



ACE Public Opinion Research: Voters' Perceptions of Higher Education Related to Speech and Viewpoint Diversity Across Campus and in the Classroom

In the summer and fall of 2022, ACE conducted public opinion research (via The Winston Group) involving several focus groups and a national survey. The survey was of 1,000 registered voters (Republicans, Democrats, and Independents), conducted online September 7–10, 2022.

Some key findings:

Bipartisan majorities said that all topics should be open for discussion on college campuses, as long as issues are fairly presented, because college students are adults—in contrast to K–12 environments, where some restrictions may be permissible.

The vast majority of those surveyed believed that it is good for college students to be exposed to a wide range of topics and viewpoints.

- Overall, 86% believed that it is good for college students to be exposed to multiple points of view (86-8, believe-do not believe). By party: Republicans (87-8), Independents (86-5), and Democrats (84-11).
- Eighty-three percent believed that having to weigh multiple points of view about a controversial topic helps students learn to think critically (83-10). Seventy-eight percent believed teaching at the college level often includes exposing students to controversial topics (78-13), while 77% believed that in some academic fields, exposure to controversial topics is part of a college education (77-14). Seventy-five percent believed part of growing up and becoming an adult involves being able to handle considering different ideas even if they are uncomfortable (75-17).
- Sixty-two percent of the electorate said that as long as they are fairly presented, all topics can be taught or discussed on college campuses, with 30% saying there are topics that should not be taught or discussed and with general agreement across party.
- Forty-three percent agreed that while there should not be limits on the kinds of topics that can be taught and discussed at colleges, there should be limits in K–12 schools. By contrast, just 33% thought there should be limits at both levels, while 18% did not think there should be any limits at either level.

Strong opposition to federal and state mandates

The public opinion research identified strong opposition to federal and state policymakers mandating what can or cannot be taught or discussed on college campuses and imposing restrictions or conditions on campus speech or curricula.

The level of trust voters had in different entities to make decisions about what should or should not be taught or discussed on college campuses also reaffirmed voters' general skepticism toward state legislators.

- When asked who should make decisions about what is allowable for discussion on public college campuses, 48% of voters overall said either college leadership (29%) or faculty

(19%). Only about one in three (34%) said either the lawmakers in the state where the college is located (17%) or the state's taxpayers (17%).

- Only 37% of voters overall said they had a lot or some trust in state legislators to make such decisions (56% said little or no trust).

Should taxpayers have a say?

There is sentiment among many Republicans, as well as a fair number of Independents and Democrats, that taxpayers should have a say in what is taught at public colleges and universities. Still, just 35% of voters overall said a lawmaker should move to restrict a topic because taxpayers should have a say.