

# COMPAS Points

*A Bulletin of the Center for Ethics and Human Values and the  
Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA)*

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## What Do Ohio State Students Believe Will Improve U.S. Democracy?

The COMPAS Program  
wanted to find out.

**Jon Kingzette**



INSTITUTE FOR  
**DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT  
AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

CENTER  
FOR ETHICS AND  
HUMAN VALUES

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### Editors' note

This second issue of *COMPAS Points* inaugurates a partnership between the [Center for Ethics and Human Values](#) (CEHV) and the [Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability](#) (IDEA). Our goal is to provide an annual bulletin reporting on online deliberative forums in which Ohio State University students engage contentious issues taken up by the COMPAS program.

Each year, CEHV runs a year-long series of events called COMPAS (“Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society”) to promote informed and respectful public discourse (see [cehv.osu.edu/compas](http://cehv.osu.edu/compas)). IDEA is one of the nation’s leading institutes studying how democratic citizens and their representatives can more effectively and constructively engage each other in deliberative contexts. An ongoing collaboration between IDEA and the Kettering Foundation has made available an online platform, called *Common Ground for Action*, that allows Ohio State students to address COMPAS topics in moderated forums. In these forums, small groups of students are asked to reflect on and discuss policy options presented in issue booklets published by the non-partisan National Issues Forums. The program then allows the researchers to track features of these deliberations to see what policies were supported and how participants discuss each issue.

The COMPAS topic in 2019-2020 is “**What Is America?**”. The online forums this year enrolled over 125 first-year students as part of the First Year Success Series and used the National Issues Forums booklet entitled “A House Divided: How Do We Get the Political System We Want? What Would We Have to Give Up to Get It?” (available here: <https://www.nifi.org/en/issue-guide/house-divided>). This issue guide focuses on possible actions that could be taken to improve U.S. democracy. In this bulletin, we report on the results of these forums. Highlights include:

- **Students value free expression of controversial viewpoints, but are open to social media restrictions on threatening speech**
- **Students favor nonpartisan commissions to draw fair voting districts, and removing obstacles to voting**
- **Students *increased* their respect for the views of people they disagree with after participating in the deliberative forum**

Over time, we hope to use these forums and other issue booklets to develop a richer sense of what Ohio State students believe about the important challenges facing the United States.

The author of the report is Jon Kingzette, a PhD Candidate in Political Science. He was aided by two other Political Science graduate students, Emily Ann Israelson and Abby Kielty. We are very grateful to the Ohio State First Year Experience team for working with us on setting up these forums and for the assistance of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning. -- *The Editors*

# What do first-year Ohio State students believe will improve U.S. democracy?

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## I. Introduction

Over the course of the Fall 2019 semester, first-year Ohio State students could register to take part in an online discussion on how to improve U.S. democracy through the First Year Success Series (FYSS). The goal of this series is to give students the skills and resources they need to smoothly transition into college. In our session, students learned how to have respectful dialogue on contentious political issues.

Overall, 129 students participated in an online session, and 101 students completed an exit survey that we fielded directly after students participated in the session. We held 16 deliberative forums, which means the mean number of students who participated in each forum was about 8.

Before each forum, students were asked to review the National Issues Forums booklet entitled “A House Divided: How Do We Get the Political System We Want? What Would We Have to Give Up to Get It?” (available here: <https://www.nifi.org/en/issue-guide/house-divided>). The booklet presents “three different options for deliberation, each rooted in something held widely valuable and presenting a different way of looking at the problem.” These are:

- Option 1: Reduce dangerous, toxic talk.  
*This option focuses on how much we should attempt to curtail the dissemination of threats, false information, or biased media reports across a variety of platforms.*
- Option 2: Make fairer rules for politics and follow them.  
*This option focuses on several distinct institutional changes that could be made to the political system, such as making it easier for people to vote or placing limits on PAC contributions to political candidates.*
- Option 3: Take control and make decisions closer to home.  
*This option focuses on shifting political power toward state and local governments.*

Within each option, the issue guide presents four specific policy actions for participants to consider (12 total actions), highlighting the trade-offs each action might involve. In this issue guide, these were the actions.

<p><b>Option 1</b> <b>Reduce dangerous, toxic talk</b></p>	<p><b>Option 2</b> <b>Make fairer rules for politics and follow them</b></p>	<p><b>Option 3</b> <b>Take control and make decisions closer to home</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Action A</u>: Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs and profanity or threaten physical violence.</li> <li>• <u>Action B</u>: Require all television networks to provide opposing views on controversial issues.</li> <li>• <u>Action C</u>: Make websites and television stations liable for allowing ads that make unproven or false charges about political candidates.</li> <li>• <u>Action D</u>: Protect freedom of speech on college campuses by protecting professors, students, and speakers who espouse unpopular or “politically incorrect” views.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Action E</u>: Remove the burdensome registration and scheduling barriers that make voting difficult for so many Americans. Too many people are being shut out.</li> <li>• <u>Action F</u>: Revise the 1965 Voting Rights Act to forbid new laws or requirements that could make it harder for minorities or poor people to vote.</li> <li>• <u>Action G</u>: Establish nonpartisan commissions to draw congressional districts based on population patterns so politicians don’t design them to favor their own party.</li> <li>• <u>Action H</u>: Strictly limit how much outside groups and individuals can contribute to candidates and PACs, even by constitutional amendment if necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Action I</u>: Dramatically reduce cumbersome federal regulations on the environment, energy, and transportation. Local residents have a much better understanding of what their communities need.</li> <li>• <u>Action J</u>: Give states money without restrictions for major federal programs such as Medicaid and education so states can adapt them to fit their own needs.</li> <li>• <u>Action K</u>: Local governments should rely much more on community groups, organizations, and churches to address issues like crime, health, and welfare.</li> <li>• <u>Action L</u>: Return full control and funding of K-12 public education to local communities and the states so residents can determine what’s best for their own children.</li> </ul>

Within each forum, participants first introduced themselves to the group by sharing their personal perspectives on the issue coming into the forum. They then engaged in a moderated deliberative process built around the 12 actions, and were asked to reflect on the conversation at the end. As the forum concluded, participants were encouraged to take our post-survey.

The results from this process are divided into four sections. First, we present data on who attended our sessions compared to the Ohio State first-year population. Second, we show levels of support for each of the 12 policies in the issue guide. Third, we present data on participants’ current and prospective levels of political engagement. Fourth, we show that participants overwhelmingly believed that deliberation was a useful process and came to respect the views of those they disagree with more due to the session.

## II. Who Participated in Conversations on How to Improve U.S. Democracy?

129 participants in our forums received credit for the FYSS. And of these 129, 101 participants completed our exit survey. On our exit survey, we collected a variety of data on students' political orientations and demographic characteristics. Thus, we have fairly robust profiles for a vast majority of participants. Table 1, below, shows information about the students who participated in our forums and completed our exit survey.

**Table 1:** Profile of Participants Who Completed Exit Survey

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Partisanship</b>	
Democrats (including leaners)	69.7%
Republicans (including leaners)	26.3%
Independent/Other	4%
<b>Ideology</b>	
Strongly liberal	20.8%
Somewhat liberal	32.7%
Moderate (Neither liberal nor conservative)	14.9%
Somewhat conservative	14.9%
Strongly conservative	7.9%
Other	8.9%
<b>Speak English As...</b>	
Primary language	76.2%
Second (or higher) language	23.8%
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	47.5%
Female	52.5%
<b>Race/ethnicity<sup>1</sup></b>	
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.0%
Arab or Middle Eastern	2.0%
Asian	25.7%
Black or African-American	10.9%
Hispanic or Latino	5.0%
White	61.4%

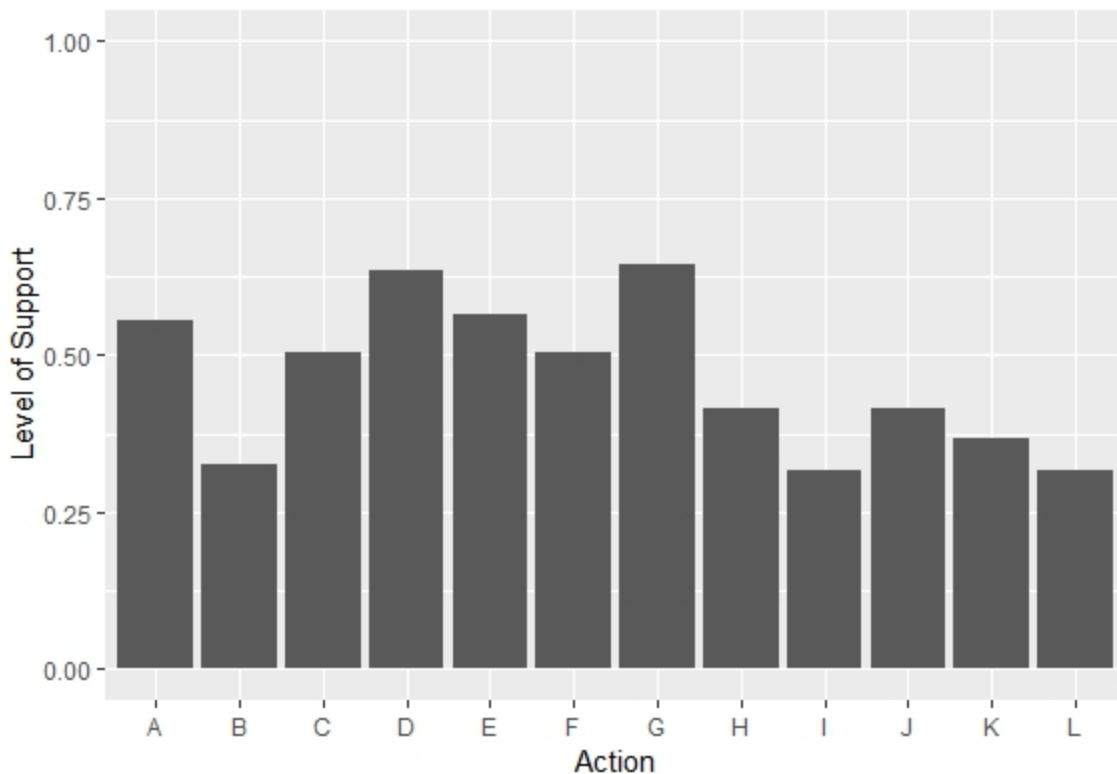
<sup>1</sup> These add to over 100% because respondents could select multiple options, as is considered best practice. Also, no participants who completed our survey identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, though this was a response option on our survey.

As can be seen, participants in our forums were quite diverse. As might be expected among college students, there is a Democratic and liberal skew, but there were still a good number of Republican and conservative identifiers in our forums. The percentage of males and females is roughly equivalent to 49/51 male to female ratio for the incoming class as a whole, while our forums were more racially diverse than the incoming class as a whole. For a detailed breakdown of the 2019 entering class of Ohio State students, see [Enrollment Report 2019](#).

### III. What Do Ohio State Students Believe Will Improve U.S. Democracy?

In the exit survey, participants marked their level of support for each of the 12 potential actions listed above on five-point Likert scales going from “Strongly oppose” to “Strongly support.” In Figure 1, below, we show the percentage of respondents who supported each action (marked either “Support” or “Strongly support”).

**Figure 1: Levels of Support for each Action**



Overall, the two most widely supported actions -- each with over 60% support -- were D and G:

Action D: Protect freedom of speech on college campuses by protecting professors, students, and speakers who espouse unpopular or “politically incorrect” views.

Action G: Establish nonpartisan commissions to draw congressional districts based on population patterns so politicians don’t design them to favor their own party.

Clear majorities also supported actions A and E:

Action A: Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs and profanity or threaten physical violence.

Action E: Remove the burdensome registration and scheduling barriers that make voting difficult for so many Americans. Too many people are being shut out.

By contrast, actions B, I, and L received very low levels of aggregate support, around 30%:

Action B: Require all television networks to provide opposing views on controversial issues.

Action I: Dramatically reduce cumbersome federal regulations on the environment, energy, and transportation. Local residents have a much better understanding of what their communities need.

Action L: Return full control and funding of K-12 public education to local communities and the states so residents can determine what’s best for their own children.

Also, it should be noted that respondents showed significantly less support for the actions in Option 3 (I-L) than the other two options. Ohio State students who participated in our forums preferred reducing toxic talk and making fairer rules for politics as ways to improve U.S. democracy over transferring decision-making power closer to home.

Finally, a few patterns emerged across many forums on Option 1 (Reduce Toxic Talk) that are not fully captured by aggregate levels of support. First, for Action A (“Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs and profanity or threaten physical violence”), participants in many discussions made a distinction between profanity and threats of physical violence. Participants were significantly more inclined to support kicking out users who make threats of violence than users who use profanity when this distinction was brought up in discussion. Second, for Action C (“Make websites and television stations liable for allowing ads that make unproven or false charges about political candidates”), several participants expressed the thought that websites and television stations should not be liable for airing ads with unproven or false charges about candidates in them, but that the creators of the ad should be liable. When this thought emerged in discussion, other participants

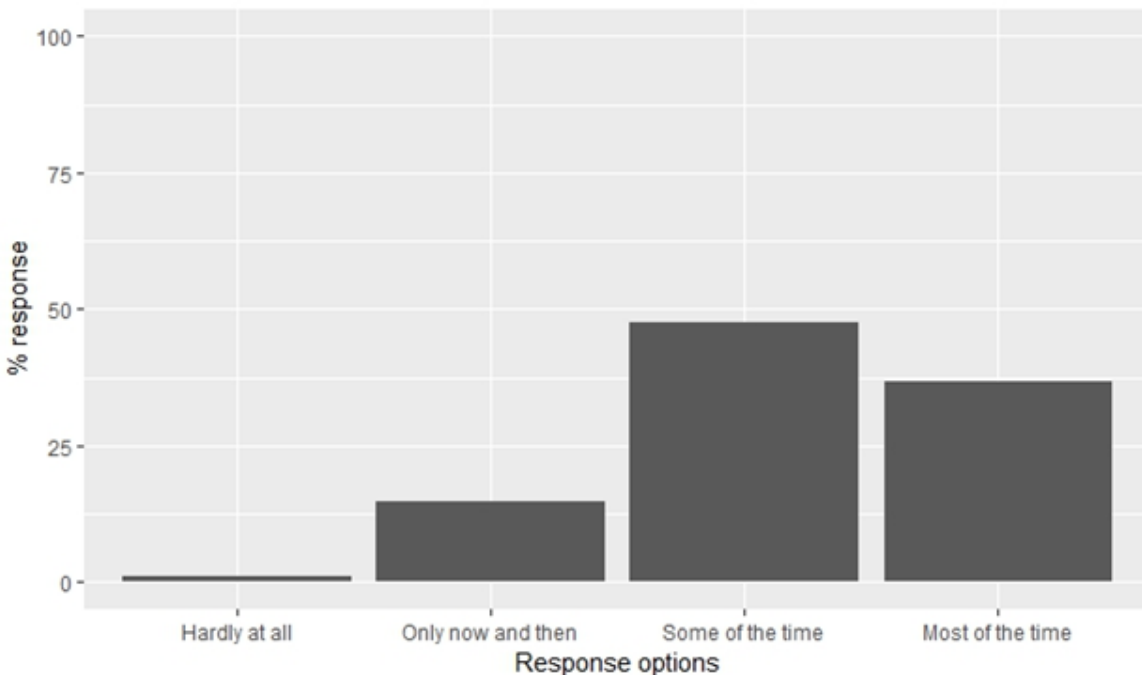
often agreed that the ad creators should be liable. Third, when it came to Action D (“Protect freedom of speech on college campuses...”) most participants agreed that speech should be protected, but many discussions ended with attempts to identify the thresholds or circumstances in which it should not be protected, without a clear resolution.

All this shows that first-year students were able to delve into difficult topics and talk about them in detail, especially when the issue is salient and does not take expertise to discuss. In general, participants discussed Options 2 (“Make fairer rules for politics and follow them”) and 3 (“Take control and make decisions closer to home”) in much less detail. This is probably due in part to declining focus throughout the forum (the options are discussed in order), but may also be driven by the fact that these options bring to the fore policy proposals that take more expertise to understand.

#### IV. Student Engagement Patterns

In addition to asking about support for each of the actions discussed in the forum, we asked participants several questions about political interest and engagement. One of these questions asked participants how frequently they follow what’s going on in government and public affairs. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses on this question. As can be seen, most participants follow politics at least some of the time.

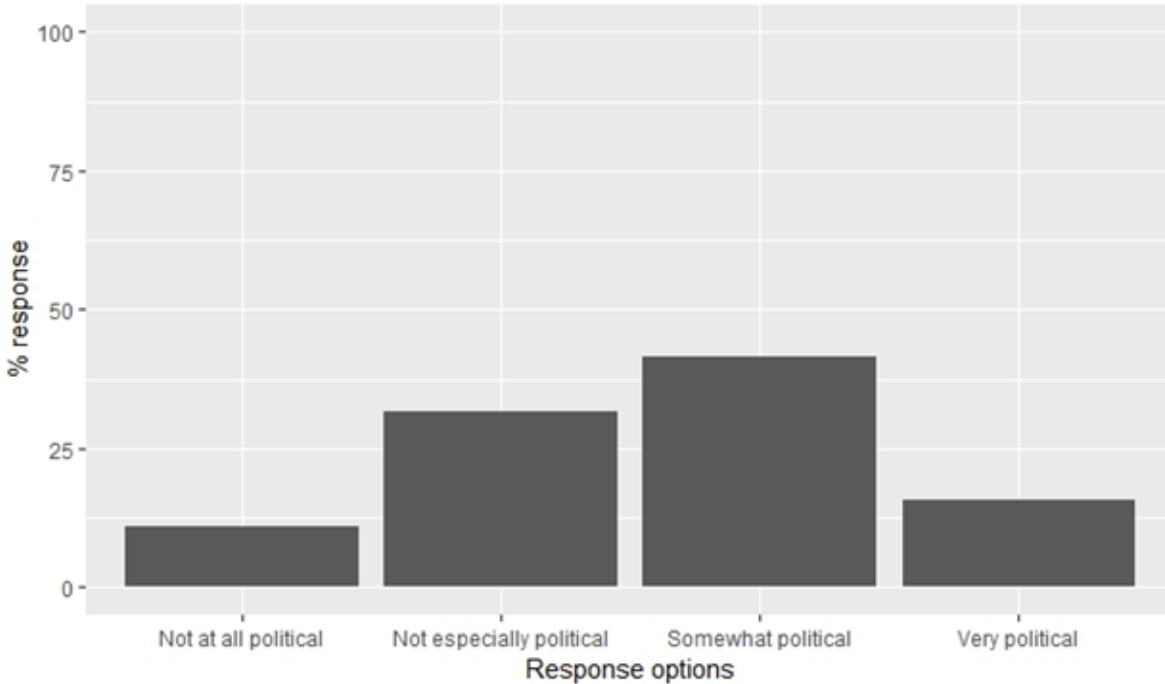
**Figure 2: Political Interest of Forum Participants**





We also asked participants the extent to which they consider themselves to be a “political person.” Responses to this question are in Figure 3. Few participants in our forums considered themselves “not at all political,” but it was also the case that few participants identified themselves as being “very political.” Instead, the vast majority of participants placed themselves on the middle two points on this scale.

**Figure 3: The Extent to which Participants Consider themselves “Political”**



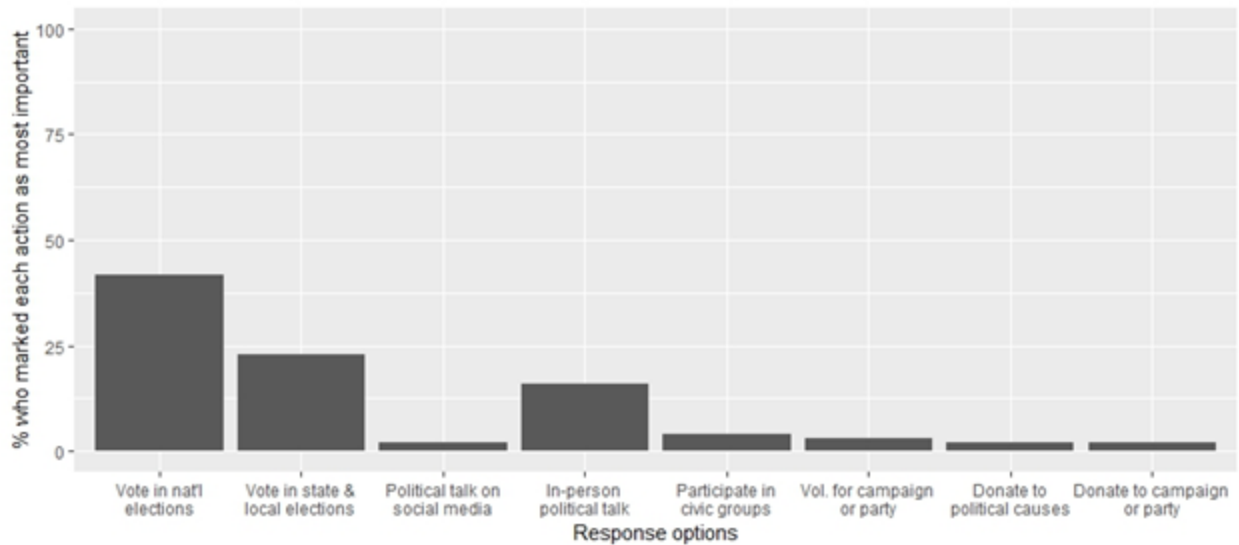
Finally, we asked participants two questions about different types of political activity. We listed the following eight kinds of political participation:

- 1) Vote in national elections
- 2) Vote in state-level and local elections
- 3) Share political views and/or have political conversations on social media
- 4) Have in-person, political conversations
- 5) Participate in civic groups or associations
- 6) Volunteer for a campaign or political party
- 7) Donate money to political causes or advocacy groups
- 8) Donate money to a campaign or political party

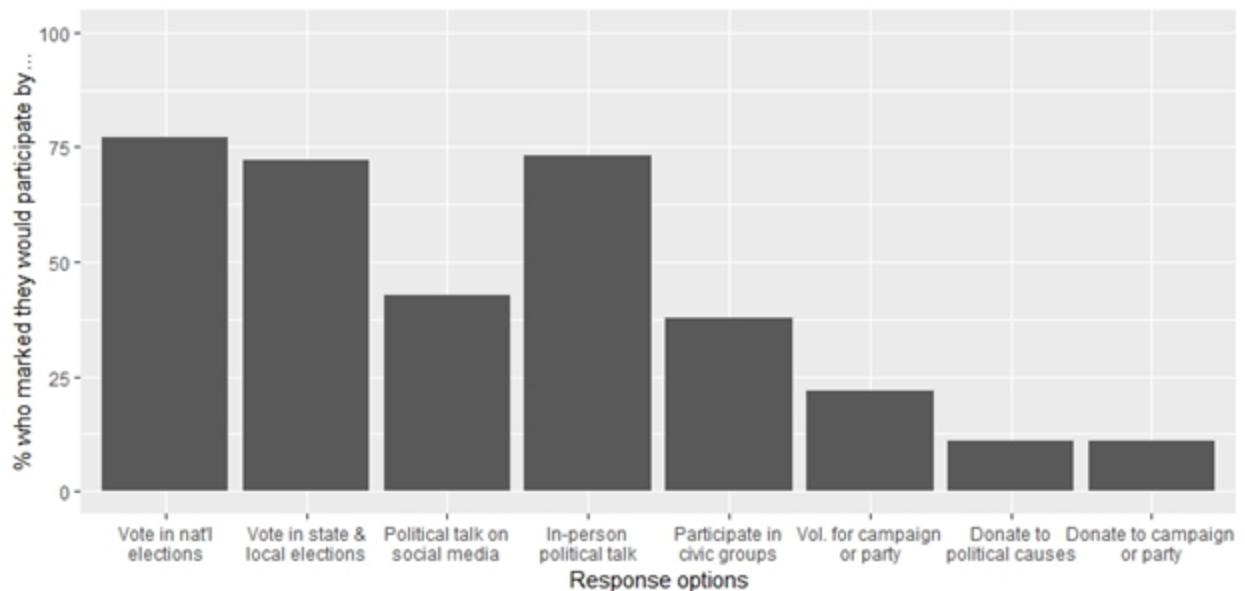
In regards to these kinds of political activity, we first asked participants to rank (order) how important each of these activities is for ordinary people to take. Figure 4, below, shows the percentage of participants who marked each response as the most important. Clearly, participants believe voting to be the most important activity, especially in national elections. But

many participants also chose having in-person conversations as the most important kind of political participation. We then asked participants to mark each of the political activities they believe they will take in college. The results of this question are in Figure 5. As can be seen, the types of political activity that students believe they will take closely aligns with the activities they believe are most important.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Participants who Marked each Action as Most Important**



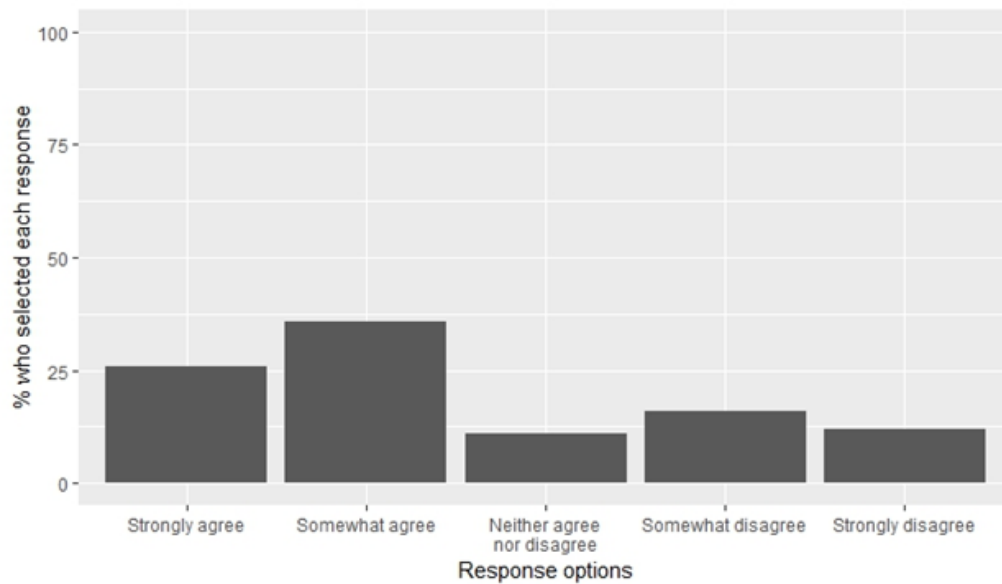
**Figure 5: Percentage of Participants who Would Take each Political Action**



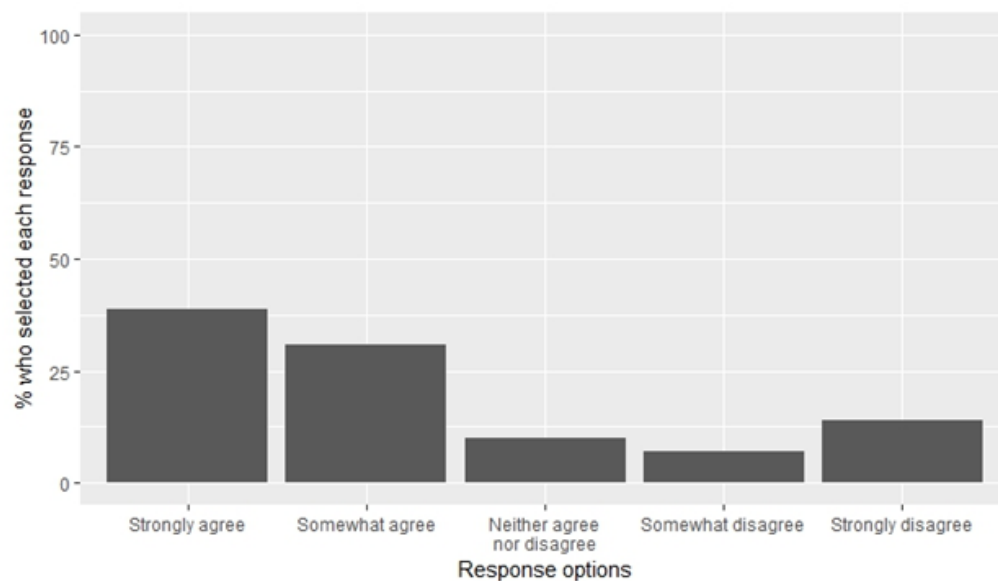
## V. Participants' Attitudes about the Forum

Finally, we asked participants several questions about the forum itself. First, we asked participants if they learned a lot from the forum, from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The results from this question are in Figure 6. As can be seen, most participants felt like they learned a lot from the forum, though some did not. Using the same response options, we then asked participants if they thought it would be useful to have similar forums on other issues. Almost everyone agreed it would be useful, as can be seen in Figure 7.

**Figure 6: Responses to: “I feel like I learned a lot from participating in this session.”**

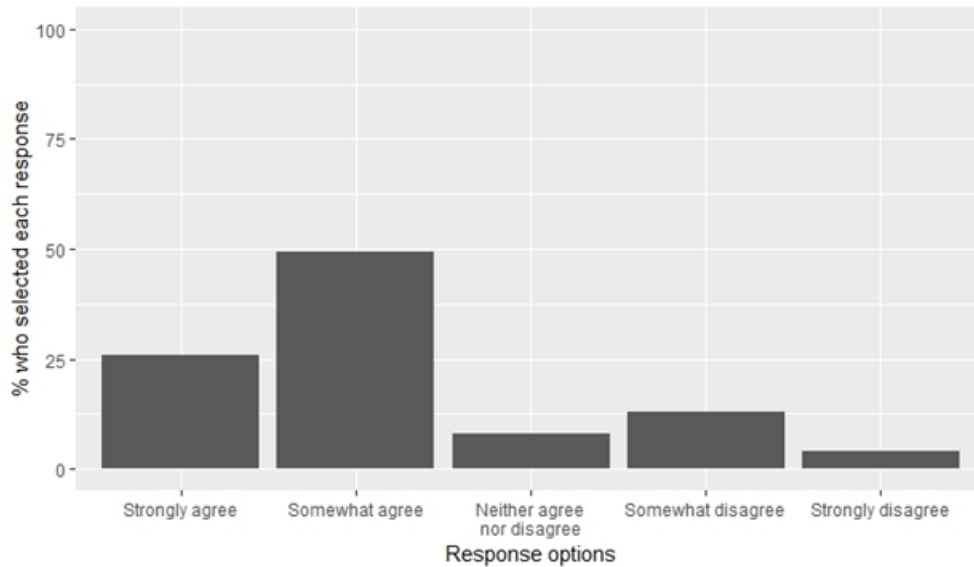


**Figure 7: Responses to “It would be useful for more sessions like this one to be held for other issues.”**



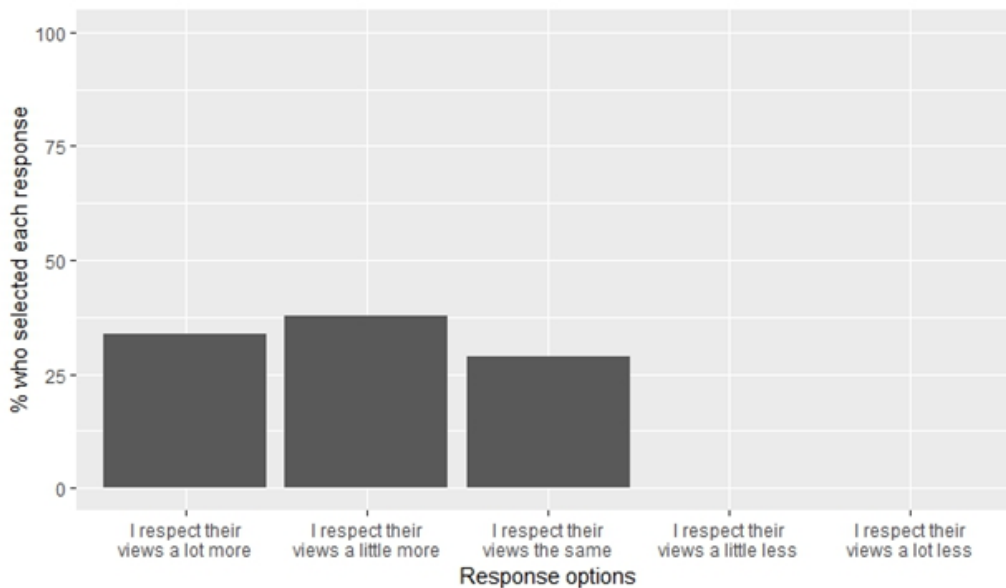
In addition to these questions, which were meant to tap into session efficacy, we also asked participants to reflect on whether the forum made them reconsider their views on the issue. Figure 8 shows responses to this question.

**Figure 8: Responses to: “This forum led me to reconsider my views on the issue discussed.”**



Finally, participants were asked to compare how much they respected the views of people who disagree with them on this issue. Incredibly, no respondents marked that they respect the other side less after participating in this session, and most reported respecting the other side more, as can be seen in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Responses to: “Compared to before attending this session, how much would you say you respect the views of people who disagree with you on the issue that was discussed?”**



## VI. Conclusion

Many doubt the ability of young people to participate in politics in a meaningful way. However, these forums showed that such doubts are misplaced. First-year Ohio State students who participated in deliberative forums about how to improve U.S. democracy were able to discuss the issue respectfully, even across political differences. Moreover, within the forums, participants often brought up considerations that were outside the scope of the existing issue guide and together identified broad solutions on the issue.

Additionally, the experience seemed to be beneficial in a variety of ways. Many participants reported learning a lot from the session and thought it would be useful to have other discussions like this one in the future. And the vast majority of participants reported respecting the other side more after this session, with zero participants reporting that they respect the other side less after participating. This reinforces the idea that college students can productively discuss politics across difference when they are given the opportunity and a structure to do so.



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