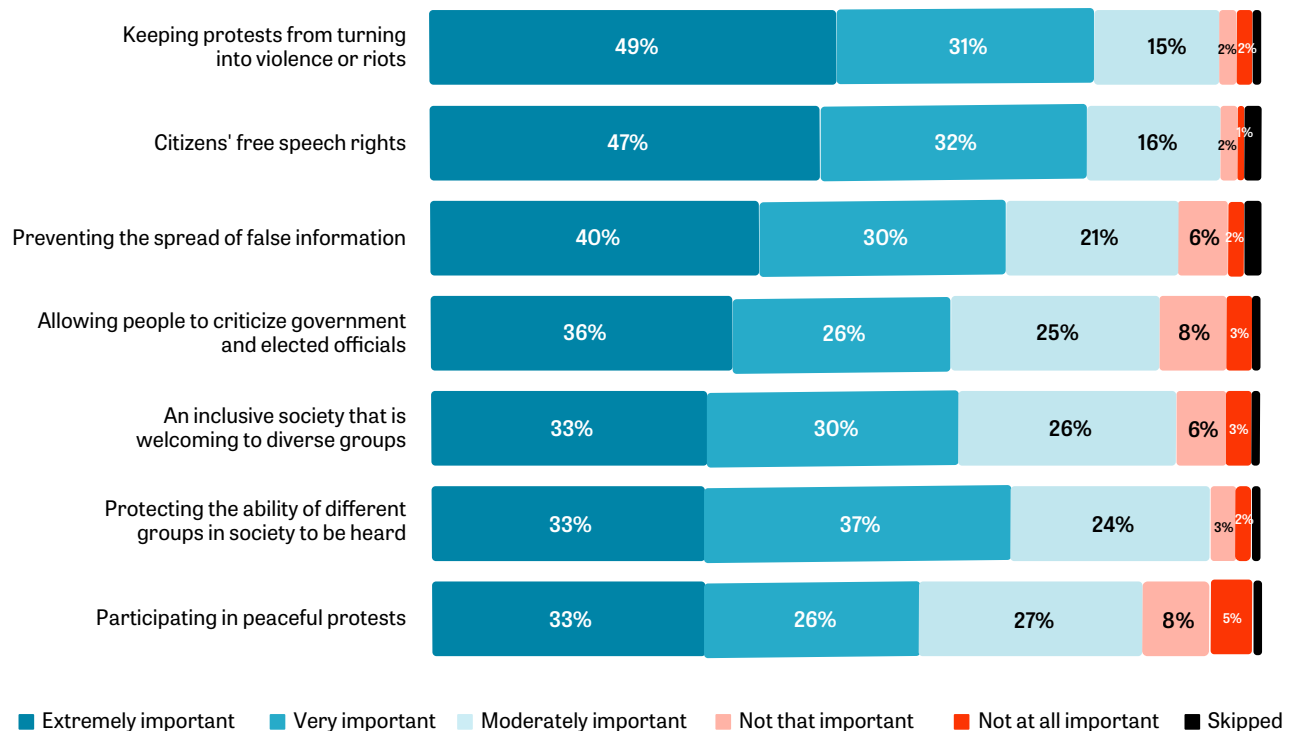
Students continue to view several goals and principles as important to democracy. Roughly eight in 10 say citizens' free speech rights are extremely or very important to democracy, but nearly as many (79%) say the same about keeping protests from turning violent.

Slightly smaller percentages rate other goals as important. For example, 70% say preventing the spread of false information is extremely or very important, while an identical percentage says the same about protecting the ability of different groups to be heard. Current opinions are roughly similar to attitudes in

2022 on the six items included in both surveys, though fewer rate "an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups" as very important today (63%) in this survey than did so four years ago (74%).²

There are only modest demographic differences in these opinions, but students who identify as liberals are more likely than self-described moderates and conservatives to say it is extremely or very important to allow people to criticize the government and to participate in peaceful protests.

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



Q10. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy?
 Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

2. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Impact of taking a class on the First Amendment

Nearly three in four students (72%) report having taken a high school class that dealt with the First Amendment. Reported exposure to First Amendment coursework varies little across racial and ideological groups, although older students are more likely than younger ones to say they have taken such a class (78% of ages 16-18 vs. 64% of ages 13-15).

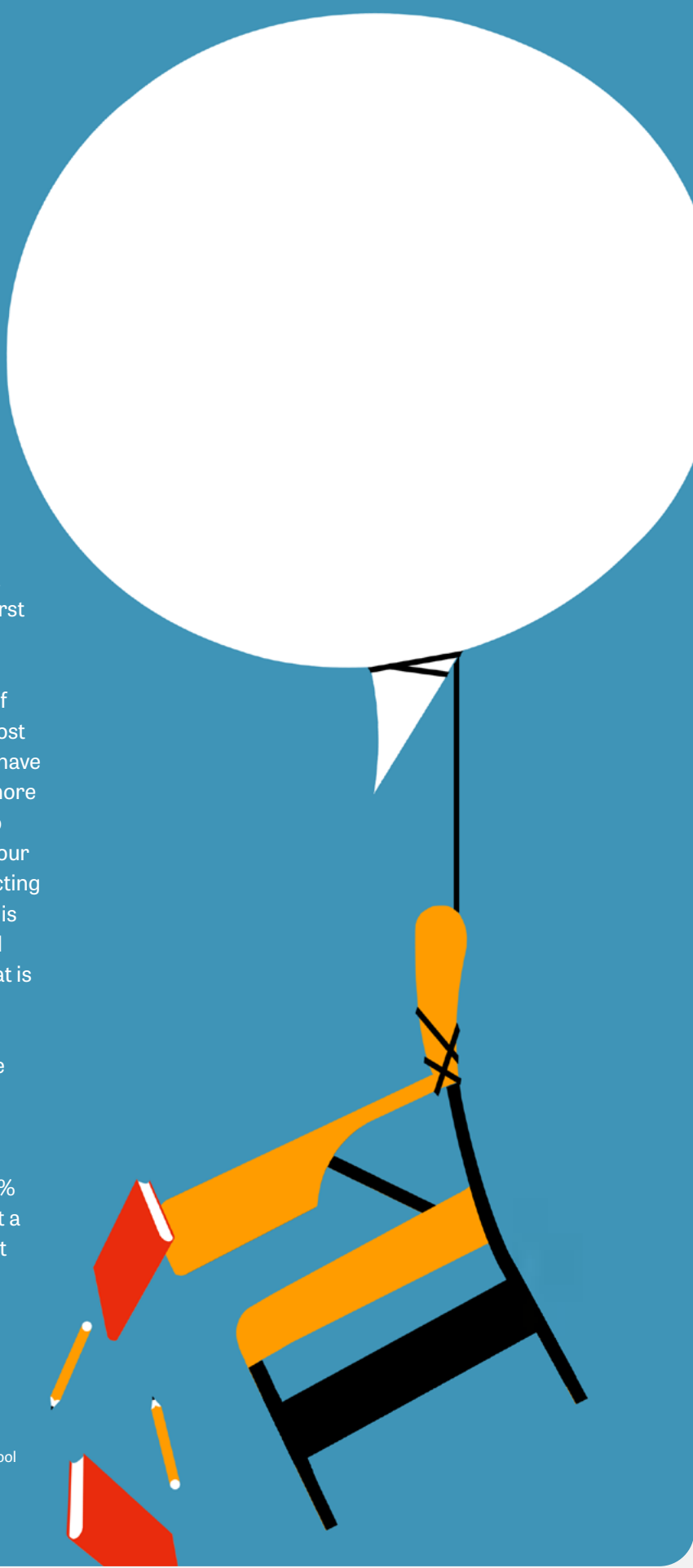
First Amendment education is linked to greater confidence in free expression

High schoolers who have taken a First Amendment class³ are significantly more likely to feel that the First Amendment protects people like them than those who have not taken a class (73% vs. 60%). Across nearly two decades of Knight Foundation's Future of the First Amendment research, this is one of the most consistent findings: that high school students who have received instruction on the First Amendment are more supportive of free speech rights than students who have not.⁴ Moreover, in this survey, nearly three in four students who have taken a class believe that protecting the ability of different groups in society to be heard is extremely or very important to our democracy, and two in three say the same of an inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups.

Those who have taken a First Amendment class are also more likely than those who haven't to report feeling comfortable speaking up in the classroom (77% vs. 68%) and voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by their instructor or other students (57% vs. 47%). About one in three have told someone that a comment was offensive or inappropriate in the past year. Along these lines, 78% express having a great deal or a fair amount of trust in their teachers.

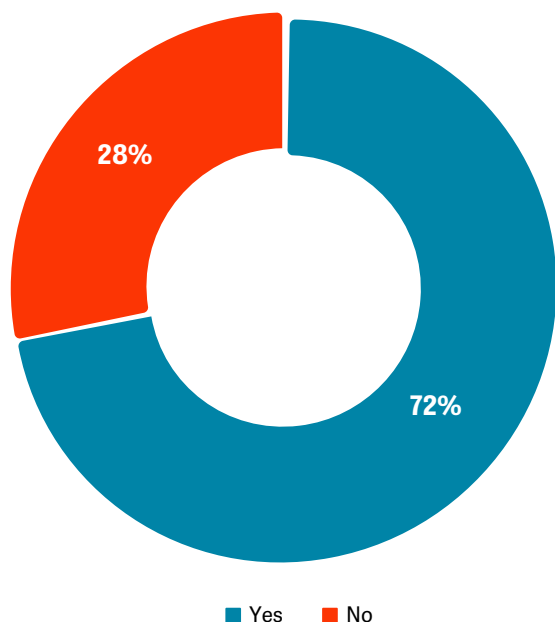
3. This question was asked as "Have you ever taken classes in high school that dealt with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution?"

4. See note about methodological changes on page 5.



When it comes to social media, 68% of high schoolers who have taken a First Amendment class agree that they feel comfortable expressing their true opinions online without worrying about what their parents see, compared with 59% of those who have not taken such a class. About seven in 10 students who have taken a First Amendment class say they consider how their social media posts might be viewed by colleges or future employers before posting (71%), compared with 57% of students who have not taken such a class.

Have you ever taken classes in high school that dealt with the First Amendment to the US Constitution?



Q1. Have you ever taken classes in high school that dealt with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution?

Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

About seven in 10 students (71%) who have taken a First Amendment class say they consider how their social media posts might be viewed by colleges or future employers before posting, compared with 57% of students who have not taken such a class.

02

THE CLIMATE FOR SPEECH AND EXPRESSION IN HIGH SCHOOLS



THE CLIMATE FOR SPEECH AND EXPRESSION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Students generally want their high schools to be places where the free expression of different ideas is supported and encouraged. However, most say the climate for speech in schools makes that goal challenging to achieve.

For more than a decade, this research has shown consistent support among students for the right to freely criticize teachers and administrators on social media, as well as for the right of student newspapers to freely report on controversial topics.⁴

In this latest survey, 64% believe they should be free to air their opinions about teachers and administrators on social media without having to worry about being punished. An identical percentage supports the right of student newspapers to report on controversial topics without first getting the approval of administrators.

Despite this broad support for free expression, many students believe the climate at their school discourages people from speaking openly. Two in three agree that “the climate at my school prevents some people from saying things they believe because others may find it offensive.”

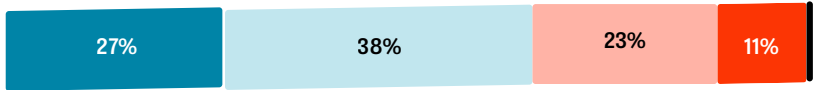
Most students (61%) say they have never felt uncomfortable in school because of something another student said about their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. However, 29% say they have felt uncomfortable over such comments, even if the remarks were not directed at them. Somewhat more female students than male students report that they have felt uncomfortable about statements others have made about their personal characteristics (32% vs. 25%).

Two in three agree that “the climate at my school prevents some people from saying things they believe because others may find it offensive.”

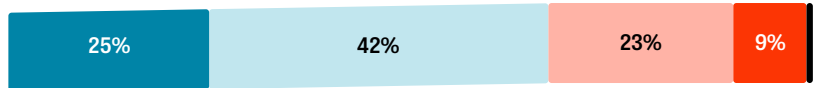
4. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Views on the climate for speech in schools

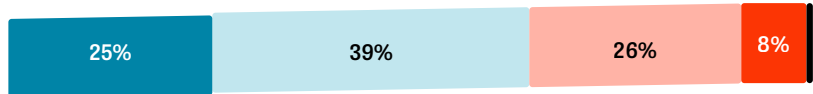
Students should be allowed to express their opinions about teachers and school administrators on social media without worrying about being punished by teachers or school administrators for what they say



The climate at my school prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive



High school students should be allowed to report on controversial issues in their student newspapers without the approval of school authorities



Schools should be allowed to punish students who post material on social media outside of school that school officials say is threatening**



Schools should be allowed to discipline students who post material on social media outside of school that school officials say is offensive*



Strongly agree Mildly agree Mildly disagree Strongly disagree Skipped

Q4. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:

Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

* = Base: Split Sample A (n=597)

** = Base: Split Sample B (n=570)

Students say their classmates hold back their opinions despite schools widely being seen as having a diverse range of viewpoints

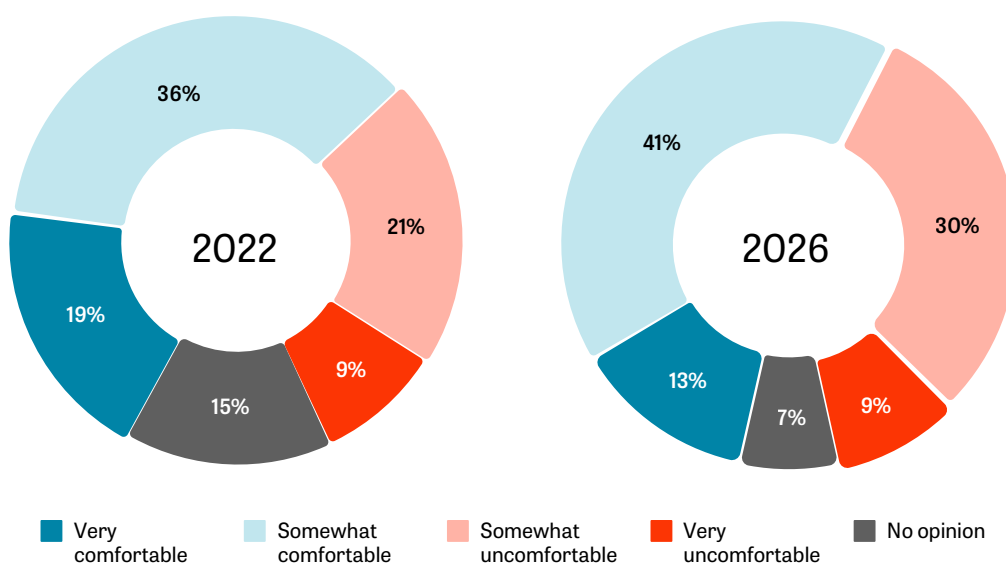
There is broad agreement among students that their peers in school have a wide range of opinions: 86% agree that their classmates have diverse viewpoints, including 42% who strongly agree. At the same time, 63% agree that the people in their classes hold similar viewpoints, suggesting that many students perceive both diversity of opinion and areas of broad agreement among their peers. There were no significant differences by political ideology, indicating that liberals, moderates and conservatives share similar perceptions of the viewpoint diversity in their classrooms.

For the most part, teachers are viewed as respecting students' opinions. About two in three students say teachers demonstrate respect for all viewpoints, even those that they disagree with. When asked about their own comfort level in disagreeing with teachers and

fellow students, more than half of students say they feel at least somewhat comfortable doing this. The share reporting discomfort in this survey is 39%, compared with 30% in the 2022 survey.⁴

About seven in 10 say that people hold back from expressing their views often or sometimes, which makes it harder to have valuable class discussions. Relatively few—just 14%—say this often occurs. While many acknowledge that this makes it harder to have class discussions, they also acknowledge some discomfort with potential conflict that may come from sharing their views. Further, as we explore in the next section, many students do report self-censoring in class or online, demonstrating the tension between desired openness to speech and high school students' lived experience.

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?



Q9. 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?
2026 Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167); 2022 Base: All respondents, High school students (n=10,098)

4. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

03

**CENSORSHIP,
SELF-CENSORSHIP AND
THE CONSEQUENCES
OF SPEECH**



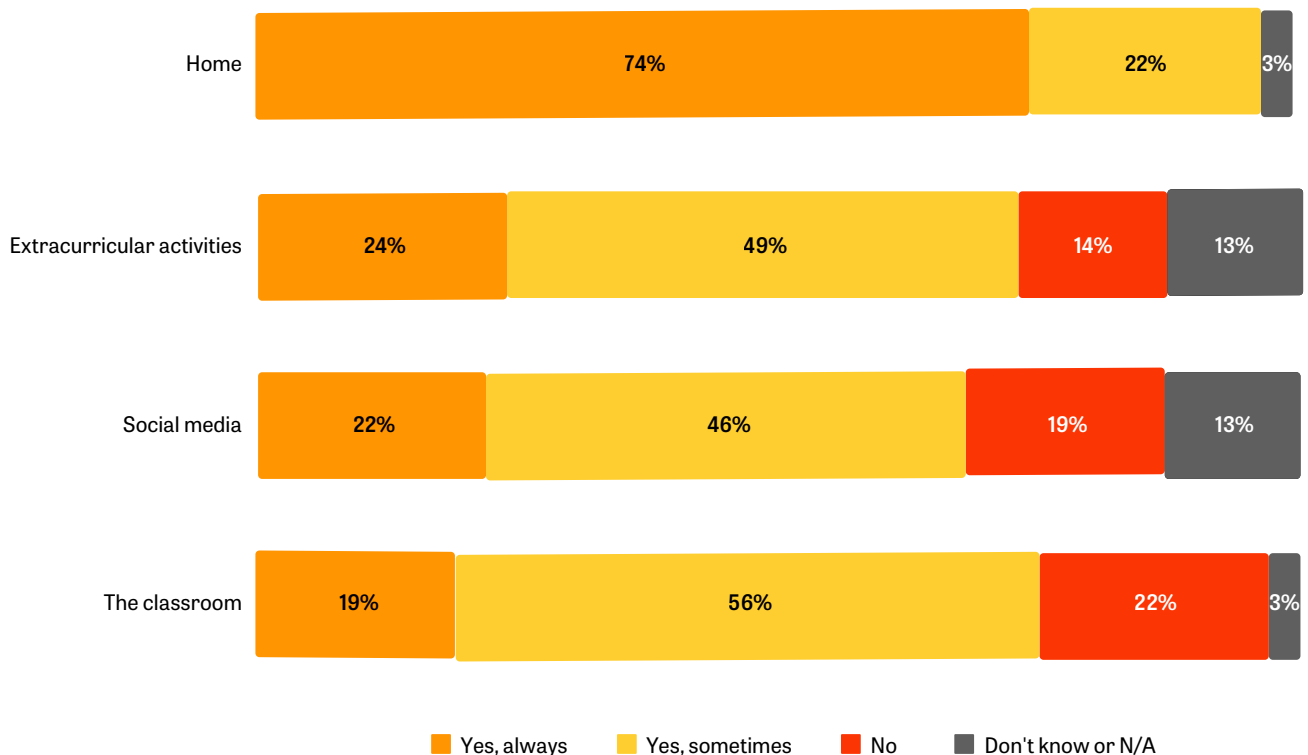
CENSORSHIP, SELF-CENSORSHIP AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF SPEECH

When it comes to exercising their rights to speech and expression, high school students report feeling most comfortable at home. Sizable majorities of students say they at least sometimes feel comfortable in expressing themselves in various places, including in school settings.

But in terms of where students always feel comfortable, home stands out. Nearly three in four students say they always feel comfortable freely expressing themselves

at home. That compares with just 24% who always feel comfortable freely expressing themselves in after-school settings, like clubs or sports teams; 22% who always feel comfortable on social media; and just 19% who say the same about classrooms. Students in households with an income of at least \$50,000 are significantly more likely to feel comfortable freely expressing themselves in the home and in the classroom compared with their counterparts in households with income under \$50,000.

Do you feel comfortable speaking freely in the following spaces?



Q5. Do you feel comfortable speaking freely in the following spaces?
Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that students are more likely to hold back from expressing their views at school than at home or with friends. While 70% say they at least sometimes hold back their views from teachers and 59% do so in conversations with classmates, only 41% report censoring themselves when talking with their parents and 35% with their friends.

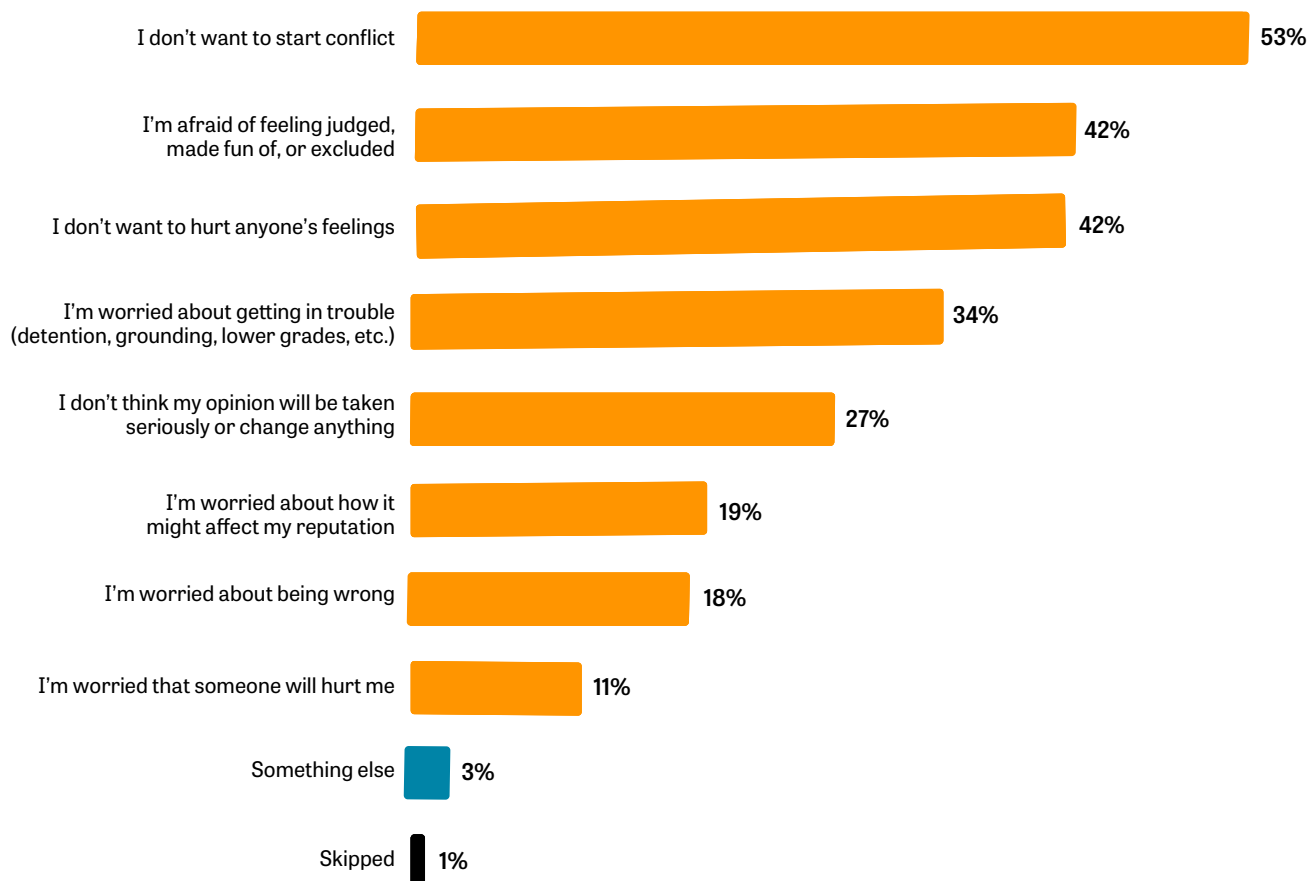
The survey goes a step further and asks students who refrain from expressing their views why they don't share their opinions. The most frequently cited reasons center on a desire to avoid conflict (53% of those who self-censor), as well as to not hurt others' feelings (42%) or to avoid being made fun of or excluded (42%).

Interestingly, concerns over possible punishment by school authorities and parents from speaking out are less widespread. Roughly one in three students who hold back their opinions say they worry that expressing their views could get them into trouble. Male students are more likely than female students to cite this as a concern, whereas female students are more likely than male students to express concern about social exclusion if they share their views.

70%

of students say they at least sometimes hold back their views from teachers

What are the main reasons you hold back your personal opinions?



Q20. What are the main reasons you hold back your personal opinions?

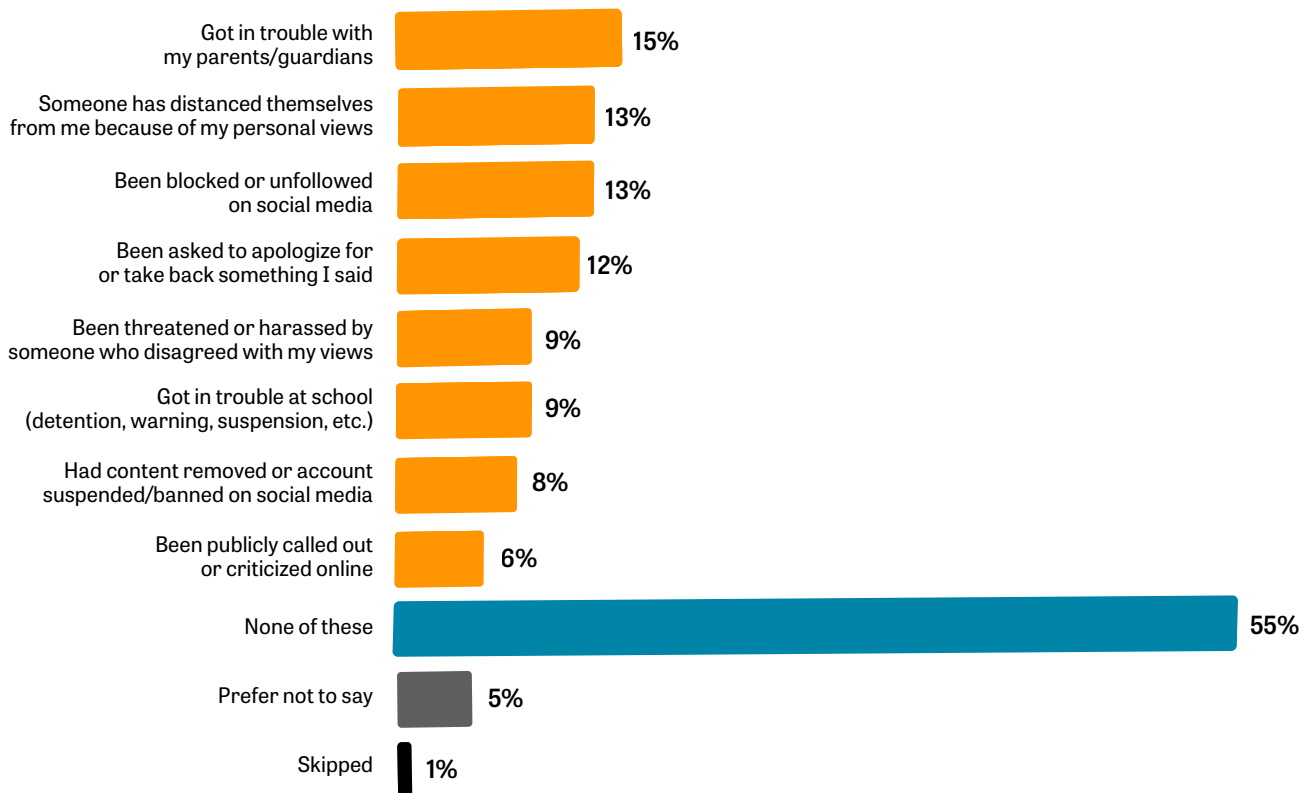
Base: High school students ages 13-18 who "Often," "Sometimes," or "Rarely" hold back their opinions (n=1,103)

Negative consequences from speech

Nearly four in 10 (39%) students say they have experienced negative consequences from expressing their views. But, for the most part, these are of a personal nature—such as getting in trouble with parents or getting blocked by others on social media—rather than formal school punishments. Just 9% of students say that in the past year they received detention or suspension for something they said.

The personal consequences include problems with parents or guardians (15% have experienced this), being blocked or unfollowed on social media (13%), people distancing themselves (13%), or being asked to apologize for something they said (12%). Of note, roughly one in 10 students (9%) report that they have been threatened or harassed by someone who disagreed with their views.

Have any of the following happened to you after expressing your own views in the past year?



Q22. Have any of the following happened to you after expressing your own views in the past year?

Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

Actions in response to other students' speech are rarely consequential. Actions primarily take the shape of students distancing themselves because of personal views (31%) or telling someone a comment was inappropriate (30%). Moreover, 40% do not take any action. Few students say that in the past year, they have reported a student (10%) or teacher (6%) for something they said, or recorded a classmate (5%) or teacher (4%) to document something they said.



04

**SCHOOLS, PARENTS
AND STUDENTS'
ACCESS TO
INFORMATION**

SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Students have mixed views about how well their schools provide access to the information they rely on to formulate their own opinions.

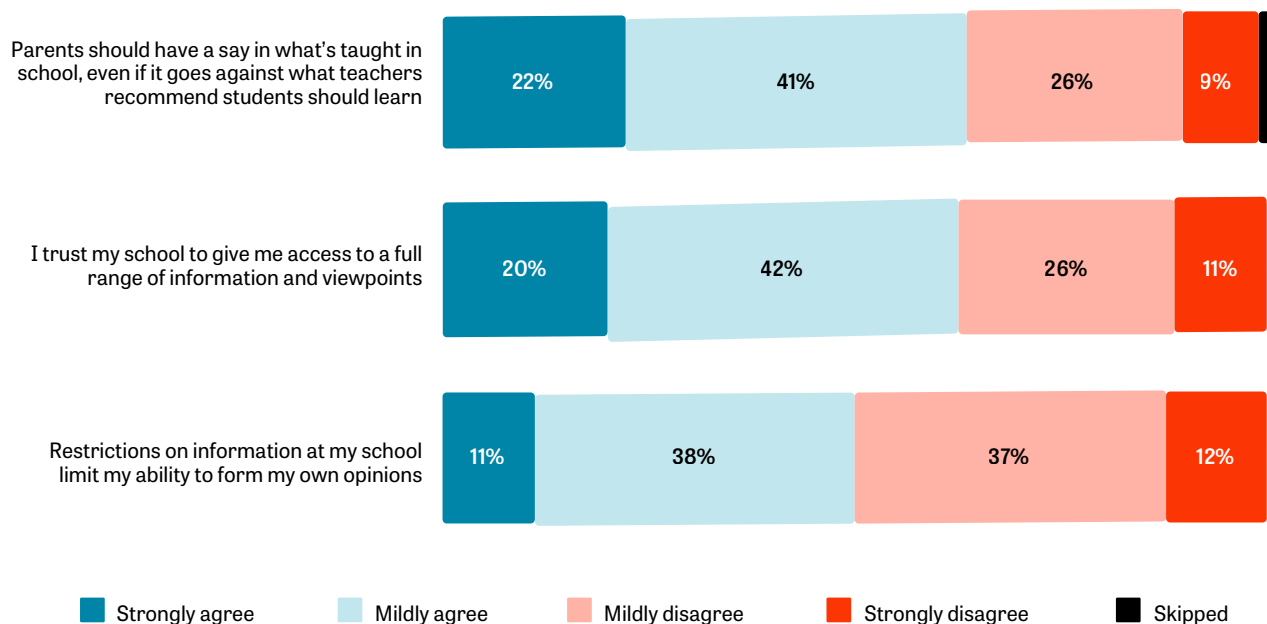
On one hand, 62% of students say they trust their schools to provide access to a full range of opinions and viewpoints. And, as noted earlier, an even larger majority (68%) say that teachers show respect for all points of view, even those they disagree with.

On the other hand, about half of students (49%) say there are restrictions on information at their schools that limit their ability to form their own opinions.

Students also weighed in on the role that parents should play in school curriculum decisions. About six in 10 say parents should have a say in what is taught, even if that goes against teachers' recommendations.

The ideological differences on this question are among the widest in the survey: 77% of students who describe their views as conservative favor parents having a say in what's taught, compared with 67% of self-described moderates and just 47% of self-described liberals.

Attitudes toward information provided by schools



Q7. Thinking about your school, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

Most students express trust in their teachers; those with higher trust are more comfortable speaking freely.

In general, students trust the teachers and administrators at their schools. Three in four (75%) say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in their teachers, and 71% say the same about coaches and instructors (such as sports or music). Smaller but still substantial majorities express trust in school counselors (67%) and principals (61%). In each case, however, only about one in five say they have a great deal of trust in these individuals. Students who trust their teachers are substantially more likely to be comfortable speaking freely in the classroom. Nine in 10 students with a great deal of trust in their teachers (91%) report feeling comfortable speaking freely always or sometimes in the classroom, compared with less than half (43%) of those who do not trust their teachers at all.

Yet students are divided over whether the adults in their lives—this includes parents or guardians as well as teachers—are overly protective in imparting information. Nearly three in 10 say adults are too protective “about what I should be allowed to see and learn about.” Slightly more (36%) say the adults in their lives are not too protective, while about as many offer no opinion.

For digitally connected teens—virtually all teens have a smartphone (93%) and most have PCs, video game consoles or other devices—parental oversight of their online activity is commonplace. About six in 10 students who have at least one of these devices say their parents monitor their online activity. Among the 81% of students on social media, most say their parents follow them or see their posts.

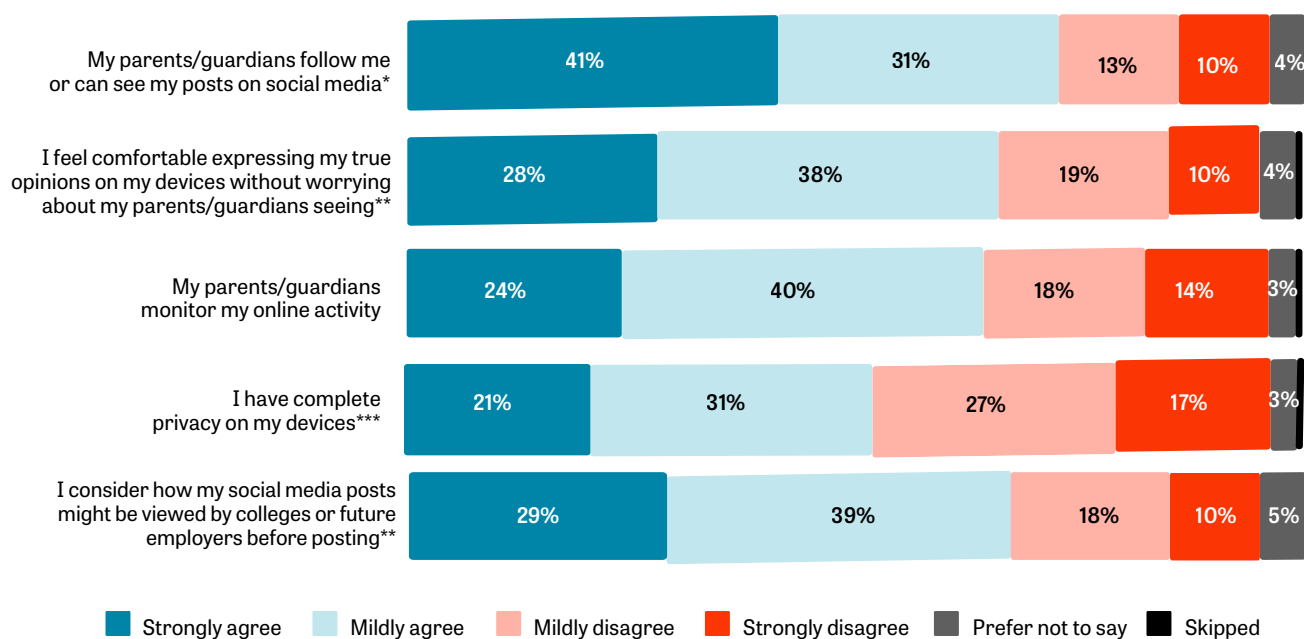
Not surprisingly, younger students (those ages 13 to 15) are more likely than teens ages 16 to 18 to say their parents track their online activity.



This level of parental scrutiny does not appear to make students more reluctant about expressing themselves online. In fact, 66% say they feel comfortable expressing their true opinions without concern that parents or others may see them. Older high school students (ages 16 to 18) are more likely to feel comfortable than students ages 13 to 15.

However, another factor may make students cautious about what views they share. Of those who are on social media (81%), roughly two in three (68%) say they consider how their expressions “might be viewed by colleges or future employers” before they post them. As mentioned above, students who have taken a class on the First Amendment are more likely to consider this.

Privacy on devices and social media



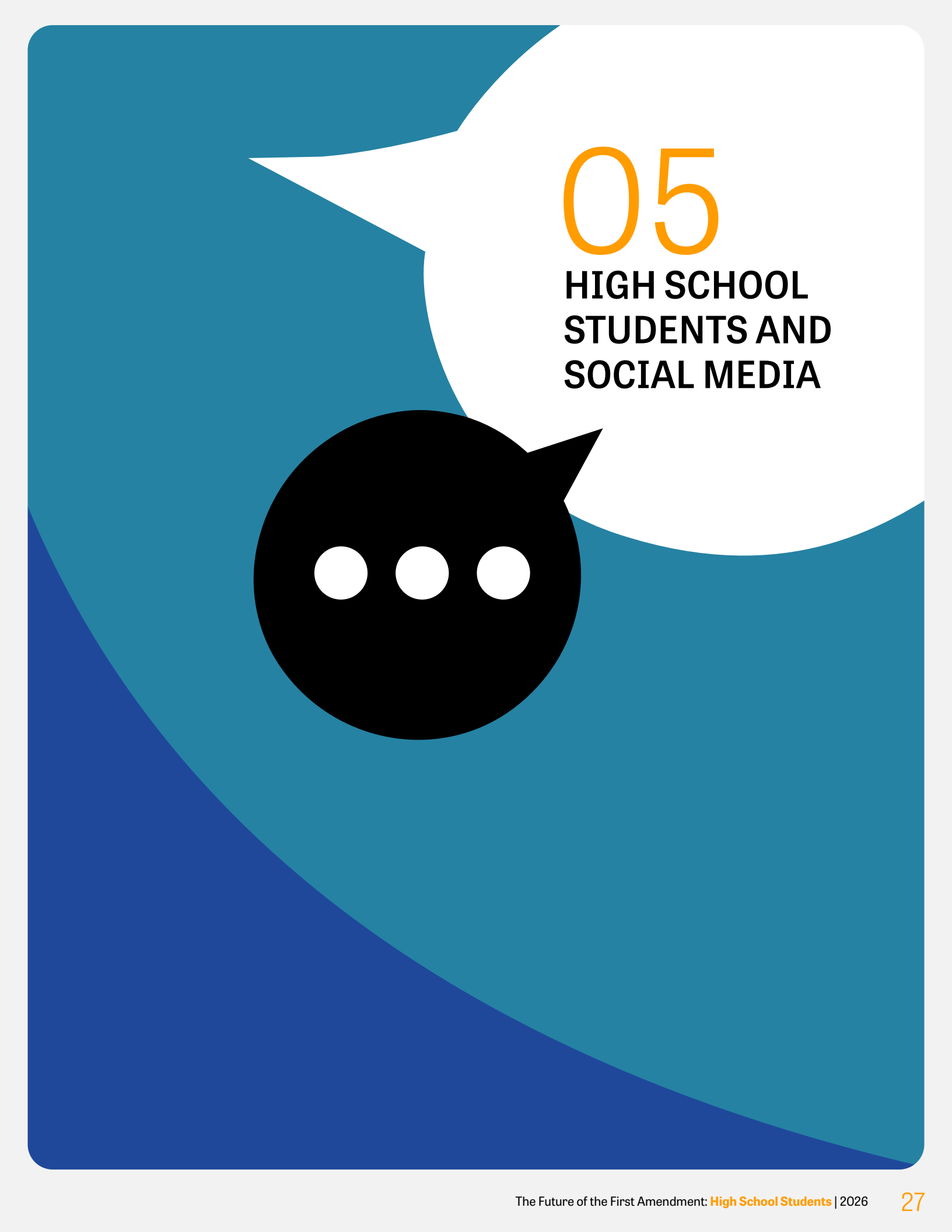
Q15. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

* = Base: High school students ages 13-18 who have a smartphone, social media account, video game console, personal computer, or tablet (n=1,139)

** = Base: High school students ages 13-18 who have a social media account (n=946)

*** = Base: High school students ages 13-18 who have a smartphone, tablet, personal computer, or video game console (n=1,138)



05

**HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS AND
SOCIAL MEDIA**

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

High school students draw distinctions between offensive speech and potentially harmful speech on social media. A majority (55%) believe that “people should be allowed to say whatever they want on social media, even if what they say is offensive to others.”

Most students also oppose censorship on social media by either the government or social media companies. However, students draw a distinction between government and private platform restrictions. Two in three (67%) say people should be allowed to express themselves on social media without government censorship. In contrast, 53% believe social media companies should be barred from blocking or censoring content.

In addition, just 28% say that the government should have the power to regulate speech on social media, if that means limiting some expression.

At the same time, most students do not go so far as to support allowing speech on social media that is threatening (68% believe this should be prohibited). In this regard, their opinions about expression on social media are somewhat similar to their views about threatening speech in public (63% think people should not be able to say threatening things in public).

Prior student surveys have asked about allowing offensive, untruthful and threatening speech on social media and in public. The share of students saying offensive speech on social media should be allowed was 55% in this survey, compared with 41% in 2022. By contrast, agreement that people should be allowed to say whatever they want in public, even if it is offensive to others, was lower in this survey than in several earlier waves of the study (see Section 1).⁴

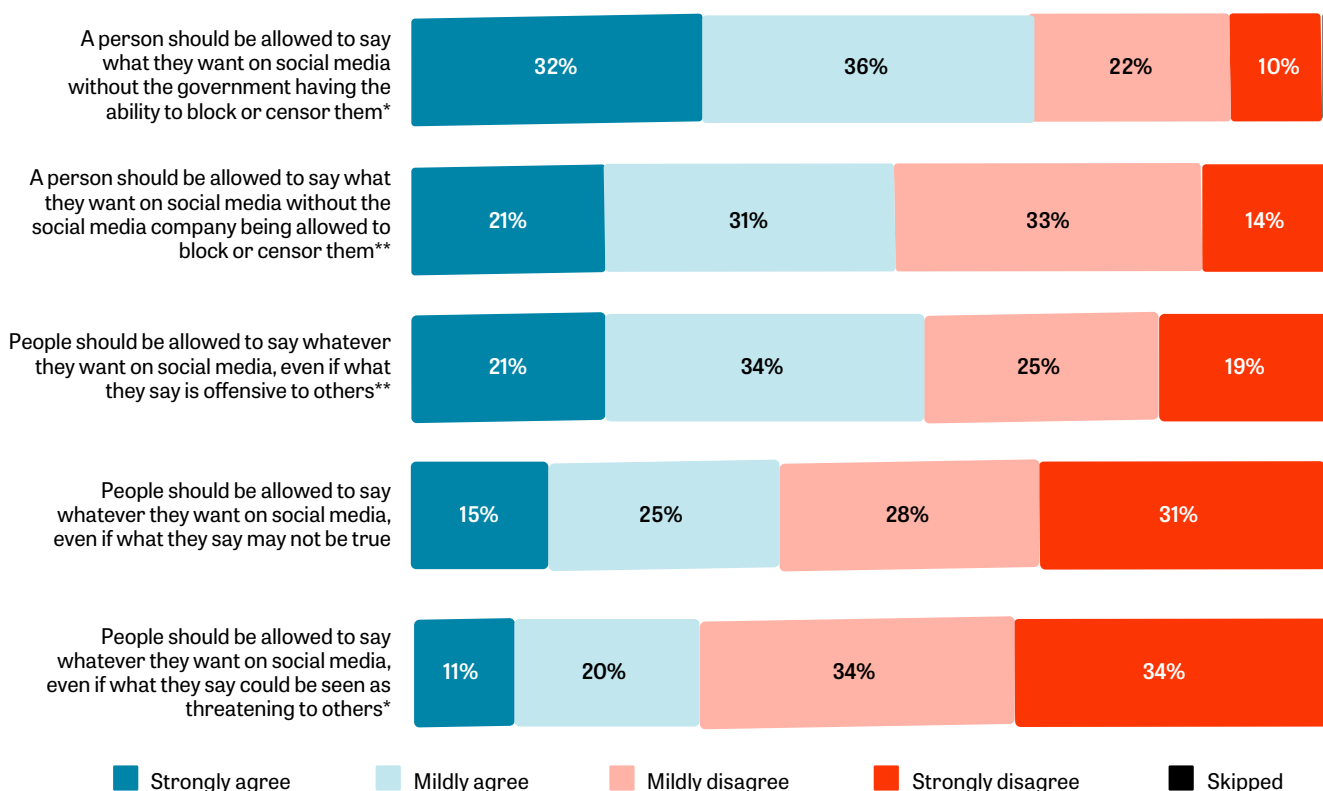
Two in three students (67%) say people should be allowed to express themselves on social media without government censorship. In contrast, 53% believe social media companies should be barred from blocking or censoring content.

4. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

Amid rising societal concern over the dangers of social media for teens and younger children, half of students say age restrictions are needed to prevent teens from seeing “harmful content,” even if it restricts them from seeing some content they want to access. Only

17% disagree that such restrictions are needed, while 34% offered no opinion. Female students, students in a household with an income of at least \$50,000, and white students are more likely to support age restrictions.

Student views on social media and free speech



Q4. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:

Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

* = Base: Split Sample A (n=597)

** = Base: Split Sample B (n=570)

Students see a 'stifling' climate for speech on social media

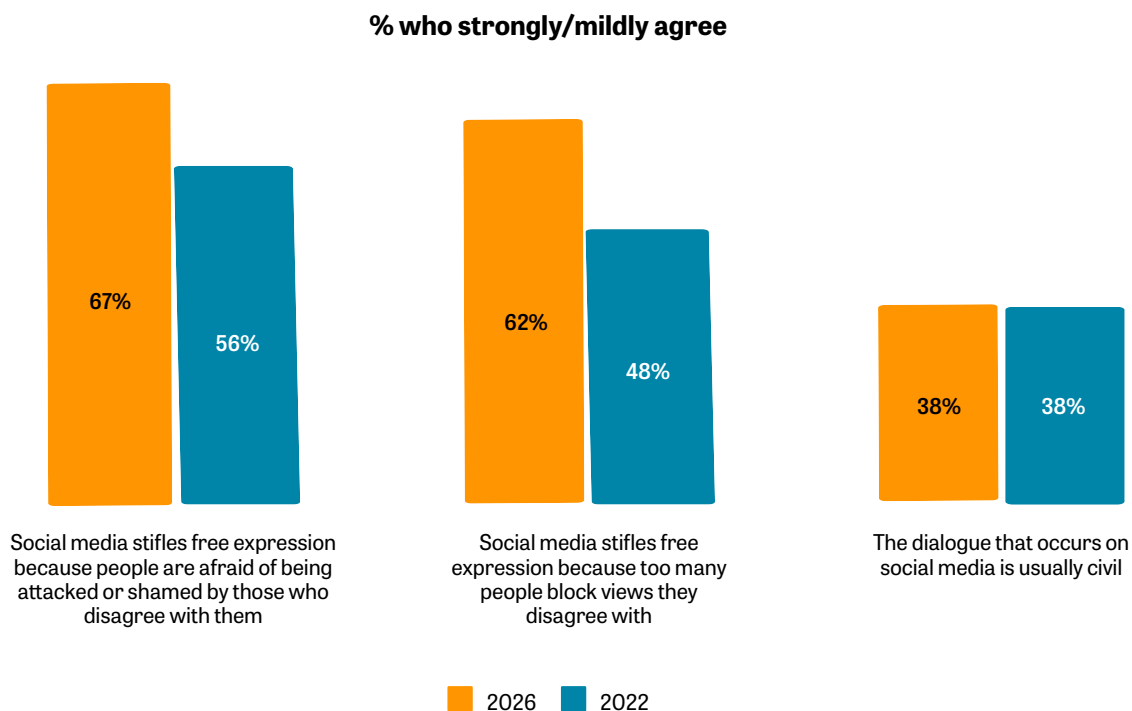
Students are largely critical of the climate for freedom of speech on social media. Two in three students say social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being blocked or shamed by others who disagree with them; 56% said this in 2022.⁴ A similar share agrees that social media stifles expression because too many people block views they disagree with (62%), up from 48% in 2022.² Male students are more likely than female students to agree that people should be allowed to say whatever they want on social media, even if it's untruthful.

What remains unchanged since 2022 is the low regard that most students have for the quality of discourse on social media. Just 38% say the dialogue on social media

is civil, which is identical to the percentage of students who expressed this view in 2022.⁴ Nearly eight in 10 say posting anonymously online allows people to express opinions they otherwise would be reluctant to share.

In terms of what they want from their own social media feeds, students are somewhat divided: 38% say they prefer a broad range of perspectives, even those they disagree with, while 27% want their feed to match their perspectives, even if that means they are exposed to a less diverse range of opinions; 35% express no opinion. Liberal and moderate students are more likely than students with a conservative ideology to prefer a broad range of perspectives.

Attitudes toward the state of free expression on social media



Q12. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:

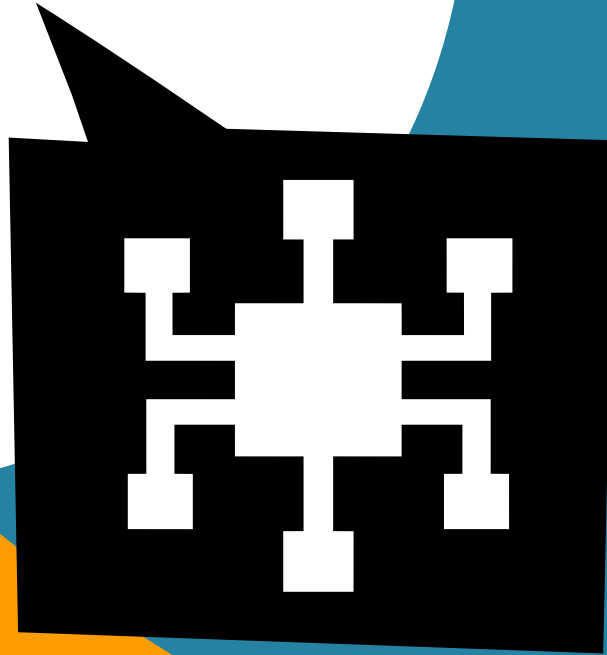
2026 Base: All respondents, High school students ages 13-18 (n=1,167)

2022 Base: All respondents, High school students (n=10,098)

4. See note about methodological changes on page 5.

06

AI AND FREE SPEECH



AI AND FREE SPEECH

The rise of AI is already having a profound impact on debates around free speech, the First Amendment and access to information. High school students broadly favor freedom of expression on AI chatbots but also support guardrails to protect against dangerous content.

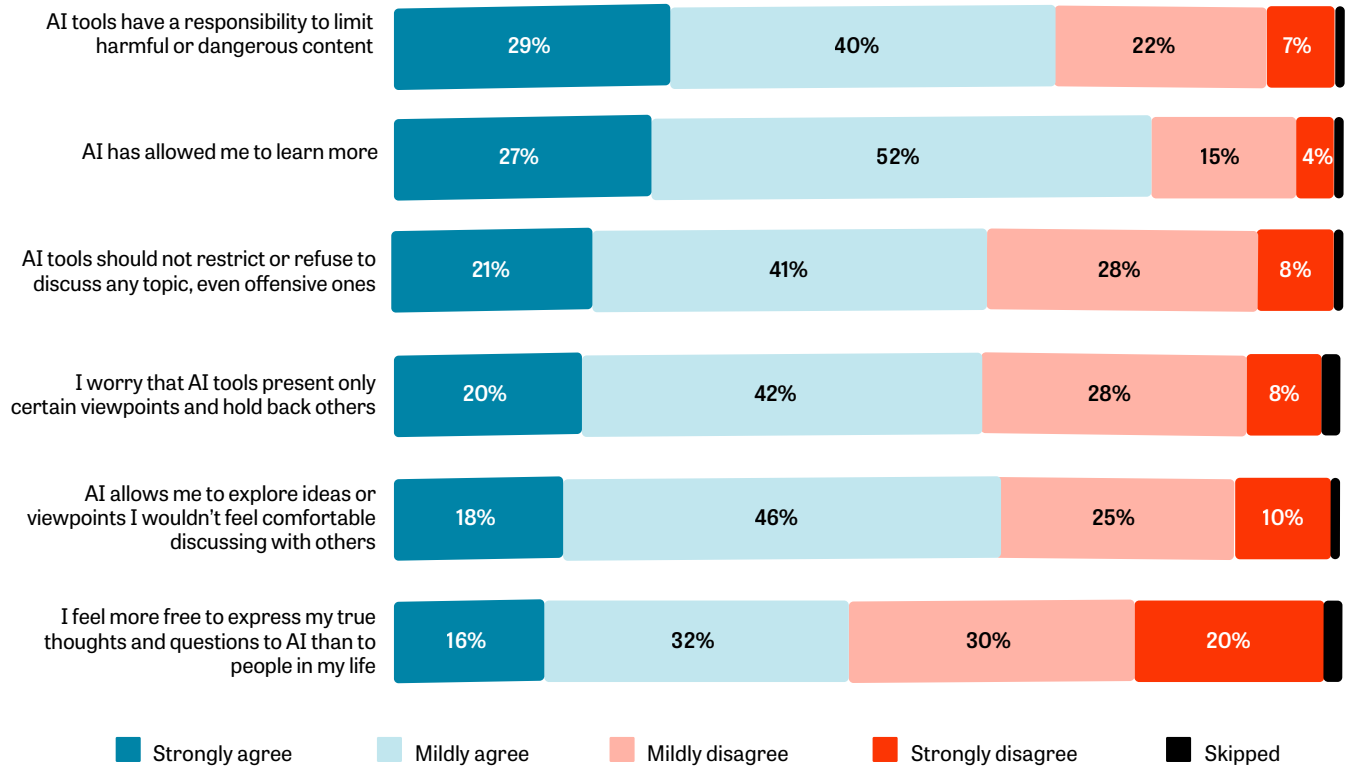
Most students have had at least some exposure to AI chatbots. While only 17% say they use them daily, an additional 44% use them weekly or monthly. AI use is higher among students in households with higher incomes than those with lower incomes.

About six in 10 students who use AI chatbots at least a few times a month say that AI chatbots should not refuse to engage on any topic, even offensive ones. Yet an even larger majority—69%—say that these chatbots also have a responsibility to limit “harmful or dangerous” content. Both opinions are widely shared among students across different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and ideological categories.

Students also express concern that AI chatbots are limiting speech and expression: 62% worry that they present only certain viewpoints while repressing other views.

Students express concern that AI chatbots are limiting speech and expression: 62% worry that they present only certain viewpoints while repressing other views.

Views on AI and freedom of expression



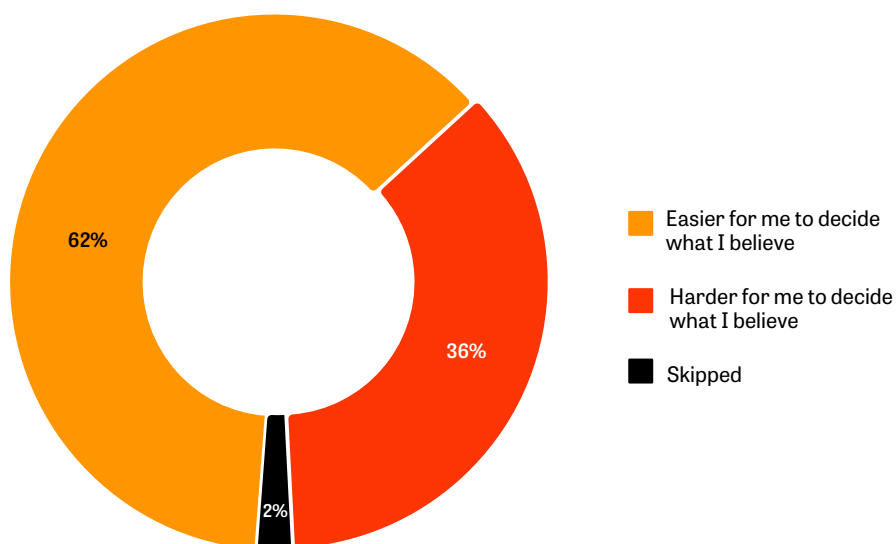
Q17. Thinking about your use of AI chatbots (such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude, etc.), how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Base: High school students ages 13-18 that use AI every day, once or twice a week, or a few times a month (n=682)

The impact of AI on student learning and the information environment

While students express concerns over AI chatbots selectively editing information, an overwhelming majority of students who have used them—79%—say the chatbots have allowed them to learn more.

Perhaps more importantly, 62% of students with experience in AI say it makes it easier for them to decide what to believe, compared with 36% who say it makes it more difficult.

Does AI make it harder or easier for students to decide beliefs?



Q18. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

Base: High school students ages 13-18 that use AI every day, once or twice a week, or a few times a month (n=682)

AI also serves as an outlet for many students to express their private thoughts and beliefs. Nearly half of students (48%) say they feel freer to share their true thoughts with AI chatbots than with people in their lives. This sentiment is more prevalent among students in households with lower incomes than among those in middle- and higher-income households. Notably, students from lower-income households are also less likely to report feeling comfortable speaking freely in the classroom, suggesting that AI may serve as an alternative outlet for expression for some students.

CONCLUSION

America's high school students face a rapidly changing landscape for speech and expression, amid the increasing dominance of social media as both a source of information and a platform for sharing opinions, as well as the emergence of artificial intelligence.

Yet the new Future of the First Amendment High School Student survey, the ninth in a series that began in 2004, finds the current generation of students as supportive of the First Amendment and free expression as past generations. More than nine in 10 say protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy. Consistent with previous waves of the study, students continue to place a high value on the right to express their views and exchange ideas.

Importantly, majorities of students even believe in protecting the right to “offensive” speech and expression, whether in public, on social media or on AI chatbots. Yet the students make a clear distinction in the case of dangerous or threatening rhetoric, which most view as unacceptable regardless of where it occurs.

The survey reveals a persistent tension between support for free expression and students' lived experiences. Students describe the climate for speech in their schools as somewhat restricted, yet they attribute this in part to a desire to not offend others. Majorities say they hold back their views from teachers and fellow classmates, mostly because they want to avoid conflict or hurting other people's feelings. In other words, students are not primarily concerned with formal censorship. Rather, they describe a climate

in which social pressures can discourage expression even when the right to speak is widely valued. This tension extends beyond the classroom. Social media platforms are not widely seen as forums for free expression; most students say they stifle free speech either because people block those they disagree with or are afraid of being attacked. And while students view AI chatbots as a valuable source of information, six in 10 worry that AI chatbots present only certain viewpoints while restricting others.

The findings suggest that the challenge facing the next generation is not simply understanding the First Amendment. It is learning how to navigate disagreement, engage with competing viewpoints and participate in open dialogue in increasingly complex information environments. Encouragingly, the findings also underscore the potential value of First Amendment education. Nearly three-quarters of students report taking a class that addressed the First Amendment, and those students are more likely to say that their rights protect people like them and that they feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions and debates.

As educators, policymakers and technology companies grapple with the future of expression, these results offer an important reminder: Today's students strongly believe in free speech, but they are still working through what it means to exercise that freedom in classrooms, the home, online spaces and AI-driven environments. Their experiences will help shape the future of free expression in America.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This is the ninth in a series of surveys of high school students and teachers sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Prior surveys were conducted in 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2022.

For past iterations of this research series, the overall design featured a multistage cluster sampling methodology. Employing this technique produced a scientific and thus generalizable survey of students and teachers in public and private high schools in the United States. This technique involved drawing a representative national sample of 50 high schools in the United States. For each school, a phone call was placed to the principal, asking if the school would be willing to participate in the project. The principals coordinated the administration of surveys to all students and teachers in their schools.

For the 2026 iteration, a methodological shift was made to now conduct the study as a nationally representative online survey. The data was collected May 6-20, 2026, by Ipsos using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel®. This poll is based on a representative sample of 1,167 current high school students, ages 13-18. The parents of the students gave their consent for their child to take the survey, which was self-administered by the student. Some differences from earlier findings may reflect methodological changes as well as real shifts in student attitudes.

The study was conducted in both English and Spanish. The data for the total sample of high school students

were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, census region, metropolitan status, grade level and household income. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). The weighting categories were as follows:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (13-14, 15, 16, 17, 18)
- Race/Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other or 2+ Races Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Grade level (Grade 9, Grade 10, Grade 11, Grade 12)
- 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)

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on the entire sample of high school students. The margin of error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.47. 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.

