

Majority of Canadian University Students Fear Backlash Over Their Political Views: Survey

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Global Research, November 19, 2024

[The Epoch Times](#) 18 November 2024

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Three in five Canadian university students say they fear expressing their honest views on contentious political issues due to potential backlash from peers and instructors, a campus free speech survey says.

Participants in a survey of 1,548 university and college students were asked if they felt comfortable discussing “controversial issues” in the classroom, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, transgender issues, and other politically charged subjects.

“Students were asked about potential consequences from other students and instructors if they shared their honest thoughts, ideas, and questions during a class discussion,” said the survey [report](#), which was conducted by the non-profit organization Heterodox Academy (HxA).

Potential consequences feared by the students included formal career repercussions, such as an instructor refusing to write a recommendation letter, as well as informal social consequences, such as a classmate posting negative comments on social media about the student’s character, the report said.

Sixty-three percent of those surveyed said “they feared at least one formal consequence if they expressed their honest thoughts and opinions during class,” the report said.

“Among responses, students feared retribution from professors more than they were concerned about formal complaints from other students.”

Forty percent of respondents said they had experienced negative consequences after discussing their thoughts on contentious topics, while nearly half (49.3 percent) reported witnessing another student face similar repercussions.

“These data suggest that both students’ reluctance to discuss controversial issues and their fear of consequences from peers and faculty may be well-founded,” researchers said.

‘Deeper Issue’

HxA researchers also assessed students’ attitudes toward freedom of speech issues using a “left-wing authoritarian (LWA) scale” to gauge opinions. Left-wing authoritarianism is defined as individuals who “support a strong central government that can enforce their preferred social and economic policies, and who are intolerant of dissent,” according to a [study](#) cited by HxA.

Through the LWA scale, students were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as “classroom discussions should be safe places that protect students from disturbing ideas” and “universities are right to ban hateful speech from campus.”

At least half of the respondents supported various restrictions on freedom of speech, researchers said.

Support for restrictions on free speech ranged from 49.7 percent of students at least somewhat agreeing with the statement “getting rid of inequality is more important than protecting the so-called ‘right’ to free speech,” to 57.9 percent saying they somewhat agree that “to succeed, a workplace must ensure that its employees feel safe from criticism.”

Researchers noted that there does not appear to be a political bias in support for curbing free speech, because 52.8 percent of students who self-identified as “very left” and 61.9 percent of those who self-identified as “very right” at least somewhat agreed that “classroom discussions should be safe places that protect students from disturbing ideas.”

HxA research director Alex Arnold said these findings suggest a “deeper issue in Canadian higher education,” because free expression and open inquiry are “essential to the core mission of universities to pursue truth and advance knowledge.”

“Absent a deep, unyielding appreciation for free speech and open inquiry, universities cannot effectively study complex social problems, including problems such as how to address inequality and reduce poverty,” he told The Epoch Times.

“Furthermore, history shows that protecting free speech has been crucial for advancing civil rights and social justice. The fact that many students, when asked what they would prioritize, are apt to sacrifice free speech and open inquiry is concerning for the future of higher education and social progress alike.”

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