From Principle to Practice: Civic Knowledge, Free Speech, and Tolerance at Florida State University

Zach Goldberg, Ryan Owens, & Lynn Woodworth

January 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between October 8 and November 4, 2025, Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) surveyed undergraduate students to examine their basic civic knowledge, tolerance for political disagreement, and attitudes toward free speech and religious liberty on campus. The study distinguishes between students' abstract commitments to expressive freedoms and how consistently they apply those principles in concrete and contested situations. The results reveal broad support for free expression *in principle*—but substantially weaker support in *practice*, especially among students with lower levels of basic civic knowledge. Key findings include:

- **Students overwhelmingly endorse free speech and religious liberty in the abstract, but support weakens in practice.**
  Large majorities affirm the importance of open expression and equal access for religious groups, yet substantial minorities support restricting speech or religious activity when other students perceive it as offensive, harmful, or disruptive.
- **Basic civic knowledge predicts whether students uphold controversial expressive freedoms.**
  Students with higher basic civic knowledge are significantly more likely to support protecting free speech and religious liberty in concrete situations--even when those rights conflict with concerns about offense, inclusion, or social harmony.
- **FSU students demonstrate strong basic civic knowledge overall, but important gaps remain.**
  Most students correctly answer questions about the basic structure of government, but large shares misunderstand Congress's constitutional authority over war powers and federal spending—areas central to democratic accountability.
- **Basic civic knowledge does not increase meaningfully with class year or with completion of the civic literacy requirement.**
  Although reported completion of the requirement rises sharply from freshman to senior year, basic civic knowledge levels plateau early in students' college careers and show no clear cumulative gains.

INTRODUCTION

Debates over free speech, political tolerance, and civic education have become increasingly prominent on college campuses. Universities are not only places of formal instruction; they are also environments where young adults encounter controversial ideas, confront political disagreement, and begin to develop habits of democratic citizenship. How students understand the Constitution, how comfortable they are with dissent, and how consistently they apply principles of free expression carry implications that extend well beyond campus life.

To examine this topic, the Institute for Governance and Civics conducted a survey of Florida State University students in Fall 2025. The study focuses on four closely related domains. First, it measures students' basic civic knowledge, with particular attention to foundational constitutional principles such as the separation of powers and the responsibilities of different branches of government. Second, it measures support for free speech and religious liberty in the abstract—broad endorsements of expressive freedom as a democratic value. Third, it assesses students' comfort engaging with political difference in everyday life, namely whether they would feel comfortable having a roommate with opposing views. Finally, it examines how students' stated principles and real world views interact in concrete situations, such as reactions to controversial speakers, campus events, or religious expression that some students find objectionable.

A central feature of the analysis is the distinction between abstract commitments and practical application. Research on public opinion has long shown that people often endorse democratic principles in the abstract but hesitate when real-world conflicts test those principles.[1] College campuses provide a particularly revealing setting for examining this gap. The report also examines whether basic civic knowledge helps narrow the gap between theory and reality. (It does.) If civic literacy reinforces civic norms, we can expect students with higher levels of basic civic knowledge to apply free speech and religious liberty principles more consistently, even when doing so proves uncomfortable.

Overall, the data presented here offer a meaningful snapshot of Florida State University students' civic awareness and their views on free speech and religious liberty.

METHODS

This report is based on an original survey of FSU undergraduate students conducted during the Fall 2025 semester. The survey examines students' civic knowledge and their attitudes toward free speech, religious liberty, and political tolerance, with particular attention to differences between abstract principles and how those principles are applied in

specific situations.

With the assistance of the university Registrar, we obtained a list of 6,919 active undergraduate student email addresses. We constructed the invitation list to approximate the distribution of the undergraduate population by class year, sex, race and ethnicity, and major. Students were invited via email to participate in an online survey administered between October 8 and November 4, 2025.

Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered. For this reason, the sample should not be interpreted as fully representative of the undergraduate student body.

A total of 364 students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of approximately 5 percent.[2] While low by conventional standards, such response rates are common for voluntary, un-incentivized campus surveys. The completed sample closely resembles the invited population, but small imbalances remain. We weight the data to align the sample with known population benchmarks for sex, class year, race/ethnicity, and major. A detailed comparison of the sample and population benchmarks is provided in Appendix A.

The analyses presented in this report are primarily descriptive and associational. Regression models are used to estimate adjusted differences between groups, but the results should not be interpreted as causal or as definitive estimates of civic knowledge and attitudes among all FSU students.

FSU STUDENTS SHOW STRONG COMMAND OF BASIC CIVIC KNOWLEDGE—BUT CRITICAL GAPS REMAIN

Overall, students in the survey demonstrate relatively strong basic civic knowledge, particularly on foundational questions about the structure of the federal government. Across the seven-item battery, respondents answered an average of 5.65 questions correctly (median = 6). On several core items, correct response rates exceed 90 percent (Table 1). Nearly all students correctly identified why states have different numbers of U.S. Representatives (97%), and a similarly large share recognized checks and balances as the primary constitutional safeguard against any one branch becoming too powerful (96%).

Knowledge of basic institutional roles is also generally high. Roughly nine in ten students correctly identified the branch responsible for determining the constitutionality of laws (90%) and for writing and passing legislation (89%), indicating a solid grasp of the core architecture of American government.

Performance drops, however, on questions related to war powers and fiscal authority—areas where constitutional responsibilities are often blurred in practice. Only 69% of respondents correctly identified Congress as the branch responsible for

determining federal spending levels, and just 47% knew that Congress—not the president—holds the constitutional authority to declare war.

This pattern may reflect modern political realities. Presidents routinely order military actions without formal declarations of war, and executive influence over budgeting has expanded over time. Still, the gaps are noteworthy. When citizens are unclear about which holds responsibility for decisions involving war or public spending, they may be less likely to recognize—or challenge—overreach or abdication in these domains.

Table 1. Correct Answer Rates Across Basic Civic Knowledge Questions

Question	Percent Correct
Why do some states have more US Representatives than other states?	97
In the US Constitution, what is the most important factor that stops one branch of the federal government from becoming too powerful?	96
Of the three branches of the federal government, which has the power to...determine the constitutionality of laws?	90
Of the three branches of the federal government, which has the power to...write and pass laws?	89
Of the three branches of the federal government, which has the power to...nominate judges?	76
Of the three branches of the federal government, which has the power to...determine federal spending levels?	69
Of the three branches of the federal government, which has the power to...declare war?	47

Note: N=364 student respondents. Respondents who skipped or didn't answer a given question—never more than seven across items—are coded as having given an incorrect answer.

Looking across the full battery, most students answered a majority of questions correctly. About one-third of respondents answered all seven items correctly, and another 30% answered six. At the lower end of the distribution, fewer than 5% answered two or fewer questions correctly.

To simplify interpretation in subsequent analyses, we classify respondents into four basic civic knowledge categories based on the number of correct answers: very low (0–3 correct, 9%), low to moderate (4–5 correct, 28%), high (6 correct, 30%), and very high (7 correct, 33%). Using this classification, roughly 63% of respondents fall into the high or very

high basic civic knowledge categories.

In short, most students demonstrate a strong grasp of basic civic concepts, though gaps remain.

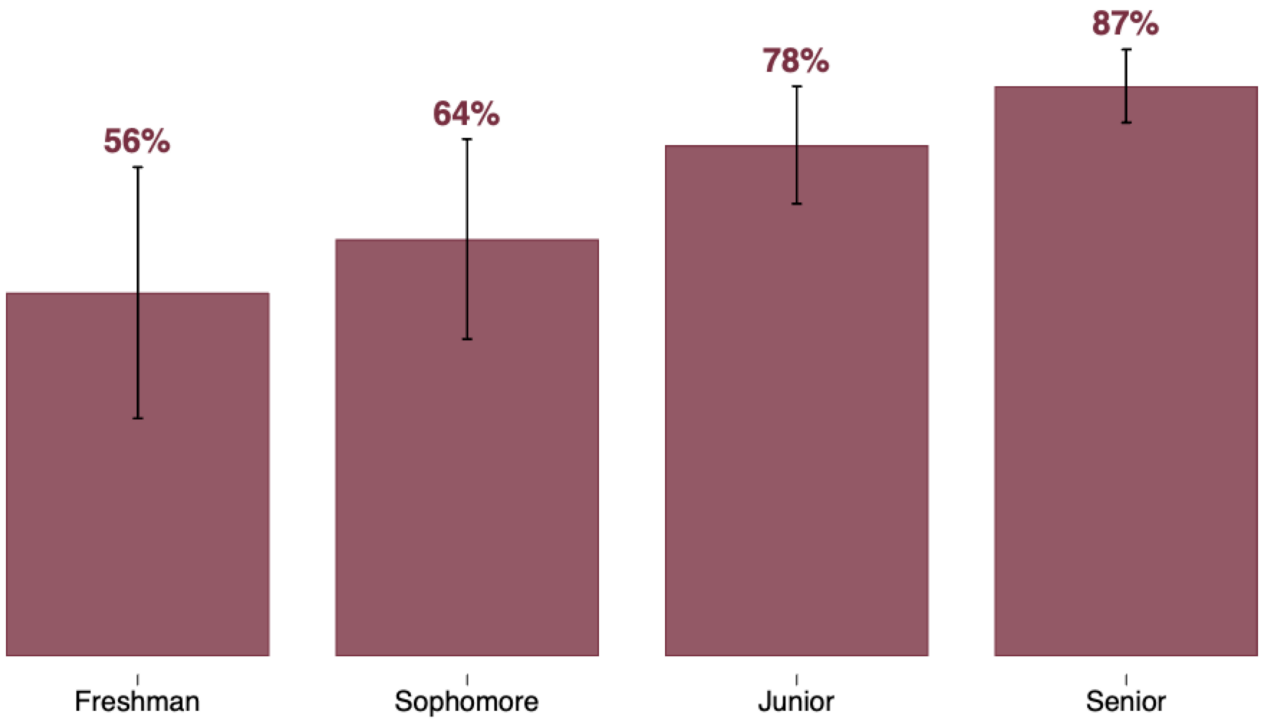
BASIC CIVIC KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT INCREASE WITH CLASS YEAR OR WITH CIVIC REQUIREMENT COMPLETION

Because Florida law requires public university students to complete a civic literacy requirement—and because students in later class years have had more time to complete required coursework—it is reasonable to expect basic civic knowledge to increase as students progress through college.

While students in later class years are far more likely to report completing the civic literacy requirement, neither class standing nor reported completion is strongly associated with higher scores on a battery of basic civic knowledge items.

Self-reported completion of the civic literacy requirement does, in fact, rise sharply with class standing (Figure 1). Just over half of freshmen report having completed the requirement (51%), compared with roughly 62% of

Figure 1. Civics Requirement Completion Rates by Class Year



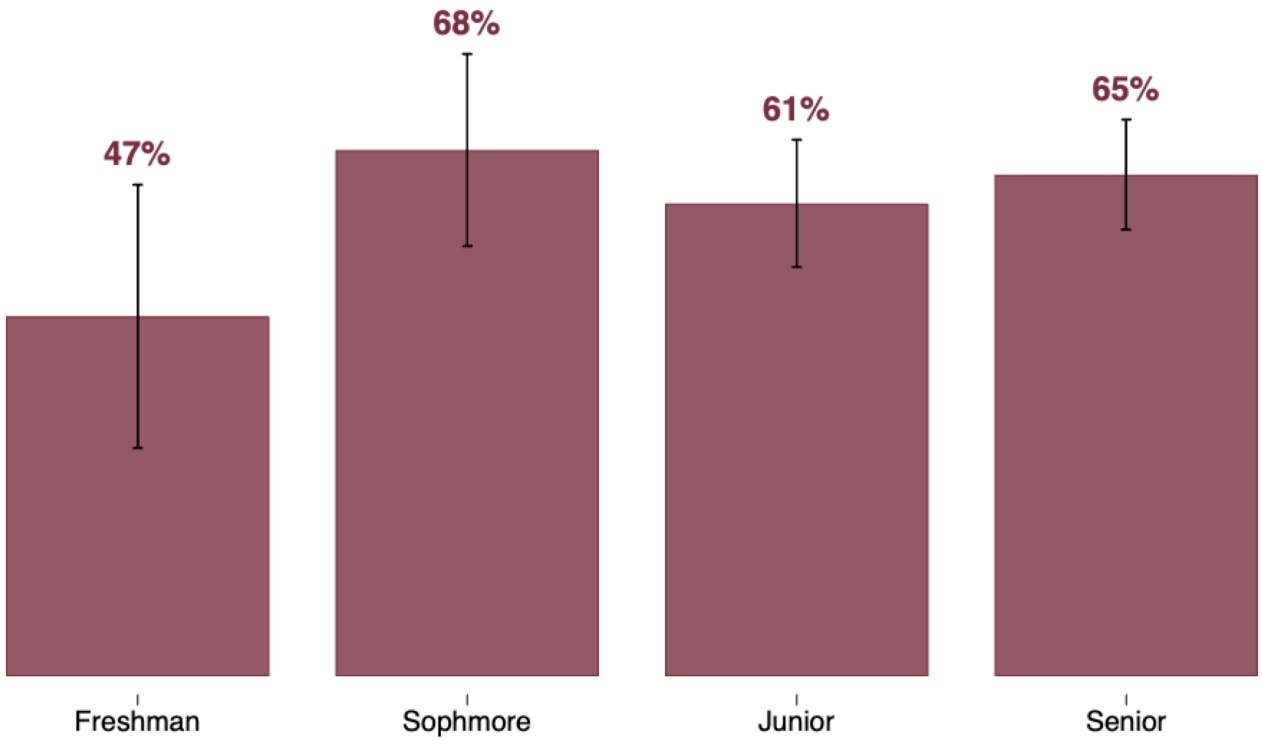
Note. N=293 student respondents. Data corresponds to question asking, "Have you completed FSU's civic literacy requirement course?". Bars represent the share of respondents in each class year who gave a 'Yes' response. "No" and "Not sure" responses are included in the data but are not shown. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

sophomores, 80% of juniors, and 87% of seniors.

Despite this clear progression in requirement completion, differences in basic civic knowledge across class years are modest. On the seven-item basic civic knowledge scale, freshmen score somewhat lower on average (5.36) than students in later years (approximately 5.7). Beyond this initial gap, however, differences among sophomores, juniors, and seniors are small and not statistically significant. Basic civic knowledge does not increase steadily as students advance through college, even as completion of the civic literacy requirement becomesfar more common.

A similar pattern appears when basic civic knowledge is examined categorically (Figure 2). Freshmen are less likely than upperclassmen to score in the "high" or "very high" basic civic knowledge categories: roughly 47% fall into these top tiers, compared with between 61% and 68% of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Differences among sophomores, juniors, and seniors are small and do not reach statistical significance.

Figure 2. Percent of Respondents Scoring in the "High" Civic Knowledge

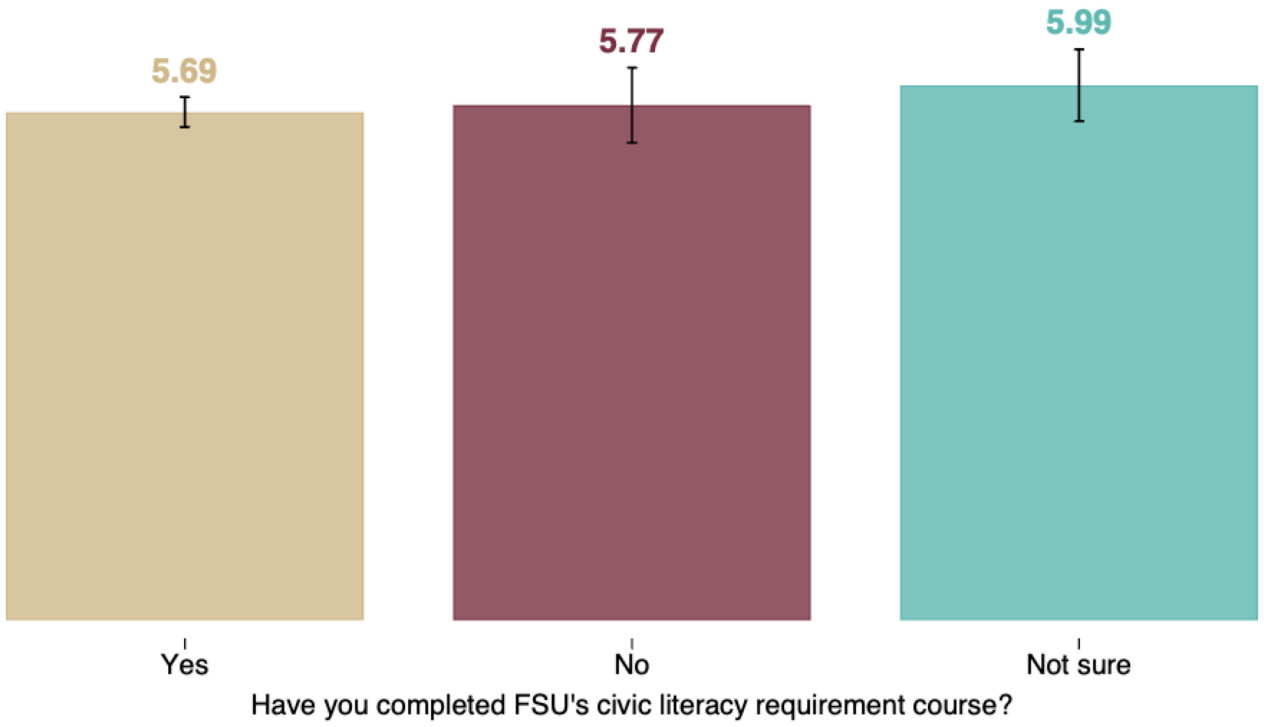


Note. N=362 student respondents. Bars represent the share of respondents who answered at least six of seven civic knowledge questions correctly. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

If basic civic knowledge does not increase consistently across class years, a natural follow-up question is whether completing the civic literacy requirement itself is associated with higher knowledge. To assess this, we compare basic civic knowledge among students who report having completed the requirement, those who report not completing it, and those who are unsure.

On the full seven-item scale, reported completion of the civic literacy requirement shows no meaningful association with civic knowledge. After adjusting for class year, sex, race/ethnicity, and major, students who report completing the requirement score virtually identically to those who report not completing it (5.69 vs. 5.77; Figure 3). Students who report being unsure whether they completed the requirement score slightly higher on average (5.99), but this difference is also not statistically significant.

Figure 3. Average Number of Correct Civic Knowledge Answers by FSU Civics



Note. N=293 student respondents. Bars represent the average number of correct responses to seven civic knowledge questions. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

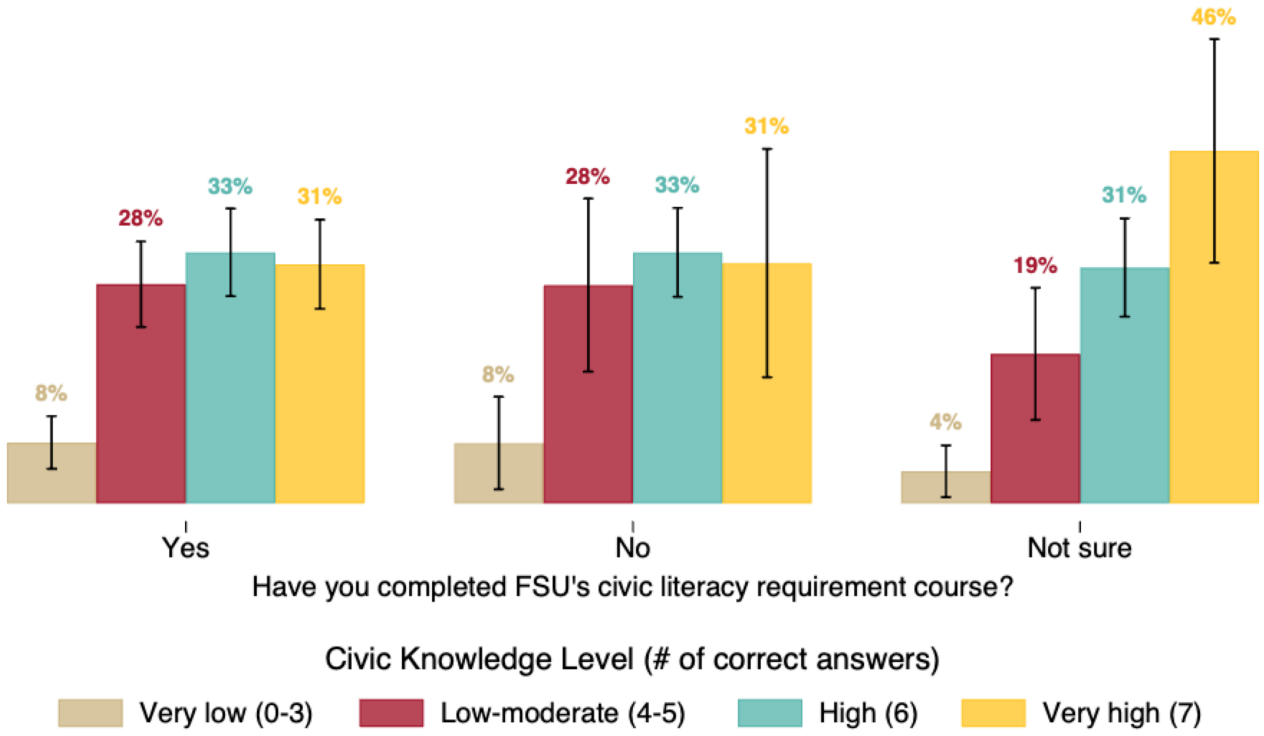
The same result emerges when civic knowledge is examined categorically (Figure 4). Students who report completing the requirement are no more likely than those who report not completing it to fall into the "high" or "very high" civic knowledge categories (64% in both groups). The overall distribution across knowledge levels remains nearly identical regardless of

reported completion status.

Collectively, these findings point to a consistent conclusion: while students in later class years are far more likely to report completing the civic literacy requirement, neither class standing nor reported completion is strongly associated with higher scores on this battery of basic civic knowledge items. This pattern could reflect the limited scope and relative ease of the questions used here, capture foundational institutional facts rather than more advanced or nuanced forms of civic understanding. As a result, scores on these basic measures appear to plateau early in students' college careers, even as students may continue to develop more sophisticated civic knowledge or reasoning that is not captured by this battery.

Overall, the gender gap in basic civic knowledge reflects a clear distributional divide: men are disproportionately concentrated at the very top of the scale, while women are more likely to fall into the lower knowledge categories.

Figure 4. Distribution of Basic Civic Knowledge Categories by FSU Civics



Note. N=293 student respondents. Bars represent the share of respondents scoring in each civic knowledge level by FSU civics requirement completion status. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

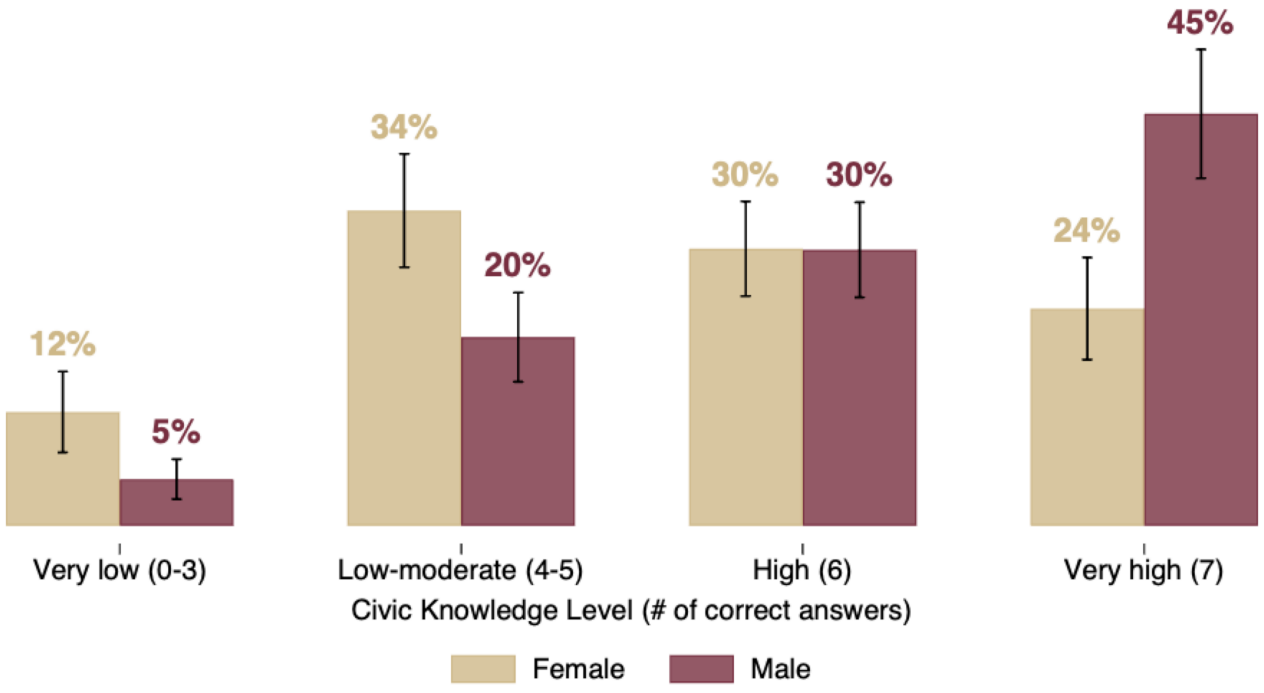
BASIC CIVIC KNOWLEDGE DIFFERS SHARPLY BY SEX

The largest and most consistent differences in civic knowledge emerge by sex. Across both the seven-item scale and the categorical measure, men score higher than women—differences that remain sizable even after adjusting for class year, race/ethnicity, and major.[3]

On the full basic civic knowledge scale, men answer an average of 6.07 questions correctly, compared with 5.32 among women—a gap of roughly three-quarters of a question.[4] This difference is statistically significant and larger than the gaps associated with class year or academic major.

The disparity is even more pronounced when basic civic knowledge is examined categorically (Figure 5). Nearly 45% of men fall into the very high knowledge category, answering all seven questions correctly, compared with just 24% of women. At the other end of the distribution, women are more than twice as likely as men to score in the very low knowledge category (12% versus 5%). Forty-six percent of women fall into one of the two lowest categories, compared with just 25% of men.

Figure 5. Distribution of Basic Civic Knowledge Categories by Sex



Note. N=293 student respondents. Bars represent the share of respondents scoring in each civic knowledge level by sex. Estimates adjust for race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Overall, the gender gap reflects a clear distributional divide: men are disproportionately concentrated at the very top of the scale, while women are more likely to fall into the lower knowledge categories. While the sources of these differences cannot be identified with the present data, prior research suggests that gaps in political knowledge often reflect differences in political interest, confidence in answering factual questions, or exposure to political information rather than differences in underlying ability.[5]

MOST STUDENTS TOLERATE POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT IN CLOSE SOCIAL SETTINGS

To move beyond basic civic knowledge and examine how students navigate political disagreement in everyday life, the survey asked whether respondents would feel comfortable having a roommate who disagrees with them on major political or social issues. Unlike later items that focus on institutional rules or abstract principles, this question captures interpersonal political tolerance—the willingness to coexist with ideological difference in close, personal settings.

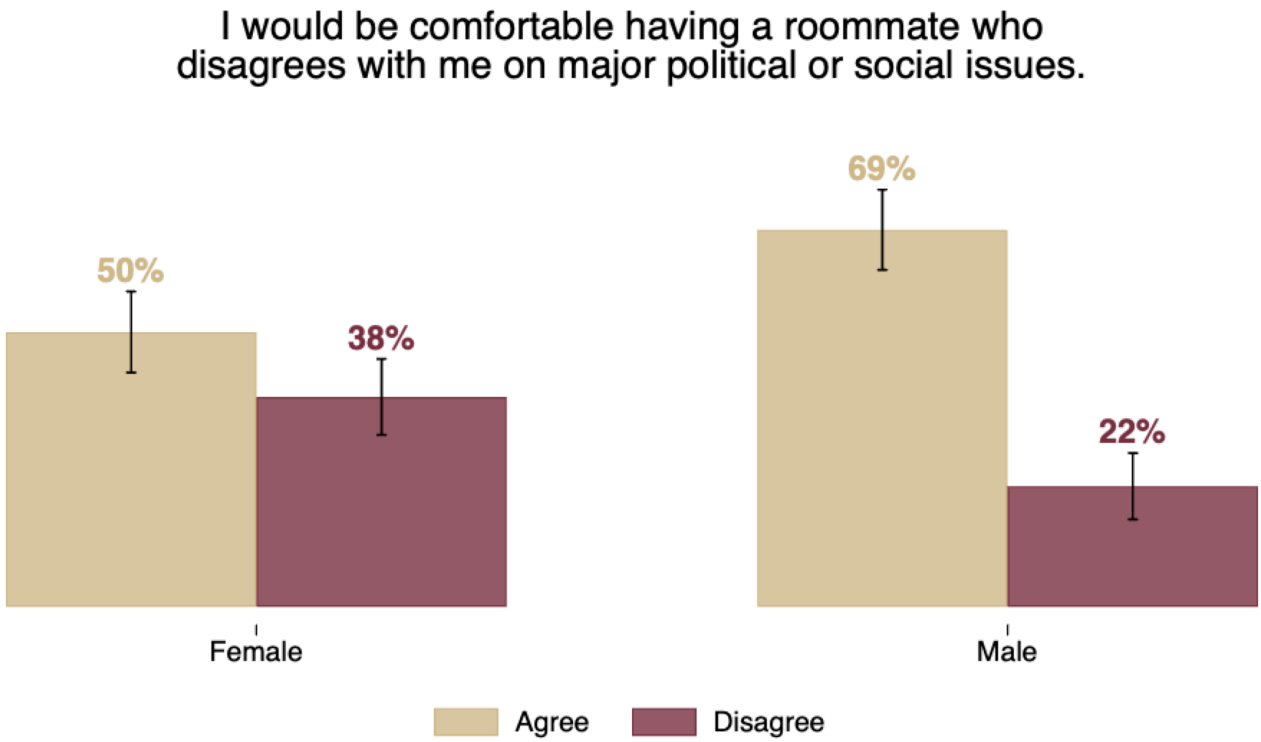
Overall, a majority of respondents express openness to political disagreement. Roughly 59% say they would be comfortable having a roommate with opposing political views, while about 31% say they would not; an additional 11% neither agree nor disagree. Although most students fall on the tolerant side of the distribution, a sizable minority express discomfort with close exposure to political disagreement.

Few respondents choose the extreme endpoints. Only 11% strongly agree that they would feel comfortable with a politically disagreeing roommate, while an additional 7% strongly disagree. Most students instead cluster near the middle: 43% choose intermediate responses—somewhat agreeing (21%), somewhat disagreeing (12%), or neutral (11%). Another 27% express clear agreement, while 13% express clear disagreement.

Roughly 38% of women disagree that they would be comfortable with a roommate who holds differing political views, compared with about 22% of men.

As shown in Figure 6, comfort with political disagreement differs sharply by sex. Men are substantially more likely than women to report comfort with a politically disagreeing roommate. Adjusting for class year, race, and major, nearly 69% of men express agreement, compared with about 50% of women. Women are far more likely to report discomfort: roughly 38% of women disagree that they would be comfortable with a roommate who holds differing political views, compared with about 22% of men.

Figure 6. Interpersonal Political Tolerance by Sex



Note. N=336 student respondents. Bars represent the share of respondents that agreed or disagreed with the listed statement. "Neither agree nor disagree" responses are included in the data but not shown. Estimates adjust for race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

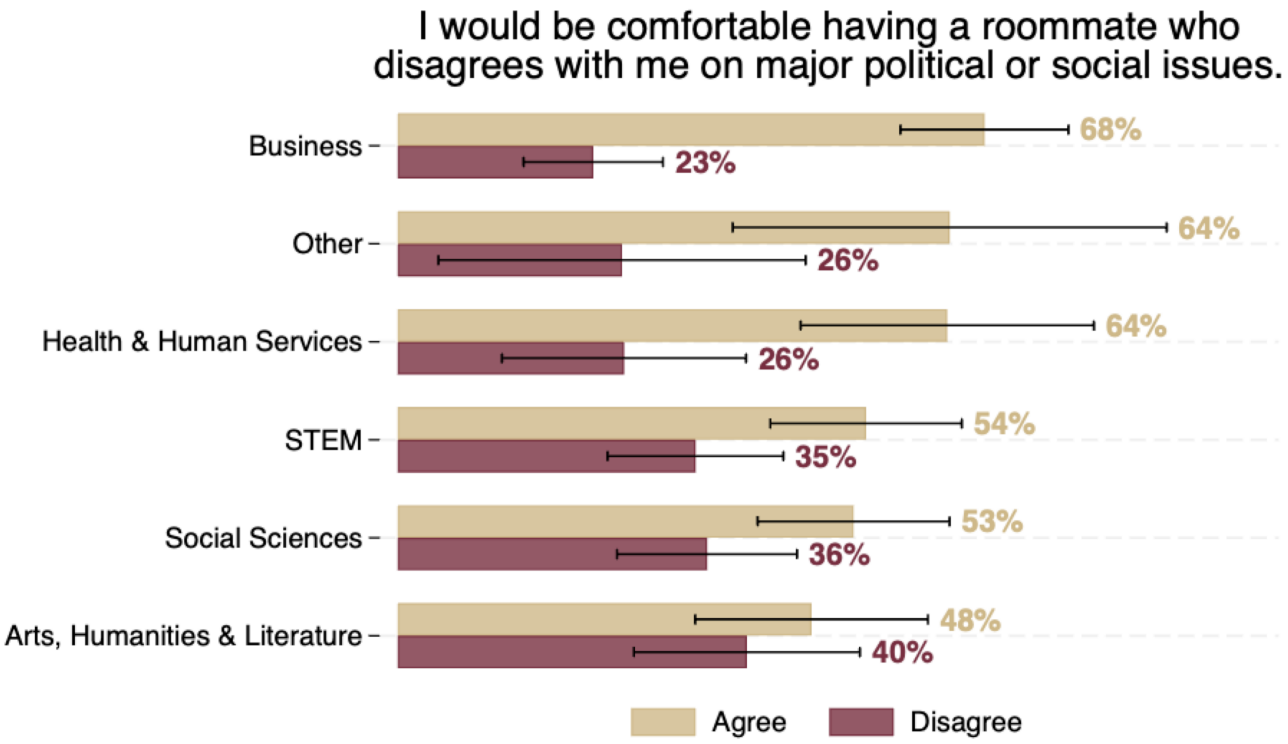
Attitudes also vary by major, though less dramatically than by sex (Figure 7). After accounting for demographic and class-year differences, students in business-related fields report the highest levels of tolerance, with roughly 68% expressing comfort with a politically disagreeing roommate. Students in health-related fields also show relatively high tolerance (about 64%). By contrast, students in arts, humanities, and literature programs exhibit lower levels of interpersonal tolerance: approximately 48% report being comfortable, and about 40% express outright discomfort. Students in social sciences and STEM fields fall between these extremes, with modest majorities expressing comfort alongside nontrivial shares reporting disagreement.

While some of these differences reach statistical significance, they should be interpreted cautiously. Major likely reflects a constellation of underlying factors—such as political interest, ideological intensity, or disciplinary norms—that the present data cannot disentangle.

In short, most students report a willingness to tolerate political disagreement in close social settings, but that tolerance is unevenly distributed.

Differences by major are smaller but still evident. These patterns provide important context for the sections that follow. Willingness to live alongside political disagreement does not necessarily translate into support for unrestricted expression in institutional settings—a distinction that becomes central when examining students' views on free speech and religious liberty in the abstract and in practice.

Figure 7. Interpersonal Political Tolerance by Major



Note. N=336 student respondents. Bars represent the share of respondents that agreed or disagreed with the listed statement. "Neither agree nor disagree" responses are included in the data but not shown. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, and class year. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

STUDENTS STRONGLY ENDORSE FREE SPEECH IN PRINCIPLE, BUT LESS SO IN PRACTICE

While many students tolerate political disagreement in close personal settings, separate but related questions are whether they support free expression as a principle—and whether they defend it in practice. To examine this, the survey distinguishes between abstract support for free speech and support for allowing controversial expression in concrete campus settings, where concerns about offense, harm, or disruption are most salient.

Table 2 summarizes responses across these two domains.[6] Responses reflecting greater support for free

expression are shown in bold. At the level of general principle, support for free expression is nearly universal among respondents. More than nine in ten students (93%) agree that being able to freely express and hear controversial social or political views is an important part of the college experience. Similarly large majorities agree that FSU students should be able to openly express unpopular opinions without fearing negative consequences from the university's faculty, staff, or leadership (89%). Support remains high but declines when potential consequences from other students are introduced. Seventy-seven percent agree that students should be able to express unpopular views without fearing backlash from their peers.

Table 2. Abstract and Situational Attitudes Towards Free Speech

Domain	Question	Agree / Support (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree / Oppose (%)
Abstract Support for Free Speech	Being able to freely express and hear controversial social or political views is an important part of the college experience	**93**	6	1
	FSU students should be able to openly express unpopular opinions without fearing negative consequences from the university's faculty, staff, and leadership.	**89**	5	6
	FSU students should be able to openly express unpopular opinions without fearing negative consequences from other students.	**77**	12	11
Support for Allowing Controversial Speech in Practice	FSU faculty should prevent students from expressing views that may offend or upset certain students during class discussions.	23	18	**59**
	If a majority of FSU students on campus oppose an invited speaker, the speaker should be disinvited.	40	15	**46**
	When there is a conflict between freedom of expression and the goal of promoting social harmony and inclusivity, freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted.	37	19	**44**
	Suppose some FSU students believe that certain views expressed on campus cause harm to certain groups of people. To what extent do you support or oppose the university restricting the expression of such views?	44	19	**37**
	When determining whether to approve a student group's event, the university should evaluate the views that will be expressed at the event.	60	14	**27**

Note. Sample size varies by question (N=306–337). Responses were collapsed and derived from 7-point Likert scales (1=Strongly agree/support, 7=Strongly disagree/oppose). Figures in bold font denote the "pro-free speech" response.

Support is more mixed, however, when students are asked to evaluate specific situations in which controversial speech might conflict with other goals. For example, 23% agree that faculty should prevent students from expressing views that may offend or upset others during class discussions, while 59% oppose such intervention. At the same time, substantial minorities express support for restricting speech under certain conditions. Forty percent support disinviting speakers if a majority of students oppose them, and 44% support restricting expression when students believe certain views cause harm to particular groups.

Similarly, 37% agree that freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted when it conflicts with the goal of "promoting social harmony and inclusivity," while 44% disagree. Finally, when asked whether the university should evaluate the views that will be expressed when approving a student group's event, 60% express support—suggesting that students are more comfortable with procedural or anticipatory forms of regulation than with direct suppression of speech.

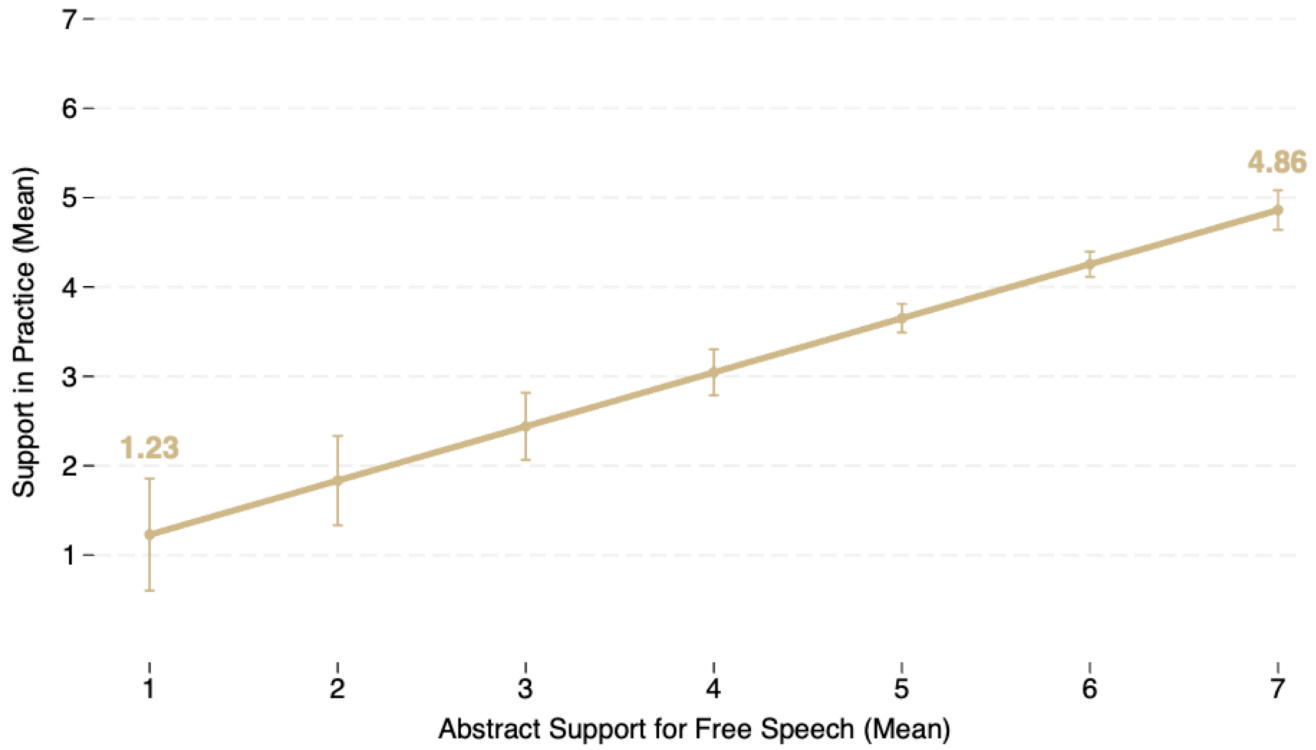
To visualize the gap between students' abstract and practical support for free speech, we construct summary indexes for each domain and examine how predicted levels of practical support vary across levels of abstract support, adjusting for key demographic and acacademic characteristics.

Even students who most strongly endorse free expression in the abstract tend to retreat when asked whether those principles should be upheld in situations with real consequences.

As shown in Figure 8, while the two indexes are positively related, the correspondence is far from one-to-one. Students who score higher on the abstract free-speech scale are, on average, more supportive of allowing controversial speech in concrete situations. But even at the highest possible level of abstract support, predicted support for free speech in practice falls well short of unqualified endorsement. Specifically, students scoring at the maximum level (7) on the abstract scale are predicted to score just under 5 (4.86) on the applied scale—placing them closer to neutrality than to clear or strong support.

In other words, even students who most strongly endorse free expression in the abstract tend to retreat when asked whether those principles should be upheld in situations with real consequences. This pattern highlights the limits of abstract commitments as indicators of real-world tolerance for controversial expression.

Figure 8. Applied Support for Free Speech Across Levels of Abstract Support



Note. N=300 student respondents. Line represents the estimated level (1–7) of applied support for free speech at each level of abstract support. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

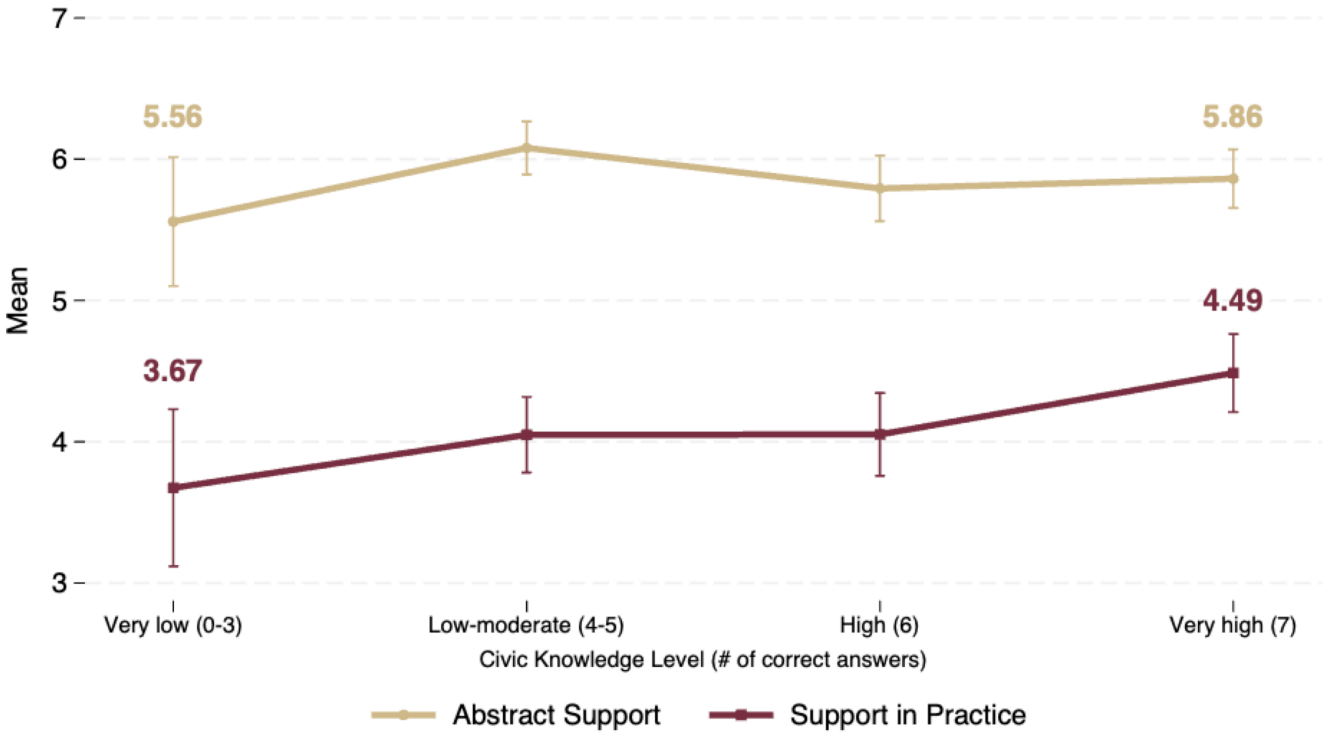
If abstract commitments to free expression are an imperfect guide to students' views in practice, an important question is: what characteristics lead students to support free speech in practice?

Basic civic knowledge is a strong predictor of support in practice.[7] While abstract for free expression is uniformly high across groups, students with greater basic civic knowledge are substantially more likely to support allowing controversial speech when it conflicts with concerns about offense, harm, or social harmony (Figure 9). Adjusting for class year, major, and demographic characteristics, students in the lowest basic civic knowledge category score well below the midpoint of the practical support scale (3.67), indicating general support for restricting speech in the situations presented. By contrast, students in the highest basic knowledge category score nearly a full point higher (4.49), reflecting markedly greater tolerance for controversial expression in concrete campus settings.

This contrast helps to illuminate where basic civic knowledge appears to matter most. Knowledge shows only a weak and inconsistent association with abstract endorsements of free speech—likely

because agreement is already near universal. Its influence becomes visible when students must weigh expressive freedom against competing values.[8]

Figure 9. Abstract and Applied Support for Free Speech by Civic Knowledge Level



Note. N=300 student respondents. Lines represent the estimated level (1–7) of abstract and applied support for free speech at each civic knowledge level. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

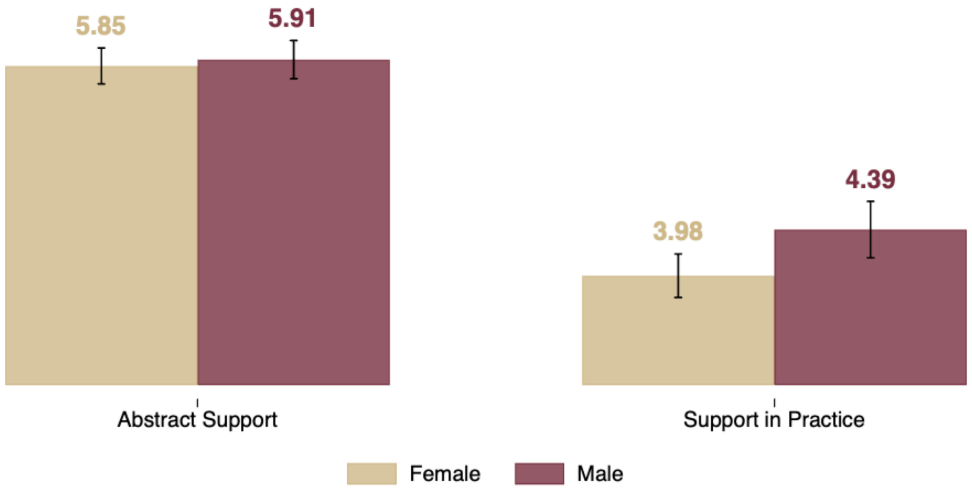
Consistent with this general pattern, Figure 10 shows that although men and women do not differ meaningfully in their abstract support for free speech, they diverge sharply when it comes to support in practice. Men score roughly 0.41 points–on a 7-point scale–higher than women on the applied support scale.

Because women in our sample score lower on the basic civic knowledge battery on average—and because basic civic knowledge is significantly related to applied support for free speech—it is plausible that differences in basic civic knowledge contribute, at least in part, to the observed gender gap in applied support for free expression.

The results shown in Figure 11 align with this expectation: the gender gap narrows and is no longer statistically significant—though it does not disappear—once differences in basic civic knowledge are taken into account. Specifically, when basic civic knowledge is included as a control, the estimated difference in applied support for free

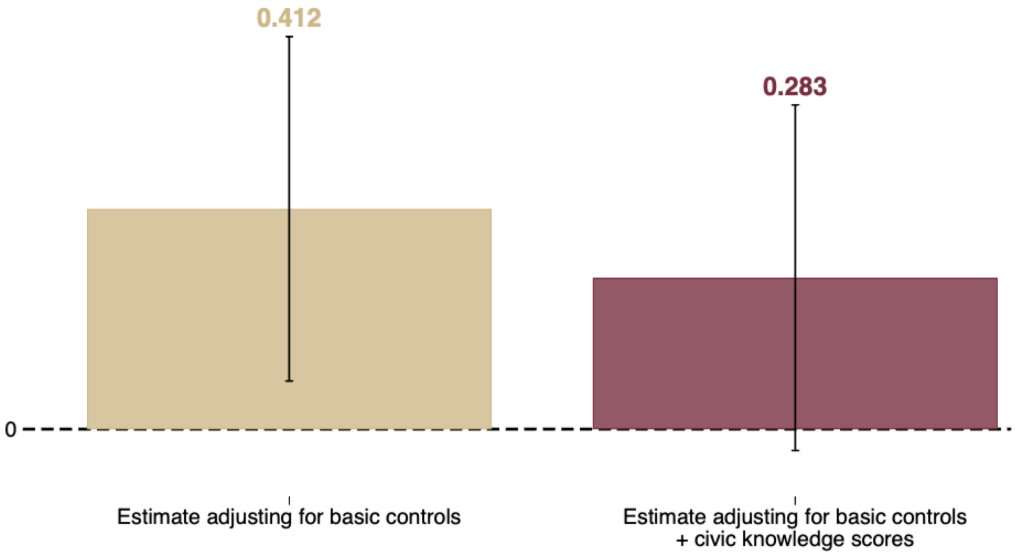
speech between men and women falls from 0.41 to 0.28 scale points (Figure 11). This attenuation suggests that disparities in basic civic knowledge explain a meaningful share of the gender gap in practical support for free expression, though substantial differences remain even after accounting for knowledge.

Figure 10. Average Levels of Abstract and Applied Support for Free Speech by Sex



Note. N=300 student respondents. Bars represent the estimated level (1–7) of abstract and applied support for free speech by sex. Estimates adjust for race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 11. Moderation of the Gender Gap in Applied Support for Free Speech



Note. N=300 student respondents. Lines represent the average difference (men – women) in scores on the applied support for free speech index (1–7). Gold bars represent estimates from models that adjust for race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Garnet bars represent estimates from models that further adjust for civic knowledge. Errors bars are 95% confidence intervals.

STUDENTS WIDELY SUPPORT COUNTER-SPEECH AND PEACEFUL PROTEST, BUT REJECT COERCIVE DISRUPTION

The survey also examines how students evaluate different responses to offensive speakers. Even students who oppose formal restrictions on expression may disagree sharply about which forms of protest, pressure, or disruption constitute legitimate responses.

To assess these norms, the survey asked students whether various actions taken in response to an offensive campus speaker were acceptable, not acceptable, or uncertain. Table 4 presents responses across a range of protest and counter-speech, choice, and peaceful protest. Ninety-five percent say it is acceptable to attend a presentation and ask challenging questions, and similarly large shares approve of ignoring or avoiding the event altogether. Large majorities also view contacting event organizers to express concern (78%) and protesting outside the event (67%).

Students overwhelmingly reject tactics that interfere with others' ability to attend or participate in campus speaking events

Table 4. Perceived Acceptability of Campus Event Protest Tactics

Student groups often invite people to speak on campus. If some students feel a speaker's message is offensive, which of the following actions do you think are acceptable or not acceptable for those students to take?	Acceptable (%)	Not acceptable (%)	Not sure (%)
Attending the presentation and asking challenging questions	95	1	4
Ignoring the speaker or avoid attending the presentation	94	3	3
Contacting the event organizers to express concerns about the speaker's message	78	9	12
Protesting outside the event	67	18	14
Petitioning the university administration to cancel the event	55	26	19
Attending the presentation with signs critical of the speaker	48	32	19
Reserving seats for the event with the intention of not attending, so that others cannot attend.	16	65	19
Attending the presentation and continually making noise so the speaker cannot be heard	7	83	10
Blocking the entrances to the event so that others have a hard time getting in.	4	88	8
Jumping on stage to confront the speaker and take over the event.	2	92	5
Attending the presentation and physically removing the speaker from the stage	1	95	4

Note. Sample size varies by question (N=303–306).

By contrast, students overwhelmingly reject tactics that interfere with others' ability to attend or participate. Large majorities say it is not acceptable to reserve seats in order to prevent others from attending (65%), make noise to prevent the speaker from being heard (83%), block entrances to an event (88%), jump on stage to confront the speaker (92%), or physically remove the speaker from the stage (95%). These findings suggest a widely shared boundary: while FSU students support protest and dissent, they strongly oppose actions that coerce, disrupt, or deny access to others.

Only a small number of responses elicit genuinely mixed judgments. Petitioning the university administration to cancel an event is rated as acceptable by a majority (55%) while deemed not acceptable by a sizable minority (26%). The acceptability of attending an event with signs critical of the speaker produces even greater division: 48% consider this acceptable, while 32% disagree and 19% remain unsure.

These two cases appear to reflect distinct sources of ambivalence. Efforts to cancel an event raise questions about institutional intervention and limits on speech, while attending with signs reflects disagreement over whether in-event protest remains expressive or crosses into disruption. Together, they mark a narrow set of situations in which students' judgments are unsettled—situated between broadly accepted counter-speech and overwhelmingly rejected coercive tactics.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This report represents the first in an IGC planned series of annual studies of Florida State University students' basic civic knowledge and attitudes toward free speech and religious liberty on campus. The study is best understood as a baseline—an initial effort to assess prevailing views, identify recurring patterns, and establish benchmarks that can be tracked and refined in future survey waves.

Several consistent patterns emerge. Students demonstrate strong understanding of some foundational aspects of American government, but notable gaps persist—especially on questions involving war powers and fiscal authority. While it may be unrealistic to expect most students to score perfectly on a civic knowledge battery, the questions asked here reflect basic features of the U.S. constitutional system. That a sizable share of college students struggle with them suggests that basic civic knowledge, at least as measured by institutional understanding, remains unevenly distributed even among a highly educated population.

More concerningly, basic civic knowledge shows little relationship to either class year or completion of the civic literacy requirement. Although completion rates rise sharply from freshman through senior year, basic civic knowledge levels do not exhibit a

corresponding upward trajectory beyond the freshman year. In other words, students appear to accumulate civic credentials that did not address weaknesses in their basic constitutional understanding.

These gaps are not merely academic. Basic civic knowledge is meaningfully linked to how students think about free speech and religious liberty. In the abstract, support for expressive freedoms is broad and often overwhelming. Large majorities endorse open expression, equal access for religious groups, and the right to voice unpopular views without institutional sanction. That consensus weakens, however, when students confront concrete and contested situations. When expressive rights come into tension with concerns about offense, harm, or institutional order, basic civic knowledge becomes most consequential. Students with higher levels of basic civic knowledge are significantly more likely to translate abstract commitments into support for protecting expressive rights in practice.

This pattern also helps contextualize observed gender differences in applied support for free speech. Men in the sample score higher than women on both the basic civic knowledge battery and measures of applied support for free expression. While the present data cannot identify the sources of these differences, accounting for basic civic knowledge substantially attenuates the gender gap in applied support—suggesting that disparities in basic civic understanding explain a meaningful share, though far from all, of the difference.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The survey relies on a relatively small sample and achieved a low response rate (5.2%). Because participation was voluntary and we offered no incentives—a limitation we intend to address in future waves—respondents may differ from non-respondents on unobserved characteristics, such as interest in civic issues or campus free-speech debates.

Even with these limitations, the results display a high degree of internal coherence. Relationships between basic civic knowledge, abstract commitments, and applied judgments appear consistently across domains and measurement strategies. Combined with similar patterns documented in national surveys, this consistency suggests that the dynamics identified here reflect broader features of democratic attitudes rather than artifacts of any single item or model.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report underscore the importance of distinguishing between abstract commitments to expressive freedom and how students apply those commitments in practice. Broad agreement on free speech and religious liberty does not guarantee consensus

when those principles collide with concerns about offense, harm, or institutional order. Basic civic knowledge appears to play a meaningful—if limited—role in shaping whether students carry their stated commitments into practice.

For Florida State University—and for public universities more broadly—this distinction carries important implications. Efforts to promote civic literacy may matter less for reinforcing abstract democratic values, which most students already endorse, than for equipping students to navigate difficult tradeoffs when those values are tested. As future waves of this survey expand the sample and refine measurement, they will allow us to assess whether changes in civic education, campus climate, or institutional policy correspond to meaningful shifts in how FSU students understand and apply the freedoms central to democratic life.

[1] Knight Foundation. (2022, January 6). *Free expression in America post 2020*. https://knightfoundation.org/reports/free-expression-in-america-post-2020/; see also Chong, D. (1993). How People Think, Reason, and Feel about Rights and Liberties. American Journal of Political Science, 37(3), 867–899. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111577.

[2] Of these 364 students that responded to the survey, 293 (80%) provided complete data. The remainder skipped or refused to answer one or more questions.

[3] Correct answer rates were higher for men than woman across all 7 items. However, the magnitude of the differences is smaller and not statistically significant for the questions on why the number of House representatives vary by state (97% vs. 93%, p=0.373) and on what stops one branch of government from accumulating too much power (98% vs. 95%, p=0.271). Differences in all other items range from 12 to 21 percentage points, all of which are statistically significant at the 95% confidence threshold or higher.

[4] The unadjusted difference corresponds to approximately 0.61 standard deviations, which falls to roughly 0.52 standard deviations when adjusting for student class year, race/ethnicity, and major.

[5] Jerit, J., & Barabas, J. (2017). Revisiting the gender gap in political knowledge. Political Behavior, 39(4), 817-838; see also Lizotte, M. K., & Sidman, A. H. (2009). Explaining the gender gap in political knowledge. Politics & Gender, 5(2), 127-151.

[6] Beyond theory, this distinction is supported by factor analysis. In an exploratory factor analysis, the three abstract free-speech items load strongly on one factor (loadings = 0.45–0.69), while the five applied items load on a second factor (0.51–0.80). Confirmatory factor analysis further indicates that this two-factor structure fits the data substantially better

[7] To our surprise, civic knowledge is not meaningfully related (p=0.311) to comfort with having a politically disagreeing roommate, though the relationship is in the expected (positive) direction.
[8] We also conducted parallel analyses in the domain of religious liberty—focusing on campus policies governing religious expression and student religious groups—and found patterns nearly identical to those observed for free speech. These results are presented and discussed in Appendix B.

APPENDIX A

Table A1. Comparison of Survey Respondents and Invited Students on Key Demographic and Academic Characteristics

Benchmark	Invited Students	Survey-Taking Students
% Male	44	42
% Freshman	9	10
% Sophomore*	21	16
% Junior	32	29
% Senior*	39	46
% White	56	60
% Black	8	6
% Hispanic	25	21
% Asian	4	3
% Two or more races	5	6
% Business & Economics	27	23
% Social Sciences	21	25
% Engineering & Technology	11	10
% Natural Sciences & Mathematics	11	12
% Health Sciences & Medicine	9	7
% Creative & Performing Arts	5	6
% Communication & Information	5	6
N	6919	364

Note. * indicates a difference that is statistically significant at the 95% confidence threshold.

APPENDIX B

To further examine how students navigate conflicts between expressive freedom and competing campus values, the survey measured attitudes toward religious liberty. As with free speech, the questions distinguish between abstract support for religious expression as a general principle and support for protecting religious expression in concrete situations where it may conflict with other students' sensibilities or institutional norms.

Table B1 summarizes responses across these two domains. At the level of general principle, support for religious liberty is widespread. Nearly 90% of students agree that all religious groups should have equal access to campus to present their faith, regardless of

the beliefs they espouse. Large majorities also support allowing student religious groups to engage other students on campus so long as those activities do not interfere with classroom instruction (80%), while support is somewhat lower—but still substantial—for permitting student-led prayers at nonreligious campus events (69%).

Table B1. Comparison of Survey Respondents and Invited Students on Key Demographic and Academic Characteristics

Domain	Question	Agree / Support (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree / Oppose (%)
Abstract Support for Religious Liberty	All religious groups should have equal access to campus to present their faith to others regardless of their beliefs.	**89**	6	6
	Student religious groups should be allowed to engage other students on campus so long as those activities do not interfere with classroom instruction.	**80**	11	10
	Student-led prayers should be permitted at campus events outside of classes, even if the events are not religious in nature.	**69**	20	11
Support for Religious Liberty in Practice	Suppose students from a religious group hand out flyers about their beliefs in a public area of campus. The activity does not block traffic or interfere with other activities, but some students find the beliefs offensive. To what extent do you support or oppose the university prohibiting the group from continuing its activity?	19	16	**66**
	A religious student group holds weekly meetings on campus and, because of its religious beliefs, requires male and female students to sit separately at its events. Some students argue this is discriminatory and ask the university to revoke the student group's registered status. To what extent do you support or oppose the university revoking the group's registered status?	26	28	**46**

Note. Sample size varies by question (N=293–296). Responses were collapsed and derived from 7-point Likert scales (1=Strongly agree/support, 7=Strongly disagree/oppose). Figures in bold font denote the "pro-religious liberty" response.

Views become more divided when students evaluate specific situations in which religious expression may generate offense or conflict with other campus values. When

When presented with a scenario in which a religious group distributes flyers in a public area of campus—without blocking traffic or disrupting activities, but in ways some students find offensive—nearly 20% of respondents support prohibiting the activity, while two-thirds oppose such intervention. Opinions are even more mixed when religious practices intersect with norms of equality and nondiscrimination. In a scenario involving a religious student group that requires male and female students to sit separately at its meetings, 26% support revoking the group's registered status, 46% oppose doing so, and a sizable minority (28%) express uncertainty.

These responses point to a familiar pattern: broad endorsement of religious liberty in the abstract does not fully translate into support for protecting religious expression in contested situations.

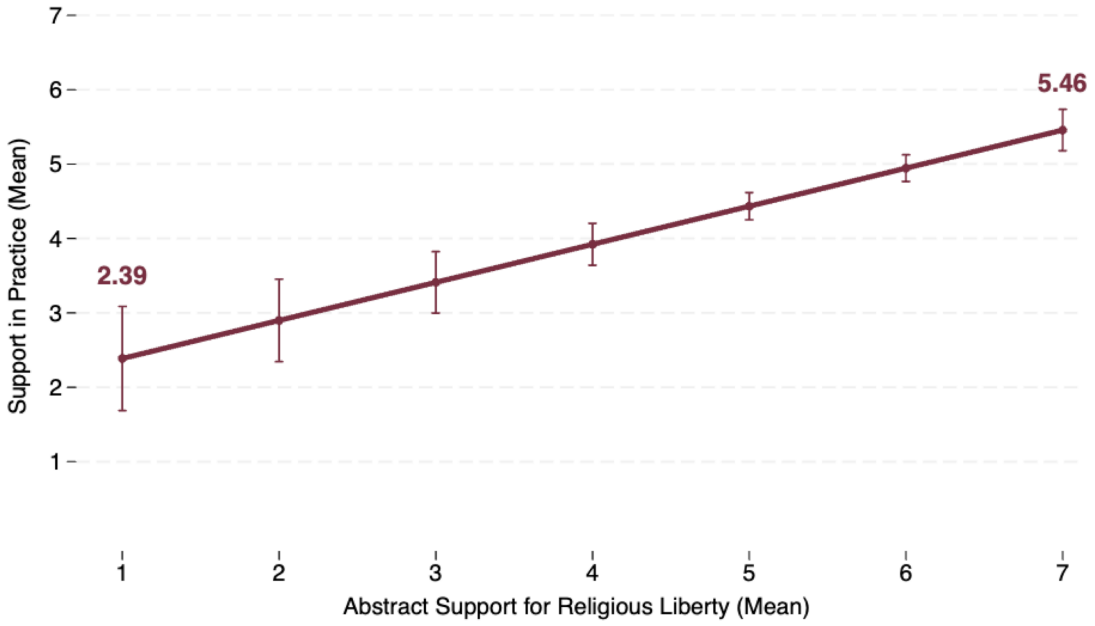
To examine this gap more directly, we construct summary indexes of abstract and applied support for religious liberty and estimate predicted levels of applied support across the abstract scale, adjusting for demographic and academic characteristics.

As shown in Figure B1, abstract and applied support are positively related, but the correspondence is far from perfect. Students who score higher on the abstract religious-liberty scale are, on average, more opposed to institutional restrictions in applied scenarios. Yet even among those who express the strongest possible endorsement of religious liberty in principle, support in practice remains conditional. Students scoring at the maximum level of abstract support (7) are predicted to score 5.46 on the applied scale—placing them between "somewhat oppose" and "oppose" restrictions, rather than at unequivocal opposition to institutional intervention.

Basic civic knowledge helps distinguish which students are more likely to uphold religious liberty when it becomes controversial. As shown in Figure B2, the gap between abstract support and support for protecting religious liberty in practice narrows as basic civic knowledge increases. Adjusting for class year, sex, race, and major, students in the lowest basic civic-knowledge category score just under 4.0 on the applied religious-liberty scale, reflecting relatively ambivalent views toward restricting religious activity. By contrast, students in the highest basic knowledge category score nearly a full point higher—approximately 5.0—indicating significantly greater resistance to prohibiting religious expression even when it is perceived as offensive or controversial.

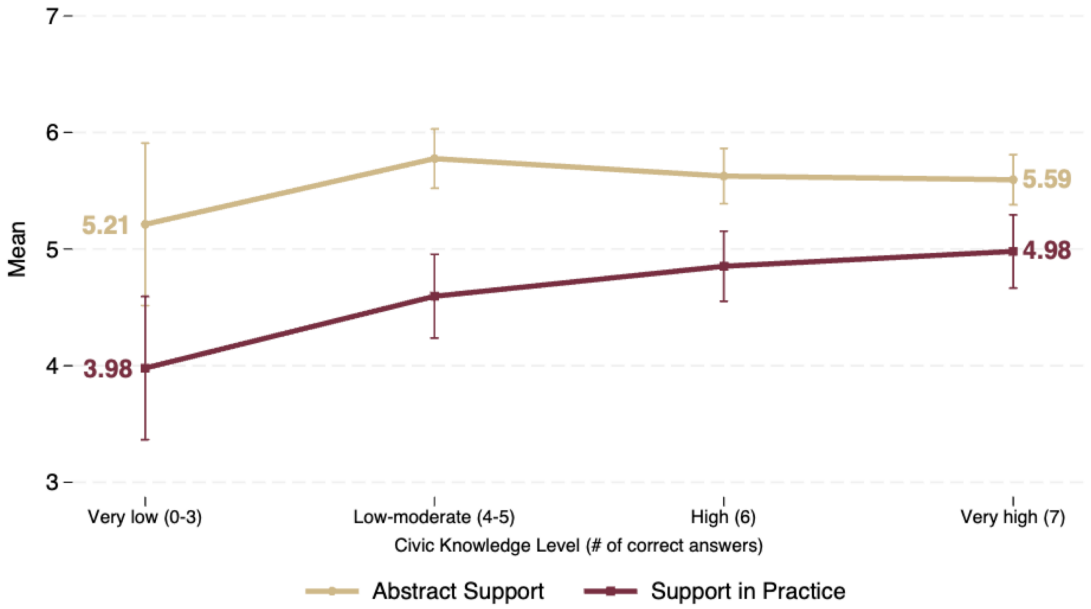
By comparison, basic civic knowledge bears no meaningful relationship to abstract support for religious liberty. Students across the knowledge distribution express similarly strong agreement with general principles of religious freedom, suggesting that—much like abstract support for free speech—endorsement of religious liberty as a value is broadly shared and does not meaningfully differentiate students.

Figure B1. Average Levels of Abstract and Applied Support for Free Speech by Sex



Note. N=293 student respondents. Line represents the estimated level (1–7) of applied support for religious liberty at each level of abstract support. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B2. Abstract and Applied Support for Religious Liberty by Civic Knowledge Level



Note. N=293 student respondents. Lines represent the estimated level (1–7) of abstract and applied support for religious liberty at each civic knowledge level. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, class year, and major. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Overall, these findings mirror the pattern observed in the free-speech domain. Civic knowledge appears to matter most not for whether students endorse expressive rights in principle, but for how they navigate tradeoffs between those rights and competing values in practice. When students must weigh free expression or religious liberty against concerns about offense, equality, or institutional norms, those with greater civic knowledge are more likely to favor tolerance and restraint on institutional intervention.