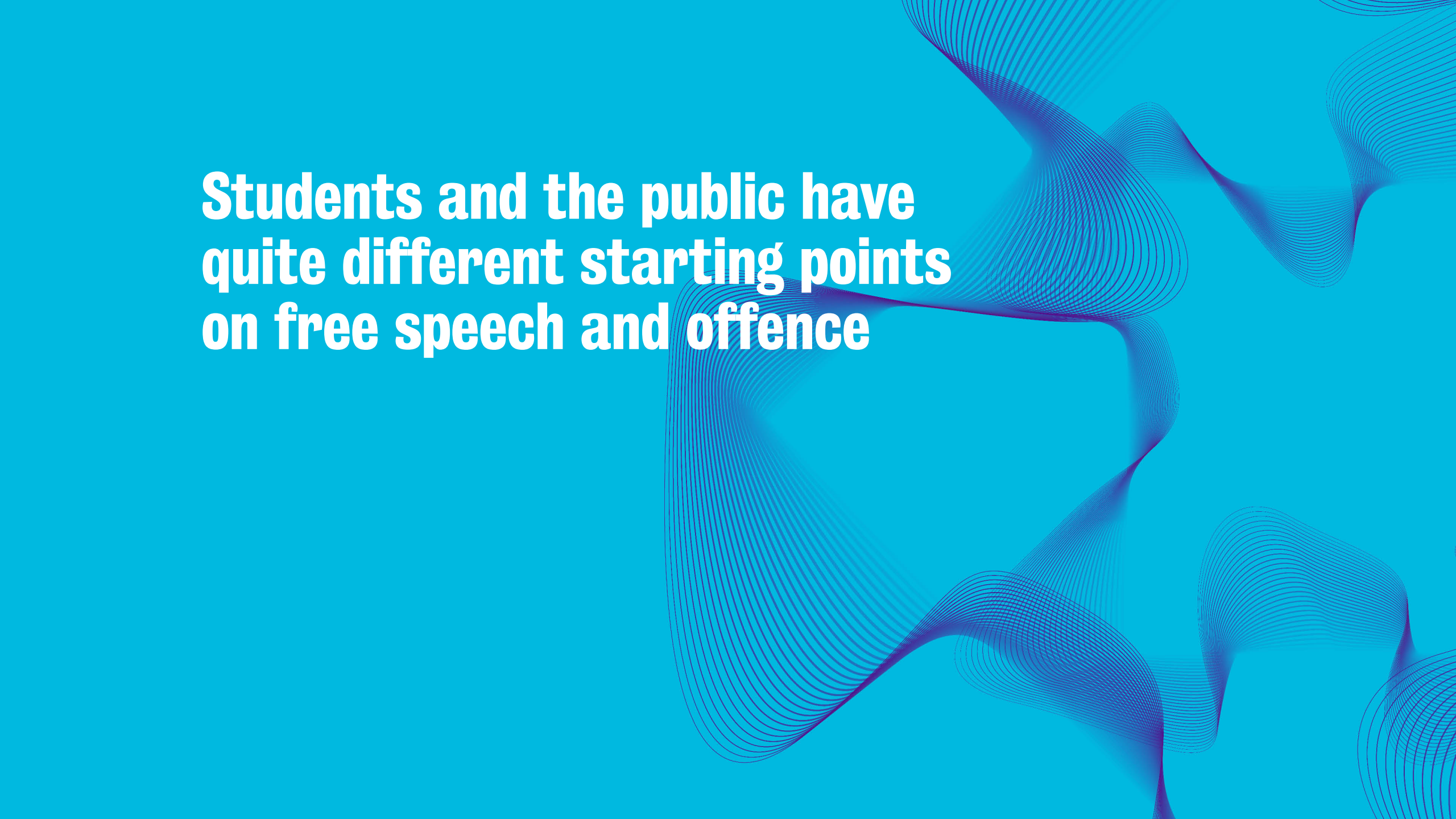


The state of free speech in UK universities: what students and the public think

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**Students and the public have
quite different starting points
on free speech and offence**

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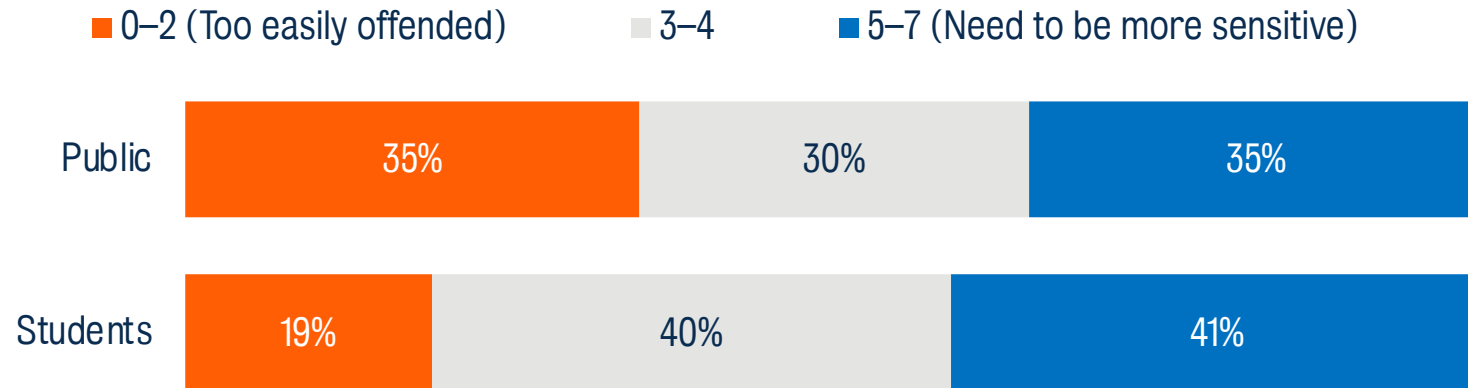
Students are less likely than the general public to say people are too easily offended...

The general public are evenly split on whether people are too easily offended (35%) or whether we should be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds (35%), with around a third holding each view.

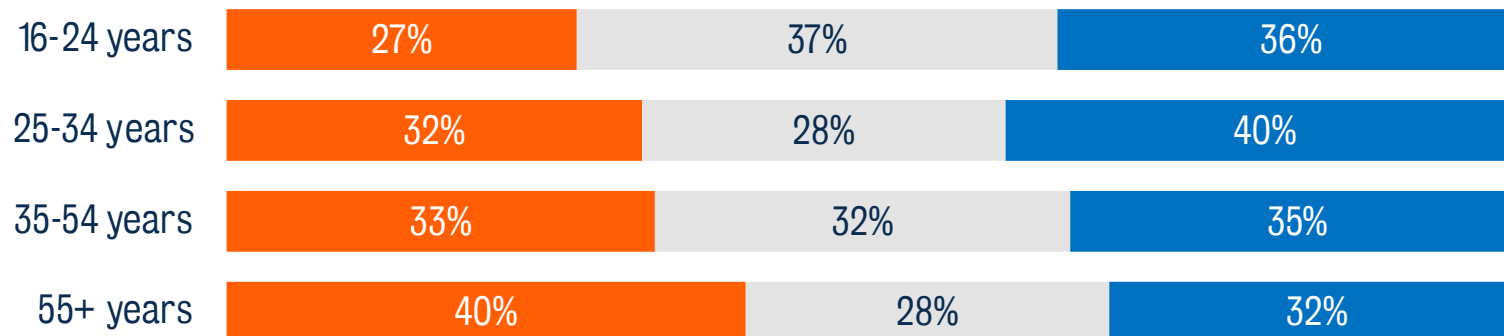
By contrast, there is a clearer divide among university students, who are twice as likely to feel we should be more sensitive (41%) than that people take offence too easily (19%). However, a higher proportion of students (40%) than the general public (30%) take a view that is somewhere in the middle of these positions.

And while young people in general are less likely to say people are too easily offended, students (19%) are even less likely than the youngest age group surveyed among the general public (27%) to feel that people are too easily offended.

Some people think that the way people talk needs to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that many people are just too easily offended. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



Where the general public place themselves on the scale, by age

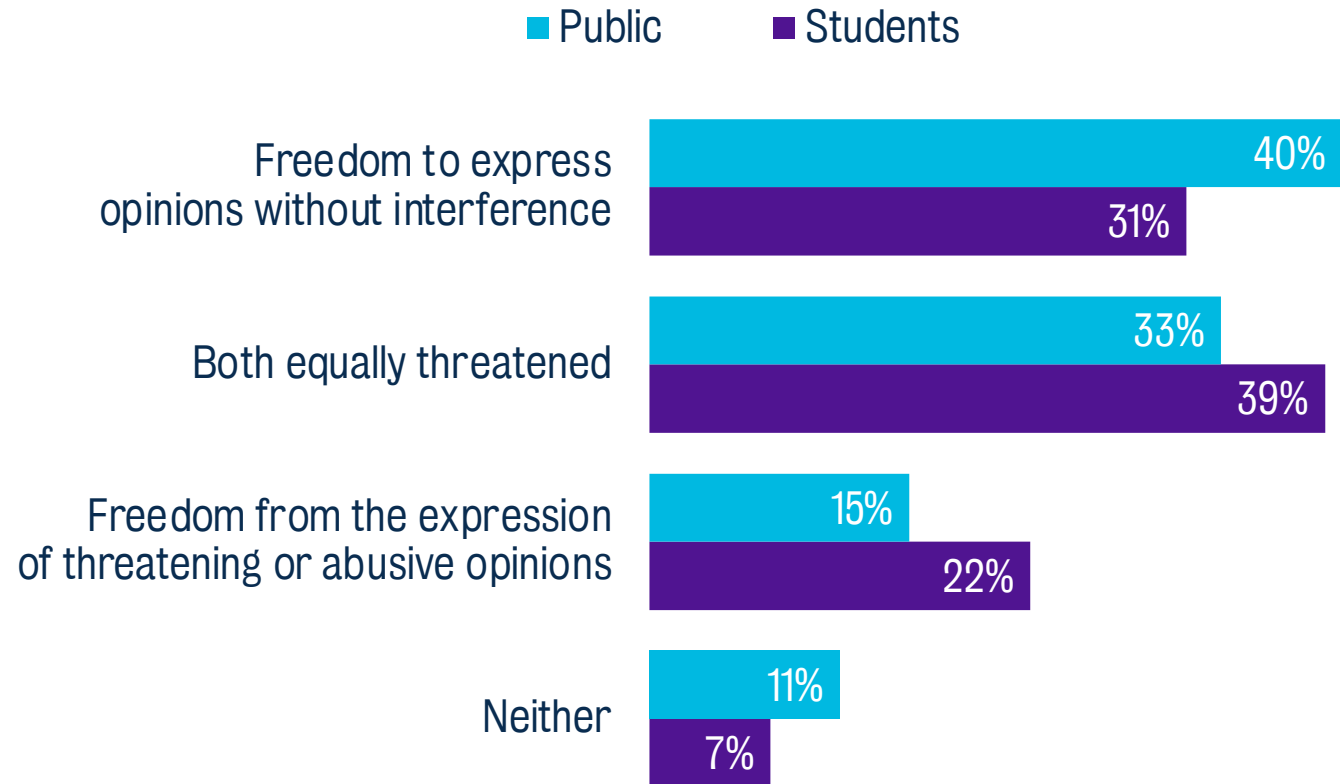


...though there is less difference in views on whether free speech or freedom from threat and abuse is most at risk in the UK today

The general public (40%) are somewhat more likely than students (31%) to feel that the freedom to express opinions without interference is most threatened in the UK today, while students are more likely to think the freedom from threatening or abusive opinions is most in danger (22% vs 15%).

However, the most common belief among students is that both freedoms are equally threatened, with 39% holding this view.

This question asks about the expression of peoples opinions, for example through speech, online, in the media and on social media. Generally speaking, which of these two freedoms, if either, do you think is the most threatened in the UK today?

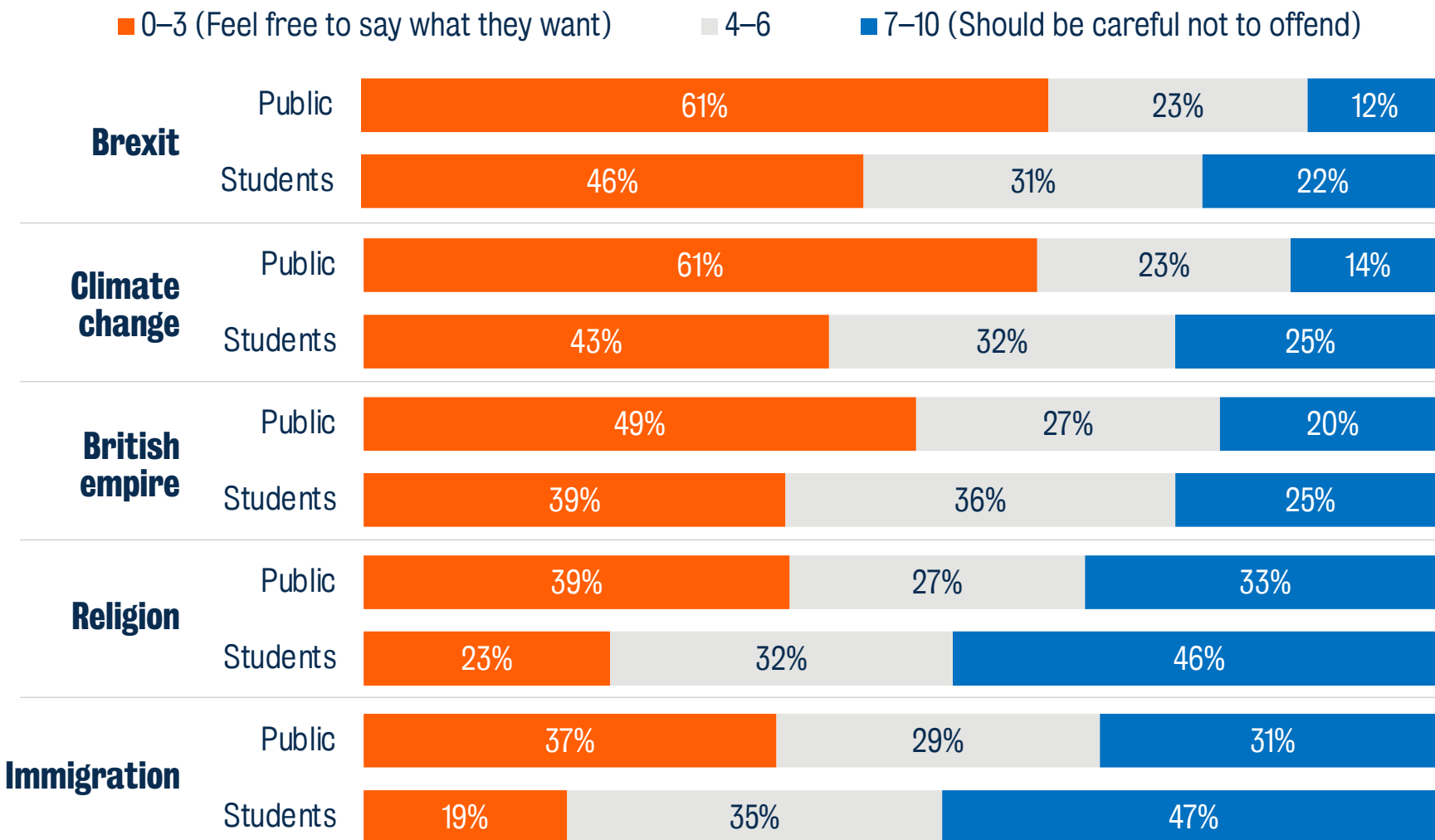


There are some big differences in views when it comes to causing offence on specific issues

When it comes to issues that can sometimes be controversial, students are much less likely than the public as a whole to think people should feel free to say what they want about them.

For example, 46% of students think people should be able to speak their minds on Brexit, compared with 61% of the public who say the same. And 22% of students believe people should be careful not to offend others on this issue, while 12% of the public overall feel this way.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to offend others when talking about these issues?

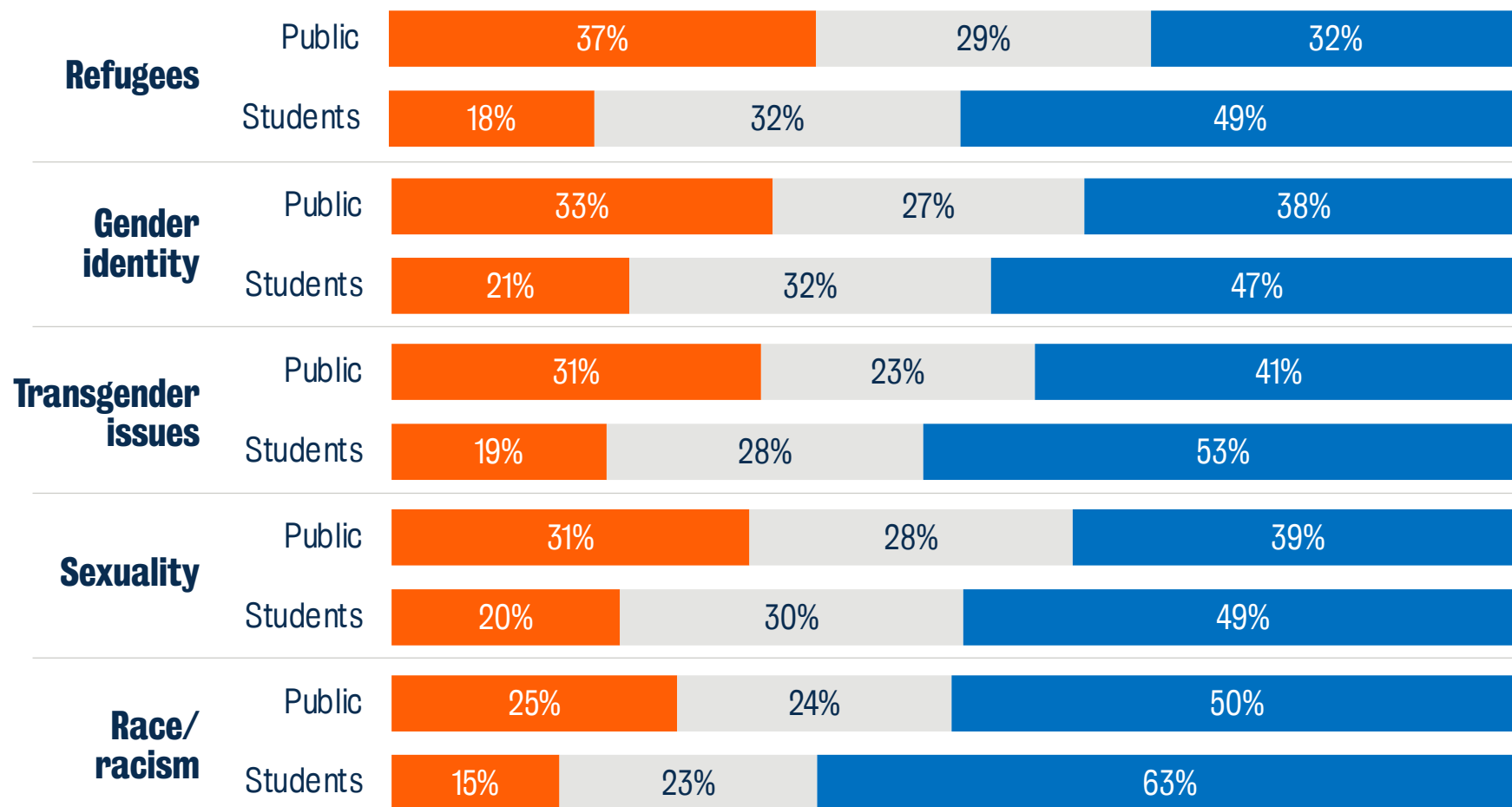


These differences extend to views on topics such as refugees, gender identity and trans issues

It's a similar story on other topics, including those that are often seen as part of a "culture war" in the UK: 31% of the public think people should feel free to say what they want on transgender issues, compared with 19% of students. Correspondingly, students are more likely to think we should be careful not to offend others when discussing such issues (53% vs 41%).

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to offend others when talking about these issues?

■ 0–3 (Feel free to say what they want) ■ 4–6 ■ 7–10 (Should be careful not to offend)

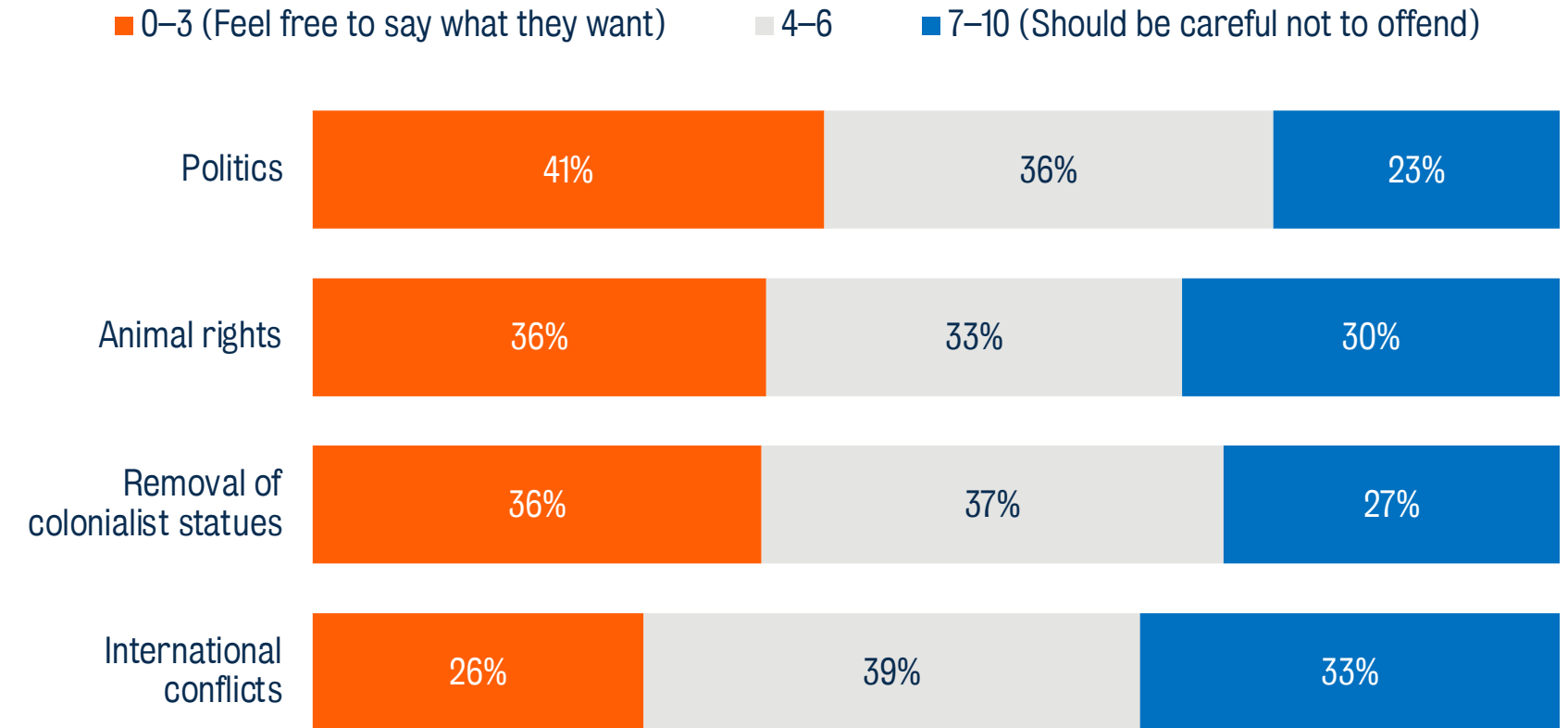


Students are more comfortable with people saying what they want on politics than on international conflicts

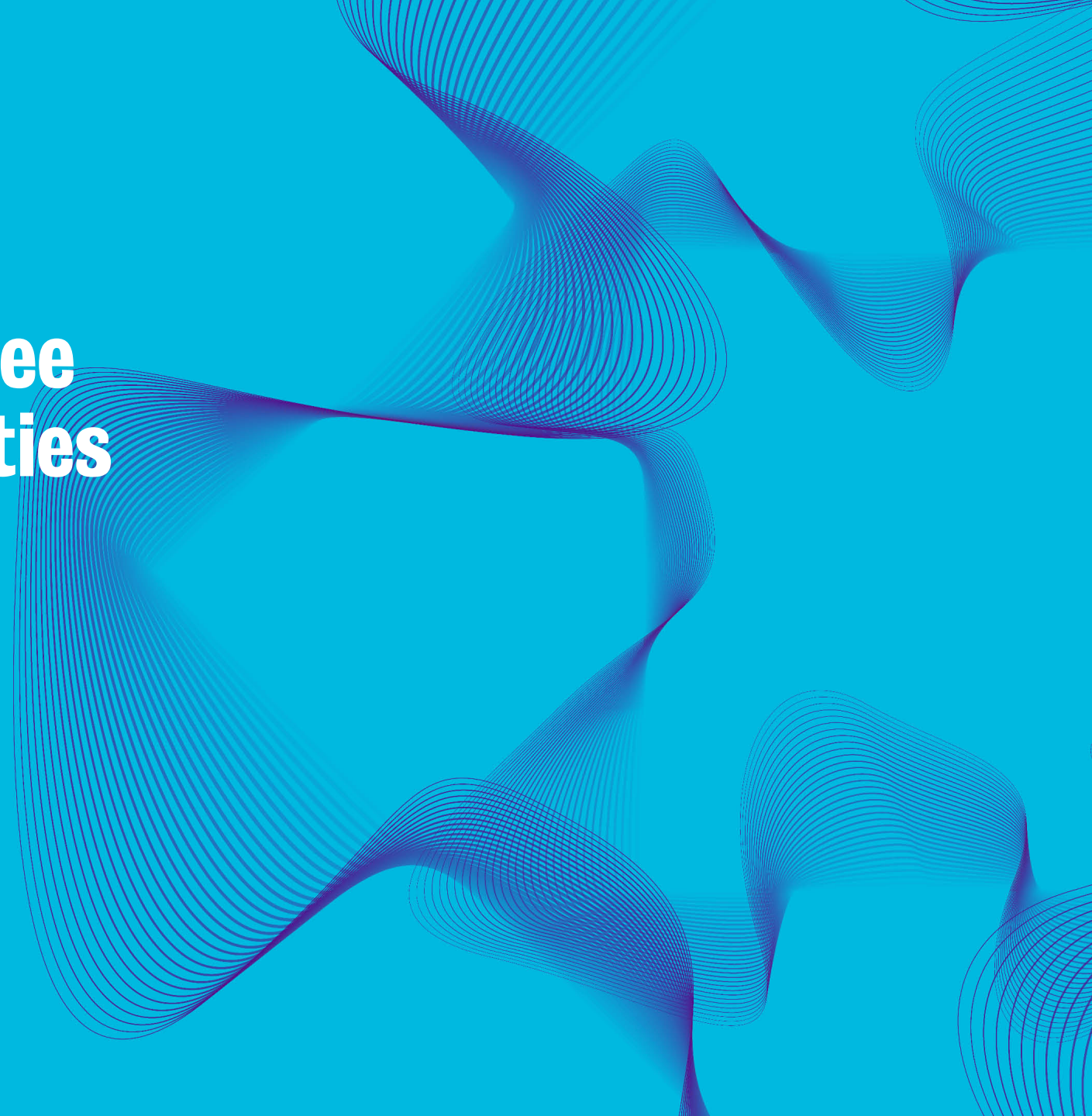
On politics, animal rights and the removal of colonialist statues, students are more likely to think people should feel free to say what they want, rather than being careful not to offend – while the reverse is true when it comes to international conflicts. But there is not always a clear view on a particular topic, with notable proportions taking a more middle-ground position.

For example, while 36% think people should be able to say what they want about the removal of colonialist statues, virtually the same proportion (37%) hold a view somewhere in between this and the opposing position of believing people should be careful not to offend, which is held by 27%.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to offend others when talking about these issues?



Overall views of free speech in universities



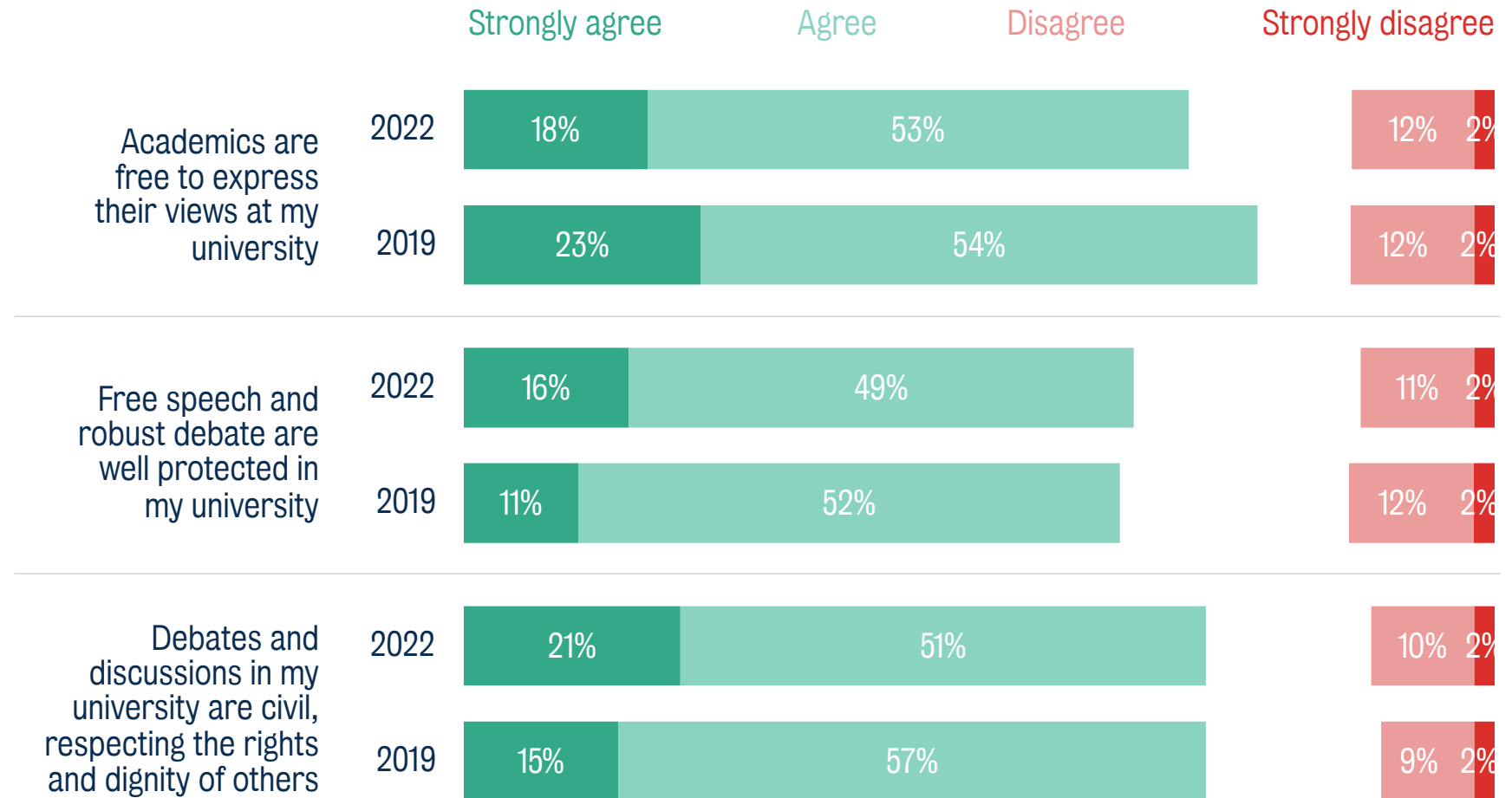
There is strong agreement among students that free speech, robust debate and academic freedom are protected in their universities

70% of students agree that academics are free to express their views at their university – down slightly from 77% in 2019.

At the same time, 65% now say free speech and robust debate are protected at their institution, and 73% report that debates and discussions are conducted in a civil way. Both figures are largely unchanged from three years ago.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...



But nonetheless, growing minorities think freedoms are under threat in their universities...

34% of students now say free speech is very or fairly threatened in their university – up from 23% in 2019.

Perceptions that other freedoms are under threat have also become more widespread, but despite this, a majority of students still feel these liberties are not in danger. For example, 59% still think free speech is either not very threatened or not threatened at all.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

How threatened, if at all, do you think each of the following freedoms are in your university today?



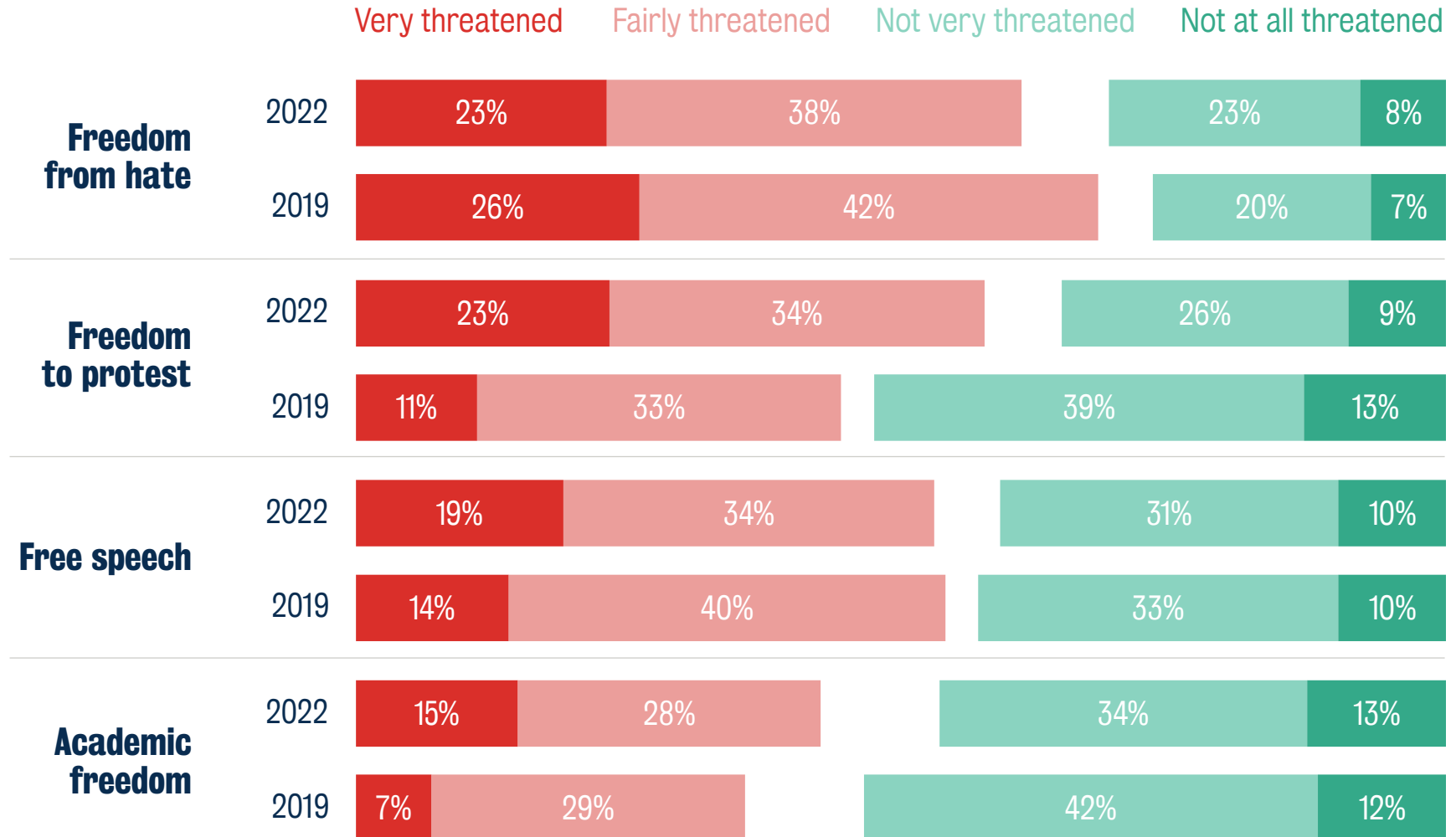
...even if students still think these freedoms are more threatened in wider society

While 34% of students think free speech is under threat at their institution, 53% think it is under threat in UK society as a whole.

And there has been a notable increase in the proportion of students who feel the freedom to protest is in danger: 45% thought this freedom was threatened in society in 2019, but this has since risen to 57% in 2022.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

How threatened, if at all, do you think each of the following freedoms are in UK society as a whole today?

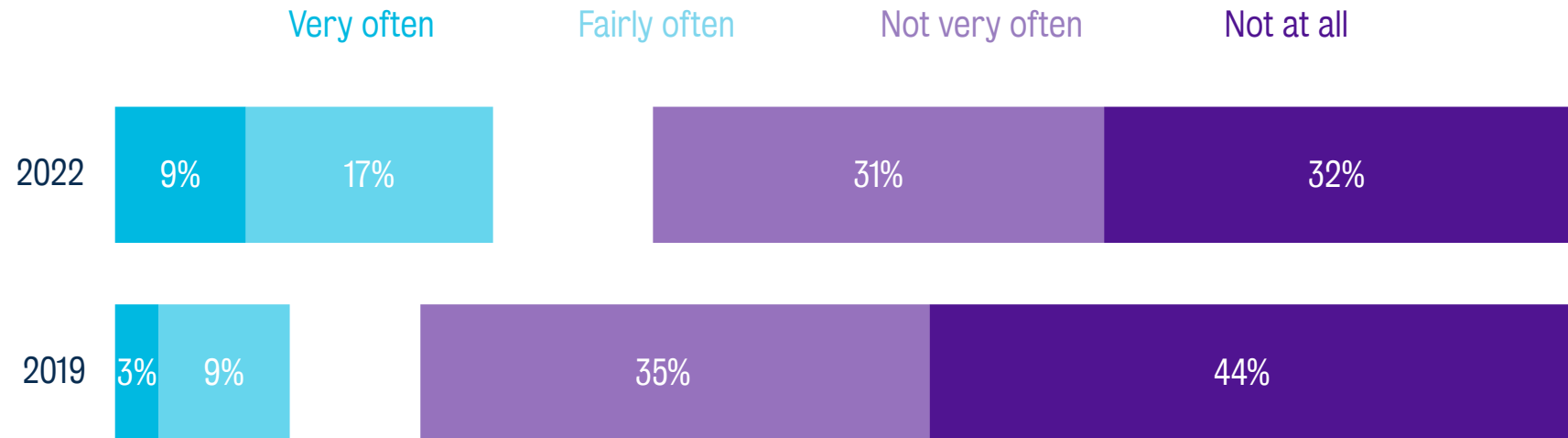


But there has been a large increase in the minority who say they've heard of free speech being inhibited at their university

25% of students now say they very or fairly often hear of incidents at their university where free speech has been inhibited – double the 12% who said the same in 2019.

However, a clear majority of 64% say they don't hear about such incidents very often, or haven't heard of them taking place at all.

How often, if at all, have you heard about incidents where free speech has been inhibited in your university?



Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

Large proportions of students say some people are prevented from saying things because others may find them offensive, similar to in the US – though the UK public are even more likely to agree

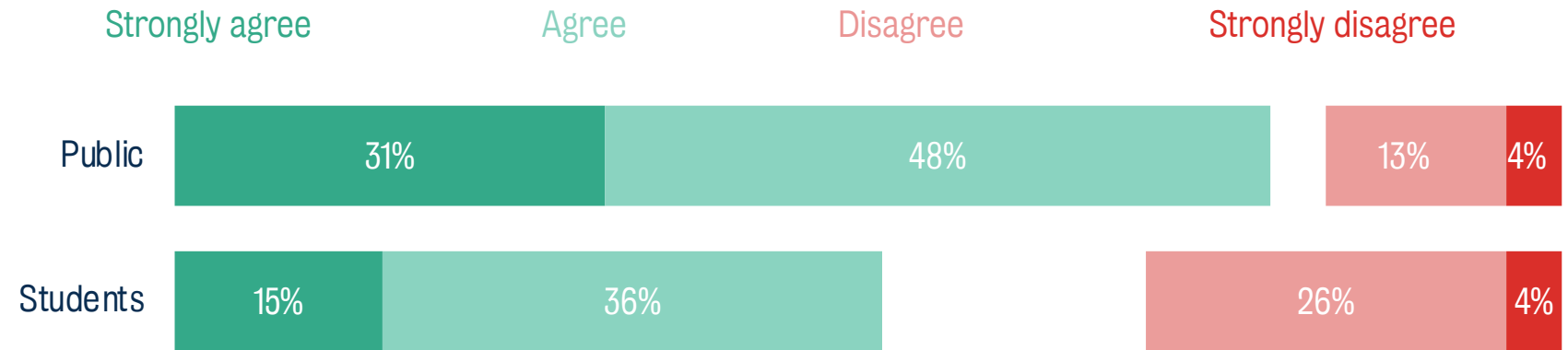
51% of students think the climate at their university prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive, while 30% disagree that this is the case.

Comparison with a previous survey of students in the US suggests that the proportion in both countries who feel there is a problem with the climate at their institution is broadly similar.

But while this negative perception of universities exists, perceptions of the situation in wider society are far worse – hence 80% of the UK public overall think that the climate in UK society inhibits some people from speaking their minds.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **The climate at my university / in UK society prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive**



Comparison with perceptions at US universities

In 2017 Gallup asked a similar question to university students in the US. It is possible to compare the results with those from this latest UK survey by rebasing the UK figures to account for the fact that Gallup did not include a “don’t know” option. Doing so suggests that levels of agreement are very similar in both countries:

US students (2017): 61% agree

UK students (2022): 63% agree

UK public base: 2,293 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 26-28 Aug 2022. UK student base: 1,537 current UK undergraduates, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022. US student base: 3,014 US college students aged 18-24, interviewed 1 Nov-10 December 2017, taken from a [Gallup Survey conducted for the Knight Foundation](#). Don’t knows have been removed from UK public and student figures, and remaining figures rebased.

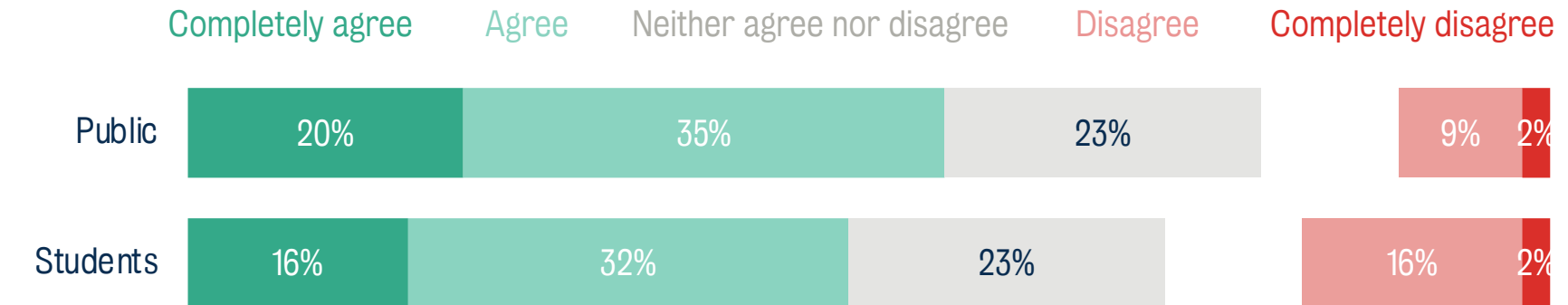
Half of students think universities are becoming less tolerant – similar to the public's perception

49% of students and 56% of the public overall believe universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints, with only small minorities disagreeing with this view.

The belief that ideological tolerance is declining among higher education institutions is much more common among students who see themselves as Leave supporters (78%) than Remain supporters (43%), and among those who say they'd vote Conservative (65%) rather than Labour (37%).

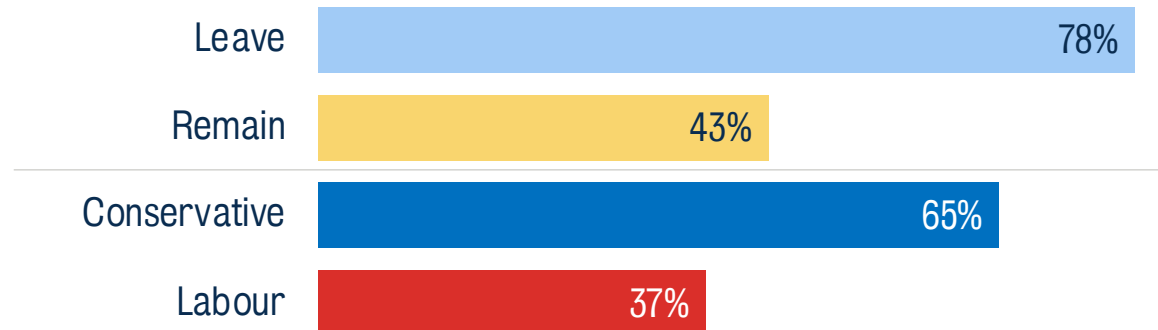
Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements... Universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints



Public base: 2,931 UK adults aged 16+, interviewed 13-19 Jan 2022. Student base: 1,537 current UK undergraduates, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022

% of students who completely agree/agree, by Brexit and party political preference



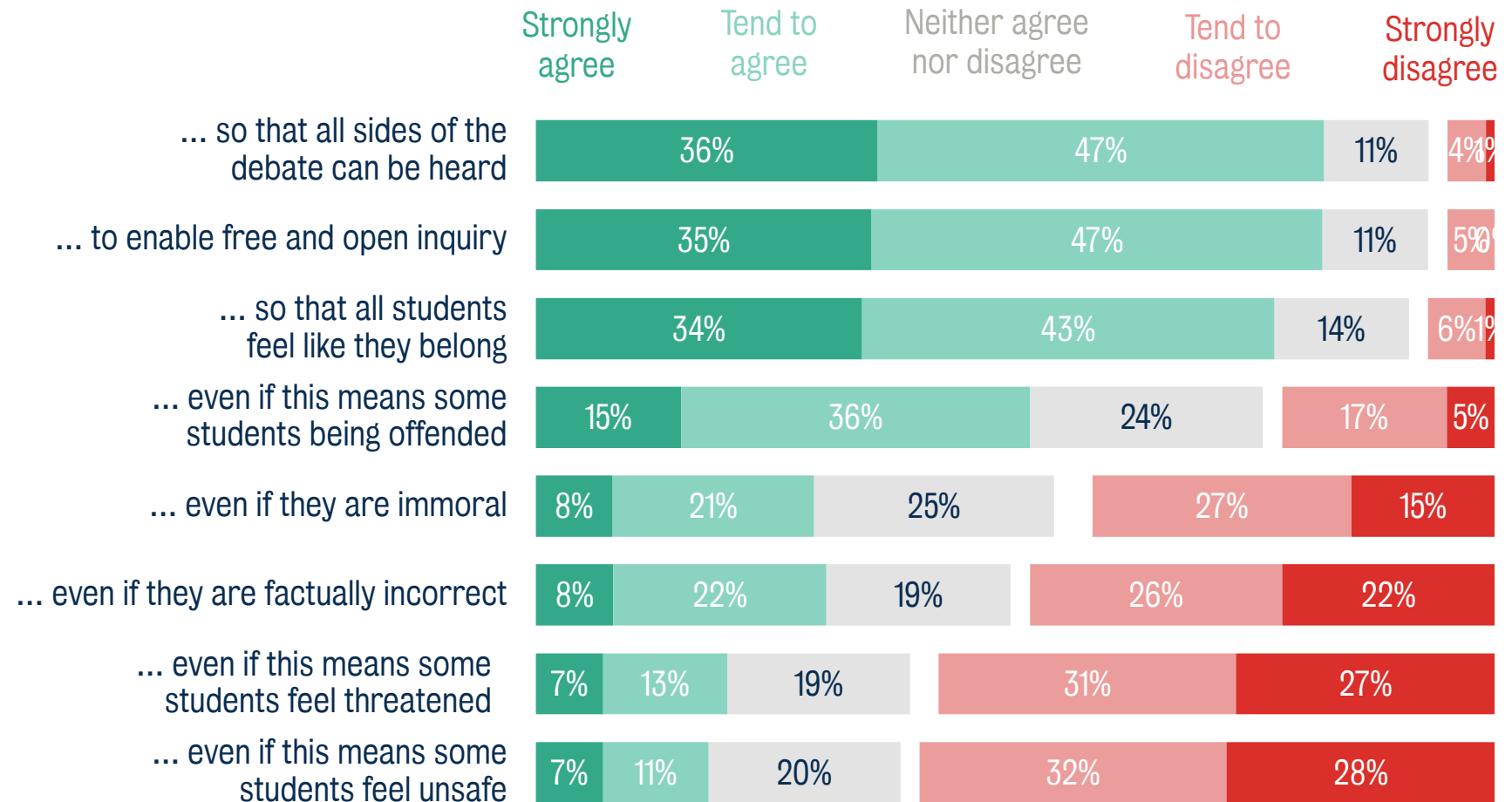
Bases: current UK undergraduates who support the Conservative party (133 – note small base size) or Labour party (487), and current UK undergraduates who identify as a Remainer (880) or Leaver (293), interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022

Support for allowing all ideas to be expressed is context-specific – and where students draw the line is important, with their priorities mainly being safety and protecting against threats, rather than concerns about offence

Students are twice as likely to agree (51%) than disagree (22%) that it's important for universities to allow for all ideas and opinions to be expressed, even if this means some students being offended. And around eight in 10 think this principle is important to enable free and open inquiry and so that all sides of a debate can be heard.

But most students disagree with allowing all ideas and opinions to be expressed if it will mean some students feel unsafe (60%) or threatened (58%).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements... It is important for universities to allow for all ideas and opinions to be expressed...



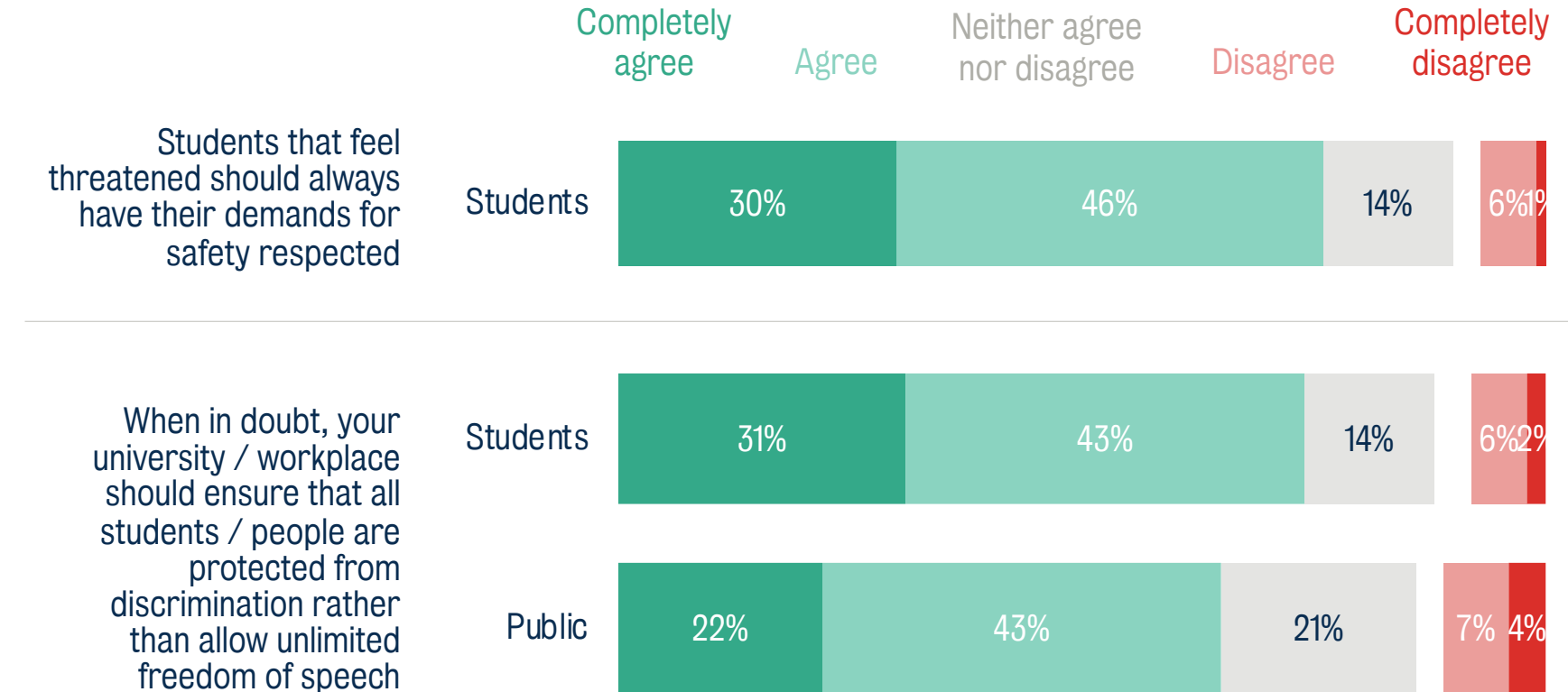
There is a strong demand among students that safety should *always* be respected, and that avoiding discrimination should be a priority

Three in four students (76%) agree that students who feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected, while another three in four (74%) feel that protecting students from discrimination should take precedence over allowing unlimited free speech.

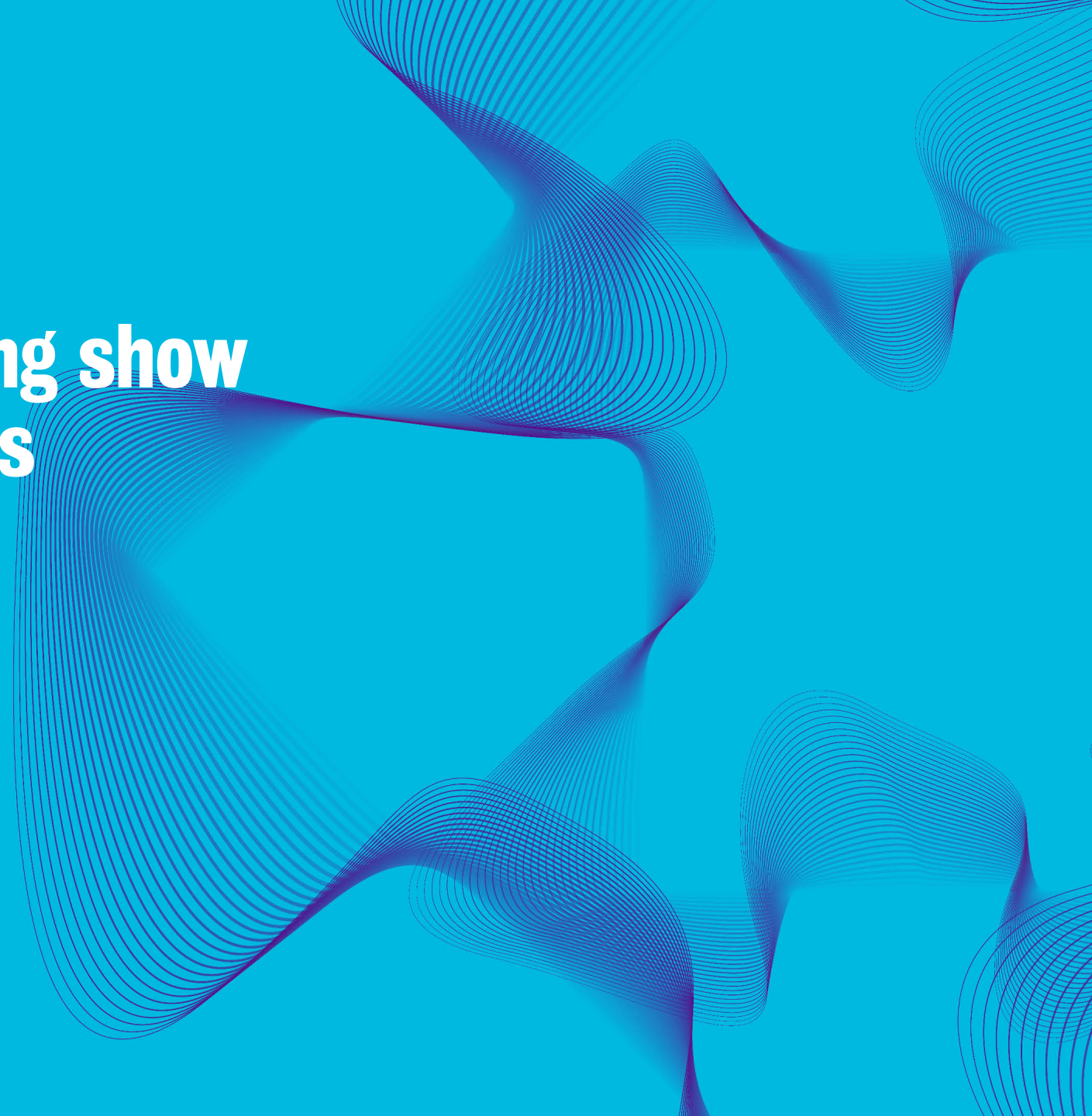
The public take a similar stance, with two-thirds (66%) believing that preventing discrimination in their workplace should be the priority over allowing unfettered free speech. Only one in 10 (10%) disagree with this view.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements...



**Events and teaching show
increasing tensions**



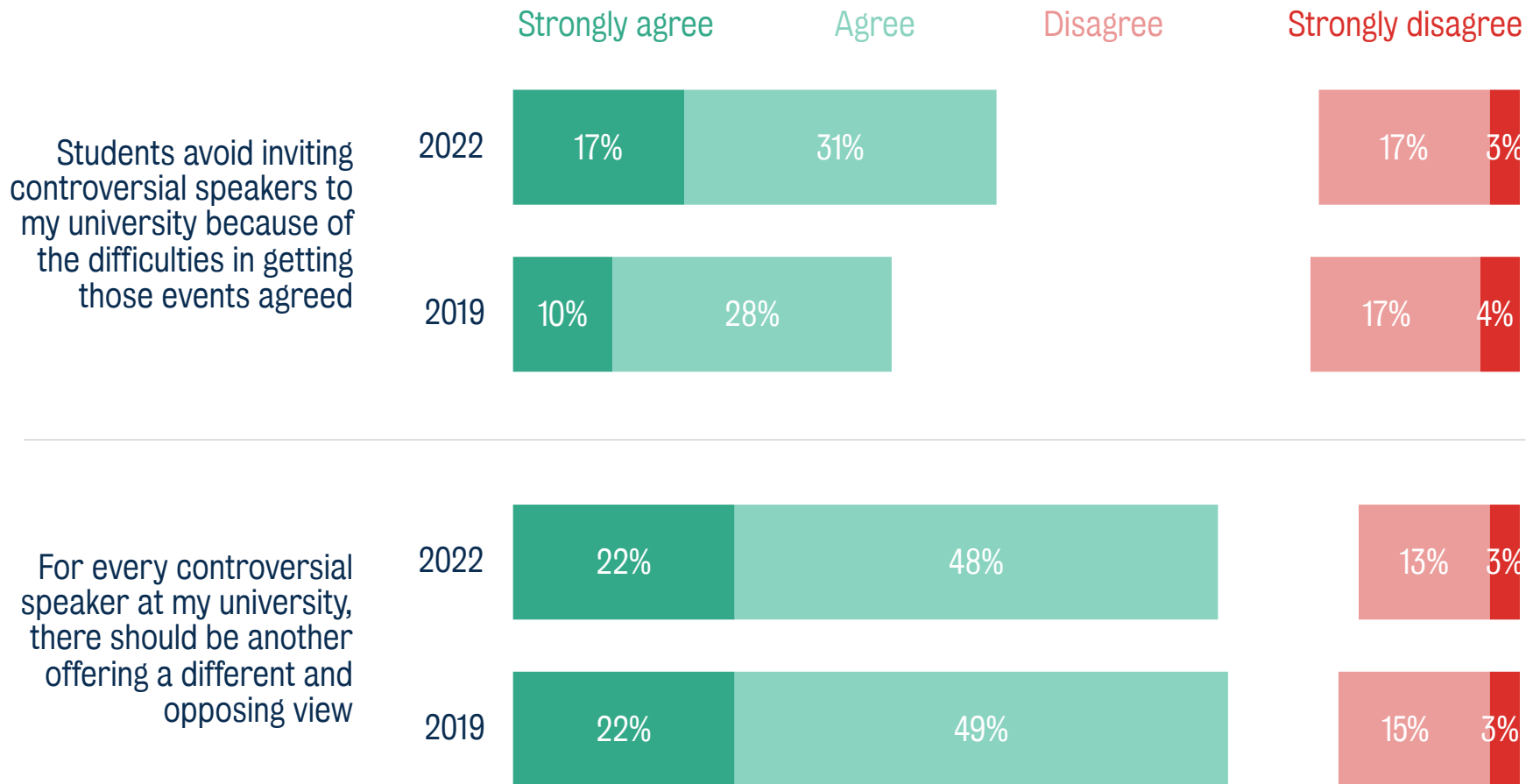
Students increasingly report that controversial speakers are being avoided at their university

In 2019, 37% of students said that students avoided inviting controversial speakers to their university because of the difficulties involved in getting those events agreed – but this has now risen to 48%.

There is virtually no change in opinions on whether controversial speakers should be balanced out by someone with the opposing point of view, with 70% of students supportive of this measure.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...



Students have quite different views from the public on banning speakers who may cause offence and firing academics

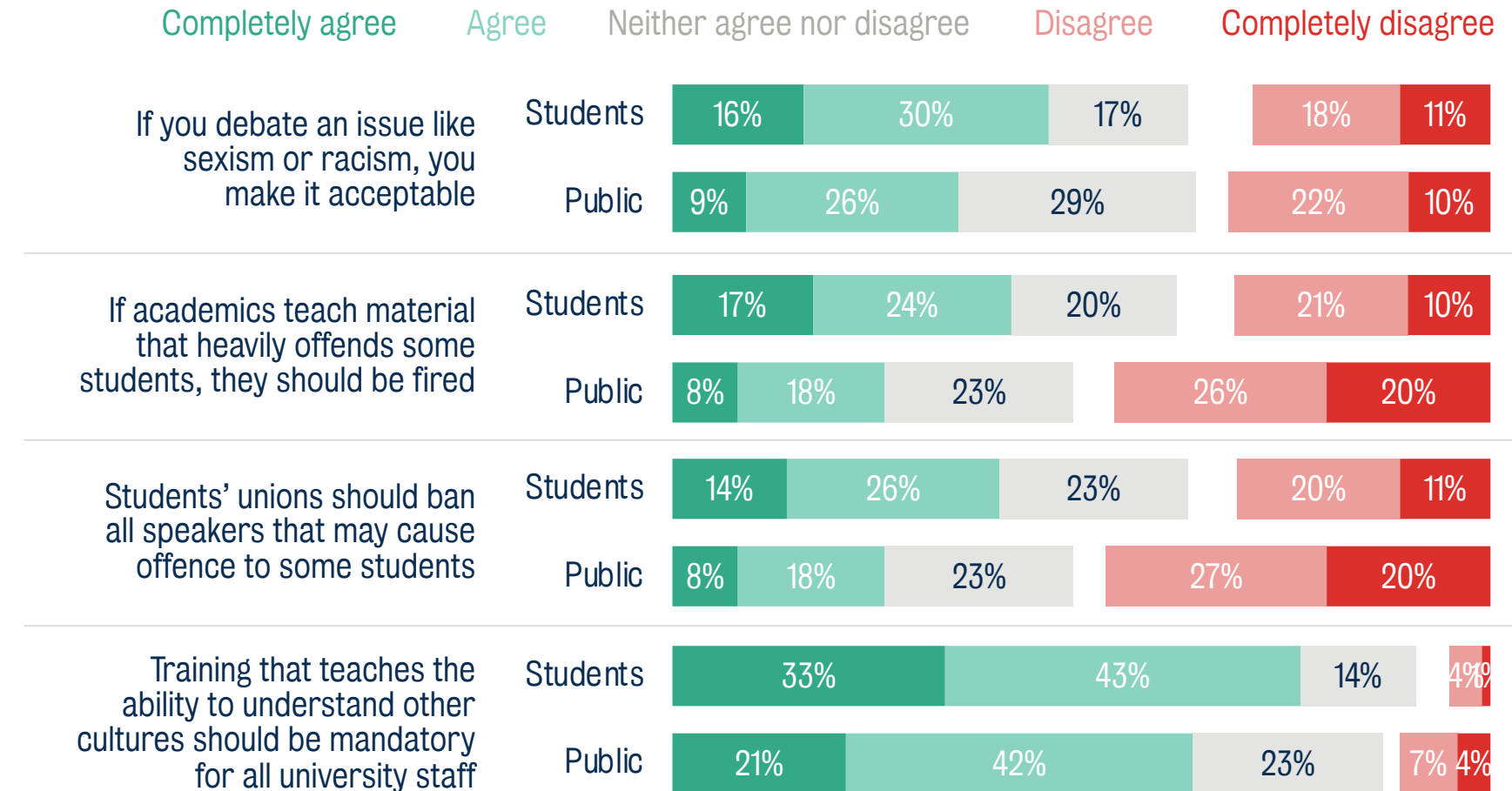
35% of the public believe that if you debate an issue like sexism or racism you make it acceptable – but this rises to 46% among students.

Similarly, 41% of students agree that academics who teach material that offends some students should be fired, compared with 25% who feel this way among the public overall.

And there is greater agreement among students (39%) than the public (26%) that students' unions should ban all speakers that may cause offence.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

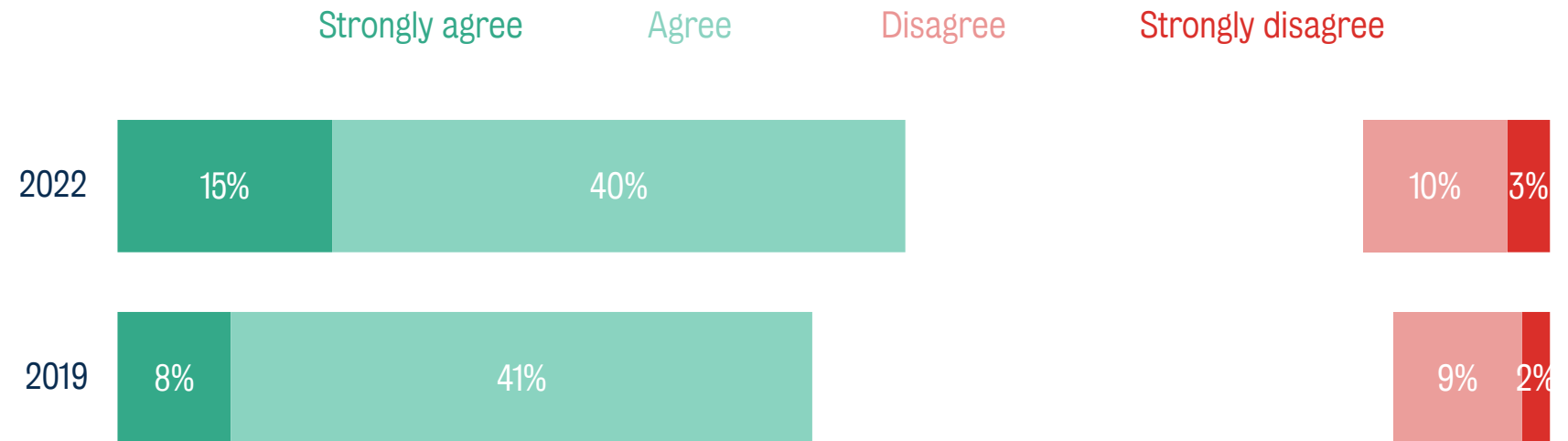
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements...



Although universities are seen to be doing (increasingly) well in managing protests

55% of students say their university manages student protests fairly – up from 48% in 2019. And only 12% now disagree with this view, while 32% say they don't know.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your own experience at your university? **My university manages student protests fairly**



**Individual experiences of free
speech issues are varied –
and depend on context**

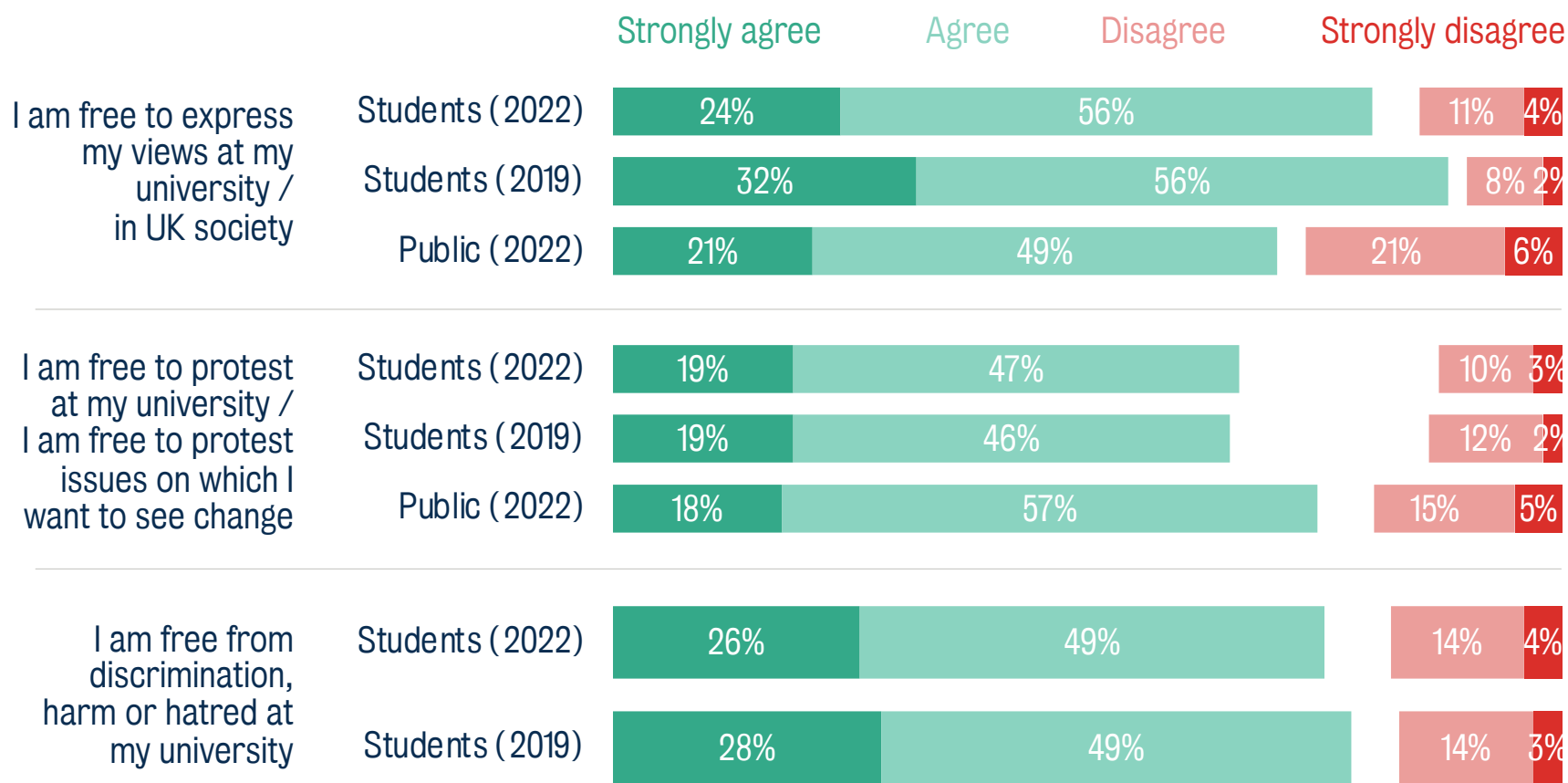
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At a more personal level, large majorities feel free to express their views and protest, and feel free from harm

80% of students now say they're free to express their views at their university, which is down from 88% in 2019. It is, however, higher than the 70% of the general public who say they are free to do so in UK society. And around three-quarters of students say they are free from discrimination, harm or hatred.

But 74% of the public say they feel free to protest issues on which they want to see change – higher than the 66% of students who say they are free to protest at their university.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your own experience at your university?

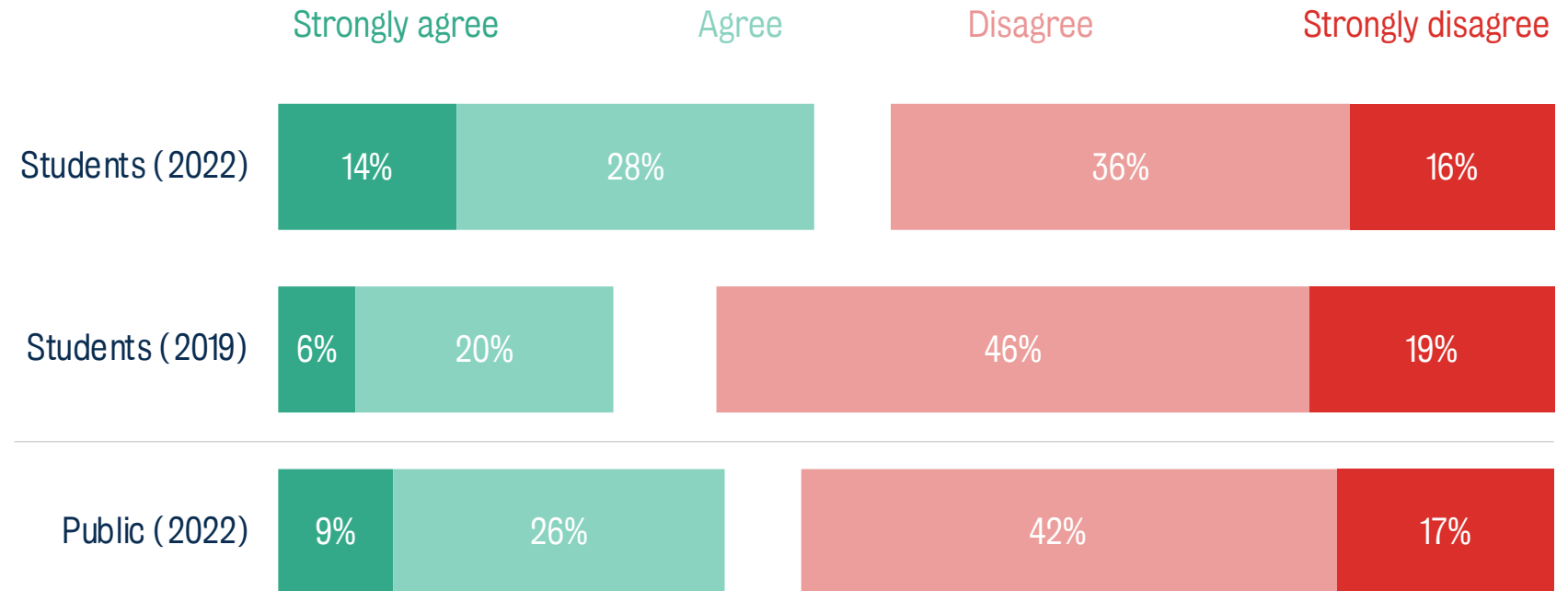


But students do feel an increasing pressure to share their views on controversial topics

42% of students report feeling pressured to share their position on controversial topics when they'd rather keep their views to themselves – up from 26% in 2019.

The proportion of students who currently feel this way is higher than the proportion of the public overall (35%) who say they've felt pressured to share their views.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your own experience at your university / your views on freedom of speech in society? **I feel pressured to share my position on controversial topics in circumstances where I would prefer to keep my views to myself**

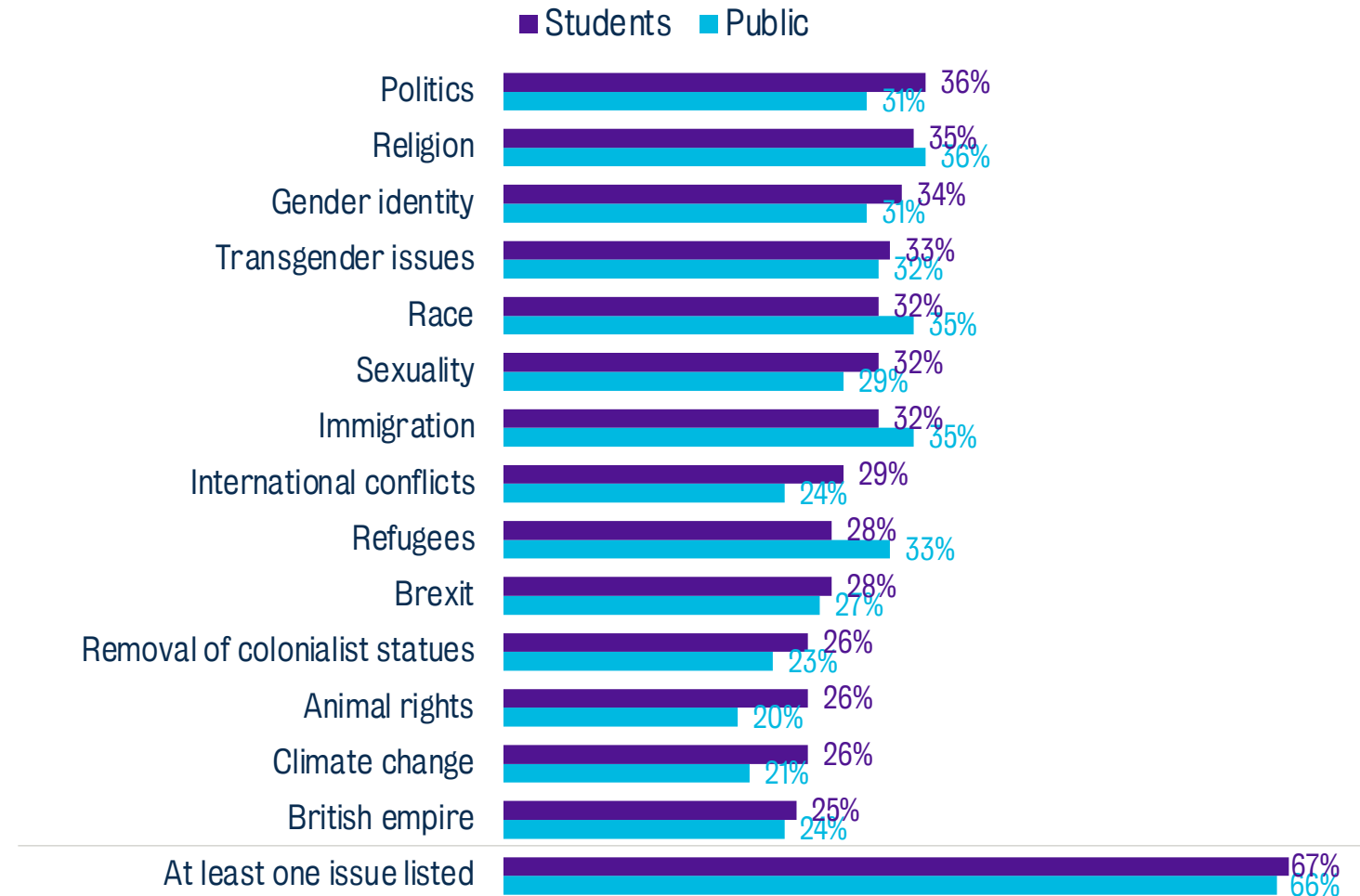


The general public are just as likely as students to say they've held back their views on specific topics

Between a quarter and a third of students have held back their views on individual topics – very similar to the general public.

Overall, around two-thirds of both groups say they've refrained from voicing an opinion on at least one of the issues asked about.

Have you, personally, ever held back on expressing your views or opinions on any of the following topics in lectures, classrooms, or in social situations on campus because you feared what others might think of you?
% who say yes, by subject



Public base: 2,293 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 26-28 Aug 2022. Student base: 1,537 current UK undergraduates, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022.

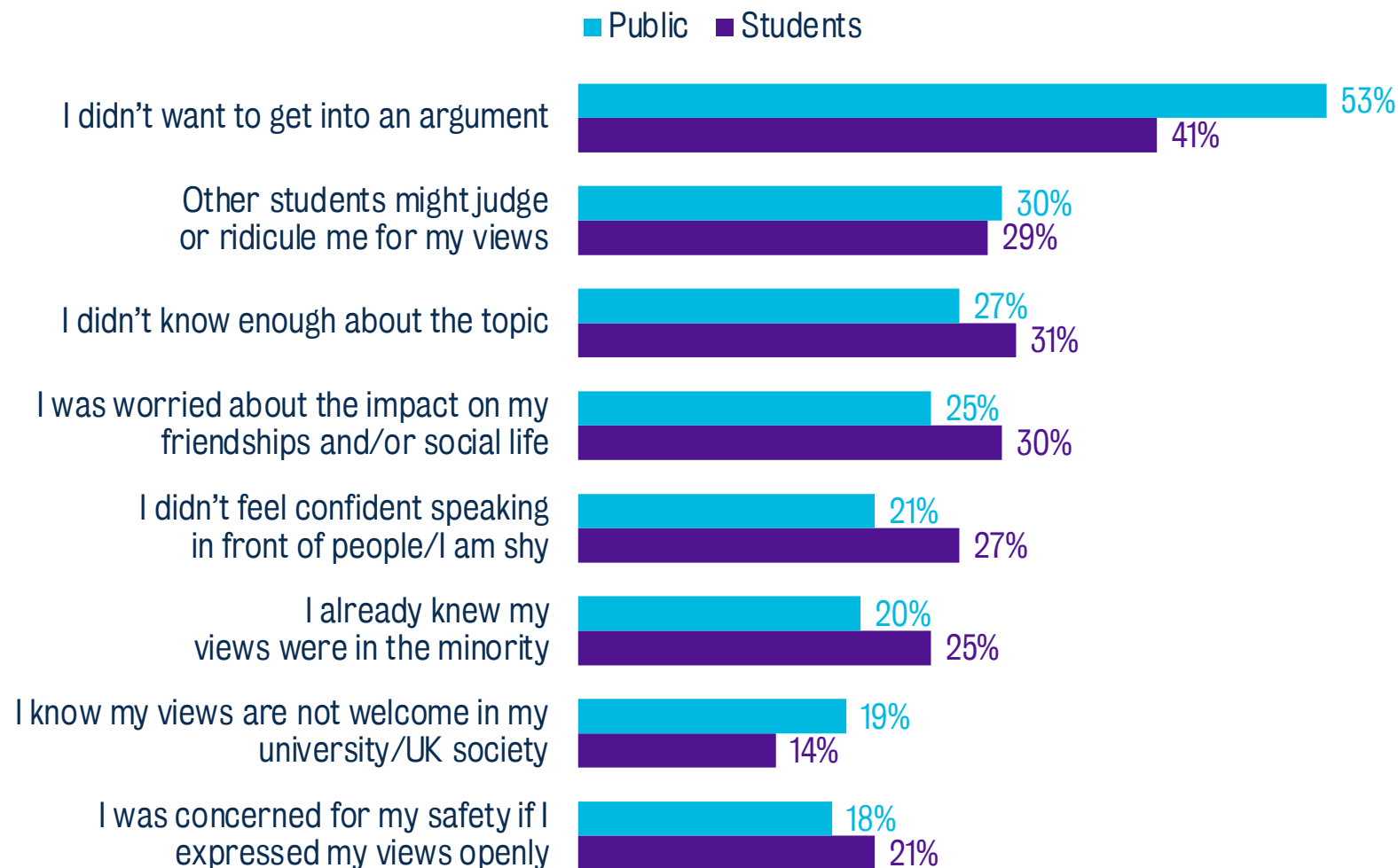
But it's important to recognise there are a range of motivations for holding back opinions

It is clear that when people are holding back from voicing their opinions in public, it is not always due to a chilling effect on speech or disapproval from peers: among those who said they'd held back their views on at least one of the topics asked about, 27% of students and 21% of the public say they'd done so because they felt shy.

The fact that they didn't know enough about the topic was another factor identified by around three in 10 of each group.

However, at the same time, there are clear concerns that the unspoken views would have provoked arguments, led to ridicule, impacted relationships or even exposed people to danger.

And could you say why you felt fearful expressing your views? Please choose as many options as apply



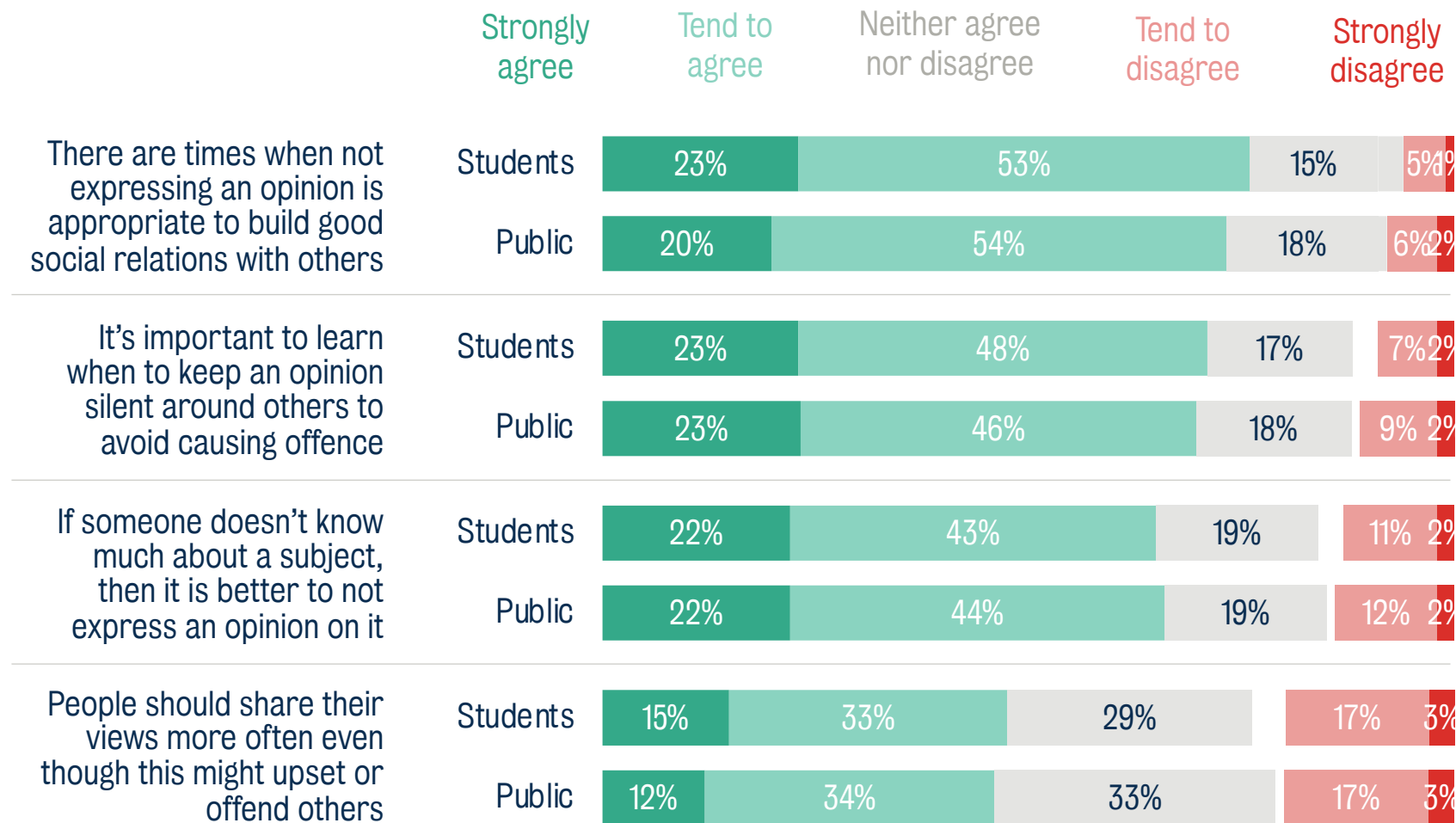
Public base: 1,507 UK adults aged 18+ who gave a reason why they have held back on expressing their views, interviewed 26-28 Aug 2022.
 Student base: 1,051 current UK undergraduates who gave a reason why they have held back on expressing their views, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022.

And the public and students both tend to agree that there are times to be quiet

Students and the public have very similar views on the circumstances in which people should refrain from expressing an opinion.

For example, around three-quarters of both groups agree there are times when doing so is appropriate to build good social relations. Seven in 10 of each group also say it's important to learn when to keep an opinion silent to avoid causing offence.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

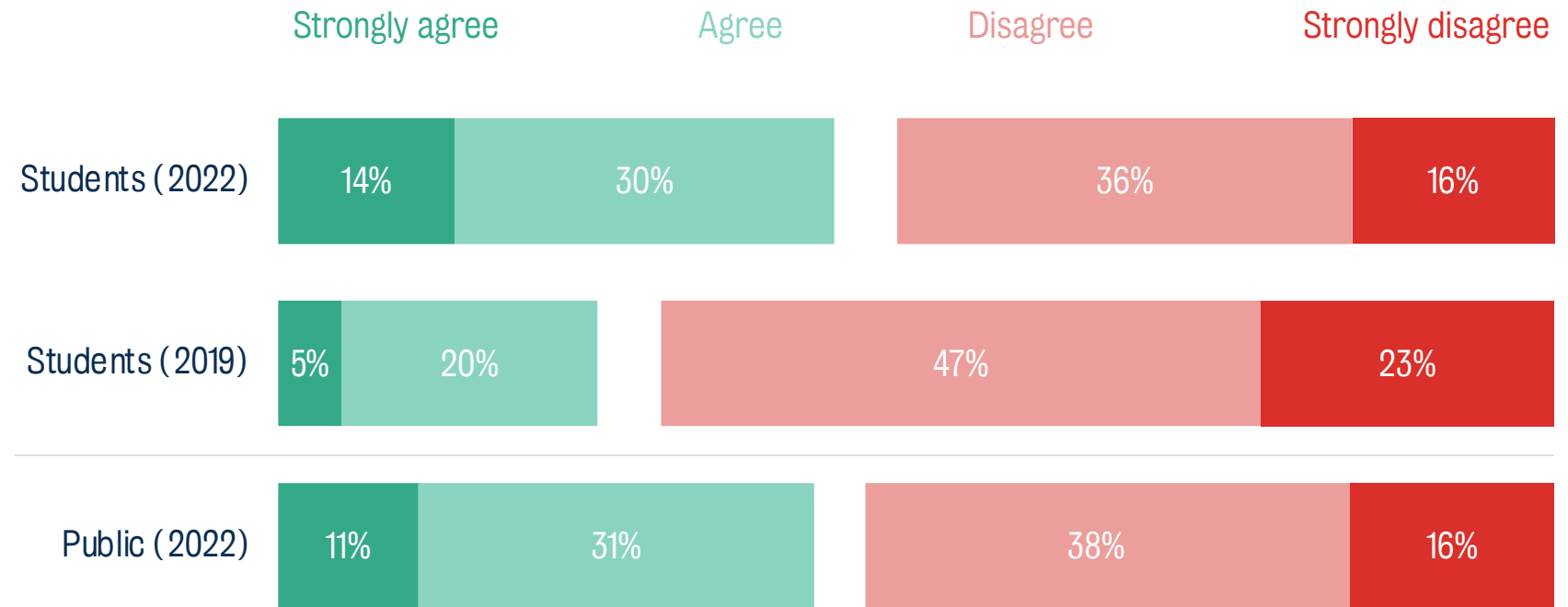


But there is increasing fear of disagreement in universities – although this is similar to how the public feel in society more generally

43% of students report feeling unable to express their views in their university because they're scared of disagreeing with their peers – an increase from 25% in 2019.

But at the same time, 43% of the public say they've felt constrained from voicing their opinions in UK society more generally, for the same reason, indicating that perceptions within universities and outside them are similar.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements... I feel unable to express my views in my university / in UK society because I'm scared of disagreeing with my peers



Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

The “chilling effect”

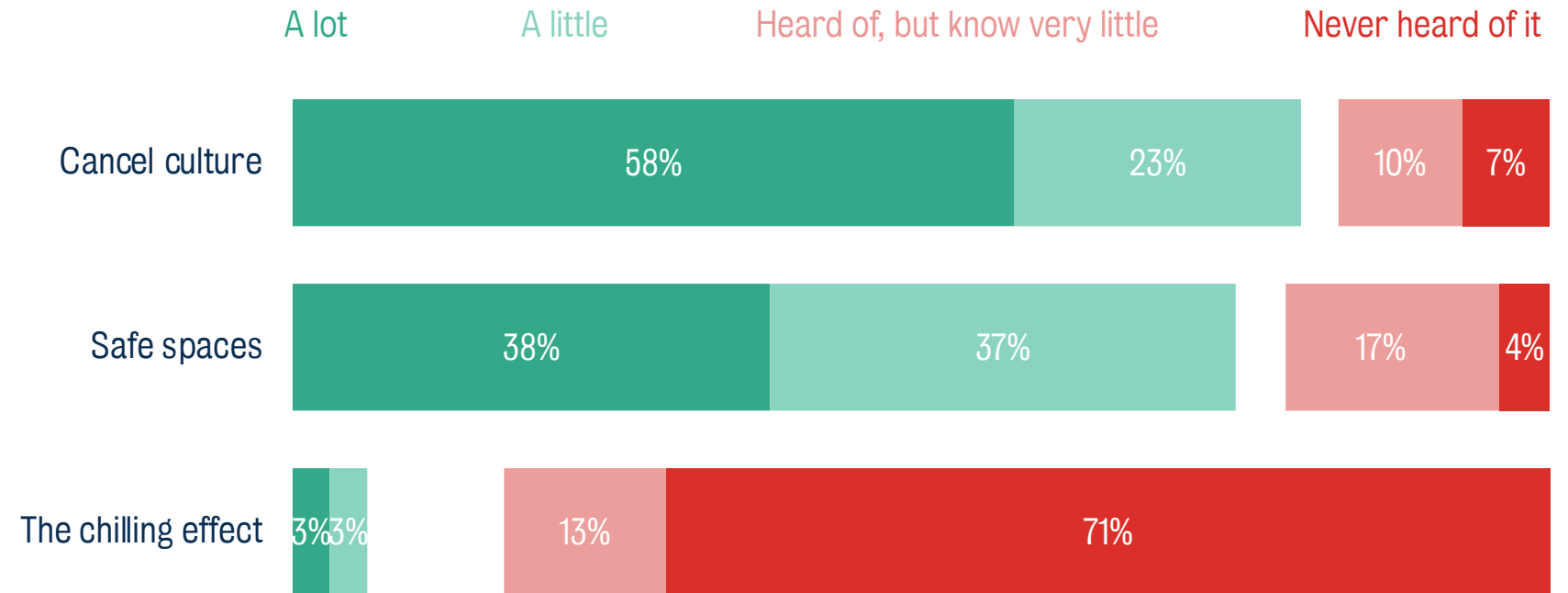


There is very little awareness of the concept of a “chilling effect” among students...

Just 6% of students say they’ve heard at least a little about the “chilling effect”, while 71% say they’ve never heard of it.

By comparison, 81% say they’ve heard a lot or a little about “cancel culture”, and 75% say the same about “safe spaces”, indicating far greater cut-through for these terms.

How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the following terms and phrases?



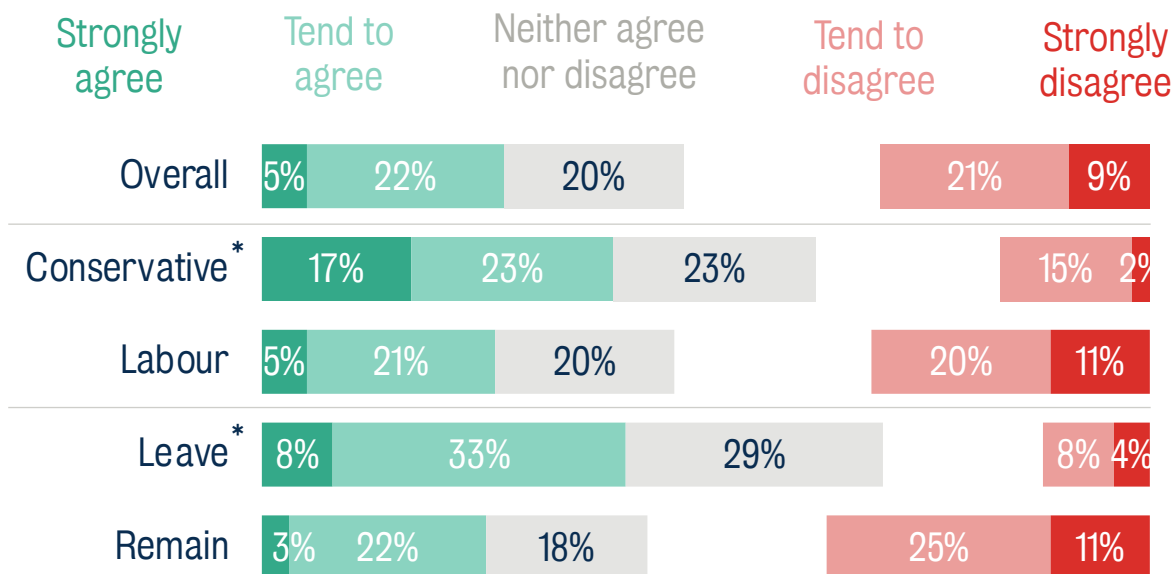
....once explained, the chilling effect is seen as a problem by a minority

After having the term explained to them (see annex for explanation), 28% of students say that the chilling effect is a problem for them personally – although virtually the same proportion, 30%, say it's not an issue for them.

Students who are inclined to vote Conservative (40%) are more likely than their Labour (26%) counterparts to feel the chilling effect is a problem for them, and there is a similar divide between Leavers (41%) and Remainers (25%).

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

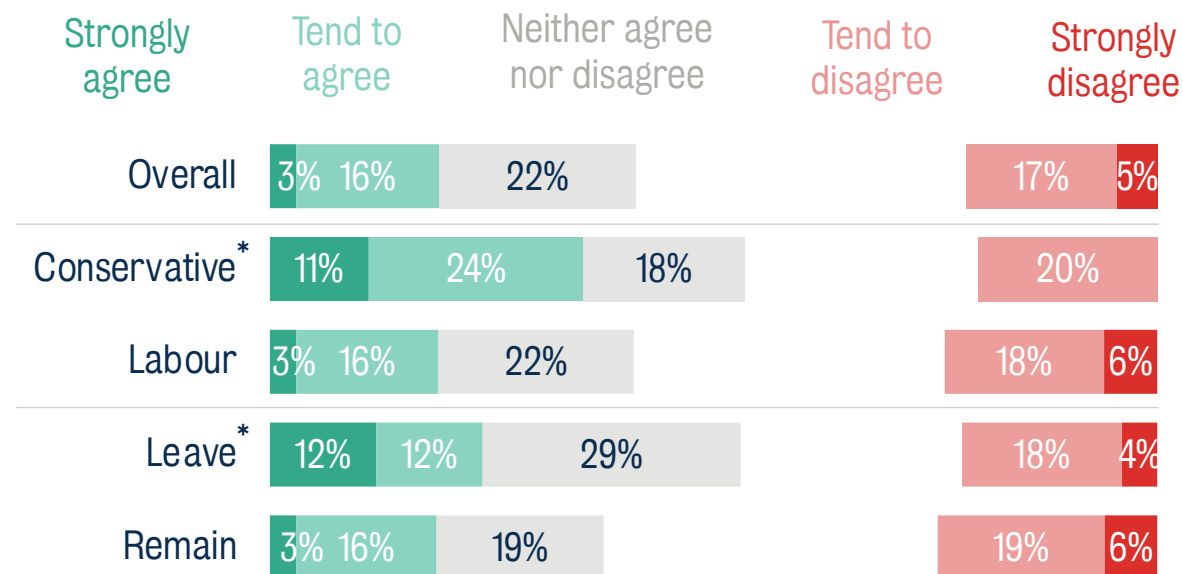
To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 'chilling effect' is a problem for you personally?



A smaller proportion of students – 19% – say the chilling effect is a problem in their university more generally. And again, Conservative (35%) and Leave (25%) supporters are more likely than Labour (19%) and Remain (19%) supporters to feel this way.

Note some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 'chilling effect' is a problem in your university more generally?

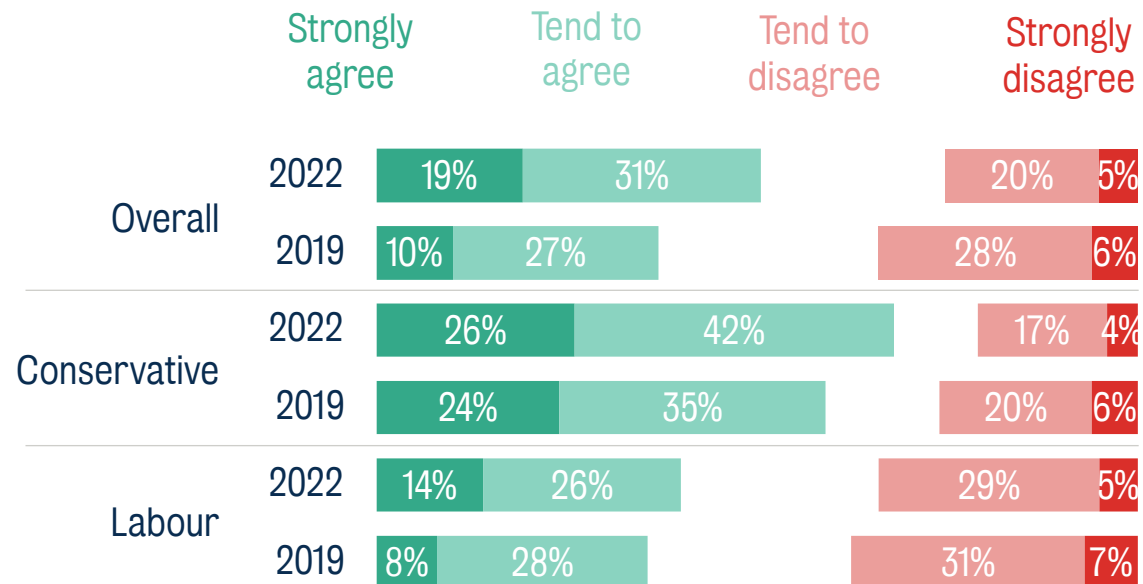


Although perceptions of chilling are increasing, for both conservative and left-wing views

Half (50%) of students now feel that those with conservative views are reluctant to express them at their university, compared with 37% who said the same in 2019.

And this perception has grown in particular among students who say they'd vote for the Conservative party, rising from 59% to 68% over the last three years.

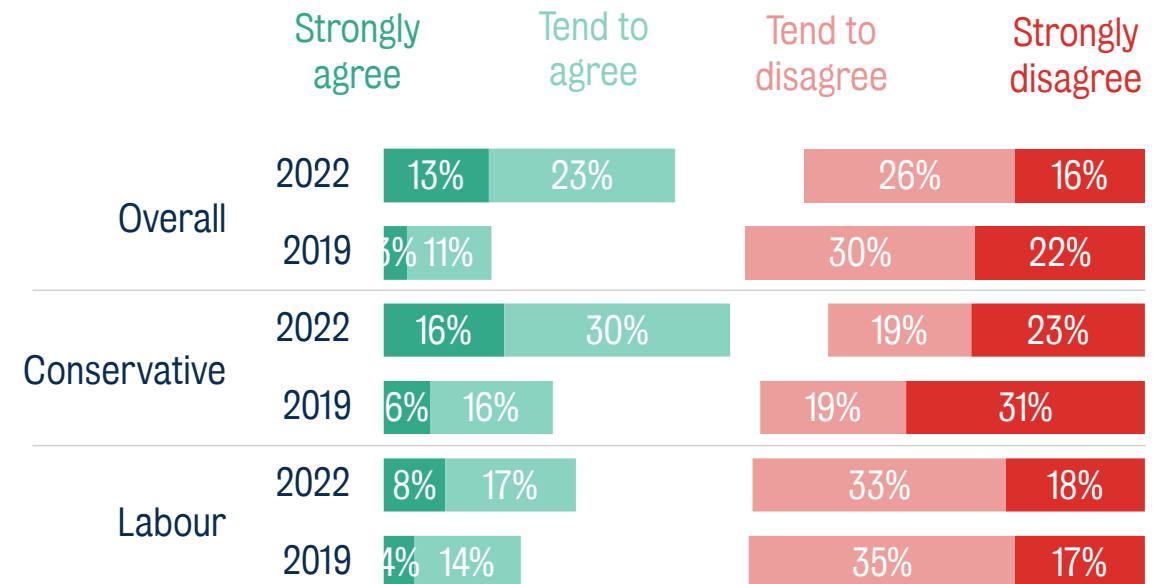
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Students with conservative views are reluctant to express them at my university



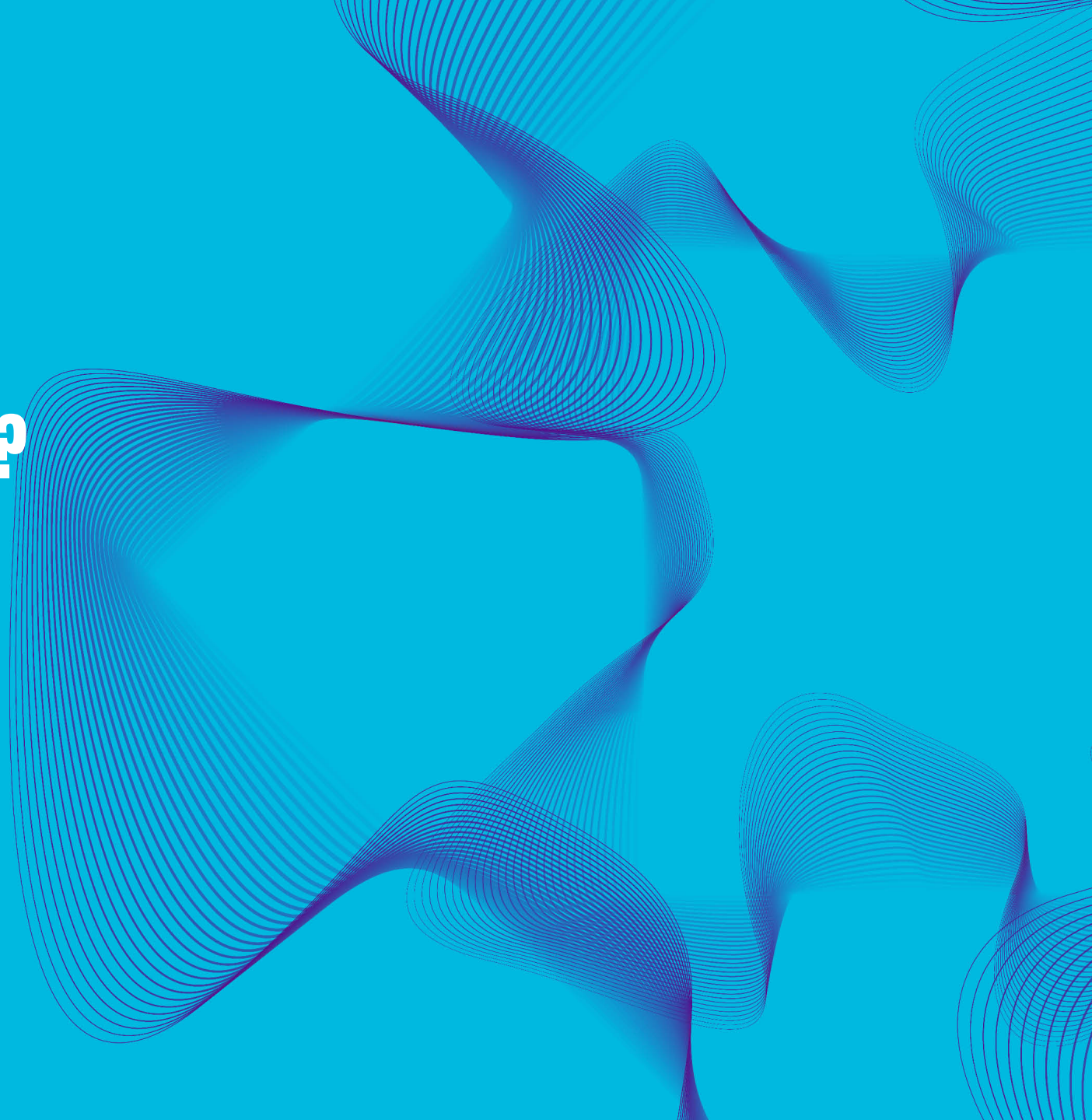
It is a similar story when it comes to left-wing views, with the proportion of students who say people are reluctant to express such opinions at their university more than doubling, from 14% in 2019 to 36% in 2022.

But students who expect to vote Labour (25%) are actually *less* likely to feel this way than their Conservative counterparts, with the latter group seeing a big rise in perceptions of such a chilling effect – from 22% to 46%.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Students with left-wing views are reluctant to express them at my university



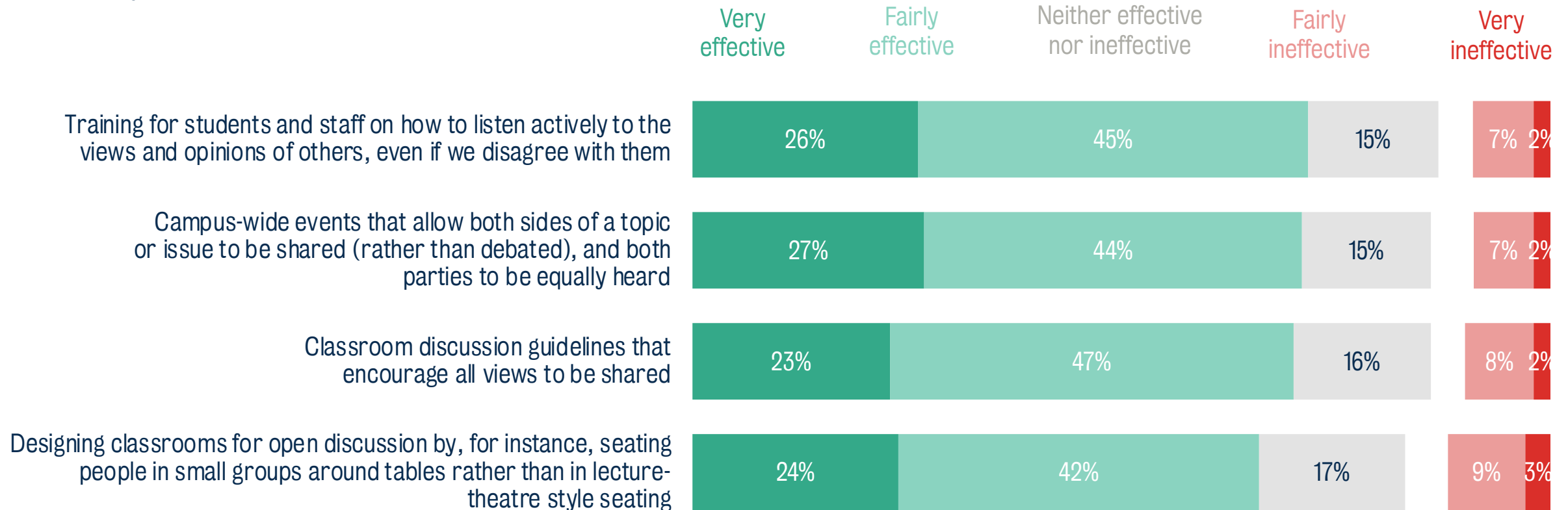
What should we do?



There is widespread support among students for a range of measures, particularly in encouraging listening and sharing of views...

Around seven in 10 students think training on active listening, events where a range of views are shared rather than debated, and classroom discussion guidelines would be effective in making people feel more comfortable expressing their views at their university.

How effective or ineffective do you think the following actions would be in making people feel more comfortable expressing their views at your university?



...as well as introducing codes of conduct to guarantee free speech and training to encourage a range of perspectives, including those that are offensive, to be heard

Majorities of students also think that promoting freedom of expression through codes of conduct for students and student unions would help people feel less inhibited from expressing their views, and that enabling people to take legal action against a university that fails to uphold free expression would foster a better environment.

How effective or ineffective do you think the following actions would be in making people feel more comfortable expressing their views at your university?

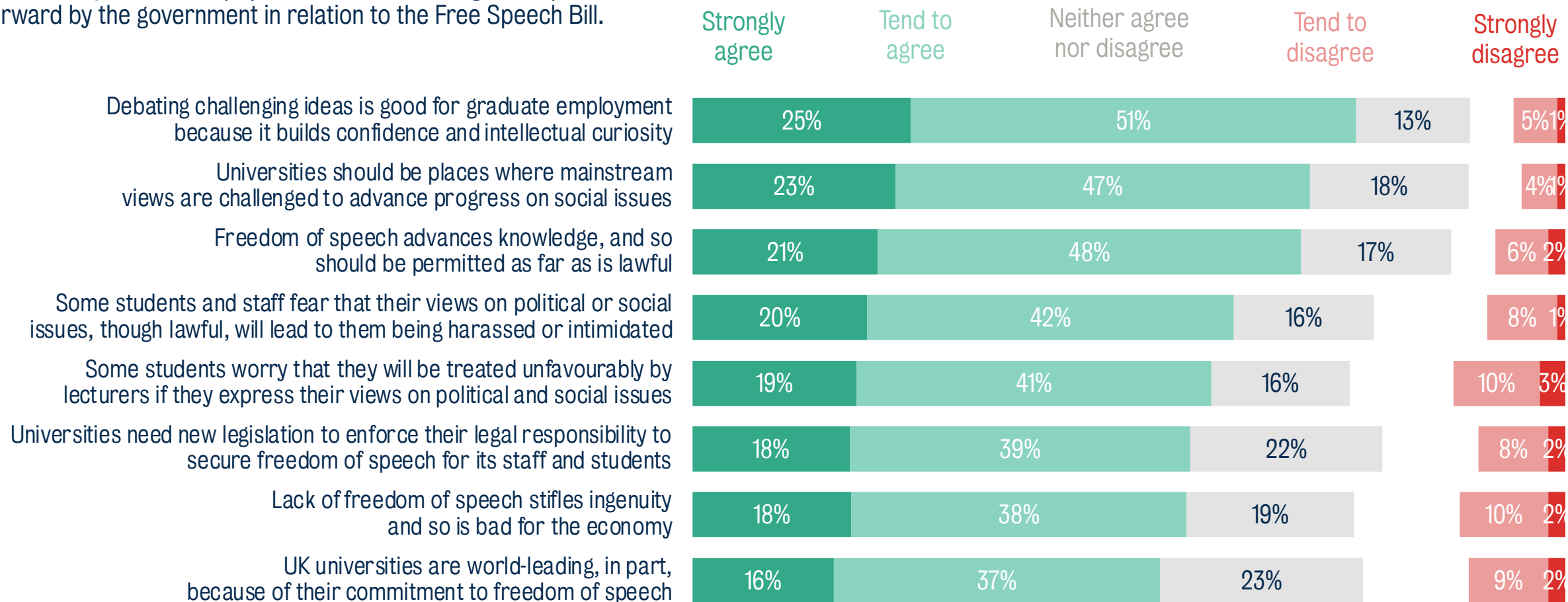


Views on government statements and the Free Speech Bill

There is significant student agreement with statements based on ministerial speeches/government reports, particularly on the value of free speech

Three-quarters of students think there are benefits in terms of graduate employment that come experience of robust debates at university – the most popular sentiment among those put forward by the government in relation to the Free Speech Bill.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*



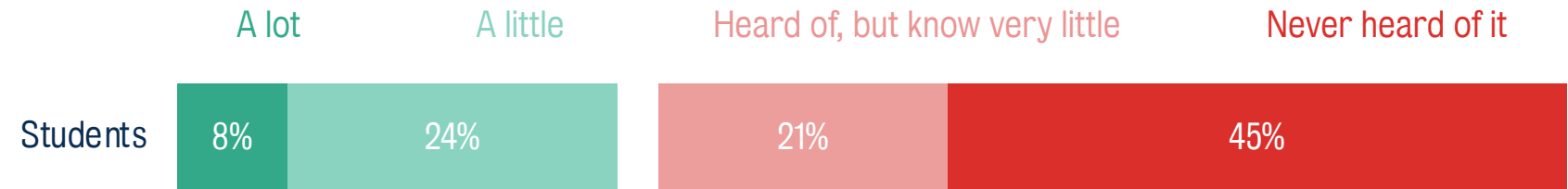
There is very little awareness of the Free Speech Bill – but a majority say they support it when it's explained to them, even if this will be a lightly held view

Nearly half (45%) of students say they've never heard of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, while another one in five (21%) say they've heard of it but only know very little about it.

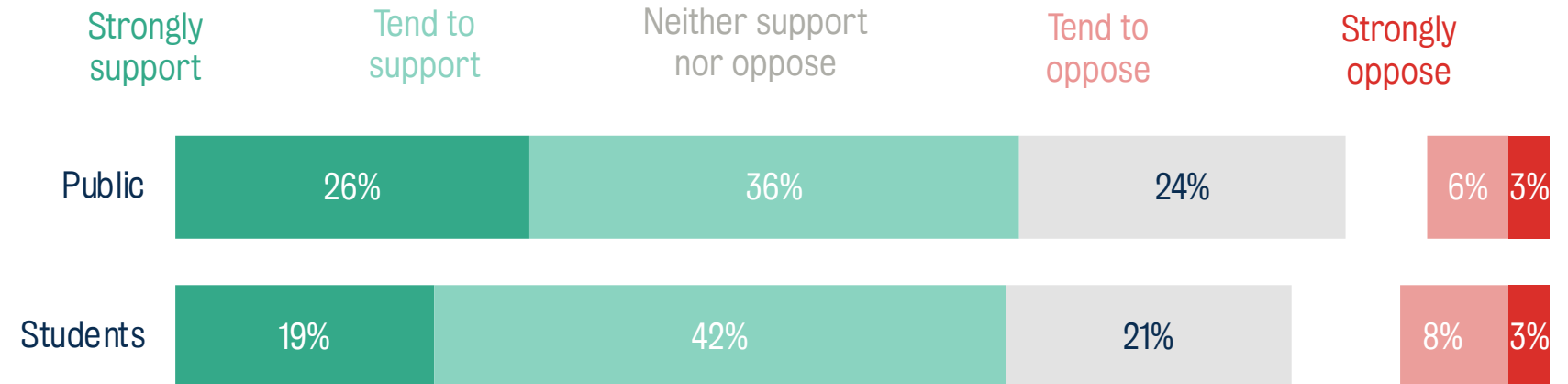
But around a third (32%) say they've heard at least a little about the bill.

Once the bill is explained in outline terms (see annex) to students and the public, around six in 10 of both groups say they support it.

The government are currently debating the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. This Bill will set out new laws focused specifically on freedom of speech in UK universities. Before now, how much had you heard, if anything, about this Bill?



To what extent would you say that you support or oppose this legislation, if at all?*



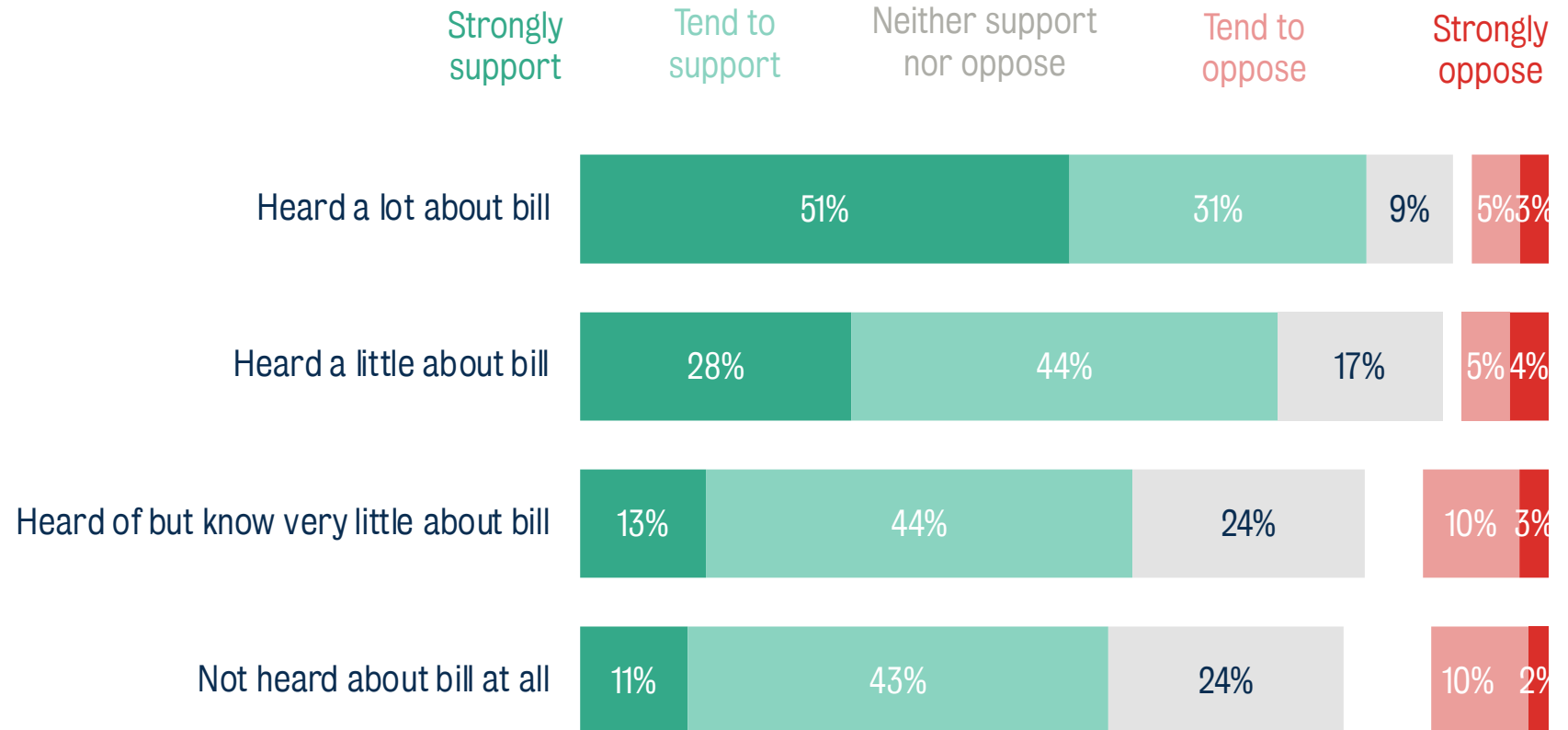
Public base: 2,293 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 26-28 Aug 2022. Student base: 1,537 current UK undergraduates, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022.

*See annex for explanation of the bill shown to respondents.

However, student support for the bill is higher among those with greater awareness of the legislation

Interestingly, support for the Bill is higher among those who have heard a lot or a little about it – which is likely to partly reflect that this group will have a greater interest in free speech issues. However, there is majority support even among those who hadn't heard of the Bill, based on a summary of its objectives and common criticisms (see annex for full wording).

To what extent would you say that you support or oppose this legislation, if at all? (See appendix for explanation shown to respondents) [Support for the bill, by reported awareness of it](#)

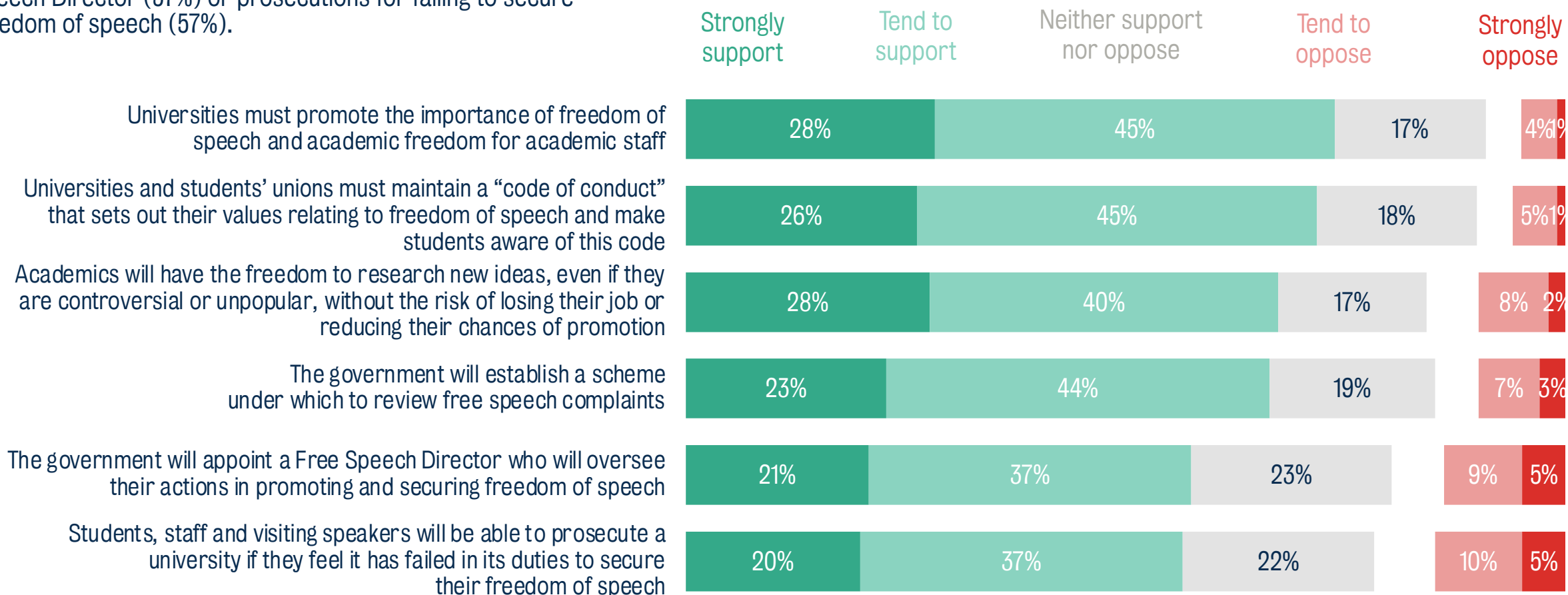


And majorities also support specific elements of the bill – particularly the promotion of free speech

Active promotion of freedom of speech and academic freedom (74%), as well as codes of conduct setting out relevant values at stake (71%), are among the most popular elements of the bill, while students are less certain on the introduction of a Free Speech Director (57%) or prosecutions for failing to secure freedom of speech (57%).

Note some figures differ from chart due to rounding.

And to what extent do you support or oppose these specific elements of the bill?*



Annex

- Page 30: Explanation of chilling effect shown to respondents:

We are now going to ask you some questions about what, if anything, you think universities should do to help students who tend to self-censor their speech for fear of repercussions – this is sometimes called the ‘chilling effect’. Please note this doesn’t include illegal speech – ie speech that is discriminatory, harassing or victimising on the basis of protected characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity or religion.

- Page 36:

The following statements are derived from arguments made in the policy paper for the bill – Higher education: free speech and academic freedom:

Universities should be places where mainstream views are challenged to advance progress on social issues.

Some students and staff fear that their views on political or social issues, though lawful, will lead to them being harassed or intimidated.

Some students worry that they will be treated unfavourably by lecturers if they express their views on political and social issues.

Universities need new legislation to enforce their legal responsibility to secure freedom of speech for its staff and students.

The following statements are derived from arguments made in a Speech by Michelle Donelan to Policy Exchange:

Universities should be places where mainstream views are challenged to advance progress on social issues.

Debating challenging ideas is good for graduate employment because it builds confidence and intellectual curiosity.

Lack of freedom of speech stifles ingenuity and so is bad for the economy. UK Universities are world-leading, in part, because of their commitment to freedom of speech.

Freedom of speech advances knowledge, and so should be permitted as far as is lawful.

- Page 37: The full explanation of the bill that was shown to respondents was as follows:

The Bill would require universities in the UK, by law, to promote freedom of speech on their campuses. This would involve developing a free speech code of conduct by which universities and students’ unions have to abide, and bringing in stronger measures to protect academic freedom and visiting speakers. The government would also put in place a Free Speech Director who will make sure universities follow these new laws, and will handle complaints and legal claims if universities fail to do what is required of them.

The government say this legislation is necessary because some students and staff at UK universities fear expressing their views on political and social issues, which limits academic freedom and freedom of speech. But others have said that the evidence for these claims is weak, and that this new legislation is not needed when there are better ways to achieve these objectives.

To what extent would you say that you support or oppose this legislation, if at all?

- Page 39: These statements are derived from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Technical note

The data in this report is taken from a range of sources, including multiple new representative surveys of both UK university students and the UK public more generally. The findings of these surveys have then been compared with those from surveys carried out in previous years, to reveal trends and differences between population groups. Full details of the surveys are as follows:

Newly carried out surveys

- A survey conducted online by OpinionPanel (YouthSight) of 1,537 current UK undergraduate students, interviewed 31 Aug-8 Sept 2022. Based on HESA statistics, the sample comprises national representation of gender, course year, and university type. The data is weighted on these factors.
- A survey conducted online by Savanta: ComRes of 2,293 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 26-28 Aug 2022. Data were weighted to be representative of the UK population by age, gender, region and social grade.
- A survey conducted online by Savanta: ComRes of 2,351 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 18-20 Sept 2022. Data were weighted to be representative of the UK population by age, gender, region and social grade.
- A survey conducted online by King's College London of 896 current UK university students, interviewed 3-18 Aug 2022. Data were weighted to be representative of the UK university student population by gender, university type and course year.

Previous surveys

- A survey conducted online by Ipsos UK of 2,931 people in the UK aged 16+, interviewed 13-19 Jan 2022. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household in order to reflect the profile of the UK population.

- A survey conducted online by OpinionPanel (YouthSight) of 2,153 UK undergraduate students, interviewed 29 July-2 Aug 2019. Based on HESA statistics, the sample comprises national representation of gender, course year, and university type. The data is weighted on these factors.
- A survey conducted by [Gallup for the Knight Foundation](#) of 3,014 US college students aged 18-24, interviewed 1 Nov-10 December 2017.

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