



CIVIL DISCOURSE IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS:

THE 2020 ELECTION AND BEYOND



© 2020, National Association of Independent Schools and Pollyanna, Inc.

As the largest association of independent schools, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) co-creates the future of education by uniting and empowering our community. NAIS provides services to more than 1,900 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, including more than 1,600 nonprofit, private K-12 schools in the U.S. that are self-determining in mission and program and are governed by independent boards. Learn more at www.nais.org.

Pollyanna advances systemic change by developing stronger communities. Pollyanna works with academic and other institutions to achieve their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Through its unique conference models, discussion platforms, and racial literacy curricula, Pollyanna increases cultural competence. Learn more at www.pollyannainc.org.

NAIS and Pollyanna would like to thank the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for its support of the Election 2020 Project.



National Association
of Independent Schools



INTRODUCTION

The 2016 presidential election created a climate of political polarization that few Americans had experienced before. In schools across the country, the divisive rhetoric and partisan combativeness affected even the youngest students. Many school leaders, administrators, and teachers reported feeling unprepared to manage the situations in their schools.

Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, many school leaders want to ensure that their communities nurture open, respectful interaction among diverse groups. They seek to engage students in the civic process and create climates that welcome authentic dialogue, but some worry that fostering political discussion could inflame divides.

To help schools address these concerns, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and Pollyanna, Inc. collaborated to gather information about independent school educators' experiences before and after the 2016 election and their hopes for the 2020 election season. Between August and September 2020, the organizations administered a survey to heads of school, administrators, and teachers. The survey responses suggest key lessons from the 2016 election. This report also provides suggestions to help educators foster civil discourse in their communities during the 2020 election season.

**Note: Some figures do not equal 100 due to rounding.*

CHAPTER 2

MANAGING UP AND MANAGING DOWN IN DIVISIVE TIMES:

Independent School Administrators and the 2020 Presidential Election

“Without a single doubt, this year’s election is the most important one in my lifetime. The future of our culture and our country depend upon it like never before.”

ADMINISTRATOR RESPONDING TO THE SURVEY

Administrators consistently offered a common viewpoint on the 2020 election: The stakes are high.

Many administrators hope to avoid the antagonism that characterized some independent school campuses in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Given that many administrators are deeply engaged in the work of racial and social justice, as well as burdened with the extra management and logistical challenges of reconvening school amid COVID-19, many administrators also expressed a concern that programming for the election was on the “back burner,” potentially leaving their communities vulnerable to rancor and division in November and beyond.

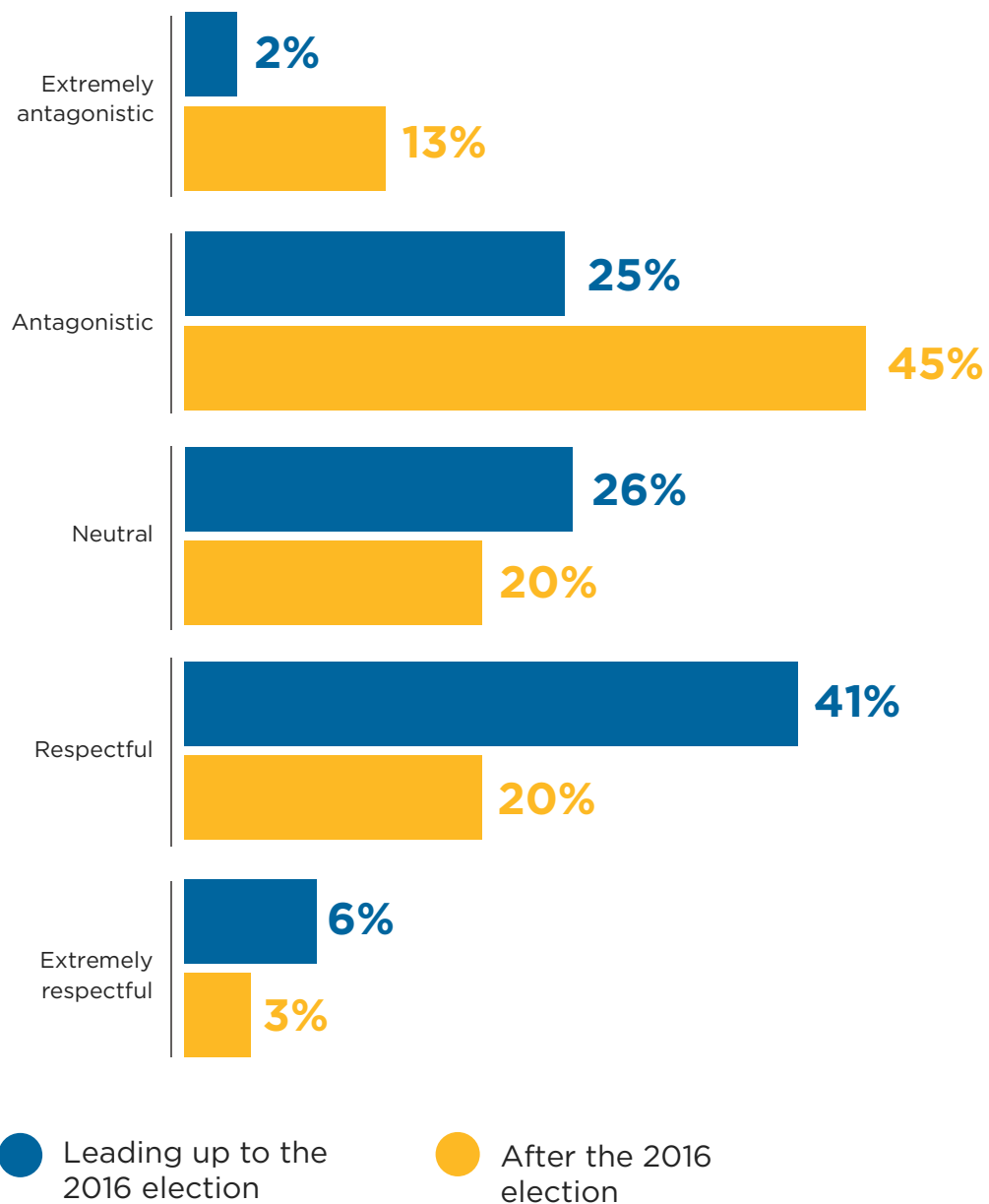
Statistically, the responses of administrators mostly aligned with the responses of school heads. However, when digging deeper, particularly into the open-ended responses, administrators offer insights into the specific challenges of their roles on campus. Because administrators often sit at the intersection of the students and families they serve, the faculty they supervise, and the head to whom they are accountable, many are challenged to manage in multiple directions at once.

Like heads of school, administrators hope to employ more resources and election-related curricula to prepare for election season and nurture more civil discourse. However, unlike heads, administrators seem slightly more comfortable engaging more personally in political discussion in order to create conversations that are both civil and authentic.

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Slightly less than half of administrators (47%) surveyed believed their school’s political climate was “respectful” or “extremely respectful” prior to the 2016 election. This shifted to more than half (58%) feeling that their school’s political climate had become “antagonistic” or “extremely antagonistic” after the election.

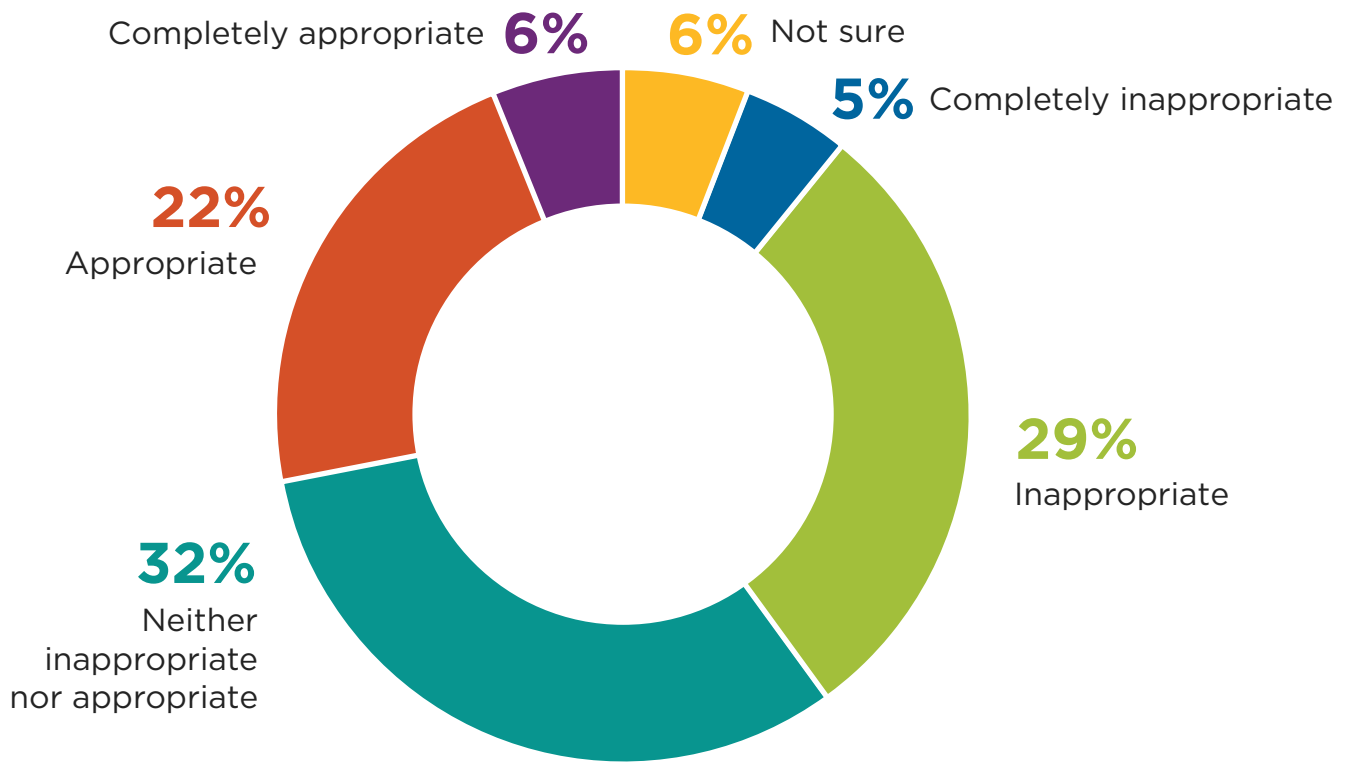
Thinking back to the 2016 presidential election, how respectful or antagonistic was the political climate at your school?



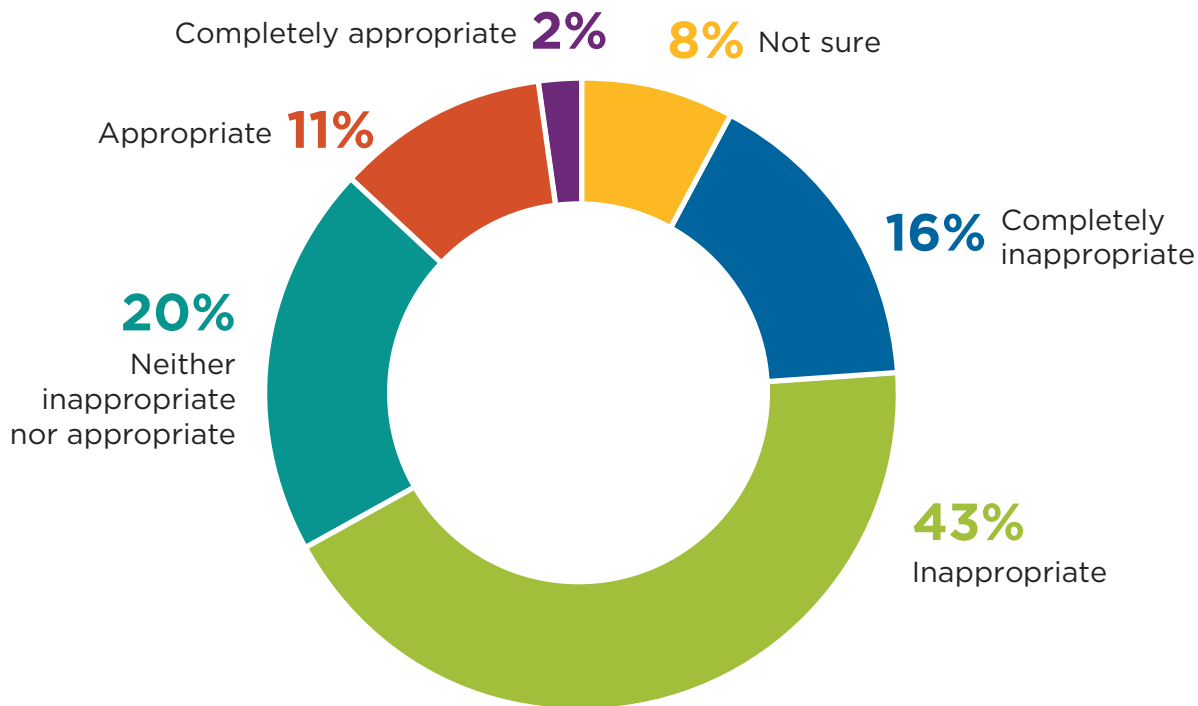
SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

More than one-third of administrators surveyed believe it is inappropriate to share their political views with the school community. Significantly more heads (64% of heads said inappropriate or completely inappropriate) reported it was inappropriate for them to share their political views with the community, perhaps indicating a greater willingness to engage personally among senior administrators. Well over half of administrators (59%) indicated that it was inappropriate for faculty to share their personal political views with students on campus.

How appropriate or inappropriate is it to share your political views, party affiliation, or the presidential candidate you support with members of your school community?



At your school, is it generally considered appropriate or inappropriate for faculty/staff to share personal political views with students?



“ After parental complaints after 2016, we were asked to take our political views out of the classroom.”

“ Teachers are told they are not to reveal their positions, but students are allowed to say whatever they want, even if it is at the expense of other students....especially if their parents hold powerful positions within the school or as donors.”

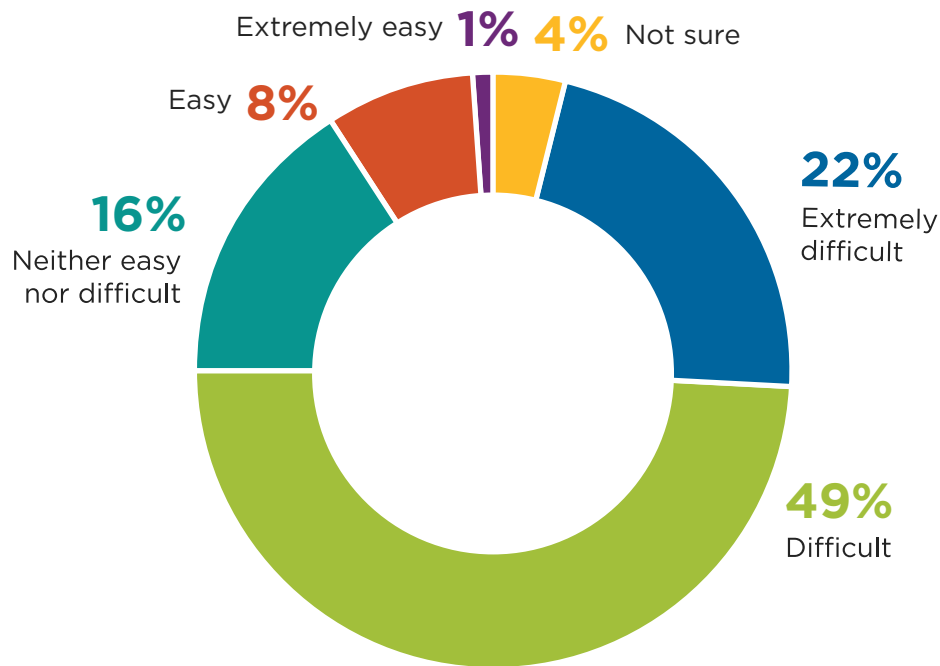
“ [It's] inappropriate if you hold conservative views.”

“ Entirely comfortable [discussing] with my peers and uncomfortable with students. I am comfortable discussing facts and policies with the students.”

EXPRESSING “UNPOPULAR” OPINIONS

A strong majority of administrators (71%) characterized their schools as places where it is difficult to express an “unpopular” opinion, thus pointing to a larger breakdown in the ability to engage in civil discourse in the current political climate.

Thinking about your school community during the 2016 presidential election, how easy or difficult do you think it was for individuals or groups of individuals who held unpopular views or opinions to be heard?



“(We should) encourage teachers to talk about the election rather than sweep comments and feelings away under the guise of irrelevant content.”

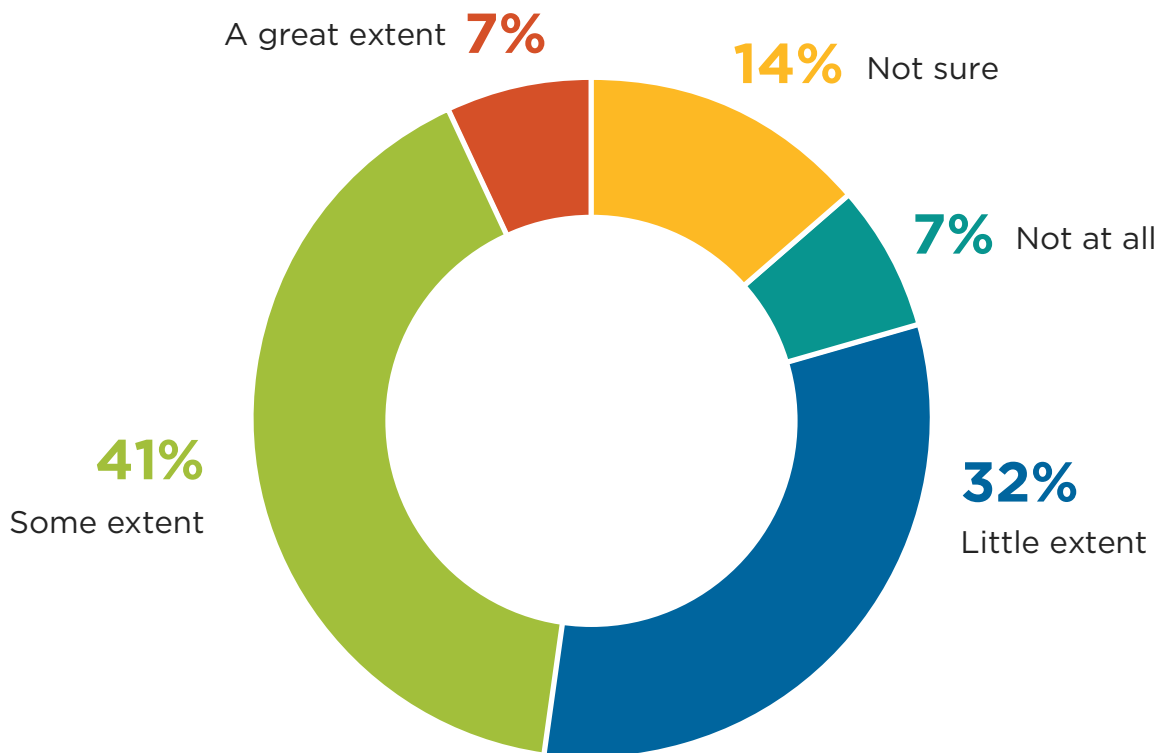
“Faculty need to know and be brave enough to have and moderate tough conversations. Our students need to see us model this so they can turn and do the same.”

“Faculty and staff may need coaching on how to confidently have conversations with students and adults on political issues. Sometimes faculty are afraid of class discussions being politicized and then retaliation.”

INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Less than half of administrators believed that different political perspectives were being included in classrooms at their school. This, in combination with the difficulty in expressing unpopular opinions, leads to a sense that schools can be inflexible in their ability to welcome varying viewpoints. Additionally, the open-ended responses indicate that schools tend to favor some political opinions over others as a function of their cultures.

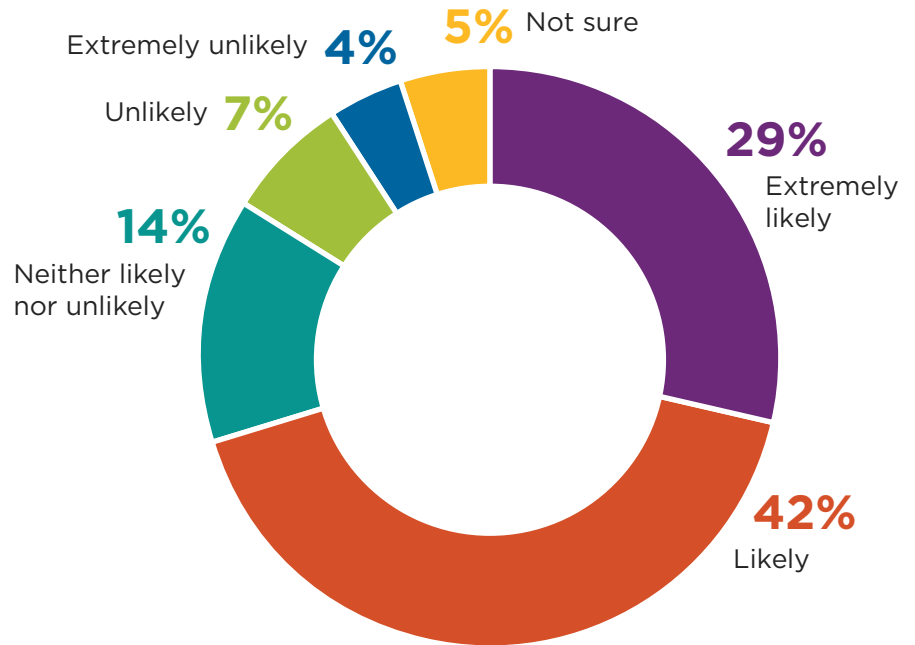
To what extent, if at all, are different political perspectives included in classroom discussions, assemblies, and choice of speakers?



CREATING PROGRAMMING

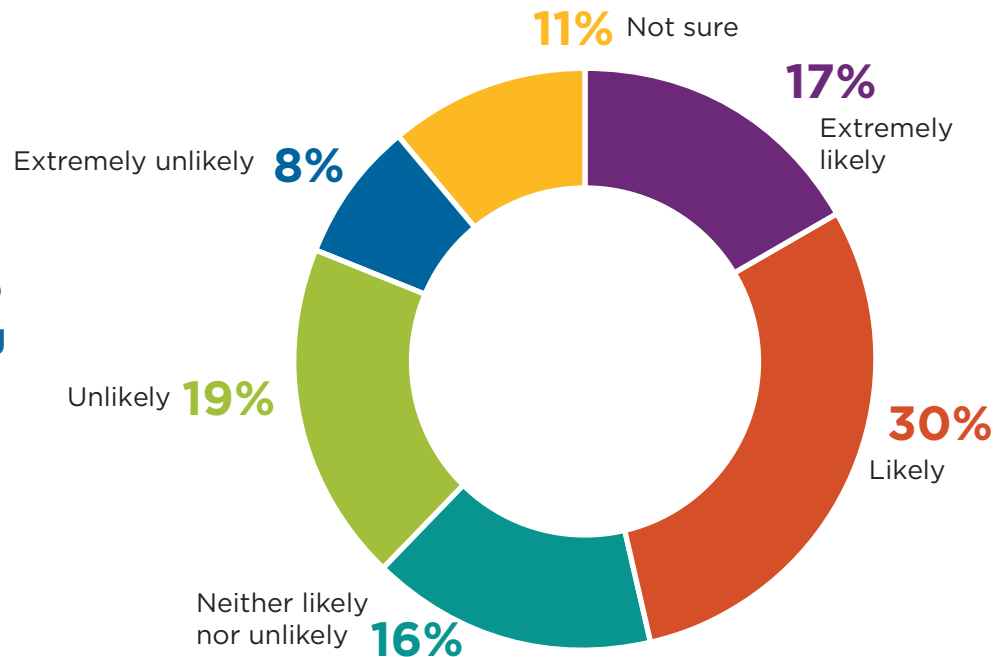
More than seven in 10 senior-level administrators report that they are likely to create election-related programming at their schools.

How likely or unlikely are you to create programming around the 2020 presidential election?



Among other administrators, less than half of those surveyed believe their school leadership is likely/extremely likely to create programming around the 2020 presidential election.

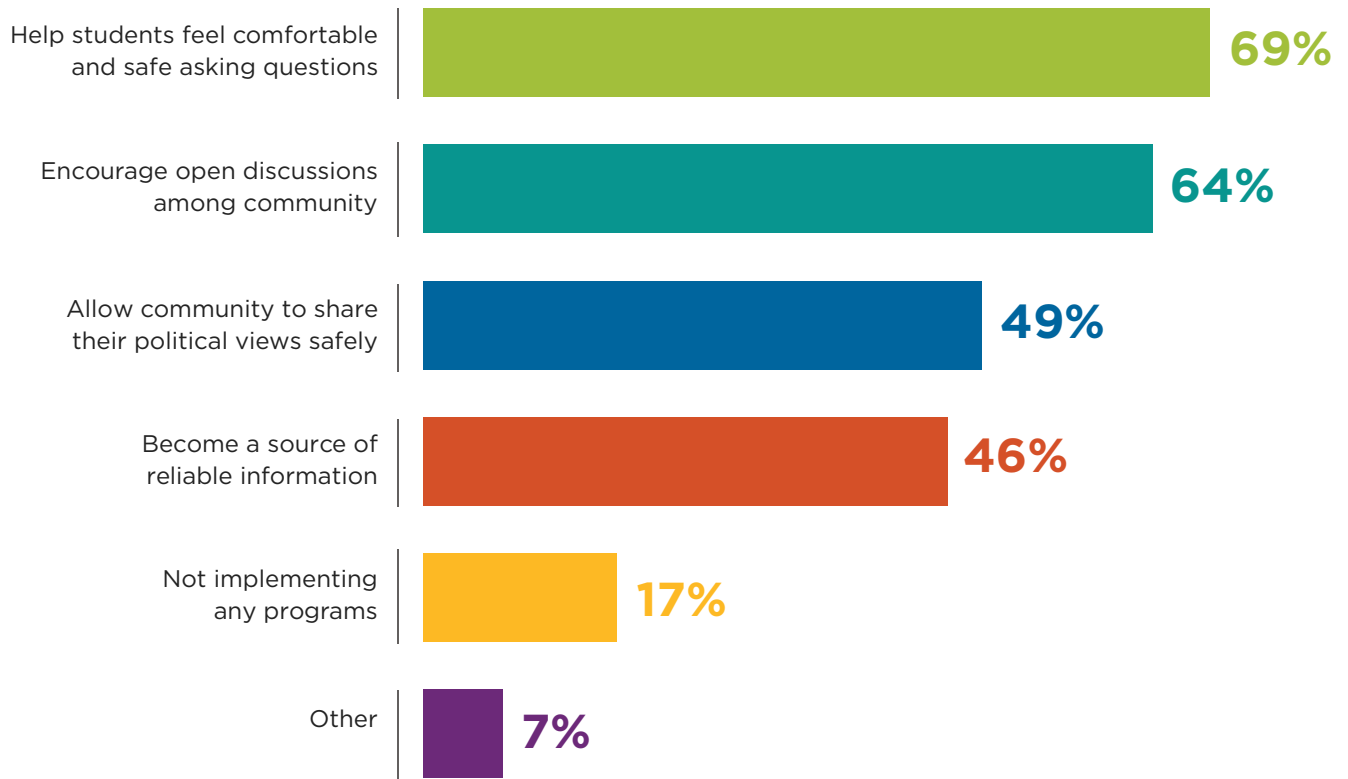
How likely or unlikely is your school leadership to create programming around the 2020 presidential election?



GOALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Administrators feel the top goals of these activities are to help students feel comfortable and safe asking questions and to encourage open discussions among the community.

What do you hope to achieve for the school community? Please select all that apply. (among 794 administrators who plan to implement programming)



“ Given the current climate (COVID, police brutality, and race relations, political divide) most of us have become more firmly entrenched in our beliefs and less likely to engage in civil discourse. I would love to have access to tools and resources that can help us facilitate conversations and manage dialogue.”

“ The Black Lives Matter movement has shown how bad things are at independent schools. Schools, their boards, and faculty should be putting up signs and organizing rallies. Neutrality is not an option.”

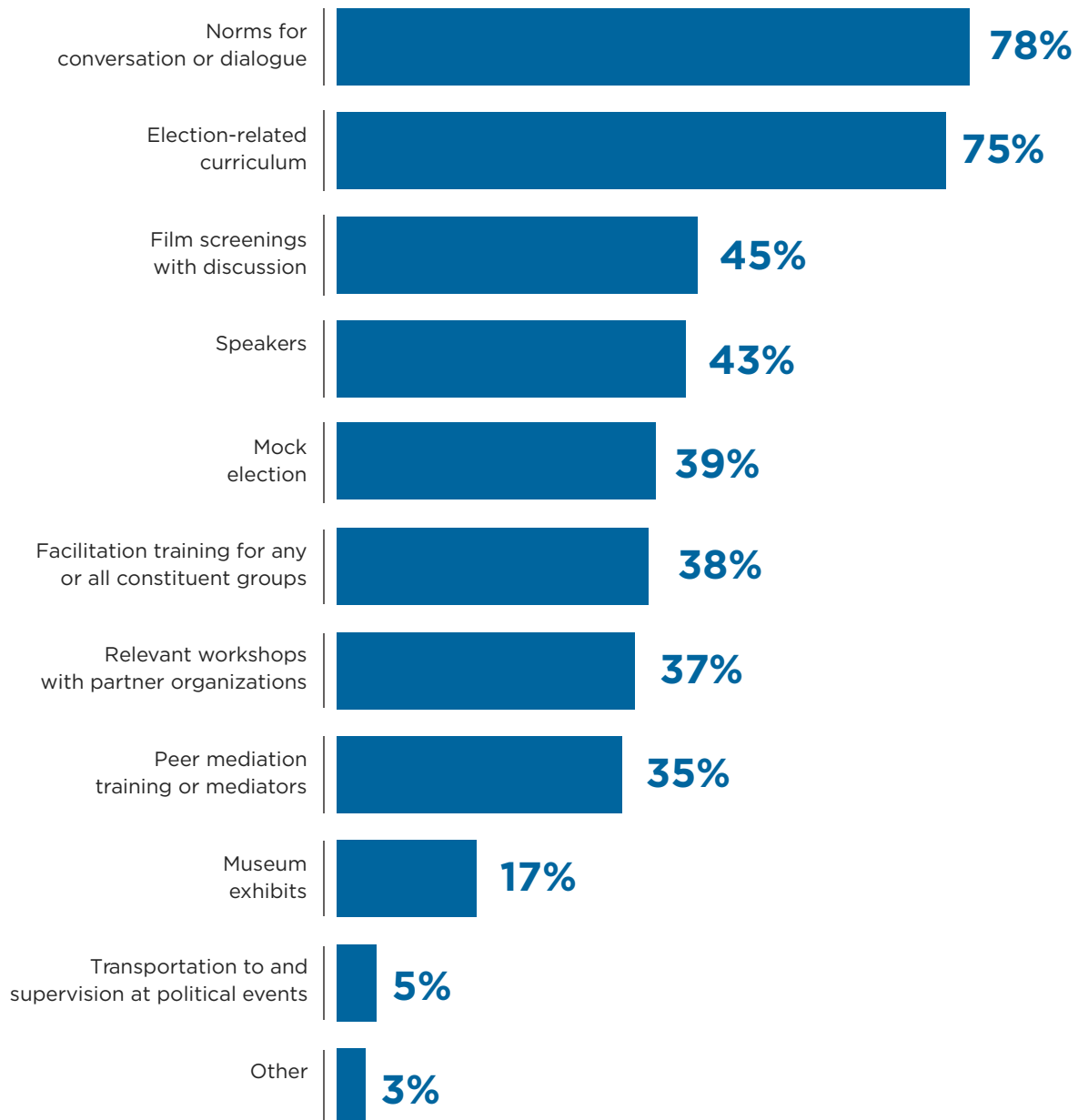
“ The faculty is very left-leaning. Anyone who doesn't ascribe to that identity is labeled and isolated.”

RESOURCES FOR THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Like heads, administrators agree that norms for conversations and election-related curricula are the top resources of interest.

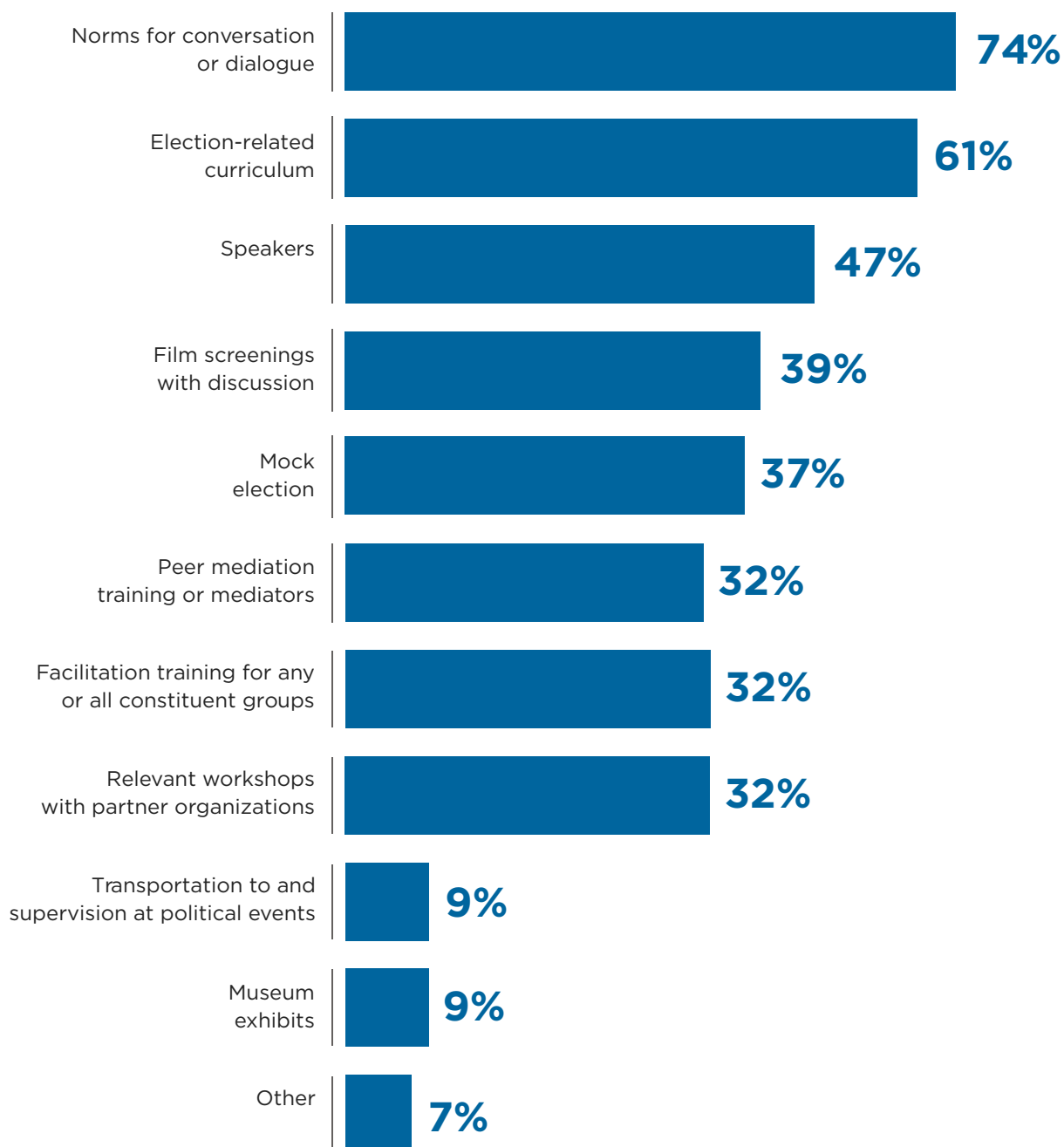
Senior administrators (including assistant heads, associate heads, curriculum directors, deans of students, directors of studies, lower school heads, middle school heads, upper school heads) were more likely to be interested in an election-related curriculum, but the offering rated highly for other administrators, too.

**Which of the following resources, if any, would you be interested in offering to your community? Please select all that apply.
(among 314 senior administrators interested in offering resources)**



Which of the following resources, if any, would you like your school to offer? (Select all that apply.)

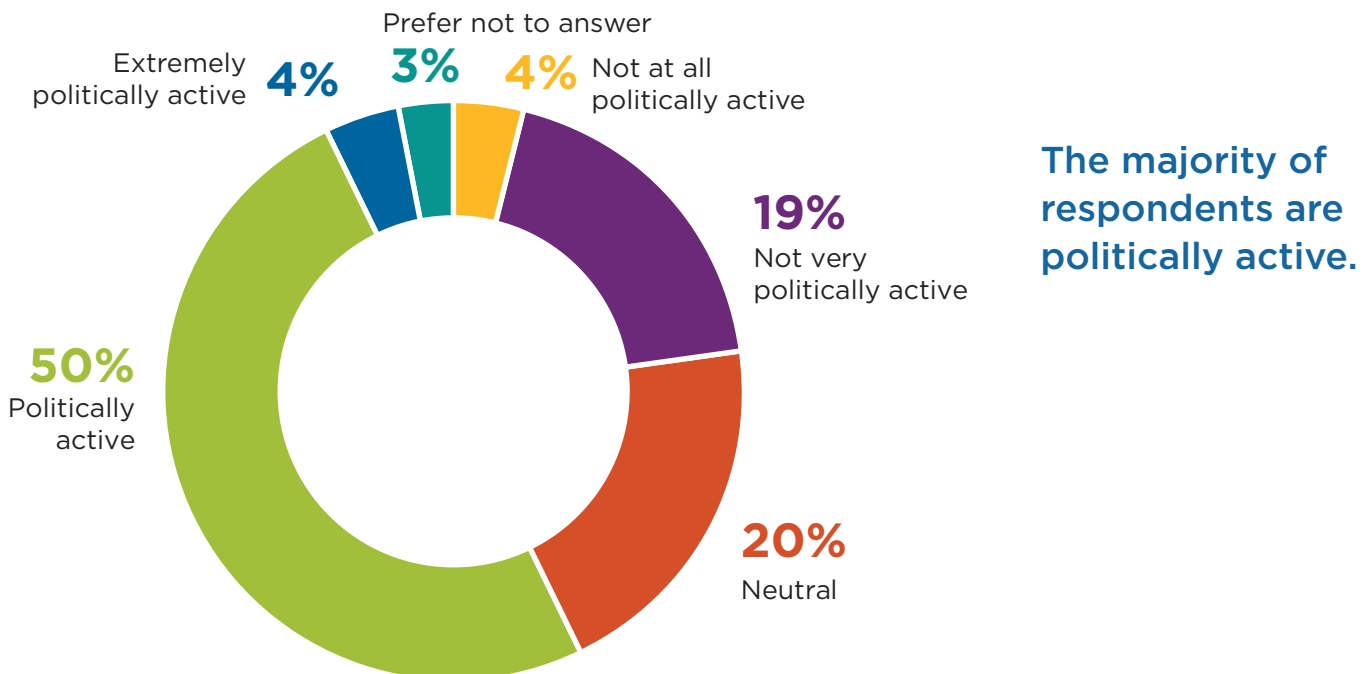
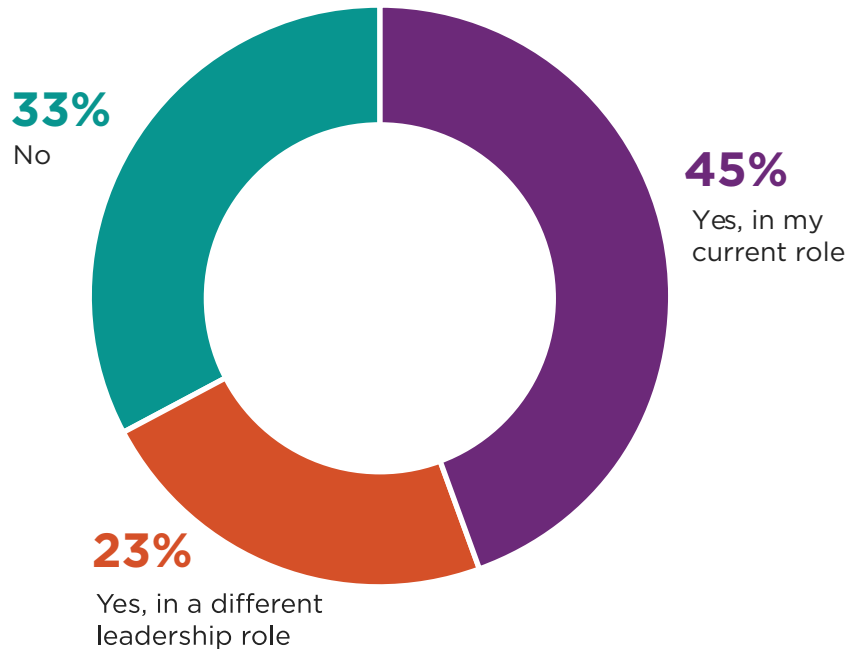
(among 585 administrators who want their school to offer resources)



SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

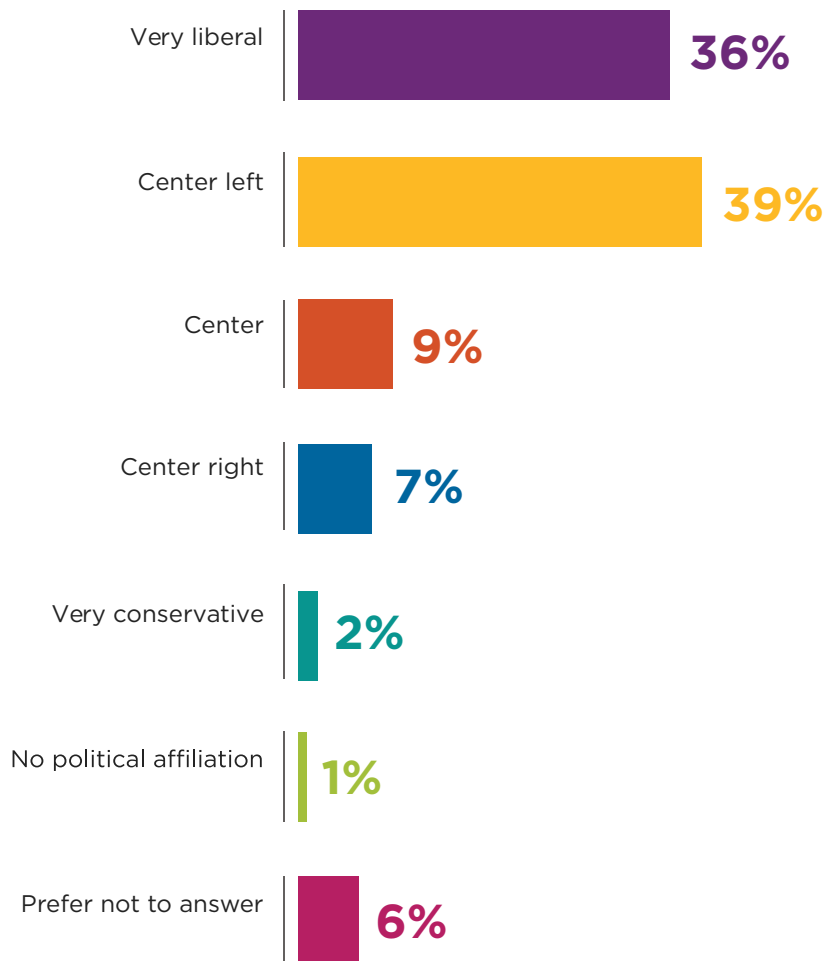
This survey was fielded among 2,630 senior administrators and 6,182 other administrators between August 4 and August 17, 2020. 425 senior administrators and 896 other administrators responded to the survey, representing a 16% and 14% participation rate, respectively.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents were in administrative roles in 2016. Fifty-six percent say they also spend time teaching.

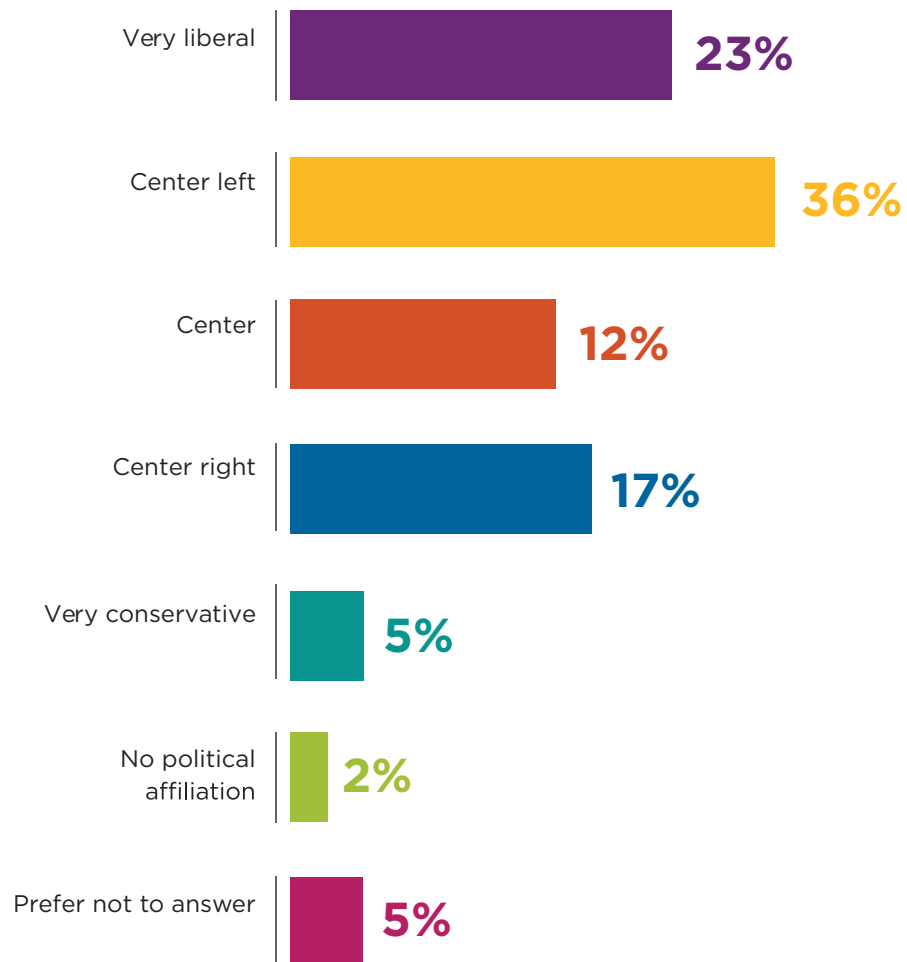


The majority of respondents are politically active.

Three-quarters of administrators identified as “very liberal” or “center left” in their personal political identification. Nine percent identified as “very conservative” or “center right.”



The majority of administrators perceive their school communities to be “center left” or “very liberal.”



DISCUSS EXPECTATIONS AND NORMS

If your head has not done so, arrange for a candid conversation discussing the following questions:

- Will our school set community-wide norms for political discussion this fall?
- Will our school have expectations and guidelines for faculty and staff regarding how they engage in displays of personal politics with students and families?
- Will our school offer social/emotional support (i.e., counselors, affinity spaces) for students, faculty, and staff during election season?

SHARE TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN CIVIL DISCOURSE

Consider using and sharing with faculty and staff the following resources for breaking down monolithic political viewpoints and engaging in civil discourse, all of which offer guidelines, lesson plans, activities, and resources for schools:

- [Civil Discourse Curriculum](#) (Teaching Tolerance)
- [Fostering Civil Discourse](#) (Facing History and Ourselves)
- [2020 Election Resources](#) (ProCon.org)

ROLE-PLAY AND PRACTICE

Role-play and practice political conversations using your norms in faculty and staff meetings. Don't let the burden fall too heavily on humanities teachers. Make sure all adults are equipped to intervene to help students engage in civil discourse.

BUILD SYSTEMS FOR EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Before election day, plan ways to support all members of your community. Prioritize students, but remember that faculty may also benefit from social-emotional support resources.

COMMUNICATE USING YOUR SCHOOL'S MISSION AND VALUES

Consider how you might communicate with faculty and staff and families about your hopes for how they will interact with students and reflect the best of your school's values during election season. Remind them that students always mirror the behaviors of the trusted adults. Their comportment during election season matters greatly.