CIVIL DISCOURSE IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS:

THE 2020 ELECTION AND BEYOND

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.

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 3

BALANCING BELIEFS, EMOTIONS, AND PRACTICE:
The Tensions for Teachers During an Election Year

"Teachers felt there was more that could have been done around providing a space and/or facilitating conversations rather than ignoring or not giving the election the attention it needed."

TEACHER RESPONDING TO THE SURVEY

The survey of independent school teachers revealed a sentiment that was hardly surprising: Many teachers do not recall the period of time following the 2016 election fondly. Overall, they characterized the time as marked by antagonism in their school communities. They felt a lack of clear support from school leadership and hoped for more resources to support students.
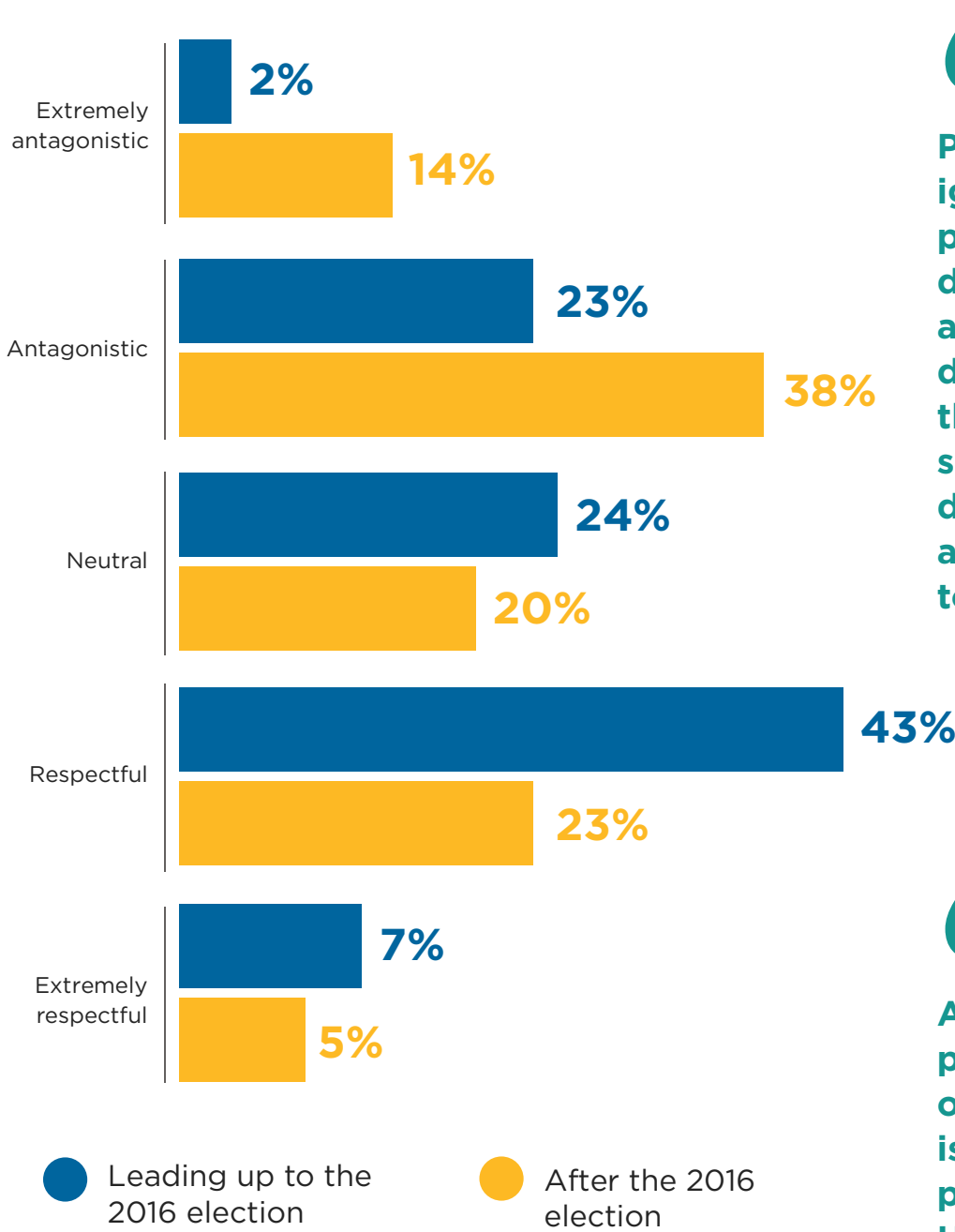
Many teachers expressed that a possible roadblock to successfully navigating election season is a sense that sharing their personal political views is inappropriate, thus limiting their ability to engage authentically in conversation. However, the survey results also revealed that many teachers feel *comfortable* sharing their views within their school community. This suggests that teachers could benefit from more clarity about their role in political conversations during election season. Many teachers also acknowledged the difficulty of expressing "unpopular" opinions at their institutions.

A key question in 2020 is: How can a teacher appropriately model civil discourse and express themselves authentically while also being mindful of the power they carry with students?

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Teachers felt a significant shift from a respectful political climate prior to the 2016 election to an antagonistic political climate after the election.

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

Extremely antagonistic
- 2%
- 14%

Antagonistic
- 23%
- 38%

Neutral
- 24%
- 20%

Respectful
- 43%
- 23%

Extremely respectful
- 7%
- 5%

● Leading up to the 2016 election   ● After the 2016 election

> **Politics were ignored and political discussions were avoided—perhaps discouraged. I feel that our school shies away from difficult discussions and controversial topics."**
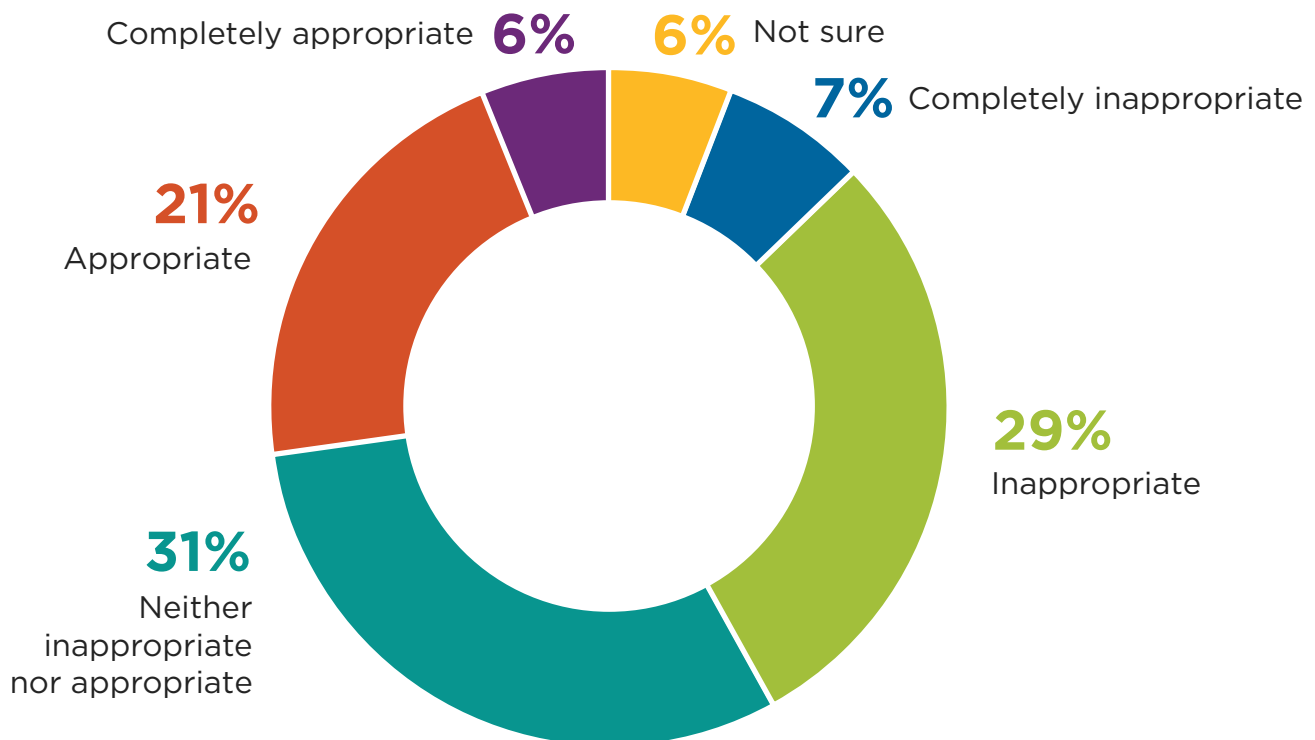
> **Adults should have planned for either outcome (my sense is that we generally planned only for an H.C. victory)."**
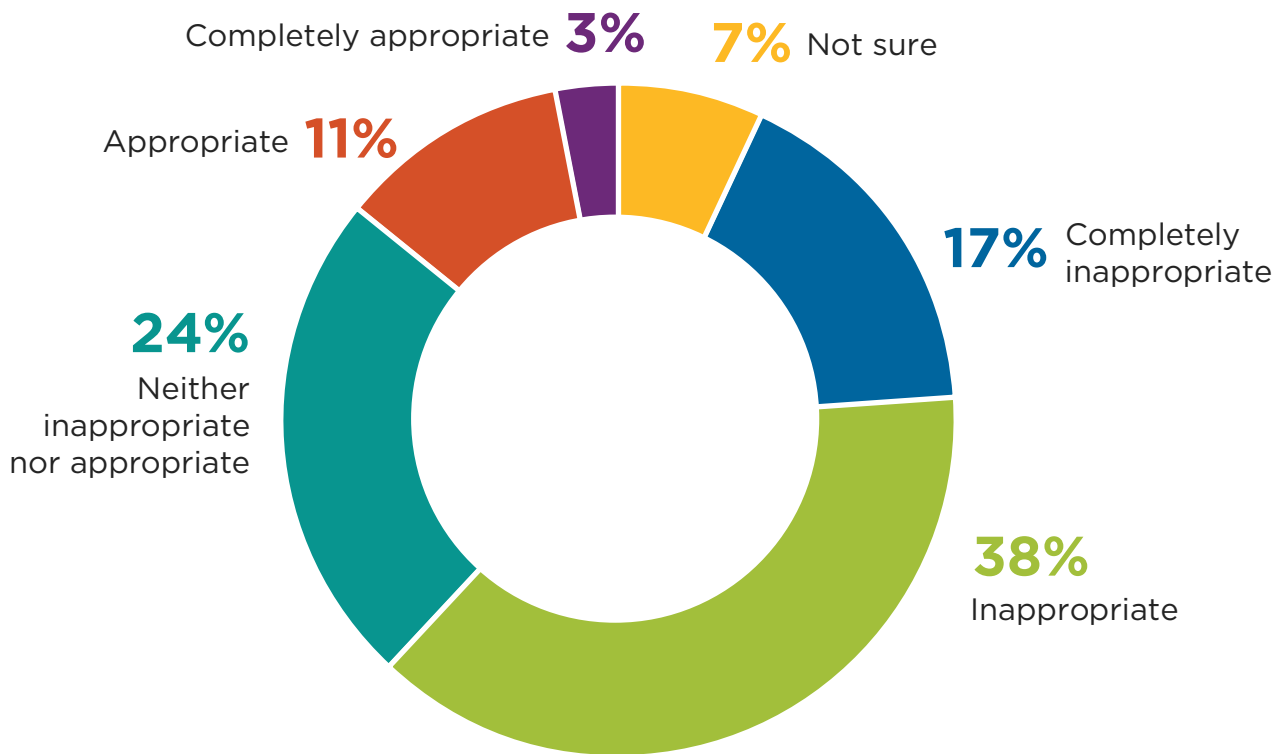
SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

Questions about appropriateness and comfort sharing personal political views highlighted a significant gap among teachers. When surveyed, less than one in three (27%) teachers said it was considered appropriate at their school to share personal views with members of their community while even fewer (14%) indicated it was considered appropriate to share these views with students.

However, when asked if they were *comfortable* sharing these views, over half (56%) said they would be comfortable sharing with members of their community, while slightly more (60%) said they felt comfortable having political discussions with students.
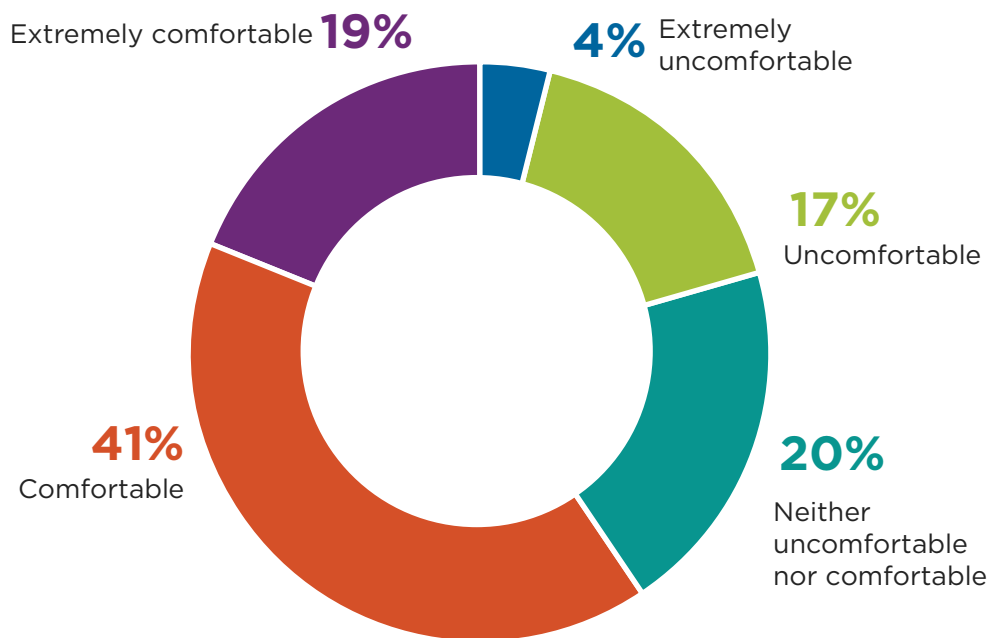
At your school, is it generally considered appropriate or inappropriate to share your political views, party affiliation, or the presidential candidate you support with members of your school community?

Completely appropriate **6%**   **6%** Not sure

7% Completely inappropriate

21% Appropriate

29% Inappropriate

31% Neither inappropriate nor appropriate

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

Completely appropriate **3%**

7% Not sure

Appropriate **11%**

17% Completely inappropriate

24% Neither inappropriate nor appropriate

38% Inappropriate

How comfortable or uncomfortable are you sharing your political views, party affiliation, or the presidential candidate you support with other members of the school community?

Extremely comfortable **15%**

2% Not sure

7% Extremely uncomfortable

19% Uncomfortable

16% Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable

41% Comfortable

Extremely comfortable **19%**

4% Extremely uncomfortable
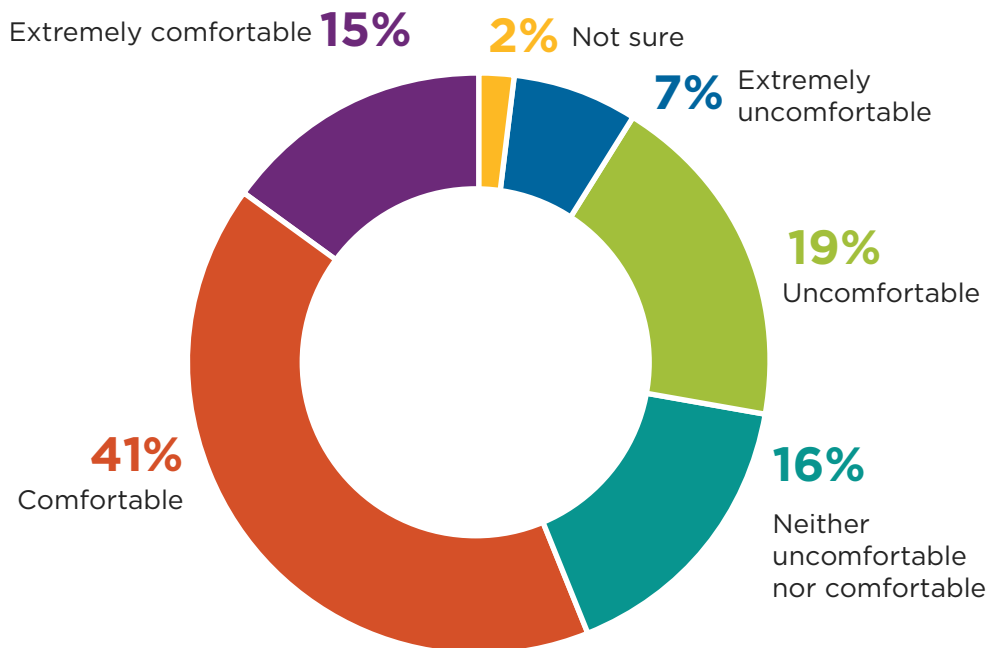
17% Uncomfortable

How comfortable or uncomfortable are you having political discussions with your students?

20% Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable

41% Comfortable

EXPRESSING "UNPOPULAR" OPINIONS

Approximately two-thirds of teachers responded that it was difficult or extremely difficult for community members to express views that did not align with majority views in their school communities during the 2016 election.

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?

Extremely easy **2%** **4%** Not sure

Easy **8%**

19%
Neither easy nor difficult

18%
Extremely difficult

49%
Difficult
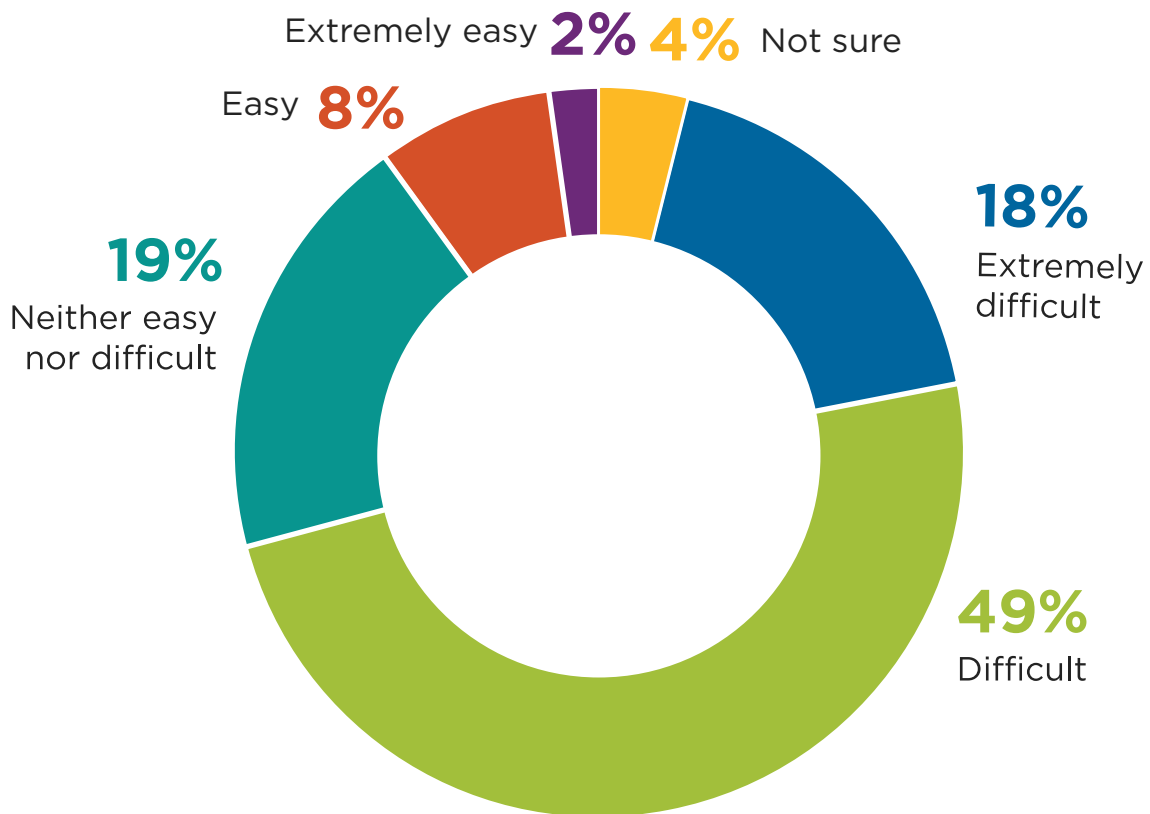
INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Close to five in 10 teachers (47%) agree that different political perspectives are included to some extent or to a great extent in classroom discussions, assemblies, and speakers in their school communities.
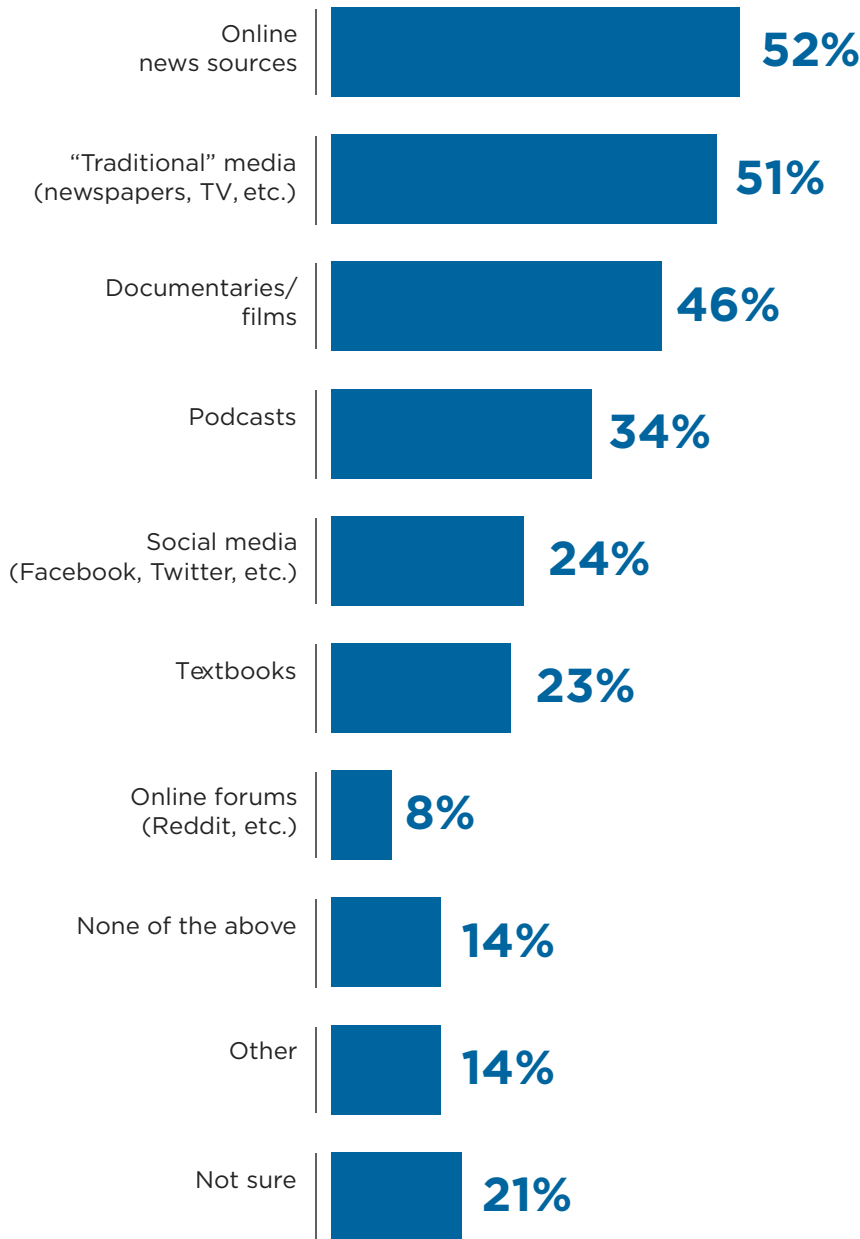
To what extent, if at all, are different political perspectives included in classroom discussions, assemblies, and choice of speakers?

A great extent **6%**   **9%** Not sure

9% Not at all

41%
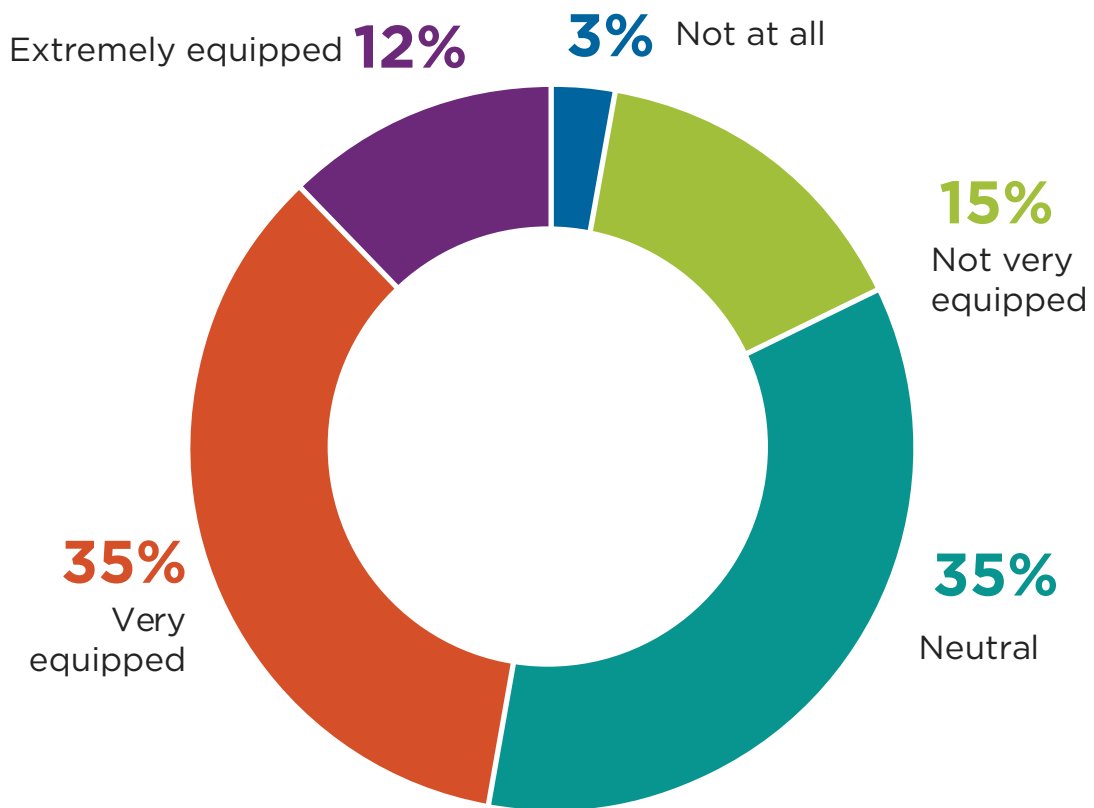Some extent

34%
Little extent
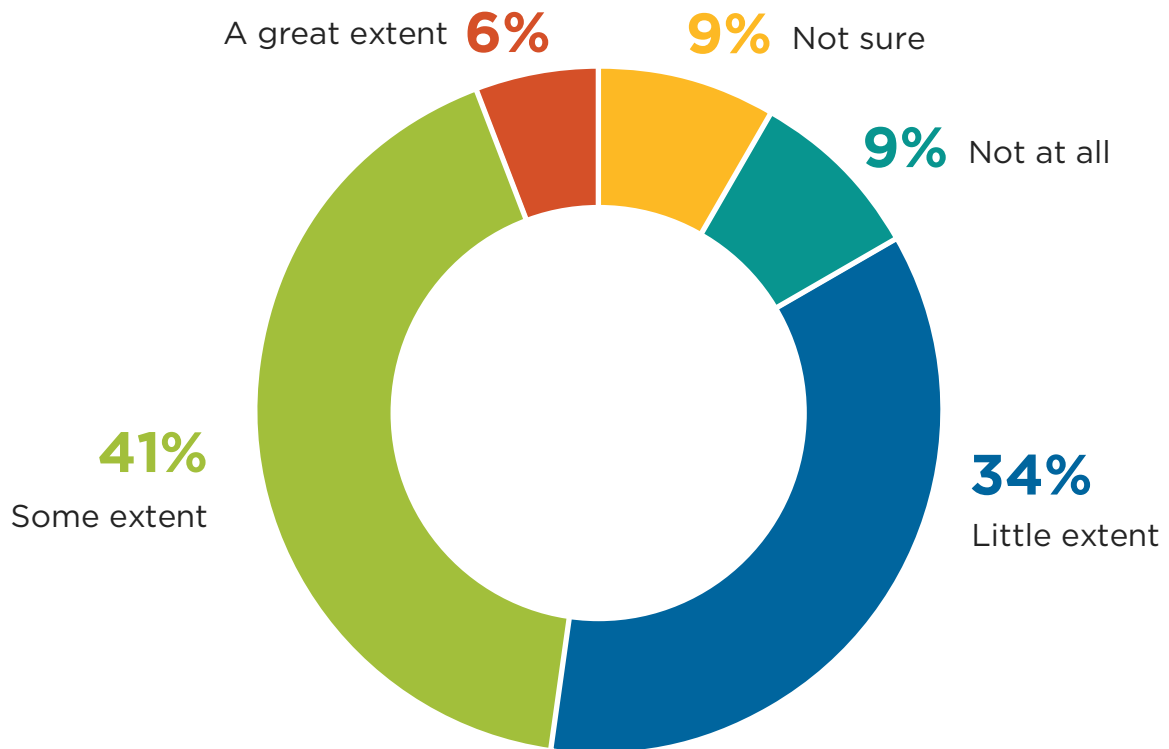
PLANS TO HAVE POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS WITH STUDENTS

Teachers plan on using online news sources, traditional media, and documentaries as resources to teach students how to evaluate political facts. However, slightly less than half (47%) of all teachers surveyed feel equipped to have political conversations with students.

Which of the following resources, if any, do you plan to use to help students evaluate political facts?

Resource	Percentage
Online news sources	52%
"Traditional" media (newspapers, TV, etc.)	51%
Documentaries/films	46%
Podcasts	34%
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	24%
Textbooks	23%
Online forums (Reddit, etc.)	8%
None of the above	14%
Other	14%
Not sure	21%

How equipped, if at all, do you feel to have political conversations with your students?

Extremely equipped **12%**

3% Not at all

15% Not very equipped

35% Very equipped

35% Neutral

SUPPORT TEACHERS HOPE TO RECEIVE

Teachers are most interested in election-related curriculum and speakers to support their efforts with students. Four out of 10 teachers also hoped for facilitation training to help with political conversations.

Which of the following, if any, would be of interest to you in supporting any political discussions with your students? Please select all that apply.

Election-related curriculum: **57%**

Speakers: **42%**

Facilitation training for any or all constituent groups: **40%**

Mediation training or mediators: **33%**

None of the above: **15%**

Other: **7%**
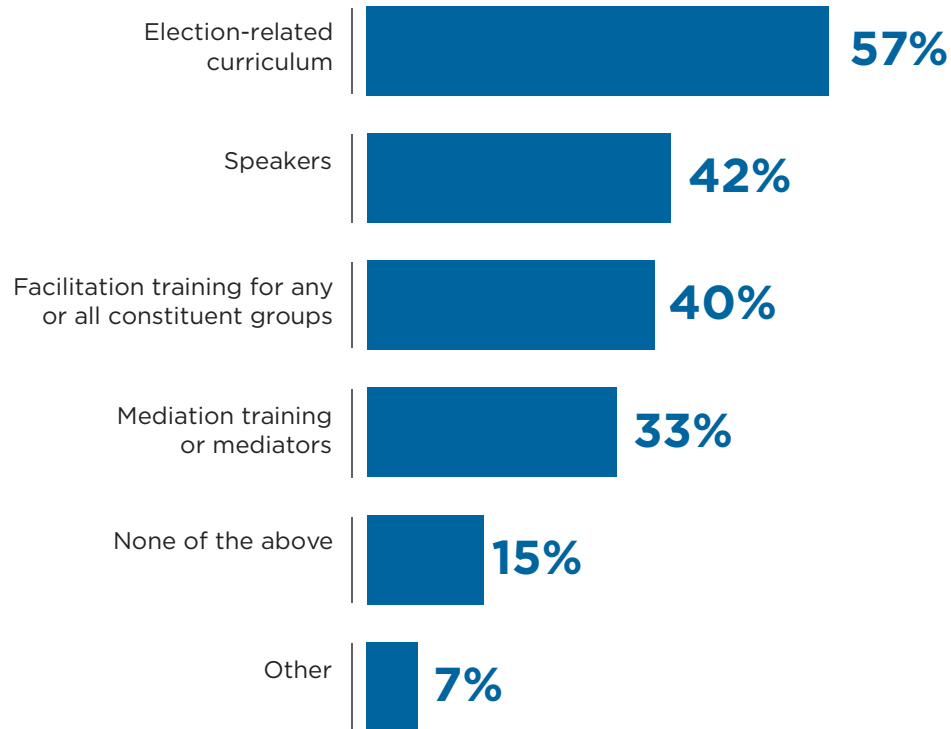
> **A little support in how to facilitate discussion to be inclusive of the unpopular perspective...."**
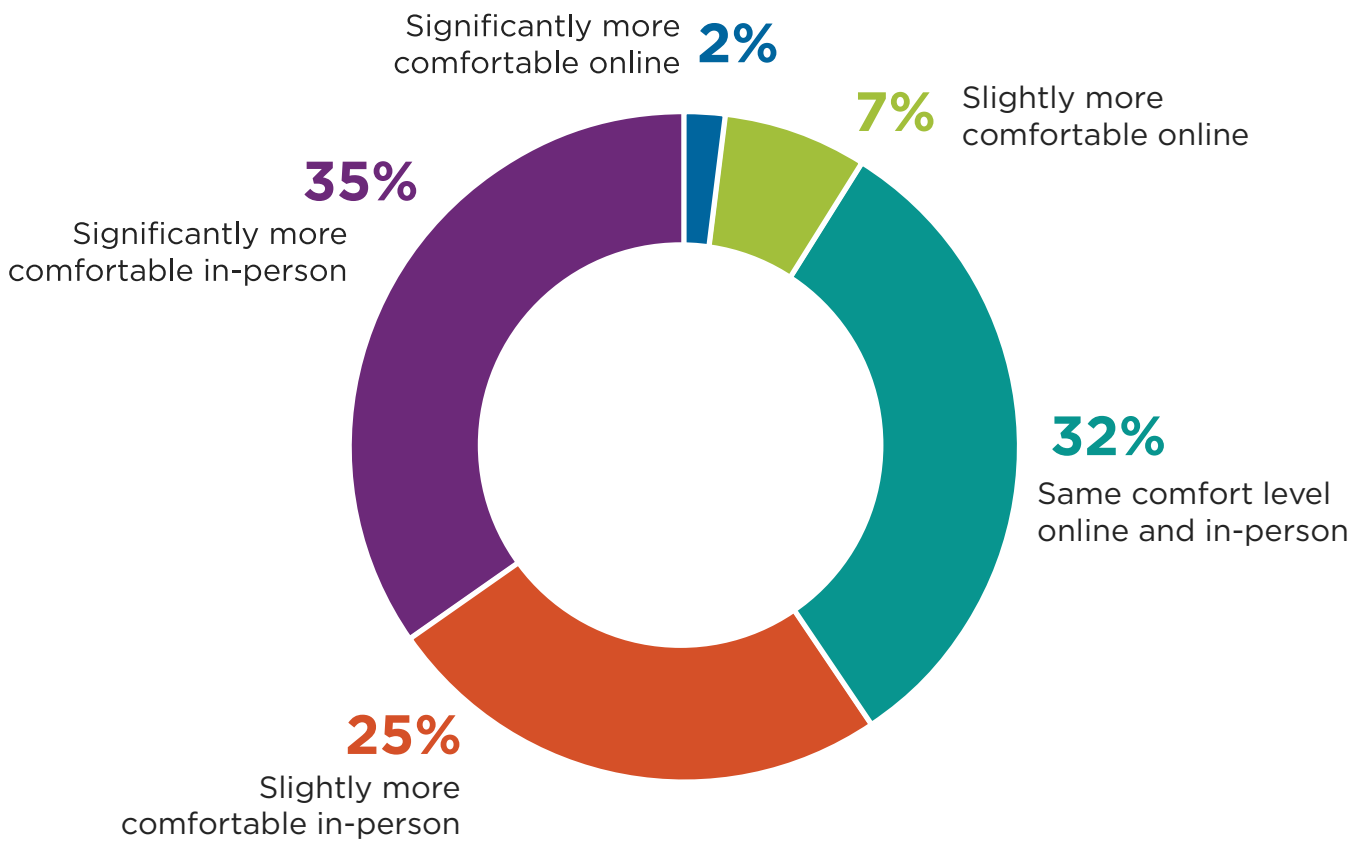
> **Allowing open conversations instead of asking people to be 'neutral' or 'silent.'"**

> **Honestly, we could have used some grief counselors/ emotional support [after the 2016 election]. We have enough folks in our community in targeted groups that Trump's win was devastating."**

ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON CONVERSATIONS

Over half of teachers surveyed indicated a preference for having political conversations in-person as opposed to online. Very few (9%) indicated being more comfortable with online conversations.

Thinking about political conversations, would you say you are more comfortable having those conversations online or in-person?

Significantly more comfortable online **2%**

7% Slightly more comfortable online

35% Significantly more comfortable in-person

32% Same comfort level online and in-person

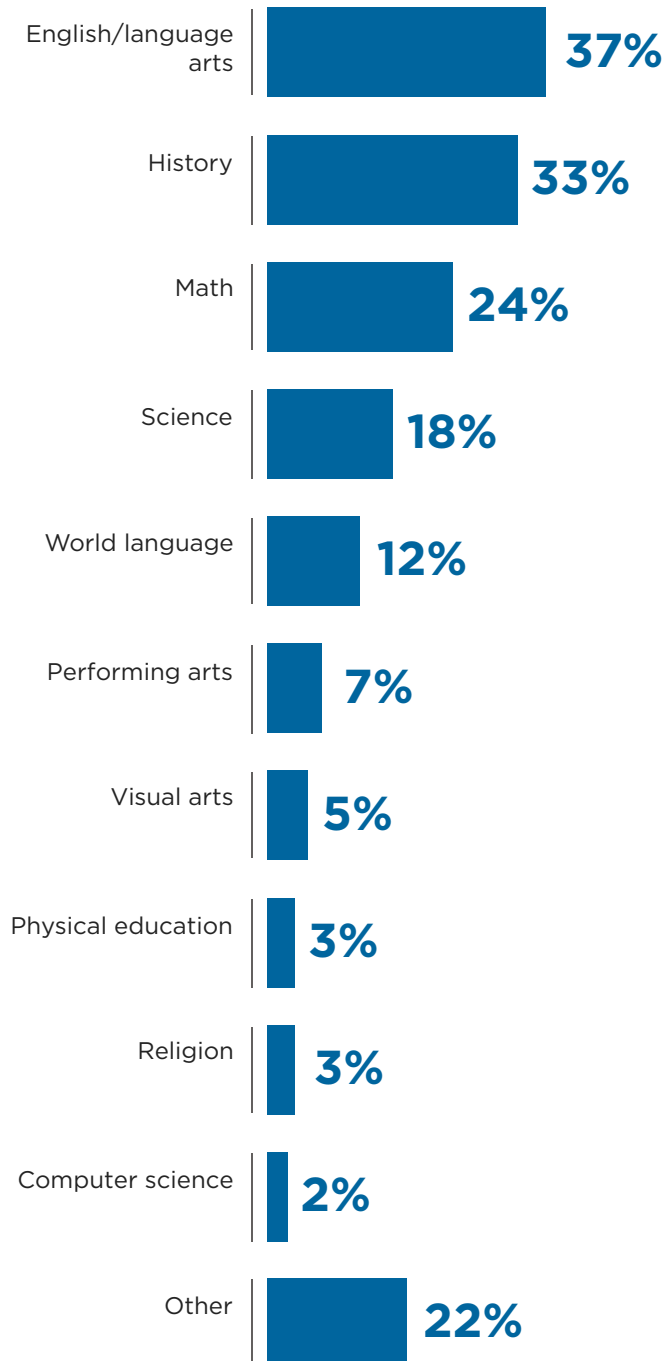**25%** Slightly more comfortable in-person

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

This survey was fielded among 8,779 teachers between August 13 and August 26, 2020. 925 teachers responded to the survey, representing an 11% participation rate.
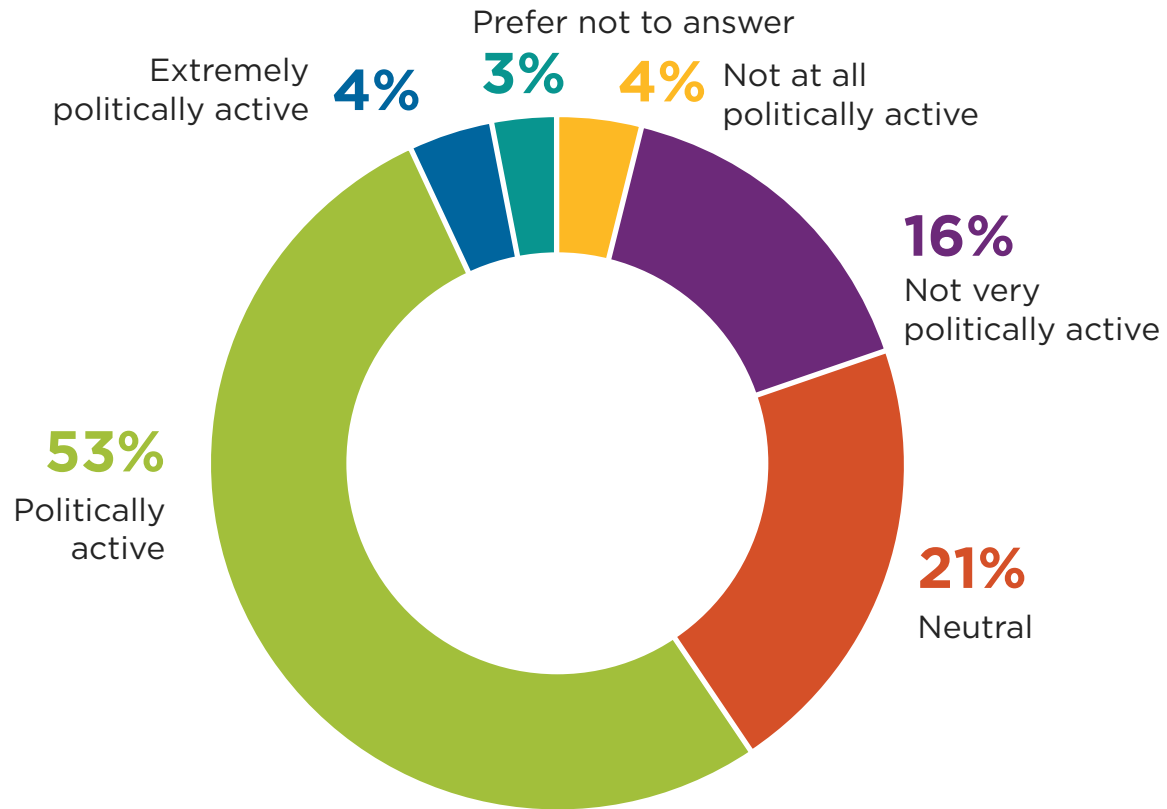
Subject Areas
English, history, and math were the subjects most frequently taught by respondents.

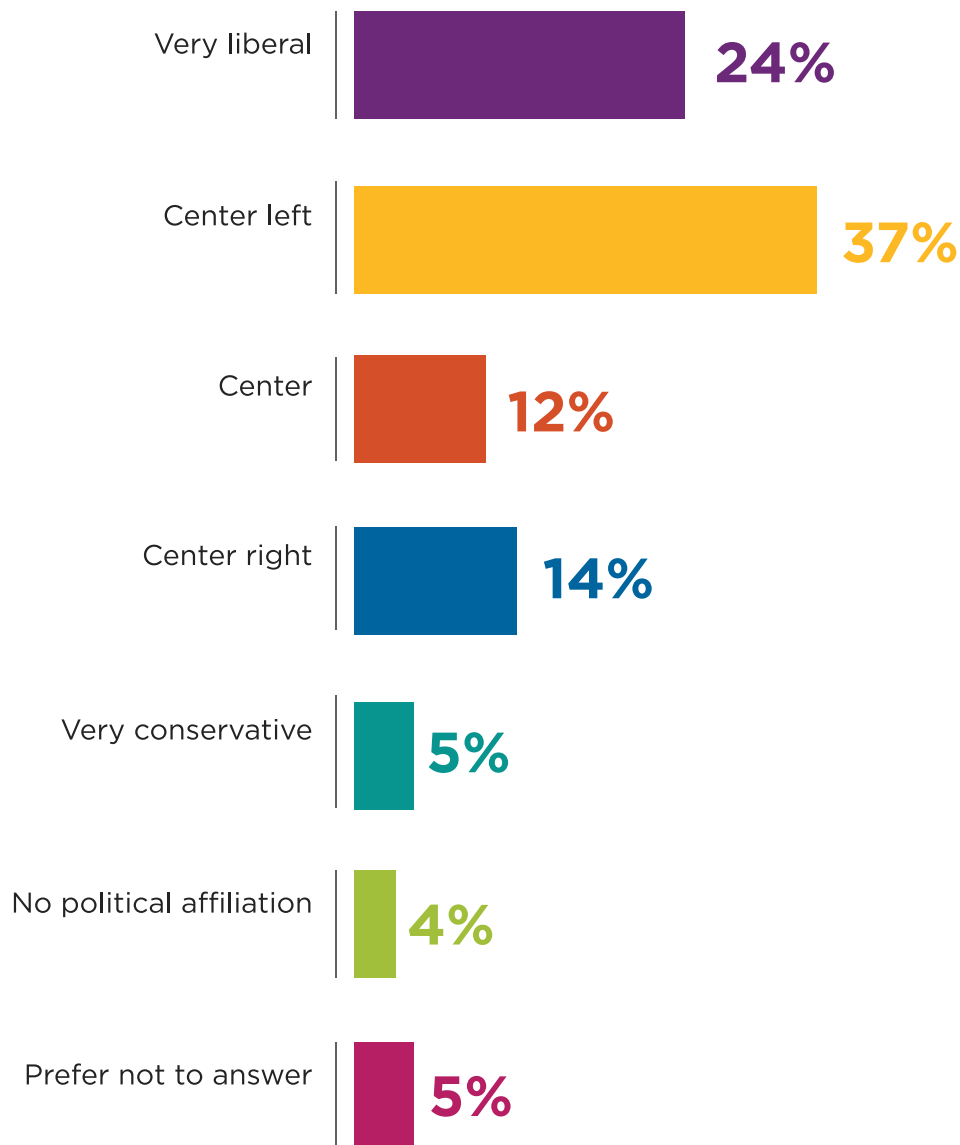| Subject	Percentage
English/language arts	37%
History	33%
Math	24%
Science	18%
World language	12%
Performing arts	7%
Visual arts	5%
Physical education	3%
Religion	3%
Computer science	2%
Other	22%

Personal Political Activity
Fifty-seven percent of the teachers surveyed consider themselves to be politically active.

Extremely politically active **4%**

Prefer not to answer **3%**

4% Not at all politically active

16% Not very politically active

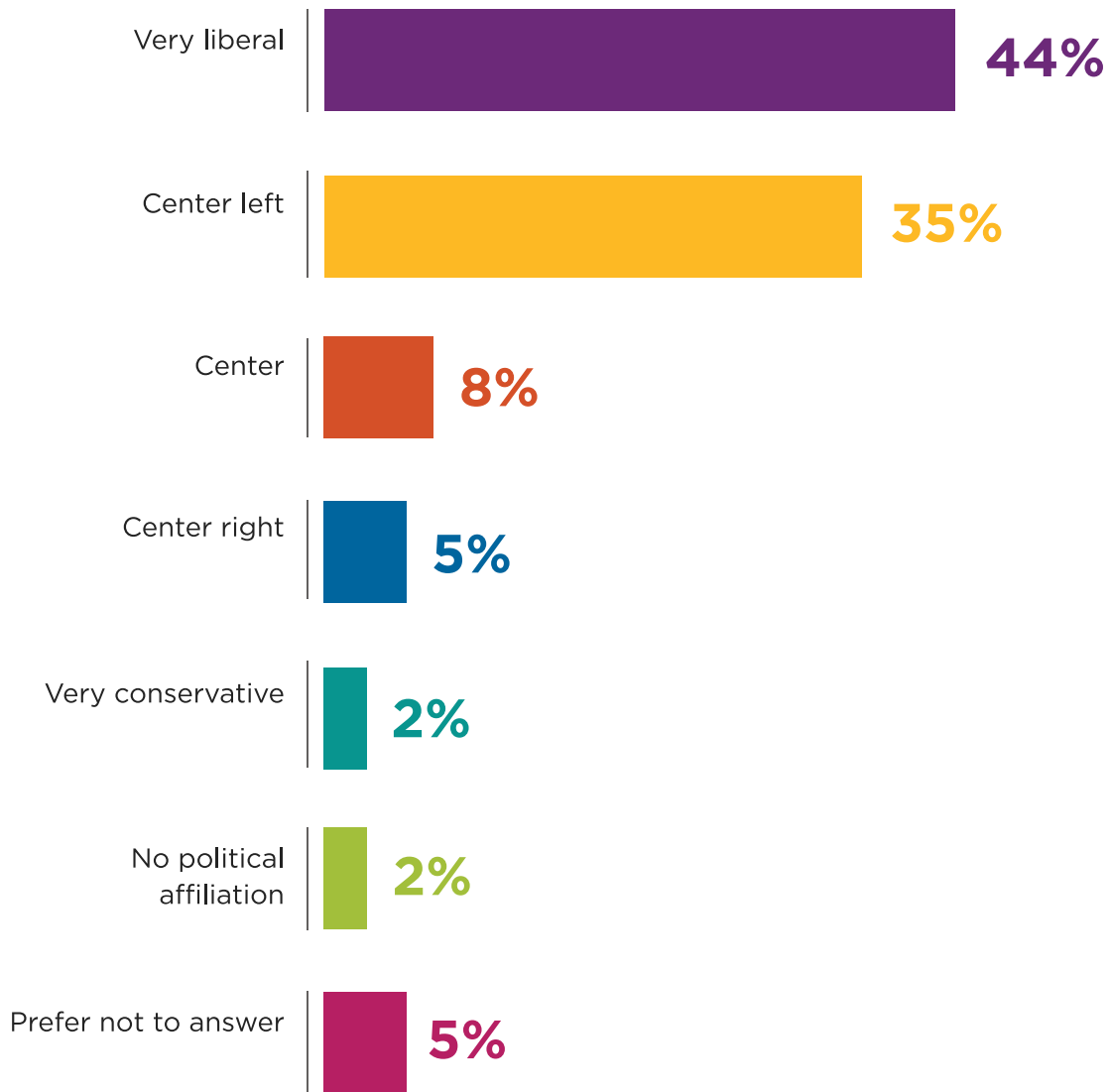**53%** Politically active

21% Neutral

PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY'S OVERALL POLITICAL CLIMATE

The majority (61%) of the teachers surveyed perceive the political views of the overall school community to be center left or very liberal. Fewer teachers (19%) consider their schools to be center right or very conservative.

Category	Percentage
Very liberal	24%
Center left	37%
Center	12%
Center right	14%
Very conservative	5%
No political affiliation	4%
Prefer not to answer	5%

PERSONAL POLITICAL VIEWPOINT

The majority of teachers (79%) identify their personal political views as being very liberal/center left. A small number of teachers (7%) identify as center right or very conservative.

Very liberal	44%
Center left	35%
Center	8%
Center right	5%
Very conservative	2%
No political affiliation	2%
Prefer not to answer	5%

DISCUSS EXPECTATIONS AND NORMS

Have conversations with school leadership and colleagues about the appropriateness of political conversations and the level of comfort teachers feel having conversations within your community.

- What are the safest spaces in your school for authentic conversation? How can you create more?

- How might your school provide norms for political conversations or guidelines for interactions with your students that are inclusive of multiple worldviews, ways of knowing, problem-solving, and communicating?

- How might your school offer support and clarity regarding appropriate ways for you to express personal political views in your community?

CREATE SPACE FOR UNPOPULAR VIEWS

Consider how you make space within your classroom to challenge dominant narratives and include marginalized voices, especially those with which you might personally disagree.

- How might you frame your beliefs personally while being mindful of the power you carry with students?

- What skills might you need to learn and practice to de-escalate conflicts between students, or between a student and yourself?

- How do you invite and model receiving feedback about your personal views? How might you also help students learn to give and receive effective feedback to one another?

BOOST YOUR EXPERTISE

Investigate the following resources about the election and civil discourse:

- Teaching about Elections (ADL)

- Voting and Election Resources (Teaching Tolerance)

- Who Gets to Vote? Teaching About the Struggle for Voting Rights in the United States (Zinn Education Project)

- The Election Collection (PBS Media)

- Election/Civics Resources (National Association for Media Literacy Education)

- The Intersections of Civil Discourse and Privilege (Beyond Intractability)

- Working with Strong Emotions in the Classroom: AGuide for Teachers and Students (Beyond Intractability)

- Civil Discourse Curriculum (Teaching Tolerance)

- Fostering Civil Discourse (Facing History and Ourselves)

- 2020 Election Resources (ProCon.org)

- Civics Related Games, Activities, and Lesson Plans (iCivics)

BUILD SYSTEMS FOR EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Consider how you can best support students, regardless of the outcome of the election. Ask school leaders what resources will be available for both students and teachers. Make a plan before November 3 for self-care throughout the election season and afterward. How can you help model this behavior for students?

PROJECT CALM AND STABILITY FOR OTHERS

Prepare yourself and your students for the likelihood that results of the election will not be determined in the days immediately following the election. How can you position your classroom as a place of stability and support during a time of national uncertainty?