



CIVIL DISCOURSE IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS:

THE 2020 ELECTION AND BEYOND



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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.

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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 1

HEADS OF SCHOOL AND THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING COMMUNITY IN DIVISIVE TIMES

“The election will be yet another fraught element of the coming fall, as it coincides with unprecedented challenges we’ve never had to confront.”

HEAD OF SCHOOL RESPONDING TO THE SURVEY

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, many school heads focused their energies on leading their communities through two unique and complicated moments in our nation’s history: the COVID-19 pandemic and the global movement for Black lives and racial justice. For many, this was a time of great change. Most schools shifted everything from the mode of delivery to the school schedule and pedagogy. Further, many communities faced a moment of reckoning that encouraged them to take a deeper look at the systemic inequities in their own schools.

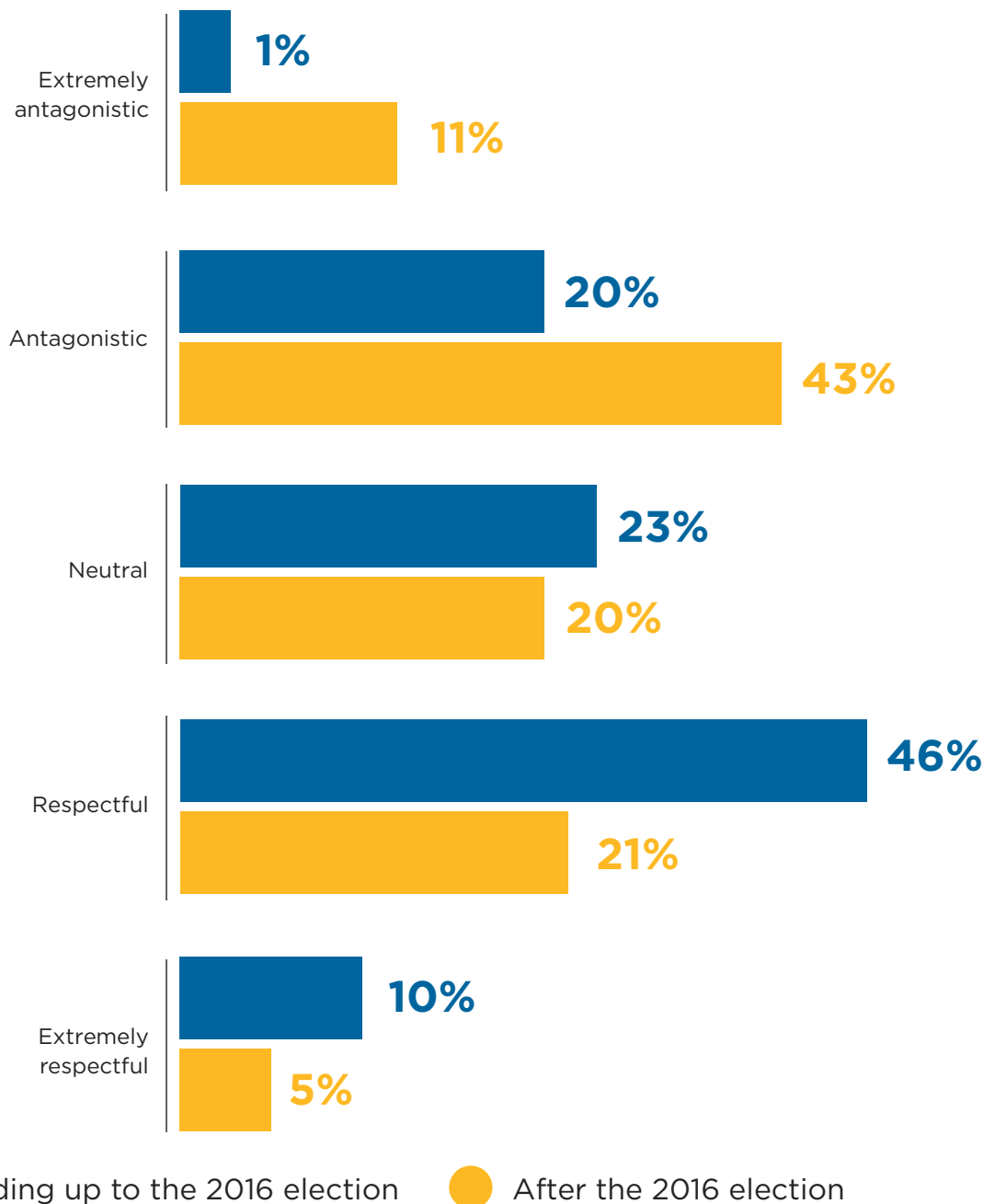
Amid this tumultuous and highly politicized time, the presidential election presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Many schools seek to educate students to become active citizens, and skills such as evaluating information and debating are highly prized. But some communities are so politically polarized that debate leads to rancor and often greater divides.

How can school leaders model and encourage civil discourse and create the conditions for authentic discussion in politically divisive times? Many heads of school shared their experiences and key learnings from the 2016 presidential election in the NAIS/Pollyanna survey. The following report also provides information about schools’ plans for the 2020 election and tips for schools navigating this fraught season.

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

More than half (56%) of the heads surveyed said that the political climate at their school was respectful or extremely respectful leading up to the 2016 election, but more than half (54%) reported that the climate was antagonistic or extremely antagonistic after the election.

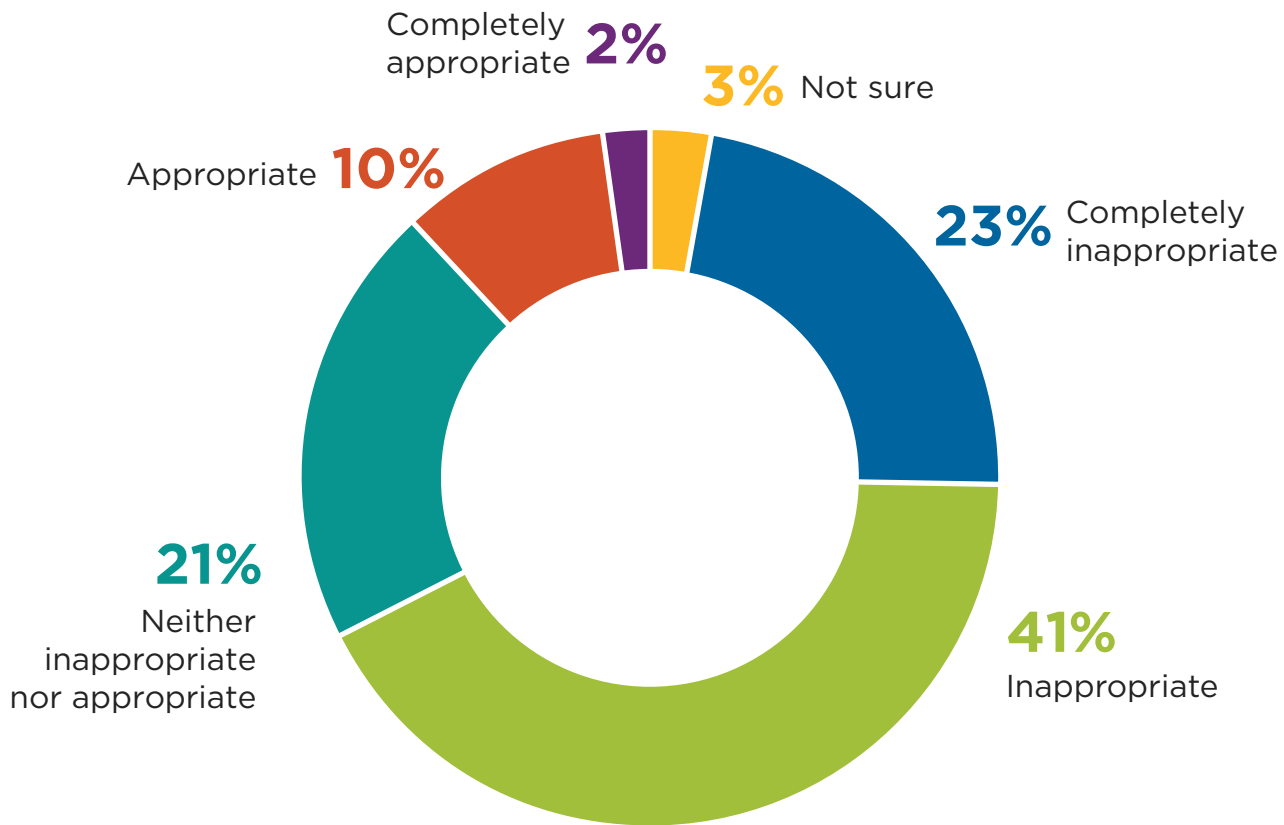
Thinking back to the 2016 presidential election, how respectful or antagonistic was the political climate at your school?



SHARING POLITICAL VIEWS

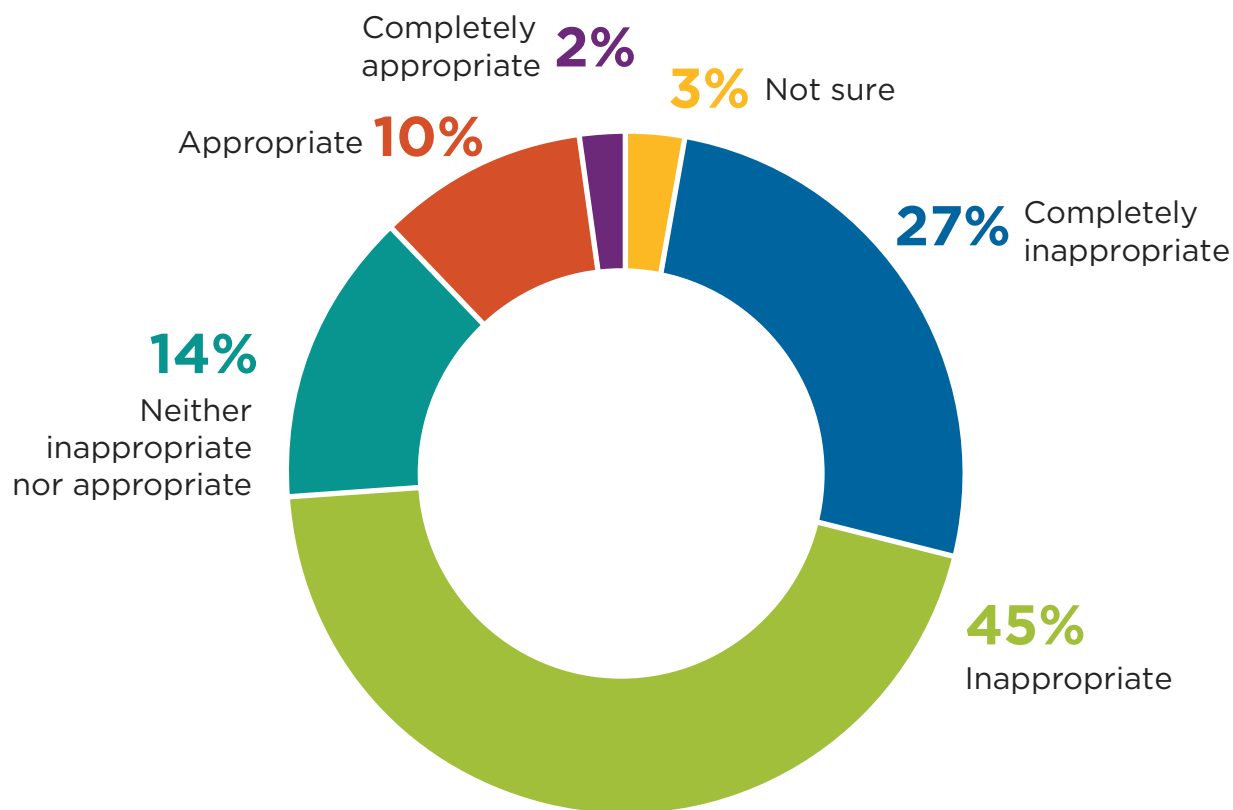
A solid majority of heads said that sharing their personal political beliefs at school is inappropriate and beyond the scope of a head's role. An even larger majority of heads felt that it is inappropriate for faculty and staff members at the school to express their political beliefs. Furthermore, some heads expressed concern that sharing personal political views can lead to an unsafe environment for discussion at school and can interfere with the learning process for students.

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?



“ As a head of school, I believe a studied neutrality is vital. All constituents need to feel comfortable with me.”

To what extent, if at all, is it appropriate for faculty/staff to share personal political views with students?



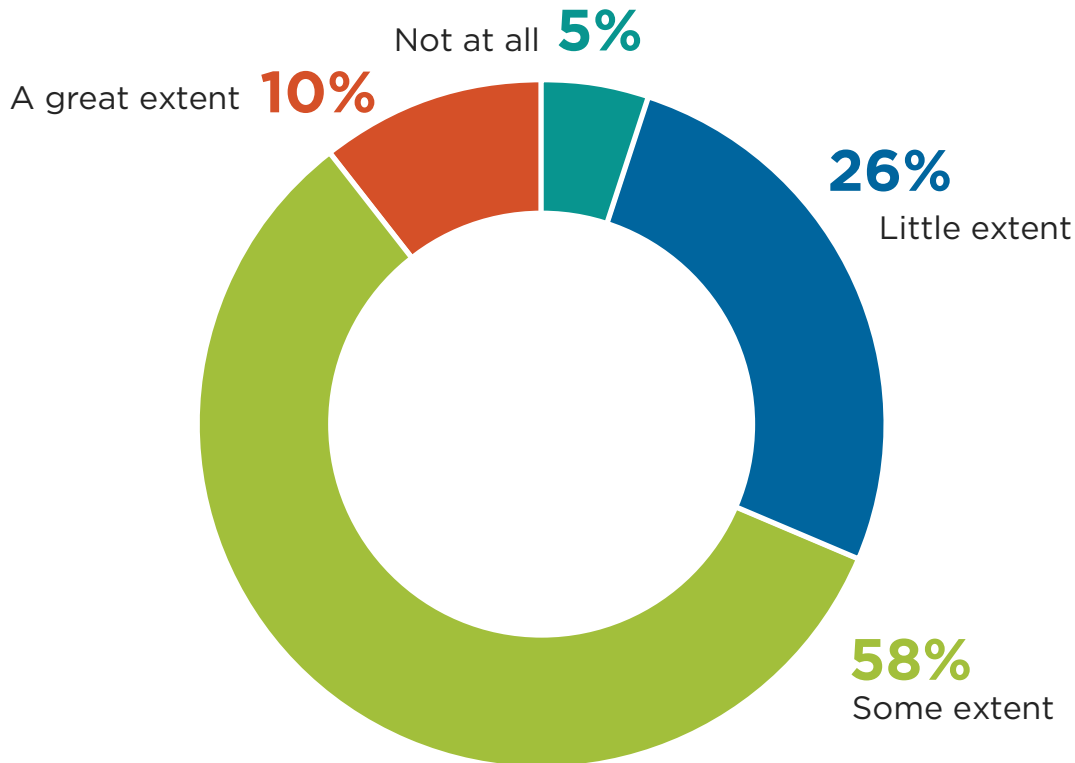
The desire for civil and respectful political discourse coupled with an ethics-based reluctance by leaders to engage personally in political discourse leads to a vexing question for school leaders: "Can heads lead their schools toward the norms and values they wish to see in their communities without fully engaging in and modeling what this discourse might look like?"

“ Education is far too precious and critical to politicize it.”

INCLUSION OF POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

More than two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that different political perspectives are included in classroom discussions, assemblies, and speakers at their school. Only 5% said that different political perspectives are not included at all.

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



“

I am very concerned that every topic in the world has now become ‘political.’ As a result, it’s as if we are all surrounded by the ‘third rail’ constantly. More than focusing on the election, I think we need to claim topics for discussion and attempt to depoliticize them. To reclaim them as ‘viewpoints’ or ‘perspectives’.... But we need them in order to have any meaningful discussion with children.”

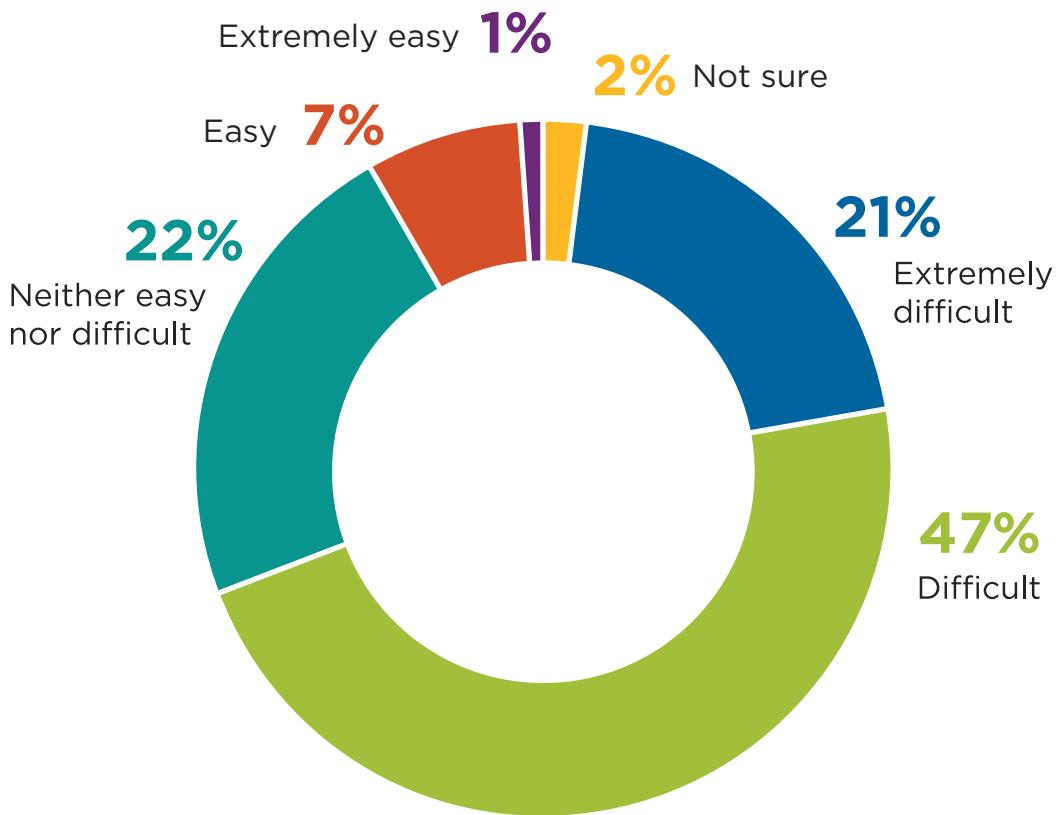
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[We should have had] more spaces for constructive dialogue focused on building empathy, rather than arguing over policies and parties.”

EXPRESSING “UNPOPULAR” OPINIONS

Heads also expressed concern that it was difficult for individuals who held “unpopular” political opinions in their communities.

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?



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[We] should have worked harder to coach students about expressing views. We should have discussed with faculty how to foster a climate of understanding to complement habits of argument.”

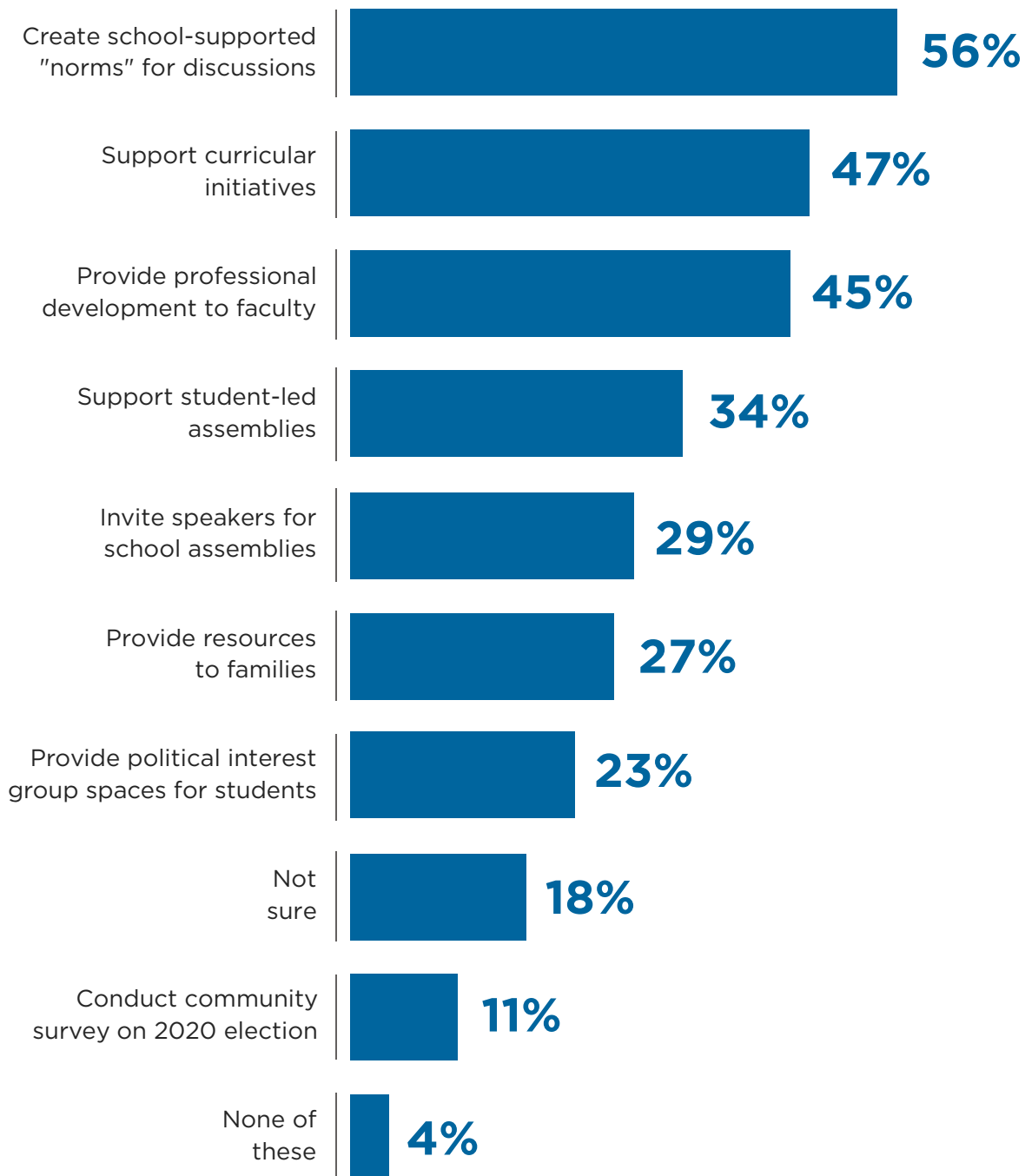
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If a student believes in a smaller federal government or opposes legalized abortion or affirmative action, I will happily defend their membership in my community. If a student thinks science is a conspiracy, or that a radicalized autocracy is good, they have refused our mission statement in a way that makes membership in our community impossible.”

PREPARATION FOR THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Heads expressed a desire to be better prepared for the 2020 election season than they were in 2016. More than two-thirds of those surveyed are likely or extremely likely to create programming around the 2020 presidential election.

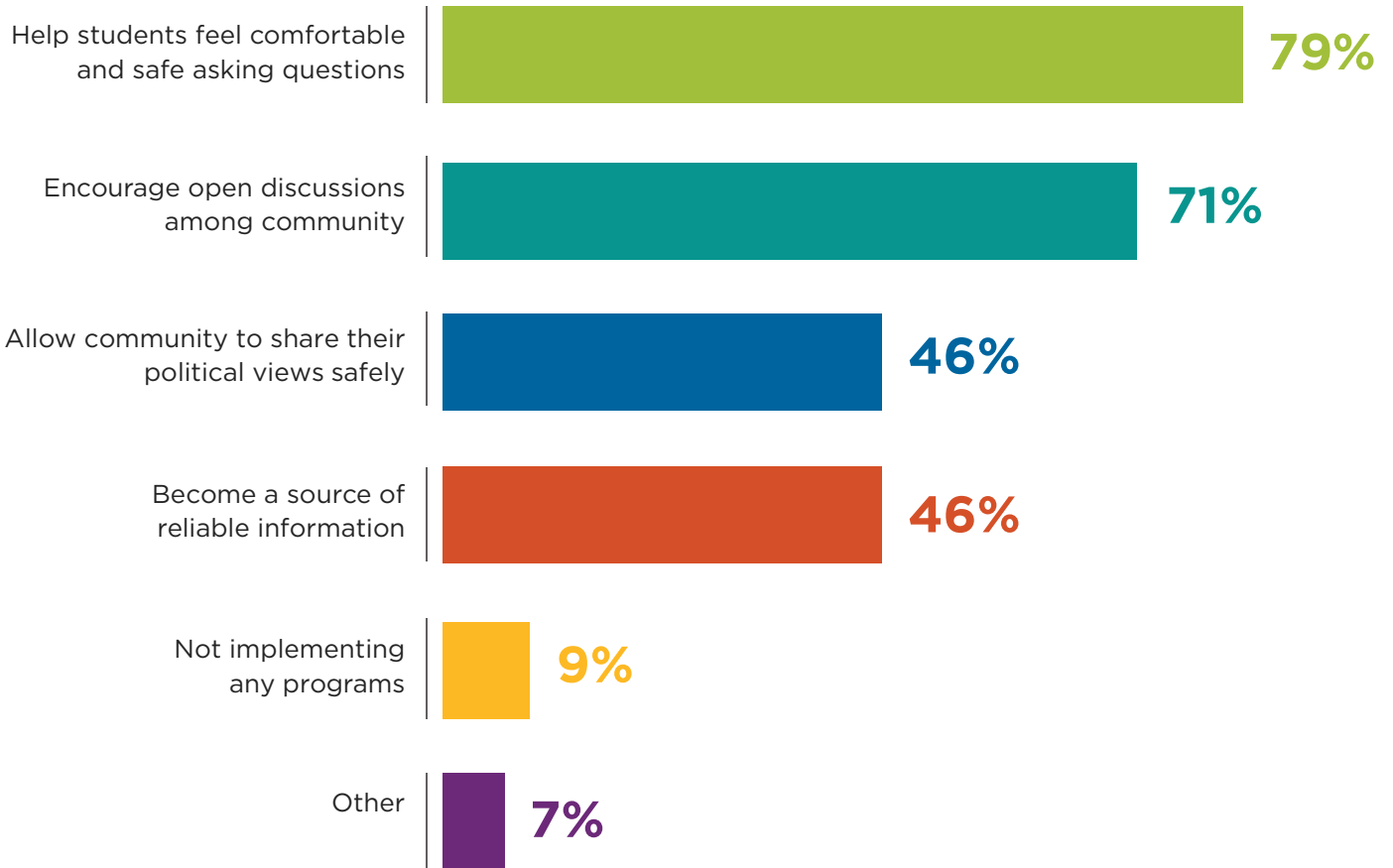
Which of the following activities do you anticipate organizing to help establish [a positive] tone before and after the 2020 presidential election? Please select all that apply.



GOALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Heads also reported that they wanted to implement these programs to foster community and to attend to the social and emotional impact of the election in their communities.

By implementing the programs above, what do you hope to achieve for the school community? (Select all that apply.)

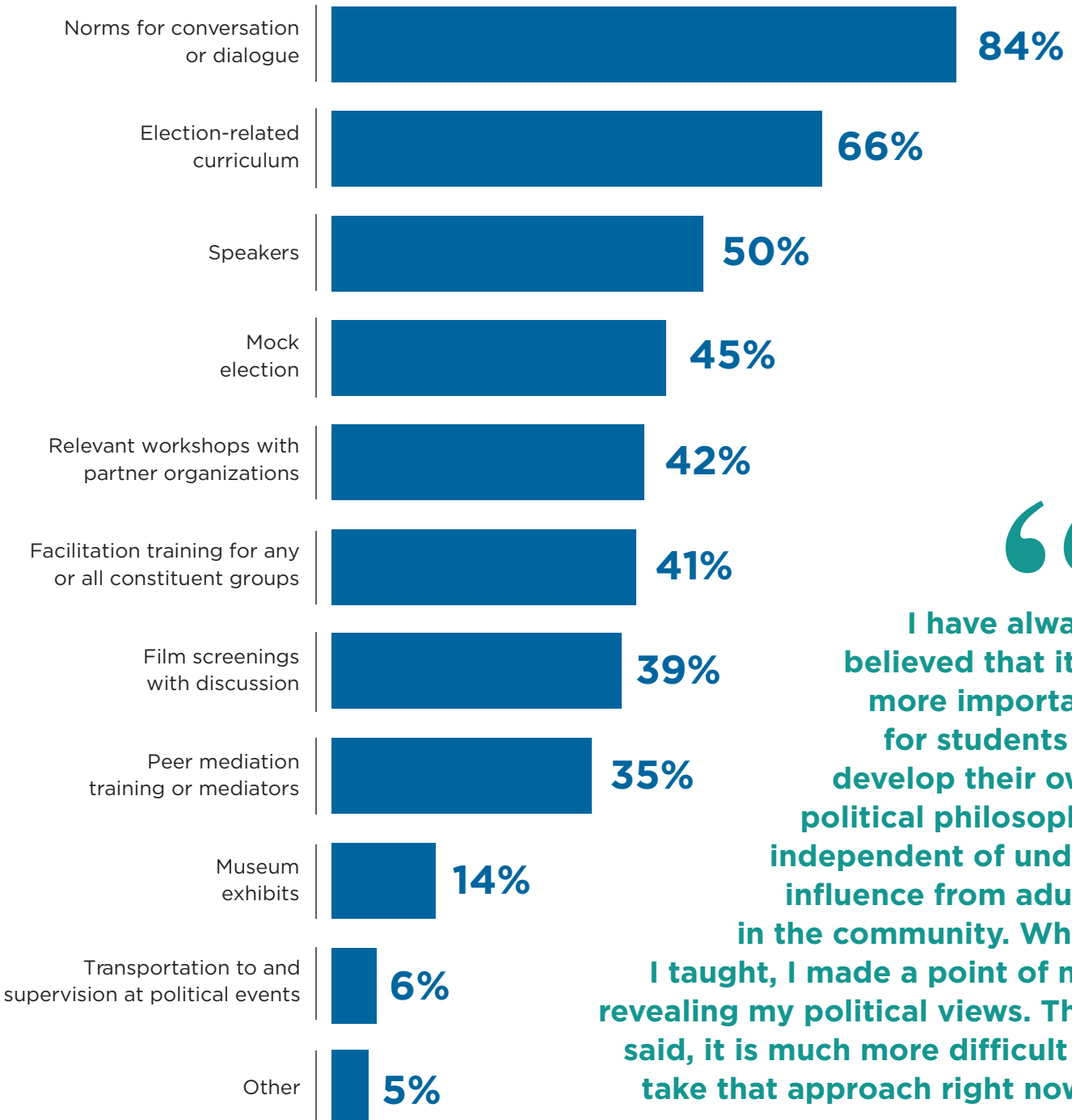


RESOURCES FOR THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

To prepare for the 2020 presidential election, heads expressed a desire to provide resources to their communities. Many also hoped that political conversations would take place in person, rather than online.

Which of the following resources, if any, would you be interested in offering to your community? (Select all that apply.)

(Among the 307 schools interested in offering resources)



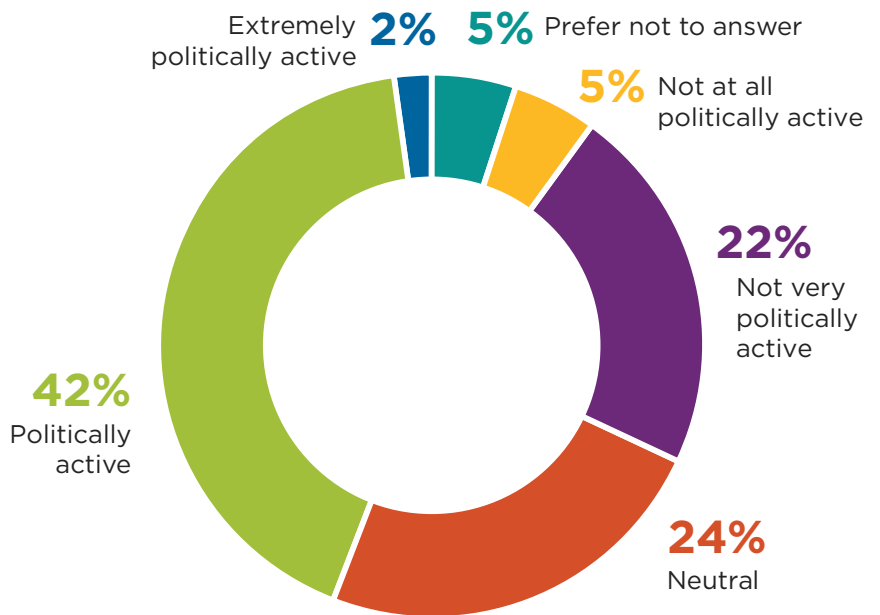
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

This survey was fielded among 1,569 heads of school between July 20 and August 12, 2020. 431 heads responded to the survey, representing a 27% participation rate.

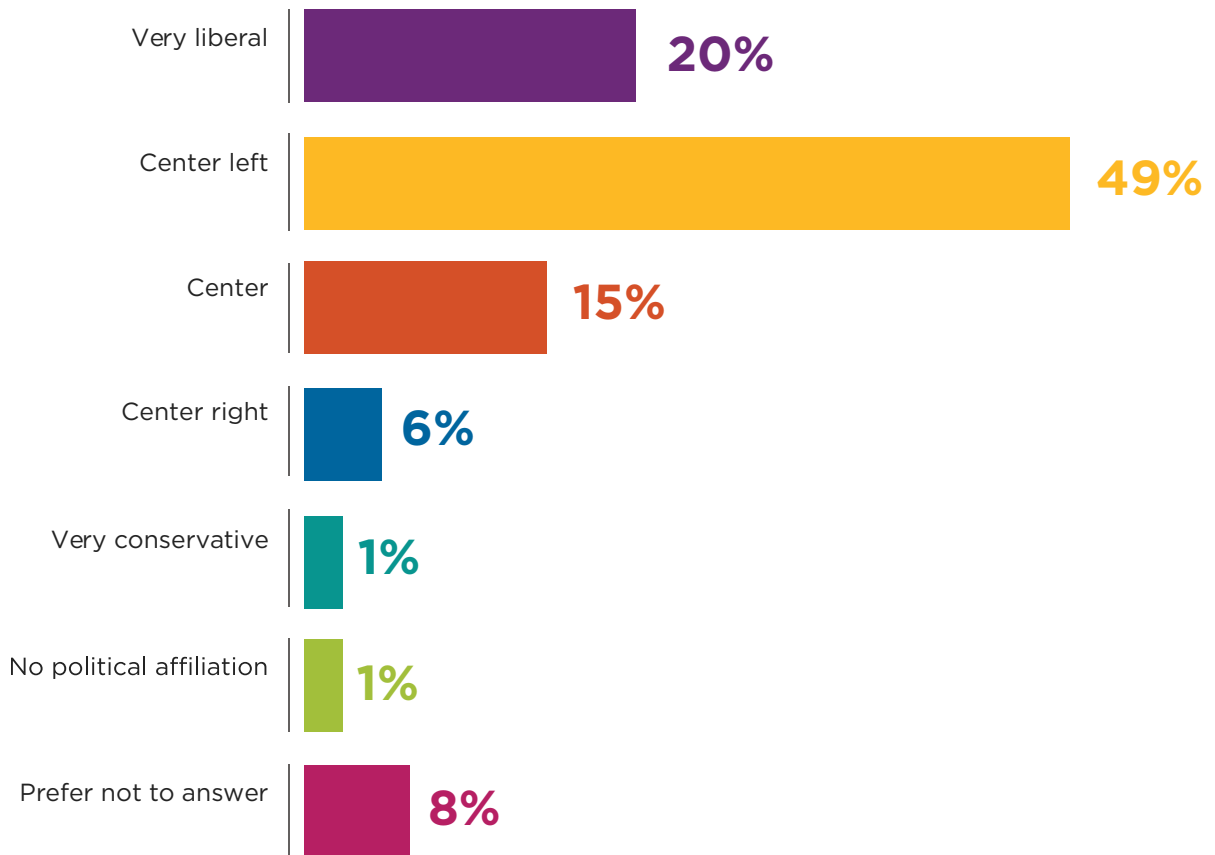
Half of all respondents were male, 45% female, and 5% chose not to self-identify.

Sixty-four percent of respondents were heads of school in 2016.

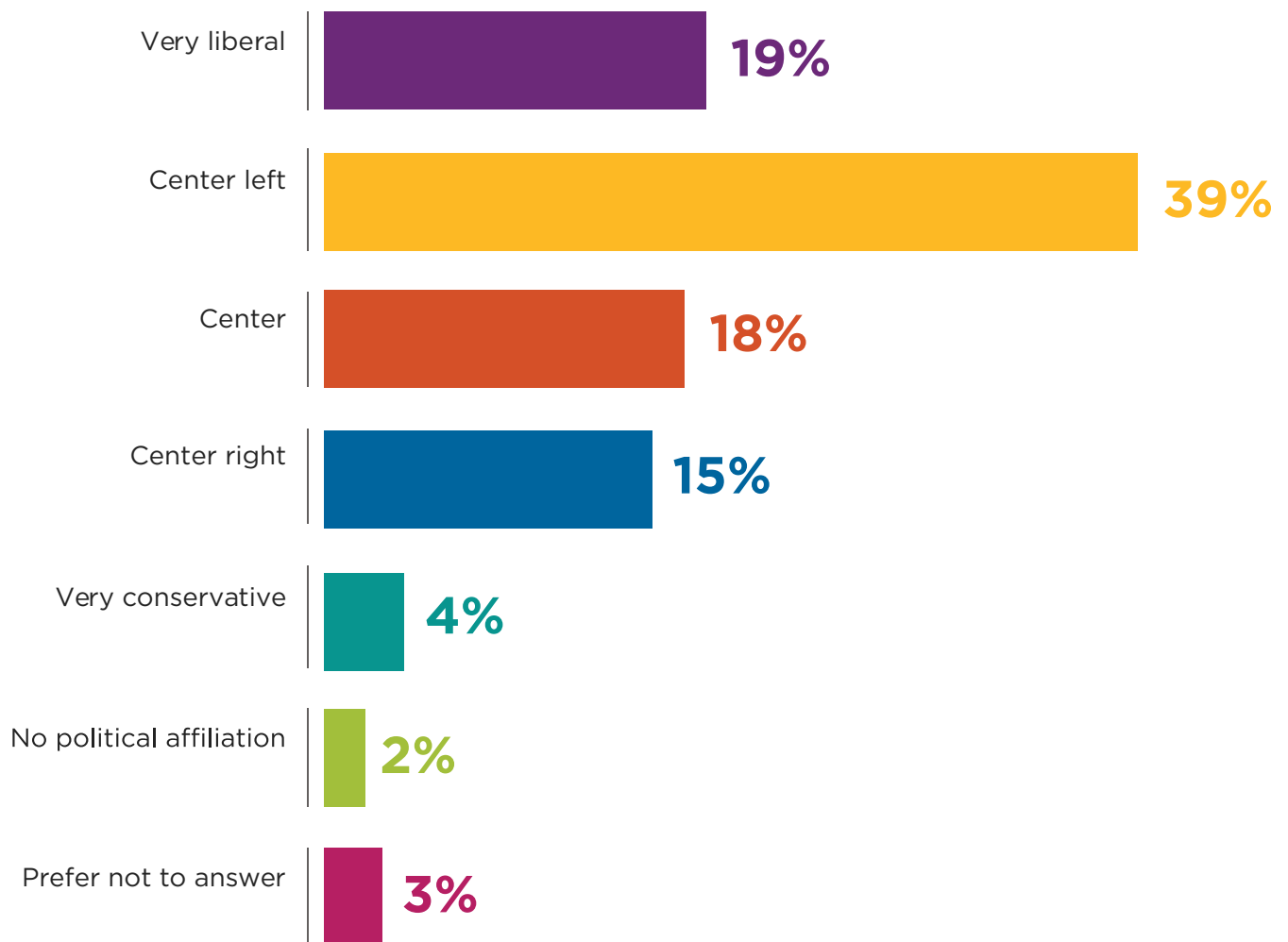
Fewer than half of the respondents said that they are politically active.



Sixty-nine percent of heads identified their personal political affiliation as “very liberal” or “center left,” while 7% identified as “very conservative” or “center right.”



The majority of heads perceive their school communities to be “center left” (39%) or “very liberal” (19%), while 19% perceive their communities to be “center right” or “very conservative.”



SET CLEAR NORMS

Set clear norms for political conversation at your school. Help community members understand the parameters of what constitutes civil discourse in your community. Make sure that adults in the community—not just students—understand that they are meant to practice and model these norms in order to better support students.

The National SEED Project uses the following discussion norms:

- Be fully present.
- Speak from the “I” perspective.
- Own your participation and shape your own experience.
- Be self-responsible and self-challenging.
- Suspend judgment of yourself and others.
- Listen, listen, listen, and process.
- Lean into discomfort.
- Experiment with new behaviors in order to expand your range of response.
- Take risks, be raggedy, make some mistakes—then let go.
- Accept conflict and its resolution as a necessary catalyst for learning.
- Be comfortable with silence.
- Be crisp; say what’s core.
- Treat the candidness of others as a gift; honor confidentiality.

Teaching Tolerance frames discussion values in the following ways:

- **Listening.** Deeply listening to what others say and to the feelings, experiences, and wisdom behind what they say
- **Humility.** Recognizing that, however passionately we hold ideas and opinions, other people may hold pieces of the puzzle that we don't
- **Respect.** Trusting the integrity of others, believing they have the right to their opinions (even when different from your own), and valuing others enough to risk sharing ideas
- **Trust.** Building a safe space to explore new ideas and work through conflicts, controversy, and painful moments that may arise when talking about issues of injustice and oppression
- **Voice.** Speaking the truth as we see it and asking questions about things we don't know or understand, particularly on topics related to identity, power, and justice

Facing History and Ourselves also offers a set of values to use in creating classroom contracts.

ROLE-PLAY AND PRACTICE

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

DEFINE WHAT'S APPROPRIATE

Clearly define and delineate what constitutes appropriate displays of personal politics in your community for both students and faculty. Consider using the language of your mission statement to set expectations for election season that are aligned with your mission. Consider discussing the following questions with your leadership team:

- Will your school create guidelines around wearing clothing that supports a specific political candidate, party, or movement?
- Will your school communicate specific, clear guidelines to faculty and staff about their role in engaging with students in political conversations?
- Will your school communicate to families your expectations for how they will engage in civil discourse with students, faculty, and staff during the election season?

ENCOURAGE VOTING

Consider what your school can do to encourage voter participation among all of your constituencies. Can you offer workshops or information about mail-in or absentee voting for community members? Can you delay the start of the school day or offer coverage for faculty and staff who would like to vote in person?

PROJECT STABILITY

Consider how to prepare your community for circumstances in which the results of the election might not be immediately clear or agreed upon. How might you use your mission and values to position your school as a place of stability and predictability during a time likely to be marked by uncertainty and controversy? Consider changing the language you use in your community to reflect this likelihood and help manage expectations (i.e., you might start referring to the time after election day as “election week”).

OFFER EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Prepare resources for social-emotional support in your community before election day. Consider ways to make sure that all community members can receive support regardless of their personal views. Prioritize students, but remember that faculty may also benefit from social-emotional support resources.

- Consider offering support or additional resources to school counselors during election season.
- Consider arranging affinity spaces for people of like-minded political viewpoints to gather during election season.
- Consider how you might provide spaces for students to process, listen, learn, and develop thoughtful responses to the results of the election.

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

Many excellent resources exist to help you set norms and expectations and provide developmentally appropriate curricula for your students.

Read more at www.nais.org or www.pollyannainc.org.