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.

POLLYANNA
Every Voice Matters.

National Association
of Independent Schools

ΙΣΝ/SNF
ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ΝΙΑΡΧΟΣ
STAVROS NIARCHOS
FOUNDATION

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 4

HEADS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND TEACHERS:

Seeking Alignment for Civil Discourse

Independent school heads, administrators, and teachers are closely aligned on most topics related to civil discourse. Heads and administrators both report that they want to "have students feel comfortable and safe asking questions" and "encourage open discussion among the community."

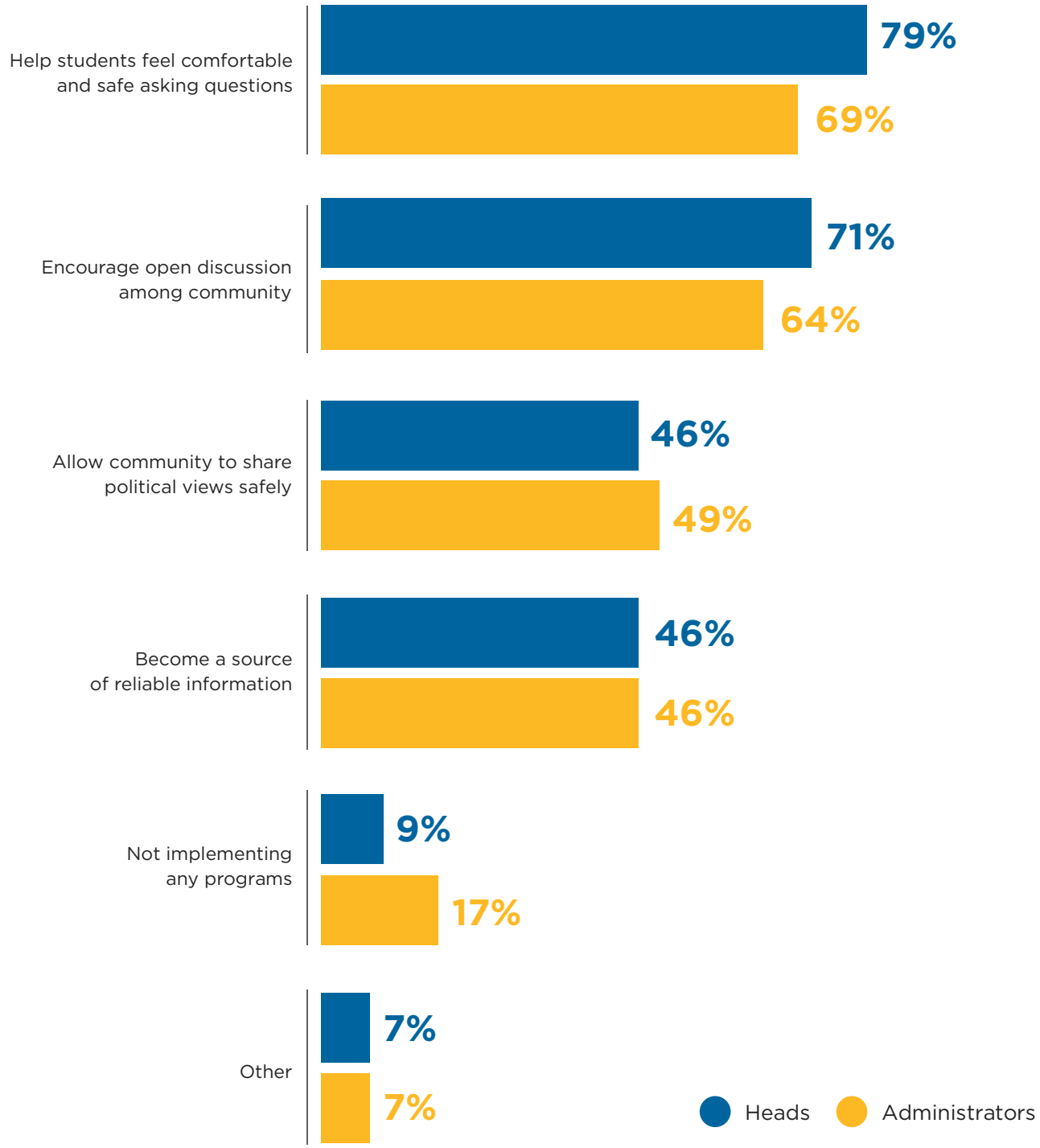
Other areas of alignment point to some of the challenges schools face in creating civil dialogue. More than two-thirds of those surveyed, regardless of position, reported it was difficult or extremely difficult for individuals or groups who held unpopular views or opinions to be heard in their communities during the 2016 election.

Yet differences emerged among the groups. Heads of school were much more likely than teachers and administrators to report it is inappropriate to share their political views with the school community. Many heads may model "neutrality" in their leadership, but some administrators and teachers take a different view of the role of personal perspectives in creating authentic conversation with students. Conversations about what is appropriate in different situations may yield environments more conducive for civil discourse.

HOPES FOR ELECTION PROGRAMMING

Heads of school and administrators were closely aligned in their goals for election-year programming. Both groups wanted to help students feel comfortable and safe asking questions and encourage open discussions among the community.

By implementing [election-year] programming... what do you hope to achieve for the school community? Please select all that apply.

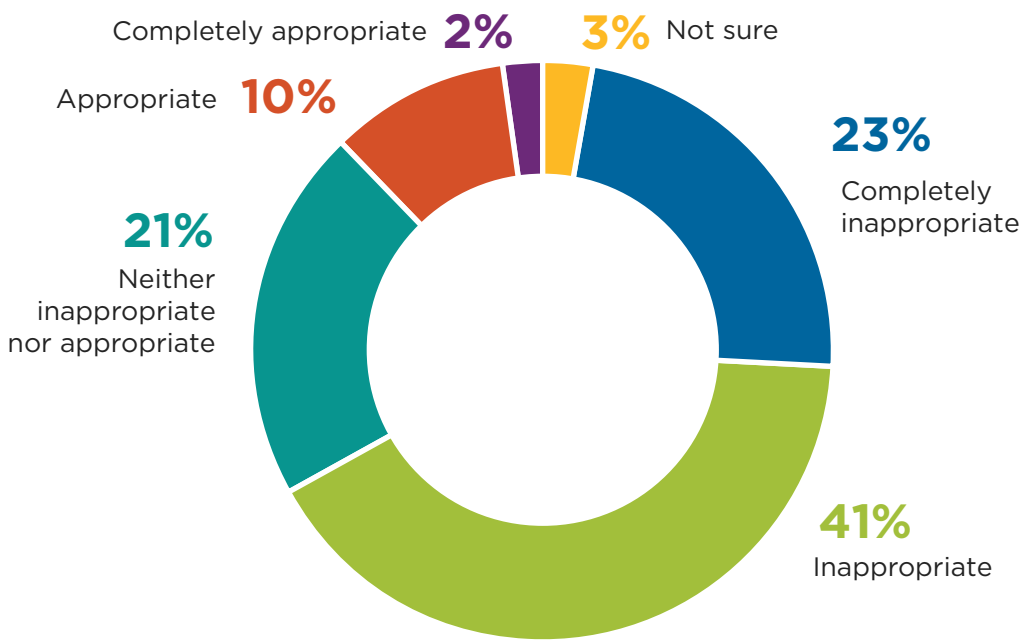


APPROPRIATENESS OF SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

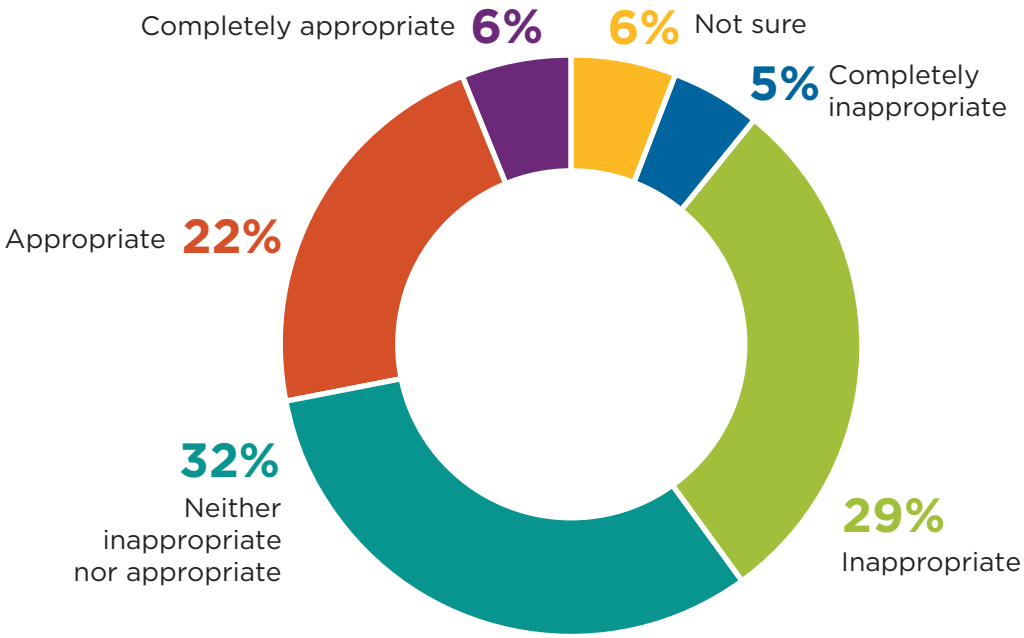
Heads of school generally consider sharing their political views, party affiliation, or which presidential candidate they support to be inappropriate, more so than administrators and teachers.

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

Heads



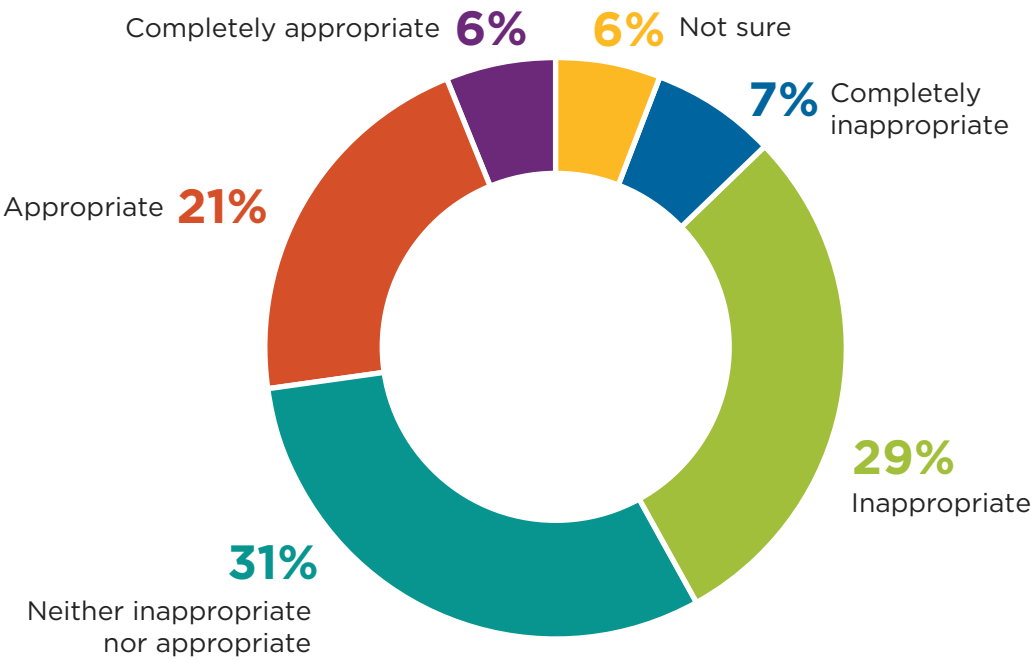
Administrators



APPROPRIATENESS OF SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS CONT.

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

Teachers

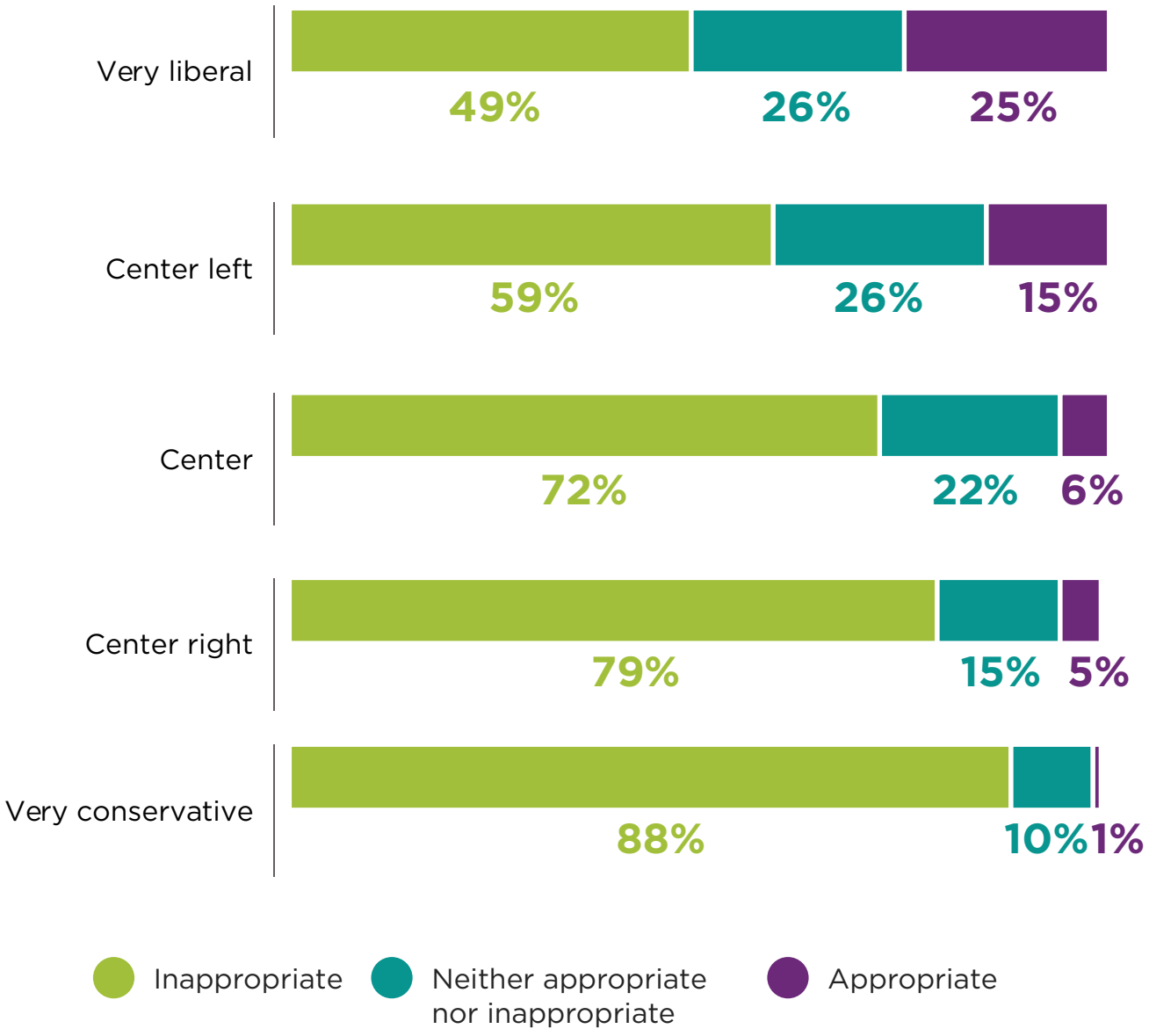


APPROPRIATENESS OF SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS WITH STUDENTS

Those who report their school has a very liberal or left-leaning climate, regardless of role, are more likely to consider it appropriate to share political views with students than those who consider their schools very conservative or right-leaning. However, personal political preference has minimal correlation with whether one thinks it appropriate to share political views with students.

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

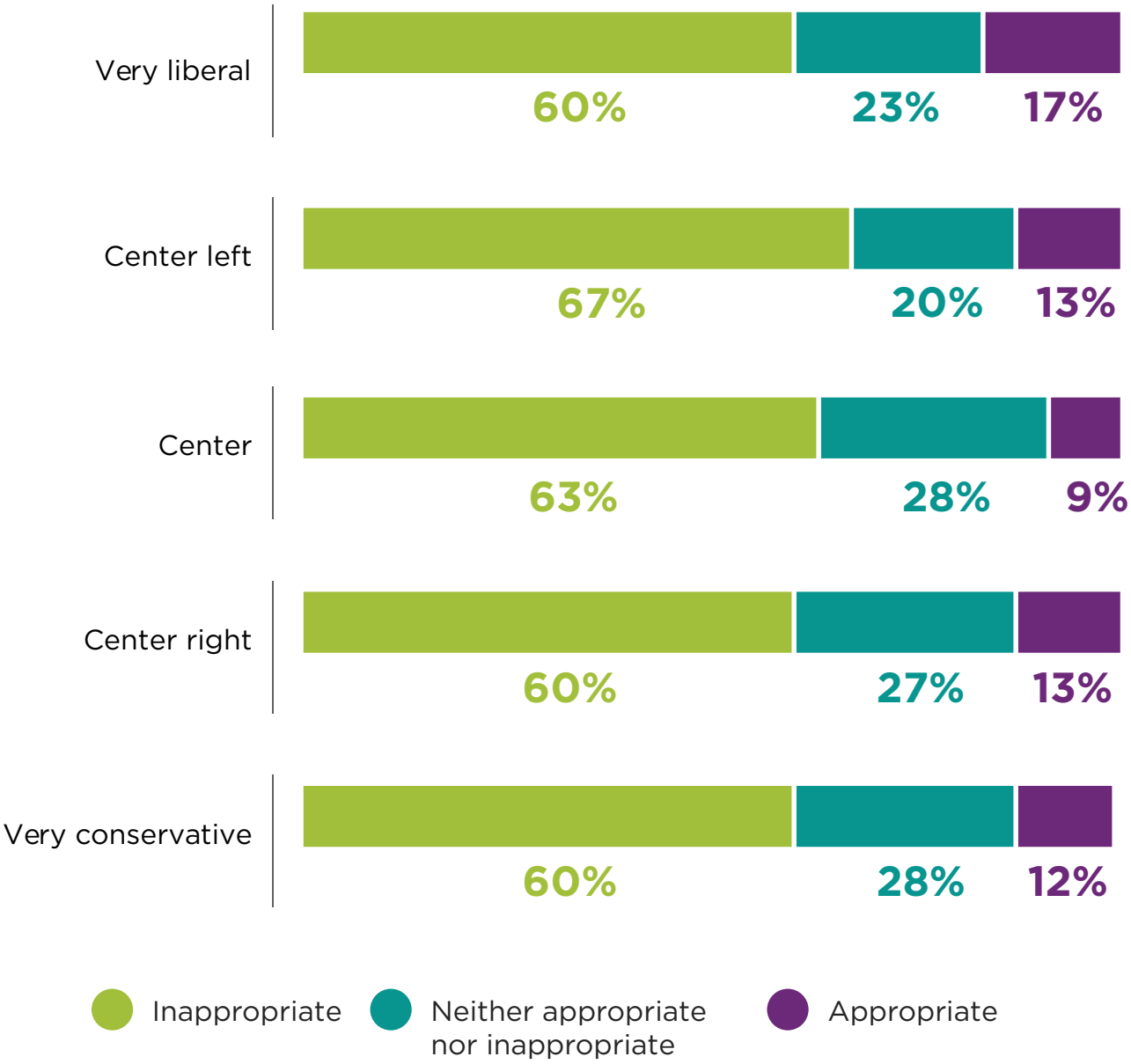
By perceived political orientation of school (all respondents):



APPROPRIATENESS OF SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS CONT.

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

By personal political orientation (all respondents):

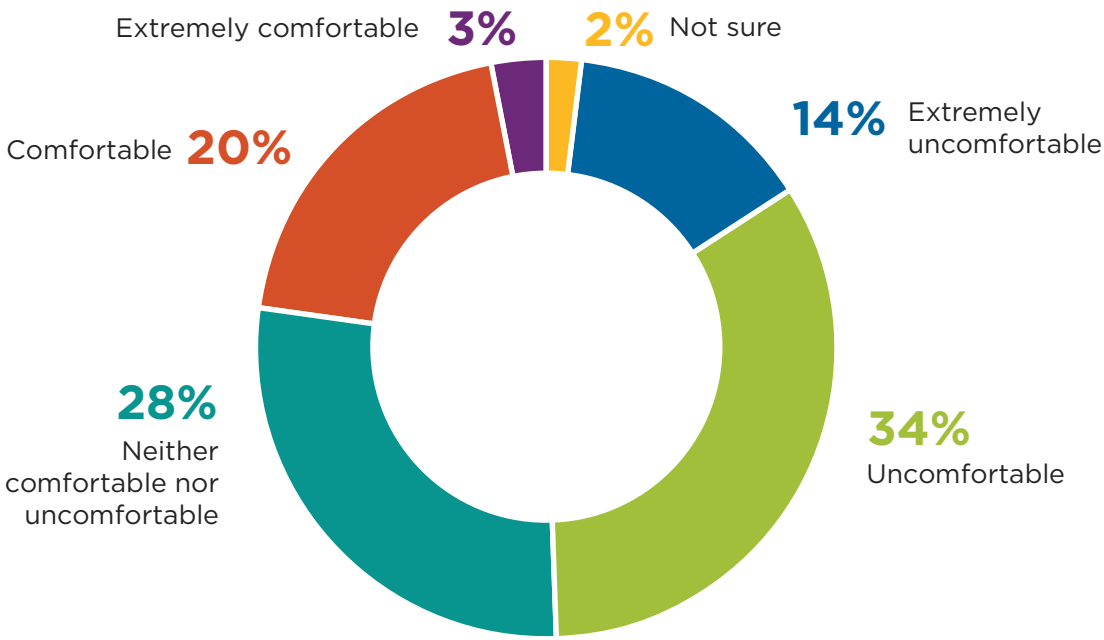


COMFORT SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

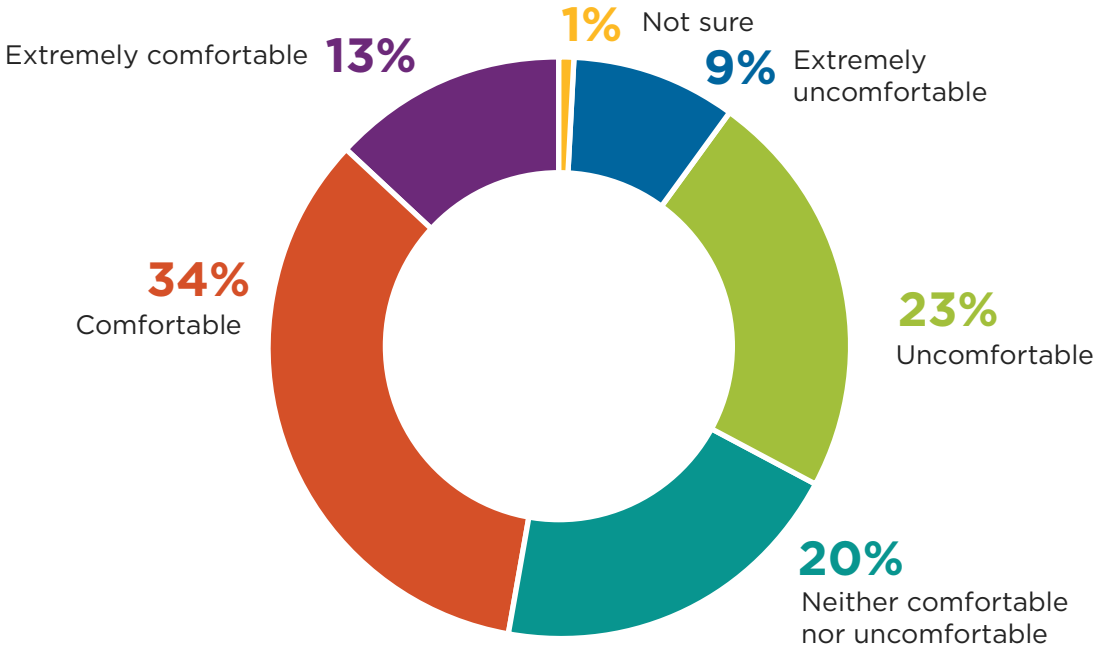
Heads of school report they are less comfortable sharing political views, while administrators and teachers are quite comfortable sharing their views.

To what extent are you comfortable sharing your political views, party affiliation, or the presidential candidate you support with members of your community?

Heads



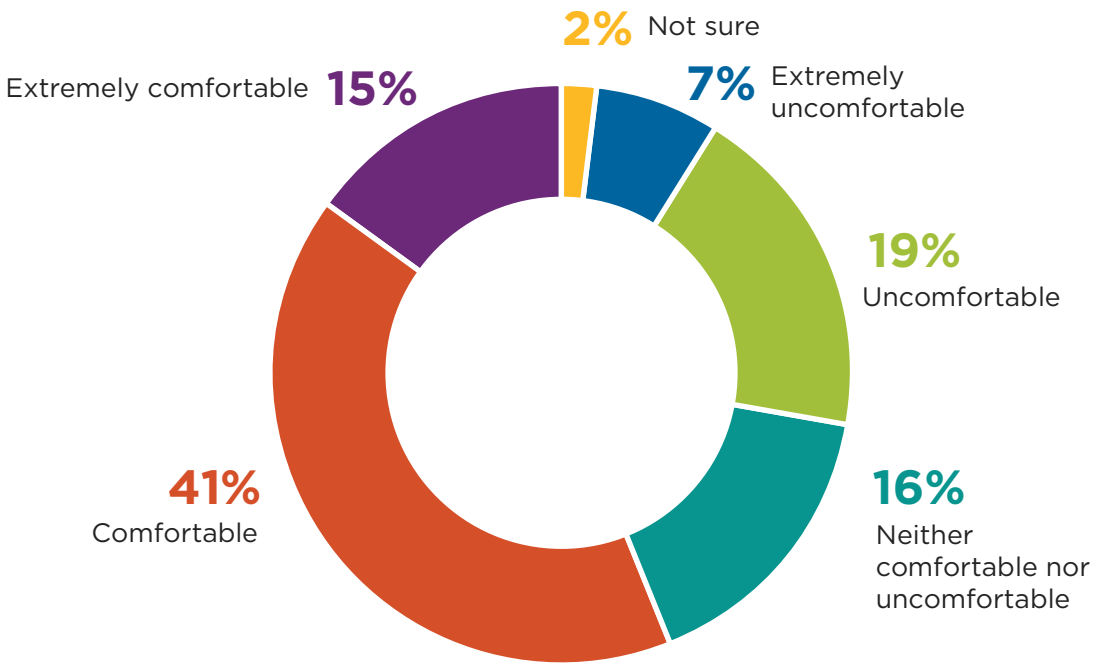
Administrators



APPROPRIATENESS OF SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS CONT.

To what extent are you comfortable sharing your political views, party affiliation, or the presidential candidate you support with members of your community?

Teachers

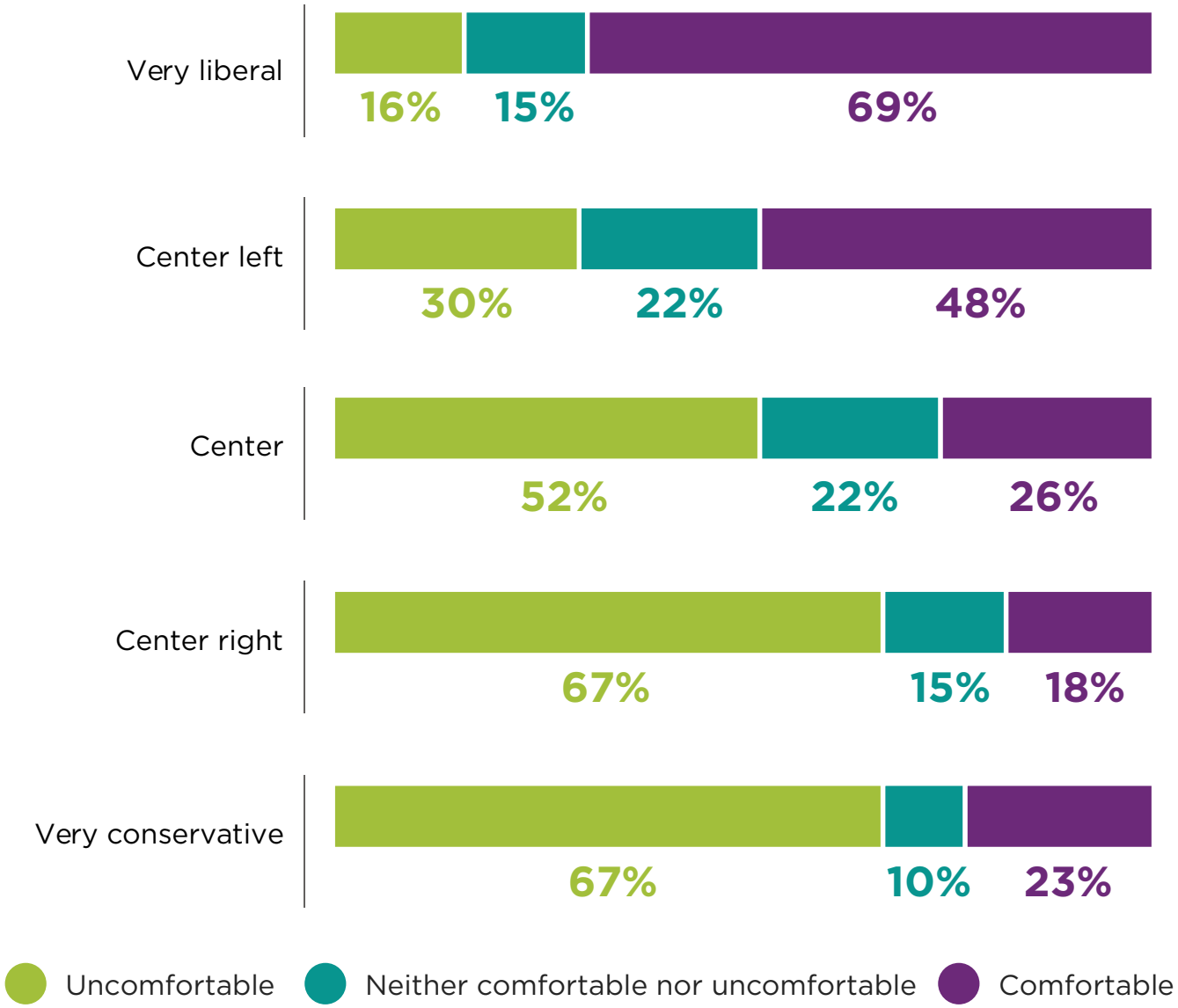


COMFORT SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

Comfort sharing political views is associated with personal political orientation, race, and LGBTQ status. People who identify as very liberal, people of color, and people who identify as LGBTQ are the most comfortable sharing their political views with the school community. Notably, people whose political views align with the perceived political orientation of the school also report greater comfort sharing their views (59%) than those at schools with contrasting views (48%).

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?

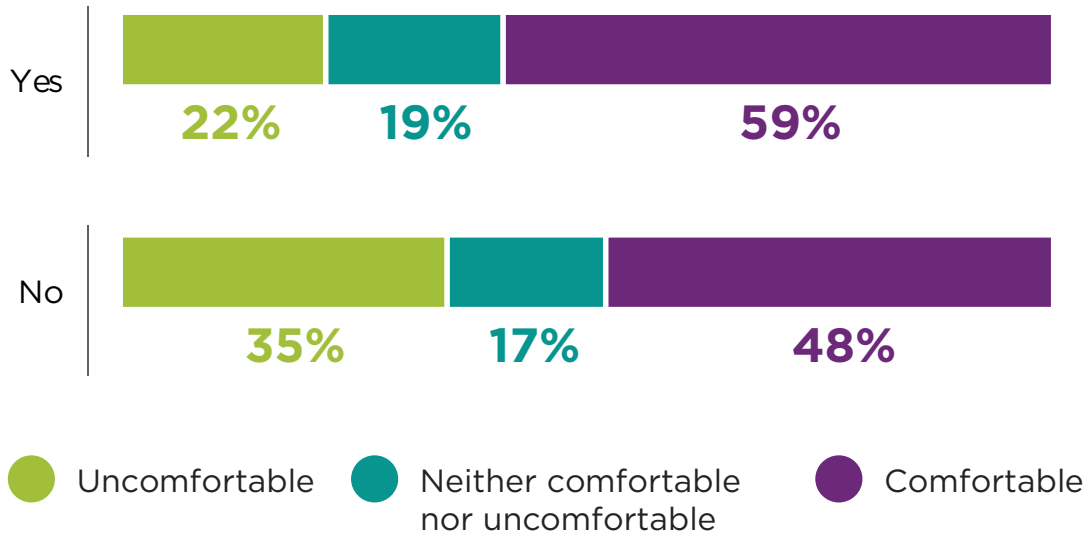
By personal political orientation (all respondents):



COMFORT SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

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?

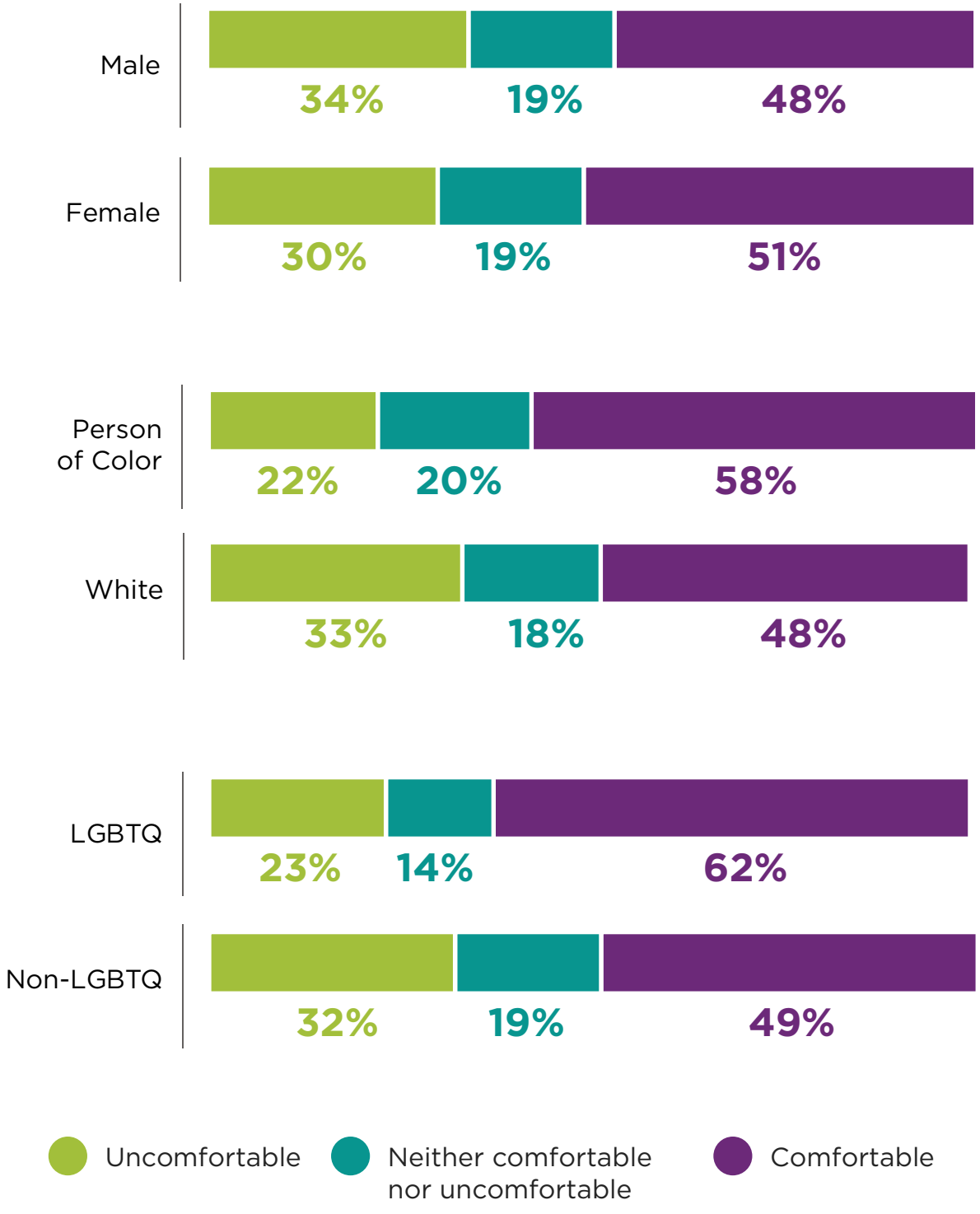
By whether or not their personal political orientation matches the school's perceived orientation:



COMFORT SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS CONT.

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?

By gender, race, LGBTQ status:

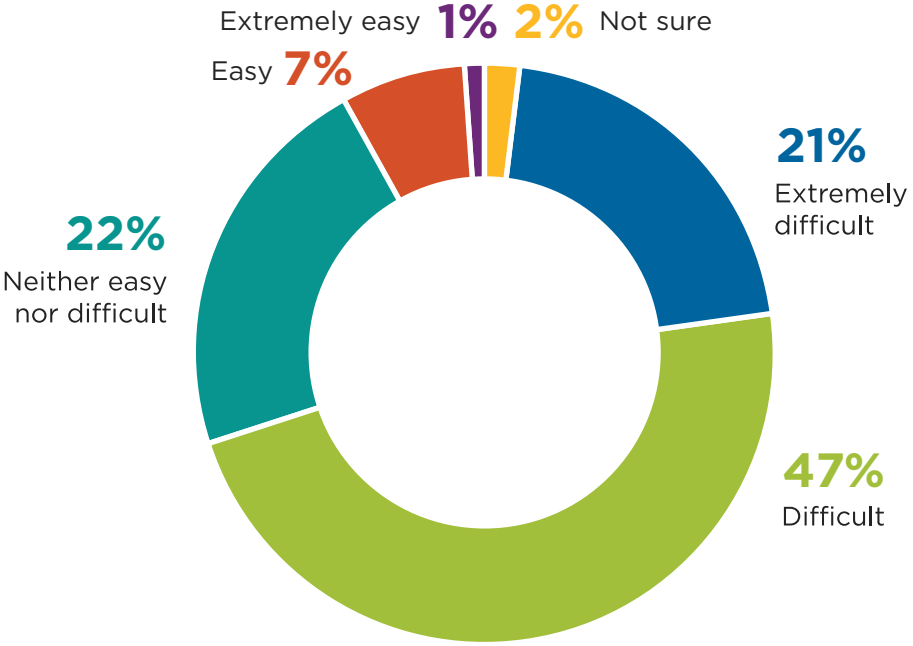


EXPRESSING "UNPOPULAR" OPINIONS

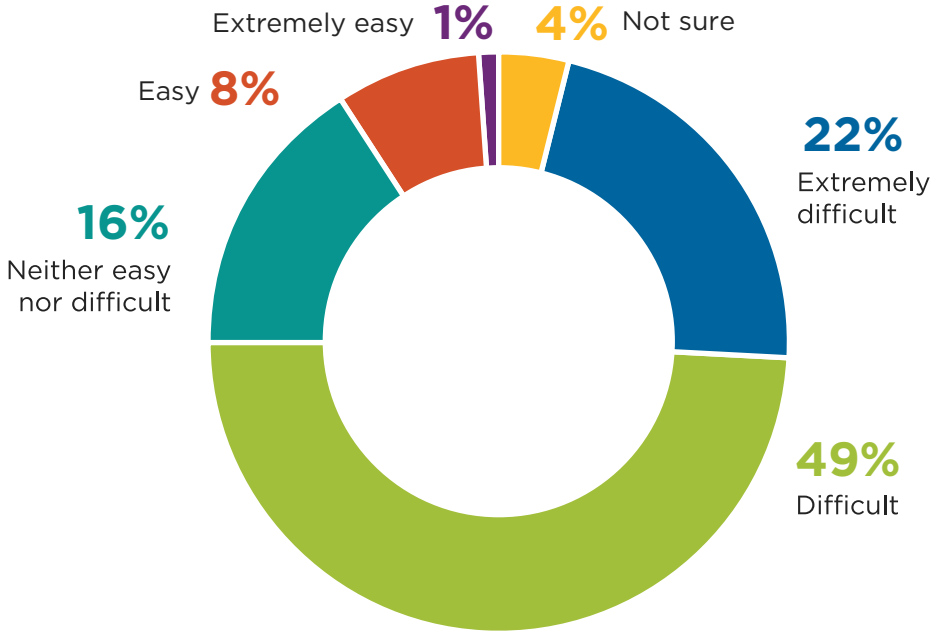
Overall heads of school, administrators, and teachers surveyed agreed it is difficult for individuals or groups who held unpopular views or opinions to be heard.

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?

Heads



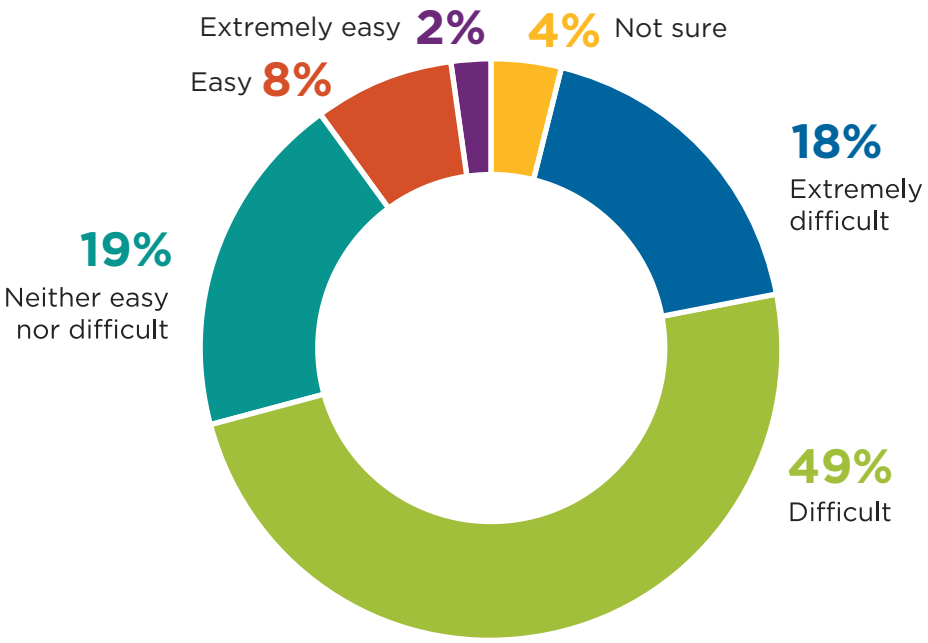
Administrators



EXPRESSING "UNPOPULAR" OPINIONS CONT.

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?

Teachers

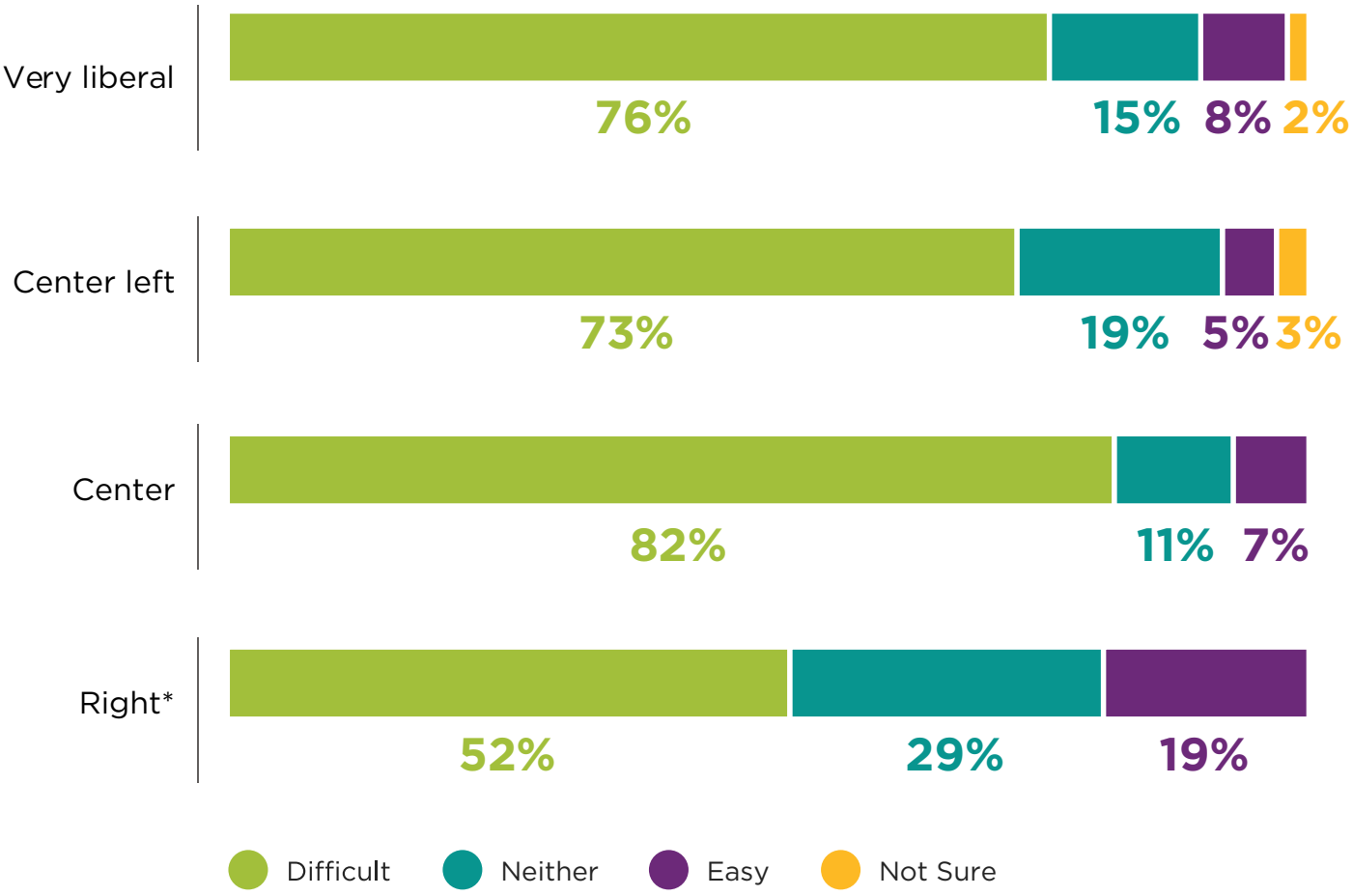


EXPRESSING "UNPOPULAR" OPINIONS CONT.

Heads of school who identify as center right or conservative were less likely than centrist or liberal heads to report that it was difficult for those with unpopular views or opinions to be heard in 2016.

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?

By personal political orientation of heads of schools:



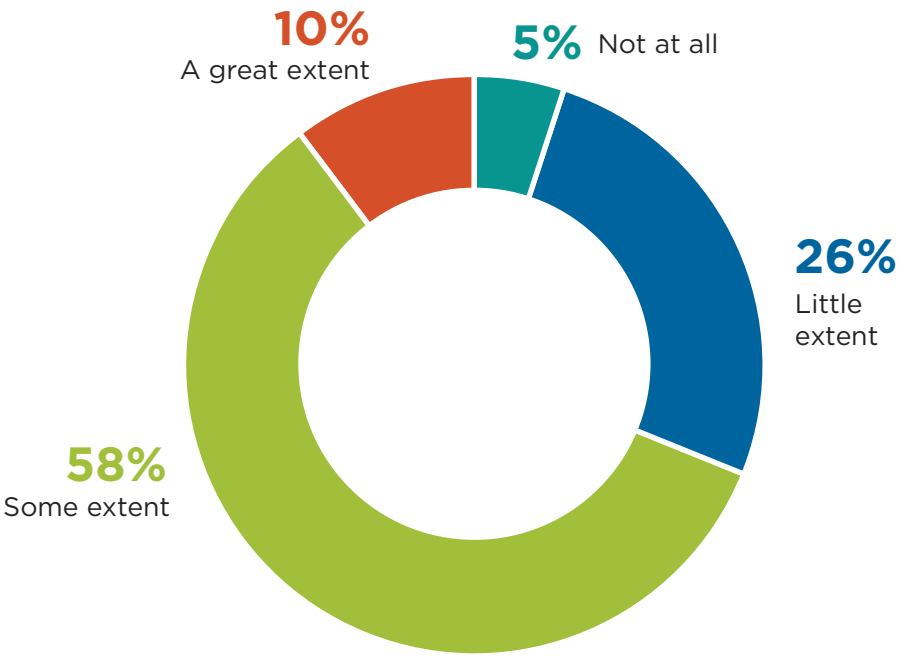
*"Center right" and "very conservative" combined due to small sample size.

INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Most heads of school reported that different political perspectives are included in classrooms, assemblies, and choice of speakers to some extent. Administrators and teachers are less likely to report these perspectives are included. People who identify as conservative, regardless of role, are significantly more likely to feel that other perspectives are completely missing from discussions, assemblies, and choice of speakers.

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

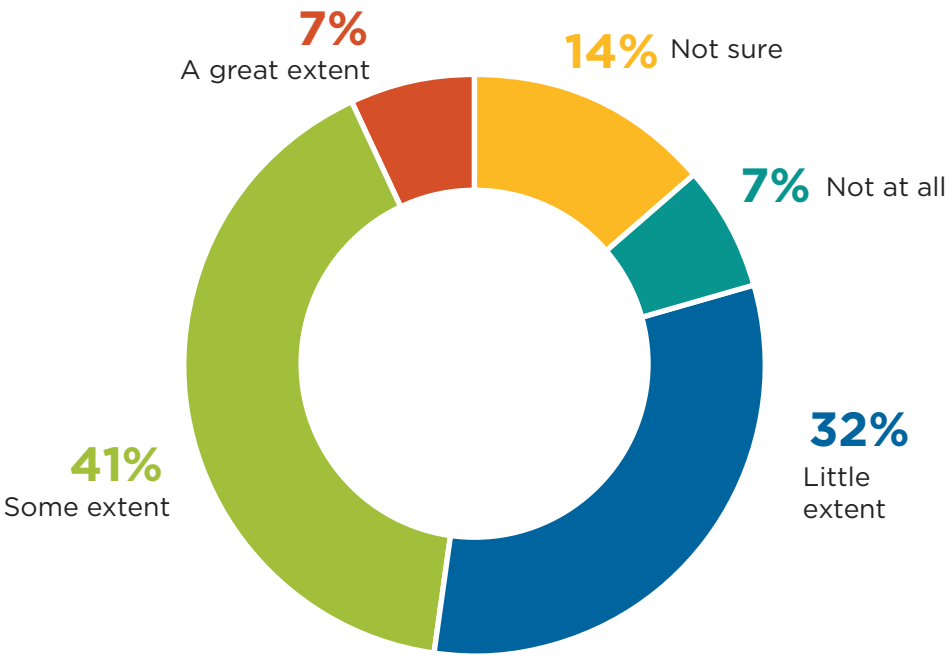
Heads



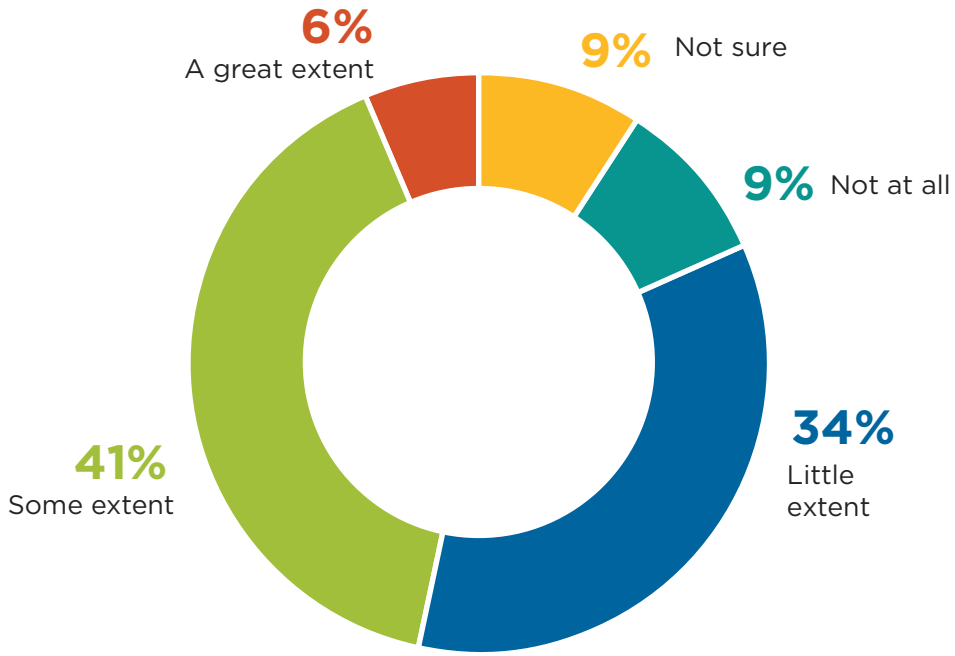
INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES CONT.

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

Administrators



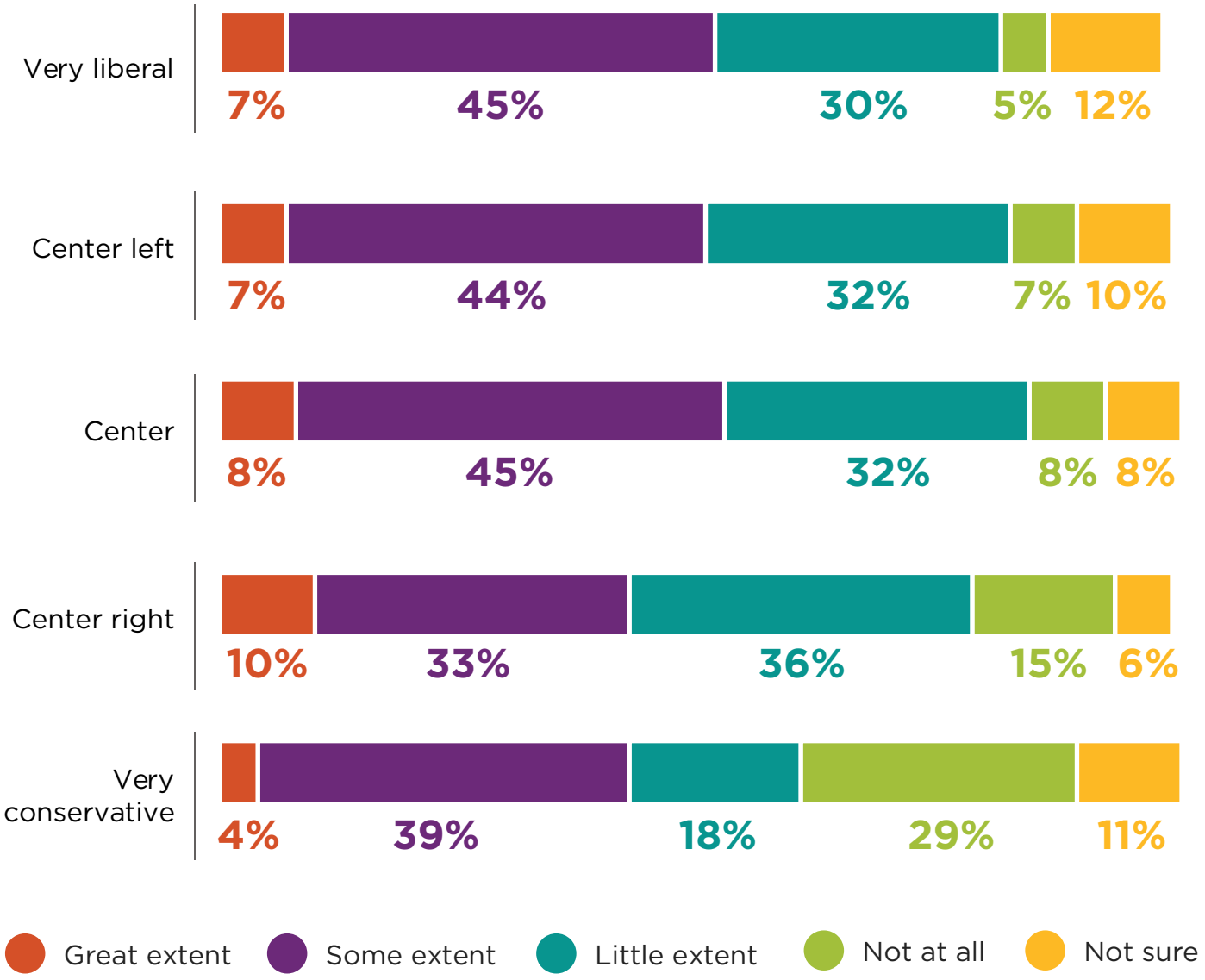
Teachers



INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES CONT.

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

By personal political orientation (all respondents):

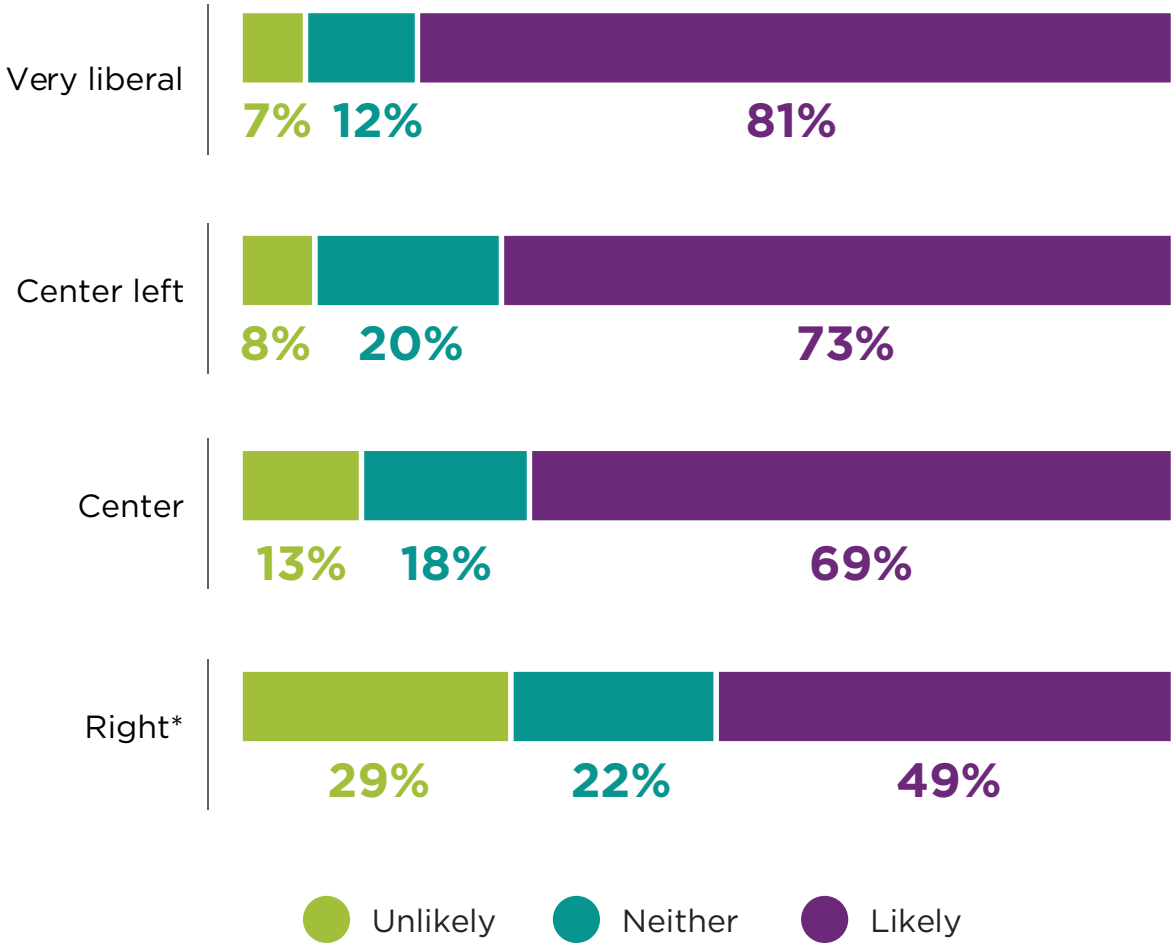


LIKELIHOOD TO CREATE PROGRAMMING

The perceived political orientation of the school was associated with the likelihood of heads creating programming related to the election, with those heads at schools identified as center left (73%) and very liberal (81%) being the most likely to implement programming. This same association was also seen based on the heads' personal political leanings.

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

By perceived political orientation of the school according to heads of school:

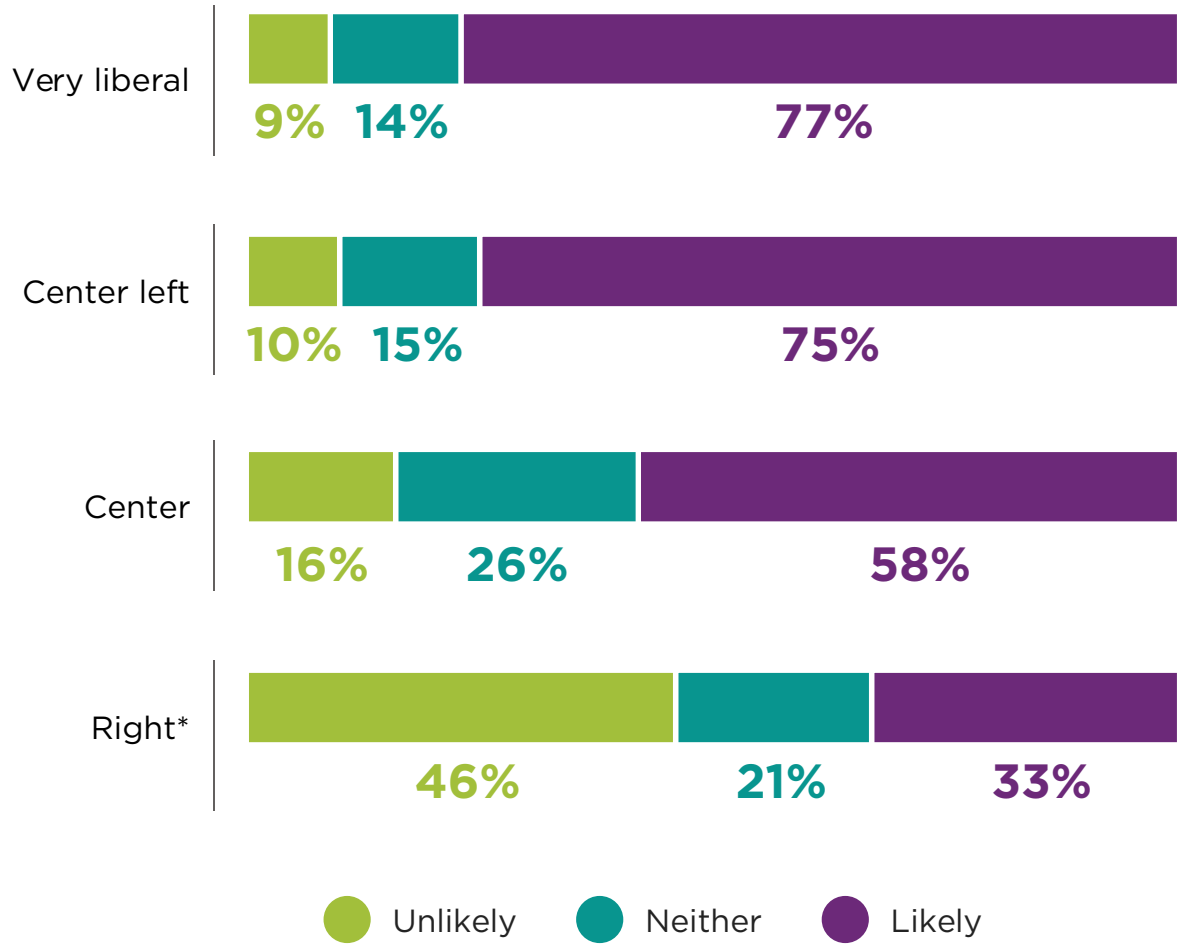


*"Center right" and "very conservative" combined due to small sample size.

LIKELIHOOD TO CREATE PROGRAMMING CONT.

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

By personal political orientation of heads of school:

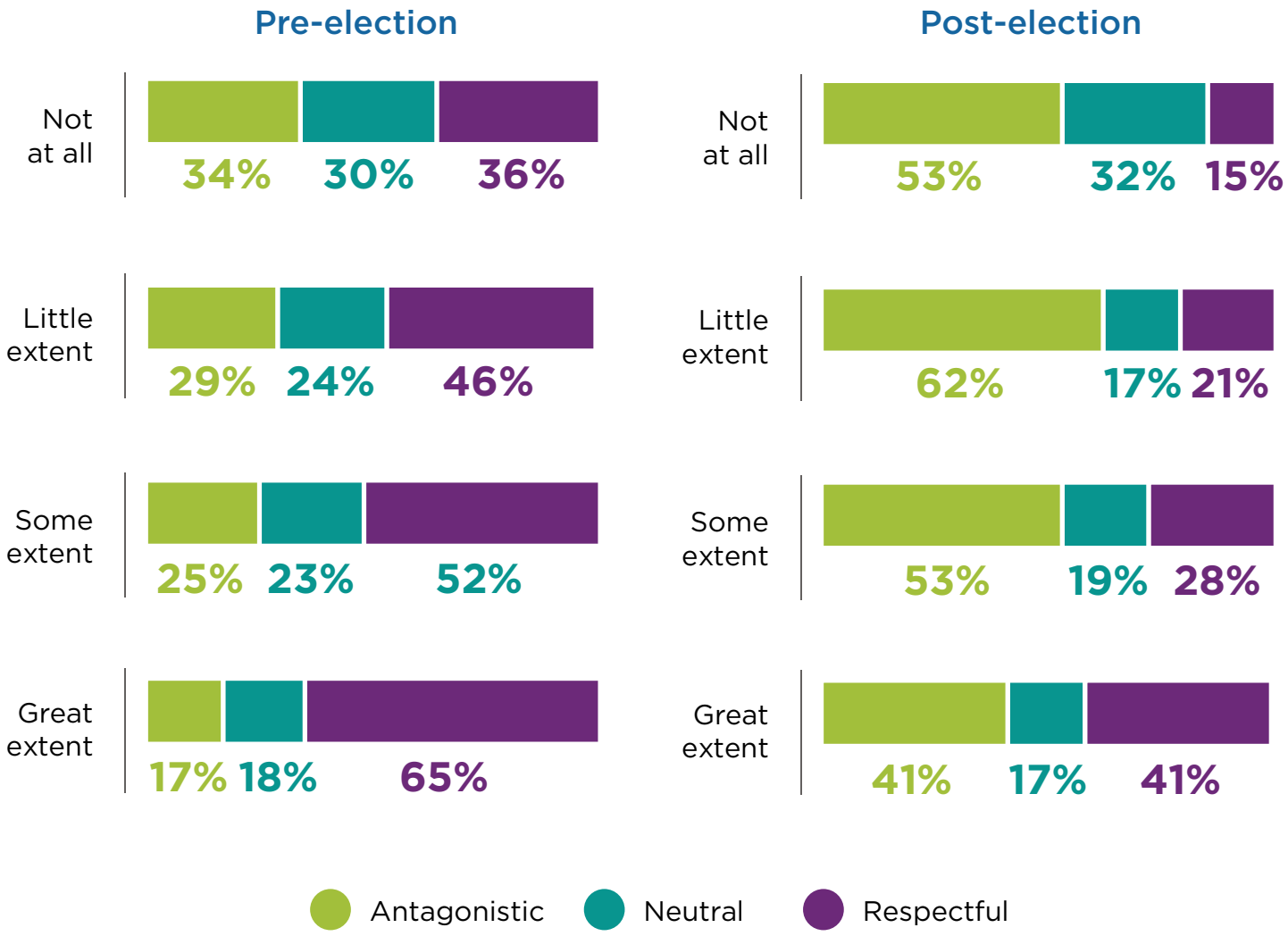


THE IMPACT ON SCHOOL CLIMATE OF INCLUDING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN PROGRAMMING

Heads who reported that different perspectives were included in programming to a great extent in their schools were much more likely to report a respectful school climate both before and after the 2016 election. Additionally, nearly a quarter of heads (23%) who reported having different political perspectives integrated into the classroom to a great extent said that it was easy for those with unpopular views to be heard.

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

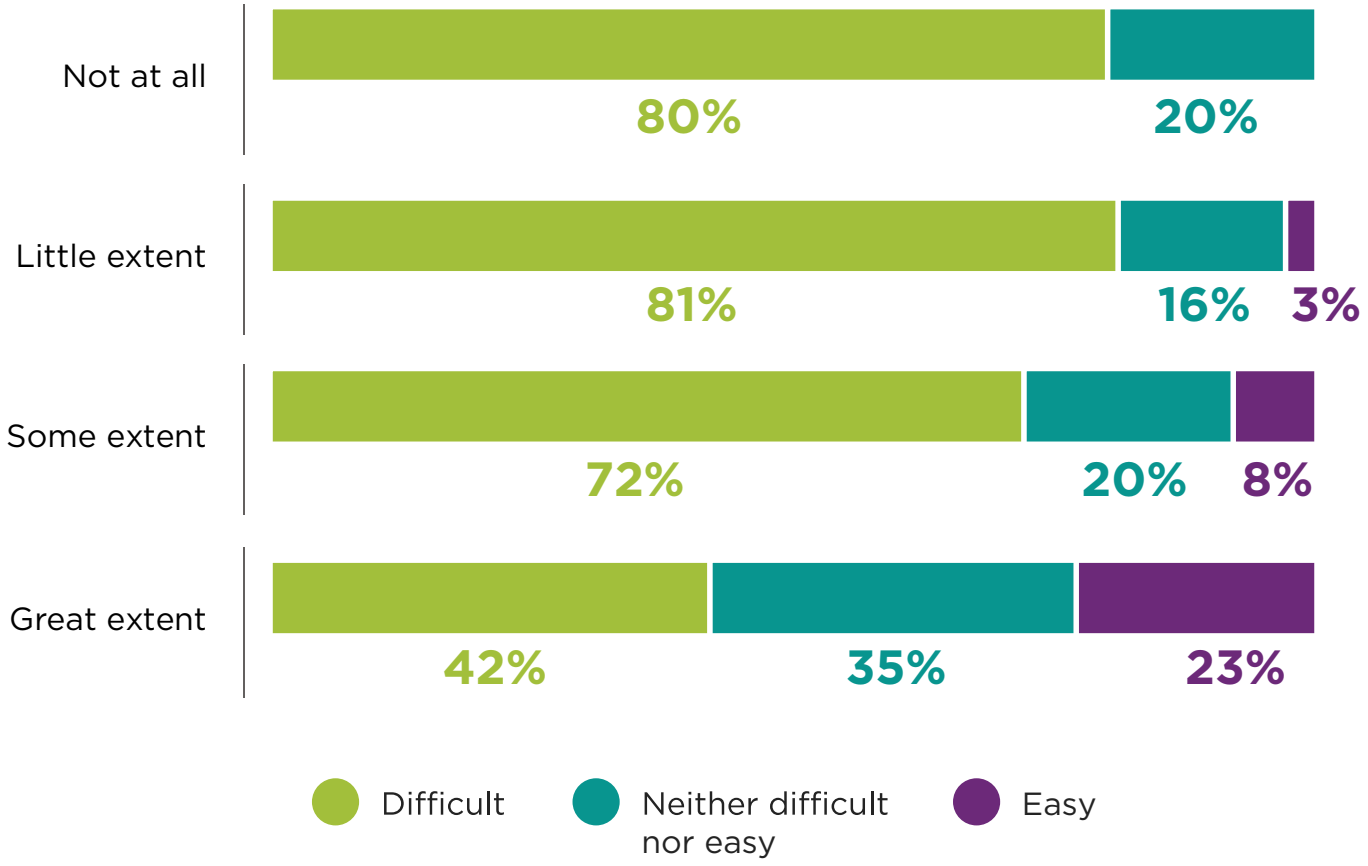
By extent differing political perspectives are included in the programming according to heads of school:



THE IMPACT ON SCHOOL CLIMATE OF INCLUDING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN PROGRAMMING

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?

By extent differing political perspectives are included in the programming according to heads of school:



Next Steps

CHECK FOR ALIGNMENT AMONG HEADS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND TEACHERS

- If these three groups do not have a shared understanding about how to engage in political discussions at school, their confusion is likely to spread to students and their families.
- Assess views about whether the school includes different political perspectives in programming. Gaps among heads, administrators, and teachers may reveal that some groups feel marginalized.
- Call one or more special faculty meetings to discuss election-year concerns and establish shared understanding about what is appropriate regarding political discussion in your school.
- Employ a set of community-wide norms to provide a framework for appropriate engagement around political issues. Determine which topics are in and out of bounds based on your school's mission and core values.

INCLUDE ALL FACULTY AND STAFF IN THESE CONVERSATIONS, NOT JUST HUMANITIES TEACHERS

During election seasons, the burden for carrying conversations often falls heaviest on social studies, history, and English teachers. In reality, political conversations can (and do) happen between and among students and adults in all spaces on campus. Consider:

- How might non-humanities teachers share in setting expectations and norms for these conversations?
- Political conversations among students are likely to happen in spaces that are more difficult to supervise (such as a locker room, cafeteria, or playground). How might you anticipate this challenge and provide the structure or space to allow students to engage in conversation with a trusted adult in the community?
- How will you teach and reinforce the skills of civil conversation, dialogue, and debate, including ways to give and receive feedback?

CONSIDER MARGINALIZED VOICES MORE THOROUGHLY

- Always ask "who's missing?" from every conversation.
- Consider the use of affinity spaces to ensure the voices of students whose identities are marginalized or minoritized have spaces to be accepted or heard. Heads or senior leaders should consider holding "listening sessions" with these groups to better address their needs and ensure their safe participation in conversation on campus.
- Examine the relationship between the perceived political orientation of your school and how comfortable community members feel expressing their views. Intentionally create space for views that fall outside of the political "norm" for your school.
- Remember that marginalized voices also exist among the adults in a community. How might heads and senior leaders tend to these colleagues to ensure their sense of safe participation in conversation on campus?

MODEL HEALTHY AND AUTHENTIC POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

- In a politically charged time, disengaging may seem the most effective way to keep students safe and avoid inflaming political divides. However, consider that perceived disengagement may also lead to a sense among students that adults are unwilling to "meet them where they are" in their political thinking and concerns.
- Disengagement may also be construed as silence or neutrality on critical issues or concerns to students. Practice acknowledging your students' individual perspectives as part of a larger set of viewpoints on complex issues. Reinforce school or classroom rules and standards about kindness and respect. Acknowledge that you have a perspective on the topic in question, if you do, but you're withholding your opinion because of power dynamics, your care for all students, and the like. Ensure that whatever stance you take protects and upholds the rights and dignity of students or groups that are minoritized and subjugated in political discussion.
- While schools should always avoid being places of indoctrination, they also need to consider how to support teachers and administrators in modeling healthy and authentic political engagement for students.
- As nonprofit organizations, independent schools cannot endorse candidates or parties, but discussing values and the civic process can help educators connect with students authentically. Educating students to become politically engaged adults who are able to discuss ideas with those whose perspectives differ can help shape the future of the nation.