



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**  
CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

# COMPAS Points

*A Bulletin of the Ohio State Center for Ethics and Human Values*

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*What do Ohio State students believe about economic inequality, security, and opportunity?*

The COMPAS program wanted to find out.



Edited by Michael A. Neblo  
and Piers Norris Turner

*Ohio State University  
Center for Ethics and Human Values*

## Editors' Note

With this issue we begin *COMPAS Points*, an annual bulletin of the Center for Ethics and Human Values that will report on a series of online deliberative forums with members of the Ohio State community.

COMPAS – which stands for “Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society” – is a campus-wide program fostering informed and constructive public discourse (see <https://cehv.osu.edu/compas>). An ongoing collaboration between political science professor Michael Neblo and the Kettering Foundation has made available an online platform, called *Common Ground for Action*, to host Ohio State undergraduates in online 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 initially and how deliberation might have shifted participants' preferences and revealed areas of agreement among them.

The COMPAS topic in 2016-2017 has been **Inequality**. The online forums this year enrolled over 200 first-year students as part of the First Year Success Series and used the National Issues Forums booklet entitled “Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?” (available here: <https://www.nifi.org/en/nifi-materials>). In this bulletin we report on the results of these forums with first-year students concerning economic inequality and opportunity. Highlights include:

- **First-year students are focused on educational opportunities and job training**
- **Students welcome the opportunity for deliberation**
- **Online deliberative forums can produce reflectively-endorsed changes in people's preferences**

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 our country.

The research was carried out by two Ohio State professors, Michael Neblo and William Minozzi of Department of Political Science, three Political Science PhD students (Jon Green, Jon Kingzette, Kyle Davis) and one Philosophy PhD student (Allison Massof). 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*



Michael Neblo,  
COMPAS co-organizer  
and project leader



# What do first-year Ohio State students believe about economic inequality, security, and opportunity?

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## I. Introduction

Before each forum, students were asked to review the National Issues Forums booklet entitled “Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?” (It is available for free download: <https://www.nifi.org/en/catalog/product/free-making-ends-meet-issue-guide-downloadable-pdf>.) 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: Create New Opportunities. *Focuses on giving people the tools to start new enterprises that will improve their circumstances and spur economic growth, as well as removing barriers to small-business growth.*
- Option 2: Strengthen the Safety Net. *Holds that we should repair and strengthen the safety net to make sure there are safeguards in place that apply equally to all people.*
- Option 3: Reduce Inequality. *Says we should reduce the large gaps between the very rich and the rest of society, and make it easier for people to get into the middle class.*

## Student Snapshot

New First-Year Students (NFYS) 2016-2017

Total students: 7885  
Male/Female: 48% / 52%

White: 5294; 67.1%

International: 848; 10.8%

Unknown: 294; 3.7%

Minority students: 18.4%

- Asian: 582; 7.4%
- African American: 338; 4.3%
- Hispanic: 296; 3.8%
- Two or More Races: 222; 2.8%
- American Indian/Alaska Native: 8; 0.1%
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 3; 0%

Source: Office of Enrollment Services Analysis and Reporting



Within the three Options, the booklet then offers 15 specific policy actions for participants to consider, highlighting the trade-offs each action might involve. In the forum, participants are asked to introduce themselves to the group and then to engage each other in a moderated deliberative process built around the 15 actions.

We were curious to discover whether students' opinions changed through the deliberative process, whether they found deliberation to be helpful individually, and whether the groups were able to agree on a set of actions to pursue despite their different starting points. Given assumptions about millennials' lack of political attention and the polarized state of contemporary US politics, we wanted to see whether offering a forum for constructive public discourse would be welcomed by incoming Ohio State students, and whether it could help promote effective democratic engagement.

Here is what we found.

## **II. What policies do OSU first-year students support on economic inequality, security, and opportunity after engaging in a deliberative forum on these issues?**

There were 202 active participants in our forums who received credit for the First Year Success Series (FYSS). 161 participants completed the exit survey. Of those who completed the exit survey, 50% were male, 68% were white and 85% indicated that English was their first language. All were first-year students enrolled at Ohio State University

At the beginning of the Common Ground for Action forums on economic inequality and opportunity, the students individually listed their top 5 policy actions out of the following 15 choices.

### Create New Opportunities

- A. *Community organizations can help new businesses get rolling with free office space and mentoring services, or by helping them cut through red tape.*
- B. *States, cities and universities could work closely with companies and move more quickly to provide the right job training so businesses can expand and put more people to work.*
- C. *Banks could make more loans to small businesses and local entrepreneurs.*
- D. *The government could reduce taxes on all Americans, especially businesses, so they can keep more of what they earn.*
- E. *People could launch new side enterprises, careers, or firms that introduce innovations and provide jobs.*



### Strengthen the Safety Net

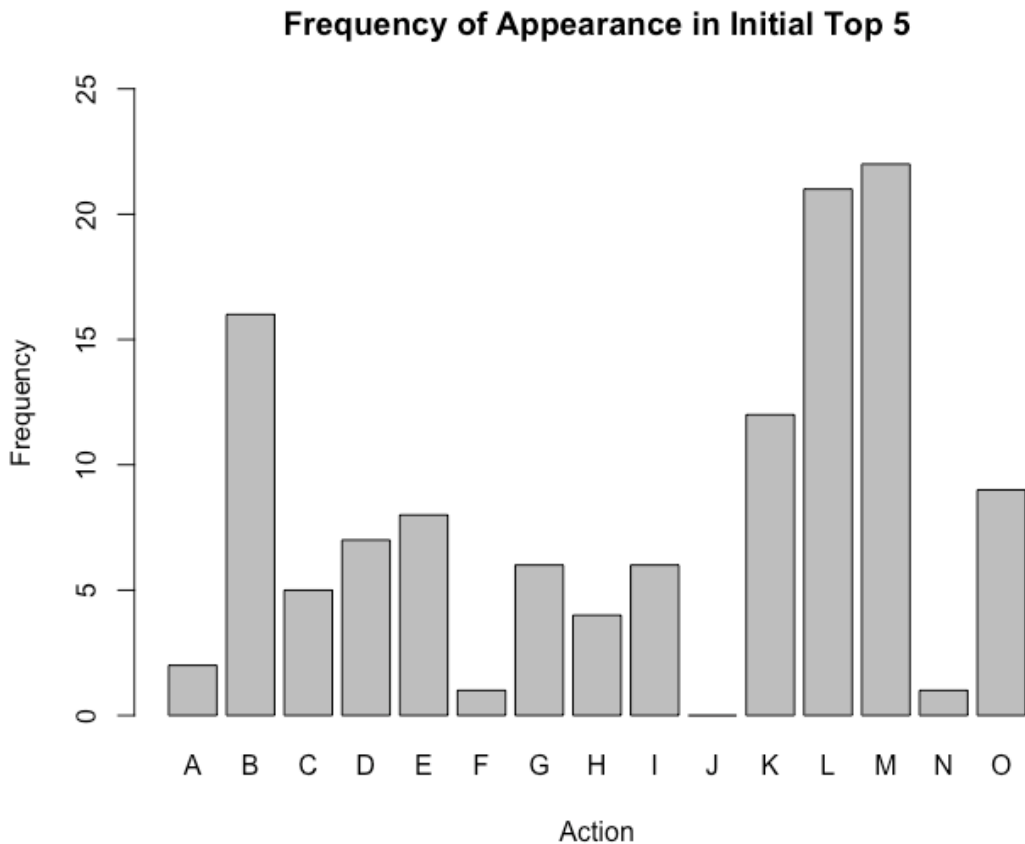
- F. Congress could disconnect health insurance and other benefits from employment entirely, making it easier for people to change jobs and for the self-employed to have benefits.*
- G. Local, state and federal governments can build or repair more roads and bridges, boosting the economy and providing jobs.*
- H. Government can strengthen Social Security and ensure it will be there for future generations.*
- I. The federal government can increase funding to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and ensure that the money actually goes to families in need.*
- J. Congress could raise the unemployment tax, extend the permanent length of unemployment benefits, and make other improvements to the program.*

### Reduce Inequality

- K. Congress could cut taxes for low-income families and raise the top income tax rates and the estate tax.*
- L. Colleges could lower tuition and states could boost higher education funding to control college debt.*
- M. States could reform school funding so that children in poor neighborhoods receive the same quality education as those in wealthy neighborhoods.*
- N. More workers could organize or join unions to push for better wages and job security.*
- O. States and cities could increase the minimum wage, as some cities already have, to a “living wage” that would cover families’ basic living expenses.*

The following plot shows the number of times a given policy appeared in a group’s Initial Top 5, measured by assigning a weight to each member’s first through fifth rank-ordered selections and aggregating:





In the initial ranking, then, the three top actions supported by students were M, L, and B:

- *States could reform school funding so that children in poor neighborhoods receive the same quality education as those in wealthy neighborhoods*
- *Colleges could lower tuition and states could boost higher education funding to control college debt.*
- *States, cities and universities could work closely with companies and move more quickly to provide the right job training so businesses can expand and put more people to work.*

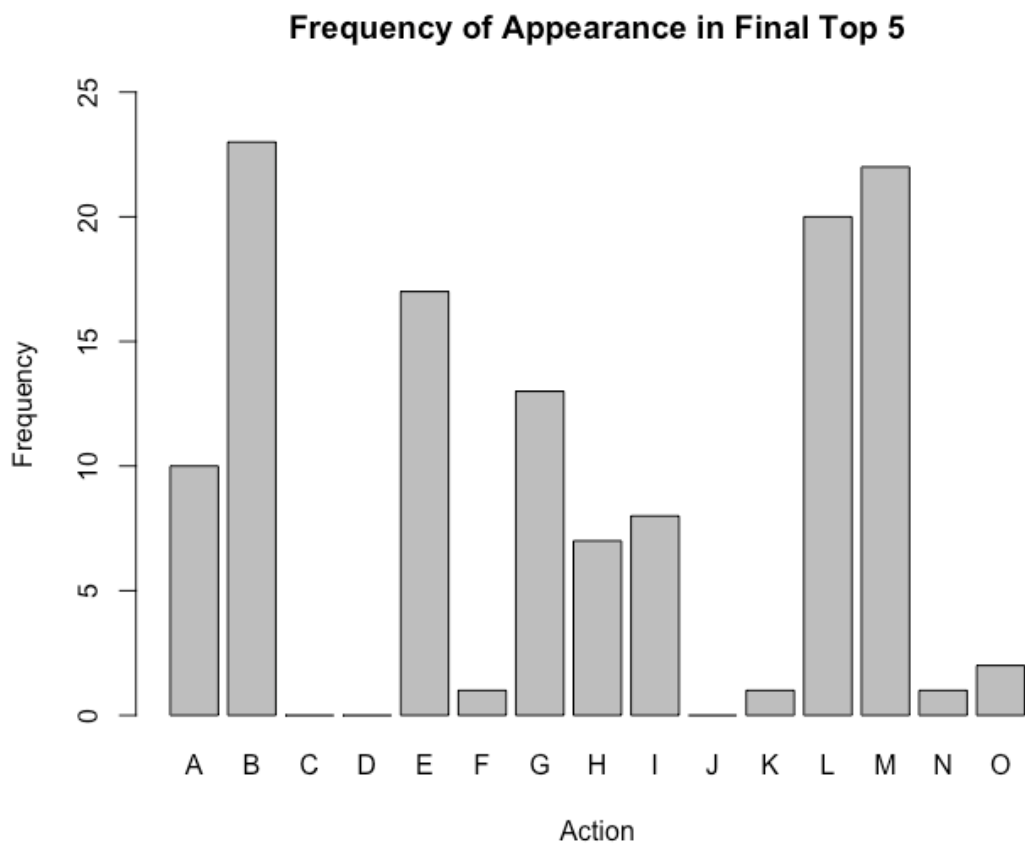
These reveal a perhaps unsurprising focus among university students on education and job training. In fact, these three actions enjoyed support throughout the deliberative process. But, as we shall see, other priorities changed – as did the relative weight placed on actions from the three broad policy Options.

After listing out the Initial Top 5 Policy Actions, participants in each forum then evaluated each action again in the context of the broad policy Options. This time, instead of simply picking their top policies, participants specifically chose whether they would support the policy, would not support the policy, or were conflicted. They then also evaluated the extent to which they were



bothered by a potential tradeoff that might occur from each policy. Throughout the deliberation, participants were free to move around their choices on each action; someone who was opposed to raising the minimum wage and could not accept the tradeoff when making their evaluation within the Option could end up supporting this policy and accepting the tradeoff at the end. At the end of the whole forum, the Common Ground for Action platform listed the 5 actions closest to Common Ground – those actions for which a solid majority of participants supported the action and could live with the potential tradeoff. We call these the Final Top 5 policies.

The following plot shows how often each action appeared in the Final Top 5 policy actions for a given group:

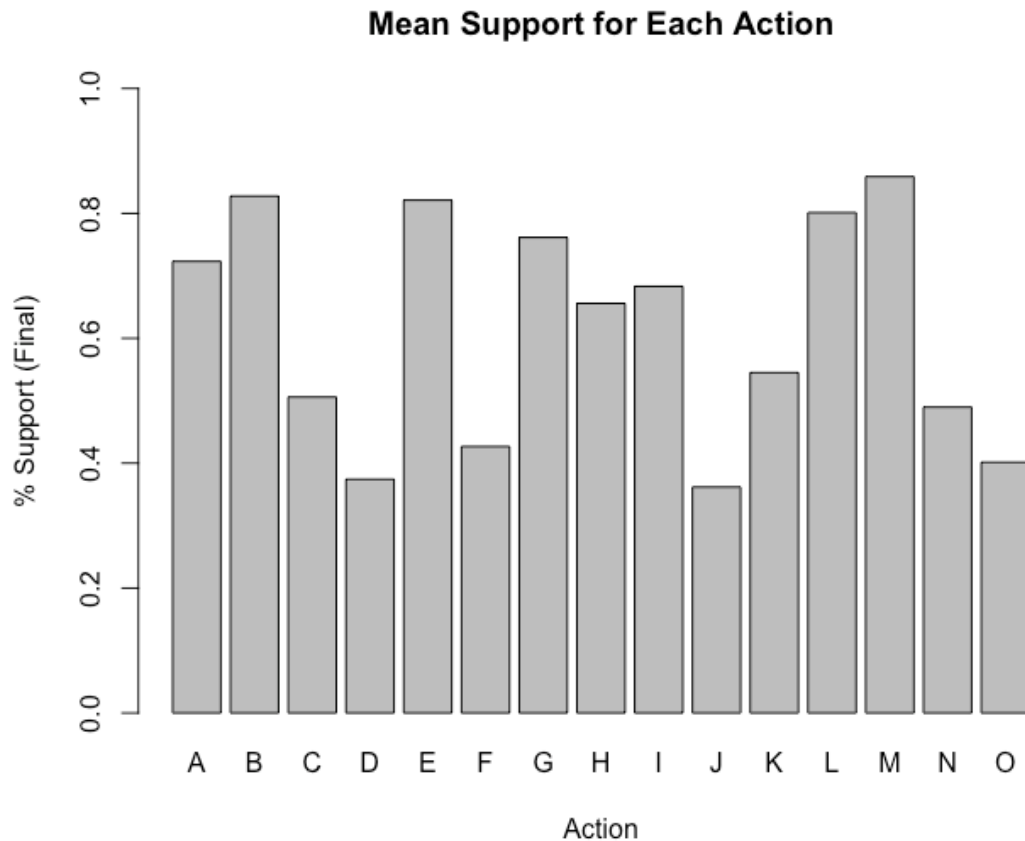


A comparison with the Initial Top 5 shows shifts in support for different actions within the deliberative groups. For instance, there was increased support for infrastructure projects to boost the economy (G), but decreased support for cutting taxes on the poor while raising them on the wealthy (K). We are quick to note that the Initial Top 5 and the Final Top 5 do not readily lend themselves to an apples-to-apples comparison. The Initial Top 5 is based on participants simply listing their top 5 policy actions out of the 15 available. The Final Top 5 is based on a more complicated measure of both group support for each action and acceptance of the



action's associated tradeoff. Additionally, all 15 actions are considered together for the ranking that produces the Initial Top 5, while actions are considered five at a time, under the three broad Options, for the evaluations that produce the Final Top 5. Because of the difference between the ways in which the Initial and Final Top 5 were measured, we would caution against definitively claiming that the differences between these sets of actions are measuring true change in attitudes. Furthermore, it is not clear what may account for these differences. It could be the result of deliberating about the issue with peers, but it could also be the result of simply having more time to mull over one's evaluation of the policy, or be the result of also evaluating a potential tradeoff of the policy.

However, we can make some comments on what broad policy Options incoming OSU students tended to prefer:

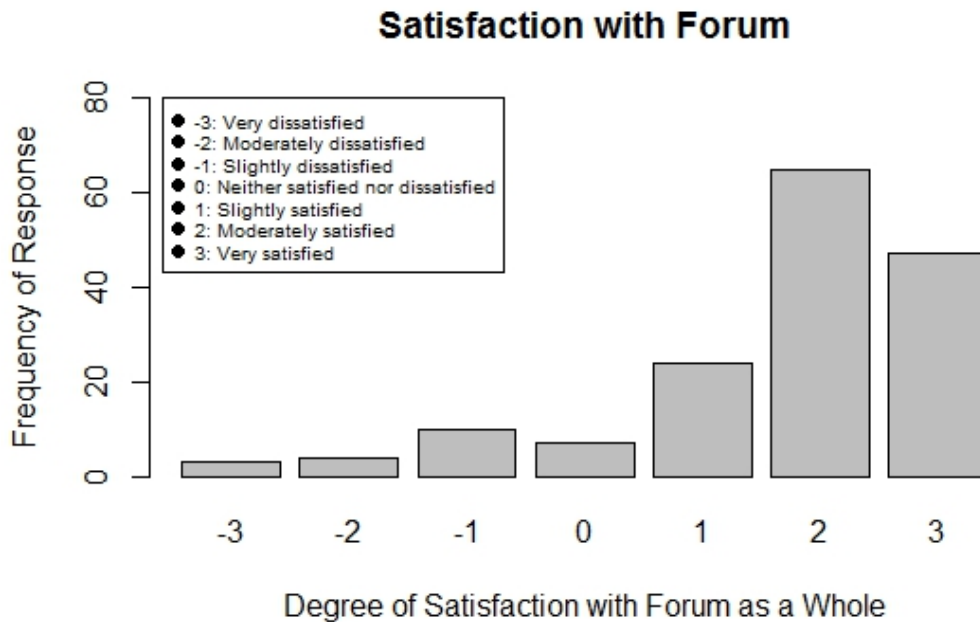


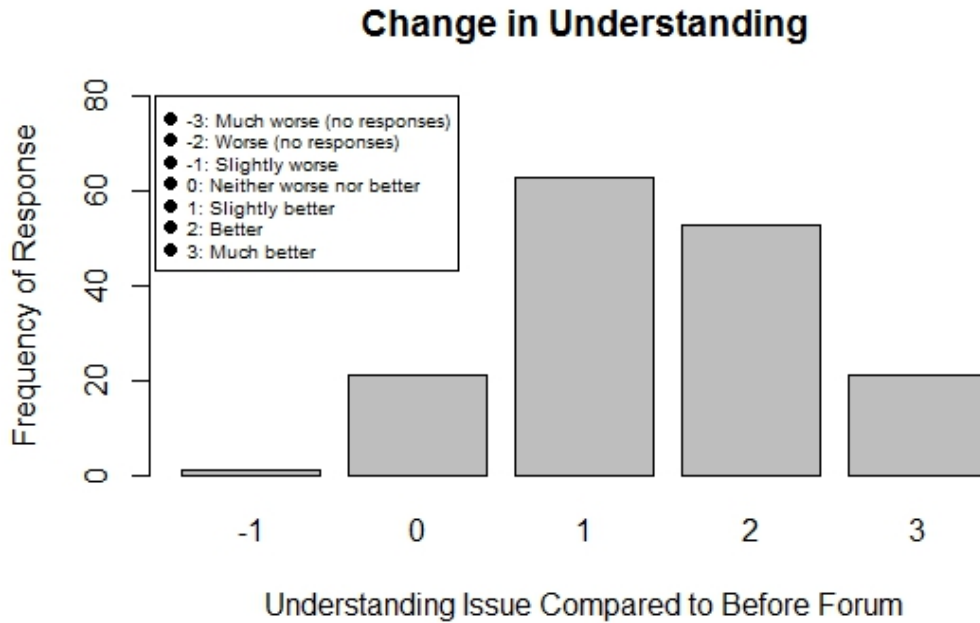
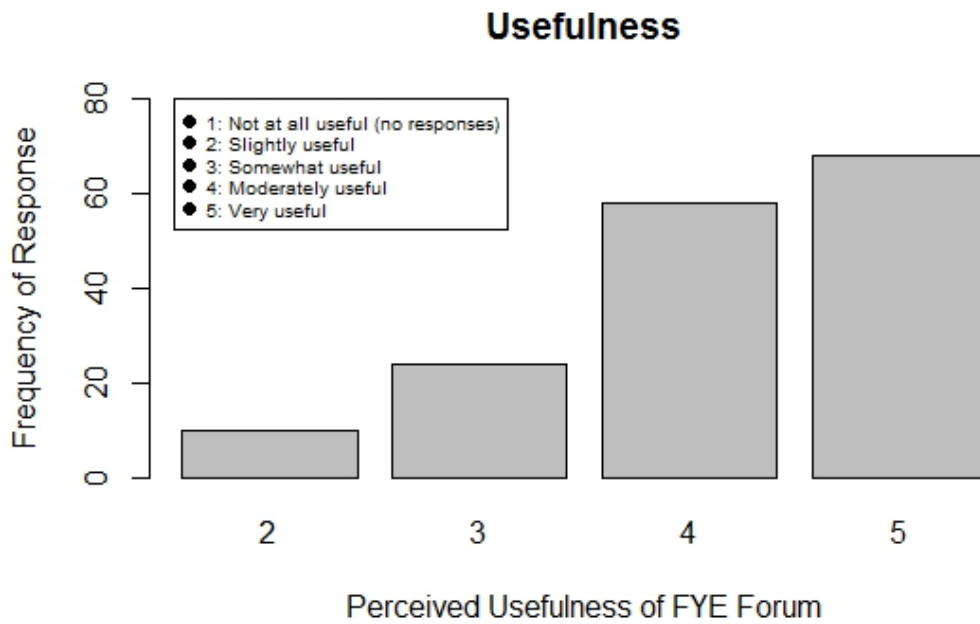
As a whole, there seems to have been much initial support for Option 3, and support for actions L and M remained strong throughout. But overall support for Option 3 also diminished as participants went through the forums, largely because support for action K dwindled. For Option 2 there was not much initial support, but support for this option increased a lot as participants went through the forum. For Option 1, there was a middling amount of initial support, and overall support for this Option stayed stagnant, though individual policies within this Option

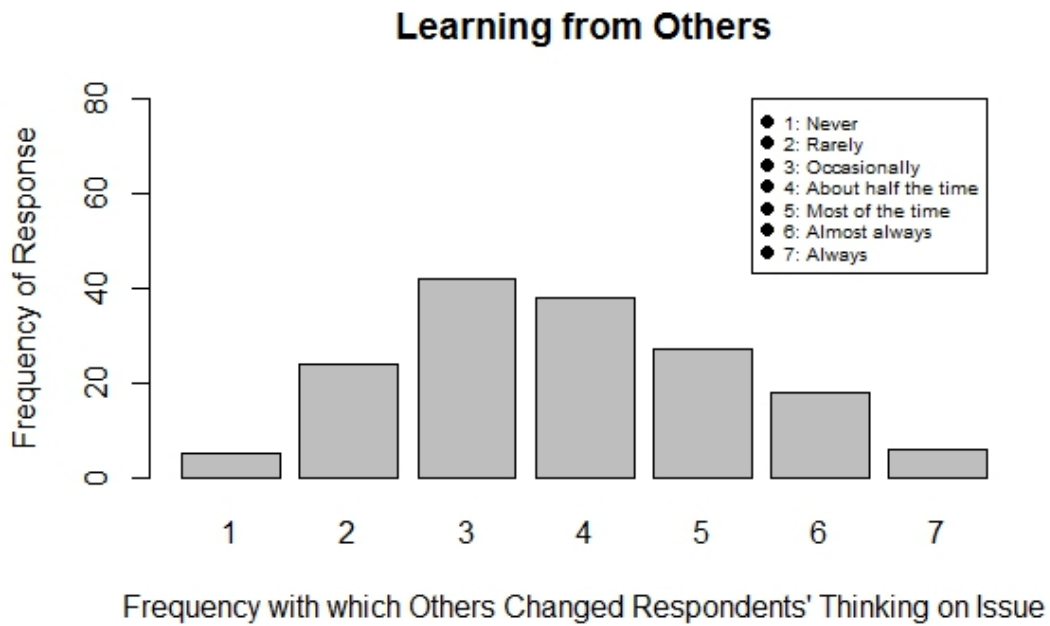
moved a lot. This results in a fairly balanced final support for each Option -- participants like some actions from each Option and do not support some actions from each Option.

### III. Do incoming Ohio State students value democratic deliberation?

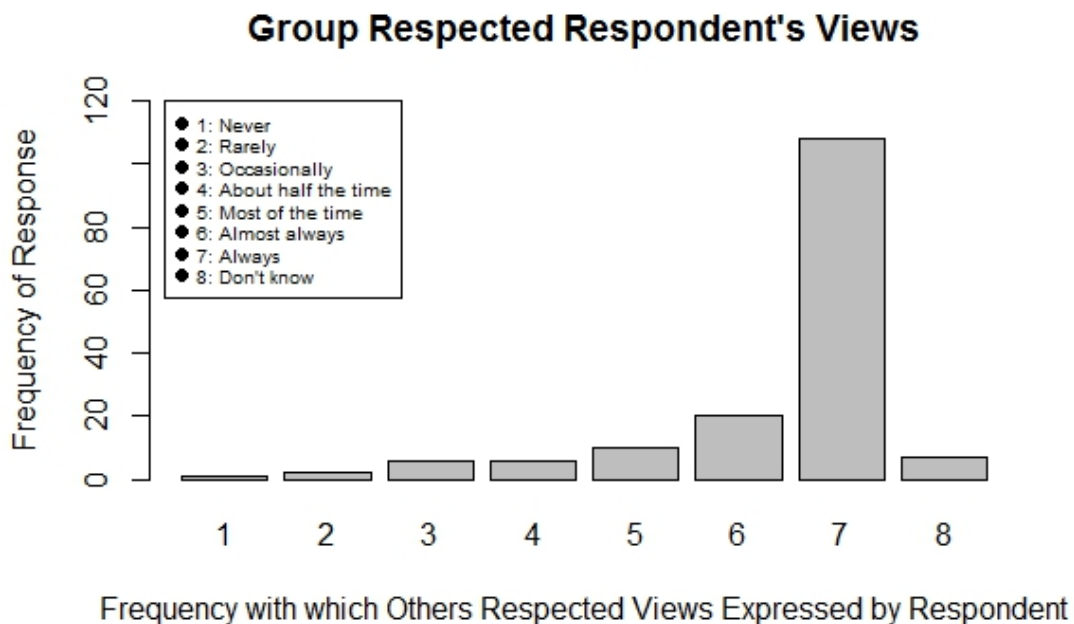
One of the clearest results from this program is that first-year students – who are often thought to be some combination of apathetic and incapable when it comes to politics – were both willing and able to engage in and learn about a complex public policy issue by talking about it with their peers. To an overwhelming degree, participants reported being satisfied with the deliberative process, more confident in their understanding of the issue they discussed, and more likely to discuss the issue in informal settings after having taken part in the forum.

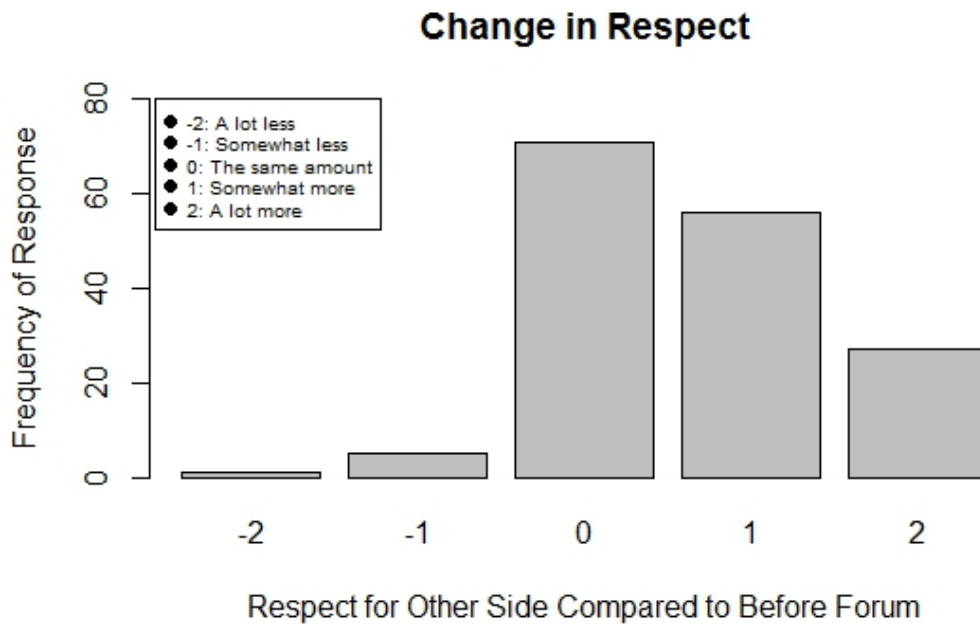






Students also reported that they felt respected by the group and that they gained respect for the opinions of those who disagreed with them as a result of the process.





From the perspective of the COMPAS program, our findings point to a heartening conclusion: **these deliberative forums generate democratic goods**. In particular, we find many students changing their views through respectful discourse rather than retreating to partisan or dogmatic stances.

This conclusion is reinforced by student comments after participating in the forum.

Moderator asked: *“Do people think their judgments have changed on the issue of economic inequality today? And if not, has anyone's thinking about others' views on economic inequality changed? In other words, even if you didn't change your mind, do you better understand where people who you disagree with are coming from?”*

Student participant responses:

1. *Some of my views changed for sure. And it sparked my ideas for solutions. I also enjoyed hearing other people's thoughts which made me question my own beliefs.*
2. *My ideas have changed based on the opinions of others. This forum has helped me to better understand many controversial issues and their (sic) risks and benefits.*
3. *I think it highlights the importance of compromise in our political system - you will never get all that you ask for.*
4. *My opinions have both changed and solidified. I think this is a constructive way to get a better feel for how other people feel about ways to universalize prosperity.*
5. *I think I've definitely been enlightened in regards to others views and ideas on this topic. It also opened my my eyes to just how difficult policy can be.*
6. *I'm a little surprised that anyone's views changed at all. Usually when I debate/discuss these issues with people everyone just gets more entrenched in their existing ideas. It was refreshing change though*



7. *It was enjoyable to see the opinions and reasoning on issues from people who come from different financial situations than I. It was definitely a learning experience!*
8. *Reading other people's opinions helped me get closer to forming my own about issues I am iffy about.*
9. *This forum made me appreciate the viewpoints that I would normally disagree with because I thought everyone was accepting of my opinions as well*
10. *I am able to respect others' views more when they are presented in a calm and logical way*

Moderator: *Has anyone's perspective or way of thinking about this issue changed at all as a result of our discussion?*

Responses:

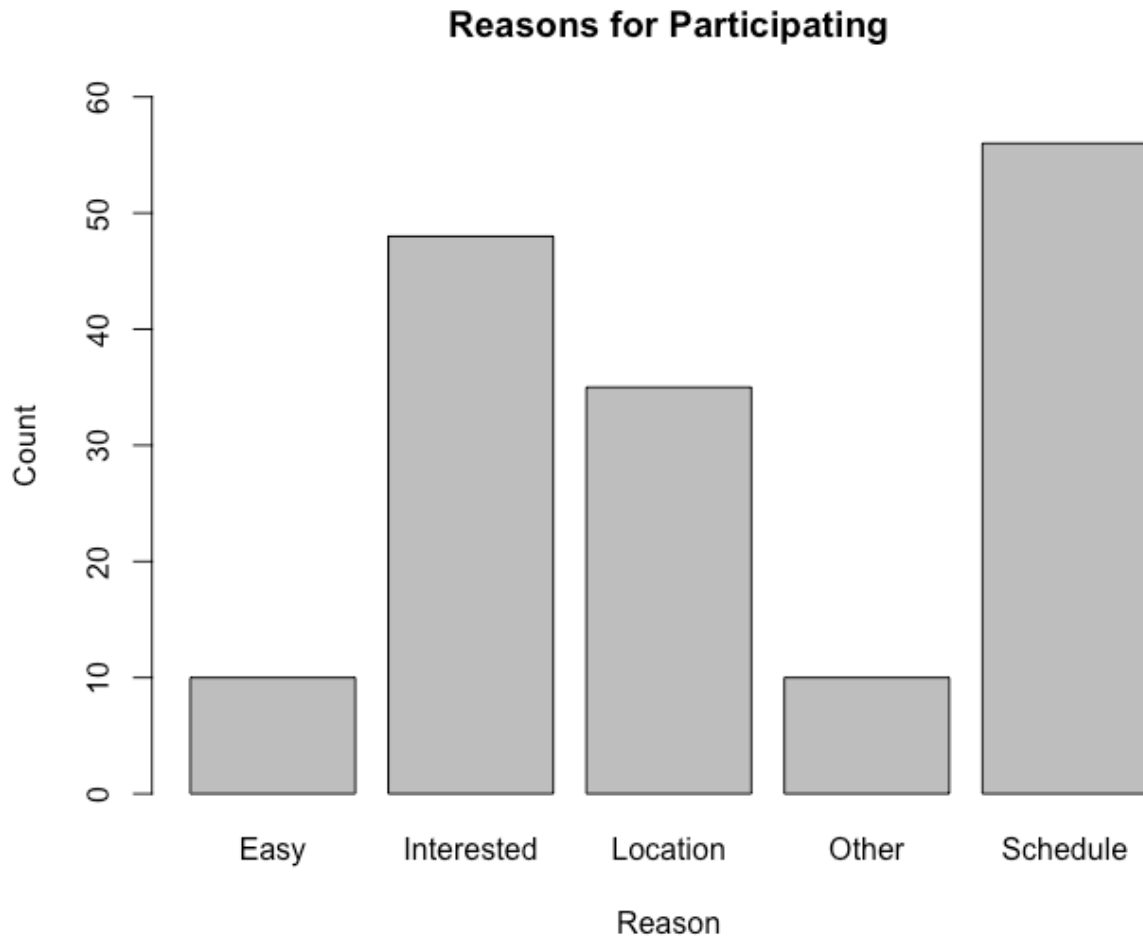
1. *My opinion on helping small businesses certainly changed. I never really put too much weight into them as a growth factor, but now I see the value (example of opinion change)*
2. *I always felt like business was more important than the employee but now I feel differently (example of opinion change)*
3. *Having to vocalize and form my ideas helped me become more sure of what it is I really thought, but I don't think they changed too much*
4. *I think it was a good way to synthesize our different views and see what policies are the most practical/beneficial.*
5. *I think this has made me realize just how difficult it really is to make concrete change in our country, but also that if we all work together we can truly make a difference.*
6. *My general perspective wasn't really changed, but this did show me how important it is to talk about issues with people who have views which may vary from your own*
7. *I was glad there's a platform to have open dialogue about these issues without fighting*
8. *I liked comparing what I originally thought to other's thoughts. Sometimes it made me change my opinion and sometimes it gave me more reasoning for my original opinion*

#### **IV. Considering objections**

In drawing these conclusions, we checked against two possible objections: first, that the students who participated in the forum were already more interested in politics, and were therefore more likely to report satisfaction with a political discussion; second, that the deliberative process reinforces existing inequalities and power dynamics along dimensions of sex and race.

With respect to the first anticipated objection, we find that a majority of participants did not choose our forum from the array of First Year Experience events because they were interested in politics. A solid plurality of our participants chose our deliberative forums because the time and location (wherever they could find a working WiFi connection) were convenient for them, while roughly one third indicated that their primary reason for attending was interest in the topic of discussion:





With respect to the second objection, we tested for differences in participation – measured by word counts – for participants by various demographic groups. While we do find that white male participants, on average, contributed more words to the discussion than their non-white/non-male counterparts, the bulk of this difference can be attributed to the language barrier (and, we would guess, differences in typing proficiency) faced by international students. When only considering word counts among participants for whom English is their primary language, differences across race and gender are no longer statistically significant.

## V. Looking ahead

Encouraged by these results, we hope to use the Common Ground for Action platform both to assess student opinion on a range of policy issues at the same time that we encourage them to develop the deliberative skills that, arguably, must be part of Ohio State’s commitment to “education for citizenship.”

