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WHY ARE STUDENTS
SELF-CENSORING
IN CIVICS CLASS?

POLICY
BRIEF

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WHY ARE STUDENTS SELF-CENSORING IN CIVICS CLASS?

A Policy Brief from the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute

INTRODUCTION

Discussion and disagreement are among America's oldest and most enduring conditions. They are not defects of our society; they are integral to it.

Civic education therefore has two related tasks. Students need to understand how American government works. They also need opportunities to practice the skills that citizenship requires: making an argument, listening to an opposing one, and working through disagreement.

The lack of civic knowledge among American students is well documented.¹ But even students who possess civic knowledge may decide that classroom civic engagement is not worth the social cost.

The Sandra Day O'Connor Institute examined one side of this problem last year in *Why Are Teachers Uncomfortable Teaching Civics?*² Nearly 80 percent of civics teachers surveyed said they had self-censored or avoided discussing certain topics in class because they feared pushback or controversy.

This year, we spoke to the students themselves. Recent high school graduates were asked about their high school civic education. A majority reported that they'd self-censored rather than say what they really thought about a political or civic topic in class because they were concerned about how others might react.

Yet these were not, in the main, students describing hostile classrooms. Most said they were generally comfortable sharing their honest views. Even those comfortable students, though, sometimes chose to self-censor.

The most striking finding was whom students worried about. Among those who self-censored, 91 percent cited classmates as a concern. Just 41 percent cited the teacher.

That result changes the shape of this problem. Debates over classroom speech often focus on adults: teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, legislators. Those adults matter; teachers in particular help shape the conditions under which disagreement occurs. But classmates are part of those conditions too. A classroom can therefore be open to disagreement in principle while students still hesitate to take part in it. America cannot educate citizens by teaching around disagreement. It must teach students how to engage it.

KEY FINDINGS

- **When students self-censor, classmates are their most commonly cited concern.** Among respondents who self-censored, 91 percent cited classmates as a concern, more than twice the 41 percent who cited the teacher. Twenty-six percent worried about being discussed or posted about on social media, 21 percent about their grade, and 12 percent about parents or other adults hearing about their views.
- **Students self-censor selectively, even when they generally regard the classroom as open.** Fifty-eight percent of surveyed students said they had withheld a political or civic opinion because they were concerned about how others might react. Yet 73 percent described themselves as generally comfortable sharing their views. Among those generally comfortable students, though, 51 percent still reported having self-censored at some point.
- **Teachers help determine the conditions under which disagreement occurs. Fifty-three percent of surveyed students said they had sometimes or often seen a teacher avoid, cut short, or shut down a political or current-events discussion.** Only 38 percent of students who self-censored said their teachers created an environment where students felt safe disagreeing, compared with 68 percent of those who did not.
- **Students are not asking schools to avoid difficult subjects.** They are asking for better ways to discuss them.

THE QUIET CALCULUS: WHEN STUDENTS SELF-CENSOR

Political expression is inherently social. Whether people speak depends partly on what they believe those around them think, and on what they expect will happen if they depart from the prevailing view.

Public opinion researchers have long studied self-censorship, or withholding a genuine opinion from an audience believed to disagree.³ A meta-analysis of 66 studies involving more than 27,000 participants found a consistent, though modest, relationship between perceptions of the surrounding opinion climate and willingness to express political views. People were more willing to speak when they believed their views had social support and less willing when they believed they did not.⁴

A view or question that never enters the discussion cannot be examined, challenged, defended, or revised.

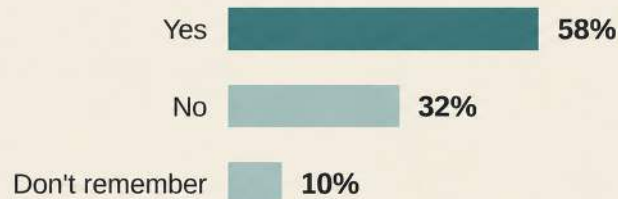
This pattern is familiar to young Americans. In Harvard's Fall 2025 Youth Poll, 47 percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 said they avoided political conversations because they worried about how others would react. The tendency crossed party lines: 46 percent of Democrats, 54 percent of Republicans, and 45 percent of independents said the same.⁵ A Knight Foundation survey of more than 10,000 high school students found that only 56 percent were comfortable voicing disagreement with teachers and fellow students in class.⁶

The O'Connor Institute survey adds an important complication.

SELF-CENSORING

A majority self-censored at least once

Did you ever hold back from saying what you really thought about a political or civic topic in class (for instance, not sharing an opinion or not asking a question) because you were concerned about how others might react?



Source: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey of recent high school graduates, summer 2026

The same respondents who reported self-censoring did not necessarily regard their classrooms as unfriendly places to speak. Seventy-three percent of recent high school graduates said they were generally somewhat or very comfortable sharing their honest opinions when political or civic subjects arose. But among those generally comfortable students, 51 percent nevertheless said that they'd self-censored at least once.

The two findings fit together: silence is often situational.



THE PARADOX

Generally comfortable, and still self-censoring

73% were generally comfortable sharing their honest views



and still, 51% of them self-censored at least once

Source: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey of recent high school graduates, summer 2026

“There was only one time in high school I held back some of my opinion,” recalled Deniya W. of Georgia. It happened during a presidential election season. Having disagreed with classmates before, she decided that “to avoid conflict I just kept it to myself.”

Not every decision to remain quiet is troubling. Listening is an important civic skill, and intellectual humility sometimes requires withholding judgment until one understands an issue better. Christian G. of California recalled occasions when he stayed quiet because he wanted to hear another person’s ideas or did not yet know enough to debate the subject well.

But regularly choosing silence because speaking seems socially costly is different. A view or question that never enters the discussion cannot be examined, challenged, defended, or revised. The student also loses an opportunity to practice a skill that citizenship regularly requires.

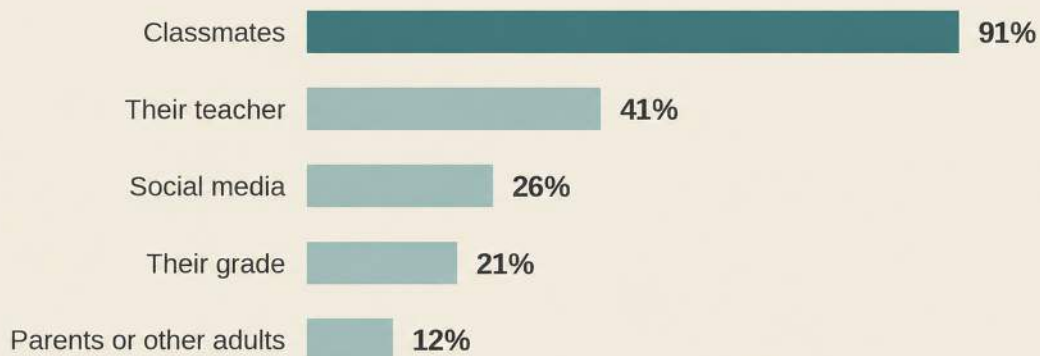
THE SOCIAL COST OF DISAGREEMENT

The survey's most striking finding concerns what and whom students were worried about when they did self-censor.

THE CENTRAL FINDING

Classmates were the most commonly cited concern

"What were you concerned about? Check all that apply." Among respondents who reported self-censoring, respondents could select more than one concern.



Source: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey of recent high school graduates, summer 2026

The conventional debate over classroom speech tends to begin with adults. Are teachers imposing their views? Are administrators discouraging difficult subjects? Are parents or legislators making teachers afraid to discuss tough issues?

But students point most often to another source of concern: their classmates.

Prior research supports this. Education researchers Diana Hess and Julie Posselt studied tenth-grade social studies classes designed specifically to engage students in controversial public issues. They found that students' perceptions of their peers exerted greater influence on participation than did their teachers' behavior.⁷

Students' perceptions of their peers can also be wrong. A study of Hungarian secondary students showed that many of them underestimated how strongly their classmates rejected prejudiced remarks, and over the school year many students' attitudes actually moved in the direction of the norm that they had misperceived.⁸ Young people can and do respond not only to what classmates believe, but to what they *assume* classmates believe, and the two can differ.

The students in our survey shared how this can all play out in the classroom.

Vince M. of Oklahoma recalled staying quiet during a discussion because the issue in question was "hard to discuss in a polarized environment." Ava C. of Alaska remembered a discussion in which classmates

“did not accept other opinions and made comments about students disagreeing.”

What these and other responses share is a social calculation: whether expressing a view is worth placing oneself at odds with the surrounding group.

Caroline T. of California captured the problem in five words. Asked what would have improved civic education at her school, she wrote: “students not being so judgmental.”

The educational task is to create conditions in which disagreement can be serious without becoming a social risk. Peer norms are not fixed. In a randomized experiment involving 56 middle schools, Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Hana Shepherd, and Peter Aronow asked students to identify classmates they spent time with, then recruited groups of students in half the schools to lead an anti-conflict campaign. The intervention was more effective when those groups included students who were more central in their schools’ social networks.⁹ Socially influential peers, in other words, can help shape what behavior classmates see as acceptable.



WHEN THE CLASSROOM IS OPEN, AND WHEN IT CLOSSES

Peers may be the principal source of social pressure, but teachers help to create the classroom environment.

Teachers decide which questions are worth asking, and they establish expectations for evidence and response. They can make room for an unpopular view without endorsing it, help a student improve an awkwardly expressed argument, and keep disagreement focused on ideas rather than personalities.

A good civics classroom makes it possible for a student to lose an argument without losing social standing.

Researchers often describe this as an “open classroom climate.” The concept is measurable and has been measured for decades. Moreover, the evidence in favor of such classrooms is substantial. A 2026 review identified 60 studies linking open classroom climates with outcomes including civic knowledge and political self-efficacy.¹⁰ Analyzing data from a major international study of civic education, David Campbell found that students from open classrooms knew more about civics, were more likely to see political disagreement as part of how democracy works rather than a sign that something is wrong, and were more likely to say they planned to vote and to learn about the candidates before voting.¹¹

Fifty-one percent of our respondents agreed that their teachers encouraged discussion of controversial issues, and 54 percent said their teachers created an environment in which students felt safe disagreeing with one another. At the same time, 53 percent said they had sometimes or often seen a teacher avoid, cut short, or shut down a class discussion of a political or current-events topic. The survey did not ask why teachers ended or avoided these discussions; there are many reasons a teacher might.

THE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

How often teachers limited discussion

How often did you see a teacher avoid, cut short, or shut down a class discussion of a political or current-events topic?



Source: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey of recent high school graduates, summer 2026

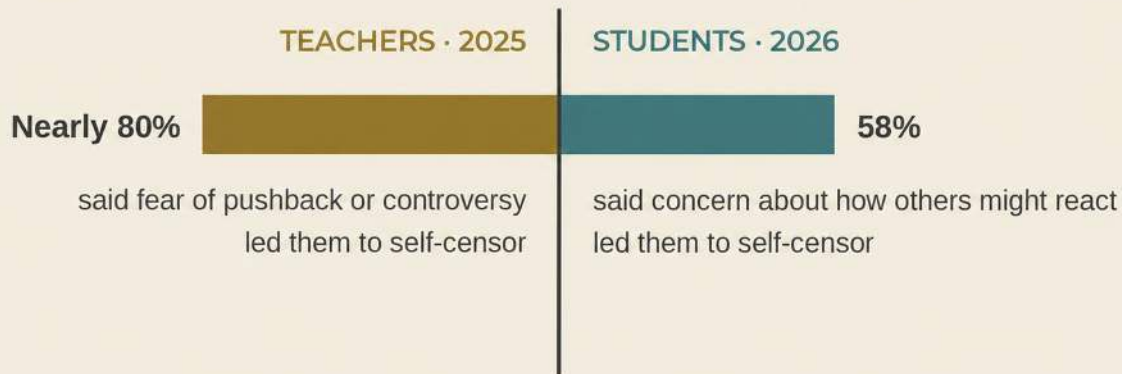
Students who self-censored also described the classroom differently from those who did not. Forty-seven percent of students who reported self-censoring said that their teachers generally avoided controversial topics, compared with only 16 percent of students who did not self-censor. And just 38 percent of those who self-censored said their teachers created an environment in which students felt safe disagreeing, compared with 68 percent of those who did not self-censor.

These comparisons cannot tell us which way causation runs, and so the teacher and student findings should not be reduced to a story about one group silencing the other. They may instead reveal a classroom in which both groups are assessing the risk.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Two sides of the civics classroom

Sandra Day O'Connor Institute surveys of civics teachers (2025) and recent high school graduates (2026). The two surveys asked different questions of different groups; the figures illustrate a parallel, not a direct comparison.



Teachers may anticipate controversy and become cautious about opening certain discussions. Students may anticipate social consequences and become cautious about sharing their views, which then shapes their perspective on the classroom environment. If a discussion goes badly, a teacher may be less inclined to try again and students may become less willing to participate the next time.

None of this means teachers are failing; it means the job is hard in specific ways. Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy followed 35 teachers in 21 high schools, sat in on their political discussions, and surveyed more than 1,000 of their students. The teachers they watched were constantly making judgment calls: which questions are open for debate and which are settled; when to step into a heated exchange and when to let it run; whether and how to tell students what they themselves think. Every one of those judgment calls is made live, in front of the class.¹² And the class is paying attention. When Dutch researchers asked secondary students how willing they would be to join a classroom discussion of a controversial national tradition, students were more willing when they perceived the teacher as warm and supportive. The authors concluded that teachers can encourage participation by creating a safe classroom environment.¹³

Importantly, safe does not mean comfortable. Serious civic discussion will be uncomfortable at times. That discomfort is part of learning, and schools should not try to remove it. But a good civics classroom makes it possible for a student to lose an argument without losing social standing.

WHAT CAN WORK IN THE CLASSROOM

Survey respondents who described difficult political conversations did not believe that schools should stop having them. Quite the opposite, in fact: they wanted more, and better, engagement opportunities.

“More discussion, debate, and hands-on opportunities,” wrote Ava C. of Alaska when asked what would have improved civic education at her school. Jose S. of Arizona said greater civic discourse would allow students “to hear different perspectives.” Riley D. of Virginia wanted “time to openly discuss political opinions and potentially engage in debates.” Others called for more discussion of current events, greater exposure to local government, visits to public meetings, mock debates, and more opportunities to connect classroom learning with civic life beyond school.

The students we surveyed want more opportunities to practice productive disagreement.

There are ways to meet this request, and the Institute’s own programs offer a practical illustration. At Camp O’Connor USA, our free summer civics program for seventh- and eighth-graders, campers debate and vote on legislation, run a mock presidential campaign, and visit civic institutions. In 2026 surveys, 71 percent of campers named the field trips and 59 percent the mock election and campaign among the parts of the week that helped them learn most.¹⁴



The Ambassadors program itself shows how repeated practice of civil discourse may boost confidence. Sixty-four percent of alumni said the Ambassadors club had made them more confident discussing civic or political issues. And that confidence was strongly associated with participation. Among alumni who described themselves as very active in Ambassadors, 89 percent said the program had increased their confidence discussing civic or political issues. The figure was 75 percent among somewhat active participants, 56 percent among occasional participants, and 17 percent among those who joined but rarely participated.

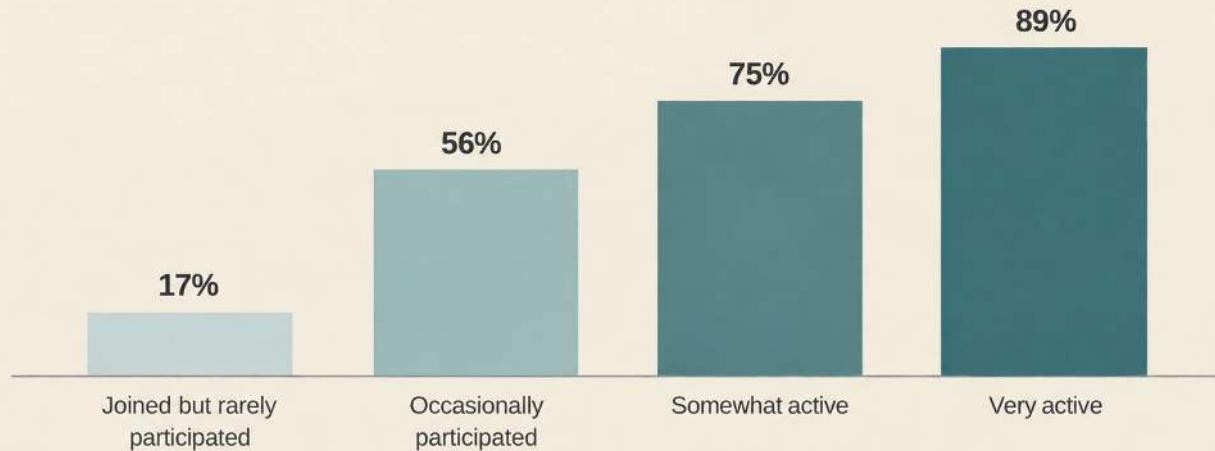
“More discussion, debate, and hands-on opportunities.”

— Ava C. of Alaska

PRACTICE AND CONFIDENCE

Confidence was higher among more active participants

Share of alumni who said Ambassadors increased their confidence discussing civic or political issues, by self-reported participation.



Source: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey of Ambassadors Civics & Debate Club alumni

The pattern does not establish that more frequent participation caused greater confidence; students who participated more regularly may have entered the program with greater interest or comfort. Even so, the Camp and Ambassadors findings point in the same direction as the broader research: civic capacities grow through experience and practice.



RECOMMENDATIONS

When surveyed students self-censored, their most common concern was not the teacher but their classmates. That finding changes the prescription. These recommendations keep civic knowledge at the center of civic education and treat the classroom's peer culture as something schools can shape.

1. Make Constructive Disagreement an Explicit Civic-Learning Outcome.

States and districts should treat constructive disagreement as a civic skill. Students should be expected to make evidence-based arguments, represent opposing views accurately, ask good-faith questions, distinguish criticism of ideas from criticism of people, and revise claims when the evidence warrants.

2. Make the Peer Norm Visible and Enlist Students in Shaping It. A peer norm is what students believe their classmates expect of them — what they think it is socially acceptable to say. If much of the pressure students feel comes from one another, students must be part of the solution. **Ask students anonymously whether a classmate who voices an unpopular opinion should still be treated with respect, and whether they think most of their classmates would agree.** If students support that norm more strongly than they believe their peers do, sharing the results may help correct that misperception. If many students do not support the norm, the peer culture itself needs attention, and schools can enlist students their classmates look up to in modeling how to make room for minority views and challenge ideas without attacking people.

3. Lower the Social Stakes Without Lowering the Standards.

Students should be able to take part in civic discussion without every contribution becoming a public declaration of political identity. Assigned positions, anonymous opening responses, and exercises that ask students to make the strongest case for a view they do not hold give practice in making and answering arguments before disagreement becomes personal. These are training devices, not substitutes for students eventually speaking for themselves. Students should also have room to clarify or revise a poorly expressed argument rather than be defined by it, a practice teachers described to the Institute last year.¹⁵ Because 26 percent of students who self-censored worried about being discussed or posted about on social media, structured discussions should carry a clear expectation that classmates' remarks are not recorded, posted, or circulated out of context.

The goal is not to make disagreement less demanding. It is to keep the social cost of participating from overwhelming the intellectual work of disagreement.

4. Prepare and Support Teachers for the Room They Actually Face. Teachers remain central in establishing the conditions in which peer pressure operates. **Professional development should cover peer dynamics as well as discussion technique:** recognizing when a view has become socially difficult to express, protecting space for a minority argument without endorsing it, intervening when disagreement turns personal, and repairing a discussion after a bad moment rather than abandoning the subject. Teachers also need institutional backing. Fewer than 15 percent of the civics teachers the Institute surveyed in 2025 said their districts had provided clear, helpful guidance about what they could teach.¹⁶ School boards and district leaders should supply that clarity and affirm that engaging contested civic questions is part of civic education.

5. Pair Civic Knowledge With Practice. The case for discussion is not a case against content. **Students need substantive knowledge of the Constitution, the institutions of government, elections, rights and responsibilities, and American political history,** and they need opportunities to use it through structured discussion, simulation, public speaking, and observation of government at work. Cross-school debates and youth commissions place students among peers they might not otherwise meet, in settings organized for civic discussion.

CONCLUSION

Civics is not simply the study of government. It is preparation for citizenship among people who disagree.

A student may know the powers of Congress, understand judicial review, and explain the First Amendment, yet still be poorly prepared for civic life if every difficult conversation ends in either attack or retreat.

The students we surveyed do not want civics removed from school. Their responses point in the opposite direction. They want more civic knowledge, open discussion, more exposure to different perspectives, and more opportunities to encounter civic life beyond the textbook.

At the same time, they describe the social cost of speaking honestly in class.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor devoted much of her work after leaving the Supreme Court to civic learning and engagement. In her 2018 letter announcing her withdrawal from public life, she explained the conviction behind that work: "I've seen first-hand how vital it is for all citizens to understand our Constitution and unique system of government, and participate actively in their communities."¹⁷ In our country, participation means learning to deliberate and work with people whose judgments differ from our own.

Our government has never depended on unanimity. Rather, it relies on citizens who can argue, persuade, lose, reconsider, compromise, and continue to regard one another as fellow citizens afterward.

Schools cannot manufacture that disposition by avoiding disagreement. They can and must give students repeated opportunities to practice it.



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3. Andrew F. Hayes, Carroll J. Glynn, and James Shanahan, "Willingness to Self-Censor: A Construct and Measurement Tool for Public Opinion Research," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 17, no. 3 (2005): 298-323.
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14. Sandra Day O'Connor Institute, *Camp O'Connor USA 2026 participant surveys*. Campers completed anonymous surveys at the start and end of the week (122 and 111 responses); results compare the group at the start of the week with the group at the end, not matched individual students. On the activities question, campers were asked to select up to two activities; all marked selections were counted, and shares sum to more than 100 percent.
15. *Why Are Teachers Uncomfortable Teaching Civics?* See note 2.
16. *Why Are Teachers Uncomfortable Teaching Civics?* See note 2.
17. Sandra Day O'Connor, public letter announcing her withdrawal from public life, October 23, 2018, originally released by the Supreme Court of the United States and preserved in the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute Digital Library.

Survey source note: Sandra Day O'Connor Institute survey findings in this brief are drawn from a summer 2026 survey of recent high school graduates. Fifty-nine respondents completed the survey between August 4 and August 19, 2026; percentages for subgroups are based on smaller numbers. Survey quotations are attributed only where respondents granted permission for public quotation, using first name, last initial, and the state in which the respondent attended high school.



ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Sandra Day O'Connor Institute, a 501(c)(3) organization, continues the distinguished legacy and lifetime work of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to advance American democracy through multigenerational civics education, civil discourse, and civic engagement. Its vision is to create a nation where important policy decisions affecting our future are made through a process of critical analysis of facts and informed participation of all citizens.



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