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Perspectives of High School Students on Political Polarization: A Survey Study

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Research Article

Keywords: Political polarization, high school students, political socialization, affective polarization, echo chambers, self-censorship, bridging political divides

Posted Date: November 3rd, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11588647/v1

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Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

Political polarization in the United States is at an all-time high. While it has been widely surveyed in the voting-age population, few studies comprehensively assess polarization in children and young adults, who are susceptible to adopting it and will shape the future political landscape. Accordingly, we conducted an anonymous 22-question online survey at our high school, which asked students about their political profiles, experience with political divides, and potential solutions. Students perceived the impacts of family and biased media on political views, and many used social media for political discourse, all of which can create detrimental echo chambers that reinforce polarization. Additionally, respondents were perceptive of partisan divides in their communities and reported related stress, which mirrored adults' opinions in existing surveys. Feelings of personal offense from political discussions were common, and self-censoring was frequent among students in the conservative-leaning partisan minority. However, students also viewed the humanity in out-partisans and were hopeful about bridging polarization, advising others to be more respectful, empathetic, informed, and open-minded. Accordingly, proposed interventions included policies against politically fueled bullying, open and constructive discourse with opportunities to hear different viewpoints, and a focus on commonalities. All solutions would be more effective with schools and families that model acceptance of diversity.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, political polarization in the United States has drastically escalated, with rising antipathy between the two major political parties. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 21% of Republicans and 17% of Democrats had a "very unfavorable" view of the opposing party in 1994, surging to 62% and 54% in 2022, respectively. Likewise, Democrats and Republicans have shifted more towards their respective liberal and conservative values, widening their ideological gap (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Factors like the media, politicians, and human psychology are catalyzing the growing partisan divide. A moderate degree of contrasting political views can increase stability by promoting civic engagement and an exchange of diverse ideas. However, excessive polarization can have the opposite effect, hindering constructive discussion and even democratic processes (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). These risks are currently surfacing, as polarization is linked to increased political violence, dehumanization, and legislative gridlock (Binder, 2016; Garcia-Navarro, 2020), making it a crucial societal aspect to research.

Political polarization has been widely studied on voting-age citizens, and several surveys have addressed youth input on aspects like media bias, institutional trust, and the influence of family on views (Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, 2025; Lyons, 2005; News Literacy Project, 2025). However, few survey studies have comprehensively assessed the effects and extent of political polarization in children and adolescents, leaving them vulnerable to adopting polarized mindsets reflected in society. Moreover, young adults and children comprise the next generation of voters and leaders, making their political attitudes important to investigate in order to determine and shape the future of American politics.

Accordingly, our study examines student perspectives regarding the prevalence and effect of political polarization within their school, community, family, and other interpersonal relationships, as well as potential solutions to bridging it.

Methods

Data Collection

On January 21, 2026, we posted a link to a 22-question survey (21 multiple choice, 1 open response) (Supplement 1) on Schoology (PowerSchool Holdings, Inc., Folsom, CA), an online learning management system accessible to all 2,055 students attending our school, Newton North High School (NNHS), at the time. NNHS is located in Newton, Massachusetts, a moderately diverse suburban city near Boston. The posted link remained available until we disabled response submission on March 6, 2026.

We created our survey using a web-based platform (Survey Monkey®), and disabled respondents from submitting more than one response. The survey was approved by the school's Center for Civic Engagement and Service, as well as Next Gen Voices, a civic engagement club at NNHS. Additionally, school administrators who moderate all posts on Schoology approved the post with our survey. We informed students that all questions were optional, participation in the survey was voluntary, and completing the survey served as consent to participate in the study. Additionally, the survey did not collect any personal identifiers and thereby ensured anonymity, which students were also informed of.

Data Analysis

Only surveys with more than 80% of items completed were included in the analysis. We performed statistical analyses using two-way ANOVA testing, defining significant correlations as having a p-value less than 0.05.

For the open-ended question, we read through and categorized responses. Each response could be assigned to one or more categories, and outlier categories (defined as only comprising one response) were excluded. The resulting data was presented as the number of responses per category.

Results

A total of 232 students completed the survey. The response rate could not be calculated because the number of students who read the learning management system post or accessed the embedded link was untraceable.

Demographics and Political Profiles

Table 1 describes survey respondent demographics. Respondents were distributed among all four grades, ranging from 49 (21.3%) in grade twelve to 71 (30.9%) in grade nine. The participants represented all genders, with a majority being females (113, 49.3%) and males (86, 37.6%). Most respondents were white

(129, 56.1%), followed by Asian or Pacific Islander (53, 23.0%), Hispanic (19, 8.3%), and African American (8, 3.5%).

Figure 1 displays the political issues that students were most interested in. They reported being most passionate about immigration (42.8%), social justice (39.7%), and education (35.8%), followed by racial equality (31.0%), climate change (30.6%), and civil rights (28.8%).

The majority of respondents expressed interest in politics, ranging from being very or extremely interested (120, 53.1%) to moderately interested (87, 38.5%). Likewise, most participants (200, 88.1%) believed that it is very or extremely important to be informed about current political events, and follow recent political news often or very often (178, 78.1%). Students' three most trusted sources for political news were *CNN* (112, 48.9%), *The New York Times* (101, 44.1%), and *NPR* (64, 28%).

Figure 2 shows the current political views of survey respondents. The most common views were moderate liberal (79, 34.4%), extreme liberal (37, 16.1%), and moderate conservative (28, 12.2%).

Social Influences and Behaviors

Nearly all students agreed or strongly agreed (222, 98.2%) with the statement that biased media influences public opinion. Additionally, a majority (143, 62.7%) of students reported that their parents or guardians' views impacted them considerably or a great deal, and 22.4% (51) reported that this occurred to a moderate extent.

While 30.7% (70) of students reported not engaging in political conversations at all on social media, the most common social media platforms on which respondents discussed politics were Instagram (97, 42.5%), TikTok (74, 32.5%), and YouTube (70, 30.7%). When interacting with peers, most participants (224, 98.3%) reported discussing politics, ranging from doing so often or very often (106, 47%) to sometimes (89, 39%) and rarely (29, 12.7%).

Figure 3 depicts the personal impact of respondents participating in or overhearing these political conversations at school. A majority (120, 53.1%) of participants claimed that political discourse has made them feel less hopeful, while 30.5% (69) of students reported that it has had no impact at all. Additionally, most (174, 77%) respondents reported that these discussions have offended their identities in some way, including making them feel discriminated against (49, 21.7%), offended (46, 20.4%), threatening their personal identities (44, 19.5%), and making them feel bullied (35, 15.5%).

During political discussions at school, 28.7% (66) students avoided expressing their political perspectives often or very often, 24.8% (57) did so sometimes, 20.4% (47) did so rarely, and 26.1% (60) never did so. Additionally, 33.9% (78) of respondents reported very often, often, or sometimes lying about their political views at school, while most (152, 66.1%) said they rarely or never did so.

Figure 4 displays respondents' behavior in political discussions at school based on their stated political view. Students with liberal-leaning political views (defined as moderate liberal, extreme liberal, socialist, or communist) reported significantly more involvement in discussing politics with their peers (83 out of 135; 61.5%), compared to center or independent (12 out of 44; 27.3%) and conservative-leaning respondents (defined as moderate or extreme conservative) (6 out of 36; 16.7%). However, significantly more conservative-leaning respondents reported avoiding (75.0%) and lying (72.2%) about their political views compared to liberal-leaning respondents (8.1% and 3.0%, respectively).

Political Polarization and Bridging the Divide

A majority of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their school (148, 65.2%), community (170, 75.2%), and friends and family (135, 60%) have become less politically tolerant over the past several years. Additionally, almost all students (221, 98.2%) claimed to see deep political divisions at the national level, with 60.4% (136) of respondents thinking they are addressable and 37.8% (85) believing they will be impossible to overcome. Regardless, most respondents (198, 87.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that they have had more overall stress from politics over the last few years.

Figure 5 shows survey respondents' opinions of out-partisan peers. The most frequently selected options to describe students with opposite perspectives were misinformed (72, 31.4%), people like themselves but with a different opinion (54, 23.6%), and brainwashed (29, 12.7%).

Among respondents, the average answer was that they would help a peer with opposing political views if they were in need (4.22/5 on a 1–5 Likert scale) and be willing to have that peer as a friend (3.27/5), although the latter statement had less agreement. Less students agreed with the idea of avoiding the out-partisan peer as much as possible (2.8/5). When asked to write a hypothetical message to other students with contrasting views, many responses suggested being more informed (25), open-minded (24), and moving past differences (21), as well as being respectful (19), finding common ground such as humanity (13), developing empathy (8), and having beliefs that align with true values and identities (8).

Figure 6 depicts respondent-recommended interventions for bridging the political divide at school. The most chosen solution was implementing rules to handle politically-fueled discrimination and bullying (136, 59.7%), followed by creating a safe environment for open, honest, and constructive discussions (123, 54.0%), and encouraging students to move beyond "us vs. them" thinking by focusing on commonalities and shared objectives (117, 51.3%). In contrast, very few participants recommended banning all political discussions (10, 4.4%) or punishing students that engage in political discussions (7, 3.1%).

Discussion

Political Socialization

Our survey assessed multiple social components, namely family and media, that drive the development of political views, a process known as political socialization. Specifically, almost two-thirds of students felt that their parents' or guardians' political views impacted theirs to some extent, which is a similar rate to other youth surveys (Lyons, 2005; Public Religion Research Institute, 2024; Yale Youth Poll, 2026). Understandably, a 2019 Pew Research Center survey concluded that 81% of teens have similar views to their Republican-oriented parents, and 89% to Democratic-oriented parents (Cooperman, 2023). The most direct way family influences political ideas and even political involvement is through discussions, as children are frequently exposed to certain worldviews from a young age (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006; Willoughby et al., 2021). However, indirect factors like values, parenting styles, and consequent childhood environments have also been known to impact the political perspectives and civic engagement of children (Karumudi, 2024). For example, authoritarian-style and strict parenting is linked to more conservative ideologies in offspring (Fraley et al., 2012; Wegemer & Vandell, 2020), while more nurturing parenting is associated with liberal attitudes (Lakoff, 2002).

Despite the long-lasting influence of family on political attitudes, other social factors such as media, school, and peers can also be impactful, altering or reinforcing views derived from family (Yi & Nelson, 2024). In particular, the respondents of our survey generally agreed that biased media influences public opinion, which reflects the impact of sensationalism, or using shocking and exaggerated styles to captivate viewers, as well as deliberate omission or selection of certain ideas. These biases tell more intense or polarizing stories, which can distort public opinion towards misleading information and even diminish trust in democratic institutions (Bernhardt & Polborn, 2008; Charles, 2025; Happier & Philo, 2013; Stirling, 2025).

Moreover, as the selective exposure theory dictates, individuals generally seek media that aligns with their political perspective, which they prioritize over truth (Schwalbe et al., 2024). As a result of both human tendencies and biased media, viewers form their own echo chambers, where they primarily encounter ideas that concord with their political views and narratives that discredit opposing ones (Maclure, 2024). Another key contributor to digital echo chambers is algorithms, which are widely employed in social media to curate feeds of users with content that matches their preferences (Golino, 2021). Among almost all other social media platforms, Instagram, the most used platform for political discussions among our survey respondents, is known for personalizing content using algorithms (Dutta et al., 2025). Thus, many students at this school experience algorithms and their effects.

In particular, environments where individuals rarely encounter contrasting ideas can catalyze the spread of misinformation (Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2022; Georgetown University, 2025; Törnberg, 2018) and limit critical thinking and empathy (Bodell, 2025; Koehler, 2024). Most significantly, echo chambers deepen divides by facilitating group polarization (Sunstein, 2002). This process causes individuals to hold more extreme versions of their beliefs when surrounded by like-minded others, and develop an "us versus them" mindset in which people delegitimize opposing views. Counterintuitively, exposure to diverse viewpoints can often backfire by exacerbating hostility and tribalism (Galef, 2021).

Behaviors and Discussions

Almost all respondents of our survey reported participating in political discussions at school, and a majority did not self-censor, a term representing those who lied about or avoided expressing their political views. However, there was a strong correlation between conservative-leaning affiliations and self-censoring. This association was likely not due to the conservative ideology itself but rather its nature as the minority partisan view in the school, compared to the liberal-leaning majority. Self-censorship is even found in online political discussions, with one study finding that participants outnumbered by the opposite partisan group felt less comfortable sharing their ideas (Allamong et al., 2024).

The spiral of silence theory provides context to this characteristic. It suggests that individuals whose opinions contrast the perceived majority are more likely to stay silent, causing the perceived majority to become increasingly dominant (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Importantly, other studies have noted that the view that is more vocal or willing to be dominant can be considered the majority, despite often being the minority (Burnett et al., 2022; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Accordingly, both the prevalence and vocality of liberal-leaning views likely contributed to self-censorship among conservative-leaning students.

Affective Polarization

Our survey respondents' most frequent description for peers with opposing views was "misinformed," suggesting an awareness of potential biases in news and other media. The general adolescent population in the United States shares a similar view, with a 2025 survey reporting that 69% of teens felt news organizations purposefully add bias to their content (News Literacy Project, 2025). However, our participants' second most popular description for out-partisans was "people like me but with a different opinion," revealing a sense of humanity despite conflicting perspectives they encounter. This finding does not align with the opinions of adult citizens, as negative feelings towards and labels for the opposite parties are becoming more evident (Pew Research Center, 2022; Shepard et al., 2025). Additionally, political dehumanization, where individuals believe out-partisans are savage, immature (Petsko & Kteily, 2023) or objectively immoral (Puryear et al., 2024), is common among both parties, and makes even people more likely to accept political violence (Garcia-Navarro, 2020). Students might have a better sense of connectedness than adults due to frequently seeing non-political aspects of peers that humanize them, revealing the importance of finding commonalities with out-partisans.

However, two key factors regarding politics were prevalent among both our respondents and American adults: recognition of political polarization and negative feelings regarding politics. For instance, in 2024, 80% of adults, a record high, felt Americans were deeply divided on key values (Jones, 2024), reflecting how almost all our participants saw polarization. Similarly, a majority of adults feel exhausted or angry about the political landscape (Pew Research Center, 2023), likewise to our respondents' reported stress regarding politics. However, hopefulness among adults is rare (Pew Research Center, 2023) and most believe political divisions will exacerbate (Lee, 2022; Murray, 2022), contrasting the idea that more students in our survey agreed that political divides were addressable than permanent. Therefore, although most Americans share the same perceptions and feelings about politics, the younger population may be more optimistic about bridging divides and thus willing to accept and implement solutions (De Witte, 2026).

Bridging the Divide

Among our respondents, the three most chosen solutions for bridging polarization at school involved handling politically-fueled bullying, having honest and constructive discussions, and focusing on shared objectives. These interventions align with the literature for ways to target polarization more efficiently and meaningfully. Specifically, one study concluded that political discourse among perceived equals had the most lasting impact in increasing political tolerance (Greene et al., 2024), which is similar to casual conversations among peers.

In these discussions, dissent should be normalized to help students feel comfortable sharing their true views, without fearing judgment (Austin, 2011). Moreover, students should focus on being receptive and recognizing commonalities, two behaviors that contribute to the most productive disagreements (Simon, 2022; Wai, 2021). Almost no respondents chose banning discussions as a solution, revealing that a sense of regulated freedom, involving open discourse but anti-discrimination policies, would be the optimal intervention.

Another study concluded that depolarization methods at the individual level, including interaction with out-partisans, are not lasting, effective, and scalable without broader reforms to societal institutions and the incentives of elites (Holliday et al., 2025), as politicians often amplify divides (Fayyad, 2018; Shapiro, 2014). Applied in the school setting, students' daily environments, consisting of teachers, curricula, and parents, should emphasize skills that help embrace differences, such as open-mindedness and expanding beyond single stories.

Overall, the recommended interventions among respondents and the literature involve constructive discourse with anti-bullying policies, opportunities to hear multiple sides, and an awareness of shared objectives, as well as schools and families that model acceptance of diversity and different viewpoints. These solutions would likely reduce discomfort or other negative feelings around political conversations, which our respondents expressed, and create a tolerant environment.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be considered regarding our findings. First, the overall number of respondents (232) was relatively low compared to the school's student body of 2,055, which could reflect the fact that not all students may have viewed the online post with the survey link. Selection bias also likely affected which students completed the survey, as it may have disproportionately attracted students interested in political or political polarization, preventing them from being a representative sample of the high school. Likewise, this survey was only conducted at one high school in the Boston metropolitan area, limiting generalizability for high schoolers across the nation due to varying responses by region, demographics, and other factors. Finally, conformity bias may have affected responses, as some participants may have tailored their answers to align with the perceived majority.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings are useful in understanding the perspectives of high schoolers on political polarization and interventions to bridging differences.

Conclusion

Our survey study contributes to the literature by providing insight to the perspectives of high school students on political socialization and polarization. Notable findings suggest that respondents were perceptive of partisan divides and reported related stress. Feelings of personal offense from political discussions were common, and self-censoring was frequent among students in the conservative-leaning partisan minority. However, participants viewed more humanity in out-partisans compared to adults in the literature, and were hopeful about bridging differences. Accordingly, proposed interventions included policies against politically fueled bullying, open and constructive discourse, and a focus on commonalities, which would be more effective with schools and families that model acceptance of diversity. Importantly, future areas of study include contributors to self-censoring, broader national youth surveys, and the effectiveness of recommended solutions.

Declarations

Acknowledgements

We would like to formally thank Erin Rossiter, the Nancy Reeves Dreux Assistant Professor of Political Science at University of Notre Dame, for her valuable guidance and feedback on our work.

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Table 1

Table 1 is available in the Supplementary Files section.

Figures

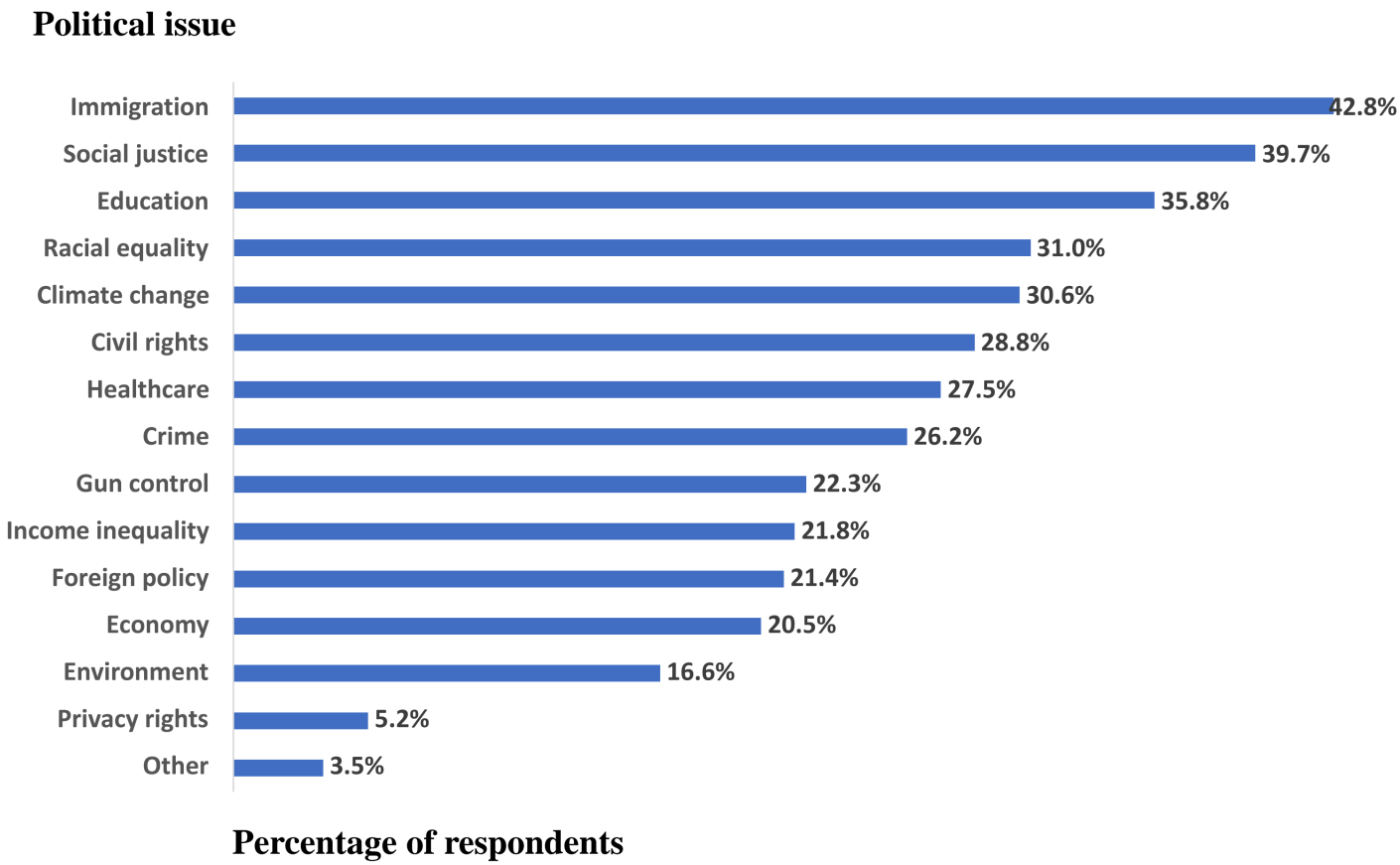


Figure 1

Political Issues of Interest to Respondents

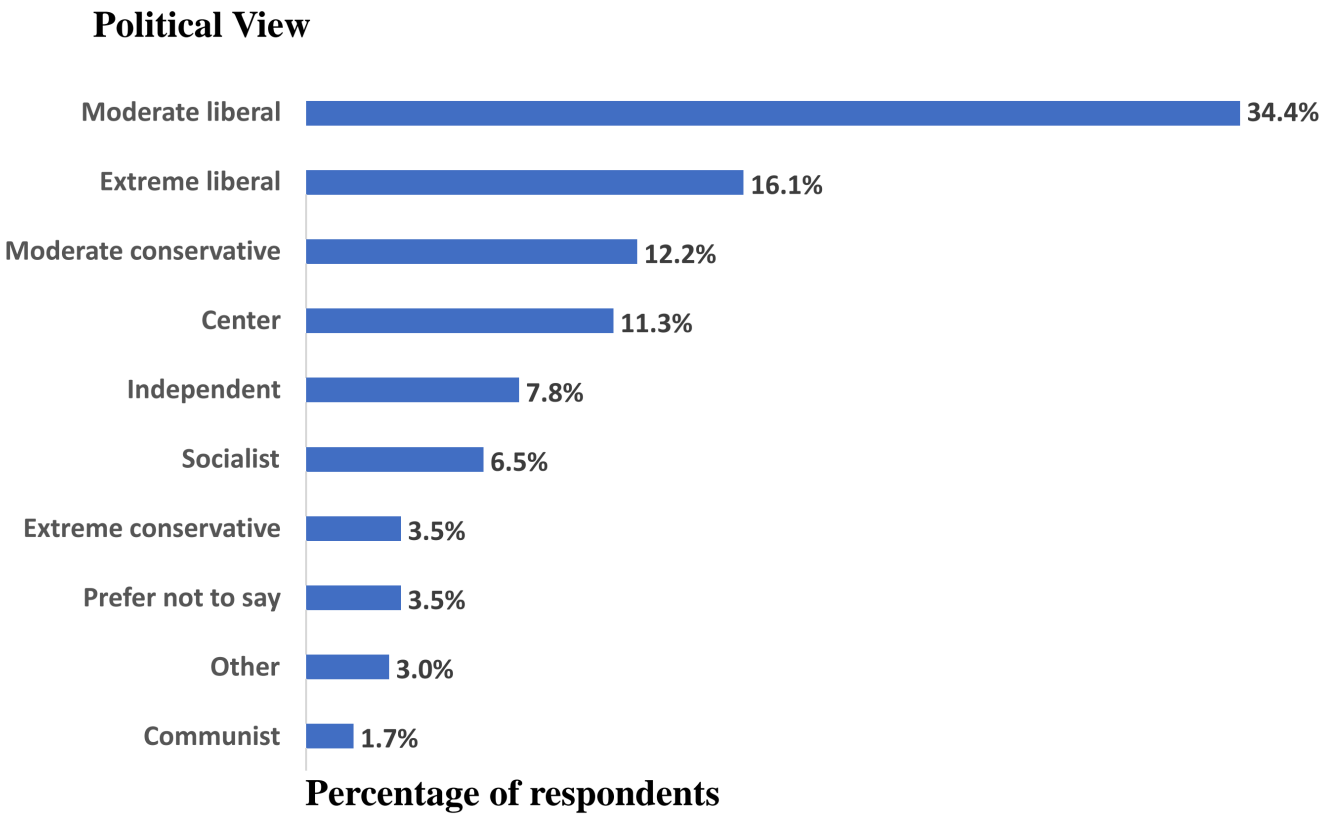


Figure 2

Current Political Views of Respondents

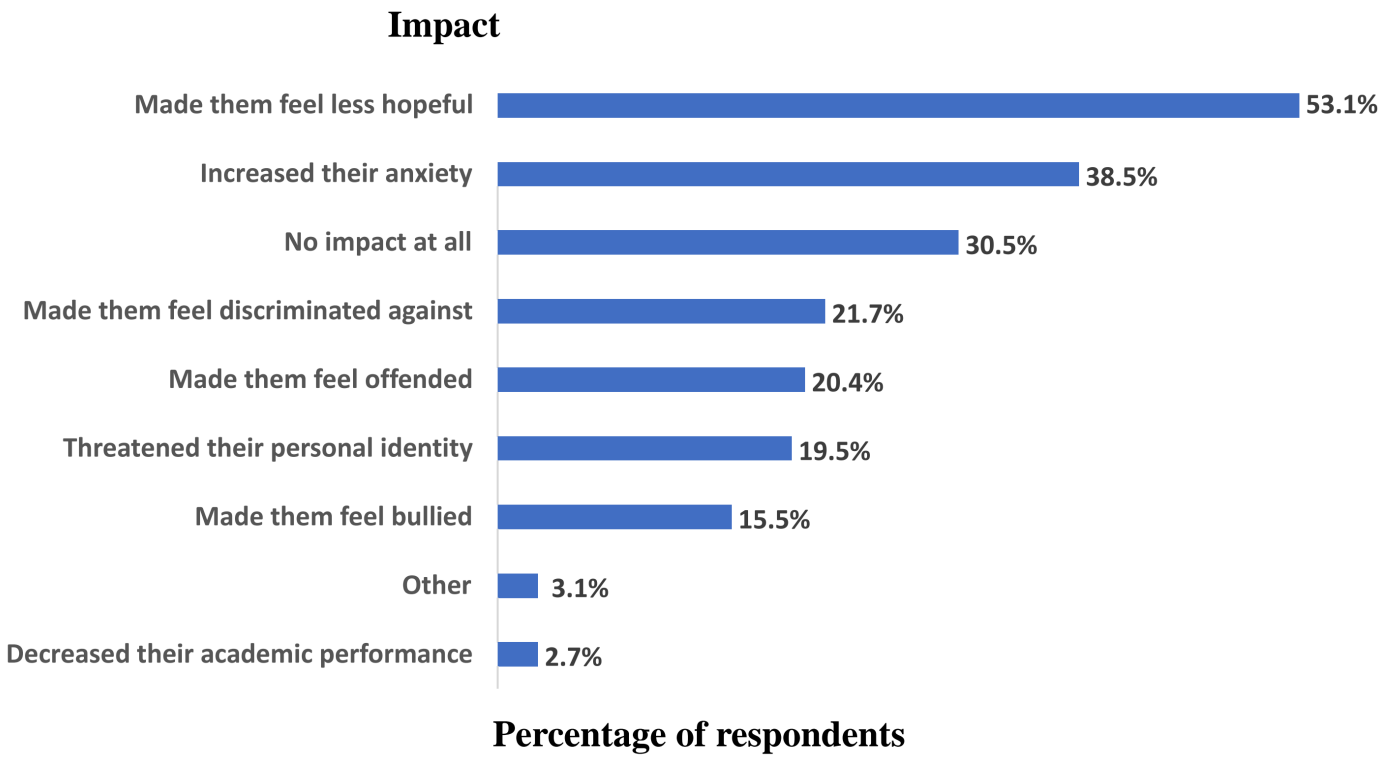


Figure 3

Personal Impact of Respondents Participating in or Overhearing Political Conversations

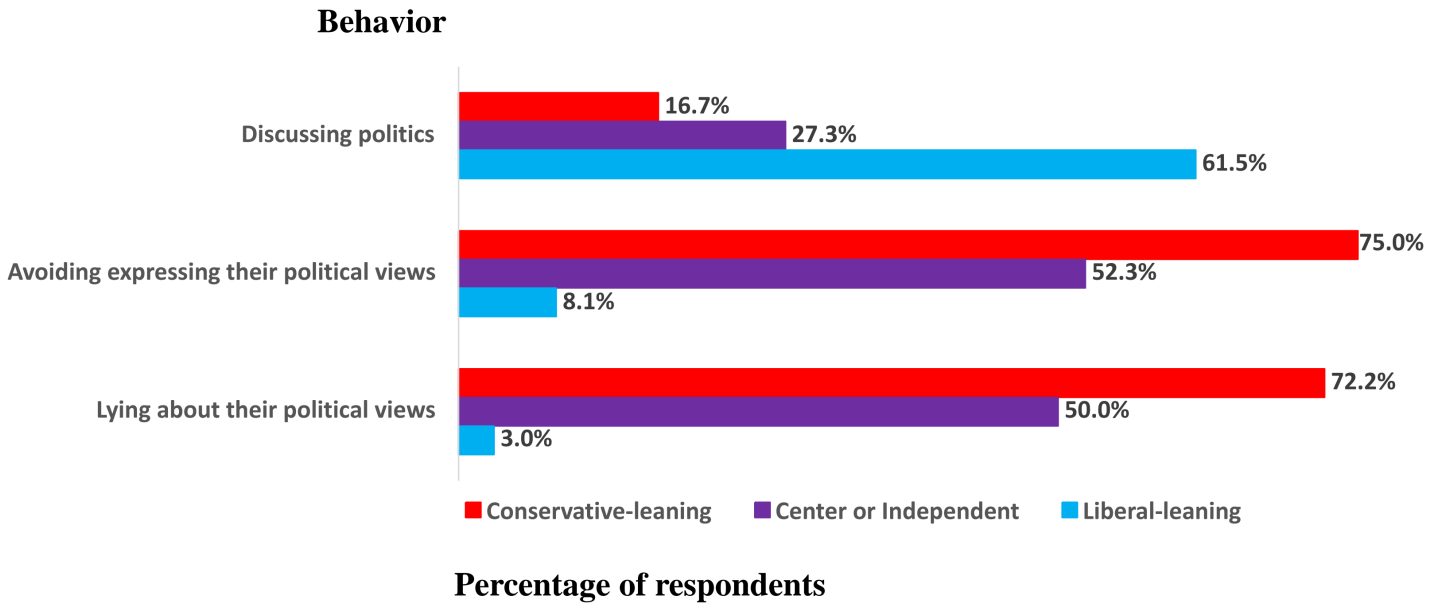


Figure 4

Respondents’ Behaviors at School Based on Political View

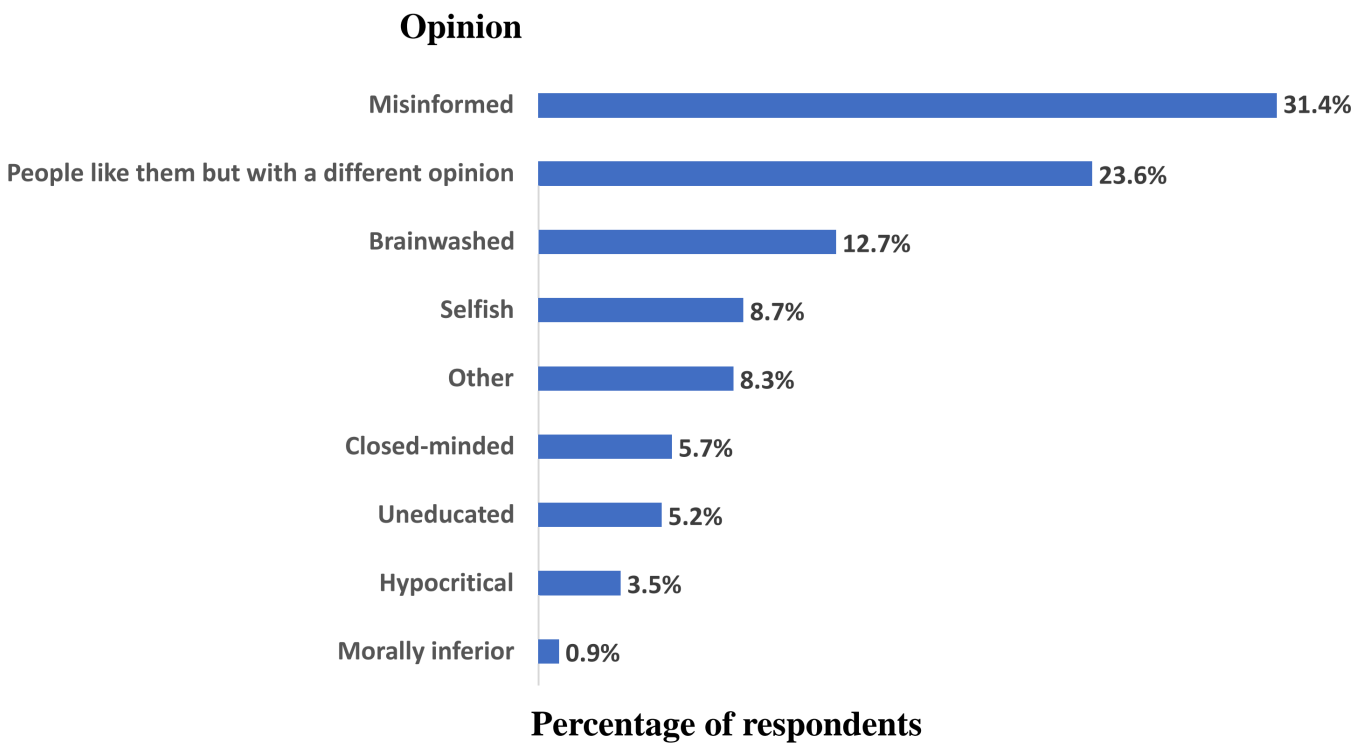


Figure 5

Respondents’ Opinions of Peers with Opposing Views

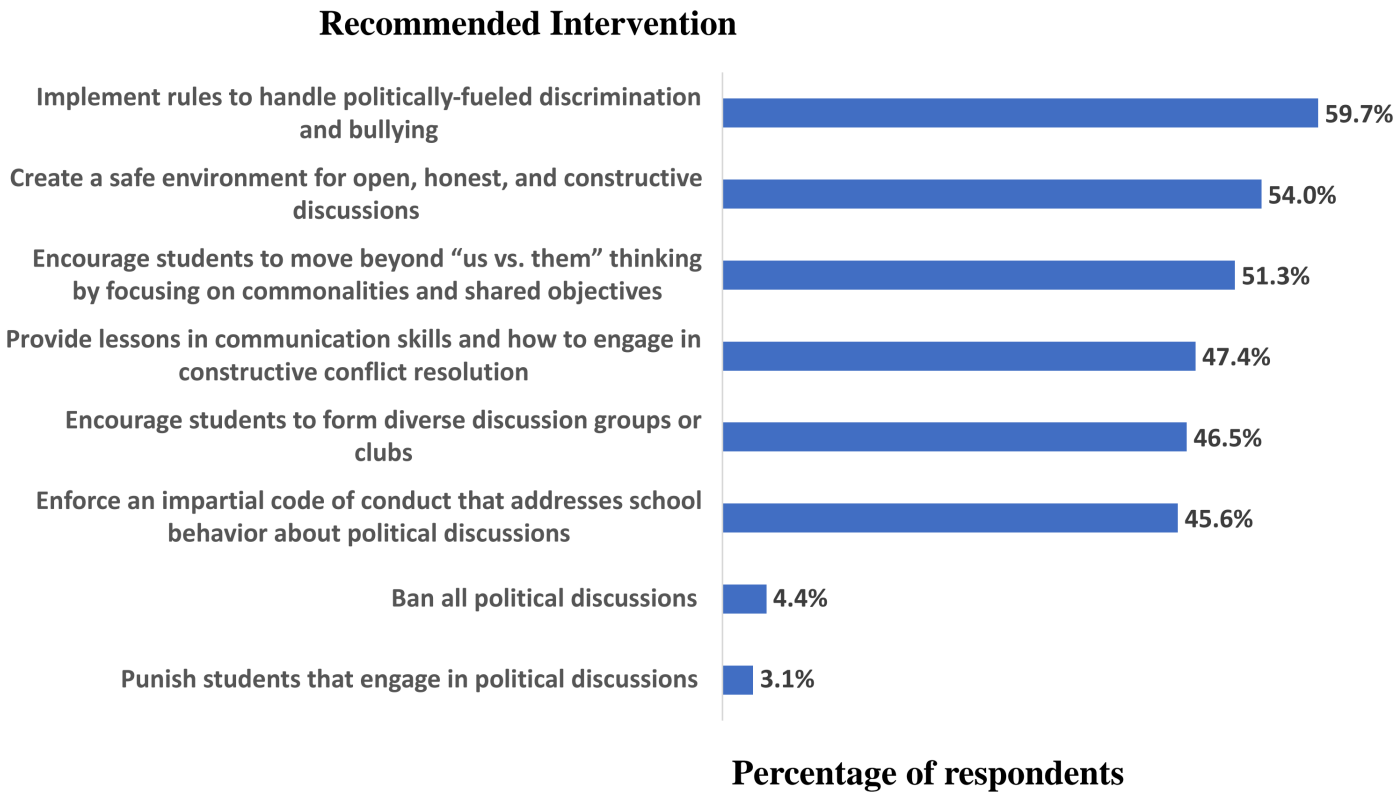


Figure 6

Respondent-Recommended Interventions for Bridging Political Differences

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Table1.docx
- Supplement1.png.zip